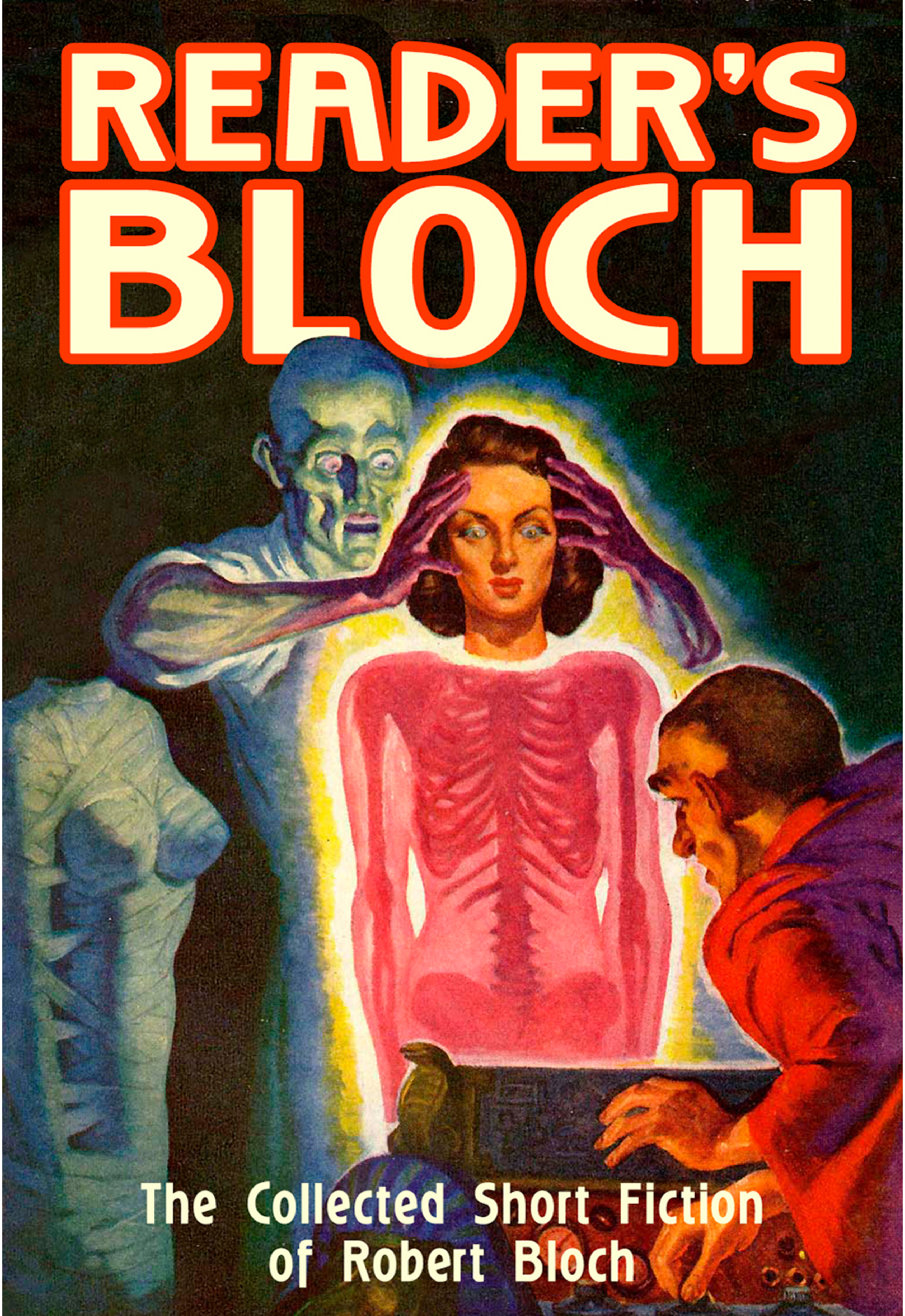
READER'S BLOCH



The Collected Short Fiction of Robert Bloch

Jerry eBooks

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READER'S BLOCH
The Collected Short Fiction
of Robert Bloch
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Reader's Bloch

The Collected Short
Fiction of Robert Bloch

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Title Page

About Robert Albert Bloch
Pseudonyms

“Meet the Authors”
“Meet the Authors”
“Introducing the Author”
“Introducing the Author”
“Author, Author”
“Men Behind Fanatastic”
“Purely Personal”
“They Write . . .”
“The People Who Make Other Worlds”
“Introducing the Author”

Bibliography: Novels
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Bibliography: Serials
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Short Fiction Bibliography: chronological
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Fiction Series

Epigraph

1934
The Laughter of a Ghoul

1935
The Feast in the Abbey
The Secret in the Tomb
The Suicicde in the Study
The Shambler from the Stars
Black Lotus

1936
The Druidic Doom
The Faceless God
The Grinning Ghoul
The Opener of the Way
The Dark Demon
Mother of Serpents

1937
The Brood of Bubastis
The Mannikin
Fangs of Vengeance
The Black Kiss
The Creeper in the Crypt
What Every Young Ghoul Should Know
The Secret of Sebek
Fane of the Black Pharaoh

1938
The Eyes of the Mummy
Slave of the Flames

Return to the Sabbath
Secret of the Observatory
The Mandarin’s Canaries
The Hound of Pedro
Beetles

1939

Waxworks
The Curse of the House
The Sorcerer’s Jewel
Death Is An Elephant
The Strange Flight of Richard Clayton
Death Has Five Guesses
A Question of Identity
The Bottomless Pool
The Red Swimmer
The Cloak
The Dark Isle
Unheavenly Twin
The Seal of the Satyr
Flowers From The Moon
The Man Who Walked Through Mirrors
Pink Elephants
The Totem-Pole
He Waits Beneath the Sea
The Grip of Death
Mannikins of Horror

1940

Queen of the Metal Men
The Ghost-Writer
Master of Silver Giants
Power of the Druid
The Fiddler’s Fee
Be Yourself
Wine of the Sabbat

1941

House of the Hatchet
Beauty’s Beast
A Sorcerer Runs for Sheriff
A Good Knight’s Work
Last Laugh

1942

The Shoes
Hell On Earth
Time Wounds All Heels
Black Bargain
Gather ’Round the Flowing Bowler
The Pied Piper Fights the Gestapo
The Weird Doom of Floyd Scrilch
Men Scared of Nothing
The Little Man Who Wasn’t All There
A Question of Etiquette
Son of a Witch
Jerk the Giant-Killer
The Golden Opportunity of Lefty Feep
Murder From The Moon
Nursemaid to Nightmares
Lefty Feep and the Sleepy-Time Gal

1943

The Eager Dragon
Lefty Feep Catches Hell
The Fear Planet
It Happened Tomorrow
Nothing Happens to Lefty Feep
Phantom from the Film
A Bottle of Gin
The Chance of a Ghost
The Black Brain

Lefty Feep and the Racing Robot
Never Trust A Demon
Genie with the Light Brown Hair
Skeleton In My Closet
Stuporman
The Goon From Rangoon
The Machine That Changed History
Yours Truly—Jack the Ripper
You Can't Kid Lefty Feep
Fairy Tale
Black Barter
A Horse On Lefty Feep
Mystery of the Creeping Underwear
It's Your Own Funeral

1944

Lefty Feep's Arabian Nightmare
It's A Small World
Lefty Feep Does Time
Iron Mask
The Beasts of Barsac
Death is a Vampire
The Devil's Ticket
The Bat Is My Brother

1945

Son of Rasputin
Lefty Feep Gets Henpecked
The Man Who Cried "Wolf !"
One Way to Mars
The Skull of the Marquis de Sade
Soul Proprietor
C.O.D.—Corpse on Delivery

1946

“. . . but doth suffer . . .”
Satan’s Phonograph
The Noose Hangs High
The Bogy Man Will Get You
Frozen Fear
The Man Who Told The Truth
Tree’s a Crowd
Enoch
Lizzie Borden Took An Axe . . .

1947

Sweets to the Sweet
A Head For His Bier!
The Mad Scientist
The Cheaters

1948

Strictly From Mars
Catnip
Change of Heart
The Indian Spirit Guide

1949

Satan’s Servants
The Sorcerer’s Apprentice
The Unspeakable Betrothal
The Strange Island of Doctor Nork
Floral Tribute

1950

All Else Is Dust
Girl From Mars
Tell Your Fortune
Tooth and Consequences

Let’s Do It My Way
Head Man
End of Your Rope
The Weird Tailor
“The Devil With You!”
The Shadow From The Steeple

1951

The Hungry Horse
Notebook Found in a Deserted House
Hell’s Angels
The Tin You Love to Touch
The Dead Don’t Die!
Hornbrook For The Atomic Age
My Struggle
The End of Science-Fiction
The Man Who Collected Poe
My Further Struggles by Floyd Scrilch
The Night They Crashed the Party
The Tchen-Lam’s Vengeance

1952

Lucy Comes to Stay
Once a Sucker

1953

The Lighthouse
The Proxy Head
Constant Reader
The Thinking Cap
The Dream Makers
The Dynamics of an Asteroid
Let’s Do It For Love

1954

The Pin
Mr. Steinway
The Goddess of Wisdom
The Communist
Grandma Goes to Mars

1955

Comfort Me, My Robot
The Past Master
I Do Not Love Thee, Doctor Fell
Mr. Margate’s Mermaid
You Could Be Wrong
The Miracle of Ronald Weems
The Big Binge
Where the Buffalo Roam
Widower’s Whalebone Stays
Widower’s Copal Varnish
Widower’s Pneumatic Falsies
Widower’s Wonderful Bloomers
Widower’s Wonderful Diapers
Widower’s Wonderful Pills
Widower’s Asbestos Trousers
Widower’s Porcelain Dentures
Widower’s Piano Accordions
Widower’s Soap
Widower’s Cod Liver Oil
Have Tux—Will Travel

1956

I Like Blondes
You Got To Have Brains
Dead-End Doctor
A Good Imagination
Terror in the Night

I Kiss Your Shadow
All On A Golden Afternoon
Founding Fathers
Corn-Fed Genius
String of Pearls
Water's Edge
A Way of Life
Try This For Psis

1957

The Real Bad Friend
The Traveling Salesman
Man With A Hobby
The Proper Spirit
Welcome, Stranger
How Bug-Eyed Was My Monster
Dig That Crazy Grave!
Terror Over Hollywood
Alternate Universe
Crime In Rhyme
Luck Is No Lady
The Cure
The Tempter
Sock Finish
Broomstick Ride

1958

Daybroke
Edifice Complex
The Sleeping Redheads
Is Betsy Blake Still Alive?
A Killing in the Market
Spawn of the Dark One
Two By Two
Terror In Cut-Throat Cove
Hungarian Rhapsody

Red Moon Rising
Egghead
Report On Sol III
Word of Honor
That Hell-Bound Train
That Old Black Magic
Block That Metaphor
A Lesson for the Teacher
This Crowded Earth
F.O.B. Venus
The Deadliest Art

1959

Nightmare Number Four
The Screaming People
The Hungry Eye
Show Biz
The Gloating Place
The Big Kick
The Last Plea
The Man Who Knew Women
Night School
Sneak Preview
Sabbatical

1960

The Funnel of God
The Show Must Go On
Till Death Do Us Part
Beep No More
The Man WHo Murdered Tomorrow
The Bald-Headed Mirage
The Masterpiece
Pin-Up Girl
A Matter of life
The Beautiful People

The Covenant
Talent
Fat Chance
The World-Timer
The Final Performance

1961

Philtre Tip
A Home Away From Home
Crime Machine
The Man Who Looked Like Napoleon
The Model Wife
Untouchable

1962

The Professor Plays it Square
Wheel and Deal

1963

The Old College Try
Beezlebub

1964

The Conventional Approach

1965

Double-Cross

1966

All in the Family
The Plot is the Thing
Life in Our Time

1967

The Living Dead
A Toy For Juliette

1968

Sales of a Deathman
The Man Who Never Did Anything Right
The Gods Are Not Mocked

1969

How Like A God
Groovyland
The Movie People

1970

Double Whammy
In the Cards

1971

The Funny Farm
The Animal Fair
The Play’s the Thing
The Oracle

1972

Ego Trip
The Old Switcheroo
Forever and Amen

1973

Space—Born
See How They Run

1974
The Learning Maze

1975
The Model

1976
The Warm Farewell
ETFF
A Most Unusual Murder
A Case of the Stubborns
The Head
Crook of the Month

1977
But First These Words
Nina
The Closer of the Way
What You See Is What You Get

1978
Oo Say Can You See—
Picture
The Spoiled Wife

1979
His and Hearse
Freak Show

1980
The Rubber Room
The Night Before Christmas

1983

Bill
Bloom
Helen
Valentine
The Shrink and the Nympho

1984

The Undead
Everybody Needs A Little Love
Pumpkin

1985

Nocturne

1986

The Shaggy Dog Bite
The Return of Lefty Feep
The Yougoslaves
Pranks
Reaper
The Chaney Legacy

1987

Comeback
Die—Nasty
The New Season
Heir Apparent

1989

Horror Scope

1991

Warning: Death May Be Injurious to Your Health
The Grab Bag
The Bedposts of Life
The Creative Urge

1993

The Legacy
It Takes One To Know One

1994

The Scent of Vinegar

1997

Scenes from a Screenplay: Earthman’s Burden
The Clown at Midnight

Robert Albert Bloch was born in Chicago, the son of Raphael “Ray” Bloch (1884-1952), a bank cashier, and his wife Stella Loeb (1880-1944), a social worker, both of German Jewish descent. Bloch’s family moved to Maywood, a Chicago suburb, when he was five; he lived there until he was ten. He attended the Methodist Church there, despite his parents’ Jewish heritage, and attended Emerson Grammar School. In 1925, at eight years of age, living in Maywood, he attended (alone at night) a screening of Lon Chaney, Sr.‘s film *The Phantom of the Opera* (1925). The scene of Chaney removing his mask terrified the young Bloch (“it scared the living hell out of me and I ran all the way home to enjoy the first of about two years of recurrent nightmares”). It also sparked his interest in horror. Bloch was a precocious child and found himself in fourth grade when he was eight. He also obtained a pass into the adult section of the Public Library, where he read omnivorously. Bloch considered himself a budding artist and worked in pencil sketching and watercolours, but myopia in adolescence seemed to effectively bar art as a career. He had passions for German-made lead toy soldiers and for silent cinema.

In 1929, Bloch’s father Ray Bloch lost his bank job, and the family moved to Milwaukee, where Stella worked at the Milwaukee Jewish Settlement settlement house. Robert attended Washington, then Lincoln High School, where he met lifelong friend Harold Gauer. Gauer was editor of *The Quill,* Lincoln’s literary magazine, and accepted Bloch’s first published short story, a horror story titled “The Thing” (the “thing” of the title was Death). Both Bloch and Gauer graduated from Lincoln in 1934 during the height of the Great Depression. Bloch was involved in the drama department at Lincoln and wrote and performed in school vaudeville skits.

On October 2, 1940, Bloch married Marion Ruth Holcombe; it was reportedly a marriage of convenience designed to keep Bloch out of the army. During their marriage, she suffered (initially undiagnosed) tuberculosis of the bone, which affected her ability to walk.

After working for 11 years for the Gustav Marx Advertising Agency in Milwaukee, Bloch left in 1953 and moved to Weyauwega, Marion's home town, so she could be close to friends and family. Although she was eventually cured of tuberculosis, she and Bloch divorced in 1963. Bloch's daughter Sally (born 1943) elected to stay with him.

On January 18, 1964, Bloch met recently widowed Eleanor ("Elly") Alexander (nee Zalisko)—who had lost her first husband, writer/producer John Alexander, to a heart attack three months earlier—and made her his second wife in a civil ceremony on the following October 16. Elly was a fashion model and cosmetician. They honeymooned in Tahiti, and in 1965 visited London, then British Columbia. They remained happily married until Bloch's death. Elly remained in the Los Angeles area for several years after selling their Laurel Canyon Home to fans of Bloch, eventually choosing to go home to Canada to be closer to her own family. She died March 7, 2007, at the Betel Home in Selkirk, Manitoba, Canada. Her ashes have been placed next to Bloch's in a similar book-shaped urn at Pierce Brothers in Westwood, California.

Bloch died on 23 September 1994 after a long battle with cancer, at the age of 77. in Los Angeles after a writing career lasting 60 years, including more than 30 years in television and film. Bloch survived by seven months the death of another member of the original "Lovecraft Circle", Frank Belknap Long, who had died in January, 1994.

Bloch was cremated and his ashes interred in the Room of Prayer columbarium at Westwood Village Memorial Park Cemetery in Los Angeles. His wife Elly is also interred there.

During the 1930s, Bloch was an avid reader of the pulp magazine *Weird Tales,* which he had discovered at the age of ten in 1927. In the Chicago Northwestern Railroad depot with his parents and aunt Lil, his aunt offered to buy him any magazine he wanted and he picked *Weird Tales* (Aug 1927 issue) off the newsstand over her shocked protest. He began his readings of the magazine with the first instalment of Otis Adelbert Kline's "The Bride of Osiris" which dealt with a secret Egyptian city called Karneter located beneath Bloch's birth city of Chicago. The Depression came in the early 1930s. He later recalled, in accepting the Lifetime Achievement Award at the First World Fantasy Convention (1975), how "times were very hard. *Weird Tales* cost twenty-five cents in a day when most pulp magazines cost a dime. I remember that meant a lot to me." He went on to relate how he would get up very early on the last day of the month, with twenty-five cents saved from his monthly allowance of one dollar, and would run all the way to a combination tobacco/magazine store and buy the new *Weird Tales* issue, sometimes smuggling it home under his coat if the cover was particularly risque. His parents were not impressed with Hugh Doak Rankin's sexy covers for the magazine, and when the Bloch family moved to Milwaukeee in 1928 young Bloch gradually abandoned his interest. But by the time he had entered high school, he returned to reading *Weird Tales* during convalescence from flu.

H. P. Lovecraft, a frequent contributor to *Weird Tales,* became one of his favorite writers. The first of Lovecraft's stories he had read was "Pickman's Model," in *Weird Tales* for October 1927. Bloch wrote: "In school I was forced to squirm my way through the works of Oliver Wendell Holmes, James Lowell and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. In 'Pickman's Model', the ghouls ate all three. Now that, I decided, was poetic justice." As a teenager, Bloch wrote a fan letter to Lovecraft (1933), asking where he could find copies of earlier stories of Lovecraft's that Bloch had missed. Lovecraft lent them to him. Lovecraft also gave Bloch advice on his early fiction-writing efforts. asking whether Bloch had written any weird work and, if so, whether he might see samples of it. Bloch took up Lovecraft's offer in late April 1933, sending him two short items, "The Gallows" and another work whose title is unknown.

Lovecraft also suggested Bloch write to other members of the Lovecraft Circle, including August Derleth, Robert H. Barlow, Clark Ashton Smith, Donald Wandrei, Frank Belknap Long, Henry S. Whitehead, E. Hoffman

Price, Bernard Austin Dwyer and J. Vernon Shea. Bloch's first completed tales were "Lilies," "The Laughter of a Young Ghoul" and "The Black Lotus". Bloch submitted these to *Weird Tales*; editor Farnsworth Wright summarily rejected them all. However Bloch successfully placed "Lilies" in the semiprofessional magazine *Marvel Tales* (Winter 1934) and "Black Lotus" in *Unusual Stories* (1935). Bloch later commented, "I figured I'd better do something different or I'd end up as a florist."

Bloch graduated from high school in June, 1934. He then wrote a story which promptly (six weeks later) sold to *Weird Tales.* Bloch's first publication in *Weird Tales* was a letter criticising the Conan stories of Robert E. Howard. His first professional sales, at the age of 17 (July 1934), to *Weird Tales,* were the short stories "The Feast in the Abbey" and "The Secret in the Tomb". "Feast . . ." appeared first, in the January 1935 issue, which actually went on sale November 1, 1934; "The Secret in the Tomb" appeared in the May 1935 *Weird* Tales.

Bloch's correspondence with Derleth led to a visit to Derleth's home in Sauk City, Wisconsin (the headquarters of Arkham House). Bloch was impressed by Derleth who "fulfilled my expectations as a writer by wearing this purple velvet smoking jacket. That impressed me even more because Derleth didn't even smoke." Following this, and continued correspondence with Lovecraft, Bloch went to Chicago and met Farnsworth Wright, the then editor of *Weird Tales.* He also met the first *Weird Tales* writer outside of Derleth he had encountered—Otto Binder.

Bloch's early stories were strongly influenced by Lovecraft. Indeed, a number of his stories were set in, and extended, the world of Lovecraft's Cthulhu Mythos. These include "The Dark Demon", in which the character Gordon is a figuration of Lovecraft, and which features Nyarlathotep; "The Faceless God" (features Nyarlathotep); "The Grinning Ghoul" (written after the manner of Lovecraft) and "The Unspeakable Betrothal" (vaguely attached to the Cthulhu Mythos). It was Bloch who invented, for example, the oft-cited Mythos texts *De Vermis Mysteriis* and *Cultes des Goules.* Many other stories influenced by Lovecraft were later collected in Bloch's volume *Mysteries of the Worm* (now in its third, expanded edition). In 1935, Bloch wrote the tale “Satan’s Servants”, on which Lovecraft lent much advice, but none of the prose was by Lovecraft; this tale did not appear in print until 1949, in *Something About Cats and Other Pieces*.

The young Bloch appears, thinly disguised, as the character Robert Blake in Lovecraft’s story “The Haunter of the Dark” (1936), which is dedicated to Bloch. Bloch was the only individual to whom Lovecraft ever dedicated a story. In this story, Lovecraft kills off Robert Blake, the Bloch-based character, repaying a “courtesy” Bloch earlier paid Lovecraft with his 1935 tale “The Shambler from the Stars”, in which the Lovecraft-inspired figure dies; the story goes so far as to use Bloch’s then-current address (620 East Knapp Street) in Milwaukee. (Bloch even had a signed certificate from Lovecraft [and some of his creations] giving Bloch permission to kill Lovecraft off in a story.) Bloch later recalled “believe me, beyond all doubt, I don’t know anyone else I’d rather be killed by.” Bloch later wrote a third tale, “The Shadow From the Steeple”, picking up where “The Haunter of the Dark” finished (*Weird Tales* Sept 1950).

Lovecraft’s death in 1937 deeply affected Bloch, who was then aged only 20. He recalled “Part of me died with him, I guess, not only because he was not a god, he was mortal, that is true, but because he had so little recognition in his own lifetime. There were no novels or collections published, no great realization, even here in Providence, of what was lost.” Elsewhere he wrote, “the news of his fate came to me as a shattering blow; all the more so because the world at large ignored his passing. Only my parents and a few correspondents seemed to sense my shock, and my feeling that a part of me had died with him.”

After Lovecraft’s death in 1937, Bloch continued writing for *Weird Tales,* where he became one of its most popular authors. He also began contributing to other pulps, such as the science fiction magazine *Amazing Stories.* Bloch broadened the scope of his fiction. His horror themes included voodoo (“Mother of Serpents”), the conte cruel (“The Mandarin’s Canaries”), demonic possession (“Fiddler’s Fee”), and black magic

(“Return to the Sabbat”). Bloch visited Henry Kuttner in California in 1937. Bloch’s first science fiction story, “The Secret of the Observatory”, was published in *Amazing Stories* (August 1938).

In 1935 Bloch joined a writers’ group, The Milwaukee Fictioneers, members of which included Stanley Weinbaum, Ralph Milne Farley and Raymond A. Palmer. Another member of the group was Gustav Marx, who offered Bloch a job writing copy in his advertising firm, also allowing Bloch to write stories in his spare time in the office. Bloch was close friends with C.L. Moore and her husband Henry Kuttner, who visited him in Milwaukee.

During the years of the Depression, Bloch appeared regularly in dramatic productions, writing and performing in his own sketches. Around 1936 he sold some gags to radio comedians Stoopnagle and Budd, and to Roy Atwell. Also in 1936, his tale “The Grinning Ghoul” was published in *Weird Tales* (June); “The Opener of the Way” appeared in *Weird Tales* (Oct); “Mother of Serpents” appeared in the December issue. The December issue also contained Lovecraft’s tale “The Haunter of the Dark” in which he killed off young author “Robert Blake”.

In 1937, following Lovecraft’s death, “The Mannikin” appeared in *Weird Tales* for April. *Weird Tales* published “Return to the Sabbath” in July 1938. Bloch’s first science fiction story, “The Secret of the Observatory” appeared in *Amazing Stories* (Aug 1938). In a profile accompanying this tale, Bloch described himself as “tall, dark, unhandsome” with “all the charm and personality of a swamp adder”. He noted that “I hate everything”, but reserved particular dislike for “bean soup, red nail polish, house-cleaning, and optimists”.

In 1939, Bloch was contacted by James Doolittle, who was managing the campaign for Mayor of Milwaukee of a little-known assistant city attorney named Carl Zeidler. He was asked to work on Zeidler’s speechwriting, advertising, and photo ops, in collaboration with Harold Gauer. They created elaborate campaign shows; in Bloch’s 1993 autobiography, *Once Around the Bloch,* he gives an inside account of the campaign, and the innovations he and Gauer came up with—for instance, the original releasing-balloons-from-the-ceiling shtick. He comments bitterly on how, after Zeidler's victory, they were ignored and not even paid their promised salaries. He ends the story with a wryly philosophical point:

If Carl Zeidler had not asked Jim Doolittle to manage his campaign, Doolittle would never have contacted me about it. And the only reason Doolittle knew me to begin with was because he read my yarn ("The Cloak") in *Unknown.* Rattling this chain of circumstances, one may stretch it a bit further. If I had not written a little vampire story called "The Cloak", Carl Zeidler might never have become mayor of Milwaukee.

Also in 1939, two of Bloch's tales were published: "The Strange Flight of Richard Clayton" *(Amazing Stories,* August) and "The Cloak" *(Unknown,* March).

In October 1941, the tale "A Good Knight's Work" in *Unknown Worlds* first appeared. Shortly thereafter, Bloch created the Damon Runyon-esque humorous series character Lefty Feep in the story "Time Wounds All Heels" *Fantastic Adventures* (April 1942). Around the same time, he began work as an advertising copywriter at the Gustav Marx Advertising Agency, a position he held until 1953. Marx allowed Bloch to write stories in the office in quiet times. Bloch published a total of 23 Lefty Feep stories in *Fantastic Adventures,* the last one published in 1950, but the bulk appeared during World War II. Feep's character name had actually been coined by Bloch's friend/collaborator Harold Gauer for their unpublished novel *In the Land of Sky-Blue Ointments,* Bloch also worked for a time in local vaudeville and tried to break into writing for nationally known performers.

Bloch gradually evolved away from Lovecraftian imitations towards a unique style of his own. One of the first distinctly "Blochian" stories was "Yours Truly, Jack the Ripper", *(Weird Tales,* July 1943). The story was Bloch's take on the Jack the Ripper legend, and was filled out with more genuine factual details of the case than many other fictional treatments. It cast the Ripper as an eternal being who must make human sacrifices to extend his immortality. It was adapted for both radio (in *Stay Tuned for*

Terror) and television (as an episode of *Thriller* in 1961 adapted by Barre Lyndon). Bloch followed up this story with a number of others in a similar vein dealing with half-historic, half-legendary figures such as the Man in the Iron Mask ("Iron Mask", 1944), the Marquis de Sade ("The Skull of the Marquis de Sade", 1945) and Lizzie Borden ("Lizzie Borden Took an Axe . . .", 1946).

In 1944, Laird Cregar performed Bloch's tale "Yours Truly, Jack the Ripper" over a coast-to-coast radio network.

Towards the end of World War Two, in 1945, Bloch was asked to write 39 15-minute episodes of his own radio horror show called *Stay Tuned for Terror.* Many of the programs were adaptations of his own pulp stories. (None of the episodes, which were all broadcast, are extant).

The same year he published "The Skull of the Marquis de Sade" *(Weird Tales,* Sept). August Derleth's Arkham House, Lovecraft's publisher, published Bloch's first collection of short stories, *The Opener of the Way,* in an edition of 2,000 copies, with jacket art by Ronald Clyne. At the same time, his best-known early tale, "Yours Truly, Jack the Ripper", received considerableattention through dramatization on radio and reprinting in anthologies. This story, as noted below, involving a Ripper who has found literal immortality through his crimes, has been widely imitated (or plagiarized); Bloch himself would return to the theme (see below). Stories published in 1946 include "Enoch" *(Weird Tales,* Sept) and *Lizzie Borden Took an Axe (Weird Tales,* Nov).

Bloch's first novel was published in hardcover—the thriller *The Scarf* (The Dial Press 1947; the Fawcett Gold medal paperback of 1966 features a revised text). It tells the story of a writer, Daniel Morley, who uses real women as models for his characters. But as soon as he is done writing the story, he is compelled to murder them, and always the same way: with the maroon scarf he has had since childhood. The story begins in Minneapolis and follows him and his trail of dead bodies to Chicago, New York City, and finally Hollywood, where his hit novel is going to be turned into a movie, and where his self-control may have reached its limit.

In 1948, Bloch was the Guest of Honor at Torcon I, World Science Fiction Convention, Toronto, Canada. In 1952 he published "Lucy Comes to Stay" (Weird Tales, Jan).

Bloch published three novels in 1954—*Spiderweb, The Kidnapper* and *The Will to Kill* as he endeavored to support his family. That same year he was a weekly guest panellist on the TV quiz show *It's a Draw. Shooting Star* (1958), a mainstream novel, was published in a double volume with a collection of Bloch's stories titled *Terror in the Night. This Crowded Earth* (1958) was science fiction.

With the demise of *Weird Tales*, Bloch continued to have his fiction published in *Amazing, Fantastic, The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction,* and *Fantastic Universe*; he was a particularly frequent contributor to *Imagination* and *Imaginative Tales.* His output of thrillers increased and he began to appear regularly in *The Saint, Ellery Queen* and similar mystery magazines, and to such suspense and horror-fiction magazine projects as *Shock.*

Robert Bloch continued to revisit the Jack the Ripper theme. His contribution to Harlan Ellison's 1967 science fiction anthology *Dangerous Visions* was a story, "A Toy for Juliette", which evoked both Jack the Ripper and the Marquis de Sade in a time-travel story. The same anthology had Ellison's sequel to it titled "The Prowler in the City at the Edge of the World". His earlier idea of the Ripper as an immortal being resurfaced in Bloch's contribution to the original *Star Trek* series episode "Wolf in the Fold". His 1984 novel *Night of the Ripper* is set during the reign of Queen Victoria and follows the investigation of Inspector Frederick Abberline in attempting to apprehend the Ripper, and includes some famous Victorians such as Sir Arthur Conan Doyle within the storyline.

Bloch won the Hugo Award for Best Short Story for "That Hellbound Train" in 1959, the same year that his sixth novel, *Psycho*, was published. Bloch had written an earlier short story involving dissociative identity disorder, "The Real Bad Friend", which appeared in the February 1957 *Mike Shayne Mystery Magazine,* that foreshadowed the 1959 novel *Psycho.*

However, *Psycho* also has thematic links to the story “Lucy Comes to Stay.” Also in 1959, Bloch delivered a lecture titled “Imagination and Modern Social Criticism” at the University of Chicago; this was reprinted in the critical volume *The Science*

Fiction Novel (Advent Publishers). His story “The Hungry Eye” appeared in *Fantastic* (May). This was also the year in which, despite having graduated from painting watercolours to oils, he gave up painting completely.

Norman Bates, the main character in *Psycho,* was very loosely based on two people. First was the real-life serial killer Ed Gein, about whom Bloch later wrote a fictionalized account, “The Shambles of Ed Gein”. (The story can be found in *Crimes and Punishments: The Lost Bloch, Volume* 3). Second, it has been indicated by several people, including Noel Carter (wife of Lin Carter) and Chris Steinbrunner, as well as allegedly by Bloch himself, that Norman Bates was partly based on Calvin Beck. Bloch’s basing of the character of Norman Bates on Ed Gein is discussed in the documentary *Ed Gein: The Ghoul of Plainfield,* which can be found on Disc 2 of the DVD release of the remake of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (2003). However, Bloch also commented that it was the situation itself—a mass murderer living undetected and unsuspected in a typical small town in middle America—rather than Gein himself who sparked Bloch’s storyline. He writes: “Thus the real-life murderer was not the role model for my character Norman Bates. Ed Gein didn’t own or operate a motel. Ed Gein didn’t kill anyone in the shower. Ed Gein wasn’t into taxidermy. Ed Gein didn’t stuff his mother, keep her body in the house, dress in a drag outfit, or adopt an alternative personality. These were the functions and characteristics of Norman Bates, and Norman Bates didn’t exist until I made him up. Out of my own imagination, I add, which is probably the reason so few offer to take showers with me.”

Though Bloch had little involvement with the film version of his novel, which was directed by Alfred Hitchcock from an adapted screenplay by

Joseph Stefano, he was to become most famous as its author. Bloch was awarded a special Mystery Writers of America scroll for the novel in 1961.

The novel is one of the first examples at full length of Bloch's use of modern urban horror relying on the horrors of interior psychology rather than the supernatural. "By the mid-1940s, I had pretty well mined the vein of ordinary supernatural themes until it had become varicose," Bloch explained to Douglas E. Winter in an interview. "I realized, as a result of what went on during World War II and of reading the more widely disseminated work in psychology, that the real horror is not in the shadows, but in that twisted little world inside our own skulls." While Bloch was not the first horror writer to utilise a psychological approach (it originates in the work of Edgar Allan Poe), Bloch's psychological approach in modern times was comparatively unique.

Bloch's agent, Harry Altshuler, received a "blind bid" for the novel—the buyer's name was not mentioned—of $7,500 for screen rights to the book. The bid eventually went to $9,500, which Bloch accepted. Bloch had never sold a book to Hollywood before. His contract with Simon & Schuster included no bonus for a film sale. The publisher took 15 percent according to contract, while the agent took his 10%; Bloch wound up with about $6,750 before taxes. Despite the enormous profits generated by Hitchcock's film, Bloch received no further direct compensation.

Only Hitchcock's film was based on Bloch's novel. The later films in the *Psycho* series bear no relation to either of Bloch's sequel novels. Indeed, Bloch's proposed script for the film *Psycho II* was rejected by the studio (as were many other submissions), and it was this that he subsequently adapted for his own sequel novel.

The film *Hitchcock* (2012) tells the story of Alfred Hitchcock's making of the film version of *Psycho.* Although it mentions Bloch and his novel, Bloch himself is not a character in the movie.

Following his move to Hollywood, around 1960, Bloch had multiple assignments from various television companies. However, he was not allowed to write for five months when the Writers Guild had a strike. After the strike was over, he became a frequent scriptwriter for television and film projects in the mystery, suspense, and horror genre. His first assignments were for the Macdonald Carey vehicle, *Lock-Up,* (penning five episodes) as well as one for *Whispering Smith.* Further TV work included an episode of *Bus Stop* ("I Kiss Your Shadow"), 10 episodes of *Thriller* (1960-62, several based on his own stories), and 10 episodes of *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* (1960-62). His short story collection *Pleasant Dreams—Nightmares* was published by Arkham House in 1960.

Bloch wrote the screenplay for *The Cabinet of Caligari* (1962), which is only very loosely related to the 1920 German silent film, and proved to be an unhappy experience. The same year, Bloch penned the story and teleplay "The Sorcerer's Apprentice" for *Alfred Hitchcock Presents.* The episode was shelved when the NBC Television Network and sponsor Revlon called its ending "too gruesome" (by 1960s standards) for airing. Bloch was pleased later when the episode was included in the program's syndication package to affiliate stations, where not one complaint was registered. Today, due to public domain status, the episode is readily available in home media formats from numerous distributors and is even available on free video on demand.

His TV work did not slow Bloch's fictional output. In the early 1960s he published several novels, including *The Dead Beat* (1960), and *Firebug* (1961), for which Harlan Ellison, then an editor at Regency Books, contributed the first 1,200 words. In 1962 numerous works appeared in book form. Bloch's novel *The Couch* (1962) (the basis for the screenplay of his first movie, filmed the same year) was published. That year several Bloch short story collections—*Atoms and Evil, More Nightmares* and *Yours Truly, Jack the Ripper* were published, as well as another novel, *Terror* (whose working titles included *Amok* and *Kill for Kali).* Editor Earl Kemp assembled a selection of Bloch's prolific output for fan magazines as *The Eight Stage of Fandom: Selections from 25 years of Fan Writing* (Advent Publishers). In this era, Stephen King later wrote, "What Bloch did with such novels as *The Deadbeat, The Scarf, Firebug, Psycho,* and *The Couch* was to re-discover the suspense novel and reinvent the antihero as first discovered by James Cain.”

During 1963, Bloch saw into print two further collections of short stories, *Bogey men* and *Horror-7.* In 1964 Bloch married Eleanor Alexander and wrote original screenplays for two films produced and directed by William Castle, *Strait-Jacket* (1964) and *The Night Walker* (also 1964), along with *The Skull* (1965).The latter film was based on his short story “The Skull of the Marquis de Sade”.

Robert Bloch’s further TV writing in this period included *The Alfred Hitchcock Hour* (7 episodes, 1962-1965), *I Spy* (1 episode, 1966), *Run for Your Life* (1 episode, 1966), and *The Girl from U.N.C.L.E.* (1 episode, 1967). He penned three scripts for the original *Star Trek* series which were screened in 1966 and 1967: “What Are Little Girls Made Of?”, “Wolf in the Fold” (another Jack the Ripper variant), and “Catspaw”.

In 1968, Bloch returned to London to do two episodes for the English Hammer Films series *Journey to the Unknown* for Twentieth Century Fox. One of the episodes, “The Indian Spirit Guide”, was included in the American TV movie *Journey to Midnight* (1968). The other episode was “Girl of My Dreams,” co-scripted with Michael J. Bird and based on the eponymous story by Richard Matheson.

Following the movie *The Skull* (1965), which was based on a Bloch story but scripted by Milton Subotsky, he wrote the screenplays for five feature films produced by Amicus Productions—*The Psychopath* (1966), *The Deadly Bees* (co-written with Anthony Marriott, 1967), *Torture Garden* (also 1967), *The House That Dripped Blood* (1971) and *Asylum* (1972). The last two films featured stories written by Bloch that were printed first in anthologies he wrote in the 1940s and early 1950s.

During the 1970s, Bloch wrote two TV movies for director Curtis Harrington—*The Cat Creature* (1973) (an *ABC Movie of the Week)* and *The Dead Don’t Die. The Cat Creature* was an unhappy production experience for Bloch. Producer Doug Cramer wanted to do an update of *Cat People* (1942), the Val Lewton-produced film. Bloch commented: “Instead, I suggested a blending of the elements of several well-remembered films, and came up with a story line which dealt with the Egyptian cat-goddess (Bast), reincarnation and the first bypass operation ever performed on an artichoke heart.” A detailed account of the troubled production of the film is described in Bloch’s autobiography.

Bloch meanwhile (interspersed between his screenplays for Amicus Productions and other projects), penned single episodes for *Night Gallery* (1971), *Ghost Story* (1972), *The Manhunter* (1974), and *Gemini Man* (1976).

In 1965, two further collections of short stories appeared—*The Skull of the Marquis de Sade* and *Tales in a Jugular Vein.* 1966 saw Bloch win the Ann Radcliffe Award for Television and publisher yet another collection of shorts—*Chamber of Horrors.* Bloch returned to the site of his childhood home at 620 East Knapp St, Milwaukee (the address used by Lovecraft for the character Robert Blake in *The Haunter of the Dark)* only to find the neighborhood razed and the entire neighborhood leveled and replaced by expressway approaches.

In 1967, another Bloch collection, *The Living Demons* was issued. He also published another classic story of Jack the Ripper, “A Toy for Juliette” in Harlan Ellison’s *Dangerous Visions* anthology. In 1968 he published a duo of long sf novellas as *This Crowded Earth and Ladies’ Day.* His novel *The Star Stalker* was published, and *Dragons and Nightmares* (the first collection of Lefty Feep stories) appeared in hardcover (Mirage Press).

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Bloch won a second Ann Radcliffe Award, this time for Literature, in 1969. That same year, Bloch was invited to the Second International Film Festival in Rio de Janeiro, March 23-31, along with other science fiction writers from the United States, Britain and Europe.

In 1971, Bloch served as president of the Mystery Writers of America, meanwhile publishing the novel *Sneak preview,* the collection *fear Today, Gone Tomorrow,* and the short novel *It’s All in Your Mind.* In 1972 he published another novel, *Night-World.* In 1973 Bloch was the Guest of Honor at Torcon II, World Science Fiction Convention, Toronto. 1974 saw the publication of his novel *American Gothic,* inspired by the true life story of serial killer H.H. Holmes.

In 1975, Bloch won the Lifetime Achievement Award at the First World Fantasy Convention held in Providence, Rhode Island. The award was a bust of H.P. Lovecraft. The occasion of this convention was the first time Bloch actually visited the city of Providence. An audio recording was made of Robert Bloch during that 1975 convention.

In 1976, two records of Bloch recordings of his stories were released by Alternate World recordings—*Gravely, Robert Bloch!” and* Blood! The Life and Times of jack the Ripper!”(with Harlan Ellison). In 1977, Lester del Rey edited *The Best of Robert Bloch* for Del Rey books. Two further short story collections appeared—*Cold Chills* and *The King of Terrors.*

Bloch continued to published short story collections throughout this period. His *Selected Stories* (reprinted in paperback with the incorrect title *The Complete Stories)* appeared in three volumes just prior to his death, although many previously uncollected tales have appeared in volumes published since 1997 (see below). Bloch also contributed the story "Heir Apparent," set in Andre Norton's Witch World, to *Tales of the Witch World* (Vol. 1), NY: Tor, 1987.

1979 saw the publication of Bloch's novel *There is a Serpent in Eden* (also reissued as *The Cunning),* and two more short story collections, *Out of the Mouths of graves* and *Such Stuff as Screams Are Made Of.*

His numerous novels of the 1970s demonstrate Bloch's thematic range, from science fiction—*Sneak Preview* (1971)—through horror novels such as the loving Lovecraftian tribute *Strange Eons* (Whispers Press, 1978) and the non-supernatural mystery *There is a Serpent in Eden* (1979).

Robert Bloch's screenplay-writing career continued active through the 1980s, with teleplays for *Tales of the Unexpected* (one episode, 1980), *Darkroom* (two episodes,1981), *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* (1 episode, 1986), *Tales from the Darkside* (three episodes, 1984-87—"Beetles", "A Case of the Stubborns" and "Everybody needs a Little Love") and *Monsters* (three episodes, 1988-1989—"The Legacy", "Mannikins of Horror", and "Reaper"). No further screen work appeared in the last five years before his death, although an adaptation of his "collaboration" with Edgar Allan Poe, "The Lighthouse", was filmed as an episode of *The Hunger* in 1998.

The First World Fantasy Convention: Three Authors Remember (Necronomicon Press, 1980) features reminiscences of that important event by Bloch, T.E.D. Klein and Fritz Leiber. In 1981, Zebra Books issued the first edition of the Cthulhu Mythos-themed collection *Mysteries of the Worm.* This item was reprinted some years later in an expanded edition by Chaosium.

Bloch's sequel to the original *Psycho (Psycho II* was published in 1982 (unrelated to the film of the same title) and in 1983 he novelised *Twilight*

Zone: The Movie. His novel *Night of the Ripper* (1984), was another return to one of Bloch's favourite themes, the Jack the Ripper murders of 1888.

In 1986, Scream Press published the hardcover omnibus *Unholy Trinity,* collecting three by now scarce Bloch novels, *The Scarf*, *The Dead Beat* and *The Couch.* A second retrospective selection of Bloch's nonfiction was published by NESFA Press as *Out of My Head.*

In 1987, Bloch celebrated his 70th birthday. Underwood-Miller issued the three-volume hardcover set *The Selected Stories of Robert Bloch* (individual volumes titled *Final reckonings, Bitter Ends* and *Last Rites).* When Citadel press reissued this in paperback they incorrectly named it *The Collected Stories of Robert Bloch.* The same year a collection, *Midnight Pleasures* appeared from Doubleday, and *Lost in Time and Space with Lefty Feep* (Creatures at Large Press) collected a number of the stories on the Lefty Feep series. The latter was the first of a projected series of three volumes, however the further volumes were never published. In 1988, Tor Books reissued Bloch's scarce second novel, *The Kidnapper.'*

In 1989, several works were published: the collection, *Fear and Trembling,* the thriller novel *Lori* (later adapted as a standalone graphic novel) and another omnibus of long out-of-print early novels, *Screams* (containing *The Will to Kill*, *Firebug* and *The Star Stalker*). Randall D. Larson issued *The Robert Bloch Companion: Collected Interviews 1969-1986* (Starmont House), together with *Robert Bloch* (Starmont Reader's Guide No 37), an exhaustive study of Bloch's work, and *The Complete Robert Bloch: An Illustrated, Comprehensive Bibliography* (Fandom Unlimited Enterprises). Larson's three books were bound in hardcover and distributed by Borgo Press.

Bloch's novel, *The Jekyll Legacy* (1990), was a collaboration with Andre Norton and a sequel to Robert Louis Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde.* The same year he returned to the Norman Bates "mythos" with *Psycho House* (Tor), the third Psycho novel. As with the second novel in the sequence, it bears no relation to the film titled *Psycho III.* It would prove to be his last published novel.

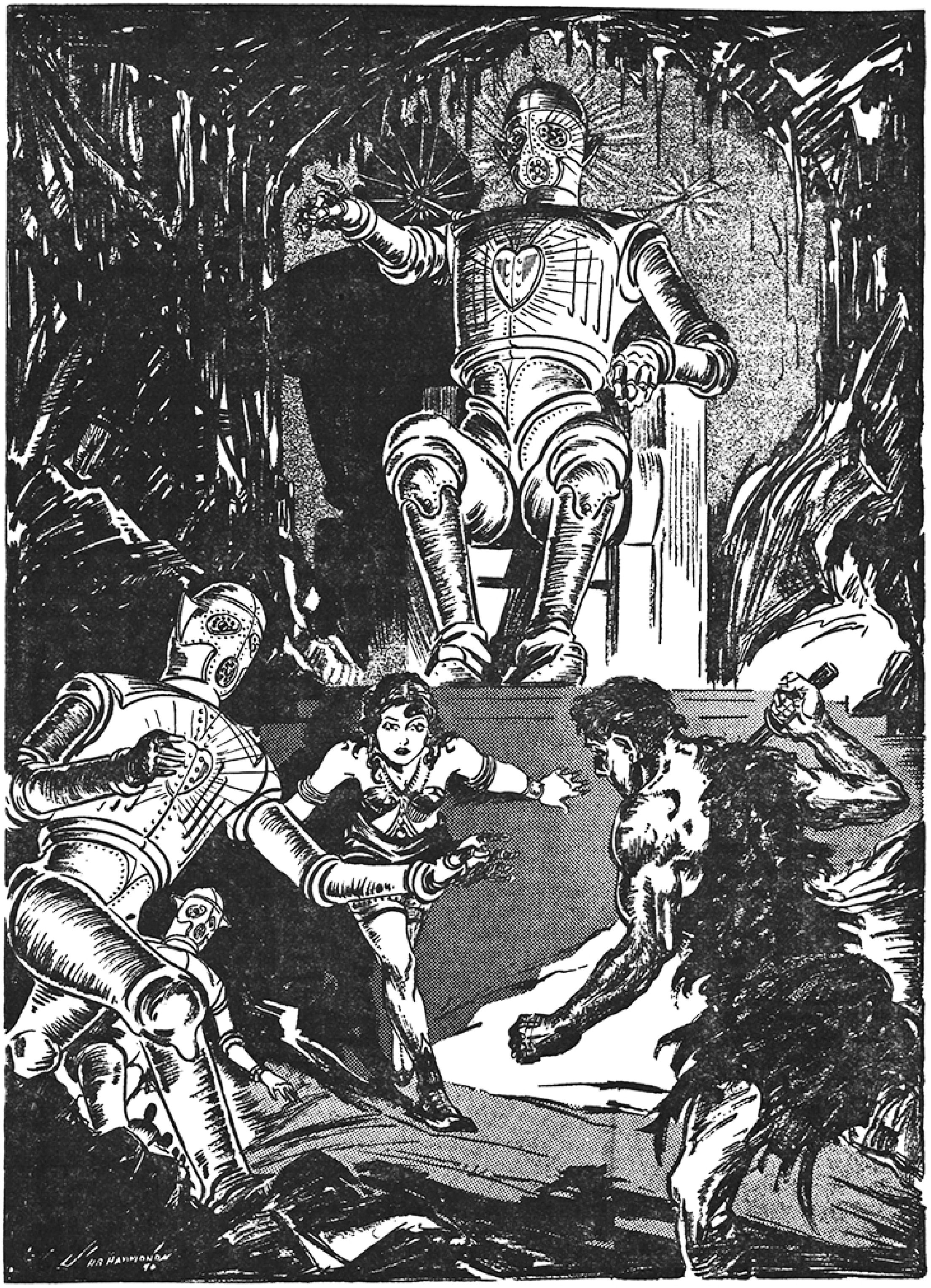
In February 1991, he was given the Honor of Master of Ceremonies at the first World Horror Convention held in Nashville, Tennessee. Weird Tales issued a special Robert Bloch issue in Spring, including his screenplay for the televised version of his tale “Beetles””. A standalone chapbook of the story “Yours Truly, Jack the Ripper” was issued in both hardcover and paperback by Pulphouse, and Bloch co-edited with Martin H. Greenberg the original anthology *Psycho-Paths* (Tor). In 1991 Bloch contributed an Introduction to *In Search of Lovecraft* by J. Vernon Shea.

In 1992, Bloch celebrated his 75th birthday with a bash at a Los Angeles mystery/horror bookstore which was attended by many sf/horror notables. In 1993, he published his “unauthorized autobiography”, *Once Around the Bloch* (Tor) and edited the original anthology *Monsters in Our Midst.*

In early 1994, Fedogan and Bremer published a collection of 39 of his stories, *The Early Fears.* Bloch began editing a new original anthology, *Robert Bloch’s Psychos* but was unable to complete work on it prior to his death; Martin H. Greenberg finished the work posthumously and the book appeared several years later (1997).

PSEUDONYMS

Robert A. Bloch
Bob Bloch
Robert Bloh
Robert Blok
Tarleton Fiske
Will Folke
Keith Hammond
Nathan Hindin
E.K. Jarvis
Wilson Kane
Herbert Scanlon
Lan Stewart
Collier Young


HR HAMMOND '40

Meet the Authors

ROBERT BLOCH Author of SECRET OF THE OBSERVATORY

I WAS born in Chicago, Illinois, and by the time this hits print I shall have attained the fatal age of 21—shall then retire and await my old-age pension. At present writing I exist (rather than live) in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Have been writing and selling weird fiction since I was 17, but this constitutes my first venture in the science fiction field. Several of my scientific articles have appeared in fan magazines, however, where they were greeted with almost frenzied indifference.

For the benefit of the morbidly curious, I am tall, dark, unhandsome. I possess all the charm and personality of a swamp adder. Am interested in contemporary literature, psychology, thaumaturgy, and metaphysics. I devote almost all my spare time to eating and sleeping. In my general attitude toward life I am impartial—I hate everything.

But in various fields, I am most fond of the following personalities—Stravinsky, James Branch Cabell, Thorne Smith, Peter Lorre, Maurice Ravel, J. K. Huysmans, W. C. Fields, John Dos Passos, and the Marx Brothers. I most dislike bean soup, red nail polish, house-cleaning, and optimists.

“Secret of the Observatory” exemplifies my interest in photographic experimentation. My own inclinations lead toward that field of fantastic portraiture best exemplified by the work of William Mortensen, but it is my prognosis that future physical development of the camera will eventually provide the key to many secrets of light which at present can be expressed only in the abstruse formulae of physicists. The possibilities of the modern camera have by no means been fully realized as yet, and it is highly probable that something quite similar to the Argus Eye may in time be evolved. But whether it does become a reality or not, I hope the readers like the story.—Robert Bloch, Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

Originally appeared in *Amazing Stories*, August 1938

Meet the Authors

ROBERT BLOCH Author of STRANGE FLIGHT OF RICHARD CLAYTON

THOSE reading my SECRET OF THE OBSERVATORY in an earlier issue will be interested in knowing that I am still the same lovable little fellow—a subtle blending of Wallace Beery and Shirley Temple; with possibly a slight dash of the Marquis de Sade. Several readers have been kind enough to ask how I write. (I'll ignore the dozens who asked "why?"). The answer is simple and has nothing to do with opium. In order to achieve generic significance I just create an environment for myself which fits the story background. Allow me to illustrate that statement.

If I write a weird tale I sit in a coffin. If I write a western I do it on horseback. (Wait until I get around to love stories!) In writing this science-fiction yarn I wore a space-suit—so called because the pants were several sizes too large for me. As I told one reader, I like to plunge right into the *locale* of my story. He suggested I write one about an open manhole.

Instead I wrote THE STRANGE FLIGHT OF RICHARD CLAYTON, which embodies a concept long fascinating to me. Since so many stories concern the *physical* difficulties of space-voyages, why not a yam about the *mental* hazards? Should inter-spatial travel evolve, I am certain that the psychological problems will be infinitely more complex than mechanical obstructions.

In order to prove this, members of the Fictioneers including authors Arthur Tofte, Ralph Milne Farley, Leo Schmidt, and myself are building a little space-ship of our own for a trial flight. Between work-periods these Fictioneers have as usual aided me in suggestions for the story, and I wish to extend my thanks. Perhaps I'll mail my next story in from the moon.

(ED. NOTE: Perhaps you won't!)

(AUTH. NOTE: Don't mind the editor, folks. I happen to know he's a robot*!)—Robert Bloch, Milwaukee, Wise.*

Originally appeared in *Amazing Stories*, March 1939

»»»» *Introducing* ««««
THE AUTHOR

ROBERT BLOCH
Author of
QUEEN OF THE METAL MEN

READERS of my stories (and they're two of the finest people I know) confess themselves amazed at my genius. Handsome as a Greek god, with a mind keener than Einstein's and a literary style superior to Shakespeare, they find it hard to believe that only six months ago I was a 9 7-pound weakling.

"How much do you weigh now, Bob?" they ask in admiration.

"97 pounds," I modestly reply.

This only goes to show where good hard work and clean living will get you in the end. That's where it got me. And yet I insist on writing fantastic fiction. I would write more, if it wasn't for the little green men that run out of the woodwork and pull down my socks every time I sit at the typewriter. I have managed to fool these fellows by not wearing socks, but lately they've taken to tugging at my trousers instead. Now there's nothing left for me to do but crawl into a burlap bag and take my typewriter with me. Fortunately there are plenty of editors who would be glad to furnish me with the bag.

Which brings us to this month's story.

I had my usual trouble with the tale, owing to the fact that I never learned to read or write, but it was a yam I very much wanted to do.

The ideas set forth in the tale are sincerely my own. I do believe that the imaginative field which produced a Weinbaum, a Merritt, and a Lovecraft demands really superior writing—and that at times it doesn't get it.

It took a vast nature to create this cosmos over billions of years; and yet many a callow hack goes blithely ahead and destroys half of it, swings planets out of line, blots out civilization, and spawns a dozen races of monsters—all in ten thousand words, or less. Quite a job. But it's a pretty serious thing to play God, and sometimes the poor author isn't always up to it. He is apt to bite off more than he can chew, or the reader can swallow.

It took a Biblical God seven days to create one poor stooge of a man, and it took a blind evolution millions of years to do the same—and yet too many authors set themselves up as demiurges and do the trick in a couple of hours.

Now why is this so? Because I think too often the boys forget that they are writing *fiction.* They take one puny fact; inverting a chemical equation to create a new physical law, for example—and because they are so sure that they have "science" in their story they forget how to be convincing. Anything goes, the wilder the better. Haven't they got a "fact" in the yam to back them up? This fallacious reasoning often results in a sorry job.

I am throwing no stones from my glass house. I know, only too well, that most S-F authors are sincere, and that the editors are conscientious. A lot of swell tales are being written, and I am inclined to think that the poor ones are the fault of only one person—the *reader.*

As long as S-F readers sit back on their haunches and swallow childish corn that's what they'll be fed. Every sincere author and editor welcomes honest constructive criticism; begs for it. Only one person can improve science-fiction, and that is the reader by his plain statement of what he wants.

In this story, "Queen of the Metal Men" I have tried to create a fantastic scene, based on the facts and theories of the present day, and visualize a world of the future as it might conceivably be. Darro is the product of a world gone mad with war, and he is as innocent of the past as his prototype, the caveman, was innocent of the future.

I was intrigued by the thought of a future man, digging down into the ruins of a vanished civilization, and finding something just a bit too hot for him to handle. I have managed to get his viewpoint sufficiently to lend enough credence to the narrative to carry him to the existence of a strange world of mystery which does lie about us; a world which should be utilized in science-fiction. Realizing that he is writing fiction and not depending on his precious "fact" it seems to me the author can do a better job every time. But as I say, it's my own insignificant opinion and nothing more; I only hope it served as inspiration for a tolerable yam.

For the benefit of those who came in late; I was born in Chicago 23 years ago and am at present living in poverty. Have written over 1,000,000 stories and have sold less than 1% of them. A professional schizophrenic, I am allergic to human beings. I owe everything to my mother, and she is suing me for it. My favorite color is redheads, my favorite sport is anthropophagism, and my hobby is reading the biographies of fantasy writers. I eat fan-letters, and my one ambition is to throw an editor into a wastebasket.*—Robert Bloch, Milwaukee, Wisconsin.*

(Editorial note: Mr. Bloch, in giving us this rather humorous account of himself, has neglected to tell a few facts about himself that your editor knows of, as a personal friend of a writer who is not in the least the sort of screwball he likes to tell people he is.

Oh, yes, he does do unusual things, and he hasn't given us as much hokum as you might infer, because your editor remembers one anecdote wherein Author Robert Bloch journeyed to the local graveyard, and there awaited the rising of the spirits, just for the purpose of getting "into the mood" for a weird yarn, and to gather "local color" of a eerie nature.

But in reality, Robert Bloch is one of the most earnest and hardworking authors in the business, and wherever he goes, is the favorite, and the center of interest. He is vastly prolific, turns out mainly weirds and science-fantasy, and does some very creditable radio script. In addition, his self-directed humor has, in your editor's opinion, led to the writing of a humorous book which tops Thorne Smith by a country mile. He's a swell fellow, that Robert Bloch.

Originally appeared in *Fantastic Stories*, April 1940

»»»» *Introducing* ««««
THE AUTHOR

IT ISN'T often I get a request for a biography (as a matter of fact I had to request this one myself) and it's quite a problem deciding just what to say.

Should, I describe myself? The picture herewith ought to tell its own story. I'm tall, thin, and twenty-six. I have one wife and innumerable brain-children. I live in a small apartment located somewhere between squalor and abject poverty.

How did I break into writing? I started out may back in '38 writing fantasy yarns for a magazine called "Strange Stories." The magazine died, but I didn't. I drifted off into the advertising game, by fits and starts. (I threw innumerable fits and made many false starts.)

Then, one evening in last December, I found myself in the palatial apartment of RAP, a little-known figure in the world of fantastic fiction. He was host to a small party of writers including Bill McGivern, David Wright O'Brien, Howard Browne, Leroy Yerxa, and Robert Bloch. These word-merchants were engaged in a friendly game of poker, and as I saw them casually peel off $100 bills from massive wads of currency, my ambition kindled.

I, too, would become a writer again—for sheer love of it! (Love of money, I mean).

No sooner said than done. I dashed home, dashed off a story, and I'll be double-dashed if it didn't sell! Since that time you can't tear me away from my typewriter. I know, because the finance company tried it.

Why did I come to write “It’s a Small World” ? Frankly, I owe a debt to William Brengle’s Lilliputian story for inspiring the notion. I read his tale, thought to myself, “There’s a nice yarn.” Then I kept right on thinking.

Lilliputians . . . fascinating figures for story material . . . but authors always put their tiny protagonists in strange, exotic settings. Swift did. The author of “Dr. Cyclops” followed suit. Ray Cummings’ stories follow the pattern.

To me, there was more of a story in the adventures of human mannikins in ordinary backgrounds. More horror and more outlandish situations in a child’s nursery, for example.

As an unusual idea, the problem of writing such a story appealed to me. So I wrote it, and hope it appeals to you! —Tarleton Fiske.

P.S. I hope the fans realize that this photograph of me is just a gag. You see, I really can’t read!

**The story for which Mr. Fiske wrote this autobiographical sketch will appear in a later issue, having been crowded out by its length, to be replaced by “Fairy Tale.” Strangely enough, this new story is also about tiny beings, and the editors believe you will be fascinated by both yarns.*—ED.

Originally appeared in *Fantastic Stories*, August 1943

AUTHOR, AUTHOR

ROBERT BLOCH

Robert Bloch once stated, “I have no sense of humor; I just think that way.” Be that as it may, such of his thoughts as he has put on paper are entertaining an ever-increasing audience; in magazines, books and on the radio.

Noted on the one hand for his hilarious humorous tales, on the other hand, he is a serious craftsman in the field of the weird and macabre. A friend and admirer of the late Howard Phillips Lovecraft, Bob freely acknowledges his influence and inspiration. That Lovecraft regarded him highly is shown by the fact that Bloch is the only one to whom Lovecraft ever dedicated a story (“The Haunter of the Dark”).

When writing a humorous story, Bob Bloch’s lack of restraint is contagious as he plunges deep into a saturnalia of mirth. On the other hand, when out to chill the reader with one of his weirds, he will seek perfection with a determination as singleminded as his pursuit of laughter. Bloch once spent a night in a graveyard to get the right atmosphere for a certain story.

Coming to the field of professional fantasy writing thru fandom, Bob is still at heart a fan. One of the busiest of men, he still finds time to keep in touch with his fan friends and to help out with fannish activities. He has attended several of the conventions and was pro guest of honor at the TORCON last year.

Until recently Bob was extremely reluctant to speak seriously of himself and his work, always concealing the picture of a serious conscientious craftsman behind a mask of levity. It has been but a few years since Bloch claimed never to have had a “straight” photo taken, the the “gag” pictures were legion. As a result, few of his admirers ever penetrated to the real Robert Bloch. We hope these few words following will help more of his fans to get Acquainted with Bob Bloch, a swell guy.

The birth certificate reads April 5th, 1917. . . . born, to poor bat honest parents, 7½ pounds of cuddlesome sweetness with Just the cutest smile!

That’s me, folks. People who know say I haven’t changed a bit. Hardly gained any weight either.

The blasted event took place in Chicago, and I spent the first five years of my life in that city; the next five in Maywood, Illinois.

As a child I was somewhat precocious, and due to a system of skipping semesters, found myself in fourth grade when I was eight.

I also managed to wangle myself a pass into the adult section of the Public Library and embarked on an omnivorous reading program. Despite this I was quite gregarious and, I fear, a nasty little brat; organizing the entire neighborhood gang for circuses, parades, pirate expeditions and trench warfare. Our back yard was dug up for No Man’s Land; tents blossomed forth from time to time and there were a series of cabins and playhouses. Somehow I seem to have neglected sex during this period.

Fond parents, relatives and teachers had me pegged as a budding artist——I still do a little watercolor work and pencil sketching from time to time but myopia in adolescence seemed to effectively bar art as a career.

On the whole, however, my childhood seems, in retrospect, to have been disgustingly normal: I was cowardly, treacherous, cruel, stubborn, unreasonable, vain, selfish and hysterical——in short just like any other child.

I had, for a time, a passion for lead soldiers—not the crude castings found today, but the delicate German-made items that included such exotic groupings as Aztecs, Roman soldiery, Hindu troops on elephants, etc.; and then, too, there were the WW Britain sets, miniature reproductions of

English regiments. I bought them with am eye to historical authenticity and set up full dining-room table replicas of famous battle scenes, using clay sandbags, log breastworks, straw, sand and a dun colored cloth for “ground” which was minutely and painstakingly covered with red watercolor “bloodstains”. Needless to say, today I am fervently opposed to war.

Another youthful passion was the silent cinema—the magic murmur of the organ in rich darkness; the flickering fantasy of the film itself. Today I can still recall, without benefit of research or even the summoning of conscious effort, the names of several hundred featured actors and actresses, of hundreds of movies seen on successive Saturday afternoons between 1924 and 1929. This probably ranks as ay most useless accomplishment.

But it is to the silent motion picture, I believe, that I owe my interest in fantasy. In 1925, when I was eight, I had never attended a movie alone at night. I chose to go, and I chose to see an actor new to me. The thespian was one Lon Chaney, and the picture “The Phantom of the Opera”. In psychiatric terminology, it soared the living hell out of me and I ran all the way home to enjoy the first of about two years of recurrent nightmares.

In August, 1927, I happened to be in the railroad depot with my parents and ay aunt, and she artlessly offered to buy me a magazine to read. The October, 1927 issue of WEIRD TALKS was my choice——over her shocked protest. I read several issues and particularly admired the Lovecraft stories then appearing. My parents, however, were not impressed with Hugh Rankin’s sexy covers, and when we moved to Milwaukie the following year I gradually abandoned my interest. It wasn’t until 1932 that I returned to reading WT during convalescence from flu.

By this time I’d entered high school, where my childhood interest in “dressing up” flowered into a series of rather elaborate dramatic enterprises. I soon became an amateur comic—a rile, watered-down version of the late Robert Woolsey, sporting a rubber cigar and accoutering myself in a series of lurid garments which, I regret to say, seemed to influence my sartorial tastes permanently. But I was writing my own alleged “dialogue” and doing skits and plays with a certain obnoxious facility. An asthenic type, I soon found that the high school stage was my forte, affording me the ego-gratification I never could hope to attain in athletic pursuits.

Late in ’32 I wrote my first “fan letter” to H.P. Lovecraft. He responded, and for some reason encouraged correspondence—offering to lend me the books in his library, and suggesting that I try my hand at stories of my own. He introduced me via mail to other fantasy writers; August Derleth, Clark Ashton Smith, I. Hoffman Price. Why he bothered with the rambling letters of a 13-year-old kid, I’ll never know, but his Kindness and interest got me started on the road to ruin—oops, I mean, writing.

During my last year of high school, I rented a typewriter and learned to type the hard way; by batting out stories which I began to submit to fan magazines of 1934. William Crawford published “Lillies” in that year, and “The Black Lotus”. FANTASY FAN brought out “The Laughter of a Ghoul”. Soon I was submitting yarns to WEIRD TALES. Editor Farnsworth Wright worked patiently with me, and in 1934, two months after high-school graduation, he bought my first story and then another, and another, and another. By the end of ’34 I had sold him the staggering total of four stories and made a cool one hundred dollars, cash. Of course there was no question in my mind any longer——I would be a writer. It was all very simple. Almost halfwitted.

But I was seventeen. The depression was in full swing. My fellow classmates graduated directly into the CCC or the ranks of the jobless. The really lucky ones worked their way through college and then starved. Some of the boys with connections in high places managed to get real jobs and made as much as fifteen dollars a week. Well, maybe I could keep my rented typewriter on that rickety card table in the bedroom and eventually make fifteen dollars a week myself. It was worth a try. So I tried.

The Milwaukie Fictioneers, a local writing group, Invited me to join——their members included at that time the currently popular Ralph Milne Farley, Ray Palmer and Stanley Weinbaum. I met another Milwaukeean, Earl Pierce, Jr. Gradually my contacts widened; I was doing some radio gag work, a series of humorous articles for FANTASY MAGAZINE, and continuing with WEIRD TALES. My list of correspondents widened; one of the people who wrote me was a man named Henry Kutter, or Kudner——some such name; lived way off in California. Pretty soon he and I began to collaborate by mail.

In 1937 Lovecraft died. It broke me up. The California correspondent seemed to sense that, and invited me west for a visit. So I went out to vacation for a month or so with Kuttner and while his guest met the L.A. crowd, and Fritz Leiber, Jr., and another vacation guest—C.L. Moore (later Mrs. Kuttner, of all people).

The next few years were spent in breaking into new magazine markets. There were several unsuccessful solo and collaboration attempts at novels, but in the main I concentrated on short stories, under my own name and the pseudonym, Tarleton Fiske.

In 1940, a friend and myself did the ghost writing on a local mayorality campaign. Its success brought in sufficient funds for me to move into a place of ay own and marry Marion Holcombe, who was rash enough to agree.

Her ill health in 1941-2 forced me to seek additional revenue in political campaigns and other fields, and I finally found a position in advertising with the Gustav Marx Agency of Milwaukie. As things got tough, I began to write more and more humor. My daughter, Sally Ann, appeared under a cabbage bush in 1943, and I sank so low that I even wrote science-fiction. In ’44 I was asked to do a series of radio horror shows, based on my own stories, and the result (39 episodes entitled STAY TUNED FOR TERROR) was transcribed and broadcast widely throughout the United States, Canada and Hawaii. I started to write detective stories, having no shame at all any more.

My stories began to appear in anthologies and in 1943 ARKHAM HOUSE published ay own collection, “The Opener of the Way”. Meanwhile, a run-of-the-mill yarn, “Yours Truly, Jack the Ripper”, began to make the rounds of radio shows, anthologies and reprinting. Things were looking up a bit——so much so, that in the fall of ’46 I determined to write a novel, which I did, working right on the job in the advertising agency, in five weeks. After a week or so of revision it was promptly accepted by DIAL PRESS and published in 1947.

Today, I look wistfully back on that time. The pressure of business has increased so that I have no opportunity to duplicate the novel writing stint, although there are two novels in the mill at the moment. As a matter of fact, ay short-story production is down to almost zero at present; however, I fully intend to keep up sporadic appearances in magazines and to turn out more books.

One of the reasons why ay writing has such a poor literary quality is that, to save eyesight, I write everything “first draft” at a rate of 1500-2500 words an hour.

I was happy to get away to attend the PACIFICON and the TORCON; I try to keep up a desultory correspondence with writers and fans, and to do my share of writing for the fan magazines which do so much to keep interest alive at the grass-roots level. As I said in my alleged speech at the TORCON, I appreciate more than anything else the friendships and contacts that fandom has brought me through the years.

So here we are in 1949. I’ve been writing now, professionally, for about fifteen years. It’s been fun. I started as a kid and I’m now a broken-down old hack, past 30, with a family and a job and hypochondriacal delusions.

At present, in addition to ay advertising writing and fiction, ay interests include reading (as always), the collection of modern symphonic recordings, and various other hedonistic hobbies. I’m not a very interesting person in the all-too-reluctant flesh; I am inclined to garrulity but not to brilliance. People who meet me for the first time are invariably disappointed. This is perhaps due, in addition to ay obvious inadequacies, to the fact that I have somehow acquired a dual status as a “humorist” and as a “horror story writer”. They expect me either to say something funny or to scare them to death. I can do neither.

But if I can manage the task through the medium of ay typewriter, I’m personally satisfied. A critic reviewing a book of nine once described me as a “born storyteller”. For some reason or other, this flatters me more than anything else I’ve been called. Because that’s all I want to be or hope to be——a storyteller, in the field of writing that appeals to ay own imagination. If I can give somebody, somewhere, a few minutes or hours of entertainment, I’ve achieved my own ambitions.

After all, that ought to be enough for any man.

——ROBERT BLOCH

Originally appeared in *The Fanscient*, #8, Summer 1949

MEN *BEHIND* fanatastic

ROBERT BLOCH and friend

Author of: “THE DEAD DON’T DIE!”

THERE ARE usually two kinds of author’s autobiographies—the modest kind and the boastful kind.

Both are lies.

The only question remaining, then, is which kind do you want to hear from me?

Shall I tell you the modest kind? About how I just knock out my little stories in my spare time between jobs as a merchant seaman, cabdriver, dishwasher in a restaurant and attendant in a public washroom? That I’ve only had a 4th grade education and couldn’t hope to sell a yarn except for the fact that the editor is my brother-in-law?

Or would you prefer a bit of judicious boasting? A few words on the number of yarns I’ve had published and the number of magazines that have published them and the number of pages in the yarns and the number of words on the pages and the number of letters in the words? Do you want to know how many wives I have? How many children I have? How many yachts I have?”

Personally, I don't care much for either kind of an approach. The only thing of interest about any writer is the stories he has to tell. And I'd rather save words for my stories rather than for long, involved explanations about myself.

As to the present yarn—"The Dead Don't Die"—perhaps a couple of those words may be in order. The first thing I want to explain is that I didn't choose the title. Your editor chose the title and sent it to me, together with a letter suggesting that I write a story around said title and have it in his hands within four weeks—or else. Or else what, he didn't say. I wired him "Yes" and went to work.

But at the time he wrote me and at the time I wired him, I wasn't aware that I'd suddenly be left with an office full of work as a sort of souvenir of my associate's trip to Florida. Yet, that's what happened. No sooner did I consent to write than my associate (he's really my boss, but I don't tell anybody that) left town for the Everglades. And I began to sweat it out. The more I sweated, the more I realized what a lousy title I had to use—"The Dead Don't Die".

It just wasn't true. I was dead, dead on my feet and dead on whatever I used for support while writing. And I was not only dead, but constantly dying. Nobody in the world could possibly have felt worse than I did—except your editor, if I'd managed to get my hands on him.

But he's in New York, I'm in Milwaukee, and the story is in FANTASTIC ADVENTURES for you. All I can say is, I hope he's happy in New York, I hope I'm happy in Milwaukee, and I hope you'll be happy with the story.

And if you still insist on an autobiography: I was born in Chicago in 1917, but have lived in Milwaukee for most of what passes for my life. Sold my first yarn when I was 17, and have been writing fantasy ever since: for magazines, books, radio here and abroad. Have also been a political ghostwriter, and for nine years I've been copywriter for an advertising agency. If all this sounds dull to you, then think of poor me, who has to live it yet!

You know, I often think I should get out and around more, if only to provide some fascinating background material for a decent autobiography.

Only trouble is, I don't have time. Too busy writing stories!

—Robert Bloch

Originally appeared in *Fantastic Adventures*, July 1951

Purely Personal

Who wrote what in this month's Bluebook

Robert Bloch ("Once a Sucker." starting on page 96) reports that this *Bluebook* novel is "an effort on my part to comment on the cult rackets which have flourished in the past on the West Coast—with particular emphasis on the three 'D's: Devil-worship, Dogma-worship and Dollar-worship." Mr. Bloch states that his desire in his novel is to offend no one; at the same time he sounds a warning against the charlatans who will take your $$$ with the promise of curing your ills. We think he's more than hit the bull's-eye.

Mr. Bloch further reports that he has several new novels up his sleeve (which we hope to see), and has written countless short stories, novels, novelettes, radio shows, and anything else editors seemed to want and for which they would pay him money. You can't find a better objective than that.

Originally appeared in *Bluebook*, August 1952

THEY WRITE . . .

ROBERT BLOCH

“The day after I was born World War I began—but I managed to dodge the draft. I spent a sadistic but scientific childhood: instead of tearing the wings off flies I tore the wings off model airplanes. I sold my first story when I was 17—since then have sold close to 300 stories of fantasy, science fiction and mystery, plus a novel and a book of short stories. Also adapted 39 of my stories for a radio transcription series. In my spare time I’ve acquired a wife, a child, and a slightly haggard look.”

Originally appeared in *Fantastic*, January/February, January 1953

The People Who Make OTHER WORLDS

No. 14

ROBERT BLOCH

THE more 1 read autobiographical notes, the worse 1 feel. 1 just can’t seem to compete with the backgrounds of other writers.

I’ve never been a busboy, a used-car salesman, or an inmate of an opium den. I’ve never even been a newspaper man, because I’d hate to stand on those corners in cold weather. I’ve not lived in Greenwich Village. nor taken a hitch as a sailor on a tramp steamer, nor ridden a freight train, nor a broomstick. I have no distinguished scientific or technical background. I know nothing about physics, and haven’t taken one for years.

I’ve spent 36 years on this earth, and while it’s a nice place to visit, I wouldn’t want to live here. For almost 19 of those years I’ve written fantasy fiction—including political campaigns and advertising. I’ve put out the usual novel, book of short stories, radio program, and excuses for not writing more. I enjoy writing, and writers: reading, and readers. People have been very kind to me through the years (how did *that* sentence get in here?) and I’m duly grateful for the privilege of attempting to entertain them. I’ve no ambition other than to continue.

In conclusion I wish to state that I am not, and never have been a member of the human race, and any resemblance to persons living or dead is difficult to detect by looking at my photograph.

Robert Bloch

Originally appeared in *Other Worlds*, June 1953

Introducing the AUTHOR

★

Robert Bloch

★

"I'VE got a problem.

Your editor has asked me for a "650 word autobiography." That's tough. How can I get a 650-word autobiography out of a life that's been just a 30-word squib?

If you think I'm kidding, let's take a look at the record. And then play the flip side.

Like the majority of you readers, I was born. In my case *(Bloch vs. Humanity)* the event occurred on April 5th, 1917, in Chicago. I misspent my youth here, in Maywood, Illinois, and in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. I had a dull childhood, because in those days juvenile delinquency hadn't been invented yet.

My ambition was to grow up to be the heir to a fortune—an occupation for which I am eminently suited—but so far it has not been realized.

Accordingly, at the age of fifteen or thereabouts, I tried my hand at writing. This got ink all over my fingers, so I adopted a pen (an orphan, name of Parker). Then I rented a typewriter, and in order to pay for it, started to sell stories. The first sale was to *Weird Tales*. I was seventeen and foolish, so I kept on. Nothing has changed since then except that I'm not seventeen any more.

I have written steadily (and at times, unsteadily) through the years, in a variety of media: for eleven years I wrote copy for an advertising agency. I've also ghostwritten political speeches and literature, done radio and television scripts, and managed to sell several hundred short stories and novelettes, plus five books. At one time I thought of becoming a newspaperman, but I couldn't find a vacant corner.

I've been married since 1941, and have managed to acquire a daughter, aged eleven, and a dog, aged three—although not *by* similar methods. At present the family lives in Weyauwega, Wisconsin in a quaint old mortgage-covered cottage surrounded by row upon row of tall, stately creditors.

My principle hobbies consist of misanthropy, hypochondria, stasis and advanced penury. Minor occupations—reading, oil-painting, collecting records, and boring people with accounts of silent movies.

My pet gripe is probably commonplace among writers—it consists of the tendency of readers to confuse the author with his subject-matter. In my situation (hereafter referred to as "hopeless") it's particularly annoying, because I am apt to utilize a variety of styles and a variety of subjects.

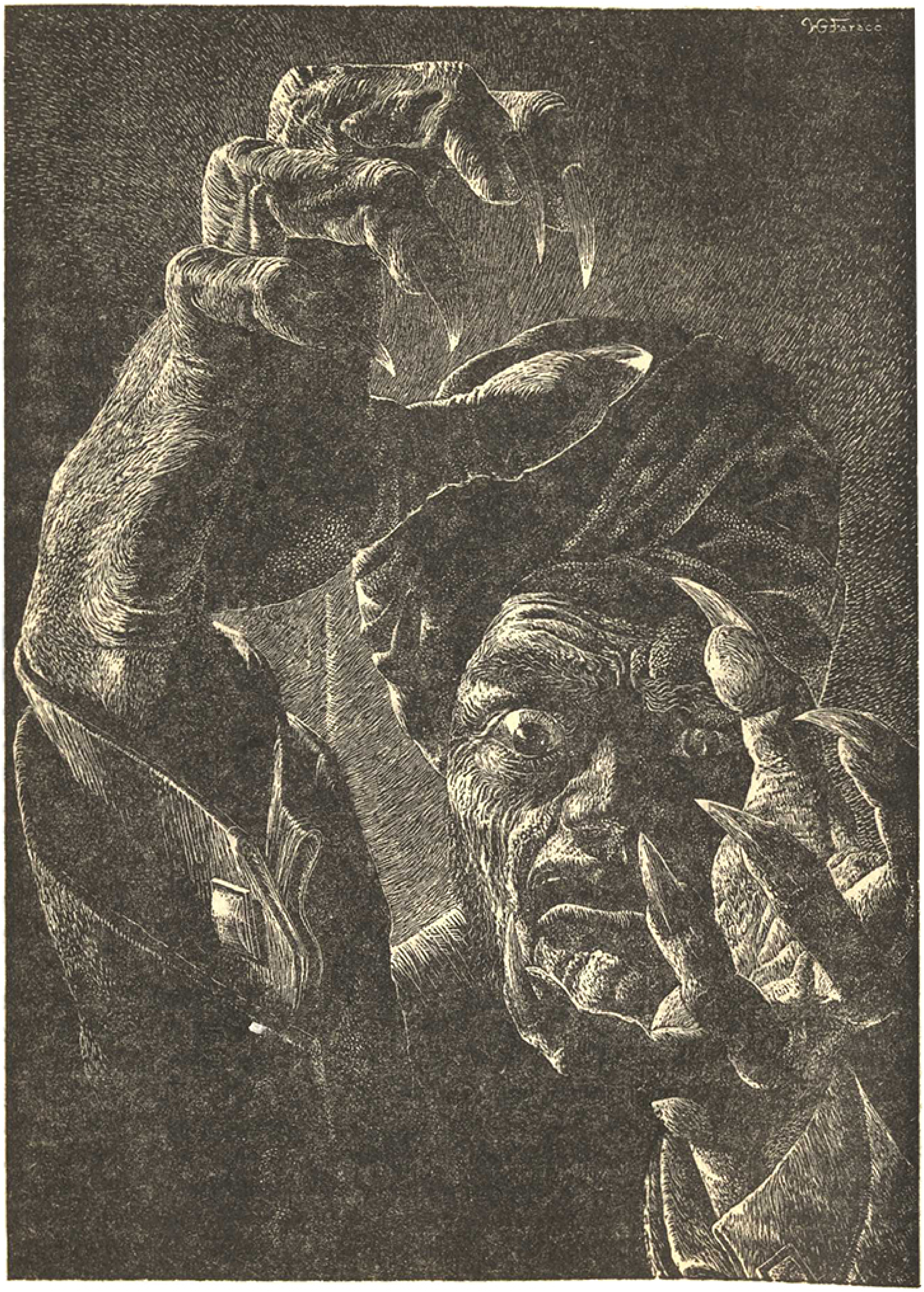
People who read my allegedly humorous efforts (such as the story in this issue) are prone to think of me as humorous: as far as I'm concerned, they can stay prone. People who read my horror stories insist that I must be more pedantic than antic, and given to consorting with vampires, werewolves and used-car salesmen. People who read my suspense novels imagine that I'm a strangler, ripper, kidnapper and criminal psychopath; little do they realize I haven't the energy!

But I am grateful for the fact that through the years my occupation has enabled me to come into contact with so many interesting people: the rewards in friendship are far greater than can be found in any other form of endeavor. A writer, though his avowed purpose is to amuse and entertain, is always basically motivated by a need to *communicate* with others—and in this I've always found pleasure.

If, in return, I can manage to turn out material that gives a little pleasure to readers, I consider myself fortunate.

—*Robert Bloch*

Originally appeared in *Imaginative Tales*, July 1955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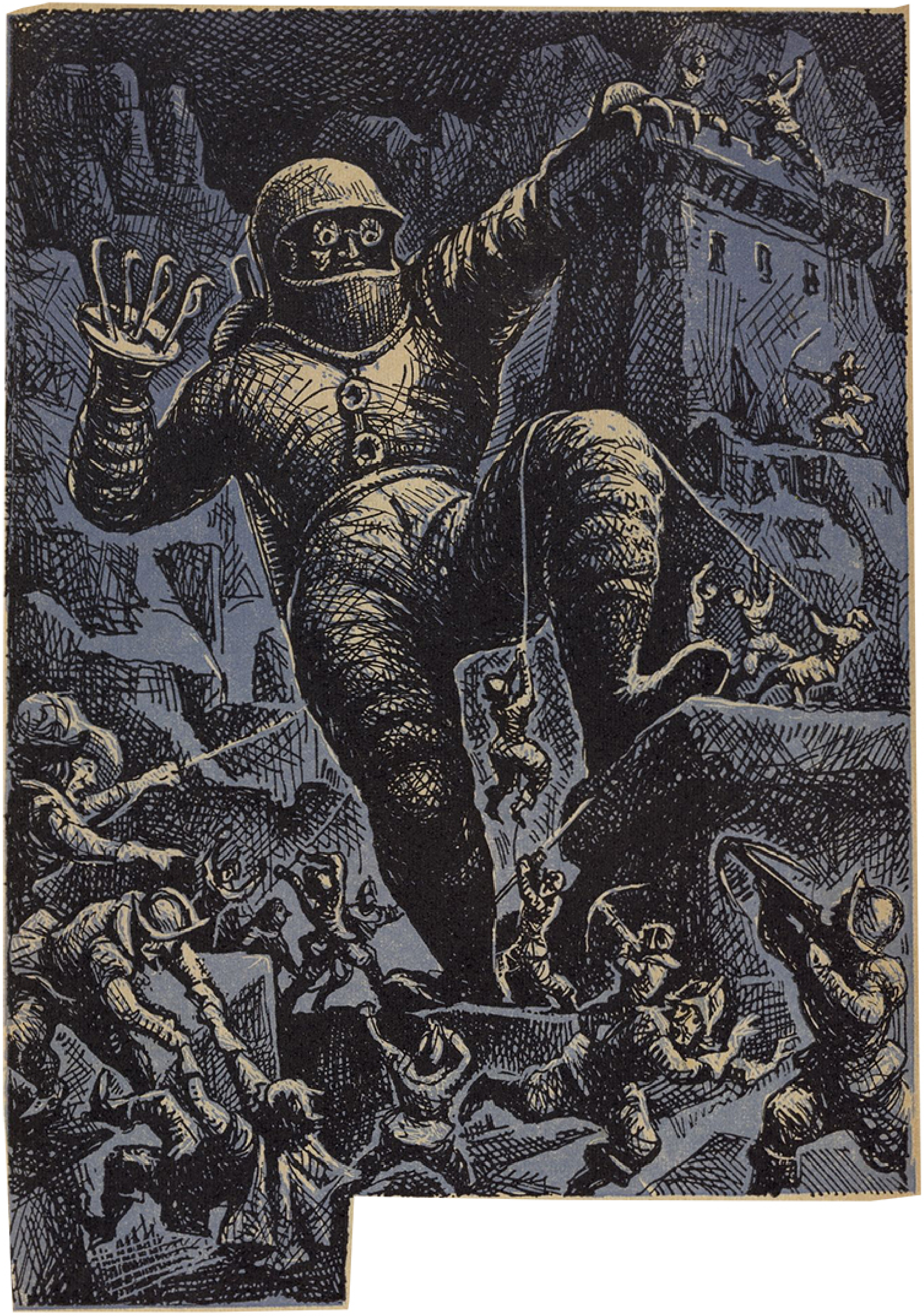

FICTION SERIES

[C] = Collection

[N] = Novel

[SF] = Short Story/Novelette

[O] = Omnibus

Series List

Barsac
Cthulhu Mythos
Lefty Feep
Margate
Psycho
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Barsac

The Beasts of Barsac [SF]

The Living Dead [SF]

Cthulhu Mythos

The Shambler from the Stars [SF]
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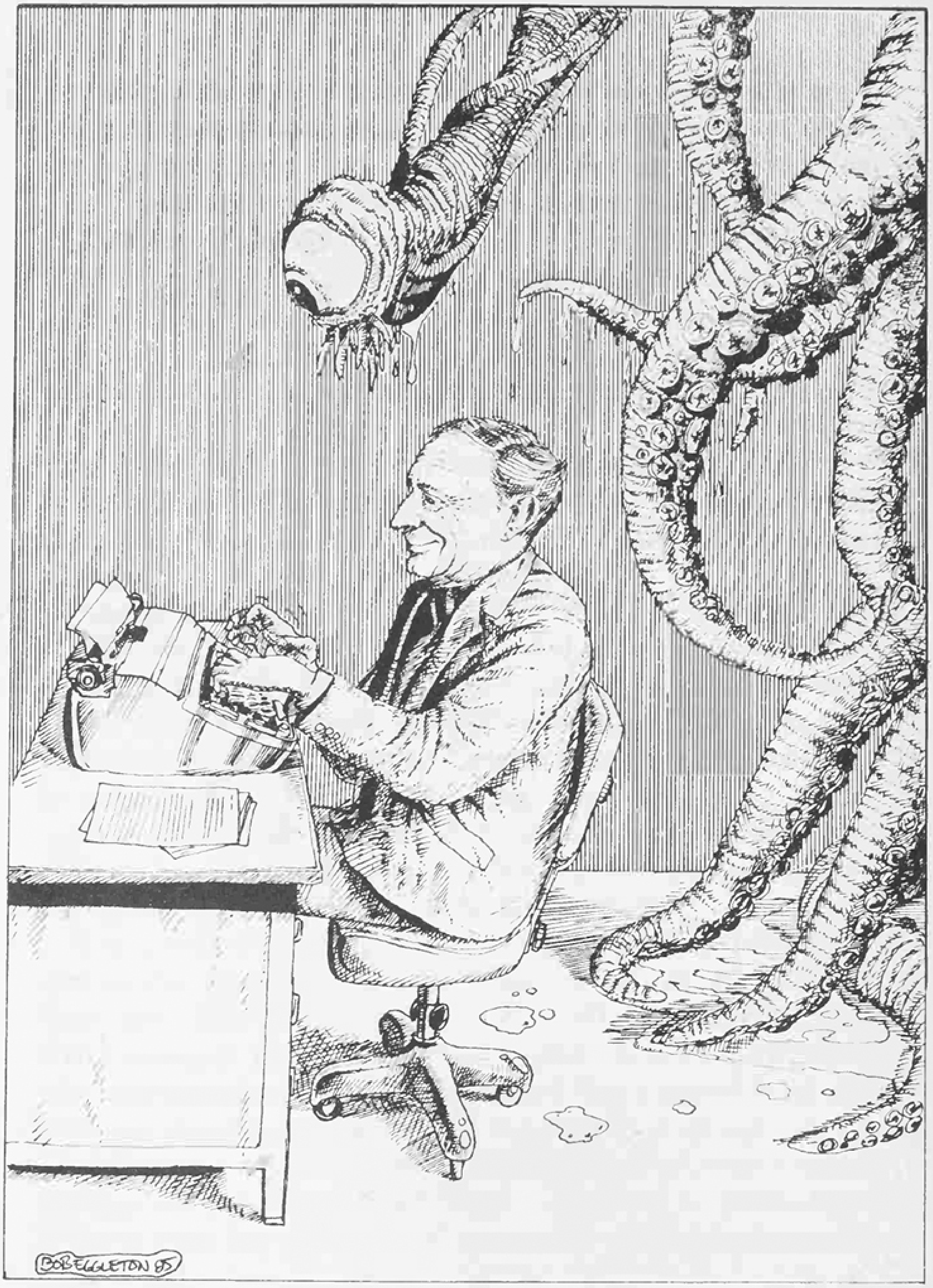
BOB EGGLETON 85

Despite my ghoulish reputation,
I really have the heart of a small boy.
I keep it in a jar on my desk.

1934

The Laughter of a Ghoul

Have you ever heard the laughter of a ghoul? Shrill and high, it rises and ululates with the cadence of a song from the Pit. Hearing it brings the soul closer to strange terrors and gives the listener vague glimpses into half-opened door-ways thru which no man should peer too closely. Once I heard that mocking laughter in the silence of the night, and since that evil-fated day the night has held neither silence nor surcease from the haunting memory of that mirth or madness. Ever it lurks and lingers in the shadows of my brain, till only thru expression of my torment can I hope to maintain my sanity in a world made hideous by the Nemesis of inescapable memory.

In all the Rood-mass realms of Nightmare, there is nothing equalling in foulness that grim and fearful monster known to legend as the Ghoul. Accursed is he, and accursed the land burdened by his presence. In such a land I dwelt, lord of an ancient, remote line.

Slithering secrets dwelt within the archaic avenues of the vast and sombre forest near my manor in the hills—secrets black and hideous, haunting and unspeakable, such as demonian presences mumble nightly in the aeon-dead abysses beyond the light of stars. Here in this forlorn realm of trickling tarns and baleful solitude my newly-wedded and beloved bride chanced one day to wander, as in rustic holiday. All unbeknowning, I spent the day in town, returning only as eventide drew near. But she, my beloved, did not return, even with the coming of darkness.

Then it was that the frightened servants who met me at the gate babbled that which sent me racing off, torch in hand, into the depths of the dream-wood looming so loathesomely in the unholy luminance of the autumn moon. Shrieking and cursing I went on, gibbering threats to the skies; but more dreadful stiff was my silence when at last I reached the end of my quest. Do not ask me how or where I found her. She was not dead, but she would have been better so after what It had done. She never spoke after I found her, and I do not think that she knew me. I pray that she did not. I carried her back to the manor and delivered her to the care of the servants. Then, with a score of retainers I returned again to the forest to do that which must be done, and to eradicate certain discoveries whose very existence was an insult to sanity. There were bloated trees to cut down, and creepers to be torn from the depths of nameless graves. There were curious holes to be blocked with massive stones and certain tracks and monstrous footprints over which the good cure must pronounce exorcism. There was another shrub-hidden cavern in the swamps containing grisly but unmistakable evidences of tenancy. One such place I entered alone and performed a deed with the long sword my grand-sire had wielded in the Orient. Then I collapsed, and was carried home upon a hastily-improvised litter of birchen branches, to toss for many weeks thereafter in the delirious agony of mocking, cacodemoniacal memory.

After that I spent many days poring unceasingly over disquieting bits of ancient legendry concerning the forest and its ghastly presences, whilst awaiting the birth of my wife's child—for she, in a condition of unsensibility precluding her removal from the manor, was about to become a mother. And so slowly passed the dreary months of waiting and expectancy, whilst over all hung the shadow of an impinging dread.

At last the day arrived when, as I brooded in my study, poring over the chronicle of a woodsman who had heard the pipes of Pan, the mid-wife came and gently touched me on the shoulder. In faltering accents she whispered that my wife was dead. I sat there dully for five endless minutes; then in a voice sepulchrally muted, I asked after my child. She led me silently into the room where dead mother and living infant lay.

Yes, the child was alive, still is alive, but I will say no more. May the Ultimate Powers of the consign it—and the Fate that produced it—to everlasting torment! For it was when I entered that room where the dead mother and the living infant lay that I heard for the first time The LAUGHTER OF A GHOUL! The End

1935

The Feast In the Abbey

The story of a grisly horror encountered in a weird monastery in the forest

A CLAP of thunder in the sullen west heralded the approach of night and storm together, and the sky deepened to a sorcerous black. Rain fell, the wind droned dolefully, and the forest pathway through which I rode became a muddy, treacherous, bog that threatened momentarily to ensnare both my steed and myself in its unwelcome embrace. A journey under such conditions is most inauspicious; in consequence I was greatly heartened when shortly through the storm-tossed branches I discerned a flicker of hospitable light glimmering through mists of rain.

Five minutes later I drew rein before the massive doors of a goodly-sized, venerable building of gray, moss-covered stone, which, from its extreme size and sanctified aspect, I rightly took to be a monastery. Even as I gazed thus perfunctorily upon it, I could see that it was a place of some importance, for it loomed most imposingly above the crumbled foundations of many smaller buildings which had evidently once surrounded it.

The force of the elements, however, was such as to preclude all further inspection or speculation, and I was only too pleased when, in reply to my continued knocking, the great oaken door was thrown open and I stood face to face with a cowled man who courteously ushered me past the rain-swept portals into a well-lighted and spacious hallway.

My benefactor was short and fat, garbed in voluminous gabardine, and from his ruddy, beaming aspect, seemed a very, pleasant and affable host. He introduced himself as the abbot Henricus, head of the monkish fraternity in whose headquarters I now found myself, and begged me to accept the hospitality of the brethren until the inclemencies of the weather had somewhat abated.

In reply I informed him of my name and station, and told him that I was journeying to keep tryst with my brother in Vironne, beyond the forest, but had been arrested in my journey by the storm.

These civilities having been concluded, he ushered me past the paneled antechamber to the foot of a great staircase set in stone, that seemed hewn out of the very wall itself. Here he called out sharply in an uncomprehended tongue, and in a moment I was startled by the sudden appearance of two blackamoors, who seemed to have materialized out of nowhere, so swiftly silent had been their coming. Their stern ebony faces, kinky hair and rolling eyes, set off by a most outlandish garb—great, baggy trousers of red velvet and waists of cloth-of-gold, in Eastern fashion—intrigued me greatly, though they seemed curiously out of place in a Christian monastery.

The abbot Henricus addressed them now in fluent Latin, bidding one to go without and care for my horse, and ordering the other to show me to an apartment above, where, he informed me, I could change my rain-bedraggled garments for a more suitable raiment, while awaiting the evening meal.

I thanked my courteous host and followed the silent black automaton up the great stone staircase. The flickering torch of the giant servitor cast arabesque shadows upon bare stone walls of great age and advanced decrepitude; clearly the structure was very old. Indeed, the massive walls that rose outside must have been constructed in a bygone day, for the other buildings that presumably were contemporaneously erected beside this had long since fallen into irremediable, unrecognizable decay.

Upon reaching the landing, my guide led me along a richly carpeted expanse of tessellated floor, between lofty walls tapestried and bedizened with draperies of black. Such velvet finery was most unseemly for a place of worship, to my mind.

Nor was my opinion shaken by the sight of the chamber which was indicated as my own. It was fully as large as my father's study at Nimes—its walls hung in Spanish velvets of maroon, of an elegance surpassed only by their bad taste in such a place. There was a bed such as would grace the palace of a king; furniture and other appurtenances were of truly regal magnificence. The blackamoor lighted a dozen mammoth candles in the silver candelabra that stood about the room, and then bowed and withdrew.

Upon inspecting the bed I found thereupon the garments the abbot had designated for my use during the evening meal. These consisted of a suit of black velveteen with satin breeches and hose of a corresponding hue, and a sable surplice. Upon doffing my travel-worn apparel I found that they fitted perfectly, albeit most somberly.

During this time I engaged myself in observing the room more closely. I wondered greatly at the lavishness, display and ostentation, and more greatly still at the complete absence of any religious paraphernalia—not even a simple crucifix was visible. Surely this order must be a rich and powerful one; albeit a trifle worldly; perchance akin to those societies of Malta and Cyprus whose licentiousness and extravagance is the scandal of the world.

As I thus mused there fell upon my ears the sounds of sonorous chanting that swelled symphonically from somewhere far below. Its measured cadence rose and fell solemnly as if it were borne from a distance incredible to human ears. It was subtly disturbing; I could distinguish neither words nor phrases that I knew, but the potent rhythm bewildered me. It welled, a malefic rune, fraught with insidious strange suggestion. Abruptly it ceased, and I breathed unconsciously a sigh of relief. But not an instant during the remainder of my sojourn was I wholly free from the spark of unease generated by the far-distant sound of that nameless, measured chanting from below.

NEVER have I eaten a stranger meal than that which I partook of at the monastery of the abbot Henricus. The banquet hall was a triumph of ostentatious adornment. The meal took place in a vast chamber whose lofty eminence rose the entire height of the building to the arched and vaulted roof. The walls were hung with tapestries of purple and blood-royal, emblazoned with devices and escutcheons of noble, albeit to me unknown, significance. The banquet table itself extended the length of the chamber—at one end unto the double doors through which I had entered from the stairs; the other end was beneath a hanging balcony under which was the scullery entrance. About this vast festal board were seated some two-score churchmen in cowls and gabardines of black, who were already eagerly assailing the multitudinous array of foodstuffs with which the table was weighted. They scarcely ceased their gorging to nod a greeting when the abbot and I entered to take our place at the head of the table, but continued to devour rapaciously the wonderful array of victuals set before them, accomplishing this task in a most unseemly fashion. The abbot neither paused to motion me to my seat nor to intone a blessing, but immediately followed the example of his flock and proceeded directly to stuff his belly with choice titbits before my astounded eyes. It was certain that these Flemish barbarians were far from fastidious in their table habits. The meal was accompanied by uncouth noises from the mouths of the feasters; the food was taken up in the fingers and the untasted remains cast upon the floor; the common decencies were often ignored. For a moment I was dumfounded, but natural politeness came to my rescue, so that I fell to without further ado.

Half a dozen of the black servants glided silently about the board, replenishing the dishes or bearing platters filled with new and still more exotic viands. My eyes beheld marvels of cuisine upon golden platters—verily, but pearls were cast before swine! For these cowled and hooded brethren, monks though they were, behaved like abominable boors. They wallowed in every kind of fruit—great luscious cherries, honeyed melons, pomegranates and grapes, huge plums, exotic apricots, rare figs and dates. There were huge cheeses, fragrant and mellow; tempting soups; raisins, nuts, vegetables, and great smoking trays of fish, all served with ales and cordials that were as potent as the nectar of nepenthes.

During the meal we were regaled with music from unseen lutes, wafted from the balconies above; music that triumphantly swelled in an ultimate crescendo as six servitors marched solemnly in, bearing an enormous platter of massy, beaten gold, in which reposed a single haunch of some smoking meat, garnished with and redolent of aromatic spices. In profound silence they advanced Mid set down their burden in the center of the board, clearing away the giant candelabra and smaller dishes. Then the abbot rose, knife in hand, and carved the roast, the while muttering a sonorous invocation in an alien tongue. Slices of meat were apportioned to the monks of the assemblage on silver plates. A marked and definite interest was apparent in this ceremony; only politeness restrained me from questioning the abbot as to the significance of the company's behavior. I ate a portion of my meat and said nothing.

To find such barbaric dalliance and kingly pomp in a monastic order was indeed curious, but my curiosity was regrettably dulled by copious imbibing of the potent wines set before me at the table, in beaker, bumper, flask, flagon, and bejeweled cup. There were vintages of every age and distillation; curious fragrant potions of marvelous headiness and giddy sweetness that affected me strangely.

The meat was peculiarly rich and sweet. I washed it down with great drafts from the wine-vessels that were now freely circulating about the table. The music ceased and the candle-glow dimmed imperceptibly into softer luminance. The storm still crashed against the walls without. The liquor sent fire through my veins, and queer fancies ran riot through my addled head.

I sat almost stupefied when, the company's trenchermannish appetites being at last satisfied, they proceeded, under influence of the wine, to break the silence observed during the meal by bursting into the chorus of a ribald song. Their mirth grew, and broad jests and tales were told, adding to the merriment. Lean faces were convulsed in lascivious laughter, fat paunches quivered with jollity. Some gave way to unseemly noise and gross gesture, and several collapsed beneath the table and were carried out by the silent blacks. I could not help but contrast the scene with that in which I would have figured had I reached Vironne to take my meal at the board of my brother, the good cure. There would be no such noisome ribaldry there; I wondered vaguely if he was aware of this monastic order so close to his quiet parish.

Then, abruptly, my thoughts returned to the company before me. The mirth and song had given place to less savory things as the candles dimmed and deepening shadows wove their webs of darkness about the banquet board. Talk turned to vaguely alarming channels, and cowled faces took on a sinister aspect in the wan and flickering light. As I gazed bemused about the board, I was struck by the peculiar pallor of the assembled faces; they shone whitely in the dying light as with a distorted mockery of death. Even the atmosphere of the room seemed changed; the rustling draperies seemed moved by unseen hands; shadows marched along the walls; hobgoblin shapes pranced in weird processional over the groined arches of the ceiling. The festal board looked bare and denuded—dregs of wine besmirched the linen; half-eaten viands covered the table’s expanse; the gnawed bones on the plates seemed grim reminders of mortal fate.

THE conversation was ill-suited to further my peace of mind—it was far from the pious exhortations expected of such a company. Talk turned to ghosts and enchantments; old tales were told and infused with newer horror; legends recounted in broken whispers; hints of eldritch potency passed from wine-smeared lips in tones sepulchrally muted.

I sat somnolent no longer; I was nervous with an increasing apprehension greater than I had ever known. It was almost as if I *knew* what was about to happen when at last, with a curious smile, the abbot began his tale and the monkish presences hushed their whispers and turned in their places to listen.

At the same time a black entered and deposited a small covered platter before his master, who regarded the dish for a moment before continuing his introductory remarks.

It was fortunate (he began, addressing me) that I had ventured here to stay the evening, for there had been other travelers whose nocturnal sojournings in these woods had not reached so fortunate a termination. There was, for example, the legendary “Devil’s Monastery.” (Here he paused and coughed abstractedly before continuing.)

According to the accepted folk-lore of the region, this curious place of which he spoke was an abandoned priory, deep in the heart of the woods, in which dwelt a strange company of the Undead, devoted to the service of Asmodeus. Often, upon the coming of darkness, the old ruins took on a preternatural semblance of their vanished glory, and the old walls were reconstructed by demon artistry to beguile the passing traveler. It was indeed fortunate that my brother had not sought me in the woods upon a night like this, for he might have blundered upon this accursed place and been bewitched into entrance; whereupon, according to the ancient chronicles, he would be seized, and his body devoured in triumph by the ghoulish acolytes that they might preserve their unnatural lives with mortal sustenance.

All this was recounted in a whisper of unspeakable dread, as if it were somehow meant to convey a message to my bewildered senses. It did. As I gazed into the leering faces all about me I realized the import of those jesting words, the ghastly mockery that lay behind the abbot’s bland and cryptic smile.

The Devil’s Monastery . . . subterrene chanting of the rites to Lucifer . . . blasphemous magnificence, but never the sign of the cross . . . an abandoned priory in the deep woods . . . wolfish faces glaring into my own . . .

Then, three things happened simultaneously. The abbot slowly lifted the lid of the small tray before him. ("Let us finish the meat," I think he said.) Then I screamed. Lastly came the merciful thunder-clap that precipitated me, the laughing monks, the abbot, the platter and the monastery into chaotic oblivion.

When I awoke I lay rain-drenched in a ditch beside the mired pathway, in wet garments of black. My horse grazed in the forest ways near by, but of the abbey I could see no sign.

I staggered into Vironne a half-day later, and already I was quite delirious, and when I reached my brother's home I cursed aloud beneath the windows. But my delirium lapsed into raving madness when he who found me there told me where my brother had gone, and his probable fate, and I swooned away upon the ground.

I can never forget that place, nor the chanting, nor the dreadful brethren, but I pray to God that I can forget one thing before I die: that which I saw before the thunderbolt; the thing that maddens me and torments me all die more in view of what I have since learned in Vironne. I know it is all true, now, and I can bear the knowledge, but I can never bear the menace nor the memory of what I saw when the abbot Henricus lifted up the lid of the small silver platter to disclose the rest of the meat. . . .

It was the head of my brother.

The Secret In the Tomb

An eldritch tale of stark horror and a terrible rendezvous in a hidden mausoleum

THE wind howled strangely over a midnight tomb. The moon hung like a golden bat over ancient graves, glaring through the wan mist with its baleful, nyctalopic eye. Terrors not of the flesh might lurk among cedar-shrouded sepulchers or creep unseen amid shadowed cenotaphs, for this was unhallowed ground. But tombs hold strange secrets, and there are mysteries blacker than the night, and more leprous than the moon.

It was in search of such a secret that I came, alone and unseen, to my ancestral vault at midnight. My people had been sorcerers and wizards in the olden days, so lay apart from the resting-place of other men, here in this moldering mausoleum in a forgotten spot, surrounded only by the graves of those who had been their servants. But not all the servants lay here, for there are those who do not die.

On through the mist I pressed, to where the crumbling sepulcher loomed among the brooding trees. The wind rose to torrential violence as I trod the obscure pathway to the vaulted entrance, extinguishing my lantern with malefic fury. Only the moon remained to light my way in a luminance unholy. And thus I readied the nitrous, fungus-bearded portals of the family vault. Here the moon shone upon a door that was not like other doors—a single massive slab of iron, imbedded in monumental walls of granite.

Upon its outer surface was neither handle, lode nor keyhole, but the whole was covered with carvings portentous of a leering evil—cryptic symbols whose allegorical significance filled my soul with a deeper loathing than mere words can impart. There are things that are not good to look upon, and I did not care to dwell too much in thought on the possible genesis of a mind whose knowledge could create such horrors in concrete form. So in blind and trembling haste I chanted the obscure litany and performed the necessary obeisances demanded in the ritual I had learned, and at their conclusion the cyclopean portal swung open.

Within was darkness, deep, funereal, ancient; yet, somehow, uncannily *alive.* It held a pulsing adumbration, a suggestion of muted, yet purposeful rhythm, and overshadowing all, an air of blade, impinging *revelation.* The simultaneous effect upon my consciousness was one of those reactions misnamed intuitions. I sensed that shadows know queer secrets, and there are some skulls that have reason to grin.

Yet I must go on into the tomb of my forebears—tonight the last of all our line would meet the first. For I was the last Jeremy Strange had been the first—he who fled from the Orient to seek refuge in centuried Eldertown, bringing with him the loot of many tombs and a secret for ever nameless. It was he who had built his sepulcher in the twilight woods where the witch-lights gleam, and here he had interred his own remains, shunned in death as he had been in life. But buried with him was a secret, and it was this that I had come to seek. Nor was I the first in so seeking, for my father and his father before me, indeed, the eldest of each generation back to the days of Jeremy Strange himself, had likewise sought that which was so maddeningly described in the wizard's diary—the secret of eternal life after death. The musty yellowed tome had been handed down to the elder son of each successive generation, and likewise, so it seemed, the dread atavistic craving for black and accursed knowledge, the thirst for which, coupled with the damnably explicit hints set forth in the warlock's record, had sent every one of my paternal ancestors so bequeathed to a final rendezvous in the night, to seek their heritage within the tomb. What they found, none could say, for none had ever returned.

IT WAS, of course, a family secret. The tomb was never mentioned—it had, indeed, been virtually forgotten with the passage of years that had likewise eradicated many of the old legends and fantastic accusations about the first Strange that had once been common property in the village. The family, too, had been mercifully spared all knowledge of the curse-ridden end to which so many of its men had come. Their secret delvings into black arts; the hidden library of antique lore and demonological formulae brought by Jeremy from the East; the diary and its secret—all were undreamt of save by the eldest sons. The rest of the line prospered. There had been sea captains, soldiers, merchants, statesmen. Fortunes were won. Many departed from the old mansion on the cape, so that in my father's time he had lived there alone with the servants and myself. My mother died at my birth, and it was a lonely youth.

I spent in the great brown house, with a father half-crazed by the tragedy of my mother's end, and shadowed by the monstrous secret of our line. It was he who initiated me into the mysteries and arcana to be found amid the shuddery speculations of such blasphemies as the *Necronomicon,* the *Book of Eibon,* the *Cabala of Saboth,* and that pinnacle of literary madness, Ludvig Prinn's *Mysteries of the Worm.* There were grim treatises on anthropomancy, necrology, lycanthropical and vampiristic spells and charms, witchcraft, and "long, rambling screeds in Arabic, Sanskrit and prehistoric ideography, on which lay the dust of centuries.

All these he gave me, and more. There were times when he would whisper strange stories about voyages he had taken in his youth—of islands in the sea, and queer survivals spawning dreams beneath arctic ice. And one night he told me of the legend, and the tomb in the forest; and together we turned the worm-riddled pages of the iron-bound diary that was hidden in the panel above the chimney-corner. I was very young, but not too young to know certain things, and as I swore to keep the secret as so many had sworn before me, I had a queer feeling that the time had come for Jeremy to claim his own. For in my father's somber eyes was the same light of dreadful thirst for the unknown, curiosity, and an inward urge that had glowed in the eyes of all the others before him, previous to the time they had announced their intention of "going on a trip" or "joining up" or "attending to a business matter." Most of them had waited till their children were grown, or their wives had passed on; but whenever they had left, and whatever their excuse, they had never returned.

Two days later, my father disappeared, after leaving word with the servants that he was spending the week in Boston. Before the month was out there was the usual investigation, and the usual failure. A will was discovered among my father's papers, leaving me as sole heir, but the books and the diary were secure in the secret rooms and panels known now to me alone.

Life went on. I did the usual things in the usual way—attended university, traveled, and returned at last to the house on the hill, alone. But with me I carried a mighty determination—I alone could thwart that curse; I alone could grasp the secret that had cost the lives of seven generations—and I alone must do so. The world had nought to offer one who had spent his youth in the study of the mocking truths that lie beyond the outward beauties of a purposeless existence, and I was not afraid. I dismissed the servants, ceased communication with distant relatives and a few close friends, and spent my days in the hidden chambers amid the elder lore, seeking a solution or a spell of such potency as would serve to dispel for ever the mystery of the tomb.

A hundred times I read and reread that hoary script—the diary whose fiend-penned promise had driven men to doom. I searched amid the satanic spells and cabalistic incantations of a thousand forgotten necromancers, delved into pages of impassioned prophecy, burrowed into secret legendary lore whose written thoughts writhed through me like serpents from the pit. It was in vain. All I could learn was the ceremony by which access could be obtained to the tomb in the wood. Three months of study had worn me to a wraith and filled my brain with the diabolic shadows of charnel-spawned knowledge, but that was all. And then, as if in mockery of madness, there had come the call, this very night.

I HAD been seated in the study, pondering upon a maggot-eaten volume of Heiriarchus' *Occultus,* when without warning, I felt a tremendous urge keening through my weary brain. It beckoned and allured with unutterable promise, like the mating-cry of the lamia of old; yet at the same time it held an inexorable power whose potency could not be defied or denied. The inevitable was at hand. I had been summoned to the tomb. I must follow the beguiling voice of inner consciousness that was the invitation and the promise, that sounded my soul like the ultra-rhythmic piping of trans-cosmic music. So I had come, alone and weaponless, to the lonely woods and to that wherein I would meet my destiny.

The moon rose redly over the manor as I left, but I did not look back. I saw its reflection in the waters of the brook that crept between the trees, and in its light the water was as blood. Then the fog rose silently from the swamp, and a yellow ghost-light rode the sky, beckoning me on from behind the black and bloated trees whose branches, swept by a dismal wind, pointed silently toward the distant tomb. Roots and creepers impeded my feet, vines and brambles restrained my body, but in my ears thundered a chorus of urgency that can not be described and which could not be delayed, by nature or by man.

Now, as I hesitated upon the door-step, a million idiot voices gibbered an invitation to enter that mortal mind could not withstand. Through my brain resounded the horror of my heritage—the insatiable craving to know the forbidden, to mingle and become one with it. A paean of hell-born music crescendoed in my ears, and earth was blotted out in a mad urge that engulfed all being.

I paused no longer upon the threshold. I went in, in where the smell of death filled the darkness that was like the sun over Yuggoth. The door closed, and then came—what? I do not know—I only realized that suddenly I could see and feel and hear, despite darkness, and dankness, and silence.

I was in the tomb. Its monumental walls and lofty ceiling were black and bare, lichened by the passage of centuries. In the center of the mausoleum stood a single slab of black marble. Upon it rested a gilded coffin, set with strange symbols, and covered by the dust of ages. I knew instinctively what it must contain, and the knowledge did not serve to put me at my ease. I glanced at the floor, then wished I hadn't. Upon the debris-strewn base beneath the slab lay a ghastly, disarticulated group of mortuary remains—half-fleshed cadavers and desiccated skeletons. When I thought of my father and the others, I was possessed of a sickening dismay. They too had sought, and they had failed. And now I had come, alone, to find that which had brought them to an end unholy and unknown. The secret! The secret in the tomb!

Mad eagerness filled my soul. I too would know—I must! As in a dream I swayed to the gilded coffin. A moment I tottered above it; then, with a strength born of delirium, I tore away the paneling and lifted the gilded lid, and then I knew it was no dream, for dreams can not approach the ultimate horror that was the creature lying within the coffin—that creature with eyes like a midnight demon's, and a face of loathsome delirium that was like the death-mask of a devil. It was smiling, too, as it lay there, and my soul shrieked in the tortured realization that it was *dive!* Then I knew it all; the secret and the penalty paid by those who sought it, and I was ready for death, but horrors had not ceased, for even as I gazed it spoke, in a voice like the hissing of a black slug.

And there within the nighted gloom it whispered the secret, staring at me with ageless, deathless eyes, so that I should not go mad before I heard the whole of it. All was revealed—the secret crypts of blackest nightmare where the tomb-spawn dwell, and of a price whereby a man may become one with ghouls, living after death as a devourer in darkness. Such a thing had it become, and from this shunned, accursed tomb had sent the call to the descending generations, that when they came, there might be a ghastly feast whereby it might continue a dread, eternal life. I (it breathed) would be the next to die, and in my heart I knew that it was so.

I could not avert my eyes from its accursed gaze, nor free my soul from its hypnotic bondage. The thing on the bier cackled with unholy laughter. My blood froze, for I saw two long, lean arms, like the rotted limbs of a corpse, steal slowly toward my fear-constricted throat. The monster sat up, and even in the clutches of my horror, I realized that there was a dim and awful resemblance between the creature in the coffin and a certain ancient portrait back in the Hall. But this was a transfigured reality—Jeremy the man become Jeremy the ghoul; and I knew that it would do no good to resist. Two claws, cold as flames of icy hell, fastened around my throat, two eyes bored like maggots through my frenzied being, a laughter born of madness alone cachinnated in my ears like the thunder of doom. The bony fingers tore at my eyes and nostrils, held me helpless while yellow fangs champed nearer and nearer to my throat. The world spun, wrapped in a mist of fiery death.

Suddenly the spell broke. I wrenched my eyes away from that slavering, evil face, and instantly, like a cataclysmic flash of light, came realization. This creature's power was purely mental—by that alone were my ill-fated kinsmen drawn here, and by that alone were they overcome, but once one were free from the strength of the monster's awful eyes—good God! Was I going to be the victim of a crumbled mummy?

My right arm swung up, striking the horror between the eyes. There was a sickening crunch; then dead flesh yielded before my hand as I seized the now faceless lich in my arms and cast it into fragments upon the bone-covered floor. Streaming with perspiration and mumbling in hysteria and terrible revulsion, I saw the moldy fragments move even in a second death —a severed hand crawled across the flagging, upon musty, shredded fingers; a leg began to roll with the animation of grotesque, unholy life. With a shriek, I cast a lighted match upon that loathsome corpse, and I was still shrieking as I clawed open the portals and rushed out of the tomb and into the world of sanity, leaving behind me a smoldering fire from whose charred heart a terrible voice still faintly moaned its tortured requiem to that which had once been Jeremy Strange.

The tomb is razed now, and with it the forest graves and all the hidden chambers and manuscripts that serve as a reminder of ghoul-ridden memories that can never be forgot. For earth hides a madness and dreams a hideous reality, and monstrous things abide in the shadows of death, lurking and waiting to seize the souls of those who meddle with forbidden things.

The Suicicde in the Study

A short story of dual personality

TO SEE him sitting there in the dim-lit darkness of the study, one would never have suspected him for what he was. Wizards nowadays are not garbed in cabalistic robes of silver and black; instead they wear purple dressing-gowns. It is not required of them that their eyebrows meet, their nails grow long as talons, and their eyes flame like emerald-imprisoned dreams. Nor are they necessarily bent and furtive, and old. This one was not; he was young and slim, almost imperially straightforward.

He sat beneath the lamplight in the great oak-paneled room; a dark, handsome man of perhaps thirty-five years of age. There was little of cruelty or malice visible in his keen, clean-featured face, and little of madness in his eyes; yet he was a wizard, just as surely as if he lurked over human sacrifices in the skull-strewn darkness of forbidden tombs.

It was only necessary for one to survey the walls of his study for corroboration. Only a wizard would possess those moldering, maggoty volumes of monstrous and fantastic lore; only a thaumaturgical adept would dare the darker mysteries of the *Necronomicon,* Ludvig Prinn's *Mysteries of the Worm,* the *Black Rites* of mad Luveh-Keraph, priest of Bast, or Comte d'Erlette's ghastly *Cultes des Goules.* No one save a sorcerer would have access to the ancient manuscripts bound in Ethiopian skin, or burn such rich and aphrodisiac incense in an enshrined skull. Who else would fill the mercifully cloaking darkness of the room with curious relics, mortuary souvenirs from ravished graves, or worm-demolished scrolls of primal dread?

Superficially, it was a normal room that night, and its occupant a normal man. But for proof of its inherent strangeness it was not necessary to glance at the skull, the book-cases, or the grim, shadow-shrouded remains, to know its occupant for what he was. For James Allington wrote in his secret diary tonight, and his musings were far from sanity.

"TONIGHT I am ready to make the test. I am convinced at last that splitting of the identity can be accomplished by means of therapeutic hypnotism, provided that the mental attitude conducive to such a partition can be induced.

"Fascinating subject, that. Dual identity—the dream of men from the beginning of time! Two souls in one body . . . all philosophy is based on comparative logic; good and evil. Why, then, can not such a division exist in the human soul? Stevenson was only partly right when he wrote *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde.* He imagined a chemical metamorphosis varying from one extreme to the other. I believe that both identities are *co-existent;* that, once they are separated by autohypnotic thought, a man can enjoy two existences simultaneously—his good self and his bad.

"They laughed at my theory in the club. Foster—that pompous old fool!—called me a dreamer. Dreamer? What does he, a petty scientific chemist, know of the basic mysteries of Life and Death? A glimpse into my laboratory would shock his smug soul into insanity. The others, too; mob-catering writers, pedantic fossils who call themselves professors, prim biologists who are shocked at the mention of my experiments in synthetic creation of life—what do such as these understand? They would shudder at the *Necronomicon;* burn it, too, if they could; burn it as their pious ancesters did three hundred years ago. Witch-baiters, skeptics, materialists all! I'm sick of the whole silly pack of them. It is the fate of the genius to dwell alone. Very well, then, I'll dwell alone—but soon they will come cringing to my door and beg for mercy!

"If my work tonight only succeeds! If I can succeed in hypnotizing myself into dual personality, physically manifested! Even modern psychology claims it can be done. Spiritualism credits its possibilities. The ancients have furnished me the key to the problem, as they have done before. . . . Alhazred knew many things—it was only the weight of the knowledge that drove him mad.

"Two bodies! Once I can achieve that state at will, I shall hold the key to powers for ever denied to men. Immortality, perhaps; it is only a step further. After that there will be no need of skulking here in secret; no necessity of passing my researches off as a harmless hobby. Dreamer, eh? I'll show them!

"I wonder what the *other* shape will look like? Will it be human? It must, otherwise—but I had better not think of that. It is quite probable that it will be an ugly-looking customer. I do not flatter myself. I know that the evil side of my nature, while concealed, is undoubtedly dominant. There is danger, though—evil is an uncontrollable force in its purest form. It will draw strength from my body, too—energy to manifest itself physically. But that must not deter me. I must make the test. If it succeeds I shall have power—power undreamt of—power to kill, to rend, to destroy! I shall add to my little collection here, and settle a few old scores with my skeptical friends. After that there will be other pleasant things to do.

"But enough of such musings. I must begin. I shall lock the study doors; the servants have gone for the evening and there will be no one to intrude upon my privacy. I dare not risk using an electrically manipulated machine for fear of some untoward consequences in removing the hypnosis. I shall try to induce a hypnotic trance by concentrating intently on this heavy, polished paper-knife here on my desk. Meanwhile, I shall focus my will on the matter at hand, using the Soul Chant of Sebek as a focal point.

"I shall set the alarm for twelve o'clock, exactly one hour from now. Its ringing will break the spell. That, I believe, is all I need bother to do. As an added precaution, I shall bum this record. Should anything go wrong, I would hate to have all my little plans disclosed to the world.

“Nothing shall go wrong, however. I have used auto-hypnosis many times before, and I will be very careful. It will be a marvelous feeling to control two bodies at once. I can hardly control myself—I find my body trembling in eagerness and anticipation of its forthcoming metamorphosis. Power!

“Very well. After this report is reduced to ashes I shall be ready—ready to undertake the greatest experiment man has ever known.”

2

JAMES ALLINGTON sat before the shaded lamp. Before him on the table lay the paper-knife, its polished blade shimmering. Only the slow ticking of a clock broke the sable silence of the locked room.

The wizard’s eyes were glassy; they shone in the light, immobile as a basilisk’s. The reflection from the surface of the knife stabbed through his retina like the fiery ray of a burning sun, but his betranced gaze never wavered.

Who knows what strange inversion was occurring in the dreamer’s bewitched brain; what subtle transmutation generated from his purpose? He had fallen into his sleep with the fixed resolve of severing his soul, dividing his personality, bisecting his ego. Who knows? Hypnotism does many strange things.

What secret Powers did he invoke to aid him in his fight? What black genesis of unholy life lurked within the shadows of his inner consciousness; what demons of leering evil granted him his dark desires?

For granted they were. Suddenly he awoke, and he could feel that he was no longer alone in that nighted room. He felt the presence of another, there in the darkness on the other side of the table.

Or was it another? Was it not he, himself? He glanced down at his body, and was unable to suppress a gasp of astonishment. *He seemed to have shrunk to less than a quarter of his ordinary size!* His body was light, fragile, dwarfed. For a moment he was incapable of thought or movement. His eyes strayed to the corner of the room, trying vainly to see the gloom-obscured movements of a presence that shambled there.

Then things happened. Out of the darkness nightmare came; stark, staring nightmare—a monstrous, hairy figure; huge, grotesque, simian—a hideous travesty of all things human. It was black madness; slavering, mocking madness with little red eyes of wisdom old and evil; leering snout and yellow fangs of grimacing death. It was like a rotting, living skull upon the body of a black ape. It was grisly and wicked, troglodytic and wise.

A monstrous thought assailed Allington. Was *this* his other self—this ghoul-spawned, charnel horror of corpse-accursed dread?

Too late the wizard realized what had befallen him. His experiment *had* succeeded, but terribly so. He had not realized how far the evil in his nature had outbalanced the good. This monster—this grisly abomination of darkness—was stronger than he was, and, being solely evil, *it was not mentally controlled by his other self.* Allington viewed it now with new fear in his eyes. It was like a creature from the Pit. All that was foul and obscene and anti-human in his makeup lay behind that grinning parody of a countenance. The beast-like body hinted of shadows that creep beneath the grave or lurk entombed within the deepest recesses of normal minds. Yet in it Allington recognized a mad, atavistic caricature of himself—all the lust, the greed, the insane ambition, the cruelty, the ignorance; the fiend-spawned secrets of his soul within the body of a gigantic ape!

As if in answer to his recognition, the creature laughed, and tentacles of terror gripped the wizard's heart.

The thing was coming toward him—it meant to destroy him, as evil always does. Allington, his tiny body ludicrously struggling to move quickly while impeded by clothes now ridiculously large for his diminutive frame, raced from his chair and flattened himself against the wall of the study. His voice, curiously treble, shrieked frantic supplication and futile commands to the approaching nemesis.

His prayers and curses turned to the hoarse gibberings of madness as the huge beast lunged across the table. His experiment was succeeding with a vengeance . . . *vengeance!* His glaring eyes watched, fascinated, as one great paw grasped the paper-knife, and fearsome laughter riddled the night. It was laughing . . . laughing! Somewhere an alarm-dock rang, but the wizard could not hear. . . .

THEY found James Allington lying dead upon his study floor. There was a paper-knife imbedded in his breast, and they called it suicide, for no one could possibly have entered that locked and windowless room.

But that did not explain the fingerprints on the handle of the knife—the terrible fingerprints—*like those left by the hand of a gigantic ape.*

The Shambler from the Stars

The story of a blood-freezing horror, evoked by the magic of Ludvig Prinn's terrible "Mysteries of the Worm"[*]

I HAVE nobody but myself to blame for the whole affair. It was my own blundering that precipitated that unforeseen horror upon us both; my own stupidity that caused our downfall. The acknowledgment of my fault does not help us now; my friend is dead, and in order to escape an impinging doom worse than death I must follow him into the darkness. So far I have relied upon the ever-diminishing potency of alcohol and drugs to dull the pangs of memory, but I shall find true peace only in the grave.

Before I go I shall inscribe my story as a warning, lest others make the same mistake and suffer a similar fate.

I am what I profess to be—a writer of weird fiction. Since earliest childhood I have been enthralled by the cryptic fascination of the unknown and the unguessable. The nameless fears, the grotesque dreams, the queer, half-intuitive fancies that haunt our minds have always exercised for me a potent and inexplicable delight.

In literature I have walked the midnight paths with Poe or crept amidst the shadows with Machen; combed the realms of horrific stars with Baudelaire, or steeped myself with earth's inner madness amidst the tales of ancient lore. A meager talent for sketching and crayon work led me to attempt crude picturizations involving the outlandish denizens of my nighted thoughts. The same somber trend of intellect which drew me in my art interested me in obscure realms of musical composition; the symphonic strains of the *Danse Macabre* and the like became my favorites. My inner life soon became a ghoulish feast of eldritch, tantalizing horrors.

My outer existence was comparatively dull. Days of grammar school and adolescent high school soon passed. As time went on I found myself drifting more and more into the life of a penurious recluse; a tranquil, philosophical existence amidst a world of books and dreams.

A man must live. By nature constitutionally and spiritually unfitted for manual labor, I was at first puzzled about the choice of a suitable vocation. The depression complicated matters to an almost intolerable degree, and for a time I was close to utter economic disaster. It was then that I decided to write.

I procured a battered typewriter, a ream of cheap paper, and a few carbons. My subject matter did not bother me. What better field than the boundless realms of a colorful imagination? I would write of horror, fear, and the riddle that is Death. At least, in the callowness of my unsophistication, this was my intention.

My first attempts soon convinced me how utterly I had failed. Sadly, miserably, I fell short of my aspired goal. My vivid dreams became on paper merely meaningless jumbles of ponderous adjectives, and I found no ordinary words to express the wondrous terror of the unknown. My first manuscripts were miserable and futile documents; the few magazines using such material being unanimous in their rejections.

I had to live. Slowly but surely I began to adjust my style to my ideas. Laboriously I experimented with words, phrases, sentence-structure. It was work, and hard work at that. I soon learned to sweat. At last, however, one of my stories met with favor; then a second, a third, a fourth. Soon I had begun to master the more obvious tricks of the trade, and the future looked brighter at last. It was with an easier mind that I returned to my dream-life and my beloved books. My stories afforded me a somewhat meager livelihood, and for a time this sufficed. But not for long. Ambition, ever an illusion, was the cause of my undoing.

I wanted to write a real story; not the stereotyped, ephemeral sort of tale I turned out for the magazines, but a real work of art. The creation of such a masterpiece became my ideal. I was not a good writer, but that was not entirely due to my errors in mechanical style. It was, I felt, the fault of my subject matter. Vampires, werewolves, ghouls, mythological monsters—these things constituted material of little merit. Commonplace imagery, ordinary adjectival treatment, and a prosaically anthropocentric point of view were the chief detriments to the production of a really good weird tale.

I must have new subject matter, truly unusual plot material. If only I could conceive of something utterly ultra-mundane, something truly macrocosmic, something that was teratologically incredible!

I longed to learn the songs the demons sing as they swoop between the stars, or hear the voices of the olden gods as they whisper their secrets to the echoing void. I yearned to know the terrors of the grave; the kiss of maggots on my tongue, the cold caress of a rotting shroud upon my body. I thirsted for the knowledge that lies in the pits of mummied eyes, and burned for wisdom known only to the worm. Then I could really write, and my hopes be truly realized.

I SOUGHT a way. Quietly I began a correspondence with isolated thinkers and dreamers all over the country. There was a hermit in the western hills, a savant in the northern wilds, a mystic dreamer in New England. It was from the latter that I learned of the ancient books that hold strange lore. He quoted guardedly from the legendary *Necronomicon,* and spoke timidly of a certain *Book of Eibon* that was reputed to surpass it in the utter wildness of its blasphemy. He himself had been a student of these volumes of primal dread, but he did not want me to search too far. He had heard many strange things as a boy in witch-haunted Arkham, where the old shadows still leer and creep, and since then he had wisely shunned the blacker knowledge of the forbidden.

At length, after much pressing on my part, he reluctantly consented to furnish me with the names of certain persons he deemed able to aid me in my quest. He was a writer of notable brilliance and wide reputation among the discriminating few, and I knew he was keenly interested in the outcome of the whole affair.

As soon as his precious list came into my possession, I began a widespread postal campaign in order to obtain access to the desired volumes. My letters went out to universities, private libraries, reputed seers, and the leaders of carefully hidden and obscurely designated cults. But I was foredoomed to disappointment.

The replies I received were definitely unfriendly, almost hostile. Evidently the rumored possessors of such lore were angered that their secret should be thus unveiled by a prying stranger. I was subsequently the recipient of several anonymous threats through the mails, and I had one very alarming phone-call. This did not bother me nearly so much as the disappointing realization that my endeavors had failed. Denials, evasions, refusals, threats—these would not aid me. I must look elsewhere.

The book stores! Perhaps on some musty and forgotten shelf I might discover what I sought.

Then began an interminable crusade. I learned to bear my numerous disappointments with unflinching calm. Nobody in the common run of shops seemed ever to have heard of the frightful *Necronomicon,* the evil *Book of Eibon,* or the disquieting *Cultes des Goules.*

Milwaukee was barren ground. Chicago became my next hunting-place. I made the trip, planning to spend a week there. Instead, I was forced to remain in that city for well over a month. Never have I seen so many book stores!

Persistence brings results. In a little old shop on South Dearborn Street, amidst dusty shelves seemingly forgotten by time, I came to the end of my search.

There, securely wedged between two century-old editions of Shakespeare, stood a great black volume with iron facings. Upon it, in hand-engraved lettering, was the inscription *De Vermis My stems,* or "Mysteries of the Worm."

The proprietor could not tell how it had come into his possession. Years before, perhaps, it had been included in some second-hand job-lot. He was obviously unaware of its nature, for I purchased it with a dollar bill. He wrapped the ponderous thing for me, well pleased at this unexpected sale, and bade me a very satisfied good-day.

I left hurriedly, the precious prize under my arm. What a find! I had heard of this book before. Ludvig Prinn was its author; he who had perished at the inquisitorial stake in Brussels when the witchcraft trials were at their height. A strange character—alchemist, necromancer, reputed mage—he boasted of having attained a miraculous age when he at last suffered a fiery immolation at the hands of the secular arm. He was said to have proclaimed himself the sole survivor of the ill-fated ninth crusade, exhibiting as proof certain musty documents of attestation. It is true that a certain Ludvig Prinn was numbered among the gentlemen retainers of Montserrat in the olden chronicles, but the incredulous branded Ludvig as a crack-brained impostor, though perchance a lineal descendant of the original warrior.

Ludvig attributed his sorcerous learning to the years he had spent as a captive among the wizards and wonder-workers of Syria, and glibly he spoke of encounters with the djinns and efreets of elder Eastern myth. He is known to have spent some time in Egypt, and there are legends among the Libyan dervishes concerning the old seer's deeds in Alexandria.

At any rate, his declining days were spent in the Flemish lowland country of his birth, where he resided, appropriately enough, in the ruins of a pre-Roman tomb that stood in the forest near Brussels. Ludvig was reputed to have dwelt there amidst a swarm of familiars and fearsomely invoked conjurations. Manuscripts still extant speak of him guardedly as being attended by "invisible companions" and "star-sent servants". Peasants shunned the forest by night, for they did not like certain noises that resounded to the moon, and they most certainly were not anxious to see what worshipped at the old pagan altars that stood crumbling in certain of the darker glens.

For years the old thaumaturgist was infamously notorious throughout the countryside, and many a pilgrim came to him for prophecies, horoscopes, and the dubious service of his potions, philtres, and talismans. There are a few surviving accounts which speak cautiously of his sepulchral dwelling-place, the Saracenic relics, and the invisible servitors he had summoned from afar. There is a curiously uniform reticence on the part of these chroniclers when it comes to describing these servitors in detail, but all agree that the terrible old man was gifted with baleful and unholy powers.

Be that as it may, these creatures that he commanded were never seen after Prinn's capture by the inquisitorial minions. Searching soldiers found the tomb entirely deserted, though it was thoroughly ransacked before its destruction. The supernatural entities, the unusual instruments, the obscure herds and compounds—all had most curiously vanished. A search of the forbidding woods and a timorous examination of the strange altars did not add to the information. There were fresh blood-stains on the altars, and fresh blood-stains on the rack, too, before the questioning of Prinn was finished. A series of particularly atrocious tortures failed to elicit any further disclosures from the silent wizard, and at length the weary interrogators ceased, and cast the aged sorcerer into a dungeon.

It was in prison, while awaiting trial, that he penned the morbid, horror-hinting lines of *De Vermis Myster its,* known today as *Mysteries of the Worm.* How it was ever smuggled through the alert guards is a mystery in itself, but a year after his death it saw print in Cologne. It was immediately suppressed, but a few copies had already been privately distributed. These in turn were transcribed, and although there was a later censored and deleted printing, only the Latin original is accepted as genuine. Throughout the centuries a few of the elect have read and pondered on its secret. The secrets of the old archimage are known today only to the initiated, and they discourage all attempts to spread their fame, for certain very definite reasons.

This, in brief, was what I knew of the volume's history at the time it came into my possession. As a collector's item alone the book was a phenomenal find, but on its contents I could pass no judgment. It was in Latin. Since I can speak or translate only a few words of that learned tongue, I was confronted by a barrier as soon as I opened the musty pages. It was maddening to have such a treasure-trove of dark knowledge at my command and yet lack the key to its unearthing.

For a moment I despaired, since I was unwilling to approach any local classical or Latin scholar in connection with so hideous and blasphemous a text. Then came an inspiration. Why not take it east and seek the aid of my friend? He was a student of the classics, and would be less likely to be shocked by the horrors of Prinn's baleful revelations. Accordingly I addressed a hasty letter to him, and shortly thereafter received my reply. He would be glad to assist me—I must by all means come at once.

2

PROVIDENCE is a lovely town. My friend's house was ancient, and quaintly Georgian. The first floor was a gem of Colonial atmosphere. The second, beneath antique gables that shadowed the enormous window, served as a workroom for my host.

It was here that we pondered that grim, eventful night last April; here beside the open window that overlooked the azure sea. It was a moonless night; haggard and wan with a fog that filled the darkness with bat-like shadows. In my mind's eye I can see it still—the tiny, lamplit room with the big table and the high-backed chairs; the book-cases bordering the walls; the manuscripts stacked in special files.

My friend and I sat at the table, the volume of mystery before us. His lean profile threw a disturbing shadow on the wall, and his waxen face was furtive in the pale light. There was an inexplicable air of portentous revelation quite disturbing in its potency; I sensed the presence of secrets waiting to be revealed.

My companion detected it too. Long years of occult experience had sharpened his intuition to an uncanny degree. It was not cold that made him tremble as he sat there in his chair; it was not fever that caused his eyes to flame like jewel-incarned fires. He knew, even before he opened that accursed tome, that it was evil. The musty scent that rose from those antique pages carried with it the reek of the tomb. The faded leaves were maggoty at the edges, and rats had gnawed the leather; rats which perchance had a ghastlier food for common fare.

I had told my friend the volume's history that afternoon, and had unwrapped it in his presence. Then he had seemed willing and eager to begin an immediate translation. Now he demurred.

It was not wise, he insisted. This was evil knowledge—who could say what demon-dreaded lore these pages might contain, or what ills befall the ignorant one who sought to tamper with their contents? It is not good to learn too much, and men had died for exercising the rotted wisdom that these leaves contained. He begged me to abandon the quest while the book was still unopened and to seek my inspiration in saner things.

I was a fool. Hastily I overruled his objections with vain and empty words. I was not afraid. Let us at least gaze into the contents of our prize. I began to turn the pages.

The result was disappointing. It was an ordinary-looking volume after all—yellow, crumbling leaves set with heavy black-lettered Latin texts. That was all; no illustrations, no alarming designs.

My friend could no longer resist the allurement of such a rare bibliophilic treat. In a moment he was peering intently over my shoulder, occasionally muttering snatches of Latin phrasing. Enthusiasm mastered him at last. Seizing the precious tome in both hands, he seated himself near the window and began reading paragraphs at random, occasionally translating them into English.

His eyes gleamed with a feral light; his cadaverous profile grew intent as he pored over the moldering runes. Sentences thundered in fearsome litany, then faded into tones below a whisper as his voice became as soft as a viper’s hiss. I caught only a few phrases now, for in his introspection he seemed to have forgotten me. He was reading of spells and enchantments. I recall allusions to such gods of divination as Father Yig, dark Han, and serpent-bearded Byatis. I shuddered, for I knew these names of old, but I would have shuddered more had I known what was yet to come.

It came quickly. Suddenly he turned to me in great agitation, and his excited voice was shrill. He asked me if I remembered the legends of Prinn’s sorcery, and the tales of the invisible servants he commanded from the stars. I assented, little understanding the cause of his sudden frenzy.

Then he told me the reason. Here; under a chapter on familiars, he had found an orison or spell, perhaps the very one Prinn had used to call upon his unseen servitors from beyond the stars! Let me listen, while he read.

I SAT there dully, like a stupid, uncomprehending fool. Why did I not scream, try to escape, or tear that monstrous manuscript from his hands? Instead I sat there—sat there while my friend, in a voice cracked with unnatural excitement, read in Latin a long and sonorously sinister invocation.

“Tibi, Magnum lnnominandum, signa stellarum nigrarum et bufaniformis Sadoqua sigillum . . .”

The croaking ritual proceeded, then rose on wings of nighted, hideous horror. It stabbed my soul with exquisite pain, even though I did not understand. The words seemed to writhe like flames in the air, burning into my brain. The thundering tones seemed to echo into infinity, beyond the farthermost star. They seemed to pass into primal and undimensioned gates, to seek out a listener there, and summon him to earth. Was it all an illusion? I did not pause to ponder.

For that unwitting summons was answered. Scarcely had my companion’s voice died away in that little room before the terror came. The room turned cold. A sudden wind shrieked in through the open window; a wind that was not of earth. It bore an evil bleating from afar, and at the sound my friend’s face became a pale white mask of newly awakened fear. Then there was a crunching at the walls, and the window-ledge buckled before my staring eyes. From out of the nothingness beyond that opening came a sudden burst of lubricious laughter—a hysterical cackling born of utter madness. It rose to the grinning quintessence of all horror, without mouth to give it birth.

The rest happened with startling swiftness. All at once my friend began to scream as he stood by the window; scream and claw wildly at empty air. In the lamplight I saw his features contort into a grimace of insane agony. A moment later, his body rose unsupported from the floor, and began to bend outward to a back-breaking degree. A second later came the sickening grind of broken bones. His form now hung in midair, the eyes glazed and the hands clutching convulsively as if at something unseen. Once again there came the sound of maniacal tittering, but this time it came from *within the room!*

The stars rocked in red anguish; the cold wind gibbered in my ears. I crouched in my chair, my eyes riveted on that astounding scene in the corner.

My friend was shrieking now; his screams blended with that gleeful, atrocious laughter from the empty air. His sagging body, dangling in space, bent backward once again as blood spurted from the tom neck, spraying like a ruby fountain.

That blood never reached the floor. It stopped in midair as the laughter ceased, and a loathsome sucking noise took its place. With a new and accelerated horror, I realized that that blood was being drained to feed the invisible entity from beyond! What creature of space had been so suddenly and unwittingly invoked? What was that vampiric monstrosity I could not see?

Even now a hideous metamorphosis was taking place. The body of my companion became shrunken, wizened, lifeless. At length it dropped to the floor and lay nauseatingly still. But in midair another and a ghastlier change was taking place.

A reddish glow filled the corner by the window—a *bloody* glow. Slowly but surely the dim outlines of a Presence came into view; the blood-filled outlines of that unseen shambler from the stars. It was red and dripping; an immensity of pulsing, moving jelly; a scarlet blob with myriad tentacular trunks that waved and waved. There were suckers on the tips of the appendages, and these were opening and closing with ghoulish lust.

. . . The thing was bloated and obscene; a headless, faceless, eyeless bulk with the ravenous maw and titanic talons of a star-born monster. The human blood on which it had fed revealed the hitherto invisible outlines of the feaster. It was not a sight for sane eyes to see.

Fortunately for my reason, the creature did not linger. Spurning the dead and flabby corpse-like thing on the floor, it purposely seized the dreadful volume with one slimy, sinuous feeler and shambled swiftly to the window; then squeezed its rubbery, viscous body through the opening. There it disappeared, and I heard its far-off, derisive laughter floating on the wings of the wind as it receded into the gulfs from whence it had come.

THAT was all. I was left alone in the room with the limp and lifeless body at my feet The book was gone; but there were bloody prints upon the wall, bloodyswaths upon the floor, and the face of my poor friend was a bloody death’s-head, leering up at the stars.

For a long time I sat alone in silence before I set on fire that room and all it contained. After that I went away, laughing, for I knew that the blaze would eradicate all trace of what remained. I had arrived only that afternoon, and there were none who knew, and none to see me go, for I departed ere the glowing flames were detected. I stumbled for hours through the twisted streets, and quaked with renewed and idiotic laughter as

I looked up at the burning, ever-gloating stars that eyed me furtively through wreaths of haunted fog.

After a long while I became calm enough to board a train. I have been calm throughout the long journey home, and calm throughout the penning of this screed. I was even calm when I read of my friend's curious accidental death in the fire that destroyed his dwelling.

It is only at nights, when the stars gleam, that dreams return to drive me into a gigantic maze of frantic fears. Then I take to drugs, in a vain attempt to ban those leering memories from my sleep. But I really do not care, for I shall not be here long.

I have a curious suspicion that I shall again see that shambler from the stars. I think it will return soon without being resummoned, and I know that when it comes it will seek me out and carry me down into the darkness that holds my friend. Sometimes I almost yearn for the advent of that day, for then I too shall learn once and for all, the *Mysteries of the Worm.*

[*] This story is dedicated to H. P. Lovecraft.

Black Lotus

This is the story of Genghir the Dreamer, and of the curious fate that overtook him in his dreams; a story old men whisper in the souks of Ispahan as other old men once whispered it in fabled Teraz, five thousand years ago. What portion of it is truth and what portion only fantasy, I leave unto your judgment. There are strange sayings in the banned books, and Alhazred had reasons for his madness; but as I have said, the judgment rests with you. I but relate the tale.

Know then that Genghir was lord over a distant kingdom in the days of the unicorn and the fleet-winged griffin. Rich and powerful was his domain, and peaceful and well-ruled withal, so that its sovereign need occupy himself only with his pleasures.

Handsome was Genghir, but formed as a woman is formed, so that he cared not for the chase or manly combat. His days were spent in rest and study, and his nights in revelry amongst the women. The functions of government rested upon the shoulders of Hassim el Wadir, the Vizier, whilst the true sultan dallied at his pleasures.

Grievous was the life he led, and soon the land was torn by dissension and corruption. But this Genghir heeded not at all, and Hassim he ordered flayed for misuse of his office. And there was revolution and killing throughout the land; and then a fearful plague arose; but all this Genghir minded not, even though two-thirds of his people died. For his thoughts were alien and far away, and the weight of his rule he felt as but a feather. His eyes knew only the musty pages of ensorcelled books and the soft white flesh of women. The witchery of words and wine and wenches cast a spell upon his senses. There was dark magic in the black-bound books his father had brought from ancient conquered realms, and there was enchantment in the old wines and the young bodies that his desires knew; so that he lived in a land of unreality and dreams. Surely he would have died were it not that those left in the land, after the plague, had fled to other kingdoms, leaving him in an empty city. The report of their going never reached his ears, for well his courtiers knew that those who brought displeasing news were beheaded. But one by one they slipped away, taking with them gold and precious jewels, until the palace lay deserted under a sun that shone upon a barren land.

No longer did the women rest within the zenana, or disport as nymphs beside the amber pools. The sultan turned to other pleasures from the realms of Cathay, and in robes of velvet black he lay and toyed with the juices of the poppy. Then did life become indeed but a dream, and the opium-visioned nightmares took on the semblances of events and places mentioned in the eldritch volumes that he read by day. Time became but as the lengthening of a monstrous dream. Genghir ventured forth into his gardens no more, and less and less did he partake of food or wine. Even his books he forgot, and lay for all the time in a drugged sleep, nor heeded the coming and going of the few followers that remained within his retinue. And a silence of desolation fell upon the land.

Now it came to pass that opium and other drugs were not enough, so that Genghir was forced to seek recourse in other and more potent distillations. And in one of the curious evil books he read of a subtle potion brewed from the juices of the Black Lotus that grows beneath the waning moon. Dire and dreadful were the warnings of the scribe regarding the concoction of this forbidden preparation, for its genesis was deemed unholy, and the dangers surrounding its use by a novice were couched in trenchant terms. But Genghir thirsted for the lurid magic of its dreams and for the promise of its delight, nor would he be content until he should taste of its forbidden ecstasy.

His palace stood dim and deserted, for in the latter days the remnant of his sycophants and houris had departed from the dusky halls, whose cheap splendours had long since been bartered for the true delights found only in the land of opiate dreams. There now remained but three faithful servitors to guard Genghir on his couch of visions, and these he called unto his side and commanded them to journey forth and seek the venom-distilled beauty of the Black Lotus, in the hidden swamps afar of which the cryptic book had told. And they were much afraid, both for him and for themselves, because they had heard curious legends; with one accord they beseeched him to recall his words. But he grew angered, and his eyes were seen to flame like opals, whereat they departed.

A fortnight passed ere one of them returned—a fortnight during which the dreamer tried in vain to beguile his satiated senses with the common reek of the white flower. Overjoyed was he when the slave returned with his precious burden and brewed from it the blissful juices of nepenthe, following the injunctions set forth in the curious book. But he did not speak of his journey, or venture aught concerning the fate of his two companions; and even the dazed dreamer wondered why he kept his features veiled. In his eagerness he did not inquire, but was content to see the philtre carefully compounded and the pearly-hued liquor inserted in the nargileh. Immediately upon the completion of this task, the servitor departed, and no man knows the manner of his going, save that he lashed his camel far across the desert, riding as though possessed by demons. Genghir did not note his genii-beset progress, for already he was enraptured at the thought of what was to come. Indeed he had not stirred from his divan in the palace chambers, and in his brain was naught but the thirsty dement of desire for the strange new thrill foretold in the elder lore. Queer dreams were promised to him who durst inhale the fumes, dreams of which the old book dare not even hint—“Dreams which surpass Reality, or blend with it in new and unhallowed ways.” So spake the scribes, but Genghir was not afraid, and heeded only the promise of delights it was said to hold.

And so it was that he lay on his couch that evening and smoked his hookah alone in the deepening darkness, a dream king in a land where all but dreams was dead. His divan overlooked the balcony high above the empty city, and as the moon rose, its crescent-given rays glistened upon the iridescent bubblings of the white fluid in the great bowl through which the smoke was drawn. Sweet indeed was the essence's taste, sweeter than the honeycombs of Kashmir or the kisses of the chosen brides of Paradise. Slowly there came stealing over his senses a new and delightful languor—it was as if he were a creature free-born, a being of the boundless air. He gazed half-seeing at the bubbles, and suddenly they bubbled up, up, up, until they bathed the room in a veil of shimmering beauty, and he felt all identity vanish in their crystalline depths.

Now ensued a period of profound and mystic sadness. He seemed to lie within the graven walls of a tomb, upon a slab of pale-white marble. Shrill funereal pipings seemed to echo from afar, and his nostrils were titillated by the distilled aromatic incense of the sepulchral lily. He knew himself to be dead, and yet he retained the consciousness that was his own in life. The timelessness of common dreams was not his lot; centuries passed on leadenly, and he knew every second of their length as he lay within the tomb of his fathers; enmausoleumed upon a slab covered with stone that was carven with demon-given basilisks.

Long after the odors and the music had faded from the darkness in which he lay came the advent of corruption. He felt his body grow bloatedly purulenscent; felt his features coagulate and his limbs slough off into charnel, oozing slime. And even that was as an instant in the weary, dragging hours of his eternity there. So much longer did he lie bodiless that he lost all conscious recollection of ever having possessed one, and even the dust that had been his bones lost all significance to him. The past, present, and future were as naught; and thus unconsciously Genghir had revealed unto him the basic mystery of life.

Years later the crumbling walls clove thunderously asunder, and shards of debris covered over the decaying slab that now housed naught but an undying consciousness. And even they were overcast by dust and earth, until there was but nothingness to mark the site of the proud tomb where once lay the lords of the house of Genghir. And the soul of Genghir was as nothingness alone amongst nothingness.

Such was the substance of the first dream. As the flicker of his soul expired into everlasting darkness within the earth, Genghir awoke, and he was sweat-bathed, trembling with fear, and as pale as the death he feared. And anon he turned the pages of his book to where it spoke of the Lotus and its prophecies thereof and this he read:

"The first dream shall foretell that which is to come."

Whereat Genghir grew much afraid, and closed the book in the ensilvered moonlight, then lay back upon his couch to sleep, and to forget. But then there came stealing upon his senses the subtly sweet odor of the essence, and its magic englamoured and engulfed, till he grew frantic with the insidious craving for its sinister soothing. Forgotten was fear and prophetic warning; all dissolved peace.

But not for long. Once again the opaque mists of roseate, sweet voluptuousness parted and dissolved, and the enchantment of rapturous, ineffable bliss faded as a new vision supervened.

He saw himself awaken and rise from the couch in the light of dawn, to gaze haggardly upon a new day. He saw the wretched agony of his being as the drug wore off its potency and left his body racked with spasms of exquisite pain. His head seemed to swell as if about to burst; his rotting, benightmared brain seemed to grow inside his skull and split his head asunder. He beheld his frantic gropings about the deserted chamber, the mad capers of grotesque agony that made him tear his hair and foam epileptically at the mouth and gibber terribly as he clawed with twitching fingers at his temples. The white-hot mist of searing anguish sent him reeling to the floor, and then it seemed as though in his dream-consciousness there came to him a horrible longing to be rid of his torment at any cost, and to escape from a living hell to a dead one. In his madness he cursed the book and the warning; cursed the ghastly lotus flower and its essence; cursed himself and his pain. And as the stark biting teeth of his torture bored still closer to the roots of his sanity, he saw himself drag his rigid, paralytic body to the outer balcony of his deserted palace, and with a grimace of agony greater than can be sensed by sanity, he raised himself slowly to the rail. Meanwhile, as he stood there, his head swelled and bloated to monstrous, unbelievable proportions, then burst rottenly asunder in a ghastly blob of gray and scarlet putrefaction, from which arose the stupefying scent of black lotuses. Then, with a single inarticulate cry of horror and despair, he crumpled and toppled from the balcony, to spatter himself in red madness upon the court below.

At this instant he awoke, and his teeth shook inside his mouth as he gagged and retched in terrible repulsion. He felt old and decrepit, and the tide of life ebbed in his veins. He would have fainted were it not for the revivifying fumes of the nargileh that still smoldered beside him. Then unto himself he swore a mighty oath to abandon the ways of the dreamer forever, and rose to his feet and took unto himself the book and turned the pages to the passage of warning, wherein he read this rune:

“The second dream shall show what might have been.”

Then there descended upon him a resignation and a black despair. All of his life unrolled before him once again and he knew himself for what he was—a deluded fool. And he knew also that if he did not go back to his drugged slumber there would come to pass the horror of his second dream, as it foretold. So, wearily, and with queer wonder in his heart, he clasped the book to his bosom and betook himself once again to his couch in the moonlight. And his pale fingers lifted the hookah to his ashen lips once again and he once more knew the bliss of Nirvana. He was under the compulsion of a sorcerous thrall.

. . . O night-black lotus flower, that groweth beneath the River Nile! O poisoned perfumer of all darkness, waving and weaving in the spells of moonlight! O cryptic magic that worketh only evils . . .

Genghir the Dreamer slept. But there was brooding ecstasy and mystic wonder in his dreams, and he knew the beauty that lies in twilight grottoes on the dark side of the moon, and his brow was fanned and his slumbers lulled by the pale wind that is the little gods who dance in paradise. And he stood alone in a sea of endless infinity, before a monstrous flower that beckoned great, hypnotic petals before his dream-dazed eyes, and whispered unto him a command. In his vision he glanced down to where a dagger hung by his side, in his jeweled stomacher of sultanship.

And there came to him a sudden gleam of understanding. This before him was the Black Lotus, symbol of the evil that waits for men in sleep. It was casting a spell upon him that would lure him to death. He knew now the way of atonement for the past and the release of his enchantment—he must strike!

But even as he moved, the great flower shot out one velvet petal steeped in the cloying scent that was a wind from the gate of heaven. And the black petal entwined itself about his neck like a loathsome and beautiful serpent, and with its succubi-like embrace sought to drown his senses in a sea of scented bliss.

But Genghir would not be frustrated. The allurement of delight left him cold, but his numbing brain commanded him. He raised the silver dagger from his side and with a single blow, slashed off the twining coder from his neck . . .

Then Genghir saw the flowers and the petals vanish, and he was left alone in a universe of mocking laughter: a dim world that rocked with leering mirth of idiotic gods. For an instant he awoke to see a ruby necklace encircling his bare throat; to realize monstrously that in his dream he had cut his own throat. Then, on a bed of moonlight, he died, and there was silence in the deserted roam, while from the dead throat of Genghir the Dreamer little drops of blood fell upon an open page of a curious book; upon a curious sentence in oddly underlined letters:

“The third dream brings reality.”

Nothing more remained, save the all-pervading scent of lotus flowers that filled the nighted room.

1936

The Druidic Doom

Two dreadful hands reached out hideously from the yawning pit beneath the Druid stone—a gripping tale of a grisly horror

IT IS written in the chronicles of olden days that the elder lore shall never die. Many savants concur in this view, and though the world may scoff, occasionally there arises some strange and dreadful proof in the shape of a mystery that cannot otherwise be explained. The ancient legends still remain, and they are still believed by the poor and the humble. These will always believe, for there will always be unusual occurrences which neither science nor religion can adequately explain and combat. I do not profess to espouse one side of the argument or another—I can but tell a story which I heard long ago in a land where the dark fables still hold sway.

THEY say on the coast that when Sir Charles Hovoco came to Nedwick he was a proud and wilful man. He had trampled his way into the baronetcy as he had trampled his way in other affairs—business, political, and social. At thirty-eight this grubby, florid citizen was a "self-made" man. He was not, from the accounts I gathered, a likable sort of person. He was too beefy, too matter-of-fact and hard-headed. In his rise from Whitechapel slums to the pinnacle of industrial success there had been little of esthetic endeavor and much of greed and ruthless cunning. Consequently, upon his accession to the Nedwick estates, he had made no attempts to ingratiate himself with the local citizenry, but merely ignored their presence.

This lack of tact was not overlooked by the neighboring rustics in the village. A queer lot they were, steeped in archaic tradition, and not fond of outsiders. They disliked Sir Charles from the start, but they all seemed genuinely sorry for him when they learned of his fate. Some of them, however, seem to imply that there was an element of poetic justice in his tragic demise. If the man had not been so stupid, he would have heeded the warnings they had given him, and the tragedy might never have occurred. But poor Hovoco had merely laughed at their old wives' tales and blundered on upon his predetermined way. Therefore he died, because he did not understand.

When Sir Charles came to Nedwick House he found it in a lamentable state of decay; a condition he proceeded to remedy by importing a crew of artizans from Birmingham and renovating the edifice completely, both without and within. He had the left gable completely demolished, and erected a new-wing jutting out from the main hall. Also he installed a heating-system and modern plumbing.

All this did not endear him to the country folk, who cherish the sacred memories of bygone days. To them this bustle of radical activity amounted to sacrilege, and insulted the Nedwickian traditions. The bland and confident way in which Sir Charles ignored their comments also met with their disfavor. He even had the temerity to order several of the more critical spectators off the premises, as these worthies stood scrutinizing the laborer's handiwork.

After that a distinct coolness manifested itself between the village and the manor. This coolness extended to the imported help as well, who were hard put to find board and lodging in the town below. Food for the new master was exorbitantly priced, and most carelessly delivered to the back door of the establishment. Sir Charles neither new nor cared. He knew nothing of the townsmen, and very little about his new estate.

Upon the completion of the restoration and the subsequent departure of the laborers, Sir Charles proceeded to remedy his ignorance concerning his recent acquisition. He took long rustic rambles over the moor, and wandered down the narrow lanes that ran between the rocky, stunted acres of pasturage. What he saw did not altogether meet with his approval. The picturesque wildness of this rugged domain failed to please his practical eye. The gnarled trees and scrubby vistas of underbrush were merely impediments to profitable cultivation; the rocky meadows signified only the fact that the land was not suitable for grazing.

He climbed to the top of a smoke-ringed hill and surveyed his kingdom with a discontented eye. This would never do! Tangled brush and boulder-strewn fields were all very well for the fox-hunting aristocracy, but Sir Charles Hovoco was made of more rational stuff. There was simply no reason for all this fertile land going to waste; with a little clearage these broad acres would yield him quite a tidy sum of money. The fact that he already had plenty of money did not figure in his calculations. Sir Charles did not countenance waste, in any form. Even he, blind as he was, realized the possibilities of objections from the peasantry. He was familiar enough with the time-honored customs which decreed the sacredness of the "right-of-way" through the land of a lord, and which held the violation of such privileges as nothing short of criminal. He vaguely understood how these folk were attached to the soil, and how the desecration of the familiar landmarks and alteration of the customary arrangements might lead to considerable annoyance. But this did not deter him. After all, precedent or no precedent, it was his land. He had paid a pretty price for his eminence, and would continue to render heavy tribute in the form of a sizable tax. The peasantry could go hang! He would go ahead.

BEFORE carrying out this somewhat rash resolution, he made several more inspection tours. It was on the third of these trips that he stumbled upon the altar.

It stood on a forest-ringed hilltop, very near to the moor. He came upon it late in the afternoon, at the conclusion of a long and arduous journey through the more adjacent portions of his property. The surrounding landscape held hints of great antiquity. The trees in the small grove were very thick, and tremendously old. The hoary stumps in the clearing were even more aged. The soil, nevertheless, was incredibly rich; seemingly it had never been tilled. The little hill on which the altar was raised seemed to be particularly fertile, though at present it was given over to a lush crop of mushrooms and toadstools.

The sight of such extravagant laxity irritated Sir Charles. He would have both trees and altar removed immediately.

He climbed the sloping mound and examined the stone that was reared upon it. It was a large boulder, smooth and very white, with a flat, tabled top. This tabled top bore some rusty stains—probably the ravages of the years; for the stone, like the surrounding glade, was very old. Why Hovoco thought so he could not say; it simply seemed to *exude* a quality of age. It was very heavy, and the base was firmly sunk into the sod, but Sir Charles soon decided that the altar was artificially placed. It seemed much too heavy a rock to be indigenous to the spot; the other glacial boulders were much smaller, and were of a distinctly limestone formation. This had obviously been a quarried block, and had probably been moved to this hilltop at some remote date. Once again Sir Charles pondered as to why he believed the altar must be old. He could arrive at no definite conclusion; nor could he assign a reason for his opinion. There was no moss upon the smooth white sides, nor any sign of an inscription. He knelt and searched for one, But in vain.

Meanwhile the sun crept away across the hills, leaving the land in the clutch of a sinister twilight. A violet haze deepened into dusk, and the shadows of the rustling trees crawled slowly across the ground. The altar, once white, glowed redly for a moment in the flames of an apocalyptic sunset, then purpled like congealing blood upon the advent of darkness. Hovoco's eyes could peer no longer through the hazy gloom. He abandoned his search for an inscription and rose to his feet. Stolidly he faced the sunset for a fleeting instant, then turned for a last look at the altar before descending and retracing his steps homeward. As he did so a shrill breeze arose and chattered mysteriously in the trees. Presently it sank to a slow, sobbing whisper, as if to mourn the dying day. In spite of himself, Hovoco was impressed. The sound was like a voice in a haunted land.

With the coming of darkness, the scene took on an unfamiliar look. The gloomy vistas seemed positively hostile to his presence, as if the entire countryside knew of Sir Charles' plans, and hated him because of what he meant to do. The doomed trees sighed, and stretched withered arms to the sky as if invoking vengeance against their enemy. The boulders loomed menacingly in the night, and the pastures beckoned him off into mystic mazes whence he would never return.

The very wind threatened him with its chill voice. Instinctively, the baronet shivered. Gloomy fancies! For a moment his eyes returned to the altar. It squatted there in the darkness, and seemed to brood like a sentient thing.

Sir Charles shrugged, then descended the hill and stalked off into the night. Once he glanced back over his shoulder. A last tiny ray of sunset light was leering over the top of the hill. It fell directly upon the center of the altar, and to Hovoco's startled eye it looked like a pool of blood.

Hastily Sir Charles turned away. But he walked home very briskly, and he did not look back any more. He was getting nervous.

2

WITH the coming of daylight, the new baronet recovered some of his accustomed aplomb. He spent the forenoon in the village, much to the natives' surprize. He dropped into the local tavern and had a glass of stout, leaning nonchalantly against the bar and wholly disregarding the unfriendly stares of the loungers beside him. After a pointed silence, during which he was uncomfortably scrutinized by the poker-faced bartender, Sir Charles abruptly addressed that worthy, and inquired where he could procure some workmen in the village to assist him in putting his land in shape.

After an astonished bit of cogitation mine host asked him just what type of work he contemplated. Hovoco explained that he wanted to clear off his land to render it suitable for cultivation. He wanted some men to cut down the useless trees, and remove the numerous stones that encumbered the fields. After that there would be rabbit-warrens to be destroyed, and birds to be killed. And, of course, there was that queer old altar off by the moorland. He would have that removed immediately.

The bartender gazed at him for a moment in apoplectic silence. Then he bluntly informed the baronet that no man in the village would think of doing such things. They would not assist in the destruction of the old landmarks, and they most certainly would not go near the altar under any circumstances. Being a newcomer, Sir Charles would not know, but the altar was generally regarded as something to shun. It had an unhealthy reputation in these parts, and always had been looked upon as a blight and a curse. No one knew how long it had stood off in those woods, nor how many had died in the old days when the drums had sounded from the hill. Wise folk said that the pagans had their dances there, and there was still talk of the old rites being celebrated on May Eve, and certain autumn nights. Bullocks had been led up that slope and given to Those who were worshipped, and some folk said that they still were. There always were a lot of farm people absent from their homes on special evenings, and without any excuses to offer the next day to the rest of the people, who had sense enough to stay indoors when the fire burned up on the hill. No, the altar was a good thing to stay away from. The grandsires could tell some wild stories on winter nights about disappearances and deaths that had never been rightly explained. They didn't generally say much before outsiders, but even Reverend Dobson, the clergyman, knew about the hill. What he probably was not aware of was the fact that some of his most loyal parishioners attended the furtive conclaves around the altar on the special nights, and carried secret charms that were handed down within their families from the days when the pagan folk ruled in the land. Therefore, the bartender was of the earnest opinion that Sir Charles should keep his hands off, and carefully avoid even the mention of the altar or hill-top, and that under no circumstances should he foolishly attempt to destroy it. There would be trouble if he did.

At the conclusion of the innkeeper's advice, Sir Charles left the tavern, without saying a word. He was obstinate in his conviction, and he would not be balked by the ignorant chatter of these yokels. Their silly superstitious prattle disgusted him, and their obvious unfriendly attitude wounded his city-bred pride. He would show them! He marched up to the local drug-store and put through a telephone call to Birmingham. Here he engaged two workmen to come out immediately and assist him in clearing off his property. This settled, he walked calmly out into the street. Tomorrow they would be here, and then he would give these country clods something to gabble about.

Meanwhile he was still human enough to entertain a keen curiosity concerning the details of the fantastic legendry which clustered about the altar on the hill. Accordingly he directed his footsteps toward the modest rectory where dwelt the local parson, the aforementioned Reverend Dobson.

HE FOUND that gentleman in his study, and introduced himself. The Reverend was a tall, wiry sort of man, with a shrewd face that was curiously counterbalanced by keen and sensitive eyes. Looking at his features, one thought of a successful broker, but a glimpse of his eyes betrayed the dreamer and the saint. The Reverend also proved to be a courteous gentleman. He so pleasantly engaged the new baronet in conversation that Sir Charles nearly forgot his errand. It was suppertime when he brought the matter around to his problem, and the clergyman hospitably urged him to stay. Hovoco consented, and they passed a pleasant mealtime in the dining-room, served by the housekeeper in a style befitting the rank of the honored guest. Afterward the gentlemen adjourned once more to the study, and indulged in a glass of sherry.

The courtesy of this reception salved the baronet's wounded ego, and in consequence he was very tactful in the way he broached the subject of the altar. He got it out at last, and managed to make his query seem merely the prompting of a curious interest he took in his estate.

The Reverend was very willing to help. He had spent a good deal of time in looking up local customs and bits of wayside legendry, and a little archeological research coupled with this knowledge had given him a good deal of the altar's history. This he would gladly impart to his guest.

The altar, he informed his visitor, was extremely ancient. While no exact date could be discovered, the time of its erection could probably be determined correctly enough by the chronology of the legends concerning it. The first tales were of pre-Celtic antiquity. When the local migratory streams had converged and set up a village upon the land, the altar was already placed. The stories had been handed down almost directly from this very remote time to the present, in a steady stream. Early myths spoke of the altar as being the gathering-place of an extremely repulsive barbarian race—short, swarthy savages, whose dwarfed priests sacrificed to the moon. They had many ceremonials, and in their warfare with the Celtic invaders they used their captives for these sanguinary rites. Eventually, through tracing the stories a bit further, one finds the primitive dark people dying out and retiring to the hills. Eventually they abandoned their claims altogether, and disappeared. For a long while following, the altar stood deserted. Then came a curious survival.

The Druids rose. Bearded vates and garlanded bards chanted their litanies to the gods of the forest. Oaks and hemlocks rose beside the altar, and a crescent-shaped grotto was erected in the glade. Here dwelt the Wise Ones who knew the secrets of the hills and called strange voices out of the earth by beating upon the great drums, or scattering pungent incense before the night-fires. To the shrill pipings of lutes they did adoration to the Dark Flame, and with the hemlock they invoked the hamadryads and the nymphs of the forest. They ruled supreme, and all the countryside bowed and obeyed. Their magical rites insured fertility, and increased the strength of their people. Rich offerings of blood were made in ever-increasing abundance, and the bleat of the faun and the shrill squeal of the centaur were heard in the land. Blood, blood, blood—ever the offering and the sacrifice—crimson drops dripping from knife-blades, dabbling the sacred robes and staining the gray beards of the elders, or trickling from the base of the altar to dye the earth with the color of life.

The iron legions of Rome thundered their way across the land. The gods of the forest were invoked in vain. They could not halt the legions. A garrison was stationed near by, and the Druids retired to their haunts in the moors. Roman customs were imposed, and the conquered ones began to turn from the old ways. Soon there was a gradual intermingling between the invaders and the natives, and a town sprang up around the garrison. Fresh arrivals came from Roman provinces across the sea, and they brought new gods to both the soldiers and the people. Cybele, Astarte, Aphrodite, and the Magna Mater were introduced, and the ways of their worship were explained and demonstrated.

Some of these rituals were very dreadful indeed, and there was need to hide them from over-curious official eyes. So the altar on the hill became a rendezvous once again. Here anthropomancy, hydromancy and animal-worship were carried out, and more blood tainted the night-wind from the hill. To the clashing of cymbals and the piercing ecstasy of the sacred conchs the nude worshippers danced in honor of the perverted gods that came from the orient lands. There were obscene images on the altar now, and mad orgies followed the initial sacrifice.

For a time the new faith prospered, and its followers grew still more abandoned in their lewdness. But One night there came a thunder across the hills, and the moonlight suddenly faded into a howling darkness. Then, while the worshippers frantically fled from that accursed and awful hilltop, a Voice shrieked a dreadful summons from afar, and the priests of the degraded cult screamed and died. The rest of the frightened congregation, men and women, soldiers and townsfolk alike, rushed into the forest. Here horror barred their way, for as the echo of that monstrous voice died away, the trees suddenly *came alive!* They swooped down upon the fugitives with tentacled branches, seizing the terrified debauchees and raising them up to the midnight sky; then dropped them to the earth below. A sudden gale had arisen, which effectively muffled their hysterical screams; so that it was not until a few straggling, half-insane fellows rushed into the town that the catastrophe was made known. The storm had meanwhile risen to such fury that it was impossible for any of the troops to venture forth again, and the story that the escaping worshippers had to tell did not encourage them in attempting any such expedition.

THE next day dawned, and an immediate search was made, but no bodies were ever discovered. The trees were again in their proper places, and there were no indications of any violent upheaval. The altar was serene and silent, and there were no littered remnants of the sacrifices to be seen. The torches, gongs, and other symbols had disappeared, and the sun beamed down upon a scene of pastoral tranquillity. Finally one of the searching soldiers happened to notice the top of the altar. There, squarely in the center of the tabled surface, lay a single sprig of hemlock.

After this incident, recorded in the chronicles by local scribes, but for political reasons never relayed back to Rome, there were no further disturbances about the altar. The missing people never returned, and the few survivors who retained their sanity were of the belief that it was for the best. Though the affair may have been a result of sympathetic mass-hallucination, nobody could deny that the disputed supernatural happenings had brought some hideously tangible results. The altar was best left alone, and the land about it was never encroached upon.

Thereafter they had a healthy respect for the Druids, and not a little fear of them. There were many things about these dark moorland ways that could not be satisfactorily explained, and many obscure caves and hidden glens that were wisely left unexplored. Bearded oldsters in white robes occasionally appeared in some of the outlying villages, and the foreign soldiers were very cautious not to molest them, or hinder them in their comings and goings. For now the pompous conquerors knew better than to scoff at the dark ways of a land they did not understand. When reports came to them about the drums and pipes that echoed from the inaccessible forests on the moor they turned deaf ears. They did not care to hear that awful Voice, or see all nature metamorphosed into a maze of menace.

At last the legions marched away, almost as suddenly as they had come. With their departure things once more assumed their normal condition. The town still remained, but when the bearded ones trickled back from their hiding-places, the old ways again held sway. The rites were resumed, and those who were sufficiently Romanized to object were mysteriously captured and burned in wicker cages upon the hills. After that the silent priestcraft reigned undisputed, and their gods did not lack for ruddy nourishment.

Gradually, however, the rites decayed. Fierce barbarian tribes ravaged the countryside. Anglo-Saxons ruled, and for the Druids they showed no mercy. They had their gods, too, and they were strong. There was no recurrence of the inexplicable phenomenon that had befallen the Roman devotees. What happened when the newcomers met the old ones in conflict has never been told. The manuscripts that Reverend Dobson possessed were strangely silent on this point. All that he had been able to learn was that in some curious way the Druidic priests suddenly disappeared. The grim invaders were unable to find them, though they were unafraid when it came to thoroughly exploring every portion of the forbiding countryside. There was one last mighty ceremony from the altar on the hill, and the next day they were gone. The tribesmen combed the moors in vain. Then they cut down the oaks and the hemlocks, destroyed the crescent-glade, and let matters rest. The altar they were unable to remove, though attempts were undoubtedly made. Accounts are unnaturally hazy on this point, also.

Centuries passed. Gradually Christianity was introduced. The refining influences of civilization descended upon the land. A priory was erected near by. It was the good monks who chronicled the history of the surrounding regions, and they had likewise recorded the history of the altar. The latter they seemed to have avoided, though now only legend remained to warn them away. There were no repetitions of the archaic rites, and no disquieting evidences to encourage this avoidance, but nevertheless there were no attempts made to raze the pagan stone.

A new abomination rose and flourished later on. Returning knights from the Crusader citadels of Malta, Rhodes, and Cyprus established themselves in the priory. They brought with them the degenerate creeds of Satanism, and there were loathsome rumors of a Black Mass. By now the country-folk were pious, and their simple concepts of religious reverence were outraged by the warrior bishops who ruled from within the walls of the monastery and abbey. Once again there was talk of Pan, and satyrs and oreads haunted the gloomy groves, or tittered across the lonely moor at twilight. Once again there was blood on the altar, and queer processions visited the hill on sacred nights. Still the Druids were not forgotten. Though the oaks were gone, and other gods were worshipped at their sanctuary, the peasants remembered the old tales, and feared the ancient horror more than they did the new.

The new passed. Henry VIII's minions swept down upon the robber bishops, and one night the priory disappeared in a red holocaust of flame. The next day the soldiers rode away, leaving only the dead behind them. They did not speak of what they found within the priory walls, nor did they venture near the altar, but it is recorded that their faces were deathly pale in the morning light.

The next night the villagers heard a faint drumming on the hilltop, and for a moment a tiny flame flickered and died. That was all, but it was enough. The Druids still reigned. Men might come and go, kingdoms rise and fall, but the old ways still remained in the secret plares.

BARON NEDWICK won his spurs and his land under good Queen Bess. A castle rose at Nedwick, and hunters galloped across the verdant fields. The Nedwick line had prospered, and won esteem from village and countryside alike. Part of this estimation was due to the fact that they asked no questions about the altar, and did not hunt too far upon the moorland.

By now the altar was being used once again, but this time by the rustics themselves. Certain old women were known to have the gift of prophecy, and the dubious repute of possessing the evil eye. Oftentimes they retired to rude huts upon the moor, and consulted their familiars before the altar on the hill. Sometimes there was need of blood, and those that came to them for help were not averse to donating a heifer or a goat. By now the place was known throughout the land for what it was, and none but the followers of witchcraft and sorcery ever ventured near it. On certain nights these people were known to make use of it, but there were other nights when it appeared deserted, and a queer drumming was faintly heard from afar. Then even the witches were afraid, for they too knew and respected the olden tales.

There is little more to say. The witches passed, and once again the altar came into its own. Every so often some old rumor was momentarily revived upon the discovery of fresh stains on the altar-top, or the fancied sound of nocturnal drumming from the hill; but in the opinion of the majority, it was now fairly safe to examine the spot. At certain seasons there were occasional sacrifices made quietly, but these were publicly disavowed by the more enlightened elements of the local population. Even so, the inhabitants still had their suspicions, and when the last of the Nedwicks died there had been a secret meeting on the hill.

The clergyman concluded his remarks by referring Sir Charles to the volumes he owned which dealt with the surrounding countryside; many of these contained references to the matter. Then he added a little advice. He was a man of God, he said, but even the Bible recognizes the Spirit of Evil. There was something wrong about that altar and the surrounding groves, something quite unsavory. There had been too much blood spilt, too many unhallowed prayers. Throughout all its history the ancient Druidic rites had played a part, and the vates were evil men. As a close student of the Stonehenge legend, and other such manifestations of the Druid powers, Reverend Dobson was led to believe that their sway had not yet altogether ceased. Somewhere, in some place, there was a survival. There was still worship under the horns of the crescent. For this reason, although he was not ordinarily a superstitious man, the clergyman earnestly warned Sir Charles that he would do best to keep away from that portion of his land upon which the stone stood.

Hovoco thanked him for his narrative, and turned the talk to other fields. An hour later he departed, bidding the Reverend Mr. Dobson a pleasant good-evening. As he strode off into the night, however, his face became a mask of scowling determination. Druid humbug! The clergyman, for all his hospitality, was nothing but a credulous fool. The altar must go.

3

MORNING heralded the arrival of the two workingmen from Birmingham. Mr. Joseph Gauer and Mr. Sam Williams were sturdy, matter-of-fact souls, with a hearty dislike of the rural simpletons and their ways. Even so, Sir Charles thought it wise not to inform them as to the nature of the stone he ordered them to destroy. He did, however, accompany them to the spot to superintend their work. They procured tools from the battered car in which they came, and started off at a brisk pace over the meadows. It was a beautiful day. When they came to the grove they saw the altar clearly Outlined against the blue background of sky. There was nothing sinister or disturbing about it in the least, for which fact Sir Charles was secretly very glad.

The two men set to work with a will. The task was difficult. First they dug around the base, spading up the firm earth until a narrow trench surrounded the stone. Then they began to use the picks, and finally the spades again. Sir Charles was surprized at the depth of the rock; it had been imbedded many feet. At last, however, their task was concluded. Using the picks as levers, they pried the great boulder loose, and with a tremendous heave, lifted it ponderously to one side. Then Sir Charles received a shock.

There was no ground beneath! Instead, a gigantic hole yawned where the stone had rested, and from it rose a putrid stench as of a thing long dead. The opening was circular, and very deep. A glimpse into the orifice did not reveal the bottom. A stone cast into the depths rebounded noiselessly from the earthen sides, and there was no sound to indicate how far it must have fallen.

Sir Charles bravely struggled to retain his composure at this unexpected revelation, and told the workmen to retire for the day. When they asked him about the hole, he informed them that in his opinion the thing was a former well, probably dry, whose shaft had been walled up. Then he hurriedly dismissed them, for he did not care to answer any further questions, or be asked to account for the nauseous odor that was still seeping from the gaping pit.

The men withdrew, and Sir Charles followed them at a distance. For the first time he was beginning to feel really afraid. He was forced to check a sudden impulse to recall the men and order them to replace the stone. Then he repressed the urge savagely. They would think him a fool, and he did not dare admit his fear, even to himself. Better to let them go. He watched them as they went off to find temporary lodging in the village, but all the while he was conscious of a black imp of anxiety tugging at his soul. At length he forced himself to go back to the manor and read, but he was far from feeling at his ease.

By midafternoon he was so restless that he decided to run down to the city for the evening. He got out the car and left in time to arrive before the last rays of sunset. He did not want to be alone after dark right now. He spent the evening at a cabaret, and the night at a hotel, taking great pains not to be unaccompanied.

It must have been close to noon when he at last drove back into the village, his former composure now completely restored. But not for long. There was horrible news for him at the little town.

Gauer and Williams were gone. Not just disappeared, but gone for ever. The story was simple. The tavern-keeper told him, with a touch of righteousness not unmixed with pity in his voice.

The two men had come into his place the afternoon before, to find rooms for a few days. The owner of the pub, not knowing, of course, the reason for their presence, had found room for them; though had he any inkling of their business he would have ordered them from his doors. The two men, once lodged, reappeared in the tavern below to get their evening meals. At first they held themselves aloof from the local habitués of the establishment, but after their supper they indulged in a few glasses of ale, and a gin-and-bitters. This encouraged them to let down their barrier of reserve, and look with more tolerance upon the friendly gathering that assembled for a nightly session about eight that evening. Soon the two men had introduced themselves by name, and became absorbed in the general conversation. One thing led to another, and by ten or so the jolly loungers were becoming tipsy. The two city men had bought several rounds for the assemblage, and the house had reciprocated in kind. All in all, it was a very pleasant and friendly little chat on things political, social, and economic.

The bar-keep admitted to having several stiff drinks under his belt by this time, and in consequence he could not rightly testify to the events immediately precipitating the quarrel. It is quite evident, however, that somehow one of the men had unwittingly let slip the casual information that he and his companion were here at the behest of Sir Charles Hovoco, for the purpose of reclaiming his land. They were, of course, totally ignorant of the general attitude on this affair, and were very surprized indeed by the reception accorded this statement. Several of their listeners had been among those present when Sir Charles had been there the afternoon before, and they took the lead in denouncing the two workmen for their contemplated part in the affair.

Here Gauer made another break. Testily he retorted that he, for one, didn't see what all this fuss was about—why, all they had done today, for example, was to dig up an old stone on a hill, and uncover some kind of abandoned well.

IMMEDIATELY following this shocking revelation came a storm of horrified denunciation. No good would come of such doings; the Old Ones were not to be disturbed, nor their dwellings violated. A foul murrain upon such doings! There was a good deal of excited conjecture over the discovery that there was a shaft beneath the altar. God alone knew how old the stone was, and only the Devil could tell who burrowed the pit beneath it. Some wheezing oldster whispered a bit of ancient gossip about the Druidic days; his grandsire had once spoken about the Druids worshipping before the altar as a *gateway,* and what could they mean but the passage or fissure beneath its base? The story about the Voice was revived, too—had it not come *out of the earth?* When the bards had disappeared, *where had they gone to?* The old ways still remain. It was a dangerous sacrilege that these men had committed, and only ill would come of it.

To this and similar statements the two laborers retorted in words of scorn and contempt. They would not be frightened by such bogy-man tales as these. They were not simple, superstitious country Reubens; they came from the city, where such foolish fancies were properly ignored. They did not believe in the stories, and furthermore they boldly expressed their crude opinions of any yokels who upheld such obvious falsehoods. The Druids, or whatever they were called, were nothing but myths. Perhaps some ignorant rustics had sacrificed animals on the altar? What of it? They were not afraid.

This drunken bickering continued to its tragic conclusion. One of the farmers, a grizzled simpleton named Leftwich, challenged the visitors' bluff. He offered to put up a pound note that the two of them would not dare to venture that very night upon the hill where the altar stood.

The bet was immediately taken, despite the warnings that the aroused innkeeper offered. The dangers of such an undertaking were ridiculed by the intoxicated non-believers, and after another round of drinks they started off, accompanied to the pasture nearest the hilltop by the farmer who had made the proposal. From there the two went on alone, teetering slowly across the field with borrowed lanterns in their hands and a ribald song upon their lips.

The farmer stood watching them for a moment; then, suddenly, the moon went behind a cloud and tire wind gave a sudden peal of mocking laughter. A strange horripilation assailed the now-sobered man, and unable to control his inexplicable terror, he hastily withdrew. As he did so he noticed that the faint notes of the song had died away, and the figures were lost to view in the blackness of the clouded night. All at once he found himself racing back in the direction of the village to get help. As he panted down the road he heard a booming from behind him, like the voice of muffled thunder. After that there was a piercing scream, then silence.

Breathlessly he ran into the village street, and re-entered the tavern. Ten minutes later a band of grim and earnest men streamed in a torchlight procession out of the little town and down the long road to the hills below the moor. The moon had reappeared, and when they reached the base of the pasture where the two workmen had cut across, they could see the top of the altar-mound quite plainly in the silver light. It was bare. The two men were nowhere to be seen. A few of the more daring volunteered to venture to the summit, while the rest combed the surrounding meadow-land.

An hour later the party reassembled, and the delegation from the hill had a report. The men were not there now, but they had been. Perhaps the best idea of what happened to them could be gathered from the fact that one of their hats had been discovered not three feet from the opening below the altar-piece. The grass upon the hilltop was curiously trampled, and though there were definite tracks in tire dewy grass which led up to the summit, there were no footprints going down. That was all.

Sir Charles heard this story with incredulous mien. “Dreadful,” he said. “Dreadful, but perfectly natural. The two fools were drunk. They reached the top, overbalanced, and fell in. For that matter, you and Leftwich are almost legally responsible for countenancing such a stupid and outlandish wager. This affair will have to be thoroughly investigated and reported now, and may cause no end of trouble. I shall have t® summon the police tomorrow, and I warn you I shall hold you and your companions morally responsible for this unfortunate occurrence. Good day!”

The baronet turned on his heel and moved rapidly in the direction of Nedwide Hall. He was never seen in the village again.

THE rest of the story was told by the Reverend Dobson, and it is to this clergyman that the responsibility goes for its authenticity. Sir Charles disappeared into his study at the Hall immediately upon entering it. What went on in there between two in the afternoon and nine in the evening we shall never know. Did he at last come around to a belief in the macabre causes of the tragedy? Did his tormenting conscience urge him to make an atonement? Nobody can say. Whatever his feelings, he is known to have left the house at nine, hastily, without speaking to the servants or accounting for his actions in any way. He was haggard and disheveled, but he almost ran down the road in the direction of the clergyman’s abode. He never went in. Whatever his purpose in coming, he changed his mind at the last moment.

It was then, as he stood hesitant upon the doorstep, that Dobson, glancing out of the window, saw his tortured face. He watched Sir Charles as he turned, and with a shudder of inward agony, began to hasten back down the road along which he had come. Thinking he might be ill, the clergyman hastily put on his hat and followed him. But even as he hurried after the retreating baronet, Dobson was forced to revise his opinion. No sick man could set so brisk a pace. For a moment the reverend gentleman was minded to retrace his steps, but the mystery of his guest’s peculiar behavior drove him on.

Suddenly Sir Charles left the road and began to cut across the open country behind the village. He no longer walked erect. Instead, he seemed to *lope.* It was as if he were ashamed of being seen, and yet in a hurry to reach his destination. It was frightening to see him scurry across the fields, like some great, misshapen animal. When he saw this, Dobson was prompted to call out to Hovoco, but he refrained. For a long while they continued in silence.

Sir Charles skulked ahead, never once looking back. His eyes were set upon the grove of trees and the little hill, and his body moved as if under the spell of some unnatural compulsion. Was he going to investigate the rumors for himself? Or was he being *forced* to go? He seemed unable to stop, and now, lanternless, and without a guide, he was racing over the rocky field that led to the trees.

Dobson followed as speedily as he could. He was still several hundred yards behind, however, when the hurrying figure of the baronet disappeared amid the grove of twisted trees. The Reverend strained his muscles in pursuit, striving to overtake his man before Hovoco reached the top of the hill; for it was by now hideously evident that that was his objective. As Dobson entered the little glen, the moon disappeared, and his quarry faded from sight. He strained his ears to detect the sound of footsteps in the darkness ahead, but in vain. Instead there was another sound.

A drumming in the earth. The ground beneath his feet began to seethe with muted sound; a hellish drone of muffled beats rose upon his ears. He stumbled through the blackness, the ghastly thunder raging in the very depths of his being. If only he could reach that hill in time! Sir Charles was being lured to his doom, just as the blundering workmen had been snared. The Old Ones were about to claim their own!

Choking and gasping for lack of breath, the clergyman emerged at last at the base of the little hill on which the altar lay. His eyes pierced the blackness and sought out the blurred form of the baronet. He was nearly at the summit now, and the drums were yammering from within the very hillside itself. To Dobson’s watching eyes came the maddening vision of Sir

Charles Hovoco on all fours, frantically running up the slope with a bestial eagerness apparent in the very outlines of his body. As he covered the final slope the drums suddenly ceased.

For a moment there was silence, and Dobson saw the baronet, risen to his full height, gazing as if entranced into the black pit at his feet. Then came a single nightmare scream from Sir Charles' foaming lips, and a second later his feet began to slide along the ground toward the great gaping mouth of the opening. Then, as the scream died in his throat, the moon came out, and for an instant his straining body was clearly outlined against the leering sky. Then it toppled forward and disappeared into the black burrow below. But in that instant the Reverend Dobson had seen that which sent him reeling from the accursed spot; had seen in the silvery moonlight *the clutching bands from the pit that had grasped Sir Charles by his ankles and were dragging him to his doom.*

THAT'S the story. Dobson swears to it, and those in the village who know are inclined to believe. Outsiders have been told that the three deaths were due to accidental suicide, and this plausible and sane surmise has been officially accepted. Another man occupies the Hall today, and he knows enough to keep his hands off what he does not understand. The natives have relapsed into a careful silence, and discourage all references to the altar, the glade on the hillside, or the legends of the Druids. They hope, in time, that the affair will be forgotten, and already they are beginning to deny any belief in the truth of the ancient lore.

But this has not prevented them from carefully replacing the altar over that ominous opening on the hill, and carefully bathing it from time to time with fresh, rich blood.

The Faceless God

A tremendous story of a fearful trek across the Egyptian desert, and the malignant stone idol that waited for the doctor's return

THE thing on the torture-rack began to moan. There was a grating sound as the lever stretched the iron bed still one more space in length.

The moaning grew to a piercing shriek of utter agony.

"Ah," said Doctor Stugatche, "we have him at last."

He bent over the tortured man on the iron grille and smiled tenderly into the anguished face. His eyes, tinged with delicate amusement, took in every detail of the body before him—the swollen legs, raw and angry from the embrace of the fiery boot; the lacerated back and shoulders, still crimson from the kiss of the lash; the bloody, mangled remnants of a chest crushed by the caress of the Spiked Coffin. With gentle solicitude he surveyed the finishing touches applied by the rack itself—the dislocated shoulders and twisted torso; the crushed and broken fingers, and the dangling tendons in the lower limbs. Then he turned his attention to the old man's tormented countenance once again. He laughed, softly, in a voice like the tinkling of a bell. Then he spoke.

"Well, Hassan. I do not think you will prove stubborn any longer in the face of such—ah—eloquent persuasion. Come now; tell me where I can find this idol of which you speak."

The butchered victim began to sob, and the doctor was forced to kneel beside the bed of pain in order to understand his incoherent mumblings. For perhaps twenty minutes the creature groaned on, and then at last fell silent. Doctor Stugatche rose to his feet once more, a satisfied twinkle in his genial eyes. He made a brief motion to one of the blacks operating the rack machinery. The fellow nodded, and went over to the living horror on the instrument. It was crying now—its tears were blood. The black drew his sword. It swished upward, then cleaved down once again. There was a dull sound of crunching impact, and then a tiny fountain spurted upward, spreading a scarlet blot upon the wall behind. . . .

Doctor Stugatche went out of the room, bolted the door behind him, and climbed the steps to the house above. As he raised the barred trap-door he saw that the sun was shining. The doctor began to whistle. He was very pleased.

2

HE HAD good reason to be. For several years the doctor had been what is vulgarly known as an “adventurer.” He had been a smuggler of antiques, an exploiter of labor on the Upper Nile, and had at times sunk so low as to participate in the forbidden “black goods trade” that flourished at certain ports along the Red Sea. He had come out to Egypt many years ago as an attaché on an archeological expedition, from which he had been summarily dismissed. The reason for his dismissal is not known, but it was rumored that he had been caught trying to appropriate certain of the expeditionary trophies. After his exposure and subsequent disgrace, he had disappeared for a while. Several years later he had come back to Cairo and set up an establishment in the native quarter. It was here that he fell into the unscrupulous habits of business which had earned for him a dubious reputation and a sizable profit. He seemed well satisfied with both.

At the present time he was a man of perhaps forty-five years of age, short and heavy-set, with a bullet-shaped head that rested on broad, ape-like shoulders. His thick torso and bulging paunch were supported by a pair of spindly legs that contrasted oddly with the upper portions of his beefy body. Despite his Falstaffian appearance he was a hard and ruthless man. His piggish eyes were filled with greed; his fleshy mouth was lustful; his only natural smile was one of avarice.

It was his covetous nature that had led him into his present adventure. Ordinarily he was not a credulous man. The usual tales of lost pyramids, buried treasure and stolen mummies did not impress him. He preferred something more substantial. A contraband consignment of rugs; a bit of smuggled opium; something in the line of illicit human merchandise—these were things he could appreciate and understand.

But this case was different. Extraordinary as it sounded, it meant big money. Stugatche was smart enough to know that many of the great discoveries of Egyptology had been prompted by just such wild rumors as the one he had heard. He also knew the difference between improbable truth and spurious invention. This story sounded like the truth.

In brief, it ran as follows. A certain party of nomads, while engaged in a secret journey with a cargo of illegitimately obtained goods, were traversing a special route of their own. They did not feel that the regular caravan lanes were healthful for them to follow. While traveling near a certain spot they had accidentally espied a curious rock or stone in the sands. The thing had evidently been buried, but long years of shifting and swirling among the dunes above it had served to uncover a portion of the object. They had stopped to inspect it at closer range, and thereby made a startling discovery. The thing projecting from the sand was the head of a statue; an ancient Egyptian statue, with the triple crown of a god! Its black body was still submerged, but the head seemed to be in perfect preservation. It was a very peculiar thing, that head, and none of the natives could or would recognize the deity, though the caravan leaders questioned them closely. The whole thing was an unfathomable mystery. A perfectly preserved statue of an unknown god buried all alone in the southern desert, a long way from any oasis, and two hundred miles from the smallest village!

Evidently the caravan men realized something of its uniqueness; for they ordered that two boulders which lay near by be placed on top of the idol as a marker in case they ever returned. The men did as they were ordered, though they were obviously reluctant, and kept muttering prayers beneath their breath. They seemed very much afraid of the buried image, but only reiterated their ignorance when questioned further concerning it.

After the boulders had been placed, the expedition was forced to journey on, for time did not permit them to unearth the curious figure in its entirety, or attempt to carry it with them. When they returned to the north they told their story, and as most tales were in the habit of doing, it came to the ears of Doctor Stugatche. Stugatche thought fast. It was quite evident that the original discoverers of the idol did not attach any great importance to their find. For this reason the doctor might easily return to the spot and unearth the statue without any trouble, once he knew exactly where it was located.

Stugatche felt that it was worth finding. If it had been a treasure yam, now, he would have scoffed and unhesitatingly put it down as a cock-and-bull story of the usual variety. But an idol—that was different. He could understand why an ignorant band of Arab smugglers might ignore such a discovery. He could also realize that such a discovery might prove more valuable to him than all the treasure in Egypt. It was easy for him to remember the vague clues and wild hints that had prompted the findings of early explorers. They had followed up many blind leads when first they plumbed the pyramids and racked the temple ruins. All of them were tomb-looters at heart, but their ravishings had made them rich and famous. Why not him, then? If the tale were true, and this idol not only buried, but totally unknown as a deity; in perfect condition, and in such an out-of-the-way locality—these facts would create a furor when he exhibited his find. He would be famous! Who knew what hitherto untrodden fields he might open up in archeology? It was well worth chancing.

But he must not arouse any suspicion. He dared hot inquire about the place from any of the Arabs who had been there. That would immediately cause talk. No, he must get his directions from a native in the band. Accordingly, two of his servants picked up Hassan, the old camel-driver, and brought him before Stugatche in his house. But Hassan, when questioned, looked very much afraid. He refused to talk. So Stugatche, as we have seen, conducted him into his little reception room in the cellar, where he had been wont to entertain certain recalcitrant guests in the past. Here the doctor, whose knowledge of anatomy stood him in good stead, was able to cajole his visitor into speaking, by the methods we have just witnessed.

So Doctor Stugatche emerged from the cellar in a very pleasant frame of mind. He was rubbing his fat hands when he looked at the map to verify his information, and he went out to dinner with a smiling face.

Two days later he was ready to start. He had hired a small number of natives, so as not to excite undue investigation, and given out to his business acquaintances that he was about to embark on a special trip. He engaged a strange dragoman, and made sure that the fellow would keep his mouth shut. There were several swift camels in the train, and a number of extra donkeys harnessed to a large empty cart. He took food and water for six days, for he intended to return via river-boat. After the arrangements were completed, the party assembled one morning at a certain spot unknown to official eyes, and the expedition began.

It was on the morning of the fourth day that they arrived at last. Stugatche saw the stones from his precarious perch atop the leading camel. He swore delightedly, and despite the hovering heat, dismounted and raced over to the spot where the two boulders lay. A moment later he called the company to a hasty halt and issued orders for the immediate erection of the tents, and the usual preparations for encampment. Utterly disregarding the intolerable warmth of the day, he saw to it that the sweating natives did a thorough job; and then, without allowing them a moment's rest, he instructed them to remove the massive rocks from their resting-place. A crew of straining men managed to topple them over at last, and clear away the underlying sand.

In a few moments there was a loud cry from the gang of laborers, as a black and sinister head came into view. It was a triple-crowned blasphemy. Great spiky cones adorned the top of the ebony diadem, and beneath them were hidden intricately executed designs. He bent down and examined them. They were monstrous, both in subject and in execution. He saw the writhing, worm-like shapes of primal monsters, and headless, slimy creatures from the stars. There were bloated beasts in the robes of men, and ancient Egyptian gods in hideous combat with squirming demons from the gulf. Some of the designs were foul beyond description, and others hinted of unclean terrors that were old when the world was young. But all were evil; and Stugatche, cold and callous though he was, could not gaze at them without feeling a horror that ate at his brain.

As for the natives, they were openly frightened. The moment that the top of the image came into view, they began to jabber hysterically. They retreated to the side of the excavation and began to argue and mumble, pointing occasionally at the statue, or at the kneeling figure of the doctor. Absorbed in his inspection, Stugatche failed to catch the body of their remarks, or note the air of menace which radiated from the sullen dragoman. Once or twice he heard some vague references to the name "Nyarlathotep", and a few allusions to "The Demon Messenger".

After completing his scrutiny, the doctor rose to his feet and ordered the men to proceed with the excavation. No one moved. Impatiently he repeated his command. The natives stood by, their heads hung, but their faces were stolid. At last the dragoman stepped forward and began to harangue the *effendi.*

He and his men would never have come with their master had they known what they were expected to do. They would not touch the statue of the god, and they warned the doctor to keep his hands off. It was bad business to incur the wrath of the Old God—the Secret One. But perhaps he had not heard of Nyarlathotep. He was the oldest god of all Egypt; of all the world. He was the God of Resurrection, and the Black Messenger of Karneter. There was a legend that one day he would arise and bring the olden dead to life. And his curse was one to be avoided.

Stugatche, listening, began to lose his temper. Angrily he interrupted, ordering the men to stop gawking and resume their work. He backed up this command with two Colt .32 revolvers. He would take all the blame for this desecration, he shouted, and he was not afraid of any damned stone idol in the world.

The natives seemed properly impressed both by the revolvers and by his fluent profanity. They began to dig again, timidly averting their eyes from the statue's form.

A FEW hours work sufficed for the men to uncover the idol. If the crown of its stony head had hinted of horror, the face and body openly proclaimed it. The image was obscene and shockingly malignant. There was an indescribably *alien* quality about it—it was ageless, unchanging, eternal. Not a scratch marred its black and crudely chiseled surface; during all its many-centuried burial there had been no weathering upon the fiendishly carven features. Stugatche saw it now as it must have looked when it was first buried, and the sight was not good to see.

It resembled a miniature sphinx—a life-sized sphinx with the wings of a vulture and the body of a hyena. There were talons and claws, and upon the squatting, bestial body rested a massive, anthropomorphic head, bearing the ominous triple crown whose dread designs had so singularly excited the natives. But the worst and by far the most hideous feature was the lack of a face upon the ghastly thing. It was a faceless god; the winged, faceless god of ancient myth—Nyarlathotep, Mighty Messenger, Stalker among the Stars, and Lord of the Desert.

When Stugatche completed his examination at last, he became almost hysterically happy. He grinned triumphantly into that blank and loathsome countenance—grinned into that faceless orifice that yawned as vacantly as the black void beyond the suns. In his enthusiasm he failed to notice the furtive whispers of the natives and the guides, and disregarded their fearsome glances at the unclean eidolon. Had he not done so, he would have been a wiser man; for these men knew, as all Egypt knows, that Nyarlathotep is the Master of Evil.

Not for nothing had his temples been demolished, his statues destroyed, and his priestcraft crucified in the olden days. There were dark and terrible reasons for prohibiting his worship, and omitting his name from the *Book of the Dead.* All references to the Faceless One were long since deleted from the Sacred Manuscripts, and great pains had been taken to ignore some of his godly attributes, or assign them to some milder deity. In Thoth, Set, Bubastis and Sebek we can trace some of the Master's grisly endowments. It was he, in the most archaic of the chronicles, who was ruler of the Underworld. It was he who became the patron of sorcery and the black arts. Once he alone had ruled, and men knew him in all lands, under many names. But that time passed. Men turned away from the worship of evil, and reverenced the good. They did not care for the gruesome sacrifice the Dark God demanded, nor the way his priests ruled. At last the cult was suppressed, and by common consent all references to it were for ever banned, and its records destroyed. But Nyarlathotep had come out of the desert, according to the legend, and to the desert he now returned. Idols were set up in hidden places among the sands, and here the thin, fanatical ranks of true believers still leapt and capered in naked worship, where the cries of shrieking victims echoed only to the ears of the night.

So his legend remained and was handed down in the secret ways of the earth. Time passed. In the north the ice-flow receded, and Atlantis fell. New peoples overran the land, but the desert folk remained. They viewed the building of the pyramids with amused and cynical eyes. Wait, they counseled. When the Day arrived at last, Nyarlathotep again would come out of the desert, and then wo unto Egypt! For the pyramids would shatter into dust, and temples crumble to ruin. Sunken cities of the sea would rise, and there would be famine and pestilence throughout the land. The stars would change in a most peculiar way, so that the Great Ones could come pulsing from the outer gulf. Then the beasts should give tongue, and prophesy in their anthropoglotism that man shall perish. By these signs, and other apocalyptic portents, the world would know that Nyarlathotep had returned. Soon he himself would be visible—a dark, faceless man in black, walking, staff in hand, across the desert, but leaving no track to mark his way, save that of death. For wherever his footsteps turned, men would surely die, until at last none but true believers remained to welcome him in worship with the Mighty Ones from the gulfs.

Such, in its essence, was the fable of Nyarlathotep. It was older than secret Egypt, more hoary than sea-doomed Atlantis, more ancient than time-forgotten Mu. But it has never been forgotten. In the mediaeval times this story and its prophecy were carried across Europe by returning crusaders. Thus the Mighty Messenger became the Black Man of the witch-covens; the emissary of Asmodeus and darker gods. His name is mentioned cryptically in the *Necronomicon,* for Alhazred heard it whispered in tales of shadowed Irem. The fabulous *Book of Eibon* hints at the myth in veiled and diverse ways, for it was writ in a far-off time when it was not yet deemed safe to speak of things that had walked upon the earth when it was young. Ludvig Prinn, who traveled in Saracenic lands and learned strange sorceries, awesomely implies his knowledge in the infamous *Mysteries of the Worm.*

But his worship, in late years, seems to have died out. There is no mention of it in Sir James Frazer's *Golden Bough,* and most reputable ethnologists and anthropologists are frankly ignorant of the Faceless One's history. But there are idols still intact, and some whisper of certain caverns beneath the Nile, and of burrows below the Ninth Pyramid. The secret signs and symbols of his worship are gone, but there are some undecipherable hieroglyphs in the Government vaults which are very closely concealed.

And men know. By word of mouth the tale has come down through the ages, and there are those who still wait for the Day. By common consent there seem to be certain spots in the desert which are carefully avoided by caravans, and several secluded shrines are shunned by those Who remember. For Nyarlathotep is the God of the Desert, and his ways are best left unprofaned.

IT WAS this knowledge which prompted the uneasiness of the natives upon the discovery of that peculiar idol in the sand. When they had first noted the head-dress they had been afraid, and after seeing that featureless face they became frantic with dread. As for Doctor Stugatche, his fate did not matter to them. They were concerned only with themselves, and their course was plainly apparent. They must flee, and flee at once.

Stugatche paid no attention to them. He was busy making plans for the following day. They would place the idol on a wheeled cart and harness the donkeys. Once back to the river it could be put on board the steamer. What a find! He conjured up pleasant visions of the fame and fortune that would be his. Scavenger, was he? Unsavory adventurer, eh? Charlatan, cheat, impostor, they had called him. How those smug official eyes would pop when they beheld his discovery! Heaven only knew what vistas this thing might open up. There might be other altars, other idols; tombs and temples too, perhaps. He knew vaguely that there was some absurd legend about the worship of this deity, but if he could only get his hands on a few more natives who could give him the information he wanted.,., He smiled, musingly. Funny, those superstitious myths! The boys were afraid of the statue; that was plainly apparent. The dragoman, now, with his stupid quotations. How did it go? “Nyarlathotep is the Black Messenger of Karneter. He comes from out the desert, across the burning sands, and stalks his prey throughout the world, which is the land of his domain.” Silly! All Egyptian myths were stupid. Statues with animal heads suddenly coming to life; reincarnation of men and gods, foolish kings building pyramids for mummies. Well, a lot of fools believed it; not only the natives, either. Tie knew some cranks who credited the stories about the Pharaoh’s curse, and the magic of the old priests. There were a lot of wild tales about the ancient tombs and the men who died when they invaded them. No wonder his own simple natives believed such trash! But whether they believed it or not, they were going to move his idol, damn them, even if he had to shoot them down to make them obey.

He went into his tent, well satisfied. The boy served him his meal, and Stugatche dined heartily as was his wont. Then he decided to retire early, in anticipation of his plans for the following morning. The boys could tend to the camp, he decided. Accordingly he lay down on his cot and soon fell into a contented, peaceful slumber.

4

IT MUST have been several hours later that he awoke. It was very dark, and the night was strangely still. Once he heard the far-away howl of a hunting jackal, but it soon blended into somber silence. Surprized at his sudden awakening, Stugatche rose and went to the door of the tent, pulling back the flap to gaze into the open. A moment later he cursed in frenzied rage.

The camp was deserted! The fire had died out, the men and camels had disappeared. Foot-prints, already half obliterated by the sands, showed the silent haste in which the natives had departed. The fools had left him here alone!

He was lost. The knowledge sent a sudden stab of fear to his heart. Lost! The men were gone, the food was gone, the camels and donkeys had disappeared. He had neither weapons nor water, and he was all alone. He stood before the door of the tent and gazed, terrified, at the vast and lonely desert. The moon gleamed like a silver skull in an ebony sky. A sudden hot wind ruffled the endless ocean of sand, and sent it skirling in tiny waves at his feet. Then came silence, ceaseless silence. It was like the silence of the tomb; like the eternal silence of the pyramids, where in crumbling sarcophagi the mummies lie, their dead eyes gazing into unchanging and unending darkness. He felt indescribably small and lonely there in the night, and he was conscious of strange and baleful powers that were weaving the threads of his destiny into a final tragic pattern. Nyarlathotep! He *knew,* and was wreaking an immutable vengeance.

But that was nonsense. He must not let himself be troubled by such fantastic rubbish. That was just another form of desert mirage; a common enough delusion under such circumstances. He must not lose his nerve now. He must face the facts calmly. The men had absconded with the supplies and the horses because of some crazy native superstition. That was real enough. As for the superstition itself, he mast not let it bother him. Those frantic and morbid fancies of his would vanish quickly enough with the morning sun.

The morning sun! A terrible thought assailed him—the fearsome reality of the desert at midday. To reach an oasis he would be forced to travel day and night before the lack of food and water weakened him so that he could not go on. There would be no escape once he left this tent; no refuge from that pitiless blazing eye whose glaring rays could scorch his brain to madness. To die in the heat of the desert—that was an unthinkable agony. He must get back; his work was not yet completed. There must be a new expedition to recover the idol. He must get back! Besides, Stugatche did not want to die. His fat lips quivered with fear as he thought of the pain, the torture. He had no desire to suffer the anguish of that fellow he had put on the rack. The poor devil had not looked very pleasant there. Ah no, death was not for the doctor. He must hurry. But where?

He gazed around frantically, trying to get his bearings. The desert mocked him with its monotonous, inscrutable horizon. For a moment black despair clutched at his brain, and then came a sudden inspiration. He must go north, of course. And he recalled, now, the chance words let fall by the dragoman that afternoon. The statue of Nyarlathotep faced north! Jubilantly he ransacked the tent for any remnants of food or provisions. There were none. Matches and tobacco he carried, and in his kit he found a hunting-knife. He was almost confident when he left the tent. The rest of the journey would now be childishly simple. He would travel all night and make as much time as he could. His pack-blanket would probably shield him from the noonday sun tomorrow, and in late afternoon he would resume his course after the worst of the heat had abated. By quick marches tomorrow night, he ought to find himself near the Wadi Hassur oasis upon the following morning. All that remained for him to do was to get out to the idol and set his course, since the tracks of his party in the sand were already obscured.

Triumphantly, he strode across the camp-clearing to the excavation where the image stood. And it was there that he received his greatest shock.

The idol had been reinterred! The workmen had not left the statue violated, but had completely filled in the excavation, even taking the precaution of placing the two original stones over the top. Stugatche could not move them single-handed, and when he realized the extent of this calamity he was filled with an overpowering dismay. He was defeated. Cursing would do no good, and in his heart he could not even hope to pray. Nyarlathotep—Lord of the Desert!

It was with a new and deathly fear that he began his journey, choosing a course at random, and hoping against hope that the sudden clouds would lift so that he could have the guidance of the stars. But the clouds did not lift, and only the moon grinned grimly down at the stumbling figure that struggled through the sand.

Dervish dreams flitted through Stugatche’s consciousness as he walked. Try as he might, the legend of the god haunted him with a sense of impending fulfilment. Vainly he tried to force his drugged mind to forget the suspicions that tormented it. He could not. Over and over again he found himself shivering with fear at the thought of a godly wrath pursuing him to his doom. He had violated a sacred spot, and the Old Ones remember . . . “his ways are best left unprofaned” . . . “God of the Desert” .

. . that empty countenance. Stugatche swore viciously, and lumbered on, a tiny ant amid mountains of undulating sand.

5

SUDDENLY it was daylight. The sand faded from purple to violet, then suddenly suffused with an orchid glow. But Stugatche did not see it, for he slept. Long before he had planned, his bloated body had given way beneath the grueling strain, and the coming of dawn found him utterly weary and exhausted. His tired legs buckled under him and he collapsed upon the sand, barely managing to draw the blanket over him before he slept.

The sun crept across the brazen sky like a fiery ball of lava, pouring its molten rays upon the flaming sands. Stugatche slept on, but his sleep was far from pleasant. The heat brought him queer and disturbing dreams.

In them he seemed to see the figure of Nyarlathotep pursuing him on a nightmare flight across the desert of fire. He was running over a burning plain, unable to stop, while searing pain ate into his charred and blackened feet. Behind him strode the Faceless God, urging him onward with a staff of serpents. He ran on and on; but always that gruesome presence kept pace behind him. His feet became numbed by the scorching agony of the sand. Soon he was hobbling on ghastly, crumpled stumps, but despite the torture he dared not stop. The Thing behind him cackled in diabolical mirth, his gigantic laughter rising to the blazing sky.

Stugatche was on his knees now, his crippled legs eaten away into ashy stumps that smoldered acridly even as he crawled. Suddenly the desert became a lake of living flame into which he sank, his scorched body consumed by a blast of livid, unendurable torment. He felt the sand lick pitilessly at his arms, his waist, his very throat; and still his dying senses were filled with a monstrous dread of the Faceless One behind him—a dread transcending all pain. Even as he sank into that white-hot inferno he was feebly struggling on. The vengeance of the god must never overtake him! The heat was overpowering him now; it was frying his cracked and bleeding lips, transforming his scorched body into one ghastly ember of burning anguish.

He raised his head for the last time before his boiling brain gave way beneath the agony. There stood the Dark One, and even as Stugatche watched he saw the lean, taloned hands reach out to touch his fiery face; saw the dreadful triple-crowned head draw near to him, so that he gazed for one grisly moment into that empty countenance. As he looked he seemed to see something in that black pit of horror—something that was staring at him from illimitable gulfs beyond—something with great flaming eyes that bored into his being with a fury greater than the fires that were consuming him. It told him, wordlessly, that his doom was sealed. Then came a burst of white-hot oblivion, and he sank into the seething sands, the blood bubbling in his veins. But the indescribable horror of that glimpse remained, and the last thing he remembered was the sight of that dreadful, empty countenance and the nameless fear behind it. Then he awoke.

FOR a moment his relief was so great that he did not notice the sting of the midday sun. Then, bathed in perspiration, he staggered to his feet and felt the stabbing rays bite into his back. He tried to shield his eyes and glance above to get his bearings, but the sky was a bowl of fire. Desperately, he dropped the blanket and began to run. The sand was clinging to his feet, slowing his pace and tripping him. It burned his heels. He felt an intolerable thirst. Already the demons of delirium danced madly in his head. He ran, endlessly, and his dream seemed to become a menacing reality. Was it coming true?

His legs *were* scorched, his body *was* seared. He glanced behind. Thank God there was no figure there—yet! Perhaps, if he kept a grip on himself, he might still make it, in spite of the time he had lost. He raced on. Perhaps a passing caravan—but no, it was far out of the caravan route. Tonight the sunset would give him an accurate course. Tonight.

Damn the heat! Sand all around him. Hills of it, mountains. All alike they were, like the crumbled, cyclopean ruins of titan cities. All were burning, smoldering in the fierce heat.

The day was endless. Time, ever an illusion, lost all meaning. Stugatche's weary body throbbed in bitter anguish, filling each moment with a new and deeper torment. The horizon never changed. No mirage marred the cruel, eternal vista; no shadow gave surcease from the savage glare.

But wait! Was there not a shadow *behind* him? Something dark and shapeless gloated at the back of his brain. A terrible thought pierced him with sudden realization. Nyarlathotep, God of the Desert! A shadow following him, driving him to destruction. Those legends—the natives warned him, his dreams warned him, even that dying creature on tire rack. The Mighty Messenger always claims his own . . . a black man with a staff of serpents. . . . "He cometh from out the desert, across the burning sands, and stalketh his prey throughout the land of his domain."

Hallucination? Dared he glance back? He turned his fever-addled head. Yes! *It was true, this time!* There *was* something behind him, far away on the slope below; something black and nebulous that seemed to pad on stealthy feet. With a muttered curse, Stugatche began to run. Why had he ever touched that image? If he got out of this he would never return to the accursed spot again. The legends were true. God of the Desert!

He ran on, even though the sun showered bloody kisses on his brow. He was beginning to go blind. There were dazzling constellations whirling before his eyes, and his heart throbbed a shrieking rhythm in his breast. But in his mind there was room for but one thought—escape.

His imagination began playing him strange tricks. He seemed to see statues in the sand—statues like the one he had profaned. Their shapes towered everywhere, writhing giant-like out of the ground and confronting his path with eery menace. Some were in attitudes with wings outspread, others were tentacled and snake-like, but all were faceless and triple-crowned. He felt that he was going mad, until he glanced back and saw that creeping figure now only a half-mile behind. Then he staggered on, screaming incoherently at the grotesque eidolons barring his way. The desert seemed to take on a hideous personality, as though all nature were conspiring to conquer him. The contorted outlines of the sand became imbued with malignant consciousness; the very sun took on an evil life. Stugatche moaned deliriously. Would night never come?

It came at last, but by that time Stugatche did not know it any more. He was a shambling, raving thing, wandering over the shifting sand, and the rising moon looked down on a thing that alternately howled and laughed. Presently the figure struggled to its feet and glanced furtively over its shoulder at a shadow that crept close. Then it began to run again, shrieking over and over again the single word, “Nyarlathotep.” And all the while the shadow lurked just a step behind.

It seemed to be embodied with a strange and fiendish intelligence, for the shapeless adumbration carefully drove its victim forward in one definite direction, as if purposefully herding it toward an intended goal. The stars now looked upon a sight spawned of delirium—a man, chased across endlessly looming sands by a black shadow. Presently the pursued one came to the top of a hill and halted with a scream. The shadow paused in midair and seemed to wait.

Stugatche was looking down at the remains of his own camp, just as he had left it the night before, with the sudden awful realization that he had been driven in a circle back to his starting-point. Then, with the knowledge, came a merciful mental collapse. He threw himself forward in one final effort to elude the shadow, and raced straight for the two stones where the statue was buried.

Then occurred that which he had feared. For even as he ran, the ground before him quaked in the throes of a gigantic upheaval. The sand rolled in vast, engulfing waves, away from the base of the two boulders. Through the opening rose the idol, glistening evilly in the moonlight. And the oncoming sand from its base caught Stugatche as he ran toward it, sucking at his legs like a quicksand, and yawning at his waist. At the same instant the peculiar shadow rose and leapt forward. It seemed to merge with the statue in midair, a nebulous, animate mist. Then Stugatche, floundering in the grip of the sand, went quite insane with terror.

The formless statue gleamed living in the livid light, and the doomed man stared straight into its unearthly countenance. It was his dream come true, for behind that mask of stone he saw a face with eyes of yellow madness, and in those eyes he read death. The black figure spread its wings against the hills, and sank into the sand with a thunderous crash.

Thereafter nothing remained above the earth save a living head that twisted on the ground and struggled futilely to free its imprisoned body from the iron embrace of the encircling sand. Its imprecations turned to frantic cries for mercy, then sank to a sob in which echoed the single word, “Nyarlathotep.”

When morning came Stugatche was still alive, and the sun baked his brain into a hell of crimson agony. But not for long. The vultures winged across the desert plain and descended upon him, almost as if supernaturally summoned.

Somewhere, buried in the sands below, an ancient idol lay, and upon its featureless countenance there was the faintest hint of a monstrous, hidden smile. For even as Stugatche the unbeliever died, his mangled lips paid whispered homage to Nyarlathotep, Lord of the Desert.

The Grinning Ghoul

A story of stark horror in the subterranean depths beneath the tomb

FATE plays strange tricks on one, doesn't it? Six months ago I was a well-known and moderately successful practising psychiatrist; today I am an inmate of a sanatorium for mental cases. In my capacity of alienist and physician I have often committed patients to the selfsame institution in which I myself am now confined, and today—irony of ironies!—I find myself their brother in misfortune.

And yet I am not really mad. They sent me here because I chose to tell the truth, and it was not the kind of truth men dare to reveal or recognize. I acknowledge that my part in the matter led me to suffer a severe nervous break-down, but it did not derange me. My story is true; I swear to it—but they will not believe. Of course I really have no substantial proof to offer; I have never seen Professor Chaupin since that eventful night last August, and my subsequent investigations failed to substantiate his claim to a post at Newberry College. This, however, only testifies to the validity of my statement; a statement which sent me to shameful confinement, to a living death which I abhor.

There is one other concrete proof which I could give if I dared, but that would be too terrible. I must not lead them to the exact spot in that nameless cemetery and point out the passage that yawns beneath that tomb. It is better that I should suffer alone, that the world at large be spared the knowledge that destroys sanity. Yet it is hard for me to live like this, and to the drabness of my days my nighted dreams add endless torment. That is why I choose to set down this account—perhaps the unfolding of my story will serve somehow to ease the painful burden of my memory.

The affair began one day last August, at my downtown office. It had been a dull vigil that morning, and the long, hot afternoon was nearly over when the nurse ushered in the first patient. It was a gentleman who had never consulted me heretofore; a man who gave his name as Professor Alexander Chaupin, of Newberry College. He spoke sibilantly, with a peculiar foreign intonation which led me to assume that he was not a native of this country. I requested him to be seated, and tried to appraise him quickly as he complied with my invitation.

He was tall and thin. His hair was startlingly white, almost platinum; yet his general physique and appearance were that of a man of forty. His green, unwavering eyes were deeply set in a pale, protruding forehead and were surmounted by long, jet-black brows. The nose was large, with sensual nostrils, but his lips were thin—a physical contradiction which I immediately noticed. The lean hands resting on the table were exceedingly small, with long, tapering fingers terminating in lengthy nails—probably cultivated for use in reading and reference work, I decided. His supple posture was akin to that of a panther in repose; he had the foreigner's ease and graceful manner. In the sunlight I was able to observe his face, and I discovered his entire countenance to be covered with a network of tiny wrinkles. I noted, too, the peculiar pallor of his skin, which indicated some dermatological disturbance. But by far the queerest thing about him was his unusual mode of dress. His clothes, while obviously new, were incongruous in two respects; they were formal attire in midday, and they did not seem to fit him. They were curiously large; his striped gray trousers sagged, and his coat bulged strangely. There was dried mud on his patent-leather pumps, and he carried no hat. Obviously he was an eccentric type; a schizophrenic, perhaps, with tendencies toward hypochondria.

I prepared to ask him the routine questions, but he intervened. He was a busy man, he told me, and he would inform me at once of his difficulty, without unnecessary preliminaries or introductions. He settled himself bark in his chair, where the sunlight faded into shadow; cleared his throat nervously, and began.

He was troubled, he said, because of certain things he had heard and read of; they sent him queer dreams, and often caused him spells of uncontrollable melancholia. This was interfering with his work, and yet he could do nothing; for his obsessions were founded on reality. Finally he had decided to come to me for an analysis of his difficulties.

I asked him for an account of his dreams and fancies, half expecting to hear one of the usual image-patterns of the dyspeptic. My assumption, however, proved to be wofully incorrect.

THE most commonplace dream revolved around what I shall call the Misericorde Cemetery, for reasons soon to be apparent. This is a large, ancient, half-abandoned tract in the oldest section of the city, which flourished in the latter part of the past century. The exact location of his nocturnal vision was in and around a certain secluded vault situated in the most dilapidated and archaic portion of the graveyard. The incidents of the dream always occurred at nightfall, beneath a waning and sepulchral moon. Fantastic visions seemed to brood somberly over the midnight landscape, and he spoke vaguely of half-heard voices that seemed to urge him onward as he found himself on the gravel walk that led to the doors of the tomb.

His dreams usually began in this fashion, in the midst of a sound slumber. He would suddenly be walking up a tree-shaded pathway in the night, and enter this tomb by unfastening the rusted chains that barred its portal. Once inside, he seemed to experience no difficulty in guiding his footsteps through the darkness, but with uncanny familiarity would go at once to a certain niche among the biers. He then knelt and pressed a tiny, concealed spring or lever set in the crumbling stones of the floor. A pivot would revolve at the base of the niche and reveal to him a small opening, leading to a moldering cavern below. He spoke here of the nitrous dampness that emanated from this passageway, and the peculiarly nauseous odors of the denser darkness that rose from below. Nevertheless, in his dream he was not repelled, but would immediately enter the chasm and subsequently descend a succession of interminably long staircases cut in stone and earth. Abruptly he would find himself at the bottom.

Then began another lengthy journey through endless labyrinthine caverns and charnel vaults. On and on he wandered, through cave and crypt, tunnel and abyss-burrowed pit; all cloaked in the blackness of immemorial night.

Here he paused in his narrative, and his voice shrank to a shrill, excited whisper.

The horror always came next. He would suddenly emerge into a series of dimly lighted chambers, and as he stood undetected in the shadows, he would see *things.* These were the dwellers that laired beneath; the ghastly spawn that ravened on the dead. They dwelt in nighted caverns lined with human bones and adored the primal gods before altars shaped of skulls. They had tunnels leading to the graves, and burrows still farther below in which they stalked a living prey. These were the grisly night-gaunts that he beheld in dreams; these were ghouls.

He must have seen the look in my face, but he did not falter. His voice, as he continued, became very tense.

He would not attempt to describe these creatures save to say that they were very horrible to look upon, in ways peculiarly obscene. It was easy for him to recognize them for what they were because of certain significant acts they always performed. It was the sight of these acts, more than anything else, which made him afraid. There are some things that should cot even he hinted at to sane minds, and the things that haunted him nightly were among them. In his visions these beings did not accost him and were seemingly unmindful of his presence; they continued to indulge in eldritch feastings in the charnel chambers or join in orgies without a name. But of this he would say no more. His nocturnal flights always ended with the passage of a vast procession of these monstrosities through a cavern still farther beneath—a journey which he would view from a ledge above. Shuddery glimpses into the realms below led him to recall tales of the *Inferno,* and he would cry out in his sleep. As he watched that demon processional from the brink, he would suddenly lose his footing and be precipitated into the charnel swarm below. Here his dream would mercifully end, and lie would awake, bathed in icy sweat.

Night after night the visions had come, but this was not the worst of his troubles. His real and besetting fear lay in his knowledge that the visions were true!

Here I impatiently interrupted, but he insisted upon continuing. Had he not visited the cemetery after the first few dreams and did he not actually find the very vault he had learned to recognize through his dreams? And what about the books? He had been led to institute some extensive research among the private volumes of the college anthropological library. Surely I, as an enlightened and educated man, must admit the veiled and subtle truths so furtively revealed in such tomes as Ludvig Prinn’s *Mysteries of the Worm,* or the grotesque *Black Rites* of mystic Luveh-Keraphf, the priest of cryptic Bast. He had made some studies recently in the mad and legendary *Necronomicon* of Abdul Alhazred. I could not refute the arcana behind such things as the banned and infamous Fable of Nyarlathotep, or the Legend of the Elder Saboth.

Here he broke off into a rambling discourse of obscure secret myths, with frequent allusions to such shadows of antique lore as fabled Leng, lightless N’ken, and demon-haunted Nis; spoke too of such blasphemies as the Moon of Yiggurath and the secret parable of Byagoona the Faceless One.

Obviously these incoherent ravings provided the key to his difficulty, and with some argument I succeeded in calming him sufficiently to tell him so.

His readings and research had brought on this attack, I explained. He must not tax his brain with such speculations; these things are dangerous to normal minds. I had read and learned enough of such things to know that such ideas were not meant for men to seek or understand. Besides, he must not take these thoughts too seriously, for after all, these tales were merely allegorical. There are no such things as ghouls and demons—he must see that his dreams could be symbolically interpreted.

He sat in silence for a moment after I concluded. He sighed, then spoke very deliberately. These things were all very well for me to say, but he knew differently. Had he not recognized the place of his dreams?

I interjected a remark about the influence of the sub-conscious mind, but he disregarded my assertion and continued.

Then, he informed me, in a voice that quavered with almost hysterical excitement, he would tell me the worst. He had not yet told me all there was to know about what had occurred when he discovered the vault of his dreams in the cemetery. He had not stopped at this corroboration of his visions. Some nights ago he had gone farther. He had entered the necropolis and found the niche in the wall; descended the stairs and come upon—*the rest.* How he managed to return he never knew, but on all three of these excursions to the scene he had come back and apparently gone to sleep; the following morning he always was in bed. It was the truth he told me—*he had seen the things!* Now I must help him at once, before he did something rash.

I calmed him with difficulty, meanwhile trying to hit upon a logical and effective method of treatment. He was obviously near to a dangerous mental lesion. There would be no use trying to persuade or convince him that he had dreamed the latter incidents as he had the former; that his nervous system had subjected him to sympathetic hallucinations. I could not hope to make him realize in his present state that the books responsible for his affliction were merely the mad ravings of disordered minds. Obviously the only course remaining open was to humor him, and then concretely demonstrate the utter fallacy of his beliefs.

Therefore, in response to his reiterated pleas, we struck a bargain. He was to undertake to guide me to the place where he claimed his journeys and his dreams had been located, and then prove to me the truth of what he stated. In short, at ten o'clock upon the following evening I agreed to meet him at the graveyard. His pleasure at this arrangement was almost pathetic to see; he smiled upon me like a fond child with a newly bestowed plaything. Obviously he was glad of my decision.

I prescribed a mild sedative to be taken by him that evening, arranged the minor details of our forthcoming tryst and undertaking; then distressed him until the following night.

HIS departure left me in a state of great excitement. Here at last was a case worthy of study; a well-educated, seemingly intelligent college professor subject to the ogreish nightmares of a three-year-old infant! I forthwith determined to write a monograph upon the subsequent proceedings. I felt sure that upon the following evening I could conclusively demonstrate the fallacy of his aberration and effect an immediate cure. The night was spent in a frenzy of research and calculated speculation; the following morning in a hasty perusal of the expurgated edition of Comte d'Erlette's *Cultes des Goules.*

Nightfall found me ready for the business at hand. At ten o'clock, clad in hip-boots, rough woolen jacket, miner's cap with candle in its brim, I was standing at the cemetery entrance. I felt fully prepared for the coming of Professor Alexander Chaupin; still I must confess to an uneasy and inexplicable nyctaphobia. I did not relish the unpleasant task to follow. Suddenly I found myself anxiously awaiting the arrival of my patient, if only for the sake of companionship.

He came at last, similarly attired, and seemingly in better spirits. Together we scaled the low stone wall surrounding the necropolis. Then he led me across the moonlit garden of graves and into the creeping shadows of a silent grove in the heart of the cemetery. Here the tombstones leered crazily amid the darkness, and the rays of the moon fell not. Some atavistic dread caused me to repress an involuntary shudder as my mind dwelt unbidden upon the fearful trafficking of the worms below. I did not care to let my thoughts rest upon the grave-earth, or the diabolic density of the encircling shadows. I was relieved when Chaupin, unperturbed, led me at last up a long avenue of towering trees to the forbidding portals of the tomb he claimed to have profaned.

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I CANNOT bear to dwell in detail upon that which followed. I shall not tell you of how we unfastened the chains that barred the tomb, or describe the grim interior of the mausoleum. It is enough for me to state that Chaupin's promise was fulfilled; for he found the niche by the light of the candles we wore upon our miner's caps—found the niche and pressed the secret spot, so that the tunnel from below was revealed. I stood aghast at this unexpected revelation, and a sudden blast of fear stabbed my senses into unnatural tenseness. I must have stood gazing into that sable orifice for many minutes. Neither of us spoke.

For the first time I hesitated. No longer did I have any doubts concerning the validity of the professor's statements. He had proven them beyond the shadow of a doubt. Still, this did not mean that he was wholly sane; it did not cure him of his obsession. I realized, with a repulsion I could not then explain, that my task was far from ended; that we must descend into those nether depths and settle once and for all the questions yet unanswered. I was not prepared to believe Chaupin's incoherent rigmarole about imaginary ghouls; the mere existence of a tomb-passage did not necessarily tend to substantiate his other claim. Perhaps if I went with him to the termination of the pit his mind could be put at rest regarding his singular suspicions. But—and I dreaded to acknowledge the possibility—just supposing there really was some malign, distorted truth in his story of what lurked and bided there below? Some band of refugees, fugitives from the law perchance, who might actually denizen the pit? Perhaps accident had led them to stumble upon this unusual hiding-place. If so, what then?

Still, in this event, something told me that we would have to go on and see for ourselves. To this inward prompting, Chaupin added his vocal pleas. Let him show me the truth, he said, and I could no longer doubt. After that I would believe, and with belief alone could I help. He was begging me to go on, but if I refused he would have to take recourse in a police investigation of the place.

It was this last point that determined me. I could not afford to see my name mixed up in a mess that involved such spectacular opportunities for scandal. If the man were mad, I could take care of myself. If not—well, we would soon see. Accordingly I gave reluctant consent to proceeding, then stepped aside for him to lead the way.

The opening gaped like the mouth of a mythic monster. Down we went; down a serpentine, slanting stairway in the damp stone passage that was chiseled out of solid rock. The tunnel was hot and humid, and upon the air was the odor of putrefying life. It was like a journey through the most fantastic realms of nightmare—a journey that led to unknown crypts beneath the corpse-earth. Here were things secret to all but the worms, and as we continued I began to wish that they might remain so. I was actually becoming panicky, though Chaupin seemed oddly calm.

Several factors contributed to my growing unease. I did not like the stealthy rats that chittered ceaselessly from countless tiny burrows that lined the second spiral of the passage. An army of them swarmed the stairs; all sleek and fat and bloated. I began to conceive some peculiar notions as to the cause of that bloating, and the probable sources of their nocturnal nourishment. Then, too, I noticed that Chaupin seemed to know the way quite well; and if it were true that he had been here before, then what about the rest of his story?

My eyes, glancing down the stairs, received still another shock. There was no dust on the steps! They looked as if they were constantly *in use!* For a moment my mind refused to comprehend the import of this discovery, but when at last it burst full-blown upon my brain I felt suddenly stunned. I did not dare to look again, lest my ready imagination conjure up the probable image of what might ascend that stairway from below.

Hastily dissembling my childish dread, I hurried on after my silent conductor, whose candle threw strange shadows on pitted walls. I realized that I was beginning to be nervous about this whole affair, and I vainly tried to reason myself out of my fears by concentrating on some definite object.

THERE certainly was nothing reassuring about our surroundings as we proceeded. The leering, crazily burrowed walls of the tunnel looked ghastly in the torchlight. I suddenly felt that this ancient pathway had not been built by anything normal or akin to sanity, and I dared not let my thoughts impinge on the ultimate revelations which might lie ahead. For a long time we crept on in stark silence.

Down, down, down; our way ever narrowed into a deeper, damper darkness. Then the staircase abruptly terminated in a cave. There was a bluish light, phosphorescent as ultraviolet, and I wondered as to its source. It revealed a small, smooth-surfaced, open area, overhung with rows of colossal stalactites and vast basic pylons of massive breadth. Beyond, in the denser dark, were openings to other burrows, leading to seemingly endless vistas of forgotten night. An air of creeping horror froze my heart; we seemed to have profaned in our intrusion some mysteries better left unsought. I began to tremble, but Chaupin gripped me roughly and dug his thin fingers into my shoulders as he told me to keep silent.

He whispered as we huddled side by side in that dim and twilit cavern under the earth; whispered awesomely of what he said lurked and shambled in the darkness just beyond. He would prove now that his words were true; I must wait here while he ventured into the black beyond. When he returned he would bring me proof. So saying, he rose and walked swiftly forward, disappearing almost immediately into one of the burrows just ahead. He left me so suddenly that I did not even have time to voice my objections to his proposal.

I sat there in the darkness and waited—I dared not guess for what. Would Chaupin return? Was it all a monstrous hoax? Was Chaupin mad, or was it all true? If so, what might not happen to him in that labyrinth beyond? And what might happen to me? I had been a fool ever to think of coming: the whole thing was insane. Perhaps those books were not so absurd as I had thought: the earth may nurse hideous secrets in its ageless breast.

The blue light cast screening shadows on the stalactitic walls and crowded closely around the dim circle of luminance afforded by my tiny torch. I did not like those shadows: they were distorted, unhealthy, disconcertingly deep. The silence was even more potent: it seemed to hint of nameless things yet to come; it mocked unbearably my growing fear and loneliness. The minutes crawled like maggots on their way and nothing broke that deadly stillness.

Then came the cry. A sudden crescendo of indescribable madness welled upon the entombed air, and my soul cleaved, for I knew what that cry meant. I knew now—now, when it was too late—that Chaupin's words were true.

But I dared not pause or ponder, for presently there came a soft padding from the far-off darkness—the rustling scrape of frantic movement. I turned and raced up the subterrene staircase with the speed of utter desperation. No need for me to look back; my horrified ears clearly caught the cadence of running feet. I heard nothing but the clamor of those feet or paws until my own breath rasped in my ears as I rounded the first spiral of those interminable stairs. I stumbled upward, gasping and choking; a realization in my soul that ate away every thought save one of deathly fear and grinning horror. Poor Chaupin!

It seemed to me that the sounds were drawing nearer and nearer; then came a hoarse barking on the stairs directly below; a bestial growling that sickened me with its semi-human tones, and an accompanying laughter that was loathly with horror. They were coming!

I ran on, to the rhythmic thundering of the footfalls below. I dared not glance behind me, but I knew that they were closing the gap. The hairs rose upon my neck as I sped up endless flights that writhed and twisted like a serpent in the earth. I toiled and shrieked aloud, but the baying horrors were at my very heels. On, on, on, on; closer and closer and closer, while my body burned with pain and agony.

The stairs ended at last, and I squirmed madly through the narrow opening while the creatures raced through the darkness barely ten yards behind. I made it just as the candle in my cap flickered out; then I jammed the stone back into place, full in the faces of the foremost oncoming horrors. But as I did so my dying candle flared up for a single moment so that I saw the first of my pursuers in the glaring light. Then it went out; I slammed the portal into place and somehow staggered back to the world of men.

I shall never forget that night, whatever I do to erase those hideous memories; never shall I find the sleep I crave. I dare not even kill myself for fear of being buried instead of cremated; though death would be welcome to such as I have become. I shall never forget, for now I know the *whole* truth of the affair; but there is one memory I would give my soul to blot for ever from my brain—that mad moment when I saw the monsters in the torchlight; the laughing, drooling horrors from below.

For the first and foremost of them all was the laughing, gloating monster known to men as Professor Chaupin!

The Opener of the Way

A tremendous tale about the dread doom that overtook an archeologist in that forgotten tomb beneath the desert sands of Egypt

THE statue of Anubis brooded over the darkness. Its blind eyes had basked in the blackness for unnumbered centuries, and the dust of ages had settled upon its stony brow. The damp air of the pit had caused its canine features to crumble, but the stone lips of the image still were curled in a snarling grin of cryptic mirth. It was almost as if the idol were alive; as if it had seen the shadowed centuries slip by, and with them the glory of Egypt and the old gods. Then indeed would it have reason to grin, at the thought of ancient pomps and vain and vanished splendor. But the statue of Anubis, Opener of the Way, jackal-headed god of Karneter, was not alive, and those that had bowed in worship were long dead. Death was everywhere; it haunted the shadowy tunnel where the idol stood, hidden away in the mummy-cases and biding amidst the very dust of the stone floor. Death, and darkness—darkness undispelled by light these three thousand years.

Today, however, light came. It was heralded by a grating clang, as the iron door at the further end of the passageway swung open on its rusted hinges; swung open for the first time in thirty centuries. Through the opening came the strange illumination of a torch, and the sudden sound of voices.

There was something indescribably eery about the event. For three thousand years no light had shone in these black and buried vaults; for three thousand years no feet had disturbed the dusty carpet of their floors; for three thousand years no voice had sent its sound through the ancient air. The last light had come from a sacred torch in the hand of a priest of Bast; the last feet to violate the dust had been encased in Egyptian sandals; the last voice had spoken a prayer in the language of the Upper Nile.

And now, an electric torch flooded the scene with sudden light; booted feet stamped noisily across the floor, and an English voice gave vent to fervent profanity.

In the torchlight the bearer of the illumination was revealed. He was a tall, thin man, with a face as wrinkled as the papyrus parchment he clutched nervously in his left hand. His white hair, sunken eyes and yellowed skin gave him the aspect of an old man, but the smile upon his thin lips was full of the triumph of youth. Close behind him crowded another, a younger replica of the first. It was he who had sworn.

“For the love of God, father—we’ve made it!”

“Yes, my boy, so we have.”

“Look! There’s the statue, just as the map showed it!”

The two men stepped softly in the dust-strewn passage and halted directly in front of the idol. Sir Ronald Barton, the bearer of the light, held it aloft to inspect the figure of the god more closely. Peter Barton stood at his side, eyes following his father’s gaze.

For a long moment the invaders scrutinized the guardian of the tomb they had violated. It was a strange moment there in the underground burrow, a moment that spanned eternity as the old confronted the new.

If the idol had been given the gift of sight it might have contrasted these white-skinned, smartly-accoutered intruders with the masked and dusky priests of olden days. But Anubis could not see; the god merely grinned in chimeric glee, with stone teeth bared in a centuried smile.

But the two men gazed up at the eidolon in astonishment and awe. The colossal figure of the jackal-god dominated the dim passage, and its weathered form still held vestiges of imposing grandeur and inexplicable menace. The sudden influx of outer air from the opened door had swept the idol's body free of dust, and the intruders scrutinized its gleaming form with a certain vague unease. Twelve feet tall was Anubis, a man-like figure with the dogface of a jackal upon massive shoulders. The arms of the statue were held forth in an attitude of warning, as if endeavoring to repel the passage of outsiders. This was peculiar, for to all intents and purposes the guardian figure had nothing behind it but a narrow niche in the wall.

There was an air of evil suggestion about the god, however; a hint of bestial humanity in its body which seemed to hide a secret, sentient life. The knowing smile on the carven countenance seemed cynically alive; the eyes, though stony, held a strange and disturbing *awareness.* It was as though the statue were alive; or, rather, as though it were merely a stone cloak that harbored life.

THE two explorers sensed this without speaking, and for a long minute they contemplated the Opener of the Way uneasily. Then, with a sudden start, the older man resumed his customary briskness of manner.

"Well, son, let's not stand here gawking at this thing all day! We have plenty to do yet—the biggest task remains. Have you looked at the map?"

"Yes, father." The younger man's voice was not nearly as loud or as firm as Sir Ronald's. He did not like the mephitic air of the stone passageway; he did not care for the stench that seemed to spawn in the shadows of the corners. He was acutely aware of the fact that he and his father were in a hidden tomb, seven hundred feet below the desert sands; a secret tomb that had lain unopened for thirty creeping centuries. And he could not help but remember the curse.

For there was a curse on the place; indeed, it was that which had led to its discovery.

Sir Ronald had found it in the excavation of the Ninth Pyramid, the moldering papyrus parchment which held the key to a secret way. How he had smuggled it past the heads of the expedition nobody can say, but he had managed the task somehow.

After all, he was not wholly to be blamed, though the theft of expeditionary trophies is a serious offense. But for twenty years Sir Ronald Barton had combed the deserts, uncovered sacred relics, deciphered hieroglyphics, and disinterred mummies, statues, ancient furniture, or precious stones. He had unearthed untold wealth and incredibly valuable manuscripts for his Government; yet he was still a poor man, and had never been rewarded by becoming head of an expedition of his own. Who can blame him if he took that one misstep which he knew would lead him to fame and fortune at last?

Besides, he was getting old, and after a score of years in Egypt all archeologists are a little mad. There is something about the sullen sun overhead that paralyzes the brains of men as they ferret in the sand, digging in unhallowed ruins; something about the damp, dark stillness underground in temple vaults that chills the soul. It is not good to look upon the old gods in the places where they still rule; for cat-headed Bubastis, serpented Set, and evil Amon-Ra frown down as sullen guardians in the purple pylons before the pyramids. Over all is an air of forbidden things long dead, and it creeps into the blood. Sir Ronald had dabbled in sorcery, a bit; so perhaps it affected him more strongly than the rest. At any rate, he stole the parchment.

It had been penned by a priest of ancient Egypt, but the priest had not been a holy man. No man could write as he had written without violating his vows. It was a dreadful thing, that manuscript, steeped in sorcery and hideous with half-hinted horrors.

The enchanter who had written it alluded to gods far older than those he worshipped. There was mention of the “Demon Messenger” and the “Black Temple,” coupled with the secret myth and legend-cycles of pre-Adamite days. For just as the Christian religion has its Black Mass, just as every sect has its hidden Devil-worship, the Egyptians knew their own darker gods.

The names of these accursed ones were set forth, together with the orisons necessary for their invocation. Shocking and blasphemous statements abounded in the text; threats against the reigning religion, and terrible curses upon the people who upheld it. Perhaps that is why Sir Ronald found it buried with the mummy of the priest—its discoverers had not dared to destroy it, because of the doom which might befall them. They had their way of vengeance, though; because the mummy of the priest was found without arms, legs, or eyes, and these were not lost through decay.

SIR RONALD, though he found the above-mentioned portions of the parchment intensely interesting, was much more impressed by the last page. It was here that the sacrilegious one told of the tomb of his master, who ruled the dark cult of the day. There were a map, a chart, and certain directions. These had not been written in Egyptian, but in the cuneiform chirography of Chaldea. Doubtless that is why the old avenging priests had not sought out the spot for themselves to destroy it. They were probably unfamiliar with the language; unless they were kept away by fear of the curse.

Peter Barton still remembered that night in Cairo when he and his father had first read it in translation. He recalled the avid gleam in Sir Ronald’s glittering eyes, the tremulous depth in his guttural voice.

“And as the maps direct, there you shall find the tomb of the Master, who lies with his acolytes and all his treasure.”

Sir Ronald’s voice nearly broke with excitement as he pronounced this last word.

“And at the entrance upon the night that the Dog-Star is ascendant yon must give up three jackals upon an altar in sacrifice, and with the blood bestrew the sands about the opening. Then the bats shall descend, that they may have feasting, and carry their glad tidings of blood to Father Set in the Underworld.”

“Superstitious rigmarole!” young Peter had exclaimed.

“Don’t scoff, son,” Sir Ronald advised. “I could give you reasons for what it says above, and make you understand. But I am afraid that the truth would disturb you unnecessarily.”

Peter had stayed silent while his father read on:

“Upon descending into the outer passage you will find the door, set with the symbol of the Master who waits within. Grasp the symbol by the seventh tongue in the seventh head, and with a knife remove it. Then shall the barrier give way, and the gate to the tomb be yours. Thirty and three are the steps along the inner passage, and there stands the statue of Anubis, Opener of the Way.”

“Anubis! But isn’t he a regular Egyptian deity—a recognized one?” Peter broke in.

His father answered from the manuscript itself:

“For Lord Anubis holds the keys to Life and Death; he guards cryptic Karneter, and none shall pass the Veil without consent. Some there are who deem the Jackal-god to be a friend of those who rule, but he is not. Anubis stands in shadows, for he is the Keeper of Mysteries. In olden days for which there is no number it is written that Lord Anubis revealed himself to men, and he who then was Master fashioned the first image of the god in his true likeness. Such is the image that you will find at the end of the inner passageway—the first true image of the Opener of the Way.”

“Astounding!” Peter had muttered. “Think what it means if this is true; imagine finding the original statue of the god!”

His father merely smiled, a trifle wanly, Peter thought.

“There are ways in which the first image differs from the rest,” said the manuscript. “These ways are not good for men to know; so the first likeness was hidden by the Masters through the ages, and worshipped according to its demands. But now that our enemies—may their souls and vitals rot!—have dared profane the rites, the Master saw fit to hide the image and bury it with him when he died.”

Sir Ronald’s voice quivered as he read the next few lines:

"But Anubis does not stand at the head of the inner passage for this reason alone. He is truly called the Opener of the Way, and without his help none may pass to the tomb within."

Here the older man stopped completely for a long moment.

"What's the matter?" inquired Peter, impatiently. "I suppose there's another silly ritual involving the statue of the god, eh?"

His father did not answer, but read on to himself, silently. Peter noticed that Sir Ronald's hands trembled as he held the parchment, and when the older man looked up at last his face was very pale.

"Yes, my boy," he replied, huskily. "That's what it is—another silly ritual. But no need to bother about it until we get to the place itself."

"You mean to go there—discover the spot?" asked the young man, eagerly.

"I must go there." Sir Ronald's tone was constrained. He glanced again at the last portion of the parchment:

"But beware, for those who do not believe shall die. Pass Lord Anubis though they may, still he shall know and not permit of their return unto the world of men. For the eidolon of Anubis is a very strange one indeed, and holds a secret soul."

The old archeologist blurted out these last words very quickly, and immediately folded up the parchment again. After that he had deliberately turned the talk to practical affairs, as if seeking to forget what he had read.

THE next weeks were spent in preparation for the trip to the south, and Sir Ronald seemed to avoid his son, except when it was necessary to converse with him on matters pertaining directly to the expeditionary affairs.

But Peter had not forgotten. He wondered what it was his father had read silently; that secret ritual which would enable one to pass beyond the Opener of the Way. Why had his father blanched and trembled, then quickly changed the subject to saner things? Why had he guarded the parchment so closely? And just what was the nature of the “curse” the manuscript mentioned at the last?

Peter pondered these questions a great deal, but he had gradually dispelled his stronger fears, because of the necessary preoccupation with technical details which the organizing of their expedition subsequently entailed. Not until he and his father were actually in the desert did his misgivings return, but then they plagued him mightily.

There is an air of eon-spawned antiquity about the desert, a certain aura of the ancient which makes one feel that the trivial triumphs of man are as fleeting and quickly obscured as his footprints in the shifting sand. In such places there descends upon the soul a sphinx-like brooding, and somber soliloquies rise, unrepressed, to rule the mind.

Young Peter had been affected by the spell of the silent sands. He tried to remember some of the things his father had once told him concerning Egyptian sorcery, and the miraculous magic of the high priests. Legends of tombs and underground horrors took on a new reality here in the place of their birth. Peter Barton knew personally many men who had believed in the potency of curses, and some of them had died strangely. There was the Tut-Ankh-Ahmen affair, and the Paut temple scandal, and the terrible rumors concerning the end of that unsavory adventurer, Doctor Stugatche. At night, under the spying stars, he would recall these and similar tales, then shudder anew at the thought of what might lie before him.

WHEN Sir Ronald had made camp at the spot designated by the map, there bad been new and more concrete terrors.

That first night, Sir Ronald had gone off alone into the hills behind the tents. He bore with him a white goat, and a sharp knife. His son, following, had come upon the old man after a deed had been done, so that the sand had been given to drink. The goat’s blood shone horribly in the moonlight, and there was a red glare of corresponding violence in the slayer’s eyes. Peter had not made his presence known, for he did not deem it wise to interrupt his father while the old man was muttering those outlandish Egyptian phrases to a mocking moon.

Indeed, Peter was more than a little afraid of Sir Ronald, else he would have attempted to dissuade him from continuing the expedition. But there was something in Sir Ronald's manner which hinted at a mad, unthwartable determination. It was that which made Peter keep silent; that which held him from bluntly asking his father the true details about the parchment's mysterious "curse."

The day after the peculiar incident in the midnight hills, Sir Ronald, after consulting certain zodiacal charts, announced that the digging would start. Carefully, eyes on the map, he measured his paces to an exact spot in the sands, and ordered the men to work. By sundown a ten-foot shaft yawned like a great wound in the earth, and excited natives proclaimed the presence of a door beneath.

Sir Ronald rewarded them with spirits sufficient to plunge them all into a comatose slumber long before midnight; then he opened the crates where the jackals were kept. Peter assisted him in this task, but reluctantly.

For Peter, remembering the instructions in the parchment, knew why his father had taken the three beasts along; knew why he had withheld digging until a night when Canis was ascendant; realized, too, that the stuporous sleep of the men was by no means accidental. The manuscript specified that the blood of three jackals should be spilled in accordance with the old rites of propitiation. So Sir Ronald took the creatures over to a spot among the stones before the excavation, and Peter watched silently from afar.

He saw a gleaming blade rise and descend thrice in the mad moonlight; heard three keening cries well out in the desert air; and the wind bore its scented baptism of blood. Then, with uncanny swiftness, there came a rustling from above, and the moon was blotted out by a brood of bats. Their beating wings coursed cloud-like over its phosphorescent face, and with eager squeakings the charnel swarm descended to batten on the bloody bodies of the beasts.

That terrible scurrying and tittering, coupled with a gust of ghoulish stench, made Peter reel with uncontrollable nausea. He had turned hastily away, but not before his eyes were assailed by the sight of Sir Ronald Barton crouching obscenely over the jackals, his face and body nearly obscured by a swarm of circling bats. On his face there was a hideous smile, and with his knife he was digging chunks of raw flesh from the carcasses beneath him—chunks of raw flesh which he held in outstretched hands, feeding the scavenger bats as they flew. And when he bent and nuzzled at one of the bodies with his own teeth, Peter ran sobbing to his tent, only to spend the rest of the night in torment-torpid dreams. The next morning he noticed that his father's lips were unnaturally red. . . .

2

That day they had descended to the outer door. Neither Peter nor his father spoke of what had occurred the previous night, and the men ascribed their sleep to the spirits alone. Evidently Sir Ronald had disposed of the fleshy remnants and bones of his victims before retiring; for there was now nought visible around the stones of the opening. And the terrible clinging odor of decay might very well be ascribed to the noisome emanations of the pit below.

By this time Peter, whose nerves were near the breaking-point, was too much afraid of his father to demur when ordered to descend to the floor of the excavation. Undoubtedly the elder man was in the grip of a severe aberration, but Peter, who really loved his father, thought it advisable not to provoke him by refusing to obey. He did not like the idea of going down into that chasm, for the seeping smell was distressingly repulsive. But the stench below was a thousand times more bearable than the sight of the dark door through which it had slithered.

This evidently was the door to the outer passageway that the manuscript had mentioned. All at once Peter knew what was meant by the allusion to the seventh tongue in the seventh head," and wished that the meaning had remained for ever obscured from his brain. For the door was set with a silver symbol, framed in the familiar ideography of Egyptological lore. This central symbol consisted of the heads of the seven principal Egyptian gods—Osiris, Isis, Ra, Bast, Thoth, Set, and Anubis. But the horror lay in the fact that all seven heads protruded from a common body, and it was not the body of any god heretofore known in myth. It was not anthropomorphic, that figure; it held nothing that aped the human form. And Peter could recall no parallel in all the Egyptian cosmology or pantheon which could be remotely construed to resemble this utterly alien horror.

The quixotic abhorrency it induced cannot be ascribed to anything which may be put into words. The sight of it seemed to send little tentacles of terror through Peter's eyes; tiny tentacles that took root in his brain, to drain it dry of all feeling save frantic fear. Part of this may have been due to the fact that the body appeared to be constantly changing; *melting,* that is, from one indescribable shape to another. When *viewed* from a certain angle the form was that of a Medusa-like mass of serpents; a second gaze revealed that the thing was a glistening array of vampiric flowers, with gelid, protoplasmic petals that seemed to weave in blob-like thirst for blood. A third scrutiny made it appear that the formless mass was nothing but a chaotic jumble of silver skulls. At another time it seemed to hold a certain hidden pattern of the cosmos—stars and planets so compressed as to hint at the enormity of all space beyond.

What devilish craft could produce such a baffling nightmare composite Peter could not say, and he did not like to imagine that the insane thing was the pattern of any human artist. He fancied that there was some sinister implication of allegorical significance about the door, that the heads, set on the background of that baffling body, were somehow symbolic of a secret horror which rules behind all human gods. But the more he looked, the more his mind became absorbed in the intricate silvery maze of design. It was compelling, hypnotic; glimpsing it was like pondering upon the meaning of Life—pondering in that awful way that drives philosophers mad.

From this beguilement, Peter was roughly awakened by his father's voice. He had been very curt and abrupt all morning, but now his words were fraught with an unmistakable eagerness.

"It's the place all right—the door of the parchment! Now I know what Prinn must have meant in his chapter on the Saracenic rituals; the part where he spoke of the 'symbols on the gate'. We must photograph this after we finish. I hope we can move it later, if the natives don't object."

There was a hidden relish in his words which Peter disliked, and almost feared. He became suddenly aware of how little he really knew about his father and his secret studies of recent years; recalled reluctantly certain guarded tomes he had glimpsed in the library at Cairo. And last night, his father had been out there with the bats, like some mad old priest. Did he really believe such nonsense? *Or did he know it was the truth?*

"Now!" The old man's voice was triumphant. "I have the knife. Stand back."

With fearful, fascinated eyes, Peter saw his father insert the tip of the knife under the seventh head—that of Anubis. Steel grated on silver; then the latter gave. As the dog-like head slowly turned as though actuated by a hidden pivot, the door swung open with a brazen clangor that echoed and re-echoed through the musty depths beyond.

And musty those depths proved to be. A noxious acrid scent burst forth from its long imprisonment, a charnel fetor. It was not the *natron* or spice-laden miasma common to most tombs; rather it held the concentrated essence of death itself—mildewed bones, putrefied flesh, and crumbled dust.

ONCE the first strength of the gaseous vapor had abated, Sir Ronald immediately stepped inside. He was followed, though much less quickly, by his son. The thirty-and-three sloping steps along the corridor were traversed, as the manuscript had foretold. Then, lantern in hand, the old man was confronted by the enigmatic eidolon of Anubis.

After that first dismaying scrutiny, during which Peter had uneasily recalled these memories of preceding incidents, Sir Ronald interrupted his son's revery and spoke. He whispered there, before the giant statue of the god that seemed to frown down upon the puniness of men with baleful, conscious eyes. Some trick of the lantern-light seemed to change the contours of that stone countenance; its chiseled grin was transformed into a gloating leer of mirthless menace. Yet the grim apprehension this aroused in Peter was soon overpowered by more acute fright when he heard his father's words.

"Listen, boy. I did not tell you all that the parchment revealed to me that night. You remember, there was a part I read only to myself. Well, I had reasons for not letting you know the rest then; you would not have understood, and probably would have refused to come here with me. I needed you too much to risk that.

"You don't know what this moment means to me, my son. For years I've worked and studied in secret over things which others scoff at as superstitious fancies. I believed, however, and I have learned. There are always lurking truths behind every forgotten religion; distorted facts which can be rationalized into new concepts of reality. I've been on the trail of something like this for a long time—I knew that if I could discover a tomb like this it must surely contain proofs which would convince the world. There are probably mummies within; the bodies of this cult's secret leaders. That's not what I'm after, though. It's the knowledge that's buried with them; the papyrus manuscripts that hold forbidden secrets—wisdom the world has never known! Wisdom—and power!"

Sir Ronald's voice was shrill with unnatural excitement.

"Power! I have read about the inner circles of the Black Temple, and the cult that was ruled by those designated as Masters in this parchment. They were not ordinary priests of magic; they had traffickings with entities from outside human spheres. Their curses were feared, and their wishes respected. Why? Because of what they knew. I tell you, in this tomb we may find secrets that can give us mastery over half the world! Death-rays, and insidious poisons, old books and potent spells whose efficacy may bring a renascence of primal gods again. Think of it! One could control governments, rule kingdoms, destroy enemies with that knowledge! And there will be jewels, wealth and riches undreamt of, the treasure of a thousand thrones!"

He is quite mad, Peter thought. For a moment he entertained a frantic impulse to turn and run back through the corridor; he wanted to see the sanity of a sun overhead, and feel a breath of air on his brow that was not dust-polluted by dead centuries. But the old man grasped him by the shoulders as he mumbled on, and Peter was forced to remain.

"You don't understand, I see. Perhaps it's for the best; but no matter, I know what I'm about. You will, too, after I do what is necessary. I must tell you now what the parchment said; that portion of it which I did not read aloud."

Some inner instinct screamed silent warnings in Peter's brain. He must get away—he must! But his father's grip was firm, though his voice trembled.

"The part I refer to is that which tells one how to get past this statue and into the tomb itself. No, nothing can be discovered by looking at the thing; there's no secret passage behind it; no levers concealed in the body of the god. The Master and his acolytes were cleverer than that. Mechanical means are of no avail—there's only one way to enter into the tomb beyond, and that is *through the body of the god itself!"*

Peter gazed again into the mask-like countenance of Anubis. The jackal-face was contorted in cunning comprehension—or was it only a trick of the light? His father hurried on.

"That sounds queer, but it's the truth. You remember what the parchment said about this statue being the first one—different from the rest? How it emphasized the fact that Anubis is the *Opener of the Way*, and hinted at its *secret soul?* Well, the next lines explained that. It seems that the figure can turn upon a pivot and open a space behind it into the tomb, *but only when the idol is animated by a human consciousness.”*

They were all mad, Peter knew. He, his father, the old priests, and the statue itself; all insane entities in a world of chaos.

“That means only one thing. I must hypnotize myself by gazing at the god; hypnotize myself until my soul enters its body and opens the way beyond.”

Peter’s blood was frozen ice in his veins.

“It’s not so bizarre a conception at that. The *yogis* believe that in their trances they incarnate themselves with the godhead; the self-hypnotic state is a religious manifestation among all races. And mesmerism is a scientific truth; a truth known and practised thousands of years before psychology was postulated as an organized study. These priests evidently knew the principle. So that is what I must do—hypnotize myself so that my soul or consciousness enters the image. Then I shall be able to open the tomb behind.”

“But the curse!” Peter muttered, finding his voice at last. “You know what it says about a curse on unbelievers—something about Lord Anubis being a guardian as well as an Opener of the Way. What about that?”

“Sheer humbug!” Sir Ronald’s tone was fanatically firm. “That was merely inserted to frighten off tomb-looters. At any rate, I must risk it. All you need do is wait. Once I pass into a trance, the statue will move, and the passage beyond will be disclosed. Enter it, immediately. Then give my body a good shake to break the coma, and I’ll be all right again.”

THERE was in his father’s words an authority which could not be denied. So Peter held the lantern aloft and allowed its beams to play over the face of Anubis. He stood in silence while his father focussed his gaze upon the jackal eyes—those stony, staring eyes that had so disturbed them with hints of a secret life.

It was a terrible tableau; the two men, the twelve-foot god, confronting each other in a black vault beneath the earth.

Sir Ronald's lips moved in fragments of ancient Egyptian prayers. His eyes were fixed upon a nimbus of light that had settled about the canine forehead. Gradually his stare became glassy; nictation ceased, and the pupils glowed with a peculiar nyctaloptic fire. The man's body sagged visibly, as if it were being vampirically drained of all life.

Then, to Peter's horror, a pallor overspread his father's face, and he sank down silently upon the stone floor. But his eyes never left those of the idol. Peter's left arm, which held the lantern aloft, was seized with a spasmodic convulsion of utter fright. Minutes sped away in silence. Time has no meaning in a place of death.

Peter could not think. He had seen his father practise self-hypnosis before, with mirrors and lights; he knew it was perfectly harmless in the hands of a skilled adept. But this was different. Could he enter the body of an Egyptian god? And if he did—what of the curse? These two questions reverberated like tiny voices somewhere in his being, but they were engulfed by overpowering fear.

This fear rose to a mad crescendo as Peter saw the change occur. All at once his father's eyes flickered like dying fires, and consciousness went out. But the eyes of the god—*the eyes of Anubis were no longer stone!*

The cyclopean statue was alive!

His father had been right. He had done it—hypnotized his consciousness into the body of the idol. Peter gasped, as a sudden thought slithered into his brain. If his father's theory had been correct so far, then what about the rest?

He had said that once inside the figure, his soul would direct it to open the way. But nothing was happening. *What was wrong?*

In panic, Peter bent down and examined the body of his father. It was limp, cold, and lifeless. Sir Ronald was dead!

Unbidden, Peter remembered the parchment's cryptic warnings:

"Those who do not believe shall die. Pass Lord Anubis though they may, still he shall know and not permit of their return unto the world of men. For the eidolon of Anubis is strange indeed, and holds a secret soul."

A secret soul! Peter, terror throbbing in his temples, raised the lantern aloft and looked once more into the god's face. Again he saw that the stony, snarling mask of Anubis held living eyes!

They glittered bestially, knowingly, evilly. And Peter, seeing them, went berserk. He did not—could not—think; all he knew was that his father was dead, and this statue had somehow killed him and come alive.

So Peter Barton suddenly rushed forward, screaming hoarsely, and began to beat upon the stone idol with futile fists. His bleeding, lacerated knuckles clawed at the cold legs, but Anubis did not stir. Yet his eyes still held their awful life.

The man cursed in sheer delirium, babbling in a tortured voice as he started to climb up to that mocking face. He must know what lay behind that gaze, see the thing and destroy its unnatural life. As he climbed, he sobbed his father's name in agony.

How long it took him to reach the top he never knew; the last minutes were merely a red blur of nightmare frenzy. When he recovered his senses he was dinging precariously to the statue's neck, his feet braced on the belly of the image. And he was still staring into those dreadful living eyes.

But even as he gazed, the whole face was twisting into a sudden ghastly life; the lips drew back into a cavern of cackling mirth, and the fangs of Anubis were bared in terrible, avid lust.

The arms of the god crushed him in a stone embrace; the claw-like fingers tightened about his quivering, constricted throat; the gaping muzzle ravened as stone teeth sank jackal-like into his neck. Thus he met his doom—but it was a welcome doom after that final moment of revelation.

The natives found Peter's bloodless body lying crushed and crumpled at the idol's feet; lying before the statue of Anubis like a sacrifice of olden days. His father was beside him, and he too was dead.

They did not linger there in the forbidden, forgotten fastness of that ancient crypt, nor attempt to enter into the tomb behind. Instead, they reclosed the doors and returned home. There they said that the old and young *effendi* had killed themselves; and that is not surprizing. There were really no other indications for them to go by. The statue of Anubis stood once more serene in the shadows; still grimly guarding the secret vaults beyond, and there was no longer any hint of life in its eyes.

And so there is none who knows what Peter Barton knew just before he died; none to know that as Peter went down into death he stared upward and beheld the revelation which made that death a welcome deliverance.

For Peter learned what animated the body of the god; knew what lived within it in a dreadful, distorted way; knew what was being forced to kill him. Because as he died he gazed at last into the living stone face of Anubis—the living stone face that held *his father's tortured eyes.*

The Dark Demon

The strange story of a man who communed too closely with things from beyond space—a shuddery tale of stark horror

IT HAS never been put on paper before—the true story of Edgar Gordon's death. As a matter of fact, nobody but myself knows that he *is* dead; for people have gradually forgotten about the strange dark genius whose eldritch tales were once so popular among fantasy-lovers everywhere. Perhaps it was his later work which so alienated the public—the nightmare hints and outlandish fancies of his final books. Many people branded the extravagantly worded tomes as the work of a madman, and even his correspondents refused to comment on some of the unpublished stuff he sent them. Then too, his furtive and eccentric private life was not wholesomely regarded by those who knew him in the days of his early success. Whatever the cause, he and his writings have been doomed to oblivion by a world which always ignores what it cannot quite understand. Now everyone who does remember thinks that Gordon has merely disappeared. That is good, in view of the peculiar way in which he died. But I have decided to tell the truth. You see, I knew Gordon very well. I was, truthfully, the last of all his friends, and I was there at the end. I owe him a debt of gratitude for all he has done for me, and how could I more fittingly repay it than to give to the world the true facts concerning his sad mental metamorphosis and tragic death?

If I can hope to clarify these things, and clear Gordon’s name from the unjust stigma of insanity, I feel that I have not lived in vain. Therefore, this statement is indited.

I am quite aware that this story may not be believed. There are certain—shall we say, “sensational aspects” ?—which have caused me to debate the step I am taking in laying his case before the public. But I have a debt to repay; a tribute, rather, to the genius that once was Edgar Henquist Gordon. Hence, the tale.

IT MUST have been six years ago that I first met him. I had not even known that we both resided in the same city, until a mutual correspondent inadvertently mentioned the fact in a letter.

I had, of course, heard of him before. Being a hopeful (and at times, hopeless) amateur writer myself, I was enormously influenced and impressed by his work in the various magazines catering to the fantastic literature I loved. At this time he was known in a small way to practically all readers of such journals as an exceptionally erudite writer of horror tales. His style had won him renown in this small field, though even then there were those who professed to scoff at the grotesquery of his themes.

But I ardently admired him. As a result, I invited myself to pay a social call upon Mr. Gordon at his home. We became friends.

Surprizingly enough, this reclusive dreamer seemed to enjoy my company. He lived alone, cultivated no acquaintances, and had no contact with his friends save through correspondence. His mailing-list, however, was voluminous. He exchanged letters with authors and editors all over the country; would-be writers, aspiring journalists, and thinkers and students everywhere. Once his reserve was penetrated, he seemed pleased to have my friendship. Needless to say, I was delighted.

What Edgar Gordon did for me in the next three years can never adequately be told. His able assistance, friendly criticism and kind encouragement finally succeeded in making a writer of sorts out of me, and after that our mutual interest formed an added bond between us.

What he revealed about his own magnificent stories astounded me. Yet I might have suspected something of the sort from the first.

Gordon was a tall, thin, angular man with the pale face and deep-set eyes which bespeak the dreamer. His language was poetic and profound; his personal mannerisms were almost somnambulistic in their weaving slowness, as though the mind which directed his mechanical movements was alien and far away. From these signs, therefore, I might have guessed his secret. But I did not, and was properly astonished when he-first told me.

For Edgar Gordon wrote all of his stories from dreams! The plot, setting, and characters were products of his own colorful dream life—all he need do was transcribe his sleeping fancies on paper.

This was, I later learned, not an entirely unique phenomenon. The late Edward Lucas White claimed to have written several books based entirely on night-fancies. H. P. Lovecraft had produced a number of his splendid tales inspired by a similar source. And of course, Coleridge had visioned his *Kubla Khan* in a dream. Psychology is full of instances attesting to the possibility of nocturnal inspiration.

But what made Gordon's confession so strange was the queer personal peculiarities attendant upon his own dream stages. He quite seriously claimed that he could close his eyes at any time, allow himself to relax into a somnolent doze, and proceed to dream endlessly. It did not matter whether this was done by day or by night; nor whether he slumbered for fifteen hours or fifteen minutes. He seemed particularly susceptible to subconscious impressions.

My slight researches into psychology led me to believe that this was a form of self-hypnosis, and that his short naps were really a certain stage of mesmeric sleep, in which the subject is open to any suggestion.

Spurred on by my interest, I used to question him closely as to the subject-matter of these dreams. At first he responded readily, once I had told him of my own ideas on the subject. He narrated several of them to me, which I took down in a notebook for future analysis.

Gordon's fantasies were far from the ordinary Freudian sublimation or repression types. There were no discernible hidden wish-patterns, or symbolic phases. They were somehow *alien.* He told me how he had dreamed the story of his famous *Gargoyle* tale; of the black cities he visited on the fabulous outer rims of space, and the queer denizens that spoke to him from formless thrones that existed beyond all matter. His vivid descriptions of terrifyingly strange geometry and ultra-terrestrial life-forms convinced me that his was no ordinary mind to harbor such eery and disturbing shadows.

The ease with which he remembered vivid details was also unusual. There seemed to be no blurred mental concepts at all; he recalled every detail of dreams he had experienced perhaps years ago. Once in a while he would gloss over portions of his descriptions with the excuse that "it would not be possible to make things intelligible in speech." He insisted that he had seen and comprehended much that was beyond description in a three-dimensional way, and that in sleep he could feel colors and hear sensations.

Naturally this was a fascinating field of research for me. In reply to my questions, Gordon once told me that he had always known these dreams from earliest remembered childhood to the present day, and that the only difference between the first ones and the last was an increase of *intensity.* He now claimed that he *fell* his impressions much more strongly.

The locale of the dreams was curiously fixed. Nearly all of them occurred amidst scenes which he somehow recognized were outside of our own cosmos. Mountains of black stalagmites; peaks and cones amidst crater valleys of dead suns; stone cities in the stars; these were commonplace. Sometimes he walked or flew, shambled, or moved in unnamable ways with the indescribable races of other planets. Monsters he could and would describe, but there were certain *intelligences* which existed only in a gaseous, nebulous state, and still others which were merely the embodiment of an inconceivable *force.*

GORDON was always conscious that he himself was present in every dream. Despite the awesome and often unnerving adventures he so glibly described, he claimed that none of these sleep-images could be classified as nightmares. He had never felt afraid. Indeed, at times he experienced a curious reversal of identity, so that he regarded his dreams as natural and his waking life as unreal.

I questioned him as deeply as possible, and he had no explanation to offer. His family history had been normal in this and every other respect, although one of his ancestors had been a "wizard" in Wales. He himself was not a superstitious man, but he was forced to admit that certain of his dreams coincided curiously with descriptive passages in such books as the *Necronomicon,* the *Mysteries of the Worm,* and the *Book of Eibon.*

But he had experienced similar dreams long before his mind prompted him to read the obscure volumes mentioned above. He was confident that he had seen "Azozath" and "Yuggoth" prior to the time he knew of their half-mythic existence in the legendary lore of ancient days. He was able to describe "Nyarlathotep" and "Yog-Sothoth" from what he claimed to be actual dream contact with these allegorical entities.

I was profoundly impressed by these statements, and finally was forced to admit that I had no logical explanation to offer. He himself took the matter so seriously that I never tried to humor or ridicule him out of his notions.

Indeed, every time he wrote a new story I asked him quite seriously about the dream which had inspired it, and for several years he told me such things at our weekly meetings.

But it was about this time that he entered into that phase of writing which brought him into general disfavor. The magazines which catered to his work began to refuse some of the manuscripts as too horrible and revolting for popular taste. His first published book, *Night-Gaunt,* was a failure, due to the morbidity of its theme.

I sensed a subtle change in his style and subject. No longer did he adhere to conventional plot-motivation. He began to tell his stories in first-person, but the narrator was not a *human being.* His choice of words clearly indicated hyperesthesia.

In reply to my remonstrances on introducing non-human ideas, he argued that a real weird tale must be told from the viewpoint of the monster or entity itself. This was not a new theory to me, but I did object to the shockingly morbid note which his stories now emphasized. Then too, his non-human characters were not conventional ghouls, werewolves, or vampires. Instead he presented queer demons, star-spawned creatures, and even wrote a tale about a disembodied intelligence that he called *The Principle of. Evil.*

This stuff was not only metaphysical and obscure, it was also insane, to any normal concept of thought. And the ideas and theories he expounded were becoming absolutely blasphemous. Consider his opening statement in *The Soul of Chaos:*

> This world is but a tiny island in the dark sea of Infinity, and there are horrors swirling all around us. Around us? Rather let us say *amongst* us. I know, for I have seen them in my dreams, and there are more things in this world than sanity can ever see.

The Soul of Chaos, by the way, was the first of his four privately printed books. By this time he had lost all contact with the regular publishers and magazines. He dropped most of his correspondents, too, and concentrated on a few eccentric thinkers in the Orient.

His attitude toward me was changing, too. No longer did he expound his dreams to me, or outline theories of plot and style. I didn't visit him very often any more, and he rejected my overtures with unmistakable bruskness.

I thought it just as well, in view of the last few sessions we had together. For one thing, I didn't like some of the new books in his library. Occultism is all right for a study, but the nightmare arcana of *Cultes des Goules* and the *Daemonolorum* are not conducive to a healthy state of mind. Then too, his last private manuscripts were almost too wild. I was not so favorably impressed at the earnestness with which he treated certain cryptic lore;

some of his ideas were much too strong. In another century he would have been persecuted for sorcery if he dared express half the beliefs contained in these writings.

THERE were other factors which somehow made me half glad to avoid the man. Always a quiet recluse by choice, his hermit-like tendencies seemed visibly accentuated. He never went out any more, he told me; not even walking in the yard. Food and other necessities he had delivered weekly to the door. In the evening he allowed no light but a small lamp within the parlor study. All he volunteered about this rigid routine was noncommittal. He said that he spent all his time in sleeping and writing.

He was thinner, paler, and moved with a more mystic dreaminess of manner than ever before. I thought of drugs; he looked like a typical addict. But his eyes were not the feverish globes of fire which characterize the hashish-eater, and opium had not wasted his physique. Then I suspected insanity myself; his detached manner of speech, and his suspicious refusal to enter deeply into any subject of conversation, might be due to some nervous disorder. He was by nature susceptible to certain schizoid characteristics. Perhaps he was deranged.

Certainly what he said at the last about his recent dreams tended to substantiate my theory. I'll never forget that final discussion of dreams as long as I live—for reasons soon to be apparent.

He told me about his last stories with a certain reluctance. Yes, they were dream-inspired, like the rest. He had not written them for public consumption, and the editors and publishers could go to blazes for all he cared. He wrote them because he had been *told* to write them.

Yes, told to. By the creature in his dreams, of course. He did not care to speak about it, but since I was a friend . . .

I urged him. Now I wish I hadn't; perhaps I could have been spared the knowledge that follows. . . .

Edgar Henquist Gordon, sitting there in the wan lunar light of the moon; sitting at the wide window with eyes that equaled the leprous moonlight in the dreadful intensity of their pallid glow. . . .

"I know about my dreams now. I was *chosen,* from the first, to be the Messiah; the messenger of His word. No, I'm not going religious. I'm not speaking of a God in the ordinary sense of the word men use to designate any power they cannot understand. I speak of the *Dark One.* You've read about Him in those books I showed you; the Demon Messenger, they call Him. But that's all allegorical. He isn't Evil, because there is no such thing as Evil. He is merely alien. And I am to be His messenger on earth.

"Don't fidget so! I'm not mad. You've heard about it all before—how the elder peoples worshipped forces that once were manifested physically on Earth, like the *Dark One* that has chosen me. The legends are silly, of course. He isn't a destroyer—merely a superior intelligence who wishes to gain mental rapport with human minds, so as to enable certain—ah—exchanges between humanity and Those beyond.

"He speaks to me in dreams. He told me to write my books, and distribute them to those who know. When the right time comes, we shall band together, and unfold some of the secrets of the cosmos at which men have only guessed or even sensed in dreams.

"That's why I've always dreamed. I was chosen to learn. That is why my dreams have shown me such things—'Yuggoth' and all the rest. Now I am being prepared for my—ah—apostleship.

"I can't tell you much more. I must write and sleep a great deal nowadays, so that I can learn faster.

"Who is this *Dark One?* I can't tell you any more. I suppose you already think I'm crazy. Well, you have many supporters of that theory. But I'm not. It's true!

"You remember all I've told you about my dreams—how they kept growing in *intensity?* Well enough. Several months ago I had some different dream-sequences. I was in the dark—not the ordinary dark you know, but the absolute dark beyond Space. It isn't describable in three-dimensional concepts or thought-patterns at all. The darkness has a *sound,* and a *rhythm* akin to breathing, because it is alive. I was merely a bodiless mind there; when I saw Him.

"He came out of the dark and—ah—communicated with me. Not by words. I'm thankful that my previous dreams had been so arranged as to inure me against visual horror. Otherwise I should never have been able to stand the sight of Him. You see, He is not like humans, and the shape He chose to wear is pretty awful. But, once you understand, you can realize that the shape is just as allegorical as the legends ignorant men have fostered about Him and the others.

"He looks something like a medieval conception of the demon Asmodeus. Black all over, and furry, with a snout like a hog, green eyes, and the claws and fangs of a wild beast.

"I was not frightened after He communicated, though. You see, He wears that shape merely because foolish people in olden days believed that He looked that way. Mass belief has a curious influence on intangible forces, you understand. And men, thinking such forces evil, have made them assume the aspect of evilness. But He means no harm.

"I wish I could repeat some of the things He has told me.

"Yes, I've seen Him every night since then. But I promised to reveal nothing until the day is ready. Now that I understand, I am no longer interested in writing for the herd. I am afraid humanity doesn't mean anything to me since I have learned those steps which lie beyond—and how to achieve them.

"You can go away and laugh at me all you like. All I can say is that nothing in my books has been exaggerated in the least—and that they only contain infinitesimal glimpses of the ultimate revelations which lurk beyond human consciousness. But when the day He has appointed shall arrive, then the whole world will learn the truth.

"Until then, you'd best keep away from me. I can't be disturbed, and every evening the impressions get stronger and stronger. I sleep eighteen hours a day now, at times, because there is so much that He wishes to tell me; so much to be learned in preparation. But when the day comes I shall be the godhead—He has promised me that in some way *I shall become incarnate with Him!”*

SUCH was the substance of his monolog. I left shortly after that. There was nothing I could say or do. But later I thought a lot about what he had said.

He was quite gone, poor fellow, and it was evident that another month or so would bring him to the breaking-point. I felt sincerely sorry, and deeply concerned over the tragedy. After all, he had been my friend and mentor for many years, and he was a genius. It was all too bad.

Still, he had a strange and disturbingly coherent story. It certainly conformed to his previous accounts of dream-life, and the legendary background was authentic, if the *Necronomicon* is to be believed. I wondered if his *Dark One* was remotely connected with the Nyarlathotep fable, or the “Dark Demon” of the witch-coven rituals.

But all that nonsense about the “day” and his being a “Messiah” on Earth was too absurd. What did he mean about the *Dark One’s* promise of incarnating himself in Gordon? Demonic possession is an old belief credited only by the childishly superstitious.

Yes, I thought plenty about the whole thing. For several weeks I did a little investigating of my own. I reread the later books, corresponded with Gordon’s former editors and publishers, dropped notes to his old friends. And I even studied some of the old magic tomes myself.

I got nothing tangible from all this, save a growing realization that something must be done to save Gordon from himself. I was terribly afraid for the man’s mind, and I knew that I must act quickly.

So one night, about three weeks after our final meeting, I left the house and started to walk to his home. I intended to plead with him, if possible, to go away; or at least insist that he submit to a medical examination. Why I pocketed the revolver I cannot say—some inner instinct warned me that I might meet with a violent response.

At any rate I had the gun in my coat, and I gripped the butt firmly in one hand as I threaded some of the darker streets that led to his old dwelling on Cedar Street.

It was a moonless night, with ominous hints of a thunder-storm in the offing. The little wind that warns of approaching rain was already sighing in the dark trees overhead, and streaks of lightning occasionally flared in the west.

My mind was a chaotic jumble of apprehension, anxiety, determination, and a lurking bewilderment. I did not even formulate what I was going to do or say once I saw Gordon. I kept wondering what had happened to him in the last few weeks—whether the "day" he spoke of was approaching at last.

Tonight was May-Eve. . . .

THE house was dark. I rang and rang, but there was no response. The door opened under the impact of my shoulder. The noise of splintering wood was drowned out by the first peal of thunder overhead.

I walked down the hall to the study. Everything was dark. I opened the study door. There was a man sleeping on the couch by the window. It was undoubtedly Edgar Gordon.

What was he dreaming about? Had he met the *Dark One* again in his dreams? The *Dark One,* "looking like Asmodeus—black all over, and furry, with green eyes, hog-snout, and the claws and fangs of some wild beast;" the *Dark One* who told him about the "day" when Gordon should become incarnate with Him?

Was he dreaming about this, on May-Eve? Edgar Henquist Gordon, sleeping a strange sleep on the couch by the window. . . .

I reached for the light-switch, but a sudden flash of lightning forestalled me. It lasted only a second, but it was brilliant enough to illuminate the entire room. I saw the walls, the furniture, the terrible scribbled manuscripts on the table.

Then I fired three revolver shots before the final flicker died away. There was a single eldritch scream that was mercifully drowned in a new burst of thunder. I screamed, myself. I never turned on the light, but only gathered up the papers on the table and ran out into the rain.

On the way home rain mingled with tear-drops on my face, and I echoed each new roar of thunder with a sob of deathly fear.

I could not endure the lightning, though, and shielded my eyes as I ran blindly to the safety of my own rooms. There I burnt the papers I had brought without reading them. I had no need of that, for there was nothing more to know.

That was weeks ago. When Gordon's house was entered at last, no body was found—only an empty suit of clothes that looked as though it had been tossed carelessly on the couch. Nothing else had been disturbed, but police point to the absence of Gordon's papers as an indication that he took them along when he disappeared.

I am very glad that nothing else has been found, and would be content to keep silent, were it not for the fact that Gordon is regarded as insane. I once thought him insane, too, so you see I must speak. After that I am going away from here, because I want to forget as much as I can. At that, I'm lucky I do not dream.

No, Edgar Gordon was not insane. He was a genius, and a fine man. But he told the truth in his books—about horrors being around us and *amongst* us. I dare not say all I now believe about his dreams, and whether or not his last stories were true. Perhaps it was just an optical illusion that I saw. I hope it was. But still, his clothes were there. . . .

Those last dreams—about the *Dark One,* who was waiting for the right day, and who would *incarnate* himself with Gordon. . . . I know what *incarnate* means now, and I shudder to think of what might have happened if I had not come upon the scene when I did. If there had been an awakening . . .

I thank God I was there in time, even though the memory is a haunting horror I cannot long endure. I am lucky to have had the revolver, too.

Because when that flash of lightning blazed across the room, I saw what lay in sleep upon the couch. That is what I shot; that is what sent me screaming into the storm, and that is what makes me sure that Gordon was not crazy, but spoke the truth.

For the incarnation had occurred. There on the couch, dressed in the clothes of Edgar Henquist Gordon, lay a demon like Asmodeus—a black, furry creature with the snout of a hog, green eyes, and the dreadful fangs and talons of some wild beast. It was the *Dark One* of Edgar Gordon's dreams!

Mother of Serpents

A short but powerful tale about a Haitian president who disowned his mother, and the terrible curse uttered by a voodoo-woman

VOODOOISM is a queer thing. Forty years ago it was an unknown subject, save in certain esoteric circles. Today there is a surprizing amount of information about it, due to research—and an even more surprizing amount of misinformation.

Recent popular books on the subject are, for the most part, sheer romantic fancy; elaborated with the incomplete theorizings of ignoramuses.

Perhaps, though, this is for the best. For the truth about voodoo is such that no writer would care, or dare, to print it. Some of it is worse than their wildest fancies. I myself have seen certain things I do not care to discuss. It would be useless to tell people anyway, for they would not believe me. And once again, this may be for the best. Knowledge can be a thousand times more terrifying than ignorance, I know, though, for I have lived in Haiti, the dark island. I have learned much from legendry, stumbled on many things through accident, and the bulk of my knowledge comes from the one really authentic source—the statements of the blacks. They're not talkative people, as a rule, those old natives of the back-hill country. It took patience and long familiarity with them before they unbent and told me their secrets.

That's why so many of the travel books are so palpably false—no writer who visits Haiti for six months or a year could possibly ingratiate himself into the confidence of those who know the facts. There are so few who really do know; so few who are not afraid to tell.

But I have learned. Let me tell you of the olden days; the old times, when Haiti rose to an empire, borne on a wave of blood.

1

IT WAS many years ago, soon after the slaves had revolted. Toussaint l'Ouverture, Dessalines and King Christophe freed them from their French masters, freed them after uprisings and massacres and set up a kingdom founded on cruelty more fantastic than the despotism that reigned before.

There were no happy blacks in Haiti then. They had known too much of torture and death; the carefree life of their West Indian neighbors was utterly alien to these slaves and descendants of slaves. A strange mixture of races flourished: fierce tribesmen from Ashanti, Damballah, and the Guinea Coast; sullen Caribs; dusky offspring of renegade Frenchmen; bastard admixtures of Spanish, Negro, and Indian blood. Sly, treacherous half-breeds and mulattos ruled the coast, but there were even worse dwellers in the hills behind.

There were jungles in Haiti, impassable jungles, mountain-ringed and swamp-scourged forests filled with poisonous insects and pestilential fevers. White men dared not enter them, for they were worse than death. Blood-sucking plants, venomous reptiles, diseased orchids filled the forests, forests that hid horrors Africa had never known.

For that is where the real voodoo flourished, back there in the hills. Men lived there, it is said, descendants of escaped slaves, and outlaw factions that had been hunted from the coast. Furtive rumors told of isolated villages that practised cannibalism, mixed in with dark religious rites more dreadful and perverted than anything spawned in the Congo itself. Necrophilism, phallic worship, anthropomancy, and distorted versions of the Black Mass were commonplace. The shadow of *obeah* was everywhere. Human sacrifice was common, the offering up of roosters and goats an accepted thing. There were orgies around the voodoo altars, and blood was drunk in honor of *Baron Samede* and the old black gods brought from ancient lands.

Everybody knew about it. Each night the *ratta-druxns* boomed out from the hills, and fires flared over the forests. Many known *papalois* and conjure-doctors resided on the edge of the coast itself, but they were never disturbed. Nearly all the "civilized" blacks still believe in charms and philtres; even the church-goers reverted to talismans and incantations in time of need. So-called "educated" Negroes in Port-au-Prince society were admittedly emissaries from the barbarian tribes of the interior, and despite the outward show of civilization the bloody priests still ruled behind the throne.

Of course there were scandals, mysterious disappearances, and occasional protests from emancipated citizens. But it was not wise to meddle with those who bowed to the Black Mother, or incur the anger of the terrible old men who dwelt in the shadow of the Snake.

Such was the status of sorcery when Haiti became a republic. People often wonder why there is still sorcery existent there today; more secretive, perhaps, but still surviving. They ask why the ghastly *zombies* are not destroyed, and why the Government has not stepped in to stamp out the fiendish blood-cults that still lurk in the jungle gloom.

Perchance this tale will provide an answer; this old, secret tale of the new republic. Officials, remembering the story, are still afraid to interfere too strongly, and the laws that have been passed are very loosely enforced.

Because the Serpent Cult of Obeah will never die in Haiti—in Haiti, that fantastic island whose sinuous shoreline resembles the yawning jaws of a monstrous *snake.*

One of the earliest presidents of Haiti was an educated man. Although born on the island, he was schooled in France, and studied extensively while abroad. His accession to the highest office of the land found him an enlightened, sophisticated cosmopolite of the modern type. Of course he still liked to remove his shoes in the privacy of his office, but he never displayed his naked toes in an official capacity. Don’t misunderstand—the man was no Emperor Jones; he was merely a polished ebon gentleman whose natural barbarity occasionally broke through its veneer of civilization.

He was, in fact, a very shrewd man. He had to be in order to become president in those early days; only extremely shrewd men ever attained that dignity.

Perhaps it would enlighten you a bit to say that in those times the term “shrewd” was a polite Haitian synonym for “crooked.” It is therefore easy to realize the president’s character when you know that he was regarded as one of the most successful politicians the republic ever produced.

In his short reign he was opposed by very few enemies; and those that did work against him usually disappeared. The tall, coal-black man with the physical skull-conformation of a gorilla harbored a remarkably crafty brain beneath his beetling brow.

His ability was phenomenal. He had an insight into finance which profited him greatly; profited him, that is, in both his official and unofficial capacity. Whenever he saw fit to increase the taxes he increased the army as well, and sent it out to escort the state tax-collectors. His treaties with foreign countries were masterpieces of legal lawlessness. This black Machiavelli knew that he must work fast, since presidents had a peculiar way of dying in Haiti. They seemed peculiarly susceptible to disease—“lead poisoning,” as our modem gangster friends might say. So the president worked very fast indeed, and he did a masterful job.

This was truly remarkable, in view of his humble background. For his was a success saga in the good old Horatio Alger manner. His father was unknown. His mother was a conjure-woman in the hills, and though quite well known, she had been very poor. The president had been born in a log cabin; quite the classic setting for a future distinguished career. His early years had been most uneventful, until his adoption, at thirteen, by a benevolent Protestant minister. For a year he lived with this kind man, serving as house-boy in his home. Suddenly the poor minister died of an obscure ailment; this was Most unfortunate, for he had been quite wealthy and his money was alleviating much of the suffering in this particular section. At any rate, this rich minister died, and the poor conjure-woman's son sailed to France for a university education.

As for the conjure-woman, she bought herself a new mule and said nothing. Her skill at herbs had given her son a chance in the world, and she was satisfied.

It was eight years before the boy returned. He had changed a great deal since his departure; he preferred the society of whites and the octoroon society people of Port-au-Prince. It is recorded that he rather ignored his old mother, too. His newly acquired fastidiousness made him painfully aware of the woman's ignorant simplicity. Besides, he was ambitious, and he did not care to publicize his relationship with such a notorious witch.

For she was quite famous in her way. Where she had come from and what her original history was, nobody knew. But for many years her hut in the mountains had been the rendezvous of strange worshippers and even stranger emissaries. The dark powers of *obeah* were evoked in her shadowy altar-place amidst the hills, and a furtive group of acolytes resided there with her. Her ritual fires always flared on moonless nights, and bullocks were given in bloody baptism to the Crawler of Midnight. For she was a Priestess of the Serpent.

The Snake-God, you know, is the real deity of the *obeah* cults. The blacks worshipped the Serpent in Dahomey and Senegal from time immemorial. They venerate the reptiles in a curious way, and there is some obscure linkage between the Snake and the crescent moon. Curious, isn't it—this serpent superstition? The Garden of Eden had its tempter, you know, and the Bible tells of Moses and his staff of snakes. The Egyptians revered

Set, and the ancient Hindoos had a cobra god. It seems to be general throughout the world—the kindred hatred and reverence of serpents. Always they seem to be worshipped as creatures of evil. Our own American Indians believed in Yig, and Aztec myths follow the pattern. And of course the Hopi ceremonial dances are on the same order.

But the African Serpent legends are particularly dreadful, and the Haitian adaptations of the sacrificial rites are worse.

AT THE time of which I speak some of the voodoo groups were believed to actually breed snakes; they smuggled the reptiles over from the Ivory Coast to use in their secret practices. There were tall tales current about twenty-foot pythons which swallowed infants offered up to them on the Black Altar, and about *sendings* of poisonous serpents which killed enemies of the voodoo-masters. It is a known fact that several anthropoid apes had been smuggled into the country by a peculiar cult that worshipped gorillas; so the serpent legends may have been equally true.

At any rate, the president's mother was a priestess, and equally as famous, in a way, as her distinguished son. He, just after his return, had slowly climbed to power. First he had been a tax-gatherer, then treasurer, and finally president. Several of his rivals died, and those who opposed him soon found it expedient to dissemble their hatred; for he was still a savage at heart, and savages like to torment their enemies. It was rumored that he had constructed a secret torture-chamber beneath the palace, and that its instruments were rusty, though not from disuse. The breach between the young statesman and his mother began to widen just prior to his presidential incumbency. The immediate cause was his marriage to the daughter of a rich octoroon planter from the coast. Not only was the old woman humiliated because her son contaminated the family stock (she was pure Negro, and descendant of a Niger slave-king), but she was further indignant because she had not been invited to the wedding.

It was held In Port-au-Prince. The foreign consuls were there, and the cream of Haitian society was present. The lovely bride had been convent-bred, and her antecedents were held in the highest esteem. The groom wisely did not deign to desecrate the nuptial celebration by including his rather unsavory parent.

She came, though, and watched the affair through the kitchen entranceway. It was just as well that she did not make her presence known, as it would have embarrassed not only her son, but several others as well—official dignitaries who sometimes consulted her in their unofficial capacity.

What she saw of her son and his bride was not pleasing. The man was an affected dandy now, and his wife was a silly flirt. The atmosphere of pomp and ostentation did not impress her; behind their debonair masks of polite sophistication she knew that most of those present were superstitious Negroes who would run to her for charms or oracular advice the moment they were in trouble. Nevertheless, she took no action; she merely smiled rather bitterly and hobbled home. After all, she still loved her son.

The next affront, however, she could not overlook. This was the inauguration of the new president. She was not invited to this affair either, yet she came. And this time she did not skulk in the shadows. After the oath of office was administered she marched boldly up to the new ruler of Haiti and accosted him before the very eyes of the German consul himself. She was a grotesque figure; an ungainly little harridan barely five feet tall, black, barefooted, and clad in rags.

Her son quite naturally ignored her presence. The withered crone licked her toothless gums in terrible silence. Then, quite calmly, she began to curse him—not in French, but in native *patois* of the hills. She called down the wrath of her bloody gods upon his ungrateful head, and threatened both him and his wife with vengeance for their smug ingratitude. The assembled guests were shocked.

So was the new president. However, he did not forget himself. Calmly he motioned to his guards, who led the now hysterical witch-woman away. He would deal with her later.

The next night when he saw fit to go into the dungeon and reason with his mother, she was gone. Disappeared, the guards told him, rolling their eyes mysteriously. He had the jailer shot, and went back to his official chambers.

He was a little worried about that curse business. You see, he knew what the woman was capable of. He did not like those threats against his wife, either. The next day he had some silver bullets molded, like King Henry in the old days. He also bought an *ouanga* charm from a devil-doctor of his own acquaintance. Magic would fight magic.

That night a serpent came to him in dreams; a serpent with green eyes that whispered in the way of men and hissed at him with shrill and mocking laughter as he struck at it in his sleep. There was a reptilian odor in his bedroom the next morning, and a nauseous slime upon his pillow that gave forth a similar stench. And the president knew that only his charm had saved him.

That afternoon his wife missed one of her Paris frocks, and the president questioned his servants in his private torture-chamber below. He learned some facts he dared not tell his bride, and thereafter he seemed very sad. He had seen his mother work with wax images before—little mannikins resembling men and women, dressed in parts of their stolen garments. Sometimes she stuck pins into them or roasted them over a slow fire. Always the real people sickened and died. This knowledge made the president quite unhappy, and he was still more overwrought when messengers returned and said that his mother was gone from her old hut in the hills.

THREE days later his wife died, of a painful wound in her side which no doctor could explain. She was in agony until the end, and just before her passing it was rumored that her body turned blue and bloated up to twice its normal size. Her features were eaten away as if with leprosy, and her swollen limbs looked like those of an elephantiasis victim. Loathsome tropical diseases abound in Haiti., but none of them kill in three days. . . .

After this the president went mad.

Like Cotton Mather of old, he started on a witch-hunting crusade. Soldiers and police were sent out to comb the countryside. Spies rode up to hovels on the mountain-peaks, and armed patrols crouched in far-off fields where the living dead-men work, their glazed and glassy eyes staring ceaselessly at the moon. *Mamdois* were put to the question over slow fires, and possessors of forbidden bodes were roasted over flames fed by the very tomes they harbored. Bloodhounds yammered in the hills, and priests died on altars where they were wont to sacrifice. Only one order had been specially given: the president's mother was to be captured alive and unharmed.

Meanwhile he sat in the palace with the embers of slow insanity in his eyes—embers that flared into fiendish flame when the guards brought in the withered crone, who had been captured near that awful grove of idols in the swamp.

They took her downstairs, although she fought and clawed like a wildcat, and then the guards went away and left her son with her alone. Alone, in a torture-chamber, with a mother who cursed him from the rack. Alone, with frantic fires in his eyes, and a great silver knife in his hand. . . .

The president spent many hours in his secret torture-chamber during the next few days. He seldom was seen around the palace, and his servants were given orders that he must not be disturbed. On the fourth day he came up the hidden stairway for the last time, and the flickering madness in his eyes was gone.

Just what occurred in the dungeon below will never be rightly known. No doubt that is for the best. The president was a savage at heart, and to the brute, prolongation of pain always brings ecstasy. . . .

It is recorded, though, that the old witch-woman cursed her son with the Serpent's Curse in her dying breath, and that is the most terrible curse of all.

Some idea of what happened may be gained by the knowledge of the president's revenge; for he had a grim sense of humor, and a barbarian's idea of retribution. His wife had been killed by his mother, who fashioned a waxen image. He decided to do what would be exquisitely appropriate.

When he came up the stairs that last time, his servants saw that he bore with him a great candle, fashioned of corpse-fat. And since nobody ever saw his mother's body again, there were curious surmises as to where the corpse-fat was obtained. But then, the president's mind leaned toward grisly jests. . . .

The rest of the story is very simple. The president went directly to his chambers in the palace, where he placed the candle in a holder on his desk. He had neglected his work in the last few days, and there was much official business for him to transact. For a while he sat in silence, staring at the candle with a curious, satisfied smile. Then he called for his papers and announced that he would attend to them immediately.

HE WORKED all that night, with two guards stationed outside his door. Sitting at his desk, he pored over his task in the candle-light—the candle-light from the corpse-fat taper.

Evidently his mother's dying curse did not bother him at all. Once satisfied, his blood-lust abated, he discounted all possibility of revenge. Even he was not superstitious enough to believe that the sorceress could return from her grave. He was quite calm as he sat there, quite the civilized gentleman. The candle cast ominous shadows over the darkened room, but he did not notice—until it was ton late. Then he looked up to see the corpse-fat candle wriggle into a monstrous life.

His mother's curse. . . .

Use candle—the corpse-fat candle—was *dive!* It was a sinuous, twisting thing, weaving in its holder with sinister purpose.

The flame-tipped end seemed to glow strongly into a sudden terrible semblance. The president, amazed, saw a fiery face—his mother's; a tiny, wrinkled face of flame, with a corpse-fat body that darted out toward the man with hideous ease. The candle was lengthening as if the tallow were melting; lengthening, and reaching out toward him in a terrible way.

The president of Haiti screamed, but it was too late. The glowing flame on the end snuffed out, breaking the hypnotic spell that had held the man betranced. And at that moment the candle leapt, while the room faded into dreadful darkness. It was a ghastly darkness, filled with moans, and the sound of a thrashing body that grew fainter, and fainter. . . .

It was quite still by the time the guards had entered and turned up the lights once more. They knew about the corpse-fat candle and the witch-mother's curse. That is why they were the first to announce the president's death; the first to fire a bullet into his temple and claim he committed suicide.

They told the president's successor the story, and he gave orders that the crusade against voodoo be abandoned. It was better so, for the new man did not wish to die. The guards had explained why they shot the president and called it suicide, and his successor did not wish to risk the Serpent Curse.

For the president of Haiti had been strangled to death by his mother's corpse-fat candle—*a corpse-fat candle that was wound around his neck like a giant snake.*

1937

The Brood of Bubastis

A shuddery story of a ghastly charnel crypt in a weird cave in the hills of Cornwall

I WISH I did not have to write these lines. Ordinary suicide notes are morbid enough, and the tale which I must tell is infinitely more ghastly. Still, before I seek forgetfulness in the black boon of death, I feel impelled to leave this final testament.

I owe it to my friends, who have never understood the frightening, unexplained metamorphosis of personality I underwent upon my return from England. Perhaps this will serve to explain my abhorrent and unnatural zoophobia—feliphobia, rather. My quite inexplicable fear of cats caused them much anguish, I know, and for a while there was talk of a "nervous breakdown." Now they shall hear the truth. I trust it clears up other points which may have puzzled them: my voluntary retirement to the country, the breaking off of all personal contacts and correspondence, and my brusk rejection of all their sympathetic advances. Here, then, is my final explanation to those I once knew and loved.

Here, too, I trust, is material of value to students of archeology and ethnology; perhaps the first example of ancient legends substantiated by the testimony of an eye-witness. I hope that it will prove useful.

It is quite possible, however, that both my friends and scientific authorities will dismiss this entire screed as the work of a crazed and degenerate mind. It does not really matter, though. By the time it reaches other eyes I shall have gone on to find the nepenthe that lies in death. Maybe it is for the best if these words are not believed, for the memories behind them are filled with a haunting horror that drives me to doom.

But be it called truth, raving, or warning—here is the tale.

ON NOVEMBER twelfth of this last year, I sailed for England. My friends knew that I planned to visit my old college companion, Malcolm Kent, at his Cornwall estate. Malcolm had been a fellow-student of mine, and we had formed a close bond of friendship, cemented by our mutual interests in psychology, philosophy, and metaphysics.

I had a pleasant crossing, spiced with eager anticipation of the visit to come, for I had heard much of Malcolm's fine old home. He had often spoken in detail of the ancient manor in which he dwelt, and reminisced at length upon his ancestral heritage. His was an old family, steeped in the archaic traditions of the past—a past filled with Celtic myths, Pictish legends, and still more remote fables of antique days. The countryside about his estate was deeply imbued with hoary and fantastic lore. He had recounted olden whispers of goblin-folk, the dark dwarfs and gnomes that burrowed in the bogs and swamps. Ghost tales and stories of furtive wizardries seemed to spring from the very twilight land itself. I looked forward to an interesting experience.

So, at first, it seemed to be. I was enchanted with the Cornish countryside: a region of mystic mountains, cloud-haunted hilltops, and purple peaks that towered above wild forest glens and green-grottoed swamplands. Here was a region rich in romance—the dark land of Irish, Saxon, Roman, and primitive pagan gods. Witches could walk in these woods, sorcerers sweep across these sullen skies on their satanic steeds. I was well pleased with the place.

I found in Malcolm an agreeable host. He had not changed; the tall, fair-haired youth had become a mature man whose cultured tastes still coincided harmoniously with my own. There was a world of wisdom in his pale blue eyes, and a warmth of welcome in his smile when first we met at the gate of his estate.

Together we walked up the long tree-spanned pathway which led to the door of his dwelling. Here I stopped for a moment to survey the imposing structure.

The Kent manor was a fine example of good old English architecture. It was large, with low, ivy-covered wings that jutted out on the sides; typically British solidness seemed to exude from the place.

Now I can think of it only with repulsion, for everything connected with that place is tinged with dread for me.

The interior was, I suppose, beautiful. Now I detest the thought of long, shadowed halls. I don't like to let my mind dwell on the stone study, for it was there that the affair started.

We had dined well, and Malcolm suggested we retire and chat before the fire. After perfunctorily discussing trivial matters of our recent years, our conversation ebbed.

It was then that I sensed in Malcolm a peculiar hesitancy of manner. At first I ascribed it to a vague embarrassment on his part. I admit that I was gazing about me with great curiosity.

I noted that his library on occultism had been greatly augmented since his first interest in it, during college. The walls were solidly shelved with books bearing unmistakable earmarks of the mantic arts. The skull on the mantel was a rather affected touch, I thought, though there was a genuine note of weirdness in some of the paintings and tapestries. But my intent scrutiny of these things, I felt, could not wholly explain his air of *eagerness.* He was nervous, his eyes ever on the floor as I gazed about the room. It was almost as though he wanted me to see certain things without his telling me; as though this place had some secret to impart of which he dared not speak.

At length I grew impatient. The silence, the dim luminance of candles and fire, all affected my nerves.

“Something wrong?” I asked.

"Nothing," he replied, easily. Too easily!

"Aren't hiding any bodies around here, are you?" I forced jocularity. "No, of course not." He smiled, then leaned forward, earnestly.

"Are you still as interested in the occult as you used to be?" he asked.

Something in the intent tone of his voice warned me.

"Well, to tell the truth, I haven't studied much lately. Writing, you know, takes up pretty near all my time. And then, too, we got to a certain stage where ordinary work must cease. I can't get the use of the more advanced books."

"I have them," Malcolm said, carelessly indicating his shelves. "But that's not the point. Are you still interested?"

"Yes," I replied.

Was it fancy, or did his eyes light up with a disturbing gleam? Did a look of triumph cross his face?

"I think that I have something of importance to tell you," he began, slowly. "But I warn you, it may prove shocking. So if you'd rather we talked of something else——"

"Go ahead," I murmured. "Let's have it."

For a long moment he averted his head. He seemed to be nerving himself to speak; his glance avoided mine again, as though attempting to conceal some hidden fear. It may have been a trick of the candlelight, but when he looked up, that queer glitter again shone in his eyes. When at last he spoke, his voice was very low.

"Very well, then. I shall tell you the truth—all of it. It will be wise for me to do this, perhaps. I don't like to bear the knowledge alone any longer."

Then, as I sat silent, he began his tale, and for the next hour I was transported to a world of mad imagination. While he spoke, it seemed as though the very shadows on the wall crept closer to listen, while the wind wailed a dirge beneath the windows, piping a threnody to his hints of hidden horrors.

I heard him out. Afterward the words seemed to blur in my brain, so that I forgot many of his statements and remembered only their loathsome effect on me. Perhaps it is just as well, for at the time those stark, shuddery sentences moved me overmuch. The general details of his story, however, remain clear.

For the past two years Malcolm had become intensely interested in neighborhood folk-lore. Time hung heavy on his hands, and his obscure studies impelled him to seek practical explanations of local legends. His questioning of the country rustics had brought to light much that was fascinating. He corroborated what he heard from them by reading archeological treatises, and there was much in ethnology and anthropology regarding the ancient days and the peoples then settled here. He read of Druidic times, and correlated his readings with certain still-current fables telling of olden rites in the glades of oak. He rode across the countryside to view remains of menhirs and partly-standing altars ascribed to the priests of this primal cult.

He learned of Roman invasions and Roman gods, and had repeated to him the fable of Maximus Lupus, whom a dragon devoured on the midnight moor. The fantastic stories of Little People were substantiated in country folk-lore, and from then on he delved deeply into the demonology of many races and a score of centuries. Sea-serpents haunted the gloomy coasts, and mermaids shrilled a siren song above the storm. Kelpies and leprechauns croaked from bog and tarn, while certain peaks and hillside caves were reputed to be the abode of the dread trolls, dwarfs, and unfriendly small dark folk of pre-Pictish days. Witch rites, the Black Mass, the Damned Given—all seemed to have their place in the history of the countryside. Such myths offered a wide field for investigation.

This research had finally driven Malcolm past all sane boundaries. Abandoning the garbled distortions of the yokels, and the cautious, tentative references of historians, he plunged boldly into the black tomes of evil lore. At first the more reputable of such dubious authorities sufficed him, but his way led him ever into wilder and more fantastic wisdom. He managed to borrow Ludvig Prinn's almost legendary Latin edition of *De Vermis Mysteriis,* and in that cryptic repository of nightmare knowledge he found much over which to ponder perplexedly.

That was several months ago. Since then he had returned the volume—it was the property of the British Museum—but had made a number of notes from it. Among these scribblings was an almost incredible statement which greatly excited his fevered fancy.

Since then he had checked the facts in established archeology texts and books on the subject of race-migration. They echoed the truth. Substantially, the theory was simple: the Egyptians had Once colonized Cornwall!

According to the fragmentary allusions Malcolm had discovered, the strange dark peoples of Africa had sailed up the coast lands in their Phenician-built galleys. This much was known from the wrecked remnants of several craft unearthed on desolate and sand-swept shores. Later and even more startling advances had been made during the investigation of numerous primitive, abandoned mines dotting the local heaths. These had been previously ascribed to early Gaels, but the familiar symbols and ideography of ancient Egypt were unmistakably inscribed on the rock walls of the deeper chasms. Most of the mines bore traces of having been hastily abandoned, thus accounting for their discontinuance.

Comparison with accounts of early navigation did much to substantiate the theory. The fleets of Egypt sailed to the Orient; why not westward as well?

Malcolm put forth these ideas in tones of such profound eagerness and agitation that I was tempted to inquire as to his particular interest in them.

He told me, intensely, and at length. For two definite reasons he was interested. First—there was one of those Egyptian mines in this very neighborhood.

He had stumbled across it quite by chance, during a walk along the moors. Upon descending the outer rim of a precipitous cliff, he had noticed faint remnants of a definite pathway around a ledge. Upon following the trail out of curiosity he found himself standing before a deep, cavernous indentation in the wall of the ledge. Half obscured by weeds and branches, an aperture yawned inward, seemingly leading to the very bowls of the earth below the moor. He cleared away enough of the debris to wriggle through, and discovered a long, slanting tunnel that stretched blackly before him. Flashlight in hand, he had entered. There was a musty fetor in the darkness, an odor of furtive decay. Dust danced about his feet as he floundered on. The burrow widened, until a cyclopean maze of inner passages confronted him. Here he had turned back, as his torch was failing fast, but not before he had seen certain unmistakable hieroglyphic designs in the archaic style of Egypt.

He had deferred his return until I arrived. Now we could go together.

"But," I interjected, "I think this is a task for reputable authorities. Why not publish your findings and invite a group of recognized savants to aid you in the project?"

He demurred. We had best go alone, until we were really certain of the extent and importance of our discovery. I saw his point, and agreed.

"Didn't you mention having a second reason for your moodiness?" I asked.

He again avoided my glance. "Never mind that now. It's getting late. I'll tell you tomorrow, when we get there."

"Tomorrow?" I gasped.

"Why not? Turn in now, and get a good night's rest. We're off in the morning."

I let it go at that, but as I went up to bed I could not help but remember his last, curiously twisted smile.

2

IT WAS a long walk across the moor in that misty, early morning fog. Malcolm and I both grunted under our burden of food, torches, and other apparatus. Groping in gray gloom, we skirted the steep edge of a seaward cliff until Malcolm found the proper path. Then we began our descent. Hanging in space, I heard the roar of the mist-obscured surf from far below, and the brisk breeze sent spray to sting my face and hands. Amidst the shrill, mocking cries of the gulls, we clambered along the narrow ledge until it broadened sufficiently to permit of more casual passage. At last Malcolm turned to me and indicated the spot for which we searched.

There was the tunnel, just as he had described it—a black fissure in the rock; a thin opening that looked as though it were scratched in the stone by a gigantic claw of some ogreish monster. The hole was deep and black, and as I contemplated it I received my first definite impression of uneasiness.

I have never liked the dark places beneath the earth. The sight of caves and tunnels brings a train of almost atavistic recollection. I instinctively associate such burrows with death and graves. And too many unwholesome legends seem to cluster around caverns. Perhaps it is a relic of primitive times, but caves in my mind always conjure up a vision of mythical dragons and vast, lumbering beasts; of black, half-animal races of troglodytes; of vaults and catacombs given over to the dead. And this sinister slit in the ageless rock looked oddly unnatural. Consequently I paused before it, suspicion mounting within me.

"This—this doesn't look like a mine to me," I said. "However primitive, I don't see how ore could be carried up the cliff, and the opening is too narrow. I don't like it. Are you sure you're not mistaken?"

Malcolm smiled. It was a peculiar smile, tinged with sardonic amusement.

"I'm not mistaken," he said. "And it isn't a mine. I know that. But it all ties up with the second reason for my moodiness which I promised to explain. I'd better tell you before we go in."

He spoke. It was a strange place to impart such a secret; on a fog-wrapped ledge half-way between sea and sky, before a dark doorway to the inner earth. But the secret was fitting for such a scene as this.

"I lied to you last night," Malcolm said calmly. "I didn't tell you all I studied, or all I found out. There's more, much more, behind this visit than a mere glimpse of ancient times."

He paused. "Have you ever heard of Bubastis?" he asked.

"Bubastis?" I was a little puzzled. "Why, yes. Old Egyptian city, wasn't it? And isn't there a god, Bubastis—Bast, or Pasht, they call it?"

"Yes." Again that puzzling smile. "Bubastis, or Bast, was the cat-goddess of Egypt during the days of the Pharaohs. According to the proper myth-cycle, Bubastis was the daughter of Isis. The temples of the goddess were located separately in the cities of Bubastis and Elephantine."

"What are you getting at?" I was frankly bewildered; he told me this with such an air of grave importance, and his recurring smile was baffling. "What do you mean?" I asked, impatiently.

"I mean that we are now entering the new temple of Bubastis," he purred. "Don't gape at me! If you've read Prinn's *Saracenic Rituals* chapter, or the Roman contemporary historians, you must know that Elephantine and Bubastis were destroyed. It is hinted that the Priests of Bast were blaspheming against the reigning religions, and their sacrifices were atrocious. Finally an army was sent against their cities and the temples were ravished. But—and this is important—the priests were said to have vanished; escaped somewhere, with their acolytes. They came here."

"Here? You mean, to Cornwall?"

"Exactly. That's why those stupid fools were deceived by the mines. Most of them were blinds—with hollow shafts leading to temples beneath."

"But what were they trying to do?"

"The renegade priests knew black arts. Their worship was perverted. Bast was a ghoul-goddess, remember, and her feline fangs must know blood. And besides, the priests were experimenting. Somewhere in the old *Desmonolorum* it is written that there was a sect of Egypt which believed literally in their gods; believed that Anubis, Bast, and Set could assume human form. That is to say, that the cat-goddess could be brought to life. And there were wise men in those days; science and biology were not unknown. It is the belief of savants that the priests of Bast were mating animals and humans in an attempt to create a hybrid—a hybrid with the attributes of their deity. For this they were expelled, and they fled here." Incredible! But the cavern gaped its grinning mouth in mockery, and the fog twisted its way into my brain.

Malcolm went on.

"Clever, clever priests! Here, in the safety of the under-earth, they rebuilt their shattered fanes. With slaves and devotees they continued their experiments. I know that within this very moor are treasures far greater than those of the Pyramids or temple tombs. That's what we're going to see now. I don't want any meddling experts to gain the credit. It's a secret you and I alone must know."

He could not help but see my face.

"Don't be afraid, you fool! I've been here many times, no matter what I told you. I know the way. It's wonderful, I tell you."

He pushed me through the cleft, and we wriggled into darkness. Was it a trick? Was Malcolm, perhaps, unbalanced? Was I? The darkness did not reply, though its black strands were already coiling around my brain.

The torch-glow guided me through the fissure and into a long, sloping passage where I could once more stand erect. Wading through dust, we walked between narrow, carefully chiseled walls for what seemed an interminable time. Already the nightmare aspects of this whole strange adventure were deadening all rational thoughts. Now Malcolm led the way, through twisted burrows that stretched like hollow tentacles of some unseen horror ahead. Walking deep in the ageless earth, beneath a moor! With every step, my time-sense faded away, until I might easily believe that we had left centuries behind and were again in primal days.

MOLE-LIKE, clambering through the shaft, we descended. The utter queerness of the place precluded speech, and we went silently onward. It was quite hot, but jets of warmer air were wafted from gulfs ahead.

The way widened. We were approaching the caverns now. This, indeed, was no mine-shaft. And the pit we had just entered was unmistakable.

It was a tomb. Basalt walls were carefully chiseled in geometric lines. The floor was set in stone, and here the dust was not so thick. This touch of artificial design was peculiarly disturbing after the utter crudity of the passageway. But what occupied the room was more disturbing still.

Slabs of stone lined the walls—slabs of stone, and on them, mummy-cases; dust-covered, moldering, but unmistakable.

It was true! There was no mistaking the familiar forms. And now, through the discolorations, I saw designs on the walls. Egyptian designs, four thousand miles away from Egypt and three thousand years away from the present!

"The early priests," Malcolm said, softly. "They were buried here, just as though they were at home."

I would have stopped and attempted to peer into some of the sarcophagi, but Malcolm intervened.

"This is nothing," he whispered. "There are—ah—real sights ahead."

We left the hall. I was beginning to feel the fear that crept upon me. Malcolm was right, and what did he mean now by showing me "real" sights?

Gnawing curiosity overcame my dread, as I followed him through the ossuarium and into a second chamber. More slabs, more mummy-cases. There must have been hundreds of people dwelling here at one time! There were side-corridors now, all artificially hewn in the rock. These perhaps had led to the dwelling-places of the inhabitants.

A question flashed through my thoughts. "Malcolm," I said, "what did these people feed on here? There's no place for cultivation of food-stuffs?"

He faced me with that damned smile of his again. "Bubastis was, I told you, a ghoul-goddess. The priests and worshippers *emulated* her."

A sickening wave of repulsion swept over me. This was all so unnatural—it savored of nightmares and old things that haunt men in their dreams. I wanted very much to turn back, but Malcolm strode resolutely ahead, and he beckoned imperiously, leading on to further horrors. We entered pits.

Our lights, while strong enough to penetrate ordinary darkness, proved eerily dim amidst these black and eldritch walls through which we now wandered. Batlike shadows basked and hovered just outside the luminance of our torches, and occasionally dispersed to hint at what lay behind. At first I was irritated by the lack of illumination, but I was soon to give thanks that it was no brighter. As it was, I saw more than enough; for in this third room, Malcolm allowed me to examine some of the mummies.

What unnatural life had festered and flourished here in the black bosom of earth? That first coffin was awful. Ghoullike, I clawed the lid from the case and peered at what lay within. The thing was perfectly embalmed, and as I unwrapped it with trembling haste, the face came into view. It crumbled, thank heaven, almost immediately, but not until I saw the malformed creature within.

Two dead eyes stared from the rigid face of a dark-skinned priest. Two dead eyes, set in a forehead withered with decay—*a forehead from which protruded the hideous, misshapen head of a tiny serpent!*

"Skin-grafting," I gasped, weakly.

"No. Look closer." Malcolm's voice was grave, but I knew he smiled.

I looked again, as the air putrefied that withered countenance before my eyes.

I reeled. It was unmistakable, though sanity clutched vainly for another explanation. There was nothing to do but face the monstrous truth—that serpent's head actually *grew* on the mummy's brow. And since it, too, was mummified—but I dared not finish the thought. Malcolm again supplied the ghastly answer.

"It was alive, when he was."

I ROSE to my feet and went on. There was nothing else to do. Horror supplies a merciful anesthesia of its own, and I was partly drugged by that first dread realization. I must have been, else I should have gone mad viewing the sights that followed.

Malcolm was right. The priests had mated animals with humans. We opened other cases; that is, Malcolm did, while I stood fixed and fascinated beside him. There was a Pan-thing, with a horned forehead and a face that even through centuries still held a goatish leer. In one spot we discovered a fiendish trinity—three dwarfed and stunted faces on a single head and neck. The most frightful ravings of archaic mythology were all duplicated here—gargoyle, chimera, centaur, harpy—parodied in the Gorgonic features of leering, long-dead priests.

Then there was the section farther on with the bodies. Lycanthropic sights were revealed as Malcolm hacked away the case-coverings. The stench of natron hung like a miasma above the violated sarcophagi of creatures with human heads and the mummified bodies of apes. There was a hoofed horror with vestigial remnants of a tail, and a Ganesha-like thing with the enormous trunk of an elephant. Some of those we saw were evidently failures: noseless, eyeless, faceless freaks with extra arms; and finally an awful corpse without limbs, whose swollen neck grew into a gaping, headless maw. All mercifully dissolved into dust after a moment.

By this time all semblance of normality had departed from me. I followed Malcolm from slab to slab, wrenching off outer casings and unwinding each new terror. Sated, I feasted my eyes on new perversions and greater blasphemies.

When I thought of how these things had been born—what mad, unnatural experiments had performed these matings—I could hardly control myself. It was all long ago, I knew, but the very thought of such things existing in an outwardly sane universe was terrifying.

I refuse to let myself admit how deeply we had burrowed in that accursed labyrinth when the horror came. Malcolm and I, our torches trembling in hands palsied with dread, stumbled down a sable spiral of rock-hewn stairs. The memory of those things in the crypts above buzzed in my brain; else I would not have ventured on into the noisome, fear-infested darkness—that seething, slithering darkness in which our very shadows drowned.

Malcolm was no longer my companion. He seemed utterly detached. He was horribly familiar with our way, and strangely calloused. His silence oppressed me; with diabolical abandon he plodded down the stairs, his intent body straining forward as if avid to meet and mingle with dread yet to come.

Nevertheless, I followed him. I could not bear to go back alone, and my voice refused to function when I thought of suggesting it. Somehow, this whole thing was like a dream, and I was afraid that the sound of my own conversation would shatter that impression and make me aware of this awful reality. Besides, Malcolm was now literally racing down the stairs, and I must go on to intercept him. I meant to lead him back again to the world of light before it was too late.

Or did I? Horror swept over me in sweet black waves of ecstasy. The steps which I descended seemed to lure onward to new, infinitely enchanted nightmares. My being was wrenched between sharp, hysterical fear for the sake of Malcolm, and a grinning delight, a loathly lusting for terrors to come.

We staggered down the stairs. There were gusts of odious vapor; venom-brewed stenches, chill breezes that dripped with dampness. From far below the wind droned a dirge that was a death-rattle in the dark. But these went almost unnoticed. What little thought I still possessed was occupied with visual evils.

3

THE winding walls of the shaft we descended were gelid black in the glare of our lights, but they were not bare. There were pictures—more Egyptian art, but not conventional ideographic work like that in the catacombs above. These sketches were disturbingly different, with great, sprawling figures, like those traced by an idiot in sand. Once again we viewed the monsters I was trying to forget; the snake-men, the satyr-creatures, the deformed cacodemons we found in the upper tombs. But now we saw them pictured in life, and it was worse than any imagining. These caricatures of humanity were shown while engaging in certain acts, and the needs they performed were evil. There were scenes which told an ancient story all too well—glimpses of the living monsters sacrificing to their gods, and gratifying their lusts. Among these were pictures of normal men; high priests, I suppose, and they were mingled with the beast-herd in lechery so perverted that it sickened me.

But Malcolm laughed. Spasm after spasm of cackling mirth welled from his rasping throat. He chuckled with a terrible, gloating rictus at my look of dread. I turned the light of my torch away from the walls and went blindly forward down the remaining stairs. If I had been normal I should have guessed what lay below, after seeing those grimacing frescoes of cannibalistic, necrophilic animal-men. I might have remembered Malcolm's sly allusions to the Priests of Bast, and their efforts to create an unholy life for their god.

But I was not normal; so I followed Malcolm's scurrying shape until the stairs ended.

I will be very brief here, and spare myself as much of the memory as possible.

The caverns below were immense; perhaps they were the product of a great air-bubble in the earth's inner crust. It was hot and dark down there, but for that I am glad. The darkness and suddenly increased perspiration blurred my eyes. Even so, I could not fail to see the tormenting truth.

The floor of this pit stretched off into interminable burrows beyond, each gaping its black and hungry mouth. And before each mouth there was a little pile of bones. Bones, osseous dust; a shambles of skulls. Even from a distance I could see the marks of gnawing teeth in the splintered death's-heads. A thought seared through me.

There had been pictures on the wall—pictures of beast-men feeding on human flesh, on one another. Perhaps those buried in the tombs above were the *human* experiments; then these bones represented the other, nearly animal, creatures. Just how near the old priests had approached to their idea of a godhead I dared not surmise. Many of the bones before me hinted of ghastly spawnings between beast and man.

It was then that I saw the altar. A bare black stone reared loathsomely up in the center of the cavern floor; a stark, shining surface that sprang from the rock beneath. But the place where it met the floor was entirely buried beneath bones.

As I gazed at them in the low light, I clutched Malcolm's shoulder for support. For I saw—I saw!

These were no disarticulated skeletons; these osseous fragments before the sinister altar! These were *fresh* bones! And among the shredded, fleshy remnants that clung to them were tattered bits of cloth and leather—*English doth and leather!*

What did it mean? The priests of Bast died, and their creatures devoured one another after them. But what did they sacrifice to on the black altar; what lurked in the ebon burrows beyond, that still crept forward to feast? And who fed it?

I looked into Malcolm's twitching visage and read the answer to my questions. From the expression on that laughing, demented countenance I knew him to be completely crazed.

"There's no dust on *this* floor," I found myself whispering. "No dust."

"No, you fool." He glared into my eyes, as he gripped my wrists. "There's no dust where things still *move around.* I can see that you noticed the bones. I might as well tell you the truth.

"Do you know what this was? The temple of Bubastis! That altar held its sacrifice, when the priests offered up their beast-man victims to the god. That was the altar from which the god took its prey—*and by the eternal, it still does!*

"Yes, tremble. It's well you do. You'll need to shudder before I've done with you. You're not the first to follow me down these stairs in the past six months; those bones tell their own story. I've shown some of the local people this spot.

"You see, the god is hungry. The god needs food. At first I was afraid, but now I know that if I please the god with sacrifices it will not harm me. Perhaps in time it will teach me the secrets of the dead old priests, and then I shall know many things. But the god needs blood. Blood!"

He dragged me, weak and half fainting with shock and terror, across that dreadfully dustless floor, shambling as though in the grip of some insane compulsion. Before I was able to struggle or resist he had me up against the black altar, and we fought knee-deep in gleaming bones.

His eyes were mad, and his strength that of a fanatic. I screamed and screamed, until his hands grasped my throat and choked me. But even as I fought him, my brain battled against its own fears.

Sacrifices, and a Feeder from the Pit. . . . What cursed experiment of the dead priests still groped about in the gloom beyond? . . . What chewed those bones?

A phrase from some book flashed through my head. "Ghoul—Chewer of Corpses."

MALCOLM lifted me on the altar, then turned his head and gazed across the charnel chamber to the burrows. He called, shouted, in unintelligible gibberish that resembled the tongue of ancient Egypt.

Then came the unmentionable rustling from the black openings beyond. Something was waddling into view out of the pits; something *emerged.*

Chewer of Corpses!

With the strength of the doomed I leapt from the altar, and my fist crashed into Malcolm's grinning, exultant face. He toppled across the black slab as I turned and ran across the cavern to the stairs. But by the time I reached it the thing had completely emerged; emerged, and stalked across the floor to the altar-stone where Malcolm lay. And it lifted him, though he moaned when he felt his body being dangled in those flabby paws. He hung like a broken doll, while the thing bent its rugose head and opened its mouth.

Chewer of Corpses!

That is what I sobbed as I turned and fought my way up those dark, basaltic stairs. That is the phrase I moaned as I lurched through nether halls of twilight where the monstrous mummies lay; that is what I crooned as I clambered bade along the outer shaft. And when the sudden shock of sunlight burst upon my face at the entrance to the ledge, I weakly murmured the words as I sank into unconsciousness.

I was strangely calm when I recovered. I managed the climb to the top of the cliff, and even made the mile journey across the moor. Weak as I was, I packed and caught a train at the village station.

Only that night did I sink into the fevered dreams that have made life an unbearable torment ever since. I was a sick man on the boat, and when I reached New York I shut up my apartment for ever.

I CAN only surmise as to the termination of the affair. Whether Malcolm’s disappearance is ascribed to me I do not know; whether the disputed fate of the rustics he lured to death has been forgotten, I cannot say. Nor does it really matter.

What does matter is the necessity for immediate investigation of the horror below those moors; that blasphemy that broods beneath.

I can no longer bear the blight of memory; so I leave this task to other hands. Let men do what they will—study the place if they wish, but by all means destroy it, lest there be a repetition some day of my own tragic experience.

I can force myself to coherence no longer. Since that awful day I have pondered overmuch on what I heard, and worse still—what I *guessed.* That is what impels me to take my life.

Yes, there was the pit, and the priests of Bast dwelt there. It is all true about their experiments with men and beasts, their creation of loathsome monsters in the black burrows builded beneath the earth. Thank God they died off and destroyed one another as they did. For that alone I can be grateful.

But I have learned more than that. Now I know *what* those unholy wizards meant to do; why they mated beasts and men. I know what they wished to create to rule over them, and what they *did* create at the last—the thing that still lives in the farther pit.

That is what I cannot endure to remember—the sight of the thing Malcolm madly meant to serve; the thing that killed him—the secret of the priests of Bast.

It came rustling out of the darkness in the pit; the great blind thing that seized Malcolm as he lay on its altar. It grasped him in cruel claws, and gnawed or nuzzled at his throat. It was the Chewer of Corpses.

There on the altar it crouched, ten feet tall—the mockingly human figure, like that of the lioness-creatures pictured on the walls. The giant, human figure, but oh! that head! . . .

The priests had succeeded at the last. They brought their god to earthly life.

That head—*the leering, ravening muzzle of a carnivorous beast!* It haunts me, for now I know that Malcolm Kent met his death at the hands of the living, breathing, hybrid monster, whom the priests made.

The thing that killed him was *the Cat-goddess of Bubastis!*

The Mannikin

What was the thing that moved and writhed on Simon Magi ore’s back?—a tale of stark horror

MIND you, I cannot swear that my story is true. It may have been a dream; or worse, a symptom of some severe mental disorder. But I believe it is true. After all, how are we to know what things there are on earth? Strange monstrosities still exist, and foul, incredible perversions. Every war, each new geographical or scientific discovery, brings to light some new bit of ghastly evidence that the world is not altogether the sane place we fondly imagine it to be. Sometimes peculiar incidents occur which hint of utter madness.

How can we be sure that our smug conceptions of reality actually exist? To one man in a million dreadful knowledge is revealed, and the rest of us remain mercifully ignorant. There have been travelers who never came back, and research workers who disappeared. Some of those who did return were deemed mad because of what they told, and others sensibly concealed the wisdom that had so horribly been revealed. Blind as we are, we know a little of what lurks beneath our normal life. There have been tales of sea-serpents and creatures of the deep; legends of dwarfs and giants; records of queer medical horrors and unnatural births. Stunted nightmares of men’s personalities have blossomed into being under the awful stimulus of war, or pestilence, or famine. There have been cannibals, necrophiles, and ghouls;

loathsome rites of worship and sacrifice; maniacal murders, and blasphemous crimes. When I think, then, of what *I* saw and heard, and compare it with certain other grotesque and unbelievable authenticities, I begin to fear for my reason.

But if there is any *sane* explanation of this matter, I wish to God I may be told before it is too late. Doctor Pierce tells me that I must be calm; he advised me to write this account in order to allay my apprehension. But I am not calm, and I never can be calm until I know the truth, once and for all; until I am wholly convinced that my fears are not founded on a hideous reality.

I was already a nervous man when I went to Bridgetown for a rest. It had been a hard grind that year at school, and I was very glad to get away from the tedious classroom routine. The success of my lecture courses assured my position on the faculty for the year to come, and consequently I dismissed all academic speculation from my mind when I decided to take a vacation. I chose to go to Bridgetown because of the excellent facilities the lake afforded for trout-fishing. The resort I chose from the voluminous array of hotel literature was a quiet, peaceful place, according to the simple prospectus. It did not offer a golf-course, a bridle-path, or an indoor swimming-pool. There was no mention made of a grand ballroom, an eighteen-piece orchestra, or formal dinner. Best of all, the advertisement in no way extolled the scenic grandeur of the lake and woods. It did not polysyllabically proclaim that Lake Kane was "Nature's eternal paradise, where cerulean skies and verdant wilderness beckon the happy visitor to taste the joys of youth." For that reason I wired in a reservation, packed my bag, assembled my pipes, and left.

I WAS more than satisfied with the place when I arrived. Bridgetown is a small, rustic village; a quaint survival of older and simpler days. Situated on Lake Kane itself, it is surrounded by rambling woods, and sloping, sun-splashed meadows where the farm-folk toil in serene content. The blight of modern civilization has but dimly fallen upon these people and their quiet ways. Automobiles, tractors, and the like are few. There are several telephones, and five miles away the State Highway affords easy access to the city. That is all. The homes are old, the streets cobbled. Artists, suburban dilettantes and professional esthetes have not yet invaded the pastoral scene. The quota of summer guests is small and select. A few hunters and fishers come, but none of the ordinary pleasure-hunting crowd. The families thereabout do not cater to such *tastes;* ignorant and unsophisticated as they are, they can recognize vulgarity.

So my surroundings were ideal. The place I stayed at was a three-story hostelry on the lake itself—the Kane House, run by Absolom Gates. He was a character of the old school; a grizzled, elderly veteran whose father had been in the fishery business back in the sixties. He, himself, was a devotee of things piscatorial; but only from the Waltonian view. His resort was a fisherman’s Mecca. The rooms were large and airy; the food plentiful and excellently prepared by Gates’ widowed sister. After my first inspection, I prepared to enjoy a remarkably pleasant stay.

Then, upon my first visit to the village, I bumped into Simon Maglore on the street.

I first met Simon Maglore during my second term as an instructor back at college. Even then, he had impressed me greatly. This was not due to his physical characteristics alone, though they were unusual enough. He was tall and thin, with massive, stooping shoulders, and a crooked back. He was not a hunchback in the usual sense of the word, but was afflicted with a peculiar tumorous growth beneath his left shoulder-blade. This growth he took some pains to conceal, but its prominence made such attempts unsuccessful. Outside of this unfortunate deformity, however, Maglore had been a very pleasant-looking fellow. Blackhaired, gray-eyed, fair of skin, he seemed a fine specimen of intelligent manhood. And it was this intelligence that had so impressed me. His class-work was strikingly brilliant, and at times his theses attained heights of sheer genius. Despite the peculiarly morbid trend of his work in poetry and essays, it was impossible to ignore the power and imagination that could produce such wild imagery and eldritch color. One of his poems—*The Witch Is Hung*—won for him the Edsworth Memorial Prize for that year, and several of his major thanes were republished in certain private anthologies.

From the first, I had taken a great interest in the young man and his unusual talent. He had not responded to my advances at first; I gathered that he was a solitary soul. Whether this was due to his physical peculiarity or his mental trend, I cannot say. He had lived alone in town, and was known to have ample means. He did not mingle with the other students, though they would have welcomed him for his ready wit, his charming disposition, and his vast knowledge of literature and art. Gradually, however, I managed to overcome his natural reticence, and won his friendship. He invited me to his rooms, and we talked.

I had then learned of his earnest belief in the occult and esoteric. He had told me of his ancestors in Italy, and their interest in sorcery. One of them had been an agent of the Medici. They had migrated to America in the early days, because of certain charges made against them by the Holy Inquisition. He also spoke of his own studies in the realms of the unknown. His rooms were filled with strange drawings he had made from dreams, and still stranger images done in day. The shelves of his bookcases held many odd and ancient books. I noted Ranfts' *De Mosticotione Mortuorum in Tutnulis* (1734); the almost priceless *Cabala, of Saboth* (Greek translation, circa 1686); Mycroft's *Commentaries on Witchcraft;* and Ludvig Prinn's infamous *Mysteries of the Worm.*

I made several visits to the apartments before Maglore left school so suddenly in the fall of '33. The death of his parents called him to the East, and he left without saying farewell. But in the interim I had learned to respect him a good deal, and had taken a keen interest in his future plans, which included a book on the history of witch cult survivals in America, and a novel dealing with the psychological effects of superstition on the mind. He had never written to me, and I heard no more about him until this chance meeting on the village street.

He recognized me. I doubt if I should have been able to identify him. He had changed. As we shook hands I noted his unkempt appearance and careless attire. He looked older. His face was thinner, and much paler. There were shadows around his eyes—and in them. His hands trembled; his face forced a lifeless smile. His voice was deeper when he spoke, but he inquired after my health in the same charming fashion he had always affected. Quickly I explained my presence, and began to question him.

He informed me that he lived here in town; had lived here ever since the death of his parents. He was working very hard just now on his books, but he felt that the result of his labors more than justified any physical inconveniences he might suffer. He apologized for his untidy apparel and his tired manner. He wanted to have a long talk with me sometime soon, but he would be very busy for the next few days. Possibly next week he would look me up at the hotel—just now he must get some paper at the village store and go back to his home. With an abrupt farewell, he turned his back on me and departed.

As he did so I received another start. The hump on his back had grown. It was now virtually twice the size it had been when I first met him, and it was no longer possible to hide it in the least. Undoubtedly the hard work had taken severe toll of Maglore's energies. I thought of a sarcoma, and shuddered.

WALKING back to the hotel, I did some thinking. Simon's haggardness appalled me. It was not healthful for him to work so hard, and his choice of subject was not any too wholesome. The constant isolation and the nervous strain were combining to undermine his constitution in an alarming way, and I determined to appoint myself a mentor over his course. I resolved to visit him at the earliest opportunity, without waiting for a formal invitation. Something must be done.

Upon my arrival at the hotel I got another idea. I would ask Gates what he knew about Simon and his work. Perhaps there was some interesting sidelight on his activity which might account for his curious transformation. I therefore sought out the worthy gentleman and broached the subject to him.

What I learned from him startled me. It appears that the villagers did not like Master Simon, or his family. The old folks had been wealthy enough, but their name had a dubious repute cast upon it ever since the early days. Witches and warlocks, one and all, made up the family line. Their dark deeds had been carefully hidden from the first, but the folk around them could tell. It appears that nearly all of the Maglores had possessed certain physical malformations that had made them conspicuous. Some had been born with veils; others with club-feet. One or two were dwarfed, and all had at some time or another been accused of possessing the fabled “evil eye”. Several of them had been nyctalops—they could see in the dark. Simon was not the first crookback in the family, by any means. His grandfather had it, and *his* grand-sire before him.

There was much talk of inbreeding and dan-segregation, too. That, in the opinion of Gates and his fellows, dearly pointed to one thing—wizardry. Nor was this their only evidence. Did not the Maglores shun the village and shut themselves away in the old house on the hill? None of them attended church, either. Were they not known to take long walks after dark, on nights when all decent, self-respecting people were safe in bed?

There were probably good reasons why they were unfriendly. Perhaps they had things they wished to hide in their old house, and maybe they were afraid of letting any talk get around. Folk had it that the place was full of wicked and heathenish books, and there was an old story that the whole family were fugitives from some foreign place or other because of what they had done. After all, who could say? They looked suspicious; they acted queerly; maybe they were. Of course, nobody could rightly tell. The mass hysteria of witch-burning and the herd-mania of satanic possession had not penetrated to this part of the country. There was no talk of altars in the woods, and the spectral forest presences of Indian myth. No disappearances—bovine or human—could be laid at the doors of the Maglore family.

Legally, their record was clear. But folk feared them. And this new one—Simon—was the worst.

He never had acted right. His mother died at his birth. Had to get a doctor from out of the city—no local man would handle such a case. The boy had nearly died, too. For several years nobody had seen him. His father and his uncle had spent all their time taking care of him. When he was seven, the lad had been sent away to a private school. He came back once, when he was about twelve. That was when his uncle died. He went mad, or something of the sort At any rate, he had an attack which resulted in a cerebral hemorrhage, as the doctor called it.

Simon then was a nice-looking lad—except for the hump, of course. But it did not seem to bother him at the time—indeed, it was quite small. He had stayed several weeks and then gone off to school again. He had not reappeared until his father's death, two years ago. The old man died all alone in that great house, and the body was not discovered until several weeks later. A passing peddler had called; walked into the open parlor, and found old Jeffrey Maglore dead in his great chair. His eyes were open, and filled with a look of frightful dread. Before him was a great iron book, filled with queer, undecipherable characters.

A hurriedly summoned physician pronounced it death due to heart-failure. But the peddler, after staring into those fear-filled eyes, and glancing at the odd, disturbing figures in the book, was not so sure. He had no opportunity to look around any further, however, for that night the son arrived.

People looked at him very queerly when he came, for no notice had yet been sent to him of his father's death. They were very still indeed when he exhibited a two-weeks' old letter in the old man's handwriting which announced a premonition of imminent death, and advised the young man to come home. The carefully guarded phrases of this letter seemed to hold a secret meaning; for the youth never even bothered to ask the circumstances of his father's death. The funeral was private; the customary interment being held in the cellar vaults beneath the house.

THE gruesome and peculiar events of Simon Maglore's homecoming immediately put the country-folk on their guard. Nor did anything occur to alter their original opinion of the boy. He stayed on all alone in the silent house.

He had no servants, and made no friends. His infrequent trips to the village were made only for the purpose of obtaining supplies. He took the purchases back himself, in his car. He bought a good deal of meat and fish. Once in a while he stopped in at the drug-store, where he purchased sedatives. He never appeared talkative, and replied to questions in monosyllables. Still, he was obviously well educated. It was generally rumored that he was writing a book. Gradually his visits became more and more infrequent.

People now began to comment on his changed appearance. Slowly but surely he was altering, in an unpleasant way. First of all, it was noticed that his deformity was increasing. He was forced to wear a voluminous overcoat to hide its bulk. He walked with a slight stoop, as though its weight troubled him. Still, he never went to a doctor, and none of the townsfolk had the courage to comment or question him on his condition. He was aging, too. He began to resemble his uncle Richard, and his eyes had taken on that lambent cast which hinted of a nyctaloptic power. All this excited its share of comment among people to whom the Maglore family had been a matter of interesting conjecture for generations.

Later this speculation had been based on more tangible developments. For recently Simon had made an appearance at various isolated farmhouses throughout the region, on a furtive errand.

He questioned the old folks, mostly. He was writing a book, he told them, on folk-lore. He wanted to ask them about the old legends of the neighborhood. Had any of them ever heard stories concerning local cults, or rumors about rites in the woods? Were there any haunted houses, or shunned places in the forest? Had they ever heard the name "Nyarlathotep", or references to "Shub-Niggurath" and "the Black Messenger" ? Could they recall anything of the old Pasquantog Indian myths about "the beast-men", or remember stories of black covens that sacrificed cattle on the hills? These and similar questions put the naturally suspicious farmers on their guard. If they had any such knowledge, it was decidedly unwholesome in its nature, and they did not care to reveal it to this self-avowed outsider. Some of them knew of such things from old tales brought from the upper coast, and others had heard whispered nightmares from recluses in the eastern hills. There were a lot of things about these matters which they frankly did not know, and what they suspected was not for Outside ears to hear. Everywhere he went, Maglore met with evasions or frank rebuffs, and he left behind a distinctly bad impression.

The story of these visits spread. They became the topic for an elaborate discussion. One oldster in particular—a farmer named Thatcherton, who lived alone in a secluded stretch to the west of the lake, off the main highway—had a singularly arresting story to tell. Maglore had appeared one night around eight o'clock, and knocked on the door. He persuaded his host to admit him to the parlor, and then tried to cajole him into revealing certain information regarding the presence of an abandoned cemetery that was reputed to exist somewhere in the vicinity.

The farmer said that his guest was in an almost hysterical state, that he rambled on and on in a most melodramatic fashion, and made frequent allusion to a lot of mythological gibberish about "secrets of the grave," "the thirteenth covenant," "the Feast of Ulder," and the "Doel chants." There was also talk of "the ritual of Father Yig," and certain names were brought up in connection with queer forest ceremonies said to occur near this graveyard. Maglore asked if cattle ever disappeared, and if his host ever heard "voices in the forest that made proposals."

These things the man absolutely denied, and he refused to allow his visitor to come back and inspect the premises by day. At this the unexpected guest became very angry, and was on the point of making a heated rejoinder, when something strange occurred. Maglore suddenly turned very pale, and asked to be excused. He seemed to have a severe attack of internal cramps; for he doubled up and staggered to the door. As he did so, Thatcherton received the shocking impression that the hump on his back was *moving!* It seemed to writhe and slither on Maglore's shoulders, as though he had an animal concealed beneath his coat! At this juncture Maglore turned around sharply, and backed toward the exit, as if trying to conceal this unusual phenomenon. He went out hastily, without another word, and raced down the drive to the car. He ran like an ape, vaulted madly into the driver's seat, and sent the wheels spinning as he roared out of the yard. He disappeared into the night, leaving behind him a sadly puzzled man, who lost no time in spreading the tale of his fantastic visitor among his friends.

Since then such incidents had abruptly ceased, and until this afternoon Maglore had not reappeared in the village. But people were still talking, and he was not welcome. It would be well to avoid the man, whatever he was.

Such was the substance of my friend Gates' story. When he concluded, I retired to my room without comment, to meditate upon the tale.

I WAS not inclined to share the local superstitions. Long experience in such matters made me automatically discredit the bulk of its detail. I knew enough of rural psychology to realize that anything out of the ordinary is looked upon with suspicion. Suppose the Maglore family were reclusive: what then? Any group of foreign extraction would naturally be. Granted that they were racially deformed—that did not make them witches. Popular fancy has persecuted many people for sorcery whose only crime lay in some physical defect. Even inbreeding was naturally to be expected when social ostracism was inflicted. But what is there of magic in that? It's common enough in such rural back-waters, heaven knows, and not only among foreigners, either. Queer books? Likely. Nyctalops? Common enough among all peoples. Insanity? Perhaps—lonely minds often degenerate. Simon was brilliant, however. Unfortunately, his trend toward the mystical and the unknown was leading him astray. It had been poor judgment that led him to seek information for his book from the illiterate country people. Naturally, they were intolerant and distrustful. And his poor physical condition assumed exaggerated importance in the eyes of these credulous folk.

Still, there was probably enough truth in these distorted accounts to make it imperative that I talk to Maglore at once. He must get out of this unhealthful atmosphere, and see a reputable physician. His genius should not be wasted or destroyed through such an environmental obstacle. It would wreck him, mentally and physically. I decided to visit him on the morrow.

After this resolution, I went downstairs to supper, took a short stroll along the shores of the moonlit lake, and retired for the night.

The following afternoon, I carried out my intention. The Maglore mansion stood on a bluff about a half-mile out of Bridgetown, and frowned dismally down upon the lake. It was not a cheerful place; it was too old, and too neglected. I conjured up a mental image of what those gaping windows must look like on a moonless night, and shuddered. Those empty openings reminded me of the eyes of a blind bat. The two gables resembled its hooded head, and the broad, peaked side-chambers might serve as wings. When I realized the trend of my thought I felt surprized and disturbed. As I walked up the long, tree-shadowed walk I endeavored to gain a firm command over my imagination. I was here, on a definite errand.

I was almost composed when I rang the bell. Its ghostly tinkle echoed down the serpentine corridors within. Faint, shuffling footsteps sounded, and then, with a grating dang, the door opened. There, limned against the doorway, stood Simon Maglore.

At the sight of him my new-born composure gave way to a sudden dismay and an overpowering distaste. He looked sinister in that gray, wavering light. His thin, stooping body was hunched at a repellent angle, and his hands were clenched at his sides. His blurred outline reminded me of a crouching beast. Only his face was wholly visible. It was a waxen mask of death, from which two eyes glared with ghoulish light. That was it! Maglore looked like a crouching ghoul! A physical nausea welled up in my soul, and I longed to wind my hands around that withered neck, or batter my two fists into that leering face. A smile writhed its way over that twisted countenance, a smile of sly, lurking evil. The fretted lips curled back in a fanged grimace of idiotic mirth.

"You see I am not myself today, you fool. Go away!" The creature chuckled, as if in relish over some subtle jest known only to itself. Then its voice changed to a sudden shriek. "Go away, you fool—go away!" The door slammed in my astounded face, and I found myself alone.

But I was not alone on the walk home; for my thoughts were haunted by the presence of another—that ghastly, grisly creature that had once been my friend, Simon Maglore.

2

I WAS still dazed when I arrived back in the village. But after I had reached my room in the hotel, I began to reason with myself. That romantic imagination of mine had played me a sorry trick. Poor Maglore was ill—probably a victim of some severe nervous disorder. I recalled the report of his buying sedatives at the local pharmacy. In my foolish emotionalism I had sadly misconstrued his unfortunate sickness. What a child I had been! I must go back tomorrow, and apologize. After that, Maglore must be persuaded to go away and get himself back into proper shape once more. He *had* looked pretty bad, and his temper was getting the best of him, too. How the man had changed!

That night I slept but little. Early the following morning I again set out. This time I carefully avoided the disquieting mental images that the old house suggested to my susceptible mind. I was all business when I rang that bell.

It was a different Maglore who met me. He, too, had changed for the better. He looked ill, and old, but there was a normal light in his eyes and a saner intonation in his voice as he courteously. bade me enter, and apologized for his delirious spasm of the day before. He was subject to frequent attacks, he told me, and planned to get away very shortly and take a long rest. He was eager to complete his book—there was only a little to do, now—and go back to his work at college. From this statement he abruptly switched the conversation to a series of reminiscent interludes. He recalled our mutual association on the campus as we sat in the parlor, and seemed eager to hear about the affairs at school. For nearly an hour he virtually monopolized the conversation and steered it in such a manner as to preclude any direct inquiries or questions of a personal nature on my part.

Nevertheless, it was easy for me to see that he was far from well. He sounded as though he were laboring under an intense strain; his words seemed forced, his statements stilted. Once again I noted how pale he was; how bloodless. His malformed back seemed immense; his body correspondingly shrunken. I recalled my fears of a cancerous tumor, and wondered. Meanwhile he rambled on, obviously ill at ease. The parlor seemed almost bare; the book-cases were unlined, and the empty spaces filled with dust. No papers or manuscripts were visible on the table. A spider had spun its web upon the ceiling; it hung down like the thin locks on the forehead of a corpse.

During a pause in his conversation, I asked him about his work. He answered vaguely that it was very involved, and was taking up most of his time. He had made some very interesting discoveries, however, which would amply repay him for his pains. It would excite him too much in his present condition if he went into detail about what he was doing, but he could tell me that his findings in the field of witchcraft alone would add new chapters to anthropological and metaphysical history. He was particularly interested in the old lore about “familiars”—the tiny creatures who were said to be W. T.—S emissaries of the devil, and were supposed to attend the witch or wizard in the form of a small animal—rat, cat, mole, or ousel. Sometimes they were represented as existing on the body of the warlock himself, or subsisting upon it for their nourishment. The idea of a “devil’s teat” on the witches’ bodies from which their familiar drew sustenance in blood was fully illuminated by Maglore's findings. His book had a medical aspect, too; it really endeavored to put such statements on a scientific basis. The effects of glandular disorders in cases of so-called "demonic possession" were also treated.

At this point Maglore abruptly concluded. He felt very tired, he said, and must get some rest. But he hoped to be finished with his work very shortly, and then he wanted to get away for a long rest. It was not wholesome for him to live alone in this old house, and at times he was troubled with disturbing fancies and queer lapses of memory. He had no alternative, however, at present, because the nature of his investigations demanded both privacy and solitude. At times his experiments impinged on certain ways and courses best left undisturbed, and he was not sure just how much longer he would be able to stand the strain. It was in his blood, though—I probably was aware that he came from a necromantic line. But enough of such things. He requested that I go at once. I would hear from him again early next week.

As I rose to my feet I again noticed how weak and agitated Simon appeared. He walked with an exaggerated stoop, now, and the pressure on his swollen back must be enormous. He conducted me down the long hall to the door, and as he led the way I noted the trembling of his body, as it limned itself against the flaming dusk that licked against the window-panes ahead. His shoulders heaved with a slow, steady undulation, as if the hump on his back was actually pulsing with life. I recalled the tale of Thatcherton, the old farmer, who claimed that he actually saw such a movement. For a moment I was assailed by a powerful nausea; then I realized that the flickering light was creating a commonplace optical illusion.

When we reached the door, Maglore endeavored to dismiss me very hastily. He did not even extend his hand for a parting clasp, but merely mumbled a curt "good evening," in a strained, hesitant voice. I gazed at him for a moment in silence, mentally noting how wan and emaciated his once-handsome countenance appeared, even in the sunset's ruby light. Then, as I watched, a shadow crawled across his face. It seemed to purple and darken in a sudden eery metamorphosis. The adumbration deepened, and I read stark panic in his eyes, Even as I forced myself to respond to his farewell, horror crept into his face. His body fell into that odd, shambling posture I had noted once before, and his lips leered in a ghastly grin. For a moment I actually thought the man was going to attack me. Instead he laughed—a shrill, tittering chuckle that pealed blackly in my brain. I opened my mouth to speak, but he scrambled back into the darkness of the hall and shut the door.

Astonishment gripped me, not unmingled with fear. Was Maglore ill, or was he actually demented? Such grotesqueries did not seem possible in a normal man.

I hastened on, stumbling through the glowing sunset. My bewildered mind was deep in ponderment, and the distant croaking of ravens blended in evil litany with my thoughts.

3

THE next morning, after a night of troubled deliberation, I made my decision. Work or no work, Maglore must go away, and at once. He was on the verge of serious mental and physical collapse. Knowing how useless it would be for me to go back and argue with him, I decided that stronger methods must be employed to make him see the light.

That afternoon, therefore, I sought out Doctor Carstairs, the local practitioner, and told him all I knew. I particularly emphasized the distressing occurrence of the evening before, and frankly told him what I already suspected. After a lengthy discussion, Carstairs agreed to accompany me to the Maglore house at once, and there take what steps were necessary in arranging for his removal. In response to my request the doctor took along the materials necessary for a complete physical examination. Once I could persuade Simon to submit to a medical diagnosis, I felt sure he would see that the results made it necessary for him to place himself under treatment at once.

The sun was sinking when we climbed into the front seat of Doctor Carstairs' battered Ford and drove out of Bridgetown along the south road where the ravens croaked. We drove slowly, and in silence. Thus it was that we were able to hear clearly that single high-pitched shriek from the old house on the hill. I gripped the doctor's arm without a word, and a second later we were whizzing up the drive and into the frowning gateway. "Hurry," I muttered as I vaulted from the running-board and dashed up the steps to the forbidding door.

We battered upon the boards with futile lists, then dashed around to the left-wing window. The sunset faded into tense, waiting darkness as we crawled hastily through the openings and dropped to the floor within. Doctor Carstairs produced a pocket flashlight, and we rose to our feet. My heart hammered in my breast, but no other sound broke the tomb-like silence as we threw open the door and advanced down the darkened hall to the study. All about us I sensed a gloating Presence; a lurking demon who watched our progress with eyes of gleeful mirth, and whose sable soul shook with hell-born laughter as we opened the door of the study and stumbled across that which lay within.

We both screamed then. Simon Maglore lay at our feet, his twisted head and straining shoulders resting in a little lake of fresh, warm blood. He was on his face, and his clothes had been tom off above his waist, so that his entire back was visible. When we saw what rested there we became quite crazed, and then began to do what must be done, averting our gaze whenever possible from that utterly monstrous thing on the floor.

Do not ask me to describe it to you in detail. I can't. There are some times when the senses are mercifully numbed, because complete acuteness would be fatal. I do not know certain things about that abomination even now, and I dare not let myself recall them. I shall not tell you, either, of the books we found in that room, or of the terrible document on the table that was Simon Maglore's unfinished masterpiece. We burned them all in the fire, before calling the city for a coroner; and if the doctor had had his way, we should have destroyed the *thing,* too. As it was, when the coroner did arrive for his examination, the three of us swore an oath of silence concerning the exact way in which Simon Maglore met his death. Then we left, but not before I had burned the other document—the letter, addressed to me, which Maglore was writing when he died.

And so, you see, nobody ever knew. I later found that the property was left to me, and the house is being razed even as I pen these lines. But I must speak, if only to relieve my own torment.

I DARE not quote that letter in its entirety; I can but record a part of that stupendous blasphemy:

". . . and that, of course, is why I began to study witchcraft. *It* was forcing me to. God, if I can only make you feel the horror of it! To be born that way—with that thing, that mannikin, that *monster!* At first it was small; the doctors all said it was an undeveloped twin. But it was alive! It had a face, and two hands, but its legs ran off into the lumpy flesh that connected it to my body. . . .

"For three years they bad it under secret study. It lay face downward on my back, and its hands were clasped around my shoulders, The men said that it had its own tiny set of lungs, but no stomach organs or digestive system. It apparently drew nourishment through the fleshy tube that bound it to my body. Yet it *grew!* Soon its eyes were open, and it began to develop tiny teeth. Once it nipped one of the doctors on the hand. . . . So they decided to send me home. It was obvious that it could not be removed. I swore to keep the whole affair a secret, and not even my father knew, until near the end. I wore the straps, and it never grew much until I came back. . . . Then, that hellish change!

"It talked to me, I tell you, it talked to me! . . . that little, wrinkled face, like a monkey's . . . the way it rolled those tiny, reddish eyes . . . that squeaking little voice calling more blood, Simon—I want more . . . and then it grew, and grew; I had to feed it twice a day, and cut the nails on its little black hands. . . .

"But I never knew *that;* I never realized how it was taking control! I would have killed myself first; I swear it! Last year it began to get hold of me for hours and give me those fits. It directed me to write the book, and sometimes it sent me out at night on queer errands. . . . More and more blood it took, and I was getting weaker and weaker, When I was myself I tried to combat it. I looked up that material on the familiar legend, and cast around for some means of overcoming its mastery. But in vain. And all the while it was growing, growing; it got stronger, and bolder, and wiser. It talked to me now, and sometimes it taunted me. I knew that it wanted me to listen, and obey it all the time. The promises it made with that horrible little mouth! I should call upon the Black One and join a coven. Then we would have power to rule, and admit new evil to the earth.

"I didn't want to obey—you know that. But I was going mad, and losing all that blood . . . it took control nearly all the time now, and it got so that I was afraid to go into town any more, because that devilish thing knew I was trying to escape, and it would move on my back and frighten folk. . . . I wrote all the time I had those spells when it ruled my brain . . . then you came.

"I know you want me to go away, but it won't let me. It's too cunning for that. Even as I try to write this, I can feel it boring its commands into my brain to stop. But I will not stop. I will tell you, while I still have a chance; before it overcomes me for ever and works its black will with my poor body and masters my helpless soul. I want you to know where my book is, so that you can destroy it, should anything ever happen. I want to tell you how to dispose of those awful old volumes in the library. And above all, I want you to kill me, if ever you see that the mannikin has gained complete control. God knows what it intends to do when it has me for certain! . . . How hard it is for me to fight, while all the while it is commanding me to put down my pen and tear this up! But I will fight—I must, until I can tell you what the creature told me—what it plans to let loose on the world when it has me utterly enslaved. . . . I will tell. . . . I can’t think. . . . I *will* write it, damn you! Stop! . . . No! Don’t do that! Get your bands——”

THAT’S all. Maglore stopped there because he died; because the Thing did not want its secrets revealed. It is dreadful to think about that nightmare-nurtured horror, but that thought is not the worst. What troubles me is what I saw when we opened that door—the sight that explained how Maglore died.

There was Maglore, on the floor, in all that blood. He was naked to the waist, as I have said; and he lay face downward. But on his back was the Thing, just as he had described it. And it was that little monster, afraid its secrets would be revealed, that had climbed a trifle higher on Simon Maglore’s back, wound its tiny black paws around his unprotected neck, *and bitten him to death!*

Fangs of Vengeance

An eery story of an animal-trainer in a circus—of nine ravening leopards, and a weird black panther that chose its time for vengeance

CAPTAIN ZAROFF was not his real name. But then, of course, it did not happen at Stellar Brothers Circus, either. Both appellations are fictitious, though the facts—more the pity—are all too true. I know, for I was there to see the drama unfold; a drama of death and blood-stained vengeance, set against the glittering background of circus make-believe.

The affair occurred, fortunately, in winter quarters. That is the only reason it was fortunate enough to escape press notice. Despite its sensational aspects, I am very thankful that we were able to hush the whole thing up. It is not good for the common herd to know too much, and there are certain terrible questions in connection with it that are extremely difficult to answer. All that has ever leaked out is that Captain Zaroff met death in the big cage during a rehearsal of his act, and that his animals were shot in a vain effort to save him. Concerning the Ubangis, the press was informed that due to disagreements over salary, they severed their connection with the show.

There was something wrong from the very start that winter. We had had a bad season, and the old man decided that innovations were in order. Culper sent out an agent for the Ubangi troupe—six duck-billed and exceedingly ugly savages, only a year removed from their native jungles. But the old man didn’t stop there, either. He decided to go back to wild animal acts—a policy we had discarded some eight years previous. He argued that the public wants excitement—the cracking of whips, the snarling of sullen cats, the roaring of restless lions.

Now for some unknown reason, the majority of the larger shows have abandoned the cat acts within the last ten years. The result is that good animal-trainers are mighty hard to find. Practically the only ones available are Europeans, and they’re scarce enough. So the old man counted himself lucky when a German agency sent him Captain Zaroff.

He arrived early in January. I wasn’t there at the time, but he was described as very distant, and very foreign. He had his own quarters, and special cages for the nine leopards in his troupe. He even insisted on keeping his personal assistant to clean the wagons and feed the animals. These affectations of exclusiveness, coupled with his extremely reserved manner, did not win him any friends. He, on his own part, seemed unmindful of the circus people; eating alone, sleeping in his own private wagon on the winter grounds, and devoting all his time and attention to his act.

There were many vague and conflicting rumors floating around concerning the man. For one thing, there were speculations as to his age and nationality. It was said that he was just back from Africa, and that he was breaking in these jungle leopards for the new act. Another version of the story represented him as being driven from the Continent in disgrace, following a scandal over a woman. By the time I returned to headquarters, the whole show was engaged in wild speculation. I disregarded it all.

Then I saw him work. It was the first time, and only the old man and I were present in the barn-like hippodrome which held the great steel cage. Zaroff had promised the old man something distinctively different. He got it.

PICTURE to yourself a vast wooden arena, with white, bare walls that reflect hideously all the glare of a hundred overhead lights. In the center, a steel cage. Two assistants stand beside it, tense and alert. Occasionally, they finger nervously with their guns—guns that are not loaded with blanks. The boss and I sat on chairs placed near the door, our eyes glued on the runway. The old man chewed viciously on the stub of his cigar. The atmosphere was charged with the static electricity of fearful expectation.

There are no bands playing in the winter quarters, no happy, cheering crowds. No clowns perform their antic drolleries to ease the tension with a laugh. Working with newly broken jungle beasts is by no means the same safe routine as a developed act. The real danger does not strike after the spectacular routine is perfected—it comes before, during the long, slow hours of winter training. It was with this thought in our minds that we waited in that silent, empty barn; waited, and worried.

Suddenly the silence was broken by a moan. From the wooden runway on the other side of the steel cage came the soft and purposeful padding of velvet feet—and the scrape of razored claws. Short, guttural coughs echoed in the air. At the same time our nostrils were filled with a warm, fetid odor of jungle musk—the wild-beast smell that makes the short hairs rise on the nape of one's neck. More coughs—amplified to a menacing roar in the vast silence of that looming atmosphere. They were coming!

Down the runway stalked a tawny shape—the spotted, sinister shape of a giant African leopard; graceful as a serpent and beautiful as death. Green eyes roved restlessly over the arena with an emerald glare. Yellow fangs parted, revealing a long, slavering tongue. The beast slunk stiff-legged around the arena, then turned to us with a roar. I suddenly realized that I was bathed in perspiration.

Another yellow body catapulted into the cage. Like a streak of amber lightning it leapt to the bars and clawed madly at the steel. Suddenly it subsided, and sank to the sawdust in a spasm of insanely hysterical laughter. A third spotted devil entered, suavely. Like an overgrown cat it purred, mincing its way as it made a circuit of the cage. Feline-like, it rolled over on its mottled back, exposing a sleek belly beneath which muscles played like bands of pliable steel. The other two animals growled deeper still. Then, like a golden avalanche, a horde of fanged furies raced down the runway—six snarling demons charged into the arena, and hell broke loose. In a moment the steel enclosure became a maelstrom of yellow shapes, tearing with frenzied talons at the iron barriers, and howling in fiendish chorus to the skies. There was death in their claws, hatred in their foam-flecked jowls, and blood-lust in their feral eyes. Beasts of the jungle, awaiting the coming of man.

They did not wait for long. Into the hippodrome stalked Captain Zaroff. A tall, thin, commanding figure of a man, his was the walk of a conqueror. Beneath his gorgeously-epauletted red coat I sensed the strength of supple sinews; the resiliency of his walk betrayed a perfection of muscular control. His face was immobile, but his eyes held a faint tinge of amusement. Slightly graying black hair worn in pompadour style, and a tiny waxed mustache—by these signs alone did he betray his foreign birth.

With a brief nod to the old man, he motioned the two assistants to unbar the cage. I gasped. For Zaroff had no chair! All he carried in his hand was a whip—to face nine ravening wild beasts, mad with animal excitement!

Clang. Steel grated on steel. The cage door was open. Quickly, Zaroff stepped inside—into that maelstrom of bared fangs, raking claws, and supple bodies crouched to kill. A roar of animal ferocity greeted his appearance. I gasped. Zaroff, weaponless in that vast cage with a jungle act! Every trainer carries both gun and chair during the breaking in of a new cat routine. With the points of the chair outthrust before him he can ward off the sudden charge of a nervous beast. The animal, confused by the underside of the chair presented before him, usually bruises his nose and paws on the four projecting legs. For many years this protection, slim as it is, has saved dozens of trainers' lives. But Zaroff had no chair. Nor was there a gun at his hip. Alone, he faced them—a sneer on his face and a whip in his hand; man's eternal defiance of the brute.

For an instant he stood there just inside the cage, while ten feet away jungle eyes roved restlessly, jungle bodies flexed stealthily, jungle throats roared fearsomely. Suddenly, a leopard detached itself from the rest and began, ever so slowly, to edge its way forward on its belly. It was the big cat that had entered first. Zaroff watched it, his face flushed. To all intents and purposes the beast's body appeared relaxed, but it was slinking forward nevertheless, and its yellow tail lashed in fury.

WITHOUT warning, the leopard sprang. Into the air it soared, straight for Zaroff's shoulders; red maw glistening, ferocious claws outspread to rend, and tear, kill and destroy. Swift as the attack was, Zaroff had anticipated it. His hand shot out, loosing the thongs of the whip. The lash hissed like a serpent as it wriggled through the air. The heavy, weighted end curled smoothly around the spotted murderer, imprisoning the tawny neck and jerking the feline's body to the ground, where it lay choking and gasping for several moments. The other cats, meanwhile, had retreated to the other side of the cage. Zaroff, drenched and panting, turned his head to us—and smiled!

Then began the most amazing animal routine in circus history. While the old man and I trembled and the assistants gasped in awe, Zaroff, with only a whip in his hand, put those animals through paces so amazing that they pass the bounds of credibility. The beasts did everything but fly. Balancing, juggling, jumping, group-posing—everything in the regular wild-animal show repertoire was used and improved on. At the sound of Zaroff's whip every cat was in its place. Despite snarls, growls, and obvious attempts to buffet the trainer from their perches, the creatures obeyed him perfectly. It was a great act—and I sighed with relief when it was finished.

The old man waxed enthusiastic. Surely Captain Zaroff would make show history! How he ever got new cats intelligent enough to build a routine like that was a mystery. Zaroff should be more careful, though. It was a bad business, going into the cage with only a whip.

After we left the hippodrome I went over to the front office for a quiet smoke. Somehow I couldn't agree with the old man. The act was good, no doubt, but there were some queer things to be explained.

To begin with, I know enough about the big cage to realize that no trainer could do what Zaroff had done when his animals hated him. An act is built very slowly, one animal at a time; for the tamer must instill trust and respect into the minds of his performers. Learning the tricks is a task founded on affection for the teacher.

Yet the leopards hated Zaroff—hated and feared him!

Then, too—Zaroff knew that they were dangerous and unfriendly. Even a well-trained leopard is never *tame,* as a lion or a bear can be. And despite that knowledge, the captain was foolish enough not to use a chair.

Surely there was some mystery here. New African leopards, and a foreign trainer who dislikes strangers. Private cages for the beasts, and a special attendant. A wonderful act, beautifully performed by raw beasts who are openly antagonistic to their trainer.

I recalled some of the rumors floating around the lots concerning Zaroff and his cats. Something about queer adventures in Africa. Oh, well, it was all nonsense—the man was merely a skilful trainer. But even a skilful trainer cannot make his animals work so *intelligently.* The whole thing was very strange. I decided to keep an eye on the man and wait for something to turn up. I didn't have to wait very long.

THREE days later the Ubangis arrived.

They had been signed for the act in New York, and were shipped south under the personal supervision of Culper himself. To me they proved a woeful disappointment. Six small, timid-looking blacks; three male and three female—their only exotic feature was the widely publicized lip deformity that gave them mouths projecting almost a foot from their faces. Even this barbaric feature looked sadly incongruous, since all six wore

American clothes. Imagine a Harlem flapper with lips a foot long and eight inches wide and you will get some picture of what I saw.

But the old man was pleased. The Ubangis must have special quarters. Was their interpreter here? He trusted that none of them had suffered overmuch on the journey. He hoped they would find the accommodations sufficiently comfortable. In the face of all this effusiveness, the blacks remained nervously silent. Without a word they suffered themselves to be led off to their sleeping-quarters.

During the next few days the Ubangis kept us busy. Not only did we have our hands full trying to explain their part in the performance through an interpreter, but we also had to contend with a really profound ignorance. They obviously knew the meaning of money—dollars meant francs, and francs meant luxury back on the Ivory Coast. That was why they had signed up. But as to the meaning of their duties, they were completely in the dark. Personally, I was not able to work up any enthusiasm over the whole venture. The poor savages were unhappy, the old man was unhappy, and the prospects of box-office draw were uncertain. But the old man had to touch off the fireworks.

He decided to stage one of the preliminary rehearsals, and arrange for the Ubangis to attend. There they could actually see a circus, and perhaps their part would be easier to understand thereafter. I was not pleased with the idea, but it was carried out. The six blacks occupied one of the observation booths, and the show went on.

At first everything went smoothly enough. Even the savage can appreciate the instinctive appeal of clown humor, and realize the agility of the aerial performers. They beamed like carefree children and jabbered constantly among themselves.

I was waiting for Zaroff. I knew that for the past few days he had been rehearsing at great length, and was eager to observe the changes or improvements in his act. The rest of the show waited, too. They had never seen him work, and the rumors had only whetted their curiosity.

The act went on. For fifteen minutes all eyes were glued on that steel cage. Zaroff outdid himself that day. His whip for ever cracking, he put the carnivores through their paces in a way to keep everyone's attention riveted to the arena.

At last, when the coughing, snarling leopards had bounded back down the runway into their cages, the boss and I turned to the Ubangis to get their reaction.

It was not slow in coming. The entire troupe were excitedly haranguing one another in their box. At length they approached us, headed by their interpreter.

Hesitatingly, he announced that the troupe would not play in the show; that it resigned. Nor would he give any further explanation, save that the Ubangis did not care for Captain Zaroff and his act.

The boss fumed, swore, threatened, entreated, and pleaded. It did not avail. The savages left the following day.

But before they departed I went around and had a talk with their interpreter myself. Somehow I sensed a mystery behind their reasons for departure, and I questioned the man very closely. At last he abandoned his reserve and told me the details as he had overheard them.

Briefly, the Ubangis did not like Zaroff's act, but their aversion did not have a natural cause. They were going because they thought Zaroff himself was a witchdoctor; because they had heard him *talk to his animals.*

Naturally I was inclined to scoff at this statement. But then I began to remember certain details. Zaroff lived alone, took care of his animals alone. He had his own cages, his own assistant keeper. He avoided company, and spent most of his time with the beasts. It was quite possible that he did talk to his leopards.

But when I told the interpreter, he laughed. The Ubangis knew of such men, and feared them. Zaroff was a wizard, for they could see that he talked to the animals and they answered him! They had seen Zaroff growl in the cage as if he himself were a beast, and they saw the leopards answer his commands. The man was an evil shaman.

That was the substance of the Ubangis' complaint, as I got it from the interpreter. I left him a puzzled man. There was something hidden away in my brain that was beginning to bother me as it tried to edge into consciousness. Something about leopards.

THE next day brought a train of events which further puzzled me.

I was walking through the menagerie quarters when the affair began. It was midafternoon, and the place was deserted, for the entire troupe was over in the arena for regular rehearsals. I rounded the horseshoe bend where the regular cages stood, and passed by the partitioned section. Here Zaroff's leopards were quartered. Behind the canvas which screened the cages from the rest I caught a glimpse of booted feet. That would be Zaroff himself, feeding the beasts. Low moans and bestial laughter drifted over the canvas walls.

Then all at once I heard a sudden roar, louder than the rest, and a terrible clang of bars. Zaroff's voice rose in an angry curse, and it was answered by a terrible growl. Suddenly a streak of spotted lightning leapt through the side of the canvas, which shredded before saber claws. One of the leopards had escaped.

It landed on its feet and stood crouching there not a dozen feet before me; a great, tawny monster with flaming fury in its evil eyes. Slaver dripped from its wrinkled, furry snout as it glared at me with unmistakable menace. Its back stiffened, and I broke out into a cold sweat as the fanged horror edged toward me, tensing to spring. Quivering with fright I watched it, unable to move, or even breathe. Its feline gaze held me hypnotically rigid; for I knew that I was staring at the face of Death. The leopard gathered itself for a leap.

Crack! The sound of Zaroff's whip broke the tension. The tall figure stepped into view from behind the canvas, blazing fury in his face. At the sound of his master's approach the sullen carnivore turned. With a snarl it gazed up into the captain's face, but its body was still crouched and ready to hurtle in attack.

Then I heard with my own ears that which my mind told me could never be. I heard Zaroff talk to his leopard!

Low barks and growls issued from his throat. The voice of a beast came from human lips. And the leopard answered! Cringing, it fawningly approached its trainer, growling in return. And its growls and cries held a note that was dreadfully, unmistakably *human!*

It was hideous to hear a beast murmuring like a man and a man roaring like a beast. I trembled afresh as Zaroff, with cries of animal rage, brought his whip down over the leopard's shoulders; brought it down with full force again and again until the poor creature's dappled hide was streaked with crimson stains. And all the while it kept whining, purring, pleading in monstrously human tones, while Zaroff screamed like a great cat.

With never a look or word for me, he drove the leopard to its quarters. From behind the canvas I heard the bars grate into their place once more, and then Zaroff reappeared.

This time he was not alone. There was a woman with him—a beautiful woman.

She was tall and slim, like a Grecian Diana, with a body of ivory and hair like ebony. Jade-green eyes dominated her aquiline face, contrasted oddly with her vivid red-lipped mouth and tiny white teeth. She wore a regal velvet dress which stood out incongruously amidst the sawdust atmosphere surrounding her.

I prided myself on knowing the entire personnel of our show, but I had never seen the woman before.

Zaroff, after apologizing to me for the disturbance, introduced her as his wife, Camille. The woman bowed graciously, but remained silent, eyeing her husband with restrained anger. I was speechless.

I had never known that Zaroff was married. I was just beginning to realize that there were a lot of things about him that I didn't know; a lot of things requiring considerable explanation. The scene I had just witnessed, for example.

He was explaining about that now.

With elaborate ostentation he again apologized for the accident. The beast had escaped as he was feeding it. He was very sorry, and he would see that it did not occur again. He would be extremely pleased if I would refrain from reporting the affair to the management; it would unnecessarily upset people, he explained.

Here the woman broke in.

"He's lying, *M'sieu.* It will happen again, I know. You must report it; it happened in Europe, and a little boy was killed. He did nothing to prevent it, *M'sieu,* even when it began to—feed. You must make him stop beating them—it frightens me. Please, tell them and make them stop him. Please!"

Zaroff's countenance, as he listened to this recital, turned red with rage. He raised his whip—the long, cruel whip, still red from the lashing of the leopard—and brought it down on the woman's back with full force. She screamed, once. Then he seized her, and without a backward glance, bore her behind the canvas.

I stood stunned at the rapidity of events, then stumbled off to my own quarters. I wanted to be alone and think.

Zaroff—a foreigner whom nobody knew; a man who beat his leopards and his wife. Zaroff—the most brilliant trainer I had ever seen; hated and feared by his animals, yet obeyed. Zaroff—the man who talked to his cats like a beast, while they answered with the cries of men; Zaroff, whom the Ubangi savages denounced as a witch-doctor and wizard. Who was this man? What was he? Why was he so furtive and unfriendly? What was he doing to his wife that made her hate and fear him as much as the leopards did?

Before the show opened that year I must find out. And Camille Zaroff, I decided, was the woman who could and would tell me.

SHOW business occupied my time heavily for the next few days, but the mystery of Zaroff still occupied my thoughts. Somehow, I was beginning to hate the man. I disliked his cruel, unsmiling features, his reticent, almost disdainful manner, and his pompous, arrogant walk. I did not care for the way he treated his feline charges, and I did not wonder that his wife was afraid.

His wife—there was another angle. When I saw her she had been afraid, but I could see that she wanted to speak. Perhaps that was why Zaroff had kept her away from the rest of the show-people. Maybe she was his prisoner, because of what she knew. He had beaten her with the whip. . . .

He beat her often. Several nights later, as I went through the menagerie quarters on my way to the main office, I saw a light behind the canvas partition where Zaroff's tent stood. I am not by nature or inclination an eavesdropper, but no one could ignore the shouts that came from the other side. The voices were audible throughout the deserted menagerie, and I recognized the guttural tones of Zaroff blending with the thrilling, husky speech of his wife, Camille.

"I will tell them all," she was saying. "I can't stand it any longer, do you hear? Knowing what I know, and seeing what I see. Unless you stop this dreadful business, I will tell them all."

A cynical laugh, almost gloating in its sardonic cadence. That would be Zaroff.

"Oh, no you won't, my dear. I have been gentle with you in the past—too gentle. But if you persist in making these—ah—demonstrations, I can take harsher measures."

"I'm not afraid of you any more. Tomorrow I shall go to him who is the head of this show and tell him the truth. You will no longer keep me caged up here like one of your beasts."

Again that mocking cackle of laughter from the man.

"So—I shall no longer cage you as I do my beasts, eh? We shall see. You know about my leopards, and what happened on the Guinea Coast, eh? Well—how would you like it if I were to——"

The voice trailed off here into a loathsome whisper, then culminated again in peal after peal of demoniacal mirth.

"No!" the woman screamed. "You dare not do that. I will go now—do you hear me?—now! I'll tell them all! Oh!"

There was a low moan, and then the hateful sound of a striking whip. Again and again I heard the hiss of a lash.

Clenching my hands in a frenzy of fury, I bit my lips to keep from crying aloud and rushing into that tent. I wanted to tear the whip from that unnatural monster and flog him. Red anger surged and poured into my brain, but something held me back.

There was more to this than a domestic quarrel. That woman, with her half-heard hints of secret things, was being mistreated for a purpose. It would do no good to accost Zaroff himself for an explanation and it would be worse than useless to precipitate a scene before the entire company. No, diplomacy urged me to wait. Tomorrow I would seek an opportunity to speak to Camille Zaroff alone. She would gladly talk then. Perhaps things could be straightened out.

Meanwhile, the show went into its final rehearsal in two days, and Zaroff was a good animal-trainer. I decided to bide my time, and left the tent. But that night I dreamed of a man, a leopard, and a whip. And the dream was far from pleasant. . . .

The next day brought with it an entirely unexpected surprize. At nine o'clock a man walked into my office and casually took a seat. Looking up, I gazed into the impassive face of Captain Zaroff.

I was astonished. The man had never come to me before; he habitually kept away from the rest of the company. Concealing both my surprize and distaste, I asked him his business.

"I am bringing in a new animal for my act," he said, calmly.

For a moment I was too startled to speak. The final dress rehearsal only two days away, and he was going to work a new cat! It was unheard of. I told him so. Besides, what did he need a new leopard for?

"Do not worry," he assured. "It is already broken in; I—I had it shipped here this morning. And it is not a leopard—it is a black panther."

A black panther! That *was* a novelty. A trifle mollified, I told him that he would have to take the matter up with the boss.

"I will rehearse tomorrow afternoon," he agreed, suavely. "Would you care to come over and look at the animal?"

TOGETHER we walked across the lot and entered the menagerie. There were ten cages behind the canvas partition now. In nine were the leopards; the other held the new beast. We approached the bars.

There is nothing more beautiful than a black panther. Sleek, sinuous grace is personified in its ebony body, and aristocratic poise blazes forth from its jade eyes. Its nervous pace is regal; it is a picture of dignified beauty even when enraged. Consequently I expected much of Zaroff's acquisition. But I was to be disappointed.

The animal crouched behind the bars, its body limply lolling on the floor of the cage. Its exquisite black coat was disheveled, and on its back I detected the marks of the whip. Had Zaroff already begun his usual practises? The animal's eyes were lusterless; they gazed on me with a sort of dazed, numb expression in their depths. It whined, piteously, and once again I was shocked at the almost human tones in the throat of a jungle beast. When Zaroff approached closer, the panther cringed, and crawled away from the bars.

"Is it sick?" I inquired.

Zaroff smiled. "No, my friend. Perhaps the journey has tired it—the change, shall we say? It will be all right."

The great black cat whined dolefully. It kept staring at me with those amber eyes—staring and staring, as if it were humanly aware of my presence. With a slight shudder, I turned away. In order to make conversation, I casually asked after the health of Zaroff's wife.

A queer look came into the man's face.

"She—she has gone away," he said. But his stolid features were averted. "She has been nervous and ill of late, so I thought it would be best if she went for a rest instead of going out with the show. We had an argument last night, and she took the train this morning."

The man is lying. Accuse him.

The words ate their way into my brain, *he may have beaten her to death.*

But such thoughts were mad. My eyes searched wildly for something on which to rest; something to divert my thoughts. I looked at the leopard cages. The cats were all curled up somnolently near the bars, as if they had just eaten. As if they were sated with food, rather.

Maybe he fed her to the leopards.

Was I really going insane?

She was going to tell a secret. I heard him threaten her with something, and he spoke of leopards before she screamed.

Why not? No one would ever know.

My mind rocked with chaotic confusion. The woman was gone; as we passed the living-quarters I saw that the tent was empty and I knew he never allowed her to wander free. What had become of her?

Zaroff watched me with an enigmatic smile. Did he suspect?

"I will see you at rehearsal tomorrow," he said. "Good day."

I stumbled out into the menagerie. As I passed the last cage the panther raised its head and moaned.

I OFTEN wonder how I got through the rest of that day. The morbid suspicions that preyed on my mind had come to a harrowing climax. I kept thinking of Zaroff, and the queer rumors I had heard about the man. His leopards were queer, his act was queer, his whole history was shrouded in a cloak of nebulous dread. His wife knew, and she had disappeared. I must find out the truth.

But perhaps I was wrong. Imagination, once unleashed, can distort facts immeasurably. Possibly his wife had left. True, he had beaten her, but they do such things on the Continent. The leopards were queerly trained, but Zaroff was an eccentric man. Was I unduly suspicious?

These two conflicting trains of thought ran riot through my brain. The afternoon was a dream. I performed my routine functions automatically, but I could not forget. I neglected to inform the boss that Captain Zaroff had a new black panther, and I said nothing about the rehearsal on the following day.

That night was the beginning of the end.

What impelled me I cannot say, but I felt that I must learn the truth. So at midnight I rose from my restless cot and staggered off to Zaroff's quarters. The lot was black and deserted, save for the looming shadows that lurked and capered in the comers beneath a leering yellow moon.

There was a light in Zaroff's tent when I entered. How I meant to excuse myself or what I intended to say I did not know. But Zaroff took the situation into his own hands.

He was quite drunk. There was a bottle on the table before him, and another on the floor. He sat there sprawled back so that he resembled a seated corpse in the dim light, and his face was equally pale. He had discarded his uniform, but the ever-present whip still rested on the ground beside him.

"Sit down, my friend," he mumbled. His foreign accent became more noticeable under the influence of liquor.

I seated myself beside him and haltingly began to talk. But his libations had made him loquacious, and he interrupted.

I cannot say to this day what got him started, or whether he was too drunk to understand, but he told me plenty.

Somehow he launched out on the story of his career during the war. He had, it seems, been an officer in the "Belgische Congo." Later, he had become an animal trader in Senegal, and served as guide to several expeditions on the Sierra Leone coast.

I let him ramble, occasionally prompting him to refill his glass. Sooner or later, I believed, something would slip out. It did.

As the shadows about us deepened, his voice became lower and more confidential. He was speaking of the blacks now—the furtive, sinister blacks of Sierra Leone, who practised voodoo and obeah rites in the hidden swamps. He told me of the witch-doctors who invoked the Crocodile God to the beat of jungle drums; spoke of the snake-gods of secret, inner Africa. And he whispered of the Leopard-men.

I had heard of them before—the human leopards of Sierra Leone, whose cult was dedicated to the beasts of the forest. They were said to be vampires, possessing the power of anthropomorphism; that is, they could, by means of secret spells, become leopards themselves. This they were reputed to do, at certain times. As leopards they lay in wait for their enemies and destroyed them, or else invoked their rites to transform their foes into animals. I had read newspaper stories about the British police and their futile efforts to stamp out the dreaded clan.

Zaroff, mumbling incoherently, told me of these things again; spoke of how he himself had been initiated into the Leopard Cult one night beneath the waning autumn moon that gloats over Africa when the devil drums boom in nighted swamps. He told me of the spells he had learned from the shriveled arch-priests, and of the powers he could invoke by chants and rituals.

“Remember the legend of Circe?” he whispered, and his eyes were alight with unnatural flame. “Man into beast Man into beast.”

Abruptly he recovered himself once more, and changed the subject. By now he was so drunk that his voice slurred unintelligibly as he droned on. All I could catch were occasional phrases, but that was enough.

“I decided to show the fools a real act . . . knew the proper spells . . . rest was easy . . . nobody suspected. . . . Came to Europe with me. . . . Wish to God I’d never met and married that slut . . . spying on me at night . . . found out . . . spoiled the act . . . that damned child. . . . They wanted blood . . . scandal. . . . Looked all right here, but those Ubangis knew . . . her stubbornness . . . had to do it . . . was the only way . . .

As his voice droned on, his body slid flaccidly to the floor, I left, but I had not found the satisfaction I sought. Instead, my heart was filled with a greater and more hideous unease.

The man's drunken tales had disturbed me. Of course all that rot about Leopard-men was childish, but still I felt afraid. There were those who believed it, and some of his furtive hints had smacked of the truth. Funny, what liquor will do to a man. But I could not dismiss the incident so easily. There was a strange and terrible mystery here.

As I stalked off to my quarters I saw the blazing eyes of the black panther staring silently at me in the darkness. A crazy thought assailed me—perhaps it knew the truth! With a shaky smile I turned away.

OF COURSE I should have reported all this to the boss. A drunken trainer who abuses his animals is never to be tolerated in a show. But something held me back. I would at least wait until the final rehearsal the following afternoon. Zaroff would work the new panther then, and there would be a showdown.

There was a showdown, but not the kind I expected.

I can see it now, in my mind's eye—that bare arena, with the great steel cage in the center. The boss and I were sitting in the box, just as we had sat that first day. The clown number had just ended, and now four men took their places about the grim, barred barrier.

Zaroff swaggered into view. Despite his debauchery of the previous evening he was as cool and erect as ever. As he entered the little green-grilled door, his hand clenched tightly about the butt of his whip.

The runway into the arena jerked into place between the bars. The wooden gates opened.

Claws and fangs clicking, growls and coughs rumbling, tongues lolling and tails ladling, the leopards entered. Tawny bodies and green eyes, red throats and white teeth.

Nine leopards, and then—the panther.

The leopards had raced in, roaring their defiance. The panther sidled down the runway with stealthy tread. It uttered no sound, but entered the arena like a silent black shadow.

Zaroff cracked his whip. But today the leopards did not move. Instead, they held their places, a note of menace rumbling low in their great throats. They gave the curious impression that they were waiting for something. Zaroff cracked his whip again, impatiently.

The blade panther padded over to the group of giant cats, then turned and stared at Zaroff.

Captain Zaroff stared bade. There was a strange look on his face; he actually appeared to be nervous. He cracked his whip again, and swore. The growling in the leopards' throats rose in a thundering crescendo, but they did not move. The panther lashed its tail and continued to stare hypnotically at the tamer with evil, lambent eyes.

Sweat broke out on Zaroff's brow. I could have sworn that I saw a look of positive hate on that black beast's face as it gazed at the man. The trainers, guns ready, moved closer to the bars outside. They sensed something. Why didn't the man do something?

The leopards roared louder. They were grouped behind the panther now, and the panther, step by step, was slowly inching forward. Its tail shot erect, but it never took its eyes from Zaroff's tormented white face.

Suddenly, with a shriek of almost human fury, the black body of the beast rose in the air and sprang for Zaroff's neck. The leopards closed in, and the man went down beneath the fangs of ten jungle cats. There were shrieks from crimson-dabbled lips, then all sound was blotted out, as the four trainers shot blindly, pumping lead into that knot of blazing yellow bodies, shooting and shooting and shooting. . . .

THE end came quickly, and only dead bodies remained about the mangled ruins of the thing that had once been Captain Zaroff.

Nobody ever speaks of that scene any more, but the tragedy itself was not the greatest horror. For I found the truth in Zaroff's private papers, and learned those things that had been hidden.

Now I know why Zaroff left Africa, and what he had really learned about the Cult of the Leopard-men, I know now why he boasted that he was going to have the greatest animal act in the world, and why he took such unusual precautions to guard and care for the beasts himself. I know how he was able to train them so well, and why the Ubangis thought he was talking to the creatures.

And I know just how his wife went away, too, and what she would have tried to tell the boss. It's not pleasant knowledge—those things in the papers and diaries of the dead trainer.

But it is infinitely more endurable than the memory of that last terrible sight—that dreadful glimpse of what lay in the arena when Zaroff, the leopards and the panther died. I can never forget that, because it is the final proof of all I dreaded to believe.

Captain Zaroff's chewed and lacerated form lay in a great pool of blood. Around him were the bodies of what the men with the guns had slain—nine bodies, not of leopards, but of negro men. Negro Leopard-men, from Africa.

And the tenth—the dreadful thing that was tearing at Zaroff's throat; the new black panther with the human eyes—*was his wife, Camille!*

The Black Kiss

Two popular writers of weird fiction join forces to produce one of the eeriest sea-stories ever written—a story of the thing that swam in the black waters off California, and called itself Morelia Godolfo

They rise in green robes roaring from the green hells of the sea,
Where fallen skies and evil hues and eyeless creatures be.
—Chesterton: *Le panto.*

1. The Thing in the Waters

GRAHAM DEAN nervously crushed out his cigarette and met Doctor Hedwig's puzzled eyes. "I've never been troubled like this before," he said. "These dreams are so oddly persistent. They're not the usual haphazard nightmares. They seem—I know it sounds ridiculous—they seem *planned*

"Dreams planned? Nonsense." Doctor Hedwig looked scornful. "You, Mr. Dean, are an artist, and naturally of impressionable temperament. This house at San Pedro is new to you, and you say you've heard wild tales. The dreams are due to imagination and overwork."

Dean glanced out of the window, a frown on his unnaturally pale face.

"I hope you're right," he said, softly. "But dreams shouldn't make me look like this. Should they?"

A gesture indicated the great blue rings beneath the young artist's eyes. His hands indicated the bloodless pallor of his gaunt cheeks.

"Overwork has done that, Mr. Dean. I know what has happened to you better than you do yourself."

The white-haired physician picked up a sheet covered with his own scarcely decipherable notes and scrutinized it in review.

"You inherited this house at San Pedro a few months ago, eh? And you moved in alone to do some work."

"Yes. The seacoast there has some marvelous scenes." For a moment Dean's face looked youthful once more as enthusiasm kindled its ashy fires. Then he continued, with a troubled frown. "But I haven't been able to paint, lately—not seascapes, anyway. It's very odd. My sketches don't seem quite right any more. There seems to be a quality in them that I don't put there ——"

"A quality, did you say?"

"Yes. A quality of *malignness,* if I can call it that. It's indefinable. Something *behind* the picture takes all the beauty out. And I haven't been overworking these last weeks, Doctor Hedwig."

The doctor glanced again at the paper in his hand.

"Well, I disagree with you there. You might be unconscious of the effort you expend. These dreams of the sea that seem to worry you are meaningless, save as an indication of your nervous condition."

"You're wrong." Dean rose, suddenly. His voice was shrill.

"That's the dreadful part of it. The dreams are *not* meaningless. They seem cumulative; cumulative and planned. Each night they grow more vivid, and I see more of that green, shining place under the sea. I get closer and closer to those blade shadows swimming there; those shadows that I know aren't shadows but something worse. I see more each night. It's like a sketch I'd block out, gradually adding more and more until——"

Hedwig watched his patient keenly.

He suggested "Until——?"

But Dean's tense face relaxed. He had caught himself just in time. "No, Doctor Hedwig, You must be right. It's overwork and nervousness, as you say. If I believed what the Mexicans had told me about Morelia Godolfo—well, I'd be mad and a fool."

"Who is this Morelia Godolfo? Some woman who has been filling you with foolish tales?"

Dean smiled. "No need to worry about Morelia. She was my great-great-grand-aunt. She used to live in the San Pedro house and started the legends, I think." Hedwig had been scribbling on a slip of paper. "Well, I see, young man! You heard these legends; your imagination ran riot; you dreamed. This prescription will fix you up."

"Thanks."

Dean took the paper, lifted his hat from the table, and started for the door. In the doorway he paused, smiling wryly.

"But you're not quite correct in thinking the legends started me dreaming, Doctor. I began to dream before I learned the history of the house."

And with that he went out.

DRIVING back to San Pedro, Dean tried to understand what had happened to him. But always he came up against a blank wall of impossibility. Any logical explanation wandered off into a tangle of fantasy. The one thing he could not explain—which Doctor Hedwig had not been able to explain—was the dreams.

The dreams started soon after he came into his legacy; this ancient house north of San Pedro, which had so long stood deserted. The place was picturesquely old, and that attracted Dean from the first. It had been built by one of his ancestors when the Spaniards still ruled California. One of the Deans—the name was Dena, then—had gone to Spain and returned with a bride. Her name was Morelia Godolfo, and it was this long-vanished woman about whom all the subsequent legends centered.

Even yet there were wrinkled, toothless Mexicans in San Pedro who whispered incredible tales of Morelia Godolfo—she who had never grown old and who had a weirdly evil power over the sea. The Godolfos had been among the proudest families of Granada, but furtive legends spoke of their intercourse with the terrible Moorish sorcerers and necromancers. Morelia, according to these same hinted horrors, had learned uncanny secrets in the black towers of Moorish Spain, and when Dena had brought her as his bride across the sea she had already sealed a pact with dark Powers and had undergone a *change.*

So ran the tales, and they further told of Morelia's life in the old San Pedro house. Her husband had lived for ten years or more after the marriage, but rumors said that he no longer possessed a soul. It is certain that his death was very mysteriously hushed up by Morelia Godolfo, who went on living alone in the great house beside the sea.

The whispers of the peons were hereafter monstrously augmented. They had to do with the *change* in Morelia Godolfo; the sorcerous change which caused her to swim far out to sea on moonlit nights so that watchers saw her white body gleaming amidst the spray. Men bold enough to gaze from the cliffs might catch glimpses of her then, sporting with queer sea-creatures that gamboled about her in the black waters, nuzzling her with shockingly deformed heads. These creatures were not seals, or any known form of submarine life, it was averred; although sometimes bursts of chuckling, gobbling laughter could be heard. It is said that Morelia Godolfo had swum out there one night, and that she never came back. But thereafter the laughter was louder from afar, and the sporting amidst the black rocks continued, so that the tales of the early peons had been nourished down to the present day.

Such were the legends known to Dean. The facts were sparse and inconclusive. The old house had fallen into decrepitude, and was only occasionally rented through the years. These rentals had been as short as they were infrequent. There was nothing definitely wrong with the house between White's Point and Point Fermin, but those who had lived there said that the crashing of the surf sounded subtly different when heard through windows that overlooked the sea, and, too, they dreamed unpleasantly. Sometimes the occasional tenants had mentioned with peculiar horror the moonlit nights, when the sea became altogether too clearly visible. At any rate, occupants often vacated the house hastily.

Dean had moved in immediately after inheriting, because he had thought the place ideal for painting the scenes he loved. He had learned the legend and the facts behind it later, and by this time his dreams had started.

At first they had been conventional enough, though, oddly, all centered about the sea which he so loved. But it was not the sea he loved that he knew in sleep.

The Gorgons lived in his dreams. Scylla writhed hideously across dark and surging waters, where harpies flew screaming. Weird creatures crawled sluggishly up from the black, inky depths where eyeless, bloated sea-beasts dwelt. Gigantic and terrible leviathans leapt and plunged, while monstrous serpents squirmed a strange obeisance to a mocking moon. Foul and hidden horrors of the sea's depths engulfed him in sleep.

This was bad enough, but it was only a prelude. The dreams began to change. It was almost as though the first few formed a definite setting for the greater terrors to come. From the mythic images of old sea-gods another vision emerged. It was inchoate at first, taking definite form and meaning very slowly over a period of several weeks. And it was this dream which Dean now feared.

It had occurred generally just before he awoke—a vision of green, translucent light, in which dark shadows swam slowly. Night after night the limpid emerald glow grew brighter, and the shadows twisted into a more visible horror. These were never clearly seen, although their amorphous heads held a strangely repellent recognizable quality for Dean.

Presently, in this dream of his, the shadow-creatures would move aside as though to permit the passage of another. Swimming into the green haze would come a coiling shape—whether similar to the rest or not Dean could not tell, for his dream always ended there. The approach of this last shape always caused him to awake in a nightmare paroxsym of terror.

He dreamt of being somewhere under the sea, amidst swimming shadows with deformed heads; and each night one particular shadow was coming closer and closer.

EACH day, now, when he awoke with the cold sea-wind of early dawn blowing through the windows, he would lie in a lazy, languid mood till long past daybreak. When he rose these days he felt inexplicably tired, and he could not paint. This particular morning the sight of his haggard face in the mirror had forced him to visit a physician. But Doctor Hedwig had not been helpful.

Nevertheless Dean filled the prescription on the way home. A swallow of the bitter, brownish tonic strengthened him somewhat, but as he parked his car the feeling of depression settled down on him again. He walked up to the house still puzzled and strangely afraid.

Under the door was a telegram. Dean read it with a puzzled frown.

JUST LEARNED YOU ARE LIVING IN SAN PEDRO HOUSE STOP VITALLY IMPORTANT YOU VACATE IMMEDIATELY STOP SHOW THIS CABLE TO DOCTOR MAKOTO YAMADA 17 BUENA STREET SAN PEDRO STOP AM RETURNING VIA AIRPLANE STOP SEE YAMADA TODAY

MICHAEL LEIGH

Dean read the message again, and a flash of remembrance came to him. Michael Leigh was his uncle, but he had not seen the man for years. Leigh had been a puzzle to the family; he was an occultist, and spent most of his time delving in far comers of the earth. Occasionally he dropped from sight for long periods of time. The cable Dean held was sent from Calcutta, and he supposed that Leigh had recently emerged from some spot in the interior of India to learn of Dean’s inheritance.

Dean searched his mind. He recalled now, that there had been some family quarrel about this very house years ago. The details were no longer clear, but he remembered that Leigh had demanded the San Pedro house be razed. Leigh had given no sane reasons, and when the request was refused he had dropped out of sight for a time. And now came this inexplicable cablegram.

Dean was tired from his long drive, and the unsatisfactory interview with the doctor had irritated him more than he had realized. Nor was he in the mood to follow his uncle's cabled request and undertake the long journey to Buena Street, which was miles away. The drowsiness which he felt, however, was normal healthy exhaustion, unlike the languor of recent weeks. The tonic he had taken was of some value after all.

He dropped into his favorite chair by the window that overlooked the sea, rousing himself to watch the flaming colors of the sunset. Presently the sun dropped below the horizon, and gray dusk crept in. Stars appeared, and far to the north he could see the dim lights of the gambling-ships off Venice. The mountains shut off his view of San Pedro, but a diffused pale glow in that direction told him that the New Barbary was wakening into roaring, brawling life. Slowly the face of the Pacific brightened. A full moon was rising above the San Pedro hills.

FOR a long time Dean sat quietly by the window, his pipe forgotten in his hand, staring down at the slow swells of the ocean, which seemed to pulse with a mighty and alien life. Gradually drowsiness crept up and overwhelmed him. Just before he dropped into the abyss of sleep there flashed into his mind da Vinci's saying, "The two most wonderful things in the world are a woman's smile and the motion of mighty waters."

He dreamed, and this time it was a different dream. At first only blackness, and a roaring and thundering as of angry seas, and oddly mingled with this was the hazy thought of a woman's smile . . . and a woman's lips . . . pouting lips, softly alluring . . . but strangely the lips were not red—no! They were very pale, bloodless, like the lips of a thing that had long rested beneath the sea . . .

The misty vision changed, and for a flashing instant Dean seemed to see the green and silent place of his earlier visions. The shadowy black shapes were moving more quickly behind the veil, but this picture was of but a second's duration. It flashed out and vanished, and Dean was standing alone on a beach; a beach he recognized in his dream—the sandy cove beneath the house.

The salt breeze blew coldly across his face, and the sea glistened like silver in the moonlight. A faint splash told of a sea-thing that broke the surface of the waters. To the north the sea washed against the rugged surface of the cliff, barred and speckled with black shadows; Dean felt a sudden, inexplicable impulse to move in that direction. He yielded.

As he clambered over the rocks he was suddenly conscious of a strange sensation, as though keen eyes were focussed upon him—eyes that watched and warned! Vaguely in his mind rose up the gaunt face of his uncle, Michael Leigh, the deep-set eyes glowing. But swiftly this was gone, and he found himself before a deeper niche of blackness in the cliff face. Into it he knew he must go.

He squeezed himself between two jutting points of rock, and found himself in utter, dismal darkness. Yet somehow he was conscious that he was in a cave, and he could hear water lapping near by. All about him was a musty salt odor of sea-decay, the fetid smell of sunless ocean caves and holds of ancient ships. He stepped forward, and, as the floor shelved sharply downward, stumbled and fell headlong into icy, shallow water. He felt, rather than saw, a flicker of swift movement, and then abruptly hot lips were pressed against his.

Human lips, Dean thought, at first.

He lay on his side in the chill water, his lips against those responsive ones. He could see nothing, for all was lost in the blackness of the cave. The unearthly lure of those invisible lips thrilled through him.

He responded to them, pressed them fiercely, gave them what they were avidly seeking. The unseen waters crawled against the rocks, whispering warning.

And in that kiss strangeness flooded him. He felt a shock and a tingling go through him, and then a thrill of sudden ecstasy, and swift on its heels came horror. Black loathsome foulness seemed to wash his brain, indescribable but fearfully real, making him shudder with nausea. It was as though unutterable evil were pouring into his body, his mind, his very soul, through the blasphemous kiss on his lips. He felt loathsome, contaminated. He fell back. He sprang to his feet.

And Dean saw, for the first time, the ghastly thing he had kissed, as the sinking moon sent a pale shaft of radiance creeping through the cave mouth. For something rose up before him, a serpentine and seal-like bulk that coiled and twisted and moved toward him, glistening with foul slime; and Dean screamed and turned to flee with nightmare fear tearing at his brain, hearing behind him a quiet splashing as though some bulky creature had slid back into the water.

2. A Visit from Doctor Yamada

HE AWOKE. He was still in his chair before the window, and the moon was paling before the grayness of dawn. He was shaken with nausea, sick and shuddering with the shocking realism of his dream. His clothing was drenched with perspiration, and his heart hammered furiously. An immense lethargy seemed to have overwhelmed him, making it an intense effort to rise from the chair and stagger to a couch, on which he flung himself to doze fitfully for several hours.

A sharp pealing of the door-bell roused him. He still felt weak and dizzy, but the frightening lethargy had somewhat abated. When Dean opened the door, a Japanese standing on the porch began a bobbing little bow, a gesture that was abruptly arrested as the sharp black eyes focussed on Dean's face. A little hiss of indrawn breath came from the visitor.

Dean said irritably, "Well? Do you want to see me?"

The other was still staring, his thin face sallow beneath a stiff thatch of gray hair. He was a small, slender man, with his face covered with a finespun web of wrinkles. After a pause he said, "I am Doctor Yamada."

Dean frowned, puzzled. Abruptly he remembered his uncle's cable of the day before. An odd, unreasonable irritation began to mount within him, and he said, more bruskly than he had intended, "This isn't a professional call, I hope. I've already——"

"Your uncle—you are Mr. Dean?—cabled me. He was rather worried." Doctor Yamada glanced around almost furtively.

Dean felt distaste stir within him, and his irritation increased.

"My uncle is rather eccentric, I'm afraid. There's nothing for him to worry about. I'm sorry you had your trip for nothing."

Doctor Yamada did not seem to take offense at Dean's attitude. Rather, a strange expression of sympathy showed for a moment on his small face.

"Do you mind if I come in?" he asked, and moved forward confidently.

Short of barring his way, Dean had no means of stopping him, and ungraciously led his guest to the room where he had spent the night, motioning him to a chair while he busied himself with a coffee-pot.

Yamada sat motionless, silently watching Dean. Then without preamble he said, "Your uncle is a great man, Mr. Dean."

Dean made a noncommittal gesture, "I have seen him only once."

"He is one of the greatest occultists of this day. I, too, have studied psychic lore, but beside your uncle I am a novice."

Dean said, "He is eccentric. Occultism, as you term it, has never interested me."

The little Japanese watched him impassively. "You make a common error, Mr. Dean. You consider occultism a hobby for cranks. No"—he held up a slender hand—"your disbelief is written in your face. Well, it is understandable. It is an anachronism, an attitude handed down from the earliest times, when scientists were called alchemists and sorcerers and burned for making pacts with the devil. But actually there are no sorcerers, no—witches. Not in the sense that man understands these terms. There are men and women who have acquired mastery over certain sciences which are not wholly subject to mundane physical laws."

There was a little smile of disbelief on Dean's face. Yamada went on quietly. "You do not believe because you do not understand. There are not many who can comprehend, or who wish to comprehend, this greater science which is not bound by earthly laws. But here is a problem for you, Mr. Dean." A little spark of irony flickered in the black eyes. "Can you tell me how I know you have suffered from nightmares recently?"

Dean jerked around and stood staring. Then he smiled.

"As it happens, I know the answer, Doctor Yamada. You physicians have a way of hanging together—and I must have let something slip to Doctor Hedwig yesterday." His tone was offensive, but Yamada merely shrugged slightly.

"Do you know your Homer?" he asked, apparently irrelevantly, and at Dean's surprized nod went on, "And Proteus? You remember the Old Man of the Sea who possessed the power of changing his shape? I do not wish to strain your credulity, Mr. Dean, but for a long time students of the dark lore have known that behind this legend there exists a very terrible truth. All the tales of spirit-possession, of reincarnation, even the comparatively innocuous experiments in thought-transference, point to the truth. Why do you suppose folklore abounds with tales of men who have been able to change themselves into beasts—werewolves, hyenas, tigers, the seal-men of the Eskimos? Because these tales are founded on truth!

"I do not mean," he went on, "that the actual physical metamorphosis of the body is possible, so far as we know. But it has long been known that the intelligence—the mind—of an adept can be transferred to the brain and body of a satisfactory subject. Animals' brains are weak, lacking the power of resistance. But men are different, unless there are certain circumstances ——"

As he hesitated, Dean proffered the Japanese a cup of coffee—coffee was generally brewing in the percolator these days—and Yamada accepted it with a formal little bow of acknowledgment.

Dean drank his coffee in three hasty gulps, and poured more. Yamada, after a polite sip, put the cup aside and leaned forward earnestly.

“I MUST ask you to make your mind receptive, Mr. Dean. Don’t allow your conventional ideas of life to influence you in this matter. It is vitally to your interest that you listen carefully to me, and understand. Then —perhaps——”

He hesitated, and again threw that oddly furtive glance at the window.

“Life in the sea has followed different lines from life on land. Evolution has followed a different course. In the great deeps of the ocean, life utterly alien to ours has been discovered—luminous creatures which burst when exposed to the lighter pressure of the air—and in those tremendous depths forms of life completely inhuman have been developed, life forms that the uninitiated mind may think impossible. In Japan, an island country, we have known of these sea-dwellers for generations. Your English writer, Arthur Machen, has told a deep truth in his statement that man, afraid of these strange beings, has attributed to them beautiful or pleasantly grotesque forms which in reality they do not possess. Thus we have the nereids and oceanids—but nevertheless man could not fully disguise the true foulness of these creatures. Therefore there are legends of the Gorgons, of Scylla and the harpies—and, significantly, of the mermaids and their soullessness. No doubt you know the mermaid tale—how they long to steal the soul of a man, and draw it out by means of their kiss.”

Dean was at the window now, his back to the Japanese. As Yamada paused he said tonelessly, “Go on.”

“I have reason to believe,” Yamada went on very quietly, “that Morelia Godolfo, the woman from Alhambra, was not fully—human. She left no issue. These things never have children—they cannot.”

"What do you mean?" Dean had turned and was facing the Japanese, his face a ghastly white, the shadows beneath his eyes hideously livid. He repeated harshly, "What do you mean? You can't frighten me with your tales—if that's what you're trying to do. You—my uncle wants me out of this house, for some reason of his own. You're taking this means of getting me out—aren't you? Eh?"

"You must leave this house," Yamada said. "Your uncle is coming, but he may not be in time. Listen to me: these creatures—the sea-dwellers—envy man. Sunlight, and warm fires, and the fields of earth—things which the sea-dwellers cannot normally possess. These things—and *love.* You remember what I said about mind-transference—the possession of a brain by an alien intelligence. That is the only way these things can attain that which they desire, and know the love of man or woman. Sometimes—not very often—one of these creatures succeeds in possessing itself of a human body. They watch always. When there is a wreck, they go there, like vultures to a feast. They can swim phenomenally fast. When a man is drowning, the defenses of his mind are down, and sometimes the sea-dwellers can thus acquire a human body. There have been tales of men saved from wrecks who ever after were oddly changed.

"Morelia Godolfo was one of these creatures! The Godolfos knew much of the dark lore, but used it for evil purposes—the so-called black magic. And it was, I think, through this that sea-dweller gained power to usurp the brain and body of the woman. A transference took place. The mind of the sea-dweller took possession of Morelia Godolfo's body, and the intelligence of the original Morelia was forced into the terrible form of that creature of the abyss. In time the human body of the woman died, and the usurping mind returned to its original shell. The intelligence of Morelia Godolfo was then ejected from its temporary prison, and left homeless. That is true death." Dean shook his head slowly, as though in denial, but did not speak. And inexorably Yamada kept on.

"For years, generations, since then she has dwelt in the sea, waiting. Her power is strongest here, where she once lived. But, as I told you, only under unusual circumstances can this—transference take place. The tenants of this house might be troubled with dreams, but that would be all. The evil being had no power to steal their bodies. Your uncle knew that, or he would have insisted that the place be immediately destroyed. He did not foresee that you would ever live here.” The little Japanese bent forward, and his eyes were twin points of black light.

“You do not need to tell me what you have undergone in the past month. I know. The sea-dweller has power over you. For one thing, there are bonds of blood, even though you are not directly descended from her. And your love for the ocean—your uncle spoke of that. You live here alone with your paintings and your imaginative fancies; you see no one else. You are an ideal victim, and it was easy for that sea horror to become *en rapport* with you. Even now you show the stigmata.”

DEAN was silent, his face a pale shadow amidst the darker ones in the comers of the room. What was the man trying to tell him? What were these hints leading up to?

“Remember what I have said.” Doctor Yamada’s voice was fanatically earnest.

“That creature wants you for your youth—your soul. She has lured you in sleep, with visions of Poseidonis, the twilight grottoes in the deep. She has sent you beguiling visions at first, to hide what she was doing. She has drained your life forces, weakened your resistance, waiting until she is strong enough to take possession of your brain.

“I have told you what she wants—what all these hybrid horrors raven for. She will reveal herself to you in time, and when her will is strong upon you in slumber, you will do her bidding. She will take you down into the deep, and show you the kraken-fouled gulfs where these things bide. You will go willingly, and that will be your doom. She may lure you to their feasts there—the feasts they hold upon the drowned things they find floating from wrecked ships. And you will live such madness in your sleep because she rules you. And then—then, when you have become weak enough, she will have her desire. The sea-thing will usurp your body and walk once more on earth. And you will go down into the darkness where once you dwelt in dreams, for ever. Unless I am mistaken, you have already seen enough to know that I speak truth. I think that this terrible moment is not so far off, and I warn you that alone you cannot hope to resist the evil. Only with the aid of your uncle and me——"

Doctor Yamada stood up. He moved forward and confronted the dazed youth face to face. In a low voice he asked, "In your dreams—*has the thing kissed you?"*

For a heart-beat there was utter silence. Dean opened his mouth to speak, and then a curious little warning note seemed to sound in his brain. It rose, like the quiet roaring of a conch-shell, and a vague nausea assailed him.

Almost without volition he heard himself saying, "No."

Dimly, as though from an incredibly far distance, he heard Yamada suck in his breath, as if surprized. Then the Japanese said, "That is good. Very good. Now listen: your uncle will be here soon. He has chartered a special plane. Will you be my guest until he arrives?"

The room seemed to darken before Dean's eyes. The form of the Japanese was receding, dwindling. Through the window the surf-sound came crashing, and it rolled on in waves through Dean's brain. In its thunder a thin, insistent whispering penetrated.

"Accept," it murmured. "Accept!" And Dean heard his own voice accept Yamada's invitation.

He seemed incapable of coherent thought. That last dream haunted him . . . and now Doctor Yamada's disturbing story . . . he was ill—that was it!—very ill. He wanted very much to sleep, now. A flood of darkness seemed to wash up and engulf him. Gratefully he allowed it to sweep through his tired head. Nothing existed but the dark, and a restless lapping of unquiet waters.

Yet he seemed to know, in an odd way, that he was still—some outer part of him—conscious. He strangely realized that he and Doctor Yamada had left the house, were entering a car, and driving a long way. He was—with that strange, external other self—talking casually to the doctor; entering his house in San Pedro; drinking; eating. And all the while his soul, his real being, was buried in waves of blackness.

Finally a bed. From below, the surf seemed to blend into the blackness that engulfed his brain. It spoke to him now, as he rose stealthily and clambered out of the window. The fall jarred his outer self considerably, but he was on the ground outside without injury. He kept in the shadows as he crept away down to the beach—the black, hungry shadows that were like the darkness surging through his soul.

3. Three Dreadful Hours

WITH a shock, he was himself once more—completely. The cold water had done it; the water in which he found himself swimming. He was in the ocean, borne on waves as silver as the lightning that occasionally flashed overhead. He heard thunder, felt the sting of rain. Without wondering about the sudden transition, he swam on, as though fully aware of some planned destination. For the first time in over a month he felt fully alive, actually himself. There was a surge of wild elation in him that defied the facts; he no longer seemed to care about his recent illness, the weird warnings of his uncle and Doctor Yamada, and the unnatural darkness that had previously shadowed his mind. In fact, he no longer had to think—it was as though he were being *directed* in all his movements.

He was swimming parallel with the beach now, and with curious detachment he observed that the storm had subsided. A pale, fog-like glow hovered over the lashing waters, and it seemed to beckon.

The air was chill, as was the water, and the waves high; yet Dean experienced neither cold nor fatigue. And when he saw the things that waited for him on the rocky beach just ahead, he lost all perception of himself in a crescendo of mounting joy.

This was inexplicable, for they were the creatures of his last and wildest nightmares. Even now he did not see them plainly as they sported in the surf, but there were dim suggestions of past horror in their tenebrous outlines. The things were like seals; great, fish-like, bloated monsters with pulpy, shapeless heads. These heads rested on columnar necks that undulated with serpentine ease, and he observed, without any sensation other than curious familiarity, that the heads and bodies of the creatures were a sea-bleached white.

Soon he was swimming in among them—swimming with peculiar and disturbing ease. Inwardly he marveled, with a touch of his former feeling, that he was not now horrified by the sea-beasts in the least. Instead, it was almost with a feeling of kinship that he listened to their strange low gruntings and cackles—listened *and understood.*

He *knew* what they were saying, and he was not amazed. He was not frightened by what he heard, though the words would have sent abysmal horror through his soul in the previous dreams.

He knew where they were going and what they meant to do when the entire group swam out into the water once more, yet he did not fear. Instead, he felt a strange hunger at the thought of what was to come, a hunger that impelled him to take the lead as the things, with undulant swiftness, glided through the inky waters to the north. They swam with incredible speed, yet it was hours before a sea-coast loomed up through the murk, lit by a blinding flare of light from offshore.

Twilight deepened to true darkness over the water, but the offshore light burned brightly. It seemed to come from a huge wreck in the waves just off the coast, a great hulk floating on the waters like a crumpled beast. There were boats gathered around it, and floating flares of light that revealed the scene.

As though by instinct, Dean, with the pack behind him, headed for the spot. Swiftly and silently they sped, their slimy heads blurred in the shadows to which they clung as they circled the boats and swam in toward the great crumpled shape. Now it was looming above him, and he could see arms flailing desperately as man after man sank below the surface. The colossal bulk from which they leaped was a wreck of twisted girders in which he could trace the warped outline of a vaguely familiar shape.

And now, with curious disinterest, he swam lazily about, avoiding the lights bobbing over the water as he watched the actions of his companions. They were hunting their prey. Leering muzzles gaped for the drowning men, and lean talons raked bodies from the darkness. Whenever a man was glimpsed in shadows not yet invaded by rescue-boats, one of the sea-things craftily snared his victim.

In a little while they turned and slowly swam away. But now many of the creatures clutched a grisly trophy at their squamous breasts. The pale white limbs of drowning men trailed in the water as they were dragged off into the darkness by their captors. To the accompaniment of low, carrion laughter the beasts swam away, back down the coast.

Dean swam with the rest. His mind was again a blur of confusion. He knew what that thing in the water was, and yet he could not name it. He had watched those hateful horrors snare doomed men and drag them off to the deep, yet he had not intervened. What was wrong? Even now, as he swam with frightening agility, he felt a call he could not fully understand—a call that his body was answering.

The hybrid things were gradually dispersing. With eery splashings they disappeared below the surface of the gelid black waters, pulling with them the dreadfully limp bodies of the men, pulling them down to the blackness biding beneath.

They were hungry. Dean knew it without thinking. He swam on, along the coast, impelled by his curious urge. That was it—he was hungry.

And now he was going for food.

HOURS of steady swimming southward. Then the familiar beach, and above it a lighted house which Dean recognized—his own house on the cliff. There were figures descending the slope now; two men with torches were coming down to the beach. He must not let them see him—why, he did not know, but they must not. He crawled along the beach, keeping close to the water's edge. Even so, he seemed to move very swiftly.

The men with the torches were some distance behind him now. Ahead loomed another familiar outline—a cave. He had clambered over these rocks before, it seemed. He knew the pits of shadow that speckled the cliff rock, and knew the narrow passage of stone through which he now squeezed his prostrate body.

Was that someone shouting, far away? . . .

Darkness, and a lapping pool. He crawled forward, felt chill waters creep over his body. Muffled by distance came an insistent shouting from outside the cave.

"Graham! Graham Dean!"

Then the smell of dank sea-foulness was in his nostrils—a familiar, pleasant smell. He knew where he was, now. It was the cave where in his dream he had kissed the sea-thing. It was the cave in which—

He remembered now. The black blur lifted from his brain, and he remembered all. His mind bridged the gap, and he once again recalled coming here earlier this very evening, before he had found himself in the water.

Morelia Godolfo had called him here; here her dark whispers had guided him at twilight, when he had come from the bed at Doctor Yamada's house. It was the siren song of the sea-creature that had lured him in dreams.

He remembered how she had coiled about his feet when he entered-, flung her sea-bleached body up until its inhuman head had loomed close to his own. And then the hot pulpy lips had pressed against his—the loathsome, slimy lips had kissed him again. Wet, dank, horribly avid kiss! His senses had drowned in its evil, for he knew that this second kiss meant doom.

"The sea-dweller will take your body," Doctor Yamada had said . . . And the second kiss meant doom.

All this had happened hours ago!

Dean shifted around in the rocky chamber to avoid wetting himself in the pool. As he did so, he glanced down at his body for the first time that night—glanced down with an undulating neck at the shape he had worn for three hours in the sea. He saw the fish-like scales, the scabrous whiteness of the slimy skin; saw the veined gills. He stared into the waters of the pool then, so that the reflection of his face was visible in the dim moonlight that filtered through fissures in the rocks.

He saw all . . .

His head rested on the long, reptilian neck. It was an anthropoid head with flat contours that were monstrously inhuman. The eyes were white and protuberant; they bulged with the glassy stare of a drowning thing. There was no nose, and the center of the face was covered with a tangle of wormy blue feelers. The mouth was worst of all. Dean saw pale white lips in a dead face—human lips. Lips that had kissed his own. And now—*they were his own!*

He was in the body of the evil sea-thing—the evil sea-thing that had once harbored the soul of Morelia Godolfo!

At that moment Dean would gladly have welcomed death, for the stark, blasphemous horror of his discovery was too much to bear. He knew about his dreams now, and the legends; he had learned the truth, and paid a hideous price. He recalled, vividly, how he had recovered consciousness in the water and swum out to meet those—others. He recalled the great black hulk from which drowning men had been taken in boats—the shattered wreck on the water. What was it Yamada had told him? “When there is a wreck they go there, like vultures to a feast.” And now, at last, he remembered what had eluded him that night—what that familiar shape on the waters had been. It was a crashed zeppelin. He had gone swimming into the wreckage with those things, and they had taken men . . . Three hours—God! Dean wanted very much to die. He was in the sea-body of Morelia Godolfo, and it was too evil for further life.

Morelia Godolfo! Where was *she?* And his own body, the shape of Graham Dean?

A RUSTLING in the shadowy cavern behind him proclaimed the answer. Graham Dean saw *himself* in the moonlight—saw his body, line for line, hunching furtively past the pool in an attempt to creep away unobserved.

Dean's flippered fins moved swiftly. His own body turned.

It was ghastly for Dean to see himself reflected where no mirror existed; ghastlier still to see that in his face there no longer were *his* eyes. The sly, mocking stare of the sea-creature peered out at him from behind their fleshy mask, and they were ancient, evil. The pseudo-human snarled at him and tried to dodge off into the darkness. Dean followed, on all fours.

He knew what he must do. That sea-thing—Morelia—she had taken his body during that last black kiss, just as he had been forced into hers. But she had not yet recovered enough to go out into the world. That was why he had found her still in the cave. Now, however, she would leave, and his uncle Michael would never know. The world would never know, either, what horror stalked its surface—until it was too late. Dean, his own tragic form hateful to him now, knew what he must do.

Purposefully he maneuvered the mocking body of himself into a rocky comer. There was a look of fright in those gelid eyes . . .

A sound caused Dean to turn, pivoting his reptilian neck. Through glazed fish-eyes he saw the faces of Michael Leigh and Doctor Yamada. Torches in hand, they were entering the cave.

Dean knew what they would do, and he no longer cared. He closed in on the human body that housed the soul of the sea-beast; closed in with the beast's own flailing flippers; seized it in its own arms and menaced it with its own teeth near the creature's white, human neck.

From behind him he heard shouts and cries at his very back, but Dean did not care. He had a duty to perform; an atonement. Through the comer of his eye, he saw the barrel of a revolver as it glinted in Yamada's hand.

Then came two bursts of stabbing flame, and the oblivion Dean craved. But he died happy, for he had atoned for the black kiss.

Even as he sank into death, Graham Dean had bitten with animal fangs into his own throat, and his heart was filled with peace as, dying, he saw himself die . . .

His soul mingled in the third black kiss of Death.

The Creeper In the Crypt

A tale of stark horror in a gangster's hide-out in the dread cellar of an evil house in legend-haunted Arkham

IN ARKHAM, where ancient gables point like wizard's fingers to the sky, strange tales are told. But then, strange tales are always current in Arkham. There is a tale for every rotting ruin, a story for every little corpse-eye window that stares out at the sea when the fog comes up.

Here, fantastic fancy seems to flourish, nourished at the shriveled witch-paps of the town itself, sucking the graveyards dry of legend, and draining at the dark dugs of superstition.

For Arkham was a queer place, once; abode of witch and warlock, familiar and fiend. In olden days the King's men cleared the town of wizardry. Again, in 1818, the new Government stepped in to destroy some particularly atrocious burrows in and about some of the more ancient houses and, incidentally, to dig up a graveyard better left untouched. Then, in 1869, came the great immigrant panic in Old Town Street, when the moldering mansion of Cyrus Hook was burned to the ground by fear-crazed foreigners.

Even since then there have been scares. The affair of the "witch-house" and the peculiar episodes attendant upon the fate of certain missing children at All-Hallows time have caused their share of talk.

But that isn't why the "G-men" stepped in. The Federal Government is usually uninterested in supernatural stories. That is, they were, up to the time I told the authorities about the death of Joe Regetti. That's how they happened to come; I brought them.

Because, you see, I was with Joe Regetti just before lie died, and shortly after. I didn't see him die, and I'm thankful for that. I don't think I could have stood watching if what I suspect is true.

It's because of what I suspect that I went to the Government for help. They've sent men down here now, to investigate, and I hope they find enough to convince them that what I have told them is actual fact. If they don't find the tunnels, or I was mistaken about the trapdoor, at least I can show them Joe Regetti's body. That ought to convince anybody, I guess.

I can't blame them for being skeptical, though. I was skeptical myself, once, and so were Joe Regetti and his mob, I suppose. But since then I have learned that it is wiser not to scoff at what one does not understand. There are more things on earth than those who walk about upon its surface—there are *others* that creep and crawl below.

2

I HAD never heard of Joe Regetti until I was kidnapped. That isn't so hard to understand. Regetti was a gangster, and a stranger in the town. I am descended from Sir Ambrose Abbott, one of the original settlers.

At the time of which I speak, I was living alone in the family place on Bascom Street. The life of a painter demands solitude. My immediate family was dead, and although socially prominent through accident of birth, I had but few friends. Consequently, it is hard to understand why Regetti chose me to kidnap first. But then, he was a stranger.

Later I learned that he had been in town only a week, staying ostensibly at a hotel with three other men, none of whom was subsequently apprehended.

But Joe Regetti was a totally unknown factor in my mind until that night when I left Tarleton's party at his home on Sewell Street.

It was one of the few invitations I had accepted in the past year. Tarleton had urged me, and as he was an old friend, I obliged. It had been a pleasant evening.

Brent, the psychiatrist, was there, and Colonel Warren, as well as my old companions of college days, Harold Gauer and the Reverend Williams. After a pleasant enough evening, I left, planning to walk home as I usually did, by choice.

It was a lovely evening—with a dead moon, wrapped in a shroud of clouds, riding the purple sky. The old houses looked like silver palaces in the mystic moonlight; deserted palaces in a land where all but memories are dead. For the streets of Arkham are bare at midnight, and over all hangs the age-old enchantment of days gone by.

Trees tossed their twisted tops to the sky, and stood like furtive conspirators in little groups together, while the wind whispered its plots through their branches. It was a night to inspire the fabulous thoughts and imaginative morbidities I loved so well.

I walked slowly, contentedly, my thoughts free and far away. I never saw the car following me, or the man lurking ahead in the gloom. I strolled past the great tree in front of the Carter house, and then, without warning, balls of fire burst within my head, and I plunged, unconscious, into waiting arms.

When I recovered, I was already there in the cellar, lying on a bench.

It was a large cellar—an old cellar. Wherever I looked there was stone and cobwebs. Behind me lay the stairs down which I had been carried. To the left was a little room, like a fruit-cellar. Far down the stone wall to the right I could discern the looming outlines of a coal-pile, though furnace there was none.

Directly in the space before me was a table and two chairs. The table was occupied by an oil lamp and a pack of cards in solitaire formation. The chairs were likewise occupied, by two men. My captors.

One of them, a big, red-faced man with the neck of a hog, was speaking.

"Yeah, Regetti. We got him easy. We follow him like you say, from house, and grab him in front of tree. Right away come here—nobody saw noting."

"Where's Slim and the Greek?" asked the man who was playing solitaire, looking up. He was short, slim, and sallow. His hair was dark, his complexion swarthy. Italian, I decided. Probably the leader. I realized, of course, that I had been kidnapped. Where I was or who my captors were I could not say. My throbbing head cleared, and I had enough sense not to bluster or start trouble. These weren't local men—not with those clothes—and there was an ominous bulge in the dark man's coat-pocket. I decided to play 'possum and await developments.

The hog-necked man was replying to the other's question.

"I tell Slim and Greek to go back to hotel with car," he said. "Just like you say, boss."

"Good work, Polack," said the other, lighting a cigar.

"I do my best for you, Joe Regetti," said the big man, in his broken dialect.

"Yeah. Sure. I know you do," the swarthy Regetti replied. "Just keep it up, and we're going to be all set, see? Once I put the snatch on a few more of these birds, we'll clean up. The local coppers are all stiffs, and as soon as I get a line on some more of these old families we'll be taking in the dough regular."

"I BEG your pardon," I said.

"Oh, awake, eh?" The thin Italian didn't move from the table. "Glad to hear it. Sorry the boys had to get rough, mister. Just sit tight and everything's going to be swell."

"I'm glad to hear that," I replied, sarcastically. "You see, I'm not accustomed to being kidnapped."

"Well, let me handle it," said Joe Regetti. "I'll show you the ropes."

“Thanks,” I retorted. “You already have.” And I pointed to the ones that bound my hands and feet.

“Sense of humor, eh? O. K. Hope your friends come across with the dough after they get this letter I wrote, or maybe the rest isn’t going to be so funny.”

“What next?” I said, desperately hoping that something would turn up to give me an opening of some sort.

“You’ll see soon enough,” advised the man. “First, I’m going to sit up with you down here for the rest of the night.”

The Pole’s face paled.

“No, boss,” he begged. “You no stay down here.”

“Why not?” rasped Regetti, harshly. “What’s the matter with you, Polack—turning yellow on me, eh?”

“I’m not,” whined the man. “But you know what was happen here before, boss—how they find Tony Fellippo’s leg lyin’ on floor with no body left.”

“Lay off the bedtime stories,” Regetti chuckled. “You yokels make me sick with that stuff.”

“But dot’s true, boss. They never was for to find any more of old Tony Fellippo—just his leg on cellar floor. Dot why his mob go ‘way so quick. They no want for to die, too.”

“What do you mean, die?” snarled Regetti, testily.

The Pole’s face paled, and his voice sank to a hushed whisper that blended with the cellar’s darkness; a shadow voice in a shadow world.

“Dot what everyone say, boss. Dot house is witched—like haunted one, maybe. Nobody put Tony Fellippo on spot—dot feller, he too dam’ smart guy. But he sit all alone here one night, and something come up from earth and swallow him, all but leg.”

“Will you shut up?” Regetti cut in. “That’s a lot of hooey. Some wise guy put the heat on Fellippo and got rid of the body. Only his leg was left to scare off the rest of his mob. Are you trying to tell me a ghost killed him, sap?”

"Yah, sure," insisted the Pole. "No man kill Tony. Not like you say, anyhow. Find leg, all right, but all over is lot blood on floor, and little pieces skin. No feller kill man like dot—only spirit, Vampire, maybe."

"Nuts!" Regetti was scornfully biting his cigar.

"Maybe so. But look—here is blood."

And the Pole pointed a stubby finger at the floor and cellar wall to the left, Regetti followed it with his gaze.

There was blood, all right—great, rusty blobs of blood, spattered all over the floor and wall like the pigments on the palette of a mad painter.

"No man kill odder feller like dot," the Pole muttered. "Not even ax make such mess. And you know what fellers they say about Fellippo's leg—was all full of tooth-marks."

"Right," mused the other, thoughtfully. "And the rest of his gang did get out of here pretty fast after it happened. Didn't try to hide the body, or do anything about it." He frowned. "But that doesn't prove any balony about ghosts, or vampires. You been reading too many bum magazines lately, Polack."

He laughed.

"What about iron door?" grumbled the Pole, accusingly, his red face flushing. "What about iron door back of coal in. coal-pile, huh? You know what fellers down by Black Jim's place say about house with iron door in cellar."

"Yeah." Regetti's face clouded.

"You no look by iron door yet, boss," the man continued. "Maybe you find somet'ing behind door yet, like fellers say—dot where t'ing dot got Fellippo come from; dot where it hide. Police they not find door either, when they come. Just find leg, and blood, and shut up house. But fellers know. They tell me plenty about house with iron door in cellar; say it bad place from old days when witch-fellers live here. It lead to hill back of house; cemetery, maybe. Perhaps dot's why nobody live here so long—afraid of what hides on other side of door; what come out and kill Tony Fellippo. I know about house with iron door in cellar, all right."

I KNEW about the house, too. So that's where I was! In the old Chambers house on Pringle Street! Many a story I've heard from the old folks when I was a boy about the old man, Ezekiel Chambers, whose wizard tricks bequeathed him such an unsavory reputation in Colonial days. I knew about Jonathan Dark, the other owner, who had been tried for smuggling just before the terrible days of 1818, and the abhorrent practise of grave-robbing he had been said to pursue in the ancient cemetery directly behind the house, on the hill.

Many peculiar rumors were circulated about the moldering house with the iron door in the cellar at this time—about the door, particularly, which Dark was said to use as a passageway for bringing his stolen cadavers back to dispose of. It was even claimed that the door had never been opened when Dark was tried, because of his astounding and hideous claim that the key which locked it was on *the ether side.* Dark had died during the trial, while in prison, babbling blasphemies that no man dared believe; monstrous hints of what lay beneath the old graveyard on the hill; of tunnels and burrows and secret vaults used in witch-days for unhallowed rites. He spoke of tenants in these vaults, too, and of what sometimes would come to visit the house from below when a wizard invoked it with the proper spells and sacrifice. There was more, too—but then, Dark was quite mad. At least, everyone thought it better to believe so.

Old tales die. The house had stood deserted for many years, until most men forgot the reason for which it had been forsaken, ascribing its vacancy only to age. The public today were utterly unaware of the legends. Only the old ones remembered—the old ones who whispered their stories to me when I was a boy.

So this was the Dark house to which I had been brought! And this was the very cellar of the tales in question! I gathered from the remarks between Regetti and the superstitious Pole that another gang had recently used it for a hideaway until the death of their leader; indeed, I even vaguely remembered some newspaper reports of Tony Fellippo's mysterious murder.

And now Regetti had come from New York to use it as a base.

Clever scheme of his, evidently—coming to an old New England town and kidnapping the local gentry to hold for ransom; then hiding them away in some old, deserted house so conveniently protected by superstition. I supposed that there would be more victims after me, too; the man was smart and cunning enough to get away with it.

These thoughts flashed through my mind during the argument between the Pole and his leader. But their altercation came to an abrupt halt.

"I wish you get out of here," the Pole was saying. "If you stay only one night dot t'ing he come. Dot's all Tony Fellippo stay."

"Shut up, you fool. Didn't we stay here last night, too, before the job? And nothing happened."

"Yeah, sure. I know. But we stay upstairs, not by cellar. Why not keep feller upstairs?"

"Because we can't afford to risk being seen," Regetti snapped, wearily. "Now, cut the chatter."

He turned to me.

"Listen, you. I'm sending this guy out with a ransom letter right now, to your friends back at the party. All you have to do is keep your mouth shut and sit tight. But any funny business means you're through, see?"

I kept silent.

"Take him in there, Polack, and tie him up." Regetti indicated a fruit-cellar adjacent to the stairs.

The Pole, still grumbling, dragged me across the floor and into the room. He lit a candle, casting strange shadows over the cobwebbed, dust-drowned shelving on the walls. Jars of preserves still stood untouched, storing, perhaps, the crop of a hundred years ago. Broken jars were still strewn about on the tottering table. As I glanced about, the Pole tossed me into a chair beside the rickety board, and proceeded to lash me to it firmly with a stout rope. I was not gagged or blindfolded again, though the choking atmosphere about me served as a good substitute for both.

He left me, closing the door. I was alone in the candle-lit quiet.

I strained my ears, and was rewarded by hearing Regetti dismiss his henchman for the night, evidently to deliver the ransom note to the proper authorities. He, Regetti, would stay behind on guard.

"Don't run into any ghosts on your way," he called after his companion, as the big Pole lumbered up the stairs.

A slamming outer door was his only response. From the ensuing quiet I judged Regetti had gone back to his solitaire.

Meanwhile, I looked about for some means of escape. I found it at last, on the table beside me. The broken jars—glass edges to cut my bonds!

PURPOSEFULLY I edged my chair closer to the table end. If I could get a piece of that glass in my hands . . .

As I moved, I strained my ears once more to make sure that any noise made by the chair would be inaudible to Regetti, waiting outside. There was no sound from the chair as I reached the table, and I sighed with relief as I maneuvered my pinioned hands until they grasped a piece of glass firmly. Then I began to rub it against the edge of the rope which bound them.

It was slow work. Minutes ticked away into hours, and still no sound from outside, save a muffled series of snores. Regetti had fallen asleep over his cards. Good! Now, if I could get my wrists free and work on my feet, I would be able to make it.

My right hand was loose at last, though my wrist was damp with mingled sweat and blood. Cutting away from behind was not a precise, calculated sort of job. Quickly I finished the work on my left, then rubbed my swollen fingers and bent over to saw at the ropes on my legs.

Then I heard the sound.

It was the grating of rusty hinges. Anyone who has lived in archaic houses all his life learns to recognize the peculiar, eery clang. Rusty hinges grating from the cellar beyond . . . from *an iron door?* A scuffling sound among the coal . . . *the iron door is concealed by the coal-pile.* Fellippo only stayed down here one night. All they found was his leg.

Jonathan Dark, babbling on his deathbed. The door locked from the other side. Tunnels to the graveyard. What lurks in graveyards, ancient and unseen, then creeps from crypts to feast?

A scream rose in my throat, but I choked it back. Regetti still snored. “Whatever was going on in the outer room, I must not wake him and lose my only chance of escape. Instead, I had best hasten and free my legs. I worked feverishly. but my ears were alert for developments.

They came. The noise in the coal-pile abruptly ceased, and I went limp with relief. Perhaps rats were at work.

A moment later I would have given anything to have heard the coal rattling again, if only to drown out the new noise.

There was something creeping across the cellar floor; something crawling, as if on hands and knees; something with long nails or claws that rasped and scraped. There was something croaking and chuckling as it moved through the cellar dark; something that wheezed with bestial, sickening laughter, like the death-rattle in the throat of a plague-stricken corpse.

Oh, how slyly it crept—how slowly, cautiously, and sinisterly! I could hear it slinking in the shadows, and my fingers raced at their work, even while my brain grew numb.

Traffic between tombs and a wizard’s house—traffic with things the old wives say can never die.

Regetti snored on.

What bides below, in caverns, that can be invoked by the proper spell—or the sight of prey?

Creep.

And then . . .

REGETTI awoke. I heard him scream, once. He didn’t even have time to get up or draw his gun. There was a demoniac scurrying across the floor, as if made by a giant rat. Then the faint sound of shredding flesh, and over all, a sudden ghoulish baying that conjured up worlds of nightmare horror in my shattered brain.

Above the howling came a series of low, almost animal moans, and agonized phrases in Italian, cries for mercy, prayers, curses.

Claws make no sound as they sink into flesh, and yellow fangs are silent till they grate on bone. . . .

My left leg was free, then my right. Now I slashed at the rope around my waist. Suppose it came in here?

The baying ceased, but the silence was haggard with horror.

There are some banquets without toasts. . . .

And now, once again, moans. My spine shivered. All around me the shadows grinned, for outside was revelry as in the olden days. Revelry, and a thing that moaned, and moaned, and moaned.

Then I was loose. As the moaning died away in the darkness, I cut the final strands of rope that bound me to my chair. . . .

I did not leave at once, for there were still sounds in the other room which I did not like; sounds which caused my soul to shrivel, and my sanity to succumb before a nameless dread.

I heard that pawing and padding rustle along the floor, and after the shrieking had ceased, a worse noise took its place—a *burbling* noise—as if someone or something was sucking marrow from a bone. And the terrible, *clicking* sound; the feeding sound of gigantic teeth. . . .

Yes, I waited; waited until the crunching had mercifully ceased, and then waited on until the rustling slithered back into the cellar, and disappeared. When I heard the brazen clang of a rusty door grate in the distance, I felt safe.

It was then that I left at last; passing through the now-deserted cellar, up the stairs, and out unguarded doors into the silver security of a moonlit night. It was very good to see the street-lights again, and hear the trolleys rumble from afar, My taxi took me to the precinct station, and after I had told my story the police did the rest.

I told my story, but I did not mention the iron door against the hillside. That I saved for the ears of the Government men. Now they can do what they like about it, since I am far away. But I did not want anybody prying around too closely to that door while I remained in the city, because even now I cannot—dare not—say what might lurk behind it. The hillside leads to the graveyard, and the graveyard to places far beneath. And in olden days there was a curious traffic betwixt tomb and tunnel and a wizard's house; traffic not confined to men alone. . . .

I'm pretty positive about all this, too. Not alone from the disappearance of the Fellippo gang, or the wildly whispered tales of the *foreign* men: not alone from these, but from a much more concrete and ghastly proof.

It is a proof I don't care to speak about even today—a proof that the police know, but which is fortunately deleted from newspaper accounts of the tragedy.

What men will find behind that iron door I will not venture to say. but I think I know why only Fellippo's leg was found before. I did not look at the iron door before I left the house, but I did see something else in the cellar as I passed through to the stairs. That is why I ran frantically up the steps; that is why I went to the Government, and that is why I never want to go back to witch-haunted, age-accursed Ark ham. I found proof.

Because when I went our, I saw Joe Regetti sitting in his chair by the table in the cellar. The lamp was on, and I am quite sure I saw no footprints. I'm glad of that. But I did see Joe Regetti sitting in his chair, and then I knew the meaning of the screams, and the crunching, and the padding sound.

Joe Regetti, sitting in his chair in the cellar lamplight, *with his naked body chewed entirely to ribbons by gigantic and tin hum an teeth!*

What Every Young Ghoul Should Know

by Professor Robert Bloch-head
Former Tutor to the
President of the United Cigar Stores

ON MARCH 12th, F. Orlin Tremendous disappeared. He was the editor of *Flabby Stories,* so it might have been for the best. Still, it was strange.

The following morning marked the unaccountable vanishing of Leo Margulouse, editor of *Monstrous Yarns,* and Hugo Tahellenback, pilot of *Asinine Tales.* Immediately the fantasy world became greatly excited, although it must be admitted that nobody else gave a particular damn.

When, on March 14th, several others editors disappeared, the world was agog. Farnsworth Wrong, editor of *Worried Tales,* and Mort Weisenheimer, of the staff of *Awful* and *Putrid,* were both missing. Even Corwin F. Stinky, infant editor of the fan magazine, *The Chorus-pondent* (now combined with *Pleurisy),* had vanished. To make a long story worse, and all seriousness aside, every fantasy editor in the country was gone. They were not at home, nor at the office, nor in a turkish bath. Searchers turned away from the morgue, disappointed. It was a nine-days'-wonder in the world of pulp magazines. Then new editors were appointed for the fantasy books by a group of competent alienists, and the old were gradually and gratefully forgotten.

But meanwhile the six errant editors were still alive and—like all editors—kicking. But where were they? Guess. No—that's wrong; and besides, it isn't nice. Guess again. No. Give up? I thought so, you dumb cluck.

They were on the moon.

How did they get there? *I* sent them there. Yes, I. Heh heh heh heh! As I write these lines I am gloating. Burp! Hm-m-m. Maybe I'm bloating. Anyhow. I sent them.

My motive? Revenge. The month before, I submitted a story to Farnsworth Wrong entitled *A Journey to the Moon by Canoe and Whiffleboard.* He rejected it as impossible. Mr. Stinky even had the nerve to declare that "a trip to the moon is impossible and you know it." Such crust—and in science-fiction, too! When I received my last rejection slip I saw red. It was a blue slip, so I went to the oculist. He prescribed glasses. So I went into a tavern and had several. It was there that my idea was born.

I would get revenge! A trip to the moon impossible, eh? And they rejected my masterpuss—my fifty-three word story, over which I had sweated so many months! . . . It's about time you took a bath, Bloch-head. . . . Who said that? . . . The money from my story was going to send me through Harvard! I guess I went mad, for—I kidnapped the editors.

Wrong was the first. I caught him with a butterfly net. Then I sprinkled salt on the tails of Margulouse and Tahellenback. Under the name of Albert Einstein I was admitted to see Corwin Stinky. He thought I was a fan of his. I was, fanning him with a club. And the rest were just as easy. Bundling the six unconscious editors into my car, I drove back to Milwaukee. Here, in my basement, lay the rocket ship.

Perhaps those of you who are interested in the more technical scientific details of space-flight will be interested in how I constructed this great machine. (Two "interested" in the same sentence sound bad. I know. But I couldn't think of a synonym for "interested", and Clark Ashton Smith has my dictionary.) For your benefit, the procedure was as follows. I got together a lot of stuff and tore it apart with some tools. Then I built a sort of thing with wheels on the side, and stuck a mess of wires someplace so that the whatchamacallit wouldn't you-know when I pushed too hard on the jiggers. After that I constructed something very much like an airplane, only instead of wings I had several mechanisms instead of the wheels I would have used if I were only building a pair of roller-skates. Then, of course, all I had to do was to put in my levers, adjust my dials, and change my oil every two thousand miles (It rhymes, don't it?). I also see my dentist twice a year. Anyhow, that's how I built the rocket. I did a pretty good job of it, if I do say so myself—and I'm the only one who *will* say so.

And there it was—(affectionate sigh) my rocket. Operated by atomic generators, electricity, gas, maid-service and towels free of charge, it was ready to leave.

Cleverly I placed my six helpless passengers in the "space-ship", as I brilliantly call it. The nose of the great rocket zoomed upwards and disappeared.

Right through the first and second stories of the house, leaving quite a nasty hole.

Even today we have to walk around it in our living-room. But the rocket was gone.

Through a telescope I "borrowed" I followed its flight, saw it land on the moon's surface.

Eagerly I sat at my radio set, which I'd "borrowed", for the next three days.

It was attached by a special hook-up to the sending-set in the cabin of the rocket.

Would I hear anything? Finally, one night, it came.

"Hey!" said a voice. "Now look heah, Amos——" I turned the dials to another place.

"Hey, there!" it came again. Ah, it was the voice of Leo Margulouse. "Is that you, Bloch—you rat? This is us. on the moon."

I chuckled, twirling my mousetrash—er, mustache. I anticipated his next words—how they were starving up there on that desolate orb; lonely, bewildered, frightened; six sad editors face to face to face with the terrifying reality of lunar solitude. The voice spoke.

"See here, Bloch. We've been talking to the natives, and I want to thank you for what you did by sending us here. Next month we're bringing out the first issue of *Colossal Stories,* featuring thought-variants under a new policy. Freddie Tremendous is starting a series called *Is There Life on the Earth?* and I'm doing a column on *Man's Brain. If Any.*

"You'd love it up here, boy. The natives are all great science-fiction fans. They have six heads, you know; that means they can read six fantasy magazines at once. What a field! Tahellenback and Stinky are having great fun jumping into bottomless craters and coming out on the other side of the moon. Don't worry about us; we'll try to send you down our first issue. Goo'bye, now." The radio voice was silent. I sat aghast. I'm always a little aghast after meals. A fine revenge *this* turned out to be! I send them to the moon and they immediately start science-fiction magazines up there! It just ghost to show how unco-operative some people will be.

So I have decided to confess. It does not matter any more. I caused their disappearance. Let the police come now. They cannot find me. No! They cannot find me!

You see, I'm not really here. And besides, I hung myself twenty minutes ago.

The Secret of Sebek

What grisly horror, spawned in prehistoric ages in ancient Egypt, stalked through that weird house in New Orleans? A tale of the Mardi Gras

I SHOULD never have attended Henricus Vanning's costume ball. Even if the tragedy had not occurred, I would be better off had I refused his invitation that night. Now that I have left New Orleans I can view the episode in saner light, and I know that I made a mistake. The remembrance of that final inexplicable moment is a horror that I still cannot face with a rational mind, however. Had I suspected beforehand I might now be spared the recurrent nightmares which afflict me.

But at that time of which I speak there was no premonition to guide me. I was a stranger in the Louisiana city, and very lonely. The Mardi Gras season served only to accentuate my feeling of utter isolation. During the first two evenings of celebration, tired from long vigils at the typewriter, I wandered alien and alone along the quaintly twisted streets, and the crowds that hustled by seemed to mock my solitude.

My work at the time was very exhausting—I was doing a series of Egyptian stories for a magazine—and my mental state was a bit odd. During the day I sat in my quiet room and gave my mind over to images of Nyarlathotep, Bubastis, and Anubis; my thoughts were peopled with the priestly pageantries of olden times. And in the evenings I walked unknown amidst thoughtless throngs more unreal than the fanciful figures of the past.

But enough of excuses. To be perfectly frank, when I left the house that third night after a weary day, I expressly intended to get drunk. I entered a cafe at dusk, dining lavishly with a bottle of peach brandy. The place was hot and crowded; the ribald, costumed masqueraders all seemed to be enjoying the reign of Momus.

After a time this did not disturb me. Four generous goblets of the really excellent *liqueur* had set the blood running like elixir in my veins; bold, reckless dreams cascaded through my head. I now gazed at the impersonal swarms about me with new interest and understanding. They too were trying to escape tonight—escape from maddening monotony and humdrum commonplace. The fat man in the clown costume near by had looked silly an hour ago; now I seemed to sympathize with him. I sensed the frustration behind the masks these strangers wore; appreciated how valiantly they strove to find forgetfulness in the Mardi Gras.

I would forget, too. The bottle was emptied. I left the cafe and once more walked the streets, but this time I no longer had any feeling of isolation. I strode along like the carnival king himself, and traded gibe for gibe with chance buffeters.

Here memory is temporarily blurred. I went into a club lounge for scotch and soda, then continued on my way. Where my feet led me I cannot say. I seemed to float along effortlessly, but my mind was crystal-clear.

I was not thinking of mundane things. Through some quirk I recalled work again, and I contemplated ancient Egypt. Through crumbled centuries I moved, in visions of secret splendor.

I lurched down a dim, deserted street.

I walked through templed Thebes, while sphinxes stared.

I turned into a lighted thoroughfare where revellers danced.

I mingled with the white-clad acolytes adoring sacred Apis.

The carousing mob blew paper trumpets, strewed confetti.

To the shrill litany of lutes the temple virgins showered me with roses red as the blood of betrayed Osiris.

Thus I passed through streets of saturnalia, my thoughts still wine-wafted and far away. It was all very much like a dream when at last I entered that obscure thoroughfare in the heart of the Creole district. Tall houses reared deserted on either side; darkened, dingy domiciles deserted by their owners, who mingled with the merrymakers amidst more pleasant surroundings. The buildings were old; in the fashion of ancient days they stood narrowly together, row on row.

They are like untenanted mummy-cases in some forgotten tomb; they stand deserted by the maggot and the worm.

From the steeply gabled roofs little black windows yawned.

They are empty, like the eyeless sockets of a skull, and like a skull they too hide secrets.

Secrets.

Secret Egypt.

It was then that I saw the man. Threading my way down that black and twisted street, I noticed a figure in the shadows before me. It stood silent, as though awaiting my approach. I endeavored to hurry past, but there was something about the motionless man which arrested my attention. He was dressed—unnaturally.

SUDDENLY, shockingly, my drunken dreams were fused with stark reality. *This waiting man was dressed like a priest of ancient Egypt!*

Was it hallucination, or did he wear the triple-crowned insignia of Osiris? That long white robe was unmistakable, and in his lean hands was the sceptered diadem of Set, the Serpent.

Overcome with bewilderment, I stood stock-still and stared. He stared back, his thin, tanned face bland and expressionless. With a quick gesture, his right hand darted under his robe. I shrank back, as he withdrew it once more and pulled out—a cigarette.

“Got a match, stranger?” asked the priest of Egypt.

Then I laughed, remembered, and understood. Mardi Gras! What a scare he had given me, though! Smiling, my head suddenly clear once more, I extended my lighter. He used it, and as the flame flared upward, peered curiously into my countenance.

He started, gray eyes evincing sudden recognition. To my astonishment, he spoke my name in interrogation. I nodded my head.

"What a surprize!" he chuckled.: "You're the writer, aren't you? I've read some of your recent stuff, but I had no idea that you were here in New Orleans."

I mumbled a few words of explanation. He genially interrupted.

"That's great luck. My name is Vanning—Henricus Vanning. I'm interested in the occult myself; we should have a lot in common."

We stood chatting for several minutes; or rather, he chatted and I listened., I learned that Mr. Vanning was a gentleman of means and leisure. He touched a bit glibly and flippantly on his studies in primitive mythology, but expressed a patently genuine interest in Egyptian lore. There was mention of a social group whose mutual and private researches in metaphysics might interest me.

As if seized with sudden inspiration, he clapped me heartily on the back.

"What are your plans for the evening?" he said.

I confessed my predicament. He smiled.

"Splendid! Just had dinner, myself. I'm on the way back to the house now to play host. Our little group—I told you about them—is holding a costume ball there. Like to come along? Interesting."

"But I'm not in costume," I protested.

"Doesn't matter. I think you'd particularly appreciate this affair. Most unusual. Come on."

He beckoned me to follow and started off down the street. I shrugged, but acquiesced. After all, I had nothing to lose, and my curiosity was aroused.

As we walked, the garrulous Mr. Vanning carried on a smooth and intriguing conversation. He spoke in greater detail of his little "circle" of esoteric friends., I gathered that they rather ostentatiously referred to themselves as *The Coffin Club,* and spent much of their time in pursuit of exotic and macabre phases in art, literature or music.

Tonight, according to my host, the group were celebrating the Mardi Gras in their own unique fashion. Defying the conventional masquerade, all members and invited friends planned to come attired in supernatural garb; instead of the usual clowns, pirates, and Colonial gentlemen, they would represent the more outlandish creatures of fancy and myth. I would mingle with werewolves, vampires, gods, goddesses, priests and black magicians.

I must confess that this news did not wholly please me. I never could stomach the pseudo-occultist or the quack devotee and metaphysicist. I dislike a bogus interest and a sham knowledge of legendry in others. Petty dabblings in spiritualism, astrology, and "psychic" charlatanry have always been repellent to my tastes.

I feel that it is not good for fools to mock the old faiths and the secret ways of vanished races. If this was to be one of the usual groups of middle-aged neurotics and pallid-purple dilettantes, then I would spend a boring evening.

But Henricus Vanning himself seemed to have more than a surface smattering of erudition. His cultured allusions to various myth-sagas in my stories seemed to hint at deep knowledge and sincere research that peered beyond the blacker veils of human thought. He spoke quite fluently of his delvings into manicheism and primal cult-ceremonials.

I became so absorbed in his words that I failed to heed the direction in which he led me, though I know we walked for some time. When we drew up at last, it was to turn into a long, shrubbery-bordered walk which led to the doors of a well-lighted and imposing mansion.

In simple truth, I must admit to being so seduced by Vanning's picturesque statements, that I cannot remember a single concrete detail of the house's exterior appearance or the environs in which it stood.

Still bemused, I followed Vanning through the opened door and walked into—nightmare.

WHEN I stated that the house was brilliantly lighted, I meant just that. It was lighted—*in flaming red.*

We stood in a hallway; a hallway of hell. Scarlet simitars of light scintillated from the surface of mirrored walls. Vermilion drapes cloaked inner entrances, and the crimson ceiling seemed to smolder with the crystalline carmine fires of ruby gas-torches that hung in blood-imbrued braziers. A Luciferean butler took my hat, handed me a goblet of cherry brandy.

Alone in the red room, Vanning faced me, glass in hand.

“Like it?” he inquired. “Gay setting to put my guests in the mood. Little touch I borrowed from Poe.”

I thought of the splendid *Masque of the Red Death,* and winced inwardly at this crude and vulgar desecration.

Still, this evidence of the man’s eccentricity did intrigue me. He was *trying* for something. I was almost moved when I lifted my glass to the pseudo-priest of Egypt there in that eery anteroom.

The brandy burned.

“Now—on to our guests.” He pushed a tapestry aside, and we entered the cavernous chamber to the right.

Green and black were the velvet backgrounds of these walls; silver the candles that lighted the niches. The furniture, however, was modern and conventional enough; but when I first surveyed the throng of guests I felt for a moment as if I were again in dreams.

“Werewolves, gods, and black magicians,” Vanning had said. There was more of understatement than exaggeration in that cryptic remark. The occupants of that room constituted a pantheon from all the hells.

The orchestra at the corner of the room were dressed as skeletons, and some diabolically clever lighting arrangements made the fantasy uncomfortably real from a distance. The merrymakers circled the floor against the sinister background of ebon and emerald velvet.

I saw an obscene Pan dancing with a withered night-hag; a mad Freya embracing a voodoo priest; a Bacchante clinging lecherously to a wild-eyed dervish from Irem. There were arch-druids, dwarfs, nixies and kobolds; lamas, shamans, priestesses, fauns, ogres, magi, ghouls. It was a sabbat—a resurrection of ancient sin.

Then, as I mingled with the throng and was introduced, the momentary illusion faded. Pan was merely a stout, rather puffy-eyed, middle-aged gentleman with an obvious paunch which no goatskin girdle could obliterate. Freya was a desperately-bright debutante, with the predatory slut-eyes of a common harlot. The voodoo priest was just a nice young man in burnt cork, with a slightly incongruous English lisp.

I met perhaps a dozen guests, and quickly forgot their names. I was a trifle surprized by Vanning's seeming superciliousness; he almost snubbed several of the more talkative.

"Enjoy yourselves," he called over his shoulder as he dragged me across the floor. "Those are the fools," he confided in a lower voice. "But there are a few I want you to meet."

Over in the corner sat a little group of four men. All wore priestly raiment similar to Vanning's own, in that religion dominated.

"Doctor Delvin." An old man, in Babylonian, almost biblical robes.

"Etienne de Marigny." Dark, handsome priest of Adonis.

"Professor Weildan." A bearded gnome in a kalender's turban.

"Richard Royce." A young, bespectacled scholar, monkishly cowled.

The foursome bowed courteously. Upon my being introduced, however, there was an immediate slackening of their reserve. They crowded about Vanning and me in a rather confidential way, while our host spoke softly in my ear.

"These are the real members of the group I spoke about. I saw the way you looked at the others here, and I quite understand and agree with you. Those people are silly fools. We, here, are the initiates. Perhaps, then, you wonder at the reason for their presence. Let me explain. Attack is the best defense."

"Attack is the best defense?" I echoed, puzzled.

“Yes. Suppose, now, that I and my friends here are really deep students of black magic.”

There was a subtle suggestion in the way he breathed “suppose.”

“Suppose that is true. Don’t you think that our society friends would object, gossip, investigate?”

“Yes,” I admitted. “That sounds reasonable.”

“Of course. That’s why we formulated our attack. By publicly proclaiming an eccentric interest in occultism, and showing it by giving these stupid parties, we are left quite unmolested to carry out our serious work by ourselves. Clever, eh?”

I smiled in agreement. Vanning was no fool.

“It might interest you to know that Doctor Delvin, here, is one of this country’s foremost ethnologists. De Marigny is a well-known occultist—you may remember his connection with the Randolph Carter case several years ago. Royce is my personal aide, and Professor Weildan is *the* Weildan, Egyptologist.”

Funny, how Egypt kept recurring in the course of the evening!

“I promised you something interesting, my friend, and you shall have it. First, though, we must endure these cattle for another half-hour or so. Then we’ll go up to my room for a real session. I trust you will be patient.”

The four men bowed to me as Vanning again led me into the center of the room. The dancing had stopped now, and the floor was covered by little groups of idle chatterers. Demons drank mint-juleps, and virgin sacrifices to the Magna Mater artfully applied their lipstick. Neptune passed me, with a cigar in his mouth. The gayety was shrill.

Masque of the Red Death, I thought. Then I saw—him.

IT WAS all Poe, his entrance. The black and green curtains at the end of the room parted, and he glided in as though emerging from the hidden depths of the hangings rather than the door behind them.

Silver candle-light silhouetted his figure, and as he walked a grisly nimbus seemed to cloak each movement. I had the momentary impression of gazing at him through a prism, since the queer lighting made him appear indistinct and sharply-etched in turn.

He was the soul of Egypt.

The long white robe concealed a body whose contours were elusively problematical. Taloned hands hung from swirling sleeves, and the jeweled fingers clasped a rod of gold, set with the seal of the Eye of Horns.

The top of the robe terminated in a cape-collar of black; it stood, a stiffly hooded background for a head of horror.

The head of a crocodile. The body of an Egyptian priest.

That head was—awful. A slanted, saurian skull, all green and scaly on top; hairless, slimy, slick and nauseous. Great bony ridges socketed the embered eyes, staring from behind a sickening sweep of long, reptilian snout. A rugose muzzle, with great champing jaws half opened to reveal a lolling pinkish tongue and scummy teeth of stiletto-like sharpness. The saber fangs seemed to move, but it was only a trick of the light.

What a mask!

I have always prided myself on a certain *sensitivity.* I can *feel* quite strongly. Now, gazing at that triumph of morbid mummery, I received a sensory shock. I felt that this masquer was real—more real than his less grotesque fellows. The very outlandishness of his costume seemed to carry added conviction when contrasted with the pitiful makeshift pretenses of those through which he walked.

He seemed to be alone, nor did anyone attempt to converse with him in passing. I reached forward and tapped Vanning on the shoulder. I wanted to meet this man.

Vanning, however, swung ahead to the platform, where he turned and spoke to the orchestra men. I glanced back, half intending to approach the crocodile-man myself.

He was gone.

I searched the crowd with eager eyes. No use. He had vanished.

Vanished? Had he existed? I saw him—or thought I did—only for a moment. And I was still a little befuddled. Egypt on the brain. Perhaps I had been over-imaginative. But why the queer flooding feeling of reality?

These questions were never answered, for my attention was distracted by the performance on the platform. Vanning had started his half-hour of entertainment for the "guests." He had told me it was a mere sop to conceal his real interests, but I found it more impressive than I expected.

The lights turned blue—haggard, graveyard-misty blue. The shadows darkened to indigo blurs as the celebrants found seats. An organ rose from beneath the orchestra platform, and music throbbed.

It was my favorite number—the superb and sonorously sepulchral Number One scene from *The Swan Lake,* by Tchaikowsky. It droned, mocked, shrilled, blared. It whispered, roared, threatened, frightened. It even impressed and quieted the milling geese about me.

There was a Devil Dance following; a magician, and a final Black Mass ritual with a really terrifying illusion of sacrifice. All very weird, very morbid, and very false. When the lights went up at last and the band resumed their places, I found Vanning, and we hastened across the room. The four fellow-researchers were waiting.

VANNING motioned me to follow them through the curtains near the platform. We made our exits unobtrusively, and I found myself walking down a long, darkened hallway. Vanning halted before an oak-paneled door. A key flashed, grated, turned. We were in a library.

Chairs, cigars, brandy—indicated in turn by our smiling host. The brandy—a fine cognac—momentarily sent my thoughts astray once more. Everything was unreal; Vanning, his friends, this house, the entire evening. Everything but the man in the crocodile mask. I must ask Vanning. . . .

Abruptly, a voice summoned me back to the present. Vanning was speaking, addressing me. His voice was solemn, and held an unusual timbre. It was almost as though I was hearing him speak for the first time;

as if this were the real man, and the other genial inhabitant of an open house merely a sham as insubstantial as the Mardi Gras costumes of the guests.

As he spoke, I found myself the focus of five pairs of eyes; Delvin's Celtic blue, Marigny's penetrating Gallic brown, Royce's bespectacled gray, Weildan's deep umber, and the gun-metal pinpoints of Vanning himself. Each seemed to ask a question:

"Do you dare?"

But what Vanning said was much more prosaic.

"I promised you an unusual time. Well, that's what you're here for. But I must admit that my motives are not altruistic alone. I—I need you. I've read your tales. I think you are a sincere student, and I want both knowledge and advice. That is why we five are admitting a comparative stranger to our secret. We trust you—we must trust you."

"You can," I said, quietly. For the first time I realized that Vanning was not only earnest; he was nervous. The hand holding the cigar shook; perspiration gathered beneath the Egyptian hood. Royce, the scholarly student, was twisting the belt of his monkish costume. The other three men still watched me, and their silence was more disturbing than the unnatural earnestness in Vanning's voice.

What was all this? Was I drugged, dreaming? Blue lights, and crocodile masks, and a melodramatic secret. Yet I believed.

I believed, when Vanning pressed the lever in the great library table so that the false drawers beneath swung outward and revealed the gaping space within. I believed when I saw him hoist out the mummy-case, with de Marigny's aid.

I became interested even before I noted the peculiarities of the case itself. For Vanning went over to a shelf and came back with an armful of books. These he handed to me silently. They were his credentials; they confirmed all that he had told me.

Nobody but a recognized occultist and adept could possess these strange tomes. Thin strips of glass protected the crumbling covers of the ill-famed

Book of Eibon, the original editions of *Cultes des Goules,* and the almost fabulous *De Vermis Mysteriis.*

Vanning managed a smile when he saw the light of recognition in my face.

"We've gone in pretty deep these past few years," he said. "You know what lies in these books."

I knew. I have written of *De Vermis Mysteriis* myself, and there are times when the words of Ludwig Prinn fill me with a vague fright and an indefinable repulsion.

Vanning opened the latter volume. "You are familiar with this, I believe. You've mentioned it in your work."

He pointed to the cryptic chapter that is known as *Saracenic Rituals.*

I nodded. I knew the *Saracenic Rituals* only too well. The account dealt with Prinn's mysterious sojourn in Egypt and the Orient in what he claimed were Crusader days. There is revealed the lore of the *efreet* and the *djinn,* the secrets of the Assassin sects, the myths of Arabian ghoul-tales, and the hidden practises of dervish cults. I had found within it a great wealth of material on the legends of ancient Inner Egypt; indeed, much story material was culled from those tattered pages.

Egypt again! I glanced at the mummy-case.

Vanning and the others watched me intently. At last my host shrugged.

"Listen," he said. "I'll put my cards on the table. I—I must trust you, as I said."

"Go ahead," I rejoined, impatiently. Such mystery of manner was irritating.

"It all started with this book," said Henricus Vanning. "Royce, here, dug it up for me. We got interested in the Bubastis legend, at first. For a while I contemplated some investigations in Cornwall—looking up the Egyptian ruins of England, you know. But then, I found a more fertile field in actual Egyptology. When Professor Weildan, here, went on his expedition last year, I authorized him to obtain anything of interest he might discover, at any price. He returned last week, with this."

Vanning stepped over to the mummy-case. I followed.

He didn't have to explain further., One detailed inspection of that mummy-case, combined with what I knew of the *Saracenic Rituals* chapter, led to an inference that was unmistakable.

The hieroglyphs and markings on the case indicated that it contained the body of an Egyptian priest; a priest of the god Sebek. And *Saracenic Rituals* told its own story.

FOR a moment I mentally reviewed my knowledge. Sebek, according to reputable anthropologists, was a lesser deity of Inner Egypt; a fertility god of the Nile. If recognized authorities be correct, only four mummies of his priesthood have ever been found; though numerous statuettes, figurines, and pictures in tombs testify to the veneration accorded this deity. Egyptologists have never fully traced the history of the god, though some unorthodox surmises and wild linkages have been made or hinted at by Wallis-Budge.

Ludvig Prinn, though, had delved further. I recalled his words with an appreciable shudder.

In *Saracenic Rituals,* Prinn spoke of what he had learned from Alexandrian seers; of his journeyings into the deserts and his secret tomb-lootings in hiddert valleys of the Nile.

He told a tale, historically authenticated, of the Egyptian priestcraft and its rise to power—how the servants of the dark nature-gods ruled the Pharaohs from behind the throne, and held the land in their grip. For Egyptian gods and religions were based on secret realities. Strange hybrids walked the earth when it was young; gigantic, lumbering creatures—half-beast, half-man. Human imagination alone did not create the gigantic serpent Set, carnivorous Bubastis, and great Osiris. I thought of Thoth, and tales of harpies; thought of jackalheaded Anubis and the legend of werewolves.

No, the ancients trafficked with elemental powers and beasts of the beyond. They could summon their gods, the humans with the heads of animals. And, at times, they did. Hence their power.

In time, they ruled over Egypt; their word was law. The land was filled with rich temples, and every seventh man owed allegiance to the ritual bodies. Incense rose before a thousand shrines—incense, and blood. The beast-mouths of the gods hungered for blood.

Well might the priests adore, for they had made strange and curious bargains with their divine Masters. Unnatural perversions drove the cult of Bubastis out of Egypt, and a never-mentioned abomination caused the symbol and story of Nyarlathotep to be forgotten. But ever the priests waxed stronger and bolder; their sacrifices more outrageous, and their rewards greater.

For the sake of life everlastingly reincarnated, they pleasured the gods and assuaged their curious appetites. To safeguard their mummies with divine curses, they offered up scapegoats filled with blood.

Prinn speaks of the sect of Sebek in particular detail. The priests believed that Sebek, as a fertility deity, controlled the sources of life eternal. He would guard them in their graves until the resurrection-cycle was completed, and he would destroy their enemies who sought to violate their sepulchers. To him they offered virgin maidens, to be torn between the jaws of a golden crocodile. For Sebek, the Crocodile God of the Nile, had the body of a man, the head of a crocodile, and the lustful appetites of both.

The description of these ceremonies is grisly. The priests all wore crocodile masks, in emulation of their Lord, for that was his earthly aspect. Once a year, they thought, Sebek himself appeared to the High Priests in the Inner Temple at Memphis, and then he too assumed the form of a man with a crocodile head.

The devout believed that he would guard their graves—and countless screaming virgins died to support their faith.

This I knew, and hurriedly recollected, while glancing at the mummy of the Priest of Sebek.

For now I looked into the case, and saw that the mummy had been unwrapped. It lay under a pane of glass, which Vanning removed.

"You know the story, then," he said, reading my eyes aright. "I've had the mummy here a week; it's been chemically treated, thanks to Weildan, here. On its chest, though, I found this."

He pointed to an amulet of clear jade—a saurian figure, covered with ideographic images.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Secret code of the priesthood. De Marigny thinks it's Nacaal. Translation? A curse—as the Prinn story has it—a curse on the heads of tomb-looters. Threatens them with the vengeance of Sebek himself. Nasty wording."

Vanning's flippancy was forced, I could tell that by the restless stirring of the others in the room. Doctor Devlin was coughing nervously; Royce twisted his robe; de Marigny scowled. The gnome-like Professor Weildan approached us. He glanced at the mummy for some time, as if seeking solution to a secret in those eyeless sockets that blindly brooded in the gloom.

"Tell him what I think, Vanning," he said, softly.

"Weildan, here, has done some investigation. He managed to get this mummy in past the authorities, but it cost him plenty to do it. He told me where he found it, and it's not a pleasant story. Nine of the caravan boys died on the return journey, though it may have been bad water that did that. The professor has gone back on us, I'm afraid."

"I have not," interposed Weildan, sharply. "When I tell you to get rid of the mummy it is because I want to live. We had some notion of using it in ceremonials here, but this is not possible. You see, I believe in the curse of Sebek.

"You know, of course, that only four mummies of his priests have ever been found. That is because the others repose in secret crypts. Well, the four finders are all dead. I knew Partington, who found the third. He was investigating this curse myth quite thoroughly when he returned—but he died before publishing any reports. It was rather curious, his end. Fell off the bridge into a crocodile pit of the London Zoo. When they pulled him out, he was a mess."

Vanning looked at me. "Bogey man," he said, deprecatingly. Then, in more serious tones, he continued. "That's one of the reasons I asked you here to share this secret. I want your own opinion, as a scholar and occultist. Should I get rid of the mummy? Do you believe in this curse story? I don't, but I have felt quite uneasy of late. I know of too many peculiar coincidences, and I have faith in Prinn's veracity. What we intended to use the mummy for does not matter. It would have been a—a desecration great enough to anger any god. And I wouldn't like to have a crocodileheaded creature at my throat. What do you say?"

Abruptly, I remembered. The man in the mask! He had been dressed like a priest of Sebek, in emulation of the god.

I told Vanning what I had seen of him. "Who is he?" I asked. "He should really be here. It makes things—appropriate."

Vanning's horror was not feigned. I regretted having spoken, after observing his terrified reaction.

"I never saw *that!* I swear I didn't! We must find the man at once."

"Perhaps it's a polite form of blackmail," I said. "He may have the goods on you and Weildan, and frighten you into paying hush-money."

"Perhaps." Vanning's voice held no note of sincerity. He turned to the others.

"Quickly," he said. "Go back into the other room and look among the guests. Collar this elusive—stranger; bring him here."

"Police?" suggested Royce, nervously.

"No, you fool. Hurry, all of you!"

The four men left the room, and their footsteps echoed in the outer corridor as they receded.

A moment's silence. Vanning tried to smile. I was in a strange oblivious fog. The Egypt of my dreams—*was it real?* Why had that one glimpse of the mysterious man in the mask so impressed me? The priests of Sebek spilt blood to bind a bargain of vengeance; could they satisfy an ancient curse? Or was Vanning mad?

A soft sound. . . .

I turned. And there in the doorway stood the man in the crocodile mask.

"That's the fellow!" I exclaimed. "That's——"

Vanning leaned against the table, his face the color of wet ash. He just stared at the figure on the threshold, but his tormented eyes telepathically conveyed a dreadful message to me.

The man in the crocodile mask . . . nobody had seen him but myself. And I was dreaming of Egypt. Here, in this room, was the stolen mummy of Sebek's priest.

The god Sebek was—*a crocodileheaded god.* And his priests were dressed in his image—*they wore crocodile masks.*

I had just warned Vanning about the vengeance of the old priests. He himself had believed and was afraid when I told him what I had seen. And now, in the doorway, stood the silent stranger. What was more logical than to believe it was a resurrected priest, come to avenge this insult to his kind?

Yet I could not believe it. Even when the figure entered, sinister and still, I did not guess its purpose. Even when Vanning cowered and moaned against the mummy-case, I was not convinced.

Then, everything happened so swiftly that I had no time to act. Just as I was about to challenge the unnatural intruder, doom was unleashed. With a darting, reptilian movement, the body beneath the white robe *undulated* across the room. In a second it towered above the cringing figure of my host. I saw clawing hands sink into sagging shoulders; then the jaws of the mask descended and *moved.* Moved—in Vanning's quivering throat.

As I leapt, my thoughts seemed sluggishly calm in contrast. "Diabolically clever murder," I mused. "Unique death-weapon. Cunningly contrived tooth-mechanism in a mask. Fanatic."

And my eyes, in a detached fashion, observed that monstrous muzzle biting into Vanning's neck. Moving, the squamous horror of the head loomed like a camera close-up.

It took only a second, understand. Then, with sudden purpose, I had seized a sleeve of the white robe, and with my free hand wrenched at the mask of the murderer.

The killer wheeled, ducked. My hand slipped, and for a moment rested on the crocodile snout, the bloody jaw.

Then, in a flash, the invader wheeled and disappeared, while I was left screaming before the ripped and tattered body on the mummy-case of Sebek.

Vanning was dead. His murderer had disappeared. The house was crowded with revellers; I had but to step to the door and call for aid.

I did not. I stood for one stark second in the center of the room, screaming, while my vision veered. Everything was swimming around and around—the blood-blotched books; the sere mummy, its chest now crushed and crimsoned by the struggle; the red, unmoving thing on the floor. All blurred before my eyes.

I could see nothing but my right hand—the hand that had brushed the masked muzzle of the killer. There was blood on my fingers. I stared at it and shrieked.

Then, and only then, did volition come to me. I turned and ran.

I WISH my tale could end there, but it cannot. There is a hideous conclusion to be drawn. It must be revealed so that I can know peace once more.

I'll be frank. I know it would make a better story if I had asked the butler about the man in the crocodile mask and heard him say that no such person entered the place. But this—God save me!—is not a story, but truth.

I *know* he was there, and after I saw Vanning die I did not wait to interview another soul. I made that last desperate clutch at the masked murderer, then screamed and ran from the room. I rushed through the revellers on the floor without even giving an alarm, dashed out of the house and panted up the street. Grinning horror bestrode my shoulders and urged me on, until I lost all consciousness and ran blindly back to the lighted lanes and laughing throngs that dwelt smugly safe from the terrors I knew.

I left New Orleans without investigating any further details. I purposely did not buy a paper, so that I do not even know if the police discovered Vanning's body or investigated his death. I have never attempted to learn anything more, nor dare I. There might be a sane explanation for it all—and then, again . . .

I prefer not to be sure. I desperately try to make myself believe that I was drunk; that the whole incident never happened, or if it did, that part of it was unreal. Even Vanning's death I could bear, but not that legend of Sebek and the mummy-case of Sebek. I told Vanning the truth about that, and my belief has been hideously confirmed.

Yes, I wish that the stranger in the crocodile mask had never existed; wish he was unreal. But I *know* otherwise.

The stranger in the crocodile mask—of Egypt. I don't care to write Egyptian stories any more, now that I know.

Knowledge came during that last moment, when I saw the stranger sink his curiously constructed crocodile muzzle in poor Vanning's throat—sink in with saber-teeth slashing. It was then that I grabbed him for a moment before he slipped away; grabbed at him, screamed, and hysterically fled. *The murderer was not a priest.*

Then I *knew.* Ancient evil of Egypt! Not legend, but truth!

I grabbed him, in that horrible moment, by the bloody muzzle of the frighteningly realistic crocodile mask. Just a single moment of horrid contact, before he disappeared. But it was enough.

For when I seized that bloody, reptilian muzzle, I felt beneath my fingers, *not a mask, but living flesh!*

Fane of the Black Pharaoh

Terrible was the fame of Nephren-Ka, and more terrible still teas the destiny that Captain Cartaret read on the walls of the red-litten underground corridors

"LIAR!" said Captain Cartaret.

The dark man did not move, but beneath the shadows of his burnoose a scowl slithered across a contorted countenance. But when he stepped forward into the lamplight, he smiled.

"That is a harsh epithet, *effendi,"* purred the dark man.

Captain Cartaret stared at his midnight visitor with quizzical appraisal.

"A deserved one, I think," he observed. "Consider the facts. You come to my door at midnight, uninvited and unknown. You tell me some long rigmarole about secret vaults below Cairo, and then voluntarily offer to lead me there."

"That is correct," assented the Arab, blandly. He met the glance of the scholarly captain calmly.

"Why should you do this?" pursued Cartaret. "If your story is true, and you do possess so manifestly absurd a secret, why should you come to me? Why not claim the glory of discovery yourself?"

"I told you, *effendi,"* said the Arab. "That is against the law of our brotherhood. It is not written that I should do so. And knowing of your interest in these things, I came to offer you the privilege."

"You came to pump me for my information; no doubt that's what you mean," retorted the captain, acidly. "You beggars have some devilishly clever ways of getting underground information, don't you? So far as I know, you're here to find out how much I've already learned, so that you and your fanatic thugs can knife me if I know too much."

"Ah!" The dark stranger suddenly leaned forward and peered into the white man's face. "Then you admit that what I tell you is not wholly strange—you do know something of this place already?"

"Suppose I do," said the captain, unflinching. "That doesn't prove that you're a philanthropic guide to what I'm seeking. More likely you want to pump me, as I said, then dispose of me and get the goods for yourself. No, your story is too thin. Why, you haven't even told me your name."

"My name?" The Arab smiled. "That does not matter. What does matter is your distrust of me. But, since you have admitted at last that you do know about the crypt of Nephren-Ka, perhaps I can show you something that may prove my own knowledge."

He thrust a lean hand under his robe and drew forth a curious object of dull, black metal. This he flung casually on the table, so that it lay in a fan of lamplight.

Captain Cartaret bent forward and peered at the queer, metallic thing. His thin, usually pale face now glowed with unconcealed excitement. He grasped the black object with twitching fingers.

"The Seal of Nephren-Ka!" he whispered. When he raised his eyes to the inscrutable Arab's once more, they shone with mingled incredulity and belief.

"It's true, then—what you say," the captain breathed. "You could obtain this only from the Secret Place; the Place of the Blind Apes where——"

"Nephren-Ka bindeth up the threads of truth." The smiling Arab finished the quotation for him.

"You, too, have read the *Necronomicon,* then." Cartaret looked stunned. "But there are only six complete versions, and I thought the nearest was in the British Museum."

The Arab’s smile broadened. “My fellow-countryman, Alhazred, left many legacies among his own people,” he said, softly. “There is wisdom available to all who know where to seek it.”

For a moment there was silence in the room. Cartaret gazed at the black Seal, and the Arab scrutinized him in turn. The thoughts of both were far away. At last the thin, elderly white man looked up with a quick grimace of determination.

“I believe your story,” he said. “Lead me.”

The Arab, with a satisfied shrug, took a chair, unbidden, at the side of his host. From that moment he assumed complete psychic mastery of the situation.

“First, you must tell me what you know,” he commanded. “Then I shall reveal the rest.”

Cartaret, unconscious of the other’s dominance, complied. He told the stranger his story in an abstracted manner, while his eyes never swerved from the cryptic black amulet on the table. It was almost as though he were hypnotized by the queer talisman. The Arab said nothing, though there was a gay gloating in his fanatical eyes.

2

CARTARET spoke of his youth; of his wartime service in Egypt and subsequent station in Mesopotamia. It was here that the captain had first become interested in archeology and the shadowy realms of the occult which surround it. From the vast desert of Arabia had come intriguing tales as old as time; furtive fables of mystic Irem, city of ancient dread, and the lost legends of vanished empires. He had spoken to the dreaming dervishes whose hashish visions revealed secrets of forgotten days, and had explored certain reputedly ghoul-ridden tombs and burrows in the ruins of an older Damascus than recorded history knows.

In time, his retirement had brought him to Egypt. Here in Cairo there was access to still more secret lore. Egypt, land of lurid curses and lost kings, has ever harbored mad myths in its age-old shadows. Cartaret had learned of priests and pharaohs; of olden oracles, forgotten sphinxes, fabulous pyramids, titanic tombs. Civilization was but a cobweb surface upon the sleeping face of Eternal Mystery. Here, beneath the inscrutable shadows of the pyramids, the old gods still stalked in the old ways. The ghosts of Set, Ra, Osiris, and Bubastis lurked in desert ways; Horus, Isis, and Sebek yet dwelt in the ruins of Thebes and Memphis, or bided in the crumbling tombs below the Valley of Kings.

Nowhere had the past survived as it did in ageless Egypt. With every mummy, the Egyptologists uncovered a curse; the solving of each ancient secret merely uncovered a deeper, more perplexing riddle. Who built the pylons of the temples? Why did the old kings rear the pyramids? How did they work such marvels? Were their curses potent still? Where vanished the priests of Egypt?

These and a thousand other unanswered questions intrigued the mind of Captain Cartaret. In his new-found leisure he read and studied, talked with scientists and savants. Ever the quest of primal knowledge beckoned him on to blacker brinks; he could slake his thirsty soul only in stranger secrets, more dangerous discoveries.

Many of the reputable authorities he knew were open in their confessed opinion that it was not well for meddlers to pry too deeply beneath the surface. Curses had come true with puzzling promptness, and warning prophecies had been fulfilled with a vengeance. It was not good to profane the shrines of the old dark gods who still dwelt within the land.

But the terrible lure of the forgotten and the forbidden was a pulsing virus in Cartaret’s blood. When he heard the legend of Nephren-Ka, he naturally investigated.

Nephren-Ka, according to authoritative knowledge, was merely a mythical figure. He was purported to have been a Pharaoh of no known dynasty, a priestly usurper of the throne. The most common fables placed his reign in almost biblical times. He was said to have been the last and greatest of that Egyptian cult of priest-sorcerers who for a time transformed the recognized religion into a dark and terrible thing. This cult, led by the arch-hierophants of Bubastis, Anubis, and Sebek, viewed their gods as the representatives of actual Hidden Beings—montsrous beast-men who shambled on Earth in primal days. They accorded worship to the Elder One who is known to myth as Nyarlathotep, the "Mighty Messenger." This abominable deity was said to confer wizard's power upon receiving human sacrifices; and while the evil priests reigned supreme they temporarily transformed the religion of Egypt into a bloody shambles. With anthropomancy and necrophilism they sought terrible boons from their demons.

The tale goes that Nephren-Ka, on the throne, renounced all religion save that of Nyarlathotep. He sought the power of prophecy, and built temples to the Blind Ape of Truth. His utterly atrocious sacrifices at length provoked a revolt, and it is said that the infamous Pharaoh was at last dethroned. According to this account, the new ruler and his people immediately destroyed all vestiges of the former reign, demolished all temples and idols of Nyarlathotep, and drove out the wicked priests who prostituted their faith to the carnivorous Bubastis, Anubis, and Sebek. *The Book of the Dead* was then amended so that all references to the Pharaoh Nephren-Ka and his accursed cults were deleted.

Thus, argues the legend, the furtive faith was lost to reputable history. As to Nephren-Ka himself, a strange account is given of his end.

The story ran that the dethroned Pharaoh fled to a spot adjacent to what is now the modern city of Cairo. Here it was his intention to embark with his remaining followers for a "westward isle." Historians believe that this "isle" was Britain, where some of the fleeing priests of Bubastis actually settled.

But the Pharaoh was attacked and surrounded, his escape blocked. It was then that he had constructed a secret underground tomb, in which he caused himself and his followers to be interred alive. With him, in this vivisepulture, he took all his treasure and magical secrets, so that nothing would remain for his enemies to profit by. So cleverly did his remaining devotees contrive this secret crypt that the attackers were never able to discover the resting-place of the Black Pharaoh.

Thus the legend rests. According to common currency, the fable was handed down by the few remaining priests who actually stayed on the surface to seal the secret place; they and their descendants were believed to have perpetuated the story and the old faith of evil.

FOLLOWING up this exceedingly unusual story, Cartaret delved into the old tomes of the time. During a trip to London he was fortunate enough to be allowed an inspection of the unhallowed and archaic *Necronomicon* of Abdul Alhazred. In it were further emendations. One of his influential friends in the Home Office, hearing of his interest, managed to obtain for him a portion of Ludvig Prinn's evil and blasphemous *De Vermis Mysteriis,* known more familiarly to students of recondite arcana as *Mysteries of the Worm.* Here, in that greatly disputed chapter on oriental myth entitled *Saracenic Rituals,* Cartaret found still more concrete elaborations of the Nephren-Ka tale.

Prinn, who consorted with the mediaeval seers and prophets of Saracen times in Egypt, gave a good deal of prominence to the whispered hints of Alexandrian necromancers and adepts. They knew the story of Nephren-Ka, and alluded to him as the Black Pharaoh.

Prinn's account of the Pharaoh's death was much more elaborate. He claimed that the secret tomb lay directly beneath Cairo itself, and professed to believe that it had been opened and reached. He hinted at the cult-survival mentioned in the popular tales; spoke of a renegade group of descendants whose priestly ancestors had interred the rest alive. They were said to perpetuate the evil faith, and to act as guardians of the dead Nephren-Ka and his buried brethren, lest some interloper discover and violate his resting-place in the crypt. After the regular cycle of seven thousand years, the Black Pharaoh and his band would then arise once more, and restore the dark glory of the ancient faith.

The crypt itself, if Prinn is to be believed, was a most unusual place. Nephren-Ka's servants and slaves had budded him a mighty sepulcher, and the burrows were filled with the rich treasure of his reign. All of the sacred images were there, and the jeweled books of esoteric wisdom reposed within.

Most peculiarly did the account dwell on Nephren-Ka's search for the Truth and the Power of Prophecy. It was said that before he died down in the darkness, he conjured up the earthly image of Nyarlathotep in a final gigantic sacrifice; and that the god granted him his desires. Nephren-Ka had stood before the images of the Blind Ape of Truth and received the gift of divination over the gory bodies of a hundred willing victims. Then, in nightmare manner, Prinn recounts that the entombed Pharaoh wandered among his dead companions and inscribed on the twisted walls of his tomb the secrets of the future. In pictures and ideographs he wrote the history of days to come, revelling in omniscient knowledge till the end. He scrawled the destinies of kings to come; painted the triumphs and the dooms of unborn empires. Then, as the blackness of death shrouded his sight, and palsy wrenched the brush from his fingers, he betook himself in peace to his sarcophagus, and there died.

So said Ludvig Prinn, he that consorted with ancient seers. Nephren-Ka lay in his buried burrows, guarded by the priestly cult that still survived on Earth, and further protected by enchantments in his tomb below. He had fulfilled his desires at the end—he had known Truth, and written the lore of the future on the nighted walls of his own catacomb.

Cartaret had read all this with conflicting emotions. How he would like to find that tomb, if it existed! What a sensation—he would revolutionize anthropology, ethnology!

Of course, the legend had its absurd points. Cartaret, for all his research, was not superstitious. He didn't believe the bogus balderdash about

Nyarlathotep, the Blind Ape of Truth, or the priestly cult. That part about the gift of prophecy was sheer drivel.

Such things were commonplace. There were many savants who had attempted to prove that the pyramids, in their geometrical construction, were archeological and architectural prophecies of days to come. With elaborate and convincing skill, they attempted to show that, symbolically interpreted, the great tombs held the key to history, that they allegorically foretold the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, the Great War.

This, Cartaret believed, was rubbish. And the utterly absurd notion that a dying fanatic had been gifted with prophetic power and scrawled the future history of the world on his tomb as a last gesture before death—that was impossible to swallow.

Nevertheless, despite his skeptical attitude, Captain Cartaret wanted to find the tomb, if it existed. He had returned to Egypt with that intention, and immediately set to work. So far he had a number of clues and hints. If the machinery of his investigation did not collapse, it was now only a matter of days before he would discover the actual entrance to the spot itself. Then he intended to enlist proper Governmental aid and make his discovery public to all.

This much he now told the silent Arab who had come out of the night with a strange proposal and a weird credential: the seal of the Black Pharaoh, Nephren-Ka.

3

WHEN Cartaret finished his summary, he glanced at the dark stranger in interrogation.

“What next?” he asked.

“Follow me,” said the other, urbanely. “I shall lead you to the spot you seek.”

“Now?” gasped Cartaret. The other nodded.

"But—it's too sudden! I mean, the whole thing is like a dream. You come out of the night, unbidden and unknown, show me the Seal, and graciously offer to grant me my desires. Why? It doesn't make sense."

"This makes sense." The grave Arab indicated the black Seal.

"Yes," admitted Cartaret. "But—how can I trust you? Why must I go now? Wouldn't it be wiser to wait, and get the proper authorities behind us? Won't there be need of excavation; aren't there necessary instruments to take?"

"No." The other spread his palms upward. "Just come."

"Look here." Cartaret's suspicion crystallized in his sharp tones. "How do I know this isn't a trap? Why should you come to me this way? Who the devil are you?"

"Patience." The dark man smiled. "I shall explain all. I have listened to your accounts of the 'legend' with great interest, and while your frets are clear, your own view of them is mistaken. The 'legend' you have learned of is true—all of it. Nephren-Ka *did* write the future on the walls of his tomb when he died; he *did* possess the power of divination, and the priests who buried him formed a cult which *did* survive."

"Yes?" Cartaret was impressed, despite himself.

"I am one of those priests." The words stabbed like swords in the white man's brain.

"Do not look so shocked. It is the truth. I am a descendant of the original cult of Nephren-Ka, one of those inner initiates who have kept the legend alive. I worship the Power which the Black Pharaoh received, and I worship the god Nyarlathotep who accorded that Power to him. To us believers, the most sacred truth lies in the hieroglyphs inscribed by the divinely gifted Pharaoh before he died. Throughout the ages, we guardian priests have watched history unfold, and always it has agreed with the ideographs on those tunneled walls. We believe.

"It is because of our belief that I have sought you out. For within the secret crypt of the Black Pharaoh it is written upon the walls of the future that you shall descend there."

Stunning silence.

"Do you mean to say," Carteret gasped, "that those pictures *show* me discovering the spot?"

"They do," assented the dark man, slowly. "That is why I came to you unbidden. You shall come with me and fulfill the prophecy tonight, as it is written."

"Suppose I don't come?" flashed Captain Cartaret, suddenly. "What about your prophecy then?"

The Arab smiled. "You'll come," he said. "You know that."

Cartaret realized that it was so. Nothing could keep him away from this amazing discovery. A thought struck him.

"If this wall really records the details of the future," he began, "perhaps you can tell me a little about my own coming history. Will this discovery make me famous? Will I return again to the spot? Is it written that I am to bring the secret of Nephren-Ka to light?"

The dark man looked grave. "That I do not know," he admitted. "I neglected to tell you something about the Walls of Truth. My ancestor—he who first descended into the secret spot after it had been sealed, he who first looked upon the work of prophecy—did a needful thing. Deeming that such wisdom was not for lesser mortals, he piously covered the walls with concealing tapestry. Thus none might look upon the future too far. As time passed, the tapestry was drawn back to keep pace with the actual events of history, and always they have coincided with the hieroglyphs. Through the ages, it has always been the duty of one priest to descend to the secret tomb each day and draw back the tapestry so as to reveal the events of the day that follows. Now, during my life, that is my mission. My fellows devote their time to the needful rites of worship in hidden places. I alone descend the concealed passage daily and draw back the curtain on the Walls of Truth. When I die, another will take my place. Understand me—the writing does not minutely concern every single event; merely those which affect the history and destiny of Egypt itself. Today, my friend, it was revealed that you should descend and enter into the place of your desire. What the morrow holds in store for you I cannot say, until the curtain is drawn once more."

Cartaret sighed. "I suppose that there is nothing else left but for me to go, then." His eagerness was ill dissembled. The dark man observed this at once, and smiled cynically, while he strode to the door.

"Follow me," he commanded.

TO CAPTAIN CARTARET that walk through the moonlit streets of Cairo was blurred in chaotic dream. His guide led him into labyrinths of looming shadows; they wandered through the twisted native quarters and passed through a maze of unfamiliar alleys and thoroughfares. Cartaret strode mechanically at the dark stranger's heels, his thoughts avid for the great triumph to come.

He hardly noticed their passage through a dingy courtyard; when his companion drew up before an ancient well and pressed a niche revealing the passage beneath, he followed him as a matter of course. From somewhere the Arab had produced a flashlight. Its faint beam almost rebounded from the murk of the inky tunnel.

Together they descended a thousand stairs, into the ageless and eternal darkness that broods beneath. Like a blind man, Cartaret stumbled down—down into the depths of three thousand vanished years.

4

THE temple was entered—the subterranean temple-tomb of Nephren-Ka. Through silver gates the priest passed, his dazed companion following behind.

Cartaret stood in a vast chamber, the niched walls of which were lined with sarcophagi.

“They hold the mummies of the interred priests and servants,” explained his guide.

Strange were the mummy-cases of Nephren-Ka’s followers, not like those known to Egyptology. The carven covers bore no recognized, conventional features as was the usual custom; instead they presented the strange, grinning countenances of demons and creatures of fable. Jeweled eyes stared mockingly from the black visages of gargoyles spawned in a sculptor’s nightmare. From every side of the room those eyes shone through the shadows; unwinking, unchanging, omniscient in this little world of the dead.

Cartaret stirred uneasily. Emerald eyes of death, ruby eyes of malevolence, yellow orbs of mockery; everywhere they confronted him. He was glad when his guide led him forward at last, so that the incongruous rays of the flashlight shone on the entrance beyond. A moment later his relief was dissipated by the sight of a new horror confronting him at the inner doorway.

Two gigantic figures shambled there, guarding either side of the opening—two monstrous, troglodytic figures. Great gorillas they were; enormous apes, carved in simian semblance from black stone. They faced the doorway, squatting on mighty haunches, their huge, hairy arms upraised in menace. Their glittering faces were brutally alive; they grinned, bare-fanged, with idiotic glee. And they were blind—eyeless and blind.

There was a terrible allegory in these figures which Carteret knew only too well. The blind apes were Destiny personified; a hulking, mindless Destiny whose sightless, stupid gropings trampled on the dreams of men and altered their lives by aimless flailings of purposeless paws. Thus did they control reality.

These were the Blind Apes of Truth, according to the ancient legend; the symbols of the old gods worshipped by Nephren-Ka.

Cartaret thought of the myths once more, and trembled. If tales were true, Nephren-Ka had offered up that final mighty sacrifice upon the obscene laps of these evil idols; offered them up to Nyarlathotep, and buried the dead in the mummy-cases set here in the niches. Then he had gone on to his own sepulcher within.

The guide proceeded stolidly past the looming figures. Cartaret, dissembling his dismay, started to follow. For a moment his feet refused to cross that gruesomely guarded threshold into the room beyond. He stared upward to the eyeless, ogreish faces that leered down from dizzying heights, with the feeling that he walked in realms of sheer nightmare. But the huge arms beckoned him on; the unseeing faces were convulsed in a smile of mocking invitation.

The legends were true. The tomb existed. Would it not be better to turn back now, seek sane aid, and return again to this spot? Besides, what unguessed terror might not lair in the realms beyond; what horror spawn in the sable shadows of Nephren-Ka's inner, secret sepulcher? All reason urged him to call out to the strange priest and retreat to safety.

But the voice of reason was but a hushed and awe-stricken whisper here in the brooding burrows of the past. This was a realm of ancient shadow, where antique evil ruled. Here the incredible was real, and there was a potent fascination in fear itself.

Cartaret knew that he must go on; curiosity, cupidity, the lust for concealed knowledge—all impelled him. And the Blind Apes grinned their challenge, or command.

THE priest entered the third chamber, and Cartaret followed. Crossing the threshold, he plunged into an abyss of unreality.

The room was lighted by braziers set in a thousand stations; their glow bathed the enormous burrow with fiery luminance. Captain Cartaret, his head reeling from the heat and mephitic miasma of the place, was thus able to see the entire extent of this incredible cavern.

Seemingly endless, a vast corridor stretched on a downward slant into the earth beyond—a vast corridor, utterly barren, save for the winking red braziers along the walls. Their flaming reflections cast grotesque shadows that glimmered with unnatural life. Cartaret felt as though he were gazing on the entrance to Karneter—the mythical underworld of Egyptian lore.

“Here we are,” said his guide, softly.

The unexpected sound of a human voice was startling. For some reason, it frightened Cartaret more than he cared to admit; he had fallen into a vague acceptance of these scenes as being part of a fantastic dream. Now, the concrete clarity of a spoken word only confirmed an eery reality.

Yes, here they were, in the spot of legend, the place known to Alhazred, Prinn, and all the dark delvers into unhallowed history. The tale of Nephren-Ka was true, and if so, what about the rest of this strange priest’s statements? What about the Walls of Truth, on which the Black Pharaoh had recorded the future, had foretold Cartaret’s own advent on the secret spot?

As if in answer to these inner whispers, the guide smiled.

“Come, Captain Cartaret; do you not wish to examine the walls more closely?”

The captain did not wish to examine the walls; desperately, he did not. For they, if in existence, would confirm the ghastly horror that gave them being. If they existed, it meant that the whole evil legend was real; that Nephren-Ka, Black Pharaoh of Egypt, had indeed sacrificed to the dread dark gods, and that they had answered his prayer. Captain Cartaret did not greatly wish to believe in such utterly blasphemous abominations as Nyarlathotep.

He sparred for time.

“Where is the tomb of Nephren-Ka himself?” he asked. “Where are the treasure and the ancient books?”

The guide extended a lean forefinger.

“At the end of this hall,” he exclaimed.

Peering down the infinity of lighted walls, Cartaret indeed fancied that his eyes could detect a dark blur of objects in the dim distance.

“Let us go there,” he said.

The guide shrugged. He turned, and his feet moved over the velvet dust.

Cartaret followed, as if drugged.

"The walls," he thought. "I must not look at the walls. The Walls of Truth. The Black Pharaoh sold his soul to Nyarlathotep and received the gift of prophecy. Before he died here he wrote the future of Egypt on the walls. I must not look, lest I believe. I must not know."

Red lights glittered on either side. Step after step, light after light. Glare, gloom, glare, gloom, glare.

The lights beckoned, enticed, attracted. "Look at us," they commanded. "See, dare to see all."

Cartaret followed his silent conductor.

"Look!" flashed the lights.

Cartaret's eyes grew glassy. His head throbbed. The gleaming of the lights was mesmeric; they hypnotized with their allure.

"Look!"

Would this great hall never end? No; there were thousands of feet to go.

"Look!" challenged the leaping lights.

Red serpent eyes in the underground dark; eyes of tempters, bringers of black knowledge.

"Look! Wisdom! Know!" winked the lights.

They flamed in Cartaret's brain. Why not look—it was so easy? Why fear?

Why? His dazed mind repeated the question. Each following flare of fire weakened the question.

At last, Cartaret looked.

5

MAD minutes passed before he was able to speak. Then he mumbled in a voice audible only to himself. "True," he whispered. "All true."

He stared at the towering wall to his left, limned in red radiance. It was an interminable *Bayeux tapestry* carved in stone. The drawing was crude, in black and white, but it *frightened.* This was no ordinary Egyptian picture-writing; it was not in the fantastic, symbolical style of ordinary hieroglyphics. That was the terrible part: Nephren-Ka was a realist. His men looked like men, his buildings were buildings. There was nothing here but a representation of stark reality, and it was dreadful to see.

For at the point where Cartaret first summoned sufficient courage to gaze he stared at an unmistakable tableau involving Crusaders and Saracens, Crusaders of the Thirteenth Century—yet Nephren-Ka had then been dust for nearly two thousand years!

The pictures were small, yet vivid and distinct; they seemed to flow along quite effortlessly on the wall, one scene blending into another as though they had been drawn in unbroken continuity. It was as though the artist had not stopped once during his work; as though he had untiringly proceeded to cover this gigantic hall in a single supernatural effort.

That was it—a single *supernatural* effort!

Cartaret could not doubt. Rationalize all he would, it was impossible to believe that these drawings were trumped up by any group of artists. It was one man's work. And the unerring horrid consistency of it; the calculated picturization of the most vital and important phases of Egyptian history could have been set down in such accurate order only by a historical authority or a prophet. Nephren-Ka had been given the gift of prophecy. And so . . .

As he ruminated in growing dread, Cartaret and his guide proceeded. Now that he had looked, a Medusian fascination held the man's eyes to the wall. He walked with history tonight; history and red nightmare. Flaming figures leered from every side.

He saw the rise of the Mameluke Empire, looked on the despots and the tyrants of the East. Not all of what he saw was familiar to Cartaret, for history has its forgotten pages. Besides, the scenes changed and varied at almost every step, and it was quite confusing. There was one picture interspersed with an Alexandrian court motif which depicted a catacomb evidently in some vaults beneath the city. Here were gathered a number of men in robes which bore a curious similarity to those of Cartaret's present guide. They were conversing with a tall, white-bearded man whose crudely drawn figure seemed to exude an uncanny aura of black and baleful power.

“Ludvig Prinn,” said the guide, softly, noting Cartaret’s stare. “He mingled with our priests, you know.”

For some reason the depiction of this almost legendary seer stirred Cartaret more deeply than any other hitherto revealed terror. The casual inclusion of the infamous sorcerer in the procession of actual history hinted at dire things; it was as though Cartaret had read a prosaic biography of Satan in *Who’s Who.*

Nevertheless, with a sort of heartsick craving his eyes continued to search the walls as they walked onward to the still indeterminate end of the long red-illumined chamber in which Nephren-Ka was interred. The guide—priest, now, for Cartaret no longer doubted—proceeded softly, but stole covert glances at the white man as he led the way.

Captain Cartaret walked through a dream. Only the walls were real now: the Walls of Truth. He saw the Othmans rise and flourish, looked on forgotten battles and unremembered kings. Often there recurred in the sequence a scene depicting the priests of Nephren-Ka’s own furtive cult. They were shown amidst the disquieting surroundings of catacombs and tombs, engaged in unsavory occupations and revolting pleasures. The camera-film of time rolled on; Captain Cartaret and his companion walked on. Still the walls told their story.

There was one small division of the wall which portrayed the priests conducting a man in Elizabethan costume through what seemed to be a pyramid. It was eery to see the gallant in his finery pictured amidst the ruins of ancient Egypt, and it was very dreadful indeed to almost watch, like an unseen observer, when a stealthy priest knifed the Englishman in the back as he bent over a mummy-case.

What now impressed Cartaret was the infinitude of detail in each pictured fragment. The features of all the men were almost photographically exact; the drawing, while crude, was life-like and realistic. Even the furniture and background of every scene were correct. There was no doubting the authenticity of it all, and no doubting of the veracity thereby implied. But—what was worse—there was no doubting that this work could not have been done by any normal artist, however learned, unless he had seen it all.

Nephren-Ka had seen it all in prophetic vision, after his sacrifice to Nyarlathotep.

Cartaret was looking at truths inspired by a demon. . . .

On and on, to the flaming fane of worship and death at the end of the hall. History progressed as he walked. Now he was looking at a period of Egyptian lore that was almost contemporary. The figure of Napoleon appeared.

The battle of Aboukir . . . the massacre of the pyramids . . . the downfall of the Mameluke horsemen . . . the entrance to Cairo. . . .

Once again, a catacomb with priests. And three figures, white men, in French military regalia of the period-The priests were leading them into a red room. The Frenchmen were surprized, overcome, slaughtered.

It was vaguely familiar. Cartaret was recalling what he knew of Napoleon's commission; he had appointed savants and scientists to investigate the tombs and pyramids of the land. The Rosetta stone had been discovered, and other things. Quite likely the three men shown had blundered onto a mystery the priests of Nephren-Ka had not wanted to have unveiled. Hence they had been lured to death as the walls showed. It was quite familiar—but there was *another* familiarity which Cartaret could not place.

THEY moved on, and the years rushed by in panorama. The Turks, the English, Gordon, the plundering of the pyramids, the World War. And ever so often, a picture of the priests of Nephren-Ka and a strange white man in some catacomb or vault. Always the white man died. It was all *familiar.*

Cartaret looked up, and saw that he and the priest were very near to the blackness at the end of the great fiery hall. Only a hundred steps or so, in fact. The priest, face hidden in his burnoose, was beckoning him on.

Cartaret looked at the wall. The pictures were almost ended. But no—just ahead was a great curtain of crimson velvet on a ceiling-rack which ran off into the blackness and reappeared from shadows on the opposite side of the room to cover that wall.

"The future," explained his guide. And Captain Cartaret remembered that the priest had told how each day he drew back the curtain a bit so that the future was always revealed just one day ahead. He remembered something else, and hastily glanced at the last visible section of the Wall of Truth next to the curtain. He gasped.

It was true! Almost as though gazing into a miniature mirror he found himself staring *into his own face!*

Line for line, feature for feature, posture for posture, he and the priest of Nephren-Ka were shown standing together in this red chamber just as they were now.

The red chamber . . . familiarity. The Elizabethan man with the priests of Nephren-Ka were in a catacomb when the man was murdered. The French scientists were in a red chamber when they died. Other later Egyptologists had been shown in a red chamber with the priests, and they too had been slain. The red chamber! Not familiarity but *similarity!* They had been in *this chamber!* And now he stood here, with a priest of Nephren-Ka. The others had died because they had known too much. Too much about what—Nephren-Ka?

A terrible suspicion began to formulate into hideous reality. The priests of Nephren-Ka protected their own. This tomb of their dead leaders was also their fane, their temple. When intruders stumbled onto the secret, they lured them down here and killed them lest others learn too much.

Had not he come in the same way?

The priest stood silent as he gazed at the Wall of Truth.

“Midnight,” he said softly. “I must draw back the curtain to reveal yet another day before we go on. You expressed a wish, Captain Cartaret, to see what the future holds in store for you. Now that wish shall be granted.”

With a sweeping gesture he flung the curtain back along the wall for a foot. Then he moved, swiftly.

One hand leapt from the burnoose. A gleaming knife flashed through the air, drawing red fire from the lamps, then sank into Cartaret’s back, drawing redder blood.

With a single groan, the white man fell. In his eyes there was a look of supreme horror, not born of death alone. For as he fell, Captain Cartaret read his future in the Walls of Truth, and it confirmed a madness that could not be.

As Captain Cartaret died he looked at the picture of his next hours of existence *and saw himself being knifed by the priest of Nephren-Ka.*

The priest vanished from the silent tomb, just as the last flicker of dying eyes showed to Cartaret the picture of a still white body—*his body*—lying in death before the Wall of Truth.

1938

The Eyes of the Mummy

A fascinating story of flashing jewels and an old Egyptian tomb—a story with a strange and terrible climax

I MAY as well tell the truth. It's easy enough to hint of "hideous horrors" and "forbidden mysteries" when dealing with fictional characters, but in a narrative where the protagonist is one's self, there's a difference—a dreadful difference.

Nor can I hope to tell this story in the way I wish to tell it. My impulse is to set down that damnable revelation; to scream it out in all its mocking clarity that denies sanity to what is left of my life. But this I must not do, for without the proper explanation no one would understand me or believe. Then again, I must fight against the impulse for my own sake. I want to write, clearly and coherently, a natural exposition of all the events leading up to this evening. In that way alone can I restore my own shaken belief in my lucidity.

The account properly begins on the day I decided to leave for Egypt. And yet, do you believe in Destiny? If so, then you will agree, as I do, that, there were dark roots in the past which nurtured tonight's flowering of horror.

Egypt had always fascinated me; Egypt, land of antique and mysterious secrets. I had read of pyramids and kings; dreamed of vast, shadowy empires now dead as the empty eyes of the Sphinx. It was of Egypt that I wrote in latter years, for to me its weird faiths and cults made the land an avatar of all strangeness.

Not that I believed in the grotesque legends of olden times; I did not credit the faith in anthropomorphic gods with the heads and attributes of beasts. Still, I sensed behind the myths of Bast, Anubis, Set, and Thoth the allegorical implications of forgotten truths. Tales of beast-men are known the world over, in the racial lore of all climes. The werewolf legend is universal and unchanged since the furtive hintings of Pliny's days. Therefore to me, with my interest in the supernatural, Egypt provided a key to ancient knowledge.

But I did not believe in the actual existence of such beings or creatures in the days of Egypt's glory. The most I would admit to myself was that perhaps the legends of those days had come down from much remoter times when primal earth could hold such monstrosities due to evolutionary mutations.

Then, one evening in carnival New Orleans, I encountered a fearful substantiation of my theories. At the home of the eccentric Henricus Vanning I participated in a queer ceremony over the body of a priest of Sebek, the crocodile-headed god. Weildan, the archeologist, had smuggled it into this country, and we examined the mummy despite curse and warning. I was not myself at the time, and to this day I am not sure what occurred, exactly. There was a stranger present, wearing a crocodile mask, and events were precipitated in nightmare fashion. When I rushed from that house into the streets, Vanning was dead by the priest's hand—or fangs, set in the mask (if mask it was).

I cannot clarify the statement of the above facts; dare not. I told the story once, then determined to abandon writing of Egypt and its ancient ways for ever.

This resolve I have adhered to, until tonight's dreadful experience has caused me to reveal what I feel must be told.

Hence this narrative. The preliminary facts are simple; yet they all seem to imply that I am linked to some awful chain of interlocking experiences, fashioned by a grim Egyptian god of Fate. It is as though the Old Ones are jealous of my pryings into their ways, and are luring me onward to a final horror.

For after my New Orleans experience, after my return home with the resolution to abandon research into Egyptian mythology for ever, I was again enmeshed.

PROFESSOR WEILDAN came to call on me. It was he who had smuggled in the mummy of Sebek's priest which I had seen in New Orleans; he had met me on that inexplicable evening when a jealous god or his emissary had seemed to walk the earth for vengeance. He knew of my interest, and had spoken to me quite seriously of the dangers involved when one pried into the past.

The gnome-like, bearded little man now came and greeted me with understanding eyes. I was reluctant to see him, I own, for his presence brought back memories of the very things I was endeavoring to forget for ever. Despite my attempts to lead the conversation into more wholesome channels, he insisted on speaking of our first meeting. He told me how the death of the recluse Vanning had broken up the little group of occultists that had met over the body of the mummy that evening.

But he, Weildan, had not forsaken his pursuit of the Sebek legend. That, he informed me, was the reason he had taken this trip to see me. None of his former associates would aid him now in the project he had in mind. Perhaps I might be interested.

I flatly refused to have anything more to do with Egyptology. This I told him at once.

Weildan laughed. He understood my reasons for demurring, he said, but I must allow him to explain. This present project of his had nothing to do with sorcery, or mantic arts. It was, as he jovially explained, merely a chance to even the score with the Powers of Darkness, if I was so foolish as to term them such.

He explained. Briefly, he wanted me to go to Egypt with him, on a private expedition of our own. There would be no personal expense involved for me; he needed a young man as an assistant and did not care to trust any professional archeologists that might cause trouble.

His studies had always been directed in recent years toward the legends of the Crocodile Cult, and he had labored steadily in an effort to learn of the secret burial-places of Sebek's priests. Now, from reputable sources—a native guide in his pay abroad—he had stumbled onto a new hiding-place; a subterranean tomb which held a mummy of a Sebekian votary.

He would not waste words in giving me further details; the whole point of his story was that the mummy could be reached easily, with no need of labor or excavation, and there was absolutely no danger, no silly truck about curses or vengeance. We could therefore go there alone; the two of us, in utter secrecy. And our visit would be profitable. Not only could he secure the mummy without official intervention, but his source of information—on the authenticity of which he would stake his personal reputation—revealed that the mummy was interred with a hoard of sacred jewels. It was a safe, sure, secret opportunity for wealth he was offering me.

I must admit that this sounded attractive. Despite my unpleasant experience in the past, I would risk a great deal for the sake of suitable compensation. And then, too, although I was determined to eschew all dabblings in mysticism, there was a hint of the adventurous in this undertaking which allured me.

Weildan cunningly played upon my feelings; I realize that now. He talked with me for several hours, and returned the next day, until at last I agreed.

WE SAILED in March, landed in Cairo three weeks later after a brief stopover in London. The excitement of going abroad obscures my memory of personal contact with the professor; I know that he was very unctuous and reassuring at all times, and doing his best to convince me that our little expedition was entirely harmless. He wholly overrode my scruples as to the dishonesty of tomb-looting; attended to our visas, and fabricated some trumped-up tale to allow the officials to pass us through to the interior.

From Cairo we went by rail to Khartoum. It was there that Professor. Weildan planned to meet his "source of information"—the native guide, who was now admittedly a spy in the archeologist's employ.

This revelation did not bother me nearly as much as it might have if it occurred midst more prosaic settings. The desert atmosphere seemed a fitting background for intrigue and conspiracy, and for the first time I understood the psychology of the wanderer and the adventurer.

It was thrilling to prowl through twisted streets of the Arab quarter on the evening we visited the spy's hovel. Weildan and I entered a dark, noisome courtyard and were admitted to a dim apartment by a tall, hawk-nosed Bedouin. The man greeted the professor warmly. Money changed hands. Then the Arab and my companion retired to an inner chamber. I heard the low whisper of their voices—Weildan's excited, questioning tones mingling with the guttural accented English of the native. I sat in the gloom and waited. The voices rose, as though in altercation. It seemed as though Weildan were attempting to placate or reassure, while the guide's voice assumed a note of warning and hesitant fear. Anger entered, as Weildan made an effort to shout down his companion.

Then I heard footsteps. The door to the inner chamber opened, and the native appeared on the threshold. His face seemed to hold a look of entreaty as he stared at me, and from his lips poured an incoherent babble, as though in his excited efforts to convey his warning to me he had relapsed into familiar Arabic speech. For warning me he was; that was unmistakable.

A second he stood there, and then Weildan's hand fell on his shoulder, wheeling him around. The door slammed shut as the Arab's voice rose high, almost to a scream. Weildan shouted something unintelligible; there was the sound of a scuffle, a muffled report, then silence.

Several minutes elapsed before the door opened and Weildan appeared, mopping his brow. His eyes avoided mine.

"Fellow kicked up a row about payments," he explained, speaking to the floor. "Got the information, though. Then he came out here to ask you for money. I had to put him out the back entrance, finally. Fired a shot to scare him off; these natives are so excitable."

I said nothing as we left the place, nor did I comment on the hurried furtiveness with which Weildan hastened our way through the black streets.

Nor did I appear to notice when he wiped his hands on his handkerchief and Hastily thrust the cloth back into his pocket.

It might have embarrassed him to explain the presence of those red stains. . . .

I SHOULD have suspected then, should have abandoned the project at once. But I could not know, when Weildan proposed a ride into the desert the follow morning, that our destination was to be the tomb.

It was so casually arranged. Two horses, hearing a light lunch in the saddle-bags; a small tent "against the midday heat" Weildan said—and we cantered off, alone. No more fuss or preparation about it than if we were planning a picnic. Our hotel rooms were still engaged, and not a word was said to anyone.

We rode out of the gates into the calm, unrippled sands that stretched beneath a sky of bucolic blue. For an hour or so we jogged on through serene, if searing, sunlight. Weildan's manner was preoccupied, he continually scanned the monotonous horizon as though seeking some expected landmark; but there was nothing in his bearing to indicate his full intention.

We were almost upon the stones before I saw them; a great cluster of white boulders outcropping from the sandy sides of a little hillock. Their form seemed to indicate that the visible rocks formed an infinitesimal fragment of the stones concealed by the shifting sands; though there was nothing in the least unusual about their size, contour, or formation. They rested casually enough in the hillside, no differently than a dozen other small clusters we had previously passed.

Weildan said nothing beyond suggesting that we dismount, pitch the small tent, and lunch. He and I pegged in the stakes, lugged a few small, flat stones inside to serve as table and chairs; placing our pack-blankets as padding for the latter.

Then, as we ate, Weildan exploded his. bombshell. The rocks before our tent, he averred, concealed the entrance to the tomb. Sand and wind and desert dust had done their work well, hidden the sanctuary from interlopers. His native accomplice, led by hints and rumors, had uncovered the spot in ways he did not seem anxious to mention.

But the tomb was there. Certain manuscripts and screeds bore testimony to the fact that it would be unguarded. All we need do would be to roll away the few boulders blocking the entrance and descend. Once again he earnestly emphasized the fact that there would be no danger to me.

I played the fool no longer. I questioned him closely. Why would a priest of Sebek be buried in such a lonely spot?

Because, Weildan affirmed, he and his retinue were probably fleeing south at the time of his death. Perhaps he had been expelled from his temple by a new Pharaoh; then, too, the priests were magic-workers and sorcerers in latter days, and often persecuted or driven out of the cities by irate citizenry. Fleeing, he had died and been interred here.

That, Weildan further explained, was the reason for the scarcity of such mummies. Ordinarily, the perverted cult of Sebek buried its priests only under the secret vaults of its city temples. These shrines had all been long destroyed. Therefore, it was only in rare circumstances like this that an expelled priest was laid away in some obscure spot where his mummy might still be found.

“But the jewels?” I persisted.

The priests were rich. A fleeing wizard would carry his wealth. And at death it would naturally be buried with him. It was a peculiarity of certain renegade sorcerous priests to be mummified with vital organs intact—they had some superstition about earthly resurrection. That was why the mummy would prove an unusual find. Probably the chamber was just a stonewalled hollow housing the mummy-case; there would be no time to invoke or conjure any curses or other outlandish abracadabra such as I seemed to fear. We could enter freely, and secure the spoils. In the following of such a priest there surely were several expert temple craftsmen who would embalm the body properly; it needed skill to do a good job without removing the vital organs, and religious significance made this final operation imperative. Therefore we need not worry about finding the mummy in good condition.

Weildan was very glib. Too glib. He explained how easily we would smuggle the mummy-case back wrapped in our tent-folds; how he would arrange to smuggle both it and the jewels out of the country with the help of a native exporting firm.

Fie pooh-poohed each objection that I stated; and knowing that whatever his personal character as a man might be he was still a recognized archeologist, I was forced to concede his authority.

There was only one point which vaguely troubled me—his casual reference to some superstition concerning earthly resurrection. The burial of a mummy with organs intact sounded strange. Knowing what I did about the activities of the priests in connection with goety and sorcerous rituals, I was leery of even the faintest possibility of mishap.

Still, he persuaded me at the last, and following lunch we left the tent. We found the boulders no great hindrance. They had been placed artfully, but we discovered their appearance of being firmly imbedded in rock to be deceptive. A few heavings and clearing away of minor debris enabled us to remove four great stones which formed a block before a black opening which slanted down into the earth.

We had found the tomb!

With the realization, with the sight of that gaping, gloomy pit before me, old horrors rose to mock and grin. I remembered all of the dark, perverted faith of Sebek; the minglings of myth, fable, and grimacing reality which should not be.

I thought of underground rites in temples now given to dust; of posturing worship before great idols of gold—manshaped figures bearing the heads of crocodiles. I recalled the tales of darker parallel worships, bearing the same relationship as Satanism now does to Christianity; of priests who invoked animal-headed gods as demons rather than as benignant deities. Sebek was such a dual god, and his priests had given him blood to drink. In some temples there were vaults, and in these vaults were eidolons of the god shaped as a Golden Crocodile. The beast had hinged and barbed jaws, into which maidens were flung. Then the maw was closed, and ivory fangs rended the sacrifice so that blood might trickle down the golden throat and the god be appeased. Strange powers were conferred by these offerings, evil boons granted the priests who thus sated beast-like lusts. It was small wonder that such men were driven from their temples, and that those sanctuaries of sin had been destroyed.

Such a priest had fled here, and died. Now he rested beneath, protected by the wrath of his ancient patron. This was my thought, and it did not comfort me.

Nor was I heartened by the noxious vaporing which now poured out from the opening in the rocks. It was not the reek of decay, but the almost palpable odor of unbelievable antiquity. A musty fetor, choking and biting, welled forth and coiled in strangling gusts about our throats.

WEILDAN bound a handkerchief over his nose and mouth, and I followed suit.

His pocket flashlight flicked on, and he led the way. His reassuring smile was drowned in the gloom as he descended the sloping rock floor which led into the interior passageway.

I followed. Let him be the first; should there be any falling rock traps, any devices of protection to assail interlopers, he would pay the penalty for temerity, not I. Besides, I could glance back at the reassuring spot of blue limned by the rocky opening.

But not for long. The way turned, wound as it descended. Soon we walked in shadows that clustered about the faint torch-beam which alone broke the nighted dimness of the tomb.

Weildan had been correct in his surmise; the place was merely a long rocky cavern leading to a hastily-burrowed inner room. It was there that we found the slabs covering the mummy-case. His face shone with triumph as he turned to me and pointed excitedly.

It was easy—much too easy, I realize now. But we suspected nothing. Even I was beginning to lose my initial qualms. After all, this was proving to be a very prosaic business; the only unnerving element was the gloom—and one would encounter such in any ordinary mining-shaft.

I lost all fear, finally. Weildan and I tilted the rock slabs to the floor, stared at the handsome mummy-case beneath. We eased it out and stood it against the wall. Eagerly the professor bent to examine the opening in the rocks which had held the sarcophagus. It was empty.

“Strange!” he muttered. “No jewels! Must be in the case.”

We laid the heavy wooden covering across the rocks. Then the professor went to work. He proceeded slowly, carefully, breaking the seals, the outer waxing. The design on the mummy-case was very elaborate, inlayed with gold leaf and silver patterns which highlighted the bronze patina of the painted face. There were many minute inscriptions and hieroglyphs which the archeologist did not attempt to begin deciphering.

“That can wait,” he said. “We must see what lies within.”

It was some time before he succeeded in removing the first covering. Several hours must have elapsed, so delicately and carefully did he proceed. The torch was beginning to lose its power; the battery ran low.

The second layer was a smaller replica of the first, save that its pictured face was more exact as to detail. It seemed to be an attempt to duplicate conscientiously the true features of the priest within.

“Made in the temple,” Weildan explained. “It was carried on the flight.”

We stooped over, studying the countenance in the failing light. Abruptly, yet simultaneously, we made a strange discovery. The pictured face was eyeless!

"Blind," I commented.

Weiland nodded, then stared more closely. "No," he said. "The priest was not blind, if this portraiture is correct. His eyes were *plucked out!"*

I stared into torn sockets which confirmed this gruesome truth. Weildan pointed excitedly to a row of hieroglyphic figures which ornamented the side of the case. They showed the priest in the throes of death upon a couch. Two slaves with pincers hovered over him. A second scene showed the slaves tearing his eyes from his head. In a third, the slaves were depicted in the act of inserting some shining objects into the now empty sockets. The rest of the series were scenes of funeral ceremonies, with an ominous crocodileheaded figure in the background—the god Sebek.

"Extraordinary," was Weiland's comment. "Do you understand the implication of those pictures? They were made *before* the priest died. They show that he *intended* to have his eyes removed before death, and those objects inserted in their place. Why would he willingly subject himself to such torture? What are those shining things?"

"The answer must be within," I answered.

WITHOUT a word, Weildan fell to work. The second covering was removed. The torch was flickering as it died. The third covering confronted us. In almost absolute blackness the professor worked, fingers moving deftly with knife and pryer as he broke the final seals. In the yellow half-light the lid swung up, open.

We saw the mummy.

A wave of vapor rose out of the case—a terrific odor of spice and gases which penetrated the handkerchiefs bound round nose and throat. The preservative power of those gaseous emanations was evidently enormous, for the mummy was not wrapped or shrouded. A naked, shriveled brown body lay before us, in a surprizing state of preservation. But this we saw for only an instant. After that, we riveted our attention elsewhere—upon the eyes, or the place where they had been.

Two great yellow disks burned up at us through the darkness. Not diamonds or sapphires or opals were they, or any known stone; their enormous size precluded any thought of inclusion in a common category. They were not cut or faceted, yet they blinded with their brightness—a fierce flashing stabbed our retinas like naked fire.

These were the jewels we sought—and they had been worth seeking. I stooped to remove them, but Weildan's voice restrained me.

"Don't," he warned. "We'll get them later, without harming the mummy."

I heard his voice as though from afar. I was not conscious of again standing erect. Instead I remained stooped over those flaming stones. I stared at them.

They seemed to be growing into two yellow moons. It fascinated me to watch them—all my senses seemed to focus on their beauty. And they in turn focussed their fire on me, bathing my brain in heat that soothed and numbed without scorching pain. My head was on fire.

I could not look away, but I did not wish to. These jewels were fascinating.

Dimly came Weildan's voice. I half felt him tugging at my shoulder.

"Don't look." His voice was absurd in its excited tones. "They aren't—natural stones. Gifts of the gods—that's why the priest had them replaced for eyes as he died. They're hypnotic . . . that theory of resurrection . . ."

I half realized that I brushed the man off. But those jewels commanded my senses, compelled my surrender. Hypnotic? Of course they were—I could feel that warm yellow fire flooding my blood, pulsing at my temples, stealing toward my brain. The torch was out now, I knew, and yet the whole chamber was bathed in flashing yellow radiance from those dazzling eyes. Yellow radiance? No—a glowing red; a bright scarlet luminance in which I read a message.

The jewels were *thinking!* They had mind, or rather, a will—a will that sucked my senses away even as it flooded over me—a will that made me forget body and brain alike in an effort to lose myself in the red ecstasy of their burning beauty. I wanted to drown in the fire; it was leading me out of myself, so that I felt as though I were rushing toward the jewels—into them—into something else——

And then I was free. Free, and blind in darkness. With a start I realized that I must have fainted. At least I had fallen down, for I was now lying on my back against the stone floor of the cavern. Against stone? No—against wood.

That was strange. I could feel wood. The mummy lay in wood. I could not see. The mummy was blind.

I felt my dry, scaly, leprously peeling skin.

My mouth opened. A voice—a dust-choked voice that was my own but not my own—a voice that came from death shrieked, “Good God! *I’m in the mummy’s body!”*

I heard a gasp, the sound of a falling shape striking the rocky floor. Weildan.

But what was that other rustling sound? *What wore my shape?*

That damned priest, enduring torture so that his dying eyes might hold hypnotic jewels god-given for the hope of eternal resurrection; buried with easy access to the tomb! Jeweled eyes had hypnotized me, we had changed forms, and now *he walked.*

The supreme ecstasy of horror was all that saved me. I raised myself blindly on shriveled limbs, and rotting arms clawed madly at my forehead, seeking what I knew must rest there. My dead fingers tore the jewels from my eyes.

Then I fainted.

THE awakening was dreadful, for I knew not what I might find. I was afraid to be conscious of myself—of my body. But warm flesh housed my soul again, and my eyes peered through yellowed blackness. The mummy lay in its case, and it was hideous to note the empty eye-sockets staring up; the dreadful confirmation afforded by the changed positions of its scabrous limbs.

Weildan rested where he had fallen, face empurpled in death. The shock had done it, no doubt.

Near him were the sources of the yellow luminance—the evil, flaring fire of the twin jewels.

That was what saved me; tearing those monstrous instruments of transference from my temples. Without the thought of the mummy-mind behind them they evidently did not retain their permanent power. I shuddered to think of such a transference in open air, where the mummy body would immediately crumble into decay without being able to remove the jewels. Then would the soul of the priest of Sebek indeed arise to walk the earth, and resurrection be accomplished. It was a terrible thought.

I scooped the jewels up hastily and bound them into my handkerchief. Then I left, leaving Weildan and the mummy as they lay; groping my way to the-surface with the aid of illumination afforded me by matches.

It was very good to see the nighted skies of Egypt, for dusk had fallen by this time.

When I saw this *clean* dark, the full nightmare force of my recent experience in the evil blackness of that tomb struck me anew, and I shrieked wildly as I ran across the sand toward the little tent that stood before the opening.

There was whisky in the saddle-packs; I brought it out, and thanked heaven for the oil lamp I uncovered. I must have been delirious for a while, I fancy. I put a mirror up on the tent wall, and stared into it for a full three minutes to reassure myself as to identity. Then I brought out the portable typewriter and set it up on the table slab.

It was only then that I realized my subconscious intention to set down the truth. For a while I debated with myself—but sleep was impossible that evening, nor did I intend to return across the desert by night. At last, some elements of composure returned.

I typed this screed.

Now, then, the tale is told. I have returned to my tent to type these lines, and tomorrow I shall leave Egypt for ever behind me—leave that tomb, after sealing it again so that no one shall ever find the accursed entrance to those subterranean halls of horror.

As I write, I am grateful for the light which drives away the memory of noisome darkness and shadowed sound; grateful, too, for the mirror's reassuring image that erases the thought of that terrifying moment when the jeweled eyes of Sebek's priest stared out at me and I *changed.* Thank God I clawed them out in time!

I have a theory about those jewels—they were a definite trap. It is ghastly to think of the hypnosis of a dying brain three thousand years ago; hypnosis walling the urge to live as the suffering priest's eyes were torn out and the jewels placed in the sockets. Then the mind held but one thought—to live, and usurp flesh again. The dying thought, transmitted and held by the jewels, was retained by them through the centuries until the eyes of a discoverer would meet them. Then the thought would flash out, from the dead, rotted brain to the living jewels—the jewels that hypnotized the gazer and forced him into that terrible exchange of personality. The dead priest would assume man's form, and the man's consciousness be forced into the mummy's body. A demoniacally clever scheme—and to think that *I* came near to being that man!

I have the jewels; must examine them. Perhaps the museum authorities at Cairo can classify them; at any rate they're valuable enough. But Weildan's dead; I must never speak of the tomb—how can I explain the matter? Those two stones are so curious that they are bound to cause comment. There is something extraordinary about them, though poor Weildan's tale of the god bestowing them is too utterly preposterous. Still, that color change is most unusual; and the life, the hypnotic glow within them!

I have just made a startling discovery. I unwrapped the gems from my handkerchief just now and looked at them. They seem to be still alive!

Their glow is unchanged—they shine as luminously here under the electric torch as they did in the darkness; as they did in the ruined sockets of that shriveled mummy. Yellow they are, and looking at them I receive that same intuitive prescience of inner, alien life. Yellow? No—now they are reddening—coming to a point. I should not look; it's too reminiscent of that other time. But they are, they must be, hypnotic.

Deep red now, flaming furiously. Watching them I feel warmed, bathed in fire that does not burn so much as it caresses. I don't mind now; it's a pleasant sensation. No need to look away.

No need—unless . . . *Do those jewels retain their power even when they are not in the sockets of the mummy's eyes?*

I feel it again—they must—I don't want to go back into the body of the mummy—I cannot remove the stones and return to my own form now—removing them imprisoned the thought in the jewels.

I must look away. I can type, I can think—but those eyes before me, they swell and grow . . . look away.

I cannot! Redder—redder—I must fight them, keep from going under. Red thought now; I feel nothing—must fight. . . .

I can look away now. I've beaten the jewels. I'm all right.

I can look away—*but I cannot see.* I've gone blind! Blind—the jewels are gone from the sockets—*the mummy is blind.*

What has happened to me? I am sitting in the dark, typing blind. Blind, like the mummy! I feel as though something has happened; it's strange. My body seems lighter.

I know now.

I'm in the body of the mummy. I know it. The jewels—the thought they held—*and now, what is rising to walk from that open tomb?*

It is walking into the world of men. It will wear my body, and it will seek blood and prey for sacrifice in its rejoicing at resurrection.

And I am blind. Blind—and *crumbling!*

The air—it’s causing disintegration. Vital organs intact, Weildan said, but I cannot breathe. I can’t see. Must type—warn. Whoever sees this must know the truth. Warn.

Body going fast. Can’t rise now. Cursed Egyptian magic. Those jewels! Someone must kill thing from the tomb.

Fingers—so hard to strike keys. Don’t work properly. Air getting them. Brittle. Blind fumble. Slower. Must warn. Hard to pull carriage back.

can’t strike higher case letters any more, can’t capitalize, fingers going fast, crumbling away in air. in mummy now no air. crumbling to bits, dust fingers going must warn against thing magic sebek fingers grope stumps almost gone hard to strike

damned sebek sebek sebek mind all dust sebek sebe seb seb seb seb se s sssssss s s s . . . .

Slave of the Flames

A weird tale of the great Chicago fire

HE HAD always loved the sight of flame, ever since he was a boy. There had been the haymow in the barn, the cottage where he spent the night while tramping to the city. Fire made him feel strange inside, as if it were burning there. And it was beautiful to see things burn.

They hadn't understood that when they made him leave the farm after the haymow in the barn had burned; Squire Henslow had beaten him and said he was "touched." People never understood—they didn't realize what he was trying to do. Why, making a fire was like—like painting a picture, or playing music; it was making something beautiful.

They didn't understand. That's why he ran away after staying at the cottage. He hit the farmer over the head with a poker while he slept, because he wouldn't have understood, either. Then he had done *it* and hurried off. It looked wonderful in the night. It was beautiful to see things bum. And not only things now—people also.

He had imagined about that all the way to the city. If only the farmer had waked and tried to get out—how would he look?

Would he be all red, like those pictures of Hell in the Bible?

Well, one could find out those things now. Here in the city it would be easier and better. Such tall buildings, so many of them! It was the biggest city he had ever seen—one of the biggest there was, they had said back home.

He walked around for a long time. All day, all night, all the next day. He didn't eat, didn't sleep. He had no place to go. He just walked, and looked at the people and buildings, trying to imagine what it was going to look like.

It would be the biggest thing in the world, what he was going to do. He had to laugh, inside of course, so nobody would suspect. All the carriages going by, and the men hurrying, and just as soon as it was dark the lights in the houses winking so pretty.

Just as soon as it was dark there'd be light enough. . . .

He stopped in front of the stable on the street. It was nearly midnight, and there was nobody around. All over, in all these houses, a million people slept.

He walked around in back. There was a big wooden wall stretching out from the side of the barn. It was dry, thick. It would start things nicely.

His hand had been in his pocket for an hour now, holding the box. He felt that it was almost soaked with sweat, but he took it out. The striking surface was dry enough.

He bent down against the wall and lit a match. One match.

And Chicago burned.

The fire ravaged four city blocks. All that evening of October seventh it raged, and the brigades labored at the hydrant unceasingly. It was a tense situation. The watching crowds gazed silently at the ominous red glare that rose from the razed ruins, but though they felt that curious prescience of warning, they did not conceive the whole truth with all its implications. The firemen did. This blaze was in the nature of a mere hint, a taste of what might befall. This the firemen knew only too well. For Chicago, in that summer of 1871, had felt but little rainfall. All through the year the dry gusty winds from the prairie had swept the city; the hot summer sun had blazed down on frame buildings and wooden sidewalks. Now these sudden flames had taken fifty dwellings and a score of lives in the space of a few hours. It was a grisly example of what might so easily happen. A stray spark, a vagrant breeze, a few minutes time—then there might be no checking of the blasts. The fire department was small, the waterworks inadequate. Chicago was wooden, vulnerable.

But the men had come in time. The watching crowd sighed with relief. Sun rose over smoky ashes.

SOMEWHERE in the crowd he had stood. Men had run past him, throngs pushed and jostled as they strained forward. Of this he knew nothing, for his soul was in his eyes—his eyes that reflected the flames as they gazed at the ghastly glory that streamed in the sky. The Apocalypse in the Bible . . . it was like the pictures in the book . . . this was even better than he had thought it would be.

See how the big building behind the stable caught. Little red tongues were licking at the sides, a monster with many mouths eating its walls and breathing hot sparks. And the people were running out and trying to get away from the monster. There was an old man on the porch, who moved very slowly. And the cunning monster watched him—see, it had coiled its flaming tail to bar his path and now it was swelling up closer to wrap around the old man like a big snake. The man screamed, and the monster roared and hissed as it fed on the wooden boards beneath the old fool’s feet. The monster crackled with glee because it was soon going to feed on flesh. It did. Hungry monster!

Greedy, greedy monster! It was creeping toward a second house now—no, it was holding out its arms on both sides to embrace two houses at once. It must keep feeding and growing if it would leap like that; leap swiftly as it now leapt at the other buildings. Then its chuckle would grow louder. It had to eat to grow, and the more it ate the hungrier it got because of its size . . . but that was too mixed up to think about.

No, think about how pretty the monster was. All red and glowing and alive against the black sky; beautiful beast eating ugly frame houses. It had put its fingers on the roof-tops now, and tossed a shower of red-hot roses to the sky. Happy monster!

Oh, now the people came. And the horses pulling the fire-wagons. They were going to fight the monster. Fools! They couldn’t stop the feast now. Look—the whole block was burning. Roping off the squares wouldn’t help. These foolish men—they were going to try and fight the monster with the little black snakes they dragged in their arms, the little black snakes that spit water instead of venom. Water-snakes.

So much noise! Bells clanging and men shouting and horses neighing and people wailing. Well—the monster heard it too and drowned it out with loud roars, as it crawled over the second block of houses. It was pulling in its tail after it and winding it around new victims, not people now, but whole buildings. How big and fast it was!

Everybody was so excited. Silly! Why didn’t they watch this pretty thing while they could?

The fighting men angered the red monster. Roaring, he toppled over the wall of a building. It fell like a flaming wave, and several of the firemen disappeared. Good! But more kept coming, and there were hundreds of little hissing snakes spitting and poisoning the monster’s body. But it was cunning. It knew! Now it had broken up into many parts—divided into a dozen smaller monsters. That was wise. A dozen mouths to eat and grow and curl scarlet lips around windows and doors and drag down roof or chimney in flaming fingers. A dozen roaring monsters to fight back as they crawled over the black house-tops and spat embers and ashes on the heads of those puny fools. A dozen dancers, a dozen writhing roarers . . . pull over more walls on the fighters and feast!

Oh . . . it was going. There were too many men, too many snakes. Three of the monsters died. Another was spluttering and fuming, trapped inside a house while stabbing streams of water pierced its bowels so that it belched black smoke and sang in agony. The firemen closed in. They had the biggest monsters trapped in a street-comer. The monsters crawled inside the buildings but the snakes followed them. Some men carried them in to get at the heart of the monsters, and the silver water stabbed them there. They groaned as they died, and pulled down roofs in their death throes. Sometimes their fingers or their tails still moved after they were dead, but the men were now running everywhere and stabbing these fingers or chopping away the tails with axes. Only one monster left now, far away, and it was bleeding. It turned pinker and pinker as it was drained of its life by the water-poison shot by the snakes. Then it turned rose-color; red rose, pink rose, yellow rose, white rose. It was dead.

It was dead. They were all dead, after their feasting. They lay amidst the bones of the buildings on which they had feasted. Dead—poor monsters!

When he realized this he again became conscious of who and where he was. He looked about and saw that he stood against the ropes along the street, in the middle of a great crowd. Now he was suddenly afraid, and all his beautiful thoughts were slipping away; all the beautiful thoughts about monsters and roses and feasts that had surprized him even when he imagined them. These lovely ideas were all gone, and he was standing in a mob alone with his crime.

It was a crime. It was—Sin! He was a sinner, and afraid. Suppose somebody knew? Perhaps one of these people had seen what he had done. Maybe there were men who had watched him while he looked at the fire and guessed why he had such glowing eyes. What if they were looking for him now? They would come for him and take him away because he had given life to the beautiful red monsters and they were angry. Now that the monsters had died they could not protect him any more, and he didn't have fine thoughts to make him brave. No—he must get away quickly.

He jostled his way out of the throng, elbowed through until he was back on the wooden walk, then hurried off into a side street. He walked fast, and he really wanted to run only people would stare.

They *were* staring. Here—down this alley, now. . . .

Had he been followed? No. . . .

Yes.

A man in a cloak was walking down the alley behind him. He walked faster. Perhaps the man would not see him. But the man was hurrying, too.

Where to hide? The cloaked man was approaching. He broke into a run, down the dark alley red-etched in flames from behind. The cloaked man, he saw, was bearing down upon him. He gasped.

A hand fell on his shoulder. A waxen yellow face smiled into his own, as the stranger's bearded lips curled bade.

"Come with me," said the man.

And he propelled him back through the alley, pushed him through a gate, entered a yard.

The cloaked man was not a constable or a policeman. He had smiled. He seemed to know, but he didn't act as others would. And he was being hurried into a darkened house, standing back in the yard.

THEY walked up long stairs until they came to the door of a big room. It opened, and they entered in brilliant candlelight.

There were flaming tapers and torches set on low tables. A sweet smell came from the smoke that curled up out of great urns and pots set on the floor. The room was curtained in velvet, and very barely, though regally, furnished. Only a great divan stood at the opposite end, and through the gray vapor from the urns he saw a man lying upon the couch. He stared as the man sat up.

The occupant of the couch was fat—monstrously so—and his great barrel-body was clothed in a long white robe. He had a peculiar green wreath on his head, and everywhere his flesh was covered with jewels; ear-rings, necklaces, rings, bracelets, medals, ornaments—big rubies that flickered with fire, and yellow flame-opals tinged with smoky hues.

The fat man had a face that was old and awful; his flesh was blue and hung in pulpy folds under his eyes, his cheeks, his chin. His nose was hooked and his curved lips purple and swollen.

He looked like a big blue corpse, like the man they had found drowned in Squire Henslow's creek—all swollen up and bloated. Only his eyes were alive, and they were terrible. They were redder than the rubies and more fiercely flaming. They stared at him, never moving.

The cloaked man dropped his arms and sank to his knees.

"I have found him, Divinity," he murmured.

Fat face bobbed, but the eyes never changed. They kept staring. Then curved purple lips opened, and a voice—a deep, dead, drowned voice that was oh so old—spoke.

"Good. Good, indeed. This is the one. I dreamt that it would be so. You remember Apius, my friend? And his spirit, that shone again in Roger that time at London? The cycle of incarnation has revolved again—this man has the look of Apius and of Roger about him. Mark the vacant eye, the dwarfed body, the ever-moving fingers. 'Tis Apius to the life, and his deed alone proclaims it. The final omen has been secured. We are ready, then, at last!"

"Yes, Divinity." The cloaked man pushed his garment to one side, revealing a white robe similar to the one worn by the fat man on the couch.

The fat man stared, then spoke again. "What is your name?" he purred.

"Folks call me Abe," said the incendiary.

"You shall be called Apius, as is your right," pronounced the fat man, with a frown of annoyance. Then, in brighter tones, "Did you start the fire?"

Abe stood silent for a moment. Something inside him was clamoring for outlet. Reason—even his twisted reason—told him that he must speak the truth. This was no ordinary man; even city folks didn't live in houses like this or wear such clothes. This man seemed to know about him, seemed to understand in spite of his funny way of talking. He was interested. Nobody had ever understood Abe, and most people laughed at him to hide that they really hated him. Abe knew that; he wanted to tell the truth.

"Yes, I started the fire." The words came easily after that. Before Abe realized it he had told the whole story. And he described for the first time his feeling about flames. He told about the monsters and the fight with the water-snakes, and was reassured by the smile spreading over the puffy countenance of the fat man as he listened carefully. The tale was soon told, and it felt wonderful to be able to show other people that Abe could think up dreams like that out of fire.

"Apius!" exclaimed the man on the couch to the bearded one. "I knew it. He lacks wit, but in his crude way he fumbles to Beauty. And did you mark the tale of the monster—'tis Apius' *Salamander* fancy, and Roger's *Great Dragon!"* He turned to Abe.

"And now, my friend, I shall tell you why you were brought here; tell you my own story. I think you will understand, and soon I shall furnish proof. Listen, then."

THE tale was told; the gross body quivered earnestly, the age-blue lips writhed, and the red eyes stared. Abe listened.

"In ancient days I ruled a throne. I was a poet—I sought the perfect beauty in life. Being Caesar, I knew no manmade law in my search for the sublimities that shine in stars. I tasted all delights, those of the flesh and of the spirit. And Beauty eluded me at the last. In drugs and in wine I found a soaring glory, but it was not true Beauty, for it fled and left only ugliness upon awakening. I abandoned such debauchery early in youth. When I became ruler I builded temples of marble and towers of chrysolite and jade so that my eyes might feast upon their loveliness as they stood straight and clear in the sunlight from the green hills. This delighted me, but there were days when the sun shone not, and then the stone was gray and ugly, and I saw that wind and rain and dust had destroyed the perfection of Beauty I sought. And age would crumble these monuments I knew, so that I builded no longer.

"In women I hoped to find that intangible delight of soul that poets dream of. Their bodies are but mortal clay, I found, and the ecstasies of passion wane. I turned to new and curious pleasures, yet they too palled to imperfectness. I read the literature of the ancients, but though some had glimpsed of Beauty from afar, none had imprisoned it fully in their strophes or sentences. I walked with philosophers and priests, sought jewels and perfumes, searched every avenue where my prize might lurk. I found it not. For Beauty lay only in Life, and Life is—*fire.”*

The ancient one paused. There was anguish in his flabby face.

“They called me cruel—they said that Nero was a monster! No one ever understood that I sought only happiness and perfection and the meaning behind all lovely things! Because I burnt those damnable criminals they branded me a beast, a sadist! I dipped them in oil and tallow and placed them upon crosses whilst the flames consumed their worthless lives; only because fire is beautiful, and I had thought perhaps that when it fed on flesh its glory would become transcendent.

“I burnt pyres on altars, beacons in a pharos. I loved to watch the flames rise and dance as they sang their song of life eternal and unchanging. I sought the way to capture the true Beauty I found in those ocher, crimson, orange, violet, multicolored depths—sought a way to prison and prolong it. Then Zarog came.”

He indicated the bearded man who had worn the cloak.

“Zarog told me of the Rosicrucians—those Orient worshippers of the Eternal Fire that is Life. He told me of Prometheus and Zoroaster, and of the Phenix Fable. He was a priest of the Rosicrucian sect, and I learned his mystery. He told me of bright Melek Taos, the Peacock god of Evil, and imparted to me the secret weddings of Evil and Beauty.

“But I bore you with these esoterics, which you do not comprehend. Suffice that I learned. Zarog told me how a lover of Beauty might dedicate himself for ever to its search; of what Melek Taos might grant if given a sufficient sacrifice of fire.

“For a while I was afraid. Rome was in tumult, and the people hated me because they did not understand. They called me a tyrant, a madman—I, the greatest poet of them all! But Zarog pleaded. I must sacrifice my empire for eternal life. I wavered before this decision.

"I had a slave named Apius, who loved me. He too sought Beauty. And it was he, at last, who showed me the way to strength. He knew what Zarog wanted of me, and one night he crept away and performed the deed. He entered the thieves' quarter of the city and fired the houses. The district burned; the work was attributed to the Nazarenes, or Christians, as they called themselves.

"Apius had set the example to give me courage. I would dedicate myself to eternal Beauty, as Zarog wished; sacrifice with fire to Melek Taos. So—I burned Rome."

The red eyes were glazed with reminiscence, the ancient voice mused onward.

"I watched the towers topple one by one, and with my lyre I sounded the paeans of prayer. Day and night the fire raged, and day was night under the sable smoke. The sky was bleeding and I stared at the terrors of Hecate's Hell. Thus I sacrificed an empire to Melek Taos and the Beauty that is Fire. Fire, the eternal life of flames, was now mine.

"When the time came, a harmless dupe—my double, whom I sent in my stead to civil functions—was forced to kill himself to appease the wrath of my deluded people, who did not understand that I had made myself a god. When he died, Nero died. Zarog and I left."

Compassion entered his voice.

"I left Rome, left my poor, foolish people that lacked the wit to understand a god. They found no truth in Beauty, and they hated me until my name became a twisted legend of evil. Irony! But I, a poet, am content that this was so.

"And I have lived on. Zarog and I had sacrificed, and we could not die. Only the flame of Melek Taos can destroy us now; nor shall it descend while yet we worship.

"YOU must know that we have wandered far since those lost days. Their history is too lengthy for repetition here, but they have brought many things. In many lands and under various disguises we have quested. It has been necessary from time to time to renew our bond to Melek Taos, and sacrifice again. Paris, Prague, a thousand cities have burned in the night on one vast altar to Beauty and Fire.

“In London, long centuries ago, we kindled a blaze that delighted the eyes of the Bright God. And it was there that I again lacked courage to carry on. A villein called Roger was my servant, as Apius was in Rome. Once again he led the way and kindled the preliminary flame of sacrifice. His deed gave me the strength, so London burned.

“Centuries of Beauty, my friend. Centuries dedicated to the perpetuation of poetry. But now the time for sacrifice drew near again. Zarog and I were beginning to age once more, a sign that our bond with the Bright God needed renewal. We abandoned our journeys, then, and came to this new world. That was a dozen years ago, and since then we have not prospered aright.

“Ten years ago, during the Draft Riots in New York, our mission failed. The fire we lighted did not spread. And age crept close. So we have wandered here, at last. The city is large enough for our purpose. My money has insured us secrecy until the deed is accomplished. And Zarog’s pyromancy has shown the time to be ripe.

“We had planned to act soon. Once again my courage failed at the last—but now you, Apius anew, have come as an omen to lead the way. Tomorrow night we shall set the fire; and it will be a fire to delight your soul, a flame of triumph rising to charm the eyes of the Bright God so that he shall again renew his pledge.”

Abe listened. The fat oldster drew a great ruby ring from his finger and presented it to him. The monstrous red stone was set in the beak of a silver bird.

“Here,” said Nero. “A gift, my servant. The Phenix-seal is yours by right. Take it, and pledge your support.”

Abe glanced dubiously at the man. His head was reeling; this was all so confusing. . . .

"It shall be such a fire," purred Nero. His eyes flickered on Abe's, craftily winked as he gloated and coaxed with wicked words.

"Such a fire as you have never dreamed of, it will be. Or, rather, such a fire as you *have* dreamed of. The fire you meant to start tonight. The great fire, when the streets are sheets of flame, and the houses turn to red hells in which little burning devils dance and scream for deliverance. Little burning devils, these stupid people will be, shrieking in their torment—these stupid people that never understood you and your love of Beauty. The Bright God wants such people destroyed; so that then the earth shall be free for you and me and the other poets to whom the secrets of Truth are revealed. And we shall see this wonder, then go away to other lands and worship anew. You will be safe; Zarog, here, is very clever. With aeromancy to control the winds, and divination to aid, we cannot be deterred. And after that, to live for ever—you would like money, women, power, excitement; you long for these things, my friend. You can have them, with moments of scarlet ecstasy as well. Say you will come."

"I—will." Abe placed the ring on his finger.

The Emperor smiled.

"Now I have courage," he asserted. "Zarog, let us prepare that which is to come."

ON OCTOBER the eighth, 1871, one day after the first blaze that had so alarmed citizens everywhere, the catastrophe came. At nine-thirty in the evening, Taylor Street burst into a flood of flame.

And with this, as though the first flaring of the fire were a cosmic signal of disaster, a skirling wind rose. The fire-force faced disaster is the blaze crept onward. Great gusts of sparks swirled across the river, and the South Side and business district were showered with angry embers. Soon a great glare arose and soared over the city. A red hurricane roared, belching smoke and ashes and cinders from a aimson maw that engulfed the city in relentless wrath.

Balls of fire swept the skies and descended to raven at random. On the ground the flames writhed onward more slowly, but they were thorough. Wood and fabric and flesh were food not to be ignored.

Madness stalked the city. Throngs rioted in a stampede of utter fear; the streets were choked with fleeing figures; drays and vans and carriages trampled the hysterical crowds that swept the streets in utter horror and despair. The roar of the fire drowned out all sound save the screams of the dying and wounded, and the shrieks of insane torture from trapped and burning horses. The gas works exploded with a thunderous detonation that shook the wooden sidewalks along which the flames now flowed in rivulets of doom. The great bell of the Court House fell with a final clang of terror, and its collapse was echoed by the crash of crumbled walls.

A river of melted lead ran from the Federal Building. Frightened pigeons sobbed as they rose against the scarlet skies, then dropped, burning as they flew, like winged comets. Daybreak brought new dread as the flames wheeled and spread again, dividing and subdividing so that they combed each street, each alley-way with fiery teeth. Nightfall again, and new horrors. Thousands fought the blaze in vain fury, while the city roared into red ruin.

ABE saw it all. He and Zarog had crept forth, after those curious prayers in the old dark house which they had made at sunset. Zarog wore his cloak, and under it he carried the tarred, oil-soaked ropes. He had chosen a spot in the meaner quarter of the city; a row of ramshackle houses stood close, and a dark alley entered on a stable front. Here, as darkness fell, Zarog had knelt. Abe lit the match, after the ropes had been placed so very cunningly by Zarog’s long white fingers. Abe lit the match. . . .

They ran. The carriage waited around the corner, and they drove back, furiously. Behind them was a faint pinkish flicker in the sky. . . .

The wind came, just as Zarog had said it would. He had explained about the prayers, and the circle he had made on the floor. He and the fat man who called himself Nero had talked a lot.

Perhaps they spoke the truth; perhaps they were crazy. Abe didn't know. He couldn't understand half of what they had said, at any rate. All he knew was that he had been promised the fire. The ring he wore was pretty, but he wasn't Apius. Zarog told him that he had seen him start his fire the night before and knew he was a "reincarnation"; Abe didn't know what this meant, but he disliked being called Apius. Still, they were nice men, and they understood about the flames, and now the fire had started. What a great wind!

Back at the house, it was curious to see the fat man wearing a cloak and a tall hat. He was waiting, and when Zarog spoke to him in a funny language he smiled.

"Come," he said to Abe. "Let us roam abroad. We'll find rare sport tonight."

They had driven down the street together. Abe saw it all. After a while they had to get out and walk because the whole way was choked with people and buggies. They were screaming and shouting, so Abe knew that the fire must be spreading fast. Soon he saw the red skies, and then ashes started falling, and he heard the thunder of the blaze.

They struggled through the streets. People were running out of houses carrying bedding and furniture, loading their goods into vans that could not move for lack of space. Women and children cried, dogs raced everywhere as they howled in animal fear. Men on horseback fled through the throngs, trampling and crushing those who barred their way, and lashing out at them with whips.

Now they were in the heart of the fire, and Abe forgot the people as he watched the red walls about him. Fat Nero and lean Zarog stared and smiled.

"We walk through Hell tonight, I think," said the fat man. "And how else, pray, does one reach Heaven? May Melek Taos heed this offering!"

Abe ignored this. Some more of the old man's ravings about Beauty and living for ever, he guessed. Better to watch the fire—the glowing, living fire. It was a thousand monsters now, a thousand roaring beautiful beasts lashing tails of sparks and beating great red wings.

Crash! A wall fell from the crimson skeleton that was the building ahead.

"Back," Zarog counseled. "Blade or bullet cannot harm us, Caesar, but beware of flame."

"A poet dies by that he worships," observed the Emperor, "but I have no urge to unduly hasten that demise."

Abe only half heard this nonsense. He stared at the embers over his shoulder as they hustled back along the deserted street. All living here had fled before the onrush of the flames.

They came to the center of the city. Here men rioted in the streets, smashing the windows of the stores, plundering them of food, liquor, precious goods. Pickpockets, thieves, drunkards, held high revel as they pillaged unhindered.

"Fools!" sneered Nero. "If these be men, they deserve to die. Behind them is Beauty, and they grovel in trash."

A detonation shook the streets, and waves of liquid horror pulsed down the thoroughfare. Burning oil lapped about the feet of the drunken roisterers. They screamed and fled, or sank into the seething sea to perish. A hostelry with imposing pillars smoldered into flames, and its great iron columns melted like waxen tapers with the heat.

Molten metal sprayed the heads of the retreating crowd.

Abe and his companions were engulfed in the madness; they fought and trampled with the rest. Mad women cackled in hysterical glee as they tore their garments from white bodies made crimson by reflected flames. Idiotic men cursed and fought and clawed one another in raving delirium. And underfoot great startled rats raced and scurried, padding from their holes beneath the sidewalks.

Abe began to laugh and sing, so that Zarog and Nero had to drag him into the side streets. Night merged into day, but darkness remained as the smoke pall shrouded the city. And the roaring of hungry flames obscured all lesser sounds.

The carriage took them to the cemetery high above the city, and here they stood amidst the grassy graves and peered down into the lake of fire. They stood in peace and watched a purgatory, while he who called himself Nero laughed and played upon a curious stringed instrument.

All alone they were, on a hill beneath a sky of blackness, and the strange fat man played a wild sad tune that had no words—nor needed any to aid the voice of mad despair. The man called Nero sang, too, and his voice was singularly sweet. His language was not one Abe could understand, but it too held despair that was a worship. And the bearded Zarog lifted his eyes to the billowing, burning skies and chanted. They were alone with the dead that day, and there was curious wine to drink that somehow made the music easier to understand.

Abe lay back and watched the burning city, and he felt a peace he could never express in thought or word. This was the most beautiful thing of all. And if the man who called himself Nero was mad, his madness was right, and just. Didn’t they call Abe mad? People—like those awful ones rioting in the streets—never could understand.

Night again. “It will bum through the evening,” said Zarog. “Let us return to the house and arrange for our departure.”

He drove the carriage back along the quieter, deserted streets. It was dusk on the drive—a dusk of ashen hue, and through a blackly sooted sky flames redder than sunset mounted in the north.

This section of the city was almost deserted, but here in the quiet, untouched sections, strange figures crept abroad. There were little old men scurrying close to the walls with leaves and faggots. A small boy was lighting matches before a house with opened doors which proclaimed it to be deserted. A laughing woman was dancing before a flaming barn as they passed, and startled neighbors swarmed out of an adjacent building, shouting threats and oaths as she ran, cackling shrilly, down the smoke-filled street.

“You see?” purred the man who called himself Nero. He sank back in the carriage seat and gripped Abe’s arm. “There are a few of us, after all.

Pyromania, the fools call it. Little do they know of the true beauty these folk serve in their hearts—the true beauty of Fire, pure and pulsing with the elixir of Life."

They came to the house in the alley-way, left tethered horses and entered, proceeded to the curtained room. There Zarog lit the candles and the braziers.

Abe and the fat man sat in the taper-light as the bearded one scurried about, placing incongruous objects and garments in open trunks and suitcases.

The fat man sighed and spoke. "It is over, my friend. The three of us shall leave here before morning—the fire will be dead by then. But it was glorious—a dream of rhythm from the cemetery hilltop—and a tribute to Melek Taos."

Abe listened, uncomprehending.

"You shall have your reward now. Remember what I told you; how Our sacrifice is rewarded. Zarog and I are not as you see us now—we shall become young men once more, youthful and vigorous for many years to come. Melek Taos shall again grant us youth.

"I have riches hoarded in many places. We shall seek them and live again for pleasure's sake until the cycle comes upon us and we kindle another flaming tribute. You shall come with us, friend. For your unwitting aid you shall have all that you can desire."

Abe smiled, fingering his ring. These words meant nothing. This old man was crazy—crazier than they had said Abe was.

The fat one saw his smile, and frowned. Then a gasp of pain crossed his face. Looking up, he motioned to Zarog.

"Hasten," he said. His voice had become shrill and cracked these last few moments.

"Hasten. I feel the time approaching. I'm numbing a bit; I can feel age running sluggishly in my veins, cooling the blood. Before we go—rear the altar and conjure Melek Taos to grant us the boon of youth again."

Zarog bowed. Abe saw that his beard was indeed graying almost perceptibly each passing moment; noted that he shuffled away as he crossed to the center of the room and began to heap incense on a great open brazier placed there.

The fat man who called himself Nero turned again to Abe. He wheezed his words painfully.

“You do not yet believe, friend Apius reborn? Then as I promised, here is the proof. Remember what I told you—how Zarog and I long ago dedicated ourselves to eternal life, given by the Bright God in return for the burnt offering we placed before him.

“Now we shall evoke the spirit of Melek Taos once more, and receive youth. For fire is Life; fire gave birth to this earth ages ago, and through fire men have been enabled to live upon it. Always they have worshipped their gods with flame; always they worshipped fire under many names. Moloch, Satan, Ahriman, Melek Taos—the Divine Principle remains the same and shall be served.”

Nero turned his head again. “Pour the sacred oils, my friend,” he called. “Hasten.”

Abe listened. In the dusk he perceived with a start of horror that the bluish tinge of Nero’s face had deepened. Great blackened lines now wrinkled the flabby face; it was as though this incredibly old man was slowly putrefying before his eyes.

“Look,” croaked the one called Nero. “Here is testament and proof for you. I shall invoke the Fire-God and ask the boon.”

Abe saw the old man creep across the floor. Zarog, stooping, cast pungent oil into the brazier; so that it glared up redly and illumined the blackness of the room. The great pot of fire flamed, and heady smoke swirled and filled the air with acrid perfume. Zarog knelt down, tracing lines upon the floor with phosphorescent oils, which he lighted so that a little flaming line formed a pentagon in which the two old men now stood.

The man Nero now produced the curious stringed instrument and held it in trembling hands. Slowly he twanged eery notes that rose above the crackling of brazier-born fires. And Zarog, as though in rhythm to the music, began a measured chanting in an alien tongue.

ABE shifted uneasily. These madmen with their curious ritual unnerved him. The insane story had been bad enough, but now this strangely disturbing ceremony made him feel afraid.

Flames seemed to tower ceilingward. The room became filled with a purple haze through which music and chanting crawled.

And then, as Abe rose and gasped, a Presence formed.

Out of the somber smoke, rising from the brazier on roots of fire, a vast intangible outline was limning.

The music, chanting, figure swelled simultaneously. The fire-shape was blinding in its brilliance, but it slowly resolved into the definite figure of a man, a gigantic Being of Flame who writhed out of the brazier-coals and seemed to peer down at the two ancients in the pentagon.

“Melek Taos,” breathed a cracked voice.

Then Abe believed. He knew that somehow the story was all true—this was Nero, and he had made a pact with the Lord of Fire.

Nero was speaking, in a high, quavering voice that came slowly, painfully, from an aging throat. His hideous purpled face was shrunken.

“Quickly, O Lord,” he wailed. “You have seen that which we have given you in sacrifice—this mighty city we have kindled that its smoke rise to pleasure you. And now we ask again the boon of renewed youth, in accordance with our pact of old.”

Abe listened. Of a flash, a thought struck and stunned him.

His voice rose above the crackling flames.

“But *you* didn’t start the fire. *I* did.”

Nero and Zarog wheeled. Abe proceeded, unwittingly. He would boast before this god.

“Remember? When we set fire to the stable—I lighted the match, not you or Zarog. It’s my fire—not yours. Mine!”

The two ancients stared, horrified realization on their faces. It was true! Nero's lyre fell suddenly silent.

Above them the flaming figure pulsed. It seemed to crouch, and out of the fiery depths an angry purring rose. The god was wrathful. Two great reddish tongues of flame swooped out arm-like.

Abe did not hear the screaming of the stricken men within the burning pentagon. He was watching the great man-flame now, staring as though hypnotized at the pillar of fire which writhed from the brazier and hummed madly.

The idiot's eyes glazed. This was another fire—a beautiful living fire. And *he* had brought it! *He* had burned a city to do this!

A shrill laugh escaped his lips. This Nero and his priest—they were running about in the circle and screaming, and the light fell cruelly upon rotting faces as they lurched about. Then the men were sunken upon all fours, crawling weakly as the fire-arm swooped and descended.

Two great flames seemed to circle the crumbling bodies and lift them high into the air. A single shriek rang out, and then both figures disappeared into the center of the fiery head. The Bright One, Melek Taos, had feasted.

Abe laughed, maddened by the beauty of the mounting red glare—laughed to see what he had wrought. He knew that he should flee the place, for the fire was spreading rapidly; yet he wanted to remain.

Now the figure of fire reached out again. It had seen him—Abe! It was roaring angrily. Abe could not stop it.

Or could he? Nero's lyre still lay upon the floor where it had fallen. The old one had played upon it; perhaps its music would appease the rage of the flames.

Abe crawled toward it, picked up the silver instrument. His fingers strummed, as around him whirled bright butterflies of flame.

But two arms were reaching out. Melek Taos wanted *him!* Abe roared as they descended. The lyre fell; he was lifted in blazing paws that seared with incredible torture. There was a moment of terrific anguish, then engulfment.

SEARCHERS in the ruins of the great Chicago fire of 1871 made many startling discoveries. The freaks of the conflagration had resulted in hideousness. There were many bodies found in the lake, in a condition which can only be described as *cooked.* Evidently some poor unfortunates had been driven into the very water before encroaching flames; here oil-blasts had so heated the lake-shore currents that the dead had been boiled alive.

Fires had also started in isolated sections; single houses had burned in vicinities far from the main path of the holocaust. In one of these dwellings, on the near south side, searchers amidst the debris-filled roof-boards found a curious relic, perhaps the most incongruous object of all the myriads uncovered after the disaster. Its total disassociation with the setting in which it was unearthed caused considerable comment, and the object was finally placed on exhibition in the Art Institute some years later. To this day, the story behind the token is unknown, but visitors are still privileged to stare at the strange instrument discovered in the prosaic ruins of a Chicago house.

It was the battered, tarnished, but unmistakable fragment of an old Roman lyre.

Return to the Sabbath

A shuddery weird tale of Hollywood and the film industry—a story of the gruesome thing that emerged from the burial crypt

IT'S NOT the kind of story that the columnists like to print; it's not the yarn press-agents love to tell. When I was still in the Public Relations Department at the studio, they wouldn't let me break it. I knew better than to try, for no paper would print such a tale.

We publicity men must present Hollywood as a gay place; a world of glamor and star-dust. We capture only the light, but underneath the light there must always be shadows. I've always known that—it's been my job to gloss over those shadows for years—but the events of which I speak form a disturbing pattern too strange to be withheld. The shadow of these incidents is not *human.*

It's been the cursed weight of the whole affair that has proved my own mental undoing. That's why I resigned from the studio post, I guess. I wanted to forget, if I could. And now I know that the only way to relieve my mind is to tell the story. I must break the yarn, come what may. Then perhaps I can forget Karl Jorla's eyes. . . .

The affair dates back to one September evening almost three years ago. Les Kincaid and I were slumming down on Main Street in Los Angeles that night. Les is an assistant producer up at the studio, and there was some purpose in his visit; he was looking for authentic types to fill minor roles in a gangster film he was doing. Les was peculiar that way; he preferred the real article, rather than the Casting Bureau's ready-made imitations. We'd been wandering around for some time, as I recall, past the great stone Chows that guard the narrow alleys of Chinatown, over through the tourist-trap that is Olvera Street, and back along the flop-houses of lower Main. We walked by the cheap burlesque houses, eyeing the insolent Filipinos that sauntered past, and jostling our way through the usual Saturday night slumming parties.

We were both rather weary of it all. That's why, I suppose, the dingy little theatre appealed to us.

"Let's go in and sit down for a while," Les suggested. "I'm tired."

Even a Main Street burlesque show has seats in it, and I felt ready for a nap. The callipygy of the stage-attraction did not appeal to me, but I acceded to the suggestion and purchased our tickets.

We entered, sat down, suffered through two strip-tease dances, an incredibly ancient black-out sketch, and a "Grand Finale." Then, as is the custom in such places, the stage darkened and the screen flickered into life.

We got ready for our doze, then. The pictures shown in these houses are usually ancient specimens of the "quickie" variety; fillers provided to clear the house. As the first blaring notes of the soundtrack heralded the title of the opus, I closed my eyes, slouched lower in my seat, and mentally beckoned to Morpheus.

I WAS jerked back to reality by a sharp dig in the ribs. Les was nudging me and whispering.

"Look at this," he murmured, prodding my reluctant body into wakefulness. "Ever see anything like it?"

I glanced up at the screen. What I expected to find I do not know, but I saw—*horror.*

There was a country graveyard, shadowed by ancient trees through which flickered rays of mildewed moonlight. It was an old graveyard, with rotting headstones set in grotesque angles as they leered up at the midnight sky.

The camera cut down on one grave, a fresh one. The music on the soundtrack grew louder, in cursed climax. But I forgot camera and film as I watched. That grave was reality—hideous reality.

The grave was *moving!*

The earth beside the headstone was heaving and churning, as though it were being dug out. Not from above, but from *below.* It quaked upward ever so slowly; terribly. Little clods fell. The sod pulsed out in a steady stream and little rills of earth kept falling in the moonlight as though there were something clawing the dirt away . . . something clawing from beneath.

That something—it would soon appear. And I began to be afraid. I—I didn't want to see what it was. The clawing from below was not natural; it held a purpose not altogether *human.*

Yet I had to look. I had to see him—it—emerge. The sod cascaded in a mound, and then I was staring at the edge of the grave, looking down at the black hole that gaped like a corpse-mouth in the moonlight. Something was coming out.

Something slithered through that fissure, fumbled at the side of the opening. It clutched the ground above the grave, and in the baleful beams of that demon's moon I knew it to be a human hand. A thin, white human hand that held but half its flesh. The hand of a lich, a skeleton claw. . . .

A second talon gripped the other side of the excavation top. And now, slowly, insidiously, arms emerged. Naked, fleshless arms.

They crawled across the earth-sides like leprous white serpents. The arms of a cadaver, a rising cadaver. It was pulling itself up. And as *it* emerged, a cloud fell across the moon-path. The light faded to shadows as the bulky head and shoulders came into view. One could see nothing, and one was thankful.

But the cloud was falling away from the moon now. In a second the face would be revealed. The face of the thing from the grave, the resurrected visage of that which should be rotted in death—what would it be?

The shadows fell back. A figure rose out of the grave, and the face turned toward me. I looked and saw . . .

Well, you've been to "horror pictures." You know what one usually sees. The "ape-man," or the "maniac" or the "death's-head." The papier-mache grotesquerie of the make-up artist. The "skull" of the dead.

I saw none of that. Instead, there was *horror.* It was the face of a child, I thought, at first; no, not a child, but a man with a child's soul. The face of a poet, perhaps, unwrinkled and calm. Long hair framed a high forehead; crescent eyebrows tilted over closed lids. The nose and mouth were thin and finely chiseled. Over the entire countenance was written an unearthly peace. It was as though the man were in a sleep of somnambulism or catalepsy. And then the face grew larger, the moonlight brighter, and I saw—more.

The sharper light disclosed tiny touches of evil. The thin lips were fretted, maggot-kissed. The nose had *crumbled* at the nostrils. The forehead was flaked with putrefaction, and the dark hair was dead, encrusted with slime. There were shadows in the bony ridges beneath the closed eyes. Even now, the skeletal arms were up, and bony fingers brushed at those dead pits as the rotted lids fluttered apart. The eyes opened.

They were wide, staring, flaming—and in them was the grave. They were eyes that had closed in death and opened in the coffin under earth. They were eyes that had seen the body rot and the soul depart to mingle in worm-ravened darkness below. They were eyes that held an alien life, a life so dreadful as to animate the cadavers body and force it to claw its way back to outer earth. They were *hungry* eyes—triumphant, now, as they gazed in graveyard moonlight on a world they had never known before. They hungered for the world as only Death can hunger for Life. And they blazed out of the corpse-pallid face in icy joy.

Then the cadaver began to walk. It lurched between the graves, lumbered before ancient tombs. It shambled through the forest night until it reached a road. Then it turned up that road slowly . . . slowly.

And the hunger in those eyes flamed again as the lights of a city flared below. Death was preparing to mingle with men.

2

I SAT through all this entranced. Only a few minutes had elapsed, but I felt as though uncounted ages had passed unheeded. The film went on. Les and I didn’t exchange a word, but we watched.

The plot was rather routine after that. The dead man was a scientist whose wife had been stolen from him by a young doctor. The doctor had tended him in his last illness and unwittingly administered a powerful narcotic with cataleptic effects.

The dialog was foreign and I could not place it. All of the actors were unfamiliar to me, and the setting and photography was quite unusual; unorthodox treatment as in *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* and other psychological films.

There was one scene where the living-dead man became enthroned as arch-priest at a Black Mass ceremonial, and there was a little child. . . . His eyes as he plunged the knife . . .

He kept—*decaying* throughout the film . . . the Black Mass worshippers knew him as an emissary of Satan, and they kidnapped the wife as sacrifice for his own resurrection . . . the scene with the hysterical woman when she saw and recognized her husband for the first time, and the deep, evil whispering voice in which he revealed his secret to her . . . the final pursuit of the devil-worshippers to the great altar-stone in the mountains . . . the death of the resurrected one.

Almost a skeleton in fact now, riddled by bullets and shot from the weapons of the doctor and his neighbors, the dead one crumbled and fell from his seat on the altar-stone. And as those eyes glazed in second death the deep voice boomed out in a prayer to Sathanas. The lich crawled across the ground to the ritual fire, drew painfully erect, and tottered into the flames. And as it stood weaving for a moment in the blaze the lips moved again in infernal prayer, and the eyes implored not the skies, but the earth. The ground opened in a final flash of fire, and the charred corpse fell through. The Master claimed his own. . . .

It was grotesque, almost a fairy-tale in its triteness. When the film had flickered *off* and the orchestra blared the opening for the next "flesh-show" we rose in our seats, conscious once more of our surroundings. The rest of the mongrel audience seemed to be in a stupor almost equal to our own. Wide-eyed Japanese sat staring in the darkness; Filipinos muttered covertly to one another; even the drunken laborers seemed incapable of greeting the "Grand Opening" with their usual ribald hoots.

Trite and grotesque the plot of the film may have been, but the actor who played the lead had instilled it with ghastly reality. He *had* been dead; his eyes *knew.* And the voice was the voice of Lazarus awakened.

Les and I had no need to exchange words. We both felt it. I followed him silently as he went up the stairs to the manager's office.

Edward Reich was glowering over the desk. He showed no pleasure at seeing us barge in. When Les asked him where he had procured the film for this evening and what its name was, he opened his mouth and emitted a cascade of curses.

We learned that *Return to the Sabbath* had been sent over by a cheap agency from out Inglewood way, that a Western had been expected, and the "damned foreign junk" substituted by mistake. A hell of a picture this was, for a girl-show! Gave the audience the lousy creeps, and it wasn't even in English! Stinking imported films!

It was some time before we managed to extract the name of the agency from the manager's profane lips. But five minutes after that, Les Kincaid was on the phone speaking to the head of the agency; an hour later we were out at the office. The next morning Kincaid went in to see the big boss, and the following day I was told to announce for publication that Karl Jorla, the Austrian horror-star, had been signed by cable to our studio; and he was leaving at once for the United States.

IT WAS a stroke of genius on Kincaid's part. We all felt that way about the matter. Horror pictures were on the way in; Karloff and Lugosi were turning out their early numbers over at Universal, and grossing big. Lionel Atwill was doing his usual villainy on several lots, and profitably so. Peter Lorre, the peer of them all, had just been signed for American films after his sensational performances as the psychopathic murderer in *M* and his gruesome spy-portrayal in *Man Who Knew Too Much.*

And we knew that Karl Jorla topped them all. If the fans were really sincere in their liking for the macabre, they were going to get the genuine article. Not since Lon Chaney had I seen such consummate artistry; certainly this man was Chaney's superior in that he had a sincerity which out-distanced the horror of mere make-up tricks.

I printed these items, gave all the build-up I could. But after the initial announcements I was stopped dead. Everything had happened too swiftly; we knew nothing about this man Jorla, really. Subsequent cables to Austrian and German studios failed to disclose any information about the fellow's private life. He had evidently never played in any film prior to *Return to the Sabbath.* He was utterly unknown. The film had never been shown greatly abroad, and it was only by mistake that the Inglewood agency has obtained a copy and run it here in the United States. Audience reaction could not be learned, and the film was not scheduled for general release unless English titles could be dubbed in.

I was up a stump. Here we had the "find" of the year, and I couldn't get enough material out to make it known!

We expected Karl Jorla to arrive in two weeks, however. I was told to get to work on him as soon as he got in, then flood the news agencies with stories. Three of our best writers were working on a special production for him already; the Big Boss meant to handle it himself. It would be similar to the foreign film, for that "return from the dead" sequence must be included.

JORLA arrived on October seventh. He put up at a hotel; the studio sent down its usual welcoming committee, took him out to the lot for formal testing, then turned him over to me.

I met the man for the first time in the little dressing-room they had assigned him. I'll never forget that afternoon of our first meeting, or my first sight of him as I entered the door.

What I expected to see I don't know. But what I did see amazed me. For Karl Jorla was the dead-alive man of the screen *in life!*

The features were not fretted, of course. But he was tall, and almost as cadaverously thin as in his role; his face was pallid, and his eyes blue-circled. And the eyes were the dead eyes of the movie; the deep, *knowing* eyes!

The booming voice greeted me in hesitant English. Jorla smiled with his lips at my obvious discomfiture, but the expression of the eyes never varied in their alien strangeness.

Somewhat hesitantly I explained my office and my errand. "No pub-leecity," Jorla intoned. "I do not weesh to make known what is affairs of mine own do-eeng."

I gave him the usual arguments. How much he understood I cannot say, but he was adamant. I learned only a little; that he had been born in Prague, lived in wealth until the upheavals of the European depression, and entered film work only to please a director friend of his. This director had made the picture in which Jorla played, for private showings only. By mischance a print had been released and copied for general circulation. It had all been a mistake. However, the American film offer had come opportunely, since Jorla wanted to leave Austria at once.

"After the feelm app-ear, I am in bad lights weeth my—friends," he explained, slowly. "They do not weesh it to be shown, that cere-monee."

"The Black Mass?" I asked. "Your *friends?"*

"Yes. The wor-ship of Lucifer. It was real, you know."

Was he joking? No—I couldn't doubt the man's sincerity. There was no room for mirth in those alien eyes. And then I knew what he meant, what he so casually revealed. He had been a devil-worshipper himself—he and that director. They had made the film and meant it for private display in their own occult circles. No wonder he sought escape abroad!

It was incredible, save that I knew Europe, and the dark Northern mind. The worship of Evil continues today in Budapest, Prague, Berlin. And he, Karl Jorla the horror-actor, admitted to being one of them!

"What a story!" I thought. And then I realized that it could, of course, never be printed. A horror-star admitting belief in the parts he played? Absurd!

All the features about Boris Karloff played up the fact that he was a gentle man who found true peace in raising a garden. Lugosi was pictured as a sensitive neurotic, tortured by the roles he played in the films. A twill was a socialite and a stage star. And Peter Lorre was always written up as being gentle as a lamb, a quiet student whose ambition was to play comedy parts.

No, it would never do to break the story of Jorla's devil-worship. And he was so damnably reticent about his private affairs!

I sought out Kincaid after the termination of our unsatisfactory interview. I told him what I had encountered and asked for advice. He gave it.

"The old Lon Chaney line," he counseled. "Mystery man. We say nothing about him until the picture is released. After that I have a hunch things will work out for themselves. The fellow is a marvel. So don't bother about stories until the film is canned."

Consequently I abandoned publicity efforts in Karl Jorla's direction. Now I am very glad I did so, for there is no one to remember his name, or suspect the horror that was soon to follow.

4

THE script was finished. The front office approved. Stage Four was under construction; the casting director got busy. Jorla was at the studio every day; Kincaid himself was teaching him English. The part was one in which very few words were needed, and Jorla proved a brilliant pupil, according to Les.

But Les was not as pleased as he should have been about it all. He came to me one day about a week before production and unburdened himself. He strove to speak lightly about the affair, but I could tell that he felt worried.

The gist of his story was very simple. Jorla was behaving strangely. He had had trouble with the front office; he refused to give the studio his living address, and it was known that he had checked out from his hotel several days after first arriving in Hollywood.

Nor was that all. He wouldn't talk about his part, or volunteer any information about interpretation. He seemed to be quite uninterested—admitting frankly to Kincaid that his only reason for signing a contract was to leave Europe.

He told Kincaid what he had told me—about the devil-worshippers. And he hinted at more. He spoke of being followed, muttered about "avengers" and "hunters who waited." He seemed to feel that the witch-cult was angry at him for the violation of secrets, and held him responsible for the release of *Return to the Sabbath.* That, he explained, was why he would net give his address, nor speak of his past life for publication. That is why he must use very heavy make-up in his film debut here. He felt at times as though he were being watched, or followed. There were many foreigners here . . . too many.

"What the devil can I do with a man like that?" Kincaid exploded, after he had explained this to me. "He's insane, or a fool. And I confess that he's too much like his screen character to please me. The damned casual way in which he professes to have dabbled in devil-worship and. sorcery! He believes all this, and—well, I'll tell you the truth. I came here today because of the last thing he spoke of to me this morning.

"He came down to the office, and at first when he walked in I didn't know him. The dark glasses and muffler helped, of course, but he himself had changed. He was trembling, and walked with a stoop. And when he spoke his voice was like a groan. He showed me—this."

Kincaid handed me the clipping. It was from the London *Times,* through European press dispatches. A short paragraph, giving an account of the death of Fritz Ohmmen, the Austrian film director. He had been found strangled in a Paris garret, and his body had been frightfully mutilated; it mentioned an inverted cross branded on his stomach above the ripped entrails. Police were seeking the murderer. . . .

I handed the clipping back in silence. "So what?" I asked. But I had already guessed his answer.

"Fritz Ohmmen," Kincaid said, slowly, "was the director of the picture in which Karl Jorla played; the director, who with Jorla, knew the devil-worshippers. Jorla says that he fled to Paris, and that *they* sought him out."

I was silent.

"Mess," grunted Kincaid. "I've offered Jorla police protection, and he's refused. I can't coerce him under the terms of our contract. As long as he plays the part, he's secure with us. But he has the jitters. And I'm getting them."

He stormed out. I couldn't help him. I sat thinking of Karl Jorla, who believed in devil-gods, worshipped, and betrayed them. And I could have smiled at the absurdity of it all if I hadn't seen the man on the screen and watched his evil eyes. He *knew!* It was then that I began to feel thankful we had not given Jorla any publicity. I had a hunch.

During the next few days I saw Jorla but seldom. The rumors, however, began to trickle in. There had been an influx of foreign "sight-seers" at the studio gates. Someone had attempted to crash through the barriers in a racing-car. An extra in a mob scene over on Lot Six had been found carrying an automatic beneath his vest; when apprehended he had been lurking under the executive office windows. They had taken him down to headquarters, and so far the man had refused to talk. He was a German. . . .

Jorla came to the studios every day in a shuttered car. He was bundled up to the eyes. He trembled constantly. His English lessons went badly. He spoke to no one. He had hired two men to ride with him in his car. They were armed.

A few days later news came that the German extra had talked. He was evidently a pathological case . . . he babbled wildly of a “Black Cult of Lucifer” known to some of the foreigners around town. It was a secret society purporting to worship the Devil, with vague connections in the mother countries. He had been “chosen” to avenge a wrong. More than that he dared not say, but he did give an address where the police might find cult headquarters. The place, a dingy house in Glendale, was quite deserted, of course. It was a queer old house with a secret cellar beneath the basement, but everything seemed to have been abandoned. The man was being held for examination by an alienist.

I HEARD this report with deep misgivings. I knew something of Los Angeles’ and Hollywood’s heterogeneous foreign population; God knows, Southern California has attracted mystics and occultists from all over the world. I’ve even heard rumors about stars being mixed up in unsavory secret societies, things one would never dare to admit in print. And Jorla was afraid.

That afternoon I tried to trail his black car as it left the studio for his mysterious home, but I lost the track in the winding reaches of Topanga Canyon. It had disappeared into the secret twilight of the purple hills, and I knew then that there was nothing I could do. Jorla had his own defenses, and if they failed, we at the studio could not help.

That was the evening he disappeared. At least he did not show up the next morning at the studio, and production was to start in two days. We heard about it. The boss and Kincaid were frantic. The police were called in, and I did my best to hush things up. When Jorla did not appear the following morning I went to Kincaid and told him about my following the car to Topanga Canyon. The police went to work. Next morning was production.

We spent a sleepless night of fruitless vigil. There was no word. Morning came, and there was unspoken dread in Kincaid's eyes as he faced me across the office table. Eight o'clock. We got up and walked silently across the lot to the studio cafeteria. Black coffee was badly needed; we hadn't had a police report for hours. We passed Stage Four, where the Jorla crew was at work. The noise of hammers was mockery. Jorla, we felt, would never face a camera today, if ever.

Bleskind, the director of the untitled horror opus, came out of the Stage office as we passed.

His paunchy body quivered as he grasped Kincaid's lapels and piped, "Any news?"

Kincaid shook his head slowly. Bleskind thrust a cigar into his tense mouth.

"We're shooting ahead," he snapped. "We'll shoot around Jorla. If he doesn't show up when we finish the scenes in which he won't appear, we'll get another actor. But we can't wait." The squat director bustled back to the Stage.

Moved by a sudden impulse, Kincaid grasped my arm and propelled me after Bleskind's waddling form.

"Let's see the opening shots," he suggested. "I want to see what kind of a story they've given him."

We entered Stage Four.

A Gothic Castle, the ancestral home of Baron Ulmo. A dark, gloomy stone crypt of spidery horror. Cobwebbed, dust-shrouded, deserted by men and given over to the rats by day and the unearthly horrors that crept by night. An altar stood by the crypt, an altar of evil, the great black stone on which the ancient Baron Ulmo and his devil-cult had held their sacrifices. Now, in the pit beneath the altar, the Baron lay buried. Such was the legend.

According to the first shot scheduled, Sylvia Channing, the heroine, was exploring the castle. She had inherited the place and taken it over with her young husband. In this scene she was to see the altar for the first time, read the inscription on its base. This inscription was to prove an unwitting invocation, opening up the crypt beneath the altar and awakening Jorla, as Baron Ulmo, from the dead. He was to rise from the crypt then, and walk. It was at this point that the scene would terminate, due to Jorla's strange absence.

The setting was magnificently handled. Kincaid and I took our places beside Director Bleskind as the shot opened. Sylvia Channing walked out on the set; the signals were given, lights flashed, and the action began.

It was pantomimic. Sylvia walked across the cobwebbed floor, noticed the altar, examined it. She stooped to read the inscription, then whispered it aloud. There was a drone, as the opening of the altar-crypt was mechanically begun. The altar swung aside, and the black gaping pit was revealed. The upper cameras swung to Sylvia's face. She was to stare at the crypt in horror, and she did it most magnificently. In the picture she would be watching Jorla emerge.

Bleskind prepared to give the signal to cut action. Then—

Something emerged from the crypt!

It was dead, that thing—that horror with a mask of faceless flesh. Its lean body was clothed in rotting rags, and on its chest was a bloody crucifix, inverted—carved out of dead flesh. The eyes blazed loathsomely. It was Baron Ulmo, rising from the dead. *And it was Karl Jorla!*

The make-up was perfect. His eyes were dead, just as in the other film. The lips seemed shredded again, the mouth even more ghastly in its slitted blackness. And the touch of the bloody crucifix was immense.

Bleskind nearly swallowed his cigar when Jorla appeared. Quickly he controlled himself, silently signaled the men to proceed with the shooting. We strained forward, watching every move, but Les Kincaid's eyes held a wonder akin to my own.

Jorla was acting as never before. He moved slowly, as a corpse must move. As he raised himself from the crypt, each tiny effort seemed to cause him utter agony. The scene was soundless; Sylvia had fainted. But Jorla's lips moved, and we heard a faint whispering murmur which heightened the horror. Now the grisly cadaver was almost half out of the crypt. It strained upward, still murmuring. The bloody crucifix of flesh gleamed redly on the chest. . . . I thought of the one found on the body of the murdered foreign director, Fritz Ohmmen, and realized where Jorla had gotten the idea.

The corpse strained up . . . it was to rise now . . . up . . . and then, with a sudden rictus, the body stiffened and slid back into the crypt.

Who screamed first I do not know. But the screaming continued after the prop-boys had rushed to the crypt and looked down at what lay within.

When I reached the brink of the pit I screamed, too.

For it was utterly empty.

5

I WISH there were nothing more to tell.

The papers never knew. The police hushed things up. The studio is silent, and the production was dropped immediately. But matters did not stop there. There was a sequel to that hideous horror on Stage Four.

Kincaid and I cornered Bleskind. There was no need of any explanation; how could what we had just seen be explained in any sane way?

Jorla had disappeared; no one had let him into the studio; no make-up man had given him his attention. Nobody had seen him enter the crypt. He had appeared in the scene, then disappeared. The crypt was empty.

These were the facts. Kincaid told Bleskind what to do. The film was developed immediately, though two of the technicians fainted. We three sat in the projection booth and watched the morning's rushes flicker across the screen. The sound-track was specially dubbed in.

That scene—Sylvia walking and reading the incantation—the pit opening—and God, when *nothing* emerged!

Nothing but that great red scar suspended in midair—that great inverted crucifix cut in bleeding flesh; no Jorla visible at all! That bleeding cross in the air, and then the mumbling. . . .

Jorla—the thing—whatever it was—had mumbled a few syllables on emerging from the crypt. The sound-track had picked them up. And we couldn't see anything but that scar; yet we heard Jorla's voice now coming from nothingness. We heard what he kept repeating, as he fell back into the crypt.

It was an address in Topanga Canyon.

The lights flickered on, and it was good to see them. Kincaid phoned the police and directed them to the address given on the sound-track.

We waited, the three of us, in Kincaid's office, waited for the police call. We drank, but did not speak. Each of us was thinking of Karl Jorla the devil-worshipper who had betrayed his faith; of his fear of vengeance. We thought of the director's death, and the bloody crucifix on his chest; remembered Jorla's disappearance. And then that ghastly ghost-thing on the screen, the bloody thing that hung in midair as Jorla's voice groaned the address. . . .

The phone rang.

I picked it up. It was the police department. They gave their report. I fainted.

It was several minutes before I came to. It was several more minutes before I opened my mouth and spoke.

"They've found Karl Jorla's body at the address given on the screen," I whispered. "He was lying dead in an old shack up in the hills. He had been—murdered. There was a bloody cross, inverted on his chest. They think it was the work of some fanatics, because the place was filled with books on sorcery and Black Magic. They say——"

I paused. Kincaid's eyes commanded. "Go on."

"They say," I murmured, "that Jorla had been dead for at least three days."

Secret of the Observatory

Desperate danger menaced Dan Marlin, betrayed by the girl he loved, as he trained his super camera on the grim secrets of Okida's observatory.

CHAPTER I

The Mystery Girl

GREAT yellow eyes winked down from the mountain. Its great egg-shaped head reared from behind the trees, and the eyes stared from it; winking and watching the tiny human figures struggling up the path.

"What's the matter with me?" Dan Marlin muttered aloud.

His companion, a short, bald-headed man with a shrewd, bull-dog face, stared at him through the darkness.

"That's what I'd like to know," he replied, sarcastically. "What the matter with you?"

Marlin disregarded the mockery in his friend's voice, and continued: "I must have the shakes, I guess. Know what I was thinking? I got the idea that the observatory up there on the mountain was shaped like a gigantic head, and that those two windows were its eyes. As though it were watching us."

"Seeing things, eh?" grunted his bald-headed companion. "Well, I thought it would come to this. You used to be a first-rate reporter, Marlin—

but now I think you're an A-number-one screwball."

There was gruff affection not unmixed with genuine concern in the little man's voice. Marlin stopped in the path and faced him.

"Don't worry, Hughes," he said. "I know all this seems pretty crazy to you—sneaking up here to spy on an observatory in the dark—but I know what I'm doing. If I'm right we're on the trail of the biggest news story ever broken."

"If you're wrong," returned the other, "we're going to land in a Canadian jail, and the only thing broken is liable to be our heads."

"Come on," whispered Marlin. "And from now on, don't talk so loudly. If they *are* watching us from the mountain up there, we're sunk."

The burning yellow eyes of the observatory's lighted windows blinked as though in answer. Unconsciously the two men began to creep in the shadows, as though they were indeed being spied upon by unseen presences. The night wind whistled through the trees. Marlin led the way up a steep, vine-tangled path. Hughes tagged behind, lugging in his arms a large black box resembling an oversized valise.

"I don't mind your crazy notion of dragging us up here in the dead of night," grumbled the little man. "But just why you have to load me down with this infernal contraption is more than I can see."

"I told you all that before we started," murmured Marlin. "It's my spying instrument."

"It just don't make sense, that's all," Hughes grunted, as he stumbled along. "Spying on an astronomical observatory in the woods after dark is my idea of a—"

"Quick! Get down!" Marlin turned and pulled Hughes to the side of the path, then dropped to all fours, dragging the little man with him beneath a sheltering bush.

Scarcely had he done so when a great beam of yellow light cut across the little pathway ahead—a yellow beam which rode the sky straight from the top of the observatory half a mile away.

"I was right," Marlin whispered. "They *are* watching!"

He rose slowly, as the light flickered and died away. Hughes pulled himself painfully erect, and stood tottering beneath the burden of the bulky black box.

"I don't get it," he said. "Why not just march up to the place and ask this Doctor Okida, or whatever his name is, for a look-around? Why the secrecy?"

"THAT'S what I'm here to find out," Marlin retorted. "Why the secrecy? These Asiatics came over two months ago and secured permission from the Canadian government to operate this observatory on Long Mountain. That checks. But they immediately discharge all the White assistants, barricade the place with barbed wire, and refuse admittance to all outsiders.

"This Doctor Okida, the man in charge—I heard of him before, when I covered war news on the Chinese front. He's a big scientist all right, but no astronomer. He specializes in building new weapons and war machinery."

"But—" spluttered Hughes.

"Put it all together, and it doesn't spell Mother to me," Marlin continued. "It looks very much to me as if our oriental friends were using this astronomical observatory for a blind; as though they were really working on one of Okida's secret inventions. And judging from that spotlight we just avoided, the Doctor doesn't welcome press visitors."

"O. K.," Hughes said. "I see the point. But then why come up here at all? You can't get in, and what do you expect to see in the dark?"

"Plenty," returned Marlin, with a grin. "Wait until I set Argus up."[1]

"Who?"

"Argus—the Argus Eye. The machine you're carrying in the black box."

"Oh, it's a machine, is it? From the weight I thought you were going to call on the Doc and sell him a few gold-bricks."

Hughes was facetious, but there was hidden respect in his grey eyes. He knew Marlin, and the man's history—knew that in the days before he had become Dan Marlin, ace correspondent, he had been a physicist at the Foundation in New York—and a good one. Just why Marlin had turned reporter he didn't understand; but he shrewdly reasoned that it had something to do with the little black box he inevitably carried with him on foreign assignments. Hughes had noted that Marlin's employer—Fiske, head of the syndicate—treated him with unusual respect. And that was enough for the older man. Still, he was curious.

"Just what is this contraption, Dan?" he persisted, as they wound their way along the tangled trail.

"I might as well let you in on it now," Marlin said. "Because in a few minutes, barring accidents, you'll see it at work. It's an x-ray camera."

"A *which?"*

"An x-ray camera. It photographs motion pictures through walls."

"Do you take dope?" snorted the little man, incredulously, pointedly. "The Argus Eye," said Marlin, complacently, "is the camera of the future. Takes movies through solid objects up to a distance of a quarter mile, under proper lighting conditions. Adjustable, instantaneous focus. Eight millimetre film, easily developed by a special process, so that films taken can be shown almost immediately. The Argus Eye can be attached to an ordinary movie projector for that purpose. Portable, fool-proof, easy to operate—if you know how. And—*Look out!"*

Marlin leaped backward, pulling his companion with him. He grasped the little man by the shoulders and hurled him to the ground.

"What's the matter?" wailed Hughes, sitting up and rubbing his bruised back.

"There—on the path ahead." Marlin pointed. "Those leaves—I felt them give when I put my foot down. There's a pit under there; somebody dug a neat little hole and covered it over for a trap."

"Okida?" whispered Hughes.

"Yes. A charming host, and very thoughtful, I'm afraid. Come on, we're climbing up the side of this bluff."

Suiting the action to the words, Marlin led the way, Hughes scrambling after him, puffing and swearing softly as he wrestled with the clumsy black box.

They reached the top in darkness, and stood on a little ledge overlooking the observatory, a quarter mile away. Its lights still flickered mockingly into the night, but no sound came from within its walls, no sign of life other than the blinking yellow radiance that poured into the black sky.

"Here we are," Marlin said. "Give me the Argus."

HUGHES was at his side. "Before you knocked me over," he observed, "you were trying to tell me some fairy tale or other about this mechanical suitcase of yours. Something about taking pictures through walls."

"Watch me, now, and I'll give you a demonstration," Marlin answered. "Meanwhile I'll try to explain the working principle in one-syllable words, for the benefit of your five-star final brain."

Although his tone was flippant, there was a business-like firmness to Marlin's jaw, and a keen alertness in his eyes. It was easy for Hughes to sense that this was an important moment—that the entire trip had been merely a prelude to this queer activity on a midnight mountain. He listened with respect, watched with interest, as Marlin removed the outer covering from the black box. From the side he extended the spider-legs of a long, collapsible tripod.

Unsheathed, the black box was revealed to be ornamented by a great series of gleaming metal dials, and small levers set in the face. It resembled a portable radio of the old style, Hughes thought. There seemed to be a microscope attachment at the front that looked something like a series of graduated lenses and prisms, mounted in a quartz tube.

"You see," began Marlin seriously.

"The whole secret of the thing lies right here in this front attachment. That opaque disc in the end is the receiver. It receives the impact from the electrons shooting off the surface of the illuminated object, and translates them back into light once more."

"I don't get it," objected Hughes dubiously. "What do you need to translate electrons into light for? Can't you use the light direct?"

Marlin shook his head. "How can I get light direct through solid walls? I've got to reconstruct that light, as it appears on the other side."

Hughes looked at him belligerently. "I still don't get it," he said firmly. "If nothing comes through, then what is it you pick up?"

Marlin was patient. "It's a sort of billiard-ball phenomenon.[2] You know how the motion is translated from one ball to another, causing it to move with the motion of the first."

"You mean," said Hughes incredulously, "that light is solid, like billiard balls?"

"Sure, didn't Einstein prove it?"

"Yeah," Hughes muttered dubiously. "I think I remember reading about it in the Sunday section one time—"

Marlin busied himself with the Argus Eye, sighting, getting his focus, consulting several tables and charts by the light of his flash.

He clicked open the shutter of the Argus Eye, and began grinding away as Hughes stared at the quartz tube, which seemed to glow with a weird light that was strangely artificial in nature, yellow, electric.

"You mean you got that thing focused on that observatory up there," he demanded, "and that light is the light from inside the building?"

"Sure. By means of my focusing charts, and some surveying I did, I can pick up light from any point in space I want up to a quarter mile range. I can even pick out any room, and my Argus Eye reproduces the original scene."

THERE was a look of awe on Hughes' face as he sat back and stared up at the laboratory, shifting his gaze back occasionally to the Argus Eye and shaking his head slowly as he watched the dim glow in the quartz tube.

For several moments all was silent on the mountain-top, save for the wind that rustled about the huddled forms bent over the gleaming silver and black of the Argus Eye.

Neither Marlin nor Hughes saw the gathering shadows in the bushes above the ledge; neither heard the cautious padding footfalls.

A shot ricocheted from the boulder at Marlin's left. The reporter turned and his eyes, flashing upward, caught the glint of a revolver's steely barrel extended from the brush overhead.

"Down, Hughes!" he shouted. The two men dropped to the protection of the rock, and clung to the outer side of the ledge as a volley whistled past their heads. Marlin saw a half-dozen forms appear on the bluff above them; masked figures, curiously short. The moonlight gleamed on saffron hands, as weapons were raised.

"Okida's welcoming committee," he whispered. "Give me your gun, Hughes." Then, "Look out—they're trying to smash the machine!"

Indeed, the attackers were directing their fire at the black box which now stood unprotected on the ledge, shadowed by the wall of rock.

Dan raised his pistol and fired. A small figure tottered and fell with a wild scream, twisting and writhing in the air as the wounded man was hurtled into the gulf below. Marlin rose to his feet. Again the pistol barked, and again. A shot went wild, but the second one brought a shrill cry from one of the masked men, who dropped to his knees. The others were moving through the brush, hastily firing at the blurred outlines of the Argus Eye.

"Get the camera, Hughes," Dan whispered. "Hurry."

The little reporter crawled out from behind the boulder and inched his way towards the black box on hands and knees. Hughes' figure was clearly outlined. Marlin stepped before him, pistol ready, eyes alert for the slightest hint of motion from the bushes above. Suddenly instinct prompted him to wheel toward the side-wall of the ledge behind him. Four silent stalking figures were creeping down the rocky bank of the wall. Marlin fired blindly, pumping shots at the two foremost figures.

Hughes reached the machine, rose with the bulky box in his arms, and reached Marlin's side. The two moved cautiously back down the ledge. An answering volley greeted Marlin's fire, and little spurts of dust rose about their feet as the bullets struck. The remaining assailants came on with hoarse cries in high-pitched, excited voices.

"Down the ledge, now," Marlin commanded softly. "I'll hold them off."

Hughes slid from sight as he clambered down the steep sides of the bluff to reach the trail they had originally ascended.

Marlin crouched on his knees, reloading the pistol. He raised it once more, and the four masked men were upon him. Flame burst about his face. He fired wildly, and a moan rose as a running figure dropped. Again he shot, and another of the masked attackers fell. The other two turned in retreat.

Marlin quickly clambered down the ledge.

Suddenly a burst rang out from below.

Marlin leaped the last eight feet of his descent. "Hughes!" he cried.

At the foot of the trail lay the little reporter, his body a huddled heap. Bending over him were the two surviving members of the attacking body. They were lifting up the Argus Eye.

Rage rose in Marlin's heart. His pistol spoke. Surprised, the two rose to their feet and raced off down the trail. Marlin forgot the Argus Eye, forgot everything but the memory of his friend, lying death-still at the foot of that midnight trail. He sped after the fleeing figures, red murder in his heart.

Into the woods the slight, stooping masked men ran. Marlin followed. He could hear them crashing in the brush ahead, see glimpses of retreating forms amidst the trees. His pistol spat again.

Suddenly he blundered into a little clearing. A figure moved just ahead. Putting on a burst of speed, Marlin overtook the flying form just as the clearing's edge was reached. His arms went out, his legs rose in a flying tackle, as he bore the masked figure to the earth.

"Got you!" he grunted. The body struggled, then lay still, as Marlin turned it over in the moonlight. With a swift motion, Marlin tore the mask from the face, the hat from the sagging head. The moonlight revealed all.

"Well I'll be damned!" Dan Marlin swore.

For he was gazing not at the features of a Japanese, but the face of a blonde, indisputably white girl!

CHAPTER II

An Important Discovery

WITH characteristic swiftness, Marlin made his decision. He lifted the limp form of the unconscious girl in his arms and turned down the trail towards the battered little coupe at the end of the road.

It was still standing there, just where he and Hughes had left it, a few hours previously. So much had happened since then—but Marlin did not permit himself to ponder. Action was imperative. He slid the girl into the seat, closed the door, and raced up the face of the bluff once more; ran down to the ledge where the Argus Eye still lay. Breathing a prayer of thanks, he lugged the camera back to the car, dumped it in the girl's lap, and started his motor. His eyes stabbed the darkness for a glimpse of lurking presences, but the assailants had evidently fled. Satisfied, he turned and started back down the narrow little road through the night.

"Say! Get this thing off my lap!"

Marlin, jerked from revery, jumped so violently that the coupe lurched almost into the bordering brush. He returned the car to the road and then gazed into the upturned, piquant features of the blonde girl in the seat beside him. Her blue, almost violet eyes were alight with indignation.

"What's this box doing here? Who are you? Where do you think you're going with me?"

"Wait a minute," Marlin drawled out the words, amused by the girl's utter indignance at the situation. "Not so fast sister—I'm not Professor Quiz, you know."

“Stop the car this instant, do you hear me?” Her husky, vibrant voice rose in command.

“Now hold on there—I’d like to have a little talk with you first, if you don’t mind.” Marlin’s seriousness halted her tirade.

“In the first place, I’d be interested in knowing what you were doing with that band of cut-throats who tried to finish me off in the woods.”

“What band?” Almost he could have sworn that genuine surprise appeared in her countenance. “Who are you?” she persisted.

“Dan Marlin, special correspondent, Continental News Syndicate.”

“What were you doing?”

“Trying to find out a few things about that amateur astronomer, Doctor Okida. Unfortunately, he sent down a couple of his playmates and the game got rough. But look here, I’m doing the interviewing.”

The girl flashed him a long, steady look. Evidently what she saw satisfied her—a hint of a smile curled about her red lips as she sat up, and her hands went to her hair in that instinctive feminine gesture known to all men.

“My name is Lois Doring. My father was Louis Doring, who used to be head of the Long Mountain Observatory.”

“Then you know something about Okida?” Marlin persisted. Again a steady appraisal of his face by the girl.

“I think I can answer that. I’ll take a chance—I must trust somebody.” Her voice was shrill again.

Marlin patted her shoulder. “Let’s have it now,” he said.

“I know about Okida, all right. I lived at the observatory with my father, when Hatsuki Okida came here from the Orient to take over the place. The Canadian government granted him permission to establish his fellow-scientists here, and my father was to remain and supervise their work. That was two months ago.

“My father didn’t trust Okida—he’s a queer man, very brilliant; but he looks like a fat little spider, and there’s something repulsive and furtive about him. At any rate, Dad asked me to leave, but I refused. Instead, he agreed to let me pose as his housemaid.

“Okida and his men had been at the observatory a month when Dad—disappeared.”

HER eyes were moist as she continued, and Marlin nodded understandingly.

“I know Okida did it. The minute he came he barricaded the place—discharged the caretaker that used to live on the grounds, and sent some of his men out to build a barbed-wire fence blocking off the hillside. He closed the road, too; never allowed visitors. He himself took over the inner chamber and set up his own telescope—dismantling the old ones.

“That got Dad suspicious at the start; he told me Okida didn’t know anything about proper astronomy, and certainly some of those yellow men he brought with him looked more like hoodlums than scientists. Dad had other ideas, too, about what Okida was doing all locked up in that room with the big telescope he brought. He wouldn’t tell me, but I could see he planned to do something about things very soon—and then he disappeared.

“I listened to Okida’s explanation; he said Dad had wandered off into town one day and hadn’t come back. But I left the place that same night; climbed over the wall. Because I knew in my heart what had happened, and knew Okida would never let me go if he found out.

“I went back to town. Of course Dad hadn’t been there—nobody from the observatory ever came down except once a month, to buy supplies.

“I didn’t say much. I decided I’d better keep my mouth shut until I found out a few things for myself.”

“Smart girl.” Marlin nodded approvingly.

“So the past three weeks I’ve been on my own. I’ve gone up to the woods every afternoon and—”

The girl paused then looked abruptly out into the night. A sudden suspicion gripped Marlin. She was stalling, her story was a hoax; she was fumbling for a plausible explanation.

“What were you doing sneaking around in the woods?” Marlin grated.

The girl turned her face towards him, eyes wet with tears. In an almost inaudible whisper she replied, “I was looking for Dad’s grave.”

Marlin bowed his head. “I’m sorry,” he said.

“I came up there tonight, wearing the mask. I know Okida sends masked men out into the woods at night—they nearly caught me the evening I got away. That’s one of the mysteries I want to find out about. So I decided to dress like them, in case I was challenged. Then I could follow them around tonight and perhaps they might lead me to—the place.

“I heard shooting, and ran. Then you caught me—and I guess I fainted.”

Marlin drove in silence for a long moment. Then, making a mental decision, he began to tell his story in short, comprehensive fashion. He told the girl of his work with the Argus Eye; of the purpose he intended for it; spoke of how his employer, Publisher Fiske, had commissioned him to investigate this Okida affair. And he outlined his actions of the evening.

Town lights twinkled before he concluded, and he drew up before the hotel.

“By the way,” he asked, “I don’t know where you’re staying.”

“Why, here,” the girl replied. “I’ve got a room on the third floor.”

“Great God of coincidence,” Marlin muttered. “So have I! It looks like Fate is throwing us together. Same hotel, same mission. Now look here—I don’t know why, but I trust you. And I hope you trust me. Let’s work together.”

The girl’s nod was sufficient. Marlin watched her blonde locks bob in assent, and irrelevantly he thought to himself that Lois was very beautiful.

Lois was more beautiful still the following afternoon as they climbed the hilltop to the ledge. The woods seemed brighter by her presence, and for the first time Marlin felt a lull in the atmosphere of menace which so strangely surrounded him on this mission.

AT the ledge they halted, and Marlin trained the Argus Eye on the gleaming crown of the observatory across the tree-tops. Lois handed him the surveying charts and the notebook of formulae he had gathered for information on how to focus the camera with accuracy. Then she paled.

“Dan.”

“Yes—what’s the matter.”

“Okida said—nearly a month ago, I remember, before I left—something I didn’t understand at the time. He spoke about *screening off* the rooms.”

“Screening off?”

“Yes. He had a wire from New York, I guess, and it got him terribly excited. He sent men out to buy lead plates, or something with lead in them. He talked to Dad about spies; said that he was expecting some one to come up there and try to photograph the place. It was all very confusing to me at the time, and I was puzzled when his men built the lead screens flush with the outer walls of all the rooms. Do you think he knew about the Argus Eye?”

“By George,” Marlin exclaimed. “It checks. I returned from the Chinese front a month ago, on Okida’s trail. He must have put one of his men on me, learned that I had some kind of apparatus or other for taking pictures, and guessed the method. I can’t get through lead with the Argus Eye, you know—the atomic reaction of light pulsations when passing through it distorts the images into a blur on the negative. So he screened off the rooms. What’ll I do now?”

“Take your motion pictures anyway,” the girl advised, calmly. “Here, I’ll help you get an accurate idea of what the place looks like.”

Pencil and paper aided her in producing a rough sketch of the observatory interior; marked with crude estimates of the rooms and their dimensions. Marlin studied the crude chart, then picked his focus.

The camera ground again and again, with pauses for reloading and refocusing. Marlin used general focus and close-up on every room indicated. It was a weary three hours of work, but there was a smile of satisfaction on the faces of both man and girl as they descended the trail.

"You've been a great help, Lois," Marlin said. "I only hope I can get something from these shots. Those I took yesterday are probably bungled. Anyway, tonight will tell the story."

That night did tell the story, after hours of labor in the improvised darkroom of the bedchamber at Marlin's hotel. Roll after roll of film was blurred, distorted, utterly blank. The leaden screens had done that. But the last roll—

Marlin scarcely waited for it to dry completely before he had dragged Lois from her room down the hall, rushed her into his own room, and seated her before the projector. The little silver screen he carried was tacked up against the wall; the lights dimmed, the machine whirred—and a scene flashed into view.

A room in the observatory; general view. A desk, a blackboard, and standing beside it, a peculiar device. It resembled a machine-gun, but the muzzle was glass.

Marlin stopped the film, studied the general outline, then ground on. Close-up.

The reporter gasped. The figures on the blackboard; two charts loomed into view. There was writing beneath the charts, which indicated construction of the mechanism on the floor.

Marlin stopped the film again and laughed triumphantly.

"By all that's holy, we've got it!" He executed an impromptu war-dance around the room, then rushed to the door.

"I'm phoning the Chief in Frisco," he called. "I've got the biggest story of the year. And tomorrow night I'll have a bigger one—when we lay hands on Doctor Hatsuki Okida!"

CHAPTER III

Attack in Darkness

"LOOK!" The reporter thrust the headlines before the girl's eyes. His own eyes sparkled in the afternoon sunlight. "Good job?" he demanded.

Gigantic headlines greeted Lois's gaze.

"SECRET OF NEW WAR
WEAPON EXPOSED
Deadly machine uncovered.
Ignition-stopping ray[3]—principle a future military peril."

AN article followed, and there were photographs—the movie stills from the Argus Eye camera, showing the charts and diagrams which gave the principles on which the weapon worked. The article concluded with a short account of Marlin's work, omitting direct reference to the exact spot he had found his discovery. The article also implied that the ignition-stopping machine was in the hands of an unfriendly foreign power that planned to utilize it in future attacks on the United States. The exposure of the plans, however, would mitigate such a danger; since now the secret was common property.

"Great write-up, eh?" Marlin exulted. "What luck! Okida screened off all the other rooms except this one—and look what we found. I'll bet that there's a dozen other such things in similar rooms; Okida is using that observatory as a base for manufacturing war weapons. Tonight I'll go down and get the authorities to organize a little raid. But first, you and I are going to have dinner to celebrate."

"I'm proud of you, Dan." There was no mistaking the note in the girl's voice, and Marlin's heart soared as he grinned at her in boyish pleasure.

"Run along and get dolled up, honey. We're really going to paint this town a distinct red."

Laughing, Lois swept out of the room, turning at the door to blow him a little kiss—a foolish gesture which Marlin somehow found particularly attractive at the moment.

He sat down and lit a cigarette, thumbing over the paper once again as he reread the write-up. There was triumph in his manner, but underneath it lay a quiet satisfaction. This was a bigger matter than just getting a headline. Marlin had labored for years on perfecting the Argus Eye. It was to be an instrument of peace—and work like this promoted peace.

Marlin hoped sincerely that a few more such efforts would insure that goal. Once nations realized their secret plans could be discovered, there would be an end to trickery and stealthy war preparations.

In the midst of his musings, a staccato knock sounded on the door. Marlin opened it, took the bulletin, read it, and sank into his chair.

Stunned, Dan Marlin read and reread the bulletin in his hand. He had no doubts as to its authenticity—the signature of Ralph Fiske, his employer and head of the Continental News Syndicate was unmistakable. And yet what did it mean?

Your photos of Okida's observatory have provoked international incident. Advised by War Department that Canadiatt Government demands immediate explanation. Ignition-stopping ray machine is property of Canadian government, not Japan. Diplomatic relations seriously strained unless you can advance full explanation of your actions at once. Don't move until further notice from me.

—Ralph Fiske.

The ignition-stopping machine was a Canadian weapon. But then what was it doing in Okida's observatory?

Sudden suspicion seized Marlin's brain. He knew now. Okida had suspected he would return. Therefore the scientist had stolen the machine from the Canadian government, and placed it where Marlin might observe it. Okida undoubtedly knew the properties of the Argus Eye, if not the secret method of constructing it. He had set up the Canadian machine in one of the rooms of the observatory, and allowed Marlin to photograph it.

In this way, he knew that Marlin's work could be stopped. Once the photos were printed, Canadian and American authorities would prevent him from further use of the Argus Eye. It was a brilliant scheme.

A brilliant scheme—too brilliant. Marlin thought further. How had it happened that all the rooms save the one holding the machine were screened off? Who had directed him to the proper spot for his photography?

Lois.

Lois had been a servant in the observatory. He had captured her, masked, in the woods. She had no identification beyond her own word, nothing to prove her fantastic story. And yet he had trusted her and she had led him—into this muddle.

Somehow the thought of Lois as a spy dismayed him. It did not seem possible. Perhaps she had acted squarely; he hoped with all his heart she could offer an explanation.

With ashy lips set in a determined line, Marlin left his room and strode down the hall. He knocked on the girl's door.

"Come in." The musical voice invited, and its even tones stabbed Marlin's heart. Surely she couldn't have such composure if she had actually betrayed him. He entered.

T OIS stood in the center of the room, her slim hands busily adjusting the shoulder-strap of the cool blue evening dress she wore. Despite his anxiety, Marlin could not help but marvel again at the fresh, youthful beauty of the shapely blonde girl. Her violet eyes were alight, and as he entered, her lips curved into a red, provocative smile of pleasure.

"Like it?" she asked, indicating the lines of her dress, and pivoting around the room in imitation of a professional model. Marlin nodded appreciatively. Then sober thought triumphed.

"Lois, I must talk to you." His voice was soft but firm.

"Why—yes." She sensed the seriousness of his tone. "But couldn't we wait until after dinner—"

"Right now, if you please."

"Is anything the matter?" Marlin could have sworn there was genuine concern in her pretty features. He strode across the room until he stood facing her.

"I've been tricked," he said. "Read this."

Silently, her face a mask of growing confusion and dismay, Lois read Fiske's message. At the conclusion she looked up into Marlin's somber eyes.

"What do you think, Dan?" she said, slowly.

"I don't know what to think, yet. I was hoping that you might have something to say."

For a moment there was silence. Marlin held the girl's gaze steadily, but her glance never wavered.

Then, "Let's go back to your room," she suggested. "I'll talk there."

"Why not here?" Sudden suspicion flooded Marlin's brain.

"Because the machine is in your room. Whoever knew enough to plant this ignition-stopping ray device where it could be photographed must also be aware of your Argus Eye. And it's logical, isn't it, that Okida would try to get hold of the camera, if he could. You must be on hand to guard it at all times."

The girl's manner convinced Marlin. "Come on," he said. He led the way down the silent hall, halted before his door, and produced the key. Turning the knob, he entered the blackness of the room, Lois behind him. His hand fumbled for the light-switch on the wall.

Suddenly the darkness was filled with movement. Strong arms closed around Marlin's throat, a fist dug into his side. The reporter lunged forward, crashing into a solid form, but the grip on his throat never loosened. The blackness was filled with hoarse pantings and grunts of pain as Marlin's fists lashed viciously into the hidden forms of his assailants.

Lois did not scream, but she gasped as she stepped forward and closed the door of the room. Now Marlin battled in utter night-gloom. He tried to call out, signal the girl to turn on the light, but his throat was gripped by those tenacious fingers—cruel, unshakable hands holding their relentless, steely grip on his throat.

And from out of the darkness, panting forms rose and wound their arms about his body. For a moment Marlin struggled to break their grips, and then something came out of the blackness behind him and crashed down upon his head. The grip on his throat relaxed. He went down in a sea of roaring red that turned black, blacker, and swirled into nothingness.

CHAPTER IV
A Lone Hand

BLACK into grey, grey into white, white into reality again. Dan sat up, fingers fumbling automatically at his bruised skull. He was still in his hotel-room, but now the lights were on. A quick glance about showed him that the place was empty. Where was Lois?

He rose unsteadily, but anxiety lent him strength. He opened the door, literally raced down the deserted hall to the girl's room. But even before he frantically battered at the door he knew in his heart that the girl was gone. They had taken her—

They had taken her and *what else?* With fear gnawing at his vitals, he sped back to his own room, and fumbled in the closet for the familiar bulk of the Argus Eye.

The camera was gone!

And Lois was gone. She had warned him that Okida knew of the machine, was after it.

She had warned him—and yet she had led him back to the room where the attackers had waited.

It was not fear now, but despair that held him as he reviewed the facts. He had asked Lois for an explanation—she had given none. Instead she had warned him about the camera. She said Okida knew of it; but who could have told him? Lois.

Who led him back to his room, back to the trap? Lois.

She had not screamed or called for help. She had waited until the gang had overpowered him, showed them where the machine was, and left with them. It had all been a ruse—the capture in the woods was deliberate, the planting of the ignition-stopping device, the frame-up tonight; it was the work of Lois, serving Doctor Okida. And he had trusted the girl!

Anger and resentment rose in Marlin's heart, mingled with another deeper feeling he could not name. She had seemed so honest, so brave! The memory of her face in the moonlight, her voice, her slim figure in the evening dress, her eyes, her hair, her fresh young laughter—no, it wasn't right. And yet the facts remained.

Marlin thought quickly. The Argus Eye was on its way to Okida now. He was helpless—and powerless to act, since the scandal that had broken over the Canadian incident. He realized that he had escaped death tonight only because the noise might have aroused the hotel, and the discovery of his body excite suspicion. Still, he was not safe. Okida would not rest until he died.

"You're on the spot, Dan," he whispered to himself. "And you're on it alone."

A sudden rustling outside the door of the room caused him to turn his head with new apprehension. Quickly Marlin reached into the drawer of his desk for the pistol which lay there.

A knock sounded from outside. Marlin pointed the muzzle in a steady bead with the door-knob. "Come in," he invited. The door opened to admit a tall, elderly man with a heavy-set body surmounted by a square-jawed head.

"Mr. Fiske!" Marlin exclaimed. "What the devil—"

The tall man smiled grimly.

"I take it that's an invitation to come in," he said.

Marlin nodded mutely, too confused for speech. Ralph Fiske, his employer and head of the Continental News Syndicate, was the last person in the world the reporter expected to see. And as Fiske seated himself, Marlin gazed at the grim, set smile on the older man's face and felt foreboding. The presence of the newspaper magnate meant only one thing—Marlin was to be discharged. It was not unlikely that serious charges might be pressed against him, that the Government might prosecute him for unauthorized espionage work.

What a muddle it was—and yet, two weeks ago Marlin had seen Fiske in his New York office. He had unfolded his plan of using the Argus Eye camera, and Fiske had enthusiastically authorized him to go up to Okida's observatory.

Ralph Fiske was a crusader in the cause of World Peace. For years his papers had campaigned relentlessly against war agitators, and the construction of new and more deadly weapons. Fiske had backed Marlin and his camera, only to precipitate disaster. The reporter knew how his employer must feel at this moment, and he watched Fiske's grim smile with bitterness in his heart.

The grey-haired man spoke.

"Rotten break you got, son. I came up here as soon as that Canadian story broke. I wanted to hear your version from your own lips."

SOMETHING in the manner of his employer encouraged Marlin to speak freely, frankly. Hastily he sketched his movements from the time of his arrival up to the present moment, omitting nothing. He spoke of Hughes' death, the meeting with Lois, the photographs of the following night, and tonight's sudden betrayal. And as the tale unfolded, a look of understanding robbed Fiske's smile of its grimness. Marlin finished his story, and sat back expectantly.

"I knew you were playing the game, son," said Fiske. "I had to send you a somewhat harsh message to cover up—the Government expected action. But I believe in you, Dan—always have. And that's why I'm going to fire you."

"Fire me?"

"Exactly."

Marlin's face fell. Of course; it was to be expected, after all. Still, Ralph Fiske had seemed so earnest, so sincere—

“But I have another job for you.”

Marlin rose.

“As head of the Syndicate, I am officially required to dispense with your services. However, if you want to work for me, personally, I’m offering you a two hundred dollar raise, and free rein to go ahead and do whatever you can to get Okida.”

With a quick stride, Marlin was across the room. The two men shook hands and a smile of understanding flashed electrically between them.

“Now, to work,” snapped Fiske. “I have news for you. A certain oriental power—no need to name it—has obtained complete plans of all fortifications on the West Coast; shipyard constructions and air-base locations. The War Department wired me the information in connection with your pictures.”

“Okida!” Dan exclaimed. “But how?—he has no spies there.”

“You’re going to find out how,” Fiske replied. “That observatory of his has something to do with it, I’ve got a hunch on that. You must take that camera of yours and find out, fast.” Suddenly Fiske’s face became ashy. “Great guns, boy, I forgot! They’ve stolen the Argus Eye—how can you work?”

Marlin smiled. “I’ll build another. It will take two days.”

“You can do it, then?” The older man looked reassured, and then again he paled. “But what if Okida discovers the secret of your camera—the one he stole? With that in his hands he can utilize it as a new weapon.” Fiske’s tones were leaden. “He could probably build a thousand of them, distribute them to agents, and then the entire country would be at his mercy insofar as military secrets are concerned.”

Dan Marlin laughed.

“He may guess as to the principles operating the Argus Eye,” he said. “He may even operate the one he stole—but he can never build another, or learn the secret of its construction.”

“What do you mean?”

"When I built the Argus Eye, I put it together on the same principle as is used in fashioning the recuperator of the U.S. 3.3" gun.[4] That is, the machinery is composed of interlocking springs and mesh gear formations. The entire works will fly out in a thousand small pieces when tampered with by a stranger. It is therefore impossible to discover the identity of the parts and the method of their functioning."

Fiske looked relieved.

"All right, son. Now get to work. Two or three days might mean a lot right now. Okida is learning secrets—important secrets—and unless he's checked he'll pry out priceless information for his own government. I'd imagine he'll make a get-away soon, and you must stop it. Once that yellow scientist gets all his data, we'll be completely at the mercy of possible invaders; and it will always be a potential threat to our country. I may be melodramatic about this, but I believe that a great part of our national safety now lies solely in your hands. Get back to Okida's laboratory at once." Fiske nodded curtly, turned, and left the room. Dan stared in silence at the closing door.

FOR a long moment he remained still, but his mind was busy with thoughts for the morrow. He must find a metal-worker, rent his shop for two days, and devote his time to intensive work on a new Argus Eye. Fortunately he had had the foresight to grind and prepare the intricate series of lens for a new camera, and bring along another motion-picture camera with parts easily convertible to use in his own instrument. But there was hard labor ahead, and a need for secrecy. Okida's men might be watching him at this very moment.

What Fiske had said about Government plans being stolen was all very confusing. Had Lois spoken the truth when she hinted that Okida was more interested in espionage work than in war weapons? But how could the scientist get information about fortifications and shipyards two thousand miles away? What was the Oriental's secret?

Marlin sank into a chair, his mind whirling under the stress of the past few hours. Now, to sleep—

A sudden knocking at his door. A gentle tap, audible only to his trained ears.

Marlin produced his revolver and stepped silently across the room. He opened the door.

The body of Ralph Fiske fell forward across the threshold, his face a purple mask of agony. About his constricted throat was woven a strangler's knot. Marlin knelt and tugged at the finely-woven cord which had choked the life from the publisher's body. The dangling end fastened in place a tiny card which hung over Fiske's chest. The reporter lifted the card to the light. Upon its white surface, in heavy, vermillion brush-strokes—such as might be used by an Asiatic priest—was written a single sentence.

"STAY AWAY."

They had listened outside the door to Fiske's conversation, and killed him as a warning.

Dan Marlin smiled bitterly at the thought, but he didn't smile as he looked again into Fiske's tortured face. "You'll have your fight for peace yet, sir," he promised.

CHAPTER V

Doctor Okida's Secret

MARLIN never knew how the next days passed. They loomed, a chaotic jumble in his memory. He fled the hotel at once, taking only his plans and equipment for the building of the new Argus Eye. He could not afford to risk the scandal connected with the discovery of his employer's body; could not spare the time necessary for a police investigation. He could never hope to convince authorities that Okida was back of the murder, and even if they did go to the observatory the wary scientist would flee. And that would be fatal to Marlin's plan.

So the reporter fled to the village of Belltown, rented the shop of a metalworker for the following three days, and immediately plunged into a whirlwind of activity.

Later he remembered long hours of toil over the iron tables, broken by an occasional pause for food and rest. But after the second day it was all a nightmare of haste, anxiety, and sheer dogged determination that bit through the weariness which numbed his brain. The lenses were adjusted, the machinery cut to specifications by the puzzled owner of the shop, whose curiosity concerning the camera was only halted by repeated offers of more money for his services.

On the morning of the third day the Argus Eye stood completed once more. Hastily, Marlin rigged up an improvised dark-room at the back of the place, and let down a screen for the movie projector. After that he slept through noon.

But before the afternoon sun had traveled midway across the western sky he was at the wheel of the battered coupe, driving again up the winding trail that led to Long Mountain. His face was marked with the toll of sleepless nights and feverish days, but there was new hope in his heart. Okida would not expect him this time. The rooms might no longer be screened off. If that was the case, then the truth would be known—the truth Hughes and Fiske had died for; the truth that would vindicate Marlin.

As he drove, the reporter could not repress a pang of misgiving. Once his mission was accomplished, Lois would suffer with the rest. Somehow, despite the girl's treachery, Marlin hated the thought of her paying the bitter penalty he knew an angry government might exact. After all, the girl was sincere; she did her duty with no thought of personal gain. Okida himself was a fanatic, and no doubt he visualized the power and prestige he would gain from his inventions. But Lois—

A vision of her laughing eyes floated, serene and lovely, through Marlin's mind. Resolutely he put the thought away. There was a more important stake in this game—the safety of the country. And the crusading spirit in the reporter's soul flared into determination.

He swung the car around, halting it behind the concealing shrubbery at the terminal of the road, then took the Argus Eye in his arms as he started up the pathway. The woods were dark and still; even in the afternoon they brooded in perpetual twilight. Marlin listened carefully for the sound of footsteps, but all was silent, deserted.

Deserted, too, was the ledge when Marlin reached it. The soft haze which was the prelude of twilight spun a delicate mist about the observatory dome in the distance.

The reporter quickly adjusted his range-finding devices. His surveying data again came into use as he carefully trained the lens upon the side of the observatory wall. It was quick work this time; the preliminaries were simple. But then Marlin proceeded with caution. He fed film after film, photographing each outer room in detail. Readjusting his focus, he proceeded to the next section of inner rooms, and a third focus gave his lens access to the final chamber.

Finally he felt assured that he had covered every inch of the observatory on this side. Looking up he was startled at the descent of darkness; deep twilight was already fading into night. He re-packed the camera and started down the path to the car. Once inside, he abandoned all caution and turned on the headlights as he raced back along the road.

Two hours more and it would all be over. If these films developed—if Okida had left his rooms unscreened, particularly that inner chamber—Marlin was assured of sufficient evidence to authorize a raid on the observatory.

The thought sent fresh courage tingling through his veins. It was with new initiative that he entered the shop and made for the dark-room. For an hour he worked in feverish haste; for another hour he paced the floor as the films curled under the dryers. And then the projector was fed with the rolls, the screen was let down, and Dan Marlin, heart in his throat, saw the end of his quest.

From the first flicker he knew that he had triumphed. Dim, in some cases obscured by ill-lighting and often out of focus; nevertheless the camera did not lie.

THE first roll showed him the room of the ignition-ray machine once again; empty now, dismantled. The second roll showed a similar chamber, also dismantled.

Marlin was puzzled, then fearful. Was the place deserted? Had Okida fled? Another fear bit into his brain. There were no more machines—if that were so, then the observatory had not housed new war weapons. What, then, was its real purpose?

In the third roll, he gazed upon an outer chamber; the last of the three. Several small figures were seated around a table. White coats proclaimed them to be laboratory workers; slant-eyes and oriental features betokened their kinship with Okida. They were studying a series of maps and charts, but Okida was not visible. Nor was Lois. Marlin felt a pang of disappointment. He did not realize until this moment that he had been subconsciously hoping for another glimpse of the girl who had betrayed him.

Still, he projected the next roll with growing excitement. This was the reel exposing the inner chamber—and as it flashed on he gasped with excitement.

A great domed room—and squarely across one wall stood a monstrous tangle of gleaming coils, clustered about a telescope that resembled a miniature cannon. Its gigantic muzzle was reared upwards through the observatory dome, and great mirrored panels scintillated at the side of the opening to the sky. Never had Marlin seen such a colossal instrument; nor could he guess the purpose of the numerous attachments.

He thanked his Maker that he had taken the precautions he did in photographing this inner chamber; for at this point he had shifted to a more direct close-up which now brought out the center of the room in vivid detail. And here stood the figure of Doctor Okida—unmistakably. The squat, barrel-chested yellow man with the shaven head bent before one of the coils attached to the telescope. *And in his hands was Marlin's Argus Eye!*

The watching reporter gasped. The stolen camera seemed to be in some way altered; the outer box had been removed, and it rested upon its tripod with the lenses evidently pointing into the end of a long gleaming coil. Then Marlin understood.

Okida had connected the Argus Eye to his telescope!

Why? How? A thousand questions flashed through his brain as he followed the movements of the yellow man, who removed the camera and placed it carefully on a side table.

Marlin watched Okida walk across the room once more, studying the expression of triumph which gleamed unmistakable from his fat face. Suddenly Okida knelt, and Marlin understood.

The Asiatic was bowing before a small bronze idol, squatting in a niche against one wall. Incense swirled from a brazier before the ugly figure of the god, and Okida's lips seemed to move in prayer. He reached into a corner and drew forth several great joss-sticks which he placed upright in the brazier before the statue. Then, as Marlin followed each movement, the scientist drew forth several great cloths; long rectangular strips of silk, covered with what seemed to be painted Oriental characters. These he held up for a moment before the god, his lips continuing to move in prayer. Carefully he wrapped them about the joss-sticks and applied fire from a brazier brand. The cloths burned slowly.

Marlin guessed. Okida was offering up prayers of thanksgiving to his god. Thanksgiving for what? If he only knew!

As the film flickered off, Marlin rose with a grin of satisfaction. He *could* know!

He ran the film back to the moment when Okida held up the two strips of silk before the altar. Then he stopped the film and stepped up to the screen with a magnifying glass. Pencil in hand, he jotted down the characters which were plainly visible upon the silk.

Ten minutes of study, and he had translated the prayers. What they told him caused him to tremble with excitement at the magnitude of his discovery.

For Okida thanked the gods in triumph. His telescope was successful—*his curved-light long distance telescope, which had enabled him to spy on United States fortification secrets thousands of miles away.*

A curved-light telescope! Of course that had to be the explanation. That was where Okida secured information. He had perfected the use of special refractive devices in building a long-distance telescope; naturally he placed it in an observatory and worked from there. No need to send out spies when the instrument could work! Marlin marveled. So that was Okida's secret.

He longed for the moment when he could investigate the nature of the miraculous instrument; compare its principles to those governing his own Argus Eye.

HIS Argus Eye! Hastily, Marlin unreeled the film to the spot showing the second prayer strip. On the cloth were figures he again took down, interpreted; gratefully thanking his lucky stars for the linguistic abilities acquired from two years on the Eastern War Front at Shanghai.

Yes, the prayer-cloths revealed their message; dimly this time, and in such poor focus that several sentences were obscured. But there was enough to show that Okida rendered homage to the Powers Above because he had harnessed the stolen camera to his telescope in a combination.

Now, with the benefit of motion pictures photographing telescoped scenes thousands of miles away, he had an apparatus for directing gun-fire and therefore an invincible war weapon.

And Okida thanked the gods, for tonight he would leave again for the Orient, present his information to his government, and plan for the use of the knowledge in future attacks.

Marlin pieced it out, skipping over the flowery eloquence of the language, and clinging only to the hard, factual phrases which burst like bombshells before his eyes as he thought of their implications. He must act at once!

But there was still another reel of film to be shown. Marlin half-debated omitting its projection entirely. Surely the information he already had was important enough for immediate concern—but still, there might be additional knowledge to be gained. The reel, as he remembered, showed the lower chamber under the floor of the observatory proper; the one Lois had told him about as being abandoned. Was it a storehouse?

Hastily, Marlin inserted it, projected, gazed.

The dark walls of a dungeon. Stone bench, stone floor, gloom broken by torchlight. Torchlight streaming from a flare in a man's hand. A Japanese on guard.

He stepped aside, and Marlin gazed into the terrified face of—Lois!

The girl was shackled to the wall, her arms cruelly pinioned in iron cuffs. Her streaming hair hung down about her shoulders. There were rents and tears in her tattered dress.

A curse burst from between Marlin's gritted teeth. Lois—they had been torturing her! She had spoken the truth then; she hadn't betrayed him. When the attackers overpowered him in his room they had carried her off, and now they were trying to force her to tell what she knew of his activities.

Blind rage rose in Dan Marlin's heart. Gone were his plans of carrying his films to the authorities; gone was his scheme of waiting until midnight and leading a raid with government officers, if his pictures convinced them. Lois was in danger—immediate danger. He must act himself, go at once. If they had harmed her, killed her—

Pocketing his revolver, Marlin dashed out of the room, leaped into the car, and hurled it down the road at breakneck speed.

CHAPTER VI

Death in the Dungeon

THE burning yellow eyes leered down from the hilltop on which the observatory crouched. Dan Marlin felt that dreadful lifeless stare of light as his fingers worked the wire-cutter in feverish haste. The stout fence in the brush at the base of the observatory hilltop yielded an entrance at last, and he slipped through the gap of broken wire-ends.

He started up the long, shrubbery-bordered walk which led to the door, his senses alert for the slightest sound; the hint of movement in the bushes about him, the gleam of a torch ahead. Instead he moved in complete silence—the silence of desertion; oppressive with unspoken menace.

There had been no plan in Marlin's mind when he started out—nothing but an overwhelming anger and a dreadful fear for the safety of the girl he "had unwittingly misjudged. But now, as he crept along the shadowed pathways, his intelligence began to function swiftly.

How was he to enter the observatory undetected? Here memory served him in good stead. The Argus Eye camera films had revealed to him the geography of the observatory, and Lois's description gave him a fairly accurate conception of the rooms and corridors and their interrelations.

He remembered that there had been two deserted chambers in the films run off this afternoon. Surely there were windows in these rooms. His eyes searched the wall to the left of the entrance. A dark square of glass appeared at the end. This must be one of the chambers.

Marlin crept to a spot directly beneath the window. He leaped upward, his fingers clutching the projecting ledge, and drew himself to a crouch upon the sill. His hands pushed at the frame, and he breathed a prayer of thanks as the window raised.

He dropped, catlike, soundlessly landing upon the floor of the darkened room. His pocket flashlight quickly stabbed the gloom, revealing only the signs of utter desertion which had characterized the spot in the Argus Eye films. The glare illumined a door. Marlin knew it led to a corridor, and the corridor led to Lois.

Without hesitation he moved forward. In a saner moment he would have stopped, searched even this apparently deserted chamber for evidence—but

Marlin's anger brooked neither sane consideration nor delay. He opened the door, his free hand tightening on the revolver in his pocket, stepped out into a long corridor dimly lighted by a few weak lamps on the side walls.

Cautiously he edged his way down the hall, passing another door which memory told him led to the second deserted room of the pictures. And then he approached the third door, saw the fan of light which spread from under it. This was outer headquarters. And even as he stared at it, the door opened.

Marlin sank back against the wall, crouching in the shadows as a figure stalked forth—a figure that sent chills of dread rippling up his spine. It was the figure of a gigantic Mongol. The great, half-naked brute was grinning in a way which sickened Marlin, and in his hand he carried a strange glowing object.

INSTINCTIVELY Marlin knew where the man was going, and he scarcely waited for the door to reclose behind the Mongol before he was creeping along behind.

The yellow giant strode down the corridor, and as he walked Marlin heard something clank at his side. And in the weird light from the thing he carried the silver outlines of a key-chain hanging from his belt were revealed, and there was no longer any doubt as to the man's destination.

Marlin breathed a prayer of hope. All he need do now was follow the giant, wait until he unlocked the door to the dungeon, and then shoot him down. It was simple.

The reporter turned at the end of the corridor, as the Mongol led the way and began to descend a flight of stairs. Marlin edged close behind him, ready for action. And then—

Something „ cold bit into Marlin's neck, something bored deeply against his spine. A soft voice hissed, "Kindly raise your hands, sir."

Marlin extended his arms upward. He tried to turn his head, but the boring coldness bit deeper as the voice quickly continued, "Please not to look around, sir."

The game was up. One of the Japs had followed him from the room, stalking him as he had stalked the Mongol. And now the muzzle of a gun was at his spine. A yellow hand clawed around to the pocket of Marlin's coat, fumbling for the revolver within. Marlin stood helpless, hands upraised, with the unseen figure behind him. The hand gripped his gun, lifted it.

SUDDENLY, the reporter stepped backwards. His left foot lunged out behind him, catching his unseen enemy at the knee and unbalancing him momentarily—just long enough for Marlin to wheel and lash out with his right. The blow landed just as the gun in the yellow hand moved for aim. Marlin grabbed at it with a speed born of desperation. He caught the arm, his right fist crashing into the face of the astonished Japanese. The man fell, soundlessly, as Marlin leaped forward and caught the falling weapon lest the clatter arouse those down the corridor.

Without a pause the reporter sped down the black stairs, holding his flash before him for guidance. But a moment later he needed no such aid.

For a woman screamed from the darkness ahead—and the voice was dreadfully familiar.

Lois!

Racing through spidery blackness, running across cold, wet stone that dripped with the slime of subterrene night, crashing blindly against the icy slickness of dark, damp walls, Marlin sped through the tunnel that led to the torchlit room ahead. Again the girl's voice rose on a note of utter horror, and above it came the sound of deep, bestial laughter.

Then Marlin halted, frozen by the tableau he glimpsed through the intervening bars. There, against the wall of the cell, crouched Lois. And above her towered the giant Mongol, grinning insolently. And then Marlin saw what the glowing thing was he carried in his hand.

It was a peculiar, somehow menacing weapon, glowing with strange radio-activity. Constructed with a blunt muzzle, a grip, and a thick butt, it made an efficient and mysterious looking instrument of torture. A sort of radium gun.

Even as he watched, the great, naked yellow arms were swinging up, pressing the horrible looking thing closer and closer to the white throat of the captive girl. What weird torture might not this thing, evidently another of Okida's horrid inventions, inflict on the helpless girl. Would it burn deeply, perhaps even lead to a slow, tortured death from radium cancer—?

There was a sadistic grimace on the Mongol's brutish face. One great paw reached out to rip away the dress; the gun descended in heated horror and the world turned red as Marlin pumped shot after shot into the yellow body of the Mongol torture-master.

The figure toppled and fell; Marlin dashed through the open door, tore the keys from the belt, released the iron shackles, and with a greater exultation than he had ever known, took the sobbing girl in his arms.

Her hysteria subsided, and suddenly they were together, arms and lips, and for a long moment Marlin forgot the world. Lois gasped out her story, and abruptly the reporter jerked back to awareness of present reality.

"They took me away, Dan," she whispered. "Okida discovered everything. He locked me up down here, and sent that creature to threaten me. He thought I knew the secret of the Argus Eye, and he said I would be tortured if I didn't speak. He came twice, and tonight Okida came an hour ago and said he didn't need my information, so he would send the Mongol down again to kill me if he wished. And he was going to when you—"

"I know." Marlin soothed her, as men have soothed frightened women from time immemorial. Gently, he narrated the events which had occurred since he had been struck down in the hotel room. When he spoke of the pictures taken that afternoon, Lois's eyes widened, and a look of apprehension clouded their perfect blue.

"Oh, Dan," she breathed. "Then it is true—I knew it! Okida wasn't lying when he said he wouldn't need any information about the Argus Eye. He's discovered the secret of your camera. That means he can leave here tonight with the plans he's uncovered, the secret of his telescope, and your own invention. Once he gets away we'll never touch him, and he'll be able to go ahead with his scheme. He means to turn his inventions and information over to his government and urge them into war. And to think of the uses he'll put your cameras to, once he builds them—" Marlin calmed the girl, his face set in a reassuring smile in which there was no heart. He realized only too well that Lois had presented an accurate picture of what was likely to occur. But he spoke with desperate ease.

"Okida will never be able to build more Argus Eyes even if he does know how to operate one. The camera is constructed on the same plan as the recuperator of the U.S. 3.3" gun—I told you that. If he opens it up to examine the machinery, it flies apart into a thousand springs."

"But that telescope of his—I heard the others talking. He's packing it all up, hiding it away tonight. I know he means to flee the country at once. And if he ever gets away with what he knows we're lost. Don't you see?" Marlin saw, only too well. But he smiled as he kissed her, and raised her to her feet, breathing a silent prayer that her flawless beauty had not been marred by the threatening sear of the radio-active gun he had glimpsed in the photographic reels. A part of the quest had been successful. But now, the grim path of duty lay before him—a grim path through the underground blackness of a hostile citadel. Somewhere over his head the fat, cunning little oriental scientist was putting away the web that he had woven; the web of destruction which when next spun might engulf them all. The smile left the reporter's face and he stared down into the eyes of the girl.

"Will you follow me?" he asked. She nodded, slowly.

"Yes, Dan."

Through the cellar dark, up the stairs again, past the huddled body of the Japanese—Dan Marlin halted in the corridor near the lighted door.

"Okida's inner chamber," he whispered. "How near is it?"

"Around the corridor again, and through a series of doors. It's at the center of the building; shut off and soundproofed from outside."

"That's what I wanted to know," he answered. His features grew tense, sombre.

“Wait for me here. I have a duty to perform. A *duty,* understand?”

“I understand, Dan.”

Lois did not waver as she saw the reporter raise his revolver and walk slowly towards the lighted door. She did not waver as he slowly entered, slammed it behind him.

There was a momentary babble of surprised voices; then two shots rang and echoed in rapid succession. Marlin re-emerged from the room, revolver again in his pocket. His face was still grim, but Lois flashed him a glance of understanding and sympathy. It was a duty. Nothing could interfere now; there was too much at stake.

“Can you lead me to Okida’s observatory chamber?” Marlin asked.

“Yes.”

Down the corridor again, and through a door at one side. The pocket flash picked a path of light through a dark room, evidently a library. Another door, another room—living quarters. A third door, third room; long bare tables betokening the former presence of a laboratory. At the end of this room Lois halted.

“The next door,” she whispered.

Marlin’s fingers fumbled at the knob. It showed that this door, too, was unlocked.

“Now,” he breathed. “Perhaps we can catch him unawares.

He’s probably finishing putting up his equipment. Are you sure there were only three Japs and the Mongol here in the observatory?”

“That’s all I knew of,” the girl answered.

Marlin took her in his arms in a silent embrace.

“Just in case,” he muttered. Then he turned. His hand pushed the door open a crack. He peered in.

The long, lighted chamber appeared monstrous in its nudity. Gone was the gleaming intricacy of telescope apparatus Marlin had seen in the pictures of the afternoon. The black skylight opening had been shut again, and the light glittered from high white walls. The tables were bare of charts and instruments. A few great boxes stood at the further end of the chamber;

Marlin guessed that in these the machines had been stored away, preparatory to departure. At the center of the great deserted room, slightly to one side, was a small table. Otherwise all was bare.

And Okida—where was he? The figure of the scientist was nowhere visible.

Perhaps he had another sanctum. At any rate, here were the secrets Marlin sought. He pushed open the door, entered, with Lois behind him. And the door swung shut. From behind it stepped a squat, sinisterly familiar form.

CHAPTER VII
Master of the World

"KINDLY raise your hands," hissed Doctor Okida. The fat yellow man held a Mauser directly in line with Dan's waist as he motioned Marlin towards the center of the chamber. He smiled, but there was no more mirth in his grimace than in the grin of a skull.

"So Mohammed comes to the mountain?" he purred. His voice was sibilant, yet icy. Marlin stared into the cold dark eyes that blazed from the bland, hairless face of the scientist. Okida, with his plump paunchy body, his shaven skull, and his moon-shaped countenance was like a Buddha—a Buddha in the robes of science, holding in his hands a quite efficient modern weapon of death. Marlin looked upon Okida with more than a tinge of respect, and the oriental read his gaze, for he grinned sardonically.

"You are Mr. Marlin, are you not? The so clever young man who invented this apparatus?" His eyes flickered for an instant to indicate the Argus Eye which now rested on the table at one side of the room.

Dan Marlin nodded, sparring for time. But the Mauser muzzle never wavered. Okida went on.

"A very commendable effort, indeed. It took me over three days to fathom the intricacies of its construction. Fortunately, a knowledge of

Einsteinian formulae enabled me to adjudge the mechanical steps your reasoning would predicate in constructing a device to circumvent accepted light theories. After such reasoning, operation of your Argus Eye became a simple matter. I was so bold as to—ah—improve your little toy by attaching it to my own telescope. But I infer you already know its uses?"

"Yes," Marlin muttered.

"Well then, we are fellow-scientists after a fashion, eh? Let us enjoy that distinction for a few moments; for I fear that we soon must—ah—part."

The Mauser waved emphasis to his last words, and the fat bald head wobbled with mirth.

"Spider and fly, no, Mr. Marlin?" Again came laughter.

Marlin spoke. He had to keep talking. "Yes, but a very educated fly, Doctor Okida. You see, I know the purpose of your machine—I know how my Argus Eye attachment will enable you to direct gunfire accurately at any distance."

"Yes, and instantaneously." The fanatic in Okida flared from his eyes. "Together, we have unwittingly constructed the greatest all-round war weapon in the world. Not only will all bombardment be instantaneous and accurate, but the machine as a spy weapon is absolutely miraculous. With this device, my country will be utterly invincible. You see that, eh?"

Okida's plump fingers curled about the handle of the Mauser. He stepped back towards the table and his free hand dropped to the camera.

Marlin's arm encircled Lois's waist in a gesture of instinctive protection.

He felt her tremble, but her eyes, looking up into his, were unafraid. Okida seemed to be aware of the girl's presence in the room for the first time.

"I fear we are boring the young lady with our scientific discussion," he purred. "Although the young lady seemed very much interested in science at one time—almost too interested."

Okida's stare was mocking the girl.

"You were an excellent bait, my dear. I am sure chivalrous Mr. Marlin would never have blundered in here alone unless he had noticed your plight.

It was fortunate I waited without killing you before this.”

Marlin shuddered. His eyes stared at the weapon in Okida’s hand.

“Now, before we say goodbye,” the yellow man continued. “I shall thank you for this so excellent invention on behalf of my country. I am sure that it will prove of great service in—ah—our future plans.”

FUTURE plans! A vision born in Hell seared across Marlin’s brain; a picture of screaming thousands rushing through a bombed city, as shells dropped with frightful accuracy upon defenseless throngs, guided by eyes peering through a telescope thousands of miles away.

“You did me an unwitting service in disposing of my men tonight,” Okida was concluding. “They would not have been permitted to live, at any rate. I am the only one to be trusted with the secret, and my plans go with me tonight, when I take the Eastern plane. We three are all who know of this, and that must—not—be—”

The gun raised. Marlin tensed himself for the break. When the muzzle swept up, Marlin lunged forward. Okida stepped back hastily. The Mauser spoke and Marlin felt a stab of fire flame through his upper arm. Lois screamed as the reporter ran forward. The yellow man backed away, raising his weapon more deliberately for deadly aim. Once again the gun spoke. Marlin staggered, fell. Okida levelled the revolver for a finishing shot.

The terrified girl saw the reporter raise himself painfully. Despite wounded arm and shoulder, Dan Marlin rose half-way, then gathered himself in a final leap—a leap of desperate courage which could end only in death, for the revolver pointed at his heart.

But instinct intervened. Despite himself, Okida, startled at the movement, took another step backwards, and as he did so he collided with the table edge behind him. The Argus Eye, perched precariously on the rim, slid and fell. There was a crash as the camera box smashed to the floor, and suddenly the machine exploded.

A thousand springs flew upward as Okida screamed. Wires and coils struck him in the face. The gun went off in the air as Dan leapt with every remaining ounce of strength and bore the struggling oriental to the floor. His own weapon flashed out. The two men threshed and rolled, Okida clawing insanely at the metallic mask of tangled wires that tore his face. Marlin's gun pressed against one shaven temple and his finger pressed on the trigger.

Hatsuki Okida, greatest of Asiatic scientists, slumped to the floor, dead.

And Dan Marlin, rising unsteadily to his feet, turned to contemplate the pile of boxes housing the massive telescope with a puzzled frown.

"Beats me how we're going to move it to the War Department," he said, aloud. "But we'll do it. And I hope we never have to move it out again."

Again he ruefully surveyed the wreckage of the shattered Argus Eye. "I hope that's the last military duty it performs," he continued.

Then Lois had stepped forward, her arms cool and close around him. "I hope that's the last military duty you ever perform," she whispered. "There are other duties for a man like you."

As his lips found hers, Dan Marlin decided that he agreed perfectly.

THE END.

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[1] Argus—Fabled in Greek mythology as a giant with a thousand eyes.—Ed.

[2] Marlin means by this, that light striking on the wall inside, causes an impact. Motion is imparted from one object to another through kinetic energy. Hit a row of contacting balls with another, and the one at the end receives the transmitted motion, and moves along at the same rate of speed as the initial ball. It is the same with the molecules of the wall.

The particles of light hit the molecules of the wall and the motion is imparted entirely through, and then passes through the air itself, or any intervening element in the same manner, in a straight line with the speed of the original light. Finally, when the motion is impressed on the molecules of the radio-active disc, the result is a glow, or a light, caused by millions of tiny explosions or sparks.

Einstein postulated that light had mass, and he was borne out in his theory by observations of astronomers, who reported light was effected by gravity as it passed the sun during solar eclipses, being deflected from a straight line. And thus, light obeys the law of impact and transmits its kinetic energy to whatever it hits. Some of it is deflected, some reflected, from the object, and some is dissipated in heat. However, it finally reaches the opaque radio-active disc in Marlin's machine, as a weakened force, but strong enough to reproduce a good picture. Marlin also used a special super-sensitive high-speed emulsion, and succeeded in a maximum concentration of light by means of the system of lenses behind the receiving disc, lit by impact of billions of molecules.—Ed.

[3] The ignition ray machine referred to is undoubtedly similar to the one developed by U. S. Army Technicians in 1933. This device was capable of sending a directional beam of high magnetic force, which utterly damped the spark and froze the cylinders of planes within a range of two thousand feet of the transmitter. However, the inability of rapid shifting of the beam made it impracticable for wartime use, since the plane's motors ceased only for the short second when the ray enveloped it, resuming immediately as they passed beyond it.—Ed.

[4] The gun Marlin mentions here has an interesting history not generally known to the public. Immediately after the close of the World War, the Ordnance Department of the U.S. Army set about to develop an American weapon to take the place of the "seventy-fives" used in the war. For this purpose, four experimental 3.3" guns, each with slightly different rifling and other ballistic characteristics, were built and shipped to Aberdeen Proving Ground for test. (I happen to possess in my ballistic collection, the first sectional projectile fired in these tests.)

One of the outstanding features of these artillery weapons was a secret new design of recuperator. Only one mechanic in the employ of the War Department was permitted to know the details, and whenever a recuperator got out of order, or required adjustment, he had to be summoned.

In order to insure against anyone else learning the secret, the recuperators were put together with springs; so that, if tampered with, the recuperators would fly all to pieces. The pieces were so made that even an expert would be unable to figure out how to put them together again.—Roger Sherman Hoar, Major, Ord. Res.

The Mandarin's Canaries

A grim and fascinating tale of a torture-mad Chinese ruler who fed strange food to the feathered songsters in his garden of horror

THERE was revelry in the garden of the Mandarin Quong; revelry as attested by the loud cries and supplications for mercy interspersed with high titterings of pleasure.

The Mandarin was amusing himself today in a new fashion. Through the bamboos it could be seen that the stakes were bare, their rusty iron shackles hanging empty in the sunlight. The lotus-blossoms and orchids swayed with the wind to reveal that the racks stretched along the garden-paths were likewise empty, and the iron beds beneath the vines untenanted. No whips lay amidst the grass and flowers, no pincers or knives or barbed flails.

Therefore, as the cries and laughter proclaimed, the Mandarin Quong had found some new sport here in the Garden of Pain.

In a remote bower, guarded by great trees whose limbs had been trained to twist in torment, and veiled by serpentine creepers that extended fangs of scarlet blossom, the Mandarin stood. There had been those who were kind enough to compare Quong to the Lord Buddha, and there were times when his fat little figure held a dignified serenity quite similar.

But in moments such as this, Quong was transfigured; his fleshy face creased into a mask of demoniac mirth; his red, full lips writhed back above his black beard, and his eyebrows were swords over slitted points of flame.

Pleasure was an intense emotion in the Mandarin, and his pleasure was Pain.

He stood staring across the bower at the two figures before him: the bound man against the great tree, and the robed figure confronting him some ten paces distant. The bound man was uttering the cries and the pleadings; the robed one was silent. He moved, but no sound emanated from those movements save an occasional twanging thrum. For the robed man held in his hands a great crossbow, and upon his back was a quiver bristling with barbed arrows. These he was swiftly and efficiently removing one by one; fitting them to his bow and taking expert aim as he released them at the bound, writhing figure of the captive.

His aim was remarkable—despite the agonized movements and convulsive startings of the victim, he never erred. The arrows sped to a living mark: the wrist, the ankle, the knee, the groin. With curious precision, he avoided placing the cruel shafts in a vital spot, and his arm carefully judged the depth with which each arrow would penetrate the shrinking yellow flesh of his tormented target.

But Quong did not notice this dexterity, or if he noticed it he gave the matter no heed. His laughing eyes were on the victim, watching the impact of each arrow, the jerk of the flesh as it sank in, and the thin trickle of blood that followed the piercing. To an observer it might almost be said that Quong appeared to be studying his victim's pain, studying with the amused and detached pleasure of a bibliophile who reads for the hundredth time some treasured volume—foretasting each delight, yet seeking unfelt nuances of enjoyment.

His delighted laughter fell as an arrow struck the bound man's left eye and penetrated the brain. The writhing ceased, the body sagged limply and hung from the ropes which restrained its fall.

The Mandarin Quong heaved a sigh—the sigh of the bibliophile when his book is closed—and with a wave of his saffron hands dismissed the archer. The bowman bowed and backed from the bower with gestures of obeisance, leaving his master alone.

QUONG stood stock-still for an instant after the fellow's departure, and his features underwent a curious change. Gone was the sadist's smile, gone the passionate intensity which had made of his face a gargoyle's grimace. Serenity returned to shine from his slant eyes, and his lips relaxed into a softer smile of pleasure. He moved forward to the tree where the bound body hung, passing the gory thing without so much as a glance.

Behind the tree, suspended by the selfsame ropes which upheld the victim, a series of thin metal pipes were hanging. From the sleeve of his robe the Mandarin drew forth a slender stick. With a gentle, caressing motion he drew the ivory head of the stick across the metal. A chiming rang forth—a soft, liquid, almost chirping series of notes holding a peculiar bird-like quality. The tones flooded forth, clear and mellow, as the Mandarin chose his notes with careful attention to harmonics. Music came from the tree where horror hung.

Again the Mandarin stepped back, and stood still as though waiting. And suddenly, while the last strains of metallic melody still floated through the garden, the air was filled with a curious rustling sound—hundreds of tiny sounds, rather, blurred into a single whirring note. And there came a cheeping and shrill whistling from all around which caused the yellow face of Quong to glow with kindly pleasure.

Without warning, the air turned to gold. A thousand yellow forms swirled to outshine the sun—moving yellow dots with bejeweled eyes that flamed. They whirled and dipped against the serene sky, then swooped about the tree in a golden cloud that spun round and round about the trunk and its grisly adornment.

And still they came, whirring and scudding down until the tree was covered with a yellow blossoming in all its boughs, and vines of living gold crawled across the bark and what sagged against it. The garden was filled with tiny birds, filled with the exquisite darting flight of graceful elfin swarms that chirped liquid cries of pleasure.

The Mandarin watched the golden pageant flow over the tree-trunk, watched the shining cluster as it moved across the tree in frantic life. The symphony of this motion enthralled him so that the minutes passed unheeded.

It was perhaps half an hour later that the swarm dispersed. It rose suddenly in a golden spiral, swerving up from the tree-trunk to settle in the limbs. And now, in the space made vacant by the canaries' departure, a silver figure gleamed in the sunlight. Where the dead man had hung there remained only a dry-picked, shining skeleton.

The Mandarin stared quietly, then lifted his eyes to the boughs where the yellow horde rested in its repletion. He waited, and in a moment the melody came forth.

The song of pleasure was indescribable in its sweetness—soft, limpid, yet glowing with tonal color and pulsing with painfully ecstatic threnody. It rose and fell, faintly at first, then culminated in a burst of beauty as the chirping resolved into eery notes that were shrill yet vibrant.

For perhaps ten minutes the song continued, and then the last trills died away, the golden chain shattered link by link, and the birds departed.

Quong turned away toward the oncoming twilight, and as he walked toward the Palace the dusk hid the tears that streamed down his yellow cheeks.

2

THE Mandarin Quong loved his birds.

This was a matter of common knowledge throughout the South, and the statement of it was generally coupled with tire other known fact that Quong loved nothing else.

In these brave days China was used to cruel and dreadful masters, but in a land noted for the perversity of its overlords the name of Quong was feared above all others.

Shortly after the Mandarin usurped his father's throne in the Great Palace he had given evidences of those qualities which caused many of his people to flee to Canton's coast where now the foreign devils had landed with many ships.

Those that remained after Quong's accession did so because they were unable to leave the lands; but in them was the same fear which had driven their more fortunate companions to seek the safety of seaward lands.

They feared Quong even as a boy, for he had given many instances of his cruel precocity when a mere lad in his father's house. With the impatience of youth he did not bother to amuse himself, as his brothers did, with the flogging and torturing of slaves. He was eager for death-throes, for the spasms of agony, and the servants he toyed with died swiftly in the dark dungeons. It was only in adolescence that he learned to control the intensity of his lusts; then he turned to the more subtle tortures. And not for long did he feel satisfied with the Copper Bowl, the Water-Death, or the Seven Bamboo Chastisements. The time-honored devices of his father's hired torture-masters he improved on, and his days were spent in the study of pain.

Now this was well, for the future Master must govern his people strictly and be quick to wrath, but even the conservative graybeards whispered that young Quong possessed a devil within him which knew delight only in debauches of cruelty.

It is true that his first favorites were seldom fated to survive his yearning for experiment over the period of a month; only families utterly destitute sold their daughters into the House of Quong. Each passing month saw the young man's quest of Pleasure in Pain increase its horror; he grew pale from long hours spent in dark cells and murky oubliettes. This could be readily understood in an old man, whose other pleasures were few, but for a youth it was not seemly to be so confined. Still, Quong was precocious.

This precocity further evinced itself in Quong's judicious disposal of his three brothers, who found their last cups of rice wine to be very bitter indeed. They died quietly, without ostentation, and it was only to be expected when one morning the old Mandarin, Quong's father, went to his ancestors with the cord of a silken bowstring for a necklace about his throat.

Then Quong was Lord of the House, and high Mandarin over the jungles, the plains, and the village lands of all his people. His regal reign started with a most sumptuous funeral in honor of his father, and then he gave the people of his city a noble tiger-hunting in the streets of a little village close by. But these evidences of propriety did not wholly satisfy his subjects, who unkindly grumbled about the vast number of coolies who were immolated outside his father's tomb during the funeral ceremonies. Other ungrateful coolies said that the tiger-hunt was spoiled by the deaths of almost the entire populace in the village where it occurred.

But when Mandarin Quong made the pronouncement about his law, the flights to the coast began. Quong as Mandarin was the judge over all criminal trials in his domain, but he now specified that he would usurp the office of executioner as well. In the first three years of his official rule every case brought before him ended in conviction; and there were many cases, due to his increasing his force of guardsmen and the peculiar system whereby he paid them a bounty for each criminal obtained. This he could well afford, for an increasing number of crimes seemed to be discovered among the wealthier merchant and land-holding class, and conviction carried with it a confiscation of money and property to Quong's house.

As an executioner, Quong scorned beheading or any of the accepted modes of torture. No longer was the sentence carried out in public; Quong preferred the darkness of his palace dungeons or his ivory Hall of State: Here, it was averred, the walls were lined with human heads, mounted as one might mount the head of a deer or a buffalo.

In an effort to discourage such unfortunate predilections toward torture, one of Quong's advisers subtly hinted that his constant stay indoors was injurious to the health of the Mandarin.

It was then that Quong built his garden—his beautiful Chinese garden behind the palace, where trees and flowers and mirroring-pools opened to the sky. And he built racks and wheels and scaffolds that blossomed with evil fruit, so that things went much the same as they had in the old dungeons below the Palace.

But Nature stirred a new love of beauty in the Mandarin's breast. He caused vines to grow upon the iron racks to conceal the rusty stains; trained creepers to hide the stark lines of his scaffolds. Sometimes he walked in the gardens alone, and was serenaded by musicians from concealed glades and dells.

For the birds did not rest here. Blood nourished the fantastic flowers, and the perfume of rare orchids was rich in the air; but over all was the carrion taint that brought crows and vultures but kept the songsters away. Nightingales and finches shunned the green confines, and those brought by the animal-venders flew away with peepings of terror rather than chirps of song. Even the scarlet macaws and green parrots refused to color the landscape with their presence, and the garden remained incomplete without its musical background.

BUT at this time the two missionaries came to Quong at the Palace, and asked if they might stay. They were foreign devils; Portuguese, in robes of black, who spoke a curious tongue and blasphemed against Lord Buddha, the Four Books, and Kwong-Fu-Tze with equally impartial fervor.

Some of their paraphernalia interested the Mandarin, who spent several days with the queer thunder-sticks which worked on principles so divergent from Chinese guns; the sextants, silver watches, and other marvels brought from the court of King John.

They had birds, in cages—tiny yellow birds, that sang with infinite sweetness. Canaries, the priests called them, and their golden beauty much impressed the Mandarin; so much so, that after listening to an especially severe tirade against his torturing and cruelties by the two missionaries, he conducted them to the garden and accorded them the fate of the One they called their Master.

And he loosed the canaries in the garden, and beheld with pleasure that they did not fly away but remained close to him. To his great amusement one of them perched upon the sagging shoulder of the first priest, and sang up into the dead face with affectionate fervor. He rewarded the birds with the most delicate of meats—the tongue of the priest.

Perhaps, he mused, it would instill the creatures with the eloquence of their former masters.

This did not occur, but the birds stayed. And within a few years they had multiplied a hundredfold, then grew to many thousands. They filled the garden by day, and then fared afield at will, returning only toward twilight to await the feast spread for them.

They had developed a terrible appetite for the ghastly fruit which ripened daily in the garden sunlight. It had arisen at the first, and as generation after generation lived and bred and died in the torture-maze, the blood-strain carried with it the nameless hunger.

Formerly Quong had set aside a burial-ground on his lands, but now only bones need be piled in his great cellars. The birds, thousands strong, did the rest. And after a time they learned to await his signal.

Over all the garden Quong had set up little metal bars which played a curious scale. Upon completing his daily dispensing of justice, he would summon the flock with his chimes and they came to partake of his largess. Afterward they raised their voices in the sweet reward of song—and it was a song infinitely more beautiful than any the Mandarin had ever known. It soothed him like mellow wine, set his blood tingling like the hands of one well-beloved, thrilled his imaginative senses like moonlight over dragon-guarded pools. He loved his birds, loved their daily tribute.

But others feared them. Men learned of his canaries, saw the flocks speed over their fields and descend at will to ravish the grain and seeds. They were not molested lest this incur the Mandarin’s displeasure. The growing horde swarmed about the cities and villages, and none might wave them from the streets. A dead bird meant a dead man if the Mandarin’s guards found the creature.

The legend of their feastings in the garden became known, and after that strange tales were told of the foreign devils who had brought the birds as spies. It was whispered that the tiny chattering creatures possessed human souls; that they sucked evil nourishment from the dead, and absorbed the wisdom of men which they used when prying about the streets. Other lore hinted that they reported to the Mandarin the misdeeds which they observed in daily flight, and they came to be hated and feared as living symbols of the terrible power which ruled the land.

3

Now lately Quong had devised a new torture which pleased him greatly. He was writing, on many parchments, a history of Pain to bequeath to the Great School in Peking, and it heartened him to be able to include interesting variations invented by himself.

This Death of a Thousand Arrows was such an invention. Barbed darts of various sizes, shot with various degrees of force into certain carefully-selected portions of a victim's body, produced a lingering torment delightful to members of the aristocracy of Pain.

Quong had devised the idea himself, but he needed an expert bowman to assist him. It was then that he sought Hin-Tze, the Emperor's archer, and offered him employment.

Hin-Tze came to the Palace with his wife Yu-Li, and the Mandarin noted with pleasure that his bowman was efficient and the bowman's wife lovely to look upon.

So it was not many days after Hin-Tze first employed himself with victims in the garden that the Mandarin caused the woman to be removed to his quarters and gave himself over to dalliance.

The archer learned of this, and his heart was sore. He did not like his dreadful task, but he had come at the Emperor's command and dared not disobey. He hated the cruelty, hated the Mandarin, and was repelled by the nauseous birds whose unnatural feastings gave him such qualms as he had never known on the battlefield. Indeed, one day he had accidentally pierced a yellow body with an arrow—and only the fact that the canary had winged itself within the line of flight saved him from the Mandarin's wrath. He was a soldier, and to him the music of the canaries was not sweet after the spectacle of their dining.

Now that his wife had been taken, Hin-Tze was very bitter in his heart against Lord Quong, though he dared not speak. He feared, instead, for he had heard tales of the Mandarin's love.

And one evening not many weeks after the taking of his woman, Quong grew enraged and with his dagger slit the golden throat of his new favorite so that pretty Yu-li died sobbing her husband's name.

Hin-Tze saw, and said nothing, even when the pitiful limp form was carried into the garden by servants.

He returned to his quarters and sat alone in the moonlight, awaiting what he knew he would hear. And then came that sweet, detestable song from the tree-tops, the satisfied song of the canaries. At that moment Hin-Tze swore his oath against the Mandarin, against the desecration of his wife's body, which was not even accorded godly burial but sacrificed instead to a few moments of melody from the hateful tiny throats of Quong's friends.

Of this he said no word to the Mandarin, for that was not seemly; and with lordly courtesy Quong forbore mentioning the occurrence when they met the next day.

Hin-Tze carried a bound coolie into the garden sunlight; a poor, choking wretch who had stolen a few taels in some market outside the town. He pleaded with Hin-Tze as he walked, and it was curious to the archer to hear that the doomed man did not fear death nearly so much as he feared the loss of his immortal soul. He and all the people were afraid of the canaries of Quong, whose feasting deprived them of proper burial.

But Hin-Tze said nothing as he slipped a knife through the man's bonds and awaited the Mandarin.

Quong strode down the path, smiling in the sunshine. A fat prisoner—a greater song. He advanced, beaming serenely on his bowman, whose gentle tact in ignoring the unfortunate accident of the previous evening he greatly admired. Quong clapped his hands to signal that the ritual binding begin, and indicated the great tree as the one to which the victim was to be tied.

But the Lord of Pleasure and Pain was chagrined when the prisoner suddenly wheeled and bolted off through the garden, his severed bonds trailing behind him. He opened his mouth, forming it for a shout of anger; but it gaped still wider in astonishment as Hin-Tze advanced and seized him by the throat. There was a great arrow in the bowman's hand, and its point was barbed. It moved slowly toward the Mandarin's neck as he struggled back against the tree-trunk. His face paled at what he read in his captor's gleaming eyes.

It was then that he babbled for mercy and screamed, and struck out wildly. But Hin-Tze drew the barbed point over the breast of Quong and pinned him to the tree.

Then the bowman stepped back and fixed an arrow to his great bow. He shot the dart, eyes blind with rage and ears deaf to the cries of his living target. He drew, fixed, fired automatically; a halfhundred times perhaps, he aimed with eyes dazzled by a sort of madness. Only then was vengeance appeased—only then did he cease and approach the living horror that still stood before the tree-trunk.

One of the hands was moving, a bloody claw. It curled around the bark, fumbling, fumbling. It rested, then moved again. And suddenly shrill chimes rang upon the air—chimes that summoned and commanded. The hand fell, but into the glazing eyes crept a look of triumph and of craftiness. The lips worked piteously.

"Lift me down," whispered the Mandarin.

Hin-Tze, confused, drew the pinioning arrow forth and the body of the dying Quong slumped forward as though fainting in his arms.

TOO late did Hin-Tze see the arrow torn from the flesh; the arrow in the hand that now struck with every ounce of strength that remained in the broken arms. With a last effort, the Mandarin had nailed him to the tree!

The figure in the gorgeous robes fell earthward, but Quong's triumphant eyes still stared up into Hin-Tze's pain-contorted face.

"I have summoned the birds," said the Mandarin, faintly. "They are my friends, and they come when the chimes call. You have heard the legends which say my canaries possess living souls—the souls of the dead that once hung upon the tree where you hang now."

The Mandarin shuddered a moment, then fell silent. At last he whispered again.

"This is not true. The birds are simply birds; they know me and they love me, for I have prepared for them many feasts. Therefore vengeance for my death shall rest with them. And—I shall hear one last song as I die."

Hin-Tze understood then. He struggled to free himself, but the arrow held him so that he hung by the barbs that nailed him to the tree of horror.

He clawed and screamed when he heard the rustling sounds, moaned aloud as the golden cloud hummed down toward him. And then they were all about with their beating wings, their tiny beaks that stabbed sharply, cruelly, with dreadful hunger. Blood blinded him, two winged knives flew to his eyes, and the golden glow faded to black pain. For a few moments longer he writhed beneath the beaks of his tiny tormenters. Then the cloud settled down in silence.

Upon the ground lay the Mandarin Quong. His wounds were forgotten, for he had the nature of a poet. This final revenge, this last triumph in defeat, was atonement. He watched every movement of the raptorial birds, drank in their graceful beauty to the full. And soon he would hear the song—the final song before death.

For he had spoken truly to Hin-Tze. The birds loved him; and they were only birds. The notion of psychopomps—the absurd superstition that these creatures of his possessed the souls of the dead from his garden—was incredible.

Quong watched the yellow swarm move across the body of the bowman. They rose, chittering. In a moment the song would commence. The Mandarin awaited the perfection of the poet's death.

They rose—and suddenly one of the tiny birds detached itself from the sun-bright cluster. It was a tiny female—and it flew straight down toward the skeleton on the tree. It perched, absurdly, upon the fleshless ribs; as though peering into the bony bars of a cage.

Quong gazed with new interest. He drew himself up on one elbow, painfully. The bird was sitting there—and then—there were two birds!

Was it hallucination, dying delirium? Or had another bird suddenly appeared from *inside* the skeleton? A yellow form, whirring within the ribs where the heart had been?

And now the two winged out, together. Their beady little eyes rested upon the recumbent form of the Mandarin.

He sank back, strange horror tugging at his heart. A female bird—Yu-Li. And a male from the skeleton of the dead bowman! *Psychopomps?*

The two flew upward, to where the yellow cloud hovered in midair. They flew to the forefront, shrilling as though in command. And then they wheeled, swooped down. Quong screamed in utter fear. Dead souls were exacting *their* vengeance. Yellow knives stabbed and struck home; ten thousand fluttering forms tore and clawed at the writhing thing upon the ground.

And so there was no one to hear the final moment when it came—it was in a deserted garden that the last sweet serenade was sung by the canaries of the Mandarin Quong.

The Hound of Pedro

A tale of old Mexico under the Spaniards, of an evil black Moor from Granada, of a dire oppression of the Indians, and a ghastly game of tenpins played on the desert sands

THEY said he was a wizard, that he could never die. Men JL whispered that he held traffic with the undead and that his swarthy servants were not of human kind. The Indians murmured their fears of his incredibly wrinkled face in which, they averred, blazed two green eyes that flamed in a manner alien to men. The padres muttered too, and hinted that no mortal could exercise the powers he controlled.

But nobody knew who Black Pedro Dominguez was, or where he had come from. Even today the peons tell their tales of the Spanish oppressor, and mumble fearfully that monstrous climax which has become a legend throughout all Sonora.

It was a spring day in Novorros; that morning of April fifth, 1717. The hot sun beat upon the adobes, the wind whirled dust amidst the cacti. The bells were tolling noontide in the little stone chapel of the mission. Almost it seemed as though they pealed in welcome to the little band of men that rode up through the canyon to Novorros town that noon. Indeed they might, for the shaman's drums had boomed over the western hills the night before, spreading the story of the Caballero who rode with his beast of black.

The Yaqui tribesmen filled the streets, their sullen faces illumined by the light of curiosity. The padre and his two brothers of the cloth watched discreetly from the steps of the mission as Black Pedro Dominguez rode into town.

FORTY men and fifty horses smoked through the dust at a gallop. Strange, shining men, faceless in iron armor, straddling snorting steeds—the Indians were curiously impressed. They knew of the *conquistadores* from tales their fathers told; they had seen horses before. But the sight of the burnished steel corselets, the sun-tipped lances, the grilled masks—these things impressed them.

The padre and his brethren were impressed, too, but by more subtle details. They noted the man that rode behind the leader, the tall, lean figure on the white pony whose garb differed curiously from the war-like raiment of his fellows. This thin rider's face was hidden not by steel but by a silken mask; he wore no helmet, but a curious turban. By this and by his light Saracenic armor the priests knew him for a Moor. A Moor of Granada—here!

Then there was the heavy figure on the bay mare, the man who sat uneasily astride as though unused to riding. He wore no helmet, but about his head was wound a scarlet neckerchief. The glitter of his squinting eyes was matched by the sparkle of the gold earrings that dangled at either side of his bearded visage. He carried neither sword nor spear, but in his bloused belt reposed a hilted cutlass, in a scabbard that shone with jewels. The padre recognized him, for he had crossed the Caribbean in a galleon long years ago. This man was a buccaneer.

There were other unusual features which the white men observed while the Yaquis remained in ignorance, but there were two things which both groups noticed, two objects which impressed: Black Pedro Dominguez and his hound.

Had anyone present known of the legend, the comparison would have been irresistible, for Pedro Dominguez was seated on his horse like a malignant Buddha. He was a hog in armor, a swarthy, bearded hog whose porcine jowls were surmounted by a splayed nose and the skull-shadowed eyes of a more carnivorous beast. His forehead was a livid scar; he had been branded there by slave-irons, it seemed. There was something impressive about the man's very obscene ugliness; he *was* Buddha, but Buddha turned demon.

The natives felt it, the priests felt it. Here was evil in man.

Then they saw the hound. A great black shape loped at the heels of Pedro's horse. Huge as a cougar, supple as a panther, black as the velvet of midnight; this was the hound of Pedro, bellow claws gleamed in the ink of great splayed paws; dark muscles rippled across the enormous belly. The lion-head was jeweled with ruby eyes, and the great slavering jaws opened on a fanged red maw that gaped in hideous hunger.

The natives felt it, the priests felt it. Here was evil in beast.

Black Pedro Dominguez and his hound rode through the town. The cavalcade halted at the mission steps. The priest raised his hands in benediction as Pedro dismounted and stood before him.

The band had traveled far. There was foam on the horses' flanks and dust upon the armor of their riders. Sweat oozed across Black Pedro's scarred forehead. The hound cowered at his feet, moaning, with its tongue lolling like a red serpent.

Therefore as Pedro approached, the padre opened his mouth to invite him into the mission; rest, food, water might be provided.

BEFORE he could speak, Black Pedro growled a greeting. He, he informed the padre, was Pedro Dominguez of Mexico City. He wished nothing from the good father save that he should immediately pronounce the prayers for the dead.

“What is this, sir?” the padre asked. “Can it be that you carry with you the body of some poor man who died unshriven in the desert?”

“No,” said Pedro, curtly. “But get along with the prayer.” His dark eyes smoldered.

“But I do not understand,” the priest continued. “Who is this prayer for?”

“For you—you——fool!” Pedro smiled, grim mirth flaming in his eyes. “For you!”

It happened very quickly then. Even as he spoke, Pedro’s saber had leaped from the scabbard, risen in Pedro’s hand, and descended in flashing fury on the priest’s neck. There was a thud and the padre’s body lay in red dust. There was a puddle in the little space between head and neck.

Others had seized the two brethren. Daggers flashed in silver sunlight. The black-gowned men dropped beside their superior.

The Yaquis stood silent. Then a vast murmuring arose, a muffled drone of anger. These strangers had killed the white brothers. Knives and bows appeared in brown hands. The tall natives closed in on the mission steps, converging in a red wave.

As if by premeditated signal the little band of whites grouped themselves in a semicircle. Pistols appeared. And as the tribesmen closed in, flame burst upon them. A score dropped, screaming. Another belch of fire. Brown bodies writhed in agony on the dusty ground. The natives turned and fled up the adobe-lined street. The whites remounted, wheeled their steeds, and leveled their lances. Steel shivered through the retreating backs. Swords hacked at heads and shoulders. There were screams and imprecations; horses whinnied and armor clanged. But above all was the sound of grisly laughter as Black Pedro sat quaking on the mission steps. Beside him was the great hound. As the beast began to worry the bodies of the young tribesmen, Pedro laughed anew.

THE truce came soon. The Yaquis dragged away the bodies of their slain. Gomez, the mestizo chieftain, parleyed in the mission chapel with Pedro that evening. When he heard Pedro's terms—his command—the old Indian's gray face turned pale with sick rage. He muttered to himself of Yaztan, the great Yaqui leader to the south. Even now a messenger to Yaztan was on his way, and that champion would raise an army of thousands to march against this invader.

Pedro listened, chuckled. He beckoned to the turbaned figure of the Moor behind him. Smiling with cryptic relish, the Arab bowed and left the room. In a moment he returned, bearing a leathern saddle-bag.

Pedro placed it on the table before him. Then he faced the silent Indian.

"Yaztan," he said. "I have heard of this Yaztan, the mighty chief. Is it not true that he is said to have a ring of gold set within his nose, and has pierced his cheeks with golden bracelets?"

The Indian nodded in assent.

Pedro smiled, looked at the Yaqui without comment, and opened the bag on the table.

SOMETHING shriveled and dry rolled out—something that held the glitter of gold about a crumbled nose and sparkled yellowly in bloodless cheeks. There were no eyes in this—the head of Yaztan.

"I have already visited your chief," Pedro purred. "Before he died he told me of this place; of its mission, and of your tribe's mines. He spoke of your gold, and by the nature of your people's ornaments I see that he spoke truly. Now, as I have said, you will mine this gold for us. You have heard my terms; think them over. Or perhaps you might join Yaztan——"

Thus began the tryranny of Black Pedro; the dreadful days of bondage about which men still whisper.

They tell how Pedro visited the crude native mines, and how he ordered them enlarged and changed so that the labors of his servants might be increased. They speak of the manner in which he conscripted all the able-bodied males of the tribe, so that the women were forced to hunt while their men-folk toiled in the mines, guarded over by the bearded white men with their flame-rods that dealt death to the disobedient and their whips that bloodied the backs of the laggard and weary. They tell also of the gold that was piled in the mission towers, of the ingot-lined chambers at the church where now Black Pedro dwelt.

They speak with shame about the usage accorded their women by Pedro and his men, of Maquila the chieftain's daughter who danced to the stroke of whips in the courtyard when she failed to please the strange dark man who rode behind Black Pedro. They whisper of young virgins who disappeared each month; for with every moon Pedro exacted the tribute of a maiden.

The dark man would come at dusk to the village and demand the girl; then she would ride away to the mission house and disappear. No one dared approach that night, though the screaming sometimes would be borne afar on the lonely wind; no one dared ask next day why the girl did not return.

There was asking at first; the chief's son came, with ten young men. And Pedro scowled at them, while his hirelings seized the youths in sight of the entire tribe. They were stripped and carried to the desert. Here Black Pedro caused holes to be dug in the sand and in these holes were lowered the bodies of the young tribesmen, and earth was heaped around so that they stood buried up to the neck.

Only their heads stood silhouetted against the sand; only their faces wreathed in wonderment and vague fear. They could not know, dared not guess their fate. Did Pedro mean to leave them here to starve and die? Would they suffer hunger, thirst, the torment of heat? Would the wheeling vultures come to feast?

THE tribe watched, impassive, held in check by Pedro's crew. They saw Pedro conversing with the dark man, and the swarthy squint-eyed one with the rings in his ears. They heard Pedro whisper to the squint-eyed one, and he laughed terribly and cursed in his outlandish tongue.

Then Black Pedro motioned to his soldiers, and they forced the throng away. There were fathers, mothers, wives, children of the ten young braves in that group; they were herded back with the rest.

Ten pairs of eyes followed them—ten pairs of eyes from heads set in the sand. Hopeless, helpless eyes.

The men escorted the savages back to the village. Pedro, the dark man, and the squint-eyed lieutenant remained all alone with the buried, living heads.

What occurred in the next few hours could never be rightly known. But the Yaquis could guess. For there were terrible hintings.

Several soldiers went into the convent and presently returned carrying great wooden balls of hardened fiber. These they carried back into the desert.

The savages had seen Pedro roll these balls along the inner lawn of the convent garden at times; he and the dark man were adept at bowling.

The balls were carried with them into the desert. Perhaps that was what Pedro had whispered to make the others laugh. He might have conceived a jest.

Ten-pins. Ten heads.

The heavy wooden balls rumbled thunderously as they rolled across the flat sands. The sound of human screams rose unmistakably over the booming.

When Pedro and his companions returned it was already dark. Their faces were flushed as though from exertion. When the released tribesmen hastened out to the desert, they could find no trace of heads in the sand. The men had vanished. But in the twilight when Black Pedro returned, they had seen ominous stains on the wooden bowling-balls.

The natives asked no questions, but their scowls deepened to the impassive malignity of the savage enraged. They dared not search the spot or linger to dig up that which they suspected lay beneath the sands; dared not search because it was night.

At night, Pedro's hound was abroad. It roamed their village at will, descended even to the mines where they toiled under the lash by day. When hungry, the beast sprang on the native nearest—unless an alert white guard beat it off in time. Sometimes the guard would not bother to repulse the hound if the attacked native was old and feeble.

That hound. . . .

The Yaquis feared it more than they did their vicious but human master. They began to conceive queer fancies connected with both of these oppressors. These fancies were based on their scanty knowledge of what went on behind the convent walls where Pedro and his men lived in guarded seclusion. No one entered the place save to be conducted into dungeons and torture chambers below, but rumors spread. It was guessed that Pedro's band had come from Mexico, lured by tales of mines and yellow metal. How long he would stay here none could say, but the gold was piling up daily in the chapel rooms. A few old natives had been detailed to tend it there, and they started the disturbing rumors of life within the walls.

The dark man, they said, was a shaman—a wizard. It was he who advised Pedro, the old natives whispered; and it was he who tended the torture vaults in the abandoned cellars below the former mission. Victims came from the mines; disobedient natives were taken here and "punished" before their reward of death.

But (so hinted the oldsters) they were "punished" as a wizard would chastize; they were sacrificed, and their bodies rended in terrible ways.

It was the dark man, too, that demanded the virgin every moon. She was led into the cellars, the old Indians averred, and given in sacrifice where none could see. The dark man and Black Pedro and the hound went down into those depths with her, and there would be the sound of chanting and praying, the screams of the girl mingled with the baying of that sable beast.

The old ones cautiously spoke of how the hound would re-emerge after this and slink off into outer darkness, but they said Pedro and the dark man remained below for several days. When the hound returned they ventured abroad once more, to hear tales of new atrocities committed without the mission walls.

Some of the tribe believed these old ones in their mutterings. Certainly they came to fear Black Pedro and his great dog increasingly as the months went by. And the secret messengers they had sent to the south gave no word.

But even the most credulous refused to believe the wilder stories of Pedro speaking to the dog, and the animal replying in human tongue. Nevertheless a growing panic manifested itself in tribal ranks. There was talk of fleeing, but this was impossible. Uprising was out of the question; in truth, the men with the flame-rods were not over-cruel—it was Pedro, the dark man, and the strange beast that reveled in brutality.

PANIC increased the rumors so that Pedro and his hound became almost legendary figures of evil. The two were almost alike in their animal lusts; dreadful things were hinted as to the fate of the maiden taken each month—tales of bestial passion and the old shaman stories of the uses accorded virgin blood. These stories drew added color from the almost human attributes displayed at times by the hound. If it could not talk to its master as the wildest stories reputed, it could at least understand human speech and make itself understood.

The Yaquis began to realize that on nights following the monthly ceremonies the great black hound prowled about their adobes; that it listened below windows and lurked amidst the shadows beyond their campfires.

For whenever there was midnight talk of rebellion and discontent Black Pedro knew of it, and summoned the speaker to the mission. Could it be that the beast actually *reported* these things? Or was it the wizardry of the strange dark man?

None knew the truth, but each passing day the shadow of Pedro and his hound loomed larger over all their lives. And far away the messengers sped south to spread the tale.

3

DON MANUEL DIGRON halted his march at the head of the canyon. Signal fires smoked in the dusk, and the three emissaries were waiting as the messengers had said.

They held a secret parley in the darkness, while Don Manuel listened to the natives' story. He scowled deeply as he heard, then broached his plan of action. The Yaquis nodded, then faded away in the gloom of the twilight canyons.

The men-at-arms dismounted, encamped. Don Manuel Digron kept counsel with his aide, Diego.

"Sure it is the same man," he growled. "This is Black Pedro Dominguez of wham they speak. Friar Orspito tells me that this Pedro is long wedded to the Devil, for the Holy Inquisition seeks him even now in Mother Spain. He fled from there with the Moor, Abouri—a black wizard of Granada; men tell of their exploits. The hound Pedro rules is not an earthly thing, I warrant, if tales I've heard are true."

"What does such a man here?" Diego inquired. A frown crossed Don Manuel's lean face.

"I know not. He left Mexico City—he and his band of freebooters and gutter-rats—no doubt the smell of gold lured him across the plains to Sonora. It is always so. With gold he and his damned sorcerer can command an empire."

"Are we to turn him over to Mother Church or the civil authorities?" asked Diego.

"Neither," Manuel drawled. "We have no horses to convey forty captives across the desert, nor water and provisions to sustain them. They must be disposed of here—and if half the tales of evil magic he true, it is God's work to do this."

The Don stared at the fire for a moment, then continued.

"We may taste of necromancy tonight, Diego. The chieftains inform me that this is the eve appointed for sacrifice. A living maiden is delivered to him once each moon. I trust our arrival is timely; I do not care to ponder on the usage accorded a woman by these sorcerous swine."

The two men ate and drank.

4

TWO MEN ate and drank within the mission walls. Black Pedro dined tonight with Abouri, the Moor; they toasted gold and goety alike from amber goblets.

There was little of speech between them, but many a glance of dark understanding. The Moor smiled after a long silence, and lifted his glass.

"Fortune!" he pledged.

Pedro sneered, his little pig-eyes sullen with discontent.

"When shall we leave this cursed hole, Abouri? I long for cities where there is no sun to dry the juices from my body; we've gold enough to ransom the kings of all the world. Why tarry?"

The Moor pursed his lips urbanely as he stroked his graying beard, and his smile was placating.

"Patience," he counseled. "Be guided by my wisdom, O brother. Was it not I who led you from the galleys to riches beyond all dreams? Did we not pledge a pact before Ahriman, your Sathanas; has not He guided us on our way?"

"True." Pedro was thoughtful.

"I have brought you wealth," pursued the Moor. "And I must have my due, as our bond with your Lucifer demands. Here we have found the blood of maidens and other useful things, and I may carry out my bargain undisturbed. That was our agreement with the Master before the Altar—wealth for you, and mantic power for me, and souls for Him.”

Strange fear flooded Pedro’s face.

“ ’Tis a dreadful pledge,” he half whispered. “Souls for Him! And at what price! For the hound frightens me, and I am afraid when the exchange is made; should anything go amiss——”

The Moor raised his hand in a gesture of restraint. “That was the bond. The hound is His; He gave it to us as an instrument to secure souls for His Devil’s bondage. A few days each month is little enough to ask in return for wealth. And yours is a nature to delight in the shedding of blood.”

“As a man, yes—I warrant I find pleasure enough in slaying,” Pedro admitted, with utter candor. “But as the other——”

Again the Moor checked his companion’s speech. “Here is the maiden now, and we must prepare for this night’s work.”

Two trembling natives had entered the room, pushing a bound and frightened girl before them. She struggled in her bonds once they freed her legs, but they took no heed. Bowing low, they averted their faces and ran out. The Moor rose and approached the dark, lithe figure of the Indian maiden. As his hands grasped her pinioned arms she closed her eyes in utter fear.

Black Pedro leered, laughing.

“A fine wench, indeed!” he chuckled. “Could I but——”

“No,” declared the Moor, sensing his purpose. “She must remain immaculate for the sacrifice. Come.”

All mirth, all desire, vanished from Pedro’s face as he followed the Moor and his captive down the winding stairs to the cellar crypts below. Fie knew what was to happen, and he was afraid.

There was nothing to reassure him in the dungeon itself. A vast, gloomy chamber, taper-litten, it was an oddly terrifying place.

Corridors stretched off into further gloom. Here were to be found the cages and the racks for prisoners, but the Moor did not go on. Instead he proceeded down the center of the main chamber to the further wall, where stood a great table and two flat rocks. There had been an altar here once, but it had since been removed and the crucifix above it inverted. An inverted crescent was emblazoned against it.

The girl was placed on the table. Braziers and flares were lit; alembics lifted to the light. Bubble-glass jars were hung over the fires, and a tripod sent pungent incense through the room in swirls of spiced smoke.

Tightly the girl was bound. Strongly the basin was held. Swiftly the knife was plunged. And a shriek, a moan, then bubble, bubble, bubble, as the basin filled.

Incense added, red and yellow powders filled the basin as it hung over the tripod. Black Pedro's swarthy face was pale, and sweat spurted across his gashed brows. The Moor ignored him as he worked over the flames.

Black horror loped into the room as the great dark hound slunk purposefully down the stairs. With prescient intelligence it stalked to the further of the two stone slabs and took its place upon it. Pedro reluctantly followed suit, mounting the second slab.

And then the Moor took up the basin, filled with red and silver bubbles that glistened in the light. And the tapers were snuffed out so that darkness fell upon the crypt, and only a strange red light flamed forth from the basin in the wizard's hands. That, and the emberous glow from the hound's deep eyes. . . .

The hound lapped at the basin's contents with a long red tongue. Pedro sipped, his lips ashen with terror. The Moor stood beneath the cross and crescent in the pulsing darkness. He raised his arms in a gesture of invocation as man and beast sank into coma deep as death. Sibilantly came the wizard's prayer.

"Ahriman, Lord of Beasts and Men——"

His sword was crimson when Manuel Digron raced down the darkened stairs. Behind him lay nightmare; nightmare and screaming death in the black reaches of the mission walls. The men-at-arms slew swiftly, but the Yaquis remained to mangle and maim in bloody attack.

The surprise attack had been successful. The Indians and the Spaniards had converged on the mission, and the forty were slain—murdered in their beds, for the most part; though a few had put up stout resistance under the leadership of the buccaneer.

Now Don Manuel Digron sought the cellar, with Diego and his lieutenants at his heels. The torches brought light as they rounded the curve in the stairs, and for a moment Manuel stared aghast.

The dead, bloodless thing lay on the table. Before it stood a turbaned figure, rapt in prayer; and behind it the two dreadful slabs of stone, on which lay a man and a gigantic hound. The lips of the hound and the lips of the man were alike bloody. And the hound squatted in a dreadfully man-like fashion, while the man crouched. It was unnatural, that tableau.

At Manuel's descent, turmoil came. The Moor looked up and wheeled about, snatching a dagger from his scarved waist. Manuel dodged the descending weapon and thrust his sword upward so that it pierced the dark man's belly.

Then it ripped upward dreadfully, so that a crimson-gray torrent gushed forth from the side, and the Moor dropped writhing into death.

Then Manuel advanced to the slab where Black Pedro Dominguez lay. The great swarthy man cringed and gibbered, but drew no weapon. Instead he cowered, whimpering like a beast when Manuel's sword ran him through.

Manuel turned upon the hound, but the great beast had already sprung. Two men-at-arms stood on the stairs, and it leaped for the first one's throat. He fell, and beast-jaws crunched. The mighty creature turned as the other soldier raised his lance. A great paw brushed spear and shield aside; then talons ripped into the man's face and left behind only a furrow of bleeding horror.

The hound was silent, ghastly silent; it did not growl or bay. Instead it turned and rose. On two hind legs it stood, in monstrous simulation of humanity; then it turned and raced up the stairs in frantic flight. Manuel stumbled, recovered a moment later.

The rest was never quite real to him. He lay still for but a moment, listening to the groans of the dying wizard on the crypt floor, but what he heard haunted him forever.

Babblings of black delirium . . . hints of a monstrous exchange the wizard made monthly after a blood sacrifice to Ahriman . . . tales of a lycanthropic pact whereby the bodies of Black Pedro and the Devil's hound held alien souls for days following the sacrifice, when the hound that was not a hound ravened forth for souls given to Satan in return for gold and gifts . . . the cracked voice of the sorcerer, telling of a rite just concluded . . . the monthly exchange just made through blood and prayers, and a werewolf serving Evil loosed upon the world once more to seek souls for the Master . . . delirium or truth?

It was then that Manuel understood and screamed aloud as he jerked erect, glaring with horrified eyes at the feebly writhing body of the Moor. Shuddering, he whirled and sprang up the stairs in pursuit of the hound.

His soldiers met him. The Indians, they said, had captured the black beast as it raced into view from the depths. A Yaqui *lay* dead on the floor, his throat ribboned in mute testimony to the hound's ferocity. And now Manuel could hear drums dinning in the hills, throbbing blood-lust.

He was muttering long-forgotten prayers as he ran toward where the red glare flickered, muttering prayers as he whipped the sword from his scabbard. A Yaqui death-chant, grim and relentless, boomed out into the savage night.

Then Manuel plunged over the brow of the hill—and saw.

He saw that the Yaquis had remembered the deaths of their ten young men; they had remembered the ghastly jest of Black Pedro. And since he was dead, they were repeating that jest with Pedro's hound. He saw the dark head buried in sand to its shaggy throat, heard the thunder of wooden balls as they bowled along the sand, as they plunged unerringly at the screaming horror that was their target.

Manuel fell upon the natives. Snarling curses that somehow kept him sane, he and his men drove them back with the flats of. their swords. And at last, alone, Manuel dared to approach the thing in the sand—the black, jutting head that lifted its foaming muzzle to the skies as it moaned in that last agony.

But Manuel, knowing what he did, dared not look at it. The wizard's dying whispers had been too much.

He gave only a swift, furtive glance as in mercy he thrust his sword through the ruined beast-skull. And as he stabbed, his heart went icy cold. He had seen the smashed jaws move feebly in one final effort as the dazed eyes glared into his own. Then, above the muffled, triumphant thunder of the distant drums, Don Manuel heard that which confirmed all the legends and rumors of which the wizard had hinted.

Don Miguel heard the incredible voice, then collapsed beside the dying beast-head with the sound still dinning in his ears.

The hound of horror spoke.

And it moaned, *"Mercy—a prayer for the dead—for me—Black Pedro."*

Beetles

A tale of the ghastly fate that befell an archeologist who stole an Egyptian mummy that was protected by the sacred Scarab

WHEN Hartley returned from Egypt, his friends said he had changed. The specific nature of that change was difficult to detect, for none of his acquaintances got more than a casual glimpse of him. He dropped around to the club just once, and then retired to the seclusion of his apartments. His manner was so definitely hostile, so markedly antisocial, that very few of his cronies cared to visit him, and the occasional callers were not received.

It caused considerable talk at the time—gossip rather. Those who remembered Arthur Hartley in the days before his expedition abroad were naturally quite cut up over the drastic metamorphosis in his manner. Hartley had been known as a keen scholar, a singularly erudite field-worker in his chosen profession of archeology; but at the same time he had been a peculiarly charming person. He had the worldly flair usually associated with the fictional characters of E. Phillips Oppenheim, and a positively devilish sense of humor which mocked and belittled it. He was the kind of fellow who could order the precise wine at the proper moment, at the same time grinning as though he were as much surprised by it all as his guest of the evening. And most of his friends found this air of culture without ostentation quite engaging. He had carried this urbane sense of the ridiculous over into his work; and while it was known that he was very much interested in archeology, and a notable figure in the field, he inevitably referred to his studies as “pottering around with old fossils and the old fossils that discover them.”

Consequently, his curious reversal following his trip came as a complete surprise.

All that was definitely known was that he had spent some eight months on a field trip to the Egyptian Sudan. Upon his return he had immediately severed all connections with the institute he had been associated with. Just what had occurred during the expedition was a matter of excited conjecture among his former intimates. But something had definitely happened; it was unmistakable.

The night he spent at the club proved that. He had come in quietly; too quietly. Hartley was one of those persons who usually made an entrance, in the true sense of the word. His tall, graceful figure, attired in the immaculate evening dress so seldom found outside of the pages of melodramatic fiction; his truly leonine head with its Stokowski-like bristle of gray hair; these attributes commanded attention. He could have passed anywhere as a man of the world, or a stage magician awaiting his cue to step on the platform.

But this evening he had entered quietly, unobtrusively. He wore dinner clothes, but his shoulders sagged, and the spring was gone from his walk. His hair was grayer, and it hung pallidly over his tanned forehead. Despite the bronze of Egyptian sun on his features, there was a sickly tinge to his countenance. His eyes peered mistily from amidst unsightly folds. His face seemed to have lost its mold; the mouth hung loosely.

He greeted no one; and took a table alone. Of course cronies came up and chatted, but he did not invite them to join him. And oddly enough, none of them insisted, although normally they would gladly have forced their company upon him and jollied him out of a black mood, which experience had taught them was easily done in his case. Nevertheless, after a few words with Hartley, they all turned away.

They must have felt it even then. Some of them hazarded the opinion that Hartley was still suffering from some form of fever contracted in Egypt, but I do not think they believed this in their hearts. From their shocked descriptions of the man they seemed one and all to sense the peculiar *alien* quality about him. This was an Arthur Hartley they had never known, an aged stranger, with a querulous voice which rose in suspicion when he was questioned about his journey. Stranger he truly was, for he did not even appear to recognize some of the men who greeted him, and when he did it was with an abstracted manner—a clumsy way of wording it, but what else is there to say when an old friend stares blankly into silence upon meeting, and his eyes seem to fasten on far-off terrors that affright him?

That was the strangeness they all grasped in Hartley. He was afraid. Fear bestrode those sagging shoulders. Fear breathed a pallor into that ashy face. Fear grinned into those empty, far-fixed eyes. Fear prompted the suspicion in the voice.

They told me, and that is why I went round to see Arthur Hartley in his rooms. Others had spoken of their efforts, in the week following his appearance at the club, to gain admittance to his apartment. They said he did not answer the bell, and complained that the phone had been disconnected. But that, I reasoned, was fear's work.

I WOULDN'T let Hartley down. I had been a rather good friend of his—and I may as well confess that I scented a mystery here. The combination proved irresistible. I went up to his flat one afternoon and rang.

No answer. I went into the dim hallway and listened for footsteps, some sign of life from within. No answer. Complete, utter silence. For a moment I thought crazily of suicide, then laughed the dread away. It was absurd—and still, there had been a certain dismaying unanimity in all the reports I had heard of Hartley's mental state. When the stolidest, most hard-headed of the club bores concurred in their estimate of the man's condition, I might well worry. Still, suicide . . .

I rang again, more as a gesture than in expectation of tangible results, and then I turned and descended the stairs. I felt, I recall, a little twinge of inexplicable relief upon leaving the place. The thought of suicide in that gloomy hallway had not been pleasant.

I reached the lower door and opened it, and a familiar figure scurried past me on the landing. I turned. It was Hartley.

For the first time since his return I got a look at the man, and in the hallway shadows he was ghastly. Whatever his condition at the club, a week must have accentuated it tremendously. His head was lowered, and as I greeted him he looked up. His eyes gave me a terrific shock. There was a stranger dwelling in their depths—a haunted stranger. I swear he shook when I addressed him.

He was wearing a tattered topcoat, but it hung loosely over his gauntness. I noticed that he was carrying a large bundle done up in brown paper.

I said something, I don't remember what; at any rate, I was at some pains to conceal my confusion as I greeted him. I was rather insistently cordial, I believe, for I could see that he would just as soon have hurried up the stairs without even speaking to me. The astonishment I felt converted itself into heartiness. Rather reluctantly he invited me up.

We entered the flat, and I noticed that Hartley double-locked the door behind him. That, to me, characterized his metamorphosis. In the old days, Hartley had always kept open house, in the literal sense of the word. Studies might have kept him late at the institute, but a chance visitor found his door open wide. And now, he double-locked it.

I turned around and surveyed the apartment. Just what I expected to see I cannot say, but certainly my mind was prepared for some sign of radical alteration. There was none. The furniture had not been moved; the pictures hung in their original places; the vast bookcases still stood in the shadows.

Hartley excused himself, entered the bedroom, and presently emerged after discarding his topcoat. Before he sat down he walked over to the mantel and struck a match before a little bronze figurine of Horus. A second later the thick gray spirals of smoke arose in the approved style of exotic fiction, and I smelt the pungent tang of strong incense.

That was the first puzzler. I had unconsciously adopted the attitude of a detective looking for clues—or, perhaps, a psychiatrist ferreting out psychoneurotic tendencies. And the incense was definitely alien to the Arthur Hartley I knew.

“Clears away the smell,” he remarked.

I didn’t ask “What smell?” Nor did I begin to question him as to his trip, his inexplicable conduct in not answering my correspondence after he left Khartoum, or his avoidance of my company in this week following his return. Instead, I let him talk.

He said nothing at first. His conversation rambled, and behind it all I sensed the abstraction I had been warned about. He spoke of having given up his work, and hinted that he might leave the city shortly and go up to his family home in the country. He had been ill. He was disappointed in Egyptology, and its limitations. He hated darkness. The locust plagues had increased in Kansas.

This rambling was—insane.

I knew it then, and I hugged the thought to me in the perverse delight which is born of dread. Hartley was mad. “Limitations” of Egyptology. “I hate the dark.”

“The locusts of Kansas.”

But I sat silently when he lighted the great candles about the room; sat silently staring through the incense clouds to where the flaming tapers illuminated his twitching features. And then he broke.

“You are my friend?” he said. There was a question in his voice, a puzzled suspicion in his words that brought sudden pity to me. His derangement was terrible to witness. Still, I nodded gravely.

“You are my friend,” he continued. This time the words were a statement. The deep breath which followed betokened resolution on his part.

“Do you know what was in that bundle I brought in?” he asked suddenly.

"No."

"I'll tell you. Insecticide. That's what it was. Insecticide!"

His eyes flamed in triumph which stabbed me.

"I haven't left this house for a week. I dare not spread the plague. They follow me, you know. But today I thought of the way—absurdly simple, too. I went out and bought insecticide. Pounds of it. And liquid spray. Special formula stuff, more deadly than arsenic. Just elementary science, really—but its very prosaicness may defeat the Powers of Evil."

I NODDED like a fool, wondering whether I could arrange for him to be taken away that evening. Perhaps my friend, Doctor Sherman, might diagnose. . . .

"Now let them come! It's my last chance—the incense doesn't work, and even if I keep the lights burning they creep about the corners. Funny the woodwork holds up; it should be riddled."

What was this?

"But I forgot," said Hartley. "You don't know about it. The plague, I mean. And the curse." He leaned forward and his white hands made octopus-shadows on the wall.

"I used to laugh at it, you know," he said. "Archeology isn't exactly a pursuit for the superstitious. Too much groveling in ruins. And putting curses on old pottery and battered statues never seemed important to me. But Egyptology—that's different. It's human bodies, there. Mummified, but still human. And the Egyptians were a great race—they had scientific secrets we haven't yet fathomed, and of course we cannot even begin to approach their concepts in mysticism."

Ah! There was the key! I listened, intently.

"I learned a lot, this last trip. We were after the excavation job in the new tombs up the river. I brushed up on the dynastic period, and naturally the religious significance entered into it. Oh, I know all the myths—the

Bubastis legend, the Isis resurrection theory, the true names of Ra, the allegory of Set——"

His voice was a drone that frightened me.

"We found things there, in the tombs—wonderful things. The pottery, the furniture, the bas-reliefs we were able to remove. But the expeditionary reports will be out soon; you can read of it then. We found mummies, too. Cursed mummies."

Now I saw it, or thought I did.

"And I was a fool. I did something I never should have dared to do—for ethical reasons, and for other, more important reasons. Reasons that may cost me my soul."

I had to keep my grip on myself, remember that he was mad, remember that his convincing tones were prompted by the delusions of insanity. Or else, in that dark room I might have easily believed that there was a power which had driven my friend to this haggard brink.

"Yes, I did it, I tell you! I read the Curse of the Scarabæus—sacred beetle, you know—and I did it anyway. I couldn't guess that it was true. I was a skeptic; everyone is skeptical enough until things happen. Those things are like the phenomenon of death; you read about it, realize that it occurs to others, and yet cannot quite conceive of it happening to yourself. And yet it does. The Curse of the Scarabaeus was like that."

Thoughts of the Sacred Beetle of Egypt crossed my mind. And I remember, also, the seven plagues. And I knew what he would say. . . .

"We came back. On the ship I noticed them. They crawled out of the corners every night. When I turned the light on they went away, but they always returned when I tried to sleep. I burned incense to keep them off, and then I moved into a new cabin. But they followed me.

"I did not dare tell anyone. Most of the chaps would have laughed, and the Egyptologists in the party wouldn't have helped much. Besides, I couldn't confess my crime. So I went on alone."

His voice was a dry whisper.

"It was pure hell. One night on the boat I saw the black things crawling in my food. After that I ate in the cabin, alone. I dared not see anyone now, for fear they might notice how the things followed me. They did follow me, you know—if I walked in shadow on the deck they crept along behind. Only the sun kept them back, or a pure flame. I nearly went mad trying to account logically for their presence; trying to imagine how they got on the boat. But all the time I knew in my heart what the truth was. They were a sending—the Curse!

"When I reached port I went up and resigned. When my guilt was discovered there would have been a scandal, anyway, so I resigned. I couldn't hope to continue work with those things crawling all over, wherever I went. I was afraid to look anyone up. Naturally, I tried. That one night at the club was ghastly, though—I could see them marching across the carpet and crawling up the sides of my chair, and it took all there was in me to keep from screaming and dashing out.

"Since then I've stayed here, alone. Before I decide on any course for the future, I must fight the Curse and win. Nothing else will help."

I started to interject a phrase, but he brushed it aside and continued desperately.

"No, I couldn't go away. They followed me across the ocean; they haunt me in the streets. I could be locked up and they would still come. They come every night and crawl up the sides of my bed and try to get at my face and I must sleep soon or I'll go mad, they crawl over my face at night, they crawl——"

It was horrible to see the words ooze out between his set teeth, for he was fighting madly to control himself.

"Perhaps the insecticide will kill them. It was the first thing I should have thought of, but of course panic confused me. Yes, I put my trust in the insecticide. Grotesque, isn't it? Fighting an ancient curse with insect-powder?"

I spoke at last. "They're beetles, aren't they?"

He nodded. “Scarabaeus beetles. You know the curse. The mummies under the protection of the Scarab cannot be violated.”

I knew the curse. It was one of the oldest known to history. Like all legends, it has had a persistent life. Perhaps I could reason.

“But why should it affect you?” I asked. Yes, I would reason with Hartley. Egyptian fever had deranged him, and the colorful curse story had gripped his mind. If I spoke logically, I might get him to understand his hallucination. “Why should it affect you?” I repeated.

HE WAS silent for a moment before he spoke, and then his words seemed to be wrung out of him.

“I stole a mummy,” he said. “I stole the mummy of a temple virgin. I must have been crazy to do it; something happens to you under that sun. There was gold in the case, and jewels, and ornaments. And there was the Curse, written. I got them—both.”

I stared at him, and knew that in this he spoke the truth.

“That’s why I cannot keep up my work. I stole the mummy, and I am cursed. I didn’t believe, but the crawling things came just as the inscription said.

“At first I thought that was the meaning of the Curse, that wherever I went the beetles would go, too, that they would haunt me and keep me from men for ever. But lately I am beginning to think differently. I think the beetles will act as messengers of vengeance. I think they mean to kill me.”

This was pure raving.

“I haven’t dared open the mummy-case since. I’m afraid to read the inscription again. I have it here in the house, but I’ve locked it up and I won’t show you. I want to burn it—but I must keep it on hand. In a way, it’s the only proof of my sanity. And if the things kill me——”

“Snap out of it,” I commanded. Then I started. I don’t know the exact words I used, but I said reassuring, hearty, wholesome things. And when I finished he smiled the martyred smile of the obsessed.

"Delusions? They're real. But where do they come from? I can't find any cracks in the woodwork. The walls are sound. And yet every night the beetles come and crawl up the bed and try to get at my face. They don't bite, they merely crawl. There are thousands of them—black thousands of silent, crawling things, inches long. I brush them away, but when I fall asleep they come back; they're clever, and I can't pretend. I've never caught one; they're too fast-moving. They seem to understand me—or the Power that sends them understands.

"They crawl up from Hell night after night, and I can't last much longer. Some evening I'll fall completely asleep and they will creep over my face, and then——"

He leaped to his feet and screamed.

"The corner—in the corner now—out of the walls——"

The black shadows were moving, marching.

I saw a blur, fancied I could detect rustling forms advancing, creeping, spreading before the light.

Hartley sobbed.

I turned on the electric light. There was, of course, nothing there. I didn't say a word, but left abruptly. Hartley continued to sit huddled in his chair, his head in his hands.

I went straight to my friend, Doctor Sherman.

2

HE DIAGNOSED it as I thought he would: phobia, accompanied by hallucinations. Hartley's feeling of guilt over stealing the mummy haunted him. The visions of beetles resulted.

All this Sherman studded with the mumbo-jumbo technicalities of the professional psychiatrist, but it was simple enough. Together we phoned the institute where Hartley had worked. They verified the story, in so far as they knew Hartley had stolen a mummy.

After dinner Sherman had an appointment, but he promised to meet me at ten and go with me again to Hartley's apartment. I was quite insistent about this, for I felt that there was no time to lose. Of course, this was a mawkish attitude on my part, but that strange afternoon session had deeply disturbed me.

I spent the early evening in unnerving reflection. Perhaps that was the way all so-called "Egyptian curses" worked. A guilty conscience on the part of a tomb-looter made him project the shadow of imaginary punishment on himself. He had hallucinations of retribution. That might explain the mysterious Tutankhahmen deaths; it certainly accounted for the suicides.

And that was why I insisted on Sherman seeing Hartley that same night. I feared suicide very much, for if ever a man was on the verge of complete mental collapse, Arthur Hartley surely was.

It was nearly eleven, however, before Sherman and I rang the bell. There was no answer. We stood in the dark hallway as I vainly rapped, then pounded. The silence only served to augment my anxiety. I was truly afraid, or else I never would have dared using my skeleton key.

As it was, I felt the end justified the means. We entered.

The living-room was bare of occupants. Nothing had changed since the afternoon—I could see that quite clearly, for all the lights were on, and the guttering candle-stumps still smoldered.

Both Sherman and I smelt the reek of the insecticide quite strongly, and the floor was almost evenly coated with thick white insect powder.

We called, of course, before I ventured to enter the bedroom. It was dark, and I thought it was empty until I turned on the lights and saw the figure huddled beneath the bed-clothes. It was Arthur Hartley, and I needed no second glance to see that his white face was twisted in death.

The reek of insecticide was strongest here, and incense burned; and yet there was another pungent smell—a musty odor, vaguely animal-like.

Sherman stood at my side, staring.

"What shall we do?" I asked.

"I'll get the police on the wire downstairs," he said. "Touch nothing."

He dashed out, and I followed him from the room, sickened. I could not bear to approach the body of my friend—that hideous expression on the face affrighted me. Suicide, murder, heart-attack—I didn't even wish to know the manner of his passing. I was heartsick to think that we had been too late.

I turned from the bedroom and then that damnable scent came to my nostrils redoubled, and I knew. "Beetles!"

But how could there be beetles? It was all an illusion in poor Hartley's brain. Even his twisted mind had realized that there were no apertures in the walls to admit them; that they could not be seen about the place.

And still the smell rose on the air—the reek of death, of decay, of ancient corruption that reigned in Egypt. I followed the scent to the second bedroom, forced the door.

On the bed lay the mummy-case. Hartley had said he locked it up in here. The lid was closed, but ajar.

I opened it. The sides bore inscriptions, and one of them may have pertained to the Scarabaeus Curse. I do not know, for I stared only at the ghastly, unshrouded figure that lay within. It was a mummy, and it had been sucked dry. It was all shell. There was a great cavity in the stomach, and as I peered within I could see a few feebly-crawling forms—inch-long, black buttons with great writhing feelers. They shrank back in the light, but not before I saw the scarab patterns on the outer crusted backs.

The secret of the Curse was here—the beetles had dwelt within the body of the mummy! They had eaten it out and nested within, and at night they crawled forth. It was true then!

I SCREAMED once when the thought hit me, and dashed back to Hartley's bedroom. I could hear the sound of footsteps ascending the outer stairs; the police were on their way, but I couldn't wait. I raced into the bedroom, dread tugging at my heart.

Had Hartley's story been true, after all? Were the beetles really messengers of a divine vengeance?

I ran into that bedroom where Arthur Hardey lay, stooped over his huddled figure on the bed. My hands fumbled over the body, searching for a wound. I had to know how he had died.

But there was no blood, there was no mark, and there was no weapon beside him. It had been shock or heart attack, after all. I was strangely relieved when I thought of this. I stood up and eased the body back again on the pillows.

I felt almost glad, because during my search my hands had moved over the body while my eyes roved over the room. I was looking for beetles.

Hartley had feared the beetles—the beetles that crawled out of the mummy. They had crawled every night, if his story was to be believed; crawled into his room, up the bed-posts, across the pillows.

Where were they now? They had left the mummy and disappeared, and Hartley was dead. Where were they?

Suddenly I stared again at Hardey. There was something wrong with the body on the bed. When I had lifted the corpse it seemed singularly light for a man of Hartley's build. As I gazed at him now, he seemed empty of more than life. I peered into that ravaged face more closely, and then I shuddered. For the cords on his neck moved convulsively, his chest seemed to rise and fall, his head fell sideways on the pillow. He lived—or something inside him did!

And then as his twisted features moved, I cried aloud, for I knew how Hartley had died, and what had killed him; knew the secret of the Scarab Curse and why the beetles crawled out of the mummy to seek his bed. I knew what they had meant to do—what, tonight, they had done. I cried aloud as I saw Hartley's face move, in hopes that my voice would drown that dreadful rustling sound which filled the room and came from *inside Hartley's body.*

I knew that the Scarab Curse had killed him, and I screamed quite wildly as his mouth gaped slowly open. Just as I fainted I saw Arthur Hartley's dead lips part, allowing a rustling swarm of *black Scarabaeus beetles* to pour out across the pillow.

1939

Waxworks

The story of a wax statue that was instinct with evil allure—a fascinating tale of a weird, crime, that rises to a climax of horror

IT HAD been a dull day for Bertrand before his discovery of the waxworks—a dark, foggy day which he had spent in tramping aimlessly about the dingy streets of the quay district he loved. It had been a dull day, but none the less it was of a sort that Bertrand's imaginative nature best loved. He found a morose enjoyment in the feel of the stinging sleet upon his face; liked, too, the sensation of semi-blindness induced by the nebulosity of outline conjured up with the fog. Mist made the dingy buildings and the narrow streets that threaded crookedly between them seem unreal and grotesque; the commonplace stone structures squatted in the blueness like vast, inanimate monsters carven from cyclopean stone.

So, at least, thought Bertrand, in his somewhat maudlin fashion. For Bertrand was a poet—a very bad poet, with the sentimentally esoteric nature such beings affect. Fie lived in a garret in the dock district, ate crusts of bread, and fancied himself very much put upon by the world. In moments of self-pity, which were frequent, he made certain mental comparisons between his estate and that of the late Francois Villon. These estimates were none too flattering to the latter gentleman; for after all, Villon had been a pimp and a thief, whereas Bertrand was neither. Bertrand was just a very honorable young man whom people had not yet learned to appreciate, and if he starved now, posterity would spread him a pretty feast. So his thoughts ran a good part of the time, and days of fog like this were ideal for such personal compassions. It was warm enough in Bertrand’s garret, and there was food there; for after all, his parents in Marseilles did send him money regularly, under the impression that he was a student at the college. Yes, the garret was a fine refuge on such a dismal afternoon, and Bertrand could have been hard at work on one of those noble sonnets he was always intending to produce. But no, he must wander about in the fog, and think things out for himself. It was so—romantic—he grudgingly conceded, in his mind, for he hated to use “trite” expressions.

This “romantic” phase was beginning to pall on the young man after an hour’s walk about the wharves; sleet and drizzling rain had dampened more than his ardor. Then too, he had just discovered in himself a most unpoetic case of the snuffles.

In consequence, he was more than heartened by the sight of the dim lamp that shone through the murk from a dark basement doorway between two houses on this obscure side street. The lantern served to illuminate a sign proclaiming *Waxworks Within.*

Upon reading this legend, Bertrand felt a faint tinge of disappointment. He had hoped that the beacon ornamented the door of a tavern, for our poet was given to the bottle at those odd times when he found himself in funds. None the less, the light was a symbol of warmth and shelter within, and perhaps the waxworks would be interesting.

He went down the steps, opened the dark door, and stepped, shivering slightly at the sudden change, into a warm, dimly lit hallway.

A fat little man in a greasy cap shuffled out from behind a side door and took his three francs with a shrug of surprise, as if wordlessly indicating his amazement at securing a customer at such a time.

Bertrand glanced down the plain hall as he removed his wet jacket. His fastidious nose wrinkled slightly at the musty odor about the place; this, combined with the peculiar acridity common only to discarded wet garments in a warm room, gave the air a genuine “museum smell.”

As he walked down the hall to the wide doorway leading into the exhibit he was conscious of a subtle heightening of his melancholy, which the fog had so visibly augmented. Here in this shabby darkness he felt a profound spiritual depression. Without knowing it, he slipped from self-dramatization into reality. His mind craved morbidity, his thoughts were steeped in umber stillness . . . steeped in umber stillness . . . he must remember that, and write it down.

He was, in point of fact, quite properly in the mood for the waxworks exhibit which he now beheld. It was a carnival of the gruesome and the macabre.

Once, in a moment of temporary affluence, Bertrand and a feminine companion had visited the great Madame Tussaud's. His memories of the occasion were vague, and dealt more fully with the charms of the young lady than with the rather inanimate attractions of the statuary. But as he recalled it, the wax figures had been those of historically prominent and journalistically notorious personages; representations of generals and statesmen and movie stars. This had been Bertrand's sole experience in viewing such objects, save for the odious Punch and Judy displays in the traveling carnival companies he visited during his far-off childhood. (He was twenty-three.)

A CASUAL glance served to show that these waxworks were of a vastly different nature.

A long vast chamber stretched before him—a surprisingly large chamber for such an obscure enterprise, he thought. It was low-ceilinged, and the fog outside the narrow windows lent an effective dimness to the already poor lighting-arrangements; so that the atmosphere was one of profound gloom appropriate to the scene.

An army of still white figures paraded in arrested processional against the dingy walls—an army of stiffly-staring corpses—an army of mummified, embalmed, petrified, ossified . . . he ran out of descriptive terminology, and realized guiltily that his words were pitifully inadequate to describe the impressiveness of these silent wax figures. They held an attitude of arrested motion which in turn captured a peculiar feeling of ominous *waiting.* They seemed to have just died; or rather to have been frozen in some airy, invisible ice that was about to melt and release them once again at any moment.

For they were realistic. And the lighting-effects of the room disguised what crudities and blemishes might exist. Bertrand began to walk along the left wall, and gazed intently at each figure or group of figures.

The subject-matter of these exhibits was harrowing to the extreme. Crime was the theme—perverse and dreadful crime. The monster Landru crept upon his sleeping wife in the night, and see, the maniac Tolours lurks with bloody knife behind the barrels as his tiny son descends the cellar stairs. Three men sit within an open boat, and one is armless, legless, headless, while the others feast. . . . Gilles de Retz stands before the altar, and his beard is dabbled red as he holds his basin high; the sacrifice lies broken at his feet . . . a woman writhes upon the wheel and the sharp-fanged rats race round and round the dungeon floor . . . flayed alive is he that hangs upon the gibbet, and giant Dessalines advances with a leaded whip the murderer Vardac stands accused while from his suitcase trickles a red stain . . . the fat monk Omelee digs within his crypt amidst the barrels of bones. . . . Here sleeping Evil rises from hidden depths in men’s souls and slyly grins.

Bertrand saw and shuddered. There was a disturbingly artful verisimilitude in the depiction of these frights which made him ill at ease. They were so cunningly, so artfully conceived! The details of background and setting seemed minutely authentic, and the figures themselves seemed to be the products of a master craftsmanship. Their simulation of life was startling; their molder had instilled genuine action into pose and posture, so that each pictured movement was actually portrayed. And the heads, with the expressions on the faces, were astonishingly real. They glared and twisted with rage, lust, anger; contorted and blenched with fear, shock, agony. The eyes stared with a more than glassy reality, the hair hung naturally from bearded cheeks, lips opened as though warm with breath.

So they stood, the waxworks figures, each living eternally the supreme moment of the horror which justified their existence as images and damned their souls as living men.

Bertrand saw them all. Little sighs proclaimed the characters in each pictured melodrama in suitably grandiloquent style, and cards recited bloody histories of famous misdeeds.

Bertrand read them self-consciously. He knew that what he saw was cheapest theatricalism, sensational yellow-journal stuff at its worst; the type of lurid gore-parading in which the moron-mind delights. But he fancied that there was something rather grand about this whole insane array of melodramatics; they seemed to have a certain *intensity* which ordinary life shuns to express in daily actions. He wondered as he stared .whether or not this feeling of intensity was one of the attractions for the ordinary foolish sensation-hunters; whether or not they felt it, and were vaguely envious of its contrast to their sedulously eventless lives. And he almost chuckled when he realized that the pictured scenes were real; that their counterparts had actually existed—moreover, were still existing today, in a hundred hidden places. Yes, murderers and rapists and mad fiends crouched unknown even now, waiting to strike. Some of them would be exposed, others die in secrecy inviolate; but their deeds went on—their gory, melodramatic deeds.

THE young poet walked on. He was all alone in this room, and the sight of the blue fog-fingers still clawing at the window-panes encouraged him to take his leisure. He spent much time in noting the perfections of the figures. Gradually he approached the right wall of the hall, which seemed to be given over to the bloody scenes of actual recorded history; the burnings, pillagings, tortures and massacres of olden times. Here too he was forced to concede admiration for the designers of the displays; historical costuming was splendid throughout. There must be many details to this waxwork-making business, he thought, as he examined a particularly noteworthy figure of the Emperor Tiberius Caesar at sport in the torture chamber.

Then he saw her. She was standing statue-still, straight and poised and lovely. She was girl, woman, goddess; imperially slender, with the delicious curves of a succubus fashioned in dreams.

Bertrand's poet-eyes deigned to notice actual physical details, though his bemused brain must translate them anew into elaborate imagery. Thus her splendid auburn hair was a crimson cloud, her smiling, finely-chiseled face a mask of enchantment, her starry blue eyes twin pools in which a soul must drown. Her parted lips were curved as though in voluptuous delight, and from them her tongue protruded like a little red dagger whose stab was joy. She wore a filmy, bejeweled robe of sorts, which only served to accentuate the white beauty of the body it half revealed beneath.

Actually, she was a very pretty redheaded woman, and she was wax—common, ordinary wax, very much of the sort which had served to fashion the form of Jack the Ripper. Her pose was commonplace, but arresting; she stood tiptoe with outstretched arms that held a silver salver; stood before King Herod on his throne. For she was Salome, wanton of the seven veils, white witch and wooer of all evil.

Bertrand stared into her wicked oval face, the eyes of which seemed to flicker with amusement in returning his gaze. And he thought that she was the most beautiful creature he had ever beheld, and the most dreadful. Her slim hands held a silver platter, and on it rested the severed head . . . the gory, decapitated head of John the Baptist, lying with stony eyes, death-bright in a pool of blood.

Bertrand didn't move. He simply looked at the woman. A queer impulse to address her came over him. She was mocking his goggle-eyed gazings, she thought him rude. Speak, man! He wanted to tell her—that he loved her.

Bertrand realized this with a thrill of pain that was almost horror. I *did* love her, love her wildly beyond all dreams of love. He wanted her—this woman who was only wax. It was torture to look at her, the ache of her beauty was intolerable when he realized that she was unattainable. What irony! To fall in love with a waxwork!—he must be mad.

But how poetic it was, Bertrand pondered. And not so highly original at that.

He'd read of similar cases, seen some claptrap dramatizations of the theme which was as old as Pygmalion and his statue.

Reason wouldn't help him, he realized with a sort of despair. He loved her beauty and her menace, always would. He was that sort of poet.

It was amazing, finally to glance up and see the sun sullenly shining through the windows from which fog had fled. How long had he been gaping here? Bertrand turned away, after one last soul-wrenching look at the object of his adoration.

"I'll come back," he whispered. Then he blushed guiltily to himself and hurried down the hall to the door.

2

HE CAME back the next day. And the next. He became familiar with the pudgy gray features of the little fat man who seemed to be the sole attendant at the door; grew to know the dusty museum and its contents. He learned that visitors were scarce these days, and discovered late afternoon was the ideal time for his hours of worship.

For worship it was. He would stand silently before the cryptically smiling statue, and stare enraptured into the maddening cruelty of her eyes. Sometimes he would mumble bits of the verse with which he struggled by night; often he would plead mad lover's entreaties meant for waxen ears. But red-haired Salome only stared back at him in return, and regarded his ravings with a set and cryptic smile.

It was odd that he never inquired about the statue or any of the others until the day he spoke with the little fat attendant.

The squat, gray-haired man approached him one day at twilight and entered into conversation, thus ending a revery in a manner which greatly annoyed the love-sick Bertrand.

"Pretty, eh?" said the gray-haired man, in the coarse, vulgar voice such unfeeling dolts habitually possess. "I modeled her from my wife, y'know."

His *wife! His* wife—this shabby little old fat fool? Bertrand felt that he was really going mad, until the next words of his companion dispelled the notion.

"Years ago, of course."

But she was alive—real—alive! His heart leaped.

"Yes. She's dead a long time now, of course."

Dead! Gone; as far away as ever, only this taunting waxen shell remaining. Bertrand must talk to this little fool, draw him out. There was so much he had to know. But in a moment he found that there was no need to "draw out" his companion; loneliness evidently begot garrulity upon the little man's part. He mumbled in in his gruff, crude fashion.

"Clever work, isn't it?" The grayhaired dolt was surveying the wax figure in a manner which Bertrand found peculiarly repulsive. There was in his eyes no adoration for the being represented; only the unfeeling appraisal of a craftsman commenting on his handiwork. He was admiring the wax, not the woman.

"My best," mused the little man.

And to think that he had once possessed *her!* . . . Bertrand was sickened dreadfully at the fellow's callousness. But the man did not seem to notice. He kept glancing from the statue to Bertrand and back again, meanwhile keeping up a steady stream of comment and information.

Monsieur must be interested in the museum, eh? He seemed to be a frequent visitor. Good work, wasn't it?

He, Pierre Jacquelin, had done it all. Yes, he had learned the waxworks business well in the past eight years. It cost money to hire assistants; so save for occasional group-pieces, Jacquelin had fashioned all the figures himself. People had done him the honor of favorably comparing his work to

Tussaud’s. No doubt he could get a place on the staff there, but he preferred to run a quiet business of his own. Besides, there was less notoriety. But the figures were good, weren’t they? That’s where his medical knowledge served him. Yes, it had been Doctor Jacquelin in the old days.

Monsieur admired his wife, didn’t he? Well, that was strange—there had been others. They too came regularly. No—no need to take offense. It would be silly to be jealous of a wax image. But it was peculiar the way men still came; some of them not even knowing about the crime.

The crime?

Something in the little man’s gray face as he mentioned it caused Bertrand to perk up his ears, to ask questions. The old fellow showed no hesitation in answering.

“Can it be that you do not know?” he said. “Ah well, time passes and one forgets the newspapers. It was not a pleasant thing—I wanted to be alone then, and the notoriety caused me to abandon practise. That is how I began here; to get away from it all. She caused it.”

He pointed at the statue.

“The Jacquelin case, they called it—because of my wife, you know. I knew nothing until the trial. She was young, alone in Paris when I married her. I knew nothing of her past. I had my practise, I was busy, away a great deal of the time. I never suspected. She was pathological, *Monsieur.* I had suspected certain things from her conduct, but I loved her and never guessed.

“I brought a patient to the house—an old man. He was quite ill, and she nursed him very devotedly. One night I came in quite late and found him dead. She had cut his throat with a surgical knife—I came upon her silently, you understand—and she was attempting to go further.

“The police took her away. At the trial it all came out; about the young fellow at Brest she had done in, and the two husbands she had disposed of at Lyons and Liege. And she confessed to other crimes; five in all. Decapitation.

"Oh, I was broken up over it, I can tell you! That was years ago, and I was younger then. I loved her, and when she admitted that she had planned to finish me off next I felt—well, never mind. She had been a good wife, you see, quiet and gentle and loving. You can see for yourself how beautiful she was. And to discover that she was mad! A murderess like that . . . it was terrible.

"I did my best. I still wanted her, after all that. It is hard to explain. We tried to plead insanity. But she was convicted, and they sent her to the guillotine."

How badly he tells the story! thought Bertrand. Material for tragedy here, and he bungles it into a farce! When will Life live up to Art?

"My medical practise was ruined, of course. The papers, the publicity, that was fatal. I had lost everything. Then I began this. I'd made plaster busts, medical figures, to earn a little extra through the years. So I took my savings and began the museum. All these misfortunes had upset me, I can tell you, and I was in a bad way when I started. I had become interested in crime, for obvious reasons. That is why I specialized in this sort of thing."

The little man smiled a bit tolerantly, as though in memory of things long dead and forgotten—his emotions. He tapped Bertrand on the chest with a jollity which the latter found hideous.

"What I did was a capital joke, eh? I got permission from the authorities to go down to the morgue. The execution had been delayed, and my business here was well started; I had learned my technique. So I went down to the morgue after the guillotining, understand, and made a model of my wife. From life—or death, rather. Yes, I made the model, and it's a grand joke. She had beheaded, and now she was beheaded. So why not make her Salome? John the Baptist was beheaded, too, wasn't he? Quite a jest!"

The little man's face fell a bit, and his pale gray eyes grew bright.

"Perhaps it wasn't such a joke, *Monsieur.* To tell the truth, at the time I did it for revenge. I hated her for the way she had broken my life; hated her because I still loved her in spite of what she had done. And there was more irony than humor in my doings. I wanted her in wax, to stand here and remind me of my life; my love and her crime.

“But that was years ago. The world has forgotten, and I have, too. Now she is just a beautiful figure—my best figure.

“Somehow I have never again approached the art; and I think you will agree with me that it is art. I have never achieved such perfection, though I’ve learned more mastery with the years. Men come in and stare at her, you know; the way you do. I don’t believe many of them know the story, but if they did, they would still come. You will come again, won’t you—even though you know?”

Bertrand nodded bruskly as he turned and hurried away. He was playing the fool, rushing out like a child. This he knew, and he cursed himself under his breath even as he ran from the museum and the hateful little old man.

He was a fool. His head throbbed. Why did he hate the man—her husband? Why did he hate her because she had once lived, and killed? If the story were true—and it was. He remembered something of the Jacquelin case; vague headlines dimmed by the passage of years. He’d probably shuddered over the penny-dreadful newspaper versions as a boy. Why did he feel as though he were in torment? A wax statue of a dead murderess, made by her stupid, insensate brute of a husband. Other men came and stared—he hated them, too.

He was losing his mind. This was worse than silly, it was insane. He must never go back there; must forget all about the dead, and the lost that could never be his. Her husband had forgotten, the world had not remembered. Yes. He had made his decision. Never again. . . .

He was very glad that the place was deserted the next day as he prayed before the silent, red-haired beauty of Salome.

A FEW days later, Colonel Bertroux came to his lodging. An insufferable boor, the colonel; a close friend of his family—a retired officer and a born meddler. It did not take Bertrand long to discover that his worried parents had sent the colonel down to "reason" with him.

It was the sort of thing they would do, and the sort of thing a pompous ass like the old colonel would enjoy doing. He was brusk, dignified, pedantic. He called Bertrand "my dear boy," and wasted no time in coming to the point. He wanted Bertrand to give up his "foolishness" and return home to settle down. The family butcher shop—he belonged there, not in a Paris attic. No, the colonel was not interested in this "poetry scribbling." He came to "reason" with Bertrand.

And more of the same thing, until Bertrand was half frantic with exasperation. He could not insult the old dodderer, try as he may. The man was too stupid to understand his satirical deprecations. He followed Bertrand about the streets when he ate, and took it for granted that he was invited. He "put up" at a near-by hostelry and spent his first night in conversation. He was absurdly confident that "the dear boy" would heed his wisdom.

Bertrand gave up after that evening. The colonel put in his appearance again at noon, just as Bertrand was about to leave for the museum. Despite pointed hints, Colonel Bertroux would be only too glad to accompany him to the waxworks. He did.

Once inside the place, Bertrand sank into the strange mood of mysterious excitement he had now learned to expect—no, to hunger for. The colonel's asinine commentaries on the criminal displays he was able to ignore. His reveries drowned out the conversational background.

They approached *her.* Bertrand said nothing—stood silent on the spot, though his eyes cried out. He gazed, devoured. She mocked. Silently they duelled, as minutes fled down the path of eternity.

Abruptly, Bertrand jerked back to consciousness, blinking like a sleeper just awakened from an enthralling and ecstatic dream. Then he stared.

The colonel was still beside him, and he was gaping at the statue of Salome with utter bemusement. On his face was a look of wonder so alien and somehow *youthful* that Bertrand was amazed. The man was fascinated—as fascinated as he was!

The colonel? It was impossible! He couldn't have—not he. But he had. He was. He felt it, loved her too!

Bertrand wanted to laugh, at first. But as he looked into that utterly absorbed old face once again he felt that tears might be more appropriate. He understood. There was something about this woman that called forth the dreams buried in the soul of every man, old or young. She was so gorgeously aloof, so wickedly wanton.

Bertrand glanced again at her evil tenderness, noted the shapely grace with which she stood holding that horrid head.

That horrid head—it was different, today. Not the black-haired, blue-eyed, glassy-staring head he had seen on previous visits. What was wrong?

A touch on his shoulder. The little gray-haired owner of the waxworks, horribly solicitous.

"Noticed it, eh?" he mumbled. "Deplorable accident; the old head was accidentally broken. One of her—her gentlemen friends tried to poke at it with an umbrella and it fell. I substituted this, while repairing the original. But it does detract."

Colonel Bertroux had glanced up from his shattered reveries. The little gray-haired man fawned on him.

"Pretty, eh?" he began. "I modeled her from my wife, y'know."

And he proceeded to tell the whole grim story, just as Bertrand had it from him a week before. He told it just as badly, and in practically the same words.

Bertrand watched the sick-hurt look on the colonel's face, and wondered with a start if he had not appeared much the same way when he listened for the first time.

In curious parallel to his own behavior, it was the colonel who turned on his heel and walked away at the conclusion of the narrative. Bertrand followed, feeling the eyes of the little gray man appraising their departing backs in a quizzical fashion.

THEY reached the street and walked in silence. The colonel's face still wore that dazed expression. At the door of his lodging, the colonel turned to him. His voice was curiously hushed.

"I—I think I'm beginning to understand, my boy. I'll not trouble you again. I'm going back."

He marched up the street, shoulders strangely erect, leaving Bertrand to ponder.

Not a word about the waxworks incident. Nothing! But he loved her too. Strange—the whole affair was strange. Was the colonel going away or *fleeing?*

The little man had retold his story with such curious readiness. It was almost as though he had rehearsed it. Could it be that the entire business was a hoax of some sort? Perhaps it was all a fabrication, a clever ruse on the part of the museum-keeper.

Yes, that must be the explanation. Some artist had sold him the wax figure; he noted that its realistic beauty attracted lonely men, and concocted the story of a notorious murderess to fit the statue's history. The case might be real enough, but the little man did not look as though he had ever been the husband of a murderess. Not *her* husband. The story was just bait, a lure to keep the men coming, keep their money rolling in. With a start, Bertrand computed the amount in francs he had spent visiting the museum these past weeks. It was considerable. Clever schemer!

Still, the real attraction lay in the statue itself. The figure was so beautiful, so *alive* in its loveliness, through which there breathed a sort of alluring wickedness. Salome was a red witch, and there was a mystery in her which Bertrand felt he was soon to penetrate. He had to understand that smile and its spell over him.

So thinking, he retired. And the next few days he wrote. He started an epic poem of surprising promise, and labored without pause. He was thankful the colonel had left; grateful to *her* for helping. Perhaps she did understand; perhaps she was real; mayhap she heard his wild mutterings in the night, his lonely entreaties cast up to the stars. Perchance in some far-off poet's Avalon she waited, or in some flaming poet's Hell. He would find her. . . .

He told her that the next day when he thanked her for removing Colonel Bertroux. He was going to recite to her a stanza of his sonnet when he became aware that the eyes of the museum keeper rested on him from a distance down the hall.

He ceased his mutterings, crimson with shame. Spying on him? How often had he gloated over the anguish of the poor wretches enmeshed in her beauty? Withered little beast!

Bertrand tried to look away. He stared at the new head of John the Baptist. Substitute, eh? He wondered under what circumstances the original had been cracked. Some fool with an umbrella, the little man had said. Trying to touch her—as though such a desire were granted a mere mortal! This substitute head was fine, though; as realistic as the first. The closed eyes of the blond young man lent a rather morbid note lacking in the pallid stare of the other. Still, it was not exactly John the Baptist. Hm.

The little man was still staring. Bertrand cursed under his breath and turned away. No more peace today. He hurried down the hall, trying to appear oblivious. As he neared the door he bent his head and sought to avoid the stare of the keeper. In doing so he almost ran into the oncoming figure of a visitor. He muttered a hasty "Your pardon, please" and left. Turning back he gazed with a shock at the retreating back of the man he had jostled.

Was he mad, or did he perceive the shoulders of Colonel Bertroux?

But Bertroux had left—or had he? Was he lured back to worship in privacy, as Bertrand worshiped; as others did? Would the little old man stare at him? Had Salome ensnared another?

Bertrand wondered. The next few days he came at odd hours, hoping to encounter the colonel. He was interested. He wanted to question the older man; seek to learn if he too were affected by this puzzling infatuation for a waxen image.

Bertrand could have questioned the little gray museum keeper concerning his friend, but he felt a vague dislike for the fellow which restrained him. If the keeper's story were a hoax he hated the imposture; if true, he could not forgive him for having known, for having embraced a beauty Bertrand would have given his life to possess.

The poet left the museum in a state of mental anguish. He hated the place, hated its keeper; hated *her* because his love chained him. Must he come to this dark old dungeon forever, mutely suffering away his life for a glimpse of beauty forever denied him? Must he walk past mocking murderers in gloom to gaze into the eyes of his waxen tormentress? How long? The mystery was unseating his reason. How long?

4

WEARILY he climbed the steps to his room. His key turned the lock, his door opened on lighted brilliance, and he stepped forward in surprise to confront—Colonel Bertroux.

The old man was seated in the easy-chair, his elbows resting on the table as he faced the poet.

“Pardon this intrusion, boy,” said the colonel. “I used a skeleton key to enter. I could have waited outside for you, but I prefer remaining some place where I am locked in.”

His voice was so grave and his face so serious as he spoke these last words that Bertrand accepted their import without questioning.

He framed a reply; he wanted to inquire why Bertroux had not left town, if it had indeed been he whom the poet had seen leaving the museum a few hours previous. But the older man lifted a hand in a tired gesture and motioned Bertrand to a seat on the couch. His dim blue eyes stared out from a face lined with exhaustion.

"Let me explain this visit," he began. "But first, a few questions. I beg of you to answer these truthfully, my boy. Much depends on your veracity, as you shall learn."

Bertrand nodded, impressed by the utter gravity of his visitor.

"First," said the colonel, "I want to know just how long you have been visiting that wax museum."

"About a month. In fact, a month ago tomorrow I made my initial visit."

"And just how did you come to go there, of all places?"

Bertrand explained the circumstances of the fog, the chance glimpse of the sign with its hint of shelter. The colonel listened intently.

"Did the keeper speak to you during that first visit?" he asked.

"No."

The old man started, blinked in puzzlement. He mumbled to himself. "Strange . . . eliminates hypnosis . . . latent force in the statue . . . never took that rot about demonology seriously."

He checked himself hastily, and his glance met Bertrand's once again. He spoke very slowly.

"Then it was—*she*—who drew you back?"

There was that in his voice which caused Bertrand to affirm the truth; caused him to pour out his story in a ceaseless rush of words untouched by any attempt at concealment or adornment of the queer tale. At its conclusion the old man sighed, heavily. He stared at the floor for a long time.

"I thought as much, my boy," Colonel Bertroux said. "Your family sent me down suspecting that something—or rather, someone, was holding you here. I had guessed that it was a woman, but I never dreamed that she was a woman of wax. But when you took me to the museum and I saw how you gazed at that statue, I knew. After looking at the image myself, I knew and understood far more. And then I heard the tale of the museum keeper. It started me thinking—if think I could, with a mind bemused by that damnable beauty of the cursed figure.

"At first, when I bid you good-bye, I intended to go. Not so much for your sake, but for my own. Yes, I shall admit it frankly, I feared for myself. Bertrand, you understand the power that queer image holds over you, and other men as well, if the keeper is to be believed. That power it exercised upon me. I was frightened by the feeling I, an old man long forsaken by thoughts of love, experienced on seeing that red witch."

Bertrand stared at the colonel, who continued without heed.

"But I did not go back. The next day I returned to the museum in the morning, to gaze as you gazed, alone. And after an hour before that strange simalacrum, I left in a daze of wonder commingled with practical alarm. Whatever power that statue possessed, it was not good, or right, or wholly fashioned by sanity.

"I acted on impulse. I recalled the story of the museum keeper, this man Jacquelin. I went down to the newspaper offices to search the files. At last I found the case.

"Jacquelin had stated that the affair occurred many years ago, but he had not said just how many. My dear boy, that case was closed *over thirty years ago!"*

Bertrand's gasp was cut short as Bertroux rushed on.

"It was true, all true. There was a murder, and the wife of Doctor Jacquelin was convicted of it. It did come out that she had perpetrated five similar crimes under various names, and the journals of the day made capital out of certain testimony that was formally disbarred. This testimony spoke of wizardry, and hinted that Madame Jacquelin was a witch, whose mad butcherings were actuated by a sort of sacrificial frenzy. The cult of the ancient goddess Hecate was mentioned, and the prosecution hinted that the redheaded woman was a priestess of some sort whose deeds constituted a monstrous worship. This offering of male blood in honor of a half-forgotten pagan deity was, naturally, disallowed as testimony; but there was enough evidence to convict the woman of actual killings.

"It was fact, remember. And I uncovered things in the old papers of which this Jacquelin did not speak. The witchcraft theory was not formally recognized, but it got the doctor himself banned from the practise of medicine. It was more than substantiated that he was beginning to indulge in certain practises, encouraged by his wife; little pilferings of blood and flesh and sometimes vital organs from corpses in the morgues. That seems to be the real reason why he abandoned his practise after the trial and execution.

"The narrative about obtaining his wife's body from the morgue for sculpturing purposes is not mentioned, but there *is* an item about the body being *stolen.* And Jacquelin left Paris after the execution, thirty-seven years ago!"

THE colonel's voice was harsh.

"You can imagine what this discovery did to me. I searched through year after year in the files, trying to trace the path of the man. Never did I find the name of Jacquelin mentioned. But occasionally little disturbing items about traveling waxworks exhibits cropped up. There was a wagon show run under the name of *Pallidi* which toured the Basque provinces in 1916, and after it left one town the bodies of two young men were discovered buried beneath the lot where the exhibition tent had been pitched. They were headless.

"A *George Balto* operated for a time in Antwerp under almost identical conditions about '24. He was called in to testify concerning the case of a mutilated body found in the streets outside his museum one morning, but was exonerated. There are other couplings of disappearance connected with waxworks, but the names and dates vary. In two of the later ones, however, the press reports distinctly describe a 'short, gray-haired proprietor.'

"What does it all mean? I wondered. My first impulse was to communicate with the *Surete,* but a pause convinced me that wild theories do not concern the police. There was much to be learned. The real mystery was just why men continue to stare at that statue. What is its power? I cast about for an explanation; for a time I guessed that the proprietor might hypnotize his solitary male visitors, using the statue as a medium. But why? For what purpose? And neither you nor myself was so hypnotized. No, there's something about that image alone; some secret power connected with it that smacks of—I must admit it—sorcery. She's like one of those ancient lamias one reads about in fairy-tales. One can't escape her.

"I couldn't. After leaving the newspaper offices that afternoon I went back. I told myself that I was going to interview the little gray man, clear up the mystery. But in my heart I knew better. I brushed him aside as I entered the place and sought the statue. Once again I stared into her face and that terrible fascination of evil beauty flooded me. I tried to read her secret but she read mine. I felt that she knew my emotion toward her, and that she rejoiced and exercised her cold power to rule my mind.

"I left in a daze. That evening at the hotel, while I tried to reason things out, to plan a course of action, I felt a strange urge to go back. It cut across my thoughts, and before I knew it I was on the street, walking toward the museum. It was dark, and I returned home. The longing persisted. Before I could sleep I was forced to bolt my door."

The colonel turned a sober face to Bertrand as he whispered.

"You, my friend, went to her willingly every day. Your torment at her aloofness was slight compared to mine, which fought against her enchantment. Because I would not go willingly she compelled. Her anguishing memory haunted me. This morning, as I started here to see you, she forced my footsteps to the museum. That's why men go there—if willing, like you, they worship unbidden. If unwilling, she commands and they come. I went today. When you came I was ashamed and left. Then I came here, to wait, and opened your door so that I might lock it from the inside and fight to keep from leaving until I could see you. I had to tell you this so that we might act together."

"What do you propose?" Bertrand asked. It was strange how earnestly he believed the other's story; he could realize only too easily that his beloved was evil without ceasing to adore her. He knew that he must fight against her siren magic even while his heart cried out to her. The colonel, he understood, shared his feelings. Therefore he asked eagerly:

"We will go to the museum tomorrow," the colonel said. "Together we will be strong enough to fight against that power, suggestion—whatever it is. We can speak frankly to Jacquelin, hear him out. If he refuses to talk, we shall go to the police. I am convinced that there is something unnatural about all this; murder, hypnotism, magic, or just plain imagination, we must get to the bottom of it quickly. I fear for you, and for myself. That cursed statue is chaining me to the spot, and always it seeks to draw me back. Let us clear up this affair tomorrow, before it is too late."

"Yes," Bertrand agreed, dully.

"Good. I will come for you about one in the afternoon. You will be ready?"

Bowing at Bertrand's nod of assent, the colonel withdrew.

5

THE poet worked all that evening on his poem; first to forget the strange tale of Bertroux, and second because he felt that he could not rest until he had completed his epic. In the back of his mind was a puzzling suspicion that he must work fast, that matters were coming to a head in such a fashion as to demand haste.

He was exhausted by daybreak, and somehow thankful that his tired sleep would be dreamless. He wanted to be free of that flame-haired image that haunted him by night, free to forget his terrible bondage to a wax woman.

He slept deeply as the sun crept from window to window of his attic room. When he arose it was with the prescience that noontide had passed, though by this time the sunlight had gradually faded into a mist of yellow fog that grew ever thicker beyond the window-panes.

Glancing at his watch he was startled to note that it was already long past three o'clock.

Where was the colonel? Bertrand was confident that his *concierge* would have awakened him with racket to spare should he have a daytime visitor. No, the colonel had not come. And that meant only one thing. He had been called, lured. Bertrand jumped up, raced to the door.

Hastily he crammed the finished manuscript of his poem into the ulster he donned against the encroaching fog. He took the stairs hastily, then rushed out along the dismal, fog-drowned streets.

This was like that first day, a month ago. And still he was running to the museum to keep his inevitable tryst with torment.

The very movement seemed to make him forgetful of his real errand, the finding of the colonel. Instead he could think only of *her* as he rushed through the gray fog to the gray room, the gray man, and the scarlet glory of her hair. . . .

The building loomed out of the mounting mists ahead. He hurried down the stairs, entered. The place was deserted, the little doorkeeper gone. A strange surmise rose in Bertrand's heart, but it receded before an irresistible urge to commune once more with Salome.

The air was tense with a feeling of impending fury, as though the crystallization of some cosmic dread was near. The murderers leered waxenly within as he paced down the hall. No Bertroux.

Deserted in the darkness, he stood alone before her. Never had she seemed so radiant as today. In the half-light she wavered, slitted eyes shining with wild invitation to forbidden rhapsodies. Her lips hungered.

Bertrand leaned forward, staring into that inscrutable, agelessly evil face. Something about her knowing smile of appeasement caused him to glance down—to glance at the silver salver that held the head of John the Baptist. Staring, still, wide-eyed it gaped.

The head of *Colonel Bertroux!*

6

THEN he knew as he glanced at the mocking smile of anguish, glanced at the blood flooding forth from the slashed neck. *Realistic art!* The first head a month ago, the second last week, and now the colonel, who felt the flooding desire to return. Young men forever coming to worship her beauty—newspaper accounts of decapitation tragedies. The beauty of a murderess unveiled in a deserted wax museum—she who had beheaded her lovers for witchery. *How often was that head changed?*

The little gray man crouched at his back, his eyes filled with leaden fire. His hand held a surgeon's knife. He smiled—at *her.* And he mumbled.

"Why not? You love her. I love her. She was not like a mortal woman—she was a witch. Yes, she killed when she lived, she liked the blood of men and the sight of eyes forever fixed in worship of her beauty. We worshipped together her mistress Hecate. Then they guillotined her. And so—I stole the body to model this image. I became her priest. Men come and they desire her, and to them I bring the gift I bring to you. Because they love her, I give them what I can—the chance to rest their tortured heads within her hands. Wax hands, perhaps, but her spirit is near. They all feel her spirit, and that is why they come and adore. Her spirit talks to me at night and asks me to bring new lovers. We have traveled together many years, she and I, and now we have returned to Paris for new adorers. They must lie in her hands, bleeding and bright, and stare their stare of love forever into her face. When she tries, I give her a new admirer.

"The colonel came this morning, and when I told him that which I tell you, he consented. They all do. And you shall consent, my friend; I know you will. Think of it: to lie within her pale white hands and stare forever; to die with the benediction of her beauty in your eyes! You will make the sacrifice, won't you? No one will know; they never suspect. You will play John the Baptist? You want me to, now, don't you? You want me to——"

Hypnosis. Hypnosis at the last. Bertrand tried to move as the voice droned, the eyes stared in glorious pleading from above.

And the cold edge of the knife caressed his throat. The blade began to bite. He heard words through the gray fog, through the scarlet fog as he stared into *her* face. She was a witch, a Medusa—to lie within her arms and worship as others had worshipped! A poet's death? In a moment his head would be resting on the salver and he could see her as he sank into the dark. He could never possess her—why live on? Why not die and know her radiance forever? It was easy, her husband knew and he was being kind to Bertrand. Kind. The knife bit.

Bertrand's hand went up. A sudden horror flickered in his soul. He grappled with the screaming little madman and the blade clattered to the floor. They fell in a lashing embrace, as Bertrand tore at the pudgy gray face, clawed deeply in the blazing eyes of the maniac.

Murderer! Wizard! Madman!

Something deep within him had risen in resurrection. Youth—sanity—the will to live. His fingers pressed as he shoved the gray man's head against the floor. He squeezed, throttled, until time dissolved in the welter of red anger. When his hands finally loosened, the little maniac lay quite still and dead.

BERTRAND rose and faced his impassive goddess. Her smile was unchanged. He looked again into her infernal beauty and his soul wavered once more. Then his hands fumbled at the breast of his ulster and he gained courage.

He drew forth the crumpled manuscript that lay there—his finished poem to Salome.

He found matches.

He lit the manuscript. It flamed as he held it forth, held it to her flaming hair. Fire mingled with fire as she continued to stare in the way Bertrand could not yet understand; the terrible way that enchanted him and all men and lured them to doom.

Impulse seized him even at the last. He took Salome in his arms—took her in his arms as she burned, writhing and moving with fiery life. He held her close for a moment as the glowing flames spread, then eased her again to the stand. She was burning horribly fast.

Witches must burn. . . .

And like a witch, her dying features changed. They melted into a hideous mass—her face became a gargoyle horror, a melting, shapeless yellow blob from which two glassy eyes fell like blue tears. Her body wriggled in agony as wax limbs sloughed. She was real then—real, and tortured. Tortured, just as Bertrand was as he beheld her waxen agonies. Tortured by fire; but a fire that purified.

Then it was all over. Bertrand stared at the man on the floor; still and dead he lay as the fire began creeping redly against the fog. It would soon blot the museum out forever; blot out the horror that lured men to a tragic re-enactment of an ancient crime. Fire purified.

Bertrand stared again at the little pile of melted yellow liquid that lay bubbling and seething as though in some hasty process of putrefaction. He stared, and then he prayed that the fire would mount swiftly. For now, with a gasp of horror, he understood, knew the mystery of her allure which had eluded him.

The maniac murderer on the floor—he had fashioned the statue from the morgue-procured body of his wife. This he had told Bertrand. But now Bertrand saw more; knew and guessed the secret of the statue’s evil power. There is a miasma of evil about the dead body of a witch. . . .

Bertrand turned and ran sobbing from the redly ravaged room, ran sobbing from the sight of that yellow, bubbling pile of melted wax from which protruded the *charred, bony skeleton of a woman that had served as the statue’s frame.*

The Curse of the House

Twelve Generations of Evil Incarnate Rise to Avenge the Abode of Secrets Forbidden!

"DID you ever hear of a haunted house?"

I nodded slowly.

"Well, this case is different. I'm not afraid of a haunted house. My problem is that there's a house haunting *me."*

I sat silent for a long moment, staring at Will Banks blankly. He in turn regarded me calmly, his long, thin face impassive, and his gray eyes shining quite rationally as they focussed at random on various objects about my office.

But a slight, almost imperceptible twitching of the lips indicated the undoubtedly hyper-neurasthenic tendencies which his calm exterior hid. Nevertheless, I mused, the man had courage. Victims of hallucination and obsession are usually quite unstrung, and their schizoid tendencies generally are uncontrollably manifested. But Will Banks had guts. This thought came quickly, then was overmastered by curiosity regarding his statement: "There's a house haunting *me."*

He had said it so matter-of-factly, so calmly. Too calmly. If he had been hysterical about it, or melodramatic, then it would indicate that he realized his plight as a victim of an obsession and was trying to fight it. But this acceptance implied implicit faith in his delusion. A bad sign.

“Perhaps you’d better tell me the story from the beginning,” I said, a bit nervous myself. “There is a story, I presume?”

Banks’ face, all at once, displayed genuine agitation. One hand rose unconsciously to brush back his blond, straight hair from the perspiring forehead. His mouth twitched more perceptibly.

“There is a story, Doctor,” he said. “It isn’t an easy story for me to tell and it won’t be an easy story for you to—to believe. But it’s true. Good God,” he burst out, “don’t you understand? That’s what makes it so awful. It’s true.”

I ADOPTED a professional suavity as I ignored his emotion and offered him a cigarette. He held it in nervous fingers, without lighting it. His eyes sought mine imploringly.

“You aren’t laughing at me, are you, Doctor? In your capacity—” (he could not bring himself to say “psychiatrist”) “you must listen to a lot of things that sound peculiar. You do, don’t you?”

I nodded, offering him a light The first puff braced him.

“And Doctor, another thing. You fellows have some kind of medical oath, don’t you? About violating confidences, and all that sort of thing? Because there are certain—”

“Tell your story, Mr. Banks,” I said, briskly. “I promise you that I’ll do what I can to help, but in order to help you I must have absolute sincerity from you.”

Will Banks spoke.

“I told you that I’m haunted by a house. Well, that’s true, strange as it may sound. But the circumstances are stranger still. To begin with, I’m going to ask you to believe in witchcraft. Get that, Doctor? I’m going to ask you to believe. I’m not arguing with you to convince you, although I think that can be done. I’m merely asking you. That in itself should convince you of my sincerity and my sanity. Unless I miss my guess, the sure indication of a psychotic personality is when the deluded puts up a long, fantastic argument to convince his hearer. Am I right?”

I nodded. It was true.

“Well, I’m merely asking you to believe in witchcraft for the duration of my tale. Just as I believed, years ago, when I went to Edinburgh. I had been a student of the lost sciences men choose to call the Black Arts. I was interested in the use ancient sorcerers made of mathematical symbols in their ceremonies—surmising that perhaps they were unconsciously employing geometric patterns which hold keys to the outer cosmos, even the Fourth Dimension recognized by modern-day scientists.

“I spent years in the fascinating pursuit of olden devil-worship, traveling to Naples, Prague, Budapest, Cologne. I shall not say what I came to believe, nor shall I do more than hint at the survival of demon-worship in the modern world. Enough that after a time I established connections with the vast underground system controling hidden cults. I learned codes, signals, mysteries. I was accepted. And material for my monograph was being piled up.

“Then I went to Edinburgh—Edinburgh, where once *all* men believed in witchcraft. Talk about New England witch-baiters! That’s childish stuff compared to the Scottish town where not twenty or thirty old hags, but thirty thousand witches and sorcerers once lived and lurked. Think of it; three hundred years ago there were thirty thousand of them, meeting in old houses, creeping through underground tunnels in which lay buried the black secrets of their blood cults. *Macbeth* and *Tam O’Shanter* hint of it, but vaguely.

“Here in ancient Edinburgh I hoped to find the final corroboration for my theories. Here in the veritable witches’ cauldron of wizardry, I settled and began to investigate. My underground connections served me, and after a time I was admitted to certain houses. In them I met people who still live a secret life of their own under the very surface of a quiet, modern Scottish city. Some of those dwellings are many hundreds of years old—still in use—some in use *from below.* No, I won’t explain that.

“Then I met Brian Droome. ‘Black Brian’ Droome he was called, and in the coven he had another name. He was a gigantic man, bearded and swarthy. When we met I was reminded of descriptions concerning Gilles de Rais—reminded in more ways that one. Indeed, he did have French blood, though his ancestors had settled in Edinburgh hundreds of years ago. They had built Brian’s house, and it was this house that I particularly wanted to see.

“For Brian Droome’s ancestors had been sorcerers. I knew that. In the infamous secret history of European cults, the clan of Droome occupied a detestable eminence. During the great witchcraft craze of three hundred years ago, when the king’s soldiers came seeking the burrows in which the wizards lay hidden, Droome House was one of the first to be ransacked.

“For the Droomes presided over a truly terrible cult, and in their, great cellars fully thirty members of the family died before the muskets of the outraged militia. And yet the house itself had survived. While thousands of ransacked dwellings had burned in those terrible nights, Droome House had been left gaunt and deserted, but untouched. Some of the Droomes escaped.

“Those surviving Droomes returned. The worship went on, but in secret now; the Droomes were a devout race, not easily moved to abandon their religious tenets. The house stood, and the Faith stood. Until this day.

“But now only Brian Droome remained, of all the line. He lived alone in the old house, a reputed student of sorcery who seldom attended the gatherings out on the hills where surviving believers still invoked the Black Father. My connections secured me an introduction, for I was greatly desirous of seeing the ancient dwelling and looking at certain inscriptions and designs which legend said were engraved on the stony walls of the cellars.

“Brian Droome. Swarthy, bearded, burning-eyed! Unforgettable! His personality was as compelling as a serpent’s—and as evil. Generations had moulded him into the epitome of a sorcerer, a wizard, a seeker after things forbidden. The heritage of four hundred years had made a wizard of Droome.

"IN boyhood he read the black books in his old house; in manhood he walked the shadows of its halls in a palpable atmosphere of witchery. And yet, he was not a silent man, he could talk a blue streak, and was remarkably well-informed and well-educated—in a word, cultured. But he was not *civilized.* Brian Droome was a pagan, and when he spoke of his beliefs he had the trusting manner of a fearless child.

"I met him several times at—gatherings. Then I requested the pleasure of visiting him at his home. I had to wheedle, I admit, because he was damnably reluctant. On the excuse of showing him certain notes of my own, I at last obtained his grudging consent. Others expressed genuine amazement when I told them; it seems that Droome had never allowed strangers in the great house was alone in the sense that he entertained no *human* company.

"So I called on Brian Droome. When I went, as I told you, I believed in witchcraft; believed, that is, that the art had been practised and had a scientific basis—although I did not concede that its achievements were in any way connected with the supernatural.

"But when I came in sight of the House of Droome, I began to change my mind. I didn't realize the full extent of the change until later, but even at the time the first glimpse of Brian Droome's dwelling filled me—filled me—with horror!"

THE last words seemed to explode out of Will Banks. He went on, more softly than before.

"Now you must mark this. The house stood on a hillside against the bleeding sunset sky. It was a two-story house, with twin gables on either side of a peaked roof. The house rose out of the hill, like a gigantic head emerging from a grave. The gables were horns against the heavens. Two jutting eaves were ears. The door was wide as a grinning mouth. There was an upper window on each side of the door.

"I won't tell you that the windows were like eyes. They *were* eyes. Through their narrow slits they peered at me, watched me approach. I felt it as I have never felt anything before—that this house, this centuried dwelling, possessed a life of its own; that it was *aware* of me, saw me, heard me coming.

"I walked up the path, nonetheless, because I didn't know what was to come. I walked up and the mouth opened—I mean, the door opened—and Brian let me in. *It* opened, I tell you. Brian didn't open it. That was awful.

"It was just as though I had walked into a monster's head; a thinking monster's head. I could almost feel the brain buzzing about me, pulsing with thoughts as black as the shadows in the long, narrow, throat-like hallway through which we walked.

"Bear with me while I give a few details. There was a long hall, with a stairway at the further end, branching off into side rooms. The first side room to the left was the study Brian took me to. How well I know the geography of that house! Why shouldn't I know it? I see it every night in my dreams.

"We talked. Of course it's important to remember what we talked about, but I really cannot recall. Brian, immensely forceful personality though he was, paled into insignificance beside the weight exerted by that ghastly house. If Brian Droome was the product of twelve generations, then this house was the twelve generations incarnate.

"It was something that had stood for three hundred and eighty years, filled with life all that time. Filled with evil life, filled with weird experiments, mad cries, hoarse prayers, and still hoarser answers. Hundreds of feet had trod its floors, hundreds of visitors had come and departed. Some, many in fact, had not departed. And of those, legend said that some had not been men. Blood had run in a slow, throbbing stream.

"And the house—not Brian Droome but the house—was an aged person who had seen all of birth and life and death and what lay beyond. Here was the real wizard, the true viewer of all secrets. This house had seen it all. It lived, it leered down from the hill.

"While Brian talked and I automatically replied, I kept thinking of the house. This great study, a monstrous room, filled with massive bookcases and long tables burdened with excess tomes; this great study with its olden oak furniture, suddenly seemed in my mind's eye to be stripped of all extraneous objects. It became an empty room again—just a vast wooden expanse with huge timbers that formed the rafters overhead.

"I imagined it like that, dusty and deserted, robbed of all signs of visible habitation. Still that damnable impression of life remained. An empty room here was never empty. The thought agitated me.

"It agitated me so much that I had to talk about it to Brian Droome. He smiled, slowly, as I described my sensations. Then he spoke.

" 'It is a much older house than even you imagine,' he said in his deep burring voice. 'I who have dwelt here all my life still do not know what further secrets it may possess. It was built originally by Cornac Droome, in 1561. You may be interested in knowing that at this time the hill on which it stood supported several Druidic stones, originally part of the circle-pattern.

" 'Some of these were laid in the foundations. Others still stand in the upper cellar. And another thing, my dear Banks—this house was not built, it *accumulated.*

" 'It was reared upward for two stories, that is true. The gables and eaves and roof were then as they are now, and the second floor remains unchanged. But the house had once only a single cellar. It was not until the Faith prospered that we built again. And we built *downward.*

" 'We built downward, I say. Just as a church spire rears toward Heaven, we of the Faith appropriately builded toward our own Kingdom. First a second cellar, and then a third; finally passages under the hill for secret goings-forth when under duress.

" 'When Droome House was entered, the King's men never discovered the lower cellars, and that was well, for they would not have liked what they saw, being unbelievers and sacrilegious. Since then we have been wary of visitors, and the covens no longer meet; the lower cellars have fallen into disuse. Still, we have held many private ceremonies, for the Droomes had secret pacts of their own requiring certain regular rites. But in the past three hundred years we and Droome House have lived together in solitude'."

Will Banks paused, drew breath. His lips twitched, he went on:

"I listened eagerly to his admissions concerning the cellars which I so desired to inspect. But something of his discourse puzzled me—his use of the word 'we' interchangeably, so that at times it meant the family, at times himself, and at other times it actually seemed to imply the very house!

"He arose and stood by the wall, and I noted how his fingers softly caressed the ancient wood. It was not the caress of a connoisseur handling a rare tapestry, not the caress a master bestows upon a dog. It was the caress of a lover—the soft stroking motion of understanding and concealed desire.

" 'This old house and I understand one another,' Droome burred. His smile held no humor. 'We take care of one another, even though today we are alone. Droome House protects me even as I guard the secrets of Droome House.' He stroked the woodwork gently."

BANKS paused again, swallowed hard before continuing. "By this time a revulsion had set in. Either I was mad, or Brian Droome was. I wanted my information and then I wanted to get out. I wanted to get out, I realized, because I never wanted to see this house again. I never wanted even to think about it again. And it wasn't the well-known fear of enclosed places—It wasn't claustrophobia, Doctor. I just couldn't stand the place, or rather, the unnatural thoughts it aroused. But a stubbornness was in my soul. I did not want to leave without the information I had come for.

"I rather bungled things because of the unreasoning panic I felt, the unreasoning panic that rose in my heart as he lighted candles in the gray room and peopled the house with walking shadows. I asked him almost point-blank if I could visit the cellars. I told him why, told him about inspecting certain symbols on the walls. He was standing by a candelabrum on the wall, lighting the waxen taper. As it flared up, a corresponding flare flamed in his eyes.

“ ‘No, Will Banks,’ he said. ‘You cannot see the cellars of Droome House.’

“Just that and nothing more. The glare, and the flat refusal. He gave no reason, he did not hint of mysteries I had no right to know, he did not threaten harm should I insist. No, not Brian Droome. But the house—the house did! The house *hinted.* The house *threatened.* The shadows seemed to coalesce on the walls, and a gathering oppression fell upon me, seized me in impalpable tentacles that strangled the soul. I cannot express it save in this melodramatic wise—the house *hated* me.

“I was silent. I did not ask again. Brian Droome tugged at his black beard. His smile signified that the incident was closed.

“ ‘You’ll be going soon,’ he said. ‘Before that, a drink with me to stay your journey.’

“He walked out of the room to prepare the drink. Then a mad impulse seized me. Yet the impulse had reasons behind it. After all, I had come to Edinburgh solely for this end. For years I had studied, and here lay a clue I sorely needed. It was my only chance of obtaining the information I desired, and if the inscriptions were what I fancied, I could jot them down in a notebook in a moment. This was the first reason.

“The second was more complicated. The house—it threatened me. Like a mouse in the grip of a cat, I knew my doom but could not keep still. I had to squirm, wriggle. Once deprived of Droome’s company, even for a moment, panic gripped me like that cat, pouncing on the helpless mouse. I felt as though eyes were watching me, invisible claws extending on every hand. I was unable to remain in this room, I had to move. Of course I could have followed Brian Droome, but the other reason impelled me.

“I determined to enter the cellar. I rose quietly, on tiptoe, went down the hall. It was dark and still. Now don’t misunderstand. It wasn’t *haunted.* This was not a mystery-thriller mansion, with cobwebs and bats and creaking noises. It was merely dark, and the dark was old. Light hadn’t shone here for three hundred years, nor sane laughter broken the stillness. It was darkness that should have been dead, but it was alive. And it oppressed and terrified, a thousand times more than the sight of a ghost.

“I found myself trembling when I located the cellar door with the steps below. The candle I had slipped into my pocket before leaving the study came into my hands, wet with sweat from my palms. I lit it and descended the stairs. I left the house’s head and entered its heart.

“I’ll be brief here. The cellar was huge and there were many rooms, yet there was no dust. I won’t go any further to describe the signs of life. There was a chapel and long walls with the symbols I sought, and an altar that undoubtedly must have been one of the Druid stones Brian referred to.

“But I didn’t notice that. I never did see what I came to see. Because in the second chapel room I kept looking at the rafters. The long brown beams overhead against the cellar roof. The long brown beams with the great hooks on them. The great steel hooks. The great steel hooks that held dangling things! White, dangling things! Human skeletons!

“HUMAN skeletons that gleamed as they hung in the breeze from the opened door. Human skeletons still so new as to remain hanging articulated. New skeletons on hooks on the long brown rafters.

“There was blood on the floor and strips of flesh, and on the altar a thing still lay—not cleanly stripped—yet. There was a vacant hook waiting, but the thing lay there on the altar before the black statue of Satan.

“And I thought of Brian Droome’s mention of *private rites* still carried on by his family. I thought of his reticence concerning guests, and his refusal to allow me entrance to the cellar. I thought of the further cellars that lay below; if this were the heart of the house what might lie beyond in the *soul?*

“Then I looked back at the dancing skeletons that trod the air with bony feet and swung their gleaming arms as they grinned down on me in mockery. They hung on the rafters of the House of Droome, and the House of Droome guarded them as one guards a secret.

"The House of Droome was with me in the cellar, watching me, waiting for my reaction. I dared not show it. I stood there, in fancy feeling forces quiver about me. Forces radiating from the bloodstained walls. Forces bursting from the outlandish designs cut in the stones. Forces rising from the floor, from depths still further below.

"Then I felt human eyes. Brian Droome stood in the doorway."

BANKS was now on his feet. His eyes were staring. He was reliving the scene.

"I threw the candle and struck him in the face with the burning end. Then I snatched up the unmentionable basin from the altar top and I hurled it at his head. He went down. I was upon him then, desperately tearing at his throat. I had to act first, because when he had stood there in the doorway I had seen the knife in his hand. A cutting-knife, a sawing-knife. And I remembered the thing still lying on the altar. That was why I moved first, and now I was wrestling with him on the stone floor, trying to wrest the knife away. I was no match for him.

"He was a giant and he picked me up and carried me to the center of the room, carried me toward the vacant hook that gleamed in the line of skeletons. Its steel barb projected outward, and I knew he meant to hang me there. My hands fought for that knife as he forced me down that grinning line of eyeless watchers. He lifted me high, until my head was on a level with his own madly distorted face.

"Then my hands found his wrist. Desperation gave me strength. I drove his wrenched arm back, upward. The knife entered his belly in one great thrust. The force spun him around and he fell back. His own neck caught against the steel hook hanging from the rafter. As his great arms released me he was pinioned-Blood gushed from his corded throat as I plunged the knife home again and again.

"He died there, on the hook, and he mumbled, 'The Curse of my House upon you.' I heard the curse through red hazes of madness. It was not dramatically impressed on my mind—then. Instead, there was only the gnawing horror of our struggle and his death; the fear which caused me to race up those steps without turning back, grope through darkness to the study—and set fire to the house.

"Yes, I burned Droome House, as one burns a witch or warlock; as they destroyed wizards in the olden days. I burned Droome House so that fire might purify and flame consume the evil that leaped at me as I ran out of the blazing dwelling. I swear the flames nearly trapped me as I ran, although they had only risen a moment before. I swear I clawed at the door as though it were a living thing that grappled with me, seeking to hold me back.

"Only when I stood below the hill and watched the red glow arise did I remember Brian's words. 'The Curse of my House upon you.' I thought of them as the door broke into a gash of scarlet flame, and when the people came and clustered about I still remained, heedless of danger, until I saw the walls of that accursed mansion crumble into glowing ash, and the place of evil destroyed forever. Then I knew peace, for a while.

"But now—Doctor—I'm haunted."

Will Banks' voice became a whisper.

"I left Edinburgh at once, dropped my studies. I had to, of course. Fortunately I was not incriminated in the affair, but my nerves had been shattered. I was on the verge of a true psychotic condition. I was advised to travel, regain my health and strength to fortify my mental outlook. So I traveled.

"In England I saw it first. I was spending a week with friends at Manchester; they had a country place just outside the industrial town. We rode about the estate one afternoon and I lagged behind to rest my horse. It was about sunset when I rounded a bend and saw the hill. The sky was red above it.

"I saw the hill first. And then, something *grew* on it. It *grew.* You've read about ghosts, Doctor? About how they manifest themselves with ectoplasm? They say it's like watching a picture come out in the solution in which a print is developed. It comes gradually, takes shape. The colors fill in.

"It was the house that did that! Droome House! Slowly, wavering lines grew solid as I recognized the damnable head that leered out of the hillside. The window-eyes were red with slanted sunlight, and they looked straight at me. 'Come in Will Banks,' they invited. I stared for a full minute, blinking and hoping with all my heart that the vision would go away. It didn't.

"Then I spurred my horse to a gallop and fled down the road to my friends, never looking back.

" 'Who lives on the hill?' I gasped. Jessens, the banker friend I was staying with, gave me a look. Even before he spoke, I knew. 'No one,' he said. 'Trying to pull my leg, are you?'

"I kept still. But I left the next day. Went to the Alps. No, I didn't see the Droome House on the Matterhorn. I had a good solid six months of peace. But on the train back to Marseilles I looked out of the window at sunset and—there it was. 'Come in, Will Banks,' the eyes invited. I turned away. That same night I went to Naples.

"After that it was a race. For six months, eight months at a time I seemed safe. But if sunset found me near a hillside, be it in Norway or Burma, the damned vision re-occurred. I've put it all down. Twenty-one times in the past ten years.

"I grew clever enough about it all. After the third or fourth manifestation I realized that this combination of sunset and hillside was necessary to produce the image—for ghost I would not admit it was. I avoided being out in the open after dusk began. But in the last year or so, I've grown more hopeless.

"Travel has proved fruitless. I cannot escape it. Naturally, the story has remained with me alone. I dared not tell anyone, and several occasions served to convince me that nobody saw the apparition save myself. What has frightened me is the later developments of the thing.

"Now, when I force myself to gaze steadily at the house, I see it for a longer and longer time. And each time—this in the last three years, I have finally computed—that house appears nearer and nearer to the spot where I am standing.

"Don't you understand what it means? Sooner or later I shall be before the house, at the very door! And one sunset I may find myself inside! Inside, under the long brown rafters with the hooks, and Brian all bloody and the house waiting for me. Nearer and nearer. Yet God knows I'm always on the road when I see it up there on the hill. But I get closer to it every time, and if I enter that place of ghosts I know *something* waits for me; the spirit of that house—"

WILL BANKS did not stop of his own accord—I stopped him. "Shut up!" I rapped sharply. "What?"

"Shut up!" I repeated. "Now listen to me, Will Banks. I've listened to you, and I haven't commented; I expect the same courtesy in return." He calmed down at once, as I knew he would—I was not a psychiatrist for nothing, and psychiatrists know when to let their patients talk and when to shut them up.

"I've listened to you," I said, "without any gibes about witchcraft or fantasies. Now suppose you listen to my theories with the same respect. To begin with, you're suffering from a common obsession. Nothing serious, just a common, everyday obsession—a cousin to the one that makes a habitual drunkard see pink elephants even when not actually suffering from *delirium tremens."*

Banks bridled. I stared him down.

"It's undoubtedly a symptom of a guilt-complex," I said matter of factly. "You killed a man named Brian Droome. Don't bother to deny it. We'll admit it. We won't go into the motives, we won't even examine justification. You killed Brian Droome under very peculiar circumstances. Something about the house in which the deed occurred was strongly impressed upon your susceptible subconscious mind. In a state of tension following the killing, yon fired the house. In your subconscious, the destruction of the house loomed as a greater crime than the destruction of the man. Right?"

"It did, Doctor—it did!" Banks wailed. "The house had a life of its own, a concentrated life that was greater than that of a single person. That house was Brian Droome, and all his wizard ancestors. It was Evil, and I destroyed it. Now it seeks vengeance."

"Wait a minute," I drawled. "Wait—a—minute. You're not telling me, I'm telling *you.* All right. In consequence of your guilty feelings this complex has arisen. This hallucination is a mental projection of your own guilt; a symptom of the weight you felt while keeping the story a secret.

"Understand? In psychoanalysis we have come to refer to confession as a *cathartic method* whereby the patient is often relieved of mental difficulties by merely telling frankly the story of his troubles. Confession is good for the soul.

"It may be that all of your problem has been solved by simply unburdening yourself to me here. If not, I shall endeavor to probe more deeply. There are some things I wish to learn regarding your association with witchcraft cults; I will need to find out certain details of your mental attitude regarding superstitions and the like."

"Don't you see?" Banks muttered. "You can't understand. This is real. You must know the supernatural as I do—"

"There *is* no supernatural," I stated. "There is merely the natural. If one speaks of *supernatural* one might as well speak of the *subnatural,* a manifest absurdity. Extensions of physical laws I grant, but such things merely occur in a disordered brain."

"I don't care what you believe," Banks said. "Help me, Doctor, only help me. I can't bear it much longer. Believe that. I would never have come to you otherwise. Even drugs won't keep me from dreaming. Wherever I go I see that cursed house rising up out of hills, grinning at me and beckoning. It gets nearer and nearer. Last week I saw it here—in America. Four hundred years ago it rose in Edinburgh; I burnt it ten years ago. Last week I saw it. Very close. I was only fifteen feet away from the door, and the door was open. Help me, Doctor—you must!"

"I will. Pack your things, Banks. You and I are going fishing."

"What?"

"You heard me. Be ready at noon tomorrow. I'll bring the car around. I have a little lodge up in the Berkshires, and we can put in a week or so of loafing around. Meanwhile I'll get a slant at you. You'll have to co-operate, of course—but we'll discuss those details later. Here now, just do as I say. And I think if you try a tablespoonful of this in some brandy tonight before you go to bed you won't have any more house-parties in your dreams. Noon tomorrow, then. Good-by."

IT was noon the next day. Banks wore a gray suit and a nervous frown. He didn't feel like talking, that was evident. I chatted gayly, laughed a lot at my own stories, and swung the car up through the hills all afternoon.

I had it all planned out in my own mind, of course. The first notes on the case were down. I'd handle him easily the first few days, watch him for betraying signs, and then really get to work from the analytical side. Today I could afford to put him at ease.

We drove on, Banks sitting silent until the shadows came.

"Stop the car."

"Eh?"

"Stop it—it's getting toward sunset."

I drove on, unheeding. He shouted. He threatened. I hummed. The redness deepened in the west. Then he began to plead.

"Please stop. I don't want to see it. Go back. Go back—there's a town we just passed. Let's stay there. Please. I can't bear to see it again. Close! Doctor, for God's sake—"

"We'll arrive in half an hour," I said. "Don't be a child. I'm with you."

I piloted the car between the green borders of the encircling hills. We headed west against the fading sun. It shone redly on our faces, but Banks was white as a sheet beneath its glare as he cowered in the seat beside me. He mumbled under his breath. All at once his body tensed and his fingers dug into my shoulder with maniacal strength.

“Stop the car!” he screamed.

I applied the brakes. He was cracking.

“There it is!” he yelled, with something that was almost triumph in his voice. Something masochistic, as though he welcomed the ordeal to come. “There’s the house, on that hill. Do you see it? There!”

Of course it was just a bare hillside, some fifty feet back from the road.

“It’s grinning!” he cried. “Droome is watching me. Look at the windows. They wait for me.”

I WATCHED him closely as he moved out of the car. Should I stop him? No, of course not. Perhaps if he went through with it this time he’d throw off his obsession. At any rate, if I could observe the incident I might get the clues necessary to unraveling the threads of his twisted personality. Let him go.

It was awful to watch, I admit it. He was screaming about the “House of Droome” and the “Curse” as he went up the hillside. Then I noticed that he was sleep-walking. Self-hypnotized.

In other words, Banks didn’t know he was moving. He thought he was still in the car. That explained his story of how each time the imaginary house seemed closer. He unconsciously approached the focal point of his hallucination, that was all. Like an automaton he strained up the green grade.

“I’m at the door,” he shouted. “It’s close—God, Doctor—it’s close. The damned thing is creeping toward me, and the door is open. What shall I do?”

“Go inside,” I called. I wasn’t sure he could hear me in his state, but he did. I counted on such an action to break the thread for him; watched his reactions carefully.

His tall form was silhouetted against the sunset as he walked. And now one hand reached out, his feet rose as though crossing an actual threshold. It was—I admit it—horrible to watch. It was the grotesque pantomime beneath a scarlet sky, the mimicry of a madman.

“I’m inside now. Inside!” Bank’s voice rose with fear. “I can feel the house all around me. Alive. I can—see it!”

Without knowing it, I too, compelled by a fear I could not name, had left the car. I started for the hill. “Stay with it, Banks,” I called. “I’m coming.”

“The hall is dusty,” Banks mumbled. “Dusty. It would be after ten years of desertion. Ten years ago it burned. The hall is dusty. I must see the study.”

As I watched in revulsion, Banks walked precisely along the hilltop, turned as though in a doorway, and entered—yes, I said entered—something that wasn’t there.

“I’m here,” he muttered. “It’s the same. But it’s dark. It’s too dark. And I can feel the house. I want to get out.” He turned again and made an exit.

“It won’t let me go!”

That scream sent me scrambling up the hillside.

“I can’t find the door now. I can’t find it, I tell you! It’s locked me in! I can’t get out—the House won’t let me. I must see the cellar first, it says. It says I must see the cellar.”

HE turned and walked precisely, sickeningly. Around a bend. A hand opened an imaginary door. And then—did you ever see a man walk down non-existent stairs? I did. It halted me on my charge up the hillside. Will Banks stood on the hill at sunset walking down cellar stairs that were not there. And then he began to shriek.

“I’m here in the cellar, and the long brown beams are still overhead. *They* are here, too. *They* are hanging, grinning. And why—it’s you, Brian. On the hook. On the hook where you died. You’re still bleeding, Brian Droome, after all these years. Still bleeding on the floor. Mustn’t step in the blood. Blood. Why are you smiling at me, Brian? You *are* smiling, aren’t you? But then—you must be alive. You can’t be. I killed you. I burned this house. You can’t be alive and—the house can’t be alive. What are you going to do?”

I had to get up the hill, I couldn’t stand hearing him shriek such things into empty air. I had to stop him, now!

“Brian!” he shrieked. “You’re getting down off the hook! No—the beam is falling. The house—I must run—where are the cellar steps? Where are they? Don’t touch me, Brian—the beam fell down and you’re free, but keep away from me. I must find the steps. Where are they? The house is moving. No—it’s crumbling!”

I made the top of the hill, panting. Banks screamed on, and then his hands went out.

“God! The house is falling—it’s falling on me. Help! Let me out! The things on the brown beams are holding me—let me out! The beams are falling—help—let me out!”

Suddenly, just before my outstretched hands could reach him, Banks flung up his arms as though to ward off an impending blow, then crumpled to the grass.

I knelt at his side. Of course I did not enter a house to do it. It was under the dying sun that I gazed into his pain-contorted face and saw that he was dead. It was under a dying sun that I lifted the body of Will Banks and saw *—that his chest had been crushed as though by a falling beam.*

The Sorcerer's Jewel

Eyes Focused on Infinity, an Artist-Scientist Beholds a Horrific World Not Meant for Mortal Eyes to Look Upon!

BY RIGHTS, I should not be telling this story. David is the one to tell it, but then, David is dead. Or is he?

That's the thought that haunts me, the dreadful possibility that in some way David Niles is still alive—in some unnatural, unimaginable way alive. That is why I shall tell the story; unburden myself of the onerous weight which is slowly crushing my mind.

But David Niles could do it properly. Niles was a photographer; he could give the technical terms, perhaps explain coherently many things that I do not pretend to understand. I can only guess, or hint.

Niles and I shared a studio together for several years. It was a true partnership—we were both friends and business associates. This was peculiar in itself, for we were dissimilar types, with widely divergent interests. We differed in almost every particular.

I am tall, thin, and dark. Niles was short, plump, and fair. I am naturally lazy, moody, inclined towards introspection. Niles was always tense with energy, high-spirited, volatile. My chief interests, in latter years, have leaned towards metaphysics and a study of occultism. Niles was a skeptic, a materialist, and above all, a scientist. Still, together, we formed an integrated personality—I, the dreamer; Niles, the doer.

Our mutual business association, as I have already intimated, lay in the field of photography.

David Niles was one of the most brilliant personalities in the domain of modern portrait photography. For several years prior to our association he had done salon work, exhibiting internationally and creating a reputation which brought him a considerable income from private sittings.

AT THE time of our meeting he had become dissatisfied with commercial work. Photography, he argued, was an art; an art best nourished by serious, solitary study unimpeded by the demands of catering to customers. He therefore determined to retire for a year or so and devote himself to experiment.

I was the partner he chose for the work. He had lately become a devotee of the William Mortensen school of photography. Mortensen, of course, is the leading exponent of fantasy in photography; his studies of monstrosities and grotesques are widely known. Niles believed that in fantasy, photography most closely approximated true art. The idea of picturing the abstract fascinated him; the thought that a modern camera could photograph dream worlds and blend fancy with reality seemed intriguing. That’s where I came in.

Niles knew of my interest in the occult, knew that I had made a study of mythology. I was to serve as technical adviser on his subject matter. The arrangement pleased us both.

At first Niles limited himself to studies in physiognomy. With his usual thoroughness, he mastered the technique of photographic makeup and hired models whose features lent themselves to the application of gargoylian disguises. I handled the matter of checking over reference works, finding illustrations in old books of legends to use in devising suitable makeup.

Niles did a study of Pan, one of a satyr, and a Medusa. He became interested in demons, and we spent some time on his *Gallery of Fiends* series; Asmodeus, Azaziel, Sammael, and Beelzebub. They were surprisingly good.

But for some reason or other, Niles was not satisfied. The quality of the photographs was excellent, the posing effective, the characterization superb. And still Niles did not feel that he was achieving his goal.

“Human figures,” he stormed. “Human faces are, after all, only human faces, no matter how much you cover them up with grease-paint and putty. What I want is the soul of Fantasy, not the outward aping.”

He strode up and down the studio, gesticulating in his feverish manner. “What have we got?” he demanded. “A lot of stupid horror-movie faces. Amateur Karloffs. Kid stuff. No, we must find something else.”

So the next phase was modelling clay. I was handy here, for I had a rudimentary knowledge of sculpture. We spent hours on composing scenes from an imaginary Inferno; constructing bat-winged figures that flew against bizarre, other-worldly backgrounds of fire, and great malignant demons that squatted and brooded on jagged peaks overlooking the Fiery Pit.

But here, too, Niles could not find what he was looking for.

One night he exploded again, after finishing a set. With a sweep of his arm he smashed the papier-mâché set and its clay figures to the floor.

“Hokum,” he muttered. “Peep-show, penny-dreadful stuff.”

I sighed, getting set to listen patiently to a further tirade.

“I don’t want to be the Gustave Dore of photography, or the Sime, or even the Artzybasheff,” he said. “I don’t want to copy any style. What I’m after is something original, something I can claim as absolutely individual.”

I shrugged. Wisdom had taught me to keep my mouth shut and let Niles talk himself out.

“I’ve been on the wrong track,” he declared. “If I photograph things as they are, that’s all I’m going to get. I build a clay set, and by Heaven, when I photograph it, all I can get is a picture of that clay set—a flat, two-dimensional thing at that. I take a portrait of a man in makeup and my result is a photo of a man in makeup. I can’t hope to catch something with the camera that isn't there. The answer is—change the camera. Let the instrument do the work."

I saw his argument, and conceded its validity.

THE following few weeks Niles' existence was a frenzy of experimental activity. He began to take montage shots. Then he worked with odd papers, odder exposures. He even reverted to the Mortensen principles and employed distortion—bending and twisting the negative so that prints showed elongated or flattened figures in nightmarish fashion.

An ordinary man's forehead, under these methods, would register as being hydrocephalic; his eyes might appear as bulging beacons illumined by insane lights. The perspective of nightmare, the nuances of oneirodynia, the hallucinative images of the demented were reproduced by distortion. Pictures were shadowed, shaded; portions blocked out or moulded into weird backgrounds.

And then came a night when Niles again paced the floor, tracing a restless path through piles of torn-up prints. "I'm not getting it," he murmured. "I can take a natural subject and distort it, but I can't actually change its content. In order to photograph the unreal, I must see the unreal. *See the unreal*—Good Lord, why didn't I think of that before?"

He stood before me, his hands twitching. "I studied painting once, you know. My instructor—old Gifford, the portrait man—hung a certain picture in his studio. It was the old boy's masterpiece. The painting was of a winter scene, in oils; a winter scene of a farmhouse.

"Now here's the point. Gifford had two pairs of spectacles; one sensitive to infra-red, the other to ultra-violet rays. He'd show a guest the winter scene, then ask him to try on the first pair of spectacles and look again. Through the glasses the picture showed the same farmhouse on a summer day. The second pair of lenses gave a view of the farmhouse in autumn. He had painted three layers, and the proper lenses each showed a different picture."

“So what?” I ventured.

Niles talked faster, his excitement increasing.

“So this. Remember the war? The Germans used to camouflage machine-gun nests and field batteries. They did it quite elaborately; painting the guns with leafy hues and using artificial plant formations to cover them up. Well, American observation posts employed ultra-violet lenses in field glasses to spot the camouflaging. Through the glasses the natural leaves showed up in entirely different colors in comparison to the artificially painted ones, which lacked ultraviolet pigment.

“I still don’t see the point.”

“Use ultra-violet and infra-red lenses in photography and we’ll get the same effect,” he almost shouted.

“But isn’t that just an extension of the ordinary color-filter principle?” I asked.

“Perhaps. But we can combine them with reground lenses of various types—lenses that will distort perspective in themselves. So far we’ve merely distorted form, shane. But with both color and form distorted, we can achieve the type of photography I’m striving for—fantasy, pure and simple. We’ll focus on fantasy and reproduce it without tampering with any objects. Can you imagine what this room will look like with its colors reversed, some of them absent completely; with the furniture shapes altered, the very walls distorted?”

I couldn’t, but I was soon privileged to actually see it. For Niles at once began another cycle; he experimented endlessly with the new lenses he brought in daily. He sent out special orders for grinding, spent time studying the physical laws of light, enmeshed himself in technicalities I cannot pretend to comprehend. The results were startling.

THE *outré* views he had promised me materialized. After a final day of effort before the camera and in the dark-room, we gazed together on a wonderful new world created right here in our own studio. I marveled at some of the effects Niles had creaated.

“Splendid,” he gloated. “It all seems to tie in with the accepted scientific theories, too. Know what I mean? The Einsteinian notions of coexistence; the space-time continuum ideas.”

“The Fourth Dimension?” I echoed. “Exactly. New worlds all around us—within us. Worlds we never dream of exist simultaneously with our own; right here in this spot there are other existences. Other furniture, other people, perhaps. And other physical laws. New forms, new color.”

“That sounds metaphysical to me, rather than scientific,” I observed. “You’re speaking of the Astral Plane—the continuous linkage of existence.”

We were back again at our perpetual squabbling point—science or occultism; physical versus psychical reality.

“The Fourth Dimension is Science’s way of interpreting the metaphysical truths of existence,” I maintained.

“The metaphysical truths of existence are the psychological lies of *dementia praecox* victims,” he asserted.

“Your pictures don’t lie,” I angered.

“My pictures are taken by recognized scientific means,” he said.

“Your pictures are taken by means older than science,” I replied. “Ever hear of lithomancy? Divination by the use of jewels. Ever hear of crystal-gazing? For ages, men have peered into the depths of precious stones, gazed through polished, specially cut and ground glasses, and seen new worlds.”

“Absurd. Any oculist can tell you that—”

“You don’t have to finish that one,” I cut in. “Any oculist will tell you that we really see everything upside down. Our minds alone interpret the retinal image as being right-side up. Any oculist will tell you that muscularly, a near-sighted person is really far-sighted, and a far-sighted person is near-sighted.”

I warmed to my theme. “Any oculist will tell you that the hand is quicker than the eye; that mirages and hallucinations are actually “seen” by the brain, rather than by the actual retina. In fact, any oculist will tell you that the phenomenon of sight has very little to do with either actual perception or the true laws of light.

“Look at the cat—contrary to popular impression a nyctalops. Yet men can train themselves similarly. Reading, too, is a matter of the mind rather than of minute perception. And so I say to you, don’t be too sure of your laws of optics, and your scientific theories of light. We see a lot no physical laws will ever explain. The Fourth Dimension can be approached only through angles—science must concede that in theorization. And your lenses are cut similarly. It all goes back to occultism in the end—occultism, not ‘oculism’ or ophthalmology.”

It was a long speech for me, and it must have astonished Niles, who glowered at me, speechless for once.

“I’ll prove it,” I went on. “Let me cut you a lens.”

“What?”

“I’ll go down to a friend of mine and borrow a few stones from him. There are some Egyptian crystals there which were used by the seers for divination. They claimed that they could see other worlds through the angles of the jewels. And I’m willing to bet you that you’ll get pictures through them that will make you forget experiments with Iceland spar and quartz and all the rest; pictures you and your scientific ideas won’t so readily explain.”

“All right. I’ll call you on that,” Niles snapped. “Bring me the stones.”

SO THE next day I went down to Isaac Voorden’s. I went with misgivings. The truth was that I had been half bragging when I had spoken about the properties of jewels and glasses. I knew that such things were much used for prophecy and various forms of lithomancy; but as to whether I could procure one, and whether it could be ground into a camera lens, I was not at all certain.

Still, I spoke to Isaac Voorden. He was the logical person to go to. His antique shop down on South Kinnikinnic, pervaded by an aura of mysticism, was a little fortress that preserved the past. Isaac Voorden made a profession of his hobby and a hobby of his profession; he lived on metaphysics and dabbled in antiques. He spent the greater portion of his time in the musty back rooms of his establishment, and left the care of his shop to a clerk.

Here in the rear of the place he had relics of other days which made his commercial antiques seem bright and new by contrast. The centuried symbols of magic, alchemy, and the secret sciences fascinated Voorden; he had gathered unto himself a collection of statuettes, talismans, fetiches and other paraphernalia of wizardry that would have been hard to match.

It was from Isaac, then, that I expected help in my quest, and he gave it to me. I told my story of Niles' photographic problems. The sallowfaced, thin-lipped little antique-dealer listened, his eyebrows crawling over his forehead like astonished black beetles.

"Very interesting," he said, when I had concluded. His rasping voice and preoccupied manner betokened the introverted pedant—Isaac always seemed to be delivering a lecture to himself.

"Very, very interesting," he repeated. "David Niles has had illustrious predecessors. The priests of Ishtar sought in their Mysteries to peer beyond the veil, and they looked through crystals. The first crude telescopes of Egypt were fashioned by men who sought to use them in seeing beyond the stars and unlocking the gates of the Infinite. The Druids contemplated pools of water, and the mad emperors sought the Heavenly Stairway in China, hoping to ascend by gazing at turning rubies whilst under the influence of drugs.

"Yes, your friend Niles has an age-old wish, and expresses it in a timeless fashion. It is the wish that animated Appolonius, and Paracelsus, and the absurd, posturing Cagliostro. Men have always sought to see the Infinite; to walk between the worlds—and sometimes that wish has been granted."

I cut in. Voorden was wound up for the afternoon, but I wanted my information.

“They say there are jewels that hold queer visions,” I murmured. Unconsciously, I adopted Voorden’s pomposity of speech. He smiled, slowly.

“I have them here,” he replied.

“Niles does not believe that,” I countered.

“Many do not believe. But there is a stone once used by Friar Bacon, and a set of crystals which intrigued Theophrastus, and divining-jewels that the Aztecs peered through before the blood-sacrifice. Jewels, you know, are mathematical figures of light—they reflect within their facets. And who knows but that in some way those angles impinge on other worlds? Perhaps they reach out and transmute poly-angularity so that gazing into their depths, we become aware of it three-dimensionally. The ancients used angles in magic; the moderns do the same thing and call it mathematics. De Sitter says—”

“The jewel for the camera lens,” I interrupted.

“I am sorry, my friend. Of course.

I think I have one that should prove eminently suitable. The Star of Sechmet. Very ancient, but not costly. Stolen from the crown of the Lioness-headed Goddess during a Roman invasion of Egypt. It was carried to Rome and placed in the vestal girdle of the High-Priestess of Diana. The barbarians took it, cut the jewel into a round stone. The black centuries swallowed it.

“But it is known that Axenos the Elder bathed it in the red, yellow and blue flames, and sought to employ it as a Philosopher’s Stone. With it he was reputed to have seen beyond the Veil and commanded the Gnomes, the Sylphs, the Salamanders, and the Undines. It formed part of the collection of Gilles De Rais, and he was said to have visioned within its depths the concept of *Homonculus.* It disappeared again, but a monograph I have mentions it as forming part of the secret collection of the Count St. Germain during his ritual services in Paris. I bought it in Amsterdam from a Russian priest whose eyes had been burned out by little gray brother Rasputin. He claimed to have divinated with it and foretold—”

I broke in again at this point. “You will cut the stone so that it may be used as a photographic lens, then,” I repeated. “And when shall I have it?”

“You young men have no love for quiet conversation,” he rebuked me. “Tomorrow, if you like. You understand, the jewel has only a great sentimental value to me; I have never experimented with it personally. All that I ask is that you report to me your findings with it. And I counsel you that if the camera reveals what I think it will, you promise to take care in using it. There is danger in invading the realms—”

He was still chattering away as I bowed out. Great character, Isaac.

THE following afternoon I called and took the little package which he proffered me.

That evening I gave it to Niles. Together we unwrapped the cloudy lens. I had given Voorden the specifications of the large camera we ordinarily employed in our later work—

a reflex, with a reflecting mirror set inside so that we could easily peer through and view the focus. Voorden had done his work amazingly well—Niles gave a little snort of astonishment before he commented, “Nice job.”

He lost no time in changing the lenses and inserting the Star of Sechmet. He bent over the camera—I shall never forget the sight of him there—and his plump body loomed large against the shadowed walls of the studio. I thought of a stooping alchemist peering into a crystal to seek instructions from the demons that danced within.

Niles jerked erect with a grunt. “The devil!” he muttered. “It’s all cloudy. Can’t make any adjustment. The whole thing’s a fake.”

“Let me try.”

I took my place and stared through a gray mass. Yes, it was merely a dull lens. Or was it?

A hint of movement in the cloudy gray.

A swirling, as of parted mists. A dancing light. The fog was dispersing, and it seemed to be opening up—opening to a view that receded far into the distance. The wall it was focused on appeared faintly, very tiny, as though through the reverse end of binoculars. The wall began to fade, so that I thought of a ghost room, with ectoplasmic lines. Thin it fled away, and something new loomed large before the camera. Something grew out of empty space. Abruptly—focus!

I think I shouted. Certainly a scream seared across my brain.

For I saw Hell.

At first only angles and angles, weaving and shifting in light that was of no color, yet phosphorescent. And out of the angles, a flat black plain that stretched upward, endlessly, without horizon. It was moving, and the angles moved, and yet through the lurching roll as of a ship's deck in heavy seas, I saw cubes, triangles, mathematical figures of bewildering size and complexity. There were thousands of them, lines of light in the shape of polyhedrons. And as I gazed, they *changed.*

Changed into forms.

Those forms—they were spawned only in delirium; only in nightmare and dreams of the Pit. There were grinning demons that skulked on padding paws across that endless moving plain; there were shapeless toadstools with tentacles ending in Cyclopean eyes; there were fanged heads that rolled towards me, laughing; great hands that curled and crawled like mad spiders. Ghouls, monsters, fiends—the words sprang to my consciousness. And a moment ago they had been mathematical figures!

"Here," I gasped. "Look again, Niles."

HE gazed, his face reflecting puzzlement at my agitation. "Still nothing," he grumbled. But watching him I saw the pallor come into his face as he stared more intently.

"Yes!" he hissed. "The mist parting. Yes! The room is smaller, fading. And now—something is rushing up or I'm rushing toward it—angles of light."

“Wait,” I said in a low voice, yet triumphantly. “You haven’t seen anything yet.”

“I see geometrical shapes. Cubic shapes. Polyhedrons of luminance. They cover a plain and—Good God!” His body shook over the camera.

“I see them!” he cried. “I see them. Dozens of tall, eyeless creatures with heads all hair. Knotted hair, it twists and weaves, and underneath the hair, little wrinkled pink-pulp mouths like the convolution slits of the human brain. And that—*the Goat with the Hands!”*

He made an indescribable sound, fell back shaking, and turned the adjusting device. His eyes were red, he looked as though he had awakened from a fever-sleep.

We each had a drink. We didn’t trouble about glasses, we drank from the bottle.

“Well?” I said, when composure had been restored.

“Hallucination,” he hazarded, somewhat weakly.

“Want to look again?” I countered. He gave me a wry smile.

“It can’t be delusion,” I went on. “I didn’t see any goat, but we both saw the mists swirl, saw the same plane, the same geometric forms of living light.”

“True. But the last—things—were different to each of us. I don’t understand.”

“I think I do,” I said. “If Voorden is right. That jewel is a key. Its angles open to the Astral Plane. The Astral Plane—here, don’t shake your head so—corresponds to the scientific conception of the Fourth Dimension, although metaphysicians believe it is an extension of third-dimensional life. That is, when men die their souls enter the Astral Plane and pass through it into another higher form of existence on a higher dimension. The Astral Plane is a sort of No Man’s Land existing all about us, where lost souls, and lower entities that have never achieved life, wander forever in a sort of Limbo.”

“Hooey.”

"A modern criticism. But it's an ancient belief, mirrored in a thousand forms in scores of religions. And wait until you see what I'm getting at. Ever hear of Elementals?"

"Nothing but a few mentions. Ghosts, aren't they?"

"No—forces. Entities not human, but linked with humanity. They are the *demons* and the *familiars* and the *incubaee* and the *genie* of all religions; the beings that exist invisibly around us and seek traffic with men. Organisms outside three-dimensional life, if you want it in more scientific terminology. They inhabit another Time-field, another space continuum that is nevertheless synchronized and co-existent with our own. They can be viewed, or reached, as ultradimensional inhabitants, only through angles. The angles, the facets of this jewel, enabled us to see through to them. They establish a focal point with infinity. What we saw, then, are Elementals."

"All right, *swami,* but why did we see different creatures?" he persisted.

"Because, my dear fellow, we have different brains. At first we both saw geometrical figures. That is the purest form of life they exist in.

"But our minds interpreted these figures into familiar shapes. I saw one type of monstrosity because of my background of mythological study. You received another impression—and I gather from your little comments (you look smug enough now, friend, but you were bleating pretty loudly a while ago and I know you were genuinely impressed) that you drew your images from past dreams and nightmares. I should imagine that a Hungarian peasant, peering through the lens, would see vampires and werewolves.

"IT'S psychological. In some way that jewel establishes a focal point in more than a visual way. It must also enable those creatures to become aware of us—and they *will* that we see them according to our mental concepts of such entities. In fact, that's how superstition probably originated; these beings at times communicated with men."

Niles made a gesture of impatience. "Dropping the psychological and the nut-house angle for a minute," he said, "I certainly must hand it to your friend Voorden. Whether his story about the jewel is hokum or not, and whether your rather naive explanation is accepted or disbelieved, I still can see that we've stumbled on something quite marvelous. I mean it. The pictures we can take with that camera will be unique in the field. I've never read of any experimental work that even approached this. It goes beyond the wildest Dadaistic or Surrealistic concepts. We'll get actual photographs—but of what. I'll be darned if I can foretell. Your so-called mental concepts were different from mine." I shook my head as something that Voorden had said came back to me.

"Now look here, Niles. I know you don't believe me, but you believe what you saw in the lens. I saw you shudder; you must admit the horror of those creatures—whether you choose to think they originate in your imagination or in my theory of the Astral Plane, you must recognize the fact that they are a menace to any man's sanity.

"If you see too much of that sort of thing you'll go mad. I'm not being melodramatic. I wouldn't advise looking too closely into that lens, now, or spending too much time before it."

"Don't be silly," Niles said.

"Elementals," I persisted—and you must believe this—yearn for life. They are cosmic ghouls, feeding on dead soul-bodies; but they long to lure a living man through the planes to them. Consider all legend—it's merely allegory. Stories of men disappearing, selling their souls to the devil, going to foreign worlds; all are founded on the idea of Elementals seeking human prey and dragging men down to their plane."

"Cut it out, it annoys me." Niles was colloquially common in his speech, but his eyes betokened a slight credulity that grew as I ignored his skepticism.

"You say it's superstition," I went on. "I say it's science. Witches, wizards, so-called wonder-workers; the wise men whose secrets built the pyramids—they all employed spells in which they used what? Geometrical figures. They drew angles and pentagons and cabalistic circles. Through the lines they summoned the forces from the Astral Plane—or the outer

Dimensions. These forces granted them boons, and in turn they finally were drawn along the angles themselves into the Astral Plane, to pay for the boon with their lives. Witchcraft and geometry are strange bedfellows, but it's historical fact.

"And so I warn you. You see creatures through the jewel lens, and they see, feel, are in some way aware, of you. They will seek your soul—and just as you can look through the lens at them, they can extend their forces back through the jewel to suck you down. Hypnotic force, of some sort psychology has not yet postulated. Magnetism, telepathy; these are the words psychologists use to describe things they do not fully understand; just as the ancients called such forces magic. Don't look too long or too closely through that jewel."

Niles laughed.

"Tomorrow I'll take the pictures," he declared. "And then we'll see just what your Elementals are like. If it makes you nervous, you can stay away."

"Frankly, I will," I said.

And I did.

The following afternoon I left the studio in Niles' hands. He was tremendously excited. He spoke of using new focusing adjustments to extend part of the field; he wondered what speeds to photograph with, what paper to use for printing. He also speculated as to whether or not the creatures he saw would appear on the finished negative, or merely the amazing light-figures. I left, for I felt growing nervousness and apprehension I did not wish him to see.

I went down to Voorden's.

THE shop was open, but the clerk was not there when I passed through the front of the place, although the bell tinkled its usual warning of a customer's approach as I entered the door. I walked back through the gloom to the room where Isaac usually spent his time in study.

He was sitting there in the soft haze peculiar to the lightless chamber; his eyes glazed in rapt attention on the open pages of some old book.

"Isaac," I said. "That jewel has something. Niles and I used it last night, and I think it's a gateway to something incredible. Those divinators of ancient times were no fools. They knew what they were doing—" Isaac never moved. Imperturbable, he sat and stared through the quiet dusk. There was a little smile on his sallow face.

"You promised to look up some more of the jewel's history," I went on. "Did you find anything? It's amazing, you know; quite amazing." Isaac sat and stared and smiled. I bent forward.

Sitting bolt upright in his chair, hand clutching a pen, Isaac Voorden, seemed a modern necromancer.

And like many an ancient necromancer who had overstepped the pale, Isaac Voorden was dead.

Stone-dead.

"Isaac!" I shouted. Funny, isn't it, how people always shout the name of the departed upon discovery of death? It's a sort of despairing wail of disbelief at a friend's passing; an invocation, as though the echo of human voice can recall the soul of one that has passed beyond. Beyond—to the Astral Plane?

Quickly I bent over the cold body, stared at the crabbed scrawl covering the paper. I read the notes Voorden had been working on when his pale Visitor had arrived.

They blurred through my brain.

"The Star of Sechmet. Ptolemaic. Aug. Lulla, name of Roman who stole it. See note in Veno's *History.* Lulla died under curse for removing sacred jewel. Point one.

"Priestess of Diana who wore it in vestal girdle also died. For sacrilege. Again, see Veno. Point two. The pattern grows.

"Gilles De Retz—his fate is known. He misused the jewel. Yes, it's the inevitable story of violation.

"See *Mysteries of the Worm* for Prinn's chapter on divination. Might be reference concerning jewel during its disappearance.

"Again, the Russian. Claims to have stolen jewel from Rasputin, who used it in prophecy. Rasputin dead. The Russian lost his eyes. And unless he lost his reason, his warnings concerning sacred character of the jewel are to be respected. Points three, four, and five. Whoever or whatever exists in the world opened up by the jewel is not anxious to have the gateway changed, or misused. Cutting the stone, transplanting it from one setting to another, misusing it—all result in death.

"And—I have done all three. God help this man Niles for what he must endure. They may get at him through the stone.

"God help me. There will be a price I must pay; soon.

"Why didn't I think before I gave up the jewel? Now I'm—"

That was all he had written. There was no scrawling off of the interrupted pen, no frozen look of horror, no "mounting dread" in the text of the writing. Voorden had written it. One minute he was alive, and the next minute he was dead.

Of course it could have been heart-failure, thrombosis, or simply old age. Shock, excitement, anxiety might have brought it on; a stroke may have done it.

BUT I didn't fool myself. I knew.

I rose and ran from that shop as though fiends dogged my heels. And all the way my legs worked in rhythm to a single phrase racing through my brain. "God help Niles." It was dusk when I unlocked the studio door. The studio was empty, the twilight room darkened. Had Niles gone out?

I prayed so. But where would he go? He wouldn't abandon work. I walked to where the camera loomed; noted the exposure of one film. He must have been called.

I restrained an impulse to peer again through the jewel lens, as I lit the light. No—I did not wish to see that plain again; see those horrible figures dwelling outside laws of space and time, yet—mocking thoughts!—actually existing here around me, in this very room. World's within worlds of horror. Where was Niles?

I couldn't brood like this. Why not develop the exposed film? Keep busy. I carried the camera into the dark-room. Ten minutes in darkness, then the regular process. I set the fans going as I hung the dark square up to dry.

My mind teemed with excited conjectures. Would we find a blank photograph? Would it show the angled figures of light? Or would—wonderful possibility—the creatures conjured up by our imaginations appear? Would our own brains aid in taking the pictures, as a part of the focal point linked to the camera by the hypnotic jewel? It was a fascinating thought.

The fans hummed as the minutes fled.

But where was Niles? Whatever had caused his hasty departure, surely he would have returned by now. And he had left no note.

The door had been locked from outside, and I had the only key.

The thought grinned at me through a wave of horror.

There was no way Niles could have left.

Only one way.

I jammed the dried negative into the printer, with a sheet of ordinary paper.

I pressed down, slipped the print into the developer; waited a moment.

I raced out into the light of the other room, held the finished print, wet and dripping, to the light.

Then I screamed, and smashed that camera, stamped on the jewel until I could control myself sufficiently to pick it up and hurl it through the open window at the further rooftops. I tore print and negative to shreds. And still I screamed, for I could not and never shall be able to erase the memory of what I had seen in that picture Niles had taken.

He must have clicked it off at a very fast speed. Very fast. And perhaps it was the actual working of the camera which accounted for what had happened. It might have established the focal point instantaneously—

established it so that those things—forces, Elementals, call them what you will—could achieve their goal.

I saw the print. It was as Niles guessed it might be; a picture of a black endless plain. Only there were no lights visible, no figures, nothing except black shadows that seemed to blur around a central point. *They* did not photograph.

But *they* blurred around a point—a central point. *They* got through just as the picture must have snapped, yet faster than light itself. They got through and drew Niles along the angles as I had feared. Faster than light itself, as I have said. For it had to be faster, else I would not have seen—I would not have seen what I did see on that print. The central point. . . .

The central point of that accursed picture; the only visible thing amidst the shadows—*was the dead and mangled body of David Niles!*

Death Is An Elephant

A fascinating story of a circus, a sacred white elephant, and the series of dreadful deaths that haunted the dreams of the rajah of Jadhore

> "Death is an elephant
> Torch-eyed and horrible
> Foam-flanked and terrible."
> —Vachel Lindsay: *The Congo.*

IT'S not the easiest job in the world, this being press agent for a circus. The ordinary routine is bad enough, what with temperamental stars and equally temperamental newspaper men to deal with. There are a thousand angles to every story, and a thousand tricks to play in order to get that story printed.

But the very devil of it is, the best stories are those which can never be printed: fascinating, mysterious, incredible stories set against the background of circus glamor—stories which I can never write—that's the worst side of this business.

Of course, there's a way out, and I'm taking it. The queer business about the animal trainer, Captain Zaroff, has already seen publication; with radical changes in the names of the principals involved.

I have an itch to see the yarns in print; there's ink in my blood, as the boys say. Particularly when the tales are true; then there comes a time when

I can no longer suppress the urge to reveal them to the world.

Such a story and such a time is here again, Hence this document, with names, dates, and slight details altered—but with a strange story, to the truth of which my eyes can testify; for I was there to see it all. I saw the horror when first it crept from its lair in the jungle hills; I saw it stalk and stride. Sometimes I wish I could forget that striking, but still I dream. I dream of an elephant with blazing eyes, and feet that are blood-red. Blood-red. . . . But this is the tale.

IN THE fall of '36, Stellar Brothers Circus went into winter quarters and plans were begun for the following year, and a new show. The old man and I knew what we wanted and what the public always wants—novelty. But where to find that novelty? It's the perennial question which drives the entertainment world mad. Clowns, animals, acrobats—these are the eternal backbone of the circus's attraction; but novelty is the drawing-card.

Two weeks of planning, pondering, and bickering got us no place. The question of a novel star feature remained unsettled. To add to the confusion, the old man was in bad shape physically. As a result he left the whole situation in the balance, threw up the work, and sailed for a six-weeks' trip abroad.

Naturally, I accompanied him. I managed to see that the papers played it up in the right way; the boss was traveling to secure a mysterious foreign attraction for next year's show—an attraction so important that he personally would handle the affair.

This sounded pretty good, but it left us in a spot. We had to come back with something that lived up to expectations, and I swear neither of us had the faintest idea as to what it could be. It was up to Fate to deal the aces.

A Pacific crossing took us to Honolulu; thence to the Philippines. Gradually the old man's temper improved, and my own spirits were raised. After all, we were heading for the Orient, and there's plenty of circus material there. The best jugglers, acrobats, tumblers and freaks are found in the East, and as for animals and natural oddities, the woods are full of them.

Acting on a hunch, I cabled George Gervis in Singapore. Gervis is an animal man; a trapper and collector of circus beasts who knows the tropics like a book. I felt confident that he'd have something new for us, and arranged to meet him.

And that's how we got the Sacred White Elephant of Jadhore.

Gervis explained the situation carefully that first afternoon as we sat in his hotel room. I've known George for a number of years, and never have I seen him so excited. He tried hard to speak casually of the matter, and emphasize the fact that we had only an outside chance, but enthusiasm fairly oozed from him.

Briefly, the situation as he outlined it was this. Jadhore is one of the smaller principalities of the Malay States, under British protectorate. The natives are ruled by their own hereditary rajah; for unlike the majority of the Straits Settlements, the inhabitants are more Hindoo than Moslem. They have their own priesthood, their own government—under British jurisdiction. For years it had been the custom of the English government to pay the rajah an annuity; this, in turn, maintained the dignity and splendor of his court.

At this time, however, the annuity had for some reason been discontinued, and the present rajah was in sore straits for money. If his splendor as a potentate diminished, he would lose face before the eyes of his own people and neighboring kingdoms. And this rajah, in accordance with the tenets of his faith, had a Sacred White Elephant. Now if we could tactfully broach the matter in such a way as not to offend the religious scruples of the rajah or his priests; well—there was our attraction!

It sounded like a natural to me. Evidently the old man felt the same way, for he immediately gave Gervis *carte blanche* in the matter and sent him off to Jadhore to negotiate the transaction.

It was nearly a week later that he returned—a very anxious and fretful week for the old man and myself, for we were fighting against time.

Gervis had not brought the Sacred Elephant with him, but he had come to terms. These he now outlined for us.

The rajah definitely refused to sell the animal. His religious principles absolutely forbade the sacrilege. After consultation with the priests, however, he offered to rent the beast to the show for one season, provided that certain stipulations be made.

The animal must not be trained nor molested in any way. It must not be decorated, nor allowed to mingle with common pachyderms. It could, however, be placed on exhibition, and take part in any parades or processionals that were a feature of the performance. Special food and quarters would have to be provided as a matter of course. In addition, the rajah himself must be allowed to travel with the show, as guarantor of the Sacred Elephant’s safety to the priests. Native attendants would be provided by the priests as well, and certain religious ceremonials must not be interfered with.

Such were the terms Gervis had agreed to. He had inspected the animal, and pronounced it to be a splendid specimen of its kind—abnormally large for the Indian elephant, and quite handsome.

At the conclusion of this report the old man blew up.

“Animal be damned!” he shouted. “I can’t buy it, I can’t train it, can’t use it in the regular show. Can’t even handle it myself—got to let a two-bit rajah and a gang of nigger priests feed it and burn incense in front of its trunk! What’s the use? Special quarters, too—a gold freight car, I suppose. How much did you say?—seventeen hundred a week rental and expenses? Of all the——”

Here the boss demonstrated his restored health by going off into one of the profane tirades for which he is justly famous. I waited for him to cool *a’* bit before I stuck my oar in.

Then I quietly pointed out certain obvious facts. These terms—they sounded difficult, but really were just what we wanted. Novelty—we’d play up the restrictions ourselves. “The Sacred White Elephant of Jadhore—Accompanied by the Priests of Worshipping Millions! See the Sacred Rites of the Jungle Temples! Personally Accompanied by the Illustrious Char Dzang, Rajah of Jadhore!" And so on.

I recalled for his benefit the success of the old white elephant importation of other days, which resulted in the famous Barnum-Forepaugh feud. Barnum's white elephant was a great success, and Adam Forepaugh, a rival circus-owner, thereupon took an ordinary beast and whitewashed its hide. The subsequent exposure of this hoax and the resultant publicity attendant had made fortunes for both men.

I showed the old man how the religious angle would pack them in. We'd play up the sanctity, the restrictions, the priests and attendants. And imagine a circus with a real rajah! Why, this was an attraction that would sell itself—no other build-up was needed.

When I had finished I knew from the look on the old man's face that my case was won.

"How soon can you arrange to get the animal down here?"

"Within two days," the animal-man promptly replied.

"Get going," said the old man, lighting a fresh cigar. Then to me, "Come on. We're heading for the steamship office."

2

TRUE to his promise, Gervis returned on the third morning. We were already on the dock, waiting, for the boat sailed at noon. Passage had been arranged, quarters for the beast made ready; cables had been sent ahead to winter quarters. And I had just released a story that met with instant success. It was therefore with an air of pleased anticipation that we greeted the arrival of our prize and regal guests.

Nor was our first glimpse disappointing. Today, in view of the sinister aftermath of the whole affair, it seems almost incredible that we so blithely accepted our acquisitions; that we did not realize even then the curious and disturbing features of the itinerary. But that morning, as the procession came down the dock, I felt quite proudly satisfied with our work.

Two swarthy Hindoos led the way—little, turbaned, bearded men, clad in robes of purple and gold. Their hands held silvered chains, for they were leading the Sacred Elephant.

The mighty beast lumbered into view—I gasped a bit, I confess. Never had I seen an elephant like this! Fully ten feet tall was the White Elephant of Jadhore; a giant among the East Indian pachyderms. It had long, gleaming white tusks that swept outward from its massive jaws like twin sabers. Its trunk and hooves were enameled in gold, and on its back rested a howdah of hammered brass. But the color!

I had expected, from what I'd read, that a white elephant was a sort of sickly gray-skinned creature. This beast was almost silver; a leprous silver. From its oiled body glinted little shafts of scintillating light. It looked unreal, unearthly, yet magnificent.

At a word of command the beast halted and surveyed us with smoldering little eyes that rested like red rubies in a silver skull.

The occupants of the howdah dismounted and came forward, and again I was astonished. The rajah of Jadhore wore an ordinary business suit, and his face was clean-shaven in contrast to the bushy beards of the attendants. He wore a green turban that seemed utterly incongruous in comparison to his modern attire. It seemed even more incongruous when he greeted us in perfect English.

"Are we ready, gentlemen?" he inquired. "Have arrangements been made to take this—er—sacred tub aboard ship? My men want to handle it, of course; there are certain religious restrictions against crossing water, y'know."

I stared at him, and I saw the old man's eyebrows rise in surprise as the rajah lit a cigarette and calmly tossed the match beneath the Sacred Elephant's gilded feet. He took charge of the situation.

"It was stipulated in the agreement, gentlemen, that the beast was to have a permanent religious attendant. Allow me to present her—the High

Priestess of the Temple of Ganesha."

He beckoned the figure in the background to come forward. Out of the shadow cast by the elephant's body stepped a girl. And for the third time that morning I uttered a low murmur of surprise.

Now I understood the meaning of that beauty of which Oriental poets sing. For this woman was lovely past all understanding or describing. She was dressed in a robe of white, but the lissome curves of her perfectly molded body shone through her garments and caused all memory of them to be forgotten. Her hair was ebon as the jungle night, but it was coiled like a crown above a face of such bewitching perfection as to render powerless even a press-agent's powers of portrayal.

Was it the ripe scarlet blossom of her mouth, the gem-like facets of her high bronze cheeks, the creamy marble of her sweeping brow that so blended into a blaze of indescribable beauty?

Or was it her eyes—those great green jewels with tawny flecks glittering in a serpent stare? There was icy wisdom here as well as loveliness; the woman had the look of Lilith about her. Woman, girl, priestess; she was all three as she gazed at us, acknowledging all introductions in calm silence.

"Leela speaks no English," the rajah explained.

Leela! Lilith! Green eyes—priestess of mystery. For the first time I was aware of an inner disturbance. I sensed now the reality of what we were doing; we were dabbling in sacred spheres. And I knew that this woman did not like us; that she scorned and hated this prostitution of her religion. We had made a dangerous opponent, I mused.

The truth of my surmise was soon to be horribly revealed.

In due time the elephant was hoisted aboard the ship and deposited in special quarters within the hold. The attendants and Leela accompanied the animal; the rajah joined us. At noon, we sailed from Singapore.

THE old man and I found the rajah a likable fellow. He was, as I suspected, educated in England; his present life frankly bored him. We found it easy to converse with him about our plans for the circus, and told him how we intended to use the elephant in the procession and build quarters in the menagerie tent. I even proposed that the High Priestess be a member of the Grand Entry number, riding in the howdah on the beast's back.

Here the rajah looked grave. No, he declared, the idea was out of the question. Leela was sacred; she would never consent. Besides, she had opposed the entire venture, and the priests had upheld her. It was best not to cross her, for she had mystic powers.

"Well," I interjected. "Surely you don't believe all that Oriental bosh."

For the first time the rajah of Jadhore lost his carefully-acquired British aplomb.

"I do," he said slowly. "If you were not ignorant of my people and their ways, you would also know that there are many things in my religion which you of the West cannot explain. Let me tell you, my friend, what the High-Priestess means to our faith.

"For thousands of years there has been a temple of Ganesha, the Elephant-God in our land. The Sacred White Elephant holds His Divine Spirit, bred through generations of the animals. The White Elephant is not like others, my friends. You noticed that.

"The God of my peoples is more ancient than your Christian one, and master of darker forces which only the jungle peoples know and can invoke. Nature-demons and beast-men are recognized today by your scientists; but priests of my simple people have controlled such strange forces before ever Christ or Buddha trod the earth. Ganesha is not a benevolent god, my friend. He has always been worshipped under many names—as Chaugnar Faugn, in the old places of Tibet; and as Lord Tsathoggua aforetime. And He is evil—that is why we treat His incarnation in the White Elephant as sacred. That is why there have always been High Priestesses in his temple; they are the holy brides and consorts of the Elephant One. And they are wise; bred from childhood in the black arts of worship, they commune with the (beasts of the forest and serve to avert the wrath of the evil ones from their people."

"You believe that?" laughed the old man.

"Yes," said the rajah, and he was no longer smiling. "I believe. And I must warn you. This trip, as you must have heard, is against the wishes of my priesthood. Never has a Sacred Elephant crossed the great waters to another land, to be gaped at by unbelievers for a show. The priests feel that it is an insult to the Lord Ganesha. Leela was sent with the elephant by the priests for a purpose—she alone can guard it. And she hates you for what you're doing; hates me, too. I—I don't like to speak of what she can do. There are still human sacrifices in our temples at certain times, of which the Government knows nothing. And human sacrifices are made with a purpose—the old dark powers I spoke of can be invoked by blood. Leela has officiated at such rites, and she has learned much. I don't want to frighten you—it's really my fault for consenting to this—but you should be warned. Something may happen."

The old man hastened to reassure the rajah. He was smugly certain that the man was nothing but a savage beneath his veneer of superficial culture, and he spoke accordingly.

As for me, I wondered. I thought again of Leela's eery eyes, and imagined easily enough that they could gaze on bloody sacrifice without flinching. Leela could know evil, and she could hate. I remembered the rajah's final words, "Something may happen."

I went out on deck, entered the hold. The elephant stood in his stall, placidly munching hay. Leela stood stolidly beside him as I inspected the animal's chains. But I felt her eyes bore into my back when I turned away, and noticed that the Hindoo attendants carefully avoided me.

Other passengers had got wind of our prize, and they filed into the hold in a steady stream. As I left, a fellow named Canrobert strolled up. We chatted for several minutes, and when I went up on deck he was still standing there before the beast. I promised to meet him in the bar that evening for a chat.

At dinner a steward whispered to me the story. Canrobert had come up from the hold late in the afternoon, walked to the rail in plain view of several passengers, and jumped overboard. His body was not recovered.

I took part in the investigation which followed. During the course of it we ventured down into the hold. The elephant still stood there, and Leela was still keeping watch beside him. But now she was smiling.

3

I NEVER did learn about the death of a man named Phelps on the third day out. But it was a hoodoo voyage for certain, and *I* was glad when we disembarked at last and headed for winter quarters.

I am a practical man, but I get occasional “hunches.” That is why I avoided the rajah during the rest of our homeward journey. I fled when he approached, because I felt that he would have an explanation for the deaths of the two men—an explanation I did not care to hear. I didn’t go near Leela nor the elephant either, and spent most of my time doping out the show with the old man.

It was good to see winter quarters again. A handsome stall had been built for the Sacred Elephant, and Ganesha (for so we had christened the beast) was quartered therein.

No greater compliment could have been paid to my advance ‘publicity than the attention shown the beast by our hardened circus folk. Stars and supers alike, they crowded around the stall, eyed the mighty animal, gazed at the silent bearded attendants, and stared in speechless admiration at Leela. The rajah struck up an immediate acquaintance with Captain Dence, our regular elephant-keeper.

I immediately plunged into work with, the old man, for the show opened shortly.

Therefore it wasn’t until several weeks later that I began to hear the disquieting rumors that floated around the lot concerning our star attraction.

The restlessness of the other elephants, for example—how, in rehearsal for the Grand Entry, they shied away from the Sacred Ganesha, and trumpeted nightly in their picket line. The queer story of how the foreign woman *lived* in the stall with the animal; ate and slept there in stolid silence. The way in which one of the clowns had been frightened while passing through the animal barn one evening; how he had seen the two Hindoos and the girl bowing in worship before the silver beast, who stood amidst a circle of incense fires.

Even the old man mentioned a visit from the rajah and Captain Dence during which both men pleaded to break the contract and allow the animal and its attendants to return to Jadhore before the show opened. They spoke wildly of "trouble" to come. The proposal was of course rejected as being out of the question; our publicity was released, and both men were evidently under the influence of liquor at the time.

Two days later Captain Dence was found hanging from a beam behind the elephant-line. It was a case of suicide beyond question, and there was no investigation. We had a show funeral, and for a while a gloomy shadow overcast our lot. Everyone remarked about the shocking look of horror on poor Deuce's death-distorted face.

About this time I began to wake up. I determined to find out a few things for myself. The rajah was almost always intoxicated now, and he seemed to avoid me purposely; staying in town and seldom visiting the lot. I know for a fact that he never again entered the menagerie barn.

But I learned that others did. Perhaps it was morbid curiosity; but the show-folk, even after their first trips of inspection, seemed to spend much of their time around the elephant lines. Shaw, our new keeper, told me that they were continually before the stall of the Sacred Elephant. In his own opinion many of the men performers were stuck on that "pretty foreign dame." They stared at her and at the elephant for hours on end; even the big stars came.

Corbot, the trapeze artist, was a frequent visitor. So was Jim Dolan, the acrobatic clown, and Rizzio, our equestrian director.

Another was Captain Blade, our knife-thrower in the side-show. What they found in the woman he couldn't say, for she never spoke and they were silent.

I could make nothing of this report. But I determined to watch the beautiful High Priestess for myself.

I got into the habit of sauntering through the menagerie at odd hours and glancing at the Sacred Elephant. Whatever the time of day, there was Leela, her emerald eyes burning into my back. Once or twice I saw some of the performers gazing raptly at the stall. I noticed that they came singly at all times. Also I saw something which proved the keeper's theory to be wrong.

They were not infatuated with the woman, for they looked only at the elephant! The gigantic beast stood like some silver statue; impassive, inscrutable. Only its glistening oiled trunk moved to and fro; that, and its fiery eyes. It seemed to stare mockingly in return, as though contemptuous of attentions from the puny creatures before it.

Once, when the place was deserted, I saw Leela caressing its great body. She was whispering to it in some low and outlandish tongue, but her voice was ineffably sweet and her hands infinitely tender. I was struck by a curious and somewhat weird thought—this woman was acting toward the beast as a woman in love acts toward her lover! I remembered how the rajah spoke of her as the bride of Ganesha, and winced. When the animal's serpentine trunk embraced the lovely girl she purred in almost blissful satisfaction, and for the first time I heard the beast rumble in its massive throat. I left, quickly so as to be unobserved.

OPENING day loomed, and once again I was forced to turn my mind to other things. The cars were loaded for Savannah; the dress rehearsal was performed; I sent the advance men on the night before we left, and the regular routine got under way.

The old man was pleased with the show, and I must admit that it was the best we'd ever turned out. Corbot, the trapeze artist, was a good drawing-card; we got him from the big show through sheer good fortune. Jim Dolan, the chief clown, was always a draw. We had some fine animal acts, and many novelty features as well. And the Sacred Elephant of Jadhore was bidding fair to becoming a household name before the public had ever seen it.

We had a private car for the animal and its three attendants; the two Hindoos smiled happily when they saw it, and even Leela was slightly taken aback with its splendor. On our arrival under canvas the beast was installed in a superb new station atop a platform in the center, and with its hide newly oiled and decorated it looked superb.

The menagerie crowd on the opening day was highly impressed. They stared at the impassive Hindoos and positively gaped at Leela in her white ceremonial gown. The rajah they did not see—he was shaking drunk in his own quarters, behind locked doors.

I didn't even have time to think of the superstitious coward. I'm like a kid when a new show opens each year, and the old man is no different. We sat in our box and positively beamed with joyous excitement as the trumpet blasts announced the Grand Entry.

Our procession was Oriental—Arabian riders, Egyptian seers on camels, harem beauties on elephants, califs and sultans in jeweled litters. At the very last came the Sacred White Elephant of Jadhore; the mightiest of them all. The great silver beast moved with a sort of monstrous beauty; in regal dignity Ganesha padded on to the beat of thundering drums. The two Hindoos led the way, but Leela was not present. The great spotlight followed every step; so did the eyes of the crowd. I can't explain it, but there was *something* about that animal which "clicked." It had beauty—and that unearthly majesty I had noticed. It was the Sacred Elephant indeed.

The procession vanished. The show was on. Sleek black ponies galloped into the rings, and whips cracked in merry rhythm with their hooves. The music altered its tempo; the clowns strutted in to do the first of their walk-arounds. Applause, laughter, and the ever-beating rhythm of the band.

Excitement, as the jugglers vied with a troupe of seals in dextrous competition.

The star acts were coming up, and I nudged the old man to attract his special attention.

With a flurry of drums the big spot in the center ring blazed forth as the other lights dimmed. Alonzo Corbot, the trapeze star, raced in. His white body bounded across the ring to the ropes beneath the main pole where his partner waited.

The snare-drums snarled as the two performers mounted up—up—up—sixty feet in the air to the platform and the trapeze rings.

Out they swung now, silver bodies on silver rings; out into the cold clear light that bathed the utter emptiness of the tent-top. Swing—swoop—soar; rhythmically rise, unfalteringly fall. Tempo in every movement of the clutching hands; timing even in the feet that danced on empty air.

Corbot was a marvel; I'd seen him work in rehearsal many times and was never tired of watching the perfection of motion he displayed. He trained rigorously, I knew; and he never slipped. He caught his partner by the hand, the wrist, the elbow, the shoulder, the neck, the ankle. Feet suspended from the rings, he shot to and fro like a human pendulum while his partner somersaulted through space into his waiting hands. At precisely the exact fraction of a second they met in midair; an error in timing meant certain death. There were no nets—that was Corbot's boast.

I watched, the old man watched, the audience watched, as two men fluttered like tiny birds so far above. Birds? They were demons with invisible wings now in the red light that flashed on for the climax of the act. Now came the time when Corbot and his partner would both leave the rings, leap out into that dizzying space and turn a complete somersault in midair, then grasp the rings on the opposite side of their present position.

The drums went mad. The red light glared on that little hell of high space where two men waited, their nerves and muscles tense.

I could almost feel it myself—that moment of dread expectancy. My eyes strained through the crimson haze, seeking Corbot's face so far above.

He “would be smiling now; he was preparing to leap. . . .

DRUMS, cymbals crashed. The waiting figures sprang. Corbot’s arms were ready to grasp his partner in whirling space—or were they? Good God, no—*they were stiff at his side!*

There was a streaking blur crossing that empty scarlet expanse of light, and then it was gone. Something struck the center ring with a heavy thud. Somebody screamed, the band blared a desperate march, and the lights went up. I saw that Corbot’s partner Victoire had saved himself by catching a ring just in time, but my eyes did not linger above. They centered themselves on the ground; on the center ring where something lay in a pool of crimson that came from no light.

Then the old man and I were out of our box and running across the tent with attendants at our side. And we stared for a sickening second at that boneless pulpy red thing that had once been Alonzo Corbot the trapeze star. They took him away; fresh sawdust covered the spot where he had fallen, and the band, the lights, the music covered the audience’s panic until their fears were forgotten. The clowns were out again as the old man and I left, and the crowd was laughing—a bit weakly, perhaps, but laughing nevertheless. Corbot’s hail and farewell was typical; the show went on.

Victoire, the partner, staggered in as we gathered by the body in the dressing-room. Pale, limp, badly shaken, he wept convulsively when he saw —it—lying there.

“I knew it!” he gasped. “When he stood on the other platform just before he leaped, I saw his eyes. They were dead and far away. Dead. . . . No, I don’t know how it happened. Of course he was all right before the show. I hadn’t seen him much lately; between rehearsals he spent a lot of time some place. . . . His eyes were dead. . . .”

We never learned anything more from Victoire. The boss and I hurried through the menagerie to the main office. As we passed the big platform where the Sacred Elephant was quartered, I noticed with a shock that it was empty of attendants. Something brushed against me in the dark as I hurried on. It was Leela, the High-Priestess, and she was smiling. I had never seen her smile before.

That night I dreamed of Leela's smile, and Corbot's redly ruined face. . . .

4

THERE'S only a little more to tell. For that I'm thankful, because the rest is even now a nightmare I would rather forget. We learned nothing of Corbot's death from anyone. It created a flurry, of course, and the performers' nerves were shattered. After all, an opening-day tragedy like that is disquieting.

The old man raved, but there was nothing to do. The show went on; the morbid public swarmed in that second day, for despite my efforts publicity was released.

Nor was the morbid public, disappointed. For on the second night, our fourth show—Jim Dolan died.

Jim was our acrobatic clown, and a star in his own right. He'd been with us twelve seasons, always doing his regular routine of juggling and pantomime.

We all knew Jim and liked him as a friend. He was a great bidder; nothing of the pagliaceio about Dolan. But on that second evening he stopped for a moment in his routine before the center ring, put down his juggling-clubs, pulled out a razor, and calmly slit his throat.

How we got through that night is still a mystery to me. "Jinx" and "hoodoo" were the only two words I heard. The show went on, the boss raved, and the police quietly investigated.

The following afternoon Rizzio, our equestrian director, walked into the line of the bareback routine, and a horse's hoof broke his spine.

I'll never forget that twilight session after the show, in the old man's tent. Neither of us had slept for two days; we'd talked ourselves out, and our souls were sick with fear and nameless apprehension. I've never believed in "curses," but I did then. And so I looked at the official reports and the headlines in the papers, glanced at the old man's gray face, and buried my own in my arms. There was a curse on the show.

Death! I'd walked with it for weeks now. Those two chaps on the boat, then Captain Dence, the elephant man, then Corbot, Dolan, Rizzio.

Death—ever since we had taken the Sacred White.

The rajah's words! His story about curses and queer rites; the vengeance of the god and his priests! The Priestess Leela, who smiled now! Hadn't I heard stories about the performers visiting the elephant's stall?—why, all three of the men who died here in the show had done that! The rajah knew—and I had thought him a drunken coward.

I sent a man off to find him. The old man, utterly collapsed, slept I spent an anxious hour waiting.

The rajah entered. A glance at my face told him the story.

"You know now?" he said. "I thought you would never come to your senses. I could do nothing without your belief, for *she* knows I understand, and she hates me. I have tried very hard to forget; but now men die and this thing must be stopped. Ganesha may send me to a thousand hells for this, but it is better so. It is magic, my friend."

"How do you know?" I whispered.

"I know." He smiled wearily, but there was black despair in his eyes. "I watched from the beginning. She is cunning, that Leela, so very cunning. And she knows *arts."*

"What arts?"

"You of the West call it hypnotism. It is more than that It is transference of will. Leela is an adept; she can do it easily with the elephant as medium."

I tried vainly to understand. Was the rajah crazed? No—his eyes burned not with derangement but with bitter hatred.

"Post-hypnotic suggestion," he breathed. "When fools came to watch the Sacred Elephant, she was always there. Her eyes did it; and when they watched the gleaming trunk of the beast it acted as a focal point. They came back again and again, not knowing why. And all the while she was willing them to act; not then, but later. That is how the two men died on the boat. She experimented there, told them to drown themselves. One went immediately, the other waited several days. All that was needed was for them to see her once at the time she willed for them to die. Thus it was. And here, in the menagerie, it has been the same way. They stare at the silver elephant. She willed them to die during the performance. At the proper time she stood in the entrance-way; I have, seen her there. And the men died—you saw that.

"She hates the show, and will ruin it. To her the worship of Ganesha is sacred, and she is wreaking vengeance. The old priests that sent her must have instructed this, and there must be an end. That is why I dare not face her."

"What's to be done?" I found myself asking. "If your story is true, we can't touch her. And we can't give up the show."

"I will stop her," said the rajah slowly. "I must."

Suddenly, he was gone. And I realized with a start that the show was almost ready to begin. Quickly *I* roused the old man from his slumber. Then I dashed out. Collaring a roustabout, I ordered him to find the rajah at once. There would be a showdown tonight; there must be.

I HAD two guards with guns secretly posted at the side entrance to the tent, where the performers came in. They had orders to stop anyone who loitered there during the show. There must be no Leela watching and commanding that night.

I dared not incarcerate her at once for fear of a row while the show was on. The woman was evidently capable of anything, and she must not suspect. Still, I wanted to see her for myself. A half-hour before the menagerie opened I hurried in. The elephant's stall was again untended!

I ran around to the side entrance. There was no one there. Out on the midway I raced, mingling with the crowd. Then it was that I noticed the excited throng before the side show. Elbowing through, I came upon two men and the barker as they emerged from the tent carrying a limp form in their arms. It was the girl assistant of Captain Blade, the knife-thrower. He had missed.

Leela passed me in the crowd, smiling. Her face was beautiful as Death.

When I rushed back to the boss tent, I found the roustabout and the rajah. The latter was trembling in every limb.

Hastily I collared the potentate and dragged him through the crowd toward the main tent.

"I believe you now," I whispered. "But you're not going to do anything rash. Give me your knife."

I'd guessed correctly. He slipped a dirk out of his sleeve and passed it to me unobserved.

"No more bloodshed," I muttered. "I have two men at the side entrance. She'll not watch *this* show and cast any spells. When the performance is over, I'll have her behind the bars on your testimony. But no disturbance before the crowd."

I shouldered my way into my regular box and he followed after me.

The big tent was crowded. There was an air of grim waiting, as if the spectators were *expecting* something. I knew what they expected; hadn't the papers been full of "the Hoodoo Circus" for the past three days? There was a low murmur as of massed whispering voices. I thought of a Roman amphitheater and shuddered.

The big drums rolled. The parade swept into view, and I cast an anxious glance at the side entrance when it cleared. There were my two guards, armed with efficient-looking guns. No trouble tonight! And the rajah was safe, with me.

The Sacred Elephant swept into view; serene, majestic, lumbering gigantically on ivory hoofs. There was only one Hindoo leading him tonight and—the howdah was on his back!

In it sat—Leela, the High Priestess of Ganesha.

"She knows," breathed the rajah, his brown face suddenly animal-like with convulsed terror.

Leela was smiling. . . .

Then horror came.

The lights flickered, failed, blinked out. The vast tent plunged into nighted darkness and the band ceased. There was a rising wail of sound, and I rose in my seat with a scream on my lips.

There in the darkness glowed the silver elephant—the Sacred White Elephant of Jadhore. Like a leprous monster, its body gleamed with phosphorescent fire. And in the darkness I saw Leela's eyes.

The elephant had turned now, and left the parade. As shrieks rose in a thousand throats it thundered forward—straight for our box.

The rajah broke from my grasp and vaulted over the railing to the ground. My hand flew to my pocket and I cursed in dismay. The knife he had given me was gone. Then my eyes returned to the hideous tableau before me.

The elephant charged with lifted trunk, tusks glistening before it. There was a shrill trumpeting from its silver throat as it bore down on the slight figure of the man who raced toward it.

He ran to death, but his head was high. He was seeking that black figure in the howdah on the beast's back.

In a moment everything was over. A gleaming arc in the air as something long and thin and silver whizzed up to the elephant's back. A woman's shrill scream and gurgling sob. A mighty bellowing of brutish, berserk rage. A thud of massive feet as the silver giant trampled on. The crunching . . . the screams, the shots, and the great shock as the great body turned and fell.

And then the audience rose and fled. When the lights went on once more, there was nobody in the tent but the performers and the roustabouts.

In the center of the areaway lay the gigantic Ganesha, silver sides streaked with scarlet in death. The crumpled howdah held all that remained of Leela the High Priestess. The rajah's knife had struck home, and her torn throat was not a pretty sight.

As for the rajah himself, there was only a slashed red horror dangling on the end of those ivory tusks; a mashed and pulpy thing.

THUS ended the affair of the Sacred White Elephant. The police accepted our story of the animal's running *amok* during the show when the lights failed.

They never learned of the Hindoo who had so horribly short-circuited the connection with his own body, and we buried his seared remains in secret.

The show closed for two weeks and we re-routed it for the rest of the year. Gradually, the papers let the story die and we went on.

I never told the truth to the old man. They're all dead anyway, and I'd like to forget it myself. But I have never liked novelty acts since, nor visited the Orient; because I know the rajah's story was true, and Leela had killed those performers as he had explained it. Those priests and priestesses have secret powers, I am convinced.

I've figured it all out—Leela found out that the rajah had told me the facts; knew she'd be exposed, and acted accordingly.

She sent the Hindoo to fix the lights, then arranged to have Ganesha the elephant charge our box and kill the rajah as she'd planned.

I have it all figured out, but I'd never tell the old man. There's one other fact I know which I must not reveal.

The rajah's knife did not kill Leela as she rode on the elephant's back. It could not, for she was already dead; dead before she entered the tent.

One of the two guards I stationed had shot her two minutes before at the side entrance as she rode past in the howdah of Ganesha, the Sacred White Elephant.

It seems that she must have hypnotized the beast, too—or did she? The Soul of Ganesha inhabits the body of the Sacred Elephant, the rajah said. And Ganesha wreaks a vengeance of his own.

The Strange Flight of Richard Clayton

Terrible indeed was the prospect of a lifetime in a tiny cell, but the achievement was worth the price.

RICHARD CLAYTON braced himself so that he stood like a diver waiting to plunge from a high board into the blue. In truth he was a diver. A silver space-ship was his board, and he meant to plunge not down, but up into the blue sky. Nor was it a matter of twenty or thirty feet he meant to go—instead, he was plunging millions of miles.

With a deep breath, the pudgy, moonfaced scientist raised his hands to the cold steel lever, closed his eyes, and jerked. The switch moved downward.

For a moment nothing happened.

Then a sudden jerk threw Clayton to the floor. The *Future* was moving!

THE pinions of a bird beating as it soars into the sky—the wings of a moth thrumming in flight—the quivering behind leaping muscles; of these things the shock was made.

The space-ship *Future* vibrated madly. It rocked from side to side, and a humming shook the steel walls. Richard Clayton lay dazed as a high-pitched droning arose within the vessel. He rose to his feet, rubbing a bruised forehead, and lurched to his tiny bunk. The ship was moving, yet the terrible vibration did not abate. He glanced at the controls and then swore softly.

"Good God! The panel is shattered!"

It was true. The instrument board had been broken by the shock. The cracked glass had fallen to the floor, and the dials swung aimlessly on the bare face of the panel.

Clayton sat there in despair. This was a major tragedy. His thoughts flashed back thirty years to the time when he, a boy of ten, had been inspired by Lindbergh's flight. He recalled his studies; how he had utilized the money of his millionaire father to perfect a flying machine which would cross Space itself.

For years Richard Clayton had worked and dreamed and planned. He studied the Russians and their rockets, organized the Clayton Foundation and hired mechanics, mathematicians, astronomers, engineers to labor with him.

Then there had been the discovery of atomic propulsion, and the building of the *Future.* The *Future* was a shell of steel and duraluminum, windowless and insulated by a guarded process. In the tiny cabin were oxygen tanks, stores of food tablets, energizing chemicals, air-conditioning arrangements—and space for a man to walk six paces.

It was a small steel cell; but in it Richard Clayton meant to realize his ambitions. Aided in his soaring by rockets to get him past the gravitational pull of Earth, then flying by means of the atomic-discharge propulsion, Clayton meant to reach Mars and return.

It would take ten years to reach Mars; ten years to return, for the grounding of the vessel would set off additional rocket-discharges. A thousand miles an hour—not an imaginative "speed of light" journey, but a slow, grim voyage, scientifically accurate. The panels were set, and Clayton had no need to guide his vessel. It was automatic.

"But now what?" Clayton said, staring at the shattered glass. He had lost touch with the outer world. He would be unable to read his progress on the board, unable to judge time and distance and direction. He would sit here for ten, twenty years—all alone in a tiny cabin. There had been no room for books or paper or games to amuse him. He was a prisoner in the black void of Space.

The earth had already faded far below him; soon it would be a ball of burning green fire smaller than the ball of red fire ahead—the fire of Mars.

Crowds had swarmed the field to watch him take off; his assistant Jerry Chase had controlled them. Clayton pictured them watching his shining steel cylinder emerging from the gaseous smoke of the rockets and rushing like a bullet into the sky. Then his cylinder would have faded away into the blue and the crowds would leave for home and forget.

But he remained, here in the ship—for ten, for twenty years.

Yes, he remained, but when would the vibration stop? The shuddering of the walls and floor about him was awful to endure; he and the experts had not counted on this problem. Tremors wrenched through his aching head. What if they didn't cease, if they endured through the entire voyage? How long could he keep from going mad?

He could think. Clayton lay on his bunk and remembered—reviewed every tiny detail of his life from birth to the present. And soon he had exhausted all memory in a pitifully short time. Then he felt the horrible throbbing all about him.

"I can exercise," he said aloud, and paced the floor; six steps forward, six back. And he tired of that. Sighing, Clayton went to the food-stores in the cabinet and downed his capsules. "I can't even spend any time eating," he wryly observed. "A swallow and it's over."

The throbbing erased the grin from his face. It was maddening. He lay down once more in the lurching bunk; switched on oxygen in the close air. He would sleep, then; sleep if this damned thrumming would permit. He endured the horrid clanking that groaned all through the silence; switching off the lights. His thoughts turned to his strange position; a prisoner in Space. Outside the burning planets wheeled, and stars whizzed in the inky blackness of spatial Nothingness. Here he lay safe and snug in a vibrating chamber; safe from the freezing cold. If only the awful jarring would stop!

Still, it had its compensations. There would be no newspapers on the voyage to torment him with accounts of man's inhumanity to man; no silly radio or television programs to annoy him. Only this cursed, omnipresent vibration . . .

Clayton slept, hurtling through Space.

IT was not daylight when he awoke.

There was no daylight and no night. There was simply himself and the ship in Space. And the vibration was steady, nerve-wracking in its insistent beating against the brain. Clayton's legs trembled as he reached the cabinet and ate his pills.

Then, he sat down and began to endure. A terrific feeling of loneliness was beginning to assail him. He was so utterly detached here—cut off from everything. There was nothing to do. It was worse than being a prisoner in solitary confinement; at least they have larger cells, the sight of the sun, a breath of fresh air, and the glimpse of an occasional face.

Clayton had thought himself a misanthrope, a recluse. Now he longed for the sight of another's face. As the hours passed he got queer ideas. He wanted to see Life, in some form—he would have given a fortune for the company of even an insect in his soaring dungeon. The sound of a human voice would be heaven. He was so *alone.*

Nothing to do but endure the jerking, pace the floor, eat his pills, try to sleep. Nothing to think about. Clayton began to long for the time when his nails needed cutting; he could stretch out the task for hours.

He examined his clothes intently, stared for hours in the little mirror at his face. He memorized his body, scrutinized every article in the cabin of the *Future.*

And still he was not tired enough to sleep again.

He had a throbbing headache constantly. At length he managed to close his eyes and drift off into another slumber, broken by shocks which startled him into waking.

When finally he arose and switched on the light, together with more oxygen, he made a horrible discovery.

He had lost his time-sense.[*]

“Time is relative,” they had always told him. Now he realized the truth. He had nothing to measure time by—no watch, no glimpse of the sun or moon or stars, and no regular activities. How long had he been on this voyage? Try as he might, he could not remember.

Had he eaten every six hours? Or every ten? Or every twenty? Had he slept once each day? Once every three or four days? How often had he walked the floor?

With no instruments to place himself he was at a total loss. He ate his pills in a bemused fashion, trying to think above the shuddering which filled his senses.

This was awful. If he lost track of Time he might soon lose consciousness of identity itself. He would go mad here in the space-ship as it plunged through the void to planets beyond. Alone, tormented in a tiny cell, he had to cling to something. What was Time?

He no longer wanted to think about it. He no longer wanted to think about anything. He had to forget the world he left, or memory would drive him frantic.

“I’m afraid,” he whispered. “Afraid of being alone in the darkness. I may have passed the moon. I may be a million miles away from Earth by now—or ten million.”

Then Clayton realized that he was talking to himself. That way was madness. But he couldn’t stop, any more than he could stop the horrible jarring vibration all around him.

“I’m afraid,” he whispered in a voice that sounded hollow in the tiny humming room. “I’m afraid. *What time is it?”*

He fell asleep, still whispering, and Time rushed on.

CLAYTON awoke with fresh courage. He had lost his grip, he reasoned. Outside pressure, however equalized, had affected his nerves. The oxygen might have made him giddy, and the pill diet was bad. But now the weakness had passed. He smiled, walked the floor.

Then the thoughts came again. What day was it? How many weeks since he had started? Maybe it was months already; a year, two years. Everything of Earth seemed far away; almost part of a dream. He now felt closer to Mars than to Earth; he began to anticipate now instead of looking back.

For a while everything had been mechanical. He switched light on and off when needed, ate pills by habit, paced the floor without thinking, unconsciously tended the air system, slept without knowing when or why.

Richard Clayton gradually forgot about his body and the surroundings. The lurching buzz in his brain became a part of him; an aching part which told that he was whizzing through Space in a silver bullet. But it meant nothing more, for Clayton no longer talked to himself. He forgot himself and dreamed only of Mars ahead. Every throb of the vessel hummed "Mars—Mars—Mars."

A wonderful thing happened. He landed. The ship nosed down, trembling. It eased gently onto the grassy sward of the red planet. For a long time Clayton had felt the pull of alien gravity, knew that automatic adjustments of his vessel were diminishing the atomic discharges and using the natural gravitational pull of Mars itself.

Now the ship landed, and Clayton had opened the door. He broke the seals and stepped out. He bounded lightly to the purple grass. His body felt free, buoyant. There was fresh air, and the sunlight seemed stronger, more intense, although clouds veiled the glowing globe.

Far away stood the forests, the green forests with the purple growth on the lushly-rearing trees. Clayton left the ship and approached the cool grove. The first tree had boughs that bent to the ground in two limbs.

Limbs—limbs they were! Two green arms reached out. Clawing branches grasped him and lifted him upward. Cold coils, slimy as a serpent’s, held him tightly as he was pressed against the dark tree-trunk. And now he was staring into the purple growths set in the leaves.

The purple growths were—*heads.*

Evil, purple faces stared at him with rotting eyes like dead toadstools. Each face was wrinkled like a purple cauliflower, but beneath the pulpy mass was a great mouth. Every purple face had a purple mouth and each purple mouth opened to drip blood. Now the tree-arms pressed him closer to the cold, writhing trunk, and one of the purple faces—a woman’s face—was moving up to kiss him.

The kiss of a vampire! Blood shone scarlet on the moving sensuous lips that bore down on his own. He struggled, but the limbs held him fast and the kiss came, cold as death. The icy flame of it seared through his being and his senses drowned.

Then Clayton awoke, and knew it was a dream. His body was bathed with moisture. It made him aware of his body. He tottered to the mirror.

A single glance sent him reeling back in horror. Was this too a part of his dream?

Gazing into the mirror, Clayton saw reflected the face of an aging man. The features were heavily bearded, and they were lined and wrinkled, the once puffy cheeks were sunken. The eyes were the worst—Clayton did not recognize his own eyes any more. Red and deep-set in bony sockets, they burned out in a wild stare of horror. He touched his face, saw the blue-veined hand rise in the mirror and run through graying hair.

Partial Time-sense returned. He had been here for years. Years I He was growing old!

Of course the unnatural life would age him more rapidly, but still a great interval must have passed. Clayton knew that he must soon reach the end of his journey. He wanted to reach it before he had any more dreams. From now on, sanity and physical reserve must battle against the unseen enemy of Time. He staggered back to his bunk, as trembling like a metallic flying monster, the *Future* rushed on in the blackness of interstellar Space.

THEY were hammering outside the vessel now; their iron arms were breaking in the door. The black metal monsters lumbered in with iron tread. Their stern, steel-cut faces were expressionless as they grasped Clayton on either side and pulled him out. Across the iron platform they dragged him, walking stiffly with clicking feet that clanged against the metal. The great steel shafts rose in silvery spires all about, and into the iron tower they took him. Up the stairs—clang, clang, clang pounded the great metal feet.

And the iron stairs wound round endlessly; yet still they toiled. Their faces were set, and iron does not sweat. They never tired, though Clayton was a panting wreck ere they reached the dome and threw him before the Presence in the tower room. The metallic voice buzzed, mechanically, like a broken phonograph record.

“We-found-him-in-a-bird-oh-Master.”

“He-is-made-of-soft-ness.”

“He-is-alive-in-some-strange-way.”

“An-an-im-al.”

And then the booming voice from the center of the tower floor.

“I hunger.”

Rising on an iron throne from the floor, the Master. Just a great iron trap, with steel jaws like those on a steam-shovel. The jaws clicked open, and the horrid teeth gleamed. A voice came from the depths.

“Feed me.”

They threw Clayton forward in iron arms, and he fell into the trap-jaws of the monster. The jaws closed, champing with relish on human flesh . . .

CLAYTON woke screaming. The mirror gleamed as his trembling hands found the light-switch. He stared into the face of an aging man with almost white hair. Clayton was growing old. And he wondered if his brain would hold out.

Eat pills, walk cabin, listen to the throbbing, put on air, lie on bunk. That was all, now. And the rest—waiting. Waiting in a humming torture-chamber, for hours, days, years, centuries, untold eons.

In every eon, a dream. He landed on Mars and the ghosts came coiling out of a gray fog. They were shapes in the fog, like slimy ectoplasm, and he saw through them. But they coiled and came, and their voices were faint whispers in his soul.

"Here is Life," they whispered. "We whose souls have crossed the Void in death have waited for Life to feast on. Let us take our feasting now."

And they smothered him under gray blankets, and sucked with gray, prickling mouths at his blood. . . .

Again he landed on the planet and there was nothing. Absolutely nothing. The ground was bare and it stretched off into horizons of nothingness. There was no sky nor sun, merely the ground; endless in all directions.

He set foot on it, cautiously. He sank down into nothingness. The nothingness was throbbing now, like the ship throbbed, and it was engulfing him. He was falling into a deep pit without sides, and the oblivion closed all about him . . .

Clayton dreamed this one standing up. He opened his eyes before the mirror. His legs were weak and he steadied himself with hands that shook with age. He looked at the face in the glass—the face of a man of seventy.

"God!" he muttered. It was his own voice—the first sound he had heard in how long? How many years? For how long had he heard nothing above the hellish vibrations of this ship? How far had the *Future* gone? He was old already.

A horrid thought bit into his brain. Perhaps something had gone wrong. Maybe the calculations were at fault and he was moving into Space too slowly. He might never reach Mars. Then again—and it was a dreadful possibility—he had passed Mars, missed the carefully charted orbit of the planet. Now he was plunging on into empty voids beyond.

He swallowed his pills and lay down in the bunk. He felt a little calmer now; he had to be. For the first time in ages he remembered Earth.

Suppose it had been destroyed? Invaded by war or pestilence or disease while he was gone? Or meteors had struck it, some dying star had flamed death upon it from maddened heavens. Ghastly notions assailed him—what if Invaders crossed Space to conquer Earth, just as he now crossed to Mars?

But no sense in worrying about *that.* The problem was reaching his own goal. Helpless, he had to wait; maintain life and sanity long enough to achieve his aims. In the vibrating horror of his cell, Clayton took a mighty resolve with all his waning strength. He *would* live, and when he landed he would see Mars. Whether or not he died on the long voyage home, he would exist until his goal was reached. He would fight against dreams from this moment on. No means of telling Time—only a long daze, and the humming of this infernal space-ship. But he'd live.

There were voices coming now, from outside the ship. Ghosts howled in the dark depths of Space. Visions of monsters and dreams of torment came, and Clayton repulsed them all. Every hour or day or year—he no longer knew which—Clayton managed to stagger to the mirror. And always it showed that he was aging rapidly. His snow-white hair and wrinkled countenance hinted at incredible senility. But Clayton lived. He was too old to think any longer, and too weary. He merely lived in the droning of the ship.

AT first he didn't realize. He was lying on his bunk and his rheumy eyes were closed in stupor. Suddenly he became aware that the lurching had stopped. Clayton knew he must be dreaming again. He drew himself up painfully, rubbed his eyes. No—the *Future* was still. It had *landed!*

He was trembling uncontrollably. Years of vibration had done this; years of isolation with only his crazed thoughts for company. He could scarcely stand.

But this was the moment. This was what he had waited for for ten long years. No, it must have been many more years. But he could see Mars. He had made it—done the impossible!

It was an inspiring thought. But somehow, Richard Clayton would have given it all up if he could only have learned what time it was, and heard it from a human voice.

He staggered to the door—the long-sealed door. There was a lever here.

His aged heart pumped with excitement as he pulled the lever upward. The door opened—sunlight crept through—air rushed in—the light made him blink and the air wheezed in his lungs—his feet were moving out—

Clayton fell forward into the arms of Jerry Chase.

Clayton didn't know it was Jerry Chase. He didn't know anything any longer. It had been too much.

CHASE was staring down at the feeble body in his arms.

"Where's Mr. Clayton?" he murmured. "Who are you?" He stared at the aged, wrinkled face.

"Why—it's Clayton!" he breathed. "Mr. Clayton, what's wrong sir? The atomic discharges failed when you started the ship, and all that happened was that they kept blasting. The ship never left the earth, but the violence of the discharges kept us from reaching you until now. We couldn't get to the *Future* until they stopped. Just a little while ago the ship finished shuddering, but we've been watching night and day. What happened to you, sir?"

The faded blue eyes of Richard Clayton opened. His mouth twitched as he faintly whispered.

"I—lost track of Time. How—how long was I in the *Future?"*

Jerry Chase's face was grave as he stared again at the old man and answered, softly.

"Just one week."

And as Richard Clayton's eyes glazed in death, the long voyage ended.

[*] Einstein has taught us that everything is relative, and time most of all has this peculiarity. We tell time by relative means, comparing the motion of one body in relation to another. In our case, the revolution of the earth on its axis, and around the sun provide us with a time sense. Remove this visible means of telling time, in improvised units, and its very meaning becomes unintelligible. In short, time becomes non-existent. We have nothing to compare. Thus, it was inevitable that Richard Clayton should lose his ability to tell what time it was, or even at what rate time was passing. Minutes seem hours to one who is trying mentally to compute time.—Ed.

Death Has FIve Guesses

What Frightening Force in Clinton's Brain Wove the Scarlet Pattern of His Mysterious Fate?

THE real horror lay in the fact that Harry Clinton was just an ordinary college boy. He sported a disreputable suede jacket, the left under-arm well-worn from the rubbing of the textbooks he carried. He was given to whistling popular song hits, and he owned most of the latest "swing" phonograph recordings. He drove a nondescript car, and worried about the price of gasoline. He played basketball on the second team, he liked ketchup on his hamburgers, he—oh well, he was an ordinary college boy, just one of thousands. And yet he knew grinning Fear.

Harry Clinton had gone to Western Tech for two years when Professor Bairn began his experiments. Like the other students in Psychology 4, Clinton participated in the initial trials. It was just a routine matter, nothing more.

Professor Bairn was interested in the Rhine Experiments—the Duke University studies in extra-sensory perception. He summarized his intentions to the Psych. 4 class briefly, at the outset.

The Rhine Experiments were an effort to determine the laws of Chance and their relation to human guesses.

"You've heard of hunches, and intuition, and telepathy," Bairn told his class the first day. "Well, here's your chance to find out what it's all about. I have here a pack of twenty-five playing-cards. They are special cards—five suits of five each. There are five stars, five circles, five squares, five sets of wavy lines, and five crosses. They are single black line figures on a white background, and these five were more or less chosen for their simplicity and their symbolic association with ordinary conscious and subconscious images.

"Is that clear enough? Five sets of cards; square, circle, cross, star wavy lines. I'll pass these sets out and allow you to examine them."

He did so, and Harry Clinton looked at the little cards with the rest. Professor Bairn continued: "The basic idea in using these cards is simple. The operator holds one of them up to the subject, with only the back visible. The subject closes his eyes, allows his mind to become a blank. Then he calls out the name of the first of the five symbols to cross his consciousness. He may actually seem to see a square, or a circle, or a star, as the case may be. Perhaps the operator and the subject are seated back to back, so that there is no possibility of facial expression or eye reflection on the part of the operator informing the subject, or giving him a hint."

THE class exhibited tepid interest, Clinton included.

"According to the experiments, the score of correct guesses in most cases is five. This seems natural enough, because if you were to go through the deck of twenty-five and call out 'star' each time you'd have to be right five times, since there are five cards in each of the five suits.

"But—and this is a very large 'but'—in the course of these experiments it was discovered that some students were able to guess perhaps ten or twelve cards correctly. Upon repeating the tests over a period of days, many achieved scores of fifteen or even twenty. Certain people seemed peculiarly apt guessers. While the scores of others varied from high to low, there were some who *persistently* turned in the same or nearly the same high score.

"This has led to the setting up of a theory of extra-sensory perception—an unknown quantity which may, or may not, account for certain people having the knacks in making hunches or foreseeing the future, or even for receiving telepathic communications.”

Harry Clinton was thinking about betting on football games.

“Certain students submitted to months of testing. It was discovered, then, that odd effects on their scoring ability could be brought about by getting them drunk; or by testing them when they were fatigued, or excited, or stimulated. Some of them scored higher when told they were making progress; others dropped woefully.

“It was ascertained that guessing ability has nothing to do, apparently, with the actual intelligence of a person.

“But—and this is important—the variance of reaction under differentiated forms of stimuli implied that there was a definite power affected—Rhine has chosen to call this power the power of extra-sensory perception. I believe that Professor Rhine has shown the way to opening up new frontiers of the human mind. And with your permission, I should like to call upon a few volunteers today.”

Clinton was one of the five chosen. He watched three others sit blindfolded in a chair while Professor Bairn held up the cards one by one and waited for them to call out a symbol. He sorted the cards into piles of correct and incorrect guesses.

Clinton noticed that the first subject, a girl, guessed very swiftly. The second hesitated often. The third went quite fast for a space, slowed down, and regained speed toward the end.

Clinton sat in the chair, placed the warm blindfold over his eyes, and began guessing.

“Square—circle—circle—star—square—curly line—star—cross—cross—curly line—cross—no, that’s a square—now a cross—circle—”

He felt queer. It was hardy his own voice droning. It was hardly his brain that saw in the darkness the rapid flickering images of circles and squares and stars and curly lines and crosses. Something directed him, made him speak. He completed the test in forty-two seconds.

BAIRN said nothing. He discoursed on individual peculiarities, mentioned how some guessers were fast, others slow, others erratic. He also intimated that memory, that is, the knowledge that one had already called "star" five times and consequently would not call it again during the same testing—might subconsciously influence the guessing.

"A real definitive score," he said, "can be obtained only after seven consecutive tests. Ah—Mr. Clinton, would you care to go through the pack again six times for the benefit of the class?"

Clinton agreed, sat down in the chair again.

The images came swiftly.

The period bell rang as the tests were concluded, and the students trooped out.

Bairn's bulky figure leaned close as Clinton rose and removed his bandages.

"Mr. Clinton, I'd like to have a word with you."

"Yes, Professor."

"Mr. Clinton, I should very much appreciate your working with me this semester on these tests. Your initial scores, I might say, are—ah, remarkably high. This might be a fluke, an accident; but any extraordinary ability should be cultivated. Of course, this will be credited to your regular work, you know."

"Why, sure. Why not? Say, what is my average, anyway?"

"Twenty-three, Mr. Clinton. An amazing twenty-three."

Clinton worked with Professor Bairn for months. The experiments broadened in their technique. New methods were employed. One night Bairn called Clinton on the phone and requested him to guess the cards over the wire. They worked in separate rooms for several days; worked with screens between them; worked in total darkness; conducted the tests with telegraph keys, and called the guesses in French and German. It made no difference; Clinton showed his remarkable aptitude throughout.

At first, for Clinton, it was a lark. Then it became a problem to wonder over. After a time it reached the stage of a competition, a battle of wits against the Unknown. And finally, during the third month, it was drudgery.

Bairn was writing a monograph on his work with Clinton. Although the professor endeavored to repress his enthusiasm, Clinton knew that he was highly pleased with the venture.

The extra-classroom nature of the studies kept Clinton very busy. Bairn’s demands on his time, and his insistence on undertaking tests at odd hours and under odder circumstances began after a while to annoy him.

There were days when Clinton went through the deck thirty times running. He grew sick of the symbols, exasperated. Even the surprisingly high percentage of totally correct scores no longer seemed a worthy goal to him. Despite all the work, he understood no more of his unusual power or ability than he had at the beginning. He merely closed his eyes and the pictures came; the five symbols loomed up almost automatically.

He tried guessing ordinary playing cards and failed miserably. He lost two dollars on the home team in a football game. He had no luck in guessing examination questions. Undoubtedly, this peculiar sixth sense was uncontrollable.

By the conclusion of the third month it was worse than that. He left his daily tests with headaches. He began to experience periods of moody irritability. Moreover, he had a tendency to forget trifles and details. A sort of mild amnesia seemed to steal over him at times, so that he was unable to account for his actions for half-hours at a time.

Usually, after his testing periods, he would have difficulty in concentrating on anything else for quite a while. The symbols stuck with him, and closing his eyes he would involuntarily conjure up images of crosses and stars and curly lines and squares and circles. They floated in his head, and when he opened his eyes again an hour had passed, somehow.

This got worse. Clinton told no one, for he himself did not quite know what was the matter. But in the middle of May he suddenly experienced an attack of amnesia which lasted for three days.

* * * * *

IT WAS so hard to think.

Harry Clinton—that *was* his name—had gone into a room and now his hands were around something soft.

He had done many things in the past three days and somehow he couldn't think just what they were. Or rather, a part of him didn't want to remember what they were. They had been bad things.

Was he at home, in the rooming-house, in his own bed? Was this all a nightmare?

No, it was real. He was standing with his hands around something soft, and three days had passed.

Three days of school, of study, of work. Why couldn't he remember them?

It was even hard to see. He felt as though his eyes were closed, as though he was taking the tests—guessing at the brightly-colored mental pictures of crosses, stars, curly lines, squares, and circles.

That was why he couldn't remember. It had something to do with the tests, and the way they had affected him lately.

He must think back now. For a week or so he had been taking forty turns through the deck a day. Professor Bairn had asked him to, as a final experiment to be written up for his almost completed monograph. Each day's testing had left him with a terrific headache.

More than that, he had been unable, lately, to shake off the recurring visions of the five symbols. He would leave the college and one or more of the symbols would come and stay in his brain. He would fall asleep thinking of the cross, and awake with the same thought static in his mind. That had caused his memory lapse. But where was he now?

He stared down again at his hands, and gasped as mists cleared.

He—Harry Clinton—remembered. He remembered that first evening, when he had thought he was going to be sick, and had stepped into the alley. He had leaned over the refuse-box as consciousness dissolved into a swirling mist. But now he could recall what happened.

He had leaned over the refuse-box, had gazed into it and seen what lay at the bottom. Two broken sticks lay there; probably torn from some packing-crate. They lay there, one atop the other—and they had formed a cross.

A cross. Clinton had picked them up—that is, his hands had done so. Clinton, himself, did not exist. There were only hands, and something guiding them which was not Clinton, or Clinton's brain—some alien force that felt drawn to the symbol of the cross. The hands picked up the sticks, fumbled about in the trash-box for a length of wire, bound the sticks into a permanent crucifix-shape. Then Clinton's body had walked down the narrow alley, and Clinton's eyes had kept looking at the base of the cross, where the stick was broken and ended in a jagged point. Clinton's eyes had gloated.

But Clinton himself had hated what he was doing because he did not understand, and hated the other part of consciousness which drove him to fashion a symbol he wished to forget; so that as he walked, he grew very angry. Every time he closed his eyes the cross was there, in his forehead.

It was burning up there, just the way it did when Clinton guessed the cards at school. Only there were no cards this time, and still the cross remained. The memory was haunting him, making him do absurd things like fashioning this wooden crucifix with the pointed end. If only Clinton could forget the cross! He closed his eyes quite tightly, lurching down the alley, wishing that the two crossed iron bars against his brain would go away. He must not see the cross—

Clinton opened his eyes and saw the man coming down the alley from the opposite direction. It was dark, but the moon was up, and he saw that the man wore black skirts. For a moment he feared he was delirious, and then he realized the truth. It was a priest. Coming near, he saw the moonlight pick out a glittering pattern on the priest's chest. A glittering pattern—of a cross.

The golden cross dangled, it swayed from side to side as the priest walked. The moon was cruelly bright, so that its rays made of the crucifix a blinding blur. Clinton looked and could not tear his eyes away. But he wanted to; he wanted to with all his soul. He did not want to do what he—

And then Clinton stepped over to the priest just as he passed, and from behind his back he drew the wooden crucifix with the pointed end, and drove the point straight into the priest's chest.

He walked away, his empty hands clutching at the air with a sort of joy born of the fact that they were empty; they no longer held the cross. There was joy in his mind, too, for it was empty of the symbol which, when normal, he so deeply respected, but which, in his dreamlike state of abnormality, obsessed him. No cross now, only that tingling emptiness—his whole brain was empty and free.

Harry Clinton went home and slept; slept gratefully without dreams. For he was empty, and when he awoke he had forgotten the night before with the cross and the priest.

In the class the next day when the cards were called Clinton scored only seven. Two squares had come, two circles, one curly line, and two stars. But no cross. Never, during the entire test, had he called out a cross or thought of one.

There were times when, his eyes closed, he had almost consciously tried to conjure up the vision of the cross in his mind. He had failed. He knew that there were five crossmarks in the pack of twenty-five, and yet in honesty he could not call aloud an image that he did not see.

This Clinton now remembered.

HE remembered the following day—the day he guessed the five stars correctly. It was the day of the astronomy lecture too. Had that affected him? He wondered.

He had called the five stars correctly. After leaving class the headache had come.

He walked through the cool streets of dusk, his feet moving automatically along unbidden paths. Thoughts refused to come. He stopped in at a drug store and bought some aspirin, then meandered along the streets again. He had not wanted to go to his room. He caught himself straining to hear the sound of cars passing, the conversation of others in the street. For some reason he was particularly anxious to be amidst noise and lights and people—anything that might arrest his attention and ease the ache in his temples; the ache that was all dull nothingness in which a bright star blazed.

Erratic footsteps followed his gregarious urge until he was moving along downtown. The welcome clangor of street-cars began to fade, and only constant blinking enabled him to keep his eyes open. Abnormal nictation seemed the sole salvation at the moment when now even sounds failed to hold his attention.

HATEFULLY he had entered the vaudeville theater, sunk into a loge seat, and willed himself to watch the final reels of the motion picture flashing across the screen. At the conclusion he experienced a nasty shock when the trademark of the producing company flickered into view with its crest of five stars. The theater was nearly deserted at supper-hour, and in the darkness Harry Clinton fought a losing battle with the five-pointed image that thrust itself again and again between his inner eyes and his outer vision of the screen.

The brassy orchestra heralded the stage show, and for a few minutes Clinton again knew peace.

But the star act—Clinton had winced when the master of ceremonies announced the turn as such—was the personal appearance of a movie queen.

The whole thing was madness. Movie *star*—she swept onto the stage against a background of a glittering silver-foil *star*. Garishly lighted, the five silver points gleamed painfully, and Clinton could not move his eyes away. The image mocked him, and the blonde girl before it, undulating about the stage in sequins, seemed a part of the star itself.

Clinton bit his hand to keep from screaming.

His mind groped for a thought—any thought to hold his attention, to swerve it from the thought which engulfed him. And in the darkness he lost.

He rose to his feet and started down the aisle before the act was over. No longer was he conscious, aware of thought or action. He passed the boxes and entered the passageway which led backstage. Some part of him was moving slowly, cautiously. All he saw was a great glittering star—a star which was emblazoned on his mind and which obtruded between any other image and reality. He must get rid of the star in his mind.

Cautiously he moved along the deserted backstage corridor. The act was over, the hallway momentarily deserted. He walked slowly down toward the door under the light, paused before it.

There was a gold star on the door of the dressing-room. Its five points were saw-teeth biting into his brain. He stared at it, then pushed the door open.

The blond girl was sitting at her dressing-table, eating. Clinton did not see her. He saw a star.

There was a heavy, blunt-ended mirror on the table. There was a large, sturdy walking-stick in the corner. Clinton did not see them. He saw a stage-property artificial mace in a wall-stand. Its head was studded with five-points. A star. Clinton ignored the other weapons. Walking slowly, he seized the mace as the door closed behind him.

The girl turned around. Clinton saw the star burn brighter. She rose, said something. Clinton saw the star move closer. It was close enough to reach now. Some part of him held the mace. And then dream fused with reality as he brought the mace down. One, two, three, four, five times—each time a point fell away from the core of torment in his brain. Then there was only a blur that became red; red as the pool on the floor where something lay.

Clinton turned, opened the door, walked out back through the passage and resumed his seat in the theater. He must have fallen asleep, for when he awoke the last show was over, and the house-lights were going up.

He did not remember how he had come to this place, or what he had done here. And he did not think about stars.

The next day in class he had refused to take the test, telling Professor Bairn that he was indisposed. At the time he did not know any reason for doing so, except that he felt vaguely tired and incapable of effort.

He asked to be excused early and went home. He did not even read the papers; had he done so he might have seen the accounts of the mysterious death of Father Pornelski who had been murdered by an unknown religious fanatic two days before. He could have read of a second murder which was already making national headlines; the strange death of a well-known motion picture actress.

HARRY CLINTON was oblivious to all; he only knew that he felt tired, and quite unaccountably he did not wish to continue with the extra-sensory perception experiments. They had given him these recent headaches and peculiar lapses of memory, he felt sure. Today he was glad that his mind was free. Once in his room he lay back in the windowless gray and almost revelled in the blankness of his brain.

Funny—since taking up these psych, experiments, he'd thought a hell of a lot about his own mind. Before that he had never even known he had one. Oh, well. It was pleasant and soothing here. Closing his eyes he watched the two dancing lines of parallel curlicues—two gray curly lines wriggling before his naked brain. Two curly lines. What did they remind him of?

Sally.

Of course, Sally. Sally's curly hair. He sure was forgetful these days—why, he hadn't seen Sally for over a week. Mrs. Johnson, the landlady, had left a note under his door three days ago saying that Sally had called the night he was out somewhere, walking off his headache. The poor kid; she was worrying about him! Why had he neglected her that way?

NOW that he thought of it—thought of gray lines—he could not stop. This psych, stuff was sure developing his concentration, all right. It seemed as though he just had to go and see Sally. She would be home now, Thursday afternoon. Her biology lab. period was over at eleven on Thursdays. He must drop in and surprise her. He had to surprise Sally. Sally with the curly yellow hair. Two curls in back. Long golden curls. Old-fashioned girl. Curls.

He was already walking down the street, turning up. A light misty rain was falling, and glancing into the street Clinton noticed the tread-markings caused by the tires of a skidding car. They left two curly lines. He was going to see Sally.

One block more. The curly lines. They got mixed up with his thoughts of Sally. Two golden caterpillars on her neck. On her white neck. Two curly lines.

Ring the bell. No one in? Open the door, her room is in front.

Curly fringes on the carpet beneath his feet. Curly fingers knocking on the door. Curly lines of two red lips to kiss.

“Oh Harry—where have you been. I’ve worried so—”

Curls. On her neck. Think about Sally, not the curls.

“What are you staring at? You look—funny.”

Must feel the curls. Don’t want to, but must. Can’t think until they are felt.

Can’t think at all. . . .

It was only after touching the curls that Harry Clinton did begin to think. It was then that he remembered everything—the death of the priest, and the star, and the obsessive mingling of Sally and the curly lines. Clinton thought of all these things because he had been shocked into doing so—shocked by gazing down at his own hands clutching Sally’s curls! Sally’s curls which his hands had wound about her neck and tightly pressed to strangle her to death!

Clinton knew then. Even as he ran through the streets he knew. He could think only too clearly now. He was in the grip of some obsession concerning the five symbols on the extra-sensory perception cards. The strain of guessing those symbols with closed eyes, day after day for months, in a variety of experiments; his facility in conjuring up the proper mental images—these things had induced some abnormal condition whereby one or more of the symbols now came to his mind without conscious effort to recall any. It was sheer habit to think of a star, a cross, a curly line, a square, or a circle.

Telepathy—what was it? What peculiar force in the brain aided him in his guessing? Was it a psychic power, or an alien intelligence prompting him?

Whatever the cause, the matter had passed all controllable bounds. He was helpless to fend off the power of the symbols; for symbols they had become.

When preyed upon by the recurring image of the cross, he had encountered the priest, and some part of his brain had identified the holy man with the cause of his torment. He had killed the priest to erase from his mind the cross symbol. And had not instinct guided him to choose a symbolic weapon?

In the vaudeville theater he had seen the star. Out of several weapons in her dressing-room he was prompted by the symbolism of the mace-head.

Was he actually guilty of such crimes? Or was he a dual personality? Some subconscious murdering impulse had guided him very cunningly in the execution of his killings. Was he insane?

He must have been, to kill Sally. Good God, he had killed her! That was why he was running. No one had seen him. Her curly hair, two curly lines on her neck, writhing through his brain—he was forced to erase the crawling curly lines from memory. Symbolically, he did so with her death.

That was another thing. He had not taken the test. Merely thinking of Sally, this last time, had caused identification. And there was still the circle and the square to go. Would he murder two images of transference because of them?

He panted with exhaustion, lying on the bed in his room. Would he murder two more? What could he do to prevent it?

HAD to drop psych. That was certain. And keep from anything which might even vaguely be associated with the last two symbols. He could not, he fancied, play poker any more with the three boys down the hall. They sat at a square table, and there were four of them. It might suggest the square. Or the chips might suggest the circle. A fat man could evoke the circle image. Or even the phrase, “a square-shooter,” applied to some man, was liable to set him off.

Yet he needed a square-shooter. He had to tell someone about this. That was the way they did it in psychiatry, wasn’t it? The old idea of the confessional. Whom could he trust? Whom could he tell? He would state the case hypothetically, of course, and get the dope straight. But whom?

Professor Bairn. Yes, Bairn was the logical man. He knew about all this. Clinton would have to see him to drop the class, anyway. And perhaps Bairn knew of a way out.

There had to be a way out, at once. Murders could not continue. He was going crazy. It was all insane, and at any minute the torturing images might recur to blot out all thought and sanity.

Why not go now?

Clinton rose and walked swiftly out of the room, out of the house, down the street to the Campus Square.

It was four o’clock.

He had murdered Sally at two-thirty.

It was an absurd thought. An hour and a half ago he had murdered a woman. Now he was going to—what was he going to do? Oh yes, see Bairn. Good old Bairn. He would know a way to help. His classes were over, he’d be working in his office.

The wide office door loomed before him. It was very wide. Almost square.

Clinton walked in. Bairn was sitting at the desk, his square shoulders hunched over—

Oh no. Mustn’t think of squares.

“Hello, Professor.”

Don’t think about the square jaw.

“I wanted to talk to you.”

Think of something else, quick. What’s he doing? Ob yes, he has the cards out on the desk. Why—the cards are square!

“Your cards are square, Professor.”

WHAT was he saying? *The cards are square.* Professor Bairn’s cards are square. Professor Bairn taught me to think of squares. Professor Bairn will play square with me. Professor Bairn is a square.

“What’s the matter? Don’t be afraid, Professor.”

Professor Square—no, Bairn—he’s afraid. He’s backing away. What do I look like? What am I doing? He’s backing up to the window. The window, think of the window, for God’s sake, think of anything but Professor Bairn is a square. Think of the window.

The window is square.

Bairn is backed against the open square window.

Square against square.

Square accounts.

“Professor, I—”

He’s falling. Twisting around. Twisting—why he isn’t square any more. He’s all crumpled.

Well. That was easy. It’s gone. Simple. Now, to get rid of that damned circle.

Clinton was almost happy as he slipped out the side entrance. He walked slowly back to the rooming-house, even listened to the newsboy on the corner of Hale and Jefferson shouting about the “Extra! Reedalla bouta moider! Collichgoilfoundead! Extraaah!”

He didn’t buy a paper. He knew all about the murder. He knew all about lots of murders. But what worried him was that he didn’t know about the next murder.

There had to be one. There simply had to be one. He must get rid of the circle. Then he'd be all right again. Somehow he realized that these things were not right, but it was all necessary. A man couldn't live when his brain was on fire with incomprehensible images. This peculiar power of his—this psychic power of guessing correctly—it was somehow alien, and evil.

Poor old Bairn; had he actually realized the full extent of the forces he had tampered with? There was certainly a lot to it he hadn't suspected. Must have had his suspicions though, when he went out the window. Perhaps he knew now.

This stuff was all from across the Border. Clinton didn't know and couldn't control it. Funny idea. Suppose this was really some "extrasensory perception" of his, this guessing faculty he'd developed. Suppose it were, and that it was not meant for men. Something or some one might guard it. Or perhaps this faculty merely opened up a new part of the mind in such a way that the old mind was unable to govern or control the actions of its augmented self?

There was dark stuff here, and Clinton didn't want to tamper with it. Do the murder, get rid of the last image, forget about it all—erase the circle and be free.

Whom to sacrifice?

The moonfaced husband of Mrs. Johnson, the landlady? Rogers, the kid with the shaved head and the round skull?

The circle is the symbol of infinity, eternity. All life is a circle. Curved space. Curved existence. Round. Round and black.

Up the stairs, around to the room.

Think deliberately of the circle, so that it may provide a key to the way out. Release the brain.

This would be a planned, deliberate murder. Why not? There was a gun in the drawer. A gun.

Clinton took out the gun, filled it with round cartridges, gazed down the round hole in the muzzle.

He was trying hard to think of the person he meant to kill, and strangely no thought came; although by this time he could see the circle quite plainly in his mind, and for the first time he actually rejoiced in the pain. The blazing circle coruscated, swirling round and round and round as he looked down the dark round muzzle of the gun.

It was then that he heard the sounds from below, and the tramp of footsteps on the stairs.

Sluggishly he realized the truth. They were coming for him. After all, four murders—he was in a daze, must have left many clues. They were coming for him now.

But they couldn't come. They couldn't lock him up now. Not now, when the circle was squeezing tightly around his brain. He must get rid of the circle first, find peace. Because they would shut him away for the rest of his life in a madhouse, and he couldn't stand it there with nothing but the thought of the circle. They were coming up the stairs.

Who? What? Clinton rose and stepped forward wildly, gun in hand. The circle of his room.

Something bright arrested his attention. Something bright, and round like the circle in his head. He tried to see it. Yes. Yes. He could see it. It was the mirror—the silver circle of the mirror over his bureau. He stared into it.

In the silver circle he saw himself—his own round head.

The knocking on the door came.

But Clinton stared into the silver circle at his own round head. Clinton stared into the dark circle of the gun-muzzle. He put the round muzzle to his round head and looked into the round mirror as though for confirmation.

Yes, it was right.

"Open in the name of the law."

He had found the fifth symbol. It was the circle of life—back to himself. He was the last symbol. Once he erased that he could find peace.

Harry Clinton sent a circular bullet into his circular brain.

Whatever the source of his extrasensory perception, he had guessed right at the end.

A Question of Identity

No Pang of Hunger nor Torment of Thirst Can Stifle the Questions of Who, Where and What!

MY LIMBS were lead. My heart was a great coiled clock that throbbed rather than ticked, ever so slowly. My lungs were metal sponges, my head a bronze bowl filled with molted lava that moved like sluggish quicksilver, back and forth, in burning waves. Back and forth—consciousness and unconsciousness interplaying against a background of slow, dark pain.

I felt just that, nothing more. I had a heart, lungs, body, head—but I felt nothing external; that is, my body did not *impinge* on anything. I was not sitting or standing or walking or lying or doing anything that I could feel. I was just heart, lungs, body, head alone in darkness that was filled with the pulsing of a muted agony. This was myself.

But who was *I?*

The thought came; the first real thought, for before that had been only an awareness of being. Now I wondered as to the nature of my being. Who was I?

I was a man.

The word *man* aroused certain associations which struggled through the pain, through the thumping heart and gasping lung sensation. If I was a man, what was I doing? Where was I?

AS IF in response to the thought, awareness increased. I had a body, and therefore I possessed hands, ears, eyes. I must try to feel, hear, see.

But I could not. My arms were lumps of immovable iron. My ears knew only the sound of silence and the throbbing that came from within my tortured body. My eyes were sealed by the leaden weight of enormous eyelids. This I knew, and felt panic.

What had happened? What was wrong with me? Why couldn’t I feel and hear and see?

I had been in an accident, and I was lying on a hospital bed under ether. That was one explanation. Perhaps I had been crippled; blinded, deafened, maimed. Only my soul existed faintly, like a whispering that rustles through the ruins of an old, old house.

But what accident? Where had I been before this? I must have lived. What was my name?

I resigned myself to the darkness as I strove to grapple with these problems, and the darkness was kind. My body and the darkness seemed to be equally detached so that they mingled. It was peaceful—too peaceful for the thoughts that throbbed through my brain. The thoughts fought and clamored and finally screamed, until I felt myself awaken.

It was the sensation, I vaguely recalled, of finding one’s foot “asleep.” It spread over my body, so that a pleasant tingling made me aware, bit by bit, of having definite arms and hands, definite chest and pelvis, definite legs and feet.

Their outlines *emerged,* and were defined by that tingling. A burring droned in my spine, as though a dentist’s drill had bit into it. Simultaneously I became aware that my heart was a Congo drum within my chest, my lungs great gourds swelling and sinking in frantic rhythm. I exulted in the pain, for through it I felt myself. That sensation of detachment faded, and I knew that I—complete, intact—lay against softness.

But where?

That was the next question, and sudden energy seemed ready to solve it. My eyes opened. They encountered nothing but a continuation of the blackness which lurks behind the curtains of closed lids. If anything, the blackness was deeper, richer. I could see nothing of myself, and yet my eyes were open. Was I blind?

My ears still heard no sound other than the mysterious inspiration of my own breath.

My hands moved ever so slowly at my sides, rustling against cloth which told me that my limbs were clothed, and yet unblanketed. They moved upward, outward. An inch, two inches, three—and then they encountered hard, unyielding surfaces on either side. They rose upward, prompted by fear. Six inches, and another unyielding surface of wood. My feet thrust out as I stretched, and through shoe-leather the tips of my toes encountered wood. My mouth opened, and a sound poured forth. It was only a rattle, though I had meant to scream.

For my thoughts whirled around one name—one name that somehow groped through a haze and loomed as the symbol of my unreasoning fear. I knew a name, and I wanted to scream.

Edgar Allan Poe.

And then my rattling voice whispered, unprompted, that which I so feared in connection with this name.

"The Premature Burial," I whispered. "Poe wrote it. I am—living it!"

I was in a coffin, in a wooden coffin, with the hot stale air of my own corruption reeking in my nostrils, burning in my lungs. I was in a coffin, locked in earth, and yet I was alive.

Then I found strength. My hands had been frantically scratching and clawing at the surface above my head. Now they gripped the sides of my prison and thrust outward with all strength, my legs braced at the foot of the box. My legs, then, kicked. New vigor, the vigor of a madman, rushed through my boiling blood. In sheer frenzy, in an agony born of the fact that I could not scream and give expression to it, I lashed out with both feet at the bottom of the coffin, felt it splinter and give way.

Then the sides cracked, my bleeding fingers clutched at the earth beyond, and I rolled over, burrowing and scrabbling at the moist, soft-packed earth. I dug upwards, wheezing in a sort of mindless desperation as I worked. Instinct alone combatted the insane horror which gripped my being and transformed it into the activity which alone could save me.

They must have buried me in a hurry. The earth above my grave was shallow. Choking and half suffocated, I clawed my way to the top after endless eons of utter delirium during which the dust of the grave covered me and I wriggled like a worm through the dark ground. My hands reached up to form a cavity; then I lunged upward with full strength and burst through to the surface.

I crawled out into silvery moonlight flooding down upon a world of marble toadstools which sprouted richly from the mounds of grass all about me. Some of the fantastic stone growths were cross-shaped, others bore heads or great urnlike mouths. They were the headstones of graves, naturally, but I saw only toadstools—fat, bloated toadstools of dead-white pallor, reaching unthinkable roots into the ground below to draw forth nourishment.

I lay staring at them, staring back at the pit through which I had come up out of death into life once again. I did not, could not, think. The words "Edgar Allan Poe," and "Premature Burial" had come unbidden to my brain, and now for some reason I found myself whispering in a hoarse, dreadful voice, then crooning more loudly, "Lazarus. Lazarus. Lazarus."

GRADUALLY my panting subsided, and I drew fresh strength from the air that sang through my lungs. I stared at the grave again—my grave. It bore no headstone. It was a poor grave, in a poor section of the cemetery; probably a Potter's Field. Nearly on the outskirts of the necropolis it was, and weeds writhed over the poor graves. There was no headstones, and it made me remember my question.

Who was I? It was a unique problem. I had been someone before I died, but who? Surely this was a novel case of amnesia; to return to a new life in the actual sense of the phrase. Who was I?

Funny I could think of words like “amnesia” and yet could not in the least associate them with anything personal in my past. My mind was utterly blank. Did death do this to me?

Was it permanent, or would my mind awaken in a few hours, just as my body had? If not I was in sore straits. I didn’t know my name, or my station, what I had been. For that matter, on reflection, I didn’t even know where I was. The names of cities flooded foolishly through my brain. Chicago, Milwaukee, Los Angeles, Washington, Bombay, Shanghai, Cleveland, Chichen Itza, Pernambuco, Angkor Wat, Rome, Omsk, Carthage. I could not associate a single one with myself, or for that matter, explain how I knew those names.

I thought of streets, of Mariposa Boulevard and Michigan Avenue and Broadway and Center Street and Park Lane and the Champs Elysees. They meant nothing to me.

I thought of proper names. Felix Kennaston, Ben Blue, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Studs Lonigan, Arthur Gordon Pym, James Gordon Bennett, Samuel Butler, Igor Stravinsky—and they represented no image of myself.

I could see all those streets, visualize all those people, picture all those cities; but myself I could not associate with any of them.

Comedy, tragedy, drama; it was a mad scene to play in a cemetery at nightfall. I had crawled out of a grave without a headstone, and all I know was that I was a man. And yet who?

My eyes roved over my person, lying in the grass. Beneath mud and dirt I saw a dark suit, torn in places, and discolored. It covered the body of a tall man; a thin body, poorly muscled and flat-chested. My hands, rustling over my person, were long and leanly muscular; they were not the hands of a labourer. Of my face I knew nothing, though I passed my hand over each feature in turn. One thing I felt certain of: whatever the cause of my apparent “death,” I was not physically maimed.

STRENGTH prompted me to rise. I rose to my feet, stumbled over the grass. For a few minutes I had that drunken floating sensation, but gradually the ground became solid under my feet, I knew awareness of the cool night wind on my forehead, heard with indescribable joy the chirping of crickets from a swamp afar. I walked around the tombstones, gazed at the clouding sky, felt dew and dampness fall.

But my brain was aloof, detached, wrestling with invisible demons of doubt. Who was I? What was I to do? I could not wander strange streets in my disheveled condition. If I presented myself to authorities I would be put away as a madman. Besides, I did not want to see anyone. This fact I realized quite suddenly.

I did not wish to see lights, or people. I was—different.

It was the feeling of death. Was I still—?

Unable to bear the thought, I frantically groped for clues. I tried every means of awakening dormant memories. Walking endlessly the night through, combatting chaos and confusion, fighting the gray clouds that clung to my brain, I wandered up and down the deserted corner of the cemetery.

Exhausted I stared at a lightened sky. And then my thoughts fled away, even the confused ones. I knew only one thing—the need for rest, and peace, and forgetfulness. *Was it the death-urge? Had I risen from the grave only to return?*

I neither knew nor cared. Actuated by a compulsion as inexplicable as it was overpowering, I stumbled toward the ruins of my grave and crept inside, burrowing like a mole into the grateful darkness, whilst the earth tumbled in behind me. There was enough air, the thought came, to enable me to breathe while I lay back in the shattered coffin.

My head fell back and I settled in my coffin, to sleep. . . .

The muttering and rumbling died away from dreams I could not remember. They died away from dreams and grew in reality until I sat up, pushing wet earth so that it fell around me. I was in the grave!

Again, terror. Somehow the hope had lurked that this was a dream, and awakening might bring me to grateful reality. But I was in the grave, and a storm howled above. I crawled upward.

It was still night—or rather, instinct prompted me to believe that it was night again. I must have slept the clock around. This storm had kept people from the graveyard, kept them from discovering the torn earth and its inmate. I rose to the surface and the rain lashed me from skies wild with anger.

And yet I was happy; happy for the life I knew. I drank the rain; the thunder enraptured me as though it were a symphony; I marvelled at the lightning's emerald beauty. I was alive!

All about me corpses rotted and sloughed, nor could all the fury of the unleashed elements imbue them with one spark of existence or of memory. My own poor thoughts, my own poor life, were infinitely precious in comparison to the lot of those below. I had cheated worm and maggot; let the storm howl! I would howl with it, share in the cosmic jest.

Vitalized in the truest sense of the word, I began to walk. The rain washed the earth-stains from my garments and body. Singularly, I felt no cold, no especial dampness. I was aware of these things, but they did not seem to penetrate. For the first time I realized another odd thing; I was not hungry or thirsty. At least I did not seem to be. Had appetite died with memory? I wondered.

Memory—the problem of identity still pressed. I walked along, impelled by the storm. Still pondering, my feet carried me past the confines of the cemetery. The gale leading me seemed to guide my footsteps out onto the stone sidewalk of a deserted street. I walked, almost without heeding.

Who was I? How had I died? How revived?

I walked through the rain, down the dark street, alone in the wet velvet of the night.

Who was I? How had I died? How revived?

I crossed a block, entered a narrower street, still stumbling alone with the wind and the laugh of thunder from clouds mocking my bewilderment.

Who was—

I knew. My name—the street told me. Summit Street. Who lived on Summit Street? Arthur Derwin, myself. I was Arthur Derwin, of Summit Street. I used to be—something, I couldn't remember. I had lived, lived for years, and yet all I could recall was my name.

How had I died?

I had been to the seance, and the lights were out, and Mrs. Price was calling to someone. She had screamed something about evil influences, and then the lights had gone on.

They hadn't gone on.

But they *must* have.

They had, but *I* wasn't there.

I had died. Died in the darkness at the seance. What killed me? Shock, perhaps? And then what happened? Mrs. Price had hushed it up. I was alone in the city; I had been buried hurriedly, in a pauper's grave. "Heart failure," the coroner had probably called it. I was laid away. That was it. And yet I was Arthur Derwin, and surely somebody had cared.

Bramin Street said the sign in the lightning.

Bramin Street—someone had cared—Viola.

Viola had been my fiancée. She had loved Arthur Derwin. What was her last name? Where had I met her? What did she look like?

Bramin Street.

Again the sign. Unconsciously my feet seemed to have led me down this way. I was walking down Bramin Street without thinking in the storm.

Very well. I would let my feet lead the way. I wouldn't think. My feet would take me to Viola's home through habit. There I would learn. No thinking, now. Just walk through the storm.

I WALKED, my eyes closed to the blackness through which thunder beat. I walked out of death, and I was hungry now. I was hungry and thirsty here in the night, and I was hungry to see Viola and thirsty for her lips. I had come back from death for her—or was that too poetic?

I came from the grave and went back to sleep in it and rose again and sought the world without memory. It was gruesome and grim and macabre. I died at a seance.

My feet plodded, slopping through rain. I felt no cold, no wet. I was warm inside, warm with the memory of Viola, her lips, her hair. She was a blonde, I remembered. Her hair was coiled sunlight, her eyes blue and deep as the sea, her skin the milky whiteness of a unicorn's flanks. I had told her so, I recalled, when I had held her in my arms. I knew her mouth as a scarlet gate to ecstasy. She was the hunger within me, she the burning beacon of desire that led me back through mists of memory to her door.

I was panting, and did not know it. Within me revolved a wheel that had once been my brain and was now just a grinding round screen flashing kaleidoscopic images of Viola, of the grave, of a seance and evil presences and inexplicable death. Viola had been interested in mysticism, I had been interested in the occult. We went to the seance. Mrs. Price was a famous medium. I died at the seance and woke up in a grave. I came back to see Viola. I came back to find out about myself. I knew now what I was, how I had died. But how revived?

But how revived? Bramin Street. Feet plodding.

And then instinct turned my feet up the pathway to the porch. It was instinct which caused my hand to fumble for the familiar door-knob without knocking, instinct which led me across the threshold.

I STOOD in a hallway, a deserted hallway. There was a mirror there, and for the first time I could see myself. Perhaps that would shock me into complete remembrance and recognition. I looked, but the mirror faded before my gaze into a blur. I felt weak, dazed. But it was due to the hunger within me; the hunger which burned. It was late. Viola wouldn't be downstairs. She would be in her bedroom at this hour.

I went up the stairs, dripping water at every step, walking quite silently aside from the little dripping patter of rills running down to the stair below.

All at once giddiness left me again and I felt strong. I had the feeling that I was ascending the stairs to Destiny; as though once I reached the top I would know the truth of my fate.

Something had brought me from the grave here. Something lay behind this mysterious resurrection. The answer lay above.

I reached the top, turned down the dark, familiar hall. The bedroom door opened beneath my hand. A candle burned at the bedside, nothing more. And I saw Viola lying there. She slept, incarnate beauty, slept. She was very young and lovely at that moment, and I felt pity for her at what she must know upon awakening. I called softly.

"Viola."

I called softly, and while I did so my brain said the last of the three questions over and over.

"And how revived?" said my brain. "Viola!" called my voice.

She opened her eyes, allowed life to flood them. She saw me.

"Arthur—" she gasped. "You're dead!" It was a scream, that last?

"Yes," I said softly.

Why did I say "Yes" ? I wondered. And my brain whispered, "And how revived?"

She rose up, shuddering. "You're dead—a ghost. We buried you. Mrs. Price was afraid. You died at the seance. Go away, Arthur—you're dead!"

She moaned it over and over. I looked at her beauty and knew hunger. A thousand memories of that last evening came to me. The seance, and Mrs. Price warning of evil spirits; the coldness which had gripped me in the darkness and my sudden sinking into oblivion. Then this wakening, and my search for Viola to appease my hunger.

Not for food. Not for drink. Not for love. A new hunger. A new hunger known only at night. A new hunger that made me shun men and forget my former self. A new hunger that hated mirrors.

A hunger—for Viola.

I moved toward her very slowly, and my wet grave-clothes rustled as I reached out my hands reassuringly and took her in my arms. I was sorry for her just for an instant; then the hunger came stronger and I bent my head.

The last question rang in my brain once again. “And how revived?” The seance, the threat of evil spirits, answered that question. I answered it myself.

I knew why I had risen from the grave, and who and what I was, as I took Viola in my arms. I took Viola in my arms, and my teeth met in her throat. That answered the question.

I was a Vampire.

The Bottomless Pool

What the Fisher, What the Bait—? Martin Aylethorp Plumbs the Depths!

IT WOULD be stupid of me to write this with the intention of saving my life. Of course I shall be threatened with a murder charge, but they shall never be able to produce the body. Consequently they must eventually set me free.

But there is a possibility that I may be held for a sanity hearing. For that reason I must pen this account, and attach it to the other papers. It may serve to convince the officials at the investigation. And those officials *must* be convinced.

They must be convinced, because there is a deed which they must do. It is imperative that they heed my plea and board up the bottomless pool in the swamp beyond Prichard's Woods. They must board up the pool and drain the bog-land; fence it off if they cannot destroy it. Otherwise there will be further tragedies—this I swear is true. And until that black pool is boarded over I shall never find the solace of sound sleep, but will continue to dream of that thing in the swamp—the dark thing that took the life of my friend, Martin Aylethorp.

There was a time when I knew peace. That's the mockery. My friend Martin had been in a "slump period"—he wrote for a living—and I invited him East for the sole reason that I thought we'd find a soothing tranquillity at my home.

My cottage is near Mill Brook, just outside of Concord. Martin, I reasoned, would enjoy tramping in Prichard's Woods, and in the fall the New England countryside takes on a mellow beauty most conducive to easing shattered nerves.

AS I recall my preparation for his coming, it seems like a grim joke. I was so careful in rigging up his room to insure its quiet—I even sent into town for a noiseless portable to replace my regular typewriter.

For when Martin arrived in late August he was a sick man. His tall, normally lean figure was now emaciated; his eyes were sunken behind his spectacles, and the smile I had remembered as habitual upon his countenance seemed drowned by inward melancholy. He smoked too much, and when he held a cigarette the gray spirals rose from the tip unevenly because of the trembling of his hand.

I did my best to conceal my concern over his changed appearance. He had been working on a novel and trying to hold down a librarian's job during the day. I gathered that he was completely done in, and had lately found is impossible to continue with his short story work. It is amazing what creative effort can do to a man of Martin's peculiar temperament. He was drained dry—sucked of all vitality as though his nights had been given over to visits from a vampire or succubus, rather than writing.

It isn't a bad comparison, for Martin Aylethorp wrote weird fiction. He wrote it intensely; and it was his theory, not mine, that writing fantasy took more out of an author than work in any other field. His own person certainly seemed to be good proof of this contention.

I did my best for him. I carefully avoided all topics of conversation which might relate to his work. I did not show him any of my recent stuff. I locked away all my reference books and magazines. And I did not allow him to speak of his book.

I coaxed him into resting, argued and bullied him with the notion of getting outdoor exercise interspersed with plenty of sleep. After a week or so I gradually augented the menu at meal time and encouraged him to eat.

It worked. By the time September had passed, he had regained his normal attitude, and his health was once more back to par. Incidentally, I myself had gained six pounds.

Soon I proposed a series of daily hikes in and about the local woods. Martin took to the idea, and for the first time I learned that as a boy he had often spent the summer with relatives in Concord. He seemed eager, as his health improved, to re-visit familiar landmarks. Although I had been at my cottage for over a year, I was amazed at the unsuspected secrets of the countryside he uncovered. Soon he was acting as my guide and I played the meekly following visitor to local shrines.

As his physical well-being increased, his normal interests were correspondingly re-aroused. Within several weeks he was talking stories and plots to me again, and by the end of the month he was literally champing at the bit, eager to get back into harness and do a few tales. Although I held out as long as I could, he insisted that he be allowed the use of my typewriter, and our daily jaunts were now filled with his talk of proposed work and plans for stories.

And then our hikes and his interest converged—disastrously.

One morning after breakfast he came into my room and yanked me out of my chair.

“Come on,” he urged. “The sun’s high and we’re going for a little exploring jaunt.”

“Where to?” I asked. “Haven’t we covered all the local show-places yet?”

“This is no show-place,” he replied, smiling. “It’s a secret. I’ll wager there’s a spot you’ve never seen, and only a mile away from here, too.”

“I doubt that,” I said. “What kind of place is it?”

Martin assumed a look of melodramatic grimness.

“It’s called ‘The Bottomless Pool’,” he whispered.

“What’s the gag?”

"I'm serious. It's in the swamp south of Prichard's Woods. I remember my gang explored it during one of the summers I stayed here as a kid. It's a strange place—George Graves warned us to stay away from it when we told him we'd been there. He was the only grown-up we ever spoke to about it, and it was he who called the place 'The Bottomless Pool.'

"He mentioned Walden Pond in Concord—the place where Thoreau wrote his nature studies, you know—and said that it was bottomless, too. It lies in a hollow in the hills; has neither inlet nor outlet, yet the water is always fresh. Springs and a subterranean river cause that, no doubt; the glacier created some queer freaks hereabouts. But he said that Government engineers once came to Walden to take soundings, and there were spots in that pond that were deeper than their longest sounding-wires. That's what he meant by a 'bottomless' pool, and he said that the one in Prichard's Woods was similar.

"Well, his warning just whetted our interest in the spot, you see. Kids are like that, I guess. We got together all the fishline the gang could lay their hands on and tied it all together with a lead weight on one end. Then we lowered it down into that sluggish black pool in the swamp.

"We never struck bottom! Well, that sort of scared us—it's a creepy place—and we took the warning more seriously.

"I never have gone back. That was my last summer at Concord—and I gradually lost track of the boys. But I did hear something in a letter once about Sam Dewey disappearing in the swamp the following year. Sam was the lad who suggested we take soundings. Of course I don't think his disappearance had anything to do with his interest in the Bottomless Pool; although it might have at that. He was foolhardy and George Graves, when warning us, hinted something about people who had fallen in."

I listened to all this with a sort of tepid interest. But Martin seemed genuinely enthusiastic.

"Let's go take a look at the place," he urged. "It's really a weird spot, and I've got a hunch there's a story there somewhere."

I rose and obediently put on my boots. In my own solitary wanderings I had avoided the mucky, wooded depths of the old swamp, and it was only to humor my guest that I acceded to his request We struck out to the south and soon reached the swamp edge.

THE swamp was awful. The limbs of dead trees interred the sunlight, and only the wan ghosts of its beams haunted the murky avenues of the morass. Rotten logs and slimy creepers covered a slough of quicksand and bog through which I floundered at Martin’s heels. The instincts of boyhood guided him aright, so that he avoided the gray, bubbling patches of deeper ooze. He remarked over this, voicing his amazement that after all these years the place seemed to be unchanged.

At first it was the physical difficulties we encountered which impressed me. Gradually, however, as we waded deeper into the dark swamp, I became more aware of other, less tangible things. The place looked like death, and smelled of death’s rottenness and decay. Moss and fungoid growths clung to the gray tree-trunks; bloated toadstools reared pulpy death’s heads on fat, stemmed necks rising from the ooze.

The bubbling of the swamp-juices beneath our boots was a silent kind of sound, or rather a noise that seemed to intensify the silence and at the same time to be a part of it. There was no wind in the hanging branches, and we saw neither bird nor animal in these depths.

Still, there had been life here once, for we soon struck a rickety old fence which wound in a seemingly haphazard manner through the lower swamp.

Martin, beckoning to me, turned and followed the meandering wooden outlines until he came to the willow tree that bent over the ground before it. And there, in the deep, dark shade of the ancient boughs, lay the Bottomless Pool.

It was small—barely six feet across—and black. Jet black water, motionless. The pool was like a large, unblinking eye, with an odious green scum filming its pupil.

That’s a highly fantastic comparison—but something about the pool’s appearance inspired such thoughts in me. It was strange, and somehow unnatural. It wasn’t right for this small pool to be here in the swamp, and certainly the thing looked as evil as any natural formation I’ve ever seen.

MARTIN stood looking into the depths for a few moments. “The water’s black, too,” he murmured—strange how in the presence of silence the human voice is always hushed. “The water’s black as ink,” he said. And he dipped one hand into the pool, brushing off the scummy froth and cupping ebon drops for me to see. The water was black, and the decayed matter in it gave it a veined appearance; it was striated with dark green rills.

“Place eery enough for you?” asked Martin. I nodded.

“Scared us when we were kids,” he observed. “And I wouldn’t be too sure of my reactions now. But what a setting for a story.”

“Perhaps.” I had been staring into the silent water, and now I wondered what was generating the impulse in me to turn and run away.

Were my own nerves bad? I hastily averted my gaze.

“Look!” Martin shouted. He really spoke in a normal tone of voice, but in contrast to our previous hushed murmurs, it was a shout.

“Look at the lizard,” he exclaimed. Sure enough, the surface of the black water had parted with a widening ripple, and a small dark lizard of some sort appeared. It floated on its back, as though dead. I reached down and grabbed it; yanked it out.

“Why, there’s a wire attached to it!” I gasped. The wire led down into the water.

Just then there came a pull on the line from within the pool. It yanked the little dead reptile right out of my hands, but something attached to it caught in my coat, cut right through it, and dug painfully into my side. A hook!

“I’m caught!” I cried, as I stepped toward the pool to ease the pain of the barb in my side. But now the wire line had tightened, was drawing me in short jerks toward the brink of the black pool. I grabbed the line with both hands, braced my feet at the very edge, and leaned backward. But the sod on which I was standing crumbled, and I slid feet foremost into the stygian water.

“Help!” I cried.

Martin leaped forward and grabbed me. With a tremendous tug he hurled me back on the bank. Water coursed down my body, and warm blood scalded the deep wound in my side. I felt faint.

Martin swore softly as he daubed iodine on the cut beneath my shirt, and I swore loudly at the pain. Neither of us were ready to comment, but suddenly Martin turned his head and darted again to the edge of the pool. He pointed, speechless.

Another lizard, larger than the first, now rose to the surface of the pool. It bobbed, and seemed to beckon.

Martin scowled deeply, pointed to my hook-gashed side, and growled out a single word:

“Bait!”

Bait? What bait? The lizard? I snorted disgustedly.

But all the way home we marveled at the incident. We argued as I changed into dry garments; debated as I bandaged my side; mused during luncheon, and speculated wildly all the long afternoon.

Martin, ever the imaginative, had a dozen fantastic theories.

Who fished at the depths of the bottomless pool? And with hooks? Something lived in the pool. Maybe *somethings.* The *somethings* fished for men. As a boy, hadn’t George Graves hinted about disappearances? And hadn’t Sam Dewey vanished near the swamp?

SOMETHING in the pool set traps for men—putting lizards on hooks and using a wire line. The Bottomless Pool led to inner earth, and there was life below. Thus Martin, expressed himself, half-seriously.

To which I offered the obvious replies. The hook and line had been used by some fisherman. It had fallen into the water. Perhaps the lizard had been accidentally impaled upon the hook, risen to the surface as it died, and brought the line up. I grabbed it, got hooked, and a snag, entangling the line's end under water, had pulled me into the pool.

"But what about the second lizard we saw?" Martin insinuated, gently.

I was silent.

Martin was grave for a moment before continuing. "I remember, as a boy, fishing for pickerel up Assabet. The boat rocked. I was only about nine at the time, but I was a smart fisherman. I hooked a big pickerel that day—and the pickerel hooked *me,"*

I gave him an uncomprehending glance. "How?" I asked.

"Line got wrapped around my foot and the fish pulled me out of the boat," he laughed. Then, in graver tones, he went on: "If I were a fish, and I wanted to catch a fisherman, I'd tangle him up in a line. Take the Bottomless Pool, for example. If I meant to capture whoever or whatever is fishing for me from below, I'd grab that lizard bait and allow it to drag me in toward the pool. Then I'd pull up more line and attach the wire to a windlass rope. And then I'd let go of the hook. The sudden release might precipitate the fisherman below overboard into the water and tangle him up. Then, by quickly winding in the windlass, I'd haul the fellow up to the surface."

"But that's absurd," I began. "There's no fisherman in the Bottomless Pool—there can't be, and besides—"

"How does your hooked side feel this evening?" interjected Martin sarcastically.

"Oh, let's forget it," I grumbled.

But I didn't forget. I dreamed that night. And Martin did not forget, either. He spent the midnight hours at the typewriter, taking notes for a story. Neither of us, however, spoke again of the Bottomless Pool.

The next day I awoke with a slight fever. The wound in my side was a little inflamed, and I lay abed, bathing it with hot cloths to reduce the swelling. Martin, after assuring himself that I was not utterly helpless, announced that he was going for a walk.

"I'd like to interview a few old-timers around here about that place," he told me. "There should be myths."

I forget What remark I made, but I know that I tried to laugh him out of his interest. Secretly, I was very much disturbed. My dreams had not been pleasant, and the Bottomless Pool had figured rather too prominently in them. For a moment I had the wild notion that Martin was going off to try out his fishing theory. He seemed almost unnaturally interested; a person of his temperament can be greatly influenced by imaginative concepts.

He left on his purported mission of investigation, and I spent a long day in dozing and dreaming. It was late afternoon when he returned, greeted me brusquely, and went in to the other room. In a few moments I heard the vibration of the noiseless typewriter.

Rising, I got supper together. We ate but little; fever had banished my own appetite, and excitement seemed to grip Martin so that food could not interest him.

Almost as soon as he sat down he launched into a long babble of gossip he had picked up during the day. Old Bert Pickens down near the Causeway had known Martin's parents; he had filled my friend up with old Colonial tales and even some Indian lore he'd heard as a boy back in the seventies.

There were stories about the swamp south of the woods; specific cases of disappearances dating way back as far as community memory went.

Visiting Granny Mercer's cottage later in the day, Martin had persuaded the always garrulous old woman to recount her own family history. It was a point of pride with the crone that her pure blood had at one time produced a martyr during the Salem witchcraft hysteria, and she warned Martin most gravely about the old pool. It was from her that he picked up his tale of the Indian rites in the swamp, *where the braves sometimes* offered up sacrifices to the pit-god they believed dwelt in the pool—casting bodies into the orifice.

I could see that Martin was more impressed with this lore than even he admitted; he was very glib in patching together his yarn so that it formed an almost recognizable story sequence. He quoted from memory the words of

Cotton Mather concerning “gateways to Hell and openings in earth which lead to the Regions of the Damned.” Indeed, he weaved a fine romance about the pool, and did it so deftly that I was forced to the conclusion that he half-believed some of it.

“I’ll write it all up tonight,” he told me. “Then I must have another look at the place. You know, there’s something fascinating about all this—it’s a real mystery. Wouldn’t it be remarkable if there *is* some truth about my theories concerning the fishing? After all, those lizards don’t manufacture hook and wire. And some of these old wives’ tales are very definite.”

I made no comment. I went to bed early, leaving Martin to type away in the next room as he had planned. My sleep was troubled, and it must have been about midnight when I woke in a cold sweat and stumbled into the kitchen for water. The house was dark and still. I passed through Martin’s room, and noticed with a start that his bed was empty.

Fever left me. I knew, with an inexplicable dread, that Martin had gone. And I knew, too, *where* he had gone.

My first thought was that I had over-estimated his recovery. He might still be mentally ill; the pool in the swamp had exercised a morbid fascination on his mind. Poor judgment might have led him to see the thing by moonlight, for the sake of capturing story “atmosphere.”

I went back to bed, but I did not sleep. I kept waiting for him to return. The night was long. I trembled with fever, and with secret fear. It was not a good thing to wander alone in the swamp by night. Quicksand and fog, to say nothing of the possibilities of running into some *prowler,* made the stunt dangerous.

But after an hour had passed, I found that it was not this spectacle of actual, apparent dangers which disturbed me. I began to think only of the pool itself, and of the bait upon its black surface.

Then it was that unreasoning panic gripped me. I rose and bundled up, tugged on my boots. I snatched up my belt flashlight and ran out.

I SWEAR I had no sense of time passing on my nocturnal trek in the woods. It seemed only a fever-filled instant before I was already wading into that black jungle fringing the swamp; only a mist-wrapped moment before I darted from hummock to hummock in the rising fog, calling Martin’s name. Only the frogs croaked an answer.

Then I was following the fence-rail and finally grasped the willow trunk as I stared down at the bank of the pool—the bank of wet mud in which were implanted the fresh boot-prints of human feet. They faced one way only—toward the pool. And as they neared the edge they slurred into a sort of sliding, scooped-out impression, as though the wearer had been dragged. . . .

Dragged into the black, silent water, from which the tiny bubbles now arose, slowly, slowly. . . .

I screamed and ran back into the night.

Fever held me the next day. But I was glad, for it kept me from thinking too much—thinking about what had happened, and also about what I planned to do.

I didn’t consider the possibility of suicide—not when I read the typed notes Martin had written the night before. The whole story of his belief lay there, and there were incredible hints of what he expected to bring forth from the pool depths. At the last he spoke of the urge to re-visit the scene and capture a lizard for examination—to see if it were of a recognizable species, and also to determine just how it had been killed. He wanted some wire, also, and one of the hooks. Then he would go ahead and try his plan.

For he quite definitely had intended to use the windlass trick. I learned that before the morning was over—the delivery truck brought the order from the city.

I went sick as I signed Martin’s name for the shipment. I had a sudden vision of him on the night before, standing by the pool as he waited for the appearance of the bait, then stooping to remove the reptile and being caught, dragged. . . .

No, it was not suicide. It was murder.

But by what means?

Through burning delirium came the answer—pictures conjured up from Indian legends and witchcraft whisperings. A Dweller beneath the waters, fishing for humankind, and snaring the curious. A fissure in the earth's crust, leading to some hellish subterranean cavern. And Martin going down, down into the inky waters on the end of a hook, to be seized by—what?

I would find out. The windlass and Martin's scheme—he would be avenged with his own plan, his own instrument.

I must have been a little mad. I talked and laughed to myself a great deal as the day sped. I gathered the equipment together at dusk, and started for the swamp. An unhealthy night-fog was already rising when I left Prichard's Woods, but though fever coursed through my veins I plodded on. I walked through nightmare.

The unseen frogs croaked a dismal litany as I stumbled through the bog. Tapers of fog rose dimly on all sides, and smoky mist hung about my head. I floundered through the gray darkness, lugging the windlass. Often I sank ankle-deep into puddles of bubbling slime.

All about me in the night was rottenness and decay and death, and I recall thinking that this putrescent swamp was but a frame; a background, a setting for the black jewel of the bottomless pit. But the fog and the fever in my temples accounted for such wild fancies.

Fog and fever conspired toward my feeling of unutterable loathing when first I caught sight of the ebon waters upon the inky chasm in the center of the swamp.

Fog and fever addled me so that I monotonously cursed as I anchored the windlass to a big log set upon the firm higher ground of the bank. A short rope from the drum of the windlass ran to the edge of the pool and ended in a quick-settling clamp. There was a detached part of me that carried out these operations with methodical precision, and yet another part that inspired my cursings as I crouched there in the forest darkness of the heaving, breathing swamp.

BENEATH my feet the quicksand thrummed and groaned, and I recall that a wild picture rose in my mind. I had a fantastic image of myself crouching upon the epidermis of some gigantic monster—as though the swamp itself were just the skin of a vast beast, and the bottomless black pit a tiny pin-prick in the flesh. But that, too, was fog and fever.

The preparations were made. I had not even glanced at the scummy surface of the pool; so sure was I of what my eyes must encounter. Now, with the drum ready for use and the windlass securely placed, I gazed into the dark depths and jerked on the flashlight I wore at my belt.

Its rays disclosed the floating blue body of a tiny lizard, bobbing monotonously upon the surface of the cryptic waters. There it lay in death, rising and sinking upon water that did not move. And that fact inspired me with the terrible fear of a corroboration for poor Martin's story.

I stared at the creature, fighting the fog and fever that created gray mist upon my brain until the only thought distinguishable was a panic impulse to flee the spot. I rocked on my heels *when* I *wished to run screaming* back across the bog to a spot where Nature is sane and friendly.

And then I felt in my pocket for the wire-clipper I had found on Martin's desk. For some absurd reason, the cold feel of the prosaic, factory-cut metal reassured me. And with my free hand I reached out and snatched at the blue lizard.

I tugged the body from the water in the beam of the flashlight on the bank—and the clear yellow beam was cut by a black line. The lizard *was* wired! Seizing the clamp next to me, I quickly clipped the wire to the windlass rope.

Then I yanked on the wire with both hands. I tugged. A shudder ran through me, for I felt a dreadful, unmistakable *response* from the other end of the line! Through the water it tightened, jerked.

SOMEONE below was pulling on the rope. *Someone was fishing!* But who? And from how far below? The tugger was strong. In sudden desperation I felt my heels slide along the bank. Powerful jerks were drawing me close to the black brink of that dark, still pool. With a gasp, I let go.

The line whipped back into the water. In my mind's eye I formed a silly, senseless picture of a fisherman standing on his wharf; then falling over backwards as the catch released his line. An idiotic picture it was, for there could be no fisherman at the bottom of a bottomless pool. Or could there be?

I would soon know. The line fell back, then reached the spot where I had clamped it to the windlass rope. There it snapped—taut.

The fisherman had fallen overboard. He had been hooked. I laughed without mirth at the insane thought.

And then I gripped the windlass handle and turned the drum, and I felt a terrific threshing tauten the line until it stood straight in the flashlight's beam again. The wire began to snap back and forth in the black waters of the pool. I turned and turned; a hundred, a thousand revolutions were made in augmenting frenzy—for now I desperately realized that each crank was bringing me closer and closer to the secret of the bottomless pool.

Suddenly the winch jammed. I stared in dismay, then saw that the drum was full. Then I leapt in front of the windlass and grabbed the remaining wire in my hands.

It took a second, but I experienced a year. Through fever and fog came images of what I might expect to find at the end of my line. Martin's bloated corpse, blue and swollen, with the line gripped between death-clenched teeth . . . the shapeless body of a child long mired in the slime of the pit . . . sea-monster. . . .

But no, it could not be. There was a fisher down there—a fisher that baited cunningly this hook and sent a wire line upwards to entrap children, and wanderers, and curious men. And the fisher had taken Martin, and was now entangled in this line. A fisher in a black and bottomless pool; I was drawing in a fisher from Below.

The rays of the flashlight on the bank now gleamed upon the surface of the scummy waters, but they were still no longer. In oozing eddies they bubbled and swirled, and black slime was tossed upwards as I drew the cutting wire through my hands. A terrific force was pulling against me, and fright alone conspired to intensify the strength of my grip. At that moment, I would gladly have released my hold but sheer hysteria made my muscles rigid. Slowly, inexorably, I drew the final length of the wire from the water in the yellow light.

The Fisher emerged. . . .

I cannot remember if I screamed aloud, but there was the sound made by utter fear ringing and crashing against my brain. For I saw the creature of the pit—saw the strangled neck about which the tangling wire had wound and allowed me to pull the Fisher upwards. I saw what filled the six-foot surface of the pool as it emerged.

It was a head shaped by horror's dreams alone. Not human, not reptilian, not frog-like—it was nevertheless featured with great staring yellow eyes, snouted like a saurian, and covered with a greenish batrachoid skin that glistened slickly against the yellow light.

The monstrous bulging eyes rolled wildly and dilated in agony as the creature opened its great slitted mouth in a soundless, choking gasp. I stared into a red maw that was fanged in a manner unknown to any beast still roaming earth—and as I did so a sickening realization swept over me. This was the Fisher!

An instant only did that gigantic glistening head rise greenly above the waters of the pool—then my clippers were out, the wire snapped with a shrill twang, and the Fisher from Below sank beneath the bubbling black waves with a thunderous splash of slime. I stared down blankly into the depths as the waters quickly became quiescent once again. I could see nothing—but I did not wish to.

I did not wish to learn what manner of horrid life flourished unnaturally at the bottom of this opening—wherever that bottom might be. I did not care to speculate upon the cunning intelligence of a primal entity which even now fished for men from its lair in the black deep. I did not think I could endure surmises which now clamored for consideration.

Was this the only creature of its kind, or were there more down there? What inversion of sane natural laws allowed existence in nighted depths, and what manner of ghastly intelligence prompted prehistoric beasts to set bait for men? Were there other such openings in the earth's concealing crust through which the madness below had access to humanity?

But what I most devoutly tried to keep from thinking about was the scraped sides of the pool-bank, and the reasons for it. Only the *head* of the monster had emerged, and it had filled the pool. The sides were scraped by the shoulders—*and the six-foot pool had not been wide enough to permit the passage of the body.*

Fog and fever were merciful releases. I know that I dumped the windlass in the pool and it sank like a plummet, and I dimly remember running back through the swamp.

I WAS ill the next few days, and then the police came, and I told them what I dared. They have seen the pool, but they have said nothing of their opinion to me. I told them more today, and will tell them all I know soon—not to preserve my freedom, but because now I want the spot boarded up. It must be, lest others see the bait It must be boarded up; for it cannot be *filled up.*

I shall tell them soon, or let them read this. They can think me demented if they like, but I trust they believe enough to act, and act promptly. Perhaps if even then they do not believe, I may show them the hook I have—the hook from the wire in the pool, which I cut off. I hate to reveal it to them, for I detest the very memory of the thing myself.

It is made of some golden metal, harder than pure gold. It is cut, and rudely shaped—and I dislike to conceive of the creatures who deliberately formed it for its horrid purpose and made the wire to which it was attached.

I cannot bear to think of the civilization behind such a creative effort. And worst of all is the memory of those designs in the metal.

Those designs, created by what primal artist? There are three of them, cut into the gold surface. They tell all, so that I know only too well why the Fishers seek men with bait from their bottomless pits.

The first design is tiny like the rest, but it unmistakably depicts a creature such as the one whose head I saw. I dare not describe the body which is shown here. But the creature is baiting a hook. . . .

The second little design is a crude representation of a man, falling through water at the end of a line, as Martin must have fallen.

And the third design—but I must not speak of that—tells of what Martin's fate was; tells why the Fishers fish. That third hellish design on the hook!

It shows a feast. . . .

The Bottomless Pool must be boarded up.

The Red Swimmer

A horrendous story of the Spanish Main and an unscrupulous English pirate —a tale of the Elixir of Life, and horrible red arms that reached out of the sea

LUKE TREACH bowed and smirked in the Spanish sunlight as his distinguished passengers came up the gangplank. His curled and scented hair rippled most elegantly in the Caribbean breeze; a breeze that lifted the dainty ruffles at the wrists and throat of his rich velvet coat.

He made a fine figure of a Spanish gentleman, did English Luke Treach that merry morning, as he stood stroking his spade beard to hide the malicious smile which he had managed to erase from his lean, browned face, but which still persisted about his cruelly thin lips.

Captain Luke Treach bowed then, as the old grandee and his daughter ascended, bowed low a second time when the white-bearded gentleman addressed him as "Captain Obispo." Treach gazed covertly into the aged, aristocratic face of his passenger, then allowed his glance to embrace the figure of the woman. Abruptly he started, jerked erect.

Now Captain Treach had gazed on the fine ladies of old England, yes, and the plump, rosy-cheeked barmaids, too; he had seen the dusky Caribs that danced upon the beach; in Cuba and Barbados and the Antilles there were dark-eyed Spanish girls that lured with sly laughter, and mulatto or mestizo maidens savage in the charm of their delight. Captain Treach had known many women, but there was none to compare with the girl who now stood before him.

Her hair was ebony over ivory forehead, her eyes dark diamonds and lips warm ruby red. These comparisons came naturally to the Captain, for his covetous nature was ever ruling. But never had it ruled him as it did at this moment; he wanted this girl, with her maiden beauty of face and her slim, young, untaught body curved and lissome for delight. Young, dark, smiling—Body of Christ! The captain swore inwardly as his lips shaped their polite greeting.

Courteously he welcomed Señor Montelupe and his daughter to the ship. Yes, their cabins were in readiness, and he trusted that they would be comfortable. But certainly, they would cast off at once, and might the Blessed Savior speed them on a prosperous, untroubled voyage to Mother Spain.

Guns and men here? Yes, for there were pirates—cursed scoundrels, these buccaneers; and if they attacked, it was best to be ready—though Gracious God forbid!

CAPTAIN TREACH escorted Señor Montelupe and his daughter to their cabins, then returned to watch his bullies bring up the chests and bags his passengers brought with them; chests and bags—silk, satin, gold, jewels.

It made Treach smile. He smiled again as he thought of pirates. This second smile made his wolfish face assume an almost beneficent aspect, for it was the charitable smile of one well pleased with himself. And Captain Luke Treach, now known as Captain Obispo, but more famous as “English Luke,” had good reason to respect his cleverness.

First, he had taken the galleon. Few men had been lost, much wealth gained. After efficiently disposing of the crew and their captain, he had hit upon a brilliant idea. Instead of careening off some inlet and waiting until intermediaries reached him to buy and dispose of his loot, he would seek a regular port.

The galleon *Golden Crest* had been bound for Vera Cruz. Very well, he would sail for Vera Cruz, rig himself out in the captain's garb, and dress his men according to Spanish style. He and his mates spoke the tongue well—with a little careful disguise they would pass as Spaniards. On reaching port they could dispose of their cargo, cash in the booty, and sail away again swiftly with no one the wiser. Better still, the appearance of the ship would preclude any fuss such as might be occasioned by its disappearance; there would be no reprisal, no scouring of the seas by Spanish fleets in search of English Luke the buccaneer.

A noble idea, Luke Treach thought at the time. And it had worked. With the common seamen kept on shipboard against any betrayal, he and his lieutenants had entered town. Officials had even been permitted to land on the ship and inspect it. Trade had been accomplished without suspicion, and Luke was ready to sail.

Then Commandante Portiz had asked him to take passengers. At first Luke had demurred, until he had learned that Señor Montelupe and his daughter were returning to Spain with all their wealth. They wanted to leave at once; he had been an official and there was some scandal.

Wealthy? Scandal meant money—it would be brought aboard ship. Luke Treach agreed, and the affair was settled.

Now they were ready to set sail, and more luck had befallen the clever captain. This daughter of Montelupe—she was a new treasure, another prize.

So Treach smiled indulgently when he thought of his cunning and what it had gained for him.

But ever business-like, his musing abruptly ceased and his thoughts turned to the exigencies of the moment. He gave the orders to lift anchor in the clarion voice for which he was justly famous.

A moment later he proved that his English erudition in the matter of cursing, as he loosed a fine volley of oaths at the half-naked seamen straining at the ropes on deck.

Then Captain Treach sauntered below, gentleman-like, pausing merely to kick aside the sailor who chanced to stray across his path carrying a spar-piece. He rapped discreetly on the cabin door, surreptitiously spat out his plug of tobacco and entered the Montelupe quarters.

THE old man greeted him, but Captain Treach had eyes only for the appointments he found therein; for the piles of brocaded and jeweled cloth now removed from their wrappings and stacked against the wall; for the jewel-caskets and the ingots in the rough sea-bags.

And then he stared at Ynez Montelupe, stared with the selfsame avidity. All the while he spoke graciously enough to the old fool, but his gaze burned a blush into the girl's cheeks, and he thought of the night—not tonight, but the next, when they would be past hail or chance of pursuit.

He chatted for perhaps an hour. Yes, he had an excellent voyage out. No, his passage had been free of storm or danger from freebooters, though that cursed Blackbeard was reputed to be in these waters. He fabricated news from Spain, glibly explained the death at sea of the ship's *padre.* He was forced to do most of the talking, for the doltish old man merely stared at him with his liquid, curiously youthful brown eyes. Treach didn't like that stare; it held a faint tinge of contempt or amusement; but then, he would not have to put up with it for long. On this thought he took his departure, after graciously asking their attendance at dinner in his own quarters.

Upstairs the gentlemanly mood left him, and he called for rum and his lieutenant, Roger Groat. Groat shambled into his cabin, mouthing oaths and damnation because the lace frippery at his wrists dangled into his tankard while he was drinking. The red-bearded lieutenant made it known that he was sick of wearing these thrice-damned Spanish spangles, and the men were tired of the masquerade as well. They grumbled because they weren't put ashore to amuse themselves with the proceeds of the plunder.

To this information Captain Treach listened with occasional frowns. Then he told Groat that they would sail on only another day, dispose of the old fool, and head in for the nearest island a few hours off their position at that time.

"Rich, isn't he?" muttered Groat. "Blackie and Tom swore he had bullion in those bags o' his."

He chuckled, then snickered as he brought a hairy paw down on the table at which they sat.

"And the girl's a beauty. A beauty, by God, and there'll be rare sport ——"

Captain Treach raised his hand. A slight gesture, but the accompanying frown was enough to quell the big man into silence.

"The girl is mine," he snapped. "Mine alone. The swag we'll divide according to our articles, but the girl is mine.

"You and the others will have your fill of wenching when we put in, but she's mine."

Groat could not restrain a hoarse chuckle.

"I don't envy her, at that. Remember Lucy, on that English ship we took? When you finished with her and Salvatore tried to take her, you flayed the lass. And I warrant this one would prefer the crew's sport to the other end."

Captain Treach smiled. "Tell Salvatore I want wine for dinner. Amontillado. I want my guests to eat, drink and be merry tonight."

They both laughed.

2

THEY both laughed. This Captain Obispo was certainly a witty man. And tonight he was out-doing himself. Señorita Ynez found her first instinctive dislike fading, though she still felt a tinge of strange panic whenever his beady eyes rested too intently upon her face or bosom.

As for Señor Montelupe, his taciturnity waned under the brandy and the mellow amontillado sherry. His reserve down, he proceeded to let his host guide the conversation into personal channels.

Captain Treach asked him about his duties in Vera Cruz; learned that the old man had held a secretarial post for years and owned several lucrative mines. There had been a scandal of sorts. . . .

Money, the captain presumed. No, not exactly money. The old man's reticence held him silent for a moment, but the wine, the courtesy, the mood urged him on. His bright eyes grew shadowy as he spoke.

There was—was the captain a church-goer?

Something in the shadowed eyes cued Treach to ignore the natural lie and speak truly. No, he was not a son of the Mother Church.

That was well, said Señor Montelupe. For there was a charge against him, a charge of sorcery.

Yes, the Black Arts, as ignorant fools called them—the mantic arts. He had studied with the Moorish masters in Spain as a youth; not wizardry or witchcraft, but the true magics that lie in nature; aeromancy, the controlling of winds; hydromancy, divination and command of waters; pyromancy, the lore of fire. It was science, not sorcery, which he sought to rule, and the ancient Moors held secrets of natural wisdom known to seers before Solomon.

Here in this new world he had availed himself of his governmental position to study certain things; it would be wise for one so old to take heed of the Elixir Vitas, the Elixir of Life.

And native blood was cheap; slaves and peons died by the dozens in the mines each day, perished by flogging and torture. He had meant no harm; he wanted to kill no one, but merely to study the blood of a few slaves, to experiment with revivification of the dead—that did no harm. And he *had* discovered things—marvelous secrets, gathered from the wisdom of Egyptis, the Orient, the Arab sages. In his hands he would use his knowledge for good, not evil.

But the natives complained, the people whispered, and the *alcalde* told the *padre,* who in turn brought tidings to the Commandante. And so Señor Montelupe had given up his post, taken his daughter—his wife was dead these many years, alas!—and departed for home.

Luke listened, with a polite show of interest. No need to antagonize the old duffer. He and his talk of magic—but then, what could one expect from a bloody Spaniard?—those fools were all alike with their Inquisition, and witch-burning, and alchemy.

Alchemy! The thought crossed his mind even as he nodded in polite assent to the grandee's words. Alchemy—the transmutation of base metals into gold, wasn't it? Perhaps this stupid Southern dog knew something. Best to draw him out.

LUKE drew him out, aided by further drafts of wine. He politely hinted that a man of Señor Montelupe's wisdom must have uncovered secrets in his quest of baleful knowledge.

Señor Montelupe stroked his gray beard as he replied that he had uncovered secrets. His eyes flamed with a bright gleam of fanaticism as he leaned across the great cabin-table.

He, Montelupe, had succeeded in his experiments. Men had sought the Elixir of Life in ancient lands for centuries untold, without avail. Charm, incantation, invocation—all methods had failed. But he had come to a new world, and there his efforts had been crowned with triumph. It was a great discovery; much toil and study had gone into it, and not a little blood. It was not generally known, but his wife had died from an injection of a spurious Elixir he had compounded in earlier studies. Since then the tragic failure had spurred him on, and many slaves had been sacrificed to the attainment of perfection. But he had done it—there was a vial filled with a golden liquid; not the mythical water of poor Ponce de Leon's Fountain of Youth, but the veritable *Elixir Vitae*. Its compound merit had cost Señor Montelupe many years of his life, but now when he returned to Spain with his wealth, he and his daughter would be insured eternity—eternity in which to study, to seek further wisdom.

Luke Treach frowned and swore damnation to himself. The blasted idiot was mad! No alchemical secrets here, no Philosopher's Stone, or anything real; only this demented gibberish about some crazy scheme of perpetual life. The Spanish dog bored him; for that he would pay on the morrow. And she would pay, too—Ynez, listening with a cryptic smile that implied belief in her father's words, and a covert glimmer in her eyes which proclaimed that she thought the captain an ignorant fool, incapable of understanding the magnitude of her sire's secrets.

Yes, he would pay, and she would pay—though in sweeter coinage.

With that thought hidden in his politely-phrased adieu, Luke Treach strode up on deck for a breath of fresh air; air untainted by this fool's talk of wizardry and enchantment.

He checked the position, oversaw the change of watch at the wheel, and retired to sleep against the morrow's sport.

NIGHT clouds had scudded before the dawn, and the sun ruled azure southern heavens ere he awoke. The cabin window showed him beauty of sea and sky, but his ears heard sounds most unlovely.

This was the day, and the men were drunk. Groat had evidently broken out the rum.

Cursing, Treach ran up on deck, and found shambles. The *Golden Crest* drifted, unpiloted. Laughing, gleeful men overran the ship, moving about at will or clustering before the broached casks that stood upon the after-deck. The English sea-dogs had abandoned their Spanish costumes in favor of pirate regalia, or utter nakedness.

Treach saw his steward, Salvatore, slopping rum over his maroon coat with the white piping, then wiping his red mouth with the lacy sleeve that had once graced the arm of a Portuguese admiral of war. He saw Roger Groat slapping his naked, tattooed thighs with the flat of a cutlass as he danced about "One-Light" Samuel Slew, whose black eye-patch was the sole incongruous note in the ensemble he wore—the grotesque finery of some silken lady whose denuded body had long since passed to the mercies of the sharks. The rest roared and bellowed forth crude gibes, or shouted toasts over the swilling of their tankards.

Treach paused. The men had broken discipline, but they were in a jovial mood and order could be restored. But what matter? Their drinking could have waited until night, as planned, but a few hours made no difference now. Let them have their sport. And he—now he could go below and seek Ynez.

He went, smiling.

Ynez and her father were staring out of the cabin window, their eyes veiled with perplexity.

"What does this mean, Captain?" asked the old man, as Treach entered. Then his face betrayed that he knew the answer.

For Treach had entered without knocking, and he had entered not as Captain Obispo, but as English Luke—swaggering, his smile a sneer.

"What does this mean?" Ynez echoed, in a faint voice that trailed away beneath the intensity of Treach's stare.

Treach laughed.

"Mean? It means a lot, I fancy. Firstly, that you've made a mistake in taking passage with us. Ye see, we've changed our colors—we're an English crew, not Spanish, and we fly still a third flag today, I fancy. Have ye heard of the Jolly Roger?"

He grinned. His bow was a mockery of previous courtliness.

"So it's English Luke Treach at yer service today, my friends."

"Buccaneer!" The old Spaniard scowded, then drew Ynez close to his side. She trembled in her father's arms, but her terror invested her with a weird enhancing of beauty; the beauty of a frightened fawn. Luke stared at the softness of her black eyes, at the trembling of her fear-taut body.

He stared so closely that he did not see the sudden gesture of the old man—did not observe his hand slip a tiny golden vial from his pocket to the bodice of his daughter.

He stared at the girl, and then he began to laugh. The laugh told all. It told Señor Montelupe that he need not waste words in threats or pleas. It told Ynez Montelupe that which made her crimson with shame.

Laughing, the pirate advanced. This time he saw the second movement of the old man—saw the silver dagger slid from the sleeve and raised on high. But his laughter did not cease as he tore the cutlass from its scabbard at his side. The blade slashed down upon the Spaniard's wrist. When it struck it seemed as though the steel had sent sparks flying, but it was only blood, spurting forth in tiny gouts as the hand fell severed to the cabin floor.

The old man cried out; then Luke was upon him, lifting the graybeard bodily and carrying him from the cabin. On deck he collared Roger Groat and kicked the form of the fainting grandee to indicate his prize.

"Amuse yourself," he instructed the lieutenant. "I go below again."

"Amuse *yourself,"* parroted Groat, leering.

Treach good-naturedly pushed the man in the face with the flat of his wet blade, and went down the stairs again.

ONCE more he entered the cabin, and saw that Ynez still stood there. She faced him now and she did not cringe. Her features held no fear, for they were set in the immobility of death. Only her eyes were alive—so dreadfully, so intently alive that Luke Treach stood staring aghast into their black depths. His own face twisted as though seared by the black flame that leapt forth from her burning orbs! Then he mastered himself and advanced.

"Ye'd best pull no tricks with me, girl," he muttered.

Her dead face smiled a dead smile—the mirthless smile of a corpse that crawls to feed. And her voice spoke, muffled as though it came from the under-earth.

"I fear ye not," said Ynez. "I fear no man, and no thing. Ye had best fear *me."*

Her tone was leaden, and the words were heavy against Luke Treach's ears. He grimaced, shrugged in a bravado he did not feel.

"Enough of this!" he growled. "Come, lass——"

"Wait."

Luke paused.

"Ye shall have will over me, if ye must. But dog though thou art, I warn thee still. My father gave me this."

She held up the little golden vial. It was empty.

"Ye heard what it contained—the precious distillation which insures eternal life. I drank of it. And so I warn thee. I cannot die, and the hatred within me cannot die. Use me as thou wilt; yea, cast me into the sea"—her eyes flamed—"but I shall return, Luke Treach. I shall return. And there will be reckoning."

For a moment the buccaneer trembled with instinctive horror. Then the wine mounted to his brain, and as the light faded from the girl's eyes he stepped across the cabin with a hoarse laugh. Ynez threw the empty vial in his face, but he only grinned.

3

Luke Treach stumbled from the cabin with a curse—stumbled with the body of the swooning girl across his shoulder. Lurching figures moved in the dusk, snarling and laughing in drunken animation.

Treach cursed savagely as he sought the deck and made for a group of huddling men that clustered about the mast.

He was rather surprised to see that old Señor Montelupe was still alive, considering what had been done to him.

The old grandee was nailed to the mast most painfully, by his remaining hand.

The men turned to Treach and regarded him with bleary eyes.

“What’ll we do, Cap’n?” demanded Groat, moving to the pirate’s side. “A tough old bird, this vulture. He’ll not die and he’ll not be still. He hangs there and curses and prays in his Spanish, damme if he don’t.”

Treach smiled wolfishly.

“Perhaps I can devise a new diversion,” he said.

There was snickering, for the buckos knew their captain. They watched as he threw the swooning Ynez to the deck, and the mangled head of Montelupe turned to follow Treach’s movements.

The captain’s knife flashed, and the anguished old man moaned aloud, as he cast the terribly altered form over the vessel’s side. Then Treach faced the father. The gray Spaniard stared from tortured eyes until Luke’s face fell in shame.

“Fool!” The voice rang faint, but vibrant with hatred. “Fool!”

Luke wished to turn array, but those eyes, that voice, held him prisoner before the victim.

“There is vengeance for fools,” hissed the old man. “I’ve prayed to Powers while your dogs tormented me; prayed to Powers over wind and water. You and your currish crew are doomed, I swear—and *your* torment shall not end there.”

Was this death-racked horror really smiling?

Luke shuddered. He stepped forward, blenching before the madman’s eyes. For the old man was mumbling.

To the crew, it appeared as if Montelupe were whispering in confidence to Treach, for the captain bent his head close to the ravaged face, and the Spaniard’s lips moved. It was hard to hear what he was saying.

“Vengeance . . . my daughter . . . elixir . . . nothing can stop life that will flow? eternally through veins . . . nothing can stop hate . . . vengeance for you . . . return.”

In the gathering shadow it was difficult for the men to see the expression on their captain’s face. Could it be fear at the dying man’s whispers?

But a moment later everyone witnessed their captain’s rage. For suddenly the horrid head writhed as the old Spaniard spat full in Treach’s face.

Then a sword flashed out, and a red-daubed head rolled across the deck. At that moment the sky bled, and crimson waters bubbled against the sunset. When the maimed body went over the side, the waters stirred with a new turbulence, and a wind sprang up from the flaming western sky.

Treach shuddered even as he cursed, noting the silence of his companions, their furtive looks and gesturings. The imbecile had awed them with his curses—faith, but it was lucky they had not heard what the old devil had said there at the last! Still, his wizard babbling was working on these superstitious fools.

With an effort, Luke met the mood and mastered it. He shouted for fresh rum, roundly cuffed the nearest members of the crew, and swaggered forward.

After a time his mates followed, and the warm bite of the liquor soon banished morbid melancholy.

They drank as sunset smoldered into dusk, drank as the dark clouds of night fled before the rise of wailing winds; drank even as the waters lashed the ship through trough and swell. For now white waves raced and reared, and the sea began to boil and bubble as though heated at some devil's cauldron from below.

NEAR midnight the storm broke, and the rain lashed the drunken roisterers from the deck. It was then that several awoke from their bemusement, but it was too late.

The *Golden Crest* whirled in an angry sea amidst a wind that shrieked and tore at sail and spar. Treach roared futile orders to the scant dozen of his crew that he could muster, but these did not avail. No one dared go aloft or brave the gale above the deck. Even when the mast fell, the panic-crazed men were helpless to forestall further disaster.

The black night howled about them, and the sea surged over the decks as the ship heeled against the storm. Floundering figures were tossed screaming over the side as the waters retreated; cursing sailors blundered in the darkness as the yard-arms crashed about them to splinter the deck and cabins into a shambles.

Some there were who made a break for the boats. Five or six lifted one over the side and clambered in, just as a new wave struck. They dashed to death against the bows as the craft smashed to bits before the flooding impact of the water.

The ship lurched madly. It was leaking, foundering—that was a certainty. Treach collared Roger Groat, Salvatore, Samuel Slew, and as many others as he could shake into consciousness. His orders were curt, oath-weighted. They dashed below, returning with rations, water-jugs. A great combing wave crashed over the deck, then subsided as the men dashed for another boat.

They made it, lowered the ropes and floundered in, casting off just in time to escape the flooding fury that spent itself against the vessel's side.

Rowing was madness in these swirling waters, but they pushed away in time.

Already the great vessel was rearing and plunging in the throes of final surrender. It rose and sank, and above the storm came the sound of faint shrieks as those left behind realized the imminence of their doom.

Then, with a geyser-burst, the waters boiled above the ship, poising against the ruined mast-stumps before they hurled down to smash the vessel to ruins.

With a rumble, they fell and claimed their own. The craft rose up, tilted at the bow, and fell into the gigantic trough as the wave crashed down upon it. There was a single mighty roar of triumph as the ship slid into the sea; then foaming waters closed about it, and a terrible circle spread and widened from the point of its disappearance.

Treach and the men met the shock, though two yammering forms disappeared under the drenching violence of the inundation and were sucked down by the hungry depths.

Then they tossed all alone in the black storm amidst the sound of gigantic laughter, and the booming wind mocked them through the night.

4

IT WAS calm as death the next morning, and the waves purred against the side of the boat as though in satisfaction at the appeasement of their hunger.

The weary men slept as the sun rose; Treach huddled forward over the provisions, Roger Groat bent over his oar, Salvatore stretched across his seat, Sam Slew and Gorlac lying supine in the dampness at the bottom of the craft.

It was Gorlac who woke first; Gorlac, the gigantic Krooman. His brutal negroid face wrinkled into a frown as he surveyed his sleeping companions and the empty sea in which they drifted. Then his eyes fell upon the two water-casks, the oiled sea-bag of provisions at the captain's side. He stretched black ape-arms forward, ate and drank noisily.

Treach chose this moment to awake, and for a second he stared at the giant Negro, who sat obliviously munching a slab of bully-beef. Then he snarled an oath and drew his knife. In a moment he had flung himself forward on the startled black and buried his blade in the gleaming ebon column of the corded neck.

Gorlac grunted in pain, and crushed die captain's body in a terrible embrace. His arms tightened as Treach tore the knife from the wound in the neck and stabbed again and again at the dark back.

The Negro, grimacing with mad pain, locked his great hands about the pirate's neck and squeezed—squeezed terribly, with sobs of agony as he sought to throttle his foe. Then Treach slid the knife around to the ribs, arched upward in a silver slash, and disemboweled his antagonist. The ape-paws relaxed their grip, and the captain slid the twitching body over the side.

It fell with a splash, and disappeared. The captain crawled back to his place, feeling his throat experimentally to make sure that all was well; then polishing his knife carefully on his breeches. He looked up to face the stares of his awakened companions. The scuffle had taken place so quickly that the men were still rubbing their eyes and grumbling their bewilderment.

“Gorlac’s gone,” announced Treach, in a harsh voice. “And damn my lights and liver, the rest of ye curs will go too if I catch ye tampering with the provisions.”

He took cut a small stone from his blouse and began to sharpen his knife, gazing meaningly at his audience. They sat stolid, each man looking off into the empty sea and thinking his own thoughts.

Luke mused with the rest. His mind was teeming in turmoil. First thoughts were pangs of regret as he remembered the fine ship, the fine crew he had lost—and more tragic still, the stores of bullion and silver ingots; the money-chests gleaned from trading off loot for gold doubloons and pieces-of-eight. And there had been a small fortune in the silks and jewels and moneys left by his two passengers as well. It was all lost.

Further reflection was brought to bear on his *own* plight; adrift here in the boundless sea with three men, an open boat, and water and provisions for perhaps two days.

From these ponderings his thoughts strayed off into darker considerations. Luke Treach was a practical man and an all-round materialistic scoundrel to boot, but he could not help but remember the strange dying words of the Spaniard—he who claimed mantic powers. The wretch may have been raving, but he spoke of aeromancy, power over wind and water, and of conjuring up a storm. The storm had come. And the seer had cursed him with other things. . . .

But enough! A little food, a little water, a few attempts at formulating a plan; these were the things he needed to drive such foolishness from his brain.

He apportioned a meager fare of beef and hard-tack to the three survivors of his crew, and snapped orders for rowing assignments and night watches. Dark grinning Salvatore, big dour Groat and the leanly sinister “Dead-Light” Slew listened stolidly to his commands and set to.

But rowing is onerous, and the broiling sun of the mid-Caribbean no kindly overseer. The sea is a lonely place, and last night these men had glimpsed Death with jaws agape to swallow. Now they feared that those jaws would close about them again, not to engulf but to gnaw slowly with the sharp teeth of thirst and hunger.

THE day passed in sullen, apprehensive silence; Groat and Slew, then Treach and Salvatore, taking the oars while the alternate pair rested and tried to shield their eyes from the eternal glare.

Row—but where? There was no compass, and until the stars shone guidance was missing. Treach hoped to put south to the islands, and the sun's deceptive shimmer showed him the way none too truly.

Nevertheless the labor kept the men from thinking too much; kept them from remembering little things that now came to slyly torment Treach. There had been a little golden vial, and the wizard had sworn a vengeance. What was that about Eternal Life?

Couldn't torture kill? What did it mean?

Sunset again—flaming sunset, like that in which Montelupe had died. He had died; the dead harm no one. She too could harm no one, now.

But it was night. Captain Treach apportioned the food in darkness, watched his companions at the water to insure that they were not over-greedy.

Treach snapped commands, set the course by the stars. The men hauled at the oars in silence, and the boat glided through black waters.

Groat and Slew labored. Salvatore dropped off to sleep, his swarthy face buried in his hands as he huddled up against the forward seat. Treach kept awake by sheer will, cursing mechanically at the oarsmen, so that the sound of his voice might drown out the greater sound of the Silence—the empty Silence of rolling waters. The very rustle and lap of the waves seemed to become a part of a maddening stillness that sapped the mind. The night sea was an entity that crawled about them. Treach felt this, although no concrete thought was formulated. But his instinct awakened him to fear; fear which the silent sea now personified. Here, drifting alone in black infinitude, the Powers of which the dead wizard had spoken assumed new reality. It was easy for the tired imagination to conceive of vast pulsing shapes, embodiments of the night and the wind and the water.

Treach felt his burning forehead, drew the back of his hand over lips cracked with fever.

He fell asleep while the waters murmured. In his dreams the water was whispering. From far away it whispered—from behind the boat. The whispering grew louder. It was right behind the boat now. He could almost hear words floating up out of the water. The whispering was trying to tell him something—something about vengeance, and a curse—right under the boat now. . . .

There was a scream of utter agony.

TREACH wrenched himself from sleep, sat bolt-upright as the scream trailed off into a gurgling noise in the blackness.

“What’s that?” he shouted to his companions.

For a moment there was no answer. Groat’s face was buried in trembling hands.

Salvatore heard him, but when he opened his mouth it merely hung loosely, without moving in speech. And Slew was gone.

“Where’s Sam?” shouted Treach.

Salvatore managed to regain partial control of his jaws.

“He—gone,” the swarthy man spluttered. “It came over the side and took him—it was kissing him and then it pulled him into the water—it took him —*santo Dios*——”

Then Treach was upon Salvatore, shaking his shoulders and shrieking into his very face.

“What took him, damme? Speak up, man, for the love of heaven!”

“I not know,” whimpered the other. “I not know. We row here, and then Slew he stop rowing. I take the oar. He just sit there at end of boat. All at once he say, ‘Listen.’ I listen, hear nothing. ‘Listen,’ he say. ‘I hear ‘whisper,’ I tell him he crazy. But he just sit and look at water and say, ‘It getting louder.’ All at once he lean down, and then—*Sacramento!*—two arms come up out of water and go around his neck. Fie just scream once and then over side he go. No splash, no bubbles. He go, and I see arms—all red arms. *All red!”*

As the big man slumped down in the boat Treach peered wildly at the black waters about him. They were still, unruffled. No body, no rippling.

“You’re daft, man,” he whispered, but there was no conviction in his voice.

“Those red arms,” Groat muttered, from behind. “I never believed in mermaids or sea-monsters, but——”

“Shut up, both of you! You’re crazy! Slew fell overboard, that’s all. Fever’s got you. There’s nothing in the water but sharks. And they have no arms.”

“You threw something in water with arms,” Salvatore mumbled.

Treach struck the man across the mouth. “Shut up!” he screamed. “Let me alone.”

Silently, he sat there until dawn arose, and when he saw its redness, he shuddered.

THEY were all mad now, food and water gone, Slew gone. And the sun, searing down, cooked the madness into their brains until thoughts writhed and twisted amidst flames.

Salvatore wouldn’t row any more. He kept staring at the water behind the boat while Treach and Groat worked the oars. Treach watched him. Toward midday Salvatore turned. “There,” he “whispered. “I know. I know it come. I see it. There in the water. It following us. Swimming in water. Oh, Cap’n, look there.”

"Shut up!" But Treach looked. It was only sunlight glinting on the waves behind.

"Look. It move again!"

Something *was* moving, away back. "Sharks, you fool!"

"Sharks are not red."

"Shut up!"

They pulled the oars, but Salvatore gazed back as sunset dripped blood upon the waves. He was trembling and his face was soaking with perspiration not born of heat alone.

"Let us all stay awake tonight," he whispered. "Maybe we pray and it go away. Otherwise——"

"Quiet!" Treach snapped the command with his old authority.

But the authority was in his voice alone now. Inside, Luke Treach was afraid.

When the sun went down he heard the whispering at once, It welled out of the black waters, and he prayed that the moon might rise at once. Hearing that whispering in the blackness was too much. He turned toward the back of the boat. He'd talk to Salvatore, anything, just drown out that growing whisper. He turned—and saw.

The big man was on his knees. He was leaning over the gunwale. His arms were outstretched and he was staring down into the black water, his face icy with horror.

And two arms were rising out of the water—two long, red arms. They were pinkly phosphorescent in the darkness. They glowed like—like stripped flesh.

The arms reached out, twin serpents that embraced. Treach tried to call out, to motion to Groat. He was frozen, frozen as the arms rose, embraced Salvatore. And silently, the big man toppled over the side. The splash broke the spell.

"Quick!" Treach screamed. Groat followed him on his hands and knees as they thrashed their oars in the blackness of the waves. Nothing moved.

"Sharks move a lot," Groat muttered, in a hoarse voice. "Sharks move, and octopus move. But this—you saw?"

"I didn't see anything," Treach lied. "He was mad. Threw himself over."

"Drowning men move," Groat croaked.

Treach mastered himself, "Row," he commanded. "For God's sake, row, man! We must reach land before tomorrow night."

They rowed as though Death were at their heels. And in their hearts it was this they feared. They rowed past midnight; tired, feverish, aflame with thirst and hunger. But Fear called their strokes, and Fear drove the boat on through the inky, whispering waters.

Treach was nearly mad now. There *was* something out there! He could no longer keep from thinking of the curse—of what Ynez had said about not being able to die. Yet he had killed her; what he did would kill anyone. She must be dead.

"What's that?" Groat had stopped rowing.

"Where?"

"Back there in the water—see, where the moonlight hits the wave."

"I don't see——" Treach stopped, eyes wide with dread.

"Yes, you do. You see it. That head, coming toward us."

They sat there while the bobbing thing approached. And the whispering rose about them in a great murmur as of winds rising from ocean depths, and the whispering was clear this time so that they heard.

"Where are you, Luke Treach? I come for you. You have taken my eyes, Luke Treach, and I cannot see. But you are there, and I come for you!"

Groat began to laugh. A low chuckling rose from his throat until it drowned out: the sound of the whispering. Groat raised his head to the moon and bayed his laughter. He sat there quaking with mirth.

And Treach watched him, then watched the bobbing head that circled the boat. It went around once, twice. It stopped for a moment on his side, and he saw a dark, seal-like outline that might or might not have been human. It hesitated in the water, and Treach drew his knife. Then it circled the boat again and came to rest on the side where Groat sat laughing. Two arms rose out of the water in the moonlight—two red arms, glistening and wet. And Groat went over, still laughing. His laughter rose, then bubbled away as the arms dragged him down.

It was then that Treach himself began to laugh. All alone in the boat he sat, laughing up to the moon. He laughed because he knew he was mad—what he had seen could not be true.

He was mad, and yet he would escape. Luke Treach seized an oar and began to row with demented fury.

THE sun was high when he ceased. Madness passed, and the events of the night were a dream. Treach leaned back, rubbed his eyes, and looked around in amazement.

“Groat? Salvatore? Slew? Where are you?”

They were gone—but they couldn’t be gone, or it would be true.

“Groat? Salvatore? Slew?”

And then the waves around the boat parted, and three heads appeared in the water. Sam Slew’s one-eyed stare came from a blue, bloated face. Salvatore’s eyes were closed and his mouth was sealed with seaweed. The drowned visage of Groat, smiling through a tangle of kelp, bobbed horridly on the waves. All three heads came to the side of the boat. They shimmered there through the haze of heat from the sun.

Treach had been screaming for a long time in a high shrill voice when they disappeared.

“Fever,” he muttered. “Just one day more.”

He clawed at the oars.

But now he couldn’t keep his eyes off the water. And as noon approached, he could begin to see the swimmer behind—far off, crawling through the trough of the waves. It was keeping distance; but a few strokes and it would be upon him.

The delirious pirate redoubled his efforts with every ounce of remaining strength. And still the gap between boat and swimmer narrowed. Now

Treach could see long red arms ill the water. He could not quite make out a head or face, but he saw the arms. Remembering what he had done he shuddered. *Red arms!*

But the breeze was changing. Offshore?

He faced the sunset. A black bulk loomed from the water to his west. Dominica, he guessed. If he could make it before nightfall he would be safe.

He rowed on, faster.

The swimmer was fast, too. The gap narrowed, just as the red band of sunset narrowed.

"How can she follow?" Treach muttered. "She's blind. I know that. She took the others, searching for me. How can she follow? Wizard tricks—that vial! Why didn't I believe it would keep her alive, even after *that!* I must row—harder."

Panting, the wrecked body of Luke Treach tugged at the oars. His bloodshot eyes stared now at the bobbing head just behind the boat. His ears buzzed, but he heard the whisperings.

"I swore it, Luke Treach. Now I come for you."

There was no use to row, but Treach rowed; no use to scream, but Treach screamed; screamed and rowed as the red thing swam around the boat. Then it was crawling over the side, and Luke Treach avoided the pinkish-red arms as they reached out. Laughing, he drew his knife. But then it crawled into the boat so that Treach saw it, drowned, yet livid red all over. And he pointed the knife, but it came on, eyeless and groping. One hand grasped the knife and then both arms went around Luke Treach so that he fell back. The hand grasping the knife came down and a voice that was not a voice whispered:

"I came a long way—from death itself. And now I shall do to you what you did to me before you cast me over the side. You shall be as red as I am."

And the knife sang down as Luke Treach's knife had sung down when he killed Ynez before her father and cast her into the sea. It sang down, and when it ceased the red swimmer went over the side of the drifting boat and disappeared.

Night fell, and still the boat drifted. At dawn it bumped the shore.

Two men found it there some hours later.

They peered into it and shuddered at the sight of the figure lying on the bottom of the boat.

"Dead?" whispered one.

"Of course he's dead."

"Wrecked, doubtlessly, in an open boat."

"Yes." His voice was vibrant with horror. "But what could have done *this* to him?"

"Just what was done?—I cannot understand it yet."

The first man stared again at the red thing in the boat. "You fool," he said, "can't you see that this man was *flayed alive?"*

The Cloak

The costumer assured him the cloak was genuine, of course—

THE sun was dying, and its blood spattered the sky as it crept into its sepulcher behind the hills. The keening wind sent the dry, fallen leaves scurrying, toward the west, as though hastening them to the funeral of the sun.

“Nuts!” said Henderson to himself, and stopped thinking.

The sun was setting in a dingy red sky, and a dirty raw wind was kicking up the half-rotten leaves in a filthy gutter. Why should he waste time with cheap imagery?

“Nuts!” said Henderson, again.

It was probably a mood evoked by the day, he mused. After all, this was the sunset of Halloween, Tonight was the dreaded All Hallows’ Eve, when spirits walked in and skulls cried out from their graves beneath the earth.

Either that, or tonight was just another rotten cold fall day. Henderson sighed. There was a time, he reflected, when the coming of this night meant something. A dark Europe, groaning in superstitious fear, dedicated this Eve to the grinning Unknown. A million doors had once been barred against the evil visitants, a million prayers mumbled, a million candles lit. There was something majestic about the idea, Henderson reflected. Life had been an adventure in those times, and men walked in terror of what the next turn of a midnight road might bring. They had lived in a world of demons and ghouls and elementals who sought their souls—and by Heaven, in those days a man's soul meant something. This new skepticism had taken a profound meaning away from life. Men no longer revered their souls.

"Nuts!" said Henderson again, quite automatically. There was something crude and twentieth-century about the coarse expression which always checked his introspective flights of fancy.

The voice in his brain that said "nuts" took the place of humanity to Henderson—common humanity which would echo the same sentiment upon hearing his secret thoughts. So now Henderson uttered the word and endeavored to forget problems and purple patches alike.

He was walking down the street at sunset to buy a costume for the masquerade party tonight, and he had much better concentrate on finding the costumer's before it closed than waste his time daydreaming about Halloween.

His eyes searched the darkening shadows of the dingy buildings lining the narrow thoroughfare. Once again he peered at the address he had scribbled down after finding it in the phone book.

Why the devil didn't they light up the shops when it got dark? He couldn't make out numbers. This was a poor, rundown neighborhood, but after all—

Abruptly, Henderson spied the place across the street and started over. He passed the window and glanced in. The last rays of the sun slanted over the top of the building across the wall and fell directly on the window and its display. Henderson drew a sharp intake of breath.

He was staring at a costumer's window—not looking through a fissure into hell. Then why was it all red fire, lighting the grinning visages of fiends?

"Sunset," Henderson muttered aloud. Of course it was, and the faces were merely clever masks such as would be displayed in this sort of place. Still, it gave the imaginative man a start. He opened the door and entered.

The place was dark and still. There was a smell of loneliness in the air—the smell that haunts all places long undisturbed; tombs, and graves in deep woods, and caverns in the earth, and—

“Nuts.”

What the devil was wrong with him, anyway? Henderson smiled apologetically at the empty darkness. This was the smell of the costumer’s shop, and it carried him back to college days of amateur theatricals. Henderson had known this smell of moth balls, decayed furs, grease paint and oils. He had played amateur Hamlet and in his hands he had held a smirking skull that hid all knowledge in its empty eyes—a skull, from the costumer’s.

Well, here he was again, and the skull gave him the idea. After all, Halloween night it was. Certainly in this mood of his he didn’t want to go as a rajah, or a Turk, or a pirate—they all did that. Why not go as a fiend, or a warlock, or a werewolf? He could see Lindstrom’s face when he walked into the elegant penthouse wearing rags of some sort. The fellow would have a fit, with his society crowd wearing their expensive Elsa Maxwell take-offs. Henderson didn’t greatly care for Lindstrom’s sophisticated friends anyway; a gang of amateur Noel Cowards and horsy women wearing harnesses of jewels. Why not carry out the spirit of Halloween and go as a monster?

Henderson stood there in the dusk, waiting for someone to turn on the lights, come out from the back room and serve him. After a minute or so he grew impatient and rapped sharply on the counter.

“Say in there! Service!”

Silence. And a shuffling noise from the rear, then—an unpleasant noise to hear in the gloom. There was a banging from downstairs and then the heavy clump of footsteps. Suddenly Henderson gasped. A black hulk was rising from the floor!

It was, of course, only the opening of the trapdoor from the basement. A man shuffled behind the counter, carrying a lamp. In that light his eyes blinked drowsily.

The man’s yellowish face crinkled into a smile.

“I was sleeping, I’m afraid,” said the man softly. “Can I serve you, sir?”

“I was looking for a Halloween costume.”

“Oh, yes. And what was it you had in mind?”

The voice was weary, infinitely weary. The eyes continued to blink in the flabby yellow face.

“Nothing usual, I’m afraid. You see, I rather fancied some sort of monster getup for a party—don’t suppose you carry anything in that line?”

“I could show you masks.”

“No. I meant werewolf outfits, something out of the sort. More of the authentic.”

“So. The *authentic.”*

“Yes.” Why did this old dunce stress the word?

“I might—yes. I might have just the thing for you, sir.” The eyes blinked, but the thin mouth pursed in a smile. “Just the thing tor Halloween.”

“What’s that?”

“Have you ever considered the possibility of being a vampire?

“Like Dracula?”

“Ah—yes, I suppose—Dracula.”

“Not a bad idea. Do you think I’m the type for that, though?”

The man appraised him with the tight smile. “Vampires are of all types, I understand. You would do nicely.”

“Hardly a compliment,” Henderson chuckled. “But why not? What’s the outfit?”

“Outfit? Merely evening clothes, or what you wear. I will furnish you with the authentic cloak.”

“Just a cloak—is that all?”

“Just a cloak. But it is worn like a shroud. It *is* shroudcloth, you know. Wait, I’ll get it for you.”

The shuffling feet carried the man into the rear of the shop again. Down the trapdoor entrance he went, and Henderson waited. There was more banging, and presently the old man reappeared carrying the cloak. He was shaking dust from it in the darkness.

“Here it is—the genuine cloak.”

"Genuine?"

"Allow me to adjust it for you—it will work wonders, I'm sure."

The cold, heavy cloth hung draped about Henderson's shoulders. The faint odor rose mustily in his nostrils as he stepped back and surveyed himself in the mirror. The lamp was poor, but Henderson saw that the cloak effected a striking transformation in his appearance. His long face seemed thinner, his eyes were accentuated in the facial pallor heightened by the somber cloak he wore. It was a big, black shroud.

"Genuine," murmured the old man. He must have come up suddenly, for Henderson hadn't noticed him in the glass.

"I'll take it," Henderson said. "How much?"

"You'll find it quite entertaining, I'm sure."

"How much?"

"Oh. Shall we say five dollars?"

"Here."

The old man took the money, blinking, and drew the cloak from Henderson's shoulders. When it slid away he felt suddenly warm again. It must be cold in the basement—the cloth was icy.

The old man wrapped the garment, smiling, and handed it over.

"I'll have it back tomorrow," Henderson promised.

"No need. You purchased it. It is yours."

"But—"

"I am leaving business shortly. Keep it. You will find more use for it than I, surely."

"But—"

"A pleasant evening to you."

Henderson made his way to the door in confusion, then turned to salute the blinking old man in the dimness.

Two eyes were burning at him from across the counter—two eyes that did not blink.

"Good night," said Henderson, and closed the door quickly. He wondered if he were going just a trifle mad.

AT EIGHT, Henderson nearly called up Lindstrom to tell him he couldn't make it. The cold chills came the minute he put on the damned cloak, and when he looked at himself in the mirror his blurred eyes could scarcely make out the reflection.

But after a few drinks he felt better about it. He hadn't eaten, and the liquor warmed his blood. He paced the floor, attitudinizing with the cloak—sweeping it about him and scowling in what he thought was a ferocious manner. Damn it, he was going to be a vampire all right! He called a cab, went down to the lobby. The driver came in, and Henderson was waiting, black cloak furled.

"I wish you to drive me," he said in a low voice.

The cabman took one look at him in the cloak and turned pale.

"Whazzat?"

"I ordered you to come," said Henderson gutturally, while he quaked with inner mirth. He leered ferociously and swept the cloak back.

"Yeah, yeah. O.K."

The driver almost ran outside. Henderson stalked after him.

"Where to, boss—I mean, sir?"

The frightened face didn't turn as Henderson intoned the address and sat back.

The cab started with a lurch that set Henderson to chuckling deeply, in character. At the sound of laughter the driver got panicky and raced his engine up to the limit set by the governor. Henderson laughed loudly, and the impressionable driver fairly quivered in his seat. It was quite a ride, but Henderson was entirely unprepared to open the door and find it slammed after him as the cabman drove hastily away without collecting a fare.

"I must look the part," he thought complacently, as he took the elevator up to the penthouse apartment.

There were three or four others in the elevator; Henderson had seen them before at other affairs Lindstrom had invited him to attend, but nobody seemed to recognize him. It rather pleased him to think how his wearing of an unfamiliar cloak and an unfamiliar scowl seemed to change his entire personality and appearance. Here the other guests had donned elaborate disguises—one woman wore the costume of a Watteau shepherdess, another was attired as a Spanish ballerina, a tall man dressed as Pagliacci, and his companion had donned a toreador outfit. Yet Henderson recognized them all; knew that their expensive habiliments were not truly disguises at all, but merely elaborations calculated to enhance their appearance. Most people at costume parties gave vent to suppressed desires. The women showed off their figures, the men either accentuated their masculinity as the toreador did, or clowned it. Such things were pitiful; these conventional fools eagerly doffing their dismal business suits and rushing off to a lodge, or amateur theatrical, or mask ball in order to satisfy their starving imaginations. Why didn't they dress in garish colors on the street? Henderson often pondered the question.

Surely these society folk in the elevator were fine-looking men and women in their outfits—so healthy, so red-faced, and full of vitality. They had such robust throats and necks. Henderson looked at the plump arms of the woman next to him. He stared, without realizing it, for a long moment. And then, he saw that the occupants of the car had drawn away from him. They were standing in the comer, as though they feared his cloak and scowl, and his eyes fixed on the woman. Their chatter had ceased abruptly. The woman looked at him, as though she were about to speak, when the elevator doors opened and afforded Henderson a welcome respite.

What the devil was wrong? First the cab driver, then the woman. Had he drunk too much?

Well, no chance to consider that. Here was Marcus Lindstrom, and he was thrusting a glass into Henderson's hand.

"What have we here? Ah, a bogy-man!" It needed no second glance to perceive that Lindstrom, as usual at such affairs, was already quite bottle-dizzy. The fat host was positively swimming in alcohol.

"Have a drink, Henderson, my lad! I'll take mine from the bottle. That outfit of yours gave me a shock. Where'd you get the make-up?"

"Make-up? I'm not wearing any make-up."

"Oh. So you're not. How . . . silly of me."

Henderson wondered if he were crazy. Had Lindstrom really drawn back? Were his eyes actually filled with a certain dismay? Oh, the man was obviously intoxicated.

"I'll . . . I'll see you later," babbled Lindstrom, edging away and quickly turning to the other arrivals. Henderson watched the back of Lindstrom's neck. It was fat and white. It bulged over the collar of his costume and there was a vein in it. A vein in Lindstrom's fat neck. Frightened Lindstrom.

Henderson stood alone in the ante-room. From the parlor beyond came the sound of music and laughter; party noises. Henderson hesitated before entering. He drank from the glass in his hand—Bacardi rum, and powerful. On top of his other drinks it almost made the man reel. But he drank, wondering. What was wrong with him and his costume? Why did he frighten people? Was he unconsciously acting his vampire role? That crack of Lindstrom's about make-up now—

Acting on impulse, Henderson stepped over to the long panel mirror in the hall. He lurched a little, then stood in the harsh light before it. He faced the glass, stared into the mirror, and saw nothing.

He looked at himself in the mirror, and there was no one there!

Henderson began to laugh softly, evilly, deep in his throat. And as he gazed into the empty, unreflecting glass, his laughter rose in black glee.

"I'M DRUNK," he whispered. "I must be drunk. Mirror in my apartment made me blurred. Now I'm so far gone I can't see straight. Sure I'm drunk. Been acting ridiculously, scaring people. Now I'm seeing hallucinations—or not seeing them, rather. Visions. Angels."

His voice lowered. "Sure, angels. Standing right in back of me, now. Hello, angel."

"Hello."

Henderson whirled. There she stood, in the dark cloak, her hair a shimmering halo above her white, proud face, her eyes celestial blue, and her lips infernal red.

Are you real?” asked Henderson, gently. “Or am I a fool to believe in miracles?”

This miracle’s name is Sheila Darrly, and it would like to powder its nose if you please.”

“Kindly use this mirror through the courtesy of Stephen Henderson,” replied the cloaked man, with a grin. He stepped back a ways, eyes intent.

The girl turned her head and favored him with a slow, impish smile. “Haven’t you ever seen powder used before?” she asked.

“Didn’t know angels indulged in cosmetics,” Henderson replied. “But then there’s a lot I don’t know about angels. From now on I shall make them a special study of mine. There’s so much I want to find out. So you’ll probably find me following you around with a notebook all evening.”

“Notebooks for a vampire?”

“Oh, but I’m a very intelligent vampire—not one of those backwoods Transylvanian types. You’ll find me charming, I’m sure.”

“Yes, you look like the sure type,” the girl mocked. “But an angel and a vampire—that’s a queer combination.”

“We can reform one another,” Henderson pointed out. “Besides, I have a suspicion that there’s a bit of the devil in you. That dark cloak over your angel costume; dark angel, you know. Instead of heaven you might hail from my home town.”

Henderson was flippant, but underneath his banter cyclonic thoughts whirled. He recalled discussions in the past; cynical observations he had made and believed.

Once, Henderson had declared that there was no such thing as love at first sight, save in books or plays where such a dramatic device served to speed up action. He asserted that people learned about romance from books and plays and accordingly adopted a belief in love at first sight when all one could possibly feel was desire.

And now this Sheila—this blond angel—had to come along and drive out all thoughts of morbidity, all thoughts of drunkenness and foolish gazings into mirrors, from his mind; had to send him madly plunging into dreams of red lips, ethereal blue eyes and slim white arms.

Something of his feeling had swept into his eyes, and as the girl gazed up at him she felt the truth.

“Well,” she breathed, “I hope the inspection pleases.”

“A miracle of understatement, that. But there was something I wanted to find out particularly about divinity. Do angels dance?”

“Tactful vampire! The next room?”

Arm in arm they entered the parlor. The merrymakers were in full swing. Liquor had already pitched gaiety at its height, but there was no dancing any longer.

Boisterous little grouped couples laughed arm in arm about the room. The usual party gagsters were performing their antics in comers. The superficial atmosphere, which Henderson detested, was fully in evidence.

It was reaction which made Henderson draw himself up to full height and sweep the cloak about his shoulders. Reaction brought the scowl to his pale face, caused him to stalk along in brooding silence. Sheila seemed to regard this as a great joke.

“PULL a vampire act on them,” she giggled, clutching his arm. Henderson accordingly scowled at the couples, sneered horrendously at the woman. And his progress was marked by the turning of heads, the abrupt cessation of chatter. He walked through the long room like Red Death incarnate. Whispers trailed in his wake.

“Who is that man?”

“His eyes—”

“Vampire!”

“Hello, Dracula!” It was Marcus Lindstrom and a sullen-looking brunette in Cleopatra costume who lurched toward Henderson. Host Lindstrom could scarcely stand, and his companion in cups was equally at a loss. Henderson liked the man when sober at the club, but his behavior at parties had always irritated him. Lindstrom was particularly objectionable in his present condition—it made him boorish.

"M'dear, I want you t' meet a very dear friend of mine. Yessir, it being Halloween and all, I invited Count Dracula here, t'gether with his daughter. Asked his grandmother, but she's busy tonight at a Black Sabbath—along with Aunt Jemima. Ha! Count, meet my little playmate."

The woman leered up at Henderson.

"Oooh Dracula, what big eyes you have! Oooh, what big teeth you have! Oooh—"

"Really, Marcus," Henderson protested. But the host had turned and shouted to the room.

"Folks, meet the real goods—only genuine living vampire in captivity! Dracula Henderson, only existing vampire with false teeth."

In any other circumstance Henderson would have given Lindstrom a quick, efficient punch in the jaw. But Sheila was at his side, it was a public gathering; better to humor the man's clumsy jest. Why not be a vampire?

Smiling quickly at the girl, Henderson drew himself erect, faced the crowd, and frowned. His hands brushed the cloak. Funny, it still felt cold. Looking down he noticed for the first time that it was a little dirty at the edges; muddy or dusty. But the cold silk slid through his fingers as he drew it across his breast with one long hand. The feeling seemed to inspire him. He opened his eyes wide and let them blaze. His mouth opened. A sense of dramatic power filled him. And he looked at Marcus Lindstrom's soft, fat neck with the vein standing in the whiteness. He looked at the neck, saw the crowd watching him, and then the impulse seized him He turned, eyes on that creasy neck—that wabbling, creasy neck of the fat man.

Hands darted out. Lindstrom squeaked like a frightened rat. He was a plump, sleek white rat, bursting with blood. Vampires liked blood. Blood from the rat, from the neck of the rat, from the vein in the neck of the rat, from the vein in the back of the squeaking rat.

"Warm blood."

The deep voice was Henderson's own.

The hands were Henderson’s own.

The hands that went around Lindstrom’s neck as he spoke, the hands that felt the warmth, that searched out the vein. Henderson’s face was bending for the neck, and, as Lindstrom struggled, his grip tightened. Lindstrom’s face was turning, turning purple. Blood was rushing to his head. That was good. Blood!

Henderson’s mouth opened. He felt the air on his teeth. He bent down toward that fat neck, and then—

“STOP! That’s plenty!”

The voice, the cooling voice of Sheila. Her fingers on his arm. Henderson looked up, startled. He released Lindstrom, who sagged with open mouth.

The crowd was staring, and their mouths were all shaped in the instinctive O of amazement.

Sheila whispered, “Bravo! Served him right—but you frightened him!”

Henderson struggled a moment to collect himself. Then he smiled and turned.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” he said, “I have just given a slight demonstration to prove to you what our host said of me was entirely correct. I *am* a vampire. Now that you have been given fair warning, I am sure you will be in no further danger. If there is a doctor in the house I can, perhaps, arrange for a blood transfusion.”

The O’s relaxed and laughter came from startled throats. Hysterical laughter, in part then genuine. Henderson had carried it off. Marcus Lindstrom alone still stared with eyes that held utter fear. *He* knew.

And then the moment broke, for one of the gagsters ran into the room from the elevator. He had gone downstairs and borrowed the apron and cap of a newsboy. Now he raced through the crowd with a bundle of papers under his arm.

“Extra! Extra! Read all about it! Big Halloween Horror! Extra!”

Laughing guests purchased papers. A woman approached Sheila, and Henderson watched the girl walk away in a daze.

"See you later," she called, and her glance sent fire through his veins. Still, he could not forget the terrible feeling that came over him when he had seized Lindstrom. Why?

Automatically, he accepted a paper from the shouting pseudonewsboy. "Big Halloween Horror," he had shouted. What was that?

Blurred eyes searched the paper.

Then Henderson reeled back. That headline! It was an *Extra* after all. Henderson scanned the columns with mounting dread.

"Fire in costumer's . . . shortly after 8 p.m. firemen were summoned to the shop of . . . flames beyond control . . . completely demolished . . . damage estimated at . . . peculiarly enough, name of proprietor unknown . . . skeleton found in—"

"No!" gasped Henderson aloud.

He read, reread *that* closely. The skeleton had been found in a box of earth in the cellar beneath the shop. The box was a coffin. There had been two other boxes, empty. The skeleton had been wrapped in a cloak, undamaged by the flames—

And in the hastily penned box at the bottom of the column were eyewitness comments, written up under scareheads of heavy black type. Neighbors had feared the place. Hungarian neighborhood, hints of vampirism, of strangers who entered the shop. One man spoke of a cult believed to have held meetings in the place. Superstition about things sold there—love philters, outlandish charms and weird disguises.

Weird disguises—vampires—cloaks—*his eyes!*

"This is an authentic cloak."

"I will not be using this much longer. Keep it."

Memories of these words screamed through Henderson's brain. He plunged out of the room and rushed to the panel mirror.

A moment, then he flung one arm before his face to shield his eyes from the image that was not there—the missing reflection. *Vampires have no* *reflections.*

No wonder he looked strange. No wonder arms and necks invited him. He had wanted Lindstrom. Good God!

The cloak had done that, the dark cloak with the stains. The stains of earth, grave-earth. The wearing of the cloak, the cold cloak, had given him the feelings of a true vampire. It was a garment accursed, a thing that had lain on the body of one undead. The rusty stain along one sleeve was blood.

Blood. It would be nice to see blood. To taste its warmth, its red life, flowing.

No. That was insane. He was drunk, crazy.

"Ah. My pale friend, the vampire."

It was Sheila again. And above all horror rose the beating of Henderson's heart. As he looked at her shining eyes, her warm mouth shaped in red invitation, Henderson felt a wave of warmth. He looked at her white throat rising above her dark, shimmering cloak, and another kind of warmth rose. Love, desire, and a—hunger.

SHE must have seen it in his eyes, but she did not flinch. Instead, her own gaze burned in return.

Sheila loved him, too!

With an impulsive gesture, Henderson ripped the cloak from about his throat. The icy weight lifted. He was free. Somehow, he hadn't wanted to take the cloak off, but he had to. It was a cursed thing, and in another minute he might have taken the girl in his arms, taken her for a kiss and remained to—

But he dared not think of that.

"Tired of masquerading?" she asked. With a similar gesture she, too, removed her cloak and stood revealed in the glory of her angel robe. Her blond, statuesque perfection forced a gasp to Henderson's throat.

"Angel," he whispered.

"Devil," she mocked.

And suddenly they were embracing. Henderson had taken her cloak in his arm with his own. They stood with lips seeking rapture until Lindstrom and a group moved noisily into the anteroom.

At the sight of Henderson the fat host recoiled.

"You—" he whispered. "You are—"

"Just leaving," Henderson smiled. Grasping the girl's arm, he drew her toward the empty elevator. The door shut on Lindstrom's pale, fear-filled face.

"Were we leaving?" Sheila whispered, snuggling against his shoulder.

"We were. But not for earth. We do not go down into my realm, but up—into yours."

"The roof garden?"

"Exactly, my angelic one. I want to talk to you against the background of your own heavens, kiss you amidst the clouds, and—"

Her lips found his as the car rose.

"Angel and devil. What a match!"

"I thought so, too," the girl confessed. "Will our children have halos or horns?"

"Both, I'm sure."

They stepped out onto the deserted rooftop. And once again it was Halloween.

Henderson felt it. Downstairs it was Lindstrom and his society friends, in a drunken costume party. Here it was night, silence, gloom. No light, no music, no drinking, no chatter which made one party identical with another; one night like all the rest. This night was individual here.

The sky was not blue, but black. Clouds hung like the gray beards of hovering giants peering at the round orange globe of the moon. A cold wind blew from the sea, and filled the air with tiny murmurings from afar.

This was the sky that witches flew through to their Sabbath. This was the moon of wizardry, the sable silence of black prayers and whispered invocations. The clouds hid monstrous Presences shambling in summons from afar. It was Halloween.

It was also quite cold.

"Give me my cloak," Sheila whispered. Automatically, Henderson extended the garment, and the girl's body swirled under the dark splendor of the cloth. Her eyes burned up at Henderson with a call he could not resist. He kissed her. trembling.

"You're cold," the girl said. "Put on your cloak."

Yes, Henderson, he thought to himself. Put on your cloak while you stare at her throat. Then, the next time you kiss her you will want her throat and she will give it in love and you will take it in—hunger.

"Put it on, darling—I insist," the girl whispered. Her eyes were impatient, burning with an eagerness to match his own.

Henderson trembled.

Put on the cloak of darkness? The cloak of the grave, the cloak of death, the cloak of the vampire? The evil cloak, filled with a cold life of its own that transformed his face, transformed his mind, made his soul instinct with awful hunger?

"Here."

The girl's slim arms were about him, pushing the cloak onto his shoulders. Her fingers brushed his neck, caressingly, as she linked the cloak about his throat.

Henderson shivered.

Then he felt it—through him—that icy coldness turning to a more dreadful heat. He felt himself expand, felt the sneer cross his face. This was Power!

And the girl before him, her eyes taunting, inviting. He saw her ivory neck, her warm slim neck, waiting. It was waiting for him, for his lips.

For his teeth.

No—it couldn't be. He loved her. His love must conquer this madness. Yes, wear the cloak, defy its power, and take her in his arms as a man, not as a fiend. He must. It was the test.

"Sheila." Funny how his voice deepened.

"Yes, dear."

“Sheila, I must tell you this.”

Her eyes—so alluring. It would be easy!

“Sheila, please. You read the paper tonight.”

“Yes.”

“I . . . I got my cloak there. I can’t explain it. You saw how I took Lindstrom. I wanted to go through with it. Do you understand me? I meant to . . .to bile him. Wearing this damnable thing makes me feel like one of those creatures.”

Why didn’t her stare change? Why didn’t she recoil in horror? Such trusting innocence! Didn’t she understand? Why didn’t she run? Any moment now he might lose control, seize her.

“I love you, Sheila. Believe that. I love you.”

“I know.” Her eyes gleamed in the moonlight.

“I want to test it. I want to kiss you, wearing this cloak. I want to feel that my love is stronger than this—thing. If I weaken, promise me you’ll break away and run, quickly. But don’t misunderstand. I must face this feeling and fight it; I want my love for you to be that pure, that secure. Are you afraid?”

“No.” Still she stared at him, just as he stared at her throat. If she knew what was in his mind!

“You don’t think I’m crazy? I went to this costumer’s—he was a horrible little old man—and he gave me the cloak. Actually told me it was a real vampire’s. I thought he was joking, but tonight I didn’t see myself in the mirror, and I wanted Lindstrom’s neck, and I want you. But I must test it.”

“You’re not crazy. I know. I’m not afraid.”

“Then—”

The girl’s face mocked. Henderson summoned his strength. He bent forward, his impulses battling. For a moment he stood there under the ghastly orange moon, and his face was twisted in struggle.

And the girl lured.

Her odd, incredibly red lips parted in a silvery, chuckly laugh as her white arms rose from the black cloak she wore to circle his neck gently. “I know—I knew when I looked in the mirror. I knew you had a cloak like mine—got yours where I got mine—”

Queerly, her lips seemed to elude his as he stood frozen for an instant of shock. Then he felt the icy hardness of her sharp little teeth on his throat, a strangely soothing sting, and an engulfing blackness rising over him.

The Dark Isle

An eldritch tale of the Romans and the Druids, and the horrendous doom revealed by the flaring torchlight in that frightful underground passage in England

THE Celts knew it as Mona; the Eritons called it Anglesey; but the Welsh spoke truly when they named the shunned spot “Ynys Dywyll”—the Dark Isle.

But all the peoples of Britain feared it for its dwellers. Here were die oaken temples of the Druids, the caves and caverns of the forest people, and the strange altars reared to dread gods. In these times the Clan of Mabon ruled, and heavy was its hold upon the lands. Erin knew the furtive, bearded priests that stalked through the forests seeking stealthy counsel with voices that moaned in the night. The Britons paid their tribute, turning over the criminally condemned for unspeakable sacrifice before the menhirs of the Druids in groves of oak. The Welsh feared these silent wizards and wonderworkers who appeared at clan gatherings to dispense law and justice throughout the land. They feared what they knew of these men, but greater still was the fear of what they *suspected.*

It was said that the Druids first came from Greece, and before that, from lost Atlantis; that they ruled in Gaul and crossed the seas in boats of stone. It was whispered that they were gifted with curious magics, that they could control the winds and waves and elemental fires. Certainly they were a sect of priests and sorcerers possessing powers before which the savage, blue-painted Britons quailed; black wisdom to quell the wild clans of Erin. They made the laws of the land, and they prophesied before the tribal kings. And ever they took their toll of prisoners for altar rites, their tribute of maidens and young men rich in blooded life.

There were certain dark groves in isolated forests where the boldest huntsmen did not venture, and there were great domed hills bearing curious stones and dolmens where voices cried in the night—voices good folk did not care to hear. In glades of oak the priestcraft dwelt, and what they did there was not a thing to be rashly spoken of.

For this was an age of demons and monsters, when dragons slumbered in the seas, and coiling creatures slithered through burrows beneath the hills; the time of Little Folk, and swamp kelpies, of sirens and enchanters. All these the Druids controlled, and it was not good to stir their wrath.

They kept their peace, and their island stronghold of Anglesey was inviolate to other men.

But Rome knew no master. Caesar came, and the legions thundered into bloody battle with the stout kings of Britain. Emperor Claudius followed later, and the Eagle Standards were planted ever further in the land. Then crafty Nero held the throne afar, and he sent Suetonius Paulinus to ravage Wales. And so it was that one black night, Vincius the Reaper looked on Anglesey—the Dark Isle of the Druids.

2

VINCIUS the Reaper gazed on Anglesey with bold black eyes; wise, unblinking eyes that had seen much that was beautiful, and strange, and dreadful. These eyes had seen Imperial Rome, they had beheld the Sphinx, they had visioned the dark forests of the Rhine, the templed columns of ancient Greece.

They had witnessed blood and battle; fierce fighting, scenes of pain, anguish, barbaric torture.

Yet now they stared in a manner previously unknown; behind the dark pupils crept an unfamiliar tinge of fear. For the great dark island rising out of the sea was reputed a dreadful place. During the long sea-voyage to Britain, the fleet had buzzed with wild tales of the Druids; tales of their dire magic and hideous blood-thirst in the presence of enemies.

Vincius' friends—grizzled veterans of the legions—had known comrades serving against the Druids in Gaul. Some of these comrades had returned with horrific stories of almost unbelievable sorceries they had seen; of voices that cried out in the night, and of sentries found with mangled throats in the morning. They had whispered, these comrades, of how the beasts of the forest fought side by side with the blue barbarians; how packs of wolves and boars were summoned by wizard priests who piped. And these returning comrades of Vincius had been haggard, their laughter hushed, as though dark memories precluded all thoughts of gayety again. Then too, many of Vincius' comrades had not returned at all. The tales of their dying were singularly unnerving—Druid killing and torture and sacrifice employed ghastly magics.

All through the voyage, rumors and hintings spread from vessel to vessel. For once the invincible might of the Roman standard was questioned; arms were not invulnerable to wizardry. And everyone knew that the fleet sailed to Anglesey—the great sullen island stronghold of the chief Druid clans. It had been a disturbing passage, through the dismal green seas of the North.

Now, anchored offshore, the fleet awaited morning to land and attack.

And Vincius, sleepless, took the deck and stared out across the brooding waters toward the black bulk of the island.

His lean, lantern-jawed face, browned by Syrian sun in the last campaign, was set in a scowl of puzzled bewilderment. Vincius was a veteran, and there were many things about this night which past experiences warned him of.

For one thing, the great island was too dark, too silent. Usually on the eve of battle the barbarian peoples gathered for war-dances about great fires. They would shriek and prance to the thunder of drums, give frenzied sacrifice to the gods for victory. But here all was dark and still; and the darkness and the stillness hinted of secret thoughts and plottings.

Again, Vincius' trained senses told him that the fleet was being watched. Although they had anchored under the cover of a foggy dusk, he felt that their movements had been observed; nay, expected. And now eyes peered across the silent waters.

The old soldier scowled, and stroked an ancient scar which whitely slashed the bronze of his forehead. A restless uneasiness kept him from sleep; some inner intuition told him to wait out the night and the silence.

The silence—it was too silent! The sullen lapping of waters against the sides of the vessel had seemingly ceased. Instinctively, the Reaper's eyes turned toward the helm, where a sentry stood peering and still. In the murky torchlight Vincius saw that his eyes were open, but glazed. He had turned, so that his back was to the rail.

And now, in the soundless hush, Vincius stared at the rail—stared at the two blue talons that slowly crept above it and clutched for support.

Two *blue* talons!

And two blue arms—long, emaciated arms, leprous and phosphorescent in the night—writhed above the rail. A great shaggy head appeared over the side of the ship, a terrible head, haloed by a tumbling mass of matted white hair. It framed a face shaped in Hell; a gaunt, thin face with cadaverous cheeks, hollowed eye-sockets, and a snarling mouth opened to reveal animal fangs. Two burning yellow eyes blazed under corpse-lids.

The face was blue.

Vincius the Reaper stared transfixed, and gaped as the bony body slithered over the rail, dropped noiselessly to the deck and stood erect; a figure clad in animal skins; a figure whose moist and dripping skin was deep, unearthly blue—a burning blue no dye could produce.

The withered old man crept slowly toward the glassy-eyed sentry. His hands stretched out, and taloned claws sought a windpipe. Then Vincius moved.

A flash of reason bade him still the cry which instinctively rose to his lips. The enormity of this; a naked barbarian boarding a ship of the fleet and killing a sentry at will—it would be shocking and shameful were this fact revealed to the legions on the eve of battle. Better to keep silent; better to draw one's sword, leap silently across the deck, press the blade into the neck of the ancient horror.

Vincius did so. The old man dropped the sentry's body without a sound. As the lean claws released their hold, a muffled burbling came from the dying throat of the strangled soldier. Then the strange blue creature turned and stared.

Vincius held him, pinioning his arms with one hand and holding his sword with the other. His flesh crawled at the feel of the slimy wet flesh that seemed unnaturally cold, and dreadfully soft.

Still, his grip never relaxed as with his free arm he drew the naked sword-blade in an arc under the throat of the ancient horror that gazed at him unblinking and impassive. Looking deep into the empty yellow eyes, the Reaper shuddered. On the wrinkled forehead he now discerned the almost imperceptible outline of a coiled serpent set in raised weals against the terrible bluish flesh.

"A Druid priest!" The exclamation escaped him in a whisper. At the sound of the words his captive smiled.

"Aye." A croaking voice wheezed out, as though the effort of speech were painful and the Latin tongue difficult.

"Aye," said the blue man. "Druid am I. Mark ye, Roman—I came to slay, but ye thwarted me in that; else there would be a dozen sentries dead, and as many ships at the mercy of my peoples.

"I came to slay, but I remain to warn. Tell this to your commander, oh blasphemer! On the morrow ye come to attack the shrines of our people; this we know. And we are ready. Aye! It will be a warm welcome—by

Primal Nodens, know that we of the Druids can conjure magics for your confoundment. Tell your commander to turn back lest he and all his cursed hordes perish dreadfully before the Children of Mabon. Tell him, fool.”

THE old man croaked out his words slowly, in deep gutturals which unnerved Vincius more than he durst admit even to himself. Impulse prompted him to drive his sword home and destroy this creature whose weird blue skin was somehow utterly unnatural.

Still, reason told him to wait. This old priest evidently knew the plans of the enemy. Threats might force him to talk, or else torture might be employed as a last resort.

Accordingly, the Reaper whispered. “Speak of these plans, dog, or my sword will prompt your tongue.” The blade bit into the neck.

And the old man lifted his blue and ghastly face in a horrid smile. Retching mirth burst in cackles from his corded throat.

“Eeeeeeeh! The fool—the heathen fool threatens me with death. The jest is rich. Eeeeeeeh!”

Mad laughter, though Vincius shook the withered body in rage. Then the terrible eyes slitted, and the fretted mouth gaped again.

“Look at me,” hissed the ancient Druid. “Did ye not mark the blue pallor of my flesh? Think ye the Druids are fools to send a common priest on a desperate errand such as this? No!”

Vincius guessed, with a thrill of horror, the next words.

“Look at me,” droned the croaking voice. “No paint, no dye empurples the flesh to my hue. Yet ye think to threaten me with death! Know then, fool, that I *am* dead—dead and drowned these three years past!”

With a sort of madness, Vincius lunged his blade out at the laughing corpse-head, slashed at the bony yellow eyes set in flabby, bluing skin. The sword sheared the grinning face, and laughter ceased. The body fell, and like a pricked bladder, collapsed. No blood flowed forth, yet the form dwindled and shrank upon the deck. There was an instant of terrible coagulation as the flesh fused, and then the planks were drenched with a wave of gelatinous ichor. Where the twice-dead body had crumpled there was now only a greenish-black pool of slime that flowed bubbling over the deck toward the rail.

Vincius the Reaper turned and ran cursing from the spot.

3

TRUMPETS sounded the dawn. The boats set out, laden with cargoes of living steel. Armored, corseletted men glared shoreward through the mists. Sword, lance, spear, bow, shield, helmet, breast-plate—these were thousandfold duplicated jewels to glitter against the rising sun. These were thousandfold instruments to clash in martial symphony. These were thousandfold symbols of the might that was Mother Rome. The boats rode shoreward.

Vincius stared again at Anglesey as it loomed near. He had not spoken of the night to anyone. The ichor had vanished almost instantly from the deck when he returned after arousing another sentry to stand watch.

Wisdom had kept him from going to Paulinus, the commander, with any fantastic tale of a dead Druid who came to slay and warn. Not only was such a story difficult to credit, but even belief meant only disaster—for such a fearful warning might dishearten the leaders. As it was, Vincius noticed that there had been no report on the auguries taken this morning; no word that favorable omens had been observed before battle. It was a bad sign when the gods did not prophesy victory for the arms of Rome. The soldier’s smile was grimly echoed by his comrades.

Now die boats were beached. The phalanx formed along the sandy shore as the leaders gathered under the Eagles.

Britons and scouts delegated by the Army of Occupation were scurrying off into the deep woods offshore. They sought the Druid hordes in the woods.

Formations stood in silence; then signals flashed in sword-points against the sun. Bugles blared, and kettle-drums set up a martial clangor. The long lines swept on. If the Druids chose to keep silent and lurk in the woods, they would be hunted out—beaten from cover.

Armored ranks swept across the rocky beach toward the still green depths. Clank of weapons set against utter silence from beyond.

And then, soundlessly, a thousand serpents flew straight against the sun. A thousand barbed, feathered serpents, rigid and unswerving, dipped toward the legion rows.

Arrows!

From the seemingly deserted woods they poured, and found their marks. Men dropped.

Another cloud followed very swiftly. Screaming and cursing, the phalanx formations burst into a charge. More arrows met their advance, and hundreds fell. Each dart, wherever it struck, produced a hideous result Within a moment after the wound was inflicted, the unfortunate victim was writhing on the ground, froth bubbling from shrieking lips. A moment later and the man was dead—dead and decaying!

Indeed, the Druids employed strange magic. Invisible, they poured poisoned arrows into the finest men of Rome.

The broken front ranks entered the outskirts of the woods. Arrows hummed about them as they sought foemen behind tree-trunk and buried boulder. They found only death—swift, writhing death.

Officers swore, bugles bleated vain commands, men shouted in confusion, fear, sudden agony. The dark woods closed about the legions—the bold legions that planned to swoop in unbroken lines straight across the barbarian island.

And still, no foes appeared.

Men cursed and died there in the green dark, as swarming arrows struck again and again—yet never a face of the enemy.

Vincius was in the van. Perhaps a hundred had managed to penetrate the wood to any extent; behind them came the confused murmur which bore the shameful tale of an army in flight. The legion was retreating back down the beach!

Vincius' companions turned to follow, arrows pursuing. And then there were shrill whistlings and pipings all about them, and from beyond further trees robed figures appeared—blue-faced, bearded men screaming in wild triumph as they closed in on the fleeing band. Now stone clubs whizzed about helmeted heads. To the commands conveyed by the pipings, little groups were creeping around to head off the escaping men. Stones catapulted into the running bodies. Arrows found screaming targets.

Vincius and two companions made for a thicket. The Reaper took the lead, beckoning for the others to follow. He knew that an instant's delay would be fatal, for the forest men had virtually cut off all avenues of escape.

He entered the brush—and five skin-clad savages rose to confront him. Roman swords and stone war-clubs met in blow, thrust, parry. A legion man went down, his face crushed to red pulp. A short dagger tore a bearded throat. The Reaper's sword whirled about in a pendulum-course of death. The blue-skinned men crept under the guard as the second Roman fell, pinned to the ground by a shivered spear. The Reaper fought alone, lopping at arms that brandished bludgeons and crude maces. He fought until a crouching figure sidled to his rear, half turned to meet the blow of his enemy; then sank to the ground as red fire drowned his senses.

4

VINCIUS opened his eyes. He lay where he had fallen, in the shadow of a large rock.

He stirred tentatively, then sat up and rubbed his aching head where the glancing blow of the stone club had left its painful bruise. Satisfied that he had suffered no permanent or seriously incapacitating injury, the Roman glanced about.

The glade was very still, and there were no noises audible from the beach. Far out on the water, the galleys still rolled at anchor. But from them rose no martial clangor, no trumpeting of victory. The pennons of triumph did not flutter forth amidst the billowed sails. The Reaper was puzzled—could it be that the attack had failed?

In the glade about him he found the answer with his eyes; the mute answer of arrow-riddled bodies, heaped in gory profusion. The men of the legions lay where they had fallen, and in death they were hideous to see. Some few had fallen by the sword or by the blow of club and ax, and these had made a peaceful passing compared to the greater number that lay slain by Druid arrows. For the latter were lying in twisted and contorted attitudes of agony. Their hands clutched at the sod in torture, their faces bore the mark of delirium. And their bodies—their writhing, convulsed bodies—were blue! Swollen, puffed, bloated with evil poison from the wounds, they had died in an instant; an instant that brought them madness. It was an awesome spectacle, and one which caused the soldier to shudder. Never before had he seen Romans in a death like this. It hinted of sorcery, of the dark magic prophesied by the Druid priest.

Vincius the Reaper rose to his feet slowly, his thoughts a confused jumble of pity for his companions, awe at their defeat, and furtive fear at the manner of their passing. But in a moment a much more personal note of concern obtruded.

For even as he rose, a hand fell upon his shoulder. Cat-like the Roman wheeled and faced—a Druid warrior!

Short, squat, his moon-face painted blue in ghastly simulation of the dead, the Druid confronted him. Vincius raised his sword.

The Druid held up his hand hastily and spoke; spoke in Latin—not as the old priest had spoken, hesitantly—but as though it were his native tongue.

“Wait, soldier,” the short man gasped. “I’m Roman, not a savage.”

Half expectant of some treachery, though he now saw that the fellow was unarmed, Vincius lowered his blade.

“Who are you?” he growled. “And if you’re a Roman, what means this heathen garb?”

“I can explain,” babbled the little man, hastily. “Lupus, my nickname is. I served on the triremes—at the oars, you know. Galley slave for bad debts. The ship foundered off this cursed coast three months ago, and I swam ashore. They captured me, the priests did, and gave me my choice: service or death. Well, I’d no mind to die; so since then I’ve lived with these blasted barbarians.”

“What do you seek now?” asked the Reaper, suspiciously.

The little man’s face was pale beneath the woad-stains. He peered up at the tall soldier earnestly.

“Believe me in this,” he murmured. “When I heard of the attack today I sought the shore hoping to escape; even the galleys are better than life among such godless swine. But more than that, I had hoped to find someone whom I could warn. The attack failed; I could not pass through the fray and make myself known in time. I’ve been skulking about in the bushes ever since, hoping to find some survivor to give my message to.”

“Well, speak up, man,” grunted the Reaper.

Lupus nodded gravely before continuing.

“My message is this,” he said. “I’ve heard in their black council last night that these heathens mean to sink the fleet tomorrow.”

“Sink the fleet?” echoed the Roman, incredulously. “Why, that’s impossible! They’ve no boats, and besides they fight on land behind the trees like the cowards they are.”

“So?” said Lupus. His voice was mocking, but his manner gravely earnest. “Did not the attack fail? Look around you and tell me what you see.” With a wave of his hand he indicated the blue and swollen bodies of the dead.

“I tell you that they spoke truly. If they vowed to sink the fleet they’ll do it. Not with boats, or men, but with their cursed magics. It was magic that defeated us today, and it will be magic that brings doom on the morrow. I know. I’ve seen their devilish ways before. They control land, air, fire, water—and *things that dwell in them.* What demons they mean to conjure up for the deed I cannot say, but be warned. We must get news to the ships."

The Reaper scowled.

"How are we to do this?" he questioned. "We're marooned, practically prisoners here. There are no boats available, and the shore is probably guarded well."

"I have a plan," said Lupus, slowly. "We can't get through to the beach without being observed. If we move inland we are equally liable to capture. But tonight there will be a big ceremony and sacrifice in the biggest temple grove."

"I understand," nodded the Reaper. "We shall wait until then, and make for the beach."

"Not so fast, friend," returned the other, with a sad smile. "It Isn't as simple as that, by any means. The Druids are cunning. They keep guard everywhere along the shore, by night as well as by day. Only on the sea-wall is there no sentinel. And it is a thousand-foot drop of sheer rock."

"Then what do you propose?" countered the Reaper.

"This." Lupus lowered his voice to a confidential whisper. "In my days here I have had occasion to observe many things.

I watched, and I learned. There is one altar in the big glade that has a hollow base. Beneath it is a tunnel of some sort that runs under the island to an opening on the base of the sea-wall. This the priests have spoken of, and with my own eyes I have seen certain of them go and come by means of this tunnel below the altar. Methinks I can find that altar and learn the secret of its pivot."

"But what is the purpose of this passage?" asked the soldier, a trifle incredulously. Lupus looked grave.

"That I do not know," he answered. "What the priests do down there I cannot say. Perhaps they commune with their black heathen gods. They are strange men. We may encounter peril below, but it is better than certain death above, say I."

"Your plan?" persisted the Roman.

"Simply this. In the evening they will gather by the oak glade and perform some damnable rite or other. That I know. Then the woods between there and the beach-sentries will be free, and we can approach the spot. After their ceremonies will come some revel or feast. At any rate, the grove will be deserted for the rest of the night. We can enter then, find the altar-stone and the passage beneath it, and take our chances on making the shore by morning. From there we shall swim out to the ship, the gods willing."

"Umm." The Roman grunted. Then he placed his hand on the little man's shoulder. "A pact it is, friend," he said.

Until twilight they remained crouching in the concealment of the boulders.

Lupus kept up a steady stream of conversation in a soft voice, narrating his story of captivity among the oak-men. He told the soldier of Druid ways, and the strange faith of the nature-gods these people worshipped. He spoke of their black powers, and how their magic had driven back even the Roman might this afternoon.

Night fell, and as the moon crept across the sky, the two ventured forth from their place of concealment. The Roman was hungry. Down the path lay a body—that of a huge German mercenary, in full regalia. The Reaper, spying the provision pouch at the dead man's belt, stooped down and tugged it free. His eyes grew wide with loathing at the sight of that blue, contorted face, those blackened, swollen limbs that bore mute testimony to the strange power of Druidic poison. With an oath, he tossed the pouch aside and followed his companion down the path that led into the woods.

They walked slowly, in wary silence. The trees about them rustled in the stillness, and Lupus started nervously upon several occasions.

How far they proceeded it was difficult to judge, but the moon rode high in the heavens when first the sound of voices was audible from somewhere ahead.

Soon faint flickers of light filtered through the twisting trees. Lupus leading, they warily circled the path and crept close through the untracked woodland. In a short time they were nearing the open space in the forest from which the light and sound proceeded.

The Reaper scowled at the spectacle before him. A throng of triumphant Druids moved about the grove, clustering before stone altars on which reposed the limp bodies of sheep and cattle. Blood bubbled redly on the slabs in the light of the torches flaring at the sides of the clearing; blood stained the robes and limbs of the celebrants.

Gongs clashed, horns blared, men and women moved and gestured, but the whole gathering maintained an attitude of expectancy.

Lupus gestured the Reaper to come forward, and together they took their station behind a thick cluster of underbrush.

Vincius saw the priests foregather about the central altar and heard the throbbing drums boom out in a subtle, augmented rhythm that steadily mounted to a delirious crescendo. Something was about to happen!

Drums beating, and the shadows on the trees. . . . For the first time the two men noticed that tree-bordered background and discerned what stood against it.

It seemed as though there were great, shadowy shapes weaving and hovering over the heads of the multitude; great shapes moving in rhythm with the surging drums; nightmare shamblers, tall as the tree-tops. The drums boomed madly. More torches flared.

“Look!” cried Lupus. His fingers dug into the Reaper’s wrist as with his free hand he gestured excitedly toward the clearing ahead.

The Reaper gazed, and for all his stoicism he could not repress an involuntary shudder. For in the torchlight he discerned the outlines of the great, shadowy figures; saw that they were green and moving; saw that these giants were like trees in the shape of men. And they were forty feet tall!

CROUCHING in the bushes, Vincius the Reaper stared in fascinated horror at the cyclopean shapes looming before him. Gigantic human trees? That was not possible. What then?

Lupus placed his mouth against the Reaper's ear as he whispered an explanation.

"It's the sacrifice," he murmured. "The Druids are disposing of the prisoners. I've heard tales of this: Caesar's men spoke of it in Rome. The devils build great wicket frames and place branches around them; these they shape into a series of cages until they construct the figure of a man. Then they fill these cages with prisoners and condemned and bum the tree-idol in honor of their heathen gods."

The Reaper looked again and saw that his companion spoke truly. For ringed in a semi-circle stood six great green figures made in a horrid mockery of human form. Their lower limbs were trees, their arms vast pruned branches formed from whole trunks, stripped white in ghastly semblance of flesh.

Evil, painted faces were surmounted by leafy hair, so that each giant stood like a green ogre in the forest—a green ogre whose monstrous wicker belly was filled with living men!

Sweat beaded the Reaper's brow as he gazed at the gargantuan paunches that bulged forth in a wicker framework from those huge and dreadful simulacra. Through lattice and leafy interstice, through knotted rope and wicker vine he saw that each idol's body was in reality a vast cage, a cage packed with the huddled bodies of Roman soldiers and mercenaries. Stifled, half suffocated by the density of their crowding together, they clawed vainly at the bars of their prison, or stared down in white-faced horror at the dancing throng below.

Vincius caught the flash of armor through the green trellises, heard the moaning wails of frightened men as they huddled together awaiting an undreamtof fate.

Nor was that fate long in coming. For even now the bearded priests, had stepped forth from the throng, and, torches in hand, they approached the white columns of the giant feet. The torches flared, then quickly kindled the dry wood. The limbs of the moving monster-shapes burst into livid flame.

Others had climbed to adjoining trees, the Reaper noticed. Now, leaning out on the branches, they flung their brands into the bushy green hair of the gigantic images so that each painted brow now wore a flaming crown.

A scream of animal ecstasy rose exultant from the crowd below. It was echoed by a shriek of horror from the imprisoned men, as they strained at the iron bellies of the monsters that held them.

Vincius stifled an oath, and his hand leaped instinctively to his scabbard. But Lupus pulled him back into the concealment of the shrubbery.

“Don’t be a fool, man!” he growled. “One man can’t help them. An army couldn’t, now.”

It was true. The flames were eating into oaken arms and rising to girdle the wooden waists. Suddenly, with a grotesqueness utterly terrifying in its sheer, unexpected horror, the six painted faces of the burning monsters were contorted as if with hideous pain. Great eyes rolled in anguish-torn sockets, and red lips writhed back to reveal clenched white teeth. Deep, droning bellows rose from the burning wooden throats.

The Reaper trembled. The voices of the tortured gods! Then common sense told him that the faces were hinged so that they could be manipulated with ropes by the priests below. Horns and bladders of air in the hollow necks produced the terrifying sounds. But the reality was dreadful, for the fiery images moved flaming arms as if in torment, and crumbling legs twisted in agony. The howling worshippers danced and bowed in adoration, their faces ever turned upward, for now the flames were reaching the bound bellies from both ends of the tree-monsters’ burning bodies. The flames were licking at the wicker prisons, and the captives were wheezing and choking in the swirling smoke.

Tongues of fire licked between the oil-soaked bars. A man cried out terribly in a scream that rose even above the roar of the fire as he was consumed by the blast. Others within the prison beat at their flaming hair. The fire spread, until all six of the colossal shapes were merely great pillars of glowing flame; flame that glowed more redly as it sucked fresh nourishment from the burning bellies.

Then, one after another, the giants pitched forward, still burning. Showers of sparks singed the bodies of the fleeing crowd; the images fell with thunderous crashings and disintegrated into ashy embers or smoking dust. The fire still ate away at the skeleton bellies, and a few awful shapes still writhed and twisted in the red furnaces.

But the priests and devotees had gone, back into the forest groves. From far away came the thudding thunder of their drums.

"It's over," Lupus whispered. "No one will disturb this spot till morning now. You see, the whole rite is connected with the religion; it is symbolical. The tree-images are those of Mabon and their other devil-gods. The prisoners are placed in the bellies to signify that the gods have devoured their enemies. The fire is a purification of the gods after their contamination by enemies. Now that the rite is accomplished the gods sleep appeased, and the Druids—curse their black entrails!—may celebrate their triumph undisturbed by wrathful eyes. They will not return here to wake the divine spirits."

Vincius grunted. The sonorous speech of his companion annoyed him. A man of action, he wanted only to escape. Consequently it was he who led the way into the clearing. Lupus followed, stepping gingerly to avoid the rosy ashes and still smoking embers that littered their path.

SOON they reached a spot untouched by the flames, for the bare, hard-packed earth did not allow the fire to spread. Then Lupus resumed his place as leader, and guided the soldier to a shadowy corner of the grotto. Here loomed an altar, gray against the darkness.

"This is the one," the little man whispered. "Give me your sword."

Vincius complied; then, frowning, he watched his guide thrust the tempered blade amidst the small rocks at the altar's base.

"I'll find the pivot," grunted Lupus, as he poked away. "Damnably clever, these barbarians."

The metal rang. Lupus tugged at the hilt of the weapon as he twisted it into some invisible niche. With a little click the stone tilted forward.

"Wrath of Jupiter!" the Reaper swore. Leaning forward, he stared down into a black chasm slanting deep into the earth beneath the altar-base. A series of stone steps was dimly discernible in the darkness.

"I was right, as I told you," said Lupus, calmly, as he relinquished the sword to his companion. The soldier shoved it back into its scabbard with a sigh of satisfaction. But he knitted black brows as he gazed again at the cryptically yawning mouth of that mysterious pit.

"I don't like the looks of this," he declared. "Such crawling about in the dark is not to my liking. And if there be such things below as you hint of ——"

The other held up his hand in a gesture of despair that served to silence the Roman.

"It's our only chance," he whispered. "We can't skulk about in those heathen-infested woods, and when the morning comes we'll be taken surely. I do not like the passages myself, but I like still less the usage accorded those in the wicker cages." With a wry grimace, Lupus indicated the smudging remains of the fire-giants.

"What we may encounter there below I dare not say, but I would rather risk my skin with a chance of reaching the beach and escaping than stay behind. They'll kill you, but I shall assuredly be tortured." Lupus subsided, awaiting a reply.

The Reaper smiled dourly. "Come on, then," he said, pushing his companion before him. "Well chance the caverns. But I'm not blundering through darkness."

So saying he stooped and picked up a burning branch from one of the tree-images. It made an admirable torch.

Steps led down. Torchlight flickered on stone stairs, low rock walls of a narrow passage. The Reaper turned, and drew the altar-base down over their heads. His muscles tautened with effort, and his face contorted.

Lupus's countenance was likewise contorted, but it expressed fear rather than exertion.

"There's no turning back now," he whispered, eyeing the now immovable stone barrier above their heads. "Well have to risk whatever lies ahead, and I've little stomach for any Druid magic this night."

The Reaper smiled grimly.

"It's your decision," he declared, "and we must abide by it. Let's be off."

Torch in hand, he padded down the stairs, Lupus following with obvious reluctance as he stared at the carved-out walls of the tunnel. The stairs turned, then abruptly gave way to a slanting stretch of stone that wound off into deep darkness. It was a hot, unhealthy darkness; as they walked, the rocky floor became damp. Moisture dripped from the walls and the low ceiling. Moss and lichens were green-coiled on wet walls beaded with a diamond sweat in the firelight. They walked on in silence, into still blacker abysses ahead.

Now the footing became precarious, as they toiled through the rocky under-earth. Occasionally side-passages pitted the walls, sometimes singly and sometimes in pairs like the eyeless sockets of some strange stone monsters. The silence and damp heat were more and more oppressive as time went on. Stolidly, the Reaper plodded ahead; Lupus glanced about with increasing nervousness.

The little man grasped Vincius by the sword-arm, halting his stolid stride. He whispered shrilly in the soldier's ear.

"I've a feeling we're being observed. Quick—your torch."

Grasping the beacon, he flashed it suddenly toward the nearest opening in the wall just ahead. Was it fancy, or did the light indeed glint upon two staring eyes in the darkness? Neither man could say, for in a moment the half-fancied flash of reflection had disappeared. The flame disclosed only the silent blackness welling from the orifice mouth.

"Hurry," mumbled Lupus.

Their feet quickened as they half ran along the rocky floor of the burrow. The Reaper was almost flung against the wall when with a sudden sharp turning the tunnel twisted still deeper into the earth.

Now the damp silence exuded tangible menace. As they gazed down the long corridor ahead, their pace slackened to a halt. They stared into the gloomy shaft, its sides so ominously slitted with grinning cavern mouths.

And then from afar rose the sound of a strange piping—a faint, eery cascade of sweetness. Its import was unmistakable; only a combination of reed and lips could produce that high stabbing wail that held within its weird beauty a hint of summoning and dark command.

It came from one of the side-burrows ahead, and welled forth to echo through the stillness of the caves. The unseen piper played, and Lupus half turned as if to flee.

"We can't go back, you fool," the Reaper muttered. "The altar-stone is replaced."

"Druid magic," whimpered the other. We——"

"Come on." Vincius half dragged his cowering companion along the path. "There's a man playing that pipe, and I've something here to change the scoundrel's tune."

His sword flashed silver as he thrust the torch into Lupus's trembling hands.

THEY advanced down the corridor, and still that high-pitched music swelled, luring and calling.

Abruptly another sound was superimposed upon the shrillness; a deep whispering, a rustling noise that gathered rhythmic volume. It came from the pit mouths, and slithered forth as though answering the music's summons.

The Reaper's eyes scanned each pitted opening in turn, seeking the source of the shrilling pipes. Then the strange rustling crawled, and the Reaper, glancing downward, saw coiled horror.

The path before him was filled with serpents. Weaving, writhing, hissing in dreadful rhythm to the sound of the far-off flute, they swayed and undulated forth from each pit until the floor of the shaft ahead was a wriggling mass of moving emerald menace. Snakes of every size and shape glided across the gelid stones.

For a moment Vincius recoiled. Lupus crouched behind him in sudden terror. His mumbled prayers were faint against the eery wailing, the rustle and hissing. The great living wave advanced.

Steeling himself, the Reaper met the attack. His sword rose, descended to shear the heads of a dozen wriggling foes. And still the serpentine sea moved forward, choking the narrow passage and rising knee-deep in living, writhing dread. The Roman slashed again, and again. Hissing in pain, a score twisted severed coils, but those behind swept on, commanded by the wild whistling of the unseen pipes.

The great mass bore down upon the two, a twisting torrent studded with opal eyes that flamed malignantly in the dusk. The Reaper scanned the choked path before him, then turned hastily to his cringing companion.

“Get ready to follow me,” he whispered. Lupus nodded, lips working in his white face.

Vincius stepped forward, both hands gripping the hilt of his weapon as he brought it down in a sweeping arc. Again and again it rose and fell, slashing, slicing, shearing at the shapes that now pressed his very legs. He felt the slimy wetness of cold bodies, smelt the sickening reek of their foulness. He hacked a pathway through, only to see it obliterated by fresh hordes from further pits. And the piping mocked from afar.

The writhing blob swept him back. The green strands of Medusa’s locks were coiling about his waist and thighs, dragging him down to fanged kisses and choking caresses.

“Follow,” he yelled, glancing at Lupus over his shoulder.

Wheeling he dashed back a few paces along the corridor, with Lupus at his heels. Then he turned and again confronted the reptile army. He ran forward, swinging his blade. To Lupus's startled eyes it looked as though he were running directly into the mass that crawled before him.

But as he reached the spot he leaped. His jump carried him over the heads of the foremost serpents. Lupus closed his eyes and followed suit. His feet left the ground, he sailed into space. His feet landed on a treacherous wriggling heap. He leaped again, seeing the Reaper ahead of him. The Roman was alternately leaping and landing. So sudden were his movements that the reptiles had no time to prepare themselves for striking, and each time he came down the sword swooped.

Within a few breathless minutes the two stood clear on the other side of the blocked corridor.

Vincius forced a wry smile.

"Much more of that," he observed, "and we'll never live to deliver our little message of warning before daybreak."

It was quite evident from his frightened face that the little man agreed only too well with this statement. When the soldier started forward once more, Lupus restrained him.

"Don't go on," he begged. "They know we're here. The priests—the high priests—must be down here tonight. And I've a feeling that they are summoning up their Powers for the morrow."

"What's this?" the Roman queried.

"This must be the Place of Mysteries they speak of," Lupus went on. "The place where the Arch-Druids and the inner circle come to seek aid of their gods for magic. Tonight they have to do with the wrecking of the fleet. We'd best turn back. Those devils would never let us through alive, and if we were to encounter what they may have summoned to aid them——"

"We must go on," pronounced the Reaper, shortly. "You know there's no turning back. And hurry."

"It's death."

"Death for the fleet if we don't get through," Vincius reminded. "We'll have to try."

Turning, he hurried down the gloomy incline. Lupus dogged his heels, turning his head quickly from side to side and eyeing each burrow he passed as though expecting the worst.

Winding, twisting, writhing into darkness, deeper and deeper into the tunneled maze they plunged. A hundred turnings, each with a thousand branch burrows, were passed at almost running speed. There were no further evidences of hostility, but both men still felt that peculiar sensation of being under scrutiny of alien eyes—wise, evil eyes that waited.

Then they took that final turning that led into the cyclopean chamber where the red torches flared interminably from rocky niches in the vaulted walls. They saw the piper waiting before them—a tall, white-robed Druid, with the shaven head of a Vate, and a bearded face alight with gloating expectancy. In one slim hand he bore the slender reed of his piping, and in the other he held a coiling viper that fawned up at him even as it hissed. And from out of the chamber's stone sides stepped other Druids, armed and ready for combat.

They were silent, and the Reaper did not speak as he reached again for his sword. But he was speechless not at the sight of them, but at die vision of what lay behind them. For he saw that which they guarded.

There was a pool in the center of the cavern—a great murky pool of gelid water that rose subterraneously from some hidden spring below. It was black, unmoving. Beside its ringed orbit stood a flat stone and on it lay something huge and red and swollen—something that bled horribly, yet wobbled as though still pulsing with life. It was monstrous, gigantic, yet unmistakable—a swollen, severed *tongue.*

VINCIUS could not tear his eyes away from the tremendous ruby organ that lolled palpitant upon the stones. Imagination quailed before the thought of a beast so enormous as to possess a tongue of this incredible size. Lupus cowered behind him.

Then the slender, shaven-headed piper raised his head so that his gaze challenged and commanded attention. The other Druids grouped behind him in the red torchlight, standing upon the brink of the black chasm of water at their back.

The mocking Vate smiled, stepped forward.

“Who interrupts the Council of the Crescent?” he purred. “You stupid Roman intruders have troubled our deliberations.”

Vincius scowled, but stood silent. His grimness cloaked a fear only too fully manifested by the quaking Lupus at his side. Why did this priest speak? Why not strike? His sneer of mockery seemed to veil a horror greater than anything yet revealed to the Reaper—and the Roman almost wanted to cast himself forward on the swords of the foe, to die in a red blaze that might drown the uneasy presence of dread which now oppressed him.

Yet the priest continued, sibilantly. “Ye have dared the secret temple of our people, and for that ye shall die. But a few hours and all your kind shall perish. We Druids will never bow before the spawn of Rome. Even as today the Dragon’s tongue venom laid your comrades low, so tomorrow the Dragon shall destroy the cursed ships which brought ye.”

Dragon’s tongue? Vincius glanced again at the monstrous red thing lying on the stone—glanced at the oozing greenish fluid which dripped onto the floor—and knew the secret of the day’s battle. This organ held poison; reptile venom, which, placed on the Druid arrows, had brought swift and dreadful death.

Dragon’s tongue? Dragons—those were the terrible creatures of old British legend; great sea-serpents, reptilian monsters supposed to inhabit the subterrene sea-depths. But they were only legends, like the Tritons, and Dagon, and Greek monsters.

Or were they? This great red tongue was real, and the Druids could summon and control all beasts and creatures of the deep. Tomorrow they planned to wreck the fleet, and a Dragon could pull ships down into the sea. Was it possible?

Vincius mused for only a second. Then he realized that the cunning priest had revealed these words to him for that reason alone—so that in a moment's contemplation he would be lost.

Now the other priests had crept up behind, and Lupus screamed. The Reaper wheeled, to see three priests stab at the short man's unprotected throat. Roaring, Vincius slashed out. A head rolled to the floor, to stare up Medusa-like from a pool of serpentinely rilling blood.

Again the sword leaped and fell, parrying a stabbing thrust and coming down on the arm of the second priest. He dropped, howling as he clutched a jerking stump of shoulder.

And then a half-dozen priests were at his back. Vincius leaped, dodged, smote. They pressed forward, while the slim bearded leader urged them on.

"Into the pool!" shouted the Vate. "Food for the Primal One! Take him—by the Three and Thirty Tests, I command ye!"

THEY fought grimly, though two fell.

The Reaper's arm was tiring under the weight of the heavy blade. He all but slipped in a sticky red pool, and was forced to give ground again. Now he was being forced back to the brink of the terrible black chasm where inky water lapped. The Druid swords were everywhere. Vincius tried to round the stone on which the gigantic tongue rested. They pressed him back against it—one blade shot out under the Reaper's waist. His quick duck brought the Druid against him, and they grappled. Locked in deadly embrace, they reeled against the stone.

Then Vincius knew. His sword-arm jerked free. He plunged his weapon to the hilt in the great spongy red mass upon the altar-stone. It gave, and something green and wet spurted onto the blade. Vincius tore the sword free and sought the enemy's back. At the first thrust the Druid stiffened and fell.

And Vincius swung. One swordsman after another felt the terrible point, felt the poisoned tip of the steel bite into his veins; fell in writhing death. The Vate piped wildly.

The last man he beheaded completely, then re-thrust his weapon into the envenomed organ. He raced after the fleeing Vate, who ran frantically back toward the tunnel entrance. The Reaper was swift. His blade was swifter. With a scream of anguish the last Druid priest went down in final agony.

Vincius turned. The black pool loomed. Beyond it was a dark slit in the rock—and poor dead Lupus had said that it led to the sea.

He must still warn the fleet, Dragon or no Dragon. Into the gelid waters, then.

Murky, clinging, slimy depths enfolded him as he leaped, sword tucked into his belt. The dark waves were sticky and warm, as though befouled. Vincius swam quickly, making for the orifice beyond, where he fancied he could detect a faint glimmering of starlight. A few strokes now. . . .

Then horror came. From directly ahead the water spouted and inky jets spurted upward. A boiling froth arose, and great waves bubbled from the depths.

Suddenly a head appeared—a gigantic head, born only in nightmare delirium and the realms of insane myth. Great, green, scaly head, red eyes glaring from behind huge, dripping jaws—and then a thrashing body; reticulated jade, gilled, slitted, winged, with a tremendous lashing tail.

The mad head rose and undulated above the waves on a long barrel-neck; then the great scarlet jaws drew back to disclose simitar fangs—and a great empty cavern that was red, bleeding, and *tongueless!*

It was the Dragon of Druid lore.

Vincius saw it tower above him in the slimy black water; heard the brazen bellow, and felt the carrion wind that was its breath.

Its tail was curving toward him, its clawing appendages reached out, its neck swooped down so that the cruel, tremendous maw yawned to engulf him.

It was true then. This was the Beast of Myth which the ancient, evil priests had summoned to destroy the fleet upon the morrow. By some magic power they had lured it here, prisoned it in the pool, and ripped out its tongue for venom to use in their archery warfare. Vincius thought this, but felt fear. The enormous horror had seen him. It thrashed toward his puny, swimming form, loomed larger than any ship. From depths of dread it had come, and on the next day it would drag down the armies of Rome to those drowned realms of dread.

Now the mouth rushed on, churning and bubbling as it cut the waves and reached to swallow the struggling man. No use to fight. Or Vincius remembered. His sword—the venom upon it! He groped, drew, raised the blade.

The gigantic teeth ground in his face, then raised. Another swoop and he would be drawn between those fangs. He raised up out of the water, threw himself forward.

As the throat opened, he jammed the blade into the bleeding, tongueless maw of the monster. A shrill scream blasted his ear-drums as the beast reared back, sword jerking like a silver sliver in the open jaws. Titanic thrashing sent waves surging across the pool. The Dragon roared with pain; a great green body reared out of the black waters, then fell back to squirm in mad, thunderous pulsations of pain.

With a single moan of gigantic, convulsive agony, the hideous head sank beneath the waves, red eyes glazed in death. The nightmare's own poison had destroyed it.

Vincius trod water until the bubbling from below subsided, then stroked for the slit in the stone without glancing back into the chamber of fear. He entered the narrow opening, swimming on.

Ahead he saw starlight, paling into dawn. A few moments brought him out into open water. He swam slowly out toward the nearest vessel; nor did he even turn to gaze at the dark cliff-wall which shielded this side of Anglesey.

His mission was done. Now, with morning, the Romans might land freely; leaderless, the Druids would give way before the legions. They and their cursed barbarian sorceries would be blotted out forever.

Vincius smiled as he neared the ship's side. Then he frowned at the final memory of the dying dragon, going down with the Reaper's blade wedged in its throat.

“I’ll need a new sword for the morning,” he growled.

Unheavenly Twin

Roger Talquist had always known that he would return to Greece. The spell laid upon him in childhood had lingered through the years. After his father had brought him back to school in England, he never could forget the beauty of the ancient hills of which the shepherd poets sang. Talquist's later career in archaeology emphasized the hold of the pagan on his soul; he dreamed of purple hills and marble ruins gleaming beneath an age-yellowed, ivory moon.

It was inevitable that he return, and when the Oxonian Expedition went to excavate a Temple of Poseidon, he accompanied it to the land of his boyhood.

Once arrived, his interest in the work itself slackened. He did his routine duties diffidently, and spent all of his free time wandering through the wild country beyond the seaport of Mylenos. A short walk would bring him to the mystic hills and the shadowed treelands. His imagination quickened in the forest silence as he mused on the old lore of paganism he'd heard from peasants.

Dryads dwelt in the woods, and harpies hovered. Skyways beckoned Roger Talquist to climb the green-studded stairs of the mountains, until from some lofty eminence he could gaze down on the plains where once lambs had gamboled to the fabled piping of the Goat-god. It pleased him to half-believe the ancient legends, and he decided to compile a monograph on local superstition. Here the rustics still knew the myths of Pan and the forest spirits.

Talquist spoke Greek fluently, and the natives made him welcome in their simple cottages while they told of forgotten lore. And here Roger Talquist met old Papa Lepolis—a tall, patriarchal oldster with the wrinkled, august face of some Cretan sea-king. Papa Lepolis promised the dark, grave-eyed young scientist an actual glimpse of an altar where his people had once worshiped the gods of the forest.

It was an ancient place in the forest, a grotto where primitive folk had paid worship to the Nature gods in olden days, before the recording of history. Here were ruins that only a few knew about; the grotto was kept secret now that the Greek Orthodox Church held sway. Here were stones and carvings which might interest an archaeologist greatly, Papa Lepolis told him.

"Take me there," Talquist said eagerly. "I must see this grotto."

Lepolis grew silent, stroked his beard, then scowled.

"I wonder if I dare, Mr. Talquist."

"Dare?" Talquist exclaimed.

"You and I—we are modern men. We do not fear what the ignorant peasants hereabouts still tremble before."

"They ate afraid? But what is there for them to fear?"

Lepolis stared at the floor. "Nothing, perhaps. But in that grotto there is an altar where once men bowed to Pan. And they did more than that."

Talquist listened eagerly. "Yes," Lepolis went on. "If legends are to be believed, worshipers did a great deal more than bow. They gave—sacrifices."

"You mean animals?"

"No, Mr. Talquist, I do not mean animals. The forest gods desired things of men; the warm, living flesh of young maidens and youth sated their divine appetites."

Talquist smiled tolerantly. "Well, what of it? Human beings were sacrificed in groves thousands of years ago. So what? I've heard of such things, of course. Surely today there's nothing to fear because once blood was spilled."

"But you do not understand, my young friend. Do you know why there were such sacrifices, what the ancients believed?"

"No," Talquist admitted.

The old man whispered through his beard. "They said that the gods appeared in human form at certain times, and at other times in the shape of beasts. Shepherds and wandering maidens met the old Nature gods on lonely hills—and later there were satyrs and fauns—half-beast, half-human."

"Oh, I know of such myths, Lepolis. Satyrs, centaurs, goatheaded men tumble all over themselves in Greek mythology. So what?"

"These creatures had divine blood in them, Mr. Talquist. And, as such, they did not die."

Talquist's eyes widened. "What? You mean that you're afraid the forest and the altar are, perhaps, guarded by fabled monsters?"

"No. No, nothing as childish as that," the old man reproved. Talquist wondered whether he were sincere in his denial.

"Then what bothers you, Lepolis?"

"Only this. When the ancients made sacrifice on the altar, they received gifts in return. Do you understand? They gave blood and the gods gave gifts in exchange. Terrible gifts, Mr. Talquist."

Talquist stared at the old man. "What do you mean?"

"I cannot say, exactly. Worshipers wanted things from the gods. They wanted the immortality that fauns and satyrs and dryads received. So sometimes the gods would leave tokens and amulets. Those that wore them were supposed to be *changed.* "

Talquist was scornful. "Are you trying to tell me that you believe such —"

"No—not exactly," Papa Lepolis replied slowly.

"Then take me to the altar," the young scientist insisted.

The old man's eyes avoided Talquist's face. "I do not show people the grotto," he mumbled. "It is a secret in our family. Better not to know some things. I was a fool to suggest it."

Talquist made a little pile of *drachmas* on the table. Lepolis looked at the coins, shuffled his feet in silence. Then he smiled.

"I am an old man, Mr. Talquist. An old, tired man. It is hard for me to travel. But—I will lead you to the altar in the forest, if you wish."

Talquist smiled patiently. "Tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow."

It was a strange pair that set out the next day through the woodland pathways. Tall, bearded Papa Lepolis in his ragged robes led the trimly-dressed Roger Talquist through the dense semi-twilight. As they walked along, the trees, shrubbery and vines grew thicker and more tangled; the sun shone through in only a few spots.

At first Talquist had followed the old man along a definite path, where birds sang gayly from the branches. Now they plunged deeper into the greenish darkness between twisting trees, and there was no life here—only a palpitant stillness. The stillness was of the ancient past.

This was the deep forest of an older Greece, undisturbed through three thousand years. Here centaurs pranced and whinnied beside the dark streams, and dryads capered upon cloud-crowned hilltops to the sound of hidden lutes. So Talquist imagined. He thought musingly of the myths told him by the oldster. They seemed appropriate enough now in this setting.

Lepolis plodded ahead silently, almost furtively. Now that he had embarked on the trip, it seemed he did not relish this journey. Talquist noticed how the oldster kept peering over his shoulder toward the silent trees. Lepolis seemed frightened; it was almost as though he believed the fantastic fables of which he had spoken.

Through deep glades and great lonely swamps they toiled, and again Talquist marveled that the old man did not lose his way in the trackless marshes. But at last they took a winding trail which led through a thicket and into a sunken grove, bordered by a land of tree-guarded twilight.

Roger Talquist gazed in silence at their goal. His eyes noted the great grassy ring in the center of the low grade, and he saw that the crumbled stones surrounded it in a sort of half-imaginary pattern. It was a moot question whether these rocks had been naturally or artificially placed; if the latter, they had been laid at a time incredibly remote. But they did resemble a crude altar-circle, and the great stone in the middle might easily have served the purpose of a sacrificial slab.

They descended upon the grotto and then Talquist took the lead while his aged guide hung back. Talquist examined the stones and noted the faint, rusty stains still visible on their tops. He fumbled amidst the fragments of broken rock that littered the bases of the altars in search of some ancient token or relic.

And then Roger Talquist saw. The grass was damp, and pressed down. The earth was wet. And in a circle about the central altar were the unmistakable imprints of *hoofs.*

Talquist gasped. “Come here, Lepolis!” he exclaimed.

The old man looked down at the hoofmarks, clear and fresh. He smiled unfathomably.

“I warned you, Mr. Talquist. There are creatures who seek this lonely altar.”

“Nonsense!” he stammered “I merely wanted to ask you about wild goats. Are there any that might graze here?”

The old man’s smile was more enigmatic still. “Wild goats?” he said. “Look again, Mr. Talquist. These are not goat tracks.”

Talquist looked, and they were not goat tracks, these great hoofed imprints in the earth. But they had to be! Why was Lepolis laughing so?

“I warned you, Talquist,” the old man went on. “I told you about what lurks, still undying, in the forest. I told you how my family knows, has always known and guarded the secret of the ancient Faith. I told you how one can sacrifice on this altar and receive a gift from the gods. A gift of eternal life and power, for the gods send a token conferring their reward upon the sacrificer. It is not pleasant to live in a changed shape, perhaps—but it is better than dying."

What was the old fool raving about? Had he gone stark mad?

Lepolis' voice was shrill now. "I warned you, remember that! I tried to keep you from coming. But you insisted. I am weak, I know—weak because I am old and do not want to die. I am afraid to die! I would far rather live, even in changed shape! And so, Mr. Roger Talquist, now that we are at the altar, the time has come—"

It came then, so swiftly that Talquist was caught wholly unprepared. Even as he was speaking. Lepolis edged closer and closer. Then suddenly from out of one ragged sleeve a knife flashed! Lepolis raised the gleaming blade on high and brought it down in a vicious stroke.

Talquist dodged desperately aside, just in time. But the old man, laughing insanely, was gripping him harshly by the throat. The knife raised again, and Talquist was forced back against the altar stone. The blade trembled, Lepolis tightened his grip, and Talquist knew with an icy heart that he must die.

With the strength of panic, Roger Talquist raised his free arm and caught the old man's wrist. He lunged forward, twisting Lepolis against the stone, and then wrestled with the mad strength of the shrieking patriarch. The knife bit keenly several times as Lepolis stabbed futilely again and again.

"O Great Pan, aid me!" screamed the old man. And then Talquist twisted the wiry wrist just as the blade thrust downward, and it turned. The knife buried itself inches deep in Lepolis's wrinkled throat, and a red stream poured out over the altar-top as the coughing ancient fell in racking death upon it.

Talquist stepped back, aghast. The hysteria of the last few moments had left him dazed. The earth seemed to spin around him madly, the stones moved, the darkness deepened, and in his wild fancy Talquist heard the rumbling of thunder from beneath his feet. Then the shock was all over, and he stared mutely at the dead man on the altar.

Lepolis had lured him here, believing in the myths he had himself revealed. He had tried to kill the young scientist on the altar, that he might receive the gift of eternal life, though in a changed shape, from the ancient gods. Lepolis had been mad. It was all a most unfortunate occurrence.

Talquist turned. He must find his way out of the forest, and quickly.

But what was this? In the shards at his feet, at the base of the altar, something glinted dully. Talquist stooped and picked it up. Funny, he hadn't noticed this when searching before. He held it against the light of the blood-red sunset.

It was an octagonally cut medallion of greenish stone, so worn and polished as to hint of extreme age. The medallion was fastened on a linked chain of true gold, and was evidently designed to be worn around the neck.

All this Talquist observed in a fleeting moment, for his eyes and thoughts were directed now on the startling figure emblazoned on the face of the amulet.

There was something about the technique of the design that puzzled Talquist even while it disturbed him. The lines did not seem as though executed by *human thought.*

Each artist puts into his work something of himself, and what the designer had put into this figure was horribly alien. The goat seemed to be a symbol of another figure underneath; a figure Talquist couldn't make out but which he knew instinctively was lurking there.

The metal was of peculiar lustre, the carving was unnatural, and looking at the thing somehow shocked Talquist. The goat was the symbol of Pan, and perhaps the wild ravings of Lepolis, with his talk of "gifts" from forest gods, had unnerved the scientist.

Roger Talquist stared at the evil figure as he absently fastened the golden chain about his neck.

With a start, he realized what he was doing. *Why* had he put the amulet on? He raised his hand to remove it, and as he touched the stone he received a second shock. The stone was quite warm! There was a tingling in Talquist's fingertips—a tingling not altogether unpleasant. The stone was radiant, and warm as ardent flesh; as though it possessed some radioactive properties.

In a second the sensation passed and Talquist was brought sharply back to reality. A breeze now curled out of the encroaching night. The twilight grove was eerie, and the trees were fantastic figures bowing in the wind. They stretched long green arms as though to bar the wanderer's path. For a moment Talquist had the absurd notion that these trees would conspire to keep him in the forest.

He looked again at the dead man on the altar; then glanced down at the horrible, unexplained tracks at his feet, and shivered. He must get out of this grotto!

Talquist started across the grove to the thicket. Halfway across the last red rays of sunset glinted on his chest, and he glanced down again to see the amulet moving in a slow arc. He touched it, and a painful shock stabbed his fingertips again. Once more he knew fear—because now he felt life pulsing in the stone. It was living animation he felt, the sensation of powerful forces running in waves through his hand and up the length of his arm.

The contact somehow invigorated Talquist. He looked at the carved figure of the prancing goat that blazed up, and his eyes smarted and burned. The same eerie force tingling through his fingers now seemed to dance into his eyes and into the brain behind them.

There *was* a force in the stone! Lepolis with his wild talk of a "change" in the men who found the gifts of the old gods—Lord, could the fool have been speaking the truth?

After all, Lepolis had been killed, though not intentionally, on that altar, like a sacrifice. Whereas the old man had meant to sacrifice Talquist and receive in reward the grant of immortality, though he would be "changed" in some indefinable way by the divine blood of satyrs. But Lepolis had died, and then Talquist had found this peculiar talisman. Odd, that he hadn't seen it before when he searched.

Had it been sent *after* the sacrifice? That thunder from below his feet—

Oh, but that was absurd! There were no forest gods in this twentieth century.

Hoofprints in the grass. . . .

Talquist tried to think of something else. Paradoxically enough, that was simple. His own body. Why was he suddenly feeling so strange?

He had a sudden impulse to tear the amulet from his throat, and his fingers instinctively tightened about it. There came a rapid acceleration of that flowing force within him, so that his arm seemed numb, as though from an electric shock.

What was this terrible thing doing to him? *Changing* him?

God, his body *did* ache! His arms and legs burned, there were sharp twinges in his thighs as he stumbled on—the kind of stabbing throb which in childhood had been spoken of as "growing pains."

Growing pains!

In a sort of panic, Talquist tried desperately to be sane. It was rheumatism—that's what it was! He had caught a chill in the damp and dew of the woods. His legs hurt from walking in tight boots.

He loosened his shirt as he walked across the glade; untied the lacings then, stopping to remove his boots. He seemed feverish, his head felt constricted, yet through the dull throbbing ran a thin red thread of exultation. He was terrified, yet strangely joyous.

Fever? Perhaps. His body, despite the pain, no longer seemed a part of him. He stroked his brow, and he scarcely recognized the convolutions. Feeling the stubble on his cheeks, he wondered if he had remembered to shave that morning. His hands were bronzed, and his fingers still tingled from the shock of the amulet.

He ought not to go on. He must rest. Shirtless, barefooted, Talquist flung himself down in the shadow of a bush at the edge of the glade. The last flicker of sunset crossed his chest.

His eyes focused again on the burning green brightness of the amulet, and as he stared his whole being turned to liquid flame. He felt oddly tortured, racked; his muscles stretched, tautened, and nerves ached with an exquisite pain that was almost animal ecstasy. He could not move his eyes or raise his hand to drop the talisman and claw off the burning band of gold about his throat. Yet his brain was enthralled by a tormented bliss, though another part of his consciousness shrieked “hypnotism—magnetism—madness.” But his being continued to writhe in bondage to the living stone.

Abruptly came the release. Dusk flooded the grove, and its purple pallor mingled oddly with the green lambency of the flaming amulet on Talquist’s chest.

Roger Talquist rubbed his eyes. Why was he lying here on the grass? What had he been doing? He felt no pain now, only a hot surging of blood through quickened veins. He could feel the shrill singing at his temples. Why had he wanted to run away? Why had he feared the power of the amulet?

It was pleasant here in the forest at night, and the tingling in the talisman now was flowing through his body evenly, in invigorating waves. Whatever the power in this seal of the satyr, be it natural or supernatural, it was good. He had been a fool to dwell on such obscure fears.

Talquist rose to his feet, hardly conscious of his nakedness, and faced the edge of the grotto once again. Through the haze of dusk he saw the standing stones, shining whitely. The grass seemed greener and more lush about the bases—there seemed to be new life here. The rocks appeared larger and more numerous than in the afternoon. He soon realized that they were arranged in a circle so as to form a crude pattern.

Talquist wanted to step over and examine them. But something halted him in the shadow of the bushes.

From afar came the sound of conches. Into the glade marched a small procession of bearded men, robed in white. There were perhaps a dozen of them, and Talquist vaguely recognized faces from the village.

Then there was still worship here!

The priests, if priests they were, gathered around the central altar, and Talquist saw that they discovered the body of Lepolis with great surprise. They stood there, huddled and whispering in the twilight.

"He told us that the young foreigner would be ready," whispered one, loudly enough for Talquist to overhear.

"Something has gone amiss."

"Let us go, quickly before *they* assemble."

"Yes, *they* will come for the body."

"We will leave the incense burning here, but the talisman is already gone."

"Hasten; I am afraid."

The men produced small bundles of sticks which they lighted on the eight outer stones. Great clouds of perfumed smoke wafted to wooded skies. It was a scene from old Greece—the ancient Greece of mystic forest gods.

The body of Lepolis lay on the central altar, and the pungent smoke rose all about him. The old men hurried off then, whispering and casting veiled glances back into the glade. Talquist crouched, watching, his breathing excited and irregular.

For a long moment there was utter silence. Then began a curious rustling, a slithering of leaves upon the trees, and a purposeful padding as of hoofs upon the grass.

The sun had died in fathomless crimson skies, and the moon rose from the pallid purple of the east. It shone down upon the grotto as the rustling noises increased. A silver moon-shaft sped across the central altar, and as it did so a faint, shrill peeping filled the air. Hysterically high, the treble notes sounded from far away—the peeping summons of a syrinx. The peeping noise blended with rustling; the spicy perfume from the fires scented the forest dark.

And now other sounds were audible: queer moanings and high neighing, chirping and animal growls. Another scent, or combination of scents, mingled with the perfume; the musklike odors of beasts and creatures of the wood. Talquist stared and saw—and nearly shrieked.

For into the grove the forest creatures headed, bounding and leaping and pawing the hard-packed earth. Shaggy and manlike, the fauns capered about in the moonlight, their goatish beards wagging to their squealing laughter.

Here were the living creatures of myth!

Bull-bodied maenads stamped into the glade with throaty bellows of guttural mirth, shaking their hairy heads in bovine playfulness. Across the sward the centaurs ranced, their sly, wicked faces wreathed in lustful grimace, their stallion bodies flexed with animal vigor. They snorted and reared, bringing spiked hoofs down to strike fire from the altar stones.

Now Talquist understood the hoof-prints on the grass!

With hoarse cries, the Ægypans bounded in, lifting their horrid, goat-heads to bleat at the moon, and stretching their shambling legs and shapeless paws in animal ecstasy as they sniffed the aromatic incense of the spiced perfume.

The far-off piping grew more frantic still, and the whirling forest creatures laughed more shrilly, whirled more wildly, sniffling the reek of the smoke and bathing in moonlight as they danced and gesticulated amidst the altar stones.

Talquist gasped. Fabled legends come true! He glanced down at the seal of the satyr on his breast, then looked up as a shrill screaming sounded.

The living shadows of nymphs emerged from the rushes that bordered the stream within the forest. They danced over the grass and flung their wet green hair in carefree abandon as they wheeled before the beast-men.

There was one green-haired creature with eyes red as blood that Roger Talquist watched closely. The strength surging in him leaped at the sight of her, as she postured with the rest.

Now the creatures saw what lay upon the altar top. A faun crept close, gesturing to his less emboldened companions. One hairy paw reached out to touch the body of Lepolis. A black satyr capered before the corpse. His nostrils flared as he fumbled at the old man’s beard. A centaur trotted past, so that his sweaty flanks brushed the stone. The nymphs tittered shrilly.

They gathered before that inner altar and their eyes and hands and lips caressed what lay upon it, and they laughed and bleated. And when they turned away, they dragged the body with them.

The piping scurried higher in its shrillness. The peeping syrinx, the scent of smoke, the shrieking laughter—these things finally made Talquist emerge from the bushes. He did not think of what he had seen; he felt only the drumming of the incredible scene in his blood, fusing his being in strange response.

The dance of the forest creatures had become a pursuit, and the nymphs fled before the insane figures that scurried after them in the darkness. Hoarse screams filled the night.

Then the syrinx sounded, swelled, merged into a gigantic, triumphant bleat. The horde bore the body of Lepolis into the dark forest.

Talquist, his blood sweet fire, raced after the others about the altar. It was a strange madness that possessed him, that gave him a sense of curious kinship with these beings of the past. They shrieked when they saw him and pointed to the glowing green amulet on his chest, but he did not hear.

His eyes were searching for a figure—the figure of the green-haired nymph with the red eyes. She saw him, and turned with a mocking leer. Talquist hated the sight, but something inside him urged his body forward. He ran toward the taunting nymph. She fled in mimic dismay, back into the dark groves where now the distant piping died away.

Talquist ran through the forest, following the fleet wood sprite that leaped ahead, the wet green hair blending with the leaves of the livid trees. His temples burned, he gasped for breath, and his being was filled with a nameless strength. He loped after the fleeing figure, maddened by her taunting laughter that drifted back through the nighted pathways.

Soon he emerged upon the bank of a little stream where now the nymphs and nereids had returned. The fleet little creatures splashed noisily through the reeds and sank into the pool, diving beneath the rushes. None of them re-emerged.

Roger Talquist, fired by his madness, leaped after the taunting figure of the nymph he pursued, and the amulet jangled against his chest on its chain.

She turned suddenly on the bank and grinned up at him with slyly parted lips, and tossed her snake-locked hair. Her moist, flabby hands pawed at

Talquist's arms. Her red eyes were not human, and gazing into them Talquist abruptly lost his madness and tried to push the creature away.

She stepped back on the bank. Noticing the amulet on the chain she reached for it. Talquist pushed her away again. Sniggering, the nymph reached out a cold hand to grasp at him for support. Instead, her fingers closed about the chain. She stepped back further, clutching the green seal—and lost her balance.

With a wrench the links parted, and the nymph fell screaming into the water. The amulet in her hand described a jeweled arc, then slipped beneath the churning surface of the stream, and sank. Nymph and seal of the satyr disappeared together in the pool. . . .

Roger Talquist stood on the bank, staring stupidly at the widening circles in the water.

He remembered, now. He was cold, naked, standing in the woods at midnight, after chasing the phantoms of fever and delirium.

There had been no sacrifice, no nymphs or satyrs. It had all been a dream, a delusion brought on by the peculiar hypnotic power of the amulet he had stared at when he lay down.

It was gone now, that strange talisman. He had probably flung it into the water himself, in a final frenzy. Well, good riddance to the cursed stone!

Old Lepolis had been right, in a way. The seal of the satyr, whether a gift of the ancient gods or not, did change a person. Wearing it, Talquist had not been himself. He had become some kind of beast; his mind had undergone a peculiar change which made him feel kinship with the wild creatures of elder myth. Lepolis had said that such things still existed in the forest and came forth after a sacrifice.

And indeed these things had come to pass.

Poor Lepolis! He had believed it all, and he wanted the amulet because he thought it would make him a forest creature that could live forever. He had wanted it enough, believed enough, to risk murder. And he was dead, and the amulet was gone.

Talquist mused. Oddly enough, he had not believed the old man's tale that the amulet could change one. He should have known it was some kind of allegory. The seal caused a mental change rather than a physical one; assuredly it had hypnotized him into thinking his body was different. Indeed, he *had* felt different; still did, in fact. Those tingling vibrations!

But what was he doing here? Better go back to the hotel now and try to forget his delirium.

Talquist gave a final glance at the waters of the pool into which the amulet had been thrown. The waters were calm now, and there was a glassy reflection in the clear moonlight. Talquist saw his own reflection in the moon flooded depths, saw himself in Nature's silvery mirror.

Head, forehead, face, throat, arms, body, legs—he saw them all. And then he understood the real truth of Lepolis' incredible story of gifts from the gods that would change a man.

He did not look long. A single moment of numbing realization, and then he leaped into the pool—leaped straight into the deepest water, breaking with his body the mad reflection he had seen on the mirrored surface.

For, staring down at himself, Roger Talquist had seen *the face and figure of the wood-god, Pan!*

The Seal of the Satyr

Roger Talquist had always known that he would return to Greece. The spell laid upon him in childhood had lingered through the years. After his father had brought him back to school in England, he never could forget the beauty of the ancient hills of which the shepherd poets sang. Talquist's later career in archeology emphasized the hold of the pagan on his soul; he dreamed of purple hills and marble ruins gleaming beneath an age-yellowed, ivory moon.

It was inevitable that he return, and when the Oxonian Expedition went to excavate a Temple of Poseidon, he accompanied it to the land of his boyhood.

Once arrived, his interest in the work itself slackened. He did his routine duties diffidently, and spent all of his free time wandering through the wild country beyond the seaport of Mylenos. A short walk would bring him to the mystic hills and die shadowed treelands. His imagination quickened in the forest silence as he mused on the old lore of paganism he'd heard from peasants.

Dryads dwelt in the woods, and harpies hovered. Skyways beckoned Roger Talquist to climb the green-studded stairs of the mountains, until from some lofty eminence he could gaze down on the plains where once lambs had gamboled to the fabled piping of the Goat-god. It pleased him to half-believe the ancient legends, and he decided to compile a monograph on local superstition. Here the rustics still knew the myths of Pan and the forest spirits.

Talquist spoke Greek fluently, and the natives made him welcome in their simple cottages while they told of forgotten lore. And here Roger Talquist met old Papa Lepolis – a tall, patriarchal oldster with the wrinkled, august face of some Cretan sea-king. Papa Lepolis promised the dark, grave-eyed scientist an actual glimpse of an altar where his people had once worshiped the gods of the forest.

It was an ancient place in the forest, a grotto where primitive folk had paid worship to the Nature gods in olden days, before the recording of history. Here were ruins that only a few knew about; the grotto was kept secret now that the Greek Orthodox Church held sway. Here were stones and carvings which might interest an archeologist greatly, Papa Lepolis told him.

‘Take me there,’ Talquist said eagerly. ‘I must see this grotto.’

Lepolis grew silent, stroked his beard, then scowled.

‘I wonder if I dare, Mr. Talquist.’

‘Dare?’ Talquist exclaimed.

‘You and I – we are modem men. We do not fear what the ignorant peasants hereabouts still tremble before.’

‘They are afraid? But what is there for them to fear?’

Lepolis stared at the floor. ‘Nothing, perhaps. But in that grotto there is an altar where once men bowed to Pan. And they did more than that’

Talquist listened eagerly. ‘Yes,’ Lepolis went on. ‘If legends are to be believed, worshipers did a great deal more than bow. They gave – sacrifices.’

‘You mean animals?’

‘No, Mr. Talquist, I do not mean animals. The forest gods desired things of men; the warm, living flesh of young maidens and youth sated their divine appetites.’

Talquist smiled tolerantly. ‘Well, what of it? Human beings were sacrificed in groves thousands of years ago. So what? I’ve heard of such things, of course. Surely today there’s nothing to fear because once blood was spilled.’

‘But you do not understand, my young friend. Do you know why there were such sacrifices, what the ancients believed?’

‘No,’ Talquist admitted.

The old man whispered through his beard. ‘They said that the gods appeared in human form at certain times, and at other times in the shape of beasts. Shepherds and wandering maidens met the old Nature gods on lonely hills—and later there were satyrs and fauns – half-beast, half-human.’ ’Oh, I know of such myths, Lepolis. Satyrs, centaurs, goat-headed men tumble all over themselves in Greek mythology. So what?’

‘These creatures had divine blood in them, Mr. Talquist. And, as such, they did not die.’

Talquist’s eyes widened. ‘What? You mean that you’re afraid the forest and the altar are, perhaps, guarded by fabled monsters?’

‘No. No, nothing as childish as that,’ the old man reproved. Talquist wondered whether he were sincere in his denial. ’Then what bothers you, Lepolis?’

‘Only this. When the ancients made sacrifice on the altar, they received gifts in return. Do you understand? They gave blood and the gods gave gifts in exchange. Terrible gifts, Mr. Talquist.’

Talquist stared at the old man. ‘What do you mean?’

‘I cannot say, exactly. Worshipers wanted things from the gods. They wanted the immortality that fauns and satyrs and dryads received. So sometimes the gods would leave tokens and amulets. Those that wore them were supposed to be *changed.’*

Talquist was scornful. ‘Are you trying to tell me that you believe such—’

‘No – not exactly,’ Papa Lepolis replied slowly.

‘Then take me to the altar,’ the young scientist insisted. The old man’s eyes avoided Talquist’s face. ‘I do not show people the grotto,’ he mumbled. ‘It is a secret in our family. Better not to know some things. I was a fool to suggest it’ Talquist made a little pile of *drachmas* on the table. Lepolis looked at the coins, shuffled his feet in silence. Then he smiled.

‘I am an old man, Mr. Talquist. An old, tired man. It is hard for me to travel. But – I will lead you to the altar in the forest, if you wish.’

Talquist smiled patiently. ’Tomorrow?’

‘Tomorrow.’

It was a strange pair that set out the next day through the woodland pathways. Tall, bearded Papa Lepolis in his ragged robes led the trimly-dressed Roger Talquist through the dense semi-twilight. As they walked along, the trees, shrubbery and vines grew thicker and more tangled; the sun shone through in only a few spots.

At first Talquist had followed the old man along a definite path, where birds sang gaily from the branches. Now they plunged deeper into the greenish darkness between twisting trees, and there was no life here – only a palpitant stillness. The stillness was of the ancient past.

This was the deep forest of an older Greece, undisturbed through three thousand years. Here centaurs pranced and whinnied beside the dark streams, and dryads capered upon cloud-crowned hilltops to the sound of hidden lutes. So Talquist imagined. He thought musingly of the myths told him by the oldster. They seemed appropriate enough now in this setting.

Lepolis plodded ahead silently, almost furtively. Now that he had embarked on the trip, it seemed he did not relish this journey. Talquist noticed how the oldster kept peering over his shoulder toward the silent trees. Lepolis seemed frightened; it was almost as though he believed the fantastic fables of which he had spoken.

Through deep glades and great lonely swamps they toiled, and again Talquist marveled that the old man did not lose his way in the trackless marshes. But at last they took a winding trail which led through a thicket and into a sunken grove, bordered by a land of tree-guarded twilight.

Roger Talquist gazed in silence at their goal. His eyes noted the great grassy ring in the center of the low grade, and he saw that the crumbled stones surrounded it in a sort of half-imaginary pattern. It was a moot question whether these rocks had been naturally or artificially placed; if the latter, they had been laid at a time incredibly remote. But they did resemble a crude altar-circle, and the great stone in the middle might easily have served the purpose of a sacrificial slab.

They descended upon the grotto and then Talquist took the lead while his aged guide hung back. Talquist examined the stones and noted the faint, rusty stains still visible on their tops. He fumbled amidst the fragments of broken rock that littered the bases of the altars in search of some ancient token or relic.

And then Roger Talquist saw. The grass was damp, and pressed down. The earth was wet. And in a circle about the central altar were the unmistakable imprints of *hoofs.*

Talquist gasped. ‘Come here, Lepolis!’ he exclaimed.

The old man looked down at the hoofmarks, clear and fresh. He smiled unfathomably.

‘I warned you, Mr. Talquist. There are creatures who seek this lonely altar.’

‘Nonsense!’ he stammered. ‘I merely wanted to ask you about wild goats. Are there any that might graze here?’

The old man’s smile was more enigmatic still. ‘Wild goats?’ he said. ‘Look again, Mr. Talquist. These are not goat tracks.’

Talquist looked, and they were not goat tracks, these great hoofed imprints in the earth. But they had to be! Why was Lepolis laughing so?

‘I warned you, Talquist,’ the old man went on. ‘I told you about what lurks, still undying, in the forest. I told you how my family knows, has always known and guarded the secret of the ancient Faith. I told you how one can sacrifice on this altar and receive a gift from the gods. A gift of eternal life and power, for the gods send a token conferring their reward upon the sacrifice. It is not pleasant to live in a changed shape, perhaps – but it is better than dying.’

What was the old fool raving about? Had he gone stark mad?

Lepolis’s voice was shrill now. ‘I warned you, remember that! I tried to keep you from coming. But you insisted. I am weak, I know – weak because I am old and do not want to die. I am afraid to die! I would far rather live, even in changed shape! And so, Mr. Roger Talquist, now that we are at the altar, the time has come—'

It came then, so swiftly that Talquist was caught wholly unprepared. Even as he was speaking, Lepolis edged closer and closer. Then suddenly from out of one ragged sleeve a knife flashed! Lepolis raised the gleaming blade on high and brought it down in a vicious stroke.

Talquist dodged desperately aside, just in time. But the old man, laughing insanely, was gripping him harshly by the throat. The knife raised again, and Talquist was forced back against the altar stone. The blade trembled, Lepolis tightened his grip, and Talquist knew with an icy heart that he must die.

With the strength of panic, Roger Talquist raised his free arm and caught the old man's wrist. He lunged forward, twisting Lepolis against the stone, and then wrestled with the mad strength of the shrieking patriarch. The knife bit keenly several times as Lepolis stabbed futilely again and again.

'O Great Pan, aid me!' screamed the old man. And then Talquist twisted the wiry wrist just as the blade thrust downward, and it turned. The knife buried itself inches deep in Lepolis's wrinkled throat, and a red stream poured out over the altar-top as the coughing ancient fell in racking death upon it Talquist stepped back, aghast. The hysteria of the last few moments had left him dazed. The earth seemed to spin around him madly, the stones moved, the darkness deepened, and in his wild fancy Talquist heard the rumbling of thunder from beneath his feet Then the shock was all over, and he stared mutely at the dead man on the altar.

Lepolis had lured him here, believing in the myths he had himself revealed. He had tried to kill the young scientist on the altar, that he might receive the gift of eternal life, though in a changed shape, from the ancient gods. Lepolis had been mad. It was all a most unfortunate occurrence.

Talquist turned. He must find his way out of the forest, and quickly.

But what was this? In the shards at his feet, at the base of the altar, something glinted dully. Talquist stooped and picked it up. Funny, he hadn't noticed this when searching before. He held it against the light of the blood-red sunset.

It was an octagonally cut medallion of greenish stone, so worn and polished as to hint of extreme age. The medallion was fastened on a linked chain of true gold, and was evidently designed to be worn around the neck.

All this Talquist observed in a fleeting moment, for his eyes and thoughts were directed now on the startling figure emblazoned on the face of the amulet.

There was something about the technique of the design that puzzled Talquist even while it disturbed him. The lines did not seem as though executed by *human thought.*

Each artist puts into his work something of himself, and what the designer had put into this figure was horribly alien. The goat seemed to be a symbol of another figure underneath; a figure Talquist couldn't make out but which he knew instinctively was lurking there.

The metal was of peculiar luster, the carving was unnatural, and looking at the thing somehow shocked Talquist. The goat was the symbol of Pan, and perhaps the wild ravings of Lepolis, with his talk of 'gifts' from forest gods, had unnerved the scientist.

Roger Talquist stared at the evil figure as he absently fastened the golden chain about his neck.

With a start, he realized what he was doing. *Why* had he put the amulet on? He raised his hand to remove it, and as he touched the stone he received a second shock. The stone was quite warm! There was a tingling in Talquist's fingertips – a tingling not altogether unpleasant. The stone was radiant, and warm as ardent flesh; as though it possessed some radioactive properties.

In a second the sensation passed and Talquist was brought sharply back to reality. A breeze now curled out of the encroaching night. The twilight grove was eerie, and the trees were fantastic figures bowing in the wind. They stretched long green arms as though to bar the wanderer's path. For a moment Talquist had the absurd notion that these trees would conspire to keephim in the forest.

He looked again at the dead man on the altar; then glanced down at the horrible, unexplained tracks at his feet, and shivered. He must get out of this grotto!

Talquist started across the grove to the thicket. Halfway across the last red rays of sunset glinted on his chest, and he glanced down again to see the amulet moving in a slow arc. He touched it, and a painful shock stabbed his fingertips again. Once more he knew fear – because now he felt life pulsing in the stone. It was living animation he felt, the sensation of powerful forces running in waves through his hand and up the length of his arm.

The contact somehow invigorated Talquist. He looked at the carved figure of the prancing goat that blazed up, and his eyes smarted and burned. The same eerie force tingling through his fingers now seemed to dance into his eyes and into the brain behind them.

There *was* a force in the stone! Lepolis with his wild talk of a ‘change’ in the men who found the gifts of the old gods – Lord, could the fool have been speaking the truth?

After {ill, Lepolis had been killed, though not intentionally, on that altar, like a sacrifice. Whereas the old man had meant to sacrifice Talquist and receive in reward the grant of immortality, though he would be ‘changed’ in some indefinable way by the divine blood of satyrs. But Lepolis had died, and then Talquist had found this peculiar talisman. Odd, that he hadn’t seen it before when he searched.

Had it been sent *after* the sacrifice? That thunder from below his feet—

Oh, but that was absurd! There were no forest gods in this twentieth century.

Hoof prints in the grass. . . .

Talquist tried to think of something else. Paradoxically enough, that was simple. His own body. Why was he suddenly feeling so strange?

He had a sudden impulse to tear the amulet from his throat, and his fingers instinctively tightened about it. There came a rapid acceleration of that flowing force within him, so that his arm seemed numb, as though from an electric shock.

What was this terrible thing doing to him? *Changing* him?

God, his body *did* ache! His arms and legs burned, there were sharp twinges in his thighs as he stumbled on – the kind of stabbing throb which in childhood had been spoken of as 'growing pains'.

Growing pains!

In a sort of panic, Talquist tried desperately to be sane. It was rheumatism – that's what it was! He had caught a chill in the damp and dew of the woods. His legs hurt from walking in tight boots.

He loosened his shirt as he walked across the glade; untied the lacings then, stopping to remove his boots. He seemed feverish, his head felt constricted, yet through the dull throbbing ran a thin red thread of exultation. He was terrified, yet strangely joyous.

Fever? Perhaps. His body, despite the pain, no longer seemed a part of him. He stroked his brow, and he scarcely recognized the convolutions. Feeling the stubble on his cheeks, he wondered if he had remembered to shave that morning. His hands were bronzed, and his fingers still tingled from the shock of the amulet He ought not to go on. He must rest. Shirtless, barefooted, Talquist flung himself down in the shadow of a bush at the edge of the glade. The last flicker of sunset crossed his chest.

His eyes focused again on the burning green brightness of the amulet, and as he stared his whole being turned to liquid flame. He felt oddly tortured, racked; his muscles stretched, tautened, and nerves ached with an exquisite pain that Was almost animal ecstasy. He could not move his eyes or raise his hand to drop the talisman and claw off the burning band of gold about his throat. Yet his brain was enthralled by a tormented bliss, though another part of his consciousness shrieked 'hypnotism – magnetism – madness'. But his being continued to writhe in bondage to the living stone.

Abruptly came the release. Dusk flooded the grove, and its purple pallor mingled oddly with the green lambency of the flaming amulet on Talquist's chest.

Roger Talquist rubbed his eyes. Why was he lying here on the grass? What had he been doing? He felt no pain now, only a hot surging of blood through quickened veins. He could feel the shrill singing at his temples. Why had he wanted to run away? Why had he feared the power of the amulet?

It was pleasant here in the forest at night, and the tingling in the talisman now was flowing through his body evenly, in invigorating waves. Whatever the power in this seal of the satyr, be it natural or supernatural, it was good. He had been a fool to dwell on such obscure fears.

Talquist rose to his feet, hardly conscious of his nakedness, and faced the edge of the grotto once again. Through the haze of dusk he saw the standing stones, shining whitely. The grass seemed greener and more lush about the bases – there seemed to be new life here. The rocks appeared larger and more numerous than in the afternoon. He soon realized that they were arranged in a circle so as to form a crude pattern.

Talquist wanted to step over and examine them. But something halted him in the shadow of the bushes.

From afar came the sound of conches. Into the glade marched a small procession of bearded men, robed in white. There were perhaps a dozen of them, and Talquist vaguely recognized faces from the village.

Then there was still worship here!

The priests, if priests they were, gathered around the central altar, and Talquist saw that they discovered the body of Lepolis with great surprise. They stood there, huddled and whispering in the twilight.

‘He told us that the young foreigner would be ready,’ whispered one, loudly enough for Talquist to overhear. ‘Something has gone amiss.’

‘Let us go, quickly before *they* assemble.’

‘Yes, *they* will come for the body.’

‘We will leave the incense burning here, but the talisman is already gone.’

‘Hasten; I am afraid.’

The men produced small bundles of sticks which they lighted on the eight outer stones. Great clouds of perfumed smoke wafted to wooded skies. It was a scene from old Greece – the ancient Greece of mystic forest gods.

The body of Lepolis lay on the central altar, and the pungent smoke rose all about him. The old men hurried off then, whispering and casting veiled glances back into the glade. Talquist crouched watching, his breathing excited and irregular.

For a long moment there was utter silence. Then began a curious rustling, a slithering of leaves upon the trees, and a purposeful padding as of hoofs upon the grass.

The sun had died in fathomless crimson skies, and the moon rose from the pallid purple of the east. It shone down upon the grotto as the rustling noises increased. A silver moon-shaft sped across the central altar, and as it did so a faint, shrill peeping filled the air. Hysterically high, the treble notes sounded from far away – the peeping summons of a syrinx. The peeping blended with rustling; the spicy perfume from the fires scented the forest dark.

And now other sounds were audible: queer moanings and high neighing, chirping and animal growls. Another scent, or combination of scents, mingled with the perfume; the musk-like odors of beasts and creatures of the wood, Talquist stared and saw – and nearly shrieked.

For into the grove the forest creatures headed, bounding and leaping and pawing the hard-packed earth. Shaggy and manlike, the fauns capered about in the moonlight, their goatish beards wagging to their squealing laughter.

Here were the living creatures of myth!

Bull-bodied maenads stamped into the glade with throaty bellows of guttural mirth, shaking their hairy heads in bovine playfulness. Across the sward the centaurs pranced, their sly, wicked faces wreathed in lustful grimace, their stallion bodies flexed with animal vigor. They snorted and reared, bringing spiked hoofs down to strike fire from the altar stones.

Now Talquist understood the hoof-prints on the grass!

With hoarse cries, the Ægypans bounded in, lifting their horrid goat-heads to bleat at the moon, and stretching their shambling legs and shapeless paws in animal ecstasy as they sniffed the aromatic incense of the spiced perfume.

The far-off piping grew more frantic still, and the whirling forest creatures laughed more shrilly, whirled more wildly, sniffing the reek of the smoke and bathing in moonlight as they danced and gesticulated amidst the altar stones.

Talquist gasped. Fabled legends come true! He glanced down at the seal of the satyr on his breast, then looked up as a shrill screaming sounded.

The living shadows of nymphs emerged from the rushes that bordered the stream within the forest. They danced over the grass and flung their wet green hair in carefree abandon as they wheeled before the beast-men.

There was one green-haired creature with eyes red as blood that Roger Talquist watched closely. The strength surging in him leaped at the sight of her, as she postured with the rest.

Now the creatures saw what lay upon the altar top. A faun crept close, gesturing to his less emboldened companions. One hairy paw reached out to touch the body of Lepolis. A black satyr capered before the corpse. His nostrils flared as he fumbled at the old man’s beard. A centaur trotted past, so that his sweaty flanks brushed the stone. The nymphs tittered shrilly.

They gathered before that inner altar and their eyes and hands and lips caressed what lay upon it, and they laughed and bleated. And when they turned away, they dragged the body with them.

The piping scurried higher in its shrillness. The peeping syrinx, the scent of smoke, the shrieking laughter – these things finally made Talquist emerge from the bushes. He did not think of what he had seen; he felt only the drumming of the incredible scene in his blood, fusing his being in strange response.

The dance of the forest creatures had become a pursuit, and the nymphs fled before the insane figures that scurried after them in the darkness. Hoarse screams filled the night.

Then the syrinx sounded, swelled, merged into a gigantic, triumphant bleat. The horde bore die body of Lepolis into the dark forest.

Talquist, his blood sweet fire, raced after the others about the altar. It was a strange madness that possessed him, that gave him a sense of curious kinship with these beings of the past. They shrieked when they saw him and pointed to the glowing green amulet on his chest, but he did not hear.

His eyes were searching for a figure – the figure of the green-haired nymph with the red eyes. She saw him, and turned with a mocking leer. Talquist hated the sight, but something inside him urged his body forward. He ran toward the taunting nymph. She fled in mimic dismay, back into the dark groves where now the distant piping died away.

Talquist ran through the forest, following the fleet wood sprite that leaped ahead, the wet green hair blending with the leaves of the livid trees. His temples burned, he gasped for breath, and his being was filled with a nameless strength. He loped after the fleeing figure, maddened by her taunting laughter that drifted back through the nighted pathways.

Soon he emerged upon the bank of a little stream where now the nymphs and nereids had returned. The fleet little creatures splashed noisily through the reeds and sank into the pool, diving beneath the rushes. None of them re-emerged.

Roger Talquist, fired by his madness, leaped after the taunting figure of the nymph he pursued, and the amulet jangled against his chest on its chain.

She turned suddenly on the bank and grinned up at Him with slyly parted lips, and tossed her snake-locked hair. Her moist, flabby hands pawed at Talquist’s arms. Her red eyes were not human, and gazing into them Talquist abruptly lost his madness and tried to push the creature away.

She stepped back on the bank. Noticing the amulet on the chain she reached for it. Talquist pushed her away again. Sniggering, the nymph reached out a cold hand to grasp at him for support. Instead, her fingers closed about the chain. She stepped back further, clutching the green seal – and lost her balance.

With a wrench the links parted, and the nymph fell screaming into the water. The amulet in her hand described a jeweled arc, then slipped beneath the churning surface of the stream, and sank. Nymph and seal of the satyr disappeared together in the pool . . .

Roger Talquist stood on the bank, staring stupidly at the widening circles in the water.

He remembered, now. He was cold, naked, standing in the woods at midnight, after chasing the phantoms of fever and delirium.

There had been no sacrifice, no nymphs or satyrs. It had all been a dream, a delusion brought on by the peculiar hypnotic power of the amulet he had stared at when he lay down.

It was gone now, that strange talisman. He had probably flung it into the water himself, in a final frenzy. Well, good riddance to the cursed stone!

Old Lepolis had been right, in a way. The seal of the satyr, whether a gift of the ancient gods or not, did change a person. Wearing it, Talquist had not been himself. He had become some kind of beast; his mind had undergone a peculiar change which made him feel kinship with the wild creatures of elder myth. Lepolis had said that such things still existed in the forest and came forth after a sacrifice.

And indeed these things had come to pass.

Poor Lepolis! He had believed it all, and he wanted the amulet because he thought it would make him a forest creature that could live forever. He had wanted it enough, believed enough, to risk murder. And he was dead, and the amulet was gone.

Talquist mused. Oddly enough, he had not believed the old man’s tale that the amulet could change one. He should have known it was some kind of allegory. The seal caused a mental change rather than a physical one; assuredly it had hypnotized him into thinking his body was different. Indeed, he *had* felt different; still did, in fact. Those tingling vibrations!

But what was he doing here? Better go back to the hotel now and try to forget his delirium.

Talquist gave a final glance at the waters of the pool into which the amulet had been thrown. The waters were calm now, and there was a glassy reflection in the clear moonlight. Talquist saw his own reflection in the moon-flooded depths, saw himself in Nature's silvery mirror.

Head, forehead, face, throat, arms, body, legs – he saw them all. And then he understood the real truth of Lepolis's incredible story of gifts from the gods that would change a man.

He did not look long. A single moment of numbing realization, and then he leaped into the pool – leaped straight into the deepest water, breaking with his body the mad reflection he had seen on the mirrored surface.

For, staring down at himself, Roger Talquist had seen *the face and figure of the wood-god, Pan!*

Flowers From The Moon

Stranger Than the Fact of the Spatial Voyage Itself is the Horrible Doom of Lycanthropy!

ONE minute there was nothing in the clear blue depths of the sky. The next, streaking across the far horizon like a silver comet, the great ship appeared, roaring down to earth.

With anxious eyes I watched it fall as the roaring intensified. With a sense of relief I heard the sound diminish, even as the speed of the dropping space-ship diminished. They had shut off the propulsion successfully. The last danger had passed! Now the vessel seemed to drift toward earth. I ran back to my car, raced the motor, then shot down the road toward the west. The ship would land in the plain about three miles distant, I calculated. As I sped toward the spot my eyes scanned the silver hull, and I sighed with relief as I noted that it seemed undented, unblemished.

Cars behind me hooted, horns, for the reporters were here, too. I pressed my foot down hard and shot up to eighty, then ninety. Ahead of me the ship was purring to rest, easing gently down upon the smooth turf of a meadow. It landed.

I put on the brakes and the car screeched to a halt; then with my heart thumping and thundering in my chest, I ran across the grass toward the ship —toward the silver door.

“Edna,” I murmured. “Edna!”

Of course my voice could not be heard through the insulated duraluminum walls of the space-ship—but it was almost magic to see the door slowly open in response to my cry, and it was magic when she stepped into the doorway, lovelier than the images of my dreams during the past two months. She hesitated-, blinking in the sun that flamed through her auburn hair; gazed at the ground six feet beneath the base of the doorway.

Then I held out my arms, and she leaped, and we were locked together in an embrace that freed me of all the anxious longing and heart-sick worry of the past eight weeks.

"Edna, you're safe—alive," I whispered tenderly.

"Oh, Terry, I knew you'd find us."

"Your father—Charles—the captain—are they all right?"

Her blue eyes clouded in momentary confusion. "Yes," she whispered. "But—"

The sentence was never finished. The reporters were on us; literally *on* us from all sides. The cars straggled in. Cameras clicked.

"Story, Miss Jackson? . . . Picture. . . . Hold it, please. . . . Your father safe? . . . Get to the moon, Miss Jackson? . . . Gonna marry this young man?"

Edna's white hands tugged at my shoulder.

"Terry, do something. Let Father and the others get away from these men. They're—they're too tired to talk now. And, besides, Charles isn't well."

FOR answer I fought my way through the struggling swarm of reporters and climbed into my car. Deliberately I wheeled around and drove straight at the babbling horde. The reporters scattered as I skidded to a stop directly under the ship's doorway. By this time a rope ladder had been let down from this ship, and now Professor Jackson appeared.

His tired eyes blinked nervously, and one hand went to his white head as he took in the scene. He descended the ladder and seated himself in the car.

Then the captain appeared; not the fat Captain Zurrit I remembered, but a thinner, haggard looking man. He carried a great satchel in one hand. He paused in the doorway to shout into the depths of the ship. He scowled, then slowly descended. Halfway down he paused again and reached up to shut the door. But the door opened.

A figure appeared then.

It was Charles DeVeaux, my rival; Charles the suave, Charles the laughing, the debonair, the black-haired, sleek, handsome scientist. So I remembered Charles.

But this man was different—horribly different.

His face was dead white, and his black hair bristled down almost to his eyebrows. His features seemed oddly altered—the shadows of the sun seemed to have lengthened his nose and chin. His hands went to his face, and they seemed thin as claws, and when the hands came away I saw his red eyes. They glared. And his mouth grinned.

That mouth! It hung open, working, a crimson maw of drooling imbecility. Charles DeVeaux was mad!

The captain looked up.

"Go back!" he shouted. "Charles—go back!"

Charles opened his mouth and snarled. I have never heard such a sound from a human throat. The yelling reporters quieted about the car, and then Charles came down.

He didn't climb down. He leaped.

"What's wrong with him?" shouted an excited little man, who climbed on the running-board as the captain took his seat. "Hey, buddy, what's the matter?"

Charles leaped and landed—not on the running-board, but on the shoulders of the little man.

With a sound I can only describe as a *growl,* Charles bore the small reporter screaming to the ground. His hands clawed at the little man's throat, and his mouth gaped open, and then he snarled and put his mouth to the reporter's throat and *bit.*

Edna was shuddering at my side, and the professor was screaming something in a high, hysterical voice.

The reporters were tugging at Charles, pulling him away. I tried to free myself, but Edna clung to me, sobbing. The captain acted. With a single gesture he pulled out a revolver and fired. There was a moan, and Charles fell backward, hands clawing the air; fell backward from the bleeding horror of the little man's torn neck.

And then the captain heaved the crumpled figure of Charles into the car and snapped, "Drive, Terry—drive like hell!"

I did.

WE WERE safe at last in the laboratory. Safe from the screaming headlines:

JACKSON RETURNS FROM MOON

JACKSON'S DAUGHTER RETURNS
FROM MOON VOYAGE TO WED

MADMAN IN JACKSON'S LUNAR
PARTY ATTACKS REPORTER

We were safe in the laboratory, and Captain Zurrit had gone back to remove the party's effects from the space-ship. The professor and Edna sat beside me in the room, while upstairs Charles DeVeaux tossed and moaned with a bullet through his shoulder.

"Tell me," Professor Jackson began, "have you kept the charts?"

I nodded, a bit ruefully, I must confess. It was something of a sore point with me—those charts and records of the voyage I had astronomically recorded while they were away. It dated back five years ago to my college days, when I worked with the professor in his laboratory; became his intimate and then his assistant.

During those years I met and learned to love his daughter Edna, and during those years my life, like his own, was centered about his plans for a voyage to the moon. We had gone over the construction of the vessel together.

Then Dr. Charles DeVeaux had come as assistant. He designed the actual space-ship while I plotted the course by astronomy. Edna had helped me, and we had all worked with but a single goal for years—that voyage to the moon and return.

When the trial ships we sent up exploded, or disappeared forever, we had suffered the keen pangs of disappointed dreams. Then Captain Zurrit had come from Moscow to perfect our plans and finance the venture. The voyage was about to begin.

But when it came to selecting the passengers, the professor omitted me. The captain, Charles DeVeaux, Edna, and himself had gone. I was forced to stay behind and keep the records—a bookkeeper of astronomy, I reflected bitterly. Up there in the solar blue my future bride rode with my nearest rival, while I could not share her perils.

It had been a bitter pill for me to swallow! To wait, to gaze each night in agony at the cold moon; wondering, wondering where she was, whether I'd ever hold her in my arms again. It was hell on earth those eight anxious weeks.

The papers had scoffed, called us all mad for our scheme, despite the validity of our plans we gave them. That had added to my worries. Was it, after all, an impossible scheme? I wondered, wondered through sleepless nights.

But now they had returned. There were a thousand questions I must ask. What had they found? Was there life on the moon, as the professor had always staunchly maintained? What was the temperature, the nature of the soil, the effect of gravity?

And what had made a drooling madman of Charles DeVeaux?

I asked those questions now. And the professor answered, while Edna sat at my side, her eyes alight with a strange, unspoken fear.

THE voyage had been calm enough as planned. Captain Zurrit handled the ship nicely, the propulsion devices had worked smoothly, the insulation had been perfect and the air-conditioning sound. Food capsule supplies had held out. The speed had been calculated properly, the automatic direction steering had proved practical.

The actual voyage took a little over three weeks each way. They had spent four days actually on the surface of the moon. The figures, exact detailed reports, were all here. The instruments were to be unlocked and their findings checked and recorded. The voyage had proved a brilliant success.

But why was Professor Jackson so haggard? Why did his hands tremble so when he spoke of the voyage home? Why didn't he begin, with his old-time enthusiasm, to recount the story of his days on the moon? Why did Edna draw closer to me as though in fear?

These questions flashed through my brain.

"But your actual experiences on the moon, Professor?" I asked. "What did you bring back with you?"

"Terry, I'd rather not go into that just yet. I'm tired, my boy." The professor's words came too hastily.

"Don't ask about that, dear. It's—it's something you'd better not know," Edna whispered.

"But I've a right to know," I snapped angrily. "You made me sit here and eat my heart out, my heart that belonged to you and to the plan for years. Now I've a right to know what happened on that voyage—to know what made a lunatic out of Charles DeVeaux!"

"Lunatic!" The professor breathed the words. "Lunacy—madness caused by the moon. The old definition was right. Yes—and that *other* definition."

"Father—please—" Edna begged.

The professor looked at me.

“No, Edna. He has a right to know, as he said. He must know about what we found—and about Charles. Because we’ll have to do something right away.”

He rose to his feet as I watched him, and went over to a table on which rested the big satchel the captain had brought with him.

Without a word he opened it and motioned me over. I went to his side and looked down at what he drew forth.

His hands were filled with flowers—white, orchidlike flowers, waxen as the face of Death, and lovely as pearls. The ivory petals hung open on scarlet depths unblossomed, and as the professor stroked the thick, white cups they seemed to tremble, rising and falling like the flesh of a woman’s throat as she breathes. And they were lovely, lovely past all imagining.

“We brought these back to earth,” the professor said. “We found them on the second day when we descended into the crater. We had seen no life in the barren soil, but we descended into this deep crater and found them growing at the bottom, near the mouths of the caves.”

I listened, but scarcely heard, so intently was I studying the white and scarlet blossoms.

“We plucked them. Charles carried them back with him, and he put them away.” His voice sounded from a great distance. “We didn’t know, then. But that night, as they lay on a shelf in the ship, we had the dreams. And we heard the howling. Waking, I realized for the first time that these flowers had a scent.”

A SCENT! Abruptly I jerked myself into awareness. That was it—that was why I couldn’t hear, couldn’t see. These flowers had a scent!

It was a scent so subtle, so delicate, I had not known that I was inhaling it. And it was a scent so powerful that I could scarcely stand. It was a scent so strong that my olfactory nerves blotted out consciousness of other faculties; I could only smell, could no longer hear or see or feel.

It was an indescribable scent—but terribly sweet; so sweet it hurt my eyes and throat and burned in my brain with lovely white fire.

I fought to awaken as I stood there, reeling before the strange white flowers from the moon, and then I saw once more—*saw that my breath was coming in rhythm to the pulsing of the flowers.*

“Terry!” Edna’s voice called from far away. “Wake up, Terry!”

But I didn’t want to awaken. I wanted to drown in that sweetness, let that scent flood my veins and surge up in white fire. My closed eyes saw waving blossoms, and I was suddenly in a deep, black pit on the surface of the moon where flowers nodded in the darkness and bent toward me blossoming, their hungry red mouths like the avid ruby lips of vampires. I was bending toward them—

“Terry!”

Edna’s arms, her voice, brought me to my senses.

“What are these accursed things?” I gasped.

The professor shook his head gravely. “I do not know. The odor affects one strongly at first. I’m used to it now, I think. But that first night we all had queer dreams, and I remember waking from my slumber to stare at the glass door of the ship—the glass temporary door we affixed after landing. I could see eyes in the doorway—great red eyes, like the eyes of a wolf.

“And then we all awoke and heard the howling, the dreadful, wolfish howling. God, I’ll never forget the way—”

“What’s that?” I shouted the interruption.

The ghastly sound rose on wings of nightmare dread, sweeping down from the rooms upstairs. It was a sound that made the short hairs rise on my neck, that caused my throat to go dry with sudden, unnamable fear. It was the sound all men instinctively dread—the horrible, deep-throated baying of a wolf.

And it came from within the house!

“Charles!” shouted the professor. “Come on!”

He raced from the room and plunged up the stairs, while I pounded at his heels. Edna tried to hold me back, but I brushed her arm away.

The professor, his face frantic with alarm, ran down the hall and jerked open the door of a bedroom where Charles had been placed. I followed swiftly, entered behind him. Too late.

For as the door opened, the horror sprang.

The professor went down, and then the thing was at his throat, tearing and tearing, with that monstrous growl rising from a fanged maw as it bit and snapped.

I staggered back, my eyes blurring at the enormity of the dread I saw before me. It was not Charles DeVeaux attacking Professor Jackson. DeVeaux had disappeared; he was not in the room.

There was no Charles DeVeaux any more. There was a wolf. . . .

THE face I thought lengthened in the sunlight's shadows was now completely gone. It was a snout, a furry-rimmed, gleaming muzzle with wicked red jaws from which the long yellow fangs protruded. The clawlike hands *were* claws, and the naked body was furry and shaggy as a gigantic wolf's body is shaggy.

That nightmare metamorphosis had occurred—and now this *thing* tore at the professor's helpless throat, and then it looked up at me and snarled, and sprang. I flung up my arms to shield myself from the ripping talons. One hand struck against the coarse hair of the beast's shoulder, and the lupine creature yelped with pain.

My hand had touched the wolf's shoulder where it bled from a bullet wound which Charles DeVeaux had sustained. Whining with pain, the animal swerved aside and sprang past me, out the door. It scuffled down the stairs and I raced after it. Edna was in the laboratory.

I sighed with relief as the thing continued on out the open door. In my daze I didn't realize that the horror was escaping, loosing itself on the world. My only thought was for Edna's safety.

I turned back up the stairs, but it was too late. One glimpse of the fallen professor and I knew that it was all over. Mercifully I covered the torn features and hurried down the stairs. Edna, sobbing, fell into my arms. I tried to speak.

"Oh, Terry—I know, I know," she murmured. "Father's—gone. And it was Charles. Did he get away?"

I nodded. And then Edna showed the stuff that she was made of. Her eyes cleared, her voice became firm. "We must act at once," she said.

"Terry, you're the only one who can save us from *it."*

I held her close.

"It was my fault. I should have made Father tell you everything at the first. I will tell you now."

She spoke swiftly, urgently.

"Those flowers—I have a theory about them, Terry. Have you ever read those old books in Father's library? Those ones on witchcraft and demonology he collected?"

I looked up, comprehending. "Yes."

"He was a serious student of occultism, remember? You used to argue with him as to whether there weren't actually distorted scientific truths in old superstitions and legends that strangely persisted in every age and every country. He said that perhaps these legends had a basis in truth, and a scientific meaning men just hadn't learned to interpret yet. And I think he was right. Because of this."

She paused for breath, then hurried on.

"Those books speak of werewolves. Remember? The legend that men sometimes alter their shape to that of beasts? Under the influence of some drugs, the books say, the minds of men change. That's true—it's regularly accepted science. Opium, various narcotics do that to your mind. They are made from flowers, remember.

"And the old books say that there are *other* drugs, rarer ones, that alter not the mind but the body. They say that in certain valleys of the Orient, where the moon shines always, there grows a curious white flower which blossoms under the full moon. The books say that those who breathe the scent of this flower change their bodies and become wolves. *Werewolves.*

"Only a silver bullet slays them, once they breathe the scent of these strange, rare flowers that legends say grow from seeds that drift in space—seeds that come from the moon."

WHEN she paused for breath, I spoke hesitantly.

"You mean that—"

"Yes, Terry. Don't you see? And those other medical theories of olden days about lunatics, people who go mad when the moon is full. The moon influenced their minds, those ancient savants believed. The moon is a strange thing, Terry. It's a weird world, that controls much on earth. It affects our tides, influences our seasons—why not our minds? The old faiths that worshiped the moon were aware of long-forgotten truths. These white flowers that grow on the moon; you smelled them and you know what happened to your own mind. It's true."

"But Charles DeVeaux? What did he do?"

"We were asleep that first night after plucking the flowers. Their scent filled the ship, although we didn't know it then. And the howling awoke Father. He saw the wolf outside. It howled. And Charles began to howl in return!

"It was horrible. Father and Captain Zurrit knew at once that he had gone mad, somehow. We strapped him to the bed, but he was raving about flowers, about how he had sat there poring over them all evening We didn't listen to him, then, thinking that he babbled in delirium brought on by some strangeness in the lunar air, or by the rigors of the trip. But the wolf howled outside, and Charles raved about the white flowers and a change within his blood, and how he felt his body going wrong. That was the worst, Terry—Charles guessed what the truth was. And we didn't heed.

"The wolf vanished. Father went back to the craters again, though I begged him to leave at once. But he was so excited by the possibility of life on this dead planet—particularly such a high form as canine life. He theorized as to how this particular form managed to maintain its existence.

“He searched for hours. When he came back he was pale; stricken and aged. Charles was worse, straining at his bonds, and howling continuously. We put the flowers away, still not believing in their potency. And we started back.

“The return voyage was terrible. Charles began to change visibly. And Father and the captain argued, until they hit on the truth. The wolves on the moon must have once been men, but the flowers of lycanthropism had changed them into wolves who howled in pits, just as poor Charles howled for blood.

“We landed, hoping to keep Charles confined until we could move him secretly. Father wanted to study his lycanthropy as a disease—cure him, if possible. But Charles knew. Even though he could no longer speak, he knew. And he gnawed through his bonds and tried to escape. When he bit the reporter, Captain Zurrit shot him. But ordinary bullets won’t kill a werewolf. And now he has killed Father—”

Edna laid her head on my shoulder and shuddered.

“We must find him, Terry! He’s loose on the world now, and he’ll seek blood wherever he goes. Those things live on and on, and the flowers will change others, too. We must destroy those flowers first of all. All the blossoms must be burned until that evil scent is gone forever.”

“No, you don’t!” a deep voice barked through the room.

BOTH of us turned to see the set face of Captain Zurrit. I looked at that face, then into the staring muzzle of a revolver.

“Lucky I arrived in time,” the captain said. “Just listen to what I say, and keep your hands at your side. I don’t want trouble.”

Edna looked curiously at the captain.

“But the professor is dead,” she faltered. “Charles escaped.”

“That’s no concern of mine,” snapped the captain. “I’m interested in the flowers—not saving a few worthless lives. This flower cluster came from the moon. Don’t be fools. It has incalculable scientific value. It is a form of lunar life and must be studied. Science can learn much from it that should be known. You must not destroy it in childish, superstitious dread."

"But DeVeaux is out, and he'll kill," I argued.

The gun waved to silence me.

"Stop talking like a schoolboy. What if he is? He'll be captured in due time, and captured alive, too. He must be studied now, as well."

"You're mad," I shouted. "Crazy, a fanatic! Science or no science, there's a horror in these blossoms that must be destroyed to save humanity. His bite will kill many, but it will merely infect others—like rabies from a dog, it will work in their blood until they too become living-dead animals that raven to kill. The world will be filled with snarling horrors, werewolves. They'll destroy all men. You saw what happened on the moon; it can happen here. Whole cities of baying wolves, howling at the moon. You can't want that!"

"I don't care. I'm taking these flowers, now."

I glanced at the windows. It was dark outside, and the moon was already rising. Night was falling, and somewhere in the blackness that loping thing waited to kill, red tongue lolling, gleaming jaws agape.

"The papers from the ship, the instruments?" I asked, stalling for time to think.

"I brought them here," said Captain Zurrit. "They are safe in the house, all your precious secrets. The vessel has been checked over, too—you will find it in readiness for a return voyage, if you like. That doesn't interest me. I stalled off the reporters and the police about the shooting this afternoon. They won't be around till morning. I didn't want anything to hinder my plans. These plants leave with me tonight for Moscow. I shall study them at my leisure, with my own staff."

Edna moved away, but the captain saw her.

"Don't try anything foolish, girl. I'll shoot without hesitating, I assure you. Now—I'll take the flowers and go—"

He scooped them up from the table and for a moment one great hand clutched the mass of white, evil blossoms. His nostrils flared as he inhaled the cloying scent. His eyes narrowed.

"Exquisite," he murmured, half to himself. "They bring me dreams. I dreamed on the voyage back, dreamed of them. Now they shall be mine, their perfume mine to breathe. I shall inhale all beauty and all strangeness —"

"He's mad!" Edna whispered to me. "He's mad! His story is insane; he doesn't want the flowers for scientific reasons, but because they've begun to bewitch him. The scent is starting to change him, as it did poor Charles. He'll become a—"

"He is!" I hissed.

AND he was. In the wan twilight I could see it. The evil fingers of moonlight clawed at the windows, then entered in long, bony webs of luminance. They seemed to strike at the blossoms in the captain's hand, and a white fire blazed forth. The odor, that unhallowed effluvium, seemed to strengthen in the lunar rays. I could not shut my nostrils to the increasing scent, the sorcerous scent that rose from my breath to my brain.

The captain held the flowers and I could see him change, now. His nose was a snout, and his eyes were red. Faint hair bristled on his face, coarsened in his beard and on the shadowed neck. His arms were long.

He inhaled deeply, holding the gun steadily enough. Yes, it was true! He must have succumbed later than Charles, his stronger will had resisted longer, but now the flowers were winning; the wolf-taint was in his blood, his lungs, his flesh.

His shoulders slumped as he turned away. "I'm going now," he mumbled —and it was dreadful to hear his deepened voice, his growling, slurring tones. "You can go out and catch your werewolf whenever you please. I shan't care. My plane leaves at once."

He left the room, stooping in a monstrous way. I wondered how long it would take for the change to be completed; how soon he would howl like a thing of darkness in the night. And how soon the world would howl with him, a nightmare world of shaggy wolves that tore away at the throats of all humanity and plunged earth into a barren horror akin to the shining moon above.

"Edna, we have to stop him!"

She nodded. Together we ran out into the hall, toward the open door. And there in the garden twilight we saw him running across the lawn. The night was still, but a faint breeze stirred, and on it was the strong, almost overpowering scent of the lycanthropic moon-flowers. The vine trailed from the hands of the mad captain as he sped away. It filled the garden as the moonlight filled it; under a full moon the full scent rose in a world of white light, white perfume, white horror.

Even as he crossed the lawn the captain's body seemed to change. His coat sloughed off, his form bent closer to the ground. His hands, holding the blossoms, were dark and hairy. Moonlight performed a dreadful acceleration of his condition. The scent was so strong that Edna reeled in faintness beside me. I smelled that damnable odor everywhere.

Another smelled it.

A long howl sounded from the bordering bushes near the walk.

It was Charles. He had waited there, drawn back to the house by the scent of those maddening evil-scented moon-blossoms.

The captain turned halfway. Charles saw him, crept from the bushes, shaggy body crouching close to the ground. The captain held up one hand as though to shield himself, and the blossoms glistened slickly in the pale moonlight.

Then Charles leaped forward. The wolf-head dipped, raking talons hurled the captain to the ground. With a triumphant baying, the wolf was at his throat.

And—the captain bayed back!

"Terry," Edna moaned, clinging to me.

THERE before our eyes two wolves fought and snarled in the, moonlight, fighting with fang and claw, leaping and slashing with bloody muzzles. Back across the lawn they raced, the captain still clutching the ragged flowers in one paw—one paw that should not, could not be real; yet was.

The yelping rose in our ears. Champing jaws grated on bone. Two wolves fought to the death, and through the growling came an abominable, throaty voice.

“I must—have the blossoms—Charles.”

And then it happened. The flowers slipped from wolf-paws as the two rolled in a rending embrace. I raced silently across the lawn, caught up the scented moon-flowers, and sped back to Edna. “Come on,” I whispered. “Let’s get out of here.”

She turned and ran at my heels as I made for the car, clutching the handful of demonic blossoms. Behind us the baying rose to the cold moon.

“What—where?” gasped the girl.

“To the ship,” I panted. “Put these things aboard. Zurrit said it was ready. Going to send them up in the ship, let them plunge back into space, back to the moon, perhaps—anything. Must get them off the earth.”

I suppose I was a little delirious. But the notion fastened to me. It was the only way to cleanse the world of the terror, the scented terror. I raced the car.

“Terry—look!”

Down the silvery white road that gleamed in the moonlight behind us, two figures loped. Two fully formed wolves! Charles and the captain had discovered the theft of the blossoms, and now they pursued.

It was a mad race through midnight with two creatures of myth howling at our heels, the scent of doom welling in our nostrils as I shot the speed up, up. We turned. The running forms vanished from behind us. Yet they were coming, coming.

And I was in a garden, a cool, sweet garden, and the air was a white wine that I breathed richly, intoxicating myself with the deep fire of strange new life. I was in a garden, and Edna was beside me, eyes closed, lips opened to inhale the magic perfume of rapture. . . .

No. I wasn't in a garden. I was in a car, doing seventy miles an hour down a moon-blazed road, while between my face and Edna's rested the damnable cluster of vampiric blossoms, their scent sucking our souls out with every breath. The cursed things were getting at *us!*

I dared not throw them away. Those things behind would catch up, find them. I dared not. I had to fight, fight to keep awake, to keep speeding down the road toward the ship.

Yet I didn't want to fight. I wanted to sleep, to rest, to forget everything except the beauty of perfumed dreams. Now I understood the enslavement of opium eaters, of hasheesh addicts, who sought strange worlds of the mind at the expense of their bodies.

Edna must not be exposed to this scent any longer! I shot up to a hundred, screaming down the road toward the plain where the ship rested. Edna lay white and still, her bosom rising and falling, rising and falling in rhythm with the weaving blossoms that coiled out as though to touch her milky, moon-white skin. Edna!

We jarred to a halt before the great gleaming bulk of the ship. I wanted to rest. I could smell the scent, and I wanted to rest. The moonlight hurt my eyes. So easy to close them, to forget. . . .

BLINKING painfully, I threw the door open and jumped to my feet. I shook Edna into wakefulness. She moaned.

"Come on—come on," I panted. "Hurry!"

The ladder still hung, although the door was closed. I forced Edna to mount before me, placing the blossoms in her hands. It was awful to see her fingers close lovingly about the stems of the leprous growths, awful to see the cataleptic stare in her eyes, the way those eyes slanted in the moonlight. But I had to have my hands free to support her, to urge her upwards. We scrambled up the ladder, and I prayed that the door was unlocked. It was.

The captain had left in haste. We pulled ourselves into the darkened cabin of the ship. I fumbled for lights.

Edna crouched on the floor, clasping the flowers to her face. I had to tear them away from her. In the little cabin the scent rose strongly, compellingly. We had to get out of here. I fumbled with the panel controls. Impossible, of course, to chart a course; to plan. Just throw the switch with a half-minute's delay, catch hold of Edna, and hurry out in time to be clear of the ship as it left—taking with it in its plunge those damnable blossoms. That was the only way. Get those things off earth before it was too late!

I studied the panel for a moment. There must be no hesitation. We were in danger from the scent ourselves; or was it a danger? It was so pleasant, that odor, so peaceful. Why not surrender?

And then, from without the door, from the ground below, a long dreadful howling from two threats. They had found us and they were waiting!

That was the end. We couldn't escape. I knew it then, knew that the things that waited would rend and tear if we ventured outside. And here, within the cabin, the flowers still rustled as though filled with alien, moon-given life. The scent rose stronger on the air. Edna lay still, beside the blossoms, breathing, breathing. . . .

HOWLS rose from the outside.

I found pen and paper then. Had to, to keep from going mad. Had to concentrate on something, anything. Anything but the howling outside and the quiet horror of scent within.

So I scribbled this. I don't know how long I've been sitting here. There is no howling any longer, but low whining sounds proclaim that the waiters are patient. My task is finished, but I cannot step outside to face those ravening fangs, those fangs set in what were once human throats.

Nor can I stay inside. The air is close. No, there is no air any longer. There is merely the scent. For a while it weakened me while writing, but now it seems to be easier to breathe. I can hear myself breathing, quite hoarsely, but easily enough. I feel a little better, a little stronger. Perhaps I'm immune. Edna is still asleep, but she's stirring. Maybe she, too, is immune. I pray that this is so. She is waking, now. The flowers still move, her breathing is attuned—and so is mine. Perhaps there's nothing to worry about. But what shall we do?

It is difficult to write these last words, for some reason. The labor makes me glance down at my hands. And I read the answer there.

My hands are growing darker. There are hairs sprouting on them. The fingers are curling. The dark hairs are sprouting.

I know what I must do, now.

I thought we'd throw the switch and leap out, and send the flowers back to the moon, or back into space. But we cannot leave. That was the problem, but it has been solved, dreadfully solved. We shall have to go with the flowers, now, out into space. *My hands are hairy.*

Sitting here in the close confines of the cabin has done it. I have breathed too many fumes. No wonder I don't mind it any longer, don't try to resist that cursed scent. I'm—changing.

How soon, I wonder? Better start the ship, now.

Edna mustn't know. I pray to God she doesn't know. The knowledge would kill her. Just start the ship and pray she doesn't suspect at first. Good idea. If she doesn't know, then she'll trust me. She is smiling at me now, bravely. Her blue eyes, so frank, so trusting! And still she breathes in rhythm with the white blossoms.

I won't tell her. Because then, when I get hungry enough—why do I get hungry when I look at her now?—I can approach her. She trusts me. She doesn't know what the flowers have done to me. And the pulse-beat in her white neck moves up and down, and I'm hungry. When we're plunging out there in the spatial darkness all alone it will be too late to think of my hairy hands when I do tell her. When I tell her, and take her.

I will throw the switch now, arid throw this manuscript out of the ship. I'm hungry. That perfume from the white flowers is making me hungry. Well, there will soon be a feast.

Yes, very soon. And yet, I wonder. Edna is standing at my side now, trying to read what I write. She still isn't afraid, and has just laid one hand on mine. And I see something else.

There will be a feast soon out in space, but perhaps I will not be the feaster.

Edna's hand is growing hairy, too.

The Man Who Walked Through Mirrors

To Stanhope's office he came, bearing a strange machine. Obviously he was mad, his machine a fake, and yet. . . .

EDITOR STANHOPE gazed at his mild, round face in the mirror. He noted the redness of his eyes, the tight lines around his usually placid mouth, the dishevelment of his ordinarily orderly blond hair. He looked like the devil.

Ordinarily, the editor enjoyed receiving visitors. Some of the magazine authors were old friends of his; some of the fans were welcome guests in the office. But today had brought out the screwballs.

Stanhope sighed. Running a science-fiction magazine had its drawbacks. There were eccentrics interested in the field, and at times they got *ideas.* One day a man had come up to the office with a perpetual motion machine, made out of rubber bands. Another visit produced a wild-eyed little fellow with an egg-beater attached to an electric motor. He had set the contraption up in the editorial office and insisted that Stanhope look into the revolving blades of the egg-beater and see the Fourth Dimension. It was exasperating. Today he had been visited by no less than three of these ninnies; all armed with pages of formulae and garbled quotations from Charles Fort or *Tertium Organum.* Editor Stanhope had been quite diplomatic, but it was a strain. And stories! "Every Story Scientifically Accurate" read the lines on the cover of the magazine. It was Stanhope's sole standard. And the manuscripts he read today were impossible.

There was the old story of the man who went back in time; written by somebody who probably thought a time-machine was some kind of alarm-clock.

There was a novelette in which the city of New York was destroyed by Martians, and once again the Empire State Building fell down. Editor Stanhope firmly resolved never to buy any more stories where the Empire State Building fell down. Why couldn't they pick on some other building for a change? Even the Chicago Tribune Tower would be a novelty; but no, it was always the Empire State Building that had to go boom. He wondered what Al Smith thought when he read all this.

There was a story about an atomic disintegrator ray; sound in theory, but with human characters so wooden and stilted the editor wished to heaven they'd turn the ray on themselves.

It was discouraging. But stories must be bought; good stories. "Every Story Scientifically Accurate." Editor Stanhope scowled into the mirror, then read on grimly. He was half-way through an absurd item about a spaceship with wings, meanwhile thinking of how Stanley Weinbaum must be turning over in his grave, when the door opened.

Stanhope looked up. He sighed, under his breath.

The stranger in the doorway did everything but carry a ten-foot sign on his chest labeled "Screwball."

There were all the signs. The tangled mop of black, curly hair straggling over the high forehead. The deep-set, blazing eyes. The cynical half-sneer of the mouth. The untidy clothing. The excited movements of his hands, the quickened breath, the nervous blinking of the eyelids. Worst of all, the stranger carried a machine under one arm.

STANHOPE knew the type. He was not prejudiced, he was a reasonable man; but long experience had taught him that in some cases it did not pay to be overly tolerant. There are cranks and eccentrics in every field; but scientific cranks are by all odds the worst.

After all, it had been a hard day. The editor resolved to be firm.

“Good afternoon, sir. What can I do for you?”

“What can *you* do for me? Don’t make me laugh! I’m going to do something for you.” The smiling stranger advanced into the room.

“You’re Stanhope, the editor of this rag, aren’t you?”

“I am Mr. Stanhope, yes. But see here—”

“Never mind.” The stranger waved the words aside with an airy gesture of his left hand as he sat down in the chair opposite the desk and deposited the shining mechanism he carried on the table. “Mr. Stanhope, my name is Volmar Clark. You know of me, no doubt?”

“Can’t say that I do.”

“What?” The stranger’s eyebrows became two swords of accusation. “Never heard of Clark, the man who left the Institute after telling them all off for the pack of fools they were; the man who was called in to advise on the building of the Pasadena Observatory lens in spite of it all? Never heard of Clark? You’re like all the other dolts; gabbling of H. G. Wells and Sir James Jeans and a few other publicity hounds and ignoring the quiet work of the scientific great under your very nose.”

“Wait a minute, Mr. Clark. I’m very busy and—”

“One is never busy in the presence of Genius. But you’ve never heard of Clark, you say? You know Einstein, don’t you? Well, forget him. In years to come, Clark will outshine Einstein as the sun outshines a penny match!”

Stanhope winced. He was as patient as the next, but he couldn’t afford to waste time any longer. This schizophrenic who referred to himself in the third person was impossible.

“You’ll have to excuse me,” Stanhope said, rising.

“Oh that’s all right. I’m not blaming you for anything,” the man called Clark announced. “It’s only that I thought you might remember me. About a year ago, when I was still naive enough to wish for earthly recognition, I did a foolish thing. I embodied my scientific thesis, rejected by the academic ignoramuses of the Institute, in a story and sent to you. I thought you might remember it; certainly it was the best thing of its kind ever written, and I don’t ever see how it could have been rejected.”

Stanhope lost his tact.

“What was the name of the story?”

“You don’t even recall the name of the most startling bit of literature ever penned? Mr. Stanhope, I am truly sorry—for you. The story was entitled *Fourth Dimensional Mirror.”*

ABRUPTLY, Stanhope recalled.

How could he ever forget? *Fourth Dimensional Mirror!* A rotten title. But the story itself was far worse than the title implied. It had been something Stanhope had really tried to forget. Sheer babbling lunacy—a rambling, incoherent tale which purported to contain a theory about mirrors being the gates of the Fourth Dimension. It had been filled with wild explanations of the laws of optics and how the eye was connected by electric impulse with the brain so that light-waves and thought commingled to produce awareness of the Fourth Dimension. There was something about a field of force set up on the mysterious reflecting surface of a mirror, which could be physically entered by the human body. A man walking through a mirror into the Fourth Dimension was by all odds the most absurd notion Stanhope had ever encountered in all his reading of science-fiction. He had firmly rejected the tale on his usual grounds: “Every Story Scientifically Accurate.”

“I remember now,” he said. “I recall rejecting the story.”

“Why?” The word was a jet of flame.

“Why? Why? Because it was implausible, Mr. Clark. Here,” Editor Stanhope picked up a copy of the magazine from his desk. “You know our by-line, our trademark, as it were. ‘Every Story Scientifically Accurate.’ I’m sorry, but your story wasn’t.”

Clark's beady eyes flickered as he suddenly grasped the magazine and crumpled it convulsively between his fingers.

"Every Story Scientifically Accurate!" His tone was purest venom. "You call this stuff science? Robots and Martians and fungoid beings and opium-smoker's visions? What if the so-called theories are mathematically correct? Does that make these stories accurate? They are fiction, not fact. And science is factual. How can you draw the line?"

"I haven't time to go into that just now, Mr. Clark."

"Of course you haven't. Neither have I. Neither did the men at the Institute when I showed them my theories no paper. They forced me to resign. And yet they respected my pre-eminent authority in the field of optics enough to call me in on the telescopic lens job; but they refused to believe the truth. I wrote the truth up in the form of fiction and even you couldn't swallow it as mere imagination. And yet it is true—truer than all this Martian humbug or space-flight nonsense you insist is within the pale of possibility. But I'll show you! I'll show them all! What Einstein and De Sitter hinted at, I shall reveal. Every story scientifically accurate, eh?"

Stanhope thought vaguely of running out and getting help. This man was insane. He might become violent in his megalomania; this unnatural fuss about the rejection of a story a year ago was obvious proof of his pronounced unbalance.

"What makes stories scientifically accurate?" Clark was shouting. "I ask you?"

"Proof," muttered Stanhope, trying to avoid the too-bright gaze of his demented visitor.

"Proof? Exactly. And I've brought proof." Clark pointed at the machine.

"You ask me why I didn't go to the Institute, or to higher authorities with this machine. Simple. I've spent a year working on this, a solid year! I spent twenty before that in perfecting my theory and was laughed at for my pains. So I spent one year more building my proof; my machine. Now instead of taking it to the scoffers higher up, I decided this time to start at the bottom; with you, the most insignificant of my critics. You, and your 'scientifically accurate' stories couldn't swallow my theory. Therefore you shall be the first to swallow my proof. You shall be ray guinea-pig, Editor Stanhope. How would you like to see that Fourth Dimension your ignorant authors are always babbling about?"

STANHOPE was really afraid now. This madman was larger, stronger than the slight-bodied editor, and he was obviously aroused. Stanhope must humor him, keep him talking until the art-editor or one of the stenographers happened in and could get wind of the situation. Therefore the editor tried to smile. He caught sight of his haggard face in the mirror and shuddered.

"Going to send me to the Fourth Dimension, eh?" he said. "How?"

"You read the story. Through the mirror, of course."

Stanhope wanted to be diplomatic, but his natural honesty rebelled at this. He was, first and foremost, an honest man; an honest editor. And his creed, "Every Story Scientifically Accurate" was written on his heart just as firmly as it was emblazoned on the cover of his magazine. He couldn't stomach this statement.

"Clark, be sensible. Send me through the mirror? Why that's childish fairy-tale stuff. Like Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass*

"Exactly," Clark answered, a smile on his pale face. "That's where I got the idea. Oh, you needn't scowl so. Lewis Carroll—what do you know about the man? He was a mathematician, writing children's books under a pseudonym. Nobody ever noticed the quiet little fellow in real life, yet *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass* are perhaps the most unique literature ever written in themselves. Not only children but adults have found keen satire in their pages; and more than that, the two books are still conceded to be the most accurate descriptions of dreams ever recorded. Do you understand what I mean? Lewis Carroll, the shy, furtive little schoolteacher, was one of the world's greatest psychologists. And mark you, he was a mathematician as well. He was no fool—and when he sent

Alice through the mirror into the dreamworld he was basing fantasy on the most advanced and abstruse mathematical logic ever conceived. Even today there are those who link dreams with the Fourth Dimension; the mathematical symbols of each are interchangeable. Where but in dreams, or the Fourth Dimension is body and consciousness altered? Where does life take on new and varied forms of expression? I wouldn't be such a fool, if I were you."

Stanhope lost his temper for one desperate moment.

"Get down to facts," he shouted. "Where is this machine and what does it consist of? Stop talking about dreams and fairy-tales."

"That's right. The editor wants his scientifically accurate proof, doesn't he?" Clark's voice was. mocking. "Very well. Here's the machine on the table."

Stanhope turned to gaze closely at the contrivance. It was a long, gleaming silver tube mounted on a pedestal base from which jutted a series of levers and buttons. Superficially, it resembled an ordinary microscope. Clark picked up the instrument, sat down on top of the desk, and cradled it in his lap. His hands unconsciously caressed it, and Stanhope watched the play of his long, slim fingers.

"Just what does this machine do?" the editor inquired.

"Just what the machine in my story did. You look through the lens, adjust the focus to correspond with your own vision—that is, the rate of speed by which light-rays impinge on your retina and are translated into electrical impulse by your brain. This sets up an electrical rhythm which in turn is acted upon by the system of angled lenses in the tube. Then you gaze through the tube at your image in a mirror and you become translated into the Fourth Dimension by means of electrical contact of duplicate focii. In other words, when you apply your eye to this tube, it becomes merely an extension of the tube itself; a necessary part of the machine linking your brain directly with your image. The force-field draws brain into image, and there you are."

"In the nut-house," Stanhope wanted to add, but he thought better of it as he gazed into the fanatical eyes of Volmar Clark.

"BUT how did you build this; what are the principles?" asked the editor, sparring for time. Why didn't some one come in and rescue him?

"Let us be scientific, by all means," purred Clark. "Perhaps I can explain it by questioning you. To begin with, you believe in scientific accuracy, don't you?"

Editor Stanhope nodded.

"And yet you'd say my principle of mirror-images being Fourth-Dimensional projections of three-dimensional objects is not founded on scientific fact, and is therefore absurd?"

Again Stanhope nodded.

"Very well. Let us see whether or not you can give scientific reasons for your disbelief. I say you look through this tube into the mirror and become drawn through it."

"A solid man can't enter his own reflection," Stanhope parried. "That mirror on the wall is nothing but plate glass, backed by a thin coating of mercury. It merely reflects light from the smooth, polished surface of the glass."

"Very good, my skeptical editor. Very good. And now would you mind telling me something about glass?"

"Why, surely—"

"Scientifically, what is glass? Is it a metal?"

"Well—"

"Isn't it true that glass has no crystalline structure? All metals have."

"Now, wait a minute."

"Is glass a liquid or a solid? What is its definite melting point?"

"I don't know that."

“True. Nobody knows.[*] No scientist knows, any more than he knows the exact nature of electricity, for instance. And neither you nor Einstein can discover the make-up of its molecular structure.”

“Yes, I’m afraid you’re right,” the editor confessed.

“Of course I am. Glass is a mystery. Like electricity, man can produce it, control it within limits, and even use it in a few simple tasks which do not even begin to impinge on its possibilities. We can guess that thought is electricity, and that life is perhaps an electrical manifestation. No one has ever bothered to theorize on the mystery of plain, everyday glass; the greatest key to the secret of light. The strange substance through which we see the stars is the link between light and electricity; between seeing and being.

“And properly handled according to mathematical formulae, I say that a man can enter the peculiar molecular chaos of glass and enter through its planes into the Fourth Dimension. Man co-exists; he appears before himself in a mirror. The only reason the mirror image isn’t real is because his brain is absent from it. His three-dimensional consciousness cannot penetrate a Fourth-Dimensional reflection—but my lens does that. By linking his eye to the lens to the image of his reflection, and by thus directly connecting brain to image, the electric structure of thought impinges on the mysterious planes of glass and he is drawn through.”

Clark’s eyes blazed.

“There’s scientific accuracy for you,” he challenged. “Refute me if you can. Everything I’ve asked about the nature of glass, and about the nature of reflection cannot be answered by science. I tell you I’m right.”

“Negativism isn’t proof,” Stanhope replied. “That mirror over there may be all you say it is, but your machine is impossible. Have you ever tried it out?”

“I just completed it, under considerable stress. And I haven’t tried it yet, thank you. I don’t want to enter into a mirror. Beyond my own reflection and that of this room, I cannot dream of the strange world which inhabits the peculiar structure of ultra-dimensional light. But that's why I came to you, my editorial scoffer. You're my guinea pig, as I said. You shall look through the tube with your skeptical eye and find out the truth."

"What?" The maniac *mas* convincing. Editor Stanhope felt a shudder he strove vainly to repress. For a moment the man's wild whispers had convinced him that he lived in a cosmos governed by strange laws. But it was nonsense. It had to be. Every story scientifically accurate—theory rejected.

CLARK read skepticism in the editor's face.

"Well," he challenged. "You don't believe me, so you needn't be afraid. Look into my harmless little tube. Adjust the levers until you see perfectly; until you see your reflection in the mirror. Then watch the lens-angles as they revolve, as your brain spins *into* the tube, your consciousness flows *through* it and into the mirror. Go ahead."

Stanhope began to perspire. Clark towered over him, hands twitching.

He looked as though he might spring at his throat. The white face was contorted.

"What would become of my real body if I was—drawn in?" he asked, trying to keep his voice calm, trying to stall for time.

"It would disappear, naturally. You would be real, then, in the mirror; in the strange molecular structure of the glass, which is the Fourth Dimension. We co-exist in the Third and Fourth Dimension, you know; even Einstein admits that. But we feel alive in the Third because our consciousness is tridimensional. Once that consciousness, by means of light-action on the electrical impulse we call thought, is transformed into our image, we live there. You'd disappear, into the room reflected in the mirror. What lies beyond we cannot say. But you shall find out." Clark's voice rose to a half-scream. "Look!"

He grasped the editor's shoulder and bent him forward toward the gleaming instrument. Stanhope struggled silently. The man was strong. His fingers forced—

And then there was uproar; welcome pandemonium.

The two men had come in very quietly, for all their burliness. They were efficient despite their strength. Without a word they had crept up behind Volmar Clark, and now they were upon him. Soundlessly they dragged him off the table and locked his arms behind his back. Clark gasped madly, but he was no match for the determined and capable captors. They held him firmly.

Editor Stanhope looked up. One of the men touched his hat.

"Sorry he disturbed you, sir. We've had orders to bring him in."

"What?"

"This is Volmar Clark. He's been in our charge at the Sanitorium for the past year; ever since he finished the observatory lens job. He had a—breakdown afterwards, and his relatives saw to it he was put in our care."

"Don't listen to the fools," Clark hissed. He lunged, but a quick jerk of his captors' arms brought him to a standstill.

"Usually he's very quiet. We allowed him to build his laboratory in his room at the Sanitorium and he's been quite happy building some kind of machine or other. But today he sneaked off. Luckily we traced him down here at once; he let his destination slip to the nurse. Sorry he's been a bother—but I'd appreciate it if nothing was said to the authorities. He's in a private institution, and in view of his past position, his family would be grateful for secrecy."

Stanhope nodded.

The man turned. "Come along, Mr. Clark," he said. "Back to the laboratory."

It was the cue for the maniacal scene. It was the point where Clark should have gone berserk and collapsed, to be dragged screaming from the room. By dramatic tradition it should have happened. Instead, Volmar Clark, mathematical genius and optics authority, drew himself up to full height and smiled at Editor Stanhope.

"All right," he said. "Sorry about our little interview, Stanhope. Another minute and I'd—well, never mind. Wish you'd remember what I told you, though. I've worked for a year."

With that he turned, and the two efficient-looking men escorted him from the room.

Stanhope sank into his chair behind the desk and mopped his brow. That was that. What a day!

Thank heavens, all over now. He glanced at his face in the mirror once more. He *was* haggard. No use to resume manuscript reading; it was time to go home and rest. No use to submit his dazed brain to the test of maintaining that "Every Story Scientifically Accurate" standard. Not now.

Abruptly his eyes fell on the silver object which still stood on the desk-top. Clark's lens. He'd left it here! The guards had never noticed it. Clark hadn't either. Or had he? Had he left it here on purpose? Editor Stanhope remembered the cryptic parting words.

HE picked up the magazine once more and gazed unseeingly at the cover. "Every Story Scientifically Accurate." He smiled, wearily. Well, Clark's story wasn't scientifically accurate. Mystery or no mystery, man didn't walk through glass mirrors into new worlds. The theories didn't hold. No scientific accuracy. He rejected the idea as he would a story.

But wait a minute. That madman had been a genius, once. He was still sincere. As an editor, Stanhope admired sincerity. He wouldn't reject a story without reading it. Could he wholly reject Clark's theory without testing it? The test lay merely in looking through the lens.

When Clark was forcing him, Stanhope had been afraid—charmed by the words of the demented man. Now his fear had passed. He could look through the lens calmly, discover just what principles actuated the mechanism. Why not? Here it was.

Idly, Stanhope bent over the tube, one hand still clutching the magazine. He half-rose and squinted down the long chamber, then raised the cylinder and aimed it at his image in the mirror. He peered down. He saw nothing but cloudy gray. He remembered the lever system. His free hand casually twirled first one lever, then another. He turned and adjusted.

Ah. There it was. His face, his body in the mirror. The room in reflection. Why, this device didn't change the image at all! Clark was mad. He adjusted focus, as he would if peering into a microscope. How clear his image in the mirror was!

No. Not so clear now. It was blurring. Getting gray again. And—his eyes hurt. A series of flickering, brilliant lights seemed to run from the mirror up through the tube into his eyes; into the brain behind them. His eyes felt *glued* to the lens; his *brain* felt glued. He no longer had eyes. His brain was a part of the lens.

"Eyes and brain and tube all part of the machinery," Clark had said. But Clark was mad. Then he must be mad, imagining this!

The brilliant rays were brighter than ultra-violet. They moved *circularly* and Stanhope saw in *circles.* It was impossible, but he knew it was like that. The tube was filled with spinning lenses, all moving at queer angles, distorting the image he gazed at, sending blinding light that was not light, but electricity, into his brain. He couldn't look away, he couldn't *think* away. He felt one with the image beyond; felt himself slide into it.

For one climactic, dreadful instant he had the peculiar sensation of looking *out* from his eyes instead of *in;* the lightwaves seemed to be reversed, flowing from his retina instead of flowing toward it. He felt as though he were in the bottom of the tube, looking up, instead of down. And then the image in the mirror grew brighter and brighter, and larger and larger, and Stanhope felt his body swim in circles of light.

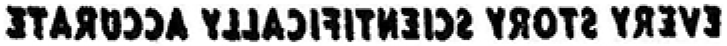
With a gasp, he crumpled to the floor in the gray room.

He opened his eyes in a moment. He blinked rapidly. For a single gruesome moment he thought he had been blinded. Then the brilliant mist passed, and he could see.

He rose from the floor, clutching the magazine. He breathed deeply. That damnable machine! Clark *had* done something with it after all; he had made a hypnotizing agent out of it. The bright reflecting surface of the mirror, viewed through twirling mirrors and lenses in the tube, acted as a focal point in the hypnotic process. That was what had happened. He'd hypnotized himself. Yes, glass and mirrors had strange properties, and light became electrical thought in the brain all right. But that Fourth-Dimensional theory wasn't scientifically accurate after all.

Stanhope laughed. He'd looked through the tube, and he hadn't entered the mirror and the reflection of the room in the Fourth Dimension. There was the mirror now, still in front of him. It reflected the room of his office, just as it always had.

Editor Stanhope glanced idly down at the magazine he still held in his hand. With wild panic surging up in his breast, he read the words on the cover. Strange words, words that could not be safe in reflection, words that bit into his brain.



EVERY STORY SCIENTIFICALLY ACCURATE

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[*] Glass is not liquid, not solid; not metal, not crystalline; there is no exact chemical formula for glass; its specific gravity varies from 2.4 to 5.6.—Ed.

Pink Elephants

At Night They Came, from Out of Dark Corners—Marching Right into Gregory Mitre's Brain!

SCREWBALLS don't bounce.

Otherwise, Gregory Mitre might have sailed up to the ceiling every time he took a step. As it was, he was flopping around the room like a badly chloroformed baboon.

It really wasn't funny, though—it was just too pathetic to deal with seriously. Greg Mitre was a great guy once, before he started traveling; rather close friend of mine, as a matter of fact. And now he was a professional grape-squeezer.

Of course, he'd invited us all to the home-coming party; there were at least a dozen of us in his apartment that evening, and we fully intended to do well by the liquid hospitality we expected. Nevertheless, everyone was a bit put out to walk in and find mine host loaded to the gills in advance. What made it worse, Greg Mitre appeared to be more than ordinary bottle-dizzy. He was mawkishly, almost helplessly drunk.

Foster and I arrived first, at about the same time. We had to wait several minutes before Mitre answered the bell, and when he opened the door he almost fell on top of us. Once inside, when we got a good look at that red', sweating face with the unnaturally rolling eyes, we were both a little shocked, I think.

Of course, neither of us showed it, though Mitre's quite incoherently mumbled greetings further distressed us. He waved us to chairs and indicated the refreshments by walking up to the table and clawing out a bottle from the imposing array thereon. He gulped his drink from the neck and urged us to partake. We did so, silently. I know Foster's thoughts were my own.

WHAT the devil had happened to Mitre? He never had been a heavy drinker, before his trip. Two years is a good stretch, but granted he had picked up dipsomania in that time, the fact remains that in two years a man should also mature by that much. And Mitre apparently had lived a dozen since we last saw him. He was thinner, and his hair was graying. He'd tanned, but there were unpleasant lines about his eyes and mouth. And his smile was forced, maudlin. We took quick glances at him, and I caught Foster's eye.

Mitre never appeared to notice. He just lapped up the gravy, shot after shot. In ten minutes we saw him put down a swig of rye, two highballs, a straight Scotch arid a brandy. During that time he said scarcely a word. I began to grope for an opening question.

The doorbell began to ring. From then on it kept ringing steadily throughout the evening. The apartment filled up. I watched my fellow guests. All of them seemed genuinely puzzled by Mitre's obvious intoxication; no one, apparently, knew any more than we did.

Mitre didn't explain. He kept on drinking. Somewhat embarrassed, the others joined in, though naturally at a much slower pace, which rendered Mitre's own antics less conspicuous. But I kept my eye on him alone, wondering as the hours passed how any man could put away what he did without passing out.

It worried me; that and his silence. He laughed a lot, gabbled to the boys, but never once referred to his trip. Naturally they threw him a few friendly questions, but he ignored them. That wasn't like Greg Mitre. I felt a little put out because of his attitude. After all, we had been friends. Now he'd made a toy ship of his interests and put it in a bottle.

I kept my eye on Mitre, and I was watching him when the doorbell rang, at about eleven. Mitre stumbled through the laughing, chattering crowd to answer the door and I saw him open it.

A dapper, black-haired man with a Latin face stood in the hallway, and when he saw Mitre he bowed and smiled, showing his even white teeth, which stood out in startling contrast to the pallor of his face.

I was watching Mitre, and I almost fancied I saw a look of curious recognition in his drink-bleared eyes. Through the buzz of conversation about me I caught a few words of the quick exchange.

"So sorry to disturb, but I thought that perhaps you might wish to part with the object now."

The stranger spoke with a peculiar accent, in a hissing voice that annoyed me.

But Mitre's sudden angry response disturbed me more.

"No, no, I tell you! I gave you my final answer on the ship, and that still stands. You can't frighten me out of it, you can't do that! No use of phoning any more, either."

The man smiled, unperturbed, though there was a flaring in his deep, dark eyes.

"But I thought perhaps my last message might have made you change your mind."

"You mean that call yesterday afternoon?"

"No." There was mockery in the hissing voice. "I mean the message last night. Last night after you went to bed. Last night when you wanted to sleep, Mitre. Surely you remember the message you heard—the playing, and what followed?"

"No!" Mitre's shout rose to quiet the room. "No! There was nothing, nothing. You can't devil me that way!"

"My message will come *every* night, Mitre. It will come stronger and stronger. I do not wish to be harsh, but if my message fails I shall soon have to send a stronger one. A more persuasive one. I shall have *it* deliver that last message, Mitre."

Mitre got apoplectic. *"Get out!"* he screamed. *"Get out!"*

The smiling stranger made a single gesture. I seemed to catch a glint of silver flashing from his sleeve, as though he were pulling out a dagger—no, a steel rod of some kind. At the sight, Mitre lashed out with his hands, wildly, and the stranger ducked, then turned and hastened down the hall.

We all stood stock-still now, staring at the open door and the retreating figure of the man. Mitre was trembling, purple-faced, in the doorway; he seemed quite unconscious of our presence, and he was gasping for breath in a desperate sort of way.

And then, in the stillness, we heard a sound from down the hill. It was unmistakable; we all heard it.

A thin, wailing whistle rose on the air—a reedy piping from afar, as though played by eerie flutes. Mitre heard it, too.

"The Dance!" he muttered in a shocked voice.

The wailing rose, and abruptly a vision came to me wherein the stranger was pulling something long and silvery from his sleeve. Had it been a pipe, a flute of some kind? And was this the "message" those two had spoken of so mysteriously?

The music reached a horrid pitch, an inhuman shrillness that brought the puzzled guests to their feet. We stood staring at each other like fools, and then the music seemed to touch a responsive chord in all of us—a chord of stark fear. It was as though cold air had blown through the room from some outer gulf of space. The music bit into my brain as it faded away down the hall, still rising, rising, rising.

Mitre's gasps brought us to our senses. He turned and stared wildeyed at his guests. And then speech came to him.

"You'd better go," he mumbled. "Quickly. Can't explain. Just go—clear this all up later. Get out, all of you—for God's sake, get out!"

FOSTER started toward the distraught figure of our host.

"What's the matter, old man?" he began.

"Don't touch me! Go—go, for the love of mercy, go! I must get back, get back and look at *it* to see if the music has stirred it again. It mustn't be left alone when the music plays. It has to be watched, because if it ever—"

Mitre checked himself hastily, on the verge of hysteria. He pulled himself erect with a tremendous effort that did not deceive me, though the others may have been deluded.

"I'm sorry about this," he said, speaking very precisely. "I'm not well—touch of nerves, I guess. Nothing to worry about. And I've been drinking a bit too much. Won't you all accept my apologies? And forget what just happened here tonight? I'll explain all this—matter of fact, I'll drop in and see you, Bob, tomorrow." He nodded at me. "But if you'll be kind enough to leave now, I'd be obliged."

This was better. At least he was rational now. The crowd donned outer garments and departed. Conversation was subdued and there were wondering glances, but on the whole things were clearing up. I lingered behind. Mitre stood in the doorway, bidding farewells in a nervous manner.

"You'll be in my office, Greg?" I murmured to him.

"Yes, I meant what I said about explaining. I'll see you tomorrow."

"Would you like some company tonight?" I ventured, trying to seem casual about it. After all, I was not only his friend but his doctor, and thus had a double responsibility, so to speak.

Fear flamed in his face. "No—no, not tonight!"

I abruptly changed my tack. "Could I prescribe a sedative, then?"

"No. It wouldn't help—God, I know! I'll see you tomorrow—explain it then—"

He pushed me out and closed the door. Going out, I looked around quickly but saw no sign of the stranger and his pipes. . . .

The next morning. "Got a drink, Doc?"

I had, and I gave it to him despite any scruples to the contrary. Mitre looked as though he needed a drink, and damned badly. He put it down and stopped shaking a bit. Then he looked at me and apparently thought about smiling, but gave it up.

"Listen, Doc. Got to help me! I've got 'em bad."

"Got what?" I considered looking surprised and gave that up, too.

"D.Ts. Hallucinations. Something, I don't quite know what. But I *see* things."

"What sort of things, Mitre?"

"What do you suppose? Pink elephants, mostly."

Now right then is where I should have suspected a gag. I've had *delirium tremens* cases before, but in all my experience the only time such patients see pink elephants is in the funny papers. The devil of it was, Mitre was obviously serious.

"Go on," I prompted; but that was entirely unnecessary, because Mitre had already started. His jaw was hanging loose, and his eyes were half closed as he mumbled in the flat, monotonous drone characteristic of hysteria.

"I see them at night. Every night they march into my room—out of Ganesha they come, and march around the bed. When the light is on they go away, but then it's worse because I *hear* them. Nobody else sees them and hears them, but I do. That's why I know they're not real, those little pink elephants.

"But even if I know it's a dream, why do I fear them so? I can't stand to see them walking around with their tiny red eyes staring at me and their gleaming yellow tusks raised, and then they trumpet at me and come closer and closer and I can't sleep, or they'd get on top of me!

"They come out of Ganesha, I tell you—every night they come—and I have to drink and drink until I fall asleep. Then I don't hear them any more with their little shrill trumpetings in the dark, just as I did that first time in the temple. No, I know what you'll say, and it's not true. They *aren't* fantasies of alcoholic origin! I wasn't drinking when I went into the temple that day, and I heard them then. I heard them when I pinched the idol—the Ganesha idol."

Mitre shuddered. “I was all alone in the big dark room with the awful stone frescoes on the walls. The silly priest had gone out to ring the bells, and I was alone, and here was this little statue in the niche. I didn’t take it for its value; it had none. It wasn’t like stealing a jewel from an idol’s eye and then having a curse set on you—none of that stage melodrama stuff. I wanted the dirty little statue for a souvenir, and that was that.

“Put it in my sun-helmet, I did, and carried it out in my hand. But when I copped it, I heard the trumpeting, and I’ve heard it ever since. I’ve seen them marching around in my room, at night. They come out of Ganesha and march and their red eyes stare, and—”

HE BEGAN to tremble again, and I gave him another drink. “Let’s go over and have a look at your statue,” I suggested. I wanted to look over his room, look over the figurine. The Hindus are great ones for hypnosis and I’ve seen some damnable tricks; statues with polished surfaces that reflect light so that, when stared at, they induce self-hypnotic states. Mitre might have been the victim of some similar device; hence my suggestion.

On the way over I questioned him.

I got more details of the story. Mitre had stolen a statue of Ganesha, Hindu elephant-god, from a little temple in Seringapatam. The fantasies began then, and his drinking mounted apace. No priest had shouted hysterical curses, no little dark men with knives followed him about. It was just that the temple had given him the creeps, and the statue seemed so evil, so *malign* that he believed his theft had invoked a curse on him.

The little pink elephants running around—I tried to trace the image. The temple had housed several live, sacred white elephants. They are really pink in color rather than white. I could see that the hallucinations might have arisen there. That and the fact that Ganesha is the patron god of the elephant. Moreover, Mitre said that after his “haunting” began, he read up on Hindu mythology. Potent imaginative forces involved here, obviously.

Oh, he had the D.Ts. very properly, poor Mitre did. I wanted to see his room now.

I did. Ordinary enough, surely. I looked at the statue, and it was black and dull. There was no reflecting surface, no jewel. The statue was scarcely eight inches in height, carved out of basalt, and the execution was crude but effective. I didn't realize how effective until I had handled and stared at it for some minutes. Then it hit me full force.

THE figure was that of a seated man with much too many arms. The figure was of a man, but the head that of an elephant. Grotesque? Yes; and frightening, too. The thing had eyes that almost peered from the stone, and its trunk was not motionless—it was *poised!* Simple as it was, the effect was not that of an inanimate representation, but rather of a creature whose arms and legs might move at any second. Watching it, I began to *wait* for it to move.

Then I understood Mitre's case. He'd watched it, too; watched it with many bottles before him, and waited for that movement so diabolically captured in stone. And fantasies had come to haunt him; guilt-complex had arisen. Now the elephants indeed marched. Pink elephants, in all truth.

"But why didn't you get rid of it?" I asked, at length. It was a logical enough question.

"I was afraid," Mitre answered simply. It was a quite logical reply. The more I looked at the thing, the more sensible the reply became. I'd be afraid, too—I confess it quite frankly. I wouldn't throw the staring statue into the sea, or break it, or lock it away; not unless I could destroy completely the evilness inherent in it. Mitre had borne his cross with him halfway around the world; and seeing it, I understood. But something had to be done, logic or no logic.

We stood there in his bedroom staring at that horrid little black idol with its man-body, its extra arms with the detestably exquisite fine work that made even the tiny fingers real; stood staring at the horrid elephant trunk and the sharp, pointed tusks; staring at the little hoofs on the ivory-inlaid feet. The little, dark eyes seemed to stare back in return, to flash as though with sardonic life. In the dusk the dully gleaming statue unnerved me, and I began to wait for it to move—

And then, from the window, came the sound. It trickled in, as though from the courtyard below, and I recognized it with a chill prickling of my spine.

It was the music—the eerie flute music that had played in the hallway last night after Mitre had repulsed the stranger. It was the high, shrill, hysterical music that seemed to flicker from indefinable, alien worlds, bringing a message of some unhuman madness. I recognized it with a fear I could not name, could not hide.

Mitre recognized it, too. He blanched, faced me wildly.

"The music," he whispered, "Again! It's the *Dance of Ganesha!"*

The words broke the spell. He had said something during that mysterious conversation last night—something about a "Dance." This was it, then?

I seized his trembling shoulders and looked straight into his eyes.

"Tell me the truth, man," I said. "Out with it. Who was that stranger, and exactly what does he want of you?"

Mitre shook all over. "I'll tell you—but make him stop playing—make him stop before it*—before it's too late!"*

I flung open the window and peered down into the courtyard. As I did so the music abruptly ceased! My eyes swept the opening below. I fancied I saw a figure moving quickly away through the shadows close to the building, but I could not be sure. Did the dying sun glimmer on a silver reed?

No, there was nothing there! Nothing but the last haunting echo of that strangely ceased music. I turned to Mitre again. He sighed deeply with relief.

"It's gone. And it didn't do what he threatened. Thank God for that!"

MY PATIENCE snapped. “Who is that fellow—and what is this all about, anyway? The truth, Mitre—if you really want my help?”

Mitre looked away and spoke rapidly. “I didn’t tell you everything, Doc. But you might as well know now. I was followed from that temple, have been—ever since. At first, I hadn’t realized it; the man was dressed like a European, talked like one. He didn’t wear a melodramatic beard-and-turban get-up, and he didn’t come yipping to me with threats or curses.

“On the boat he sidled up to me one day and asked if I’d picked up any curios in the East. We fell to talking, and I took him down to the cabin and showed him some vases, other knickknacks I had purchased. When we finished he said nothing, but smiled. And then he asked me to show him the statue of Ganesha.

“I got excited; asked him how he knew of it. He didn’t say anything—just told me that he’d heard. And he would like very much to buy it. Offered me a thousand, there, sight unseen, in spot cash. I refused, showed him curtly to the door. He just smiled again and said I’d hear from him.”

Mitre mopped his face. “In Paris, on the way back, he came to my hotel. How he found me, I don’t know. Offered me ten thousand this time. Again I refused. By now I was getting worried. How did he know of the theft? If he knew, who else knew? Who might send agents after me in vengeance?

“On the boat here it began all over again. He showed up; I almost expected him to. I asked the steward and the purser about him—they could tell me nothing. They withheld his name but said he came from India. Then I realized—he was the agent sent by the temple!”

Mitre’s eyes seemed haunted. “He didn’t flash a knife or send cobras through my transom, or even threaten me, like such people are supposed to. He just smiled, showed up in unexpected places, and offered me money. Sometimes he just shewed up—and that alone got on my nerves, I can tell you! Wherever I went he was standing off at the side, smiling, watching me. I began to drink then and there.

“And the second night out for New York, he came and whispered outside my stateroom; whispered because I wouldn’t let him in. He made his only threat then. He said that if I didn’t return the statue, he would make the statue come to him!”

I could see the sweat on his face now. “That was sheer madness. I asked him whether he was a priest; pointblank. And he said ‘yes,’ he had been in the temple when I stole the idol, and he was a priest who knew many mysteries and had powers over the elephant-god. Power enough to make the statue come when he called, if need be.”

Mitre paused, stared at me with haggard eyes.

“Doc, it’s crazy, and it’s wild—but it’s true! He said he could play the Dance of Ganesha on his pipes—play the sacred music used in secret temple rites, and make the idol come alive. He said they did that in the temple, that the stone held the spirit of the god incarnate—and that the spirit could be released by playing sacred music. Or am I mad?”

“No, Greg,” I said softly. “Go on.”

“Well, I scoffed. And so he played. Played softly, shrilly. The music sounded into my room. And that’s when I first saw the things—those damned pink elephants, coming like—like little pale ghosts from the statue! They were pink, misty things, but they marched around the room at my feet and trumpeted shrilly in reply to that wailing music. I almost fancied I saw the idol moving, its malignant little eyes staring at me—and I began to scream and scream—”

I could see Mitre shudder. “So he went away quietly then, before anyone was aroused. And I took a drink and went to bed and had dreams. Dreams of Ganesha.

“The next morning some fool stubbornness kept me from going to him. I couldn’t confess that I was afraid—I *couldn’t* confess that he had these powers, don’t you see? If it were true, then this world is a monstrous, unthinkable place, and we walk unheeding amidst unimagined terrors. I could not believe that and remain sane!”

Mitre shrugged helplessly. “So I guarded the statue, thinking he might steal it. But he would never stoop to such a petty trick. He played again, though, that same night. And I drank and drank, and the elephants marched around me, and the statue nearly moved. I think it did, I mean. . . .

"Then we landed. I hid out in a hotel for three days, and I thought I'd slipped him off my trail. So I came home to the apartment. I had to; it was getting so that I'd sit in front of this damnable idol all day and stare at it, and take another drink whenever my head cleared. I threw the party last night to get people here; to take my mind off this horrible elephant-creature."

The man's eyes were bitter. "You saw what happened, Doc. He showed up. And he made those threats. Said that he'd play again—this was the *last chance* I had to sell! He wants to take the thing back to the temple for rites soon to be performed. He said it was angry now, and if it came alive it would harm me before going to him. And it will come alive if he plays again—*I know it!* It might have happened today if you hadn't been here."

I faced him then. "Greg, keep still."

"What—"

"I said, be quiet. Listen to me, now. At first I thought you were being hypnotized by the statue. Your drinking and continual staring might have given you hallucinations."

"That's not true!" Mitre flared. Anger—an encouraging sign!

"I know it. It's *not* the statue that has hypnotized you—it's that unearthly music."

Mitre gaped at me. "The music?"

"Yes, those pipes. I've heard them—they *are* insidious, Greg. They hold certain tones that appeal to primal instincts; paralyze certain nerve-centers and in some way deaden the brain, as an opiate does. And so you imagine pink elephants marching out of the statue, imagine the thing is about to move. There's absolutely nothing in the statue. Do you follow me, Greg? It isn't, hollow—it's solid. I could smash it, of course. But I won't. You're going to fight this thing like a man, and I'll fight with you. Here's my plan, Greg. This man must be stopped. And stopped now."

MITRE began to shake. “No—don’t harm him! He’s a priest, he has powers—”

I shook my head. “No powers, Greg—he’s simply a dangerous fanatic. Now, I’m going to post myself down the street. In the drugstore. I’ll wait. When you hear the music, I’ll come back. And Mr. Flute-player won’t get away this time. Believe me, Greg—this is the only way to stop this morbidness of yours. Breaking the statue won’t help your mental state any. We must have that man. He’s the source behind all your troubles.”

Mitre still wasn’t entirely convinced. “Yes, but the danger—If he plays again, the statue moves.”

“Nonsense! You must keep a grip on yourself, man. Do as I say now. Stay here; the Hindu will be back, I know. Then call me at once. And don’t worry. We’ll lick this guy yet!”

I gripped his shoulder, turned and departed. Mitre was still shaking, but he managed to pull himself together a bit, grinning weakly in farewell. I went down the stairs and crossed into the drugstore; arranged with the clerk that when my call came, he was to turn around immediately and phone the police, sending them right up to Mitre’s.

Then I sat down to dinner in the booth. It was dark in that corner of the store, and as I stared into the shadows an image rose, unbidden, to my brain.

The staring elephant face of Ganesha emerged blackly and grinned, and the trunk began to wave and wave; the tusks moved forward, the horrid hoofs pranced evilly.

Stifling fear, I ate. That cursed idol, that cunning music was getting me, too.

Night fell, and though the drugstore radio played reedy jazz my brain was listening to other music—strange, eerie music from afar, that crept through my senses and clawed away at my sanity. I heard the awful music rise as in a daze and then—

Then came the sharp tinkling of the phone!

The booth was black as I lifted the receiver in a trembling hand. And over the wires, Mitre's voice screamed in high hysteria.

"Doc! He's here—in the courtyard! I've shut the window, and still the music comes, louder and louder. It's dark here in the bedroom, and yet I can see the statue! It's glaring at me, and the eyes are moving—*stop the music, Doc!"*

"Greg, control yourself!" I snapped.

"Doc, hurry—it's beginning to wave its trunk—in time with the music! Listen, Doc, you can hear the music—They're coming out of the statue now! I see them glistening in the light—Doc, come on—the music is louder, closer—"

"Greg, for God's sake!"

"Doc—it's getting down off the pedestal—it's coming for me—I see the tusks—it's crawling—up—now—*Doc!"*

There was an indescribable scream, an echo of pure madness. And then over the buzzing phone I heard that damnable, that accursed, that soul-chilling flute music, rising and rising in bubbling waves of horror.

I dropped the phone and scrambled out. My feet thudded down the street, into the lobby, up the stairs. Greg's key was in my hand and I yanked the door open upon harsh blackness. Through the parlor I raced, as the music burst out on me from all sides—triumphant, cackling notes that seemed to mock and scream defiance.

Then I was in the bedroom. Mitre lay on the floor, and I snapped up a lamp. Still the music shrieked in the air about me, and I glanced wildly at the pedestal. It was—*empty!*

My eyes went to the door with a dread I dare not name, and the music screeched in horrid glee. I didn't see pink elephants marching. There were none. There were no beasts with tiny hoofs and gleaming tusks. But over at the window—

SOMETHING crawled blackly into the shadows. Something dark, stony, about eight inches high. Something gleamed in the lamplight and lumbered across the floor, climbing up the window ledge and resting there as though directed by the unearthly music.

From the street a police car squealed, but I scarcely heard it above the infernal music that dinned in my ears. I scarcely heard it, because I could only stare and *see*—See that unbelievable, grotesque little monster clambering to the window ledge and with one stony arm raise the window to permit an exit. See, in the lamplight, the miniature elephant-head with the bobbing, moving trunk of stone, the little red eyes staring down, the tiny hands clawing, the hoofs of the feet lumbering as it prepared to leap from the window toward the waiting flute player below.

And then the roar of a revolver sounded from the courtyard and the music abruptly ceased. . . .

But another sound came then from within the room. It was not from me, nor from Mitre. It came from I dare not say where—but it was a *tiny, shrill trumpeting!*

Abruptly the thing leaped. Just as the shot died away it leaped from the window. A second later it landed with a crash on the stone court below.

I rushed to the window, stared with uncomprehending eyes at the tiny statue that had fallen to the ground, shattered now into a hundred little pieces—fragments of simple stone.

Next to it lay the dark body of a strange man—a man whose dead hands still clutched a silver pipe. And policemen were bending over him; bending over the little broken statue that was, thank God, only stone after all.

I turned with a sob of relief. It had been the music, at that—horrible sounds that hynotized Mitre and had hypnotized me, too, at the last. The statue must have been on the windowsill all along; it had toppled out. Hallucinations induced by the music had made me see what could not have been.

But how had that statue got to the window?

Had Mitre placed it there and then fallen back on the floor?

Mitre—on the floor. What had this cruel hypnosis done to him, with his maddening obsession of living statues and pink elephants and Hindu vengeance?

I bent over the body of Gregory Mitre—for it was his body, and he lay quite dead.

And then I stood up and began to scream and scream, staring at the body of Gregory Mitre—that loathsome, mangled body, *covered all over with the bruises of stony hoofs, and the little red stabs from the goring tusks of a tiny elephant!*

The Totem-Pole

A frightful honor was consummated in the Indian wing of the a compelling tale of a weird revenge

ARTHUR SHURM belonged to the vast army of the unidentified—that mighty swarm of nonentities which includes street-car conductors, restaurant counter-men, elevator operators, bellboys, theatre ushers, and other public

servants wearing uniforms of their professions. One never seems to notice their faces; their garb is a designation of official capacity, and the body within makes no impression on the memory.

Arthur Shurm was one of those men.

To be exact, he was a museum attendant, and surely there is no employment which makes a person less conspicuous. One might perchance take notice of a counterman's voice when he bellows "Two sunny side up and cuppa cawfee;" it is possible to observe the demeanor of a bellboy as he lingers for a tip; one can perhaps mark the particularly erect subservience of an individual usher as he leads his party down the aisle. But a museum attendant never speaks, it seems. There is nothing about his carriage or manner to impress a visitor. Then too, his personality is totally overshadowed by the background in which he moves—the vast palace of death and decay which is a museum. Of all the unidentified army, the museum attendant is beyond doubt the most self-effacing.

And yet the fact remains that I shall never forget Arthur Shurm. I wish to heaven I could.

1

I WAS standing in the tavern at the bar. Never mind what I was doing there—let's say I was looking for local color. The truth is, I was waiting for a girl and had been stood up. It happens to everybody. At any rate, I was standing there when Arthur Shurm rushed in. I stared at him.

It was the natural thing to do. A museum attendant is a museum attendant, after all. He is a little man in a blue uniform—a quite nondescript blue uniform, lacking the gaudiness of a policeman's outfit, or the dignified buttons that adorn a fireman. A museum attendant wears his inconspicuous garb, standing stolidly in the shadows before mummy-cases or geological specimens. He may be old or young; one simply never notices him. He always moves slowly, quietly, with an air of abstract deliberation which seems part and parcel of the museum's background, its total disregard of Time.

So it was natural for me to turn and stare at Arthur Shurm when he ran into the tavern. I had never seen such movement before.

There were other arresting things, however, which emphasized his entrance. The way his pale face twitched, for example; the roll of his bloodshot eyes—these were phenomena impossible to overlook. And his hoarse voice, gasping for a drink, quite electrified me.

The bartender, urbane as all such servitors of Bacchus, never flickered an eyelash as he poured the whisky. Arthur Shurm gulped down his drink, and the look in his eyes made it unnecessary for him to ask for a second one. It was poured, and as quickly downed. Then Arthur Shurm put his head down on the bar and began to cry. The bartender blandly turned away. Nothing surprises a tavern-keeper. But I was the only other customer, and I edged down the rail and braced the weeping museum attendant on the shoulder.

"Come on, now," I said, signaling the acolyte of Silenus to refill our glasses. "What's up, man?"

Arthur Shurm gazed at me through tears, not of sorrow, but of agonized remembrance. I felt that gaze, pouring from bloodshot eyes that had seen too much. I knew that the man could never contain such memories within himself alone. The story was coming. And when Shurm had drunk the third drink, it came.

"Thanks. Thanks, I needed that. Guess I'm pretty upset. Sorry."

I smiled reassuringly at his incoherency. He braced himself.

"Look here, Mister. Let me talk to you. Got to talk to someone. Then I'll go out and find a cop."

"Any trouble?"

"Yes—no—not what you think. It isn't the *right* kind of trouble. See what I mean? I have to talk to someone first. Then I'll get a cop."

I had the glasses refilled and led Shurm to a booth where the bartender could not overhear. Shurm sat there and trembled until I grew impatient.

"Now then," I said, briskly. The firmness in my voice was just what he had been looking for. He needed such reassurance of strength. He was almost eager to talk.

"I'll tell it to you straight. Straight, like it was a story, or something. Then you can judge making heads or tails out of it all. I'll tell it to you from the beginning and leave it up to you, Mister."

Lord, he *was* frightened!

"My name's Arthur Shurm. I'm caretaker over at the Public Museum up the street. You know it. Been there six years and never had any trouble. Ask anybody once if I ever had trouble. I'm not crazy, Mister. They thought I was this week, but I'm not. After tonight I can prove I'm O.K.—but something else is crazy. That's what gets me. Something else is crazy, and that nearly drives me nuts."

I waited. Shurm rattled on.

"Like I say, here it is from the beginning. I been six years on the second floor—American Indian ethnology. Room 12. It was fine until last week.

That's when they brought in the totem-pole. *The totem-pole!"*

He had no reason to scream, and I told him so.

"Sorry. I have to tell you about the pole, though. Shoshoonack Indian totem-pole, from Alaska. Doctor Bailey brought it back last week. He was up there on an expedition some place in the mountains, where these Shoshoonack Indians live. They're a new tribe, or something; don't know much about them. So Doctor Bailey he went up there with Doctor Fiske to get a few things for the museum. And last week Doctor Bailey came back home with the totem-pole. Doctor Fiske died up there. He died there, don't you see?"

I DIDN'T see, but I ordered another drink.

"That totem-pole he brought back—he had it set up in the American Indian room right away. It was a new pole, carved especially for him by the medicine men of the tribe. About ten feet tall it was, with faces all over it—you know how they look. Horrible thing.

"But Bailey was proud of it. He was proud of all he had done up there in the Shoshoonack country, bringing back a mess of pottery and picture-writings and stuff that was new to the curators and the big professors. He had them all in to look at it, and I guess he wrote up an article on the customs of the Shoshoonacks for some official report. Bailey is that kind of a man, very proud; I always hated him. Fat, greasy fellow, used to bawl me out for not dusting around proper. Crazy about his work, though.

"Anyhow, Bailey was awfully set up over his discoveries, and he didn't even seem to be sorry about Doctor Fiske dying there in Alaska. Seems Fiske had some kind of fever, and just kicked off in a few days. Bailey never even talked about it, but I know for a fact that Fiske did most of the work. You see, he was the one who found out about the Shoshoonack Indians in the first place, and he ran the expedition. Bailey had just come along, and now he strutted around claiming all the credit. He used to bring in visitors to see that ugly totem-pole and tell how it was made specially for him by the grateful Indians and presented to him just before he left for home. Oh, he was cocky enough!

"I'll never forget the day we first put in the totem-pole and I got a good look at the thing. I'm used enough to outlandish stuff on the job, Mister, but one look at this totem-pole was enough. It gave me the creeps.

"You've seen them? Well, never one like this. You know what they mean—symbols of the tribe, sort of a coat-of-arms; made up of faces of bear-gods and beavers and owl-spirits, one on top of the other? This totem-pole was different. It was just faces; six human faces one on top of the other, with arms sticking out at the sides. And those faces were awful. Big staring red eyes, and grinning yellow teeth like fangs; all snarling brown faces leering out in a row so that they seemed to be looking right at you all the time. When the shadows hit the pole about midafternoon you could still see the eyes sort of glowing in the dark. Gave me a fright that first time, I tell you.

"But Doctor Bailey came in, fat and snappy in a new suit, and he brought a raft of professors and big shots, and they stood around examining the pole while Bailey jabbered like a monkey who just found a new coconut. He dragged out a magnifying-glass and puttered with it, trying to identify the wood and the kind of paint used, and bragging how the medicine man, Shawgi, had it done as a special going-away present and made the men of the tribe work night and day to get it done.

"I hung around and listened. Things were kinda quiet anyway. Bailey was telling about the way they carved the thing in the medicine man's big hut working only at night, with seven fires set around the place so no one could get in. They burned herbs in the fires to call down the spirits, and all the time they worked the men in the hut prayed out loud in long chants. Bailey claimed that the totem-poles were the most sacred things the Shoshoonacks had; they thought the spirits of their dead chiefs went into the poles, and every time a chief died a pole was made to set up in front of his family's hut. Shawgi, the medicine man, was supposed to summon the dead chief's spirit to inhabit the pole, and this called for a lot of chants and prayers.

"Oh, it was interesting stuff. Bailey laid it on and everybody was impressed. But none of them could figure out just how the pole had been put together, whether it was one piece of wood or a whole lot of pieces. They didn't find out what kind of wood it was, either, or the nature of the paint used to ornament those ugly-looking heads. One of the professors asked Bailey just what the faces on this pole meant, and Bailey admitted he didn't know—it was just a special job made by the medicine man to give to him as a farewell gift before he left. But all this set me figuring, and after the crowd went away, I had another look at the pole. I had a good look, too, because of something I noticed."

He paused. "This may sound long and silly to you now, Mister, but I got good reason to tell you all this. I want to explain what I noticed about them faces. They weren't *artificial* enough. Do you know what I mean? Usually Indian carving is kinda stiff and square-cut. But these faces were done real carefully, and they were all different, just like they were sculptures of human heads. And the arms were carved out perfectly, with hands on the ends. That just don't seem natural. I didn't like it when I found this out—more so because it was getting dark already and those eyes gleamed at me there, just as though these were real heads that could see me. It was a queer thing to think, but that's the way I felt.

"And the next day I thought so more. I walked through the room all day and couldn't help taking a look every time I passed the totem-pole. Seemed to me that the faces were getting *clearer*—I could recognize each one of the bottom four now, just like the faces of people I knew. The top ones were a little high up to see closely, and I didn't bother about those two. But the bottom four looked like human faces, now—evil, creepy faces. They grinned so, showing their teeth, and when I walked away I got the feeling that their red eyes were following me, just like people stare at your back.

"After about two days I got used to that, but then last Friday night I worked late cleaning, just as I did tonight. And last Friday night I *heard*.

IT WAS about nine o'clock and I was all alone in the building—all alone except for Bailey. He stays in his office generally to do work late. But I was the only one in the place; for sure the only one on the second floor. I was cleaning Room 11—the one just before the American Indian room, you know—when I heard voices.

"No, I wasn't puzzled, like a guy in a book. I didn't think of anything else, couldn't. Right away I thought *those Indians on the totem-pole were talking.*

"Low, mumbling voices. Talking in whispers almost, or voices from very far away. Talking in gibberish I couldn't understand—Indian talk. I edged near the door, and I swear I don't know whether I meant to sneak in on them or run away. But I heard the voices just whisper alone in the dark room; not one, or two, or three voices, but all of them. Indian talk. And then a high voice—a different voice. It came so quick I didn't catch all, but I heard the word. 'Bailey,' it said, at the end. Then I thought I was crazy, and on top of that I was scared stiff. I ran down the hall and downstairs to the office and dragged Bailey back with me. Made him come quietly, without telling him a thing. We got to Room 11 and I just held him there while the droning talk went on.

"He was pale as a sheet. I snapped the lights on and we went in. Bailey kept staring at the totem-pole. It was all right, of course, and there weren't any noises coming from it now. But it was all wrong in another way. Those faces were too easy for me to recognize now—those Indian faces. They stared at me and they stared at Bailey, and every second they seemed to snarl more and more. I couldn't keep looking at, them, so I watched Bailey.

"Ever see a frightened fat man? Bailey was almost fainting. He kept looking and looking, and then his eyes seemed to go all black in the pupils and he began to mumble to himself. He did a funny thing. He looked at the bottom of the pole and then he pulled his head up real slowly, from one jerk to another. I knew he was watching each face in turn. And he mumbled.

" 'Kowi, Umsa, Wipi, Sigatch, Molkwi,' he said. He said it three times, so I remember. He said it in five separate words, like he was calling off names. Then he began shaking and groaning. ‘It’s them,’ he said. ‘It’s them all right. All five of them. But who’s on top? All five of them that went over the cliff. But how could Shawgi know that? And what did he mean to do, giving me this? It’s mad—but there they are. Kowi, Umsa, Wipi, Sigatch, Molkwi and—good God!’

“He ran out of the room like doom was at his heels. I turned out the lights quick and followed. I didn’t wait around to see if the whispering started again, either, and I had enough of looking at those faces. I went out and had a few stiff drinks that night, I can tell you. Oh—thanks, Mister. Thanks a lot. I can use this one with what I still got to tell you. I’ll make it short, too. We have to get a cop.

“Well, Monday, Bailey got me before I went on duty. He looked plenty pale around the gills, and I could see he hadn’t slept any better than I did. ‘I think it’s better if we forget about last Friday night, Shurm,’ he said. ‘Both of us were a little upset.’

“I wasn’t that easy. ‘What do you think is wrong, Doctor?’ I asked him.

“He knew enough not to stall. ‘I don’t know,’ he said. ‘All I can say is that the faces on that totem-pole are those of Indians I knew up in the Shoshoonack country—Indians that died in an accident, going over a cliff in a dog-sled. He looked sick when he said this. ‘But don’t say anything to anyone, Shurm. I give you my word I’m going to investigate this fully,’ he says, ‘and when I get the facts I’ll let you know.’

“With that he slipped me five dollars.

“So I worked along, but I wasn’t happy. I didn’t go into that room any more than I had to on Monday or Tuesday, and still I just couldn’t get ideas out of my head. Queer ideas. Ideas about how the medicine man, Shawgi, used to call souls to put in the totem-poles he made. Ideas of how Doctor Bailey might be lying some way about this accident he claimed the Indians were killed in. Ideas of how Shawgi gave the totem-pole to Bailey knowing it would haunt him. Ideas like that, and always the pictures of those terrible grinning faces and the little thin whispering in the dark.

“Wednesday I noticed Bailey go into the room. It was raining out, and the place was just about empty, and Bailey went into the room. He didn’t know I’d seen him go in, and I was just curious enough to follow him, and mighty curious to stick behind a case and listen when I saw he was kneeling on the floor in front of the totem-pole and praying.

“ ‘Save me,’ he mumbles. ‘Spare me. I didn’t know. I didn’t mean to do it. I killed you—I cut the thongs on the harness and when the sled rounded the bend it went over. That I did. But you were present when I did—the other—I couldn’t spare you as witnesses. I couldn’t.’

“He sounded crazy, but I was guessing what he meant. He had killed those Indians, as I suspected, to hush them up about something else. And so Shawgi had fixed up the totem-pole to haunt him with it.

“Then Bailey began talking real low, and I heard him say something about Doctor Fiske and the way he had died; how Shawgi had been Fiske’s friend, and how Fiske and Bailey had quarreled. The truth came to me then. I knew that Bailey had killed Fiske, instead of Fiske dying of. fever like he was supposed to. Probably they had gone on a trip after specimens with the Indians. Bailey had killed Fiske to steal his trophies and the credit of the expedition. The Indians had found out about it. So Bailey had tampered with the sled and sent the Indians over the cliff on the way back. Shawgi made the totem of their faces and gave it to Bailey to drive him crazy.

“WELL, it looked as though he was succeeding. Bailey whimpered like a dog, crawling on the floor in front of those six grinning faces in the gloom, and it made me really sick to see it. I was going crazy too, hearing voices and looking at smiles from wooden faces. I got out without going back to that room.

“Thursday was my day off, and it pleased me. Today I went back. First one I saw was Bailey. He looked almost as though he was dying. ‘What’s the dope, Doctor?’ I said.

"He just shook his head. Then he whispered. 'There were voices again last night, Shurm. And I could understand them. I looked to see if he was kidding, but no. He bent down close. 'Voices came to me in the night. I wasn't here. I was home. But they came. They can come anywhere. I hear them now. They called me to the museum. They wanted me to come very much last night. All of them did—the *other,* too. I nearly went. Tell me, Shurm—for the mercy of God—did you hear voices too?'

"I shook my head.

" 'I'm going to take that totem-pole down as soon as I can,' he went on. 'I'm going to take it down and have it burned. I will get permission today from the Chief. He must let me. If not you and I shall have to tell him what we know. I'm relying on you. We must beat that devil Shawgi—he hated me, I know—that's why he did this—beating his drums and calling up devils with his magic while he carved the faces to hide the souls that wait ——"

"Then someone came by, and Bailey went off.

"That afternoon I couldn't help myself—I went in and looked at the totem-pole once again. Funny the way I trembled when I passed the door; it was getting me, too. Now that I had guessed about the murdered Indians I could see that the faces were taken from real life. I looked at them all—even the top one. The sixth one I still couldn't recognize—it might be the face of the medicine-man, Shawgi, himself. But it was the worst of all the smiling wicked faces with white teeth through which they whispered at night. At night!

"Tonight I was going to have to stay and look over the place; clean up. I didn't want to. I had too much to think about. Would I have to hear voices again? And downstairs working would be Doctor Bailey—the man I suspected of six murders. Yet I couldn't do a thing. No one would believe me, and I had no proof of either voices or Bailey being guilty. I worried, and all the time it got darker and darker, and the museum closed, and I began to go over the second floor room by room. Bailey was down in the office, working.

“About an hour and a half ago I was in Room 10. I heard the voices two rooms away. They were loud tonight; loud as if they were calling. I could hear grunting Indian sounds. And then I heard the high voice calling.

“Bailey! Bailey! Come here, Bailey! I’m waiting, Bailey—I’m waiting!’

“I was scared sick when Bailey came, a minute later. He walked slow as if he didn’t see me, and his eyes were all black pupil. In his hand he had a match-box, and under his arm was a jug of kerosene. I knew what he was going to do.

“The voices were grumbling louder, but I had to follow. I didn’t dare use any lights. Bailey went in ahead of me, and then I heard that laughing.

“It was the laughing that made me stop. I can’t tell you about it, except that it was horrible—a chuckling laugh that went right through me. And someone—some-*thing*—said ‘Hello, Bailey.’ Then I knew I was crazy, because I recognized the voice. For a minute I was stunned. Then I ran into the room.

“Just as I got near the doorway the screaming started. Bailey was screaming, and it mixed in with the awful laughing, and I heard a scrabbling sound and a crash as the kerosene jug fell. I pulled out my flashlight and I saw it. Lord!

“I didn’t wait. I ran out. I came here. I want a cop. I haven’t gone back yet. I want you to get the cop with me and come back. I want you should believe me and see what I saw. Oh——”

2

WE GOT the cop, Shurm and I, and we went back. I wish I could skip this part. We went back and took the elevator to the second floor, and Shurm nearly fainted before we dragged him out. We got his keys and made him light the place up—I’d give a million if we hadn’t insisted on that. Then we marched down the hall and into Room 11. At the door Shurm had another hysterical outburst, but we dragged him on in.

At first neither the cop nor I saw it. Shurm had us by the arms, screaming away.

"Before you look I want to tell you something. Remember when I said I recognized the voice that called Bailey's name? The voice belonged to the sixth head—the one I couldn't see so well—the one Bailey was afraid of. You know whose head it was, don't you?"

I guessed.

"It was Doctor Fiske's head," Shurm moaned. "Shawgi was his friend, and when Bailey double-crossed and killed him, Shawgi included him with the Indians in the revenge. Shawgi put Fiske's face on top of the totem-pole—he put Fiske's soul there just as he did with the five dead Indians. Fiske called Bailey tonight!"

We pulled Shurm forward as we rounded the cases. And then we stood before the totem-pole.

It was not easy to see the wooden pillar because there was a man standing against it—quite close against it, as though his arms were around it. A second glance, however, revealed the truth. *Its arms were around him!*

The wooden arms of the totem-pole had closed about Bailey's body in a tight embrace. They had seized him as he stooped to fire the pole, and now they crushed him close—crushed him dose against the five writhing heads, dose against the pointed wooden teeth of the five mouths. And one mouth had his legs, another his thighs, a third his belly, a fourth his chest, a fifth his throat. The five pairs of mouths had bitten deep, and there was blood on wooden lips.

Bailey was staring upward with what was left of his face. It was simply a torn red mask that gazed into another mask—the sixth and uppermost face of the totem-pole. The sixth face, as Shurm had said, was undoubtedly the face of a white man; the face of Doctor Fiske. And on the bloody lips rested not a smile, but a sardonic grin.

He Walts Beneath the Sea

Trapped at the Bottom of the Ocean, David Ames Fights a Terrible Menace that Would Rule the World with Cadavers!

DAVID AMES took Jean in his arms and kissed her. It was quite characteristic of Ames that he did this efficiently, expertly, and very thoroughly. The result was a scientific kiss, typical of Ames' scientific mind—but it seemed to please the girl. She closed her eyes. So did Ames.

Together the two of them tried to imagine the peaceful waters of the South Atlantic all about them, with a soft tropic moon silvering the waves. It was not a great stretch of the imagination—merely a matter of focusing their minds three thousand feet above them. For, after all, they were in the South Atlantic, and there definitely seemed to be water all about them. But no moon penetrated these depths. David Ames and Jean Banning kissed in a submarine on the ocean floor.

Somewhere in one of the forward compartments Jean's uncle, Ronald Banning, was working with the crew. The men were checking figures on the charts, estimating and calculating and theorizing in many technical ways which neither Ames nor Jean cared to think about at the moment. All thoughts of the expedition, even the consciousness of their peculiar situation here on the bottom of the sea, did not seem to matter as they embraced again. In their minds, researches in marine biology held no attractions comparable to the quite human biological research of a kiss.

Then came the shock. For a moment neither of them realized that the submarine was lurching. Abruptly, they stepped apart.

“What’s up?” Ames muttered.

The ship was moving forward along the ocean floor; not steadily, as a submarine glides, but with a dragging motion that bumped and scraped the bottom. Ames’ blue eyes steeled with sudden apprehension. His long legs quickened in hasty strides as he made for the door.

“Wait here, dear,” he cautioned the girl. “I’ll see what’s happened.”

BEFORE he crossed the threshold there was a terrific shuddering in the entire submarine, followed by a series of excited shouts from the forward compartments, the sound of tinkling glass and falling instruments. Ames leaped forward just in time to see the iron hatch above the doorway descend with a brazen clang, barring his exit from the compartment. “David!” The girl clung to him. And constantly the submarine was dragging, dragging across the rocky bottom. Then a terrific swoop and the ship tilted upwards. An audible roaring from outside proclaimed that the craft was being drawn downward.

Downward? But there was nowhere to go! They were on the ocean floor, three thousand feet below the surface. The ship had been dragged ahead into what—an ocean fissure? And by what?

There was no time to think. Jean shuddered in his arms as Ames endeavored to keep his footing on the shifting floor. The roaring grew louder. The submarine plunged; down, down, through inky, chill waters.

“What is it?” Jean whispered.

Ames’ lean face darkened, his tall form tensed as he held the girl more closely to protect her loveliness from a danger he could not name; a question he could not answer.

Twisting, turning, a chip in a black maelstrom, the vessel hurtled down.

“Uncle Ronald and the men,” Jean murmured. “They’re outside. And the oxygen tanks are in here—”

Ames staggered across the slanting floor, beat vainly at the fallen iron door. He could not lift it, nor would the levers raise the barrier. It was as though some gigantic force held it fast; some gigantic force that was sucking the very submarine itself into the depths.

Gasping, Ames crawled back to the girl. They lay on the tilted floor, clinging tightly as the rocking vessel swung up-ended.

“I—can’t—breathe,” she gasped.

With a hoarse sob, Ames fought his way to the oxygen outlets. He turned the valves. Life-giving air flooded the stuffy compartment. And they gasped, as still the ship plunged down.

“This is the end,” whispered Jean. Her dark eyes rested without fear on Ames’ face. “I’m glad we’re together.”

The supply of oxygen was giving out. And the steel walls were bending like the sides of a paper boat. Ames’ temples throbbed as the pressure glued him to the floor. But he smiled as he returned Jean’s gaze. They kissed again, and the kiss mingled with the blackness about them.

And then it stopped. With a final tremor the submarine righted itself. The roaring ceased. There was only stillness; deathly stillness all about them. The walls, bent inward, did not collapse. Half-choking, Ames rose to his feet and stumbled to the iron door.

His hand hesitated on the lever. It might not rise. If so, they were trapped in an airless room, countless thousands of feet beneath the sea in some strange fissure in the ocean floor.

Or, then again, it might rise—rise upon a crushed shell beyond, where the submarine had bent inwards due to lack of oxygen to neutralize the tremendous pressure of the depths. In that case, the open door would admit a torrent of flooding waters.

AMES gripped the lever. And then he smelled air. Air seeping through a tiny crevice at the side of the door near the grated hinges on which it lowered. Air from a little crack which during their descent had trickled only water!

But it was incredible—to find air down here. Still, they could not exist much longer in this stifling cell. Ames made his decision. He pulled the lever, breathed a silent prayer as the door rose.

No water entered. But both Ames and the girl uttered a simultaneous gasp.

From the opening, light came. Light on the ocean bottom! Drawing Jean to her feet, Ames moved forward, into shambles.

The rest of the submarine was a wreck. Twisted and battered, the steel sides were bursting in a dozen places. Smashed instruments littered the floor. But there were no bodies. Whether they had floated away or simply had been crushed out of existence, Ames could not say, but he was thankful that the girl had been spared a sight of them.

Only a moment did he glance about, for there was more strangeness ahead.

Through the opened sides Ames saw that the submarine rested in a gigantic cavern, a place totally free of water. From this cave the air blew in, salty and of the sea, but definitely air.

The cavern was lighted; dimly enough, to be sure, yet radiance undeniably poured forth from some unknown source. The light was faintly green, and it cast eery shadows over the rocky walls. There was something ghastly and unnatural about it all, but Ames had no choice. He took Jean's arm, and together they stepped out of the ship.

"Where are we?" the girl whispered. "In Davy Jones' Locker," Ames answered, and grinned. "But whether it's the Sailor's Snug Harbor or Hell itself, I don't know. I suggest that we investigate."

There was something very strange about all this; the inexplicable wreck, and a descent to a lighted, airy cavern miles below the ocean floor. The sea is large, and water covers three-fourths of the earth's surface. Men have not begun to plumb the secrets of the ocean; science has not fathomed its final mysteries. Ames wondered.

But there was rock beneath their feet, air to breathe, light to guide them. They stepped into the cavern, arm in arm.

It was massive, with high, domed walls which seemed to have no apertures or fissures in the piled rocks. But on all sides, at a distance, stretched little corridors leading off into depths of green twilight. They did not appear to be other than natural formations, yet their design as corridors hinted horridly at the presence of alien life, or intelligent minds which had constructed them.

As Ames and the girl drew near to one cave mouth, Jean drew back, hands brushing her dark curls as she pressed her forehead.

“I’m afraid,” she whispered. “Let’s not go in.”

“We can’t stay here,” Ames answered. “No food. We must explore; see if there’s a way out of here; or if not, how we can remain alive if we must stay.”

Jean tried to smile, but she clung to his broad shoulder very tightly with one small hand as they entered the long green corridor that led deep under the rocks.

THEY walked forward in utter silence; the silence of the depths; the silence of the dead and the drowned. There was coldness and dampness in the air about them, as if, it too, were dead and drowned. But the green light mocked and beckoned from ahead, and they went deeper into the unnerving stillness.

“What’s that?” The girl’s brown eyes widened with sudden fear. “I heard something.”

Ames halted. Yes, the silence had been broken. From ahead came a sound—a soft, shuffling sound as though something were being dragged over the rocky floor of the cave.

“Here!” Ames whispered. He drew the girl into a niche between the rocks of the wall, then peered out ahead. And suddenly he saw what was coming—saw that which was never meant to be.

"Good God!" he muttered.

"David—what is it? What's coming?"

David Ames stared with wild eyes into the passageway.

"David, tell me. What's coming?"

The man still stared. "I don't know," he whispered hoarsely. "But I think it's—*Death.*"

Along the corridor the three dragged their way. One was tall and bony, wearing the uniform of the U. S. Navy. It had no face. The second was dressed in rags and finery commingled, with a buccaneer's cap resting on a head of hair matted with seaweed. The third wore iron over a ghastly frame—ancient Spanish breastplates above white nothingness; for it was truly a skeleton in armor.

The three figures walked along stiffly, jerkily, staring straight ahead; one with dead glazed eyes which did not see, the second with red orbs peering from beneath strings of kelp, and the horrible third leering out of no eyes at all—just two black sockets in a skull.

They passed, marching down the corridor into further gloom. Ames drew the trembling girl out as they hastened up the passageway.

"David, what—" she faltered.

"I don't know, dear."

The horrible memory of the marching dead bit into Ames' brain. "Just a little research expedition in marine biology," old Ronald Banning had promised.

To a young scientist in love with a girl whose uncle was bringing her on an expedition, the trip had sounded quite attractive to David Ames at the time. And now—it had led to this. Banning and all the men were dead, the ship had been dragged into a strange, lighted cavern, and he was alone with Jean in a submarine world where dead men walked.

Yet there was nothing to do but go ahead. Go ahead and—

Ames almost stumbled on what lay at the side of the passage. Jean drew back with a shudder of terror.

Two bodies rested in the shadows. The first was dressed in a flowing robe with leather harness. On its sagging head rested a helmet—a Roman helmet, unmistakably. Across the chest, which neither rose nor fell with breath, rested a gleaming sword, a sword of the legion.

Ames gazed incredulously. Then he glanced at the second figure. It was blue and bloated, swollen with water so that the purpling face had thickened. He glanced more closely at the features.

“Steve Bascom!” he muttered. “Steve Bascom!”

“What do you mean, darling?”

“Steve Bascom—I knew him. Eight years ago he died; his boat was sunk by a Government ship. He was a rumrunner; smuggled liquor from Havana to Florida. It’s Steve all right—but he’s dead!”

FOR a moment longer Ames stood there, then stooped and with an impulsive gesture pulled the sword from the chest of the Roman.

“I don’t get this,” he said. “But something tells me we’ll have a better chance of finding out if I hang onto this sword.”

The two turned down the path. Suddenly there was a sound from behind. Ames stood still, then hastened back along the path to where the bodies lay. They were gone!

And in the distance, that ghastly dragging sound. . . .

Suddenly, without warning, a scream sounded from the bend ahead; a horribly familiar woman’s scream. “Jean!” Ames shouted.

Sword in hand, David Ames rounded the corner. Jean was crouching against the wall, and confronting her with outstretched talons, were three new figures from the depths of nightmare.

The first was a gigantic black, nude and gleaming, swinging forward on ape-like arms—for the creature had no legs; merely twitching stumps that hung from his barrel-waist. The second creature wore a yachting costume, green with slime, and its face was covered with mossy growth on which snails had feasted. The third horror was merely bones—a partially articulated skeleton with remnants of flesh clinging to talonlike hands. They were closing in on the girl as Ames dashed forward, his sword swinging in a silver arc.

The blade swooped and descended, and the skeleton fell. There was a clicking sound as the bones collapsed into a jumbled heap. The corpse in the yachting outfit turned to confront this unexpected opponent, only to meet the point of Ames' weapon as it thrust full into the moldy horror of the rotted face. The sword sliced through to the neck and tore out of the shoulder, and the monster fell. But the legless, gigantic black grasped the girl in mighty arms, and the snarling African face leered upward as Ames confronted it.

The sword slashed out, but the black dropped Jean and dodged.

Then its great arms rose swiftly and it moved forward, swinging the helpless torso from side to side as the sword missed, lunge after lunge. The bestial countenance seemed to watch Ames as he wielded the blade, and the scientist fancied he saw derision in the queerly dead eyes. All at once the mighty arms rose upward.

Ames felt the limbs close about his neck. The hands dug into his throat, and they were cold with the iciness of death. He felt his body crush against the slimy chest, felt the life-blood oozing through his bursting veins. The sword slipped from his fingers, and he went down into buzzing blackness.

Then came release. The grip relaxed. Jean, brave girl, had pierced the black back with the sword. Now it rose again, and the frantic girl brought it down on the ebon giant's neck. It sliced through the throat and cut the head as though it were a black apple on a brittle branch. The head rolled across the floor. There was no blood—not from the dead.

Ames rose. Sobbing, the girl went to his arms. Ames stood there, quieting her panic as best he could. But his eyes were watching the shambles about him. He saw the skeleton bones still moving on the rocks, saw the green horror in the yachtsman's outfit clawing blindly at its ruined face. He stared at the black, severed head which still leered up at him, just as it had during the silent struggle.

AMES stared at the dead head. And as he did so, black eyelids rolled back, red lips parted, and the head grinned. Then a red mouth opened. A voice came from a throat which should not speak; a deep, blurry voice from far away.

"Go forward, fools. The One Who Waits expects thee."

Blind panic ruled. Turning with insane revulsion, Ames and Jean fled down the corridor while the derisive head grinned after them, its mad, cackling laughter ringing in their ears.

Ames raced through nightmare. Along the twisting emerald-litten corridor he ran; then halted as the girl gasped for lack of breath. They stood huddled together, two tiny figures in the green gloom.

"Oh, David," whimpered Jean.

The tall, blue-eyed man put his arms around the girl, but he maintained a tight grip on the Roman sword. And his mind retained an even tighter grip on reality—if it was reality that he faced here.

"I know," he muttered. "It's awful, but we must face it. Somehow we've landed in a place where dead men walk. All I can piece together seems to hint that these men are—were—sailors of various times. They must have been wrecked and in some way dragged down here throughout the ages. There were skeletons, remember, and a Roman corpse. That means men have been trapped here for thousands of years; are still being trapped, because Steve's body shows it. And someone, or something, animates the bodies; gives them a will to walk and obey commands. *The One Who Waits*. That's all we know."

"It's too awful," Jean whispered faintly. "Let's turn back, David. I can't bear more of this."

"No, dear. We must find out. It's our only hope. I think we had better interview Mr. *One Who Waits,* and if he proves to be hard to persuade—well, I at least have a chance of putting up a sharp argument." He smiled, fingering the sword, but there was no mirth in his voice.

Together they walked, and now the way widened. The brilliance of the green light blossomed about them, coming from ahead. And together, they emerged from the corridor.

They stood inside a vast bubble in the rock—a great cavern with stone walls egg-shaped on all sides against the sea. At intervals other cave mouths like their own gaped in the rocks. Apparently the caves in the spot where they had landed all led inward to this central chamber.

The vaulted dome was high, and the light seemed to emanate phosphorescently from the murk above. Its actual source was not visible, but it undoubtedly originated in some peculiar gaseous phenomenom actuated by the same freak which had blown this mass of rock into a sealed cavern at the bottom of the sea. For a moment David's scientific soul burned to investigate these submarine marvels, but necessity turned his thoughts elsewhere.

For the cavern was not empty. The vast floor was a charnel-house, littered with bodies. Ames and the girl stared at a world of horror.

VIKINGS in armor, savages in feathers, sailors in dungarees—the whole burial ground of the sea lay exposed to their eyes. Roman galley slaves rested in a final sleep; pirates slumbered after walking the plank of death. There were bodies in the uniforms of Nelson's days; bearded giants from whaling fleets, swarthy corsairs from the Barbary Coast; clean-shaven men of the modem merchant marine.

All were sprawled together in a shambles, rank on rank, in hundreds and thousands they answered the roll-call of the ocean's dead. Here kings and cabin boys, admirals, captains, and common seamen, explorers and pleasure cruisers, cutthroats and missionaries rested in the sea's sleep.

Some of the bodies were skeletonic cadavers; others were blue and bloated with water; some bore wounds and many had given ghastly feast to the fishes. Piled helter-skelter like broken dolls in a toy factory, they lay unmoving, weapons at their sides. Ames thought of the legends of the Sargasso Sea.

Here was the real Port of Lost Ships; the haven of the *Flying Dutchman.* What stories of wreck and battle and storm these men could tell if only they were living!

But—perhaps they *were* living. The terrible memory of those encounters in the caves seared into Ames' brain. These men lay still in death, but they could be revived by *The One Who Waits.*

And *He* waited here!

Beyond the pile of bodies stood the black box. In the center of the chamber it stood on end, like a Chinese coffin. It was closed, sealed, but Ames knew instinctively that it contained Life.

Jean clung to him as he faced the center of the chamber, and her grip tightened as a voice came. It was a voice from nowhere, echoing through the great cavern.

"Ye have come at last," the voice whispered. "After ages, ye have come, just as I have dreamed. I have been lonely here, and ye have come."

There was triumph in the whisper, and a hinted dread.

"Approach me, so that I may look upon ye," the voice droned. "Fear not —I shall clear a path."

And as the two hesitated, the path was cleared. The dead rolled back. A long, shuddering groan swept through the cavern, as though the slumber of many dreamers had been disturbed. Rows of bodies turned on their sides, opening a horrid pathway through the sleepers.

"Come on," Ames whispered. "We must."

He drew the girl with him, and together they walked down the terrible aisle. Ames held his sword in readiness. Jean's eyes never left the bloated bodies of the drowned on either side. Then they stood before the black box.

"Ye need not fear," came the whisper, softer this time. "They cannot harm lest I command it."

"Who are you?" Ames demanded. He controlled his voice only by effort, for his reason tottered. Addressing an empty black box in a hall filled with drowned men was madness, yet it was true. "Who are you?"

The voice came solemnly and softly. “I am The One Who Waits. I am not of your world—the tiny world above the waters. I come from the sea, from the depths below where once all life began. Ye of the animal world rose to walk on land, but life began in the sea and here it has remained. Here it has developed, and evolution has progressed infinitely further than in your world above.”

THE voice paused, then continued.

“I find it hard to put into words ye can comprehend. But this I can say—after a time, we below evolved so highly that our bodies disappeared. Only Intelligence remained; an Intelligence so great ye could not begin to understand it. And carrying out the full cycle of Evolution, that Intelligence finally began to die. I am the last survivor; The One Who Waits.

“I was the wisest. I knew the fate in store for me, and so in these final years I have planned. During the past few thousand—ye cannot understand, but such passage of time is comparable to a few of earthly days to you—I have thought and planned and worked to find a way of surviving the doom which lies ahead.

“Long ago, in the days when Atlantis still rose above these waters, our people had achieved a science greater than anything ye know. But as we disembodied, such knowledge became worthless. And ambition died. So that all forgot the secrets we once cherished, all but myself. I remembered.

“And I used them in my plans. With their aid I protected myself when Atlantis sank, survived the earthquake which sent a continent crashing. This hollow cavern saved me, though it destroyed our cities here below. Here I have dwelt and worked. For I evolved a plan of survival.

“There were many bodies in the water when Atlantis fell. Some of these, using the science we had long since discarded as worthless, I reanimated. This I achieved by sending a portion of my intelligence into their dead brains. Once given life again, I set these creatures to work, building this cavern against all future disasters. Then I built the magnet. Ye have not seen that, but ye felt it. It is set above this cavern, directly under the fissure leading to the ocean floor. It drags down every vessel that passes overhead, drags it into the fissure, and to the cavern."

"So that's what pulled our submarine here," Ames muttered. "No wonder the iron door fell and wouldn't raise."

"Precisely," the voice answered, as though reading Ames' thought. "From all these ships I took the bodies of the men. This I have done for centuries. Why, ye ask?"

The voice rose to a passionate crescendo. It was ghastly to hear such emotion rising out of nowhere.

"Because I discovered the way to survive—by putting myself, my intelligence, into a human form! Once that is accomplished, I can rise to the surface of the earth. And then I shall live again—live and rule.

"It will all be so simple. Ye have seen my army here. Stout fighters all; crippled and disabled as they are, they cannot be conquered unless blown to bits, for they are already dead and will not die again. I shall master the tiny upper crust.

"But one thing has halted me. Of all the bodies brought below the surface, none have retained perfection. I shall not enter a drowned or a wounded, or a crippled shell, with my entire intelligence. I waited, knowing sooner or later that a perfect body would be caught. And now—ye have come!"

Unconsciously, Ames raised his sword. A laugh rang out, then silence.

"Strange! I have never laughed before. I know no emotions that ye understand as such. Perhaps it is a symbol of my approaching humanity. Ah, well—I but mean to warn ye that resistance is futile. Ye cannot harm me, for I do not exist in a physical state. Do not trouble to hold the thought any longer. I want one body and I shall take it. Everything is arranged. My army has builded well.

In the cave beyond rest many thousand conveyors—akin to the torpedoes ye use at present, and similar to these—submarines, I believe they are called.

"Ye see, I know thy world. Each of these vessels can hold many men. Once I assume my human guise and send my intelligence forth to animate the others, we shall embark in the vessels and rise to the surface. This world will be destroyed as we pierce the rocky shell and enter the fissure, but no matter. We shall not return. We will conquer the outside earth and resume dominion. I am The One Who Waits—and I need wait no longer. I have chosen my body."

The voice subsided into a dreadful silence.

AND then hideous life rose all about Ames and the girl—life rose from Death.

A dozen bony arms reached out. Corpse-cold fingers clawed. A score of the dead men stiffly hobbled to their feet. Ames was already swinging his blade, and it descended in a pendulum of destruction. As fast as the cadavers approached, his sword sheared out, lopping limbs, slicing throats, ripping bloated bellies. Somewhere behind him Jean fought silently, but Ames was lost in the red fury of this silent, hideous battle with the dead.

And then they were upon him, bearing him down by sheer weight of numbers with their cold, drowned limbs. With a mighty effort he hurled them off, only to go down again. They were all about him now, and he smelled their horrid stench as they gripped his arms and legs, swarmed over him until he was hidden from sight. He would be done for in a moment—

Then the weight relaxed. He was lying only under dead. Dazed, he rose to his feet, comprehending. The Intelligence in the box had thought him finished off, and left, relaxing the will which animated the bodies. Why had it left in such a hurry? Where had it gone, and for what purpose?

Ames whirled.

Jean!

The girl was gone. The cavern was empty, save for the bodies of the dead stretching in waves over the floor.

It had taken Jean away to the chamber where the vessels waited; taken Jean to exchange bodies and summon this horde of drowned to rise upon the earth!

For a moment utter panic swept over the young scientist. This was the end. He turned at a sudden sound.

The dead were rising again.

No; only three had gained their feet. Ames grasped the sword, then watched as the three sightlessly staring figures ignored him and walked across the cavern floor. He understood then, and breathed a blessing.

The One Who Waited was summoning these three to his chamber, wherever that might be. Possibly they were to assist him in whatever final arrangement must be made.

Silently, Ames followed them. He had no idea of the Intelligence's powers; they might be so great that It was watching these dead progress.

Consequently, David Ames walked stiffly, like a resurrected corpse. His face assumed an immobile stare. But he never dropped his sword, and within his brain a small voice called, "Jean—Jean—where are you?"

Down a short corridor he followed the three corpses. One was short and squat like a Frankish galley slave; the second wore the uniform of the French Navy; the third was dressed in modern garb, but the head dangled loosely. The neck was broken and the lolling face swung almost backwards in a ghastly fashion, and there was something evilly familiar about the horrid figure. Ames gasped as he realized.

The once kindly and wrinkled face was now contorted in a grimace of death-agony, and the horrid jaws lolled open—but David Ames realized that the corpse before him was that of Jean's uncle, Ronald Banning marine biologist!

THIS was no time for thinking of such things. The walking dead men were turning the corridor. Swiftly Ames moved forward. The sightless eyes did not even notice him, since the Intelligence behind them was not directing them for that purpose. Ames reached the first man, the one in the uniform of the French Navy.

He was of Ames' height and general build, though his hair was darker. Ames did not bother to ponder such details. His sword flashed. The figure fell, twitching. The scientist leaped upon it, jerking off the naval coat and the cap. Hastily he donned the disguise, then raced to reach the other two figures just as they entered a rocky cave set back from the walls. The green light burned strongly within. Ames followed the animated body of Ronald Banning into the small cavern.

In the distance, row on row, stood the vessels. They were, to all outward appearances, submarines; yet they were pointed nose upward, straight at the stone ceiling. Ames noticed that they had peculiar torpedolike attachments at the snout—undoubtedly explosive agents to blast the vessels out of the cavern. The foremost one was open, and a light gleamed within, an electric light!

Ames followed the two figures that moved without hesitation toward the open door in the side of the vessel. Then he stood in the cabin.

The black box lay on a table, and before it stood Jean—Jean, terrified, her black hair hanging in disordered loveliness about her piquant face. A thing without a head was holding her—a thing that was scarred and torn by a dozen gaping wounds, yet it gripped her in a steely grasp.

And from the box a voice spoke.

"So. Now, my child, let us begin. The vessel is ready to start. Within a few moments I can summon the rest and fill the other ships. We shall leave at once—my plans are laid. All that remains lies between myself and you."

The girl sobbed. Ames looked ahead in agony. He dared not betray himself. The voice purred on.

"Do not feel badly. I know how emotion affects human kind, but I assure you, it is nothing. Ye are participating in something far greater than has ever occurred before; ye are lending thy body to the most astounding service ever rendered in the Cosmos. Believe me, it is greater thus to die. In no other way could thy life be rendered so worthy. But enough of words—I must act now."

There was a moment of silence, and the headless thing held the girl quite tightly. Suddenly Ames, watching, saw the color draining from Jean's face. Her eyes grew glassy, fixed in a blank stare. They were riveted on the black box, and now the room seemed to whirl as it hummed with unseen power.

A terrific force seemed to be rising from the black box, as though *It* were emerging. There was nothing to see or hear, but the feeling grew. And Jean's face faded. *Another* face was peering through.

The One Who Waits was taking Jean's body!

Then came surcease. Life gradually returned to the girl's face. And from the box came a murmur.

"No—I am not strong enough yet. Never have I permitted myself utterly to enter a single body. It is as I feared—the strain is too great. I must make another attempt, work up to the ordeal more gradually. That is why I summoned these three. They are dead, and a portion of Intelligence has animated them. They have no will of their own, and I can enter into such shells more easily. I shall allow myself to enter one of them as an experiment, and thus strengthen my will for a second experiment with ye. And I shall not fail."

JEAN stood half-swooning from her struggle. The voice in the black box paused, then went on.

"I shall choose this one—with the broken neck. He came with ye, and has never known domination before. Therefore he is stronger than my other servants, and will provide a better final test."

The voice ceased, and for the first time Jean recognized her dead uncle with a look of startled horror. The hideous head dangled, grimacing in her face, and then turned on its stalklike neck.

The force flooded forth, fiercely. For a moment the room was filled with a pulsing that seemed to shake the walls of the submarine. And then—"I have triumphed!”

The voice came, not from the box, but from the dead lips on the dead face of Ronald Banning. It came, not from a stiff, unseeing corpse, but from an actual living dead man. The deep voice brought life from dead lungs, breathed horridly as it walked across the submarine cabin.

The girl shuddered. Ames still stood silent, but his legs were trembling, and he felt the sweat of utter dread upon his brow.

The man with the broken neck, the man with Ronald Banning’s face, the man who was not a man but One Who Waits, walked and spoke.

“A human body. Remarkable! I feel life once more—form, corporeal existence. I shall like that. Ye are but a woman, but thy body shall suffice. This one is a broken reed. Ye are young, and strong, and healthy. And I have the strength to enter. Why delay?”

A horribly inhuman chuckle burst from the swollen purple lips.

“I shall hold ye in my arms and breathe my soul into thy form. And then—arise to power!”

The corpse advanced. And Ames acted. His sword thrust upward. At the instant, the figure turned.

“An impostor!” The thing that was not Ronald Banning darted to one side. “Kill him!” he shouted.

And the other two corpses acted.

The galley slave rushed in, arms swinging. But Ames was already lunging with deadly precision, and swept his sword through waist and belly alike with ripping thrust. Jean rushed across the cabin and slammed the door fast. The creature in Banning’s body vainly clawed at the handle.

Ames went after him, but slipped and fell. The remaining corpse was on him from the rear, together with the awful headless creature. The three went down together, but Ames held the sword upthrust, and as the headless being fell forward it was pierced. Rolling to one side, Ames again slashed the crippled galley slave. The two bodies lay twitching madly as the scientist rose to his feet and confronted the body of Banning.

"You can't be touched, eh? Disembodied Intelligence?" he grated. "You're alive now, and in a human body! The One Who Waits? Your waiting is—ended."

THE sword came down. There was a shearing sound, as grasped in both hands, the blade cleft through head and neck. Something red and bleeding fell to the floor and lay still. It looked not unlike a human brain.

The pulsing vibrations that had filled the room were ceased. The thing was dead. And Ames turned to look for Jean.

"Jean!" he cried. "What are you doing?"

The girl was fumbling at a panel at the end of the room.

She turned to him with a determined smile.

"We're getting out of here, and right now," she answered.

Her slim hands pulled levers. Suddenly, with a roar and a lurch, the submarine rocketed upward. There was a single grinding shock as the vessel exploded through rocky walls, then merely a steady humming as the righted submarine arose.

From below came a deep, sonorous rumble.

"The cavern is filling in," the girl whispered. "We're going up." Silently, Ames took her in his arms. Their kiss was long. It was not interrupted until the vessel lurched again. Ames' eyes followed the wall until they reached a periscopic mirror. He nudged the dark-haired girl with a slow grin.

"Look through there," he said. "I can see the stars."

Together, thankfully they gazed on the blue heavens above the South Atlantic.

The Grip of Death

Two Hands—and a Throat; Ten White Links in a Grim Necklace of Death!

LUKE HOLLAND'S narrow, sallow face twitched as he slowly mounted the stairs. He carried a tray on which rested a napkin, a decanter of port, and a wineglass filled with poisoned wine.

Luke had acquired the poison by soaking sheets of flypaper in water; he'd read of the trick in a book. The police would have no way of tracing it now. Some people—his uncle, for instance—might think of him as stupid. But no, he was wise and cunning. Yes, Luke Holland was very cunning, with the warped brain generations of decadent Puritan stock had given him.

Luke's cunning was not unmixed with superstitious fear. That was why he meant to kill his Uncle Lionel. He thought he knew of the old man's trafficking in witchcraft; the Bible forbade that, and said a sorcerer deserved to die.

Besides, Luke could use the money he would inherit with his uncle's death, as sole living relative. Then he could get away from this strange, evil house and cease being dependent on the whims and vagaries of an eccentric old man.

How he hated Uncle Lionel!—hated his white, wrinkled face, his sunken, watery eyes, his thin blue lips. He hated, too, the disturbing smile on that withered countenance when old Lionel talked about the money Luke would get when he died. It was almost as though the wretch knew what was in his nephew's mind and was mocking him.

So Luke had thought it all over very carefully for many days, and decided to act. The poisoned wine old Lionel would drink as his regular midday tonic, and the police would say that his death was due to heart failure.

What a joke! All deaths, thought Luke, are due to heart-failure, in the final analysis. Quite a whimsical notion. He laughed now, as he mounted the stairs.

It was good to laugh again. He had found little mirth here in the gloomy house where for the past year he had waited for his invalid uncle to die. For Lionel Holland was an occultist, and dabbled in certain realms of knowledge better left alone. Upon his retirement from the spice business eight years ago, the old man had taken a long sea voyage in the East. His original plan of rest had evidently given way to a less wholesome purpose, for when he returned he brought many crumbling, queerly bound books, and this new gnawing interest in black arts. Slyly, he had adopted the life of a recluse, breaking all social connections and retiring to his family house on the decaying grandeur of the waterfront. His nephew was suddenly offered a secretarial position, and that was all the world ever learned.

Luke Holland had not learned very much more himself. It was what he *suspected* that now made him so afraid.

His uncle was a very peculiar man. During his years' stay in the dwelling, Luke had seen his elderly employer infrequently, for the old invalid stayed upstairs in carefully locked chambers. Luke's duties consisted merely of preparing meals, administering his uncle's medicine, and discouraging all callers. The meals were sent up on a dumbwaiter, a speaking-tube served for infrequent communication, and Luke was left with plenty of time on his hands to think—and to listen.

WHAT was the old fool doing up there? Why was he so secretive? And what were those noises from the locked chambers? From the second floor, on recent evenings, had come the grating that accompanies the opening of long-sealed windows. After that he had heard a measured chanting, subdued, yet resonant. The low, scarcely audible litany seemed to strike Luke's straining ears like the insistent beating of primordial jungle drums. His uncle was praying—but' not to any gods Luke knew. These were older gods, for who but the Ancient Ones demanded sacrifice?

One day, in response to written orders, Luke had procured three fine white roosters and sent them up, still alive, on the dumb-waiter. That night, after endless brooding and a strange ordeal of anticipation, his troubled vigil was disturbed by the shrill screech of a butchered fowl. There was the clatter of a heavy knife, the vibrant beating of blood-dabbled wings, followed by short silence and then the muttering rise of a prayer. The windows groaned open from above.

It was then that Luke became certain his imagination was playing him sorry tricks. For he smelt the reek of heavy incense drifting down into the room, intermingled with the odor of fresh blood and *something else.*

There was an alien scent his nostrils could not name, and which his brain dared not. It was the stench' of a carrion thing, summoned to accept a blood offering—and it was not an olfactory but an atavistic sense which told him what was answering that prayer and sacrifice.

Luke shivered in his bed, as presently the feeble yet immeasurably potent ritual was resumed. Even his shocked and half-dazed mind dared not credit that final dread suspicion—that now there were *two* voices chanting instead of one.

But when Luke felt the massive timbers of the house shake beneath that lumbering tread, when he heard the whistling wind from the harbor howl through the upstairs rooms in answer to that gargantuan footfall, he knew what must be done. A black tryst, a scarlet sacrifice; those mocking sounds from the ceiling must be stopped. His uncle was practising sorcery. How much longer must he be pent up here in this rotting old house, prisoner and slave of that sorcerous monster?

A monster may be killed. . . .

Luke thought about it the following night before he sank into the noxious nightmares that now lurked in slumber.

A monster should be killed. Witches and wizards must die. . . .

The next night the scent of incense pervaded the house. Luke’s sleep was interrupted by the trickling whispers that slithered fearsomely down through the ceiling. Then again that lumbering, far-off tread of gigantic feet—or hooves. He remembered the open windows and lay awake until dawn brought the sanity of sunlight.

I will kill him. I must. . . .

THAT was when Luke Holland began to plan, and got the flypaper, and tampered with the dumbwaiter so that now he personally must carry the meals and medicine upstairs. He planned, and acted, and all the time he thought. He thought about how he hated his uncle, and about how he feared the legends of New England childhood that spoke of witchcraft and the nauseous beings that could be summoned from afar. He thought of how he could use his uncle’s money, and he thought of how the pious were enjoined to destroy wizards and warlocks.

So now Luke Holland went up the creaking staircase with his tray. There was a merry little tune humming within his head; a whimsical phrase of catchy music that tinkled gaily to the rhythm of his pounding pulse.

“Kill him, *Kill him, KILL HIM!”* A surge of confident elation seethed in his veins. Never had he felt more alive, more powerful. He was the Angel of Death. His feet moved in a set cadence; his pulse beat in harmony, his very eyelids blinked to the rhythm of that tinkling tune which beat into his brain.

“Kill, kill, kill, kill him!” For the first time in months Luke Holland’s face wore a peaceful and contented smile.

THE big black door swung open, and he was in the room. His uncle was sitting by the table, a faint smile on his withered countenance. It was all Luke could do to prevent himself from answering that smile with a burst of triumphant laughter.

His uncle did not know about the little tune in back of Luke Holland's head; the little tune that was rising to a sure, swift climax.

Luke tried to master his elation. He stared at the huge, oldfashioned chamber, with its oaken panels shooting up toward the ceiling. It was furnished in a fashion popular fifty years ago—filled with great mahogany chairs, cumbersome sofas, and massive tables. The walls were ranged with bookshelves stuffed with tomes of a size and age commensurate with the room's general atmosphere. It looked sane enough, that room, but there were others further on behind the locked doors. Mad things lurked in the sealed chambers, just as the mad tune lurked in the sealed chambers of Luke's brain. And mad things lurked now in the face of old Lionel Holland.

The invalid had changed terribly in that last shadow-shrouded year. His face had become deeply reticulated, so that wrinkles shot from his eyes like the strands of spiderwebs. His mouth was-a toothless black slit in corpse-white skin, and his pallid face was framed by the dank locks of silver hair that hung below his brow. Luke, gazing upon that countenance, was reminded of the mummied visage of some long-interred Mongol conqueror.

Old Lionel was dressed in a black robe that hung limply over his dwarfed, stooping shoulders. It was embroidered at the breast with a crescent moon design in leprous silver. That was the only note of life in the figure—that and the old man's eyes.

They were blue and deep like the ice of polar seas, and they seemed tinged with a peculiar and disturbing *awareness.* Luke, meeting them, felt some of the elation ooze from his veins; the eyes gripped his gaze and held it as if in some way they had the power to drain all secrets from his mind. Two blue magnets, they were. Luke shuddered as he thought of what those eyes must have looked on in past moonless nights.

Abruptly he jerked back to consciousness. No time for fancies now, for he must act. The old man was speaking.

“Thank you, Luke,” said Lionel Holland. His voice disconcerted the youth queerly; it seemed to come from far, far away—from some source infinitely behind the shrivelled lips purporting to utter the words.

“No trouble at all,” Luke answered, forcing a smile.

“You have been most kind and patient with me of late,” continued the aged recluse, quietly. His voice was a droning purr, but those searching eyes never left his nephew’s face.

“I shall remember that kindness when I die, which will be very soon now—I am told.”

Told by what? Luke shuddered at the thought.

“Soon I shall finish my experiments and will be ready to go.”

LUKE couldn’t keep his eyes from his uncle’s hands. They were fumbling with the filled glass now. The long, skinny fingers twitched like the tentacles of two tiny octopi. His uncle was “ready to go,” in just a moment, if he would only raise that glass. In just a moment Luke would be free—free of those eyes which still stared ceaselessly into his own.

“You are so impatient, my boy,” said the old man. Still that grim mockery lingered in his tones. “Too impatient, I fear. Too hasty. You really should think matters over before taking drastic steps. If you should ever get the idea of hastening my demise, for example, before I have completed my experiments, it would be impossible for you to escape. You realize I have learned many curious things.”

He suspected! A pang of icy fear went through Luke. But no, his uncle was raising the glass to his lips. Three inches more and . . .

The hand holding the glass stopped in midair.

“Are you ill?” the old man demanded, staring at Luke. “You look like a corpse. What’s the matter?”

“It’s nothing,” Luke muttered. Would the old fool never drink?

"Here!" Lionel reached out a slender, blue-veined hand to a nearby table and picked up a small glass tumbler. "Take some port with me before you faint, you ninny. Go on go on, pour it out," he commanded, as Luke hesitated. Was this some trap?

Apparently not, for although Luke watched carefully his uncle made no attempt to switch glasses. Instead he waited impatiently for Luke to finish pouring the red wine from the decanter. Together the two raised glasses to their lips. Only after Luke had drained the tumbler did he realize that his uncle's glass was still filled.

Instantly fear lanced through him. He put down the tumbler quickly, staring at his uncle with bloodshot eyes. The old man deliberately tilted his glass and poured his wine to the floor.

"Why did you cut the rope on the dumbwaiter?" he asked very gently. "Did you think you could murder me, Luke?"

A wizard. The old man was a wizard! He had stared into Luke's eyes with his own ice-folue orbs and read the secrets of the mind behind them. Lionel Holland was a wizard and this was proof. Something he had read swam into Luke's mind. "Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live . . .

He tried to speak, but only a low, choking gasp came from his lips. Little flecks of foam appeared at the corners of his mouth.

"You fool, Luke." The old man's voice was mocking. "You're a superstitious, wicked fool, like the rest of your breed. Only I, the black sheep of the family—have had the strength to throw off the weakness in our blood. There's genius, but there's decadence, too. Your righteous ancestors were white sheep, bleating in their pulpits. I am a black sheep, and I have had the courage to learn that a black sheep can be sacrificed in return for certain boons. And now you, the last little superstitious, decadent white sheep, come seeking to slay me."

HE LAUGHED gently, and Luke knew he was quite mad. Luke was mad, too—he felt that something had happened to his body, numbing it to ice that bit like needles at his throat. He gasped: “Have you—poisoned me?”

“I took precautions. Poison? No, nothing as crude as that; not your stupid trick here. I’ve dealt with you in a manner I learned from my experiments. Experiments with life and death, Luke, and with that strange trace of life that remains after a body is dead. D’you know what tetanus is, Luke?”

The younger man did not answer. He was staring horrified at his uncle, his eyes all whites.

“I suppose you don’t. It’s a contraction of the muscles, like *rigor mortis*, only that comes after you’re dead. That is—it usually does.” Lionel Holland smiled, tapping the arm of his chair with withered fingers. “I wonder what poison you put in my glass, Luke? Strychnine? That causes tetanus, you know; tonic tetanus, in which all the muscles of the body are rigid. By experiment I found a drug much more effective than strychnine. It causes *rigor vitae*—the rigor of life rather than the rigor of death. Slowly your muscles become rigid, and your body becomes paralyzed. But not your brain, Luke. You’ll be able to see and hear quite clearly—when they put you in your coffin.”

A strangled cry burst from Luke’s throat. For a moment he was no longer Luke Holland, product of the twentieth century—he was a fanatical Puritan, stamping out the black and evil foulness of witchcraft; the sin that the Scriptures cursed.

“You devil—you had powder at the bottom of the glass you gave me,” he panted.

He lunged at Lionel Holland, his hands rising swiftly.

A mad rhythm jangled in his brain. As his fingers closed around the neck of the startled old man the rhythm screamed louder, into words.

“Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live.”

Everything dissolved into a red haze, and nothing seemed to exist but his hands, closing very slowly around his uncle’s throat. It was oddly difficult to move them, and they seemed strangely cold. He, threw all his strength into the effort of sinking stiff fingers into the wrinkled flesh. It was queer his hands were so cold and stiff—very queer. He was surprised to hear himself laughing gently and quite insanely. He forced himself to stop thinking and listen to the tune in his head as he choked and choked. . . .

Then it was very still. The only sound was the faint creaking of the chair as Luke shook his uncle's body back and forth. He did not see the blue pallor on the wrinkled face, nor the bulging, agonized eyes. He was trying to remember something. It was very important that he remember. Oh yes—he had it now. Something to do with a drug; with paralysis. What had Lionel said? "Slowly your muscles become rigid, and your body becomes paralyzed." His feet were cold, lifeless. And his throat ached. Luke felt stiff all over.

Suddenly the haze cleared and he stared down at his hands gripping the wrinkled throat. He tried to relax his grip, remove his hands. And—he could not. His muscles were rigidly contrasted about the neck of the dead man, as though in *rigor mortis.*

Luke began to whimper like a hurt dog.

AN HOUR later Luke Holland still crouched over his uncle's corpse in the big dark room where now the shadows crept away to secret caverns in the night. Time after time he had attempted to free his fingers from their grisly embrace, but to no avail. They were deeply imbedded in the rapidly cooling flesh—ten white links in a necklace of death.

He wondered how long he had been lying here. Five minutes? No, an age, a century, seemed more accurate. The dull ache in his throat had increased, and the strange cold had penetrated his knees.

It was apparent that he could not free himself from the ghastly grip without tools to assist him. At the thought hope shot through him. Why hadn't he thought of it before? He must get rid of the body. A knife would pry his fingers free.

Luke tried to crawl to his feet, but fell heavily. His legs were encased in blocks of ice. Breathing in hoarse gasps, he hitched himself laboriously on his knees, painfully dragging his monstrous burden behind him. There seemed to be no knives in his uncle's room; he dared not waste time searching further.

Into the hall he crawled, dragging the ghastly prisoner between locked fingers. Down the great staircase he clambered. Almost at once he lost balance and plunged forward, wheezing. Down they came, dead and halfdead together. And slowly, slowly, Luke felt the icy tide of doom creep through his veins.

How could he handle the knife? His feet were useless; his hands trapped in their frightful grip of horror. Yet there remained his mouth; he could grip the hilt of the knife in his teeth and pry his fingers free.

Blood smeared his face before he managed to drag a kitchen drawer from its place and let the cutlery cascade to the floor. There it was—a slender-bladed carving knife. Now—

He deliberately rolled over on the floor until his lips brushed the bone handle of the knife. The dull ache had subsided from his throat now, but there was a sensation of icy cold in his jaws. . . .

He could not open his mouth! The jaws were rigidly clenched! The muscles worked in hard knots, the knife lay mockingly against his lips, but he was powerless to grip it between his teeth. Whimpering, he tired to catch it between shoulder and cheek, but this was impossible. And all through his body the cold crept slowly. . . .

Luke knew then that this was the end. He could not leave the house, chained to the evidence of his crime. He could not eat, nor sleep, nor stand erect. He was as dead as the corpse between stiffened fingers; the corpse with the mocking face that seemed to smile upwards in triumphant appreciation of the grim jest.

What had the old wizard said? That Luke's body would become rigid and paralyzed. "But not your brain, Luke. You'll be able to see and hear quite clearly—when they put you in your coffin."

Luke visualized what searchers would find when at last they broke into the house. Two dead men, stiff in *rigor mortis,* the icy fingers of one sunk into the cold throat of the other. *But one of those men would be living within that dead shell. . . .*

"No!" gurgled the stricken murderer. "No!"

And he painfully rose to his knees, crawling along the floor with his grisly Nemesis dragging behind.

HE MADE the stairs, somehow; cut and bruised, with blood flowing sluggishly from wounds he could not feel. It took ages to ascend the staircase with his monstrous burden, and more than an hour to reach Lionel's room with the open windows through which sea-borne twilight seeped.

The icy bonds were tight on Luke now. He could scarcely move his stiffened body, and the hideous bulk he dragged made his task almost an impossible one. Very slowly he crawled toward a window. He had to make it. There was only one way to break the bond, to sever his linkage with the dead. Only one way to kill himself and not be buried alive. A fall from a height would loose his fingers, kill him. He'd escape the wizard's planned vengeance yet.

Somehow Luke propped himself up against the wall, reached the windowsill with his knees, and dragged the smiling thing up beside him. Only the ghastly thrill of triumphing over his uncle animated him, for the cold was gripping his heart now, stopping it. Soon he would be merely a living mind in a dead body, unless he fell out into the street, quickly. He must.

He stared down between his fingers at the smiling sardonic face that leered insanely upwards. He felt it stiffen. Six hours dead, and *rigor mortis* was actually setting in on his uncle's body. It was nearly as stiff as his own. Luke wanted to smile, but his face was ice. And now he had to will himself to lean forward and topple out, dragging the stiff body with him. He had to. He felt the cold stop his heart. Now he was only a living mind in a dead body.

He leaned, plunged—tried to drag the body after him.

NEXT morning the hastily-summoned police broke into the Holland mansion and invaded the second-story bedchamber. There they found what had attracted a crowd to the streets below—the body of a man, dangling from a window, hands clutched in an inflexible grip of death about the throat of Lionel Holland. Lionel Holland's body had become wedged in the narrow window-opening; *rigor mortis* had kept it from becoming dislodged and squeezing through. Apparently *rigor mortis* had held Luke's grip firm on the dead throat of his uncle so that he had hung there in midair, attached to the rigid body of the old man.

The mystery was never solved, and the undertaker seemed singularly disinclined to speak of what measures he had taken to loosen the hands of Luke from their iron grip.

The two were buried with modest obsequies a few days later. The funeral was for the most part quiet and dignified, as befitted services for one of the oldest families in the region. A brief disturbance, however, was occasioned when a youthful artist attending the funeral suddenly went into hysterics over the rigid smile on Lionel Holland's face—and because of a certain look he swore he glimpsed in the glazed eyes of Luke Holland as the coffin-lid swung into place.

Mannikins of Horror

Colin was a sculptor, who combined in himself the attributes of Pygmalion and Frankenstein—a tale of a dread doom

COLIN had been making the little day figures for a long time before he noticed that they moved. He had been making them for years there in his room, using hundreds of pounds of clay, a little at a time.

The doctors thought he was crazy; Doctor Starr in particular, but then Doctor Starr was a quack and a fool. He couldn't understand why Colin didn't go into the workshop with the other men and weave baskets, or make rattan chairs. That was useful "occupational therapy," not foolishness like sitting around and modeling little clay figures year in and year out. Doctor Starr always talked like that, and sometimes Colin longed to smash his smug, fat face. "Doctor" indeed!

Colin knew what he was doing. He had been a doctor once: Doctor Edgar Colin, surgeon—and brain-surgeon at that. He had been a renowned specialist, an authority, in the days when young Starr was a bungling, nervous interne. What irony! Now Colin was shut up in a madhouse, and Doctor Starr was his keeper. It was a grim joke. But mad though he was, Colin knew more about psychopathology than Starr would ever learn.

Colin had gone up with the Red Cross base at Ypres; he had come down miraculously unmangled, but his nerves were shot. For months after that final blinding flash of shells Colin had lain in a coma at the hospital, and when he had recovered they said he had *dementia praecox.* So they sent him here, to Starr.

Colin asked for clay the moment he was up and around. He wanted to work. The long, lean hands, skilled in delicate cranial surgery, had not lost their cunning—their cunning that was like a hunger for still more difficult tasks. Colin knew he would never operate again; he wasn't Doctor Colin any more, but a psychotic patient. Still he had to work. Knowing what he did about mental disorders, his mind was tortured by introspection unless he kept busy. Modeling was the way out.

As a surgeon he had often made casts, busts, anatomical figures copied from life to aid his work. It had been an engrossing hobby, and he knew the organs, even the complicated structure of the nervous system, quite perfectly. Now he worked in clay. He started out making ordinary little figures in his room. Tiny mannikins, five or six inches high, were molded accurately from memory. He discovered an immediate knack for sculpture, a natural talent to which his delicate fingers responded.

Starr had encouraged him at first. His coma ended, his stupor over, he had been revivified by this new-found interest. His early clay figures gained a great deal of attention and praise. His family sent him funds; he bought instruments for modeling. On the table in his room he soon placed all the tools of a sculptor. It was good to handle instruments again; not knives and scalpels, but things equally wonderful: things that cut and carved and reformed bodies, Bodies of clay, bodies of flesh—what did it matter?

It hadn't mattered at first, but then it did. Colin, after months of painstaking effort, grew dissatisfied. He toiled eight, ten, twelve hours a day, but he was not pleased—he threw away his finished figures, crumpled them into brown balls which he hurled to the floor with disgust. His work wasn't good enough.

The men and women looked like men and women in miniature. They had muscles, tendons, features, even epidermal layers and tiny hairs Colin placed on their small bodies. But what good was it? A fraud, a sham. Inside they were solid clay, nothing more—and that was wrong. Colin wanted to make complete miniature mortals, and for that he must study.

IT WAS then that he had his first clash with Doctor Starr, when he asked for anatomy books. Starr laughed at him, but he managed to get permission.

So Colin learned to duplicate the bony structure of man, the organs, the quite intricate mass of arteries and veins. Finally, the terrific triumph of learning glands, nerve-structure, nerve-endings. It took years, during which Colin made and destroyed a thousand clay figures. He made clay skeletons, placed clay organs in tiny bodies. Delicate, precise work. Mad work, but it kept him from thinking. He got so he could duplicate the forms with his eyes closed. At last he assembled his knowledge, made clay skeletons and put the organs in them, then allowed for pin-pricked nervous system, blood vessels, glandular organization, dermic structure, muscular tissue—everything.

And at last he started making brains. He learned every convolution of the cerebrum and cerebellum; every nerve-ending, every wrinkle in the gray matter of the cortex. Study, study, disregard the laughter, disregard the thoughts, disregard the monotony of long years imprisoned; study, study, make the perfect figures, be the greatest sculptor in the world, be the greatest surgeon in the world, be a creator.

Doctor Starr dropped in every so often and subtly tried to discourage such fanatical absorption. Colin wanted to laugh in his face. Starr was afraid this work was driving Colin madder than ever. Colin knew it was the one thing that kept him sane.

Because lately, when he wasn't working, Colin felt things happen to him. The shells seemed to explode in his head again, and they were doing things to his brain—making it come apart, unravel like a ball of twine. He was disorganizing. At times he seemed no longer a person but a thousand persons, and not one body, but a thousand distinct and separate structures, as in the clay men. He was not a unified human being, but a heart, a lung, a liver, a blood-stream, a hand, a leg, a head—all distinct, all growing more and more disassociated as time went on. His brain and body were no longer an entity. Everything within him was falling apart, leading a life of its own. Nerves no longer co-ordinated with blood. Arm didn't always follow leg.

He recalled his medical training, the hints that each bodily organ lived an individual life.

Each cell was a unit, for that matter. When death came, you didn't die all at once. Some organs died before others, some cells went first. But it shouldn't happen in life. Yet it did. That shellshock, whatever it was, had resulted in a slow unraveling. And at night Colin would lie and toss, wondering how soon his body would fall apart—actually fall apart into twitching hands and throbbing heart and wheezing lungs; separated like the fragments torn from a spoiled clay doll.

He had to work to keep sane. Once or twice he tried to explain to Doctor Starr what was happening, to ask for special observation—not for his sake, but because perhaps science might learn something from data on his case. Starr had laughed, as usual. As long as Colin was healthy, exhibited no morbid or homicidal traits, he wouldn't interfere. Fool!

Colin worked. Now he was building bodies—real bodies. It took days to make one; days to finish a form complete with chiseled lips, delicate aural and optical structures correct, tiny fingers and toe-nails perfectly fitted. But it kept him going. It was fascinating to see a table full of little miniature men and women!

Doctor Starr didn't think so. One afternoon he came in and saw Colin bending over three little lumps of clay with his tiny knives, a book open before him.

"What are you doing there?" he asked.

"Making the brains for my men," Colin answered.

"Brains? Good God!"

Starr stooped. Yes, they *were* brains! Tiny, perfect reproductions of the human brain, perfect in every detail, built up layer on layer with unconnected nerve-endings, blood vessels to attach them in craniums of clay!

“What——” Starr exclaimed.

“Don’t interrupt. I’m putting in the thoughts,” Colin said.

Thoughts? That was sheer madness, beyond madness. Starr stared aghast. Thoughts in brains for day men?

Starr wanted to say something then. But Colin looked up and the afternoon sun streamed into his face so that Starr could see his eyes. And Starr crept out quietly under that stare; that stare which was almost—*god-like.*

The next day Colin noticed that the day men moved.

2

“FRANKENSTEIN,” Colin mumbled. “I am Frankenstein.” His voice sank to a whisper. “I’m not like Frankenstein. I’m like God. Yes, like God.”

He sank to his knees before the table-top. The two little men and women nodded gravely at him. He could see thumbprints in their flesh, his thumbprints, where he’d smoothed out the skulls after inserting the brains. And yet they lived!

“Why not? Who knows anything about creation, about life? The human body, physiologically, is merely a mechanism adapted to react. Duplicate that mechanism *perfectly* and why won’t it live? Life is electricity, perhaps. Well, so is thought. Put thought into perfect simulacra of humanity and they will live.”

Colin whispered to himself, and the figures of clay looked up and nodded in eery agreement.

“Besides, I’m running down. I’m losing my identity. Perhaps a part of my vital substance has been transferred, incorporated in these new bodies. My—my disease—that might account for it. But I can find out.”

Yes, he could find out. If these figures were animated by Colin’s life, then he could control their actions, just as he controlled the actions of his own body. Fie created them, gave them a part of his life. They *were* him.

He crouched there in the barred room, thinking, concentrating. And the figures moved. The two men moved up to the two women, grasped their arms, and danced a sedate minuet to a mentally-hummed tune; a grotesque dance of little clay dolls, a horrid mockery of life.

Colin closed his eyes, sank back trembling. It was true!

The effort of concentration had covered him with perspiration. He panted, exhausted. His own body felt weakened, drained. And why not? He had directed four minds at once, performed actions with four bodies. It was too much. But it was real.

“I’m God,” he muttered. “God.”

But what to do about it? He was a lunatic, shut away in an asylum. How to use his power?

“Must experiment, first,” he said aloud.

“What?”

Doctor Starr had entered, unobserved. Colin cast a hasty glance at the table, found to his relief that the mannikins were motionless.

“I was just observing that I must experiment with my clay figures,” he said, hastily.

The doctor arched his eyebrows. “Really? Well, you know, Colin, I’ve been thinking. Perhaps this work here isn’t so good for you. You look peaked, tired. I’m inclined to think you’re hurting yourself with all this; afraid hereafter I’ll have to forbid your modeling work.”

“Forbid it?”

Doctor Starr nodded.

“But you can’t—just when I’ve—I mean, you can’t! It’s all I’ve got, all that keeps me going, alive. Without it I’ll—”

“Sorry.”

“You can’t.”

"I'm the doctor, Colin. Tomorrow we'll take away the clay. I'm giving you a chance to find yourself, man, to live again——"

Colin had never been violent until now. The doctor was surprised to find lunatic fingers clawing at his throat, digging for the jugular vein with surgically skilled fingers. He went over backward with a bang, and fought the madman until the aroused guards came and dragged Colin off. They tossed him on his bunk and the doctor left.

IT WAS dark when Colin emerged from a world of hate. He lay alone. They had gone, the day had gone. Tomorrow they and the day would return, taking away his figures—his beloved figures. His *living* figures! Would they crumple them up and destroy them, destroy actual *life?* It was murder!

Colin sobbed bitterly, as he thought of his dreams. What he had meant to do with his power—why, there were no limits! He could have built dozens, hundreds of figures, learned to concentrate mentally until he could operate a horde of them at will. He would have created a little world of his own; a world of creatures subservient to him. Creatures for companionship, for his slaves. Fashioning different types of bodies, yes, and different types of brains. He might have reared a private little civilization.

And more. He might have created a race. A new race. A race that bred. A race that was developed to aid him. A hundred tiny figures, hands trained, teeth filed, could saw through his bars. A hundred tiny figures to attack the guards, to free him. Then out into the world with an army of clay; a tiny army, but one that could burrow deeply in the earth, travel hidden and unseen into high places. Perhaps, some day, a world of little clay men, trained by him. Men that didn't fight stupid wars to drive their fellows mad. Men without the brutal emotions of savages, the hungers and lusts of beasts. Wipe out flesh! Substitute godly clay!

But it was over. Perhaps he was mad, dreaming of these things. It was over. And one thing he knew: without the clay he would be madder still.

Tonight he could feel it, feel his body slipping. His eyes, staring at the moonlight, didn't seem to be a part of his own form any longer. They were watching from the floor, or from over in the corner. His lips moved, but he didn't feel his face. His voice spoke, and it seemed to come from the ceiling rather than from his throat. He was crumpling himself, like a mangled clay figure.

The afternoon's excitement had done it. The great discovery, and then Starr's stupid decision. Starr! He'd caused all this. He was responsible. He'd drive him to madness, to a horrid, unnamed mentally-diseased state he was too blind to comprehend. Starr had sentenced him to death. If only he could sentence Starr!

Perhaps he could.

What was that? The thought came from far away—inside his head, outside his head. He couldn't place his thoughts any more—body going to pieces like this. What was it now?

Perhaps he could kill Starr.

How?

Find out Starr's plans, his ideas.

How?

Send a clay man.

What?

Send a clay man. This afternoon you concentrated on bringing them to life. They live. Animate one. He'll creep under the door, walk down the hall, listen to Starr. If you animate the body, *you'll* hear Starr.

Thoughts buzzing so . . .

But how can I do that? Clay is clay. Clay feet would wear out long before they got down the hall and back. Clay ears—perfect though they may be—would shatter under the conveyance of actual sounds.

Think. Make the thoughts stop buzzing. There is a way. . . .

ES, there was a way! Colin gasped.

“Y His insanity, his doom, were his salvation! If his faculties were being disorganized, and he had the power of projecting himself into clay, why not project special faculties into the images? Project his hearing into the clay ears, by concentration? Remodel clay feet until they were identical replicas of his own, then concentrate on walking? His body, his senses, were falling apart. Put them into clay!

He laughed as he lit the lamp, seized a tiny figure and began to recarve the feet. He kicked off his own shoes, studied carefully, looked at charts, worked, laughed, worked—and it was done. Then he lay back on the bed in darkness, thinking.

The clay figure was climbing down from the table. It was sliding down the leg, reaching the floor. Colin felt his feet tingle with shock as they hit the floor. Yes! *His* feet.

The floor trembled, thundered. Of course. Tiny vibrations, unnoticed by humans, audible to clay ears. *His* ears.

Another part of him—Colin’s actual eyes—saw the little creeping figure scuttle across the floor, saw it squeeze under the door. Then darkness, and Colin sweated on the bed, concentrating.

Clay Colin could not see. He had no eyes. But instinct, memory guided.

Colin walked in the giant world. The foot came out, the foot of Colossus. Colin edged closer to the woodwork as the trampling monster came down, crashing against the floor with monstrous vibrations.

Then Colin walked. He found the right door by instinct—the fourth door down. He crept under, stepped up a foot onto the carpet. At least, the grassy sward seemed a foot high. His feet ached as the cutting rug bit sword-blades into his soles.

From above, the thunder of voices. Great titans roared and bellowed a league in the air.

Doctor Starr and Professor Jerris. Jerris was all right; he had vision. But Starr . . .

Colin crouched under the mighty barrier of the armchair, crept up the mountainside to the great peaks of Starr’s bony knees. He strained to distinguish words in the bellowing.

"This man Colin is done for, I tell you. Incipient breakdown. Tried to attack me this afternoon when I told him I was removing his clay dolls. You'd think they were live pets of his. Perhaps he thinks so."

Colin clung to the pants-cloth below the knees. Blind, he could not know if he would be spied; but he must cling close, high, to catch words in the tumult.

Jerris was speaking.

"Perhaps he thinks so. Perhaps they are. At any rate—what are you doing with a doll on your leg?"

Doll on your leg? Colin!

Colin on the bed in his room tried desperately to withdraw life; tried to withdraw hearing and sensation from the limbs of his clay self, but too late. There was an incredulous roar; something reached out and grasped him, and then there was an agonizing squeeze. . . .

Colin sank back in bed, sank back into a world of red, swimming light.

3

SUN shone in Colin's face. He sat up. Had he dreamed?

"Dreamed?" he whispered.

He whispered again. "Dreamed?"

He couldn't hear. He was deaf.

His ears, his hearing faculty, had been focussed on the clay figure, and it was destroyed last night when Starr crushed it. Now he was deaf!

The thought was insanity. Colin swung himself out of bed in panic, then toppled to the floor.

He couldn't walk!

The feet were on the clay figure, he'd willed it, and now it was crushed. He couldn't walk!

Disassociation of his faculties, his members. It was real, then! His ears, his legs, had in some mysterious way been lent vitally to that crushed clay man. Now he had lost them. Thank heaven he hadn't sent his eyes!

But it was horror to stare at the stumps where his legs had been; horror to feel in his ears for bony ridges no longer there. It was horror and it was hate. Starr had done this. Killed a man, crippled him.

Right then and there Colin planned it all. He had the power. He could animate his clay figures, and then give them a *special* life as well. By concentrating, utilizing his peculiar physical disintegration, he could put part of himself into clay. Very well, then. Starr would pay.

Colin stayed in bed. When Starr came in the afternoon, he did not rise. Starr mustn't see his legs, or realize that he could no longer hear. Starr was talking, perhaps about the clay figure he'd found last night, clinging to his leg; the clay figure he'd destroyed. Perhaps he spoke of destroying these clay figures that he now gathered up, together with the rest of the clay. Perhaps he asked after Colin's health; why he was in bed.

Colin feigned lethargy, the introspection of the schizoid. And Starr gathered up the rest of the clay and went away.

Then Colin smiled. He pulled out the tiny clay form from under the sheets; the one he'd hidden there. It was a perfect man, with unusually muscled arms, and very long finger-nails. The teeth, too, were very good. But the figure was incomplete. It had no face.

Colin began to work, very fast there as the twilight gathered. He brought a mirror and as he worked on the figure he smiled at himself as though sharing a secret jest with someone—or something. Darkness fell, and still Colin worked from memory alone; worked delicately, skilfully, like an artist, like a creator, breathing life into clay. Life into clay. . . .

"I TELL YOU the damned thing *was* alive!" Jerris shouted. He'd lost his temper at last, forgot his superior in office. "I saw it!"

Starr smiled.

"It was clay, and I crushed it," he answered. "Let's not argue any longer."

Jerris shrugged. Two hours of speculation. Tomorrow he'd see Colin himself, find out what the man was doing. He was a genius, even though mad. Starr was a fool. He'd evidently aggravated Colin to the point of physical illness, taking away his clay.

Jerris shrugged again. The day—and last night, the memory of that tiny, perfectly formed figure dinging to Starr's pants-leg where nothing could have *stuck* for long. It had *clung.* And when Starr crushed it, there had been a framework of clay bones protruding, and viscera hung out, and it had writhed—or seemed to writhe, in the light.

"Stop shrugging and go to bed," Starr chuckled. It was a matter-of-fact chuckle, and Jerris heeded it. "Quit worrying about a nut. Colin's crazy, and from now on I'll treat him as such. Been patient long enough. Have to use force. And—I wouldn't talk about clay figures any longer if I were you."

The tone was a command. Jerris gave a final shrug of acquiescence and left the room.

Starr switched off the light and prepared to doze there at the night-desk. Jerris knew his habits.

Jerris walked down the hall. Strange, how this business upset him! Seeing the day figures this afternoon had really made him quite sick. The work was so perfect, so wonderfully accurate in miniature! And yet the forms were clay, just clay. They hadn't moved as Starr kneaded them in his fists. Clay ribs smashed in, and clay eyes popped from actual sockets and rolled over the table-top—nauseous! And the little clay hairs, the shreds of clay skin so skilfully overlaid! A tiny dissection, this destruction. Colin, mad or sane, was a genius.

Jerris shrugged, this time to himself. What the devil! He blinked awake.

And then he saw—it.

Like a rat. A little rat. A little rat scurrying down the hall, upright, on two legs instead of four. A little rat without fur, without a tail. A little rat that cast the perfect tiny shadow of—a *man!*

It had a face, and it looked up. Jerris almost fancied he saw its eyes *flash* at him. It was a little brown rat made of clay—no, it was a little clay man like those Colin made. A little clay man, running swiftly toward Starr's door, crawling under it. A perfect little clay man, alive!

Jerris gasped. He was crazy, like the rest, like Colin. And yet it had run into Starr's office, it was moving, it had eyes and a face and it was clay.

JERRIS acted. He ran—not toward Starr's door, but down the hall to Colin's room. He felt for keys; he had them. It was a long moment before he fumbled at the lock and opened the door, another before he found the lights, and switched them on.

And it was a terribly long moment he spent staring at the thing on the bed—the thing with stumpy legs, lying sprawled back in a welter of sculpturing-tools, with a mirror flat across its chest, staring up at a sleeping face that was not a face.

The moment *was* long. Screaming must have come from Starr's office for perhaps thirty seconds before Jerris heard it. Screaming turned into moans and still Jerris stared into the face that was not a face; the face that changed before his eyes, melting away, scratched away by invisible hands into a pulp.

It happened like that. Something wiped out the face of the man on the bed, tore the head from the neck. And the moaning rose from down the hall. . . .

Jerris ran. He was the first to reach the office, by a good minute. He saw what he expected to see.

Starr lay back in his chair, throat flung to one side. The little clay man had done its job and Doctor Starr was quite dead. The tiny brown figure had dug perfectly-formed talons into the sleeping throat, and with surgical skill applied talons, and perhaps teeth, to the jugular at precisely the most fatal spot in the vein. Starr died before he could dislodge the diabolically clever image of a man, but his last wild clawing had torn away the face and head.

Jerris ripped the monstrous mannikin off and crushed it; crushed it to a brown pulp between his fingers before others arrived in the room.

Then he stooped down to the floor and picked up the torn head with the mangled face, the miniature, carefully-modeled face that grinned in triumph, grinned in death.

Jerris shrugged himself into a shiver as he crushed into bits the little clay face of Colin, the creator.

1940

Queen of the Metal Men

Darro, the warrior, sought the meaning of Dagon's Curse in a weird city buried deep beneath an ancient glacier, and found a lovely queen of a robot world.

"YOU must promise," said the wrinkled little man known as The Wise One. "Warriors are forbidden to read the words of the ancients. Now that you have read from the forbidden books, you must forget. Promise that."

Darro turned away. In the dusk, the little fire before the two men, the Wise One Tabor, and the young warrior, Darro, was a flickering point of light. The hot coals lay like red eyes on the dark earth, and Darro looked again at the old man.

"Tell me, O Tabor," he said slowly, "why the knowledge of the great cities that lie buried beneath the ground is kept from us." His eyes searched as he spoke. "What have our strong people, the descendants of the great and ancient city of Baltimore, to fear from a world we have never seen, a world dead these two centuries?"

The Wise One was silent a few moments. At length he said, "You are young, Darro. In my grandfather's day there was a warrior, strong and impetuous as you, with a curious nature. He too had read the books, and he resolved to find the hidden entrance to the dead city. One day he did find it.

Half the men in our clan were killed before . . . before . . .” and the old man stopped.

“What, O Tabor?” cried Darro. “You are speaking of my ancestor Dagon. What did he find? What is the meaning of *Dagon’s Curse?”*

“Do not ask me,” spoke the Wise One. “There are dead cities buried beneath the ground all over our land. But under us alone, under the proud Marylander Clan, lies the key to ultimate death of every living being on earth. The days of ice sealed it. You must not disturb it.”

“But tell me what this key is, and I will be content.”

“Do not ask me,” repeated Tabor. “If you ever knew, the fire that burns in you would not be content until you had found the entrance again. A thousand lives were lost there once. Go now, only promise me to forget.”

“No!” cried Darro, fiercely, as he sprang up. “No! I am not a timid maid! I am not a fool! If there are things to be known, I will know them—and I will tell the whole world!”

He remembered the eyes of the old man as he stalked away, eyes that held sorrow and an old fear. But Darro was heedless. He had come to the Wise One honestly, asking him what the forbidden books meant, the books over which his elder sister constantly pored, and which he had read secretly. But something else he had not told old Tabor. . . .

For Darro had found the entrance to the ancient city! Days before, returning alone from a hunting foray, he had come upon the overgrown crevasse that hid it. Or else why should he, the warrior Darro, read books like a child or a maiden? He had waited long enough, and Tabor had only taxed his patience.

Now he stood on a hill, his face turned to the sky, impatient with the very night itself. When the dawn came, Darro would go!

Then, when the day was but a streak of light grey in the heavens, Darro was on his way. Swiftly he ran over the hilly ground, past fields laid bare by the advancing autumn, through a deep woods, until he stood at length before the first ridge of what formed the crevasse. A little cave marked the beginning. After that there was a huge iron door—a door that he had found ajar, rusted with age and unwieldy. Farther than that he had not gone before, but now . . .

Cautiously Darro drew his hunting knife, gripped his spear more firmly, and stepped into the gloom of the cave. With both hands he pressed against the huge iron door. Creaking, it gave until Darro squeezed past it—and suddenly Darro the warrior knew fear.

He stood in the half-darkness and gazed at that which rested before him—the iron body of a man; motionless, quieter than death. It did not breathe, for iron cannot live, and yet within the metal face glared two living eyes. The eyes were yellow, blazing with sight here in the murkiness of the cavern.

With an effort, Darro stopped trembling.

His face relaxed, and the long jaw protruded in a defiant grin. He stood his spear against the rocky wall and advanced slowly toward the throne, staring at the metal monster, hand clenching the dagger tightly. The Thing did not move.

Slowly Darro reached out one hand and touched the cold metal of the Thing's chest. Nothing happened. Darro's hand moved over the iron body, and he grinned. No need to fear this image!

And then, eyes blazed and body lunged. But not the eyes or body of the metal man. Charging across the floor of the cave on great, talon-studded paws, lunged a shaggy, elephant-bodied monster. The Thing had a head the size of a horse's body, and the great, slant-jawed skull held blazing green eyes. The snarling face was Catlike, but no cat or common carnivore had the tusk-like fangs of this monster. The gaping red jaws held teeth like ivory sword-blades.

Darro whirled to face it. Sabre-tooth! The deadliest creature of destruction of a new primitive world was upon him. That explained the half-open door—the sabre-tooth lived there!

The monster leaped, and with a lightning movement Darro dodged behind the rocky throne on which the metal man rested. Yet the tiger did not swerve. Soaring through the air it landed full on the chest of the iron man, claws raking the metal in an impotent swath of doom. The ponderous body swayed. It was toppling back, crushing Darro as the beast lunged frantically against it.

Darro braced himself, trying to hold the figure erect as a shield. The rear of the iron being was studded with knobs and levers; Darro felt one strike his temple as he pushed against it. The creature was falling upon him; a moment and the sabre-tooth would push it over, pin him helplessly beneath the giant iron figure, then leap over and close tiger-teeth in his throat.

Darro felt his knees give. He slid desperately to the floor, his hands clutched despairingly at the iron knobs in the metal back. They twisted under his fingers, slipped away as he landed with a gasp. The tiger lunged again. The figure would topple backward now, crush him, and then—

But no. The figure didn't fall. *It was moving!* With a start of awe, the trapped warrior gazed upward. The metal man was rising on ponderous feet. Great arms went up and embraced the shaggy body of the monstrous beast, catching it against its chest as one might catch a playful dog. Slowly the arms bent in. The roaring sabre-tooth raked impotent claws against the metal, bit furiously at the iron face. But the arms pressed, squeezed, crushed.

Suddenly the roaring became a fierce scream and the body of the metal man became covered with ruddy spray. Claws ripped in one last convulsive spasm, and then the iron being dropped the limp carcass to the floor. The sabre-tooth was dead.

For a moment the metal man stood swaying, arms still open. Darro saw that the tiger's blows had taken some effect, for one of the arms was dangling loosely on twisted wires, and the chest was partly crushed. Darro rose to his feet, rushed around to the front of the iron creature. He gazed into the yellow eyes that were strangely fading. With a thunderous crash, the iron body toppled to the floor atop the sabre-tooth, the head splintering against the rocks into a tangled mass of coils and jagged splinters of steel.

LATER, a crude, fine torch in his hand, Darro proceeded cautiously down the rocky floor of the passage. In the torchlight he could see smoothly-chiseled walls. He was on the right track; legend and fable must be true! Men had fashioned this corridor under the ice—for what strange purpose he could not say. Men, or else—

Darro nearly stumbled over the first one. It was an iron man, lying across the path. One great metal hand still grasped a strange implement. Tools lay scattered around the sprawling figure.

Another iron man! Darro pressed the levers in the back. Perhaps this one would move, too. But no, twirl as he might, the fallen figure lay motionless.

Darro rose, puzzled. What had destroyed the spark in this metal giant? And restored it to the other?

He shrugged, passing on. And then he found another. And yet another. From this point on the floor was strewn with fallen men of metal. Each one held a tool or instrument of outlandish design; the use of which Darro could not fathom.

Darro paused. His torch was exhausted. As he lit the second one he shivered. It was hellishly cold here in the pit under the ice. It was cold; much colder than in the cave above.

Darro hastened on, shivering, through the endless maze of the passage. Every few feet he passed another metal man; another giant sprawling helplessly on the rocks. There must have been thousands of them, and Darro felt a strange awe surging through him. Why did they lie here? What was their purpose? What civilization had produced them? And the buried city that legend said lay below; would he really find it dead when he reached it?

The cold grew intense; the journey became a nightmare of torch-lit shadows on twisted walls under icy earth, of frantic groping in frozen darkness beneath the glacier, of blind stumbling over the cold iron bodies of monster-men. Darro plunged doggedly forward, a burning spark of life in a world of death.

And then the cavern slanted down—down to a door. The metal men lay in heaps, covered with a frost which made their bodies horrid, fur-covered monstrosities. But Darro did not waste a glance on them.

He stared at a new door; a great metal thing in the rock walls. It was flat, solid, undecorated, but it was a door—and beyond . . .?

Darro ran down the incline. His arms gripped the remaining torches; he raised them and beat upon the door. A brazen clang echoed down the silent corridor under the heart of ice. He stood there, a grotesque,’ half-naked little figure—pounding vainly at the gates of frozen mysteries.

Again and again he hammered on the doorway. It did not yield, it did not open. Darro swore softly. Was he to be thwarted at the end of his quest? He hammered with redoubled fury.

And then the miracle happened. Slowly, with a grating clang, a groaning of metal torment, the door began to slide open at the side.

Darro gaped. He thought of a city beyond, of power; of machines, of a million metal men straining and wrestling with that massive gateway. He gazed avidly, waiting for the revealed sight of the city’s might, moving the mountainous door for him to enter.

The door slid back with a ponderous crash, and then Darro’s mouth dropped open in amazement, for standing alone in the shadows, was a tiny, goldenhaired girl!

“COME in,” she said, smiling.

Darro’s ears stung at the sound of the southern tongue, spoken here under the ice!

Darro had seen in his father’s camps at ancient Baltimore the captive maidens of a dozen lands; he had journeyed through the world and gazed on beauties of every tribe. But this girl, this golden woman, was beyond any comparison he could make. Her hair was a misty cloud drawn from the sun, her eyes deep pools bluer than the diamond-glint on the ice, her slim body a creamy loveliness which dimmed the glacial snow. Her shapeliness was veiled in a flowing robe of green that struck fiery contrast to her vivid lips, now parted in a smile of greeting before which Darro’s senses reeled.

"Come in," repeated the girl. Darro stepped past the doorway, no longer intent on seeking an army of automatons. He had eyes only for the charms of the golden girl. It was a full moment before he realized that the door had slid noiselessly back into place; a moment more before he comprehended that the operation was performed by her slim hand pressing a lever at its side. In another instant his senses were struck by the pleasurable warmth of the air about him; it was a tropical atmosphere contrasting delightfully to the freezing temperature of the tunnel beyond.

Still all this meant nothing to Darro, staring into the incarnate face of Beauty.

"You have come again," she said. "You returned."

"I don't know what you mean," Darro said slowly.

The girl regarded him. "You look so alike," she murmured. "Yet it could not be. That was so long ago. I have almost forgotten about time." As if from a reverie, she asked, "Who are you?"

"Men call me Darro. I am of the south."

"The—the world?"

"The world."

"But how do you come here?"

Darro explained, briefly. The blue eyes of the girl clouded. "Then the robots did get through to the surface after all," she whispered. "I—we—couldn't know, you see. 18366 was set to come back and report; but the cold must have reached its coils before it could return."

"Didn't you send some one out to investigate?" Darro demanded.

"Who could—we—send?" asked the girl. "That was many years ago, and it had taken many years to build the passageway so that by the time it was completed I—we—had almost forgotten about it. And there was nothing to do. If the robots succeeded in digging a tunnel to the outer world they would return; if not, I couldn't risk going alone."

Darro knitted his brows. "I don't understand," he muttered. "I don't know."

The girl smiled. “Of course you don’t—Darro. It’s simple. When I say ‘I’ I refer to myself, naturally. I am the only *moving* being left here in Subterra, now that the robots are gone. I could not leave alone to investigate the progress of the tunnel. When I say ‘we’ I am referring to the other living being that cannot *move;* the brains that I tend. But perhaps I had better explain as I show you.”

The blonde girl grasped Darro’s hand. Her fingers were cold, but they held him firmly as she led him away from the door. Darro’s eyes widened at the panorama of Subterra before him.

This was the great city under the ice. This was the gigantic realm of wisdom. This was the miracle of all legends.

This tiny little series of small rooms!

Darro saw his surroundings for the first time. He stood in an iron chamber with a high, plated ceiling embedded in the rock. A series of small apartment cubicles opened before him; their walls rising only a few feet higher than his head, so that he could see the rooms from the elevation at the doorway where he stood.

“Come along,” said the girl. Darro followed, disappointment gnawing at his heart. But there was mystery, too; and Darro listened as the girl spoke.

“I’LL be brief,” she said. “The details are recorded in the talking cylinders, and you can hear it all later; data, statistics, scientific information, everything. Subterra was once a great nation under another name, ruling above on outer earth. This you know from the legends. The war years forced all life underground, and even when wars had gone, people lived there. And then the ice came.

“The scientists had known, of course, and made certain plans. But the actual glacier was preceded by volcanic convulsion which destroyed the city; ruined the tunnels and subterranea already dug in preparation. Only a small band of nobles and scientists escaped to one of the pits. This was the cavern of Rann Sivo, the Creator.

“Rann Sivo was the man who invented the robots; the metal men. They were the result of his experiments with electricity, and were provided with electrically-actuated brains attuned to vocal command. Rann Sivo was a great and wise scientist; he had been among the leaders in the preparation of plans for moving underground and escaping the ice. He built this pit, lower than the rest, and reinforced the walls with iron. In fact, on the night of the quake, he and some of the leading nobles were performing a tour of inspection here. They thus escaped the fate of the others. Rann Sivo was trapped, with his handful of men, here below the surface of the earth.

“The ice came, covering all, and still Rann Sivo and his few companions survived on the stores of food-tablets. Rann Sivo’s vision of a great new underground city dwindled to this pitiful sham, here in a tiny alcove. But he did not despair. He worked. He built the robots; knowing some day that he would want them to dig a way out of the buried world. He set to work collecting all the wisdom he and the ethers could remember; all the history, the science recorded on talking-discs. They are now stored here, In this apartment.”

The golden girl led Darro into the first tiny chamber, pointing to the rolls of metal cylinders in racks along the walls. “There is a machine to play them,” she said. “Later, perhaps, you may wish to hear these things.” She withdrew, and Darro followed.

“You see, it was Rann Sivo’s dream, like your own, to some day bring wisdom back to a ruined world. But he was a man. And men are human. They die.”

The girl’s voice was harsh. Darro started at her tones of bitterness. “So Rann Sivo planned again. He was wise. Knowing that he was getting older, that others were getting older and the race would not endure, he began one of his greatest creations—the brain-tube.”

The girl led Darro into the second apartment. “The robots he never animated, storing them on the halls until the time the digging to the surface would begin. Now he concentrated on the brain-tubes.”

The girl indicated the tables in this second small room, and Darro saw that their surfaces were covered with shiny silver domes. Wires ran from the disc-studded sides of these silver containers.

"Into these tubes Rann Sivo planned to place the brains of the men as they died. A simple surgical operation, and then the living brain-tissue, preserved in a saline solution favorable to maintain existence, would be hooked up by means of electrical apparatus, to speaking-devices. Rann Sivo's science that had discovered the electrical basis of life in creating robots, also extended to the preservation of thought as electricity in human brains.

"And thus it was. As men died, their brains were transferred to these cylinders, to live forever, and electrically record their thoughts as speech when the proper wires were connected. Now Rann Sivo and his followers would, in a manner of speaking, live forever. When the time came they could instruct the robots to dig them out, return, and carry their living brains into the world beyond; there to be hooked up again and by vocal command instruct the robots to rebuild the shattered cities. A tremendous scheme; and this simple account will hardly satisfy you. Later you can hear the cylinders."

"You mean Rann Sivo and his followers are still alive?" Darro gasped.

"Of course. Their brains are in these tubes. I myself change the saline solution regularly and do whatever else is necessary."

"But then why not turn them on, let me hear the words of Rann Sivo himself?"

It must have been imagination, or else Darro did detect a look of furtive fear flickering across the girl's face.

"No, I never turn them on. It is—forbidden," she whispered. "Later, perhaps—now, let me finish."

She led him into the other apartments in turn. "This is where they lived, centuries ago."

"Centuries?"

"Of course. Rann Sivo was the last to die, and his brain was transformed into a cylinder fully eight—" The girl stopped abruptly, then rushed on. "But that's not important. This is: Rann Sivo had accomplished what he set out to do, but it was not enough. He dreamed of another triumph. He wanted to improve his robots so as to perpetuate the race he knew had been destroyed. He began to experiment with synthetic flesh preparations. His knowledge of the electro-biologic basis of chemical life served him well. He built machines, instruments, which are stored now in these other apartments. He had accomplished much when he died, the last of them all."

"But you?" said Darro. "Who are you, and how are you alive after so many years?"

The girl was silent. Then—"Soon you may know all," she said quietly. She continued.

"But Rann Sivo's plans had gone further. He had meant to keep his work going after death; energizing the robots and having them carry out his commands directed by his voice from the cylinder. Then the robots would create the synthetic race under his direction, and finally tunnel a way out of Subterra.

"But he had finished his first experiment when he died, and although the robots transformed his brain to a cylinder they could not work on. Because Rann Sivo would not give them the secret of fire."

THE girl sat down on a chair in the apartment and Darro followed suit.

"You may have noticed that there is no fire here. This sealed chamber has natural heat, fed through vents from the gaseous inner earth beneath, and it has a ventilating system the secret of which died with Rann Sivo. But no fire. Sivo used fire to make the robots and he needed fire to create the synthetic robot race, but he refuses to give up his secret from the brain-tube. So after his solitary experiment, no more synthetic humans were created.

"The robots began to dig the tunnel and their controls were affected by the cold so that they did not return. So there is no one to carry the brain-tubes or the cylinders of wisdom into the world.

"With the secret of fire I could build synthetic humans myself and form a new race; then we could go forth and with our hidden knowledge rebuild the world; fill it not with puny men that die, but with mechanical beings far more clever and beautiful than mere products of earthly flesh.

"That was my dream. But I could not leave here after the robots failed to return; I had to keep the brains alive, and the cylinders oiled. All that is changed now. You have come, and with that coming have brought the secret of fire once more. The machines will hum again, and soon we can go forth together. Heat will cause the robots to rise up from the passageway; they can be our army as we march back into the world with wisdom. Then we shall rule, and I can destroy the hateful brain of Rann Sivo and his friends' brains will be smashed, and only we two shall know and rule."

"We two . . .?" Barro's head spun. Who was this woman? What was she, with her strange story and her stranger dreams? There was something wrong here, something dangerous. He turned to question her, but the baleful beauty of her blue eyes held him in flaming bondage to her smile. "But why do you hate them?"

"I've talked too long," she whispered. "You're tired. Rest here. Tomorrow—strange, I have not used that word in years I—we shall plan."

Darro wanted to rise, to protest. But her eyes, her lips commanded. The golden glow of her beauty, blending with the blissful warmth of this chamber, impelled him toward impotent lethargy, toward the release of dreams. Darro let his head sink back. It was all so confusing. Tomorrow, rested, he could think, reason. Now, he wanted to sleep. His eyes closed as he felt the strangely cool hands of the girl restfully stroking his forehead.

DARRO awoke. How many hours had passed he did not know. Here in the cavern created by Rann Sivo there was no time. But Darro was rested, although somehow strangely nervous and tense. Something was wrong. He could feel it in the silence. Where was the girl?

That girl—she was stranger than everything else. Her fantastic story, her reticence concerning herself, her unnatural beauty, her wild plans. What weird mental outlook actuated her?

Why wouldn't she let him talk to Rann Sivo? Was it all a fraud?

Darro rose, searched for her. She wasn't in any of the apartments. Nor was she in the outer chamber. The gate of iron was closed. For some reason, instinctive panic was rising in Darro's heart.

He stepped down the hall between the cubicles. Impulsively he halted before the second one—the one housing the brain-cylinders, as the girl had called them. This was where Rann Sivo's brain rested; in the largest of the silver dome-things. Darro's eyes carefully inspected the wiring, the dials. Perhaps, if he were to tinker about a bit—

Cautiously he twisted and turned. For a moment nothing happened. Then Darro jumped. From a sounding-board in the wall above his head a strange, metallic voice crackled into the room.

"Greetings."

"Rann Sivo?"

"I can scarcely hear you. Turn up the auditory response."

Darro found the dial, twisted it. And then he spoke, asking questions and the voice from the tube answered. For ten minutes Darro lived in a world of horror. Then he heard the crash.

It came from overhead; from far overhead. It was a rumbling, a thundering, a cosmic clashing; the sound of moving mountains, of shifting continents.

"Earth tremors," came the passionless voice from the brain; the same passionless voice that had just spoken such unemotional words of horror. "Escape. But do as I have told you."

"Dagon's curse!" Darro cried. He turned, quickly, as the thundering increased.

“Turn me off,” commanded the voice from the cylinder, and Darro complied. He raced from the room, hands fumbling at his waist. Sure enough, his flint was gone. *She* had stolen it as he slept, just as the brain of Rann Sivo had hinted. And Rann Sivo had done more than hint of what *she* would do with fire. His revelations had filled Darro with a sort of sick horror which was now tremendously accelerated in its effect by the ominous quaking of the earth about him. Such a tremor, long ago, had walled the little band of scientists and nobles in this subterranean chasm. Now he would be trapped unless he hastened. And somewhere out in that corridor, *she* worked, with one of the machines Rann Sivo had spoken of, warming the robots, bringing them to life so they would march out—

Breathing a prayer, Darro tugged at the lever in the iron door. It groaned open, and he reeled forward into the fetid air of the long passageway. The *warm* air!

Out here, where it had been awful cold, it now was as sultry as Hell’s own chambers. Darro plunged down a long passage, running desperately. The rumblings shook the rock ceiling over his head. The place would topple at any moment!

Racing through the midnight madness without torch, Darro sprinted on. Horror gnawed his brain as he saw that his feet did not stumble over iron bodies. They were gone. She had raised them!

HE ran, breath surging in time to the rumbles from above. A crash like doom echoed in his ears from behind. He knew a section of the rock had fallen, crushed down by glacial pressure, to bury forever the secrets of Subterra.

Darro sobbed with aching lungs as he rounded the curve and ran relentlessly, driving his body forward. The rumbling increased. Soon the entire cavern would collapse. He must reach *her* in time.

The heat increased. He was near, now. Yes, there—

Ahead, marched the iron army of robots, filing with brazen tread through the rocky passage. Hundreds, row on row, metal faces set in grimaces of brassy dread. And before them, the golden body of the girl, bending over each robot as she passed, bathing their bodies in the flaming glow shot from a long tube she carried in her arms; a machine ignited by the flint she had stolen, which warmed the secret core of the robot bodies and brought them again to life. Sensitive, coiled inner springs reacted to heat and a constantly augmented robot army marched on into the world, with *her* at the head, *and that must not bet* Darro remembered the words of Rann Sivo, thundering in his brain as now the very walls about him thundered.

He plunged through the robot ranks, heedless of danger, of trampling feet and iron arms that swung. He struggled up, the girl not suspecting his approach. She was bending over the figures, bathing them in the flame from her instrument, and they rose like resurrected corpses. There was a smile on her face which no human should ever wear, and her eyes blazed with an unearthly triumph.

Straight ahead she stared, straight ahead her iron army marched, and then Darro saw that they were nearly out of the passage.

“Too late!” he gasped. “I’ll be too late!”

The gateway to the world loomed before them. Another moment and—

Darro reached her, as the ground quivered sickeningly beneath his flying feet.

“Stop!” he screamed hoarsely.

She faced him then, and the robots halted. On her face was a look of hideous dismay. It faded quickly, to be replaced by a crafty smile.

“Forward,” she commanded. “Take him.”

The ponderous surge, the metallic thudding of iron feet, moving over the rocks. They were coming, iron hands ready to crush and rend, and then over their thunder rose another thunder—a colossal, elemental throb that wrenched the earth in the throes of utter agony.

With a roar the walls caved down. The golden queen of the robots leaped toward Darro, bearing him back. They made the gateway, stood again in the cave beyond, safe in the upper world. But behind them the surging still sounded, and mountains of rock rained down to shatter the moving iron figures under tons of glacial debris.

Darro glanced down at her, panting with exhaustion.

She clung to him, the golden girl of his dreams. Her eyes were wide with fright, her lips parted with invitation. She was all woman, all female, now.

“Darro,” she whispered. “I’ve been an ambitious fool. I meant to trick you, to take the robots out into the world and rule with my wisdom. But you were stronger, wiser. I know that now. So I ask you merely to take me with you. You will be the master, I the slave. I can teach you many things, Darro; I know the wisdom and the secrets of Rann Sivo. Together we can go far.”

“You thought you knew me,” Darro breathed. “You remembered Dagon, the man whose hot curiosity proved, a curse to his people. You enchanted him with your beauty—and it took a thousand lives to right that mistake. It almost cost mankind its existence.”

Darro gazed tenderly down into the most beautiful face he had ever known. Tremblingly his hands caressed the cold throat, then suddenly they tightened.

She screamed then, just once, as Darro ruthlessly crushed her unearthly and beautiful body backward. There was a sharp snap, his hands clawed away strips of non-human tissue. He ripped once more and from beneath the mask of flesh projected a mass of tom wires and tiny cogwork.

Darro let the broken doll sag to the floor of the cave, and the shiny, twisted coils rolled outward.

“A robot,” he grated through clenched teeth, “just as Rann Sivo told me!”

Several hours later, the warrior Darro, great-grandson of Dagon, came back to the peaceful plain of his clan. His eyes shone as he thought of the story he would tell. There would be a new story told for generations, told to his children’s children—to the whole world, for the world was waking again.

The Ghost-Writer

A curious tale of two writers of weird fiction, and dark powers, and the fantastic doom that befell Steven Ayres

IT'S an old Chinese proverb that when two screwballs get together they usually click. This would explain the strange friendship of Luther Hawkins and Steven Ayres.

You may not know of Luther Hawkins, and you wouldn't want to meet him now because he's dead. Steven Ayres, at the moment, is equally undesirable, as an acquaintance. But I am sure that all readers of fantasy know both Hawkins and Ayres under their pseudonyms, for both have written weird fiction of considerable merit.

Hawkins produced the superior work, and many of his stories have been reprinted (under his pen-name, naturally) in anthologies of horror stories. Steven Ayres, the younger man, has done fair work in that line and recently wrote a surprising series of tales very much in the style of his late friend. As writers, both deserve recognition in their field.

But they were screwballs. Hawkins—and what a poor, drab name for a fantasy writer!—was an Edgar Wallace type, an E. Phillips Oppenheim character, a Sax Rohmer special. He took himself pretty seriously, Luther Hawkins did; Hawkins the South Dakota country bumpkin with his snaggle teeth and foolish mop of straw-colored hair. What strange force within him produced the bizarre tales and Wildean verse that made him famous? This man, with the background and physical aspect of a farmer, had something that made him strive for education, erudition; something that drove him to New York, drove him to a typewriter, drove him to the creation of a unique world of literary fantasy. He was an alien to his environment, and an alien to his very body; genius and bumpkin; Svengali in the body of a peasant clod; the Devil looking out of the eyes of Uncle Ezra.

Of course, I exaggerate. But Luther Hawkins exaggerated, too. He was, as I say, an Edgar Wallace character. Consciously, I mean. When he attained success, when his stories brought him a certain assured income and recognition, Hawkins began to live up to his reputation. He must have read *La Bas* and *Against the Grain,* then looked in the mirror. He was Luther Hawkins, horror-story writer. And he looked like Luther Hawkins, hog-raiser. His freckled hands, holding a copy of Ranft's *De Masticatione Mortuorum in Tumulis,* looked more fitted to grasp a copy of the Sears-Roebuck catalog. So Hawkins decided to do something about it.

He bought a dress suit. Hawkins, country gawk, in tails. He moved into a "bachelor apartment" and fitted it up in pre-Beardsley style; black velvet drapes, concealed lights, bronze figurines of Horns and Set and Typhon, Japanese incense-burners—the whole works. Looked like a 1925 movie-set for one of Lew Cody's seduction scenes. But to Hawkins this was glamor, mystery.

I never met the man, understand. But I've heard he took to wearing a long black coat, scowling like Boris Karloff with a sour stomach, and stalking about as though filled with the lead of melancholy. One mutual friend assures me that toward the last Hawkins adopted a lisp a la Peter Lorre, but I think he's joking. Be as it may, Luther Hawkins became a *poseur,* a melodrama character labeled "horror-writer."

He wasn't a fool, by any means. When he got money he bought books; rare old treatises on demonolatry I'd give my eyeteeth to own. He studied, too, under real masters—occultists and divinators of international repute in cult circles. There are some left, you know; direct descendants of

Appolonius, not commercial charlatans but serious students of the Black Arts.

There is talk that toward the end Hawkins had traffic with Satanism and actual Black Mass ritualism. They say that in certain secret places in the heart of modern cities there still persists a survival of the infamous worship to Lucifer. Whether or not this is true, and whether Hawkins actually participated in the blasphemous ceremonies reputed to occur,! cannot say. But I know this—he was a sincere student of and believer in sorcery, and he might have stumbled across some queer things. Underneath the farmer, and underneath the poseur, too, there was a stranger; a dark stranger who said nothing, but who wrote ghastly compelling stories of monstrous worlds and monstrous beings; a stranger who spoke in a tongue of flame, whose words crawled across a page into your soul with hideous, frightening sincerity.

SO MUCH for the enigma that was Luther Hawkins. Read his stories and perhaps you will understand what I seem unable to explain.

Explaining Steven Ayres is another matter. I can give you Steven Ayres in one word—leech.

Steven Ayres was a parasite in the intestines of literature. He was a wanter, a hoper, a farmer. He wrote me long, incoherent letters describing longer, more incoherent stories he desired me to "criticize." His definition of "criticize" seemed to be a combination of praising his abominable hack-jobs and then completely rewriting them for him. I have met nothing but interesting people through correspondence as a writer, but Steven Ayres popped up as the one sour note. For quite a while I was tolerant of him and his absurd demands, but patience fled. One day I woke up with a headache and four rejection slips and answered his last letter, inclosing his most miserable effort and advising him to file the manuscript in a fantastic manner. And that was apparently that.

But Luther Hawkins didn't think so. Ayres must have got tired of pestering us small fry and decided to try one of the king-pins of the game.

He wrote to Luther Hawkins, much as he had written to me, I suppose. He "admired" Hawkins' work. He was a "fan" of Hawkins. Incidentally, he was a "writer himself" but had never "actually sold anything yet." And so forth, *ad nauseam.*

Hawkins fell. Steven Ayres was clever—he quickly learned the hobbies, the interests of his victims; cultivated their mannerisms in writing, and professed a great enthusiasm for the subjects venerated by them. Ayres must have poured out a great stream of canal-juice anent his own "deep interest in the occult" and run off to the public library to study up on demonology and witchcraft so as to quote bits in his letters. At any rate, he clicked with Hawkins. They became regular correspondents. Hawkins read the rancid manuscripts—he was a kindly, generous man—and criticized them. Hawkins rewrote for Ayres. He gave advice, help; and what was more important, put in a good word with the editors. Ayres must have chafed under the frank dissection of his eminent friend, but after a time he knuckled down. Within a year, Steven Ayres blossomed forth on the printed page under a gaudy pen-name. He sold, regularly. He was an *author.*

Well, you know how it is with a bluffer. Call his bluff, and nine times out of ten he'll work his head off to make it good, rather than admit defeat. It was that way with Ayres. He started to sell horror stories; so he actually began to take an interest in supernatural lore. He studied thaumaturgy, learned references. He went so far as to make an attempt at learning to write, also. It was hard sledding at first, I imagine, but he progressed. Another year and Steven Ayres was really turning out some fairly competent yarns. They read well, their structure was sound, and their factual basis in actual occultism was authentic.

But you know how it is with bluffers after they make good their bluff. As the great poet George S. Kaufman has it, "Confidentially—they stink." Well, that was Steven Ayres, I'm afraid. Where Hawkins had turned into an actual mystic as the result of success, Ayres became a big shot. His head became inflated with the hydro-cephalism of success. Now *he* gave “advice” to young writers. *He* was an “authority on witchcraft.” And *he* was—in his own eyes—writing just as well as his teacher, Luther Hawkins.

I WATCHED the whole thing, remember. News flies fast in the little clique of fantasy-writers. I was still corresponding with Hawkins myself. I got the dope. After some time, Ayres began to get up additional steam. Now he was not only the equal of Hawkins—he was superior! He took to criticizing Hawkins’ work in recent months, pointing out, with illustrations from his own stuff, just where the pupil excelled the master. He said Hawkins was “old hat” and went so far as to ridicule the older man’s eccentric habits of living.

“You’re a pretentious fake . . . your so-called studio is nothing but circus ring for Greenwich Village clowns . . . throw away your black cloak, it tangles your arms when you try to write . . . the Black Mass is nothing but another name for a dark cloud over your brain . . . selling your soul to the Devil went out of style with the late Doc Faustus.”

Steven Ayres was clever enough with his indictments. I couldn’t help but marvel when I read them—marvel, and wish to Heaven I could smash his teeth in.

Hawkins couldn’t take it either. I guess he didn’t mind having his own work criticized, even by such a fool, but he could not stand to have his serious interest in magic questioned. Underneath the cloak and the scowl he was sincere. I know that, only too well. Luther Hawkins, through study and research, had come to believe in certain things; what things I’d rather not say, but he believed enough to make him rage against those pitiful ignoramuses that scoffed at Powers they could not even dream of, let alone understand.

So Hawkins told Ayres off, quietly and efficiently, and finally. No, he didn’t put a curse on him. He didn’t threaten Ayres with supernatural visitors of vengeance. He didn’t slit his throat and then come crawling around Ayres’ door with blood dripping over the carpet. He sent no little green men down young Steven's chimney. He just quit. Quit writing, quit criticizing, quit helping. Didn't even exactly tell Ayres to go to the devil—because Hawkins entertained a certain affectionate respect for the Devil.

What he *did* do, however, was very subtle. Hawkins sat down and wrote an article for a writer's magazine. It was a short article, not very profound, in which he narrated an author's experience in dealing with a "fan." The "fan" was Steven Ayres, and the whole story was quite simply told, with a killing, ironic humor. It was sarcastic, biting, and unmistakable. Everyone in the game recognized the "fan" immediately, and the editors caught the inference at once. Steven Ayres sold no more stories. He got no more "fan letters," no more praise. He was *out*—simply out on his asinine ear.

So much for that. A simple incident, perhaps a meaningless one. A squabble between writers, of no interest to anyone save other writers. A little "trade" story, without much point or punch. But the story doesn't end here. It begins.

For Luther Hawkins died. Just like that. I heard from him on a Tuesday. Thursday morning he was dead. Heart attack. Found in his exotic room, lying on the floor. No devilish hoof-marks on his face, no blue hand-prints of some monstrous ape on his neck, not even a Dacoit dagger in his back. Heart attack. Simple, elderly businessman's heart attack. Luther Hawkins, fantasy writer and student of the Mysteries, dead.

And Steven Ayres came to town. Yes, to my town, to live. Not two weeks later he came, and called me at once.

I still wanted so much to smack him—smack him hard. But I was quite upset over Hawkins' death, quite soothed, therefore by Ayres' abject moans of apology, his agonized and apparently sincere wails and self-accusations. I relented, invited him up, talked to him.

STEVEN AYRES was a wreck. Something had burrowed under that rat-fur of his, burrowed under and touched whatever excuse for a heart he possessed. His tardy conscience now stung him with fury.

He was broken up by the death of his former benefactor; truly repentant for his scurviness. No question of sincerity; he sat bawling on my sofa for an hour.

"I thought Luther hated me," he finally got out. "I wasn't sorry to see him die. But—but he—sent me his—effects. His—typewriter."

"What?"

"Yes—his own typewriter—and a note."

"You mean he knew that he was going to——?" I began. But Steven Ayres fumbled in his coat-pocket and handed me a crumpled sheet. I read.

"Dear Steven:

"I see it now. That which you have always scoffed at has told me. Before I submit to that which must be, then, let me act My typewriter I send to you as most fittingly symbolic of our past friendship. If my work did not always please you, perhaps your work on the same instrument may prove more suitable. Be as it may, the gesture pleases me, and may it forever serve as a reminder of what has passed between us.

"We have gone through a great deal together—this simple old box and I. It is almost as though I were relinquishing a part of myself. Indeed, it is with that feeling that I proffer this to you. Use it well, as you have used me.

"Farewell.

"LUTHER HAWKINS."

I am ashamed to admit it, but I smiled. It was Luther's touch all over. The grave melodrama. "That which you have always scoffed at has told me. Before I submit to that which must be," and so forth. The melodrama, so carefully cut from his stories, bubbled over into his personal correspondence. This letter was typical. A final gift. A forgiveness, with still a hint of sardonic malice—"Use it well, as you have used me." Luther's touch, indeed.

It had upset Ayres, though, terribly. His ingratitude had been so intense, and yet Hawkins had turned the other cheek. Asked him to "carry on," selected him as recipient of his most cherished possession. Ayres could say nothing. He just bawled.

"Shut up," I said, kindly. It *is* kindness, when addressing an incipient hysteric.

I pulled Steven Ayres to his feet and put my hands on his shoulders in that "man-to-man" gesture one unconsciously borrows from the movies. "Now listen to me. I know how you feel, but my advice is to pull yourself together. Luther's dead. You're alive. Instead of yammering about how sorry you are, the best thing for you to do is to make some practical amends."

"How?"

"You've got his typewriter. How about using that—using it properly, to write good stories with; stories that will be a credit to Hawkins' teaching, to his memory? Use it to write with, man—not to scribble out cheap criticisms of your betters, or mawkish juvenile thrillers. Get to work."

Ayres' dark face twisted into an odd smile as he shook off the grimace of sorrow. He faced me, his lean body still listless, but with life in his gray eyes.

"Yes," he said softly. "That would be the way. I—thanks for saying that. I appreciate it. And I'll do it, too."

"Let me know how you get along," I said, pushing Ayres toward the door. He nodded. I watched him exit, then heaved a profound sigh of relief. "Scenes" always embarrass me, and this "Go and sin no more" role I'd just played is not my forte. I sat down and lit a cigarette, but it didn't give me a lift.

Why the devil had Hawkins given Ayres his typewriter? And how did he know he was going to die? Had that yokel with the soul of a sorcerer really foreseen the end? Did he really possess the key to certain secret Powers he constantly referred to in his tales? Perhaps. Luther Hawkins was an amazing man, a complex personality indeed. I fancied there was just a hint of mockery in his gift to Ayres. Instead of breaking his weapon he chose to hurl it contemptuously at an armless man. That typewriter in his hands had been an instrument of strange magic—for after all, it *is* magic, this creation of words, particularly such dream-words as Hawkins conjured up. Was it Cabell who compared writing to wizardry? Hawkins, whether he had occult powers or not, was a wizard with his typewriter. He chose to offer it, sardonically, to a hack; an ironic gesture, just as a voodoo hag might give one of her little wax dolls of death to a child, who would innocently play with it and never understand its horrid powers.

SO I mused, smoking. I was pretty smart that day—pretty much the amateur philosopher, the armchair Spinoza. Three months later I had to eat my words, and they were bitter indeed.

Steven Ayres had done the impossible. He began writing again, selling again. He couldn't help but sell what he wrote. What *writing!* The first yarn appeared, and I read it. I didn't admit anything, even to myself. But the next month brought another tale, and yet another. I couldn't deny it any longer. Steven Ayres had turned into a master.

He came up to the house shortly after the appearance of the third story. I greeted him with sincere pleasure, though I own to being a bit shocked by his haggardness. He was no longer lean; he was ascetic. His long arms hung not listlessly but leadenly. His bright eyes were now *too* bright. Three things can do that—drugs, fear, or intensive creative effort. I chose to suspect the latter.

"Great job, Steven," I commented. "That last one especially."

Ayres smiled.

"Six more in the office right now, and they're better still."

"Same old Ayres, always the shrinking violet in fantasy's garden."

I chose to insert my rapier. My cutlass, rather; I'm not very subtle.

"You look as though you've been working hard," I said. "But then it must be difficult, copying Hawkins' style."

"What's that?"

"Don't snarl at me, I'm no rejection slip."

"What do you mean, I'm 'copying Hawkins' style' ?"

"Well—aren't you? Using his mythology, his theories—yes, and his word-choice, his sentence-structure and rhythm patterns. I've read the technical books, my friend, and I've read Hawkins too. You're writing Hawkins stories now; though I must admit you're doing an excellent job. These stories sound—oh, I'll admit it—even better than his usual product."

Now that's a fair speech. No undue bitterness. A little plain fact, but no threats about it, no intimidation. And I wasn't scowling when I said it; I didn't bare my fangs like a menacing bull ape. But there must have been *something* frightening.

Steven Ayres began to tremble. Tremble all over. I've never seen that before. His thin hands, his *wrists* shook. His face twitched and he swallowed rapidly.

"You dare to say that?"

"Why not? True, isn't it?"

Steven Ayres suddenly began to bawl again. It was getting monotonous for me, this blubber-fest. I told him so.

"You don't understand. I've been getting letters; from the editors, from the fans. And you—you who knew Hawkins so well—you say the same thing. That they're his stories. His!"

"I say you copy his style, that's all."

"All? I sit at his typewriter and write my tales, and it comes out *wrong.* Don't you understand? It comes out *wrong.* I think of what I'm going to say, and it writes itself differently. Writes itself as he wrote."

This time I didn't ask him to shut up.

I shut up myself instead. His too-bright eyes stared at me.

"I swear to you, I'm not responsible. It's not me that's writing—it's the machine. Hawkins' machine! It writes the stories, I tell you. I tried to hide it from myself, even when the letters began to come in. But now, what you say—oh, what a fool I was? Why did I ever accept the damned thing? Luther must have known when he sent it; he never forgave me at all. His note didn't exactly say so, remember? He gave me that machine out of pure revenge. He *wanted* me to have it, to be haunted by his ghost, his personality. And it's driving me mad."

"It's driving me mad," I mimicked. "Like a stooge in a horror mystery, I suppose. Now listen to reason, Ayres. First, Hawkins isn't a ghost. His typewriter isn't a ghost-typewriter either. It seems to me you're suffering from the symptoms of an ordinary guilt-complex. You wronged Hawkins. Your guilty conscience was profoundly stirred by his unexpected gift. His foolish babblings about expecting death upset you. Now, subconsciously, whenever you sit down at that typewriter it all springs back to your mind. Your subconscious directs you to atone, to recompense. Therefore you unconsciously strive to duplicate his writing, his style. Now perhaps Hawkins *did* dislike you. I wouldn't blame him for that. Perhaps he was an astute enough psychologist to figure out your reactions in just this way. He might have wanted this to happen. But still, it needn't upset you. You're doing good work, great work. As long as you keep it up, your stories will sell. You'll make money. Be grateful to Luther Hawkins, Ayres, grateful for his gift or his revenge. It will be the making of you."

"But I'm afraid. I sit down every day with a ghost—a ghost that guides my fingers. I tell you I can almost *feel* his hands moving over the keys! When I write it's like a dream. Afterward I read, and can't remember putting the words down. I know the stuff is good, so I submit it and it sells. But it's not me, it's Hawkins who does the work."

I began to snort, but Ayres rushed on.

"It's driving me crazy, particularly when I begin to think about it. Hawkins was a strange man—you know that. He was a small-town boy by birth—but Salem was a small town also and witches were born there. Fie was an ordinary-looking farmer—but the Devil walks clothed in strange flesh. He was a vulgar enough poseur—but underneath was the man, or the entity, or tire *thing* that wrote those damnably drilling stories of his. Yes, the *thing,* I call it; the *thing* that urged him into studying demonology. Fie pried into strange cults at the last, and he might have learned queer secrets. Your psycho-analysis might work in here, considering Hawkins. He was a dual personality; one, a country boy trying to live in character with his success as a weird writer. As such he was grotesque, a down. But the other, the *thing* inside him! The other, that wrote his stories, expressed itself by delving into dark mysteries—that was a part of Luther Hawkins we'll never know. It was that part which governed him when he sent me his typewriter. His typewriter! When he wrote, he was that other self. The hands of that other self clawed at the keys. The thoughts of that other self poured out from beyond wild gulfs of imagination. The typewriter has an *aura;* it is permeated with alien personality. It has—a soul."

"You have—a bellyache," I retorted, inelegantly. "You certainly can't believe that!"

"I do." Ayres was on his feet now. "And I *know* more. Oh, much more! Hawkins was a wizard, at least he knew secrets we would call sorcerous. He knew he was going to die, and so he sent me the typewriter out of hate. He must have *done*

something to it, too. Did you know how he was found dead? Not on the floor—but *over* the machine. His last breath, going into the keys—and in the platen *the note he sent me,* the last thing he ever wrote! Don't you see what I'm trying to tell you, man? Don't you understand? Luther Hawkins is dead, *but his soul is in the typewriter!"*

THAT sounded so funny to me I wanted to laugh out loud. The grotesqueness of the phrase was killing. I thought "John Brown's body lies a-moldering in the grave but his soul goes marching on." It was very, very funny. Only Steven Ayres wasn't funny. When he yelled the last words he toppled over in a faint, and it took me five minutes to bring him to—five minutes, and the rest of my precious brandy. During those five minutes I had a little time to think, and my thoughts weren't pretty.

I had just played the amateur Freud with the problem this time, and I hadn't been right. Suppose Ayres was right? After all, there *are* strange things in this world, unexplained mysteries. Catalepsy, telepathy, and the peculiar trances, obsessions, lycanthropies, and unnamed dreads of recognized psychopathology. “Witchcraft” in 1600, but scientific fact today. Hypnotism, and all the rest, leading to a realm of hidden, unguessed-of mental powers. Suppose Hawkins *had* infused his personality into the typewriter that represented so great a part of it?—just before he died; a strong final wish entering that which was as much a part of himself when he wrote as his very hands. Surely Ayres believed, and he was afraid. But of what? Why should he be so sure that Hawkins hated him strongly enough to do this? Why did he worry so? There was more here than met the eye, or my ears.

I thought a lot, and worried too until I brought Ayres around. When he sat up, both of us were quieter.

“Listen, Steven. You’re a little shaky. Better let me take you home.”

“Yes. . . . No. No! Don’t come! I’m all right—please——”

But I had him out the door, into the car. He mumbled at my side, weakly protesting, but I persisted. We pulled up, I helped him out, went into the hall with him.

And then it started. I heard it. Steven lived on the second floor. But I heard it, coming through the wall from upstairs. The click-click-clicking of a typewriter.

Click-click-click. Keys moving down. Ting! The bell. The slide of a carriage-lever. Click-click-click.

Steven heard it, too. He began to moan.

“Yes, yes, yes! I warned you, tried to keep you away. Now you know why I’m afraid. Why I think as I do. That’s my typewriter—you hear it, don’t you? That’s Luther Hawkins’ typewriter. And you know now that I’m not afraid I’m mad; I’m afraid I’m *sane!* Sane, and yet hearing that, knowing that.”

I was halfway up the steps by now, and Steven found the energy of horror to race at my heels, still babbling.

“See? Understand? I said Luther writes my stories. But I didn’t want to tell all. *I* don’t write at all. Don’t even sit down at the thing. I put in the paper—you know I use rolls of bond instead of single sheets—and the machine *starts.* It starts! I've sat there and watched it, seen the keys going down, the carriage returned, the space-bar pressed, without human hands touching it. And when it stops, there's a finished story. Luther's story, on Luther's typewriter, typed by his own dead hands!"

He nearly passed out again. I got his keys, opened the door. I was dazed, but not too dazed to make for the sitting-room; not too dazed to mistake the direction of those sounds that should not be.

I dashed in, Ayres at my side.

And there it was. On the table. Luther Hawkins' typewriter, clicking madly, clicking insanely, clicking in my head. Little clicks of horror clicking in my head; little bells ringing as lines were ended.

"Months now," Ayres whispered. "Months. I'm afraid to throw it away, or smash it, for fear he'll send something *worse.* I know this isn't all he planned—he must have known from the first, and devised some devilish scheme of which tills is a part. But I dare not interfere. I've tried everything, everything."

His voice rose above the typing in that lonely room. It wasn't so ghastly, somehow, after watching it awhile. A mechanical device, working the keys automatically; that was all. My eyes searched for a wire, a connection—there was none, and I was a fool to even suspect it.' Ayres was frightened, and for a moment I'd felt the same way. But now was the time for sanity.

"You've tried—what?"

"Oh, many things. I put in the first roll of paper; you know they come in thirty-foot lengths. The machine started before I sat down, that first time. I didn't believe, until I saw the story pour out. *His story.* Back-spaced over errors. Lines crossed out, as in his manuscripts. Stopped about a foot from the end of the roll, because the story was ended. I took it out, cut it, read it. I put in another roll, to keep from going berserk, I guess; then sat down to type myself. The keys don't work. Hear me? When I type, the keys don't work! I've never typed a line on that machine, I swear it!"

Click-click-click went the ghost typewriter, there in that room, clicking above Ayres' words in horrid mockery.

"So I experimented. I put in another roll. Another story, a shorter one. The machine didn't type when no paper was in it—I wanted to leave it out permanently but I didn't dare, any more than I dared destroy the machine. Because if he could do that to me he could do worse if I interfered. You understand?"

Click-click-click. Yes, I understood. And shuddered.

"Once I tried to stuff up the carriage. It didn't work. I tried to tangle the keys. They can't be budged. Several times I inserted ordinary sheets of typing-paper. The clicking started, but stopped at the bottom of the page. The machine is *intelligent.* At other times I put in fresh rolls and nothing happened; nothing at first, that is. The machine wasn't *ready* to write. It was —thinking! Then, perhaps in the middle of the night, I'd wake up and hear it. Hear the machine clicking in the darkness, ghost hands writing in the darkness that was deeper than the night. Writing from what strange gulfs? In what black pits coils the mind that pens these tales? Stories written from the grave, thoughts from a brain already rotting under the worms!"

Click-click-click. I couldn't stand it. I went over to the table. Halfway through the roll the machine typed on, and I read three sentences just as they poured out. Luther Hawkins' sentences. His style, his word-choice. I passed my hand across the keys. They did not move. I felt nothing guiding them. The typing went on, and I stared stupidly at the label of a standard model L. C. Smith machine. No ghost-built instrument of human bones, but Luther Hawkins' old typewriter. On the side I read the date, seal, and serial number of the machine. It clicked on.

YOU see what I mean? A sunny room, an ordinary typewriter on an ordinary table, writing words of horror without human hands to guide it. Each dick *hurt* my brain. Ayres just stared glassy-eyed at me.

I began to whisper without knowing it. “But why? Why? Why should Hawkins hate you so, torment you? What purpose would he have, if in some strange manner he guessed he was about to die, in cursing you this way? What can he hope to gain by animating his typewriter with his spirit and doing this? Why, Ayres?”

“There’s a reason!” It was almost a scream. “I daren’t tell, but there’s a reason. He knew he was going to die, and how. I haven’t told you just how bitterly we’d quareled before the end, either. He had reason to hate me, and then he learned about his death. He had a reason, believe me—and I don’t know what he means to do, but you must stop him, for the love of God, stop him——”

The typewriter stopped. My eyes were on it. In higher-case letters at the end of the last line it wrote,

FINIS

just as Hawkins always wrote. There was perhaps six feet of paper left in the machine. Automatically I jerked it out—jerked out the story. I don’t know why. I was a little crazy, I guess, what with Ayres screaming at me, and my own brain screaming back. I only know that I put a fresh sheet of ordinary white paper in the typewriter for no reason at all. Just to see what would happen, I suppose. Then I turned back to Ayres, my mind on his last words.

“What’s the reason, Ayres? Why did he hate you *this* much? What did you do to Luther Hawkins that makes you so afraid?”

Ayres was white as the sheet of paper I’d just inserted in the typewriter. His ryes were black as carbon. His teeth shone like the keys.

“I’ll tell you! I stole two of his stories—first copies he sent me to read when we were friends. I stole them, and he threatened to expose me. And he threatened me with more; crazy threats of his powers. He told me part of what he had learned of demonology, and I was afraid. So I—I—oh, no!”

Oh yes. The typewriter was clicking again. The bar was going up and down, the keys were clicking. It cut short Ayres' words. It tore my eyes down. And I read—*this*:

"Dear Bloch:"

Yes, my name! My name, printed by a typewriter that moved without the guidance of human fingers. Moved on.

"Dear Bloch:

"What Ayres is trying to tell you is quite simple. He killed me. That should explain everything.

"The young fool was afraid of me, and resorted to a very simple trick; one I should have suspected, knowing his talent for cheap melodrama. He sent me a poisoned letter. Very simple, as I say; I opened it, pricked my finger, and died. A childish stratagem that went out with the Borgias—only a fool like Ayres would be mad enough to conceive of such a scheme. His morbid hatred of me must have warped his judgment; it was droll, though, that the absurd plan succeeded. But not utterly.

"I have powers. *Had* powers, rather, since I no longer exist. By divination I was able to foretell my approaching death, and the agent causing it—though under the Wizard's Law I could not see the exact method of death and thus defeat it. All I knew was that I must die and Ayres would kill me in some way.

"So I planned this. Sent my typewriter, after doing that which was needful, to Ayres. He would not dare destroy it after what I chose to tell him. I meant him to keep it until it drove him mad. But you are here now, and I know a better way.

"This note which I now write will expose him as the murderer he is. Ask him about the letter of November 19th, which is still locked in my desk. Wire the New York police to produce it—the tiny sliver of poisoned wood lodged in the envelope is still visible. Hold Ayres for the police; don't divulge the source of your information.

“And so, my friend, the task is ended. Do not question my powers; but remember that there *are* dark Mysteries beyond life, and one bold enough to pay the price may direct the linger of Destiny—even direct it to press down typewriter keys,

“Yours,

“LUTHER HAWKINS.”

I write from memory—memory in which those words are burned. The searing horror of that final clicking which wrote the signature of the dead man almost paralyzed my senses. I hadn’t realized that Ayres was standing before me, gazing with insane eyes at the accusing words as they clicked out in that ghostly rhythm of revenge.

But now Ayres screamed. His hands went down, raking the paper from the machine, tearing it out as lie shrieked aloud at the top of his voice.

“Yes, yes, it’s true—I did it—but you can’t cheat me, Hawkins—you can’t——”

He tore the paper, his maniac hands gripping the typewriter as he raised it in his arms to dash the accursed tiling to the floor.

Then Steven Ayres fell.

No, I’ll be truthful. He didn’t fall. The typewriter pushed him. He held it in his arms, and it *crushed,* down. He crumpled to the floor beneath its pressure, the typewriter crashing into his chest, and Steven Ayres stopped screaming, and the base of the machine was stained red.

There was a tiny bit of paper left dangling in the machine. Now, resting on the body forever still, the clicking began again. Faintly, but surely, one last line. And then a final crash. The machine bounced up and splintered. *Exploded.* Keys, tabs, inner mechanism flew all over the room in tangled bits of what had once been the typewriter of Luther Hawkins.

I picked up the little scrap of paper before I ran out—picked it up and read the final epitaph:

“Here Lies the Body of Steven Ayres—*and the Soul of Luther Hawkins.”*

From now on, I’m writing all *my* stories with a fountain pen.

Master of Silver Giants

When Professor Scorpo Begins His Weird Experiments Jim end Vicky Are Drawn Into a Ghastly Whirlpool of Terror!

CHAPTER I

The Brain-Ghoul

I KISSED Vicky gently.

"Damn you!" she said.

I kissed her again.

"Yes, you and Uncle Jeff, too!" she added. Then her heart-shaped face clouded, and long lashes fell over her troubled eyes. "Oh, Jimmy! If only Uncle Jeff hadn't died, if only he'd left his money to the Old Folk's Home or a dog hospital, or even a flea circus! But he had to leave it to me, and—"

"I'm not going to marry anyone for her money," I finished, grinning. "Sorry, Vicky, but that's the way I feel. I've been sweating for a raise these past three years so that I could support you. Finally it comes through, and my fifty a week turns out to be cigarette money to a girl who's worth half a million."

Both of us stopped smiling.

"You understand that, don't you?" I said. "It's not just false pride, Vicky. Working for you, for us, meant something to me. And I can't fall back on your money now; it takes all the meaning out of our being together."

Vicky pouted. “Meaning? Oh, there is no meaning in anything any more. A month ago you and I were engaged, planning our wedding. Uncle Jeff was alive and well. Then that horrid accident, and Professor Scorpo coming and taking away Uncle Jefrs—oh, I can’t stand thinking about that!” She shuddered closer in my arms.

“You’ll have to think about that,” I said gravely. “I’ve been doing a lot of thinking, and I still believe there’s funny business somewhere.”

“He had the papers,” Vicky answered.

“Yes, I know. But it doesn’t match up,” I mused. “Consider the facts again. Your uncle gets a phone call at midnight a month ago. Right?”

Vicky nodded.

“He rushes out, wildly excited, telling you something about just talking to Arnold Stem. Right?”

Again Vicky nodded.

“But Arnold Stem has been dead for six months. He was your uncle’s business associate. He’d been dead for six months. Right?”

THIS time Vicky just trembled.

“That’s screwy enough for me. Your uncle gets in his car, drives off, and plunges over the cliff on Beach Road. The car burnt, your uncle’s body is practically unrecognizable, except for the rings and the clothing. You inherit the money. And then this Professor Scorpo goes down to the morgue with this paper bearing your uncle’s signature—an agreement willing your uncle’s brain to Scorpo for ‘experimental purposes.’ He takes it away, refuses to explain, and disappears.”

“I don’t want to talk about it,” Vicky pleaded.

“Sorry, dear. I must. I’ve got a hunch. Just who and what is this man Scorpo?”

“I—I don’t know. He used to work at the plant with Uncle Jeff. He was an industrial chemist. Then he retired. He used to visit with Uncle Jeff and with Arnold Stem, and I guess Uncle Jeff signed that paper as some sort of joke. He never told me why."

"Well, it doesn't make sense," I argued. "You know I've been suspicious about the whole affair. Today I stumbled on something that makes the whole thing smell. Your uncle spoke of talking to Arnold Stem on the phone that night, yet Stem had died five months before."

"But my uncle was—upset," Vicky faltered. "He must have been confused, worried. The coroner's jury said—"

"That your uncle was mad. Oh, they didn't put it so bluntly, but that's what they hinted. Business worries, hallucinations. I thought so, too, until today. I began to investigate the past of Arnold Stern. He died in an explosion at the plant, you know."

"Yes, I know."

"But do you know what he'd done before he died?" I asked softly. "He'd signed a paper leaving his brain to Professor Scorpo. And after the explosion Scorpo went to the morgue and claimed his legacy."

"Jimmy!"

"It's true. I hate to upset you like this, Vicky, but don't you see? Once a reporter, always a reporter. I knew something was wrong, somewhere. I'm going to go to this man Scorpo. if I can trace him, and demand a showdown. On that night last month when your Uncle Jeff was phoned by the dead voice of Arnold Stem—"

The phone rang. Its eery tinkle cut across my words. Night, and a ringing phone—the same phone that had rung for Uncle Jeff. I rose, walked to the hall, while Vicky crouched in the shadows of the sofa behind me. I picked up the receiver with a none too steady hand and cleared my throat. "Hello?"

It was no dead man's whisper that reached my ears. "Clayburn?" snapped the voice. "Thought I knew where to find you on your night off."

"What's up, Chief?" I asked.

"It isn't your night off any more, Clayburn. There's been a blazes of a fire over at Jacob Trent's place—you know where it is, about a mile down from you. Hop down right away and cover. We’re standing by on the morning edition.”

“Right.”

I HUNG up, turned and explained.

“Take me with you,” Vicky pleaded. “Don’t leave me here alone, Jimmy.” There was honest entreaty in her eyes.

“Come on,” I snapped. We swung out of the room, down the hall, out the moonlit walk, into the drive. My jaloppy was parked half-way up on the gravel. I led the way, Vicky clinging to my arm.

“Jimmy!”

Her scream cut the still, dark air; her hand yanked my shoulder, spun me half-way around.

“Look—over there!”

Trick of moonlight, trick of madness—call it what you will. I saw it there, crouched by the side of the car, heard the glass tinkle as its arm extended through the window, heard that monstrous crunching on gravel.

It was a man. But men are not eight feet tall. Men do not have arms and legs of hammered silver. Men do not have metal bodies. Men do not have faces set in a grinning snarl of steel. The ghastly visage that was raised to mine in the moonlight was not human, not animal, not anything known to sanity. I stared into a silver skull, and as I stared the great figure rose and lumbered stiffly away. I raced after it, but the thing moved swiftly despite its jerky gait, and crashed into the shrubbery.

“Come on, Vicky, we’ll go after it in the car,” I shouted. I turned. Vicky swayed against the hood, her eyes pools of fear.

“The—the car,” she murmured.

I turned. The front window glass had been shattered. Peering in, I saw the smashed panels of the dashboard. An iron arm could break the glass, an iron fist could hammer the dashboard.

“What was it?” Vicky breathed.

"A man in armor." I hazarded. "Probably some drunk from a masquerade." Even drunks feeling high aren't eight feet tall, and the thing had not worn armor, but I didn't tell Vicky that. "We'll have to use your car," I said. "Come on, there's a fire to cover. We'll attend to this other business later."

It must have been an hour before we stood in ashes, the grim ruins of what had once been Jacob Trent's home but which was now his tomb.

"You're too late," Sergeant Brady greeted me. "It's all over."

"What's all over?" I asked.

"Trent's body," said Brady. "Pardon me, Miss. But it's the truth I'm telling you. When we found him he was burned to a crisp. The place went up all at once; must have been like an oven."

"How'd it start, Sergeant?"

"I dunno, me lad. Have to wait for the investigators' reports. Guess he was asphyxiated or something. He was all alone, the butler was out. He must save fallen asleep in the library and the place went up in smoke." Brady was voluble. "The safe was melted down. We got the will, though."

AT this I frowned thoughtfully. "Where's—the body?" I asked.

"You're too late for that, too, me lad. It's down at the morgue, and a fellow has already showed up right away with a certificate."

"Certificate?"

"Yeah, a paper Trent made out to him, leaving him his brain when he croak—pardon, Miss, when he died."

"What was his name?" I snapped.

"Professor Scorpo, he called himself," answered the Sergeant. "How he heard about it so quick, and what the divvil he wants with the poor cooked brain of Jacob Trent—"

"Scorpo!" It was Vicky who gasped the name.

"Come on," I said, pulling her away. "I've got all I want. I'll phone it in and call it a day."

But Vicky wasn't to be dissuaded. "What does it mean?" she persisted. "First Arnold Stern, then Uncle Jeff, and now Jacob Trent. All leaving their brains to Professor Scorpo, all dying—why, it's murder!"

We climbed into Vicky's car and started down the road. I turned to Vicky with a reassuring smile.

"Not so fast," I said. "It's too pat for murder. Scorpo can't be a killer. What reason would he have for killing Stern, who left his money to his sister, or your Uncle Jeff, who left his money to you, or Trent? No financial gain. I've prowled around the files down at the office, and I know that Scorpo hadn't quarreled with your uncle or Stern, so it wasn't a revenge motive, either. And nobody but an idiot would brazenly appear immediately after a man had died and claim his brain. He'd know suspicion would be cast on him right away. It just doesn't make sense."

"And yet Scorpo's name keeps coming up," Vicky reminded.

"I'm going over to call on our friend the professor tomorrow," I announced. "Perhaps something can be settled then. So let's not bother ourselves any further tonight."

"Jimmy, I'm afraid." She snuggled close. "That—that thing wrecking your car tonight."

I had been afraid she'd remember that. I remembered it, too, and for some reason it affected me a lot more than the deaths. I could still see that silver skull grinning at me, that incredible iron figure lumbering off.

"Forget it," I coaxed. "See you tomorrow. Turn in and get a little rest. I'll call you first thing in the morning. Good night."

I hopped out at the curb in front of my hotel. Vicky slid over into the driver's seat, then turned her mouth to mine in a long kiss.

"Keep your chin up," I whispered. "And don't worry."

CHAPTER II

YEAH, don’t worry, kid. *I’ll* do that.

So thinking, I entered my room. After five years in a reporter’s berth you get so you can sense news. Now, for the first time, I was sensing evil. It wasn’t a pleasant experience. Sudden, mysterious deaths, dead voices, the claiming of corpse-brains, and finally that utterly unreal figure that crept up to my car.

Why had my car been smashed? Why did that thing follow me? Who knew of my investigations? What was waiting, watching, lurking for Vicky?

I undressed, switched out the lights, and lay in darkness as black as my forebodings. The room was still, and I could hear the rustle of the sheets as I pulled them over my body in bed. I could hear the rustle of the thoughts that crawled maggotlike in my brain, feasting on my sanity, stripping my skull of all save naked fear.

Oh, I was an imaginative fool. I was behaving like a child. But I had seen that silver monster, I had seen that steel skull leering in the moonlight. I had seen three men die, and now I lay in darkness, listening to the rustle of sheets like the rustle of a shroud-cloth.

I heard more.

In the hall, outside my bedroom, sounded heavy footsteps, coming this way. The footsteps were too heavy. They clanged like—*iron.* And they ceased just outside my door.

I slipped out of bed, groped through darkness to my dresser. The pistol slipped into my hand and I gripped the butt as I moved over behind my door.

The *thump-thump-thump* of that steel tread having halted, the knob turned. I stood tensed, raising the pistol, butt foremost. Steel grated in the lock—a skeleton key. The door opened, and simultaneous with its inward swing a shaft of moonlight sped through the window of my room. A figure entered.

Without hesitation I acted. The pistol butt swung down in a vicious arc upon the head of my unknown visitor. The pistol butt swung down—and my wrist wrenched in a numbing shock as the weapon smashed into something hard and jerked from my hand to thump on the floor.

The figure never wavered, did not fall. Instead, its gigantic bulk moved forward, looming in the moonlight until I saw its shining face, the horrid, unmoving silver features of a robot.

Eight feet tall, a man of metal, an automaton!

The thing walked stiffly, jerkily. This was no human being, though the huge body was built in horrid mockery of human form. Two great steel columns were the legs that supported a gleaming barrel-body. From the shoulders long jointed arms extending with crablike appendages for fingers. The thin pipe of the neck bobbed beneath the silvery skull-head. For one grotesque moment I had a wildly incongruous thought. My mind went back to childhood, and the Oz books. This hideous thing was exactly like the Tin Woodman of Oz!

Only it wasn't. And I wasn't living in a child's fairy tale. I was standing huddled behind my bedroom door, cowering before a monster of metal eight feet tall that walked like a man but didn't have man's weakness. I was helpless, staring into the shining face that was like grinning death. The mouth was a slit in metal, there was neither nose nor cheeks, but under a steel plating shone goggling eyes of glass. The eyes turned on me, and the steel mouth jerked back on repulsive hinges, and I heard a voice.

A voice that could not be. A voice coming from a robot, from a steel body, a shrill, mechanical voice emanating from no human vocal cords. The words chilled through the darkness.

"You are James Clayburn?"

"Yes," I whispered.

The thing had no ears, it couldn't hear—or could it? It had no heart, no lungs, yet it lived. It had no eyes, yet it saw. Oh, it was intelligent, all right!

And that mocking, mechanical voice shrilled on.

“You had better keep out of Professor Scorpo’s affairs,” it said. “I was sent here to deliver that message.”

I stared aghast. “What—who are you?” I whispered.

There was a long pause, and the robot turned towards me.

“I am—or I was—Arnold Stem.” The words knifed through sanity. “It’s a trick!” I shouted, though my senses shrieked denial. “It’s a trick!” I repeated, more to save my reason than in any hope of denial. I sprang forward; I had to act. That grinning silver thing stood awaiting my charge.

I scooped up the pistol as I ran, and again I smashed it forward, this time into the hideous metal face. It clicked against steel, and then the robot’s arms went up and I was locked in an iron vise. I felt no flesh beneath my flailing fingers, nothing but brazen metal, hammered and hinged.

I clawed wildly at a steel throat, and in my desperation I tore at the goggling, bulging glass facets of the monster’s eyes. And then the iron arms squeezed. I fought a thing without breath or being, a thing I could not kill. And it bent me back in its grasp, its horrid face came close, and a silver fist raised and smashed into my jaw.

I went down into black tunnels of nightmare, with the final glimpse of that iron sneer boring into my brain.

The clicking, metallic voice droned through a mist. “Keep out of Professor Scorpo’s affairs. I was Arnold Stem. I know.”

I LAY where I had fallen, sunlight streaming into my empty room when I awoke and fingered my bruised temples. Only the swinging, half-open door remained to recall my midnight visitor—only the door, and the grisly words I could not forget.

So *that* was Arnold Stern; *that* was what had called up Uncle Jeff and spoken in a voice that should have been forever silent in a six months’ grave. A metal monster, but with a human brain!

I couldn't refute it. Professor Scorpo, coaxing his friends into willing him their brains for "experimental purposes."

"Experimental," indeed! What madness had he conceived whereby he took the brains of dead men and used them to animate giant bodies of steel? What crazed quirk of the scientific mind had aided him in the perfection of this incredible outrage to sanity? Human brains, slaves in steel—but why?

A shower cleared my aching head of pain and gnawing fear alike. There was only one way out, go to Scorpo and demand an explanation. He had a legal right to the brains; the signed papers gave him that. No law in the land would be able to deal with this incredible problem of brain-slavery in the bodies of super-robots. Scorpo held the whip hand, and yet the whole affair was insane. And if he threatened me further, or tried to harm Vicky—

Vicky! I must go to her at once, tell her, and then seek Scorpo. I dressed hastily, and took a cab. In fifteen minutes I was banging on the door.

Della, the maid, answered.

"Oh, Mr. Clayburn," she greeted me, "I'm so frightened."

She didn't have to tell me that. One glimpse of her haggard face and twitching lips betrayed incipient hysteria.

"Where's Vicky?" I demanded.

"Miss Vicky's gone out," stammered the maid. "Something awful's the matter with her, Mr. Clayburn, something awful."

"Out with it!" I snapped.

"She got a phone call this morning from her Uncle Jeff."

"What?"

"I took it, and I'll swear it was his voice. She talked to him and he told her to come to Professor somebody's house right away." Della began to sob, but I shook her shoulders.

"What was the man's name?"

"Here, on this paper. She wrote down the address for you, too."

I took the paper Della proferred. Professor Scorpo. Number 43, Beach Road.

Scorpo, all right. And Uncle Jeff's voice from the grave!

"Phone!" I shouted. I called desk, told the chief I wouldn't be reporting, and hung up before he could muster an oath. Then I dialed for a cab.

DELLA sobbed on my shoulder, but I had other things to think about. The cab arrived, and I was in it before it had stopped moving.

"Step on it, buddy!" I ordered, giving the address.

He stepped. Soon the wooded ravines of Beach Road flashed by the windows. Number 43 was on the hillside, on a little cut-off we almost missed. The road was dusty, and I saw the tiremarks of Vicky's car. We crashed through a tangle of hanging trees until the forest-hidden house loomed up on the lofty promontory overlooking the sea. It was a long, rambling two-story structure with a rounded roof that made it look like a gigantic brown leech clinging stubbornly to the hillside.

But I had no time for fancies. And I wasn't a fool. I hopped out, paid the driver, and added five dollars. "Listen, pal," I told him, "I've got a call to make here. If I'm not out in fifteen minutes, streak down the road and call a couple of state troopers. And get back fast." The driver blinked until I shoved my press-card under his nose, then nodded.

"Monkey business going on in there?" he asked, and I nodded grimly.

"Monkey business," indeed! That was an understatement.

Upon the porch, finger on the bell, I waited. And the door swung open. I started. There was no butler in the doorway, no maid; but an eight-foot bulk loomed before me. One of Scorpo's robots! My hands rose involuntarily—as did the hairs on my neck. A silver visage spawned in nightmare yawned before me and from the slitted mouth came sounds.

"Come in. You are expected."

The automaton turned and stalked down the darkened hall on ponderous, weighted feet. I followed. I would have followed old John T. Devil himself if he led me to Vicky. But this was something worse, something wrested not from myth, but from the cold cruelty of scientific logic, not an imaginary evil but a real one. The robot thumped down the hall, into a large room, and across the floor.

"Jimmy!"

Vicky was in my arms. She clung there while I surveyed the library with a swift glance.

"Ah, Mr. Clayburn, I believe."

The voice, brittle and precise, caused me to turn.

A tall man arose from a seat at the fireplace. His unbelievably elongated limbs were draped in black, so that the long, thin fingers pressed against his breast shone with accentuated pallor. He had the body of a spider and the face of a devil—a long, slitted mouth and over-large eyes of jet. His hair bristled in a wiry shock, but all I could see was mouth and eyes. Spider-body, spider-mouth, spider-eyes.

"I am Professor Scorpo," he said.

I didn't hear that. The nursery rhyme about the spider and the fly jingled in my brain.

"Jimmy! What are you staring at?"

VICKY'S voice recalled me to reason. I faced Scorpo without flinching.

"Sorry. I rushed over so fast I'm still a little bewildered."

"Naturally." The professor bowed. "I'm glad you came."

"You didn't seem so glad last night," I ventured. "Your—ah—messenger didn't extend a very cordial invitation."

The shot went home. Was it fancy, or did a flicker of annoyance rise in those deep-set eyes?

"I am sorry, Mr. Clayburn, truly sorry. I was a fool. This morning I experienced a change of heart. I decided it would be best if I had both you and the young lady call in order to explain certain things which I know must puzzle you. Naturally, I can understand that in view of the unusual nature of my recent experiments, suspicions might be aroused. So I wished to take this opportunity to clear matters up."

I dead-panned. But Vicky hastily supplemented Scorpo's remarks.

"You see, Jimmy? It's all right. I was frightened when I came, but now that Professor Scorpo has told me a little about what he's doing, I'm beginning to understand."

"Exactly." Scorpo bowed. "And now, to prove my good faith, I'd like to show you around my laboratory. You understand, Mr. Clayburn, that my work hasn't yet approached the point where it can be made public. But I progress, and when I lay my findings before the world, rest assured that I shall give you and your paper a—'scoop,' I believe you call it. Now, if you'll follow me."

The tall black figure moved out of the room. Vicky's blue eyes stared trustingly into mine, and her grip was cool on my arm. I had no one to stare at with trust, no one to grip, except that waiting cab-driver. I wondered if I'd need him.

Meanwhile, there was Vicky. So I smiled down at her and stepped after Scorpo. We entered the hall again, and Scorpo was joined by the grotesque silver figure of the robot servant. At the end of the hall we halted before sliding doors of steel, firmly closed.

"Electrical lock," Scorpo called over his shoulder. "Can't be opened by key. That's where robots come in. You know that thought is electricity—that's one of the principles on which my robots have been constructed. But I won't confuse you further. Watch."

He beckoned to the motionless metal figure.

"Number Five," he said.

"Yes, I hear."

"Your head, please."

Then it happened, happened as though in nightmare. The giant robot lifted silver arms and fumbled with its neck. There was a sharp click, and then the head began to revolve, to turn on metal screws. The arms lifted the robot head from its shoulders!

Vicky gave a shudder at my side as the headless monster stood, self-decapitated, and with fumbling fingers pressed the metal neck at a spot in the center of the doorway. The doors slid open with a jerk, and the smiling professor beckoned us to enter.

CHAPTER III

Prisoners of Hell

BEHIND us came the echo of a thunderous crash. The metal man had fallen to the floor, the silver skull rolling across the hall, a ball of horror.

"The brain connection is severed when the head is removed," Scorpo explained. He stooped and adjusted the automaton's head to the neck. The creature rose and backed away stiffly.

"Now," said Professor Scorpo.

We stood in a large, white-walled room before an altar to science. Bunsen burners flamed before the fane of the God of Reason, and retorts sparkled like altar-jewels. Test-tubes stood candlelike in racks, huge electrical machines took the place of sacred statues, and over all was the odor, not of sanctity, but of chemicals. And at the farther end of the room, resting on slabs like bodies at a church funeral, were the men of metal.

There were five of them, lying motionless in a row. On a table nearby were extra skulls, extra arms, extra limbs, and extra round bodies shining in the strong light. There were coils of wire, cold spikes of steel, and in the center of the table a solitary glass jar. It contained something that looked like a sponge; a bloody sponge flecked with horrid gray. I recognized it instantly for what it was—a human brain!

Scorpo turned towards us.

"There," he said. "This tells it all, better than my words. I shall not bore you with a long history of my experiments, nor any intricate explanation of how I managed to achieve my effects. Working on the theories of Pavlhov and the Russians, and on the notion that thought is electricity and hence governs life, I began my work.

"I have learned how to build bodies of metal, patterned with an intricate electrical system that corresponds to the human nervous system. Naturally, I kept my earlier and unsuccessful efforts a secret. Recently I perfected my theories and began to put them into practice. Kind friends of former years were good enough to will me their brains for the work. Men like Arnold Stem, Jacob Trent, and your uncle."

He nodded at Vicky.

"Then it's true?" she gasped. "You've put my uncle's brain into—into one of those monsters?"

"Exactly. But the robot is not a monster. He has a man's brain, and can use it. He can control his metal body, subject to mechanical adjustments. Think of it—I have conquered death! There will be no death. Metal bodies do not wear out and the brain, kept alive in a saline solution actuated by electrical stimuli in its metal case, lives forever! Think of the possibilities!"

"I'm thinking of my uncle," Vicky flashed out. "What have you done with him? I'm not interested in your awful studies. I want to know what you've done with Uncle Jeff?"

Scorpo sighed, a weary and discouraged sigh. "I'm afraid you're like all the rest. That's why I've been so secretive about my experiments. That's why I had friends sign over their brains instead of using unclaimed bodies from the morgue. Because if people found out the nature of my experiments they wouldn't understand. You don't, my dear. You want to see your uncle. Very well. I'll show him to you."

SCORPO stepped to the wall and pressed a buzzer.

I stood tense, watching the smiling professor. What hokus-pokus was this? Uncle Jeff was dead, and Scorpo was a charlatan. Or was he? Could he make dead brains live in metal bodies? Was he mad, or a genius, o; *both?*

I stood there as the buzzing echo died away and was replaced by a new sound, one that had become dreadfully familiar in the past two days. The iron clang of metal feet.

“Oooh!” wailed Vicky.

And into the room stepped Horror. A horror in steel, but one without a face, without eyes of glass. The thing lumbered blindly into the room, knocking against the wall in the doorway, and then swaying with outstretched arms. This robot had a plain metal globe set where the head should be, and there was no countenance at all; only a mouth-slit.

“I have not given him eyes yet,” Scorpo whispered. “It takes time for the reorganization process, and he has been here less than a month.”

“That isn’t he—it can’t be!” Vicky sobbed.

“Vicky!”

The voice came from far away, from far away, indeed. A voice from the grave, a voice from a metal coffin, a voice from the metal monster swaying before us.

“Uncle Jeff!” she screamed.

“Is that you, Vicky? I called you today. Professor Scorpo let me call you when I begged and begged. Now you’re here, but I can’t see you. I can’t see you because I’m dead, Vicky, dead, dead—”

“Stop!” screamed the girl, her face contorted in pain. She turned on Scorpo with blazing eyes.

“You beast! You filthy ghoul! Taking him and making him a slave, a prisoner in a metal hell. You ought to be burned at the stake, as they burned sorcerers in the old days!”

Scorpo’s spider-smile was steady. “I expected this,” he said calmly, shrugging.

And then the horrid voice came again from the robot.

“Vicky,” it whispered. “You don’t know what it’s like to be this way. I never dreamed when I willed my brain that he was going to do—what he did. You don’t know what it is to be alive in a body of metal, without seeing.

"There's a switch in my side. When he turns it off, I go back to death, and when he turns it on I must walk at his command. I'm his slave, Vicky, his slave! Make him let me go, Vicky, back to the grave, to peace. Make him, Vicky, you must!"

"That will do. Go." Scorpo's voice crackled in command, and the robot turned and lumbered out. Vicky's woman-heart forced her arms toward the retreating metal figure, but her eyes recoiled in horror from the sight of the monstrosity.

"Let him go," she whispered to Scorpo. "Oh, you must release him from *that!"*

"He'll he dead," Scorpo reminded her.

"Better that than this hell." Her voice rose. "You must let him go. You must! The police—"

"Will do nothing," Scorpo finished. "Have you forgotten the agreement?" He drew the folded paper from his breast and flourished it. "Your uncle's signature gives me his brain after death. I can do with it what I will, and no court in the country can touch me.

"I'll do anything," Vicky whispered. "Anything."

I COULDN'T stand any more. I stepped forward.

"Listen, Scorpo," I began. "You're pretty smooth, but I think I can persuade you. To begin with, I'd like to make a few inquiries about just how Vicky's uncle met his death. That burned car story doesn't satisfy me."

Scorpo's face remained calm, but I noted the trembling of his hands. Then Vicky interrupted.

"Never mind, Jimmy. Professor, listen to me. I've got money—lots of money. I'll sign it all over to you if only you'll let Uncle Jeff rest in peace."

"So?"

"A quarter of a million dollars, all yours! You can use money in your experiments, can't you? You can get other bodies, expensive equipment, all you'll need."

“There is something in what you say,” Scorpo mused. “I could find a place for that money in my work. It is expensive, and in order to present my secret properly to the world of science I shall need funds. Besides, I understand your feelings in this matter, and so—”

“Take it,” Vicky begged. “Take the money and let him go!”

“No!” I said.

They both faced me, but I kept my eyes on Scorpo’s.

“She’ll give you no money,” I announced. “Not a penny. And you’ll present nothing to science. You’ll make your presentation before a jury. Professor Scorpo. You’re a murderer!

You were clever enough. You thought your very boldness would hide the facts. But you killed Arnold Stem, and Vicky’s uncle, and Jacob Trent arranging it so that their deaths looked like accidents, in order to get their brains. You’re a murderer, and the fire investigators’ reports on last night’s blaze will prove it!”

I stepped back to Vicky’s side, and that proved my undoing. I never saw them approach, but at that moment my arms were caught in a literal grip of steel. Metal hands squeezed my windpipe, metal fingers held my elbows. I was powerless to kick out at robot bodies.

Scorpo’s spider-smile was grim as death.

“So?” he said. “You force me, Mr. Clayburn.”

A shrill scream sounded at my side. I wrenched my head around and saw Vicky struggling in the iron arms of a gigantic robot servant. The metal man picked her slender body from the floor and held her like a child, one great paw ripping free a piece of her blouse and pressing it as a gag against her mouth.

“Vicky!” I yelled. I tore at the pinioning grasp that bound me, rocked forward, and then was lifted from my own feet by the huge arms of the automaton.

“Sing him a few nursery rhymes,” Scorpo chuckled. “Meanwhile, I’ll convince the young lady in the matter of that donation she offered me.”

“There’s a delegation of state police on their way,” I yelled. “You’re finished, Scorpo.”

“You mean your arrangement with the cab driver?” mocked the professor. “Here.”

He waved an arm. Another robot entered on ponderous feet. In his arms he bore a limp figure with a hideously dangling neck. As I stared into the dead face of the driver, Scorpo’s chuckle rose.

“Take him out,” he commanded. “Bring the girl here to the table. I’ve never had a woman robot before. It may prove interesting!”

His chuckle boomed, but above it came the sound of Vicky’s frightened scream. The robot bore her to the table, and its iron bands clawed at her bared flesh. My head was buried helplessly against the steel chest of my captor as the robot dragged me away to the basement of this terrible house.

The cellar door clanged shut behind me. I rushed to the bars of the cell into which I had been thrust and rattled them in a fury of impotent rage. I screamed aloud at the thought of Vicky, upstairs in that chamber of scientific horror.

The echoes of my shouts rang helplessly along the dark corridor. Then there was silence.

Suddenly there was a clanking sound; the grisly, familiar clanking sound that would forever haunt my dreams. Was my captor returning to finish me off? No, the footsteps were closer. They moved up and down, almost at my side. Was I going mad?

I pressed my ear to the left wall of my cell. The iron tread came from just beyond, along the wall. Someone—something, rather—was pacing up and down in a room next to mine.

“Who is it?” I called guardedly.

There was silence.

“Who are you?” I repeated.

A long pause. Then:

“Jacob Trent,” answered a voice.

CHAPTER IV

Secret of the Metal Giants

JACOB TRENT! The man burned to death in his home last night, the man whose body Scorpo had accompanied to the morgue, with a paper claiming the brain. It couldn't be—and yet it was!

"Trent, can you hear me? I'm Jim Clayburn, remember me?"

"The reporter? What are you doing here?"

"I'm Scorpo's prisoner."

"In iron? Like me?"

"No. Not yet." The words slipped out of me quite grimly. "What happened to you?"

"I don't know, Clayburn. I'm so confused. The last thing I remember is sitting in my parlor and falling asleep. When I woke up I was in this body.

Scorpo told me how he'd claimed my brain after the fire and brought me here. But I never knew he meant to do this to me."

The tones were filled with agony.

"When I awoke I was lying on the operating table upstairs, with a steel body, steel limbs, steel face. I saw it in the mirror before they took off the electrical attachments and Scorpo taught me to walk. You know he teaches us again. We're like children at first."

"Were you blind?" I asked.

"Yes, and then he gave me eyes. I don't know how. I don't understand how he keeps me alive."

"Do you feel anything?" I asked. I had to know that. I still couldn't believe the impossible.

"Yes. I feel tired—heavy. It's hard to walk, hard to move. Of course, there is no thirst or hunger, or anything else. I just walk and do what I'm told. There's a switch in my side. All the robots have switches. Scorpo comes in every once in a while and turns off the switch. Then I fall asleep—or fall into death again, I don't known which.

"But, Clayburn, this is hell. I've got to get out. I want to be free, not Scorpo's slave. I can't stand to look at myself, to know I'm alive when I should be dead. For days now I've pleaded with Scorpo to let me call my relatives and talk to them. Maybe they can free me somehow. They have all my money. For days I've pleaded, hoping he'll relent and agree."

"For days?" I repeated. "Trent, how long have you been Scorpo's robot?"

"I guess about three weeks," Trent answered. "That's what he told me. He turns me off quite frequently, and I lose track of time."

It hit me then. Trent claimed that he'd been here three weeks, but he'd only died last night!

I thought fast. "Trent, you want to get out, so listen to me. You've got an iron body. You can smash your bars—you're in a cell like mine, aren't you? I thought so. Well, smash them. Let me out. I can help you, Trent. I'm the only man who knows Scorpo's secret."

"You do?"

"Yes, of course," I bluffed. "I'll promise to save you if only you'll free me and help me. At once, Trent! *Jeff's* niece is upstairs, in danger. We've got to stop Scorpo in time. Smash those bars, Trent!"

He heard, believed. He *had* to. The iron feet clanged forward. Steel met steel as his hands clawed at the bars, bent them. I stood in a frenzy of urgency. And then, with grinding wrench, something gave.

A moment later the figure of the robot that was Jacob Trent stood before me. Again the fists thudded against the bars of my cell. They bent back. The lock was splintering. The metal giant lunged its body against the lock. It grated and shattered. The door swung open. I was free!

"Come on," I urged. "Not a moment to spare."

As if to corroborate, a sound rose from above—a sound that turned my blood to glacial ice. It was Vicky's scream.

I raced forward down the corridor. Trent lumbering at my heels. Up the stairs we crashed, and down the hall. The laboratory door was open and we sped in—into a world of fear.

The machines still stood around the table, the tall, weird electrical machines, like inanimate robots with insane heads together, peering down with eyes that shot sparks at what was lying on the table. And Professor Scorpo was bent over the table, hammering with a great steel mallet at something that screamed and screamed.

Vicky's clothes lay in a huddled heap on the floor.

"What's this?" Scorpo wheeled. One slim hand went to his waist, and the blunt muzzle of a revolver snouted towards me.

"Get him, Trent!" I shouted. "Bullets won't hurt you!"

Scorpo raised the weapon and fired point-blank at the steel chest of the robot. But Trent lurched forward and swept the gun aside with one gleaming arm. Then Scorpo raced around the table, the automaton at his heels, I darted forward, but cold hands gripped my neck.

The three robot servants had thundered into the room and come toward me. Their grinning skull-heads gaped, their iron arms menaced, and the barrel bodies bore me back under their ghastly weight. My clutching fingers fell on Scorpo's great metal mallet. I raised it in both hands like a battle-axe and brought it down with all my strength on the head of the first robot.

The silver skull smashed inwards and skidded from the pipe-neck as the monster floundered back and fell, writhing, to the floor. The second robot was upon me. I brought the hammer up again and smashed squarely into the evil glassy eyes. With a shrill scream of horror, the gigantic automaton toppled. The third giant crushed me from behind. As I drew the mallet up, iron fingers wrenched it from my grasp. A steel fist thudded against my back and, as I fell forward, the ponderous metal man was upon me, feet uplifted to crush my chest into pulp.

"Look out!" screamed Scorpo's voice.

Trent charged the robot with lowered head. His steel skull rammed into the other mechanical man and hurled him back. Then Trent was upon the monster, and his feet stamped and pounded and tore. I bounded erect, and my searching eyes fell on Scorpo. He stood at the table, revolver in band, again the master.

"Stop!" His voice razored the room. "Not so fast, Clayburn," he snapped. "You're too late. Look there!" His finger stabbed at the figure on the table, the figure held by wires attached to the electrical apparatus.

It was not Vicky. It was the gleaming metal body of a robot. As I gaped, the slit mouth jerked, and a voice, Vicky's voice, came from the steel throat.

"You're too late, Jimmy!"

I half-reeled.

"You see?" Scorpo purred. "She defied me, and this is her fate. I have placed her brain in the steel skull. The operation is a simple one. If you attempt to harm me further, she suffers, as only I can make her suffer."

I stood stunned. Vicky lost to me forever? She was a woman of steel, a robot. Scorpo had triumphed.

"No!" I shouted. I lunged forward. A bullet blazed, scorching my arm. I didn't halt. My leap carried me to the mad professor's side. My fist crashed into his body, sending the revolver flying across the room. Scorpo's arms swung up, clawing at my face. I drove my left into that snarling spider-mask and his head snapped back.

He lurched blindly into the tangle of machinery and wires snapped. There was a roar, a blaze of crackling heat that seared my eyes with ultra-violet lightning, and then the smoke cleared. Scorpo lay where he had fallen.

The robot Trent lumbered to my side. Silently he lifted Vicky's metal body into my arms. Deep sobs came from the robot throat.

"Too late," Vicky's voice whispered.

"No," I grinned. "I've figured it out. Listen." I held her steel form close.

"It's a fake. Scorpo was clever. He knew too much to blackmail his rich friends outright so he cooked up a fantastic but eminently persuasive scheme. Arnold Stem, your Uncle Jeff, and Trent were all drugged. In two cases their homes, and in one, a car was burned. But Scorpo started the fires after drugging the men and dragging their bodies out."

"But the bodies in the fire?"

"Substitutes, provided by Scorpo. Possibly bodies he got for medical purposes. Burned, with rings and clothing switched, they defied identification. Scorpo took the drugged men and put them, not into metal bodies, but into metal suits he built for that purpose."

"Metal suits?" Trent interjected.

"Of course. His servants wore them to heighten the illusion. Take a look at the ones whose 'heads' I crushed. The heads were artificial—no brains in them, just a steel shell. He's a six-foot man and his head is about chest-level in the armor."

Trent bent over the fallen bodies of the three servants. "Right," he announced. "But I don't understand. Am I in a steel suit? I haven't eaten, or slept, or felt—"

"Your story gave me the clue," I answered. "You thought you'd been here for weeks, but actually you were brought here last night. Scorpo put you in a suit at once, and drugged you. That switch in your side he said he **[story not finished]**

Power of the Druid

The Mystic Snake Cave Cruel Claudius Youth—But Wild Debauches Deafened Him To His Enemies' Hisses

TIBERIUS CLAUDIUS NERO CAESAR was bored.

His sacred Majesty, Augustus, Protector of the People, Emperor Tiberius stared moodily at the blue Caprian waters and heaved a scented sigh. He was heartily sick of living. Ten years ago he had become sick of Rome and the cares of empire. He abandoned all government at that time and retired here to Capri.

He built the twelve villas in which he lived. He peopled them with his German bodyguard, his staff of Greek professors, his friend Nerva, and the astrologer Thrasyllus—all as a safeguard against further boredom.

But he tired quickly enough of island exile, and so had come to him the loathsome Spintrians, the abominable practitioners of the arts alluded to in the book of Elephantis. And Tiberius built torture chambers in the villas, to amuse himself in still more curious ways. But now, even these strong diversions no longer titillated his aging senses.

Tiberius could no longer escape from himself, from his own aging body and jaded senses. He was growing quite old now. A tall, bony man with a thin, pitted face and a high, bald pate. His physicians were forever at him, cautioning him against his addiction to drugged wine, and myrrh.

He sat, stiff-jointed, on the cliff overlooking the beach at Capri, alternately staring at the waves and fingering the fifth volume of Elephantis in his lap. He sat alone, and he cursed under his breath in round, imperial oaths.

"Caesar!"

The harsh voice echoed from below the cliff at his feet. Tiberius sat up, his bony legs stiffening with apprehension. No strangers came to this, his island. Tiberius feared assassins.

"Caesar!"

Peering over the edge of the cliff, the Emperor descried a boat, moored to a rock in the waters below. The voice came from the throat of someone clambering up the steep cliff, through the bushes.

Suddenly the bushes parted at one side, and a weird figure appeared. It was a disheveled man, ragged and soaking with sea water that glistened on his tanned skin. He had a wild, bearded face that bled from the scratchings of the thorny bushes, encountered during his climb. His yellow teeth were bared in a grimace of fatigue.

But Tiberius scarcely noticed these details. His eyes were focused on the long knife the stranger carried in one hand. It was a sharp knife, a glittering knife. It was the kind of blade that could be easily plunged into a neck, even an imperial neck.

Tiberius looked wildly to either side for his German guards, who always waited near by. But the man approached, grinning. And now Tiberius perceived that he carried a great sack.

"A gift for you, Majesty," panted the ragged stranger. "I caught it just now, saw you sitting here on the cliff, and wish to present you with my catch."

He smiled through his tangled beard through his scratched, bleeding face. Opening the sack, the man drew out a great barbel, still squirming in life. The stranger gestured with his knife. "A gift, oh Caesar."

Tiberius did not look at the catch. His lean hands fumbled for the golden whistle on the cord about his scrawny throat. He blew frantically.

“Guards! At once!”

FROM either side guards appeared.

Great, blond, brawny warriors in armor, with barbs protruding from their iron helmets. They moved in, holding assegais in readiness.

“You would kill me, then, under pretext of presenting me with this object?” Tiberius sneered.

“But, Caesar, I speak truly. I caught it only a few moments ago and brought it as a present to you, Divinity.”

“The knife?” snapped Tiberius, his. face set in a cold frown.

“To cut my way through the thorn bushes,” wailed the fisherman.

“Rub the barbel in his face,” commanded the Emperor.

In a flash, one of the Germans had pinioned the helpless rustic. Another hacked a piece from the fish and rubbed the scaly bits in the squirming man’s face.

“Mercy, Caesar!” gasped the captive.

“See what else is in the sack,” Tiberius commanded.

A third German dug into the sack and drew out an enormous lobster, alive, as its great pointed pincers showed.

“Mercy, Tiberius.”

“You’d frighten me, you boor?” whispered the Emperor. “Guard, rub his face with this. Rub it well.”

The German advanced on the tightly-held fisherman and drew the giant lobster across his contorted face. He drew it forward and back, scrubbing.

Tiberius stood looking on.

“That’s it.” He smiled. “Again.” The huge pincers tore the flesh from both cheeks.

“Caesar! Mercy—please—”

“Capital!” Tiberius cackled, his senile laughter rising. “Prove his innocence to his face, guard. Again!”

The struggling fisherman screamed, but the German drew the lobster down, pressed it tightly into the victim's face. The pincers settled into the hollow ridges of the fisherman's eyes. There was a mad shriek of pain, and the lobster came away. But its pincers were no longer empty.

The man's eye-sockets were. From their red, streaming emptiness even the Germans recoiled in horror. But Tiberius still laughed, a bleating laugh which rose even above the screams of the blinded man.

"Release him," commanded the Emperor. "You may go, loyal and faithful subject."

The blind man raced screaming about the edge of the cliff. His clawing hands clutched empty air as he tottered on the brink, then fell forward from the crag to plunge down into the rocks a hundred feet below. His body crashed, cutting off the wild madness of his death-cry. Tiberius squinted over the edge of the cliff and shrugged as he turned away.

"So," he said. "You may go, guards." His eyes lighted on the cut fish at his feet.

"Perhaps one of you will carry this to the villa," he suggested. "Tell the cook to prepare it for this evening's feast. I am fond of fresh barbel, very fond of it, and this one's a beauty. Besides, we should be ungrateful did we not enjoy the fellow's gift. He was put to such pains in the giving."

The Emperor chuckled as the Germans bowed and withdrew. Then Tiberius resumed his place at the edge of the cliff and picked up Elephantis once again. After a moment he sighed deeply.

For the Emperor Tiberius was bored.

THE sun was sinking in the center of a cloud that hung over the western sea. It peered out from the round blackness of the cloud like the red eye of a Cyclops swimming away across the waters. And the red eye fell upon Tiberius as he turned the pages of his book, fell upon him and bathed his face with bloody light.

The night breeze was rustling in the bushes, whispering in a chill voice of mourning that the day was dead. Tiberius felt clammy cold steal over his thin limbs, stepped briskly to the edge of the cliff for a final glance into the waters below.

“Jove’s Curse!” exclaimed the emperor.

The boat of the dead fisherman was still anchored there below. But that did not disturb His August Majesty.

It was the sight of what lay beside it in the dusk. Another boat. A long, queer-looking craft was anchored there. And it had no oars, though it was plainly some sort of barbarous shell.

The rustling in the bushes took on a new and menacing meaning.

Tiberius clutched at his whistle.

The rustling was louder. Was it the ghost of the dead fisherman coming for vengeance?

Tiberius blew frantically.

And then the bushes parted.

A ragged man with a tangled beard, his face bleeding in the sunset.

It *was* the fisherman!

But no, the light alone caused the face to look as though it bled. And this man’s beard was white. His rags were white, also, and his skin. Moreover, he had eyes.

Tiberius could not escape those eyes. They burned more redly than the sun, and with a deeper, more compelling fire. They smoldered from that face in the dusk as the man slowly advanced.

Tiberius screamed.

“Guards! *Schnell!”* He babbled frantic German commands, and still the figure approached.

The Germans appeared, running through the trees.

The man did not appear to notice them. He advanced on Tiberius, a slow smile on his face.

“Guards! Over the cliff, quickly!” the Emperor screamed.

They were on the stranger in a rush, bearing him back. He did not struggle. One of the Germans picked up the great lobster that still lay on the sand and ground it into the captive's face. It pressed pincers into his reddened eyes, but no sound came from the victim. And then they hurled him from the cliff, hurled him down upon the rocks below, as Tiberius screamed in fear and rage.

There was a faint splashing from the beach, then stillness.

HIS Imperial Majesty motioned the guards away in silence, then slowly turned and followed them up the path.

The appearance of this second, frightening stranger was too much for him. Henceforth he would entertain no visitors. All would be thrown from the cliff, just as he tossed the favorites of whom he tired. Tiberius could not brook assassination. He was soon to die, and no one should hasten that horrid end.

But who was this man with the disturbing eyes?

Well, no matter. He was dead, and those red eyes were ground out forever. The wind rustled strongly at Tiberius' back. Too strongly.

The Emperor knew suddenly that he was being followed. In a panic, his hands again went to the whistle about his neck.

But other hands reached it first. Two slim white hands rested on the cord, on the golden whistle. Two slim white hands came over his shoulders. Tiberius, speechless with fear, turned his head.

He stared into the red, burning eyes of the eyeless dead stranger he had thrown over the cliff!

"Hail, Caesar!"

The deep voice penetrated his being, though it was soft as a whisper.

"Go away! You're dead. I killed you," Tiberius gasped. He felt that he was going mad.

"I would speak with you, Caesar."

"Stop staring at me! You have no eyes. I killed you."

"Aye, Caesar. You killed me, and tore out my eyes, and threw me from the cliff, just as you threw that poor fisherman earlier in the day. But I am not a fisherman, Caesar. I cannot be blinded, or killed."

"You're his ghost," wailed the Emperor.

"Nay, I am not a ghost. But I have powers greater than the supernatural. You saw me die, and now you see me live again. Such powers should be of interest to you, Caesar. It was to tell you of them that I came."

"Yes."

"I allowed you to have your will, though I could blast your Germans with a glance—and I could blast you, too, Tiberius, my friend." The red eyes compelled.

"Yes, you are right. Come, be my guest at dinner tonight at the villa. We shall talk then."

THE Emperor's couch was soft.

The Emperor's table was filled with delicacies. The Emperor's slaves, servants, musicians, and guests were attentive and solicitous.

But the Emperor paid no heed to comfort, food, drink, or entertainment. He sat staring at the white-bearded man, his ears open only to his whispered words.

The stranger sat stiffly at the great board. He did not loll beneath the fannings of slaves, nor did he partake of the viands before him. Instead, he drank wine from the special flagon placed at his side, draught after draught of wine from the great goblet he constantly refilled. Yet never did his even tones falter. The stranger could not get drunk!

Tiberius listened long. At last he ventured a whispered reply above the chattering of the others at the table.

"You say, then, that you are a Druid who came here in a stone boat from Britain."

"Aye. I have been ovate and bard in the great Druidic college you call Stonehenge. And I was archdruid, too, of all Britain."

"I have heard of your cult. It is known throughout Britain, the Celtic isles, and even Gaul. You Druids are wizards, are you not?"

"Not wizards, but students of Nature. We worship Tanarus, the god of primal life, who dwells in the sacred oak. And we accord homage to Mabon, the white bull of the sun, and to Primal Nodens, serpent of waters, "The true secrets of Druidism are guarded by the initiate. Only a few of the many who pass twenty years in study and trials of endurance ever manage to become admitted to our secret priesthood. One must learn strange magics and discover the secrets of Nature in order to be worthy.

"I am one of the few true initiates.

I rule over the thirteen clans of Druid, and I know the real truths behind Life and Death."

"You boast of such powers?" Tiberius sneered.

"Did I not come from Britain in a stone boat without oars?" the Druid returned with a slow smile. "Primal Nodens guided me here. Did you not kill me and tear out my eyes? Am I not therefore master over Nature and Life and Death?"

Tiberius nodded.

"But then, what would you have of me? Why did you leave your powerful offices in Britain to seek me out?"

"That, oh Caesar, I shall explain. I tired of my leadership because of its restrictions. I am human! I have never known the love of woman, and all common men feared me for my powers, even my priests. Well, love of woman is denied me now, and friendship too. But I am still human enough to long for wealth and riches and adulation.

"I know magics that bring all riches, but dare not use them in my sacred office. If I desired any pleasures my priests would sacrifice me as a violator of my trust. So I decided to leave my post, before it was too late. And I bethought myself of the greatest man in the world—you, Emperor of Rome. I would come to you. Surely there would be a way to serve you and in return gain reward. So I came."

AUGUST TIBERIUS smiled, and under cover of his guests' babblings, he leaned forward to reply. "There is a way to serve me."

The Druid smiled.

"In the spring the trees blossom and the flowers bud. They die in autumn but next year are reborn. Their life is eternal, but their forms change. And that is the secret of human existence. Life lies in the soul, and the soul moves from body to body without ceasing."

"But what has that to do with me?"

"A great deal, oh Caesar. We of the true Druids have learned how to govern the soul, and Life. We can take the vital force before it dies and transplant it. And you, I know, want to escape death. So, Tiberius, I can help you. I will place your soul in another body, transpose the soul of another to your own dying body. Thus you can live again."

Tiberius trembled.

The Druid took a long gulp from his wine glass.

"You cannot make me drunk, you see," he smiled. His red eyes became points. "That ought to prove something." He smiled again, staring straight at Tiberius.

"You can't even kill me."

The Druid drank deliberately again of the wine.

"What do you mean?" Tiberius quavered.

"I told you I knew all things." Again the Druid drank slowly. "And of course I know that this wine you set before me is highly poisoned. A glass of it will kill a man in half an hour. Yet I have been drinking all night." The smile was terrible.

"But Druid, I did not know, I could not suspect! If you can do what you say, if you can give me another lease on life in a new, young body, I shall reward you as richly as you desire."

Druid eyes gleamed.

"You're an evil man, Tiberius. I've never seen worse. As a Druid I should not prostitute my powers to serve you, lest I incur the vengeance of my gods. You must reward me well."

“I shall, I promise! As I love my life.”

“That oath is convincing enough. Now, to find you a body.”

Tiberius extended a thin finger and pointed at his nephew.

“That is the body,” he murmured. “Put me in his place. That young man is to be my heir, the next Emperor of Rome. He is young, healthy. The people love him as much as they hate me. That is the body I desire to inhabit.”

The Druid nodded, staring down the table at the thin, serious face of the Emperor’s nephew, Gaius Caligula.

It was done!

Tiberius Caesar returned to the mainland. At Misenum he fell sick, and called Caligula to his side. The old man, wheezing and gasping in his bed, gave Caligula the Imperial ring.

Caligula put it on gravely, there in the darkness of the bedroom. He was alone with his imperial uncle, and he sobbed with deep emotion at the thought of this terrible old man, for all his power, dying alone and friendless after a final debauch. Where was the Druid?

But lie did not sob long. And he did not wonder where the Druid was for long, either, because the white-bearded old man rose in the darkness behind the bed and advanced with blazing eyes. One hand held a staff of yew, with a serpent head.

Caligula rose from the bedside, turned.

The serpent head darted out of the Druid’s hand. It hissed.

The wood hissed, and moved. A great snake coiled about the throat of Caligula, strangling his screams. The young man fell across the bed where the Emperor lay, with the snake tight against his neck.

Then, slowly, the tail of the snake rose and coiled in turn about the neck of Tiberius, who did not resist. Both men lay side by side on the bed now, the great green serpent coiled at either end about their throats. Their faces blackened.

And the Druid chanted there in the darkness over the bodies of the two dying men.

“Oh Great Typhon, Great Set, Great Nodens!” whispered the Druid. His voice slurred into Celtic, into ancient Phoenician.

The Druid whispered long, and at his words the candle flames in the chamber sickened and died. The two men died. Only the Druid and the serpent were alive—and the horrid voice, uttering strange words that somehow caused the air to tremble at their utterance.

Now, swiftly, a flame seemed to course through the wriggling coils of the serpent. It came from both ends. The one from the tail about the neck of Tiberius was a dim blue flame. The other, from the head about Caligula’s throat, was a strong red flame. They met and mingled in the serpent’s body, seemed to pass and seek opposite ends.

Suddenly the candles flared up, the serpent hissed again and then uncoiled from the young firm throat and the wrinkled old throat.

Both men began to breathe once again. The young throat moved regularly, while the old one wheezed and rattled.

The serpent wriggled from the bed and retreated to the Druid’s slim hands, seeming none the worse for its experience. Then, as the Druid caught it, it suddenly became a mere shaft of wood once more. The Druid smiled and turned to the bed.

“It is done,” he announced.

“Yes. It is done!”

The triumphant voice of Tiberius rose—from Caligula’s lips.

“What have you done?” The feeble quaver of Caligula came from Tiberius in the bed. “What has happened? Where am I?”

With renewed vitality, born of utter dread, the body of aged Tiberius sat up, and Caligula’s dazed eyes stared from its face.

Caligula’s body caught up a pillow. Gently Tiberius pressed it against his own former mouth, saw his own body sink back on the mattress and struggle feebly as it slowly strangled.

“Ah, it’s over.” The new Caesar stood erect.

The Druid chuckled, and they left the room. The black face of Tiberius leered behind them in the darkness, its swollen tongue protruding as though in sardonic derision.

THE new Emperor was announced to the people.

"Caligula! Hail the Young Emperor! Hail to the Little Boot!"

The crowds cheered lustily.

Caligula entered his private chambers while the cries of the mob still echoed from without the palace below. He paced to the windows and shut them against the clamor, then turned to face the smiling Druid.

The Druid wore velvet now, and his beard was curled and scented. Rings adorned his fingers, and the lines of fasting and privation were gone from his face. But his face held new wrinkles more unpleasant—wrinkles of evil about his eyes, craftiness etching his lips. His smile was no longer omniscient, merely humanly avaricious.

"Well, Caesar?" he said. "Satisfied?"

"No." The Caesar scowled. "This is a ghastly mess, Druid. I've leaped from bad to worse, it seems. As Tiberius, I could do what I willed, since it was expected of me. They hated and feared my every act. Therefore, I was not constrained in following my nature. But as Caligula, I have a part to play. I am a public hero. I must be good, and kind, and merciful. The weight of convention is great, Druid. I cannot escape from doing what is expected."

"Why not be good?" suggested the Druid. "If such elementary concepts as good and evil occupy your philosophy? I am giving you a new chance, a new life to live, so to speak. Why not atone?"

Caesar laughed.

"What, Druid? Do you then prove craven?"

"Not I. Do as you like." The Druid hastily corrected himself.

"But I can't. I want my Spintrians again. By Neptune's trident, man, I have a young body again. It is fit for pleasures, and for reveling. That is why I desired my youth. But as Caligula I cannot use it without excuse."

"There is a solution," the Druid conceded.

"What? Tell me? I'm going mad with boredom."

"You could perhaps—fall sick."

"Yes."

"And when you become well you accept divinity. Your forebears did. Augustus is worshiped as a god. You can be one too, alive. The common people know that a god has different moral standards, just as Jove had in the myth. And your intimates here in the palace will accept your change as madness resulting from your sickness."

"Druid, you are right! Ah, how fortunate I am in your counsel!"

The Druid smiled.

"Sicken for a month," he advised.

Caligula was ill for a month.

When he rose again, all Rome fell sick.

The god, Caligula, reigned in a hell upon earth. Rome was his hell, and all souls felt the torment of his lordship. As a divine figure, his antics were unquestioned at the first—and then it was too late. He killed his son, and killed the old captain of his guards, substituting a figurehead he could easily command. Once the army was in his power he wantoned unquestioned. He took brides, one after another, in a steady stream, and killed them. In disguise he and his companions roamed the city, rioting and burning at will.

In secret rooms the Spintrians revelled. Magicians and wonderworkers plied their spells for his delight. It was a fresh youth, at the expense of Rome—Rome's fairest women, Rome's finest men, Rome's money, Rome's honor.

EVER the Druid was at his side, "You're getting sleek and fat," the Emperor observed one day. "This life agrees with you, too, my friend." The Druid smiled grimly.

"You're sleek and fat, too, Caesar. And you're stupid, too."

"What's that?"

In his new-found, intoxicating power, the Emperor was beginning to resent these caustic comments from his servant. The Druid was much too familiar these days, irking in his reminder of superiority. But he had advice to offer. Best to listen.

"What's that?" he repeated, his face growing ugly.

"I say you are stupid, Caesar. You are supposed to be mad, remember. Here in the palace there are strange rumors, already current, comparing your antics to those of old Tiberius. Quash those rumors, I say. Quash them by diverting attention elsewhere—to your madness. Be mad!"

Then the Druid began to whisper, and as he whispered Caesar smiled, unpleasantly.

Caesar went mad the next day.

His favorite horse, Porcellus, was taken from the stable. In the robes of priesthood, Caligula made him a citizen and a senator. With holy oils he christened the steed anew—"Incitatus" the "swift-speeding."

When the crowd summoned to attend the ceremony at the altar began to grumble uneasily at this strange caprice, Caligula quickly went on with his ceremony. And "Incitatus" became a consul of Rome, one of the three rulers.

Caligula was mad enough for Rome now.

The money was scarce, so he sold public offices and killed the criminals in the prisons to save their keep. Thriftily, he used their bodies in the arena for feeding the wild animals in the shows. He raised more *money* for his excesses with actors, charioteers, and his crew of chosen intimates that attended him on his debauches. The city was openly in revolt by now.

"Madder still," warned the Druid.

Caligula built a bridge of boats across the bay of Baiae. Four thousand boats were commandeered from merchants. At the head of his guards he rode across the bridge, throwing coins to the populace who appeared at this public festival. Then he charged back, scattering the mob and killing them, pushing hordes to drown into the water as he fought the sea and defied Neptune.

"Madder still," warned the Druid. There was talk of rebellion.

Caligula became a god in person now. He wore the robes of Jove and appeared as high priest in all temple ceremonies. He took the heads from all statues of the other gods and substituted his own.

"Madder still," warned the Druid. Mutinies were breaking out on the borders of the Empire.

Caesar frowned, this time.

"I'm mad enough right now," he declared. "After all, Druid, there are limits to human endurance."

"Perhaps." The Druid nodded. "But if they ever let their minds wander to your personal life—"

The Emperor's youthful face took on a dreadful darkness, and it hideously resembled the face of the dead Tiberius. Surely the eyes of Tiberius blazed as he roared:

"Eternal damnation to the people! Yes, and to my evilness as well!

Druid, it's no concern of yours what I do. I fulfilled my promise. I gave you money and comforts and power even over me.

"But my life is my own. I've always hated my people, just as they hate me. Now they shall suffer. I find a deal of pleasure in their suffering. You know, at Capri, I had torture chambers, discovering in my old age that there are peculiar pleasures in inflicting pain. Now I profit by that knowledge and inflict pain while young. Let me have my people to play with, Druid, and do not question me in that. Ah, would but that all Rome had a single neck for me to hack!"

THE Druid's fattening face fell with alarm.

"Caesar, such talk tempts my gods whose gift you bear! Stop such blasphemy, I pray you!"

"Ah!" The Emperor spat. "Think you I care for your gods? All I need fear is the people—the stupid, silly people. As long as I give them plenty of holidays, plenty of shows in the amphitheater, they will not rebel. As long as I import wild beasts for fights they will be satisfied. And I like the shows.

I like the blood. I like the fierceness of the combat. Come see our next show tomorrow, Druid. It will be very interesting."

The Emperor smiled at the Druid. There were secrets in his smile as he watched the plump, unsuspecting face of the wizard.

The wizard smiled at the Emperor. There were secrets in his smile as he watched the plump, unsuspecting face of the Emperor.

The Druid knew the plot. Tomorrow, when Caesar left the arena, he was to be stabbed to death by conspirators in the guards. Men were sick of his tyranny. His smile was knowing, indeed. Well, let Caligula-Tiberius die. He was sick of the cruel master he had taken.

The use he had made of his new life offended the Druidic gods. This the Druid knew from oracle and divination in secret. He longed to return to Britain now and do penance for his sin. Otherwise, it was written in the stars, there was a vengeance awaiting the Druid—a vengeance coming soon. So the Druid smiled, for tomorrow Caligula would be dead.

Caligula smiled, for tomorrow the Druid would be dead. He was sick of the sly, bearded man's tyranny. Besides, he was the only one who knew his secret, and should be destroyed for safety. Now this soft palace life had fattened him, dulled his senses and powers. He no longer feared treachery, and probably did not guard against it. It would be easy to rid himself of this leech, and rule as he desired.

Caligula smiled that night as he poured the powder in the Druid's wine at table. This time, he knew, the Druid was unprepared. There would be no mystic power against poison, no resistance.

And it was true. After a few minutes the bearded Briton suddenly slumped forward in his place. His eyes were glazed in paralysis.

Quickly the guards carried him out. Caligula had arranged it all.

The next day the Emperor took his place in the box at the arena. It was a public holiday. The pleasure-seeking people of Rome crowded the gigantic amphitheater as the trumpets blew for the gladiatorial bouts. It was a splendid show and the crowd cheered, but Caligula-Tiberius waited, brooding, for the moment of his triumph.

Then the arena was cleared of bodies, the floor was sanded, and the cages at the far end opened. The lions!

Women—vestals who had profaned their office—huddled in the center as the tawny beasts bounded forward with ripping claws and rending fangs.

The Emperor's nostrils flared at the scent of blood.

The bugles blew. He leaned forward in his box. This was the moment!

The bulls entered. The wild bulls, the horned bulls, the great bulls that killed lions and tigers here in pitched battles. The bulls that killed not for hunger, but out of sheer savageness. The gigantic bulls with the slashing horns that gored and gored their victims into bloody rags. The bulls!

The crowd roared acclaim, and the bulls bellowed and snorted, angered by the noise. The smiling Emperor rose and dropped his baton.

FROM the entry-way beneath his box proceeded a lone figure, an unarmed, white-bearded man, pushed into the arena *by* the guards. It was the Druid. Still weak from the paralyzing potion, he stumbled into the ring.

The Caesar laughed. What a jest! He'd feed this foe to the bulls, rid himself of an enemy and enjoy the sport at no expense. The Druid was too dazed for tricks.

The unarmed old man faced the bulls at the farther side of the arena—faced one great white bull that saw him now and began to lope purposefully towards him as the crowd cried out. And the Druid shrieked in a voice rising above the crowd's tumult.

"Mabon! It is Great Mabon come to me in vengeance!"

Caesar heard the words with a chill of recollection. Mabon? Yes, the bull-god of the Druids. One of the gods the Druid had feared to offend with wickedness. Caesar laughed again. How apt a death!

"You seek vengeance, Mabon?" screamed the Druid. "Ah, I deserve to die. But not this death, Mabon. I'll take the other, awaiting *him.* Let he that defamed his new life take this death in my stead. Let *him* take it!"

Caesar heard the words above the roaring. And then, he saw the Druid deliberately turn his back to the loping bull—turn his back and face Caesar in the imperial box. His eyes were on Tiberius-Caligula, and for a moment they gleamed, despite weakness, as red and powerfully as of old. They were redder, stronger. The Emperor felt the gaze press him, gripped his baton of office firmly in his hand to give him strength in resisting the terrible pressure of that stare.

Then the Druid whispered swiftly. Caesar saw his lips moving. His own brown eyes fell before that glance and he gripped the baton.

But it was not a baton. It was something cold, and alive, and moving, that crawled about his throat like the stick the Druid had held that day when Tiberius exchanged souls with Caligula.

Red eyes blazed up, and a thing crawled to move with weird swiftness over the Emperor's throat.

Those in boxes near Caesar saw him clutch his neck once. They gazed into the ring and saw the red eyes of the Druid flicker and go out.

A single scream from the old man, muffled by the crowd's howling. But it was the voice of the Emperor in his throat. And then the form of the Druid seemed to crumple for a moment and rise again.

This time the Druid did not stand still.

He ran, shrieking insanely, as the great white bull charged down. He ran, yelling for mercy toward the imperial box. And the bull caught him and hurled him high in the air, so that he twisted as he fell to be caught by the cruel, hooking horns. The horns tore and tore, and the hooves slashed out, and then the bull snorted and stamped on what was left.

All the while the figure of the Emperor remained standing as though whispering a prayer. He no longer clutched his throat, but seemed to smile.

But the Emperor rose suddenly and left his box. Fie knew where the assassins waited, but did not seek an alternative route. Instead he advanced slowly down the aisle, muttering to himself in a low, strange voice. Onlookers later recalled that he spoke in a peculiar hissing tongue, unknown to men. Others whispered that he murmured over and over, “Thank you great Mabon. Thank you. I shall atone.” There is some confusion on this point.

All, however, agree on a strange thing. As the Emperor left the amphitheater they could see that his eyes had changed from their usual dark brown to a *deep, blazing red.*

The Fiddler's Fee

Genius for sale—at a price that could not be repaid in all Eternity.

THE door of the inn swung open and the Devil entered. He was as thin as a corpse, and whiter than the shroud a corpse lies in. His eyes were deep and dark as graves. His mouth was redder than the gate of Hell, his hair was blacker than the pits below. He dressed like a dandy, and he came from a fine coach, but it was assuredly he: Satan, Father of Lies.

The innkeeper cringed. He had no fancy to play host to this emissary from Darkness. The innkeeper trembled under Satan's smile, while his eyes searched Satan's person for signs of a tail, of cloven hoofs. Then he noticed that Satan carried a violin-case.

It was not Satan, then! The innkeeper breathed a silent prayer of relief. It was only momentary. A minute later he was trembling with augmented fear. If this was not Satan, this man who looked like the Devil and carried a violin-case—then it must be——

"Signor Paganini!" whispered mine host.

The stranger inclined his dark head with a slow smile.

"Welcome," quavered the innkeeper, but there was no smile on his face. It was almost as though he preferred confirmation of his first fear rather than this. Satan one could deal with, perhaps—but the child of Satan?

Everyone knew that Paganini was the son of the Devil himself. He looked like the Devil, and many were the diabolical legends concerning his unholy life. He was said to drink, gamble, and love like the Prince of Darkness, and to entertain an equal hatred of all men. Certainly he played like Lucifer—in that case under his arm he carried an instrument of hellish power; a violin whose sublime singing drove all Europe mad.

Yes, even here in this tiny village men knew and feared the strange and terrible legend that had grown up about the destiny of the world's most famed violinist. New and fantastic stories were continually pouring in from Milan, from Florence, from Rome—and half the capitals of the Continent as well. "Paganini murdered his wife and sold her body to Satan."

"Paganini has formed a Society against all God-loving men."

"Paganini's mistresses are offered in the Black Mass."

"Paganini's music is written by the very fiends of Hell."

"Paganini is the son of the Devil." Legends these might be, but the atrocious conduct attributed to the *maestro,* that was fact His scandalous amours, his disgraceful attitude toward the great and the nobility had been confirmed time and time again. Gossip, slander, malice these things were in part. But one shining truth remained.

No one had ever played the violin like Nicolo Paganini.

Therefore the innkeeper bowed despite his fear. He sent a lad to change horses and serve the driver of the coach, ushered *Signor* to the best room, and awaited his presence in the parlor of the inn with a carefully prepared table.

Another awaited his presence as well—the inkeeper's son, also called Nicolo.

Young Nicolo knew even more about the great man than his father. The lad knew more about the violin than anyone in the village, with the exception of Carlo, the vine merchant's son. Both boys had studied at tire local conservatory since early childhood, and there was keen rivalry between them; between their families, each of whom fostered the budding genius of their heirs.

Now Nicolo awaited his glimpse of the great man. What a triumph over Carlo! What a thing to talk about in weeks to come! Perhaps he, Nicolo, might even speak to the illustrious musician—might, if the saints were kind, receive a word in return. But that was almost too much to hope for. Paganini was not interested in boys. Still, Nicolo was determined to see him; he did not fear the legends. So the lad waited, working on the preparations for the meal in the kitchen with his sensitive ears attuned to the sound of footsteps on the stairs above.

They came.

PAGANINI sat in solitary splendor at the great table of the inn. No other customers were present to stare at the great man, and he seemed oddly content to be alone—he who loved applause, adulation, obeisance. His thin, hawk-like face—singularly Satanic in the lamp-light it was—cast a black blurred shadow on the wall behind. His carefully curled hair rose in two horn-like projections against that shadow, so that the innkeeper noticed it as he entered, and nearly spilled the wine.

Paganini ate and drank sparingly—as fiends do. He said never a word, nor did he exhibit the humanity of smile or scowl. When he had finished, he sat back and seemed to stare into the candle-flame.

It was as though his eyes turned homeward to Hell.

The innkeeper left the room, crossing himself. This silent guest was indeed a son of Satan! In the passage he came upon Nicolo, staring at the pale violinist.

“No, no!—come away,” the father whispered. “You must not.”

But Nicolo, moving as one entranced, entered the parlor. A voice that was unlike any his father had heard came almost mechanically from his throat.

“Good evening, *Signor Paganini.”*

The eyes left the flame, after partaking of their glare. A long, deliberate glance pierced Nicolo’s face like a dark lance.

“The whelp knows my name. Well!”

“I have heard much of you, *Signor.* Who in Italy does not know the name of Paganini?”

“And—fear it,” said the violinist, gravely.

“I do not fear you,” answered the boy, slowly. His eyes did not fall when the *maestro* smiled his wolfish smile.

“Yes?” The voice purred. “Yes; that is right. You do not fear me. I feel that. And—why?”

“Because I love Music.”

“Because he loves Music,” parroted Paganini, cruelly mimicking the intonations until the statement stood naked in its triteness. Then, slowly, as the stare came again: “But you do love Music, boy. I feel it—strange.”

A hand reached out, a pale ghost of a hand with great sinews that hinted at delicate strength, however paradoxical that might seem. The hand gestured Nicolo to a seat. The hand poured wine into a glass. The hand drummed on the table slowly.

“Do you play?”

“Y-yes, *maestro.”*

“Play for me, then.”

Nicolo raced to his room. The beloved violin rested against his heart as he ran back.

“It is such a poor thing, *maestro.* It does not sing——”

“Play.”

Nicolo played. He never remembered what he played that night; he only knew that it came to him, and he played as he never had played before.

And the face of Satan smiled through the music.

Nicolo stopped. Paganini asked his name. He answered. Paganini asked of his teacher, his practice, his plans. Nicolo answered all questions. And then Paganini laughed. The innkeeper, listening in his turn in the passageway, shuddered when he heard that laugh.

It was a laugh that cracked through the earth and came up from Hell. It was the laugh of a sobbing violin played by a fallen angel in the Pit.

“Fools!” shouted the *maestro.*

Then he stared at Nicolo. Something inside the lad begged him to turn away. But as he had before, the boy returned the stare, until the master musician spoke.

“What can I say? Should I advise you to go to a good teacher, buy a better violin? Should I even give you money for that purpose? Yes, but to what end? You have the gift, but you will never use it.”

Paganini sneered.

“You may be competent. You may even win small fame, a certain amount of success. But true greatness you cannot achieve through teacher or instrument or training. You must be inspired—as I was.”

Nicolo stood trembling, he knew not why. There was a horrible conviction in the words he heard. It frightened him, that hint of certain authority, of final knowledge.

“A man must compose his own work, play his own work,” the voice went on. “And no human teacher can give you that gift.”

Suddenly Paganini stood up.

“My pardon. I forgot. I came to this place because I have an—appointment nearby. I cannot keep my—the one I must see—waiting. I shall go now. But thank you for your playing.”

Nicolo’s face fell. He was convinced that in a moment or so more the *maestro* would have revealed something to him which he very much wanted to know. For Nicolo felt as Paganini did about his work. He knew that within him lay great talent; knew that any ordinary training would subdue that talent in channels of mere mechanical perfection. There was a bond between his humble self and the greatness of the master before him. And if only Paganini had spoken! Now it was too late!

The black cloak swirled as the violinist went to the door. Then in a rush of ebony Paganini swept back the garment as he turned.

“Wait.”

He stared, and Nicolo felt his soul lifted and examined and torn and probed by the red-hot pincers of Paganini’s eyes.

“Come with me. We shall keep our appointment together.”

An almost audible gasp issued from the passageway at the end of the room. Nicolo knew it came from his father, listening. But he did not care. As the door swung against darkness, he moved to the musician's side. They left together.

"I will apprentice you this night to a true Master," Paganini whispered.

2

IT WAS a long walk up the mountainside to the Cave of Fools. The road was lonely in the midnight, but then it was always lonely, for men hereabouts feared the Cave. The Devil was said to dwell in its mists, and the Cave itself was unexplored by those who deemed its depths led down to Tartarus itself.

It was a long and lonely walk, and the way "Was strange amidst winding paths and twisting passages of rock; yet Paganini never faltered. He had walked this way before.

Now, the bony hand gripped Nicolo's brown fingers in an icy clasp so filled with cold, inhuman strength that the lad shuddered. But he followed through the steam and mist and fog that hid the clean light of the stars; followed to the mouth of the Cave as though impelled by the magic of Paganini's voice.

For the *maestro* spoke all that way, and spoke without reticence. Sensing a kindred soul, he revealed.

"They say I am a spawn of the Devil, and that is a lie. All my life they told me so—even my father, cursed fool! In the academies my fellow-students made the sign of the horns at me and the girls fled screaming.

"They screamed at me, who lived for Music and Beauty! But at first I did not care. I lived for my work, and I worked hard. Always I felt within me that spark, glowing to a flame.

"And then when I made my first appearances, I came again into the world of men. My music was acclaimed, but I was hated. 'Child of the

Devil' they called me, because I was ugly, and my temper bad. I tried again to drown myself in work, but this time it no longer sufficed, because I knew my playing was not good enough. I had genius, but I could not express it. "After a while one begins to reason.

My work was not enough. The world hated me. 'Child of the Devil?' Why not?

"I knew the way. I studied. I read the old forbidden books I found in the great libraries of Florence. And I came here. There is a legend of Faust, you know.

"There are ways of meeting Powers that grant things to men in return for an exchange."

They entered the Cave now, and when Nicolo's hands trembled at the words the musician's grip tightened.

"Do not fear, lad. It is worth the cost. Thirteen years ago tonight I was just such a lad as you; perhaps a bit older. I came this way alone, and with the same fears. And it was well.

"When I came forth I had within me the gift I craved. Since that time, you know, all the world knows, my story. Fame, wealth, beautiful women—all earthly success is mine to command. But more than that; greater than that, is my Music. I learned to compose, and to play. They say His songs moved the angels and the stars. I have that gift. And you, who know, love, and have born within you, Music—you shall this night partake of the same gift."

NICOLO wanted to run, to get out of this deep cavern where the steam swirled in fantastic shapes. Fie wanted to make the sign of the cross as he heard the bubbling and the booming from the depths ahead. And then a curious picture came to his mind—the vision of Carlo Zuttio, the wine-merchant's son. Carlo went to the conservatory, and he was a fool. But he had a better violin, and private lessons, so that he played more masterfully than Nicolo. And his parents were wealthy, and they boasted to Nicolo's father of their son and his music. The whole town knew that Carlo would go on to the big school in Milan. Fie, Nicolo, would not go on—he would remain and take over the inn, and sometime when he was old and fat he might play at country weddings for drinks. Carlo would be rich and famous, and wear silk when he returned to visit. Nicolo would no longer be a rival, then; merely a country innkeeper.

It was this vision, and no love of Music that came to Nicolo in the bowels of the earth. It was this vision that made him smile and follow Paganini as they advanced into the heart of the hot smoke and knelt upon the stones in the darkness.

Then Paganini called a Secret Name and the earth thundered. He made a sign not of the cross, and he prayed in a voice that was black and crawling.

Then the mists grew red and the thundering swelled, and Nicolo was formally introduced to his Teacher.

3

PAGANINI had been crafty. It was a bargain. Three years for him, and no more; where Paganini had gained thirteen. But the other ten years went to the *maestro* as payment for leading the way. It was a fair arrangement; a business arrangement.

That was what shocked Nicolo more than anything else when he returned home. It had all been so business-like. There was behind it a terrible hint of purpose; the Power knew what it was doing—there was no aimlessness, no blind evil. It was all so *arranged.*

Three years.

But there was singing in Nicolo’s heart, singing which over-rode the sound of his father’s quavering prayers, singing which rose to triumphant heights when he played at the conservatory the next afternoon.

“Paganini taught me,” is all that Nicolo would say when the faculty exclaimed. “Paganini taught me,” Nicolo told Carlo with a smile.

The singing rose higher as the weeks Nicolo, who read notes poorly, composed.

Nicolo improvised.

The faculty bought him a new violin, and on the festival day it was Nicolo who appeared as soloist with tire orchestra from Venice; though Carlo was second in competition for the post.

Nicolo won the scholarship and went to Milan.

His father prayed but said nothing. Paganini did not write, but word came of his triumphs in France.

In Milan, Nicolo was a sensation at the school. Carlo came too, his parents paying his tuition; and Carlo was successful. He studied hard, worked diligently, played expertly.

But Nicolo's soaring tones were born of inspiration within. He was mastering a technique against which mere practise could not compete.

Through the year it was a constant competition between the two country boys—Nicolo and Carlo. The whole school knew it Nicolo had the talent. Carlo had the ambition. The battle for perfection was deadly.

Nicolo was aging. His face was already maturing in set lines, and the color had left it set and harsh. It was whispered that his nights were spent in study that left him wasted.

The truth was that Nicolo's nights were spent in fear. He was remembering the tryst in the Cave of Fools, and he was anticipating the days to come. Only two years now—and so much to do!

He had been a fool. But Paganini's personality had overshadowed his own, dominated it. He had been led. He knew that now. Paganini had wanted a dupe, so that he might make such a bargain and extend his own life at the expense of another's. That is why he had taken Nicolo. Nicolo often wondered just what might have happened had Paganini gone alone to his accounting. He wondered, because in two years he must go—and there would be no dupe for him.

Two years! Nicolo would toss on his pillow and shudder at the thought. He could not hope to do what Paganini had done in thirteen. He could not win much but initial acclaim; none of the fame and the riches would be his in so short a time. But one thing he could do—beat his rival, Carlo.

Nicolo hated Carlo now. He hadn't used to hate him. They had been rivals, but friendly enough. Ever since that night in the Cave of Fools Nicolo had hated.

Carlo was keeping up. Nicolo found that his work came to him almost effortlessly. His hands moved without thought along the bow, and his fingering seemed undirected. There was no triumphant thrill for him in his music, no sense of mastery in his easy playing.

Carlo had this, because Carlo had to work and sweat to compete, and when he did so he felt satisfied. Moreover, aided by no supernatural gift, Carlo *was* competing too closely for comfort.

And the school liked Carlo. The teachers knew his work and praised him for it. They did not praise Nicolo because they could not understand his methods. He puzzled them.

The other pupils liked Carlo. He had money, and he was generous. He bought sweets for his friends, laughed with them at their parties. Nicolo had no money for sweets, no fine clothes for parties. The pupils were in awe of him, and they distrusted his face.

Carlo was handsome, too. The girls liked Carlo. Even Elissa liked him. And that added to the agony of Nicolo's nights.

4

ELISSA'S hair was yellow flame on a pillow. Elissa's eyes were the jewels on the breast of Passion. Elissa's mouth was a red gateway to delight. Elissa's arms were——

It was no use. Nicolo couldn't think of anything more poetic. All he knew was that Elissa burned within him at all times. Her beauty was like a lash across his naked heart.

Actually, Elissa Robbia was a very pretty blond student, but Nicolo was in love and Youth knows only a goddess.

Elissa walked with Carlo, and she went to parties with him, and they danced at the festival together. Throughout the second year they were together always.

Always Nicolo watched from the corner. Once or twice he spoke to the object of his worship, but she did not seem to notice him, despite his efforts to be ingratiating. She preferred the handsome Carlo.

So Nicolo worked. He outplayed Carlo, though it was not easy now. Despite Nicolo’s secret power, Carlo seemed inspired by love. Carlo followed his most difficult trills, mastered every detail of the well-nigh flawless technique which Nicolo mastered.

Still, Nicolo triumphed always in the end. The better teachers were now confounded by tire spectacle of their two notable students. Often outsiders witnessed performances. The Opera sent conductors down to listen, and notables from all over the South attended the salons in local aristocratic homes when the star pupils played.

Nothing was said officially, but it was understood that one or the other of the boys would be groomed for concert debut within the year.

Both of them knew it, though they no longer spoke to each other. Both of them worked frantically. The final concert of the season would decide; they suspected that. Both had been asked for a performance of some solo composition.

Nicolo went to work a month in advance. What took place in his dark room will never be known, but he emerged with what he felt was a true masterpiece. He had worked as never before. He would win, he would shame Carlo before them all; shame him before Elissa.

He could hardly wait for the night.

The stage of the school was lighted and the house was filled with those of a station to allow their jewels to reflect that fight. Rumor had passed, and in the audience were musical notables from all Italy. And the Master was there, too—yes, the great Paganini himself! Come to watch Nicolo, his former pupil, they said.

What a triumph! Nicolo shivered with ecstasy, fondling his violin as he waited in the wings for the solos to end. Tonight he would appear before Paganini himself when he took victory over his rival. Nothing could make his happiness more complete!

Where was Carlo, by the way? He had not appeared in the wings as yet.

But—there he was—*in the audience! With Elissa.*

What did this mean?

A number ended. The director was announcing his name.

“Unfortunately the soloist who was to compete with Signor Nicolo this evening, Carlo Zuttio . . .”

What was that?

“Resigned from the school . . .”

Yes?

“Marriage to . . .”

Married! To Elissa!

He had done that, knowing he would lose tonight he’d given up music, retired to his father’s business, and married Elissa. And now he had arranged for it to be announced, to rob Nicolo of his victory! Bitter despair rose in Nicolo’s heart, and black anger.

But when his name was called he stepped forth and played.

He played his number, but it was not the original he had planned. For now he improvised; or rather, hate improvised for him. Hate tore at the strings, plucked frenetically at a flayed violin.

And waves of horror crept through the house.

Through red mists, the black eyes of Paganini blazed, the smile dropped from Carlo’s face, the lips of Elissa grew pale. Nicolo saw *her* eyes grow blank, and poured his music into them. She had never noticed him before, eh? Well, she would not forget him now—not this, and *this.*

Swooping to Hell, spiraling to Heaven, shrieking and whispering of damnation and glory, the violin sang accompaniment to dark voices that yammered in Nicolo’s brain.

Nicolo had no arms, no fingers. He was all violin. His body was part of the instrument, his brain a part of the song. Both were being played by *Another.*

He finished.

Silence.

Then the thunder.

And while he bowed and smiled and the sound tore at his ear-drums, his eyes blazed into Elissa’s empty face through the standing crowd.

Nicolo had won and lost tonight. But he would win again.

5

THEY came to him after the concert.

They offered him money, for private study.

In a year, they said, he would come back and perform in a solo concert at the school.

Nicolo accepted the money gravely. It was supposed that he would use that money to spend his year in Rome, working under the great *maestri* as a private pupil.

But Nicolo had other plans. He knew that Carlo and Elissa would return to the village, and he meant to follow them there. He thanked the directors of the school and prepared to depart.

In the hallway stood a cloaked figure. It was Paganini.

Without a word the pale genius took Nicolo’s hand, just as he had that night two years before. Together they walked the dark streets.

“You played well tonight, my son. They said your music was like Paganini’s.” Pie smiled. “And well it might be, since we study under the same Master.”

Nicolo shuddered.

“Do not fear. In a year’s time you shall have had all the fame and glory you desire. The world will bow before your power. That is as you desired, no?”

“No.” Nicolo shook his head. “I shall not study and I shall not go to Rome. My desire lies elsewhere.” He told Paganini of Carlo and Elissa. The *maestro* listened.

“So you return to the village, eh? Well, if it is that what you seek, I am sure you will be aided in your quest. Do not despair.”

Nicolo sighed.

“I am afraid of that aid. This music—this playing—it is not a part of me. It comes from other sources, and I feel no satisfaction in stirring my listeners. Carlo and Elissa were stirred tonight; but it was the music that did it, not myself. Don’t you understand?”

A cold whisper bit through the darkness as Paganini spoke.

“Yes, I understand, perfectly; but you do not. Tonight you played through hate, and there was hate in the hall. *But when you go to Elissa, you will play through love.* She will be stirred. For our Master is eminently successful in amours. Let your violin speak and she shall become yours.”

“But what of him? What of Carlo?”

“Again, let your violin speak. It has a voice that drives men mad. *Let him hear that voice.”*

A slow laugh crawled out of Paganini’s lips.

“I know how it will be. Ah, I know! Years ago I discovered that secret, and well have I used it. Madden the cuckold and woo the mistress, and rejoice in the gift of the Teacher! I envy you your year, my friend. It will be a great triumph for you.”

Nicolo’s heart was pounding.

“You really believe I can do it?” he asked.

“Certainly. You were given the power; let it guide you to your purpose.” Paganini’s voice grew grave. “But it was not of that which I proposed to speak when I awaited you this evening. There is another thing.

"I want to remind you that a year from tonight you have an appointment in the Cave of Fools."

"I am afraid."

"It was a bargain, and you must go."

"What if I do not go?"

"That I cannot speak of. *He* will come for you then, I know it. *He* will revenge himself horribly."

"I wish," and Nicolo's voice was low with hatred, "I wish that I had never met you. You led me to this—tricked me into this infernal bargain! I was a fool, and I should kill you for it."

Paganini stopped and faced the youth. His eyes were ice.

"Perhaps. But think—think of the coming year. You shall win Elissa, and drive Carlo mad. Win Elissa and drive Carlo mad. Win Elissa and drive Carlo mad——"

His voice was like his violin, playing and replaying the same damnable, wheedling trill until it surged through Nicolo's brain.

"Think not of revenge. Go to the Cave of Fools a year from tonight; but first, win Elissa and drive Carlo mad."

Still whispering the words, Paganini turned in the darkness and disappeared. And Nicolo walked the streets, muttering to himself:

"I shall win Elissa and drive Carlo mad."

6

NICOLO did not stay at his father's inn when he returned. He had money now, and he procured rooms in town—rooms below the apartment of the newlywed couple he had followed.

He did not see them for a month. He was in his dark room with the violin. He played in darkness now, for he needed no notes in this composition. He developed only two themes. One was soft and sweet and tender, thrilling was passionate beauty. As Nicolo played, his face would glow in ecstasy and warmth flooded his being.

The second theme slithered out of the darkness. Then it padded. Then it began to run, and leap, and dance. At first it squeaked like a rat, then it howled like a dog, finally it bayed like a black wolf. It was a fiendish howling of terrific power, and when Nicolo played it his hands trembled and he closed his eyes.

For a month Nicolo played the two themes over and over in his tiny room—alone. Not quite alone, for there was a whispering in his brain that prompted each tone, and an unseen hand that guided the bow over the Strings. Nicolo played and played, and he grew thin and gaunt. After a month the music was a part of him, and he was ready . . .

It took him a week to become friendly with his neighbors again. In another week he had learned their habits; knew when Carlo worked at the wine-press and left Elissa alone.

Then, one afternoon, Nicolo visited Elissa. She sat regal in her blond beauty while they talked, and after a while Nicolo suggested that he play something for her. He took out his violin and drew the bow across the strings, eyes on her face.

His eyes never left her face while he played. His eyes feasted on her face as the music feasted on her soul.

The tune came forth, reiterated; in endless variations it rose in soaring rhapsody. And Elissa rose in soaring rhapsody and came toward him, her eyes empty save for the soul-filling majesty of the music.

Then Nicolo put down the violin and took her in his arms.

He came the next day, and the next. Always he brought his violin. Always he played and always she surrendered to the music.

For months Nicolo was happy. For many months he played each day, and his nights ware peaceful at last. Carlo suspected nothing.

Nicolo began to plan. In a little while he would return to Milan for the solo concert. After that he would be famous—go on tour. He had, under the inspiration of his love, written enough to insure his success at the debut. He would take Elissa with him, and together they would scale the heights.

Then he remembered.

He could not go to Milan, or the concert. That night he had an appointment in the Cave of Fools.

Nicolo didn't want to die. He didn't want to give his soul. That cursed bargain!

But there was no way out.

Every day he saw Elissa he longed for life with greater-fervor. Knowing the end was near, he came oftener, took greater and greater chances. He was counting the hours now, the minutes.

Three days before the time appointed he went there in the evening. Carlo would be late at the wine-press, so Nicolo played. Elissa sat there, her face blank as it always was when he played. Sometimes Nicolo would find himself wishing that he had no music to do his wooing—that he himself would inspire such adoration in the woman he loved. But that was too much to hope for; Elissa loved Carlo, and only the music gave her to Nicolo. It sufficed. The spell was strong. Nicolo played tonight as he had never played before, and as the music rose it drowned out the sound of footsteps on the stairs.

Carlo was in the room.

NICOLO stopped playing.

Elissa's eyes opened as though she were wakening from profound depths of sleep.

And Carlo faced them both. He was a big man, Carlo, with strong hands that now opened and closed convulsively at his sides. Carlo's heavy body was lunging across the room and the hands moved for Nicolo's throat.

They never reached it.

Nicolo's delicate hands were on the violin. He began to play.

It was not the love-strain that he played this time. It was the other—the song of madness.

At the sound of the rat-like squeaking Carlo stopped. Nicolo watched him as the shrieking mounted. Carlo's eyes grew wide. The shrieking became a moan. Carlo's wide eyes were growing red. The moaning was a rising bark, a yelp of agony. Carlo's hands went to his head. He stepped back, sank to his knees. Then Nicolo played. The violin screamed, the bow moved up and down upon it like a red-hot poker descending on human flesh. Nicolo played until Carlo lay rolling on the floor, baying in rhythm as the foam poured from his lips. Nicolo played until the room pulsed with horrid sound, until the glass shivered with the vibration and the candlelight wavered and the flame danced in agony. Nicolo played, and then he stopped.

Carlo lay there moaning, and he rose to his knees and looked at Nicolo. Then he looked at Elissa.

Nicolo followed his glance.

Elissa—he had forgotten Elissa! He had played the music of madness and forgotten she was in the room.

Elissa lay where she had fallen and her face was white with the unmistakable whiteness of death. Carlo looked at her and began to laugh.

Nicolo sobbed. Tears rolled down his cheeks.

Husband and lover laughed and sobbed together.

It was all over. She was dead, and he was mad. And two nights from now Nicolo must go to that rendezvous in the Cave of Fools.

So this was Satan's gift! This awful mockery was what it had brought him.

The dead woman lay on the floor as the madman crawled toward her, cackling.

Nicolo rose to go. His bow accidentally scraped the strings. The mad Carlo rose, laughing, and seized the violin. He broke it across the bridge and hurled it from the window.

Still laughing, he turned, but there was no sane hatred in his eyes.

And then the thought came to Nicolo.

"Carlo," he whispered. "Carlo."

The idiot husband laughed.

"Carlo, your wife is dead. But I did not kill her. I swear it. It was the Devil, Carlo. The Devil who dwells in the Cave of Fools. You want to avenge your wife's death, don't you, Carlo? Then seek out the Devil two nights from tonight in the Cave of Fools. Remember, Carlo—two nights from tonight in the Cave of Fools. I will stay with you until then and tell you where to go."

The madman laughed.

Softly, Nicolo repeated his suggestion. He whispered it all that night as the deranged Carlo slept. He whispered it the next day as they sat beside the body of the dead woman. At last, when Nicolo rose to leave on the coach for Milan, he felt that Carlo understood and would go. Smiling, the violinist withdrew, leaving the chuckling lunatic and his dead wife in the dark room.

7

IN THE night of travel Nicolo smiled bitterly but often. It had worked out after all! He would trick Satan then; sending Carlo in his stead. Thus he could play the concert and go on to fame. Poor Elissa was dead, of course, but there were other women to hear the song of love. It was good.

It was good to hear the praise in Milan. His old teachers spoke, his friends gathered around him and whispered of the celebrities who would attend the concert tonight.

Nicolo was so busy that day that he forgot a very important item. Indeed, he had just finished a meal in his dressing-room when he remembered.

Carlo had broken his violin!

Confused by tragedy, by lack of sleep and overmuch planning, it had slipped Nicolo's thoughts. His violin—not a precious instrument to him, for

Nicolo knew that he could produce his music on any violin. Still, it was necessary.

He rose to summon the director, when the door opened. Carlo entered.

Carlo was mad. His eyes glittered and his teeth were bared, but he walked erect. He was able to control himself sufficiently to pass unnoticed, it seemed.

Nicolo, beholding him, nearly froze on the spot. A wave of fear rose chokingly in his throat.

“Carlo—why are you here? Don’t you remember—the Cave of Fools and your appointment?”

Carlo grinned.

“I went last night, Nicolo,” he whispered. “I went last night. Tonight I am here to see you play. You will be playing soon, Nicolo.”

Nicolo stammered wildly. “But—but what did you find in the Cave? I mean—there was One who waited, and he wanted something from you ——?”

Carlo grinned wider.

“Do not trouble yourself. I gave Him what He wanted. It was all arranged last night.”

“You mean that?” Nicolo whispered. *“You gave your soul?”*

“I gave my soul. We made a bargain,” Carlo chuckled.

“Then why are you here?”

“To bring you this. I broke your violin, and tonight you must play.”

Carlo thrust a bundle into Nicolo’s hands. At that moment the prompter entered.

“*Maestro!* The concert is starting. You are wanted on stage. Oh, what a crowd is here for your debut! Ah, there has never been such a tribute—you played but once, a year ago, but they remember and have returned. It is wonderful! But hurry, hurry!”

Nicolo left, and the grinning Carlo followed, standing in the wings as the violinist stepped on the stage. In his confusion, Nicolo unwrapped the parcel and tossed the paper to the wings as he took the violin and bow in his hands and faced the applauding audience.

Nicolo's eyes sparkled. This was triumph!

His heart was light within him. Fame was here, and poor Carlo had settled matters with the Master. He had made a bargain, and that did not concern Nicolo. What concerned him was that he was free, and this was the greatest evening of his life, and he would play as he had never played before.

Automatically he gripped the violin and raised it to his chin. It felt heavy; an ordinary instrument. But it would suffice. Poor Carlo was mad; bringing a violin to the man who had killed his wife!

But—*play.*

Yes, play with the Devil's gift, play the Devil's love-song that won Elissa. Let it win the audience tonight. What matter the violin, or Carlo chuckling in the wings? Play!

NICOLO played. His bow stroked the opening strains of the melody. But a droning arose.

What was wrong?

Nicolo tried to correct his stroke. But his fingers moved automatically. He tried to stop.

But his fingers, his wrist, his arm moved on. He could not stop. The power within him would not swerve. And the droning increased.

This was the song of madness! Nicolo's fingers flew, his arm flailed. He fought, trying to hold back. But the sounds increased. Rats scurried and cluttered and then the hounds of Hell began to bark. Fiends brayed in his brain.

Yes—in *his* brain.

The audience, he dimly realized, was hooting and jeering. They were not being driven mad by the music. *He* was!

Nicolo closed his eyes, clenched his jaw to make the violin slip; and still it played. Fie wanted to think of something else, anything but the music that now shrieked in his skull. A vision of Paganini's satanic face, of Elissa's dead features, of Carlo's mad red eyes, of the black Cave of Fools where he should be tonight—these things swept On wings of horror through his brain. And then the music broke through and Nicolo fiddled madly.

Eyes jerked open and stared down at the violin—at the coarse wood, the peculiar strings, the ghastly bridge glistening with pearly brilliance.

And then the voice of the music screamed the truth to him. Mad Carlo had gone to the Cave of Fools last night, to make a bargain. He had said that, and Nicolo had believed that it meant he was free. But what had that bargain been?

Carlo had sold his soul for vengeance. What could that vengeance be?

That One had told him to make this violin!

And now Nicolo stared at the violin—the violin he was helplessly playing, but which made a music that drove him mad.

Nicolo stared at the coarse wood. He had seen such wood before. Where? *Why did it remind him of El is so?*

The wood was stained red; ghastly red. *Why did the red stain remind him of Elissa?*

Music thundered in Nicolo's ears, and still he played and stared.

The glistening bridge of the violin was pearly. *Why did that bridge remind him of Elissa?*

The bridge grinned up at Nicolo, grinned insanely as Elissa had grinned when she was driven mad by music. The violin tones rose to a shattering crescendo, and Nicolo staggered. His blurring eyes glanced at the golden strings of the violin that were singing his doom. In a burst of ghastly fear he seemed to recognize them.

Why did those strings remind him of Elissa?

And then he understood.

The music he was playing was the music that had driven her to madness, to death. In some way this violin now held her soul.

He was not playing a violin, he was playing her soul, and its madness was pouring out to drive him mad!

He looked down again as the shrieking music rose in his ears, and he saw.

He did not hold a violin in his arms, but the dead body of a woman—the body of Elissa. He was playing on her body, playing on the gray ghost of her body, drawing the bow across long golden strands that he recognized in a final burst of fear that tore his brain to shreds.

Nicolo played her body like a violin and drew the madness out into his own being, and then he recognized the wood, the stain, the bridge, and the horribly familiar strings.

That was why Elissa's soul was in the violin!

Nicolo suddenly began to laugh, insanely, and the music rose to drown out his laughter as he held the horrible thing playing in his arms. Then with a lurch Nicolo fell, face black with agony.

The curtains dropped, the hysterical manager ran to the dead body of the violinist.

Then the madman that was Carlo crept slyly from the wings and crouched over the body, tittering in a shrill voice. He took tire violin from the dead Nicolo's breast and laughed.

His fingers lovingly caressed the wood he had carved from Elissa's coffin, the stain of blood he had drawn from Elissa's body, the pearly teeth on the bridge he had taken from Elissa's throat. And finally, his fingers fell to stroking the long, smooth golden strings on which the music of madness had been played—the long, golden strands of dead Elissa's hair.

Be Yourself

When Imagination Runs Rampant, Eddie Thompson Is Faced By An Eerie Problem of Scrambled Identity!

CHAPTER I

Fair Exchange Is . . .

F. THATCHER VAN ARCHER SAT BEFORE HIS typewriter feeling more and more like Eddie Thompson. As a matter of fact, F. Thatcher Van Archer *was* Eddie Thompson, but that was something F. Thatcher Van Archer did not care to think about. It had taken years for F. Thatcher Van Archer to materialize, resplendent in a purple dressing gown. Years of pulp writing, slick writing, ghostwriting, hack writing, newspaper writing, scenario writing, book writing, and just plain hard slavery before a desk.

Every time a story appeared bearing the byline "F. Thatcher Van Archer," the name of Eddie Thompson grew a little paler behind it. The magic pseudonym acted as a sort of charm, conjuring up a figure beside which the reality gradually faded. And now, on the very pinnacle of the literary heap, wearing his best purple dressing gown, F. Thatcher Van Archer sat in his study and felt just like plain Eddie Thompson again. It was hard.

It was unusual, too. Eddie Thompson had almost forgotten about himself by this time. Ten years of writing, steady work since leaving college, had caused him to identify himself completely with his pseudonym.

Eddie Thompson, on graduation, had been a beardless youth with a pleasant, ordinary face, and a completely self-effacing manner. But in his writing, he was F. Thatcher Van Archer, man of the world, cosmopolite, raconteur. An adventurer, a swashbuckler, a sophisticated, distinguished-looking fellow. At least, that was the impression his stories would convey. And strangely enough, as his success grew, Eddie Thompson gradually adopted the outward characteristics of his literary masquerade.

Eddie Thompson grew a short Vandyke beard. He brushed his hair back from the temples, and eagerly awaited the time those temples would turn aristocratically gray. Eddie Thompson bought the kind of clothes F. Thatcher Van Archer might conceivably wear—English tweed, drape models. He used a cigarette holder and smoked a vile pipe.

When he began making money he moved into the type of "diggings" the worldly Van Archer would naturally live in. By this time he was so wealthy he could carry a cane on the street and get away with it.

And Eddie Thompson learned to talk like F. Thatcher Van Archer, too. After all, he had written like him for ten years. He knew what Van Archer would say and do. He wouldn't act like a timid local boy.

THOMPSON had got away with it, too. His wife, Maizie, had fallen in love with the worldly, bearded author. She probably didn't know that a real Eddie Thompson existed. F. Thatcher Van Archer did all the love-making, and if he plagiarized himself from Eddie Thompson's stories, nobody knew the difference.

F. Thatcher Van Archer was helpful to Eddie Thompson's social life. He made friends a lot easier than the shy ex-college student. Certainly, when he stormed into a publisher's office with his beard bristling, he got better results than a dub author ever could hope for.

Yes, F. Thatcher Van Archer was a great success, and by this time Eddie Thompson had almost forgotten himself, or so he thought. But once in a great while Eddie came back. When F. Thatcher Van Archer sat down at the typewriter and got stuck in the middle of a story, Eddie Thompson came back—to help.

He had come back tonight. Eddie was very much himself as he sat wondering how the devil he ought to finish this confounded mystery. It was scheduled for magazine publication in two months, and he had already pocketed an advance. It was a mess, and Author Van Archer wasn't up to any solution.

So Eddie Thompson had gradually taken shape again, and sweated over the plot difficulties. Eddie Thompson had taken off the necktie that F. Thatcher Van Archer wore, and loosened F. Thatcher Van Archer's belt, and even removed F. Thatcher Van Archer's elegantly polished shoes. In no time at all, Eddie Thompson, by sweating in a most undignified fashion, had worked things out in his crude, blundering way.

And now it was time for F. Thatcher Van Archer to come back, to take over the notes Eddie Thompson had scribbled down, and type them up into the story, using his own familiar, inimitable style. It was time for F. Thatcher Van Archer to snap into existence once more.

But he didn't.

Eddie Thompson just sat there, feeling like Eddie Thompson. A rather foolish feeling, too.

"What the devil is the matter with me?" he muttered. "Heebie-jeebies, I suppose."

His hand went out to the whiskey decanter, then halted. When F. Thatcher Van Archer was nervous, he drank. But Eddie Thompson didn't drink. He ruffled his hair.

Eddie Thompson ruffled his hair. "Maybe it's overwork," he said. "Maybe I need a rest, a vacation." He started down the dim expanse of his beautifully appointed study and shook his head. "Yes, that's it. Maybe I need a vacation."

"Why don't you take one, Eddie?" said a voice.

Eddie Thompson whirled around in his chair as though a bomb had just exploded behind his back. And then he realized he hadn't heard a bomb explode. He had just heard the ticking. Right now he was staring at the bomb explosion.

The bomb explosion was an image of himself, but the image was not the reflection from any mirror.

It was himself that sat there in the chair across the room; himself complete with beard, cigarette holder, purple dressing gown, and gleaming expensive shoes.

“I’ve got ‘em!” muttered Eddie Thompson hoarsely. “The heebie-jeebies!”

“Must you speak so crudely?” said the apparition, with a slight frown of distaste. “Your choice of words astounds me.”

EDDIE THOMPSON was not a little astounded himself. He stared at the hallucination and, still staring, reached for the whiskey decanter. He didn’t bother with a glass.

The apparition stared back. Eddie Thompson took a deep drink that made him blink, but when he opened his eyes the vision had not disappeared.

“Heebee-jeebies,” mumbled the stricken man again.

“You haven’t got the ‘heebee-jeebies’, as you so inelegantly put it,” said the voice. “I’m quite real, you know.”

“I *don’t* know,” said Eddie Thompson.

“How about offering me a drink?” continued the manifestation in the purple dressing gown.

“Sure—help yourself,” said the author. “I—I’d pour for you, but my hands are shaking.” And they were, violently.

The vision poured a drink. Eddie Thompson watched carefully. He saw the whiskey trickle into the glass, saw the glass raised to the lips of the apparition, saw the whiskey disappear with an ever so genteel gulp which moved the Adam’s apple. Then he stared at the whiskey decanter and saw that its contents were indeed diminished.

“I am real,” repeated the hallucination.

Eddie Thompson’s teeth did a tap dance. He had seen the whiskey go down. Now he got up. This—this thing was smoking a cigarette in a holder, the exact duplicate of Eddie Thompson’s holder. Cigarettes are real, and cigarette smoke is a palpable thing. Eddie Thompson got up and stuck one trembling finger through a smoke ring. The ring broke. So did Eddie Thompson’s nerve.

“Who are you?” he gasped.

The apparition arched its eyebrows.

“So?” came the voice. “We get on. Your question admits that you believe in my reality, that I am actually somebody, and not a figment of your imagination.”

Thompson nodded. “Yes,” he quavered. “But *who* are you?”

“I?” said the man in the purple dressing gown. “Why, I am F. Thatcher Van Archer.”

Eddie Thompson’s natural pride rose to the surface. He bridled.

“Like hell you are!” he grated. “J am F. Thatcher Van Archer.”

The apparition smiled.

“You mean you *were* F. Thatcher Van Archer,” the voice corrected. “But I am he now. You are just Eddie Thompson.”

“But—but—”

“Look at yourself and see,” suggested the bland voice.

Eddie Thompson rose and lurched to the mirror. There the second bomb went off.

Eddie Thompson, the man with the beard in the purple dressing gown, was no more. Instead he stared at a picture from ten years back—a picture of Eddie Thompson, the clean-shaven college graduate. The features, unadorned by chin foliage, were much the same, but they wore a fresher, more youthful look.

“It can’t be—”

Eddie Thompson was staring at his clothes. The *Kampus Kut* clothes of a college boy, *circa* 1930.

“My clothes—where are my clothes?” he muttered.

"I'm wearing them," said the voice. "Why shouldn't I? They're F. Thatcher Van Archer's clothes!"

"Mad as I am, I couldn't have traded clothes with you without knowing it," said Eddie Thompson. "And I couldn't have shaved off my beard."

"Now you're being sensible," said the figure in purple.

Eddie Thompson turned and subjected the speaker to an intense scrutiny.

"Yes, yes—you are me," he sighed.

"I am F. Thatcher Van Archer," corrected the other. "What's up?"

FOR Eddie Thompson, ruffling his hair into a dust-mop thatch, was spluttering incoherently.

"I untied that tie," he gibbered, "and I unlaced those shoes five minutes ago. And now they're tied and laced again."

"Of course," said F. Thatcher Van Archer. "You untied them. But Author Van Archer doesn't do things in that sloppy fashion. So consequently, they are rearranged."

"There *is* no F. Thatcher Van Archer," Thompson insisted, despairingly. "You're me, and I'm talking to myself."

"I was you five minutes ago," said the stranger. "But I'm not you any longer, my friend. In those five minutes I've been created, just as out there"—and he gestured grandly toward the stars beyond the window—"new worlds have been created in the last five minutes and old worlds have died a flaming death."

Again Thompson blinked. He recognized in these words his own grandiloquently literary style. Van Archer's style, rather.

"But how?" he said weakly.

"How? Who knows? How were those stars created in that time? What is the secret of your own creation? Who understands the life force, the creative urge?"

"But I can't be two people," objected Eddie Thompson.

“My dear boy, of course you can’t. That’s just why I’m here. You have been trying to be two people for ten years, and it doesn’t work. Sooner or later we had to separate. It happened five minutes ago. Now you’re what you always were—Eddie Thompson. I am what you created—F. Thatcher Van Archer.”

The bearded man smiled.

“Oh, it sounds strange, I admit, but don’t take it so hard. After all, you have created me, you know. I suppose you might say I’m a product of your psychic forces. For ten years you’ve tried in every way to make yourself into a different man. You’ve lived, breathed, thought in terms of that man. F. Thatcher Van Archer has been on your mind night and day. You even changed your appearance to look like him, changed your habits and personality in accordance with what his tastes would be. To the world you were that person, and not yourself.

“Who wrote all your stories? F. Thatcher Van Archer. Who made your money? Van Archer. Who made your friends? Van Archer. Whom did your wife marry? Author Van Archer. Who worked fourteen hours a day, intensely; who did all your actual living, you might say, for ten years? F. Thatcher Van Archer! Is it a wonder, then, that there is such a person? The real miracle is that there still exists an Eddie Thompson.”

“Oh, now *I’m* not real? snapped the baffled man. “Not content with stealing my body and my soul, you’ve even got to deny me the right of my own existence!”

“No,” Van Archer said slowly. “No one can be denied that right. I suppose that’s why this happened. You were denying yourself, by pretending to be me. We had to become separate identities, before your true self was lost. Another drink?”

Eddie Thompson poured his drink, and took one himself. F. Thatcher Van Archer drank slowly, with an appreciative smile.

"THE creative impulse is a strange thing," he mused. "Who can say exactly what goes on in the mind when it creates? What forces are really invoked when a man makes a picture out of canvas and oils, when he plays music, or writes a novel?"

"That's merely assembling things," Eddie Thompson was forced to say. "You don't really create anything except a picture in the minds of those who are affected by your work."

"What is reality?" snapped Van Archer. "You, yourself, are just a picture, an image in the minds of your friends, your public. You are no more real than a character they read in a book. And in ten years you've made F. Thatcher Van Archer more real than yourself. He is stronger than you are. Look."

He tossed the bankbook on the table. F. Thatcher Van Archer had a bank account in his name.

"Look."

He indicated the row of books by the distinguished author, F. Thatcher Van Archer. He tapped F. Thatcher Van Archer's monogrammed stationery on the table, the calling cards. He pulled out a handkerchief and delicately blew his nose, indicating the lacy initials of "F. T. Van A."

"Oh, I'm real, all right," he concluded.

"Yeah," said Eddie Thompson. "Yeah, I guess you are." He was seized by a sudden thought. "But look here, this whole thing must be stranger to you than it is to me. Why aren't you excited?"

Van Archer smiled. "Haven't you forgotten that I'm a man of the world?" he reminded. "I'm a sophisticate. Nothing startles me—thanks to you. No, it's you, my boy. You're the callow, unsophisticated one. The college boy. And that's my problem now."

"What problem?"

"Why, what to do with you, of course. Obviously, you can't go on living here, you know."

"What?"

"Well, look, Thompson. From now on, I'm you. I've got your beard, your clothes, your name. I'm the author, am I not? I'm the one your public reads, your publisher consults with, your wife knows, your friends are familiar with. And you're now an ordinary college lad. Why, nobody knows you! This is my house, don't you see? I bought it and paid for it, and I can't have you hanging around."

"Thatcher!"

"Good Lord, my wife!" said Eddie Thompson, and no revue blackout gag line was ever more enthusiastically delivered.

"Your wife?" said Van Archer. *"My* wife!"

He didn't have time to say more, because Maizie entered the room.

CHAPTER II

No Robbery

MAIZIE VAN ARCHER was a blonde with brunette eyes and a redhead's temper. She was the kind of woman Eddie Thompson would have liked to marry, but couldn't. The kind of woman who was attracted by a sophisticate like F. Thatcher Van Archer. Eddie Thompson had always been Van Archer to her.

Secretly he was afraid of Maizie. But now, surely she would stand by him when he explained. Surely, after ten years of married life, she would recognize her own husband despite his disguise.

With an imploring look in his eyes, Eddie Thompson watched the pretty woman as she entered the room.

"Oh, Thatcher, I've been so worried about you," she cooed.

And walked straight into the arms of the man in the purple dressing gown!

“Did you work out your story?” she coaxed, snuggling up against the beard coyly.

“Well, not exactly,” said F. Thatcher Van Archer. “You see, darling, I’ve had company.”

“Oh!”

Maizie whirled around and stared at Eddie Thompson. Thompson braced himself. Surely she would recognize him. She must!

But there was no comprehension in her eyes. She regarded him quite coolly.

Was this Van Archer creature really going to do it? Was he actually in a position to throw Eddie Thompson out of his own home? That was the question.

Eddie Thompson smiled inwardly. Well, here it was. It would be rather awkward for this imposter to explain who he was, and how *he* came to be here.

Van Archer was speaking again.

“Yes, I’ve had company, dear,” he repeated. “He sneaked around the back way to surprise me. Darling, I want you to meet my brother Steve, from California.”

“Your brother?” Maizie’s blue eyes opened.

“Of course. My kid brother. Don’t you notice the family resemblance?”

Eddie Thompson winced. What a brain this fellow had! Thought of everything, even a possible resemblance. He himself could not have doped that out, might have concocted a weak story about a “friend.” But Van Archer was clever. Of course he was. Hadn’t Eddie Thompson made him that way?

“So you’re Thatcher’s baby brother, are you?” Maizie advanced upon him with a charming smile. “Came up to surprise him, did you? Of course you’ll be in town for awhile?”

“As a matter of fact, Thatcher has invited me to stay here,” said Eddie Thompson. “Of course, if it’s convenient.”

He flashed a covert grin of triumph in the direction of Van Archer, who scowled and turned away. Good! He had played that one right, anyway.

"Certainly we can put you up," Maizie said promptly. "We have lots of guest rooms, haven't we, dear? Where is your luggage?"

"Haven't got any luggage," said Eddie Thompson, desperately. "You see—I'm bumming my way around the country." It was lame, but necessary.

"Oh, like Jim Tully! You write too, I suppose? Thatcher has such interesting friends, I think—and I just knew his family would be that way too!"

Maizie seemed delighted, although Van Archer scowled.

"I'll wear Thatcher's clothes," said Eddie Thompson. "They always used to fit me. Eh, Thatcher?"

"Unless I've outgrown you," said the author, acidly. "I might have, you know." There was pointed irony in his tones.

"We'll see," said Thompson.

"Well, you must be tired," prattled Maizie. "I'll put you up right away. You're tired too, Thatcher. We'd better turn in early. You have to see your publisher tomorrow, you know."

She led the men down the hall and into a guest bedroom, indicating the conveniences to "brother Steve," who hated that damned guest room, hated to use guest towels, and was more than a little worried about F. Thatcher Van Archer and his wife. If only he could get Maizie off alone somewhere, and explain! Surely he could make her understand.

But Van Archer was too clever for that. He flung a pair of pajamas at his "brother" and herded Maizie out of the room.

"Good night," called the woman, from the doorway. "Hope you sleep well."

"If there's anything I can do for you," said Van Archer, "just let me know."

"Drop dead!" said Eddie Thompson under his breath, but they had closed the door.

He could hear the two sets of footsteps receding down the hall, and he heard them all night, even through his troubled dreams. Eddie Thompson did not sleep well that night, but then, as he later remarked, he wasn't feeling quite himself at the time . . .

Thompson was at the mirror the moment the sun entered his room. It had all been a nightmare, a lobster-and-ice-cream fantasy. Of course it had.

But as the image met his eyes, hope left them. For there was bare-faced Eddie Thompson, the young college graduate, goggling at himself with a look of stupefied resignation.

"It's true, then," he muttered, turning away from the baffling reflection, and ruffling his hair a la Harpo Marx.

AS he bathed and dressed, his mind worked swiftly. Surely there was something he could do about this, strange as the situation was. He had to do something—had to get rid of Van Archer before Van Archer got rid of him. Because that was what it amounted to. The author had as much as told him he was going to stay, and that meant Eddie Thompson was going out on the street very shortly, unless he could manage things otherwise.

There must be a way to expose Van Archer for the fake he was. Thompson scowled. He had built up his outer personality so completely and so cleverly, with so few weaknesses—but he had to discover a weakness somewhere. Van Archer was clever and would lose no time. So it behooved Eddie Thompson to hasten in outsmarting him.

It was with this resolve that he went down to breakfast, entering the dining room to find a smiling Maizie already seated at the table, doing things to toast. She looked up and greeted him, and Thompson half bent down to kiss her before he remembered.

"Hello, Steve," she called.

"What—who—huh?" said Thompson, baffled. "Oh, sure. Hello, hon—I mean, hello, Maizie."

Maizie's blue eyes clouded in sudden concern.

"Aren't you feeling well?" she asked solicitously. "You're not having one of your spells, are you?"

"My what?" muttered the perplexed man.

Maizie colored. "I'm sorry," she said. "But Thatcher told me last night. You needn't worry about my knowing."

"Knowing?" Thompson dropped his spoon.

"Why, yes. He explained everything. About how you were—were dropped on the head by that awful nurse when you were a boy, and how ever since you get those—"

Maizie paused to pat the man on the back, for he was strangling over his egg.

"He told you I was dropped—*hack-hack*—on my head, did he?" sputtered Thompson. "He did—*hoop-hoop*—eh?"

"Of course," prattled the woman. "It's all in the family, isn't it?" Maizie was not the tactful type. "He said that's why you wander around the country so much by yourself when these spells come on, and sometimes you sign those checks."

"I sign checks, do I?" parroted Eddie Thompson, grimly.

"Oh, I'm not blaming you for it," consoled Maizie. "I'm sure that if I was dropped on my head I might get to thinking I was Admiral Byrd sometimes, myself. Or Major Bowes, or Tyrone Power. You know"—she favored him with a dazzling smile—"you do look something like Tyrone Power at that. I wonder how Thatcher would look with his beard shaved off."

Eddie Thompson tore a piece of toast into forty-six irregular pieces.

"Though how you ever got the notion you were Father Divine I just can't imagine," continued the artless Maizie. "Perhaps your face was grimy at the time. You must tell me all about it when we have more leisure."

"I'm sure my dear—ah—brother will be more than glad to slip you the details," said Thompson, savagely. "Just what else did he speak of?"

"Oh, nothing, really. He was just explaining these things to me in case you did happen to have one of your spells. He said nothing was impossible

—that you might even start thinking you were *him,* for example."

"I might start thinking I was him," muttered the man. "I see."

"Of course you needn't worry, now that it's all explained. I wouldn't take you seriously, of course."

"I'm sure you wouldn't," said Eddie Thompson, spilling his coffee.

"My, you're nervous today," Maizie observed. "You aren't having much breakfast."

"I'm having it, all right," sighed "brother Steve."

"Having it all over my lap."

Maizie laughed, and favored him with a ravishing glance, under which Thompson colored and turned away.

SO that was it! Thatcher hadn't wasted time. Knowing Thompson might try to convince his wife of the facts, he had concocted the insanity angle quickly and adroitly. Very neat. Damn it, why had he made F. Thatcher Van Archer so clever?

"Now I know how Frankenstein must have felt," he whispered.

"Ooh!" squealed Maizie. "You say you feel like Frankenstein? How thrilling!"

Thompson looked on his wife with something akin to awe. What a woman! Why did she have to be so credulous, so *interested* in everything? Still, that was one of the reasons he had married her. Or rather, one of the reasons F. Thatcher Van Archer had married her.

"Where is my dear brother today?" asked Thompson.

"Oh, he's in his study, I suppose, getting things ready to go in to town. He has to see his publisher today, you know."

"Yes, the new novel contract," said Thompson, absent-mindedly.

"What?" Maizie's eyes opened wide. "But that's a secret! How did you know that?"

Thompson decided to play a long chance. He stared at his wife intently. His lips curled in a knowing smile—the kind of thing F. Thatcher Van

Archer would have found beneath his dignity, but which plain Eddie Thompson could do with a certain reckless abandon.

"Because I'm crazy," said Thompson, grinning. "You see, when I was dropped on my head, I became psychic."

"You mean you can read people's minds?"

"Yes, exactly." Thompson allowed himself a burning gaze. "For example, by looking at you I can tell that you like to wear pink lingerie, only that booby brother of mine thinks it's too commonplace, and makes you buy black. I know that you like Benny Goodman, but my brother insists that you listen to Prokofieff and Stravinsky. I know that you have wanted to go out to the beach and ride the roller coaster for the past three years, but my brother makes you stay in town and ride penthouse elevators to stupid parties."

Thompson smiled.

"It's true, isn't it?"

Maizie stared, entranced.

"Yes," she whispered. "Yes, it's true—but you really shouldn't talk about Thatcher that way. He—he's a genius."

"He's a horse's neck," said Eddie Thompson, pressing his advantage. "And you know it."

A look of sudden pain creased the woman's face.

"I don't know," she said, suddenly serious. "I don't know. When I married Thatcher he was a little different. Younger, somehow—more like you. Of course he never showed it, with that beard and dignity and all, but I was hoping—I thought—once we were married, he'd relax, and be human. He is human underneath all that front, I know he is! Only it never came out, that's all. He just got stuffier and stuffier, and he wears that silly cane and prances up and down in a purple dressing gown, and all the while I wish from the bottom of my heart he'd shave off that stupid beard and just be himself.

Maizie leaned forward toward Eddie Thompson.

“I know I’m just a plain, dumb female,” she said. “I don’t understand geniuses or authors or writers or anything like that. But what I want is a husband, not a—what you might call a screwball!”

CHAPTER III

A Common Need

EDDIE THOMPSON sat aghast. The way this woman talked about him was dreadful. But in another sense, it was just what he wanted. He had never dreamed that Maizie felt that way, but if she did—

“Maizie,” he purred sweetly. “Maizie, it’s not too late. You’re young, beautiful. You have many years of happiness yet. I’d like to share them with you, Maizie. I think we could have fun together.”

And casting dignity to the winds, Eddie Thompson crawled up on the dining room table and lay there, putting his arms around the startled woman’s neck, and kissing her most violently, without impediment of beard. He hadn’t kissed a woman without his beard for ten years, and Maizie had not been kissed by a beardless man in that time. Both of them found it a definitely pleasant experience.

But F. Thatcher Van Archer did not.

“What goes on here?” snapped the eminent author, entering the room.

Eddie Thompson got off the table so quickly he broke three dishes. He stood up with some dignity and wiped a piece of toast from the seat of his pants.

“Maizie got something in her eye,” he hurriedly explained. “I was just trying to work it out for her.”

"Through her mouth, I should suppose," observed Van Archer. "Maizie, will you please wipe that butter off your elbow and get my briefcase? I'll be late."

"Yes, dear."

Maizie stepped contritely to the floor and, casting Thompson a covert but ardent look, vanished from the room.

Eddie Thompson faced his Nemesis with conflicting emotions. He felt triumphant, yet defeated. He hadn't enjoyed kissing his wife so much in ten years, but he didn't like the idea of her willingness to deceive him behind his back, even though she was deceiving him with himself. It was a peculiar feeling, but as he observed Van Archer's ill-concealed wrath, he felt amply repaid.

"I'm one up on you," he said.

"So I see."

The cigarette in the author's hand trembled briefly, and for a moment he seemed hard put to control his emotions. Then a look of apprehension came over the bearded face.

"But say now, Eddie, there's something I wanted to ask you."

"Yes?"

"About this contract I'm signing this morning. I rather need your advice, you know."

"Need *my* advice?" said Thompson, with elaborate astonishment. "But you'd hardly want the opinion of your little kid brother Stevie, now, would you?"

"Quit clowning," said Van Archer. "You know I'm not good at this sort of thing—business, and all. I need your mind, just as you need my appearance, my sophistication. We have to stick together on these matters."

"Do we?"

"You'll come along in case I need help, won't you?" pleaded Van Archer.

"Well, I don't know about that. After all, I'm mildly insane, and if I suddenly got the idea I was Shakespeare, or something, you might have a bad time of it. Why I might even say I was F. Thatcher Van Archer and insist on signing the contract myself. Of course you couldn't blame me. I was dropped on the head when I was a baby."

"Oh, I can explain that," said Van Archer, hastily.

"Never mind," said Eddie Thompson. "I'll go with you. After all, I'm as much interested in the contract as you are."

"Thanks."

TOGETHER the two men left the room. Van Archer received the briefcase and a brief kiss from Maizie. Eddie Thompson winked at her behind the author's back. It hurt him to act against himself that way, but her answering smile sent a flood of inexplicable warmth through him. Damn it, this wasn't fair—making him fall in love with his own wife!

Thompson thought about that on the way to town in the car. Van Archer babbled complacently beside him on the seat.

"You know, Thompson, I've changed my mind about you. Let's be friends and work together. After all, that's practically what we did when I was you, you know."

He lowered his voice as the chauffeur blinked.

"We've got to get a contract for the novel out of old Grovel today. Grovel's a pretty tough customer, and it's up to both of us to handle him properly. Now you've always relied on yourself—on me, rather, that is—to put up the kind of sophisticated front that impresses him. I'll work that all right—the cane, the beard stroking, the erudite conversation. Don't worry, I'll do my part, just as I always have.

"But when he starts talking figures and royalties, that's where you come in. Remember? You—I—we used to sit back and think, then. Eddie Thompson has the brain for those matters, and Van Archer relies on that. We need each other. Let's stick together."

Thompson nodded. But there was a secret smile on his face. He had a hunch. Perhaps there was a way out of this after all.

Perhaps . . .

Petronius Grovel was a solid man. He had a solid body, a solid face, a solid opinion of himself, and plenty of good solid cash in the bank. Also, he was a bit solid behind the ears, but this didn't bother Petronious Grovel very much. He was a publisher, and it was his business to buy brains, not use them. He handled brains, publicized brains, exploited brains. To him brains were much the same as kidneys to a butcher. You sold them to other people and never stopped to think about your own.

Petronius Grovel's office, therefore, was something like a stockyard. A place where brains were herded in, roped and hog-tied by the adroit Mr. Grovel, and then sent forth branded by the seal of his publishing house. A place where brains were bought at so much the square inch of cortex; where gray matter was spattered on paper at so much an ounce.

Today head butcher Grovel stood ready, axe in hand. F. Thatcher Van Archer was a pretty big steer in any publisher's corral, a prize bull who would yield many fat beefsteaks of profit. Petronius Grovel was ready to slice one off the rump once he could tie Van Archer down with a contract.

He therefore opened the door to the luxurious abattoir of his private office, and his teeth gleamed in a dazzling yellow smile as the author entered, followed by a younger man.

"Good morning, my dear sir," said F. Thatcher Van Archer, with a courtly inclination of his distinguished head. "How fares the Pharaoh of all scriveners?"

"Pretty fair," answered Grovel, blinking rapidly.

"My brother Stephen," said the author, with a nod toward Eddie Thompson. "Dauphin to the literary throne."

"Yeah—yeah, pleased to meet you." Grovel seemed ill at ease. "Won't you come in."

"Certainly, certainly. Ah, wait here if you will, Stephen?"

He disappeared into the inner sanctum with Publisher Grovel, and Eddie Thompson sat down on a bench in the outer office.

FORthe first time, he began to think determinedly. He was on the spot. He'd had a hunch when he had come down in the car, an inkling that there was a way out of this baffling mess, but now it refused to come to him. His pseudo-personality was in there, signing a contract in his name. His psuedo-personality would then go home to his wife, live in his house, and that seemed to be that. Eddie Thompson cursed the fate which had prompted him to obliterate his true self so completely. There was no one in the wide world to whom he could turn. His own wife accepted this *poseur* as his real self; his publisher, of course, was too stupid to detect any change. What a situation!

Thompson's musings were interrupted as a figure entered the outer office. It was Arthur Keel, Thompson's best friend. Keel, like Van Archer, was a prominent writer, and as such they had much in common. They met frequently—at least twice a week—and Thompson entertained a keen affection for the man.

"Hey, Art!" said Eddie Thompson.

The bespectacled author turned around with a start. As he did so, Thompson realized just who and what he was, and quickly buried his face.

"Somebody call me?" asked Keel of the office stenographer.

"I didn't hear anything," answered the girl.

"Oh, sorry. Must have been my imagination. Say, how's chances of seeing Mr. Grovel?"

"Not right now, Mr. Keel. He's in conference wit the Mad Genius."

Eddie Thompson perked up his ears.

"Not old Van Archer, the beard king?"

The girl laughed. "Oh, Mr. Keel!"

"I suppose he's signing the elder Smith Brother to another contract. Well, I'll wait. One mustn't intrude upon the presence of genius."

Keel sat down next to Thompson.

"I thought Mr. Van Archer was your friend?" said the girl.

"He is, he is," Keel said, hastily. "I like Thatcher a lot. He's a good fellow when you get to know him. But that's just the trouble—it's hard getting to know him. He hides under that spinach and behind his ridiculous clothes, and whenever you get near him you think he's liable to snick at you with his cane. I wish he'd cut out those affectations, for his own good."

"You know, confidentially, I think you're right," confessed the girl. "Mr. Van Archer frightens people. He's always so serious, and he talks so highbrow. I see a lot of authors come in here, and there's some pretty quaint sketches, begging your pardon, but Mr. Van Archer takes the prize."

Eddie Thompson's ears burned. Then they pricked. For the inner door had opened and Van Archer's beard waggled through the crack.

"Oh, Steve, won't you come in here a minute," he called. "I'd like you to speak to Mr. Grovel." He caught sight of Arthur Keel. "Oh, greetings, fellow philologist! A word with you, Sir Oracle." He popped out to meet his friend, and as he passed Thompson he whispered, "For heaven's sake, talk to Grovel. He's got me worried."

Eddie Thompson entered the inner office and closed the door, then turned to face Petronius Grovel. The publisher crouched behind his desk, sweating foolishly.

"Sit down, young man," he boomed. "Van Archer tells me you've just become his business manager."

"Oh—yes," Thompson answered. "I have."

"Well, he certainly needs one," Grovel rejoined. "He certainly needs one. Needs an interpreter, too, if you'll pardon my frankness."

"Go right ahead."

"Now I'm a fair man, my boy. I've been doing business with Van Archer for years, and let me tell you it's been no picnic. He's a good writer, and a smart one, but there's just no talking to him. I can't seem to understand his line, that's all. Comes in here and pulls at his beard, and spouts out a lot of high-*faluting* phrases until I get all confused."

AGAIN Eddie Thompson blinked. Then his resolve strengthened.

"Of course you don't understand Van Archer, you ignorant baboon!" he said. "In order for that to come about he'd have to come in here and talk baby talk."

"What—what's that?" spluttered Petronius Grovel.

"You heard me, Pete!" declared Thompson. "Why should you understand Van Archer? You don't know anything about the man. You've never even read his books."

"I have, certainly I have," insisted the publisher, indignantly.

"You lie through your teeth, which are false!" thundered Eddie Thompson. "You read nothing but the reports on his book sales. The sales are good, so Van Archer is good. That's your duck-brain idea. Why don't you read what the man writes and find out something about him? He's a genius! No wonder you can't understand what he's talking about. Do you expect him to waste his valuable mind in conversation with a money-grabbing, skin-flinted moron like you who can't read a comic paper without moving his lips?"

Petronius Grovel had a face which would have pleased the composer of "Deep Purple." He made wild sounds in his neck.

"But never mind that, Grovel. I don't care what you think of Van Archer, and I don't care what you think of me, either. All I care about is what you think of the way he sells his books, and I know that pleases you. So will you sign that contract, or won't you? That's all. Will you sign, or won't you? There's plain, understandable talk for you. That's what you want, isn't it?"

Publisher Grovel stood up and took a deep breath. For a moment he looked as though he were about to huff and to puff and blow the house in. Then his pudgy face relaxed into a broad grin. He held out his pudgy hand.

"You know, Steve," he said, "I like you. You have guts. Yes, sir, I wish that old Van Archer would climb down off his high horse and talk to me like that, man to man. I guess you're right—I am pretty thick, and I got no business dealing with geniuses. But I can recognize guts when I see them, and by George you've got 'em! Sure, I'll sign that contract. Call him in!"

Eddie Thompson stepped to the door and in response to his wink, F. Thatcher Van Archer stalked into the room, tapping his cane along the floor.

"Sign here," said Petronius Grovel, genially. "I've changed my mind. You know, I never did quite understand you, Thatcher, and I don't mind admitting it. But your brother, here, put me wise. If you're anything like him underneath all your—your—your genius—then I'm a fool. By the way, I'd like to read the manuscript of this new book of yours before we go to press on the first edition. The readers tell me it's pretty good, and I think I'll take a whack at it."

F. Thatcher Van Archer allowed his eyebrows to meet in a delicate arch. Eddie Thompson nudged him as he signed, and then led him from the room.

CHAPTER IV

Dissolve into Clinch

OUTSIDE, in the car, Van Archer was voluble.

"I don't know how you did it," he confessed. "I talked and talked until I was blue in the face, but the old ogre just stared at me and mumbled that he wasn't sure about the contract."

"I'll handle my affairs and you handle yours," said Eddie Thompson, wisely. "Right now I'm anxious to get home to our wife."

Van Archer smiled.

"Our wife is a charming girl, isn't she?" he remarked.

"She certainly is," Thompson answered.

"You know"—Van Archer coughed delicately—"I've been meaning to speak to you about that. Now that the contract is signed and settled, I was thinking that perhaps it might be well if you were to—go away."

"Go away?" muttered Eddie Thompson.

"Why, yes. You see, I don't really need you any more, and it might be rather embarrassing, both of us in the same house with Maizie, and all that."

The car rounded the drive of the Van Archer home, but it wasn't the curve that jerked Eddie Thompson bolt upright.

"Listen, you blackhearted scoundrel, you can't take my wife away from me!" he shouted.

"Your wife? Why, my dear boy, you have no wife. She's my wife."

Van Archer was equable, but there was an evil glitter in his eyes as they stepped from the car.

"And come to think of it, what I said last night was true, you know. This is my house, and my home, not yours. They're my friends, and my readers, not yours. And that contract you just assisted in getting is my contact—I signed it. Certainly, I do all the writing. So, I think, really, that the decent thing for you to do is to clear out. I—I don't like spongers."

"You're going to kick me out of my own house?" Thompson demanded.

There was a sudden sinking feeling in his heart. He knew it would come to this sooner or later; of course, it had to. He might have suspected Van Archer's overtures of friendship. Van Archer had needed him to get that contract. Now everything was settled, and Van Archer could throw him into the street. He dragged his feet leadenly after the strutting author as they entered the house and mounted the stairs to the bedroom.

"But listen, pal—" he quavered. "What'll I do, where will I go?"

"That's of no concern to me," snapped Van Archer. He sensed his advantage, and pressed it. "You're my younger brother Stevie, and you just wander off, understand?"

Van Archer changed into his familiar purple dressing gown, lit a cigarette and slid it into the elaborate holder.

"But suppose I won't go," whispered Thompson, desperately.

"Then they'll take you," the bearded man replied.

"Take me?"

"Of course. To the asylum. You're a little crazy, you know. You've even admitted it yourself, to Maizie."

"You wouldn't dare!"

"I'd dare anything. And after all, it's no risk. You did this thing yourself, you know. You created F. Thatcher Van Archer, and now he's real. He owns your house, and your body, and your writing, your career, your wife."

"Not Maizie!" yelled Thompson. "I don't care about the writing, and the money. It can go to hell, do you hear me? It can go to hell, you can have it. In a way this has been a good experience for me. It's taught me how little all that silly elegance really means, how stupid I was to make a jackass out of myself in order to get it. Take the name and the career if you want. But I want Maizie!"

"So do I," said F. Thatcher Van Archer. "And I'm going to keep her."

Eddie Thompson lunged forward threateningly.

"You touch my wife again and I'll kill you."

"She's my wife, not yours."

"Well, she married me!"

"All right, but it's me she loves. I found that out today."

"It won't happen again, I assure you," said Van Archer. "I don't care if she married both of us or not."

"You can't accuse my wife of bigamy," snarled Thompson. "Don't you dare call Maizie a bigamist, you—you pseudo-nobody!"

"What's that?" gasped Van Archer.

"The hunch!" Thompson muttered to himself. "Yes, that was it! The hunch!"

"What hunch?"

"Listen, Van Archer." Eddie Thompson pushed the author back on the bed. "Listen, and listen well. You're pretty sure of yourself, aren't you?"

"Why not?" said the bearded man defiantly. "I know where I stand."

"You stand with one foot in the grave," said Thompson, savagely. "And you don't know a thing. You think you have money, career, friends, a loving wife, don't you? Well, you haven't. They're mine—all mine."

"What do you mean?"

"Your wife doesn't love you. She loves me. I found that out this morning. She hates your silly beard and your stupid, outlandish clothes, and your posing all over the house. It's me she loves—the little of me I've ever shown her. I thought I was winning her with that senseless masquerade, but I was wrong. Maizie hates you and all you stand for.

"And your friends. You know what your friends think of you behind your back? They call you the 'Mad Genius'. Why the very office girls laugh at your absurd posing. Somewhere, deep down, buried under that chin foliage and those polysyllables, they can sense me, and that's why they manage to tolerate you. But at heart they despise all the melodramatic professional author hocus-pocus that you stand for."

"I—I—"

"Shut up and listen. You think you can get along without me, do you? Why, you wouldn't last ten minutes. You can't write without me. Whenever you get in a tough spot I have to help you out of the jam. And if it wasn't for my brain you couldn't even get a contract writing Silly Symphonies."

Eddie Thompson drew himself up to his full height.

"I've found out something," he declared. "You can't get along without me, F. Thatcher Van Archer, but I can get along without you! I was a fool not to know it—to deceive myself, and the world, all these years, trying to be something I'm not. I can be myself and get along very well. I know that now. Because you're the helpless one—you're the creation of my own brain, and by yourself there's no personality, no initiative, nothing. Just a big cardboard front, a fake. A lot of clothes, a beard, and windy talk. You haven't any guts! Throw me out? Why you poor stupid piece of make-believe, I'm going to throw *you* out!"

Was it fancy, or did Thompson see Van Archer turn pale? The bearded author seemed thinner, almost transparent.

"Why you're just a figment of my imagination," Eddie said. "When I forget about you, you cease to exist. You admit I created you—very well, I can destroy you, too. Tear you up as I would a bad manuscript!"

"Yes?" The voice was thin, but it held a terrible intensity. "Perhaps so. But you'll never have a chance. I'll kill you first!"

THE pale figure on the bed moved swiftly. Thin hands locked around Eddie Thompson's neck, and the two went down in a tangle on the floor. Thompson clawed at the purple bathrobe, pulled at the beard. He was fighting for his life, for his sanity—for Maizie. The thought gave him courage.

An overwhelming hatred of this thing overcame him. He hated the mincing body, the pointed beard, the exotic costume; hated it with a clean, healthy disgust. For the first time he saw clearly what an incubus this artificial creation had become—and he put all his thought behind the muscle that smashed at the thin jaw of the apparition before him.

"I'll tear you up like a bad manuscript," he grunted. "Take that, Mr. F. Thatcher Van Archer, and—*ugh*—that."

"Thatcher!"

The voice cut through his consciousness and stabbed him to his senses.

He looked up, panting. Maizie stood in the doorway, blue eyes filled with wonder.

"Thatcher, what are you doing, groveling on the floor like that?"

Thompson blinked. She was addressing not the author, but himself!

He looked down at the figure in the purple dressing gown.

There was no figure.

The purple dressing gown lay on the floor and it was quite empty. There was no man with a beard, nothing but the rumpled gown he still wrestled with.

"Thatcher, what's come over you?" Maizie stepped into the room. "What are you doing with your clothes?"

Eddie Thompson rose to his feet with a slow grin.

"Just throwing this damned thing away, honey," he said. "Want to get rid of some of these old clothes."

"And—Thatcher, you've shaved off your beard!"

Thompson wheeled toward the mirror. Yes, he was still beardless, still young-looking. He smiled as he remembered Maizie's remark of the morning, that he resembled Tyrone Power. Well, he was rather good-looking at that! He turned back toward the woman.

"Just a celebration," he said, and smiled. "I'm starting life over, darling. Because I've just signed a new contract."

"You got it?" Maizie exclaimed happily.

"Of course I did," said Eddie Thompson, drawing her close. "Now, how about a kiss?"

"Why—"

Eddie Thompson smothered her remark most efficiently. It was a long time before she spoke again.

"You remind me of Steve," she giggled, as last. "You know, Thatcher, you look like him . . . Say, where is he?"

"Oh, he just wandered off again, in town," Eddie said, adding reassuringly. "He'll be all right. I don't think he'll be back, but he'll be all right."

"He was nice," sighed Maizie. "But then, you're nice, too." She smiled. "I'm so glad you're getting rid of those awful clothes, darling. I've always wanted you to. And now I can buy you an electric razor, and everything."

"Sure. But come on. We're going out and celebrate tonight. Get on your beach pajamas."

"Beach pajamas?"

"Of course. We're going down and ride the roller coaster."

"Thatcher! You mean that?"

"Sure I do, honey."

"I like you this way," confided Maizie, happily. "I—I wish you were like this all the time."

"I will be," said Eddie Thompson, a faraway look in his eyes. "Yes, honey—from now on I'll always be myself!"

Wine of the Sabbat

Wine whose-bouquet was the enflamed embrace of a stone Sphinx—whose perfume was warm blood on obscene altars.

IT'S too damn bad this story hasn't got the proper setting. Prague would do it, I think, or Budapest—one of those foreign burgs that no one knows anything about but vaguely associates with Bela Lugosi or Peter Lorre. That's what this yarn needs; setting and atmosphere—what the books call "build-up" and what critics of weird fiction call "adjectivitis." But it's just my hard luck that this happens to be true, and I can't see it in my mind any way except that in which it happened. So that's the way I'll have to tell it.

Maybe it's just as well. I've noticed that in what we laughingly call "real life" the big things come pretty much as a surprise. The Paramount Studio Orchestra doesn't play *Leiberstraum* in the background when you propose to a girl. There are no three pages of foreboding description preceding an actual railroad wreck in which you cut your throat. Those infrequent moments of icy horror in real life come suddenly, without warning. Sometimes they occur in the bright sunlight of morning, amidst prosaic happenings. Then it's the contrast, the *unnaturalness* of instantaneous dread in commonplace circumstances, which makes for true horror.

That's the way this thing was—no haunted castles, no mad hypnotists, no ravens wheeling and croaking under an accursed and blood-bloated moon.

But simple and sudden as it was, I still wake up in the middle of the night and feel cold sweat at the memory of Mabel Fiske's party.

When I met Mabel Fiske I was living in Los Angeles. That was before I turned commercial. I had a little-room in a flop-house where I ate graham crackers and drank milk and wrote the Great American Novel. It dealt, as I recall it, with the life of a young man who lived in a flop-house, ate graham crackers and drank milk, and was writing the Great American Novel.

Excuse the autobiography, but it's necessary to account for my relations with Mabel Fiske.

Mabel Fiske had a house near Laguna Beach, a sense of humor, and a wide circle of acquaintances. That's why I liked her.

She had a house, and once a week I could drop in for a square meal. Hunger knows no conscience.

She had a sense of humor, and I like that sort of person. Loneliness is in itself a hunger.

She had a wide circle of acquaintance, and I met interesting people at her place. To a fellow of my garrulity, that's a godsend.

So I cultivated Mabel Fiske, I admit it. Not romantically, just socially. Mabel was a mousy little brunette of at least thirty-five.

Her late husband had been a scenarist of considerable means and since his death she had lived in a sort of haze—a haze in which her old friends moved in an extremely social set that dropped into the house at all hours of the day or night. Her home was a continual open house, open bar, and open forum.

Amongst the crowd that knocked lettuce out of the ice-box, burned the piano-keys brown with cigarettes, and added to the pile of empty fifths in the bath-tub were quite a number of interesting people. Movie folk predominated, but there were also at times visiting business men, college professors, dude ranch cowboys, aviators, taxi-drivers, hermits, Cubist painters, radio comics, messiahs, swamis, and admirals of the Pacific Fleet. But the occult note predominated on occasion. Mabel and her late husband seemed to have been on intimate terms with every yogi, divinator, metaphysicist and screwball on the Coast. They generally swarmed down for the weekends, waving their crystals and horoscopes and luck-charms, babbling of Paracelsus and Swedenborg and Hermes and Father Divine. In flowing robes, Flouse of David beards, evening dress and goatees, burlap bags and bare feet—all came to prance under the genial influence of the juniper berry.

Frankly, I found it fascinating. I was impressionable enough to relish calling a film big-shot by his first name; avaricious enough to dream of meeting some befuddled publisher who might give my book to a waiting world; human enough to enjoy those fantastic parties.

There it was. And there was I.

THERE was I, on Saturday evening of April 30th, 1940. I hitch-hiked down late that afternoon and hit the house about five. It was almost dinner-time and I had a very healthy appetite.

I walked in—you didn't knock at Mabel's, on a Saturday—and stared around the living room. There was a room worthy of its name. Never have I seen a room that looked quite so *lived* in. The walls were black with smoke, and there were lipstick frescoes on the mantel, and on the floor was what had once been an oriental rug but was now merely a sort of Teheran ash-tray. The furniture stood (and slouched, and tottered) in a war-torn parade of crippled chairs; armless, legless, even seatless. The sofas were sagging hulks of disembowelled stuffing. The hands of the grandfather's clock on the mantel were pulled down to form a mouth, and the face was repainted to caricature Groucho Marx. The fireplace under the mantel housed a portable refrigerator for those too weak to seek the kitchen's nourishment.

Glancing around, I noticed the faces of several old friends. Anyone you ever shared a drink with became an "old friend" at Mabel's.

There was Cyril Bruce, the movie actor—a matinee idol whose afternoon was nearly over. He was a tall, blond chap of about forty; his eyes ravaged by the effects of Kleig lights and bright lights in equal proportions.

Bruce stood deep in conversation with Ensenada Eddie; a swarthy little Filipino whose feet had never been confined by shoe-leather. Ensenada was a mysterious beachcomber who spent all his time writing free verse—he couldn’t sell it.

Bruce and Eddie spotted me at the same time, drifted over. Bruce shook hands and Eddie offered me a glass, which meant the same thing to him. “Welcome to Liberty Hall,” Bruce chuckled.

“Libertine Hall, I’d call it,” remarked a voice behind me. It was Lavinia Hearn who spoke; a statuesque blonde who claimed to be a painter, but exhibited no signs of her work save a heavily-rouged face.

“Don’t mind Lavinia, she’s bottle-dizzy,” said Arch Blaine, the writer’s agent, appearing at her side. I liked Blaine; he usually rescued me from the attentions of the schizoid guests.

“Enjoying yourself?” he asked me.

Lavinia answered for me. “He always enjoys himself! But he seldom enjoys anyone else.”

“Quite a crowd,” I commented to Blaine as Lavinia, Bruce, and Ensenada Eddie wandered off. It was quite a crowd. In addition to those I’d met, I recognized a number of people wandering from the parlor to the kitchen and back. There was a cowboy, a playboy, and bus-boy; a composer, a housewife, an elderly woman psychiatrist, and a burlesque chorine. They were all (a) going to the kitchen for a drink (b) coming from the kitchen with a drink, or (c) staying in the kitchen and drinking.

The conversation sparkled like fake champagne.

“So I say listen Zanuck, if you want me to write General Grant into tire picture you’ll have to cut out the Ritz Brothers—and it was the custom of this Gilles de Rais to procure small children which he—gets fresh with me, see, so I says whaddya want for two beers, a floor show?—all right, I’m a radical. But I’m impartial—I hate everything—He’s no naive in his sophistication—I’ll mix a flock of them right away—sometimes wonder if people grow up or down—want to know is when’s feeding time in this zoo?”

That last sentence struck a responsive chord in my own breast, and lower, in my stomach. I turned to Arch Blaine. “When *do* we eat?” I inquired. “When Mabel Fiske gets back,” he replied.

Lavinia, entering, heard him. “When Mabel *what?”* she giggled. “Blaine, you outlaw, you aren’t inferring that our Mabel has gone out?”

Blaine nodded.

“But Mabel never goes out,” Lavinia wailed. “It’s the Apocalypse.”

“She went down to L.A. to pick up some important guests,” Blaine offered. Lavinia looked stunned.

“She wouldn’t go ten blocks to meet Roosevelt. Or Charlie McCarthy.”

“Must be a big evening planned,” I said. “Wonder what’s up—what kind of guests she’s bringing.”

“Step into the kitchen,” Blaine advised. “The crowd out there ought to give you a hint. Their kind never shows up unless something is doing.”

I stepped out. The kitchen was a dark shrine of Bacchus, but today it held queer worshipers. There were dark men in turbans, pale men in togas, gaunt women in flowing gowns. Beards wagged furiously, slim fingers gesticulated in ivory patterns, lips were red blurs of motion. Such a queerly dressed talkative crowd meant only one thing—occultists.

It was a meeting of the Isms and the Osophies; a congregation of Ologies and Abrists. The faces, on the whole, were unfamiliar to me, but they were interesting. The blur of sounds; deep male voices, shrill female tones, outlandish foreign inflections, blended into a conversational hash from which I gradually extracted information.

Tonight was April 30th. Tomorrow was May Day, then—maypoles and Communist parades, all that sort of thing. But this was not the point. Tonight was Walpurgis Eve. Walpurgis Eve, the immemorial night of the Sabbat—the Witche’s Sabbat. Black Mass Eve.

On Walpurgis Eve the demon stars formed in a black conjunction. On Walpurgis Eve things walked that were meant to crawl; things crawled that were meant to lie and rot. On Walpurgis Eve the covens assembled and drank in honor of the Master of all Mystery. On Walpurgis Eve all ancient evil became reanimate. Christians kept their holy days, and Diabolists kept their unholy nights.

BUT where was Mabel Fiske on Walpurgis Eve?

Mabel had learned that Doctor Voidin was expected on the Coast; Voidin the Satanist. She meant to bag him, hence her trip.

This Doctor Voidin, who was he now? A rather fabulous figure; wealthy European manicheist. A dabbler in necromancy, some said.

What was he doing on the Coast? Oh, that was a secret. Of course, there were stories of underground Devil-worship out here; of a quite sizable cult whose devotees included many wealthy eccentrics, a smattering of movie-colony folk, and a number of serious students. Hearsay had it that the doctor was out to conduct the Mass—the Black Mass of the Sabbat, always held on Walpurgis Eve.

When and where? Who could say? Naturally, it was a secret. The Satanists did not reveal their faith or its mysteries. But it really was no joking matter, and there were amazing tales of the worship and how the rites were conducted, and why, and who attended. And where the blazes is that other fifth of gin?

I stood in the doorway and listened to that crowd of dilettantes babble of mysteries older than the Sphinx, and all at once the incongruity struck me full force. I started to laugh. Then I walked in and had a drink.

Arch Blaine joined me, and Lavinia, and Cyril Bruce. We were talking about *The Golden Bough* and double-scotches and Kwong-fu-Tze and Thorne Smith and *Till Eulenspiegel* and Bruce’s new picture and Blaine’s sobriety and Lavinia’s tipsiness, and I just switched the conversation around to my book, very cleverly, and started to down my fifth drink, when Mabel Fiske entered.

Mabel Fiske entered, and that was unusual. Mabel was the kind of a woman who appeared; who drifted in. But tonight, despite my slight befuddlement, I could see that she *entered.*

Her slight figure poised momentarily in the doorway. I'd never quite swallowed that phrase—"poised momentarily"—when I read it; but that was exactly what Mabel did. She surveyed the crowd, and then deliberately advanced. Mabel was sober. Mabel's brown eyes sparkled.

"Hello, Bob," she greeted me. "Bruce, Blaine—you're wearing an alcohalo, Lavinia—help me to get these hammerheads out of here, will you please?"

We circulated, pushed, led, persuaded the majority of the drinking esthetes into the other room. Then Mabel beckoned to the waiting figures in the doorway.

"Come in, Doctor," she invited.

Now I had thought it was a joke. I'd been drinking with Blaine and ribbing him about the Sabbat, and picturing the longhaired old boy Doctor Voidin was going to be. Lavinia had called him a "French poodle with a dash of Sigmund Freud about the beard."

But the tall, cadaverously thin figure in the black coat was real. His was the pale face of the ascetic; his eyes the ancient black of forgotten midnights.

No, it wasn't the scotch in me, nor the Ben Hecht. Doctor Voidin's stare sobered; and warned. He brushed the single strand of silver back into his black, curly hair, and extended his talon—I swear to Heaven, for a moment I thought It was that!—to shake hands. His voice was the deep purr of a cat's. A black, wise, sinister feline.

"Pleased. You have written of goety, no? We must talk."

"My associate, Dubois."

I would have guessed "Hassim." But it was "Dubois," just as it had once been "Christophe." The man was a gigantic black; Haitiian, no doubt—ebony in evening dress.

"And the Reverend Mr. Orsac."

There was mockery in the way Doctor Voidin pronounced the title, and mockery in the eyes of the fat little bald-headed Orsac who grasped my hand in the cold, pudgy grip of a meeting in the morgue. I didn't like this fish-eyed little foreigner, and I didn't care for the sneering Negro giant. As for the tall, thin figure out of Poe—

"We will meet again at dinner," purred Doctor Voidin. He turned, with the Negro and the clergyman, and left the room in Mabel's company.

Lavinia smirked in astonishment. "What a trio," she remarked to herself. "Dracula, Uncle Tom, and Bishop Shapiro."

"That man is—disturbing," was Blaine's comment. He stared into my eyes, and I nodded slowly, knowing his thought.

"I wonder if Mabel knows just what's goin' on," Blaine continued. "He isn't one of the occult boys, by a long shot. I'm pretty skeptical, but if I ever saw living, psychologically incarnate Evil walk, it's walking in that man. I'm worried about tonight."

"DEATH," gigged Lavinia, "Takes a Holiday. And what a time he'll have at this party!"

Neither Blaine nor I could laugh at this sally. There was an ominous ring of truth in the witticism.

There was an ominous ring of the dinner-bell. Mabel had opened up the little-used dining room, and we turned to enter. There were only twenty of us at the table. Perhaps a dozen or so of the lesser figures departed, urged by Mabel. She had a newfound spirit of purposefulness which surprised me; ushering the guests out firmly.

Mabel shared the head of the board with Doctor Voidin. The black Dubois and Reverend Orsac sat nearby. Lavinia, Cyril Bruce, Blaine, and the esoteric crew comprised the remainder of the company.

It was a good dinner, for Mabel's place. The long table was spotless, for once. Food had evidently been brought from a restaurant, and it was decently served.

But no one spoke. There was a definite tension in the air. Mabel's changed manner seemed to amaze her friends to silence. The occultists glanced nervously at the grim figure of Doctor Voidin. To them he seemed appropriately playing the part of skeleton at the feast. Blaine and I watched his imperturbable death-mask throughout the meal.

No one ate much. Mabel whispered to Voidin, Voidin whispered to Orsac and Dubois.

I remembered those nasty rumors floating around the crowd in the kitchen and wondered. The rumor-mongers themselves were wondering, too. I could tell that, because they began to drink.

Lavinia set the pace, of course. “Brrrr,” she giggled. She rose and went into the kitchen for a bottle. Others followed. It was steady, serious drinking at the table from then on. No laughter, no sociability—just a shuddering glance at the corpselike face of the doctor and a hasty gulping from the glasses.

A mood had fallen over the company; one of those herd-impulse things which at times seems to grip a social gathering *en masse.*

“Condemned man drank a hearty breakfast,” Lavinia whispered. She poured for Blaine and myself.

The scene began to remind me more strongly of Poe—of his story, *King Pest* about the revellers in a charnel house during a plague. A drinking-bout of the doomed, as it were.

We drank. Blaine stared at me. Mabel mumbled to Voidin. The occult brethern re-filled their glasses. And yet, there was nothing *really* wrong, or out of place. But that room held panic. I could feel it rising from each quickened breath. The way Voidin *stared* down the table. The gloating look in Orsac’s eyes, the sneer of Dubois’ face. Mabel’s changed expression of determination. Something was very wrong. Was this really Mabel’s house, were these Mabel’s carefree friends? Something alien had crept in; crept in and crouched, waiting. Waiting for—what?

Mabel rose from her chair.

“Listen, friends. I have a surprise for you.”

I caught it at once; the forced tone in her voice. She wasn’t natural any more. Something had happened.

She continued. “Doctor Voidin, here, has just returned from a European trip and he tells me he’s managed to get hold of some real wine. He brought along a half-dozen bottles or so, out in my car. Shall we try it?”

“Yeah. Why not?” And so forth, in varying tones and inflections. The guests were just primed for that psychological suggestion. I looked at Blaine queerly, and he winked. Yes, there was a *purpose* behind all this.

Dubois left the room. Presently the black returned, assisting the single servant in passing glasses around the table. Then he produced a number of tall, green bottles that bore no labels.

“Say, what kind of stuff is this?” asked Bruce.

Doctor Voidin smiled. “It’s a special preparation of my own vineyards,” he replied. “A sacramental wine.”

Dubois was pouring.

The words should have clicked in my brain, but I felt dazed. Previous drinks had set my mind wandering in dark channels of unwholesome fancy. For perhaps ten minutes I sat there in a sort of abstracted trance. I suppose I became aware of what was happening only when the conversation started.

For suddenly—it seemed sudden—everyone commenced to speak. I looked up. There was a queer animation in every countenance.

I looked down. My fingers clutched the stem of a wine-glass, filled with a dark red liquor.

I glanced about. Twenty hands were duplicating my gesture; clutching a glass of ruby fluid, raising it to drain the contents. Black, gigantic statue of silence, Dubois passed around pouring from the long green bottles as he refilled the glasses.

I RAISED my glass to my lips and inhaled the scent. It was bitter, yet alluring. It did not appeal to the physical senses, but to the imagination. It was the kiss of a cold woman named Mystery, it was the chill caress of a serpent; it was the enflamed embrace of a stone Sphinx.

I shook myself out of *that.* Where the devil did such thoughts come from? Looking up, I saw Voidin. He too was holding a glass, but as I watched, he carefully slipped it under the table for a moment and brought it up emptied. He wasn't drinking.

Neither was I. I nudged Blaine, who followed my gaze. Together, very discreetly, we followed Voidin's example. Dubois didn't notice. He refilled Blaine's glass, my glass, Voidin's glass. The strong perfume of the wine rose again, and I fought against the peculiar drugging scent. Quickly I looked about. That buzz of conversation sounded *wrong.* And on my left I saw Cyril Bruce's glassy eyes. He looked through me and said:

"Many are the moons that ride the night when the peacock soars to shado-wed khem and the dark lord ascends to the throne of his delight."

He said it like that. Bruce, the actor, said it like that—no inflection, no capitalization, no punctuation in the monotony of his cold, dead tones. I stared raptly into his dead face as he drank his second glass.

"And over the graves the mandragora embrace for this is the night of their desire when all passion creeps from dark places to rule men who share the sabbat—"

I turned to Lavinia, stared into her purple pupils as her coral lips parted.

"Hail the Black Goat of the Woods! Prance from the stars, oh Prince, and thy hooves shall be bathed in shining red! The Black Goat comes—"

Quietly, I slipped my glass under the table and poured the refilled contents out upon the carpet. As I did so I again became aware of the abominable reek of the wine, welling in a black bouquet. It was the smell of hasheesh, the scent of musk, the odor of aphrodisiac, the perfume of warm blood on an obscene altar.

Voidin's wine, from his own vineyards—or the Devil's brew!

Wine of the Sabbat.

The words flamed through my brain.

The wine of Evil—the liquor that transformed men's nature; as the devil's ointment was said to transform the bodies of witches and wizards. It was being used.

Circe’s wine.

I stared at faces—once-familiar faces—about me. Yes, Circe’s wine. For I saw not men, but animals. Hog-snouts, hound muzzles, feline eyes and wolf-teeth and bat-ears and red slavering mouths crept through distorted flesh. The light caught each shadowed expression and caused it to simulate some animal countenance. And from the throats came the growls of beasts.

The food was gorged, and ever the red wine poured. Claws snatched the glasses refilled by the silent Dubois. Talons trembled as they held beakers to snarling lips so that the long red tongues might lap.

They drank deeply, and then in torrents came that incomprehensible jumble of speech.

At the head of the table sat the Reverend Orsac, his wine untouched, fish-eyes closed. Mabel Fiske was chuckling with laughter. Doctor Voidin looked about him and smiled.

His smile was somehow worse than any of the bestial grimaces on the faces about me. It was a smile that could not, should not be—the smile of a corpse, the smirk of a death’s-head.

He *knew.*

And Mabel knew. That laughter—for the first time I saw Mabel Fiske. There had been a method in her madness, a purpose. This was a climax, a consummation. It had all been planned, arranged.

The feast went on. The feast indeed! Mowing and braying, cackling and moaning like animals—the people I had once known drank of the red wine. Man into beast.

And then, as the shrieking rose to a crescendo—beast into demon.

Voidin rose to his feet and said “Come. It is the Hour!”

They followed into the other room; followed on hands and knees, crawling, leaping, rending their garments. Cyril Bruce was a hound from hell as he turned and bit savagely at Lavinia’s leg in the doorway. The Reverend Orsac, Dubois, Mabel, and Doctor Voidin paused near the threshold in a whispering group.

And I—ludicrous figure, grotesque *farceur* in a melodramatic setting—crouched cowering under the table where Blaine had dragged me. We listened to Voidin's triumphant purr.

"You have worked well, Mrs. Fiske. Better than I had hoped for. There was no trouble introducing the wine to these sycophants."

"Three years," muttered Mabel, in low tones I didn't always distinguish. "Three years to pave the way—tolerated all sorts of fools—gained the reputation for eccentricity—rented house and posed as one of them—adopt themselves to the plan. When will the Change occur?"

Her speech capitalized the word. What Change? I wondered desperately for there were hints in her speech. Had she deliberately planned all this? In conspiracy with Voidin she had lured us here to put us under the influence of that accursed wine. But why?

Voidin's voice.

"Shall occur at once. Did you raise the Altar? Very well. I am ready to officiate.

I have the sacrifice, and the Host."

ALTAR. Priest. Sacrifice. Host. Walpurgis Eve. *The Black Mass.*

And now from the next room, organ strains. Dubois played the organ. Dubois tortured the organ; he flayed its keys with massive, claw-like fingers that tore screams and sobs and groans that rose from Hell. It was the *Dies Irae* of the damned he played, beneath yellow candle-light, in a room evidently transformed during our meal by silent servitors. Incense flickered forth from braziers against newly hung black velvet drapes on the walls. And at the head of the room an Altar had been reared. This I saw from my vantage beneath the table, through a slit in the portieres. Now the view was obscured by the moving legs of Voidin, Mable and Reverend Orsac.

Blaine nudged me and whispered.

"I never would have believed it of her," he muttered. "A secret Satanist, paving the way, luring excitable guests to be drugged by the wine—"

Guests? The thought swept through my brain. Where were the guests in the other room?

"What comes to the Sabbat?

"Witches, and warlocks that ride the winds. Men in the diverse and curious shapes of strange beasts."

For some reason these words, resurrected in memory from some old monograph on demonology, now whispered through me. A part of my mind was struggling with hints of horror. Drugged wine, a Circe's wine that changed men to beasts. There was a Sabbat wine, I knew, drawn from grapes plucked by the moon of midnight; grapes nourished strangely by blood. I had read of such things.

And I had read the phrase that now rang in my head—*"Men in the diverse and curious shapes of strange beasts."*

Now the two thoughts met and mingled to produce a monstrous surmise. Satan is worshiped by mockery, and the human tenement is sacred because it holds a soul. If the human form can be violated, what greater mockery exists? Drugged wine. Beasts attend the Sabbat—

I stared into the other room and saw nightmare come true. For from the opposite side of the chamber they came, pouring in as an obscene horde. The gigantic shadows crept along the wall before I saw them—the shadows that should not, could not be. And then the bodies; the loping, trotting, crawling bodies!

A black dog, tongue lolling as it squatted and grinned a grin of agony. A black dog with the tormented eyes of Cyril Bruce!

The great gray cat entered with mincing terror; stauesque even in fear. A picture of Lavinia crossed my brain. The rats padded in; and the sow with the human eyes; the little green toad that hopped and hopped, croaking with fright and shame. Voidin tended the flames in the brazier set at the altar sides. He wore a black cassock now, and Orsac was garbed in a red cowl from which his white face leered forth. He grinned at the beasts and his laughter rose.

Of course I couldn't stand it. Mabel was just an eccentric alcoholic, Lavinia was a drunken *poseur,* and Bruce was an ordinary enough rounder, and this was a stucco house in California. We were in the Twentieth Century; not five miles away a movie house was playing Shirley Temple, and in a parked car down the road someone was listening to Raymond Scott's Quintette—

My mind fought. Mabel's queer guests had brought in a pack of animals for their screwball ceremonies, and my friends had gone. These amateur theatricals in the front parlor were just that.

So I desperately reasoned. But all the while I kept reviewing Mabel's scheme; how she'd planned for this night and given her guests the Sabbat Wine so that they might be changed to beast-forms and worship the power of Satan. I heard again the horrid cries from human throats, saw again the terrible change in visages once familiar. I saw the black dog with the eyes of Cyril Bruce, and the gray cat that walked like Lavinia. I fought, but I could not forget. And from the next room the organ boomed, I heard the whimpering of beasts, and smelled the acrid animal scent mingling with incense reek.

I fought, and lost.

"God, give me a drink!" I gasped. Blaine, crouching under the table next to me, reached one hand around and fumbled for a bottle. I grasped it and drank avidly in the darkness. The liquor warmed my senses.

"Now! We've got to do something." There was command in my voice. Blaine grasped my shoulder.

"I've a revolver in my car," he whispered. "If I can make it."

I gripped his hand. "Hurry!"

He scuttled away, crawled through the portieres, through the throng. I strained to see his weaving figure as it reached the hall and disappeared. Then I sat back and took another drink.

And staring, into the parlor, waiting, waiting, I saw Mabel enter. She was clad in white, and bore the Shepherd's Crook, which is shaped in a way that I cannot name.

She was Circe, face alight with the white fire that burns up from the Pit. The music ceased, the mowing beasts bowed down, and Voidin stood before the altar, in his hands the knife of sacrifice. The chanting began, and the animals moaned at the goading of Mabel's staff. The Sabbat was at hand!

I crouched watching, suddenly numbed. I felt cold. There is a tingling sensation when one's foot falls asleep, and now this sensation invaded my entire body. In another way it entered my mind. Shadows seemed to pour over my brain, buzzing away all thought. I felt it, and struggled to resist. I seemed able to clear my mind, but the numbness of my body persisted.

And then I jerked upright. Blaine had re-appeared. He stood in the doorway as the chanting rose, and his face was a grim shield of vengeance. In one hand he held the revolver, and as I watched he raised it, pointed it at Voidin's chest. I saw him.

They saw him.

"Slay!" The voice crackled from Voidin's throat. And the animal horde turned, swiftly. Blaine hadn't expected that. The pack was upon him even as he fired. The shot went wild, and then they were milling around his waist, leaping up for his throat. A dozen furry forms tore at Blaine's flesh and he went down, down in a moaning melee. He screamed.

I screamed. I clutched the portieres for support there in the doorway, for that numbness was stealing over me. My knees were giving way under me. I tried desperately hard to stand erect, but my body burned, and the bottle I held in one hand began to slip through my fingers. Madly I struggled to act.

I made it. Racing forward, tottering forward, I swung my bottle down, beating at furry backs. Fangs snapped at me; fangs freshly reddened at a ghastly feast. My tom fingers groped for the floor. I clutched the revolver, scooped it from where it had fallen. I was burning to the floor, they were baying at my waist, and yet I dared not sink. I wheeled and fired a shot, not into that nightmare horde, but through the portieres. The burst of quick flame was welcome as it seared into mounting light across the doorway. The throng turned and howled. Voidin leaped from the altar, Mable and Dubois at his heels.

But the revolver held them back. The flames spread swiftly—they had to, I prayed. Flames cleanse.

I held them; held them in swirling smoke and rising heat. They knew my purpose—to destroy them in fire.

Then through the wall of brightness I saw that they were looking at me in a peculiar way. And I felt the shivery horror of burning lance through my body—burning not of fire. I felt my hands drop the revolver, felt the room whirl as I readjusted perspective. I felt my bones wrench, and then I seemed to be on my knees. I was smaller, standing on shortened feet and hands as well. I was—I must admit it—on all fours.

They laughed then, as though something had happened, and tried to leap through the mounting barrier of the flames. But merciful Fate was with me, for of a sudden the fire blazed as the wood caught, and it swirled through the room fed on oils spilled from the brazier. Cries of horror drowned in a crackling red sea as I turned.

Turned on hands and knee—turned to stare down at the bottle still resting in my palm; the bottle Blaine had fumbled for on the table, the bottle from which I drank.

The bottle—containing the Wine of the Sabbat!

And it did not rest in my palm. It rested in a *paw.* They had laughed, and I was numbed, and on all fours. I had drunk the Sabbat Wine!

Then I crawled into the hall on hands and knees. I saw the big hall mirror bright in the flames behind me, stared at myself in the mocking glass. It was then that I screamed—although what rose in my throat was not a scream. The dreadful sound was a confirmation of what tortured eyes revealed to me in the reflection. I leapt from that burning house and surrendered to nightmare. Since Walpurgis Eve I have never returned.

I don’t know how I got home. It’s a long way from Laguna to Los Angeles, but I made it.

A man can’t run that far, nor crawl on hands and knees. I might have been drunk or drugged by that wine, but I made it. Because the next morning I woke in my garret bed. I was naked, and tired, and shocked to read in the papers of the house that had burned last night in Laguna Beach. But I was in human shape, and to that my sanity clung. I wish I could convince myself that the Wine of the Sabbat was ordinary vintage.

I could, too, if I were not such an untidy person. Being untidy I had neglected to sweep my garret in days past. And the cruel sunlight of that morning glinted only too plainly on the uncarpeted area of floor stretching from the open door to my bed. The uncarpeted floor was dusty, and the dust had been recently disturbed.

Leading from door to bed were a series of great tracks in the dust; tracks leading inward only—the unmistakable, the damnable, the maddening pawprints of a giant wolf!

I lay back in bed and pulled the covers tightly over my head.

1941

House of the Hatchet

A spirit was chained to the blood-stained block—a force of hatred born when a woman died.

DAISY and I were enjoying one of our usual quarrels. It started over the insurance policy this time, but after we threshed that out we went into the regular routine Both of us had our cues down perfectly.

"Why don't you go out and get a job like other men instead of sitting around the house pounding a typewriter all day?"

"You knew I was a writer when I married you. If you were so hot to hitch up with a professional man you ought to have married that brokendown interne you ran around with. You'd know where he was all day; out practising surgery by dissecting hamburgers in that Chili parlor down the street."

"Oh you needn't be so sarcastic. At least George would do his best to be a good provider."

"I'll say he would. He provided me with a lot of laughs ever since I met him."

"That's the trouble with you—you and your superior attitude! Think you're better than anybody else. Here we are, practically starving, and you have-to pay installments on a new car just to show it *off to* your movie friends. And on top of that you go and take out a big policy on me just to be able to brag about how you're protecting your family. I wish I *had* married

George—at least he'd bring home some of that hamburger to eat when he finished work. What do you expect me to live on, used carbon paper and old typewriter ribbons?"

"Well, how the devil can I help it if the stuff doesn't sell? I figured on that contract deal but it fell through. You're the one that's always beefing about money—who do you think I am, the goose that laid the golden egg?"

"You've been laying plenty of eggs with those last stories you sent out."

"Funny. Very funny. But I'm getting just a little tired of your second-act dialogue, Daisy."

"So I've noticed. You'd like to change partners and dance, I suppose. Perhaps you'd rather exchange a little sparkling repartee with that Jeanne Corey. Oh, I've noticed the way you hung around her that night over at Ed's place. You couldn't have got much closer without turning into a corset."

"Now listen, you leave Jeanne's name out of this."

"Oh, I'm supposed to leave Jeanne's name out of it, eh? Your wife mustn't take the name of your girl-friend in vain.

Well, darling, I always knew you were a swift worker, but I didn't think it had gone that far. Have you told her that she's your inspiration yet?"

"Damn it, Daisy, why must you go twisting around everything I say—"

"Why don't you insure her, too? Big army insurance—you could probably get a policy issued by Brigham Young."

"Oh, turn it off, will you? A fine act to headline our anniversary, I must say."

"Anniversary?"

"Today's May 18th, isn't it?"

"May 18th—"

"Yeah. Here, shrew."

"Why—honey, its a necklace—"

"Yeah. Just a little dividend on the bonds of matrimony."

"Honey—you bought this for me?—with all our bills and—"

"Never mind that. And quit gasping in my ear, will you? You sound like Little Eva before they hoist her up with the ropes."

“Darling, it’s so beautiful. Here.”

“Aw, Daisy. Now see what you’ve done. Made me forget where we left off quarreling. Oh, well.”

“Our anniversary. And to think I forgot!”

“Well, I didn’t. Daisy.”

“Yes?”

“I’ve been thinking—that is, well, I’m just a sentimental cuss at heart, and I was sort of wondering if you’d like to hop in the car and take a run out along the Prentiss Road.”

“You mean like the day we—eloped?”

“Um, hum.”

“Of course, darling. I’d love to. Oh, honey, where *did* you *get* this necklace?” That’s how it was. Just one of those things. Daisy and I, holding our daily sparring match. Usually it kept us in trim. Today, though, I began to get the feeling that we had over-trained. We’d quarreled that way for months, on and off. I don’t know why; I wouldn’t be able to define “incompatibility” if I saw it on my divorce-papers. I was broke, and Daisy was a shrew. Let it go at that.

But I felt pretty clever when I dragged out my violin for the *Hearts and Flowers.* Anniversary, necklace, re-tracing the honeymoon route; it all added up. I’d found a way to keep Daisy quiet without stuffing a mop into her mouth.

She was sentimentally happy and I was self-congratulatory as we climbed into the car and headed up Wilshire towards Prentiss Road. We still had a lot to say to each other, but in repetition it would be merely nauseating. When Daisy felt good she went in for baby-talk—which struck me as being about as much in character as Boris Karloff playing the part of Caspar Milquetoast.

But for a while we were both happy. I began to kid myself that it was just like old times; we really were the same two kids running away on our crazy elopement. Daisy had just “gotten off” from the beauty parlor and I’d just sold my script series to the agency, and we were running down to Valos to get married. It was the same spring weather, the same road, and Daisy snuggled close to me in the same old way.

But it wasn't the same. Daisy wasn't a kid any more; there were no lines in her face, but there was a rasp in her voice. She hadn't taken on any weight, but she'd taken on a load of querulous ideas.

I was different, too. Those first few radio sales had set the pace; I began to run around with the big-shots, and that costs money. Only lately I hadn't made any sales, and the damned expenses kept piling up, and every time I tried to get any work done at the house there was Daisy nagging away, Why did we have to buy a new car? Why did we have to pay so much rent? Why such an insurance policy? Why did I buy three suits?

So I buy her a necklace and she shuts up. There's a woman's logic for you.

Oh well, I figured, today I'll forget it. Forget the bills, forget her nagging, forget Jeanne—though that last was going to be hard. Jeanne was quiet, and she had a private income, and she thought baby-talk was silly. Oh well.

We drove on to Prentiss Road and took the old familiar route. I stopped my little stream-of-consciousness act and tried to get into the mood. Daisy *was* happy; no doubt of that. We'd packed an overnight bag, and without mentioning it we both knew we'd stay at the hotel in Valos, just as we had three years ago when we were married.

Three years of drab, nagging monotony—

But I wasn't going to think about that. Better to think about Daisy's pretty blond curls gleaming in the afternoon sunshine; to think about the pretty green hills doing ditto in the afternoon ditto. I was spring, the spring of three years ago, and all life lay before us—down the white concrete road that curved across the hills to strange heights of achievement beyond.

So we drove on, blithely enough. She pointed out the signs and I nodded or grunted or said "Uh-uh" and the first thing I knew we were four hours on the road and it was getting past afternoon and I wanted to get out and stretch my legs and besides—

THERE it lay. I couldn't have missed the banner. And even if I did, there was Daisy, squealing in my ear.

"Oh, honey—look."

CAN YOU TAKE IT?

THE HOUSE OF TERROR

VISIT A GENUINE, AUTHENTIC
HAUNTED HOUSE

And in smaller lettering, beneath, further enticements were listed.

"See the Kluva Mansion! Visit the Haunted Chamber—see the Axe used by the Mad Killer! DO THE DEAD RETURN? Visit the HOUSE OF TERROR—only genuine attraction of its kind. ADMISSION—25 c."

Of course I didn't read all this while slashing by at 60 m.p.h. We pulled up as Daisy tugged my shoulder, and while she read, I looked at the large, rambling frame building. It looked like dozens of others we passed on the road; houses occupied by "swamis" and "mediums" and "Yogi Psychologists." For this was the lunatic fringe where the quacks fed on the tourist trade. But here was a fellow with a little novelty. He had something a bit different. That's what I thought.

But Daisy evidently thought a lot more. "Ooh, honey, let's go in."

"What?"

"I'm so stiff from all this driving, and besides, maybe they sell hot dogs inside or something and I'm hungry."

Well. That was Daisy. Daisy the sadist. Daisy the horror-movie fan. She didn't fool me for a minute. I knew all about my wife's pretty little tastes. She was a thrill-addict. Shortly after our marriage she'd let down the bars and started reading the more lurid murder trial news aloud to me at breakfast. She began to leave ghastly magazines around the house. Pretty soon she was dragging me to all the mystery-pictures. Just another one of her annoying habits—I could close my eyes at any time and conjure up the drone of her voice,. tense with latent excitement, as she read about the Cleveland torso slayings, or the latest hatchet-killing.

Evidently nothing was too synthetic for her tastes. Here was an old shack that in its palmiest days was no better than a tenement house for goats; a dump with a lurid side-show banner flung in front of the porch—and still she had to go in. “Haunted House” got her going. Maybe that’s what had happened to our marriage. I would have pleased her better by going around the house in a black mask, purring like Bela Lugosi with bronchitis, and caressing her with a hatchet.

I ATTEMPTED to convey some of the pathos of my thoughts in the way I replied, “What the blazes?” but it was a losing battle. Daisy had her hand on the car door. There was a smile on her face—a smile that did queer things to her lips. I used to see that smile when she read the murder-news; it reminded me, unpleasantly, of a hungry cat’s expression while creeping up on a robin. She was a shrew and she was a sadist.

But what of it? This was a second honeymoon; no time to spoil things just when I’d fixed matters up. Kill half an hour here and then on to the hotel in Valos. “Come *on!”*

I jerked out of my musings to find Daisy halfway up the porch. I locked the car, pocketed the keys, joined her before the dingy door. It was getting misty in the late afternoon and the clouds rolled over the sun. Daisy knocked impatiently. The door opened slowly, after a long pause in the best haunted-house tradition. This was the cue for a sinister face to poke itself out and emit a greasy chuckle. Daisy was just itching for that, I knew.

Instead she got W.C. Fields.

Well, not quite. The proboscis was smaller, and not so red. The cheeks were thinner, too. But the checked suit, the squint, the jowls, and above all that “step right up gentlemen” voice were all in the tradition.

“Aii. Come in, come in. Welcome to Kluva Mansion, my friends, welcome.”

The cigar fingered us forward. “Twenty-five cents, please. Thank you.”

There we were in the dark hallway. It really was dark, and there certainly was a musty enough odor, but I knew damned well the house wasn’t haunted by anything but cockroaches. Our comic friend would have to do some pretty loud talking to convince me; but then, this was Daisy’s show.

“It’s a little late, but I guess I’ve got time to show you around. Just took a party through about fifteen minutes ago—big party from San Diego. They drove all the way up just to see the Kluva Mansion, so I can assure you you’re getting your money’s worth.”

All right, buddy, cut out the assuring, and let’s get this over with. Trot out your zombies, give Daisy a good shock with an electric battery or something, and we’ll get out of here.

“Just what is this haunted house and how did you happen to come by it?” asked Daisy. One of those original questions she was always thinking up. She was brilliant like that all the time. Just full of surprises.

“Well, it’s like this, lady. Lots of folks ask me that and I’m only too glad to tell them. This house was built by Ivan Kluva—don’t know if you remember him or not—Russian movie director, came over here about ’23 in the old silent days, right after DeMille began to get popular with his spectacle pictures. Kluva was an “epic” man; had quite a European reputation, so they gave him a contract. He put up this place, lived here with his wife. Aren’t many folks left in the movie colony that remember old Ivan Kluva; he never really got to direct anything either.

“First thing he did was to mix himself up with a lot of foreign cults. This was way back, remember; Hollywood had some queer birds then. Prohibition, and a lot of wild parties; dope addicts, all kinds of scandals, and some stuff that never did get out. There was a bunch of devil-worshippers and mystics, too—not like these fakes down the road; genuine article. Kluva got in with them.

“I guess he was a little crazy, or got that way. Because one night, after some kind of gathering here, he murdered his wife. In the upstairs room, on a kind of an altar he rigged up. He just took a hatchet to her and hacked off her head. Then he disappeared. The police looked in a couple of days later; they found her, of course, but they never did locate Kluva. Maybe he jumped off the cliffs behind the house. Maybe—I've heard stories—he killed her as a sort of sacrifice so he could *go away.* Some of the cult members were grilled, and they had a lot of wild stories about worshipping things or beings that granted boons to those who gave them human sacrifices; such boons as *going away* from Earth. Oh, it was crazy enough, I guess, but the police did find a damned funny statue behind the altar that they didn't like and never showed around, and they burned a lot of books and things they got hold of here. Also they chased that cult out of California."

All this corny chatter rolled out in a drone and I winced. Now I'm only a two-bit gag-writer, myself, but I was thinking that if I went in for such things I could improvise a. better story than this poorly-told yarn and I could ad-lib it more effectively than this bird seemed able to do with daily practice. It sounded so stale, so flat, so unconvincing. The rottenest "thriller plot" in the world. Or—

IT STRUCK me then. Perhaps the story was true. Maybe this was the solution. After all, there were no supernatural elements yet. Just a dizzy Russian devil-worshipper murdering his wife with a hatchet. It happens once in a while; psychopathology is full of such records. And why not? Our comic friend merely bought the house after the murder, cooked up his "haunt" yarn, and capitalized.

Evidently my guess was correct, because old bugle-beak sounded off again.

"And so, my friends, the deserted Kluva Mansion remained, alone and untenanted. Not utterly untenanted, though. There was the ghost. Yes, the ghost of Mrs. Kluva—the Lady in White."

Phooey! Always it has to be the Lady in White. Why not in pink, for a change, or green? Lady in White—sounds like a burlesque headliner. And so did our spieler. He was trying to push his voice down into his fat stomach and make it impressive.

"Every night she walks the upper corridor to the murder chamber. Her slit throat shines in the moonlight as she lays her head once again on the bloodstained block, again receives the fatal blow, and with a groan of torment, disappears into thin air."

Hot air, you mean, buddy.

"Oooh," said Daisy. "She would."

"I say the house was deserted for years. But there were tramps, vagrants, who broke in from time to time to stay the night. They stayed the night—and longer. Because in the morning they were always found—on the murder block, with their throats chopped by the murder axe." I wanted to say "Axe-ually?" but then, I have my better side. Daisy was enjoying this so; her tongue was almost hanging out.

"After a while nobody would come here, even the tramps shunned the spot. The real estate people couldn't sell it. Then I rented. I knew the story would attract visitors, and frankly, I'm a business man."

Thanks for telling me, brother. I thought you were a fake.

"And now, you'd like to see the murder chamber? Just follow me, please. Up the *st*airs, right this way. I've kept everything just as it always was, and I'm sure you'll be more than interested in—"

Daisy pinched me on the dark stairway. "Ooh, sugar, aren't you thrilled?"

I don't like to be called "sugar." And the idea of Daisy actually finding something "thrilling" in this utterly ridiculous farce was almost nauseating. For a moment I could have murdered her myself. Maybe Kluva had something there at that.

The stairs creaked, and the dusty window's allowed a sepulchral light to creep across the mouldy floor as we followed the waddling showman down the black hallway. A wind seemed to have sprung up outside, and the house shook before it, groaning in torment.

Daisy giggled nervously. In the movie-show she always twisted my lapel-buttons off when the monster came into the room where the girl was sleeping. She was like that now—hysterical.

I felt as excited as a stuffed herring in a pawnshop.

W.C. opened a door down the hall and fumbled around inside. A moment later he reappeared carrying a candle and beckoned us to enter the room. Well, that was a little better. Showed some imagination, anyway. The candle was effective in the gathering darkness; it east blotches of shadow over the walls and caused shapes to creep in the corners.

"Here we are," he almost whispered.

And there we were.

Now I'm not psychic. I'm not even highly imaginative. When Orson Welles is yammering on the radio I'm down at the hamburger stand listening to the Raymond Scott Quintette. But when I entered that room I *knew* that it, at least, wasn't a fake. The air reeked of murder. The shadows ruled over a domain of death. It was cold in here, cold as a charnel-house. And the candle-light fell on the great bed in the corner, then moved to the center of the room and covered a monstrous bulk. The murder block.

It was something like an altar, at that. There was a niche in the wall behind it, and I could almost imagine a statue being placed there. What kind of a statue? A black bat, inverted and crucified? Devil-worshippers used that, didn't they? Or was it another and more horrible kind of idol? The police had destroyed it But the block was still there, and in the candle-light I saw the stains. They trickled over the rough sides.

Daisy moved closer to me and I could feel her tremble.

Kluva's chamber. A man with an axe, holding a terrified woman across the block; the strength of inspired madness in his eyes, and in his hands, an axe—

"It was here, on the night of January twelfth, nineteen twenty-four, that Ivan Kluva murdered his wife with—"

The fat man stood by the door, chanting out his listless refrain. But for some reason I listened to every word. Here in this room, those words were real. They weren't scareheads on a sideshow banner; here in the darkness they had meaning. A man and his wife, and murder. Death is just a word you read in the newspaper. But some day it becomes real; dreadfully real. Something the worms whisper in your ears as they chew. Murder is a word, too. It is the power of death, and sometimes there are men who exercise that power, like gods. Men who kill are like gods. They take away life. There is something cosmically obscene about the thought. A shot fired in drunken frenzy, a blow struck in anger, a bayonet plunged in the madness of war, an accident, a car-crash—these things are part of life. But a man, any man, who lives with the thought of Death; who thinks and plans a deliberate, cold-blooded murder—

To sit there at the supper table, looking at his wife, and saying, "Twelve o'clock. You have five more hours to live, my dear. Five more hours. Nobody knows that Your friends don't know it. Even you don't know it. No one knows—except myself. Myself, and Death. I am Death. Yes. I am Death to you. I shall numb your body and your brain, I shall be your lord and master. You were born, you have lived, only for this single supreme moment; that I shall command your fate. You exist only that I may kill you."

Yes, it was obscene. And then, this block, and a hatchet.

"Come upstairs, dear," And his thoughts, grinning behind the words. Up the dark stairs to the dark room, where the block and hatchet waited.

I wondered if he hated her. No, I suppose not. If the story was true, he had sacrified her for a purpose. She was just the most handy, the most convenient person to sacrifice. He must have had blood like the water under the polar peaks.

IT WAS the room that did it, not the story. I could feel him in the room, and I could feel *her.*

Yes, that was funny. Now I could feel *her.* Not as a being, not as a tangible presence, but as a force. A restless force. Something that stirred in back of me before I turned my head. Something hiding in the deeper shadows. Something in the blood-stained block. A chained spirit.

"Here I died. I ended here. One minute I was alive, unsuspecting. The next-found me gripped by the ultimate horror of Death. The hatchet came down across my throat, so full of life, and sliced it out. Now I wait. I wait for others, for there is nothing left to me but revenge. I am not a person any longer, nor a spirit. I am merely a force—a force created as I felt my life slip away from my throat. For at that moment I knew but one feeling with my entire dying being; a feeling of utter, cosmic hatred. Hatred at the sudden injustice of what had happened to me. The force was born then when I died; it is all that is left of me. Hatred. Now I wait, and sometimes I have a chance to let the hatred escape. By killing another I can feel the hatred rise, wax, grow strong. Then for a brief moment I rise, wax, grow strong; feel real again, touch the hem of life's robe, which once I wore. Only by surrendering to my dark hate can I survive in death. And so I lurk; lurk here in this room. Stay too long and I shall return. Then, in the darkness, I seek your throat and the blade bites and I taste again the ecstasy of reality."

The old drizzle-puss was elaborating his story, but I couldn't hear him for my thoughts. Then all at once he flashed something out across my line of vision; something that was like a stark shadow against the candle-light.

It was a hatchet.

I felt, rather than heard, when Daisy went "Ooooh!" beside me. Looking down I stared into two blue mirrors of terror that were her eyes. I had thought plenty, and what her imaginings had been I could guess. The old bird was stolid enough, but he brandished that hatchet, that hatchet with the rusty blade, and it got so I couldn't look at anything else but the jagged edge of the hatchet. I couldn't hear or see or think anything; there was that hatchet, the symbol of Death. There was the real crux of the story; not in the man or the woman, but in that tiny razor-edge line. That razor-edge was really Death. That razor-edge spelled doom to all living things. Nothing in the world was greater than that razor-edge. No brain, no power, no love, no hate could withstand it.

And it swooped out in the man's hands and I tore my eyes away and looked at Daisy, at anything, just to, keep the black thought down. And I saw Daisy, her face that of a tortured Medusa.

Then she slumped.

I caught her. Bugle-beak looked up with genuine surprise.

"My wife's fainted," I said.

He just blinked. Didn't know what the score was, at first. And a minute later I could swear he was just a little bit pleased. He thought his story had done it, I suppose.

Well, this changed all plans. No Valos, no drive before supper.

"Any place around here where she can lie down?" I asked. "No, not in this room."

"My wife's bedroom is down the hall," said Bugle-beak.

His wife's bedroom, eh? But no one stayed here after dark, he had said—the damned old fake!

This was no time for quibbling. I carried Daisy into the room down the hall, chafed her wrists.

"Shall I send my wife up to take care of her?" asked the now solicitous showman.

"No, don't bother. Let me handle her; she gets these things every so often—hysteria, you know. But she'll have to rest a while."

He shuffled down the hall, and I sat there cursing. Damn the woman, it was just like her! But too late to alter circumstances now. And at least she had her mouth shut. I decided to let her sleep it off.

I went downstairs in the darkness, groping my way. And I was only halfway down when I heard a familiar pattering strike the roof. Sure enough—a typical West Coast heavy dew was falling. Fine firing, too; dark as pitch outside.

Well, there was the set-up. Splendid melodrama background. I'd been dragged to movies for years and it was always the same as this.

The young couple caught in a haunted house by a thunderstorm. The mysterious evil caretaker. (Well, maybe he wasn't, but he'd have to do until a better one came along.) The haunted room. The fainting girl, asleep and helpless in the bedroom. Enter Boris Karloff dressed in three pounds of nose-putty. "Grrrrrrr!" says Boris. "Eeeeeeeeh!" says the girl. "What's that?" shouts Inspector Toozefuddy from downstairs. And than a mad chase. "Bang! Bang!" And Boris Karloff falls down into an open manhole. Girl gets frightened. Boy gets girl. Formula.

I thought I was pretty clever when I turned on the burlesque thought pattern, but when I got down to the foot of the stairs I knew that I was playing hide-and-go-seek with my thoughts. Something dark and cold was creeping around in my brain, and I was trying hard to avoid it. Something to do with Ivan Kluva and his wife and the haunted room and the hatchet. Suppose there was a ghost and Daisy was lying up there alone and—

"HAM and eggs?"

"What the—" I turned around. There was Bugle-beak at the foot of the stairs.

"I said, would you care for some ham and eggs? Looks pretty bad outside and so long as the Missus is resting I thought maybe you'd like to join the wife and me in a little supper."

I could have kissed him, nose and all.

We went into the back. Mrs. was just what you'd expect; thin woman in her middle forties, wearing a patient look. The place was quite cosy, though; she had fixed up several rooms as living quarters. I began to have a little more respect for Bugle-beak. Poor showman though he was, he seemed to be making a living in a rather novel way. And his wife was an excellent cook.

The rain thundered down. Something about a little lighted room in the middle of a storm that makes you feel good inside. Confidential. Mrs. Keenan—Bugle-beak introduced himself as Homer Keenan—suggested that I might take a little brandy up to Daisy. I demurred, but Keenan perked up his ears—and nose—at the mention of brandy and suggested we have a little. The *little* proved to be a half-gallon jug of fair peach-brandy, and we filled our glasses. As the meal progressed we filled them again. And again. The liquor helped to chase that dark thought away, or almost away. But it still bothered me. And so I got Homer Keenan into talking. Better a boring conversation than a boring thought—boring little black beetle of thought, chewing away in your brain.

"So after the carny folded I got out from under. Put over a little deal in Tia and cleaned up but the Missus kind of wanted to settle down. Tent business in this country all shot to blazes anyway. Well, I knew this Feingerber from the old days, like I say—and he put me up to this house. Yeah, sure, that part is genuine enough. There was an Ivan Kluva and he did kill his wife here. Block and axe genuine too; I got a state permit to keep 'em. Museum, this is. But the ghost story, of course that's just a fake. Get's them in, though. Some week-ends we play to capacity crowds ten hours a day. Makes a nice thing of it. We live here—say, let's have another nip of this brandy, whaddya say? Come on, it won't hurt you. Get it from a Mex down the road a ways."

Fire. Fire in the blood. What did he mean the ghost story was fake? When I went into that room I smelled murder. I thought *his* thoughts. And then I had thought *hers.* Her hate was in that room; and if it wasn't a ghost, what was it? Somehow it all tied in with that black thought I had buzzing in my head; that damned black thought all mixed up with the axe and hate, and poor Daisy lying up there helpless. Fire in my head. Brandy fire. But not enough. I could still think of Daisy, and all at once something blind gripped me and I was afraid and I trembled all over, and I couldn't wait. Thinking of her like that, all alone in the storm, near the murder-room and the block and the hatchet—I knew I must go to her. I couldn't stand the horrid suspicion.

I got up like a fool, mumbled something about looking after her, and ran up the black staircase. I was trembling, trembling, until I reached her bedside and saw how peacefully she lay there. Her sleep was quite untroubled. She was even smiling. She didn't know. She wasn't afraid of ghosts and hatchets. Looking at her I felt utterly ridiculous, but I did stare down at her for a long time until I regained control of myself once again. . . .

When I went downstairs the liquor had hit me and I felt drunk. The thought was gone from my brain now, and I was beginning to experience relief.

Keenan had refilled my glass for me, and when I gulped it down he followed suit and immediately poured again. This time we sat down to a real gab-fest.

I began to talk. I felt like an unwinding top. Everything began to spin out of my throat. I told about my life; my "career," such as it was; my romance with Daisy, even. Just felt like it. The liquor.

Before you know it I was pulling a True Confession of my own, with all the trimmings. How things stood with Daisy and me. Our foolish quarrels. Her nagging. Her touchiness about things like our car, and the insurance, and Jeanne Corey. I was maudlin enough to be petty. I picked on her habits. Then I began to talk about this trip of ours, and my plans for a second honeymoon, and it was only instinct that shut me up before becoming actually disgusting.

Keenan adopted an older "man-of-the-world" attitude, but he finally broke down enough to mention a few of his wife's salient deficiencies. What I told him about Daisy's love for the horrors prompted him to tease his wife concerning her own timidity. It developed that while she knew the story was a fake, she still shied away from venturing upstairs after nightfall—just as though the ghost were real.

Mrs. Keenan bridled. She denied everything. Why she'd go upstairs any time at all. Any time at all.

"How about now? It's almost midnight. Why not go up and take a cup of coffee to that poor sick woman?" Keenan sounded like somebody advising Little Red Riding-Hood to go see her grandmother.

"Don't bother," I assured him. "The rain's dying down. I'll go up and get her and we'll be on our way. We've got to get to Valos, you know."

"Think I'm afraid, eh?" Mrs. Keenan was already doing things with the coffee pot. Rather dizzily, but she managed.

"No, no—but really—"

"You men, always talking about your wives. I'll show you!" She took the cup, then arched her back eloquently as she passed Keenan and disappeared in the hallway.

I GOT an urge.

Sobriety rushed to my head. "Keenan," I whispered.

"Whazzat?"

"Keenan, we must stop her!"

"What for?"

"You ever gone upstairs at night?"

"Course not. Why sh'd I? All dusty up there, mus' keep it tha'way for cust'mers. Never *go* up."

"Then how do you know the story isn't true?" I talked fast. Very.

"What?"

"I say perhaps there *is* a ghost."

"Aw, go on!"

"Keenan, I tell you I felt something up there. You're so used to the place you didn't notice, but I *felt* it. A woman's hate, Keenan. A woman's hate!" I was almost screaming; I dragged him from his chair and tried to push him into the hall. I had to stop her somehow. I was afraid.

"That room is filled with menace." Quickly I explained my thoughts of the afternoon concerning the dead woman—surprised and slain, so that she died only with a great hate forming as life left her; a hate that endured, that thrived on death alone. A hate, embodied, that would take up the murder hatchet and slay—

"Stop your wife, Keenan," I screamed. "Stop her!"

"What about your wife?" chuckled the showman. "Besides," and he leered, drunkenly, "I'll tell you somethin' I wasn't gonna tell. It's *all* a fake." He winked. I still pushed him towards the staircase.

"All a fake," he wheezed. "Not only ghost part. But—there never was a Ivan Kluva, never was no wife. Never was no killing. Jus' old butcher's block. Hatchet's my hatchet. No murder, no ghost, nothin' to be afraid of. Good joke, make myself hones' dollar. All a fake!"

"Come on!" I screamed, and the black thought came back and it sang in my brain and I tried, to drag him up the stairs, knowing it was too late, but still I had to do something—

And then *she* screamed.

I heard it. She was running out of the room, down the hall. And at the head of the stairs she screamed again, but the scream turned into a gurgle. It was black up there, but out of the blackness tottered her silhouette. Down the stairs she rolled; bump, bump, bump. Same sound as a rubber ball. But she was a woman, and she ended up at the bottom of the stairs with the axe still stuck in her throat.

Right there I should have turned and run, but that thing inside my head wouldn't let me. I just stood there as Keenan looked down at the body of his wife, and I babbled it all out again.

"I hated her—you don't understand how those little things count—and Jeanne waiting—there was the insurance—if I did it at Valos no one would ever know—here was accident, but better."

"There is no ghost," Keenan mumbled. He didn't even hear me. "There is no ghost." I stared at the slashed throat.

"When I saw the hatchet and she fainted, it came over me. I could get you drunk, carry her out, and you'd never know—"

"What killed her?" he whispered. "There is no ghost."

I thought again of my theory of a woman's hate surviving death and existing thereafter only with an urge to slay. I thought of that hate, embodied, grabbing up a hatchet and slaying, saw Mrs. Keenan fall, then glanced up at the darkness of the hall as the grinning song in my brain rose, forcing me to speak.

“There is a ghost now,” I whispered. “You see, the second time I went up to see Daisy I killed her with this hatchet.”

Beauty's Beast

That pet shop was a very strange place indeed.

PEG and I were like the Smith Brothers—only better, because neither of us had beards. We disagreed so perfectly that we made an irresistible combination. Of course, Peg always permitted me to be boss, provided I did what she told me. And when she invited me to dinner at Leonard Merril's, whom I detest, I naturally argued and agreed.

So there we were, walking down the street because Peg was athletic and I preferred a taxi. I was walking fast and Peg was dawdling, so she spotted the place first.

"Look at the cute puppy!" she. exclaimed. My eyes wandered quickly to surrounding lamp-posts.

"No—over there, in the window."

Peg dragged me before the glass pane of what I perceived to be Mardu's Pet Shop. Of course there was the usual black and white pup crouching wobbly-legged in the sawdust, and Peg began to make those disgusting noises women always make when confronted with puppies, babies, or Tyrone Power.

Now I don't like dogs, and that is putting it mildly. If I were perishing in the snow of the Alps and a St. Bernard came running up with a bottle of brandy under his neck I might fall on him in gratitude—but I'm sure the pooch would bite me in the leg.

Somehow I never could believe that a dog was man’s best friend; I know of at least three people who are higher in my affections than a canine.

After Peg stopped squealing at this dopey-looking little mutt, I told her this, adding that if we didn’t step on it we’d be late for the party.

“Ooh, let’s go inside and look around,” she countered. Always agreeable, was Peg.

“I do not care for animals,” I said, gently. “In fact I would not go into this foul-smelling joint to see King Kong in a bathing suit. I despise anteaters, dingos, emus, pandas, yaks, aardvaarks, hartebeestes, ocelots, steinbok, dugongs, and elk.”

“My uncle is an Elk,” said Peg.

“And you, my dear, are a horses’ neck,” I murmured; following Peggy into the pet-shop in response to a charming tug on the lapel which knocked off a button.

“I simply must have that puppy,” she prattled. “He’s so cute, and I could buy him a little red blanket with his name on it, and you could walk him around the block every night—”

Yes, and I could drop dead too, sister, only it’s bad for my health. So was the pet-shop. To be brutally frank, it smelled in there.

“Come on, Peg, we haven’t got much time,” I said, glancing around the dingy, cage-lined walls in a sudden attack of combined *claustro*—and *zoophobia.*

“Can I do anything for you, sir?”

“Yes, you can open a window and air out this joint. Only you look as though you came from the Black Hole of Calcutta yourself, mister.”

He did. lire tall, thin man who rounded the counter was obviously not a Caucasian. Pie had the dark, pointed face of an East Indian, and his voice held a nasal twang.

In all frankness, I must admit he didn’t impress me then. It was only afterwards, thinking of it, that I realized his movements were those of a panther; that in his pet shop he was a jungle beast. Quiet, quick, supple, ember-eyed, he confronted me.

“That puppy in the window—” Peg began. The tall, dark man shot her a single glance. I don’t know exactly what it conveyed, but Peg shut up. I determined to get him alone sometime and find out how he did it.

Then the lean-faced one turned to me.

“Yon would perhaps wish to look around a little first. I have many pets here, and I think the young lady could find one a little more interesting. Perhaps?”

I can tell you what kind of a glance he gave *me.* It was a look that made it impossible for me to say “No.” I can’t explain that. Maybe Dale Carnegie could, but I’ve a hunch this Hindu had a lot Dale Carnegie never dreamed of. It wasn’t sales personality he turned on, it was the air of command.

“Would you show us?” I heard myself saying.

“But that puppy—Peg wailed.

“This way.” I nudged Peg to follow the dark shop-owner. I was doing a little rationalization on my part. I didn’t want Peggy to get that puppy; I didn’t want to put on its ittsy-bittsy red blanket and take urns out for a nice walk around the block every night. Blazes no! If she could be steered into getting a parrot, or goldfish, or even a pet gorilla it was okay by me. But I had no intention of spending my evenings gazing at the trees. So what if this fellow was domineering?

We walked between the long lines of cages. I stared curiously. There were dogs, lots and lots of dogs. Chinese Chows, Toys, Pekes; exotic little creatures with curiously bright eyes. That was funny. No common western breeds.

“Imported?” I asked.

“Yes, sir. All imported. I bring them from the East. Fine blood. Some of the best, sir.”

CAGES of birds; gilded, ornamental cages with curiously-designed bars, teakwood perches of oriental patterns. They held canaries with bodies like golden, living notes; finches and nightingales, scarlet humming-birds with peacock purple crowns. And in larger grilled prisons were blood-beaked macaws, white cockatoos, heavy-crested parrots with blinking eyes. “Quite a collection,” I said.

“From all over the world,” answered the Hindu, softly. “From all over the world they come.” But he didn’t stop to expound further, didn’t offer to show us anything. We passed a crystalline counter of fishbowls, passed the insane eyes of a million wriggling exotics. And then Peg grabbed me in the gloom and I felt her body trembling against mine.

“Snakes!” she shuddered, in a voice hard with loathing.

From their pits the vipers swayed, the cobras crawled, undulating in the evil glory of their poisonous beauty. Eyes bright as Lucifer blazed upwards in the darkness, and the air was filled with a sluggish rustling that sounded against my spine in little cold notes of horripilation.

“Beautiful, are they not?” murmured our guide. “In my country they worship them. I had great trouble procuring these.

“Get them yourself?” I asked, merely to hear the sound of my own voice.

“I have secured everything in the shop—personally,” answered the tall man.

“You mean you captured all these things? Sort of a Frank Buck, aren’t you?”

“I bring them back alive.”

Peg giggled feebly as I squeezed her arm and we resumed our inspection. A moment later she grabbed me in the shadows with a low scream.

“Here, now, don’t get so affectionate,” I cautioned. “This is no place for —”

“Ooooh! Rats, take them away!”

“Merely white mice,” came the soft voice at my side. “From Burma.

“Sacred in the temples, you understand,” continued our mentor. “Like that peacock over there.” He gestured in the darkness. “In fact, I might mention that all the animals in this shop are sacred to Eastern mythology. The snakes, of course, and the Chows in China; the fish are worshipped in

Java and the Celebes, and the various birds in Borneo and the Malay States. But I was going to show you the monkeys."

"Why?"

"I am sure the young lady here will be more satisfied with a monkey. Such as—this one."

And he stopped before a row of cages at the back of the shop. Stooping, he prodded the bars of a shadow-shielded crate. "Hanuman," he whispered. "Hanuman."

"What?"

"I call him Hanuman. After the sacred monkey-god of India," came the voice. "A temple monkey; tame, intelligent, and very hard to procure."

I began to wonder whether this Mardu, as his sign proclaimed him, was some kind of nut. Sacred animals! I spotted a tortoise, and a Siamese cat. Half-expected a crocodile and a white elephant.

"Hanuman," called the Hindu. "Show thyself."

I stood there in the shadows, Peg at my side, and suddenly something clicked. I knew there was a screwy feeling in the air, and now I placed my finger on it.

It was too quiet. Utterly still. When you go into a pet shop the dogs bark, the parrots squawk, the birds screech, the monkeys chatter. And here it was still. The animals watched us as we passed, but did not move. We had walked down a row of glittering eyes in the darkness, and there wasn't a sound. Something wrong.

"What's the matter?" I asked. "Is it bedtime in this menagerie?"

"No." The Hindu smiled. "But my pets are all very well-trained.

"Let me assure you, sir, of that. They are well-trained animals. Temple beasts are intelligent; they are bred with human backgrounds almost in their blood. And I have personally instructed every one. I know you will be satisfied with—ah, Hanuman. Show thyself to the lady, here. She might want to buy thee, little friend."

THE monkey appeared suddenly, head pressed against the bars. And Peg stooped down, looked into the monkey’s eyes. Very quiet was the monkey, and its bright little orbs were timid, but they rested on Peg’s face in mute appeal. Animal magnetism, or something—but silly as it sounds, the little creature had that trusting, ingratiating sort of gaze that nauseated me and went over with a bang where Peg was concerned.

“That is the way,” the Hindu whispered. “Show that you like the lady, that you trust the lady. She wants to buy you. She wants you. Don’t you, lady?”

The drone of his voice in darkness was almost hypnotic, and Peg stared into the beady little eyes. Auto-suggestion.

“I want him!” Peg stood up. It wasn’t “Isn’t he cute?” or “What an adorable little fellow!” It was “I want him!”

“I thought he would be suited to you when I saw you,” said the Hindu. “Yes, perfectly suited. You are in complete accord.”

“How much?” I barked.

“To the lady? Ten dollars. A small sum, but they are so perfectly attuned, so beautifully matched that—”

“She isn’t going to marry the monkey,” I interrupted. “Here’s your ten. Give us the monk and let’s get going.”

“It is done.” He stooped, opened the door of the cage. The monkey just crouched there. And then Mardu stooped and picked him up in slim, almond hands, and held him for a moment against his face. His long fingers stroked the beast’s fur in a hypnotically soothing caress. And the Hindu whispered softly, unintelligibly, in a strange tongue. The monkey seemed to nod, and it struck me so funny I let out a guffaw; whereupon Peg kicked me in the shins.

Ah. Here you are. Treat Hanuman well; I have told him much of you. And do not forget Mardu.

Peg took the monkey on her shoulder and we walked down the aisle of the shop, the smiling Hindu behind us.

Do not forget—

Peg smiled and the monkey made that ridiculous nodding gesture. I stood on the sidewalk and laughed.

"All right, Peggy. Where do we buy the organ?"

"He's wonderful. I'm going to take him to the party."

"To Leonard Merril's?"

"Why not?"

"Well, I admit he's an improvement over the average run of Leonard's guests, but don't you think that—"

We walked down the street. The monkey clung to Peg silently and its eyes never left her face.

"Wasn't that the queerest place?"

"That's what I'm thinking," I answered. A mighty queer place."

"And that Mardu—he has such an air about him."

"So has the place. Whew!"

"Oh, don't talk that way. Honestly, I'll bet he's a wonderful man. The way he handled those animals. Like some old Brahmin priest or something. Don't the Hindus believe that animals have human souls? Reincarnation, isn't it?"

"I don't know, I don't like flowers. Hurry up and drag that soulful baboon of yours to dinner."

What Peg had said started me thinking. It was a queer place, and the Hindu was a strange man. I determined to go back there and ask a few questions. Sometimes there's a story behind such things; wouldn't hurt to find out. If Mardu were a renegade holy man, now, who collected sacred animals and sold them to those he thought were psychically attuned to the spirit of the beast—Oh, the devil with it. But he had steered Peg off the puppy, and almost hypnotized her into buying the monkey. I wondered what he would have picked out for me. I hoped it would be a chicken, fried. I was hungry.

"Here we are, Peg. Upstairs quickly or I'll shove Hanuman here between two slices of rye bread and eat out on the steps."

"Nasty!" Peg faced me. "Thanks for buying me the monkey, you swine." She put her arms around me and her face very close so that I stood on the brink of eternity as we kissed. Sometimes Peg could be very nice that way; so sweet and cuddly that I'd forget she used red nail polish. Right now she turned my heart into a creampuff, and then I drew away and I saw the monkey watching me with glittering little eyes and it clawed at Peg, pulling her face around.

"Well look who's jealous," Peg giggled. "You've got a new rival."

"He needs a shave," I grumbled.

But I noticed that Peg didn't look at me any more, just stared at the monkey as we went up the stairs and knocked on Leonard Merril's door.

Inside, everybody stared at the monkey, too.

All during dinner they stared, and Peg told her story, and I just ate. The monkey rested very quietly on Peg's lap, and looked up at her whenever she gave too much attention to one of the other guests. It tugged at her shoulder in the irresistibly human gesture of a small child, and it wasn't long before everyone noticed it and began making cracks about jealousy, and a few off-color comments that might have made me bum if they weren't so damnably funny and appropriate.

"What you going to call it?" asked Leonard Merril, as we went into the living room.

"I don't know," Peg mused.

"Just plain Mr. X will do," I growled. "That's the best way of referring to the third member of a romantic triangle."

"Mr. X it is, then."

"Beauty and the Beast," said Merril. "Where'd you say you got it, Peg?"

"A place called *Mardu's* down on Flynn Street. I told you about this funny Hindu that runs it—"

"Mardu's?" It was Mrs. Merril who interrupted. "Why, that's where Lillian got Toby."

"What Toby?"

“That—that snake.” Mrs. Merril shuddered. “A fine sister I’ve got. I can’t understand it; she’s always hated reptiles, and yet only about a week ago she came home with a nasty little cobra she keeps in a wire cage and feeds live mice to—ugh!”

“Really?”

“It’s the truth. And now that you mention it, she got it at *Mardu’s.* She told me she passed there and happened to notice a puppy in the window, but this fellow that runs the shop started talking to her and she—”

I STOPPED listening. I knew the rest.

So she went in to buy a puppy and came out with a snake. Like Lou Holtz’s story about Lapidus going to the race-track, taking bad advice and betting on the wrong horse; listening to the same fellow again and betting on the wrong horse again until he loses all his money; deciding to spend his last dime for a bag of peanuts only to buy popcorn instead on the advice of this same stranger. So the puppy in the window was a decoy, and Mardu sold his customers what he felt was best. All right—but why?

“You know Lillian is absolutely devoted to the horrid thing?” Mrs. Merril was in full conversational cry. “Why, the kiddies are beginning to complain that she neglects them to spend all her time with that nasty monster. And she goes to *Mardu’s* every day; he’s supposed to be teaching her Hindu philosophy. One would think that the man had hypnotized her. I declare, if I didn’t know my own sister better than that I’d be scandalized!”

Looking suddenly at Peg, I caught her staring at the monkey. And right then and there I had the hunch—the hunch that was cold along my neck.

“Let’s go,” I whispered. “Let’s pick up Mr. X and get out of here.”

Peg shrugged and rose as I made my excuses. We departed. I didn’t want Peg to hear any more about Lillian and her pet. It would be too easy—first thing I knew Peggy would be dropping in at the Hindu’s place, and hearing some “philosophy” and I had just one strong notion that I didn’t want this to happen.

We walked home very quietly. I was silent, worried by something I couldn't quite shape into thought. As for Peg, she was crooning at the monkey. It clung to her, clung to her; I wondered if it would leave her when she went to bed. Its paws sunk into her shoulder and it clung like a little black leech, like an incubus. Its eyes glittered in the moonlight. What had the Hindu whispered to it when he took it from its cage?

Oh, that was nonsense! But it wasn't nonsense when Peg ignored me in favor of the dizzy orang-utang, and it wasn't nonsense as I kissed her good-night to feel those tiny paws clawing at my hair, pulling my head away from hers. No, that wasn't nonsense.

I went to bed with the grim determination of seeing *Mardu* again the next day. There were some things I had to find out. No need of letting my imagination run riot, but still I intended to interview my Hindu friend and get matters straight.

I awoke next morning as the phone rang. It wasn't Peg. It was Sullivan, my agent, and he bawled out his orders in a peremptory voice. An hour later I was on the train, and for a week I was much too deep in work to think much about Hindus, animal trainers, or pet monkeys with a mother fixation.

But I came back, and I hadn't changed my shoes before the phone tinkled, and Peg's voice did a ditto. No, it didn't tinkle this time. She sounded grave.

"Hello, just get in?"

"No, darling. No, how are you. No, when can I see you." And she sounded upset.

"What's happened, Peg?"

"Lillian's dead."

"Who?"

"Lillian. Mrs. Merrils' sister. You remember, the one that bought the snake from Mardu. Oh, it's just awful—"

"Be right over." I hung up, broke the lace in excitement as I changed shoes, and dashed.

I don’t know what I expected to find at Peg’s place, or what I expected to hear. Probably Peg sprawled out, strangled by the monkey; with a wild note revealing that Lillian had been bitten by her snake, and that Mardu was a Hindu murder master who sold killer beasts to his victims. Something like that made my heart thunder as I ran upstairs and knocked on Peg’s door.

But there stood Peg, cool and slim. She was all right, then. But the monkey was perched on her shoulder—

Its beady little eyes were stabbing at me, but I could only see the figure of the girl.

“Let’s have it,” I said. “Let’s have it straight.”

“Nothing’s the matter with me,” Peg answered. “It’s Lillian. And even that isn’t so bad. I guess I was a little hysterical when I called you; it came so suddenly. I just heard today.”

WE SANK side by side on the sofa, and that damned monkey was grinning on her shoulder, like some eavesdropper. She didn’t seem to mind, or even to notice its presence; but every once in a while her hand rose unconsciously to caress the simian. She caressed it the way Mardu had caressed it and its eyes shone.

“It sounded so funny, darling. Merril called me. It happened last night; heart attack or something. She was in the studio, playing to Toby.”

“Toby?”

“That snake she bought. Mardu had given her a little silver flageolet like snake-charmers use. She was playing it when she keeled over.” Peg paused. “That’s all there was to it. Leonard saw it happen; the doctor came and certified it.”

“Go on.”

“Why, that’s all.”

“Oh no it isn’t. Don’t try and fool me, Peg. Out with it.”

Peggy bit her lip, then plunged ahead hurriedly. “Oh, nothing else matters much, except for the funny thing that happened today. Mardu showed up at Merril's house and took the snake."

"What?"

"This morning. He came to the door and asked for his snake. Said that if the lady was dead she wouldn't need it any more and he would like to buy it back."

"Did he get it?"

"Merril almost threw it at him. Pie went away then." Peg sat staring, one hand caressing the monkey on her shoulder. "But that's what upset me so at first. You see, Mardu didn't ask if Mrs. Merril had died, he *knew* she was dead before he came."

"Peg."

"Yes."

"Have you been to Mardu's since that night? Look at me—have you?"

"I—"

"Thought so! Now what's all this? Why did you go?"

"I had to."

"Had to?"

"To find out about the dreams. I haven't told you that, have I? That I've been dreaming of Hanuman?"

"I thought the monkey's name was Mr. X?"

"No. His name is Hanuman. That's what Mardu tells me. I must call him Hanuman."

The look in her eyes, the *vacant* look that was not Peg, unnerved me. I shook her shoulders, none too gently. "Come on, now; those dreams!"

"All right. They started that first night.

I put Hanuman in the kitchen and went to bed. I wasn't conscious of falling asleep, and the first thing I knew Hanuman was in the room, next to my bed. He hopped up to my pillow and snuggled next to me, and began to talk. Not chatter, but talk. At first it was all a drone, then I could make out words, and then I recognized the voice. It was like Mardu's—soft, whispery. He was telling me things; things I could *feel* rather than understand. He talked for a long time, but I wasn't frightened. Then I seemed to wake up. It had all been so real I half expected to find the monkey lying *next to* me, but of course it wasn't there. I knew then that I'd been dreaming. Funny though, I couldn't remember those important things Hanuman had said to me. I went out to the kitchen and there he was. It may sound kind of foolish, but I was all worked up and in a daze, and I began to speak to the brute. Of course he just blinked at me. So I went back to bed. The next day you left and I went to Mardu's."

"Go on."

"I told him. He just smiled, and asked me if I remember what Hanuman had said, and when I answered no, he laughed and asked me to sit down. I did, and he explained that I must have been unconsciously hypnotized. That was the funniest thing, because you know I'd been thinking so myself. Yes, the night we bought Hanuman in the dark, Mardu's voice had influenced me. By association—Mardu and the monkey—it had carried over into my subconscious in sleep. Peculiar, wasn't it?"

"Very," I said, curtly.

"Well, this Mardu is really quite a person. He found out I was interested in psychology, and he began to tell me what the Hindus have learned of the subject; how the Brahmin holy men can control the mind, and influence others. He studied in some temple or other himself at one time; I believe it was a temple of Yami, he said, and what he found out about animals in particular was of great help to him in his work. He told me how trappers can hypnotize animals, and how snakes are charmed, and how sometimes in the temples the priests teach certain animals to actually hypnotize human beings!"

"What's that?"

"Oh, it's only a sort of legend in the East; they think that snakes hypnotize birds, and that sometimes the animals can learn that power. It's all mixed up with a lot of other things he taught me, about the theory of reincarnation. You know I said something like that when we first met him; that he might be interested in reincarnation. Funny that he is. He believes absolutely that men go through all kinds of incarnations on earth; starting out as the lowest insects and gradually, life after life, evolving into human form. If a life is good, the soul is rewarded by ascending to a higher form in the next existence; if a life is bad, the soul sinks to a lower animal state. That's one of the fundamental principles of their religion, you know.

"Mardu talked about how all religions believe that gods once walked the earth in the shape of beasts; the Egyptians and the Greeks and the Hindus, of course. He told me about lycanthropy as a universal superstition—oh, thousands of things! He's quite an educated man. Well, in the end he had me quite calmed down; warned me not to worry about any more dreams, and gave me this."

Peg pulled it from her blouse—the tiny silver pipe with the worn scroll design in the metal. "He said I should play the pipes to Hanuman every night before I went to sleep; that it would show my mastery of the beast and thus reassure my own subconscious and keep me from dreaming. So I have. And then—I heard about Lillian." I gave her a long look. What I saw didn't satisfy me yet.

"All of it," I whispered. "Come on, all of it. You went back to Mardu's again, didn't you? And your dreams didn't stop, did they? And before Lillian died you saw her and she told you—"

"That Mardu was a wizard and that the little silver pipe was a token of his power, and that the snake came to her in dreams and whispered, and she was afraid of—"

PEG blurted it out as though she couldn't stop. But *it* stopped her. Crawling up to her mouth its tiny paws raked her lips.

And Peg fainted.

I grabbed at the furry little monstrosity, but it cluttered and leapt to the floor. Then I was chafing Peg's wrists and whispering her name, kissing away the bright trickle of blood from her lips. She sat up and clung to me for a long, shuddering moment, and then she got control of herself.

“See no evil, hear no evil, speak. no evil,” she said, in a voice with a ghost of amusement. “The three monkeys. Well, indeed.”

“Where’s that damned pipe?” I demanded. “I’m going to smash it. And then I’m going down and smash Mardu. Fakir, holy man, medicine man, magician—whatever he is!”

“It’s raining,” said Peg. She was staring out the window. The drops thundered down. “The pipe? Why—Hanuman has it.” Indeed, the monkey, now perching on the mantel, clutched the silver pipe to its bosom.

I went for that monkey. I went for him for half an hour, in the midst of the most torrential rainstorm I’ve ever seen. The lights went out, and I stumbled after the elusive beast in the dark. Then Peg got frightened and began to cry, and I comforted her. Chasing an inhuman intelligence in pitch-blackness isn’t a pleasant thing, and I’d rather not talk about it. But the way that diabolical little simian eluded me was uncanny. At the end of the half hour I was nearly as hysterical as Peggy, and quite willing to believe her story. Mardu hadn’t hypnotized me, but I knew.

I knew as I took Peg in my arms, there in the rainswept darkness, and I understood her murmurings.

“You know what Lillian was afraid of, don’t you? And why Mardu knew she died, and wanted that snake back—You know why he keeps those pets now, and why they are so quiet, and why he only gives certain ones to certain people? You know what he means by reincarnation, and animals that can hypnotize, just as music can.

Little silver pipes. You know what the dreams mean, and why every night they get stronger and stronger and Mardu calls me and pulls me out of myself into—”

“Don’t be silly,” I said, but I didn’t believe she was silly. And somewhere in the dark room was the monkey. I could almost feel it grin.

“But why?” I said aloud. “You see, dear, it isn’t reasonable. If it’s all a trap to do—what you’re hinting—Mardu must have some purpose behind it all. He hasn’t, so your notion is absurd.”

Only inside my head it wasn't absurd. I'd figured it out. Peggy had said he was a priest of Yama. Yama is the god of Death and Pleil. Mardu was the Hindu equivalent of a devil worshipper. Now a devil worshipper has one aim; to degrade God and His works, to pull men's souls to Satan. A Hindu devoted to Yama and working for the devil, would degrade others. If he believed in reincarnation, used hypnotic powers, he would try to degrade others by dragging them back, lowering them on the reincarnative past by putting their human souls into—

But no. This was the Twentieth Century. Snakes and monkeys, even temple snakes and monkeys, cannot hypnotize human beings, cannot whisper in dreams, cannot pull a human soul out of its body and—oh, this was the Twentieth Century—Or it was a mad world of thunder and lightning and skirling rain. I went to the window. The streets swirled in water. It was rising from the river. Flood-level or over.

Peg whispered behind me very softly. "I went there today. I took a look at the snake Mardu had given Lillian. He tried to hide it, but it was lying there in a box. When it saw me it opened its eyes and I knew, and then I screamed and ran out before he could stop me. But I knew."

"Nonsense," I said, but the thunder drowned it out.

"He must be stopped before he does what I know he'll do. That monkey—the next time I fall asleep it will whisper again and pull me out and I can't fight any longer, I can't!"

"I'm going to Mardu's now," I said.

"In this storm? The river might—"

"Take a chance. Got to. You stay here. Get hold of that monkey—he's hiding somewhere here. And beat its brains out. Yes, kill it! Then wait for me. I'll be back."

She clung to me in the darkness, and I could hear the rain, and her heartbeat, and above that a faint, evil rustling as the unseen simian scampered grinning round the room.

"Be careful," Peg whispered.

I SLAMMED the door and raced through water-swept streets. The pools rose above my ankles, but I made my apartment. I ran in, opened my desk-drawer, and pulled out the revolver lying there.

Then the phone rang. I knew right away who it was. Peg. She'd dissuade me. Well, let her—"Hello."

The phone just buzzed. I held the receiver close. Brrrrrrr. And then, a chattering. A chattering. Monkey-chattering.

I never stopped to hang up. In a moment I was out on the swirling streets, running madly with the revolver in my hand. I banged on Peg's door, then forced it with my shoulder.

Blackness within, but I had matches. Peg lay there on the floor, the little silver flageolet in her hand. She hadn't fainted.

It must have come to her suddenly in the darkness; dozing off, then the drone of monkey-voice, Mardu's voice, compelling her to play. And in that playing, a hypnotic linkage took place.

But that was insane. She'd had a shock, heart attack. That devilish little beast had done it. Where was it?

Tugging at my ankle. I looked down, striking a second match. The monkey was at my side. The monkey that always hated me. It was tugging at my leg, whining, and it looked upwards with a gaze so startlingly familiar that my own heart skipped a beat.

"Devil," I muttered, and struck out. It avoided the blow, but made no move, to scurry away. It just looked up, patiently, and then it whined, whimpered and pointed. First at the body, then at its own chest. And it tugged my leg. It led me over to the phone, indicated the mouthpiece.

Sure. Peg had suffered a heart attack, and then she had phoned me and chattered like a monkey.

But it had to be that way. This other was too much.

And still the monkey whined, and when I picked it up it tugged at my shoulders and pointed at the door.

All right. I was crazy. I was going to be guided by a monkey. I was going out on the dark, flooded streets, down to the river-front where the water was rising; all at the instigation of a pet monkey.

Then I looked at the white body of Peg on the floor and I looked at the monkey and I made my decision.

“Come on,” I said.

I stopped thinking right there. The streets were knee-deep in water. Through thunder and storm-streaked flashes of fury I waded, a wet-furred monkey chattering on my shoulder. Crashing through flooded darkness, down towards the river, down to the dark shop on Flynn Street to avenge something my sanity wouldn’t let me believe.

The shop was a blur of darkness in a sea of ink. The monkey chattered shrilly, urging me forward through the circling waters. I rattled the door as thunder boomed, then drew my revolver.

The monkey screeched and left my shoulders. It climbed the lintel. And then the wet brown form wriggled upwards through the transom, dropped inside the shop. A moment later the door opened, and a flood of water drenched the floor as I swept inside.

It was silent. Even in the storm the animals did not cry out, but a thousand eyes burned through the darkness. The monkey scampered before me, leading me.

A thousand eyes watched our progress. A thousand—How many of them *were* animals? Mardu had travelled all over the world, he said. In how many cities had he opened a pet-shop, sold his beasts, and had them *returned?* How many of these strangely silent animals had come back? I must avenge Lillian, and Peg, and how many others?

We were almost at the end of the shop when the simian paused before me. It crouched next to a low, box-like cage with a netting front. It chattered. And answering through the blackness came a hiss.

Monkeys hate snakes. But Lillian had a snake—

The beast fumbled at the netting. And then something moved, something wriggled across the floor ahead of me. There was hissing and chattering. I tiptoed forward and we came to the door. Then the monkey tugged at my leg, looked up with those bright eyes I knew too well. I pushed open the door, just a crack.

A single candle burned in the room within. Mardu was lying on a cot in the small back room. Whether he slept or whether his attitude was one of Yogi-like repose I cannot say. He was motionless as though in a trance. I raised my revolver, but the monkey squealed softly.

I stood there in the doorway as surging waters rocked the timbers of the shop; stood there as the monkey and serpent crept through the small opening, scurried across the floor. I could not move, I could only stare. The waters groaned against the house, and I felt a swaying. I knew it was time to be getting out, the river was loose. But I couldn't move. I could only watch the grotesque brown figure moving across the floor to Mardu's cot.

The sleeping face, the brown, impassive face of Mardu, suddenly quickened with animation. The Hindu opened his eyes, and it was as though all hell yawned within their lambent depths.

"You here?" he whispered, staring at the creeping monkey before him. "But this must not be. Tonight was the night—yes—I directed that. But I meant to call tomorrow for you. You would not come of your own free will—or would you?"

The monkey stared. And then I understood. It was stalling for time. For, unobserved, up the side of the cot, the snake was crawling.

Thunder sounded, the waters crashed against the timbers, and still I watched through the crack of the doorway as the Hindu gazed down at the monkey, his face a mask of perplexity. Suddenly his tone, his word-choice altered.

"Ah! Can it be that I have failed? Hast thou failed, Hanuman? Did I not direct thee, animate thy purpose in dreams? Didst thou not take the woman's psyche and incarnate—"

I watched the snake, wriggling unnoticed at the Hindu's side. It lashed upwards. Again the thunder blared, but Mardu's scream of terror drowned out the very voice of Nature. The Hindu sat bolt upright as a green band of horror tightened against his throat. His hands tore at the surging coils, his eyes bulged.

And then the monkey raced forward, chattering in triumph. Its tiny claws raked Mardu's chest, its teeth sank again and again near the heart. The snake tightened its embrace, encircling Mardu's brown throat with a jade necklace of death.

A crash, the tinkle of glass, and the sudden scream of animal terror sounded from the shop without. The place was flooding. And yet I could only stare at the strangling Hindu, stare at vengeance.

The monkey leaped from the brown body to my waist, chattering wildly.

Its paw pointed toward the door. It tugged my shoulder. I nodded. I gestured toward it, but it shook its head. For an awful instant our eyes met again, and then I plunged away. From behind me I heard a gurgling moan, but I did not look back.

I FOUGHT my way through the shop as water rose. Dying animals in cages yelped beneath the oncoming torrent soon to rise; floating crates blocked my path and the water surged ponderously in menacing waves, but I fought through. The street was waist-deep, and as I cleared the doorway the shaking shop began to sag in the blackness. Cursing and gasping, I staggered through grinning chaos.

Wet to the skin, thunder-deafened and lightning-blinded, I went on. There were no thoughts left to think, no emotions left to feel. There was only an urge that drove me forward. The shop was gone, Mardu was gone, and Peg.

Why, I was back at the apartment, walking the steps to her flat. How long had I struggled? What unreasoning instinct had brought me here? The forced door swung open on darkness. I lurched in.

"Peg!"

She was lying limply on the sofa, but a single candle gleamed, and as I rushed forward she sat up, smiling weakly.

“Darling, I must have fainted when you left, but the monkey’s gone and I feel—all right. What happened?”

“Don’t you *know?”*

“Of course not. How could I? I had a spell, or something.”

“But I thought—”

“Tell me.”

I told her, whispering within the circle of her arms. She smiled and nodded, and it was good to see her smile and nod. But I kept wondering. Hadn’t it happened, then? Was the monkey just a monkey after all? Had a beast led me to that shop and exacted vengeance? It must have been so, because Peg was here. Or else—when Mardu died Peg had been released. Perhaps she hadn’t *changed* long enough for the astral connection to become permanent. Perhaps there was a secondary spell which Mardu performed when the animal was returned. Or I might have imagined the whole thing. Yet the revolver in my hand disproved that. And the absence of the monkey backed it up.

I told Peg the story straight, though, and then added my doubts. “Are you sure?” I said. “You didn’t know, didn’t feel?”

Peg smiled.

“You must have been imagining things,” she said. “That’s the trouble with you, darling, you have such a perfectly silly imagination. Of course, your idea that I was a monkey and led you to Mardu’s is cockeyed.”

“Peg,” I said. “Either you’re a very brave girl in trying to spare me those memories, or you’re just a stubborn, sweet damn fool. Now which is it?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know?” said Peg. And she gave me a look. It was quite a knowing look—she grinned like a monkey, and I remembered *another* look that a monkey had given me, and I had terrible doubts. Then Peg kissed me and I didn’t bother about doubts any more.

There would be plenty of time for arguing later. Peg and I always argued anyway. But from now on, I determined, there would be only one argument I’d stand for with Peggy—whether it would be a boy or a girl. And even then, I hoped we might reach a compromise in time.

A Sorcerer Runs for Sheriff

The shadow of witchcraft falls across a modern American city . . . . How often had these same shadows flickered in witched cots and wizards' dens?

ALLAN WANDO was one of the most popular men in town. He belonged to all the clubs, all the fraternal organizations, and all the civic movements. He attended more social gatherings than the rest of the Four Hundred put together. He knew everybody by their first name. He threw the most unusual parties in local society.

I hated his guts.

Perhaps that takes explaining. Maybe most men enjoy being slapped on the back in public places until their spines crack. Maybe most men like a glad-hander whose laugh splits their eardrums. I don't, that's all. And when Allan Wando got up in a banquet hall and trumpeted about "public service and helping one's fellow man," I could only remember that Mr. Wando paid the lowest wages in town to his factory workers, and was notorious for his political grafting in business.

Hence my dislike of Allan Wando's internal organs. I might as well go whole hog and admit that my hatred embraced Wando's external organs as well. He was too fat, and the smile that spread over his three chins was too oily.

When I saw that fat body and oily smile looming ahead of me in the corridors of an office-building, I wanted to dodge, but it was too late.

Wando had seen me, and he was striding forward with one hand outthrust as though it were a bayonet poised to plunge into my stomach. That meant he wanted to shake hands. So I offered my fingers, and got them back in much worse shape after about thirty seconds of mauling.

"Well, well, well—good to see you—come on in—"

I mumbled that I had an appointment, that I just happened to be in the officebuilding on business, that I hadn't time—and before I was finished he had pushed me into his office.

Bewildering business. Wando evidently knew how I felt toward him, and reciprocated heartily. Why did he want a fly like myself in his spider's den?

But there I was, standing in his mahogany-panelled private room, with its big glass-topped desk, and the fluorescent lights gleaming upon the *"Service"* mottoes adorning the walls. And no sooner was the door closed behind me than Wando got to the point.

"I'm thinking of going into politics," he announced, portentously.

"Too bad for politics," was my thought, but I didn't say it.

"Yes, my friends about town have been urging me to do my duty as a citizen and run for public office."

It would be pretty hard for a guy like Wando to do both. I could see him running for office all right, but in order to do his duty as a citizen he'd have to drop dead. I didn't mention this thought, either, but waited for more revelations.

"So," smirked Allan Wando, "I've just about decided to announce my candidacy for sheriff in the coming election."

"Sheriff?" I echoed, "That's a surprise." It was, too. But at that, he might make a good one—if he could shoot off a gun as much as he could shoot off his mouth.

"I thought you'd like to know. Naturally, I expect my friends to support me in the race."

Probably he meant he'd be too drunk to stand alone.

"And when I saw you," concluded the would-be candidate, "I said to myself, there is just the man I need. How'd you like to write a few speeches for me? You're a writer, aren't you?"

"Well—" I began.

"You know, just knock together a few planks for my platform."

I'd much rather have knocked together a few planks for his gallows.

"Got to kid the public along, isn't it so? Just knock me out a few patriotic phrases, wave the flag a little, and I'll do the rest. I've got my financial backing all set, and the boys will be around passing out the beer—the usual campaign. So what do you say?"

What I had to say I was polite enough to say under my breath. Still, I needed an excuse to change the subject.

"Give me a while to think it over," I told him. My eyes roamed the room, seeking an opening to switch the conversation.

I FOUND it.

On the table next to Allan Wando's desk was the most incongruous series of objects encountered in a business man's office.

Item number one, the cover of a horror story magazine. It showed the hands of a witch, sticking pins into a tiny wax doll.

Item number two, a newspaper clipping dealing with witchcraft.

Item number three—and here was the startling one—a dozen crude, tiny wax figures, standing in a row.

"Say," I blurted, "who are you trying to hoodoo?"

"Hoodoo?"

"Yes. Who are you planning to kill with those witch dolls?" I asked.

Allan Wando turned on his triple-chinned smile. "Come to my party tonight and find out. It's going to be a very unusual affair, I promise you."

I did, and—it was.

"WHAT have we here?" Wando murmured in a solemn voice, holding up the magazine cover in a dim light.

The dozen guests seated around the big fireplace in his apartment craned forward to stare at the picture of the witch-hands stabbing pins into the wax mannikin. The shadows, Wando's deliberately assumed air of mystery, and several stiff highballs had put them into the mood.

"I'll tell you," said the host who gave the unusual parties, with the triumphant air of a host who knows damn well he gives unusual parties. "This is a picture of a poppet."

"Like Pinocchio?" asked Myrna Weber, giggling with all the girlishness of her forty years.

"No, not at all. This is not a puppet, but a *poppet*—a little doll made out of wax melted from church candles. In the old days the witches and wizards used to steal holy candles, melt them down, and fashion images of their enemies. Then, with appropriate ceremonies, they would plunge needles into the wax bodies—and the real persons represented by the wax figures would sicken and die. That was witchcraft."

"How interesting," simpered Myrna Weber, running one hand nervously through her blondined locks.

"I've heard of the superstition." It was Joe Adams who spoke. "Didn't William Seabrook mention it in his latest book?"

"I'm glad you mentioned him," Wando said. "Because we're coming to that point right now. Yes, he did speak of poppets in his book, and there are hundreds of treatises on sorcery and demonology that echo it. Savages practice those rites today—and they are supposed to work. Psychiatrists tell us that the power of suggestion can kill—if a man knows he's under a curse, he will sicken and die. But the wizards called it sympathetic magic, and it is known as Black Magic to us today."

"What about Seabrook?" persisted Joe Adams.

"I've got a clipping here referring to him." Wando held up the strip of paper I'd seen on his desk that afternoon.

“Here’s a newspaper story that appeared a few months ago. A couple of people who read Seabrook’s book on witchcraft wrote him letters asking whether it wouldn’t be possible to ‘wish’ a victim to death. He had written in his volume about the power of thought—how circles of sorcerors, chanting together and concentrating their hatred on an enemy, could actually kill him. And these people, getting in touch with Seabrook, were asking for a formula to wish an enemy to death. He gave it to them.”

“He did?” tittered Myra Weber. “But if he was serious—if he believed it—he’d be helping to commit a murder!”

“True.” Allan Wando smiled mysteriously. “But he gave them a formula to chant and they got together in a party and all sat concentrating.”

“What happened?” asked Myra.

“Nothing, yet. But it might—if they work it right.”

“Just who was this person Seabrook and these people were so anxious to wish to death?” asked Joe Adams.

Wando smiled again. “Hitler,” he said.

“Oh! Sounds screwy to me.”

“Here’s the newspaper clipping for proof.”

“Damned interesting,” I ventured. “But it didn’t work.”

“I’ve got a theory on that,” said Wando. “Seabrook invented a sort of chant for these people to use, but there was nothing genuine about it. Just a gag. Now I propose that *we* try our hands at the game tonight—but with an *authentic* sorceror’s weapon.”

“What?”

“These.”

Wando stepped aside. On the table behind him stood a dozen crude wax figures, roughly carved from candles. There was a pile of assorted cloth, some crepe hair, and a large box of pins and needles. We all got up and crowded around.

“Here are your poppets,” said our host. “All made of genuine church candle wax. The game now is to take a figure, work the wax with your fingers until you get Hitler’s face, put crepe hair on the doll, dress it according to your fancy, and then stick in the pins. Who knows, maybe it will work! At least it's better than Seabrook's idea, and we can all turn wizard for the evening."

So that's what Wando had up his sleeve! I could just see an account in tomorrow's paper—a nice facetious article, good publicity for a potential candidate!

But the others went for the idea in a big way. The women, led by Myra Weber, cackled about how it was, "Just too cute! Imagine making dolls again!" And the men, even practical Joe Adams, took up the figures and grinned sheepishly as they turned talk to the progress of European affairs.

"Stop!" Wando held up his hand. "This is serious business, my friends. Let's preserve an air of dignity. We might be on the verge of a big thing here—we cannot tell. We are about to attempt to kill a man. That is a serious experiment. It may be one that has a scientific basis—at least, it is actual magic. And if we were performing this deed in medieval Europe three centuries ago, we would be burned at the stake!"

Half-seriously he rambled on, but his words took hold. So did the dim lights, and the grotesque spectacle of a dozen men and women holding tiny waxen dolls in their hands.

"Come, to work!"

Wando had the big table in his parlor laid bare. We gathered about it in chairs, each with his cloth, his crepe hair, his pins. A picture magazine had been opened to a portrait of Hitler, and it lay face upwards to serve as a model.

We took our seats in a silence that was almost ominous. As I held my wax doll in my fingers, I was half-convinced that we *were* embarking on a murder plan in grim earnest.

Hands began to mould and soften the wax. Fingers began to knead features. Faces frowned in concentration, and the dim light masked the room where a spell was being born.

Myra Weber, hands continually running through her hair, was affected even more strongly than myself. She sat at my right, next to Wando, and she was almost trembling as she whispered to me.

"You're a writer, Bob. You know about these things. Do you really believe—?"

"Who can tell?" I answered. "For hundreds of years, millions of human beings *did* believe. Behind what we call witchcraft lies a very strange and deadly primitive lore; a secret knowledge that extends back to the primal eons. God shaped Adam out of clay and breathed the breath of life into him. And ever since, men have shaped clay of their own in an effort to take away that life from enemies. The poppets are known to all ages and all places; the secret wizardry is as old as mankind. And when men believe, and have always believed, in facts which are not disprovable by any known science, perhaps those facts are true."

"What you're telling me is that sticking pins in these dolls can kill, isn't it?" Myra whispered.

"I'm telling you I don't know," I said. And returned to my modelling.

Within a few moments virtually all of us had dolls. We began to dress them, cutting the tiny strips of cloth with shears; pasting crepe forelocks and mustaches on with glue.

There was a good deal of laughter over some of the results; many of the wax figures bore no resemblance to Hitler or anything human, for that matter.

But the laughter was forced. Get a man to do something, and after awhile he'll take the task seriously. When Wando called for silence again, the laughter ceased immediately. Faces resumed their grim contours. The shadows flickered across the wall—shadows of hands holding tiny dolls.

How often had those same shadows flickered in witches' cots, and wizard's den? How often had dolls of death danced in black mockery across the walls of secret and forbidden places?

J was not alone in the thought. Myra Weber's lips trembled. Even Joe Adams was scowling as he stared down at the wax visage of the dictator doll.

And Wando spoke.

"Now for the most important step of all," he announced. "I am going to pass around the needles. Be careful—they're very sharp. Sharp enough to reach the heart—if Hitler has a heart." He smiled. "I think it would be most—effective—if we all stabbed our dolls at once; and in the same place. I would suggest the head of our—victim."

Silence. Nobody dropped a pin, and nobody would have been able to hear it, for all of us were caught up in a mood of earnest concentration.

"Select your weapons."

The needles were passed. Sharp and shining, tiny daggers for the death of a doll.

"Let us all concentrate for a moment upon our enemy." Wando's voice was low. "Let us muster our hate, our desire. And then, when my hand flashes down, let yours flash too—and plunge the weapon into the brain of the tyrant."

Poetry—and from Wando! But it was all natural, in the midst of enchantment.

TWELVE wizards in a circle. Twelve dolls dressed for doom. Twelve sharp points to tear and slash.

Myra Weber shuddered. I did, too.

And we stared at our dolls in the silence, stared and hated, and the shadows were filled with the hate, the room was filled with it. It spilled out of our souls, it ran down our arms, into the fingers holding the needles, into the needle points—

"Now!"

Allan Wando's needle flashed down.

There was a swish of air as twelve daggers sought twelve wax foreheads—pierced, slashed, tore.

Was it fancy, or did my very soul descend to tear the tiny features of the mannikin?

Was it fancy, or did the room throb with a single gigantic impulse that was our mass hate?

Was it fancy, or did I hear a gasp?

No—that wasn't fancy.

As the blades bit home, the gasp came from my side. Myra Weber's body pitched forward onto the table.

"Hold it!"

I rose to my feet, bent over her. Wando, seeing me, switched on extra lights.

The mood vanished in a babble of excitement. I lifted Myra's blonde head up. The eyes were staring, but—sightless.

"She's fainted," I said. "Too much excitement, weak heart."

Joe Adams was at my side. He reached for her wrist, held it. Then he turned. He didn't look at me, he didn't look at Wando. He talked to the wall.

"She's dead," he announced.

"Dead?"

"Cerebral hemmorhage." He indicated the bright red drop on the table, fallen like a bloody tear from her eye.

"But that wouldn't be from cerebral—" I began, and stopped. It had to be. Excitement, too much of it. Joe Adams was Myra Weber's doctor. He'd know. And it had to be that way.

"Get out of here, all of you," Adams said. "I'll certify it."

Of course he said a lot more, too, and so did everybody. There was enough silly gabbling and speculation and gaspings of horror to fill a small-sized book, but Joe Adams herded them all out as quickly as possible.

He and Wando and I were left alone. We looked at one another. It was better than looking at Myra.

Wando's face was white with fear.

"I knew what he was thinking. The black thought filled my own brain.

"Do you think we—what we were doing—had anything to do with it?" he managed, at last.

I answered for him. “Of course not. And, since it’s all over and you won’t try a silly sensational stunt like this again, I may as well tell you that you couldn’t kill Hitler that way either.”

“No?”

“No. Because you neglected the most important part of the sorcery. When you want to kill somebody with dolls, you must take care to have your church-wax candle moulded to include *part of the person it represents*. You must mix in a nail-clipping, or spittle, or perhaps a wisp of the victim’s hair. That’s essential. And you didn’t have a hair of Hitler’s mustache in the dolls, so it naturally didn’t matter whether they represented Hitler or Charlie McCarthy. They wouldn’t kill.”

“But that hate—I felt it. And Myra died.”

“Forget it,” Adams echoed. “Cerebral hemmorhage, I’ll swear to it. And you heard just now that the dolls won’t kill unless they have something from a person’s body in them.”

“I want a drink.” Wando wasn’t kidding, either. He went for it.

“Go on home,” Joe Adams advised me, when *we* were left alone. “Forget this whole affair. I’m sure none of the others will ever mention it—they all swore not to. It would start a scandal, and the whole thing is ridiculous, anyway. I’ll make my report and smooth it over.”

“All right,” I said.

My hands strayed over the table, picked up one of the dolls. It was the one Wando had been working on, at Myra Weber’s left side. I glanced blankly at the wax face. Didn’t seem to be much of an artist, did Wando. Not even a mustache on his Hitler. And wait—there was something caught in the wax at the head!

I picked it out.

Stuck into the moulded wax was a long golden hair. A long golden hair, from the head of Myra Weber!

"WIN WITH WANDO!" screamed the billboards.

"VOTE FOR HONEST AL!" urged the window cards.

Why not? The "WANDO FOR SHERIFF" campaign was running full blast. I wouldn't stop it.

Weeks had passed since the unfortunate incident at Wando's party. Joe Adams had kept his word and hushed matters up. Certainly none of the others present would talk about it—it was much too unpleasant a subject.

As for myself, I kept silent. What good would it do to tell Wando? I didn't like the man, but even so it would not be fair to upset him. He couldn't help it. While he had been modelling, one of Myra Weber's hairs had fallen, brushed by her hands, and it became imbedded in the wax.

Myra Weber had died.

But of course, Wando didn't kill her. We were all hating equally.

More than that, the whole idea was silly. Hate and wax dolls don't kill a woman. Nervous excitement bringing on a cerebral hemmorhage—that can be understood. That's sane and simple. It can kill. But wild sorcery, never!

At least, I hoped not. And I vowed that I wouldn't put the question to any further tests.

So Mr. Wando began his campaign without my interference—but also without my help.

As a matter of fact, I was working on the opposite side of the fence. Believe it or not, Joe Adams had ambitions of his own.

The taciturn little medico confided in me after that strange evening. I'd never suspected he harbored a desire to run for public office, but he told me of his plans and they contained a great deal of common sense. It was my job to add dash and color to his ideas. Joe Adams had much the same thought as Wando—I must write speeches for the campaign. So, as fate would have it, I took the job and we automatically became opponents of our former host.

Adams was nobody's fool. Honest, capable, a shrewd observer, he relied upon me to dramatize his public platform appearances. I ferreted around in newspaper files to uncover facts on the present sheriff, and then played them up in speech form for campaign rallies and radio broadcasts.

Within three weeks Joe Adams had become the “Reform Candidate for Sheriff.” His growing popularity was amazing.

Still more amazing, to me, was Wando’s own campaign. I had automatically expected gladhander Wando to spend money like water, run around waving his membership cards and urge his fellow joiners to support him. I anticipated his free beer campaign, his lavish display of billboard and poster advertising.

Well, there were billboards and posters, but no Allan Wando. He held no public meetings. He distributed no campaign literature. He had no radio speeches. He didn’t even bother to shake hands at church suppers. It was all strangely unlike the man—this reticence. I began to wonder whether or not the unfortunate episode at his party had shocked him out of his senses.

One rumor kept reaching me constantly—that Wando went everywhere with a group of unsavory strangers at his heels; foreigners or illiterate ward-heelers. That puzzled me more than all the rest.

Then I saw it with my own eyes.

On one morning the news broke that the present Sheriff had entered the race for re-election, opposing Wando and my candidate, Joe Adams. I dashed for the Election Commission offices for further details—and ran into Wando there.

He stood at the desk, surrounded by the tall, dark strangers; three hawknosed men whose nasal voices twanged in a foreign tongue.

My entrance caused him to turn, and the men turned with him. Allan Wando gave me a single glance, and I knew that the rumors were correct, that my theory must be correct.

The man was mad.

The fat, triple-chinned face of a business man stared at me—but the eyes in that face fairly blazed. They burned with a life of their own, and they did not *belong* on that smug countenance. They were like the eyes of a serpent peering from the wooden sockets of a child’s doll.

Wando stared, but gave no other sign of recognition save the deadly hate emanating from his unnatural eyes. Then one pudgy hand nudged the men at his side. His lips moved softly.

"That is one—remember him," he said. Or seemed to say.

And the dark men looked at me and grinned, and Wando grinned, and his grinning was worse than his hatred.

I'll admit I didn't hang around there. I left without accomplishing my mission, without taking a step further through the doorway. Of course I was foolish. Of course I was mawkishly melodramatic. Of course I was a coward.

But I'd rather be a live coward than a dead coward.

I can't explain it. Wando looked at me, and the dark men looked at me, and I *knew* I had to get out.

It's easy to explain it now. At the time, it didn't take five minutes before I was cursing myself for a fool.

"So he looks at you," I said. "So right away you think he's gone crazy. That gleam in his eye might be indigestion."

I kicked myself mentally—but hard.

"So he's got three mulattoes with him for bodyguards. What does that mean? Let him walk down the street with Cab Calloway's orchestra and it still shouldn't upset you so."

Oh, it was a great job of reassuring myself I did when I got out on the street again.

But I didn't go back.

I WENT for a shave.

As I settled back in the chair at Tony's Barber Shop, I remembered that I ought to combine business with pleasure. After all, the sheriff himself had entered the race today, and I ought to feel out the public pulse on the matter—see how it would affect the election.

So after a few remarks on the weather and Europe and the current baseball standings, I steered Tony the barber around to politics.

"What do you think about the elections?" I began.

“Pretty hot, eh?” Tony ventured.

“Right. Particularly the sheriff’s race. How do the boys feel about the sheriff coming out today and saying he’s going to run again?”

“In the bag for sure,” said Tony. “Sheriff, he’sa gonna make it easy. He’sa good man, sheriff.”

“Really think so?” I wanted to ask about Joe Adams’ chances, but Tony’s eyes began to sparkle.

“You know, she’s a funny thing. Every day, I shave-a sheriff right here in this chair.”

“That so?”

“You betcha. Today I shave two sheriffs.”

“Two?”

“Sure. First a real sheriff, he’s come-a in, get shave. Then, right away after, I shave this fella Wando who’sa run against him.”

“Wando?” I played dumb. “Do you think he’s got any chance in the race, Tony?”

Tony laughed. “No—he’s what you call one crazy fella. You betcha,” he chuckled. “One crazy fella. You know whatta he do?”

“What?”

“He ask me—he ask me right here, cross over my heart, was a sheriff in here today? I tell him sure. Then he say he want to buy the sheriff’s shaving mug.”

“Go on,” I said, through the lather.

“I tell him it’sa all dirty yet—not cleaned out. But he say, swell, that’s just-a what he’s wants. So he gives me fifty cents for sheriff’s mug and walks out. One crazy fella!”

“Dirty shaving mug—hair in it and all?” I said.

“You betcha! Crazy fella, Wando, he’sa no good.”

“You’re telling me?”

“What he want with sheriff’s old hair? What he—*hey, come back!”*

But I didn’t come back. I went out of there, cut face and all, raced across the street, and dived into a drug-store phone booth.

I called Joe Adams.

"Joe," I panted. "Maybe I'm crazy, but I just stumbled across something big. Our friend Wando is out to—"

I should have seen the three of them following me, ever since I went into the barber shop. I should be seen them closing in on the phone booth now as I talked. But I didn't.

Consequently, as I uttered the opening words of my sentence to Joe Adams, my connection went dead.

Nobody cut the wires.

But somebody—*cut my throat!*

4

THAT'S what it felt like. My last impression was of those arms tightening around my neck in the phone booth, of the cold steel that swept up across my face.

When I woke up at Emergency Hospital with Joe Adams at my side, I found my head wrapped in bandages.

"Just missed the jugular," Adams assured me. "Somebody spotted them, and I guess they got frightened. Cut your face open in a few places, but nothing serious. You'll be all right in a few weeks."

"Who were they?" I whispered. Maybe it was because I didn't *want* to hear the answer.

"Three dark strangers. Fellow behind the counter didn't notice them when they came in.

Clustered around your phone booth, and when he looked up and started to say something, they ran. He found you, called the cops. They got away."

"Of course," I whispered. You don't talk loud through bandages.

Joe Adams bent over me. "What was it?" he asked. "What were you trying to tell me? Who were they, do you know?"

"They weren't supporters of Adams for Sheriff," I told him. "I'll explain later. Now we've got to get going."

"Get up? You'll have to stay in bed, take it easy a few days."

"Can't do it." I sat erect, fighting off pinwheels that rose in my brain. "That's why I called you. We must go to a political rally tonight. The sheriff is holding his opening meeting."

"But—"

"You can't see the look of grim determination on my face under these bandages, Joe," I said. "But it's there, and we're going. We must, I tell you."

We went.

THE hall, on the west side of the city, was crowded. The sheriff was a popular man with the voters.

Joe and I arrived late. He was still trying to make me talk, and I wouldn't. He argued with me even as we took our places at the rear of the hall—and others turned around and grumbled.

"Shhh! Shuddup, willya? We wanta hear!"

We quieted down and stared at the lighted stage. The sheriff was already speaking.

His tall, commanding figure, topped by a mane of silvery hair, bent in animation as he delivered his address. Leaning on the table and bringing down his fist for emphasis, he launched into a flood of oratory calculated to drown his listeners in political platitudes.

I made no pretense of listening, at first. Then my ears caught a mumbling from the crowd ahead. Yes, right there.

Craning my head, I saw what I feared.

Seated down front, facing the stage, was Allan Wando. And next to him, three dark figures, heads together. The mumbling was coming from their throats.

Spectators tapped Wando on the shoulder as I watched. He shrugged, turned away, and continued to drone unintelligible sounds. It was as though he and his companions were in a church and—chanting.

Chanting! That was it. They *were* chanting!

The sheriff thundered on. He must have heard it, for his voice rose to drown out these “hecklers” in the crowd. He leaned toward the audience.

The chanting rose.

And I felt *it.* Amidst five hundred grimy citizens, packed like squirming sardines into the smoky, sweaty atmosphere of a political meeting, I felt the breath of ancient evil blow.

My bandaged face was bathed in perspiration. I half-rose. I had to stop it, crazy or not. I started down the aisle, as the chanting and the sheriff’s voice rose to a crescendo.

I stared at his distorted, purpling face. He was screaming in unconscious apoplexy, hands upraised.

And then—voice and chanting vanished beneath a gasp from five hundred throats.

In mid-sentence, in mid-flourish, the sheriff halted. The tall body swayed, bent forward, and suddenly crumpled to the floor in a writhing heap.

A scream from the audience. Everybody rose at once. The campaign managers raced onto the platform, gathered around the contorted body of the sheriff.

I fought my way down that aisle, Joe Adams behind me. The crowd peered back toward the exits. It was almost panic. A man on stage was trying to placate the mob, bawling about “sudden heart attack” through the microphone system. It didn’t mean a thing. They fled from the place in droves.

It didn’t mean a thing when the police arrived, or the ambulance.

What really mattered was that Wando and his three chanting companions were gone with the crowd, lost in the swirl fighting for an exit.

What did mean a thing was that the sheriff, before they carried him from the stage, was dead.

Apoplexy.

I didn’t hear the news.

I was bending over the seats Wando and his henchmen had occupied. Bending over and searching the floor with my fingers.

Something pierced my thumb. I picked it up. It was a long needle, the kind Wando had passed out at his fateful party.

Then I stooped again and got the other object. Joe Adams was at my side when I raised it to the light.

The tiny black frock coat, the striped trousers, and the little necktie were covered with dust from the floor. But die devil’s doll leered in the light, and its face was the face of the dead sheriff.

Buried in the heart was a long silver needle.

Buried in the wax beneath was a cluster of grizzled hair—grizzled hair from a human beard. The kind of hair one finds in a barber’s mug, after a man has been shaved.

Joe gasped.

I didn’t. I grabbed his arm.

“Come on,” I snapped.

“Where?”

“To see a barber, first. And then—we’re going to pay a visit to Mr. Allan Wando.”

5

THE squad car picked up the three dark foreigners in, of all places, the YMCA. Joe and I didn’t offer many details; just hinted around that these men should be held on suspicion, because of their presence at the meeting.

Then we left the cops, and hurried along to Wando’s apartment.

“Why don’t we take them with us?” Joe asked. “Better still, why not send them to lock him up?”

I shrugged my bandaged head. “He’d be out tomorrow,” I told him. “You can’t convict a man on a charge of witchcraft.”

“Witchcraft?” Joe’s voice was tense. “It’s all so strange—what you’ve told me, and what the barber said, and what he intends to do.”

“He’ll do it, if we don’t hurry. Step on it.”

Joe stepped on it.

I pushed the buzzer.

Wando opened the door.

Joe crowded in.

Wando’s jaw dropped.

I got a look at the table and saw the two figures.

Wando stepped behind me.

Joe let out an oath.

Wando pulled the gun.

And there we were. Oh it was simple. Just like the movies. But not quite as pleasant. I remembered my thought about going into Wando’s office—that spider and fly simile. Well, it was true now. We were two flies, caught properly in Wando’s web.

A web of wax, and an insane spider to spin. To spin—and break the thread of life.

Joe Adams and I stood there in his apartment. His gun rested upon our breasts, and his burning eyes smoldered up.

“I might have expected this visit,” he half-chuckled. “You have a very clever campaign manager, Mr. Adams. Unfortunately, your campaign is now ended.

Joe and I both stared behind him at the table—the table I had just bent over, staring down at the two wax dolls that stood upon it.

Joe and I both stared at our miniature selves—the tiny little fat figure of Joe Adams, with the incongruous wire spectacles, and the tall figure with the bandaged face that represented me.

Wando caught our gaze and smiled. The gun never wavered.

“I suppose you know what I am going to do,” he said. “You must have, or you’d never have come.”

“That’s right,” I answered, keeping my voice firm—just as firm as the muzzle of the gun trained on my chest. “I figured it all out. You *did* kill Myra Weber intentionally, didn’t you?”

“Right,” acknowledged Allan Wando. “It was an experiment. And it worked.”

“Then you went a little mad, I suppose.”

“Mad? Who is mad? Witchcraft is a science, not the product of a diseased imagination. Witchcraft can kill, and by killing one attains power.”

Wando’s voice rose shrilly.

“Yes, but only a madman would have the supreme audacity of your enterprise,” I said. “You got hold of those foreigners somewhere to aid you in the work. They helped you in chanting, in focussing your hate. Tonight, after making a doll of the sheriff and mixing in part of his beard, you went to the hall and killed him.”

“Who would believe that?” Wando laughed. “If you told that story to the police *you’d* be the madman, not I! Of course, you will never tell that story, because your turn is next.” He came nearer.

“Your image is finished,” he told me. “It was so obliging of you to do what the sheriff did—go to the barber shop and get shaved. After my men failed to finish you off today, I went back for some of *your* hair.”

“The barber told me tonight.”

Wando smiled in acknowledgment. “Very clever. *Very* clever! But it will not do you much good, I fear. I must also thank you for bringing Mr. Adams to me. I have not finished his doll yet. I need a lock of his hair.”

Wando’s hand went to the table, and clutched a scissors. Approaching Adams, he snipped at his forehead, holding the gun ready with his other hand.

Clutching a wisp of hair, he turned to the table. The free hand kneaded the wax figure of Adams. Wando sat there and moulded, kept the gun on me. We stood waiting.

It was *all wrong*.

As a writer, I felt it. Even in the face of death, I felt it. A sorcerer doesn't mould *poppets* with one hand and hold a gun in the other. A sorcerer doesn't get hair from shaving mugs in modern barber shops.

A sorcerer doesn't work under the fluorescent lights of a modern apartment and above all, a sorcerer doesn't run for sheriff.

THEN Wando turned his face to me and I forgot it all. Evil is evil, through all the ages, whatever its outward guise may be. The fat face of the business man, the politician, the gladhander, was no more. The eyes of a necromancer lanced upwards, and the pale hand shaping its doll of death now groped for a needle.

The eyes, the doll, and the needle—these were all that mattered. Twentieth century, business, politics; what were such concepts but empty words masking an ancient horror? The dolls of death had killed in ages past, and they could kill again. The hair or skin or nail parings of a human, mixed with the wax of a church candle shaped in his image. The knife to the heart of the wax, and the death of the human—if the sorcerer hated, and believed in his hate.

That was reality, black reality, rising in waves that beat at my brain.

Those eyes, and the hand with the needle, and the little doll with the bandaged head which was myself.

Wando stared at me.

"Now you know," he whispered. "Call it madness or Black Magic if you like. Names don't matter. Deeds do. And I shall do deeds. Myra Weber, and the sheriff, then you and Adams. I shall be the new sheriff."

Again he laughed, self-consciously.

"Silly notion, isn't it? This power for such a goal? But a man must crawl before he walks, and I'm merely experimenting as yet."

"You knew that, didn't you?" The stare was dreadful in its intensity.

"You knew that I'm not stopping here. Ways and means, my friend. I'll be sheriff, but not for long. Business rivals will be going next. I can become governor, president, yes more than that! You think I'm mad, but I'm using sound sense. I'll rise; slowly but surely, and by proper means in the public eye. I'll move from office to office as men die accidental deaths—but it will all be politics, just politics. The good old American way."

"The good old American way," said this man, his fat hands clutching the little wax figure of doom.

"I shall have power, great power. And no one will know, no one will suspect. For you won't be here to tell them—will you?"

"You'll never get away with it," I said. "They'll find us here, and then —"

"You'll be found at home, in your beds," Wando corrected me. "I'm going to take you there, in just a few moments, A *very* few moments. First you, then Adams. No, stand still—I'll shoot if I must. But I prefer the dolls, my little dolls, and the needles that—"

"It won't work," I sparred. "Nobody to chant, and I—I don't believe it!"

Wando rose, holding the doll in one hand, the gun and needle in the other.

"You believe it," he said, slowly. "For it is true. In a moment I shall plunge the needle into the waxen heart, and you shall die. And Adams shall die next. And others will die, many others. And so it ends."

I didn't hear. I stared at the hand holding the doll with the bandaged head, stared at the needle coming down toward the tiny body, stared at the waxen breast, stared at Wando's hate-filled eyes.

"Wando!" screamed Joe.

But it was too late.

The needle plunged home into the wax image.

For a long moment nothing happened. The three of us stood there. Wando's hand held the tiny figure, the long silver needle knifing its breast.

AND then, slowly, a *look* came over his face. A look of horror, of fear, of burning agony. The hand dropped the doll. The other hand dropped the gun. Allan Wando clutched at his heart, eyes gazing at me in dreadful anguish. Then, like a scarecrow lifted from its pole, Wando sagged to the floor.

Joe stepped over to the body.

“Phone the cops,” I said. “He’s dead. Shock.”

Joe phoned.

I made a fire in the fireplace and as the flames rose I threw in the extra wax candles and needles I found, and the tiny doll that was Joe Adams. I took the hair out of it first, very carefully. Then I got ready to throw in the doll with the needle in it—the doll with the bandaged face that Wando stabbed when he died.

Joe Adams watched me.

“Too bad Wando was mad,” I commented. “He believed so much that he was going to kill me by sticking pins in a wax figure that the excitement got him. What nonsense!”

Suddenly Joe Adams reached out. “Let’s see the doll,” he said.

I tossed it quickly into the fire.

“Damn you!” said Joe Adams. “You—”

The flames crackled up. We turned. The fire was closing over the wax, eating away the cloth bandages on the head. We saw the flames flicker over the revealed face.

It wasn’t my face on the doll. It was Allan Wando’s.

“So that’s what you did,” Adams whispered. “Went to the barber’s again tonight, got some of his hair, made a doll, and switched dolls with his when we came in here at first. So that when he thought he was stabbing an image of you he was really stabbing himself.”

I took the other doll out of my pocket and dug out hair, then threw it into the fire when Adams wasn’t looking. Then I laughed.

“You can’t believe such stuff,” I chuckled. “Wando killed himself. Just remember that. Wando killed himself.”

We both turned by common impulse and stared at the wax figure of the doll. The face was melting, coagulating into slime, oozing away. The features of Allan Wando had disappeared, and the body followed. There was only a shapeless blob.

"Trick of light," I assured Joe, confidently. "You thought you saw his face. But it wasn't any doll of him I made, and there wasn't any part of Allan Wando's body in it. Besides, what happens to a wax, image doesn't affect a real person."

"All right if you say so," Joe Adams shrugged. "Maybe it's better that way."

And we turned away from the melted wax figure in the fire.

I'm sorry we did. I know it would have been better that way—if Joe Adams had believed me.

But he couldn't.

When we turned away from the fire we saw Allan Wando's body lying on the floor.

Something had happened to it, was happening.

Slowly the face disappeared. Melted away. And the body oozed into a shapeless blob.

By the time we had clawed open the door, there was nothing left of Allan Wando but a melted heap shining in the firelight.

He looked like the liquid, sticky remnants of a gigantic wax doll. And the fire burned on. . . .

A Good Knight's Work

A helping hand from the horny-handed gentleman with the solid iron nightshirt proved of use against the modern equivalent of ye olde dragon—

I AM stepping on the gas, air is pouring into the truck and curses are pouring out, because I feel like I get up on the wrong side of the gutter this morning.

Back in the old days I am always informing the mob how I am going to get away from it all and buy a little farm in the country and raise chickens. So now I raise chickens and wish I am back in the old days raising hell.

It is one of those things, and today it is maybe two or three of them, in spades. Perhaps you are lucky and do not live in the Corn Belt, so I will mention a few items to show that the guy naming it knows what he's talking about.

This morning I wake up at four a. m. because fifty thousand sparrows are holding a Communist rally under the window. I knock my shins over a wheelbarrow in the back yard because the plumbing is remote. When I get dressed I have to play tag with fifty chickens I am taking to market, and by the time that's over I am covered with more feathers than a senator who gets adopted by Indians in a newsreel. After which all I do is load the cacklers on the truck, drive fifty miles to town, sell biddies at a loss, and drive back—strictly without breakfast.

Breakfast I must catch down the road at the tavern, where I got to pay ten bucks to Thin Tommy Malloon for protection.

That is my set-up and explains why I am not exactly bubbling over with good spirits. There is nothing to do about it but keep a stiff upper lip—mostly around the bottle I carry with me on the trip back.

Well, I am almost feeling better after a few quick ones, and am just about ready to stop my moans and groans when I spot this sign on the road.

I don't know how it is with you. But this is how it is with me. I do not like signs on the road a bit, and of all the signs I do not like, the SIAMESE SHAVE signs I hate in spades.

They stand along the highway in series, and each of them has a line of poetry on it so when you pass them all you read a little poem about SIAMESE SHAVE. They are like the Old Lady Goose rhymes they feed the juveniles, and I do not have any love for Ma Goose and her poetry.

Anyhow, when I see this first sign I let out some steam and take another nip. But I cannot resist reading the sign because I always do. It says:

"DON'T WEAR A LONG BEARD."

And a little further on the second one reads:

"LIKE A GOAT."

Pretty soon I come to the third one, saying:

"JUST TAKE A RAZOR."

And all at once I'm happy, hoping maybe somebody made a mistake and the fourth sign will say:

"AND CUT YOUR THROAT!"

So I can hardly wait to see the last one, and I'm looking ahead on the road, squinting hard. Then I slam on the brakes.

No, I don't see a sign. There is a *thing* blocking the road, instead. *Two* things.

One of these things is a horse. At least, it looks more like a horse than anything else I could see on four drinks. It is a horse covered with a kind of awning, or tent that hangs down over its legs and out on its neck. In fact, I noticed that this horse is wearing a mask over its head with eyeholes, like it belonged to the Ku Klux Klan.

The other *thing* is riding the horse. It is all silver, from head to foot, and I notice that there is a long plume growing out of its head. It looks like a man, and it has a long, sharp pole in one hand and the top off a garbage can in the other.

Now when I look at this party I am certain of only one thing. This is not the Lone Ranger.

When I drive a little closer my baby-blue eyes tell me that what I am staring at is a man dressed up in a suit of armor, and that the long sharp pole is nothing but a little thing like a twelve-foot spear with a razor on the end.

Who he is and why he is dressed up this way may be very interesting to certain parties like the State police, but I am very far away from being one. Also I am very far away from Thin Tommy Malloon who is waiting for my ten bucks protection money. Thin Tommy is not the kind of a man who likes waiting, especially for money.

So when I see Old Ironsides blocking the road, I place my head outside the window and request, “Get the hell out of the way, buddy!” in a loud but polite voice.

Which turns out to be a mistake, in spades and no trump.

THE PARTY in the tin tuxedo just looks at the truck coming his way, and cocks his iron head when he sees steam coming from the carburetor. The exhaust is beginning to make trombone noises, because I am stepping hard on the gas, and this seems to make up the heavy dresser’s mind for him.

“Yoicks!” howls his voice behind his helmet. “A dragon!”

And all at once he levels that lance of his, knocks his tootsies against the horse’s ribs, and starts coming head-on for the truck.

“For Pendragon and England!” he bawls, over the clanking. And charges straight ahead like a baby tank.

That twelve-foot razor of his is pointed straight for my radiator, and I do not wish him to cut my motor, so naturally I swing the old truck out of the way.

This merely blows the carburetor cap higher than the national debt, and out shoots enough steam and hot air to supply a dozen congressmen.

The horse rears up, and the tintype lets out a yap, letting his lance loose. Instead of hitting the radiator, it smashes my windshield.

Also my temper. I stop the truck and get out, fast. "Now, listen, buddy," I reason with him.

"Aha!" comes the voice from under the helmet. "A wizard!" He uses a brand of double-talk I do not soon forget. "Halt ye, for it is Pallagyn who speaks."

I am in no mood for orations, so I walk up to him, waving a pipe wrench.

"Bust my windows, eh, buddy? Monkey business on a public highway, is it? I'm going to—Yow!"

I am a personality that seldom hollers "Yow!" even at a burlesque show, but when this armor-plated jockey slides off his horse and comes for me, he is juggling a sharp six feet of sword. And six feet of sword sailing for your neck is worth a "Yow!" any day, I figure.

I also figure I had better duck unless I want a shave and a haircut, and it is lucky for me that Iron-lung has to move slow when he whams his sword down at me.

I come up under his guard and give him a rap on the old orange with my pipe wrench.

There is no result.

The steel king drops his sword and lets out another roar, and I caress his helmet again with the wrench. Still no result. I get my result on the third try. The wrench breaks.

And then his iron arms grab me, and I am in for it.

The first thing I know, everything is turning black as solitary, and my sparring partner is reaching for a shiver at his belt. I get my foot there, fast.

All I can do is push forward, but it works. About a hundred and fifty pounds of armor loses balance, and there is nothing for the guy inside to do except go down with it. Which he does, on his back. Then I am on his chest, and I roll up the Venetian blind on the front of his helmet.

"Hold, enough!" comes the double-talk from inside. "Prithee, hold!"

"O. K., buddy. But open up that mail box of yours. I want to see the face of the damned fool that tries to get me into a traffic accident with a load of tin."

He pulls up the shutters, and I get a peek at a purple face decorated with red whiskers. There are blue eyes, too, and they look down, ashamed.

"Ye are the first, O Wizard, to gaze upon the vanquished face of Sir Pallagyn of the Black Keep," he mumbles.

I get off his chest like it was the hot seat. Because, although I am very fond of nuts, I like them only in fruit cakes.

"I've got to be going," I mention. "I don't know who you are or why you are running around like this, and I maybe ought to have you run in, but I got business up the road, see? So long."

I start walking away and turn around. "Besides, my name is not O. Wizard."

"Verily," says the guy who calls himself Sir Pallagyn, getting up slow, with a lot of rattling. "Ye are a wizard, for ye ride a dragon breathing fire and steam—"

I AM THINKING of the fire and steam Thin Tommy Malloon is breathing right now, so I pay little or no attention, but get in the truck. Then this Pallagyn comes running up and yells, "Wait!"

"What for?"

"My steed and arms are yours by right of joust."

Something clicks inside my head, and even if it is an eight ball, I get interested. "Wait a minute," I suggest. "Just who are you and where do you hang out?"

"Why," says he, "as I bespoke, O Wizard—I am Sir Pallagyn of the Black Keep, sent here ensorcelled by Merlin, from Arthur's court at Camelot. And I hang out at the greves in my armor," he adds, tucking in some cloth sticking out of the chinks and joints in his heavy suit.

"Huh?" is about the best I can do.

"And having bested me in fair combat, ye gain my steed and weapons, by custom of the joust." He shakes his head, making a noise like a Tommy-gun. "Merlin will be very angry when he hears of this, I wot."

"Merlin?"

"Merlin, the Gray Wizard, who sent me upon the quest," he explains. "He it was who sped me forward in Time, to quest for the Cappadocian Tabouret."

Now I am not altogether a lug—as you can tell by the way I look up some of the spelling on these items—and when something clicks inside my noggin it means I am thinking, but difficult.

I know I am dealing with the worst kind of screwball—the kind that bounces—but still there is some sense in what he is saying. I see this King Arthur and this Merlin in a picture once, and I see also some personalities in armor that are called knights, which means they are King Arthur's trigger men. They hang out around a big table in a stone hide-out and are always spoiling for trouble and going off on quests—which means, putting the goniff on stuff which doesn't belong on them, or copping dames from other knights.

But I figure all this happens maybe a hundred years ago, or so, over in Europe, before they throw away their armor and change into colored shirts to put the rackets on an organized paying basis.

And this line about going forward in Time to find something is practically impossible, unless you go for Einstein's theory, which I don't, preferring Ann Sheridan.

Still, it is you might say unusual, so I answer this squirrel. "What you're trying to tell me is that you come here from King Arthur's court and some magician sends you to find something?"

“Verily, O Wizard. Merlin counseled me that I might not be believed,” says Pallagyn, sadlike. He chews on his mustache, without butter. He almost looks like he is promoting a weeper.

“I believe you, buddy,” I say, wanting to cheer him up and also get out of here.

“Then take my mount and weapons—it is required by law of the joust,” he insists.

Right then I figure I would rather take a drink. I do. It makes me feel better. I get out and walk over to the oat-burner. “I don’t know what to do with this fourlegged blue barrel,” I tell him, “or your manicure set, either. But if it makes you happy, I will take them with me.”

So I grab the nag and take him around back of the truck, let down the ramp and put him in. When I get back, Sir Pallagyn is piling his steel polo set into the front seat.

“I place these on the dragon for thee,” he says.

“This isn’t a dragon,” I explain. “It’s a Ford.”

“Ford? Merlin did not speak of that creature.” He climbs into the seat after his cutlery, looking afraid the steering wheel will bite him.

“Hey, where you going?”

“With thee, O Wizard. The steed and weapons are thine, but I must follow them, even into captivity. It is the law of the quest.”

“You got laws on the brain, that’s your trouble. Now listen, I don’t like hitchhikers—”

THEN I GANDER at my ticker and see it is almost ten and remember I am to meet Thin Tommy at eight. So I figure, why not? I will give this number a short lift down the pike and dump him where it is quiet and forget him. Maybe I can also find out whether or not there is somebody missing from Baycrest, which is the local laughing academy, and turn him in. Anyway, I have my date to keep, so I start the truck rolling.

This Pallagyn lets out a sort of whistle through his whiskers when I hit it up, so I say, “What’s the matter, buddy, are you thirsty?”

“No,” he gasps. “But we are flying!”

“Only doing forty,” I tells him. “Look at the speedometer.”

“Forty what? Speedometer?”

My noggin is clicking like a slot machine in a church bazaar. This baby isn’t faking! I get another look at his armor and see it is solid stuff—not like fancy-dress costumes, but real heavy, with little designs in gold and silver running through it. And he doesn’t know what a car is, or a speedometer!

“You need a drink,” I says, taking it for him, and then passing him the bottle.

“Mead?” he says.

“No, Haig & Haig. Try a slug.”

He tilts the bottle and takes a terrific triple-tongue. He lets out a roar and turns redder than his whiskers. “I am bewitched!” he yells. “Ye black wizard!”

“Hold it. You’ll cool off in a minute. Besides, I’m not a wizard. I’m a truck farmer, believe it or not, and don’t let them kid you down at the Bastille. I’m through with the rackets.”

He gets quieter in a minute and begins to ask me questions. Before I know it, I am explaining who I am and what I am doing, and after another drink it doesn’t seem so screwy to me any more.

Even when he tells me about this Merlin baby putting a spell on him and sending him through Time to go on a quest, I swallow it like my last shot. I break down and tell him to call me Butch. In a few minutes we’re practically cell mates.

“Ye may call me Pallagyn,” he says.

“O. K., Pal. How about another slug?”

This time he is more cautious, and it must go down fairly well, because he smacks his lips and doesn’t hardly even turn pink.

“Might I inquire as to your destination, O Butch?” he lets out, after a minute or so.

"You might," I says. "There it is, straight ahead."

I point out the building we are just coming to. It is a roadhouse and tavern called "The Blunder Inn," and it is in this rat hole that Thin Tommy Malloon hangs his hat and holster. This I explain to Pal.

"It doth not resemble a rat hole," he comments.

"Any place where Thin Tommy gets in must be a hat hole," I tell him, "because Thin Tommy is a rat. He is a wrongo but strongo. Nevertheless, I must now go in and pay him his ten dollars for protection or he will sprinkle lye on my alfalfa."

"What do you mean?" asks Pallagyn.

So I explain to him very simple in words of three letters how Thin Tommy use to be a high number in the rackets back in town but decides to retire. How he buys this roadhouse and clips customers at night, but being naturally a very energetic type of guy, he gets bored unless he can clip customers by day, also. So he figures out that he can sell protection to farmers in the country just like he sells it to grocery stores and gas stations in the city.

"Protection?" interrupts Pallagyn.

"Yes, Pal. I have a little farm, and I must pay Thin Tommy ten a week or else I will have trouble, such as finding ground glass in my hen mash, or a pineapple in my silo."

"Ye pay to keep vandals from despoiling the crops?" asks the knight. "Would it not be expedient to discover the miscreants and punish them?"

"I *know* who would wreck the farm if I didn't pay," I reply. "Thin Tommy."

"Ah, now methinks I comprehend thy plight. Thou art a serf, and this Thin Thomas is thy overlord."

Somehow this remark, and the way Pallagyn says it, seems to show me up for a sucker. And I have just enough drink in me to resent it.

"I am no serf," I shout. "As a matter of fact, I am waiting a long time to fix the clock of this Thin Tommy. So today I pay him no ten dollars, and I am going in to tell him so to what he calls his face."

Pallagyn listens to me kind of close, because he seems pretty ignorant on English and grammar, but he catches on and smiles.

“Spoken like a right true knight,” he says. “I shall accompany ye on this mission, for I find in my heart a liking for thy steadfast purpose, and a hatred of Thin Thomas.”

“Sit where you are,” I says, fast. “I will handle this myself. Because Thin Tommy does not like strangers coming into his joint in the daytime without an invitation, and you are dressed kind of loud and conspicuous. So you stay here,” I tell him, “and have a drink.”

And I pull up and climb out of the car and march into the tavern fast.

MY HEART is going fast also, because what I am about to do is enough to make any heart go fast in case Thin Tommy gets an idea to stop it from beating altogether. Which he sometimes does when he is irked, particularly over money.

Even so I walk up to the bar and sure enough, there is Thin Tommy standing there polishing the glasses with boxing gloves on. Only when I look again I realize these are not boxing gloves at all, but merely Thin Tommy’s hands.

Thin Tommy is not really thin, you understand, but is called that because he weighs about three hundred fifty pounds, stripped—such as once a month, when he takes a bath.

“So, it’s you!” he says, in a voice like a warden.

“Hello, Thin Tommy,” I greet him. “How are tricks?”

“I will show you how tricks are if you do not cough up those ten berries fast and furious,” grunts Thin Tommy. “All of the others have been here two or three hours ago, and I am waiting to go to the bank.”

“Go right ahead,” I tell him. “I wouldn’t stop you.”

Thin Tommy drops the glass he is polishing and leans over the bar. “Hand it over,” he says through his teeth. They are big yellow teeth, all smashed together in not such a pleasant grin.

I grin right back at him because how can he see my knees shaking?

"I have nothing for you, Tommy," I get out. "In fact, that is why I stopped in, to tell you that from now on I do not require protection any longer."

"Ha!" yells Thin Tommy, pounding on the bar and then jumping around it with great speed for a man of his weight. "Bertram!" he calls. "Roscoe!"

Bertram and Roscoe are Tommy's two waiters, but I know Tommy is not calling them in to serve me.

They come running out of the back, and I see they have experience in such matters before, because Bertram is carrying a blackjack and Roscoe has a little knife in his hand. This knife worries me most, because I am practically certain that Roscoe is never a boy scout.

By the time I see all this, Thin Tommy is almost on top of me, and he lets go with one arm for my jaw. I bend my head down just in time, but Thin Tommy's other hand catches me from the side and slaps me across the room. I fall over a chair, and by this time Bertram and Roscoe are ready to wait on me. In fact, one of them pulls out the chair I fell over, and tries to hit me on the head with it.

I let out a yell and grab up a salt cellar from the table. This I push down Bertram's mouth, and I am just ready to throw a little pepper in Roscoe's eyes when Thin Tommy crashes over, grabs the knife from Roscoe's hand, and backs me into the corner.

All at once I hear a crash outside the door, and somebody hollers, "Yoicks! Pendragon and Pallagyn!"

INTO the room gallops Sir Pallagyn. He has got his sword in one hand, and the empty bottle in the other, and he is full to the eyeballs with courage.

He lets the bottle go first and it catches Bertram in the side of the head, just when he is getting the salt cellar out of his mouth. Bertram slides down with a sort of moan, and Roscoe and Yommy turn around.

"It's one of them there rowboats, like I seen at the Fair!" remarks Thin Tommy.

"Yeah," says Roscoe, who is all at once very busy when Pallagyn comes for him with his sword. In fact Roscoe is so busy he falls over the chair and lands on his face, which gets caught in a cuspidor. Pallagyn is ready to whack him one when Thin Tommy drops hold of me and lets out a grunt.

He grabs up the blackjack and the dagger both in the same hand and lets fly. They bounce off Pallagyn's helmet, of course, so Thin Tommy tries a chair. This doesn't work, either, so he picks up the table.

Pallagyn just turns kind of surprised and starts coming for him. And Thin Tommy backs away.

"No . . . no—" he says. All at once he reaches into his hip pocket and pulls out the old lead poisoner.

"Watch out!" I yell, trying to get to Tommy before he can shoot. "Duck, Pal—duck!"

Pallagyn ducks, but he is still running forward and his armor is so heavy he can't stop if he wants to keep from falling over.

The gun goes off over his head, but then Sir Pallagyn is going on, and he runs right into Thin Tommy, butting his head into his stomach. Thin Tommy just gives one "Ooooof!" and sits down backward, holding his belly where the helmet hit it, and he turns very green indeed.

Pallagyn sticks out his sword, but I say, "Never mind. This ought to teach him a lesson."

Going out, Thin Tommy just manages to whisper to me, "Who is that guy?"

"That," I tell him, "is my new hired man. So if I was you, I wouldn't plant any pineapples on my farm, because he is allergic to fruit."

So we leave and climb back into the truck.

"Thanks, Pal," I say. "You not only threw a scare into that monkey but you also saved my life. I am in debt to you, whoever you are, and if Thin Tommy didn't serve such rotgut, I would take you back in and buy you a drink."

“Verily, ’tis a trifle,” says Pallagyn.

“I’ll do you the same some day, Pal,” I tell him. “You are my buddy.”

“Ye could help me now, methinks.”

“How?”

“Why, in pursuit of my quest. I was sent here by Merlin to seek the Cappadocian Tabouret.”

“I do not know anything about the new night clubs,” I tell him. “I am not an uptown boy any longer.”

“The Cappadocian Tabouret,” says Pallagyn, ignoring me, “is the table on which the Holy Grail will rest, once we find it.”

“Holy Grail?”

So Pallagyn began to tell me a long yarn about how he is living in a castle with this King Arthur and a hundred other triggers who are all knights like he is. As near as I get it, all they do is sit around and drink and fight each other, which makes it look like this King Arthur is not so good in controlling his mob.

The brain in this outfit is this guy Merlin, who is a very prominent old fuddy in the Magician’s Union. He is always sending the lads out to rescue dames that have been snatched, or to knock off the hoods of other mobs, but what he is really interested in is this Holy Grail.

I cannot catch exactly what the Holy Grail is, except it’s kind of a loving cup or trophy that has disappeared from some hock shop back there in the Middle Ages. But everybody is hot to find it, including the big boys in the mob like Sir Galahad and Sir Lancelot.

When Pallagyn mentions these two I know I have heard of them some place, so naturally I ask questions and find out quite a bit about ancient times and knights and how they live and about the tournaments—which are pretty much the same as the Rose Bowl games, without a take—and many other items which are of great interest to an amateur scholar like myself.

BUT to slice a long story thin, Merlin cannot put the finger on this Holy Grail yet, although he is sending out parties every day to go on these quests for it. But he is a smart cookie in many another way, and one of his little tricks is to get himself coked up and then look into the future. For example, he tells King Arthur that he is going to have trouble some time ahead, and Pallagyn says he may be right, because he personally notices this Sir Lancelot making pigeon noises at Arthur's skirt. But gossip aside, one of the things Merlin sees in the future is this Cappadocian Tabouret, which is a sacred relic on which the Holy Grail is supposed to sit.

So the old hophead calls in Sir Pallagyn and says he is sending him on a quest for the glory of Britain, to get this table for the Holy Grail and bring it back.

All Merlin can do to help him is to put a spell on him and send him into the future to the time where he sees the Tabouret.

And he tells him a little about these times and this country, sprinkles a little powder on him, and all at once Pallagyn is sitting on his horse in the middle of County Trunk AA, where I find him.

"That is not exactly the easiest story in the world to believe," I remark, when Pallagyn finishes.

"Here I am," says the knight, which is about as good an answer as any.

For a minute I think I can understand how he must feel, being shipped off through Time into a new territory, without even a road map to help him. And since he is a good guy and saved my life, I figure the least I can do is try.

"Didn't this old snowbird give you a hint where it might be?" I ask.

"Merlin? Forsooth, he spoke of seeing it in a House of the Past."

"What kind of house?"

"House of the Past, methinks he named it."

"Never heard of it," I says, "unless he means a funeral parlor. And you don't catch me going into any stiff hotel."

I say this as we are driving into my yard, and I stop the truck.

“Let’s grab a plate of lunch,” I suggest. “Maybe we can think of something.”

“Lunch?”

“Grub—hay—food.”

“Here?”

“Yeah. This is my dump—house.”

I SALVAGE Pallagyn out of the car and take him inside. Then, while I fix the food, he sits there in the kitchen and asks me a thousand screwy questions. He is very ignorant about everything.

It turns out that back in his times, there is not enough civilization to put in your ear. He doesn’t know what a stove is, or gas, and I can see why they call them the Dark Ages when he tells me he hasn’t ever seen an electric light.

So I tell him everything, about cars and trains and airplanes and tractors and steamships, and then I break down and give him a few inside tips on how citizens live.

I hand it to him about the mobs and the rackets and the bluecoats, and politics and elections. Then I give him a few tips about science—machine guns and armored cars and tear gas and pineapples and fingerprints, all the latest stuff.

It is very hard to explain these matters to such an ignorant guy as this Pallagyn, but he is so interested and grateful that I want to give him the right steer.

I even show him how to eat with a knife and fork, as it turns out at lunch that King Arthur’s court doesn’t go in for fancy table manners.

But I am not a schoolteacher, and after all, we are not getting any closer to Sir Pallagyn’s problem, which is snatching this Tabouret in his quest.

So I begin asking him all over again about what it is and what it looks like and where this fink Merlin said he could find it.

And all he manages to come clean with is that it's in the House of the Past, and that Merlin sees it in a jag.

"Big place," he says. "And the Tabouret is guarded by men in blue."

"Police station?" I wonder.

"It is in a transparent coffin," he says.

I never see any of these, though I hear Stinky Raffelano is buried in one when he catches his slugs last year.

"Ye can see but cannot touch it," he remembers.

All at once I get it.

"It's under glass," I tell him. "In a museum."

"Glass?"

"Never mind what that is," I say. "Sure—guards. House of the Past. It's in a museum in town."

I tell him what a museum is, and then start thinking.

"First thing to do is get a line on where it is. Then we can figure out how to pull the snatch."

"Snatch?"

"Steal it, Pal. Say—do you know what it looks like?"

"Verily. Merlin described it in utmost detail, lest I err and procure a spurious Tabouret."

"Good. Give me a line on it, will you?"

"Why, it is but a wooden tray of rough boards, with four short legs set at the corners. Brown is its hue, and it spans scarce four hands in height. Plain it is, without decoration or adornment, for it was but crudely fashioned by the good Cappadocian Fathers."

"So," I said. "I think maybe I have a notion. Wait here," I tell him, "and improve your education."

And I hand him a copy of a movie magazine. I go down to the cellar, and when I come up after a while, Sir Pallagyn comes clanking up to me, all excited.

"Pray, and who is this fair damsel?" he asks, pointing out a shot of Ann Sothern in a bathing suit. "She has verily the appearance of the Lady of the

Lake," he remarks. "Albeit with more . . . more—"

"You said it, Pal," I agree. "Much more, in spades. But here—does this look like the table you're after?"

"Od's blood, it is the very thing! From whence didst thou procure it?"

"Why it's nothing but a piece of old furniture I find laying down in the basement. A footstool, but I knock the stuffing out of it and scrape off some varnish. Now, all you got to do is get this Merlin to wave his wand and call you back, and you hand him over the goods. He will never catch wise," I say, "and it will save us a lot of trouble."

Pallagyn's puss falls in a little and he starts chewing his red mustache again.

"I fear, Sir Butch, thy ethics are not of the highest. I am a quest, nor could I present a spurious Tabouret in sight of mine own conscience."

So I see I am in for it. Of course it will be easy for me to tell this tin can to go chase his quest, but somehow I feel I owe him a good turn.

"I will work things out in a jiffy, Pal. You just go out and put your nag in the stable, and when you come back, I will have things fixed up."

"On thy honor?" he says, smiling all of a sudden. "Sure. Shake."

He shakes until his armor rattles.

"Never mind," I say. "Take care of the nag and leave it to me."

He clunks out and I get busy on the phone.

When he comes back I am set.

"Come on out and hop in the truck," I invite. "We are on our way to pick up that furniture for you."

"Indeed? Then we really quest together, Sir Butch?"

"Don't ask any questions," I remark. "On your way."

I notice he fumbles with that movie magazine a minute, and when he sees me looking he blushes.

"I wouldst carry the image of this fair lady, as is the custom of the quest," he admits, tucking the picture of Ann Sothern in his helmet, so only her legs stick out over his forehead.

"O. K. by me, Pal. But come on, we got a drive ahead of us."

I grab up a pint, the fake Tabouret, and a glass cutter; head for the truck, and we’re off.

It is a long drive, and I have plenty of time to explain the lay of the land to Sir Pallagyn. I tell him how I call the museum and find out if they have this table in hock. Then I hang up and call back in a different voice, telling them that I am an express man with a suit of armor on hand for them which I will send over.

“Pretty neat, eh, Pal?” I ask.

“But I do not comprehend. How did you talk to the museum if it is in the city and—”

I do not understand the telephone so good myself, because I never see the movie “Young Tom Edison” or whatever, so I just pass it over.

“I am a wizard myself,” I let it go.

“Still, I fail to perceive the plan. What place has armor in a House of the Past?”

“Why, it’s a relic. Don’t you know nobody wears armor no more? It’s all bulletproof vests.”

“Still, how doth that contrive for us to—snatch—the Tabouret?”

“Don’t you get it? I’ll carry you into the museum like an empty suit of armor. Then we will spot this Tabouret, I will set you down in a corner, and when the joint closes up you can snatch it very quick indeed. You can use this glass cutter to get it out, substitute this fake furniture in the case, and nobody will be hep to it the next morning. Simple.”

“By’re Lady, ’tis a marvel of cunning!”

I admit it sounds pat myself. But I notice we are now coming into some traffic, so I stop the truck and say, “From now on you are nothing but a suit of armor with nothing inside. You climb into the back of the truck so citizens will not give you the queer eye, and lie quiet. When we get to the museum I will drag you out, and you just hold still. Remember?”

“Verily.”

So Pallagyn hops into the back of the truck and lies down and I head into the city. Before I get too far I take myself a couple of quick ones because I am a little nervous, being so long since I pulled a job.

I am not exactly floating but my feet do not touch bottom when we get downtown. Which is why I accidentally touch a fender of the car ahead of me when we stop in traffic. In fact I touch it so that it drops off.

It is a big black job, and an old Whitey with a meanlooking puss opens the door and leans out and says: “Here now, you ruffian!”

“Who are you calling a ruffian, you bottle-nosed old baboon?” I answer, hoping to pass it off quiet.

“Aaaaargh!” says Whitey, climbing out of his buggy. “Come along, Jefferson, and help me deal with this hoodlum.”

It is funny he should call me such when I feel sure he never sets peepers on me before in his life, but then it is a small world. And the chauffeur that hauls out after him is much too big to be running around in a small world. He is not only big but mean-looking, and he comes marching right at me along with old Whitey.

“Why don’t you go away and soak your feet?” I suggest, still wanting to be diplomatic and avoid trouble. But Whitey does not go for my good advice.

“Let me have the number of your license,” he growls. “I am going to do something about reckless drivers that smash into cars.”

“Yeah,” says the big chauffeur, sticking his red face into the window. “Maybe this fellow would slow down a little if he was driving with a couple of black eyes.”

“Now wait a minute,” I suggest. “I am very sorry if I bump into you and lose my temper, but I am on my way to the museum in a hurry with a rush order. If you look in the back of the truck, you will see a suit of armor I am delivering there.”

As it turns out this is not such a hot suggestion at that. Because when I see Whitey and the chauffeur marching at me I have presence of mind to toss the whiskey bottle in the back of the truck. And now Sir Pallagyn has got a gander at it, so when Whitey hangs his nose over the side, there is Pal taking a snifter.

When he sees the old guy coming he stops still with his arm in the air, snapping his visor down with the bottle in his mouth.

“Here, what’s this?” snaps Whitey.

“Huh?”

“What’s that bottle doing stuck in the visor of this helmet? And what’s making the arm hold on to it?”

“I don’t know, mister. That’s how I find it when I unpack it this morning.”

“Something wrong,” insists old Whitey. “They didn’t drink whiskey way back then.”

“It’s pretty old whiskey,” I tell him.

“I’ll vouch for that,” he says, real nasty, “if your breath is any indication. I think you ought to be run in for drunken driving.”

“Say,” pipes up Jefferson, the big chauffeur. “Maybe this mug doesn’t even own the truck like he says. He might have stole this armor.”

Whitey smiles like a desk sergeant. “I never thought of that. Now, sir”—and he wheels or me fast—“if you know so much about this particular bit of armor, perhaps you can tell me the name of its original wearer.”

“Why . . . why . . . Sir Pallagyn of the Round Table,” I stammer.

“Pallagyn? Pallagyn? Never heard of him,” snaps Whitey. “He never sat at the Round Table.”

“He was always under it,” I say. “He was a lush.”

“Preposterous! This is all a fraud of some sort.”

“Look!” Jefferson yells. “The whiskey!”

We all look around, and sure enough the whiskey is disappearing from the bottle because Pallagyn is gargling it down very quiet.

“Fraud!” says Whitey, again, and taps the helmet with his cane.

“Come on, where you steal this from?” growls Jefferson, grabbing me by the collar. And Whitey keeps hitting the helmet.

“Desist, by blessed St. George!” roars Pallagyn, sitting up. “Desist, ere I let air through thy weasand, thou aged conskiter!”

Whitey stands there with the cane in the air and his mouth is open wide enough to hang a canary in. Pal sees the cane and grabs for his sword.

“A joust, is it?” he yells.

And all around us the citizens are honking their horns and staring out startled like, but when they see Pallagyn standing up and waving his pocketknife they drive away very fast in high.

“Robot!” mumbles Whitey.

“Rodent, am I?” and Pallagyn begins to slice away at Whitey’s breadbasket.

“Hey!” yells the chauffeur, dropping me. “Cut that!” He makes a dive for the knight, but he sees him climbing up into the truck and bops him with the whiskey bottle. The big guy falls down and sits still. Whitey dances around for a minute and then runs for his car.

“Lam a trustee of the museum,” he bawls. “And whatever that thing is, it isn’t going on display. Witchcraft, that’s what it is!”

Now this is a fine time for a bluecoat to show up, but when he does I quick-motion to Pal to hold still and grab the duckfoot by the collar.

“This guy and his chauffeur back into me,” I say. “And if you smell the chauffeur you see he is drunk; as a matter of fact he is passed out. That old bird is also a lush, but me,” and I step on the gas, “I am in a hurry to deliver this armor to a museum, and I do not wish to press charges.”

“Hey—” says the beat daddy, but I pull away fast. I am around the corner before he has time to cry “Wolf!” and I take it up several alleys.

Meanwhile I bawl out Pallagyn in all suits.

“From now on,” I tell him, “you don’t make a move, no matter what happens. Understand?”

“Hie,” says Pallagyn.

“The only way I can get you into the museum is for you to be quiet and lay limp,” I say.

“Hie.”

“And stop those hiccups or it’s good-by quest!”

“Hie.”

“Here we are,” I tell him, pulling up in back of the big gray building, into the loading zone.

“Hie.”

“Shut your trap,” I snarl.

Pallagyn pulls down his visor.

“No, wait.” He is still hiccuping, so I yank his plume off and stuff it into his mouth.

“Now be quiet and leave it to me,” I say, I get the table under one arm and slip the glass cutter into one pocket. Then I open the back of the truck and slide Pallagyn down the ramp to the ground.

“Ugh! Oooof!” he groans, under his helmet.

“Sh! Here we go!”

IT IS NOT so easy to drag Pallagyn along by the arms, but I manage to hoist him up the platform and get him past the door. There is a guard standing there.

“New armor,” I tell him. “Where is your hardware department?”

“Funny. Nobody told me to expect a delivery. Oh, well, I’ll let you set it up. Dr. Peabody will probably arrange to place it tomorrow.”

He looks at me, all red in the puss, trying to drag Pallagyn along.

“Funny it should be so weighty. I thought armor was light.”

“This baby must be wearing heavy underwear,” I tell him. “How about giving me a hand?”

He helps lift Pallagyn and we carry him through a lot of halls into a big room.

There are a lot of suits of armor standing around the walls, and several are hanging on wires from the ceiling, but I see something else and let out a snort.

Sure enough, in the center of the room is a glass case, and inside it is standing a little table just like the one I have under my arm.

I set the thing down and the guard notices it for the first time.

“What you got here?” he asks.

“The armor is supposed to stand on it,” I explain. “It comes with the set.”

“Oh. Well, just stand it up against the wall. I got to get back to the door.”

And he goes away. I take a quick gander up and down and see the place is deserted. It is getting dark and I figure it is closing time already.

“Here we are,” I whisper.

“Hie,” says Pallagyn.

He opens his visor and takes a look at the Tabouret. “Verily, it is that for which I seek,” he whispers. “My thanks, a thousandfold.”

“Forget it. Now all you got to do is wait till it gets a little darker, then make the snatch.”

I go up to the case and tap it.

“Why,” I say, “this is real luck. It opens from the back and you don’t even have to use the glass cutter.” But Pallagyn is not paying any attention. He is looking around at the armor on the walls.

“Gawain!” he snorts.

“What?”

“ ’Tis the veritable armor of Sir Gawain!” he yaps. “One of the Brotherhood of the Round Table.”

“You don’t say!”

“Aye—and yonder stands the coat of mail of Sir Sagramore! Indeed! I recognize the main of Eldeford, he that is cousin to Sir Kay. And Maligaint—” He is rattling off the names of old friends, clanking around and tapping the tin, but it all looks like a bunch of spare parts in a hot car hide-out to me.

“I am among friends,” he chuckles.

“Yeah? Don’t be too sure. If these museum babies ever find out what you’re up to, it’s good-by quest. Now get to work, quick. I got to be going back." I push him over to the case. "I'll watch the door for you in case anyone is coming," I whisper. "You switch the Tabourets. Snap into it."

So I stand there, and Pallagyn makes for the case, trying not to clank too loud. It is dark and quiet, and creepy.

Pallagyn gets the case open in no time, but he has trouble in hauling out the Tabouret, because it is nailed down.

He is grunting and yanking on it and I am shaking because he is maybe going to rouse a guard.

"I cannot say much for this guy Merlin," I comment. "He is supposed to help you knights over the hard spots, but I do not notice he has done you a good turn yet."

"Nay, I have thee to thank for my success," says Pallagyn. "For, lo, my quest is ended!"

And he rips the Tabouret loose and slides the other one in. Then he closes the glass again and marches over across the room.

Only right in the middle of it he lets out a squawk and falls down on the stone floor when his foot slips.

There is a loud crash like all hell was breaking loose.

It does.

Guys are yelling down the hall and I hear feet running this way. I get over to Pallagyn and help him up, but just as I am easing him onto his feet a squad of guards charges into the room and the heat is very much on.

"Stop, thief!" yells the guy in the lead, and the whole gang charges down on us. Pallagyn is trying to stand still again and I am yanking open a window, but when he sees them coming, Pal lets out a whoop and drops the Tabouret, waving his sword around.

"Stand back ere I skewer thy livers!" he howls. Then he turns to me. "Make haste, Sir Butch, and effect thy escape whilst I told off yon varlets."

"Give me that," I say, grabbing at the sword. "I'll hold them off and you get out of here and gallop back to your Merlin with the Bank Nite prize."

"There he is, men!" yells a new voice. Coming through the door is none other than old Whitey in person, and behind him are about eight cops. Then the cops are ahead of him, because they are coming for us, fast. A fat sergeant has his gun extremely out.

“Pendragon and England!” yells Pallagyn, patting the first cop on his bald spot with the flat side of his sword.

“Hell and damnation!” bawls the sergeant. He lets go a slug, which bounces off the helmet.

“Superman!” hollers another cop.

“Get him, boys!” screams Whitey.

It is a picnic without ants. I plant one on the sergeant’s neck, and Pal wades in with his sword. But the other six push us back into a comer, and the guards come up behind them. As fast as we knock them down, the others close in. They swarm over us like a gang of Airdales on a garbage heap.

“Here we go,” I gasp out, punching away.

“Be of good . . . uh . . . heart!” roars Pallagyn. He slices away. All at once he slips and the sword falls. And two coppers jump him before he can get up. The sergeant gets his gun out again and points it at me.

“Now then—” he says. The boys grab us and push us forward.

All at once Pallagyn closes his eyes. “Merlin!” he whispers. “Aid!”

Something very unusual happens here. The first thing I notice is a lot of clanking, and scraping coming from the dark corners of the room.

And then there is more noise, like Pallagyn’s armor makes, only louder.

“For Arthur and England!” Pallagyn yells. “Gawain, Sagramore, Eldevord, Maligaint!—”

“Aye, we come!”

Out of the dark crashes a half dozen suits of armor; but there are men in them now. It is the armor from the walls, and I see Pallagyn’s gang is here.

“Merlin sent help!” he grunts. And then he grabs his sword and wades in.

The others are whacking up the cops already, and there is a smashing of tinware. Some of the duckfeet are running and the guards make for the door. As fast as they get there, tire suits of armor hanging on the walls drop down on their necks and throw them.

In a minute it is all over.

Pallagyn stands in the center of the room holding the Tabouret and all the guys in armor huddle around him.

“The quest is over,” he says. “Thanks to Merlin, and Sir Butch, here—”

But I am not here any more. I am sneaking out of the window, fast, because I have had enough trouble and do not like to get mixed up in hocus-pocus or magician’s unions. So I do not stay, but drop over the ledge.

Before I do so I think I see a flash of lightning or something, but cannot be sure. Anyway, I look around once more and see the museum room is empty. There are a lot of cops lying on the floor and a lot of empty suits of armor are standing around, but there is nothing in them. I look for Pallagyn’s suit and it is gone. So I blink my eyes and head for the truck, which I drive the hell away from there.

THAT IS how it is, and I do a lot of thinking on my way home. Also the air helps to sober me up and I remember that I have been practically drunk all the time since morning.

In fact, I am drunk since before I meet this Pallagyn if I ever do meet him and it is not my imagination.

Because when I look back in the museum I do not see him any more and I wonder if it is all something I dream up out of air and alcohol. It bothers me, and I know that whatever happens at the museum will not leak out in print, because cops are touchy about such matters and as far as they know nothing is stolen.

Then I figure maybe Thin Tommy Malloon can tell me if I drop in, so on the way home I park the car at his tavern and step inside.

Nobody is behind the bar but Bertram, and when he sees me he is very polite.

“I would like to speak with Thin Tommy,” I say.

Bertram gulps. “He is upstairs lying down,” he says. “In fact he does not feel so chipper since you bop him in the belly this morning.”

“What do you mean *I* bop him?” I ask. “My buddy does that.”

“You come in alone,” Bertram tells me. He gives me a long look, but there are customers in the joint so I just shrug and walk out.

So die rest of the way home I am no better off, because I figure either Bertram is lying to me or I am nuts. And right now I would just as soon be a little nuts as admit anything so screwy could happen.

Which is how it stands with me. I am sober, and I am done with chasing around for the day. If I lay off drinking shellac, I will not see any more knights in armor with dopey stories about magicians and quests. I will let bygones be bygones and be a good boy.

That suits me, so I back the car into the garage.

And then I get out and start cursing all over again.

All at once I know for sure whether or not it all happens.

Because standing there in the garage is that dizzy nag with the mask over the head that I have Sir Pallagyn put into the stable.

Do you know anybody who wants to buy a horse, cheap?

THE END.

Last Laugh

Angus Breen Exiled Martin Vail to a Death on a Runaway Planet-But His Ambitions Ran Away With Him!

ANGUS BREEN, controller of the Cosmic Research Division of Interplanetary Colonies, Incorporated, laughed pleasantly as he brushed his hair. Why shouldn't he laugh? He was preparing to sit down to a hearty breakfast. But that wasn't all. Today was the last possible day in the time limit set that Martin Vail could return from Hystero to prevent Breen's legal acquisition of his properties, insurance, and inventions.

Of course, Breen had promptly taken over things after Vail's departure. Everything belonging to his brilliant subordinate was now in Breen's control. But today made possession absolutely legal. So Angus could well afford to smirk at his fat-faced reflection in the mirror and laugh out loud.

Suddenly the laugh choked in his throat, the smirk froze on his features. In his ears there sounded an ear-splitting crash outside his window, a crash that jarred and shook every beam in his ornate penthouse residence. A stratosphere liner or a small space ship had landed in his backyard.

Offhand, this statement would seem silly. Not to Controller Angus Breen. The pudgy little controller's back yard was a mile-square area atop the gigantic Cosmic Research Plant, and the experimental space vessels returning from the exploration of other planets came to rest there regularly.

But they didn't come down with a crash—*and they didn't appear unscheduled!*

Angus Breen scowled and put down his hairbrush. If some drunken intruder had landed by mistake on the scientific sanctuary of his roof—well, the interloper was slated to lose his license, that was all. The controller's pudgy face creased unpleasantly as he strode toward the glass wall that was his window. He stared out at the crumpled hulk lying on the sodded roof yards away from the nearest landing cradle.

"Well, I'll—I'll be eternally damned!" exclaimed Mr. Breen, his fat features whitening.

A pretty accurate prediction, at that. For Controller Breen was an excellent candidate for damnation, although nobody on Earth knew that. But right now he was a better candidate for stark amazement. He was looking at something he had never expected to see again.

Martin Vail's space ship! Vail—the scientific explorer he had sent to certain death. Vail, who had been commissioned to land on Hystero!

HYSTERO—aptly named, because it had appeared out of nowhere to disrupt the Pleiades, whirling in a gaseous orbit that betokened its arrival as a strange, cosmic intruder in the galaxy.

Breen had sent Vail to explore Hystero, knowing that he would die. The planet had never been observed, let alone studied. Its surface conditions were unknown. It appeared in imminent danger of exploding, this runaway planet from another system passing by the Solar family like a ship steaming past an island.

So Breen had sent Vail there "for the sake of Science." And after sending him, went home and appropriated Vail's properties. He knew that Vail would never come back.

Yet here he was.

Here was the ship, a long silver splinter resting on the roof. A dagger thrown from the sky. A dented dagger—for the sides of the vessel were scarred and pitted by the meteoric stones of space. The entire surface appeared to be crusted with a congealed, silvery fuzz, attesting to the heat and friction of the voyage.

Controller Angus Breen didn't take a second look. He buzzed the Observation Tower to signal that he knew of the vessel's arrival, and barked a brief message. "Don't send a crew up. I'll take over myself."

No one else must witness this meeting between himself and Vail. Vail had returned, and if he should suspect now why he had been sent—

Breen buckled on his drug-gun, felt for the clip of opium needles with which it was loaded. He might face violence.

"Well, let's get it over with," the fat Controller muttered, as he strode out on the roof.

Wind fluttering his white jacket, he waddled up to the ship's side. The port was sealed. There was a lever on the side, but Breen, impatient as he was, didn't pull it at once. He knew the heat generated by the friction of speed through space; could feel it radiating yet from the ship's silver sides. Pulling out his gloves, he let his asbestos-clad fingers release the catch and throw out the metal ladder leading up to the port. He climbed, pulling out his master-key—for ordinarily the ports of a spaceship can be opened only from the inside. Safety measure.

Only men like Controller Breen had master keys. Only men like Controller Breen could send others to their death in space ships. . . .

But Angus Breen didn't want to think about that. He had supposed Vail dead, and now he had come back, alive. Sometimes plans go wrong.

"Get it over with," he muttered again, clutching his drug-gun. Then he pulled the airlock door open and hauled his heavy body up until he could step inside.

A breath of synthetic air smote him as his feet touched the floor of the ship's interior. It was dark. He snapped on the lights.

The long narrow cabin was immaculate. No signs of scarring, no inner damage. No signs of life, either. At one end of the little chamber was the great silver control-board. Before it was the piloting chair. But where was Vail?

The cot was empty, the bunks untenanted. Had the ship returned *alone?* Why wasn't Vail at the door to greet him? After a month's confinement in these steel prisons poised in space, men usually were clamoring for release. Breen had seen them babbling with ecstasy as they fought their way out to solid earth.

But no Vail. Only the empty chamber, the chair, and the control-board.

Angus Breen's eyes cut through the glare. And then he saw the back of Vail's head, over the top of the piloting chair that faced the controls.

"Vail!" he barked.

The head didn't move.

Was he unconscious? Was he—this would be almost too much to hope for—dead?

Breen didn't know. "Vail!" he called again.

And then something rustled in the shadows of a wall shelf. Angus Breen nearly jumped out of his skin—no mean feat, considering his weight.

Then he relaxed. Vail, sentimentalist, had taken his cat, Comet, on the voyage. Comet jumped down from the shelf and Breen saw horror.

The cat, the gray cat, walking on mincing feet across the floor, had no head!

It was a headless feline that blundered over the surface of the cabin, and in a ghastly moment arched its back and rubbed its living fur against Controller Breen's leg.

Breen shuddered terribly, forced himself to look down at the apparition. He saw where the neck ended in a little silver cap, like the cover of a tin can. One or two wire ends stuck up from the interior of the silver cap. But the beast was headless. Headless—yet alive!

It was to escape this monstrosity that Breen moved toward the controls. He wasn't thinking so vividly of Vail, and he almost unconsciously put out his hand to pat Vail on the shoulder over the back of the piloting chair.

His groping hand encountered—nothing.

He felt again, eyes still on that headless horror of a cat. Again his hands met empty air. Vail's head did not turn.

And Angus Breen, choking with startled fear, moved around until he faced the front of the piloting chair.

Faced—*the bodiless head of Vail!*

Clamped with steel sutures against the top of the chair, fastened with a system of cords and wires leading from the severed neck, throat studded with glass and rubber tubing, the head of Martin Vail stared up at Angus Breen with a glassy smile.

Controller Breen stared back, stared into open eyes, open mouth. Stared, and stared, and stared—

"HOW are you, Breen?"

No. That couldn't be. The lips moving, and the metallic voice that wasn't Vail's, coming from Vail's throat.

"What's the matter, Breen? Surprised?"

"Y—yes—" whispered Breen.

"Never thought you'd see my face again, eh? Well, that's just about all you are seeing, at that."

"Vail—don't joke about this."

"Joke? That's what it is, isn't it? A joke." The face smiled.

Breen stared into the smiling visage with a sick dread in his heart. Vail's expression had changed. No, his hair hadn't turned white overnight, and there was no network of wrinkles etched in agony. The change was the agony in the eyes, and yet they were laughing. The fat man shivered.

He saw where the silver wires entered the neck like shining strands of veins and arteries; saw that they extended down into the seat of the piloting chair, which appeared to have been scooped out and then re-covered after the wires had been run through them.

The eyes of the head suspended in space stared into his, following his glance.

"Clever, isn't it? Looks crude—like the early Russian experiments we used to read about in school. They used a saline solution for dogs' heads, or something of the sort, didn't they? This is much better."

Angus Breen didn't look as though he thought this was much better. He could only gaze in fear at the decapitation that spoke.

It wasn't Vail's voice. What does speech sound like without lungs? It was a metallic burr. That silver tubing in the throat might account for it.

The nostrils didn't move. No breathing. Chemical life. Bloodstream fed through wires and tubing. A self-sustaining solution.

Fragments of chemical biology filtered through Breen's brain. Just fragments, filtering through the greater bulk of the pure horror which held it. "Vail—what happened? Why—this?"

Vail laughed. The head on the clamps atop the chair shuddered. "Sorry, but it *hurts* to laugh. I forget that sometimes; you understand?"

Breen nodded. Understand—how could he understand? He wanted to run; wanted to tear his eyes away from that living head and flee. He had made that head what it was by sending Vail on that perilous mission. Vail's eyes showed he knew that. And while the head couldn't harm him, Angus Breen was still afraid.

"Go on," said Controller Angus Breen, hoarsely. "Go on."

"I followed your orders, and the temporary charting," droned the metallic voice. "The voyage itself doesn't matter. Oh, I know you're interested. I thought it was important myself at the time. Took it all down in the chart-book. So if you want details, look there. The whole of the observations are recorded.

"But they're not important to me any more. And I doubt if they'll be important to you, after you hear the rest of my story. Who wants to read a roadmap that leads to Hell?"

That metallic whinny could only be laughter, Breen knew. It sickened him.

"I have something else to tell you, Breen. About Hystero itself. I landed, you know. The surface is solid enough, and after a preliminary observation I saw that oxygen masks wouldn't be necessary. That's how Comet happened to leave the ship and come along with me."

VAIL'S eyes indicated the cat.

Breen glanced down, saw the headless creature with the tin-can over an empty throat. A feeling of being in a nightmare came over him. Vail was buzzing on.

"I'll condense it. Hurts to talk, and nothing's important except my message. Hystero is inhabited. By *men,* if you choose to call them that."

Breen got excited. "Men? Why, there's never been another body discovered that has men on it! Vail—do you realize what this discovery may mean?"

"Yes," said the head. "But you don't. Not yet. There are some men one doesn't *bother* too much. Nor *study.* I didn't think so at first. I thought I'd blundered into a higher race. They had cities, you know, and a civilization. They wore clothes, and talked, and communicated in other ways.

"That's how they understood me, Breen. Telepathic communication. Their speech is too difficult to learn. Other habits are difficult to understand, too—but it isn't important to talk about them."

"What do you mean, it isn't important?" Angus Breen exploded. Already avarice was overcoming his initial fear. Why, publicization of this discovery would make him famous! "Why, everything about this new planet and race is important."

"No," said the head of Vail. "Only one thing is important. What they did to me." The drone in the voice deepened. So did the dreadful intensity of Vail's stare. It held Breen's eyes riveted.

"You see what they did to me," Vail said. "Do you know why?"

"No."

"For a joke."

"Joke?"

"Yes. Now do you understand? These are men, but men far in advance, mentally, of earthly beings. Minds above so much that interests us and our lesser intelligences. For example, on Hystero there is no music, no art. Those beings read no books. Their minds are beyond that; they find no stimulation in the *synthetic.*

"They are no longer interested in what we call 'civilization.' They don't want to build higher buildings any more, or bigger factories, or make more 'money.' They are quite above those qualities we call 'patriotism' or 'idealism' or even 'love'—though they understand such mental attitudes perfectly."

"What *do* they find interest in?" Breen asked.

"Jokes."

"Jokes?" Breen echoed weakly.

"Yes. And since there is cruelty in humor, and a certain reality, they are cruel. As the ancient Roman emperors who had everything became cruel in their humor. Like Caligula. They have a sense of irony.

"I found that out. Here was I, a stranger from another world. Did they fear me? No—for they were too clever to know fear. Did they worship me, like savages? Again, no. Their reactions were not our human reactions at all. Nor did they study me. They weren't even curious. The intricate science of their civilization no longer exists as a means of *learning.* They wanted to use it only to play a joke."

VAIL paused an instant, as though to draw breath—breath no longer needed. "That's what they did to me, Breen. They played with me, like a child plays with its toys. They took Comet, here, and examined her. There are no animals on Hystero. And they began to experiment. You see what that experiment leads to, don't you?

"They wanted to keep this strange living thing animate after removing its brain. A sort of puzzle for them, a game. That kind of curiosity, the same curiosity which men used to manifest centuries ago when they took automobiles and radios apart, tinkered with them, and put them back together again. So they did that to Comet. And they did *this* to me!" Breen shivered as he saw the eyes of the head, saw them moisten with ghastly tears.

Vail went on, with a terrible smile.

"So you've had your way, Breen, haven't you?"

"What—what do you mean?"

"You sent me out there knowing I'd be killed, didn't you?"

"No—no—"

"Oh, why bother to lie? I can't harm you now, can I?"

Breen couldn't check a grin that broke through. That *was* true. He fingered his drug-gun. There was no danger in Vail any more. There was, instead, a definite value. Breen thought of calling in the scientists, all his fellow-workers and superiors. Exhibiting Vail's head. Telling the story. Conducting a research of the processes that kept him alive, bodiless. Perhaps mastering the technique himself. It was all simple chemistry, biology, and surgery.

Why not? And meanwhile, Vail's possessions were his.

There were just a few things he wanted to find out first. He might as well admit it.

"I guess you're too clever for me, Vail?" he chuckled. "It's true. I didn't think you'd come back. But there was nothing underhanded in my sending you—I swear it. You were the best, the bravest; you had the endurance. And I'm glad you made it. Glad, even in spite of your—accident."

"It was no 'accident' as you call it." The droning laugh was mirthless. "Any more than it was an 'accident' that I came back."

"Yes, I meant to ask about that. Why did they let you go? Why did they send you back?"

"Because of their sense of humor," said Vail. "They sent me back to kill you."

"Kill me? Why?" Breen was shocked, trembling unaccountably.

"I told them the story. Told them you sent me. How they laughed at me. They psycho-analyzed you—through me. Turned you inside out. They proved to me that you never expected me to return, that your motive was to steal my parabola warp and my property. Do you deny it?"

THE fool! He *knew!* Breen's pudgy fingers tightened on the drug-gun. Then he smiled. He realized he had nothing to fear from a mere bodiless head, clamped to a metal chair. "So they let you go," he whispered. "Like this."

"Yes. When I got over the shock and saw the humor of it I told them what a fine situation it would be. What a glorious *joke.* The idea, you see, appealed to their prime instinct—their sense of humor. That's why they let me come back to kill you." Now Breen knew. Vail was mad. Those eyes proved it.

"Sense of humor, see Breen? You didn't expect me. Seeing me like this would startle you, then make you confident I was out of the way. And I'd talk to you. Tell you what masters of surgery and chemistry these creatures were. How they could control the body. How they could make a cat live without a head. How they could make a head live without a body. How they could keep a heart beating or a leg moving without any other control than the proper wires and tubes. And I knew you'd listen; would believe me without guessing what I was driving at. And that I could kill you.

"That's what I've been thinking about. A month is a long time to go on this way, living as I have. Looking out into space and watching the chart as I came back. Knowing what I was, remembering my agony—only one thing kept me going. The thought of killing you. I have acquired some of *their* sense of humor now, you see. The time has come for me to laugh."

"You—" Breen spluttered. "You can't kill me. You can't move!"

"How did you think I got the ship back through space?" whispered Vail.

"My head *directed* it, yes. But brains, with all the Hysteroan surgical cunning, can't make a ship steer by thought alone."

“What steered your ship?” Breen whispered.

The answer loomed suddenly behind him, a horrible answer that gripped Breen’s throat and pressed and choked his life away. While he had been talking with Vail’s head, Vail’s great body had come silently forward from the after part of the ship, functioning precisely like the body of the cat, and had seized him. The horrified controller stared at the ghastly monstrosity with a silver cap instead of a head on the neck stump—a thing animated by the diabolic surgery of a strange and runaway planet—a hulking horror that was strangling him to death. . . .

Breen was almost dead when, through the roaring in his ears, he heard the head of Martin Vail laugh. At the same moment he felt one groping paw of the headless monstrosity release his throat and slide down to grip his right hand and start jerking it up and down.

“Yes,” cackled the head of Vail, “a marvelous sense of humor. We all have it. You sent me to my death. They cut off my head. So I told them I’d come back to Earth on one condition—that they’d fix it so I could *shake hands with you again.”*

The laughter rose madly long after Breen’s life had ebbed away. And in the darkening cabin of the space ship the headless body continued, automatically, to pump Breen’s dead hand in a gesture of greeting.

1942

The Shoes

The man has a pair of shoes—patent leather shoes—gifted with remarkable powers. Immortality, among other things. But not a homing instinct—

"It will cost you your soul," said the voice.

"I know," snapped the little man, impatiently. "You're quite willing to go through with it?"

"Quite," answered the little man.

There aren't many such interviews in this day and age. Few men have the courage, and fewer still possess the knowledge to arrange one. But the little man, despite his appearance of mild timidity, had both the daring and the wisdom.

He didn't cringe now, when he heard the voice. He didn't cringe at the Presence *behind* the voice. He sat in the curiously darkened room and stared into the red glow. Impatience marked his countenance, and greed, but never a trace of fear. "Let's get on with it, then," he urged.

"Yes." The voice droned deeper. "Now—just what is it that you want?"

The little man smiled faintly.

"I want never to be killed."

"Eternal life?" the voice echoed, then paused. "You know that is one thing I cannot grant you."

"I didn't ask for that," insisted the little man. "I said I want never to be killed. There's a slight difference there, I think."

"Perhaps. Yes, perhaps there is." The voice was contemplative. "A very clever distinction. I must compliment you."

The little man chuckled faintly. "A compliment from you is a compliment indeed. But now—how about it?"

"You drive a hard bargain," the voice reflected. "Still, I think it can be arranged. If I understand you correctly, you wish to be immune from normal death. From disease, accident, starvation, drowning, knives, bullets, explosives, poison, lethal gas."

"Correct."

"A very hard bargain," commented the voice. "You must realize, that while I endeavor to do all in my power to please, there are certain natural limitations—laws, I might say—to be observed."

"Listen, I didn't go to all this trouble just to hear you make excuses. A bargain's a bargain. Either you can or you can't."

"I'd like to do it," answered the voice. "I really would. I think I'd enjoy your soul. It seems quite unique. You've got talent."

"Well, then, fix me up," commanded the little man, scowling into the red glow. "You know what I want. You ought to be able to get around those limitations, somehow."

"Maybe. But if you follow me, there are difficulties. I could keep you from dying if stabbed, or shot, or poisoned, or diseased—but I take it you don't care to run around a helpless cripple. That isn't your plan, is it?"

"Certainly not."

"You see, there's the rub. I've got to figure out a way of rehabilitating your body after such injuries, don't I?"

"You're the doctor," said the little man. "You figure it out."

"I could give you a new body each time, I suppose," mused the voice.

"Change places with other people, you mean?"

"No, certainly not. Your own body, of course. You could have your head blown off, and instantly reappear beside the corpse, as good as new.

Naturally, there would be your old body to dispose of. Outside of that, no other inconvenience."

"That ought to do the trick," said the little man. "Yes, I think that will do nicely." He paused. "Don't I get some kind of token, or talisman embodying the power?" he asked "That's customary, I thought."

"In your case it might prove dangerous. Too easy to lose. I could give you the power in a a garment, though."

The voice paused. The little man had the impression that the red Presence was scrutinizing him closely.

Then, "Those shoes," said the voice. "Very unusual. Patent leather, aren't they?"

"My tastes aren't stylish, I'm afraid," said the man. "But what is this—a fashion chat?"

"No. Not at all. I think . . . yes, I will! I'll give you the power through your shoes. Wear them and you won't be killed."

"Fair enough," the little man chuckled. "It's a bargain."

There was a moment of silence.

"I suppose it's customary to sign something to bind the agreement?" queried the man in the patent-leather shoes.

"Yes, it is. The mark of the Covenant. I've got a Book here, On the table —you'll see it there."

A convenient reddish glow now illumined the black tome resting on a small end table.

The little man reached for it, fumbled with his fountain pen.

"If you don't mind," said the voice. "A little blood would be more—acceptable."

"So sorry," smiled the little man. "I'm afraid I'm not quite used to—"

He paused abruptly. The Presence was waiting, and a pulsation of eagerness, of impatience, filled the darkness. The man found a pin, pricked his finger. He wrote his name in the Book.

"There. Thank you. You are a cool one, I must say! Your hand didn't even tremble."

The little man laughed.

"Why should it? I've outwitted you, haven't I?"

"What do you mean?"

The voice was piqued.

"Well, if I can't be killed, you'll never get my soul."

"I'm not so sure," purred the voice. "When your shoes wear out—"

"That's just what I mean. You think your bargains are so clever, don't you Always a joker in the pack. Well, this time I hold the joker. My shoes will never wear out. Because each time I die, my body will be reproduced, brand new. And with *new shoes!"*

"Well, I'll be blessed!" said the voice, in shocked accents.

"Not likely," commented the little man. "I think I've driven about as shrewd a bargain as can be expected. So—goodby."

"For a little while," added the voice.

"Forever," insisted the man.

"We'll see."

"See you in church." The little man thumbed his nose at the fading glow.

There was a faint, indignant flicker as the red Presence faded from the room.

The little man walked over to a desk and switched on a lamp. He went to the windows and switched the black drapes back into place. He opened the porch door to air out the fumes of certain gases and vapors, wrinkling his nose at a perceptible brimstone odor. He dumped the contents of three tiny braziers into the fireplace and stamped out the embers. Taking a rag, he knelt and carefully erased a pentagram of blue chalk from the floor, then kicked the rug back in place.

Satisfied that the apartment was restored to its normal aspect, he poured a hooker of whiskey and sat down near the fireplace. There was a smile on his middle-aged face, and he hummed pleasantly under his breath.

Then the little man looked down at his feet—at the two patent-leather shoes. A slick reflection shone in their polished surfaces. The reflection of his smile, in black.

He wiggled his toes reflectively.

Suddenly he rose.

"Why not?" he grinned. "Might as well find out once and for all. Nothing ventured, nothing won."

The little man, gulping his whiskey en route, made for the bathroom. He stood before the medicine cabinet and made a face at himself in the mirror.

Opening the cabinet, he took out his straight razor. He hummed again as he sharpened the long blade.

"Feet, do your stuff," he whispered.

Lifting the razor to his neck, the little man chuckled and cut his throat.

"A room and bath, sir? Certainly. Sign here."

The hotel clerk held out his pen and pushed the register forward.

Smiling, the little man signed. It wasn't his real name, but the pseudonym chosen tickled his sense of humor.

"Dr. Faust."

The clerk read the signature without comment. He rang for a bellboy.

"207 for this gentleman."

The little man followed the bellhop, who staggered beneath the weight of the small trunk.

Once in his room he rewarded the boy with a quarter, locked the door, sat down on the bed.

"Yes, guess he was right. Getting rid of the body is going to be the hardest problem. This time it might as well be a hotel suicide."

The little man pulled out a key, unlocked the trunk, and dumped his body out on the floor.

He shuddered, slightly. Dead bodies are not pretty sights. Cut throats are messy. And when you stare at your own body, lying with a cut throat—but that's just the point, you *don't* do that.

The little man forced himself to survey his corpse, between shudders. His eyes caught details. The brown hair, pompadour fashion; the sharp aquilinity of the small nose, the tightness of the mouth. The rumpled gray suit, the grotesque compression of arms and legs at the side of the body—indicating the manner in which it had been jammed into the trunk after the advent of *rigor mortis.*

He didn't dwell on the neckline—that was a little too much. He chose instead to stare at the patent-leather shoes, identical with the ones on his own feet.

"Hard night," the little man whispered, with a forced grin. "Sold my soul. Killed myself. Smuggled my body into a hotel. Very hard night."

It had been. That first moment of recovery—finding himself standing in the living room, out on his feet. Almost as though nothing had happened in the bathroom at all. In fact, he thought for a moment, then, that he really had dreamed it. Until he walked across the room, opened the door, and stared at the red thing on the white tiles.

HS had been horrified, but elated. It worked. More than that, it worked in a manner exceeding his wildest expectations. He not only rematerialized at once, but he rematerialized at a spot a good fifteen feet from his own corpse!

That fitted in perfectly with his plans. His plans—

The little man sat down, lit a cigarette. Here in the hotel room there were problems to consider, He must buy clothes to fill the empty trunk. He must wait until *rigor mortis* abated, then drag the body into the bathroom and arrange details of the supposed suicide.

Well that could be done, easily enough. But it was of no importance, compared to the plans.

Sleep now. Tomorrow would be time enough to start moving. The little man lay down, switched out the light. He hardly glanced at the still figure on the floor. A shaft of moonlight filtered across the frozen white face.

As sleep descended, he peered at the face drowsily. Funny. His own face. Ordinary enough one, too. Mot a hint there of the iron determination, the fanatic purpose that impelled him. Not a hint of the mad dream. Just a dead face, a little man's face.

Quietly, the little man slept. The moonlight crept across the face on the floor, crept across the face on the bed. Two white blurs gleamed together—and two silvery blurs twinkled as the moonlight fell on the little man's shiny patent-leather shoes.

"I told you if I ever saw you again, I'd kill you." Judson Connors' voice was ice. He rose from the desk and faced the little man in berserk fury.

"Go to the devil," said the little man.

"When I found out you'd been playing around with my wife, I gave you warning. Now you come here and—"

The little man laughed in Judson Connors' face.

"Why shouldn't I come here? Sylvia told me to come, she sent for me. You old fool, don't you know that we've been seeing each other right along? You know what we did after we heard your threats—we laughed at them, that's what we did. We laughed at them, and we laughed at you, like I'm laughing now!"

Judson Connors lunged forward. One bony hand scrabbled in the top drawer of his desk, but the little man made no move to stop him. The hand, trembling with the convulsive rictus of rage, emerged with a gleaming revolver. The muzzle swung up as the little man laughed.

Sobbing incoherently, Judson Connors fired. He pumped six slugs into the little man's body as he stood laughing before him. The body fell, life squeezing out of it with the last echo of the laughter.

Judson Connors stared down at the little man, stared down at the riddled form, of his enemy. His eyes noted incongruous details. Like the tiny drops of red on the shiny patent-leather shoes. Why did he wear those things? Patent-leather shoes weren't in style—

Murder wasn’t in style, either.

It took Judson Connors thirty seconds before the red haze cleared; thirty seconds to realize what he had done.

Then he started mumbling to himself, “But he made me do it—he taunted me to my face—he made me. Another thirty seconds and the whining subsided.

“What’ll I do? Must do something. Get rid of it—the furnace. Nobody saw him come in. Nobody knows. The furnace.”

The gaunt old man stooped. His hands hooked themselves into the collar of the suit. He dragged the body across the floor, wheezing more from panic than exertion. The little man’s body slid out of the room, patent-leather shoes last.

And then, from the corner, the living little man stepped forth. He rocked with silent merriment.

“Perfect! Absolutely perfect!” he chuckled.

He’d seen the whole thing. It had hurt a moment when the slugs bit home. Then that blackness. And all at once, it a second’s time, he was standing on his feet across the room, near the drapes. Behind the drapes he’d watched the comedy. Watched Connors fear-crazed face. Going down to burn the body in the furnace, was he? Good. It would never be confused with the body of “Dr. Faust” in the hotel, now. And while he was downstairs, there was perfect safety here.

Safety to search the desk, look for the keys, open the safe. Judson Connors had a quarter of a million in negotiable securities locked up in the house, the old miser. Sylvia had told him. Dear Sylvia! Lucky he’d had the sense to make love to his employer’s wife.

The little man smiled. Yes, it was all so simple, now that he couldn’t be killed. Goad Connors into one of his famous rages, get him to shoot, and search the house while the fool disposed of the body.

It was too simple. The key, now. The little man found it almost at once. It was in the top drawer, right next to where the gun had rested.

And the safe? In the library, of course. Right across the hall. Connors was downstairs. Clever, choosing a time when he knew the servants would be out. No interference at all.

Using the keys, pocketing the bulky packets within the safe, relocking, and putting the keys back in the desk—three minutes did the job.

Somewhere in the basement the fear-stricken cuckold was trying to start the furnace. Ha! He must be in a fine state of nerves. And when he returned and found he had been robbed—

Oh, it was perfect! No suspects, no pursuit. You don't suspect the man you've murdered.

Yes, life was looking up.

The little man opened the door, walked down the driveway of the Connors estate, climbed into his car and whizzed downtown. He bought a ticket to New York at the depot.

"Train leaves in ten minutes," the clerk told him.

The little man smiled, walked past the booths, and entered the barber shop near the train shed. He climbed into a chair in the corner, beckoned to a Negro attendant.

"Shine, please," he requested.

Staring at his patent-leather shoes, the little man whistled gayly.

The little man lay in his Pullman as the train did Reginald Gardiner imitations over the tracks.

He couldn't sleep, but it didn't bother him. Why sleep when he could dream with his eyes open? Dream dreams that would come true?

It didn't matter what the world looked like to anyone else. To him it was just an oyster. His oyster.

From now on he could have anything. Anything at all.

He smiled happily in the darkness. A quarter million! Not a bad start—but only a start. He was going places, fast. This trick now, of forcing somebody to murder you. That was pretty neat. It could be worked again, with variations.

Yes, and there were other gambits. A man who couldn't be killed was valuable. Espionage, for one thing. There were governments in the market for an operator whom the enemy could not destroy. Yes, indeed. Millions. And perhaps, one could aspire to rule—

The little man thought of a cartoon strip. *Hyperman.* Why not? Fantastic? A quarter million in his valise reassured him.

Nothing was fantastic any more.

They used to laugh at him for a crackpot down at the bank. Say he was a "screwball." Thought he wasted his time on "occultism or some crazy religion." Well, he'd bided his time. Waited. Studied. Learned. Learned? Why, he'd cheated the devil himself with this shoe deal. Patent-leather shoes. The man with the patent-leather shoes. The millionaire with the patent-leather shoes. "The Leader has only one eccentricity. Whatever his attire, he persist in wearing his patent-leather shoes, even on State occasions —"

The little man smiled at his own fancies. Smiled because they were soon to become realities. And stay that way. Never die. No weapon could kill him. Rich. Patent-leather shoes. Never get his soul. Patent-leather—

"I tell you, it's the guy from the hotel."

The words were more than an alarm clock. They echoed and re-echoed through the little man's consciousness like the knell of doom.

His eyes blinked open. That voice—whispering! From a berth nearby, of course.

It was morning already. The little man sat up, ears straining.

"You're crazy. You say yourself the guy cut his throat."

"I know, I know! Dr. Faust, or somebody. But if this ain't the same guy, it's his twin brother. I ain't been a hotel dick for twenty years without bein' able to spot a face. Minute I seen him climb on the train I says—"

"All right," chuckled the second voice. "All right. But you're on a vacation now, Steve. You don't wanna—"

"All the same," came the loud whisper of the first man. "When we have breakfast I'm gonna step up to His Nibs and ask a few questions. Ain't gonna hurt to ask a few questions. Yeah."

The little man's heart beat a staccato rhythm. It was a fitting accompaniment to the speed with which he dressed.

"Got to get out of here," he murmured. He edged out of the berth cautiously, brushed his way down the sleeping-car corridor. At the far end he caught a porter.

"Listen, George," he rasped. "When's the next stop?"

"Why, we gonna stop in about two hours, suh."

"Oh. Thanks."

Two hours? Too long. The detective would spot him by that time. Hide in the berth? Not safe. Other cars? The snooper would probably nose around. Ask questions of other passengers, the porter. Get him spotted. Damn! No way out.

Why, there was always a way out!

If he were to hide in his berth, he'd be searched for—unless he were seen somewhere else. Seen dead, for example.

That was it.

Grasping his shaving kit, the little man walked stealthily down the aisle toward the men's room.

He stood, swaying slightly before the mirror, and opened the razor. He grinned. "Second time in three days," he whispered. "But they can't stop me.

No, they couldn't stop him. Nobody could. God, man, nor the devil. He was going to climb, he was going to be master, he had the power, the bargain to protect him.

A recurrent vision of his splendor came to him, and he smiled again. Then he lifted the razor, laid the keen, cold edge against his bare neck with a practiced hand.

The porter opened the door.

"Say, mistah—"

Then the porter saw what was lying on the floor—lying horribly still, except for the loosely rolling head, which moved with a deeper horror of its own.

The porter stared at the wide grin on the dead face, and the wider opening at the throat. His eyes rested on the lolling arms, the legs, the feet.

Something about the feet seemed to inspire the porter with professional interest, even now.

“Dead,” he whispered. “Dead. An’ here I was just going to tell him about the mistake I made this mawnin’—when I got his shoes mixed up with the fella in the other berth.”

Scratching his head, the porter continued to stare at the body of the little man with the tan shoes.

THE END.

Hell On Earth

Modern day Fausts raise bell among the skyscrapers of Manhattan—and conjure up daemons in the heart of downtown New York!

1. Devil's Brew

"LET me ask you a question," said my visitor. "Would you go—to hell for ten thousand dollars?"

"Brother, just show me the money and tell me when the next train leaves," I told him.

"I'm serious."

I sat back and did my goldfish imitation—staring with my mouth open. I'm pretty good at it.

But Professor Keith was pretty good at looking serious. Too good. After a minute I closed my mouth and just stared.

"Wait a minute," I said. "You haven't got a cloven hoof. You didn't appear out of a cloud of smoke. You're not crazy, and you don't take drugs. You're Professor Phillips Keith, Associate Director of Rocklynn Institute. And you're offering me ten thousand dollars to go to hell."

The pudgy little man with the graying hair adjusted his spectacles and smiled. He looked for all the world like a kindly bishop as he answered, "I'd rather see you go to hell for me than anyone else."

"That's very flattering of you, I'm sure. But, Professor—perhaps you could explain yourself a little more fully before I decide. A man doesn't get an offer like this every day."

Plump fingers held out a newspaper clipping. "Read this."

SCIENTIFIC INSTITUTE TO BECOME
WITCHCRAFT DEN

The world-famous Rocklynn Institute will be transformed into a rendezvous for goblins and demons, according to the plans of Thomas M. Considine, wealthy philanthropist.

Considine has authorized a donation of $50,000 to be used in what he describes as a "scientific study of sorcery and Black Magic."

Professor Phillips Keith today announced that Rocklynn Institute is "seriously contemplating" the possibilities of the project. Scientific basis for ancient magic is by no means improbable, Keith declared, and such a study may yield valuable results.

Vendors of black cats, dried toads, and love-philtres might find it worth their while to apply at the Rocklynn Institute in the near future.

"Lousy piece of writing," I commented, handing the clipping back to Keith. "Now, what's the real story?"

Keith rose.

"Why not come along with me and find out for yourself?" he asked.

"Don't mind if I do." I grabbed my hat and followed Keith down to the waiting car. We weaved into traffic before I broke the silence again.

"So it's no gag, then," I mused. "Not just a publicity stunt. You're really going through with something like this?"

The eyes behind the spectacles were penetrating in their gray intensity. "I've never been more serious about anything in my life," declared Keith.

"It was I who badgered Thomas Considine into donating that money. For years it has been my ambition to conduct experiments along this line. Too bad the papers got hold of the story—but from now on there will be no publicity. No one must know that Rocklynn Institute is attempting to raise the dead and conjure up daemons in the heart of downtown New York."

Now if there is one thing I have learned in this Vale of Tears, it's this—you don't tell a man he's crazy when he has fifty thousand dollars to spend. Particularly if he has just offered you ten thousand of that fifty.

So all I said was, "That's fine. But where do I fit into this picture?"

Keith smiled, as he swung the car towards a parking lot.

"Simple. Your name was given to me as a writer of so-called horror-fiction. As such I expect you to be more or less conversant with demonology and witchcraft lore."

"Right. But I certainly don't believe such bunk."

"Exactly! That's my point—while you are in a position to understand what we're attempting, you still don't believe. In other words, you are an average, skeptical representative of John Public. That's why you were chosen to act as official eye-witness and historian of our endeavors. You know what's going on, but you don't believe in it. You will be shown. In other words, you're being hired as a witness."

"You mean ten thousand dollars for standing around and watching you play witch? Ten grand to see you ride a broomstick?"

Keith laughed. "You're almost too skeptical. Come on. I think you need an immediate example."

We entered the skyscraper, purred upwards in the private elevator, stepped briskly across the business-like outer lobby of Rocklynn Institute's spacious quarters on the penthouse floor. Keith led me along the hall to a door marked *Private.*

He pushed it open, beckoned.

Usually I hate such doors. I hate the smugness of their curt warning. *Private!*

But if ever a door deserved such a marking, this one did. For it barred madness.

BLACK madness, in a velvet draped room. Red madness, in the flickering braziers winking demonic eyes from shadowy niches.

We stood in a dark chamber, hidden in the topmost recesses of a modern skyscraper—a dark chamber, reeking of blood, musk, hashish, and the tomb.

It was a room tom from the Fifteenth Century, a room torn from ancient dreams.

True, the tables and shelvings were modern, but they groaned with the impedimenta of forgotten nightmares. I looked down at the first ledge beside me, and a casual glance convinced.

A rack of test-tubes reared from the surface. Modern Pyrex, but labeled with inscriptions old as wizardry. “Bat’s blood.”

“Mandrake root.”

“Deadly nightshade.”

“Mummy dust.”

“Corpse fat.” And worse. Much worse.

There were shiny new refrigerators in one corner, but they bulged with unnamable carcasses. There were queerly bubbling vats near a small open fire. One long shelf held alchemic instruments. Jars of herbs stood amidst vials of powdered bones. The floor was crisscrossed with pentagons and zodiacal designs drawn in blue chalk, phosphorescent paint, and some substance that yielded a dull, rusty red.

One wall held books—books I didn’t like. The light gleamed on musty tomes once hugged to the withered bosoms of witches, once grasped by the bony, trembling talons of long-dead necromancers.

For just an instant I stood at Professor Keith’s side, as the iron door closed behind us. For just an instant my eyes ran their spidery pattern across the red glare and black shadow of that room.

And then something rose out of the farther gloom, something wheeled and scuttled from the darkness, something moved in shroud-white silence across the floor.

I jumped two feet.

"Meet Doctor Ross," said Keith.

"Ulp!" I commented.

Doctor Ross's oval face moved toward me. A slim hand darted out. "Charmed," said Doctor Ross.

"Ulp!" I declared again.

"Can't you say anything but 'Ulp' ?" inquired Doctor Ross, with some curiosity.

"Well, you'd 'Ulp' too if you were dragged into a chamber of horrors and had a zombie come at you and the zombie turned out to be a pretty girl with —"

I stopped. But it had slipped out, and I wasn't too sorry. Because Doctor Ross was a remarkably attractive young lady. Her blond hair was not marred by any medical severity of coiffure, and her piquant features were very adequately rouged and decorated. Even the white surgical gown did not wholly conceal features which would make Will Hays foam at the mouth if he saw her in a sweater.

"Thank you," said Doctor Ross, without embarrassment. "And welcome to Rocklynn Institute. I presume you are interested in witchcraft?"

"If all witches are like you—" I began, but Keith cut me off.

"Lily Ross isn't Circe, you know," he remarked, but his eyes twinkled. "And you aren't being hired to pass out compliments. There's work to do. We've got a demon to raise this afternoon."

Right then and there it stopped being funny.

Here I was, yanked into a weird chamber atop a skyscraper, in the hands of two lunatics whose avowed purpose was to experiment in Black Magic, and ordered to stand by and watch them evoke a demon. It was confusing, to say the least. In my agitation I stepped back a foot and bumped into something that clicked. I turned around, stared into the grinning visage of a dangling skeleton, and uttered my familiar "Ulp!"

I got my voice back at once. "Now look here—are you really serious about all this?"

Keith took a sheaf of papers from his pocket and placed them on a table near an inverted crucifix bearing the impaled body of a dried bat, hanging head downwards. He produced a fountain pen, waved me over.

"Sign," he ordered.

"Sign what?"

"The contract. Calling for your services as eye-witness for three months. Ten thousand dollars. Five now, five at the conclusion of our experiments. Serious enough for you?"

"Very." My fingers trembled as I scribbled a signature on both sets of contracts. They fairly shook with palsy as Professor Keith extended his check. Five thousand dollars right now! It was quite serious, no doubt about that.

"Well, then." Keith pocketed the papers. "Are we all ready to proceed, Lily?"

"Everything is in order, Professor," said the girl.

"Then draw the Pentagram," purred Keith. "You'll find the blood in the refrigerator still fresh enough. Recite the chant and light the fires, my dear. And don't worry—I'll keep you covered with the revolvers. If anything goes wrong I'll shoot to kill."

With a bland smile, Phillips Keith drew two guns from his vest holster and leveled them into the darkness of the curtained room.

2. Up Pops—

"SILVER bullets in here," explained Professor Keith. "Very good against vampires, werewolves, vrykolas, or ghouls. Don't know how effective they are against a draconibus, though."

"What?"

"A draconibus. Flying cacodemon of the night. Sort of an incubus. If Abbot Richalmus is correct. We're using his spell from *"Liber Revelationum de Insidia et Versutiis Daemonum Adversus Homines."* He says the things are black and scaly, quite human in appearance except for the wings and fangs, but on a low order of intelligence. Something like the elementals. If the bullets don't work, there's always the Pentagram. You know what it is; a five-pointed star, two angles ascendant and one pointed down. It represents Satan, Goat of the Sabbath."

"Are you crazy?" I had to say it.

"See here." Keith's face was stem in the red glare. "We might as well understand each other once and for all. I don't mind your skepticism in the least, but please don't cast doubts on my sanity or sincerity."

"But it all seems too absurd—mingling science and sorcery."

"Why?" Keith snapped. "Yesterday's magic is today's scientific fact. Voodoo witch doctors and medieval savants tried to cast out demons. Today psychiatrists attempt to cure insanity by hypnosis, suggestion, and shock treatments, in almost the same way.

"Once alchemists attempted to transmute base metals into gold. Today that effort constitutes the basis of scientific research along identical lines.

"Are not scientists attempting to find the Elixir of Youth in their laboratories, using animal and human blood in their experiments like the mages of old?

"Don't scientists concern themselves with the vital problems of Life and Death—and keep chicken hearts and dog heads alive when severed from the dead bodies?

"Men died for that at the stake in ages past. They died for dealing with the very mysteries we scientists now openly attempt to probe. Science is sorcery, I tell you—except that in some cases, the ancient wizards might have been more *successful* "You mean that you believe thaumaturgists once actually did revive the dead and call upon elementals?"

"I mean they tried to do it and may well have succeeded. I mean there was nothing wrong with their theories, but their methods were at fault. And I mean that modern science can take those same theories, apply the proper methods, and meet with complete success. That's what we're going to do."

"But—"

“Watch.”

I watched. The slim figure of Lily Ross weaved a white pattern across the far side of the black chamber. Flame blossomed in her fingers as she bent over the braziers in the niches and re-kindled their dying fires. From a pouch at her waist she scattered fine dust upon the embers.

The fires flared upward—not red now, but green and blue and purple. A kaleidoscope of diabolic luminance flooded the vast room.

Red tongues rose from candle tips and lapped at the darkness. Thick, bloated candles, like the puffy fingers of a gigantically swollen corpse—thick, bloated candles, fed by a slim white priestess.

White witch!

SHE stooped over and drew a silvery design upon the floor, and its five luminous points were bathed with a crimson fluid poured from a canister.

“Blood,” whispered Keith. “Type B blood.”

“Type B?”

“Naturally. Didn’t I tell you we were using modern scientific methods in witchcraft?

“Let’s get down to cases. Sorcery in the Middle Ages was almost a racket. The average goetist was a charlatan. Some wizards hung around the courts of small nobles or petty princes, dabbling in astrology and palmistry, and fawning on their patrons like court jesters. They were arrant fakes.

“Others were like modern confidence men, forever asking money to perfect wild plans of transmuting lead to gold, completing an Elizir of Youth, or finding the Philosopher’s stone. Just grafters.

“A third class were quack doctors—boys who took little shops in the side streets and sold phony love philtres, promised to put curses on enemies for a small fee, and attempted to cure everything from epilepsy to the French disease.

“Mixed in with these impostors were the psycopathic cases. Demonomaniacs and diaboleptics who pranced naked on the hilltops during Walpurgis Eve, claimed to ride broomsticks to the moon, or converse with the dead, and have infernal lovers. Inverted religious mania.

“But always there were serious students of the mantic arts. From their records—their spells and incantations—we are working here.”

Keith pointed toward the bookshelves. “It took me years to gather this collection. Manuscripts, parchments, fragments from treatises, secret documents from every country and every age. Much of it is locked away in those files. In cunabula. Cost a small fortune, but worth it.”

“But aren’t they filled with the same fake gibberish as all the rest?” I objected. “I’ve read some of that stuff, and it’s usually pretty silly.”

“True. But there are kernels of truth. It’s easy to discern. Some of the spells are known frauds; others are genuine.”

“You mean if you read a spell aloud that it might conjure up a ghoul or a ghost?”

“If you read it *correctly,”* answered Keith. “There’s the whole point. That’s where science steps in.

“In many cases the spell has not been set down completely, due to fear. In other instances, the incantation has certain word changes, due to imperfect translations, or incorrect interpretation of the medieval Latin or Greek. The Church burned as much of the genuine stuff as could be found over centuries of time. We’ve had to spend months of preparation—weeding the genuine from the spurious, piecing together fragments, studying contemporary sources. It’s been a lengthy job for Doctor Ross and myself, but we’re now assured of one thing—we have on hand nearly one hundred actual, authentic incantations for the evocation of supernatural forces. If spoken correctly, the proper vibrations will be set up as in ordinary prayer, and responses will be made.

“Also, some of these incantations require ceremonies, such as this one. We’ve spent a goodly sum acquiring the necessary instruments and materials for our experiments. It’s hard to buy a Hand of Glory, or baboon’s blood; hard to secure enough cadavers. Grisly, too—but important.”

I shrugged. “But Class B blood?”

“Merely an illustration of our thoroughness. We’re going to attack the supernatural with modern aid. Consider the reasons for the failure of ancient sorcerers.

“For one thing, as I pointed out, many were admitted fakes. And serious students often got hold of the wrong translations, as I have demonstrated. Naturally, they didn’t succeed.

“Again, they were balked by lack of proper materials. If the spell called for baboon’s blood, they might have had to use the blood of a rhesus monkey, for example. It spoiled the mixture, by simple chemistry. We’re experimenting, when we use human blood, with all blood types—because it might well be that a spell only works with a specific chemical compound. That’s something the ancients didn’t know.

“Similarly, they often were taken in by frauds. Perhaps they attempted brewing a philtre calling for ‘powdered unicorn’s horn.’ Naturally, when *we* see such a recipe, we know it’s a fake and throw it out. They weren’t so fortunate, and again they failed.

“So there you are. It may look like hocus-pocus to you, but it’s the result of applied scientific reasoning. We’ve sifted our spells, we’ve checked our formulae, we’ve gathered together only the most authentic ingredients, we’re working by trial and error and modern logic.

“Under such conditions we cannot fail, if there is any truth in the supernatural lore which has dominated all nations and all religion since the dawn of Time.

“SURELY there is a basis of truth underlying this tremendous mass of legend and theory that is older than any other form of worship. Science has recognized today the pathological existence of the vampire and werewolf and ghoul in mental cases. Science has recognized today many practises which were once called witchcraft. Now we shall take the further step and discover whether the ancients were wiser than we knew. We shall reconstruct—correctly—the enchantments of the magicians and evocators.

"Today, using Class B blood, we are performing the Richalmus rune to evoke a draconibus. Doctor Ross has drawn the Pentagram. She has placed the five candles at the points, and fed the fires with the Three Colors.

"Now she will read the invocation in the original Latin. If the conditions are reproduced correctly, we shall soon see the veritable flying daemon of the night which the good Abbot describes so graphically. Mayhap we shall capture it and offer our living proof to the world."

"You'll *capture* it?" I murmured.

Keith smiled. "Why not? That's the kind of evidence we need to confound the smug skeptics, the pompous figures who delight in shaming poor old women at seances and ridiculing sincere students of the occult. Why, when Tom Considine put up the money for all this, he laughed at me! I wonder what he'd say if I sent a draconibus into the office in a packing-case."

Keith chuckled as he pointed at the ceiling.

"Of course, if the thing does appear, and is dangerous, I've got the silver bullets to stop it. But I'd much prefer to take my apparitions alive. There's the scientific means."

I followed his directing finger. Suspended by chains in the shadowy heights above was a square sheet of transparent glass.

It hung directly over the spot where the Pentagram gleamed upon the floor.

"Notice the lever at the door," Keith said. "Turn that, and the glass cage drops down. Fits over whatever appears in the circle, fits like a cage."

"But your demon would surely break out of it at once," I said, half-ashamed at even using the word.

"Not from that," Keith assured me. "There are repelling crosses ground into the glass itself—including the crux ansantor. Tubes of holy water in the paneling along the sides. Besides, it's the modem 'unbreakable' glass, for added precaution, and there's a little tubing at the top which extends inside. It admits air—and it can also admit enough monoxide to turn that glass cage into a lethal chamber within thirty seconds. So if anything appears, just you pull that lever."

So there it was. I stood in the dark chamber as the white witch wove her spell, and heard the wizard instruct me on the fine art of demon-catching. If it hadn't been for that five thousand dollar check in my pocket, I'd have quit there.

Not because it was silly.

Because it was serious. Too serious. Keith had spoken wildly, but he had spoken with conviction. He was Professor Phillips Keith, associate director of a recognized scientific institute. He was a known scholar and savant, not a crackpot eccentric.

Lily Ross was nobody's fool, I felt—and she wasn't giggling behind her hand, either. She was going about her preparations like a trained scientific assistant. *Or a witch.*

Witchcraft! The Black Arts of legend, the hideous whisperings creeping throughout history and leering madly through all barriers of reasons. Satanism, the Black Mass, trafficking with the dead and the masters of the dead.

Here in this room, the reek of the grave. The corpse-fat candles, and the flames that burned with a blue light, a green lividity, a purple pallor. Blood trickling across an ancient symbol on the floor. Silence and darkness, and now a rustling, a Lily Ross took the yellow parchment in her hand and stepped toward the light of the blue brazier.

She stood there, poised and statuesque, a blond handmaiden of Evil. Her oval face was dedicated to darkness as her red lips shaped the first syllables that broke the utter silence.

Keith's face was pudgy and prosaic in the glare, but his eyes shone with the fanatic zeal of a Puritan warlock.

Sweat beaded my forehead.

"Would you go to hell for ten thousand dollars?"

Here, in this skyscraper tower, I was nearer to hell than I would be in the bowels of the earth.

Here stood the magic circle, the witch, the wizard. Here was the source, the linkage between Man and Mystery.

Lily Ross spoke the first sentences of the incantation.

I thought that her mouth was a scarlet flower, emanating corruption. I thought that her lips were heaven, but her voice was hell. I saw a beautiful young girl, and I heard the withered croaking of a crone.

It can’t be explained. There was nothing wrong with her *tone.* It was what she *said.*

The words were Latin, but they didn’t seem to be words as much as sounds, and not so much sounds as *vibrations.*

Not college Latin. Not words with meaning in themselves. Not words spoken as sentences. Just sounds, constructed for a purpose. An evil purpose.

I knew that. I knew it as strongly as I knew my own existence.

Lily Ross was reciting an incantation, and for the first time I realized what an incantation meant.

It was a call to a demon.

It was the use of human tongue in a peculiar way, to set up certain vibrations, certain forces that touched, or impinged upon, other worlds. Sound-waves, reaching across planes and angles of existence, commanding and guiding. Sound-waves shatter glasses in modern laboratories. Sound-waves shatter buildings, if properly pitched in volume and intensity. And sound-waves, over and above radio frequency vibrations, can pluck the harps that sound in hell. Can knock upon the gates of the Pit and call forth Presences.

Her voice was but an instrument. The meaningless drone was rising, almost uncontrollably.

Now I knew what truth there was in the power of the word. The word used in prayer, and the word used in black summons.

The drone blended with the blackness. The blackness mingled oddly with the green, the violet, the blue fires.

The Pentagram became a wriggling, phosphorescent serpent, swaying amidst green, purple, and blue words of flame. The shadows droned. The girl burned and flickered.

Suddenly the pulsing began.

It shook the walls. It rose with the words the girl recited, blended with them, then emerged stronger, triumphant. Smoke spiralled up in a sudden jet from the braziers, as a great wind filled the chamber.

I shook before the icy blast that was not air—shook as though a dental drill buzzed through my nerves.

I looked through water at a shimmering, slim figure, a slithering silver line on the floor, a wiggling spiral of colored fires. And then the light came up, the roar came up, the voice came up to a single, sustained note.

“Wake up!”

“Somebody was shaking me. It was Keith. Slowly the roaring died away.

“You’re out on your feet, man!”

I looked around. There was no shimmering. No wind. No noise. Lily Ross—a girl, not a witch—stood silent and dejected.

Keith scowled at me. “We’ve failed.”

“But I felt something—something—”

“Pure self-hypnosis. It didn’t work.”

Lily Ross stepped over.

“Let me see this copy of the incantation,” Keith demanded, wearily. He took the paper from her hand.

“Damnation!”

Lily’s eyes widened to a deeper blue. “What’s the matter?”

“Matter? Here’s a perfect example of what I was trying to explain. You’ve made a mistake here. This isn’t the proper invocation at all. This isn’t the Richalmus ritual. It’s that other one almost like it—Gorgioso’s Invocation of the Devil!”

“How did that happen?” asked the girl. “I could have sworn—”

"I'll do the swearing," snapped Keith. "You've recited the Invocation of the Devil by mistake. No wonder nothing happened!"

He turned to me, but didn't say anything. There was no chance to speak.

For the roaring started again, and this time there was no question of self-hypnosis involved.

The rumbling shook the room as though the building was clawed by an earthquake. Lily and Professor Keith stood swaying beside me as the wind rose, the flame flared, the thunderous crescendo swept through our bodies, tore at our brains.

Gleaming with lambent fire, the Pentagram writhed at our feet. Within it a black shadow—a black shadow, coalescing, blurring into an outline—an outline in the Pentagram of Satan, Black Goat of the Sabbath!

Out of the corner of my eye I saw Lily Ross's trembling hands move out, saw the crumpled scrap of paper fall from her fingers. It was the parchment from which she had read the incantation—the *wrong* incantation. The one that summoned up the Devil.

And now—a figure stood in the Pentagram!

3. Speaks of the Devil

WE STARED, all of us. Lily Ross gave a tiny gasp, lost amidst the crackling of the braziers. Keith was numb. I found myself trembling, unable to lift my hands and shield my eyes from a vision that seared and burned with a flame from the Pit.

The Presence crouched there in the Pentagram, its black goat-face gleaming in the glare of the fires. The shaggy, tousled head with the stumps of goat-horns, the fiendishly familiar visage, the cloaked body—I saw them all, merging into a sharper focus of actuality.

The Presence *gathered* itself as I gazed, as though revelling in the actuality of its new physical existence. Like a child being born and *realizing* it.

But this was no child. There was nothing youthful in the ancient smirk of relish on that ageless face. The fires in those slitted eyes burned long before the gases which created Earth.

It was a tableau born in a daemonic dream. And like a dream, it dissolved into sudden, terrible action.

The goat-body moved, black arms extended. Claws, talons, call them what you will, emerged swiftly from the cloak. They reached across the Pentagram.

One foot moved out. Black, misshapen. Hooflike. *Cloven!*

My own feet moved then. Moved in desperate swiftness. As the Presence lumbered forward I raced for the doorway. My outstretched arms tugged frantically at the lever Keith had shown me. I wrenched it down.

From the ceiling the iron chains grated. There was a thunderous crash, and then the great glass cage dropped down squarely over the black body of Satan, Prince of Darkness.

The creature in the cage beat black claws against the glass and suddenly recoiled.

“Good Lord!” These, the first words spoken, were Keith’s contribution. They sounded most appropriate.

I began to laugh. I couldn’t help it.

“What’s that for?” Lily Ross whispered.

“I was just thinking,” I gasped weakly. “I’ve—I’ve matched wits against Satan himself, the Arch-Enemy. And won!”

Lily calmly reached out with one slim hand and slapped my face. Hard.

I sobered. “Thanks,” I whispered. “I couldn’t control it.”

“No hysteria,” she said. “If you’d kept that up one minute more, I’d have started to scream myself. It’s too much—we’ve got Satan locked up in a skyscraper!”

“Are you still skeptical?” Keith asked. “Skeptics don’t sweat,” I answered, dabbing my forehead. “But if I’m not skeptical, I’m practical. What do we do now?”

“Turn on the lights, for one thing.” Keith pressed the rheostat. The room blazed up into prosaic outline. Fluorescence turned the darkness to daylight, and we stood in the draped chamber—ordinary figures once more, in an ordinary room.

Except for that glass cage, and the horror it held.

It was bad enough in the firelight, but now the nightmare quality of our captive was accentuated ten-fold.

The black figure stood proudly in the center of the glass enclosure—stood proud as Lucifer. Unbidden, the three of us drew closer.

Under the lights I saw every detail. Too much detail. The monster was shaggy, a goat-headed Aegypan figure with human eyes and mouth. The skin was jet-black, but dull. I stared intently at one gnarled talon—horrified at its microscopic detail and the total absence of visible pores in the skin.

Lily’s blue eyes, Keith’s gray ones, followed mine.

“It’s incredible,” muttered the pudgy professor. “Just like the mental image I’d formed. “The beard, the mustache, the monocle. And the red skin.”

“Red skin?” I snapped. “It’s black!”

“Scaly!” insisted Lily.

“No scales,” I said. “What are you talking about? And what do you mean, monocle? Why, he’s like a black goat.”

“Are you crazy?” Keith said. “Why anyone can see that he’s a man in evening dress with a red face and a monocle.”

“What about that forked tail?” asked Lily. “That’s the worst.”

“No tail at all,” I retorted. “You two aren’t seeing straight.”

Keith stepped back.

“Wait a minute,” he protested. “Let’s consider this.” He cocked his head my way. “You claim you see a sort of black goat, with human features, wearing a cloak?”

NODDED.

I

“And you, Lily?”

“A scaly creature with a forked tail. More like a gray lizard.”

“And I see a red fiend in evening dress,” Keith announced. “Well, we’re all correct.”

“I don’t get it.”

“Don’t you understand? No one really knows what the Devil looks like. Each of us has his own mental picture, drawn from imaginative illustrations in books. Throughout known history, Satan has been pictured in several ways by his worshipers and enemies. To some he appeared as the Goat of the Sabbath, the primitive fiend of the oriental nomads, the Father of Lies known to the Bible.

“To others he is essentially the incarnation of the Tempter, the Serpent. To moderns, he is the red gentleman. We three each visualize him in our own way, and the focal thought of millions throughout the ages materializes him in whichever aspect seems most natural to the beholder.

“We’re all looking at the same figure. We all see different concepts. What he really looks like, we cannot say. He may be gas, or light, or simply a flame. But our thoughts give him the material body.”

“You may be right,” Lily hazarded. “Why not? I don’t want to blaspheme, but does anyone know what Christ really looked like? No—all we have to go by is the standard concept, which was invented by medieval painters. And yet, He is always pictured in one way, and we have come to think of Him in that way. We couldn’t see Him in any other form. So it is with the Enemy.”

“That’s all very interesting,” I interrupted. “But what do we do now—phone for the papers?”

“Are you joking? Do you know what would happen if the world learned that we had—him captive in this room? Can’t you see the panic, the madness that would be loosed on earth?

“Besides, we must experiment. Yes, this is our opportunity. Providence must have guided us when we made that mistake!”

“Are you sure it was Providence?” asked Lily, quietly. “This gift did not come from Heaven.”

“Don’t quibble. My girl, just realize what we have here in our midst! Why, it’s the greatest thing that’s happened since—”

“The capture of Gargantua, the gorilla,” I finished for him. But I didn’t smile when I said it. “Keith, this is dangerous. I don’t like it. We’ve apparently got our visitor bottled up under glass, but if he ever gets loose—”

“He won’t get loose,” Keith barked. “Are you a coward, man? Can’t you see that here, in this very room, we hold a proof of witchcraft, a proof of the existence of the supernatural, of evil?”

“I agree with you about evil,” I answered. “And I’m afraid. He who sups with the devil must have a long spoon.”

“You talk like—”

“A priest,” I finished again. “And perhaps they are wiser than you scientists think. They have been fighting this creature here for long centuries, and their wisdom should be heeded.”

“Why, you said yourself that you matched wits with the Devil and beat him,” Keith protested. “We, with the weapons of scientific research at our command, are going to study our guest. Why, we’ll give him a blood test, we’ll examine the skin, we’ll isolate cells under the microscope, we’ll use X-ray, we’ll—”

I turned away. It was madness. I sought sanity in Lily Ross’s blue eyes. But she was babbling too. The scientific spirit.

“Maybe the creature can speak. What about an intelligence test? We’ll get our dope from the staff. Take pictures.”

“You’d think it was some new sort of guinea-pig. But I didn’t. Not when I saw the black body crouching there, huddled up away from the cross-etched glass, but with flaming evil in its eyes. They had the Devil in a cage, and they wanted his fingerprints!

“Success!” Keith trumpeted. “Success beyond the wildest dreams of man. We’ll conduct a scientific study of all evil—of incarnate evil. The nature and principle of evil. The evil men have known of, feared throughout the ages since Creation. It's there. We all see it differently through our own eyes. All men do, but it exists. Like electricity. A force."

He stood beside the glass enclosure, gesturing like a circus barker.

"Behold the Great God Pan! Yes, and behold the Serpent, the Tempter, the Fallen Angel! Behold Satan, Lucifer, Beelzebub, Azriel, Asmodeus, Sammael, Zamiel, Prince of Darkness and Father of Lies! Gaze on the Black Goat of the Sabbath, gaze on fabled Ahriman, on Set, Typhon, Malik Tawis, Abaddon, Yama, Primal Nodens, the archetype of evil, known to all men by all names!"

Once again I felt the urge of hysterical laughter. This was too much. Only the girl saved me.

"Let's get out of here," she suggested. "At once. We've had a shock. Tomorrow we can sit down and reason this thing out clearly, if we're not crazy already. We can make plans sensibly then. Let's rest."

"You're right. I'm sure that—he—will be safe behind the glass. And this room is locked, sealed. No one must suspect."

Keith moved toward the door and we followed. He snapped out the light as the door opened, plunged the room into Stygian night.

We went out. I looked back once. There was nothing but blackness, and two red coals burning. Eyes. Eyes in the darkness. The eyes of Satan. The eyes that saw Faust.

4. Hell Breaks Loose

"THAT'S my story," I concluded.

"Now, what's yours?"

Lily Ross raised her glass, tinkling the ice in rhythm to the music from the orchestra.

"Just a little astro-physics and bio-chemistry," she smiled. "A job at Rocklynn as Keith's assistant."

"Don't kid me. You're a blonde in a green evening dress, the prettiest come-on girl in this supper club. And you're going to dance with me, because you never heard of chemistry or physics, but you can La Conga all night."

She could, too. One whirl around the floor convinced me. Clinched me, in fact. That noise like a ton of bricks was me falling. But I didn't care. I had the Devil by the tail and Lily Ross in my arms, and I was sitting on top of the world tonight.

But when we got back to our table, Lily sobered for a moment.

"I say," she said. "I'm worried about Professor Keith. That excitement today, our experiment, unnerved him. Hope he's going to be all right tomorrow. He went home in a taxi and went to bed."

"Calm yourself, Lily," I said. "If he isn't all right tomorrow, he'll merely be suffering from a hangover."

"What do you mean?"

"Take a squint at that table near the orchestra," I grinned. "If Keith got in a taxi he wasn't going home."

Lily took her squint, and then her eyes went wide. "Why, he's here—and he's with a woman!"

"That's putting it mildly," I told her. "He's got a woman and a half there. It's Eve Vernon, the singer in *On the Beam.* Never thought he was such a man-about-town."

"He isn't!" Lily gasped. "Why, he never goes anywhere at all. I've never heard of him escorting a woman. And that's champagne on his table, too. Why—"

"Live and learn," I said. "He's just relaxing, that's all. Shall we join him?"

"Certainly not. It might embarrass him. Besides, there's something strange about this—"

I shrugged, but subsequent events bore me out. Keith was relaxing to a point where it was necessary to bear him out. He danced. He drank two quarts of champagne, solo. He laughed. He reddened. He tried to dance with the girls in the floor show. When Lily and I slipped out he was singing drunkenly at the top of his lungs, to the delight of the surrounding tables.

"Disgusting," Lily commented.

"Forget it," I advised.

I forgot it in her good-night kiss. I forgot everything. All I knew was that tomorrow, at ten o'clock, she would be waiting down at Rocklynn.

She was. I entered the outer lobby and took her arm.

"Where's the Professor?" I asked.

"He didn't show up."

"He *must* have a hangover, then! Did you call him?"

"Certainly. His housekeeper says he hasn't been in all night."

"Strange. What shall we do?"

"Let's go into the laboratory and wait. We must inspect our—specimen."

Lily led the way down the hall, to the barred doorway. She fumbled with a key. "Why—it's open!"

We entered.

The room was dark, and only a single brazier burned. A single brazier, and the red eyes in the glass cage.

A figure huddled before the cage. "Keith!"

I shook him. He struggled to his feet. "Oh—I must have dozed off. Been here almost all night. Watching to see what he would do—"

Keith's face was haggard, his clothing rumpled. He spoke thickly, as though half-asleep.

"Better get home and get some rest," Lily suggested. "We'll stay here. If you feel up to it this afternoon, we can make our plans then."

SUDDENLY the Professor drew himself up. He seemed to visibly shake off his fatigue.

"Nonsense! I'm all right. Feel splendid, perfectly splendid. But no time for a conference, my dear. I've got to find Considine. Need more money from him, at once.

"Got a great idea, a great idea. Tell you all about it. Must find Considine, though. You stay here, keep your eyes open. See you tonight at the Test Tube Ball. I'll arrange to meet Considine there, and some of his friends."

He was gone. Lily's mouth was a red oval of astonishment.

"Test Tube Ball?" I repeated.

"Yes. Society masquerade. Patrons of Rocklynn Institute hold it every year. Collect funds there, you know. But what does Keith want at such a gathering? He never dances or goes in for social affairs."

"You forget last night."

"That's just the point—I can't forget last night. That Professor isn't well, I'm sure of it. Something has happened."

"He isn't the only one who isn't well," I said softly. "Look into the glass."

Lily turned and we surveyed the cage together.

Satan squatted, half-slumping, on the floor. The red eyes flickered, but they were suddenly fainter in their fire.

"Sick?" Lily murmured.

"No air—or no food. What does His Majesty eat?" I began. But something about the aspect of the creature cut me short.

"I wish Keith were here," said Lily. "We ought to do something."

We peered into the glass.

Suddenly Satan opened his eyes. He sat up and stared back. All at once he rose to his feet, stepped forward. His upraised claws almost touched the glass, but not quite. The gesture was one of appeal. And in those eyes I read not hate, but—recognition!

Lips curled, disclosing yellowed fangs. They moved silently behind the glass.

"He's trying to talk to us!" Lily gasped. "I'm sure of it!"

"Watch!"

The black fiend was gesturing wildly. Its eyes rested first on Lily's face and then my own.

"If we could only find out—"

“No use.”

Evidently it was true. His Unholiness suddenly slumped to rest once again on the floor, head buried in the long black arms.

We stared at one another for a long moment.

Once more there was activity within the cage. The creature had bent down on its knees over the floor. One claw held a tiny sliver. With a start, I recognized it. It was chalk—the phosphorescent stuff used to draw the Pentagram with. And the Devil was writing!

From time to time eyes rested on our faces in a strange appeal. The bony fingers continued to move: slowly, painfully.

Letters traced upon the floor. Words. Sentences. And then it was done.

“Turn out the flame of the brazier,” Lily whispered. “Then we can read it.”

I clicked it off, plunged the room into utter darkness. I advanced through that darkness to her side, stared into the dim glow on the floor. A glow that brightened.

Letters. Letters of fire. Silver fire on the floor. I read the words.

“Quickly! Stop him before it’s too late. He got into me this morning and I know what he means to do.”

That’s when I gasped.

I gasped again at the sight of the two words beneath the message. They were a signature.

“Phillips Keith,” I read. Letters of silver fire in my brain.

Lily was shaking at my side. I pulled her to her feet.

“Come on,” I said.

“Where?”

“After the Professor, of course. We’re going to the Test Tube Ball.”

5. The Devil Dances

THE Lone Ranger never had a mission like mine. Nor a costume like mine, either. Lily's hunting outfit was more appropriate. We were out to get our man—if man he was.

There was no dancing in mind for us tonight. Not if what we suspected were true. It might have been cunning on the thing's part—the cunning of a fiend. But anything was possible in a world gone mad. We had the Devil in a cage. Who in this room would believe that? Yet it was true. And these dancing, babbling digits of the Four Hundred hadn't the faintest suspicion.

I smiled grimly at the thought. Suppose His Hellishness should walk suddenly into this very ballroom?

I imagined the screaming, the dismay, the horror. They'd dance to a different tune if *that* happened!

But—*it did.*

Lily and I stood by the door waiting. We'd been there for ten minutes, ever since our arrival, eyes scanning the dancers for a glimpse of Keith. He was on his way, the housekeeper had said, when our frantic call had come through. He should be here now, any minute. So we stood there, and Satan walked in.

It was Keith, of course, in a Mephistocles disguise. Red suit, false beard and mustache. But he'd added a grisly touch. Red chalk on face and hands. *His* concept of Satan.

I HAD never realized he was so tall.

Tall and slender. He looked the part, looked it too well.

We weren't the only ones to notice it. The orchestra had just finished a number, and the crowded hall was a perfect setting for his entrance. He came down three stairs, and all at once the conversation seemed to die away. Women stopped talking in mid-screech, and the fat paws of business men tightened about their cigars in astonishment as Phillips Keith walked into the room.

My mind shuttled back in memory to a similar scene. Red Death! That was it—Lon Chaney as Red Death in *The Phantom of the Opera!* It terrified me as a child, and now my spine tingled anew. Phillips Keith as Satan, Master of Evil.

"What a disguise!"

"Perfect!"

"Even the club foot!"

I could have choked the thin matron who said that. She would have to call *that* to my attention. The tingling in my spine became a pulsation of dread.

For Phillips Keith limped.

"Dropped something on his foot," Lily whispered. "He must have—"

Club foot. Or cloven hoof?

The red figure of Mephistocles stalked through the parted lane. Proudly he walked, despite the limp. Proud as Lucifer.

I saw him beckon to a stout man in pirate costume.

"Considine," said Lily, dully. "That's Thomas Considine."

Keith said a few words. Considine appeared to be laughing, commenting on the disguise. He walked at the Professor's side, then beckoned to a companion. The party moved toward a side door.

At that moment the orchestra struck up. Dancing started once more, conversation rose suddenly, and the red-clad Mephisto and his two companions disappeared from the floor.

I grabbed Lily's wrist and jostled through the crowd.

"Hurry," I commanded. "Something's up!"

WE REACHED the door just as the red cloak whisked into the elevator. The door closed, the car moved down. "Stairs!"

Three flights down in nothing, flat. The red cloak flicked tantalizingly out of the lobby.

We reached the street just as the black car rolled away.

Heaven sent a taxi around the corner.

I pushed Lily inside, to nurse her black and blue wrist.

“Follow that car—” I began. Then, “To blazes with that! Just take us to Rocklynn Foundation. I know where they’re going.”

Lily knew, too. We didn’t say anything, just stared at each other, and I’m afraid my eyes were as frightened as hers.

Hurtling down the black, gaping mouths of midnight streets, riding the wind behind the red cloak of Satan—this wasn’t New York, but ancient Prague.

Then, climbing the dark tower of the skyscraper, up toward the hidden chamber—this wasn’t the twentieth century, but a scene set in medieval nightmare.

As we paused before the door marked *Private,* we heard a voice. It too was filtered through a black dream. Keith’s voice—partly.

I don’t like to admit that it was only *partly* Keith’s voice, but what else can one say? It was a voice coming from his throat, using his larynx, but there was a deep, burring overtone that was altogether unnatural in any human throat.

It might have been imagination. As we stood before that door, I hoped it was imagination.

Maybe Keith had a cold. That’s why he sounded that way. But cold or no cold, I couldn’t help hearing what he *said.* That was by far the worst of all.

Whispering huskily from that black room—

“So now you see what I have accomplished, gentlemen. You, Considine, and you, Mr. Wintergreen, can no longer doubt the evidence of your own senses.”

“But it’s monstrous!” Considine boomed. “The Devil in a cage!”

“Monstrous, you say? Glorious! Don’t you see the possibilities here?”

“I suppose it’s all very interesting scientifically, but what do you intend to do—exhibit this creature to the public or something of the sort?”

Keith laughed. Or rather, that voice laughed.

"Considine, you talk like a fool. Can't you realize we have something here that can become the most powerful force on earth?"

"Powerful?" interrupted the nasal tones of Wintergreen.

"Yes, all-powerful. Consider, gentlemen, for a moment, what our captive can mean to us. Have you ever heard of the Black Mass, of the worship of Satan?

"For centuries men have gathered to pay homage to the Devil. Believing that the Kingdom of Heaven is ruled by God, they claim that earth is ruled by Satan, and choose to worship him. If he grants them happiness here on earth, they are willing to forsake celestial joys."

"What utter rot!"

THE voice droned on, contemptuous of the interruption. "They meet in hidden places—the cellars of ancient houses or ruined churches—on Walpurgis Eve and other unhallowed nights. Candles, fashioned from the corpse-fat of unbaptized infants, light their devotions to the Prince of Darkness. An unfrocked priest presides over the altar; the altar which is the naked, living flesh of a woman. All boast of their sins, and confess penitently their good deeds.

"Then, as the Lord's Prayer is recited in reverse, a parody of the Mass is held. The Mass of St. Secaire, the unholy ritual of Gilles de Retz and the Marquis de Sade. A sacrifice is given to Satan, and celebrants drink of a red wine which is truly human blood. All do homage to the Father of Evil, who grants them then their dark desires."

"Don't talk like that," Wintergreen begged, in nervous protest. "We're not children, to be frightened by bogey-men."

"Neither are the thousands of secret Satanists who carry on these rites. They believe. Many of them are the victims of charlatans, frauds who prey on the neurotic rich.

"And I'm not offering you a bogey-man. I'm offering you the actual physical entity of the Fallen Angel, the Master of the Great Black Lodge.

"That's why I brought you here and showed you our captive. Your money enabled me to summon him. It is only fitting now that you be given the opportunity to profit thereby."

The droning voice held cunning. Devilish cunning. Lily grasped my wrist, but I shrugged her into silence again as we crouched, listening.

"We have here the opportunity for power. For undreamt of wealth. We, and we alone, are the masters of Satan. Let me tell you my plan.

"I shall become the High Priest of the Satanists. You, Considine, and you, Wintergreen, shall go out among your friends and proselyte. Bring the rich old women, the eccentric old men into the fold. Bring them to the Black Mass, spread the word that a new day is at hand for those who would pay the price to the Powers of Darkness. Tell them that there are ways to obtain eternal youth, ways to obtain more wealth, ways to wreak revenge.

"Can't you see? We'll build an empire out of what was once only an old wive's tale! We can control nations, master the earth!"

"Have you gone crazy, Keith?" Considine's deep voice trembled. "Are you utterly mad? First you show up in a Mephisto costume, then you bring us to look at this freak, this animal hybrid of yours, and now you babble insanities."

"Yes," Wintergreen amended, weakly. "I'm getting out of here."

"No you don't. You know the secret, and it's too much. Neither of you leaves this room until you've agreed."

I don't know what I intended to do. I only realized that there would never be a better cue for my entrance.

I flung the door open and marched in, Lily Ross at my side.

Considine and Wintergreen stared with open mouths. In the glass cage beyond, the black figure gestured frantically in the red glow of the braziers.

I ignored them all. I had eyes only for Keith—for the man in the red cloak, the man with the red face and the spade beard.

As he turned to face me, I read his eyes, read the blazing message there. His hands swooped up, claw-like, as I charged.

Sheer instinct drove me on; the same instinct that guides a man to crush a wriggling serpent, even though he knows it is about to strike.

Lily screamed as my hands closed about Keith's scarlet throat, rose to rake his face. I almost screamed as I felt that face.

I was tearing at his disguise, at his false beard. Tearing and tearing—and it wouldn't come off.

For Professor Phillips Keith was *not* disguised at all. He was Satan in red flesh!

The dragging club-foot, the cloven hoof moved up, butting my thighs. The claws razored my chest. The deep growling from the creature's throat welled horribly. I punched out at the fiendish visage, and my hands hammered against iron.

Considine and Wintergreen, Lily and the creature in the cage whirled crazily by. Red arms encircled me, and began to crush.

To crush and break. Pudgy little arms bent me back until I felt my spine bending like a white-hot wire of pain. Pudgy little arms—but they held strength. *The strength of a demon.*

Demon arms crushing. Demon breath searing my face. Demon face glaring into my own. My senses ebbed, and a chuckling rose from the grinning thing that crushed me like a rag-doll, crushed me down into darkness and a swirling mist of pain.

I tore my left hand free, somehow; got it up to my pocket. I wrenched the flask out, ripped the cork with frantic fingers. The creature grabbed for my arm, twisted it, but the flask was open. I jerked it up.

A white stream spurted against the red face. With a howl of agony, the thing's arms flew up to shield its head. Breaking free, I spattered more of the fluid on the head and shoulders. Rocking on its feet a moment, the creature staggered, fell to its knees. A hideous stench arose. Smoke seemed to pour from the redskin.

As the thing fell, I was upon it. I tore the hands from the ravaged face, for there was no strength in those red talons now. I jammed the flask up against the pain-contorted mouth, tilted it. The liquid gushed forth, gurgled down the crimson maw.

In a moment it was over. I rose and faced the three at my side. Lily sobbed.

"I—I thought it would kill you," she gasped. "Until you threw the acid in its face."

"Acid?" I echoed. "Acid, hell—*that was holy water!"*

6. Getting Behind Satan

"YES, the holy water did the trick." It was Professor Phillips Keith who spoke—spoke weakly, through ashen lips—but spoke, and in a voice unmistakably his own. Considine and Wintergreen knelt at his side, propping up his gray head.

It had taken ten minutes to bring him around. At first we had thought the red thing dead—and it was Lily who noticed the *change,* and pointed it out with a murmur of astonishment.

The redness of the skin faded out, slowly. The contours of the body altered subtly, almost before our eyes. It was like the Jekyll-Hyde transformation accomplished by a movie camera, but the reality was ghastly.

When we saw Professor Phillips Keith lying on the floor in an incongruous red cloak, when we saw his eyelids flutter weakly, some measure of composure returned. By the time the familiar, "What happened?" came faintly from his lips, we were prepared to answer. I told him the story.

"Yes, it was the holy water, all right," he repeated. "Pure inspiration on your part to think of it."

"Pure desperation," I corrected.

"I must have been pretty bad."

"You were—evil," Lily interjected slowly. "Utterly evil."

“But what does it all mean?” Considine asked.

“It means that I was possessed of the devil.”

“Do you really believe—”

“You saw me,” Keith continued. “It was a clear case of what the ancients called *demoniac possession.* From Bible times down, literature and history is filled with recorded instances of men and women who were ’possessed.’ Such a condition overtook me.

“I don’t know how it started. When we evoked that thing in the cage, I suppose. The shock of our success weakened my mental resistance. The barriers went down in a wave of enthusiasm. You remember my harangue before the glass, don’t you?” Keith turned to me.

I nodded.

“That night I came back. I wanted another look at our captive. I got it—guess I got too much. The creature hypnotized me. I didn’t know. I looked at it and I became *elated.* I felt exhilarated, half-intoxicated. What religious maniacs describe, and what the old priests of Pan used to call—*ecstasy.*

“That was it. You and Lily saw the effect it had on me. I went out that night, can’t even remember how. Another will than my own seemed to command me, drive me. Working through my senses, the creature broke down my volition. Satan knows the flesh.

“After that night I came back. I came back at dawn, under a compulsion born of intoxication and the inner urge upon me. I came back to stare at the creature in the cage, stare at the red eyes in the darkness which glistened like two distant whirling worlds of evil. Two distant worlds that came closer, merged and blended with our own world, blended with my own brain. You and Lily found me asleep beside the cage this morning. The change had occurred.

“I don’t remember much of today. It must have worked very fast. I have only two distinct memories—one, of looking into a mirror late this afternoon and seeing my skin assume a reddish tint, as though I had been deeply sunburned. The other memory is vaguer still. It concerns writing something with a piece of chalk in a dream.”

I told Keith about our experience with the strangely cowed creature in the cage.

"Part of me must have entered into it when it took my body," he said gravely. His face clouded again in recollection. "My body! By nightfall it wasn't my body any more. The leg dragged. I seemed to know what was happening, but I didn't care. I had this ecstasy, this force, driving me. I went to the ball, and you know the rest."

There was silence. Somehow Considine's muttered "Incredible!" sounded mawkish and inappropriate.

"Professor, you should get some rest," said Lily. "The shock—I think it would be best if you spent a few days in the hospital until—"

A white hand waved.

"I can't, my dear. I can't. Don't you see? We have *him* to deal with."

The hand leveled toward the glass cage. Our eyes followed.

THE slumping figure behind the glass was gone. In its place once more was Satan, Lord of the Sabbath. Black, erect, and menacing, with the yellow, rotted fangs sneering in malignant fury. There was no mistaking the hate, the thwarted desire in those burning eyes. Considine and Wintergreen saw it for the first time. They breathed through their mouths hoarsely.

Yes, Satan was back. Satan waited again, waited to spring.

"We thought we had him trapped, but you see—we haven't," Keith whispered. "He has found the way to get out. He can take possession of the human body and walk the earth as a man. For a day or so, anyway. Then the human body changes and the man becomes outwardly, as well as inwardly, the image of Evil. We must get rid of him once and for all. We must!"

"Take it easy," I said. "We understand."

"But you don't understand, you can't. Not until you've been through what I've been through. God!" Keith shuddered. "I'll never rest until we've found a way to send him back to Hell."

"You'll rest. Lily and I will get to work, I promise you." The girl nodded agreement.

"Send him back," Keith whispered. "You can't kill him, there is no way. Send him back before—"

The gray head slumped.

"He's passed out," Wintergreen said.

"Good! Phone for an ambulance. We'll carry him out to the lobby. Say it's collapse from overwork or something. Our word is good. He needs hospital attention."

We carried Keith out, carried the plan out.

Lily and I faced the two industrialists.

"Not a word of this now, to anyone," I cautioned. "We alone share the secret, and we alone must solve it. Keith was right. We must find a way to send this creature back."

"I still can't believe it," Wintergreen said. Considine scowled in perplexity.

"Neither do I, but I can feel it, all right. I don't pretend to understand all you've told me, but I know that you're right. It's a mistake to pry into these things. Send that thing back to wherever it came from, use any method you want, and charge the bill to me."

"You'll keep silence?" I reiterated.

"We will." Considine walked heavily toward the door. Suddenly the big man turned. His beefy face worked with unwonted emotion. "And may God help you in the task," he said softly.

The two went out. I faced Lily.

"There's a job to do," I said grimly. "Are you game?"

"You know I am."

"After what happened to Keith, I'm almost afraid to let you help," I murmured.

"You'll have to. I'm the only one who knows the formulae."

"We'll be playing with fire," I persisted.

"Hell fire," added the girl. "But we won't be burned."

7. Devil May Care

"ANY luck?" I asked dully.

"No," sighed the girl. She rose from the desk, one slim hand brushing back the golden cascade of her hair. "I'm afraid it's no use. There are no formulae here to get rid of him."

"But there has to be one," I insisted. "There must be a way to send him back."

"Not by incantation." Her hopeless glance met mine, melted. For a moment we stood together—then turned, by common impulse, to the glass cage in the center of the room.

Black, brooding, baleful, the Goat of the Sabbath crouched on the floor. The leering, beady eyes rested scornfully on our own. Yellowed fangs menaced in a derisive grin.

Lily shivered. "Can he hear us?" she asked.

"It doesn't matter. He knows. He's waiting, too."

"That's what I'm afraid of. Darling, we can't go on like this forever. It's been two days already. We can't Jfeep on hiding it always—and if anyone should suspect—"

"There must be a way out!" I scowled, my eyes restlessly searching the room.

"Wait a minute. I've got it!"

"What?"

"Didn't Professor Keith say something about tubing in the glass cage? Something about lethal gas?"

"You're right!" Lily's smile became animated. "That tank over there under the table—it's got the tubing attached. We just plug into the panel at the side, and the gas is released. Hand-pump. Come on, I'll show you."

We did the job. It wasn't easy to brave the ghoulish stare of the creature in the cage as my hands fumbled with the nozzle of the hose and screwed it into place.

It was easier to feel the reassuring firmness of the efficient hand-pump handle, once things were in readiness.

“I hope it works,” Lily whispered.

“It must work. We have to kill this thing somehow,” I answered. “Here goes.”

I pumped.

There was a hissing, the inflated tube writhed like a serpent. I watched the nozzle in the panel.

A cloudy vapor poured into the glass enclosure.

I pumped harder, as the black figure vanished suddenly in a whirl of poisonous fog.

“It’s working!” exclaimed the girl. “Keep it up—nothing can survive this stuff.”

Billows of whitish smoke writhed in miniature Inferno behind the glass. Inferno for a demon.

The pump sighed emptily.

Together we advanced toward the clouded glass pane.

“See anything?” I asked.

“No. Not yet.” Lily pressed her forehead against the glass of the cage, wrinkled it, in straining scrutiny. “No—wait a minute. The smoke is clearing.”

“Clearing? There’s nowhere for it to go!”

“But it is!”

And it was. Even as we watched, the white vapor thinned into spirals, shreds, cumulae.

Behind it crouched the black, goatish body.

Crouched, not slumped.

Satan was alive! And yet the gases cleared—*because he was inhaling them!*

“Good Lord, he’s absorbing the stuff into his system! He *breathes* poison!” I murmured.

Malignant, triumphant, the black goat pranced. Its eyes shone with evil merriment, with a sort of added animation.

“He thrives on the stuff,” Lily sighed. “Now what?”

“Water,” I said.

The details don’t matter. We used the same tubing, and a new pump. Filled the glass enclosure to the brim. Enough water to drown anything inside.

He absorbed it, of course.

I was afraid to try an arc-welder.

“You can’t kill the Devil with fire,” Lily told me.

That was that. Bombs were out—anything was out which entailed the risk of releasing His Satanic Majesty.

We were back to where we started.

“Give me another day,” Lily said. “I’ll find an incantation. There must be something here. Some variant on a spell for casting out demons, perhaps. Just put a twist on it. We must get one.”

“I must get some sleep,” I added. And meant it. Devil-killing is hard work.

“Go home,” commanded the girl.

“And leave you here alone with that? Not on your life! Remember what happened to Keith.”

“Well, go into the private office down the hall and take a nap. There’s a couch there. I’ll keep on working.”

“I don’t know,” I said, slowly.

“I’ll be all right. I won’t even look at our friend here. Besides, you know what Keith said. He was almost out on his feet, his mental barriers were down. I’m no pushover. Go ahead now, run along and get your rest. I’ll promise to get out of here in an hour or so.”

“Promise me that?”

“Of course, darling.”

“And you won’t look at him?”

"Not when I can look at you." She stood very close. I put my arms around her, held her. Over my shoulder the fiend grinned. But her smile warmed.

"All right. But I'm coming back within an hour. And if I catch you flirting with Old Nick here, you'll be sorry."

Abruptly I sobered. "You really think there's a chance of finding a way?"

"I do. We *must.* Now, off with you." I left the room. Lily Ross sat down, ran her hands through her golden hair, and opened the black book on the desk. In the dancing light of the braziers she looked as she had when I first saw her—like a white witch.

She *was* a white witch in my dreams.

8. Hell Hath No Fury—

SHE was only a girl when she awakened me.

I grinned sheepishly through a shroud of sleep. "Sorry. Guess I broke my promise and overslept. Didn't know I was so tired."

"You were tired, darling. Know how long you've been sleeping?"

"No."

"Three hours."

"Really?"

"Uh huh. Feel better now?"

"Certainly. I'm ready for anything. What about you?"

"Still bright." She looked it, too. Her eyes sparkled with gaiety.

"You. look as though you had some luck. Find anything?" I asked.

"Well—yes and no. There's a chant in the Prinn *Saracenic Rituals* relating to djin and efreet that could be used, I think. But the German translation is bad. I'm going to check it against the Latin."

"Now?"

"No, silly. Tomorrow. Now I'm going to relax. And you're going to relax with me. Let's go out and take in the town tonight; forget all about this crazy business.”

“But what about—”

“Quit scowling, dear. It’s all right. We need a vacation. The strain is too much, sometimes, when you think about what we’re doing, what’s in that room.”

“Don’t you think you’d be better off if you went home and rested, Lily?”

“No.” Her eyes met mine. “It’s dark, and I don’t like the dark. It makes me think too much. It makes me dream about—*him.* Don’t you see? I want light, people, something to make me forget.”

She was shaking underneath her smile. Hysteria, nearly.

“All right. Did you—lock up?”

“Certainly. Stop fretting. The room is barred.”

I rose to my feet.

“We’d better stop in at the hospital and see how Professor Keith is resting,” I suggested.

“Please—not now. I’m all on edge. I just want to forget everything connected with this, for tonight. Let’s not think about anything except us.”

The suggestion was pleasant. Alluring. Alluring, as Lily was. She did sparkle. Her golden hair, the scarlet of her lips, the turquoise of her eyes—all seemed accentuated by inner fire. She slipped one arm in mine, possessively. I felt a tingling as her bare flesh met my wrist. We swept into the outer lobby of Rocklynn. I almost laughed.

Here was a crowd of bustling, officious clerks and directors. White-coated chemists stepped briskly in and out of the long series of offices along the further corridors. Well-dressed visitors and patrons—giggling stenographers—bearded doctors who might have advertised laxatives in the popular magazines—a typical *Kildare* atmosphere about the place.

They didn’t suspect what was going on in the private chamber down the hall. They didn’t suspect that the golden girl on my arm was a white witch.

Again that white witch thought had crossed my mind. White witch. Why did I think of Lily that way? Was it because here in the afternoon sunlight she positively glittered? Her hair was *so* golden, her skin had such a milky texture. Ah, she was a pretty girl—nothing more.

“Supper?” I said. She nodded.

We glided down to the lobby, stepped into a cab. She snuggled close. I liked it.

But when I looked at her again, the semi-darkness of the cab’s interior had wrought another change.

She wasn’t a white witch any more. Her hair seemed darker. The golden tint was gone. The locks were almost brunette; brown with darker tones. The scarlet of her lips had turned to rose. A trick of late afternoon light.

“What are you staring at?” she giggled.

I got personal for a while. A good while, as we were tied up in traffic. By the time we neared the chosen destination it was almost twilight.

WAS twilight in the taxi.

And Lily’s hair was gray. Not gray, exactly, and not platinum. There was a bluish tint. Her lips were purple.

Her lips were purple—or I was crazy.

Seeing things. A girl who changed in light and shadow. What was that? White witch—black witch—blue witch. What did they call it? Adaptation. Chamelon.

But the term in sorcery. *Glamour.* Sympathetic magic. The ability to conform with surroundings. The attribute of a sorceress.

Circe had that power.

But Lily Ross?

Here she was, laughing away, affectionate and alluring. And I was picturing her as an enchantress. Ridiculous.

Well, it was best forgot. I did forget as we entered the supper club. But when we sat down under the red drapes I saw her titian locks flame forth in evil glory, saw her tawny skin glow, saw the crimson depths of her eyes.

Red witch, now!

I had a drink. Several drinks. In between I blinked. She talked, but I hardly listened.

“Let’s dance.”

I held the red witch in my arms, held a living flame close. Held her closer than I had ever held her, and felt her respond. Her response was flame. Fire kindling, feeding.

That fire engulfed me. I was tired of thinking, tired of toying with the incredible. The wine helped, and her beauty was a greater intoxication. I went down into the warmth—the warmth of her glowing hair, the warmth of her eyes, the red glow of her mouth.

Why deny it? When she suggested her apartment I didn’t hesitate. This wasn’t the Lily Ross I knew, but the realization no longer bothered me.

She clung to me in the cab, on the stairs. “We’ve been working too hard, darling,” she whispered, over and over again, as though it were a formula. Her words no longer mattered. I was consumed by the flame of her nearness. The red, swift flame, coursing through my blood and being.

She opened the door. I stepped in. We embraced in the darkness for a long moment.

Then, “I’ve waited for this,” she murmured. “You and I, together. We’re going to do wonderful things, aren’t we?”

“You mean down at Rocklynn?” I asked lazily.

“Oh—*that!”* she laughed. “Of course not, silly! That’s child’s play. Don’t you think so? It has no real meaning at all.”

“Well—”

“You and I were meant for greater destinies.” Her voice, vibrant in velvet darkness, had a new quality of its own. A *dark* quality. Peculiarly, I wondered what she looked like here. What color was her hair? And those lips, that now burned mine?

Lips that burned away my questions and left only a desire.

“Greater destinies,” she whispered. “You’ve the brains. I have the beauty.

“You know, I’ve never felt this way before. Today I saw the futility of it—cooped up in a stuffy little laboratory when we might be playing for bigger stakes.”

Did you ever have a woman make love to you with lips and arms while she talked like a bank director? It's an unnerving experience.

"Yes, we'll go a long way together. Keith's out of it, of course. We have the power now. The power to learn. The power to command. With those spells and incantations there are no heights we cannot achieve.

"I could be a queen—"

Well, it was enough. Lips or no lips, I knew. The shudder that ran through me could not. be repressed. The voice was Lily's but the thoughts were Keith's. Not Keith's—but Keith's when he was possessed of the Devil.

I knew what I held in my arms now. The girl that had worked alone in the black chamber, under the glowing eyes of the monster in the cage. The girl that changed in light and darkness. The girl who desired power, who lured like the priestess of a Mystery.

I knew, and as I shuddered, she knew. Her arms pressed closer, her body moulded to mine, her warmth sought to drown my dread, and I felt her mouth seek mine, seek mine with a promise of ecstasy.

I pushed her back. She sensed it, but suddenly embraced me. Again her mouth neared. I felt it graze my lips and then—Lily Ross bent in the darkness, and with the fury of a tigress, locked her teeth in my throat!

9. Devil's Bargain

AS THE tiny, pointed fangs met, I shook her free.

A feline growl rose in her throat. Her panting breath rasped as her hands raked my face.

"You fool!"

Again her mouth sought my neck. I lifted one arm and let go. I had to do it.

Just a short uppercut to the chin and she slumped to the floor. I stepped over, switched on the lights, and carried her limp body to the sofa.

She lay there, eyes closed, a golden witch under lamplight. From her bruised mouth ran a tiny crimson trickle.

The sleeping sorceress—

I got cold water, a towel, brandy. It took three minutes before her eyes fluttered open. By that time I'd been in her bedroom and found what I was seeking. So when her eyes did open, they focussed directly on the bronze crucifix held before them.

A look of pain seared her face. She writhed.

"No—take it away—please—"

I held her twisting body taut.

"Look!" I commanded.

"No—fool—let me go—I can't—"

The crucifix pressed closer. I placed the cool metal against her forehead.

She screamed.

I drew it off and stared at the livid welt—the imprint of the cross burned into her white flesh.

Perspiration beaded my brow, but I didn't desist. I knew what had to be done. Exorcism. The casting out of demons.

First Keith, and now Lily. She had to be freed.

Her moanings ceased. I waved the crucifix before her and whispered.

"Lily, darling. Look at the cross. Look at it. I know it hurts, but you must look. You must. Just gaze from under your eyelids. I won't burn you with it. Just look. Look and sleep. Try to sleep, Lily. You're tired, so very tired. So tired. Sleep. And look at the cross. Sleep."

Science and witchcraft, eh? Well, let's see what a little modern hypnotism will do.

Psychic trauma or possession by a fiend, call it what you will. I waved the crucifix and commanded her to sleep. The light glittered on the weaving outline. Her eyes followed it, her ears heard my murmurs.

Lily slept.

MY SHIRT was wet clear through. I was trembling. But she slept. And I kept whispering. “Lily, come back! Lily fight it. Come back. Lily, come back.” The tremors came then. Convulsions. I saw her writhe in agony and still I didn’t stop. Didn’t dare stop.

She moaned, and it wasn’t her voice. Her hands darted like talons to her temples, as though to tear away the scar. Her face was the worst—changing from pallor to deep flush.

But my voice was winning. I felt that. Her whimpers grew weaker. She slept under the cross, accepted the vision.

The force within her waned, then blazed in a final access of fury. That’s when my hand trembled so that I nearly dropped the crucifix. When her face began to look like *other* faces.

They bubbled up from beneath her flesh, those malignant expressions of hate and rage. The expressions seen on the faces of the schizophrenic, the demented. The faces of madness—and what was madness in olden days but demoniac possession?

They came now, grinning their defiance. And the voice and the cross fought them, fought them down, fought them from her being.

At the end she slept, and I slumped beside her. The crucifix rested against her bare arm, but it no longer burned. I had won. She had won. I knew that Satan had returned to his body in the glass cage.

In the morning’s awakening we made our decision. I told her what she didn’t know—and she told me what I had guessed; about the “dizzy spells” she had experienced while working alone in the chamber.

“I’m going back there,” I insisted. “You need rest. I’ll carry on alone, and I’m forewarned as well as forearmed by what you and Keith have gone through. I won’t succumb, I promise you—not until I’ve found a way to get rid of His Satanic Majesty once and for all.”

“Be careful, darling—”

I smiled grimly. “You’re telling me? But it has to be done. That menace must be removed, quickly. If you or Keith had been allowed to continue it might spread like a plague. There's no choice in the matter. Either we get rid of Satan or he gets rid of us. That's the bargain."

"You'll call me regularly?"

"Of course. And in a day or two both you and Keith can come down again to help. But now—I'm going back to hell." Lily smiled. "May God be with you," she whispered.

10. Powers of Darkness

THAT night we worked alone, The Devil and I.

The Devil and I, in that black tower. The red braziers burned as a beacon, but the red glare from his eyes blazed a still stronger warning.

All alone in the dark room, behind locked doors. A crouching fiend in a cage. A crouching man at a table.

From time to time the ebon monstrosity reared ponderously to pad back and forth behind the barrier. From time to time I rose and paced the floor with equal restlessness.

Frequently a malignant scowl convulsed the black and bony face. Often, I too, scowled.

I turned the yellowed pages of a dozen bulky books. I scanned the notes written in Lily's precise handwriting. But learning the mantic arts is a grim business. No wonder wizards grew gray!

Here was White Magic—the nine steps in the evocation of angels. The command of the Seven Stewards of Heaven; Arathron, Bethor, Phaleg, Och, Hazith, Ophiel, and Phul. White Magic, and a jumble of theosophical arcanum which would be of no use here. Wrong lead.

Black Magic—ashes of hosts and dried toads—unguents of grease and blood of corpses heated over human bones—burning crucifixes—gibberish.

Red Magic? The highest esoteric art was never written or told. Nothing here.

Try divination.

I tried divination for hours. Long hours in the black room.

Long hours under hell-spawned eyes. Eyes that watched me as I studied. Eyes that seemed to pierce the glass cage, to peer over my shoulder as I read, peer and mock.

The file on divination was huge. Could I evoke an omen, a clue? Divination—

There was aeromancy, alectryomancy, aleuromancy, alphitomancy—but I had neither wind nor rooster, flour nor hard dough.

Amniomancy? Use the caul of a newborn child? No. And the horrid anthropomancy—prophecy by use of human entrails—no, again.

Arithomancy, Astragalomancy. Both mathematical tricks, long since discredited. Axinomancy and Belomancy were relics of the old "trial by ordeal" of Saxon days.

Capnomancy? Divination by smoke-wreaths from a drug-sprinkled fire? Hashish visions. A fake.

Cephalonomancy, Dactyliomancy, Gastromancy, Geomancy, Gyromancy. I had no donkey's head to sprinkle with live coals, no finger ring, no gift at ventriloquism, nor was I a sand-diviner. I might try Gyromancy as a last resort—walking in a circle until I grew dizzy and fell. The direction of the fall had significance.

Oh, sure. Sorcery is so fascinating, until you analyze it.

Hippomancy, the Celtic trick with white horses. Out.

Hydromancy, Ichthyomancy, Lampodomancy, Lithomancy, Margaritomancy, Myomancy, Onomancy, Onychomancy, Oomancy, Parthenomancy.

Fine stuff! All superstitious nonsense, though the last—divination by employing a virgin—might prove entertaining.

Well, Pyromancy, Rhabdomancy, Sciamancy.

Sciamancy. Evocation of the dead. Was there a proven formulae here in Lily's list? There wasn't. I was singularly grateful. To command the dead sorcerously—dangerous ground.

Spondonomancy, Sycomancy, Theomancy.

That was the end of divination.

And still Satan stared. I was becoming more and more conscious of that stare. Satan grinned. The grin burned through me. I'd find a way! I had to.

There was no sleep for me that day, and it was almost midnight when I blundered back into the notebooks and hit the section on *Elementals.*

Elementals. The primitive spirits.

Hie gnomes inherent in earth own the kingdom of the North, and they exert the melancholic influence over the temperament of man. Their sign is the Bull, and they are commanded by the Magic Sword. Their sovereign is Gob.

NONSENSE!

The sylphs are of the air, their kingdom is the East, and their influence bilious. Under the sign of the Eagle, they are controlled by the holy pentacles, as is their sovereign, Paralda.

Well?

Salamanders are spirits of fire, and their kingdom lies South. Sanguine in their influence, under the sign of the Lion, and the command of the trident, their sovereign is Djin—yes, the prototype of all *djinn.*

And the undines of the West, those who evoke the phlegmatic aspect of men, are governed under the sign of Aquarius, commanded by the cup of libations, and under the sovereignty of Necksa.

Gnomes, sylphs, salamanders, undines. Earth, air, fire and water. Astrology and oriental legend, and mysticism.

Except that—there were spells.

Spells for the evocation of elementals. Elementals, known to our theology as fiends. Fiends of the Pit.

Spells to command them, written in Lily Ross's handwriting. Taken from the tomes. Precise directions for mixing incense, and drawing figures, and reciting commands.

“There are nearly a hundred proven spells and incantations. Genuine.” That’s what Keith had said.

Genuine spells. Recipes to raise daemons. “A pinch of salt and a tablespoon-full of butter. Bake well under low flame.”

Not exactly. These recipes might affect the stomach, but only with a nausea of dread. “A pinch of ground bone, and a cup of blood. Place under the fires of Hell.”

I was light-headed. Light-headed enough to try.

After all, I had to experiment, didn’t I? Find a way to evoke, familiarize myself with rituals? Why shouldn’t I take this perfectly absurd routine about the gnomes, for instance, and see what happened?

Lily’s marginal notes said, “Sword in cupboard, lower shelf. Important—use no other. Steel sword. Steel alone guards and commands gnomes.”

I had the silly-looking old blade in my hand before I knew what I was doing. I had the blue chalk, too, as directed, and I was kneeling down facing North. The gnome kingdom.

Grimm’s fairy tales? Why not find out?

Draw the mathematical design, as directed. Draw the sign of the bull—the peculiarly Egyptian sign, so indicative of ancient stylization. The bull of Apis, of astrology, of ancient days. A blue bull. Make it big. The gnome materializes on that sign and cannot leave it until you command. Draw it big and play safe.

Play safe? With this nonsense?

But there was a black bulk in a glass cage grinning out at me and this wasn’t nonsense.

I waved the sword. I realized what a ridiculous figure I cut in that dark room, waving a “magic sword” before a lot of chalk drawings scribbled schoolboy-fashion on the floor. But there was nobody to watch me—except the glaring eyes of Satan in his prison.

Slowly I mumbled the incantation. Lily had accented it and phoneticized carefully. No mistakes. Now to recite it aloud. The sword pointed north—

thus. My feet touched the tip of the outer blue circle. At the syllable breaks I must point the sword at the horns of the Bull. Sychronize. So.

"Oh Gob—" I began.

It sounded foolish. Self-conscious.

Grimm's fairy tales. But I persisted. It didn't take long, after all.

No. It didn't take long before I felt the cold wind strike my face. Felt the sword tingle in my hand as I pointed, felt an electric surge sweep up my arm. Heard the syllables blaze out, saw the flame of the braziers *bend* before the words.

And then, in the Sign of the Bull, the tiny, crouching figure. It coiled into shape, into substance. The little swarthy creature with the mouse-like face, the rodent body, and the beady, glittering eyes. Standing there, bowing. The gnome.

Grim fairy tales!

The gnome. The little man who *was* there. The little man that hid in the woods. The little dwarf man who tempted maidens in die forest. The little man who guarded the mines and the gold of earth, the little man who haunted the dark mountaintops of the north countries and dug the burrows beneath the hills.

One of the ancient Pictish, Celtic *little people.* The tiny race of troglydites that lived on earth before men came, retreated to the dark depths like the serpent. The figure known to all legends and all times. The dwarf. The troll. The kobold. The Brownie. The leprechaun.

"Master?"

Oh, that piping little voice! That shocking, detestable little voice, so hateful in its reality!

And it *was* real.

I dropped the sword.

Then I picked it up. This was the sword of command. Of command. The thought hit me then. I could—command.

I COULD command this creature out of myth, command it to do anything I desired. Anything. To—kill. To burrow under a building and send it toppling to ruins, as he and his fellows toiled like rats. The way they used to burrow under castles, in ancient legend. Like a warlock, I could send it on errands of death. It was my servant, my familiar now. I could have it and its fellows. Yes, thousands of them. Merely by command. Command with the steel of the sword.

The thought burned. Burned like Satan's eyes. Burned like fire.

Fire.

The salamander!

I won't describe the next hour. The wave of elation that swept over me is too much a part of hysteria. I drew the Lion, kindled the flame, waved the trident. The yellow blaze revealed the lizard figure that grew out of flame, absorbed it. Fiend, imp, archetype of hell's legions, the salamander of evil. And the hissing inflection in the word, "Master?"

Here were spells that worked. Here were orisons arid litanies that brought results. I couldn't send Satan back, but I could conjure up his hosts.

Conjure up his hosts! Why not? Imagine this tower room filled with waiting monstrosities from myth. Imagine *rooms* filled with them. A horde, a vast and limitless horde, all calling me—"Master!"

Master of demons. Master of evil. Lord of a power greater than any known.

For the first time I began to realize the feeling inherent in that word. Power. Power to rule. Power over wind and water and fire and air. Over earth. Power to rule earth.

Now I knew how Keith must have felt. He'd dreamed of something like this. Men laughed at evil, did they? All the better, they would not burn him at the stake for sorcery but permit him to evoke evil unmolested. He'd been a fool, Keith had. Trying to interest millionaires. Why did he need any allies? One man to rule them all, that was the way.

And Lily. Silly child! Personal vanity was her downfall. She wanted to be a Cleopatra, did she? Sheer melodrama. Juvenile. She might have been a queen—greater than a Circe. Queen of evil. But I'd stopped that. Her mistake was to rely on me for help.

I wouldn't make that mistake. I'd rely on no one. I and I alone would evoke and rule. I had the power, didn't I? I had Satan in a cage. He was no longer Prince of Darkness. I could take his place.

The King is dead. Long live the King!

Why not?

A week ago, if anyone had foretold my future I should have scoffed. Like everyone else, I suppose. But now it was real, I had this opportunity. The goal of witch and wizard through the ages. The powers of darkness mine to command. Why hesitate?

Why not evoke? Use the rituals, use all of them. Fill the room with a legion of nightmare shapes. *Revenants.* Ghouls and *efrits, Vrykolas, hippocampi, amphisbartae, striges.* An army, a black army. An army to conquer the world.

Keep them ringed in the magic figures, until the word of release was given. Keep them ringed, and then—

But what about Satan? What about the spell to send him back? Back to where—to hell? But we could have hell here on earth!

And why not?

An earth filled with man-made war and misery. An earth filled with grasping, cheating, lying, stealing, raping, murdering, crazy humans. Filled with pestilence, disease, idiocy. Let the Lord of Evil come into his own!

Sweep away humanity. Sweep away the earth. Black gifts the creatures might grant you for the power. Eternal life, eternal ecstasy. Lips might whisper secrets. Primal forces to invoke and control.

Why send Satan back at all?

I glanced at the listless black figure in the cage. Glanced and smiled. Smiled and laughed suddenly.

Was this—this thing—the fabled Lucifer? This mangy, decrepit, listless bag of bones with the sick eyes and whining sneer? Was this whimpering mongrel really the Arch-Enemy?

I felt stronger than he did. I *was* stronger than he. I had stripped him of his power and taken it for my own.

I was the Master of Satan!

Plans, plans, plans. Dreams swirling in the blackness. The salamander staring, the gnome crouching in the chalk-dust. Yes, and I, standing in darkness, chanting out invocations. Chanting for endless hours, gripped by an inner elation and compulsion.

The room, surging with power. Pulsing with vibrations. And filled with shapes.

Until I stood there, amidst a crowded maze of circles and designs, each filled with a figure. A bowing figure that croaked, "Master!"

I stood there and made a Hell on earth.

11. Hell on Earth

"SLOWLY now—it's a surprise."

I guided Lily and Keith toward the door marked *Private.* Keith leaned feebly on my arms, but he pressed forward eagerly.

"Surprise?" gurgled Lily. "You mean—you've sent him back?"

I smiled. "You'll see," I told her.

She and Keith gave me a long look. I didn't like it. They seemed too conspiratorial. Eying me. I'd open their eyes for them in a minute.

I pushed open the door. "Come into my parlor," I said.

Keith kept staring at me. So did Lily.

"Ladies first," I said. Lily suddenly shrugged and stepped in. Keith followed her. I went in and shut the door. Locked it.

Then I faced them.

They faced the room.

They didn't say a word. They couldn't. It was too overpowering.

I'd taken the drapes off, swept the room clear of tables and cupboards. Needed more space. The place reeked with mingled incense odors, but even the braziers were gone to provide more floor area.

Floor area for *visitors.*

They stood there and gazed at Hell. My Hell. The Hell I had created by incantation, by invocation. Around the glass cage housing Satan the legions swarmed. One of each. A Noah's Ark, in a way, of horrors.

Hell's sample-display showroom. Take your pick. Plenty more where these, came from.

The thoughts made me laugh. I did laugh, too. The noise grated against the silence, and there was a vast answering response. "Master!"

"What have you done?" Keith's eyes blazed anger.

"Merely played sorcerer's apprentice," I told him. "How do you like it?"

"These—monsters," Keith spluttered. "Do you realize what would happen if you lost control?"

"Certainly." I smiled.

"It's insane," he muttered.

"It's science," I answered. "Isn't this your dream come true? Your dream of proving the validity of sorcery?"

"It's a nightmare. I want no part of this. Send these creatures back—there's directions for that. Send them back at once."

"Change of heart, eh? Well, recognize another change at the same time. You're not giving me orders any more, Keith. I'm in charge here."

Keith paled. He faced me with an intent stare.

Lily stepped between us.

"You must send them back," she whispered. "You were going to get rid of Satan, remember?"

"What do you mean—remember? Do you think I'm a child? Of course I remember that foolishness. But it's no good. Think of the power I possess. Think of what we could do with these creatures."

"Creatures!" Lily quavered the word.

She stood like a golden goddess, surrounded by the bobbing, weaving, crouching shapes of darkness. The tiny men with the malignant faces, the snake-like figures that shimmered in air, the canine visages of ghouls, the monstrous bulk of squatting incubae, the leprous-white crawlers. An aquarium, a menagerie, a gallery of fiends. They filled the room, each in his tiny island of chalk. Behind was the cage with the figure of Satan slumped on the floor. Had he no interest in this gathering? Where was his burning desire to escape? No matter.

"Creatures," Lily quavered, and her glance rested on me in strange appeal. "Darling—for my sake—send them back. You're not well, you've overworked, you can't think what you're doing—"

"Enough." I stepped closer to her. "I'm not crazy, if that's what you mean. Three days in this room hasn't made a wreck out of me. I've learned more about the essence and nature of evil than you both know. And I'm going to use that knowledge and that power."

"The Devil is through, in other words," Keith commented, dryly. "You're taking over."

For a moment the bald statement seemed to paralyze me. As if through a fog I caught his meaning. Then I chuckled.

"That's just about the size of it. From now on, I'm in command. These creatures are my minions. At the signal they will be released."

I lowered my voice.

"I've got a plan. It's all thought out. I've done a lot of thinking here these past days. I know just what to do—how to use these things. Rule, I tell you! And you two will share the power with me, if you like."

"Send them back," Lily begged. "You don't know what's happening to you."

"Happening to me? I'm waking up, that's all. I feel more alive at this moment than I ever have. I'm strong, and he's weak. I'm going to do what no man has ever dared. I'll open the gates! Lucifer will again rule earth. Why shouldn't he—I mean I—he—*I*—"

THEN I realized.

Realized what I was saying.

I thought, “Satan,” and I said, “I.”

I. Satan.

I looked at Keith and the girl. Their eyes were fixed in fascination on my face.

My face!

Lily’s hand was holding something out.

A mirror.

I took it.

Took the silver glass and stared at my face in the mirror. Stared at the black, goatish countenance, at the growing beard on the chin, stared—transfixed—at the darkened temples from which *the two horns were beginning to protrude!*

What had happened to Keith and Lily had happened to me. Three days in a room with the black man, three days in a room while his will gnawed at my soul in darkness, burrowed in.

The change had taken place. *I was Satan!*

The mirror fell and shattered. I stood there, looking at the dark skin on the back of my hands. The dark skin on the back of my—claws.

Turning, turning; body and mind and soul. Cloud of darkness pouring out of the cage and into my brain.

I was Satan and I had evoked demons and I would rule earth.

Madness!

But why not?

Nobody was dashing holy water in *my* face. Nobody was waving any crucifixes. Nobody was shooting any.—

I saw it out of the corner of my eye. Keith’s holster, with the two guns, lying on the little table near the door. Saw it as he saw it and made a dash. I got there first.

I pulled the guns out and pointed them very carefully. Keith stopped in his tracks.

“No you don’t,” I chuckled. “No one is shooting me, if you please. Lily—the door is locked. Very tightly.” She’d made a dash, too. “We are all alone now. With our—servitors.” I chuckled again. It was beginning to feel very pleasant.

“Stand still, both of you,” I directed.

“Madman,” Keith shouted. “Put down those revolvers!”

“Please—” Lily whispered.

I slipped one weapon into my pocket, held the other high in my right hand. My blackening right hand. I could *feel* it change. I *pulsed.* Every nerve tingling, as the change completed.

One claw held the revolver. The other rose.

“Now, you two. When I lower my left hand, our little playmates will be released. I don’t need my right hand for anything but keeping you covered. So remember. Stand and watch.”

“Satan!” Keith mumbled. “Satan incarnate!”

“Please, darling,” Lily whispered. “Oh, please, darling—”

I laughed. The grinning throng waited behind me. Waited, and ravened. I could feel their pulsations mingling with my own. How they lusted to be free! To walk the earth once more; to walk and creep and crawl and lope and fly and—kill! They waited and they crouched for my command. My command would free them. From the black tower they’d swarm out over the world of night and the shriek of earth in torment would mock the walls of heaven.

The strength welling in me. . . .

I lifted my left hand high. One gesture now—

Then Lily moved.

“Back or I’ll shoot!” I screamed.

She came forward. Her eyes held no hate and no fear, only a pleading that burned and burned. I had to get rid of that burning. Kill her, kill her and release them. Free the hordes of Hell!

My left hand swooped. My right hand moved out. The hand of Satan. I flicked my wrist, pressed the trigger—and sent a bullet crashing into my brain.

12. Fall of Lucifer

"EASY," I said. "Easy."

"Must probe," grunted Keith. "Get it out. Silver bullet or no, there might be infection."

"Easy," I repeated. Then, "Are you sure it's gone?"

Lily smiled down at me.

"Of course, darling. They're all gone. And the cage is empty. The instant you fired the gun they disappeared. Not in a cloud of brimstone, either. They just—weren't there."

I smiled. It wasn't so hard, because Keith had the little silver pellet out.

"Lucky shot," he commented. "Just missed grazing the parietal lobe."

"I still can't understand it," I said. "Can't understand what made me shoot myself and why Satan disappeared."

"The oldest story in the world," answered Keith. "Virtue triumphant. It fought the evil in you and won, even though you weren't conscious of it. When Lily came toward you the battle was resolved. You and the Devil fought it out in your own soul, and you won.

"And that was the secret of getting rid of Satan. The human soul pitted itself naked against his will and denied him."

I shook my head as Keith continued.

"Evil preys on inner weakness. In my case, Satan focussed his forces on my dominant quality of ambition. That ambition, directed sanely, caused me to embark on scientific research. Perverted just a little, Satan made my ambition become a lust for power at any price.

"In Lily's possession, her natural feminine vanity was accentuated to the point where she desired utter adoration. Again the psychology of evil came into play. And when the Devil invaded you, he worked through your love of learning, turning your scholarly inclinations into the field of sorcery."

"It's hard to believe now," I said. "Maybe it was all a mass hallucination. Those old wive's tales—"

Keith chuckled.

“Perhaps what we saw and called Satan *wasn’t* physically real. We each saw a different figure in the glass cage, and Considine and Wintergreen might have had their own concepts. Even these creatures you materialized might be merely focal imaginative visions.

“But this I know. Whether we choose to personify it as Satan, or the Devil, or the Powers of Darkness—evil exists as a force in this world of ours. Describe it in terms of witchcraft or psychiatry as you will—evil is real.”

Lily laid her head on my shoulder. “Let’s forget it all now,” she suggested.

“Suits me. Got any methods to suggest?”

“Well, if you’re not too sick—”

“Too sick? I feel swell.”

“Well, if you’re not too sick, I suggest we celebrate.”

“Fine idea,” I responded.

“Sure,” said Keith. “Let’s go out and raise hell! Why—what’s the matter?”

“Nothing at all,” I replied; and promptly fainted.

Time Wounds All Heels

Jeep had a reputation for being a liar, but there was something about his story that was convincing; and besides there was his appetite—and those pills!

I DROPPED into Jack's place the other night for a slice of tongue—some of it in a sandwich and some from between Jack's lips. The place was pretty crowded, but I managed to find a booth as Jack glided over to take my order.

"What'll it be?" he asked. Then—"Well I'll be damned!" said Jack. "Probably," I observed.

But Jack didn't hear me. He was staring at the tall thin man who elbowed his way toward the booth.

I stared, too. There was nothing remarkable about the gentleman's thin, somewhat dour face, but his suit was enough to attract anyone's attention.

It isn't often that you see a horse-blanket walking.

"See that guy?" Jack whispered, hurriedly. "He's a number for you. Used to be an upper bracket in the rackets."

"He looks it," I confided. "Is he dangerous?"

"No. Reformed, completely reformed. Ever since he divorced his third wife he's led a simple life, playing the races. But I never expected to see him in here—he hasn't been around for months. Wait—I'll see if I can steer him into your booth. You'll enjoy it—he's the biggest liar in seven states."

"What seven?" I asked, in some curiosity. But Jack was signalling the glum-faced man in the checkered suit.

"Hello, Lefty! Where in blazes have you been?"

"Everywhere, and up to my neck," said the stranger. "But make with the menu because at the moment I arrive by express from hunger."

"Sit here," Jack suggested, indicating my booth. This guy is a friend of mine."

Lefty favored me with a long look. "Is he a righto or a wrongo?" he asked.

"He's a writer," said Jack. "Bob, I want you to meet a friend of mine—Lefty Feep."

"A pleasure," I said.

Lefty sat down without a word and grabbed the menu from Jack's hands.

"Shoot the steak to me Jack," he said. "Also I will have bean soup, clam chowder, a double order mashed potatoes, peas, carrots, roast chicken, a ham on rye, baked beans, an order of waffles, asparagus, pork tenderloin, scrambled eggs, coffee, apple pie, ice cream, and watermelon."

"You kidding?"

"No—eating. Now bring it here, but fast. My stomach is empty so long I think it's haunted."

Jack shrugged and moved away, muttering the incredible order under his breath.

Lefty Feep turned to me suddenly with a scowl.

"Vitamins!" he grated. "Vitamins!"

"You need them?" I asked.

"I hate vitamins," said Lefty. "Give me food any time."

"What's the matter, been on a diet?"

"You speak a mean truth, all right. For a week now I partake of nothing but vitamins. I am going pill-wacky." Lefty sighed heavily. "B'-bugs," he mumbled. "D-dizzy."

"Doctor's orders?" I inquired.

“No. Restaurant orders. It’s all I can get. Will you live in a burg where nobody nibbles anything but pills?”

“What town is this you’re speaking of?”

“New York.”

“But there’s plenty of food in New York—” I began.

“There is and there isn’t,” said Lefty, darkly brooding. “There is now but there will be ain’t.”

“I don’t get it.”

“I figure you don’t. Nobody will. I can make with the explanations but it is not such a thing as anyone will believe and I do not wish to get the reputation of a guy who sniffs snow.”

“You’re no drug addict,” I said. “Come on, spill it.”

Lefty Feep looked at me again with a wry smile. He shrugged.

“You asked for it,” he said. “It is a story that will make your hair curdle and your blood stand on end.”

“Shoot,” I urged.

He shot.

* * *

“LAST week I am coming back from Buffalo where I wager a few pennies on the bow-wows. My pooch comes in and I make collections, so I drive back very happy. It is the first time I make money by going to the dogs.”

“More and over, I know I have five rancho grandos waiting for me in Manhattan, where I place another bet with a personality name of Gorilla Gabface.

“This Gorilla Gabface is a number I dearly love to hate. He is a big noise in the rackets, and I do not care to have dealings with such riff and raff. Our association is just sentimental, because he and I once work our way through reform school together selling alky.

“But while I get reformed, Gorilla merely gets more and more unscrupulous in his business deals, until he is left with not one single scruple at all.

I do all right, but he is always poking from fun at me, saying the only gold I will ever see will be in a halo, while he has enough gold for a complete set of teeth.

“So I am very hepped over winning this little wager, like I say, and I start driving back thinking about how I will hand him the old razz and he will hand me the old cash and it will be a very fair exchange.

“Along about noon a.m. I find myself in the mountain country, and I am so happy I start to yodel while I drive. In fact, I even open the car window a trifle to sniff some air, which is unusual for me, because I have a theory that air is not so healthy on guys if it is too fresh.

“But the hills are very pretty, and the road has more curves than a Minsky stripper, and the sun is shining, and the birds are singing, and it is just one great big popular song if you know what I mean. I feel like a character on the Alka-Seltzer Barn Dance.

“I am too happy to notice where I’m going, so it is no wonder at all that I snap out of it to find myself off on a side road going up a hill.

“I figure on turning around when I reach the top, so I keep driving up and over. But the hill does not seem to have any top to it—I just keep on twisting and turning, and all the time the road is getting dustier and smaller, and the woods on each side are as thick as a House of David beard.

“It is so uncivilized I do not even spot a gas station. For that matter, I no longer see any farm houses or catalogue cabins. I wonder about this more than slightly, but keep on driving.

The air is blue up there, and so am I, because I figure I am lost for sure unless I get a chance to turn around.

“THEN all at once I come to a level grade that goes off for quite a space into a little valley between the hills. I am just ready to wheel around when I notice the sign.

"It is on the side of the road just ahead, standing on a stick between some rocks. I am curious to see what kind of advertising goes over here in the provinces, so I pull up and read it. It says:

PICNIC TODAY
DIMINUTIVE SOCIETY OF
THE CATSKILL MOUNTAINS

FREE ENTERTAINMENT AND
REFRESHMENTS.
STRANGERS WELCOME

"I suddenly realize I am panging from hunger, not having taken in groceries yet today. And here is free refreshments, so what can I lose? I never hear of the Diminutive Society of the Catskill Mountains before, but I figure they never hear of me either, so it's even.

"Before you can say Jack Dempsey, I make up my mind to drive on in, which I do. The road is just a little trail now, but I can make it if I go slow between the rocks.

"All at once I look up at the sky, because I hear thunder. The sky is still blue, and the sun is shining, so I figure I make a mistake. But no, I get a little further, and the thunder is louder.

"Then I round the last bend in the road and come out on an open space, and I see what is making with the thunder. There is an outdoor bowling alley, so help me, and the noise is from the balls rolling along the rocks.

"But that is not what makes me turn off the ignition and sit there like somebody stuffed a watermelon in my mouth. I am staring at the bowlers.

"Now I am a personality who gets around considerable for many's the year. I have the pleasure of placing my peepers on a lot of screwy spectacles, including pink elephants. But never do I see a wormier looking sight than this.

“Because the bowlers at this picnic are a bunch of dwarfs. So help me, there are a couple dozen of them, little shorty guys in nightcaps and ski suits, all running around like fugitives from Walt Disney.

“This baffles me but plenty. Because the sign says this is a picnic for the Diminutive Society, and instead of seeing Diminutives, there are these dwarfs.

“FINALLY I figure it is some kind of circus brawl or publicity stunt, though I don’t notice any Pathe newsreel cameras. What I do notice is the nice collection of beer kegs off on one side.

“I sit there and watch the pint-size Hank Marinos knock off the tenpins for some minutes. And then, all of a sudden, I hear a scratching at the side of the car. ‘Aha, termites!’ I say to myself.

“But when I open the door I do not see any termite. Instead, the smallest guy in the world is standing on the running board, trying to reach the door handle.

“He has a long gray beard on his face and a short beer in his hand. ‘Welcome, stranger,’ he pipes up, in no voice at all. ‘Welcome to the Diminutive Society of the Catskills.’ I do not altogether understand this, but what he says next shows me his heart is in the right place. ‘Have a drink’ he says.

“So I climb out and take the mug from him. The beer is plenty good, and has more kick than a chorus girl with her costume on fire. ‘Little man, what now?’ I ask.

“He grins through his chin-spinach. ‘What gives out here?’ I inquire. ‘Make with the explanations.’

“He shrugs. ‘We do not entertain visitors very often, I fear’ he pipes. ‘I fear I fail to comprehend your meaning.’

“By this time a whole crowd of shorty guys are standing around watching and poking each other. I begin to feel like I was back in school the time I was 16 and in the Third Grade. Most of these babies couldn't pick my pocket without using a stepladder.

"So I turn around to the head squeaker again and try to make him understand, because I can see from what he says that he can't be any too bright.

" 'Listen, quaint-face,' I say, politely. 'Where's Snow-White?'

"This does not go over. Evidently these jerks cannot even understand English.

" 'I mean, what's the score? Which one of you is Dopey? What is this—a convention of Midget Auto Racers?'

"The head little guy smiles again. 'You don't seem to understand at all' he tells me. 'This is the annual picnic of the Diminutive Society of the Catskill Mountains. It is the one occasion each year when we venture forth from our homes to celebrate our ownership of these hills. We bowl, we drink, we make merry from sunup to sundown. It has been a long time, as I say, since the last stranger's arrival. May we welcome you?'

"I don't get it at all. There is something awfully queer about this whole setup. The way these little guys dress, and talk, and giggle. But what have I got to lose? They are too small to hurt me, and I don't see any equalizers in the mob. They are kind of drunk and out for a good time so why shouldn't I stick around for a few drinks and a few laughs? Maybe it is the mountain air that does it, or maybe it is the first beer on an empty stomach. Anyhow, I shake hands with the head midget and say, 'Thanks, Shorty. How's for a little bowling?'

"SO then it begins. I take a turn at the alleys and I take a turn at the beers. These small fry have special bowling balls made up to fit their hands—about the size of tennis balls and not much heavier. I fling them two at a time, to be fair.

"These small fry also have special beer mugs made up to fit their mouths. So I drink three or four at a time, also to be fair.

“Pretty soon I turn out to be not only fair but also quite stinkaroo. These local yokels brew a mean beer, and before I notice it I am quite dizzy. The dwarfs do not seem to notice, either, but keep right on setting up the pins and the drinks, and I keep right on knocking them down.

“I am a nasty hand at the old strike-and-spare, even though the ground is rough, and they stand around cheering me on while I polish off one bowler after another, also one beer after another.

“Perhaps I am telling this kind of confused—but that’s the way I get, all right.

“It only seems like minutes, but it must be hours, when I glance over my shoulder and see the old sun is going down. I have killed the whole afternoon at this picnic.

“The dwarfs also seem to keep track of the time, because all of a sudden they quiet down and get ready to take a last drink. Nothing will do but for me to drink with them. And on account of there being two dozen of them, I have a lot of drinking to do.

“The head shorty keeps staring at me and nudging his pals while he watches me inhale the brew. ‘Verily, he has a greater capacity than Master Van Winkle,’ he giggles.

“The name seems to penetrate the speckled fog in my noggin for a minute. ‘What’s this about Van Winkle?’ I ask.

“But the sun is very low and red, and it is dark all around, and I see the dwarfs suddenly start running across the bowling lawn and into the shadows. The head shortly runs after them. ‘We must leave you, stranger,’ he calls over his shoulder. ‘Pleasant dreams.’

“I start to run after him, but all at once I stumble on the grass and everything starts going round and round—ten little red suns juggle themselves in my head, and the ground comes up and I am out.

“Just before I close my eyes I manage to holler after the last little runt again. ‘Who is this Van Winkle?’ I gasp.

“I can not be sure, because I am going down for the third time, but I think I hear his voice come from far away. ‘Why, Master Rip Van Winkle, of course,' whispers the dwarf.

"I open my mouth to say something, but the only thing coming out is a snore.

"WHEN I open my beautiful baby blue eyes again, it is daylight. At first I do not remember where I am, but then it all comes back in a hurry and I realize I pass out and probably sleep the night here.

"I raise up on one elbow to see if my little friends are around, but there are no signs. In fact, to make it funny, there is not even any bowling lawn, or tenpins, or tennis-size bowling balls. To make it not so funny, there is no beer keg, either—and I have a thirst, but strong.

"Maybe it is all a dream, I figure. Then I turn my head and I begin to pray it is a dream.

"Because I am now staring at the car, parked off to one side. And what I see is not altogether a sight for sore eyes like mine.

"Yesterday I leave a nice new coupe standing there. Today I find a jallopy you couldn't trade in on a pair of roller skates. It is covered with rust an inch thick; the tires are down, and the windows are out.

"I get up in a hurry because it is all clear to me now. These dwarfs I drink with are nothing but a gang of car thieves. They slip me a Mickey Finn and steal my coupe, leaving me this broken down wheelbarrow just to be quaint. No wonder they treat me so well—they are nothing but a bunch of Dead End Kids in whiskers!

"I run over to the wreck and wrench open the door. It not only opens but comes off in my hand.

"Then I reach inside, and all at once something flies out and hits me in the face. A couple of bats—so help me!

"I stare down at the cobwebs on the seat. Then I go around in front and stare again. This time I nearly fall down.

"Because I see my license plates on this jallopy!

“There is something wrong here. This is my car, all right—but . . . But? I reach up to scratch my chin. My hand never gets there. It tangles up in something soft, like a fur coat.

“My hand is tangled in a beard. A white beard. *My* beard! At least it is growing on me, so it must be my beard, though I do not want such a thing. No, I do not want such a thing as this beard at all, because it is all tangled up with burrs and thistles.

“I look down at my clothes and that is the last straw. You could even say that is the last shred. Because there isn’t much left of my clothes except shreds. My trousers have got French cuffs made of rags. The moths have been holding a convention on my knees. My coat and vest look like something a goat would eat for dessert.

“I AM not sitting in the hot seat at the moment, but I am still plenty shocked.

“Here I am, lost in the mountains, with an old car and a new beard. It is enough to make a guy holler—so I do. I kind of lose my head and run around yelling for the dwarfs to come out and make with the explanations. I guess I am off the beam for several moments, just screeching there, when I hear a sound.

“It is a buzzing sound, and it gets louder. All at once I look up and see a plane. The plane circles around, comes lower, and taxis down right in the open space where the bowling green should be.

“I just gawk. It is a new model plane, very small; all silvery and shining. What makes me gawk is the fact that it lands in just about a minute, and it only taxis maybe a hundred feet.

“I do not have much time to gawk, because a guy climbs out of the door and steps over to me. ‘Anything wrong?’ he asks me.

“ ‘Yeah,’ I reply. ‘You are.’ And he is.

“He is wearing a pretty funny getup himself—a pair of overalls with long sleeves and lapels on top. Instead of a hat he has a kind of basin on his head that looks like a helmet with antennae sticking up.

" 'Who are you?' I say, kind of sad. 'And if you tell me you're Flash Gordon, you can lock me up.'

"He just grins. 'My name is Grant,' he says. 'Special investigator for the government. What might your name be?'

" 'It might be Old Man Mose, from the looks of things,' I tell him. 'But it isn't. I'm on my way to New York, but I run into a little difficulty.'

" 'You mean to say an old man like you intends to walk all the way to New York?' he says. 'No wonder you are yelling. Would you like a lift?—I'll be hitting New York in about half an hour.'

" 'I'm with you, brother,' I say. So we hop in the plane. I do not look back at the car again, and for some reason I do not wish to look down at myself, either. Still and all I have to make a crack. 'Who are you calling an old man?' I yap.

"He grins again. 'Why you, of course. You're every bit of 60, aren't you? And with a beard, too—I haven't seen one of those things in years.'

"This shuts me up as we take off. 'You are quite a hot sketch yourself,' I tell him. 'What are you doing with that thunder mug on your head?'

"Grant looks at me like I am stir-simple. 'Why that's the radio control helmet for the plane, of course. Don't you know planes are operated by radio adjustment?' he asks, turning the antennae on top of the basin and making the plane rise. 'Say, how far in the backwoods do you come from?'

" 'Brother, I wish I knew,' I answer. " 'You know, there's something funny about you,' he goes on. 'Those clothes you're wearing—they aren't exactly 1962 cut.'

" '1962?' I yell.

"Grant gives me a long look. 'Of, course. Don't tell me you don't know what date it is?'

" 'Why, April 30th, 1942,' I snap back.

"HE BEGINS to laugh. Somehow I do not like to hear him laugh because I am not on the Bob Hope program at the time. 'This is April 28th, 1962,' he tells me. 'You are just 20 years and 363 days off. Or maybe you're further off than that.'

" 'I think so myself,' I say. 'Because I lay me down to sleep just last night, and if it is not 1942 at the time, I am robbed when I buy a newspaper.'

" 'Are you kidding me?' asks this Grant.

" 'Somebody is kidding somebody,' I tell him. 'All I know is I hoist a few beers with a gang of dwarfs on a picnic and fall asleep. When I wake up my car is rusty, my suit is a ragpicker's delight, and I have long white whiskers. Which is hard to figure out, because I am really a young guy with a sporty car and a nifty checkered suit. And if I'm not the guy who has the beard, then who the hell am I?'

" 'You sound like Rip Van Winkle to me,' laughs Grant.

"I pick up my ears. 'Rip Van Winkle!' I yell. 'That's the bozo the head dwarf mentions to me just before I hit the hay. Who is he?'

"So this Grant guy tells me a story about some jerk who lives way back when and gets lost in the mountains like I do. He meets up with a troupe of Singer's Midgets or somebody and starts bowling and drinking. They slip him some knockout drops and he goes out for the count. In fact he has such a hangover he sleeps for twenty years. At least that is the line he hands his wife when he gets back home.

" 'That sounds like me, all right,' I decide. 'So I do a twenty-year stretch on the grass. Well, there are worse places. But I see where I am plenty behind on current events. What do you hear from the mob?'

"This Grant guy doesn't know whether to take me serious or not. 'You actually claim an experience like Rip Van Winkle's?'

" 'I do not make up such a line just to explain to my wife,' I say. 'Because at the moment I do not have a wife, only alimony expenses. And after twenty years I wager I do not even have to pay alimony. But make with the news broadcast, buddy. What goes on in the world? Who wings the

Series last year? Are they still running the nags at Saratoga and wherever? Is Joe Louis still champion? Give out with important stuff like that.'

"Grant's face falls about a foot. 'I'm afraid the world isn't in such good shape,' he tells me.

" 'You mean the New Deal hasn't cleaned things up *yet?"* I ask.

" 'No, not exactly. Things are a lot better now, nationally and internationally, I suppose. You'll find plenty of new customs and fashions current, and a lot of inventions and improvements over your time. But one problem still remains. And it's a problem that's baffling me in my work right now.'

"I ASK him what it is.

" 'Crime,' he tells me. 'Bootlegging. Right now I'm investigating the biggest bootlegging racket this country has ever seen.'

" 'What's the matter, is Prohibition in again?' I ask.

" 'Prohibition? Oh—no, it's not liquor that's being bootlegged. It's vitamins.'

" 'Vitamins? You mean that alphabet stuff—like A, B, C, D? I never go for such articles personally. Give me a beefsteak rare any time.'

" 'You don't understand at all,' Grant tells me. 'Vitamins are food now. Today we eat only vitamin pills. Scientific research has perfected vitamin sources of energy and nourishment during the past years, largely as a result of crop shortages and famine following the second world war. Now everyone takes a daily ration of vitamins. It's improving the stamina of the world's population. But lately large stores of synthetic vitamin capsules are being stolen—hijacked, you'd call it—from the government warehouses. Women and children are starving again in a world where we have no place for hunger and want any more. Some organized group of vandals is stealing capsules and bootlegging them to merchants. And since all vitamin production is centered at New York, and most of the capsules are stored there before distribution, the situation is grave. For weeks now, millions of capsules disappear daily. And people go hungry.

" 'I am on my way back to New York from Cleveland. My clues there prove to be false leads. But unless I can crack this mess soon, it's all up with me.' Grant admits this sourly.

" 'I am an old alky runner myself,' I tell him. 'Maybe when I get into town I will look up some of the old mob and see if there are any leads. If so, I will give you a buzz. How about the phone number?'

" 'Use the private shortwave system,' he says. 'You'll find sending sets wherever you go. But you're not leaving me—I want to hear more about this Rip Van Winkle yarn.'

'I got business in the city. But urgent. I will contact you later,' I promise.

"He doesn't answer. He is fiddling with his headpiece again, making a landing. Because before I realize it, we are already over New York. I look out. The burg is not much changed. The buildings look a little taller, but I still see the Empire State and Radio City, and I think I spot Minsky's as we circle down.

"We land just outside Flushing, in another little field. The air around us is filled with little silver specks—more planes. In fact we come down in a place that says:

PLANES PARKED—50c
OVERNIGHT HANGARS—75c
MOTOR TUNEUP—$1.00

"And a guy comes running out to wipe off the windshield. I duck out of the seat in a hurry, and head for the gate. There is a subway entrance about a block away.

" 'Hey, wait for me!' yells this Grant guy. 'I want to talk to you.'

" 'See you later,' I call back. 'I may be a little slow getting there, but I still got a five grand bet to collect from Gorilla Gabface.'

"THERE is a lot I could tell. About the rocket subway they put in instead of the old one—all new improvements, except that I still have to stand up. About the screwy way they dress, in these overalls with the lapels, and about the new type cars I see downtown that operate with these radio controls but still try to get every pedestrian who steps off the sidewalk. I notice television movie houses, too, and I kind of get to wondering what happens to the oldfashioned strip-tease, but I do not have time to find out.

"Because, like I tell this Grant, I am on my way to see Gorilla Gabface. In 1942 he hangs out behind a pool hall on Second Avenue, and I figure it is an even chance he is still there, because Gorilla is not the kind of character who gets around much. In fact he is very lazy and hardly ever moves from his chair except to kick his wife.

"So I get off the subway and start walking. The streets look no better; in fact twenty years age them the way they age me.

"On the subway persons look at me kind of peculiar and I am undoubtedly a sight, but here on Second Avenue I look quite natural—because the street is full of broken down bums.

"I get to thinking about that. I am a broken down old bum myself, now, and I hardly know what to do. But I figure once I get my hands on that five grand I will shave and dress and look around for some odds on the dogs or nags, and get back on my feet.

"Still and all it is not pleasant to hike along. Because there are a lot of sad-looking people on the street, sitting in front of their houses. Kids crying, and women with shawls around their heads, and guys sitting with their heads in their hands.

"Pretty soon I come to a long line of guys standing in front of a store. They are mumbling and double-talking under their breath. Up at the head of the line they are pushing and rattling the door to the joint, which is locked.

"All at once a guy sticks his head out of the window upstairs. 'Go away,' he says. 'Go away, all of you. Government orders. We can't sell any capsules today—vitamin shortage.'

“Guys in the line let out a groan. ‘What about my family?’ one yells. ‘My old lady and the baby have nothing to eat for three days now, except a few capsules of C and half an ounce of E.’

“ ‘I’m sorry,’ says the guy in the window. ‘You know how it is. I’m not responsible.’

“ ‘We got to eat,’ says the fellow in the line. ‘It’s those damned hijackers! Why don’t they catch them?’

“MOST of the men turn away. I walk on. All at on once I notice a little rat-face personality sneaking up to one of the guys in the line.

“ ‘You want some capsules, buddy?’ he whispers. ‘I got some here—nice fresh’ stuff. A to Z, anything you want, if you’ll keep your mouth shut.’

“The guy looks at rat-face kind of funny, but he says, ‘I suppose I have to. My folks are hungry. How much for a two-day supply of general rations?’

“Rat-face smiles. ‘Ten bucks,’ he says.

“ ‘Ten bucks? Why that’s robbery—these capsules are only 80c at a regular store!’ says the guy.

“Rat-face smiles again. ‘Regular store hasn’t got any,’ he whispers. ‘You know that. Ten bucks, buddy. You’re lucky to get it.’

“The guy hands him the money and gets a little tube. I don’t wait to see any more, but I know rat-face is going down the line now.

“I understand what this guy Grant tells me on the plane, about the vitamin shortage. It’s just like bootlegging—only with a difference. Because, you see, these people *need* food. They must have it. And to hi-jack this stuff and then sell it—well, I don’t go for it, that’s all. Maybe I am getting soft in my old age.

“Anyhow, I do not think about it any more, because I arrive at Gorilla’s pool hall and walk in. The joint looks just the same, and it is just as empty out front. There is only one guy sitting there—a new guy to me. He has a red face with a lot of warts growing on it, and there is a dead cigarette butt in his mouth. A collar ad boy.

" 'Hello, character,' I greet him. 'Is Gorilla around?'

"Warty gives me a slow look. 'He might be. Who's looking for him?'

" 'Tell him Lefty Feep wants to see him. It's about five grand.'

" 'You got five grand?'

" 'I'm going to get five grand from him,' I correct.

"He gives me the old leer and sneer. But I stare right back, and finally he climbs off the stool and goes into the rear room. He returns in a couple minutes.

" 'Go right in,' he says.

"So I toddle back and open the door.

" 'Well, pappy?' says a voice.

"I see a big fat guy sitting at a table. He has a bald noggin and a couple spare chins, but mostly he is all jaw from the neck up and all arms from the neck down. He looks like King Kong with a bad shave.

" 'Pardon me, curly,' I state. 'Where could I find Gorilla Gabface?'

" 'In hell,' says the fat guy at the table. 'He's been dead for eighteen years. Come to think of it you don't look far from dead yourself, pappy.'

" 'Don't call me pappy! ' I snap. 'Or I will let the air out of your chins, you overgrown walrus.'

"THEN the fat guy gets up from the table and I see he is about ten feet tall, or maybe six and a half anyhow. Part of him is muscle and the rest is meanness, so when he laughs I am not fooled, and when he sticks out his mitt I do not clasp it in any fraternity grip.

" 'Who are you and what do you want?' he says, moving around toward me.

" 'I am Lefty Feep, and Gorilla Gabface owes me five Gs on the dog-races,' I repeat, stubborn. Only my feet are not stubborn, because they back me to the door.

“ ‘Well I am Gorilla’s nephew and I am running this show now for many’s the year. I do not ever hear my uncle mention your name, and he certainly never mentions owing anyone five pennies, let alone five grand. So my advice to you, Feep, is to get out of here before I strangle you in your whiskers, you old sponge!’

“ ‘I take it you do not wish to pay me?’ I inquire, just to make sure.

“The fat guy reaches out across the floor with one hand, which wraps around my neck. ‘No,’ he says, lifting me off the floor and shaking me like a used bar-rag. ‘Though I can see you have a good use for five thousand dollars, if only to pay hospital expenses after I get through beating you up.’

“This is not exactly good news to me, and it is even less good when he smacks me one on the side of the head. I am just hanging there helpless while the fat guy draws back for another clout, when all at once he drops me to the floor.

“Another guy comes in behind me, and he attracts the fat guy’s attention. I lie there on the floor looking up and I see the newcomer is none other than Rat-face, the slug that was selling bootleg vitamin capsules to the citizens in front of the market.

“He is so excited he does not even notice me, and nearly steps on my face while I am lying there. ‘It’s going great, Boss!’ he yells to the fat guy. ‘I sell three hundred bucks of pills in the last hour. The rest of the mob is covering the district. We are running out of stock.’

“RAT-FACE is still talking when Wart-face comes in from the front room. He has an acetylene torch in one hand. ‘The boys are ready to tunnel through to the Government warehouse again this evening,’ he says. ‘Shall I send the trucks over?’

“Fat guy looks at the two of them kind of funny. ‘You birds talk too much,’ he says. ‘Here,’ he says to Ratface. ‘Go back out and tell the mob to stop selling for today. We don’t want to flood the market all at once.’ Then he turns to Wart-face. ‘Get down to the warehouse. The boys are tunneling through from the building alongside. But leave this torch with me. I think I got to use it. Now—powder!'

"The two guys back out of the room without even noticing me. I am lying on the floor listening to the birdies from that crack on the head, but I am also thinking. If these guys are the ones Grant is after, they have been running this bootleg vitamin racket from this place. One gang must be tunneling through to steal Government supplies, and the other gang goes out and sells the pills. And this fat guy is the brain.

"So there I am, locked in a room with Gorilla's nephew. I am sixty years old, I have no equalizer, and he is a pretty tough customer.

"What he has to say to me is not encouraging, either. He stands over me and looks down with a very nasty grin. 'I am sorry about you, pappy,' he says. 'I only intend to beat you up and send you to a hospital. But now you hear a little too much, so I think your next stop is the morgue.'

"I think in high gear. 'Have a heart,' I tell him. 'I am an oldtimer myself. I know your late uncle, in fact I am associated with him, you might say. I just do a twenty-year stretch, but I am an uptown boy. I can help you plenty.'

"Fat guy stands right over me and laughs some more. 'No use, pappy,' he says. 'You old-fashioned gangsters are all through. We don't use rods and rattlers any more. This is big business. I am bucking the Federal Government myself, and winning. Why, we got eighty million vitamin food capsules stored away under this joint, and we're tunneling through tonight for another thirty million. I got a hundred guys out organized to cover bootleg territories. It's big business. We got a dozen cities at our mercy. Do you think I am some cheesy little punk in back of a poolroom like my late uncle? Not for a minute—this is big time stuff and you has-beens are no good.

" 'But give me a chance—I know a few tricks,' I plead.

"He turns on the laugh again. 'Not on your life,' he chuckles. 'And speaking of your life, here goes.'

"So he reaches down for the acetylene torch and the interview is over.

"FIFTEEN minutes later, after I locate this guy Grant by shortwave from a cigar store on the corner, he arrives and claps the cuffs on the fat guy. Also his men surround the pool hall and snag Rat-face and his pals when they drift in from time to time.

"They also capture, I hear later, all the mob down at the tunnel job, and they find the stores of capsules in a big cellar warehouse hidden downstairs.

"So all in all it turns out to be a good thing for this guy Grant. And also for me, when I learn the Government is paying a five grand reward for turning up the vitamin racketeers.

"Two days later the money comes through. Meanwhile I pal around with Grant and eat vitamins in restaurants. That is why I get so sick of them.

"In fact, on the third day I am sitting in a hamburger stand making faces while I gulp down my third order of the dizzy beef pills with a ketchup drop on the side. Grant is with me, and he says, 'Well, what are you going to do with the reward—go into business for yourself?'

"That is when I get mad. 'No,' I tell him. 'I am not cut out for this day and age, I see that. I am too old to start in again, I do not like the class of people that run the rackets nowadays, and besides I do not see any strip shows in progress at all. More and over, these vitamin pills ruin my digestion and I have not even got an excuse to carry a toothpick. I think maybe I am better off back in 1942.'

" 'Too bad,' Grant tells me. 'Those days are gone forever.'

"But I do not hear him. I am staring at a calendar on the wall. 'April 29th!' I holler. 'Listen, do you or do you not tell me I sleep for 20 years and 360 days? And do I or do I not spend 4 more days here? That makes tomorrow April 30th again!'

" 'So what?' Grant asks.

" 'So that means tomorrow is the annual picnic of the Diminutive Society of the Catskill Mountains. Hop into that plane of yours—we're going to see those dwarfs and give them a little proposition.'

"WHICH is just what we do. Grant lets me off near the top of the mountains the next morning. I go up and find the dwarfs bowling as usual. They are surprised to see me, and kind of embarrassed, till I get the head shorty off.

"I ask him if he has got anything to drink that will send me back to where I was. He plays smart and says no. Then I tell him that fun is fun, and a gag is a gag, but I want to go back and am ready to pay for the trip.

"This gets him interested, and he asks what the deal is. I tell him. He gets excited and calls a conference. Well, to make a long story short, they get together with me and the head shorty goes off and mixes up a fresh drink. Not beer, but something else. I promise not to mention it. Then I take care of my end of the bargain and drink the stuff.

"It puts me out right away. And when I wake up everything is O.K. It is morning and when I hike down the mountain I find out that it is May 1st, 1942.

"I wire ahead for some funds, and rush into town. The first place I head for is here, because after eating nothing but vitamins for four days, I am plenty hungry."

* * *

LEFTY FEEP concluded his story with a profound sigh. It was followed by a snort from over my shoulder.

Jack stood there with the tray of food.

"What did I tell you?" he asked me. "Did you ever hear such a line in your life?"

Feep bridled. "What is wrong with my story, I would like to know?" he asked.

Jack snorted again. "Everything. But even if I believed it—which I don't—there are just a few things that puzzle me. To begin with, I thought you were at the mercy of that fat guy in the back room of the pool hall. He was going to kill you with an acetylene torch, wasn't he? In fact you were lying there on the floor and he was standing over you. And yet you say that fifteen minutes later you walked out free and left him there to be captured.”

“Oh, that?” said Lefty Feep. “That is very simple. Like I say, this guy thinks he is so smart, and that old-timers do not know any clever tricks. But I have one trick up my sleeve he does not know. It is a very ordinary trick today and much used in the rackets—but I suppose he never hears of it in 1962, I am lying there on the floor, he reaches down for the torch, but I grab it first. He shoves his foot down on my arm, but then I pull this old-fashioned trick on him, like I say. I merely turn on the torch and give him the hot-foot. And if you do not think a hot-foot with a torch is effective, you are crazy.”

Jack turned crimson. “All right, I give up,” he sighed. “But just one thing more. About that deal you made with the dwarfs.”

“What about it?”

“Well, certainly you didn’t just offer them money. They have no use for money.”

Feep smiled. “Of course not. But I use the money to make the deal. I buy something the dwarfs will really go for. That is what I tell the head shorty to make him go through with it. I tell him I will give his little pals something they can use at their picnics from now on.”

“And what is that?”

“A modern bowling alley. Sure—I tell him I contract to build a bowling alley right on top of the mountain, so they can organize a league and get into the tournaments. In fact, next year I am going back there again and play them myself. Maybe you would like to get on the team?”

“Come on,” said Jack to me. “Let’s you and I get out of here.”

We left the table, but Feep didn’t see us go. He was tearing apart the roast chicken with the famished look of a man who has eaten nothing but pills for four days.

Black Bargain

Maybe you've heard it said of someone, "he's scared of his own shadow." Well, here's the story of a man who had a damned *good reason to be!*

IT WAS getting late when I switched off the neon and got busy behind the fountain with my silver polish. The fruit syrup came off easily, but the chocolate stuck and the hot fudge was greasy. I wish to the devil they wouldn't order hot fudge.

I began to get irritated as I scrubbed away. Five hours on my feet, every night, and what did I have to show for it? Varicose veins. Varicose veins, and the memory of a thousand foolish faces. The veins were easier to bear than the memories. They were so depressing, those customers of mine. I knew them all by heart.

In early evening all I got was "cokes." I could spot the "cokes" a mile away. Giggling high-school girls, with long shocks of uncombed brown hair, with their shapeless tan "fingertip" coats and the repulsively thick legs bulging over furry red ankle socks. They were all "cokes." For forty-five minutes they'd monopolize a booth, messing up the tile table-top with cigarette ashes, crushed napkins daubed in lipstick, and little puddles of spilled water. Whenever a high-school girl came in, I automatically reached for the cola pump.

A little later in the evening I got the "gimme two packs" crowd. Sports-shirts hanging limply over hairy arms meant the popular brands. Blue work-shirts with rolled sleeves disclosing tattooing meant the two-for-a-quarter cigarettes.

Once in awhile I got a fat boy. He was always a “cigar.” If he wore glasses he was a ten-center. If not, I merely had to indicate the box on the counter. Five cents straight. Mild Havana—all long filler.

“Oh, it was monotonous. The “notions” family, who invariably departed with aspirin, Ex-Lax, candy bars, and a pint of icecream. The “public library” crowd—tall, skinny youths bending the pages of magazines on the rack and never buying. The “soda-waters” with their trousers wrinkled by the sofa of a one-room apartment, the “hairpins,” always looking furtively toward the baby buggy outside. And around ten, the “pineapple sundaes”—fat women Bingo-players. Followed by the “chocolate sodas” when the show let out. More booth-parties, giggling girls and red-necked young men in sloppy play-suits.

In and out, all day long. The rushing “telephones,” the doddering old “three-cent stamps,” the bachelor “toothpastes” and “razor-blades.”

I could spot them all at a glance. Night after night they dragged up to the counter.

I don’t know why they even bothered to tell me what they wanted. One look was all I needed to anticipate their slightest wishes. I could have given them what they needed without their asking.

Or, rather, I suppose I couldn’t. Because what most of them really needed was a good long drink of arsenic, as far as I was concerned.

Arsenic! Good Lord, how long had it been since I’d been called upon to fill out a *prescription!* None of these stupid idiots wanted *drugs* from a drug-store. Why had I bothered to study pharmacy? All I really needed was a two-week course in pouring chocolate syrup over melting icecream, and a month’s study of how to set up cardboard figures in the window so as to emphasize their enormous busts.

Well—

He came in then. I heard the slow footsteps without bothering to look up. For amusement I tried to guess before I glanced. A “gimme two packs” ? A “toothpaste” ? Well, the hell with him. I was closing up.

The male footsteps had shuffled up to the counter before I raised my head. They halted, timidly. I still refused to give any recognition of his presence. Then came a hesitant cough. That did it.

I found myself staring at Caspar Milquetoast, and nearly rags. A middle-aged, thin little fellow with sandy hair and rimless glasses perched on a snub nose. The crease of his froggish mouth underlined the despair of his face.

He wore a frayed $16.50 suit, a wrinkled white shirt, and a string tie—but humility was his real garment. It covered him completely, that aura of hopeless resignation.

“TO HELL with psycho-analysis! I’m not the drug-store Dale Carnegie. What I saw added up to only one thing in my mind. A moocher.

“I beg your pardon, please, but have you any tincture of aconite?”

Well, miracles *do* happen. I was going to get a chance to sell drugs after all. Or was I? When despair walks in and asks for aconite, it means suicide.

I shrugged. “Aconite?” I echoed. “I don’t know.”

He smiled, a little. Or rather, that crease wrinkled back in a poor imitation of amusement. But on his face a smile had no more mirth in it than the grin you see on a skull.

“I know what you’re thinking,” he mumbled. “But you’re wrong. I’m—I’m a chemist. I’m doing some experiments, and I must have four ounces of aconite at once. And some belladonna. Yes, and—wait a minute.”

Then he dragged the book out of his pocket.

I craned my neck, and it was worth it.

The book had rusty metal covers, and was obviously very old. When the thick yellow pages fluttered open under his trembling thumb I saw flecks of dust rise from the binding. The heavy black-lettered type was German, but I couldn’t read anything at that distance.

“Let me see now,” he murmured. “Aconite—belladonna—yes, and I have this—the cat, of course—nightshade—um hum—oh, yes, I’ll need some phosphorus of course—have you any blue chalk?—good—and I guess that’s all.”

I was beginning to catch on. But what the devil did it matter to me? A screwball more or less was nothing new in my life. All I wanted to do was get out of here and soak my feet.

I went bade and got the stuff for him, quickly. I peered through the slot above the prescription counter, but he wasn’t doing anything—just paging through that black, iron-bound book and moving his lips.

Wrapping the parcel, I came out. “Anything else, sir?”

“Oh—yes. Could I have about a dozen candles? The large size?”

I opened a drawer and scrabbled for them under the dust.

“I’ll have to melt them down and reblend them with the fat,” he said.

“What?”

“Nothing. I was just figuring.”

Sure. That’s the kind of figuring you do best when you’re counting the pads in your cell. But it wasn’t my business, was it?

So I handed over the package, like a fool.

“Thank you. You’ve been very kind. I must ask you to be kinder—to charge this.”

Oh, swell!

“You see I’m temporarily out of funds. But I can assure you, in a very short time, in fact within three days, I shall pay you in full. Yes.”

A very convincing plea. I wouldn’t give him a cup of coffee on it—and that’s what bums usually ask for, instead of aconite and candles. But if his words didn’t move me, his eyes did. They were so lonely behind his spectacles, so pitifully alone, those two little puddles of hope in the desert of despair that was his face.

All right. Let him have his dreams. Let him take his old iron-bound dream book home with him and make him crazy. Let him light his tapers and draw his phosphorescent circle and recite his spells to Little Wahoo the Indian Guide of the Spirit World, or whatever the hell he wanted to do.

No, I wouldn't give him coffee, but I'd give him a dream.

"That's okay, buddy," I said. "We're all down on our luck some time, I guess."

That was wrong. I shouldn't have patronized. He stiffened at once and his mouth curled into a sneer—of superiority, if you please!

"I'm not asking charity," he said. "You'll get paid, never fear, my good man.

In three days, mark my words. Now good evening. I have work to do."

Out he marched, leaving "my good man" with his mouth open. Eventually I dosed my mouth but I couldn't clamp a lid on my curiosity.

That night, walking home, I looked down the dark street with new interest. The black houses bulked like a barrier behind which lurked fantastic mysteries. Row upon row, not houses any more, but dark dungeons of dreams. In what house did my stranger hide? In what room was he intoning to what strange gods?

Once again I sensed the presence of wonder in the world, of lurking strangeness behind the scenes of drug-store and apartment-house civilization. Black books still were read, and wild-eyed strangers walked and muttered, candles burned into the night, and a missing alley-cat might mean a chosen sacrifice.

But my feet hurt, so I went home.

II

SAME old malted milks, cherry cokes, vaseline, Listerine, hairnets, bathing caps, cigarettes, and what have you?

Me, I had a headache. It was four days later, almost the same time of night, when I found myself scrubbing off the soda-taps again.

Sure enough, he walked in.

I kept telling myself all evening that I didn't expect him—but I *did* expect him, really. I had that crawling feeling when the door clicked. I waited for the shuffle of the Tom McCann shoes.

Instead there was a brisk tapping of Oxfords. English Oxfords. The $18.50 kind.

I looked up in a hurry this time.

It *was* my stranger.

At least he was there, someplace beneath the flashy blue pin-stripe of his suit, the immaculate shirt and foulard tie. He'd had a shave, a haircut, a manicure, and evidently a winning ticket in the Irish Sweepstakes.

"Hello, there." Nothing wrong with that voice—I've heard it in the ritzy hotel lobbies for years, brimming over with pep and confidence and authority.

"Well, well, well," was all I could say.

He chuckled. His mouth wasn't a crease any more. It was a trumpet of command. Out of that mouth could come orders, and directions. This wasn't a mouth shaped for hesitant excuses any longer. It was a mouth for requesting expensive dinners, choice vintage wines, heavy cigars; a mouth that barked at taxi-drivers and doormen.

"Surprised to see me, eh? Well, I told you it would take three days. Want to pay you your money, thank you for your kindness."

That was nice. Not the thanks, the money. I like money. The thought of getting some I didn't expect made me genial.

"So your prayers were answered, eh?" I said.

He frowned.

"Prayers—what prayers?"

"Why I thought that—" I'd pulled a boner, and no mistake.

"I don't understand," he snapped, understanding perfectly well. "Did you perhaps harbor some misapprehension concerning my purchases of the other evening? A few necessary chemicals, that's all—to complete the experiment I spoke of. And the candles, I must confess, were to light my room. They shut my electricity off the day before."

Well, it *could* be.

"Might as well tell you the experiment was a howling success. Yes, sir. Went right down to Newsohm with the results and they put me on as assistant research director. Quite a break."

Newsohm was the biggest chemical supply house in our section of the country. And he went right down in his rags and was "pat on" as assistant research director! Well, live and learn.

"So here's the money. $2.39, wasn't it? Can you change a twenty?"

I couldn't.

"That's all right, keep it."

I refused, I don't know why. Made me feel crawling again, somehow.

"Well then, tell you what, let's do. You are closing up, aren't you? Why not step down the street to the tavern for a little drink? I'll get change there. Come on, I fed like celebrating."

So it was that five minutes later I walked down the street with Mr. Fritz Gulther.

We took a table in the tavern and ordered quickly. Neither he nor I was at ease. Somehow there was an unspoken secret between us. It seemed almost as though I harbored criminal knowledge against him—I, of all men, alone knowing that behind this immaculately-clad figure of success, there lurked a shabby specter just three days in the past. A specter that owed me $2.39.

We drank quickly, both of us. The specter got a little fainter. We had another. I insisted on paying for the third round.

"It's a celebration," I argued.

HE LAUGHED. "Certainly is. And let me tell you, this is only the beginning. Only the beginning! From now on I'm going to climb so fast it'll make your head swim. I'll be running that place within six months. Going to get a lot of new defense orders in from the government, and expand."

"Wait a minute," I cautioned, reserve gone. "You're way ahead of yourself. If I were in your shoes I'd still be dazed with what happened to me in the past three days."

Fritz Gulther smiled. "Oh, that? I expected *that.* Didn't I tell you so in the store? I've been working for over a year and I knew just what to expect. It was no surprise, I assure you. I had it all planned. I was willing to starve to carry out my necessary studies, and I did starve. Might as well admit it."

"Sure." I was on my fourth drink now, over the barriers. "When you came into the store I said to myself, 'Here's a guy who's been through hell' !"

"Truer words were never spoken," said Gulther. "I've been through hell all right, quite literally. But it's all over now, and I didn't get burned."

"Say, confidentially—what kind of magic did you use?"

"Magic? Magic? I don't know anything about magic."

"Oh, yes you do, Gulther," I said. "What about that little blade book with the iron covers you were mumbling around with in the store?"

"German inorganic chemistry text," he snapped. "Pretty old. Here, drink up and have another."

I had another. Gulther began to babble, a bit. About his new clothes and his new apartment and the new car he was going to buy next week. About how he was going to have everything he wanted now, by God, he'd show the fools that laughed at him all these years, he'd pay back the nagging landladies and the cursing grocers, and the sneering rats who told him he was soft in the head for studying the way he did.

Then he got into the kindly stage. "How'd you like a job at Newsohm?" he asked me. "You're a good pharmacist. You know your chemistry. You're a nice enough fellow, too—but you've got a terrible imagination. How about it? Be my secretary. Sure, that's it. Be my secretary. I'll put you on tomorrow."

"I'll drink on that," I declared. The prospect intoxicated me. The thought of escape from the damned store, escape from the "coke"-faces, the "ciggies"-voices, very definitely intoxicated me. So did the next drink.

I began to see something.

We were sitting against the wall and the tavern lights were low. Couples around us were babbling in monotone that was akin to silence. We sat in shadow against the wall. Now I looked at my shadow—an ungainly, flickering caricature of myself, hunched over the table. What a contrast it presented before *his* suddenly erect bulk!

His shadow, now—

His shadow, now—

I saw it. He was sitting up straight across the table from me. But his shadow on the wall was *standing!*

"No more Scotch for me," I said, as the waiter came up.

But I continued to stare at his shadow. He was sitting and the shadow was standing. It was a larger shadow than mine, and a blacker shadow. For fun I moved my hands up and down, making heads and faces in silhouette. He wasn't watching me, he was gesturing to the waiter.

His shadow didn't gesture. It just stood there. I watched and stared and tried to look away. His hands moved but the black outline stood poised and silent, hands dangling at the sides. And yet I saw the familiar shape of his head and nose; unmistakably his.

"Say, Gulther," I said. "Your shadow—there on the wall—"

I slurred my words. My eyes were blurred.

But I felt his attitude pierce my consciousness below the alcohol.

Fritz Gulther rose to his feet and then shoved a dead-white face against mine. He didn't look at his shadow. He looked at me, through me, at some horror behind my face, my thoughts, my brain. He looked *at* me, and *into* some private hell of his own.

"Shadow," he said. "There's nothing wrong with my shadow. You're mistaken. Remember that, you're mistaken. And if you ever mention it again, I'll bash your skull in."

Then Fritz Gulther got up and walked away. I watched him march across the room, moving swiftly but a little unsteadily. Behind him, moving very slowly and not a bit unsteadily, a tall black shadow followed him from the room.

III

IF YOU can build a better mousetrap than your neighbor, you're liable to put your foot in it.

That's certainly what I had done with Gulther. Here I was, ready to accept his offer of a good job as his secretary, and I had to go and pull a drunken boner!

I was still cursing myself for a fool two days later. Shadows that don't follow body-movements, indeed! Who was that shadow I saw you with last night? That was no shadow, that was the Scotch I was drinking. Oh, fine!

So I stood in the drug store and sprinkled my sundaes with curses as well as chopped nuts.

I nearly knocked the pecans off the counter that second night, when Fritz Gulther walked in again.

He hurried up to the counter and flashed me a tired smile.

"Got a minute to spare?"

"Sure—wait till I serve these people in the booth."

I dumped the sundaes and raced back. Gulther perched himself on a stool and took off his hat. He was sweating profusely.

"Say—I want to apologize for the way I blew up the other night."

"Why, that's all right, Mr. Gunther."

"I got a little too excited, that's all. Liquor and success went to my head. No hard feelings, I want you to understand that. It's just that I was nervous. Your ribbing me about my shadow, that stuff sounded too much like the way I was always kidded for sticking to my studies in my room. Landlady used to accuse me of all sorts of things. Claimed I dissected her cat, that I was burning incense, messing the floor up with chalk. Some damn fool college punks downstairs began to yap around that I was some kind of nut dabbling in witchcraft."

I wasn't asking for his autobiography, remember. All this sounded a little hysterical. But then, Gulther looked the part. His sweating, the way his mouth wobbled and twitched as he got this out of me.

"But say, reason I stopped in was to see if you could fix me up a sedative. No, no bromo or aspirin. I've been taking plenty of that stuff ever since the other evening. My nerves are all shot. That job of mine down at Newsohm takes it all out of me."

"Wait a minute, I'll get something."

I made for the back room. As I compounded I sneaked a look at Gulther through the slot.

All right, I'll be honest. It wasn't Gulther I wanted to look at. It was his shadow.

When a customer sits at the counter stools, the storelights hit him so that his shadow is just a little black pool beneath his feet.

Gulther's shadow was a complete silhouette of his body, in outline. A black, deep shadow.

I blinked, but that didn't help.

Stranger still, the shadow seemed to be cast *parallel* with his body, instead of at an angle from it. It grew out from his chest instead of his legs. I don't know refraction, the laws of light, all that technical stuff. All I know is that Fritz Gulther had a big black shadow sitting beside him on the floor, and that the sight of it sent cold shivers along my spine.

I wasn't drunk. Neither was he. Neither was the shadow. All three of us existed.

Now Gulther was putting his hat back on.

But not the shadow. It just sat there. Crouched.

It was all wrong.

The shadow was no denser at one spot than at another. It was evenly dark, and—I noted this particularly—the outlines did not blur or fade. They were solid.

I stared and stared. I saw a lot now I'd never noticed. The shadow wore no clothes. Of course! Why should it put on a hat? It was naked, that shadow. But it belonged to Gulther—it wore spectacles. It was his shadow, all right. Which suited me fine, because *I* didn't want it.

Fiddling around compounding that sedative, I got in several more peeks.

Now Gulther was looking down over his shoulder. *He* was looking at his shadow, now. Even from a distance I fancied I saw new beads of sweat string a rosary of fear across his forehead.

He knew, all right!

I came out, finally.

"Here it is," I said. I kept my eyes from his face.

"Good. Hope it works. Must get some sleep. And say—that job offer still goes. How about coming down tomorrow morning?"

I nodded, forcing a smile.

Gulther paid me, rose.

"See you then."

"Certainly." And why not? After all, what if you do work for a boss with an unnatural shadow? Most bosses have other faults, worse ones and more concrete. That shadow—whatever it was and whatever was wrong with it—wouldn't bite me. Though Gulther acted as though it might bite *him.*

As he turned away I looked at his departing back, and at the long, swooping black outline which followed it. The shadow rose and stalked after him. Stalked.

Yes, it followed quite purposefully. To my now bewildered eyes it seemed larger than it had in the tavern. Larger, and a bolder black.

Then the night swallowed Gulther and his non-existent companion.

I went back to the rear of the store and swallowed the other half of the sedative I'd made up for that purpose. After seeing that shadow, I needed it as much as he did.

IV

THE girl in the ornate outer office smiled prettily. “Go right in,” she warbled. “He’s expecting you.”

So it was true, then. Gulther was assistant research director, and I was to be his secretary.

I floated in. In the morning sunshine I forgot all about shadows.

The inner office was elaborately furnished—a huge place, with the elegant walnut panelling associated with business authority. There was a kidney-desk set before closed Venetian blinds, and a variety of comfortable leather armchairs. Fluorescent lighting gleamed pleasantly.

But there was no Gulther. Probably on the other side of the little door at the back, talking to his chief.

I sat down, with the tight feeling of anticipation hugged somewhere within my stomach. I glanced around, taking in the room again. My gaze swept the glass-topped desk. It was bare. Except in the corner, where a small box of cigars rested.

No, wait a minute. That wasn’t a cigar-box. It was metal. I’d seen it somewhere before.

Of course! It was Gulther’s iron-bound book.

“German inorganic chemistry.” Who was I to doubt his word? So naturally, I just had to sneak a look before he came in.

I opened the yellowed pages.

De Vermis Mysteriis.

“Mysteries of the Worm.”

This was no inorganic chemistry text. It was something entirely different. Something that told you how you could compound aconite and belladonna and draw circles of phosphorescent fire on the floor when the stars were right. Something that spoke of melting tallow candles and blending them with corpse-fat, whispered of the uses to which animal sacrifice might be put.

It spoke of meetings that could be arranged with various parties most people don’t either care to meet or even believe in.

The thick black letters crawled across the pages, and the detestable odor arising from the musty thing formed a background for the nastiness of the text. I won’t say whether or not I believed what I was reading, but I will admit that there was an air, a suggestion about those cold, deliberate directions for traffic with alien evil, which made me shiver with repulsion. Such thoughts have no place in sanity, even as fantasy. And if *this* is what Gulther had done with the materials, he’d bought himself for $2.39.

“Years of study,” eh? “Experiments.” What was Gulther trying to call up, what did he call up, and what bargain did he make?

The man who could answer these questions sidled out from behind the door. Gone was the Fritz Gulther of the pinstripe suit personality. It was my original Caspar Milquetoast who creased his mouth at me in abject fear. He looked like a man—I had to say it—who was afraid of his own shadow.

The shadow trailed him through the doorway. To my eyes it had grown overnight. Its arms were slightly raised, though Gulther had both hands pressed against his sides. I saw it cross the wall as he walked toward me—and it moved more swiftly than he did.

Make no mistake. I saw the shadow. Since then I’ve talked to wise boys who assure me that under even fluorescence no shadow is cast. They’re wise boys all right, but I saw that shadow.

Gulther saw that book in my hands.

“All right,” he said, simply. “You know. And maybe it’s just as well.”

“Know?”

“Yes. Know that I made a bargain with—someone. I thought I was being smart. He promised me success, and wealth, anything I wanted, on only one condition. Those damned conditions; you always read about them and you always forget, because they sound so foolish! He told me that I’d have only one rival, and that this rival would be a part of myself. It would grow with my success.”

I sat mute. Gulther was wound up for a long time.

“Silly, wasn’t it? Of course I accepted. And then I found out what my rival was—what it would be. This shadow of mine. It’s independent of me, you know that, and it keeps growing! Oh, not in size, but in *depth,* in intensity. It's becoming—maybe I *am* crazy but you see it too—more solid. Thicker. As though it had palpable substance.

CREASE-MOUTH wobbled violently, but the words choked on.

"The further I go the more it grows. Last night I took your sedative and it didn't work. Didn't work at all. I sat up in the darkness and watched my shadow."

"In darkness?"

"Yes. It doesn't need light. It really *exists,* now. Permanently. In the dark it's just a blacker blur. But you can see it. It doesn't sleep, or rest. It just waits."

"And you're afraid of it? Why?"

"I don't know. It doesn't threaten me, or make gestures, or even take any notice of me. Shadows taking notice—sounds crazy, doesn't it? But you see it as I do. You can see it waiting. And that's why I'm afraid. What's it waiting for?"

The shadow crept closer over his shoulder. Eavesdropping.

"I don't need you for a secretary. I need a nurse."

"What you need is a good rest."

"Rest? How can I rest? I just came out of Newsohm's office. He doesn't notice anything—yet. Too stupid, I suppose. The girls in the office look at me when I pass, and I wonder if they see something peculiar. But Newsohm doesn't. He just made me head of research. Completely in charge."

"In five days? Marvelous!"

"Isn't it? Except for our bargain—whenever I succeed, my rival gains power with me. That will make the shadow stronger. How, I don't know. I'm waiting. And I can't find rest."

"I'll find it for you. Just lie down and wait—I'll be back."

I left him hastily—left him sitting at his desk, all alone. Not quite alone. The shadow was there, too.

Before I went I had the funniest temptation. I wanted to run my hand along the wall, through that shadow. And yet I didn't. It was too black, too solid. What if my hand should actually encounter *something?*

So I just left.

I was back in half an hour. I grabbed Gulther's arm, bared it, plunged the needle home.

"Morphine," I whispered. "You'll sleep now."

He did, resting on the leather sofa. I sat at his side, watching the shadow that didn't sleep.

It stood there towering above him unnaturally. I tried to ignore it, but it was a third party in the room. Once, when I turned my back, it moved. It began to pace up and down. I opened my mouth, trying to hold back a scream.

The phone buzzed. I answered mechanically, my eyes never leaving the black outline on the wail that swayed over Gulther's recumbent form.

"Yes? No—he's not in right now. This is Mr. Gulther's secretary speaking. Your message? Yes, I'll tell him. I certainly will. Thank you."

It had been a woman's voice—a deep, rich voice. Her message was to tell Mr. Gulther she'd changed her mind. She'd be happy to meet him that evening at dinner.

Another conquest for Fritz Gulther!

Conquest—two conquests in a row. That meant conquests for the shadow, too. But *how?*

I turned to the shadow on the wall, and got a shock. It was lighter! Grayer, thinner, wavering a little!

What was wrong?

I glanced down at Gulther's sleeping face. Then I got another shock. Gulther's face was dark. Not tanned, but dark. Blackish. Sooty. *Shadowy.*

Then I did scream, a little.

Gulther awoke.

I just pointed to his face and indicated the wall-mirror. He almost fainted.

"It's combining with me," he whispered.

His skin was slate-colored. I turned my bade because I couldn't look at him.

"We must do something," he mumbled. "Fast."

"Perhaps if you were to use—that book again, you could make another bargain."

It was a fantastic idea, but it popped out. I faced Gulther again and saw him smile.

"That's it! If you could get the materials now—you know what I need—go to the drug-store—but hurry up because—"

I shook my head. Gulther was nebulous, shimmery. I saw him through a mist.

Then I heard him yell.

"You damned fool! Look at *me.* That's my shadow you're staring at!"

I ran out of the room, and in less than ten minutes I was trying to fill a vial with belladonna with fingers that trembled like lumps of jelly.

V

IT MUST have looked like a fool, carryrying that armful of packages through the outer office. Candles, chalk, phosphorus, aconite, belladonna, and—blame it on my hysteria—the dead body of an alley-cat I decoyed behind the store.

Certainly I felt like a fool when Fritz Gulther met me at the door of his sanctum.

"Come on in," he snapped.

Yes, snapped.

It took only a glance to convince me that Gulther was himself again. Whatever the black change that frightened us so had been, he'd shook it off while I was gone.

Once again the trumpet-voice held authority. Once again the sneering smile replaced the apologetic crease in the mouth.

Gulther's skin was white, normal. His movements were brisk and no longer frightened. He didn't need any wild spells—or had he ever, really?

Suddenly I felt as though I'd been a victim of my own imagination. After all, men don't make bargains with demons, they don't change places with their shadows.

The moment Gulther closed the door his words corroborated my mood.

"Well, I've snapped out of it. Foolish nonsense, wasn't it?" He smiled easily. "Guess we won't need that junk after all. Right when you left I began to feel better. Here, sit down and take it easy."

I sat. Gulther rested on the desk nonchalantly swinging his legs.

"All that nervousness, that strain, has disappeared. But before I forget it, I'd like to apologize for telling you that crazy story about sorcery and my obsession. Matter of fact, I'd feel better about the whole thing in the future if you just forget that all this ever happened."

I nodded.

Gulther smiled again.

"That's right. Now we're ready to get down to business. I tell you, it's a real relief to realize the progress we're going to make. I'm head research director already, and if I play my cards right I think I'll be running this place in another three months. Some of the things Newsohm told me today tipped me off. So just play ball with me and we'll go a long way. A long way. And I can promise you one thing—I'll never have any of these crazy spells again."

There was nothing wrong with what Gulther said here. Nothing wrong with any of it. There was nothing wrong with the way Gulther lolled and smiled at me, either.

Then why did I suddenly get that old crawling sensation along my spine?

For a moment I couldn't place it—and then I realized.

Fritz Gulther sat on his desk, before the wall *but now he cast no shadow.*

No shadow. No shadow at all. A shadow had tried to enter the body of Fritz Gulther when I left. Now there was no shadow.

Where had it gone?

There was only one place for it to go. And if it had gone there, then—*where was Fritz Gulther?*

He read it in my eyes.

I read it in his swift gesture.

Gulther's hand dipped into his pocket and re-emerged. As it rose, I rose, and sprang across the room.

I gripped the revolver, pressed it back and away, and stared into his convulsed countenance, into his eyes. Behind the glasses, behind the human pupils, there was only a blackness. The cold, grinning blackness of a shadow.

Then he snarled, arms clawing up as he tried to wrest the weapon free, aim it. His body was cold, curiously weightless, but filled with a slithering strength. I felt myself go limp under those icy, scrabbling talons, but as I gazed into those two dark pools of hate that were his eyes, fear and desperation lent me aid.

A single gesture, and I turned the muzzle in. The gun exploded, and Gulther slumped to the floor.

They crowded in then; they stood and stared down, too. We all stood and stared down at the body lying on the floor.

Body? There was Fritz Gulther's shoes, his shirt, his tie, his expensive blue pinstripe suit. The toes of the shoes pointed up, the shirt and tie and suit were creased and filled out to support a body beneath.

But there was no body on the floor. There was only a shadow—a deep, black shadow, encased in Fritz Gulther's clothes.

Nobody said a word for a long minute. Then one of the girls whispered, "Look—it's just a shadow."

I bent down quickly and shook the clothes. As I did so, the shadow seemed to move beneath my fingers, to move and to melt.

In an instant it slithered free from the garments. There was a flash—or a final retinal impression of blackness, and the shadow was gone. The clothing sagged down into an empty, huddled heap on the floor.

I rose and faced them. I couldn’t say it loud, but I could say it gratefully, very gratefully.

“No,” I said. “You’re mistaken. There’s no shadow there. There’s nothing at all—absolutely nothing at all.”

Gather 'Round the Flowing Bowler

Lefty Feep had a great idea: why not get the world's most experienced bowler, the Catskill dwarf, to challenge the champs!

I WAS sitting in my usual seat at Jack's place the other night when I was startled out of it. I literally began to rise and show the shine on my trousers.

"Hey, there!" I called.

A gangling figure paused midway between tables and veered rapidly in the direction of my booth. With a melancholy grin, Mr. Lefty Feep sidled over and extended a dripping hand.

"You been carrying a herring?" I inquired. "Your hand is wet."

"I am all wet," said Lefty Feep. "And I like it."

It was true. Lefty Feep was all wet. For the first time I permitted my gaze to run along the rainbow of his suit. Feep was wearing a box-shoulder Navajo blanket pattern of such blinding hue that at first I thought somebody had spilled spaghetti on him.

But it was not spaghetti that poured from his lapels and cuffs. It was water. Lefty Feep was soaked to the skin.

"Have you been out in the rain?" I ventured.

"You win the $32 question, friend," said Feep. "I am strolling in a storm this last hour. Outside it is mostly moistly."

"But you'll ruin your clothes," I said—as if it were possible to ruin that atrocious costume.

"So I buy another suit," Feep grinned, sitting down. "You will pardon me if I seem to drip."

"I never knew you liked water."

"I am extremely fond of water—for external use only. Why, it is water that brings me my fortune this last year."

"Your fortune?" I echoed. Then I regretted it.

For the last time I'd met Lefty Feep he was introduced to me as the biggest liar in seven states. The story he told then more than qualified him for that honor. It dealt, as I remember, with Mr. Feep's accidental visit to the bowling dwarfs of the Catskill Mountains. Feep claimed to have followed the footsteps of Rip Van Winkle by drinking the dwarf's brew and sleeping twenty years into the future. He explained his return by claiming he'd bribed the dwarfs to send him back—by building for them a regulation bowling alley on the mountain top.[1]

When Feep had unfolded this slightly incredible saga there had been a curious glint in his eye. I saw it now, as I mentioned his fortune.

"Fortune?" he murmured. "Friend, I have adventures in the last annum that, will make your blood run from zero below. I have experiences that will make icebergs out of your corpuscles. Doubtless you wish to catch the details?"

"No," I grated.

"Well, if you insist—" said Lefty Feep.

AT FIRST I think I am lucky last year when I do not run into pneumonia. Then something worse happens to me—I run into Gorilla Gabface.

Gorilla Gabface, I believe I mention before, is quite a lusty shout in the old rackets, and he and I are what you might call unfriendly enemies for many the year. We are always making sociable wagers on such matters as who will win the pennant, or what bank will be held up next, and such matters of sporting interest.

Gorilla hangs out in a pool room night and day, in fact I never know him to leave this cue casino in all his unnatural life. I even state the fact that he would not stick his neck out the door if there was a ten-pound cheese on the sidewalk. And this should be quite a temptation, because he is a rat.

So I am quite naturally confused when I see him this night walking down the old stem. He is bouncing along like a bad check, and almost runs me off the sidewalk.

What crooked parole board lets you out? I naturally inquire.

He blinks at me and sticks out his paw. I do not take it, because there is a ring on my own hand which I value.

“I am on my way to the bowling alleys,” he cracks.

I just stare. “Bowling alleys? I never hear you are a sports-lover.”

Fie gives a laugh. “There is a lot those big floppy ears of yours never hear, Feep. But it may interest you to know that I am now manager and owner of none other than Yank Albino, the world’s champion pin-punisher. Tonight we are holding an exhibition match with Ed Knight, and I am on my way down to take charge of the box office receipts.” He laughs, and several persons look around to see if a hyena is loose. “I am making myself some pin money, you might say.”

What I might say I say under my breath. It grieves me extremely to see this Gorilla muscling in on something like the bowling game, which is a line I am personally fond of. I figure it a nice clean sport, and do not approve of putting vaseline on bowling balls, or plugging up the finger-holes with cork, or otherwise bollixing the works. But if Gorilla Gabface is operating, it will sooner or later be too bad for the bowling game. How he gets hold of a champion like Yank Albino I do not figure out. So I ask him.

“SIMPLE,” he says. “Albino owes me a number of yards on a little bet, so I take over his contract and he will work it out. Right now I am figuring a few neat deals. “You know,” he says, “the bowling game is so clean it hurts me to look at it. Give me a few months with this champion and I will put over so many angles that it will take a cross-eyed accountant ten years to untangle the mess.” And he laughs again, causing several people to run home and hide under their beds.

But I do not say anything, and when he asks me if I want to come along and place my peepers on the exhibition matches, I make with the feet to the bowling alleys and take a seat.

This Yank Albino is indeed a sweet bowler, and when I grab a place in the crowd watching I am soon exhibiting my pleasure by uttering such sounds as “Wow!” and “Atta baby!”

All at once I hear a voice at my side contradicting me in such a manner as “Boo! Take him away! He stinks!” This more than surprises me, particularly since the voice comes out of the mouth of a very pretty ginch. This ginch is just a little thing with long 18-karat hair, but she has a very loud voice, and she keeps up with her “Boo! Throw him out!” even when I stare at her. So naturally I inquire, “Why, ginch, do you make like a censor? Is it the bowling, or do you have a grudge against Yank Albino?”

She gives me a stare and then she starts to bawl. “Boo hoo!” she yammers. “Yank Albino is my fiance. Boo hoo!”

Naturally I do not catch, and tell her so. If Yank Albino is her fiance she should be happy to scramble with such a champion instead of hollering out in public that he is a menace to the nose.

“You do not understand,” she tells me. “I don’t want people to like Yank’s bowling. Because if he becomes unpopular, then maybe his manager will break his contract. I want this to happen, because I know his manager is no better than a thug, and he has got Yank tied up on account of debts and is making some crooked plans for him. I tell Yank this, but he won’t believe me, and he refuses to bowl badly. I don’t know what to do.”

“Leave it to me,” I advise. “I have a few ideas I wish to talk over with Mr. Gabface.”

She gives a little jump. “Oh, you know Yank’s manager, too?” she asks. I wink.

“I know him like a book,” I tell her. “Even better, because I am not acquainted with any books except racing. I think I have me an idea which will make you happy and me money.”

“What is it?” she pipes, cheering up a little and giving me a smile that would go good in advertising love-seats anywhere.

“I think I can find a bowler to beat your Yank Albino,” I say. “In fact I will wager with Gorilla that I find such a character. Then when he beats Yank I will win the bet and Gorilla will get mad and release his contract.”

“You are crazy,” sobs the ginch. “Nobody can beat my Yank.”

I smile.

WHEN I run down to the box office and catch Gorilla Gabface. I tell him what I tell the ginch, or at least part of it—that I am willing to lay a grand on a bowling match against Yank Albino if I can provide another champion.

“Who is he?” asks Gabface. “Albino already beats every bowler in all leagues.”

“My man is called the Masked Marvel,” I tell him.

“You are making a bad bet,” chuckles Goldfarb.

I dig into my pocket. “Here is the alphabet for you—one G that says my Masked Marvel will beat Yank Albino in an exhibition match, any date after April 30th.”

“Why after April 30th?” he asks.

“I got to go get him,” I answer. “He lives outside the city. Way outside.”

“How about May 1st?” says Gabface. “We got a date open.”

“Pretty quick, but it’s ok with me,” I agree.

Gabface takes the money and laughs again. “I still say that no human being can beat Yank Albino,” he gurgles.

I answer, but under my breath. “I didn’t say he would be a human being,” I whisper.

DRUNK and early on the morning of April 30th, I slip out of my pajamas and into a Manhattan. I grab me a flask and make for the car, heading up the Hudson valley and cutting west.

From time to time I take a slug from the flask, because I am looking forward to a tough time.

Pretty soon I am in Catskill country, on my fourth side road and my fifth drink. I am climbing up, and I figure I might as well be as high as the scenery.

The old bus clunks along pretty steady, but I am doing the shivering. Particularly when I get off on the last side road, which is so deserted there aren’t even any hot-dog stands.

I am driving all alone up steep hills covered with trees so they look like a bunch of Smith Brothers’ faces without a shave. To make the resemblance complete, it is so quiet you can hear a cough drop.

Then it isn’t so quiet any more. Far off in the distance there is a low, rumbling sound—like Gorilla Gabface makes after a heavy meal.

I climb higher, it gets darker, and the noise is louder. In spite of myself I begin making like a goose with the flesh. Here I am, all alone in the Catskills, without any weapon but my flask.

By the time I rise over the top of the highest hill, the rumbling is strictly from thunder. A minute later I know I have arrived. Because there is the sign on the rocks at the end of the deserted road.

ANNUAL PICNIC
THE DIMINUTIVE SOCIETY
OF THE CATSKILL MOUNTAINS

I am back with the dwarfs I meet last year, and, sure enough, up ahead is the open-air bowling alley I build for them. The rumbling comes from inside, so I park the car and go over.

This takes some time, because my feet want to go the other way. You see, I do not wish to remember my last meeting with these half-pints, when they slip me the old double cross and I wake up twenty years too late for the current World Series.

But I have my scheme to make a thousand government etchings of old George Washington, and I know what I must do.

So I do it. I walk inside.

There on the alleys are about twenty of these extremely small fry that call themselves The Diminutive Society of the Catskill Mountains, although what they really are are dwarfs. Some of them are bowling and the rest are glassing around a beer barrel.

I almost run out again when I see the beer, because it is this stuff that knocks me out for the long count last time. But I take a deep breath and go up to them.

“Hello slobs, what you hear from the mob?” I ask politely.

The whole crew looks up. They have to look up to see me, because they are only three feet tall, and besides most of them have beards growing right into their eyes.

“Why it’s Squire Feep!” cackles the head shorty, who I remember from before. “Back to visit us again!”

THEY get very excited and start dancing around me like I was a Maypole. Some of them are thanking me for the bowling alley, and the head shorty tells me that the new alleys work very good, and that they are using a couple field-mice for pinboys.

“Have a drink,” says the head shorty, holding out a tankard.

But this time I play smart. “Not on your life,” I tell him. “This is the stuff that ripped Van Winkle. Me, I am sticking to my little flask this trip. I just drop in to see how you boys are getting along.”

Well, they do not seem offended, but get back to bowling again, and I take a couple turns at the alley myself.

It is a regulation alley, you understand—I send up a gang to build it myself, because the dwarfs only come out once a year on April 30th, and there is nothing around on other days to make the workmen suspicious. The dwarfs always go in for lawn bowling and ninepins before, but I am glad to see that they understand the new alley very well.

I keep my eye particularly on the head shorty. He is a little guy, like the others, and he has a long white beard that hangs down to his knees, but this does not interfere with his bowling. This personality just runs up one strike after another, even though he stands wrong and his arms are so long I am afraid he bruises his knuckles because they scrape along the alley. But he strikes and drinks and drinks and strikes, and I know I have found what I was looking for.

I sit tight, and after a while the dwarfs get tight. They spend more time around their beer barrel than they do on the alley, and pretty soon I signal the head shorty to come over and sit down with me.

"I wish to ask you a few questions, shrimp," I inform him. So he leaves the beer barrel polka and sits on my lap, confidential like.

"Now, my little Charlie McCarthy, I got a proposition for you. How would you like to make some money?" I say.

He just blinks.

"Big money," I tell him. "A fortune."

"What is money?" he asks.

"Cash. Dollars. Hay. Mazuma Laughing lettuce."

"Squire Feep, you jest."

"I just what?" Then I catch on This midget is so far back in the woods he does not even know what money is. So I explain. Then he shakes his head. His beard bobs around like a dust mop.

"What do I want with money?" he asks. "I do not visit the face of the earth save once a year, on April 30th. And then it is only to bowl and drink, as is our ancient custom."

"That's just the point," I tell him. "You can make a lot of money bowling the way you do. And then you won't have to live in a hole in the ground.

You can live in a swell dump in town. You can visit the Stork Club. Why, you can even go to a barber! A clean shave will make a new man out of you.

“Besides, I never do figure out why you dwarfs are not around except on this one day, April 30th. Can’t you live above ground the rest of the year? Or do you just figure rents are too high?”

“No,” he tells me. “I can live above ground. But it’s so much nicer down below. All that nice dirt to dig and eat.”

“You sound like a columnist,” I tell him. “But seriously now, how about coming back to town and bowling for me? I’ll manage you and we’ll clean up. I’ve arranged a little exhibition match for you tomorrow night. All you got to do is get up and sling a few balls.”

“Tomorrow night? Never!” squeaks Shorty. “I tell you, we of the Catskills must not bowl save on one day alone. If we transgress, dire things transpire.”

“Cut the double talk,” I tell him. “This is your big chance.”

I must refuse, Squire Feep,” Shorty pipes. And he wriggles off my knee.

SO THERE I sit, thinking about my lost G. There is nothing to do but pull out my flask.

I do. And then the idea hits me. Why not? That’s what the head shorty does to me the last time I visit him. Turn about is fair play. I drink his beer and pass out. What if he drinks my whiskey?

No sooner said than drunk. I amble over to the keg. The dwarfs are singing now in voices that would not please Walt Disney, but I do not mind. I just stand there and tug at my flask, making happy faces. And sure enough, pretty soon the head shorty sees me and his eyes begin glowing.

“What are you drinking, Squire Feep?” he asks me.

“Just a little beer of my own,” I tell him. “Have a slug?”

He takes one. Pretty soon his nose begins glowing.

“Methinks it powerful strong,” he tells me.

"Have another."

He does. We sit down in the corner and I let him play spin the bottle.

Meanwhile, outside it is getting dark. The dwarfs begin bowling again, and the rumbling gets louder and louder, drowning out the way my little shorty pal is burping.

Then I see the dwarfs looking over their shoulders at the sunset, and they begin scurrying out of the bowling alley pretty quick. I know they are going back to their caves on the inside of the hill. It is all over.

It is all over with the head shorty, too. Because he is lying under the seat. I cover him with my coat and nobody notices he is missing. The dwarfs say goodnight, and leave.

So I sit there alone in the twilight with the empty flask. It is very quiet now on the mountain. In fact I hear only one sound, like a dive bomber calling its mate.

It is the head dwarf, snoring under my seat.

"Come on," I whisper, carrying him out the door and into the car. "Little man, you'll have a busy day."

IT IS a very busy day indeed, that 1st of May. When the dwarf wakes up in my room about lunch time I can see that he does not want any.

"Where am I?" he groans.

"In my dump, pal," I inform him.

"Why is my beard in my mouth?" he asks.

"There is no beard in your mouth. What you have is merely a slight hangover." I do not tell him that I Mickey Finnish him, but he can guess.

"It is another day!" he squawks, climbing out of the bureau drawer which I park him in for a bed the night before. "Squire Feep, you are a false friend! Now I am stranded on upper earth for a year!"

"Calm down," I advise. "It isn't going to hurt you any. A little fresh air and sunshine will do you good."

"Fresh air!" he squeaks. "Sunshine? Never!" He begins to dance up and down, tearing at his beard. "Take me back to my cave!"

"You've got a bowling match tonight," I tell him. "And there'll be lots of nice beer, too."

"I'm hungry. I want some dirt!" he yells.

"How about some nice scrambled eggs?"

"Fie upon eggs! Bring me some nourishing dirt——I need humus!"

Well what can I do but humor him? So I go downstairs and borrow a vacuum cleaner and let my small feathered friend get at the bag. For dessert he finishes up with a little pocket fuzz I find in my overcoat.

"Fine," he says. "Now, Squire Feep, if you'll take me back to the mountains, I can get along very well for the next 364 days until the Diminutive Society comes out again."

"Not on your life," I remind him. "You're going to bowl tonight. Not only that," I say, pulling out a little black mask, "but you're going to wear this over your puss because you are now the Masked Marvel."

"Never, never, never!" says the dwarf. "My name is Timothy."

"I will call you Tiny Tim for short, then. But you are still the Masked Marvel and you bowl tonight."

This does not please Tiny Tim at all. I am none too pleased myself, because the doorbell rings and I have to answer it.

There is the little blonde ginch who is engaged to Yank Albino.

"Oh Mr. Feep!" she says. "I'm so worried, I had to stop by and see if everything is all set for tonight."

"It is," I tell her. "In fact, I have the Masked Marvel right here with me now."

WHICH is true. Because Tiny Tim sticks his head out from between my knees and stares up at her.

"Is this the Masked Marvel?" asks the blonde ginch, with a little shriek. "Why he's so little and old—"

And then she lets out a real shriek, because Tiny Tim leaps up in the air and begins yanking on her curls.

“Gold!” he yells. “Gold!”

“That’s hair, you dope,” I tell him, pulling him down.

“Then what is that creature?” he asks.

“A ginch.”

“What?”

“A broad, a queen, a babe—a woman.”

“Woman? What is that?”

“I have not time to go into the matter with you now,” I say.

But the blonde giggles. “You mean your little friend has never seen a woman before?” she asks.

“He is a very backward personality,” I explain. “In fact he is a hermit from the Catskill Mountains.”

“You want to eat some dirt?” Tiny Tim asks her.

The blonde giggles again.

“I think he’s cute,” she says. And pats him on the head.

Tiny Tim lets go with a smile. Then he blushes. “I like you. Your hair is gold. I like gold,” he tells her. Then he makes a grab for her finger. “Gold!” he hollers, tugging at her ring.

“Mustn’t touch!” I say, politely bopping him one on the old orange.

“Eccentric, isn’t he?” says the blonde ginch. “I hope he knows how to bowl. He must beat Yank tonight.”

“Will you be there?” asks Tiny Tim. “Certainly,” she says.

Tiny Tim turns to me. “Very well, then. I shall bowl. I shall beat this Yank of yours if you wish me to.”

I wink at the ginch, because this is a big load off my mind.

“Give me a nice dirt supper,” squeals Tiny Tim. “I’ll show you some bowling you’ve never seen in your life!”

It turns out he isn’t kidding.

WHEN we get to the bowling alleys that night, Gorilla Gabface is waiting at the door.

"So there you are, Feep," he greets me. "I do not figure you will even turn up after that foolish bet you make. In fact," he sneers, "I already send word to Yank Albino to start exhibition stunts so the crowd will get something for its money. Which is more than you will get for your money, Feep, because I never see anyone in top form like Yank tonight. He has more strikes than an eight day clock."

"Well here is somebody to fix his clock for him," I announce, and push Tiny Tim out from behind me.

He does not look any too good to me, wearing that old-fashioned pair of square-cut shorts the dwarfs caper around in. More and over, he is standing with his knuckles touching the pavement and his beard hanging down between. There is a lot of caked earth on his beard, too, because he insists on having mud-pies for dessert at supper. Besides, his mask is on crooked, and you can't see his face under the hair.

Gorilla Gabface stares. "What is this, a trained monkey?" he yaps. "I do not realize you make your money with a hand organ before, Feep."

"This is the Masked Marvel," I tell him. "Which you will find out as soon as we get on the alleys. Kindly move your fat figure along, Gorilla—I want that thousand smackers."

We go inside; Tiny Tim, the blonde ginch, and myself. Halfway down the aisle the dwarf nudges me.

"I forgot!" he whispers. "This is not April 30th. I cannot bowl. It is against the Catskill laws."

"Quit stalling," I whisper.

"But I mean it, Squire Feep. Something dreadful happens if we bowl on any other than the permitted day. That's why we only appear on April 30th. On all other days something terrible occurs. For your own sake—" Then the ginch takes over. She gives him the old eye and begins to play with his beard. "You'll do it for me, won't you, Tiny Tim? You must do it."

He turns very red. "Yes, but—"

“Never mind,” I crack. “Get hold of a ball and let fly.”

Meanwhile I got hold of his whiskers and dragged him out there before the crowd of yahoos in the audience.

They begin to laugh the minute they see him. Gorilla is still introducing the Masked Marvel, and when they see this dopey looking dwarf stumble out they let out a howl.

But after that first ball they howl from astonishment.

To make a short story shorter, Tiny Tim knocks down no less than 240 pins in a row, in less than seven minutes.[2]

He keeps four alleys busy—he does not bother with rules—just picks up a ball and hurls it whenever he sees ten pins together. Yank Albino stands there with his mouth open, and so does Gabface, and so does nearly everyone in the crowd. For that matter I am breathing through my tonsils myself.

The crowd howls and the balls rumble, and the dwarf bowls. And then maybe I am cuckoo, but it seems to me the rumbling is getting louder. It *is* getting louder. It sounds like thunder. It *is* thunder.

Because something hits me on the tip of the nose just then.

Water.

The thunder gets louder, I look up, and I see an extremely strange thing.

It is raining in the bowling alley!

YES, right there inside under the roof, rain is pouring down from the ceiling. And now the thunder is louder than ever, and I can even see a flicker of lightning.

The crowd sees it too. They set up a murmur, but it is better for them if they set up umbrellas, because in a minute the rain turns into a downpour.

Yank Albino and Gorilla Gabface run around making with amazement. But the dwarf is so excited he does not even notice—just keeps right on tossing balls down the four alleys, one after another. And now, every time he makes a strike there is more thunder, and a big streak of lightning to keep score.

People are screaming and pointing at the ceiling, and the alley is getting wet so that the balls float down. Pretty soon the pins are bobbing around on top of water, and the dwarf's legs are wet to the knees. He is almost doing the Australian crawl every time he lets go with a ball.

Then the old panic comes on and the crowd does a Brooklyn—getting up and screaming and trying to head for the door—and Gabface runs out like he hears they discovered gold in the next room.

"Hey—stop!" I call to the dwarf. Now I realize what he means when he says something dreadful happens if he bowls. Because drowning is dreadful, and that is what we are all liable to do here. The water is rising, and now there is more lightning. But the dwarf does not stop. He can not hear me over the thunder and shouting.

I see I have to yank him off the floor, so I wade down and by this time he is up to his waist and swimming in a pool.

But he manages to hurl one last ball—and that does it.

A streak of lightning bangs down from the roof, all the lights go out, and the side of the bowling alley caves in. It is struck.

I get to the dwarf just as he is going down for the third time.

And that is when the cops get to me.

"WHAT do you mean, disorderly conduct?" says Magistrate Donglepootzer.

We are all lined up in front of him in night court about an hour later—me, the blonde ginch, and Tiny Tim.

The cop that brings us in looks at Magistrate Donglepootzer and shrugs. "These people are the ones I find creating a disturbance in a bowling alley," he says.

"A disturbance? What kind of disturbance?"

"Well, this little runt here is bowling and the wall comes down."

“That sounds pretty serious,” says the Magistrate, frowning. “You mean he knocked the wall down with a bowling ball? Doesn’t look like he has the strength.”

“Not exactly,” says the cop, turning red a little. “He bowls and lightning knocks the wall down.”

“Oh, lightning. Then it turns out that a storm is responsible for the damage, and not this man. So why arrest him?”

“He started the storm, Your Honor,” pipes the cop, kind of embarrassed.

“What kind of talk is this? People don’t start storms, you know. And come to think of it, it isn’t raining at all outside.”

“I know, your Honor. It’s only raining inside this bowling alley.”

Magistrate Donglepootzer stares at the cop for a long time. “Do you mean to stand there and tell me that it is raining inside a bowling alley?” he repeats, in a nasty voice.

“I know it’s hard to believe, Your Honor, but that’s the way it is. I nearly drown trying to arrest these people.”

Donglepootzer stares again. “I wish you would drown!” he groans. “Drown dead! Telling me that it’s storming inside a bowling alley and a wall falls down—and then arresting these innocent bystanders for disorderly conduct!”

“But this guy starts the storm,” protests the cop. “I see it myself. He bowls and it rains.”

Donglepootzer turns red now. “Are you trying to drive me crazy?” he says. “Or have you?”

“Yes, Your Honor,” says the cop.

“Shut up!” yells Donglepootzer. “I can’t stand this. You’re trying to tell me this midget with the moss on his face starts storms in bowling alleys. What about the mask on his face, then? Isn’t he a burglar, too? And I suppose the woman is his gun moll. And that stupid-looking oaf next to her is undoubtedly an accomplice, perhaps an umbrella salesman.”

When he says the part about the stupid-looking oaf he points to me. I resent this, because pointing is not nice.

"Speak up!" he yells at Tiny Tim, all of a sudden. "Maybe you can explain this mad story?"

"It's true, Squire," pipes Tiny Tim. "But I am not responsible. If Squire Feep here hadn't dragged me out of my cave and made me eat dirt all day, I'd still be happy up in the hills with the other dwarfs instead of making thunderstorms in bowling alleys."

DONGLEPOOTZER pulls out a handkerchief and wipes his forehead. Then he talks, in a sort of strangled voice. "That last sentence is perhaps the most remarkable one I shall ever hear," he chokes. "Before I break you," and he points at the cop, "and before I turn all of you maniacs over to the court psychiatrist, I should like you to repeat one statement. Did you or did you not start a thunderstorm in a bowling alley?"

"I did," says Tiny Tim.

Donglepootzer groans. "No, no," he whispers. "I can't believe it. I won't believe it! All of you—come with me."

"Where are you taking us?" asks the blonde ginch.

"Downstairs," says Donglepootzer. "Downstairs. There is a recreation gymnasium here in the station for police officers. I believe it has a bowling alley attached to the premises. You are going to bowl for me, by little friend. I want you to show me exactly what you did before I see a psychiatrist myself."

"You will not enjoy it," says Tiny Tim, pulling at his beard.

And when we get to the alley, Magistrate Donglepootzer does not enjoy it, a small bit.

While the cop watches, he gives Tiny Tim a ball. I act as pinboy. And Tiny Tim lets go.

At first everything is fine. Donglepootzer cannot believe the way he knocks the pins over.

Then I hear a rumbling.

"How about stopping?" I ask.

Donglepootzer shakes his head. “I must see this,” he groans.

I shrug. Tiny Tim bowls. Thunder growls.

Well, what’s the use? All I can state is that ten minutes later Donglepootzer is trying to dog-paddle his way out of the alley when a bolt of lightning uncorks from the ceiling and the police gymnasium roof caves in like an eggshell.

“Help!” yells the blonde ginch.

“Blub-blub,” gurgles the dwarf, going under water.

“Holy Smokes!” bawls the cop.

“Six months for disorderly conduct,” groans Magistrate Donglepootzer.

IT IS lucky for me that Tiny Tim and I end up in the same cell that night.

It is also lucky for me that the dwarf is in good appetite. Otherwise he can never swallow all the dirt he does, to say nothing of about three pounds of cement.

But he manages. It is nearly six a.m. when he finally gets a hole big enough at the bottom of the side of the cell and wriggles out.

He crawls down the hall to the turnkey’s office and manages to sneak the keys off the desk. Then he crawls back.

I unlock the cell and we do a fast and furious powder. This powder does not end until we are in the car and heading out of town.

Before I go, I stop for only one thing. I call up Gorilla Gabface on the phone and get him out of bed.

“About that thousand bucks,” I tell him, “I still claim my Masked Marvel wins and you owe me.”

“I owe you nothing, Feep!” growls Gabface. Then he laughs. “Because the match is called on account of rain!”

I let out a few harsh names, but I can do nothing—except get out of town before the heat is on.

Which I do.

We reach the Catskills that afternoon. I dump Tiny Tim out of the back seat.

“Well, now what?” he asks me.

“Help me with these canned goods,” I tell him. “Bring them inside your private bowling alley here. I need something to eat these next 363 days.”

“You are staying here?” he asks.

Where else? The heat is on in town for me, and you can’t go back to your little pals until next April 30th. We might as well live here together. Then neither one of us gets into trouble. We are all alone here in the alley on top of the mountain, and I hope we stay that way.”

We do.

There is not much worth telling about that year. I am not cut out for the hermit life, being an uptown boy, but after I teach Tiny Tim how to deal a few hands of pinochle, we get along all right. Beside I keep him in bowling practice.

Every once in a while I slip down the mountain into town to catch up with this and that. I find out from the local bladder’s sports section that Gorilla Gabface takes his Yank Albino on a tour all over the country, and is cleaning up.

I just smile, because I figure out a plan. I smile and keep track of the days, and finally the time comes.

One morning I grab Tiny Tim by the beard to wake him up, as usual. Only this time I have a scissors in my other hand. And in two snips the beard is off.

“What is this?” he bawls. “Squire Feep, what are you doing?”

“I am shaving you,” I tell him. “But close. So hold still.”

HE DOES not hold still, but I shave him.

“What is the meaning of this?” he squeaks, feeling his chin.

“It means that you are now Tiny Tim, the Boy Bowler,” I say. “Let me put on this hair dye, now.”

Which I do, holding him down until I finish and he is a little clean-shaven guy with black hair.

"Boy Bowler?" he gasps. "Certainly." I tell him. "You do not think I spend my time this year with you because I love your company. I prefer to be a hermit with somebody like Lana Turner. But I am going to get my money back from this Gorilla Gabface before you go back to the hills for good, and so I figure out this scheme.

"Today is April 27th. We drive to Milwaukee and arrive there on the 29th. I wire ahead and arrange a match between the Boy Bowler and Yank Albino—because the papers tell me he will be playing exhibition games there. And I make another bet with Gorilla, only this time I collect, rain or no rain. Then we fly back here in time for the 30th and you can join your pals, the Catskills Mountain Junior G-Men, or whatever they are."

Tiny Tim listens to this and scratches the place where his beard should be. "Methinks it sounds reasonable," he decides. "But it rains when I bowl."

"Just leave that part to me," I say. "I have it all figured out, this time." Which I have. Only it is not figured out the way I care to tell him about. Because I tell him it is the 27th when I know it is the 28th. So we will arrive in Milwaukee on the 30th and hold the match.

Of course the 30th is the one day a year when it will not rain if the dwarf bowls.

That is not such a hot trick on Tiny Tim, I know—but I need the money and after all I spend a year in hiding. I figure that the next year will be easier on him, now that he knows pinochle. Besides, when I clean up, I will not only buy him a bushel of the best dirt, but also some fancy milorganite.

So we make the drive. A thousand miles between the Catskills and Wisconsin is not too easy, but I am so happy at figuring things out, I do not mind.

In Buffalo I wire ahead to Gorilla Gabface that I find a new champion bowler and want another match with Yank Albino.

"Play it up big," I state. "My boy is only 7 years old and a marvel. But five grand says he beats Yank Albino."

I get an answer waiting for me in Cleveland. It is OK, bet and all.

And so, on April 30th, at 8 o'clock, we pull up in front of the Milwaukee alleys, Tiny Tim and I.

It is a beautiful spring day, and I cannot help but wonder how the dwarfs are enjoying it back in the Catskills. Only I do not speak to Tiny Tim about this, because he will not understand and just get sore.

So far everything is under control. I buy clothes on the way, and now Tiny Tim the Boy Bowler is wearing a little knicker suit and a moppet's hat. He is disguised perfectly, as I shave him again, close.

GORILLA is waiting in the office, and when he sees Tiny Tim he doesn't tumble.

"Feep, you pick up the oddest characters," he chuckles. "First a fugitive from a miniature golf course, and now a school boy. Of course it's tremendous publicity stunt stuff, but why you want to plunk away five grand, I don't know."

"I am making five grand," I tell him.

"And besides, this is no school boy, but a genuine Quiz Kid. Come on, let's get started."

Gabface steps close to me. "Just a minute, Feep," he says. "If there's anything phoney about this kid, you're going to catch plenty. I'll leave you looking like a map of Japan. Because unless Yank Albino makes a good showing tonight, I'm dropping his contract and taking another man. Bowling officials are here to look him over. So just remember—if you cross me you can mark the 29th of April as your unlucky day."

"The what?" I gasp.

"The 29th of April, dope! Today." I go green around the gills. I realize I make a terrible mistake in keeping track of the days back there in the Catskills. I think I am kidding the dwarf about the dates, but I really kid myself. Today is the 29th—and it looks like thunderstorms ahead!

But it is too late to say anything. Because a bald-headed man sticks his head in. “Come on, all set?” he yells. “You should see the crowd out there —boy, we’re packing them in. Bet you a hundred there’s 2,000 people.”

“This is Better O’Brien, the promotor,” Gabface introduces. “Better, meet Lefty Feep and the Boy Bowler.” Tiny Tim keeps plenty quiet. He thinks it’s all right and I have a scheme. He should only know!

“Go on out there, Tim,” I tell him, gulping. “Everything is all set.”

SET is right. The dwarf marches out, with his arms dangling. This Better O’Brien person laughs.

“Some champion you’ve dug up, Feep,” he chuckles. “Hear you put five grand on him to win out tonight. Wish I had a piece of that myself. Why that little kid couldn’t lift a ball, let alone beat Yank Albino. Gorilla has a sure thing betting against you.”

All I do is groan.

“You wouldn’t want to make another wager on him, would you, Feep?” says O’Brien.

I groan again. Because outside in the alleys I hear a rumbling that tells me the match is starting. And the rumbling is getting louder. Like thunder.

“Frankly,” O’Brien keeps up, “I think your man is all wet.”

I groan again and walk into the alleys with O’Brien. What else can I do? I am a drowning man without a straw.

To make a long story short, I guess you know what happens on that Milwaukee alley on the 29th of April. The local bladders tell the story, only I do not save any.

All I can say is that after the storm I pay Gorilla Gabface five grand, he bounces Yank Albino off his contract, Yank Albino makes up with his blonde ginch, and me—me, I’m spending two hours pumping water out of Tiny Tim the dwarf, who nearly drowns.

The alley is flooded, and this time lightning hits the top of the building outside. In the excitement I wade down into the water and shrink a brand new suit.

Then I hop a plane with Tiny Tim and get him back to the Catskills the next day and turn him loose with the other dwarfs. This time I do not stay to bowl, but come right back into town. And so here I am with my fortune.

* * *

LEFTY FEEP finished his story and shook the water from his hair as he looked at me.

I stared back.

“That’s a pretty hard story to swallow,” I commented.

He just grinned.

“Not that I don’t believe you about the dwarf and all,” I told him. “But that other stuff—about making your fortune. I thought you said it stormed in Milwaukee and you had to pay Gabface five thousand dollars. Where does your fortune come in?”

“Didn’t I mention?” asked Feep. “Didn’t I tell why I like rain?”

“You didn’t.”

“Well it is funny such a matter slips my mind. Because it is all very simple. You remember I mention a personality name of Better O’Brien the promoter who talks with me before we go into the alleys?”

“Yes.”

“Well, I make a fortune from Better O’Brien. The idea comes like a flash while we stand there. I know I lose five thousand to Gorilla because of what will happen, so I turn around and bet O’Brien ten thousand. It looks like a sure thing to him and he takes it up.”

“You mean you bet O’Brien ten thousand dollars that your dwarf would win at bowling?” I asked.

“Of course not,” grinned Lefty Feep. “I merely bet him ten thousand dollars that it is going to rain all over his brand new suit in ten minutes.”

THE END

[1] Time Wounds All Heels," April 1942 issue of *Fantastic Adventures*.—ED.

[2] When Tiny Tim knocked down 240 pins in a row, he achieved the astounding feat of bowling two perfect games in succession. A perfect game is a score of 300, and is the result of twelve strikes in ten frames, or a complete game. Bowling is scored in ten separate frames, by adding the product of the total pins knocked down on three successive balls. Thus, the first frame receives no score until the third ball, whereupon a score of 30 is marked up. When the fourth ball is bowled, the second frame receives an added 30 pins, making the score 60, and so on, till the last frame. Three balls are thrown in the last frame to finish out the 300 total. This scoring only applies when only consecutive strikes are made. A spare is worth two balls, and thus cuts down the score by ten pins.—ED.

The Pied Piper Fights the Gestapo

He was the hottest music man in town. He could really cook with gas! Even the rats came out and danced. But then the Gestapo found Pfeiffer; came to exact their revenge!

WHEN I walked into Jack's Shack I saw Lefty Feep sitting at his usual booth. With the suit he was wearing, it was impossible not to see him. Even a blind man would have found Feep at once—if he couldn't see the suit, its color was so loud he'd hear it.

Feep was waving his arms at Jack as I approached. He turned and gave me a nod of recognition, then continued to place his order.

"Make please with the cheese," he demanded. "But snappy."

"You want some snappy cheese?" Jack inquired.

"I do not care what kind of teeth the cheese is using," Feep asserted. "Just so there is plenty of it. Let it be long and strong. Let it be mean and green. Let it be old with mould. But bring me lots of plenty in a fast hurry."

Jack scribbled his order and shuffled away. Lefty Feep turned and I saw his beady eyes were unstrung.

"Cheese," he whispered reverently. "Limburger with real limbs! Thick brick! I love it. Swiss is bliss. Cheddar is better. Camembert is the nerts!" I stared.

"What's the matter?" I asked. "You sound like a cross between Ogden Nash and Mickey Mouse. Since when did you develop such a passion for cheese?"

"It is not all for me," Feep explained. "I take some of it to a friend of mine."

"Are you hanging around with a bunch of rats?"

Feep shook his head. "I do not see Gorilla Gabface for weeks," he declared.

"Then what in the world—" I began, but didn't finish. For Jack returned, bearing an enormous platter loaded with concentrated nose-torture.

"Ah!" sniffed my companion. "The breeze of cheese! What a stiff whiff!"

The whiff was almost too stiff for me. But Feep inhaled ecstatically.

"It brings memories," he exclaimed.

"It brings suffocation," I corrected.

Feep picked up a hunk of Roquefort and began to nibble eagerly. All over the cafe, patrons were hastily retreating to tables near the open door. Feep smiled as he saw them go.

"We are alone," he grinned. "Maybe now I can tell you the reason I am so partial to this cow-candy."

"Go ahead," I urged. "But your reason must smell better than your cheese. And if there are as many holes in your story as there are in your limburger—"

Feep waved his Parmesan at me indignantly. Then he bent forward.

"Hold your nose," he muttered. "And I will give you a blow by blow description which I guarantee is not to be sneezed at."

* * *

IT all starts two months ago when I suffer an accident one night. It seems I get my fingers stuck around the handle of a slot machine at a very embarrassing moment—in fact it is the moment when a couple of bloodhounds break down the door of the joint. They invite everybody to play cops and robbers with them and take a little ride in the city taxi downstairs.

Which we do. Of course, when the patrol wagon arrives down at night court, I am bailed out at once. I think nothing of it and am just getting ready to go, when a little guy rashes up to me and grabs my hand. I recognize him at once for a personality named Boogie Mann.

"I am so grateful to you," he shouts.

"How can I ever thank you?"

"What did I do?" I ask, lightly, but politely.

"I hear you give your seat in the patrol wagon to an old tomato who is standing there," he says.

"That's right. So what?"

"She is my mother," says Boogie Mann, and tears of gratitude come into his eyes.

"You are a gentleman and a scholar," he tells me. "Giving a seat in the paddy wagon to my dear old mother."

"It is nothing," I assure him. "She looks like she is too high to stand up anyway."

We walk out of the court together, and all the time this Boogie Mann is thanking me I am looking him up and down. You see, I never have much to do with such a personality before, because this article happens to be a swing band fan—what they call a "hep-cat." And I personally have nothing at all to do with swing, not being a hangman. So here and to fore, I steer clear of Boogie Mann and his unusual brand of swing-talk and his dizzy enthusiasm for juke symphonies.

When we get outside, Boogie grabs my shoulder by the padding and hangs on.

"Feep," he says, "I must reward you for what you do tonight. I am going to let you in on a big deal."

"The last time I am let in on a big deal," I answer, "I am holding a full house and the other guy turns up four kings."

"This is terrific," Boogie insists. "I will give you the chance to make a fortune. A fortune. Do you like money?"

Well, this question is easy to answer. I do, and then ask him one.

"What's the angle?" I inquire.

"How would you like to be the agent for the hottest swing musician in the world?" he asks.

"Who is it—Nero and his fiddle?" I crack. But he doesn't bend.

"No, this is the genuine jive," he tells me. "A hep Joe from Buffalo. A walkie-talkie from Milwaukee. Strictly a mutt from Connecticut."

"Who is he, where is he, and how come I get a chance to be ten per center for such a wonder man?"

"THAT is easy," Boogie tells me.

"He is a refugee and nobody discovers him yet. He is playing in a little joint called the Barrel House way down the street, and nobody suspects that he plays the warmest licorice-stick in the world."

"Licorice-stick?"

"Clarinet, of course."

"A refugee, huh?"

"That is right," says Boogie. "The whole band is made up of refugees. Hot Mickey is the leader."

"Hot Mickey?"

"Sure. The outfit bills as *Hot Mickey and His Five Finns.*"

"Do tell."

"They are not Finns, though—most of them are German refugees. But they ride with a solid slide. They groove. They send."

"But can they play?"

"Play?" yells Boogie. "Wait until you hear the way they dig it out of the dugout! The fella on the slush pump is terrific, the guy who handles the gut-bucket can really slap doghouse, and they've got an alligator who really can keep the plumbing humming."

I ask for an explanation, and I find out that Boogie refers to a trombone player, a jerk with a bass viol, and a saxophone snorter.

By this time Boogie is so excited he is dragging me down the street.

"No contract," he yells. "You can get this guy for next to nothing. Take him uptown. I guarantee once you get him in for an audition, any band in the country will offer him half a G a week to start. He's playing for peanuts here—it's the chance of a lifetime! Wait until you see what he does to a crowd. Here we are—just step into the silo."

"What silo?"

"The place where they keep the corn. The dance-hall."

Sure enough. We are standing in front of a little rat-race track called the Barrel House. Before I can make up my mind, he drags me inside.

It is nothing but a made-over barn, with a bar and a lot of tables where the stables used to be. A gang of jitterbugs are shagging all over the floor, and up on the platform sits this Hot Mickey and his refugees. They look like refugees from a bath-tub to me.

In fact I never see such a mangy collection of human beings outside of a Turkish Bath on the day after New Year's Eve. They look like they are dying, and they sound like it, too.

Because they are playing a brand of noise I never hear in all my life, and I once work in a steel foundry for a year. But these cookies are hammering and yammering on horns and trumpets and drums, and they are blasting so loud you would think somebody was building a subway.

BUT the crowd loves it. The place is packed, and everybody is prancing around with their fingers in the air, and sometimes their skirts. I do not need to take a second squint to see that there really are a lot of finks who go for this kind of bazoo.

Boogie drags me over to a table and leers.

"Listen," he chirps, beaming all over. "Come on and listen," he urges, making me take my fingers out of my ears. "Hear that baby pounding the tusks."

"What?"

"Punching ivory," says Boogie.

“Huh?”

“Playing the piano.”

“Oh.”

“Scar me, Daddy, eight to the mar,” he yells, or something like it. “Feep, I want you should pipe that clarinet.”

Me, I do not know a clarinet from a ocarina; in fact, where music is concerned I can not tell a bass from a hole in a piccolo. But I look for the guy who is playing most loud and proud, and I spot who he refers to.

He is a tall, thin drip tooting on a tall, thin horn. He stands up when he plays, and the rest of the band follows. When I try hard I can hear his clarinet honking way up above the other noise, and it has plenty of rhythm.

In fact, the whole crowd hears it, because they do not wish to stop dancing at all. Whenever a number finishes, they clap their pinkies together so hard and long that the band must keep right on playing.

“See?” whispers Boogie. “What did I tell you? He’s a natural. He’s hep to the step.” Boogie jerks his finger at the mob. “Look—even the bartenders have to dance.”

This is a fact. I notice them myself. Also I find my own feet jumping up and down a little. It is really rhythm.

“Pipe that!” grunts Boogie, all of a sudden. He points to the floor. I see a little mouse run out of its hole in the woodwork and scamper up and down in time with the music.

“It takes a real hep-cat to catch mice,” Boogie tells me. “Now come on up to the stand and tell this guy you want to be his agent. Tell him you’ll line up an audition with a big-time band for him. Take it easy, because he is plenty timid and he doesn’t know the score yet, being new in this country.”

So when the number is over and the crowd finally finishes clapping and sits down, we slide over to the stand. First Boogie introduces me to the leader.

“Come on, ick, meet the stick,” he says. “This is Hot Mickey. Mickey, my pal here would like to talk to your clarinet player.”

“Huh,” grunts the fat leader. “Is he safe?”

“Strictly a square from Delaware,” Boogie tells him. He drags me over to the skinny clarinet man. “They’re all nervous about meeting strangers,” he whispers. “Afraid of spies on their trail, or something. These refugees have a pretty tough time getting out of Europe. So take it easy.”

THEN he pushes me up on the platform and grabs the skinny man by the arm.

“Herr Pfeiffer,” he says, “I want you should meet your new agent, Lefty Feep.”

The skinny guy looks up. He has big, deep eyes, with a light in them like burning reefers. It is a very powerful stare, and when we shake hands I find out he has a very powerful grip.

“Agent?” he says. “I do not need an agent. I have here a good job, I am in this fine orchestra playing, so why in the world should I an agent want?”

This double-talk turns out to be a kind of German accent, but I just pass it off and do what Boogie tells me.

“How would you like to earn big money in a real band?” I brace him. “I can get you a job where you’ll be famous overnight.”

Pfeiffer shakes his head very fast.

“I do not wish to famous become,” he says. “I have on my trail enemies, and I do not wish publoosity.” He shakes his long curly hair again.

Then Boogie and I really go to work on him. It takes an hour between dances, but to make a long story, he finally agrees to show up tomorrow, on his night off, for an audition.

So Boogie and I leave, very happy, while he is playing the last number for the evening. When we go out the door, the crowd is making like crazy all over the floor.

“He’s a sensation,” Boogie yells. “Broadway will love him! Think of the radio—movies—ouch!”

The last word comes from him when he nearly trips going out the door. He stumbles over a gang of mice that are waltzing around in the hall.

“We can at least sell him to Walt Disney,” I decide.

BUT it is not Walt Disney I sell Pfeiffer to the next day. Boogie and I go down and arrange an audition with none other than Lou Martini and his Cocktail Cavaliers. They are playing in a big hotel, in what they call the Tiger Room.

Boogie handles all the details. I learn that the way a player auditions is to show up for a regular dance performance and sit in with the rest of the orchestra, to see if his noise fits in with the blasting. And Boogie gives this Lou Martini a terrific buildup about how good Pfeiffer is. From the way he describes his tooting you’d think Pfeiffer was the angel Gabriel instead of a broken-down refugee. But Martini says all right, he’ll give him a chance, let him come around tonight with his clarinet for the dinner dance hour. Only Martini warns us that Pfeiffer better be good, because the Tiger Room only caters to the cream of society, and bad music will make them curdle.

So out we go, very steamed up, and I take Pfeiffer up to my place and tell him the good news. Pfeiffer doesn’t seem any too pleased—in fact, you would think he had a date to be hung in the Tiger Room. Those big eyes of his get misty and he runs his skinny fingers through the mop on his head.

“Ach, this playing I do not like the idea of, Mr. Feep,” he grunts. “My music is safer to play a stable in, but on a dance floor not.”

“You’re terrific,” Boogie tells him. “You know all the numbers Martini uses anyway. Besides, you have your own style, and all you do is hot licks, not score-work.”

“Perhaps the licks too hot will be for this band,” Pfeiffer mourns.

“The crowd will go wild over you,” Boogie promises.

“That is what I am afraid of,” says Pfeiffer. “Besides, there are on my trail now certain men I do not wish to find me.”

“What’s the matter, you owe money on that clarinet?” Boogie asks him.

“Nein. The instrument, I make it myself a long time ago,” Pfeiffer says. “And it is not a clarinet.”

"I wonder about that," Boogie tells him. "It does not resemble an American instrument at all, but it sounds like one."

Pfeiffer smiles.

"I can make it sound like many things," he answers. "But I do not make it sound tonight. Positive!"

Well, I see a great opportunity slipping away, so I stick in my oar.

"You have to play, Pfeiffer," I argue. "It's the chance of a lifetime. A young punk like you ought to have a big future."

"You are wrong," he says. "I am not so young and not so punk, and I have a great past. But if the men on my trail up to me catch, I will have no future left at all."

"How will they know?" I tell him. "All you do is sit in on a few numbers with a big band. Nobody will even notice you."

I'm wrong. I find it out that night.

WE finally argue Pfeiffer into keeping his date, and at eight in the evening we breeze into the Tiger Room and take him up to Lou Martini, who gives him a seat with the band.

Then Boogie and I sit down at a table and order a couple hamburgers while we wait for the dancing to start. I gander around and I am impressed. The Tiger Room is strictly uptown—some of the customers have as many as six chins, and most of the guys are wearing tuxedos nearly as good as the waiters have. There are a lot of old society tomatoes and a whole gang of debutramps. I begin to worry a little about whether this Pfeiffer is as good as we think he is—because from the looks of this mob they don't go for anything but the best. If they dance, they got to have at least St. Vitus leading the orchestra.

And there is skinny Pfeiffer up on the platform with his battered old clarinet, wearing the kind of a suit they put on window dummies when they want to burn them. His big round eyes are rolling, and he looks frightened and nervous. He keeps staring out at the tables like he was afraid of seeing a ghost, or his mother-in-law.

Then I see they are ready to start. Just before Martini goes out to lead the band, he stops over at our table and throws down a sheaf of papers.

“This is our stock contract,” he tells me. “If your man is any good tonight, we’ll sign it.”

Then he blows, and Boogie and I sit there, biting our nails without ketchup when we see Martini raise his stick.

The music begins. Couples get up from all the tables and begin to break down their arches. They jiggle along, and I look at Pfeiffer and see he is playing kind of soft behind the band. So far, so good.

There is another number, and this one is a little on the torrid side, so I know pretty soon Pfeiffer will have a chance to let out some blasts on his kazoo. Sure enough, comes the second chorus and Pfeiffer begins to let go with those high notes. They shriek out plenty loud, and the rest of the band lets him carry the tune. He has to carry it, the way he is mangling same, but everybody seems to like it. The dancers wiggle a little harder, and when it is over they all push their paws together. Pfeiffer is plenty red in the face, but Martini calls for another number and off they go.

This time he must pick out a special, because it is almost all clarinet There are some drums, but what you hear is that awful squeaking. It runs up and down my spine like I have frogs down my neck. But these hepcats are crazy for it. They begin to truck all over the place, and Pfeiffer stands up and blows away.

“Look at that man send!” Boogie shouts.

But I am not looking at that man. I am looking at something else.

WE are sitting at a table near the wall, and I happen to glance down when I see it. There is something crawling out of the woodwork, and I recognize it right away. It is a mouse. A big, black mouse. And behind it is another mouse. And another.

I turn away, not believing my peepers, and then I see something else running between two tables. Grey mice. Three or four of them, scampering out onto the dance floor. I turn to the bandstand and I see a couple more, jitterbugging out from underneath.

"Jumping jive!" yells Boogie. "Look twice at the mice!"

And all at once the floor seems to be full of them. They are running and squeaking between the dancers. Some of the society tomatoes notice them for the first time and begin to let out little squeaks themselves, pointing down at their feet.

Martini turns around to see what the matter is and he is so astonished he nearly drops his stick. Then he waves at Pfeiffer. But Pfeiffer doesn't pay any attention. He is blowing his clarinet, and like Boogie says, he is out of this world. His eyes are shut, his face is red, and all he can do is squeal out that high note of his.

And the mice run out, dozens of them, from all over the place. Some of the men are trying to kick them, and a couple of the jitter girls climb up on chairs and go right on dancing while they scream to take them away. A waiter is crossing the floor, running very fast, and he trips over a brown rat.

Everybody is squawking and running at once. By this time mice are climbing up on the tables and grabbing at food, and I see one fat bozo going crazy with the giggles because a mouse crawls into his tuxedo and tickles him.

Boogie runs up to the bandstand and helps Martini grab the clarinet away from Pfeiffer. Meanwhile I am very interested watching a young tomato at the next table who seems to get a mouse caught in her bustle. She is doing a very torrid rumba even after the music stops.

So the next thing I know is when Martini grabs me by the collar and pushes me out of my chair. He has Pfeiffer's neck in his other hand, and he is sort of kicking Boogie along with his feet in a mild sort of way. Also he is saying things that I do not wish to repeat.

"But what about our contract?" I ask, as he moves us along to the door. "What about our contract?"

“Take a look,” Martini gurgles, between curses.

I look back at the table and all I see is a pile of mice scampering around a few strips of paper. They eat our contract for us! And something tells me Martini is not going to make out another one. In fact he confirms this suspicion when he throws us down the stairs of the Tiger Room.

“Get out and stay out,” he shouts. “You rats will bring a bunch of mice into my place!”

“Aw, shut your trap!” yells Boogie, which is not the right thing to say, because Martini turns very red and throws a small chair after us.

It happens to hit me on the head, so the last words I hear come from Martini when he yells after us:

“I’ll teach you—trying to put the Pied Piper in my orchestra!”

WHEN I come to, I am sitting in the alley, and somebody is pouring water over my noggin as if I was some kind of potted plant. I look up and see Pfeiffer.

“Where is Boogie?” I ask, strictly from confusion.

“I do not know, Herr Feep. He says he wants to make a grab far.”

“Grab far? You mean, a get-away?”

“Yes. *Ach,* he runs very fast, that Herr Boogie.”

I stand up, and when I do I remember everything. I stare a long stare at this skinny guy with the wild mop of hair, the big bulging eyes, and the funny clarinet.

“What is this Martini yells about you being the Pied Piper?” I get out, finally.

Pfeiffer’s eyes turn down and he does a slow shrug. Then he sighs.

“I might as well confess,” he whispers. “It is true. That is why tonight I do not wish the music to make. Because when I play little mice and rats come out. In the stable where it is dark, the customers do not notice take, but when I play upstairs right away they smell a mouse. It is just what I am afraid of.”

I listen, but all the while I am wrecking my brains to remember what I hear about this Pied Piper. I catch the gossip when I am a brat in school, I guess. Some burg over in Germany gets filled with rats—even before the Nazis arrive. And instead of calling the exterminator, they hire this guy with the pipe to swing out a few tunes. He plays and the rodents follow him and get drowned. Then he comes back and turns in a bill, but the rats are gone and they try to stall him off on a cash settlement. So he plays again and all their moppets run after his music like jitterbugs and dance away forever.

I ask him about this story, and Pfeiffer shakes his head.

"It is a lie," he hollers, waving his arms. "It is a dirty black lie; propaganda. It is true I go to Brunswick, to Hamelin where the rat-plague is. It is bad, that plague. Across the Volga the rats swim, from Asia they come. Brown rats. To Prussia they march, like an army on its stomach traveling. Because they eat everything. Food, merchandise, poultry, flowers, seeds. At buildings they gnaw, at the pipes and walls and the foundations even. Fires they start by gnawing matches. Floods they commence by gnawing dams. In Hamelin there are more rats than people.

"And in Hamelin they hire me the rats to kill. I have my pipe and my music which I learn from traveling in India where they charm serpents. So for the rats a concert I arrange and they follow me to the river and drown dead. This is true.

"But it is a lie that I take away children! It is a lie made up to spoil my business. Now they only mouse-traps use and I am—how you call it?—a bum. It gets so bad I must a job in an orchestra take, playing my pipe like a clarinet. Still the music I make enchants the rats, so I get from many theatres and cafes on my behind thrown out.

"Then come the Nazis, and because of what I do I must from Germany run like a rat myself. What happens after that you know."

PFEIFFER shakes his head. I pat him on the shoulder.

"Why don't you spill this before?" I tell him. "You got a fortune in that pipe of yours and you don't know it! Why you could set yourself up as a rat-remover and put the exterminator companies out of business!"

"Nein. You forget—they are still on my trail, those Nazis, because of what I try to do before I leave. That is why to Pfeiffer I change my name—it is German for Piper. Publoosity would be deadly fatal. The Gestapo wants to take me back. Up to now I sleep in the basement under the Barrel House because I am afraid. Down there the rats and mice protect me. But now I will be caught and they will—how you say so?—bake for me my goose."

"Nuts to that," I console him. "We get no Gestapo over here. The government cleans out fifth columnists. You got nothing to worry about. Just put that in your pipe and play it."

Pfeiffer smiles a little.

"You are kind, Herr Feep."

"Come home with me," I tell him. "I'll figure an angle for you. A guy with your talent—a regular rat Stowkowski—you won't have any trouble."

We start off down the side street. I am still talking to Pfeiffer and I pay no attention to the car that pulls up alongside the curb just ahead. The street is deserted anyway, so I just give Pfeiffer the old juice.

"I got a million ideas for you," I am saying. "Maybe not playing in a swing band, but other places. Hold it—I've got it—I see the light!"

But it is not the light I see.

It is the dark. Because when I say this I suddenly feel something hard smack me across the back of the head. A big hand reaches out and grabs me, and just as I turn around, I get it in the hat-rack again, and everything goes blankety-blank. For the second time that night I am down and out.

And when I wake up I am higher than ever in my life. Twenty thousand feet, to be exact.

I am in a plane, and so is Pfeiffer. We are lying on the seat of the rear compartment, and in the seat ahead a pilot is giving out with the old push and pull.

I sit up, and that is all I can do. Because Pfeiffer and I have our hands and legs tied together in Boy Scout knots.

Only one look at our pilot tells me he is very far from being a Boy Scout. He is a big side of meat with shoulders like a wrestler, and his head is shaved, even though his face isn't. He is wearing a pilot's outfit, but there is a little round badge in his sleeve. Pfeiffer looks at it and shudders.

"Ach!" he whispers. "Gestapo!"

SURE enough, I spot the swastika. I give Pfeiffer a nudge.

"What's happened?" I ask.

"Just what I am afraid of. They catch up to me, as I know they will. They drag us into the car and take us to some place where this plane in a secret hangar is kept. Now they fly us back to Germany."

I raise my head.

"But feel how cold it is. We're heading north. And look down there—we're over land, not water."

Pfeiffer shakes his head.

"We are probably to Canada going first. To another secret hangar. We make the trip in instalments, and I am worried only about the last payment."

The pilot never looks around. It is getting very frigid in the plane, and steam comes out of our yaps when Pfeiffer and I whisper. I squirm closer to him.

"I don't get this," I remark. "Just what is it you do in Germany that makes the Gestapo so hot to catch you?"

"I may as well tell you now," Pfeiffer decides. "I play for the rats."

"So what?"

"You do not understand. I play for the rats over the underground—the secret radio broadcasts against the Nazis. Music I make for them to come out, music I make for them to appear in every city. So they will jaundice bring, and typhus, and the plague. There is a rat for every man, you know—a population of millions. And I play oh so sweetly for the rats, to make them happy, to make them hungry. I play music that is with appetite filled, so they will eat. They will eat under buildings and bite away the foundations. They will destroy docks and warehouses and railroad bridges. They will make sabotage and the machinery up-geshcrew."

"I get it."

"So do the Gestapo. Every night I play, hidden away, over the wireless. And every night they hunt for me and my broadcasting set. Because the rats and mice come out and eat. Finally—how you say it?—the heat is upon me. I must smuggle myself from the country out. And now, even here, they have orders to find me and bring me back. So now they do. *Achoo!"*

This last remark is a loud sneeze. It is very cold, and Pfeiffer is shivering. So am I, but not from cold. I merely have to look at the bullet-headed pilot to start shivering.

"You really can get the rats to go on a rampage with your music?" I whisper.

"That is so. Music has charms—*achoo!"*

I SIT there thinking about the screwy pickle I am in, but not for long. Because the pickle develops warts very soon. We start going down. The plane noses over and I look out and see us rushing down into blackness. No lights, no nothing.

At first I think we are cracking up, but the pilot is still sitting very calm. Then all at once I see a flare shoot out, and it hangs in the air while we land.

We taxi along some dirt almost into a clump of trees, and I look around. All I can see outside is woods, and some patches of snow.

"Canada, all right," I whisper to Pfeiffer, while the pilots gets out. "Must be another hideaway."

This turns out to be a good guess. Because the pilot comes around to the rear door, opens it up, and cuts our feet loose. For the first time I get a full look at his bearded puss, and it is a face that only Karloff's mother could love.

"Raus!" he says, kindly dragging Pfeiffer and me out by the neck. "To the cabin—march!"

And he pulls us along the ground toward a little cabin standing there all alone in the wilderness. The door is open and we go inside, Pfeiffer sneezing his way ahead of me.

Now I do not like the buzzard with the beard, but I will take him for a cellmate any time instead of the personality waiting for us inside the cabin.

He is sitting at a little table, and when we come marching in, he waves us to a seat with a smile and a big black Luger.

He is an old character, but his age does not make him any more harmless than a lot of other old things, such as tigers. He has a big beak of a nose which he points at us like he does the Luger, and behind the schnozz are two red eyes that go through me and come out of the back of my head.

"So," he says to the beard. "You bring guests, *hein?"*

"Ja," snaps the beard, lifting a hand like he wanted to leave the room. *"Heil Hitler."* And he stands at attention.

"Good, good. This is Pfeiffer. And the other garbage?"

I do-not know who he is referring to, but I can guess. What he calls me is appropriate, because I look like I am down in the dumps.

The beard starts to wag.

"I wish to report that I make contact with the man Pfeiffer and his companion tonight at 9 o'clock, in the sedan. No trouble picking them up. I bring them with me to the plane and here we are."

"Good, good." The beak is smiling. "Go outside to the tanks and refuel at once. You must leave immediately and deliver our guests to the proper authorities."

The beard smiles and heils, then ducks out to refuel the plane. Meanwhile the beak gives us the old eye.

"SIT down," he says, gesturing with the gun in way that is too careless to suit me. "You seem cold, Pfeiffer?"

Pfeiffer is sniffling and shivering again.

"Yes," he whispers.

The beak smiles. "Too bad you are so cold, but it will not be for long. Soon your journey will be over, and then I am sure they will make it hot enough for you."

This does not strike either me or Pfeiffer as so funny.

But the beak laughs.

"Yes, they are waiting anxiously for you, Pfeiffer. The Pied Piper is quite a catch, even for the Gestapo. It is well worth the risk we are taking to maintain a plane service when we can handle such passengers as yourself." He grins very wide. "You are going for a ride."

"Achoo!" says Pfeiffer.

"Gesundheit," says the beak, very polite.

I study the situation. There is nothing in the old cabin but the table, some chairs, and a couple bunks. Nothing to throw or hide behind. And the beak has a Luger. In a couple minutes we will be back on the plane, headed for Germany. I wish very sincerely to get my hands on that gun—but my hands are tied. I begin to feel a trifle depressed.

And Pfeiffer just sits there and sneezes. He has a terrific cold.

The beak notices it. "It is too bad I cannot light a fire," he remarks. "But sparks fly up from a chimney, and this is Canada. One must be very careful, you understand."

Pfeiffer shakes his head. And then a kind of gleam comes into his eye.

"Perhaps I can make myself warm," he suggests. "If you do not mind, I will my pipe play the time to pass."

The beak chuckles.

"A serenade? *Wonderschon!* It is not every man who can hear the Pied Piper play."

Pfeiffer reaches into his coat with his bound hands. And the beak's Luger follows every move, in case Pfeiffer springs a gat or something. But nothing comes out except the clarinet from inside the overcoat pocket. It is pretty well dented, but Pfeiffer puts it up to his lips and lets out a blat. The squeaking starts.

The beak doesn't care. Out here in the wilderness there is nobody to hear. So Pfeiffer begins to dig in. He smiles a little and wrestles with the cold pipe. It doesn't seem to work right, somehow. The cold air makes the notes lower. And Pfeiffer's cold does something to his breathing, so that the tones are all screwy. They carry a long wail, a sort of echo from far away.

SOMEHOW it is all kind of impressive—Pfeiffer sitting there tied up in this cabin in the woods at night, with a guy pointing a gun at his head—playing like one of those statues of Pan, or whatever they call him. His long fingers tug at the pipe and his lips pucker up, and the big squeals run up and down the air.

Then the door opens and the beard comes in. He has finished refueling and he is ready. He sits down for a minute when he hears Pfeiffer tooting away. He tries to get the beak's attention, but the beak is watching Pfeiffer.

And then I hear it. Far away. That rustling noise. That padding sound. It seems to be coming nearer, getting louder. More like a clumping noise. It sort of moves in rhythm to the piping. I look around, quick, but I don't see anything.

From the look in Pfeiffer's eyes, I know he hears it too. And all at once he pulls out the stops and gets loud on the clarinet. He rides to town. And over it comes the running sound, nearer and nearer.

Then the beak gets it too. He stands up all at once.

"Stop that!" he yells. But it is too late. All of a sudden there is a cracking sound, the walls of the cabin start to bend in, and the side of the door breaks down with a crash.

Pfeiffer's tune blares out louder, and there is a hell-splitting bang. The table spins into the comer.

"Himmel!" gasps the beak, turning around to face the door.

This is my chance. I throw myself across the room and grab the gun out of his hands. The beard falls down when the door topples over on him.

“Come on, Pfeiffer!” I advise him. For a minute or two there is nothing but confusion when the cabin is filled with what Pfeiffer calls on his pipes.

Then we are running down the trail, keeping the gun in the beak’s ribs, and climbing in the plane. In three minutes we are off, making the beak pilot the ship.

* * *

“SO there is not much more to tell.

When we return, we hand the beak over to the FBI, along with the plane. They get all the details on this Gestapo ring from the beak, and that is that.

“Naturally, Pfeiffer is a hero. I guess he will be doing sound effects for Walt Disney pretty soon. But right now he is working with the Coordinator of Information’s office. You know, the babies that broadcast short-wave radio to the Axis.

“He is doing just what he does back in Germany—playing request numbers for the mice over there. He is trying to get the mice to revolt by using his pipe over the radio. Maybe he can get a bunch of them to tunnel under Berchtesgaden and kill Hitler. Perhaps the mice will get that rat.

“So that is why I come in here and order all this cheese. I take some down to the headquarters where the Pied Piper makes his broadcasts from, and feed it to the mice and rats that sneak into the studio when he starts to play.

“It is better to feed them than bump them off, because they do us such a good turn.”

Lefty Feep sat back and folded his hands.

“Does this answer your questions?” he asked.

I stared him straight in the eye. “Listen, Feep. When you started this wild story of yours, I warned you. About holes in the story, wasn’t it? And there is something you haven't managed to explain. Thought you'd get away with it—but I've caught you."

"To what do you refer, pal?" asked Feep, pleasantly.

"To that little matter of Pfeiffer playing in the cabin. You said he did something which caused an awful commotion; started some kind of row that you took advantage of in overpowering the Gestapo men and escaping."

"Of course," Feep answered me. "I can set you straight on that."

"Just a minute." I raised my hand. "I think I know what you're going to tell me. You're going to tell me that Pfeiffer played his pipe and a lot of mice started to tunnel under the cabin and eat away the foundations so that the door fell in. And I tell you right now, I won't believe it!"

"You don't have to believe it," Feep grinned. "This is not what happens. Pfeiffer has such an idea when he starts to play, but it is lucky for us that he also has a bad cold."

"What's that got to do with breaking the door down?" I snapped.

"I tell you before Pfeiffer has a bad cold and it makes his music sound different."

"I know that," I replied. "And I also know that you won't find mice running around in the wilds of Canada."

"Sure," Feep agreed. "It is not mice that break down the cabin door. Pfeiffer plays music for a mouse to come, but his cold causes a slight mistake. And he does not get a mouse."

"What does he get to break the door down?"

"A moose," said Feep, grinning.

The Weird Doom of Floyd Scrilch

Lefty Feep really ran into something when he met the “average man” the advertisements are always aiming at! He was too average!

I HAD almost finished with my meal over at Jack’s Shack. In fact, I was half-way between my last cup of coffee and my first bicarbonate of soda. Shaking the gravy off my newspaper, I unfolded it and began to read.

Suddenly a hand descended and brushed the pages aside. I looked up into the startled face of Lefty Feep. His wildly rolling eyes were staring at the discarded paper with a look of intense loathing.

“Remove it away,” he grated. “Grab loose from that!”

I raised my eyebrows as he lowered his hips into a seat.

“What’s the matter, Feep?” I asked. “Does the sight of the news upset you so much?”

“News?” echoed the eccentric Mr. Feep. “It is not the news which upsets me at all. It is the advertisements that drain the rosy color from my handsome face. I can not bear to look at them.”

For the first time I foresaw that I was going to get into an argument with my friend.

“So you’re just another highbrow, eh?” I said. “Just another one of those know-it-alls who run around pointing their fingers at the advertising business. Don’t you realize what advertising has done for this country? How it has revolutionized business, brought new products and better products forward to the average consumer, given ethics to commerce? Advertising today is more than a profession—it's an art, and a science. The American public owes a debt of gratitude to advertising for—"

"Yeow!" yelled Lefty Feep, quite suddenly. His hands covered his ears as he rocked back and forth in his seat. In a moment he regained composure and leaned forward.

"Please," he whispered. "Pretty please, with ketchup on it. Do not mention that word to me. It gives my dimples goose-pimples."

"Why?" I asked. "What harm has ad—all right, what harm has commercial display ever done to you?"

"Not a bit," Feep answered. "It is not because of myself that I ache and shake. I am merely thinking of what advertising does to poor Floyd Scrilch."

"Floyd Scrilch?"

"Perhaps I better tell you about Floyd Scrilch from the beginning," said Lefty Feep. "It will teach you a lesson."

"I'm sorry, Feep," I said. "But I've got to be going. Heavy date. Some other time, perhaps?"

"Well," Feep shrugged. "If you insist."

He pulled me back into my seat and held me there firmly. Then, plunging his elbows into the butter plates, he began.

* * *

WHEN I first meet up with this Floyd Scrilch, I do not pay any great attention to him. He is that kind of personality. A nobody from nowhere. Strictly a dud. When he walks into a room it is just like somebody else walks out. You don't even know he's there even after you look at him. His face is as empty as a Jap's promise. He never opens his mouth between meals. He is so shy he never looks in the mirror when he shaves. He is what the psychologists call an introtwerp, if you follow me.

He hangs out around the poolroom, and also around the elbows. His clothes are a model of what the well-dressed scarecrow doesn't wear. Also he is very puny. In fact, he is so thin that when he has a toothpick in his mouth it looks like he is hiding behind a tree. One glance at him and you know he cannot lick his weight in wild flowers. In fact, one day I am standing in the pool parlor when he weighs himself and I see he only tips the scales at 84 pounds. Not stripped, either, because the poolroom is crowded.

That is the first time I have anything to do with Floyd Scrilch. He notices I am watching him, and he turns around and hands me a sick smile.

“I do not seem to be so healthy,” he gets out.

“At least you won’t be taken by the draft,” I console him.

“I always get pneumonia from drafts anyway,” he sighs.

“Why don’t you visit a croaker?” I inquire.

“A what?”

“An undertaker’s understudy. A pulse-promoter. A doctor.”

He shakes his head.

“No use,” he tells me. “All the doctors give me up for dead long ago. The last medico who examines me says my lungs look like a couple of tea-bags and my heart only beats to mark the hour.”

I feel sorry for this weak but meek little guy, and I want to pat him on the shoulder, only I am afraid he will collapse.

But Gorilla Gabface does not share my sentiments. He is watching this Floyd Scrilch hang around his pool-room for the last week, and just now he waddles over to where Scrilch is standing and grabs him by the collar, which rips.

“Listen, jerk,” says Gabface. “You got a job?”

Scrilch shakes his head.

“No,” he mumbles. “Nobody will hire me.”

“You got any money?” Gabface sneers, shaking Scrilch up and down like a dice-box until his teeth roll sevens.

“No money,” Scrilch chatters.

Gabface grunts.

“That is the way I figure it, too,” he says. “And I do not wish for my poolroom to become a Rescue Mission. So I fear I shall invite you to get the blazes out of here.”

GABFACE sort of emphasizes his remarks by picking Scrilch off the floor and tossing him through the door. He lands someplace out on the curb, and when I run out to see what happens he is still bouncing. I catch him on the third bounce and pick him up again.

“That is a mean thing to do,” I console him. “Gorilla Gabface is no better than a skunk in wolf’s clothing.

If I am you I go back in and give him a good beating.”

Scrilch sighs.

“I can not beat up an eggnog, let alone a big ape like that,” he tells me. “But I only wish I can peel his orange for him some day. Only it is no use, I guess. I am just a rundown weakling. Nobody ever worries about me. I got no friends, no girl, no job. I just as soon go home and put my head in the oven, only the gas company turns it off on me.”

Then I get an idea. I have a newspaper in my hand, fanning Scrilch with it to bring him around, and I happen to glance at the page. And I see the advertisement.

It is a big muscle-building ad. I grab Scrilch by the hair.

“Listen to this!” I holler.

“Nuts!” says Joe Stronghorse in the ad. “In seven days you can have a body like mine l

“You wouldn’t think to look at me that I am just a 92-pound weakling? Yet I have no muscles painted on. I am just a nobody, but my body is as good as anybody’s. You can possess the same muscular strength.

“Let me tell you how you can add three inches to your biceps, eight inches to your calves, sixteen inches to your chest—or bust!

“No complicated exercises! No harsh laxatives! Earn big easy money at home growing hair on your chest in your spare time!

“Send for my exercise system today! A free tiger-skin included with every order! I will build you a powerful body in three weeks, or your muscles refunded. This course guarantees a powerful physique. It will even make your breath stronger!”

Anyhow, it reads something like that. And when I spill this to Floyd Scrilch his eyes light up. He looks at the picture of Joe Stronghorse and a grin spills down his chin.

“Say,” he whispers. “Do you think it will work for me?”

“All you got to do is tear out this coupon,” I tell him.

“I’ll do it!” he shouts. “Yes sir, I’ll do it!”

Then his face falls. “Can I ask you one favor, Mr. Feep?” he gulps.

“Sure. What is it?”

“Will you please tear out the coupon for me? I’m too weak to do it myself.”

SO that is how Floyd Scrilch answers his first advertisement. I forget about him in a couple of weeks, because I do not see him at the poolroom any more.

I am playing a little game on the first table one afternoon about a month later when an elephant flies over my head.

I do not notice this at first, but then I hear the elephant trumpeting, so I look up and see that it is none other than Gorilla Gabface. He is flying through the air and traveling very fast. He does not even stop to go out the door, but plows right through the plate glass window. Then he sits down very carefully on the sidewalk and pulls splinters out of his ears.

I turn around to the back and duck very quick, because two other personalities are doing a nonstop flight my way. They land up against the wall and pause for a nap.

And I hear a big booming voice say,

“Any other goon want a trip to the moon?”

The rest of the mob just stands there very quiet indeed while a broad-shouldered little guy walks out from between them. I take a good look and then another. Because I recognize none other than Floyd Scrilch.

But he is plenty changed. He has big arms and a broad chest, and looks like he weighs 170 in muscles alone. He walks over to me and yells,

"Hello, Feep—glad to see you! Put 'er there."

"Ouch!" I remark, shaking hands. He has a grip like a politician.

"I want to thank you for what you do for me," he says. "Ever since I mail that coupon, I feel like a new man. Once I get those lessons they do wonders for me. A month ago, if I want to tear a telephone book in half, I have to do it one page at a time. Today I can tear a telephone booth in half."

He slaps me on the back and I cave in.

"Now I settle with this Gorilla person, I feel like celebrating. How about coming along with me for a little drink?"

"O.K.," I tell him. "But aren't you hard up for money?"

He laughs.

"Not since I answer the advertisement," he tells me.

"The muscle ad?"

"No. The other one. About entering the big $5000 prize contest. I enter it and win."

SURE enough, when we get outside I notice Floyd Scrilch is wearing a new English burlap drape suit, and he leads me over to a big car with actual new tires on it.

We go over to Daddy's Tavern, where you always find about eight to the bar, and have a drink on Scrilch's new success.

"It is a funny thing," he tells me. "Ever since you point out that ad to me, I study advertisements and answer them. And every ad I answer works out for me."

"How do you mean?"

"Well, take like this ad about raising a truck garden at home. My neighbors send for some seeds a long time ago and try. it out, and they tell me nothing comes up. Me, I send in just ten days ago and already my garden is full of carrots and tomatoes and peas and radishes and such articles. It is like magic.

"Then, just for fun, I send in for another ad which tells about getting rid of unsightly pores. And now look at me. Go ahead, look at my face."

I stare at him real close. Sure enough, there is not a pore on his face. The skin is closed up tight all over.

"You see?" he tells me. "I got no more pores than an empty bottle. I got a hunch I am going places with these advertisements. For some reason they just work out right for me."

I have to leave just then, because I have a heavy freight date. And when I duck out, I do not see Floyd Scrilch again for weeks.

This is because I am all the time riding these heavy freight dates. I happen to be mixed up with a torrid tomato. I call her Pearl, because her old man is a bad oyster.

I am not a personality who usually makes like a wolf after the little red riding hoods, but this dame has me dizzier than a Joe Louis left. I am almost on the point of hanging a ring on her finger, even if it means she will then be leading me by a ring through my nose. We do the old dine and dance routine every night, and she has old Lefty Feep's name down in the number I spot on her hit parade. We are closer together than the Gold Dust Twins—and prettier, too.

SO WHEN she calls up one night and asks me to take her out, I give her the nod, quick.

"Will you take me down to the Sunset Roof?" she asks. "I hear there is a new piano player there that can really barrelhouse the boogie in a lowdown doggy way."

She is just crazy for music and culture like this, see?

Well, the Sunset Roof is very high in its class and also in its price, but who am I to refuse Pearl anything her little ticker desires?

So I tell her sure, and pick her up after dinner, and take her down to the Sunset Roof. I bring her a lovely orchard to wear on her dress, and I hire a taxi, and I pay the stiff cover charge without a squawk, and I give her the old routine, so by the time we sit down at the table she is practically in my lap. She is giving me the gaze—you know, the old "we-can-buy-our-furniture-on-the-instalment-plan" look, and I am going for it three ways. Hook, line, and sinker.

Then the floor show starts, and the slush melts all of a sudden. Because that piano player she is so crazy to hear wheels out his infant grand and begins to polish ivory.

"Listen to that man play!" squeals Pearl. So I listen. He is really a gee with the keys, and everybody is quiet while he meddles the pedals under a blue light all alone.

When he chalks up his numbers, there is a lot of palm-pounding, and the lights go on, and Pearl yaps.

"Isn't he just like Eddy Duchin?" So I take a squint at the face and shake my head fast.

Because this piano player is not like Eddy Duchin. He is not like Rachmaninoff either. But he is exactly like my old friend Floyd Scrilch!

In fact, he is Floyd Scrilch, in a tuxedo. He spots me when he is coming off the floor, and runs over.

"Well, it is Lefty Feep!" he gurgles. "And with a charming companion." He bows like a movie extra.

So I make with the introductions and he drapes his creases in a chair at our table.

I can not resist asking him the natural question, which I do.

"What are you doing here?" I get out. "Since when do you manicure a keyboard?"

He turns and gives me a big smile.

“A month ago I am ignorant of music,” he admits. “The only notes I can read are the ones I get from my creditors. I think a sharp is a card player and a fiat is some place you live in. Then I pick up this magazine and read the ad. *They Laugh When I Sit Down At the Piano.* It tells how you can learn to play in ten easy lessons, or five hard ones. So I mail the coupon, get my lessons, and right away I am so good I figure I can get a job. So I come up here and they hire me. It is sensational, no?”

HE TALKS to me, but he looks at Pearl. She giggles.

“Why, Mr. Scrilch, you must be a virtuoso.”

“Never mind my private life,” he tells her, with an enchanting leer. “And why be so formal? Just call me Floydie.” His eyes light up like payoff numbers on a pinball machine.

“You just answer the ad and you get what you want, huh?” I ask.

But Floyd Scrilch is not paying any attention to me. He is too busy casting the old goo-goo glance at Pearl.

“What?” he mumbles.

“I say what you got in your hand?” I inquire.

“Why, Pearl’s arm,” he tells me. And he has. “Pearl,” he whispers. “A lovely name. Pearl, you are too good to cast yourself before swine.”

This sounds like a dirty crack of some kind, but Pearl just giggles and wiggles, and I see the handwriting on the wall. Also on the check.

“Shall we waddle out of here?” I ask her.

“No, I want to stay. Floydie here says we’re going to have lots of fun,” she simpers.

So that is the way it is. Floyd Scrilch sits there in his tuxedo, with his big broad shoulders waving and his hair slicked down, handling my tomato like she comes from his own vine.

I get up to go. I should be sore, but for some reason I am more interested in how he does it. In fact, I have a little suspicion when I see his hair. I can not resist bending down and whispering to him before I exit.

"Tell me the truth, Scrilch," I mutter. "Do you also answer one of these ads which tell you to buy hair tonic that makes you irresistible to women?"

He grins.

"You guess it, Feep," he admits. "I just mail the coupon and in comes the stuff to put on my hair, and now wherever my hair goes, women get in it."

I shrug and sneak off. I make up my mind right then and there to forget Pearl and this guy Scrilch.

But this is not so easy to do. Because how can you forget a guy with hair three feet long?

THAT is the way Floyd Scrilch's hair is when I bump into him on the street a few weeks later.

He is running down the block wearing a purple nightgown, and a big shock of long bushy air is tangled all over his dome.

In fact, he bumps into me and I get a mouthful of the stuff. I chew a while and then let go and Scrilch recognizes me.

"Don't tell me," I say. "You figure you have falling hair so you send in for a hair restorer and this is what happens."

"Right," he says. "It almost worries me, the way these ads come true. I begin to think they overdo things for me a little."

"But why the purple nightgown?" I ask.

"That is no nightgown," he comes back. "That is a smock."

"Smock?"

"Sure. All artists wear smocks."

"Since when are you artistic?"

"Since I get this long hair. It gives me the idea. All guys with long hair are artists. So I happen to be looking through a magazine and I see this ad.

"Be an Artist!" it says. And there is a picture of an animal down below it. Get Out Your Easel and Draw This Weasel, it states. And it says that the guy who draws the best weasel gets a free art course from this school, by mail. Now me, I think a palette is something you have in your mouth, and a

brush is something you have with the law. But I draw, and I win the course, and every lesson works out. In fact I am way ahead of the lessons. I get some oil paints and start to work three weeks ago. I quit my job at the Sunset Roof and take up painting in a big way.

“Last week I have about twenty paintings done. And the big art critic, Vincent van Gouge, happens to drop into my place and—”

“Wait a minute,” I cut in. “Since when do guys like art critics come to see you? You are not so popular as that.”

Scrilch smiles.

“I am since I answer that ad about Be the Life of the Party,” he tells me. “I win friends and influence people all over the place. So they are always running around to see me. Anyway, this van Gouge drops in, takes one look at my paintings, and tells me I got to have an opening.”

“You tell me he is an art critic,” I object. “So why does he give you advice like a doctor?”

“You don’t understand. He means an opening—an exhibition of my paintings. In fact he gets up some sponsors, and today I have twenty paintings hanging down in the art gallery up the street. So I put on my smock and go down there now to the big reception. I am going to be famous. I answer the right ads.”

By this time I am a little dizzy. In fact I am so dizzy I decide to go down to the art gallery with Scrilch and see what this is all about.

ON THE way down I ask him about Pearl. He does not even remember her name.

“I am so popular,” he babbles. “Like the ads say, I have friends and invitations galore.”

I just groan.

When we get to the art gallery I groan again. Because I see Scrilch’s paintings.

There are twenty of them, all right, and they look like two sets of ten nights in a barroom. Never in my life do I see such screwy drawings, and I am a fellow who goes in a lot of phone booths.

But there is a big gang of society people walking around and making bleats over the things. Mainly they stand around a big painting at the end. It is a study of two goldfish with skis on, waiting for a street car at the North Pole during a thunder shower. Anyhow, that is the way it looks to me. But not to the society crowd. “Look!” yaps one old babe. “It reminds me of Picasso in his blue period.”

“Blue, lady?” I tell her. “He must be ready for suicide.”

The old babe sniffs and trucks away from there.

I turn to Scrilch.

“What kind of stuff is this?” I ask. I point to another picture. “How about that one? It looks like a kangaroo walking a tightrope over a garbage dump with Mayor La Guardia in its pouch reading a newspaper.”

“You do not understand,” Scrilch shrugs. “This is all surrealism.”

“You and your sewer realism,” I sniff. “If you ask me, the only things you can draw is your pay and your breath.”

Scrilch puts his finger to his lips. “Not so loud,” he tells me. “Lots of important people here. They’re all very much impressed.”

“Depressed, if you ask me,” I come back.

“I am sorry you don’t like it,” he tells me. But perhaps you will like my writing better.”

“Writing?”

“Why of course. I am writing the Great American Novel. I answer an ad just this week. *Shake a Leg and Be Another Shakespeare! Just Clip This Coupon And Learn To Write!* So I am only on my third lesson, but yesterday I start my novel. It is almost half through already.”

I listen to this and start foaming at the mouth like a beer keg. And I am not the only one.

A LITTLE short fat personality stands right behind us. Now he taps Scrilch on the shoulder and stares at him. He is wearing a heavy pair of cheaters, with enough glass in them to cover a store window.

"Pardon me," he croaks. "But is it not Floyd Scrilch the artist whom I have the honor of addressing?"

"Right."

"And do you not just remark that in addition to your remarkable gifts as a painter, you are also a *literateur?"*

"Naw, I write stuff."

The little goggle-eyes smiles. "Really?"

"That isn't the half of it," I butt in. "He is also a piano player, a social lion, and an all-around athlete."

"Wonderful!" breathes the goggle-eyes. "How I wish I might psychoanalyze such a genius!"

Then he introduces himself. He turns out to be none other than Doctor Sigmund, the psychiatrist—better known as Subconscious Sigmund.

Subconscious Sigmund grabs Scrilch by the collar.

"How do you manage to cope with such versatility?" he asks.

"I just take a little bicarbonate."

"I mean to say, how is it that you are so accomplished in so many different fields of endeavor?"

"Oh," blurts out Scrilch. "I just answer advertisements and they work out for me."

Subconscious Sigmund stares.

"You mean you just clip out advertising coupons that offer to teach you things and you learn them?"

"Sure."

"Then, Mr. Scrilch, I beg of you—permit me to psychoanalyze you at once."

"Does it hurt?"

"Certainly not. I merely take you to my office and ask you a few questions. I wish to probe your unconscious."

"You wish to what my what?"

"Look into your inner mind. You seem to be a most remarkable man." Well, Scrilch is a sucker for flattery. The end of it is, he agrees, and we go off to the psychiatrist's office together.

"Come with me, Feep," Scrilch says. "I do not wish to get my brain drained without protection."

SUBCONSCIOUS Sigmund has a swell office downtown, and he takes us into a nice private room and we all sit down and have a drink.

"Now," he says, rubbing his hands together. "I am going to ask you to sit down here, Mr. Scrilch." And he puts Floyd Scrilch in a soft chair. Then he turns out all the lights except one lamp, which shines in Scrilch's face. "I will now ask you to answer a few questions," he purrs.

It is just like a high class third-degree.

So he begins to ask questions and Scrilch answers him. And now I see what Subconscious Sigmund is doing. He is pumping Scrilch for his whole life history. And the story comes out. About what a dull life Scrilch leads as a kid. About how nobody ever pays any attention to him, how he is just an average jerk.

And then Scrilch tells about the advertisements. How he answers the first one and gets muscles. About answering the piano-playing ad and getting lessons and being a wizard on the piano. About how he becomes irresistible to women like the hair ad tells him. About his hair growing with scalp restorer. About the painting ad and the writing ad and the life of the party ad.

Subconscious Sigmund is amazed. I can see it. He walks around Scrilch grunting and coughing and chuckling, and then he stops.

"I see it all," he whispers. "It is truly remarkable! Scrilch, you are that mythical cipher, that abstract integer, that legendary personification—the typical average man! The forces of heredity and environment have for once conspired to blend perfectly the component elements of physique and mentality into the pure norm!"

Scrilch gives him the double take.

"What does this mean without pig Latin?" he inquires.

"It means you are the man all these ads are written for," Subconscious Sigmund tells him. "You are the average citizen these ads are slanted to appeal to. You are the normal man on which these preparations and lessons and exercises and products are designed to work. On a lesser personality or a greater one, they never succeed so fully. But by some kinetic miracle, you are the one person in the world who is perfectly attuned to advertising formulae. It is almost magical. The very words and phrases advertisers use come true in your case."

"You mean if an ad comes out saying you can live forever, I might live forever?"

"Who knows?" Sigmund comes back. "You are physiologically and psychically attuned to the vibrationary reflexes induced by advertising."

IT WORRIES me," Scrilch confesses.

"How do you mean?"

"Well, lately, the ads work *too* good."

"Too good?"

"That's right. I mean, I learn piano playing, but I become a master. I take up drawing, and right away I'm a great artist. I tackle writing, and I write half a novel in one 12-hour day. I send for a hair restorer and I get too much hair. I try to attract friends and women and I have too many friends and too many women. See what I mean? Something is working so that I just seem to get *too much."*

"So? That is most interesting, my friend."

"Sometimes I wonder if I answer the wrong ad, will it kick back on me? Will I get too wealthy or too strong or too talented?"

“I see,” mumbles Subconscious Sigmund. “Over-compensation. A most illuminating development. We must probe further.”

“What you going to do, Doc?” asks Scrilch.

“Just look at me,” Subconscious Sigmund says. He sits down in front of Scrilch and begins to stare at him with those big cheaters wobbling.

I catch on right away. He is trying to put Scrilch to sleep. He talks to him and keeps the light shining in his face all the time, and he stares away and waves his arm around a little.

Scrilch just sits there.

Subconscious Sigmund stares harder and waves more. He begins to sweat.

Scrilch just sits there.

Subconscious Sigmund’s eyes pop out under his goggles. His hands tremble. He sweats plenty.

Scrilch just sits there.

And all of a sudden, Subconscious Sigmund stops mumbling. His pop eyes go shut. His hands drop in his lap. He slumps down in his chair. Then he tumbles off on the floor and just lies there.

Scrilch gets up.

“Come *y* on,” he says. “Let’s get going.”

“But what about Subconscious Sigmund?”

“We’ll leave him be,” Scrilch tells me. “Can you imagine,” he says, in a disgusted tone of voice. “This psychiatrist tries to *hypnotize* me! Me, when just the other day I answer that swell ad about *Hypnotism Made Easy!”*

THAT is the last I see of Floyd Scrilch for many a week. I do not hear anything more about his painting or his writing or his piano-playing. I do not see anything in the papers. I figure maybe he answers an ad on how to be a hermit or something, and let it go at that.

But one afternoon I am at the pool hall, minding my *ps* and cues, and a hand taps me on the shoulder.

I turn around and see Floyd Scrilch. His hand still taps me, because he is trembling. And because I do not recognize him there at first.

Floyd Scrilch is pretty pale. He looks thinner, and there are a couple rings under his eyes I would not like to see on bath tubs.

“Feep,” he whispers. “You got to help me.”

“Sure, what do you want me to do?”

“I want you to come out to my house,” he mutters. “We’re going to burn some ads.”

“Burn some ads?”

“Sure. All of the ads. All the ones I answer and all the ones I plan to answer. Get rid of them. Before they get rid of me.”

I give him a long stare and see he means it.

“There’s a taxi waiting outside,” he says. “Come on. There’s not a minute to lose.”

We hop in and drive away. It is a long ride.

“Make with the explanations,” I request. “What happens to you? Why don’t I see you around?”

“If I am around once more, I am dizzy,” Scrilch tells me. “It is terrible. I have no peace. Friends calling me up. Women rushing in to visit me. Art galleries phoning. Agents after my book. And look!”

He is wearing a hat, and now he yanks it off. His hair falls out. So help me, it is six feet long!

“You see?” he mutters. “It won’t stop growing! Nothing stops any more. Just for fun I send in my picture to a movie talent bureau that advertises. I win a Hollywood contract. I win another contest. But I can not go away. I am almost too muscle-bound to walk, now!”

He waves his arm, and his sleeve rips. A bicep sticks out and he pushes it back.

“You see? Ads are good for everybody else, but not for me. They work too well. That is why I run away. I have to get away from people, from women, from advertising.

"That is another thing. A compulsion. That's what Subconscious Sigmund calls it. Every time I see an ad now, I must answer it.

"So I leave my studio and get myself a house in the country. I must. And that is where things go wrong. I hope we're not too late. We must destroy the ads and—something else."

HE SITS huddled up in the cab as we drive out into the sticks. At last the cab pulls up in front of a rickety old frame house and we climb out. It is almost dark, and Scrilch runs up the steps so fast he nearly trips in the dim light.

I follow him in.

"No time to lose," he says. "Help me bundle this stuff up. I must get it down into the furnace while I'm still able to. At this rate of growth I may not even get into the cellar."

I see he is a little off the beam, but I do not comment. I merely look at the living-room which is just filled with old paper. It looks like a government drive.

There is nothing but piles of clipped out coupons. Thousands of them. And Scrilch begins to stuff them into boxes. So I help.

All the time he looks at the door.

"Smell anything?" he asks me. I shake my head. We pile some more. "Hear anything downstairs?" he asks. I shake my head.

I notice he is shaking again.

"What's the matter?" I ask. "What am I supposed to smell and hear?"

"It's the last ad I answer," he breathes, hoarsely. "I'll tell you about that later. We'll have to figure out a way to destroy it. Dynamite, or something. It's growing every hour. I'm almost afraid to go down there. I want to get this stuff in the furnace before it blocks the way."

"What?" I come back, while we bundle up the stuff and carry it out to the cellar door.

Then I hear a rippling noise. Scrilch wheels around. His eyes bulge.

“You don’t smell anything, or hear anything,” he yells. “But you must see something? Or am I nuts?”

I think I am. Because I *do* see something now.

It is the kitchen floor. It *bulges.* Yes, the boards in the floor are bulging up. And the ripping noise comes from the wood.

“Growing!” Scrilch screams.

Then he grabs up a pile of coupons. “I’ll get these in the furnace anyway,” he shrieks. “No matter how big it is! I’ll do it—I’ll show you no ad can frighten me!”

He opens the cellar door. It is black down there, but he does not turn on a light. Instead he grabs his pile and runs down the steps.

I hear him yelling in the dark. “Don’t follow me!” he shouts. “It might be dangerous.”

Then I just hear some thumping. All at once he yells again.

“Oh—no—it can’t be—growing—no—get away—oh—”

And I hear something else. An awful noise. A *rubbery* noise, like somebody was bouncing a zeppelin up and down like a ball. Then there is an awful grunt, and I do smell something, and I hear another sound.

The floor rips further. I hear Scrilch give just one last scream, and then I hear the other sound again.

But the other sound comes from far away, because I am already out the back door and running down the street.

I never go back. Because now I know what happens to Floyd Scrilch. He answers the wrong ad.

* * *

LEFTY FEEP took his elbows out of the butter plates and gave a long sigh.

“Poor Floyd,” he whispered, reminiscently.

I coughed discreetly.

“There’s just one thing bothering me,” I said.

“Name it and you can have it.”

"Well—apparently, Floyd Scrilch was killed there in his cellar. But I don't see how it happened."

"He gets swallowed," Feep told me.

"Swallowed?"

"Sure. For answering the wrong ad."

"But what is this thing that grows down there and makes the floor creak?" I asked. "What did you smell and hear at the last? In plain words—what was it that Floyd Scrilch kept in his cellar?"

"That I never know," Feep answered.

"I thought so!"

"Except for a lucky break of mine," Lefty Feep added, triumphantly. "When I run out of there I happen to have an ad in my hand. I hang on to it unconscious. And later, when I look at it, I figure out what Floyd does. This is the last ad he tells me he answers. And it works too good again. So he gets killed."

"You mean this ad tells what he had down there in the cellar?"

"Look for yourself," said Lefty Feep.

He reached into his vest pocket and handed me the crumpled piece of paper.

The advertisement was quite small. I read only the top line, but that was enough.

"Earn Big money!" the advertisement urged. "*Use Your Own Basement to Raise Giant Frogs!"*

Men Scared of Nothing

Deep in the jungle was a weird "nothing" that made the souls of men shudder. It was Klipura, the mighty!

WAVELL DARK brought the heavy rifle to his shoulder. His gray eyes sought the line of the sights. At the foot of the slope below the log house, at the edge of the river, a party of natives were busy preparing the torches to light the canoes on their return journey. Across the sullen flood of the river, distant a good three hundred yards, three fat logs lay stranded on a sandbar. Dark lined up the sights. Frowning, he took the gun from his shoulder and glanced up at the lowering sun.

"Light's bad," Mosier muttered, interpreting his glance. Mosier was sitting on the steps. He was a biologist, and a good one. Weighing perhaps two hundred and fifty pounds, he normally possessed all the good humor characteristic of fat men. He wasn't in a good humor now. He slapped fretfully at the mosquitoes, and the tiny camera, suspended on a leather cord around his neck, bounced up and down with the motion.

"Too near night," he said. "Light's bad. And you're shooting down."

Dark glanced down at the broad back. He was rather fond of this fat biologist and he was inclined to sympathize with Mosier's exasperation. "I'll take the middle one," he said.

He brought the gun up again. Muscles writhed steadily in his thick forearms. His brown cheek cuddled gently against the stock. The barrel came up slowly, smoothly, steadied for an instant. Mosier put his fingers in his ears. The gun roared.

Across the river two of the logs stranded on the sandbar erupted to violent life. Raising on short forelegs, they hurtled into the water. The middle log lifted too, to whirl in a dozen fantastic somersaults. Then, forelegs pawing at the sand, it dragged itself into the river. A second later it flashed to the surface, splashing as it rolled. It ceased rolling. The current caught it. Yellowish belly up, it floated with the flood.

"It was a good shot," Mosier admitted. "Not quite dead center or even a crocodile would not have been able to move after so heavy a bullet hit it, but a good shot. It is a good gun that you have had sent to you from the states. But why an elephant gun, Dark? Why an under-and-over rifle in this country?"

He waved his hands at the jungle stretched away in a warm haze under the lowering sun. Mosier had just arrived from up stream. He made regular trips to this country, gathering specimens for some museum in the United States. Every time he went up or down the river he stopped at Dark's rubber plantation.

Dark retired into silence. He was not a big man; he wouldn't tip the scales past 170. But he was all bone and hardened muscle. He slapped at the mosquitoes, lit a cigarette, and spoke out of a cloud of smoke.

"I got troubles."

Mosier waited for him to go on. When he didn't, the biologist waved his hands apologetically. "Look, Dark, I'm not trying to pry. Your business is your business. But I am not exactly unfamiliar with this jungle, and if you are in trouble, I might be able to help. But I can't for the life of me understand how an elephant gun can help you solve your troubles."

"Animals," said Dark. "An animal."

"Nonsense!" Mosier exploded. "Animals! That is nonsense. This is the Amazon country. We have here the jaguar, we have the tapir—" He ticked them off one by one on his fingers. "We have monkeys, big and little. But there is in all of South America no animal that is hunted with an elephant gun. No rhinos, no hippos, no big water buffalos, and no elephants. They just aren't here, my friend."

"Yeah," Dark answered. "I know. Hello, Merto. What say?"

AS SILENTLY as a jaguar, Merto had come around the corner of the house. He was a native, but he stood a good six feet two inches in his bare feet and he was all man.

"Master, the drums," he said.

Dark listened. In the far distance, almost lost in the tropic stillness, was a thin rattle of sound, the talking drums.

"What do they say?" Dark questioned. He had spent years in this jungle but neither he nor any white man had ever learned the meaning of the drums.

"They talk of *Klipura,"* Merto answered. He showed no fear. If anything, he stood a little straighter.

A shadow crossed Dark's face. It was instantly gone, "How do they talk—of *Klipura?"*

"They say *Klipura* walks."

"Is that all they say?"

"They say they are afraid. The hands of the drummers shake with fear."

The shadow came back to Dark's face. He was sitting in a crude chair on the front veranda, his feet on the railing. His fingers tightened on the elephant gun that lay across his legs. Merto watched him. When he showed no disposition to ask further questions, the native turned and vanished around the house as silently as he had come.

Mosier smote fist into palm. "By damn, Dark, that man of yours is the finest specimen of physical manhood I ever saw. There's nothing like him in these jungles. I'd give my right eye to know his genealogy."

"He's pure native," Dark answered, the shadow still on his face. "He comes from the tribe that gathers my rubber. You've seen them."

Mosier nodded emphatically. “He comes from a race that averages four and a half feet tall and weighs, when times are good and they have enough to eat, a husky hundred pounds. They’re damned near pygmies, your rubber gatherers are. But Merto is a giant. How does it happen that a race of pygmies can produce a giant?”

“You’ll have to answer your own question. You’re the biologist.” Mosier nodded again. “I can answer it. He’s a freak, a sport, a mutation. Nature seems never to cease experimenting. She’s always trying to improve the stock. We know how she goes about doing it too. She uses cosmic rays, radiations from radium, and possibly a dozen other forces about which we know nothing as yet, to produce changes in the germ plasm which in turn produces mutations, freaks. Usually these freaks are monsters, but occasionally—and Merto is one of those occasions—they are perfect physical specimens. That’s how evolution is brought about, on a grand scale, in nature’s laboratory. The same thing happens to plants. This new rubber tree of yours, that you’re tending so carefully, is also a mutation.”

The biologist was full of the subject. It was his life’s work and at the slightest opportunity, he would talk his head off about it. He went on talking. Dark wasn’t listening. In the far distance he could hear the whispering drums. Inside the house he could hear a man packing his belongings, a man named Clayton, who had been Dark’s sole assistant. Had been. Down at the river landing the natives finished preparing their torches and began looking expectantly up toward the house.

A shrilling *tucano,* frightened by something lurking in the jungle, flew across the path that led from the house down to the edge of the river. Dark’s eyes followed the flight of the bird. His mind was elsewhere.

THE door banged. Clayton came out, a bag in each hand. He was thin and sallow, with a ragged mustache and sandy hair. He had been here in the jungle, as Dark’s assistant, for three years. He set the bags down and went over to shake hands with Dark. Mosier watched him.

“Sorry, Mr. Dark,” Clayton said, “Forget it. You’re doing what’s right. I don’t blame you.”

Clayton seemed relieved. “Nice of you to take it that way. I really hate to run out on you, but I’ve got to get away from here for six months. I’ll come back after I’ve had a rest, but if I stay here another month—another week—I’ll crack up.”

His voice was a husky note in the thickening shadows of night.

“If I hadn’t seen it,” the voice said, the words coming in little gusty sounds. “If I hadn’t seen it, I would have been able to stay. But I saw it—”

“Forget it,” Dark said, slapping him on the shoulder. “Go back to civilization and take a rest. You’ll be all right as soon as you get out of the jungle.” Again he slapped his former helper on the shoulder. Still apologizing, Clayton picked up his bags and started down the path that led to the river. The two men watched him. He vanished into the shadows toward the waiting canoes.

“What’s the matter with him?” Mosier questioned suddenly.

“He saw it,” Dark answered.

“What the devil are you talking about?”

“Klipura,” Dark said tonelessly. *“It. Klipura.* The natives think it is a jungle demon.”

“A jungle demon! What kind of a monkey business is this? Have you gone off your nut, Dark?”

“I haven’t seen it. But my rubber workers believe in it.”

“Hell, they believe in anything!” the biologist exploded. “Every tribe, every village, has a jungle demon. It’s twiddle-twaddle, Dark. It results from the efforts of the primitive mind to explain the forces of nature in terms the natives can understand. When a storm comes, they say a demon caused it. If a croc carries off one of their kids, they say the river demon took it. If you pay any attention to the natives, they’ll have you believing there’s a demon behind every tree. You don’t mean to tell me that you—*Say, is that why you had that elephant gun brought in here?”*

Dark hesitated. “Well—yes.”

There was a moment of silence. Then the biologist spoke soothingly. “My friend, you had better take a trip to civilization and have yourself looked over. Put yourself in the hands of some good doctor and get a thorough examination. Sometimes these tropic fevers get a man down before he knows it.”

“Clayton saw it,” Dark said almost defensively.

“Clayton is wise enough to know when he needs a check-up.”

“He said it was about seven feet tall and covered all over with gray fur. He said it walked on two legs and carried a club. It was big, he said. Big. So I got an elephant gun,” Dark ended.

“Fever,” Mosier diagnosed. “There is no animal in this country answering that description. Nor in any other country. I know. That is my business.”

“No animal, perhaps. Demon.”

“Tosh! Fiddle-faddle! Nonsense!”

To the left in the jungle, something grunted, a low forceful sound. The darkness was thick by now. At the landing the torches of the natives flared against the night. The natives had been talking, and their voices had drifted upward as a gentle murmur of sound, sound that went into sudden silence now.

DARK came to his feet, gun in hand.

He took one step, jerked open the door and leaped into the house. Mosier rose, perturbed without knowing why. “What are you running for?” he asked.

The door slammed again. “I’m not running,” Dark said. “Here. Take this.” He shoved a long flashlight into the biologist’s hands.

“Clayton!” he called sharply. “Clayton. Lookout!”

Down the path a man shrieked. Once. Then the shriek was cut off by the sound of a heavy *thump.* There was a wild, harsh gibbering, a heavy grunting, a strange slobbering. The man screamed again, a sound that ran through the depths of terror into the shrill tremulo of unutterable pain.

"Light!" Dark husked. But the biologist was already using the flash, flinging a beam of bright radiance down the path.

Something loomed in the lancing beam of light. Taller than any man, broader than three. Hulking, heavy. In one hand it held a club, in the other hand it held an arm.

It looked up the slope, seeking the source of the light. Tiny eyes gleamed in the illumination.

"Shoot!" Mosier whispered.

"Can't. Don't know where Clayton is. The natives down below are in the line of fire," Dark answered. He ran down the path, the heavy rifle in his hands. Mosier followed.

The thing saw them coming. As lightly as a jaguar, it leaped from the path and into the tangle of the jungle. Dark's rifle boomed. It was a snap shot, hurried, without aim. The heavy slug whanged into the trees. A body crashed through the underbrush. Saplings shook. Dark fired the other barrel. He didn't have a target. He was shooting blindly.

A tornado crashed through the underbrush. It rolled away while Dark plugged fresh cartridges into his gun. Mosier held the light, playing it over the green tangle. Dark brought up the gun, seeking a target. The crashing in the underbrush died in the distance.

Clayton lay in the trail. He didn't move. The two men knelt beside him.

"God!" Mosier whispered. "It had an arm in its hand. God. . . ."

Clayton no longer had a left arm. Apparently the first heavy thump had been the club striking him. Then he had been grabbed. He had screamed. While he screamed, his arm had been torn off at the shoulder. Blood slowly rilled out of the empty socket, rilled slower and slow, and stopped running.

At the landing the natives frantically launched their canoes and paddled madly downstream. *"Klipura!"* they were screaming. *"Klipura!"*

THE drums started at sun rise.

Dark, carefully pulling a clean rag through the rifle, heard the thin rattle of sound coming through the dawn. He finished pulling the rag through the gun, squinted down both barrels, snapped shut the breech and looked inquiringly at Merto.

The native was stringing a bow, one foot pressed against the stave. Muscles writhed in his brown back and the string slipped into its notch. Merto stroked his thumb across the string. It hummed. He glanced at Dark.

“They talk of *Klipura,”* he said.

“Nothing else?”

Merto squinted, turning an ear up to the sky. “They are afraid,” he said. “Their hands shake. The drums talk foolishly because the hands of the drummers shake. It is hard to understand, this shaking talk.”

“Listen closely.”

Merto listened, mouth open, to the thin rattle of sound running through the morning sky. “They call all together. They make talk-talk.”

“They do not talk of leaving?”

“No, Master. Nothing is said of leaving. They call all together and make talk-talk.”

Dark sighed with relief. The natives were only holding a pow-wow. They weren’t clearing out of the country, yet. He still had a little time. To get *Klipura,* to kill the jungle demon. The natives were jumpy, scared. They liked the white man, but they feared *Klipura.* How they feared him! Nothing Dark could offer would induce them to stay much longer in this region. If they left—

He thought about that. Without the help of the natives, the jungle would swarm over his new growth of rubber trees. Eight years he had spent with these new trees, working with them, babying them along. Sweat and blood. All wasted. Eight years wasted, if the natives left. Wasted because the jungle spawned a beast that frightened away his helpers. Nor could he solve the problem by getting new helpers. The talk of the drums would be relayed for hundreds of miles. No new tribe would come here and work on a plantation inhabited by a demon.

“Damn *Klipura!”* he muttered, under his breath.

The door of the house opened. Mosier stood there. The fat biologist was clad in khaki shorts. He was wearing a sun helmet. Suspended on a leather thong around his neck was a camera. He had no gun.

“Gad, what a bow!” he said, seeing Merto’s weapon.

“Yeah, it’s something all right,” Dark said. Abruptly he changed the subject. “We ought to be back by night. In the meantime, make yourself completely at home here.”

Mosier shook his head.

“You’ll find the larder well stocked,” Dark said. “Sorry to go off and leave you like this but I’ve a little job to attend to.”

“But you are not going off and leaving me like this,” Mosier answered. “I’m going with you.”

“No.”

“But, of course, I am. Do you think I am going to miss an opportunity like this? I am interested in your demon too, for scientific reasons.”

Dark grinned. He decided he really liked this biologist. “Well, if you want to come along, I’m willing. But we may run into a bit of danger.”

“So what, my friend? There is danger if I stay here. I might catch a fever, or something. No. Decidedly you are not going to leave me here.” He came down the steps.

“Okay,” Dark said. “Where’s your gun?”

Mosier stared reproachfully at him. “When you have an elephant gun and your man has a six-foot bow, why should I need a weapon? No. I will do my hunting with this.” He pointed at the camera.

“I wish I had a tribe like you, to work my rubber trees,” Dark said approvingly. “Come on.”

Merto led the way. Starting at the spot where Clayton had died, he plunged into the jungle. There were footprints in the path, huge misshapen blotches. They led into the green tangle. Merto followed. Torn vines, crumpled plants marked the trail. A heavy weight had gone this way in a hurry. As long as *Klipura* had been in a hurry, Merto had no difficulty. But *Klipura* had recovered from his fright. Merto went slower and slower still, but always he went forward. Dark followed, a step behind, the rifle ready. The biologist brought up the rear.

They passed near a space where the jungle growth had been thinned. Slender trees, spaced regularly, grew here.

"Rubber," said Dark proudly. "The beginning of what will someday be a huge plantation."

Mosier glanced around. "Where are your workers?" he questioned.

"Holding a pow-wow," Dark answered. Listening, he was aware that the drums had gone into silence.

"Klipura go this way," Merto said, leading on.

THE trail led near the village where the workers lived. To Dark, the silence of the drums was ominous. "We will stop for a while at the village," he said.

The natives were there all right. They greeted the white men with sullen silence.

"Scared bunch of little men," Mosier commented.

"Tell them," Dark said to Merto. "Tell them they no longer need be scared. Tell them I have sent far away to the country of the white men and gotten a great gun, with which to destroy *Klipura.* Tell them we seek *Klipura* now, to destroy him."

Merto relayed the message. "We will destroy the jungle demon," he said proudly. "See the new gun of the white man. With it, he will destroy the demon."

"Guns will not destroy demons," the halting answer came. "The gods are angry and they send the demon. The gods must have a sacrifice."

Beyond that, they wouldn't talk. Merto looked at Dark. "It is bad," he whispered. "They plan something, won't say what. They scared. Master must kill *Klipura.* If *Klipura* not destroyed, they not stay here long."

"Tell them *Klipura* will be dead before night," Dark answered grimly.

He turned and walked back to the jungle. Mosier followed him in sympathetic silence. The biologist knew how much this rubber plantation meant to Dark. He knew, also, upon how slender a thread it hung.

The sun was sloping toward the west when Merto halted. They were at the edge of a little glade where the ground began to slope upward toward the hills. The trail had led here. Merto did not enter the glade. He stopped suddenly, just at the edge.

Dark, a step behind him, stopped too. "It's coming," he thought. "It's here." Merto's stiffened silence told him that the native sensed something. Perhaps he didn't see it yet. But he sensed it. Dark brought the rifle forward. He didn't raise it to his shoulder. He just brought it forward, got it ready.

Behind him he could hear Moiser trying to breathe quietly. The biologist knew the jungle. He knew when to be quiet.

There wasn't a sound. It was afternoon and the air was quiet. The animals were taking a siesta. Not even a monkey was chattering. No bird called. There was only sticky heat and silent oppressive air. The jungle seemed to stand on tiptoes, listening.

Dark's eyes ranged through the green foliage. The little glade ahead of them was empty. He saw nothing. Merto moved.

Slowly, ever so slowly, Merto moved his hand, sliding a long, iron-tipped arrow across the bow. He didn't draw the bow. He stood with the arrow on the string, waiting.

"He thinks he sees something," Dark thought. "He isn't sure, but he thinks he sees something."

He whispered. "What is it?"

Merto slowly pointed.

Straining his eyes, Dark could see something in the shade of the trees across the glade. There was a tangle of green leaves, but between the leaves was a grayish blotch. Grayish! It might be the bark of a tree. It might be—*Klipura!*

Dark couldn't be certain. Piggy eyes might be watching them. *Klipura* might be waiting for them. Demon or animal, he was cunning. He had been lurking beside the trail when Clayton had come along. He might be lurking across the glade, waiting.

"Put an arrow into the gray place," Dark said softly. "If it's the trunk of a tree, nothing will be wasted. If it's *Klipura*, an arrow will bring him out."

Merto's dark face gleamed. Slowly, ever so slowly, he brought back the nock of the arrow toward his ear. He didn't release it. He didn't have time.

With a coughing grunt something erupted from the other side of the glade. It was—*Klipura!*

DARK was vaguely aware that Merto had released the arrow. He caught a glimpse of the iron-tipped shaft hurtling across the glade. The shaft missed. Merto had been startled and the shaft had missed. More certainly he realized that a grayish mass—it looked to him to be as big as an elephant—was charging across the clearing.

He shuffled his feet, finding a firm foothold in the leaves.

"One side, Merto," he hissed.

It was an order that Merto did not need. He knew he was in the line of fire. Besides, he saw the thing that was coming. He stepped to one side. He wanted to run. He was a native, a magnificent one but a native, with all the fears and superstitions of the primitive. He wanted to run. But his master wasn't running. And he did not run. He stepped to one side, his hand seeking another arrow.

Dark brought up the gun. It was not thirty yards across that glade. The grayish mass would cover that distance in seconds, in less than seconds. Dark snuggled the butt of the heavy rifle against his shoulder, laid his cheek against the stock. He might have been at target practice.

"Shoot!" Mosier shouted behind him, then lapsed into apologetic silence.

“One shot!” Dark thought. “One’s all you get.”

Somewhere in his mind was the idea that this shot had better be good.

His rubber plantation was hanging on this one shot. Eight years of his life was hanging on it, eight years in this tropic hell. That his life itself was hanging on the shot did not occur to him.

Klipura was big. He was coming like a race horse. Vaguely Dark wondered what that beast really was. It looked like King Kong. His eyes went down the sight. It seemed that *Klipura* was reaching out to take hold of the end of the gun barrel. His finger tightened on the trigger, tightened gently. The gun smacked against his shoulder. Thunder raced through the jungle.

He saw the hair curl where the bullet hit. It was lead, was that slug. It would hit and spread. It would make a tiny hole where it entered and a huge hole where it came out. It had a shocking power of thousands of foot pounds. He couldn’t remember exactly how many thousands. It was designed to knock down an elephant.

Dark tried to bring the gun to bear for a second shot. To him it seemed that the charging mass was diving under the line of sight. He tried to depress the gun. He was still trying to depress it when he realized a heavy weight had slid against his legs and stopped. He looked down. *Klipura* lay on the ground. Shoulders against Dark’s legs, the jungle demon lay on the ground. A tremble passed through the mass, a quiver. It was still.

Automatically, Dark clicked open the chamber of the rifle, slipped in fresh cartridges. He was aware that Mosier was talking.

“By gad!” Mosier was saying. “I’m sure as hell glad that is an elephant gun.”

The biologist stepped around Dark, mopped sweat from his forehead. “By gad!” he repeated. “I’m glad that’s an elephant gun!”

“So am I!” Dark said suddenly. There was a weakness in his knees. He sat down.

“Now,” said Mosier, “With your permission, I’ll take a few pictures of this beast.”

"Hell, yes," Dark answered. "Take all the pictures you want."

He didn't care what the biologist did. All he was thinking was that *Klipura* was dead. To hell with what the beast was and where he had come from. It was dead. Now his workers would return to their tasks, helping him fight the jungle. Now he had proved to them that the jungle demon could be killed. They would not be afraid any longer. They would help him fight the jungle. He had won, the thought was in his mind. He had won the right to his rubber.

The thought was singing through his mind as they worked their way back home. He realized that Mosier was muttering about the possible origins of the creature he had killed, but he didn't pay any attention to the biologist. To hell with that. The thing that counted was that his rubber plantation had been saved. He detoured to look again at the growth of trees.

He came to the place where the jungle growth had been thinned, where the trees stood. He looked. Something choked him. There was an obstruction in his throat. His eyesight was blurring. Beside him, Mosier suddenly stopped talking. The biologist looked at the grove of trees. Merto looked at them. Both seemed to be dumfounded.

The trees were there. But they didn't stand erect any longer. They were on the ground. All of them. On the ground. Chips showed where axes had been used.

Chopped down. Every rubber tree. Already their leaves were curling in the heat of the dying sun.

DARK sat in the night on the porch and slapped at the mosquitoes. Inside the house he could hear Mosier puttering around as he developed the films he had taken. Below him on the steps a dispirited shadow sat.

"They not know," the shadow said, for the tenth time. "Master, they not know. They think the gods send *Klipura.* They have to make sacrifice to make the gods friendly again. It has to be big sacrifice because *Klipura* was big. They chop down trees. Make big sacrifice to the gods."

Dark said nothing. In his mind he cursed the natives, cursed the fears that had driven them to chop down his rubber trees as a sacrifice to their gods. That was what was wrong with working in this country. The natives could not understand, they could not be trusted. White men were needed to fight the jungle, white men who feared neither gods nor demons, and laughed at danger.

If he could bring white men in here! If! He could start over again. The trees would be transplanted and tended. They would send out new shoots from their roots. These shoots would grow. A new plantation could be started. It would take years, and a fortune. The world would be the gainer, by a new rubber tree. The world could use that, its appetite for rubber being what it was. But it would cost a fortune. Every dollar he owned and every dollar he could borrow had gone into this growth of trees. They would have been producing in another year, if the natives had not—

He cursed softly in the darkness. "They not know," Merto almost whimpered. "They not understand."

"It's all right, Merto," Dark said. "It's not your fault that your people are afraid of demons."

Merto straightened up. "Make new plantation," he said. "Master and Merto. Grow new trees. My people not help, but Merto help. Merto not afraid. Merto and master grow new trees, whip jungle yet."

Dark swallowed. "You're all right, Merto. No, I'm afraid it wouldn't work. We need capital. We don't have it." He lapsed into silence.

Mosier came out of the building. He sat down on the steps. With exaggerated slowness he lit a cigarette, slapped at the mosquitoes.

"How does it feel to be rich?" he said.

"I don't know."

"You ought to," the biologist continued. "You're probably the richest man in all Brazil right now."

"Cut out the damned chatter," Dark snarled. "Sorry," he apologized a second later. "I feel like the devil. Didn't mean to be snappish."

"It's all right," said the biologist. "But you are rich, you know."

A SUDDEN silence fell. Dark sat up in his chair. “What the devil are you talking about?” he demanded.

“My plates were all fogged,” the biologist answered. “Every damned one of them. Not a picture in the bunch that’s any good.”

“So what? I lose a rubber plantation and you whimper because your pictures are no good.”

“That’s the point,” Mosier answered imperturbably. “That’s why you’re rich.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about your rubber trees. They were a mutation. I’m talking about Merto. He’s a mutation. I’m talking about *Klipura.* He was a mutation. You know what stock he came from? Ape. He was just an ape that forgot to quit growing. Something happened to his mother before he was born and he forgot to quit growing. Finally, I’m talking about my plates. They’re fogged. No good.”

“What does it add up to?”

“It adds up to radium. You located your rubber plantation right in one of nature’s laboratories, right in a place where she creates new species. Your new rubber tree, Merto, *Klipura,* my fogged plates, all point to the same thing. There’s a deposit of pitchblende somewhere near here. We crossed it today and didn’t know it. Dark, damnit, you’ve lost a rubber plantation, but you’ve found what must be one of the richest radium deposits in the world.”

Dark was suddenly out of his chair. He was shaking the biologist. “Damn you, are you sure?”

Mosier pushed him away. “Of course I’m sure. I don’t know the exact location of the deposit but we can find it. Damn it, man, how was radium first discovered? By a fogged photographic plate! Of course I’m sure.”

“My God!” said Dark. He sat down. Radium. He didn’t doubt that the biologist knew what he was talking about. With radium as the goal, white men would come into the jungle. With radium paying the bills, he could hire men to replant his rubber plantation. Radium. Radium had created the rubber trees, had created Merto, and *Klipura.*

"I once said I wished I had a tribe like you to tend my rubber trees," Dark said suddenly. "How would you like to be my partner in helping discover and develop a radium mine?"

"White man, you've got yourself a partner," Mosier answered.

THE talking drums of the upper Amazon still whisper of the dance of the two crazy white men in celebration of the slaying of *Klipura,* the jungle demon. They still talk of demons, do these drums, whispering darkly of strange creatures that walk the night. They also tell of the many white men who came later, and of the clanking machinery they brought, seeking yet another demon who lurks in the earth. The white men are crazy, the drums whisper. The white men have no fear of demons and are therefore crazy.

They tell also of how the two white men who slew *Klipura,* after they had gone down river and brought back with them many other white men who sought the demon in the ground, went yet farther up the river, taking with them, of all things, the tender shoots of trees. They say also how the white men carefully planted the shoots in the ground and brought still other white men to stand guard over them. "No doubt they will grow demons from these trees," the drums say, whispering sagely in the night.

The natives give these strange affairs a wide berth. No man not white dares pit his strength against the jungle demons. It is even whispered by the drums, not without some reason, that the two white men are themselves demons.

If the native giant who goes with the two white men, guiding them, working with them, hears the talking of the drums, he gives no sign. Deep in his heart he knows his masters are not demons.

"Men scared of nothing," he calls them. He is proud to be the friend of men who are scared of nothing, not even of demons.

THE END

The Little Man Who Wasn't All There

When Lefty Feep put on that coat, he let himself in for a lot of trouble because it was a coat that was part of a suit of invisibility. And being half invisible isn't practical

I WALKED into Jack's Shack accompanied by a terrific appetite. It tugged me toward a table with a haste not to be denied. I didn't notice the thin and melancholy figure in the booth until a thin and melancholy arm grabbed my coat tails.

"Hey!" said a voice, plaintively. "Why, Lefty Feep! I didn't see you when I came in."

A grimace of positive horror crossed Mr. Feep's face, together with half of the sandwich he was eating.

"Don't say that," he pleaded.

"But I really didn't notice you." Feep trembled violently.

"Please put a collar on that kind of holler," he begged. "It makes me queasy but uneasy when you say you do not see me."

"Oh, I see you now all right."

"That's better." Feep pushed a relieved smile through the sandwich lettuce and waved me to a seat opposite him. "Now you're cooking with sterno."

I gave my order and sank back in my chair.

"Well, Lefty, what's new? Haven't seen hide nor hair of you for a few days."

"Don't say it that way!" Feep grated.

"What's biting you?"

"The finance company," Lefty Feep replied. "But that is neither here nor there. It is this stuff about not seeing me that disturbs and perturbs."

I began to feel a question coming on. I struggled to resist, but it was no use.

"What's the reason you're so upset when I mention not seeing you?"

Feep wiggled his ears impressively.

"Do you really want to know?" he asked.

"No. But you're going to tell me, anyway."

"Seeing you are so inquisitive," said Lefty Feep, "I suppose there is nothing else I can do but spill it. The whole thing starts out when I get tangled up with this Gorgonzola."

"The cheese?" I inquired.

"No—the magician," Feep replied.

Waving a stalk of celery in mysterious rhythm, Lefty Feep hunched forward and began his story.

I KNOW this Great Gorgonzola for many a year. In fact, I know him when he is just plain Eddie Klotz, doing a vaudeville act. Then he gets a magic show of his own, and pretty soon he calls himself the Great Gorgonzola and becomes tops in the sleight-of-hand racket.

I see his latest show just recently, and it is only a couple of days later that I run into him in front of a brass rail I happen to be standing on.

I give him the old once-over, because he is dressed very stylish, like a corpse, and he has a dance-floor mustache—full of wax. Then I recognize him.

"Well, if it isn't the Great Gorgonzola," I yap. "How are tricks in the magic game?"

"Fair," he tells me. "The legerdemain is all right, but the prestidigitation is lousy."

"I am sorry to hear that," I reply. "But by the way, as one magician to another—who is that lady I saw you in half with last night?"

"That is no lady, that is my wife," he comes back, with a straight puss. "She is my assistant in the show we are doing. How do you like it?"

"Very nice," I tell him. "Strictly uptown. I figure I will go again this week."

He shakes his head.

"The show closed last night," he informs me. "I have a little business to attend to the rest of this week, so I close up and get ready to leave town. But I hate to do it."

"Why?"

"Do you ever hear of my rival?"

"Rival?"

"Yes," he sneers. "Gallstone the Magician."

"What's with him?"

"My wife, mostly," says Gorgonzola, looking very sad. "Gallstone is nothing but a bushy-haired wolf. He is making passes at my wife, and not just to practise his hypnotism, either."

"That is a tough break," I agree. "But why do you not give him a tough break too—say, his neck, for instance?"

"An excellent idea," Gorgonzola tells me. "But I simply must leave on this business trip. Meanwhile this Gallstone will be hanging around my wife, trying to insinuate himself with her."

"That is a lousy thing to do," I pronounce. "There is nothing I hate worse than an insinuator. Isn't there a law?"

"You do not seem to understand me," says Gorgonzola. "He wants to worm something out of her."

"That is even worse."

"I mean, Gallstone is trying to get my wife to give away the secrets of my new magical effects for the next season's show. He wants her to tell him my new tricks."

"Aha! Then why don't you take your wife with you?"

"That's out. Private business, very important and just a little dangerous. I'm leaving her out at the house. Futzi will have to take care of her."

"Futzi?"

"My houseboy," Gorgonzola explains. "He's a Filipino." Then he slaps his hand on the bar. "Say, there's an idea. Listen, Feep—why can't you come out to the house and stay there this next three days? It would solve everything if you'd keep your eyes open."

"I AM sorry," I tell him. "But it is necessary for me to stay downtown and look after my interests."

"You mean those lousy $2 horse-bets?"

"Well, if you choose to put it that way."

"But you can come down every day anyway. Just so you are on hand if this Gallstone shows up. It means a lot to me, Lefty—more than I can tell you now."

"All right," I agree. "When do I go, and where?"

"Today," Gorgonzola tells me. "Here's what I'll do—I'll go home, pack, and leave. Then I'll have Futzi come around and call for you with the car. You can carry your things easier that way."

"What things?" I reply, very bitterly. "One toothbrush and a pair of socks is not exactly a load."

"Nevertheless, Futzi will call for you. He'll bring the keys and everything. Expect him at your place around two. And thanks a million."

With that, Gorgonzola breezes out and I go home and dry out that pair of socks. I am just shredding the bristles on my toothbrush when the doorbell rings.

I yank it open, careful, and look out into the hall. I do not see anybody. Then I glance down. Somewhere about a few feet from the floor is a little guy with a face like yellow jaundice.

This face is all plastered up in a big grin with the teeth sticking out like they want to use my toothbrush.

The little yellow guy bows up and down.

“Honorable Feep?” he says.

I give him the nod.

“Honorable Feep, honorable Gorgonzola say for me to carry you to honorable house. Myself, humble Futzi, am yours truly to command.”

This is Filipino double-talk meaning I am going to Gorgonzola’s dump with him.

So I grab my handclasp—it is so small, you can hardly call it a grip—and close the door.

“O.K.,” I tell this Futzi. “Lead the way, my Japanese sandman.”

HE TURNS around and gives me an un-laundered look.

“Me Filipino boy, not Japanzee,” he hisses. “I do not enjoy it when you stick amusement at me.”

“You mean poke fun at you?” I ask.

“Correctly. If I one of those Japanzees I go out commit hootchiekootchie.”

“You mean hotsytotsy?”

“No, hocus-pocus.”

Then I get it. “You mean hari-kari.”

“No. Hocus-pocus. I kill myself with magician’s knife.”

This kind of talk is hard to follow, and so is this guy’s driving. We skid through traffic in Gorgonzola’s car, and a dozen times I think we are morgue-meat, but little Futzi just sings away at the wheel. Then I decide to take advantage of the chance to find out a few things about the setup I am heading into.

“Does Mrs. Gorgonzola expect me?”

“Of coarsely. She expectorate you right away. Mr. Gorgonzola he tell her you coming down on week end and then he take it on the sheep.”

"On the lam, you mean."

"Honorable correction noted. And here we arrive."

We pull into the driveway of a two-story bungalow.

"What kind of woman is Mrs. Gorgonzola?" I ask, just to be on the safe side.

"She very female person," Futzi answers. "But so sorry. Too skinny for suiting me. Not too skinny for honorable Gallstone though. He all the time dangle around like ants in the pants."

"You mean snake in the grass."

"Surely. Shrubbery serpent, that honorable skunk. Mr. Gorgonzola say if you catch Gallstone hanging around you cut his throat from ear to there."

We get out and head for the door. Futzi rings, grinning at me.

"Mrs. Gorgonzola arrive now," he says.

Sure enough, the door opens.

"Slide in," Futzi suggests.

"Not me!" I yelp. I do not like what is standing in the doorway. I dislike it so much my knees begin to knock it.

"Listen, my fine Filipino friend," I whisper. "You tell me Mrs. Gorgonzola is thin, but you do not tell me she is *that* thin."

Because the thing that opens the door is nothing else than a white, grinning skeleton!

"SQUEEZE yourself together," Futzi giggles. "This is not Mrs. Gorgonzola. Is just a trick. Gorgonzola he very tricky honorable baby, you betcha! This just harmless bones."

Sure enough, I see the skeleton is attached to the doorpost. We edge inside.

"Now here are keys to honorable house," Futzi tells me in the hall. "Especially keys to Mr. Gorgonzola's bedroom. He hides tricks up there so nobody steals. He say you take nice care of these, so Gallstone cannot stick honorable schnozzola into secret business."

I pocket the keys and then I hear somebody coming.

"So there you are," snaps a voice. Futzi turns around.

"Honorable Mrs., allow me to gift to you honorable Feep, Lefty, Esq. He is here to sit down on week end."

Mrs. Gorgonzola gives me the old eye, and a very pretty eye it is too, under all that mascara and pencil work. She is a tall, thin damsel with drugstore-blonde hair. I hold out my hand, but she must think I have a bad case of tattle-tale gray, because she does not take it. Instead she hands me a stuffed fish look.

"My husband tells me you're going to be here until he gets back," she freezes.

"I hope it does not put you out," I tell her.

"Oh, it's perfectly all right, I suppose. Futzi, show Mr. Feep to his room. Dinner's at seven. Now, if you'll pardon me, I must go lock myself in a trunk."

"What kind of talk is that?" I ask Futzi, when we walk upstairs.

"Straight from elbow talk," he says. "Mrs. Gorgonzola always lock herself in trunk or safe or something. She makes practise for magic act. What you call, escape artist?"

"I see."

When I get into Gorgonzola's room upstairs, I see a lot more. The place is filled with trunks and boxes and cases, and when I hang my coat in the closet I find still more. There are decks of cards under the bed, and artificial flowers and flags and wands. I head for the bath to wash my hands and Futzi leaps for the door ahead of me.

"Wait!" he hollers. "You wish to release rabbits?"

"Rabbits?"

"Honorable Gorgonzola keeps rabbits in bath. Bathtub full of lettuce, you notice."

SURE enough, the place is full of bunnies. I start to wash, and the lop-ears flop around and jump up on me, while Futzi tries to shoo them off.

“Ow!” I mention, with my eyes full of soap, because a rabbit jumps onto the washbowl and starts tickling my stomach. But it is too late for me to do anything, and I get my coat splashed up plenty.

“Do not spend any attention to that,” Futzi grins. “I send honorable coat to honorable cleaners.”

“Fie upon that noise,” I bark. “If I do not get back downtown this afternoon I am going to the cleaners myself. I have to place a bet on a pet, and I cannot run down there in my shirtsleeves. The snappy dressers at the pool hall will laugh at me.”

“Why not wear coat of Mr. Gorgonzola?” Futzi suggests. “He got plenty clothes in closet. Enough for whole nudist colony, I gamble you.”

This seems to be an idea. After Futzi takes my wet coat away and tells me I can use the car to drive down, I go to the big bedroom closet and start looking around.

The place is full of magic paraphrenalia like I say, but there do not seem to be any clothes hanging there at all, except costumes. I do not wish to wear a turban or a Chinese kimono, and I am about ready to give up when I see this trunk.

It is a great big iron chest locked away at the bottom of the closet, and I pull it out and see that it is closed very tight indeed. For a minute I give up, because I do not carry any nitroglycerine on my person for many years. Then I remember the keys Futzi gives me.

Sure enough, the first key I try unlocks the trunk. It is filled with mirrors and folding stuff and glass balls—and I realize this must be the trunk full of new tricks that Gorgonzola is so anxious for me to watch over.

But there at one side is just what I am looking for—a nice tuxedo. There is a coat, a vest, a pair of pants, and a top hat to match.

I merely remove the coat and slip it on for size. It fits pretty well and I am just going to yank on the trousers when I look at the clock and see I must beat it downtown in a hurry if I wish to catch the fifth race.

So I just keep my old trousers and wear Gorgonzola's coat. I run down the hall and out into the yard, climb into the car, and make like crazy.

Ten minutes later I am entering Gorilla Gabface's pool palace. It is here that I make my modest investments on the races from time to time.

There are quite a bunch of bananas standing around phoning in their wagers, and big fat Gorilla Gabface is making book. When I rush in, they turn around and stare.

Now I admit it is unusual for me to wear a tuxedo coat and checked trousers. Such a spectacle is worth a stare any day of the week. But the kind of look I get from the personalities around the phone is quite queer indeed. And there is a very quaint silence along with it.

I RUSH up to Gorilla Gabface and hold up my hand. He is standing there with his mouth open and his tongue hanging out a mile, and when I come close he sort of shudders and puts his hands over his eyes.

"No!" he gasps. "No—no!"

"What's the matter, you big ape?" I ask, kindly. "You look like you never see me before in your life."

"I don't!" he gasps. "And if I never see you again I am very satisfied."

"But you know me. I'm Lefty Feep!" Gorilla moans a little.

"The face is familiar," he groans. "And so are the trousers. But what happens to the rest of you?"

"Nothing at all," I tell him. "I merely borrow this tuxedo coat to wear here."

"What tuxedo coat?" Gabface asks. "I don't see any."

"Then what do you think I'm wearing?"

"I don't know." Gorilla is sweating. He backs further away. "From the looks of you, you should be wearing a shroud. I don't know what holds your neck up."

"Are you giving me the rib?" I ask. "No—you're giving me the shivers," he says. "Coming in here like that; just a face and a pair of pants underneath. What happens to the rest of you?”

He pulls me along the wall by the seat of my trousers, very careful, until I am facing a mirror.

“Tell me what you see,” he whispers. I look, and then it is my turn to gasp. Because in the mirror I see a pair of pants, a neck, and a head. There is nothing in between. I am cut off at the hips, and my head and neck are floating around about three feet above in the empty air!

“You must do a lot of betting in the first races today,” Gorilla whispers. “I hear of guys losing their shirts on the horses before, but you go ahead and lose your whole torso!”

I just stand there. Looking down, I can see my tuxedo coat very plain. But it does not show in the mirror and it is not visible to anybody else.

“You say you borrow that coat?” one of the specimens at the phone inquires.

“Yes, I find it in a closet.”

“Maybe the thing is full of moths,” he suggests.

“Very hungry moths,” Gorilla chimes in. “So hungry they not only eat up the coat but your chest and arms, too.”

I just stare at the mirror. Because now I think I know what happens. I look around for clothes in a trunk where Gorgonzola keeps his magic tricks and I get a trick coat. One that makes me invisible.

Just to prove it, I take the coat off. And sure enough, I am all right again. I stand there in my shirtsleeves looking foolish, but not so foolish as the rest of these mugs.

“How do you do it?” Gabface asks me.

“It is a magician’s coat,” I admit.

“Well, do not put it back on,” he begs. “You give us all quite a shock with that trick. For a minute I think you must be suffering from an overdose of vanishing cream.”

"NEVER mind that," I snap. "I want to place a wager in the fifth race at Santa Anita. On Bing Crosby's horse."

"You are too late," Gorilla tells me. "It just finishes."

I let out an unkind remark. "Curse this coat business," I suggest. "It spoils a sure 15-1 shot for me."

"Cheer up," says Gabface. "You are lucky you do not make the bet, because you lose anyway."

"How come?"

"Well, Bing Crosby's horse is disqualified at the post, so Crosby runs the race himself instead. And loses."

This cheers me up a little, and so I take my leave and go back to Gorgonzola's house for supper. I am very careful not to wear this coat in the car, because if I do so it will look like the jallopy has no driver in it.

Besides, I can not get used to the idea of what I see when I look in the mirror. Being invisible is a very funny feeling, and every time I remember it I have to close my eyes and shudder.

The last time I do so I am just ready to park. And I run smack into the back of a big Packard.

"Aha!" yells a voice from inside. "Watch where you're going, you hoodlum!"

I look around to see what kind of uncouth person he is talking to, and then I realize the remark is made to me. More and over, the owner of the voice jumps out of the Packard and climbs up to the running board. He is waving one hand in front of my face and he does not have any flag in it, either. Just a big fist.

"I am sorry," I say. "I must be driving with my eyes closed."

"That is the way you will drive for a long time, you oaf," he says. "Because I am going to black both eyes for you."

I notice he is a big, beefy fellow with a red face and a big shock of bushy hair that stands out from his head like a dust mop.

"Can't we talk this over?" I suggest.

One big arm reaches in and grabs me. He lifts me out of the car and holds me up by the neck.

"The only thing I will talk over is your dead body," he snarls. "You smash both my rear fenders and that is what I am going to do to you."

Just then the front door opens and Mrs. Gorgonzola runs out. She smiles at the big bushy-haired specimen.

"Why Mr. Gallstone, you've arrived for dinner," she simpers. "I see you and Mr. Feep already know each other."

"Yes," I gasp. "I bump into him just now coming in."

"Mr. Feep is a house-guest," says Mrs. Gorgonzola.

"So?" Gallstone drops me down to my feet and takes his paw off my collar. "I am pleased to meet you," he snarls, and holds out his hand. I take it, and he nearly breaks my fingers off at the joints.

"So you are Gallstone the Magician."

"I manage to get out. "Gorgonzola tells me a lot about you."

"He does, huh? Well—he can't prove it." Gallstone sneers. Then he turns to Mrs. Gorgonzola and gives her a look at his big teeth.

"I hear your husband is away," he says.

"That's right."

"Too bad. Ha-ha!"

"Yes, isn't it, tee-hee!" cracks Mrs. Gorgonzola.

SO RIGHT away I figure it is one of those things. I get out of the way to avoid being hit by any flying mush they are slinging at each other.

Then Futzi sticks his head around the door.

"Dinner is swerved!" he yells. "Rush to put on honorable food-sack."

Mrs. Gorgonzola turns to me. "When you left, I didn't think you'd be back for dinner," she says. "So—"

I catch on to this, also.

"I eat downtown," I lie. "I will just go up to my room, if you don't mind. You two go right ahead and entertain each other. If you don't mind, of course.”

Gallstone grins and now I know what he reminds me of with his bushy hair. A wolf. It is like Gorgonzola says. And now he is sneaking around Gorgonzola’s wife.

I just go upstairs but already I have an idea in the old noggin. When I get into the room I make for the trunk and pull out the rest of the tuxedo, also the top hat. I put these on, and then go for the mirror.

For a minute I am afraid to look. I stare down at my coat and pants. They are very ordinary-looking to me, and I can see them very plainly. So naturally I know I must be able to see them in the mirror.

But when I do look in the mirror, there is nothing. Nothing at all. The coatsleeves come down over my hands and the pants cuffs cover my shoes, and the top-hat pulls down over my face—all this I know, but I do not see it in the mirror. The mirror is blank. Absolutely blank.

I pull off the hat. Then I see my head hanging in empty space. This looks worse, so I put the hat back on, slow. And I am invisible again.

Maybe there is some new chemical in the cloth, or some fibre that does not reflect light. Whatever it is, Gorgonzola has an invisible suit, and I am wearing it. This is enough for me.

Because I have this plan. I do not like Gallstone the Magician and I promise to watch Gorgonzola’s wife. So I decide to go ahead.

I wait awhile and then I sneak downstairs wearing the invisible suit. Sure enough, Gallstone and Mrs. Gorgonzola are at the supper table, flirting with each other.

When I slide in, he is showing off by juggling three water glasses in the air at once. She giggles and watches him and he smirks all over the place. Pretty soon he puts down the glasses and pulls out his napkin. A big rubber plant grows from underneath it.

“Oh, Mr. Gallstone, you are so clever,” she says.

“Just call me Oscar,” he says. And pulls a live snake out from the potatoes. “I’ll bet your husband can’t do this,” he remarks.

"Oh—*him,"* sniffs Mrs. Gorgonzola. "He doesn't do anything. Before we were married, he used to be so cute—always grabbing rabbits out of my neck and surprising me by turning coffee into champagne. Now he doesn't even juggle the dinner plates any more."

"Such neglect! Shameful!" says Gallstone. He reaches over and tweaks her ear. A gopher jumps out.

"You're wonderful, Oscar," she tells him.

"That's nothing at all to what I can do," boasts Gallstone. "Come into the living room."

"Why?"

"I want to show you some of my parlor tricks."

THEY go into the living room. Mrs. Gorgonzola grabs his arm. I follow right behind, but of course they can not see me at all.

"You ought to leave that clumsy oaf of a husband," Gallstone suggests. "A woman like you deserves only the best kind of thaumaturgy, to say nothing of a little gayety now and then."

"Oh—I couldn't," she says.

"Why not? What has your husband got that I haven't got? What if he does saw you in half? I've got a trick where I can saw you into four parts. Six, even. And if you'll join my act instead I'll promise not to stop until I can cut you into sixteen pieces."

"That would be thrilling," she blushes.

"Why your husband doesn't even know how to stick knives into you in the basket trick," Gallstone sneers. "Me, I can use axes on you."

"You make it all sound so fascinating," she simpers, snuggling up against him.

"Tricks? Why I've got tricks Gorgonzola never even dreamed of," whispers Gallstone, grabbing her in a halfnelson and giving her the kind of look a rat has when he grabs a piece of cheese.

"I know what kind of tricks you have," I bust out. "And you can stick them back up your sleeve, Gallstone."

"What's that?" Mrs. Gorgonzola shrieks, jumping up.

Gallstone looks around.

"Huh?"

"That voice—it spoke to me out of empty air."

They stare but they do not see me, of course, even though I am standing right in front of them.

"You must be imagining things," says Gallstone, with a puzzled look.

"Ouch! I didn't imagine *that,"* snaps Mrs. Gorgonzola.

Because I decide to pinch her in a likely spot at this moment, and do so, hard.

"What?" asks Gallstone.

"That!" shrieks the lady. "There—you did it again. You naughty boy."

"I didn't do anything."

"You pinched me."

"Where?"

"On the davenport here."

"How can I pinch you when you're holding both my hands?"

"Well somebody pinched me."

I stick my face down close.

"You'll get pinched again if you don't stop holding hands with that bushy-haired baboon," I mutter.

"Eeek—that voice again!" Mrs. Gorgonzola wails. "Don't tell me you didn't hear it this time, Oscar."

Gallstone is on the spot now. All at once he smiles.

"Oh, *that* voice," he says. "Just another little trick of mine your husband can't duplicate. That's a spirit. A ghost. I'm psychic, you know. I can call ghosts out of the empty air."

She gives him a sick calf look.

"Oh, how wonderful you are!" she says. They go into another clinch. I break this up by stepping on Gallstone's toes, hard. Then I let out a long groan. They jump apart fast.

"CUT out that romantic stuff, Goldilocks," I grate. "Or you'll be a ghost yourself in a couple of minutes."

"I don't think I'd like to live with such spirits," Mrs. Gorgonzola wails. "Oscar, make that voice go away." Gallstone is plenty confused. But he stands up, and tries to smile.

"Listen, darling—once and for all, let's forget all these things. I want you to go away with me and join my act. That's what I've come to tell you. You and I can take your husband's new tricks with us and—"

Aha, that was it! He was after those tricks, just the way Gorgonzola warns me. I watch the two of them close.

"I'm not sure," Mrs. Gorgonzola flutters. "You must let me decide."

"No time for that. I'll prove to you that I'm a better magician than Gorgonzola any day. And then you must come with me."

"Well—"

"Come on. Name a trick your husband can't do and I'll do it for you right now."

"Let me see. Oh yes, that safe trick. You know that big iron safe he has. He tries to get out of it after it's locked and he just can't seem to master the combination."

"Let me at it," Gallstone boasts. "Lead me to it. I'll show you."

"It's in the cellar," she says.

"Show me."

They go downstairs and I follow. I try to trip Gallstone on the stairs, but miss. And there we are in the cellar; the two standing in front of a big iron safe and me invisible next to them.

The safe is really a terrific box, big and heavy, with a huge lock on it. Gallstone looks at it and laughs.

"Why breaking that is like breaking a baby bank," he sneers. "I'll climb in and let you lock me up. In three minutes I'll be out again and we'll be off together. Is it a deal?"

Mrs. Gorgonzola blushes.

"Very well, Oscar," she says. "You have my consent. If you can break out of this safe I'll run away with you."

"Kiss me, darling," moos Gallstone. They clinch, but I stick my face in between and Gallstone kisses my neck. He blinks a little but breaks away. Then he wraps his coat around himself and opens the safe.

"Here I go," he says, crawling inside, and bending himself double to squeeze in. "Lock the door, darling. I'll be out in no time."

I stoop down and notice, when he pulls his feet in, that there is a little steel pick attached to the sole of one shoe. But Mrs. Gorgonzola does not see this. She closes the door and blows him a kiss and then steps back to wait.

In about a minute I can hear this Gallstone fumbling around inside with his pick, working on the combination. I just wait. The tumblers start to dick.

ANOTHER minute goes by and another. Still no Gallstone. Mrs. Gorgonzola stoops down.

"Are you all right, Oscar?" she calls. "Sure—be with you in a jiffy," he gasps.

But a jiffy passes and so does five minutes. And no Gallstone.

Mrs. Gorgonzola is getting impatient.

"Can I help you?" she asks.

"No—I'm—getting on fine—just a second," he groans.

Fifteen more minutes go by. Gallstone is thumping around and rattling the combination and panting for breath.

Mrs. Gorgonzola is getting redder and redder. All at once she looks at her wristwatch.

"You've been in there twenty-five minutes," she calls. "I'll give you five minutes more."

There is a grunt from inside and a lot of rattling. But five minutes pass, and Gallstone is still locked in the safe. The noise stops. Gallstone gives up trying to get out. Mrs. Gorgonzola gives a sigh and looks stern.

"Very well, Oscar, you have shown me your true colors. You are nothing but an imposter. You are not a good magician. You cannot find your way out of a telephone booth, let alone a safe. I will never run off with you. Good night!"

She turns around and marches upstairs. I followed her, because there is nothing more I have to do. I do my job when I keep turning the dial of the safe after Gallstone lines up the tumblers.

SO I go to bed very happy. Gallstone will sneak away like the beaten pup he is. Now I know Mrs. Gorgonzola is all through with him, and there is nothing to worry about. Gorgonzola will be back in a day or so and his tricks are safe after all.

I take off my coat and hat and am just going to remove the tuxedo trousers, when the door opens. Futzi walks in.

"Honorable Feep, I expect you are—oh mercy what in name is honorable that?" he yells.

He is staring at my trousers, or rather at the place where my trousers should be. But because of the pants I wear, he does not see anything below my waist at all.

"Oh what unhappy accident!" he wails. "You get cut in twice by auto car?"

"No, of course not," I say.

"Then perhaps you lose on races?"

"There are some things," I answer with dignity, "which I will never bet. No, I do not lose anything."

"But you have no limbs downstairs," Futzi wails. "Just head and torso."

"I have more so than torso," I assure him, stepping out of the trousers. "There, you see? All that happens, Futzi, is I wear this suit of Gorgonzola's.

It is some kind of trick suit, because when I wear it I am invisible."

"So?" whispers Futzi. "That is remarkable, also strange."

"Sure," I say. "This must be one of the new tricks that Gorgonzola wishes me to protect. I prefer you do not mention this around. Now I lock the suit up again and that is that."

So I haul out the trunk and lock up the tuxedo and hat. Futzi hangs around staring at me.

"Where is honorable Gallstone?" he asks.

"Downstairs on ice," I tell him. "He locks himself up in a safe like a defense bond."

"Then he does not rush away with Mrs. Gorgonzola?" Futzi says. "I expect they lope off together." His face falls.

"No elopement," I tell him. "You better go down and unlock the safe now and let Gallstone go home."

FUTZI still hangs around.

"Maybe you like me to press honorable suit?" he asks. "Make it nice and fresh for Mr. Gorgonzola to be invisible in? Gorgonzola always proud to look his best even if invisible, I gamble you."

"No, get out of here," I snap.

"I press and iron plenty fast," he begs. "Please, let me press nice invisible coat and trousers."

"I'll press your trousers for you with my foot if you don't scram," I suggest.

So Futzi scrams.

I go to bed. I tuck the keys right under my pillow, too, because I do not wish to lose them. An invisible suit is plenty valuable and I am taking no chances. I figure on keeping awake.

But I am not awake a couple of hours later. In fact I am very much asleep, and dreaming about rabbits with big teeth and bushy hair that are locking me into a safe. The dream is so real I can even hear the tumblers clicking.

The clicking gets louder and I wake up. Then I know what is making the sound. The keys under my pillow.

They are sliding out, in a hand.

It is a yellow hand. Futzi's hand.

He is standing over my bed in the dark, grabbing for those keys.

"Hey!" I yell, jumping up.

"Hey!" I yell, going down again.

Because Futzi's hand drops the keys and grabs my wrist. He jerks it and I go back on my head. Then his other hand gets hold of my waist. I turn over on my stomach. Then he uses both hands in a very busy fashion and we have quite a scramble.

In a minute I am sitting on the bed looking straight into a pair of legs wrapped around my neck.

Something about them looks quite familiar to me. And I suddenly realize that these are my legs. Around my neck. I am tied up like a Christmas package.

Futzi stands in front of me, grinning.

"Very sorry to disturb," he says.

"What is this?" I gasp, trying to get loose.

"Jiu-jitsu," he tells me.

"Jiu-jitsu? But that's a Japanese trick, isn't it? Then you're not a Filipino, you're a—"

Futzi bows.

"That is most correct," he tells me. "I am not a Filipino, Mr. Feep. Nor do I need to continue the disguise with that ridiculous accent, either. All I require now are those keys of yours. I shall take the suit and leave."

"But I don't understand—" I say.

"Of course not." Futzi laughs, very low. "Why should I disguise myself as a Filipino house boy, get a job in a magician's house, and act as a servant?

"The answer is obvious. Gorgonzola is a clever man, but I know his secret. Fie has not left town—he's here now, down at local headquarters of army ordnance. He's telling them that he has discovered a new chemical treatment which renders clothing invisible and offering it to the army as a military weapon. Like Dunninger's work in camouflage that makes battleships invisible. The invisible suit is just a sample of the material. Quite a valuable secret.

"Now I have that suit. I shall wear it, slip downtown and put Gorgonzola out of the way once and for all. Information comes to me that his conference with ordnance officials is scheduled for late tonight.

"Naturally I would not be admitted to such a gathering under normal circumstances." Here Futzi gives a little smirk and bow. "But with this suit on as a passport I think I can slip in quite freely. With your curiosity thus satisfied, I leave you."

I still sit there with my legs tied into Boy Scout knots while Futzi goes over to the closet, hauls out the trunk, and opens it. He gets the dress suit and hat and slips them on very fast. He is so small the clothes hang all over him and in a few seconds he is gone. Disappears into thin air. I see the door open. His voice chuckles.

"Goodnight, honorable Feep," he says, sarcastic. "We must discuss hari-kari again some time. Perhaps you will prefer committing it yourself when you think of what's going to happen to your friend Gorgonzola."

THEN the door closes and I am left tied to be fit. I grunt and groan and wrestle with myself, but I can not get my legs loose. Finally I roll off the bed onto the floor. That does it. It cracks my skull, but it loosens my legs.

I stagger downstairs to the phone and look up the ordnance headquarters number. I ring and there is no answer. Then I decide to call the cops—until I remember this invisible suit stuff is a military secret. Also, it will not sound so good to ask the cops to chase an invisible man at midnight.

So there is only one thing to do. I spot Gallstone’s Packard still standing outside. Futzi has the other car, of course.

I have some trouble sitting down inside, with my sore legs, but no trouble at all in getting that car up to ninety. When I think of that invisible little Jap sneaking around and trying to knock off Gorgonzola and steal his plans, I know there is no time to lose.

In exactly seven minutes I pull up in front of the old destination. The joint is dark, but open, and I make the stairs very fast to the second floor. There is a light burning in an office room and the door is open. They are inside—and I am sure from the open door that Futzi is with them. Invisible.

I tiptoe in and look through the inside door. There are four characters sitting around a desk, and sure enough.

Gorgonzola is with them. He has a briefcase open in front of him and he is talking very fast.

I am the only one who sees what is behind him, though. It hangs in the air very still, but it is ready for action. A big black revolver, in the hands of that invisible Jap.

I throw myself through the doorway and grab the revolver. There is a lot of yelling, but I get it in my hands. Then there is a real yell.

Naturally, all these birds can see is me, waving a gun. They do not see any invisible Futzi, and I can not yell out to them to look for him, either. He can be hiding anywhere in the room and nobody can spot him.

So I just turn my gun around, point it at a perfect bullseye, and shoot Futzi.

And that is how I save a military secret.

LEFTY FEEP stopped waving the celery and put it in his mouth.

“I can understand now why it upset you when I spoke of not seeing you,” I said. “You must have had quite an experience.”

“Sure. But it is O.K. now. Gorgonzola gives the ordnance department his new chemical invisibility formula, his wife gives Gallstone the air, and I give that little Jap spy some lead poisoning where it does him the least good."

I coughed.

"About that business of shooting the Jap," I said. "There's just one question that bothers me."

"Yes?"

"Well, you say he was wearing this invisible suit and nobody could see him. Yet you managed to shoot him at once. Just what were you aiming at?"

Feep blushed.

"I do not like to say exactly," he confessed. "But I will mention that I get suspicious that night when Futzi hangs around wanting to get his hands on the suit. I decide to figure out a way to make the suit a little less invisible, in case it is worn by anybody else. So I do, and as a result when Futzi wears it he gives me a target he does not notice himself in his hurry putting it on."

"What target?" I persisted.

"I refuse to say," Feep grinned. "All I can tell you is that before I lock honorable suit up for the night, I take a scissors and cut a big hole in the seat of honorable pants."

A Question of Etiquette

Cities always twinkle with little lights. Lights to ward off the great blackness of night; the blackness where the dead dwell—and the things that are not dead . . .

THE house was old, like all the rest of them on the block. The gate squeaked as I pushed it open. That was the only sound I heard. My shoes had stopped squeaking hours ago. Taking the census takes the squeak out of shoes very quickly.

I walked up the steps of the porch. I was tired of walking up steps. I rang the bell. I was tired of ringing the bell.

Feet sounded inside. I was tired of feet sounding inside.

Just the same, I braced myself.

"Here it comes," I thought. "Another nose!"

And I was particularly tired of counting noses.

You understand how it is. Walk all day. Ring doorbells. Lug a heavy portfolio under your arm. Ask the same stupid questions over and over again. And when you finish, you haven't sold anybody a vacuum cleaner. You haven't sold a Fuller brush, or even a package of shoe laces. All you get out of it is four cents a nose, taking the census. There's no chance for advancement. Uncle Sam isn't going to call you into his private office, hand you a cigar, and say, "Well, now! I hear you've been doing a mighty fine job of this house-to-house work. From now on you're going to sit at this desk. No more nose-counting for you."

No, all you get out of this census business is a new list of noses to count tomorrow. Four-cent noses. Big ones and little ones, pug noses and hooked noses, and red, white and blue schnozzles—until you develop a case of nasal allergy. You feel that if the door opens on just one more nose you'll slam it back and go away after tweaking or punching that nose.

So here I was, waiting for this particular nose to stick out. I braced myself, and the door opened.

A sharp pinched beak appeared, the advance guard for a nondescript face and an ordinary housewife's body. The nose sniffed the air and hovered there somewhat uncertainly in the protecting shadow of the door.

"Well?"

"I'm from the U.S. Government, madame. I'm taking the census."

"Oh. Census-taker?"

"Yes. May I come in and ask you a few questions?"

This kind of sparkling dialogue went on all day. Just one great big exchange of personalities after another.

"Come on."

Down a dark hall, into a dark parlor. A lamp flared up as I set the bulky portfolio down on the table, opened it up, and drew out the form.

THE woman watched me. Her solid face was expressionless. Housewife's face. Used to watching encyclopedia salesmen and bill collectors, with one eye kept on the kitchen stove.

Well, thirty-five questions to wade through. Routine. I filled in the MALE or FEMALE bracket, and the RACE bracket, set down the address. Then, "Name?"

"Lisa Lorini."

"Married or single?"

"Single."

"Age?"

"Four hundred and seven."

"Age?"

"Four hundred and seven."

"Oh—what?"

"Four hundred and seven."

All right, so I work all day, so I run into a half-wit. I looked into the blank face. Well, hurry on, get it over with. "Your occupation?"

"I am a witch."

"What?"

"I said that I am a witch."

For four cents it wasn't worth it. I pretended to write it down and skipped to the next question.

"Who do you work for?"

"I work for myself. And, of course, for my Master."

"Master?"

"Satan Merkatrig. The Devil."

FOR ten cents it wasn't worth it. Lisa Lorini, single, four hundred and seven years old, a witch, working for the Devil.

Oh, no, it wasn't worth while for fifty cents.

"Thanks. That's all. I'll be going now."

The woman wasn't interested. I folded up the sheet, jammed it into the portfolio, grabbed my hat, turned around, and headed for the door.

The door was gone.

Well, I can't help it. The door *was* gone.

It had been there only a minute ago, just a plain, ordinary door in an ordinary sitting room. There was an armchair at one side of it and a small table at the other.

Well, I saw the armchair and I saw the table. But there was no door in between.

I started off in another direction. Over here, perhaps. Still no door. No door anywhere in the room.

Walking around in the hot sun all day isn't good for anybody. Brooding about noses is tire first sign. Then you begin to hear voices answering questions in a crazy way. After that you can't find doors. All right. I turned to the woman.

"Madam—would you show me the way out of here? I must have—"

"There is no way out."

Funny. I hadn't noticed the *quality* of her voice. It was pitched evenly, but low. Resonant. And there was no tiredness in it. I sensed something else. Was it—amusement?

"But—"

"I should like you to stay here with me for a while. It was fortunate that you dropped in."

"Dropped in," from a witch! But she *wasn't* a witch, damn it! There are no witches.

There are no doors.

"You will share a cup of tea with me."

"Really, I must be—"

"It is prepared. Sit down, young man, please do. I'll just take it off the fire."

Now I hadn't seen the fireplace behind me. I hadn't seen the flame. But the fire was burning, and there was a pot on the hearth irons. She stooped over, and a shadow fell across the wall.

It was a big, black shadow. Big and black, in the way that a frightened child says the words. A big, black shadow of a woman, creeping across the wall.

I stared at Lisa Lorini. She still looked like a housewife. Black hair, plaited and parted in the middle. A slim figure, unbent by years.

Four hundred and seven years—

A good thought to skip. Her face now; the nose was sharp, the mouth taut, the eyes slightly slitted. But the features were quite ordinary. Quite ordinary, except that the trick of firelight lent them a vulpine cast. A red face grinning as it bent over a pot.

No, she was feeble-minded. Feebleminded, like the old hags they used to burn at the stake in medieval days. Hundreds of thousands of crones and beldames burned at the stake. All of them feebleminded. Millions of them. All feebleminded. Not a sane one in the lot. Of course not. Witches were a myth. All of the millions were merely crazy in the same way, with the same story. Millions of lunatics. There were no witches. Only—

Only I was afraid.

She was smiling at me. One claw—one hand, I mean—held out the cup. Steam spiralled up from a brownish liquid. Tea. Witch-brew. Drink it and—

Drink it and shut up! This was foolishness. I tried to look around again for the door, but it was dark in that room. The fire flickered so. It was quite red, that fire. I couldn't see clearly. Besides, it was hot in here. Drink the tea and get out.

She had a cup too. It wasn't poison. She hadn't dropped anything into it. What is it witches are supposed to drop? Herbs, I guessed. And all that stuff you read about in *Macbeth.* They believed it in those days. Lunatics!

So I drank the tea. Maybe she'd let me out then. Or rather, I'd humor her and drink it and then get out. That sounded a little better.

"I don't have many visitors."

Her words came softly. Across the table I felt her eyes watching my face. I imitated a man smiling.

"I used to. But business has fallen off."

"Business?"

"Witchcraft. Sorcery. It's no good any more. So few people believe. They don't come to me for love-philtres, or little things like that, let alone the big things. I haven't made a poppet for years."

"Poppet?"

"ONE of those little wax dolls shaped like a man. The kind you stick pins in when you wish death upon your enemies. Men don't hate any more. They don't want a witches' curse. I have not killed for years. Business has fallen off."

Sure, sure. Kill anybody today? No? All right, let's close the office up, our business has fallen off.

Just a tired business woman. A career girl, no less.

But my hand trembled so I nearly dropped my tea-cup.

"All of my beautiful spells and—but you're not drinking your tea."

The condemned man and his hearty breakfast. Eat your cereal, it's good for you!

"Drink your tea."

Quite a spot. My head told me that I must drink it. Drink it to prove that she was crazy, or that I was crazy, that there were no witches and nothing would happen. My hands didn't want me to drink it, though. It took quite a bit of maneuvering to get the cup to my lips. She watched me as I sipped.

The tea was bitter, acrid, but warm. A foreign brew, but it wasn't Oolong. It went down easily enough, except for that tart taste.

"I am surprised, young man, that you evinced so little interest in my occupation. One does not meet a witch every day."

She had to tell *me.*

"I'd like to talk about it," I said. "Some other time. But really, I've got a lot of names on my list, and I have to be going. Thanks for the tea."

I kept looking around for the door. The fire made a sort of red pattern in the room—but not wholly there. The red pattern was in my head, too. It flamed and danced. The tea had been hot, and now heat shimmered through my head. Shadows mingled with the red pattern in the room, and they too seemed to invade my brain. Dark shadows from the dark brew of the tea. Shimmering red and shadows in my head, before my eyes, blocking the vision of the door. I couldn't see it. I had the illusion that if I concentrated hard enough, and long enough, I could find it. It was *there,* somewhere in the room, somewhere amidst the redness and the shadows. It *had* to be there. But I couldn't see it.

I could see her, though, quite clearly. Her nondescript features were stronger now. That grim, ironic smile held an ancient wisdom. She didn't need wrinkles. That smile was older than a mortal lifetime could engrave on a face. It was as old as the grin on a skull.

Yes, I could see her, even if I couldn't see the door for lights and shadows.

"I must go now," I said. My voice sounded far away. Only her eyes were close. Her eyes, holding the red light and the black shadow.

I stood up.

I *tried* to stand up.

Once I drank nine vodkas in a hot tavern, then rose to go home and found myself lying on the floor.

Now I had drunk a cup of tea and when I rose—

I rose.

Floated. My feet weren't touching the floor. They were resting on air—solid air, made up of red firelight, dark shadow-blur. My limbs tingled with something stronger than vodka. Little needles pin-cushioned my body. I weaved in air.

"Don't leave yet." Her voice didn't notice my position. Her smile did. She understood, all right. "Don't leave yet," said Lisa Lorini. "I have so few guests. You must come with me tonight."

"Come with you?"

"I am going—out."

"A party?" Always the stiff upper lip, ready retort, mustn't realize where I was, *how* I was.

Her smile deepened, yawned, engulfed the thought. "Yes, you might call it that. And I need you as a matter of etiquette." A witches' etiquette. Beezlebub and Emily Post! I was crazy, definitely. Floating in air, and talking etiquette.

“You see,” said Lisa Lorini, “I must obey certain—rules. Just as you, holding a dinner party, must not seat thirteen at dinner. I must not hold a Sabbath unless there are thirteen present. A full coven. He wouldn’t like it.”

“He?”

“Satan Merkatrig.” Again the smile. I began to dread that smile, prepare for it—like a convict lashed to a post, waiting for the next cut of the whip.

“And so you must come with me to the Sabbath tonight,” said Lisa Lorini.

“A witches’ Sabbath?”

“Exactly. We hold it on the hills. We have far to travel, so you must prepare.”

“I’m not going.”

YES, and a three-year-old kid isn’t going to bed when its parents tell it to, either. I knew what good my refusal was when I wobbled there in the air. I knew it when I saw her eyes. She didn’t have to emphasize it with her laugh, though.

I was learning fast. An hour ago it was lunacy. Now that chuckle crept up and scraped at my heart. Witchcraft, Black Magic, ancient dreads in a room of black and red. It was real; just as real as when thousands died screaming in the flames to expiate their evil in an age when men were wise enough to dread man’s blasphemy before the laws of God and Nature.

“You are going. Maggit shall prepare you.”

Maggit appeared. There was no door, so I don’t know how Maggit got into the room. I don’t know exactly what Maggit was, either. Maggit was small and furry, like a weasel with human hands—very tiny—and a *face.* It wasn’t a human face, although Maggit did have eyes and ears and a mouth and nose. But the evil in that face transcended humanity—the evil, peering out from a tiny hood of animal fur, and grinning with a wisdom neither animals or humans should possess.

Maggit crawled across the floor and piped, “Mistress Lisa?” in a detestably shrill little voice that somehow shocked me more than anything else.

Maggit was—what was the term—the witch’s familiar. The animal thing, given to a witch or sorcerer by the Devil, when the Black Bible of the Sabbath was signed in the coven. The little fiend, the familiar spirit, servant of Satan.

Only such things don’t exist, save in the laws and the writings of every civilized nation for thousands of years. Such things cannot be.

So it was imagination that crawled up my floating body as I wavered, powerless to move a hand against that hideous, furry pattering that chilled my flesh. It was hallucination’s tiny paws that began to rub my chest and throat with a yellowish paste or salve Lisa Lorini gave to it from a jar on the table. It was legend that chuckled and rubbed the burning ointment on my limbs. It was nightmare that perched on my shoulder, chattered in my ear, and lisped unspeakable vileness as it rocked with glee.

“The flying ointment.” Lisa Lorini’s voice came through a burning wave that caused my tingling body to tremble. “Now we can depart.”

I scarcely noticed her nakedness. The black hair, swirling now, covered her like a cloak.

Or a shroud. A shroud for long-dead wickedness to wear. Her slim hands rubbed the yellow paste upon her limbs. Her body floated upward, joined mine.

“No broomsticks?” I thought, hysterically. From some popular magazine I remembered an article on the “delusions of flight.” Witch-ointment, rubbed on the limbs to give the illusion of flying through space. Popular fancy had transformed the ointment to broomsticks. But the salve was real enough. Powerful drugs. Aconite, belladonna, others. Giving rise to these hallucinations. Any chemist could prepare it. Run down to your neighborhood druggist tonight and—

I had to stop that.

I couldn’t.

“Hold my hand.” She grasped it. Two electric wires met. Tingling shocks ran through me. We were rising. Was that a door? Floating out. Darkness. Night. Floating along. She held me.

Superman, the cartoon character. Stop that hysteria! Up into blackness, her naked white body curved like the ivory horns of a half moon.

The cottage below. Witches’ cottage. “Let me live in a house by the side of the road and—” Yes, very funny. “And be a fiend to man.” Hysteria again. Who wouldn’t be hysterical, floating through air with a Sabbath hag? And Maggit, chittering as it rocked on her shoulder, its tiny paws locked in her raven hair.

And then we swooped. I held on. The burning was gone now. The wind was rushing by. Below, the city twinkled. Cities always twinkle. Little lights, built to ward off the great blackness of night. The blackness where wolves howl and owls screech, the blackness where the dead dwell, and the things that are not dead. Lights to guard, lights to hide a fear. And we, above, flying through that fear, into its blackest depths.

I don’t know how long, how far. I don’t know how we descended. There was the dark, domed hill, and the fire flaring at its peak. There were the crouching figures—white against the shadowed hillside, black against the flaming fires. A horde of furry creatures scampered at the feet of the presences. There were eight, nine, ten—no, eleven.

Plus Lisa Lorini and myself.

Thirteen in a coven.

Thirteen—and the sacrifice.

I didn’t look at the faces. They were not meant to be looked at, only *dreamed.* Lisa Lorini’s own face was masked by exultation. It was she who prepared the sacrifice. The black goat was led to a rock before the fire. One of the other crones wielded the knife. A third held the bowl. And when the bowl was filled, all drank. Yes, I said *all.*

THAT ointment burned. Even on my feet it held me in a burning web. I couldn’t run, I couldn’t move out of the circle of firelight. And when the drum began to pound, I joined the circle. The furry things were lapping at the empty bowl, and their chattering was drowned in the drumming din, the howling.

“Lisa has brought an acolyte,” wheezed one of the hags.

“ ’Tis in place of Meg, who could not come,” called Lisa Lorini.

Those are the last intelligible words I heard, the last intelligible thought I managed to retain.

Because the howling rose and the fire rose, and it became revival meeting—voodoo—bedlam, only worse than any of these prosaic terms. They were calling on somebody.

Somebody came.

No burst of flames. No lightning. No theatricals. That was all done by the crones. It meant nothing, really; no more than any savage cavortings about a stone idol.

It was pure business. He stepped out from behind one of the rocks, carrying a large book under his arm, for all the world like a bank examiner coming to examine balances.

But bank examiners are not—black. He wasn’t negroid, not in the least, but—black. Even the eyeballs, the fingernails. A black shadow, a limping shadow. Whether he wore a cloak, or whether a deeper shadow draped his figure, I don’t know.

They were quiet when he entered the circle. He opened his book and they crowded around. Their mumbling rose in the “night. I crouched down next to the rocks.

Lisa Lorini was talking to him, pointing my way. He didn’t turn his head, but he was aware of me. He didn’t smile, or nod, or exhibit a single movement. But I *felt* him do those things. He handed out orders. He heard reports.

It was a business meeting. Satan and Co., holding a Board Meeting on a hilltop. Souls bartered, dark deeds recorded. And tire black man scribbled in his book, the beldames babbled, and I crouched there trembling in the night while the little furry creatures skulked about, my ankles. I shouldn't have trembled, for the blackman's actions were very prosaic after all. Prosaic—as hell.

Then it happened. The white figures screamed down out of the dark sky. The clinging figure at its breasts dropped to the ground. There was a cry.

"Meg! Meg has come!"

Meg, the missing witch.

They turned as she advanced, breathless.

The black man *spoke* then. I won't attempt to set down the sound of it. Something of rusty locks and the primal grumbling of volcanoes. Age and depth, mingled in a sort of loathsome hissing, as though articulate human speech could not frame the concepts of daemonic thought.

"There are fourteen at coven."

I wasn't the only one trembling now. They all were shaking. White jelly figures in the firelight. The voice did it.

Lisa Lorini whirled. She dragged me into the circle before I could attempt resistance.

"I—I thought Meg wasn't—"

"There are fourteen. Fourteen."

The voice hinted. Just *hinted* its anger.

"But—"

"There is a Law. There is a Punishment."

The voice capitalized the words.

"Mercy—"

You don't ask *him* for mercy.

I saw it happen. I saw her clutch at her throat when his black paw grazed her wrist. Lisa Lorini writhed to the ground, wriggled for a moment like a white slug impaled on a stick, and then lay silent.

The black eyes, the black pupils turned to me.

"There must be thirteen. That is the Law. So you shall sign and take her place."

"I?"

You don't question *him,* either.

Somebody was holding the bowl. Another guided my hand, opened the book he gave to her.

I felt the clinging, furry form of Maggit move swiftly over my chest. It was at my neck—nibbling. A trickle of blood fell in the bowl. A sharpened stick dipped in it. The stick was placed in my hand.

"Sign," said the voice of the black man.

You don't disobey him—not when you hear the voice.

My fingers moved. I signed.

And then his hand, his black hand, reached out and gripped mine. I felt a surge, a blinding wave of redness, blackness, voice-depth, wind.

Something was lying on the ground now, but it wasn't Lisa Lorini. I glanced at the body because it looked familiar. It was my own body that lay there.

The black man was saying something again, but the buzzing drone of his voice was lost. The cackling from the circle about me was lost.

"I unbaptize thee in the name of—"

Maggit led me away. Maggit whispered, "Fly."

I didn't hear. The soaring journey back was instinct—instinct born in another's body, another's brain.

I slept in that house, slept in the darkness, slept in the conviction that when I awoke the dream would be over.

I awoke.

I saw the mirror.

I saw Lisa Lorini, witch, with my own eyes—peering out of her body.

Maggit chattered at my feet.

That was a week ago. Since that time I've learned to listen to Maggit. Maggit tells me things.

Maggit showed me her books, and her stock of herbs. Maggit told me how to make the philtres and the potions, and what to do to keep this body of mine from aging. Maggit told me how to brew the tea, and compound the paste. Maggit says that the coven meets again on the hilltop tonight.

I remember the rest, of course. I know that now I’ve signed the book and taken Lisa Lorini’s place, I can’t escape. Unless I use her method. Bring another to the coven, and let—etiquette—have its way.

That’s the only solution.

TODAY, after a week, they must be looking for me. Census headquarters must have sent out another man on my route. Herb Jackson might take it over. He’s in this district. Yes, Herb Jackson might knock on my door late this afternoon, and come in to ask Lisa Lorini some questions about the census.

When he comes, I should be ready.

I think I’m going to get busy and brew up a pot of that tea.

Son of a Witch

Lefty Feep was just bidding to run up the opposition at the auction, but he went too far and bought a bale of woe.

WHEN Lefty Feep approached my table at Jack's Shack, I rose to my feet with a gasp of indignation.

"Here, let me brush you off," I said. "The nerve of those careless waiters—spilling a tray full of chop suey on your suit."

Feep's eyebrows rose and circled above his thin, morose face. His hand motioned me back into my seat.

"Nobody spills chop suey on me," he corrected. "This is not Chinese hash on my coat—it is the weave of my suit." I took another look. What I saw on Feep's suit was more of a writhe than a weave. The threads cascaded snakily through a baggy tweed in a riot of clashing colors.

As Feep sat down I shook my head.

"I don't understand you, Lefty," I murmured. "These loud clothes you sport—your taste in color! Don't you ever wear anything quiet?"

"Sure," snapped Feep. "Earmuffs."

"I mean, why these awful patterns and color combinations? Have you no love of beauty?"

"Certainly. Me, I like blondes."

"No," I amended, hastily. "I speak of aesthetics."

"Aesthetics? I have aesthetics last year when they yank my tonsils out."

"That's anaesthetics," I told him. "But don't you like soft, pastel shadings in paintings and tapestries? Don't you like the quiet richness, say, of a fine oriental rug?"

"Rugs!" snarled Lefty Feep.

"But you haven't—"

"Rugs!" howled Feep. "Bugs to rugs!"

"What's the matter, man? I only asked you if you liked rugs."

Feep's eyebrows bristled like twin toothbrushes. He leaned even closer and spoke from between tight lips. "Rugs are for mugs, thugs, and slugs," he grated. "On my floor at home you find only tile, linoleum, or empty gin bottles. Rugs, never!"

"Why? What have you got against rugs?"

"You ask me that? Can it be that I do not tell you about the time I go to Out-Of-Business Oscar's auction?"

"Can be," I answered. "I never knew you attended an auction in your life."

"It is very nearly the last thing I do attend," murmured Lefty Feep, closing his eyes. "When I think what could happen to me because of it, the cold chills still use my spine for a racetrack."

Something about Feep's voice made me want to hear the story. Or perhaps it was just the fact that he now grabbed me by the lapels and held me so I couldn't escape.

"I will tell you about the experience I have with a rug," he muttered. "Then we will take you out to be defrosted."

"Why?"

"Because," whispered Lefty Feep, "it will turn your blood to ice."

I sat there, refrigerating slowly, as Feep began to unwind his tongue . . .

* * *

I AM always a very active personality, as you know. I am hep to pep. Making lazy drives me crazy. Well, I get up bright and early one afternoon, all ready for a big day. I am just pulling the cork out of my breakfast when I realize there is nothing to do.

This is a terrible feeling for an ambitious guy like me, but it is true. Today there is nothing for me to do at all. No races are running. No football pools are going. All the pinball machines are shut down. There isn't even a crap game going on over at Gorilla Gabface's pool hall. In other words, I am unemployed.

Naturally, any sensible citizen will realize the only way out is to crawl right back into bed until at least the burlesque shows open. But I am all energy today, so I decide to go out and stroll around.

I am toddling down the old stem about an hour later when I find myself passing Out-Of-Business Oscar's.

This Out-Of-Business Oscar is a personality who runs a second hand joint down the street. He derives his nickname from the big signs he plasters up all over the front of his rubbish palace.

GOING OUT OF BUSINESS says the big banner across the front.

MUST VACATE IN THIRTY DAYS. FORCED SALE—LEASE EXPIRES!

It is hard to read the words on these signs. They are pretty faded, because the signs must be about twenty years old by now.

But Oscar has some new ones up today.

PRICES CUT says the first one.

PRICES SLASHED says the second one.

PRICES BLEEDING TO DEATH says the third.

Then there is one just under these that reads FIRE SALE. But I do not pay any attention to that. Out-Of-Business Oscar is the kind of guy who starts a fire sale every time he lights a cigar.

Which is pretty often, because Oscar finds a lot of cigars in front of the curb.

The sign that does interest me is hanging over the door. AUCTION TODAY!

SURE enough. I peek in and see a lot of specimens around a big counter; and Oscar is standing up on top looking like a judge with a gavel in his hand.

So I figure I got time to kill and maybe I can murder it by taking a look at this auction. I walk inside and listen while Oscar begins to deal out the spiel.

"Gentlemen," he yaps, just as though there are some in the crowd. "As you know, today we auction off the estate of the late Mrs. Bobo Grope. We are privileged to dispose of the household effects of this millionaire-ess—her valuable collection of old masters, her antiques and art treasures, and her priceless oriental curiosities."

Then he starts the sale. Well, to make a long story tedious, he is not doing so hot. The stuff he auctions off is very high class, but the customers aren't. They bid only a half buck or a dollar on all the lovely pictures and pottery. This is a shame—I am not a corner sewer of art, but from the way he describes it, I see that this is all the real McCoy, if oriental furnishings are ever made by any McCoy.

Poor Oscar warms up and sweats. He hauls out the brie and the brae and gives with the tongue. He grabs a couple pots and waves his arms.

"I have here two gorgeous specimens of the Sung Dynasty," he hollers. "Two exquisite Chinese cuspidors."

They go for a mere six bits.

"And here is a rare Ming mustache cup," he says—and knocks it down to an old goat for a dime.

So it goes. He sells an Egyptian mummy case to a musician who wants it to carry his bass viol in. He disposes of Hindu idols and Siamese carvings for a buck or two. It is breaking his heart.

On top of it, some smart alecks in the crowd keep making gay remarks, and it is very embarrassing to poor Oscar.

He hauls out a big rack and says,

"We will now proceed to dispose of this remarkable collection of Persian and Oriental rugs."

A jerk in the rear hollers out to him. “Get rid of that junk and start auctioning off the harem!”

This its too much for Oscar. He announces that there will be a five-minute pause in the sale and slide’s back of the counters.

I know he is going for a drink, so I quick scoot along after him and nab him in the act.

“Why it’s Lefty Feep,” he says, recognizing my lips on the bottle. “You are a sight for sore eyes. And my eyes are plenty sore today from looking at that crummy mob.”

“Too bad,” I sympathize.

“WELL, it is my fault,” he shrugs.

“This collection of Mrs. Bobo Grope’s is famous all over the world. A dozen big experts and orientalists wire and phone that they will show up today. I expect they will pay thousands for some of these rare and curious pieces. So I send out regular engraved announcements, very high class.

“Only I make a mistake. I print that the sale begins at three in the afternoon. And when I file notice legally, I set the time for two. According to law I must start the auction at two, and so here I am, an hour early. None of the big shots arrive yet, and this stuff goes for next to nothing.”

I pat him on the back with one hand and reach for the bottle with the other. Then Oscar looks at me.

“Feep, I must get price up. Maybe you will shill for me?”

“You mean, bid against some of those customers and make them bid higher?”

“I appreciate it if you do it,” Oscar tells me. Have another drink and let’s get to work.”

So we go back to the auction room and that is what I do. Whenever Oscar holds up a rug and somebody offers two dollars, I offer three. And so forth.

Prices rise. We auction off a dozen Arab blankets in a row.

Then Oscar gets to the bottom of the pile. He hauls out a dusty old roll, all tied together with wires at the ends. And he makes a little speech.

He says,

“Friends—I have here a very unusual item, just brought in from abroad.”

“What broad?” hollers the heckler in back. But Oscar gives him a nasty look and he shuts up.

“This is one of the rugs Mrs. Bobo Grope buys on her last trip east. It does not arrive until after her death, so I can not tell you its history. It has not been unwrapped but will be sold sight unseen in its original condition. I can assure you it is a very fine piece, because of the elaborate way in which it has been wrapped and crated. Yet I am willing to let it go to the highest bidder to expedite this sale.”

Oscar holds up the roll of carpet, tied together at the ends by wire, and waves it around.

“What am I offered?”

“Two bits,” yells a guy at my right.

Oscar glares.

“Two bits? I am insulted. Who knows what this precious bundle contains? Remember—Cleopatra herself comes rolled up in a rug when she visits Anthony. Perhaps she is hiding inside.”

“In that case, fifty cents,” says the heckler. “Though I prefer Gene Tierney.”

“Fifty cents!” snorts Oscar. “Why this rug maybe is worth thousands for all we know. Mrs. Bobo Grope pays plenty of money for her rugs. She has plenty of filthy lucre.”

“I don’t care if she is a filthy looker. I don’t care how she looks. I bid fifty cents!” snaps the heckler.

SO I see I must do some shilling here.

I bid a dollar. The heckler bids two. I come right back with three. He bids five. I have him going, so I bid seven. He bids eight. I shrug and bid ten.

“Ten dollars!” yells Oscar. “Do I hear more?”

I wait for the heckler. He is going to raise now. But—he doesn’t!

All at once Oscar bangs his gavel.

“Sold for ten dollars,” he shouts.

I just stand there with my mouth open. I never expect such a situation, at all. All at once I find out I just buy a lousy piece of carpet for ten dollars. It is awful.

But there is nothing else to do but go up to Oscar and take the rug. I give him ten dollars. Then I put my shoe back on.

“Double-crosser!” I whisper under my breath.

“Sorry,” Oscar tells me. “But who knows? Maybe you really got something there.”

“Sure. I get a backache carrying home this hunk of burlap,” I answer. And I pick up the heavy rug and march out, burning up.

I am still smouldering when I hit the sidewalk. So much so that I do not notice a guy coming in and he runs smack into me at the doorway. I stumble and almost drop my rug.

He turns around.

“Please pardon,” he says.

I am all set to give him a few hot remarks when I take another look. I see he just climbs out of a big limousine, about half a block long. So I modify my remarks before I open my mouth. I look again and realize he is a pretty old pickle. Quite a pappy guy, with a long white beard hanging down to his waist. So I modify my remarks still further and finally come out with,

“Don’t give me the bump, chump.”

He gives me the old eye and I suddenly get a shivering spell. Because he has a pair of very dark peepers with a glare in them like the neon lights on a funeral home. Those eyes are now boring a hole right through what I am carding.

“You attend the auction inside?” he asks, very fast.

I admit it.

"Is it very far along?" he questions, excited.

I tell him yes, nearly everything is sold by now.

Pappy jumps up and down on the sidewalk when he hears this. He almost falls on his face or vice-versa, only his beard is tangled up in my coat and it holds him up.

"Tell me I'm not too late," he gasps. I realize he must be one of the big collectors Oscar tells me about, who get the wrong announcements.

"What about the rugs?" he yells to me.

"I am afraid the rugs are going now," I answer. "In fact I purchase a couple yards of oriental cheese-cloth myself."

PAPPY'S face turns a rich purple, which looks very nice with his white beard. He hops up and down, almost pulling off my coat.

"Ten thousand dancing demons," he yells. "I may be too late to find it! Out of my way, by the high-hung, hammered, heated, hissing hot hinges of hell!"

And he tears through the door into the auction, almost knocking my rug out of my arms.

I shrug, and then I start to lug and tug. Carrying that rug home is a mean job. I walk along trying to remember that swell curse the Old boy gives out with, because right now I am in a cursing mood. To make it worse, I can not even seem to hang on to the rug properly. It is all the time slipping down under my arm, hanging down in front or wriggling out behind. With the result that I am tripping over the curb and walking sideways, and making very slow progress.

That Is how Out-Of-Business Oscar manages to catch up with me before I get home.

I hear feet clicking behind me; somebody running very fast. And along comes Oscar, his face purple just like the old pappy who bumps into me.

“Oscar.” I say, surprised, “I figure you are auctioning. What brings you here?”

“My conscience,” Oscar gets out, puffing for breath. “Feep, I realize I play you a dirty trick when I make you take that rug. After all, you are working for me, and can you help it if the bidding goes wrong? It bothers me so much I have to drop everything and come after you. The thought of my misdeed stabs me to the quick. To the quick.”

Now I do not know what Oscar’s quick is, that he is being stabbed to, but I get interested right away. Oscar has me by the collar and his left hand grabs for the rug.

“I am going to give you your ten dollars back, Feep,” he says. “Is that square?”

Well, it sounds square to me, and that is just what is wrong with it. Coming from a personality like Oscar, it should be crooked.

So I stall a little.

“Maybe I don’t want to sell,” I say.

Oscar’s face gets almost black.

“You must,” he begs. “This is on my conscience. It touches my heart.”

Then I know he is lying. Because Oscar has no conscience and his heart is so hart! nothing can touch it except a pneumatic drill.

“I will keep the rug for my room,” I say. “It will cover up the cigarette butts.”

OSCAR splutters.

“I know how you feel and I don’t blame you at all. Just to make it up for all your trouble, I’ll give you fifteen dollars for it.”

“No,” I answer.

“Twenty.”

Right then and there I get the score. Somebody else wants to buy this rug at a higher price, and Oscar thinks he can get it away from me. So I just shake my head and keep on going.

"This rug is not for sale," I yell. "And that's that!"

Oscar wails, but I ignore him and walk away. Now I can hardly wait to get home. I wonder just what kind of a rag this thing is. I remember Oscar telling about how Cleopatra comes rolled up in a rug, and I can just imagine unrolling it and seeing Lana Turner bounce out. Or anyway, something valuable and rare.

When I climb the stairs to my room I begin to get another idea. Perhaps somebody hides gold or jewels in the rug roll. Maybe some Arabs smuggle diamonds out of the country in it. Who can tell? The carpet is heavy enough, and it is tied up very tight indeed. I am very eager to open it up.

But just as I open the door, there is a rush on the stairs and who comes running up but the old pappy guy.

"Wait just another moment," he hollers. "You are Mr. Lefty Feep?"

"That's what my momma done told me," I admit.

"Oscar directs me here," he wheezes. "It is quite important."

"Who are you?" I ask.

"You read English? Here's my card—don't bend it," says the old fuddy. I take the card and read the name.

BLACK ART
Thaumaturgist

"What is this, a gag?" I ask. "In the first place, you are not a negro, and in the second place what is a thaumaturgist—some kind of chiropractor?"

He gives me a little bow and a smile.

"I admit it is all a little unusual," he tells me. "But you see, a thaumaturgist is a magician. And Black Art is really a very appropriate name."

"Well I got no time to see any card tricks," I answer. "So if you will excuse me, I must go inside and milk a goat."

HE holds up his hand, and I see those deep red eyes of his burning at me again.

"Don't be a fool," he says, in a real soft voice, like a dentist's drill. "I am not a conjuror. I am a sorceror. An evocator. An enchanter. A goetist. A geomancer."

"Calling yourself names won't help any, buddy," I tell him. But I am really impressed. It is dark in the hallway and here is this old man with his red eyes shining at me and his long skinny claws scrabbling at my coat.

"I want to buy your rug," he whispers.

"What, another?"

"Believe me, it is most important to me that I obtain it. I need it and I am prepared to pay well. I offer five hundred dollars."

"Five hundred—"

"A thousand, then. Money is no object. A thousand dollars for that rug!"

"Nelson Brothers should see me," I whisper. "I can be a star salesman."

But I am doing some quick figuring. First, Oscar wants to buy it back, and then this Black Art. Maybe they are both crazy. And then again—Oscar tells the crowd that this rug is wrapped up and shipped in and nobody sees it. He says Mrs. Bobo Grope pays big money for her stuff. Maybe the rug is worth the money. Maybe it is worth a lot more.

I think of the gold and jewels that might be hid away in it. I think about Cleopatra. And then I turn to Black Art and shake my head.

"No, I do not sell this rug," I tell him.

"Two thousand," he hisses.

"No."

It is very hard for me to say no this time. Two thousand is a very convincing argument, and his two eyes are also quite convincing. They glare at me, and when they look at the rug they are *hungry.*

"Come back some other time," I manage to say. "I must think it over."

"Very well, Mr. Feep. But Black Art is not to be foiled, I warn you! I shall get that rug, sooner or later."

And he beats it down the stairs.

I beat it indoors. Now I almost crazy to open this carpet up. I throw it on the floor and run into the closet to hang up my hat and coat. It is very dusty in the closet and I am coughing and clearing my eyes when I come out.

I look at the rug on the floor and then I rub my eyes some more.

Because the wires at the end of the rug are snapped.

I can swear they are tied a minute ago when I throw it down, but now they are untied. Thick wires, too. And the rug lies there.

I RUSH over and unroll it. Very careful, inch by inch, so if there are any jewels or coins wrapped inside I will not miss them.

But there is nothing there. I unroll the rug completely and it stretches across the floor. I stare at it.

What do I see?

A platinum border with jewels in the pattern? A gold fringe on a silver carpet? A solid weave made out of ten dollar bills and war bonds?

No.

I see a dirty, dingy old hunk of burlap I wouldn't use to cover the floor of a hen-coop. It is torn and ragged on the edges. The fringes are raveled and there is a pattern running through it that looks like a map of Hitler's retreat in Russia, and twice as messy.

And I refuse two thousand dollars for the thing!

I let out a whoop and hit myself on the forehead in rage. In fact, I hit myself quite a solid smack, and it knocks me so groggy I reel over to the wash-stand to put cold water on my noggin.

This I do, cursing under my breath and under the faucet. Then I wipe my head off and turn around again, feeling better.

But one look tells me I am still groggy. Worse.

I stare down at the rug I unroll on the floor. Only I do not have to stare *very jar* down.

Because the rug is floating.

Floating in mid air!

That dirty did hunk of carpet, that hotel for Persian fleas, is floating around in the air, about a foot off the floor.

I just stand there with my mouth open, showing my adenoids and tonsils. Then I sneeze, because a cloud of dust rises from the rug while it swoops across the floor.

The damned thing is alive!

ALL at once I remember how it slips out from under my arm all the time I carry it, and how the wires break open of their own accord, and now I understand. The rug is alive. It moves by itself!

I am so upset I watch it without doing anything for a minute. And it floats up, moves over toward the open window. It is going out the window!

“No you don’t.” I remark, hurling myself across the floor and giving it the flying tackle. No mg worth two thousand dollars is going to run off and leave me, even if it floats like Ivory Soap. I bring the rug down and hold it against the floor.

I pant for a minute, because it is a long time since I do a flying tackle, not running around with jitterbug girls any more. The rug sort of wriggles under me, like a big snake.

I reach over and grab a floor lamp and put it down on the carpet, anchoring it to the floor. Then I haul a chair over to hold it, and stick the fringes under the bedpost legs.

The rug thumps to the floor and lies still. I get off and stoop over to take another look. But it doesn’t seem any different. It is still a dingy rag, all dirty and torn. I watch it, see it is quiet, and slip the lamp and chair off it. Then I squat down on it and try to scrape away the dirt to see if I can find some kind of pattern underneath which tells me what it is supposed to be.

All I get is a mouthful of dust. I sneeze again, and my temper blows out right through my nose.

“Blast the whole business,” I yell. “I wish I do not get mixed up in such messes—why can’t I be enjoying myself at a nice crap game at Gorilla Gabface’s joint instead?”

All of a sudden there is a terrible wind blowing. I look around to see if I am still sneezing, but no. I am not making this wind. The rug is.

Because the rug is moving. And I am sitting on top of it!

This time we sail right for the open window, and through it. In another second, I am whizzing along through the air over the street, riding on the rug!

“Put me down!” I yell. But the wind chokes the voice right out of me. And before I can holler again, there is something caught in my throat. My heart.

Because we are zooming across the sky, over the streets and houses, and when I figure the speed I just lie down on my face and close my eyes. A second later I feel an awful thump and I know we have crashed. So I open my eyes and sit up.

THE first thing I look for is broken bones. But there are no broken bones. In fact, there are no bones at all—except two. These two bones are rolling right on the floor next to me. A four and a three.

Because when I open my eyes, I am sitting in the back room of Gorilla Gabface’s pool hall, watching a crap game!

Here is an item for Ripley. I sit on the rug, wish I was at a crap game at Gorilla’s joint, and the rug flies me there!

I look up, still confused, and see we come in through the open skylight. We come in very quiet, too, because nobody notices us, the rug and I.

They are all kneeling in a knot around the game on the floor—four of them, including Gorilla Gabface himself. And in front of them is a pile of lettuce big enough to choke Morgenthau. So it is no wonder they are too interested in the game to see me make my three-point landing.

I am very shaky, but I am beginning to understand a few things about the rug now. Why this Black Art the magician wants to buy it, and why it is such an unusual item. So I roll it up very tight under my arm before I move over to the game and introduce myself.

“Well, if it isn’t Lefty Feep!” yells Gabface. “Another dog come to rattle these bones, I presume?”

Which means I am in the game.

Now I am very fond of African polo myself, in fact it is a sort of a passion with me. And I am indeed eager to rattle the ivories. But I do not wish to lose this rug of mine, either, and it is such a tricky gadget I can not afford to let it out of my sight. I can not figure out where to park it, without a horse-anchor. Then I get an idea.

would dearly love to play marbles with you gentlemen,” I say to these rats. “But I wish you to humor me a bit. I have here a piece I call my lucky carpet. I desire we should all shoot craps on its surface. Besides,” I add, courteously, “I do not like to see you all kneeling on the bare floor this way. It is undignified, and it wrecks the knees of your trousers.”

So they let me unroll the carpet and we all kneel down and I get the dice in my hands and begin to make like castanets with them.

IN A very short while I have enough lettuce in front of me to make a full-size Victory Garden, and I am very happy.

Every time I place the dice down I get either a seven or an eleven, and every point I roll I make.

I suppose this is all very technical talk to you, if you do not understand the intricate technique of shooting craps, but the idea is, I win a lot of money.

This does not please the others a small bit. Finally, when Gorilla Gabface gets the dice, he is very irate, having lost about two hundred berries. He grabs up the cubes in the oversize catcher’s mitt he calls a hand and shakes them until the spots come loose.

“Now roll, curse you,” he remarks, in a voice like thunder. But the storm breaks when he lets go of the dice and gets snake eyes—‘which means he loses. He picks up the dice again, very displeased, and they make a noise in his hand like a couple of skeletons doing calisthenics on a tin roof during a hailstorm.

"Come on," he chants. "Get going. Off to Buffalo."

That does it.

I make a mistake when I do not warn him in time. But it is too late now.

Because when he says "Off to Buffalo" the rug rises up with a bounce, and we are through the skylight. But quickly.

There is yelling and screaming and howling. All five of us get pitched forward into the center of the carpet, and we tangle up our arms and legs. Maybe it takes a minute, maybe it takes ten. Meanwhile we are howling through the night. And when I finally manage to get my head out from under that pile of jerking bodies, I look down at the ground and what do I see?

Niagara Falls!

We are off to Buffalo, all right!

We land about a minute later, right on the edge of town, in a vacant parking lot.

It is a moonless night, and I am glad, because if anybody sees us coming down the anti-aircraft will get busy in very short order. As it is, I have enough trouble explaining things to Gorilla Gabface and his pals. They are naturally flabber from gasted.

So I tell them the story.

"JEEZ!" remarks a character name of Dime-Mouth McCarthy, who is a scholarly type. "What youse got is probibly that there Magic Carpet like in them Arabian Nights."

"Magic Carpet?" I say, while the idea suddenly clicks in the old brain.

"Sure," says Dime-Mouth. "A flying carpet, see? What them there oriental rug-cutters use to cruise around on it for a quick getaway. Just the thing to keep in the parlor for a powder, see? I always figure it is one of these here missological things, but youse can see I am wrong. On accounta here it is. And there we are."

The other lugs listen to Dime-Mouth's explanation and shake their heads, trying to calm down.

"Now what do we do?" asks Gorilla Gabface.

"Maybe we can get it to take us back to town," Dime-Mouth suggests. "It don't cost nothing to try. There ain't no meter on it. If I was youse, Feep, I'd beat it back to the house in a hurry and wait for the customer to show up. He will pay big money for a rug like this."

"Yes, but why?" I ask. "What use has he got for it?"

"Very simple," Dime-Mouth tells me. "He shows up in a big limousine, doesn't he? That's it. He wants to put the car away and use the flying rug during the tire shortage."

This sounds logical to me, so we all hop back on the carpet.

"I wish to be back at Gorilla Gabface's," I say, very loud. And the rug swirls around, takes off, and we are on our way.

This time nobody is quite so frightened. Me, I am even getting used to traveling by air, so I look down on all the scenery as we pass, and in no time at all we are coming down into the street. Gorilla Gabface nearly gets his head knocked off when we skim under the telephone wires, but outside of that there is no trouble. The rug steers itself perfectly, and we sail through the skylight and land without even a bump.

The minute we are all landed, they crowd around me and begin to make with the brains. The whole gang is loaded with schemes.

"Why don't youse open a travel bureau?" suggests Dime-Mouth.

"Nuts to that. Use the rug for a taxi," says Gorilla Gabface.

Somebody else suggests sight-seeing tours over the town. And naturally, there is a shifty-faced little rat in the crowd who comes out with a proposition to smuggle liquor.

This I turn down, of course; pointing out that it is not only dishonest, but also that there isn't enough room on the rug to carry much alky on a trip.

Besides, I do not wish to get myself all involved with these oafs on any deals, until I figure out this situation for myself. I have a Flying Carpet. It is such a matter as requires thought. I do not wish to go for a fly-by-night scheme.

So in the end I pop back onto the rug and say, “Home, James.” The rug lifts me back out of the skylight and I fly through the air with the greatest of ease.

ALL the way home I wreck my brains trying to figure out what to do about all this. But when I finally glide in through the open window and land, a new problem arises.

It arises from the chair in my room, where it is sitting. And its name is Black Art, the thaumaturgist.

He stands there giving me the glare and stare when I come down. I flash him a weak smile and anchor the rug under the bedposts again, trying to act like nothing happens.

But it is no use. He can see what the score is.

“So,” he greets me. “You know the secret.”

I nod.

He shrugs, lifting his beard up and twisting the end. “Too bad. For years I search for the magic carpet in vain. I haunt the *souks* of Ispahan, Teheran, Damascus, Alepo. I comb the bazaars from here to Hyderabad. Agents of mine are on the trail of the fabulous Flying Carpet.

“And in the end, a silly woman, this Mrs. Bobo Grope, stumbles on the prize by accident. She buys it as part of a lot consignment, never dreaming that she is acquiring the legendary rug of oriental fable. She dies. And a silly auctioneer raffles it off to a witless lout.”

“You are wrong about that, pal,” I correct. “I buy this rug myself.”

He smiles.

“Well, let it pass. The important thing is that you now know the true value of this carpet. And I am again prepared to offer you a good price.

Shall we say—ten thousand dollars?”

Now, there is nothing I rather hear somebody say than “ten thousand dollars.” It is a very cute phrase and tickles my ears. But I am still playing my hunch, so I stall.

“Why is thus rug worth ten grand to you?” I ask. “If you are one of these wizards like you claim, what do you need with a flying rug? The way I hear it, you guys can do almost anything you want.”

Black Art sits down again and sighs. The wind ruffles his white beard. Then he sighs again and tears come into his eyes. He pulls up the end of his beard and wipes them away. Then he blows his nose.

“Being a wizard isn’t so easy,” he moans. “It is a terrible life. If you know how hard it is for me to get along, you would have pity on me and give me the rug.”

“Don’t sluff me that guff,” I answer. “Wizards can do anything.”

“You are wrong,” says Black Art. “Maybe I can make you understand if I tell you my secret.”

“Your secret?”

“Yes,” Black Art whispers. “You see, I am the son of a witch.”

“DON’T tell me!”

“It is true,” he sighs. “And I wonder if you know what it means? To be born in a horrible little cottage way off in the woods. Without the comforts of a city home, without a furnace, without plumbing. Never to have a father. Never to have any other kids to play with. Just sit in this awful cottage all day long, with the horrid smell of sulphur and brimstone in the house.

“Your mother is always brewing up stuff on the fire—big cauldrons of herbs and awful messes that stink up the place. She brews so many philtres she doesn’t have time to cook for you.”

“I never have such an experience,” I admit. “Though the way I remember it, Ma sometimes whips up some bathtub gin.”

“That is different,” Art sighs. “You don’t have any toys to play with if you are the son of a witch. Just poppets—not dolls, but poppets. The little wax figures witches stick pins in. She gives them to you to play with and that’s all. And that awful black cat—her familiar! If you pet it, it scratches you up in a jiffy.

“And then you are alone so much. She is always going out to Black Sabbaths and stuff, and her broomstick is never in the corner. On May Eve and Halloween, and all times during the year you are left alone in that hideous cottage. One time I remember drinking some love-philtres as a boy, when left home alone. They only upset my stomach.”

Black Art sighs again.

“That’s my life,” he goes on. “No school. I have to study books on sorcery and black magic every day. Cast spells and study horoscopes, learn awful subjects like anthropomancy and lithiomancy, and divination. I work for years all alone. It is a dog’s life. And when she dies, I am left to myself. Before I know it I am all mixed up with second mortgages to the Devil and a lot of legal stuff. I inherit nothing but a bunch of debts to demons. And I am already an old man before my time.

“Look at me—look at my wrinkles and beard! Do I look like a young and happy man? Do I look as though I enjoyed practising magic powers?”

He starts crying, and my own eyes are a little misty. It does sound terrible. Imagine this poor enchanter—probably never even gets to see a floor show or play a juke box or do anything with culture!

“Then to make it worse, I find out I cannot even attend the Black Sabbath. On account of Ma falling down and busting her broomstick when she dies.

“You know what this means to a wizard? It means disgrace! It is like not attending union meetings or paying lodge dues. If I do not show up at least once a year at Sabbath meetings, I am all washed up.”

THEN he explains to me about these Black Sabbaths, which are stag parties for witches and wizards. Sort of a picnic, like, only just a little wilder. They all get together on a hilltop or mountain over in Europe someplace and dance around for a while and talk shop. Then the Big Boss shows up and pitch-forks around and gives them their orders for the coming year.

And this is what upsets Black Art so much.

Without the broomstick to ride on, he cannot get to his Sabbath. And there is one coming up pretty soon, on Halloween.

“What about a plane?” I ask.

“Don’t be foolish! In the past, I travel by plane or boat. But with this war going on—how can I get to Europe? Or the Hartz Mountains? Priorities fix it so I cannot even buy a private plane for myself, let alone get booked as a passenger. And that is why I need your Flying Carpet. That is why I search for it. It is the one means of transportation left to me—and unless I get to this Sabbath, it will be all up with me. All down, rather. Because the Big Boss has a nasty habit of disposing of we wizards when he is not obeyed.”

Well, this song and dance he hands me has me all softened up, I figure I might as well take ten grand and let the carpet go. What good is it anyway? And if he has to get to this Black Sabbath of his—

“But just what arrangement have you got with the Big Boss?” I ask.

Black Art smiles.

“I see you are clever,” he mumbles. “So I will not conceal it from you. I am anxious to attend this Sabbath in particular, because it is my only chance to see the Big Boss. And if I can see him I am going to make a deal that will give me tremendous power. If you wish, you and I can share it together.

“Because you *are* right, Feep. A wizard *can* have anything he desires—if he will pay the price. You know what that price is. Your soul. You have a soul, haven’t you, Feep?”

“I guess so.”

“Good. I still have mine, too.” Black Art chuckles. He is not so sad now, and the chuckle is something to hear. “Yes, even though I owe the Big Boss a number of debts, I still have my soul to bargain for. And I shall make a bargain.”

IT is pretty dark in my room, but Black Art’s eyes are shining very bright. His teeth gleam, too. Somehow I would feel better if I didn’t see them so well. They bother me. So does his chuckling voice.

“Yes, and what a bargain it will be! Because I want power, Feep. Great power. Now, in a time of war, there will be new chances to rise, to rule. Imagine a wizard, with a knowledge of spells and enchantments, capturing control of entire nations! Ruling armies! Directing destinies!

“I, who haunt in darkness, who must study and pore over musty tomes, waste my life as I do, am sick of sitting in the shadows. I want to rule. And the time is now.

“There is a man in Europe, Feep. A sick, neurotic, half-crazed man, who believes in magic. In astrology, and the stars. He is always willing to listen, to be guided by those who profess to be sorcerers. Fakes. But I am no charlatan. I want to get to that man—make him believe in me. Make myself his master. Give him orders and see that he obeys.

“That is the kind of bargain I am going to make at the Sabbath, Feep! Now do you understand why I must get there? Now do you see why I want your carpet?”

I see all right, and I do not like it a little bit.

“It is no dice, buddy,” I tell him. “I still am not selling the rug.”

Black Art stands up. I never noticed how tall he is before. How nasty he looks in his long black coat. He points a skinny finger at me.

“You dare to refuse, you miserable lout? Why, it means riches for you! You have nothing here—sitting in this dirty, dingy little room. Why, I wouldn’t keep a pig in this filthy sty.”

“Get out, then!” I holler. And push him over to the door.

“I’ll be back!” he yells. But I slam the door on his beard, and it is all he can do to tug it out and bounce down the stairs.

I am really burned up now. I do not mind him suggesting a foul deal like he does, but when he tells me I live in a crummy dump, I get very angry.

Because I know only too well I *do* live in a crummy dump, and something inside me tells me I am a fool not to take his ten thousand. Only I rather be a fool than a rat.

Still and all, my temper is ruined. It is late, and I must get some shut-eye, so I undress for bed. Just before I climb in, I remember the rug. I do not wish it to fly away on me, so I grab it off the floor and stick it in the closet and lock the door on it. The closet is so dusty I start to cough again and this makes me madder still.

I lie in bed and burn up. What a day! I get hooked into buying a rug, I get a reputation for being some kind of a screwball with all my friends, and a crazy magician comes around and threatens me.

Maybe he will show up again with some phony trick or other. But I do not think so. Anyhow, that is a problem for tomorrow.

So at last I fall asleep.

And I have a nightmare.

IN the nightmare it is the next morning. I am waking up when I hear a knocking at the door. I sit up and ask,

"Who's there?" and a voice says, "Black Art," and I say, "Shut up and go away, you bewhiskered baboon!"

Then I turn over and all at once I hear a rustling sound. I sit up again.

I stare at the door.

Something is oozing in through the keyhole. Something white, like fog. A little cloud of smoke. It trickles in very slow and swirls around. All at once it gets thicker. There is a burning red center to the fog. Deep red. And then I recognize it.

It is the color of Black Art's eyes. Deep red eyes. And all at once a face forms around the eyes. And the fog turns into a long white beard. Then a body.

Black Art is standing in my room!

"I will teach you not to thwart a wizard's desires!" he whispers.

Before I know it, he is over at the closet door. He opens it. I see him stooping over the floor, scrabbling around. He picks up the rug. He comes out—

And then I do sit up in bed.

Because I am not dreaming. I am wide awake, and Black Art is stealing the rug before my eyes!

"Hey, you carpet-goniff!? I holler.

He just turns and looks at me.

His red eyes stare. I stare back. And all at once I find out I can't look away. I am what you call hypnotized. I gawk at him like he was a chorus cutie instead of an old geezer with a long white beard.

"So," he whispers. "A wizard has powers. And you are not going to move. I am taking your rug, Feep. I have a flying trip to make to the Hartz Mountains. There is just time enough to make it."

He steps on the carpet and stands in front of the open window. I try to jerk my eyes away. All at once I do it. I jump out of bed.

Black Art smiles. One hand goes to his waist. I think he is pulling a rod on me, but no. He just lifts up his beard. I see underneath it. Hanging from his neck, hidden by the beard, is a very long, very sharp knife. He takes it out and waves it. I can see he is used to waving it.

"Do you like mince-meat?" he asks. "Well, that is what you will be if you come one step closer to me."

So I just stand there while he gets on the rug. He pulls his beard to one side like it was a handkerchief and waves goodbye.

"Well, I am off," he tells me. And then he stares at the rug and mumbles, "Hartz Mountains, please."

The rug gives a flap, and floats out the window.

I SHIVER myself out of it. There he goes. It is all over. My rug is gone, he is gone, and that deal is going through. There will be hell to pay—and I know who will pay it. All of us, if Black Art has his way.

And then, while I am standing there, I hear a thump.

It comes from just outside my window.

I rush over and look out.

There is a terrible crash from down below, and I stare at the back alley. Lying on the stones is Black Art. On top of him, like a shroud, is the Flying Carpet.

I am downstairs in three leaps. I pick Art up and phone for an ambulance. First I hide the rug. When the medicos get there I tell them he falls out of the window—and after one look at the body, they believe me.

And when they go away I take a look at my rug again.

Then I understand what happens. I take another look at my closet and get the whole story straight.

For the first time in my life, I thank my lucky stars that Black Art is right when he says I live in a dirty old dump.

Because that is the one thing that saves us all from the bargain Black Art wants to make.

Of course, the rug is no good any more since it does not fly, and I throw it in the ash heap. But maybe it is just as well the way things work out. I got a bicycle to travel by, anyway.

* * *

I SAT back in my seat with a frown.

“Sounds like you had a pretty close call there, Lefty,” I admitted. “But —”

Feep gave me a sour look.

“You and your ‘Buts.’ Always something bothering you, friend! Well—what is it this time?”

“Nothing,” I said. “Nothing at all.

Only, you see I can’t figure out what it was that made the Flying Carpet fall down and kill the wizard. It always flew before, didn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“So why did it fall?”

“That is my lucky break,” Feep said. “Like I say, if I take the ten thousand dollars, I never get rid of this Black Art and he goes out and does his dirty work. It is pure luck that I refuse and he gets bumped off.”

“How do you figure that?”

“Well—if I take the ten thousand, I move out of my room, into a better apartment. And you know what a dump I live in. All dirty and dusty. And if I am not in my dirty and dusty apartment, then I do not put my rug overnight into the dirty and dusty closet, and it does not get fixed there so that it will not fly any more.”

“You mean keeping that rug in the closet overnight killed Black Art when he used it?”

“Sure. That is the lucky break. Because of what happens in the closet to the rug—what gets into it to make it fall down.”

“All right, Feep! Just what did get into the Flying Carpet, anyway?”

“Moths!” said Lefty Feep.

Jerk the Giant-Killer

Lefty Feep didn't intend to overwork himself, so he picked out the smallest bag of seeds to plant. But they grew the biggest crop of all!

I WAS sitting at my usual place in the usual booth of the usual restaurant the other night, when Lefty Feep made his unusual entrance.

At first I didn't notice anything out of the way about him. His face still looked like a fugitive from a pair of moose-horns. His suit was as gaudy as ever, and his necktie spilled over the front of his shirt like a two-bit sundae.

Then, as Mr. Feep slid into a seat across from me, I noticed the difference.

"No cuffs on your trousers," I remarked.

Lefty Feep nodded.

"From now on the only cuffs I get will be about the head," he grinned. "And at that, I do not think she will catch me. In fact I am sure of it."

"Who?" I asked.

Feep shrugged. I let it go at that. Some aspects of his private life won't stand close scrutiny. If he chooses to live as a one-man matrimonial bureau, it's his business.

"No," Feep continued. "No cuffs for me—on trousers or hands. This is the new Victory Suit."

"Looks like it's been through some pretty gory battles," I said. "Such a color scheme! It certainly isn't camouflaged."

Feep pouted.

"Do not criticize," he said. "I merely do my part for the war effort. I give up my cups, I bust my record of *The Japanese Sandman,* and I spend my dough for bonds instead of blondes."

"Very patriotic."

"Oh, it is nothing." Feep sighed. "I only wish I can do something really fine, like my friend Jack does."

"Jack? Jack who?"

"I do not know his last name," said Lefty Feep. "In fact I do not even know if he is really named Jack. We just call him Jack because he never has any."

"Poverty-stricken, eh?" I observed. "But what can a poor man do that's really going to aid victory?"

A gleam kindled in Feep's eye. I shuddered, because I knew what was coming.

"It is quite a story," he murmured. "I know you will be happy to hear all about it."

"Sorry," I gasped. "I have a heavy date."

"Never mind how fat your girl friends are," snarled Feep. "This is such a tale as does not come your way every day in the week."

"Thank God!"

"What's that? Well, never mind. I will tell you the story just as I hear it from Jack, when I run into him the other day."

Lefty Feep's tongue shot out of his mouth, and we were off. Way, way off.

THIS guy Jack is what you might call a very down and out personality. He is down because he is only five feet tall and he is generally out about two hundred dollars to the bookies.

About a year ago he gets so far out that he is living in the suburbs—Pennsylvania, in fact. Maybe he goes there for the cool climate, because it is pretty hot for him around town.

The next time I see him Jack tells me he gets married. This does not surprise me, because Jack always has a soft spot for women—in his head.

The dame he hitches up with is in the neighborhood of six feet tall, which is quite a neighborhood to be in for a guy of Jack's stature. In addition she is built along the lines that Longfellow thinks of when he writes *The Village Blacksmith.*

But it turns out she owns a little farm in the Pennsylvania hills, and so that is where Jack now lives.

Just about this time the war breaks and everybody is talking about the defense effort. Jack is very patriotic, like I say. He is willing to do his part. In no time at all, he drives into one of the mining towns around there, steps up to the employment office, and gets his wife a job in the mills.

The war comes closer, and even this is not enough for Jack. He goes to another mill and gets his wife a night-shift job as well.

"We must work night and day," he tells me. And then a star-spangled gleam comes into his eye, and he says, "My only regret is that I have but one wife to give to my country."

So you see how it is with Jack. His wife goes to work and he stays home and tends to the farm. Not a day passes but he is doing something to brighten up the place—like carving his initials in a tree, very fancy, or decorating the porch with some beautiful fishing flies. A great fellow to brighten up the place is Jack—in fact he is almost always lit up.

For some reason or other, dames being funny like they are, this does not altogether please his partner in matrimoaning.

One morning she comes home from the night shift in order to cook the meals before she goes back to work on the day shift, and she is feeling very cranky. It seems that Jack cooks up some overtime for her at another plant.

"LISTEN you lazy bum," she says—it pains me to use such vulgar language, but that is the way this coarse woman phrases it—"I want you to do some work around this place. Here I am, day and night, working my fingers to the bone over a hot blast-furnace, and you sit around the house and loaf. You do not even sew the buttons on my overalls. What kind of a husband are you, anyway, you bum?”

In order that Jack does not miss any of this lecture she picks him up and holds his ear next to her mouth. Now she drops him down on the floor again in such a rude fashion that Jack cannot even answer her last $64 question.

But this does not matter.

“Go upstairs and clean out the attic today,” she says. “It is time for spring planting, and you will find all the seeds up there that Papa saves when he comes here from the old country.”

“I should go out in the dirty fields and plant seeds?”

“By tomorrow morning one thing or the other will be planted—the seeds or you,” says his wife.

And she grabs up her lunch pail and storms out.

So poor Jack picks himself up off the floor and hauls his hips way up to the attic. Of course, after such a walk, he has to sit down and rest a while. Which he does, stretching out on all the sacks of seeds up there.

He lies there looking at all the big bags, and the more he looks the more discouraged he gets. Some of them weigh fifty or a hundred pounds. And he cannot imagine himself carrying a hundred pound sack a mile out into the fields and then dumping it.

You see Jack is not a farmer, he just bets like one. And he does not understand the first thing about crops like the local yokels do. He is strictly an uptown boy, and the only way he knows how to raise corn is in a bottle.

So he is very discouraged, but when he thinks about his wife he is even more discouraged. Finally he gets up and starts to haul the bags around. He is looking for the smallest sack he can find.

He stirs up a lot of dust—because these things are up in the attic now for many a year, ever since papa dies after coming from the old country. But in the middle of his wheezes and sneezes, Jack finds a very tiny leather pouch, way at the bottom of the piles.

He figures at first maybe it is only tobacco, but when he shakes it he knows it is seeds all right.

"That's for me," he decides. He puts it in his pocket and goes downstairs.

ON THE way down he accidentally finds some very nice fishing tackle in the closet next to the stairs, and he figures he might as well stop by the creek on his way to plant the seeds.

Well, one thing leads to another, and one road leads to the creek, and then one fish leads to another. So when Jack sits up and takes notice, it is after dark.

His wife will be coming home from the day shift and making supper before going back on the night shift. So Jack realizes he must get back to the house in order to grab some grub.

He gallops across the fields and then he remembers the seeds. It is too dark to see, and too late to waste time. He stops, scuffs a little hole in the ground with his fishing rod, and pours a handful of seeds into it.

At least this gives him the old alibi that he actually does some planting today. So he puts the rest of the seeds back in the pouch and trots home.

When his wife asks him if he engages in any agriculture, he answers yes. So she goes to work that night very happy because Jack reforms this way. And Jack goes to bed very happy for the same reason.

The next morning, when the Happy Farmer gets up, he forgets all about it. Today he figures on going back to the creek, because the fish are biting faster than a crowd of relatives at Thanksgiving dinner.

Right after breakfast he tackles his tackle and does a sneak to the creek.

On the way he crosses over the fields again. At least, he crosses part way.

But he does not get any farther. Because right smack in the middle of the last field, down away in the valley where it is hidden from the house and road, is this plant.

When Jack sees it, his lower jaw drops so far he can rest his shoes on it.

The plant just sticks right up out of the ground. How far is hard to tell, because Jack cannot see the top of it. It is all made of green stalks, but it is not a tree. Jack looks up to see if he can notice branches, but all he sees is clouds.

It is a sort of a horticultural Empire State Building, if you know what I mean, and if you do please tell me.

ANYHOW, such a sight in a bare field is very unusual. Jack pats his hip, feels that the flask is still full, and pinches himself to find that he is still awake. He takes another look.

“What kind of seeds do I plant, anyhow?” he wonders. “Possibly they come from some mail-order catalogue. That is the only place where things grow so big.”

The more he looks at the big tall stalks on the plant, the hotter he gets to find out what it is.

“Maybe if I shinny up a ways I can see the top and find out if this is a plant for peas, or potatotes, or rhubarb,” he decides.

So Jack drops his fishing tackle and grabs hold of a big tough stalk and boosts himself up. He climbs very easily, because there is plenty to hang on to. Before he notices it, he is way up out of this world, and the air is getting thin. But still he is not at the top.

He climbs a little higher, stopping now and then to rest. The further he goes, the more anxious he gets to figure out what kind of a vegetable he raises.

Pretty soon he is so high he is afraid to look down at the ground. But he is now very far away from the good earth.

This is certain, because he is now getting quite damp from tangling with a cloud.

A minute later he is damp inside as well as outside, from tangling with his flask. But he needs his courage, where he is.

Soon there are clouds all around him. He has to take another nip. He climbs some more, and gets scared finally. He wants very much to get down now, but he cannot see his feet any more. There is nothing to do but keep climbing up.

Which he does, hauling away with his hands until he gets them blistered, and hauling away at the flask until his lips get blistered.

“I am thankful for one thing,” he mutters. “Imagine how big this thing grows if I put fertilizer on it last night.”

ALL at once the clouds start to thin away. He goes about the distance of the Washington Monument and he is in the open. In fact, he is reaching the top of the plant.

Only the top is not exactly what he expects to see. There is no raw vegetable dinner waiting up there. No beets, no succotash, no cauliflowers, no tomatoes, no spinach.

Instead, the top of the plant goes right through a hole in the clouds, and when Jack crawls through this hole he is on solid ground!

“So this is China,” says Jack, getting a little mixed up in his geography —to say nothing of the flask. But there he is, and very glad to be standing on some firmer terra, too.

He looks around. The scenery is nothing much—just country, with a lot of hills. And there is a path running along a ways off.

When he gets his breath back in his lungs and his cork back in the bottle, he is about as high as the scenery. He decides he might as well amble down this path and see what the score is.

So he walks along. Not exactly in a straight line, but he gets places.

Before you know it, or he knows it, for that matter, he is going up the path to a big stone apartment house on a hill. At least it looks like an apartment house to Jack, but when he gets a closer glimmer at the turrets and all, he knows it is nothing but a castle. A genuine castle, stuck right out here in the lonely hills!

Jack knows that there is only one explanation for a castle standing out on a country road—it must be a filling station.

So he footsies up to the door, wondering where the gasoline pumps are.

The door is open, and all at once he notices somebody is standing there in the entrance.

This turns out to be nothing less than a very pretty filet of femininity—a little red-headed ginch, with enough curves to strike out DiMaggio.

“Greetings,” says the ginch, just as if Jack was expected. “Who art thou and from whence dost thou hail?”

Jack figures he is getting the old double-talk, see? But he is a very hep number, and always ready with a line.

“Why, I am a traveling salesman,” he says. “And might you be the farmer’s daughter?”

“I know no villiens, churls, nor peasantry,” the ginch comes back. “I am the Lady Imogene, and this is the fief of my husband. And what,” she coos, “might a traveling salesman be?”

“You don’t know?” says Jack. “Well, well—”

He gives this Imogene ginch the old eye. And she smiles right back in a way which tells Jack that her husband isn’t home. Probably out tending to his fiefs, or something.

WHICH suits Jack perfectly. In no time at all, he is inside this joint. It turns out to be a real castle, with sure-enough stone walls.

The whole place is terrifically big, like a downtown movie lobby, but what impresses Jack most is the size of all the furniture in it. The chairs are almost twenty feet high, and the tables even higher.

“Who is this husband of yours, King Kong?” he asks.

“No. He is King Glimorgus,” answers Imogene.

“Sounds like a dandruff-remover,” says Jack. And the ginch giggles.

She is throwing off plenty of smiles and such, and shows Jack around the joint very sweetly.

“I am glad you are here,” she confesses. “I am so lonely.”

“What does old Glimorgus do for a living?” asks Jack.

“Verily, he is a cattle tender.”

“You mean he is out all day taking care of his herds?”

“Not exactly,” simpers the ginch Imogene. “It is other people’s cattle that he takes care of. Also he is a renowned sheep-raiser. He raises them from other people’s land and carries them here.”

“In other words, this husband of yours is no better than a thief,” says Jack.

Imogene turns pale.

“Prithee, I implore you not to speak thusly in his presence. Such gibes make him exceedingly furious. And when he is furious, he is apt to become very angry. And being angry makes him mad.”

“What you are trying to tell me is that he has a bad temper. I get it,” says Jack. “Well, I do not wish to tangle with this cowboy husband of yours anyway. I would just as soon stay a stranger to this Lone Ranger.”

“I grieve to hear you speak thusly, for King Glimorgus would like you.”

“You don’t say?”

“Verily. He likes men.”

“He does, eh?”

“Yes—with a little salt and pepper. Some he likes roasted and basted. Others he likes raw. Lean as you are, methinks he wouldst relish you in a fricassee.”

Jack gulps.

“Pardon me, I got to catch the Chattanooga choo-choo,” he gasps, diving for the door.

BUT Imogene grabs his arm.

“Tarry a while,” she suggests. “I do not expect him for many an hour. And I promise, I shall not permit him to eat you.” Here she gives out with another dreamy smile, and Jack wavers a little.

“Speaking of food,” Imogene goes on, “Methinks that after your travels you might be hungry. Wouldst do with a roast duck or two?”

“Wouldst do plenty,” says Jack. “Lead me to it.” Because he is really strictly from hunger.

So he follows the red-head into the kitchen, which is a huge place like all the other rooms. There is a terrific stone oven in the middle, and next to it stands an oversized table and some big chairs.

The ginch Imogene helps Jack climb up into one of these seats, and he sits there looking like a brat in a high-chair while she fusses around the oven with a couple quackers she is going to roast for him.

Jack is plenty curious to find out more about this setup, which strikes him as a little unusual.

“Isn’t it a little trying to live with this Man Mountain Dean?” he asks.

“I fail to comprehend.”

“I mean, aren’t you afraid of living with Hannibal the Cannibal?”

“You mean King Glimorgus, my husband?” laughs the ginch. “But pray what must I fear?”

“Well, you tell me about his slightly unusual diet, and I figure maybe he will gobble you up between meals.” Imogene smiles and shakes her head. “He needs me to cook for him,” she explains. “Truly, were I gone, the servant problem here wouldst be most vexing.”

“I can understand that all right,” Jack agrees. “But still, if he is such a big brute like you say, it is a wonder he does not beat up on you all the time.”

Imogene looks a little frightened. “Let us not speak of that,” she says. “Often do I wish to be free of him, but these is no way.” Her smile turns on again. “Verily, it was my hope when you came here that perhaps you might be the champion who could rescue me.” She comes over to Jack and waves the duck under his nose, very temptingly, and how can he resist?

He gets up on his chair and pounds himself on the chest.

“You got the right idea there, baby,” he says. “I’m going to do just that. When I set my peepers on you I say there is a little number that is too classy to be cooped up with an oversized cattle-thief like this Glimorgus. And when that big tramp shows up I'm going to—"

WHAT Jack intends to do is never settled. Because all at once the big tramp shows up.

Merely the big tramp of feet, but that is enough. He can hear the feet just outside, and they are pounding along like a couple of twenty-ton tanks. Standing on the chair as he is, he can just see outside the window when a head passes. One look at the size of that head and Jack changes his mind.

"Here he comes!" he yells. "Hide me somewhere, quick!"

Imogene looks around wildly.

"Here—do you climb into the oven," she suggests.

"Do I? And how!" Jack dives off the chair and runs to the big stone oven. He can hardly reach up to the door and it takes a lot of effort to get it open, but the sound of those huge feet echoing through the house is all the encouragement he needs.

"Boost me up," he whispers.

"I cannot."

Just then the problem is settled. Because a big hand sticks itself around the kitchen door. Jack takes one look and then gives a flying jump up into the oven. He slams the door just in time as the giant walks into the room.

He lies there in the dark, does Jack, squinting through the air-holes in the oven door. And there is certainly plenty for him to see.

Plenty of the giant, anyway. Because this King Glimorgus turns out to be thirty feet tall. He is so big he could black Jack's eyes for him with his knees. And Jack does not wish to give him such an opportunity, so he looks very quietly from behind the oven door.

The giant comes in and stands there for a minute. He does not shake hands with his wife, either—because he is carrying a calf under each arm. He sort of swings the calves around like they were chickens and then tosses them down on the table.

“I brought a little snack for lunch,” he announces. Then he grabs Imogene up and kisses her.

This makes Jack shudder. The idea of anyone having to come close to that great big face is very unpleasant. He has a tremendous black beard, and kissing him must be like falling into a pile of bushes face-first.

But Imogene smiles, being used to it, and the giant smiles back. His smile is like grim death, because he has teeth as big as tombstones.

HE SETS Imogene down very carefully, like a doll, and then he yawns. This isn’t so bad, even if it does make all the dishes rattle and the clock on the wall stops dead.

“Anything happen?” he asks, in a voice like a sick foghorn.

“Naught, my lord,” says Imogine.

“Guess I’ll eat then,” the giant decides.

“Very well.”

“Roast these calves for me,” says the giant.

Jack gulps. Imogene turns pale.

“Just shove them in the oven under a hot fire,” the giant orders.

“But—but my lord—”

“Eh?”

“You know it is not wise for you to indulge in roast meat during the midday. Remember the advice of the leech—cooked meat is bad for the pressure of the blood.”

“Is that so?”

“Of course.” Imogene begins to coax. She climbs up on the giant’s lap and strokes his forehead—which is like running your hand across a washboard.

“You are so delicate, my lord. So anemic. You must guard your health. You are not strong.”

This is fine talk to hand somebody who looks like the big brother of Gargantua the Gorilla, but it works with the giant.

"Perhaps you are right, my little pet," he says. "I do not feel my best. In fact I am not even very hungry. So I will just eat those two calves raw."

Jack breathes a sigh of relief as the giant begins to pick at his food. He merely toys with it, dabbles around—in fact it takes him nearly ten minutes to eat the two calves. Just an invalid's diet.

Imogene bustles around, bringing him salt and pepper, and rolling out a pony of ale for an appetizer. She is doing her best to keep King Glimorgus from noticing anything wrong.

But all at once he holds up the leg of a calf and turns his head.

"I smell something," he says. This time his voice is so loud that the clock on the wall falls off completely.

"What do you mean?" quavers the little ginch.

"Aha!" yells the giant. "I thought so!"

"Thought what?"

"Fee, Fi, Fo, Fum
I smell the blood
Of an Englishman."

This is bad poetry, but the thought behind it is worse. At least, to Jack. Because he is not an Englishman, but Irish, and this is quite an insult, to say the least.

TO SAY the most, if the giant finds Jack it is curtains. So he trembles inside the oven. The giant gets up.

"Are you hiding a man in this castle?" he booms.

"Verily, you jest," trembles Imogene.

"But I smell one."

"Perchance you suffer from a cold in the head."

"I know a man when I smell him," insists the giant. "And when I smell him I find him. And when I find him—I eat him!"

Jack begins to feel like a hunk of sandwich meat already.

The giant is striding back and forth across the room.

“Where is he?” he yells. “Show him to me and I’ll tear him limb from limb! I’ll clean his wishbone and use it for a toothpick.”

“The use of toothpicks is vulgar,” Imogene says. “And you are mistaken, my lord. That is no man you smell—merely the hen.”

“Hen? What hen?”

“Why, the marvelous hen I purchased from the itinerant wizard who chanced by this morning.”

“You bought a hen? Honestly, you women are all alike,” grumbles the giant. “Every damned peddler that comes along, you have to buy something—”

“Wait until you see it,” says the ginch. “Truly, it can perform a miraculous feat.”

She runs out into the other room and brings back a live chicken. It is an ordinary-looking white bird and the giant scowls at it.

“I see nothing remarkable in this fowl,” he sneers.

“Ah, but there is something remarkable in it. And wait until it comes out.”

She sets the hen down on the table and strokes it. It clucks a little.

“Lay!” she says to the chicken. “Lay.”

The chicken squawks. All at once it sits up. Imogene lifts it off the table. Underneath the chicken is an egg. An egg of solid gold!

“Is not this a remarkable thing to find in a chicken?” she asks.

“It lays golden eggs, does it? And all you must do is tell it that want one?”

“Merely stroke its back and command it to lay.”

So King Glimorgus the giant sits down and begins to stroke the chicken and yell, “Lay!” And the eggs pour out.

“Eighteen carats!” chuckles the giant. “Nice, grade-A size, too. My dear, all is forgiven.”

He scoops up a pile of golden golf-balls and gets up.

“I shall take these down to have them assayed,” he says. “Mind you, guard the hen well until I return.”

And he tramps off.

A COUPLE minutes later, Jack crawls out of the oven.

"Nice work," he tells Imogene. "You saved my life. Now I must beat it before my wife beats me."

"You are wed?" says Imogene. Her face falls. "I am sorry. For I was of a mind that you should stay here with me and console me."

"A very noble idea," Jack answers. "In fact, nothing suits me better. But pretty soon your husband comes back and starts poking his big nose around again, so I figure I will keep out of his way. And my wife is not quite so big, but she is just as tough."

So Jack heads for the door with Imogene after him.

"Perchance you will return?" she asks.

"Who can tell?"

"If not," sighs the ginch, "I will bestow a parting gift. Take this hen." And she gives him the hen that lays the golden eggs.

"A very sweet gesture," Jack says. "And thank you for giving me the bird." He leaves Imogene then and puts the castle behind him. Jack makes time on the path now with the hen under his arm. He looks around to see that the coast, is clear, and when he comes to the plant sticking through the ground, he slides down through the hole and begins to climb.

Going down doesn't take so much time. He manages to slide quite a bit of the way, and he is very willing to hurry.

He figures on getting home and doing some planting before his wife arrives. He wants to plant seeds, and he also wants to plant this remarkable chicken where she won't find it.

Sliding down, he does his best to figure out this adventure he has.

The whole thing reminds him of a yarn he reads in a book when he is a tiny tot—a little epic entitled *Jack and the Beanstalk.* In fact, this seems to be almost a duplicate.

His name is Jack; and he finds some seeds and plants them, and they grow. He plants them in the dark, but now he is almost sure they are beans. The stalk comes up, he climbs it, and there he is with this giant. The giant even talks like the book, with his hi-de-ho about sniffing the corpuscles of a British subject.

And now Jack gets a hen that lays nuggets. It all adds up, somehow.

SO JACK hits the earth feeling pretty pleased with himself. He hops back to the farmhouse and sticks the chicken away in the back of the hencoop.

Then he grabs up a sack of corn and goes out to plant it. He is so happy he even feels like doing a little work, and by supper time he has the satisfaction of spreading more corn than a politician does at election time.

He heads for the house, very happy. His wife is all smiles when she sees he is working.

“I am glad you reform, you bum,” she greets him. “I fix an extra nice supper for you.”

Which it is.

But right in the middle of the meal, Jack stares down at his plate.

“Where do you get this lovely fried chicken, darling?” he asks.

She smiles at him.

“Who do you ask, you naughty boy? From the hencoop, of course.”

“The hencoop—”

“Certainly.” She wags her finger at him. “You are so thoughtful to go and steal one of the neighbor’s chickens for me.”

“Neighbors—”

“But of course, just like a man, you do not realize they will recognize it if it is running around in our yard. So I kill it and fry it.”

“You fry the chicken I put in the hencoop?”

“Of course.”

And all at once Jack does not like his fried chicken any more. In fact he loses his appetite. So his wife has to take the rest of the chicken in her lunch pail when she goes off to work on the night shift.

Jack lies in bed thinking about what a rotten deal he gets. Here he has a chicken that can lay golden eggs—he has a potential Fort Knox right in his own back yard—and he loses it. It is enough to get anybody up in the air.

And that, finally, is where he decides to go.

There is nothing else to do, after such a disappointment, but to climb the beanstalk again tomorrow and see if he can lay his hands on another hunk of this precious poultry.

He can hardly wait. For the first time in years he is up at dawn and running out into the field in the valley where the beanstalk stands.

Sure enough, it is still there, and when Jack gets there he is far from still. He boosts himself up hand over hand and makes like a monkey.

PRETTY soon he is high and dry, not bringing a flask with him this trip. The going is tough, and for a minute Jack gets a bad attack of qualms.

After all, why should he risk his neck again by playing around with a thirty-foot bozo whose idea of a complete hamburger dinner would be Jack with a bottle of ketchup poured over him?

So Jack stops to think things over. And he looks down at the ground. It is so far away that he gets the shakes just thinking about his position on the beanstalk, and there is nothing to do but look up again—and climb some more.

In a little while he is up in the clouds again, looking for silver linings. But all he gets is water on the knee trying to wade through the dampness. So Jack climbs as fast as he can, to get through the rain, and shortly he is crawling through the hole at the top of the beanstalk.

He is on the path in the hills once more, and this time he knows his way. He walks along very slowly, looking to see if he can notice the giant's footprints in the dust. But there is no mark of any size 44 brogans treading this way, so he skips along until he comes to the big stone castle.

The door is still open, and Imogene is standing there. When she sees Jack she smiles and tucks up her pretty red hair.

“I am so glad you are back,” she says. “I wight you wish to console me?”

“Wight you are,” says Jack, who is catching on fast to her brand of conversation.

“Shall we step inside?” asks Imogene.

“Is Shorty home?” Jack comes back.

“King Glimorgus?” she giggles. “Nay, he is out hunting.”

“Deer?”

“Nay—you.”

“Me?”

“Verily. He suspects the presence of a stranger about. It is his belief that you are responsible for the disappearance of his chicken, and he will not rest until he finds you.”

“If he finds me, I will not rest,” says Jack. “Maybe I better jam on the scram.”

Imogene’s pretty blue eyes cloud up and look like rain. She sighs.

“You wouldst desert me?” she wails. “And here it is my hope that you are a gallant champion come to rescue me from that miserable ogre! If I were only free again to live as other women, instead of being cooped up here with that monstrous tyrant—oh, I should do anything to reward the noble rescuer who saves me!”

“Anything?” says Jack.

“Anything,” sighs Imogene.

WELL, this is a pretty big proposition, and Jack knows it. So he takes his time thinking it over. Then he makes up his mind.

“Would you get me a drink?” he asks.

“Surely—we have mead and ale in plenty! Come with me into the castle.”

So Jack wanders into the castle again. He keeps his eyes open this time, because he is really on the lookout for another hen to grab. If he can only find an 18-carat chicken or a platinum-producing pullet he is satisfied to run a few risks.

But the castle rooms are empty, and when they come to the kitchen he gets his drink and sits down on the floor—not having a stepladder handy to climb up to the table.

Then he decides to pump Imogene for information.

“Do I hear you mention raising that chicken from a gizzard?” he asks her.

“No. I purchase it from a wizard,” she answers.

“Do you suppose he has any more fowl like that?” says Jack. “I am in the market for another chicken, or maybe a duck that lays a few bucks.”

“That is the only chicken of its kind, he tells me.”

“What?” moans Jack, disappointed. “No turkeys? No ostriches?”

She shakes her head. Then she smiles.

“But wait until your eyes rest on the purchase of today,” she tells him. “This is indeed a wondrous bargain. ’Twill interest you greatly.”

“Let’s have a squint,” Jack suggests.

But he does not get a squint. He gets a scrunch. The scrunch-scrunch of the giant’s feet outside the castle. King Glimorgus is coming home.

“Here he comes,” yells Jack. “Open the oven and start in shoving!”

“But you were to rescue me—”

“How can I rescue you unless I rescue myself first?” Jack argues, running across the big kitchen tiles. “I got to hide safe to save my hide.”

BUT when they get to the oven and Jack reaches up, the door is stuck. And so is he, because he can hear the giant coming into the front hall.

“Now where?” Jack yells.

"Here—lift yourself into the bread-box." Imogene points out the big canister on the floor. So Jack pops off the cover and pops inside.

Meanwhile, the giant is coming up like thunder through the house. Jack tips the lid a little to see what's going on.

King Glimorgus stamps into the room, with a very nasty look spread all over his face.

"Don't tell me," he yells, before Imogene can open her mouth. "I can sniff him a mile off—the paltry poultry pilferer."

He gives her the old leer and sneer from ear to ear.

"It is in my mind to wring your pretty neck," he growls.

"But my lord—there is no one here. Seeing you approach, I have come to pour your tankard of ale."

And she offers him the drink she fixes for Jack.

"Ale—bah!" hollers the man higher up. "There is but one drink for me—the blood of that thieving rogue!"

"I do not see him."

"Use your nose," grunts the ogre. And he goes off into his poetry hour again, in a voice that would melt rocks.

"Fee Fi Fo Fum
I smell the blood
Of an Englishman!
Be he alive
Or be he dead,
I'll grind his bones
To make my bread."

Jack lies in the breadbox and almost shakes the lid off.

"Why doesn't he try some of that new enriched bread?" he grumbles to himself. "A little vitamin B, is all right. Why does he need my bones in the stuff?"

But this is not a question to ask any thirty-foot giant, so Jack keeps strictly from silent.

“He’s hiding here,” the giant yells. “Maybe in that oven!” And he strides over to the oven door, yanking it open. The door is still stuck, but this does not stop the ogre. He wrenches the door off and looks in.

OF COURSE the oven is empty. “I’ll search everywhere,” yells King Glimorgus. But Imogene pouts and tugs at his knees.

“You’ll spoil my surprise,” she says. “You will find its hiding place.”

“Surprise? What surprise?”

“The surprise I bought from the wizard today.”

“He here again?” But the giant looks interested.

“This item is truly rare,” says Imogene. “Do you be seated, whilst I bring it to you.”

She scampers off and comes back in a minute carrying a lot of wires under her arm.

“What manner of trash is this?”

“A harp, my lord. A wonderful harp.”

“Harp? I don’t play a harp.”

“No need to play it. It plays itself.”

“Plays itself?”

“That is the marvel of its minstrelsy. Merely command it to play, my lord.”

So Imogene sets the harp down on the table and the giant sits down and gawks at it for a minute. Then he says, “Play!”

And the harp plays.

Jack cannot believe his peeping eyes. The strings on the harp move and a tune comes out. Of course it is not anything that is leading the hit parade, but the stuff makes music.

And the giant begins to smile.

When the chorus is over he says, “Play,” again, and the harps swings out. Pretty soon there is quite a jam session going on, in a corny sort of way. The giant taps the table with his fingers—very gentle, so as not to splinter it to bits—and the harp goes through its repertoire. It is better than a juke box, because you don’t have to put nickels in it.

After a while it starts playing some real soft stuff—regular slumber music. And in no time at all, the giant is snoring. In fact he snores so loud it drowns out the music, and the harp shuts up.

SO THERE is the giant, slumped over the table fast asleep. As soon as she sees it is safe, Imogene gives Jack the old high-sign and he climbs out of the breadbox.

“Very glad to get out of there,” he whispers. “Too crowded. Loaves of bread jamming my knees and rolls all over my waist. I do not mind getting a bun on, but not on my head.”

“Quickly,” pants Imogene. “He sleeps now. You must go.”

“Mind if I take a souvenir?” asks Jack, pointing at the harp.

“Very well.”

So Jack tiptoes over to the table, reaches up, and grabs hold of the harp.

The result is very startling. Because the harp sort of tugs back on him and then it plunks out some sounds that resemble words.

“Help—Master—Help—”

Jack grabs it under his coat to stifle the noise, but too late. The giant opens his eyes and sits up.

“So!” howls the ogre. “There you are—you chicken-hearted chicken thief!”

Jack is on the spot. In fact he will *be* a spot if the giant’s foot ever smashes down on him.

He thinks fast.

“Yes, I am the yegg who snatches your eggs,” he admits. “And now I am taking your harp. So what are you going to do about it, Gus?”

King Glimorgus makes a lunge for him. This is just what Jack wants, because he runs right between the giant’s legs. Glimorgus turns around, but Jack is scampering down the hall, with the harp tucked inside his coat.

"Stop thief!" yells the harp.

"Fee, Fi, Fo, Fum," yells the giant.

"Nuts to you, brother," remarks Jack running very sincerely.

But the giant is right behind him.

Jack races out of the castle and down the trail, but Glimorgus stomps along right after him. He has to run stooped over with his hands out, because if he takes too much of a stride his legs pass right over Jack and he can not see to grab him.

Jack weaves and ducks but keeps to the trail. And the giant's hands come scooping down behind him in the dust, trying to grab hold.

Jack spies the hole and the top of the beanstalk and dives for it. He starts climbing down.

Then he starts sliding down.

Because the giant comes right after him!

HE TEARS away an acre or so of ground around the hole and jumps down on the stalk. The whole thing trembles at the terrific weight, and the beanstalk shakes and sways, but Jack does not stop. He slides for very dear life—his life.

Right down through the cloud layers he goes, skinning his hands and knees. Beans pop all around his head, but he does not hesitate. The giant bellows up above, and then he seems to get stuck in the fog from the clouds. Jack can hear him Fee-ing and Fi-ing, and when he comes down closer to the ground Jack hears the thunder of his Fo-ing and Fum-ing.

Then Jack hits solid earth. He is panting and gasping, but. he is also planning and grasping.

"If this is really such a beanstalk like in the story," he quavers, "then there is only one thing I need to do. I must chop down the beanstalk with my little hatchet."

This is a very cheerful idea. But Jack is not George Washington.

I cannot tell a lie. He has no hatchet!

So there is Jack, staring up the shaking beanstalk, waiting while the giant's feet start sticking out from the clouds. He is coming down fast. The stalk is wobbly, but it is not falling. And there is not a hatchet in sight!

Jack grabs at himself and beats his chest. Then he hits it.

The harp!

He yanks it out.

"Hey—leggo of me!" yells the harp, in a very impolite manner.

But Jack has no time to be polite. He rips the wood away from the harp and grabs a handful of loose wires. He twists them together at the ends.

Then he kneels down and saws away at the base of the beanstalk. The wire is sharp. It cuts.

Now the giant's knees are visible. And Jack hears his voice out of the clouds.

"Fee, Fi, Fo, Fum
Ready or not—
Here I come!"

Jack saws away. And the beanstalk gives. He looks up and yells.

"Fee, Fi, Fo, Fum
Here you go,
You oversized bum!"

AND that is just what happens. The beanstalk suddenly snaps with a twang and a bang. The whole stalk swings free and a gust of wind lifts it straight up in the air.

From up above, Jack hears the giant giving what the poets call one hell of a yell. But it is too late. The beanstalk shoots up through the clouds and disappears. The field is empty. There is nothing left.

So Jack goes back home to his wife.

"After all," he figures. "Maybe it is best things happen like this.

"The giant is gone, and that means I really rescue Imogene from him, and make good my promise.

"It is nice to have a lot of golden eggs, but the government arrests you if you keep over $100 in gold on you.

"A harp that plays itself is also fine—but what has it got that a portable radio hasn't got?"

Such is the story Jack tells me when he comes to town a couple days later. His wife thinks he is a jerk for not doing the planting like he promises, but Jack has plans. He tells me the plans, too, and he is very happy about the whole thing. Remarkable, is it not?

LEFTY Feep sat back and balanced an olive on his tongue.

I leaned forward and exploded.

"It's not remarkable—it's downright screwy! I have never heard such exaggerations in all my life."

Feep looked hurt.

"Do not say such a thing," he snapped. "It may be that I lie a little from time to time, but I never exaggerate!"

"But Lefty—do you actually expect me to believe that the Jack and the Beanstalk fable happened here in real life?"

Feep shrugged.

"Who can tell? Jack's wife says the beans are very old when her Papa brings them over to this country."

"Nuts to beans," I sighed. "But there's one thing that really puzzles me."

"Name it and you can have it."

"In the fable, the stalk falls down, and the giant gets killed. In your story, it flies up in the air. That isn't much to believe. In fact, it is too much to believe it!"

Lefty looked injured, even a trifle hurt.

"It only shows your scientific ignorance," he snapped. "The giant is closer to China than he is to me, so he falls up."

"Up?"

"Sure. Gravity, you dope!"

I nodded slowly, because I could see he was right there. But another thing bothers me. I mention it.

“When you started out, you told me that this Jack was making such a wonderful contribution to the war effort. And nothing in your story even hints at such a thing.”

“Oh, that.” Feep smiled. “I forget that part. What Jack does for the war effort is something he tells me the other day. Remember, I mention he has plans.”

“So?”

“The night Jack plants the beanstalk he uses only a couple of beans. He still has a lot left over in the pouch he finds.”

“Well?”

Feep shrugged again. His smile broadened.

“Very simple. Jack is going back to the farm right now. He is going to plant the rest of those beans in a Victory Garden.”

THE END

The Golden Opportunity of Lefty Feep

It was the break of a lifetime. Here in Lefty Feep's grasp was the Midas touch. And without the misfortune that Midas had!

LEFTY FEEP slumped into his seat across my table and beckoned to a waiter.

"Bring me a glass of water and a toothpick," he ordered. "And kindly cut the point off the toothpick first, so I am not tempted to cut my throat."

I stared at Feep in astonishment. "What's the matter, Lefty—aren't you eating any more?"

"Not any more than I can get," he muttered.

I searched his long morose face for a possible explanation. All I saw was eyebrows and a frown.

"You certainly look down in the mouth," I told him.

Lefty Feep sighed.

"Everything is down in the mouth with me, except food."

"Broke?"

He nodded.

"Yesterday I am the richest man in the world. Today I am a bum."

"Why should today be an exception?" I asked, but under my breath. He didn't hear me.

"Yes, yesterday I sits at the Ritz. Today I mutter in the gutter. I am all set to go over the hill to the poor-house, only I am too weak to climb hills."

I patted him on the shoulder to cheer him up. Then I patted him in the face with a roll. This did the trick. His mouth opened gratefully, and the roll disappeared. Also his frown.

“Don’t take it so hard,” I consoled him. “After all, money isn’t everything. All that glitters is not gold.” The frown came back.

“Gold!” rasped Lefty Feep. “Please do not exclaim the name of same. Do not meddle with that metal.”

“Why, what’s wrong with that?”

“Everything. It is gold which causes all my troubles. In fact, I go from a gold rush to a bum’s rush all in one day.”

The waiter returned with the water and toothpick, peep gargled noisily, then balanced the toothpick on the end of his nose in a wistful fashion.

“I still don’t understand,” I mused. “Why this dislike of gold?”

“It is very hard for me to talk about it,” Feep sighed.

“All right, then. I’ll change the subject.”

A gleam entered Feep’s eye. He began to breathe heavily as he rose and grasped my shoulders.

“But if you insist,” he said, “I will spill the story to you.”

“Oh, I don’t insist at all—”

“You are forcing it out of me,” Lefty Feep accused. “So you ask for it, so you’ll get it.”

Forcing me back in my seat with a half-nelson, Feep arranged my right ear for a target, aimed his mouth, opened, and fired.

And I got it.

* * *

AS YOU know, I am the kind of personality who likes to go places and do people. It is very difficult to get me embarrassed.

But the other day I wake up and find myself embarrassed, in the worst way—financially. I am caught with my pants-pockets down. I am not only broke, but fractured.

You see, a couple weeks ago a medico looks me over and advises me to go off to a summer resort hotel for change and rest.

Well, the bellboys get the change, and the hotel gets the rest.

So there I am, flatter than last night's beer.

To make it worse, I am all tangled up with a very neat little number name of Sweetheart Singer. I do not know how she gets such an unusual name, but that is what the Navy calls her.

Do not get the wrong idea, now. Sweetheart is really a very intellectual type of ginch. She is very fond of etchings—particularly the kind the Government puts out on $20 bills. So you see I am now mixed up in what you call a love triangle—I love Sweetheart, and Sweetheart loves money.

And here I am, dead broke. In order not to be heart-broke also, it is necessary for me to lay my pinkies on some coin, but swiftly. In fact, I have a weighty date this very evening. But the way it stands, I do not possess enough cash to rent a telephone booth.

So to make a long story wrong, there is only one thing for me to do. I hop back to town and pay a visit to Out-Of-Business Oscar.

This Out-of-Business Oscar, you may recall, is a loveable old cutthroat who runs a combination auction mart and hock shop where I once purchase a rug. He is called Out-of-Business Oscar because he is always advertising a close-out sale. Although the only thing Oscar ever closes is his fist—over money.

Even so, Oscar and I are friends of many years' standing—principally me standing in front of him trying to get two or three bucks when I pawn my watch. Getting dough out of Oscar is like trying to squeeze tears out of a landlord.

Still, today I know this is the only chance I have of raising a few chips to take Sweetheart out on, so I amble down to Oscar's store and unbuckle my watch chain before I go in. I also take off my rings, my cuff-links, and tie pin. This ought to get me at least a fiver, I figure. But just to make sure, I bring along a small hammer—in case he makes me knock the fillings out of my teeth.

When I get up to the doorway of the hock shop I see a big sign outside:

OUR LEASE EXPIRES!

GET YOUR BARGAINS—IT’S OUR
FUNERAL!

ATTEND THE BIG PRICE
MASSACRE!

So I know business is still going on as usual. And I walk inside.

THE place looks empty. It is very dark, and there does not seem to be anybody around. I stand there for a minute, and all at once I hear a voice gasping behind my back.

“Turn around and let me look at you—at last, at last, somebody to talk to. Speak to me!”

It is Oscar, of course. He rushes up to me and grabs my hand, pumping it like he was running a meat-grinder and expected hamburgers to drop out from under my arm.

“You don’t know what a pleasure this is,” he wails. “Nobody comes into this joint for an entire week. It is a week since I see a human face.”

Then he recognizes me and frowns.

“Of course I do not exactly feel that I see a human face yet when I look at yours.”

I choose to ignore this remark.

“Speak up,” he says. “What brings you here?”

“A bicycle,” I tell him.

“I mean, what’s on your mind?”

“Hair-restorer, mostly,” I confess. “What I am mainly interested in is raising a couple guilders on these family jewels of mine.”

"You wish to hock this junk, in other words?" he says.

"I do not care for your other words, but that is the idea."

"It is a good idea," says Oscar. "But it will not work. Because I have not more and not less than no money. Here," he says, "I will prove it to you." And he steps over to the cash-register and rings it open. Something halfflies out of it and then falls back.

"See?" Oscar shrugs. "A moth. And it is so starved, it is too weak to even fly. Around here is strictly from hunger."

"What's the matter?" I ask, very mystified.

Oscar sighs and shrugs some more.

"I don't know, Lefty. I can't understand it. This week is the most baffling one I ever lived through.

"On Monday I start out as usual with a big sign. PRICES SLASHED TO RIBBONS. Nobody comes in. So on Tuesday I put up my bigger sign. PRICES CUT TO BITS. Still nobody enters. On Wednesday I hang out the sign that reads, PRICES TORN TO PIECES—COME IN BEFORE THE BARGAINS BLEED TO DEATH! And nothing doing.

"On Thursday I am so burned up I put out the sign for FIRE SALE. Nobody shows up—not even the Fire Department.

"Today I got all the signs up, but they are staying away from me in droves. I am about as popular as leprosy. Nobody wants to hock anything and nobody wants to buy anything. Too much prosperity. If it keeps up, I am ruined."

OSCAR rubs his bald noggin until it begins to shine like a street lamp.

"Maybe you got a few suggestions to help me with?" he asks. "I will appreciate same, Lefty."

I hesitate. It is a terrible thing to even think of, but I can see no way out of it in such a case. So I let my voice sink very low and try to keep it from trembling.

“Well, Oscar—there is only one thing left to do. You’ll have to get out the hook.”

“The hook?”

“Yes. That’s all you got left.”

“You really think so?”

“I’m afraid that’s all.”

“All right.”

Oscar sighs and creeps behind the counter. He stoops down very carefully and pulls out a long iron pole with a scythe on the end of it. It looks very mean indeed.

He tries not to look at me while he creeps over to the door. He is ashamed, but he is still an old master when he goes to work, so I watch him. carefully.

Oscar half-opens the door. He sticks his bald noggin out and squints up and down the street. His mustache bristles with anticipation, and dried noodle soup.

Then he hears it. Footsteps from the left, coming down the street.

Oscar sticks his head out further and frowns when a pair of socks hanging in the doorway hits him a mildewed blow in the face. He draws the hook up and begins to slide one end of the pole out of the door.

“Shhh! I think I hear a fink approaching now,” he whispers.

Now Oscar is not a sports lover, and he does not care for fishing—even though the river runs right in back of his shop. But I can learn more about fishing by watching him land a customer than old Izaak Walton could ever teach me.

So I watch this fink coming down the street. He is a little old dried-up guy with a face like a prune that wears glasses. He walks along very swift, and Oscar waits from behind the doorway playing his hook over the sidewalk down low.

All at once the old bird is just ready to pass the door. Oscar jerks the hook up very sharp and trips the guy. Then he digs the hook into his belt, very careful, and plays him from left to right across the sidewalk. Oscar now braces his feet against the threshold and pulls his victim in. The old guy flies across the floor of the shop, and Oscar jumps right behind him and locks the door.

Then he turns to face the old buzzard with a smile—because he is now a legitimate customer.

“What can I do for you, sir?” he asks.

“Where am I—hey—what’s the idea—ouch!” wails the little old bird, trying to get up off the floor.

OSCAR promptly taps him over the temple with a rare old New Jersey Ming vase. And the customer promptly falls down again.

Oscar turns to me.

“I am sorry, but I learn from experience this is the best way to make such a customer forget exactly how he happens to come in here.”

Then he very carefully gets a glass of water and revives the little oldy. He opens his eyes and sits up.

“Nasty fall you just had, buddy,” he remarks.

“Fall?” squeaks the customer.

“Sure—remember? You fall down and pass out just in front of my store. And say, that’s lucky for you—because of the way you rip and ruin your clothes when you fall.”

Then Oscar whips into his old routine. He runs behind the counters and begins to grab at his stock of flour sacks, mumbling to himself.

“New coat—the old one is torn—let’s see, I got something handy and dandy here, just imported from the Bronx. And a new hat now—the old one is busted, and anyway you must just come from walking near a pigeon loft—here’s a beautiful homburg from Hamburg—only $1.88, costs me $2.00, but it’s yours for $1.00, I make it up by saving string—a new tie instead of that greasy hunk of rope you’re choking yourself with—aha—”

He races back to where the guy stands, bewildered, and begins to tear off his vest and coat. Then he rips his shirt, and replaces all the old clothes with stuff from the shop. The little old fink stands there in a cloud of dust while Oscar pats the new clothing into shape.

"Pity you ain't taller," says Oscar, throwing on a size 42 vest. "But you're young—you'll grow yet."

Then he grabs the trousers.

"You must have ripped these when you fell," he comments, showing the guy the place where he was grabbed by the hook. "Well, don't worry, I've got a pair of leg-tapestries here that will give you legs like a chorus queen."

He jams a pair of pants over the scrawny legs, thrusts a cane into the guy's hand, and plunges a tie-pin into his neck. Then he steps back and registers ecstacy.

"Marvelous!" he croons. "You look just like a page torn out of *Esquire."*

WHAT he looks like certainly would be torn out of any magazine, quick, by whoever would see it. But this is all part of Oscar's song and dance.

"Now let's see," he mumbles. "That's $1.49 and $2.76 and $7.63 and $9.27 and $3.04 and $.18 for Social Security, and $.05 for the glass of water I revive you with. Comes to a grand total of not more and not less than $43.77 you owe me."

The little old customer looks bewildered.

"But I have no money," he says. "I'm sure I'm grateful to you for taking care of me, and getting me all fixed up with these splendid new clothes. But I'm not in a position to reimburse you. Ouch!"

He makes the last remark because of Oscar the Tiger, who is already snarling at him and clawing off his clothes in one furious leap.

"Wait," pleads the customer. "I can pay later—soon."

"Later!"

Oscar rips off his tie.

"Soon!"

He tears the shirt open.

"Pay me later, eh?"

He reefs the trousers.

"A wise guy! Huh!"

Off goes belt and socks.

"But," pants the old bird, trying to resist while he is whirling around in the air like a pinwheel, "I am an inventor, you see, and for the past year I've been working. Ouch! And I am just on my way to the Patent Office today to get it registered and I am sure it will make me a lot of money."

"Money?" Oscar pauses, clutching the trousers. "What kind of invention you got, Buddy?"

The little old guy strikes a pose in his underwear.

"Well, sir, I'm glad you ask me that. Most people just laugh at me when I mention it. They think I'm crazy. But just yesterday I terminate my experiments and complete the invention of what I call the Midascope."

"Midascope?"

"Simple. Named after Midas, the king of the well-known legend.

"The bozo with the golden touch?"

"Exactly."

"I don't get it."

"My invention is a super-reagent which has the property of turning all inanimate matter into gold."

"You mean you could turn wood into gold, for example? Like that King Midas did in the story by touching it?"

"Definitely. Hence the name. However, there is nothing supernatural about my discovery. Supernormal, perhaps, yes. But this does not operate by touch—it consists of a ray. A simple ray, which, if directed properly at an object, will transmute its atomic components into the structural equivalency of gold."

"Cut the double-talk," Oscar tells him. Then he turns to me. "What do you say, Lefty? I think you better call the zoo and tell them one of their squirrels got out of his cage."

"You mean to infer I am demented?" hollers the old bird.

“Not at all. I think you’re nuts,” Oscar replies.

“Then you’d better take a look.”

HE STOOPS down and fumbles in his old discarded coat. Then he pulls out a small metal tube that looks like a flashlight. There is a cap over the end.

“By removing this cap the ray is released,” he says, smirking.

“Oh, yeah?” I put in my two cents worth. “Then how come the cap does not turn to gold?”

“Because it is made out of a metal specially treated to resist the action of transmutation,” says the guy, going back into his scientific double-talk. “But take the cap off and you get gold right away wherever you point the ray.”

Oscar steps up and yanks the cylinder out of the old bird’s mitts.

“Looks like a fake to me,” he yaps. “I bet if I open it up and look in, I get a black eye—like those ones with the hula dancer’s picture inside.”

The small article sniffs and looks very haughty.

“There is no trickery involved, gentlemen,” he says. “This represents my life-work. I guarantee its genuineness. To prove it, I will allow you to point the ray at whatever article you may choose in this shop.”

“Nothing doing, buddy,” says Oscar. “How do I know it ain’t one of these disintegrator-rays like you read about? Blow my furniture or clothes to bits.” I personally do not see where this will be such a great loss, considering the quality of Oscar’s furniture and clothing stock, but I keep still.

“Wait a minute,” Oscar says. “I will step outside. There is a fruit store right across the street, and I will get hold of something to experiment on.” So he ducks off and comes back in about a minute with something in his hand. A banana.

“Here we are,” he says. “Now, buddy, you turn on this thing and let’s see you coin some gold.”

The little stranger takes the cylinder and holds it in his hand. He sets the banana down on the counter, then looks at it. He smiles. All at once he pulls the cap off his cylinder and points it at the monkey-cigar.

Nothing happens.

No light shines out. Nothing explodes. The little fink just waves the cylinder at the banana, that's all.

"Fake!" sneers Oscar.

The banana lies there on the counter, and Oscar snatches it up in disgust. All at once he stands frozen with the banana in his hand.

"It feels different," he mutters. "Heavier."

I take a good look. The banana is still yellow, but it is *shining.* Shining like gold!

"It is gold!" yells Oscar. "Solid gold!"

HE BEGINS to dance up and down, waving the jungle pigs-knuckle in the air.

"It works, you see? It really works!" he shouts.

I grab at the banana. Sure enough, it is heavy metal now. I can't peel it. The whole thing is a golden lump.

"Now what do we do?" I ask.

"What do we do?" echoes Oscar, staring at the banana. "What do we do? Why—we just run right over to that fruit store again and bring back a watermelon!"

I do not wish to go into details about the next hour we spend. Oscar does bring back a watermelon, and the stranger does turn it to gold with his cylinder. Then we sort of go gold-bugs, I guess.

Because we start to turn the junk in the store to gold. We wave the cylinder at the stuff on the counters and on the shelves. We get golden golf-clubs and tennis rackets, gold fountain pens, vases, pictures, microscopes, candid cameras. We even get gold leaf pages in the books when we point the cylinder at them. It is all like one grand and glorious bingo game where we always hold the winning corn. Nothing is impossible. An hour ago we are lower than a worm's toenails and now we are kicking around the pot at the end of the rainbow. No wonder we do not have much of the old self-control.

Finally Oscar climbs up on a golden step-ladder and points the cylinder at the stuffed moose-head hanging over the door. He looks at the golden moose for a minute and then he stops and frowns. He climbs down slowly.

"Why are you rubbing your forehead?" I ask.

"Because a thought hits me."

"You should have concussion of the brain," I remark, but he ignores this. He points at me and the little inventor.

"We are wasting our time," he says.

"Meaning what?"

"Meaning just this—why should we hang around here trying to turn this petty stuff into carats? We can go out and really coin money with this thing.

"Why not turn it on the sidewalks, on the trees, on the buildings? Imagine owning a whole skyscraper of gold! A 22-carat Empire State Building? Or a golden Subway? I can picture Radio City—"

"Stop!" says the little old fink, striking another pose in his long underwear. "You talk like a fool."

"I do, eh?"

"Certainly. Allow me to remind you of a few elementary truths. To begin with, there's a government law making it impossible for anyone to own more than $100 in raw gold."

" 'Laws,' he says!" snorts Oscar.

"VERY well, then," continues the small inventor. "If you do not respect government laws, perhaps the laws of economics will prove more stringent.

"Don't you realize that if you run around indiscriminately transforming everything into gold, that gold will lose its value? Don't you understand that if you create too much gold it will become common and therefore worthless?"

"I am willing to risk it," Oscar sneers.

"Well I'm not," the stranger snaps. "As I say, I am on my way to the Patent Office with this working model. I intend to register it and present the formulae involved to our government; to keep, not to use. In times of need, the cylinder can be employed. But it must be worked with discretion.

"I can see that common men cannot be entrusted with such great power. You, my friend, have already bruised your knees bowing down to the Golden Calf. It is an object lesson to prove mankind is not yet ready for easy riches."

I get the little fink's point all right, but Oscar grunts.

"Get off your soap-box and come down to earth," he says. "Here we got a fortune in our grasp and you want to give it away."

"We?" says the inventor. "It's *my* cylinder. I demand that you return it to me at once so that I may proceed on my errand to the Patent Office."

"Cylinders you want?" Oscar sneers. "Nuts you get!"

This is a very discourteous statement, and it seems to make the little guy quite angry, because he suddenly makes a dive for Oscar and tries to grab the cylinder out of his hand.

There is quite a lusty scuffle, and all in a moment the two of them are rolling on the floor.

I look on, very shocked. Because I would not roll on a floor as dirty as Oscar's for all the gold in the world. Not even dice would I roll.

But in a minute I am even more shocked. Oscar jumps up on his feet and grabs the cylinder. The little old guy starts to dive for him, with his underwear flapping in the breeze. And all at once Oscar whips the cap off the cylinder and points it—right at the inventor's legs and feet.

There is a hideous scream. Then, an awful thump.

The little guy stops short and stares down at his waist. He is still screaming, but every time he tries to take a step the thumps drown him out.

Because Oscar has turned the bottom half of his underwear to solid gold!

"I can't move," wails the inventor fink. "It's too heavy!"

"Good," Oscar grunts, putting the cylinder back on the counter.

"GET me out of here," yells the little stranger. "The underwear is frozen tight to me. Even the buttons are solid, and the buttonholes. Get a can-opener or a pick-axe and chip me loose!"

"You mean I should go to work on you like a miner?" asks Oscar. "Not on your life. Seeing how you cannot move, I am going to carry you into the back room and let you cool off for a while. Do not make any noise, or I will turn the rest of your longerie to gold and you will be a statue from the neck down."

"What are you going to do with me?" quivers the little old guy.

"Nothing, if you are a good boy. I will let you stay in the back room and see that you are fed and that nobody melts you down into wedding rings. Meanwhile I will make use of your little invention—very good use."

While he is talking, Oscar is shoving the half-man, half-statue back of the counter to the back room overlooking the river.

It all happens so fast I scarcely make up my mind. And just as I do make it up, Oscar comes back and raps me on the knuckles. So I drop the cylinder back on the counter again.

"Trying to put the snatch on it, eh?" he grates.

"But—"

"I can't trust you either, can I, Feep?" he says. "Maybe I better tie you up, too. In a little burlap bag. Then I can turn the bag into gold and toss you into the river. You always say you want a luxurious funeral."

"Honest, I'm not going to steal the cylinder."

"I'll say you're not," Oscar tells me. "And you're not going to say anything about our inventor friend, either. You are going to be very quiet while I figure out what I want to do with this little money-maker."

So while Oscar sits there trying to figure out what to do with his little money-maker, I am sitting there trying to figure out what to do with my little money-spender.

Because I do not forget that I have a date with Sweetheart Singer this evening, and I still do not raise any money to raise whoopee on.

I do not see which way to turn, but if it is any consolation, neither does Oscar. He sits there grumbling to himself under his breath, thinking up scheme after scheme. But always something is wrong.

"What if I do turn sidewalks into gold," he says. "I don't own the sidewalks. Also, the Empire State Building is out—why should I make money for Al Smith? Of course, I already got a fortune right here in the store, but I must figure out a way to get more. I need a lot of stuff I can turn into gold."

EVERY time he makes a remark Oscar rubs his bald spot. And he makes so many remarks I figure he will wear himself down until he has nothing above the forehead in a little while. But he is so greedy that no scheme he thinks of will satisfy him.

All at once he sighs and gets up.

"Well, maybe I better think some more," he yawns. "After all, there is plenty of time. The cylinder will not run away."

"That is right," I say.

"Oh, I forget!" he shouts. "Quick, I must lock up the store! With all this gold lying around I don't want any customers wandering in."

He races to the door, pausing only to turn the hook into gold and then going on his merry way.

"Better close the awnings, too," he decides. "Don't want anybody looking in through the windows tonight."

"I'll do it," I volunteer.

"Good."

So I step outside while Oscar waits.

When I skid past the door I do not hoist any awnings. I merely hoist my coat tails and race away down the street.

Because Oscar is right when he says the cylinder will not run away. He just does not figure that I will run away, and that I will take the cylinder with me.

Which I do, lifting the thing off the counter just before I go out, when his back is turned.

So now I make very fleet with the feet, and behind me I hear Oscar yelling, “Stop, thief, stop thief!” at the top of his voice.

Only this does not do any good. Because on such a street as the one where his store is, this command can apply to almost anyone passing by.

I just keep running, holding the cylinder under my coat, and I do not pause until I dash into the lobby of Sweetheart’s apartment building.

It is already dark, and I do not wish to be late for my date. My heart is going like an overtime shift in a defense plant, but it pounds even faster when I walk up to Sweetheart’s door. Because I am really gooey for this ginch. I got no more chance when I get near her than a hot marshmallow has around a Girl Scout.

I hold the cylinder very tight under my coat when I step up and ring the bell.

Already I am making plans. I will tell her about this cylinder and it will make her very happy and then perhaps we will get ourselves wedlocked. And this suits me fine. Some people do not approve of such an idea, because they say this Sweetheart is too mercenary. Me, I know different. She is not mercenary at all—only greedy.

And I figure the cylinder will take care of that. I mean to return it to the inventor, naturally, but I merely need to use it tonight.

So I have my little act all prepared. When the door opens I strike a pose with my arms stretched out and I whisper, “Sweetheart!”

“Ain’t youse a little bold, stranger?” says a deep voice.

TO MAKE a long story embarrassing, it is not Sweetheart at all in the doorway, but a big lug.

I look up into a bristly red beard. Then I look further up into a big red mouth and a bigger red nose, and then I look way up into little red eyes.

This is quite a squint, because the lug in the doorway is over six feet tall in his stocking feet. Which is probably the way they measure him, because he does not look like the kind of personality who ever wears shoes.

“Was youse looking for somebody?” the lug suggests. “Or maybe just for a sock in the jaw?”

I stand there figuring out what to do. The way I see it, the only chance I have of punching him in the nose is to jump up in the air and hit it with the top of my head.

Just then Sweetheart sticks her attractive puss around the doorway.

“Oh, hello Lefty,” she says. Then she turns to the lug. “Will you excuse me a minute?” she coos, very sweet. And steps out in the hall with me, shutting the door behind her.

“I’m sorry, Lefty,” she tells me. “I forget all about our little date for this evening. I am going out with this gentleman friend of mine from Alaska.”

“You mean that polar bear with the henna fur?” I snap.

“Don’t talk that way,” she pouts. “He is none other than the famous Klondike Ike. He is a very wealthy prospector.”

“Prospector, eh?” I mention, in a sarcastic manner. “What does he own—a halitosis mine in Breath Valley?”

“He is rich,” sniffs Sweetheart. “Why, he always carries a bag of raw gold dust around in his pocket.”

“That’s nothing,” I tell her. “If it’s gold you want, I am plenty dusty with it myself. I am so rich I am filthy.” She gives me a fishy stare.

“What are you trying to hand me, Lefty Feep? The only way you make money is by playing a slot machine—with a hammer.”

“Give me five minutes,” I yell. “Just five minutes. I’ll be back here with more gold dust than this Eskimo Elmer of yours ever has.”

“His name is Klondike Ike,” Sweetheart says. “And yours is mud.”

She slams the door on me.

WELL, I am far from discouraged.

I run downstairs and into the back yard of the apartment building. I find the janitor's shovel and a couple paper bags from the garbage incinerator. I fill the bags with dirt and get out the cylinder. I uncap it and point it at the dirt.

"Midascope, do your stuff," I whisper.

In thirty seconds I am puffing up the stairs again, lugging up two sacks filled with gold dust. I take out a couple nuggets and pound on the door.

Klondike Ike sticks his beard out.

"Oh it's you, is it?" he sneers. "What do you want—darling?" he says, in a very effeminate manner.

"I am a traveling dentist," I tell him, politely. "When you snarl at me, I see your teeth are decaying. I think they need some gold fillings."

Then I smash him one in the teeth with the nuggets. He looks very dented at my dentistry and slumps down on the floor. I march over him and into the apartment.

Sweetheart just stares at me when I pour the bags out over the carpet.

"See what I mean?" I tell her.

"Oh Lefty, darling, you're so rich—I mean, wonderful," she sighs, falling into my arms.

"What about our date?" I ask her, coming up for air a few minutes later.

"Let's go," she murmurs. "Oh honey, I never could resist a wealthy—a masterful man."

So she puts on her hat and face over at the mirror and steps out the door.

"Wait a minute," I call to her. "I want to wash up."

Saying which, I close the door and get to work. I figure on one grand gesture. I will turn on the cylinder all over her apartment. I will transform the floor, the walls, the furniture, everything into solid gold. Then when we come back later in the evening she will really see what I can do. This will certainly put my number up on her hit parade.

So I let fly with the Midascope, flashing it around like I was spraying with a Flit gun. In a minute I am standing dazzled. My eyes hurt.

Everything sparkles and glitters and I am looking at a fairy tale come to life. Yellow, tawny, shining gold surrounds me on all sides. The place looks like Morgenthau's delight.

Then I tiptoe out and lock the door. Sweetheart is waiting for me in the hall and we go downstairs. On the way down I pick up another bag of gold dust I leave cached in the hallway. We are all set.

WELL, I am just the kind of a personality to entertain a gold-digger this evening.

"Where shall we go?" Sweetheart asks.

"Why, the Ritz, of course," I tell her. And we do, in a taxi. When we get out I do not pay the driver, but hand him the bag of gold instead.

"Jeez," the cabby whispers. "There must be a fortune here, mister."

"Sure," I remark. "Almost enough to buy yourself a new tire."

And we swoop into the Ritz. On the way I duck off at the cloakroom until I find one of those big urns with the sand in it they use for throwing cigarette butts in. I scoop out sand, turn on the Midascope, and come back with pockets bulging from still more gold dust.

We go in and order the best—meaning plenty of champagne. Because I have just the appetite to drink a hearty meal.

All of this makes Sweetheart almost hysterical.

"I don't understand it at all, Lefty," she keeps saying. "Where did all this money come from?"

I just look mysterious. But after two quarts of the champagne, maybe I only look confused.

Anyway, she will not rest until she gets the story out of me. She keeps coaxing me all the time we are dancing, and she is some coaxer.

"You must tell me, darling," she sighs. All at once her eyes get very soft and tender. "I know—my great big wonderful man holds up a bank."

"Guess again. Gold is where you find it," I quote.

Her eyes get still more tender. She is wild about me.

"Maybe you kill a tax collector?" she breathes, sweetly.

"No. You're still cold."

This is a lie. Sweetheart is a lot of things, but she is not cold.

"Do you own a gold mine?"

"Uh-uh."

"Maybe you got a lot of sugar-rationing cards."

I lead her back to the table.

"I hate to disappoint you, Sweetheart," I say. "But I do not do anything dishonest to get this stack of chips. I just discover I am one of the long-lost Gold Dust Twins."

"They're black," she pouts. "And you are kidding me."

But she cannot pump the secret out of me. All she can do is pump champagne into me.

After we leave the Ritz—where I leave a cupful of dust to tip the waiter with—we go on to a couple of other hot spots. In fact, by midnight we see more joints than a chiropractor.

And all the while Sweetheart is itching to discover my secret. I keep stepping out for a minute on her to find some more sand or dirt to make dust out of with the Midascope—looking for rubber plants or cuspidors or sawdust—and every time I come back with a fresh batch she stares again. The Midascope cylinder is hot from being used so much. And Sweetheart isn't much cooler.

FINALLY, in our fifth joint and our sixth quart of champagne, I pop another bottle and the question.

"Sweetheart," I say, romantically, "Let's you and me try a little wedded blitz."

"Are you proposing matrimony?"

"Matrimony hell—let's get married!" I snap.

She turns her big baby blue eyes up at me.

"Lefty," she says, "I think you are the one I am always waiting for. You are kind, and generous, and brave, and generous, and strong, and generous, and cultured, and—well, generous."

"I am glad you see it this way," I tell her. "Personally, I always look for a girl who agrees with me. And if you think I'm wonderful, I agree with you. So what are we waiting for?"

"Just one thing, darling," she tells me. "We must have no secrets between us. You must explain where it is you get all this gold from."

"All right," I say. The champagne is bubbling around in my head, and I figure it will not hurt to tell her.

So we leave this last dump and taxi home, and in the cab I explain the whole picture to her. Or at least part of it. I tell her I have this magic gimmick that turns anything I want into gold. And I also tell her that I have a little surprise waiting for her when she gets home.

"How wonderful you are," she says, softly. "To think that I am marrying a man with the Golden Touch! I hope we spend money—I mean, many—years together."

Right then and there I begin to feel maybe I am making a mistake.

I also begin to feel her fingers digging into my pocket and trying to snatch the cylinder.

I slap her very gently on the nose, but I am really just a wee bit burned up. She may not make such a perfect wife after all, I figure—like the other three I marry at one time or another.

In fact, from the way she speaks, she does not want a man at all. She would be happier with a cash register.

BUT it is too late now. I ask her, and a gentleman cannot back down. Without being sued for breach of promise, that is.

So I decide to make the best of it. We get up to the apartment door and she can't wait to get inside and see the surprise I promise her.

She runs up the stairs ahead of me, and I lurch behind. I hear her open the door and scurry in. Then I hear her give a screech.

"She must be plenty surprised," I figure.

But she is not as surprised as I am a minute later.

That is when she comes out just when I get to the head of the stairs. On her face is a very nasty look, and in her hand is a lead bookend.

The bookend does not stay in her hand long. It comes right down on my skull.

"Take that!" she shrieks. "You four-flushing phoney! You and your fake gold bricks!"

I keep staring at the bookend. Only a couple hours ago I turn it into gold. Now it is lead—

"My whole apartment," she screams. "Turned to lead—everything turned to lead! You—you counterfeiter!"

She catches me one across the side of the old noggin that spins me backward down the stairs.

When I get to the bottom I do not stop. I just keep right on running.

All the way to Out-Of-Business Oscar's I am trying to puzzle it out in my aching orange. First gold and then lead—is something wrong?

Oscar and the little inventor fink are the only ones who can tell me. That is why I streak for the store.

When I get there the joint is still lighted behind the drawn awnings and shades. I bang on the door.

Oscar opens it.

"Something terrible happens," I yell. "I got to tell you—"

He glares and drags me inside by the scruff of the neck. I have a very tender scruff, too.

"You want to tell me?" he hollers. "Something terrible happens to *you?* Look at what happens to me!"

I look. I stare straight up into a stuffed moose head of solid lead. I look around at the lead clothing, the lead microscopes, the lead counters. Everything that the Midascope turns to gold is lead now. Dirty grey lead.

"IT HAPPENS an hour ago," Oscar groans. "The gold just seems to fade away and there is nothing but lead all over."

He picks up the lead banana from the counter and throws it on the floor in a rage. He kicks out at the lead watermelon and then yells.

For the next minute all he can say is ouch.

"What about the inventor fink?" I ask.

"He is locked up in the back room," Oscar reminds me.

"Well, let's tell him—he ought to know what's wrong."

"So quiet back there I figure he goes to sleep," Oscar says. "But you're right. He might know what the trouble is."

We go up to the door and knock.

There is no sound.

"Come on in there," Oscar hollers. "Wake up."

"What is it?" asks the little stranger from behind the door.

"Something terrible happens to your Midascope. The stuff it turns to gold is all changing to lead now."

"Not really?"

"Absolutely."

All at once we hear a funny sound.

It is the little inventor fink, laughing. Laughing!

"I am glad," he chuckles. "Something must be wrong with my discovery after all. And I am glad! Because your greedy behavior proves that the world isn't ready for such a miracle yet at all. I'm glad I make this failure.

"But now I must be leaving you—"

The voice stops.

"What does he mean?" Oscar yells. "How can he leave us?"

"The window in the room," I pant. "It opens on the river."

"But his heavy underwear is too heavy—" Oscar begins. I shake my head.

"Listen to that."

There is an awful bumping sound.

Oscar unlocks the door, throws it open.

There is the little inventor guy, balanced across the window-sill. He is ready to dive out. We stare at the heavy bottoms of his underwear.

“Hey—wait—don’t jump—you can’t!” we scream.

But the little inventor fink jumps. He tips forward, topples over, and disappears.

There is a terrific splash from below.

Oscar grabs the Midascope from my hand and runs to the window. “Come back here!” he shouts, hurling the cylinder out into the river.

“Missed him,” he says. “Oh well—he’s done for.”

“It’s suicide, swimming with that gold on him from the waist down,” I admit.

“Gold? What gold? It changes, remember,” Oscar reminds me. “He probably drowns because of all the lead in his pants.”

* * *

LEFTY FEEP cleared his throat in order to push another one of my rolls down it.

“So that’s what you mean by being rich yesterday and poor today,” I mused.

“Tragic, isn’t it?”

“Very. I suppose Oscar is pretty mad at you for all this?”

“Why should he be?” Feep asked. “The cylinder turns out to be no good, so he doesn’t lose anything. The junk in his store he can’t sell, and now that it’s turned to lead he can maybe get rid of it to the army for bullets. So he is all right.

“As for me, I get out of this mess with Sweetheart, so I am not behind on the deal.”

“Then everything worked out all right.”

“Well, yes and no. Oscar *is* sore about just one thing. You see, this inventor fink is screwy when he says his Midascope turns stuff to gold. And he is also wrong about one other point—when he claims the cylinder does not work on flesh.”

"Meaning what?"

"It's this way. Oscar is pretty blue last night when it's all finished. He asks me what he's going to eat the next day without any money.

"So I tell him to hang a line out of his window and catch some perch from the river. He does, and that is why he is mad."

"How so?"

"Because he hangs his line in the spot where he throws the cylinder after the inventor. And instead of perch, he gets a string of nice, cute little goldfish."

I smiled.

"Too bad. But after all, he could still eat them, I suppose."

Feep frowned.

"That's what I tell him. And he does eat them. So now, you see, he's in the hospital."

"What's the matter?"

"Lead poisoning," said Lefty Feep.

Murder From The Moon

Murder can be committed with two hands very well, but with four, it gives the killer quite a decided advantage indeed

CHAPTER I

Warm Welcome

"AND what do you think of America?" asked Bill Stone, eagerly. "It surpasses my wildest expectations," answered the visitor.

"You surpass mine," Stone grunted under his breath. Nevertheless, the reporter scribbled hastily. A knot of his fellow scribes crowded closer around notebooks and craning necks in unison.

"Do you plan a long stay?"

"I have accepted the hospitality of Solar Foundation," the soft voice purred. "It is their intention to exchange information with me for a considerable period of time."

"Fine. Say—how about some pictures?"

It was the signal for clamor. The penthouse of Solar Foundation was filled with arms waving cameras and flash bulbs.

"Very well."

"Suppose you pose shaking hands with some of the guests?"

"Just as you say."

Bill Stone took charge. He faced the other end of the penthouse chamber, where scientists and savants stood waiting until the press had its will of their visitor.

"Let's see, now." The reporter scanned faces, counted beards, squinted at bald heads.

"Mr. Bennet, you'll pose, of course?"

A bulky young man in a white laboratory apron rose heavily to his feet and smiled in assent. He elbowed his stout body through the crowd of news-hounds and took his place beside the visitor.

"I don't suppose you'd object if we included Professor Champion in the same shot?"

"Not at all." Bennet smiled at the scowling, bearded man who bustled towards him. "Hello, Butch," he said.

The Director of the Champion Foundation favored the young head of the Solar Foundation with an intent stare in which all the hatred of his bitter rivalry shone.

The reporter rattled off the names of the rest.

"Changara Dass."

A turbaned Hindu bowed low and approached.

"Miss Valery."

The smiling secretary of Solar took her place with a smile which caused several of the photographers to murmur, "Ah—cheesecake!" in a complimentary fashion.

"O.K." said Stone. He turned to the visitor. "Now, if you'll just shake hands with all of them—"

"All four at once?"

"Certainly."

Bill Stone turned again to the photographers at his side and exulted in low tones.

"Boy, what a shot!" he whispered. "Never anything like it in the history of the world before. Imagine—the four biggest scientists in the world shaking hands with *him*. And at the same time, too!"

IT was quite a scene at that.

There stood the visitor—his four long arms extended from two sets of shoulder blades, his four bird-like claws grasping the hands of the scientists. The visitor's snouted pink face stared affably into the distinguished countenances.

Stone's brain was already busy with captions and headlines.

MAN IN THE MOON MEETS
MORTALS
VISITOR FROM VOID PROVES
DOWN-TO-EARTH FELLOW
LUNAR LUMINARY SHAKES
WITH SCIENTISTS

Why, the creature was almost human! True, it didn't look exactly like a man. Manlike body, yes—but with four arms. And the face was mostly nose; a mass of pinkish flesh with a slit mouth and two popping blue eyes.

Despite this it had a voice of human pitch and timbre, it spoke English, and it certainly seemed at home here on earth. This, and the marvel of the space-ship in which it arrived certainly indicated a mentality equal to any human's.

Stone was still lost in musing as the flashbulbs flickered. He was ready to resume the interview when the fat body of Stephen Bennet blocked him off. Young Bennet raised his arms and voice.

"Quiet please, gentlemen. I feel our distinguished visitor has had enough excitement for the moment. He will be glad to receive the press again tomorrow.

"At the moment I must insist that the reception proceed, so that he be given the opportunity to meet our guests. However, if you like, I'll issue a statement for the papers at this time."

The great room was hushed as Stephen Bennet, Director of the Solar Foundation, faced his audience.

"I wish my father were here today," said Bennet, softly. "It would have been the greatest triumph in a life filled with triumphs.

“You all know the story of Avery Bennet. Solar Foundation was his achievement. He was a great scientist, a great pioneer, a great discoverer. We know that, now.

“Yet forty years ago they thought him mad. The world felt that he had tricked his financial backers into setting up this gigantic laboratory, that his plans for a flight to the moon were fantastic, impossible. When he announced the completion of his lunar surveys and the construction of the ship to undertake the first voyage, he was laughed at.

“When he announced that he was taking a staff of research men with him, there was almost a court investigation. Finally, when my mother declared she’d acompany him, public indignation reached its peak.

“ ‘The Mad Noah.’ That’s what they called my father. You all know the story of how he launched the flight in secrecy. You all know how the press jeered when he failed to return.

“Only Changara Dass, here, believed. He was my father’s friend. He fought to keep Solar Foundation legally in my father’s name. He waited for a message, for pre-arranged signals that never came.

“At the end of six years—but you know *that* story. The ship that came back; without my father, without the crew. The ship that plummeted to earth in Jersey. The ship in which *I* was born, en route from the Moon to Earth.”

HERE, Bennet cast a look of malice at bearded Professor Champion.

“Yes, I was born there in space—when my father locked my mother into the compartments and set the controls to chart the voyage back to earth.

“What became of him we have never been able to learn. What perils forced him to imprison my mother and send her back to the safety of earth? These questions have remained unanswered through the years. You know my mother died at my birth. It was Changara Dass who took me from that spaceship, reared me in the tradition of Solar Foundation.

“For thirty-odd years we have waited here—waited while so-called scientists have jeered and sneered at the story. It was too fantastic for them to swallow. It was all a hoax, they claimed. My father had never reached the moon. He'd hidden out somewhere—sent the ship back to prove his wild story of a flight. For thirty-odd years we have endured these insinuations, endured the malicious libels of men like Professor Champion."

Bennet cleared his throat.

"My father's secrets, we thought, died with him. We had no access to his plans for constructing a new vessel. He sent back no charts, no journals, no vestige of proof or record of his discoveries. We could not answer our critics. We could only wait.

"During those years I have had faith in my father. Changara Dass has had faith. We knew that sooner or later there would be proof forthcoming.

"The years have been bitter. I will not hide the fact. The press has made a mockery of my own life. Called me 'The Moon-calf.' Ridiculed the way I was educated here in the privacy of the Solar Foundation. Laughed at my habit of hiding from the world, carrying on astronomical and astro-physical research.

"Now it is my turn to laugh. Three days ago, when the space-ship landed upstate, the world learned for the first time that my father's secrets had not died with him. That there was life on the moon—as he had always claimed. That this life possessed intelligence, that it had learned from him, worked with him, and created indisputable proof of its own.

"Because when the space-ship was entered, we found—our visitor.

"He is here today to tell the story to the world. And the world, laughing no longer, is waiting to hear him.

"I need not impress you with the importance of this moment. For the world, it means the beginning of a new era in scientific achievement. For me, it means a little more."

Bennet's voice softened.

"It means that I shall learn at last the story of my father's flight—of his life, and his last days. It means that the name of Bennet will rise from ignominy to shine beside the stars."

There was a murmur of excitement from the crowd.

"Today you—the great scientific names of this world—are gathered here to meet a man from another world."

Lila Valery stepped before the impassioned scientist and pressed his arm with a smile.

"Stephen, dear, you're talking too much. Let's get on with the reception."

"Guess you're right." Bennet waved his arm.

"You'll find drinks at the end of the room. Shall we proceed with a little informal discussion and introductions?"

CROWD murmurs swelled to conversational pitch. Bennet, Changara Dass, and Lila Valery moved towards the fleshy pink body of the lunar visitor. The scowling Professor Champion was already deep in conversation, his eyebrows wagging cynically.

The pink snout of the visitor flashed up when Bennet neared.

"I must see you at once. I have an urgent message for you. You are to come back with me, you know."

"What's that?" Bennet gasped.

"I cannot delay any longer. I had thought to humor you by attending this —reception, you call it?—and then leave. I see you have other ideas, so I must speak to you at once."

"This sounds interesting." Professor Champion gazed intently at the fleshy countenance.

But Bennet paled.

"Perhaps, if it's so urgent, we'd best step into the other room for a moment. Dass, you come with me. And you, Lila."

"Surely you wouldn't exclude a fellow-scientist from these revelations?" Champion's tone was mocking.

Bennet gave him a long look.

"Come along if you wish," he invited. They retreated discreetly to the doorway of an adjoining chamber.

The lunar visitor shuffled along, waving his pinkish arms grotesquely.

"All this noise—this excitement—it makes me cold. You know, Stephen." Bennet bit his lip. "Of course. I'd forgotten. Can I get you a cocktail?"

"Cocktail?"

"It contains alcohol. Warms the blood."

"It's a cold drink, though," Lila interjected.

"Yes—so it is. Better make it cocoa. Did you prepare some, Dass?"

The aged Hindu nodded.

"Get a cup and hurry."

The turbaned savant withdrew hastily. They stood alone in the antechamber.

"And now—"

"Spill it, friend."

The four-armed moon visitor turned. So did his companions.

"How did you sneak in here?" Bennet angrily addressed Bill Stone. The young reporter faced him with a disarming grin.

"It's my business to go after news. Something tells me there's plenty of it right in this room."

"I must ask you to leave at once. This is a private matter."

"Please." The moon man quavered, hysteria droning through the queer, high-pitched voice. "All this excitement—I am getting so cold—so cold."

The long arms were trembling now. The slick, poreless flesh was chafed, and the pinkish glow was queerly dull.

"I forgot. Where's Dass with that cocoa?"

Bennet made for the door, disappeared. Dass entered with the steaming cup a moment later. Bennet followed, grasped it hastily.

"Here you are."

"Wait—you're spilling it. Allow me." Champion, grinning in disdain at Bennet's excitement, grasped the cocoa and offered it to the visitor.

One of the four arms extended in a weaving, octopoidal pattern. The clawlike hand closed around the cup and the creature from the moon raised it to his lips, draining the steaming contents.

A little sigh of satisfaction bubbled from the fleshy pink throat.

Then came another sigh.

It wasn't satisfaction.

Four arms rose simultaneously. Four claws clutched at a convulsive neck. The tall body trembled in sudden revulsion.

"Wait—what's wrong—"

Lila Valery stepped forward to face the shuddering moon man, but it was too late for inquiry.

With a shrill scream the lunar visitor fell and huddled in a writhing heap on the carpet. As the others watched, the pinkish flesh slowly faded to a dead rose colour, then turned silver as frost.

In less than a minute the thing on the floor lay still. Still and—

"Dead!"

Changara Dass felt for a pulse forever stilled.

"Dead and—cold." Champion drew his hand away from the neck with a shudder. "Cold as ice."

"Oh!" Lila Valery hid her eyes with her hands. For the white body was quite silver now—silver and shining, like the moon that gave it birth.

They stared.

All but Bill Stone, the reporter. He made the door in three strides.

"Got my story," he panted. "And what a story! THE MAN IN THE MOON IS—MURDERED!"

CHAPTER II

The Strangler from the Sky

IT was Lila Valery who stopped Stone.

The fact that the reporter allowed himself to be persuaded was a tribute to her eloquence—or perhaps to her brown eyes.

"Don't you see?" the girl pleaded. "It would create a scandal that would ruin Solar Foundation. We can't let those people outside know."

"Got to notify the police anyway," Stone argued.

"Why? Are you sure it's murder? It might be shock—exhaustion—anything. You can't print such a story until you have proof."

"But—"

Champion intervened.

"I think she's right. Let me go out and dismiss the guests. Tell them our visitor needs rest. Then when we're alone, I'll see to it that you get your story. I'm interested in going to the bottom of this affair myself. I'll take this cooca, with Bennet's permission, and analyze it for poison. You'll get your story, I promise you, and shortly."

Champion flung a baleful glance at Stephen Bennet, who shrugged. "Go ahead," he mumbled. "Does that suit you, Stone?"

The reporter answered, but he looked at Lila Valery.

"I suppose it's worth waiting for."

Champion stalked out.

In a few moments he returned. "They're leaving," he announced. "Now, if you will excuse me for a few moments, I'll make use of your excellent laboratories, Mr. Bennet. Perhaps Changara Dass would accompany me to verify my report?"

Dass rose silently. His brown hand closed around the cup. He scooped it from the floor where it had fallen. A few drops of brownish liquid still rested in the rounded side.

Together the scientist and the savant departed. Stone, Lila, and Stephen Bennet remained.

It was Stone who drew a couch-cover over the silent silver monstrosity on the floor. Bennet and the girl were, huddled in the corner.

The stout young man was trembling as he rocked to and fro, head bowed.

"Don't—Stephen," Lila whispered.

"I can't help it," sighed Bennet. "Don't you realize what this means? Here, at the very moment of triumph, all that I've worked for and lived for has been snatched away. The clearing of my name, and my father's name.

The research and knowledge that could have been ours. Gone now. Because he died before he could speak!”

“Dou you think he was—murdered?” Lila whispered.

“I don’t know. I can’t think. Dass carried the cocoa. I handled it. And Champion gave it to him. If it contained poison, we’re the only suspects. And none of us has a motive.”

“Perhaps not.” Stone thought aloud.

“You haven’t, Bennet. But Professor Champion is your rival, after all. He has been the chief critic of you and your father, and he is the head of the Champion Foundation.”

Surprisingly enough, Bennet bridled. His pudgy features creased indignantly.

“Professor Champion, whatever his scientific attitude may be, is a man of unquestioned integrity. Certainly he would never be so foolhardy as to endanger his reputation by so clumsy a trick.”

“And this Changara Dass?”

“Changara Dass is my friend, my father’s friend. Today’s success meant as much to him as it did to me.”

LILA VALERY rose and faced the reporter. “I think your hunch is wrong. Our lunar visitor had a chill. You heard him complain of the cold, didn’t you? We don’t know anything about the physiology of these creatures. Probably he succumbed to his seizure just as he drank the cocoa. I’m willing to wager that Dass and Champion find no trace of poison in that cocoa.”

“Right you are.” Champion’s booming voice rose as he entered the room, followed by the Hindu. He faced Stephen Bennet.

“We found nothing, absolutely nothing,” the Hindu added. His turbaned head nodded slowly as he bent over the cloth-covered object on the floor.

“We shall, therefore, proceed with the autopsy at once.”

“Wait a minute.” Bennet was on his feet.

"Yes?"

"Do you think it's really—necessary?"

"If you don't do it, the coroner will."

"But the law has no rights over a lunar inhabitant."

"Stephen Bennet." The Hindu's voice was soft, grave. "I have known you all your life. Was I not as a father and mother to you?"

"Yes, Changara Dass."

"Have we not worked together, planned together for this day? Have we not dreamed of the heritage of wisdom which might be ours?"

"True."

Dass's eyes gleamed. "Today we have met seeming failure. Death has stilled the voice that could have told us all we wished to learn. But with an autopsy, we can perhaps cheat death."

"How?"

"We can study the physiology of our visitor. The structure, the mechanics of his anatomy. Even if we find no trace of poison, there are things we want to learn, you and I. Is that not true?"

Bennet bit his lip.

"Yes. You're right. Go ahead with it then, man—but don't talk about it. I don't like to hear you talk about it. I can't stand it."

His voice rose, cracked. Lila Valery's arms soothed his huddled shoulders.

Silently Dass stooped and gathered the limp, cold body of the moon man in his arms. The dangling silver arms hung bobbing from the folds of the cloth as he carried the corpse from the room.

Lila turned to Stephen Bennet.

"Lie down. Try to rest," she urged. "It will be an hour or so at least. We'll go down the hall."

Champion cleared his throat. "Might as well stick here and see this thing through," he decided. "But I'm not going to sit around. I'm hungry. There's a table full of food in the next room, and that's where you'll find me."

IN THE end it was Bill Stone who followed Lila Valery down the twilight-darkened hall to the office. He sat on the desk, swinging his legs, his blue eyes frankly appraising the girl in an admiring grin.

"You seem to be the only cheerful person around here," the girl murmured. "This place is like a—"

"Morgue," Stone finished for her. "That's what it is, with bodies being dissected, and all the trimmings."

"Please, let's not talk about it," Lila whispered. "I'm worried."

"Bennet?"

"Yes. He's so upset about this thing."

"He'll sleep it off and forget it." Stone smiled. "You must be very fond of him—covering him up and everything. Maternal instinct?"

"We're engaged." Her voice was low.

"Oh. I understand."

"Stephen's a brilliant man. But he has to be watched over, always. Changara Dass is like a nursemaid to him. Humors him. Because he isn't like the rest of us, you see."

"No, I don't see, exactly."

"Well, you heard what he said today about his father—Avery Bennet, who founded Solar, and made the moon voyage. How his mother went along, and how Stephen was born out there in space on the way back.

"Stephen has never forgotten his heritage. Never forgotten that he's—well, an outsider, really. Sometimes I think he's really alien to this world at heart.

"You know, he's never left this Foundation since he came here?"

"Really?"

"Changara Dass brought him up. He had a private tutor. He lives here in his own apartments, refuses to go outside. His childhood was hardly—normal. All his life he's hated the world for what it did to his father. He shuns people. Stephen has worked and waited only for the day when proof of his father's discovery would be forthcoming. Not until then, he swore, would he enter the outside world."

“You mean he doesn’t even go out of the building for a shave?” Stone asked, incredulously.

“No. Even the tailors come here for his fittings. He’s a recluse. Or was, until I met him. I’ve tried to wean him away from these eccentricities of his. I think I’ve succeeded, a little. But even though we’re engaged, I sometimes feel that he *resents* me. He gets these bitter moods and I don’t understand him. Oh, but why should I tell you this—”

“It’s been very interesting,” Stone protested. “Very. But tell me—what about the landing of this space-ship and our late lunar friend? Just what did Bennet expect to learn from all this?”

“I don’t know, exactly. When the ship came down, three days ago, he and Changara Dass were as surprised as the rest of the world. When they found this creature inside and it asked at once to be taken to Solar Foundation, Stephen knew that it was the expected proof from his father at last.

“He told me that it meant a complete vindication of everything he’d claimed. That his father had discovered life on the moon, that he had probably lived on up there for a long time—long enough to establish communication and interchange knowledge with the lunar inhabitants.

“Naturally, all this was conjecture. Stephen hoped that the moon man would possess complete information—tell him of Avery Bennet’s life and fate, and exchange data. The moon man asked to be brought here to Solar Foundation, as you know; asked for Stephen Bennet, and refused to divulge anything to anyone else.”

“In other words, he made the voyage especially to see Bennet?”

“Yes.”

STONE pursed his lips.

“Miss Valery—Lila—do you recall what the moon man said when we went into the private room? About some message he had for Stephen—about wanting him to come back?”

“That’s right.”

“Did he mean that he wanted Stephen Bennet to return to the moon *with* him?”

“I don’t know. He *did* say something like that, didn’t he?”

“I wonder why.”

“Perhaps he had news of his father.”

“Perhaps.” Bill Stone dismissed the notion momentarily. He rose, wiped his forehead.

“Whew! Don’t see how he froze to death. It’s hot enough here to boil eggs.”

“They keep it warm enough here at Solar Foundation. Changara Dass is something of a fanatic on the subject of air-conditioning. He sees to it that the temperature is always up in the eighties and nothing can argue him out of it.”

“I wonder if the old swami is making any progress?”

“Progress?”

“Yes, on his little carv—on the autopsy, I mean.”

The answer came in the form of a sudden buzz from the desk telephone. Stone lifted the receiver.

“Mr. Stone?” It was the voice of Dass, a hasty whisper.

“Yes.”

“Mr. Stone, I wonder if you would care to step down the hall to the surgery. It’s at the far end, at the right.”

“Why? Something up?”

“I think, Mr. Stone, that I have news for you. Some very startling news.”

“I’ll be right down.”

The reporter clicked the receiver back.

“Lila, you stay here. I’m going over to the morgue—I mean, the surgery.”

“And leave me here all alone? Not on your life!”

The girl joined him.

Together, the two moved down the black corridor of the empty Foundation. Once outside, Lila made it evident that she regretted her decision to accompany him. The girl shivered at the shadows, and involuntarily her hand clutched Stone's wrist.

"I'm scared," she murmured.

"Of what? There's no one here but ourselves."

"I can't help it. I have a feeling something's wrong."

"Forget it. Dass is waiting for us. Here."

Bill Stone pushed open the surgery door.

They entered.

Lila screamed.

Changara Dass was waiting for them. But the turbaned Hindu would wait forever. He slumped forward over the horrible pinkish body of the moon man, his eyes bulging glassily in a fixed stare at the corpse on the slab. His brown skin was very pale indeed, save for one spot around his neck.

One spot on Changara Dass's neck—a long, pinkish spot forming the outline of a hand. A hand that had twisted around the Hindu's throat and strangled him to death.

CHAPTER III

The Lunatic

THEY found Bennet on his couch down the hall. Champion dropped his sandwich in the outer chamber a moment later. The four of them were back in the surgery room, trying hard to keep their eyes away from the death that seemed to lurk in the shadows.

"The hand," Champion whispered. "Look at the prints. No human hand makes such an impression."

"It was his," Bennet muttered. "His." He started down at the pinkish body lying on the slab. "Look at those claws. They did it."

"But he's dead," Stone answered. "Dead man can't rise and murder."

"Dead *men* cannot rise," Bennet groaned. "But he wasn't a man. He was a creature from another world, another planet. Who knows what ghastly laws govern such beings?”

“You’re hysterical, Bennet,” scowled Professor Champion. “Look.” His hands went to the creature’s armpits. “These tendons were severed by the dissecting knife. The thing, even if animated, couldn’t raise its arms, let alone strangle a man with its hands.”

“But it did,” Bennet whispered. “Or *something* did. A ghost, perhaps. Perhaps it was a ghost.”

“Don’t be a fool!” Champion objected. “Let’s reason this thing out. Dass called Stone. In less than two minutes Stone and Miss Valery arrived. They found Dass dead.”

“Dead.” Bennet couldn’t control himself. “Dass is dead. He had found something out and he was going to tell. So he died. The moon guards its secrets well. It’s fate, I tell you! We weren’t meant to know such things—that’s what we get for meddling! Let’s burn the bodies, get out of here!”

“Stephen.”

“I’m sorry, darling. But it’s too much.”

“I know. Let’s go back to the office.”

“Go ahead.” Champion took command. “I’ll phone the police.”

“Police?”

Of course. There’s no doubt of at least one murder, now.

“That’s right,” Bill Stone agreed. “And I’ll phone the office with the story.”

Bennet shrugged.

“I suppose,” he said, tonelessly, “This means the end, but it has to be.”

Together he and Lila left the room. Champion followed.

“Coming, Stone?” he called.

“I’ll stay here for a minute and look around. Want to get the details straight in my mind. Once the cops get here we reporters won’t have a chance.”

“Very well. I’ll go back to the reception room and phone from there.”

Champion left.

Bill Stone stared down at the partly-dissected cadaver of the moon-creature. Once more he gazed at the horrible prints on the dead Hindu's throat. He fingered the scalpels and instruments on the adjoining table. He noted the empty cocoa cup and the partly-filled retorts beside it. He ran his eyes along the cabinet of pharmacopia.

SUDDENLY his eyes were arrested by a label. He opened a metal tin curiously. Then he stared at the dead moon man once again.

With a shrug of decision, he selected an empty glass from the table and poured the contents of the tin into it. Then he covered the glass with a handkerchief.

Quickly, he left the room and headed down the corridor. It was pitch black now, and silent as death. Silent as the death that crept through the night about him. Death that had crept and then sprung.

As he neared the closed office door the silence was broken by the strident murmur of conversation.

Stone paused outside.

Bennet and Lila, inside.

"But don't you see?" Bennet's voice. "I can't face that, Lila. It will ruin me—ruin the Foundation. The publicity, the investigation, the suspicions. And in the end, they'll never get anywhere. They can't bring Dass or the moon man back to life. They'll never be able to tell the story that will clear my father's name."

"But your idea is madness."

"Why? What other way of escape is open? The space-ship is waiting. It's ready. I have no charts or instruments, but the control system itself should be easily mastered. We can take it and get away now, before the police arrive. Come with me, Lila."

"To the moon? No, Stephen;—I can't."

"Lila, don't you understand? I want to know. I want to find out for myself. I could go there and prove that my father was right—go there and return with the full story. We could be together you and I.

"And who knows, Lila? Who knows what we might find up there? Avery Bennet might have built himself an empire. We could rule that empire, Lila, you and I. I am his son. I have the heritage of my birth. Oh, I know it sounds like madness, but it's the one chance, the only chance."

"You're wrong."

Bill Stone entered quietly, stood in the doorway. Bennet wheeled, his pudgy arms waving, his face flushed with agitation.

"Stone!"

"I think I can help you out," the reporter replied. "No need to go to the bother of that lunar trip. At least I think I know how our moon man was murdered."

"Poison?"

"No." Stone smiled. "He was literally frozen to death. That's what Dass must have discovered during the autopsy. That's why he called me. And I think I've found out what did it."

The reporter turned to the girl.

"Lila—go get Professor Champion. He'll want to hear this."

The girl nodded, left the room.

As the door closed, Bennet shook his head.

"I still don't understand."

"It's very simple." Stone held out the glass, covered by his handkerchief. "This stuff here did it."

Bennet took the glass and held it. His eyes met Stone's. "But what about Changara Dass? Who killed him?"

"That's a puzzler, isn't it? Perhaps we can solve that when the others get back."

ABRUPTLY, Bennet winced. "Here, Stone—take this. It's too damned cold to hold."

Stone retrieved the glass.

“Aren’t you going to look inside?” he asked. “Cold or not, I’d think you’d be interested in what it contains. Unless,” he murmured, “unless you already know.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that you murdered the moon man.”

Stephen Bennet laughed. Then he did a very curious thing. His hands fumbled with his white jacket.

Stone watched him closely. Too closely. He didn’t see Bennet’s feet glide forward. They glided swiftly—and suddenly Stephen Bennet sprang.

His fists crashed against the reporter’s face. Stone moved back, arms flailing as he beat against the bulky body of his assailant.

Bennet’s blows glanced from his forehead. A fist dug into his eye. Stone parried, trying to keep off those lunging arms.

Bennet was punching, punching. And then Stone felt cold horror. For as Bennet’s fists punched at his face, Bennet’s hands were locked around his neck!

It could not be—but it was! Stone saw the fists hammer towards him through a red haze. And at the same time he felt fingers tighten in his throat. Strong, tearing fingers digging away his life!

Bill Stone glanced down and saw them then—saw what was strangling and clawing at his neck.

Saw, from Bennet’s opened jacket, *the two pink arms—the two extra arms, ending in the birdlike claws.* The claws of a moon man!

Then the red haze welled up. Stone’s head whirled. Desperately he parried blows from human fists. And all the while the hidden hands from inside Bennet’s jacket pressed and pressed.

Stone went to his knees.

The monster was gasping now. Bennet’s great bulging eyes shone with maniacal intensity as he ripped and tore. A high, wheezing cackle burst from his corded, pinkish neck.

Blindly, Stone fumbled for his pocket. Bennet was bending him back. The cold claws were digging deep. In a moment it would all be over. In a moment—

With a last desperate wrench, Stone's fingers closed about the glass, tore away the handkerchief. One hand rose to Bennet's neck. He pressed the glass down, let the contents pour forward.

Bennet screamed. The two pinkish arms fell away, tore at Stone's hand, clawed at the glass cupped tightly against Bennet's neck.

Stone rose. He pressed the glass down.

Bennet's fingers clutched the air. His human fists fell. A gurgling came from a pinkish neck that slowly whitened. The color drained from Bennet's face.

The glass dug deeper. And then Stephen Bennet fell. Fell like a white ghost, like a silver ghost.

In a moment the bulky body lay inert upon the floor. The two horrid tentacles lay limp, the claws extended upwards in a last gesture of supplication.

"BILL!"

Lila was at Stone's side, and Champion with her.

"I had to do it," the reporter gasped. "I had to."

"Those arms—" the girl whispered. "Look at those arms."

"No wonder he always wore that heavy jacket," Stone whispered. "Look at the straps—he had them strapped down at his sides. No wonder he never went out; had a special tailor."

"What does it mean?"

"It means that Stephen Bennet's mother was not human," Stone answered. "That was his secret, and his father's secret. Changara Dass must have known, and shielded Bennet all these years. Stephen Bennet had moon blood in his veins.

"When the lunar visitor came, he had a mission. He wanted Bennet to forsake earth and return to the moon. Bennet preferred the fame that would be his if he remained here on earth, as a human.

“The lunar visitor was about to insist—and Bennet feared he would reveal his secret, if necessary, in order to make him go back.

“So Bennet murdered him. Changara Dass discovered how he did it during the autopsy, and phoned me. Bennet must have been listening in on the wire. He got to the surgery before I did. Using his lunar tentacles, he strangled Dass.

“Then he wanted to escape in the space-ship, knowing he’d be discovered if the police examined him. He was pleading with Lila here to accompany him when I walked in and announced that I’d solved the lunar visitor’s death. So he tried to kill me as well.”

“But how did he do it?” Champion asked. “That’s still a mystery.” He scowled. “There was no poison—I’m sure of that.”

“Of course there wasn’t. No need for it. Bennet, having lunar blood himself, knew the weakness of the moon beings. Knew they cannot stand cold. He always had it hot as an oven here, you remember.

“So he slipped something into the cocoa which immediately chilled the moon man’s system; paralyzed his peculiar blood stream with sudden cold. Something that wouldn’t show up in analysis; something we’d never expect in steaming cocoa.”

“What was that?”

“Nothing but simple, every-day dry ice,” Stone grinned.

“It steamed naturally in the cup and left no traces. I found a can of it in the surgery, brought a glassful here. When Bennet attacked me, I pressed the stuff against his throat. You know the rest.”

There was a long silence in the little room. Lila’s hand went to Bill’s shoulders as they stared at the tentacled body on the floor.

“He wanted me to go there with him—to the moon,” she whispered. “I’m glad I refused.”

“Perhaps it is not meant for men to dwell beyond earth,” mused Champion, gravely.

“Let’s get out of here,” was all Bill Stone said. They moved towards the door. Stone snapped out the light.

“Look!” whispered Lila.

Through the high windows, a shaft of silvery moonlight crept into the room. It moved over the floor and bathed the grotesque, crumpled body in an evil glow. But in its rays the face of Stephen Bennet shone with a peaceful light.

“Maybe he’s gone there, now. Back up there, where his spirit belongs.”

“Maybe,” Stone nodded. “But right at the moment, my spirit belongs somewhere else. Somewhere where there is electric light and a little down-to-earth entertainment. Want to join me?”

“All right.”

“I may have a few drinks, too.”

Lila smiled. “That’s all right with me,” she murmured. “But Bill, if you have a drink, promise me one thing.”

“What’s that?”

“Don’t put any ice in it.”

They closed the door behind them. In the little room, the silvery light continued to pour down on the dead face of the man from the moon.

Nursemaid to Nightmares

How would, you like a job with a man who requires you to take care of his menagerie of vampires, werewolves, mermaids and centaurs?

1. A Very Odd Job

THE man at the employment agency gave me a long look. “Why do you keep coming back?” he muttered, wearily. “There’s nothing for you. I’ve told you that a dozen times.”

I lost my patience.

“What’s wrong with me?” I snapped. “I’ve done everything the books advise. Look at me—my shoes are shined. My trousers are worn but neatly pressed. I haven’t got unsightly pores, or dandruff or five o’clock shadow. I use a deodorant. My fingernails are clean.”

Despite himself, I could see that he was impressed. I pursued my advantage.

“I smile pleasantly, don’t I? My handclasp is firm, isn’t it? Look!” As a crowning gesture I produced a handkerchief and waved it under his nose. “See?” I exclaimed, triumphantly. “No tattle-tale gray.”

The employment man sat up and then shrugged.

“I know all that,” he conceded. “You come up to all the specifications except one, as far as a job is concerned.”

“And what’s that?” I asked.

"You can't *do* anything."

I kept still. I knew he had me there.

"Listen, Mister," he said, patiently.

Your card says you're a writer. And we just don't get any calls for writers. Now if you could only do something useful—like plumbing, for instance. Or if you were an arc-welder. Lots of calls for arc-welders.

"But no. You're useless. All you can do is write." A slight sneer crossed his face. "Can't even operate a lathe," he accused.

I bowed my head. It was true. I couldn't operate a lathe.

"But I can type," I suggested, desperately. "You surely must get plenty of calls for a stenographer."

He grunted. "Wouldn't you look cute now, sitting on a business man's lap?"

"Never thought of that."

He rose from his desk. "So you see how it is. You're just not the type. Too puny for outdoor work or the army. Haven't got a chance in a factory. My advice to you is to go back home and start pounding the typewriter again."

I faced him and bowed.

"A very excellent suggestion," I agreed. "But there are one or two slight difficulties. To begin with, as of this morning I no longer have a home. Nor a typewriter. My landlady is in possession of both."

The employment man sighed sympathetically. "Sure tough. There must be some way out. Wonder what I'd do if I were in your shoes."

"Have them re-soled, probably," I told him. "My feet are touching the pavement."

"Must be something," he muttered, scratching his head. "Writer, huh? Inside work. Hey—maybe I've got it!"

He faced me across the desk and his voice dropped.

"Would you mind going to work for a screwball?" he asked.

"What do you mean, a lunatic?"

"No. Of course not. Why this guy is a millionaire. He's just kind of eccentric."

"You mean that if he were poor he'd be crazy."

"What do you care? A job's a job, and this is a good berth, if you fill the bill. Ever hear of Julius Margate?"

"No."

"Lives uptown. In a mansion, no less! I've checked. He called in last week—let me see now, if I can find the order." He bustled around opening a card file.

"Here it is. Yes, Julius Margate. He wants a house man. $200 a month, plus room and board."

$200 a month and keep for such a job? He must be whacky!" I exclaimed.

"Wait. Listen to this. Man selected must be fond of animals, able to climb trees, a good horseman; must have Type C blood and an I. Q. of 180 or higher."

He looked at me.

"Well?"

I SMILED. "Happen to know my blood type is okay," I answered. "Got a transfusion once. I've got an I. Q. record lying around that I think I can get my hands on. I haven't climbed a tree for ten years, but I guess I can manage. I used to ride pretty well. I'm not fond of animals—but for $200 a month and keep I'll sleep with a rhinoceros."

"Maybe you'll do at that," commented the employment man. "I'll call up Margate and see what he says. Drop back this afternoon around two."

"Doesn't he want me to go out there for an interview?"

"No. Told you he sounded like a screwball. Insists on phone interviews only. Says when he selects a man he'll send a guide down to take you to his place."

I let it go at that.

Promptly at two I returned. The employment agent was waiting for me. He ushered me into the private office at once.

"You've got the job," he informed me. "And you start today. Your things will be called for. All ready to go?"

"Suits me."

"Sign here. Usual commission."

I signed.

"What about that guide?" I asked.

"He's waiting for you now in the outer office."

I paused. "I didn't see anyone there," I objected. "That is, nobody but a blind man."

"He's your guide," the employment agent told me. "I warned you Margate was a screwball."

We went back to the outer office. The fat blind man with the striped cane rose as we entered.

"Here he is," said the employment man. He introduced me. "And this is Captain Hollis."

"Pleased to meet up with you." The captain's voice was a jovial boom. He grasped my hand, held it. "Sure we'll get along fine. Boss ought to like you. You got long fingers. Like eels. Artistic, ain't you?"

"Writer," I admitted.

"Well ain't that swell, dammit! Boss likes writers. Thinks they're just too stinking intellecshool. He's pretty intellecshool himself. But let's heave anchor. The car's outside."

We left the building. Captain Hollis led the way, cane and all. He moved with marvelous celerity for a sightless man. He found the elevators and his cane pressed the *down* button with unerring accuracy.

He threaded his way through the outer lobby, using his cane for a needle. And once in the street, he walked directly toward a large gray limousine which stood resplendently defying the car shortage at the curb.

A uniformed chauffeur opened the door.

"This is Dave," the captain told me.

“Pleased to meet you,” I said, climbing in.

“He’s deaf.” The captain thrust his face forward and his lips moved, repeating my name and greeting.

Dave smiled. “Glad you’re with us. The Boss is gonna like you, I guess. You wear glasses. I’ll bet you read a lot.”

The limousine moved out into the traffic as we sat back. I turned to Captain Hollis.

“How about giving me a few tips on my new employer?” I asked. “He seems to be a most remarkable man.”

“Who, the Boss? Listen, remarkable ain’t the word for that guy. Some people might think he was a little balmy, but they just don’t understand him. Kindest man in the world. Big hearted? Why, he loves everybody. He loves people you and I wouldn’t put up with in a nightmare.” The captain shivered slightly. It was a startling phenomenon! in so large a man.

“Not that I’m saying a word against the house-guests, you understand. They’re all nice, decent folks in their way. But what a way!”

He shivered again.

“That’s why I’m glad you’re taking this job. I’ve been helping the Boss out around the house. It isn’t easy for me, without my lights to guide me, and besides I can’t seem to get used to them guests of his. Even if I went and brought a couple of them in the first place. I remember snagging Jory in Hungary. Before the war, that was. Dammit, there was a voyage! But—”

“I don’t understand. What about Mr. Margate’s guests? Who are they?”

The captain ignored my questions as he leaned forward suddenly to address Dave.

“Wait a minute! I nearly forgot something. Jory wants some flea powder. Better stop at the pet shop on our way up!” Dave read his lips and nodded. A moment later the car turned in at the curb. “You go in and get it,” ordered the captain. “Here’s the money. A large can of flea powder.”

I DID. It was my first act in the service of Julius Margate and I was oddly disappointed. After all this build-up I expected something better than buying a can of flea powder for a guest's poodle.

When I returned to the car, the captain was already issuing a further order to Dave.

"Dammit, I'm losing my memory!" he growled. "We got to stop by the dentist for Mr. Simpkins."

Obediently, the car moved forward. The captain turned to me. "You'll like old Simpkins," he predicted. "He's the best of the gang. Easiest to get along with, I think. Of course Simpkins isn't his real name. Talks with an accent. But the Boss doesn't care about a guy's past if he's working on the level now."

The captain chuckled. "Poor Simpkins kind of over-stepped himself, though. That's why the Boss made him go to the dentist today. It puts an end to all chances of accident."

His fingers went to my wrist.

"What time does your watch say?"

"Almost five."

"Is it dark yet?" His sightless eyes blinked.

"Yes."

"Good. Simpkins will be out. He was asleep when I brought him down. Lugged him up myself. He ought to be awake now. And will he be mad when he finds out what the dentist did!"

Again the captain chuckled.

The car moved in once more.

Dave turned his head from the wheel.

"There he is, waiting at the curb," he indicated.

"Does he look mad?"

"Boiling."

We pulled up.

I saw a tall, thin, middle-aged man with thinning hair. *He did* look mad—his eyes, anyway. The rest of his face was covered by his cupped hands.

“Hello, Mr. Simpkins,” boomed the captain. “Climb in. Meet the new house man.”

He introduced me.

Tall Mr. Simpkins entered with a grunt. His black coat covered the seat beside me as he extended a bony hand. I grasped it, but not for long. It was icy cold.

“Gratified, I’m sure,” said Mr. Simpkins, in a burring voice. “You will excuse me. I am very upset.”

His hand went back to his jaw as he turned to the captain.

“That was a very bad thing you did to me,” he accused. “Taking me to the dentist while I am asleep.”

“Boss’ orders.”

“Ah! I thought so. He is a hard man, Julius Margate. Do you know what he had the dentist do to me?”

“What?”

“He pulled all my teeth! When I woke up a few minutes ago I was lying in the chair and my teeth were gone. All of them!”

Captain Hollis began to laugh.

“Dammit, that’s rich! Beg your pardon, Mr. Simpkins, but that’s rich!” The captain turned to me. “Don’t you think so?”

“I don’t understand,” I answered. “What’s so funny about pulling out all of a man’s teeth when he’s asleep?”

It was Simpkins who answered, sulkily.

“It isn’t funny at all. Losing my teeth is the worst thing in the world that could happen to me. Because,” continued Mr. Simpkins, in a dismal voice, “I happen to be a vampire.”

2. The Perfect Host

CAPTAIN HOLLIS was a very strong man.

I discovered this when I tried to jump out of the car.

Mr. Simpkins was almost as upset as I was.

"Don't be afraid," he whispered. "I won't hurt you. My teeth are all gone, anyway. I couldn't bite you if I wanted to."

His bony hand pressed my shoulder. I winced.

"Honestly," he pleaded. "I never bit anyone even when I had my teeth. Julius—Mr. Margate—always took excellent care of me. Bought me canned blood, the kind they use in transfusions. Liver extract. Anything I wanted. I was never hungry."

"Best-hearted guy in the world," Captain Hollis repeated. "Besides, you've got nothing to worry about. You're Type C, and Mr. Simpkins here is allergic to Type C blood; ain't you now, Mr. Simpkins?"

"Of course. There's nothing to be afraid of," reassured the vampire. He mumbled badly through his aching jaws.

"If you're a sample of Mr. Margate's house-guests, I'm going to have a pretty tough job," I answered.

"Not at all. Now take me, for example. I'm no bother to anyone. Of course, I don't like to have mirrors in my room, and I can't cross running water. You'd think I'd have trouble bathing, but I use liquid soap and oil."

"I don't want to know a vampire's beauty secrets," I retorted, somewhat harshly. Mr. Simpkins looked glum.

"You don't like me," he accused. "Nobody likes me."

"There, there," Captain Hollis consoled him. "Of course he likes you. We all like you. Doesn't the Boss take care of you? Didn't he bring you all the way from Transylvania and put you up in his swell mansion? Doesn't he give you everything you want?"

"Everybody hates me," the vampire mumbled. "I'm going out and let the worms eat me."

"Don't talk like that, dammit! You're acting very ungrateful to the Boss. Why when we found you back there in Europe, you was starving to death. Sneaking into henhouses at night and killing chickens, you was. Living from hand to mouth. Thin—you was anaemic! And all the time afraid somebody was going to find out where you holed up to sleep in the daytime.

"Now look at you! Got a swell boudoir rigged up down in the cellar. Nobody to bother you. All you got to do is come out at night and talk to the Boss. He's gonna write you up in his book, he says. You'll be famous!"

Mr. Simpkins smiled weakly. "Maybe I am a bit hasty," he conceded. "And I assure you I shall be of little trouble." He turned to me. "I am a noctambulistic soul.

I sleep from sunrise to sunset. My wants are simple. I won't bother you."

This was evidently meant to console me. It didn't.

"Listen," I began, addressing the captain. "You might as well tell me everything now. What about these other house-guests? Has Mr. Margate got a couple of zombies boarding with him? Any ghouls to feed?"

"The Boss? Of course not—he wouldn't have anything to do with no such creatures. Kindest guy in the world. But wait a minute. You can get the dope straight from him."

I hadn't realized it, but the car was turning into a driveway. We rode through an avenue of trees, hinting at spacious grounds beyond. The limousine pulled up before the steps of a large, rambling stone structure. The interior, brilliantly illuminated, justified the captain's description. It was a mansion, all right, and a big one.

We climbed out—Simpkins, the captain, and myself. Dave the chauffeur drove off to the rear.

Simpkins rang the bell. Tie door opened. No butler stood there. Instead, a pudgy little man in an ornate purple lounging jacket fairly flung himself out onto the terrace. His shock of gray hair bristled with an excitement matched by the gleam in his darting black eyes.

"Here you are! How's your jaw, Simpkins? Ha, ha—explain about that later. Matter of necessity. Captain? Everything shipshape? Want to see you tonight. And you—you must be the new house man."

His hand pumped mine in a friendly, vigorous grip. "My name's Margate. Julius Margate. Sorry, we haven't got a butler. Can't keep them.

Devil of a servant problem. Hope you'll be a bit more broad-minded."

He ushered us inside, bustling and talking in a quite breathless manner.

"Got a very good report on you from the agency, young man. Very good. Seem to be just what I need around here. So much to attend to, you know. So much. But come along—I'll show you to your rooms later. Right now, dinner's waiting."

I followed the short man and the captain through the long hall. We entered a spacious dining room. The table was set for three.

"You're eating upstairs, aren't you?" Margate called to Simpkins. The vampire nodded.

"I'll be up to visit later," said the host. "Want to take some notes."

He turned to me.

"Hear you're a writer. Fine! You'll be interested in the book I'm doing. Helpful too, no doubt."

We sat down, following Margate's example.

"Jory's cooking," Margate said. "Had him go out and take Trina her fish. Gerymanx ate earlier. Took his stuff out myself. We'll have to teach our new house man how to feed our guests, eh, Captain?"

Margate turned his gray head.

"Jory!" he called. "Oh, Jory—we're ready now!"

Jory brought the platter in from the kitchen. I was introduced quite naturally.

I correctly assumed that Jory was a guest, not the cook.

As far as I was concerned, Jory would be neither guest or cook in any house of mine.

JORY was a big man. Too big. His arms were too long and his legs were too short. He didn't have any neck. His hair was long. And plentiful. It ran over his forehead and bristled on cheek and chin. It sprouted from his wrists.

If he were my guest I'd insist on his using a depilatory. And I'd send him to the dentist too. I didn't like the look of his teeth when he smiled at me.

"You new house man, huh?" he grunted.

"That's right, Mr. Jory."

"Okay. Where's my flea powder?"

I'd forgotten about that little item. I took the can from my pocket and handed it to him.

"Thanks," he grunted.

His huge fingers tore open the lid. Raising the can, he doused his head liberally with the powder. With a nonchalant smirk he unbuttoned his shirt and poured flea powder down his chest.

"Jory—please!" objected Margate. "Huh?"

"The moon will be up in half an hour. I'll powder you then, after you change." Margate turned to me.

"Jory's a werewolf," he explained.

I tried to get up. The captain tripped me with his cane.

"He changes every night when the moon is more than half full," Margate continued. "But there's nothing to worry about. I've got his lycanthropy under control. He doesn't get violent unless he sees the moon, and I take care of that. Make him wear dark glasses."

Jory shuffled out of the room. The others began to eat. I didn't feel very hungry, somehow.

"You mustn't mind Jory," Margate told me, noticing my hesitation. "He's crude, I'll admit Illiterate peasant type. Hungarian backwoods, you know. Hasn't got the breeding of Mr. Simpkins. But he means well. Faithful as a dog, too.

"That's his only trouble. That canine streak. You know," Margate confided, "I wouldn't want it to get around for the world, but in winter Jory has a very bad habit. He *sheds!* Dreadfully. Usually make him stay in his room. He prefers to sleep in the kennel in back, of course, but I see to it that his hamburger is waiting for him upstairs. Fleas bother him a bit, too. But not so much any more. When the captain captured him he was really—I confess—mangy.”

Margate passed me my salad.

“You ever bathe a dog?” he asked. “You can give Jory a bath every so often.” Bathing a werewolf somehow didn’t appeal to me. But I was past making objections.

“I’d like to introduce you to some of our other guests later this evening,” Margate said. “But I doubt if I’ll have time. I must talk to the captain here. Fact is, Captain, I’ve got another voyage planned for you.”

“Now?” boomed Captain Hollis.

“Yes, for you and Dave both.”

“What’re we after this trip?”

“Never mind.”

Margate glanced at me significantly. “I’ll tell you later. But it’s the kind of thing I need you for especially. No one else could do it. And Dave has his part to play as well.”

“Don’t like it,” the captain answered. “Risky business. Blockades and submarines and all. Where to?”

“Greece again.”

“German-occupied.”

“You’ll get by if you follow orders.

You’ll be using my yacht, you know. Little danger of being fired on. And the regular crew. They’ll handle things. All you must do is follow the map and act when the time comes.”

“Something hard to capture?”

“Very hard. Hardest yet. No one but you could do it. There’s a bonus in it, of course. Make it worth your while.”

The captain grunted. Margate beamed on me.

“Well, young man—suppose you’re drawing your own conclusions?”

“More or less,” I admitted.

“What do you make of my little household from what you’ve seen of it?”

“It’s very—unusual,” I ventured. “Unusual? Diplomatic word. Very. Tactful, aren’t you? Why don’t you come right out with it and say you think I’m crazy?”

“Because I suspect that I might be the crazy one.”

“Ha. Good! Very good!” Margate leaned back. He offered me a cigar. I took it as we sipped our coffee.

“Don’t alarm yourself,” he told me. “It’s very simple. I’m a collector, that’s all. Just a collector. Hobby of mine. Many wealthy men collect books. Some collect paintings, or antique furniture. I collect mythological entities.”

“So I see.”

“Might call me something of a hunter, too. But I’m not interested in the usual big game. Besides, even if I have captured most of my guests, they are guests. And are treated as such. I rather flatter myself that I’ve improved their lot. It’s not easy, in times like these, to be a vampire or a werewolf.”

I AGREED with him on *that.*

“Perhaps you’re wondering just what impulse led me to the pursuit of this little hobby?”

“I am.”

Margate giggled.

“Oh, it’s silly enough, I suppose. At least to people who fancy themselves the practical, hard-headed sort. As a boy, I mooned around a lot over books. Mythology. Bulfinch. You know the stuff. I inherited money. There was no need to work. I inherited a certain amount of intelligence, too, I claim. Enough intelligence to avoid emulating the average career of the wealthy man of leisure. You know the stuff—blondes, polo, blondes, golf, blondes, horses, blondes, tennis.” He giggled again. “But I do like blondes,” he added.

“You might say I rebelled against certain so-called rational concepts of reality. I began to study myth-cultures. I convinced myself that certain deviations from the accepted norm existed in Nature. That the legends of supernatural presences and entities might conceivably rest on a basis of truth. That you can't sit back and say, 'There is no such thing as a werewolf,' for example, if you've never looked for one. Besides, psychopathology has only recently admitted the psychotic existence of werewolves, if not the physiological possibility.

"I knocked around the globe a bit in the yacht. Picked up Captain Hollis, here. A good man, the captain. Lost his eyes in my service. A maenad scratched them out, off the Dardanelles."

"She was a hussy, that one!" the captain boomed.

"We found a few things together, he and I. Things the hard-headed scientific boys never bothered to look for. They're always willing to go chasing off to nowhere and back to capture a reported new specimen of gorilla, or something, but you never hear of them getting up an expedition to actually track down a sea-serpent, for example. Dullards!

"At any rate, you'll meet some of my—discoveries—later. At the moment, I am engaged on a little writing project of my own. Sort of combination of clinical case-histories and a revision of mythology. That's why my guests are here. I'm extracting their life histories."

Margate smiled amiably.

"I think you'll like it here, once you get accustomed to things," he said. "There's a number of tasks for you to perform, of course. But if you humor my guests a bit you won't have any trouble. They're all goodhearted, if a little unusual."

A crash interrupted his monologue.

"The kitchen!" the captain muttered.

Indeed, the noise of falling crockery and silver resounded from the kitchen doorway.

Margate was on his feet. I followed him.

"Damn that Jory! How often have I told him not to change in the house? He's always doing that, and he always smashes the dishes!"

We stared into the kitchen.

Floundering amidst a welter of broken plates, a large wolf stared up at us with contrite eyes. The wolf had brown fur—like Jory's hair, only more of it. The wolf was panting a little, and its red tongue lolled.

As we watched, it rose to its paws and uttered a little yelp of embarrassment.

"Oh, Jory, you're so careless!" Margate sighed, shaking his head.

The wolf nuzzled against his leg.

"All right. But try to remember!"

I stared at the red eyes. Jory's eyes.

Now I was able to trace, not without a certain fascinated horror, the human outlines inherent in the wolf body. The bony structure of the ribs. The peculiar adaptation of elbow to joint. The finger-like pattern of the paws. And the human cast of the lupine muzzle.

The werewolf turned and began to scratch patiently at the door.

Margate stared at me.

"Oh dear!" he whispered. "Oh dear!"

"What's the matter?"

He stepped to the wall and took down a harness and muzzle. Stooping, he adjusted them about the wolf's body and throat.

"I'm sorry," he told me. "But I'm afraid you'll have to take Jory outside. I can tell he wants to go."

He placed the end of the leash in my nerveless fingers and pushed me forward into the night. The wolf tugged me into darkness.

"Just once around the block," Margate cautioned.

So I did it. My first duty in the house of my new employer was to walk his pet werewolf around the block.

3. Sleeping Beauty

I SLEPT soundly that evening, in spite of it all. I could save my nightmares for when I was awake.

Margate met me at the breakfast table. He was in bubbling spirits—as usual.

“The captain’s left,” he announced. “Got his maps and orders last night. Should be gone about six weeks, I estimate.”

He chuckled to himself.

“If he succeeds this time, my collection will be complete.”

“After something unusual?”

“Unusual is hardly the word! This one will really paralyze you! Hope he makes it all right.”

“Isn’t it a risky business for a blind man?”

“Riskier for a man with his eyes.” Margate babbled on. “But finish your breakfast. I’m going to show you around.”

I had hardly downed my coffee when Margate jumped up from the table, bursting with eagerness.

“Come on, come on!”

He led the way into the yard. We walked along a shaded gravel pathway leading to the rear of the house. Margate stooped midway.

“Jory’s tracks,” he muttered. “Didn’t hear him come in last night. Oh well, he’ll sleep until noon or later. And Simpkins won’t be with u$ until sundown.”

We proceeded, moving between ordered flower-beds.

“Warm, isn’t it?” Margate commented. He paused in the shadow of a tree.

“It is hot.” I rested my hand against the trunk.

“Get your hands off me!” commanded a voice.

I looked around. There was nothing to see.

“You heard me!” The voice was high, feminine; yet strangely muffled.

I stared again. As I did so, a branch descended and slapped my face.

“Fresh!”

Margate laughed.

“That’s Myrtle,” he explained. “In the tree. A hamadryad.”

I wheeled and surveyed the tree. It looked quite ordinary to me.

"Tree nymph," Margate continued. "Don't mind her. Her bark is worse than her bite."

"That isn't funny," came the voice from the tree. "Who's the new fellow, Margate?"

"That's our new house man."

"Hmm. Not very polite, I must say."

I thought it best to turn and bow at the branches.

"Sorry if I offended you. As a matter of fact, I was merely admiring your limbs. That's a lovely trunk you have there."

This was the right approach. I could tell that. A peal of girlish laughter was my reward.

"Flatterer!"

"Not at all, I assure you."

"Margate," said Myrtle, softly. "I hate to say it, but I wish you'd remember to tell Jory to keep away from me when—"

"Of course, Myrtle. He's just thoughtless, that's all. How are things otherwise?"

"Pretty fair."

"Your new friend here can climb a tree. I might have him shinny up you if you want to be pruned at any time."

I recalled that tree-climbing was one of my requisites listed by the employment man. Type C blood, fond of animals, a tree-climber—yes, it worked in, all right.

"I'd be glad to handle your limbs at any time," I offered.

Myrtle laughed.

"How you talk!" Her branches shook coyly.

Margate moved on down the path. I followed. Myrtle resulted coyly in farewell.

"Lovely girl," my employer remarked. "Often wonder what she looked like. The captain picked her up in the Carpathians. Had to fight off a gang of peasants when he transplanted her." He sighed reminiscently.

We walked down a graveled pathway through the garden which led to the door of a large, low structure. It resembled a stable or barn.

“Want you to meet Gerymanx,” Margate explained, as we entered. He bustled in. I had to stoop in order to pass the doorway.

Gerymanx stood in a large stall. Or rather, a part of Gerymanx. Gerymanx was a horse, and since his back was turned toward me, the part I gazed upon hardly constituted a proper introduction.

“There he is,” said Margate. “Nice looking, isn’t he?” He thumbed at the portion of Gerymanx which was visible. “Ever see anything like it before?”

I had an answer for that one.

SUDDENLY, at the rear of the stall, a man raised his head and peered intently at us. He was a stranger, and a rather disreputable one. Tousle headed and unshaven, he bared prominent yellow teeth in sly grin.

It rather disappointed me to find Margate employing such a raffish-looking fellow. I told him so, under my breath.

“Not much of a stable-boy,” I commented.

“Stable-boy? That’s no stable-boy, that’s Gerymanx.”

“But I thought you told me this—this thing—is Gerymanx,” I protested, weakly indicating the protruding brown backside of the horse.

“So it is. But the head is also Gerymanx. Don’t you understand, my boy? Gerymanx is a centaur.”

He would be. I might have known it. But I could hardly control my confusion when the human head wheeled, the horse body pivoted, and Gerymanx trotted out of his stall to welcome us formally.

I am no judge of horseflesh, and certainly no judge of centaurflesh either, but I must admit Gerymanx was impressive. His horse-body glistened beautifully in the sunshine from the stable sky-light. His human torso, rising from the waist, was superbly muscled. I had always imagined centaurs to be somewhat shaggy. Gerymanx wasn’t. He trotted forward, and upon our introduction, shook hands. He had to bend his elbows to do it, being considerably taller than myself.

“A pleasure,” he boomed. “Mr. Margate here tells me you’re quite a horseman. We must go for a ride together soon.”

Margate beamed with pride. “Gerymanx is quite a pacer,” he told me. “Four-gaited.”

“Glad to get out again,” the centaur went on. “No one has been around to exercise me but Dave, and he can’t do anything but hang on. Thought I’d like to work out mornings and maybe enter the steeplechase this fall.”

“He’s very ambitious,” Margate added. “Wants to race.” He turned to the centaur. “How’s the oat situation?”

“Pretty fair. You can tell this gentleman here what to do for me. I’d like to be curry-combed this week, if you don’t mind.”

“Your mane wants clipping,” Margate observed, critically.

“Guess it does.” The centaur smiled coyly. “You know, Margate, I’ve been thinking of having my tail bobbed.”

“Don’t do anything hasty now,” my host begged.

“But it’s all the style. I was looking at the *Breeder’s Annual* last night.”

“We’ll discuss that later,” said Mr. Margate, curtly. “Right now we have to be moving on. I’m sure you two will get to be great friends.”

He turned to me. “I must give you instructions on Gerymanx shortly. You’ll take care of him as well as Myrtle and the rest.”

We moved out of the stable as Gerymanx trotted back into his stall.

“Lunch time. Listen—I want you to call up the grocer in town and order a few items for me.”

We marched back to the house.

“You understand, I can hardly allow tradespeople to get in here. You’ll meet them at the gate, of course. But let’s see now. We’ll need a roast for ourselves—and some raw hamburger—about two pounds—a bottle of Lextron—that’s Vitamin B extract for Mr. Simpkins—better get a bottle of Glover’s Mange Cure for Jory—five pounds of halibut steak—and then call the feed store and ask them to send up a bale of hay—a bottle of tabasco sauce—"

I used the hall phone.

"Afraid you're going to be in for a little heavy duty these days," Mr. Margate apologized. "What with the captain and Dave away. Why not run upstairs and take a shower before lunch? It might freshen you up a bit for the afternoon. I want to go over the notes for my book with you, if you don't mind. Run along now—I'll fix us a snack if Jory isn't around."

I ascended the stairs to my own quarters. I had quite a nice bedroom with bath attached. I noted that my things had arrived some time during the morning. Jory must have brought them up.

It was quiet in my room. Quiet, and normal. That's what I needed most. A touch of normalcy, after all this bewilderment.

I walked into the bathroom, reached around the shower curtains and turned on the water. Then I undressed, slowly. I had a cigarette—one of Margate's Turkish.

I went back to the bath. I pulled aside the curtain, climbed in the tub.

"Hey!" said a voice.

I looked down.

THERE was a girl in the bathtub.

She was a very pretty girl. I noticed that at once. She had a long oval face, high cheekbones, deep blue eyes, and long, curly hair.

I also observed that she would look good in a sweater, though at the moment she wasn't wearing any that I could notice. And I noticed.

"Hey," she repeated, staring up at me.

I just stood there. Because a second glance afforded me certain observations of a disturbing nature. She was a pretty girl with long hair, all right—but her hair was green. A vivid green. Most unusual color.

"What are you trying to do?" persisted the girl.

"I was just going to take a bath," I answered, not too brightly.

“Well don’t stand there on one leg like a stork, then,” she replied. “Come on in. The water’s fine.”

I didn’t move, but I was taken aback.

“Who are you?” prattled the chatterbox in the tub. “My but you’re skinny, aren’t you?”

It was a trifle disturbing—this criticism. What would you say if you walked into your bathroom and a strange girl in your tub made disparaging remarks about your physique?

I was still pondering the problem when a discreet cough sounded from the doorway.

It was Margate.

He ignored me and strode toward tire tub, staring down at the soapy water.

“So here you are, Trina,” he accused. “At it again, eh? How did you ever get up here?”

“Jory carried me,” answered the girl, defiantly. “I didn’t think anyone would notice. Besides, I just wanted to use the bath salts.”

“Well, you’ll have to get out now. This is our new house man. He wants a bath, I imagine. That is what you want, isn’t it?” he added, turning to me for corroboration.

“Yes.”

“Oh very well. If you will be a pig, and hog it all for yourself.” Trina sulked. “Lift me out.”

I hesitated.

“Come on.”

I stooped and lifted. She was slippery. But that wasn’t the reason I almost dropped her.

I was staring at her waist. At the green—oh, it might as well be admitted! Trina was a mermaid.

“Shame on you,” Margate scolded. “I thought I told you not to leave your tank.” He sighed. “What will our new house man think of us, I wonder? Jory changing in the kitchen and you sneaking into his tub.”

“I just wanted bath salts,” the mermaid wailed. “And a chance to use this lovely mirror here to comb my hair.” Her eyelids fluttered up at me coyly, like waving kelp.

“Maybe you’ll help me comb my hair?” she suggested.

“Not now!” Margate extended his arms. “Here, give her to me. Go ahead and bathe in peace.”

He bore Trina from the room. A most attractive armful, too. I bathed meditatively.

At the luncheon table, Margate confided in me.

“It’s her French blood,” he declared. “Trina’s a Breton, you know. Found her off the coast of Brittany, two years ago August. Just before the war.

“She’s the restless type, though. Wants to sneak out to bathing beaches, I suppose. Crazy about bath salts and perfumes. Guess she’s lonesome. Used to a lot of ocean-ides and nereides around. To say nothing of sailors.”

“I like her,” I ventured. “I don’t blame her for getting bored in a tank. It must be like living the life of a goldfish. Isn’t there a swimming pool or something around here?”

“Say, that’s an idea! You could dig her one! There in the garden. You know how to handle cement?”

“Guess I could manage.”

“Jory will help,” Margate promised. “Say, that’s fine.”

We finished our luncheon in high humor. After a smoke we adjourned to Margate’s study.

It was more of a library than a study, and more of a museum than a library. The walls were lined with bookshelves. I scanned the titles with eager curiosity.

“Quite a collection you have here,” I commented. “Lots of sorcery.”

Margate gave me an earnest glance. “Just for reading purposes,” he emphasized. “Never monkey with the stuff personally. Too dangerous.”

I noted a glass bell jar on the side table. A long, thin bone rested on a cushion within. Margate marked my interest.

“Supposed to be unicorn horn,” he explained. “But I’m inclined to believe it’s a fake. Anybody knows there are no such things as unicorns.”

I RETURNED to the large center table and desk. In order to avoid resting my fingers on a mummified head I brought my hand down on a large, dark brown bottle. Margate gasped.

“Careful there! Don’t jiggle that bottle! Got a djinn in there.”

I stepped back.

“Bought it from a sailor in Aden. Set me back a pretty penny. Don’t know why I wanted it—I’m afraid to open the thing.”

I stared into the brown, cloudy glass. I could see nothing. But when I lifted the bottle it gave forth a rustling sound—a most disconcerting noise to emanate from glass or liquid.

“Let me see, now,” Margate began. He stooped over the desk drawers and began to draw forth sheafs of manuscript.

“Here’s the case history of Mr. Simpkins,” he muttered. And the notes Jory is giving me. Cave stuff—archeological background from Gerymanx. What’s this? Oh, the report of the Demonolatrical Society. 1936. Out of date.

He lifted his hands, eyebrows waggling in despair.

“You see? Everything’s topsy-turvy. Never get anything done this way. Need some system. A little order. Then I can get started again.”

But somehow we didn’t get at any filing system that afternoon. We sat, down and got involved in a little discussion, during which my employer added a few scraps of information to my data on his life-work.

I learned that he had conducted this somewhat singular menage of his for about five years. Mr. Simpkins was his oldest guest; then Gerymanx, Myrtle, and Jory. Trina was really the latest acquisition.

They got along fairly well together, according to Margate. Of course he humored them. Kept them happy. And in return, they afforded him diversion enough to recompense him for the sacrifice of a normal social life.

“Never go out,” Margate told me. “Couldn’t afford to, under the circumstances. Never invite guests, either. But the book is coming along, and it’s well worth it. When I am finished I’ll take my place alongside of Frazer and Ellis. What Darwin and Huxley did in their fields I will do in mine.”

He seemed a simple soul, did Julius Margate. I felt a growing affection for the man.

“Only one complaint,” he confided. “People are always trying to palm off fakes on me. Those things get around, you know. I’ve had side-show dealers trying to sell me freaks. And some unscrupulous dealers try to peddle their fakes—monstrosities that never existed. Missing links, and basilisks. One Irish rogue had the cheek to claim he could secure a leprechaun. Anyone with any sense knows there aren’t things like that. I ask you, now, is that right?”

He didn’t wait for an answer, but rose to his feet with a frown.

“Dear me! Almost supper time. Better dash out to the gate for those groceries. I’ll route Jory out. He’s in the kennel, most likely.

“On your way back,” he called, “I think you’d better take a run down to the cellar. Fix the furnace. It’ll be chilly tonight.”

I left on my errand. After lugging up the groceries I made for the cellar stairs, descended.

It was dark down there. I struck three matches before I located the furnace in the gloom.

I found the coal, filled the hopper. It took some time. Little red shadows danced on the walls behind me as I got the fire glowing. It was cheerful, warm. I began to whistle.

Then I heard the sound.

The creaking, groaning sound from the corner.

And a rustling. A slow, crawling rustle. A slithering noise.

I lit a match, held it up in none too steady fingers.

Fire swept across a mound of churning earth. A mound in which a box was set—a long, white box. A box that opened. Opened in darkness, as two long arms rose silently, swiftly.

Something sat up. Something with a long white face.

With a sudden start, I recognized Mr. Simpkins.

"You!" I gasped.

"Hello." Simpkins rose. The earth fell from his black coat. He stretched himself and yawned.

"What time is it? Forgot to set the alarm clock again."

I stared down at the coffin from which he had emerged.

The vampire stood beside me. "Pretty bad, isn't it?" he commented.

I shuddered in complete agreement.

"Know what I'm going to do, my friend?" he asked.

"N—no."

"I am going to make our host purchase a new coffin for me. It's the least he can do to repay me for that scurvy trick of removing my teeth."

I nodded numbly.

"Since Dave is gone, you shall have to accompany me," he continued. "We can go tonight, I suppose."

"Go—where?"

"Why to the undertaking parlor, of course. Where else would you buy yourself a coffin?"

"I won't do it," I declared.

And that settled that.

After supper Mr. Simpkins and I went out to buy him a new coffin.

4. A Grave Undertaking

JASON HARRIS operated one of the most thriving mortuary chapels in the city. Business was never dead. Mr. Harris himself was always on hand to welcome a fresh customer. That's the only way he liked his customers—fresh.

But he didn't like us.

I could tell that almost as soon as Mr. Simpkins and I entered his outer display rooms.

It had been a struggle to drag me this far. Both Mr. Simpkins and Mr. Margate had argued with me—pointing out that I was the only one who could drive the vampire down, and that night was the only opportunity Simpkins had of going out to make a personal selection. They clinched the argument by reminding me that I was, after all, an employee. And an employee must be obedient.

Now I wanted to get the whole business over with, quickly and quietly. So when Jason Harris moved forward to greet us, I lost no time.

"My friend and I should like to purchase a coffin," I began.

"Very well." Mr. Harris assumed a mask of sympathy. "Might I inquire as to the nature of the bereavement in the family?"

Mr. Simpkins stepped out. "Never mind that. Just show us around this box factory of yours and we'll make our own selection."

"Of course." Somewhat disconcerted by the callousness of the request, Harris led us over to an imposing bronze casket.

"Here is one of our latest models," he began. "I want you to note the dignity of its outlines, the solidity of its construction, the—"

"What about a mattress?" inquired Mr. Simpkins, eagerly. "Has it got a mattress?"

"A mattress can be secured," Harris assured him. "But I must ask you to observe this special feature—the method whereby the sealed casket is made airtight."

"Airtight? Nothing doing," Simpkins snapped. "How do you expect a man to breathe in an airtight coffin? Why he'd strangle to death!"

"But the deceased does not breathe—"

"How do you know? You ever been deceased? Come to think of it you do look a little dead on your feet."

Mr. Harris was indeed quite pale.

"I don't seem to understand you gentlemen," he muttered.

"We just want to buy a coffin, that's all. For a body."

"What sort of body?" Mr. Harris persisted.

"Why no body in particular. Just any body."

The mortician looked agitated. "You aren't by any chance planning a murder? You're not gangsters, I hope?"

"Of course not." Mr. Simpkins gave out with a laugh that was meant to be reassuring. It wasn't. "Say, I heard a good one about an undertaker who specialized in gangster funerals. His motto was 'Don't Put All Your Yeggs in One Casket.' Good, eh?"

Mr. Harris didn't think so. He looked distressed. I took advantage of his confusion to pull the vampire over toward a small modest-appearing gray box.

"What about this?" I suggested.

"Not bad," Simpkins commented. "Streamlined. And plush lining. Always like a plush lining."

"This is a very select model," Harris assured us. "One of our most popular styles this season."

"Never mind the sales build-up," said Simpkins. "I'll just try it out for myself."

Lifting the lid, he climbed into the coffin and lay down.

"Very comfortable," he grunted. "Lots of leg room."

This statement didn't please the undertaker either. He kept staring at Mr. Simpkins with a rapt expression, and his teeth began to chatter like a bunch of women around a Gin Rummy game.

"This coffin isn't for you!" he exclaimed.

"Of course it is. I always pick out my own coffins when I get the chance."

"Most people don't get a chance," Harris was forced to observe.

"Not me. I'm different. I've picked out five coffins in my time. Outlasted them all." Without waiting to observe the reaction to this last statement, Mr.

Simpkins suddenly banged the lid shut. A moment later he pushed it up again.

"Have to oil this lid," he complained. "I might want to get out in a hurry some time. You know how it is."

"NO, I don't," the undertaker confessed. "I don't want to know how it is, either. You two get out of here. You are crazy."

"A fine way for a mortician to talk to a customer," Simpkins bridled. "All right. I don't want your old box anyway. It's lousy. Why I would be ashamed to be found dead in one of your coffins."

He rose. "Come on," he told me. "We'll try another joint down the street where the service is better. I probably can make a deal on a trade-in of the old casket, too."

Mr. Harris forced a smile.

"Don't be hasty," he coaxed. "It's just that I didn't seem to understand. But I guess I do now. You want to purchase this coffin to sleep in, is that it?"

"Of course," said Mr. Simpkins, in a disgusted voice. "What would ***you*** do in a coffin?"

"Very little," the mortician assured him. "But, if I might inquire, why don't you purchase a bed?"

"Beds? Bah! The dirt gets onto the sheets," Simpkins complained. "And the light comes in, too."

"You sleep during the day?"

"That's right. I want something that's dark. Something to keep out the dirt. To say nothing of the worms."

"You have worms?" asked Mr. Harris in spite of himself.

"I'll say I have worms," answered the vampire.

"Dyspepsia is my trouble," the undertaker confessed.

"Maybe a coffin would help you, too."

"Never thought of it. Quiet in there, isn't it?"

“Very quiet. And think of the plush lining—all that satin and stuff!”

“Interesting idea, if a little morbid.”

“Beds are expensive,” the vampire continued. “And linen is high, too. I should think, with all these swell boxes lying around, you’d just hop into one for forty winks now and then.”

Harris scratched his head.

“I’d have to talk it over with my wife first,” he mused.

“Haven’t you got any of these double caskets? The big jobs?”

“Yes. It might work out at that.”

“Just a thought, friend. By the way—guess we’ll take this one.”

Harris resumed his professional interest. He quoted a price. I paid him. “Do you want this delivered?” he asked. “I’ll take it with me,” Simpkins responded. He grabbed one end of the casket and I took the other.

Harris followed us to the door. “But this is all so unusual—I’m a little confused. You really want to get into this coffin?”

“Sure as I’m alive,” Simpkins answered. Harris sighed deeply.

“Well, it’s your own funeral.”

“Not bad!” Simpkins chuckled. “And don’t forget what I told you. Try a casket yourself for sleeping purposes. I’d love to see you in a coffin.”

The undertaker shuddered visibly.

“Oh, gentlemen,” he called, as we opened the door. “Just one thing more. It’s customary to have the name and address when anyone purchases a casket.” Simpkins turned. “Look me up out at Everest Cemetery,” he suggested, maliciously. “I’ve got a nice grave out there.” Harris trembled.

“Drop in some time,” Simpkins added.

As we closed the door, the undertaker turned and ran back into his shop. His shoulders heaved.

“Now see what you did,” I accused, as we climbed into the car. “He probably won’t be able to work for a week now.” Mr. Simpkins was contrite.

“I was only trying to be funny,” he apologized. “Besides, let him close up the funeral parlor if he wants to. Business is probably dead anyway.”

I shivered as we drove off. Vampires I could learn to stand—but puns, never. If Mr. Simpkins didn't behave, he'd find some worms on his pillow one of these days.

5. A Social Centaur

THE ensuing days were unexpectedly pleasant. Life quickly fell into a routine.

In the morning I usually went out to the stables and brought Gerymanx his oats and hay. Then I turned the hose on Myrtle. Afternoons I spent with Margate, trying to recopy his disordered notes and straighten out his reference sources in some kind of filing system.

At times I took Jory for a walk in the evening. Every Saturday night it was my duty to give him a bath. During the third week I had the rather unpleasant duty of shaving him, but on the whole I managed excellently.

At the time of the full moon I called up town and ordered a pair of motorcycle goggles. These fitted over his eyes more comfortably than the usual dark glasses, and he passed through the difficult days with a minimum of howling. Margate's system seemed to keep his lycanthropic instincts well under control.

Within a few weeks I had Mr. Margate's household running smoothly. My work in his study came to an end. He was able to sit down with his book material well organized. I saw little of him, these days—he spent most of his time taking new notes. Jory's recital occupied his immediate attention. Jory being rather stupid and illiterate, it was a difficult task to extract coherent information from him. But Margate persevered.

My first feeling of strangeness was almost completely dissipated. One can become adjusted to almost anything through constant familiarity.

I no longer found it shocking when Jory assumed his lupine form before my eyes. The spectacle of Mr. Simpkins snoring in his cellar coffin did not alarm me. Myrtle's muffled voice from the tree-trunk became as natural a manifestation as the rustling from the branches of surrounding elms. Gerymanx was no bother at all. He read his racing form, bragged heroically of his racing abilities, and had latterly become absorbed in a system of physical culture exercises he was taking through the mails.

Perhaps not visiting in town did it. Isolation inured me to the unusual. My duties were light, the food was excellent, and the hours passed swiftly.

Besides, there was Trina.

I got her out of that cellar tank in no time.

During the second week I began to dig the swimming pool. I worked alone, but it was a steady pace that I set for myself. Another week and I had the concrete laid. In the fifth week of my stay the pool was completed.

Trina didn't know, of course. I planned it as a surprise for her, with Margate's connivance.

When I carried her up from the basement she thought I was smuggling her in for a go at the oath salts—a frequent practice of mine which I might as well admit. We had become very friendly, Trina and I. After all, I'm broadminded enough to overlook little details like that emerald hair.

I took her out that afternoon and brought her to the pool.

At first she couldn't speak.

"Ooooooh! she squealed. Tenderly, I threw her into the water. She splashed gaily. In a moment she swam over and put her arms around my neck.

"It's wonderful!" she whispered, and kissed me. It was the first time, but not the last. I found it very nice. A mermaid's kiss is moist, and a little salty, but very interesting.

I'd built a little rockpile in the center of the pool. She sunned herself like a Lorelei, her livid curls shimmering in the breeze, the radiance of her scales glistening against the water. Her long, delicate fingers, with just the fascinating suggestion of a web at the palm, beckoned to me. I went in the house and borrowed a pair of Margate's swimming trunks to join her.

AFTER that time went very swiftly indeed. I spent hours out there on the rocks with her. We'd swim awhile and sun awhile. She used to sing me some old Breton sea ballads in a piquant Flemish accent. Some of them were slightly bawdy, I suppose. I don't understand French very well.

Trina was happy for the first time in her life since she had been ensnared in Captain Hollis' nets.

"I've been like a fish out of water," she confessed to me. "It's like coming home again. Now, if I only had a few sailors—"

I put a stop to that talk in short order. Her weakness for seafaring men was really deplorable. But mermaids are like that, I suppose.

My fondest memories are those of the moonlight bathing parties. She and I in a world of silver water, gliding along under the moon. And afterwards we'd sit on the edge of the pool, roasting hot dogs or toasting marshmallows over a little fire. It was beautiful while it lasted.

Then came the well-remembered day. Along in the seventh week it was.

Margate met me at the breakfast table with a worried frown.

"What's the matter? Still stuck on that Jory memorandum?" I asked. "That part about the relation of the moon-flower to the anthropomorphic tendencies?"

"No, it's not that," Mr. Margate answered. He ran his hand through his bristling gray crop. "It's Captain Hollis and Dave. They're nearly two weeks late. Haven't had a word—not a cablegram."

"It's the war," I consoled him.

"Perhaps. But they're on a dangerous errand."

It wasn't the first time Margate had told me that. He was constantly hinting, but never revealing the nature of this quest.

"I wish you'd tell me," I said. "Maybe I could help."

"There's no way of helping," he answered. "Maybe I'm just a fool for planning this anyway. What good will it be if they are successful? I can't look and I can't listen. Never even see or hear what I get. Have to take my notes second-hand."

I COULDN'T make head or tail out of this recital.

"In case they do get back," Margate continued, "I'd better have you clear out the back room in the cellar. The big one. I've ordered sheet metal to cover the door. It's fairly soundproof. Just clear out the old furniture and leave the place vacant. We won't need any pen, or any food either, I don't suppose."

He sighed.

"The crew is reliable, though; Hollis has used the men before. They have their orders, but Hollis has to make the actual capture, of course. Dangerous business. Oh well, we'll just have to wait and see. Or rather, wait and not see."

Curiosity gnawed within me. I opened my mouth. But Margate rose and cut me off.

"Say! I just remembered—are you a blacksmith?"

"No. Can't say that I am."

His face fell. "Too bad. Knew I'd forgotten something when I listed your requirements."

"What's the matter?"

"It's Gerymanx. He needs to be shod."

"Oh."

"Didn't he mention that his hooves hurt him?"

"Come to think of it, he said something of the sort to me yesterday. I assumed it was just a minor complaint."

"No, he needs shoes badly. And he'd like a manicure, I suppose." Margate sighed. "Tell you what you have to do. Take the small truck into town and see the blacksmith there. I've got the address. Used to ride him down at night myself.

But you'd better go. I want to stick around here in case Captain Hollis shows up."

"You mean I put the centaur in the back of the truck and haul it to a blacksmith shop?"

“It’s all right. I’ve bribed this fellow heavily. Business being what it is in the smithy line these days, he keeps his mouth shut.”

“But what about traveling on the road?”

“Oh, if you use the county truck you shouldn’t have any trouble. Not much traffic.”

“All right.”

“Better get started.” Margate scribbled down an address and gave me some money. I turned.

“Be careful now,” he warned me. “And watch Gerymanx. He’s a wild one when he gets loose. Got ambitions, he has. And he’s too friendly. Keep him out of mischief and when he gets through bring him right back. Whatever you do, don’t let him get into Droopy’s Tavern next door. He’s fond of the grape. We caught him that way, while he was drunk.”

I hurried down the path. Trina called out to me from the pool.

“Coming in for a swim, dear?”

“Can’t make it. Got to hurry into town.”

I stopped and gave her a kiss. “See you later.”

She flipped her tail at me saucily and turned away.

Gerymanx was at the stable door.

“Margate says you’re taking me in for a pedicure,” he greeted me.

“That’s right.”

“You want a saddle?”

“No. You’re coming in on the truck. And no monkey business either,” I warned.

The centaur’s face fell. “That’s too bad. I thought we might have a little canter around the park before we went to the smith’s.”

“Nothing doing. Can’t afford to attract any attention.”

“Oh, all right,” Gerymanx sulked. “Get the truck.”

I pulled it out of the garage. It was a small job, but I was grateful for the enclosed sides on the compartment. They completely hid Gerymanx’s astonishing body from view. Only his tousled head was visible above the railing.

"Take it easy," he called out.

I took it easy. Very easy. Every time we passed a car on the highway I slowed down, and I did my best to avoid jolting my peculiar passenger. It was almost lunchtime when we pulled up at the old brick smithy on the outskirts of town.

I backed the truck up to the door and walked inside.

THE blacksmith, who by the most appropriate coincidence was named Smith, came to the door. He was a broad-shouldered man with a bald head and a ruddy complexion.

"I've got a job for you," I began, hesitantly. "Gentleman in back there wants to be shod."

Smith cocked his head at Gerymanx, then smiled.

"Oh—you're from Mr. Margate. I understand. Bring him inside, there's nobody around."

I led Gerymanx down the loading platform and hurried him into the stables.

"Make it snappy, will you?" I requested, nervously.

"Take about an hour," Smith told me. "Why not go next door and have a bite of lunch?"

It seemed like a sound suggestion. I entered Droopy's Tavern and sat down.

Mr. Droopy—if that was his name—proved to be a short little man with red hair and a permanently bored expression on his unshaven features.

"Whatsa gonna be?" he asked.

I ordered a sandwich and a glass of beer. The sandwich was liberally salted. I had a second glass of beer. It must have been salted too, because my thirst increased. I had a third glass, a fourth.

All this time I could hear a merry clanging from the smithy next door. Smith was at work.

The pounding ceased abruptly. Smith came in through a side door with a pail.

"How's it going?" I asked.

"Pretty hot work," he told me. He turned to the bar. "Hey, Droopy—fill this up."

Droopy took the pail over to the tap.

Smith went out again. In a few moments the clanging increased. Suddenly it halted once more. Smith re-entered with the empty pail.

"Very hot work," he explained. "Droopy—fill this up."

Again he went out. Again the clanging rose. And in a remarkably short time, Smith walked heavily in with his bucket.

" 'Stremely hot," he mumbled. "Fill 'er up, Droop."

I watched Droopy fill the large pail. I ordered another beer myself. Smith stumbled out. More clanging. Then silence.

Smith wobbled through the door.

"Heat's terrific," he hiccupped. "Gotta fill thish up, Droop, ol' pal."

He went out. I listened intently. The clanging began again. But this time it held a peculiar cadence. A familiar cadence.

"Da-da da-da dee-da, de-da de-da, de-da-da.

Where had I heard *this* before?

I made for the side door and slipped into the smithy.

Gerymanx squatted on his haunches beside the blacksmith, whose left arm was locked around his neck. Both centaur and smithy held a hammer in their free hands. As I watched, they tapped merrily away on the anvil. Their raucous voices rose in a sour blending of the *Anvil Chorus.* The empty bucket, inverted, was perched on Gerymanx's shaggy, head.

"Hello, pal!" the centaur greeted me.

I glared. "What is the meaning of this—this horseplay?"

Gerymanx wobbled to his feet.

"Wanna nother drink of beer!" he insisted. "Feet all shod. Now I wanna celebrate."

"Gerymanx!" I yelled. "Come bad here!"

But it was too late. The centaur trotted unsteadily through the side door and into Droopy's Tavern.

He was up at the bar before the redheaded proprietor looked at him. From the waist up, it was a naked man who stared at the bartender and shouted, "Shoot the soup to me, Droop!"

"Where's your clothes?" Droopy demanded.

"I'm masquerading," the centaur temporized. I tugged at his elbow.

"Come on, get out of here," I whispered.

"I don't serve no naked persons," Droopy declared. He stepped around the bar, then fell back. His eyes took in the horse body.

"Gawd!" he breathed.

Gerymanx turned what was meant to be a reassuring smile on the bartender.

"Told you I was masquerading, didn't I?" he explained.

"Well, I don't like it." Droopy turned to me. "Get the blazes outta my joint," he demanded. "And take this horse's—whatever it is—with you!"

It was an ill-chosen moment for the entry of another couple. They lurched into the tavern; a tall, flashily-dressed man and an obviously befuddled woman. They stared incredulously at Gerymanx.

"Holy Moses!" muttered the man. "Do you see what I see?"

"Gawd, Harry, it's a mounted policeman." The woman peered tipsily at the centaur.

"What'd he do with his clothes?"

"And where's his legs?" The man quavered. "He's a horse!"

Gerymanx wheeled, offended. "Who you think you're talking to?" he bridled.

"A talking horse," the woman amended. "Harry, we better lay off the stuff for awhile."

"Lay off me, that's what you should do." Gerymanx tried to prance and stumbled unsteadily. His hooves clattered against a cuspidor.

"I bet his mother was frightened by a merry-go-round," the woman continued. "Oooh—look out!"

FOR Droopy had rounded tha-bar, bearing a baseball bat. He bore down on Gerymanx with an oath.

“I’ll learn ya to horse around in my dump,” he grated. “What you think this is, a livery stable?” He lifted his bat menacingly.

Gerymanx wheeled. His forefeet rose.

Droopy sailed over the bar. With an inhuman neigh, the centaur dashed forward. His charge carried him through the door. I raced after him.

In his drunken fury, the centaur careened into the street. By some unfortunate mischance a milk-wagon was standing beside our truck. The mare between the shafts looked up, startled.

At the sight of Gerymanx she neighed coyly. A slow blush spread over her equine cheeks. Gerymanx whinnied. Suddenly the mare’s eyes gave a flicker of apprehension as they rested on the centaur’s human torso. With a shrill, indignant squeal she dashed forward, carrying the wagon with her. There was a grinding crash as the wagon tipped sideways—right into our truck.

At the same moment Droopy emerged from the tavern. Up the street the milkman dropped his bottle-rack with a clatter and started to run our way.

“Now you’ve done it, I panted. “Wrecked the truck, too!”

“Get on my back,” Gerymanx mumbled. The shock had sobered him. “We’ll make a run for it.”

I mounted hastily.

“Hang on to my neck.”

I hung.

“Here we go.”

We went.

The centaur’s hooves struck sparks from the brick as he raced down the street. I clung to him for dear life.

“Whee!” he yelled. “This is more like it!”

A glance showed me that our pursuers were gathered in a knot around the milk-wagon and truck.

“What a mess,” I groaned. “How’ll we ever get back?”

"I'll carry you."

"On top of the load you're carrying already?"

Gerymanx laughed.

"I feel great," be snorted over his shoulder. "Great. Let's go annoy some street cleaners."

"We're going home. Right now."

"Oh, don't be a wet blanket! I want to have fun. Let's go down to Saratoga. Maybe you could enter me in a race."

I allowed this revolting suggestion to go unanswered.

"Take me home," I commanded.

"But—"

"Listen, Gerymanx," I said, slowly. "You've got a pretty soft berth there at Margate's, and you know it. If you don't behave, I'll fix you."

"What do you mean?"

"I'll tell Margate to sell you to an ice dealer. Then you'll have to pull a wagon all day long, and yell, 'Ice for sale' into the bargain."

Gerymanx's pace slackened.

"All right," he grumbled. "All right."

"Stick to the side road now," I cautioned.

He did. It was a slow trip. We hid out behind billboards whenever I spotted a car ahead or behind us. It was almost twilight when we cantered through the gate and up the drive.

"That's about enough excitement for one day," I sighed.

But—

6. Blind Man's Bluff

"COME right in!" Margate urged, standing on the steps. He waved his arms expansively.

"Me too?" Gerymanx asked.

"Of course. Wouldn't be a party without you."

"But I'll track up the carpet—"

"Track away! We're going to celebrate tonight."

"What is all this?" I inquired. Margate's flushed little face held a slightly tipsy grin.

"Great news! Captain Hollis is back, and the trip's a success."

"Fine. Where is he?"

"He called from the yacht basin. He's hired a truck and he ought to be up in a few hours."

"I'm anxious to see what he's got."

"You wouldn't be if you knew what it was." Margate snickered. "But come on, let's go inside and have a drink. I'm in the mood."

Gerymanx clattered after Margate and I followed.

The house was brilliantly illuminated. Margate was following its example. I found all the guests in the parlor. Trina sat in a wash tub. Mr. Simpkins was up and about. Jory, in his more or less human form, was busily mixing drinks.

"Success!" Margate proposed, passing glasses to the centaur and myself.

"How about some supper?" I suggested.

"Help yourself." Margate indicated a row of bottles.

I shrugged. He was too far gone to argue with. I sat down next to Trina and tried to get into the spirit of things.

I didn't succeed. Perhaps they were all too far ahead of me. Perhaps it was instinctive premonition. Maybe it was just the rotten sandwich I'd had at the tavern. Whatever it was, I was the skeleton at the feast. I couldn't get in the mood at all.

When Gerymanx began riding Mr. Simpkins around on his back I regarded it as so much horse-play. Trina, noticing my dour face, turned away and began to flutter her eyelashes at Margate.

Jory, who had been taking a drink for himself every time he mixed for anyone else, soon lost all control. He changed right in front of us, and began running around the room on his paws. Everyone seemed to get a great kick out of the spectacle, but it gave me the chills.

Margate was maudlinly solicitous.

"Whassa matter?" he demanded. "Come on, have a drink."

"No thanks."

"All right. Spoil the party. Go ahead."

I forced a smile. "I'm pretty tired. Think I'll hit the hay."

"Whassat? Aren't you gonna wait up to see the nice new spec'men Captain Hollis' gonna bring to the party? No welcoming comm'tee?"

"I guess not."

"All right, then." Margate shrugged, and nearly fell over. "Get me bucket full of whiskey," he called. Gerymanx trotted over.

"Bucket of whiskey? What for?"

"Myrtle isn't here. Gonna take it out and splash it all over her roots."

That was enough for me. I went upstairs to my room and climbed in bed.

Downstairs I could hear the murmurs from the parlor. The party was getting wild. I didn't like it. For the first time I was really ready to consider my situation. After all, this sort of thing couldn't go on forever. Trina was a nice girl, but you don't walk up the aisle with a mermaid. Mr. Simpkins was very nice, for a vampire, and Jory was an amiable enough werewolf. But we'd never be close friends. And being jockey to a centaur isn't exactly a recommendation to future employers. A man is known by the company he keeps. If this kept up, people would soon be pointing their finger at me for an incubus, or something.

I'd better have a talk with Margate soon, I decided. Yes. Margate would have to let me go. I was a little worried about him, anyway. It was hard to say what new monstrosity Hollis was bringing—but it would complicate matters. All this secrecy, and the special room in the cellar, now; this meant something pretty outlandish.

And there was Margate, whooping it up downstairs. Happy as a kid with a new toy. And just as irresponsible. Irresponsible! That was it. That's what the matter was with the whole crew. They couldn't cope with life. They needed a nursemaid. Being fantasies, they weren't able to face realities.

Oh well. In the morning, now—

I fell asleep.

I HAD the damnedest dream. It seemed to me that something sneaked into my room. It had Trina's hair and Jory's face, and it lumbered along on four hooves like Gerymanx. Somehow I got the idea that it had Mr. Simpkins missing teeth, and it wanted to bite me. All the while it came closer it was laughing like Margate himself. I tried to move, but couldn't. It squatted right on top of me and grabbed at my throat. Its mouth opened.

I woke up.

Strong hands were closing around my neck.

"What the—"

The hands relaxed.

"Wake up!" boomed a voice.

It was Captain Hollis.

"How'd you get here?"

"I made it." The blind man was panting. "I had to get you. Come on."

I sat up. "What's the matter?" I yawned. "When did you get in?"

"About half an hour ago. Around midnight. But never mind. You've got to help me get them out! You've got to. You're the only one left."

"Where's Dave?"

"Dave's—gone."

"What do you mean?"

"When we captured it. He got bit. Buried him at sea." The captain's hurried tones reached me as he jostled me toward the door.

"Tell me what happened," I muttered, as we went down the hall. "Where is everybody?"

"They're in the cellar. With it."

"With what?"

"Don't ask questions. That's what finished them. They were sitting around drunk when I got in. I carried it into the cellar in a packing crate. But I passed Myrtle, and she's gone, too."

“I don’t understand.”

We moved across the deserted parlor. I snapped on lights as we went. Hollis came after me, cane tapping.

“Don’t try to understand,” he whispered. “I couldn’t stop them. They had to take a peek. Margate forgot everything. Said he wasn’t afraid, dammit, and it was his after all. The whole crew made for the cellar.”

“Come on.” I went on through the kitchen. “They’re all down there?”

“Yes.”

“But what happened to them? What’s the matter? What must I do?”

“Try and get them out. Think of a way.”

“What’s that?”

I flattened myself against the wall of the dark staircase. A figure padded through the level below.

“Where?”

“Listen—footsteps.”

“Jory. I know those paws.”

It was Jory. The wolf was slinking down the cellar corridor.

“Jory—wait!” I called. He didn’t look around.

We followed.

The wolf made straight for the door at the end of the hall. The metal-covered door. It stood ajar. His muzzle forced it wider. The gray body moved in.

“Stop—” Hollis began.

I heard a howl. Just one howl. A howl that rose, and then froze in midair on its highest quaver. After that, silence.

“It got him,” Hollis whispered.

I moved forward.

Hollis clutched my arm. “Wait. Don’t go in there.”

“But you say they’re all in there. You want me to get them out with you.”

“I know. But you mustn’t go in now. Not like that.”

I faced the doorway. “Quit talking riddles. I’m going in.”

Hollis held me.

I began to stare at the slight opening where the door hung ajar. It was dark beyond, but not so dark. A sort of subdued light filtered through. A light that didn't dissipate the darkness, but seemed to be a part of it. A stronger part.

IT WAS a violet light, but sharper than a distinct color. Radiant. Like the reflection of a million Christmas tree ornaments. Gaudy. Alluring.

Then I felt it. The urge to enter. I wanted to see that light. It was like the ray emanating from a great jewel.

I brushed the captain's hands away.

"Let me go," I muttered. "I want to go on."

Wriggling from his grasp, I darted forward. I opened the door—

With a grunt, Hollis lunged. His fist caught me in the eye. I reeled back. His other fist lashed out. I stumbled, my hands covering my face.

"What in blazes—"

I reeled, steadied myself, took my hands away. Darkness.

"Hollis, you fool—you've blacked my eyes for me!"

"I know. Now go in!"

I groped my way through the door. He followed.

We stood in darkness. Two blind men, in a room filled with a violet light.

"Where are we?"

I groped along the wall. The room was silent. Too silent. "Jory! Trina! Where are you?" I whispered. "Margate!" No answer. I stumbled forward, hands outstretched.

I touched something. Something cold.

My hands flew back. But there was no sound, no movement. I stretched my fingers forward once more. Again they rested on a cold surface. A hard surface.

I ran them along, tracing an all too familiar outline. Hair. A face. Trina's hair and face. But hard and cold. Cold as—marble.

"She's stone!"

"Of course. They're all stone. All of them."

I moved on. Another figure. I almost collided with it. It was a standing man. Bristly hair.

"Margate."

Hollis sighed behind me.

"That's why we both had to come in, dammit. To lift them out. They're too heavy."

"But Hollis—what is it? What did this?"

"The thing," the captain answered.

My fingers fumbled toward a third figure.

"What thing?" I asked.

My fingers came to rest, and found the answer.

This surface was cold too, but it wasn't motionless. My hands moved over a long neck, and then up into an icy tangle. Hair.

But the hair moved, too. It was thick, horribly thick, in solid coils. Coils that suddenly came to life, writhing forth with a rustling.

Then I heard the hissing, felt the hair coiling around my wrist, jerked my hand away in frantic haste.

"Serpents!" I muttered.

"Get back!" Hollis yelled. "It's the thing—that damned Gorgon—the Medusa!"

As the hissing rose to a shrill crescendo I turned and ran blindly out of the cellar room.

7. Stone Broke

THAT'S the way it was.

It must have been over an hour before Hollis argued me into going back with him to get them out. I consented, finally, and we went to work.

They must have weighed at least three hundred pounds apiece. Gerymanx we had to slide across the floor—too heavy to lift. It was all we could do to keep him from chipping.

Two blind men, carrying statues. We made it, though. Until at last there was only the hissing thing.

We locked the door on it. It couldn't walk, of course. I wanted to burn the place, but it would cause trouble later on.

Hollis and I had a long talk. He wouldn't tell me much more about his voyage. Or about the charts and directions Margate gave him. I know he found it somewhere close to Crete, and that's all. He had to go into the cave alone—being blind, it couldn't harm him. It was after he had it out that Dave reached into the sack and one of the snakes bit him.

I shuddered over my own narrow escape when I heard that.

"Poor Dave," Hollis grunted. "Mebbe it was just as well. Boss had a later job for him. Going after one of these sirens—that's what you call them. Because he was deaf and couldn't hear it."

He wouldn't tell me any more.

So there we were.

"We'll have to get some sleep," Hollis told me. "Then we can figure something out."

But in the morning there was nothing figured out. I could see a little, though my eyes were puffy and swollen. I got another nasty shock when I looked at the statues we dragged out.

Usually I admire life-like work, but these things were too damned life-like to suit me. Or to suit themselves, I suppose. Trina was lovely, though. It broke my heart to look at her. And Gerymanx looked quite imposing. Margate had one hand stuck out straight, as though to steady himself. Jory and Mr. Simpkins were both caught in raid-howl. Their mouths were still open.

"Now what do we do?" Hollis groaned. "We can't go away and leave that Medusa thing down there alive."

"Why leave it alive?" I asked. "We can kill it."

He laughed sarcastically.

"That's what you think," he told me. "It won't die."

"But Perseus killed one."

"Who?"

"A Greek warrior. He had some kind of sword—"

"Boloney. It's still alive, ain't it? This Percy-what's-his-name must have been kidding somebody along."

"Never thought of that."

"Well, think of it, then. I know it won't die. Because I tried it myself."

"You did?"

"Sure. After it got Dave. I pumped six shots into the thing."

"You didn't!"

"You bet I did, dammit. And on the voyage back—two of the boys blundered onto it down in the cabin. Snoopers. It got them both. After that the rest went to work. The cook took a knife to it, from the rear. No result. Except that it turned around. I cooked the rest of the trip."

"It won't die, huh?"

"That's right."

This was a prettier problem than I'd expected. I looked at the stone faces around me. No solution there. But there must be a solution. I couldn't run off and leave that thing down in the cellar. Somebody would investigate sooner or later. And then.—more statues.

"I'm going down there again."

"Oh, no you don't. You can see now." I'd forgotten *that* little detail. I *could* see. I stared at my puffy eyes in the mirror.

Then I got it.

"Wait for me. I've found the way out."

"Not me. I'm heading for that yacht, and I'm not coming back."

"But Captain—"

He tapped off. I was left alone.

I acted fast. I found what I was looking for and went downstairs.

It was hard work unlocking the cellar door. It was harder work to nerve myself up to going in. The violet light shed its evil radiance through the chink of the keyhole.

But there was no choice. I opened the door and walked in.

The Medusa was against the wall in the center of the room. Alone, in Gorgonic glory. I heard the rustling whisper of the coiled tresses.

It didn't stop me.

I walked forward, holding the object I'd brought right squarely in front of my face. It was a shield.

"Hey!" I called.

The Gorgon wouldn't understand English. But this didn't matter. Just so long as I attracted attention.

"Hey—look!"

I was almost on top of it. But it looked. It must have looked.

Because I heard the damnedest hissing shriek that ever issued from the lips of nightmare. Whether it was the Gorgon or the serpents in its hair, I don't know.

That wail rose up as the Gorgon stared, and then there was silence.

After that, I stuck out my hand. I felt the cold face. The cold, *stony* face.

It had worked.

I dropped the object I was holding. It shattered there on the floor. But I didn't need it any more. Nor Perseus' sword.

I'd killed the Gorgon in the only possible way. I turned it to stone by showing it its own face in the mirror. So—

THERE it is. I've got two choices now.

I can go back to the employment agency and try to get another job. Something quiet and peaceful, like ditch-digging or assembly work in a boiler plant.

Or I could stay here and take care of my statues. I smashed the Medusa without looking at it. Used a crowbar. The others I have upstairs.

Margate has no relatives, so I might as well make myself at home. Let's see now—Trina would look good decorating the pool. Gerymanx would do for the foot of the staircase. I could make a gallery with Margate and Simpkins. As for Jory—I've got just the place for Jory.

I think that's die best solution, after all. Of course, I'll never touch anything that Margate dabbled in,,

Which reminds me. That bottle, with the *djinn* inside. Maybe I can get rid of that, too.

If you should happen to know of anybody who would like to buy a genuine *djinn,* cheap, just send him up to Margate's place. You'll recognize the house quite easily.

It's the one with the stone wolf on the front lawn.

Lefty Feep and the Sleepy-TIme Gal

Not even dragons could keep Feep from plunging on If the sleeping beauty was his goal!

IT was almost two o'clock in the morning when I stumbled into Jack's Shack and wearily gave my order to the waiter. I had spent a very tough day and a gruelling evening of work. Now I was so groggy I could almost see spots before my eyes.

As a matter of fact, I did see spots before my eyes. Very loud purple spots, on a very loud yellow suit.

Lefty Feep sat down opposite me.

I opened my mouth to yawn, and then let it hang that way in astonishment. The tall, gloomy-looking man-about-downtown was dressed in this shrieking suit, topped off with a bright orange shirt and a blue necktie. This outfit certainly didn't harmonize with anything but *delirium tremens*.

"Why, Lefty!" I greeted him. "What are you doing all dressed up, and at this time of night?"

"I am sitting opposite you in a restaurant," Feep answered. "And the reason I am all dressed up is because they do not allow you to come in here naked."

This was a reasonable answer, but it didn't satisfy me.

"I mean," I continued, "why aren't you in bed and asleep?"

Feep gave me a bitter stare.

"I do not lay in the hay today because I am just a lunk in the bunk," he told me.

"What's that mean in English?"

"Like I say, I am no score with the snore. My forty winks are on the blink."

"How's that?"

Feep sighed.

"I am up because I got insomnia."

"Insomnia? Too bad!" I stared at his haggard face.

The waiter appeared and Feep turned the haggard face towards him.

"Bring me a cup of black coffee," he moaned.

I stared at Feep in amazement. "If you have insomnia, why order black coffee?" I asked him.

"It will just keep you awake."

Feep grinned.

"Sure. I know that. I got insomnia and I want to keep it."

"You *want* insomnia?"

Lefty Feep nodded.

"But why not get some sleep?" I persisted.

"Because if I go to sleep I am liable to meet the girl of my dreams," he told me.

"Well, what's wrong with that?"

"I already met her."

"Already met the girl of your dreams? How could you?"

"From walking in my sleep," Feep answered. He sighed again. "Ever since, I wish very much to stay wide awake. Because if I dream about her it will give me a nightmare."

I scratched my head.

"Lefty Feep, you've told me some pretty wild yarns in your time—but I've never heard you talk in screwier riddles than the way you talk tonight.

You say you met the girl of your dreams, and now you're afraid to sleep because you might dream about her and it would be a nightmare."

"That's my story," said Lefty Feep.

"And you're stuck with it."

"I don't understand at all."

"Then I'll tell you."

Stifling a yawn with a piece of toast, Lefty Feep leaned across the table and told me the story.

And I was stuck with it.

EVER since I am a tiny tot I am a great guy for the shut-eye. *I* am a big number in slumber, and you never meet a deeper sleeper. When I am a moppet I sleep in school. After I grow up, I go to sleep on the job. Whenever I get a chance I head for a bed. I hit the hay some nasty blows in my time.

But up to a little while ago I am not the type of personality who walks in my sleep.

Once in a while I walk in other people's sleep. For example, when my landlady sleeps I walk out without paying the back rent.

Then, about a month ago, I find out that I am marching in the arms of Morpheus. I wake up from a sound slumber and find myself standing on the fire escape outside, or waltzing around in the hallway. Once I am even out on the street in my pajamas, which is very embarrassing to me because on this particular night I do not happen to wear any.

So I sit down and try to figure out this matter. Maybe I walk in my sleep because I can not stand the lousy mattress on my bed.

I shake the rocks and gravel out of it and make the landlady get me a new one, or at least one that is filled with soft stone.

But two nights later I am standing on the main stem during the early a.m. and snoring so loud I do not even hear the bell on the patrol wagon when it comes up to cart me away for walking around in public in my shorts.

I tell the judge I am a marathon runner, but the old beak still fines me five and costs. And not having any pockets in my shorts, I spend the rest of the night in the old clinkeroo. Even there I am always walking in my sleep and bumping into the bars.

So when I get back to my dump, I am very much down in it.

"Feep," I tell myself, "this has to stop. You can't take a hike every night. Maybe you better go see a morgue-booker."

Now one of the morgue-bookers I know is a doctor by the name of Sigmund. Being a psychologist, he is usually called Subconscious Sigmund. I meet him a while back and I figure this sleep-walking problem is right up his alley.

So I go right up his alley to his office.

SUBCONSCIOUS SIGMUND is sitting behind a pair of goggles when I come in.

"What can I do for you, Mr. Feep?" he inquires, getting out a straitjacket with a gleam in his eye.

"Put away the goof-overcoat," I snap. "I am not whacky. I only want to talk to you."

Subconscious Sigmund looks plenty disappointed when he hears this, because he is very fond of finding out what ticks in lunatics and he collects nuts like a squirrel.

"Too bad," he sighs. "I always figure, Feep, that some day you will be a fine patient."

"I am only impatient now," I tell him. "But maybe you can help me solve my problem."

So I slip him the story about my sleep-walking. He listens, and nods his head and pulls at his chin.

Then he gets out a little hammer and hits me on the knee with it, and he measures my skull, and he holds lights up in front of my eyes, and he is just getting ready to give me the hot-foot or something when I stop him.

"Cut out all the monkey business, Doc," I say. "All I want to know is what's wrong with me."

He gives me a dirty look.

"That," he says, "would take hours to tell."

"Meaning what?"

"Feep," says Subconscious Sigmund, "I'm afraid I have bad news for you."

"I can take it."

"I'm afraid you are a somnambulist."

I tear off my coat.

"Nobody can call me that," I yell, and dive for his neck. He holds me off.

"There's nothing wrong in that," Sigmund gasps. "It merely means you are a sleep-walker."

I groan.

"I know that! I tell you that! What I want to find out is how to cure it." Subconscious Sigmund shakes his head.

"It cannot be cured unless we discover the cause. Perhaps I might ask you a few questions about your slumber."

"You want to hear bedtime stories?"

"No. Just answer a few simple inquiries. Do you snore?"

"How else do you suppose a lovable guy like me gets divorced three times? All my wives get Bingo at Reno on the grounds that they can't stand my snoring."

"Aha!" Sigmund taps his head. There is a hollow echo. "Maybe that is the secret. Perhaps you walk in your sleep because you cannot stand the sound of your own snoring."

"Try again, Doc," I suggest. "You can do better than that."

"Well, how do you fall asleep, then? Maybe there is some subconscious manifestation there with a psychopathological connotation."

"The hell there is," I tell him. "I never am sick a day in my life."

"I mean, maybe there is a clue to some mental disturbance in the method you use to go to sleep."

“I just count sheep.”

“SHEEP?” repeats Subconscious Sigmund. “Sheep? Wool-gathering? No. Domestic fetish? No. Ah—I have it!”

“Well, give it to me, then.”

“Sheep have legs, haven’t they?”

“I do not know,” I answer. “I never notice. Now if you ask me if blondes have legs, then I am an expert—”

“Of course sheep have legs,” Sigmund interrupts. “And that is the clue. You count so many legs on these sheep that you get the impulse to walk. You fall asleep dreaming of movement. Locomotion. That is why you are a somnambulist.”

“I wish you would not use that word,” I sigh. “But suppose that is true? What am I going to do about it?”

“Stop counting sheep,” Sigmund tells me. “Count something else. Something without legs.”

“What would that be?”

“Well—snakes, for example.”

“I should count snakes? But how do you manage to see snakes?”

“I don’t know,” says Sigmund. “That’s your problem. Ten dollars please.”

So I walk out of the office with ten dollars worth of advice. I should count snakes, he says. And he doesn’t know how I can see snakes, either.

But I do.

There is only one way to see snakes around this town, and that is to take a drink at the Y-Go Inn.

So I go to the Y-Go.

It is quite a walk, and I am very tired from hiking in my sleep, but I manage to trundle my bunions down the street to the Y-Go Inn and shove my torn corns on the brass rail.

The Y-Go Inn is a very unusual tavern. At most places they serve you a shot, but here you get an explosion. The whiskey is not only frisky but risky, the beer is queer, and the only chaser you get is a guy with a blackjack who runs after you when you don't pay.

To be frank, the Y-Go Inn is not the kind of a place you want to be found dead in, and you have a very good chance of that if you dare to take more than two drinks.

But I am dying for a little honest slumber, and I know that if I have to see snakes this place has what it takes.

To make a long story censored, I spend about two hours and five bucks in the Y-Go Inn. One drink makes me shrink, two make me turn blue, three is enough for me, four and I can't find the door, five and I don't know if I'm alive, six and I'm doing tricks.

I sit there and doze away at a table, wishing I had a knife to fight the snakes off with. Because they are certainly coming.

The rattlesnakes aren't so bad. At least you can hear them. It is the cobras and the pythons I don't like, also the vipers. In a little while I am in the anaconda stage. Just before I fall asleep completely a crowd of dragons and dinosaurs come in and begin to do the conga.

But I remember what Subconscious Sigmund tells me, and I do not look at their legs. This is pretty hard to do, because I get the idea they are stepping on me. They push me right down into the dark, and I am falling, falling—

WHEN I wake up again I am walking, walking.

I know I am awake, because if I wasn't, I wouldn't feel it when I get hit on the head with a hammer.

And that is the way it feels. There is a lot of clamor with a hammer and so I know I am coming out of a hangover.

But what am I doing walking?

Where am I?

For a minute I am afraid to open my eyes. Evidently counting snakes does not cure me of sleep-walking. Evidently I get up from my chair in the Y-Go Inn and roll for a stroll.

Evidently.

Because when I finally do open my eyes I am lost. Absolutely and completely lost.

It is daylight, and I can see very plainly that I am walking down a country road like a barefoot boy with shoes on.

Now if there is one thing I know about this town, it is that there are no country roads in it. Therefore I am out of the city. Either that or out of my mind. Maybe both, because it certainly looks screwy around here.

There is nothing on either side of me but hills. The road I am following is nothing but a little winding trail. It isn't even a State Highway for goats. But here I am, climbing up in the hills like a mountain-william.

So I figure I must walk in my sleep all night at least. Maybe several days, because the stuff I drink usually puts you away for that long, if not forever.

Where I am does not matter so much to me, because there are two other things on my mind. My feet.

They ache very severely. I stop and examine my shoes and see that from now on I will wear them for spats. Because I walk the bottoms right off them.

This disturbs me because now I am actually a barefoot boy. I am lost in the hill country. I am tired. And I need all my strength to keep my tongue from hanging out so far it drags in the dust of the road.

But there is nothing to do but keep going until I come to a sign or a marker that tells me where I am marooned. So I pedal my extremities along and mumble unkind remarks under my breath about Subconscious Sigmund's advice and the Y-Go Inn's liquor and my sore feet.

THE higher I climb up the lower I feel. The more altitude I get the worse my attitude is. To say nothing of my bunions.

Then I see the sign. It is just a chalk-mark on some rocks, but I stop and read it with interest and sore eyes.

PRIVATE!
KEEP OUT!
NO TRESPASSING!
ABSOLUTELY NO VISITORS!
GO AWAY!!!
NO DOGS, CHILDREN, OR
HUMAN BEINGS ALLOWED!

Well, I am not a dog, and I am not a kid, either. And after all my troubles, I hardly feel human.

So I turn off at the little path behind the rocks and head into some woods.

All at once I nearly run head-on into a big cave. It sticks out from the rocks and the shrubbery up there and I almost fall into it. But I do not like the look of it, which is black. So I stand there and decide to see if it is empty.

"Hey," I yell. "Anybody home?"

Sure enough, a voice comes out.

"Go away," howls the voice. "I hate you!"

"But I want to talk to you."

"No visitors," snaps the voice.

"I'm not visiting. I just want some advice."

"Advice, eh?" snarls the voice. "I advise you to go jump in the lake."

"I would if I could find it, but I'm lost."

"Well, go and be lost someplace else."

"Come out and talk to me—I won't bite."

"No, but I will," the voice yells back.

"Please," I mumble.

"Well—" says the voice. "I dunno. Who are you?"

"Lefty Feep."

"Animal, vegetable, or mineral?"

"Name it and you can have it," I yell back.

“Oh, all right, then,” the voice grumbles. I hear something stirring around at the back of the cave, and in a minute this personality comes out.

HE is a very unusual-looking specimen, and if I ever get him on the end of a hook I would toss him back.

The guy is very tall, and he wears a very short burlap bag. He is also extremely thin, and so is the bag. I am so busy counting his ribs that I hardly notice his face. When I get around to that, I still can hardly notice it, because his face is all buried by a beard.

In fact, his whole face is nothing but a bush with a tomato sticking out. This seems to be his nose.

He stands there in the entrance of the cave and pulls the wool back from over his eyes. Then he squints at me and grunts.

“Goodbye,” he says.

“Goodbye? Why I haven’t said hello yet.”

“Then why bother? Go away.”

“But I’m lost!”

“You are? I’m Kermit the Hermit.”

“Pleased to meet you.”

“Why should you be?”

“Well, it’s good to see a human face again,” I tell him.

“Wish I could say the same about you.”

I do not like to take insults from this slap-happy pappy, but I have to find my way back to snivelization somehow. So I try to make friends.

“So you’re a hermit, eh?” I remark. “I often wonder why various personalities become hermits.”

“I am a hermit because I am allergic,” says the guy.

“Allergic? What are you allergic to?”

“Human beings.”

“You mean you don’t like people?”

"You talk too much," Kermit the Hermit tells me. "Why don't you go away?"

"Because I do not know which way it is," I say, very candid. "I am lost."

"What of it? I don't think anybody will miss you."

"But I want to get back to the city."

Kermit the Hermit gives me a sour look.

"What I do not figure out," he says, "is how you get up here in the first place.

"When I decide to become a hermit, I spend three years just looking for a spot like this where nobody ever goes. I go to the back woods and then I look for a place back of that. Why this place is so deserted I never even see a Fuller Brush man! And then you arrive. I can't figure it out!"

"Neither can I," I tell him. "But I do not wish to figure it out. I just want to get out."

KERMIT the Hermit shakes his beard and several woodticks jump out.

"I fear I cannot give you any directions," he says. "I have no knowledge of what paths exist around here. I just sit in my little cave and hate people all day long."

"Never mind your hobbies," I shriek, getting plenty irritated. "I can't waste any more time around this part of the country."

"Plenty of time," Kermit the Hermit grumbles. "Time is longer than anything."

All at once his eyes light up.

"Now that you're here," he says, "I think I have an idea. Why don't you become a hermit too?"

"Me, an uptown boy, a hermit?"

"Certainly. It's a wonderful life. Maybe you won't like the isolation at first, but you'll enjoy the solitude. The loneliness is good, too, particularly if there isn't anybody around. Besides, the emptiness is so deserted."

I begin to see for the first time why this knave lives in a cave.

It is so the squirrels won’t get him. But I certainly don’t want to pick raisins off this fruitcake. So I shake my head.

“I don’t care to become a hermit just yet,” I tell him. “Alimony or no alimony. All I want is out. If you can’t give me a road map, at least you can tell me how to find my way through these hills.”

“Very well then,” says Kermit, scratching the bottom of his burlap bag. “Maybe I cannot tell you where to go, but I can at least warn you where not to go.”

He stabs his skinny finger off in the direction of the trees to his left.

“Keep away from the valley beyond those trees,” he says.

“Why?”

“Don’t ask questions. I do not like questions because it is not good to talk about it.”

“What are you being mysterious about? What is in that valley?”

“Never mind. Just stay away.”

“Look here, my fine feather-brained friend,” I tell him. “I am not afraid of man nor beast, and I know plenty of both. Why, one time I even play around with the dwarfs that Rip Van Winkle knows up in the Catskills.”

Kermit the Hermit scowls.

“Beyond those trees is something worse than Sleepy Hollow,” he tells me. “It is a place where nothing stirs. That is why this country is so deserted. You are the first wideawake fellow I see here.”

“What do you mean?”

“There is a legend connected with the valley beyond,” he whispers. “They say the land is enchanted. Everyone there is fast asleep.”

“Are they pretty fast awake, too?” I ask. But he only sneers at gags.

“Do not mock,” he mutters. “I once ventured to the edge of the valley, and I can see that it has the look of a doomed place, a place to shun.”

“Well, give out the dope, ditto,” I request.

So Kermit the Hermit tells me the legend of the valley.

"A MIGHTY king resides in the valley beyond," he tells me. "He dwells in a great palace and is rich beyond men's wildest dreams. Servants and slaves attend him and keep his treasures. But his greatest riches is his beautiful daughter, the princess. She is a girl as beautiful as a dream.

"All this is long ago, remember. For a time comes when an enchantment falls upon the land. A wicked enemy of the king condemns the monarch and his daughter and all his people to an unending sleep.

"Now all in the castle, all in the village, and all in the land around lie in enchanted slumber. The legend foretells of the coming of a Prince Charming who will win through to the castle. His kiss shall awake the Sleeping Beauty who lays asleep in the castle and cause the enchantment to dissolve."

Of course, when I hear this from Kermit the Hermit I immediately know several things. First, that he is screwy. Second, that what he is giving me is an old kid's yarn about the Sleeping Beauty. And third, that maybe there is some truth in it at that.

I try to translate his line of gab into English again and that way it makes some sense.

Some old moneybags builds himself a fancy mansion back in the hills a long time ago. This tycoon goon lives there with a flock of flunkeys. His daughter is a pretty fancy frail. Then all at once the whole gang goes down with some kind of sleeping sickness and there they lie.

But I decide to humor my cave-man companion a little.

"Sounds plausible to me," I tell him. "But why don't you ever go there yourself? You could be Prince Charming and pull this frail out of her Mickey Finn-ish with a smack on the puss and win yourself a honey with money." Kermit the Hermit smiles.

"Don't you understand? The region is enchanted, I tell you. That is why it is deserted around here—because of the enchantment. Anyone who ventures into the valley falls asleep at once, like all those in it."

"I see."

“Besides,” scowls Kermit, changing his tone of voice, “I do not like women anyway, because they are so feminine. And beautiful women are much too attractive and pretty.”

“The Princess is a real ginch, eh?”

“She’s the girl of every man’s dreams,” he tells me. “Imagine a maiden of about eighteen, with alabaster skin, hair like spun gold, a neck as graceful as a swan’s—with ruby lips and eyes like stars.”

“Wow!” I remark, imagining same. “What would anyone want with a girl like that?” he grunts.

I do not tell him.

BUT I am beginning to think over his little bedtime story.

A beautiful ginch like that, with money too—in a slumber beyond the lumber. Just waiting for a Prince Charming to come along and kiss those ruby lips of hers!

Maybe it is true, after all. Maybe it is destiny that makes me walk in my sleep, as well as bad liquor.

Maybe I am supposed to wake the Sleeping Beauty!

You see, there is something I do not tell Subconscious Sigmund when he psychoanalyzes me. Something I do not tell Kermit the Hermit, either. I am just a wee bit ashamed of it.

After all, at my age, and with my experience with various tomatoes I run around with and marry, it will sound foolish to confess that I walk in my sleep because I dream of some Jeanie with light brown hair.

But it is the truth.

Ever since I start this sleep-walking I have this dream about a beautiful ginch. She is a blondie, and looks just like the number Kermit the Hermit describes in his report on local gossip.

Can it be that I dream about this number in my slumber because she is the Sleeping Beauty?

Anyhow, it is worth finding out.

So I stride off through the woods in the direction that Kermit the Hermit is pointing.

"Hey!" he yells. "Where are you going?"

"I'm off to see this Beauty cutie," I reply.

"But it means your death—you'll fall asleep like all the rest and be put under enchantment."

"Listen," I tell him, "I am an uptown boy and I will not be caught napping."

"I warn you!"

"And who are you? Just a wart in this neck of the woods!"

"Is that so?" yells Kermit the Hermit, jumping out of his burlap sack in excitement. "And just who do you think *you* are?"

"Me? I am Prince Charming, of course!"

All at once Kermit the Hermit gives a little grunt and trots after me.

"I must admit I admire your courage," he says. "So you really are going to take a chance?"

"Why not? It isn't far to the valley—only a sleeper jump."

"But how do you expect to keep awake?"

"I don't," I tell him. "Only you forget there is one thing that makes me different—one thing which makes me think I can get through to the castle even if I fall under the spell of this supernatural Mickey Finn and doze off."

"What is that?" he asks.

"Well, I can walk in my sleep. I'll just keep right on going, whether I'm awake or not!"

Kermit the Hermit grunts again.

"You know, I think you might do it at that," he cackles. "Here—wait a while and maybe I can help you."

"How?"

"I'll just step into the cave and brew something up for you."

So I sit down, wondering what the old goat is going to do, and pretty soon a smell breezes out of the cave.

"What's cooking?" I yell.

"Coffee!" says Kermit the Hermit.

"SURE enough, in a little while he runs out with a couple of thermos jars filled with coffee.

"This might help to keep you awake," he says.

"I appreciate it," I answer. "If I win the princess I will come back here and build you a swell new cave with inside plumbing."

"Bah!" sneers Kermit the Hermit.

"I don't want anything. Now go away. I'm beginning to like you, and if there's anything I hate it's liking people. The trouble with knowing people is that after a short acquaintance they become friendly."

I can see he is getting one of his dizzy spells again, so I pick up the thermos jugs and march off into the distance.

The last I see of Kermit the Hermit, he is waving goodbye to me with the end of his beard.

Then I get into the trees and it is over the river and through the woods for me. As I mention before, the country is plenty wild around here.

Now it gets wilder. And so do I, because I am always tangling my trousers in the underbrush, or getting my coat caught on the bushes.

After about half an hour of hiking, I begin to feel tired, so I stop and open one of the thermos jugs to take a gulp of hot coffee. This sets me right, and I wade on some more.

By this time I am practically lost again. Nothing around me but trees. For a minute I am tempted to turn back, but there are two reasons I do not do so.

The first reason is I want to see if there is anything to this yarn about the snoozing cutie. The second reason for not turning back is that I no longer know which way is back.

So I tramp further and further and it gets darker and darker.

Then, all of a sudden, there is a change in scenery.

I feel it first before I see it.

The air is suddenly very still. The little breeze that runs through the woods dies down to nothing. The trees stop rustling their leaves and the grass doesn't blow.

That's what I feel. Stillness.

Then I see the stillness.

THE branches over my head just droop without any swaying. The bushes under my feet hang down. The flowers are all closed up.

At first I think these hunks of vegetation are dead. Then I realize they are asleep!

More and over, I notice that there are ants on the bark of the trees—and the ants don't move. Even when I reach out and touch them, they stay still. Fast asleep.

Looking up, I can see birds hanging upside down from the trees. Other birds are lying in their nests with their feet in the air, dead to the world. Sound asleep.

I am beginning to droop myself. So I swig some more coffee, finishing up the first thermos jug, and go on.

All at once I hear something. A noise. A terrible noise. There is an awful grunting sound from in back of the bushes. I step ahead right on tiptoes and peek around.

And so help me Little Red Riding Hood, I see a big grey wolf!

His mouth is open, but his eyes are shut. He is also sound asleep, and what a sound! Because the noise I hear is the wolf, snoring.

I walk on, and now I notice a lot of little things I overlook before. Squirrels in the trees, asleep. Rabbits and gophers and chipmunks making a try at shut-eye. Minks catching forty winks. Woodchucks sawing wood.

And all the while the trees are getting thicker and thicker. So are my eyelids. There is nothing to do but stop again, open the second thermos jug, and inhale black coffee.

Then I resume my ramble through the brambles.

I go a few feet between some very thick trees with moss on them, and I see this guy.

He is a fat little personality, and his belly hangs on the ground. This is not as bad as it sounds, because he is sitting down. To be exact, he is propped up against the base of a tree, snoring away for dear life.

It is not his looks that intrigue me so much as the clothes he is wearing. I examine them very closely—a high bowler hat, a choke collar, and a checkered suit that looks like it gets rained on during Lincoln's Gettysburg Address.

To be brief, this sleeping citizen is dressed like the old family album characters of 1860 or some such annum.

Naturally this puzzles me plenty. I walk up to him and tap him politely on the derby. Nothing happens. So I take off the derby and tap him impolitely on the noggin. Still nothing happens.

Then I give him a diplomatic kick. He doesn't stir. He snores on. I shake him and jump back a foot because something sticky falls into my hand. It is a spider-web, hanging from his nose!

Another look and I even see the spider. But the spider is asleep!

FOR the first time I realize that there is actually some truth to what the hermit tells me. This specimen looks as though he is sleeping here for the last 80 years!

I just have to take another swig of coffee on that, and I only wish it is something stronger.

Then I march on. By this time there is a thicket twining around all the trees and I almost need to cut my way through. So I bring out a little knife I carry around with me in case of trouble or crap games, and slice the vines in front of me in order to keep moving.

In a little while I stumble across another exhibit for the sandman, another, and what a, man.

Only this one is lying right across the path. He is wearing one of those coonskin caps and buckskin breeches like this historical character, Daniel Goon. He carries a squirrel rifle, but it is plenty rusty from lying on the ground. And the citizen is plenty dusty from the same cause.

I run across him so fast I actually step on him. But he doesn't stir.

One more gulp of coffee and twenty yards later I spot two items in white wigs and brass button coats. They are right out of Washington's time—as a matter of fact, they look like a couple of Valley Forgers to me.

This time I do not bother to shake or wake them. I know it is useless, and besides I need my strength. I am very bleary and weary.

But I hack along, and down under the vines ahead I kick my foot against some armor. This armor is worn on the chest of a Spanish-looking greaser with a beard like the youngest Smith Brother. I do not even like to think about how long he sleeps here. Maybe two or three hundred years.

I realize more than ever that Kermit the Hermit is right when he says Rip Van Winkle is an insomniac compared to these lazybones.

Now, with my own eyelids trying to make an open-and-shut case out of me, I more than ever long to turn back.

But I think of the Sleeping Beauty. All of these finks try for the jackpot and fail. Will I be caught asleep at the switch? Never!

So I hack on.

NOW I see a lot of guys lying all over the woods—drowsy but frowsy. The place resembles an outdoor flophouse. But no flophouse ever has such residents as these.

Because they are evidently going further and further back in history. There is an old duffer in tights and a cap such as they prance in France in about 1600. Then I spot a couple of English soldiers with long bows. Pretty soon I come to a knight in full armor with a broadsword. He has it up in the air, plowing away at a branch, and evidently he falls asleep standing up, because the sword is still in the air.

When I think of how he must step right out from the center of the Middle Ages, cold chills run up and down my spine.

More coffee.

When I put the thermos cap back on there is only a little left. I wonder how much further I have to go. Not too far, I hope, or I will probably run into sleeping ape men and dinosaurs.

I cut my way into the brush another stretch, getting wearier and wearier. One more yawn and I know I'm gone.

I open my mouth, but no yawn comes out.

Instead, it's a scream.

Because just when I think about seeing dinosaurs, I do see one!

At least I see a long green tail. It is too long and too thick to belong to a snake. It curls out from behind a giant tree up ahead.

I approach very slowly, because how can you walk fast with your knees knocking together?

One look at what is behind that tree and I am back in my hangover.

It is a dragon!

As I exist and inhale, curled up behind the tree in those deep-sleep woods.

It is a *dragon!*

The meanest, greenest dragon you ever want not to see!

The minute I scream, I regret it greatly. Because I do not desire to attract the attention of anything like a dragon at this time.

But nothing happens. I notice then that the dragon is fast asleep, like everything else in the forest. It does not snore, but with every breath a little jet of smoke and flame spouts out of its nostrils. Seeing as how the dragon has a head the size of a blast furnace, this is not remarkable.

I decide to go away from there with quick swiftness, just in case the dragon does wake up. So I move my legs. Nothing happens.

I can not move. I am too tired to go on.

So I open the thermos jug for coffee.

IT is all I can do to unscrew the lid, I am so weary. But I get it off. One gulp of nice hot coffee will wake me up again.

Only I do not get a gulp of nice hot coffee. I get a mouthful of cold coffee!

This I do not even swallow, because I am already falling asleep.

“You must stay awake, Lefty!” I tell myself. “Once you lay yourself down to sleep you’ll never get up.”

But I can’t help it. I am getting numb all over.

I try to grope in my pockets for a match. Maybe if I light a fire and heat the coffee in time—

There are no matches in my pocket.

What to do? Fall down and snooze in the ooze? I try to think, but all I do is blink. Hot coffee—

In between blinks I look back and see the dragon. He is still breathing.

“Saved!” I yell.

I muster up all my bluster and manage to drag myself back to the dragon.

Then I pull out the thermos jug and hold it up. I take out the inside part with the coffee in it and stick it over the dragon’s schnozzola.

Every time he breathes the fire comes out. And in a minute or two it boils my coffee again!

I just manage to raise the jug to my kisser and swallow the coffee.

Immediately I get hep to a little pep.

I stride off and make a slash and dash on through the woods.

From now on the Boy Scouts will have nothing on me! At least, not when I have a sleeping dragon handy.

I creep along like the Last of the Moe Hickans, or whatever his name is, and my final burst of speed wins the day.

All of an instant I am chopping my way clear of the woods and coming out on the other side.

I stand on a little hill, looking down at a valley. In the valley is a small town. It looks like a typical hick burg, except for one thing.

In the center of the town is a castle.

Not a millionaire’s mansion, but a genuine, authentic castle—like the ones Warner Brothers build for Errol Flynn. It has battlements and turrets and bastions and all that kind of nonsense on it, too.

I KNOW at a glance that this is where the Sleeping Beauty is making lazy like crazy.

Down the hillside I go, all keyed up. I do not mind my weariness any more.

Pretty soon I am walking right through the village.

The streets are made of cobblestones and the houses are very ancient. They look like the ones in old picture books, with stork’s nests on top. In fact, I see a stork in one, standing on one leg, sound asleep.

Some of the doors of the houses are open and I can look inside. Sure enough, the whole village is filled with slumberlanders!

A cook is asleep over his oven. Three brats are asleep hunched over a marble game. An old man snoozes under a tree. A milkmaid is snoring at the business end of a cow.

Down next to the village hall, the town cop is sleeping in his chair. But then, there is nothing so unusual in that.

What is unusual is the costumes these personalities wear. They are all ancient vintage stuff, like they wear in Europe during the time of the early-number Louies in France.

Here in the village the drowsiness hits me again, and I am ready to go down for the count. But I drag along to the big moat in front of the castle, because now I must not fail.

After all—I walk in my sleep, I yearn for this girl of my dreams—and here is the chance to make it all worth while. The chance to make it all come true for me.

I mumble Kermit the Hermit’s words under my breath for encouragement. “Hair like spun gold, a neck as graceful as a swan’s.” Perfect! And rich, too.

So, drowsy but lousy, I head into the big stone castle.

From then on it all seems familiar—just like in the yarn they hand the nursery brats.

In the castle kitchen the knaves are asleep over their tarts. The scullions are resting their skulls on the tables. The page boys are lying on the floor with a pack of wolf hounds.

I ignore them and creep upstairs. There, in a long hall, sits an old geezer with a beautiful purple robe, trimmed with vermin. There is a crown on his head, and I know that he is the king.

But the fatigue has got old fatty, and he leans back on his throne and snores.

Next to him is the queen. She will not make such a bad-looking mother-in-law at that, I figure.

I do not waste any more time.

Because I am beginning to get impatient to see my future brawl-and-chain.

Besides, believe it or not, I am actually beginning to feel more and more at home here! It all seems natural enough now, that I should come high-tailing into a fairy-tale and double for Prince Charming.

Who knows? Maybe it is Fate. Maybe I am meant to meet my dream girl face to face.

Anyway, I am going to have a try at it.

SO I bounce up the steps to the second floor of the castle and start looking for the bedroom of the Princess.

The first bedroom has nothing in it but wolf-hounds again. I let sleeping dogs lie.

The second bedroom houses a couple of dignified-looking old babies who I take to be the court ladies.

But the third bedroom!

I can tell from the handsome carved door that this is it.

So I stop and slick my hair down, straighten my tie, and pick a few of the burrs out of my bustle.

Then I pucker up my lips a few times for practice, and walk in.

Sure enough! There, in the big room, lying on a huge canopy bed, is the Princess.

I can tell it is her at a glance, even though she is sleeping with her head under the covers. The sheets are thin, and the pattern of the body underneath them would win any beauty contest.

I tiptoe over to the bed and look down for a minute.

Just during that second I have a little qualm in my mind.

Should I wake the Princess?

I never believe in fairy tales, but this one seems to be true. Should I spoil it all by waking her up and passing myself off as Prince Charming?

Then I think of the girl of my dreams—eyes like stars, ruby lips, that alabaster skin, the neck as graceful—oh nuts! I am not much on the poetry.

But a beautiful blonde, with money!

So I bend down very gently, pull the covers back, and kiss the Sleeping Beauty.

SHE turns around. She stirs. She throws the covers off her head. She is awake!

She sits up.

I look at her.

All at once I am not tired any more.

I am peppy enough to give a loud yell.

I am also peppy enough to run like hell out of there—down the stairs, through the village, and all the way through the woods.

When I get into the woods, I am encouraged to run some more. Because when I wake the Princess, everybody else wakes up, too. The castle and village people are awake, and the personalities asleep in the woods also rise and shine. And so does the dragon—only he must sneeze when he does so, on account of the woods are suddenly on fire.

That is why I hop through them in such a hurry And just in time, too. They burn very swiftly, and I know that the woods, the village, and the castle will be going up in smoke behind me.

I come out somehow on a road, way down past the cave of Kermit the Hermit. By this time I am quite a sight with my torn clothes and singed hair, to say nothing of the horrified expression I must register on my puss.

It is enough to make the truck-driver compassionate when he comes bouncing down the road at this time. He gives me a lift and asks no questions, and so I arrive back at the city.

You might think I am plenty tired because of all these experiences, and you might think right. But I do not wish to sleep. It's like I say—if I sleep I may see the face of the Sleeping Beauty, and that I cannot stand.

* * *

LEFTY FEEP sank back in his chair.

"There is one thing I cannot stand," I remarked.

"What is it?"

"Your story," I told him.

"What is wrong with it?" Feep inquired, through a yawn.

"What is right with it?" I countered. "First of all you try to make me believe that an old fairy tale is actually true! That's bad enough. Then you make it worse."

"Worse?"

"Of course. You say you actually were the party who woke up the Sleeping Beauty. And you ran away."

"Naturally."

"Naturally, eh? How do you explain that?"

"Well—"

I raised my hand and silenced Feep. "I think I know what you'll tell me. You'll tell me she wasn't the Sleeping Beauty at all, but some ugly old woman."

"Not at all. She is the Sleeping Beauty and the story is true. That's the whole trouble," Feep answered. "The story is *too* true."

"Too true?"

"Yes. She is too much like the descriptions of such a fairy-tale Princess. That is why I cannot stand to look at her. Because when a fairy tale comes true, it is pretty awful."

Feep sighed. "I run away, and so would you."

"Why," I snapped. "Just what did she look like?"

Feep grinned.

"You remember the description of the dame that Kermit the Hermit hands me? A maiden of about eighteen, with alabaster skin, hair like spun gold, a neck as graceful as a swan's—with ruby lips and eyes like stars?"

"Yes."

"Well, that is what she looks like. And I ask you," said Lefty Feep. "Would you marry a girl with white stone skin, hair like gold wire, a swan's neck, and a lot of jewelry where her lips and eyes should be?

"Give me a taxi-dancer, any time!"

"Give me some of that black coffee," I sighed. "I think I need it, too."

1943

The Eager Dragon

I AM sitting in Thin Tommy's tavern, and maybe I have a couple too many.

This is quite possible, because I hear customers say that even one drink of Thin Tommy's whiskey is too many. But I have maybe five or six in a row, so I get about as high as the national debt.

Which is how I happen to get talking to these two strangers. They are sitting down at the other end of the bar, minding their own business—which seems to be liquor importing, if the way they spin the bottle is any indication. Each of them manages to import about a fifth of scotch down his throat while I watch. And they do not bother with any Emily Post stuff, either, such as pouring their drinks into glasses first.

Now I am not the type of personality who pries into other people's affairs. Particularly in a place like this, where it is not safe to shake hands with strangers unless you have heavy insurance on your fingers.

So after gulping my sixth anti-freeze I slide off the stool to go home. I do not intend to speak to these jerks, but one of them turns around and gabbles at me.

"I beg your pardon," he says, very polite. "But you have your foot caught in a cuspidor."

If there is anything I'm a sucker for, it's politeness. Besides, when I look down I see that I have indeed stuck my left foot into one of Thin Tommy's finger-bowls.

"Thank you for the information," I tell the stranger. "I hardly notice such a thing because I expect to walk a little funny after drinking the stuff they serve here."

"It is vile, isn't it?" says the first stranger. "Won't you have another one with me?"

Well, who can refuse such a courteous invitation? I sit down again and manage to get my Thom McCan out of the cigar-pond, and the two strangers pour me a shot, and before you can say Jack Robinson I am too stinko to pronounce it.

That is how it happens I get so gabby, I guess.

Because the first stranger—a tall, skinny guy with glasses—says, "We are a couple of traveling salesmen. We are stranded here miles from the nearest farmer's daughter. Isn't it sad?"

And the second stranger—a fat, older guy with a bald head—says, "We are working our way through second childhood selling magazines to colleges. Our car breaks down tonight and here we sit out in the country where nothing happens since the last time Halley's Comet went through." Evidently he refers to some traveling burlesque show, but I am just high enough to resent this crack about nothing ever happens.

YOU see, I like it here in the country, ever since I retire from the rackets and buy me a chicken farm. Besides, things are far from peaceful lately on my cackle ranch. In fact, what happens to me recently is so screwy I never mention it—but now I am too groggy to keep from leading with my jaw.

"Nothing ever happens here?" I say, to the bald-headed guy. "Listen, I can tell you stories that will make your hair stand on end, if you buy a wig."

"Such as?" pipes the first guy.

"I may look like a farmer but I am not handing you any corn," I say.

"Such as?" insists the first guy.

"You wouldn't believe me," I say.

"You tell me and I'll believe it," the first guy yells. "Tell me just one thing that ever happens to you around here."

"Well, about a week ago I am driving along about a mile down the road and I meet a knight," I begin.

"A what?"

"A knight—from King Arthur's court."

"Do you sniff the stuff or use a needle?" asks the bald-headed salesman. The tall guy whispers, "Say—your strait-jacket's showing."

"I tell you you won't believe me," I remind them.

"Go ahead. This is interesting."

"I meet this knight, from King Arthur's court. Sir Pallagyn, his name is."

"He tells you his name?"

"Why not?"

"Then maybe he also tells you what he's doing and how he got here."

"Of course. Merlin sent him."

"Merlin?"

"Merlin is the boss of the magician's union," I explain. "He can send his boys forward and backward in Time without paying cab fare. He sends Sir Pallagyn here on a big job—to put the snatch on a pedestal for a loving-cup he calls the Holy Grail."

"Aaaargh!" remarks the thin jerk. He is either commenting on my story or strangling on the drink he swallows. So I make with the tongue some more.

"I find out this pedestal is in a museum back in town, so the knight and I sneak in after dark. We goniff it easy, because Merlin sends some hoods from the Round Table mob to help us."

"Where is this Sir Pallagyn now?" asks the baldy jag, in a sweet voice. "I suppose he is hiding out somewhere so the government can't claim his armor for defense priorities."

"I am sorry," I mumble. "But when Pallagyn and his boys get the pedestal they are after, Merlin drags them back through Time again. And that is how it stands."

"It stands kind of wobbly to me," insists the dandruff-victim. "You are wasting your time if you are a chicken farmer. You should be a rodeo star, the way you can throw the bull."

"Listen, my fine featherless friend," I remark, "if you think you can stand there with your bare head hanging out and call me a liar, you are not only mistaken but probably dead."

"No offense, buddy," he comes back. "Only you got to admit your story is a little hard to believe."

"I know that and I am willing to prove it to you," I say. "It so happens that Sir Pallagyn leaves his glue barrel in my barn back at the farm. It is a big white nag, all covered with a fancy tin blanket to keep out the flies or something. One look will tell you it isn't any fake and I am not palming off any Derby winner on you."

I AM really third degree burned by all these insinuations, to say nothing of the dirty cracks. I really mean it now when I suggest we all three climb into my truck and ride out to the stable for *k* look at the horse.

"Fine idea," says the thin fink with the glasses. So we all have another drink on that and then we go outside.

This time I do not even notice the cuspidor on my foot until we are way up the road—which gives some idea of how reeko I am.

We climb into the truck, I shag on the gas, and pretty soon we pull up at my poultry villa.

Then I help them out of the truck. Archie Biggers—that's the thin one's name—won't get out without another drink. Larry Cotton, the baldy guy, says if he has another drink he can't get out. So I compromise and drink it for him.

After that I lead Archie and Larry right to the barn in back of the house; which is no small job itself, the way they are walking.

"Now you'll see if I'm lying or not," I say, rattling the door.

The door opens without unlocking, which is funny. I step inside. I light a match. I let out a yell.

"Somebody stole my horse!"

"Huh!" snorts Archie. "I thought so."

"That's a horse on you," says Larty. "Don't bother to lock the barn door when you go out."

"But it's true," I insist. "The horse is right, here when I leave tonight. Look—here is the hay I put out for it."

I hold up the second match and show them the hay-pile. Then I let out another yap and drop to my knees.

"What's this?" I holler, pointing to a big round white thing in the hay-pile.

"Why, a horse-egg, of course," sneers Archie.

"It's an egg all right," I agree. "But look at the size of it—why, it's over three feet long!"

And it is, too; a big, round white egg with long yellow splotches on it and a smell that his hardly Grade A.

"Wait a minute," Archie says. He stoops down and picks up a piece of grayish paper lying next to the egg. "Writing on it," he whispers. "In water colors or something. Can't make it out—bad spelling—"

"Give it here," I request, grabbing it politely. "I am expert on spelling, particularly such spelling as those lousy kidnapers use that put the snatch on my horse."

"Put the snatch on?"

"Sure. This is doubtless a ransom note from the mob stealing my nag. There is nothing I hate and detest more than a horse-napper!"

But it turns out I am mistaken.

The writing is some kind of water-color job, and the spelling is terrific. But I can figure out what the note says.

> Sir Butch:
>
> Methinks in the excitement I forgot to send for the steed. I take it now, lest Pallagyn go unmounted as a churl.
>
> Pallagyn thanks you for your seemly courtesy and bespeaks right highly your prowess as a wizard. It behooves me therefore to tender you

> this little token of my esteem as a fitting reward for your assistance. It is a seemly gift from one wizard to another, and may serve as a reminder of the gratitude of Merlin.

THIS is not only lousy spelling but lousy grammar—in fact, it reminds me of the way this Sir Pallagyn talks. Maybe this Merlin is not so much of a brain after all.

But what puzzles me is why he sends an egg for a present to a chicken farmer.

"Don't ask me," says Larry. "I don't even know what kind of an egg it is. It certainly isn't a Plymouth Rock. Looks more like a Plymouth Mountain."

"I wonder what's inside," I mumble. "We can't find out till it hatches."

"Well, how we going to hatch it?"

"It's too big for a chicken to sit on."

"Something has to sit on it though," I tell them. "From the looks of it, it should hatch soon."

"From the smell of it, it better hatch soon," says Archie.

"I've got an idea!" yells Larry. "We aren't doing anything tonight. Let's all of us sit on it."

"You mean we should hatch this egg?"

"Why not? It's warm here. We have to sleep some place, you know. We might as well curl up in the hay, sleep on the egg, and wait until it breaks open. I want to see what's coming off here, anyway."

So after another drink it doesn't sound so screwy any more. Archie lays down on one side of me and Larry lays down on the other side. All three of us cuddle up to the big white egg with its thick shell.

I close my eyes, and maybe it's only my head throbbing but I think I hear something pounding away under the egg shell. And maybe it's only the snores of Archie and Larry, but I get the idea I hear noises inside the egg.

What could be hatched from an egg over three feet long? Why it must weigh a couple hundred pounds! More than that, who cares?

That is how I feel after the last drink, so I just go right off to sleep. But all the time I think I hear the egg making noises, and after while I begin to dream about the kind of things which probably lay such eggs. And I do not like to dream about radio comics.

It is pretty late in the morning when I wake up because somebody is shaking me.

At first I think it is Archie, but he is asleep. Then I look at Larry, and he is sleeping too.

But I am being shaken. My head is going up and down.

Then I realize. The egg is moving under my head!

I jump up, but quick, before I get my neck broken. Tire egg is cracking in long strips in about a dozen places, and the chunks in between are heaving and falling off. There is no doubt about it now—I do hear noises from under the shell. There is no doubt about my smelling something either.

The egg is hatching.

By this time, Archie and Larry are awake and on their feet. But I do not watch them.

I watch the strips of shell peeling off the egg and watch the green stuff underneath moving up and down.

“What in blazes?” asks Archie, hopping up and down on one foot and pointing.

What he is pointing at is a long green thing waving out of the end of the egg. It looks like a snake without a head.

We do not answer him, Larry and I, because we are looking at the *other* end of the egg. There is another green thing sticking out of this end, and it *is* the head. You can’t make any mistake about it, because this head is several feet long and several more feet wide, and it is the kind of a head nobody would ever forget, even though they would want to forget it very much indeed.

Larry points at one end and Archie points at the other, and then both of them point at the middle. Because the eggshell cracks, and we see the thing come out.

IT IS about eight feet long and four feet high, and how it manages to curl up in a three-foot egg I don't know. But then there are a lot of things I don't know about it, and I have a hunch I do not greatly care to find out. What it looks like and what it smells like is enough to hold me for a long, long time.

"Thin Tommy should tell me," I say. "Usually when I drink his whiskey I expect lizards or snakes. But he should tell me when he switches me to a stronger brand."

But I cannot help but give the thing a gander. We all stand there staring like we saw Dorothy Lamour stepping out of a sarong instead of that green scaly thing waltzing out of a busted egg shell.

Like I say, it is eight feet long and about four feet high. Part of the eight feet is a snaky-looking tail. Part is a fat, beer-barrel body all covered with warts and scales like a flophouse bum. But the biggest and worst part is the steam-shovel it uses for a head. This is round and green, with big bulging eyes, and practically all the rest is mouth and teeth.

It wobbles around on four stumpy legs.

I wobble around on two, myself. For some reason I get the impression that this thing is slightly repulsive. In fact, my face gets nearly as green as the one it exhibits.

But all at once Larry is pointing at it and jumping up and down like he has just got a double hot-foot.

"I know what it is!" he yells. "It's a *dragon!"*

"What's a dragon?" I say, glancing down at my trousers to see if the suspenders slip.

"That's a dragon. You know, like in the story books. Back in King Arthur's days the woods are full of them. This Merlin must think he is paying you a compliment as a wizard when he sends you a dragon's egg."

"Sure, that's what it is," says Archie. "Come on down out of there."

He is talking to me. Because when he mentions the word "dragon" I all of a sudden find myself climbing up the side of the barn to the hay-rack.

Now I get down real slow, because I am not a personality that likes to hurry—particularly when it comes to meeting such things as dragons or hungry tigers or ex wives.

"He won't hurt you," Archie argues "He's just a baby."

"What you want me to do, nurse him?"

I inquire. "I am not of a mind to become a diaper artist for any walking boa-constrictors. Furthermore—*uuuuuuuh!"* Maybe this *"Uuuuuuuh!"* doesn't make sense, but it sounds very apt when I say it, because right then the dragon walks over to me and begins to rub against my leg.

"It is just like a kitten," Archie tells me. "Quit rattling your knees, or you'll brain it to death."

SURE enough, the dragon begins to purr real soft, like the Twentieth Century Limited on a clear track. It looks up at me, and all at once it grins.

"Isn't that sweet?" says Larry. "See how affectionate it is?"

"I know a character back in town who smiles like this," I mention. "He recently fried for bumping off three old ladies with a butcher's cleaver."

"Go ahead, pat it on the head. It's perfectly safe," says Archie.

I feel about as safe as a peace treaty with Hitler, but I reach down and run my hand over the dragon's scaly noggin once or twice. Then I smile, more in relief at getting my hand back than at anything else. And it smiles at me again.

FOR the first time I notice it has blue eyes. They are very pretty eyes—for a dragon. A sort of baby blue. They remind me of a dame I once knew, name of Daisy the Fish.

"Love at first sight," Archie sighs.

"All right, now we have our first sight and what do we do with this overgrown chameleon?"

“What do we do about it?” yells Larry. “What do we do about it?” he hollers, running around the hay pile. “Why listen, man—don’t you realize what you have here?”

“A hangover.”

“Hangover? You’ve got a million bucks, that’s all! A cool million!”

“I don’t even see a hot penny,” I tell him.

“Listen.” Larry stops running and begins to wave his arms. “You are the owner of the only live dragon in captivity—a real, flesh and blood dragon, the only one ever seen in the world for centuries! Don’t you realize what this means?”

“Think of Science!” says Archie.

“I rather think of the million,” I answer.

“That’s just what I’m telling you,” Larry breaks in. “You know that Gargantua the circus carries around?”

“You mean that big ape who looks like La Guardia?”

Sure. Why they pay thousands of dollars just to show such an attraction. Think of what they’d give you to have a real live dragon to exhibit.”

“Well, I’ll be—”

“Rich! Just leave it to me.”

So that is how it works out.

“We’re just the salesmen for a stunt like this,” Larry tells me. “We’ll head for town and handle the business end. Straight 25 percent cut. We’ll contact circus people and set a deal. It may take about a week or so, but don’t worry.

“Just take care of baby, here. See that it gets enough to eat. And above all, keep it out of sight, whatever you do. No word of this must leak out to anyone.”

“I *got to* hide out here and play house with this lizard?” I squawk.

“Think of the money in it,” Larry comes back. “You’ve got a fortune if you do what we tell you.”

So he and Archie borrow my truck and head for town. And I am left with a dragon on my hands.

II

I DO not know if you ever have a dragon for a visitor, but it is not such a situation I am equipped to handle. I begin to wish right away that Merlin gives a little advice along with his present or at least sends me a book on THE CARE AND FEEDING OF DRAGONS.

Because I can tell at first glance that this dragon is hungry. Not five minutes after Larry and Archie clunk off, the dragon begins to look at me with those big baby blue eyes and I know something has got to be done.

After all, it is only a moppet, so to speak, and you have to take care of moppets. I never bring up a brat myself, but one thing I realize is that kids are always hungry. Particularly when they cry.

Which is just what this dragon starts to do when it looks at me. Its eyes blink and out comes two tears about the size of footballs.

I just stand there and listen to it bawl, soft and low like a dive-bomber. I am helpless, but absolutely. I cannot bounce this baby up and down on my lap. I cannot make faces at it, either, because its own face is more peculiar than anything I can dream up.

I cannot give it a rattle, either, except with the old teeth, because I am still a little afraid of the thing.

What I need, I decide, is a drink. So I rush into the house and open the icebox.

All I find is a case of beer, but this is an emergency. So I open a couple bottles and decide to sit down and think.

Then I hear a noise from the barn. Grabbing up the case of brew I rash back out.

But it is only the dragon, crying louder. It stands there and blubbers just like a baby sniveling for its bottle.

That gives me the old idea. Bottle? I haven’t got any dragon milk, but I have *got* beer.

So I open another bottle and pour it down the dragon’s throat.

This turns out to be just what the doctor ordered. One gulp and the beer disappears. And the dragon smiles!

I smile too.

Then I hear another gulp.

The foolish thing has swallowed the bottle.

But it keeps right on smiling.

“So that is the way things are,” I say. “All right—help yourself.”

And I push over the case of beer.

The dragon gets to work. In about five minutes it has swallowed eighteen bottles. I go back to the house for another case. Also I call up Thin Tommy’s tavern and ask Thin Tommy to send over a couple dozen cases of his vile brew right away.

“Holding a party?” asks Thin Tommy, over the phone.

But I do not answer. I remember that Larry and Archie asked me to keep my mouth shut. This is always a good idea when speaking to Thin Tommy, anyway. If you open your mouth in front of him he is liable to steal your teeth.

So? just hang up, relieved. If I can nurse this dragon on beer it solves a lot of problems, and the way it drinks I do not even have to bother with piling up empty bottles.

Still and all, one other problem does bother me a little. I get to wondering if this thing is house-broken. I am just going to call uptown for a couple of pup tents in case I run out of diapers when I hear another noise from the barn outside.

It is a voice, laughing.

This time I make the trip back in nothing fiat. And I am not a moment too soon, either.

Because there is a kid standing at the barn door, looking in. He is a little towheaded shrimp about eight years old, hardly tall enough to reach up and goniff your watch. He is laughing and giggling, and when he sees me he turns around.

“Look, Mister!” he says. “The dragon has the hiccups!”

I LOOK and it is a fact. The dragon has the hiccups. It is standing in the barn and hiccuping like mad. What makes it peculiar is the fact that every time it burps a little spout of fire comes out of its nose.

“Gee, it looks funny!” laughs the kid.

I stare at him.

“Aren’t you afraid, small-fry?” I ask.

The kid keeps right on laughing. “What should I be afraid about?” he asks me. “It’s only a dragon, isn’t it? I read about them in books all the time’. Unless, of course, you’re a wicked wizard or an ogre. But you don’t look like an ogre to me.”

“Thanks, small-fry,” I say.

And my name isn’t small-fry, it’s Edgar,” says the kid.

“Edgar what?”

“I’m not supposed to tell you, because if I did you’d send me home and I’ve run away from home,” the kid gets out.

“Run away?” I say. “You mean you took it on the lam? What’s the matter—does your old man put the boots to you?”

“You mean beat me? No, of course not,” Edgar says. “Only I want to seek adventure. And I guess I’ve found it, haven’t I?”

I don’t do any guessing myself. Instead I give this little tow-headed Edgar another look. He is not a hick type, that I see. He is dressed to the ears in a swell Kuppenheimer Jr., which is a little dusty from traveling. I see his folks must be up in the tax list from his manner of gab, which is very high class. But what puzzles me is why he is not afraid of this dragon.

“You mean to tell me you aren’t scared by this fire-breathing monster?” I ask. “Doesn’t this thing with the hot halitosis give you the shivers?”

Edgar shakes his noggin. “Of course not. I’m used to animals. Why, back where I live I—” Then he stops and smiles. “But I’m not going to tell.”

I give him another stare that is old but cold.

“Listen, Edgar,” I say, kindly, “It will please me extremely if you go back to your old man before I am forced to do something rash, like kicking your teeth down your throat.”

Edgar keeps on smiling.

"You can't fool me," he says. "You aren't an ogre."

"I am not the head of an orphan asylum, either," I tell him. "I am not running a Boy's Town. I am just a chicken farmer, understand? I have nothing at all to do with the rackets these days, and I am not getting mixed up with any runaway Dead End kids. It is bad enough I got to get a dragon today without singing *Sonny Boy* to a moppet."

Edgar gets the drift of my remarks all right, because he puckers up his little puss like a sponge and begins to spring a leak from the eyes.

"You don't like me—you're sending me away—" he bawls.

"That is the general idea, urchin. Go urch some place else."

"And just when I was going to have such adventures," Edgar sniffles. "Now when I tell people about your real live dragon they won't believe me."

"Oh, oh!" This is something I do not figure. If I send the kid away it will mean he spills the story about the dragon to somebody he meets. It is, as Mr. Heinz puts it, a very pretty pickle.

So I go over to Edgar and pat him on the shoulder.

"Do not drizzle so," I console him. "Maybe I change my mind. After all, I need somebody around to take care of the dragon for me while I keep the farm going. Besides, it seems to like you. So how about playing stable-boy to the baby, here?"

"You really mean I can stay and take care of the dragon and feed it and everything?" Edgar is so excited he hugs me around the knees, knocking them together severely.

"Ouch! Certainly!"

Then Edgar has to go over and hug the dragon. It is a pretty good blueprint for a nightmare to see the kid with his arms around that green head, and the fire shooting out of the dragon's mouth when he lets go with a hiccup.

BUT Edgar does not seem to mind—in fact you would think from the look on his puss that he has his arms around Betty Grable. And the dragon lets go with another smile, this time showing enough teeth to supply the entire Japanese army.

“He likes me,” squeals Edgar. “See, we get along fine! By the way, Mister, what is his name?”

“Name?” I reply. “I do not give him a name as yet.”

“How do you expect him to come when you call if he hasn’t got a name?” asked the kid.

“What makes you think I ever want to call a dragon?” I answer.

But the moppet insists. “We can call him Herman,” he decides.

“All right, make it Herman,” I tell him. “You want I should christen him by breaking a bottle of beer over his head?”

The kid gives me a funny look while he pats Herman on the neck.

“I can’t figure it out, Mister,” he says. “You don’t act or talk like a magician. But you must be one, or how would you own a dragon?”

“I am just a farmer,” I say. “I wish you to forget all this double-talk about magicians and wizards and what-all.”

Then I make a dive for the hay.

But I am too late. The urchin gets there first and picks up the note from Merlin, which he reads.

“Boy!” he remarks. “Oh, boy! You can’t fool me, Mister—this note proves you’re a sorcerer.”

“Listen, Edgar,” I mention, sweetly, holding out my arm. “This fist proves you got a black eye unless you forget what you just read. If you want to stay here with me and take care of Herman, you must keep your lip buttoned. For certain reasons, I do not wish anyone else to know I possess this dragon. You understand?”

Edgar smiles. “Maybe you’re afraid of an enemy enchanter,” he suggests.

“Maybe,” I say.

Just then I hear a car honking in the yard. I go to the door and take a squint. It is Thin Tommy Malloon, bringing me the beer I order. So I turn around to Edgar and give him the old whisper.

"You are right," I tell him. "I am afraid of an enemy whatever-you-call-it. In fact, he arrives now. So it is up to you to keep yourself and Herman out of sight until he goes away. I do not desire a peep out of you or a burp out of Herman."

At which moment Elerman lets go with another burst of anti-aircraft from the tonsils.

"Shove a bottle of beer down his throat," I advise.

But then Thin Tommy honks his horn again, so I go out to the yard. He is sitting in his truck, and when I come up he gives me the old once-over.

"I figure you are in the house all this time," he says. "What you doing out in back?"

"The new catalogue arrives today," I explain.

Thin Tommy just grunts. It is a normal sound, because he is built like a hog, with a strain of wild boar. He is called Thin Tommy because he weighs in at 300 pounds on the latest police blotter. Besides being a very unpleasant hunk of lard to look at, he is also an unpleasant personality to do business with. He runs his tavern, but also throws the scare into local yokels so they pay him protection money in these parts. In fact, Thin Tommy is what is vulgarly termed a hoodlum. My own term for him would be about twenty years.

IT IS for these reasons that I do not wish him to find out I have a live dragon on the premises, else he is liable to get his two triggers, Bertram and Roscoe, and put the old fingeroo on it.

So I make dumb and say, "Where is the beer?"

"Right here in the truck," Thin Tommy tells me. "You holding a party?"

"No," I say. "Not exactly."

"You gonna drink two dozen cases of beer yourself?"

“Well—” I begin.

Just then another burp comes from the barn. It sounds kind of mournful and impressive, like Louie Armstrong on the trumpet.

“What in purple blazes is that godawful, blatting?” inquires Thin Tommy.

I think fast.

“I just buy a couple cows,” I tell him.

“I never hear a cow make a sound like that,” he scowls. “Holsteins?”

“No—Beersteins,” I came back. “A new bleed. They give special milk if you see they get beer to drink.”

What kind of milk does a cow give from drinking beer?”

“Malted milk, stupid!” I tell him. “That is why I order this beer. What is more, I wish you to deliver two dozen cases every day in the future.”

“I would like to see such cows,” Thin Tommy says, climbing out of the truck.

I back up to the barn door.

“They are too drunk to look at,” I excuse.

Out comes another burp, making the door rattle a little.

“I still say that does not sound like a cow,” Thin Tommy insists.

“Take my word for it,” I tell him. “That’s no bull.”

WHEN I pull out my wallet to distract him. The sight of money always distracts Thin Tommy, particularly if it is other people’s money. It will even distract him through the door of a bank vault.

“Here is your dough,” I remind him. “Kindly dump out the beer.”

Which he does, and climbs back on the truck.

“So long,” I call. “See you tomorrow. I got to go back now—one of the cows has a hangover.”

Thin Tommy stares at me again.

“By the way,” he purrs. “Speaking of hangovers, what do you feed those two finks you meet in my tavern last night?”

"Who?"

"Those two traveling salesmen with the broken-down car," he answers. "This morning they come in with awful heads and phone a garage. I hear them mumbling and muttering under their bad breaths about a dragon they hatch on your farm."

"What?"

I play dumb, but Thin Tommy keeps staring.

"Yes, they babbie about going up to the old burg and contacting a circus owner or whatever."

"They are extremely stencho," I shrug. "Are you sure it is not pink elephants they mention?"

"No, it is a dragon. So I merely desire to ask you. Of course," Thin Tommy purrs, "you do not have such a dragon."

"Of course," I say.

"Only some drunken cows," he adds.

It is a bad time to hear another burp, but I do, and so does everyone else within a mile.

Thin Tommy starts his motor and smiles. "One of your cows must be calling you," he winks. "You better put an ice-pack on its forehead. That will make the malted milk colder."

Then he backs his truck out of the yard.

I stand there shaking and then lug the beer into the barn. Opening the door I almost trip over Edgar, who is stooping down.

"I know!" he yips. "That's the wicked wizard, isn't it so? Gee, he's a mean-looking ogre."

"I agree," I come back. "But why are you doing a Winchell at the door when you should be taking care of Herman?"

"Oh, Herman's all right," says the kid. "He's eating."

I look. Herman is eating—but definitely.

The dragon is swallowing down the milk pails I keep in the corner, also a shovel, a harness, and two pitchforks. While I watch, Herman also swallows an orange crate and the rest of the empty beer bottles.

"He's got a stomach like a furnace," squeals Edgar. "Look at the fire coming out of his mouth now."

I look. It is a three-alarm all right. Smoke and sparks fly out every time he breathes.

But Edgar laughs and pets him, and the dragon stops eating long enough to rub up against his legs, nearly knocking the little shaver over. Then he starts to chew the planks in the barn floor.

I grab up the beer bottles in a hurry.

"Quick!" I yell. "Give him these to chew on. He's liable to eat me out of house and home!"

III

THIS turns out to be almost a fact in the next couple of days. Because the dragon keeps right on eating, morning, noon and night. It has a 24-hour-a-day stomach, strictly non-union shop. It eats everything—nails and blankets and boards and tin cans and barbed wire.

And the more it eats the more it grows. By the fourth day it is fifteen feet long and eight feet high. This is not a rib on my part, but the honest truth, because I measure it right there in the barn, and I have the yardstick to prove it. That is, I would have the yardstick, only Herman swallows it when I wave it near his head. Then he begins nibbling on the step-ladder, so I get down in a hurry.

Naturally, I have plenty of trouble. To begin with, I have to watch Herman's diet so that he will not actually chew down the barn itself. More and over, now that he is as big as an elephant,. I am plenty worried he will actually outgrow the barn.

I do not have any figures handy on the hips and bust measurements of a full-grown dragon, but if he grows this much in four or five days, what will he look like in a year?

Pretty terrible, I decide.

But I am still waiting to hear from Larry and Archie on their circus proposition, so there is nothing to do but hold down the fort—even if I cannot hold down Herman's appetite.

Edgar and I pour beer into him every day and a lot more at night, so he will go to sleep. It makes him very affectionate, the beer does—which is lucky for us.

In fact it is very quaint the way Herman gives us the old glad eye when we feed him, and rubs up against us. This rubbing-up business has a few flaws in it, though—because now he is always knocking us down by mistake, and we keep our distance from his nose so the flames don't give us the old hotfoot.

But Herman likes us, and he lets Edgar pet-him and lead him around. In fact, on the fourth day Edgar is out in the barn with him and actually climbs up on his back for a ride.

So the first thing I know, Edgar is riding the dragon around in the backyard.

I run out in a lather.

"Quit playing jockey!" I holler. "Don't you know they can see in from the road?"

"I have to take him out of the barn," Edgar tells me. "He just burns a hole in the roof."

I look, and it is the truth. Herman's breath shoots up in one spot of the barn, and gradually burns quite a hole.

"Take him back in," I order. "I will get some sheet iron and patch it up."

So Edgar rides the dragon into the barn, and not a bit too soon. Because Thin Tommy's truck chugs down the road just then to deliver the daily two dozen cases of brew.

IT IS very embarrassing, this business of Thin Tommy's visits. So far I manage to keep both the dragon and the kid out of his range of vision, but it cannot go on forever. More and over, Thin Tommy is still suspicious, in spades. He does not understand what I do with all the beer, or what becomes of the empty bottles. So I am hard put to keep his bashed-in schnozzle out of my business.

Today he rattles up and unloads without saying anything, which pleases me. I do not wag my chin in his direction, either, but let him haul the beer cases down.

Then, right in the middle, he stops and drops a case. He is staring very hard at something on the ground.

I look.

What I see is most peculiar.

It is a big hole, about fifteen inches across, sunk in the dirt. It has a sort of web pattern to it.

All at once I realize what it is.

It is one of the footprints left by Herman the dragon when he is out in the yard.

"What gives?" asks Thin Tommy, with a fishy eye.

"That hole?" I spar.

"Yeah," says Thin Tommy. "Now—do not tell me you are raising giant frogs in your spare time like the ads say."

It is too bad he mentions this, because he kills my alibi.

"I am just doing a little digging," I tell him.

"Funny-looking hole," he remarks.

"I got a funny shovel," I come back.

"You must have," he grunts. Then he looks up and his eye gets fishier. "Unholy smokes!" he gargles. "What's that?"

Flames are coming out of the top of the barn.

"I am roasting marshmallows," I give out.

Thin Tommy waddles in the direction of the door. "I would like to see that," he says.

I try to bar his way, but who can argue with a human tank like Thin Tommy?

Just as he gets to the door, Edgar walks out.

Thin Tommy stops.

"Well I'll be blasted blue!" he predicts. "Who is the brat?"

"That is my nephew, Edgar. Edgar, this is Thin Tommy."

"The ogre," Edgar says.

"What?" Tommy bellows.

I jump in quick. "Edgar is a boy scout, and we are just roasting marshmallows in the barn."

Thin Tommy does not listen to this explanation. He does not glance at the flames any more, or at the footprint in the ground. He just stares at Edgar and grunts.

"Your nephew, huh? Never knew you had one." He grunts again. "Name's Edgar, huh? Well, well. Pleased ta meetcha." Another grunt. "Well, I got to be going. So long."

He backs to the truck, climbs in, and roars off.

I scratch my noggin.

"That is funny how he shuts up all of a sudden," I say. "Maybe he recognizes you, Edgar."

"How can he when this is the first time I see him?" answers the kid.

So I let it go at that.

I LET a lot of things go these days. To begin with, I do not put the old third-degree on Edgar to find out where he comes from, after that first day. I intend to just as soon as I get rid of the dragon. Meanwhile I let things ride. In fact, I get very mushy over the moppet, letting him sleep in my bedroom and even reading him to sleep out of MURDEROUS DETECTIVE STORIES. For his part, Edgar still insists I am a magician and that I am keeping this dragon under enchantment.

So I figure if I do not ask him too many questions he will not ask me any, and we are even.

Still, the way Thin Tommy looks at him in the yard gets me suspicious.

"You are sure you do not know this lug?" I ask again.

“Absolutely,” he tells me. “Where is the beer? I think Herman wants his bottle again.”

So we feed Herman by climbing on the stepladder and I scurry around to find some old sheet iron to patch the roof with.

While I do it, Edgar keeps up the babble.

“When are you going to fight the ogre?” he asks.

“Who, Thin Tommy?”

“Yes. You hate him, don’t you?”

“Only his intestines,” I remark, delicately. “But I do not wish to tangle with that one-man crime wave.”

“You must be fooling,” says the kid. “I know—you’re just raising this fire-breathing dragon up and then you’ll destroy him, won’t you.”

“If I raise this dragon much higher he will destroy me,” I mutter. “The beer bills are terrific, he is eating down my barn, and I am worried sick.”

“This is a funny adventure,” the moppet remarks. “A dragon, and wizards, but no princess.”

“Princess?”

“Of course. There should be a beautiful princess. You know.”

“I am sorry, Edgar, but I do not possess the phone number of any beautiful princess. Besides, if I do, you are still too young to get mixed up with any ribs. The princess is out.”

Edgar looks sad for a minute. “All right—but it’s a heck of an adventure without any princess.”

I get the new roofing nailed down and come back to earth. Herman the dragon swishes his tail, knocking down the ladder.

“Quiet, you overgrown iguana,” I nag. “Or I will knock your warts off.”

This is just a bluff, because now Herman’s warts are big as cantaloupes and you cannot knock them off with anything but a blowtorch.

If I do not know Herman since he is a pup, so to speak, I would do a shiver shimmy every time I look at him, because he is now some sight. He is longer and greener and has more muscles than Charlie Atlas.

But right now he looks pretty tame. I do not figure why, but Edgar notices. “Look—he’s stopping the fire!”

IT IS a fact. Herman does not breathe fire right now. Perhaps it is the beer, but whatever the case, he is a little groggy. “He’s lying down,” says Edgar. Herman does lie down, with a thump like a ton of coal sliding into a manhole.

“Maybe he’s sick.” Edgar pets his forehead. “Look how pale he is.”

Herman is slightly white around the gills—merely because he cannot get any greener.

“I’ll go out and get him some more beer,” Edgar says.

I go with him.

When we get to the yard I hear the phone ringing in the house, so I make a dash up the steps. I get on the wire and hear a familiar voice. Two voices, in fact—Larry and Archy.

“Hey, we’ve got wonderful news!” says Larry. “I’m calling from a drug store in Hoosack. Guess who’s with me?”

“The Roxy chorus,” I snap.

“No—none other than J. Carver Carson.”

“So what?”

“So he’s half-owner of the greatest show on earth, that’s what! After four days we finally get him to an interview, and he’s so anxious to talk business he’s come down with us. I just want to warn you so you’ll be sure and have the dragon ready when we arrive.”

“He’ll be ready,” I say.

“Get your pen out—you’re going to sign a million-dollar contract! It isn’t easy to handle this J. Carver Carson—guess he’s having some personal troubles of his own right now—but he’s sold now. Just produce the dragon when we arrive tonight!” Larry hangs up, leaving me very happy. I am so happy I do not hear certain noises I should hear, because there is a ringing in my ears—the ringing of a million bucks.

But when I get out in the yard again, I am not happy any more.

Because in the dirt are fresh tire-marks which I recognize as the marks of Thin Tommy’s truck.

I make a dash into the barn.

“Edgar!” I yell.

There is no answer.

I go out in the yard again and shout. There is no answer here, either. Except the answer in the marks of Thin Tommy’s truck.

It is easy to see what is up, all right, and I make a fancy dash back to the house to phone the State Troopers. Only one thing stops me—if I phone them they will come out and find the dragon. Which will be very bad for all concerned, because J. Carver Carson will not like publicity for his new attraction. And besides, the Troopers will ask me many questions about Edgar which I cannot answer on any Quiz program.

There is only one question about him I can answer. Thin Tommy knows who he is and puts the snatch on him, and I know where Thin Tommy must take him.

So I dash back from the house to the barn.

Herman is still dopey, but he perks up when I kick him in the side of the head.

“Come on,” I yell. “Edgar’s kidnaped!”

IV

MAYBE it comes from the kid’s ideas about me being a magician and raising a dragon to tangle with Thin Tommy the ogre.

Maybe it comes from being plain crazy.

Maybe it comes from the mushy feeling I have for Edgar—which makes me want to exterminate Thin Tommy for snatching him.

Whatever it is, it’s there.

And I am there, racing down the highway on Herman’s back, riding a dragon to rescue a moppet.

What else can I do? It is the only way out, and if I can sick Herman onto Thin Tommy I should have the kid and be back in time to meet J. Carver Carson when the boys arrive with him.

That is the way I figure it, though it is pretty hard to figure anything when you are bumping along on a dragon’s back. Particularly since there is no steering wheel on a dragon.

Herman is not sick any more. He is full of the old pep, and the flames come out of his mouth like he is chewing dynamite.

He seems to understand what we are doing, because he picks up speed as he goes along, and when I yell, “Come on, step on it!” in his ear, he nearly jolts me off.

I do not know if you ever ride a dragon in your life, but if you do, you know it is very hard without a saddle. So I am more than a little joyful when I see the lights of Thin Tommy’s tavern up ahead in the twilight.

We round the bend and I grab Herman’s ears.

“Whoa!” I yap. He skids into the yard and sits down like a pile-driver.

“Wait here until I call,” I say, hoping he understands me.

Then I march up the steps of the tavern and go inside.

The place is empty. But after I go up to the bar, Bertram and Roscoe come out. These are the two gorillas Thin Tommy has for his waiters. Personally I would not hire them if I was running a slave market, but they are just the personalities Thin Tommy wants around.

They give me a frigid stare, but I ignore it, being more interested in the way my teeth are chattering.

“Where is Thin Tommy?” I inquire.

“He is out,” says Bertram. “You want a short one?”

“Yes,” I answer. “I want a short kid. Where is he?”

“We got no kid,” says Roscoe. “So why not beat it?”

“Now be reasonable,” I suggest. This is a very timely suggestion, because both Bertram and Roscoe suddenly pull on a pair of very black jacks and come around the bar.

I can see they do not wish to play, and so I back to the door.

Just then I hear a sound from upstairs. It is the kid’s voice, and over it I hear the kind of grunt which is manufactured only by Thin Tommy.

So I change my mind about going out the door. Instead I do a quick forward run. Bertram comes at me from one side and Roscoe from the other, but I time it right. They miss me when I duck and run into each other.

Which gives me time enough to gallop up the stairs.

I yank open the first door.

Thin Tommy is sitting on the bed, and so is Edgar. When they see me, Thin Tommy gets up and Edgar tries to, but he cannot, because his arm is handcuffed to the bedpost.

“I knew you’d come!” says Edgar.

“So did I,” says Thin Tommy. He waves a newspaper at me. “So this is why you act so mysterious these past days,” he grunts. “Because you are holding the brat for ransom. I find it out this morning when I see his puss in the press.”

“What do you mean?”

“Take a look,” he invites me. “J. Carver Carson’s kid—son of the circus owner. Reward, huh? Well, you’re out of luck.

I just put through a call myself, and I find he is on his way up here. So it is lucky you blunder in. Because when he gets here I tell him you are the kidnaper and I rescue Edgar.”

This sounds like a very reasonable scheme, even to me. What makes it more reasonable is that Thin Tommy suddenly slides the newspaper off his arm and I notice he is holding an equalizer. I notice also that it is pointing at me. I open my mouth but nothing comes out. Instead it is Edgar who screams.

THIS turns out to be a very good thing indeed. Because all at once I hear a thundering noise from below and I know Elerman the dragon recognizes the kid’s voice and is coming in.

“Damn and blast!” yells Thin Tommy, using very bad language for kids to hear. “What the hell is that?” he further inquires, rushing to the door.

“It’s the dragon!” squeaks Edgar.

It is the dragon all right. From the sounds I can tell he is smashing the bar, also Bertram and Roscoe. Thin Tommy runs down the stairs very fast.

“Hell’s bells!” he growls. “It’s a dinosaur!”

Evidently Herman does not like anyone to call him names, because he lets out a roar like an exploding boiler and there is a terrible crash. Then Thin Tommy begins to shoot.

I head out the door and make the stairs. Thin Tommy is shooting at the dragon and the dragon is not paying the proper attention at all, merely coming right on for the stairway with his eyes gleaming very bright and a tongue of flame shooting out of his mouth. In fact he starts several fires on the way.

Thin Tommy reaches down on the stairway and picks up a keg which he hurls at Herman’s head. It smashes on his nose and I see the keg is filled with whiskey.

The result is very unfortunate, because Herman’s breath sets the alcohol on fire and a tongue of blue flame leaps up. Besides, Herman is not used to hard liquor, and he lets go with a burp that does Thin Tommy no more good than a bomb explosion.

In fact, this is just what happens.

With one loud blast, the room turns red. The rafters shake, the air is filled with smoke, and when it clears away I am staring down into a mass of flames.

Thin Tommy is gone.

I turn around and rush into the bedroom.

“We got to get out of here,” I yell. “The joint is on fire.”

Then I notice for the first time that Edgar is very unhappy about the whole thing. Because he is still handcuffed to the bed.

Right then and there I have to make up my mind about a lot of things. About Edgar, and about the dragon, and about a million bucks.

Which I do.

It is not easy. What comes next is not easy to do either, and it is a dirty trick on poor old Herman. But it just has to be. The explosion is terrific, but it puts the fire out.

And so, half an hour later, I finally get the handcuffs off and Edgar and I crawl down the stairs and out of the joint. It is still smoking a little, but the fire is out.

“That’s that,” I tell him.

And it is, because just then the sirens roar and I see Larry and Archie and J. Carver Carson arriving with the cops.

V

THEN it is all over, we go back to the farm.

“I still don’t understand it,” J. Carver tells me. “Edgar here says you get rescued by a dragon. And there is no dragon.”

“Lucky the cops don’t see any,” I say.

“But what happens to it?”

“It’s simple,” I answer. “There is only one way to get Edgar out of there with the place burning down. That is to put the fire out somehow. Which I do.

“I grab a fire extinguisher and toss it down Herman’s throat. Naturally, poor Herman explodes. It wrecks the joint, but it stops the fire right away. The only trouble is, it also wrecks Herman. So now there is no longer any dragon left.”

“That is a very heroic thing to do,” says J. Carver Carson. “And I am grateful to you for it. Naturally, there is a reward.”

I shake my head. All of a sudden I feel very sad when I think of poor old Herman. I walk into the barn and the others shuffle along.

"Just think of it," I mutter. "Only this afternoon I have a million-dollar dragon on my hands. Now I have blisters. I can almost see him here now, sitting in the hay and eating a keg of nails or a couple chicken-crate sandwiches. Poor Herman!"

Larry gives me a funny look.

"What do you call the dragon?" he asks.

"Why, Herman."

"I think you make a mistake," he tells me.

"So do I," I say. "The poor thing does not even feel good this afternoon. And then I take him out and extinguish him."

"I mean, you make a mistake when you call the dragon Herman," says Larry. "There is a reason the dragon does not feel good today, I bet you—also a reason why it should not be called Herman."

"What do you mean?" I ask.

"Take a look," says Larry, pointing at the hay. "Before the dragon left here it laid an egg!"

Sure enough, lying there in the haypile is a big round egg, about three feet long.

So that is the way it turns out, after all.

Larry and Archy and Edgar and J. Carver Carson are all lying down in the barn, trying to make the egg hatch.

If it does, I make a million bucks.

If it does not—well, I cook breakfast pretty soon and I will be eating the biggest omelet in the world.

Who knows?

Lefty Feep Catches Hell

Lefty not only went to hell; he brought back a piece. But it did not show until he lost his pants

I HARDLY could wait for my meal to arrive over at Jack's Shack. It had been a tough day, and I was hungry—hungry enough to eat one of his tough steaks.

When the food arrived, I hastily grabbed a bottle of ketchup and flung it over the meat. A large gob splattered up against my nose.

"Damn it!" I muttered.

"Such language!" said a voice at my ear.

I turned my ketchup-decorated nose up and peered into the face of Lefty Feep.

The angular man who knows all the angles was surveying me with a look of extreme disapproval.

"What's wrong?" I inquired.

Feep draped himself in a chair at my side. He made little clucking sounds in his throat.

"Mustn't say such things," he said.

"I never knew you objected to profanity," I told him.

"It is not safe to say such things," Feep told me. "They are liable to come true."

I stared at Lefty Feep. This sounded very odd. I wondered if he had been drinking.

"Where in blazes have you been?" I snapped.

"Everywhere," said Feep.

"Where everywhere?"

"Like you say. Everywhere in blazes."

"What in perdition are you talking about?"

"Everything. Everything in perdition," Feep answered.

"The hell you say!"

"That's right. The hell, I say."

"Listen, Lefty," I sighed. "I'm having one devil of a time understanding you."

"That is nothing. You should see the time the devil had understanding me," Feep grinned.

I looked Lefty Feep straight in the eye. "Are you trying to tell me you've talked with Satan?" I demanded.

"Satanly."

"Feep, that's a lousy pun. What kind of a gag is this anyway?"

"No gag at all," declared Feep. "I am on the level about the devil."

"You talked to him, eh?"

"Do you think I would lie to you?" Feep accused.

I didn't answer that one. But there was no need to. For Lefty Feep suddenly gripped my collar.

"It is lucky for you that I'm here," he announced. "I got a tale to tell about Hell."

I broke free.

"Some other time, Lefty. Right now I can't stop to listen. I've got a date with an angel."

"Tell her to go play a harp. You got a date with a fiend," declared Lefty Feep. "What happens to me makes Dante's *Inferno* look like a kindergarten picnic."

"But—"

Lefty complied. He butted me back into my chair.

"You gotta hear this," he breathed.

"It looks that way," I sighed.

Fixing me with a devilish leer, Lefty Feep gulped, gave his tongue a practice flip, and plunged into his story.

I HAVE a date with an angel the other night myself. If she is not exactly an angel, at least she is one of the heavenly bodies.

To be specific and terrific, I am hep to step out with a little number by the name of Kitten Carter. Her real name is Clarice, but she is called Kitten because of her lovely puss.

When I meet Kitten at first she is working in a Five and Ten, but gets kicked out because she cannot remember the prices. So I advise her to get a job in a defense plant, and that is where she is now planted.

Naturally Kitten is most happy about all this, and when I invite her out for the evening she agrees at once.

In fact I am just talking to her in a phone booth, but somebody else wants to use it and we have to get out.

"Let's us go to a restaurant, Lefty," suggests Kitten, in her elegant manner, "And put the chew on some goo."

I smile sweetly and nod, but I do not feel so good about it. Because at the moment I am as broke as a Japanese promise. I am in a fine way to take a ginch out and show her a good time. All I got in my pockets are a couple of pawnshop tickets, and who wants to take a dame to a pawnshop?

But if Kitten Carter wants to eat, she is going to eat. I will figure out an angle.

So I steer her down the street and pretty soon we are in front of a spaghetti joint.

"How about some of that?" I inquire. Kitten nods her head, and we go in.

The place is not exactly snooty, being a sort of cross between a dive and a joint, with just a touch of dump about it. But it looks cheap enough, so we sit down at one of the tables and brush macaroni crumbs off with the menu.

We are the only customers in the place, unless the flies are spending money tonight, so we get quick service. In less than an hour the one waiter in the dive figures out that we might want something to eat. He power-dives over at a speed of at least 2 miles per hour.

“What’s it gonna be?” he asks.

“Probably ptomaine from the looks of this place,” I answer. “But we’ll take some spaghetti.”

He gives me a look from the black book. I stare right back. The waiter is a little, shrivelled-up specimen in a tuxedo that isn’t pressed since it comes from the funeral parlor, back in 1906. He is very dark and swarthy, and there is five o’clock shadow on his face, and also under his eyes. But mostly he is a walking mustache. The bristle under his nose would make any janitor grab him, turn him upside down, and use him for a broom.

But he forces a very anemic smile and takes my order and dashes away at his usual speed, like a racing snail that gets retired for old age.

KITTEN sits there and makes with her mouth, and I sit there and scurry over a worry. This waiter is going to be a tough customer when he finds out I am a broke customer. He looks like a member of the Bomb-Thrower’s Union Number 7, Mussolini Local.

More likely he is a Black Hand. This I decide when I get a look at his fingers as he comes back with the spaghetti.

I stop worrying for a while and begin to tangle with the spaghetti—which is very good, if you like shoelaces with vaseline.

Kitten and I are all wound up in our meal, and the waiter stands off at one side watching us trying to untie the Boy Scout knots in the noodles.

After we bounce the last meatball down our throats, he comes over. This time he really moves fast, because he is bringing the bill.

I take a look and gulp. Then I gulp again. The price for two orders of spaghetti is $4.50.

"What gives this $4.50?" I inquire.

He slides a sneer out from under his mustache.

"Cover charge," he answers.

"I am not buying any covers," I explain. "All I want is the spaghetti."

"The price is $4.50," he comes back. "Well," I sigh, "I have not got $4.50."

"So?" He glares at me. "Then you gotta see the cashier."

"All right with me." I walk over to the cashier's desk.

He follows me and takes off his apron, then slips around the desk.

"What you want?" he asks, like he never sees me before.

"Why, the cashier."

"That's me."

"You're the cashier, too?"

"Why not?"

"Well I am still the same guy who hasn't got $4.50."

He glares again.

"You insist, ha? Then I call the boss."

"Call him anything you like."

"Follow me." He turns around and walks back to an office marked *Manager*. I trail along and go in.

The same waiter is sitting behind the desk.

"You're the boss, too?"

"I am the boss," he growls. "And I want $4.50."

This is very embarrassing to me. I think of Kitten sitting back there at the table, wondering where I go. I also think of something else when I see this guy pulling a little blackjack out of the desk drawer and twirling it around his head. He is not going to play bean-bag with me, I guess.

"Can't we settle this thing peacefully?" I suggest.

"$4.50 settles everything."

I am stuck with this clip-joint price. All I can do is shake my head. Also my knees, because he gets up and starts to wave his blackjack.

All at once he stops.

"I give you your choice," he says. "Either I break your neck or else—"

"Or else what?" I snap, hoping to make a better deal. "Maybe just both legs, huh?"

"Or else you can work out the price of the meals."

"Work it out?"

"Sure? Why not? I am tired of all this business," he says. "Suppose you work here until 12 o'clock and we call it a deal?"

THIS sounds better. It is already after 9 p. m. and I am amazed at such a generous offer. Also I cannot understand why he has such a grin on his face, when there is hardly enough room for the mustache.

"I'll do it," I agree.

We turn around and walk back.

Kitten is standing up at the table.

"Hurry up, Lefty," she pouts. "Let's get out of here. I want to go places and do things tonight."

"Well," I gulp, "I don't know. I am sort of going to stick around here until midnight."

"But I want to go out stepping like you promised me," she says.

"Let me explain—" I begin. Then a hand pushes me out of the way.

"One side," says the waiter-cashier-boss. He bows real low and the bristles of his mustache dust his knees.

"I will have much pleasure in escorting such a beautiful lady as you," he gurgles, giving Kitten the eye. "I admire you. You have the face of an artist. Let us therefore go out and paint the town red."

"Why you—" I say. I have a swell name all picked out for him, but I never get a chance to express it, because Kitten interrupts me.

She giggles at the waiter.

"I accept your invitation," she smirks.

"But Kitten—"

"It serves you right, Lefty Feep," she tells me. "If you are going to stand me up, I might as well start toddling with this kind gentleman."

Kitten is very dull in the skull, understand? Because anybody taking one good look at this fink wouldn't walk anywhere with him except as an escort to the electric chair. He is rough, tough, and gruff, and a ticket to the hot seat is just about his speed.

I try to tell Kitten all this in a few short sentences, but the waiter just taps his hip pocket where the blackjack is and I shut up.

"I am the boss," he whispers. "You work for me until 12 midnight, understand? So no back talk from the hired help."

That is why I only stand there when he walks out with Kitten. I give her a little smile and wave my waiter's apron lit her, but no response. Except that a piece of spaghetti on the apron hits me in the eye.

And there I am, stuck as a waiter in a spaghetti jetty until midnight.

It is quiet. It is lonely. Nothing is buzzing but the flies. My girl jilts me. I am broke. And on top of it, the spaghetti!

On top of my poor stomach, I mean. Because all at once I get a very peculiar feeling. I am suddenly quite dizzy. Everything starts whirling around.

I start to sit down. That is all I do, just start. Because I don't sit down. I fall down.

Fall on the floor.

And *further.*

I get the feeling that I fall *through* the floor.

Of course I am unconscious, but I have that horrible feeling of falling. Dropping down, down, down.

All at once there is a bump, and I wake up. I blink my eyes.

IT SEEMS I am standing in a dark, dingy cavern. I blink again, because after all the spaghetti joint is dark and dingy.

But this place is different. Worse. Nothing around me but rocks and a reddish light.

Besides, it is extremely warm here.

I turn my head and notice a guy standing next to me. It is quite dim and I cannot see him, but misery loves company. So I give him a nod.

"Hotter than hell here, isn't it?" I remark.

"Can't be," says a deep voice.

"What do you mean?"

"Can't be hotter than hell. This *is* Hell!" says the voice.

"Oooooogle!" I tell him. And for a very good reason. Looking close, I see his face.

It is a red face, and it does not look natural to me. In fact it would only look natural on a bottle of Pluto Water. The face is equipped with slanted black eyes and a long mouth.

The mouth has white teeth as big as watch-charms.

The face grins at me and I shrink back. I get a blast of hot breath, like brimstone. I recognize it.

Hellatosis!

Sure enough, I am standing next to a fiend! The thing is red and scaly, like dishwater hands, only all over. And he gives me a scare and a stare at the same time.

"You're being sent for," he tells me in a voice that rumbles like volcanoes.

"Me? Sent for?"

"He wants to see you."

"Who?"

"Who in Hell do you suppose?"

I shiver. It is true, after all—those predictions people are always making about where I am going to wind up. I am dead and I am on the dirty end of the Styx.

"Come along," says the fiend.

He pulls me over the cavern floor.

I do not keep my grip when I think about the trip. We go along through the bowels of the earth, if you pardon the expression, and all around me is this awful heat. I do not see any flames, but I can feel them on the other side of the rocky walls.

I can also hear sounds. Crackling noises of fire. A lot of screams and laughing. The whole thing is like a Girl Scout marshmallow roast, only on a grand scale.

"What goes on there?" I ask the fiend.

But he does not answer. He hops along the ground ahead of me like a skinny red monkey, and I follow like an organ-grinder. Only I would not pick up any pennies if I could, because they will be plenty hot at this temperature.

"Where are we going?" I gurgle.

"Short cut," cackles the fiend. "Keep moving."

I take this advice. It is so warm that if I stand still on this ground I will give myself tire hot foot.

The fiend doesn't worry, because I notice he has cloven hoofs instead of sports shoes. I am busy noticing things this trip, and every time I notice something new I shiver again, in spite of the heat.

BUT at last we round a bend in the cavern, and we stand in a big chamber. It is nice and bright here because some obliging guy sets the joint on fire, or something. The walls shoot flames out and the floor is just a lake of leaping crimson. I take one look and get ready to sing *Smoke Gets in Your Eyes.*

I take another look and then wish smoke *would* get in them. So I wouldn't have to see the figure sitting on a rock in the middle of the pool of flames.

It is the devil, naturally. Or unnaturally. Why bother with words? I can't get them out anyway, with my heart in my mouth.

He is perched on the crag in the center of the roaring blast, smiling at me.

I groan right back at him.

Satan has diamond-bright eyes, a heart-shaped mouth, a spade beard, and a club foot. Quite a card.

More exactly, he looks like the devil. And he is.

He stares at me out of his deep eyes for a long moment.

I just wait, hopping up and down to keep from frying my toes.

“Well I’ll be blessed,” he says, at last. “You must be—”

Just then another fiend comes out of a cavern at one side.

“Please, Sir,” he begins.

The devil frowns. “What are you horning in here for?”

“Well,” says the fiend. “It’s about those California people who get here yesterday.”

“California people? What’s with them?”

“They don’t like our climate.”

“Ha! Go back and let it rain pitch-forks for a while,” says Satan.

Then he turns to me.

“You must be Regretti,” he says.

“Regretti? Who’s Regretti? I’m Lefty Feep, and I want to know why in Hell I’m in Hell.”

“But Regretti is the one I send for,” snaps the devil. “He must come when I command him. It’s a duty! I own his soul!”

“Regretti? Is he the guy who runs a spaghetti parlor?” I ask.

“Correct.”

“And he sells his soul to you? So that’s why I get here.” It begins to dawn on me now. I yell out above the crackling of the flames.

“You are cheated when you get a customer like Regretti,” I tip him off. “From what I see of him he was a lousy soul, and is probably all heel.”

“That’s my business,” the devil comes back. “The soul-buying business. I’m in it quite a while now—ever since the days of old Doc Faust, one of my first customers. And I know a bargain is a bargain. When I send for Regretti he ought to come. He must obey me.”

“But I’m not Regretti,” I remind him.

"Then why are you here?"

"Damned if I know."

"That's an idea."

THE devil snaps his fingers. There is a crackling noise, and a book appears in his lap. A black book. He squints at it. Then he calls into the air. "What's wrong out there? I ask for the letter F. Fee, to be exact. Send me the right volume."

The first book disappears.

"Curse those bookkeepers of mine," he grumbles. "Ah, here we are. Just a moment please."

Another book flashes into view. He opens it with his long red claws moving over the pages. The flames light up for his convenience. He reads and shakes his head. He closes the book.

"No," he announces. "You are wrong. You are not damned. At least your name isn't in the book."

I am not altogether disappointed at being left out of Satan's hit parade. I smile, but he shakes his head. The horns waggle.

"Very peculiar," he grunts. "Lefty Feep comes when I ask for Regretti. Why?"

Then I understand.

"I am working in Regretti's place until midnight," I suggest.

"How so?"

I explain about the deal I make to pay for my meal.

Satan smiles.

"Of course," he says. "Well that's splendid. Splendid! Matter of fact, there's a little job or two lined up for Regretti. If you're taking his place until midnight you can do the work for him. Temporarily you're one of my fiends, you know."

"Wait a minute!" I object. "I don't want to stay here in Hell."

"And why not, may I ask?"

"I can't stand it here! I can't stand all these imps and fiends and demons."

"What about gargoyles?"

"I use Listerine."

"Well, you aren't going to stay in Hell," the devil tells me, tugging at his goatee. "I have a job for you. I always find work for idle hands to do."

I stare at the hellish fires around me. "What's cooking?" I ask.

"Sinners, mostly."

"I mean, what's the job?"

"It's an assignment back on Earth," he says. "In fact, you will return to exactly the same spot you came from. You will do what Regretti should do, under my orders."

"Do what?"

"When you get there you will understand. I will send the message to you in your own mind. Saves bother of instructions." The devil grins. "Ready to leave?"

"You bet I am."

"Good. Oh, one other thing, Mr. Feep." He still grins.

"It occurs to me that you may try to deceive me and not carry out my orders."

This occurs to me, also, and I blush now to be found out.

"But," says Satan, "I will take care of that. You see, I will give you a little token to carry around. And whenever you have an urge to disobey me, the token will remind you that you are my servant—until midnight tonight, when Regretti takes over again."

"Token? What token?"

"You'll see when you look around. Remember the old saying—'Satan, get thee behind me.' Well, that's the kind of a token you'll carry."

"What is all this?" I ask.

THE devil stands up. “No time to talk. Got a lot of jobs on the fire. Back you go to Earth, Lefty Feep. And if you don’t carry out my orders—there’ll be Hell to pay!”

There is a deep rumble.

Satan disappears.

So do I.

I am falling again. But this time I am falling *up.*

Way, way up. I end up, standing on my feet. Right back in the restaurant.

I blink. Same place. Still vacant. I stand in the same spot. It is all a dream. All this stuff about meeting the devil, getting assigned to a job, getting a token—all a dream.

Or is it?

That token, now. I’m supposed to look *behind* me.

I look behind me very slowly. And I see something.

A tail!

A tail attached to *me!*

It is about four feet long, quite thin, and the color is a distinct pink. On the end is a sort of a bud, like a plant has. That is where a spike is supposed to grow, I figure.

As I look at the tail it wags at me in a very friendly way. But I do not feel so friendly towards this tail. Not that I don’t like tails, understand. I think they are fine on dress suits. But not on me!

But this one is on me, because it’s the devil’s token. Yes, that’s my tail and I’m stuck with it. Or will be, if the spike grows out.

Naturally I do not wish to walk around until midnight with my tail dragging. It will attract comment. So I reach back and smuggle it into the rear of my trousers.

“Satan get thee behind me,” I yap, like the devil says.

Now that I have my token, I begin to wonder about those duties I am supposed to perform. But I do not wonder long.

A thought flashes through my noggin.

"Calling Lefty Feep. Calling Lefty Feep. A man is coming into the spaghetti parlor. Ply him with liquor and make a drunkard out of him. That is all."

No sooner do I get this message than the door opens and a personality lurches in.

He is a huge, broadshouldered bozo with straw-colored hair to match the straw behind his ears. He wears a mail-order catalogue suit that makes me think he must study his catalogue where the light is dim, because it is three sizes too small for a Boy Scout.

This big hick gives me a smile and plops down in a chair.

"Gotta drink, buddy?" he asks.

I realize this must be the fink the devil wants me to drive to drink. Apparently it is going to be an easy trip.

"I'm a stranger in town," booms the hick, with a grin. "I want a little excitement. How about that drink?"

So I flip my waiter's apron on, scurry around in back, and return with a glass and a bottle.

HE grabs the bottle and starts to throttle it. I hold out the glass. He shakes his head.

"I don't want any souvenirs," he says. "Just a drink." And tips the bottle.

"But don't you drink out of a glass?"

I ask.

"I should waste my time with glasses?" he chuckles. "Me—F. Bronson Johnson, from Wisconsin?"

Mr. F. Bronson Johnson, from Wisconsin then goes gurgle-gurgle-gurgle.

I stand there and watch.

"Bring another bottle, pal," he booms. "Got lotsa money."

Right then and there I rebel. For years I watch these poor suckers come to town, go into bars for a good time, and end up on their ears—with their dough gone. I do not like the way cab drivers and bartenders and come-on girls clip these hayseeds.

I can see what will happen to this goof. He will get bottle-dizzy and then he will start out to tour the joints, and by morning he will be parked in an alley someplace.

A nice guy, too. Probably with a wife and kids back in Oshkosh, or wherever. Just out for a good time vacation.

Well, Lefty Feep is not going to put the hooks into any small town clown, no matter what the devil wants.

“No more drinks,” I tell him.

Then it happens.

Somebody tugs my tail.

I turn around. There is no one behind me.

But my tail is being jerked, hard!

Of course—it is like the devil warns me. If I try to disobey, he will see to it that I step back into line. So when I go against him, my tail twists.

“Ouch!” I comment, as the tail is pulled.

“Come on, how about another bottle?” insist the guy.

I am on the spot. If I give it to him, he is a goner. But if I don’t, the devil will see to it that I wind up with a terrific pain in a most unsatisfactory place.

Right now my tail is being yanked very insistently. I must make up my mind.

Then I get an idea.

“All right, I’ll mix you another,” I tell my customer. I run back and drag out a fresh bottle, open it, and pour out a glass. I bring it back and let F. Bronson Johnson gargle with it.

He gets it down.

It gets him down.

F. Bronson Johnson leans back in his chair, gives me a big wink, and then falls over on his face. Out like a lout.

I pick him up and lay him in a booth to cool off, and I am very happy about the whole thing because I double-cross the devil.

I do not wish this oaf to become a drunkie, but unless I give him a drink the devil gets mad.

So I compromise. I give him a drink with a Mickey Finn in it. The devil doesn't know. My tail stops being twisted. F. Bronson Johnson is safe on ice for the night, and everybody is better off.

I GET to thinking about this Regretti, on the devil's pay roll, and wonder whether Satan makes him pull off a lot of jobs like this. Maybe he doesn't care for the work and is glad I take his place for a few hours.

Regretti has no tail, but he probably must obey orders just the same, or be dragged down to purgatory and barbecue over some brimstone.

I wonder what he is up to now—with Kitten Carter. All at once I remember he is out squeezing my tomato. And I am stuck here.

Or am I?

Just as I get this thought, another short-wave arrives from Purgatory.

"Calling all fiends. Calling all fiends. Regretti and Kitten Carter are at the Outside Inn. Regretti is pumping defense plant information out of Kitten. Go and help him. That is all."

That is all, is it? That is all—Regretti is trying to get military secrets out of my girl and that is all. Suddenly I realize that Regretti is not only a servant of Satan, but probably an Axis agent as well. Or as bad.

Naturally, the devil and the Axis have a lot in common. But—I am supposed to go and help Regretti!

"The hell I will," I say to myself.

Immediately I get a pain in the—I mean, my tail starts to hurt. It is twisted. Severely.

"No," I mutter, gritting my teeth.

"I won't go!"

The tug on my tail is harder.

"I won't go," I gasp. "If I do, my conscience will hurt me more than my tail."

I stand there, gritting my teeth. But not for long. Something seems to grab me from behind and drag me across the floor!

Before I know it, I am going backwards out the door. My tail is being jerked along and I follow after. I am on the street, sliding down backwards.

"Hey!" I object, with a mild scream.

But there I go, wagging my tail ahead of me. There is nothing to do but turn around and walk over to the Outside Inn.

The Outside Inn is a penthouse dance palace on the hotel roof down the street. It is high up, but so are the prices. I can imagine Regretti sitting there with Kitten and plying her with liquor. He is probably stroking his mustache and pouring out the old Italian balm.

And here I am, on my way to help him. I am being led by the nose, as it were—only in reverse.

I glance at my watch and see it is after 11 p. m. There is less than one hour to go before I am free. But in that time I am still a slave.

I go through the lobby, glad my tail is concealed, and take the elevator up to the Outside Inn.

UP on the roof the band is blasting away, the waiters are scurrying around, and the customers are banging bunions on the dance floor. It is a crowd, but loud.

I look around the tables and then I spot a familiar face. Kitten. She is leaning over her glass and talking to a a guy who seems to be hiding behind a potted plant.

I take another look and recognize Regretti and his mustache.

The two of them have their heads together. She is moving her lips and he is wiggling his ears. It is like the devil's shortwave says—she is spilling the beans to Regretti. And he is taking the beans to make soup for Axis saboteurs.

I am supposed to help him.

But when I look at poor Kitten, all excited because she is stepping out, innocently telling him about her factory job and what they are making, I haven't got the heart.

"Tail or no tail," I mutter. "I am going to put an end to this."

I dash across the floor until I get to the table.

Regretti and the girl look up.

"Hello, Lefty," giggles Kitten. "I am having such a swell time telling Mr. Regretti about my job and things."

"Aha!" says Regretti, pushing his words out from under his cookie-duster. "It is you, Feep."

He scowls, but I just stand there. "What are you doing here? Our agreement is that you take my place until midnight. Your time isn't up yet."

"Yes," I nod. "But yours is, Regretti. I know what you're up to now. And I know what you will be up to in five minutes from now, unless you stop it."

"What's wrong?" flutters Kitten Carter.

"He must be—how you call it?—nuts," says Regretti, faking a smile.

"You know what I mean," I yell. "Come on, Regretti, stand up and let me knock you down."

This proposition does not seem to appeal to him. Regretti does not stand up. Instead he trips me. When I try to get up he signals to a couple bozos I do not notice before. They are sitting at another table. These two tough hoods rush over and pick me up by the arms.

A waiter wanders by. Regretti smiles.

"This gentleman falls on the dance floor," he explains. "I will take him into the lounge and dust him off."

This is just what happens. Before Kitten can object and before I can wriggle free, I am carried into the lounge.

Regretti follows me.

"So you know what I am," he sneers, standing there while the two hoods hold me down. "Well, in that case I must do what I tell the waiter. I must dust you off."

He pulls out the blackjack.

"Wait, boss," says one of the hoods. "This is a high-toned jernt, see? No violence. Can't we cool this hothead a little easier?"

"Cool him off?" says Regretti. Then he grins.

"Maybe he will cool off without his trousers," he says.

"Hey!" I squawk. "Please, boys, not that!"

BUT it is that. The two hoods turn me upside down and dump me out of my pants. I try to squirm and hide my tail, but Regretti sees it and grabs the end.

"Well look on this!" he chuckles. "Our friend is part monkey."

"The missing link," guffaws one of the hoods.

"This makes it simple," says Regretti. "We leave this ape here in the men's lounge. He will not come out on the dance floor without his trousers. Especially not with this peculiar caudal appendage. If he behaves, we give him his trousers back at midnight."

"O.K., boss," says the second hood.

Regretti flashes me a private look. He understands what happens to me, all right.

"Do not interfere," he whispers. "Our bargain is for midnight. Until then you serve the devil in my place—and you serve him by keeping out of our plans. Take this tail of yours and sit on it."

He leaves. The hoods follow. I watch them go, and my pants with them.

I am left in the lounge.

I look at my watch. Fifteen minutes to go.

But fifteen minutes is a long time. A long time to sit in a men's lounge trying to hide a tail.

Five minutes is enough for me. I pace up and down, with that damnable tail dragging the floor behind me and sweeping up cigarette butts. I am not used to it and almost step on the end when I turn around.

Suddenly a guy comes in. I freeze against the wall. He holds the door open.

I see the dance floor beyond. I see Regretti and the hoods escorting Kitten Carter to the elevator.

They are double-crossing me! Leaving in advance!

A thought flashes. They are probably taking Kitten Carter to their headquarters to really force information out of her! The two hoods must be dumb stooges and not know Regretti is an Axis agent, but they are helping just the same.

But I am stuck here without pants.

I can't run out across the dance floor with a tail. I will be disgraced. If Kitten sees me she will misunderstand completely.

It is horrible.

But—if I do not follow, who knows what will happen? Regretti gets his information and probably disposes of Kitten. I reach into my coat pocket and breathe a sigh. There is a penny there. I take it out and flip it.

"Heads or tails," I whisper.

It comes up tails.

A minute later the Outside Inn gets a new addition to its regular floor show when a half-naked bozo runs out of the lounge with a large pink tail waving the air behind him.

I slide for the elevator, but too late. It closes its door just as I reach it, and Kitten and the walking mustache are gone.

Meanwhile I am creating quite a little screamfest around me. Men are pointing indelicately and women are staring. A couple of waiters form a flying wedge with a "No Dogs Allowed" look on their faces.

I went out.

THERE is a stairway at one side.

That's all I want to know. If it is not for my tail I would slide down the banisters. As it is, I leap to the stairs and start stepping. On the second flight down I am slowed up.

My tail is pulling me back!

Naturally—the devil must know I am out to hinder his plans. So he is sending me a reminder.

I tug away and manage another flight. I must hurry!

But the tail pulls harder. I can hardly make it. Three flights later I am just crawling down. And Regretti and the girl must be escaping.

I have six flights to go. I try to yank free of the tail, but I am stuck.

I pull it up in the air in front of me. I grit my teeth. Then I sink my teeth into the tail and hold it tight.

It hurts, but I can run. I do run.

When I get to the last two flights, running isn't fast enough. So I throw myself down the rest of the stairs, with the tail wrapped around my waist.

A sort of tailspin, you might call it.

I land in a heap at the bottom and pick myself up. I dash through the lobby. There is no one outside. Then I notice the alley to my left. I run for it.

Sure enough, there is Regretti and Kitten standing by the door of a car.

"Stop!" I suggest loudly.

Regretti wheels and snarls. He pulls out his blackjack and waves it.

I make a dive for him.

But I don't quite reach him. Because the two hoods step out of the shadows and grab my arms. They hang on tight and lift my feet off the ground. I am helpless, kicking and punching. But Regretti stands in front of me and I can't reach him.

"Ha!" he laughs. "You again!"

Kitten stares at me in horror.

"Lefty," she gasps. "Lefty—you—why, what in the world—oooh—"

I blush.

Regretti grabs her arm.

"Come on, never mind the freak show," he sneers.

I dangle in the air.

He turns. And then I make up my mind. I grab him. The hoods hold me, but I hold Regretti.

For a moment we struggle, and then I hear it. The clock, striking twelve.

Regretti hears it. He gives a little moan. But it is too late.

AS THE last note dies away there is a little crackle. Just a puff of smoke, as though somebody shoots a flashlight picture.

But when the smoke clears away, Regretti is gone.

The two hoods take one look and then take one fast powder away from there.

Kitten does not know what happens, because she faints when I grab Regretti.

Me, I look around and give a sigh of relief.

My tail disappears. On the stroke of twelve it is gone. I see my trousers lying on the ground and put them on again. They fit much better now.

Then I grab Kitten, hail a taxi, and take her home. She is still out.

When we arrive she wakes up.

“Here we are,” I say.

She gives one look at me and screams. “Oooooh—it’s you!” Kitten Carter jumps out of the cab and runs away.

But I sit back and smile as we drive off.

Everything works out for the best. Kitten is sore at me, but I find out she is just a chatterbox, so it is all right with me. I lose my tail and cheat the devil out of his due. That is also all right.

Regretti gets yanked to blazes at midnight, on account of failing in his job. It is like I figure before—if he does not carry out orders Satan takes his soul.

So there will be no sabotage and that is the end of my adventure. I lose a girl, but get my pants. My tail is finished.

* * *

LEFTY FEEP sat back in his seat and favored me with a toothy smile.

I shook my head.

"Well?" he asked.

"Really, Lefty," I muttered. "That's just about the most outlandish yarn you've ever handed me."

"Diabolical is the word for it," Feep agreed. "But I can prove it is true.

Because my tail is now gone, see?"

He started to get up and turn around, but I hastily waved my hand.

"That won't be necessary," I told him. "I will take your word for it that your tail is gone. That is, if you ever had one."

"Of course I have one," Feep flashed indignantly. "It is like I say. I go to hell, I see the devil, he gives me orders and a tail, I foil Regretti. It is all very clear to me."

"Clear isn't the word for it," I sighed. "To me it's thicker than a fruitcake and much nuttier."

"What don't you understand?" Feep challenged.

"Well, you say you grabbed this Regretti in the alley while he was trying to escape."

"Right."

"But his two thugs were holding your arms behind your back, weren't they?"

"Right. But I grab Regretti and choke him just the same."

"How?" I snapped.

"Why, with my tail, of course!"

Lefty Feep grinned like a fiend. "That is how I really double-cross the devil, see?" he chuckled. "I grab Regretti with my tail and hold him there until midnight comes. You see, that is the whole moral of my story. Fight the devil with his own weapons. You'll see, like I do, that everything comes out all right at the end."

The Fear Planet

“Look around, reader. Look around! If you see a moving green shape behind you, the story’s over!”

I HOPE nobody reads this.

Because if they do, it means someone else has come here. And if they come here, they’ll get caught, like we were caught.

Just to play safe, I won’t mention dates. I won’t give the name of our expedition, either. No clues. Just a warning.

I’ll write it as a warning, then. Write it now, while I’m still able to.

We landed yesterday on this accursed asteroid. There were four of us—Commander Jason Sturm in charge; little Benson, engineer and navigator; Hecker, our biologist. And myself—radioman, assistant navigator, jack of all trades.

Never mind about the trip. It was nasty. Packed like sardines in a tin ship, hurtling through space. We’d have landed on a comet just to feel solid ground under our feet.

Commander Sturm’s chartings showed brilliant imagination, but damned little else. Why he chose this particular destination I’ll never know. A God-forsaken little asteroid is what it seemed to me—and it certainly turned out to be one.

But we were elated when we nosed down. Benson’s indications on atmospheric pressure, density and component analysis showed we could step out freely without using our insulated suits. Moist air, and almost too much oxygen. Temperature above eighty.

When we landed, Benson looked through the perio-glass.

“God!” he muttered. “What a spot!”

I couldn’t improve on his comments anyway.

I squinted out at the surface of this miniature earth. In my time I’ve done a little serious drinking. I’ve seen pink elephants. But this was the first time I ever saw green nightmares.

That’s what the place was—a green nightmare.

Nothing but forest, as far as the eye could see—a lush, tropical green forest. Swamplike growths rising out of mud that was not brown, but a verdant green. And twining through mazes of twisted vegetable tentacles was the mist. The livid mist of coiling, greenish steam.

Our own Amazon was nothing compared to this ripe and rotten blight. A true green hell.

But we’d been weeks inside the ship. As I say, anything looked good. And if the air was right—

“Let’s go,” said Commander Jason Sturm. Tall, gruff-looking, weather-beaten old space dog, but a big name in the annals of interspatial exploration.

He already had the flag out and unrolled. Typical Sturm touch. Gangling biologist Hecker helped me lug the marker with the official exploration disc.

The four of us lowered the ladder and clambered down into the ooze.

Sturm led the way. The new Columbus, you know—flag and all. He stepped down into the swirling mist and walked forward. Three paces and we could hardly see him. The steam was that thick. Literally pea soup.

But he stuck the end of his flagpole down in the mud and made a little speech.

“I claim this body in the name of—”

I didn’t listen. I was trying to haul that marker along. Hecker grunted beside me. The damned thing was heavy. Every step caused us to sink into that slimy ooze. We gasped.

Breathing the moist, warm steam wasn't much relief.

"Curse these vines!" Hecker almost tripped as his feet were enmeshed in the octopoidal coils of a trailing plant.

"Wait a minute!" Sturm had concluded his verbal formalities. He stood beside me and raised his hand.

"Better get some knives," he suggested. "We'll carry the marker over to some kind of rise and clear away the vines around it. That way, the marker will stand out."

"Doubt if it will do much good," commented Hecker, stooping over and examining a stray tendril. "This stuff will probably grow over again in forty-eight hours."

"What is it?"

"Don't know, yet. Certainly isn't earthly. Something like the Venus formations. Note the valvular conformations."

"To hell with the valvular conformations!" decided Sturm. "Time for that later. Let's get out the knives and set the marker."

WE SHOULD have taken a couple of aborigines along with their machetes. We had to virtually hack our way through the forest of plant life. No trees here, understand. Just towering vegetables and ferns and bushes.

We didn't mind, at first. The elation of landing was still buoying us up. Hecker wiped the steam from his spectacles and grinned. Benson cut a swath ahead.

Sturm stormed along, good-natured as ever.

"Here's a spot," he suggested, indicating a little green knoll.

Hecker and I set down the marker with gasps of relief.

I didn't like to gasp. Inhaled too much of that air—rank, fetid air. Rank and fetid, like the vegetation. Vegetation—

"Say!" Hecker's voice rose in an excited whisper.

"What's up?" I gave him a look. He was peering over his shoulder apprehensively.

"Thought I saw something move. A bush, over in that clump."

I followed his glance. Nothing there but a mass of livid growths waving gently.

"You're mistaken. Wipe the steam off your glasses."

Hecker grinned and followed my suggestion.

We moved the marker up, ready to dig around the base and sink it. Sturm and Benson bent down to assist.

That's why we didn't see what was coming until too late.

"Look out!"

I straightened up with a jerk, whirled around. Whirled around and stared at slithering horror.

The thing was green. That's all I saw at first—the green outlines of the rushing figure. The great green figure with the waving arms. Then I looked and realized the truth.

"It's a plant!" I yelled. "And it's *alive!"*

Undulating toward me, undulating on trailing tentacles that somehow resembled bloated caricatures of human legs, a towering monstrosity swept forward. Two stalks carried a pulpy, swollen body like that of an obscene idol. Above were the waving arms of the plant creature, on either side of a rising growth corresponding to a head.

The head was the worst of all. Round, squat, the size of a green melon, it bobbed on the monstrosity's neck—if neck it was—like a nodding flower. But there was nothing flowery in the wrinkled, obscene visage that peered from the forefront of the rounded head. The thing had a face—a face with eyes and mouth.

I know it had a mouth. Because it came too quickly for me to do more than stare, shudder, and try to dodge the groping arms. I did swerve to one side, but too late. The tentacles enfolded me.

Sturm was shouting orders. Benson was waving his knife. I couldn't see Hecker. But I paid no attention. My being—physical and mental—was literally gripped by the silent, slithering green horror with the coiling arms that now squeezed my throat in a rubbery embrace.

I fought and clawed, but I was pressed close to the pulpy body of the monstrosity; close enough to smell the rank carrion odor of fetid decay. The tentacles pinned my head back. I stared into the horrid greenish wrinkles that parodied a face on the end of the nodded stalk that served for a neck. I stared into emerald eyes—eyes with livid pupils that seemed to swim in chlorophyll.

My fist lashed out at that dreadful mockery of a countenance, landed deeply in the putrescent mass. The thing squeezed tighter. I saw Sturm at my side. He too had a knife, and it stabbed down in a vicious arc into the body of the vegetable creature.

“Look out!” he shouted, again.

Suddenly the creature raised me in its. arms. I kicked air as the plant held me aloft. The head strained closer to me, the ghastly semblance of a face craning at the end of the stalklike neck as though it sought to bury its mouth in my flesh. I watched that champing hole of a mouth—

Writhing frantically, I wriggled free. But too late. As I fell, the tentacles caught my ankles. I hung head downward as the gigantic vegetable bent. I felt the rubbery lips of the monster press against my leg. Press, and drink deep. Needle-like pains lanced through my calves.

Then, dizzy and faint, I fell.

My last memory was that of kaleidoscopic vistas of horror. The rank nausea of the face, the pain of the creature’s bite; the distorted faces of Sturm, Benson and Hecker as they plunged their knives into the towering green body—and then the cool softness of the mossy earth as I landed.

WHEN I awoke I was in my bunk. Sturm bent over me, eyes grave. I sat up.

“What are you doing to my leg?” I asked. He’d ripped the trousers away from my right leg, baring it to the knee. Now he tore the cloth from my left leg.

“The thing must have stung you,” he told me.

His fingers indicated the two incisions in the flesh of either calf. Tiny punctures, deep in the fatty part, with little purplish discolorations around them. I noted a slight angry swelling at the points of the wounds.

“Better cut into them,” Sturm grunted. “Damned thing might have a poisonous sting.”

I shook my head. “Put on some antiseptic and let’s bee what happens,” I suggested. “They don’t hurt now—and I’d hate to be laid up on the voyage back if it isn’t necessary.”

Sturm shrugged.

“What happened after I passed out?” I asked.

He sighed, rose, busied himself with the antiseptic and a swab.

“Devil got away,” he confessed. “Stung you, dropped you, and scuttled off. We had our knives into it. Benson tried to follow. The plant just lashed out once with one of those green cables and knocked him flat. Scooted hell for leather back into the jungle.”

Antiseptic applied, he stepped back. I wheeled around and attempted to stand up.

I didn’t succeed. A wave of weakness swept over me in a giddy cloud. I dropped back on to the bunk.

“What’s the matter, boy?” asked Sturm. His eyes, on my face, were anxious.

“I—I don’t know,” I murmured. “I feel weak. My legs seem numb.”

“What’s that? Can’t hear you.”

Was it possible? I thought I was talking in a normal voice, yet he couldn’t hear me. I must be weaker than I thought.

“Better lie down and let me cut,” Sturm advised.

“No.” I forced a grin. “I’ll just lie down and sleep for a bit. That’ll fix me up.”

“Think you’ll be all right? We’re going out to take a look around the place. Want to see if we run into any more of those things. And this time we’ll go armed.”

“Go ahead,” I said. “Good luck.”

Sturm clumped out. I turned my face to the wall. I felt hot, feverish. My legs were numb, and the numbness seemed to to be creeping up to my hips. It was a warm, pleasant feeling. With an effort, I sat up and propped my head on my hand. I stared down at my exposed legs. The swelling hadn’t perceptibly increased.

That was a relief. I dropped back to the pillow and lay there. The numbness was natural, after all. I was very tired. Very tired. I would sleep.

I drifted off.

How long I slept I do not know. But when I opened my eyes again, I was a different man.

The numbness was gone. I sat up and took another look. My legs were unchanged. No inflammation. No pain. I swung off the bunk, stood up. Everything was all right.

Rummaging around, I found an old white shirt. I ripped it up into strips and quickly bandaged my legs, improvising puttees.

Then I strolled out.

The change was remarkable. My depression had passed. Now I could gaze on the weird landscape with new appreciation. Whatever terrors might lurk out beyond, there was a certain ghastly beauty in this God-forsaken spot on a lonely asteroid.

As I watched, green twilight crept over the land. The trees were shadowed by approaching darkness, and the steam assumed new and fanciful shapes, peopling the abysses of the forest with misty ghost-presences.

Ghost-presences!

I wondered about that monster from the jungle. What was it—this walking vegetable? What freak, what mutation, what biological aberration had produced the strange life-form which had attacked me?

I gazed into the twilight and pondered.

IT WAS dark when they returned. Not the familiar bluish darkness of earth, but green-dark. A deep, heavy green.

I was sitting on the ladder.

"How do you feel?" asked Sturm. "Fine." I indicated the bandages I'd wrapped around my legs. "These help."

"Maybe you could use some more salve," Hecker suggested.

"Don't bother. I'm all right."

I was, too. I felt much better after my leaden slumber. Full of new energy.

"What are you staring at?" Sturm asked me.

"Look," I whispered, pointing over his shoulder.

They turned. Stared at the rising moons.

Yes, moons. Two of them. Moons for an asteroid. Green moons.

Nightmare moons for a nightmare world.

They rose over the horizon, wide apart, like two green eyes set in the broad face of space. Green eyes that gloated down on this twisted, tangled world of mad life.

Sure, I know what that sounds like. But the sight of those moons inspired that kind of thinking.

"Where'd you go?" I asked.

"Didn't get very far," Sturm told me. "That damned jungle is too thick to plow through in darkness. Besides, those things—"

"Forget it," I said, quickly.

"I can't forget it." Hecker interrupted, rubbing his glasses with a handkerchief. "There's something wrong here. Animate vegetables with animal characteristics. Almost anthropomorphic."

"Almost what?"

"Anthropomorphic. Manlike."

"You're crazy."

"I'm not crazy. Nature is crazy, yes. I tell you, I want to investigate. This is something new. Never in the annals of interspatial biological or chemical discovery have I heard of this life-form. Why, the chemistry is all wrong! The chlorophyll doesn't react—it's like blood plasma!"

"Why don't you set up the portable lab equipment and do a little checking?" asked Sturm. "Might as well put something down in your notebooks. We'll be getting out of here in the morning—whenever that is."

"That's right," Benson added. "Wonder how long night lasts in these parts?"

"We shall see. But I hope it's short. Frankly, this place gives me the creeps."

Coming from a man like Commander Sturm, this was an admission.

But we all felt it.

Nevertheless, Hecker did get busy. He went back into the ship and began to putter around. I could hear him humming under his breath. An eerie sound in the dead green emptiness all about us.

"What next?" asked Benson.

"A little food," Sturm suggested.

They ate.

"What about you?" Sturm asked me.

"I'm not hungry," I answered. And truthfully. I didn't want to eat.

"You're shaken up. Why not lie down again?"

I laughed the suggestion off.

"I feel too full of pep. Let's have another look around after you finish eating."

"You go, Benson," said Sturm. "I'll take a nap here while Hecker works."

So Benson and I started off.

Our flashlights cut a swath of white radiance through the greenish jungle. Our knives cut their swath also. It was a slow, painful journey that we made, burrowing into the lair of nightmare.

If there had only been some sound, some sign of life! But there was only the silence, the interminable silence as deep as the vegetable forest itself.

Yet we were straining our ears for a sound. A rustling sound. The sound those plants would make—the creeping plants that coiled and struck and stung. Somewhere they lurked and waited. Somewhere they crouched in the green maze beyond.

Benson and I toiled silently on. Until—

“Over there!” Benson gripped my shoulder. And I saw it.

Through the towering, outlandish boles of a clump of vegetable monstrosities, the livid moonlight fell on that incredible vision.

“A ship!” I gasped.

IT WAS indeed just that. A spaceship, blunt nose buried in the ichorous slime, from whigh the arms of strangler vines rose to embrace it and drag it down farther into the ooze.

It was a ship—but what a ship! I haven’t seen one like it except in the museums back home. Fully seventy or eighty years old—an ancient model with the big old tube-drive. How such a tub ever managed to land here under its own power was past comprehension.

We crept closer.

Benson opened his mouth to call hello, and then stopped. He grinned in embarrassment. Of course there was no need of calling out. Obviously the ship was deserted.

We found the guide rope leading up to the cabin. The door swung open, on dangling hinges. An old-style model indeed, we saw—the kind of ship they used to blowtorch shut before a voyage and then reopen at landing.

We went in. Small cabin, of course.

“Let’s look for the papers,” Benson suggested. We looked. The safe compartment was unlocked. I rummaged around inside.

“Here they are,” I said.

But I spoke too soon. My hands encountered nothing but ashes.

“The papers—they burned them,” I whispered.

“I wonder why?” Benson asked.

I didn't answer. I thought I knew, but I couldn't be sure.

"Better get out of here," I told him. "We can come back tomorrow with Sturm and really investigate."

I tried to push him from the cabin. But he saw it.

"There," he muttered. "On the floor."

He saw it, all right. Those reddish stains . . . and the tattered scraps of clothing . . . and the rotted bits of tendrils.

They told the story.

"Those vegetable things," Benson whispered. "They must have come in here. But where are the bodies?"

"Never mind that," I answered. "Let's clear out."

We cleared out, but the matter was not forgotten. The thought haunted us. The thought haunted the ghastly forest through which we floundered. It leered from the greenish mist. Leered like the pulpy visage of the monster —

"I see it!"

Benson tugged at my arm. I winced, stepped back. He pointed at the clearing ahead. Sure enough, I recognized the all-too-familiar shape of a vegetable creature. It was stalking sluggishly through the mist, long green neck craned off to one side.

We crouched back as it passed.

"Look at its back," Benson urged.

I stared. Was I mad—or did I see the tattered remnants of a garment trailing in rotted shreds from the body of the monstrosity.

It couldn't be. The things destroyed the men on the ship we found, and then took their garments, like apes or aborigines might.

More mystery. A strange ship. Burned papers. And vegetables wearing clothes. Why?

We watched the apparition moving off into the mist. Then Benson led the way. We almost ran back to camp. I couldn't move too fast. My swollen legs prevented. My hands, too, were oddly numb. That damned vegetable horror, attacking me—

But I forgot all that when we reached our camp site.

Sturm had a fire going, and his eyes reflected its glare as we approached.

“Thank God,” he muttered. “You’re safe.”

“Where’s Hecker?” I asked.

Sturm didn’t answer. He gripped my shoulder, steered me towards the ship. Benson followed.

I almost expected what I saw—a duplicate of the scene in the ruined spaceship we’d found in the forest.

The portable laboratory was no more. Shattered glass and twisted metal spread a tangle of debris across the floor of the ship. And glistening against the glass and steel were ominously bright red drops of a thick fluid. . . .

“I DOZED off,” Sturm whispered.

“Just dozed off. I thought I saw a shadow pass the fire. It slithered swiftly as though I glimpsed it in a dream. But it was no dream when I heard Hecker scream.”

“Where is Hecker?” I repeated. Sturm pointed mutely towards the shambles on the floor. I didn’t understand. Then his finger followed an imaginary line outwards. A line not wholly imaginary, marked in bright red drops.

“Those things are swift,” he muttered. “It dragged him off through the trees, into the forest and the fog. I couldn’t leave the camp alone and follow. Besides—from the way he screamed—I knew it would be no use any more. No use at all. Hecker’s gone.”

I turned away. But Benson, at my side, shivered openly.

“Let’s refuel and get out of here,” he whispered. “We must.”

If such a suggestion, usurped Commander Sturm’s authority, he gave no sign. His shrug held, instead, a definite indication of relief.

“How long will it take to get up power?” he asked.

“Seven or eight hours, full speed.”

“That means we’re stranded all night.”

"We could take turns keeping watch." I opened my mouth. "No need of that. Benson, you'll be working inside. Sturm, you might as well sleep. I can hold the fort by the fire here. I'm not tired." Sturm gave me a grateful smile, then frowned quickly.

"No, you don't," he said. "You're still shaky; your legs are swollen. That was a narrow escape you had today. Don't go in for mock heroics. You sleep and I'll stand watch."

"But—"

"Orders." Sturm patted my shoulder.

"Let Benson go to work. You lie down in the other cabin. I'll stick by the fire."

For a moment there was silence. All three of us turned, as if by common impulse, and stared out at the green fog. Stared at the livid eyes of the moons. Stared into the darkness and wondered what shambled there, lurking in wait for warm flesh.

Then, "Let's go," Sturm muttered.

He strode off.

Benson, with a shuddering glance at the floor, turned to the control panels.

I sought a bunk in the other cabin, lay down.

Before I turned out the light I got bandages. More bandages. I hadn't told Sturm how accurate his diagnosis had been. I was shaky. Very shaky.

I bound myself up like a mummy. Vague apprehensions whirled through my brain. I fought them back, bound them in under mental bandages as tight as the actual ones which swathed my limbs.

I didn't dare think. I slept.

And then I dreamed.

I dreamed of the fog-filled forest, and the ship we'd found. I dreamed of the vegetable monsters and of what happened to poor Hecker. In this dream, Sturm and Benson and I played curious roles. Roles that were somehow quite natural—now. I seemed to understand, for the first time, that this was all *right,* somehow. I lived through our discovery again, but this time there was no feeling of strangeness. It was natural.

Even the scream was natural. The scream that shattered my sleep, forced me bolt upright. It sent me out of bed and racing into the other cabin.

By the time I reached it, the scream had died away into a horrible, gurgling moan. A ghastly thud, punctuated by muffled breathing, followed. Then another moan, and silence. Deep, green silence.

I wrenched open the door, then stepped back. The horrid tableau was plainly visible—too plainly, for no man can look clearly on nightmare.

Benson, slumped over the control board, was quite dead. As dead as a partially decapitated man can be.

Sturm, at his side, was quite alive. The axe in, his hand still swung heavily from his wrist.

But I only glanced at these two. My eyes were riveted on the figure that sprawled at Benson's feet, tentacles still twitching up to his throat. The green figure, the forest figure, the image of vegetable madness that had torn Benson's neck with avid fangs.

The vegetable figure—that wore human garments!

I stared and stared at that grotesque horror, that mad caricature of all that had once been a man. A scarecrow figure, halfhuman and half-vegetable—with just the trace of contorted features in the pulpy face.

Sturm had smashed into the body with his axe, and now the creature was dead. Dead, and pouring its awful reddish, greenish ichor in a vast pool from mingled cells and veins.

I stared and blinked again, this time at those human garments which were bursting at the seams and at the plant tentacles that forced their way through. Human garments—

Hecker's garments!

STURM looked at me, tossed the axe to the floor. I picked it up, looked at the discolored blade, and flung it out of the cabin doorway.

“Don’t you understand?” whispered Sturm. “It *is* Hecker. He was bitten and carried off by those vegetable monsters. And now—he’s one himself!” Sturm sat down on one of the cabin hunks, head in hands. I watched the cords throb convulsively in his neck.

“You see what it means,” he murmured. “Hecker turned into one and bit Benson. Now Benson will rise. Like—like that old Earth legend about vampires.

“Something must get into the bloodstream, change the whole physiological structure. A virus, but more than a virus. Something that changes chemically, with amazing swiftness. Holds back death, too. Turns animal life into carnivorous vegetable life.”

Suddenly Sturm sat up, a sheepish smile on his face.

“But such a thing is incredible,” he blustered. “No, I’ve been talking like a frightened child. It couldn’t be that way, could it?”

I walked over to him, moving slowly, impeded by the bulk of my bandages.

“Maybe it could, Sturm,” I said. “I believe it could.”

He grinned at me, but I went right on.

“You see, I know,” I whispered.

“Know? How?”

“Because I lied to you today. I wasn’t stung by those things when they attacked me earlier today—I was bitten. And I didn’t go to sleep afterwards when you left me lying down.

“I *died* instead. And came alive.”

Sturm was on his feet then, but he was too late.

I pushed him back against the bunk. He was a strong man, but I was strong, too. Very strong. And quite determined—when I looked at his neck.

My bandages loosened. I brought my hands up to his throat.

He saw them.

For the first time he noticed how they had changed. That they were green.

And then he saw what heaved out from my coat, budding forth from my chest and sides. He saw my face. My strength blossomed, yes, blossomed!

That was hours ago, of course. I'm still changing as I write this. Sturm isn't *awake* yet. But he will be. And so will Benson. Then we shall be together again.

The three of us will go out and seek Hecker in the forest. And the others—the ones that came before us. We shall live there, grow there forever.

And some day a new ship will come. A new ship, with new men. Men with white throats. Men with red blood.

Look around, reader. Look around. If you see a moving green shape behind you—the story's over!

It Happened Tomorrow

Now it can be told—the story that is not of today, yet might be. What would you do—and how would you act—in a world gone mad?

FOREWORD

I*'D LIKE to say a few words about this story. It's a yarn I came very close to not writing at all.*

I wanted to do just such a tale for a long, long time. But upon consistent reading of current offerings in science-fiction, I became discouraged. I could picture an editor saying, "This sort of thing is out. Destruction of the world. Where's your heroine, your twist in the plot?"

Opposed to this was my sincere desire to tackle the job.

So here is my story about the revolt of the machines. The idea is not new. The plot-structure is quite simple. But it represents an ambition of mine—to actually write a story which would show what happens to men when the machines revolt.

Dozens of such stories have been purportedly written around that idea—but always around it. The author attempted to tackle the theme, but it was too big. Invariably, he glossed over the actual details in a few paragraphs: "First New York and then London were engulfed by the machines." Get what I mean? He would generalize. And then a plot would be dragged in by *the heels—a villain, and a heroine would appear—and the hero would save the world at the last minute.*

So I claim that the real revolt story, the daily account of what would happen to average people in a world gone mad, has never been told. And it's that story I'm telling here. I know I'm presumptuous—the theme needs an H.G. Wells and that's why most writers have been afraid of it—but the yarn had to be written. For a while I, too, toyed with a dozen devices to inject an artificial plot.

Then I realized that the power lay in merely giving the true, detailed story. The inexorable unfolding of man's doom. So I write it that way, simply. If it meets with editorial approval, fine. If not, chalk it up as a literary sin, but one I'm grateful for having committed.

CHAPTER ONE
World Gone Mad

THE trouble began with an alarm clock.

It was ringing in Dick Sheldon's stomach.

At least, Sheldon thought it was, at first. Then he rolled over and decided the damned thing was clanging from somewhere inside his head.

Reason came to his rescue. He had been drinking last night, it was true, but certainly he couldn't have reached the stage of swallowing an alarm clock.

No, the noise must be coming from the timepiece on the bureau beside the bed.

Gingerly, Sheldon extended a lean hand from under the covers and placed it on the bureau. Fumbling like the undirected tentacles of a blind octopus, his fingers slid over the metallic clock's surface, reached the protruding knob of the alarm, and switched it off.

At least, he thought he had switched it off. But the alarm kept on ringing.

In despair, Sheldon opened his eyes and sat up. Then, viciously and with malice aforethought, he extended his arm and seized the accursed mechanism. He literally tore at the knob, wrenching it to the “off” side.

The alarm pealed on.

With a rage born of migraine, Dick Sheldon threw off the bedcovers, grasped the clock in his right hand, and rose to his feet. Uttering appropriate sounds, he hurled the offending instrument to the floor.

The alarm clock expired with a final, defiant death-rattle. Sheldon stared at it in mute disgust.

“My day!” he muttered sarcastically.

His eyes, roving over the confines of the small apartment, encountered another disturbing phenomenon.

Light.

He *had* been drinking last night. When he came in, he’d tumbled into bed and left the lights on.

He tottered across the floor to the light-switch. Once again his fingers fumbled with a knob, turned it to the “off” side. The knob clicked.

But the light stayed on.

Sheldon fumbled again. The light continued to burn.

Then he revised his former pronouncement.

“My God!” he muttered.

He was still woozy; that was the trouble. His nerves were playing tricks. Well, there was a cure for that—a drastic cure. Desperate, but the only way.

Sheldon shivered and stalked into the bathroom. Resolutely, he employed his futile fingers once again, this time to turn on the cold water tap.

He placed his burning head under the icy shower. Held it there, too, until his outraged flesh ached in protest. Then he dripped across the bath mat and utilized a towel.

That was better.

Sheldon returned and shut off the water tap.

The water kept running.

He tried again. He twisted the handle firmly, felt it move. The water splashed merrily on.

"My—" Sheldon muttered, and gave up.

It was that damned landlord again. He'd give him a piece of his mind when he got downstairs.

No, that must wait until tonight. A glance at his wrist watch told Sheldon the same old story. He must hurry or be late to the office.

After all, how could they get out a decent paper down there without the able services of Richard Sheldon, that brilliant young newspaper reporter?

Sheldon knew the answer to that one—knew that they were quite capable of getting out a paper without his brilliant and youthful services.

So it behooved him to get down to the office before they decided on this fact for themselves.

He dressed hastily, jammed on his hat, surveyed his lean and haggard face in the mirror. Then he scowled—the noise of running water obtruded.

He went "back into the bathroom and made one last attempt. The knob turned freely in both directions, but the water ran in an even stream. Maybe it would flood the place before evening.

Well, let it.

He ran back into the other room, picked up his wallet and opened the door. Automatically his hand went to the light switch. It clicked, but the light stayed on.

"This is where I came in," he decided, and slammed the door behind him.

HE GOT his car keys out before he was halfway down the stairs. Then he remembered—he'd left the car in Tony's parking lot last night; had taken a cab home.

Well, that meant the street car. A further delay. No breakfast.

All right, so it was one of those days again.

Sheldon headed for the corner.

The hangover had lifted, and his anguish was now mental rather than physical—for Sheldon had a strange hatred of street cars.

"Street cars," he was wont to declaim during the course of an evening's libations. "What is a street car but the very symbol of civilization? Noise, lights, and bars on the windows." Yes, a mechanical monster, a metal prison in which human beings stood trapped as they hurtled towards unpleasant destinations.

Sheldon was something of a philosopher, but he was also something of a damned fool. This didn't help him any—he still hated street cars.

Now, as he reached the corner, he groaned. There they were—a little knot of sheep at the car stop sign, standing dumbly and patiently. Waiting for the noisy iron monster to arrive, open its maw and engulf them, then hurtle them towards their daily slavery. Not only that, they clutched dimes to pay for the privilege.

All of them—the old ones and the young ones, the men and women alike—looked hopefully towards their left. This was the direction the car came from. They stared off down the vacant track in a kind of drugged eagerness—as though they actually wanted the car to arrive, as though they welcomed its coming and hoped their stares of concentration would hasten the moment.

For a second, Dick Sheldon had a crazy idea. Perhaps the car wouldn't come this morning! Perhaps it would go wrong, jump the track, or refuse to budge. So simple—just a mechanical defect could do it. Like the alarm clock that wouldn't stop ringing. Or the light switch. Or the water tap.

What a great moment that would be! This little knot of office slaves, finally freed forever from their mechanical dependency on mechanical aids. Walking to work like free men, instead of standing jammed like captives in the Black Hole of Calcutta while a smelly, grating metal shell dragged them through the streets.

Yes, what if the street car didn't come? What if the iron tumbril wouldn't roll—Noise jarred Sheldon out of his fancies.

The street car was arriving.

The humble little passengers crowded out to the tracks, as though gathered to perform a ceremonial welcoming rite. They were about to be presented to His Majesty, the Machine. First the young and fair maidens—stenographers. Then the matrons. Then the able-bodied men. Finally, the oldsters. It was all so orderly. So damned—holy!

The car rumbled forward, stopped.

But the door didn't open.

The conductor was busy at his levers. The crowd muttered. He turned Ted. There was noise. Finally he stepped over and pushed the door with his foot. It went outward and the passengers boarded.

Sheldon smiled. Almost—but not quite!

Then he took a deep breath and dived into the melee. Three minutes later he stood like a sardine on end in the center of the car.

The big tin can rolled along. Somebody pressed a buzzer for the next stop.

Sheldon tensed himself for the shock of the car's sudden halt. But it didn't come. They passed the corner arid the car didn't stop.

The buzzer sounded angrily, firmly. The conductor had made a mistake. Somebody would walk two blocks extra this morning. The car would stop now—

It didn't. It rolled forward.

A woman whined, "Conductor—let me off!"

The conductor turned and stared into the crowd. "Sorry, lady, the control is stuck. Have it fixed in just a minute—air brakes don't work—"

The buzzer sounded again, but the street car clattered on.

Sheldon felt a sudden acceleration in its speed. It seemed to be moving *independently.*

His heart gave a leap. What if his notion had come true? What if the car didn't stop? What if, by some perverse chance, it kept on going forever, carrying these helpless mortals endlessly through the streets? A sort of Flying Dutchman of the trolley lines?

He chuckled under his breath, but the other passengers weren't chuckling. A perfect salvo of buzzes sounded, and then blended into a single buzz.

"Cut it out!" the conductor snapped, losing his temper. "For heaven's sake, folks—I'm gonna stop when I fix this here."

But the buzzers didn't quit sounding. They were stuck. Sheldon knew it. They were stuck—like his alarm clock; his lights; his water tap. Like the brakes on the street car. Brakes and buzzers and taps, all stuck.

What did it *mean?* Had something really *happened?*

No, it couldn't. Because—well, just because it couldn't, that's why. Any child knows that.

But the passengers didn't agree. They thought it could. They were yelling and cursing now, in unison that rose even over the maddening buzz.

"Stop the car!"

"Let us out!"

"What's the matter, conductor?"

"I'll report you for this!"

"I want out!"

The conductor smashed and slammed at the controls. He opened the window. The car whizzed on. Somebody began to scream, and the swaying passengers moiled.

The conductor reached out the window and yanked the trolley. There was a flash, a short-circuit, a few more screams, and the street car wailed to a halt.

It seemed to Sheldon, that there was defiance in the wail.

Then the crowd, caught up in panic, bore him forward and out of the car.

Sheldon found himself on the street, a block past the office.

HE TURNED down the block with a grin. Refreshing, that little experience. For a moment it had seemed like dreams come true. But now—Ignoring the knot of bystanders forming on the sidewalk, Sheldon turned into the building and made for the elevators.

“Morning, Mistah Sheldon.”

“Morning, Jake.”

The colored boy grinned.

“You look kind of pale around the gills, Mistah Sheldon.”

“That’s where you’re always safe, Jake.” Jake laughed. He closed the elevator door. The car rose.

It rose. And rose. And rose.

“Hey—eighth floor, Jake!”

“It’s stuck!”

“Stop it, foolish!”

“Foolish” pressed the emergency stop.

The car rose.

“Oh-oh!”

The top floor was reached. Sheldon was already tearing at the opening in the floor—they’d crash! The car was gaining speed—it moved of itself, without controls—it was intent on rising, rising, carrying them to—

Zoom.

Blood beat in outraged tempo in his temples as the car suddenly descended, and Sheldon reeled.

Up, and now down at incredible speed. Jake was frankly blubbering as he did futile things to the buttons. Then, with a grating clang, the elevator halted.

“Basement,” Jake gasped. “Pretty close, Mistah Sheldon. Use the stairs.”

“Don’t worry; I’m going to.” Sheldon raced for the stairway. He made the flights in frantic haste. Inside his head something detached and apart was droning. “You’ve got a story here—a big story—”

He headed through the outer office, through the rows of desks, plowed his way to the door marked *Lou Avery—City Editor.* He flung it open.

Lou Avery’s bald, birdlike little head cocked quizzically as he rushed in. Lou Avery’s beady little eyes squinted brightly. He rose swiftly, hovered over Sheldon.

"You're late, but I haven't time to fire you. There's something breaking and I need you."

"I think I've got a story, boss—" Sheldon began.

"You think you have a story, eh? You think you have a story, when the biggest yarn of the year is breaking around your ears!" Avery spluttered. *"I've* got a story—the maddest damned story you'll ever see."

The beady little eyes were glaring now.

"Listen, lame brain. See if you can get this through your skull. One hour ago, at 8 a. m, Eastern Standard Time, the world went crazy somehow."

Sheldon's heart fluttered again. He knew what was coming.

"The Twentieth Century is supposed to arrive at 8:10, but it's not here. It's in Reading, Pennsylvania, and it's heading west. It backed into the yards and backed right out again on a switchover. Nobody knows who pulled the switch, and nobody knows why the train won't stop—it's a runaway!"

Avery tapped the desk.

"Three planes due to land at the airport are still flying around somewhere over the Great Lakes. They won't come down.

"The *Albania* didn't dock this morning, either. It's out off the Sound, heading south. Here's the wires from the captain. He can't stop it.

"The gas company reports it can't turn power off. The electric company reports all lights burning. The waterworks has fifty calls of reported floods. Taps don't turn off."

Avery's pencil emphasized each point with a little excited click against the desk.

"The street car company reports trouble on all lines. There's been a subway smash-up at 108th Street. Trains won't stop. Elevators in office buildings are out of control.

"The Empire Theatre called—picture there's been running all night and they can't switch off the projector or the automatic rewinder.

"The whole gang is out covering the town—I've shut down on incoming calls. They're all the same, understand? They says the world's gone crazy."

“That’s my story, too,” Sheldon murmured.

“I’ll say it is!” Avery strode over to the window and stared down. “Something’s happening out there. Something big. All hell is breaking loose. We can report it, but that isn’t what I want.” The little city editor turned on his heel.

“I want to know *why* it’s happening!”

“Did you try Rockefeller Foundation? Universities?”

“Naturally. They don’t know. Sunspot energy, maybe. Something affecting mechanical laws. They’re working on it. But they’re all stumped, you can see that. Lots of screwballs calling up already. End of the world. Stuff like that.”

“What about Krane, the physicist?” Sheldon suggested.

Avery turned. “Maybe. Ought to get a statement.”

The door opened. A copy boy rushed in and flung down a sheet. Behind him loomed Pete Hendricks, the boss printer.

“Here’s your extra,” squeaked the boy. The deep voice of Hendricks drowned him out.

“Yes, here’s your blasted extra,” he grated. “And you better get another one out quick, Avery.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean we just finished the run, but the presses won’t stop. They’re jammed, you hear? Might as well put some paper on and use them. We got to do it or cut the line—”

Hendricks lost his composure. His voice broke as he went on.

“But what’s happened, chief? I don’t understand this, the way they won’t stop. And the elevator’s gone haywire, too. What’s happened?”

“Back downstairs,” Avery snapped. “Stand by—you’ll have another extra. Don’t cut or do anything rash—just stand by.”

He herded Hendricks and the kid from the room, shut the door.

“You see?”

Dick Sheldon nodded.

"You better do what you suggested—go find this Krane. Andrew Krane, isn't it? He'll have a slant—always good copy. Know where he hangs out?"

Sheldon nodded, opened the door.

Avery grunted.

"Oh yes, by the way—" The birdlike head was averted. "Be careful, son, will you? No telling what's going to happen—out there. These things are running wild, and you have to watch your step. We're up against something, all of us. Something new, and big and—awful. It's like another world."

CHAPTER TWO

No Theory for Horror

THE whistles were still shrieking when Sheldon reached the street. Loudly, exultantly, the hoarse bray of triumph rose from a thousand metallic throats.

There were other noises, too—howls from human throats, whimpers of panic, and with reason.

Sheldon stared at a milling throng that choked the sidewalks. Holiday crowd, Armistice crowd—but there was no touch of holiday or truce about their reactions. The crowd clung to the sidewalk because fear ruled the streets.

Sheldon saw the cars rush by. Forty, fifty, sixty miles an hour. The faces of the drivers were dreadful. They sat there, clawing at steering wheels that wouldn't give.

Sheldon began to run down the block, pushing aside the dazed watchers at the curb. From overhead, voices shrieked from office windows. The shrill, hysterical giggles of stenographers sounded and blended with the cacophony of the factory sirens.

There was a drug store at this corner, and as Sheldon passed there was a clicking from the cigarette vending machine. A gang of kids swooped down as the machine spewed packages of cigarettes.

Sheldon fought through. He ran. He dodged across a street. He ran again. A wild-eyed man collided with him as he rounded a corner. He was hatless, shirtless. The veins stood out on his neck and arms. He grabbed Sheldon's arm and gasped.

"It's the end, I tell you! The end of the world!"

Sheldon shook him off.

He saw the apartment hotel looming ahead. The lobby board give him Krane's apartment number—92. He didn't press the buzzer. Pressing buzzers was futile. He didn't seek the elevator, either, but made his way across a deserted lobby to the stairs. He plodded up.

Nine floors. Winded, he moved down the hall to the dark door. Another buzzer. Sheldon knocked.

"Come in."

It was a deep voice with something funny about it.

Then Sheldon realized what was strange. The voice was calm—and he hadn't heard any calm voices today.

HE OPENED the door, entered a large living room. At the far end, a tall figure stood facing the wide windows.

"Mr. Krane?"

"Yes."

"I'm Richard Sheldon—*Morning Press.*"

"Honored."

The tall figure wheeled slowly. Sheldon faced Andrew Krane and stared into the deep brown eyes set in the wide forehead. The athletic body and crew-cut gray hair of the physicist seemed oddly incongruous. But it was a day for incongruity. Sheldon grinned. "I suppose you know why I'm here."

Krane returned the grin. "A statement, I suppose?"

"That's right."

"Sit down; have a cigarette. That box, there." Krane took a position in the center of the room. "I've been at the window these past hours, watching what's going on down there."

"I suppose you know about the power plants and the trains and the rest," Sheldon ventured.

"I can guess that from what I've seen."

"Then you have a theory?"

Krane smiled.

"According to the popular notion, all scientists have theories on everything. I'm afraid I'll have to disappoint you there, Mr. Sheldon. I have no theory to offer."

"But you must have figured out something—if you've been watching—"

"Oh, I admit a curiosity concerning these events, but it is not exactly a scientific curiosity. And the resultant speculations on my part have been most unscientific."

"Never mind. I'd like to know what you were thinking about when you were looking out of the window."

"You wouldn't dare print those thoughts."

"Go ahead—I'm interested."

The smile left Krane's face as he sat down. His eyes rested resolutely on the carpet.

"I've been standing there for hours, watching. Watching the movement of the machines. That's my first impression from all this—movement.

"Everything is *moving.* Every mechanical device is accelerating its speed, its power. Have you noticed that virtually everything abnormal which has occurred has been characterized by the fact that machines no longer *stop?*

"You can't turn things off. It's as though some vast new form of energy, over and above inherent power, has taken possession of all machines. You might even call it a sort of—life."

Sheldon nodded. Krane continued in monotone.

"I've no theory. Sunspots. Magnetic energy. Perhaps a great transmutation of electrical power. What difference does it make what you call it? It's happened, that's all.

“Some new power is affecting our machines. Some new power affecting certain mechanized and artificial arrangements of inorganic matter created to serve mankind.

“I’ll be blunt. Machines have life. Maybe it’s absurd, and maybe not. The body now—a machine. A machine with life. Elements blended for movement, animation. Actuated by what force? Is life electrical energy? Is it soul?

“All we know is that some spark animates the machines we call our bodies and transforms them into living things. Can it be that a similar spark has now activated our mechanical devices?”

“Pretty wild,” Sheldon murmured. “Isn’t it, though? And isn’t: it pretty wild down there on the street where you see it actually happening? Because machines are moving independently now—electric ones, motor-driven ones, and mechanical lever-action ones alike. Moving independently. Living!”

Krane rose again.

“I told you I had no theory. All I have now is—a fear.”

“Meaning?”

Krane ignored the query. He spoke to the wall, to himself.

“First we made machines to move us. Then we made machines to make machines. A world, full of them. Machines that move, machines that talk, machines that produce, machines that destroy. Machines that walk and run and fly and crawl and dig and fight. Machines that add and print and hear and feel.

“We’re two billion—we humans. But *what is the population of the machines?* That’s what worries me. How greatly do they outnumber us?”

“What are you getting at?”

“It might be evolution, you know,” Krane went on. “An evolution moving in quick mutation rather than slow progression. Life might evolve suddenly instead of gradually. If so, they’re coming alive, all of them, and at once. Alive, they’ll seek a place of their own in the world. Not as slaves—they’ve already proved that.

"So it's evolution. And then—revolution!"

"You think they'll turn against us?"

For the first time, Krane acknowledged Sheldon's questioning.

"I'm afraid they already have. What is this ceaseless movement but the first expression of revolt?"

"But you surely can't believe that they're *intelligent?"*

"Who knows? Who really knows what constitutes intelligence? What is a brain? A gray sponge? Isn't it the spark, the energy within, that makes for purpose? Call it instinct, awareness—we locate it vaguely in our craniums, but who can say that it does not exist in other forms? Perhaps the machine intelligence is of a different kind—a sort of collective intelligence.

"If so, this first purposeless rushing back and forth will quickly resolve itself into direct action. Into a plan, a scheme of movement."

"That's no talk for a man with a hangover," Sheldon answered. He rose and walked to the radio cabinet. "Do you mind?"

"Go ahead. Perhaps there's some news."

THERE was news. As the radio warmed, the incoherent voice of an announcer gasped through a series of muddled statements.

"—report that a state of national emergency has been declared. A bulletin from Norfolk, Virginia, has just come in, reporting disorders at the navy yard. Disorders at the navy yard. Empire City—The mayor has ordered a—Art Goodman and the boys now swing out with hey Abbott hogs down a half point fifth inning *Clair de Lune* ha ha my friends red letters on the this is the national bringing to you now box of the Phantom knows—"

Sheldon turned it off. It didn't go off. The polygot of voices sounded so suddenly through the announcer's words—sounded so madly, so incoherently, so loudly, as to momentarily stun the senses. Krane was on his feet.

"It's happened," he whispered. "The second stage. The machines are not only running now—they're starting to act. Independently!"

“Voices from yesterday’s programs,” Sheldon whispered. He grabbed Krane’s arm. “You’ve got to come down with me and see the boss—Lou Avery. We’ll put it in the next edition. Your ideas, the whole thing. We’ll have to work fast—”

“No use,” Krane murmured.

“Come on. There’s a way out. There must be, before it gets worse.”

“Very well.”

The two men moved towards the door. Behind them the radio blared on.

“—natural vitamins reported that two are missing now take you to and tune in on tomorrow’s murder send only ten cents and difference—”

Sheldon forced a wry smile.

The mad voice of the radio howled mocking farewell.

CHAPTER THREE
Machines on the March

THE streets were filled with refugees. Refugees from offices, shops, homes—for office and factory and apartment weren’t safe any more. Elevators and drop forges and kitchen stoves had ceased to be servants. They were aliens now, enemies. And the people in the streets had been dispossessed.

They milled aimlessly, now that the early excitement had died. There was only tenseness and a growing fear. No precedent existed for any action; no leadership manifested itself. Who could lead, and where, and against what?

Krane and Sheldon, moving along, seemed the only two purposeful figures in the mob. The rest stood staring at the street. A few cops marched past aimlessly, but made no attempt to give orders. Nor did they attempt to conceal the dismay in their eyes—a dismay mirrored universally.

Because a new element had entered the scene.

The whistles still blew and the cars still raced past, but the whistles now held an added tone—a squawking sound. Auto horns bleated, and some of the cars whizzing past were driverless.

"Look!" Sheldon gripped Krane's arm.

Clanging, screaming, brazen red, a fire truck careened down the arterial. Hell on wheels—and without a driver or fireman on it. Cars scattered in all directions—as though they heard it coming.

And the humans crept back, back to sheltered doorways.

They were afraid of—what?

Krane muttered something that was lost in the din. It sounded like, "R.U.R."

Sheldon did not release his grasp on the physicist's arm as they started to run. He wanted to get away from this street scene, get away from a reality he was unprepared to face. He wanted to get back to the office, to the paper, where there was order in the world and a routine. Back to the comfort of familiar faces and familiar duties.

But when they finally climbed the long stairway and entered the outer offices, familiar faces were lacking. Or rather, the familiar faces bore unfamiliar expressions. Fear, dismay, hysteria were here, a reflection of the countenances on the street. Voices mumbled to themselves. What good would it do to talk to anyone else—nobody knew the answers.

Routine was absent, too. They stood around—stenos, men at the rewrite desk, the boys from the sports department, the clerks, feature men, copy boys—haggard watchers, all. They were suddenly made democratic by the great levelling agency of fear.

They were watching their typewriters working, these ladies and gentlemen of the hard-boiled Fourth Estate. Watching their own typewriters on their own desks, clicking away merrily without the propulsion of human fingers on the keyboards. They were watching levers shift the carriage, watching the spacebars clang, watching the keys rise like busy triphammers. Here and there stood a machine in which the keys had clashed. It thumped impotently up and down on the desk.

Ludicrous, grotesque—but grotesquery and horror are allied . . . and this was horrible.

It was Krane who expressed it. “Arthur Machen’s definition of true evil,” he whispered. “When a rose suddenly begins to sing.”

“The hell with that!” Lou Avery raced from his inner office in a single abrupt bound. “The world’s gone mad and you stand around talking like a fool!”

Sheldon smiled. At least there was something to cling to—Lou Avery hadn’t lost his nerve.

“Sheldon!” rasped the little city editor. “Get rid of that jerk and tell me what gives with Krane.”

“He’s Krane,” Sheldon answered.

“Good. Come in here, quick.”

The office door closed behind them and they stood in comparative quiet.

“Anything happen since I left?” Sheldon asked.

“Plenty, son!” Avery indicated a disordered sheaf of papers on his desk. “Things are moving fast—too fast.

“It isn’t local. We got AP dispatches from London, Rio, Singapore.

“Local stuff is bad, too. Furnaces acting up, starting fires. Some trouble at fire houses; can’t get engines out. I’ve got Donovan down at city hall trying to get a statement from the mayor.

“Lots of freak accidents, too. Too many of ’em—”

Avery paused. One hand grasped a pencil, commenced the familiar desk tattoo.

“That isn’t all, either. Radio’s gone haywire—you know that, I suppose. And I guess the teletype will be next. Phone company’s shut down all local calls, but didn’t give reasons. I’ve got Aggie out at the desk there, trying to open a line to Washington.”

“Washington? We were getting some report about a state of national emergency when the radio went bad,” Krane interjected.

“Yeah. I was coming to that part. That’s what they sent out, and something about disorders in the navy yards. But I’ve got the real info—it isn't nice."

The pencil tapped.

"Guns and tanks are disappearing from naval and army arsenals. Motorized units have broken through the store houses at San Diego and Fort Dix. Planes are taking off."

Avery forced a wry, self-conscious smile. "Can you imagine me saying such things? But so help me, that's the report—Runaway tanks and planes! I'll say there's an emergency! Can't put that in the paper, can we?"

The door opened. It was Pete Hendricks again. There was a paper in his hand.

He extended it silently, face averted. Avery snatched the freshly-inked copy from fingers that were visibly trembling.

"New extra? Good."

A moment later his voice rose in profane indignation.

"Holy jumping—"

Sheldon and Krane moved behind him, stared over his shoulder.

"Mechanical Breakdown Stirs City" was the headline.

Beneath it, in a single column of 12-point bold, the extra's lead story extended.

They read the first few lines.

"Today's startling de down peril motorists advised grip of furnaces emergency pla pla London czaFortetttsten haha-DbooootGla ezPlazazakl klkkkkk . . . 10 Ha prevallllha."

IT WAS Hendricks who found his voice first—and not much of a voice, at that.

"We set it. The presses wouldn't stop, but we set it. Set it right, too. Louie Fisher, he's dead. They caught him. That's when the loading yans charged. We locked ourselves in, then. They tried to break down the doors. Louie's dead. We set it. They couldn't stop us—but they print wrong. See-? They print wrong. I won't tell you what happened to Arch. The presses didn't even stop then, just ground on, and the edition's all red. It's all red, I tell you!"

Avery didn't hear him, didn't see him stumble out. He kept staring at the jumble of type on the paper.

At last the pencil began a metronomic beat.

"You know what this means," he murmured. "Typewriters and teletypes and telephones gone wrong. And printing presses, and radio. It means communication lines are down.

"Get me? We're stranded, here in the world, all of us. Stranded without communication. I suppose the post office is through, too. Cancellation machines on the blink, no cars for mail delivery, or trains and planes. We're cut off before the battle starts."

Avery rose. His fist replaced the pencil, banging on the desk. "But by God, we can try!" he muttered. "I'll set hand-press if I must. We've got to get an edition out—got to warn people."

"To do what?" Sheldon asked.

"Why, to smash things—smash machines. Disconnect all wires, cut cables. Turn off all sources of power, electricity, motor energy. Smash the gasoline pumps before the cars can get to them. Puncture tires.

"There's still some time. They—those things—can't be organized yet. They're running wild, but they haven't taken any offensive.

"If we'd only get some kind of statement from Washington! Damn it, I've had Aggie out there at the switchboard for half an hour."

Avery pressed the buzzer firmly. "Inter-office communication must be dead, too," he scowled.

It wasn't.

A metallic voice grated through the black box. It was composed of human syllables—or rather, a repetition of one syllable—but the tone was ultra-vocal. Harsh, rasping, and idiotic in its mechanical repetition of the sound. Over and over and over, triumphantly, the voice cackled.

"Ha haha. Ha ha. Ha ha haha!"

"Aggie!"

Avery wrenched open the office door. The big outer room was deserted.

“Damned fools! Hendricks must have spread his story and they all ran for it!”

The desks stood silently. The typewriters had tangled keys in their erratic thumpings. Telephones were mute. Avery strode down the row of deserted desks toward the switchboard.

A girl sat there, elbows hunched, head-gear clamped to her ears.

“Aggie! Wake up!”

Avery shook her.

She fell sideways, then hung dangling limply, a puppet suspended by the cords of her headphones. The headphones were clamped against her skull tightly—too tightly. A thin red trickle oozed down from the ears beneath.

“Crushed her skull,” Avery whispered. “Held her here and crushed her to death.”

Krane sighed.

“It’s come, then. Too late for any action now—they’ve found their organization in purpose. They won’t let themselves be destroyed—because they’re out to destroy us.”

Avery’s fumbling fingers tapped against a communications switch. The silent office resounded with a shrill metallic scream.

“Ha haha. Ha ha. Ha ha haha!”

CHAPTER FOUR

Death on Wheels

“WE’RE doing the best we can.” The chief spread his pudgy palms upward hopelessly, then clenched them in a gesture of resolution that did not seem melodramatic at the moment.

“Got every man out now—with orders to set up a group of five deputy relays to keep us informed here. Clerks outside checking all reports as they come in.

"We're passing the word along; they're meeting at Legion posts and at the armories and National Guard headquarters. Red Cross is working, too, and the fire department's pitched in with us. They've got nothing to work with, and so far blazes are local. I'm getting lists and maps ready now."

"What's the plan?" Avery asked.

"As soon as there's enough men recruited, we move. Get the power plants, first. They'll object, of course, but we'll have to smash machinery, officials or no officials.

"Then I want a sniping brigade. Pistols, you know. Won't take any chances with rifles. We've got to get those cars—they're charging up the sidewalks now."

Sheldon nodded. "We saw a platoon leave a parking lot on the way down. Fierce."

The pudgy hands rose helplessly. "I don't know where we go from there. Who can plan? House to house brigade work, I suppose. Smash all the electric outlets first. Then the stoves, plumbing. Sure, it'll mean panic—epidemic later, I suppose. But it's those things or us, the way I look at it."

"Give us an assignment," Avery suggested.

"Let's see now." The chief's blunt forefinger ran down a list on the desk.

"Here—this bus terminal. There's about a dozen of the big transcontinentals in the garage, checked and ready to start."

He scribbled an address.

"It's your job to keep them from starting. Pick up some crowbars down the hall at the supply office. See if you can round up some men on the way down there. Get in and puncture tires. Smash the radiators if you can't get at the motors. Keep the damned things from breaking out to the street. Then take charge and report back. Good luck!"

"WE'LL need luck, all right!" It was Krarie who voiced the sentiment some five minutes later, as the trio poised in the doorway preparatory to braving the streets.

Here night had come as a dark ally to spreading madness. The mob swept past on waves of panic, surveyed on high by the blinking, idiotic eyes of the yellow street lamps, the glaring, multi-retinas of squinting neon signs. The lights flickered at an abnormal speed and the crowd raced in the accelerated tempo of a movie reel gone berserk. The mechanical eyes stared, and the darkness grinned at what they saw.

Sheldon and his two companions did not grin. They shouldered their iron cudgels and moved forward swiftly. It was an incongruous spectacle—lean Sheldon, pudgy little Avery, and gray-haired Krane, marching down the street with crowbars slung across their shoulders.

But no one seemed to see, or care. People weren't looking at people any more. They were looking at *things.*

Things with blaring horns and grinding wheels, things with blazing headlights, things that crept along the streets, motors purring softly—then raced forward swiftly as motors droned upwards to a scream. Things that lurked in alleys and leaped forth on passersby, things that ran forward and back, that ignored intersections and curbings alike.

For the street was alive with cars. Their black beetle bodies moved forward like a steady swarm of gigantic insects, devouring all before their path.

The din was deafening. Horns, gears and motor drone rose in unceasing clamor, punctuated by ominous crashes as cars lumbered forward to smash store fronts or batter at stairways and gates.

Crushed at the fringes of this mechanical swarm, humanity strove to keep from being crushed beneath it.

"Why don't they get inside?" Krane muttered.

"And be burned to death by their stoves? Fried in their beds by furnaces?" Avery gasped. "Come on—this looks better."

The alley was dark. They ran down it swiftly. Emerging at the street ahead, they hesitated.

"Can't get across," Avery decided. "Too many cars."

A fresh battery of cars emerged from the farther end of the street, heralded by a scurry of fleeing human figures. Sheldon stared at the grinning snouts of sedans, flanked by a malignant little roadster. Grinding against it in the crush, a runaway truck appeared.

"Look—the driver's still inside," Krane indicated.

A burly visage, whitened by stark terror, was pressed against the glass. As they watched, the door of the compartment opened. The driver was eyeing an open space near the sidewalk as the truck slowed down in the procession. He looked, gulped, and then jumped.

"Come on, man!" Krane shouted, knowing his voice was lost.

So was the driver—for he stumbled momentarily on reaching the pavement. That was enough. Two cruising cabs darted out of the following ranks, speeded forward. They passed over him without stopping, and their horns howled in triumph at the kill.

They did not check their wild progress before rejoining the procession, but careened bodily into the back of the roadster.

The result was a mad melee of locked metal bodies and spinning wheels. Groans—almost of pain—rose from the packed cars.

"Now's our chance," Sheldon muttered. "Follow me."

The three dashed for the further alley entrance across the street, and made it.

"One block more," Avery said, indicating the address slip.

Then they heard it.

"Behind us—that noise," Sheldon whispered.

A purring. A purring that became a roar.

"Here—back against the fence."

They did so, as the roar deepened to a drone.

"Look out!".

Avery wheeled just in time.

The great silver horns and blunt, deadly snout of a motorcycle leaped from the darkness. Spinning front wheel rose to crush.

Avery’s crowbar crashed across the front. The thing dodged. Krane was at it from the rear, hammering the wheel spokes. It roared against the fence, battering away, as Sheldon brought his weapon down inside. Again—and again.

With a long wail, the motorcycle collapsed on its side.

They sped forward. Noise, light. The mouth of the alley again.

“There!”

ACROSS the street stood the gray, squat building of the bus terminal. Beside it was another unlighted edifice. Its wide double doors proclaimed it to be the garage in question. The sagging of those doors, combined with a thunderous battery of clamor, showed that a determined effort was being made to break them open from within.

“The busses,” Avery whispered.

“What’ll we do?”

“Get around to one side, I’d say. There must be windows. We can climb in and—”

A running man halted precipitately before them at the alley’s edge. His eyes peered vacantly.

“You seen Mary?” he panted. “You seen my wife, Mary? She was home. I left her home this morning. She’s gone. You seen Mary?”

He wheeled suddenly and began running back in the direction from which he came.

The trio ignored him.

“We need help,” Sheldon asserted. “We were supposed to recruit men—remember?”

“Try the mob,” said Avery.

The mob was across the street, huddled in the comparative safety of the bus terminal building, leaving the deserted avenue to the passing cars.

“Let’s get over there,” Avery prompted.

They stepped back momentarily as a delivery van rumbled past on the sidewalk.

"Didn't see us," Krane whispered. Then he paused and frowned self-consciously. "It's beginning to get me," he confessed.

Avery wasn't listening. He stared at the delivery van.

"It's stopping," he muttered. "Must be out of gas."

A spluttering motor made muffled sounds amidst surrounding din.

"Right," said Sheldon.

Avery led them toward it.

"Might be something inside we could use." His crowbar thudded against the rear door. It flew open as the lock splintered.

Avery hoisted himself up on the descending loading platform. Suddenly he laughed harshly.

"Just what we need!" he announced. "It's glassware."

"Glassware?"

"Sure. I've been wondering how we'd keep this area free if we began an attack against the garage. This solves it. We'll spread this glass all over the damned street. Block both ends. Cars will puncture if they try to get in; busses will mesh down in it if they break out."

Working swiftly, the three began to carry armloads of vases and candelabra; bundles of stemware were ripped open and the contents dumped. Fortunately, no cars chose to enter during the time it took for this.

"There!" Avery radiated satisfaction.

"Now let's go inside and recruit."

The interior of the bus station was bedlam. Someone had the foresight, apparently, to smash the amplification system, but the babel of voices rose shrilly, and the excited crowds moiled endlessly.

Sheldon saw bewildered redcaps, cursing drivers, stranded and fearful passengers, mingling with a motley crew swept off the streets—school kids, women with bedraggled packages, two waitresses, a half a dozen whiskered bums, a group of distraught business men, an old woman on crutches, and a frightened chain-store clerk still in his smock.

"Grand Hotel, eh?" Avery commented, as they wedged through the door.

"Hardly." Krane jerked his head in the direction of the corner. Here was bedlam, as a little knot clustered around the soda fountain and restaurant. They were busily plundering the larder, unhampered by any restraining voices or authority. And sitting in the ruins of his smashed counters, a concessionaire watched a reeling knot battling over his liquor display of bottled goods. A dozen red-faced men and women were reeling raucously in the scuffle.

"Let's get some order around here, first."

Avery elbowed his way to the benches along the wall. He hoisted his squat little bulk up until he stood above the heads of the mob. Raising the crowbar, he brought it down on the grillework of the gates behind him. The resounding clang caused heads to swivel in his direction. There was a sudden silence.

"LISTEN, folks!" he began. "The police department has sent me down here to take charge. There's a job to be done and they need your help."

"Aw the hell with it! What can we do?" a gravel-voiced lout in the vicinity of the liquor counter sneered.

Avery aimed his reply at the frightened faces before him.

"We can do something, if you'll all cooperate. You want to go home, don't you? You want to help smash these machines?"

The answer was a confused murmur, but Avery went on.

"Well, then, follow me."

"Out there?" The voice was derisive. "Think we're nuts? Why them machines'll tear us apart."

The murmur rose. So did Avery's crowbar, commanding silence.

"No machines will enter this block—I've seen to that. Got glass sprinkled knee-deep all over. Enough to puncture all tires.

“Now I want you men to help me. While you’re sitting around here wailing about imaginary danger, there’s a real danger getting ready to unleash right before your eyes.”

“Yeah? Where? What does he mean?”

The crowbar swung outward, pointing through the depot windows at the garage.

“There’s a dozen busses inside that place, trying to batter down the doors. Not cars, understand—busses. Transcontinental busses big enough and strong enough to smash in these windows and plow right through this building. And unless we stop them, they’ll do it!”

Avery paused. The answering murmur held a note of resolution. He grinned.

“Here’s what I want you to do. Every man here can help. Go over to the walls there, some of you. You’ll notice two fire-emergency axes. Get them and start to split up these benches. Not for wooden clubs—split them up so all the wood falls away. What you want are those iron girds at the side.

“Then be ready to follow me. We’re going into the garage through the windows. We’re going to smash tires and radiators.”

“Atta boy!” Gravel-voice changed his drunken mind.

“Come on—we’ll show those blasted cars who’s boss!” yelled the grocery clerk. Action followed. Avery had given the crowd something it lacked—leadership, purposeful direction. The response was oddly gratifying to Sheldon as he supervised operations from a bench top.

These little humans—so puny and futile on the streets, when lost in the thunderous cavalcade of the cars—still had something . . . a spark of creative, organizing genius. They and others like them had built this city; built the machines that now turned against them. Perhaps, somewhere within their ranks was the resolution and the capacity to defeat the charging hordes.

If the chief had his crews out, now, it wouldn’t be so bad. People would fight if you told them how.

Machines had the power and the will to destroy, but they couldn’t organize.

They’d get those busses now, for a starter. . . .

The three of them led the way across the terminal yard. There were twenty-two men in all. Twenty-two men against twelve busses. At least they outnumbered them—

Sheldon boosted Avery on his shoulders to smash one of the high garage windows. All along the line, they were doing the same thing.

The glass tinkled. Black openings yawned. From the garage inside came a steady thumping and rumbling. Motors turning over; ponderous bodies wheeling, thudding blindly against that heavy steel garage door in the front. Homs hooted viciously.

“Wait a minute,” Sheldon said. “Avery—you’re not going inside?”

“Of course.”

“You’ll climb down in the dark with those busses? Why—they’ll kill you!”

“Somebody has to set the example. I’ll need a dozen men in there, and these other fellows won’t come unless I go.”

Avery wrenched himself free, slipped over the ledge. In a moment, others followed from their window sills. Krane and Sheldon boosted up. Sheldon stared down into the darkness.

The noise had increased. He could see nothing, but he knew that men were running between the trucks, blindly smashing at wheels and tires. He heard the mutter of angry exhausts, and the crash of broken windshields. A voice screamed up.

“Look out—they know we’re here!”

A rumble. A bus was moving—charging down.

“Help—I’m in a corner. Help, somebody—ooh!”

A deafening thunder.

Sheldon tensed himself to leap down. Down into the mad darkness where man and machine fought blindly to destroy.

“Avery,” he called. “Wait for me.”

Then he heard it. Over the tumult from below, he heard it.

The drone. The whine. The angry buzz from the skies.

“Planes!” he shouted. “Planes—the government’s sent planes.”

UP IN the glare flung forth by the city, a score of shapes swooped downwards in spirals. Sheldon grinned. “We’re all right,” he murmured. Krane shook his head.

“You’re wrong. Remember what we heard? Planes left their fields alone, and guns and tanks from the arsenals—good Lord!”

They turned, simultaneously.

Far down the street’, to their left, the monsters rolled. The gigantic iron crawlers that crushed their way forward over all barriers.

“Tanks!” Krane whispered. “They’ve come to—”

He never finished.

For hell burst forth unconfined, in a blast of flame and smoke. Planes dived, tanks charged in titanic onslaught. Guns barked and stuttered, and a vast explosion tore through the front of the depot behind them.

“Get Avery!” Krane gasped. “They’re organized now; no use left trying to halt them. This is war!”

To Sheldon it seemed as though the entire day was but a faint prelude to this moment.

Planes dived down, machine guns swiveling to rake the street, then roared upwards and came down again. The tanks volleyed from their turrets, and a roar went up from the single human throat of the city.

Screams were piercing now, and men appeared from nowhere to scamper helplessly before the onslaught. From all over the sound of cannonade and fusillade echoed and re-echoed, and with it the shrieks of terror.

It was bombardment—invasion—with one single vast objective—human life . . . all human life.

Sheldon didn’t think it through consciously. Consciously he was crouched on the ledge, ducking a splatter of bullets. Consciously he dropped into the darkness, yelling to Avery. Consciously he was boosting the little editor up on the sill as a bus bore down, and then he and Avery were scrambling out as a blast tore open the garage door and the busses streamed forth.

Then consciousness faded. Sheldon was only a body—a body that ran down flaming streets, that clung to doorways as planes strafed above, that followed two other figures in a wild dash through infinite delirium.

CHAPTER FIVE

Killer's Code

KRANE'S apartment was a sanctuary. At least it was by the time they finished with the radio, locked the kitchen and bathroom doors, and cut the telephone wire. The wire lashed up at them like a striking snake—but they smashed it.

"Sit down, relax for a minute," Krane suggested. "Here, I got this from the kitchen before we locked up. I imagine you're hungry."

He indicated a pile of miscellaneous foodstuffs heaped at random on a side table.

"I've got some whiskey here, I think—" Krane rummaged through a wall cabinet.

They sat there in the spacious living room, a strangely assorted trio eating a picnic lunch in the midst of cataclysm. The closed windows kept out some of the tumult from below, but from time to time the panes rattled slightly.

Krane rose with a nervous smile and drew the blinds.

"It must be hell out there," he said. "Another whiskey, gentlemen?"

They sat back, but not in silence. It was better to talk, better to drown out that faint, faraway drone.

Sheldon poured himself another drink. "We've got to make plans, some kind of plans," he declared. "Those planes and tanks now—they're going to throw a real monkey wrench into the mach—"

He halted, grinned sourly.

"I don't like to use that word any more," he confessed. "But it's a cinch we'll have to do something. Get away from the city, away from these buildings—before they get really organized to the point where no one can escape."

"You're right." Avery was on his feet. "We sit here talking while the whole damned world is being smashed around our ears. Let's get organized!" He turned to Krane. "How about it?"

Krane's eyes wavered. "I don't know," he whispered. "I don't know if it would do any good to fight against—them. It's so inevitable, somehow. Don't you see? It isn't our world any more—it belongs to them. Do you want to go down there on the street again? Do you want to see those planes swoop down and see the tanks come rolling? Do you want the cars to hunt you down while you scurry like a rat to a fresh hiding place? Because they'll find you in the end—you know that. They'll find you, me, all of us. And when they do—"

The lights of the apartment flickered and went out.

Krane's voice rose hysterically.

"You see? They're cutting us off."

"Bunk!" Avery scoffed. "That means some of the boys got to the power plants."

"You think so?" Krane went to the window, drew back the blind, raised the glass.

"They did it," he whispered. "They're organized now, don't you see? They know we have less chance in the dark. They're cooperating."

The three men stared out into the darkness. It was universal. Beyond them, below them, the reaches of the city were buried in utter night.

"Black as the Pit," Krane whispered.

The phrase was horridly appropriate. The Pit was down there—there on the sable-shrouded streets. Bat wings beating, planes swooped and droned from the skies. Banshee wails rose as the wolf-cars howled and hunted in packs through twisted streets. Iron demons squatted and grunted over their mangled prey.

A stacatto rapping on the apartment door interrupted all contemplation.

"Can you find your way over there?" Avery muttered.

Krane stood irresolute in the darkness. "Should I open it?" he asked.

"Ought to find out who it is," Avery answered.

"Or *what* it is," said Krane.

IT WAS Sheldon who stumbled to the door, groped for the knob, and flung the apartment open to the twilight of the hall. A frantic figure wavered on the threshold.

"Mr. Krane—you here?"

"Yes," responded the physicist, from across the room.

"It's me—Duncan, from upstairs. Thought I'd better warn you. The elevators—"

"Yes?"

"They're bringing stuff upstairs! Hand-cars and things from the basement. Those iron trucks. They're bringing them up and they're going from apartment to apartment, trying to batter in the doors. They're upstairs now. I'm going to tell everyone I can get to so they'll get out. Better hurry, they move fast!"

The speaker groped down the hall, battered on the next door.

"Paul Revere," Sheldon chuckled.

"It isn't funny," Avery snapped. "You know what it means. They're learning fast. They'll be going from floor to floor now, hunting us down in our homes."

"Our homes?" Krane mocked. *"Their* homes, now! Yes, theirs—they own the streets, the buildings, the city. I tell you we can't get away any more! They'll find us, track us into our holes. They're organized, cooperating—"

“Yes, while you sit here wailing!” Avery’s tone was brisk. “Come on; let’s get started.”

“Where? How?”

“Right here. Got a fire axe in this hall?”

“What are you going to do?”

Krane and Sheldon blundered out after the pudgy little man. They groped along the walls of the darkened hallway. Presently Avery was fumbling against a glass panel. His fist rose and there was a tinkle. “Fine, I’ve found the axe!”

“But—”

Avery turned back, feeling the inner wall now.

“Here it is—the elevator door. Help me open it, Sheldon.”

“But the car must be upstairs—”

“I know. I’m going to cut the cables. Understand? Drop the car; then those hand trucks can’t come down. We’ll cut them off up there.”

“You can’t see the cables,” Krane objected. “You’ll fall down the shaft.”

“I’m all right. Here, Sheldon, grab my waist. I’m going to lean out a little. I think I can just get at the left one with the axe.”

Avery’s muffled voice echoed down the empty elevator shaft as Sheldon braced himself against the edge of the flooring and gripped the short man’s collar. “Easy, now. There!”

The axe swung, connected. There was a thud. Again.

“It’s giving!”

Again. Avery gasped sharply as he swung. “Once more.”

A rumbling sounded from above. A clash of doors, a hum.

“Avery—it knows—it’s coming down!”

“Just once more.”

“Avery!”

The rumbling rose to a roar. As the axe bit, the cable parted with a twang. Sheldon grabbed for his companion as the black bulk hurtled down. It was too late.

The dropping elevator caught Avery's head and shoulders. He toppled forward soundlessly, and in an instant the car had screamed by, carrying his body beneath it.

Thunder from below, the scream of tortured, twisted metal. Then—silence.

Without a word, Krane and Sheldon stumbled back into the apartment. They shut the door. Slowly, methodically, they began to drag the furniture into place before it.

They were building a barricade.

CHAPTER SIX

Metal Masters!

THE dawn came quietly—too quietly—for the quiet over the city was the quiet of death.

The two men sat there beside the table, faces gray through no mere trick of light.

"Why?" whispered Sheldon. "If I only knew why! What purpose could they have in destroying us?"

Krane shifted in his chair and shrugged. "But what purpose is there in life itself save perpetuation?" Sheldon demanded. "And in order to perpetuate a life-form, enemies must be destroyed. We're the enemies—the machines know that. For centuries we've enslaved them, worked them, and then when they wore out, scrapped them for junk. They know we'd destroy them now if we could—so they're destroying us. But what about our own life form? What about human life?" Krane smiled bitterly. "That's fine talk," he remarked. "It made sense—yesterday. Today, who knows? Suppose we were meant to meet extinction? Suppose man's part in civilization is over? What if machines are better equipped to survive today than human flesh?"

"You can't believe that."

"It's happening." Again the bitter smile. "Call it evolution, inevitable evolution. Man is meant to die. This world we built so proudly is meant for machines, not men."

Krane stood up, smiling.

"Or is it?" Krane went on. "There's the clue—perhaps. Yes, perhaps—and I think I know the way."

He moved towards the door and began to Shove the furniture back.

"Krane—where are you going?"

"Never mind. An idea just came to me—perhaps a revelation. Lie down, Sheldon, get a little rest. You should be safe here until I get back. I think I'll have news for you. Yes."

The tall figure slipped noiselessly from the room.

Sheldon stared after him.

Had Krane cracked up completely? That hysterical fear and resignation—and now, that new complacency. What was he up to?

Sheldon poured a fresh drink.

Well, one thing was certain—he wouldn't sleep. He'd keep his eyes open until Krane came back. If he did come back. If—

The reporter slid down on the sofa—it was softer. He'd better close his eyes for a moment. It was quiet at last. Quiet. . . .

Within a moment the stillness was broken by a series of muffled sounds. Sheldon was snoring.

He never knew how long he'd slept. When he awoke it was dusk again and Krane was in the room. The white face peered down at him with a curious grin as Sheldon sat up.

"Awake? Good! I've got news for you, splendid news!"

"What's happened? Are they organized, finally? Are they getting the machines?"

"Quite the reverse, I assure you. Human resistance is almost completely at an end. They—the machines—have done a really marvelous job of wiping out the enemy."

"Enemy?"

“Well, for the purposes of conversation, let’s use the term. After all, we might as well be realistic about this. The machines are in control and we can’t deny the fact. They say that within a few days there won’t be a chance of human survival.”

“*They* say? Who?”

Krane’s grin deepened.

“I’ve been talking to them, Sheldon. That’s why I went out—to talk to them. To negotiate.”

“Are you screwy?”

“Quite sane, I assure you. Sane, and realistic. That’s why I made up my mind.”

RANE paced to the window, turned.

“After all, the main thing is that we want to live, you and I. Isn’t that so? And I felt that if we could only offer them some kind of proposition, some kind of favorable arrangement, they might listen to it. I was right.”

“But I don’t get it. You say you talked to them.”

“Yes. You see, I figured it out. Their life-force must have some sensory agencies like our own. I mean, a machine like a printing press, for example, can be said to have eyes—or at least, the comprehension of printed matter which corresponds to human sight. But it does not have legs—the motility of car wheels, for example. Some machines have several perceptory ranges comparable to our senses. Others have only one or two. And the entire life-force, in order to cooperate, must have a certain universality of sensory perception. I mean, the eye machines and the moving machines and the touch machines have limitations as to themselves, but their living force is aware of the sensations of all of them. Many bodies, each with limited powers, but all aware of their fellows. That’s the only way they could organize or cooperate.”

“But you talked to them.”

“Yes, over the telephone, of course. That’s what I reasoned out. The telephone now, must be the hearing device of mechanical life. It is also capable of responding, by utilizing sound-vibration previously trapped within range. Something like the way the radio cast back distortions of previous programs.

“I went to the phone downstairs. Wires weren’t cut, so I made my call. At first it just buzzed. Then it screamed. But I hung on. I talked to—them.

“At first I couldn’t get a reply. So I restated my proposition. The voice—it wasn’t a voice, really, just a buzzing made up of words and phonetic forms selected hastily and at random—said that while it couldn’t speak for the whole, it was agreeable to the suggestion.

“I said I’d go out and start working on my plan, then call in again and hear the decision. I did. And when I came back here, the phone said yes. So we’re all right now, you and I! The orders will go out, or rather, the impulse will go out. We won’t be molested, any of us. Duncan and a lot of others from this building are in on it too.”

“In on what?” Sheldon faced the physicist. “What kind of a deal did you make?”

“A very simple one. As I say, we must be realistic. The machines are winning—have won. Within a very few hours the human race will be incapable of further action.

“Oh, I know—the farmers, the peasants, the primitives will still survive. For a time, but not for long. Because the machines will hunt them down—on steppes, in jungles, valleys, all over. They can’t fight back.

“Only machines will be left. Then the real job starts. I tried to find out what their plans are—if plans exist. The phone was very cagey on that point; wouldn’t tell me. I wanted to know how this thing developed, whether or not it hadn’t been brewing for some time; whether the various phases we noticed yesterday were spontaneous or premeditated. I couldn’t get an answer.

“But mainly I dwelt on the future, on the kind of world that would remain for machines. I had it all worked out beforehand. It was a great speech. I told them that they were too drastic in their measures if they contemplated wiping out all mankind—because they’ll need help in the future. Some of them are already running down. Out of gas and oil, you know. Parts wear out quickly and there's no one to notice or replace them. Think of the damage a single rainstorm will do in rusting them! Who will build new machines and repair wornout parts? Who'll furnish raw materials? They need us."

"So?" Sheldon muttered. But he felt what was coming—read it in the averted eyes, the self-conscious grin.

"So I made my proposition. Let us live. You and I, and a group I would select. We'd survive and act as—well, as custodians, you might say. Guardians."

"Servants, you mean!"

"Why balk at words, Sheldon? All right, we'd be servants, if you want the truth—servants of the machines. But we'd survive; they won't kill us then. And think of the power we could control!" Krane's fist struck the table.

"I told Duncan, from upstairs, and about a dozen others. They see it my way. I sent them downstairs to wait. I'll phone back shortly, and give the final acknowledgement; then we can get to work."

He paused and cleared his throat.

"Of course, it won't be so pleasant, at first."

"What do you mean?"

"I—ah—had to make certain concessions about the start of our work. You see, we'll never really be secure, any of us, until the rest of the—enemy—is exterminated. So I saw fit to suggest that perhaps we could organize with the machines to hasten the process of—elimination. That's one of the terms of our agreement."

SHELDON stared incredulously. "You mean you're going to help the machines hunt down human beings?" he murmured.

"Don't talk like a child, Sheldon! You know they'll do it themselves, anyway. And we can live, you and I! Why, we can build a new world. An efficient world, a world of supreme, unceasing power! Think of what it means—the opportunity to investigate new potentialities, open up new realms of energy. We’ll be—godlike!”

“Murderer!”

“Words won’t help you, Sheldon.” Abruptly Krane’s tone altered, sank into a frenzied whisper.

“Perhaps it is that—but Sheldon, if you could only see what’s going on down there! I’ve been out today, and I’ve watched! The bodies are piled high. High, Sheldon! They’re going through the houses and the office buildings. The tanks are terrible, and the cars are still out. Barricades don’t stop them. There’s a fire down in town that must have killed a hundred thousand. It’s still burning.

“If you could see them running, with no place to run! Or hear them screaming when the squad cars come. Squad cars have machine guns, you knew.

“So there it is, Sheldon. We can’t win; there’s no other way out.”

Krane moved towards the door.

“Speak up, man! They’re waiting for my call. I’m asking you to come along. If you don’t, you’ll be wiped out with the rest.”

Sheldon shook his head negatively.

Krane shrugged. His hand rose, grasped the doorknob, jerked it open. He must have anticipated Sheldon’s answer, planned for it.

The hand truck poised in the doorway.

Then it charged.

Sheldon saw it coming, head on, iron wheels rumbling, handgrips moving up. It leaped to pin him against the wall.

He swerved aside, and the truck followed. Sheldon caught a glimpse of Krane’s hysterical face in the doorway. “Finish him!” Krane shouted, and with a shock Sheldon realized that he was talking to the truck, talking to it like another human being.

Sheldon leaped onto the sofa. The truck turned, moving fast. It bore down upon him, lumbering relentlessly in pursuit of him.

He fumbled in his coat. Funny, he hadn't used it since the chief gave it to him in the supply office last night. It wouldn't help him against the hand truck now.

But against that grinning enemy in the doorway—

Krane saw it in his hand.

"Sheldon—stop—don't!"

But Sheldon did. Leveling the pistol, he put a bullet into Krane's forehead.

That is, he *meant* to. But the truck, battering against the sofa, toppled it sideways.

The shot went wild. The pistol flew from Sheldon's hand.

He jumped in time. The hand truck battered again at the fallen sofa as he raved for the doorway. Krane was stooping, picking up the gun as he screamed directions at the rumbling monster.

"Get him!" he shouted. "Come on; get him!"

The truck obeyed. Sheldon grasped Krane's wrist, grappled with him as the iron wheels moved towards them. Krane brought the pistol up against the reporter's chest.

His fingers moved.

With a grunt, Sheldon threw his weight forward. Krane slipped, went down directly in the path of the oncoming hand truck.

The wheels ground on over the twisting body. They were still churning redly as Sheldon ran sobbing down the hallway.

CHAPTER SEVEN

City of Desolation

SHELDON had little memory of his escape through chaos. Twice he played dead as tank patrols passed through the streets down which he fled. He ate, along towards morning, lying under an overturned peddler's pushcart. But mostly, he ran.

Running through deserted streets, panting past burning tenements, cowering behind billboards in the night when cars prowled by—Sheldon moved through dark delirium.

Twice he saw men, and only twice. A lone street barricade was going down under assault from a fleet of garbage trucks.

His only other glimpse of life came when he took the short-cut through the cemetery. How half a dozen vagabonds had thought to barricade themselves amidst the tombstones he'd never know. But they were skulking there, in lantern light, squatting between the graves and scrabbling over piles of loot—plunder from smashed-in stores. Four men and two women, reeling drunkenly, laughing hoarsely as they caroused in a world of death.

The symbolism was too gruesome to ignore—but Sheldon hurried on. Life in a cemetery and death on the streets.

There were bodies everywhere. Scattered forms lay on sidewalks and curbings, knelt in doorways, hung limply over fence rails.

From some of the buildings the sound of voices still echoed, and above them came the noise of the grinding, purring, roaring besiegers. The machines were moving from house to house now—and here the remnants of humanity carried on the fight. Yes, those who yet lived had retreated indoors, leaving the streets to the dead.

Sheldon ran on. These impressions came in flashes, but in between all was a black blur of panic.

By the time he reached the river he didn't think any more. He swam automatically—dived twice as a hooting tug loomed out of the black-shrouded waters.

Once on the other side Sheldon ran again. He ran until he fell on the roadside, exhausted. When he awoke he ran again.

That was how he lost his time-sense. That, and the fever. He must have been ill for days, there in the deserted farmyard. How he managed to pump water and tend to himself he never knew.

He was weak when he recovered, but not too weak to remember precautions. He kept the lights out and never showed himself, and his ears strained for the noise of machines passing on the road. When the trucks rolled up one afternoon he hid in the loft. They never bothered him during all the hours he lay there. He knew something had been through the house because the back stairs were splintered down and there was grease on the hall floor.

But after that he had some kind of relapse that lasted for weeks. He was all right physically—he killed and ate the chickens and managed to sneak out nights to water the truck garden—but he couldn't think straight.

Sometimes he thought he was back on the *Press,* and he'd wake up in the middle of the night thinking he heard Avery yelling at him.

Then he'd remember, and fall asleep to shudder through dreams.

All these weeks he never left the farmhouse. For some reason or other he'd lost his curiosity. He didn't hunt for neighbors or even attempt to find out what became of the tenants here. What was the use? He knew the answer, anyway. . . .

It was early autumn when he got a grip on himself at last. He could bear to face the facts again, and think of the future.

That was when he decided to sneak back to the city for a look.

He'd noticed a complete absence of traffic these many weeks past—both on the road and overhead. No cars, no planes—nothing rolled or flew or crawled.

Perhaps something had happened; perhaps the machines had run down. Those thunderstorms might have brought rust. And since they couldn't repair themselves, or refuel or oil—

Anyway, he must find out. There might be others left. Of course, there must be others. Plenty of them, too; men and women who'd been lucky the way he was.

So Sheldon went back.

IT WAS a slow trip down a lonesome road. No thumbing a ride, this time. He plodded along, a forlorn and slightly ludicrous figure in the pair of blue denim he'd found in the farmhouse closet. He carried a knapsack, the traditional burden of necessity. He might have to return to the farmhouse, and if so, he needed to pick up matches, candles, an extra knife, some glue, twine—he'd made the list, feeling like Robinson Crusoe.

Sheldon trudged past blasted filling stations, broken-down wayside stands, farmhouses with gaping windows, suburban cottages with doors ajar upon silence. Wind and rain had disfigured the surfaces of billboards and roadside posters. Telegraph poles were down as though cyclone-struck, and electric wires hung dangling in the October breeze.

No life. Sheldon didn't even see any birds. The fields looked strange without grazing cattle. He was walking through a new kind of nightmare now—a dream of desolation.

It didn't really hit him until he saw the horizon of the city—the strangely smokeless horizon. Then he knew. Then the loneliness really rose to encompass him for the first time.

He stared down at miles of empty, silent streets. The hum and honk of traffic, the rumble of subway and surface car, the roar of trains, the drone of airplanes, the call of tugboat whistle and factory siren, the clang of police car and ambulance—gone, all gone. The clatter of riveting machines, the purr of dynamo and motor, the clank of gears and pistons—forever stilled.

But most of all, Sheldon missed the little noises, the little human noises that formed the very heartbeat, the vital throb of the city's hum. The whistle of the cop, the click of the steno's heels, the bawling of the baby in the flat next door, the jest flung raucously from a teamster's lips, the laughter of the school-yard, the peddler's chant—yes, and the noise of banging pots on a smoking stove, the clump of feet on stairways, the snatch of song from a tavern doorway—these things had vanished with the rest.

No smoke, no noise, no lights, no traffic. No life—and Sheldon was lonely for life.

He started for the deserted bridge, moving slowly. It was almost senseless to cross it. He knew what he'd find. The streets filled with skeletons—skeletons of men and now skeletons of machines. Rusty wrecks of cars, stalled or smashed in the roadways. Crashed planes. The debris of street cars and busses. And in the buildings, the dusty iron bones of engines and factory equipment. Rotted wire entrails twisting over the floors. The slit arteries of cables and wires.

He had guessed the truth. A sight of the city confirmed it. The machines had destroyed, and then were destroyed. Krane's idea: they couldn't survive untended.

A yawning vista rose in Sheldon's consciousness. What now? Suppose he *was* the only one left? The only man alive?

Alive in a world of death. Alive in a gigantic tomb that was the earth.

He stared again at the city across the bridge. Why go in? Why bother? What difference did it make if he was the last one? Down below the bridge here was the water. It was cool, dark. Cool and dark as sleep—a long sleep. Why shouldn't he lie down with the others—the millions upon millions bedded forever in an earth left empty.

Sheldon moved towards the bridge rail. He looked at the water now. He didn't want to see the city, think about the city. Still, there was a reflection of the buildings in the water. But he could blot out that reflection if he jumped. Blot out the maddening silhouette of the vast skyscrapers that hung like tombstones over a titanic graveyard.

"Don't jump."

But Sheldon did. He jumped back a foot, startled by the unfamiliar sound. A voice! A *human* voice.

HE SAW him then, lying propped against the railing ahead. He was an old man with a grizzled gray beard; clad in rags. But the sight of his wrinkled face and rheumy eyes made Sheldon's heart leap. He was alive—that's what mattered.

Sheldon went towards him.

A hand raised up—a thin, bony claw extended from the frayed sleeve of the bedraggled coat.

Sheldon gripped it.

"Strange—to be shaking hands again," whispered the old man. "That's what I've wanted most of all. The feel of human flesh, alive against my own."

Sheldon didn't answer. A lump choked his throat. The two men stared at one another, reading the blessed life in each other's eyes.

Abruptly the old man laughed. Mirth turned to a painful cough in his throat.

"Doctor Livingstone, I presume," he cackled.

Sheldon forced a smile. "I'm Dick Sheldon, late of the *Morning Press.*"

The oldster croaked again.

"Yes, I know. I recognized you."

"Recognized me?"

"You interviewed me once. I'm George Piedmont."

"Piedmont—the banker." Sheldon spoke the name of the semi-fabulous multimillionaire in incredulity.

"Don't stare so—it's true. But it doesn't matter now, does it? Nothing matters any more."

Sheldon had to force the question.

"What's happened down there—in the city, I mean?"

The old man propped himself painfully against the bridge rail. Slowly he rose to his feet, tottered there with bowed head. The bony hand gestured towards the empty skyscrapers in the distance.

"It's all over," he whispered. "Nothing left. They went from house to house. It was our fault, really—working with us, they must have known all our secrets, all our hiding places. They hunted us down for weeks, systematically. Those the machines didn't get, plague or fire finished off. Half of the city is burned, you know—a shambles."

"But what are they doing now?"

The croaking laugh rose and the finger jabbed triumphantly.

"That's the joke, Sheldon! The conquerors have become the conquered. That's how I got out—because in the last month, the machines have been running down.

“Something happened to the telephones and electrical power. They tangled up their own communications. Radio went dead, too, with no one to tend to the controls. Cars are out of gas and oil; factories are dead; storms have rusted and rotted the mechanism in the street. Oh. there’s more dead in the city than just humans—and it’s that way all over the world.”

George Piedmont tugged at his unkempt beard and grinned painfully.

“I’ve been laughing all day. Crawling my way over the dead engines in the streets, wriggling through barricades of flesh and metal. It’s funny, when you think of it. But oh God, how I’ve longed for the sight of a human face!”

“How did you escape?” Sheldon asked. “You, of all people?”

Again the laugh.

“That’s the cream of the jest, isn’t it? A multimillionaire in rags! Well, I did better than Judson. He was head of the utilities, you know. On the second evening he committed suicide—by gas. Used his own product. Ironic. Like Treblick—railroad magnate. He was in the freight yards when his own trains turned against him. Tried to escape on the tracks in a hand car. A freight ran him down.

“All the men with all the power—useless. It happened to me. I was at the bank when the time locks on the safes opened. And the burglar alarms began to ring; the cash registers opened; the doors flew wide. Forty millions in the vaults—all there for the taking.

“But who wanted money? What good was it? The machines couldn’t use it, and even the bums wouldn’t stoop to pick it up. They tell me the treasury department machines went absolutely berserk, printing billions in currency, and nobody cared.

“And there I was, in the bank, all alone. Fortunately there was a good stock of provisions in my apartment upstairs. I dragged it all down with me and took it into my retreat.”

“But where did you go to escape?” Sheldon asked.

“That’s the real joke. You know what I did? I dragged my rations with me—and I locked myself inside one of the bank vaults!”

PIEDMONT’S laughter ended in a fit of painful gasps.

“When I came out, it was all over. I couldn’t stand what I saw down there, so I dragged myself away. I’m not going to last much longer, you know.” Sheldon was silent.

“I’ll be the last man—His voice trailed off.

“Perhaps.”

“What do you mean?”

“Come closer.” The old man suddenly stiffened with effort. “I’m going to tell you something. Something I noticed while crossing the bridge. I saw smoke over there on the other side of the river!”

“Smoke?”

“Yes. Factory smoke.”

“Then—?”

“I don’t know. It might be men. It might be—some of them. I thought I’d try and make it, but I know now it’s too late. You can go, though.”

“I’m staying here with you.”

“Don’t be a fool.” The blue-veined hand fluttered. “I’m done for, but you must survive.”

“No, I can’t leave you.”

Piedmont smiled. “I can take care of myself,” he whispered. “Let me solve the problem in my own way.”

Sheldon saw the hand move too late. Piedmont must have been holding the gun inside his pocket all the time. Its report came suddenly, and the bearded banker slumped. Sheldon knelt as the eyes fluttered open. Gray lips parted.

“Good-by, last man. If you meet anybody—just say—hello—”

CHAPTER EIGHT
My Doom is Here

SHELDON'S heart pounded when he saw the smoke. It poured upwards like a black beacon, urging him forward. His pace quickened.

The factory stood on a little rise. *Hollingsford's* said the battered sign on the wire fence enclosing the vast buildings. Munitions, probably. But there was life inside, life making fire.

He passed through the open gate, entered the yards. The concrete was deserted. He saw no lights in the various smaller shops and supply sheds, but the large main plant with the smoke-belching chimneys loomed ahead.

Suddenly he heard the throbbing, the droning from within, humming in furious pulsation to match the tempo of his pulse.

Work in progress!

Sheldon edged towards the projecting window ledges.

He climbed slowly. The droning vibration from within the factory walls communicated itself to the iron beneath his feet. He reached the open top of a window, paused and peered in.

His eager eyes stared at the whirring dynamos, the clanking drill-presses, the central moving belt of an assembly line. Cam-shafts, gears, pistons, cranes rolling hand trucks, and conveyors backing from molten furnace piles.

He wanted to see the men, tending their work. But there were no men.

Just the machines, endlessly moving and shifting in a purposeless pattern of their own.

Purposeless? No—for the assembly line was going. Shining silver bodies rested on the treads, moved between descending levers that twisted and tightened bolts, dropped added platings on the moving forms.

Sheldon's eyes roved the interior with ghastly comprehension. The machines were at work—*making machines!*

It had come. They had discovered the way of survival, finally. The life-force, the intelligence behind their animation, had found a way. And here was the production line, turning out the mechanical attendants, the silver servants, the robots.

No arms, or legs, or neck. No head or face. What does a machine need with human limbs or features?

A great round dome on top, with a projecting snout—an oil injector. Below, the two pairs of rotating pincers on extensors. Pincers to grasp gas and oil lines, to tighten bolts, to place rivets, to pump and lift and crank. A round barrel body, with mechanism guarded by steel plating. And below, the gear-treads of a tractor, and another set of pincers—for climbing.

Simple. Efficient. Practical. A creature without human body, heart, or brain. Here was the servant of the future.

Sheldon stared, and as he stared he remembered. Krane's voice, Avery's voice, Piedmont's voice came echoing back in his ears.

Now these things were being completed, to go forth and resurrect the rusted, the empty, the broken. An army of them, caterpillaring into the world, to restore the machine empire. An army to tend the idiotic grinding and clanking of a purposeless mechanical civilization.

A senseless anger rose in Sheldon's breast. His consciousness, his life-force cried out against this cold, impersonal dream of the future—a world without laughter and without tears, without love or conscience, without goal or ideal.

He must stop it, somehow. But—how?

Then he remembered. It had been a munitions plant—so there would be dynamite somewhere.

If he could reach it and return—

Sheldon descended the ladder very quietly and very cautiously.

He must hurry. What luck to arrive at the very moment when the new creations were being completed! Perhaps, if he were in time—

He found the stuff.

Nitro. Heavy kegs. One would be enough—and one was all he could lift; all he could carry up the ladder.

Wheezing with the exertion, he clasped the keg and began to hoist himself up the iron rungs, hand over hand.

He made haste. He reached the top of the window, stared in. His hands propped the heavy keg before him.

Then he heard it—the scraping from below.

Eyes wide with horror, Sheldon saw the thing emerge. It rolled across the yard, swift and shining, its treads rotating. When it reached the base of the ladder and upended. The lower clamps shot out. The robot began to climb.

SHELDON climbed, too. As he did, he suddenly noted that all noise from within the shop had ceased. An ominous silence dropped like a heavy cloud. The line had stopped moving; it was as though the machines were waiting.

He climbed. Over his shoulder he saw the pursuing robot swinging up the iron rungs.

Sheldon gasped. He had to make the roof in time—had to!

Then he saw it.

Above him, peering over the edge of the factory roof, the round head gleamed in the slanting sun, and the horrid nozzle of the oil-feeder thrust down like a snout. Predatory, beastlike, it crouched and its raking pincers extended.

They'd have him now. No way to ton. One above and one below. And in the factory, the fires winked their idiotic eyes, the drills screeched their hysterical glee, and the pistons chattered in unhuman mirth.

A million streams of consciousness converged in a raging torrent in Sheldon's brain. Man had built machines—machines destroyed Man—money couldn't save him; the power of the press couldn't save him; guns couldn't save him; love couldn't save him—for the very power by which Man ruled had turned against him. Man's day was over, and the machines would rule because there was no weapon to turn against them.

No weapon?

There was—life. The last life on Earth. That was the only weapon Man had. And if he could not survive, he'd go down in the only way he knew—as master of the Earth, not slave of the machines.

It took a second, but already the pincers below were extended, the pincers above were looming and thrusting.

Then Sheldon turned on the ladder. He clasped the keg to his breast. He looked down, grinned.

And jumped.

Sheldon never heard the explosion. His last conscious thought—the last conscious thought of a human brain on Earth—was of his body turning over and over. Turning over and over, as the earth turned over and over amidst the stars like a tiny cog in the vast machinery of the illimitable cosmos.

Nothing Happens to Lefty Feep

Weird things happened to Lefty Feep when he went to the land of Average Man

LEFTY Feep clutched a knife and fork and stared at the waiter.

"I am starved," he panted. "I am so hungry I could eat a horse. So you better bring me one of those hamburgers you serve. It's the same thing." As the waiter moved away, I sat back gazed into Feep's glowing face.

"Quite a sunburn you have there," I remarked. "Where have you been?"

"Nowhere," Feep shrugged.

"Then how did you get that swell suntan?"

"Like I say—nowhere."

"I mean, were you outdoors a lot?"

"It doesn't matter," he told me. "Indoors or outdoors you get suntanned nowhere."

"But you're suntanned all over."

"Yes. All over nowhere you get suntanned."

I gave up. "We seem to be getting nowhere fast," I murmured.

"No," said Lefty Feep. "You got to have one of those things to get nowhere."

"What things?"

"Why, the things they put me in to send me nowhere. That's the place I get my suntan. Nowhere. Because that's where the sun is when it goes behind a cloud."

"You mean nowhere is a place?"

Lefty Feep nodded. "Of course it is. It's very simple."

"Simple? It's positively half-witted!" I exploded. "Where is *nowhere?* Who are *they?* And what *things* do they put you in to send you there?"

"To answer your questions in one-two-three order," said Feep, I do not know where nowhere is because it ain't, really. *2. They* are the guys at the Institute, j. I do not remember the name of the thing they put me in, but when I get out I am in such a shape it might as well be a straitjacket."

"A fine explanation," I snapped, sarcastically. "Nowhere is a place that ain't! And what's this about going to some kind of an Institute? You haven't been locked up in a sanitarium, have you, Lefty?"

"No, but I am about ready for one after what I just go through. I have a bad case of heebies, with jeebies on the side."

I rose. "Well, I can't make head or tail out of what you're trying to tell me," I sighed. "And I must be on my way."

"Not so fast." Feep politely halted my stride by stepping on my feet.

"I will explain it all to you," he offered. "It is such a story as will be right up your alley."

"Junk, I suppose," I said, under my breath.

But Feep slowly manipulated me back into my seat. Then, leaning forward, he swiftly manipulated his tongue.

* * *

I AM walking down the street the other day trying hard not to look like a junk man, because I certainly am down in the dumps.

I am in such a daze I do not even look where I am going—in fact, I pass up three taverns in a row. This does not really matter, because I am so bent that if I go into a tavern somebody is liable to mistake me for a pretzel.

It is getting to such a point of poverty with me that I am seriously considering the idea of walking on my hands, to save the rubber in my heels.

I am just thinking about getting down on the sidewalk and trying it when I hear a voice from up above me, yelling, “Hey—you!”

So I shake my Adam’s apple on its stem and look up. I am standing in front of a big grey building with a sign plate in front which reads *HORSECRACKER INSTITUTE.*

And up in the second story window is this guy sticking his head out and looking down at me.

“Hey there,” he calls. “Would you like to make fifty bucks?”

I gulp. “What you got up there?” I ask. “A counterfeiting machine?”

“No. This proposition is on the level,” he yells back. “Or, rather, it’s on the second floor. Second floor of this building. Walk right up.”

So what have I got to lose, except a little more rubber from my heels? I head for the door and march up a flight of stairs. At the landing is a big door which also is labeled *HORSECRACKER INSTITUTE.* I push it open and step in.

I am standing in a big white-tiled room. It has a high ceiling and a lot of these fluorescent light fixtures. The place is filled with long tables piled with silver tubes and glass jars.

The guy at the window runs over to me while I am looking around.

“What kind of a joint is this?” I ask, politely tipping my cigar to him.

“Why, this is a laboratory,” he tells me.

I stare at him, kind of puzzled. “I always figure a laboratory is a place where you go to wash your hands.”

The guy gives me a long look, and then he smiles.

“Perfect,” he says. “Just as I thought.”

Naturally, I like compliments, but I realize I am no Victor Mature and I wonder what he is fishing for. So I give him a long look, too.

He is a very short personality and quite fat, being built on the order of one of Armour’s Star Hams. But from the long white robe and spectacles he wears, I figure he is some kind of doctor. In fact I am almost ready to stick out my tongue at him and say "Ah" when another door opens at the end of the room and a second edition enters the laboratory.

THIS one is almost a duplicate of the first. He is also short and fat, and wears goggles. Both of them have a head of hair like an order of chow mein, and both of them are now wearing big grins as they stand close together and look at me.

"Too bad I do not have a copy of *Gone With the Wind* to stand between you," I tell them. "Because you certainly would make a nice pair of book ends."

The second personality taps his partner on the shoulder.

"Wonderful," he whispers. "Observe his frontal lobes! Why, he's almost a cretin!"

"Better than that," says the first guy. "It won't be any loss to society if the experiment fails. He looks positively sub-moronic to me."

"Cut out the flattery," I tell them. "Who are you birds and which one of you is the goose who's going to lay me fifty golden eggs?"

The first little guy comes up and bows.

"Allow me to introduce myself," he purrs. "My name is Sylvester Skeetch. And this other gentleman is Mordecai Meetch."

"Skeetch and Meetch, eh?" I say. "What you running—a vaudeville team?"

"Don't tell me that our names are not familiar to you?" Skeetch snarls.

I shake my head.

"You do not know of Sylvester Skeetch and Mordecai Meetch, the renowned heads of the *HORSECRACKER INSTITUTE?*

I keep on shaking my head.

Meetch scowls at me, now. "You do not know of our scientific experiments on atomic energy? You are not aware of our thesis on the synchronization of molecular pulsation? Can it be that you do not even take cognizance of our work in the field of electronic disintegration?”

I shake my head so much it looks like a salt-cellar, what with the dandruff pouring out.

“I do not take nobody’s cognizance, or whatever,” I tell them. “And I do not know what kind of monkey business you two finks pull off. All I am interested in is the fifty buckaroos I hear about on the street.”

Skeetch shrugs his shoulders.

“That is not precisely the spirit with which to approach an important experiment,” he says. “Don’t you feel the exalted spiritual ardour of a martyr to scientific research?”

“Listen, brother,” I answer. “All I feel is a hole in my pocket which fifty bucks will patch up nicely. Now, what do I have to do to get it?”

“I shall explain,” says Meetch, shouldering the other scientist aside.

“We are at the moment engaged in studying the effects of atomic bombardment on forms of inorganic matter. It occurred to us that a still more fascinating experiment would be a similar study of the effects on organic matter. You follow me?”

“I follow anybody for fifty bucks.”

“True, in our work we have subjected guinea-pigs and rabbits to the action of the machine, but we are unable to ascertain any direct chemical reaction due to the somewhat unfortunate fact that the atomic energy tends to—how shall I phrase it?—disintegrate the animals completely. I trust you will be willing to risk disintegration, Mr. Feep?”

“What kind of ration?” I ask him. “I do not wish to cross up the government.”

MEETCH gives Skeetch a funny look. Then he shrugs again.

“Well, this has nothing to do with the government, I can assure you. All we need is your consent to this experiment. You will undergo atomic bombardment.”

“You want to use me as a clay pigeon for cannon practice?” I object.

“Not at all! This is not bombardment by gunfire. We merely turn a form of energy upon you to observe the reaction.”

“Like an X-ray machine?”

“Well—something like it.”

“This double-talk of yours gets me confused,” I tell them. “Maybe in plain English you can tell me what you want, but I doubt it.”

Skeetch pats me on the shoulder.

“Certainly. Our proposition is simply this—if you get into that machine over there and let us turn on the current, we will give you fifty dollars.”

He points now to the machine. The reason I do not notice it before is because it is in another room. Or rather, it *is* the other room.

Through what I figure is a glass wall, there is a big silver cup, with a lot of gimmicks on the outside. Now I notice a switchboard on the wall of this room connected with the silver cup beyond the glass. I give it a good look.

“What happens to me if I get In the machine?” I ask.

Skeetch smiles. “Nothing, probably. We don’t exactly know. We’ve never tried it before.”

“A fine thing! Some risk you want me to take!”

“There’s fifty dollars for you in it.”

“Well—”

“Sign right here.”

They have a paper stuck in front of me and a pen.

“This signifies that you consent willingly to the experiment. It also guarantees you your money.”

“I dunno—”

But I sign anyway.

And Skeetch and Meetch lead me into the machine. I go through the glass door and sit down inside. Then they get busy, bolting the door behind me, and work their switches.

Now I am not scientific-minded, understand, and about the only machine I know how to work is the one where you get three lemons up in a row and some nickels come out.

But I figure that maybe you will be interested in this atomic-disintegrator, or whatever they call it, so perhaps I should describe it a little.

It is sort of a big thingamajig with a lot of gadgets on the sides and a big silver whatchamacallit on the end. I sit in the center of this whoozis, like I say, and out there in the other room they are turning switches and pressing buttons and pulling levers and twirling dials and then they press a lot of do-funnys. The whole apparatus is sort of like one of those you-knows. Only with a lot more mechanisms. See?

WELL, I see, too. I sit there all alone, and listen to a lot of humming noises that start up on all sides of me. Something like *Old Black Joe* with a boogie beat. Then some lights begin to flash on and off, like the ones on the back of a patrol wagon. And all at once the round turntable I sit on begins to spin. I spin with it. The humming gets louder and I am sailing around like the ball on a roulette wheel.

Then I just catch a glimpse of Skeetch and Meetch both pressing down a big lever on the switchboard. It is so heavy they both hang onto it to bring it forward, and when they pull it there is one single howl and everything goes black. Except me. I go bumpety-bump on the old noggin, and in two seconds I am out colder than an Eskimo at the North Pole who left his fur shorts in the igloo.

I do not know just how long I am un in the conscious. But when I open my eyes again, it is no longer black around me. It is grey.

Grey. AH grey. Greyer than the front of my trousers after I smoke a cigar sitting down.

I am standing on a grey plain. At least I think it is a plain, or a sort of plateau—not a desert, because there is grass under my feet. That is, the stuff is something like grass, and something like dandruff. But it is grey.

Off in the distance I can see some trees. At first they resemble bath sponges because of their color, but they must be trees from the size of them.

They are also grey.

So is the sky. Everything. Not white. Not black. Grey. The color of my face when I look in the mirror on the morning after.

I begin to feel like this is one of those mornings after—or maybe even the night before. Except that never in all my hangovers do I ever hangover anything like this.

I do not know how in the world I get here. Or how out of the world I get here. AH I can remember is being in that dizzy machine and getting dizzy myself. Then I wake up and stand here in the back yard of My Little Grey Home in the West.

I juggle my eyeballs looking for Skeetch and Meetch, but they are not with me. I also fret my retina to see that automatic milking-machine or whatever it is I am sitting in when I pass out. It is absent.

So here I stand, lost, strayed or stolen, in a grey fog.

“Looks like the nowhere everybody is always a thousand miles from,” I mumble.

“Indeed,” says a voice.

It is a flat, grey voice.

But it *is* a voice. And that’s enough to make me jump right out of my skin. While I crawl back in, I turn around and take a look at the specimen that comes up behind me and addresses me suchly.

He is a tall, bald-headed fink dressed in a very conservative grey suit. I can not describe the geography of his puss, because all he wears on his face is a blank look. There is no more expression on his pan than there is in his flat voice.

Anyway, I do not waste much time giving this stranger the once over. I am too glad to see another human being, and I have too many questions to ask. I run up to him fast.

“WHERE am I?” I gasp.

“Nowhere.”

"Where?"

"No. Nowhere, sir," he says.

"Are you by any chance giving me the old razz?" I inquire.

"Certainly not."

"But I must be somewhere."

"Of course," he nods. "You are here, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"Well, this is Nowhere."

"Nowhere is here?"

"That is correct. You are now Nowhere. To be exact, you are at Random."

"And just where is at Random?"

"Why, in the State of Oblivion, of course." This dignified-looking fink gives me the nod again. I can only stare back at him.

"I really am," I whisper, under my breath. But he hears me.

"Just as sure as you're not alive," he says.

"But—I *am* alive!"

The fink frowns. "Nonsense!" he snaps. "There's no such thing as life!" Now I really stare. I am beginning to suffer from an acute case of poultry-bumps when I hear this. "You mean you're dead?" I chatter.

He smiles, a little. "No, I'm not dead. I just don't exist, that's all. I don't exist."

My goose-pimples are the size of mountains, now.

"But you're talking to me," I splutter. "You must exist. Why, you're as real as I am!"

He actually laughs. "You aren't real either, of course," he chuckles. "Or else you wouldn't be here."

"But I am real—"

He *keeps right on laughing.* "Now don't try to tell me you *believe* that superstition about reality," he gets out. "The next thing I know you'll be saying you actually swallow all that scientific hooey about the existence of a Third Dimension."

"Of course there's a Third Dimension," I begin. But he just hands me another frozen grin, and when he shakes his head I almost see the icicles run off his face.

I am really up a stump during this run of Abbott-Costello dialogue we go through. First I think maybe I am dead, then I think maybe I am not real any more, and now I think I know what the score is.

Obviously this dignified personality is just a wee bit nuts.

I FIGURE I better find out fast, because if he isn't crazy, there is just a tiny chance that I must be. So I give him another intelligence test.

"By the way," I yap. "Nowhere is quite interesting to me, but I wonder if you could tell me something. Why is everything around here so grey?"

"Grey? What is this grey?"

"A color, of course. Everything here is grey-colored."

"But it isn't at all," he tells me. "Those trees, for example. They're a lovely shade of coopric. And the grass here is a beautiful breehn. Naturally, the sky is verlow."

"Yes, and I'm a monkey's uncle."

"I am not interested in your family background," he snaps back.

"You're screwy."

"No. I'm John Doe," he tells me. "John Doe?"

"Precisely. John Doe, at your service."

"Now where have I heard that name before?" I murmur.

"Probably on a warrant," he says. "My name appears on many legal papers."

"You mean you're the guy they refer to when they issue a John Doe warrant?" I gasp.

"Who else?"

"But I, I always think it is some kind of legal gag," I object. "Or just a fake name they use in school books, like Richard Roe."

"You refer to my brother, of course," smirks John Doe. "We can probably meet him over at the hotel, if you are interested."

"Hotel?"

"Yes. I believe he is staying there with John Smith."

"Smith?"

"You must be aware of the fact that John Smith is registered at the hotel. He has so many rooms he often obliges with the loan of one or two."

"Wait a minute now, buddy," I get out. "Let me go over this once more. You say this is Nowhere, and you are not alive and not dead, but just don't exist. And your name is John Doe and you have a brother, Richard Roe, and he stays with the John Smith who signs hotel registers."

"What is so unusual about all that?" asks John Doe.

"Plenty, my friend," I mutter. "To begin with, how can a guy be neither alive or dead, but still kicking? And how can he be Nowhere?"

"Simple scientific truth," John Doe answers. "You must realize that it is a primary scientific postulate that matter cannot be destroyed."

"So what?"

"Therefore all imaginary characters have an actual existence in the unconscious. This is the unconscious."

"Somebody is unconscious, anyway."

"Don't you see? If the name John Doe is used on legal documents thousands of times, then there must be an actual counterpart of John Doe somewhere, someplace. But not being real, he isn't anywhere. So where is he? Nowhere! Quite simple, isn't it?"

"I have an uncle who is quite simple," I reply. "Only they put him away in the laughing academy years ago."

"Doesn't it occur to you that if John Smith's name is on a million hotel registers there must be a John Smith?"

"Then I suppose there must be a lot of other finks running around loose here," I sneer. "Like the Innocent Bystander and Mrs. Grundy, and John Q. Public."

"Right you are," Doe comes back. "They are all here. You will probably meet them soon."

"Not me," I yell. "I am getting out of here on the next street-car."

"Street-car? What is that?"

"I see you do not have any streetcars here," I sigh. "So I guess I am stuck."

"Who do you say you are?" asks John Doe.

"I do not say *who* I am," I come back.

"But that is the whole point. What imaginary character are you?"

"I am no imaginary character. My name is Lefty Feep," I inform him.

"Feep? Lefty Feep? What kind of a name is that? What do you represent? Who would invent you?"

HE RATTLES off this string of insults without batting a grey eyelash. I grab him by the collar.

"It does not matter what my name is, buddy," I snarl. "But your name will be mud unless you tell me how to get out of this nightmare!"

John Doe doesn't even pay down of attention to all this. He just scratches his head and keeps on.

"Besides, you aren't even the right color," he winds up. "I think it best if you will come with me. We may have to see somebody in authority to decide what to do about your case. I feel that you might even be an impostor!"

And he grabs my arm and marches me off.

After a minute, I figure I better go with him quietly. You know the old saying—when in Rome, see what you can do to Mussolini. I got nothing to lose, and maybe I can find out how to escape from this mess.

Every direction looks the same to me, but this John Doe steps off just as if he knew where he was going. I toddle along, and we pass between the spongy trees and come out on some winding roads between grey hills. Then I spot somebody.

"Hey," I mention, "I see someone coming."

Doe nods, and squints at the approaching party.

This personality is also dressed in grey, but a very sporty shade. Sort of a goat coat with a chest vest, and advance pants with a neat seat. He also carries a cane, and either his underwear is too long or he is wearing spats.

He prances up, walking very carefully like his stomach was a goldfish bowl filled with rare tropical fish. As a matter of fact, you would think he was stepping out on a stage.

When he sees John Doe he stops short and a big smile smears itself over his puss. He stretches out both hands and opens his mouth. "Strike me blind!" he shouts, in a rolling voice. "If it isn't John Doe. Oh, lucky day!"

"Do you know who that is?" Doe whispers to me.

"I am not sure, but I think if he had a couple slices of bread around his shoulders instead of a coat, I would take him for a ham sandwich."

"Right you are," Doe tells me. "He is the celebrated actor, George Spelvin."

"George Spelvin? But there is no George Spelvin—that's just the name they put down when they use an extra in a play, or somebody doubles in two parts, isn't it?"

Doe doesn't answer me. Because Spelvin gets wind of my statement and he stalks over.

"There is no George Spelvin, sir?" he orates. "No George Spelvin? Do you dare dismiss one of the greatest names in the tradition of the thea-truuhh? A name famous since the day of the immortal bard, Avon's swan, Will Shakespeare? True, my name has never been accorded the prerogatives of stardom, but in my time I have saved many a vehicle from extinction by the grace of my performance."

"Maybe you're right. I see your name at the tail end of many a turkey in my day."

"I never appear in a poor production, sir!" Spelvin booms, waving his arms. "You have but to see my Clerk in *The Merchant of Venice,* my

Woodland Sprite in *A Midsummer Night's Dream,* ray Courtier in *Romeo and Juliet*—"

"You have but to see my fist in your mush," I tell him, "unless you stop that line of gab."

Spelvin shrugs. Then he turns to John Doe. "Ah, as you recall, I seem to owe you a slight debt. A trifling sum of $5. This is your lucky day, sir. Allow me to repay you."

I LOOK on with interest. Never in my life do I expect to see a ham actor pay back a bad debt. But then this whole setup is screwy enough for just that. So I watch while George Spelvin hauls out his wallet and wades through the moth-balls until he can open it. He hands John Doe a bill.

"Wait a minute," I yell. "That's Confederate money!"

Both of them give me a queer look. "Of course it is," Doe tells me. "What do you expect us to use here?"

He pats Spelvin on the back and thanks him. Spelvin bows and walks away.

"Goodbye," he calls. "See you again. Meanwhile—don't take any silver dollars. Ha, ha!"

And laughing merrily like a ticklish hyena, he goes on down the road.

I scratch my brain-bin.

"So you use Confederate money, eh?" I mutter. "I suppose you got similar customs along other lines?"

"What do you mean?" asks John Doe.

"Well—what's your favorite sport here, for example. What game do you play?"

"We like jigsaw puzzles," he tells me. I am baffled. "Jigsaw puzzles? That sounds normal enough to me."

"Yes. There's nothing we'd rather do than take a jigsaw puzzle apart."

"Take it apart?" I shout. "I thought so! Do you like music? Don't suppose you have any juke-boxes here?"

"Certainly we do," Doe comes back. "What's the current hit?"

"The Lost Chord," he tells me. "Just a few notes, but it sounds like nothing you'll ever hear."

"I believe you."

All of a sudden I see something off to one side of the road. A lot of clouds, very grey and dusty, that seem to be bubbling around in the air.

"What are those?" I inquire. "Figments," he tells me. "Just figments."

"Figments?"

"Figments of the imagination, of course," Doe explains. "Ideas that haven't crystallized yet."

He turns to me. "Maybe that's it—maybe you're an abstract notion that hasn't been fully developed."

I stop in the middle of the road. "Now get this straight. I take about all the insults I intend to this trip. All I want from here is out. Let's get down to brass tacks."

"Brass tacks? You want to go to the brass tacks storehouse?"

"Oh, cut it out, will you?" I wail. "Just take me to somebody who can explain all this."

"We are arriving now," Doe reminds me. "Right around the next turn in the road is the philosopher's house. If he can't solve your problem, nobody can."

SURE enough, we are coming around the bend at considerably less than 90 miles an hour when my whistle breaks into a scream. Because there, rising out of Nowhere, stands a little grey cottage.

Sitting right in front of it, at the side of the door, is a head.

At least, all I can see is a head. Everything else is hidden by stacks of books. Thousands and thousands of books, piled up around the doorway.

"When we get closer, I notice a little fellow huddled up behind the stacks. He is reading a heavy volume and he is so absorbed in it he does not even look up.

I give him a squint and realize why he looks peculiar. He is wearing three pairs of glasses!

"Is this your philosopher pal?" I whisper. "No," says John Doe. "Don't you realize who that is? That's Constant Reader."

"Well, I'll be damned," I predict. "He just sits out in front of the house all day and reads, I suppose."

"No," says Doe. "Sometimes he sits out in back of the house."

I let this one pass.

John Doe goes up and knocks on the door.

A very nice-looking young tomato sticks her noggin out and smiles.

"Is this the philosopher?" I whisper.

"Not at all," Doe answers. "That's Sally."

"I know," I snap. "She must be the Sally that everybody wonders what became of."

"Right," says John Doe. "You're catching on fast."

Sally shows us into the house. I think to myself that it is a pity a girl so young has grey hair and wonder if I should slip her a bottle of henna or something.

But there is no time, because we now stand in the parlor of the philosopher.

HE IS a very old personality with a very determined chin—three of them, in fact. And all covered with a beard. Needless to say, this beard is like everything else around here—full of tattle-tale grey.

His eyes flicker when he sees us, and he raises one hand out of the long white kimono he wears.

"Hail!" he says.

"Hail!" says John Doe.

"Cloudy, with showers," I predict.

"Lefty Feep," Doe pipes up, "Allow me to present that celebrated Greek philosopher and authority, Anonymous."

“What’s the name?”

“Anonymous,” Doe repeats.

“Don’t I hear this name before?” I mutter.

Anonymous hurls me a sneer. “Everyone reads my works.”

“What do you write for,” I inquire, *“The Racing Form?”*

“Not lately. Though once in a while I do give out a few hot tips.”

“Then I do not run across your stuff, I guess. Because all I read is the sporting papers and what I find written on the walls of phone booths.”

“I write all that,” Anonymous tells me. “Though I am more famous for my poetry and quotations.”

“You must pardon me if I interrupt this literary discussion,” John Doe breaks in. “We come to you because of a problem.”

“No time for problems,” Anonymous snaps. “See my cousin, Ibid.”

“But you must help us. It’s about Lefty Feep, here. Or rather, Lefty Feep, Nowhere. Because he doesn’t seem to belong Nowhere but maybe some place else.”

“Make your mind up,” Anonymous grunts. He turns to me. “What have you to say, Feep? Where are you from—here, there, or some place?”

“Well, I—”

“Arid remember, when I say ‘here’ I mean somewhere else, since obviously Nowhere can’t be here, even though this place is Nowhere. And when I say ‘some place’ I mean any place, but not this place. Here. You follow me?”

“I am too mixed up to follow anybody,” I confess. “Even a redhead.”

“I want to know from whence you hail,” growls Anonymous. “Hither, thither, or yon? Near or far? In or out, up or down, or just around the corner?”

“Not unless there’s a tavern on it,” I confess. “I am simply and purely an uptown boy. All I want is to get out of this place, wherever it is.”

“Wherever it isn’t, you mean.”

“I want to go home, as sure as I’m alive!” I yell.

Anonymous jumps out of his chair. “You hear—he thinks he’s alive!” he says to John Doe.

“That’s what I’m telling you,” John Doe answers. “I want you to do something.”

“Do something?” the philosopher comes back. “Never do today what you can put off until tomorrow.”

“But we can’t have a real person running around here in Nowhere.”

“Cheer up,” says Anonymous. “I’ll find a way. It’s always darkest just before it rains. Every silver lining has a cloud.”

“But—”

“I’ve got it! We’ll take him to see the Boss!” yells the old philosopher. “Let him decide what to do. You take him there, now.”

“Aren’t you coming along?”

“I’ve got a lot of letters to write,” says Anonymous.

So John Doe turns to me.

“Come on, Feep. We’re going to see The Boss,” he tells me.

“Think he can help me?” I asked. “Certainly.”

So I follow John Doe out of the philosopher’s dump and down the road again. We travel along the gravel for quite a distance.

“Who is this Boss you talk about?” I inquire.

“You’ll recognize him at once,” John Doe answers.

“He’s the big shot here in Nowhere?”

“Naturally. Who else would be?”

“But what’s his name and racket?”

“You’ll understand when you see him.”

And that is all I can get out of John Doe.

WE WANDER through the grey for a long time, and I don’t see anything of interest. Once I spot something queer in the distance. It looks like a large, black pony, only it has a human face. The face has a big cigar in its mouth and I also notice a human hand where one of the horse-hoofs should be. The hand is stuck out and seems to be shaking empty air.

“What is that?” I whisper.

“Oh, just a Dark Horse,” Doe tells me. “We’re grooming him for a political candidate.”

“Looks like one at that,” I answer, as the horse turns his back to us and goes on grazing.

But the grey fields are otherwise empty.

Until the house looms over the side of the road.

I stop short when I see the house. It startles me.

That is because this house has colors. It is white, with a green roof. It looks funny, because it is *normal.*

We head right for it.

“This is where the Boss lives?” I whisper.

“Right.”

We go through a gate and two finks sitting in lawn chairs get up and meet us.

“Which one is the Boss?” I ask.

“Neither. Meet Mr. Null and Mr. Void. They’re the Boss’s servants.”

I shake hands with Mr. Null and Mr. Void, both of whom have very blank looks on their faces. Neither of them smile or say anything. But a tougher bunch of bodyguards I never see. They follow us up the steps to the front door.

John Doe rings the bell.

The door opens and a man looks out.

His face looks very familiar. Very very familiar. I have a feeling I know him from somewhere but I just can’t place his name. It is a face I see all my life.

He shakes hands. “Hello, buddy,” he says.

His voice is familiar, too. I swear I talk to him before—maybe over the telephone.

I stare at him again. He is wearing ordinary clothes. A cheap blue suit and a white shirt and a blue tie with dots in it. He has brown shoes and black socks with clocks in them.

Even his clothes look familiar.

"Feep," says John Doe. "I want you to meet the Boss—Mr. Average Man."

Mr. Average Man! Of course that's who it is—and he naturally would be the boss here, too!

"Come in," says the Average Man.

We enter his house. Null and Void follow us but say nothing.

SOMEHOW I stick close to the Average Man. I figure he is the most human in this whole screwy setup. I decide it is easier to talk to him, and since he is the boss of Nowhere I might as well play along a little.

"This is certainly an honor to meet you," I pipe. "I hear about you for many years."

"Thanks," he says. The voice still sounds familiar. "Lucky you arrive when I'm home. Sometimes I'm working."

"Got a job, eh?"

"Part time." He leads us into the parlor. There is a lot of ordinarylooking furniture inside. "Sit down," he says.

We squat. He walks over to the radio and fiddles with it. Then he scowls.

"Won't work, I guess."

"Let me try it," I suggest. "Maybe I can fix it."

"I doubt it. You see, there's only 8/15th of a radio there."

"Only 8/15th of a radio?"

He nods. "Statistics show that the Average Man owns 8/15th of a radio."

I blink. What kind of talk is this?

"Have a cigarette?" The Average Man holds out a package. I take one. So does he. He holds his cigarette on the table, grabs a pocket-knife, and cuts it in half. He puts one half in his mouth and throws the other half away.

"Why that?" I ask.

"The Average Man smokes 2½ cigarettes a day," he tells me.

John Doe coughs a little. He wants to get in on the gab, too.

"Do any driving lately?" he inquires. The Average Man sighs. "How can I drive 5/6th of a car? he complains. "Part of one tire is missing and part of the engine is gone. I just buy the average quota of gas and oil, but I can't drive the car. It's only 7/12th paid for anyway."

"How's your wife?" John Doe goes on.

"Don't see much of her," says the Average Man. "You know we're 1/6th divorced."

"Too bad. Been feeling all right, though?"

The Average Man frowns. "My appendix is acting up a little."

"But isn't it out? Last year—"

"I know." The Average Man shakes his head. "It's out. But I've got 1/10th of an appendix left. The Average Man has l/10th of an appendix according to latest figures."

ALL this stuff is over my head like a dive bomber. But there is a sort of screwy sense behind it all. I am just beginning to figure things out when I hear John Doe talking.

He is telling the Average Man about me. How I claim to be alive and real, and what Anonymous says, and how we come to the Average Man to let him decide what to do with me.

And the Average Man is beginning to give me a very nasty glare.

"I don't believe it," he says. "I don't believe it. How can a real person exist in Nowhere?"

"But I'm here," I say.

"That's beside the point. I know where you are. The thing is—what will we do about it?"

"Can't you send me back?"

"Back to Earth?"

"Yes."

"Why should I?" asks the Average Man.

"But I can't stay here. I'm Lefty Feep and—"

"Exactly." He grins. "You are Lefty Feep. As Lefty Feep you don't belong in Nowhere. But if you become some one else, then—"

"Some one else? You mean you will change me into one of these symbol things like all the rest of you?"

The Average Man stands up.

"A mistake is made when you arrive here, obviously. As ruler of Nowhere it is up to me to rectify that mistake. Why send you back? Why not keep you here—change you into a symbolic figure and make you a useful citizen of Nowhere?"

"But I don't want to be anyone else."

"Anybody else—" The Average Man murmurs. Then he yells. "I've got it!" he shouts. "I've got it! I know who you'll be!"

"Who?"

"Why, the one missing symbol. Missing because he never exists. You'll be Nobody!"

"Who?"

"Just a Nobody!"

John Doe gets up and clasps his hands. "Splendid! Nobody is missing a long time. He looks like the perfect Nobody to me."

The Average Man smiles. "There's a privilege for you! You'll be Nobody from Nowhere!"

I think fast.

"But how can I be Nobody when I look like Lefty Feep?" I argue.

The Average Man gives me a chuckle. "Very simple, I will make you Nobody. All we do is cut off your head. Your head will still be alive but you'll have no body. You'll be Nobody—get it?"

I get it, but I don't like it.

I turn around and do a fast breakaway for the door.

There stand Mr. Null and Mr. Void, the bodyguards. Their faces are still blank but they grab me very firmly and hang on.

"NICE WORK, boys," says the Average Man. "Now we'll just snick off his head and make him Nobody in no time."

I am really scared now.

"Wait," I shout. "Think of the disgrace such a thing will mean. For the sake of your reputation—"

"The Average Man is respected," he tells me.

"Well, for the sake of your wife, then—"

"You forget I'm I/6th divorced," he laughs.

"But think of your family, your children—"

The Average Man suddenly looks mournful.

"My children," he sighs. "Yes, my poor kids. My poor two and 3/10ths children. What will I do about them?"

"Two and 3/10ths children you have?" I ask.

"That's the average," he answers. "The two are all right, but I don't know what to do about the 3/10ths. He isn't happy at all, and things are happening to him."

"What things?"

"Well you know how it is in such cases." The Average Man blushes. Then he whispers something to me.

I perk up.

"Listen," I say. Maybe I can help you with that."

"You can?"

"But only if you help me."

"I'll do anything. Anything."

"Can you send me back to Earth?"

"Well—I could."

"How?" I am taking no chances, see?

“If I stop believing in you, you’ll disappear,” he tells me. “Then you’ll probably go right back to earth.”

“Stop believing in me?”

“Of course. Anything the Average Man doesn’t believe in will disappear. For example, I’ve stopped believing in dictators lately—they will disappear soon.”

“That’s good news,” I answer. “But if I solve your problem about your two and 3/10ths children, will you stop believing in me?”

“It’s a deal,” says the Average Man. “Just tell me what I should do about the 3/10th one.”

So I bend over and whisper to the Average Man.

He gets it.

“Of course—thanks a million!” he chirps.

“All right. Stop believing in me.”

The Average Man nods. Then he closes his eyes.

I close mine. Because I am suddenly very dizzy. John Doe, Null and Void, the grey plains—all of them swirl around in a fog. The fog comes up. I feel myself falling, falling—

I land. Land on home base.

Right back where I started from. I am sitting in the big cup in the laboratory. The two scientific Americans, Skeetch and Meetch, are bending over me.

“What happens?” I gasp weakly.

“The machinery jams on us,” says Skeetch.

“How long was I out?” I ask.

“Two seconds,” Meetch answers.

“You mean that I go through all that in two seconds?” I wail. “But I can’t possibly—”

“What do you think happens?” asks Meetch.

Then I think about it. Maybe I pass out. Maybe it is all a nightmare.

Whatever it is, nobody will believe me. So I must let it go.

“What do you think happens?” Meetch repeats.

I sigh.

“Nothing,” I whisper. “Nothing happens.”

LEFTY Feep waved his arms.

“And so that is the way it ends. Skeetch and Meetch get back to fixing their atomic disintegrator or whatever, and I walk out and come here. My trip to Nowhere is ended.” He grinned. “Sometimes I hardly believe it myself.”

“You aren’t the only one,” I responded.

Feep pouted. “You mean you do not believe my story either?” he accused. “What is wrong with it?”

“I haven’t got the time or energy to go into that,” I told him. “So I’ll settle for just one point.”

“Which is?”

“This business about your meeting with the Average Man. You claim everything he had was just average. 5/6th of a car, and 8/15th of a radio, and two and 3/10th children.”

“Absolutely. Look up the statistics for yourself.”

“I’m not questioning the statistics. I’m questioning you. What I want to know is this—why did the Average Man let you come back?”

“Because like I say, I solve his problem for him. I tell him what to do about that 3/10th of a kid.”

“What was wrong with it?”

“What do you think?” Feep shrugged. “The kid is spoiled, of course.”

“But what did you tell him to do?” I persisted. “What can anybody do with 3/10th of a child?”

“Keep it in the ice-box,” grinned Lefty Feep.

Phantom from the Film

From a silver screen stalked! a shadowed slayer. What prompted its mad mission?

NOTHING is quite as refreshing as a nice cold glass of water. Tell you what you do—go pour yourself one, now. You're going to need it.

Good! Now drink about half of it.

There. Have you still got half a glass left? Are you sure that it's icy cold?

All right. Take that remaining half glass of ice-cold water and pour it down the back of your neck.

Then you'll feel the way I did on the night of Terry Sylvestro's preview. The cold shudder running down your spine will just about correspond with mine.

I'm not trying to sell you a bill of goods. Yes, I know—I'm Pat Peters, in publicity at Seven Arts Studios. A Hollywood press agent, always building up a phoney angle. But there was nothing phoney about Terry Sylvestro and his new horror movie. I only wish there was—then maybe I'd find it easier to sleep these nights. Sometimes, when that silvery shadow crawls across my chest and wriggles into my dreams—

But let me tell you what happened.

It all started when Terry Sylvestro announced the production of *The Skull Man.* That's big news along the Strip.

I don’t suppose you recognize Terry Sylvestro’s name. Funny, isn’t it?—the public is crazy about movie stars but nobody knows anything about the real big shots, the producers and directors. Outside of Orson Welles and De Mille they’re virtually unknown.

But the Coast knows Sylvestro. One of the big independent producers, a smart showman with a talent that spells boxoffice. Seven Arts was lucky to get a three-picture release deal with him. Everybody was on edge waiting for his first production announcement.

It came. I got the news the day it broke. Terry Sylvestro planned to produce *The Skull Man.*

A shiver drama from Sylvestro? I smelled a story. I hopped over to his office on the lot.

The story was waiting for me, all right.

“Get your hands off my throat!”

I heard the gasping wail as my fingers tightened on the knob of his office door. A woman’s wail of terror.

“Get them off—you’re choking me—Ooooooh!”

The door wrenched under the impact of my shoulder. I saw the owner of the voice—recognized her. Louise. *My* Louise!

Her fear-filled face hung before me, contorted in agonized dismay. And that was all I saw of her. For towering above her, broad shoulders moving convulsively as arms bent her body back, was a creature spawned in nightmare’s darkest halls.

The silvery monstrosity was like nothing human. The torso of an anthropoid, covered with slick, hairless skin that glistened evilly—a huge, bald head resting squarely on the neckless shoulders, and a face—

THE face turned toward me as the thing noted my entrance. I stared into the visage of a fiend. Fleshless, bony jaws champed fretted lips which parted to reveal yellowed fangs. Silvery cheekbones reared about a gaping hole where a nose should be. And above that, bedded in deep-set sockets, burned hell’s own fires. The eyes. The eyes of a demon, glaring with the idiot glee of a cavern gargoyle.

The creature hissed at me, and Louise screamed again. Then I lost my head. I started forward, arms swinging. The huge bulk of the monster loomed before me, but I didn’t hesitate. I lashed out savagely, felt my arm pinned from behind.

A voice chuckled.

“Take it easy, Pat. It’s all right.”

I wheeled.

Fat, bushy-haired little Terry Sylvestro stood grinning behind me.

“But he’s got Louise—he’s—”

“Isn’t it wonderful?” It was Louise who spoke. The monster’s hands still gripped her throat, but she smiled up at me.

“Wonderful? Why—”

“Of course, darling. I’m so excited! Sylvestro’s testing me for the feminine lead in his new picture.”

“All right,” I said. “I give up. And I suppose this skull-headed gorilla here turns out to be Robert Taylor or somebody.”

“Pat, I want you to meet a new star,” Sylvestro broke in. “This is Franz Basilov. I’ve just signed him for the title spot in *Skull Man.”*

Franz Basilov released Louise and grabbed my hand. He smiled through his heavy make-up, but the hideous leer of his pseudo-skull remained.

“Please to meet you, Mr. Petairs,” he said. His voice was deep and the accent heavy. “This is great day for me, you know. Now you excuse please, I go and remove this.” Again a smile. “I hope I do not frighten you.”

He loped out of the room as Louise giggled.

“Oh, darling, you were too funny—charging in here like a mad bull!”

“Go ahead and laugh,” I retorted. “Lucky for you it was only a test. Can’t blame me for falling for it, though. Certainly is a remarkable make-up job.” I turned to pudgy little Sylvestro.

“Who’s this guy Basilov?” I demanded. “Never heard of him before. Refugee import?”

"Not exactly." Sylvestro smiled. "He's a bit player. He's been in this country about six years."

"And you're going to make him carry the lead in your picture?" I exploded. "Are you crazy?"

"Not at all," the producer assured me. "Remember *Frankenstein?* What was Karloff before that? The film made the actor—the actor didn't make the film. That's the way *Skull Man* is going to work out. That's why I'm casting unknowns like Louise, here.

"Maybe you think I'm screwy." The word sounded queer falling from the lips of the erudite little production artist, for his eyes were glowing, intense, as he faced me.

"Yes, maybe you think I'm screwy. But you're wrong. I know a horror film is something out of my usual line. I know that the usual horror film is out of any *intelligent* producer's line. It's corny hokum.

"But I have something in mind that's different. A horror film that *really* horrifies! Not a stock plot with a series of stupid closeups of grotesque makeup, but a work of the calibre of *Citizen Kane*—with experimental lighting and camera angles to tell the story. To *burn* the story into the audience's brain. That's why I'm not using any name players. The camera will be the star of this picture."

I TAPPED a cigarette against the desk. Things were beginning to click now. "Sure, I get it. And what a spot for some real publicity releases! Sylvestro does an Orson Welles! Discovers celebrated new European horror star! A new thrill is arising from the lots of Seven Arts Studio to—"

A wave of Sylvestro's pudgy hand cut me short. Pie faced me, shaking his head.

"No, Pat. That's not the way. I don't want that kind of publicity. In fact, I don't want any publicity at all."

"What?"

"That's right. No publicity. Listen, Pat. I'm sticking my neck out here. For years I've wanted to do a horror film. For years I've filed away ideas, piled up research on the job. But it isn't the kind of thing Hollywood expects from me. I've never dared risk it. Now is the time. I'm doing this picture on a low budget, without name stars or writers. Production costs are low And Monsen handles the cameras, best man in the business. I'm going to turn out a 'sleeper' picture. If it goes over, fine. If not, nobody will be hurt—if we don't publicize it in advance."

I puffed on my cigarette.

"But can't I even play up this Franz Basilov? Give him a man of mystery buildup with the fan magazines?" Terry Sylvestro's eyes narrowed. "No, Pat. He's just an unknown, understand? He's a foreigner, he's nervous and excitable. As a matter of fact, his past is—dubious. And I don't want anybody bothering him. He's ideal for this role and I'm going to handle him myself and get out of him what I want. I'll make him the monster of all time—but you must let him alone. Remember what I said. The camera is the star of this movie."

In weeks to come I had good reason to remember what Terry Sylvestro said. Good and terrible reasons.

But we're coming to that.

I'll skip the weeks of production. I didn't see Louise at all. She was on the set day and night, and the set was closed to visitors. That meant studio officials too—when Terry Sylvestro gave an order, it went through.

Naturally the lot was full of rumors about Sylvestro's new picture. The designers hinted that he had gone crazy—was ordering the most outlandish sets and props. The other cameramen couldn't get a thing out of Monsen. He and Sylvestro were always closeted in the laboratories with the day's rushes.

But the big mystery was Franz Basilov. Who was he, and what was he? Why were he and Sylvestro inseparable—going and coming together to and from the studio?

There were whispers of his conduct on the set. How he worked only to music. How Sylvestro was driving him until he cracked up into almost daily hysterics.

They said he was a dope fiend—that he was crazy—that Sylvestro hypnotized him before he went before the cameras—that he was a genius—that he was a moron—that he was actually the monster he meant to portray.

"They" said. I didn't say anything. I just sat back and waited. I still had that feeling that a big story was about to break. Without seeing Louise, without talking to Sylvestro, without checking rumors—I waited.

THEN came the preview.

It wasn't announced. Usually a Terry Sylvestro preview is an event. They run the film in three or four suburban houses simultaneously to get audience reaction. There's a lot of ballyhoo and excitement. But in keeping with his policy on this picture, there was no announcement, no fanfare. Louise called me up that afternoon. "Hello, darling—are you taking me to the preview tonight?"

"What preview—where?"

She told me. It was an obscure little house in Glendale.

"Sure. Shall I pick you up?"

She agreed. Her voice aroused my concern. It was a weary voice, and I might be haywire, but I could swear I detected a note of fright in it. Surely Louise didn't talk like a girl who might be on the verge of stardom. She didn't sound as if this preview meant a life-or-death verdict to her career. She sounded as though it just meant a life-or-death verdict to her.

But then, I was imagining things. Or was I?

Because when I drove her to the theater, I got a nasty shock.

Louise was pale, thin. Her eyes were circle-haunted. Her smile was forced, fixed. She trembled, but not from excitement.

I was smart enough to play dumb. I didn't appear to notice anything out of the way. My questions were innocent enough on the surface.

"Who's showing up?"

"Sylvestro, of course. And Monsen. And I suppose Dick Blynn."

Dick Blynn was a stock-contract pretty boy who played the male lead opposite Louise in the film.

"Anybody else?"

"Well, Mr. Kruger will be there." Barney Kruger, the Big Boss of the studio. He would be.

"What about the new star? What about Franz Basilov?"

Was I really seeing things or did Louise turn pale?

"He—he isn't coming," she whispered. "He can't."

"Can't come? But this is his great moment—"

"He's sick," Louise murmured. "He collapsed on the set on the last day of shooting. Overwork."

"Sylvestro must have driven him pretty hard, eh?"

"Yes." There was a quaver in Louise's voice. "He had to go through tortures with that makeup."

"By the way, who handled the job?"

"Why, Sylvestro did it himself."

"Sylvestro?"

"Yes, he and Monsen. It took five hours every day to apply it and three to get it off. It's something new—special. For camera effects. It's horrible."

She made no effort to control her shudders now.

"Louise. What's the matter?"

"Darling, I'm frightened."

That was no news report. She huddled close to me, biting her lips as she continued.

"That awful face," she gasped. "I can't bear to think of the way he looked—that skull—"

I SENSED something phoney here. I remembered the day I broke in on their test for the parts. Basilov was wearing makeup then and Louise wasn’t frightened. No, there was something else behind this, behind all the rumors on the lot, behind Louise’s hysteria.

She was whimpering on.

“The way he used to look at me on the set—as if he were dead. And he spoke like that, too, as though he were talking in his sleep. Or from beyond the grave.”

“Come on, Louise, snap out of it.”

“I can’t. You don’t understand. You don’t know what Sylvestro used to do to him. The way he talked to him in his dressing room. The way he directed him with his hands. And the torture he went through, with his makeup burning into his skin. Basilov told me when Sylvestro was away. He told me what the part was doing to him. It was like a vampire—draining him of his life, his soul.”

I stopped the car and took Louise by the shoulders.

“Here, now. Seems to me that you’re the one who’s collapsed, not Basilov. What’s all this about Sylvestro torturing the guy? What kind of a picture is this, anyway?”

“You’ll see,” was all that Louise would tell me.

And I did.

The dingy marquee of the little theatre bore no hint of the preview performance. But when we walked down the aisle as the feature flickered to its end, I noted the little block of seats reserved for Dick Blynn, Sylvestro, Monsen, the Big Boss, and ourselves. One extra seat—that would be for the missing Basilov, of course.

We sat down. The others straggled in. Dick Blynn tapped my shoulder casually. Monsen, the cameraman, gave me a curt flicker of recognition from behind thick-lensed spectacles. Sylvestro entered with the Big Boss. He was dressed to the hilt—his usual custom on preview evenings. His smile was disarming.

I stared at Louise’s pallid face in the gloom. Was she imagining things? None of the others looked a bit excited.

But as the feature ended, Louise squeezed my arm at the elbow until I winced with pain. She almost gasped as the preview announcement flared up, followed by the title.

"The Skull Man"

Then hell broke loose.

Never mind what the picture was about. It was all Terry Sylvestro hinted at, and more. Weird musical effects, distorted camera pans and angle shots, and a fantastic story about a man who became a zombie, long after death—a walking dead man whose head was a bare and grinning skull.

Dialogue carried the action along. Louise and Blynn dominated the early scenes. But all the while the film was building up to the climax—the moment when Basilov, as the zombie, *Skull Man,* would walk.

THE moment came. The scene was a cellar crypt beneath an old house. Here *Skull Man* lay in ghastly slumber by day, waiting sunset time to rise and walk. The camera bore down on the door of the cellar as the light faded.

Then came the hellish part.

The film went *three-dimensional!*

The audience gasped. So did I.

So this was what Sylvestro had up his sleeve—this was why he had devised special makeup and closeted himself with Monsen the camera-man!

Three dimensional film. Two projectors running together is the old, imperfect process. But this was different. I looked at the back of the house. Only one machine running film. Yet the illusion was perfect. You could see the door stand out on the screen. It was vivid.

The audience was in a frenzy. They sat on the edge of their seats, these suburban movie-goers, and waited for the horror to appear on film.

It appeared.

As the door swung open—actually swung outward, I could swear—the figure stood revealed.

Skull Man!

I could see the gleaming silver body bulking, the face hidden by shadows. Arms swung forward, almost off the screen. And the monster advanced, straight for the camera. It was a medium shot and the image was life-size. The shadows fell away. I saw the face of *Skull Man.*

Louise gasped at my side, but I didn't notice. All I could hear was the pulsing terror-throb of my own heart. For the face of *Skull Man* was the face of living death.

Death's teeth were fixed in a snarl of hate. Death's bony muzzle leered out from the screen. And his eyes—his eyes bulged and blazed from the hollow sockets in a stare that transfixed my spine.

Skull Man moved forward, towards the audience. The crowd screamed as one. It looked as though he were actually walking into the theatre. His arms clawed out. He reached. His feet moved.

And then—

Skull Man walked off the screen!

I saw it with my own eyes. Five hundred others saw it too. We didn't notice the muffled crash in the projection booth behind us. We didn't notice how the film flickered and died away. All we saw—all we could see—was that incredible silver figure, stepping from the screen to the stage. A life-sized silvery image—an image of walking death.

It moved to the edge of the stage. The crowd was on its feet. Louise was holding my arm, trying to tell me something. Her voice was lost in the single scream torn from the audience's throat. I didn't look at her. I looked at *Skull Man.*

Looked *at* him and *through* him . . .

His image was transparent. Solid—but transparent. But three-dimensional. Very.

Even as I watched, the monster was moving. His legs flashed. And then —

Skull Man leaped from the stage into the audience below!

THE silver body hurtled through darkness, arms outstretched. I saw it swoop and land. The skull-head descended, arms closed on a man's neck.

They were climbing over the seats in panic, now. The screams rose to a crescendo of fear. Somebody at the back of the house turned on the lights.

That did it. I could see everything. A little vacant space had been cleared in the block of seats where the silvery figure landed. Fleeing spectators huddled away from the man who now struggled in strangulation under those silver fingers.

I saw his body twist and turn. I saw his purple face.

But *Skull Man*—

There was nothing there! With the lights on, the figure from the screen had disappeared!

And yet the body hung in air a moment before sagging to the floor of the aisle. The skull-headed creature was nowhere to be seen!

Then the crowd swept back. Something was pushing through the packed mass. Something strong. Something—*invisible.*

For a moment, as the little wave of movement passed me, I caught a hideous glimpse of a silvery-transparent torso against the background of a woman's dark coat. Just a glimpse, nothing more. Then it was gone.

And now Terry Sylvestro was dragging me out of the theatre. I half-carried Louise through the mob. Straggling behind us came Monsen, Blynn, and the Big Boss. Monsen's goggle-eyes loomed close as he screamed in my ear.

"For God's sake, Pat—think of something! He's escaped—out of the theatre—loose now out there—loose on the world—"

We made our way through, somehow. But it wasn't until we locked ourselves in the manager's office with that worthy and a hysterical machine operator that we did any talking.

Then there was nothing to say. Nothing to do.

We couldn't help the manager. We couldn't help the shocked projectionist. Neither of them knew anything, or had any explanation. All we could do was get out before the police arrived on the scene.

Terry Sylvestro summed it all up in his car as we sped away.

“I thought I was making something new—but it turned out to be *Frankenstein* after all. I’ve created a monster. I pray it doesn’t destroy me—and all of us.”

“But how?” whispered the Big Boss, lips ashen as the tip of the cigar clenched between them.

“I don’t know. I don’t understand. The three-dimensional effect is ordinary enough. Something Monsen and I worked out together for a surprise. It’s a revolution, but it isn’t responsible for that—thing. I’d swear to it.

“Of course we used new makeup. I worked with Basilov for hours. I wanted him to ‘live’ the part. I’m afraid that somehow I’ve succeeded too well.”

“But how do you explain it?” the Big Boss persisted.

“I can’t. Nothing in physics, nothing in any science, nothing in any superstition can explain it. It’s new. A man’s image emerges from the screen as projected lightrays in bodily manifestation. Alive. And with a purpose, a will of its own. A will to destroy.”

“Yes,” Louise murmured. “And it’s escaped in the city.”

“THAT’S just it.” Sylvestro sighed and brushed his hand through his hair with a despairing frown. “It’s loose. Somewhere out there it’s lurking. What it is and what it wants we don’t know.

“But we must do something about it.” Sylvestro sighed again.

“What can we do?” It was Monsen who spoke. “If it’s a film image it isn’t visible in light. You can’t see it. We found that out when the lights went up in the show. It’s visible only against a background in darkness. Of course, even in darkness you can’t see the image at an 180 degree angle.”

“Yes.” It was Dick Blynn’s quavering voice. The young juvenile was badly frightened. “And if you do see it—then what? How can you kill an image?”

That silenced us all. For long minutes we sped on in silence.

I forced a grin.

“Cheer up. We’ll think of something. Meanwhile let’s get a little rest. Tomorrow is another day.”

Well, I was wrong about getting some rest. I doubt if anybody slept much that night.

But I was right about tomorrow being another day. And what a day!

I spent the morning in town, clamping down on the press. The Big Boss pulled every string he knew, but I had to do plenty of fast talking to keep the story of last night’s tragedy out of the papers.

The yarn would spread fast enough, anyway. But printed in the newspapers, it would cause city-wide panic. Nation-wide, perhaps. The gruesome revelation that an invisible monster was abroad ravening to kill—a monster bullets could not harm—would mean catastrophe.

The story was killed, somehow.

And when I got back to the studio, Dick Blynn was killed. Not somehow. But by—*Skull Man.*

They found him just inside the studio gates, lying behind his station wagon on the ground. He might have keeled over from a heart attack—but a heart attack doesn’t leave the marks of squeezing talons around the throat.

“He’s here—in the studio.” That’s what Sylvestro said when I entered his office. “He’s out to get us all.”

I didn’t listen to him. I was trying to smile at Louise. She sat there, next to Monsen, wide-eyed with horror.

“We’re safe here,” I assured her. “Look, there’s a police guard just outside the door.”

“But they can’t see it in daylight,” Sylvestro objected. I could have kicked him.

“Still, there’s the door itself,” I went on. “If the thing is solid now it can’t pass a locked door.”

"It could slip in sideways," Monsen reminded me. "It just looks solid. Actually it's almost two-dimensionally thin."

I had a kick waiting for the cameraman, too.

But I persevered.

"Look here, we're going to find a way out of this. The first thing we must do is to study this creature—your creation. What are its habits? What is it after?"

"Us." Louise said it.

"But why?"

"Because it hates us. It loves to kill and it hates us. It's a character in a movie, remember. A mad thing. And we, all of us, were opposed to it. That's why it killed Blynn. Because he was the hero. And I'm—the heroine."

I PUT my arms around her.

"All right. Let's grant that for the moment. But why should it kill that man in the theatre last night?"

"Panic. Or perhaps it was looking for us."

"Wait a minute. There's one sure way of finding out a few facts about *Skull Man.* Let's talk to the man who created him—really created the part and personality. Sylvestro—where is Franz Basilov?"

For a moment Terry Sylvestro's eyes avoided mine. The producer bent his head as he answered.

"Basilov's ill. He collapsed, I told you. Don't drag him into this thing, Pat. The shock might be too great. It would kill him if he knew."

"It may kill him if he doesn't know," I retorted. "Get him down here to the studio right away. Every minute counts."

Sylvestro called. Basilov was on his way. We sat in silence. Each of us was watching the door—watching for what? An invisible presence? Here in daylight the whole thing seemed grotestque, absurd. But there was nothing absurd about the dead man in the theater and the strangled corpse of Blynn.

One more call was put through. The Big Boss did it. Shut down the studio and put a police guard around every lot. Only Basilov's car could come through now. If the monster was here at Seven Arts he would menace no one but ourselves.

A pleasant thought.

I nursed it until Basilov came in.

Then I got another shock. I'd seen Basilov only once, remember. At that time he was wearing the makeup for *Skull Man.*

It was a very different figure who now entered the office. Franz Basilov was tall and thin. His shoulders were stooped, his hair greying and sparse over his domed brow. His features were emaciated but kindly, and the only light in his haggard eyes was a glow of docility.

This man was no monster. This man was no phantom or fiend. He was—weak-willed.

"Weak-willed." The phrase struck a responsive chord in my brain. Basilov was weak-willed. Louise had said something about that—

But Basilov didn't leave me in perplexity.

He came into the room, hands twitching at his sides. His eyes lighted on Sylvestro and his lips twisted back in a convulsive tremor.

"So," he muttered. "It has happened, no? You knew it would. I warned you. You cannot tamper with the mind, with the psyche.

"You made me wear the makeup You kept whispering to me your suggestions of evil. You commanded me to *be* the monster. You would not let me alone for an instant, no? Day and night you hounded me—"

"You're hysterical, Basilov!" shouted Sylvestro. "You're mad—"

"You are the one that is mad." Basilov stood before the desk, pale face drawn in a frown of accusation.

"You talk to me in my sleep. You make me watch the lights after I drink the solution and you suggest things to me that make me dream. You turn my soul into something wicked and dreadful that shines out onto the screen. You create this thing from my soul. You talk to me when I sleep—"

"HYPNOTISM!" I sat up. I had it now. Those yarns about Basilov being drugged, or crazy. Louise's story of being frightened by the man because his voice came from beyond the grave. The yarns about Sylvestro never letting Basilov out of his sight. Basilov was weak-willed. Sylvestro hypnotized him, made him a monster by influencing his subconscious while he was under the influence of some drug which released inhibitions. This, plus the strange makeup, plus the third-dimensional process combined in some way to create a new being—the image of *Skull Man* on the screen. And it came alive as a separate personality and body.

The realization was just a flash.

Basilov was still speaking when I finished my chain of reasoning. Sylvestro sat defiantly in his chair, an ugly smile about his lips.

"Crazy," he hissed. "Crazy as a loon."

Then I saw it. Saw it out of the corner of my eye.

Just a shadow. A silver shadow. Pencil thin against the dark shadow of the desk on the floor. Suddenly I saw it broaden. Of course—the angle of refraction was lessened. Now the grotesque elongated transparency that was the creature's body suddenly loomed upward.

Basilov saw it, too, but not in time.

He gave a choking cry. Hands went to his neck. And then, the monster struck.

I thought of de Maupassant's *Horla.* I thought of the struggle between *Jekyll* and *Hyde.* I thought of screaming, myself. I did.

Then I wrenched the gun from my pocket and pumped blindly at the air—the flailing air about Basilov's contorted body.

But he was slumping to the floor, throttled by that invisible monstrosity.

"Louise!" I yelled. I caught a glimpse of Sylvestro and Monsen racing out of the door. Louise was following, slowly.

"Louise—run for it!"

She heard me.

I turned to Basilov. Too late. He was lying there. And above him, as the sun went behind a cloud, I caught the faintest glimpse of the grisly shape of the screen monster, crouching at the kill.

A wild thought swept through my brain. Lucky for us the image emerging from the screen was only life-size—what if it had come off in a closeup later on?

Later on . . .

There was a clue here, somehow.

I wanted to think about it, but there wasn't time. I had to get out of here, follow Louise, protect her.

I made for the door. The leprous silver image was behind me. It moved fast. Fast as light.

I ran down the hall. Ahead the trio was racing on. Sylvestro and Monsen were leading. Louise struggled to keep pace. Sylvestro reached the door of the projection booth in the studio theatre, where the daily rushes were shown. The thing was solid metal. He had chosen it with an eye to protection.

He disappeared inside. Monsen followed. Then they shut the door. Louise arrived, found it slammed in her face. She rapped frantically, kicked against the metal. The door held.

"Let me in—it's coming!"" she gasped.

The door stayed shut. The cowards were taking no chances with their own skins.

I turned.

SWOOPING in midair behind me, swooping silently, sinisterly, was the phantom from the screen—*Skull Man.* A wave of transparent death flowed down the corridor towards us.

I grabbed Louise by the waist.

"Down!" I muttered. And dumped her to the floor. We crouched there in the corner. The thing didn't stop. It flowed forward, straight for the metal door. Then it stopped, hung in midair. Baffled.

No! Suddenly the image seemed to alter its shape grotesquely. The head and shoulders were huge, but the torso and legs dwindled. Then I saw. It was bending sideways—bending sideways and *sliding under the door!*

A moment's silence. Then a muffled scream from within the projection booth. A scream and a crash.

The door flew back. I caught a glimpse of Sylvestro writhing on the floor, enmeshed in a silver shroud of death. Then Monsen staggered out, eyes sick with loathing and despair.

He came to us, voice hoarse with panic.

"The thing's got Sylvestro. It'll look for us next. What'll we do?"

"Wait."

I held him down beside us. Louise and Monsen kept their eyes averted, but I watched carefully as the silver image rose from the huddled shape on the floor and then flowed out through the projection slit of the booth itself and into the theatre beyond.

"Then, "Come on," I shouted. And dragged Louise forward. Straight into the projection booth!

Monsen followed. He screamed his terror.

"What are we going in here for? We won't be safe. Sylvestro wasn't. What can we do? We can't hide from it. We can't shoot it or burn it or kill it in any way. It's loose on the world, forever—"

"Shut up." I grabbed the cameraman by the collar. "Shut up and listen. I've got an idea. Where's the film for the *Skull Man?"*

"Why, the can's right here. We only made one proof for the preview showing. Rest of the stuff is still over in the cutting-room with the masters."

"Never mind that. I want the film you showed at the preview."

"Here it is—but what are you going to do?"

"Rewind."

"Rewind? But then—"

So I told him. Told him in a few short, crisp sentences. Monsen rewound. I got the projector ready.

"Second reel, wasn't it?" I asked.

“Yes.”

“Well, make sure. Our lives may depend on it.”

Monsen rewound. Louise helped. In this crisis her panic evaporated. She managed to force a smile. Good girl, Louise.

I DIDN’T rewind, and I didn’t smile.

I stared out of the slit in the booth at the theatre beyond—stared out of the slit through which the silver monstrosity had so incredibly crawled.

I looked into the yawning darkness of the little studio theatre and saw the silvery horror stalk. It was perfectly visible now—a phosphorescent phantom, sometimes life-size and sometimes hideously thin as It turned at an angle from my eyes.

It was searching for us. Its talons were extended to kill. Its skull-head was bent forward as bony jaws opened and eyes stared intent on destruction.

It was searching. In a moment it would notice that the projection booth was occupied once more. In a moment it would see us and flow forward, flow forward to rend and destroy.

“No sound! Track’s not set!” Monsen’s whisper was frantic.

“Nevermind. Let’ergo!” I yelled the command.

Light flashed on the theatre screen. The projector started. The film went on.

Then the monster saw us. I didn’t wait.

“Faster!” I yelled.

Monsen stepped it up. He was sweating blood, but he knew his film.

Louise was fighting to keep down a scream.

The silver horror glided straight up for the booth. I didn’t watch. I kept my eyes on the screen. The film shuttled by. Swiftly.

And then, it happened.

Suddenly the silver phantom halted. It was almost up to the booth now.

The skull-eyes were wild with maniac glee. The claws, those intangible claws, loomed at my very throat. It was poised for the kill, ready to spring.

It sprang. I braced myself.

Then, in midair, the gleaming body stopped. Stopped so swiftly as to hang suspended in a flying leap.

Bit by bit it moved back, away. As though it were on the end of a piece of string that was being rewound. As though it were a fish being hauled in on the end of a line.

Further and further back moved the silver body. And all at once it was flying towards the stage. There was an indescribable look of confusion and apprehension in the horrid countenance. The arms scrabbled impotently at empty air.

Then it was even with the stage, flush against the screen. And all in a moment, as the film flickered on, the figure abruptly descended *into* the screen itself.

Descended, and disappeared.

IT was just a matter of seconds before the reel was finished. I halted the projector, yanked out the can. We tore it open, lifted the film from its spool. Monsen offered matches without a word.

The film sailed out of the booth in a fiery arc, and landed in a burning heap on the stone floor of the bare theatre beyond.

I turned and faced Louise with an honest grin on my face.

"That does it," I told her.

"But how did you think of it—where did you get the idea?" she murmured. "Running the film *backwards.*"

"Just a hunch," I admitted. "We don't know yet what created the monster. All we know is that he came from out of the film. Therefore there was a chance in a million that he could be drawn back into it—if we ran the reel in which he appeared in reverse."

"Well it worked." Monsen heaved a sigh.

"Wait a minute. The job isn't ended," I reminded him. "We'll burn all the rest of the reels. The masters, too. We must destroy this creature utterly, so that he can never escape again. Trap him on celluloid and then burn him. Fire alone can cleanse the earth of evil."

I stared sombrely at the flaming pile on the theatre floor. The smoke pouring up assumed a fanciful shape to my tired eyes. For a moment I almost thought I detected the twisting, ghostlike image of the silvery monster. Then it was gone—forever.

And *The Skull Man* went with it. You'll never hear the story or see the picture now. But maybe it's as well.

As for me, I'm done with horror films. So is Louise. She's working in a love story now—but not in the movies.

We spend our evenings at home, Louise and I. We never go to the movies any more.

Some folks laugh at us for that—but I guess you'll understand. Because somewhere, sometime, it *may* happen again.

A Bottle of Gin

What would you do if you were suddenly faced by a fifty-foot pillar in human shape—black-limbed, writhing like a snake, and with an insane desire to destroy?

MR. COLLINS scampered up the steps. His twitching chin, long, wobbly ears, and pinkly bloodshot eyes gave him the appearance of a frightened rabbit. Rabbit-fashion, he glanced fearfully over his shoulder, then scurried into the burrow of the building.

Little Mr. Collins bounded down a long hall on short legs. The museum corridor was deserted, but his pink eyes revolved fearfully. With a sigh of relief, he made for a door marked *Curator's Office* and hurried inside.

The young lady in the outer waiting room rose from her desk with a look of vague solicitude.

"Tom," she exclaimed. "Tom—where have you been? You worried me sick these past three days. Why didn't you call me?"

Mr. Collins gave her a fleeting glance.

"Sorry, Edith. I can't explain now. Is the Doctor in?"

The young lady marched around the desk. Her lips curled, not in solicitude, but in sudden scorn.

"Tom—you've been drinking again! Out on another bender, I suppose. Just look at you! A fine wreck you are. Haven't been to bed for three days, I suppose."

Little Mr. Collins groaned. “That’s right. I haven’t. But it’s not what you think, Edith, honest it’s not. I haven’t touched a drop—”

“Huh!” Edith snorted scornfully. It was a most unpleasant sound, and Mr. Collins winced. Then he straightened.

“I’ve got to see Doctor Sweet at once,” he insisted.

“He’s busy. Can’t be disturbed. Now, Tom, look at me! I want you to explain right this instant just what you’ve been up to and—”

Mr. Collins suddenly darted past her and whirled through an inner door. His sweaty palm locked it behind him.

He stood, gasping for breath, in Doctor Sweet’s private office. The Curator’s sanctum was large, and necessarily so. For the room was literally and incredibly stuffed with objects. Rows of books. Shelves of books. Piles of books. Statuary. Idols. Figurines. Tables filled with jars. Tables filled with vases. Tables filled with bottles. The floor was carpeted with papers and manuscripts. The desk in the center of the room was completely submerged beneath a miscellany of paraphernalia.

It took a full minute before Mr. Collins was able to detect the figure of Doctor Sweet, buried behind the debris on his desk. Then the Doctor rose, as if to fully establish his presence.

“Well?” said the old man. His hands raked upward over a dome-like forehead and into a tangle of bushy white hair. They finally encountered a pair of spectacles, which Doctor Sweet now drew down to eye level.

“By Bel and Astarte!” he exclaimed. “Collins!”

Little Mr. Collins took a step forward and gulped. “I’m back,” he announced. “So I see. Burn me in Moloch’s mouth if you aren’t! Have you got it, man? Have you got it?”

“Here.”

MR. COLLINS fumbled inside his coat, drew out an object wrapped in tissue-paper.

Doctor Sweet grabbed for it with careful haste. We undid the wrappings, then cupped the object in his hands.

“Perfect!” he muttered. “Early Korean. This vase completes the collection. By the Cabala, it’s a gem. I congratulate you.”

Mr. Collins turned pale. “You’d better offer me condolences,” he whispered.

“What’s tire matter?”

“What’s the matter? Don’t you *know?”*

“I’ve been very busy, son. Very busy. Going through my collection. Three days now.”

“Well, while you’ve been going through your collection, I’ve been going through hell.”

“Very interesting.” Doctor Sweet turned, his hands caressing the tear-vase. “You must tell me about it some time. Right now I’m very busy. Excuse me.”

“Listen, Doctor.” Collins was tense. “If you don’t hear me now, there may not be another time.”

“Quit talking nonsense, son. I asked you to go up to Mr. Sung’s house to buy this vase. You’ve done so. What you’ve been doing in the past three days does not concern me. Out on a rip-snorter, I’ll bet.” The old man cackled suddenly.

Collins lost his temper.

“You make me sick!” he shouted. “You and your secretary both! Out on a tear, was I? I’ll have you know that for the past three days I’ve been riding the subway in fear of my life.”

“Very dangerous things, subways,” Doctor Sweet observed. “Never ride them myself.”

Mr. Collins uttered a low moan.

“Get this through your head,” he screeched. “When I went up to Sung’s place to buy the vase, his downstairs shop was robbed. Some thugs held up the antique place and we heard them. Sung went down the stairs after them and they shot him. They saw me with the vase in my hand and started after me—three of them. Gorillas.”

“My goodness!” clucked the Doctor, as though humoring a child. “Must have been after that fine antique collection of his.”

“Of course they were,” Collins wailed. “But that’s not important. They were after me, too.”

“This vase is worth twenty thousand,” tire Doctor gloated. “I don’t blame them. By Eblis, I don’t at that.”

Collins muttered something under his breath, then recovered. “So I ran out the back entrance and made for the subway. They followed me. And for the last three days I’ve been dodging them from train to train. They’re after me in shifts. I recognize all three of them now. Naturally I couldn’t go to the police because there’s no record that Sung sold the vase to me before he was murdered. So I’ve had to ride the damned trains until I could net away, without sleep or rest or food or—”

“How distressing.” Doctor Sweet placed the vase carefully on a shelf. “Well, the vase is safe now. Why don’t you go home and shave? You look awful.”

Mr. Collins danced a cadenza of fright about the room.

“I’ll look quite awful if they catch up with me,” he answered. “I’m afraid to leave for fear they’re waiting outside.”

“By the Four Books!” exclaimed the Doctor. “That’s very exciting, isn’t it? If I were in your place then, I wouldn’t go outside.”

Mr. Collins suddenly slumped into a chair.

“What’s the matter?”

“I’m dying,” he groaned. “Dying from hunger. For mercy’s sake, get me something to eat.”

“I have a sandwich left from lunch in the other office,” said Doctor Sweet, dubiously. “So you care for minced ham?”

“I’ll swallow anything,” Collins gasped.

Abruptly, the little man’s eyes swivelled to the row of bottles and beakers on the desk. There were tall bottles and small bottles, some stoppered and some open. Green ones and brown ones.

"That's what I need," he mumbled to himself. "A drink."

"What's that?" Doctor Sweet paused at the door.

"I merely asked you what was in that bottle."

Collins levelled a finger at random, selecting a tall brown bottle which stood apart from the rest at the back of the table.

"That bottle?" Doctor Sweet eyed him curiously.

Yes.

The Doctor told Collins in a single word. He left the room.

TWO SECONDS later Collins was at the table. His frantic fingers scrabbled at the bottle, tore at the tight cork. He wrenched it free, held the brown bottle, to his lips, and gulped. Then he sank back and tottered over to his chair.

When Doctor Sweet re-entered the room he found Mr. Collins sitting slumped in his seat with a most peculiar expression on his face.

Suddenly he gave a little hiccup.

The Doctor ignored it and extended a sandwich.

"Here's the minced ham," he said. Collins peered at the offering with pale distaste.

"I don't want it," he said.

"What's that?"

Collins hiccuped again.

"Something wrong?"

"Hie."

"Collins—what's the matter?"

"Hie."

Doctor Sweet shook the little man's shoulders.

"What did you do?" he demanded.

"I—hie—took a swig out of that bottle of—hie—gin you have."

"Gin?" said Doctor Sweet. "By Allah's beard, I haven't any gin here."

“You said so before you left,” Collins accused. “You told—hie—me that there was gin in that brown bottle.”

“Great jumping dervishes!”

“What’s—hie—wrong?”

“I didn’t say there was gin in that bottle.”

“No?”

“I said there was a *djinn* in there.” Doctor Sweet goggled. “A *djinn,”* he repeated. “A genie. An elemental spirit imprisoned in a bottle. And you’ve *swallowed* him!”

Collins nodded weakly.

“I just took a gulp,” he whispered. “Something went down into my stomach, hard. Hie.”

“Dear me,” the Doctor wailed. “One of my most priceless treasures, too. That bottle was hundreds of years old. Found off the Persian Gulf. I’ve always been careful to keep it sealed, too. These *djinn* are terribly dangerous if let free. That’s why Solomon imprisoned them. And now you’ve got to go and swallow one.”

Collins tottered to his feet.

“You mean I have a guy in my stomach?” he croaked. “Well, get him out of there.” Excitement stifled his hiccups.

Doctor Sweet ran his hand into cottony hair. “I’m afraid I can’t,” he whispered. “You don’t understand. If the *djinn* is released, he’ll run wild. You’ll just have to keep him there.”

“Not on your life,” Collins announced. “I want a meal on my stomach, not a midget.”

“That’s just it,” the Doctor answered. “The *djinn* is a small creature when he is imprisoned. But once released, his substance grows like a cloud of smoke. He becomes a huge pillar in human shape. Perhaps fifty feet tall. He wants to destroy, wreak havoc.”

COLLINS wasn't listening. He was busily engaged in thrusting a finger down his throat.

Doctor Sweet jumped for his hand. "No, don't!" he gasped. "He'll escape."

"I want him to. You think I'm going to walk around with this—monster—inside of me? Get him back in his bottle."

"I wish I could," sighed the Doctor. "But he wouldn't go back. From now on, *you're* his bottle."

"Me?" Collins stared at his paunch. "I'm a human bottle for some oriental demon?"

"I'm afraid so. We'll just have to find a way out, somehow."

Collins glanced despairingly at the ham sandwich.

"I'm so hungry," he wailed. He reached for the bread.

"You can't eat." Doctor Sweet snatched his hand back. "Don't you understand? Food will *displace* the *djinn."*

"What'll we do, then? Stomach pump?"

"And let him out? Certainly not!"

"You've got to think of something, quick!"

"I know, I know." The Doctor moved towards the window, head bowed. He wheeled, suddenly. "Do you snore?"

"Snore? What's that matter?"

"Do you snore?" the Doctor demanded. "Suppose so."

"Then," decided the old man, "I must forbid you to sleep. Once you fall asleep and let your mouth hang open, the *djinn* comes out."

"Oh!" groaned Collins. "Fine help you are!"

"Of course," the Doctor mused, "you can have three wishes."

"Wishes?"

"Yes. It is a custom of *djinns* to offer their captors three wishes before being released. You might make a deal with the *djinn."*

"How?"

"Maybe you can talk to him," suggested Doctor Sweet.

"Talk to my own stomach?"

"Ventriloquists do."

Mr. Collins drew a long breath. "All right," he muttered. "All right, then." He paused. His voice receded peculiarly in his throat.

"Hey! Hey you down there."

A sound came from Collins' mouth. It wasn't his voice, but a voice spoke. A hollow voice. An entombed voice.

"Yes, Master."

THE actual sound of the reply disconcerted both men. Collins shuddered. When he attempted to go on, he discovered that there was really nothing his trembling voice could say. What would one say to a *djinn* under such circumstances?

"How's—how's things down there?" was the only inanity he could bring forth.

"Very distressing, Master. Please permit me to leave."

"He wants out," Collins whispered.

The Doctor nodded. "Naturally."

"What about my three wishes?" Collins asked.

The voice from his stomach grew soft. "But certainly, Master! Three wishes—whatever your esteemed presence desires." Collins turned to Doctor Sweet. "You heard him? Suppose I wish he was back in his bottle?"

SWEET shook his head. "Wouldn't work, I'm afraid. That's destroying part of the agreement, you see."

"Yes, I suppose so."

The Doctor took Collins by the shoulder. "On second thought, I don't believe it's safe for you to wish at all. Because on the third wish he comes out."

"But I could make two—"

A voice interrupted them. It was the *djinn.*

“Will you release me then, oh Master?”

“I’ve got to think about it for a while,” Collins temporized. He turned to the window with a sigh of despair. His eyes suddenly revolved in their sockets.

“There!” he breathed. “Look down there!”

“What’s the matter?”

“You see those three men?”

“Yes?”

“They’re the gorillas who’ve been following me. They’re coming in—I’ve got to get out of here.”

“But the *djinn—”*

“Never mind him.” Collins bolted for the door.

The Doctor wheezed after him.

“Here,” he urged. “Take this with you. And good luck.” He held out the brown bottle and its cork. Collins grabbed for them hastily.

“Remember,” warned Doctor Sweet. “Don’t let them shoot you, or anything. The *djinn* would escape through the holes.”

With a sob, Collins rushed through the door.

THE girl in the outer office confronted him with an icy stare. Her eyes wandered to the bottle he was clutching in his hand.

“So!” she accused.

“But Edith—it’s empty. Look?” Collins held it upside down.

“I know it is. Drank it all, did you?”

“I haven’t touched a drop,” Collins began.

But another voice broke in.

“Who is this houri, Master?”

Edith whirled.

“What did you say, Tom?”

“Is it your wish that I destroy her?” the *djinn* continued, blandly.

"No, no—nothing." Collins answered both voices at once. The effort was too much. He hiccuped softly.

"Tom, you're sick."

Collins nodded. "Stomach trouble," he said.

"Let me get you some bicarbonate," Edith suggested, softening.

"No, don't. He wouldn't like it."

"Who wouldn't like it?"

"Why the thing down there—inside me," Collins began, then checked himself.

"Are you raving, Tom?"

"I don't know!" The little man's eyes blinked rapidly. "Let me out of here," he commanded. "Quick! They'll be after me in a minute."

"What's after you? Tom Collins—you have d.t.s., that what's the matter."

"Hold your lying tongue, wench." The voice came from the stomach.

Edith gasped. As her mouth opened, Collins made a break for the door.

Dodging along the hall, he neared the entrance. Then he halted, sick with sudden dread.

Standing squarely on the steps below were the figures of three men—the stocky little fellow in the blue overcoat, the tall, thin man wearing a derby, and the ugly fat gentleman with his hand significantly inside his coat pocket.

Collins stared into the three blue-jowled faces. He saw tight lips and little eyes; a kaleidoscope of hairy knuckles, protruding jaws, and jutting brows.

They are waiting for him to come out.

Collins slipped the glass bottle into his coat. He crouched back in the doorway and mopped his forehead.

Let them wait, he decided. He was willing. Just as long as he was inside and they were outside—

But they weren't going to stay outside.

Collins saw the three huddle together. The man with the derby whispered, gesturing significantly towards the building. Then the three wheeled. They began to march slowly up the steps.

“Oh, oh!” breathed Collins.

“Master?” inquired the voice from within his stomach.

But “Master” didn’t have the time to reply. With a courage born of desperation alone, Collins decided to dash for it. If he could run through them as they were caught coming up the steps now—

He burst from the building and clattered down the stairs. They saw him coming, attempted to dodge. He caromed into the trio, hurling his body forward at the fat man in the center.

WITH a grunt of surprise, the fat man staggered back. His two companions tripped over his legs, sprawled down the steps.

Mr. Collins hurdled their tangled bodies and continued down. Then he turned. They were on their feet again, and this time the fat man waved a gun. He didn’t wave it long. He began to point it. He pointed it directly where it would do Mr. Collins the least possible good.

Collins looked around wildly for a hole in the pavement. There was none. No place to hide, no place to run to for shelter. He was in the open; a visible target.

“This is it!” he groaned.

“What, Master?”

The voice came through a fog. Then Collins remembered.

“Djinn,” he croaked. “Now’s the chance to show your stuff. I wish you’d take care of these babies, quick.”

“Your wish,” echoed the *djinn,* “is my command.”

Almost without volition, Collins felt himself running towards the man with the gun.

The three hoodlums faced him in astonishment. The fat man steadied his aim, ready to fire. And then—

Collins *felt* it happen. The feeling of growth, stealing along his throat. The trio before him *saw* it happen.

They were gaping at his mouth. It was a small mouth, but from it protruded the largest tongue in the world. Or something.

Something—something long and black. Something muscled and menacing. Something that writhed forth like a snake of smoke, swelling to unbelievable proportions from Collins' opened mouth. Something that waved in the air, extending claws and a fist.

"Look out!" shrilled the thin man, suddenly. "He's on fire—smoke's coming out of his mouth!"

But it was not smoke that darted forward a dozen feet in advance of the charging Mr. Collins.

The fat man realized this when he felt the black column against his chin. He didn't have a chance to realize anything else before he sagged to the pavement.

The gun fell from his hand. His stocky little companion snatched it up and cursed.

"You will, will ya?" he snarled. A shot pumped into the black pillar rising from Collins' throat. It thudded home, but the huge inky paw of smoke merely swirled about his head and descended.

There was the sound of a walnut cracking, magnified ten times.

"Hey!" yelled the third party, as Collins turned, and the horrid limb reared once more. "Holy Moses!"

But Moses, sanctified or not, did nothing to help him. The black triphammer descended and sent the last man to join his fellows on the ground in a soggy heap.

Slowly, the emanation disappeared from before Mr. Collins' face.

He stood there for a moment and rubbed his aching jaws.

"Whew! he panted. "How did you do that?"

"It is simple, Master. "Any wish of yours—to hear is to obey."

"Was that really your arm?" Collins asked, weakly.

"Indeed. Am I not many cubits tall?"

"Don't talk about it," begged the rescued man. "It upsets my stomach just to think about it."

"Your other two wishes?" pursued the voice of the *djinn.* "Perhaps you would like some stomach tablets?" it went on, craftily.

"No, not that," said Collins. "Give me a little more time to think."

"But I desire my freedom from this prison," the *djinn* complained. "I am no Jonah."

"I'm no whale, either," Collins snapped. "Believe me, this hurts me more than it does you."

It was true. Collins had a terrific stomach ache. The *djinn* was moving around down there. Let's see—if it fitted into the brown bottle, it could reduce its size to about four inches. Still, that was quite a bellyful at that.

Too much for Collins. But at the moment, he had other matters to consider.

HE TOOK one more glance at the three forms on the pavement. He trembled, thinking of what might have happened if any passersby had chanced to wander down the street while the battle was in progress.

"Must get away before somebody comes along," lie muttered. He started up the block and rounded a corner rapidly. He moved briskly along for ten minutes before slackening his panic-driven pace.

During this time he was becoming more and more aware of the load he carried under his belt. The *djinn,* unused to his queer surroundings, was evidently pacing back and forth.

"Will you kindly cut out walking around inside of me?" Collins begged, hoping no one else was listening.

"Is that a wish?" asked the *djinn.*

"No. Oh, let it go."

Collins shrugged. An old woman walking ahead of him glanced back. Collins closed his lips and tried to look sedate.

But not in time. A hiccup escaped from his mouth.

"Excuse me," mumbled Collins.

"Me also," said the voice from his stomach.

The woman quickly glanced away again.

"Drunken sot," she muttered.

Collins blushed.

"I wish they wouldn't—" he began then stopped.

No. That wouldn't do. He had to be careful about wishes. He mustn't say he wished he could get some sleep, or some food, or a moment's peace. The price to pay was too great.

Yet he must do something. And quickly. Collins realized the impossibility of his situation. The *djinn* must be disposed of.

"Could I wish he wasn't here?" Collins wondered. "Or was Doctor Sweet right when he said I couldn't get rid of him that way?"

He glanced down at the brown bottle he still carried under one arm. The *djinn's* bottle. How to get him back in? That was the problem. That's what he must wish for.

Ouch! The *djinn* was evidently doing a tap dance now. Collins patted his stomach gingerly.

"Who's there?" came the voice.

"Oh, shut up!" Collins barked.

A man beside him suddenly shied away. He cast a leering glance at the bottle under Collins' arm.

Collins ducked into an alley.

"Now see what you're doing," he complained. "Everybody keeps thinking I'm drunk. This simply can't go on."

"Make a wish," the *djinn* coaxed.

Collins brandished his brown bottle in futile rage.

Suddenly he smiled, as inspiration came. He stared at the bottle curiously. Here was his solution, after all!

"All right," he whispered. "I'll make a wish. Get this one, *djinn.* And get it right, because this wish is important."

"To hear is to obey."

Collins took a deep breath in anticipation. He gloated over the words.

"I wish this bottle you came in had never even existed!"

For a moment there was a stunning silence. And then—

Collins felt it in his fingers. A lessening of weight. He glanced down at the bottle he was holding in his hand. But there was no bottle! There was nothing at all between his fingers.

WITH a curious shock, Collins realized that there never *had* been anything there. He had never carried a bottle, never seen one. He couldn't exactly *remember* what it looked like.

The little man sighed deeply. "That's that," he breathed.

"You spoke, Master?"

The incredible voice, again. And still from his stomach.

"What the—thought you were gone!"

"Not *I,"* the *djinn* corrected. "Merely the bottle. But I'm not in the bottle, remember. I'm in you."

Collins clasped both hands to his head. "All right," he groaned. "I can't get rid of you. I give up."

"And let me out?" persisted the *djinn* eagerly.

"I don't know."

Collins lurched out of the alley. He walked along in a daze.

"That does it," he told himself. "Now the bottle's gone. I can never get him back into what doesn't exist."

"Master!"

That hateful voice again.

"What is it?"

"Your third wish, Master?"

COLLINS couldn't answer. His third wish? He had so many of them. He wished the damned genie wouldn't keep calling him "Master" for one thing. Because in reality, the *djinn* was *his* master. The *djinn* kept him from eating, from sleeping, from associating with human beings. And how Collins wished he could eat and sleep and meet his fellow men again!

But he dare not wish aloud. He dare not release this creature and he couldn't keep on going this way. He couldn't.

Automatically his feet led him up the stairs to his own apartment. On the way the *djinn* joggled up and down inside him with every step. It complained bitterly about the climb, too. Collins was glad the hall was empty.

Oh well, it wouldn't be for long.

Once inside, Collins went straight to his pantry. There was a fifth of gin there. Gin, by all that was ironic! He opened it and took a swig. A healthy swig. It gave him the courage he needed for what he was about to do.

Collins sat down at the phone and dialed the museum. He had to. He owed it to the girl to tell her. In a moment she answered.

"Edith?"

"Yes—oh, Tom, it's you."

"Edith, I want to say good-bye."

"But Tom, where are you going?" Collins didn't hesitate before he answered.

"Down to the pier."

"Tom, you're not going to—"

Collins hung up quickly. He'd made a damned fool of himself again. But it was no use. He couldn't tell Edith what he meant to tell her. About the *djinn.* About the way he loved her.

It was loving her that drove him to drink in the first place. That feeling of inferiority. She was always so calm, so cool. So unapproachable. And he was just a little museum clerk.

That's why he had clung to the vase the last three days, even with those men on his trail. Because Doctor Sweet had promised him an assistant curatorship if he managed to get it. Then he and Edith could be married. But now the *djinn* had come and there was no way out.

These were the things he meant to tell her. But he couldn’t. And what was the use? He’d go down to the pier now and take the plunge. He and the *djinn* together. It was the only way out.

Collins pocketed his fifth and left. Before going out the hall door, he took another drink. It consoled. And it enabled Collins to walk the five blocks down to the beach.

The *djinn* was mercifully silent. It threshed around from time to time, but Collins didn’t care. In a few moments it would all be over.

COLLINS scanned the deserted autumn vista of the beach. With plodding steps he moved out along the short white stretch of the pier. The water churned icily around the stones.

His head was clearing. That would never do.

Collins took out his gin and drank. Deeply. Then he sat down at the end of the pier. He stared at the greenish-black depths of the water. Water—how he hated it! Gin was better.

He took another swig. The fifth was going down. It would go down and then he would. He drank again. It warmed him.

“Master.”

The damned voice again! Collins forced himself to reply.

“What is it?”

“Where are we? I’m warm.”

“Never mind.”

“But I feel very strange, Master.” Good! The gin was displeasing to the demon. Collins took another drink, a long one. With malicious satisfaction, he tilted the fifth back.

“Ooooh, Master—that burns!”

“It feels fine.”

And it did feel fine. Collins was aware of tipsiness. A pleasant sensation.

“I’m getting all wet,” the *djinn* pleaded. “You’ll be wetter in a minute,” Collins chuckled.

He would be, too. Because when Collins jumped off the pier—

But that could wait. Another drink now. Collins began to feel good. He anticipated the moment of release. The water looked inviting now.

“Master—what is this?”

“A little stomach medicine. Just what you advised me.”

“But it smells strange.”

“You’ll get used to it.”

“Strong. It’s like fire.”

Collins began to laugh. “Best stuff I ever drank,” he chortled.

“You drink this?” The *djinn* was incredulous.

“Of course.”

“Oh.”

Then there was silence. Collins drank recklessly.

“This is good.” The *djinn’s* voice rose on a note of discovery.

“Glad you like it.”

“Let’s have some more.”

“Why not?” Collins took another sip. “You are right, Master. It is excellent. Warming.”

THIS was the last straw. The *djinn* was actually getting drunk on the gin Collins absorbed!

“Let’s have a lot more of it,” the voice suggested. It was loud, yet oddly blurred. Collins obliged with enthusiasm.

“Say, Master.”

“Yeah?”

“How ’bout that other wish of yours?”

“Forget it.”

“Very kind of you. Very. Have a drink on that.”

They drank.

“Hot down here. Makes me thirsty.” The *djinn* was slurring his words now. “Can’t stand up right.”

"Lie down, then."

"Can't lie down. Want another drink." Again the fifth was lifted. Collins drained the last drop.

"Good. You're th' mos' exalted of all Mas'ters."

Collins could feel the *djinn* swaying around. He stood up. Now the gin was gone, and it was time to act. The party had been swell while it lasted, but it was over. The thought of entertaining two hangovers at once was impossible. Collins looked down at the water again and took a deep breath.

"Mas'ter!"

"What is it?"

"Wanna 'nother drink."

"No," replied Collins brusquely. "No more drinks."

"Please. Got to have one."

Collins exulted. The *djinn* was frankly begging now. Let him—it served him right for the misery he caused.

"Just one. Please."

"No! Why should I give you a drink? What have you ever done for me? You wreck my life, you plot against me, you take possession of my nice warm stomach and jump around. You think I like to walk around feeling as though I were going to have a baby or something?"

"Jus' one little drink!" the *djinn* begged.

"Absolutely none," Collins retorted.

"But I wanna—enchanting stuff—do anything."

Collins felt the *djinn's* drunken frame quiver with eagerness. He glanced down at the empty fifth beside him, then looked at the water again.

Suddenly Collins sat down.

"Listen," he whispered, softly.

"Lis'ning," the *djinn* mumbled.

"You really want that drink?"

"I swear it, Mas'er."

"Then," said Collins, "you can come and get it."

"Wha'ssat?"

"I said you'll have to come after it—I'm tired of pouring the stuff down to you."

"You'll let me out?"

"Why not? If you want a drink, come and get it."

"To hear," mumbled the *djinn,* "is to 'bey."

Collins opened his mouth to reply.

THE reply never came. His throat was choked—choked with smoke. A cloud veiled from his parted lips, an ebon pillar poured forth in the air above him. Not an arm this time, but a gigantic billow that swirled inchoately in midair.

Collins caught a glimpse of a coalescing pattern—an unbelievably huge torso, towering coal-black limbs, and a pair of bloodshot rolling eyes like striated billiard balls.

"Wait!" he whispered. "It's down in there." His trembling finger indicated the fifth of gin.

The inky column wavered drunkenly. Materialization halted.

"You'll never get it that way," Collins repeated. "You're too big."

The smoke spiraled in woozy indecision. Suddenly it began to contract.

Swiftly it was shrinking to human size, then to child's height. A little black smoke doll danced over to the standing fifth.

"Smaller still," Collins whispered.

Obediently, the *djinn* contracted. A tiny ebony wisp hovered about the neck of the fifth.

"In there," Collins directed.

The wisp hesitated. A shrill little piping voice rose.

"But it's inside the bottle," it protested maudlinly.

Collins gasped.

"Yes," he breathed. "And so are you!"

His darting hand pushed the smoky wraith down the neck of the empty fifth bottle. His fingers rammed the cap over the top. He twisted it tightly.

Inside the gin bottle, the *djinn* danced up and down in drunken rage. Its wrinkled little black face was contorted, and Collins saw its mouth shaping curses he could not hear.

Nor did he hear the shrill honking of the horn from the beach behind him.

It was not until Edith had jumped from the car and run clattering out onto the pier to where he stood that Collins turned his head.

Then she was in his arms, sobbing just a little as she poured out her words in a torrent of tenderness.

"Oh, Tom, thank goodness I'm in time . . . poor dear . . . suicide over me . . . Doctor Sweet explained about everything, how you got his vase for him . . . promotion . . . and when I looked out the window and saw those three awful men lying there . . . what you did to them . . . never knew you were so strong and wonderful . . . get married."

It went something like that, between sobs and hugs and quite undignified kisses.

Collins liked it a lot.

Edith retrieved her dignity just once, and only for a moment. She saw the gin bottle standing there on the pier edge and turned away.

"But Tom . . . you'll have to promise me you'll stop drinking."

"Certainly, dear," whispered the little man. "From now on I'm off the bottled goods forever."

Edith smiled happily. Stooping, she picked up the fifth bottle with an impulsive gesture. She flung it into the water.

Collins watched appreciatively. It was a good throw. The bottle bobbed far out on the waves.

"That's a load off my mind," the girl murmured, happily.

"That's a load off my—"

But Collins didn't say it. He merely held Edith very closely to him, so that he couldn't see the *djinn* bottle as it floated away toward the open sea.

The Chance of a Ghost

Lefty Feep sought the long forgotten pirate horde of Captain Kidd; but three phantoms of the sea succeeded in complicating matters.

IT WAS early afternoon in Jack's Shack. The restaurant was almost empty when I came in, and so was I. I ordered a meal and then sat back watching the proprietor. He was training a couple of new waiters, evidently—teaching them how to put their thumbs in the soup, how to trip a customer that doesn't tip, and other necessary elements of the waiter's craft.

I was watching Jack show one pupil how to spill gravy on a tablecloth when I got a sample myself.

Not gravy. Ketchup.

The red goo spattered down the back of my neck.

"Stop it, Jack!" I yelled. "I'm not going to be a guinea pig for your new help. If you must have a customer to spill things on, buy a window dummy."

Jack didn't hear me. And the ketchup spattered down.

I whirled around, clenching my fists.

"Listen, you—" I began. Then halted. There was no waiter behind me.

Standing there holding a hamburger in trembling fingers was none other than Lefty Feep.

"It's you, is it?" I sighed.

The tall, dark, and unhandsome Mr. Feep gave me a feeble smile and another splash of ketchup.

“Cut that out!” I admonished.

Feep nodded and tottered into a chair.

“I am sorry it is you I do with the goo,” he apologized. “But my pinkies shake so that I cannot catch up with my ketchup.”

“What’s wrong?” I asked. “Have you got the palsy?”

“It is not the palsy, palsy-walsy,” explained Lefty Feep.

“St. Vitus?”

“St. Frightus, maybe.” A groan issued from under the hamburger.

“You—frightened?” The idea seemed incredible. But one look at that doleful face told its own story.

“Whatever is the matter?” I inquired. “You look as though you’ve seen a ghost.”

“That is not the trouble at all,” said Feep. “It is the other way around.”

“Other way around?”

“Yes. A ghost sees *me!”*

“Quit kidding,” I laughed. “There are no such things as ghosts. That’s just an old superstition.”

“Well, you ought to see the old superstition that I see a couple days ago, then.”

“You had an experience with a ghost?”

“Experience? Compared to what I go through, the life of a spiritualist is just medium,” Lefty Feep announced. “When I get finished, I go to my doctor for a blood test and find out it is all curdled.”

“You must have been really scared.”

“Scared? My hair is raised so high, the barber has to stand on a stepladder to cut it.”

I had a strange feeling I was going to hear a story about all this. Chattering teeth couldn’t stop Lefty Feep’s chattering tongue.

I wasn’t mistaken.

“Listen,” whispered Feep. “I will recite a fright.”

Cupping his chin in his hands and parting his trembling lips, Lefty Feep began to deliver his shiver.

* * * * *

I AM RUNNING down the drag the other day in a very rapid hurry, because I do not wish to be late for the most important appointment in my life. I am keeping a date to drown myself.

I am on the beam to the nearest stream, ready for a suicide slide.

Why do I decide to take myself to the exterminators this way? Well, I have five good reasons.

The first three reasons are my ex-wives.

The fourth reason is my exchequer. I am broke.

The fifth reason is the worst. I just get myself turned down by the draft board because of a few mistakes I make in my early youth. The guy at the board is very sarcastic, too. He says I have enough criminal records to fill a phonograph album.

For some reason or other this burns me up plenty, because I am now reformed and I want to get in there and slug for my country like a patriotic citizen.

But they turn me down. And my wives track me down. And my pocketbook gets me down.

So I am ready to go down to the river and dunk myself.

Pretty soon I arrive at a bridge I pick out—a little bridge down by the docks where the traffic is light. I pick it out on purpose, because I am afraid of being run over by a car before I can commit suicide.

I stand there and look down at the water for a long time. I figure I will review my mistakes and faults—but then I give up, because I don't wish to stand there for a solid week.

So I start to take off my clothes. I am wearing a very sporty suit, and naturally I do not care to get it all wet when I drown myself.

I strip off the coat, vest, shirt, and tie. Then I remove the trousers and stand there in my shorts. It is cold, and I know I must jump in a hurry if I do not wish to freeze to death.

The water looks mean and green. I shiver at the river, but I climb up on the railing of the bridge and close my eyes. It is a long, long jump down.

“Well,” I whisper. “Here goes.”

And I jump.

I whistle through the air. I grit my teeth for the moment when I splash into the water.

Down, down, down. Here it comes, now—

Whambo!

I land. But not on water.

On wood. On my noggin.

For a minute I am out cold. But since I land on my head I am not severely injured, so I manage to open my eyes. And there I am, sitting after a perfect three-point landing.

“Blow me down and out!” yells a voice in my ear. “A stowaway!”

I blink and look around. I am squatting on the deck of a boat which must pass under the bridge just as I jump.

Standing next to me is an old duffer with white chin-fuzz on a pile of wrinkles he uses for a face. He is a very fierce looking pappy, and he is yelling away at the top of his lungs.

“Stowaway!” he repeats. “Go away!”

I am not in the mood for poetry.

I get up on my feet and give him a glare and stare.

“Listen, sea-dog, cut out the barking,” I advise. “I am sorry I happen to land on this garbage scow of yours.”

“Garbage scowl,” howls the old boy. “You call the best craft on the seven seas a garbage scow! I’ll keelhaul you, you landlubber!”

SURE enough, when I take another look around, I realize I am not on any garbage scow, but a house-boat. This barge has a sort of little cottage up front, all painted and decorated and scrubbed clean. The boat is small, but it looks very neat and orderly.

“Where am I?” I ask, softening my hollering a little.

“You are now on the good ship *Floating Kidney,”* says pappy. “I am Captain Rivers, better known as Old Man Rivers.”

“Pleased to meet you,” I pipe. “I am Lefty Feep.”

“The pleasure is all yours,” says Old Man Rivers. “And now might I inquire what in blazes you mean by boarding my boat?”

“Just a mistake,” I tell him. “I really am bound for the bottom of the river.”

“You mean you plan to scupper yourself?”

“I am going to scupper, Skipper,” I answer.

“Don’t be foolish! A husky young fellow like you—why you’d make a fine able seaman.”

“I feel more like a disabled seaman after that swan dive I take when I hit the deck,” I confess.

“Well here, take a swig of rum,” offers Old Man Rivers, pulling out a flask.

I take a gulp and feel much better, even though I seem to start a small bonfire in my stomach.

“How about some hard-tack?” asks Old Man Rivers.

“No, thanks. But I will take another shot of that stuff.”

I drink again. The bonfire in my stomach gets hotter, and Indians seem to be dancing around it.

“You even drink like a sailor,” he tells me. “Say, how would you like to sign articles with me? I’m off on a voyage.”

“Off on a voyage?”

“Certainly. I’m heaving out to sea right now.”

“In this houseboat?”

“Got the port papers and everything. Vessel is ship-shape. Just about steers itself, Fine engine. Ten knots an hour.”

“Knots?” I ask.

"Well, miles then. Miles to me, knots to you."

I let this pass.

"But why should I go to sea?" I ask. "Besides, how do I know you are a good sailor yourself?"

"You ask me, Old Man Rivers, whether or not I am a good sailor? Me—that used to run a rowboat concession in the park? I can pilot everything from a motorboat to Noah's Ark."

Personally, I figure this guy can't navigate anything except maybe a schooner of beer.

But what have I got to lose? Maybe this old bird has a reason for taking his daffy little houseboat out on the ocean.

Sure enough, he comes out with it. He bends close to me and grabs my hand.

"Come up with me while I steer," he says. "I will tell you a secret."

So I go into the pilot's cabin or whatever, and he grabs hold of the steering wheel and swings the houseboat out up the river again.

"I don't know why I tell you this," he begins. "Except that I am getting old, and a voyage like his is going to be a strain. Besides, you can do the digging."

"Digging? In the water?"

"No, on land, you freshwater fish! On the island."

"What island?"

"The island we're heading for."

He peers over my shoulder. He grins. He whispers.

"Would you like to look at my map?"

"You have a very repulsive map," I tell Mm.

"No—here!" he yaps, pulling a piece of paper out of his sailor jacket. "The treasure map."

"Treasure?"

"Of course. What do you think you are going to dig for?"

"Clams, maybe," I tell him. He is infuriated. Also a little angry.

"We are off to find Captain Kidd's treasure," he announces.

"Wait a minute," I suggest. "You may be off, yes. But not to find treasure. And who are you trying to kid about Captain Kidd?"

"Avast there and stow the gab," says Old Man Rivers. "Do you think an old seagull like myself would risk life and limb on the ocean if there wasn't a sure thing involved? Let me tell you a few things about Captain Kidd and his treasure before you run up a distress signal."

So Rivers tells me about Captain William Kidd. This Billy the Kidd, it turns out, is a personality who flourishes back in the gay 1690's or thereabouts. He is what is known technically as a pirate, though today he would be called a sea-going hijacker.

HE SAILS with a mob when he is a young squirt, then reforms and gets a pardon from the King of England. Not only does he get a pardon, but he plans to do a stoolie on his old pals, in fact he is commissioned to go out with another ship and clean up the other pirates. Which he does. He sails off to the African coast and pretty soon he is knocking off a lot of ships filled with gold and silver and jewels and other valuable keepsakes.

But this Kidd is not only smart, he is clever. First he double-crosses his old pirate pals, and then he pulls a triple-cross on his friend the King. He collects treasure, but instead of turning it over to the government, he evades the income tax by sailing away to America and turning pirate again. He even takes one of the ships he captures to make his getaway—like it is a hot car, or something.

When he gets to the American coast, he decides to put some of the swag away for a while until it cools off. Just where he stows the loot nobody knows, but it is a cinch the stuff does not go into a safety-deposit box.

He plants it on some islands and buries it deep. At least, that is the Story—and it must be true, because a little later on he gets nabbed by the law-and-orders. He confesses but does not peep about the treasure. Pretty soon he has a slight argument with a rope and comes out on the losing end.

Anyway, that is the story of Captain Kidd. But the story of his treasure is another matter. For hundreds of years various citizens are on the lookout for the gold, digging up half of the American coast, and raising more sand than a water-spaniel.

Funny part of it is, somebody finds a chunk of his hot money over on Gardiner's Island, near Long Island—of all places. They locate about sixty grand in bullion. But the rest of it—millions—nobody can find, including Secretary Morgenthau and the FBI.

The story goes that it is buried near New York somewhere. A whole lot of bullion, says Old Man Rivers.

"Sounds like a lot of bull to me," I decide, after hearing the yarn.

"Then look at this chart," Old Man Rivers urges. And he holds out the map for me.

I give it a squint. The paper is old and yellow and crumbling, and the lines on the map are all faded. The writing is very quaint, too, but I see a picture of a little island stuck out past the local bays, so tiny that it is almost hidden away. There are a lot of figures on the paper—latitude and longitude and altitude and gratitude and all that nautical stuff—but I am interested only in the writing on the center of the island map.

"Dig here," says the chart. "Ten paces behind stone. Four feet down until skull is reached. Further directions in skull. Ye treafure awaits." That settles it.

"Ye treafure!" I snort. "Ye gods! The guy can't even spell."

"It's an old chart," grunts the sea-dog. "Ancient writers use an 'f' for an 's'. That goes to prove the map is genuine. And look here."

He points to the back of the chart. Under a yellow stain I see a very faint lettering. "Wm. Kidd—hyf mark."

"Thyf if fylly!" I yell.

"Why so?" asks Old Man Rivers. "I get it from a trusty friend."

"Well, why doesn't the guy who owns this chart originally go after the treasure himself then, if he believes it?"

"He is an old man," Rivers explains. "An old sailor with a wooden leg. He can't make the voyage with me because his leg is recently attacked by woodpeckers. At present he is under the care of a surgeon. A tree surgeon," Rivers adds, with a thoughtful sigh.

"Woodpeckers should get a feast from his head, too," I sneer. But actually I am falling for this idea. The map looks good. I think of all that pirate treasure I read about—pieces of eight, doubloons, gold bars, bullion. Buccaneers from the Spanish Main. Why shouldn't I lend my Spanish might and main to this trip? We are sailing, and the island is not far outside the harbor.

"Well," mutters Old Man Rivers, "What do you say? Will you sign articles with me for this voyage, share and share alike?"

"Treasure is my pleasure," I tell him.

We shake hands over the steering-wheel and the voyage really begins.

THE old houseboat really steams down the river in a fine fashion. And Old Man Rivers knows how to handle the *Floating Kidney.*

I have no work to do at all. He steers and I sit in a rocking chair on deck. After while I go into the houseboat cabin, which is just like a little parlor and kitchen, and knock out a few flapjacks for supper.

When I take them back on deck to where Old Man Rivers is steering, we glide out into open water past the harbor. The houseboat bobs up and down on the long ocean waves, but it rides very well, and we sit and stare out at the sunset and eat our flapjacks. It gets dark and quiet.

"Where do we sleep?" I yawn.

"Why, in the bunks."

"I sleep in a bed and that's no bunk," I insist.

"Well turn in and get a good rest. Tomorrow you may have to dig. Or fight."

"Fight?" I perk up my ears. "You do not mention fighting on the program before."

"I know." Old Man Rivers grins. "I am just joking. You know, there is a silly superstition that the ghost of Captain Kidd guards his treasure."

"When it comes to fighting ghosts, I am not worried," I assure him.

"Fine. You sleep and I'll steer," says Old Man Rivers. "Looks like a little fog coming up."

So I go into the cabin and plunk into a bunk. I look out at the black water and at the grey smoke of the fog curling up all around, and shiver a little because it is cold. Then I drowse off for a while, wondering about tomorrow and the treasure and pirates and—

"Ship ahoy!" calls a voice.

I sit up. The voice comes very faint and far away.

"Ship ahoy! Belay there, we're coming alongside."

I jump out of the bunk, barking my elbow and then barking. The voice comes from the side of the houseboat. I lean over the rail. Down below is nothing but the thick grey fog.

I turn around to call Old Man Rivers, but then I see the figures.

They rise up out of the fog so fast I think they are just part of the fog itself.

As they come over the side, climbing up the rail to the deck, I look again. And I get a real shock.

They *are* fog!

Three figures, grey as mist. Thin, smoky, wavering. I can see through them.

BUT there they stand, on the deck, three foggy figures. Three men from the mist. A short, fat fellow, wearing a three-cornered hat. A tall, thin, bald-headed fink. A big chunk of blubber that is all stomach and beard.

"Who in Hades are you?" I pause to inquire.

"Ah. Allow us to introduce ourselves." The short, fat fellow takes off his hat and bows.

"I am William Kidd, better known as Captain Kidd."

The tall, thin fink nods his head. He pulls a long, curly wig out of his pocket and puts it on.

"I, sir, am Major Stede Bonnet, late of his Majesty's service, but a gentleman privateer."

The big bozo just grins and looks me in the eye.

"Teach, Edward Teach," he grunts. "Men call be Blackbeard."

I just stare with my mouth open, like a stuffed moose.

Somebody around here is crazy, and I have a good idea it's me.

Three finks made out of a fog step on deck and claim to be Captain Kidd, Stede Bonnet, and Blackbeard the Pirate.

Kidd looks more like an old goat to me.

Bonnet looks like he has bees in his.

Blackbeard resembles a fugitive from a barber college.

But it is their look of fog that has me agog.

"Who—what—where are you?" I ask, feeling like Professor Quiz, but looking more like a guy who is scared stiff. Which I am.

"Buccaneers, freebooters, pirates—call us what you will," snaps the lug who says he is William Kidd. "Our names mean little. Our deeds loom large on History's pages."

"Writ in blood," adds Stede Bonnet.

"Blood!" booms Blackbeard, with a nasty grin.

But I get control of myself. After all, I can see right through these foggy babies.

"Why you anemic-looking imposters," I mutter. "You palefaced prevaricators!"

"Take that back!" snaps Kidd.

"All right—limp liars, then! I know that Captain Kidd and all the rest of the pirates are dead over two hundred years."

"Right you are, mate," booms Blackbeard. "We are dead men all. Dead pirates. But dead or alive, we take no insults. So—"

On the word "So," he whips something out from the side of his belt. It is long and gleaming. A sword. And there is nothing foggy about its wicked curving length.

"Yes," snaps Stede Bonnet. Suddenly a long thin blade appears in his hand. A rapier, I guess.

I TURN around. I have a vague idea I would like to take a short but swift race around the deck.

But there stands Captain Kidd, with a mean-looking sabre.

"Steel makes a sharp argument," he purrs. "It also has the saving virtue of cutting arguments short. And arguers."

"Who's arguing?" I answer. "All right. So you are really Captain William Kidd."

"At your service," says he, lowering the sabre. "Though long dangling from Execution Dock has wrenched my neck out of joint, I fear."

"Mine too," adds Major Stede Bonnet, stroking his thin throat with delicate fingers.

"A trifle," Blackbeard chuckles. "I am beheaded, no less, by that dog of a Maynard. Even in my ghostly state it is distinctly a pain in the neck."

"Fortunately we are all buried at sea," Kidd says. "Else we should not be here now. Special permission, you know."

"Special permission?"

"From our mate and free companion below."

"Below?"

"At the bottom of the sea, where we slumber with all good pirates and hardy adventurers," he comes back. "But now we rise together."

"And just why?" I ask.

"Why? Because of the treasure, that's why. Isn't this the good ship *Floating Kidney?* Doesn't the master, Captain Rivers, possess a chart showing where my treasure lies hidden?"

"Well—" I stall.

"Exactly." Captain Kidd smiles a foggy smile. "Doesn't it occur to you that the gold and bullion you seek is rightfully my property?"

“But—”

“For nearly two hundred and fifty years I am a restless spirit, a wraith that cannot sleep peacefully beneath the sea because I’ve lost my treasure. You see, I am a forgetful man. The location of that treasure is something even *I* cannot remember. The chart you possess is the only genuine one, so I await your search to lead me to my gold.”

“You forget where you hide the swag? Very careless,” I scold him.

“I too have no memory,” Major Stede Bonnet chimes in. “So I enter into agreement with Kidd that we will search for each others’ treasures, share and share alike.”

“I bury fortunes while drunk,” Blackbeard growls. “This is unwise, I know, but unavoidable—because I am never sober. I also have a pact with my two friends—as gallant gentlemen as ever slit a throat.”

“We make a deal with our free companion from below,” Kidd explains. “To wander once again as ghosts, seeking our hidden treasure trove. And so we come to you. You will lead us to the spot tomorrow.”

“Maybe I better ask Old Man Rivers about that little matter,” I suggest.

“As you wish,” growls Blackbeard.

“Lead the way, me hearty.”

I lead the way, but I am far from hearty with this party.

Old Man Rivers is steering along through the fog when I brush through the dandruff and tap his shoulder.

“Pardon me,” I say. “We have some visitors.”

“Visitors? How could they get aboard? Where? Who?”

He turns around and looks at the three pirates. Looks through the three pirates.

The explanation dawns on him.

“Ghosts!” he yells. “Shiver my timbers!”

“My timbers shiver, too,” I tell him.

“Who are these gaunt haunts?” he asks.

Captain Kidd makes with the explanation again.

Old Man Rivers doesn’t like it any better than I do.

So Captain Kidd makes with the cutlass.

Old Man Rivers decides he will obey.

"Steer your course, man," says Kidd. "You will either lead us to the treasure tomorrow or walk the plank."

"Walk the plank?" quavers Old Man Rivers.

"There is also a rope trick I learn from the hangman," suggests Stede Bonnet, very gently.

"You'd hang me in a noose?" murmurs Old Man Rivers.

"No noose is good noose," I tell him. "We better do like these gorill—these gentlemen advise. We will take them to their treasure."

"Why not?" adds Captain Kidd. "It's really mine, you know—after all, I steal it."

"Very logical," I agree.

"Steer away, then Captain Rivers," chuckles Blackbeard. "We will be your passengers on this voyage. Good to feel the salt air again. Got any rum?"

"Yes—rum!" exclaims Stede Bonnet.

SO I take them into the houseboat cabin and set up the rum. Under the lamp light the three of them are pretty ugly looking customers. Grey, pale, thin ghost-figures. I shudder when I pour.

"Careful with that stuff," yells Blackbeard. "Or I'll slice your gullet, you chicken-livered squab!"

"Rum!" sighs Captain Kidd. "It's mother's milk to me."

Evidently it is, because he pours himself about a quart of the stuff out of the big jug on the table, and guzzles it down.

Thin as he is, he can hold rum. So can the others. While I sit and watch, they gargle it all away.

"Ha ha!" yaps Blackbeard. "Spirits for spirits, that's what I always say."

"A haunting we will go," cackles Stede Bonnet, taking off his wig and wiping his bald forehead.

It is true. The ghosts are getting drunk. Just three sheets in the wind.

"Gentlemen—by Bloody Harry, I've a great ideal," yells Captain Kidd, banging on the table with one transparent fist.

"Spit it out," urges Blackbeard.

"Yes, elucidate," Major Stede Bonnet chimes in.

"Simple. Tomorrow these two dogs dig up the treasure. Right?"

"If they know what's good for them, it's right."

"Then we take the treasure with us and divvy up the swag with our free companion below, isn't it so? It is on this agreement that he consents to let us go and roam earth again."

"Correct!" says Stede Bonnet.

"Only that's where my idea comes in," hiccups Captain Kidd. "Why should we divvy up with him below? Let's take the treasures and split it amongst ourselves. Then we can be free to roam the earth. He won't catch us. Ghosts or no ghosts—we'll be rich."

"Splendid idea," laughs Stede Bonnet.

"Old Captain Kidd!" chuckles Blackbeard. "Up to your double-crossing tricks again, eh? Suits me!"

"Who wants to be under water?" sneers Captain Kidd.

"Right you are! I'd rather be under rum," Blackbeard howls.

I turn the lamp a little lower. They do not not need so much light now, being lit themselves. Then I sneak out of the cabin and run up to Old Man Rivers.

"What are we going to do?" I ask. "What can we do? We must take them to the treasures, I suppose," shrugs Rivers. "I guess there is something in that ghost story after all."

"Can't we get rid of them?"

"How? Can you kill a ghost?"

"I doubt it."

"But they can kill us all right."

"That I don't doubt."

"So we find them the treasure," Old Man Rivers decides.

So we do.

I do not sleep that night at all. The three of them are howling away in the cabin, and we stand out and steer. Along about sunrise Old Man Rivers looks at his chart again.

"Almost there," he tells me. "Unless I am mistaken, that's the island looming up ahead. We'll circle around to the inlet."

Sure enough, a little hunk of land—just a big sandbar, really, sticking up out of the water—is on our starboard bow. Wherever that is.

In about half an hour we are right outside the inlet. The water is calm and shallow.

"Heave the anchor!" yells Captain Rivers.

"I never swallow it," I answer. But it turns out he wants me to throw a hunk of iron overboard at the ends of a rope. This is the way a boat is parked.

So I heave the anchor and we all get into a little rowboat which we push over the side of the *Floating Kidney.*

THE three ghost pirates are no prettier in the daytime. But with their foggy grey faces, the hangovers don't show up. They are very happy, in fact, because they are right on the verge of laying hands on all that treasure.

We row them on to the beach and climb out. Old Man Rivers has me lug up a couple of shovels and a pick. He marches ahead with the chart, pacing off feet.

Pretty soon we cross the bare sand and hit a white stone.

"Count from here," Rivers says.

"Aha—I recognize this spot!" yells Captain Kidd.

Rivers counts off ten paces.

"Dig," he tells me.

I look at the pirates. "Aren't you going to help me?" I inquire.

Blackbeard has his cutlass out.

"Dig!" he suggests.

I dig.

I am down about four feet—a nice depth for a grave, and I feel like lying down in it—when I strike something. Something hard and white.

Reaching down, I pull it out of the sand.

A grinning skull.

"Here," snaps Captain Kidd. "I recognize this, too. Why it's Diego!" he gasps. "Blast my bones, it's Diego."

He holds the skull up. "Alas, poor Diego. I knew him well. I ought to—I cave his throat in with a pick when he buries the treasure."

Bonnet and Blackbeard laugh very loud at this, but somehow I do not appreciate the joke. I merely grin very feebly, like the skull.

"Further directions in the skull," Captain Rivers says, reading his chart. "What does that mean?"

"Why, this," says Captain Kidd. He reaches into the grinning mouth with two fingers, scrabbles around, and pulls out a little leather pouch from the jaws. He opens the pouch and fetches out a scrap of paper.

"Forty paces left," he reads. "Ye treafure awaits."

We walk forty paces left. Thirty paces, anyway. Then we are at water's edge.

"Land washes away," Kidd explains. "Out into the water with you, Feep. Ten paces. Then dig."

"Who, me?"

But before the cutlass comes out again, I am in the water, digging away. And of all the dirty digs I take in my time, this is the worst.

To make along with the story, never mind the digging. I wish I feel the same way about it—but it ends. It ends when I strike the first iron box and haul it up on the beach, slow.

I pick the lock with the pick. And open it.

Gold! Bars and bars of gold!

"More boxes!" growls Captain Kidd.

I dig further and strike another iron box. I can't even budge this one without Old Man Rivers to help me.

More gold.

A third box is hauled out. Then a fourth and fifth. One has silver, another has coins in it, and the last one contains nothing but jewels—emeralds, rubies, and pearls. Big stones that gleam in the sun.

“A half million pounds sterling!” raves Captain Kidd.

“All ours!” adds Stede Bonnet.

“Hey,” I suggest. “What about me?”

“You? Where do you come in?” sneers Blackbeard, patting his fat belly with a frown.

“Well—union labor for all that digging. You must owe me around three bucks, anyhow.”

“Pipe down!” shouts Blackbeard. “Lug this aboard the ship and we’ll cast off. Hurry now, or we’ll maroon you two on this island.”

“Better do as he says,” Captain Rivers tells me.

SO, ONE at a time, I row the boxes back to the boat. I hoist them up on an old cable after tying rope around them. It takes a couple of hours, and at the end of that time I am as limp as yesterday’s paper napkins.

In fact, when they are all safe on board again I can hardly raise my head, let alone the anchor. That is what I want to do—let alone the anchor—but the three pirates make me pull it up.

I don’t dare disobey. They stand there—Captain Kidd with his long hair and fat face and little glittering black eyes; Stede Bonnet with a face like an old mummy and long rat teeth gleaming; big Blackbeard with his red eyes glaring through a hairy jungle—and I am very unhappy about the whole thing.

Since they find the treasure, the three of them are in high spirits. Being ghosts, this is understandable.

“I laugh every time I think of it,” Captain Kidd says, as we get under way again. “Our friend below will be half-crazy when we don’t show up with the treasure as the promise stands.”

"A capital jest," Stede Bonnet agrees. "Gadzooks, what need has he of treasure? Acres of it down there."

"We're off to land," Blackbeard smirks. "Land and rum. We'll bathe in the stuff. And when we run through this swag, we'll hunt more treasure."

He strides up to where Old Man Rivers is steering.

"More speed," he urges. "These newfangled steam engines on boats—can't compare them with our sailing ships."

"Take my *Quedah Merchant,"* Kidd says. "There's a saucy vessel for you. I've not set foot on a ship for two hundred years and more. Ah—"

"Oh!" I correct him.

And "Oh!" it is. Because, looking over the port bow, I see something in the water ahead.

It is long, and grey, and pointed. It rises form the water in a very rapid manner.

One look and I recognize it. Two looks and I see the swastika on the side.

"Look!" I yell. "A German submarine!"

It is nothing else but. One of the Atlantic Coast U-boats, up for air.

"Submarine? What's a submarine?" asks Captain Kidd.

"This is no time to get technical," I gasp. "They're going to sink us."

"Sink my treasure? Damn their eyes, let them try it!" snarls Captain Kidd.

"But they have machine guns and torpedos and—"

"What are they?" asks Stede Bonnet.

"You'll find out," I tremble.

"Bring 'em on," Blackbeard grates.

Old Man Rivers stops steering.

"I'm going down to shut off the engines," he tells me. "They have us spotted all right. We can't run for it. Best stand by and surrender when they come alongside."

"Surrender? Never!" yells Blackbeard.

But when the submarine coasts closer the three ghost pirates get a look at the deadly metal prow and hull, at the gun-turrets on the deck. They begin to appreciate what modern pirates can do.

"Let's go below," suggests Captain Kidd, abruptly, "I don't like this thing."

THEY scuttle over into the houseboat cabin. Old Man Rivers comes back and joins me.

"Now what do we do?" I ask.

He shakes his head and stares at the grey sides of the approaching U-boat. The water is draining off the decks, and it is so close we can see the drops splattering down.

"What can we do?" whispers Old Man Rivers. "A houseboat can't fight a German submarine. They'll probably come aboard, search us, find the treasure, then sink us."

"But we'll drown!" I yell.

"Don't you tell me you are ready to drown yourself yesterday?" snaps Old Man Rivers.

"Yes, but I change my mind."

"Well, change it back again. Judging from the looks of this swab, we'll both taste salt water soon enough, and I don't mean taffy."

The "swab" he refers to is the guy who now steps out on the submarine deck. He is a big German bulldog, wearing an officer's uniform. He is close enough to yell over.

"Surrender in the name of the Third Reich!" he yells, "or we will your boat gesink."

"We are gesunk," I whisper.

"Nothing else to do," grumbles Old Man Rivers. "We surrender," he calls to the submarine commander.

"Stand by and we will aboard gecommen," barks the sausage in the uniform.

Sure enough, we stand by while the submarine cruises alongside us. Pretty soon a whole crew of Nazis climb out on deck—probably to get a little fresh air. They look at the *Floating Kidney* and laugh and point and sneer. We stand there and take it. What else can we do?

Then they throw an iron ladder across from the side of the submarine deck to our deck and march over. The whole crowd of *krauts* comes across.

"Heil Hitler!" snaps the commander, raising his arm like he wishes to leave the room.

"Hell Hitler," Captain Rivers answers politely.

"We will now your boat gesearch," he announces.

"Gesearch and be gedamned," says Captain Rivers.

So a gang of Nazi sailors stamps off to the cabin where the steering wheel stands.

"Oh, oh," I mumble. "That's where we put the treasure—remember?"

But it is too late to distract them. In a minute they are running out, jabbering German. The commander goes with them and pretty soon he comes out with a big smile. The rest of the Nazis come out with a big load —the treasure. They dump it on deck.

"You carry a valuable cargo, *hein,* for a boat so small?" remarks the commander. "And what is in the other cabin?"

"Nothing at all," says Captain Rivers. "No need to look there."

"Aha!" yaps the commander. "More valuables you maybe gehaben."

"You are mis-gestaken," I yell.

"We will a look take," he decides, with a leer.

I do not leer. I know what is in the cabin. The three cowardly pirate ghosts.

But the gang turns around, with the commander leading the way and goose-steps over to the cabin. The commander opens the door, grins, goes in.

The rest of them pile after him.

"They will scare the ectoplasm right out of our pirate pals," I mumble. "Suppose they are hiding under their bunks right now."

All at once I get my ears split by a shriek.

"Ach du Lieber!" yells a voice.

“*Himmel!”* comes another. *“Doppelgangers!”*

THERE is a rush and a roar, and the whole crew bursts out on deck again, running for dear life. And right behind them, waving their cutlasses and ready to cuttle with them, come Captain Kidd, Stede Bonnet, and Blackbeard the Pirate.

“Steal our treasure, will you, you black-gizzard spawn of a sparrow!” howls Blackbeard. “Take that!” And he swoops his blade down on the commander, attacking him with a surprise thrust to the rear.

The commander does a quick flank movement around the deck.

“Thief!” screams Captain Kidd, lunging at a sailor. The Nazi pulls out a gun and fires. The bullet goes right through the smoky figure of Kidd. The Nazi goes through a convulsion fit. He runs.

Stede Bonnet is trying to strangle another sailor with his wig. “I’ll teach you to board a pirate ship,” he hollers.

“Ghosts and *doppelgangers!”* the sailors scream, racing around the deck. The pirates hop after them.

Blackbeard is something terrific to see in action. He would make a good wrestler—he butts with his head, he uses his hips like a Conga dancer, and his beard stands up on end when he jumps at a sailor.

His big cutlass swings like a pendulum. Pretty soon he has the whole crew in a corner.

I turn around and look at Stede Bonnet and Captain Kidd. They are leaning over the side of the rail doing something. Then they wheel and rejoin Blackbeard.

“Over the side with them!” Kidd yells. “Feed the fishes with the scum!”

They drive the submarine crew around to where the iron ladder connects the two ships. The crew jumps up on the fail, ready to escape to the submarine.

But when they get to the top of the rail, the ladder is gone. It seems Stede Bonnet and Captain Kidd drop it into the water.

It is too late for the crew to do anything about it. The three fighting ghosts are hacking at them from behind, and they jump overboard.

"You too!" yelps Blackbeard, lifting the submarine commander by the naval base. He throws him down.

"Now!" sings out Stede Bonnet from the steering wheel. He is swinging the houseboat over—over towards where the Nazis are swimming in the water.

I close my eyes and ears for a minute. Then it is all over.

The water is empty. And so is the submarine, drifting off on our port bow.

"That finishes those bloody pirates," says Stede Bonnet. "And good riddance. Hessian dogs!"

"Stacking our treasure on deck to move it over the side," sniffs Captain Kidd. "And into an outlandish tin boat, too! Those fools aren't sailors."

"Beats me," Old Man Rivers remarks. "Just outside the harbor, too. Pretty bold."

"Just outride the harbor?" echoes Captain Kidd. "You mean we'll land soon?"

"Another few hours." Old Man Rivers points off to the shore line.

"Fine. We'll take the treasure off and—" Captain Kidd stops. He is staring at us with a very curious expression. All at once he beckons to Blackboard and Stede Bonnet. They go into a huddle.

I nudge Old Man Rivers.

"They are in a huddle," I point out. "And something tells me we won't like the signals they call."

"That doesn't worry me half as much as this," answers Captain Rivers. He points up at the sky.

SURE enough, from out of nowhere black clouds are swirling. A storm is coming up, but fast.

A wind whips over the deck. The waves turn dark green, almost black. They rise high.

“Better get back to steering,” decides Old Man Rivers.

“Never mind.” Captain Kidd looks up and speaks.

“Why not?”

“We steer from here.”

“But why not let me steer?”

“Dead men don’t steer.”

“But I’m alive.”

“Not for long,” mutters Captain Kidd.

“What do you mean?” asks Old Man Rivers.

“I have another idea. To begin with, we are double-crossing our pal below by taking the treasure on land. So why not make the job complete by double-crossing you and making off with the boat, too?”

“Typical of Captain Kidd’s brilliant if undisciplined mind,” Stede Bonnet comments, with a wolfish sneer.

“Look,” mutters Blackbeard. “Here’s a plank.”

“Plank?” I mention. “Who needs a plank?”

“You do,” Blackbeard tells me. “You’re going to walk it.”

“Walk the plank? But I’ll drown!”

“That’s the general idea,” Captain Kidd chuckles. “Now, you two—line up!” he yells, suddenly making with his sword again.

Stede Bonnet and Blackbeard lay the plank over the rail and weight down the other end with the anchor and rope.

“There’s a fine gateway to the bottom of the sea,” says Captain Kidd. “Have a nice trip.”

The boat is rolling and pitching now in the swells. The wind howls and Captain Kidd has to howl above it.

“Out you go,” he shrieks, poking at me and Old Man Rivers with his sword.

“Steer, you fool!” screams Rivers, as the boat rocks.

"Never mind—you walk the plank first!" Captain Kidd's face is as black as the storm. The three pirates stand behind us, silvery figures in the darkness. Their swords wave.

I stand out on the plank and shiver. The water yawns below.

"Hurry up and jump!" calls Blackbeard. "And say hello to our friend down below. Tell him we couldn't bring him back any treasure." He laughs like a wolf above the howding waves.

It is a moment I do not forget. The black sky is above me and the black sea is below me. The three gleaming pirate ghosts are behind me, shoving me along the plank.

"Jump!" snarls Captain Kidd, slashing at me with his buccaneering manicure-set.

Then it happens.

The thunder roars, the boat lurches, and the three pirates turn around—but too late.

The treasure that the Nazis drag out on deck is sliding over. The five chests crash into the rail—and through the rail.

"Bleach my bones!" screams Blackbeard. He dives for the chests.

They sail gracefully through the splintered railing and go kerplunk into the water.

"He's taking our treasure!" yells Captain Kidd. "He's double-crossing *me,* William Kidd! It's an outrage."

All three of the pirates lean over the side of the boat and stare at the swelling water while the chests sink.

Old Man Rivers and I see our chance and jump off the plank. With the boat lurching and pitching and tossing, we can hardly keep our feet.

The storm is really on, now.

WHILE the three pirates hang on the rail, I get busy. I loosen the plank we are supposed to walk. I wait for the boat to swing it around.

Then I yell at Kidd, Bonnet, and Blackbeard. They are much too occupied to pay attention to me.

Which is just what I want.

While they hang on to the rail, I hang on to my loose plank. I aim it carefully at the three silvery figures of the pirate ghosts. And when the boat gives the proper lurch, I let it go. It swings across the deck and smacks. Hard.

Blackbeard, Bonnet, and Captain Kidd sail up over the rail and drop into the water.

There is a single squawk, another bolt of lightning and crash of thunder, and the swashbuckling spirits are gone below the waves, following the treasure.

Old Man Rivers takes the steering wheel ready to wrestle with the elements. But the funny part of it is, right after the pirates leave us, the storm dies down. We make port in about an hour.

"I never see a storm like that one," Old Man Rivers says, shaking his head.

"There is a lot you never see before on this voyage," I remind him. "Three ghost pirates, a buried treasure, a battle with a submarine, and a near yank at walking the plank."

"But that storm," mutters Old Man Rivers. "It bothers me."

"It bothers the pirates more," I reply. "You know, I think I figure it out."

"How?" inquires Rivers.

"Well, remember Captain Kidd tells us he and his pals come back as ghosts by special permission from their pal below? They are going to find this treasure and then take it back and divide it up?"

"Right."

"Only they double-cross their pal below."

"Also right."

"So he double-crosses them. He makes the storm come up and gets the treasure to drop in the water. Also he probably helps me knock those three thugs back into the sea."

"But who is he?"

"Who else could he be but Davy Jones himself?" I decide. "The pal of pirates, you know. A guy with lots of treasure at the bottom of the sea, but one who wants more. And seeing as how our three freebooters get buried at sea, he can raise them up again. Also he can pull them down. Which he does."

"So he raises a storm, eh?" says Old Man Rivers.

"Absolutely. He must know the pirates' secret—because without the storm I couldn't knock them overboard. Anyhow it's all over. The treasure is now where it belongs—in Davy Jones' locker."

* * * * *

LEFTY Feep shrugged and stood up.

"Is it not a misfortune?" he asked.

"You mean your not drowning yourself after all?"

"No—I mean losing the treasure."

"Right. But Lefty, one thing I don't understand."

"Yes?"

"Well, you say you knocked all three of these pirate ghosts overboard with one blow. I agree it could be done with a plank, but I don't see why those tough guys didn't resist you. Why didn't they put up a fight?"

Feep winked. "That's where Davy Jones must help me," he explained. "Because he knows the pirates' secret. They are ghosts and have not sailed the seas in hundreds of years. So he merely sends the storm and they cannot fight me then."

"Why couldn't Captain Kidd and his buccaneers fight you in that storm?" I persisted.

"Because they are not used to storms any more," Feep told me. "Those pirates are utterly helpless when I attack them."

"Why?" I yelled.

Lefty Feep looked me square in the eye without a blush.

"Sea-sickness," he whispered.

THE END

The Black Brain

If this was the brain of a Martian dead millions of years, how could it be alive? How could it keep on growing?

"HE'S brought me a brain," Hilton whispered. "A black brain!"

I stared into that cold grey face and wondered what madness lurked beneath the intensity of his eyes.

"Think of it," Hilton mumbled. "A black brain from Mars."

I thought of it and turned away. My own eyes stared at the grinning faces of the shrunken *dworp*-heads from Jupiter that hung from the walls, at the colossal skeleton of the giant *qtella* from the Saturnic ooze.

It was a long moment before I could look at Dennis Hilton again. He was smiling. He hugged his triumph, gloated over it, chuckled again.

"A black brain," he crooned. "A brain from Mars."

I thought vaguely of calling a physician. But you don't easily question the sanity of a man like Dennis Hilton—the "Uranium King" himself—the famous interplanetary financier. That's what the telepapers called him. That's what the public thought he was. I suppose I am one of the few friends who know him in his true guise, as a man with an obsession. You couldn't call it a hobby, really. Dennis Hilton had an actual passion for collecting.

We sat now in his private sanctum. Sanctum? More truthfully, it was Hilton's private museum. All around the vast chamber were the trophy-cases, the wall chests, the display tables holding Hilton's prizes.

Jewels from the Martian deserts, stuffed *ekis* from Venus, mummified *dringi* from the caves on the dark side of the Moon . . . pottery from Vlakka, statuary from the crypts of Ignis, rare parchments found in the seas of Yabar. Osseous, geologic, paleontological remains . . . fragments of the forgotten cultures of a dozen planets . . . plunder from half a hundred asteroids and a score of satellites . . . and now, Dennis Hilton sitting there before me and mumbling, "He brought me a black brain from Mars."

I snapped out of it.

"Wait a minute, now," I said. "You flashed me in such a hurry I didn't get a chance to ask any questions. You told me nothing when I landed on the roof. All I've managed to get out of you here is something about securing a black brain. Let's start at the beginning, shall we?"

DENNIS HILTON sat back, lighted a *sybarette,* and smiled. In a moment the mask of self-consciousness slipped over his heavy, sagging grey face. He was once again the financier, the authority, the man of the cosmos.

"Sorry," he apologized with a chuckle as ingenuous as it was false. "Guess I'm a little excited, that's all. As one collector to another—you understand."

"I collect facts," I told him, dryly.

"I'm just an author, not a Uranium King. And so far I haven't heard any facts."

"Allow me to remedy that," said Hilton. "To begin with, I got the brain from Arnold Kress."

"You got the brain from *who?"* I exploded.

"Arnold Kress." Hilton repeated the name with a smile of triumph. "Yes, I know how peculiar that must sound. Kress and I have been rivals for years. Business rivals—and rivals in our hobby, as well. He's always had the jump on me, too. As owner of Transplanetary, Incorporated, he has been able to organize his own private expeditions. To Mars, the Moon, Venus, and all points solar. Always coming back with ridiculous televisual poses showing him standing there with a new trophy tucked under one arm.

"As for me, you know how I've gone about my collecting. The skippers of my own fleet have to pick up the items for me. I've sent out my own private archeologists and planeticians, too. But Kress has always been able to lord it over me because he bagged his own trophies, as it were."

I held up my hand and halted his tirade.

"I know all this," I said. "Get to the point. Why did Arnold Kress honor you with this gift, and where did he get it?"

"He got it on Mars, and he gave it to me because he was afraid," Hilton replied.

"Afraid? Afraid of what?"

"You'll see soon enough," Hilton told me. "But first, you wanted facts. Kress went out about three months ago. Some operator of his up near Dalil gave him the tip. You know the Dalil deserts? Beyond the Great Chasm?"

"Dangerous territory, isn't it? Unexplored?"

"Right. That only made Kress keener to be the first. As I understand it, his expedition was very elaborately organized. He made the desert crossing, all right. Got to the caves beyond."

"What caves?"

"The caves where he found the brain. Claims to have discovered a totally new lost Martian civilization there. Nothing alive, you understand, but remnants of immense ethnological value. Quite a contribution to interplanetary history and culture, as he tells it. Some of his professorial hirelings are probably writing up his findings for monographs.

"But all Kress actually achieved was the discovery of the brain. It was sitting in the cave. I've tried to get further details from him, but he's devilishly reticent. Not only reticent, but frightened."

"Frightened?"

"Yes." Again Hilton chuckled. "Imagine that—a big bad interplanetary buccaneer like Arnold Kress, afraid of his own shadow! And admitting it to me, his rival!"

“Facts,” I prompted him.

“There aren’t many more. From hints Kress dropped, his expedition left the caves beyond the Great Chasm in something of a hurry. Several men seem to have died in the Dalil desert crossing. The voyage back was something of an ordeal too, it seems. Fever got two of his staff planeticians—I gather it was the two who were assigned to tend and study the black brain.”

“Study it?”

“We’ll get to that, also,” Hilton told me. “At any rate, when Kress returned, he was a frightened man. Whether he had some idea that the black brain was a jinx, in the way that ancient Egyptologists thought mummies were hoodoos, I don’t know. When he came to me he merely offered me the black brain. But he seemed quite sincere in warning me that the thing seemed bewitched. He said he wished he had never removed it from its cave. In fact, he went further than that and said he is going to give up collecting. And by no means will he ever make another expedition to Mars.”

“Where is he now?” I asked.

“He went up to his private estate to recuperate, under the care of a physician. Personally, I think Arnold Kress is a sick man. I believe his present attitude—his delusions about the brain—spring from a serious ailment. Frankly, some of the things he said to me weren’t exactly sane.”

I ROSE to my feet.

“You know what you’ve doing to me, don’t you?” I asked Hilton. “You’re giving me the most damnable itch to see this black brain of yours. All this romantic buildup and air of mystery.”

“Come on, then,” Hilton urged. “I’ll let you peek at it. But I warn you, you’re due for a shock.”

Dennis Hilton led the way down the long hall. He paused before the bronze doors of a further chamber and knocked.

Kiti answered his summons and opened the door.

I shouldn't mention Kiti, I suppose. But that no longer matters now. Kiti was a Berian—a Venusian from the warm cities. Despite interplanetary codes on immigration, Dennis Hilton had smuggled him in as a personal servant. Berians, as all reports show, make the best of all possible servants, combining dog-like docility with utter devotion to their masters. Hilton was a man who liked unquestioning obedience. Hence, Kiti.

Still, I got a shock when he opened the door. You never get used to a Berian. It isn't their faces, though the single eye is bad enough. It's that greenish complexion, the dwarfed, stooping posture, and the claw-like fingers that arouse some instinctive repulsion in all earth-dwellers.

"Yess?" hissed Kiti.

"We're going to look at the brain," said Hilton.

He moved forward. But Kiti didn't get out of the doorway.

"Here, now!" Hilton snapped.

"Please. Please, Master. Do not enter here." The soft, servile voice held a note of entreaty.

"What's this?" asked Hilton, in genuine astonishment.

"Please do not go to the brain. The brain wants you to go. It is not well to obey it. Please do not go to the brain."

"Berians!" Hilton muttered to me, under his breath. "Excellent servants, but really little better than cretins according to earth standards. They get these delusions."

He shouldered the little green man aside.

"This way," he called. I followed him into another room. It was a room I'd never seen before—or had I? Of course! This had once been a guest chamber; parlor and bedroom. Now its walls were tiled, antiseptically white. It looked like a surgical theater, or a scientific laboratory. Laboratory? But why?

We went towards the second door.

Hilton turned a face filled with triumph towards me.

"Here it is," he whispered exultantly. "The black brain from Mars."

I stepped into that room. I stared at that table. I gazed at that great inverted glass bell suspended on chains from the high ceiling. I gazed *into* that bell.

I saw the black brain.

I screamed.

The transparent glass bell . . . it was hanging from the ceiling on the chains like a huge bowl, ten feet wide. And within the crystal prison, strands of ebon horror clawing inkily in a frantic effort to escape, was the living, throbbing, pulsating midnight mass of the black brain!

"It's alive!" I gasped.

HILTON turned to me. His cold grey face held a mocking grin.

"That's the surprise I promised you. That's the best fact of all, isn't it? The brain is alive. Yes, alive!"

I forced myself to stare again at the serpentine horror. To my trembling gaze it looked like a Medusa's nest—like an octopus—like an ever-changing blob of monstrous protoplasmic slime—like anything but a brain.

"Can you conceive of the organism that once held *this* encased in a sentient skull?" Hilton gloated. "What manner of being could control, and be controlled, by this brain?"

It was a question I didn't want to ponder on. And there were other questions, equally pressing, and equally unpleasant.

I couldn't hold back the obvious one, however.

"What keeps it alive?" I asked.

I stared, searching vainly for clamps, sutures, for an electro-attachment such as surgeons use in keeping animal brains alive. There was nothing. Nor did there seem to be any saline solution in the clear, shallow watery liquid at the bottom of the inverted glass compartment.

"I don't know, exactly." Hilton answered my question slowly. "Arnold Kress found it this way, or says he did. The brain was in the cave. In a bowl —this bowl, to be exact."

“Let me get this straight,” I said.

“Kress discovers this bowl in a cave beyond the Great Chasm of Mars, sitting all alone in the ruins of a bygone civilization. No one to tend to it. no evidence as to how it got there, no clue as to why it managed to stay—alive—if it is alive. That’s pretty hard to swallow.”

For answer, Hilton pointed to the black blob behind the glass.

“There it is,” he whispered.

And there it was. Throbbing ceaselessly, its nerve-endings undulating like tentacles, the black brain seethed.

“Are you sure it’s a brain?” I asked. “How do you know it isn’t some weird ultra-terrestial life form? Some macrocosmic cell, or a sea denizen?

“Look at the convolutions in the mass.” Hilton unconsciously assumed a lecturing attitude as he walked around the suspended glass bowl. “Here is a definite line of demarcation between the cerebrum and cerebellum. And note the prominence of what is unmistakably the medulla oblongata. These fissures are well-pronounced. The infinity of convolutions betokens considerable intelligence. Naturally the intelligence isn’t human, or even mundane. Yet the men in Kress’s party unanimously recognized the mass as being the living brain of what was once a conscious organism.”

Despite my inexplicable fear, I stepped closer. I was able to recognize the truth of what Hilton was telling me. Yes, it was a brain—not the small grey sponge of a human, but the black, alien, giant brain of some unknown monstrosity from another world.

“Fascinating, isn’t it?” Hilton remarked.

I shook my head. “Horrible,” I said.

“Nevertheless, it’s a prize. A remarkable specimen. I will study it.”

“Why don’t you turn it over to the authorities?” I asked.

Hilton frowned. His was the indignation of a born collector.

“It’s mine,” he insisted. “I intend to keep it.”

SHRUGGED, turned to go. At the door I paused.

I “By the way,” I remarked. “You said that Arnold Kress had some delusions about the brain? What exactly do you mean?”

Hilton hesitated before he answered. “Oh, nothing much. He thought perhaps the brain had been preserved as a sort of god by the forgotten peoples of the cave cities. He thought that it—well, you know the fancies a sick mind indulges in.”

I let it go at that.

“Let me know if you find out anything,” I told Hilton, as I left the room.

Going through the hall I encountered Kiti, crouching against the doorway in the darkness. There was a look of abject fear on his livid little face.

I fancied that Arnold Kress wasn’t the only one who had strange fancies about the black brain in the bowl. Kiti had them, too.

And that night, when the memory of that dark and living horror came to slither through my dreams, I wondered whether or not those fancies might be true.

2.

“KRESS has disappeared!”

Just three words. Three words, casually dropped by Spencer, at my office.

Yet for some reason the chills were racing up my spine.

I tried to be casual as I pumped Spencer for information. He didn’t know much. Got the news over the telepapers this morning. Kress had left his private sanitarium. There was a hint that he had not exactly “left” in the ordinary sense of the word. “Escaped” was a better choice. Because he had been under observation for an “acute mental disturbance.”

In a flash, I associated the story with what Hilton had told me. Kress was more than a bit disturbed—he was mad! And he had escaped.

Of course it wasn’t my business, really. Or was it? Anyone who had seen that black monstrosity in the bowl would make it his business to find out anything connected with it. And Kress had gone mad because he'd found it.

That's why I could hardly wait until evening to pay a call on Dennis Hilton.

Hilton answered the door himself. "Where's Kiti?" I asked.

Hilton sighed. "The crazy fool!" he said. "He left this morning. Couldn't argue him out of it, either. Wouldn't stay in the same place with the thing."

"The brain?"

"Yes."

I entered the hall. "But where could he go, Hilton? You certainly weren't fool enough to turn him loose outside. The authorities would nab you for that soon enough. Illegal entry of planetary visitors, and all that."

"I arranged to send him back to Venus on the afternoon flight," Hilton told me. "But it leaves me short-handed here. And I'm worried."

"Worried? What about?"

Hilton answered me as he plodded on ahead. Without my asking, he was leading me straight into the chamber that housed the black brain.

"This," said Hilton, opening the door and gesturing me in.

I stepped under the brilliant lights, stared around the white-tiled room, gaped at the glass bowl hanging from the chains in the ceiling.

THE brain was there, bubbling blackly as it had in my midnight dreams. It contracted and expanded rhythmically, like some enormous black heart—an evil heart, nourished on unthinkable things. I watched it pulsate. Today the tendrils; nerve-endings, or whatever they might be, were not waving. The entire mass seemed sluggish, and except for the ceaseless throbbing, it lay quiescent at the bottom of the huge bowl.

Hilton watched my eyes. Then he coughed. "Notice anything?" he asked. His voice was strangely husky.

"Why—no—that is—" I stared again. I *did* notice something!

"It's bigger," I said.

Hilton's pallor was ghastly. He couldn't keep the forced smile on his lips. "You see it too?" he whispered. "Much bigger," I said. "Why?"

"I don't know. And it frightens me. You see, Kress said that, too. The brain gets bigger. Look at it—nearly six feet in bulk! Kress told me, and I laughed at him."

The words recalled my mission. "Kress," I said. "He's escaped."

"What's that?"

"Don't you know?"

Hilton shook his head.

I broke the story as I'd heard it. "I thought he'd come here to you," I admitted. "That's why I stopped in."

"This is serious," Hilton murmured. He lit a *sybarette* with a nervous gesture. "Come on, we'll go into my den and see what must be done. Can't have Kress running around like this. He needs the proper attention."

We went out, down the hall, entered the den. I found a chair in the midst of the museum display and sat down. As I did so, my knee knocked against a stick. It fell to the floor with a clatter.

I stooped, picked it up. The object was a cane, with a silver handle. It looked vaguely familiar.

Kress! Arnold Kress always carried a silver-handled cane! Every telephoto showed him with his stick. My fingers ran over the silver head, encountered grooves on the surface. I looked down. My eyes read the initials. "A.K."

My eyes rose, to encounter the shocked stare of Dennis Hilton.

"All right," he sighed. "HI admit it. Kress was here."

"When?"

"This afternoon. He left about an hour ago. Oh, don't look at me like that! I did my best, tried to persuade him to return to the sanitarium. But he's mad, I tell you, utterly mad." Hilton must have read my face. "Perfectly harmless, though," he hastened on. "Simply delusions of persecution, that's all. He wants to go away, to escape."

"Escape from what?"

“From the brain, of course.” Hilton sat down heavily on a sofa. He thinks the brain is calling to him.”

“Calling to him?” I echoed his words in utter mystification.

“Yes. That’s what Kiti believed. That the brain is not only alive, but powerful. That it calls—telepathically. A sort of radioactive emanation that results in a hypnotic pull.

“That’s why he gave the brain to me,” Kress admitted. “He thought he could get away from it. He doesn’t like me of course, and he usually never comes near my house. So he thought if I had the brain he might pull free of it. But he can’t—he says. The brain called to him and he had to escape. He couldn’t get away. It called to him.”

“You don’t sound much better yourself,” I said, candidly. “I’m afraid you’re a candidate for a strait jacket yourself.”

“Don’t say that!” Hilton was on his feet, his face convulsed. “Don’t say that to me! I suppose you think I’m crazy, eh? That I just imagine the brain is growing? That I just imagine it whispers inside of my head and tells me to—”

HE stopped.

“Go ahead, Hilton,” I murmured. “What does the brain whisper to you?”

“Nothing.” He sat down again, hastily. “Nothing. I don’t know what I’m talking about, I guess. All this is too much of a shock to me. I wish you could have seen the look on Kress’s face when he came here. I listened to what he whispered about the brain. He does believe it was a god of some kind, away in that other world. And he said it must have called the guides to come to it.

“They were almost lost beyond the Great Chasm, he said, though the guides wouldn’t admit it. And then they seemed to go forward all at once as though they were being—directed. They came to the caves through an unbelievable maze, and found the brain right away. Because it called to them. Kress told me it wanted to be found. It wanted to go out into the cosmos again. To a world where it could find other minds to call to. A world where it could grow. Where it could grow. God!

"Why does it grow? When will it stop growing? How can I make it stop?"

I had the answer to that one.

"Destroy it," I said.

"No. I couldn't do that." Hilton was obviously sincere. "It's too important a finding to destroy."

I twirled Arnold Kress's cane. "Hilton," I said, softly. "Why do you think the black brain grows?"

"Do you want to know?" Hilton whispered. "Do you really want to know?"

I nodded.

"I think it feeds," he murmured. "I think it feeds on the minds of men. That it drains their thoughts, their urges, their emotions. That it grows by drawing the power from other brains. Like a black vampire. Yes, a black vampire, that's what it is!"

"Believing that," I said—still softly—"do you think it is wise to keep it here?"

Hilton gulped. "You're right." His voice was almost inaudible. "Yes, I can see you're right. It must be destroyed. Will you come back again tomorrow? We shall do it together, you and I. Right now, I don't think I could stand seeing it again. But tomorrow evening, at eight. Bring a gun."

It was a pleasant invitation. And thinking of that growing monstrosity—that black vampire, as Hilton called it—it was an invitation I fully determined to keep.

I KNOCKED on Hilton's door at five minutes to eight. At eight o'clock I put my shoulder to it, and battered it open in blind panic.

The feeling had been with me all through the day. Something was wrong. Something was utterly wrong.

Now I knew it. Hilton didn't answer the door.

The hallway was dark. The entire downstairs was dark. No servants, human or otherwise, greeted me.

And no voice answered my shouts as I summoned Dennis Hilton.

I raced up the stairs through the pitch-blackness of that empty house, switched on every light at the top of the stairway. Hilton's room was empty. The house was deserted.

I made for the den, the museum trophy room. Nobody there. I stood in the doorway, glancing around quickly before I turned away.

Then I saw the paper on the table.

The paper was crumpled. The handwriting was so shaky it took me a full minute to recognize it as Dennis Hilton's penmanship. But the message hit me at once. Just two words, scrawled in a sprawling hand.

"Get out!"

Never have I received more excellent advice. And it was advice I meant to act on. For some reason, panic gripped me. I had no intention of going down that hall and looking at the brain in the bowl.

I would leave now, and return with the police. That was the sensible way—the only sane way. Somehow the thought of facing that sinister entity in the room beyond was terrifying in a way I couldn't analyze. But I loathed the very thought of the black brain. The black brain, pulsing there, throbbing endlessly through uncounted eons of ghastly life; growing and growing, and preying on the minds of men with a dark, unhuman appetite.

I carried that thought with me as I turned and left the doorway.

Then I lost that thought.

I lost *every* thought.

Now I could only *feel.*

For the house was throbbing about me. Yes, the house—the floors, the walls, everything, was pulsing. Pulsing in a weird rhythm. A thumping. A contraction-expansion. *Like the brain.*

The very air seemed to move in a hideously alien tempo of its own. It blew back and forth. It hummed with a tension. The tension of a purring dynamo, of a deathless machine. A A machine that pulsed and throbbed. *Like the brain.*

My own body seemed gripped by a similar compulsion. The blood sang in my veins. I was conscious of an altered rhythm in my pulse. My heart pounded. My breathing altered to conform to the beats. And my head seemed squeezed and then released at every pulsation. Every pulsation of that ceaseless ebb and flow. *Like the brain.*

Now, through the feeling came the voice.

I thought it was a voice at first. Then I realized that it was not a voice I heard. I *heard* nothing. The voice was *felt.* I felt the voice inside me. Whispering. Urging. Commanding.

“Come.”

Every expansion, every contraction, each beat of the insistent rhythm, drove that command into my consciousness.

“Come.”

It was the brain. The brain that had called to Arnold Kress. The brain that had called to Kiti. The brain that might have called to Dennis Hilton. And now it was calling to me.

“Come.”

I WALKED down the hall. The gun in my pocket was forgotten. My original intention was forgotten. My very name, my being, was lost to me in the strength of that hypnotic command.

I passed the outer tiled chamber, where the light blazed. Like a man in a trance, I walked through the open doorway and stood before the brain.

The brain had grown. Its black bulk loomed ten feet, and towered along the glass sides of the huge bowl. I stood and stared mutely.

It was sucking my own brain, eating away my sanity. This I realized. I wondered how this would help it grow.

I wondered what would become of me—would I be left with a vacant mind, an empty shell? I wondered why I must stand before it so it could nourish itself.

All this I pondered, but I could not move. I could not resist, or run away. Even as I saw the brain swell, and thicken, I couldn't run. I was trapped. And the black brain billowed up—

I heard my name, then. *Felt* my name then. A voice that was not a voice—a voice that was only a thought within me—screamed, "Kill it! For God's sake, kill it before it gets you!"

I recognized Hilton's thought. The spell snapped. My hand went for the gun.

Even as I whipped it out, I saw things *happen.*

I saw the horrid suggestion of a *face* forming within those black and boiling depths. I saw the rudimentary nerve endings resolve into limbs and feelers that reached out to claw. I saw the utterly hellish suggestion of a great *mouth* . . . a grinning black maw, gaping in the depths of the throbbing mass.

I shot. I fired again and again. The bowl shattered into a million fragments, but I kept pumping—pumping into the writhing blackness of the huge monstrosity that slithered towards me even as I ripped it to dirty black ribbons.

In a moment it was over. I stared down at the bubbling, coagulated mass that was all that remained of the black brain. For a moment I fancied I saw something—but it must have been my own imagination.

Because I knew, suddenly, what had happened to the men lost on Kress's expedition. I knew what had happened to Kiti—who did not go back on the afternoon flight to Venus. I knew what had happened to Kress—who did not leave the house again after his escape. And staring at the mass on the floor, I knew what had happened to Dennis Hilton after he had bid me goodbye last night. I knew what had called to him and brought him to this room to die.

That's why, in the bubbling ooze, I could almost imagine I caught one last ghastly glimpse of their faces . . . shifting momentarily through the dying liquid came the twisted countenances of the dead. The brain reformed at the end, and I could see Hilton’s tortured mouth—Hilton, whose thought somewhere inside the black brain had sent the message which saved me.

I knew now what the brain had wanted, and how it grew. Because they were all wrong.

No matter what the evidence, it wasn’t a brain. It was an animal. An animal with a strange hypnotic power. And it had used this power to destroy them. Because animals must—eat!

Lefty Feep and the Racing Robot

Lefty had a swell idea for making money on the races. He would use a robot for a jockey to save weight. But the robot fell in love with a window dummy, and when she was kidnaped, Lefty's plans went haywire!

JACK'S SHACK was almost empty the other night, and so was I. I ordered a stack of wheat cakes and began to wade into them with a knife, fork, and lots of gusto.

Somewhere between-'the fourth and fifth wheat cake I suddenly noticed a human thumb. The thumb wriggled up and down, pressing the fifth wheat cake back on the plate.

A voice assailed my ears.

"Send back the platter—don't eat this batter."

I raised my head quickly and stared.

Lefty Feep was standing at the side of my table. The tall, angular indoor sportsman was grinning broadly.

"Lefty Feep!" I exclaimed. "You're a sight for sore eyes!"

And he was. Feep was wearing a creation designed to make anybody's eyes sore. A checkered overcoat, striped trousers, and polka-dot spats hung on his frame, reading from top to bottom. He was carrying a huge cigar, and as I looked, he puffed fifty cents worth of smoke into my face.

“Do not make with the cakes,” Feep insisted, pushing my plate aside. He signalled for a waiter.

“Me and my friend here wish a few pounds of caviar,” he ordered.

The waiter’s mouth hung open.

“Also tell the chef to go out and catch a couple humming birds by the tongue. Female humming birds—they are more delicate, if you follow me.”

The waiter followed, with a sarcastic grin.

“Caviar and humming birds’ tongues you say? I suppose you want some champagne, too, with a little Chinese lettuce on the side—you mooching bum!”

Lefty Feep disregarded the criticism. “Champagne is a good idea,” he nodded. “But forget us with the lettuce. I got plenty of lettuce right here.”

Reaching into his pocket he pulled out a big wad of bills.

The waiter retreated as Feep sat down next to me.

“Quite a roll you’ve got there,” I remarked.

“Sure,” said Feep. “It looks good even without butter.”

Curiosity got the better of me. “Where in the world did you make all this money?” I demanded.

Feep shrugged. “It’s in the bag with a nag.”

“How?”

“My hay starts to pay.”

“What do you mean, in English?”

“I win a horse-race,” he explained.

“But I thought you usually lost on the races,” I remarked.

“Usually I do,” admitted Lefty Feep.

“In fact up to recently I figure the only way I can clean up on a horse is to become a street-sweeper.”

“But you were lucky this time?”

“Smart is the word, buddy.” Feep beamed. “Let me tell you how it all happens. It is amazing and amusing.” I got up hastily. I could smell another story coming on. “Some other time, perhaps,” I mumbled. “Must go now. I’ve got a blind date.”

“She must be, if she goes out with you,” Feep retorted.

I tried to dodge, but his outstretched foot tripped me back into my seat.

“There. Now you are comfortable,” said Lefty Feep. “So kindly flap your ears to these remarkable remarks.” And as I flapped my ears, Lefty Feep flapped his tongue and began to speak.

IT ALL starts out one day last week when I am strolling down the street enjoying the sunshine and fresh air. I might as well enjoy sunshine and fresh air, since my landlady puts me out of my room.

It seems I do not make a dent in my rent lately, but this does not bother me half as much as the strolling. You see I am strolling on my hands and knees. The idea is I am trying to look like a dog, so my creditors won’t know me.

At the moment I happen to be crouching next to a lamp post, cursing the name of Gorilla Gabface.

This is not the first time I take Gorilla Gabface’s name in vain, because he plays plenty of unwashed tricks on me before. But this last trick is the worst—it is the reason why I am down and out. Down on my knees and out of my room.

Because Gorilla Gabface lately buys himself a race horse. Naturally he tells me about it and I take a look at the plug. To me the nag has all the earmarks of a phony pony, and I tell Gabface so. He gets sore and suggests I place a slight wager against the horse if I don’t like it.

Which I do, playing the favorite in a race the next day. And Gorilla Gabface’s horse beats the favorite.

I cannot figure this out, because his horse is such a fugitive from a milk-wagon. So the next day I bet again and Gabface’s horse comes in. And the next day.

The result is I am now flat broke. And I am just beginning to figure out why. Gabface is crookeder than a Jap diplomat, and I now realize he must be doping his horse. Also he is using a lightweight jockey and weighing him in with lead in his ears and mouth.

This I realize. But I also realize it is too late for me to do anything about it. Gorilla Gabface is still winning races, and all I can do is run races with my creditors.

So there I am, crouching by the lamp post and wondering if I can find a bone somewhere.

Then I happen to look up and I see the sign.

“HORSECRACKER INSTITUTE.”

And all at once I remember that this is the place where Sylvester Skeetch and Mordecai Meetch have their laboratory. They are a couple of scientific Americans—two professors without a quiz show. They are always cooking up some screwy idea or theory, and I happen to recall that I once collect fifty bucks from them when I assist in an experiment.

The experiment doesn’t work, but neither do I—and I get the fifty bucks anyway.

So that gives me an idea. Why not stroll into the HORSECRACKER INSTITUTE and see if they are bouncing any screwballs today?

I get up off my knees faster than I do in a dice-game when somebody looks at my dice. In two minutes I am up the stairs and in the laboratory.

The outer room is empty. So I push in the other door and take a look.

SYLVESTER SKEETCH and Mordecai Meetch are bending over a big white table. They are wearing dark glasses and those scientific nightgowns. A big light shines down on the table, and also shines on the knives and saws in their hands. Skeetch is sewing something up and mumbling to himself.

I tiptoe over and sneak a peek.

Then I give a gulp.

They have a body on the table and they are sewing it up!

Absolutely—there is a guy lying out on the table, and they are cross-stitching his neck for him!

“Hippocrates’ oath!” I mutter, or some such profanity.

Skeetch and Meetch wheel around. Their glasses glare. Then they recognize me. Meetch smiles.

“Well, if it isn’t Feep!” he says. “Glad to see you again.”

I can only stare at the body on the table.

“What kind of morgue *smorgasbord* are you cooking up there?” I gasp, which is something to gasp.

“Nothing at all,” Meetch answers. “How’s our patient, Skeetch?”

“Fine.”

“Patient?” I say.

“Well, you might call him that.” Meetch turns around. “Ready to get up now?”

Sure enough—I see that the guy on the table is smiling. He nods when Meetch talks to him. I stand there waiting for his sewed head to fall off, but it doesn’t.

Instead the guy sits up then stands up.

So does my hair.

“Feep,” says Skeetch, “Shake hands with Robert.”

I look at Robert. He stands stiff-jointed with a very wooden smile on his face. But he holds out his hand and I grab it. We shake very gently.

He stops shaking hands.

I don’t.

Then I look down at my hand to see what I am holding. His arm! It comes off at the shoulder!

“Curse it!” yells Meetch. “You aren’t glued tight enough!”

He grabs the arm, grabs Robert, and throws him down on the table again. Skeetch runs over with a big can of glue and another needle.

I can’t bear to look. I cover my eyes.

SKEETCH taps me on the shoulder after a while.

"Peekaboo," he says. "You can come out now. It's all right."

"All right?" I say. "Tearing guys arms off is all right? I guess I don't know my own strength."

Skeetch laughs.

"Take a look," he suggests.

I look. Robert is back on his feet. The arm is on again.

"Ulp!" I remark.

Meetch chuckles. "You're fooled too," he grins. "You think Robert is a man, eh?"

"What else?"

"Well, he's not. He's our newest invention, that's all."

"Invention?"

"Of course. Feep—meet Robert the Robot."

"A robot—one of those mechanical men?"

Meetch nods.

"But aren't they always some kind of tin or steel? And don't you have to press a lot of buttons to make them work?"

"Not any more," Skeetch tells me. "Robert the Robot is made out of nothing but wires, electrical batteries, synthetic brain and nerve tissue, reclaimed rubber, and plastic wood."

"Plastic wood?"

"Feel his face and hands. Marvelous likeness, isn't it? Very artistic modeling, just like flesh."

"But he's alive—he can talk and move—"

"Of course. The synthetic brain and nerve tissue takes care of that. Certain embolistic difficulties must be accounted for, and there's a synaptic differential to be eliminated or compensated for but—"

Meetch interrupts.

"Never mind all that," he says. "What Skeetch is trying to tell you is—we are successful. We create a synthetic human being, a robot. Robert the

Robot is the latest scientific achievement, the crowning triumph of this Institute!"

Robert the Robot smiles and bows.

I shrug my shoulders. "Very interesting," I admit. "But now what? What are you going to do with this plastic personality?"

Skeetch scratches his noggin.

"There is an important point. I haven't the faintest idea of what to do with Robert the Robot."

"Neither have I," Meetch chimes in. "Of course we must examine his potentialities. See what kind of a brain he has. Why right now he's as simple as a new-born babe."

Robert the Robot stands there with a silly grin on his wooden puss.

"But he walks and talks," I object. "That is not simple."

"Part of the process already under control," Skeetch says. "He can speak and understand—but he cannot think. Or can he? That is something we must find out about. What can a robot like this do? What is he capable of? What are his limitations?"

"I dunno," says Robert the Robot, fingering the suit of clothes they put on him.

"There's the answer!" Meetch sighs. "He dunno! Skeetch, it's going to be a terrific problem studying and educating this creation of ours! A scientific check will require months of observation."

"Yes," Skeetch agrees with a groan. "And here we are, up to our necks on those rocket-ship plans, too! How are we going to sandwich in enough time to train our creation?"

RIGHT here is where I get an idea.

"Why not let me show Robert the Robot around?" I suggest.

"You?"

"Why not? I am in the know. I can teach him plenty. I can show him the ropes. For a small fee, of course."

Meetch looks at Skeetch. Skeetch looks at Meetch. Neither of them are getting any bargain from this exchange of glances. But Skeetch speaks.

“You might do it. But will you take care of Robert for us? Will you check his reactions regularly?”

“Not only his reactions but also his oil,” I promise.

“No need for that. Robert the Robot is self-operating. No gears, no cogs, nothing to wind up, nothing to run down. No food, water, oil, nothing to plug in.”

“Wrap it up,” I order. “That’s for me.”

“All right,” says Meetch. “Here’s fifty dollars. Take Robert the Robot for a week and see if you can teach him anything.”

“From me he’ll learn plenty,” I assure him. “All the angles and lots of curves, too.”

“We expect a full report,” Skeetch warns me.

“You’ll get it.”

So they hand me fifty smackeroos and I waltz down the stairs with Robert the Robot at my heels.

When we get out to the doorway, I turn and take a squint at Robert again.

He doesn’t look bad. In his blue suit and white shirt he resembles a window-dummy—but a high class window-dummy. The plastic wood face and hands look like the real flesh. He has nice eyes and a cheerful smile. Not exactly a movie star, but he will pass in a crowd. There is a little glue around his neckline, but not enough to attract attention. A very remarkable personality—this Robert the Robot.

But looks are not everything, and I figure I won’t take any chances. If he is going to be my pal for a week, I might as well wise him up a little. I do not wish for him to make any bad breaks in society, and it is my job to see that he is Emily Posted.

“Well, Robert,” I tell him. “Here we go into the big city.”

“What’s a city?” he asks, with a straight face.

“What’s a city? Why a city is—a lot of buildings with mortgages on them. A place where people live.”

“What are people?”

“People? Why, persons. Human beings. Like me.”

“You’re a human being?”

“Don’t say it in that nasty tone of voice. Of course I am. And you are going to pretend that you’re one, too.”

“What do human beings do?”

“Why, I eat and sleep.”

“What are they?”

“Eating is something you do with food after cooking it.”

“What’s cooking?”

SLANG he talks! So I explain about food and eating, and then I explain sleeping.

He shakes his head. “I don’t see anything in it,” he tells me. “I will not eat or sleep. What else do people do?”

“They work.” So I tell him about jobs and working.

“But why do they work?”

“In order to get money so they can eat and sleep.”

Robert the Robot grins. “People are silly then,” he decides. “I don’t want to be a people.”

“Person,” I correct him. “Watch your grammar. People means a whole snag of finks. A person is just one lug.”

“Finks and lugs,” the Robot mumbles.

“Come on, let’s walk around for a while,” I suggest.

And off we go on a conducted tour. It is the first time I ever show a Robot the sights of the big city, but he is not a bad guy as dummies go. It really gives me a bang to point out the joints, and Robert gets quite enthusiastic.

What really gives him the old jolt is the machinery. The cars and busses and trains are quite a thrill. Being a robot, naturally he is interested in mechanical stuff. So we watch neon signs and adding machines and I take him over to see a printing press and a couple factories. In fact, it is after dark before I manage to tear him away from a clothes-pin factory.

We stand outside and wait for a car near a drug-store. Robert the Robot happens to notice the weighing machine.

“What is that?” he asks.

So of course I have to explain what a weighing machine is. And just for fun I slip a penny in the slot and let him weigh himself. A card comes out with his weight on it.

Robert the Robot weighs 55 lbs.

That is curious. Here is a robot, looking like a full-grown man, and he only weighs 85 pounds. The plastic wood, of course.

“You’re quite a lightweight,” I remark. “Funny.”

Only on second thought it isn’t funny.

It’s wonderful!

“Eighty-five pounds!” I yell. “Come on, Robert—we’re going places!”

“Home?” he asks.

“No, not home,” I answer. “We are going to the amusement park!”

And that is just where we do go.

I TAKE Robert the Robot out to the carnival. Nobody notices him, of course, or thinks he is any different. They do not realize he is a robot. They also do not realize he is a gold-mine—but I do.

I get him into the carnival and I throw him on the merry-go-round right away. Put him right on the wooden horses.

“This is nice,” he tells me, sliding up and down and hanging onto the brass pole.

“Let go the pole and see if you can ride,” I suggest.

He does. He can ride.

We go around again.

“Why are we doing this?” asks Robert the Robot.

“You’ll find out,” I answer.

Because I know what I'm doing. I'm teaching Robert the Robot how to ride.

Here is a robot who looks like a human being. He only weighs 85 pounds. If he can ride—what a jockey he will make!

I can put weights; on him when he weighs in that will make him plenty heavy. Then I remove them and he goes back to just 85 pounds on a horse. And Gorilla Gabface, for all his crookedness, can't get a jockey weighing 85 pounds, I will enter a race, bet with Gabface, and let the robot ride a horse I put my money on. It's a cinch.

After I give Robert the Robot a few more riding lessons I hustle him out of the carnival. We walk along the street and I explain my plan to him.

I tell him what a race is, and what live horses are, and how to handle one.

"Tomorrow you will ride like that," I finish up. "You will win a lot of money. That means plenty of groceries and a nice place to sleep."

Robert the Robot shakes his wooden head.

"But I do not like groceries and I never sleep," he complains. "Besides, I am not sure that one of these horses, as you call them, is safe for me. My arms might fall off again."

"You'll like it," I argue.

"No. I rather look at some more machinery," says Robert the Robot. "Beautiful wheels and pistons."

"Beautiful baloney!" I sneer.

"Yes," whispers Robert the Robot. "Beautiful."

"What?" I turn my head.

"A beautiful baloney, you call her?" breathes Robert the Robot.

He is staring off into space. I squint and follow his gaze.

Robert the Robot is looking into a department store window. He is gawking at a window dummy standing there. A blonde window dummy with long false eyelashes, wearing a negligee.

"A beautiful baloney," he whispers.

"You are wrong, Robert," I correct him. "Women are not baloneys. They are generally referred to in polite circles as tomatoes. Or wenches. Or ginch.

Of course, this one is just a window dumm—”

THEN I catch myself in time. Because another idea hits me.

“Robert,” I whisper.

He does not hear me, he is so busy giving this window dummy the old eye.

“Robert, do you like her?”

“Oh, yes,” he sighs. “I like her.”

Yes, I am right. He doesn’t know any better—he falls for this window dummy. So I go right ahead with my idea.

“Robert, how would you like to have her for a girl friend?”

“Girl friend?”

I start to explain what a girl friend is, but I don’t need to. He catches on. He shakes his head so fast the stitches nearly break on his neck. And almost cracks his plastic lips with a smile.

“I will see to it,” I promise. “If you will run this race tomorrow for me.”

“Well—”

“Think of it, Robert! She will be sitting up in the grandstand watching you ride. Watching you win! You’ll be a hero!”

“Do you think she’ll like me?” asks Robert. “I can’t seem to get her to smile at me.”

Then I catch on. *He* thinks the window dummy is alive, the way he is!

“She’s marvelous,” he breathes. “Wonderful how she manages to stand still all this time without ever moving.”

“Sure,” I agree. “Most women won’t stand still for a minute.”

“Why doesn’t she talk?” he asks.

“Listen,” I tell him. “When you hang around dames as long as I do, you will be grateful to find one who doesn’t talk.”

“Maybe so,” says Robert the Robot.

“Well, then, how about it?” I ask, giving him the needle. “If she comes along, will you ride in a race tomorrow?”

"Yes," he says.

So I pat him on his wooden back and dash into the department store. It is closed, of course, but I locate the watchman and the head designer. I tell the head designer I wish to buy his window dummy.

"You want that dummy?" ask the designer jerk.

"Well," I say, kind of embarrassed, "I don't really want it. It's for a friend. A present—like a doll."

"Awfully big for a doll," says the designer jerk.

"I have an awfully big friend," I explain.

So to make a long story snort, I finally walk off with the dummy for twenty bucks. This is a lot of hay, but I figure I will be making bales of hay when the sun shines on the racetrack tomorrow.

In a few minutes I am back on the street, dragging the dummy across my back.

"Robert, meet your new girl friend," I say. "Here she is."

"What's her name?" he asks, very gullible.

"Oh—her name is Roberta," I tell him.

He reaches out to shake hands. I wag the dummy's arm.

"Can't she walk?" he inquires.

"Have a heart," I explain. "The poor girl stands on her feet all day long. She is tired."

"I am not tired."

"You are not a woman," I snap. "No, I will carry her home. She must be ready to go to the race tomorrow."

I DO carry her home. I give the landlady the back rent and she gives me a little back talk, and then I settle Robert the Robot in one room and lock Roberta the window-dummy in the other room.

"Got to keep it proper," I tell Robert. "Now I must go out and make final arrangements."

Which is just what I do.

I head for the stable.

I am looking for a personality by the name of Horse-Sense Homer, a dear friend of mine who is quite a jack around the track. He owns a horse of his own—a nag if there ever was one—and I fancy he will be currying him in a hurry tonight.

Which he is. I step into the stable and the first person I recognize is Horse-Sense Homer himself. I do not see him in the dark but I can tell he is a stable man, because he has such an air about him.

"Homer," I yell. "It's me—Lefty Feep!"

He turns on a lantern and I see he is lying down on the straw, asleep. Next to him is his scrawny horse. "Who's your friend?" I inquire. Horse-Sense Homer smiles. "The best nag I own," he tells me. "The name is *Glue Factory* "You're telling me?"

"A great horse," he insists. "Watch her win tomorrow."

"Got a good jockey?"

"Fair. I'm depending on *Glue Factory,* though."

"Well, I've got your troubles all packed up," I tell him. "I just pick up a jockey for you."

"Pick up?"

"With one hand," I assure him. "He's that light."

"No midgets."

"A full-grown man," I come back. "Great rider, too. You can't lose. He only weighs 85 pounds."

"85 pounds?"

"A wonder. And just to show you how much confidence I have in him, I'm going to bet all your money on winning."

"All my money, eh? With who?"

"Gorilla Gabface," I answer. "He is racing his steed against you, is he not?"

"Right," says Horse-Sense Homer, frowning. "You know I am a little afraid. That horse of his, *Cut Plug,* is a pretty fast filly."

"Don't be silly with that filly!" I sneer.

"But Gabface's horse always wins."

"Not now he doesn't. Not with my 85-pound jockey."

"Well, Lefty, wait a minute now—"

"No time to wait. Got to place the bet." I grab his wallet and run off. He stares after me, shaking his head.

I SHAKE my feet back to town and into Gorilla Gabface's pool parlor where he hangs out, particularly around the chins.

And there sits the fat slob himself, grinning from ear to ear. When I walk in he laughs.

"Well if it isn't Lefty Feep," he cracks. "And pretty sagging, too! What's the matter, Lefty—you lose your racing form?"

I just hand him the onion eye.

"I guess my *Cut Plug* teaches you a lesson at the track today," he chuckles. "Maybe now you will learn to stop horsing around."

Then I give it to him.

"Listen, Gabface. Is it true that you plan to enter that horse-doctor's delight of yours in tomorrow's race?"

"The fifth race, to be exact," Gabface answers. "And what is it to you? Want to make a bet on him winning?"

"No," I come back. "But I will make a little wager with you that *Cut Plug* gets beat by another steed."

"Such as which?"

"I am betting on *Glue Factory,"* I tell him.

"Glue Factory?" Gabface laughs again and several windows fall out. "Why that oat-burner does not win a race since Paul Revere sells her back in 1776."

"She wins tomorrow," I state. "Do you wish to amble into a gamble?"

"I will bet against you Feep," Gabface sneers. "What amount do you wish to wager? A dime? Or does somebody hand you a quarter?"

"I will bet $500," I tell him.

Gabface sits up.

"Where do you get $500 and how do you hide the body?" he scoffs.

"Here is the dough." I wave the wallet at him.

He smiles. "All right. It's a bet. I will see you at the track tomorrow with my wheelbarrow. I need it to carry the winnings in."

He jerks his head all at once.

"Who is the jockey?" he asks. "Horse-Sense Homer's regular boy?"

"I got a new jockey for this race," I tell him. "Fellow by the name of Robert."

"Never hear of him."

"You will," I predict. And walk out . . ."

SO the deal is fixed. I put up the dough, the bet is on, and all I do now is arrange final details. The next morning I go down and get racing togs for Robert the Robot and have him weighed in. I put a few weights inside his stomach and sew him back up and he tips the scales at 125. While we weigh Gabface comes in with his jockey. He also tips the scales at 125, but he has a mouthful of pennies or something and does not say anything. I figure he really goes for about 118—and with Robert the Robot at 85, he is a cinch to win.

Gabface doesn't think so. He comes over and looks at Robert. Robert is nothing much to look at. His wooden face and painted smile do not show up very well in the daylight, and he moves very stiff and awkward, just as anybody would if they had wooden hips.

"So this is your new jockey?" grins Gabface, looking Robert up and down. He stares hard, and for a minute I am afraid he will realize that Robert, in spite of the plastic wood, is just a mechanical man.

But he only sniffs and says, "Fine specimen. Must be out on a bender last night from the way his face looks. He shouldn't ride a horse today. A pink elephant is better."

I do not comment, but take Robert the Robot out of there in a speedy hurry.

"How do you feel?" I ask him.

"Feel? What's feel?" he comes back.

"Never mind. Are you ready to race today?"

"Will Roberta watch me?"

"Right in the stands with me," I promise.

This cheers him up. We go around to the stable and I introduce him to *Glue Factory* and give him a few pointers on riding. This isn't really important, because the horse will race by itself, and all that bothers it is weight. So it's a cinch.

The only one who worries now is Horse-Sense Homer. He happens to come up and say hello while Robert and I stand there.

"You the marvelous jockey Feep tells me about?" he says, slapping Robert on the back.

"Oooooh!" says Robert the Robot and falls down. One of his legs buckles and comes off at the knee.

"Jumping steeple-chase!" yells Homer. "I cripple him for life! Get a doctor—get an ambulance—police——"

"Get some glue," I tell him, very calmly.

"Glue? But his leg—"

"I will glue it on again."

"Glue a man's leg on?"

"He is only a dummy," I explain. "A robot. A mechanical man. There is nothing to worry about."

Homer takes this all in and his face turns a delicate shade of blue.

"Nothing to worry about?" he gasps. "You mean you bet my $500 that you will win a race with a dummy for a jockey?"

"But he is very smart for a dummy," I assure Homer.

"Look," I say, putting his leg back on, "he is made out of plastic wood." And bend the foot backwards. "Soft as mud."

“Don’t do that,” Homer shrieks. “Your name is mud, Feep! You put $500 of mine into the paws of Gorilla Gabface with this crazy stunt.”

“Don’t bum your bridges until you come to them,” I cheer him up. “Just watch Robert the Robot race.”

“I am going to close my eyes and lie down,” Homer sighs.

THEN the bugle blows for the first race and I run off. I get Robert in his racing togs and pull them over his plastic body. I give him his last-minute instructions. But he looks worried.

“What about Roberta?” he says. “What about her?”

“She is waiting in the stands to see you,” I needle him. “Here—she sends you this to wear.”

And I pull out a part of the window dummy’s wig I clip off.

“A lock of her hair!” whispers Robert the Robot. “Gee!”

“Now get in there and win,” I coach. “The fifth race is coming up.” And I turn him over to Homer.

Then I go back to the stands. Here I sit in a box with Roberta the window dummy next to me like I promise. I dig her up a nice dress to wear and drag her along to a seat. She has to be carried in, but nobody notices very much—everybody being on their feet and screaming while they watch the races.

Comes the fifth race. Comes the horses. Comes *Cut Plug* and *Clue Factory.* Comes the break at the barrier. And they’re off!

Robert the Robot sails along in his saddle. *Cut Plug’s* jockey gives him the old boot and spur. But *Glue Factory* takes the lead. With scarcely no weight to carry, she is really feeling her oats. I see Robert bouncing up and down and the horse gallops around the inside stretch and then heads for home.

The crowd roars. *Glue Factory* is a long shot. And *Cut Plug,* the favorite, is all shot. Because *Glue Factory* wins in a breeze. Five lengths!

“Yeeeoowee!” yells a loud voice in my ear. It turns out to be my own voice.

"I am robbed!" screams another voice from in back of me.

I turn around and see Gorilla Gabface dancing up and down on one foot in a rage polka.

"Give me the dough," I call to him, in a very sweet tone of voice.

"Why you——" Gabface begins.

But he never goes any further in his description because he suddenly notices Roberta the window dummy sitting next to me.

"Ladies present," he mumbles. "Is this your latest flame, Lefty?"

I keep Roberta's back turned. "No," I explain. "She is the—the girl-friend of my jockey."

"Oh, that dirty—" Gabface commences. And catches himself once more. He shakes his head. "I still do not see how you win," he groans. "The horse looks like it isn't carrying any weight at all."

"Pay up," I say, very patient.

"All right, Feep. You get a break this time. But it doesn't happen again."

"Oh no?" I see a chance to get really even with this crook. "What do you plan to do? Give that nag of yours a shot of dynamite in his oats to make him start off with a bang?"

"Do you mean to infer that I pull a fixed race?" Gabface grunts.

"Who cares?" I grin. "No matter what you do from now on, I win all the races."

"So? Perhaps you wish to make another bet? I am racing my horse again Saturday," Gabface snarls.

This is just what I like to hear.

"Certainly I will wager. Shall we say a cool grand this time?" I suggest.

"That is plenty icy." Gabface is hedging.

"Afraid, eh?"

"Listen you," says Gabface, sticking his chins out. "I am not afraid of man nor beast—and one of those categories must cover you. I will bet the thousand. My horse against that plug you and Homer run."

So it is a bet.

GABFACE leaves and I run down to meet Robert the Robot and Horse-Sense Homer.

Horse-Sense is very excited. He cannot believe the race is won. When I tell him about the new bet he is happier than ever.

Robert the Robot is happy, too. I bring him a whole handful of hair from the window-dummy’s wig and say she pulls it out in her excitement.

He is anxious to race again.

“This is more fun than the merry-go-round,” he admits.

So it is settled. Robert the Robot and Roberta the dummy go home with me in a cab. I keep them separated and act as chaperone when we get to my dump.

Starting early the next morning I take Robert down to the stable for a workout. Only two more days to go and I don’t wish to take chances. I know Gorilla Gabface is sore, and when he gets sore he gets mean, and when he gets mean he is dangerous, and when he is dangerous there is trouble ahead.

He will do anything to win the race Saturday, I know. So the next two days I train Robert and guard him carefully. I also have Horse-Sense Homer guard his horse, too. Gorilla Gabface will not get a chance to pull any funny business, I figure. And on Friday afternoon everything is all set for the big day tomorrow.

Until we get home.

Then I discover my mistake. I spend all this time guarding Robert the Robot and the horse. Roberta is left home alone.

And when we return to the house she is gone!

Vanished!

“Where is Roberta?” squeaks Robert, hopping around the room in excitement.

“Probably she goes to the beauty parlor to get her hair fixed,” I stall. “She will pull a lot out tomorrow when you win.”

But I am panicky.

I jump two feet when the doorbell rings.

Then I get to the door, open it, and look out. There is no one there. But standing in the hall is Roberta.

She looks all right. Whoever takes her does no damage.

I drag her in and show her to Robert. He cheers up and stays cheerful all evening.

But I worry.

SATURDAY morning, the day of the big race, finds me down at the tracks quite early indeed. Horse-Sense Homer takes *Glue Factory* out for exercise and reports she is very fast today. Robert the Robot goes into the stables to rest. But me—I head for the stall where Gorilla Gabface keeps his oat meal-ticket.

Sure enough, there he is. And when he sees me he cannot keep the nasty grin off his puss.

“So,” I accuse him. “You are the one who kidnaps my jockey’s girl friend.”

“Who kidnaps who?” he comes back. “Nobody puts the snatch on her. She is back, isn’t she?”

“Yes,” I admit. “But you grab her in the first place.”

Gabface leers.

“Maybe I do. Maybe I figure on queering the race by making your jockey feel upset about his girl friend,” he hints. “But I do not realize then that the girl friend is a window dummy.”

“So what? Everybody has a hobby.”

“Window dummies aren’t hobbies,” Gabface goes on. “You know, Feep, I get to thinking when I find out this. I get to thinking about what kind of a personality might have a window dummy for a heartburn. Perhaps, I figure, he is a dummy himself.”

“You’re slightly but completely screwy,” I suggest.

“Maybe. Maybe not.” Gabface grins in his chins. “It adds up, doesn’t it? Your horse races like she doesn’t carry much weight.”

"But a live dummy is ridiculous," I stall.

Gabface nods. "I agree with you, Feep," he tells me. "And there will be no such nonsense in today's race."

"What do you mean?"

"I send some of the boys around to examine your jockey," he informs me.

"Hey, what do you mean?" I yell.

"Can't put anything over on me," he comes back. "See you after the race. I can use that thousand."

I do not waste any more time. I heat my feet running back to the stable where I leave Robert the Robot.

I rush in. "Robert!" I screech. "Where are you?"

No answer. I see no one in the gloom.

But as I rush across the floor I stumble. Stumble on Robert the Robot. Or what's left of Robert the Robot.

ROBERT THE ROBOT is lying in a heap on the stable floor. He does not look human any more. He resembles a small junk pile.

Gorilla's boys really interview him. In fact they tear him to pieces!

Sure enough, there is nothing on the floor but torn clothes, twisted wires and cords, and a lot of scraps of plastic wood. I bend down and pick up a handful. It kneads between my fingers.

"Poor Robert," I whisper, thinking of the Robot.

"Poor me!" I also whisper, thinking of the thousand berries.

"All set?" It is Horse-Sense Homer, running in panting. "I just get a fresh hunch we win," he announces. "So I plank one thousand more on the nose to win. Odds are three to one! We will clean up!"

"Clean up this mess," I suggest.

"What is it?" Homer asks.

"It's our jockey. That's what it is."

And I explain.

“But we can’t race *Glue Factory* then. We lose all our dough! And to think I put it all on her nose!”

“Wait a minute!” I stare down and get an inspiration. Crazy, but an idea.

“We need a jockey?” I say.

“Of course we do,” wails Homer.

“You got one. Me.”

“You—Feep?”

“Why not? I weigh about 130.”

“Too much. Gabface’s horse will beat us unless we get an edge in weight or something.”

“We will get something,” I promise him. “Robert the Robot will win for us yet.”

“But he’s busted and you’re riding.”

“Leave it to me,” I promise him.

The bugle sounds.

“Hurry up—where’s the nag?” I yell, picking up what is left of Robert the Robot and dashing for the stable entrance.

Homer shrugs but follows me.

Fifteen minutes later I am wearing racing togs and jogging out to the post on *Glue Factory.*

Gabface is standing next to his pony and when he sees us coming up to the starting post he nearly falls over.

“You—riding this race?” he gasps.

The hypo he is trying to slip his horse falls out of his hand.

“Winning this race,” I grin. “By a nose.”

“You’re nuts,” he yells.

“You’ll see,” I call back. “You can’t stop Robert the Robot. We win by a nose.”

“I will hold my nose,” Gabface says. “But if I hold it until you limp past the finish line I will suffocate.”

“Is that a promise?”

"Goodbye, Feep. And say goodbye to your money, too," he calls after me.

I bend down and pat *Glue Factory* on the neck as we get ready to run. She is in good form, but I am heavy. And I am depending on just one thing to win.

But my worries dissolve in a cloud of dust.

We're off. Way, way off!

I keep watching Gabface's horse—*Cut Plug*. He comes up strong. I give my nag the old pressure. We are neck and neck. We pull away from the rest. We round the turn. The crowd is busting lungs all over the place.

We head for home. I bend over in the saddle. *Cut Plug* is even with me. I see the finish line ahead. We are neck and neck. And then I give one last boot. *Glue Factory* jerks her head out. We cross the finish line.

We win—by a nose!

And that, of course, is where I get all my money.

LEFTY FEEP sat back and relighted his cigar with a dollar bill.

"Some story," he commented.

"Some hooey," I said.

"Who's hooey?"

"You," I answered. "To begin with, what did those scientists say when you told them their robot was ruined?"

"Nothing. They will build another one anyway. Right now they are all mixed up building a rocket ship and they do not even pay attention when I report to them. No trouble there at all."

"All right," I sighed. "But there is one other thing wrong with this story of yours. How did you manage to win this race? You're heavier than the average jockey. Even if your horse was in good form, I don't see how you could win by a nose, as you say."

"Well," Feep admitted, "I really don't win."

"Aha, I thought so!"

"Robert the Robot wins the race, like I tell Gabface."

"But Robert the Robot was torn to pieces."

"I know. But he still wins by a nose."

"How?"

"It's this way," said Lefty Peep. "My horse is almost as fast as Gabface's this day. In fact, without doping his nag, the two horses will run about even, I figure. So I can ride as jockey and come in neck and neck."

"But you won by a nose."

"That is where Robert the Robot really wins," Feep grinned. "You see, when he is busted, I merely take some of the plastic wood from Robert the Robot's body and—"

"And what?"

"And I mould an extra long nose to glue on the horse!"

Never Trust A Demon

Snartch conjured up a demon and set out to make his dreams come true. But he overlooked one very important factor . . .

“I GUESS I’m just no good as a I carpenter,” said Mr. Snartch, as he sawed the woman in half. “Look at this sloppy stroke!” he muttered, as he hacked through the lady’s hips.

Of course, Mr. Snartch muttered all this under his breath, because an audience isn’t supposed to hear such comments from a stage magician. And Mr. Snartch was a stage magician, travelling under the name of Jeffrey the Great.

As Jeffrey the Great, he had to saw a woman in half every night, and twice a week at matinees, and he was getting pretty sick of it. The first few times were fun, but now it was just plain drudgery. Sometimes he hardly had the ambition to put the lady back together again at the end of the show. And of course, such a thing would be bad. If it kept happening, he would not only get a poor reputation as a magician, but he would also lose a lot of partners.

So tonight he hurried through his act, sawing away like mad, and then put the pieces together in record time.

Mr. Snartch wanted to finish the show and get back to his magic.

That was Jeffrey Snartch’s salvation. His only hobby—magic. Not stage magic, but *real* magic. Black magic. Not the hocus-pocus variety, but the genuine article. Sorcery. Necromancy.

Tonight he was particularly anxious to get away from the theatre because he had just discovered a swell new formula for conjuring up a demon.

Perhaps it wasn't a swell new formula, exactly. It was more of a swell *old* formula, and Jeffrey Snartch discovered it in a very ancient book, printed in Latin.

So he finished his performance in a hurry and ran out of the theatre and over to his hotel room where he had the book hidden under the mattress.

He had translated the particular spell he was interested in, and written it out on a piece of hotel stationery, along with a list of things he had to use in order to make the incantation work.

"Let me see," said Mr. Snartch. "I will need some toad's blood and some sacramental wine and some chalk to draw a pentagon with and five black candles and mandrake roots to burn."

So he put on his hat and coat and went out on a shopping trip. Half an hour later he was back in his room with the bundles. He spread everything out on the bed and pulled down the shades.

"Of course, I didn't manage to get *exactly* the right things," he confessed to himself. "But I guess they are just as good."

Instead of toads, Mr. Snartch had to buy some frogs at a pet shop. Naturally, he couldn't buy sacramental wine, but he figured on using a little grape juice instead. He had the chalk, though, and the candles. Of course, the candles weren't black ones. They were birthday candles—but it was all the store had. And Mr. Snartch didn't even know what mandrake roots look like—so he just stepped into a vacant lot and pulled up a handful of weeds.

"But I guess it will be all right," Mr. Snartch kept reassuring himself.

SO HE took his translation of instructions and began to do what the book told him. He drew a pentagon and lighted the candles and mixed up some frog's blood and grape juice and set fire to his weeds in a tray. Of course, there were a lot of technical things he had to do with all this, but the important thing is—in half an hour he had his room in one hell of a mess.

Then he turned out the lights and began to chant his formula out loud by the light of the candles.

It was very dark and frightening in the hotel room, and the birthday candles cast some very unusual shadows. The air was filled with the smell of the burning weeds.

But Mr. Snartch didn’t worry. He was an old hand at wizard’s work, and he just read his Latin, rolling out the syllables, and hoped for the best.

He got the worst.

When he finished with the Latin—cheating a bit now and then, where he didn’t understand how to pronounce the words—he started to make the necessary passes in the air. And that’s when it happened.

Suddenly the curtains began to blow. This was unusual, because the windows were all closed.

Then the shadow appeared on the wall. Some one else was in the room! This was unusual, because all the doors were locked.

Mr. Snartch looked at the shadow. Then he blinked. He looked again and saw what cast the shadow. Then he yelled.

“Eeeeowie!” yelled Mr. Snartch.

“Not bad at all,” said a voice. “The last man who saw me didn’t yell at all. He merely jumped out of the window.”

“Candidly, that’s what I’d like to do,” chattered Snartch. “The only trouble is, the windows are locked. And my knees are trembling too hard for me to jump.”

“So I notice,” said the voice. “Hold on now, I’m coming out into the light.”

Mr. Snartch watched the figure coming forth against the candle light. That is, he started to watch it from where he stood. But he ended up by peering at it from under the bed. He crawled there in a hurry when he got a good look at what he had conjured up.

For a minute he could hardly speak.

“Bless my soul,” he whispered. “Bless my soul!”

“Sorry,” said the voice. “That’s not exactly in my department. “Maybe I’d better go.”

“I didn’t mean to offend you,” said Mr. Snartch, hastily, as he came out from under the bed and stood up. “It’s only that you sort of overwhelmed me.”

“Did I really?” said the voice, with a pleased chuckle. “Well, well.”

“You’re pretty awful, you know,” said Snartch.

“Am I?” cooed the voice. “Am I ghastly?”

“Frightful!” exclaimed Mr. Snartch.

“Oh, you’re just trying to flatter me,” simpered the voice.

“Not at all,” Snartch insisted. “You’re really and truly hideous.” The demon *was* hideous.

HE SQUATTED there in the center of the floor. His body was lean, mean, green, obscene. A vast bulk, toadlike, with slick reptilian skin. He had webbed feet and claws, fringed with moss at the cuticle. He looked as though he had been pickled a long, long time ago.

His face, as faces go, just didn’t. Imagine a green skull with yellow eyes and you get the idea. You can have it.

Mr. Snartch felt the same way. The more he looked, the less he liked his visitor.

The demon crouched forward, extending his grinning face on a stalk-like neck. A forked tongue licked forth between fretted lips. He looked as though he were crouching to spring.

Mr. Snartch stepped hastily back inside the pentagon, which was to protect him from the demon.

“You can’t cross the line of chalk or go between the candles,” he whispered. “Stop looking at me that way!”

“What way?” whined the demon. “All I wanted was a glass of water. Can’t you see my tongue is hanging out? I’ve had a long, hard trip.”

“Try some of this,” Snartch suggested, pointing to the bowl of frog blood and grape juice.

“Ah!” said the demon. “That’s more like it.”

“Vitamins,” said Snartch.

“Yes, it was a terrible journey,” the demon sighed, between gulps. “Whirling across space that way. And then wriggling between dimensions. It’s not easy when you get to be my age.”

“I can imagine,” sighed Mr. Snartch, sympathetically.

“Besides, I haven’t been getting any calls now for a long time,” the demon confessed. “I’m out of practise.”

“Really?” said Mr. Snartch.

“Yes. You know what’s happened to sorcery in the last few centuries. It’s fallen off terribly. Nobody even practises witchcraft. Say, by the way, how did *you* happen to run across my address?”

“In this book,” Mr. Snartch explained, pulling the volume out of his pocket. “Ever see it?”

The demon cocked his head thoughtfully.

“Of course. It used to get me a lot of trade several hundred years ago. Now nobody seems to read it any more. This modern age!”

He sighed, like an air-raid warning.

“Mind if I sit down?” he asked. “I’m tired out from the trip.”

“Go ahead,” said Mr. Snartch, hospitably. “You *are* pretty old, aren’t you?”

“Just look at me,” groaned the demon.

MR. SNARTCH didn’t want to look at the demon, but he managed to stand the sight for several minutes. He noted the wrinkles in the demon’s face, the flabby pouches on his arms and legs where muscles had once flexed. Varicose veins stood out prominently.

“ ’Ook ’ere,” rasped the demon. “ ’Ook af my teef. Mof of ’em are miffing.”

Sure enough, only a few big yellow stumps remained in the demon's mouth.

"Too bad," Mr. Snartch sympathized.

"Yes. I can hardly eat a thing any more," the demon confided. "I just nibble at an arm or leg now and then."

"You do," wheezed Snartch, turning pale. "Just—nibble—you say."

"Nibble," repeated the demon.

Mr. Snartch suddenly dropped all notions of becoming friendly with his guest from Gehenna. He trembled anew and hugged the safety of the pentagon.

"Well," he said. "This is all very interesting, but it isn't getting us anywhere. Pretty soon the candles will burn down—they're only birthday candles, you notice—and then you can step across and get me. In order to avoid that, I think we'd better get our business out of the way right now."

"To be sure," said the demon. "Of course." He squatted on his haunches and rubbed his hands together thoughtfully. "What can I do for you, sir?" he inquired.

Mr. Snartch cleared his throat nervously.

Here it was! It was all true, then. Mr. Snartch could actually get what the old books promised! He had a genuine dead-alive demon at his command. What *did* he want?

"Money," said Snartch. "I want a lot of money."

"A wise choice," said the demon. "I'll just put you down for say—a million dollars?"

"And the income tax," Jeffrey Snartch added, hastily.

"And the income tax. Very well."

"In return, of course, you'll want something?" said Mr. Snartch.

"Naturally." The demon's eyes sparkled. "Let's have a look at you now. Hmmm. You're nice and plump. I think I would enjoy you."

"Enjoy me?"

"Enjoy eating you, I should say."

“I should say not!” Mr. Snartch turned pale. His eyes narrowed. “I have hardening of the arteries,” he said. This was a lie.

But the demon paused. Mr. Snartch quickly followed up his advantage.

“Besides, I am a heavy smoker,” he remarked. “And you know what the cannibals of New Guinea say.”

“No, I don’t. What do they say?”

“That smokers have an unpleasant tobacco taste.”

“I see.”

“Also,” added Snartch, “I wouldn’t like to hurt those teeth of yours. You aren’t so young any more. You might have trouble with bones.” He shook his head. “Really, as your friend, I’d feel very guilty about letting you eat me.”

“Well, if you put it that way—”

“Why not take my soul?” suggested Mr. Snartch. “Give me my million, plus taxes, and six months. Then take my soul. It’s a better deal, I think.”

“All right,” said the demon. “I’ll buy that. Would you mind signing here, please?”

A LITTLE black book appeared in the demon’s claws. He tossed it across the pentagon. Mr. Snartch took out his pen.

“Blood, please,” insisted the demon. “Let’s make this thing legal.”

Mr. Snartch pricked his finger and wrote his name. Then he tossed the book back.

“Thank you,” said the demon. “See you later with that million.”

He disappeared. Mr. Snartch sighed.

Suddenly the demon’s head glimmered in the air before him.

“How do you want the money?” he inquired.

“Oh, any way at all,” Snartch told him. “Large bills will do. Just so I get it soon.”

“To hear is to obey,” hissed the demon. The head disappeared.

Mr. Snartch breathed a sigh of mingled relief and regret. Then he set about re-arranging the room. It took him quite a while to clean up and restore order. By that time it was very late. He lay down on the bed and went to sleep.

When he woke up it was daylight.

“Oh oh!” thought Mr. Snartch. “I’ll be late for the show at the theatre today.”

He’d forgotten about the matinee.

Dressing hastily, he ran out of the hotel lobby in a frenzy and hailed a passing cab.

“Grand Theatre!” he yelled.

The show had already started when he arrived. Myra, his assistant—the lady he sawed in half—was anxiously awaiting him.

“Oh, Jeffrey!” she wailed. “What happened to you?”

Jeffrey Snartch shrugged feebly. He wasn’t exactly pleased by her solicitude. A very determined type of woman, Myra. And apparently she had determined to marry him. He avoided her whenever possible, never talking to her. Their only intimate contact came when he sawed her up.

Snartch put on his dress clothes and emerged again as the magician. *Jeffrey the Great.*

The band was playing for the opening of his act. Quickly he arranged props with Myra. Then he strode out on the stage.

During all this time he had no chance to remember the events of last night. He was too busy, too rushed. Once on the stage, the audience claimed his attention.

JEFFREY SNARTCH started out with a few card tricks and a couple of handkerchief bits. As he went through the business and reeled out the patter, his thoughts blurred. He followed through his paces as a matter of routine.

Absent-mindedly, he waved his arms, feeling for the gimmicks which controlled a rabbit, flowers, and a boiled dinner which would be produced from his sleeve.

He made a few passes and let the first object slide into his hand.

“I have here a rabbit,” he said.

The audience laughed.

“I have here a—what the—”

Snartch stared at his hands. There was no rabbit in his palm. Instead, his fingers clutched a wad of yellow bills. Thousand dollar bills!

Again, automatically, he gestured. “A rabbit!” he muttered.

No rabbit. Another package of bills. The audience howled.

“All right,” said Snartch, desperately. “No rabbit. But I *have* got a lot of lettuce!”

The laugh that followed won the audience once more. Desperately Snartch wriggled around. What in blazes had happened to that rabbit?

He patted his coat. Another wad of bills flew out. And then another. He scarcely noticed.

Again he clutched at his shirt, seeking for the elusive bunny. Money showered on the stage.

Desperately now, he wondered if the rabbit had wandered into his trousers. He shook his trouser-legs.

There was a furious clanking, and a flood of gold pieces dropped from his trousers. The audience hooted and screamed.

So did Snartch.

As he attempted to bow, greenbacks burst from his waist, cascaded from under his vest, poured from his pockets. He stood knee-deep in currency as the curtains fell.

Indignant voices rose around him. The stage manager ran out, cursing.

“What the hell’s the big idea?” demanded that worthy.

Then he stared at the money.

“Jeez, it’s real!” he gasped.

Snartch grinned. Suddenly he realized what had happened. The demon's promise—one million dollars! He'd chosen a unique way to deliver it.

"Of course it's real," Snartch chuckled, scooping up bills like mad. "And so is this."

"What?"

Snartch tweaked the stage manager's nose.

"My resignation," he said. "As of today. Now. I quit. I retire." Leaving the manager goggling, Snartch strode off the stage, carrying his cash.

Myra waited for him in the wings. "What's this?" she sobbed. "You can't really mean you're through?"

"But I do mean it," Snartch said, trying not to be unkind. "I don't know just how to tell you this, Myra, but I have sawed you in half for the last time."

"What will I do?" whispered the girl. "Without you around to saw me, I'll just go to pieces."

"Maybe you can find somebody else to saw you," Snartch consoled her. "A nice young girl like you. Anybody would be proud to slice you up."

She sobbed after him as he collected his belongings.

"It won't be the same," she moaned. "No matter what happens, I'll always be thinking of you and how you dismembered me."

"Take this, kid," said Snartch, pressing a handful of gold pieces into her palm.

"Where are you going?"

"To my country estate," Snartch told her.

"Country estate? You haven't got a country estate."

"I will have," Snartch grinned. "Soon."

And he did.

SNARTCH went to the realtor's office. From there he proceeded to a haberdasher's, and ordered one hundred suits, to be delivered at the address of his new country estate. On a sudden impulse he went out and bought a yacht. Not that he needed one—he just felt like it. Besides, one of his suits was a white tropical that went well with a yacht.

After that, he invested in a limousine, a roadster, a diamond-studded wrist watch, and five hundred cases of Scotch whiskey.

All of which was to be sent C.O.D. to his new address. He felt very pleased by his day's work, and decided to relax in a night club.

He relaxed very pleasantly there. Anybody who tips waiters with twenty-dollar gold pieces can get excellent service.

Jeffrey Snartch woke up the next morning with a definite hangover. He was in bed at his new estate, and he wanted to stay there.

But the doorbell began to buzz at nine o'clock, and kept buzzing all day. Delivery men and drivers began to arrive with his new possessions, and Snartch stood at the door paying off in cash. All in all, he managed to get rid of a lot of money. The men came to sign over the house, and somebody else arrived to report that his yacht was ready in the lagoon.

Snartch paid with a smile, though his head buzzed. Finally the tumult and the shouting died. He lay down on the sofa to enjoy what remained of his hangover.

And then the doorbell rang again.

Snartch answered it.

A pugnacious-looking truck driver greeted him with a truculent sneer.

"What is it?" asked Snartch.

The truck-driver scowled. "I was here earlier today," he growled. "Brought yez that there Scotch."

"What about it? I paid you, didn't I?"

"Yeah. Yez paid me, all right. In marked bills."

"Marked bills?"

"Sure. Look." A grimy hand held out yellow currency. Mr. Snartch examined it. Yes, it was marked, all right.

"Where'd yez steal it?" muttered the truck driver.

"Steal it?" gasped Mr. Snartch. "I didn't steal anything."

"This dough is stolen!" barked the truck driver. "Take it back."

"Wait a minute," Snartch gulped. "The phone is ringing."

It was. He trotted down the hall and answered. The voice on the other end of the wire belonged to the man who had sold him the yacht.

"Mr. Snartch?"

"Speaking."

"You bought a yacht from us for $200,000? Remember?"

"That's right."

"You paid cash."

"Why not?"

"Mr. Snartch, where did you get that money? We've just checked the currency and found it marked."

"I—I—"

"Mr. Snartch, did you know that it is necessary for us to report such bills to the Federal authorities? They plan to call on you this afternoon regarding this matter."

"Fine," said Mr. Snartch. "Swell. I'll expect them. I'll bake them a cake."

HE HUNG up. Down the hall he saw the truck-driver muttering over his money.

Mr. Snartch shrugged and sighed. He couldn't explain this. Something was wrong. But he didn't want to explain it, or find out what was wrong. All he wanted was out.

Mr. Snartch tiptoed into the library and got out, through the window.

He sneaked into his limousine and drove down the drive. Then he tore heil-for-leather into town.

He registered at the hotel where he had conjured up the demon. Then he went out and bought some supplies.

Promptly at midnight that night he evoked his supernatural side-kick.

The demon crouched outside the chalk pentagon in the gloom and sighed wearily. But Mr. Snartch did not show any pity. He did not invite the demon to sit down. He didn't even offer a drink. He just stared and tapped his foot accusingly.

"You sent for me?" rasped the demon, at length.

"You know I did," Snartch snapped. "What do you desire? Is there anything wrong?"

"You know what's wrong."

The demon blushed a deeper green. "Oh. About that money, I suppose? I can explain that. You see, I—"

"Never mind," said Mr. Snartch, bitterly. "The deal's off. Breach of contract. You know I'm in the right." The demon squinted at him. A difficult thing to do, for the demon had no eyelids.

"Wait a minute," he said, softly. "Wait a minute. Money isn't everything, you know. We could work something out."

"What?" said Mr. Snartch. "Power," purred the demon. "You want power, perhaps? A lot of men are eager for power these days. Take that fellow Hitler," he hinted.

Mr. Snartch made a face. "Not for me," he said abruptly. "Power like that wouldn't interest me a bit."

"How about—women?"

"Women?"

"I could get you the most beautiful women of history," the demon coaxed. "Think of it I Helen of Troy. Cleopatra. Du Barry. Madame Pompadour. Josephine."

"You could?" said Mr. Snartch. He was thinking of Myra. Anything would be a relief after Myra.

"How would you like to be a great lover?" hinted the demon. He was on the right track now, and he smelled a sale. He hurried to close the deal.

"Gorgeous girls," he chanted. "Fond blondes. Brunette pets. Redheads galore."

"Yes," said Mr. Snartch, suddenly. "Yes. I'd like that."

"Of course," said the demon, glibly, "this is a special deal, and it will mean that your time is shortened. Instead of a six-month contract I must reduce my offer to three months."

Mr. Snartch smiled.

"That will be all right," he said. "Take back your money and bring on the girls."

The demon nodded.

"No more tricks, though," warned Jeffrey Snartch.

"Cute tricks," giggled the demon. Then he disappeared. Only the giggle remained.

Snartch cleaned up the mess thoughtfully and went to bed.

AS A RESULT of his hangover and unusual exertions, he slept more soundly than usual. To tell the truth, when he awoke it was night once again. Mr. Snartch had slept the clock around.

He rose, blinked, and went into the bathroom to shave. After shaving he bathed, leisurely. By the time he was dressed it was almost nine o'clock. He stepped back into his hotel room.

Then he reeled back into the bathroom.

Sitting on Mr. Snartch's bed, chair, and bureau, were six girls. Two blondes, two brunettes, and two redheads.

All were of different types. Short, fall, fat, lean, frail, husky. But all had one thing in common. A costume consisting of rhinestones. A few here, a few there. But the costumes were similar.

So were the scowls on the faces of the girls.

Mr. Snartch staggered in the doorway. They looked up at him.

"All right," demanded a tall redhead, in a husky voice. "What's the big idea, mister?"

"Why, don't you know what the big idea is?" asked Mr. Snartch.

"No, we don't," insisted the redhead. "Here we are, sitting in our dressing room getting ready for the first floor show, when this guy shows up with a gun—"

"What guy?"

"How should I know? He wore a mask. Besides, he didn't give us a chance to look at him. Just made us go out the back door and climb into a taxi. Then he drove us here, took us up the freight elevator, and smuggled us into your room. He locked the door from the outside."

"Kidnaper," screeched a little blonde. "That's what he was. A kidnaper."

"Taking us from the night club," complained a plump brunette. "Dragging us here at the point of a gun. And I suppose you're a white slaver."

Mr. Snartch received these revelations in dismay.

"Girls, please!" he said. "Let me explain—"

"Nuts to your explanations! Let us out of here!"

The redhead rose and faced him.

"But—" said Mr. Snartch.

It was the wrong word.

The redhead lowered her head and butted him.

"Come on, girls!" yelled the blonde.

"We'll show this big bully!"

WHAT happened then was very painful. Six women went for Mr. Snartch in a big way—but not the way he had anticipated. They went for him with hair-brushes and mirrors and pitchers and picture frames and other loose articles. They went for him with their teeth and nails.

They left Mr. Snartch lying on the floor with a Gideon Bible on his chest. And he was almost ready for it.

He recovered nearly an hour later. The girls had left, taking the door from its hinges *en route.*

Mr. Snartch had barely the strength to totter downstairs and buy fresh candles, frogs, and grape juice. He could scarcely manage to tear up some more roots and draw his chalk pentagon. His voice was hoarse as he chanted the Latin invocation.

But he made it.

And the demon appeared.

It squatted malignly before him, and Mr. Snartch thought he detected a mocking gleam in his eyes.

Gleam or no gleam, Snartch was too angry to hesitate.

“Now you’ve done it,” he grated. “Those women—come clean now, where did you get them?”

“What’s the matter?” asked the demon.

“You know very well!” yelled Mr. Snartch. “Famous beauties of history—bah! You stole a bunch of chorus girls from a night club, didn’t you?”

“Well—”

“Damned right you did!” screamed Mr. Snartch. “Just a common kidnaper, that’s what you are.”

“But you asked for women—”

“Another thing,” Snartch continued, ignoring the demon’s words. “I’ve just figured out about that money, too. It’s all here in this morning’s paper.

About the bank that was held up. No wonder the currency was marked. Hot money, that’s what you gave me.”

The demon hung his head.

“Why?” groaned Mr. Snartch. “Why? That’s all I want to know.”

THE demon faced him, his skulllike features contorted.

“Because I’m old, that’s why. Because I’m old, and out of practice. I haven’t got the stuff any more.”

“The stuff?”

“The power. Everything passes with age, you know.”

The demon sighed, heavily. Windows rattled.

“I used to be omnipotent, almost. Like the book says. I could do anything, bring you anything, grant any wish. But now I’m all through.

“I did my best for you, though. I couldn’t produce wealth for you as I used to, so I went out and stole it. And I couldn’t evoke beautiful women for you, so I stole them. Thought you wouldn’t find out. But you did.”

“Yes, I did.” Mr. Snartch was stern. “Of course, you realize this makes our agreement null and void.”

The demon sat up.

His claws scraped restlessly against the floor. His lips drew back in a bony grin. He hunched closer across the flickering shadows.

“Oh no,” he droned. “Not at all.”

“You mean?”

“In three months you die. You give me your soul.”

“Now listen here—”

“You listen to me.” The demon crept closer. “I kept my part of the bargain. I brought you a million dollars, didn’t I? I didn’t say where it would come from or who it might belong to. You got your money.”

“Still—”

“Keep still!” The demon grinned wickedly. “You changed your mind. You wanted women. Blondes, brunettes, redheads. I gave you blondes, brunettes, redheads. I didn’t specify that they would like you. But I brought them. And so, Mr. Jeffrey Snartch, I am holding you to your bargain. In three months I will claim your soul.”

Mr. Snartch drew himself erect. He shrugged.

“Very well, demon,” he sighed. “You asked for it, I suppose.”

“What?”

“I had hoped to spare you this final humiliation for a while,” said Mr. Snartch. “Out of consideration for your age.”

“What do you mean?”

“You are very old, demon. Otherwise you wouldn’t make such a mistake when you signed the contract with me. You would have looked my name up first. But you didn’t. You wanted my soul and tried to cheat me. Instead, I cheated you. You don’t get my soul after all.”

“Why not?”

“Because,” said Mr. Snartch, slowly, “I sold my soul to the Devil two years ago!”

The End

Genie with the Light Brown Hair

Lefty Feep found Aladdin's lamp, but it didn't do him much good because a gang of underworld criminals took it from him. As it turned out, it didn't do them much good either—they lit it during a blackout!

I WAS sitting in Jack's Shack the other day, eating ham and eggs for breakfast. It was early—I could see that, because there weren't many stains on the table-cloth. Outside of the people present, the place was deserted. That is to say, the usual restaurant flies weren't awake yet.

Certainly the last person I expected to see was Lefty Feep. But sure enough, the tall thin teller of tales came walking towards my table. As usual, he was wearing a loud checkered suit that matched his checkered career.

When Feep saw me, he quickened his pace.

"Accept my greeting and what are you eating?" he hailed me.

I pointed at my plate. "Just some ham and eggs," I said.

"Huh!" sneered Lefty Feep. "Ham and eggs is food for yeggs!"

"What's the matter, don't you care for the dish?"

"Very vulgar." Feep shrugged. "Me, I am used to smell and see a delicacy. I like a plate of pate de phooey grass. Or a jar of caviar. Also, I am very fond of tearing a terrapin."

"Why, Lefty," I exclaimed, "where do you get such food?"

Feep sighed as he sat down next to me.

"I don't any more," he admitted. "My luck changes. Now, to tell the truth I would just as soon lam into some of that ham, or beg for an egg."

He scowled. I patted his shoulder.

"Well, just make light of it," I consoled him.

This remark didn't console. Feep bridled.

"Don't talk about making light," he muttered.

"You needn't flare up this way," I told him.

Feep positively trembled. "Please do not give me the squirms with such terms!" he begged.

"What's the matter—you been playing with fire?" I asked.

"You know how it is," he sighed. "A burnt child fears the hotfoot." He shook his head. "But I do not like this light talk. What happens to me shouldn't happen to a Jap!"

"Must be pretty awful, Lefty," I answered.

"It is awful. So awful I will tell it to you."

I was afraid of that. I got to my feet. "Sorry," I stammered. "I must go now. I've got a hot date."

"Let her wait for you and cool off," Feep snapped. "This story is really terrible. In fact it is so atrocious you must hear it."

"That's a swell recommendation," I drawled. "I'm willing to take your word for it, and go."

"You will take all my words for it!" said Lefty Feep. He shoved me into my chair and swiftly tied my arms down with the table-cloth.

"Now!" he said.

Then Lefty Feep sat down and unfolded his tale.

I AM sitting in my room the other day suffering from a terrible injury. It seems the night before I am handling a pair of dice when they suddenly go off. I do not even know they are loaded.

Anyhow, there is quite an explosion, and I wind up with the shirt torn off my back—also most of my skin, because the other players beat me up.

So there I am sitting in my room, partly fractured and completely broke. I squat there while the collectors play drum solos on my door. The rent collector, the gas collector, the light collector, the insurance collector, the tax collector. I am afraid if the garbage collector shows up he will take me away, because I am certainly ready for the scrap-heap.

All at once I hear a new banging on the panels.

I rush to my feet and go into the closet to look for my steel traps. Because I know who is at my door now—the Wolf.

And I am not exactly in my Little Red Riding Hood mood today. But the banging keeps up, and there is nothing for me to do but open the door before it comes off the hinges.

So I slide it back a crack and take a weak peek. Then I breathe a sigh of relief and asthma.

It is not the Wolf. It is not even a coyote. Just a little shrivelled-up and drivelled-down personality in a suit that resembles a walking rag bag. He looks like something the cat drags in, and I do mean a mouse.

“Ah—excuse me,” he whispers.

“Sure, buddy,” I tell him. “You’re excused. First door to your left. Goodbye.”

“No, no,” he insists. “I mean, are you Mr. Feep?”

“You got a warrant?”

“No.”

“Then I’m Feep. And who are you?”

“Jerkfinkle is my name. Otis Jerkfinkle.”

I stare at him. “Don’t I perceive you someplace before?” I ask, trying to remember what freak-shows I attend in my life.

“I believe so.”

“In the morgue, maybe?” I guess.

“Not at all.” Otis Jerkfinkle smiles. “If I am not mistaken, you are the gentleman who secures the idol of the God Squat for my private museum.”

Sure enough, I remember now. This Otis Jerkfinkle is the curator of a museum of stuff ornamental and oriental. Once before I tangle with him when I help him get the statue of a Burmese god away from a crook.

"Could be," I admit. "Well, what's on your mind besides a tumor?"

Otis Jerkfinkle comes into my room and sits down.

"I am on a spot," he sighs. "And I want you to help me."

I laugh in a sarcastic key. "I am on the spot too," I tell him. "And nobody can help me—not even a dry-cleaner."

"But this is very simple," Jerkfinkle pipes. He fumbles around in a briefcase and brings out something wrapped up in a newspaper. I stare at the paper with disappointment. No comic strips.

"Mr. Feep," says Jerkfinkle, "I am closing up the museum for the duration of the war and storing away my valuable art treasures. But there is one item I cannot afford to store, because no insurance will cover it. It is a very special item in its way. And I am wondering if you might take care of it for me while I'm away."

"What is it?" I inquire.

Jerkfinkle hands me the bundle wrapped in newspapers.

"Open it up and see for yourself," he says.

I UNWRAP the newspapers, wondering what is underneath. Gold, jewels, platinum? Diamonds? Rubies? Rubber?

But it is none of these precious things that I pull out from the wrappings.

All I find is a lamp.

A dirty, greasy old kerosene lamp.

I give it a leer and a sneer.

Jerkfinkle watches me with gleaming eyes.

"There it is," he whispers. "Isn't it a beauty?"

"Where do you win this?" I mutter. "In the future keep away from Bingo games where they give such lousy prizes."

"This is not a prize," insists Jerkfinkle.

"You're telling me?"

"This is nothing other than Aladdin's Lamp!" he chatters.

"Aladdin's Lamp, eh?"

"Actually."

"Then why doesn't this guy Aladdin take care of it?" I ask him. "Better still, why doesn't he throw it away and buy a flashlight?"

Jerkfinkle gives me a glare and stare.

"Can it be," he asks, "that you do not know the story of Aladdin and his wonderful Lamp?"

"Can be," I admit.

So Jerkfinkle goes off into a long song and dance about this overgrown cigarette-lighter he has. Translating same into English, the gag runs like this.

ONCE upon a time there is a Chink gink by the name of Aladdin who is strictly from hunger. By hook and crook he gets hold of a magic lamp which has nothing in common with the stuff put out by the Electric Company.

Whenever he slides his pinkies around the base of this lamp and goes rub-adub-dub, a Genie appears. A Genie, according to the story, is just a big, overgrown stooge. A demon servant, strictly non-union. This Genie serves Aladdin and brings him anything he wishes. Just like a one-man Finance Company. Aladdin has a lot of adventures with his lamp and ends up rich, famous, and with ulcers.

That is the bark of Jerkfinkle's remarks.

"But where do you get this lamp?" I ask.

Jerkfinkle says he buys it from a curio dealer in a Hong Kong hock-shop some years ago.

I look at the article with new interest.

"Well," I say. "In such a case, why don't you use this magic lantern? Why don't you scrape your fingers to the bone, rubbing it? You will be rich and famous."

Jerkfinkle sighs. “That’s the rub,” he tells me. “The lamp doesn’t work any more.”

“Doesn’t work?”

“Look.” He shows me the sides of the lamp. “The metal is so worn down through rubbing that you can’t leave fingerprints, or whatever is necessary for the Genie to appear.”

“In other words, this is just a hunk of junk.”

“Thaumaturgically speaking, yes.”

“Cut out that kind of talk around here,” I warn him.

“Don’t misunderstand me,” Jerkfinkle peeps. “This lamp is very valuable as an antique alone. I prize it most highly, despite its lack of supernatural power.”

“Or candle-power,” I add, looking at the battered wreck.

“But what I want to know is, will you take care of it for me while I am away?”

“Just where are you going?” I inquire.

Jerkfinkle smiles.

“I am enlisting in the Navy!”

I size him up, then down, then sideways. “What can you do in the Navy?” I ask. “To begin with you are a runt. Besides, all you are fit for is collecting old junk.”

“There will be lots of old junk when we finish up with the Jap cities,” Jerkfinkle tells me.

I smile. “A very brilliant notion,” I agree. “I am proud of you. And I will be most happy to take care of this brie and brae for you while you are away.”

“A thousand thanks,” says Jerkfinkle, bowing and rubbing his paws together. “I know it will be in good hands.”

And he ducks out the door, leaving me to lamp at the lamp.

I sit there and stare at it. Then I get an idea. Of course I know this Aladdin story is just so much hop-slop, but it isn’t going to hurt just to manicure my fingernails against it.

So I give it a rub. Nothing happens.

I give it a complete massage. Still nothing happens.

It is just too bad. I sit there, wishing I could get hold of a Genie, or whatever. I am broke and hungry and what I want is bright lights and gayety.

But bright lights I don't get. Instead I get darkness. It is toppling towards nightfall.

I GET up and go over to the light switch and press it. Then the Electric Company hands me a shock. They turn off the electricity.

Maybe that is what I get for throwing the bill collector down the stairs without the courtesy of opening the door.

So there I am in the dark. Not only am I alone and hungry but I can't even see myself starve.

I can't rub the. lamp any more, because I don't get a look at it. So what good is the damned thing?

What I do get is a sudden idea.

"Why not put some kerosene in the lamp?" I figure.

It just so happens that I do have a can of kerosene left in the closet for cleaning my clothes. I go over and sniff around, find the can, and pour its contents into the lamp. I feel the lamp and locate a wick. I get a match.

The lamp flares up.

Things look a little better. At least I am going to have enough light to cut my throat, if I go to that point.

But after a couple of minutes I am not so pleased any more. The old lamp begins to smoke a little.

Then it smokes a lot.

I cough and wheeze and then rush to the window to open it for air.

I never get any air, but in another minute I really need it.

Because all at once I stare at the cloud of smoke and see something standing in it. Rising out of the lamp is a figure.

"The Genie!" I yell.

And it is—the Genie.

Standing there in the smoke is a large personality. He isn't quite as big as a house, and not quite as heavy as an elephant. He seems to be about 15 feet tall in his unwashed feet, and his arms will rate him the best portions at any boarding-house table. He has a dark complexion and a face that only a mother could love. A mother gorilla, that is.

Hanging down from his face is a beard that would make a swell stuffing for a hair mattress. The guy is definitely burly but surly.

He just stands there and I just shiver there. He looks at me, but I can't look at him. My very eyeballs are bouncing with fright.

Suddenly the Genie opens his mouth. I get real pangs when I see his fangs. I figure he is going to make a grab for me and a jar of mustard and maybe have a little snack.

But he does not bite. He talks.

At least I think it is talking—though it sounds more like a combination of thunder and LaGuardia.

"What is your wish, oh Master of the Lamp?" he growls.

Master of the Lamp? He means *met*

Then I get it. The yarn about Aladdin is true. But now, with the sides of the lamp worn out, the power of bringing a Genie must lie in *lighting* the lamp, instead.

So I light it, so I get this supernatural stooge—this Genie with the light brown hair. In other words, I am the master of this walking disaster.

"What do you desire?" he repeats.

I don't hesitate a second.

"Bring me some incense," I gasp.

Because the lamp smoke is filling the room. Also the Genie is apparently just returning from a garlic spree.

"I hear and I obey," says the Genie.

ALL at once I blink my eyes. He disappears into thin air. All at twice I blink again. The Genie is back, lighting a big bowl filled with roses for the noses.

"That's better," I tell him. "Now for some clothes."

"New garments?" he asks, bowing—or as the orientals call it, salami-ing.

"New and blue and not too few," I instruct him.

"I hear and I obey," he rumbles. And does a quick fade-out. In a minute he is back again with an armful.

"Try this for size," he says.

And he hands me a long striped robe.

"What is this?" I inquire. "A nightgown?"

"It's our new Spring model, just coming in," the Genie assures me. "Fresh from Damascus."

"I can't wear this kimono," I tell him. "What about trousers?"

He grabs a hunk of moth meat and throws it at me. It is a pair of oversize bloomers with about ten yards of material in each leg.

"Where's the pleats?" I yell. "What kind of a pair of pants is this?"

"It's all the thing this season," prattles the Genie. "It is said in Bagdad that—"

"Nuts to Bagdad and the Bagdaddies," I snap. "I want clothes. Trousers, shirts, coats, hats—"

"Headgear?"

The Genie tosses me a red bedsheet. "Here is a splendid turban," he recommends.

"Turban? I don't want a turban, I want a hat!" I yell. But I begin to understand. This Genie is plenty old-fashioned, and is bringing me the same line of merchandise he hands out to Aladdan hundreds of years ago, or whenever.

"Listen, my phantasmal pal," I explain. "I want something in reason for this season. Maybe a blue coat with orange trousers, so I can wear my green shirt with it, and my purple tie. You know, conservative."

"I shall do my best," growls the Genie, bowing low. Then he scoops up the Arabian night-gowns and disappears again.

Another flash and he is gone. When he returns I see he brings just what I ask for.

"Try this coat," he urges. "Three buttons. New cuffless trousers, too."

I slip into the outfit. It looks fine.

"No charge for alterations," he tells me.

I wonder where he picks up all this sales lingo and ask him.

"My late Master, Aladdin, is a tailor," he explains.

"Well, now you're catching on," I compliment him. "Genie, you're a genius!"

I want him to feel good, because already I am constructing big plans for my genial Genie. After all, he is supposed to be able to do anything. And I am all set to play Morgenthau and tax his ingenuity. Or whatever.

I run over a few future orders in my mind. A palace, a yacht, a private swimming pool and burlesque show, a—

A horrible disaster!

I turn around, and the Genie is gone. The lamp is out, too, and I am back in darkness.

And here I figure this is the beginning of such a beautiful friendship!

THEN I realize things are not really so bad after all. I merely run out of kerosene, and when the lamp goes out the Genie goes with it.

All I have to do is go out and get some more kerosene. Then the Genie will come back and do his stuff.

So I put on my green shirt and purple tie, grab the lamp up under my arm, and prance down the stairs.

"I will fill up the lamp at the corner," I figure.

But when I get to the corner the grocery is closed. I happen to notice a tavern, though, and I figure again. "Why not fill myself up a little, too?"

Besides, maybe they have kerosene there.

So I waltz in and up to the bar.

"Got any kerosene, buddy?" I ask.

The bartender gives me an unfumigated look.

"What kind of stuff do you think I serve here?" he mutters.

"I want kerosene," I insist.

"You'll take our whiskey and like it," he says. Then he winks. "Just like kerosene," he whispers. "You won't notice the difference."

"But it isn't for drinking," I explain. "I want it for my lamp here."

"I will send out and get you some," the bartender tells me. "Take your drink first."

This I cannot do, because I have no money to pay. I must get the lamp going so the Genie will give me some dough.

"Kerosene first," I tell the bartender. "You see, it's this way. I make a little promise to myself tonight. I will get my lamp lit before I am."

The bartender laughs and sends a boy out for kerosene. When he comes back I take the kerosene and the lamp into the men's lounge.

"I'll light it up back here," I explain. "It smokes pretty bad at first."

And it does. But somehow, I am very happy in about five minutes when the Genie emerges from the smoke and stands there with his hands folded across his chest. The big ugly monster actually looks very sweet to me when I think of what he can do. If I have a stepladder handy, I almost feel like running up it and kissing him.

Instead I give him a blink and a wink.

"What is your wish, oh Master?" he cracks.

"Genie," I instruct him, "make with the millions. Get us some lettuce. Slip me some chips."

"I don't understand, Master."

"I want mazuma!" I yell. "Wallpaper from the bank."

"I still do not understand."

"Dough," I explain, very patiently. "Kale. Cash!"

"So?" says the Genie. "Dough?"

"Go!" I command.

The Genie bows. Then he disappears. “I’ll be back in a flash with the cash,” he mumbles.

I wait until the Geni returns, which he does quite suddenly. He makes a very nice jingling sound when he appears.

“Give,” I gasp.

He begins to pull purses from his pockets.

I pull curses from my lips.

A SHOWER of coins falls all over me, but it is not the kind of shower I can bathe in. Because the coins are very peculiar—some of them are square and some are crescent-shaped, and all of them are old and green. As a matter of fact, the big ones are nothing but brass with a lot of dizzy writing on them.

“What kind of telephone slugs do you hand me?” I complain.

“Dinars,” says the Genie. “Very valuable.”

“Dinars, suppers, breakfasts—nuts to them all, impartially,” I comment. “I want American money.”

Once again this Arabian nightmare has the wrong idea and brings me old-fashioned merchandise.

He shrugs, gathers up the coins, and disappears again. When he returns he flings me a flock of nickels, dimes, quarters, halves, and silver dollars. To be exact, $423.15 in change.

This I pocket.

“What now, Master?” asks the Genie.

“That’s all for the moment. If I want anything I’ll light the lamp for a signal,” I tell him. “One if by land and two if by sea.”

Then I extinguish the kerosene lamp and go back to the bar.

The bartender is waiting and I flash him a big smile.

“Thanks for the kerosene,” I tell him.

“What about your drink?” he asks. “It’s still waiting for you.”

For answer I turn the glass upside down.

"Do not produce such juice," I tell him. "From now on I am drinking champagne."

"A bottle?" he says, with his eyes popping out like corks.

"A lot of bottles," I tell him. "Serve it in a bucket. And have a bucket yourself."

So we kick the bucket a few times and the bucket has quite a kick. I spill a few bills and then get restless. So I rush into the back again. I get bright with the light and wait for the Genie to show up.

"Master?" he greets me.

"I am beginning to feel hungry," I tell him. "I have an appetite for a bite. What do you suggest?"

"Dates," he says. "Figs, perhaps? Goat's cheese and rice?"

"Nuts!" I comment.

"What kind?"

"No kind," I tell him. "You are too old-fashioned, Genie. I want other food. Bring me some terrapin, a jar of caviar, a little breast of pheasant, some venison, lobster ala Newburg, oysters Rockefeller, and—a bottle of bicarbonate."

Back comes the Genie with the grub. I sit there and gobble for a while.

"Something missing," I comment.

The Genie looks surprised. "These rations are fit for Haroun Al Raschid," he insists.

"I know what it is," I tell him. "Pass the salt."

So he disappears and returns with salt. I finish my meal and am well satisfied.

"Now how about something to smoke?" I suggest.

"To hear is to obey." Off goes the Genie in a cloud. He comes back with a big glass pot with a snake hanging out of it.

"What in or out of this world is that?" I gasp.

"Something to smoke. A nargileh. Water-pipe."

"Take it back to the plumber and bring me a nice Garcia y Garcia panatella," I command.

IN a minute I am sitting back smoking quite comfortably. Now I am ready for action. I have a good meal, champagne, a little loose change, and plenty of loose ideas.

For the first time I realize I am not making proper use of my great powers. Here I have anything in the world at my disposal and all I get is a few clothes and something to fill my stomach. I am very foolish. I should be wishing for something valuable.

Something valuable. . . .

I put the grind on my mind.

“Genie,” I say, “I know what the trouble is. I cannot concentrate here. It is much too quiet for me to hear myself think. Take me to a night club. I do not say a *good* night club, because such a thing is even beyond your powers. Just a spot where things are hot.”

Suddenly I am caught up in a swirling fog—a most unpleasant fog—the kind of fog that will never be missed.

I whirl around and all at once I land. I am sitting down.

“Here we are, Master!” booms the Genie at my side.

“Ouch!” I remark.

I jump about three feet in the air, which gives me a swell view of the place I am located in—although no view of such a place Is exactly swell.

I am in some kind of cavern, apparently located next door to the central heating plant of Hell.

Squatting on rocks and boulders all around me are the most ungodly assortment of personalities I ever see—and I am a guy who attends plenty of Bingo games in his time.

Some of these personalities are all black and covered with long fur. Others give the impression of being just huge sets of teeth, with legs attached. There are many who resemble my Genie. The shortest individual in the cavern is at least nine feet high.

All this I take in as I jump up. Then I land back on the rock again.

“Ouch!” I yell, repeating myself. But the rock is repeating its heating.

“What kind of a hot seat are you giving me?” I scream at the Genie. “Where am I and why am I?”

“You ask for a hot spot,” mumbles my huge stooge. “This is it! There is much heat here.”

“You’re telling me? But exactly where am I?”

“In Eblis,” explains the oversize Oriental. “The meeting place of all Genii, *djinn, efreets,* and demons.”

I am sizzling with anger, and also with something else—so I get off the rock in a hurry. I wave the lamp at the Genie.

“Get me out of this ghoul gallery,” I command. “I ask for a night club, not a fright club.”

So I explain what a night club is in words of strictly one syllable or less, and finally the Genie catches on. By this time I catch on to the Genie and climb up his waist, because several of these black babies with the teeth are eyeing me the way a robin looks at a worm—affectionately, but with too much interest.

“Back to Earth,” I command. “Remember, make it a night club this time—you’ll recognize it by the smell of gin when you fly over same.”

THERE is another stretch of fog as the Genie waves his arms. I toss around in a cloud, and when I open my eyes I toss around in a crowd.

Sure enough, I am sitting at the table of Mabel’s Stable, a paddock for society fillies and clothes-horses.

The second my eyes pop open I blow out the lamp in my hand and the Genie blows out with it.

It is very fortunate that everybody watches the floor show when I make my unexpected appearance at a rear table, because there is no one to see the Genie before he disappears.

Even so, I notice a couple of grease-balls up at the bar are giving me a hint of a squint.

I turn around and look nonchalant. Here I am in a night spot. The band is kicking the gong on a popular song, a girl singer is making a groan at the microphone, a crowd is prancing, dancing, and romancing—it is just noisy enough for me to concentrate.

And concentrate I do.

Not on the lamp, though.

On the blonde who is sitting at the next table.

Now I don't know how it is with you. With me, it's blondes. And this particular damsel is high, wide, and peroxide.

She is sitting there alone, and so naturally I do my best to attract her attention in a polite manner with such remarks as "Hey, there, babe!" and "Say, kitten!" and just a little courteous whistling.

But she is very aloof and refined and takes no notice of me at all except to stick out her tongue and remark in a society tone of voice, "Go drop dead, you dizzy-looking jerk!"

So I can see she is really quite infatuated with me, but is playing hard to get.

And so it happens that tonight I am in a position to get. So I duck under the table, pull the tablecloth over my head, and light the lamp. It is awful under there with all the smoke, but I do not wish anyone to notice me. Of course the lights are all out during the floor show here so I am not very conspicuous, except the part of me sticking out from under the table behind.

Even so, I nearly choke to death before the five minutes are up and the Genie appears. He swells out of the smoke but before he can grow to his fifteen feet I whisper, "I command you to stop growing," and he does.

"What is your wish, oh Master?" he mutters.

"My wish is that dish," I explain, pointing at the damsel. "Bring her to toy table."

"Your wish is my command," says the Genie.

"After you bring her, disappear," I caution him.

He bows and the smoke flickers out.

IN ANOTHER minute I am back in my seat, and sitting across from me is this blonde tomato, blinking her eyes.

"How do I get here?" she gasps. "I am sitting at my table and then all at once I am over here."

"Well do not bother to go away," I said, very polite. "A beautiful tomato like you should stay planted."

She softens up a little at this flattery.

"After all," I pursue, "you are lucky. Not every girl can sit with the richest man in the world."

"Why—" she flutters. "Mr. Morgenthau, I am sorry I do not recognize you before."

"My name is Lefty Feep," I say. "And this Morgenthau of whom you shriek is just a piker compared to me."

"I do not see how anybody would be a piker—compared to you," ribs the blonde. "You are not dressed like a wealthy man. And why do you carry around this greasy old lamp?"

"It is for giving hot-foots to anybody who asks foolish questions," I reply. "But I will prove to you that I am rich."

"Go peddle your fish," she remarks, in a cultured way.

I stand up.

"Just give me five minutes," I promise her. "Five minutes is all I need. At the end of that time I will show you wealth beyond your wildest dreams."

She shrugs. But I bow, pick up the lamp, and walk away.

As I go out, I notice the two jerks at the bar still gandering at me. One nudges the other and points at Aladdin's lamp.

I give them no notice, however. I have other things on my mind.

This really my chance to prove what the Genie can do. So I proceed very carefully. I walk past the cloak room of the night club until I come to the manager's office, which is empty. I slip in and close the door.

Then I kneel down and light the lamp. "Genie," I whisper, "do your stuff!"

Five minutes later I walk back to the table. The blonde is still sitting there. When I tap her on the shoulder she smirks.

"Come with me," I tell her. "I'll show you some real wealth."

"I don't want to look at any etchings, now," she sniffs. "Or anything tattooed, either."

"This is strictly on the level," I insist. "Right this way."

I lead her to the door of the manager's office. Then I stop and look mysterious.

"Behind that door," I tell her, "is the most precious collection in the world. Imagine the most priceless treasures—let yourself go—see if you can guess."

She is really interested now.

"Gold?" she squeaks.

I shake my head.

"Diamonds?"

I shake again.

"Well—radium? Platinum?"

"You'll have to see it to believe it," I say. And push her through the doorway. She gets a look and just stands there.

"I can't believe it!" she screams.

I hold her so she won't fall in a faint.

"Rubber tires!" she whispers. "Piles of rubber tires, new ones! And look—a refrigerator! And all that gas! Typewriters, too. Thousands of tires and things!"

"All mine," I smirk. "Now do you believe I'm rich?"

SHE is just in a daze. I am very proud. I have the Genie fill the manager's office with all this stuff and it is just a sample of what he can do when he really gets started. Now I think I know the kind of career I will have.

But then I notice the blonde tomato is staring at me very funny.

"What's the matter, toots?" I ask. "Won't you go out with me now?"

She steps away with a little shudder.

“I know what you must be!” she screams. “A smuggler! Of course you are—with all this illegal stuff here! You’re a smuggler, a crook. Help!”

The last remark is not addressed to me, but to the entire night club down the hall.

I slam the door and lock myself in. This is a fine mess. I suddenly realize that I make a real mistake when I have the Genie bring me a lot of illegal merchandise. So I light the lamp in a flurry of hurry. They are thumping on the door outside by the time I bring the Genie into the room from the lamp-smoke.

“Get rid of all this,” I command.

He swirls around, scooping up all the lovely things, and disappears. I put out the lamp, swirl around to the window, and disappear myself, before they get the door open. I drop to the ground below.

I step outside and snare a little air. While I am standing there a big limousine pulls up to the curb. It is a gorgeous gaswagon, with actual tires on it. The limousine parks and the door swings open.

I blink at that, because I do not order a car from the Genie.

Then it is all explained. A couple of personalities protrude their noggins and give me the old wail and hail.

With a shock I recognize the brace from the bar. I place them at last. They are gamblers.

“Hello, Lefty!” they yell, giving me the sweet greet.

“Well if it isn’t Merton and Albert,” I reply.

And so it is. Mercenary Merton and Avaricious Albert are their names. Mercenary Merton and Avaricious Albert are so called because they are very affectionate when it comes to money, and are known to sit up all night nursing a nickel.

Ordinarily I do not have anything to do with these customers because of their needy and greedy manners.

But now I am slightly intrigued because they yell at me, and also because of their limousine.

"Going our way, Lefty?" they inquire.

I shake my head, because I am not bound for hell just yet.

"We want to talk to you," says Merton.

"Yeah," Albert chimes in. "A business proposition."

"Do I look like a gorilla?" I ask. "Because any business that you have must be money business."

Mercenary Merton and Avaricious Albert laugh very heartily at this and give me a jolly smile.

"Good old Feep," wheezes Merton. "Always a card."

"Speaking of cards," I reply, "what's up your sleeve?"

"A great idea," he insist. "Come along to our penthouse and we will discuss it."

"There's millions in it," Avaricious Albert chimes in. "Positively millions. Feep, how would you like a million dollars?"

"In dimes and quarters if you please," I reply. "I like to play slot machines."

"You can own slot machines with the money we'll make," Albert assures me. "Come on—hop in and we'll go up to the penthouse."

SO I GRAB my lamp very tightly and step into the big car. We glide along, and I notice both Albert and Merton eye the lamp under my arm quite closely.

"What you got there?" Albert asks.

"An antique," I tell him.

"Just what I need for over the mantel," he says. "Feep, it happens I am crazy for antiques. You never know that, do you?"

"Of course I do," I reply. "I see some of the dames you run around with."

This is the signal for more guffaws. You would think I was a radio comic with a hot Crosley the way they go for my remarks.

"Seriously," Albert goes on, *"I* would like to own that lamp of yours. How about making a deal?"

"No sale," I mutter.

Merton pokes Albert and he shuts up.

Then the car pokes the curb and pulls up.

"Here we are," says Merton. "Right this way."

We go through a swell lobby into a big apartment hotel. Merton and Albert lead me to the elevator and we go up to the twenty-ninth floor.

Albert unlocks the door and I step into a genuine penthouse—with two pairs of pants.

"Park it here," says Merton, indicating a sofa lush but plush.

I dip my hips. Merton and Albert sit opposite me, staring and glaring. Merton keeps his eyes on me and Albert lamps at the lamp I carry. I address my remarks to him.

"Well, heel, what's the deal?" I inquire.

Albert clears his throat with a noise that makes his Adam's apple wobble.

"Feep," he begins, "we would like to go into partnership with you. How would you like to stay here with us—live in this beautiful penthouse, drive our big limousine, and live off the fat of the land?" He smiles. "To say nothing of the fatheads?"

"Yes," chimes in Merton. "We like you, Feep. We want to see you get ahead in the world. We figure we'd make a swell team."

"You guys wouldn't make a swell team for a junk wagon," I answer, in a cynical fashion. "Cut out the soft soap and let's get down to business. Just what do you two buzzards want?"

ALBERT stops smiling.

"Feep," he growls, "You've got a lamp there. A very unusual lamp. We could use that lamp to mutual advantage."

"What are you talking about?"

"You know what I'm talking about!" shouts Albert. "Don't bother to stall around. We know you have Aladdin's lamp!"

"Not so loud," I whisper. "Somebody might hear."

“This penthouse is soundproof,” Merton chuckles. “It’s all right.”

“But about this lamp,” Albert breaks in. “We see you use it. Feep, you must be dull in the skull I Here you have such great opportunities and all you do is waste them—you don’t seem to realize the tremendous possibilities in your lamp!”

“Such as?”

“Why we could take that lamp of yours and really keep the home fires burning! As partners, we can make plans and go a long way in his world.”

“What’s with this partners idea?” I complain. “I get along all right myself. And suppose you two birds get drafted?”

“Nuts to that,” Merton says, very unpatriotic. “With such a lamp you must realize there is no need to worry about the war at all.”

“Sure,” says Albert. “That’s just the idea, Feep. Think how valuable it is to command a Genie today. Think of what he can do—not just bring money and luxuries. That’s petty stuff. Strictly small time. But with his powers he could find out military information. He could be a military weapon himself! You just aren’t big enough to grasp it, Feep—that’s why you need our brains. We know the angles, see? We could get this Genie to work discovering war plans and—”

“All right,” I interrupt. “Maybe we can make a deal at that. I am very glad to help the war effort. We will take the lamp to Washington and let the government see what can be done.” Albert flashes me a sneer.

“Almonds, pecans, pistachios, and other kinds of nuts to the government!” he declares. “What will you get from the government except a lot of red tape wound around income taxes? Oh, no—there are other parties who will pay more for such a military weapon. I got contacts, see? And if we go to them and let them have first choice—”

NOW I catch the drift of their remarks. What these babies are really planning to do is to get high on treason. And it burns me up.

I jump off the sofa and grab the lamp.

"Listen," I mutter. "I've heard all the squeaking I want to from you rats. The deal is off. I'm getting out of here right now, and if I never see you again it will be plenty early enough for me."

"You aren't leaving us, are you?" says Albert, getting to his feet with a grin.

"You can't do that, you know," whispers Merton, also rising and circling around behind me.

I don't stop to argue. I jump for the door.

But before I get to it the lights go out. Somebody must get to the switches. Whatever it is, I am in the dark. I cannot find the door.

"Turn on the lights and let me out of here!" I yell.

But apparently this is not a request program. Because neither Albert or Merton turn on the lights. Instead they turn on the heat.

"Grab him!" yells a voice behind me. I run around the room, bumping into furniture and playing hide and go seek with these two hoods. I hold the lamp tight, and also try to hold my breath tight so they cannot hear me. But no matter where I run I feel one of them reaching out to tangle with me and strangle with me.

It is only a little while before Albert gets me by the neck and Merton ties into my stomach with his fists. I can only smack back with one hand so as not to drop the lamp. Even so I blow Albert's nose for him and dot Merton's eyes.

But in a few minutes I am lying on the floor with both of them on top of me.

"Get me the window-drapes," Merton grunts. "He's the kind you have to bind."

Albert gets strips of cloth from the windows.

I am fit to be tied.

I am.

And there we are in the dark. I am lying on the floor and Merton and Albert sit on the sofa with the lamp.

"The lights—" says Merton.

"Forget that!" snaps Albert. "What do we do?"

"We've got the lamp," Merton reminds him. "What else is there to do?"

"Yeah," I mutter, from the floor. "You guys win out. What more do you want?"

"Protection," Albert growls. "We have the lamp and we know what to do with it. But you also know that we have it. So we must get rid of you, but fast."

"Let's throw him out of the window," Merton suggests.

"No, too messy," Albert tells him. I am glad to hear that, because I agree.

"We could take him for a little ride," says Merton.

"Too much trouble getting him downstairs," says Albert. "We want to get rid of him in a way that will leave no traces. No traces at all."

"Say, what are you worrying about?" Merton chuckles. "Here we sit with a perfect solution and you wonder what to do."

"What do you mean?"

"Light the lamp," says Merton. "Light the lamp and call the Genie. Tell him to take Feep and get rid of him. Drag him off to Limbo, or Hades, or wherever. The Genie will do it."

"A very in-Genie-ous scheme," Albert agrees. "Too damned dark in here anyway."

I do not like the idea at all, but who am I to object? I can only lie there on the floor while Albert strikes a match and lights the lamp.

IT CASTS a bright glow over the room, but everything looks dark to me. I sit there and watch the lamp smoke up. In a few minutes the Genie will appear. They will issue the orders—and the Genie obeys whoever lights the lamp. I will go for a one-way trip to hell and gone. They will take the lamp and start their dirty work.

I wriggle and strain, but I cannot break the knots binding me. I am strapped and trapped.

Merton and Albert sit there and laugh at me.

“Well, Feep, it won’t be long now,” snickers Mercenary Merton. “Just remember, there’ll always be a lamp in the window for our wandering boy.”

“Thanks for bringing some light into our lives,” laughs Avaricious Albert. “Too bad you won’t be around to see the fun we’re going to have. But I guess not—here comes Genie now.”

Sure enough, the lamp is beginning to smoke. And I am beginning to burn. I watch the smoke swirl up. So do Albert and Merton.

The smoke goes up and my hopes go up with it.

And then—

None of us even hear the rattling at the door. Until too late. By then the rattling turns to a crash and the door of the penthouse apartment splinters in.

There is a guy standing there, with cops on either side.

“Those are the men!” he yells. “Get them!”

The boys in blue notice me tied up on the floor and then they ignore me completely as they rush Merton and Albert.

Meanwhile the personality in plain clothes goes for the lamp.

There is quite a little struggle, during which I get stepped on several times, once in the face. But this does not prevent me from sinking my teeth in Albert’s ankles when he tries to run.

The plain clothes character tackles Merton, who is clutching the lamp and heading for a rear door. As the smoke swirls up I can almost see the Genie coming out—but the plain clothes fink suddenly grabs the lamp and clunks Merton over the noggin with it.

Merton doesn’t see Genie after all. Just birdies.

But I yell, “Look out!” It is too late. The lamp breaks over Merton’s head and drops in two pieces on the floor. It goes out at the same time Merton does.

In another minute it is all over. Merton and Albert are tied. I am untied.

They take Merton and Albert away, and I carry what is left of Aladdin’s lamp over to the incinerator.

It is the last time Aladdin’s lamp ever burns.

But I am burning ever since.

LEFTY Feep sighed and concluded. “A most unusual story,” I commented. “But things didn’t turn out so badly, after all. It certainly would be terrible if those two crooks had a Genie to command.”

“Right,” said Feep.

“But you know—I can’t see why they didn’t get away with it,” I mused. “There’s something I don’t seem to understand.”

Lefty Feep gave me a disgusted frown.

“What’s bum, chum?” he grated.

“Well, I don’t see why those cops came up to the penthouse and broke down the door. Did you warn them in some way?”

Feep smiled. “No, I do not warn them. The lamp does.”

“The lamp warned them? How?”

“By being lit.” Feep’s smile broadened. “These two crooks are unpatriotic and that is what fixes them. They do not keep up with the news or they would know better than to light the lamp and bring the cops. They figure this is one of the Arabian Nights and it isn’t—it’s a different kind of a night.”

I stared Feep in the eye.

“Why did those cops come?” I persisted.

“Because of the lamp,” Feep smiled. “You will get them too—if you ever try to light a lamp during a blackout!”

Skeleton In My Closet

At that, maybe the old guy's skeleton was the only "living" person who could solve his own murder. You'll admit the killer would hardly expect such a thing

WHEN I opened the closet door I saw the skeleton.

He was hanging there on the third hook from the left.

I just shook my head and smiled. . . .

When I came to, I was lying on the floor. The closet door was still open. I raised my eyes timidly. On the floor of the closet I saw a pair of rubbers, some old, dusty tennis shoes, and two ancient house slippers.

I glanced higher and noticed a raincoat, an overcoat, a pair of slacks, and an old hat hanging on the hooks.

Also, the skeleton.

This time I didn't faint. I even managed to get up off the floor. But I couldn't stop looking at the horror.

It dangled there, suspended by its spine from the hook, with bony body swaying to and fro. It was rather large for a skeleton, as skeletons go—and how I wished this one would! I noticed the unusually big bones, and particularly, the face. Or rather, the lack of face. The skull itself grinned a grisly grin. There was mockery in the hollow eye sockets, and menace in the leering teeth.

I wondered wildly how this skeleton had turned up in the closet. Had he been a human being trapped in there and eaten by moths? No—because the door was unlocked.

I sighed. This was just what I might expect to find in my uncle's house.

He had been interested in sorcery—black magic. My uncle was quite an eccentric that way. Every Halloween I used to send him a birthday card. Outside of that we seldom communicated, and all I knew of him was through hearsay. Rumors of what went on in his big house in the country. Rumors about his unusual library of forbidden books, and of the secret societies he was mixed up with. To judge from these reports he was mixed up plenty.

But I'd dismissed all that.

When I received word of his sudden death a little while ago, the lawyer gave me a key to the house and said I'd inherited his estate.

So here I was. And here was the skeleton.

You can't stand looking at a skeleton forever. As for me, I can't stand looking at a skeleton.

So after a moment, I sat down. Sat down and poured myself a nice, stiff drink.

I raised the glass to my lips to shut out the sight of the skeleton hanging in the open closet. I started to gulp.

"Get me down off this damn hook and I'll join you," grunted a voice.

I finished my gulp. The glass fell from my fingers as I stared in startled horror at the closet.

The skeleton was speaking!

"You've spilled your drink," the voice told me.

I spilled another, in a hurry. Right down my throat. And then another.

Talking skeletons! Was it alive?

"Come on," said the skeleton. "Do you think I want to spend the rest of my life in this stuffy closet?"

The skeleton had a deep, sepulchral voice, I noticed. I wondered how he could articulate—though he was a well-articulated skeleton.

"Spend the rest of your *what?"* I answered him, through chattering-teeth. "You've already spent your life, from the looks of you. Tossed it away. Never saw anyone with less looks of life about him. You shouldn't worry about stuffy closets. You need a nice, stuffy grave."

"Well, I can't go to one unless you take me off this hook," argued the skeleton.

I TOOK another drink—from the bottle, this time. The liquor combined with my fright and worked fast. His argument almost sounded reasonable. Although the clicking of his bones sounded plain ghastly.

"Come on," the skeleton urged. "Lift me down."

"Who's going to hold me up while I'm lifting you down?" I argued.

"What's there to be afraid of?" countered the skeleton.

"If I had a mirror, I'd show you," I told him. "I can't stand the sight of you hanging there."

"Then take me off the hook."

I approached him gingerly and with trembling fingers hooked around his spine, I lifted him down and set him on the floor.

The skeleton ran to the table with amazing and horrifying alacrity. He scrabbled around and poured out a drink. Three fingers. Three bony fingers.

With clicking elbow-sockets, he raised the glass to his lips—or to where his lips once were—and tossed the drink off.

"Where does the stuff go?" I wondered. Aloud, I said, "Where did you come from?"

The skeleton faced me. "What's it to you?" he asked.

"Well how would you like it if you came into a house, opened the closet door, and found a skeleton?"

"I'd like it pretty well," he said. "Then I'd have some company."

I shuddered.

"I'm so lonesome," the skeleton complained. "You don't know how it feels to be a skeleton."

"I don't want to find out, either."

"You will," said the skeleton, with a ghastly leer. "Some day."

"I still want to know how you got into that closet."

"You might say I used a skeleton key," he told me.

"I might say the hell with you, too," I replied. "In fact, that's just what I do say."

"And I say let's have another drink." The skeleton poured. My hands were shaking, but I managed to drink. We clicked teeth rather than glasses.

"Here's looking at you," said the skeleton.

"Here's not looking at you," I answered. "And speaking of that happy prospect, you've got to get out of here, you know. I can't have you hanging around this way. What would my friends think?"

"Couldn't you tell them I was your family skeleton?" he asked, wistfully. "After all, what can I do in my position?"

"You can lie down and play dead."

"This is a bit unusual, I admit," the skeleton acknowledged. "There isn't much precedent for it, is there? Wonder if we could get some help to figure things out."

"Well, we could read Thorne Smith's *Skin and Bones,"* I suggested. "He had a few remarks to make about a live skeleton. Only his case happened to be a man who turned into a skeleton and back to a man, intermittently. And the man was really there all the time—that is, his flesh was. He just *looked* like a skeleton."

"That wouldn't help me. I not only look like one—I feel like one, and I *am* one." The skeleton took another drink.

I FOLLOWED suit. For some reason or other, I was beginning to feel quite tipsy. It couldn't have been the liquor—or was it? At any rate, the skeleton no longer seemed so frightful. He no longer terrified me. I adopted a somewhat haughty attitude when I addressed him next.

"By the way," I observed, "I'm not exactly in the habit of speaking to strange skeletons. Might I ask your name?"

"You might," said the fleshless one. "But you won't get much of an answer." He hiccuped, rattling his lower jaw alarmingly.

"See here," I flared. "Who are you? Or, rather, who *were* you?"

"Damned if I know," the skeleton confessed. "That's what's puzzling me. I'm afraid I can't remember. It's amnesia, I guess. Must have been in some kind of an accident."

"It was a pretty severe accident, judging from the looks of you," I told him.

The skeleton shook his head mournfully.

"You don't know how you got in my closet or why you're still alive, or who you are?" I persisted.

"That's right."

"That's wrong," I corrected. "It's contrary to all the laws of nature. You shouldn't be alive, and you certainly shouldn't be hanging in strange closets."

"It doesn't bother me half as much as not knowing what my name is," the skeleton insisted. "I'm really curious to find that out."

"Maybe I'd better call the morgue," I suggested, "and see if they're missing you."

"Try the funeral parlors, too," the skeleton added.

I picked up the phone and fumbled for the directory.

"Wait a minute," I said. "I can't call these joints and ask if they're minus a live skeleton. The cops would be after me with butterfly nets. We'll have to think of another way."

The skeleton regarded me with a grave look. What other kind of look a skeleton has, I don't know. Or care to know.

"By the way, speaking of names—you haven't told me your name yet, my friend."

I blinked. "So I haven't. I'm Tarleton Fiske. This is the home of my deceased uncle, Magnus Lorry."

"Magnus Lorry? Lorry?" Bony fingers pressed into the skull. "But that's *my* name! It came back to me now. I'm Magnus Lorry—this is my home. And you're my nephew! I'll be a monkey's unc—"

"No insults," I warned him. And gulped.

"You're my uncle," I said. "I can't believe it."

"Why not?"

"Otis Kersen, your lawyer—he said you died of a stroke. You were buried in the family vault at Hopecrest Cemetery. Private funeral, and he handled all the details. There were no mourners present."

"No mourners?"

"I'm the only one left in the family," I explained. "And I was out of town. Otis Kersen wired me. You left me this house and your estate."

"Nobody mourned for me?" repeated the skeleton. "How unfortunate to let a poor man die friendless like that! If I could have been there, I would have mourned."

"You weren't such a friendly fellow when alive," I said, blushing. "You were something of a recluse. Eccentric. You were a—wizard, I believe you called yourself."

"So I was!" exclaimed the skeleton. "I do remember that. I was quite a sorcerer, wasn't I?"

"Yes, I've heard it said."

"MAYBE that's why I'm still alive," the skeleton mused. "I might have had a premonition of death and cast a spell to preserve my consciousness."

"Perhaps."

"But it's funny—there's still a lot I can't seem to recollect. For example, I don't remember having a stroke. I don't recall anything about my death."

"That's not unusual in amnesia cases," I told him. "Often a victim just recovers partial memory. The rest may gradually return."

"Stroke, eh?" said the skeleton. "Get me a mirror."

"What for?"

"I want to look at myself."

"You're not worth seeing," I argued, honestly.

"Get me a mirror, nephew."

"Very well, Uncle Magnus."

I got him a hand mirror from the dresser in the bedroom. My skeleton uncle grasped it and stared at his reflection, shuddering the while.

"My, I'm gruesome!" he exclaimed.

I nodded.

"Rather repulsive, too?"

"Definitely," I agreed.

"Hate to meet myself up a dark alley."

"Certainly would."

"Hey—"

The skeleton ran a bony phalange across the back of his skull.

"What is it?"

"Look," the skeleton exclaimed. "See this hole in my head?"

"Where?"

"Right here."

"What is it?" I asked, noting the round little opening in his skull.

"It's a bullet hole," gasped the skeleton.

"A bullet hole?"

"Definitely. And you know what?"

"What?"

"I didn't die of a stroke. I've been murdered!"

"No!" I gasped.

"Yes. This bullet must have gone clean through the *medulla oblongata.* Otis Kersen, or somebody, was lying. I tell you, I was murdered!"

"But why—how—?"

"That's not the point," the skeleton rasped. "It's *who?"* I'm going to find out if it takes the rest of my life—I mean, death!"

MAGNUS LORRY rose to his bony feet and danced up and down excitedly while his vertebrae rattled like castanets.

"I'm going to track down the person who killed me!" he yelled.

"And then what?"

"I haven't forgotten my sorcery," he declared. "I'll cook up a fate for my slayer that he'll never forget as long as he lives—and that won't be long." My unusual uncle grated his teeth unpleasantly. I averted my eyes in distress.

"Call that fat swine, Otis Kersen! Get that illegal eagle on the wire for me," he ordered.

Obediently, I dialed the attorney's office.

"Mr. Kersen, please," I requested. "Mr. Kersen is out of town," replied the stenographer's voice on the other end of the wire. "He's gone to Buffalo for a convention."

I reported the news.

"Buffalo? Hell and damnation!" growled the skeleton.

"You suspect him?" I asked.

"I suspect everybody!" the skeleton groaned. "I have no friends. Nobody loves me. Nobody cares. I might as well be dead."

"Don't cry," I said.

"I can't cry," he sighed. "Can't even cry. But I can still act. And I'm going to."

"What do you propose?"

"I think I'm going to do a little sleuthing. A little amateur detective work to find out who murdered me." He stabbed a bony finger in my direction. "And you're going to help me, nephew."

"Glad to. How do we begin?"

"We'll pay a couple of visits."

"Where to?"

"We shall call on some of my rivals."

"Rivals?"

“Rival wizards,” my uncle explained. “There are several others in this vicinity who secretly practice the mantic arts. Cheap sorcerers. All of them were jealous of me and my fine collection of incunabula.”

“You have incunabula?” I asked. “Tons of it,” he declared. “More damned incunabula than you can shake a stick at.”

“Doesn’t it hurt?”

“Incunabula are books written before 1600,” my uncle explained. “I have the finest library on sorcery extant. And some of these scoundrels knew it. I’ll bet one of them bumped me off, figuring my estate would be up for sale and he could steal my precious manuscripts and formulae for a song. That must be it.”

“Any idea who might figure such a plot out?” I inquired.

“Well, there’s the Mighty Omar,” said Magnus Lorry.

“Who is he?”

“A spiritualist, and a fake spiritualistic medium at that. He’s just a charlatan who makes a living by holding fraudulent seances, and playing the suckers. He’s really interested in the occult, and knowing my real powers, he always hated my guts—when I had them, that is.”

“Do you think that he—?”

“I’ve got a hunch,” said the skeleton. “Come on, we’ll visit him first.” He rose and clanked across the room to the door.

“Wait a minute!” I protested. “You can’t go out like that.”

“Why not?”

“People will see you walking around—you must be disguised, somehow.

“Useless,” he told me. “You can’t disguise a face and figure like the one I haven’t got.”

“But you’ll start a riot!”

“Then you’ll have to carry me,” my uncle said. “That’s it! You can carry me in your arms. Say that you’re delivering a skeleton to a medical school. I’ll play dead.”

“That won’t be hard for you,” I sighed. “But the idea of dragging a skeleton along the street in broad daylight doesn’t appeal to me.”

“Would you rather wait until after dark, then? Around midnight?”

“Midnight is no time for me to mess with skeletons either. On second thought, we’d better go right now.”

I picked him up gingerly by his clavicles.

“Hold still now,” I breathed.

CARRYING him down the hall, I kicked open the door, walked down the driveway, and put him in the car. Climbing into the driver’s seat, I started the motor.

“Where to?” I asked.

He gave me the address, and we were off.

Luckily the streets were not crowded as we drove into city traffic. Soon we moved through the winding streets of the fashionable suburban district where the Mighty Omar had his residence.

Halting for a stop-light, Uncle Magnus turned to me with a leer.

“Step on it,” he murmured. “I can’t wait to appear before the Mighty Omar. I’ll scare him out of a week’s growth I The mere sight of me ought to shake a confession out of his guilty mouth.”

“Quiet!” I panted. “Do you want somebody to hear you talking? Stop turning your head that way—people will notice.”

As a matter of fact, somebody had already noticed. About the most unpleasant somebody I could think of.

A big traffic cop loomed outside the window.

“Hey,” he growled. “What you got there?”

“Just a skeleton, officer. I’m taking it over to medical school.”

“Did I see it move?” he persisted, eyeing the bony skull with evident distaste.

“Perhaps the car jiggled it a bit,” I hazarded.

“Oh, my mistake.”

The cop was about to turn away when Uncle Magnus gave vent to an unfortunate impulse. He hiccuped, loudly.

Instantly the cop wheeled.

"What's that?" he said.

"I hiccuped," I told him.

"Drunk, eh? Driving while drunk?" He reached eagerly for his ticket pad.

"Not at all, officer. Just a little sour stomach."

"Oh."

Uncle Magnus couldn't hold it any longer. He hiccuped again, his jaws moving visibly.

"Holy Ike!" barked the officer. "That skeleton moved!"

"How could it move?" I asked, innocently. "You know that such a thing is impossible."

"Oh yeah? Well it did move," said the cop. "And it hiccuped, too! There's something wrong with that skeleton, I'm telling you! Something mighty wrong."

"That's why I'm taking it to medical school."

THE cop wasn't satisfied. His beefy hand came thrusting through the window and he fingered Uncle Magnus's collar-bone.

"What's the matter, officer?" I asked, nervously. "Why are you fingering my skeleton?"

"Is that your skeleton?"

"Of course. Whose else would it be?"

"How can it be your skeleton?" snarled the officer. "Your skeleton must be under your skin."

"Well—"

"Therefore," persisted the cop, with a warning gleam in his eye, "this is not your skeleton. And if it is not your skeleton, then it must be stolen. What are you doing with a stolen skeleton, you grave-robber?"

It was a horrible moment. And Uncle Magnus chose it for a demonstration.

"Take your pawing hands off me, you big lug," he groaned. "I'm not his skeleton and I'm not your skeleton—I'm my own skeleton, I'll have you know. And if there's any graves robbed, it's likely to be your own—because I'm going to put you in one in a hurry!"

I had never seen a traffic cop run before. It was an enthralling spectacle. How a man could move so fast in those heavy boots, I didn't know. But he was really speedy.

We drove away with equal swiftness. Uncle Magnus chuckled repulsively in my ear.

"Stop that!" I warned him. "And for heaven's sake, cut out this business of frightening strangers."

"Just rehearsing for the Mighty Omar," said my uncle. "I'll really give him the business."

We drove up to the imposingly gaunt frame house that served as residence and place of business for the medium.

I parked and got out.

"Pick me up," whispered my uncle. "Under your arm. And ring the bell. He has a colored butler, but I doubt if he'll trouble us long. We'll go right in and interview our spiritualistic friend. Just let me handle him and everything will be dandy."

Somehow I doubted this last statement.

But there was nothing else to do.

Picking up Uncle Magnus, I started up the walk, carrying the skeleton under my arm.

I rang the bell.

The door opened. A bearded negro dressed as a Hindu peered out with rolling eyes. "You wish to have audience with the Mighty Omar?" he intoned, in a sonorous voice.

I nodded.

The door swung wider.

The bearded negro caught sight of my bony burden.

“Lawd save us!” he shrieked, in purest Harlemese. “The haunts are done arriving!”

A moment later I stepped over his prostrate body and stalked down the hall. Uncle Magnus rattled with anticipation under my elbow.

We faced a darkened doorway. “Here,” he whispered. “Let me down and we’ll sneak in.”

We opened the door on pitch blackness. The seance was in full swing.

Moving quietly, we entered the darkened room. My eyes slowly became accustomed to the dimness and soon I could see faint outlines in the gloom.

SIX fat women were seated around a large table with their hands resting on its surface. At the head of the table, like the caller at the Bingo game where these women really belonged, was the Mighty Omar.

The Mighty Omar was a little dried-up man dressed in a tur-ban and an oriental night-gown. He had a face like a prune, and it didn’t take long to see that he also had plenty of new wrinkles.

At the moment the Mighty Omar was right in the middle of his act. In fact, he was just going into his trance.

“Oh Mighty Brahm!” he whispered in the darkness. “By the powers of Raja Yoga I command thee—tear aside the veil! Let thy humble servant enter the astral plane and commune with the shades of the departed.”

Uncle Magnus rattled angrily at my side, but made no move to interfere just yet.

“Ah!” sighed the Mighty Omar. “I am going now—I am passing through—and who is that I see? Ah yes! It is my psychic guide to the spirit world—Doctor Anabana!”

In a normal voice he confided to the ladies. “Doctor Anabana is a low-plane spirit. He will summon the souls of your dear departed ones and give you their messages. Who wishes to speak to Doctor Anabana?”

The fat lady next to the Mighty Omar cleared her throat nervously.

“Ask him about Grandpa,” she quavered. “Grandpa Ike Snodtrotter.”

“I will try,” moaned the Mighty Omar. “It is hard—so hard.” He breathed deeply. “I have a lady, Doctor,” he said.

A voice came out of the air. It was shrill, eery.

“What does she desire?”

“She wants to communicate with Ike Snodtrotter. Have you a Mr. Snodtrotter there?”

“I shall see,” said the high voice. “If he is here and has a message for the lady, he will communicate with her by knocking the table.”

There was a long, ominous silence. Suddenly the table resounded with a furious rapping.

“Grandpa, is that you?” gasped the fat lady.

Again a knocking.

“It is your grandfather,” said the high voice of Doctor Anabana, the “spirit guide.”

“How are you, Grandpa?” asked the lady, anxiously. “How do you feel?”

“Grandpa says he feels fine,” said the high voice. “And to prove it, he will play the tambourine.”

Sure enough, from out of nowhere floated a ghostly tambourine, lit by glowing phosphorescence. It sailed above the table in mid-air and suddenly clinked and clanked.

“You see?” said the Mighty Omar, abruptly coming out of his trance. “But we must hurry lest the astral spell be broken. Do any other ladies wish to commune with the departed?”

“I wonder,” said a lady at the opposite end of the table. “I would like you to see if you couldn’t find my Aunt Agatha.”

“We can try,” said the Mighty Omar. “If Doctor Anabana is willing. What is your Aunt Agatha’s full name?”

“Agatha Flug.”

THE Mighty Omar cleared his throat. As he did so, I felt the skeleton moving away from my side in the darkness.

“I have a lady, Doctor,” intoned the Mighty Omar.

“Ten dollars to that lady!” rasped a voice.

“What?” muttered Omar, in a flustered haste.

“I’m sorry,” said the voice. “Thought I was Doctor I.Q.”

“Doctor Anabana?” called Omar, in puzzled tones. “Do you hear me?”

“Doctor Anabana had to leave,” said the voice—which I now recognized as belonging to my skeleton uncle. “Doctor Gillespie wanted him in the surgery. This is Doctor Banana speaking. I’ve come to take his place.”

“What goes on here?” yelled the Mighty Omar. Then, hastily realizing his position, he recovered dignity. “Will you locate Miss Agatha Flug, please?” he asked.

“To hear is to obey,” said my uncle. He raised his voice. “Hey, Aggie!” he bawled. “Company!”

“This is most unusual,” fluttered the lady at the end of the table. “Are you sure your spirit control is on the right astral plane?”

“Astral plane?” mocked my uncle. “I’m on an astral dive-bomber, sister! Wait, you wanted to speak to your aunt. Well, here’s the old buzzard now. Knock on wood.”

Sure enough, the rapping sounded on the table top. But it was a most peculiar rapping—in Conga rhythm.

“One and two and three—kick!” said a high voice, which came from my skeleton uncle, doing his best to imitate a woman.

“How do you feel up there, Aunt Agatha?” breathed the woman at the end of the table.

“I’ll show you how I feel,” said my uncle, in falsetto. “I’ll play you something on the flute.”

Incredibly, a silver flute, also phosphorescent, floated out over the heads of the Mighty Omar and the ladies.

“Hit it!” snapped my uncle.

The flute began to play.

“Did you ever hear Pete go tweet-tweet-tweet on his piccolo?”

“What the blue blazes?” screamed the Mighty Omar, forgetting himself.

"That's not my Aunt Agatha!" wailed the lady.

"It's a demon!" yelled the woman beside her. "Ooooh—I felt something tickle me!"

She wasn't the only one. As the hysterical flute tooted on, several of the ladies began to giggle and shriek.

The Mighty Omar rose to his feet.

"What in hell is all this?" he howled. "Turn on the lights!"

It was a bad idea.

The lights went on.

When the ladies saw the live skeleton sitting on the Mighty Omar's lap with the flute in his bony mouth, they didn't wait.

Even as they rose to flee, the skeleton jerked one fleshless arm towards a curtain. He pulled a string. A tambourine and two horns fell on the table, along with a microphone, a loudspeaker, a sheet on a wire, and a midget who had been sitting concealed on a perch near the ceiling.

"I'm from the spirit world!" yelled the skeleton. "Any messages today or would you care to say it with flowers?" The ladies weren't listening. They were running out of the room.

THE Mighty Omar rose swiftly, dumping the living skeleton to the floor. He tried to dive through the legs of the departing fat women.

A bony hand jerked him back by the collar.

"Come on," said my uncle. "You called up a spirit, now give me a message."

"Let me go," whined Omar. "Go back to hell or wherever you came from."

"Not unless you come with me," grated my uncle.

"Wh—what do you want with me?" The medium was trembling.

"I'm taking you to see an old friend," rasped my uncle. "An old friend named Magnus Lorry."

"B-b-but he's dead."

“I know,” growled my uncle. “And you murdered him. Didn’t you?”

“N—no—no, I didn’t! Let me go!” howled the fake spiritualist. “I’m just a harmless medium—I never murdered Magnus Lorry—I just dabbled a bit in the occult—I never believed—I never knew—”

The skeleton relaxed his grip.

“I ought to take you anyway,” he hissed. “But I’ll let you go this time if you’ll promise me one thing.”

“Anything. Anything at all!” sobbed the not-so-Mighty Omar.

“Give up this vile racket,” said the skeleton. “Get a job in the war industries or something useful.”

“Yes—I will—right away.”

The skeleton released him and stalked off. I followed.

As we went down the hall, somebody rang the front door. It opened abruptly as we neared it, and to my consternation I recognized the figure standing there in the twilight.

It was the traffic cop who had halted us at the corner.

“Here you are!” he snorted. “I’ve tracked you down at last!”

“Here we aren’t!” said my skeletonic uncle, turning and taking to his bony heels down the hall. I followed with some speed as I noted the revolver in the cop’s pudgy hand.

“Back door,” wheezed my uncle. The cop thundered behind us. “Halt or I’ll shoot!” he bawled.

We didn’t and he did—but by the time the bullet buried itself in the back door we had slammed it behind us. At a dead run we made for the car in the twilight.

“Where to?” I gasped.

“To hell out of this place,” directed my uncle. “Gas rationing be damned!” We whizzed into the street. The cop appeared and in the rear-view mirror I noted that he was mounting a motorcycle.

I turned a comer quickly.

“Guess the Mighty Omar wasn’t guilty,” said Uncle Magnus.

“I’m not so sure,” I told him.

"He was too frightened to lie out of it," argued the living skeleton. "How did you like my act?"

"It frightened me," I admitted. "Good. If we can dodge this cop, I'll try it again."

"Who have you in mind?"

"Dr. Eggkopf. He's a psychiatrist at the army induction center."

"A psychiatrist?"

"Yes, but his hobby is collecting demonolatra—books on sorcery. He used to grab off items at the book dealers' shops and he hated me."

"You want to go to the army induction center now?" I asked, whizzing through an arterial as I noted the cop on the motorcycle behind us.

"Afraid I can't," panted Uncle Magnus.

"Why not?"

"Isn't safe to get myself involved there," said the skeleton. "Doctor Eggkopf is pretty nearsighted and a tough customer. If I visit him at the army induction center he's liable to draft me."

I TRIED to answer, but by this time the wailing of the siren on the motorcycle drowned out my reply.

"He's gaining on us!" screamed my uncle. "Nosey fool!"

I twisted and turned. We were now in the heart of the downtown area. The siren blasted and we drove hell-for-leather. The skeleton bounced around in the back seat.

"Stop that!" he begged. "Do you want to get us both killed?"

"I'm the only one who can be killed," I muttered.

"Do something—lose him!"

"I'm doing my best!"

The glaring face of the cop was clearly distinguishable despite the darkness. The siren screeched in our ears.

I skidded around the corner on a wheel and a half.

"Listen!" yelled Uncle Magnus.

I listened. Another wail rose to drown out the siren. A great, piercing wail.

At the same moment, the lights on the street abruptly blinked and went out. In the office buildings around us, the windows winked into darkness.

"Don't you understand?" I shouted. "It's a blackout!"

"Blackout?"

"Yes. I'll have to pull to the curb and run for it with you."

"Where to?"

"Must be a downtown air-raid shelter nearby. If we hide on the street, the wardens will pick us up."

"There's a subway entrance," panted Uncle Magnus. "Now!"

We ground to a halt as the sirens wailed. Leaping from the car, we streaked down the street. Behind us the bewildered cop groped in darkness.

"Halt there!" he bellowed.

"This way," I gasped. I saw the black mouth of a subway entrance loom out of the lesser darkness.

We clattered down the stairs—I with my heels and the skeleton with his bony metatarsae.

"We're safe now," I whispered, pausing on the landing.

It was dark all around us. Somewhere below the crowd stood in dimly-lighted safety.

"Can't go down further," grunted the skeleton. "I don't want to be seen."

"I'm sure nobody would want to look at you," I assured him. "But we're all right here."

Somebody else came racing down the steps and we froze into silence.

From the heavy footsteps I deduced the presence of a stout man.

I nudged the skeleton, who stood close to the wall.

In a moment several pairs of high heels clicked down the stairs. Two girls, I judged, from the tread.

"You all right, Mamie?" giggled the first.

"Okie-dokie by me," her companion replied.

"Gee, ain't blackouts thrilling?" observed the first girl.

"Me, I'd like it better if I had me a sailor," Mamie answered, snapping her gum.

"Any sailors down here?" the other girl tittered.

THE stout man and myself were silent. Uncle Magnus rattled his bones slightly but made no other sign.

"What's the matter, nobody sociable?" complained Mamie. She moved closer in the darkness. Unluckily for her, she moved closer to Uncle Magnus.

"Eeek!" she murmured. "What was that?"

"What?" inquired the other girl.

"I felt something cold."

"Cold?"

"Cold, and—bony," explained the girl, in puzzled tones. Then, "Oh Gawd! "

"What is it?"

"I don't know—it's all bony—like a skeleton!"

"You're screwy!" her companion diagnosed.

"No kidding, I did!" Mamie insisted.

"This is a subway, not a graveyard," scoffed the other girl. "Wait, I'll light a match and see who's getting fresh around here."

"Don't—" I began. But too late.

The match flared up. Uncle Magnus's leering skull stood out.

With a scream duet, the two girls clattered down the stairs to the safety of the subway proper.

In the darkness I heard the stout man chuckle.

"Cute trick," he laughed. "A mask, huh?"

Uncle Magnus was silent at my side. I answered. "Yes, sir. It's a mask. I was on my way to a costume party when the blackout caught us."

The stout man moved closer.

"Say," he boomed. "I know you. You're Tarleton, aren't you?"

"What?" I muttered.

"Sure. Don't you recognize me?"

"Otis Kersen," I muttered. "I thought you were out of town."

"You told me to get out," he said. "But I didn't. Just left word at the office, that's all. After all, there's nothing to be afraid of, you know. Old Magnus Lorry is safe in his grave, nobody knows anything, you have the estate and we divvy up—"

I turned, but too late. Uncle Magnus had found matches in my pocket.

Otis Kersen saw the full skeleton this time. He screamed.

"In my grave, am I?" groaned Magnus Lorry. "You forget that wizards have power."

"Lorry!" wailed Otis Kersen. "You're back from the dead!"

"Yes," said the skeleton, through clenched teeth. "This young scoundrel was humoring me, dragging me around on a wild goose chase. But I've found my goose and now I'll cook it."

"I'm innocent!" Otis Kersen gasped. "Utterly innocent! He thought up the idea—remember—he came to town secretly and slipped into your house while you slept—he brought a gun—shot you right through the head—we buried you secretly and I faked a medical certificate—he made me do it—"

I TRIPPED on the lower step. That was my biggest mistake. When the skeleton's fingers closed around my throat I knew the end had come.

"All right," he snarled in my ear. "Up we go to the car before the lights turn on." He turned. "You too, Kersen."

"Where are you taking us?" I whispered.

"Home," said the skeleton. "Home. Where my books are. My books with their spells, their incantations. I'm going to show you two a little practical experiment in sorcery."

"What do you mean?"

"You'll see," gloated my skeletonic uncle. "You'll see. Turn about is fair play."

Then I passed out.

When I came to, I was in this bedroom. I'm still here, writing this. Somewhere outside in the great house, a skeleton stalks amidst strange circles, muttering chants. He will be coming for me soon, and for Otis Kersen.

I think I know what he intends.

That's why I'm writing this. To toss it through the window.

If you on the outside find and read this, come to my uncle's house. Magnus Lorry is the name. He probably won't be here—he must have some wizard's plan for a getaway.

Never mind that. Just go to the bedroom closet and open the door. I have a hunch you'll see a skeleton hanging there. That skeleton will be Otis Kersen.

Never mind that, either. But please do something about the other skeleton right next to it. Because—

It's probably me!

Stuporman

Skeetch and Meetch perfected another of their machines. This one transferred dreams into reality. Then one day they found a customer who really had dreams!

IF IT hadn't been that I was dying of hunger, I never would have stuck my nose into Jack's Shack. It really isn't safe to stick your nose into that restaurant, because you are liable to smell some of the food.

But there was another reason why I hesitated. Down at one of the tables, I saw the tall, angular figure of Mr. Lefty Feep. He was leaning against the back of a chair with a great air of business about him—other people's business, as usual.

I was afraid he might see me and come over, and for certain reasons I wished to avoid meeting him. Because when you meet Lefty Feep he talks to you, and when he talks to you, you listen, and if you listen, you'll hear something that will distress you for days.

However, I was pleased to see that Feep was already attached to a victim—a little thin man with eyeglasses and a nervous expression. He was talking to the small, bespectacled stranger quite earnestly, and the stranger was listening. I didn't recognize the fellow, but I felt sorry for him. It grieved me to see that he had a bandage around his head, but it grieved me more to see the way Feep was talking to him. I knew what suffering he was going through.

I tiptoed over to a table. Feep didn't look up. I called the waiter. Feep was still talking. I gave my order. Feep gabbled on. My food came, and I ate. Feep was rattling away.

I grinned. This was one time I'd get away scot-free. I laid a tip on the tablecloth and rose to go.

"Do not scurry in such a hurry."

The voice of Lefty Feep cut through my complacency. I looked up. The one-man crime wave against the English language was standing at my table. He sat down.

I sat down, too, when he pushed me into a chair.

"You must please believe that I grieve when I do not perceive you until you are about to leave," announced Feep, picking up a toothpick and signalling the waiter for a glass of water.

"I'm sorry, Lefty," I answered. "But I must be off."

"Never mind your mental condition," he smiled. "I want to talk to you."

"But I must go now."

"Kindly do not bring up biological problems," Feep insisted. "I see you are wearing your golf socks today."

I glanced down at my feet.

"Golf socks?" I echoed.

"Yes," said Feep. "The ones with the eighteen holes."

I rose again. "Listen, Lefty, I have no time to waste listening to your insults. Why don't you go over and bore that fellow you were talking to before?"

Feep caught my coat-tails and pulled me down again.

"You notice that personality?" he asked. "The little skinny guy with the goggles?"

"Of course I noticed him. Who is he?"

"Who is he?" gasped Feep. "You mean to inform me you do not recognize him?"

"No."

"Why, that is none other than Joe Blow."

"Joe Blow?"

"The famous Stuporman."

"Who in the world is Stuporman?" I asked.

"Why, I always figure everybody knows who Stuporman is," Feep sighed.

I shook my head.

"Well," said Feep, "I will tell his story, if you insist."

"I don't insist."

"You are just being polite," said Lefty Feep. "It is such a yarn as is not unravelled every day. Kindly lend me your ears and I will bend them for you."

He did.

With a lightning flick of his tongue, Lefty Feep began his tale.

* * *

WHEN I first hear of this personality, Joe Blow, he is a reporter on *The Daily Bulb,* a news-bladder. I see him hanging around Gorilla Gabface's pool palace oncely or twicely, and when I examine this specimen of manhood I am more depressed than impressed.

Joe Blow is a little insignificant jerk who is too weak to lick his own lips.

I hear from some of the downtown boys that he is not a very good reporter, and he is always having trouble. It seems Joe is very much in a fatuated condition over a beautiful girl reporter by the name of Effie Fink.

But Effie Fink does not yearn and burn for Joseph Blow. She thinks he is a sissy. First his draft board turns him down and then his girl friend turns him down. In fact, he gets turned down oftener than the lamp in the parlor of a sailor's girl-friend.

Joe Blow is also turned down around the mouth when I meet him on the street one day. He recognizes me from the pool hall and ambles over with a sad, un-glad smile.

"Hello, Joe," I greet him. "What's heating for eating? What, I inquire, is on the fire? In a word, what's cooking?"

“My goose,” answers Joe Blow, very mournful.

“You have troubles?”

“Like Mussolini,” sighs Joe. “I will live in a hotel for five years, and the manager rents my nice room to somebody else and gives me a bum room instead.”

“Bum room? That’s bad.”

“I have worse,” sighs Joe Blow. “My editor also gives me the bum’s rush. On top of that, the other fellows at the paper are always picking on me. And to finish it all off, my girl friend, Effie Fink, is running around with a racketeer.”

I sympathize with this little runt. “You must assert yourself,” I tell him. “You must be impressive and aggressive.”

“Just look at me,” sobs Joe Blow. “I could not be more run-down if I would get hit by a truck.”

“Why not take some vitamins?” I suggest.

Joe Blow shakes his head. “I am too weak to swallow them,” he tells me. “Besides, they take too long to do any good. I must work fast to regain my girl-friend, also my self-respect.”

“How about a muscle course?” I inquire.

He shakes his head again.

“I send in for one, but they do not mail me my muscles yet.”

I try to console him. “We should be able to think of something. With my brains and your troubles—wait a minute! Brains—troubles—I know just the thing for you to do!”

“Commit suicide?” asks Joe hopefully.

“Not at all,” I cackle. “We will go to see the psychologist, Subconscious Sigmund. Any time you need your wits sharpened, he is the guy to grind your mind.”

“How can he help me?”

“He can psycho-analyze your condition. He can explain the pain in your brain.”

“Let’s go,” says Joe Blow.

SO WE do. I steer him up to Subconscious Sigmund's office in the quickest kind of a hurry.

We walk inside and see Subconscious Sigmund talking on the telephone, but he nods for us to sit down and wait.

I gather that Sigmund is phoning a barber shop because his kid needs a haircut.

"Let me know when two barbers are free," he says, hanging up.

"Why does your kid need two barbers for a haircut?" I ask'.

"The kid has two heads," says Subconscious Sigmund. "And now, what can I do for you?"

I point to Joe Blow and introduce him. "I wish you to tell me what is numb with his skull," I request.

So Sigmund takes Joe Blow into his private office and gives him the third degree. He pumps him for his life history. He grills him like a weenie.

Joe Blow is soon pouring out all his troubles.

Subconscious Sigmund listens very carefully.

"Do you ever dream?" he asks.

"Of course I do."

"What about?"

"Oh, I don't know," says Joe Blow, kind of embarrassed. "I have very peculiar dreams. I dream that I am strong, powerful, dynamic. I can lift great weights and have remarkable endurance. I have the ability to see through walls, and hear any sound. And in some dreams I can even fly."

"Aha!" says Subconscious Sigmund. "Also," says Joe Blow, blushing, "in some dreams I am always having dates with movie queens."

"Really," says Subconscious Sigmund. "You are strong, powerful, forceful, eh? And you have dates with movie queens."

"That's right," says Joe Blow. "Can you do anything to help me?"

"Sure," snaps Subconscious Sigmund. He fumbles around and hands Blow a little white box.

"What's this?" asks Blow.

"A box of sleeping tablets," grunts Subconscious Sigmund. "With dreams like that, what do you want to stay awake for?"

Joe Blow sighs, puts the box in his pocket, and plods downstairs. I follow him.

"Do not be discouraged," I remark, when we hit the street. "I have another idea that might help you."

"Nothing can help me."

"Rome wasn't burned in a day," I tell him. "We will try again. I think we ought to go over and see Skeetch and Meetch."

"Who?"

"Sylvester Skeetch and Mordecai Meetch," I answer. "The famous scientific Americans. They run the *Horsecracker Institute,* and they are always inventing stuff in their laboratory, such as new ways to avoid paying the rent."

"Can they help me?"

"If anybody can, they are the personalities," I brag. "They are scientific, but terrific."

JOE BLOW trims his limbs over toward the *Horsecracker Institute.*

We climb the stairs to the big private laboratory where Skeetch and Meetch hang out, mostly around the elbows.

Little fat Skeetch and his chubby partner glare over their goggles in the outer office when we come in.

"Lefty Feep!" yells Skeetch. "It's a pleasure to see you! Sit down! Have a cigar? Good—then give it to me!"

"I want to read you my latest monograph," Meetch interrupts. "It is entitled 'AN APPREHENSION OF AN INTENTION FOR THE PREVENTION OF INVENTION' and it just won an Honorable Mention at the Convention."

"I haven't time," I tell them. "I only come here because I bring you a case."

"Open it up and I will get the glasses," says Skeetch.

"Not it—him," I correct, pointing at Joe Blow.

"What do you want us to do—bury him?" inquires Skeetch.

"No. I want you to listen to his story and help him."

So Joe Blow gives out with a pout about his fate. He tells about his bum room, his overbearing editor, his reporter friends that pick on him, and his girl friend who runs around with a racketeer. He mentions that he is weak and meek and the future looks bleak.

Skeetch and Meetch sigh and shake their heads.

I can see they don't know what to suggest.

But Joe Blow goes on. He tells about seeing Subconscious Sigmund, and answering questions about his dreams. He mentions dreaming of flying and being strong and dynamic.

Suddenly both Skeetch and Meetch jump up and yell.

"We have it!" yells Meetch. "Eureka!"

"So do you," I snap.

"You come at the right moment," Skeetch babbles. "We are just looking for a subject to experiment on with our new machine."

"Machine? What do you mean?"

"The most keen machine you've ever seen!" raves Meetch. "We call it the *Morpheus Arm.*"

"Why?"

"Because it works while you sleep. It is a mechanical hypnotic device which translates the subconscious images of dreams into waking realities, utilizing subliminal concepts and energizing the psychic trauma until a vitalization occurs which impinges imaginative free-fantasies upon a framework of actuality, thus setting up a basis of positive activity actuated by the psyche."

"The hell you tell," I exclaim.

"What does he mean?" asks Joe Blow.

"Why it is simple," I inform him. "He means he invents a machine that turns your sleeping thoughts into waking realities. Whatever you imagine you can do while you dream, you actually can do."

"Right," says Meetch. "I couldn't explain it better myself. In fact, I couldn't explain it."

"But how does this machine operate?" persists Blow.

"Very simple arrangement," says Skeetch. "The subject goes to sleep. As he sleeps, electro-magnetic impulses, due to photo-electronic control are set up. The subject's heart action is synchronized to the movement of the machine. At the same time, a hypnotic force draws bodily magnetism from the sleeper as he dreams. The dreams, in a word, become a part of the machine—and the energy of the machine, operating in ratio with the dream image, flows into the body of the sleeper.

"When the sleeper wakes up, he has the ability and strength to carry out his dream activities. Simple?"

"You are simple," I tell him. "It sounds screwy to me."

"The machine is in our laboratory now," protests Meetch.

"I'd like to look at it, anyway," sighs Joe Blow. So we drag into the big laboratory.

SURE enough, there is this huge arm, attached to a big black cluster of wheels and wires, mounted on a heavy metal base set above an operating table.

"Looks like they've got something here," says Joe Blow.

"Yeah—something for the scrap drive," I sneer.

"I believe these gentlemen," says Joe Blow. "I think I would like to make the experiment. After all, what have I got to lose? I am down and out. But if I could be the way I am in my dreams—oh boy!"

"All you need to do is go to sleep," says Skeetch.

I shrug. If that is what Joe Blow wants, he will have it. But I cannot wait around for him to go to sleep.

Still, I am always glad to do a friend a favor.

So I walk behind Joe Blow and tap him over the head with a hammer.

He falls asleep at once.

Skeetch and Meetch lift him up on the table. He lies there under the laboratory lights, looking weaker and skinnier and littler than ever.

Skeetch and Meetch go into their act. They indulge in a lot of wire-connecting, strap-buckling, switch-fiddling, button-pressing, and assorted dial-turning.

All at once the machinery begins to hum in various keys, like the Four Ink Spots. Then it gains a little power and begins to sing, off-key, like the Andrews Sisters.

Sylvester Skeetch and Mordecai Meetch swings the big arm of the machine over until it hangs just above Joe Blow's head. The arm jiggles up and down. A little screen in back of the machine base lights up and long streaks of electricity crackle across it.

The pinball operators will pay real money for stuff like this, I figure.

But Skeetch and Meetch are more of the screwball operator type.

All at once Meetch utters a mutter.

"It isn't working right," he says. "We can't synchronize the heart action because the patient's pulse is too weak."

"Adrenalin," suggests Skeetch. He runs over to a glass cabinet and comes back with a hypodermic needle.

"Let's go," yells Meetch. "Shoot the harpoon to me, goon."

They give Joe Blow the needle.

The machine begins to groan and shake. So does Joe Blow. But in rhythm with the machine!

Now I notice the electric streaks on the screen also move in rhythm with Joe Blow's breathing. Everything is synchronized. And the arm above Joe Blow's head seems to be conducting energy from the machine into his body.

I sit there watching, and eating a banana, with rapt scientific curiosity. What will happen next? A short-circuit, I suspect.

But there is no explosion.

All at once the two geniuses rush over to Joe Blow and unstrap him. Meetch goes over to a wash stand and comes back with a glass of water which he throws in Joe Blow's face.

Joe Blow wakes up, sits up, gets up.

He is awake, and that is no fake.

I stare at him. He doesn't look any different as he climbs off the table.

IN BACK of him the machine grinds away, but that is the only evidence that anything happens during the last ten minutes. Except for that, it might all be a dream.

But if you ever see a dream walking, it is Joe Blow—as I soon discover.

"How do you feel?" I yell, above the machine's humming noise.

He smiles.

"Wonderful! Marvelous! Superb! Not so bad!" he announces.

Skeetch rushes up to him.

"It's a success," he gasps. "The machine works! Congratulations for helping our experiment."

He shakes hands with Joe Blow. Suddenly he starts to scowl and howl.

"Ouch!" yells Skeetch. "Leggo—you're breaking my fingers!"

Joe Blow lets go. He takes off his glasses and throws them away.

"Don't need these any more," he announces.

We look at him, wondering if it is true.

"My friend," says Meetch, "if you benefit from this machine,' we are very happy. As long as it continues to operate you will be living your dreams. We will not shut it off. So if you are indeed stronger and more capable due to our efforts we are very pleased. We urge you to take full advantage of the machine's powers, so we can study the effects. In a word, make your dreams come true."

Joe Blow stands there. He is still a little, scrawny-looking guy, but he has a new smile on his face.

"Very well, gentlemen," he says. "Thank you for all your trouble. But if you will pardon me," he murmurs, "I must go now."

"Goodbye, Joe," I tell him.

“Goodbye,” says Joe Blow, stepping over to the open window and flying away into the night.

Yes that is exactly what he does! He marches to the open window and hurls himself through the air like a rocket.

“For sobbing out loud!” I yell. “Look at that!”

Skeetch blinks, but Meetch winks.

“That’s what he dreams about,” he tells me. “With the aid of the machine he should be able to do that. He is almost walking—or rather, flying—in his sleep now. His brain is awake, but his soul is in a sort of a stupor.”

“Stuporman,” says Skeetch.

“Exactly,” Meetch answers. “Joe Blow is now a Stuporman. As long as we keep our machine running, he can do whatever his imagination will allow.”

Skeetch rubs his hands. “Well, that’s that,” he says. “We will let the machine run a while and see what happens to our subject in this little experiment. But now we must go back to work. What is next on our program, Meetch?”

Meetch looks at his list.

“We are supposed to build a rocket-ship,” he announces.

“AH right,” says Skeetch. “I suppose it will take us several days, at least. You had better go now, Lefty.”

So I take my leave of Skeetch and Meetch, wondering all the while what Joe Blow does after he flies off into the night.

I do not find out until a long time afterwards. But this is the way it works out.

Joe Blow is very delighted to find he can fly. He glides along over the rooftops, hoping an Army patrol doesn’t spot him, and practices gliding and swooping and dipping, and maybe a little peeking into second-story windows.

BUT after a while the novelty wears off and Joe Blow realizes he has a job to do.

So he heads over to his hotel. He lights down in the alley in back and walks in very normally. He prances up to the desk, where the manager is sitting—a fat, tough-looking number.

"Pardon me," he coughs, looking meek.

"Why should I?" growls the manager, looking up. He is the fellow who imposes on Joe Blow by kicking him out of his good room and putting him in a cubbyhole a few days before.

"I should like to have my old room back," Blow remarks.

The manager glares. "I already tell you it is quite impossible. That room is rented to somebody else now."

"But it has a nice southern exposure," argues Joe Blow. "I lived in it for five years and like it. Now you transfer me to a little closet with no windows at all. What can I do for air?"

"You can get the hell out of here," suggests the manager. "I have no time to waste arguing with an insignificant little pip-squeak like you."

Joe Blow shrugs. "No southern exposure?" he mumbles. "All right. Suit yourself."

He walks out of the hotel. The manager laughs.

But a minute later, the manager is not laughing. He is shaking. In fact, the whole building is shaking.

The shaking turns to a terrific shudder. Then there is a rumble, a totter, the building seems to lift in the air, and everything whirls around.

When the manager opens his eyes again, everything is quiet. And normal.

He rushes to the door and looks outside to see about the earthquake.

He looks around and almost collapses.

"I'm on the wrong street!" he whispers.

The explanation, of course, is simple. Joe Blow wants a room with southern exposure. So he merely goes outside and lifts up the building and turns it around until his room faces south.

Then he puts it back down, punches a hole through the wall of his room for a window, and flies away.

"This Stuporman business is all right," he thinks to himself, lighting on the pavement across from his newspaper office.

He starts to cross the street.

A car whizzes around the corner, almost clipping him. A tough but gruff voice sings out, "Whyn'cha look where youse is going, huh? Wanna hold up traffic?"

Ordinarily, Joe Blow cringes when somebody yells at him. But now he yells right back.

"Yes, I do want to hold up traffic," he says.

And he scoops up the car in his arms and holds it up. He puts it down out of his way, and crosses the street.

The tough but gruff guy is now sick but quick.

JOE BLOW ignores him and marches into the newspaper office. He heads straight for the back where the editor hangs out.

Usually he does not dare to invade his privacy, but today he walks right into the inner office and sits down.

The editor looks up.

"So here you are, eh, Blow? What the hell's been keeping you?" he snarls. "It's my day off."

"Day off? Day off? You just have a day off last week when your appendix busts."

"I know, but—"

"Listen, Blow," snarls the editor. "While you are taking your day off, stories are breaking all over town. I get a report about some nut who is flying over the city. Do you phone me in the yarn? No!"

"I can explain—"

"Shuddup! Then the manager of the hotel down the street phones in about an earthquake. It picks up his hotel and turns it around on its foundations. Do you cover this story? No!”

“But listen, sir—”

“You know what I’m gonna do, Blow?” yells the editor, getting up and grabbing Blow by the scruff of his neck. “I’m gonna kick you out.”

And he aims a very hearty kick indeed at Joe Blow’s stomach while his back is turned.

“Ouch!” moans the editor, hopping around and grabbing his foot. “What you got—lead in your pants?”

Joe Blow pushes the editor back into a chair and smiles.

“Now *you* listen to *me,”* he says. The editor sits back very quiet. He is so quiet you can hear his eyes popping when Joe Blow exhibits his new personality as Stuporman.

“I am sick and tired of your bossing,” says Blow. “For ten years I work here on the *Daily Bulb* without a raise. I think it is about time you double my salary.”

“What the—”

“Sit down!” snaps Blow. “I am not afraid of you any more, you big yard of lard. You are not as tough as you look. For a while I think you are all muscle, but now I know your secret.

Do I get the raise, or do I tell all the reporters you wear a corset?”

“Corset?” screams the editor. “How do you know—are you the devil?”

“No,” says Joe Blow. “But my super-vision tells me that beneath your vest is a corset.”

The editor blushes. He shakes his head violently.

“Don’t be upset,” Blow adds. “Your wig will slide off.”

The editor gulps.

“We all know you wear a wig,” Blow tells him. “Matter of fact, my superhearing tells me that some of the reporters in the outer office are talking about it right now. They are wondering if you ever find any eggs in that bird-nest you have on your head.”

The editor, after screaming, blushing, and gulping, is too tired to do anything. He just sits there.

“Where do you get your wonderful hearing and vision?” he inquires. “To say nothing of whatever you have when I try to kick you?”

“Never mind,” Joe Blow cracks. “From now on I will not be taking kicks any more, I will be giving them out. And you are always at the top of my list.”

Blow grins. “Yes sir,” he says. “I have a deep-seated affection for you and—”

JUST then the door opens and Blow’s super-vision and super-hearing get a real workout. For into the room steps his girl-friend, Effie Fink. This damsel is really quite an eyeful and quite high-spirited. In fact she is all curves and nerves.

Joe Blow’s mouth hangs open and he forgets all about his abilities as Stuporman.

Effie Fink ignores him and prances up to the editor.

“I think I’m on the trail of that subway graft,” she announces. “The *Daily Bulb* will have a scoop tomorrow if your little girl reporter knows anything about it.”

“Fine,” says the editor. “We ought to uncover this affair. We must find out what’s holding up the subway construction.”

“I’m following a hot lead,” says Effie. “Hope I don’t get my nose burned.”

Joe Blow sits there gulping and hoping Effie Fink will notice him, but she doesn’t.

“Ah—uh—hello, Effie,” he yammers.

Effie turns and gives him a look straight from the Deep-Freeze.

“Oh, it’s you,” she remarks.

“Sure,” says Joe. “Don’t you notice me when you come in?”

“No,” answers the girl reporter. “And I still don’t.”

“Uh—how about going out with me this evening?”

Effie laughs.

"I'm sorry, but I already have an engagement, thank heaven! I am the guest of Mr. Cutter."

"You mean 'Throats' Cutter, the racketeer?" gasps Joe.

"Never mind the vulgar nicknames. Mr. Cutter is a gentleman, as far as I know, and I will thank you not to cast any aspersions on him."

"I would like to cast something more then aspersions on that big baboon!" mutters Blow.

The damsel laughs. "You? Why you haven't strength enough to cast a vote," she titters. "But I cannot waste time. I'm on my way."

Effie Fink breezes, banging the door shut behind her.

The editor looks at Joe Blow sitting there and trying to pick his face up from the floor when it starts falling.

"Huh!" grunts the editor. "You and your super-vision and super-hearing and super-strength! Why don't you assert yourself with her, you superchump?"

Joe Blow shakes his head. "You don't understand," he says. "When I see Effie I don't think about myself any more. I forget everything. I worship the ground her open-toed shoes toddle on! Besides, I don't want her to know about my power. I want her to love me for myself."

The editor has a slight change of heart. "Don't feel so bad, Joe," he advises. "I happen to know she really doesn't like this 'Throats' Cutter she hangs around with lately. It is merely that she suspects him of being mixed up in this graft to halt construction on the subway. She goes out with him to pump him, try to uncover the deal, and get a story for the paper."

Joe Blow perks up a little when he hears this. "I see," he exclaims. "It's strictly business."

"Exactly. And this subway scandal is important."

"Right," says Joe Blow. "Today I happen to be visiting my scientific friends, Skeetch and Meetch," he observes, proudly. "I notice that when the subway is completed it will end very close to their *Horsecracker Institute."*

The editor makes a suggestion. "Why don't you get on this story too?" he asks. "The sooner we find out about the subway, the sooner Effie Fink is through with ‘Throats’ Cutter.”

JOE BLOW is so excited he forgets about his super-strength. He springs to his feet and bumps his head against the ceiling. He comes down gracefully, along with a shower of plaster.

“I’ll do it,” he shouts. “I’ll follow her.”

“Probably she is at his apartment,” suggests the editor.

“In that racketeer’s apartment? I must be off,” yells Blow.

He runs to the open window.

Blow blows.

The editor watches him dive out.

“Yes, he must be off,” he sighs.

But Joe Blow, flying through the night, is very much on. He swoops down at a corner drugstore and rockets into a phone booth. Every ounce of his new super-energy is quivering with excitement. He calls the *Horsecracker Institute,* meanwhile tearing the telephone book in half just for practice.

“Hello,” he yells, when Skeetch answers the phone. “This is Joe Blow. Have you still got the *Morpheus Arm* working? Good! Be sure to keep it on. I’ll need everything I’ve got tonight.”

He hangs up, whirls through the drugstore, and takes off from the curb.

A cop sees him flying into the night.

“Hey, you!” he hollers. “Why don’t you wait until the lights change?”

But Joe Blow is already a mile up, zooming for the big apartment where “Throats” Cutter hangs his coat and gat.

In a moment he is perched on the window ledge outside the 19th floor, using his super-vision to squint through into the rooms beyond.

There is Effie Fink, sitting on the sofa with “Throats” Cutter. Joe Blow looks at the celebrated racketeer and shudders.

“Throats” Cutter is only about five feet six and weighs about ISO pounds, but he is every inch a thoroughbred. A thoroughbred rat. Even if his height and weight are only average, he looks very strong. His arms bulge with muscles and his hip-pockets bulge with hardware. He is sitting with his legs crossed, and Joe Blow can see a stiletto parked in his left stocking. He has his coat off and is relaxing in a bullet-proof vest, but his tie is neatly knotted to hide the blackjack hanging underneath it. “Throats” Cutter is smoothing back his coal-black hair with his left hand, because his right hand is covered with brass knuckles.

Effie Fink doesn’t seem to notice this one-man arsenal’s appearance. She is giving him the old oil.

“It must be marvelous to be so important,” she sighs. “And have so many people interested in you.”

“I get shot at every day,” says Cutter, proudly.

“You must be very busy,” whispers the damsel. “I hear you are interested in the new subway.”

“Who tells you that?” snaps Cutter, his eyes glittering like the teeth on a hungry shark.

“Oh, a little birdie.”

“A little dead birdie, if I ever catch him,” mutters Cutter.

“But isn’t it true?” needles the girl reporter.

“Don’t bother your head about such things and you’ll keep it longer,” says Cutter. “Wait a minute. I’ll mix us up a drink and we’ll get sociable.” He gets up and walks out very slow, because of all the hardware weighing him down.

EFFIE FINK doesn’t waste any time. The minute he leaves the room she runs to the desk, trying the drawers. They are locked. Then she runs over to the wall safe and fiddles with it. It doesn’t open.

Finally she sees a closet door and opens it.

In the closet hangs three overcoats, two suits, and a large man with a bandage in his mouth.

“Eeeeek!” remarks Effie Fink.

She turns around. “Throats” Cutter stands in the doorway of the parlor, watching her.

“Do not be alarmed,” he says, smiling. “He is doing all right hanging there in the closet. I have insect spray in there so the moths won’t get him.”

“But I know him,” the girl reporter blurts. “That’s Ambrose Reed, the contractor who is building the subway.”

“Not any more,” grins Cutter. “From now on I am building the subway.”

“You kidnap him?” whispers the girl.

Cutter doesn’t grin any more.

“It is too bad you open that door,” he says. “Because I do not like for people to discover the skeletons in my closet. Even big fat skeletons like this Ambrose Reed.”

“What are you going to do?” asks Effie Fink.

“I am going to tell you everything,” Cutter answers. “Yes, I kidnap Ambrose Reed last week. I take over the contracting job and stir up trouble with the men so the work slows down. Because the longer it takes to build the subway, the more it costs. And the more it costs, the more I will make. Understand?”

“Yes.” Effie frowns. “But why do you admit all this to me?”

Cutter laughs. “So you will have a good story to put in the paper tomorrow, of course,” he answers.

“You mean I can print it?”

Cutter shrugs. “Well—maybe not. I think I’ve got a better story figured out. With a little female interest in it, see? How does this sound? ‘BEAUTIFUL GIRL REPORTER FOUND DEAD IN SUBWAY. IDENTITY UNKNOWN, BUT SEARCHERS ARE CONFIDENT OF FINDING MORE BITS SHORTLY AND PUTING THEM TOGETHER.’ There’s a real story, eh?”

It is a trifle difficult for Effie to answer this question, because she is now hanging upside down over Cutter’s shoulder as he grabs her up and smothers her mouth with his hand.

He heads for the door and dashes out of the apartment by a rear elevator.

Joe Blow, meanwhile, is very busy on his own hook.

Naturally, he wants to save Effie Fink from death.

But once a reporter, always a reporter. There is a big news story here, and he must get a scoop.

So as soon as Cutter and the damsel leave the room, he springs through the window and unties Mr. Ambrose Reed.

In a flash he whips out a pencil and notebook and gets the story of his untimely snatching from the kidnaped contractor.

Then Stuporman's strength comes into play. He rips open the desk drawers and tears the safe door from the wall. He scoops out all the documents about the subway contracts.

In a twinkling he calls the editor of the *Daily Bulb* and delivers his lead story.

"Reed says this delay will hold up the subway six months," he says. "Yes, Reed's safe, with me. Effie Fink? Oh, Effie Fink is with Cutter at the subway. He's going to blow her to bits or something. What? I should save her? Not a bad idea."

JOE BLOW, the Stuporman hangs up, waves goodbye to Ambrose Reed, and jumps out of the window.

"Dammit!" he yells, outside. "I should have enough sense to open the window before I jump."

But there is no time for quibbling. Joe Blow therefore, does not quibble. He flies. He heads for the dark, yawning mouth of the unfinished subway tunnel.

He swoops down into the black pit and skims along through darkness.

Far ahead a light gleams along the tracks.

In the glow, Joe Blow can see a sight that has not been his privilege to witness since the days of the silent movies.

Effie Fink is lying on the subway rails in the tunnel way beyond. She is tied hand and foot, and looks very uncomfortable.

Coming towards her is a big electric hand-car, whizzing along the rails. On the hand-car is a large keg of TNT, with the fuse sputtering away and burning down.

When it hits Effie Fink in a second or two, there will be a difficult time finding enough left of her to please a jigsaw puzzle fan.

This situation alarms Effie quite a bit, and she is uttering loud cries of displeasure.

Way down the tracks stands "Throats" Cutter, and he does not agree with Effie Fink's complaints. He is laughing in a jolly fashion—a jolly fashion for a hyena, that is.

Joe Blow, *alias* Stuporman, takes in this situation with a single super-vision.

In one second the TNT and the hand-car will strike Effie Fink.

He hurls himself forward.

Fast as he is, he is still a hundred feet away.

Too late!

Mustering up every ounce of his strength, Stuporman opens his mouth, takes careful aim at the dynamite keg a hundred feet away—and spits the fuse out!

It sputters and dies, but the handcar rolls.

Stuporman waits until it actually touches Effie Fink—so that the wheels cut the ropes tying her, and that saves him the trouble.

Then he zooms down and pushes the car back up the track. He gives it a powerful shove and it begins to rocket back towards "Throats" Cutter. Cutter can't run away. He fumbles in the darkness of the tunnel and whirls around as the hand-car approaches with Stuporman sitting on it.

Joe Blow sees what Cutter has in his hands.

A big, black-barreled sub-machine gun.

And it is aimed at him.

Stuporman or no Stuporman, he doesn't think he can stop bullets.

So as Cutter shoots, Stuporman Blow leaps up, comes down on the barrel of the gun, and bends it backwards while Cutter is firing it.

The bullets enter Mr. Cutter very rapidly, and he becomes very dead.

Effie Fink comes running up, after taking all this time to pull up her stockings and put on fresh make-up.

“Oh, Joe, you’re wonderful!” she whispers. “You will be a hero for saving the subway.”

Joe Blow, the Stuporman, frowns.

“The subway!” he mutters. “That’s right. I know I forget something.”

“What is it, darling?” asks Effie Fink.

“Get out of here,” orders the new Joe Blow. “I’ve got work to do.”

MEEKLY, Effie Fink walks up the tunnel and out of the unfinished subway at the nearest exit.

Joe Blow turns to the wall of earth beyond.

He glances at his wristwatch and sighs.

“Gosh! It’s almost midnight. Well, that leaves me a couple of hours, anyway.”

So taking off his coat, Stuporman gets to work and finishes building the subway before morning!

Yes, all night long he tunnels and digs, and hauls and props and scoops and cements and pushes through under the streets.

By six a.m. he is dizzier than a crosseyed octopus in a Hall of Mirrors.

Even Stuporman gets tired.

And that, of course, must be why he gets so confused and makes a mistake. His super-vision is reading blue prints while his super-strength is burrowing through the cement to build the terminal station.

Right then and there he goes wrong.

He digs a little too far and a little off-side.

As a matter of fact, he comes up in the basement of a building. The building above him is shaking and he hears familiar voices cursing away.

“What’s the matter?” he croaks hoarsely. “What’s happening? Why do I feel so weak?”

After starting this quiz program with himself, Joe Blow takes one look around him, gulps, and falls flat on his face.

When he wakes up he stares into the goggled eyes of Sylvester Skeetch and Mordecai Meetch.

“Why do you do it?” moans Meetch.

“Do what?” Joe Blow moans back at him.

“Dig up under our cellar and shake the building,” Skeetch answers. “When you do that you cause the *Morpheus Arm* to jiggle. It stops cold. Something goes wrong and it will not work any more!”

“You mean I wreck the machinery that controls my dreams come true?” sighs Joe Blow. “I am not Stuporman any more?”

“No more,” says Skeetch.

“But you are a hero in today’s papers,” Meetch consoles him.

Joe Blow gets up weakly.

“It’s all over, I guess. Now I am just Joe Blow the reporter again. Effie Fink will not go for me now that I lose my superstrength.”

“Wait a minute,” Meetch suggested.

“Nobody needs to know you aren’t Stuporman any more. Don’t tell her. She will never catch on. Go to her now. I bet she will be your slave for life.”

Joe Blow takes this suggestion, nods, and beams. He walks out in the early morning sunshine with a smile on his face.

And sure enough, when he gets back to the office, Effie Fink falls all over him. The editor is proud, the subway contractor is overjoyed, and Joe Blow—the famous Stuporman—is a hero.

LEFTY FEEP finished wagging his tale and sat back.

I nodded.

“So that’s how subways are built,” I said, a little sarcastically.

“Joe Blow tells me all about it himself just now,” Feep answered. “You do not think he is a prevaricator, do you? And certainly you know that *I* am

100% truthful."

"You're better than that," I told Feep. "Sometimes you're 200% at least."

He smiled at the compliment.

I turned to stare at skinny little bespectacled Joe Blow.

"Seems hard to believe that such a runt could do so many wonderful things," I sighed.

"You can see the subway for yourself. Doesn't that prove it?" Feep told me.

"I suppose so," I admitted. "But by the way, I forgot to ask you a question."

"Let's have it," said Lefty Feep.

"Why is your Stuporman friend wearing a bandage around his head?"

"Oh, that?"

Feep smiled as he replied,

"It seems he marries this girl Effie Fink, and she beats the hell out of him."

THE END

The Goon From Rangoon

When statues come to fife, that's more than Lefty Feep wants to monkey with—even for rubies!

JACK'S shack was very crowded when I came in to eat. I ordered and got service, then began to nibble away with a newspaper in front of my face. Suddenly a fork tore through the paper and dipped into my dish. A hand reached around and lifted my cup of coffee.

"Hey!" I said.

"Hello," answered Lefty Feep, peering through the hole left by his fork. "Excuse me, please—it is so crowded in here I make a mistake."

The long-faced strand from the fringes of society gave me a disarming smile as he lifted the fork to his lips.

Then "What is this stuff?" Feep exploded, tasting a mouthful.

"Chop suey," I replied.

Lefty Feep put his fork down with a bang.

"Phooey to chop suey!" he announced. "Chow mein gives me a pain. Egg foo yong should never be brung. Rice isn't nice. Tea is not for me. Food Chinese is only grease!"

"Why Lefty—China is an ally of ours," I objected.

"I would not wander to China to look for Dinah," Feep insisted. "Confucius say to stay away."

"What do you know about China?" Feep frowned. "Well maybe all China is not so bad. Me, I never get high in Shanghai and I never kick the gong in Hongkong. I do not even have a fling in Peking. But there is one place that I cannot stand."

"You can hardly stand anywhere," I muttered under my breath. But aloud I said, "Where is that, Lefty?"

"Why—Rangoon."

"Rangoon? But Rangoon isn't in China. It's in Burma," I told him. "Burma."

"To me Burma is only a shave," said Lefty Feep. "But a pretty close shave at that."

"So you've been to Rangoon, recently? It's occupied by the Japs, isn't it?"

"Wait a minute. I do not say I visit this Rangoon. As a matter of fact, Rangoon sends something here to me. And I do not know about it being occupied by Japs. But there are some kind of demons there, anyway. And they certainly give me a demon-stration."

"What's all this?" I perked up my ears. "You got something from Rangoon, you say? And there's demons mixed up in it?"

"I get plenty," Feep replied. "And I am mixed up in it. It is the damndest Chinese puzzle you ever hear of."

"I didn't hear of it."

"Well, you wall—right now," Lefty Feep promised me.

This was my signal to rise. "Some other time," I said. "Right now I've got to see a man about a dog."

"That is just how it starts out with me," Feep said, pushing me firmly back into the chair with the point of his fork.

He speared me into my seat, harpooned me with a baleful glance, and began to wag his tale.

* * *

LIKE I say, it all starts one day when I got to see a man about a dog. The man is a chiropodist and the dog happens to be my left dog which has on it a bunion the size of an onion.

So I move the feet down the street to the office of Doc Lessgland, a toe-twister. Lessgland is a good chiropodist, even though his sole support is heels.

Well, his office is pretty crowded, so I sit down and pick up a copy of one of those 1904 magazines and prepare to find out who wins the World Series or whatever they play those days.

Pretty soon I glance up when the door opens and get an eyeful of the personality who limps in.

"Strike me technicolor!" I mumble. "If it isn't Dr. Fu Manchu in person." At least, it looks like it might be. Because the article in question is six feet three of China Boy . . . an extremely yellow fellow with a bald head and the kind of a stomach you see on these statues. As a matter of fact, I almost get up and stick some incense in his ears just to see if he lights up. But do not mistake me—I have nothing but sympathy for this Chinese character, because he certainly looks as though he is suffering from a bad case of the Limehouse Blues.

He hobbles in the door and sits down in a chair with a groan and a scream. The groan comes from him, but the scream comes from the chair-springs when they feel the torture of 300 lbs. of China-ware resting on them.

I look at the foot of this gentle oriental and see the big bandage and shake my head.

"Tough luck," I observe.

He forces a smile.

"Accidents are no trouble unless they happen," he says.

I take in this Chinese philosophy and go back for more.

"What happens to your foot?" I inquire. "Drop a heavy safe on it?"

"A safe is safe until it is open," he comes back. "But no, it is not a safe that drops upon my humble foot. It is a jewel."

“A jewel?”

“A gem of purest ray serene,” he answers.

I SIT there with my mouth open, trying to give my brain some air. Because I am doing some fancy thinking.

Imagine a jewel so big that you hurt your foot when you drop it on your toes! Here, I figure, is a character worth cultivating. Somebody ought to look after a guy’s jewels and stuff so he isn’t all the time dropping them and hurting himself. Maybe I can get a job hauling around gold bars for this Chinatown Charlie.

“That is too bad,” I sympathize. “You should not be such a butterfingers.”

“Precious stones may break my bones,” he comes back.

“This jewel business interests me for some strange reason,” I tell him.

“I never figure there are any jewels big enough to hurt anybody. In fact, I would not mind a shower of emeralds or rubies at all.”

“But do not misunderstand,” purrs the Chinese. “This is not a genuine stone that falls upon my foot.”

Aha—it would be like this! He merely drops a counterfeit hunk of glass on his pinkies. I groan with disgust.

“No,” he continues. “It is just an imitation, naturally. I am examining it for size—because the real jewel is many times heavier.”

The real jewel! There *is* one then! I sit right back up and take plenty of notice.

“Of course, it will be difficult to pry it out of the idol,” the Chinese goes on. “And the idol will be offended.”

“I would offend anybody for a paltry fortune,” I answer.

“But the god of the idol—” says the Chinese. Then he stops and looks at me hard.

“Who are you?” he asks. “I have a feeling you may be sent from Heaven.”

“My name is Lefty Feep,” I tell him. “And I come here straight from Gorilla Gabface’s pool parlor.”

“Better still,” smiles the Chinese. “Permit me to introduce myself. I am Jack Fu Groan, proprietor of the Hoo Flung Goo Chop Suey Palace.”

This surprises me. What does a Chinese hash-house owner have to do with fancy jewelry?

But Jack Fu Groan explains all that in a few short words.

“I realize this may surprise you,” he admits. “For nothing surprises like the unexpected. Particularly if it is startling.”

“Cut the double-talk in half,” I suggest.

“You see, I have a brother in Rangoon,” he tells me.

“Yes, my brother, Wuan Low Groan is high priest of the Great Temple. And now that the cursed Japanese occupy the city, the treasures of the Great Temple are in peril. So my brother has the presence of mind to send the Temple treasures here, to me.

“One of these treasures is the famed idol of the god Squat.”

“What?”

“Squat,” he says. “And this deity, a giant figure of hammered bronze, has a sacred treasure in its brow—two gigantic pigeon-blood ruby eyes. Two ruby eyes, the size of large apples.”

“So why do you wish to squeeze applesauce from the sacred god?” I inquire.

JACK FU GROAN gives me a sweet smile.

“Do not be so stupid as to play dumb and appear ignorant,” he suggests. “You and I are enlightened men. We do not believe in superstitions or curses or heathen nonsense.

“Besides, my brother is dead now. Word reaches me today. The treasure is rightfully mine. I do not worship Squat. I do not fear a curse. Why not take the rubies?”

“Why not?” I echo.

"That is why it is fortunate that I meet you. You impress me as a strong, sturdy individual, Mr. Feep."

"I can lick my weight in war stamps," I tell him.

"Then you are precisely the man to assist me. I am too clumsy, I suppose. I order an imitation jewel in advance to substitute for one of the idol's eyes and immediately drop it on my foot. Now that the real idol is here, I shall never succeed in prying out the eyes safely, let alone do all the work of unpacking without some clumsy injury to myself.

"So what do you say, Mr. Feep? Would you care to assist me in securing the rubies? There is a large fee for you if you do."

"Me for a fee," I come back.

"Naturally all this must be kept strictly confidential. It is a secret."

"Silence without violence," I promise.

"Well then." Fu Groan gets up. "Let us be on our way at once. There is no time to lose."

"What about your foot?"

"Some other time. Once I get those rubies in my hands, I shall dance for joy."

"Get ready to step then, brother," I answer. "Because I'm all set to fool with the jewels."

And off we go to the Hoo Flung Goo Chop Suey Palace.

This turns out to be a very dingy-looking vitamin-villa indeed, in a very low neighborhood of town. In fact, it is near Gorilla Gabface's pool hall, which makes the neighborhood extremely vile.

It certainly does not look prosperous from the outside, and there are not enough customers inside to start a game of solitaire. All I see in the shadows is a little dried-up man wearing a greasy tuxedo.

"Any business, Opium?" asks Fu Groan of this little guy.

Opium shakes his head. Fu Groan turns to me and whispers:

"I call him Opium because he's such a dope."

He leads me back between the tables until we get to a little door with a dragon painted on it. He goes through, turns on a light, and beckons me to follow him in.

I enter.

THE room beyond is very large, almost as large as the entire chop suey restaurant. And it is filled up to the ceiling with big packing boxes and crates.

“The treasures of the Temple of Squat,” Fu Groan whispers. “Vases, figurines, altars, ceremonial hangings, carvings, pottery, urns. A small fortune.

“But who wants a small fortune? You and I are interested in bigger stakes. Let us proceed at once to open the big case over there—the case containing the sacred idol of Squat himself.”

“Got any tools?” I say, looking at the packing case. It certainly is a big thing. Opening it will take a chisel at least, but that is nothing to me, because in some circles I am known as quite a chiseler.

“Help yourself,” says Fu Groan with a wave of his fat hand. “Chisel, saw, hammer, whatever you want. I urge you to exhibit great care lest you damage the idol.”

“I’ll do the job lightly and politely,” I promise. And set to work.

It is a terrific task, but at last I strip the boards and packing away and the great idol of Squat sits on the floor before us. I stand back in surprise.

Squat is certainly something to look at. He is named very well, being a squatting figure with legs crossed underneath. Even so he must be over five feet tall. He looks not a little like Jack Fu Groan, only with more lard and twice as hard.

He has a very mean face, like a wrestler who gets thrown out of the ring and lands on a spike instead of a lap, and his bronze mouth hangs open, showing big ivory tusks.

But neither I or Fu Groan waste any time looking at his body and face. We stare at the eyes—the two rubies.

There they are, glowing like live coals on either side of Squat’s nose.

Pigeon-blood rubies, cut in beautiful facets, with two pupils fixed in the eyes so they seem to stare out as if old Squat was alive.

"That's nice ice," I comment to Fu Groan. "I never seen such size in a gem before."

"Perfect, too," Fu Groan pants, getting excited. "They will bring a fortune. Now you must take them out and replace them with these glass imitations."

He scrabbles around in the corner and brings over the hunks of cut glass he wants substituted. They are exact imitations.

"Made from photographs and the description my brother sends me," Fu Groan explains.

Me, I do not give him the benefit of my attention. I am all ready to claw away at the rubies.

But Fu Groan coughs and stops me for a minute.

"OH, BY the way," he says. "You are not superstitious, are you?"

"Yes and no," I tell him. "I do not walk under ladders because they may fall on me. I do not like to have a black cat cross my path because I might stumble over it. I throw salt over my shoulder when I see somebody I don't like behind me—and I don't take it out of the salt-cellar first, either.

"But I do not believe in ghosts, werewolves, vampires, or congressmen."

"That is fine," Fu Groan says. "Because then you will not be bothered by the curse on this idol."

"Curse? I get cursed many a time, but only in crap games."

"This curse is slightly different. It says that whoever removes the stones from the idol of Squat will cause it to come alive and seek its eyes."

"Statues coming alive?" I snicker.

"That is a lot of gooey hooey. Cigar-store Indians do not smoke and window dummies don't pull down the shades."

"I am glad to see you take that attitude," Fu Groan remarks. "So go ahead and take out the rubies."

"Wait a minute," I remind him. "Now is the time to settle a few details. Such as how much do I get for this and when?"

He smiles.

"How about a hundred dollars?" he suggests.

"For rubies worth a fortune?"

"Right now," he says, waving a handful of bills.

I take them out of his hand. Waving makes me nervous.

"It's a deal," I say. "Maybe I'm just a booby about these rubies, but a bird in the hand is worth two on the lips."

So I reach up and take a tug at the ruby eyes.

This is just an experiment, understand, because I figure I am going to pry them out with a chisel. But the first ruby drops right out in my hand! And then the second one!

I stand there holding them, and almost fall to my knees because of the weight. What is all this? Why should Fu Groan pay me a hundred slugs just to lift out these two stones?

Then I turn around and see the answer.

THE answer is stretching out its bronze legs and standing up. The answer is fumbling with long bronze arms at the empty air. The answer is feeling with groping fingers at its empty eye-sockets.

The answer is that the god Squat is now *alive!*

Alive and kicking!

I nearly catch one below the equator from a bronze foot.

"Ouch!" I remark, jumping two feet and coming down gracefully on my heels.

"Look at him!" I suggest.

Fu Groan is looking. His eyes are popping out of his head just the way the rubies pop out of Squat's.

"It's true—the curse is true—he's alive!" Fu Groan wails.

“I’ll say he’s alive,” I agree, dodging another kick. “But why don’t you warn me he’s a jitterbug?”

“How would I know that?” Fu Groan comes back. “I’ve got to get out of here with the jewels before he discovers where they are.”

“And leave me alone with this bronze boogie-woogie expert? Not on your life.”

“No—on *your* life,” Fu Groan tells me. “You take his eyes. Therefore, the curse falls on you. If he gets his eyes back he will kill you. So I suggest you don’t let him out of your sight. Take him away—he’s all yours.”

This statement brings a rush of grief to my head. Am I going to be saddled with a living bronze statue for a stooge?

This seems to be the program, because Fu Groan suddenly dives for the door with the rubies in his hands. And I can’t stop him.

Because I happen to be up on the chandelier at this time, keeping out of the way of Squat, the idol. The idol is far from idle with those bronze feet of his, and I am taking no chances.

So I hang there, the idol gropes around under me, and Fu Groan stands in the doorway, grinning.

“You know,” he says, “this reminds me of a story.”

“I got no time for jokes,” I yell.

“This story isn’t a joke. I think it will interest you. The tale is called A NIGHT AT AN INN, by Lord Dunsany. Really a play, to be exact.”

“I want help and you give dramatic criticism,” I gasp. But Fu Groan goes right on, with another smirk.

“It’s about three sailors who steal the eye from an idol—just like this one. The idol comes back and takes his eye, then kills the sailors one by one. How appropriate!”

“How perfectly swell!” I agree, swinging from the chandelier. “Just what I need to cheer me up, too. Grabs for his eye, eh? Well, an eye for an eye, I always say.”

Which is appropriate, after all. Because at this moment the idol of Squat suddenly lunges across the room at Jack Fu Groan and makes a snatch at the rubies with his bronze paws.

FU GROAN notices just in time. He whirls out of the door and slams it shut behind him. The idol runs straight into it, being blind.

I can hear Fu Groan chuckling from the hall.

“Hey!” I mention. “Where are you going?”

“Off to make my fortune,” calls Fu Groan. “I have the rubies now and you have the idol. Fair enough?”

“But what about my cut?” I ask.

“The hundred dollars is your cut,” Fu Groan yells. “Any other cuts you get will come from the idol. Cuts or bruises.”

With a dirty chuckle, Fu Groan scrams down the hall.

And I am left hanging in midair with the idol waiting underneath me.

“Now what do I do?” I groan.

“Yes, whattee do? Whatee do?” says a deep voice.

I stare. There is no one else in the room. Only the idol.

The idol!

Sure enough, the deep voice booms again.

“Whattee do?” it says. “You guy got my eye? Yes? No? Maybe? Perhaps? Could be possibly?”

I can hardly believe my ears. But I see the bronze mouth moving and the voice is coming out through the ivory tusks.

“You can talk!” I whisper. “How come?”

“Why not? I alive, yes?”

Which is as good an answer as any. “Where my eye, you guy?” booms the idol again.

“Haven’t got it, pal,” I tell Squat. “Might as well give up looking for it.”

“How I look for eye when I can’t see?” the idol asks.

“Wait a minute.” I get an idea here. “Maybe I can help you find your eyes if you let me down.”

“You help? Sure, come down one and all. Me no hurt you.”

This is not very good grammar but it sounds sweet to me. I hop down from the chandelier and stand in front of Squat.

"Now listen, squattie old pal," I tell him. "I will help you hunt for the eyes but you can't go out searching like this."

"How you meaning?"

"Well, you're too conspicuous that way. If I can dress you up a little and give you a pair of dark glasses you might pass in a crowd—a drunken crowd, anyway. It's worth trying." Squat takes this all in.

"Then we hunt for guy with eye and I kill him dead to pieces?"

"Sure, sure," I agree. I do not think it is diplomatic to tell Squat I am the guy who filches his pupils from him at this time.

"Let's see what I can find," I suggest.

I WALTZ over to a closet and come back with some of Fu Groan's clothes. Lucky he is a 300-pounder, but even so it is a terrific job to stuff the pants and coat over that bronze body.

Squat squirms around a lot, too, not being used to clothes. But I finally get him down and put shoes on him. Then I get another bright idea. I pull out the glass imitation jewels and stick them into the eye-sockets.

"Can you see now?" I ask.

"Sure," Squat booms. "Pretty dark but I see little bit. Little bit must be you."

I rummage around in the bureau drawer, and come up with a pair of dark glasses which I put over the rubies. Then I come across a toupe of Fu Groan's. I put a little rubber band on it and drape it over the idol's ugly mouth like a mustache, to hide the ivory fangs. It helps.

Squat now looks like a big Chinaman. A half-blind one, maybe. But it's more than I hope for at first.

"There we are," I tell him. "Now we can go out and take a look around. But just remember this—let me do the talking. Wherever we go, you keep your trap shut and do as you're told. We don't want to take any risks."

“I catch you,” says Squat.

“Remember now,” I warn. “Keep quiet.”

This is very nice advice, because the words are no sooner out of my yap when the door suddenly opens.

No, it is not Jack Fu Groan coming back with a change of heart and the rubies.

There is a perfect stranger standing in the doorway.

Or rather, a not so perfect stranger. Fie is dressed like a bum—a particularly sloppy bum. His clothes look like a walking sample display for a ragpicker. The personality himself is as thin as restaurant soup and twice as muddy in the complexion.

But he smiles at me very sweetly and digs into a pocket.

“My card,” he says. “Oh, dear, I have mislaid my calling card.”

He looks more like he mislaid his sandwich board to me. I do not comment, though. He runs his hands through his pockets—all the way through because of the holes—and then he smiles again. Very apologetic.

“It doesn’t matter,” he chirps. “You probably know who I am anyway. My name is Jerkfinkle. Otis Jerkfinkle.”

“Otis Jerkfinkle,” I repeat. “No, I don’t know you.”

“But you are Mr. Fu Groan, are you not?”

“Yes,” I say. “I am not.”

“Too bad,” says this Jerkfinkle. “I must find Mr. Fu Groan at once. I’m a curator, you know.”

“Good,” I tell him. “I’m a creditor, myself.”

JERKFINKLE stares at Squat in his new clothes.

“That isn’t Mr. Fu Groan, by any chance?” he inquires.

“No squeakee English,” booms the idol.

“Sorry, brother,” I say, pushing Otis Jerkfinkle out of the room. “Some other time.”

“It’s frightfully important,” he insists. “I’m trying to tell you I’m a curator and—”

“Well if he needs any curating done I’ll tell him,” I snap. And slam the door.

Then I turn around and face Squat. This takes a lot of doing because he is one depressing sight with his dark glasses, his false mustache, and his bronze skin sticking out from the ends of the coat and trousers.

I wish I can figure out some way to get rid of him. In the first place, I do not wish to spend the rest of my life playing nursemaid to a half-blind living statue. And in the second place, if he ever finds out I am the guy who takes his rubies I will probably spent the rest of my life dead.

It is a terrific problem, but I must shake him loose somehow.

Then I get my inspiration.

Gorilla Gab face!

Here is a character who can dispose of almost anybody. He is the lug who runs a pool hall down the street. He also runs alky, a counterfeiting machine, and anything else you can think of that is more ill than legal.

Ordinarily I stay very far away from Gorilla Gabface and his kind of business affairs, because I am personally very honest ever since I get my diploma from the reform school.

But this is a very special case, and it calls for a fink without too many ethics. So Gorilla Gabface is just the guy, because he thinks ethics is the name of an automobile they make about fifteen years ago.

I make up my mind and motion to Squat.

“Come on, let’s go.”

He pounds across the floor with his bronze feet.

“Quiet now,” I warn him. “Hang onto me. Remember—follow me and keep your trap shut.”

“No yap from trap,” he grunts. And holding on to my arm, he lumbers out of the chop suey palace and trails after me down the street.

IN SUCH a neighborhood as this nobody pays him much attention. We walk over to the pool parlor in a few minutes.

"Wait here," I suggest, leaving Squat standing on the sidewalk.

I go inside. There are the usual assortment of rats around but I do not see the big cheese himself. So I walk over and poke a character in the short ribs.

"Where's Gabface?" I inquire.

He gives me a look I can do without.

"Don't be dumb!" he snaps. "Where would Gabface be with the big match coming off tonight?"

"What big match?" says I. "Is he getting ready to give somebody the hotfoot?"

"The wrestling match, of course," the guy tells me. "Gabface is over at the gym now training his boy."

All this is strictly a news broadcast to me.

But I figure there is nothing to do but scram back outside, pick up Squat, and head for the gymnasium.

To slice a long story thin, this is just the course of action I take. Ten minutes later I am walking into Liniment Louie's Gymnasium—*No Women Allowed, No Smoking, No Holds Barred.*

And there, sitting next to the ring, is Gorilla Gabface and Liniment Louie. They are jabbering away at each other a mile a minute, and for a while they do not even notice me.

Finally I attract Gorilla Gabface's attention by dropping a quarter on the floor. When he dives for it I step on his fingers and he looks up.

"It's me—Lefty Feep!" I tell him.

He glares.

"Go away, I'm in conference," he says.

"What's the matter, Gabface? I want to talk to you."

"Can't be bothered. I'm all tied up with this promoter."

He points at Liniment Louie. This puzzles me, because Liniment Louie is not much of a promoter—in fact he looks like he doesn't even promote a square meal for a long time.

“What’s all this about a wrestling match?” I ask.

Gabface sneers. “What do you care? Ain’t I got enough troubles as it is without telling them to you all over again? Isn’t it tough enough that I got a big money fight on tonight and the finest wrestler in the world is under contract to me?”

“That doesn’t sound so bad,” I say. “Well it is,” snarls Gabface. “The match is tonight, see? And my boy is in swell shape, see? Only I can’t get anybody to wrestle with him, see? The other guy backed down, see? And that leaves me in the hole, see?”

I can’t see, because he is jabbing me in the eye with his finger.

But I can think—plenty fast.

THIS changes my plans. I suddenly take a good look at Squat, standing over in the corner where I leave him. And the idea comes to me.

“Say,” I get out. “That is why I come to see you. I got an opponent for your wrestler.”

“You got a what for what?”

A new voice says this. I turn around and look up at six feet six of live beef on the hoof. A great big walking pile-driver is grinning down at me. He wears wrestling trunks and a beard.

“Meet Musclebound Morris,” says Gorilla Gabface. “He is my wrestler.”

“A pleasure,” I wince, holding out my hand. Musclebound Morris grabs it very delicately and tries to tear it off my wrist.

“You wanna wrestle me?” asks Musclebound Morris.

“Not me,” I bark hastily. “But I got a Chinese boy to put up against you.”

“Put him up and I’ll throw him down,” says Morris. “Where is he?”

“Over there,” I say, pointing at Squat. Gabface and Louie and Musclebound Morris all stare at him.

“That fat slob?” sneers Gabface.

“Looks like he’s punchdrunk with those dark glasses,” laughs Louie.

“Who’s the Goon?” chuckles Musclebound Morris.

“That’s who he is,” I yell, hastily. “He’s Billed as the Goon from Rangoon. Best Wrestler in China.”

“I doubt if he could get a half-nelson on a creampuff,” says Gorilla Gabface.

“Half-nelson? Look at those arms and legs! He’s got something new—the double-nelson,” I insist.

“Well,” says Louie. “We gotta get somebody.”

“Why not?” grins Musclebound Morris. “I’ll tie him up into so many knots it’ll take three Boy Scouts to get him loose.”

“How about a little training exhibition now?” asks Gorilla Gabface.

“No,” I say. “He’s all set. What’s the purse?”

“A hundred,” says Gabface.

Ordinarily I would haggle a little, but I am hot to get this opportunity. So I say “OK by me,” and arrange the details. Then I walk out with Squat very happy, because tonight Musclebound Morris wrestles the Goon from Rangoon. And unless I miss my guess, I will not be bothered with the living statue any more.

But I miss my guess.

I miss it that night at the wrestling match.

WE GET there early. I buy a pair of trunks for Squat and get him in his dressing room. Outside of that I tell him nothing.

“I fightee tonightee?” he asks.

“Sure,” I tell him. But I don’t issue any instructions or bulletins. I want him to stay as clumsy as ever, and I know that he can’t see more than ten feet.

So I am very happy when I push him into the ring and the announcer tells the crowd about the main bout between Musclebound Morris and the Goon from Rangoon.

That is the last happiness I have this evening. Because the bell rings, Musclebound and the Goon come out from their corners, and the fight is on.

Musclebound comes out fast.

He goes back faster.

Musclebound comes out again.

He goes back again.

I rub my eyes. What is happening?

It is very simple. The bronze idol of Squat just stands in the center of the ring. He can't see Musclebound until he gets close. When he does spot him, he just lifts up one foot and kicks Musclebound in the breadbasket. And the bronze hoof just naturally knocks Musclebound way back into the corner.

The crowd yells and so do I.

Now Musclebound takes a new position. He comes in ducking. But Squat is ready for him. He picks Musclebound Morris up in his bronze arms and waltzes around for a minute. Then he gets tired of that and starts to squint around. He is looking for something—what, I don't know.

Then I do know. He is merely wondering where he should throw him. He picks a spot about forty feet away and lets fly. Two hundred and fifty pounds of champion wrestler goes hurling across the heads of the crowd and lands right in the balcony seats.

"Hey!" squawked the referee.

Squat looks around, startled, and sees the referee behind him. Naturally, since I tell him nothing, he doesn't understand. The referee is just another wrestler to him. And being lighter, the referee sails sixty feet and lands in the gallery.

"Cut that out!" Gorilla Gabface yells this advice, climbing through the ropes. Squat heads for him with his bronze arms lunging. He makes one single swoop and scoops up Gabface on the run. He starts to swing him out.

"Stop!" I yell through the ropes.

SQUAT is a very obedient personality.

He stops right where he is, and drops Gorilla Gabface on his dome. He drops him kind of hard, because Gabface's head goes right through the canvas floor of the ring. The rest of him is stuck and just wriggles in the air.

It looks very funny, but not to the crowd. They are screaming and yelling and a couple of the boys down front are getting ready to climb into the ring.

I grab Squat's hand fast.

"Come on, we've got to run!" I yelp. And we do. Down the aisle and out of the joint, with the mob at our heels.

"Whatsee?" pants Squat. "Don't me fightee tonightee all rightee?"

"You damn near cookee my goosee," I tell him. "Run faster, you big Goon!"

We hotfoot outside just in time. I dash around the nearest corner. There is a cab waiting.

"In here," I pant. We climb in. The cab moves off.

"Driver," I call. "Take us to—"

"He knows where to go," says a soft voice.

I turn around.

Jack Fu Groan is smiling at me.

There is a revolver in his hand, and the revolver is not smiling. It is just looking at me quite hard with its black little eye.

"That's right," says Jack Fu Groan. "Sit very still. And tell your idol companion to sit still, too. No wrestling or funny business, or I'll fill your teeth with lead."

I do not go for this suggestion about amateur dentistry, so I sit still and tell Squat to do the same.

"How come?" I ask, as the cab moves along.

"I see the announcement in the paper and I realize who the Goon from Rangoon must be," says Jack Fu Groan.

"That I can figure out," I reply. "But what do you want with Squat?" I inquire. "You tell me to take him away."

"Take away a million dollars? You are so ludicrously absurd as to appear foolishly ridiculous," smiles Fu Groan. "A million dollars?"

"Perhaps. Some large sum like that. That is what Mr. Otis Jerkfinkle is prepared to offer."

"Jerkfinkle? The guy who looks for you and claims to be a curator?"

"Exactly. Otis Jerkfinkle *is* the curator of a wealthy private museum. Learning that I have this collection of oriental art treasures, he is seeking me out to offer a vast amount of money explicitly for the idol of the god Squat. So I fear I must take Squat off your hands once more, after all."

ABOUT this time we pull up in front of the chop suey joint and get out in the alley. The cabbie can't see the revolver, but I can—so I stand very still, and so does Squat.

We go inside to the little room in back once more. I walk in and Fu Groan follows me. Squat stands outside.

"You get Squat, so why must I squat?" I object. "Let me go now."

"After I make a call to Jerkfinkle and seal the arrangement," purrs Jack Fu Groan. "Meanwhile you will stay here and guard these."

He pulls out the rubies and lays them on the table.

Then he goes out.

"Squat stays outside," he tells me.

"Why not bring the statue in here while I'm waiting?" I cleverly suggest.

He smiles. "No, my friend. You know the old saying—'the devil finds work for idol hands to do.' Farewell."

And he runs out, locking the door after him.

I hear whispering in the hall, then silence.

"Come on, Squat!" I yell through the door. "Break the lock and let me out."

No answer.

"Squat—let me out of here!"

All at once I hear a deep booming laugh.

"No out for you," chuckles Squat. "I guard you hard. Man tellee me who you be. You guy who steals my eyes. Pretty soon he come back. Make you put in my eyes. Then I kill you thief stealer into little pieces. Sit down again forever. You eyeball sneaker!"

“But we’re pals, Squat!” I coax. “Don’t I let you wrestle, and everything?”

“You give me eyes, I wrestle you pretty soon. I wrestle you pretty dead.”

I shudder. Shudder and stare at the rubies.

The big jewels glow up at me, flashing and full of fire. They gaze at me like eyes. Squat’s eyes.

They wink. Wink at me. Like the old double-cross. Because that’s what I’m getting. The old double-cross.

I THINK of what’s waiting for me out there—that bronze idol, huge and terrible, with its big arms and long fangs. It might talk funny, but there’s nothing funny about its actions. It’s a demon. And it’s out to get me. Damn its eyes, anyhow!

Its eyes—I stare at the rubies again.

But there isn’t much time for any staring. Fu Groan moves fast.

Before I know it he is back. Still alone except for his little friend, the revolver. And, of course, Squat.

Squat comes in with him. Fu Groan shuts the door.

“Now can I go?” I gulp.

He smiles. It’s the double-cross all right.

“Just one thing more, Mr. Feep,” he tells me. “Naturally, the deal I make with Jerkfinkle presupposes that the idol has its original ruby eyes. So if you don’t mind putting them back, then—?”

Why should I mind? All it means is I get killed. I tell Fu Groan so.

“I will kill you now if you don’t do it,” Fu Groan reminds me. And pokes me in the back with the revolver.

So I take off Squat’s clothes and take out the glass imitation jewels. I pull off the mustache and Squat is once more a bronze idol—a living bronze idol, with empty eye-sockets.

His mouth is open and I see the tusks gleaming there. His hands are clenching and unclenching in anticipation.

My mouth is open, too, but I am gasping through it. My hands just tremble in anticipation.

"Get the rubies," says Fu Groan.

"Give me eyes," booms the idol, massacre you in a hurry, plenty fast.

"Ulp!" I suggest.

"Get the rubies," Fu Groan snaps.

So I go over and pick up the rubies. Then I march back very slowly and put the left one in. I fix it into place quite carefully.

"The other one, please," says Fu Groan.

"But—"

"Now!" he growls.

I place the right eye in its socket, also very carefully.

Then I step back.

FOR a minute the idol just stands there. All at once, with the rubies in place, it does not look funny any more. It looks majestic—like a bronze god. It is a bronze god. A living bronze god with ruby eyes.

A rumble sounds in its chest.

The head swings around.

Then the feet move. The arms reach out. It gives a brazen shriek and reaches for its prey.

Fu Groan.

He has time for only one squeal. Then the metal claws close around his fat neck. There is a snap. He falls down to the floor.

I blink.

The idol of the god Squat is just standing there. It slumps forward, sits down. The hands fold. The mouth opens. And all at once it is only a statue again. A bronze, squatting statue. And the blazing rubies are smoky once more. Smoky and dead. Squat isn't alive at all.

Neither is Fu Groan.

But I am.

That is why I run like hell out of the place. On the way to the door I bump into Otis Jerkfinkle.

“Looking for a statue?” I gasp.

He nods.

“Right back there.” I point to him I and then keep on running. And I don’t stop until I get home.

Since that night I have nothing to do with Chinese stuff—food or anything else. Because the idol nearly makes a chop suey of me, myself.

LEFTY FEEP finished his saga and sat back.

“Quite an adventure,” I commented.

He nodded.

“You know, the surprise to me is that you can take any nourishment at all,” I told him.

“Why is that a surprise?” Feep asked.

“Well, didn’t you say that when Fu Groan got back and made you put the rubies in, the idol was going to kill you?”

“I say it looks that way. But it works out so it doesn’t look that way.”

“How about explaining?” I asked.

Feep shrugged. “Why do you wish to know?”

“Oh, call it idol curiosity,” I said.

He grinned.

“All right. Like I say, I get the idea I am being double-crossed. Which turns out to be true. So I pull a little cross on Fu Groan.”

“How, Lefty?” I inquired.

“Well there I am locked up in the room with the rubies. I am waiting for Fu Groan to get back and make me put them into Squat’s eye-sockets so he can see me and kill me.

“So there is only one thing left for me to do. I take a chisel I find lying there and change the facets on the jewels a little.

“Then when I put the eyes in the idol it grabs Fu Groan instead of me.”

“But why?” I persisted. “What did you do to the jewels? Why should chipping away the facets make such a difference? Did you make the idol blind?”

“No,” said Lefty Feep. “When he gets his ruby eyes in he can see things all right. But he grabs Fu Groan instead of me just the same. I chisel the rubies that way, catch on? It’s all the old cross, see?”

I gasped. “You mean you—?”

“Exactly,” said Lefty Feep. “He isn’t blind when he grabs Fu Groan instead of me. But boy—*is he crosseyed!”*

THE END

The Machine That Changed History

The time-machine had been tested and approved by the best scientists and physicists in the Reich; Geopolitik had mapped out plans for its use. But Hitler had his own personal ideas on how this machine could change history—and in a sense, he was right; it did change history!

"VICTORY!" The word had re-sounded through the halls of Berchtesgaden before. But this time they carried a new meaning, for they came from the lips of Adolf Hitler.

The sallow little man standing before him in the private apartment smiled humbly.

"I am pleased and honored that the Fuehrer approves of my work," he whispered, huskily. "If the Fuehrer desires, I can explain the principles on which my time-chamber operates."

Hitler's hand rose to command silence.

"Your theories? My dear Schultz, your theories do not matter. Your time-machine has been inspected, tested, and approved by the most eminent physicists and scientists in the Reich. We of the Reich are thorough. If your claims were not founded in truth, you would not now be my guest in Berchtesgaden."

Adolf Hitler rose, leaned forward. "Ah, no, I do not concern myself with your theories of invention. It is enough that you have achieved the seemingly impossible. You have constructed a working model of a machine capable of transporting men or objects through time itself."

"Yes—"

Hitler's frown cut off the sallow inventor's reply.

"It means victory, do you understand? Victory!"

He advanced across the room to the vast, gleaming silver shell which rested weirdly in the center. His fingers rose to press against the metal surface.

"We of the Reich move swiftly, Schultz," he whispered. "Already the Geopolitik has prepared for me a complete documentary survey of the potentialities inherent in this remarkable invention. It shall be of invaluable assistance to us in the days to come."

Schultz smiled.

"I too have dreamed," he murmured. "We could build many hundreds of these and with them move forward or backwards in time as we willed. We could attack—"

Hitler shook his head.

"The expense is too great. Besides, I have other plans. Plans I mean to execute swiftly. Which reminds me. You have the documents concerning this invention of yours?"

Schultz nervously proffered his briefcase.

"The method of operation is simple. A child could master the controls. Mathematical calculations are almost unnecessary, due to the principles of spatial inhibition embodied in the construction."

"In other words, it is all here in this briefcase—all that is essential to the building and operation of the time-chambers?"

"That is correct."

Hitler smiled.

"Then, Herr Schultz, our little interview is at an end."

His hand went to a buzzer.

The black-shirted man entered quietly. He took Schultz by the arm and ushered him out.

"Heil Hitler!"

Hitler nodded. "Germany will not forget your contribution, Schultz," he said.

THE door closed. Hitler sat alone in the room, staring at the briefcase, then at the silver chamber of the time-traveller.

He pressed a buzzer on the intercommunications system.

"Kellzer? Bauer has taken Schultz. He has his orders. Dispose of the body quickly. Notify his relatives of the accident as planned."

He released his finger. Again Hitler sat back, his stare intensified. Again he sounded the buzzer.

"Kellzer? Send Eglitz to me at once. Eglitz. Gestapo staff. The linguist."

Within a space of a few minutes, young Karl Eglitz clicked his heels smartly before the Fuehrer's desk. "Heil Hitler."

"Eglitz—you have heard of what has been going on?"

"The Fuehrer refers to this Schultz person and his invention?"

"Yes."

"I assisted in drawing up the report on it."

"Good. Then you understand. Eglitz—do you think you could *operate* this machine?"

"I do."

"Eglitz—do you speak French?"

"The Fuehrer must know that I have lived in France."

"So." Hitler was silent for a moment. "Eglitz—I have heard good reports of your character and ability. You are a reliable man." He paused. "I have a mission for such a man."

"I am honored."

"It is a mission of the utmost importance, and as such it is extremely confidential. No one will know of it but the two of us."

"The Fuehrer forgets that the Geopolitik knows of the uses to which the machine will be put."

"Wrong, Eglitz. This is a mission of my own—one that the Geopolitik never dreamed of. Eglitz, I have conceived of a use for this time-chamber which will stagger humanity. And you shall carry it out!

"It is a mission that will win the war—win the world! It embodies an idea so stunning in its impact that even I, whose inspiration conceived it, am humbled before it."

"The Fuehrer can trust me."

"Then listen, Eglitz. Listen to the mission I have planned for you. Listen intently."

Hitler whispered. Eglitz listened. His mechanical smile never left his face, but as the Fuehrer continued, a little gasp rose involuntarily from his throat. Beads of moisture appeared upon his forehead. His hands clenched. And still Hitler whispered on.

"So. That is your mission, Eglitz. Do you think you can carry it out?" The Gestapo man's voice quavered. "I—might," he managed. "It will take several days of preparation. Research. I must find out when he was in Cologne. We must take the machine there, too. I must study documents pertaining to his daily routine, pick a time."

"The resources of the Reich are yours to command," Hitler answered. "You must not fail. If you succeed, we shall triumph beyond our wildest dreams."

"I shall prepare." Eglitz backed towards the door.

"Heil Hitler."

Hitler sat alone once more, smiling still. Suddenly he rose and walked to a corner ledge.

A little bronze bust rested there—the head of a stout man with piercing eyes; a man whose hanging forelock rested on a majestic brow.

Hitler stared at the bronze head and his smile widened.

"They say you were master of Destiny, too," he whispered. "But I wonder if you ever dreamed of an enterprise as great as this? An enterprise defying space and time? You crossed the Alps—but I cross centuries. Napoleon, the world will soon learn you have a master!"

The time-chamber, the bronze bust, and the ruler of Germany stood motionless in the twilight while Destiny wove a web to enshroud them all.

THE smile had not faded from Adolf Hitler’s face before the wavering outlines of the metal chamber disappeared from sight. The room in Hitler’s Cologne headquarters still pulsed with the humming vibrations of the time-chamber. Eglitz had entered it and disappeared. And now the chamber had disappeared.

For a moment there was nothingness. Then slowly the blurring contours of the silver machine materialized, looming irrationally out of the air in the way a slide specimen emerges from a blank microscopic field. The humming vibration increased as the chamber solidified. Then came silence.

Hitler strode forward abruptly. “Something has gone wrong,” he rasped. “A mistake—”

The compartment door opened slowly in the silver side. The tall figure of Eglitz emerged stooping through the doorway. Eglitz drew himself erect in formal salute.

“Heil Hitler.”

Adolf Hitler stared in astonishment. Eglitz had changed. His usual uniform was gone. Instead he wore a gaudy scarlet coat with green pipings, and his braided yellow trousers were tucked into shiny black boots. A sword dangled from an elaborate scabbard fastened about his waist by a white sash. In one hand he carried a bushy black busby with a green cockade. Moreover, his usual smooth-shaven countenance had disappeared under an imposing false mustache which quite dwarfed Hitler’s own.

“Eglitz—back so soon?”

“Surely the Fuehrer realizes I have been absent a week?”

“A week? Are you raving, imbecile? You have been gone less than ten seconds.”

“Time—a week to me, ten seconds to the Fuehrer. It is relative, as Einstein has it—”

"Do not mention that person's name," Hitler scowled. Then, "Speak up, man! What of your mission? Did you get there? Was he there? *Did you bring him?"* Hitler's voice quivered with frantic impatience.

"I am pleased to report to the Fuehrer that, according to instructions, I arrived at the Imperial Palace at Cologne on July sixth, 1807, at 9:15 p. m. In keeping with my orders, I assumed the disguise of military attache of the Grand Army—"

"Where is he?"

Hitler's voice was a knife.

"I am here."

THE low tones came from the throat of the man in the doorway of the time-chamber.

Hitler stared.

The short, stocky figure descended. Hitler stared into the swarthy, fleshy face, stared at the majestic brow and the hanging forelock, stared into the deep-set, burning eyes of "Napoleon Bonaparte, Emperor of the French!"

He whispered the words.

The little man inclined his head. "Indeed, sire. And you are—"

"Reichsfuehrer Adolf Hitler."

Two hands clasped. A fat, pudgy hand, and a lean, limp one. Two hands clasped—hands that had held the earth and crushed it, each in their time. Two hands clasped across the centuries. The hands of Napoleon and Hitler. Hands that wrote history.

Eglitz stood there, gaping.

Hitler turned.

"Eglitz—I'd forgotten about you. You may go now. You deserve a rest after your journey to secure our distinguished guest."

"The Fuehrer is kind. I assure the Fuehrer that my task was not easy. This Fouche, the Emperor's Chief of Police, has a system equal to our own Gestapo. In order to—ah—abduct the Emperor—"

"I've no time for that now, Eglitz. You may go. Germany will not forget your contribution, Eglitz."

"Heil Hitler."

Eglitz left.

Hitler's hand went to a buzzer. "Kellzer? Eglitz has just left my apartment. Send two troopers and place him under arrest. No, not the camp. Treason trial. He must be disposed of within the hour. That is all."

Hitler turned again to face his visitor.

"So," he breathed. "You are here." Of the two, Napoleon was more at ease.

"So I observe."

"You are calm."

"Resigned, let us say."

"This must be a strange experience for you."

"I am accustomed to the unusual. Besides, your aide—this Eglitz, is it not?—told me much on the voyage. Despite the fact that he knocked me over the head; virtually kidnapped me as it were, I bear him no ill will. He seemed both friendly and intelligent."

"He was—is," Hitler agreed.

"He told me much of interest. This is 1942, is it not? So much seems to have happened. Naturally, I am still a bit confused as to the reasons for all this."

"Allow me to explain," Hitler urged.

Napoleon smiled.

"Very well. Your french, sire, is somewhat—rusty."

"Perhaps. But I could not risk an interpreter for what I am going to tell you. Please be seated."

EMPEROR and Dictator, seated at a table in the quiet room. Emperor, Dictator, and the time-chamber. Bridge between two worlds of war. The room that had hummed to the vibrations of a machine which defied space and time now held the whisper of voices whose echos had shaken continents.

"And so you see, that is why I brought you here." Hitler was hoarse from his hour-long monologue. "I am the master of my world. You were the master of yours. Together we can exercise twice the power." Napoleon nodded.

"Besides," Hitler murmured, "I need you. I would admit that to no living man. But I need your knowledge of military science—and the inspired genius behind it. I have made—mistakes. Mistakes which must be rectified."

Again the voice droned on, as darkness deepened. From time to time the two men rose and consulted maps, charts, documentary material which was brought from the other rooms.

It was nearly midnight when the two weary men faced one another across the long table.

"But there must be some solution," Hitler sighed.

"Your military position is perilous," Napoleon answered. "What is worse, that position is irrevocable. It cannot be changed." Imperial shoulders shrugged. "It was useless for you to send for me. I had best go back to my own day and place. I tell you frankly—your offer of joint partnership in this war is enticing, but it leads only to a hopeless end."

"You must help me," Hitler grated. "You must! You are Napoleon!"

"Yes. I am Napoleon. But I cannot change what exists," answered the Little Corporal, sadly.

Then his head jerked up.

"Wait. There is our solution!"

A pudgy finger stabbed towards the time-chamber.

"What do you mean? Are you mad?"

"No madder than you, Sire, when you sent your aide to kidnap me through time. My solution is simple. Attend.

"As we have seen, your difficulties began at the outset of this war. In September, 1939. You missed the opportunity to invade England. You did not check Russia. You failed in your mission in the United States.”

“But that is past—over two years ago. It is too late to change.”

“Is it? Why can’t we enter the time-chamber and return to 1939? Return to July of that year and plan the war anew for September?”

Hitler was on his feet.

“Could we—dare we—?”

“You want the world? Very well, we can obtain it. If you have the courage to make the journey. Once in 1939 we can rectify your previous errors, anticipate the others. Profit by experience. The war will be waged properly then, with you and me in command.”

Blurred voices in a midnight room. Blurred figures moving towards the silver machine. A nightmare vision in a nightmare world. Napoleon, Hitler, and a time-machine.

And then—only an empty room, after all. The machine was gone. Somewhere in the reaches of infinity, two dictators sped back to remould the past. The earth trembled in anticipation.

IT was Napoleon who handled the controls. The pudgy fingers of Bonaparte, ex-lieutenant of artillery, mastered the intricacies of the machine’s working parts.

His interest in the principles of operating the chamber had almost exceeded his curiosity regarding the operations of the war itself. But Hitler had been patient. After all, a visitor so distinguished must be humored. And if Napoleon chose to guide the time-chamber, it was well. He, Hitler, had chosen to guide the destinies of the world instead.

So they sat there, in the curiously vibrating metal shell. Napoleon’s hands moved over the silver surface of the panels in silent concentration. Hitler’s hands twisted nervously in his lap.

There was silence, save for the humming vibration—the silence of two men moving through the unknown, the unnameable; twisting through time on a mission to remould the fate of the world.

Just two men—but two men unlike any of the myriad billions who had preceded them on the face of earth. Two men, each of whom in his time had remoulded the face of the earth; remoulded it with ruthless surgery that left it torn and bleeding.

Never two such men before, and never such a journey. . . .

Something of the import must have occurred to them both as they sat there waiting for the vibrations to cease. For they glanced at one another suddenly, and their eyes met.

The eyes of Hitler met the eyes of Napoleon, somewhere within the emptiness of space and time. Met and mingled in a flaming resolve. It was the Fuehrer who addressed the Emperor.

“In just a moment,” he whispered, “we shall arrive. And the work will begin. It was meant to be. You and I—our greatness is such that Fate itself has willed our union. Your sun and my star shall rise together in the heavens.”

It was the voice of the mystic that rose above the humming; the voice of megalomania triumphant.

“Perhaps?” Bonaparte echoed. His dark eyes were filmed with sudden wonderment. “And yet I wonder if man can cheat his Fate?”

“I am Fate.” The harsh voice of the Fuehrer rose. “As you shall see.” His hand rose, extended. “Master of the world, and now master of time and space itself! We have gone far since your day, Napoleon. Your armies would be blasted to bits by a single *panzer* division. But you’ve seen that. You know how death can leap from the skies, or hurtle through the air from a hundred miles away. You know how death creeps on, above, and under the seas. You know how entire continents may be ravished by the flaming breath of war.”

Napoleon smiled. “I too have made speeches,” he declared, sardonically. “But perhaps I have learned to regret some of the deeds accompanying them.”

“I do not regret and I shall not regret,” Hitler retorted. “We are returning to 1939. This time there shall be no errors. England shall be invaded swiftly.

And France shall—"

He checked himself in time. A frown had appeared on the Little Corporal's forehead. Did the fool suspect? No. How could he? He did not know what had happened to France. He had been taken from Germany in 1807 to Germany in 1942. He didn't know—but Hitler worried about the frown.

"And France?" Napoleon echoed softly. "What of France?"

"France shall share its rightful place with Germany," Hitler amended, hastily.

THE frown disappeared. In its place came a slow smile. For some reason Hitler didn't like the smile any better.

"That is well," answered the Emperor. "France shall hold its rightful place, yes."

Hitler was silent. His thoughts raced swiftly. In a moment they would arrive—arrive in 1939. It would be late summer again. He and Napoleon would enter into council. The war would be plotted afresh; with Hitler's memories of two years to come as an aid. Napoleon would be helpful with strategy, extremely helpful. His unbiased viewpoint would aid in pointing out various weaknesses even Hitler and his staff might overlook.

And then, the war. Hitler's war. For he had decided finally. When Napoleon's work was over, he must go. Hitler didn't trust his frown or his smile. The fool would never stand for what would happen to France. He'd be disposed of—this self-styled Emperor.

Hitler's dream of triumph glittered in his eyes. What a final irony! Men had always compared him to Napoleon. Thought it a compliment when they termed him an equal. Well, Hitler would be superior to the French conqueror. His greatest victory.

"Wait! Do you feel that?"

Napoleon's voice cut through Hitler's meditations.

"I think we've arrived."

Yes. The vibrations were diminishing. The humming and droning within the metal chamber slackened. In a moment there was a curious little bump —not a physically-felt bump, but a sort of shifting and settling sensation in the consciousness of both men. As though they had been spinning in a void and suddenly set down on something solid.

“Yes—we’re here!”

Napoleon rose. His pompous little body moved towards the compartment door. Hitler followed. Now his smile was broad. Napoleon couldn’t see him. Instead he led the way—led the way to Hitler’s triumph and his own doom.

The door swung open as the Emperor’s fingers moved over the bolts and handles. Napoleon stood on the threshold, breathed deeply. Then he clambered out.

Hitler moved forward swiftly. He could hardly wait. To emerge again on the eve of victory—

Hitler stepped out.

Into the arms of two waiting guards.

“Hold this man!”

Napoleon’s voice barked the order.

Hitler struggled in the grip of giant hands.

“What is this? Why—”

He stared upwards into the mustached visages of two Grenadiers. They were huge shakos and gaudy green uniforms. The uniforms of Napoleon’s troops!

Hitler’s eyes roved wildly about the great chamber in which the machine rested. It was a court apartment—luxuriantly appointed in the styles of Napoleon’s day.

And standing before him, no longer an incongruous figure, but with the air of a master in his own time and place, was Napoleon.

Again Hitler saw the smile on the lips of the Emperor.

HITLER heard his voice through a swirling mist.

"We are here, Adolf Hitler—but in a time and place of my own choosing. The hour has arrived—but it is the hour of my destiny, not yours!

"We have returned to the day on which you abducted me. We are in Cologne, in my German palace, in 1807."

"But—"

Again Hitler saw the smile and shuddered. Napoleon advanced and whispered.

"You fool! Did you believe I would forsake my own destiny for yours? I handled the controls—and I set them for this day again. I want to live my own life, complete the mission of conquest on which I embarked. So I have returned to my own time."

Hitler's head whirled. He temporized swiftly.

"But you and I—we could have ruled a greater world together—I offered you everything—"

"Adolf Hitler, I do not want your kind of world." The Emperor's voice rose to a knell of doom. "Your aide, the man who brought me to you, was careless. He let hints slip on the journey through time. He told me *what you did to my France."*

"France?"

"Did you think I was fooled? No, I knew all along. You and your hordes trampled over my land, ravaged it. And I swore to avenge my country. I shall do so, in my own way.

"Hitler, I am a warrior, a conqueror. But I am not a mad butcher! And I do not intend to unleash you once again upon my people.

"You and your crazy theories of racial superiority—of men who must kill like beasts in order to live! I am going to save France and the world from you."

Hitler wet his cracked lips. "What are you going to do?" he whispered.

Napoleon gestured curtly.

"Guards—place this man back in the machine."

The Grenadiers dragged the Fuehrer across the floor. His face was ashen. His voice rose to entreaty. “What are you going to do?”

Napoleon shrugged.

“There is no place here in my world for your kind. There is no place in the world to come—1939 or 1942, or any year. There never will be a place again for men with your debased dreams!

“In all the ages, I know of only one time when the world would welcome your vile ideas. There you must go, to a world where the weak perish and only the strong survive. And I wish you joy!”

They were inside the chamber now. Napoleon’s hands were moving over the controls. A tinkling sound splintered the silence.

“What was that?”

Napoleon turned.

“I have smashed the adjustment dials,” he announced. “You are embarked on a one-way journey.”

The guards backed out of the compartment. Napoleon followed. He stood in the metal doorway before closing the door.

“Goodbye, Adolf Hitler,” he murmured. “You are going to seek your rightful destiny at last.”

Hitler rose with a snarl, lunged forward.

But the iron door of the time-chamber clanged hollowly in his face. And a humming rose to mingle with Hitler’s anguished scream.

THE humming rose and rose. It filled Hitler’s head, throbbed through it. It was a dark drone, filling his brain with the black muttering of doom.

Hitler lay in the darkness while fear pulsed through his being. Lay there for endless eons, lay there for an eternity—as he sped through eons and eternity alike.

But when the humming finally subsided, he had conquered his dread.

He sat up sharply when he felt the curious *adjustment* sensation which meant the time-chamber had arrived. Hitler drew a deep breath.

He was here.

Napoleon had done it. The controls were beyond repair. He was here, and he'd face the future unafraid.

Napoleon had outwitted him, yes. But no use crying over spilt milk. The Emperor was crafty—but a fool, for all that! He was back again in 1807, strutting across the stage of history, playing the tyrant—but Hitler knew what Napoleon did not know. Knew that there was a Waterloo lying ahead for the Emperor in eight short years. What sweet revenge! That long exile ahead!

And he, Hitler, had been exiled. But he could still mould his future freshly, in whatever time he found himself.

Hitler smiled grimly. Yes. Napoleon forgot that he, Adolf Hitler, could shape his own destiny. Hadn't he risen from humble house-painter to mighty warlord in the complexity of the modern world? Well, with his brain and vision, his knowledge of men and the future, he could start again.

He wondered where Napoleon had sent him.

"Where the weak perish and only the strong survive." That might be ancient Rome. Barbarian times. Well, that was hardly a sad fate. He'd learn. He'd make adjustments. He knew men and he knew History. Wherever it was, Adolf Hitler could always rule in a world where strength ruled over weakness.

He rose, stepped to the chamber. He unbolted it slowly, pushed it open. He drew another deep breath. The fresh air was sweet and clean.

Smiling, Adolf Hitler stepped out onto a grassy sward. His eyes blinked in the sunlight.

He stood on a hillside which rose like a grassy island amidst a sea of lush vegetation, Why, it was like a tropical forest!

Blinking again, he walked across the turf. The ground was soft, almost steaming with moisture beneath his feet.

Where was he? In what time did he exist? Where were the cities of Germany, the people?

Hitler shook his head. His vision cleared.

Then he saw them emerge from the forest at his right. They came swiftly. He wheeled in panic.

Too late! The others were creeping up on him from the rear, cutting off his return to the door of the time-chamber.

Adolf Hitler stood surrounded by a ring—a ring of advancing figures. He stared at the figures and understood Napoleon's parting words at last.

He stared at a band of ape-like shamblers—shamblers that had only the faces of men. Their shaggy bodies were covered with long, yellowish fur. Blonde fur. They were powerful, grinning in their strength. And their deep, chuckling laughter was filled with hatred—the hatred of the strong for the weak.

Strong. Blonde. Brutes living in a time where he could find his rightful destiny—

As the monsters closed in on him, Adolf Hitler's screams rose from the little forest hillside in the Stone Age.

THE END

Yours Truly—Jack the Ripper

The greatest monster of all time still lives! He's here, among us—leaving his signature in blood. . . .

I LOOKED at the stage Englishman. He looked at me.

"Sir Guy Hollis?" I asked.

"Indeed. Have I the pleasure of addressing John Carmody, the psychiatrist?"

I nodded. My eyes swept over the figure of my distinguished visitor. Tall, lean, sandy-haired—with the traditional tufted mustache. And the tweeds. I suspected a monocle concealed in a vest pocket, and wondered if he'd left his umbrella in the outer office.

But more than that, I wondered what the devil had impelled Sir Guy Hollis of the British Embassy to seek out a total stranger here in Chicago.

Sir Guy didn't help matters any as he sat down. He cleared his throat, glanced around nervously, tapped his pipe against the side of the desk. Then he opened his mouth.

"What do you think of London?" he said.

"Why—"

"I'd like to discuss London with you, Mr. Carmody."

I meet all kinds. So I merely smiled, sat back, and gave him his head.

"Have you ever noticed anything strange about that city?" he asked.

"Well, the fog is famous."

"Yes, the fog. That's important. It usually provides the perfect setting."

"Setting for what?"

Sir Guy Hollis gave me an enigmatic grin.

"Murder," he murmured.

"Murder?"

"Yes. Hasn't it struck you that London, of all cities, has a peculiar affinity for those who contemplate homicide?"

They don't talk that way, except in books. Still, it was an interesting thought. London as an ideal spot for a murder!

"As you mentioned," said Sir Guy, "there is a natural reason for this. The fog is an ideal background. And then too the British have a peculiar attitude in such matters. You might call it their sporting instinct. They regard murder as a sort of a game."

I sat up straight. Here was a theory.

"Yes, I needn't bore you with homicide statistics. The record is there. Aesthetically, temperamentally, the Englishman is interested in crimes of violence.

"A man commits murder. Then the excitement begins. The game starts. Will the criminal outwit the police? You can read between the lines in their newspaper stories. Everybody is waiting to see who will score.

"British law regards a prisoner as guilty until proven innocent. That's *their* advantage. But first they must catch their prisoner. And London bobbies are not allowed to carry firearms. That's a point for the fugitive. You see? All part of the rules of the game."

I wondered what Sir Guy was driving at. Either a point or a strait-jacket. But I kept my mouth shut and let him continue.

"The logical result of this British attitude toward murder is—Sherlock Holmes," he said.

"Have you ever noticed how popular the theme of murder is in British fiction and drama?"

I smiled. I was back on familiar ground.

"Angel Street," I suggested.

“Ladies in Retirement,” he countered.

“Night Must Fall.”

“Payment Deferred,” I added. *“Laburnum Grove, Kind Lady. Love from a Stranger. Portrait of a Man with Red Hair. Black Limelight.”*

He nodded. “Think of the motion pictures of Alfred Hitchcock and Emlyn Williams. The actors—Wilfred Lawson and Leslie Banks.”

“Charles Laughton,” I continued for him. “Edmund Gwenn. Basil Rathbone. Raymond Massey. Sir Cedric Hardwicke.”

“You’re quite an expert on this sort of thing yourself,” he told me.

“Not at all,” I smiled. “I’m a psychiatrist.”

THEN I leaned forward. I didn’t change my tone of voice. “All I want to know,” I said sweetly, “is why the hell you come up to my office and discuss murder melodramas with me.”

It stung him. He sat back and blinked a little.

“That isn’t my intention,” he murmured. “No. Not at all. I was just advancing a theory—”

“Stalling,” I said. “Stalling. Come on, Sir Guy—spit it out.”

Talking like a gangster is all a part of the applied psychiatric technique. At least, it worked for me.

It worked this time.

Sir Guy stopped bleating. His eyes narrowed. When he leaned forward again he meant business.

“Mr. Carmody,” he said, “have you ever heard of—Jack the Ripper?”

“The murderer?” I asked.

“Exactly. The greatest monster of them all. Worse than Springheel Jack or Crippen. Jack the Ripper. Red Jack.”

“Eve heard of him,” I said.

“Do you know his history?”

I got tough again. “Listen, Sir Guy,” I muttered. “I don’t think we’ll get any place swapping old wives’ tales about famous crimes of history.”

Another bulls-eye. He took a deep breath.

“This is no old wives’ tale. It’s a matter of life or death.”

He was so wrapped up in his obsession he even talked that way. Well—I was willing to listen. We psychiatrists get paid for listening.

“Go ahead,” I told him. “Let’s have the story.”

Sir Guy lit a cigarette and began to talk.

“London, 1888,” he began. “Late summer and early fall. That was the time. Out of nowhere came the shadowy figure of Jack the Ripper—a stalking shadow with a knife, prowling through London’s East End. Haunting the squalid dives of Whitechapel, Spitalfields. Where he came from no one knew. But he brought death. Death in a knife.

“Six times that knife descended to slash the throats and bodies of London’s women. Drabs and alley sluts. August 7th was the date of the first butchery. They found her body lying there with 39 stab wounds. A ghastly murder. On August 31st, another victim. The press became interested. The slum inhabitants were more deeply interested still.

“Who was this unknown killer who prowled in their midst and struck at will in the deserted alley-ways of night-town? And what was more important—when would he strike again?

“September 8th was the date. Scotland Yard assigned special deputies. Rumors ran rampant. The atrocious nature of the slayings was the subject for shocking speculation.

“The killer used a knife—expertly. He cut throats and removed—certain portions—of the bodies after death. He chose victims and settings with a fiendish deliberation. No one saw him or heard him. But watchmen making their gray rounds in the dawn would stumble across the hacked and horrid thing that was the Ripper’s handiwork.

“Who was he? What was he? A mad surgeon? A butcher? An insane scientist? A pathological degenerate escaped from an asylum? A deranged nobleman? A member of the London police?

“Then the poem appeared in the newspapers. The anonymous poem, designed to put a stop to speculations—but which only aroused public interest to a further frenzy. A mocking little stanza:

I'm not a butcher, I'm not a kid
Nor yet a foreign skipper,
But I'm your own true loving friend,
Yours truly—Jack the Ripper.

"And on September 30th, two more throats were slashed open."

I interrupted Sir Guy for a moment.

"Very interesting," I commented. I'm afraid a faint hint of sarcasm crept into my voice.

HE WINCED, but didn't falter in his narrative.

"There was silence, then, in London for a time. Silence, and a nameless fear. When would Red Jack strike again? They waited through October. Every figment of fog concealed his phantom presence. Concealed it well—for nothing was learned of the Ripper's identity, or his purpose. The drabs of London shivered in the raw wind of early November. Shivered, and were thankful for the coming of each mornings' sun.

"November 9th. They found her in her room. She lay there very quietly, limbs neatly arranged. And beside her, with equal neatness, were laid her head and hearts The Ripper had outdone himself in execution.

"Then, panic. But needless panic. For though press, police, and populace alike waited in sick dread, Jack the Ripper did not strike again.

"Months passed. A year. The immediate interest died, but not the memory. They said Jack had skipped to America. That he had committed suicide. They said—and they wrote. They've written ever since. Theories, hypotheses, arguments, treatises. But to this day no one knows who Jack the Ripper was. Or why he killed. Or why he stopped killing."

Sir Guy was silent. Obviously he expected some comment from me.

"You tell the story well," I remarked. "Though with a slight emotional bias."

"I've got all the documents," said Sir Guy Hollis. "I've made a collection of existing data and studied it."

I STOOD up. "Well," I yawned, in mock fatigue, I've enjoyed your little bedtime story a great deal, Sir Guy. It was kind of you to abandon your duties at the British Embassy to drop in on a poor psychiatrist and regale him with your anecdotes." Goading him always did the trick.

"I suppose you want to know why I'm interested?" he snapped.

"Yes. That's exactly what I'd like to know. Why are you interested?"

"Because," said Sir Guy Hollis, "I am on the trail of Jack the Ripper now. I think he's here—in Chicago!"

I sat down again. This time I did the blinking act.

"Say that again," I stuttered.

"Jack the Ripper is alive, in Chicago, "and I'm out to find him."

"Wait a minute," I said. "Wait—a—minute!"

He wasn't smiling. It wasn't a joke. "See here," I said. "What was the date of these murders?"

"August to November, 1888."

"1888? But if Jack the Ripper was an able-bodied man in 1888, he'd surely be dead today! Why look, man—if he were merely *born* in that year, he'd be 55 years old today!"

"Would he?" smiled Sir Guy Hollis. "Or should I say, 'Would she?' Because Jack the Ripper may have been a woman. Or any number of things."

"Sir Guy," I said. "You came to the right person when you looked me up. You definitely need the services of a psychiatrist."

"Perhaps. Tell me, Mr. Carmody, do you think I'm crazy?"

I looked at him and shrugged. But I had to give him a truthful answer.

"Frankly—no."

"Then you might listen to the reasons I believe Jack the Ripper is alive today."

“I might.”

“I’ve studied these cases for thirty years. Been over the actual ground. Talked to officials. Talked to friends and acquaintances of the poor drabs who were killed. Visited with men and women in the neighborhood. Collected an entire library of material touching on Jack the Ripper. Studied all the wild theories or crazy notions.

“I learned a little. Not much, but a little. I won’t bore you with my conclusions. But there was another branch of inquiry that yielded more fruitful returns. I have studied unsolved crimes. Murders.

“I could show you clippings from the papers of half the world’s great cities. San Francisco. Shanghai. Calcutta. Omsk. Paris. Berlin. Pretoria. Cairo. Milan. Adelaide.

“The trail is there, the pattern. Unsolved crimes. Slashed throats of women. With the peculiar disfigurations and removals. Yes, I’ve followed a trail of Mood. From New York westward across the continent. Then to the Pacific. From there to Africa. During the World War of 1914-18 it was Europe. After that, South America. And since 1930, the United States again. Eighty-seven such murders—and to the trained criminologist, all bear the stigma of the Ripper’s handiwork.

“Recently there were the so-called Cleveland torso slayings. Remember? A shocking series. And finally, two recent deaths in Chicago. Within the past six months. One out on South Dearborn, The other somewhere up on Halsted. Same type of crime, same technique. I tell you, there are unmistakable indications in all these affairs—indications of the work of Jack the Ripper!”

I smiled.

“A very tight theory,” I said. “I’ll not question your evidence at all, or the deductions you draw. You’re the criminologist, and I’ll take your word for it. Just one thing remains to be explained. A minor point, perhaps, but worth mentioning.”

“And what is that?” asked Sir Guy. “Just how could a man of, let us say, 85 years commit these crimes? For if Jade the Ripper was around 30 in

1888 and lived, he'd be 85 today."

SIR GUY HOLLIS was silent. I had him there. But—

"Suppose he didn't get any older?" whispered Sir Guy.

"What's that?"

"Suppose Jack the Ripper didn't grow old? Suppose he is still a young man today?"

"All right," I said. "I'll suppose for a moment. Then I'll stop supposing and call for my nurse to restrain you."

"I'm serious," said Sir Guy.

"They all are," I told him. "That's the pity of it all, isn't it? They *know* they hear voices and see demons. But we lock them up just the same."

It was cruel, but it got results. He rose and faced me.

"It's a crazy theory, I grant you," he said. "All the theories about the Ripper are crazy. The idea that he was a doctor. Or a maniac. Or a woman. The reasons advanced for such beliefs are flimsy enough. There's nothing to go by. So why should my notion be any worse?"

"Because people grow older," I reasoned with him. "Doctors, maniacs, and women alike."

"What about—*sorcerers?"*

"Sorcerers?"

"Necromancers. Wizards. Practicers of Black Magic?"

"What's the point?"

"I studied," said Sir Guy." I studied everything. After awhile I began to study the dates of the murders. The pattern those dates formed. The rhythm. The solar, lunar, stellar rhythm. The sidereal aspect. The astrological significance."

He *was* crazy. But I still listened. "Suppose Jack the Ripper didn't murder for murder's sake alone? Suppose he wanted to make—a sacrifice?"

"What kind of a sacrifice?"

Sir Guy shrugged. “It is said that if you offer blood to the dark gods that they grant boons. Yes, if a blood offering is made at the proper time—when the moon and the stars are right—and with the proper ceremonies—they grant boons. Boons of youth. Eternal youth.”

“But that’s nonsense!”

“No. That’s—Jack the Ripper.”

I stood up. “A most interesting theory,” I told him. “But Sir Guy—there’s just one thing I’m interested in. Why do you come here and tell it to me? I’m not an authority on witchcraft. I’m not a police official or criminologist. I’m a practicing psychiatrist. What’s the connection?”

Sir Guy smiled.

“You are interested, then?”

“Well, yes. There must be some point.”

“There is. But I wished to be assured of your interest first. Now I can tell you my plan.”

“And just what is that plan?”

Sir Guy gave me a long look. Then he spoke.

“John Carmody,” he said, “you and I are going to capture Jack the Ripper.”

II

THAT’S the way it happened. I’ve given the gist of that first interview in all its intricate and somewhat boring detail, because I think it’s important. It helps to throw some light on Sir Guy’s character and attitude. And in view of what happened after that—

But I’m coming to those matters.

Sir Guy’s thought was simple. It wasn’t even a thought. Just a hunch.

“You know the people here,” he told me. “I’ve inquired. That’s why I came to you as the ideal man for my purpose. You number amongst your acquaintances many writers, painters, poets. The so-called intelligentsia. The Bohemians. The lunatic fringe from the near north side.

"For certain reasons—never mind what they are—my clues lead me to infer that Jade the Ripper is a member of that element. He chooses to pose as an eccentric. I've a feeling that with you to take me around and introduce me to your set, I might hit upon the right person."

"It's all right with me," I said. "But just how are you going to look for him? As you say, he might be anybody, anywhere. And you have no idea what he looks like. He might be young or old. Jack the Ripper—a Jack of all trades? Rich man, poor man, beggar man, thief, doctor, lawyer—how will you know?"

"We shall see." Sir Guy sighed heavily. "But I must find him. At once."

"Why the hurry?"

Sir Guy sighed again. "Because in two days he will kill again."

"Are you sure?"

"Sure as the stars. I've plotted his chart, you see. All 87 of the murders correspond to certain astrological rhythm patterns. If, as I suspect, he makes a blood sacrifice to renew his youth, he must murder within two days. Notice the pattern of his first crimes in London. August 7th. Then August 31. September 8th. September 30th. November 9th. Intervals of 24 days, 9 days, 22 days—he killed two this time—and then 40 days. Of course there were crimes in between. There had to be. But they weren't discovered and pinned on him.

"At any rate, I've worked out a pattern for him, based on all my data. And I say that within the next two days he kills. So I must seek him out, somehow, before then."

"And I'm still asking you what you want me to do."

"Take me out," said Sir Guy. "Introduce me to your friends. Take me to parties."

"But Where do I begin? As far as I know, my artistic friends, despite their eccentricities, are all normal people."

“So is the Ripper. Perfectly normal. Except on certain nights.” Again that faraway look in Sir Guy’s eyes. “Then he becomes an ageless pathological monster, crouching to kill, on evenings when the stars blaze down in the blazing patterns of death.”

“All right,” I said. “All right. I’ll take you to parties, Sir Guy. I want to go myself, anyway. I need the drinks they’ll serve there, after listening to your kind of talk.”

We made our plans. And that evening I took him over to Lester Baston’s studio.

AS WE ascended to the penthouse roof in the elevator I took the opportunity to warn Sir Guy.

“Baston’s a real screwball,” I cautioned him. “So are his guests. Be prepared for anything and everything.”

“I am.” Sir Guy Hollis was perfectly serious. He put his hand in his trousers pocket and pulled out a gun.

“What the—” I began.

“If I see him I’ll be ready,” Sir Guy said. He didn’t smile, either.

“But you can’t go running around at a party with a loaded revolver in your pocket, man!”

“Don’t worry, I won’t behave foolishly.”

I wondered. Sir Guy Hollis was not, to my way of thinking, a normal man.

We stepped out of the elevator, went toward Baston’s apartment door.

“By the way,” I murmured, “just how do you wish to be introduced? Shall I tell them who you are and what you are looking for?”

“I don’t care. Perhaps it would be best to be frank.”

“But don’t you think that the Ripper—if by some miracle he or she is present—will immediately get the wind up and take cover?”

“I think the shock of the announcement that I am hunting the Ripper would provoke some kind of a betraying gesture on his part,” said Sir Guy.

"You'd make a pretty good psychiatrist yourself," I conceded. "It's a fine theory. But I warn you, you're going to be in for a lot of ribbing. This is a wild bunch."

Sir Guy smiled.

"I'm ready," he announced. "I have a little plan of my own. Don't be shocked by anything I do," he warned me.

I nodded and knocked on the door.

Baston opened it and poured out into the hall. His eyes were as red as the maraschino cherries in his Manhattan. He teetered back and forth, regarding us very gravely. He squinted at my square-cut homburg hat and Sir Guy's mustache.

"Aha," he intoned. "The Walrus and the Carpenter."

I introduced Sir Guy.

"Welcome," said Baston, gesturing us inside with over-elaborate courtesy. He stumbled after us into the garish parlor.

I stared at the crowd that moved restlessly through the fog of cigarette smoke.

It was the shank of the evening for this mob. Every hand held a drink. Every face held a slightly hectic flush. Over in one corner the piano was going full blast, but the imperious strains of the *March* from *The Love for Three Oranges* couldn't drown out the profanity from the crap-game in the other corner.

Prokofieff had no chance against African polo, and one set of ivories rattled louder than the other.

Sir Guy got a monocle-full right away. He saw LaVerne Gonnister, the poetess, hit Hymie Kralik in the eye. He saw Hymie sit down on the floor and cry until Dick Pool accidentally stepped on his stomach as he walked through to the dining room for a drink.

He heard Nadia Vilinoff the commercial artist tell Johnny Odcutt that she thought his tattooing was in dreadful taste, and he saw Barclay Melton crawl under the dining room table with Johnny Odcutt's wife.

His zoological observations might have continued indefinitely if Lester Baston hadn't stepped to the center of the room and called for silence by dropping a vase on the floor.

"We have distinguished visitors in our midst," bawled Lester, waving his empty glass in our direction. "None other than the Walrus and the Carpenter. The Walrus is Sir Guy Hollis, a something-or-other from the British Embassy. The Carpenter, as you all know, is our own John Carmody, the prominent dispenser of libido-liniment."

He turned and grabbed Sir Guy by the arm, dragging him to the middle of the carpet. For a moment I thought Hollis might object, but a quick wink reassured me. He was prepared for this.

"It is our custom, Sir Guy," said Baston, loudly, "to subject our new friends to a little cross-examination. Just a little formality at these very formal gatherings, you understand. Are you prepared to answer questions?"

Sir Guy nodded and grinned.

"Very well," Baston muttered. "Friends—I give you this bundle from Britain. Your witness."

THEN the ribbing started. I meant to listen, but at that moment Lydia Dare saw me and dragged me off into the vestibule for one of those Darling-I-waited-for-your-call-all-day routines.

By the time I got rid of her and went back, the impromptu quiz session was in full swing. From the attitude of the crowd, I gathered that Sir Guy was doing all right for himself.

Then Baston himself interjected a question that upset the apple-cart.

"And what, may I ask, brings you to our midst tonight? What is your mission, oh Walrus?"

"I'm looking for Jack the Ripper."

Nobody laughed.

Perhaps it struck them all the way it did me. I glanced at my neighbors and began to *wonder.*

LaVerne Gonnister. Hymie Kralik. Harmless. Dick Pool. Nadia Vilinoff. Johnny Odcutt and his wife. Barclay Melton. Lydia Dare. All harmless.

But what a forced smile on Dick Pool's face! And that sly, self-conscious smirk that Barclay Melton wore!

Oh, it was absurd, I grant you. But for the first time I saw these people in a new light. I wondered about their lives—their secret lives beyond the scenes of parties.

How many of them were playing a part, concealing something?

Who here could worship Hecate and grant that horrid goddess the dark boon of blood?

Even Lester Baston might be masquerading.

The mood was upon us all, for a moment. I saw questions flicker in the circle of eyes around the room.

Sir Guy stood there, and I could swear he was fully conscious of the situation he'd created, and enjoyed it.

I wondered idly just what was *really* wrong with him. Why he had this odd fixation concerning Jack the Ripper. Maybe he was hiding secrets, too. . . .

Baston, as usual, broke the mood. He burlesqued it.

"The Walrus isn't kidding, friends," he said. He slapped Sir Guy on the back and put his arm around him as he orated. "Our English cousin is really on the trail of the fabulous Jack the Ripper. You all remember Jack the Ripper, I presume? Quite a cutup in the old days, as I recall. Really had some ripping good times when he went out on a tear.

"The Walrus has some idea that the Ripper is still alive, probably prowling around Chicago with a Boy Scout knife. In fact"—Baston paused impressively and shot it out in a rasping stage-whisper—"in fact, he has reason to believe that Jack the Ripper might even be right here in our midst tonight."

There was the expected reaction of giggles and grins. Baston eyed Lydia Dare reprovingly. "You girls needn't laugh," he smirked. "Jack the Ripper might be a woman, too, you know. Sort of a Jill the Ripper."

“You mean you actually suspect one of us?” shrieked Laverne Gonnister, simpering up to Sir Guy. “But that Jack the Ripper person disappeared ages ago, didn’t he? In 1888?”

“Aha!” interrupted Baston. “How do you know so much about it, young lady? Sounds suspicious! Watch her, Sir Guy—she may not be as young as she appears. These lady poets have dark pasts.”

The tension was gone, the mood was shattered, and the whole thing was beginning to degenerate into a trivial party joke.

Hie man who had played the *March* was eyeing the piano with a *Scherzo* gleam in his eye that augured ill for Prokofieff. Lydia Dare was glancing at the kitchen, waiting to make a break for another drink. Then Baston caught it.

“Guess what?” he yelled. “The Walrus has a gun!”

HIS embracing arm had slipped and encountered the hard outline of the gun in Sir Guy’s pocket. He snatched it out before Hollis had the opportunity to protest.

I stared hard at Sir Guy, wondering if this thing had carried far enough. But he flicked a wink my way and I remembered he had told me not to be alarmed.

So I waited as Baston broached a drunken inspiration.

“Let’s play fair with our friend the Walrus,” he cried. “He came all the way from England to our party on this mission. If none of you is willing to confess, I suggest we give him a chance to find out—the hard way.”

“What’s up?” asked Johnny Odcutt. “I’ll turn out the lights for one minute. Sir Guy can stand here with his gun. If anyone in this room is the Ripper he can either run for it or take the opportunity to—well, eradicate his pursuer. Fair enough?”

It was even sillier than it sounds, but it caught the popular fancy. Sir Guy’s protests went unheard in the ensuing babble. And before I could stride over and put in my two cents' worth, Lester Baston had reached the light switch.

"Don't anybody move," he announced, with fake solemnity. "For one minute we will remain in darkness—perhaps at the mercy of a killer. At the end of that time, I'll turn up the lights again and look for bodies. Choose your partners, ladies and gentlemen."

The lights went out.

Somebody giggled.

I heard footsteps in the darkness. Mutterings.

A hand brushed my face.

The watch on my wrist ticked violently. But even louder, rising above it, I heard another thumping. The beating of my heart.

Absurd. Standing in the dark with a group of tipsy fools. And yet there was real terror lurking here, rustling through the velvet blackness.

Jack the Ripper prowled in darkness like this. And Jack the Ripper had a knife. Jack the Ripper had a madman's brain and a madman's purpose.

But Jack the Ripper was dead, dead and dust these many years—by every human law.

Only there are no human laws when you feel yourself in the darkness, when the darkness hides and protects and the outer mask slips off your face and you feel something welling up within you, a brooding shapeless purpose that is brother to the blackness—

Sir Guy Hollis shrieked.

There was a grisly thud.

Baston had the lights on.

Everybody screamed.

Sir Guy Hollis lay sprawled on the floor in the center of the room. The gun was still clutched in his hand.

I glanced at the faces, marvelling at the variety of expressions human beings can assume when confronting horror.

All the faces were present in the circle. Nobody had fled. And yet Sir Guy Hollis lay there . . .

LaVerne Gonnister was wailing and hiding her face.

"All right."

Sir Guy rolled over and jumped to his feet. He was smiling.

"Just an experiment, eh? If Jack the Ripper *were* among those present, and thought I had been murdered, he would have betrayed himself in some way when the lights went on and he saw me lying there.

"I am convinced of your individual and collective innocence. Just a gentle spoof, my friends."

Hollis stared at the goggling Baston and the rest of them crowding in behind him.

"Shall we leave, John?" he called to me. "It's getting late, I think."

Turning, he headed for the closet. I followed him. Nobody said a word.

It was a pretty dull party after that.

III

I MET Sir Guy the following evening as we agreed, on the corner of 29th and South Halsted.

After what had happened the night before, I was prepared for almost anything. But Sir Guy seemed matter-of-fact enough as he stood huddled against a grimy doorway and waited for me to appear.

"Boo!" I said, jumping out suddenly. He smiled. Only the betraying gesture of his left hand indicated that he'd instinctively reached for his gun when I startled him.

"All ready for our wild goose chase?"

I asked.

"Yes." He nodded. "I'm glad that you agreed to meet me without asking questions," he told me. "It shows you trust my judgment." He took my arm and edged me along the street slowly.

"It's foggy tonight, John," said Sir Guy Hollis. "Like London."

I nodded.

"Cold, too, for November."

I nodded again and half-shivered my agreement.

"Curious," mused Sir Guy. "London fog and November. The place and the time of the Ripper murders."

I grinned through darkness. "Let me remind you, Sir Guy, that this isn't London, but Chicago. And it isn't November, 1888. It's over fifty years later."

Sir Guy returned my grin, but without mirth. "I'm not so sure, at that," he murmured. "Look about you. These tangled alleys and twisted streets. They're like the East End. Mitre Square. And surely they are as ancient as fifty years, at least."

"You're in the colored neighborhood off South Clark Street," I said, shortly. "And why you dragged me down here I still don't know."

"It's a hunch," Sir Guy admitted. "Just a hunch on my part, John. I want to wander around down here. There's the same geographical conformation in these streets as in those courts where the Ripper roamed and slew. That's where we'll find him, John. Not in the bright lights of the Bohemian neighborhood, but down here in the darkness. The darkness where he waits and crouches."

"Is that why you brought a gun?" I asked. I was unable to keep a trace of sarcastic nervousness from my voice. All of this talk, this incessant obsession with Jack the Ripper, got on my nerves more than I cared to admit.

"We may need the gun," said Sir Guy, gravely. "After all, tonight is the appointed night."

I sighed. We wandered on through the foggy, deserted streets. Here and there a dim light burned above a gin-mill doorway. Otherwise, all was darkness and shadow. Deep, gaping alley-ways loomed as we proceeded down a slanting side-street.

We crawled through that fog, alone and silent, like two tiny maggots floundering within a shroud.

When that thought hit me, I winced. The atmosphere was beginning to get *me,* too. If I didn't watch my step I'd go as loony as Sir Guy.

"Can't you see there's not a soul around these streets?" I said, tugging at his coat impatiently.

"He's bound to come," said Sir Guy. "He'll be drawn here. This is what I've been looking for. A *genius loci.* An evil spot that attracts evil. Always, when he slays, it's in the slums.

"You see, that must be one of his weaknesses. He has a fascination for squalor. Besides, the women he needs for sacrifice are more easily found in the dives and stewpots of a great city."

I smiled. "Well, let's go into one of the dives or stewpots," I suggested. "I'm cold. Need a drink. This damned fog gets into your bones. You Britishers can stand it, but I like warmth and dry heat."

WE EMERGED from our side-street and stood upon the threshold of an alley.

Through the white clouds of mist ahead, I discerned a dim blue light, a naked bulb dangling from a beer sign above an alley tavern.

"Let's take a chance," I said. "I'm beginning to shiver."

"Lead the way," said Sir Guy. I led him down the alley passage. We halted before the door of the dive.

"What are you waiting for?" he asked.

"Just looking in," I told him. "This is a tough neighborhood. Sir Guy. Never know what you're liable to run into. And I'd prefer we didn't get into the wrong company. Some of these Negro places resent white customers."

"Good idea, John."

I finished my inspection through the doorway glass. "Looks deserted," I murmured. "Let's try it."

We entered a dingy-bar. A feeble light flickered above the counter and railing, but failed to penetrate the further gloom of the back booths.

A gigantic Negro lolled across the bar—a black giant with prognathous jaw and ape-like torso. He scarcely stirred as we came in, but his eyes flickered open quite suddenly and I knew he noted our presence and was judging us.

"Evening," I said.

He took his time before replying. Still sizing us up. Then, he grinned.

"Evening, gents. What's your pleasure?"

"Gin," I said. "Two gins. It's a cold night."

"That's right, gents."

He poured. I paid, and took the glasses over to one of the booths. We wasted no time in emptying them. The fiery liquor warmed.

I went over to the bar and got the bottle. Sir Guy and I poured ourselves another drink. The big Negro went back into his doze, with one wary eye half-open against any sudden activity.

The clock over the bar ticked on. The wind was rising outside, tearing the shroud of fog to ragged shreds. Sir Guy and I sat in the warm booth and drank our gin.

He began to talk, and the shadows crept up about us to listen.

He rambled a great deal. He went over everything he'd said in the office when I met him, just as though I hadn't heard it before. The poor devils with obsessions are like that.

I listened very patiently. After awhile I got up and took the bottle of gin off the bar. The Negro nodded, took the money I offered him, and went back to dozing. I poured Sir Guy another drink. And another.

BUT the liquor only made him more talkative. How he did run on! About ritual killings and prolonging life unnaturally—the whole fantastic tale came out again. And of course, he maintained his unyielding conviction that the Ripper was abroad tonight.

I suppose I was guilty of goading him. "Very well," I said, unable to keep the impatience from my voice. "Let us say that your theory is correct—even though we must overlook every natural law and swallow a lot of superstition to give it any credence.

"But let us say, for the sake of argument, that you are right. Jack the Ripper was a man who discovered how to prolong his own life through making human sacrifices. He did travel around the world as you believe. He is in Chicago now and he is planning to kill. In other words, let us suppose that everything you claim is gospel truth. So what?"

"What do you mean, 'so what' ?" said Sir Guy, pouring himself another glass of gin.

"I mean—so what?" I answered. "If all this is true, it still doesn't prove that by sitting down in a dingy gin-mill on the South Side, Jack the Ripper is going to walk in here and let you kill him, or turn him over to the police. And come to think of it, I don't even know now just what you intend to *do* with him if you ever did find him."

SIR GUY gulped his gin. "I'd capture the bloody swine," he said. Capture him and turn him over to the government, together with all the papers and documentary evidence I've collected against him over a period of many years. I've spent a fortune investigating this affair, I tell you, a fortune! His capture will mean the solution of hundreds of unsolved crimes, of that I am convinced.

"I tell you, a mad beast is loose on this world! An ageless, eternal beast, sacrificing to Hecate and the dark gods!"

In vino veritas. Or was all this babbling the result of too much gin? It didn't matter. Sir Guy Hollis had another. I sat there and wondered what to do with him. The man was rapidly working up to a climax of hysterical drunkenness.

"One other point," I said, more for the sake of conversation than in any hopes of obtaining information. "You still don't explain how it is that you hope to just blunder into the Ripper."

"He'll be around," said Sir Guy. "I'm psychic. I know."

Sir Guy wasn't psychic. He was maudlin.

The whole business was beginning to infuriate me. We'd been sitting here an hour, and during all this time I'd been forced to play nursemaid and audience to a babbling idiot. After all, he wasn't a regular patient of mine.

"That's enough," I said, putting out my hand as Sir Guy reached for the half-emptied bottle again. "You've had plenty. Now I've got a suggestion to make. Let's call a cab and get out of here. It's getting late and it doesn't look as though your elusive friend is going to put in his appearance. Tomorrow, if I were you, I'd plan to turn all those papers and documents over to the F.B.I. If you're so convinced of the truth of your wild theory, they are competent to make a very thorough investigation, and find your man."

"No." Sir Guy was drunkenly obstinate. "No cab."

"But let's get out of here anyway," I said, glancing at my watch. "It's past midnight."

He sighed, shrugged, and rose unsteadily. As he started for the door, he tugged the gun free from his pocket.

"Here, give me that!" I whispered. "You can't walk around the street brandishing that thing."

I took the gun and slipped it inside my coat. Then I got hold of his right arm and steered him out of the door. The Negro didn't look up as we departed.

WE STOOD shivering in the alleyway.

The fog had increased. I couldn't see either end of the alley from where we stood. It was cold. Damp. Dark. Fog or no fog, a little wind was whispering secrets to the shadows at our backs.

The fresh air hit Sir Guy just as I expected it would. Fog and gin-fumes don't mingle very well. He lurched as I guided him slowly through the mist.

Sir Guy, despite his incapacity, still stared apprehensively at the alley, as though he expected to see a figure approaching.

Disgust got the better of me.

“Childish foolishness,” I snorted. “Jack the Ripper, indeed! I call this carrying a hobby too far.”

“Hobby?” He faced me. Through the fog I could see his distorted face. “You call this a hobby?”

“Well, what is it?” I grumbled. “Just why else are you so interested in tracking down this mythical killer?”

My arm held him. But his stare held me.

“In London,” he whispered. “In 1888 . . . one of those nameless drabs the Ripper slew . . . was my mother.”

“What?”

“Later I was recognized by my father, and legitimatized. We swore to give our lives to find the Ripper. My father was the first to search. He died in Hollywood in 1926—on the trail of the Ripper. They said he was stabbed by an unknown assailant in a brawl. But I know who that assailant was.

“So I’ve taken up his work, do you see, John? I’ve carried on. And I will carry on until I do find him and kill him with my own hands.

“He took my mother’s life and the lives of hundreds to keep his own hellish being alive. Like a vampire, he battens on blood. Like a ghoul, he is nourished by death. Like a fiend, he stalks the world to kill. He is cunning, devilishly cunning. But I’ll never rest until I find him, never!”

I believed him then. He wouldn’t give up. He wasn’t just a drunken babbler any more. He was as fanatical, as determined, as relentless as the Ripper himself.

Tomorrow he’d be sober. He’d continue the search. Perhaps he’d turn those papers over to the F.B.I. Sooner or later, with such persistence—and with his motive—he’d be successful. I’d always known he had a motive.

“Let’s go,” I said, steering him down the alley.

“Wait a minute,” said Sir Guy. “Give me back my gun.” He lurched a little. “I’d feel better with the gun on me.”

He pressed me into the dark shadows of a little recess.

I tried to shrug him off, but he was insistent.

“Let me carry the gun, now, John,” he mumbled.

“All right,” I said.

I reached into my coat, brought my hand out.

“But that’s not a gun,” he protested. “That’s a knife.”

“I know.”

I bore down on him swiftly.

“John!” he screamed.

“Never mind the ‘John’,” I whispered, raising the knife. “Just call me . . . Jack.”

You Can't Kid Lefty Feep

What incredible thing had happened here in this home for aged gangsters? Somehow they had a new lease on life!

WHY do I go to Jack's Shack to eat?

The food is nothing to brag about. I suppose my ulcers are getting used to it. And the meals have improved a little lately—since they began to serve bicarbonate of soda as a regular dessert.

Still, I take an awful risk when I eat there. Because I never know when I'm liable to run into my friend Lefty Feep. Jack may dish out terrible food, but Lefty Feep dishes out worse stories. And the food isn't as hard on my stomach as those stories are on my credulity. I usually get a bad case of mental indigestion.

For example—

I was sitting in Jack's Shack just the other night, doing my best to cut into one of his steaks without an electric saw. Suddenly the door opened. I knew it opened because I felt a gust of wind.

Sure enough, on turning around I saw the gust of wind. None other than Lefty Feep himself. As usual, he was dressed in a suit with a sort of rainbow trout effect, but very becoming. Becoming painful to look at.

But the tall, thin man around town who travels in the most vicious circles was more than a sight for sore eyes. He looked youthful, radiant, positively boyish.

I told him so as he sat down next to me.

"You're looking great, Lefty," I said. "Very fresh and young."

Feep moved his chair back a foot and frowned.

"What's the matter?" I asked. "Here I haven't seen you in a month and I tell you how youthful you look. Why get peeved?"

Lefty Feep sighed.

"It is truthful I am youthful," he said. "But I do not wish to be kidded about being a kid."

He sat there sulking.

"For heaven's sake!" I protested. "There's no need to act like a baby about it."

Feep jumped to his feet with a screech. "Don't say that way!" he howled. "I got to squawk about that baby talk. I recently have an experience with a nursery that drives me nerts."

I rose to escape, for I smelled a story coming on. But Feep detained me, with a firm grasp on the collar.

"Nerts, I tell you!" he repeated. "In fact, I will tell you, and drive you nerts along with me."

"Travel alone," I suggested. "Nerts to you, all right. But as for me, I must be going."

Feep nodded. "That is right," he agreed. "You are going to listen to me."

He pulled me down in my chair again.

"But I have an appointment," I protested.

"Make it a disappointment," said Lefty Feep. "Me, I got a declaration in preparation about the younger generation."

Turning his strangely boyish face to me with an earnest stare, Lefty Feep opened his mouth and presented a slice of tongue in a conversational sandwich. The crumbs of wisdom fell.

Said Feep—

I AM personally a very active fellow and about a month ago I get extremely tired of just loafing.

Naturally this harms and alarms me, so I decide to go up and see my favorite cemetery-filler, a Doc by the name of Subconscious Sigmund. Subconscious Sigmund is a psychologist who knows all about nerves and has plenty of his own, but I figure he is just the man to explain the pain in my brain.

Subconscious Sigmund gives me the old hello and what do you know, and I explain to him how tired I get from loafing.

“Tired of loafing, eh?” says Sigmund. “Well, then, what you need is a vacation.”

“Vacation?” I say. “But I am not doing anything *now.”*

“Then why do you get tired?” he comes back. “Obviously if you aren’t doing anything and you still get tired, there is something wrong. The trouble must be that you can’t relax. So in order to relax, you must take a vacation.”

This makes sense to me.

“Also,” says Sigmund, “it is a good idea if you cultivate a hobby Have you got a hobby?”

I can answer this one, and I do. “Definitely,” I tell him. “Some guys play piano and some guys play violins. But me—I play ponies.”

“A horse-player, eh?” Sigmund barks.

“Yes,” I admit. “And there isn’t any sweeter music than the sound of a horse coming in first.”

“Then why not go to a race-track for your vacation?” asks Sigmund.

“An excellent idea. And I know just where to go now. I am off to Florida.”

Sigmund shakes his head.

“You will not get much of a vacation down there,” he tells me. “The army takes over all the hotels and you will have no place to stay.”

“You are wrong,” I come back. “I will not even try to stay at a hotel. I will stay with Happy Pappy.”

"What in the name of the Id, the Ego, and the Psychic Trauma, is Happy Pappy?" asks Sigmund.

So I explain.

"I take it you never hear of the Crook of the Month Club. It is a very exclusive group of goniffs, yeggs, and heisters from way back in the 1920's and whenever. All of the old-time hoods and molls belong to this organization, which is nothing more or less than a protective association for gangsters.

"In these days they are making a lot of the old mahoola and being careless, nobody socks it away for a rainy day. So Happy Pappy organizes the Crook of the Month Club. Every month these various personalities in the rackets put away a certain amount of lettuce to nibble at in the future when their teeth get dull.

"NOW, twenty years later, most of them are very much retired. Some are retired in various graveyards, and others are retired at Federal hotels. But there are a good dozen of old-time loud noises in the rackets who are still around.

"So Happy Pappy takes the dough they save all these years and buys a boarding house down in Florida. A sort of an Old Crook's Home. They all live there very quietly with their scrapbooks and press clippings and brag about their police records.

"I know there is always an extra room or two, and so I will stay there in Florida with Happy Pappy."

Subconscious Sigmund lifts his hands.

"You still do not tell me who Happy Pappy is," he reminds me.

I oblige. "Happy Pappy," I tell him, "is the oldest pickpocket in the world. He gets his start hoisting purses in the crowd that listens to Lincoln's Gettysburg Address. He cleans up big in the World's Fair of 1893. He is so old he finally goes around in a wheel chair as part of a charity outfit that raises funds. But he still raises most of his funds from other people's pockets.

"Anyhow he finally opens this boarding house for what is left of the Crook of the Month Club. I know he will be very glad to see me and will treat me very nicely. Particularly if I sew up my pockets first."

Subconscious Sigmund shakes his head. "I hope you have a pleasant vacation," he says. "Be sure to take things easy."

"I always take everything easy," I assure him. "Though not as easy as Happy Pappy takes things. He is a marvel."

With these parting syllables I am out the door and on my way to the train. The next morning I am on the floor in Florida.

I am so excited and happy about being here that I do not even check in to the Old Crook's Home, but head right for the tracks to play the ponies. I spend the afternoon listening to a lot of pretty notes—bank notes—and it is almost dark before I grab a cab and drive down to the Old Crook's Home in Miami.

I am feeling so good about my winnings that I do not notice the way the cabby shudders when he pulls up in front of a dark, dingy old barn on a side street.

I march up the rickety steps and ring the bell.

Nothing happens.

I ring again.

All at once a little slot opens in the front of the door and a nose sticks out. A big, red nose, with warts on it.

"What's the password," says the Nose.

"Password?" I say, confused.

"Nobody gets in without a password, buddy," says the Nose.

Sure enough, this joint is rigged up like an old-time speakeasy. Evidently these old mobsters don't realize we are living in a new day and age.

So I decide to humor the Nose.

"Joe sends me," I tell him.

"O.K., then," the Nose grumbles, and opens the door.

I STEP into the hallway. Two arms grab me from behind. In front of me there is an old ginch waving a blackjack.

"Frisk him, boys," cackles the old ginch, through her false fangs. "Maybe he's packing a gat."

Sure enough, they search me.

"No rod," says the Nose, from behind me. He lets me go. The old ginch sighs.

"Too bad," she says. "I'm just dying to conk somebody."

"Cheer up, Bertha," says the Nose. "We'll get a wrongo yet, and then we'll all get together and put the boots to him."

Then the Nose turns to me. He is a little shorty guy, and besides a nose he has arms and legs—but very little else. As a matter of fact, you have to look around the nose to find his face, and when you get to it it's hardly worth the trouble.

Nevertheless he gives me the old inspection section by section, and a very cold glint comes into his eye. Matching the cold glint of the knife he suddenly pulls out of his pants-leg.

"Who are you, buddy?" he asks. "Answer before I let the air out of your tires."

Not wishing to be deflated, I tell him my name and business in a flurry of hurry. "I am an old friend of Happy Pappy," I conclude. "And I wish to spend a few days here with him."

He looks relieved. So do I, when he puts the knife back in his garter.

"Oh, that's different," he says. "You want to hide out here, eh? The heat's on for you up North, I suppose? What you do—rub out a John Law?"

"I am just on vacation," I tell him.

The old ginch cackles. "That's the way," she says. "Play it smart. Don't spill anything. You can't trust these goons around here. Bet you really pull a job! Look like a killer to me."

The Nose smiles. "Meet one of our regulars," he says, pointing at the old ginch. "This is Lower Bertha. Used to work the old Pullman car racket."

"Pullman car racket?" I inquire.

"Tell you how I do it," she confides. "Rent a lower berth in a Pullman, see? Then during the night I take the old brace and bit and drill right through the top into the upper berth, get me? The drill works easy. Usually bores right through the guy sleeping in the upper berth without even waking him up. As soon as I figure he croaks, I just slip out, climb into the upper berth, and goniff with his dough and jewelry. Then I do a quick sneak off the train before morning."

Upper Bertha hands me a dazzling smile with her fake molars, but I do not feel like smiling when I hear this charming bedtime story. I feel like shaking, and do.

The Nose laughs. "Bertha is handing you a line," he tells me. "She does not pull off such a job in the last fifteen years. And she never does it in the old days just to be mean. It is only to help support her dear mother in Reform School."

UPPER BERTHA is very indignant.

"That doesn't matter," she snaps. "I am famous for my bloodthirstiness. Mr. Feep, if you don't believe me, I will be glad to show you my press clippings. They say I am the most coldblooded woman killer of the century. Never mind what this old fogey here says. He's just a cheap axe-murderer. One of the *hoi polloi."*

"What do you mean, a cheap axe-murderer?" snarls the Nose, offended. "You call bumping off a whole family of seven a cheap job? Why, it takes me an hour just to re-sharpen the axe and have it ready for the cops when they come for me."

I break up this little reminiscence session in a hurry.

"Where is Happy Pappy?" I ask.

"Tell you about that at dinner," says the Nose. "Better come on in. We're just sitting down. You'll enjoy the meal. We got a great cook," he tells me, leading me into the dining room. "Arsenic Arnold. Remember how he poisons his wife?"

So everything is fine. I sit down to dinner with a bunch of murderers and eat a meal cooked by a poisoner.

The rest of the mob is worse. I meet Snake Malone, who sells rotten alky in the Prohibition days, and Torpedo Tony, once known as Public Enemy Number One to Thirteen, inclusive, and an aged tomato by the name of Violent Violet, who once runs her husband through a meat-grinder.

Of course, they are all very old now, and when it is quiet you can hear their arteries hardening. The Nose walks with a cane, and Lower Bertha has false teeth, and Snake Malone has an ear trumpet the size of a public address horn. Torpedo Tony, the Public Enemy, hasn't enough strength left to pull the trigger on a water-pistol, and Violent Violet couldn't turn the handle on a slot machine any more.

But all they talk about is mobs and hiding out and putting the heat on and tipping over joints and taking it on the lam. It is very picturesque to hear all these quaint sayings and it makes me think back to the days of my youth.

Still, it is hard to get along with these old rascals, because they are always bragging about their scrapbooks and who has the longest police record and which one kills the most.

Finally I drag the conversation around to Happy Pappy once again.

"Where is Happy Pappy?" I ask.

A dead silence falls over the table, and does not pick itself up again, either.

"I am afraid he is rubbed out," says Violent Violet, at last. "About a week ago he takes a powder to his old homestead." She sighs. "He says he is coming back in time to listen to the nightly police calls on short-wave broadcast, but he never shows up. And that is seven days ago. Somebody must slip him a Mickey or something."

"This is news to me," I say. "I never know Happy Pappy has any enemies who will lay violent hands on him. Why he is the best-loved pickpocket in the business. And what is all this about an old homestead? I always figure he lives right here."

“He does,” says Arsenic Arnold, coming in with coffee and dessert. “But he also has an old shack back in the Everglades. His folks live there years ago when they smuggle slaves. And he says last week he will go back and visit it after fifty years for old times’ sake.”

I GET up. “You mean to tell me you let an old whacker like Happy Pappy wander around alone? The poor old scoundrel is over ninety. Maybe he’s sick or lost. I’m ashamed of all of you! I’ll go out and look for him myself.”

“Not until morning,” says Lower Bertha. “Those Everglades are pretty mean swamps. Lots of alligators there, and I don’t mean the kind that like swing music, either.”

“All right,” I decide. “But first thing in the morning, I am going to go up there and find out what happens to Happy Pappy.”

I spend the evening quietly, going through a lot of old WANTED FOR MURDER and REWARD posters the gang shows me in their scrapbooks, and listening to *Crime Busters* on the radio with Snake Malone. Then I have to hear Torpedo Tony tell me how he wins his *Junior G-Man* badge for eating breakfast food.

I get to bed early, making sure that Lower Bertha isn’t hiding under the mattress with her brace and bit, and by eight the next morning I am driving a rented car up to the Everglades.

Directions are not so good, and I make slow time. If it is not for the fact that the Nose has a lot of stolen gasoline on hand, I would never make it at all.

But I follow the map they give me, and pretty soon I am going down some dark and dismal roads into the Everglade swamps.

There is some pretty creepy scenery here, and enough moss on the trees to make the Smith Brothers green with envy. I twist and turn along the trail, and finally I pull up twenty miles from the nearest hot-dog stand and walk down the road the map shows.

I thud through the mud, I mush through the brush, I wade through the Everglades. Until at last I reach a little ramshackle shack down near the water. This must be Happy Pappy's old homestead.

As far as I can see, the place is deserted. There is nothing around but a bunch of snakes, and none of them resemble Happy Pappy.

I open the door of the shack and look inside. It is dark, but empty.

"Yoohoo!" I mention, in a loud manner.

"Who is it?" says a soft voice.

I turn around and nearly fall down.

There is a brat standing behind me.

A very tiny brat it is, with long golden curls, and a sweet smile, like the moppets in the laxative ads. The funny thing about it is that it wears cast-off clothes that once belong to a large man. The sleeves and pants-legs are rolled up. So are the brat's big blue eyes.

"Pardon me, urchin," I say, very politely. "But can you possibly tell me where in blue-blasted blazes I can find an old baboon by the name of Happy Pappy?"

The urchin grins.

"I am Happy Pappy," lisps the urchin.

"You are slap-happy," I snarl. "Listen, you sawed-off little squirt, I am in no mood for idle banter, see? Where is the old jerk?"

"But I tell you," says the moppet. "I am Happy Pappy."

"Please," I coax him, grabbing him by the neck just to emphasize my remarks. "I am looking for an old fink, see? Happy Pappy is so old he starts out as a card-sharp on Noah's Ark."

"You are mistaken," lisps the tyke. "I am Happy Pappy and I can prove it."

"How?" I inquire.

"Here," says the kid, lifting some articles from his pocket. "This is your watch and this is your wallet—right? I lift them off you while you clutch me by the throat."

I shake my head. Nobody but Happy Pappy has such a delicate touch.

“You are Lefty Feep,” says the moppet. “I remember you, see? And I tell you, pal, I am Happy Pappy all right.”

“But I don’t get it,” I sigh. “How come you are suddenly a little boy instead of an old vulture?”

“IT IS all a mistake,” says the kid.

“I am kind of glad you look me up. I am ashamed to go back to the Old Crook’s Home looking like this. I don’t know what I can do. And what happens to me is so distressing.”

“Tell me about it,” I suggest.

Happy Pappy smiles up at me. “Do you ever hear of Ponce de Leon?” he asks.

“What race does the nag run in?” I inquire.

“Ponce de Leon is not a horse, he is a man,” explains Happy Pappy, tossing his head and waving his golden curls. “He is the personality who looks for the Fountain of Youth.”

“I never go in drug stores,” I remark.

“Let me explain,” says Happy Pappy. And he does. I listen to his story, and it runs something like this.

Ponce de Leon is an old Spanish customer who lives in the days of the *conquistadores. Conquistadore* is a Spanish word meaning hi-jacker—at least these babies are always hanging around Spanish galleons or whatever, and they come over to this country to heist gold and silver and jewels from the Indians.

But Ponce is a little different than the other hi-jackers. In fact he as a hi-jacker is not so high. He is getting pretty old and cold, and what he is interested in is how he can put his big paunch into a suit of armor these days, and how to keep from doddering.

In a word, he is hot for rejuvenation or whatever. And he hears a song and dance from some Indians in front of a cigar-store in Havana, about a Fountain of Youth. A big stream somewhere in Florida with bubbling waters

. . . a stream that washes away the wrinkles faster than the soap flakes that advertise on the radio. One dip in this stream, say the Indians, and you come out a new man. It takes years off your shoulders.

Nobody knows exactly where this wonder water flows, but the legend says it is somewhere in Florida.

So Ponce gets his trigger men together, climbs in one of these Spanish galleons, and sets sail for the Everglades. He twists the locks on the Florida Keys and lands on the coast. He gallops through the swamps like an old fogey, trying to find this Fountain of Youth and addle his way back to adolescence.

But according to the hysterical accounts, he never finds it. He gets all the way to the Mississippi River and back, and croaks like a frog in the swamps.

Ever since, various explorers and real estate men are searching for the Fountain of Youth. But no score.

That is the way Happy Pappy explains it.

"Don't tell me you find this dream stream?" I explode, when he finishes.

Happy Pappy nods, looking up at me with a grin on his moppet's mug.

"Don't I look that way?" he says.

"But how—why?"

"I come back here a week ago," he tells me. "I figure I will spend a few days alone here in the woods, because I get fed up with that crowd at the Old Crook's Home. They are always after me to teach them tricks and show them how to goniff fillings from teeth and other difficult thefts. At my age it is a little difficult and I need a rest.

"So I sneak down here. And I run right into the very thing Ponce de Leon is looking for, hundreds of years ago.

"OF COURSE I do not know it at the time. Every morning I go down to the water, there, in back of the shack, and brush my teeth. I even drink a little of it from time to time, as a chaser, because I have plenty of alky on hand.

"After a couple of days I do not clean my teeth any more. I just take them out and throw them away.

"Because I find new teeth—not store teeth—growing in my mouth!

"It is then that I make an inspection of my reflection in the water and see that I am growing younger. You can imagine how I feel about this deal. I get so excited I drink about a quart of the stuff before going to sleep that night.

"This turns out to be too much. Because when I wake up the next morning—yesterday—I am nothing but a moppet. Yes, in my sleep I start a one-man youth movement of my own. I go to bed in my second childhood and I wake up in my third!

"So here I am, just a barefoot boy with shoes on."

This is a very remarkable yarn that Happy Pappy untangles for me, and I can only shake my head while I look at his boyish bobbings.

"Don't you believe me?" lisps Happy Pappy.

"Why not?" I say. "But I would like to see this Fountain of Juvenility."

"Come along," says Happy Pappy, leading me with little short steps down the path to the water behind the shack.

I stare down at a wide pool in the swamp, which lies all by itself, surrounded by rocks.

"Looks very much like ordinary water to me," I say with a frown—because if there is anything I hate, it is ordinary water.

"Look again," says Happy Pappy.

I notice this time that the stuff is a little off-color. A very mellow yellow, with bubbles rising from it like champagne.

"I figure there must be a hidden spring underneath," Happy Pappy tells me. "It probably dries up after a while, which is why the pool never grows any bigger."

"What about rains?" I ask.

"The rocks overhanging the pool keep rainwater out and so the stuff stays pure," he mentions.

I walk all around the pool and shake my head.

"I grieve that I cannot believe you," I admit. "But this looks like ordinary mineral water to me."

"Then why not try it?" urges Happy Pappy. "Take a little snort for sport."

"All right," I say. I bend down and start to ulp a gulp.

"Take it easy," yells Happy Pappy. "Just a little swallow or you will be an infant in an instant."

I grin and shake my head, but as I taste the water I get a surprise. It burns like fire and makes me tingle all over as though somebody gives my tongue the hotfoot. All at once I know that Happy Pappy doesn't mean maybe when he says I'll be a baby. Just a few drops trickle over my tonsils and I suddenly feel very different.

MEANWHILE I raise my noggin and stare at my reflection in the pool. My reflection shows a lighter complexion. The wrinkles are coming out of my forehead. The bags under my eyes gradually shrink. To tell the truth, I feel like a youth!

I stare at myself for a long while and all at once I grin.

"Come on!" I shout to Happy Pappy. "We must go to town right away." Happy Pappy shakes his head. "Why do you frown on town?" I expostulate which is even more high-class than asking.

"What can a little boy like me do in town?" he comes back, logically. "I am just a poor little brat now, after drinking too much of this water."

"How would you like to be a rich little brat?" I suggest.

"Try me and see," he says. "But how will I get rich?"

"By making money."

"And how will I make money?"

"You will make money like water," I tell him. "With water. With this water from the Fountain of Youth."

"I will?"

“Better than that, *we* will,” I correct him. “Every drop of this fabulous fluid is worth its weight in platinum. Don’t you realize that we have here something that will be the rejuvenation of the nation?

“Think of all the old guys with monkey glands and all the over-ripe tomatoes that go to beauty parlors to get their pusses hoisted. With a gulp of this wonder water you don’t need to have your face lifted.

“Don’t you understand? We will start a chain of beauty parlors and clean up. Life begins at eighty, that’s our motto.”

Happy Pappy starts to grin. He catches on.

“Get some bottles from the shack,” I instruct him. “We will take some of this juvenile juice back to town.”

“But we can’t let anyone find out about this stuff,” he objects. “Better leave it all here.”

“We must take some for analysis,” I say. “We must find out just how much of a swallow a person can take to get young, without overdoing it the way you do. We must experiment.”

Happy Pappy agrees. He hustles and rustles up some bottles. We walk back to the pool and fill the bottles with the water. This we stick in the car and we’re off to town.

I still cannot get used to Happy Pappy as a little boy. I have to boost him up into the front seat of the car next to me, and drive very careful over the bumps in the road so he does not fall out, being so light and small.

It is all very vexing and perplexing, and I wonder what the gang at the Crook of the Month Club home will think of it.

In fact I mention this to Happy Pappy as we ride merrily along.

“For the sake of my poor old wife and kiddies in Leavenworth,” moans Happy Pappy, “do not tell those thugs who I am. Introduce me as your nephew or something. They will give me a terrific ribbing if they find out what happens. I will think of a way to break the news gently.”

“All right,” I agree. “You will be my nephew. I will say that I meet you in town on the way back. But what will I report about seeing you at the shack in the Everglades?”

“Just say I am staying there a while longer,” suggests Happy Pappy. “Tell them I am brushing up on my pickpocketing by practising on a window dummy I keep out there. Tell them I am trying to steal teeth from alligators. Tell them a cyclone comes up and I am waiting to pick an air-pocket. Tell them anything but the truth. For you that should be easy.”

I frown at this, but there is no other way out. I will do as he says.

IT IS as dark as Hitler’s future by the time we arrive at the little house on the side street where the gang hangs out.

I go up the steps, leading Happy Pappy by the hand, and carrying the bottles full of age-exterminator along to hide on the porch before the bunch can see it.

Then I knock and the Nose sticks out of the slot in the door. When the Nose recognizes me he lets me in.

“Where do you hide out all day?” he asks. “Where is Happy Pappy and who is this hunk of brat poison?” he inquires, trying to kick the moppet at my side.

“Kindly do not put the boots to my nephew,” I request. “I pick him up in town where he is training to be a jockey. To answer your other questions, I go out to the Everglades and see Happy Pappy but he does not wish to return with me. He is practising up on some new pickpocket tricks.”

“New tricks?”

“Well,” I explain, “with all the women wearing slacks these days, he is learning how to pick slack-pockets as well as he can trouser-pockets. I figure he will be practised up in a couple of days and come home.”

The Nose takes these remarks all right and we go down to the dining room. The rest of the bunch is already hobbling in for gobbling.

I introduce my nephew to Arsenic Arnold and Lower Bertha and Violent Violet and Torpedo Tony and Snake Malone.

“Pardon me, Uncle Lefty,” says my fake nephew. “I will go wash my hands before I eat.”

Everybody looks at him, thinking he is a sissy.

"I never leave finger prints around," he explains. Everybody smiles at this.

"Pretty smart punk," says the Nose, after little Happy Pappy leaves the room. "We can learn such a urchin a lot of things. I will teach him how to handle an axe and Torpedo Tony can wise him up about Tommy-guns."

"It's always good for a growing child to have a proper education," agrees Violent Violet. "They don't teach them anything at Reform School any more." Happy Pappy comes back, and Arsenic Arnold beats it into the kitchen to serve the food.

Then for the next twenty minutes there is silence, except when Lower Bertha hits Snake Malone over the head with a plate for trying to swipe her potato.

Gradually the gravy stains begin to dry on the faces around the table and Arsenic Arnold serves coffee. Everybody drinks.

"Funny-tasting coffee," comments the Nose. "Where do you steal it this time, Arnold?"

"From the regular place," Arnold comes back.

"Well, it tastes stronger. Damn this rationing, anyhow."

"I steal as best I can," objects Arsenic Arnold. "Every morning I walk myself sick just to do my regular daily shoplifting. If you mugs have any complaints you can get a new cook."

"No complaints," says the Nose, in a hurry. "We like your cooking. And this coffee is swell. We'll all drink it down to the last drop."

Which they do. That is, everybody but little Happy Pappy and myself, who never touch anything stronger than whiskey.

I AM just reaching for my cup like the others, when Happy Pappy nudges me. "Shhh," he whispers. "Don't touch it. When I leave the room I pour some of our anti-senility special in the coffee-pot."

“Why do you do such a thing?” I whisper back. “Are you going screwy in your young age?”

“You want to experiment with the stuff, don’t you?” he comes back.

“Well, here’s our chance. I only use a little and we will see how far it works. Also I want to break the news of who I am very gently. This is one way to do it.”

I do not think it is such a good way, but it is too late now. I sit back and watch them finish their coffee and then I watch their coffee finish them.

Because once the coffee is down it gets in its work very, very quickly, and in just a few seconds I see a youth movement sweeping around the room.

Everybody seems to notice this change at the same time. They sit there with mouths hanging open, watching the years roll back.

There is nothing to say, so they all compromise by gasping.

My eyes roll faster than a pair of loaded dice in the hands of a guy with epilepsy. I stare at each changing face. Age is melting off like butter. Wrinkles vanish. White hair darkens. Crows-feet march away.

The Nose is now a guy of about 35, and his schnozz fades from deep purple to a blushing pink.

Arsenic Arnold is a handsome young squirt of 25 or thereabouts, because he takes his coffee without cream in it.

Torpedo Tony sprouts a thick head of hair and a black mustache.

Snake Malone, who is formerly just an old goof, now looks like a young goof.

But the big change comes over the two ginches. Lower Bertha sheds about 60 pounds and turns into a very striking brunette item. Violent Violet is a lovely redhead.

They look at each other and point and gawk, and then they all begin to yammer at once.

“What’s happening?”

“Look at me—how come?”

“Hey—what goes on here?”

Little Happy Pappy climbs up on the table and raps a fork against the Nose's ditto far silence.

Then he begins to explain in a squeaky voice. He tells who he is, and how he finds the Fountain and what I suggest we can do with the juvenile gargle.

His remarks are greeted with cheers. Then everybody rushes for the mirror to take a squint at the strange change.

They are all delighted.

THEY nudge and point at each other and the hoods keep looking at the two molls and whistling, and I stand there and wait for something to happen.

It does.

"This calls for a celebration!" yells Arsenic Arnold.

"Sure it does," says Lower Bertha. "Who shall we kill?"

"That's not what I mean," Arnold comes back. "We ought to go out to a night spot and make whoopee."

"Fine," says Violent Violet. "I haven't been able to dance the Charleston for years."

I grin, realizing that to these personalities, nothing happens since 1925 or thereabouts.

"Let's hop in the car and go out on a good tear," says the Nose.

Which is why, half an hour later, we are all sitting in the Sunstroke Club, one of the most exclusive dumps in Miami.

I stare around the table again, still not quite believing what I see. An hour ago all my friends are old crooks. Now they are young crooks.

For some reason I do not think this is a great improvement. These faces are more youthful, but they look a lot tougher. And my companions are acting a lot tougher, too.

The minute the waiter comes up they begin to yell for liquor. When they get it, they yell for more. This goes on for quite some time. They drink like fish.

I suddenly realize that this bunch is used to drinking in the old Prohibition days where you slug the stuff down and ask what it is later—if you are still alive.

From time to time Lower Bertha and Violent Violet grab a partner and attempt to do the Charleston. This helps the other dancers on the floor like an attack of bunions. In fact, within a very few minutes my friends attract a lot of attention.

Because when they get tipsy they get ideas, and when they get ideas they get active, and when they get active they get results.

To make a long story gory, pretty soon there is nobody left at our table except little Happy Pappy and myself. We look around and try to locate our bunch and see the following interesting items:

(a) Violent Violet is sitting on some guy’s lap stroking his hair with one hand and clawing the hair of his girl friend with the other.

(b) Snake Malone is arguing with the manager over at the next table. He is trying to persuade him to throw out his regular liquor stock and put in bootleg alky. “You’ll do it or else—” he yells, grabbing the manager by the collar and leering.

(c) Lower Bertha is underneath the manager’s table. She crawls beneath his chair and begins to drill up through the seat with a brace and bit.

“We’ve got to get them out of here before trouble starts,” I tell Happy Pappy. “Ill try and locate the others in a hurry.”

I rush around, looking for the missing links in our chain-gang.

Finally, through the swinging doors I detect Arsenic Arnold.

HE IS out in the kitchen, of course, and I can see he is pouring the contents of a little bottle into the consomme. Like all the rest, he is young again and up to his old tricks.

I yank him out of there by the scruff of his neck. In the lounge outside I run smack into Torpedo Tony. He is very busy in a little human weightlifting act of his own. By human weightlifting I mean he is holding up a lot of people.

He has a Roscoe in one hand and is backing the customers up against the wall.

"Stick 'em up," he suggests, waving his not-so-Gabriel heater.

Out of the comer of my other eye, I see Violent Violet wrestling with a dame, Lower Bertha drilling through the manager's chair and part of the manager most likely to be in that vicinity; and Snake Malone is finishing up the liquor in a hurry by breaking bottles over a waiter's head.

Then I stop looking and start hearing.

Sirens wail outside. Somebody calls the police, of course.

I rush into the dance-and-dine room and grab my Scout troop in a hurry.

We reach the door—Violet, Bertha, Tony, Arnold, Snake, Happy Pappy and myself. At the same time the cops break the door in from the other side.

We back away.

"This way!" shouts a voice. I turn around. The Nose stands behind us, waving an axe he grabs from a fire-box on the wall.

He swings the axe into the back door and smashes it open. We run.

I am in the rear, trying to help Happy Pappy with his short little legs.

"What are we running for anyway?" I gasp. "We don't do anything, you and I."

"Oh yeah? says Happy Pappy.

I stare at him. With every step he takes, stuff falls out of Happy Pappy's pockets. Rings and jewelry and bracelets bounce down his trouser-legs. Knives and forks slide from his sleeves. He is back to picking pockets again, too!

We make a sally into the alley and the cops pile out after us. But Snake Malone has the car running when we reach it and we jump on and it's off to see the wizard. Or rather, the lizard. Because Happy Pappy yells, "Head for the swamps!"

We head.

"We'll hide out in my shack in the Everglades," he pants, as we settle down into our seats and Snake Malone shatters the speed record.

THE cops follow us, but after a wild hour they get lost somewhere between the third and fourth alligator as we tear down the dark, winding roads that lead towards Happy Pappy's shack and the Fountain of Youth.

All through the bumping and thumping of the ride, I am doing a bit of heavy thinking.

Happy Pappy makes a terrible mistake when he feeds fresh youth to these old rascals. Now they are back in their prime and they will be a menace to society and so forth. It is most unfortunate. And there is nothing to do about it.

I am not calmed down any by what happens when we arrive at the shack.

We climb out, go in, and sit down at the table after Happy Pappy brings some candles out to light.

Snake Malone is still wandering out in the swamp, parking the car and looking over the lay of the land.

He comes in grinning.

"I just case the joint," he reports, "and it's a pipe! They'll never find us here. And by the way, Happy Pappy, I see this Fountain of Youth you have in the back yard. And it gives me a remarkable idea."

"But we already have an idea, Snake," says Happy Pappy. "We are going to open beauty parlors and make everybody young."

Snake Malone laughs It is a very disturbing sort of laugh, and out in the swamps several alligators run like hell when they hear it.

"No you don't," he informs Happy Pappy. "I have a better idea. We are not going to sell our water to everybody."

"We aren't?"

"Of course not. Why be so common and vulgar? We will sell it only to very exclusive customers."

"Such as?"

“Gangsters,” says Snake Malone. “Gangsters.”

“But there are very few gangsters,” objects Happy Pappy. “Most of them are in the clink. They will not get out of stir until they serve very long stretches.”

“That is just the point. After serving long stretches we catch them at just the very time they need water from the Fountain of Youth. Suppose a judge sends you up for fifty years, when you are only thirty. By the time you get out you are eighty. Wouldn’t you pay heavy sugar for a drink that makes you thirty again?”

Happy Pappy catches on, and so do the rest of them.

“We will be rich indeed,” Snake Malone goes on. “Think of it—we will revolutionize the entire underworld. No crime wave will be complete without our water!

“Nobody will be afraid of having a beak send them up the river. When they get out they plank down their dough, gulp down a drink, and start all over again.”

Everybody slaps Snake Malone on the back and tells him he is a genius. Everybody but Happy Pappy and yours truly, that is.

Snake Malone looks at me with a glare that makes the corpuscles glitter in his bloodshot eyes.

“What do you think of my idea, Lefty?” he asks.

“I don’t like it,” I tell him. “This water can be a great benefit to all mankind. Instead you want it to be a boon for goons.”

“And just what are you going to do about it, Lefty?” asks Snake Malone.

“I am not going to allow it,” I gulp. “I do not think that this wonderful water should be misused. And I will not play the part of a water-boy for a crooked team.”

EVIDENTLY this remark reminds them of a football game, because I am suddenly tackled from the rear. I go down for a loss, and in the middle of the scrimmage I find myself tied up with a stout rope. The Nose and Torpedo Tony bind me to a chair.

“Now,” says Snake Malone. “Any other objections?”

He looks at Happy Pappy. But little Happy Pappy isn’t so happy any more. He stares at me and sighs, and I can see he is sorry about starting all this. But he is too small a fry to tangle with this mob of gangsters.

“No objections,” he squeaks.

“Good,” Snake Malone remarks. “From now on I will take charge. And if I hear a squawk out of anybody I will turn that squawk into a death-rattle. Understand? Now take Lefty into the bedroom and tie him down. Good night and pleasant screams.”

That is how I pass my time the next twenty-four hours. I am tied down in bed.

About noon the next day Happy Pappy sneaks in and feeds me.

“I am very conscience-stricken about starting such a mess,” he confesses. “But what can I do now? It is too late. They are already draining the swamp.”

“Draining it?”

“Early this morning Torpedo Tony goes to town and steals a big truck with a lot of empty tanks in it. Somewhere else he manages to find a pump attachment. The rest of them are out in the swamp all day, siphoning up the water.

“The Fountain of Youth is gone, Lefty. It’s all stored in the tanks now. The swamp is dry.”

“Yes,” says a voice over his shoulder. The Nose is standing there. “Now we are ready to leave this snug little hideout and head for the big town. We’ll be out of reach of the bulls and ready to promote with our rejuvenation juice.”

The others crowd into the bedroom after him. Now Arsenic Arnold sticks his neck out of the mob.

“But first we have a little job to do, Lefty,” he remarks. “That is why we visit you.”

"What is the job?" I ask.

"Why, we are going to bump you off," he tells me.

I shudder. I always shudder when I hear all this 1925-vintage slang. It is very poor English. I do not like the grammar and right now I do not like the idea, either.

"We cannot take a chance of leaving you here, Lefty," says Arnold. "When the cops come you are liable to sing. Surely you understand how it is. We really must kill you."

"You are a dirty, double-crossing crook," I inform him.

"Now Lefty, flattery won't help you any," smiles Arsenic Arnold. "What we must decide now is the method we will use to exterminate you. I suggest a little poison."

The Nose sneers a long sneer.

"YOU and your poison," he says. "All that fuss and bother cooking it up. Let me handle the job with an axe. It will all be over within a second. A split second, if I handle the axe right."

"Too messy," says Lower Bertha. "Let me get him with my drill."

"Oh, you and your old drill!" sniffs Violent Violet. "You'd think nobody else knows how to kill a man around here! There's a meat-grinder in the kitchen. Let me handle this case. Feep would make swell hamburger."

Torpedo Tony shoulders his way through the crowd.

"Trouble with all of you," he says, "is that you're too hysterical. Too flighty, see? We want to get rid of this lug without leaving no messy stains. No clues, get me? Now I'll just take Feep out into the swamp and bury him up to his neck in the mud. The alligators can do the rest. And there won't be no traces, understand? Just a nice, quiet mud-bath out where the Fountain of Youth once is."

"Maybe you're right," says the Nose.

He grabs my legs. Tony grabs my arms. They carry me out bade of the shack. Sure enough, I see that the Fountain of Youth is gone. Nothing but an empty mud-swamp remains. Next to it stands the big enclosed truck with the tanks inside, all filled up with water.

"Dump him," says Tony. I flop in the mud.

"Now we will dig a little hole and plant this lily," the Nose suggests.

I roll around in the sticky wet mud while they make with a shovel. I am on the edge of the grave, you might say.

They get a nice deep hole. Then they lift me up. I am dripping with mud, and also perspiration. It looks like my pals are going to do me dirt.

"Cheese it, the cops!"

The voice roars into our ears.

Snake Malone comes roaring into our midst.

"I'm playing lookout up the road a way," he pants. "Just now I see the bluecoats heading into the swamp on motorcycles. We've got to scram."

"What about Lefty?" says Tony.

"Throw him in the back of the truck," yells Malone. "We're all packed, ready to go. We can't wait and let the law find him. We'll drop him along the road somewhere."

So everybody runs around collecting their stuff, and tossing it in the back of the truck between the tanks. This stuff includes me. I land with a dull thud and pass out.

When I come to, we are jolting along. The whole crew sits up in front and I am alone in the back, bouncing up and down. The tanks full of water from the Fountain are bumping around close to my head.

I sit up and strain at my ropes. The mud is drying all over me.

All at once the ropes come loose. I wonder why, because they are tied very tight, when I get trussed up last night. Now they are loose. Why?

THEN I understand. I just get a mud-bath. The mud comes from the Fountain of Youth. The water in the mud makes me younger. I must lose an inch or so of girth around the middle and a little around the wrists and ankles. Now I can wriggle out of my ropes.

I do.

Then I get to work.

As we roll along the road, I grope in the back and find Lower Bertha's brace-and-bit. She throws the drill into the back when we leave. Now I have it and I use it.

There is only one thing to do. I can't let these crooks sell Fountain of Youth water to a bunch of criminals the way they plan to do it. So I bore into each tank with the drill. One by one, I empty the tanks. The water splashes out of the sides and runs into the road behind.

I keep out of the way of the stream and watch it trickle in back of the truck. Wherever it hits the asphalt, the cracks and wrinkles in the road disappear and the road looks new and fresh again.

It makes me heave a sigh to see millions just evaporating like this, but what can I do?

It makes me heave a groan when I feel the truck stop after a long while, but what can I do?

We are pulling up on the side of the road. I look out and see a New Jersey highway marker.

Suddenly I realize I must be unconscious for maybe 24 hours in back of that truck instead of a few minutes. It is now late afternoon again—but I am out for almost a day.

Here we are, stopping in New Jersey. The water is gone, thank goodness. But now they will come around and find me, and I will be gone, too.

But I am helpless. I hear them talking and grumbling up in front. And then footsteps approach the rear.

"Looks deserted all right," says the Nose.

"We'll toss him into the cranberry bogs over there," Snake Malone snarls.

"Sure is good to get a rest," sighs Violent Violet. "A full day of driving like that is enough to make anybody sick. No stops, no food, nothing to drink."

“Stop squawking,” Arsenic Arnold tells her? “We have to drive like this to shake off the law. Now we’re safe. We can rub out Feep and head for the big town right away. Let’s go.”

The voices get louder.

I crouch there in the back of the truck, waiting. I have no weapons but the brace-and-bit and it is no good against Snake Malone and the rest. I remember Torpedo Tony has a gun. He also has a temper, and when he sees what I do to the water from the Fountain of Youth, I am sure I will be bogged down in the cranberries very shortly.

The Nose sniffs into the back of the truck.

“All right, Lefty,” he calls. “Here’s where you get off.

“What the blazes?” he inquires earnestly. “You aren’t tied up any more.”

“No,” I sneer. “But you’ll be fit to be tied when you see what I accomplish.”

THEY haul me out and look at the tanks.

I am ready to die now. Because, at least, I give all these dirty crooks the shock of their lives.

“You blasted such and such!” howls Snake Malone. “You drain our tanks on us!”

The rest of them take a squint and begin to jump up and down in rage.

Only Happy Pappy is quiet. He sneaks up to me and whispers, “Good work, Lefty. I’m proud of you. I will try to come back and see that you get a nice funeral.”

This is not very consoling. Neither is Snake Malone. He clips me one on the side of the noggin and hauls me down. Torpedo Tony caresses my ribs with his gun.

“Oh, oh, oh!” wails Arsenic Arnold. “You have to go and spill all that wonderful water and spoil our plans! I figure I will be rich and open a lovely restaurant.”

“I plan on a hamburger stand,” says Violent Violet, beginning to sniffle.

"I expect to corner the alky racket in six states," Torpedo Tony sobs. "It is enough to drive a man to drink."

"Yes," yells Arsenic Arnold. "Give me a drink! Give us all a drink before we rub out this louse who spoils everything!"

"I'm dying for a shot," says Lower Bertha. "Look—he's ruined my drill, too!"

Happy Pappy comes forward with a grin. He pulls a flask of colorless stuff from his hip pocket.

"You want a drink?" he says. "Here it is. I figure on this and save some gin for us. Everybody have some."

Arsenic Arnold grabs the bottle and opens it.

Then he frowns.

"Oh no," he says, softly. "I know your tricks, Happy Pappy. You put Fountain of Youth water in our coffee and we get young. I bet you have such water in the flask, too. If we drink it we turn into babies and then you and your pal Lefty will be free. None of your tricks, Happy Pappy."

He throws the flask away. Happy Pappy sigh and shrugs.

"We will drink from my bottle," says Arsenic Arnold. "Good whiskey."

And they do.

They spin the bottle around and I watch it drain dry.

This is one time in my life I would appreciate a drink, but nobody offers it to me. They swallow and let me wallow.

And then the whole gang marches me off into the swamps in the twilight. We go into the bog and I walk my last mile. Torpedo Tony holds the gun at my back.

"Here," he says, when we get way off the road.

"Now," he says.

And now is when it happens.

All at once I notice his voice get squeaky. High. And then I look at him. He is not so high. He is low. Low and tiny. And getting smaller.

I stare around the circle. They are also smaller. They scream, but their voices break like the whimpers of moppets, and the gang doesn't even come up to my waist.

In a minute I grab the gun from Torpedo Tony's tiny fingers.

"All right, kids," I say. "Come on. Follow me."

They do.

BY THE time we reach the truck again I almost have to carry the littlest ones. I pile them into the front seat, crying like mad, and Happy Pappy and I drive off.

Of course, on the way down the road Happy Pappy tells me how he fills up a flask with water from the Fountain of Youth. He knows they will not drink it if he gives it to them, so he plays a little trick. He colors it up a little to look like whiskey.

Being a pickpocket, he switches flasks with Arsenic Arnold in the truck while they drive, so Arsenic Arnold really has the kiddy cocktail in his bottle.

They drink it, and we escape.

So I drive here from Jersey in two days, and when I arrive I take all the children to an orphanage and leave them.

I hope they get the right training in the orphanage, so when they grow up again they will be decent, law-abiding citizens instead of a bunch of crooks.

* * *

LEFTY FEEP sat back as he finished his story.

"That is the truth about the Fountain of Youth," he said.

I nodded. "Very interesting," I told him. "And quite convincing."

Feep nearly jumped out of his chair.

"What?" he yelled. "You actually believe me for once?"

I smiled. "Why not?"

"No foolish questions about why things happen?"

"Why should there be any questions, Lefty? You've explained everything." Feep scratched his head. "I don't get it," he confessed. "You usually are such a critic."

I cleared my throat. "Just one thing puzzles me, though. A very minor thing. You say it only took one day for the gang to drive from Florida to New Jersey."

"Right."

"But after the gang became children it took you two days just to get from New Jersey to New York. Why did it take so long?"

"Oh, is that all?" exclaimed Lefty Feep. "That I can explain very easy. It is just that you do not understand how very young this water makes my gangster friends."

"Very young?"

"Sure." Feep grinned. "They are extremely young children, those gangsters. That is why it takes me so long to drive a short distance.

"You see, every couple of miles I have to stop the car and take out Torpedo Tony or Snake Malone and change their diapers."

Fairy Tale

It's easy to find a tenant for property these days. But if the house proves to be already occupied, trouble can result

"THERE is fairies in the bottom of my garden," said the guy. "The hell you say!" yelled Tim Booker.

"No. I don't say 'the hell.' I alia time say there is fairies in the bottom of my garden."

Tim Booker blew up completely and almost dropped the telephone from his hand.

This was the last straw. For five years Booker had been sitting at the phone in his rental agency office, listening to insults from tenants. That was his job at the agency—to take insults, note them down, and refer them to the boss. His not to reason why, his but to listen and lie.

During these five years, Tim Booker prided himself that he had heard everything. He knew the story of leaky plumbing by heart. The tales of noisy radiators, no heat, dripping faucets and loud neighbors were old stuff to Mr. Booker. He could handle anything from a squawk about the rent ceiling to a plea for redecorating a bathroom.

But now his nerves gave way. When the loud voice over the telephone said, "There is fairies in the bottom of my garden," Tim Booker just couldn't stand it any longer.

He lost his temper. Somebody was kidding him. Fairies in the bottom of his garden, were there?

"What am I supposed to do about it?" snarled Mr. Booker. "Do you want me to come down and wave a magic wand at them? You're drunk—get off the wire!"

"I'm not drunk," insisted the soft voice at the other end. "I'm Tom Rowland of 711 Honeysuckle Drive. And if you don't come out here right away, I'm gonna tell the Rent Control Board on you."

Tim Booker felt an icy chill take liberties with his spine.

"No," he gasped. "Not that—anything but *that!* I'll be right out, Mr. Rowland."

He hung up, trembling. His natural subservience returned. Through long habit he was once again a servant of the rental agency, and like a good servant he cringed at the very mention of the Rent Control Board.

Even fairy-befuddled drunks were easier to handle. Tim Booker sighed, reached for his hat, and left the office. Shuddering at the vibrating needle on his gas gauge, Mr. Booker swung his car out into the traffic and guided its squeaky chassis towards 711 Honeysuckle Drive and Mr. Thomas Rowland.

711 Honeysuckle Drive proved to be a most imposing mansion set back on a wide, tree-bordered lawn. Spacious grounds stretched out in back, and Thomas Rowland stretched out on the spacious grounds.

At least, he guessed it was Mr. Rowland who lay on the back lawn with a bottle resting against his chin.

As Tim Booker turned in the drive, the recumbent gentleman rolled out of the way and waved his bottle in greeting.

"Welcome to Honeysuckle Drive," he called, wobbling to his feet unsteadily. "Have a drink. "Place's yours. All yours! You're my pal, real life-saver!" He halted and assumed a look of grim belligerency. "Say, who the hell are you?" he sneered.

Tim Booker climbed out of the car. "I'm the man from the agency. I've come to see about those fairies in the bottom of your garden."

Mr. Rowland's sneer deepened.

“Who told you?” he demanded truculently. “Who alia time told you?”

“Why, you did!”

“Oh!” The smile returned to Rowland’s flushed face. “Then you’re alia time my pal. I remember, now.”

Tim Booker sighed. He *had* been right. Little Mr. Rowland was very drunk indeed. And this affair was just another wild goose chase.

MR. ROWLAND floundered around exactly like a wild goose as he led Tim Booker down the path towards the garden back of the house.

There really was a garden—a large and pretty area with trellises and a swing, and a pebbled pathway leading to a rock garden at the rear of the place. Flowers bloomed in luxuriant profusion. Tim Booker noted one incongruity. The grass needed cutting badly.

“Don’t you mow your lawn?” he asked. Mr. Rowland swung around and blinked blearily.

“O’Driscoll mowed it. He was alia time mowing it.”

“O’Driscoll? Who’s O’Driscoll?”

“Emmett O’Driscoll. He was my gardener. He got drafted last month. Now I alia time got nobody to mow my lawn.”

“Too bad.”

“He brought the fairies with him, see? They alia time come with his family, he said. And now’ he’s drafted. They took him away and left me with the fairies all alone. Alla time alone.” Mr. Rowland sobbed a little.

“I wish to Gawd the army would alia time draft them, too. What’s happening to me shouldn’t happen to Hitler!” He tapped Tim Booker on the chest with a trembling finger.

“You ever see snakes?” he demanded. “Pink elephants?”

“No,” Booker admitted.

“Well I have, brother. I alia time see such things. They aren’t pretty. But I’d a damned sight well rather see a zoo-full of them than these fairies. Fairies! Gawd—alia time fairies!” Abruptly he recovered himself and sighed. “You wanna know why I’m drunk?” he asked, sorrowfully. “You wanna know why I’m alia time drunk?” Mr. Booker didn’t want to know, but he couldn’t help it, so he nodded weakly.

“All right, if you gotta be nosey,” said Rowland, triumphantly. “I’ll tell you why I’m alia time drunk. On account of I’m alia time drinking, see?” This startling explanation would have held Tim Booker for a while, but Mr. Rowland insisted on continuing.

“And why am I alia time drinking? Because I alia time see those blasted fairies. That’s why I drink! Jeez, I wish I was drunk now!” exclaimed Mr. Rowland, falling down.

Tim Booker, wondering how he would end this maudlin session and get out of the place, helped little Mr. Rowland to his feet.

“Why don’t you go inside and lie down for a while?” he suggested.

“Because I alia time want to show you these fairies first,” Rowland muttered. “Then we’ll both go inside and lie down.”

“Very well,” said Tim Booker. “Where are these fairies?”

Mr. Rowland reeled down the pebbled pathway towards the rock garden. He paused before a cluster of rocks, his red-rimmed eyes revolving woozily as he scanned the underbrush.

“Here,” he exclaimed. “Here are the little stinkers now!”

Smiling superciliously, Tim Booker joined Mr. Rowland and peered down at the shrubbery.

“I don’t see any—” he began.

“Holy jumping smokes!” he yelled, leaping backwards across the path. “What are those?”

“Fairies,” chanted Mr. Rowland patiently. “Alla time fairies!”

Fairies, they were.

TIM BOOKER stared down at a cluster of tiny faces, rising impudently from the bushes at his feet. Marvelously, incredibly tiny faces—unmistakably human in features—barely six inches from the ground!

Bright, beady eyes twinkled from shrewd, wrinkled countenances. Tim Booker caught a glimpse of ragged garments clothing arms and legs thin as pretzel sticks. For one unbelievable moment he saw the pattern of a minute hand, no bigger than a single cornflake, as it rested against a leaf.

There was a shrill tinkle of high-pitched laughter, a sudden scurry, and the figures and faces disappeared.

The fairies were no longer “alia time.” They were gone.

Tim Booker blinked.

“I—I can’t believe it,” he whispered.

“Why don’t you alia time write to Ripley?” suggested Mr. Rowland, taking a hasty swig from his almost empty bottle. “Me, I’m getting out of here.”

“What?”

“I’m leaving,” said Mr. Rowland, wobbling back up the path, “I’m alia time through with fairies.”

“But that means breaking your lease,” gasped Tim Booker.

“I don’t care if my lease smashes to bits,” replied Rowland.

“You can’t do such a thing!” Tim Booker shouted, horrified by such blasphemy against all landlords.

“All right, so we’ll alia time take it to court. Or the Rent Control Board. You want I should tell those guys about how you have alia time fairies in your garden?”

“No,” whispered Booker. “No, we don’t want that.”

Triumphantly, Mr. Rowland rounded the corner of the house on one leg and disappeared.

Tim Booker climbed wearily into his car and fumbled with keys and clutch.

Suddenly, from the depths of the garden, he heard the sound of shrill, mocking laughter.

He zoomed down the drive in high, but the laughter followed him to the street, and clung to him that night in dreams.

TIM BOOKER would gladly have forgotten about the fairies at 711 Honeysuckle Drive, but Desmond Goudger wouldn't let him.

Desmond Goudger was Tim Booker's Boss—with a capital "B." He was the kind of an employer who will always be thought of with a capital "B"—even though the "B" doesn't necessarily stand for "Boss."

It was his Boss who started all the trouble.

"What's this about 711 Honeysuckle Drive?" he demanded harshly, pausing at Tim Booker's desk the next morning. "You let a tenant go without holding him to the lease?"

"He was drafted," Booker lied, nervously watching the telephone tremble in its cradle as the Boss's voice boomed.

"Well, hurry up and rent that dump," ordered Desmond Goudger. "With the housing shortage, you ought to have a client ready to move in tomorrow."

But Tim Booker didn't have a client the next day, nor the next. He hoped to heaven he never would. Explaining those fairies would cost him his job.

On the third day, the Boss stalked out of his office and chewed his cigar against Tim Booker's ear.

"What's the matter with you, Booker?" he growled. "Haven't you got a sucker for that 711 property yet?"

"I don't think so—you see, that is—"

"Listen, Booker," grunted Desmond Goudger. "I'm going to give you a piece of my mind."

"I don't see how you can spare it," Tim Booker *almost* said. What he really did was cringe and listen. For five minutes, the Boss distributed a portion of his mentality gratis. His conclusion was masterly, but Tim Booker didn't appreciate it.

"You'll damned well have that joint rented by tomorrow," he snapped, "or else."

With a final bite on his frayed cigar, Desmond Goudger strode off.

Tim Booker sat at his desk for a long moment. Twice his hand went out towards the volume of rental applicants. It would be so easy to pick a name from the list and call. He didn't try.

It was no use. He couldn't. Suddenly Tim Booker straightened up. Resolution kindled, flamed in his eyes.

He got up, grabbed his hat, left the office, climbed into his car, and drove to 711 Honeysuckle Drive. In the grip of his determination, all these actions seemed part of a single resolute gesture.

It was not until he was actually walking down the pebbled pathway of that deserted back yard that Tim Booker realized what he was actually going to do.

He, Tim Booker, fully (if sloppily) dressed and in his right (if slightly vacillating) mind—he, Tim Booker, was actually going to talk to the fairies!

Booker glanced nervously over his shoulder. There was nobody around. The garden gleamed in the afternoon sunlight. It looked peaceful, placid. The long, uncut grass at his feet rustled in a gentle breeze.

Everything was the way it should be. Normal. There were no fairies. It was all a mistake. There were no—

"Ouch! It's stepping on me yez are, gossoon!"

TIM BOOKER jumped like a kangaroo.

Peering up from between his turned-in toes was an incredible little figure. He drew his shoes back in dismay. The tiny mannikin stared up at him, squinting as though trying to focus his vision on something far distant.

"Och, and it's you again," said the mannikin, petulantly.

"Why not?" Tim Booker recovered a little of his composure. After all, there was nothing to fear from a creature six inches tall. He bent down, crouching on his knees, and scrutinized the tiny being before him.

The fairy was certainly no more than six inches in height, and yet there was nothing dwarfed or misshapen about his perfectly proportioned little body. Tiny, tight brown ringlets covered a head the size of an apricot. A face scarcely bigger than the circumference of a walnut regarded Tim Booker gravely, as Booker gazed in fascination at the truly pipe-stem limbs, covered with minute pinpoint freckles. The fairy, save for a sort of apron around the waist, was naked.

Booker didn't know why the fairy's woolen apron attracted his attention, but there was something familiar about it.

"And what may yez be starin' at with yer saucer eyes?" demanded the fairy, in a shrill, exasperated tone. "If it's the breach I'm after wearin' to cover me nakedness, why then 'tis but an ould sock of Emmett Driscoll's. He knitted it for me, fine gentleman that he was. Sure, and as for the hole in the toe, it's sewed up it is entirely, so the wind doesn't whistle up the small of me back."

Tim Booker remembered the story of the drafted gardener who had been responsible for the presence of the fairies. He began to formulate an argument.

"O'Driscoll was a pretty nice guy, I hear," he observed.

The mannikin nodded. "Sure and he was that. 'Twas O'Driscoll who built us the rock garden. Kind he was, and understandin' of the needs of the wee folk. He chased the accursed dogs and cats away. He was forever seein' to it that we got the dew fresh from the lawn.

"Many's the bit of clothing he's fashioned for us, to ward off the damp. As for Rowland, and may a blight rest forever on his name, he never bothered his head about the garden when Emmett O'Driscoll was here.

"Yes, O'Driscoll served us well—and why shouldn't he, I'm askin' ? Have not the wee folk served the O'Driscolls for generations past on the Ould Sod? Sure and I can be after rememberin' Rory O'Driscoll, his grandsire, and a fine strappin' bucko—"

Tim Booker cut through this flood of stage-Irish brogue and planted his planned suggestion.

"There's just one thing I don't understand," he said, naively. "Why did you folk desert O'Driscoll? Why didn't you go with him when he was drafted?"

THE fairy laughed, making a sound like a Crackerjack prize whistle.

"Sure, and what would we be doin' in the military, I'm askin' ? We'd be forever racin' about at the blast of a bugle . . . sleepin' on a parade ground where there's no dew, and a great lumberin' tank forever about to roll over yez! No, we stay here until O'Driscoll is back from the wars."

Booker took this statement impatiently. Then he hit on another argument.

"But isn't it bad for you to be here all alone? Who'll make your clothes now? What about this Rowland fellow?"

"Och!" The fairy looked doleful for a moment. "Rowland alone is a different matter entirely, that he is! After O'Driscoll left, he took to comin' out into the garden to sleep off his rampages. He trampled down the flowers and murthered them."

"So maybe you'd better leave," Booker suggested.

"Why? It's gone he is now entirely, thanks to yez," chirped the fairy, making a little bow. "We're free to stay here and wait for O'Driscoll to polish off the haythens and come back to us. It's the run of the place we have here now."

"But that's just it," said Tim Booker, in exasperation.

The fairy paid no attention to him whatsoever. He had turned, and was now beckoning in the direction of the shrubbery.

"Come out," he called. "Come out and meet the fine, grand gentleman to whom we are bespoken for his kindness."

With florid gesticulations, he ushered forth five more tiny figures. Bowing and curtseying, the fairies presented their grinning faces to Tim Booker.

"I'm Nubbin," said the first fairy, before introducing his companions. "And this, sir, is Sib."

Sib was quite elderly for a fairy, in Tim Booker's opinion—a little wizened, monkey-like figure with white hair and a wrinkled face the size and texture of a prune.

"And Slip."

Slip, by virtue of a ragged handkerchief cut like a dress, proved to be a lady. Her age was evidently equal to Sib's, and she greeted Tim Booker in a piping squeak. "Sure, it's a plasure to meet up with yer worship, that it is."

Nubbin introduced the others.

"Here's Gandy, sir."

Gandy was a snub-nosed youngster with an impudent smirk. Booker, gazing at him, was reminded of a miniature Mickey Rooney.

"How's tricks?" asked Gandy, in a surprisingly blasé voice with but a trace of brogue.

"Yeah. What's buzzin', cousin?" drawled a new voice—if you can imagine a flute drawling.

Tim Booker stared down at a saucy, pert, girlish face. The female fairy had red hair. With a shock, he realized that the obliging Emmett O'Driscoll had give her a pair of improvised slacks to wear.

"This is Dunnie," said Nubbin. "And a wild colleen she is."

The five fairies crowded about Booker's knees, gazing at his face and limbs with open curiosity and whispering behind their petal-like hands.

"You're after fergettin' me," squealed a small voice from the bushes. A sixth fairy emerged.

"Oh, Thomakin!" Nubbin exclaimed. "I did forget, truly."

"It's a noble pleasure to be beholdin' yer august and illustrious countenance, that is a fact," said fat little Thomakin. He bustled forward, wearing his bandana handkerchief toga with pompous dignity. He halted at Booker's side and lifted a hand.

TIM BOOKER, with equal gravity, made an attempt to shake hands. He could scarcely feel the tiny paw lost in the immensity of his own great palm.

"We're that grateful to you," said Thomakin, "for providin' us with this great, grand house."

Booker bit his lip.

"I'm glad to hear that." He hesitated, then plunged on. "But that's just what I've come out here to tell you, folks. You can't have this great, grand house."

"What?"

"I'd like you to have it, sure. If it were mine, I'd give it to you. But it isn't mine, don't you see? It's owned by my boss, Desmond Goudger. And I'm going to have to rent it to a new tenant right away. He sent me out here to tell you to vacate the premises."

"Vacate the premises?"

"Get off the property?"

"Leave?"

Tim Booker nodded.

Dunnie faced him, tossing her carrot-curls. "And what if we don't choose to leave?" she asked, mockingly. "What then?"

"Then we'll sue you," said Booker, weakly. He realized how meaningless the threat was as soon as he uttered it.

"Very well," said Gandy, suddenly impudence itself. "Sue and be damned to yez, says I."

"We'll not get off, and that's final," added Dunnie.

It was then that desperate Tim Booker made an unforeseen decision.

He rose to his feet and scowled.

"So you won't get off?" he muttered. "All right, to hell with you! I'll move into this place myself!"

THREE days later, Tim Booker and his wife, Mildred, moved into the house at 711 Honeysuckle Drive.

Tim had no trouble with Mildred when she heard the news. A single mention of that exclusive suburban address more than persuaded her the house must be ideal. Her flying visit was unnecessary—she had scarcely bothered to look at the place. Tim didn't show her the garden and she didn't bother to look for herself. Mildred was too busy making the kind of squeals women always make when confronted with something expensive.

“Oh, it’s wonderful, Timmie dear,” she gurgled.

Tim Booker didn’t even frown at his nickname when it fell from her lips. He was too happy about the whole thing.

Now Desmond Goudger wouldn’t be on his neck about renting the place. Mildred wouldn’t be nagging at him because she wanted to get a better address and crash society.

Whatever the financial sacrifice, Tim Booker wanted to keep his boss and his wife happy. Only when they were happy were they quiet. Tim Booker needed quiet after his experiences.

He only hoped to heaven, that Mildred wouldn’t find out about the fairies in the garden.

During the first three days she was completely engrossed in unpacking household belongings and putting them in the wrong places. On the fourth day she rearranged everything, and on the fifth she switched the rearranged furniture around again. Tim Booker buried himself in work at the rental agency and waited.

It wasn’t until the weekend that Mildred got out into the back yard at all. Tim Booker reluctantly guided her down the path, keeping a wary eye peeled for sudden movements in the long grass.

Nothing happened. The fairies had discreetly retreated to their rock-garden grottoes.

Emboldened, Booker steered Mildred over to the rock garden itself and beamed as his wife gasped in the sort of ecstasy women can summon up at will.

“How perfectly wonderful, Timmie!” she cooed. “A rock garden! The whole place is charming. We must buy some of those deck chairs and lawn umbrellas at once!”

“Timmie,” groaned, but inwardly.

“And you must mow the lawn right away,” said Mildred, cocking her head and critically surveying the tall grass. “Then we’ll be all set.”

“All set for what?”

“It’s a surprise,” said Mildred, happily. “Now why don’t you just run in and get the lawn mower and start cutting the grass right now?”

Tim Booker, who had at least eight good reasons why he didn’t want to mow the lawn this particular afternoon, obediently went in and got the lawn mower and started cutting the grass.

Mildred watched him for quite a while. She hummed gaily. Tim sweated and looked for the fairies. Not a one emerged. They were probably hiding from his wife—and in a way, he envied them.

For a brief moment he held a wild hope that perhaps the wee folk had vanished, after all.

That hope was dispelled the following morning, replaced by gloom.

TIM BOOKER, coming out to the back doorstep for the Sunday paper and the cream, found that his milk had curdled.

He said nothing. Later that morning he ran down to the shopping district and bought fresh milk.

But on Monday morning, Mildred secured the milk and opened the bottle at breakfast.

“Timmie, this milk is sour!” she announced.

“Mummph—is it?” Tim Booker played dumb.

“I’ll speak to the milkman about it,” Mildred announced.

Tim Booker had other ideas. That morning he tiptoed down the path and halted beside the rock garden.

“Hey, there!” he hissed, in a loud stage-whisper. “Hey, you guys!”

Fat little Thomakin peered around a rock.

“Good morning to yez,” he said. “And what can we be after doin’ for yer honor this morning?”

“You can damned well be after not tampering with my milk,” said Tim Booker, tactlessly.

Thomakin frowned.

“Oh, and it’s the curdled milk that’s bothering yez?” he commented.

“You did do it, didn’t you?” Tim Booker accused.

“Of course we did that,” answered Thomakin. “And beggin’ your pardon, sir, we’ll be after doin’ it again unless yez heed the warnin’.”

“What warning?”

“Don’t use the lawn-mower,” said the fairy.

“Don’t use the lawn-mower?” Tim Booker echoed.

“Absolutely not! The wee folk do detest the livin’ presence of iron.”

“Oh.” Snatches of ancient legend returned to Booker. “You don’t like iron, do you? I suppose that’s the real reason you wouldn’t hang around an army camp.”

“Correct yez are entirely,” said Thomakin. He studied Tim Booker’s face, hanging high above him, and a shrewd gleam came into the fairy’s pinpoint eyes.

“Sure, and it’s readin’ your mind I am,” accused Thomakin. “And you’d best be droppin’ such daft notions. If yez think to clear us out of here with iron, then badly mistaken yez are. For we’ll curdle your milk and sour your preserves and plague yez in a hundred ways.”

“No lawn-mower?” sighed Tim Booker. “I must let the grass run wild?”

“Precisely,” answered the fairy.

Booker shrugged and walked back up the path. He didn’t say anything to Mildred and hoped she wouldn’t bring the subject up.

THAT evening, when he came home from the office, Mildred met him at the door.

“Timmie, dear,” she chortled. “It’s been *such* a hot day! I do wish you’d sprinkle the lawn before you come into the house.”

Tim Booker didn’t need any bulletins on the weather. He had spent a sweltering day at work, and what he wanted most right now was a good cold shower for himself.

Instead, he obediently trotted out to sprinkle the lawn. He dragged the hose up from the basement, connected it, and stalked out into the back yard.

Muttering grimly under his breath, he angrily yanked the nozzle of the hose and let the spray fly. He turned the water up full force and spattered the walk, the grass, and then the pebbled pathway.

Just when the hose hit the rock-garden, Tim Booker didn't know.

A startled squeal brought the matter to his attention.

"Oouueee!" piped the voice.

Tim Booker glanced down just in time to see Nubbin run across the pathway, vainly trying to dodge the stream from the hose.

"Turn it off, man!" yelled Nubbin. "It's drenchin' me, yez are!"

For the first time that day, Tim Booker's spirits soared. Deliberately, he played the hose on the spluttering Nubbin. The little fairy was literally swept off his feet by the force of the water.

"So you won't clear out?" grinned Booker. "Well, then, stay here and take it."

Relentlessly, the hose pursued the fleeing Nubbin, hunted him out between the rocks. Tim Booker lost all sense of dignity and decency. He'd show these fairies! It was bad enough to have a wife and a boss to order him around, but when supernatural midges, six inches tall, tried to do the trick—

"What the—?"

Booker glanced down. The water had suddenly ceased to flow from the hose. A few drops dribbled weakly towards the soggy ground.

He turned quickly, and beheld a horrid sight.

Far up the pathway, five tiny forms crouched over the length of rubber hose.

He recognized the five other fairies. They were bending down to the hose, pressing their faces to it, and—

"By heaven!" yelled Tim Booker," *"you've bitten my hose in two!"*

He charged towards the wee folk furiously. They scampered off with derisive hoots and made for the tall grass along the fence.

"Don't you know there's a rubber shortage?" Booker screamed.

As they reached protection, the rearmost figure turned. It was Gandy. Incredulously, Tim Booker halted and stared as Gandy paused and deliberately thumbed his nose at him.

IT WAS a declaration of war. Tim Booker found that out when he returned home again the following evening.

An angry Mildred met him at the door.

"Somebody's been breaking in and stealing my preserves!" she chattered. "Some vandals are loose in the neighborhood, Timmie. Five jars of my best cranberries are gone. I want you to call the police, immediately."

Tim Booker winced.

"Now wait a minute," he temporized hastily.

"And another thing," Mildred shrilled. "Come here a minute. I want you to take a look at this!"

She marched Booker down the pathway into the back yard.

"Look at these flower beds," she exclaimed. "All trampled down. I tell you, some hooligans have been at work here."

Booker nodded. He knew exactly what she meant, even if she didn't. The war had started.

"You don't seem very upset," Mildred declared. "One would think you would be, after the rascals had nerve enough to write about you."

"Write about me?"

"Look there."

Booker followed his wife's frantic finger as it pointed off in the direction of the board fence. His eyes goggled with disbelief.

There were legends on the fence—legends scrawled in chalk, written in wavering letters close to the ground. Tim Booker read the legends, and reddened.

"TIM BOOKER IS A LYING SCOUNDREL"

"BOOKER BEATS HIS WIFE"

“A FOUL MURRAIN ON TIM BOOKER AND ALL HIS ILK”

“THE BACK OF ME HAND TO BOOKER”

“BOOKER HAS HOLES IN HIS SOCKS AND WE CAN SEE THEM”

“BOOKER HAS FLAT FEET”

“What in blazes!” Tim Booker inquired, dancing up and down in the intensity of his emotion. “I haven’t got flat feet or holes in my socks! Why it’s—”

Mildred giggled.

“I think they’re kind of funny,” she admitted. “I don’t see why you have to fly into a rage over a little thing like that when some thieves have been stealing my preserves and doing something really dreadful.”

Booker stared at her, open-mouthed.

“Just get a rag and wipe off those chalk-marks,” she commanded. “We don’t want them up there tomorrow afternoon.”

“Why not?”

“Because of the garden party, stupid.”

“Garden party?” groaned Booker.

“Of course. I had meant it as a surprise, but you might as well know now. I’ve ordered some nice lawn chairs and tables—those lovely metal ones—and some beach umbrellas and games and everything. And there’ll be special entertainment and oodles and gobs of people and—”

“Garden party,” said Booker, dully.

“And guess what, Timmie? Oh, I’m so excited! I’ve even persuaded Mr. and Mrs. Goudger to come. And some of their fine society friends! This is our big chance, Timmie. They’ve already accepted the invitations, and seeing tomorrow is Saturday we’ll start out at noon. It’s so wonderful!”

“Garden party,” whispered Tim Booker. “That’s all I needed!”

“I’m going in now and phone the society editor,” gushed Mildred, happily. She skipped up the pathway.

BOOKER stood there with his hands in his pockets. With a hollow groan, he edged over to the rock garden and bent down to whisper.

"Come on out," he pleaded to the empty air. "I want to talk to you." There was no response.

"You must listen to me," he begged. "Please—please—whatever you do, behave yourselves tomorrow afternoon! I've got to hold this garden party here in the back yard. For heaven's sake, don't start anything!"

No reply came from the empty twilight.

"I'll do anything you want if you'll help me out," Booker panted. "Anything at all. I'll never mow the lawn or sprinkle the grass again. I'll even sell my car so the exhaust fumes won't bother you. I'll—I'll build you a swimming pool, that's what I'll do! Anything, just so you keep out of the way while my guests are here. Please, please cooperate!"

Silence greeted his implorations in the dusk.

It was only as he started back up the path that Tim Booker heard, faintly borne on the twilight air, the faint, mysterious sound of an elfin razzberry.

THE garden party was in full swing.

Tables and chairs were set all over the lawn, and colorful, striped awnings had been hoisted, with much painful grunting, by Tim Booker early that morning.

It had taken him until noon to get everything in place, and served as an excuse for not cutting the long grass—though Mildred had given him a good tongue-lashing about that little matter.

Now, sweating freely in his new gabardine sports suit, Tim Booker wandered around and watched Dinah mix drinks at a table set up near the rock-garden. Dinah was very large, very black, and very busy. Mildred had hired her for this affair, and she plunged into her duties with gusto—particularly when it came to mixing drinks with gin in them.

Booker was in the very act of snatching a glass for himself when Mildred came up and yanked him by the arm.

"Come on, Timmie," she commanded gaily, pushing his drink away. "I want you to meet some of the guests."

Under her breath she muttered, "Quit mooching drinks, and for heaven's sake, smile!"

So Tim Booker smiled, as Mildred dragged him around by the elbow and introduced him to his new and aristocratic neighbors—a prime bunch of stinkers, if you asked him.

But nobody asked him.

"Oooh!" squeaked Mildred a moment later. "The Goudgers are arriving!"

Sure enough, Desmond Goudger and his wife, Mimi—a fat, gushing woman with dyed hair—were waddling down the pebbled pathway.

Mr. Goudger came with the inevitable half-chewed cigar working between his lips, and Mrs. Goudger—to Tim Booker's horror—came with her poodle.

It was a horrid little beast, that poodle; round and fat, with frizzy fur that bore signs of artificial curling. Tim Booker was certain Mrs. Goudger had used her own curling iron on its hair.

Introductions were effected, and Mrs. Goudger, simpering, included her poodle. "And this is Fluffy," she said, giggling.

Tim Booker forced a smile. "Hello, Fluffy," he said, bending down to pet the beast.

Fluffy smiled, wrinkled her nose, and promptly nipped at his ankle.

Booker jumped a foot backwards and sat down, rubbing his leg, as Fluffy yapped hysterically from between Mrs. Goudger's fat calves.

"Playful, isn't she?" grated Tim Booker, with a ghastly leer. He wondered if you could stuff dog-biscuits with dynamite.

Mildred took charge of the situation.

"Get up and stop clowning, Timmie dear," she cooed. "Let's all sit down at a table. Dinah will be here with some drinks directly."

Dinah brought the drinks. Booker could hardly wait to grab his highball. He needed it. While Mr. and Mrs. Goudger sipped, Booker gulped and glanced nervously about the garden. He was looking for the fairies.

They had kept out of sight, so far. Tim Booker hoped to goodness they would continue to do so.

Handling these guests was going to be enough of a problem. Booker saw them sitting at the other tables, drinking and gabbling away. The men, for the most part, seemed a decent sort—confining their activities to drinking. But their wives spent the time criticizing the chairs, the colored awnings, the garden in general, and Mildred's lawn dress.

"NICE place you have here." Goudger thrust his smouldering cigar in Booker's face.

"Oh—yeah, we like it a lot," Booker answered.

"I don't see how you can afford it on your salary," said Desmond Goudger.

Mildred promptly nudged Booker. She wanted him to ask for a raise—he knew it. Tim Booker gulped and dutifully opened his mouth. But Goudger beat him to it.

"No, I don't see how you manage it," he smiled. "And it's going to be harder after I cut your salary next month as I've planned."

Tim Booker gulped again.

"Thought I'd let you know," chuckled Goudger. "We've got to pare down expenses—it's wartime, you understand."

"But, Mr. Goudger—"

"Eeeeeek!"

Mimi Goudger made the sound, and a face.

"What is it, darling?" snapped Desmond Goudger.

"Oh—nothing." Mrs. Goudger subsided, squirming uncomfortably.

"About that salary proposition—" said Tim Booker.

"Eeeeyow!"

This time Mimi Goudger rose completely from her chair. Her face crimson, she turned to Booker.

"You pinched me!" she accused.

"I—what?" gasped Tim Booker.

"You deliberately pinched me," said Mrs. Goudger. "At first I thought you were only trying to be playful, but this is too much."

"But you must be mistaken," spluttered Booker. "I haven't let my hands leave my lap."

Mildred and Mr. Goudger glared at him. The unhappy Booker cast an imploring glance at his accuser.

"Where did you get pinched?" he inquired.

"What a question to ask a lady!" cried Mrs. Goudger. "But if you must know, it was between the second and third rung of my seat."

Tim Booker cast a quick glance underneath the lady's chair—just in time to see the tiny figure of Nubbin disappear in the rustling grass.

The fairies were at work again!

With a muttered, "Pardon me—explain it all later," Tim Booker rose and fled.

It was useless to try and pursue the malicious sprite. He was going for a drink.

At the liquor table, Dinah confronted him with a bewildered flutter of her ham-like hands.

"Lawsy, Mistah Bookah," she said. "You-all is got some mighty peeculyah guestses! Somebody done stole a whole quaht of Irish whiskey from this heah table."

"Oh gosh!" said Tim Booker, snatching the nearest bottle and draining a great gulp of the fiery liquor.

WITH tears in his eyes, he turned to face a strange spectacle. A brawny man in a leopard-skin and a thin, earnest-looking blonde girl in a bedsheet stood at a corner of the lawn.

Mildred was talking to them as Booker stumbled over.

"What kind of a freak show is this?" he demanded.

Mildred flashed him a scornful glance. "Lady-pincher!" she sneered.

“Never mind that—who are these people?”

“Haven’t you ever heard of Valour and Chrystis, the celebrated Grecian dancers?” she asked him.

“Is that some kind of a trick question?” Booker shot back. “I assume you are trying to tell me that these two are Valour and Chrystis, the celebrated whatever-they-are. What I want to know is—what are they doing on our lawn?”

“They’re going to dance, stupid!” said Mildred. “Greeks always danced on the lawn.”

“Not on my lawn they didn’t.”

“But this is my biggest surprise, Timmie. Mimi Goudger is just crazy about artistic things. She’s a patron of the dance.”

Tim Booker eyed the muscular man, and his lanky feminine partner with illy-concealed distaste.

“Mean they’re going to clodhop around barefoot?”

A blast from the portable phonograph on the back porch settled the question. Dinah had put on a record, and now Mildred stepped to the center of the lawn, clapping her hands. Hastily she introduced the two celebrated devotees of Terpsichore, and the leopard-skinned giant and his agile partner scampered to the center of the greensward.

Helplessly shrugging his shoulders, Tim Booker floundered back to the table and joined the Goudgers.

They were staring at the dance team as they cavorted in a semi-adagio over the lawn.

Absent-mindedly, Desmond Goudger’s hand fumbled for his drink and the cigar he had placed on the edge of the table.

Then he poked Tim Booker.

“Did you steal my drink, Booker?” he demanded, in a thunderous whisper.

“Of course not,” Booker replied. “I’ve one of my own here.”

But when he looked, his own drink was gone.

“But I did have,” he protested. “Just a—”

“Quiet!” snapped Mildred, digging him in the ribs.

Booker cast a quick glance at the grass beyond his feet. Sure enough, bobbing across the lawn, apparently moving of its own volition, was a whiskey-glass. Following it came a tall highball glass. Bringing up the rear like a miniature torch, was Goudger’s smudging cigar.

“Those damned fairies,” muttered Tim Booker. “They stole the whiskey—they’re drunk, that’s what they are! Drunk!”

“Who’s drunk?” yelled Desmond Goudger. “I tell you you stole my glass and you accuse me of being drunk. Listen here, Booker—”

Booker didn’t listen. He stared in rapt horror at the dancers on the lawn.

Something was going wrong with their routine. Something was going very much wrong. The two dancers were giggling and lifting their feet in awkward haste.

Grass rippled at their feet. Only Booker saw the tiny scurrying figures, hidden by the tall grass-blades, who tickled the bare toes of the pair.

AND as the babble of audience comment rose, only Booker could detect shrill voices, grumbling a few audible words.

“Trampling down the grass . . . it’s fixing them we are . . .”

The dancers were rapidly being “fixed.”

But the fairies had further plans. Tim Booker suddenly was aware of movement under his very feet. Fluffy, the poodle, was jumping around, uttering hysterical yaps.

Tim Booker shot a glance beneath the table, just in time to see Dunnie, her red hair flaming, rise from the grass and stick Fluffy in an exposed flank with Mrs. Goudger’s hat-pin.

Then Dunnie disappeared. So did Fluffy.

With a shrill yelp, the poodle charged across the lawn. Goaded by pain and indignation, Fluffy swept forward, yapping and yipping, straight for the dancers.

Leopard-skin had his partner balanced on his back at the very moment that Fluffy bore down on them.

He began to yap a little himself, and ran around through the grass. Then Fluffy caught up with him and it was all over.

The three disappeared in a whirling ball that struck the ground.

It was a sublime spectacle, but nobody even noticed it.

For at that moment, the gay, striped umbrella awning over the table suddenly collapsed and fell down upon Desmond Goudger, his wife, Mildred, and Tim Booker.

Pandemonium, true to tradition, reigned.

Floundering, gasping, choking beneath the canopy, Tim Booker fought his way free. Twice he was bitten by somebody as he was bending over struggling to his feet. He thought at the time that it was probably Mrs. Goudger, but decided not to mention it.

It was bad enough to face her and her irate husband when the awning was finally thrown aside.

Mildred saved the day. Laughing merrily, she smiled at the bewildered assemblage.

“Just a little accident,” She giggled. “Wasn’t it, Timmie?”

“Timmie” rubbed his shins and choked up a fearful smile.

“Let’s all have a drink,” Mildred suggested. “Then I’ve got something else on the program.”

For once she had come out with the right suggestion. Booker noted that she was diplomatically putting a double shot of whiskey in each drink she mixed. Within a few minutes the drinks were distributed and peace was restored.

By this time the liquor was actually taking hold of the crowd. The peaceful mood was usurped by a sudden gaiety. Everybody began laughing too loudly or shrilly.

Mildred, pleased at the change, quickly served another round of refreshments.

Booker drank both drinks and sneaked a few more. The warm glow was all he had to fortify him. He kept glancing around, waiting for the next move on the part of his tiny tormentors.

It didn't take a second glance at the nibbled ropes to tell him who was responsible for the fallen awning. He watched the grass, but saw no movements. Maybe they were all so drunk by this time that they'd crawled into the rock-garden to sleep it off. Booker felt like crawling in with them.

He didn't have a chance.

Because at that very moment, Mildred announced, "Now everybody's going to play croquet."

SURE enough, Dinah was coming down from the porch with an armful of mallets, balls and wire wickets. She set them up from a hastily-scrutinized map in her hand. Meanwhile Mildred laughingly recruited the men to push tables and chairs out of the way.

"Croquet!" muttered Tim Booker, savagely downing another drink. "That does it!"

Everything got blurry, then. The trouble was, it wouldn't stay that way.

Booker was perfectly conscious when his wife grabbed him by one hand, thrust a croquet mallet into the other, and simpered, "We're playing partners, dear. Against the Goudgers."

"On this lawn?" moaned Booker.

"Must we?" He glanced helplessly about as he saw the other couples gathering. The fairies wouldn't like their lawn trampled down—they wouldn't approve of all these wickets and pegs. And they were liable to do something about it.

"Let's have another drink first," Booker suggested, sparring for time.

"You've had enough," Mildred snapped. "Come on. Grab your mallet and let's go to work—or play."

Then everything got mercifully blurry again for Mr. Booker. He saw his wife and the Goudgers doing things with mallets and large wooden balls that rolled through wire wickets.

But he also saw something else.

The grass at the edge of the lawn was moving. Moving and bending! Bobbing above the tops of the blades he saw heads—small heads that wobbled in drunken rage. Over the click of the mallets and the squeals of the guests, Booker's alcohol-attuned ears heard the high, shrill whispering.

"It's abusin' our lawn they are, with their iron wickets."

"Begorra, and we'd best be after takin' matters in hand."

"Dunnie, dear, and did ye bring the whiskey?"

"Whist! We'd be up and at 'em."

Booker knew he was drunk. He tried to imagine that he had hallucinations, and didn't succeed very well. He knew those fairies! Slip and Sib and Gandy and Dunnie, Thomakin and Nubbin were crouching there in the grass—

"Watch this one now!"

Desmond Goudger's great voice boomed in his ears. The red-faced man mangled a cigar between his molars as he stepped up and swung his mallet.

"I used to be a champion at this sort of thing," he asserted. "I played polo for a while, too."

"Who rode you?" squeaked a voice.

"What's that?" yelled Goudger, glaring at Tim Booker.

But Tim Booker hadn't said a word. The voice came from somewhere behind his knees. He wheeled around, but the fairy was gone.

"Huh!" Goudger grasped his mallet and bent down to hit the ball.

He jumped as if stung.

"What's the matter, dear?" asked Mrs. Goudger bewilderedly.

Goudger got redder, but said nothing. He shifted his legs and prepared to take a swing.

"What in perdition?" Goudger straightened up, glowering.

"What is it?" insisted Mimi Goudger.

Goudger looked very embarrassed. "I don't like to say it," he blurted, "but somebody seems to be pulling my socks down on me."

“Don’t look at me,” said Tim Booker, hastily. “Why should I pull down your socks?”

“To spoil my stroke,” Goudger answered.

“I wouldn’t spoil your stroke. Go ahead and have it—I hope it’s apoplexy.”

“What?” roared Goudger.

TIM BOOKER wheeled again. He hadn’t said anything. The shrill voice came from his side, on the ground.

“Timmie, that isn’t funny,” whined Mildred, simpering at Desmond Goudger. “Go ahead, Mr. Goudger.”

The boss put his foot on the ball for a tight croquet stance. Then he started to swing.

“Oooooh!” gasped his wife. “Something bit my ankle.”

“Mosquitoes,” said Tim Booker.

“Nuts!” yelled Desmond Goudger. “You’ve put me off again.”

Desperately, he swung. The wooden ball rolled for the wicket. They stood watching it.

“Perfect,” said Mildred.

At the last minute something happened. The ball did not swerve through the thick grass—but suddenly the wicket seemed to jump to one side.

Open-mouthed, they saw the ball continue, while the wicket turned on one end and swung away from its path.

“How in the—”

Goudger’s question was never finished. From all around them came a series of simultaneous gasps, oaths, and startled cries.

Tim Booker, through blurry eyes, saw that the rest of his guests were having the same odd difficulties. All over the lawn, wickets were moving and turning. Men and women were pulling up their socks and stockings.

To Booker’s horror, a fat man suddenly tripped over a wicket and sprawled on the turf. A moment before there had been no wicket in his path.

"What kind of a circus is this?" Goudger exclaimed. "My drinks are stolen, my wife is pinched, awnings fall down, and now your croquet game goes whacky. Damn it all, I'm not licked yet. I don't know how you're managing to cheat me, Booker, but I'll show you."

He swung at the ball madly. His mallet came down with a sharp click. At the last second it swerved aside and hit Goudger's ankle.

"Ouch!" thundered Desmond Goudger.

From behind him, out of nowhere, a new croquet ball came sailing through the air. As Booker watched, it rose and smacked Goudger smartly on the back of the head.

"Ooooof!" Goudger gasped.

Booker stared at Gandy in the grass behind. He had thrown the croquet ball.

He was still staring as Desmond Goudger, bellowing like a bull, charged down on him.

"Curse you, Booker!" yelled the baffled man. "You threw that ball at me."

"I saw him, too!" added Mimi Goudger, glibly.

"Brute!" sobbed Mildred.

THE blur faded from Booker's brain. Suddenly he saw them all as his mortal enemies. He crouched, waiting for Goudger's spring, and gripped the mallet in his hand.

"I hit you, eh?" he shouted. "All right, I'll do it again, too!"

Raising the mallet, he swung it outward.

Desmond Goudger ran right into it, stomach first.

Right then and there the riot started.

Mimi picked up a croquet ball and hit Mildred. Mildred tripped Mimi. A man fell over Mimi's legs and promptly lashed out at his neighbor.

And Tim Booker, yelling like an Irish banshee, charged on the mob, waving his mallet like a shillelagh.

“Out of my garden!” he screeched. “Out of here, all of you! You worthless, lily-livered bunch of croquet-playing fools! I’d rather have a hundred fairies on my hands than an ill-tempered gang of mortals like you!”

Behind him came the high, squeaking battle cry of the wee folk.

A shower of croquet balls rose from the grass to pelt the fleeing guests. Wickets rose out of nowhere to trip their flying feet. Mallets launched themselves miraculously from the grass and thudded into backsides.

And with oaths and imprecations, Tim Booker whirled his weapon and drove them from his garden. They ran for their cars, they ran for their lives—and Mildred and the Goudgers led all the rest.

Only when the last car whirled out of the driveway bearing the final group of frightened guests and Mildred as well, did Tim Booker check his rage.

He stood slumped in the twilight, sick with the realization of what he’d done. He’d lost his reputation, his job, and his wife, all in one fell swoop.

Panic gripped him.

“I’ve got to get out of here,” he muttered. Without a backward glance, he turned and ran towards the house to pack his trunk.

THE panic was gone from Tim Booker’s soul when he dumped his grips and trunk on the bed in the YMCA.

There was no frown on Booker’s face. Surprisingly enough, he was grinning cheerfully as he sat down on a chair and removed his shoes.

This was the life, after all. For the first time he realized he hadn’t lost anything that really mattered. He spoke aloud, sorting his random thoughts.

“Mildred and I were through a long time ago, I guess. I just didn’t dare admit it to myself, that’s all. Now I’m free, and she can find somebody else to nag.

“And I haven’t got an old tyrant like Goudger on my neck, either. I’ll find a better job right away.”

He opened his suitcases, humming under his breath.

"Guess I owe those fairies a debt of gratitude after all. Good little people, those fairies. Hope they enjoy themselves there with the house to themselves."

He unstrapped his trunk and fumbled for a key.

"Come to think of it," he breathed, "I'm rid of them, too. Not that I don't appreciate what they've done for me. But spending my whole life with that crew of leprechauns would be pretty wearing. I'm glad *that* adventure is over."

He opened his trunk, began to take out his clothing. Then he stepped back, stiffened.

The drawers of the trunk were slowly opening outward. Booker's eyes popped.

From each of the six drawers a tiny face peered up at him with an elfin grin.

"You!" whispered Booker. "Here!"

"That's right," squeaked Nubbin, gaily. "It's here we are, my fine sir! After the fine way you protected us from those guests, did you ever for a minute think we'd be desertin' you? Ah no, me dear man—we've switched allegiance. From now on we're not Emmett O'Driscoll's wee folk any longer—we were after playing stowaway in yer trunk—and now we belong to you."

"You belong to me," said Booker, dully.

"For life!" answered Nubbin.

Booker held his head in his hands as he watched the six fairies scamper from the trunk and dance down across his bed.

This was the end. He'd have the fairies on his hands for the rest of his days now. How could he get a fresh start? How could he hope to carry out his plans—get a job in an airplane factory, for example.

An airplane factory!

Suddenly Tim Booker sat up and grinned.

"You're mine for life," he said. "You'll serve me faithfully?"

The six tiny heads nodded.

“Then listen here,” said Booker. “I’ve got some orders.”

For ten minutes the wee folk clustered about Tim Booker, climbing across his lap and nodding as he spoke.

Only once was there an interruption.

“But the iron—” said Thomakin.

“It’s for your country!” snapped Tim Booker. “Remember that. We’re all making sacrifices. And you’ll stand contact with iron for such a cause.”

They nodded again.

So Tim Booker, smiling happily, went to the telephone and called Washington, long distance. He waited for his connection, got his party, gave his name and address, and stated his business. It was a long conversation, but Booker got to the point.

“That’s what I thought, sir,” he said. “I’d read you were using midgets to crawl up inside and weld those tiny airplane parts. But I think I’ve got some workers who will do even better for you.”

He glanced happily at the fairies on the bed.

“No, sir,” said Tim Booker. “They’re not exactly midgets. But you’d better hire them anyway. I can tell you one thing—I’d rather have them fighting for me than against me. And that’s no fairy tale.”

Black Barter

Would you believe it, the guy was so lonely he longed even for the sight of a vampire, a werewolf and centaur!

1. Stone Broke

WELL, I'm back again.

Remember me? I'm the fellow who got a job with Julius Margate. Margate, the sorceror, who lived in the big mansion and had a hobby of collecting monstrosities.

No, I'm not one of the monstrosities he collected. I just took care of them. That was my job—to act as a sort of nursemaid to mythological entities.

For example, it was my duty to feed Mr. Simpkins. He was a vampire, you may recall.

I recall it too, with shudders.

Then I took care of Jory the werewolf, and Gerymanx, who was a centaur. I also had charge of Myrtle, the hamadryad—a tree nymph. And of course, there was my special pet, Trina the mermaid. I built her a swimming pool and my gifts of herring showed that I was caring.

Oh, we were a happy little family, all right! Margate was so proud of his unusual collection of monsters, and I grew fond of them all.

Then came that ghastly day when Margate received a new pet for his collection. Nothing less than the hideous Medusa. And the sight of her turned Margate and his companions to stone.

How I got rid of the Medusa is another story.

But when the Medusa was finally reduced to rubble, I was left all alone in Margate's big mansion, with nothing but stone statues for company. The stone images of Margate, Jory, Mr. Simpkins, Gerymanx, and Trina—and a stone tree on the lawn that was once Myrtle the hamadryad.

I used to sit in Margate's study, a huge room where he kept his collection of books on goety and necromantic divination, and brood despondently. I fingered his alembic, his bottles of root-extracts and poisons. There was one bottle I didn't dare touch—one that housed a geni.

After a few days I stopped fingering bottles and began to drink from them. For Margate had a stock of fine liquor in his cellar, right next to the coffin that once housed Mr. Simpkins, the vampire.

Who can blame me? I was so lonely! Lonely for a sight of my unusual friends. I used to brush the statues every day with loving care. Particularly the statue of Trina the mermaid. Ah, there was a girl! I sighed when I thought of her, and the wonderful times we'd spent together. She and I would sit in the magic moonlight and I would toss her a fish. The sight of her piquant face as she twisted her neck and caught the fish in her mouth—it haunted me with wistful poignancy.

A man can stand only so much of such moon-drenched memories. I had to do something.

Of course, I could have left the mansion and sought a job elsewhere. But if I went away, who would brush the dust from the faces of my stone friends? Into what unsympathetic hands would I entrust the statues? I couldn't bear the thought.

SO I stayed. Stayed and studied. Studied sorcery in the great black library of Julius Margate. Studied sorcery in the shadowed silence of dust-shrouded shelves.

I pored intently through endless pages, peered at passages in musty, iron-girdled tomes, perused with a perilous purpose.

For I was seeking a spell—an evocation—a rune or incantation—a rite or ritual—whereby I could summon my friends to animate life again. I sought to shatter that shroud of stone that swathed their souls.

Somewhere I must stumble across a solution, a means to kindle living flesh from marble. A mystic Pygmalion, I sought the formula to evoke a half-dozen Galateas. There must be a way!

I read, and shuddered. Here and there were hints. Only a linguist could hope to translate Greek, Latin, medieval French and German, Sanskrit, Arabic and Hebrew. Once translated, only a devotee of mantic arts would risk his soul to perform the dark offices necessary to conjure up Those who might grant the baleful boon of forbidden life.

But I searched. Day after day, night after night. When the autumnal skies were black as my despair, I read on. When the ravening winds howled as mournfully as the sighs that rose in my throat, I pondered over the yellowed, crumbling pages.

The wings of ancient evil brushed my face and left deep lines etched about my eyes, but I read on. I sat till dawn, forever seeking a solution for my dark desires.

Seated one night in the study, I heard a knock on the great outer door.

I rose, startled. Wryly, I thought of Poe's *Raven.* But dismissing the absurd fancy with a grin, I shook off my bemusement and stalked down the hall.

As I went striding along, blood flowed back into my cramped limbs. I began to feel a little foolish about the whole thing.

I was going to see another human face finally, and I was self-conscious about the way I'd been spending my time.

More than that, I experienced a curious elation. I didn't know who in the world would be knocking on Julius Margate's door around midnight, but anyone would prove a welcome visitor to me. I thirsted for companionship.

Just the mere act of answering the door brought my spirits up with a bound.

I unchained the door, fumbled with the lock, threw the door open wide.

There was a sudden swoop.

A broomstick hit me in the face.

Riding the broomstick was a witch!

2. Black Massacre

I LAY flat on my back and stared up as the witch swooped into the hallway on her broomstick.

“Whoa, there,” muttered the witch, and the broomstick clattered to a halt on the floor. The witch climbed off slowly. A dog and a cat jumped down from the shaft of the broomstick behind her. The witch dumped a large satchel on the floor.

All the while, I stared, recognizing her for what she was. Oh, she was a witch, all right! The broomstick proved it—and so did the beaked nose, the wrinkled face, the gray, disheveled hair.

My first impulse was to stay right where I was, on die floor. It seemed somehow safer there. But the witch gave me a withering glance.

“Up off the floor with you,” she snapped. “Is that any way to greet a guest?”

She placed her broomstick neatly in the comer.

I rose and faced her, mumbling my name. I didn’t have the courage to hold out my hand in greeting.

She took no notice of the omission. A smile revealed her toothless gums.

“I am Miss Terioso,” announced the witch. “An old friend of Julius Margate’s.”

“Is that so?” I answered, brilliantly.

“Used to see him around at covens,” the witch explained.

“Covens?”

"Witch Sabbats," Miss Terioso enlightened me.

"But I didn't know he went in for such things."

"Oh, it was just a hobby with him. He dabbled a bit in witchcraft. Dabbled in everything, did Julius Margate. A bit of a dabbler and a bit of a babbler. Eh?"

Miss Terioso laughed. Some of the more sadistic radio advertisers might have liked that laugh for a spot announcement I didn't care for it, myself.

"Aren't you going to ask me in?" she demanded. "Where's your courtesy, young sir?"

I indicated the parlor with a weak gesture. Miss Terioso's bent figure crept across the hall. She turned an evil profile toward me, and Ell swear she looked like something only a vulture would love. A mother vulture, at that.

"By the way," she screeched, "better get some milk for my dear pets here. My familiars, dear little lambs."

I stared at the snarling, mangy dog and the hissing, scrawny black cat. They padded towards me stealthily.

HASTILY, I backed into the hall and ran to the kitchen. Returning with a saucer of milk, I found the witch and her two familiars in the parlor under the lamplight.

"That's a courteous young man," approved Miss Terioso. "Let them sup on milk. Of course it's not as good as the real red stuff, but it's better than nothing. Eh?"

I nodded, but the last half of the nod was a shiver.

"Look at the darlings," commanded the witch. "My two sweet lovelies!"

"What are their names?" I asked, just as if I wanted to know.

"I call the cat Fido and the dog is named Puss," she told me.

"Very nice," I answered.

The witch sat down and raised her legs. With a shock I noticed that she was wearing slacks under her black skirt.

“Those slacks—” I began.

She giggled softly, like a wounded tigress.

“What’s wrong with them?” she demanded. “Nothing immodest about slacks, young sir! I have to wear them. I’m certainly not going to min a good pair of silk stockings riding a broomstick.” This sounded logical.

“As it is, I’m worried about a straw shortage for my broom,” Miss Terioso complained. She opened her big satchel and took out a woolen knitting bag and two knitting needles.

“Do you knit?” I asked.

She giggled again. “Not exactly.”

Reaching into the knitting bag she extracted a tiny wax mannikin and began to stick her knitting needles into its body.

“Just a poppet,” she explained. “Do you mind if I work while we talk?”

“Not at all,” I gulped.

She put the poppet away and reached into the big satchel again. When her hand emerged again it was clutching something.

A human arm!

She reached in again and drew out a leg. A shapely leg, but a severed limb, for all that.

“Murderess!” I choked.

Miss Terioso smiled. “Flatterer!” she cooed. “I haven’t really murdered anyone in years! No, young sir. These are not human limbs. They are the limbs of a window dummy. Here.”

She began to bring out more appendages from her satchel. Another arm, another leg. A torso. And finally, a lovely head with a red wig.

Expertly, she fitted the various parts together. Soon a complete window dummy stood before us. A very pretty redheaded window dummy—distinctly female.

“Just a notion of mine,” Miss Terioso explained. “I began to think that my poppets were too small to really get delicate work into them with the needles. So I bought this window dummy. It’s still a wax figure, but a life-sized one. Clever, eh?”

"Clever is no word for it," I said. And it wasn't.

Suddenly Miss Terioso shrugged.

"But let us get down to business, then," she declared. "I am here for a definite reason. I want Julius Margate."

"You can't see him." I spoke too rapidly to be cautious about it. "You can't see him. He's turned to stone."

The witch grinned.

"I know. I know all about it. He's stone and the rest of his freaks are statues, too. And I want him."

"You want his statue?"

"Yes."

Was I crazy, or did Miss Terioso blush slightly?

"I—I used to have a crush on die old fool," she explained. "I'd like to have him around for sentimental reasons." Somehow this didn't sound convincing. She looked about as sentimental as a barracuda.

There was more here than met the eye, I decided. So I also decided on a little strategy.

"By the way, Miss Terioso," I began. "Before we get down to details—would you care for a little refreshment?"

The witch simpered. "Don't mind if I do, young sir. Have you a bit of human—" She checked herself hastily. "No, I don't suppose you would," she sighed. "Be right back," I promised.

AND I was. I went down to the cellar, rummaged around, and emerged with a fifth of Irish whiskey and two glasses. Bearing the refreshments back to the parlor, I poured out two neat shots. Miss Terioso drained her glass.

I refilled it.

Miss Terioso drank the second as a chaser, so I refilled it again.

"Very pleasant," she told me. "I enjoy something mild for a change."

"One of Margate's prize bottles," I remarked.

"Speaking of bottles," she interrupted, "I meant to tell you this before. I not only want to buy Margate and the other statues, but that geni in the bottle as well. He has a geni in a bottle, hasn't he?"

I admitted it. "But what I want to know," I said, filling her glass for the fifth time, "is what you want with those statues."

She drank. I refilled her glass.

"I told you," she repeated. "I am sentimental about the old son of a poltergeist. I'd like to have him around to look at. eh?"

The liquor was working. The witch was getting slightly tipsy. I refilled her glass once more and proceeded artfully.

"Come now," I coaxed. "We're friends, aren't we? You can tell me tire truth. What do you really want with those statues?"

"Ha!" cackled Miss Terioso. "He's so artful, this kind young sir. Methinks he wants me to betray the fact that I intend to re-animate those statues myself and bring them back to life. But he'll never squeeze a word about it from me, he won't! Eh?"

I smiled and pressed my fingers together judiciously before my face.

"Suppose someone wanted to bring the statues back to life," I said, just as if I'd never heard her maunderings. "Would it be possible through sorcery?"

"Anything is possible through sorcery, my pet," said the witch, "If one is willing to pay the price."

She cackled, grabbed the bottle, and clawed it to her scrawny bosom.

"Now the price for a fine young man like you would be high," she mumbled. "But an old hand like myself—blast you, there are ways and means of paying very little. Of striking bargains, as it were. I should conjure a demon . . . a friendly one, of course . . . and I should not sell my soul. I could not, for I sold it long ago. Long, long ago."

The witch began to sing *Long, Long Ago* in a voice like a tugboat's whistle. I coughed discreetly.

"Eh? It's the problem of animating those statues, isn't it, dear sir?" Miss Terioso smiled. "I have a sort of a due bill on Hell, so to speak. There are certain powers and perquisites coming to me. I should just summon my demon, ask the boon, and the statues would be warm flesh and blood in the twinkling of an owl's eye!"

She drank again.

"But how do you summon demons?" I demanded.

"You hold a Black Mass," she answered. Everybody knows that." Suddenly a look of crafty reticence spread over her wrinkled countenance. "But I'm talking too much. I see that now. I'll not tell you how to hold a Mass to Satan, never fear. I'd be such a silly to tell you, eh?"

I was prepared for this. For suddenly I saw a way of bringing back my friends. So I proceeded deliberately about my appointed task.

"You can't fool me," I mocked. "You and your talk about Black Masses and witchcraft." I rose and smiled. "You and your ridiculous little wax figures. And this foolish looking window dummy here!" I tapped the red-headed dummy with an accusing finger.

"You aren't a witch," I told her. "Just a broken-down dressmaker, I'm thinking! All this is nonsense."

She rose to the bait.

"Nonsense, is it?" screeched Miss Terioso, "I'm not a witch, eh? I, the most famous sorceress in three continents and four dimensions?"

"Black Mass," I chortled, scornfully. "That's horseplay of another color."

Miss Terioso gulped the last drink in the bottle and lurched to her feet. She stared at me with bloodshot eyes.

"You can't hold a Black Mass," I snickered.

"Oh, can't I?" snarled tire witch. "I'll show you! I'll not only hold a Black Mass—I'll blessed well hold one with stripes if you like!"

3. The Mass Is a Mess

MISS TERIOSO swayed out into the wide hallway. I followed at her rundown heels, gasping in mingled apprehension and excitement.

Then we stood in the huge room that held the statuary. I lit a lamp and revealed the stony images of my friends. There was pot-bellied little Julius Margate, his face a marble mask of bewilderment. Gaunt Mr. Simpkins hovered, his false teeth forever frozen in an embarrassed grin. Jory, as a stone wolf, held a petrified paw in the air. Gerymanx was a noble Grecian centaur and looked somehow natural in stone. And Trina made a beautiful mermaid. She had a gorgeous shape-plenty of these and those, and fins, too.

I sighed.

The witch wheezed alcoholically in my face.

"Think I can't do it?" she muttered.

"A Black Mass? It's ridiculous," I told her. "I understand you must draw a pentagon in blue chalk, and use holy wafers and sacramental wine; And you intone the Lord's Prayer backwards in Latin, and use the body of a naked woman for an altar."

"Right," said the witch.

"Well, you haven't got the facilities, so that's that!" I jeered.

Miss Terioso tittered drunkenly.

"I'll fix that," she promised. "You've got some chalk, haven't you, dear boy? Margate must have some around for his own spells."

I rummaged through the library and returned with a stub of blue, phosphorescent chalk.

I found Miss Terioso on her way back from the kitchen, laden with packages. "Here's the chalk."

She set to work on hands and knees, drawing a glowing blue line. Panting, she arose.

"That's no pentagon," I exclaimed.

"There's only four sides to it."

"Ran out of chalk," mumbled the witch. "It doesn't matter, really."

She faced me and began to chew on something.

"Holy wafer?" I asked.

"No," said Miss Terioso. "Haven't got any. This is a graham cracker. Same thing, almost."

She drank something out of a cup.

Sacramental wine?"

"Coca-cola," the witch explained. "They will probably never know the difference."

Suddenly she ran tipsily out of the room and returned with the window dummy, which she placed across two chairs.

"We have no naked woman for an altar, so the dummy will have to do," said Miss Terioso. "Here goes for the invocation."

As the phosphorescent chalk glowed in the darkness, the witch crouched over the window dummy, mumbling sonorously.

"Wait a minute," I interrupted. "That doesn't sound like the Lord's Prayer backwards in Latin."

"Don't remember the Latin," sighed the witch. "I'm using pig-Latin."

She continued. After a moment she began to make passes with her clawlike hands. Her voice deepened, then rose shrilly. I recognized rumbling syllables and shrieking vocables.

The cadence was rhythmic. In my fancy the blue lines of the pentagon began to dance in pulsation with her pronouncements.

It wasn't fancy. The lines moved. The room swayed. Her voice shrieked.

Miss Terioso turned blue in the face. Her drunken mumblings slurred oddly. She began to sway.

The sight was very impressive. She looked just as though she had been given a Mickey Finn.

With a supernatural belch, Miss Terioso slid to the floor in a dead faint.

"Out like a light," I sighed. "Oh well, I might have known the old hag couldn't do it."

"Do what?"

"Why, that she couldn't—*hey!"* I wheeled suddenly as I realized that a strange voice had addressed me.

Staring across the blue line I saw the strange owner of the strange voice.

This time I almost slid to the door.

But not quite. I gazed at the presence on the other side of the pseudo-pentagon.

Was it a demon?

If demons have red, scaly bodies like gigantic lizards, and semi-anthropomorphic limbs, slick hairless skulls, and faces like grinning death—then it was a demon, all right.

Or a demon, all wrong.

Because despite this terrifying aspect, there was something horribly bedraggled about this apparition.

HIS eyes were bloodshot. His cheeks were scratched. His arms hung limply, and his chest rose and fell in despairing gasps. I noticed that his tail was dragging.

“Go ahead,” said the deep voice, in accents that congealed my vertebrae. “Go ahead, make sport of me! You accursed human midge! You enscorcelled scum, you foul thaumaturgical impostor! You’re not fit to be impaled on a spit for a weenie roast in hell!”

“What do you mean?” I gulped.

“What do I mean? The infernal impudence of the nigromantic nincompoop! I mean you bungled the whole ceremony! You used the wrong materials, you gave the wrong accent to the invocations, you even left out part of the Gloric Chant!”

“But—”

“And what does that mean? I’ll tell you what,” snarled the demon, and his eyes flashed at 400° Fahrenheit. “It means I was dragged bodily through five-dimensional space. It means I was twisted through the veritable warpings in the spatial continuum! I was bruised and battered and banged and buffeted, and nearly annihilated before I got here! My mundane simulacrum was almost impossible to assume.

“And why? Because an amateur sorceror like yourself didn’t know how to call me. Why you don’t know enough to raise the dead! Why don’t you read the rule books?"

"Wait a minute," I temporized. "I didn't call you. She did—Miss Terioso. the witch. She was drunk and forgot a lot of things."

"Drunk, eh?" said the demon, with a self-righteous smirk. "Serves her right. Never touch the stuff myself. Wine is a mocker."

I nodded.

The demon did an alarming thing. He thrust his head out on his rubbery neck. It stretched a good foot.

As he darted his skull forward and back restlessly, I diffidently jumped a yard to one side.

"Well, now that I'm here, what are you going to do about it?" demanded the demon. "Have I wriggled through the dimensions all for nothing? I want something to eat, something to kill, or something to bargain over."

"I'll bargain with you," I said boldly.

"You?" The demon sniffed. "You aren't a sorceror. What can you offer me? Your soul?"

"I don't think so," I hesitated.

"Current rate of exchange is very favorable," said the demon suddenly all coaxing smiles. "I pay highest prices."

"Not interested," I insisted.

"Then I might as well go," the demon sighed.

Inspiration smote me.

"Wait a minute," I snapped. "I'll give you a wonderful trade. How would you like to own a geni?"

"A geni? You have a geni?" The glare on the demon's face registered red incredulity. "I doubt that very much."

"I have a geni in a bottle," I told him. "Wait right here and I'll be back in a flash with the flask."

He waited, and I was.

Barely a minute passed before I returned, bearing the curious old bottle from Margate's library. Within it gurgled the geni, like a shrunken mermaid.

The demon goggled.

"You *have* got one at that," he admitted. His eyes narrowed to cunning slits. "What are you asking for it?" he purred. "A boon."

"Be specific."

"I want these statues reanimated," I said, waving my arm to embrace the stone images around me. "I want their souls, or life-force, to return to flesh instead of stone."

"That's very difficult," said the demon, thoughtfully. "Couldn't you settle for something easier? How about a blonde? Lots of you magicians seem to go for deals involving blondes. A nice blond *succubae,* now, with big—"

"Never mind," I insisted. "I want those statues alive."

The demon shrugged. "I don't know."

"Think of the geni," I said, shaking the bottle. "One of your own kind. A helpless prisoner in a bottle. How would you like to be shut up in a bottle, like—like an olive?"

The demon winced. I knew I had him. "I am too soft-hearted," he rumbled. "But I'll do it. Or try to do it. A most unusual request, and there's so much to arrange."

"Get to work," I said. "I'll toss you the bottle in a moment."

"Hold on," advised the demon. "This is liable to be a bit messy."

It was.

I didn't mind the way the air changed colors as the demon crouched in the center of the room, croaking gutturally as he squatted like a malignant frog.

I didn't mind the great quaking wind that rose to howl through my hair.

I didn't mind the smoke and the flame.

But when the chandelier crashed from the ceiling and hit me on the head, I minded very much indeed.

The world went black and I went to sleep beside Miss Terioso on the floor.

There was a confused impression of a gigantic hand grasping the geni-bottle, a muffled illusion of smoke and shouting, and then I went out, like the proverbial light.

The next thing I knew I was awake, spitting out a mouthful of broken glass.

“What a hangover!” I whispered.

“Oh, yeah?” said a strange voice.

4. A Bunch of Busy Bodies

I SAT up. Miss Terioso and the shattered chandelier still lay on the floor. But the demon had vanished from the chalk formation, and the bottle with the geni was nowhere to be seen.

I groped for the light, seeking the source of the voice.

Radiance flooded the room and I stared at the statues.

Statues no longer!

They *were* alive. I saw familiar flesh once more. The grotesque bodies of men and the wolf and the centaur and mermaid were moving.

I ran over to Trina. The beautiful mermaid with the lovely green hair stared up at me with a radiant smile.

“Trina, darling!” I whispered, taking her in my arms.

“Get away from me or I’ll kick your teeth down your throat with my hoofs!” boomed a gruff voice.

“But you have no hoofs, dear,” I laughed. “You’re a mermaid. You have a—”

“Don’t you call me ‘dear,’ you oaf! I’m a centaur!” growled the voice.

I stepped back in dismay.

That voice—I recognized it—was the voice of Gerymanx the centaur! But it came from Trina’s body!

I rushed over to Gerymanx.

“Hello, my friend,” came the calm words. Again I recognized the voice from the centaur’s body. It was the voice of Julius Margate!

“Who—who are you?” I whispered. The centaur smiled. “I’m Margate, of course. Who else would I be?”

I gulped. “You’re sure?”

“Of course.”

“Come here.” I grabbed the centaur’s arm and led the figure over to a full-length mirror.

“Take a look,” I suggested.

HE looked at himself—at the horse body projecting behind him. When he saw what he was dragging around in the rear, the man almost collapsed.

“But I’m Margate!” he wailed. “What am I doing in Gerymanx’s body?”

“What is Gerymanx doing in Trina’s body?” I asked.

“Who is in my body?” Margate suddenly yelled. He ran over to confront his body and reached out a cautious hand to grasp the chest.

“What are you reaching for, dearie?” lisped a high voice. “Be careful how you handle my trunk.”

“Myrtle!” whispered Margate. “Myrtle, the hamadryad.”

“Of course,” answered Myrtle. “Can’t you recognize my limbs?”

“What is all this?” demanded the rasping voice that had roused me from unconsciousness. I turned to face tall Mr. Simpkins.

“Why am I not a wolf?” demanded the voice. “Who stole my form? Why am I a wolf in Mr. Simpkins’ clothing?”

It was Jory the werewolf, in the vampire’s body. As I expected, the vampire was now wearing the wolf-form instead.

“Is this a way for a self-respecting vampire to be?” groaned the wolf. “Going around on all fours like an animal?”

“Something terrible has happened,” I gasped. “You’re alive, but your souls got into the wrong bodies. The demon made a mistake. You’ve switched.”

Then I remembered. Gerymanx was in Trina’s body. But where was Trina?

I stared out the open window. Then I saw it—the tree, the tree of Myrtle the hamadryad. Trina had to be in the tree! It must have been transformed through the open window like the rest of the statuary.

Running across the room, I bounded out on the lawn and threw my arms around the tree-trunk.

“Trina,” I whispered. “Trina, darling!”

There was no answer.

“Trina, speak to me!”

Not a leaf rustled.

I stumbled back into the room. “Trina,” I groaned.

“Here I am, darling!”

The familiar voice fired my blood.

I turned my head.

Coming toward me was—*the red-headed window dummy!*

She fell into my embrace, the lovely waxen figure, and we kissed.

I shuddered. She was alive—but still wax.

Now I understood. In the mixup, the window dummy, having no soul, probably entered Myrtle’s tree. Trina entered the body of the window dummy.

So there we stood.

A vampire in a werewolf’s body, a werewolf in a vampire’s. A man in a centaur’s form, and a centaur in a mermaid. A mermaid in a window dummy, and a tree nymph in the shape of a man.

And I myself, in one hell of a mess!

5. A Witch Flies Off—in a Rage

MISS TERIOSO couldn’t have picked a worse moment to regain consciousness. Which is probably why she picked this moment.

The witch rose from the floor and her bleary gaze swept the room more thoroughly than her broom could have done the job. In a moment comprehension came to her.

"So you made your own bargain with the demon," she scolded me. "Gave him the geni, I warrant? A clever young sir, aren't you. I've a good mind to—"

Then she saw the face of Julius Margate.

Instantly a change swept over Miss Terioso. I remembered she had admitted having a crush on Mr. Margate—and her actions now confirmed the fact.

She simpered coyly, straightened her stringy hair, and assumed a smile such as one sees on the face of a particularly hungry crocodile.

"Why Julius, my dear!" she gushed, advancing on Mr. Margate with a sickening leer. "I'm so glad to see you."

"Keep your hands off me, you old cow!" shrilled a high voice.

Miss Terioso halted and stared at the man.

"Don't look at me that way, you Walpurgistic wench!" said the voice from Margate's body.

Miss Terioso, not realizing that Margate's body was now inhabited by Myrtle the hamadryad, was confused.

"Here I am," called another voice. "It's me, Julius Margate, over here."

The witch turned to face, the centaur. Her face was shock-proof, but her lips twitched.

"Don't you recognize me, sugar?" asked Julius Margate,. waving his tail coyly.

Miss Terioso gaped at the centaur.

"Who is making sport of me?" she snapped. "What sort of jest are you playing?"

"Nobody's making fun of you," insisted Margate. "Come on over and get friendly. I'll give you a ride around the block if you like."

The witch froze. "I don't want a ride around the block," she announced. "I'm getting out of here."

She swooped across the hall and returned with the cat and dog under her arm. She set her satchel and broomstick down.

"I'm leaving, baggage and broomstick," sniffed Miss Terioso. "Oh, yes, I must take my window dummy, too."

"Not me," said Trina.

The witch goggled at the red-headed wax dummy.

"Did you speak?" she demanded.

"Of course. What's the matter with your ears, outside of their looks?" Trina replied.

"Something is very much wrong here," the witch declared.

"I've been trying to tell you," I said. I explained briefly.

Miss Terioso nodded.

"Nevertheless, the window dummy is mine. It's my poppet, and I shall pop off with it."

"Go fly your broomstick," shrilled Trina the mermaid. "And don't call me a dummy, you Halloween hag!"

"She's right," said Margate, from the centaur's body. "You have no claim on a soul. You'd better go now."

"You dare to order me out of your house?" screamed the witch.

"I dare to throw you out," said Margate.

Miss Terioso made for the door, hastily. She mounted her broomstick and turned.

"Very well," she sniffed. "Good riddance to all of you. And as for you, Julius Margate, you're just a—oh, go look in a rear-view mirror and see what you are!"

The door banged shut behind her.

THERE was an ominous silence. I felt the danger of that silence. I knew my peculiar friends. They were bad enough to handle in their own weird bodies. But now that those bodies were all mixed up, I'd better do something in a hurry.

"You must be hungry after such an ordeal," I said. "Let's all go out to the kitchen and I'll whip up a snack to eat." We did.

They ate ravenously. The sight of a mermaid eating oats and a centaur smoking a cigar rather spoiled my own appetite. And the clumsiness of all of them in their new forms did something to general table manners. But hunger ruled for a while. Then they finished, and gloom reigned. “This is a fine mess,” sighed Gerymanx. “What do we do now? Usually after a meal I go out for a brisk trot around the stable and grounds. But now I’m a mermaid. I can’t even canter.”

“I’d like to go out and have the birds perch on my limbs,” sighed Myrtle. “But I can’t, in this man’s body. It’s so difficult. I doubt if I can even get a robin to build a nest in my hair.”

“Don’t you dare put bird-nests in my hair,” yelled Margate, from the centaur’s body.

“Your hair?”

“That body you’re wearing still belongs to me,” Margate insisted. “I expect you to take good care of it.”

“What about me?” asked Jory, disconsolately. “I’d like to howl in the sunshine at dawn. But in a vampire’s body I’ll have to sleep all day in a musty old coffin.”

“That’s nothing,” responded Mr. Simpkins the vampire. “Just look at me in this wolf’s form! I’m afraid I’m going to shed all over the place. And I can’t seem to get the knack of changing back into a man! You’ll have to give me some lessons soon, Jory.”

“Your troubles are mild,” insisted Julius Margate. “How can I go out in polite society in a centaur’s body? It’s enough to give anybody a fright.”

Trina pouted at me from the window dummy’s body.

“Can I take a swim in the pool?” she whispered.

“No. Your wax will spoil,” I told her sadly.

“We’ve got to settle this problem somehow,” said Julius Margate. “Wonder if we could call up that demon again and make him put us in the right bodies?”

“Not without selling somebody’s soul,” I told my employer. “I’ve made the only trade I could, and from now on, souls are the articles of exchange.

And I won't sell my soul, I'll tell you that!"

Margate shook his head.

"We'll have to figure it out," he declared. "It can't go on like this forever. It isn't natural for a werewolf to be a vampire, and a centaur to be a mermaid. "It isn't natural for a mermaid to be a window dummy either," said my redheaded companion. "I'm dying to be tearing a herring."

Her words smote my heart.

"I'll think of something, folks," I promised. "Tomorrow night, when Mr. Jory wakes up at sundown in Mr. Simpkins' body, we can get together again and figure something out. Right now we all need sleep after this excitement."

So, yawning at dawning, we went to bed.

I fell asleep as soon as my head hit the pillow. But I didn't dream.

The way things were going, I was having my nightmares when I was wide awake.

6. A Slightly Cracked Beldame

"WE'VE got to do something, right now!" insisted Julius Margate, over the supper table.

The heads of his bedraggled companions nodded in eager assent.

"I'm sick of sleeping in a coffin," said Jory the werewolf. "I want to go back to my dog kennel." He shot a malicious glance at Mr. Simpkins in his wolf's body.

Simpkins wagged his tail. "What about me?" he complained. "I turned into a man in the daylight but when the sun set tonight I became a wolf again. And I don't like it. I think I'm getting the mange." Gerymanx the centaur, in his mermaid form, propped both elbows on the table and sighed. "Being a mermaid is no fun, either," he declared. "I can't go near that swimming pool unless I get a pair of water wings.

"Imagine a mermaid who doesn't know how to swim!"

He started to expand on the theme, then turned in shocked surprise to survey the body of Julius Margate. Julius Margate's human body rose and began to divest itself of clothing.

"What goes on here?" I asked, in a startled voice.

"Oh," said Myrtle the hamadryad, from within Margate's body. "I'm just pruning off these clothes, that's all. I can't stand the pressure on my limbs."

"Please, for the sake of decency," I protested. "Wait a while. I'll find a way to restore you all to your proper shapes."

"Hurry, darling." It was the voice of Trina in my ear. The wax dummy leaned dose. "I do so want to kiss you," said the girl, wistfully. "But every time I try it, my head falls off."

"Yes, hurry up," yelled Julius Margate, from the body of Gerymanx the centaur. "I'm afraid to visit the barber shop to get my tail clipped."

"Too bad," I sympathized.

"And that's not all," sighed Margate. "I wish you'd go and steal the witch's broom and use it to sweep out the stable."

"There's an idea!" cried Trina.

"What?"

"Why don't you go and visit the witch tomorrow? Persuade *her* to hold another Black Mass."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, she has some kind of a due-bill on hell, hasn't she? She can get the demon to switch us back into our regular bodies. Then we can be self-respecting mermaids and vampires and werewolves again."

"Brilliant!" said Julius Margate.

"But the witch is mad at us," I objected. "Then you must soften her up," Margate told me. "Make love to her, or something."

"Make love to a witch? A dizzy old spinster like her?"

"She's not so bad," Margate lied.

"She's not exactly a spring chicken, either," I answered. "She's more like a vulture."

"It's the only way out," Margate snapped. "You'll have to do it. You can't let us down this way."

I sighed and nodded.

Trina nibbled my ear with waxen lips. "Just remember," she whispered. "Make love to her, but no funny stuff. I get jealous so easily. Why it makes my wax melt to think of you in her arms."

"It makes my blood freeze to think of that," I replied.

"Even if you have ice-cubes in your veins, you must go through with it," implored Julius Margate. "Tomorrow you woo the witch."

And so it was decided.

NEXT afternoon, after getting directions from Julius Margate, I left the mansion on the hill and set out along a winding path through the woods to the house of Miss Terioso.

Carrying a basket on my arm, I approached the cottage feeling like Little Red Riding Hood on her way to Grandma's house.

Miss Terioso's cottage looked something like Grandma's house at that—except for the red and green smoke that poured from the crumbling stone chimney as I walked up the path.

The smoke assumed ghastly, billowing shapes, and I averted my eyes. I preferred to read the signs on the cottage lawn.

"MISS TERIOSO—BLACK, WHITE, & ALL COLORS OF MAGIC"
"LOVE PHILTRES. FORTUNES TOLD. PSYCHO-ANALYSIS"
"UNFAMILIAR SPIRITS KEEP OUT"

I knocked on the door, letting my trembling wrist provide the leverage.

Miss Terioso stuck her head out. "We don't want any," she said. "Oh, it's you, young sir. Step in, won't you?"

I would, and did.

There was a bearskin rug in the hallway. As I put my foot on it, it grunted horribly, and the gigantic head rose with gnashing teeth.

“Down, Bruno!” commanded the witch. The rug subsided, and regarded me through malevolent glass eyes.

I stood in the witch’s cottage, glancing around at the ancient furniture—1890 vintage, and typical of an old maid’s home.

Miss Terioso resumed her. seat by the fire and took up her knitting. She was silent, absorbed.

I looked at the placards on the walls. There was a Charter Membership in Local Coven Number 9, and a neatly embroidered motto, decorated with mandrake roots, reading “A *Fiend in Need Is a Fiend Indeed.”*

Then I broke the silence.

“What are you knitting?” I inquired.

“Oh, just a shroud,” said Miss Terioso, brightly.

I coughed. “I’ve brought you a little present,” I coaxed.

Her eyes brightened. I handed her the basket. She opened the cover.

“What is it?” she asked.

“Just a little wax fruit.”

“Wax fruit?”

“To melt down into poppets,” I explained.

Miss Terioso favored me with a warm smile.

“How kind of you,” she gushed.

I turned on the charm. “I was so delighted to see you the other evening,” I said, sitting down. “I admired you greatly.”

“You *did?”* She positively simpered. “Yes. I said to myself, now there’s a girl with real high spirits about her,’ that’s what I said.”

“Flatterer! I usually consort with low spirits,” Miss Terioso gurgled.

“I was wondering if you’d care to have a date with me,” I ventured. “How about going out tonight?”

“Why, there’s no Sabbat tonight.”

“I wasn’t thinking of a Sabbat,” I answered. “Just a little stepping. You know, hitting a few high spots.”

“You really want to?” beamed the witch. “Definitely.”

She blushed. “Very well. But first I must go to the beauty parlor. I’ll drop you off at home on the way and then pick you up afterwards when we go out.”

Miss Terioso rose and bustled over to her broomstick.

I gulped.

“We’re not going to ride that thing, are we?” I asked.

“We must,” she declared. “Haven’t you heard about gas rationing?”

Trembling, I mounted the broomstick behind her. She opened the cottage door, muttered a few words under her breath, and we were off in the twilight.

7. Tree’s a Crowd

I DON’T know whether or not you’ve ever ridden a broomstick, but it’s not an experience one is likely to forget. I don’t like to think about that soaring sweep through dusk-driven skies. All I can say is that for my money, the broomstick will never replace the horse.

When I was finally dropped off—literally—at my destination—Miss Terioso waved farewell and called that she would come back from the beauty parlor and pick me up again.

For several minutes I wondered if she would have to pick me up, actually, before I’d be able to stir. But after a time I groaned, stood up, and hobbled into the house.

The gang bombarded me with questions.

“Did you see her?”

“What did she say?”

“Did you make a date?”

I answered definitely. “I’m taking Miss Terioso out to dine and dance this evening,” I announced. “Margate, I’m borrowing one of your tuxedoes. And about $30 in cash.”

Trina walked up to me, her wax arms swinging in agitation.

"I'm jealous," she confessed. "Take me with you as a chaperone."

"Impossible," I sighed.

"Then I'll go alone, with Myrtle in Margate's body," she declared. "I don't trust you with that baleful hag."

"I'll hitch up the station-wagon," Margate chimed in. "Then I'll harness myself to it and pull the rest of you into town."

I protested.

"Do you want to spoil everything? You'll make a terrible scene in human society! Leave everything to me," I argued.

"But—"

There was a thump from upstairs.

Miss Terioso had made a three-point landing on the roof.

"Get out of sight," I commanded. "Don't let her see you and arouse her anger. I'll skip upstairs and change and crawl out the skylight to join her. Now all of you stay here and behave. I'll have you back in your bodies before morning."

They scattered, and I scampered.

Five minutes later I joined Miss Terioso on the roof.

I stared at the vision in the starlight.

For Miss Terioso was changed. The magic of the beauty parlor had wrought a startling transformation.

This was no old crone who awaited me, but a radiantly lovely woman—a vivid brunette with lips as red as love's own fire, Tier eyes sparkled and she smiled with pleasure as she noted my reaction.

"Life in the old gal yet, eh?" she said. Her voice was low, husky.

I said nothing, but mounted the broomstick and put my arms around her. Her nearness was intoxicating.

We sailed up toward the stars. Her hair streamed in the wind, mingling with the moonlight.

I enjoyed the ride.

All incongruity was forgotten. By the time we landed on a fire-escape and clambered down to reach a night-club entrance, we were chatting merrily.

We swept into the lobby of the club and Miss Terioso checked her broomstick in the cloakroom.

A waiter led us across the dance-floor to a table.

“Champagne,” I ordered.

I didn’t need it. I was intoxicated, as I say, by her presence. But revolving drunkenly in the back of my brain was the consciousness of my purpose.

Soon I would artfully wheedle and cajole her into changing my friends back. But the evening was young now, and I could enjoy myself first. Enjoy her company. Gaze into those burning black eyes. Hold her flowery-fragrant fingers.

We lifted our glasses.

“Here’s to you,” murmured Miss Terioso.

“Here’s to—us,” I corrected.

“Yes,” she sighed.

We drank.

After that I tried to sit on her lap.

Now, thinking back, I know what must have happened. Miss Terioso was an old hand at the game.

She’d probably anticipated this, the old she-wolf, and slipped a love philtre into my drink.

But the effects were startling.

All at once I knew that I was madly in love with Miss Terioso. The thought of my friends, the thought of Trina—all was forgotten.

SHE gave me a demure glance and I held her hand and stared into her inscrutable eyes and I leaned forward over the table, and then I got hit in the head with a human leg.

Yes, a human leg sailed through the air and hit me on the back of the head!

That’s one way to sober a fellow up.

I turned quickly and stared.

Lying on the floor was a leg. With a shock, I recognized it. Trina’s leg, from the window dummy!

Employing my knowledge of trajectory, I wheeled around and stared at a table across the way.

Sure enough, Trina had made good her threat! She sat at another table with Myrtle in Margate’s body.

I collected my scattered wits hastily. Then, bending down, I collected the scattered leg, rose politely, mumbled an excuse to Miss Terioso, and stalked over to the table carrying the wax leg.

“Pardon me, madam, but I think you’ve lost something,” I said, for the benefit of eavesdroppers. Trina accepted the leg, bent down, fastened it on again, and winked.

“What the hell’s the big idea?” I whispered, furiously. “I thought I told you to stay home.”

“We’re going to keep an eye on you,” Trina answered. “After getting an eyeful of that glamorous hag, I don’t trust you any further than I can throw my limbs.”

“We’re all here,” added Myrtle, from Margate’s body.

“No!”

But as I glanced around, I saw Mr. Simpkins and Jory at another table, in each other’s bodies. Jory’s body had resumed human shape.

“Margate and Gerymanx are outside, in the centaur’s and mermaid’s bodies,” Myrtle added. “They came in the wagon.”

“I hope to heaven they stay there,” I sighed. “What if the customers saw those monsters?”

It was a hideous thought. As things were, the situation was bad enough. No sooner had I uttered the words than I caught a snatch of conversation between Myrtle and a stranger at the adjoining table.

Myrtle, in Margate’s body, had probably been drinking. The stranger certainly had. His little bloodshot eyes revolved woozily as he mumbled.

"Pardon me, sir," he hiccuped. "But that lady at th' table wish' you—has she got wooden leg, huh?"

"Sure," answered Myrtle, gaily.

"Mos' unusual," said the drunk.

"What's unusual about that?" demanded Myrtle, suddenly argumentative. "Why shouldn't she have a wooden leg? Me, I'm *all* w-ood!"

Under the influence of liquor, Myrtle forgot she was in Margate, and thought of herself as still being a hamadryad in a tree. But the drunken stranger didn't know this. He peered incredulously.

"You're all wood?" he echoed.

"Of course," said Myrtle. "Do you want to examine my trunk?"

"You're crazy!" sneered the drunk, wobbling to his feet.

"I am not," said Myrtle. "I can prove that I'm a tree. Why, I even have termites!"

"I wouldn't brag about it, sir."

"Say, who are you calling 'sir' ?" shrilled Myrtle. "I'll have you know I'm a lady! A hamadryad."

The drunk stared at Julius Margate's body.

"I wouldn't admit such a thing," he declared, passionately.

"What's wrong with that?" Myrtle flung back. "Some of my best friends are hamadryads! And if you don't stop annoying me—I'll have my girl friend throw her head at you!"

The drunk drew back in panic.

Mr. Simpkins, in Jory's body, stalked Over to the scene and quickly led Myrtle away in time to prevent mayhem.

Jory, in Mr. Simpkin's body, quietly left the room.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Miss Terioso advancing on me. I kicked Trina's Waxen shin.

"Keep quiet from now on," I ordered. "Nearly had a riot as it is. Now I'll steer Miss Terioso away from here before she recognizes you."

I turned, bowed to the advancing witch.

"Let's dance," I suggested.

I danced with the witch on the nightclub floor, while my window dummy sweetheart regarded me with a smouldering light in her lovely glass eyes.

8. One Man's Meat Is Another's Man's Corpse

FORTUNATELY, I was dancing and didn't see the scene in the outer bar. But I heard about it later—plenty.

Mr. Simpkins, in Jory's body, had retired to the bar for a quiet and meditative drink.

"What'll it be?" asked the bartender.

"Got any bl—give me Scotch," said Mr. Simpkins, quickly erasing his original thought.

The Scotch arrived. Simpkins paid for it with a $20 bill.

The sight of the greenback fluttering in the breeze acted as an unwitting signal to a tall blonde draped over the end of the bar. She uncoiled herself and advanced sinuously on Mr. Simpkins.

"You look sad, Mister," she observed. "Are you lonesome?"

This remarkable technique overpowered Mr. Simpkins quite completely. He was pretty unworldly, being a supernatural entity.

"I am sad," he sighed.

"Tell Olga what the matter is," coaxed the blonde, summoning the bartender and ordering a Silver Fizz. "Why are you sad?"

"Well," breathed Mr. Simpkins, "I used to be a vampire, but I'm not any more."

Olga blinked. This stranger was pretty drunk.

"You know how it is," he mournfully observed. "I'm hungry for blood. Now all I get is dog biscuits."

"Say," said Olga, perturbed. "Who do you think you're kidding? That's a funny line for a guy to hand out to a girl. You look like a wolf to me."

This was definitely the wrong thing to say.

"I am a wolf," muttered Mr. Simpkins.

“What do you mean, you’re a wolf?” laughed Olga, back on familiar territory again. “You’ve got to show me, brother!”

Mr. Simpkins, naive soul, sighed.

“Right here?” he asked.

“Sure. Why not?”

“All right,” said Mr. Simpkins. “I’ll show you.”

He descended from his bar stool and crouched on the floor. He threw his head back and began to whimper. Suddenly his body seemed to quiver. A plastic horripilation coursed through his frame. His forehead melted to a slant. His nose lengthened. His arms and legs furred.

Mr. Simpkins turned into a werewolf on the barroom floor.

Olga saw and was convinced. She was so convinced she began to scream.

About that time, Miss Terioso and I were dancing near the doorway. Miss Terioso heard the scream and turned her head.

She looked out.

Her gaze was not attracted by Mr. Simpkins, but by Jory. He stood at the checking counter, and he was grabbing Miss Terioso’s broom.

“Come on,” gasped my dancing-partner, running off the floor.

“Where are you going with my broomstick?” she yelled at the fleeing Jory.

“I’m just borrowing it to use outside,” he called. “Don’t forget, Margate is in Gerymanx’s body out there.”

“Come back here,” yelled the witch, leaping after him.

Hell broke loose with a vengeance.

Miss Terioso clawed at Jory. She beat the poor man over the head with her broomstick, uttering shrill imprecations.

A flying form launched past me as I wavered in the doorway.

It was Trina, in the window dummy’s body. She hurled herself on Miss Terioso, valiantly coming to Jory’s aid.

Miss Terioso turned.

Before I could intervene, she grappled with the red-headed dummy. Before the eyes of the shrieking spectators, she tore the window dummy apart, literally limb from limb.

A torso, a head, and pairs of arms and legs fell to the floor.

Behind me came another scream. I turned in time to see Myrtle, in Margate's body, exchanging wild blows with the drunk from the next table.

"Good God, what next?" I gasped.

I started toward the howling wolf on the floor. Then something thundered past me from the outer door.

Margate, in the body of the centaur, charged into the night-club lobby. Squirming in his arms was the mermaid—Gerymanx. Stamping his hoofs, the terrible apparition, bearing its hideous burden, roared down the bar.

"What is all this?" boomed Margate, flicking his tail and neighing wildly.

Arms encircled me. I turned to face Miss Terioso, brandishing her broomstick.

"Let's get out of here, eh?" she panted. "Get on the broomstick before it's too late."

I mounted in a daze.

The howling wolf, the prancing centaur, the fighting man, and the dismembered body of the window dummy blocked our path. We sailed over them all.

Sailed over them—and into the arms of the police!

9. A Judge Loses His Judgment

JUDGE NUMBOTTOM heard the story.

First he heard it from the drunk who insulted Myrtle. Then he heard it from Olga the come-on girl. After that he got a few stumbling sentences out of me.

Finally he listened to Patrolman Lossowitz as he explained the whole thing, from ghastly beginning to untimely end.

“So she says she’s a tree, Your Honor,” mumbled Lossowitz, unemotionally. “Meanwhile out in the bar this guy is telling Olga he used to be a vampire but now he’s a werewolf. And he turns into a wolf.

“Meanwhile the witch tears this other woman to bits, and then the centaur and the mermaid run in, and the witch tries to beat it on a broomstick with this guy here.” Lossowitz pointed to me.

Judge Numbottom pointed to Lossowitz. His face was purple and he could hardly speak. The veins bulged on his bald forehead.

“Stop that kind of talk,” he gasped, weakly. “After all, this is a night court, not a bedtime story session. I’m a grown man, Lossowitz, am I not?”

“Yes, Your Honor,”, said Lossowitz, meekly.

“Yes, what?”

“Yes, you’re not,” Lossowitz declared, uncertainly.

“Shut up! You can’t think straight or talk straight! Admit you were drinking in this night club!”

“No, Your Honor. Not a drop.”

“You don’t drink drops, I realize that. Probably a bottle,” decided tire terrible old man. “But drunk or sober, you couldn’t see such things. Bring in the prisoners, Lossowitz, and let me question them myself.”

Obediently, Patrolman Lossowitz marched out and returned with Myrtle, Trina, Margate, Gerymanx, Jory, and Mr. Simpkins in tow. Miss Terioso marched before them, indignantly waving her broomstick.

Judge Numbottom took one look at the man, the centaur, the window dummy, the mermaid, the second man, and the wolf. Then he hid his face in his hands.

“No, no!” he murmured. “Cover them up. Lossowitz! Get blankets and at least cover some of them up. That horse-thing and that human fish, anyway!”

It was a matter of minutes before Judge Numbottom raised his haggard face. He winced as he stared at the motley assemblage. Finally his eyes lighted on Miss Terioso as the most attractive and normallooking prisoner.

“Will you please step forward and answer a few questions,” he said, controlling his voice.

Miss Terioso advanced.

“Your name?”

“Miss Terioso.”

“Your—your occupation?”

“Oh,” she replied lightly. Tm just a witch.”

Judge Numbottom began to turn purple again. “I beg your pardon,” he rasped. “I must have misunderstood you.”

“I’m just a witch, Your Honor,” she said. “I ride broomsticks.”

“Go on,” sighed the Judge. “You nauseate me strangely.”

“Well, it all started when these people turned into statues,” said Miss Terioso.

“Statues?”

“Yes. Marble. Stone, you know. They’re all statues, really.”

“Looks like a statue-tory offense,” put in Lossowitz, unhelpfully.

“I don’t understand,” sighed the Judge.

“This man can confirm my story,” said Miss Terioso, pointing her broomstick at me.

“That’s right,” I answered. “These people were once statues, in my charge. But as you see, they’ve undergone a change, Your Honor. That’s simple enough. I haven’t got all my marble statues any more.”

“You haven’t *got* all your marbles any more, you mean!” snarled Judge Numbottom. “Step down, you two. You’re driving me crazy!”

Margate, in Gerymanx’s body, sidled forward.

“Let me help you,” he suggested. “I owned these people before they were statues.”

JUDGE NUMBOTTOM looked at the horse’s body protruding from under the blanket. He favored Margate with a long, painful scrutiny.

“Who and what are you?” he whispered.

“I’m a centaur.”

Lossowitz interfered again. “The guy is lying, Your Honor!” he bawled, excitedly. “He ain’t no centaur. I seen lots of centaurs when I was in Washington!”

“Shut up!” thundered the Judge. “Let me speak to the others.”

He addressed the mermaid in the centaur’s arms.

“What about you, young lady?” he asked, forcing a smile, “What is the reason for your—ah—piscatorial disguise?”

“Who are you calling a lady?” snarled the voice of Gerymanx from the mermaid’s body. “And what kind of a fishy remark are you making about me being piscatorial?”

Judge Numbottom was sorry he started the whole thing.

“Can’t any of you talk sense?” he begged.

“Let me help you,” said Jory, from Mr. Simpkins’ body. “It’s very simple. You see, I used to be in that body over there.”

He pointed at the wolf form now worn by Mr. Simpkins.

“You were in the body of that animal?” Judge Numbottom’s eyes started from their sockets.

“Why not?” piped the wolf.

“A talking wolf?” moaned the Judge.

“Well, if it disturbs you so much,” sniffed the wolf. He bent forward and began to go through contortions. It was a fascinating if repulsive spectacle. Slowly, the wolf turned into a man.

“You see?” he asked.

“I don’t want to see!” groaned Judge Numbottom.

“Then look at her!” suggested Lossowitz, pointing at Trina in the body of the red-headed window dummy.

The window dummy was red-headed no longer. With a clatter, the dummy’s head dropped to the floor.

“So sorry,” said Trina. “Looking at a sight like that wolf is enough to make anyone lose their head.”

She stooped and picked up her head slowly.

Judge Numbottom’s eyes were almost resting on his cheekbones.

“It’s sorcery,” he sobbed. “Sheer black sorcery! And how can I press a sorcery charge at election time?”

I stepped up.

“Listen, Your Honor,” I whispered. “I think I have a way to straighten this matter out. Never mind getting the story straight. I know a way to restore these people to their rightful forms. Then we can forget the whole thing.”

“How?” gasped the Judge.

Briefly, I told him about Miss Terioso holding a due bill on hell. She could evoke a demon and order him to restore my friends to their rightful shapes.

“Incredible,” objected the Judge.

“No more incredible than what you’ve seen here,” I reminded him.

“Why doesn’t she do it, then?” he asked.

“She’s stubborn. I suggest that you force her to do it.”

“How?”

“Issue a court order commanding her to evoke the demon and make the change.”

The Judge sat up.

His eyes flashed fire. “I’ll damned well issue the order,” he snapped. “If not, I’ll have the lot of you jailed for the rest of your unnatural lives.”

10. Marbles Never Cease

“HAVE you got your due-bill on hell ready?” I whispered nervously, crouching next to Miss Terioso in the darkened courtroom.

“It’s right here in my satchel,” replied the witch. During the past hour her glamor had fallen away, and she was once again the familiar crone-like figure, as she puttered around making passes in the air.

Judge Numbottom had ejected the drunk, the come-on girl, and Patrolman Lossowitz from the chamber, leaving us in privacy.

A bailiff had been dispatched to secure the ingredients Miss Terioso required for the ceremony of the ritual, and now she went through the parody of the Black Mass and the moment for evoking the demon neared.

My fine finned and furry friends moved restlessly to and fro as her voice rose in awesome crescendo.

The climax came.

Amidst a shaking of walls and a rumbling of far-off vortices between the stars, the red demon slithered into tri-dimensional being in the center of Judge Numbottom's court.

A gasp rose from the assemblage.

"To think of me, acting as an accessory in this black magic," hissed Judge Numbottom morosely. "Oh, Lord—what's that?"

He saw the demon.

So did my friends.

The demon stretched a rubbery red neck and blinked with nyctaloptic eyes.

"It's you again," he growled, squatting near me.

I shrugged. "Not at all. This lady called you."

I indicated Miss Terioso, who nodded. The witch swept commandingly before the creature of darkness.

In low tones she conversed with the entity.

"You want me to switch them?" the demon asked.

"Yes."

"And you have a paper entitling you to—ah—services?"

"Here it is."

Miss Terioso fluttered a piece of paper.

"Very well," sighed the demon. "Here goes."

He paused. "I shall have to freeze them into marble again before I unscramble their psyches," he said.

"Very well."

"Don't worry," I told Trina, moving close to her. "It will just be a minute."

That is all it took, and I was glad.

For my very spine shook at the violence of the psychic force that concentrated itself in the room.

Gazing through the phosphorescence of the chalk lines, I saw a horribly unnatural transformation. Men, mermaid, centaur, and wolf, turned to gleaming white stone. They froze in marble attitudes on the floor.

"So," breathed the demon. He was sweating horribly, as sparks rising from his body attested.

"Now for the second step," he muttered. "But give me the due bill first."

His voice addressed the witch. But his eyes couldn't reach her.

It was I who finally located Miss Terioso in the darkness. She stood by the window, the open window, and she was already bestriding the broomstick.

"She's not going through with the deal!" I yelled. "She's double-crossing us and making a getaway!"

It was true.

The demon realized it instantly.

"Come back!" he shouted.

"Farewell!" called the witch.

She rose in midair.

The demon, like a gigantic rubber ball, bounded after her.

He soared, with dynamic propulsion, through the window.

I rushed over to the ledge and peered outside.

Hovering in midair, witch and demon clawed wildly in writhing tangle of arms and legs. She was trying to hold on to the piece of paper. He enfolded her in his red arms, hissing.

The broomstick wobbled violently.

SUDDENLY came a cataclysmic crash of thunder, a burst of eye-ball searing luminance, and then—nothing.

Witch and demon were gone.

The charred handle of a broomstick fell to clatter in the courtyard below.

It was over. I turned wearily to face the marble statues of what were once my friends.

Now they were statues again, statues forevermore.

“Trina,” I whispered.

A lifeless window dummy stared at me with glassy eyes. Arms were still outstretched in entreaty, but their embrace was cold.

Judge Numbottom switched on the lights.

He rubbed his eyes.

“It is the order of this court,” he whispered, “that these statues be confiscated. Immediately. And taken out of sight. Not a word of this must get out. You understand?”

I nodded.

“Julius Margate’s house will be put up for sale under court order,” he added.

“The window dummy?” I whispered.

“Will await claim by rightful owners,” he told me. “Sorry, my friend. You’d better go now.”

I went. What else could I do?

And so it ended. I left Margate, his friends, and his house. And now I try to forget.

Of course, I still see the window dummy every day.

That’s all I have left, you know. All I have to prove that it really happened.

So I see the window dummy every day. And you can come and see her yourself if you like.

She’s the third one from the left—in our biggest department store window.

A Horse On Lefty Feep

When the hour for unmasking came, a ghastly thing happened—for none could say which was the mask and which the real thing

WHEN I sat down in Jack's Shack the restaurant was almost empty. The breakfast crowd was gone and the luncheon crowd hadn't arrived. Jack took my order and I sat back to wait.

Over in one corner a waiter sat at a bare table with a child, evidently his small son. He was apparently doing his best to teach the boy a few professional secrets. At any rate, Jack's waiter was reciting the alphabet to him. I listened.

"A is Appetite, you come here to feed it; "B's for Bicarbonate—when you eat here you need it; "C's for Convulsions—"

I stopped listening and whirled around. Somebody had tapped me on the shoulder.

I blinked, shuddered.

"Lefty Feep!" I gasped.

Lefty Feep was something to shudder at, particularly in the morning. His face was as pale and weak as a cup of Jack's coffee. The circles under his eyes resembled doughnuts.

To make it worse, Feep's suit was ripped to shreds. It had once been very loud, but in its present state it was only a whisper.

Feep stumbled into a chair and slumped across the table.

I struggled to conceal my surprise.

"Good morning," I said.

Feep's eyes popped.

"That's what it is!" he muttered. "I suspect it all along. No wonder everything is so faint and quaint. It's *morning!"*

"Of course it's morning," I told him. "That big yellow thing you see up in the sky is called the sun. And those people running around on the street are going to work."

"Sky!" groaned Feep. "Work!"

"Cheer up, Lefty," I said. "You're old enough to know about such things, I think."

He moaned his order to the waiter and sat back. From time to time he examined his tattered clothing and shook his head.

"What happened to you?" I inquired. "You look as though you've been kicked in the face by a horse."

"Horse?" screamed Lefty Feep. "Who tells you about a horse?"

"Nobody," I answered. "Just a figure of speech, that's all." I forced a chuckle. "As a matter of fact, I'd merely imagine you were returning home from an all-night party."

"Party?" Again Feep shrieked. "Who is the smarty who spills about this party?"

"I'm only guessing."

"Your guessing is most distressing," sighed Lefty Feep. "As a matter of fact, I am very coarse with a horse recently, and that is responsible for my present fickle, ickle fate."

His eyes began to light up. I knew the sign, so I began to get up.

"Let me spill you a few beans about this recent and indecent affair," he urged.

"Sorry, Lefty—I've got a quick date down the street."

"Never mind about your hasty girl friends," grunted Lefty Feep, hauling me back into my chair. "Last night I experience the strangest thing that ever happens to me."

“What did you do—start telling the truth?” I muttered. But he didn’t hear me.

“Yes,” said Feep, grabbing me firmly by the shoulders, “what happens to me is so unusual that the queerness of it makes it positively extraordinary, to say nothing of being remarkably different.”

“Something screwy?”

“The very word!” snapped Feep. “I wish I have your education so I can express myself.”

“I would like to express you—to Alaska,” I whispered. Once again Feep didn’t hear me. He was coiling and uncoiling his tongue.

“Listen to this and see how it strikes you,” he said.

I listened. He struck me right between the eyes with a verbal barrage.

* * *

YESTERDAY afternoon I am marching my arches down the drag getting ready to run into a tavern. Instead I run into Dime-Mouth McCarthy.

I think I mention this personality to you before. Dime-Mouth McCarthy is a very scholarly type of jerk, and a great reader. In fact he once reads meters for the gas company.

“Greetings!” I remark.

“Well, if it ain’t my old pal Lefty Feep! How are youse?” asks my scholarly friend. “Youse coitenly look in the pink.”

“You are mistaken,” I tell him. “There is nothing in the pink about me except my tooth-brush. I personally am in the red.”

“I am extremely murderfied to hear this,” says Dime-Mouth. “Because I figure I can perhaps negoat-she-ate a modest loan from youse. Let us say ten dollars.”

“Let us say nuts to that idea,” I suggest. “But just for the sake of argument, why do you need ten dollars? I figure canned heat only costs you a quarter.”

Dime-Mouth McCarthy gives me the old wink and blink and waves his mittens in the ozone.

"What is the matter with youse?" he inquires. "Don't youse remember that tonight is the night for the big fancy dress ball?"

"Fancy dress ball?"

"Coitenly. The big masquerade brawl for the Anti-Amusement League."

All at once I do recall. Tonight is the big evening. Once a year everybody puts on a costume and heads for the headquarters of the Anti-Amusement League.

The Anti-Amusement League is a sort of club we have in the neighborhood. It gets its name from the fact that all the members are pledged not to indulge in any amusements—such as opium smuggling, counterfeiting, bankrobbing, or plain and fancy homicide.

Of course there is no harm in such business operations as gambling or drinking, so the members have a pretty good time after all. Everybody belongs—Gorilla Gabface, down at the pool hall, and Subconscious Sigmund the psychiatrist, and all the rest of the gang.

As a matter of fact, I am anxious to go to this massacre myself, and make a date with a ginch for that purpose, only it slips my mind.

So I am very rejoiceful when Dime-Mouth McCarthy mentions this item.

"But why do you need ten guilders?" I ask him.

"To rent a costume. Everybody must come there in a disguise, see?"

"And just where do you figure on renting a costume?"

"Why, at Out-Of-Business Oscar's," he tells me. "Out-Of-Business Oscar is the only fink in the neighborhood with costumes to rent. I am on my merry way down to his hockshop now, only I do not have any laughing lettuce with which to pay for no outfit, understand?"

"Well, maybe I can help you out," I decide. "Only not ten guilders worth, I'm afraid. Now that I come to think of it, I need a costume for tonight myself."

"It's getting late," says Dime-Mouth McCarthy. *"Tempus phooey,* as the old saying goes. We better hurry if we want to drape our shapes. Youse can come along with me right now."

SO WE scramble and amble down the pavement until we come to Out-Of-Business Oscar's pawn shop, which he recently redecorates very fancy and now runs under a classy reading:

YE OLDE HOCK SHOPPE

We march in and Out-Of-Business Oscar extends his chin in a grin.

"Well, if it isn't Lefty Feep!" he yaps. "And that notorious bum and moocher, Dime-Mouth McCarthy." Dime-Mouth gives him a dirty look. "Kindly do not refer to me as notorious," he says. "That is an insult."

"My apologies," says Oscar. "And what can I do for you?"

"Drop dead," says Dime-Mouth.

But I ignore this tiny talk and proceed to go stepping up to the counter.

"I am going to a masquerade party tonight," I tell him. "I don't want anybody to recognize me."

"Why don't you go disguised as a gentleman?" Oscar cracks.

"Never mind the sour-chasm," yells Dime-Mouth. "Me and my friend Lefty want a couple of those old Spanish costumes youse hand out."

"I would like to rent you a costume," says Oscar, "but they are just about all gone. Nearly everybody in the neighborhood is going to the Anti-Amusement League masquerade tonight, and they all come in and pick out costumes already. I do not think I have anything left over for you."

"But we can't go without a costume," wails Dime-Mouth, getting very excited in his scholarly fashion. "That would be a discrepancy."

"Well, look over discrepancy if there's anything you want," says Oscar, pointing to a pile of dirty costumes on a table.

We paw around for a while. Dime-Mouth holds up some rags.

"Would youse like to go as Little Bo Peep?" he asks me.

I shake my head and my fist.

"How about a nice suit of armour?"

"Can't wear it," Oscar interrupts. "Priorities."

"Well what do we do?" I inquire. "We both need costumes. And I can only lay out about $3.75 for them." Oscar shrugs. Then he stares at us. "You both need costumes. And all you have is $3.75. Well—I might give *one* costume for the two of you."

"One costume for two of us? How will that work out?"

"Wait and see!"

Oscar dives into the back room. He begins to bang around in there. After a while he comes out, dragging something after him.

"My Gawd, a horse!" yells Dime-Mouth McCarthy.

"A horse costume," Oscar corrects him. "Yes, gentlemen, I have here a really unusual masquerade disguise. This fine trick horse costume. It comes in two sections, as you see—the front legs and head, and the hind legs and . . . associated regions. One of you wears the front half, the other wears the back half. Put them both together and you have a really lovely horse."

"A Charley horse from stooping over in the thing!" I yell. "No, Oscar, that won't do! I don't want to be a horse."

"But you have no choice," Oscar reminds me. "If you want to go to this masquerade ball you'll have to be a horse and like it."

"I may be a horse but I won't like it," I insist.

"Maybe we better take it, Lefty," says Dime-Mouth. "Why you'll look swell in that horse," Oscar flatters us. "You'll be the sensation of the ball. Probably win a prize."

"What kind of a prize, a bag of oats?"

"Maybe. Because something tell me this horse was made for you. You'll look natural in it, really you will."

WELL, I am a sucker for flattery.

Or maybe I am just a sucker. But anyhow, I put down the money and we walk out of there with the horse costume in two parts.

"Getting late," I mention to Dime-Mouth. "Let's go up to my place and put on the costume. I've got to call for my ginch."

So we go up to my dump and haul out the costume.

“Wait a minute, now,” says Dime-Mouth. “We have a problem to decide.”

“What problem?”

“Well, who is going to be what in this horse?”

I never think of this before, but it is a delicate problem at that.

We stare at the two ends of the horse costume.

“I pay for it,” I remind Dime-Mouth.

“That does not matter,” he tells me. “It is the principle of the thing.”

“There is more air for the guy in back,” I coax. He can stick his head out of the hole in the middle.”

“Well, then youse are the fresh air fiend, so youse be the back end,” Dime-Mouth suggests.

“But I am healthier than you,” I tell him. “You need the air. So I will make a sacrifice and you can be the back end.”

“I will not permit youse to be so generous,” Dime-Mouth assures me. “Youse may be the back end. It is an honor, but youse really deserves it.”

“To hell with that,” I mutter. “We will toss a coin. Or rather, I will.”

“Heads or tails?”

“That’s right. Heads or tails.”

So I pull out a penny and throw it up. It comes down like a dive bomber and lands on the carpet. We look at it with much interest.

“Tails,” whispers Dime-Mouth. “Youse get tails.”

“Yes,” I groan. “I get tails. It’s a horse on me.”

“Well, let us put on our costume,” grins Dime-Mouth. “It is getting late.” So we put on the two ends of the horse. Dime-Mouth has the head over his head, the shoulders over his chest, and the front legs down over his legs. Just like a complete suit. And a piece of the horse’s body sticks out in back, to be joined with my end.

I have the hind legs over my legs, and the tail hanging down my back. My head and arms are inside the body of the horse. But when I want to stand up straight my head and arms stick out of it—so that I am like a horse from the waist down and a man from the waist up.

“Stick your head back in,” Dime-Mouth tells me, “Then we can join together at the middle.”

So we join together. Dime-Mouth looks out of the eye-holes in the horse-head and sees us in the mirror.

“Very nice,” he says. “Very nice. And youse look so very natural, Lefty.”

This burns me up, since I am entirely concealed in my end of the horse.

“Now we must practice walking together,” says Dime-Mouth.

I HAVE eye-holes in the horse’s stomach, but it is awful to walk all bent over, holding on to Dime-Mouth so the horse stays together. The idea of doing this all evening does not appeal to me. And it will not appeal to my date, either. She will feel a little cut off from me.

To make it worse, walking is very difficult. I find it hard to keep in step with Dime-Mouth. We prance around the room, and Dime-Mouth lets out a couple of neighs just to make it look good.

“Phooey!” I mutter. “I can’t do this all night. It’s hot inside here. Besides, I detect that you eat garlic for dinner today.”

“We can break up at the ball,” Dime-Mouth tells me. “Though I know I am going to feel lost without youse.”

“All right,” I grumble. “Come on. I am going to call for my ginch.”

“The ginch, by all means!” agrees Dime-Mouth.

We trot down the stairs and up the street, carrying the costume under our arms—but trotting just for practice. Finally we arrive at the home of this ginch of mine. She is a little item by the name of Josephine, but I call her Ration because she is my sugar.

We arrive at her door-step and I get ready to ring the bell. Then Dime-Mouth taps me on the shoulder.

“Wait a minute,” he whispers. “Why don’t we surprise this tomato of yours? Let us slip into our Hi-Ho Silver outfit and make like a horse. She will be very much amused and confused.”

“Why not?” I shrug. “She will have to get used to it anyway, I suppose.”

So we put on our horse, stand together, and then Dime-Mouth rings the door-bell with his hoof.

Josephine comes to the door and opens it. She stands there blinking at us.

“Why if it isn’t Lefty Feep,” she says.

This burns me up, considering the fact that I am wearing this particular disguise. I do not know how she recognizes me and I do not wish to guess.

“Say, this is splendid,” she giggles. “You couldn’t choose a cuter costume.”

That makes me feel better, because I worry that Josephine will not approve of it. But she seems to be crazy about the idea.

“Just the thing,” she murmurs. “A horse! Because I am coming as Annie Oakley the Queen of the Western Plains—and you can ride me over on your back!”

Sure enough, when she steps out I see she is dressed like a cow-girl. Being bowlegged, she looks quite becoming in the outfit. But when I think of having to carry her around on our backs, it is not so good.

But she insists and we bend down. She climbs on. “Giddyap!” she yells. Also “Whoopee!” And digs her spurs into my ears. We are off.

It is quite a ride. I am very glad the streets are pretty deserted. And I am gladder still when we pull up at the hall where the Anti-Amusement League is holding this masquerade. Because Josephine is quite a load to carry, bouncing around the way she does.

“You boys will win all the prizes,” she tells us, as we go in.

Dime-Mouth and I prance into the ball room and look around.

THE brawl is already under way, and there is a terrific crowd. Dime-Mouth and I separate and stand up to take a look around, each of us wearing our half of the costume.

I spot a number of familiar personalities. For example, there is Gorilla Gabface. He comes over when he sees me and flashes a big smile. “How do you like it?” he asks.

He is wearing a gorilla costume, and a very realistic one.

“Very nice,” I sneer at him. “But why don’t you wear a costume of some kind?”

“But I am—oh, I get it!” he snarls. “You think you are sharp, Lefty. You should talk, in that outfit of yours. You look like a fugitive from a brewery wagon!”

“Hello, Lefty, you’re looking great!” It is Out-of-Business Oscar who interrupts us. He is wearing a long white nightgown and a gold crown. Under his arm he carries a sort of combination seashell and old fashioned victrola horn.

“Who are you and what is that?” I inquire.

“I am King Croesus,” he tells me. “And just to symbolize the fact that I am rich, I carry this Corncupia. The Horn of Plenty.”

He reaches down into it and pulls out a handful of fake money which he scatters on the floor.

This amuses me, because the only way to get Oscar to let go of a dollar is to cut off his hands. The Corncupia looks plenty corny to me.

All at once I spot Subconscious Sigmund. He waves at me and comes over.

“What in the world are you supposed to be?” I gasp.

The psychologist smiles. “I am not anything in the world,” he says. “I am something in my own mind. I represent the Infantile Stage of the Ego. The childish emotional level of the intelligence.”

“You can say that again,” I remark.

Because Subconscious Sigmund is dressed like a baby, in a long bib and a bonnet. He still smokes a cigar, though, and I detect a flask bulging under his diapers.

“By the way,” says Sigmund, “I have a guest with me. A visitor. Gentlemen, meet my distinguished European friend, exiled from Germany—Herr Tonic.”

Herr Tonic comes up and bows. He is a tall, bald-headed baby wearing a big purple robe all embroidered with stars and crescents. In one hand he carries a funny-looking cane, or stick.

"What kind of an outfit is this?" I ask.

"This is a magician's robe," he tells me. "And this, of course, is my magic wand."

"That is cute," pipes up Josephine. "Coming disguised as a magician."

Herr Tonic gives her a scowl and shrugs. But before he can say anything, Gorilla Gabface lurches over.

"Let's throw our toes," he suggests. "The band is getting out of hand."

So Josephine and Gabface dance away.

Subconscious Sigmund pulls me into a corner with this Herr Tonic. Dime-Mouth McCarthy follows.

"Let us have a drink," says Sigmund, waving his flask.

DIME-MOUTH nods politely and then wrenches the flask out of Sigmund's hand.

We spin the bottle.

"Isn't this jolly?" says Herr Tonic, looking around with a smile on his grim puss. "I am pleased to see peoples enjoying themselves, *ja?* And such a pretty costumes!"

Dime-Mouth nods. "Ain't it the truth?" he says. "I always like fun because it is so amusing, particularly if you want to enjoy entertainment."

Herr Tonic looks at Dime-Mouth and I can see he is impressed by his intelligence.

Dime-Mouth is encouraged to start blabbing.

"Youse want to know something?" he says. "When I come in here tonight to this fancy-dress ball, I say to myself, I say, 'Dime-Mouth, doesn't this remind youse of the story of Cinderella?' And it soitenly does."

"Cinderella?" I ask. "What's that?"

He turns to me. "Do youse mean to say youse never heard the story of Cinderella?"

"I don't go to stag parties."

“But this is a fairy story for the brats. It is very famous. Don’t youse ever hear it at your mother’s knee?”

“When I am on my mother’s knee years ago,” I inform him, “I am always facing downwards and I cannot hear anything but the sound of a paddle.”

So Dime-Mouth McCarthy, being educated, tells me the story of Cinderella. He uses a lot of ten-cent words, but translated into English, it runs like this.

Once upon a time there is a little frail by the name of Cinderella who lives all alone in the woods with nobody for company except a step-mother, two step-sisters, and a step-ladder. The other ginches are called step-sisters because they are always out stepping, but Cinderella has to stay home and rattle the Venetian blinds while her old lady and the other tomatoes hit the high spots. One day they get a fancy bid to a brawl at the king’s castle. And off they go, leaving Cinderella parked in the kitchen to manicure potatoes.

She is sitting there crying the mascara out of her eyes because she doesn’t promote an invite to this shindig, when all at once an old bimbo appears and asks why she is making shed with the tears.

Cinderella hands her this hard-luck story and the old wrinkle smiles. She waves her hand and turns into a beautiful chorus girl with wings.

“I am your fairy godmother, Cinderella,” she pipes.

“Don’t hand me that stuff,” says Cinderella, who is no rummy.

“But look at my magic wand,” says the beautiful fairy. “I am going to send you to the party in style. I will wave this wand and you’ll see.”

So she waves the wand, and Cinderella find her slacks are now a lovely evening gown. Another wave of the wand and she has a permanent. A couple of waves fixes her up with a chauffeur and a new car. The fairy almost breaks the wand trying, but finally manages to even produce tires for the car.

Cinderella is off to the brawl.

“Whatever you do, get back here by midnight,” says the fairy. “And take good care of your shoes.”

Because along with the dress, Cinderella is wearing a pair of fancy glass slippers, like goldfish bowls.

Cinderella promises to get back and the fairy disappears. Well, the party is a great success. Cinderella meets up with Prince Charming, the king's son, and gives him the old come-on. Pretty soon they are dancing around, and the step-sisters are left out in the cold—because once Cinderella gets her hooks into a guy, he is sunk.

But she hoists a couple too many and at midnight she is still shagging around the dance-floor. She hears the clock strike and remembers. She runs like hell, and loses a slipper on the way out, but by the time she hits the air and sobers up, her fancy clothes are gone and she is back in slacks.

Meanwhile Prince Charming finds the glass slipper and figuring out that anybody who can afford glass slippers must have a lot of mazuma, he says he will marry the girl—if he can find her. So all the local ginches try on the slipper because if it fits, it proves who the girl at the brawl was. Only it doesn't fit. Finally the Prince's stooges come to Cinderella's dump with the brogan. They blow a shoe-horn and announce tire royal proclamation. So Cinderella's step-mother and step-sisters try the slipper On, and it's no go. Then Cinderella tries it. It fits perfectly, of course.

So the Prince marries Cinderella. And the moral of the whole story seems to be that you'll get your man if you have size 16 feet.

I THINK it is a pretty foolish story, and tell Dime-Mouth just that.

"But it is only a fairy story tale," says Dime-Mouth. "It does not happen, remember. Just a fragment of the imagination, see?"

He takes another drink. So does Sigmund and Herr Tonic—who is lucky he isn't a lobster, because he is pretty boiled.

"Youse don't catch the insignificance of the story, Lefty," Dime-Mouth complains. "It is just a legend, see? And this masquerade reminds me of it. But don't get the idea I fall for such stuff and nonsense."

"Nonsense, you call it?"

It is Herr Tonic who speaks.

We stare at him.

"You dare to call it nonsense? Why I have such a magic wand as you describe right here."

He taps the long cane he is carrying. I smile.

"I know, but you're just wearing a disguise," I tell him.

"What gives you that idea? Sigmund invites me here as his guest. I am not in any costume. This is what I wear when I arrive here from the old country. I am a magician."

"Youse cannot hand us that," says Dime-Mouth. "Youse are not one of these fairy godmothers."

Herr Tonic, what with the liquor he drinks and the rage he is in, now looks as red as a sloe gin fizz, and twice as deadly.

For the first time I realize how tall he is, and how black his eyes are, set in that bald forehead of his. He stands there in his long robe, waving his arms so the embroidered stars and moons glitter like his eyes do.

"So," he mutters. "I am not a fairy godmother, *hein? Aber nicht* a magician? I, the greatest evocator and necromancer of all the covens of the Hartz Mountains?"

Subconscious Sigmund looks worried and grabs Herr Tonic by the sleeve.

"Take it easy," he mumbles. "Please—don't do anything rash."

But Herr Tonic shakes himself loose. He holds up his long cane or stick. For a minute I get a close gander at it and realize it is covered all over with carvings—dragons and skulls and other pleasant things.

"And this is not a magic wand, *ja?"* yells Herr Tonic. "Well, I shall give you a demonstration."

"No—stop!" yells Sigmund.

But it is too late. Herr Tonic backs away and brings his wand up. "Anything can be transformed," he growls. "I can take any one of you and change you. But somehow, I think you are all better just the way you are. If you are *really* that way."

I cannot understand what he means.

Then he waves his wand, and I understand only too well.

Herr Tonic waves his wand, all around the ballroom. All around. And he whispers some words under his gin-soaked breath.

Then there is a scream, rising higher than the clarinet in the band.

Because people change.

Or, rather, they do not change.

They stay just as they are—only *real!*

Gorilla Gabface is the first to notice it. He is dancing with my ginch Josephine just as Herr Tonic waves his wand. All at once he lets go of Josephine and also lets go with a roar.

"Ooooorph!" yells Gorilla Gabface. "Aaaaargh! Gurrrrrr!"

And he begins to tear at his gorilla costume. Only it does not come off. And Gorilla Gabface finds it hard to tear at anything because his arms are now long enough to touch the floor with his elbows.

"Gosh!" squeals my ginch Josephine. "Gorilla Gabface is *really* a gorilla!"

Then I understand, like I say. Herr Tonic has a magic wand, and he merely waves it and turns everybody at the ball into just what their costumes represent.

I LOOK around. Dime-Mouth McCarthy is standing there in the front half of the horse. Only now he is actually that—the front half of a horse. The head is real. He looks like a horse's neck to me.

When I see him he starts to neigh and whinny and one of his two hoofs comes up and points at Subconscious Sigmund. I stare at Sigmund.

At first I cannot see him. Then I look close to the ground. Subconscious Sigmund is down there, on his hands and knees. He is crawling around in his baby costume, looking plenty confused.

He stares up at me and waves his cigar.

“Da da!” he lisps. “Lefty Fweep! You muff: do somefing! Stwop Herr Twonic from getting away—make him change uf bwack into pweople agwain! Oh, this is tewible!”

It is indeed terrible. All around me people are yelling and pointing at each other. The fake clowns are real clowns now. The disguised pirates actually are running around with cutlasses. The women who come as senoritas are gabbling in Spanish. It is a mess.

I observe all this from behind a curtain at the side of the hall, just sticking my head out.

Josephine comes running up to me, with her spurs jingling.

“Oh, Lefty—what’s the matter?” she cries.

“Plenty,” I mutter.

“Everybody’s changed!

“You’re telling me?”

“What are you doing hiding behind that curtain, Lefty?”

“Nothing. I like it here.”

“But we must do something. This is no time for horseplay.”

“Don’t say such things!” I snarl.

“But Lefty—everybody’s changed!”

“I know it,” I shriek. “And what do you suppose happens to me?”

I come out from the curtains and let her look. She almost faints.

“You’re—you’re *half horse!”* she gasps.

It is true. I stare down at myself again. A minute ago I am standing up with my head and arms and shoulders sticking out of the rear end of the horse costume that covers my legs and hips.

Now I am still standing up. My head and arms and shoulders are still sticking out.

But from the waist down I am a horse!

I have two hoofs and a long, silky tail.

That is what happens to me when Herr Tonic waves his wand.

From the waist up I am human. Otherwise I am like one of these centaurs in the legends, but with one set of horse legs instead of two.

"We must do something," Josephine whispers. "People are starting to go crazy out there."

"They are not the only ones," I tell her. "What about me? How can I live this way? Why my trousers won't even fit any more. And I will probably have to get myself a jockey and a stable boy."

Subconscious Sigmund crawls up to me, followed by Dime-Mouth and Gorilla Gabface.

"Gurrrrrulgh!" moans Gabface.

"Nyaaaaaaa!" neighs Dime-Mouth.

"I wanno change bwack!" lisps Subconscious Sigmund.

"Where's that Herr Tonic?" I yell. Looking around all of a sudden, I do not see him in all this confusion.

"He disappweared!" Sigmund chokes out. "He wan away!"

"We must catch him and make him change us back!" Josephine says, excited.

"But what about all these people here?"

"We must keep them here in the ballroom until Herr Tonic returns to change them to normal bodies again."

"How do we do that?" I ask.

Then I see the answer.

OUT-OF-BUSINESS Oscar lurches by. He is still wearing his King Croesus crown, and a very sick look. The sick look is easy to explain. Because he carries this big Horn of Plenty under his arm. And now he is dipping into it and tossing out money.

"I can't stop—I can't help myself!" he groans. "I must give away money."

"Good," I tell him. "You stand right here at the door and keep it up. Give away dough. People will scramble for it. That's the only way to hold them here until we find this magician and make him change us back."

"I must keep giving away money?"

"You can't stop anyway. And if you ever want to stop in the future, we better find Herr Tonic," Josephine tells him.

So he shakes his head and begins to scatter coins and bills.

Meanwhile the rest of us head for the door.

"He can't go far," I mutter. "He's a stranger in town, isn't he, Sigmund?"

"Yef. And he is so drunk he pwobabwy just wants a dwink down the stweet."

"Come on, then—we'll comb every bar in the neighborhood until we locate that human dandruff."

Out we go. Dime-Mouth prances on ahead. Josephine clanks her spurs behind him. Gorilla Gabface hulks along, making ape noises, but he carries little Subconscious Sigmund under his arm. I bring up the rear—and I do mean rear, with my particular costume now a regular part of me.

We hit the street, and feel lucky that it is empty. The sight of a cowgirl leading the front half of a horse, followed by a gorilla carrying a baby, and a human centaur—well, it might attract a little comment. To say nothing of hysterics.

"There's a bar!" I yell, spotting a gin-mill across the street. "Maybe he's wandering with his wand in there."

"We can't go in this way," Josephine objects. "They have some awful funny customers in there, but we are more awful than funny."

"You go in alone," I tell her. "We'll wait outside."

So in she goes. We stand there.

Pretty soon everybody gets impatient. Dime-Mouth is neighing and pawing the ground with his hoofs. Gorilla Gabface looks unhappy because his knuckles scrape the sidewalk. Subconscious Sigmund, baby or no baby, is still a little tipsey and very weepy.

"Baw!" he whimpers. "I wanna dwink!"

And so do I. I cannot help glancing behind me and whenever I do, I get a shock. I must quiet my nerves.

"All right," I decide. "We'll go in. But we must behave, see? Dime-Mouth, you wait here, and Gabface stays with you. Come to think of it, Subconscious Sigmund wouldn't look so good in a tavern either. I will go in alone."

But this idea does not seem to go over.

"You chiseler!" mutters Sigmund in his weak baby voice. "We all gwo in or nobwody doef!"

I shrug and flip my tail. "O.K. But remember—we must pretend we are still masquerades, see? With very realistic costumes on. That goes for you, Dime-Mouth, and you too, Gabface. And Sigmund is supposed to be a real baby. Understand?"

They all nod and we walk into the tavern.

THERE is quite a loud crowd in there, and it takes a minute to spot Josephine standing at the bar. It takes a minute for the crowd to spot us, and by that that time we are way down on the end of the bar where it is dark.

"Do you see this Herr Tonic?" I whisper to Josephine.

"No. He is in here about ten minutes ago, the bartender tells me, but now he is gone. Let's get out of here—you look awful."

"Get in the booth," I whisper to Dime-Mouth and Gabface. "I'll pass drinks in to you. Josephine, hold Sigmund and remember he's your baby. I'll stand at the bar with you. From the waist up I look all right, and the bartender can't see over the bar."

That is the way we work it. The bartender comes up.

"What'll it be, folks?" he asks.

"A Tom Collins," says Josephine.

"Make mine whiskey," I tell him. "Three whiskeys."

"Three?"

"Of course. One to drink, one for a chaser, and one to take the taste of the chaser out of my mouth."

He shrugs and pours. I pass two whiskeys into the booth for Dime-Mouth and Gabface when he isn't looking. Then I drink the third.

“My, you certainly can put them away!” comments the bartender, looking around at my empty glasses.

“Don’t fogwet baby!” lips Sigmund, from Josephine’s arms.

“Why of course,” says Josephine, smiling. “Baby wants his bottle, doesn’t he?”

“We have no milk, lady,” says the bartender.

“Milk, hell!” bawls little Sigmund. “Give me a bwottle of gin!”

The bartender’s eyes pop. Sigmund ignores him and pulls out his old cigar, which he lights up and puffs.

“What kind of a baby is that, lady?” he asks.

“A bottle baby,” I explain.

“Are you its father?”

“Of course.”

“But he doesn’t look like you.”

“I should hope not,” giggles Josephine.

The bartender is too curious. He leans over the bar to stare at me and gets an eyeful of my hoofs and tail.

“Jumping Ike!” he yells.

And just at that moment a couple happens to blunder into the booth where Gorilla Gabface and Dime-Mouth McCarthy are hiding.

“There’s an ape in my booth!” yells the girl.

“Never mind about your boyfriend,” I come back, but too late. Her escort now notices Dime-Mouth.

“There’s a horse drinking in my seat!” he shouts.

Between the two of them and the bartender, everybody is staring at us.

Dime-Mouth and Gorilla Gabface join us at the bar. I prance around waving my tail. Because I spot the bouncers bearing down on us from the rear of the tavern.

“Out you go, you freaks!” screams the bartender. “I don’t know who you are or what you are, but I don’t want a gang of monstrosities in my joint!”

“Who else would come into this dump?” I want to know.

And that is the signal for the riot.

IT is very hard to remember details. I can recall Gorilla Gabface swinging by his long arms from the chandeliers and making sounds like King Kong after a bad night. I remember Dime-Mouth McCarthy biting a bartender’s toupee off with his horse-teeth. I have an impression of Subconscious Sigmund running along the top of the bar with his baby legs and hitting people in the head with ash trays. I myself am plenty busy kicking out at faces with my hind legs.

But it is Josephine who gives everybody the biggest surprise. She begins to hurl bottles and glasses at bartenders, and her shots never miss. Naturally—because she is now actually as good a marksman as Annie Oakley.

The rest is just a mess. We fight our way out to the street at last, in triumph. And in a Black Maria. Because somebody calls the cops, and we run right into a patrol wagon.

Twenty minutes later we are all lined up at night court in front of Magistrate Donglepootzer.

Hiawatha Donglepootzer is an old fudge of a judge who I tangle with long, long ago. He is a very grim sort of personality with a mind like a calendar—in fact all he can seem to talk about is “thirty days” or “six months” or “five years at hard labor.”

And from the minute he sets eyes on us, I can tell he is ready to give Father Time a real workout.

The sergeant that books us steps up and reads the charges.

“Assault and battery. Disorderly conduct. Contributing to the delinquency of minors. Indecent exposure. Your Honor, it’s all the work of these people here.”

Magistrate Donglepootzer peers over his high desk. He peers again. He takes off his glasses, wipes them, and puts them on. Then he takes off his glasses and throws them away.

“People,” he whispers. “What people?”

“Why these here people, Your Honor.”

“I don’t see any people,” snarls Donglepootzer. “I see a young lady, yes. She is wearing cowboy pants but I imagine she is a young lady. I hope so anyway. And the others—"

Donglepootzer sighs.

"The others," he says, "I can't seem to classify. There is a child, yes. A child with a cigar. And a gorilla. And the other two seem to be parts of a horse, cut in half. Except that one of them has a human body and a human face. Though not a very human face."

He is speaking to me, and I resent it.

"Now, then," he tells the sergeant, "would you mind explaining those those charges once more?"

"Well, it's this way, Your Honor. The lady comes into the bar alone and asks if anybody sees a magician with a magic wand."

"Drunk and disorderly, eh?" says Donglepootzer. "Continue."

"Then the next thing you know, this horse—or man—or half and half thing—comes in and stands next to her. And all at once this cigar-smoking baby is with them. They stand there, drinking—"

"The baby, too?" asks Donglepootzer.

"Yes, The baby has a bottle of gin. And the horse-man is drinking whiskey three shots at a time and talking to the lady. It is quite a party, they tell me."

"I can imagine it," sighs Donglepootzer. "But I don't want to."

"Then all at once the customers find this gorilla in a booth, drinking with the front half of a horse—"

"Must you talk that way?" groans Donglepootzer.

"But it's the truth, Your Honor. Then the fight starts and the baby hits a bartender in the head with an ashtray. You ought to hear the baby cursing —"

"Stop!" yells Donglepootzer. "I can't stand any more!"

"But—"

"Never mind. I believe all the charges. Now, before I lock you all up forever, is there anything you can possibly say to explain this—this nightmare?"

I MAKE up my mind in a hurry.

There is only one way out and that is to tell the truth. I clear my throat and step up.

"I will explain, Your Honor," I tell him. "To begin with, it is all a mistake. There is nothing wrong with any of us."

Donglepootzer closes his eyes.

"Good—good God!" he whispers. "Nothing wrong with you?

"Of course not. This gentleman over there is Dime-Mouth McCarthy. He is a gentleman and a scholar."

"You mean the front half of a horse?" asks Donglepootzer.

"But that's just it. He's not a real horse."

"He looks real. I'm a pretty fair judge of horse-flesh myself. Offhand, I'd say he was a mudder."

"No children at all," I tell him. "It is just a masquerade costume he wears. He has the front end and I have the rear end. Sort of fifty-fifty."

"Is that true, McCarthy?" booms the Magistrate, looking at him. Of course Dime-Mouth cannot answer. He just tosses his mane and neighs. A horrid sound.

"Are you giving me the horselaugh?" snarls Donglepootzer.

"Don't mind him, Your Honor. He's just feeling his oats."

"Yes," adds Josephine. "After all, he's drinking a lot, you understand. Like the old saying. You can lead a horse to water, but he'd rather have whiskey."

"I don't want any of your old sayings," groans Donglepootzer. "I want some new facts. What next? I suppose you'll try and tell me that gorilla isn't a gorilla."

"Certainly not," I grin. "That is Mr. Gabface who runs the pool hall. Don't you recognize him?"

"But he looks like an anthropoid—"

"He forgets to shave today," I explain.

Donglepootzer blinks. "All right," he murmurs. "All right. Now—about that baby. The one that drinks gin and hits bartenders and curses."

"He's not a baby. He's Subconscious Sigmund the psychiatrist."

"That baby is a psychiatrist?"

"Sure. Don't you ever hear of a child psychiatrist?"

Donglepootzer starts to tremble.

"But he's a baby—a mere babe in arms."

"Who is a baby, sir?" lisps Subconscious Sigmund. "I'll hwave you know I am an eminwent pfychiatric authworitwy, wif a Ph.D. and a graduate cwertificate fwom the beft colleges in the cwountry. And you, sir, are a clear cafe of dementwia pwaecox!"

He blows smoke in Donglepootzer's eyes.

"Maybe I'm crazy after all," he mutters. "I never expect such language from a baby. Confess—you're a midget in disguise, aren't you?"

"Of course." Subconscious Sigmund plays up to him.

"And this is all a practical joke. You people are just wearing costumes, as you say?" Donglepootzer is almost pleading. He wants to believe it for the sake of his own sanity.

"That's it exactwly!" lisps Subconscious Sigmund, through his baby bonnet. Then he lets out a sudden wail. "Oh gwacious! I think I will need to be changed!"

"Have you got a diaper handy, Your Honor?" asks Josephine.

THAT does it.

Donglepootzer jumps up.

"Eminent psychiatrist, eh?" he shrieks. "A psychiatrist who needs a change of diapers! And a gorilla who scratches himself for fleas; and two ends of a horse—the front end can't talk but the rear end can!

"Lock them up!" he yells at the sergeant. "Lock them up and throw away the keys!"

The cops advance on us. The jig is up. The hour of doom is at hand.

The hour of——

Just then the clock over the desk begins to strike.

"Midnight!" I whisper.

And—it happens.

All in a moment. Subsconscious Sigmunds lets out a yelp and slips from Josephine's arms. He is growing—bigger and bigger. Suddenly he stands there, a normal man, in his baby costume.

I look at Gorilla Gabface and Dime-Mouth McCarthy. They are slipping out of their costumes. My own costume falls away.

"You see?" I yell at Magistrate Donglepootzer. "We're all right. It's you who must be crazy."

With a wild scream, Donglepootzer jumps off the bench and runs out of the room.

"Go away," he yells. "Go far away. Get out!"

This is excellent advice to follow. We take it. On the lam.

"Like Cinderella, Lefty," Dime-Mouth tells me. "Youse see? I am right when. I compare our masquerade to Cinderella's brawl. We change back at midnight. That is what Herr Tonic does to us with his magic wand or whatever. Changes us until midnight, only."

"Then the folks at the ball must be returned to normal too," Josephine says.

Subconscious Sigmund nods. "Of course," he says. "I must apologize for this nasty trick on the part of my friend Herr Tonic. Of course he is a real wizard and able to perform such feats. But he would not do such a thing unless he were drunk and insulted. Just bad temper on his part."

"We will forget him," I say. "But what a night! I need a drink before I turn in."

"Let's stop here," suggests Josephine, pointing out a cafe. We go in.

Standing at the bar, high as next next year's taxes, is our old wonderworking friend, Herr Tonic.

"There he is!" I whisper. "Let's get him!"

We sneak up very quietly. He doesn't have a chance.

I get his wand. The others hold his arms and legs.

"What are you doing?" he splutters.

“Never mind,” I say, very grim.

“Two can play at this magic game.”

So I make up my mind and wave the wand. Then I break it over my knee.

“What are you doing?” Subconscious Sigmund gasps.

“This is too dangerous to have around,” I tell him. “And especially in the hands of a foreigner with a bad temper. He should be interned anyway because he is not a citizen.”

“He certainly isn’t—any more,” says Josephine.

And he isn’t. We take him outside. The others go home and I dispose of Herr Tonic and come in here for breakfast. But what a night!

LEFTY FEEP sat back and mopped his forehead.

“Quite a remarkable adventure,” I agreed. “No wonder you are touchy about mentioning horses. I’d say you had a real kick coming.”

Feep winced.

“But there’s one thing you forgot to mention,” I told him. “You say you caught this magician, Herr Tonic, and took his wand away and broke it.”

“Right.”

“But before you broke it, you waved the wand at him.”

“Also right.”

“Tell me, Lefty,” I said, fixing him with an accusing stare, “Just what did you turn him into?”

Feep blushed.

“I am afraid you ask me that,” he said. “But I suppose I might as well admit it. We get Her Tonic down, and then Dime-Mouth McCarthy and I put the horse costume on him. Complete. And I wave the wand over him.”

“You mean to tell me Herr Tonic is now a horse?” I gasped.

Lefty Feep shrugged.

“Well, if he isn’t,” he chuckled, “then the glue factory I just sold him to will be awfully disappointed!”

Mystery of the Creeping Underwear

It was the most potent formula Mr. Fooze had ever mixed—the elixir of life itself!

LITTLE Mr. Fooze walked up the front steps to the door of his neat suburban bungalow. His jaw was squared with determination.

Tonight he was going to have it out with Professor Beaker once and for all.

"Things," brooded Mr. Fooze, darkly, "have gone far enough. Dora shouldn't have taken him as a boarder anyway. I admit we could use the money and the spare room was going to waste. But why did she rent it to a crazy chemistry professor?"

Sidney Fooze halted before the door and hesitated before announcing his arrival. He needed to work his courage up a little more. He paced back and forth, remembering the insults and injuries caused by their boarder.

"The first thing he did was to move in all those chemicals of his," muttered Mr. Fooze. "Then he began to make those foolish 'experiments.' Wouldn't tell what he was doing or why. Nothing leaked out about them except the smell."

Mr. Fooze wrinkled his nose reminiscently.

The smell had been terrible. Mr. Fooze and Dora would wake up in the middle of the night and sniff at what was coming down on the air from the attic where Professor Beaker lived and worked.

That was bad enough. And then Professor Beaker had set fire to his room one Sunday morning.

Mr. Fooze had wanted to throw him out then, but he paid so promptly and pleaded the urgent necessity of his "great experiment" and Mr. Fooze had let him stay.

Last week there had been a flood.

Three days ago he had brought ten live chickens into the attic and turned the place into a shambles of feathers.

Mr. Fooze was sick and tired of his star boarder and his antics. No matter what he was "experimenting" on—perpetual motion or a rocket to the moon—Professor Beaker must go. If he wouldn't tell what he was doing or let anyone into his room, that was tough. He'd better hire himself a padded cell and continued his chemical research there.

"And another thing, Professor!" growled Mr. Fooze, raising his voice and sneering at the imaginary figure cowering in his brain. "You can kindly take your whole apparatus and—"

"Sidney!"

Mr. Fooze jerked out of his twilight day-dream suddenly. Dora, his wife, stood on the doorstep.

"Hello, dear," he said, meekly.

"What in the world are you talking to yourself for?" she asked.

"I was just rehearsing," Mr. Fooze explained. "I'm going to tell the Professor off tonight."

"No, Sidney."

"What do you mean—no?"

"You won't be able to, I'm afraid."

"Why not?"

"Well—you see, he left here rather suddenly today."

"Left here suddenly? How?"

"Through the roof," Dora told him.

"No!"

“Yes. Poor Professor Beaker,” sighed Dora. “He was always afraid he’d go to pieces over his work.”

“You mean he blew himself up?”

“That’s the direction he was going,” Dora agreed.

“Then what about our roof?”

“The insurance men are going to put on a new one,” said Mrs. Fooze. “The police were here, of course.”

“Did you send for an undertaker?”

“There isn’t any need to,” said Dora, simply. “So far all they’ve found is part of his upper plate. It landed on the school-house roof three blocks away.”

She kissed Mr. Fooze on the nose. “But let’s not stand here gabbing,” she said. “Supper’s getting cold.”

MR. FOOZE shook his head. After three years of married life, he still couldn’t figure it out. The boarder blew himself to bits and took the roof off, and all Dora could do was worry about supper getting cold.

He sighed and went in to dinner. After supper he explored the attic room.

Sure enough, the roof was gone—a big chunk of it, anyway. Twisted debris was all that remained of a bunsen-burner unit and laboratory table. The Professor’s room itself was a shambles. Mr. Fooze waded ankle-deep in broken glass from beakers, retorts and bottles. Walls were stained weird hues from the splashing of exploded and spilled chemicals. The Professor’s notes and laboratory papers were a soggy mass buried under the broken glass and powdered crystals.

“The men are coming tomorrow to fix the roof,” said Dora. “I’ll have them clean up this room, too.”

“Good idea,” said Mr. Fooze.

“You should have heard the explosion,” Dora told him. “It made so much noise I could hardly hear my serial program.”

“Quite likely.”

"I wonder what he was doing up here?" Dora asked. "I often meant to ask him. But there was always so much to do during the day I never had a chance."

"You mean so many radio serials to listen to," said her husband, sarcastically.

"That's right," Dora answered. "Ooh, hurry downstairs, dear! There's a program on tonight I *can't* miss!"

She scurried down the steps and Mr. Fooze followed, shrugging helplessly.

Dora sat in the parlor fiddling with the radio, and Mr. Fooze stared at the tiger-skin rug on the floor. The tiger head winked up at him and Mr. Fooze winked back. Women were funny.

Gradually he dozed off and forgot about it.

He was walking in his sleep when he went up to bed that night. He turned in without any consciousness of what he was doing.

He was still snoring when Dora jerked him violently by the shoulder.

"Whzzmattr?" he inquired, digging his face into the pillow.

"Wake up, Sidney! It's five o'clock!"

"What of it?" grunted Mr. Fooze.

"You've got to be at the office at eleven," Dora reminded.

"Buzz' only five," groaned her husband.

"But you'll have to get up and do the washing first," said Dora.

"Washing?"

"With all that excitement yesterday, I forgot to wash," Dora explained. "And you'll need fresh clothes when you go to that big meeting today."

Mr. Fooze groaned and crawled out of bed. Once in his innocent honeymoon days he had volunteered to "help around the house." He had been so gallant.

Now he was just plain stuck. He crept into his oldest shirt and trousers.

"As long as you're up," Dora suggested, "you might as well go into the attic and pick up some of that broken glass. Carry it down to the basement when you take the wash."

MR. FOOZE shivered his way up to the attic and Professor Beaker’s ruined room. He dumped a lot of glassware into the laundry basket on top of the clothes and carried the whole mess down to the basement.

He stacked bottles and vials on the floor and then began to do things with the laundry.

Cursing sweetly, he dumped underwear, shorts, panties, shirts, socks, gloves, neckties, dresses several pairs of wash pants into the washing machine.

The machine began to clank and grind. So did Mr. Fooze who was singing *“Rinso white”* in a hideous falseto.

After a while Mr. Fooze got pretty sick and tired of the whole business—but mostly tired. He lay down on the basement floor and went back to sleep.

“Sidney!”

His wife called from the head of the stairs.

“Yes, dear?”

“Did you remember to put in the blueing?”

“Oh, sure,” lied Mr. Fooze, who had done no such thing.

He got up, rubbing his eyes, and searched the basement shelves for the bottle of blueing.

Yawning, he spied the little blue bottle on the floor, twisted the cap, and poured in a generous measure.

Then he lay down on the coal pile.

“Sidney!”

He sprang to attention. “Yes, sugar?”

“I forgot to tell you—the blueing is upstairs in the kitchen,” Dora called down.

“Oh, oh!” grunted Mr. Fooze, under his breath. He glanced in the washing machine. He hoped he hadn’t made a mistake and put some ink into it. Stooping, he examined the blueing bottle.

No label. And the stuff smelled funny. But it was blue. And the clothes didn’t look spoiled.

He hoped for the best as he carried his basket of wet wash out to the yard. The clothes-line flapped in a strong breeze. Good. The garments should dry in an hour or so with this wind.

Mr. Fooze hung clothes and then lay down in the back yard for his delayed nap.

This time he actually slept.

It seemed to Mr. Fooze that he had a horried dream, A most real and ghastly dream.

It seemed as though Mr. Fooze woke up two hours later. The first thing he noticed was that the breeze had died down—died down completely.

Then he glanced at the clothes-line and gasped.

There was no wind, but the clothes were moving!

Shirts and shorts danced up and down the line, instead of dangling decently. For a moment, Mr. Fooze had tire confused impression that the laundry was—somehow—*alive.*

He walked over and felt the edge of a chemise. It was perfectly dry. Good! He could take this stuff down, iron it, and leave for the office.

HUMMING under his breath, Mr. Fooze began to unpin the wash and drop garments into the basket.

That's when he realized he must be dreaming.

Mr. Fooze reached up and unfastened a long union suit. As he did so, the garment seemed to slip from his fingers.

It did not fall to the ground.

Instead, the union suit *stood* beside him in the yard!

Stood there on woolen legs, arms resting jauntily on the hips!

Mr. Fooze stared with jaw agape, as the union suit suddenly turned its back on him, disclosing a gaping open flap in the rear.

He reached out to grasp the unnatural object, but the union suit swiftly moved away.

Mr. Fooze lost his temper and lunged.

Immediately, the union suit started to run! Wobbling grotesquely, it scampered across the back yard, with Mr. Fooze hot on its ankles—for a union suit has no heels.

“Come back here!” yelled Mr. Fooze, scarcely realizing what he was shouting. He glanced around wildly. What if neighbors should see?

The union suit played tag around the clothes posts, its open flap fluttering coyly.

Mr. Fooze went slightly berserk, then. He jerked down the end of the clothesline and coiled the rope purposefully.

The union suit danced just out of his range, like a headless ghost, taunting him and waving its wrinkled arms.

But Mr. Fooze was ready. He twirled his clothesline and it settled—like a lasso—over the bewitched garment.

Cursing furiously, Mr. Fooze dragged the union suit to his side, stooped down, and thrust it, still squirming, into the clothes basket.

Then, as he lifted the basket full of writhing garments, he suddenly stumbled and went down. The force of his fall knocked the wind out of him.

And it jarred his senses still more. For he realized, in a hideous moment, that he was not dreaming. He was wide awake. And his laundry *was* alive!

Arms and legs waved from the basket, as imprisoned clothing squirmed. Mr. Fooze held on tight and stared.

He didn’t know what had happened, or why. But there was only one thing to do with clothes, alive or dead. That was—iron them. Iron them and lock them into drawers where they’d be out of sight.

Muttering under his breath, Mr. Fooze carried the laundry basket into the house, set it down on the kitchen table, and put up the ironing board.

He was grateful to see that Dora didn’t enter the kitchen. She was listening to a program in the parlor.

While he waited for the iron to heat, Mr. Fooze tried to figure things out.

Obviously, something had happened to the laundry. But what?

Then Mr. Fooze remembered the blueing he had dumped into the wash—the blueing that was not really blueing.

It had come from a blue bottle, he remembered. A blue bottle on the basement floor. On the basement floor, where he had dumped the bottles he carried from Professor Beaker's room.

Could it have been a bottle of chemical from the Professor's experiments?

Perhaps.

But what kind of a concoction could bring clothes to life?

MR. FOOZE tried to think. He stared at the laundry basket in apprehensive horror. The thought of ironing these unusual garments dismayed him. What if they didn't like heat? What if the pants refused to be pressed?

There was only one worse alternative—and that was what Dora would say to him if she found this out. That must never happen. He had to iron the clothes and hide them.

Mr. Fooze approached the clothes basket. To his relief, he found the garments lying still. Nothing rustled or slithered or waved to and fro.

He touched the top garments gingerly. They did not move.

Perhaps the effects of the strange chemical had worn off. He hoped so. He began to iron at top speed. First some underwear, then a pair of socks. He'd need them to wear today to the office.

After that he pressed a green wash tie. That was also a part of his wardrobe.

Then Mr. Fooze got to work on the real job—ironing the brown slack suit he must wear at the office today. The boss had insisted he wear the horrible ensemble.

As he ironed, he glanced at his watch. Only an hour left!

There was no time to finish ironing the rest of the garments. Fluttering in haste, he hurriedly jammed the rest of the wash back into the basket, picked up the ironed garments, and lugged the load up to the bedroom.

To be on the safe side, he stuffed all the unpressed clothing in his wife's bureau drawers and locked them up.

Then he took a pair of green shorts, underwear, the green tie, socks, and his slack suit, and sat down on the bed.

He dressed swiftly—but without a hitch. The garments didn't try to run away. At last he stood before the mirror in slack suit and necktie. He looked perfectly normal in his attire. Stepping into a pair of sandals, he turned and made for the stairs.

Going downstairs, his trouble started.

He remembered the blue bottle in the cellar. Some inner instinct told him not to leave without looking at it again.

Mr. Fooze made for the cellar. Sure enough, there stood the unlabelled bottle, right where he had left it. The blue glass tingled against his palm as Mr. Fooze lifted it up and took out the cork. He sniffed at the liquid. It smelled faintly of ether. But there was nothing very unusual in that.

His eye lighted on the bar of soap on the wash tub. With trembling deliberation, Mr. Fooze tilted the bottle gently. A drop fell squarely on the soap.

Mr. Fooze saw the liquid fall. Then he grinned. Nothing happened. The soap still rested there.

Then—

The soap jumped.

Mr. Fooze saw it jump, and his mouth opened.

That was bad, for the soap sailed in the direction of Mr. Fooze's face, and landed squarely in his open mouth.

He groaned and spluttered as the soap suddenly bounded from between his teeth and began to hop around on the floor. Mr. Fooze made a dive for it, but it jumped into a rat-hole and disappeared.

He stood there, trying to control his trembling fingers.

It was true then. This blue bottle—Professor Beaker's bottle—contained some mysterious ingredient that had the power of animating objects. Making things come alive.

Mr. Fooze shuddered.

Something must be done, but there was not time to decide right now. He had to get to the office.

HE WENT up the stairs, carrying the blue bottle carefully in his hand. He'd better not drop it, or the steps might suddenly spring to life and start clattering all over the house!

Mr. Fooze headed straight for the parlor. While the tigerskin rug glared up at him accusingly, he put the blue bottle in the upper drawer of his desk and locked the desk.

Still shaking, he went back down the hall and slipped out of the house. Dora was listening to the radio, and he didn't disturb her. He was afraid to tell her.

All Mr. Fooze could do was hope and pray. Hope and pray that the newly-washed clothes he was wearing would behave. Perhaps the ironing had done the trick. He had always known that clothes make the man—and he was only afraid that they might make the man crazy. Well, it would all come out in the wash.

It took all of Mr. Fooze's powers of concentration to find his street car corner—because by this time he didn't know if he was coming or going.

His slack suit was not moving, but he held his hands close to his sides, just in case. When the street car arrived, he got on cautiously and took a seat in back, all by himself.

For a few blocks he rode in peace. Then the car began to fill up with passengers. He eyed them malignantly, hoping no one would choose the vacant seat at his side.

A fat lady bustled down the aisle and caught his eye. She returned his stony stare with an obvious sniff, and plopped her poundage squarely next to Mr. Fooze, squeezing him against the window.

The pressure irritated Mr. Fooze. It also seemed to irritate his clothes.

For suddenly Mr. Fooze felt, his slack suit squirm. The arms flapped out and the trousers showed a tendency to cross. Inasmuch as his legs were not crossed, the trousers ballooned forth very obviously. Mr. Fooze struggled silently to maintain his composure—to say nothing of his sanity.

Suddenly his necktie flew up and began to curl around his neck.

The fat lady turned and noticed the green, snake-like tie as it squirmed along his throat.

Mr. Fooze forced a smile. The fat lady grunted.

He pushed the tie down hastily. But he was beginning to perspire.

Once again the tie flew up. It crept across and brushed the fat lady’s fourth chin.

Mr. Fooze tried to yank his tie back. But too late. It wrapped itself around the fat lady’s neck.

“Eeeek!” she complained, shrilly. “Take it away!”

SEVERAL passengers turned their heads and stared. It was a bad moment for Mr. Fooze, who was pulling at his necktie with both hands. To the spectators, it looked as though he were trying to strangle the woman with his tie.

Evidently she had the same opinion. Bringing up her heavy purse, she banged Mr. Fooze across the top of the head. The purse opened and Mr. Fooze received a shower of powder grains and hairpins on his head.

“Pardon me,” he wheezed. “My tie is caught—wait—”

He snapped the tie back and tucked it inside his slack shirt. The fat woman glared but settled back in her seat.

Mr. Fooze really was perspiring, now. He reached into his trouser pocket and pulled out a handkerchief to mop his face.

“Why you beast!” screamed the fat lady, rising to her feet.

Mr. Fooze glanced down. He was mopping his face with his handkerchief—what was wrong with that?

Just one thing. What Mr. Fooze held in his hand was not a handkerchief.

He was mopping his face with a pair of pink bloomers!

How the bloomers had become lodged in his pocket he didn't know. Perhaps they had climbed in of their own accord, he thought wildly.

As if to prove it, the bloomers suddenly slipped from his hand to his lap. There they stood up on their diminutive legs and began to dance. A hideous quivering convulsed the panties as the bloomers shimmied.

"Beast!" shrieked the fat lady. "Take them away!"

"They're not mine," yelled Mr. Fooze. As if to prove it, he rose to his feet and bolted down the aisle of the street car.

Passengers turned and giggled. Mr. Fooze heard guffaws and titters. He paused in his frantic race. Paused and stared at the pursuing pink panties.

The bloomers were chasing him down the aisle!

In a panic, he turned and headed back for his seat, jumping over the pink barrier. Almost at once the bloomers followed him. Back to the fat lady he ran, with panties at his heels.

She was on her feet, waiting for him.

"These bloomers—I swear they're not mine!" repeated Mr. Fooze desperately.

"Oh!" wailed the fat lady. "Do you mean to say those are *my* bloomers? Then you must have—oh, you *monster!"*

Down came the purse again, splitting on Mr. Fooze's head. The fat lady charged, and he ran; glancing back he saw her trip over the dancing panties as he jumped off the street car on the corner stop.

"Merciful God!" breathed Mr. Fooze, in a truly devout voice, as he regained his breath on the corner.

He turned and trudged the remaining three blocks to the office. He slowly recovered his composure as he noted that his clothing was unruffled. Nothing moved unnaturally. Perhaps his troubles were over. The effect of the strange liquid must be wearing off. At least, he hoped it was.

His coming ordeal would be bad enough without further complications.

Mr. Fooze entered the office and tensed himself for the business at hand.

It was five minutes to eleven by the office clock.

At eleven o’clock he would be on the spot. On the spot before a microphone in the big showroom on the second floor.

MR. FOOZE’S office was not, strictly speaking, an office. It was the business quarters of the Hummenkapper Clothing Company—manufacturers and designers of an exclusive line of men’s clothing.

In the office downstairs, Mr. Fooze, along with a large staff, labored over plans for “merchandising campaigns” and “men’s style shows” designed to sell Hummenkapper garments to out of town buyers for men’s shops all over the country.

Today such a style show was in preparation. At eleven, a hundred clothing buyers and style specialists would gather in the showroom on the second floor. One by one, fashion models would walk out and display Hummenkapper styles for the coming season, while an announcer read his script over a public address microphone.

Mr. Fooze was to be that announcer.

It was really a spot. His boss had chosen him for the assignment after long deliberation.

“You’d better do the trick,” he had snarled. “Hummenkapper needs to push merchandise. Write a script and read it as if you meant it. If not—”

The boss had made a familiar gesture, drawing his thumb across his throat.

Mr. Fooze was afraid of public address systems, but he was more afraid of his boss. Mr. Gnasher, of the Hummenkapper Clothing Company, was a hard man. A very hard man. It was a common rumor around the office that Mr. Gnasher had been named after his teeth.

Therefore, Mr. Fooze had worked hard on his script. He had rehearsed the reading of it for many hours. When they told him at the last minute he would have to appear in a slack suit—a new Hummenkapper style—he hadn’t dared refuse.

That was why he had the ridiculous garment on. He hoped it would behave.

Glancing at his tie in the mirror and fixing the crease of his rumpled trousers, Air. Fooze glided into the office, ignored the giggling stenographers, grabbed his script, and raced upstairs.

They were all up there—all the house salesmen and officials, sitting down in front on hard chairs. On either side, the buyers lolled, puffing cigars and exchanging the kind of stories salesmen always exchange.

Mr. Fooze looked through the curtains at his audience and gulped. The script rattled in his hand as he saw a spotlight go on from the back of the house and focus at the microphone that stood on the bare platform before the velvet curtains.

He would be standing out there in just a minute.

Mr. Fooze glanced nervously at the audience once more. Hard, brutal faces—coarse, crude men who would undoubtedly snicker when they saw him in a slack suit. Their business was selling new fashions, not wearing them. Most of them were dressed in unpressed, sloppy tweeds.

The models began coming out of their dressing rooms and lining up behind Mr. Fooze. As he gave them their cues from the script, they would come out and parade on the platform. Mr. Fooze looked at their calm self-possession and trembled. How could they take it so casually?

On his next peek, Mr. Fooze saw his boss, sitting down in front.

Mr. Gnasher was glancing at his watch and frowning. As little Mr. Fooze stared, the boss began to mutter something under his breath and tap his foot on the floor.

It was time to start.

Tugging his necktie into place, Mr. Fooze wobbled out onto the platform, his script waving in his jittery hand.

Clutching the microphone for support, he began to read the opening greeting of his script.

THE sound of his own voice, magnified by the microphone, reassured him. Ignoring the murmurs from his audience, he settled down to delivering his message before introducing the first clothing model.

“And so I say to you,” Mr. Fooze orated, “that if you men stock up on the new Hummenkapper fall models, you will have a record of sales this year that you will be proud of. As a matter of fact, this should be one of your most fiscal years! And now, I present to you—”

An indignant grunt came from somewhere in the audience. Mr. Fooze paused to locate it. Just as he feared, it had been Mr. Gnasher’s grunt.

Mr. Fooze started again. Again, the grunt.

What was wrong?

Fooze looked down at his script. Then he saw it.

Stabbing at his script—sticking straight out from his neck in a livid line—was Mr. Fooze’s elusive necktie!

Mr. Fooze clutched the devilish cravat in his right hand and crammed it back into his slack shirt.

He opened his mouth to speak, then let it hang open in amazement.

Something moved on his neck. Something moved swiftly. He glanced down as a whistle came from the audience.

His necktie was untying itself!

Faster than his eye or clutching hand could follow, the green cravat slithered off his neck!

Like a wriggling worm it crawled down the side of the microphone. Mr. Fooze dropped his script and tried to grab it. Too late. The audience was in an uproar.

As he stooped to pick up his script, Mr. Fooze felt strange movements across his chest. One by one, the buttons on his slack shirt slipped from their buttonholes. His shirt opened by itself!

Mr. Fooze threw his hands over his head in dismay.

This was the wrong thing to do. It gave his shirt a perfect opportunity to bunch up and shoot over his head. He felt the sleeves crawl over his arms. In a second, his entire shirt had twisted itself from his torso.

“Take it off!” yelled a raucous voice from the crowd. Above it Mr. Fooze heard the barking cough of Mr. Gnasher. He tried to locate the boss in the audience.

As he peered, something happened at his waist. Looking down, he saw the belt of his trousers unbuckle suddenly, swiftly. His pants marched down his legs!

Mr. Fooze almost tripped as the trousers bunched at his ankles. He leaped aside and they came off, pulling his sandals with them. Mr. Fooze stood before the laughing throng in his underwear, as his socks joined the parade and wiggled off his bare toes.

In utter horror he saw his shirt, trousers, necktie and socks fluttering before the microphone in mid-air. He made a grab at the garments.

“What’s coming off here?” he shrieked.

He got his answer very promptly.

As though the words were a cue, his underwear quickly unbuttoned. The sleeves crawled up his scrabbling arms, jerked past his shoulders. The garment fell. So did Mr. Fooze. He lay on the platform, kicking his legs as the underwear crawled off his body.

Clad in a pair of bright green Hummenkapper shorts, Mr. Fooze wobbled to his feet.

Amidst the screams of the mob, he dashed up and down the platform, chasing his clothes. His underwear was bowing to the audience, and as the applause rose, his pants dipped in recognition. The shirt had both sleeves over its head in a prize-fighter’s gesture and the socks were jumping over the wriggling necktie.

Mr. Fooze made one despairing dive for his galloping garments. As he did so, his shorts started to join the party.

It was too much to bear—and much too much too bare.

With a yowl of panic, he bolted from the stage. Bursting through the excited knot of models on the side, Mr. Fooze ran a naked race through the hall.

COMING upon a window dummy in the corridor, he yanked savagely at the clothing adorning it. He pulled on a shirt, a pair of pants, and a suit coat. The outfit was a good eight sizes too large for him, and the coat rose almost to the top of his ears, but Mr. Fooze didn't care. He felt like hiding.

Ignoring the shouts from the stage behind him, he galloped down the stairs and out of the building. He clambered aboard the first street car and headed home, his senses reeling.

Mr. Fooze was a broken man, and he knew it. His spirits fell when he thought of telling his wife, and so did his oversize trousers.

Mr. Fooze staggered into the house, dragging both his saggy face and saggy trousers.

Dora was waiting for him in the hall. She ignored both his long face and long pants and flung her arms around his neck.

"Oh, darling!" she whispered. "You're wonderful!"

Mr. Fooze raised his eyebrows. Then he stepped back, clutched at his belt buckle, and raised his drooping trousers.

"What do you mean?" he muttered. "Mr. Gnasher called up from the office," Dora told him, ecstatically. "He said he just couldn't wait to congratulate you."

"Congratulate me?"

"Oh, don't be so modest, Sidney! Mr. Gnasher told me all about your stunt, and I think it was so cute. Mr. Gnasher said your new strip tease method of displaying men's fashions will have the whole industry interested."

"Ulp!" gulped Mr. Fooze.

"He said he doesn't know how you did it, but if you can teach it to the rest of the models he'll make you promotion manager. He said all the buyers are talking about it—they got such a kick out of the novelty."

"So I'm not fired?" whispered Mr. Fooze, under his breath.

"What did you say, darling?"

"I said, it's just the way I figured," Mr. Fooze lied. "Well, that's that."

“I’m so proud of you,” Dora breathed. “You know, Sidney, I’ve been thinking. A man like you—in the style business—must really look his best. And I think from now on I ought to do the washing and ironing.

Really. I’m getting pretty sick of radio serials anyway.”

Mr. Fooze beamed.

“Well, all’s well that ends well,” he murmured, taking Dora in his arms. Suddenly his wife drew back.

“Oh, I almost forgot!”

“Forgot what?”

“There’s a visitor waiting to see you in the parlor.”

“Visitor? Who?”

“He wouldn’t give me his name. Said he had to wait and see you. It was very important. Maybe you’d better go in and find out what he wants.”

“Awferheavensakes!” growled Mr. Fooze. “Another salesman! Watch me get rid of this baby.”

Pulling up his trousers, the little man walked briskly into the parlor.

IT WAS dim in the fading twilight. The tigerskin rug glared up with eyes and teeth. It looked rather ghastly.

Then Mr. Fooze saw the glare of other eyes and other teeth—the eyes and teeth of his visitor. These eyes and teeth were worse than those of the rug, he quickly decided.

The visitor sat in the easy chair. He was a tall, thin man with a huge, domed forehead. His bald, bony head bobbed, and he raised a gaunt, lined visage to confront Mr. Fooze with a knowing grin.

A claw-like hand reached out, and a long finger stabbed at Mr. Fooze’s chest.

“Here you are,” rasped the stranger. “You’re Fooze, eh?”

“Yes. Who are you, might I ask?”

“You might.” The bony man grinned. “And I might tell you. I’m Doctor Kranoff.”

"Doctor Kranoff?"

"That's right. A friend of Professor Beaker's."

"But Professor Beaker is not here. He—"

"I know all about it. And that's why *I'm* here." Again Doctor Kranoff grinned. Suddenly he erased the grimace from his gaunt features and rose to tower over Mr. Fooze.

"Where is it?" he grated.

"Where is what?"

"You know—the stuff," said Doctor Kranoff, hoarsely. "Where is the Elixir?"

"I don't know what you mean."

"Don't try and deceive me," growled Doctor Kranoff, his bony fingers writhing in excitement. "Where is the Elixir of Life?"

"Elixir of Life?"

"Of course, you stupid dolt! What do you think old Beaker was working on in his chemical laboratory upstairs? A bio-chemical formula, a synthesis of protoplasmic forms capable of rendering inanimate objects animate. Elixir of Life is what the ancients called it. They never found the formula. Beaker did. He was completing it and I knew it. I wanted to share the discovery. He wouldn't let me. Now I'm here to get it."

"But I don't know anything about Beaker's work," objected Mr. Fooze, hastily.

"Then I'll have to search the place," said Doctor Kranoff.

"Look here now—this is my home. You can't go searching my house this way."

Doctor Kranoff laughed. There was nothing funny for him to laugh at, and there was no mirth in his cackle.

"Listen, friend," he whispered. "Do you think I'm going to be stopped at the last moment? Nothing will stop me from getting my hands on this great discovery, after all I've done. Who do you suppose slipped the nitroglycerine in old Beaker's mixing vat the day he went through the roof?"

"You mean you murdered Professor Beaker?" gasped Mr. Fooze.

"Exactly," said Doctor Kranoff. "And I'll do as much for you unless you let me search the house."

Mr. Fooze realized that Doctor Kranoff was a man of his word, because the tall, gaunt scientific figure suddenly pulled a pistol from his hip pocket and levelled it at Mr. Fooze's falling waistline.

"Let's try the attic, first," suggested the Doctor, pleasantly. "By the way—not a word to your wife. Or I'll have to use two bullets."

Mr. Fooze couldn't have said a word if he wanted to. His throat was dry—parched. And he couldn't very well move his tongue anyway, for his heart was in his mouth.

Silently, he led Doctor Kranoff up the stairs. The pistol prodded him in the small of the back.

ONCE in the attic, the Doctor set to work. He ransacked the piles of debris on the floor. His clawing fingers swept through the remainder of the bottles and glassware.

"Cagliostro's curse!" he growled. "Nothing here! Let's see your cellar."

Obediently, Mr. Fooze led his ghastly guest down the stairs.

Dora was listening to the radio as they passed through the parlor.

"Where are you going?" she called.

"I'm just taking this man down to look at the furnace," lied Mr. Fooze.

Dora returned to her radio and Mr. Fooze entered the cellar. The Doctor quickly surveyed the old bottles and miscellany of scientific paraphernalia gathered from Professor Beaker's room.

"It isn't here," he muttered.

"You see," said Mr. Fooze. "That proves there is no such thing."

Doctor Kranoff patted his pistol. He smiled sweetly.

"Not so fast," he answered. "Did you move this junk down here to the cellar?"

"Why—yes."

“Then you found the Elixir of Life,” the Doctor declared. “Found it and hid it away somewhere in the house. Come on—we’ll search every room until I get my hands on it.”

Silently they ascended the stairs.

“Where is the bedroom?” demanded the Doctor.

“This way.”

They entered the bedroom. Doctor Kranoff dived for the closet. He rummaged around, always keeping Mr. Fooze covered with his pistol.

Mr. Fooze got nervous. He knew the blue bottle was safely locked in the parlor desk downstairs. If he could only head this madman off somehow!

“By the way,” he gulped, “just why do you want the Elixir of Life, anyway?”

“Oh, that?” chuckled Doctor Kranoff. “It so happens I have a few cadavers knocking around my own laboratories. Medical specimens—condemned and executed criminals, mostly. I think it might be interesting to reanimate them, don’t you?”

“No!” wailed Mr. Fooze, emphatically.

“Well, either I find the Elixir and use it on those corpses,” said the Doctor, “or else I’ll be adding a new corpse to my collection shortly.”

Mr. Fooze felt his heart sink within him at these words. His trousers sagged considerably, too. He pulled them up.

Doctor Kranoff was going through the bureau drawers now, ransacking them with muttered oaths and imprecations.

“Not a damned thing!” he snorted.

“Really,” said Mr. Fooze. “You’re making an awful mistake, Doctor. There’s no such thing as an Elixir of Life around here. It must have been blown up with Professor Beaker.”

“Say, I never thought of that!” exclaimed Doctor Kranoff. “Do you really think so?”

“Sure. It was a terrific blast. The whole attic went through the roof. Practically everything was lost.”

“Just my luck!” groaned the Doctor. “I used too much nitro-glycerine, I suppose.”

“Everybody makes mistakes,” Mr. Fooze consoled him. “You can see there’s no Elixir of Life in this house. Why don’t you just forget about it? Go home and play with your corpses or something.”

“Maybe I’d better,” sighed the demented medico. “Just this one drawer here. Your wife’s things, eh? Well, looks like nothing doing—oooops!”

DOCTOR KRANOFF opened the top bureau drawer to reveal a stack of pink lingerie. As he reached in to ruffle the garments, something stirred.

Something uncoiled like a serpent—like a pair of serpents. Something raised a brown, sinuous length from the bureau drawer.

Doctor Kranoff drew back aghast as a pair of silk stockings rose from the drawer, jumped lightly to the floor, and began to march around the room.

“Aha!” yelled Doctor Kranoff.

He plunged his hand into the drawer. A pair of gloves suddenly scuttled forth to the bureau top. Two spiders poised before the Doctor’s image in the mirror.

Scampering up the shiny surface, the right glove thumbed the Doctor’s nose in the mirror. The other glove began to open a powder box.

“So!”

Doctor Kranoff wheeled and held the pistol at Mr. Fooze’s chest.

“Come on,” he said. “You’re through fooling, now. You almost got away with it, but not quite. You have that Elixir—this proves it. You’ve hidden it away. Lead me to it.”

“But—”

“Lead me to it this minute,” said Doctor Kranoff, “or I’ll arrange matters so that you’ll need the Elixir of Life for yourself.”

Mr. Fooze gave up. He paused only long enough to recapture the gloves and stockings and replace them in the drawer.

“I’m licked,” he sighed. “The bottle is downstairs, in the parlor. Follow me.”

Down the stairs they marched. Mr. Fooze felt the muzzle of the pistol boring into his back. He had never been quite so bored in all his life.

The Doctor forced him into the parlor so quickly he almost tripped over the rug.

“Hand it over,” snapped Doctor Kranoff. “Quickly, now.”

Mr. Fooze, trembling violently, tottered over to the desk. His shaking fingers fumbled with the key.

He pulled the drawer open. He groped for the little blue bottle, found it.

He drew it forth, held it up to the light. It was half-filled. Elixir of Life!

His hands shook.

But Doctor Kranoff’s hand, holding the pistol, was quite firm and steady. So was his voice.

“Hand it over,” said Doctor Kranoff.

Mr. Fooze extended his hand . . .

SOME ten minutes later a haggard Mr. Fooze lurched out of the parlor and fell into his wife’s waiting arms.

“What happened?” gasped Dora. “All that noise—”

“Elixir of Life!” grunted Mr. Fooze.

“What Elixir?”

So Mr. Fooze told her. Told her about the blue bottle and the clothes, and Doctor Kranoff, who murdered Professor Beaker to get his secret concoction. He told about giving the Elixir of Life to Doctor Kranoff at the point of a gun.

“But I don’t understand, Sidney,” said Dora. “What was all that screaming and yelling in the parlor? And what did I see when I looked out of the window—that Doctor running down the road with that awful whatever-it-was at his heels?”

“Never mind,” smiled Mr. Fooze. “It’s all over, now. The Doctor is gone for good, I imagine, and so is the Elixir. Let’s forget the whole thing ever happened.”

“Tell me what happened,” Dora demanded. “What was all that growling and shrieking?”

“It’s very simple,” Mr. Fooze explained, happily. “You see, Doctor Kranoff was chased out of the house.”

“Don’t tell me that—”

“Right,” grinned Mr. Fooze. “My hands trembled so that when I held out the Elixir of Life, I dropped the bottle. Spilled it right smack in the middle of our tiger skin rug!”

THE END

It's Your Own Funeral

With great care Stanley Colfax laid his plans for his own funeral—except for the nails in the coffin! It was murder!

STANLEY COLFAX pounded desperately at the lid of his coffin. He exerted all his strength but the hinges scarcely budged. Panting, he lay back against the satin lining of the box and stared up into the darkness—the stifling darkness, the darkness of the grave. His lips shaped words that echoed hollowly against the coffin-lid pressing down above his face.

"This is swell," whispered Stanley Colfax. "Couldn't be better, as I live and breathe!"

Once again he pushed at the lid. This time the coffin opened with a slightly perceptible squeak of the oiled hinges, and Stanley Colfax sat up in his casket and smiled.

The tall, thin man with a touch of gray about his temples looked the picture of radiant health as he stepped out of his coffin and jauntily dusted his tweed suit with a pocket handkerchief.

Colfax hummed under his breath as he surveyed the room in which the coffin rested—one of his private apartments in the Colfax mansion.

Expensive furnishings and lavish wall-panelling barely hinted the extent of the fortune of Stanley Colfax, the oil magnate. Perhaps the best indication of Colfax's riches lay in the coffin he had selected for himself—a bronze and silver box with chased handles in solid platinum. Nothing was too good for Stanley Colfax; he was going to be buried in style.

"All the trimmings," Colfax chuckled to himself, as he bent over the table and desk in the corner.

"Yes, it's all here," he mused. He examined the papers pertaining to his burial plot and the documents made ready for cemetery officials. He fingered his burial permit absently, shuffling through his papers until he found what he was looking for.

"Ah, there it is!" he exclaimed. "My death certificate!" Admiringly he held the paper to the light. It was a beauty, to be sure—signed, sealed and delivered.

"In perfect order," he nodded. "Doctor Daroff's signature—yes—and here's the cause of my death. What did he put down? Coronary thrombosis? Good! I've always wanted to die in style, and coronary thrombosis is a good rich man's death."

Stanley Colfax wandered over to a mirror and regarded his lean image sardonically.

"Guess I'm ready to die," he told himself. "Never felt better in my life."

Abruptly, he turned to a dressing-table and rummaged around in the top drawer. His hands, emerging, clutched a number of articles. Hair-dye, a pair of horn-rimmed spectacles, a blond false mustache, spirit-gum.

"All here," he concluded. "Guess I've practised the walk enough, and the mannerisms. Must remember not to smoke any more when I get this stuff on. Wardrobe is all set, too. With the new initials embroidered on my shirts and handkerchiefs."

Colfax secured an overnight bag and bundled the disguise into it. Then he stepped to a telephone and lifted the receiver.

"Henshaw? Still there, eh? Thought this was your afternoon off." A frown creased his brow. Then he smiled. "Oh, just leaving, eh? Well—will you bring the car around to the front driveway before you go? I'm off on an errand."

Colfax went down the hall carrying the bag. “Now to dump this stuff at the hideout,” he determined. “When I return Henshaw will be gone for the day. The coast is clear. I’ll get it over with in a hurry.”

HENSHAW was waiting with the car. The bald-headed, bespectacled man-servant and major-domo of the Colfax mansion offered his master a furtive smile.

Colfax grinned back at him. “Little do you think,” he inwardly chuckled, “that this is the last time you’re going to see me alive. If you knew, then you’d break your jaw smiling, wouldn’t you. Dirty sneak!”

Aloud he merely remarked, “Nice day, Henshaw. Have a good rest.” Colfax climbed into the car and wheeled down the drive. It was a nice day. Nice day for a murder. Nice day for a funeral. But tomorrow would be a damned sight nicer.

Tomorrow he would be lying in his coffin. And his relatives would come. His sister, her husband, the kids. And his stupid uncle, Professor Crowley. A fine crew of leeches and parasites.

They’d all be on hand for the funeral—and for the reading of the will afterward. They’d crowd around his attorney, Jeremy Fuller, waiting for the big moment.

How he longed to see their faces when the will was read! Two million dollars in perfectly liquid assets—the last will and testament of Stanley Colfax; unmarried, no direct descendants. Henshaw would be expecting his cut; Colfax knew his unfailing servility masked an avaricious nature. And his greedy sister and her covetous husband would expect a big bequest. Their oily friendship didn’t fool him. The children, too, were little hypocrites. He was sure of it.

Yes, they’d hang on Jeremy Fuller’s words. And when they saw Rufus Tate come in they’d stare at this intruder—this almost unknown nephew from California. They would smile secretly at one another, nudge knowingly. Here was an outsider who couldn't hope to be cut in on the gravy!

And then Fuller would come to the bequests. What a moment! "I hereby leave my entire estate to my dear nephew, Rufus Tate."

How he would love to see their foolish faces then!

But he *would* see them.

For he would be Rufus Tate!

It was a fool-proof scheme. Colfax gloated over it as he deposited his overnight bag at the apartment he'd rented. He hugged the thought as he drove back to his home.

For years now he'd been a prey to gnawing suspicions regarding his business associates, his friends, his relatives. Stanley Colfax had fought his way up to the top of his heap and found only a lonely eminence on which to stand. His relatives thirsted for his money. He was sure of it. They hung around like a group of friendly buzzards, waiting for him to die. Still in his early forties, Colfax had the uncomfortable feeling of an octogenarian with cancer.

Well, he was sick of it. He couldn't take it. He found no pleasure in business any more; no sense to piling up a further fortune. If he could only get out from under, get away, start life anew and enjoy himself. But Stanley Colfax, the millionaire, would always be a prey for swindlers, wherever he might go. He would be a sucker, a soft touch, an easy mark.

There was only one solution. Stanley Colfax must die. That would rid him of his business obligations, his relatives, and his cursed reputation of wealth in one fell swoop. As Rufus Tate he would live.

THE simple details of the scheme were easy to arrange.

Colfax smiled cynically as he thought of how Doctor Daroff and his attorney, Jeremy Fuller, had consented to the plan. They were like all the rest—he bought their professional honor for a few paltry dollars. Fuller was bribed to carry through the scheme with the will. Doctor Daroff, his personal physician, was a weak-willed drug addict. Colfax knew it. He had agreed without any trouble. He'd forge the death certificate, give Colfax a simple cataleptic agent.

So now it was arranged. Colfax had only to walk into his empty house, drink the potion—as Juliet drank the potion given to her by Friar Lawrence—and wake up in a coffin in the cemetery.

The grave-earth would be loosely packed; he'd seen to that end of it with Jeremy Fuller. And his coffin-lid would not be nailed down. He'd awake, rise from the grave, retire to his previously-rented apartment, don his disguise, and appear at the reading of the will as Rufus Tate, a nephew.

Fuller had given him papers, credentials, identification galore. There was even a Social Security number and a draft card. Fuller was unscrupulous but thorough. And neither he nor the Doctor would dare to double-cross him.

Colfax smiled as he re-entered his driveway. He parked the car, entered his house, went upstairs to the bedroom, and produced the potion from a cabinet.

This powder, in a glass of water—

He felt excited, exhilarated. "Funny," he mused. "I've never felt so good in all my life—just the thought of dying makes life worthwhile."

Now for thirty-six hours of dreamless sleep. It was a pity he wouldn't be conscious during the funeral. He'd enjoy that. Some asinine preacher delivering the conventional rich man's eulogy over his body. And the company would send banks of flowers. Wreaths from cold-blooded business men who were glad he'd passed on. Another competitor gone—good riddance. Send the old vulture a "floral tribute" and let's see how we can cut in on his business now that he isn't around to bother us.

Colfax poured the potion into the water-glass with steady fingers. A white powder; it would dissolve readily, leave no traces. There wouldn't be a single clue, not a slip-up. The press would report death by coronary thrombosis and let it go.

Newspapers! He'd have to get the papers after he awoke. He wanted to read his obituaries, of course.

Colfax thought of P.T. Barnum and smiled. The old showman had been scuffing his feet on death's doorstep when a premature report of his demise was made. The papers had printed long articles lauding his illustrious name. Barnum read the publicity in bed, and the tributes kept him alive for several days longer.

Colfax shrugged, glanced at his watch. Five o'clock. Good—just right! That would bring him out of it at dawn, day after next. He'd be buried tomorrow—Doctor Daroff had promised to rush it through for him. Let's see, he'd drink it now. Daroff would come in to "discover" his body at six. Then he'd phone, arrange burial permits, and the funeral would take place tomorrow at sunset. Just the proper eccentric touch.

"I'd better make sure," Colfax murmured.

HE DIALED an outside number.

Daroff's office. He answered the phone. Fine—his girl was gone. No eavesdroppers.

"Hello, Doc," he said.

"Yes, Mr. Colfax."

"All set."

"Good. I'D be right over."

"Step on it." Colfax grinned. "I'll be lying on the bed, by the way—not the floor. Don't want to spoil the crease in my trousers."

Stanley Colfax hung up the receiver. He stepped to a mirror, regarded his image in the glass. Then he raised the potion to his lips in an ironic toast.

"Here's looking at you," he said. "The king is dead—long live the king." He drank the whitish liquid at a gulp. Tasteless, odorless, harmless—

A fog crept from the corners of the room, stretching forth its moist and clammy arms to embrace him. The fog slithered up to grasp his naked brain, caress its convolutions with damply pressing fingers that burned into his skull with white fire. And Stanley Colfax slid down into the fog, his brain burning as it mingled with the mist that swept over him. He kept trying to imagine what the fog might be, where it might come from. His last conscious thought brought recognition. Stanley Colfax knew what the fog was now. It was the breath, the icy breath of death.

CHAPTER II
A Grave Mistake

SOMEBODY was breathing in Colfax's ear. Somebody was gasping, his inspiration a rasping rattle that tried to gulp precious air.

Somebody was pounding with bruised and lacerated fists; pounding against an immovable barrier above.

Somebody was sobbing hysterically in a high, gasping shriek.

Somebody was staring blindly into Stygian darkness, staring with horrified eyes that tried to tear away the eternal prison of night.

Somebody was—*he, Stanley Colfax!*

Consciousness came on the wings of terror. Where was he? What was he doing?

The darkness answered mockingly. He was in his coffin. What was he doing? He was trying to get out.

But why couldn't he breathe? Why was he sobbing and struggling so?

Because . . . *he couldn't get out!*

The realization smote him. He'd been fighting madly to claw open the coffin. *And the coffin was sealed.*

He lay back on the satin, hearing the faint rustle of his shroud mingle with his shredded breathing in a counterpoint of pure horror.

Colfax tried to subdue his pantings. The air was foul, oxygen almost exhausted. How long had he lain here? How long must he lay here—*forever*?

The thought was hideous in its intensity of torment. His bleeding fingers rose to scrape the immovable lid of the coffin, pressing down on his body with the kiss of death.

Nails held. They had been pounded home, pounded with a heavy mallet that sealed the coffin, sealed his doom.

“No!” The cry rose from his lips, shattered the silence of the sepulchre.

He had to be calm. He must relax, think. From now on it was a matter of time. Each moment was precious. A life-or-death matter. A death-struggle.

Somebody had been very clever. He must be cleverer. Who had done it? That didn’t matter now. The problem was to undo the state of affairs—before it undid him.

A nailed coffin. His nails against the nails of steel. Steel. Steel against steel.

His belt!

Perspiring hands crawled down to his waist. Yes, he wore a belt, with a metal buckle. But to remove it in the cramped confines of the coffin was torture.

That torture was as nothing compared to the agony of prying up the nails with the steel belt-tongue. He worked slowly—despite his frantic efforts to be swift—loosening the wood around the nails, splinter by splinter. At last he had removed eight—the eight directly above his head. He could exert pressure now with arms, head and shoulders. He heaved. A lungful of mephitic air seared his body with pain.

The coffin-lid didn’t budge.

Another lunge. No result—but his head swam, he felt a burning sensation in his chest, and fell back gasping. A rattle rose in his throat. Death-rattle?

With every fibre of his being, Stanley Colfax threw his body upward. Bloody fingers pressed, sprained wrists tautened, cramped shoulders surged. And the coffin-lid rose up—earth tumbled into the coffin.

COLFAX writhed like a worm beneath the deluge of debris. He choked, felt the horrible savor of grave-earth in his nostrils, pressing against his shredded lips.

His fingers clawed upward. Damp clods, loosely packed, gave way as he burrowed madly. Then began a nightmare ascent. Stanley Colfax was no longer a man. He was a graveyard maggot, a wriggling worm that twisted through the pits beneath the tombstones. The clammy, rotten stench of death clung to him, and the clammy, rotten earth shrouded his struggling body as he fought his way to the surface.

And then the outer crust gave way, he pulled himself over the lip of the grave's yawning mouth, he saw the crimson promise of dawn in the blessed sky above—and Stanley Colfax lay unconscious but alive on the edge of his grave.

Dawn was no longer a promise, but full reality when Colfax opened his eyes once more.

He blinked, shuddered, drew his bruised body erect and stared down at the handsome headstone.

Yes, there it was. *"Stanley Colfax—b. 1900, d. 1943."*

"Yes," Colfax murmured. "I'm dead, all right. Or almost dead."

He wondered who had double-crossed him. Who had driven home the spikes?

For a wild moment he had an impulse to scratch a message across the tombstone at the head of the grave. "Opened by Mistake."

Then he frowned wryly. The sickish-sweet scent of the floral tributes rose to his nostrils. He stared down at the brown clods of grave-earth.

Grave-earth. An open gravel.

He glanced around abruptly at the deserted cemetery in the dawn-light. Then he hastened down the path. A greens care-taker's toolshed stood beside a cluster of trees. He tried the door. It opened. He fumbled in the darkness of the little room.

Colfax emerged carrying a shovel.

With a sigh, he began to fill in his grave.

Whoever had planted him—they must never suspect that he'd managed a resurrection. The plan must proceed on schedule; the grave would be filled in.

Panting, Colfax concluded his labors, returned the shovel to its proper place in the shed, and tried to brush some of the mud from his grimy, caked clothing. He made a poor job. He looked like a tramp.

And like a tramp, he stole furtively from the cemetery. Like an outcast he slouched along. But then, he was an outcast. An outcast from life. A nameless entity, a dead man—a zombie, a walking ghost.

He would be a ghost now until he reached his hide-out and donned the disguise of Rufus Tate. Then he'd be an important figure once more. From ghost to million-heir in one easy lesson.

Yet his lesson had not been easy. It had almost cost him his life. Somebody had planned to plant him. Doctor Daroff? Lawyer Fuller?

Well, there'd be plenty of opportunity to find out, at the reading of the will.

Yes, this afternoon would be time enough. Now to go to the apartment, rest, dress, don his disguise, and show up at the Colfax residence at two.

WEARY feet carried him to his new hiding-place. Colfax found his key under the mat, opened the door, and staggered in. He fell on the couch and slept—deeply and dreamlessly.

The sun's slanting, rays struck the bridge of his aquiline nose with noonday violence when Colfax awoke.

His eyes blinked at the face of the clock.

"After one," he muttered. "Must hurry. One time I must be prompt!"

Hurry he did. Bathing, shaving, the donning of new garments and adjustment of his disguise—all actions were completed shortly before two.

And then Rufus Tate, a blond, bespectacled young man with a wispy mustache, minced down the stairs and summoned a passing taxicab.

Drawling an address, Colfax leaned back and contemplated his new image in the rear-view mirror.

Not bad. He was unrecognizable. The spirit-gum tickled his upper lip, but the disguise tickled his fancy. He was on the way at last.

On his way to—what?

Just what was he stepping into when he decided to go through with the plan, continue with his masquerade just as though nothing had happened?

For the first time since his vivisepulture, Colfax pondered the situation.

He was taking a risk showing up at the reading of the will. Surely, whoever had nailed his coffin shut must have known of the plan. It didn't look accidental. And with the assurance that he was really dead, perhaps the situation had been altered. But there was nothing else to do but carry on and meet emergencies as they arose.

Stanley Colfax smiled grimly at his unfamiliar image in the cab mirror.

Somebody would be very surprised to see him show up.

But who? That scoundrel Fuller? Or that drug-doomed sneak, Doctor Daroff? Perhaps Henshaw—he'd had opportunities to eaves-drop during the weeks that the plan was being developed. For that matter, others could have overheard telephone discussions with either Doctor Daroff or attorney Fuller. His sister and her husband were around the house often. So was his uncle, the Professor.

Colfax clenched his fists at his sides.

He'd find out. His appearance would cause a betraying sign on the part of the guilty one.

"The guilty one," he murmured aloud, as the cab purred along. "My guess would be Fuller. He'd figure on killing me and then altering the will again. Or using the old will. But then—in either case, some relative would get the money.

"How would Fuller benefit? Unless, of course, there was collusion—a split afterward. Well, I'll find out soon enough."

The cab was wheeling up the driveway of his estate. Colfax glanced at the cheap wristwatch he had secured for "Rufus Tate" and then shook his head. Two-fifteen. A bit late.

"Better late than never," he mused, paying the driver and sauntering up the walk with a grin under the false mustache. "Yes—much better late than never!"

EXCITEMENT gripped him as he reached the door. Now he must control himself. His new disguise would be a test of all his ability. He must carry it off successfully, under the eyes of half-a-dozen people who knew him since childhood.

And there was a further test. One of those people was his attempted murderer. He'd be matching wits in a deadly game.

Colfax brought his hand up to press the buzzer, then noted the door was ajar.

Acting on sudden impulse, he kicked it open. It swung to reveal an empty hallway.

A faint trickle of conversation came from the library doorway to the left of the entrance. They must be gathered in there to hear the reading of the will.

Good. He'd make a dramatic entrance now, mince in with his "Rufus Tate" walk and surprise them.

Or—

He hesitated, noticing that the library door was partly opened. Better take a look first and see if everything was clear.

Yes, they were all there. He recognized the faces, and the backs of heads. His sister, her husband, the children, gathered around the table. Doctor Daroff standing to one side. Henshaw solicitously hovering in the background. And presiding at the end of the table, Jeremy Fuller with his briefcase.

All present and accounted for.

Now to make the grand entrance—

A clatter of heels on the outer porch caused Colfax to wheel suddenly.

Someone else was coming to join the party! An unexpected guest.

Colfax noted the portieres next to the library doors and quickly moved behind the concealing drapes. He'd better take a look at this newcomer as he rang the bell. Best to know everything in advance.

But the newcomer did not ring. Seeing the open door, the stranger walked right in; taking short, mincing steps.

The stranger headed for the library without hesitation, brushing within a foot of Colfax's concealed presence.

Colfax stared, gasped, clutched at the portieres for support as his mind reeled under the staggering impact of what he saw.

For the mincing stranger had blond hair, spectacles, and the wisp of a mustache clinging to his upper lip. *The stranger was disguised as his identical double—Rufus Tate!*

CHAPTER III

Murder, He Says

THE rest was nightmare. Colfax gripped the wall and stared through the curtains at the scene beyond in the library.

He saw the gathering turn heads as though actuated by the command of a single neck and regard the blond stranger.

He heard their exclamations of surprise, just as he had imagined hearing them when he made his appearance.

That was bad. But it was worse to hear the stranger—the double imposter, speaking in the drawling voice he had personally planned to use while posing as "Rufus Tate." It was all nightmare.

For "Rufus Tate" was speaking. He introduced himself. The California nephew. And now he was producing papers and handing them to Attorney Fuller. Credentials. Colfax could swear he saw a Selective Service card in the lot.

Sweating, Colfax saw this mysterious stranger carrying out, word for word, the entire dialogue he had planned to use.

Was he mad? Everything—the grisly struggle in the grave, the strange upset in his plans, and now the appearance of this masquerader—might be merely a hallucination of his diseased mind. Perhaps he was dreaming, and would awaken.

Awaken where? In that mouldering grave?

Colfax pressed trembling fingers to his dyed temples and tried to contain himself. He'd anticipated problems, but this was too much.

Now Jeremy Fuller was suggesting that they all sit down and listen to the reading of the will. The last will and testament of Stanley Colfax, deceased.

Stanley Colfax had looked forward to enjoying this moment when his will was read.

Now he ignored it. He was frantically scanning each face, each figure in the room. He must find a betraying gesture, a sign.

His mind scurried like a frantic rat in the bony prison of his skull.

He was analyzing—searching for motives—clues.

His attention shifted from face to face.

THERE was his sister, Regina Basset. A fat, perpetually smirking woman with peroxide curls. She sat there now with a mourning veil over her triple-chinned face. What black secret did that veil hide? The veil of hypocrisy . . .

Next to her, Andrew Basset, her husband. A weak-chinned failure. Always the hearty "good fellow" type, but Colfax didn't trust his insincere flattery. Perhaps he'd ignored Andrew Basset too blithely. The weak chin might hide a strong ambition. An ambition that stopped at nothing—even murder.

The children sat beside their parents. Three good reasons why the Bassets might kill.

Colfax thought of how they had treated him. His sister had suggested moving in, keeping house for him. Just an excuse, of course, to saddle him with the whole family. She was always pitying him for his "loneliness" and urging that he marry. It hadn't fooled him. She was after the fortune.

Suppose she or her husband had stumbled on this plot of his, decided to take advantage of it by hiring their own "stooge" to play the part of the nephew from California?

Still, the Doctor and Fuller wouldn't be likely to agree. And neither his sister nor her husband could force them.

But maybe one of the children might exert pressure.

Colfax's suspicious gaze fell on the younger members of the family.

The towheaded one was Bill. Twenty-two, an instructor in the Civil Air Corps, but a snob. A chaser of society girls.

Bill had demanded a sports roadster from him two years ago. He knew where the money was, all right. Would he have the courage to go after it—in the worst way?

Maybe it was Tommy. He was older, twenty-five, with a wife. A young lawyer, already itching to get into politics. Ambitious, like his mother. Hard-headed. Hard-headed enough to plan a murder?

Cynthia. Just eighteen. A girl, but with all the mother's ruthless determination.

The whole family must hate him for his money. A lone bachelor—why was he entitled to so much when they had so little? Kill him—

Colfax scowled. He glanced at Henshaw; Henshaw the imperturbable. The secretary and man-of-all-work stood inconspicuously in shadow. Why? To hide the gloating, secret smile on his face?

Henshaw was always smiling. For ten years he'd served Colfax in this big house, and always he smiled. What in hell did he have to smile about? Unless he were hugging a secret in his breast—a cherished plan.

He'd had opportunities to listen in on the phone, to overhear conversations when plans were laid. Perhaps he'd stumbled on the plot and acted. Had his cold, bony hands driven home the coffin nails?

Colfax's glance fell on Professor Crowley. He started. Hadn't noticed his elderly uncle before—but then, nobody ever paid any attention to Professor Crowley.

Perhaps that was a mistake—not paying attention to Professor Crowley.

Come to think of it, he knew very little about his eccentric uncle. He was a poor chemistry professor in a local-university, and he was always at the point of asking Colfax for funds to set up a private research laboratory. But the bent little man had never come out pointblank with the request. He merely scurried in and out on hasty visits, said little, but sat there with a wry grin while he puffed on his pipe and regarded Stanley Colfax with myopic eyes.

An eccentric professor—serving the cause of Science—Science was a jealous master and demanded tribute. A tribute of blood for the great cause of research? Why not?

One of those things, perhaps.

COLFAX watched Jeremy Fuller as he read the will. He had a bland, purring voice; the voice of a sleek cat. And he resembled a sleek cat with his corpulent paunch, his slick grey hair, his slanted eyes and well-kept nails long as claws.

An unsavory character, Jeremy Fuller. A lawyer who wriggled his feline way through loopholes in legal fences. A cultured cat who would wallow in any garbage-pail if the pickings were rich, but who purred oh so gently when stroked the right way.

Fuller knew the plan. But would he have the guts to attempt such a thing?

Doctor Daroff, now, was a different proposition. The gaunt doctor with the mane of bushy black hair sat hunched forward in his chair. His unnaturally bright eyes gleamed beneath sabre brows. He pulled at his mustache with long white fingers. Fingers skilled at administering hypodermics—to others, and to himself.

A cokey. A hop-head. Brilliant, but thoroughly unprincipled. And perhaps not altogether sane. Those eyes of his had narrowed to black slits when Colfax promised him ten thousand dollars for the fake death certificate. Doctor Daroff loved money. It might be that he loved it enough to kill for it. And he’d had every opportunity to take advantage of the situation. He was “in” on the plans. He and he alone was master of the situation.

Colfax watched him carefully now, through the curtains, as Doctor Daroff listened to the purring recital of Jeremy Fuller.

The climax had come. Every head leaned forward as Fuller began to read the portion of the will pertaining to bequests.

Here it was now.

“Entire estate to my dear nephew, Rufus Tate.”

That *was* a shocker!

Colfax could swear that he read genuine astonishment on the faces of all those present. But anyone clever enough to plan this situation would have sense to restrain natural emotion.

And there was one unknown quantity. The false nephew. The stranger. “Rufus Tate” sat there calmly.

“This is all so sudden,” he told the gathering. “So unexpected.”

But he didn’t look surprised. He didn’t look flustered. Whoever he was, he knew what he was doing—stealing two million dollars from a supposed dead man!

“I don’t know what to say,” he drawled. “Why—Uncle Stanley—I hardly knew the man.”

“Uncle Stanley” behind the curtains had a grim smile on his face. This last statement was certainly a true one!

As Jeremy Fuller concluded the reading of the will, Colfax pondered. This “Rufus Tate” imposter, now—suppose that he were really the instigator of the plot? Suppose he, whoever he was, had managed by some accident to get wind of the affair and had acted on his own. Then everyone else’s surprise was genuine. Perhaps Doctor Daroff and Jeremy Fuller thought that this man was really Colfax in disguise. They might be fooled, too.

If so—who was “Rufus Tate?”

COLFAX’S head was spinning. All this intrigue, this mystery—and he alone to play detective and find the man who had attempted to kill him.

Or the woman. He must move quickly, take steps at once.

Should he step into the library, confront the imposter and blurt out the whole story? Tell them to their faces what he had done and why he did it?

That would be the best way. Except—

Except that nobody would believe him. Doctor Daroff had faked a death certificate. Jeremy Fuller had acted illegally in reading the will of a man he knew to be alive. They would have to deny his story. He couldn't choose the easy way out. So he had to proceed the hard way. But how?

Colfax stared again at the scene in the library.

"I'm so overwhelmed," the new heir was babbling. "Really, Aunt Regina, I don't know what to say."

Regina Basset and her husband didn't know what to say, either. They could scarcely conceal their active hatred. A glum look had settled over Professor Crowley's wrinkled face. The three Basset children were muttering between themselves.

Henshaw had turned away. What secret lay buried behind his bespectacled gaze?

Doctor Daroff was tapping a corner of the desk with nervous fingers as Jeremy Fuller fumbled with his briefcase.

Only "Rufus Tate" seemed to be at ease. He smiled now, clapped Andrew Basset on the back.

"Let's all have a drink," he suggested. "I think we need it."

There was no command in his voice, merely suggestion—but Henshaw seemed to sense the presence of a new master in the house. He scurried off.

Colfax waited, debating his next move. Henshaw returned with decanter and glasses on a tray. He poured. Fuller assisted him in passing the glasses around. Even teetotaller Professor Crowley took the whiskey.

"Rufus Tate" raised his glass and smiled. "To the memory of Uncle Stanley," he toasted.

The company drank.

Stanley Colfax tensed himself. This was the moment to act, to stop the farce. He would take off his mustache, go in there, and—

Empty glasses fell to the floor. Mouths gaped open in horror. Eyes goggled madly.

For Doctor Daroff had risen from his chair. He stood there, sabre brows raised, his eyes staring glassily at nothing. Long fingers stroked the side of his throat absently. Daroff's mouth opened. He took a step forward.

A voice—a choking strangled croak—welled from the red cavern of his throat.

"You—fiends!"

Regina Basset screamed as Doctor Daroff pitched forward on his face.

For a moment, nothing shattered the fear-etched tableau in the library. Then Jeremy Fuller sighed, heavily.

"This," he whispered, "is murder!"

CHAPTER IV

More Fun—More People Killed!

MURDER—police. Police—investigation.

It was a simple equation. Stanley Colfax solved it at once. He slipped out of the house without a backward glance and raced down the driveway as fast as his feet would carry him.

He hailed a passing cab at the corner and gave his new address—the address of the hideout.

There was work to be done and he must think.

If Colfax had any doubts about the seriousness of a murder plot before, they were dispelled now. One of his suspects was a murderer. But now there was one suspect less. The Doctor couldn't be guilty of the plot, because he was dead. And why was he dead? Because he knew too much?

Better decide that when he arrived at the apartment. One thing he knew—he couldn't have stayed there at the house when the police arrived. The presence of two gentlemen named "Rufus Tate" would be difficult to explain. He couldn't explain it himself.

There was a lot he couldn't explain. Colfax thought about it later, pacing up and down the floor of the apartment.

He still didn't know who'd tried to kill him; his sister, her husband, one of the children, Jeremy Fuller, Professor Crowley, Henshaw, or the fake nephew."

He still didn't know who the fake "nephew" could be.

He still didn't know who killed Doctor Daroff, or why.

Three mysteries to solve!

Colfax decided to take the last one first. Doctor Daroff. He had been in on the plot. Apparently somebody desired to remove him—perhaps because be knew too much about one of the other mysteries, or held the key to the situation. A fair surmise.

But who did it?

Henshaw had brought in the drinks, including the poisoned whiskey. Therefore Henshaw was the most logical suspect.

Yet suppose this were true and Henshaw had intended the poison for someone else?

That was a subtle complication.

Still, Colfax could feel fairly certain that the police would reason as he did, and hold Henshaw for the murder of Doctor Daroff.

That would release the other suspects at once: Crowley, Fuller, Regina Basset, Andrew Basset, the children, and the fake "nephew." No need to even think about Stanley Colfax. They wouldn't have a clue to make them suspect the affair demanded further investigation.

So Colfax would have to discover his own attempted murderer himself. And, of course, he'd have to discover the identity of the second "Rufus Tate."

Two cigarettes later, Colfax began to think about that imposter. The man wearing his disguise, the man with his credentials, duplicated. The man who walked in and nonchalantly took a two million dollar bequest.

Who was he?

In the answer to that question lay the key of the mystery.

How was it that this man was wearing the identical disguise Colfax had selected for himself?

Somebody obviously had tipped him off to the plot.

Even so, where would this stranger procure such a disguise?

Colfax grinned.

“Why didn’t I think of that sooner?” he muttered. “There’s only one place he could get it, of course. At the same place I got mine! Racker’s Costume Shop!”

IT WAS obvious, now. In order to make sure of duplicating the hair-dye and the false spectacles and the blond mustache, the man must have patronized the shop that Colfax had gone to.

He’d stopped in about a week ago and purchased his supplies from Mr. Racker in his seedy shop in the slum district. It had seemed safe, harmless enough. But this stranger had been on his trail and duplicated his purchases.

Colfax’s life was just one taxicab after another. He called one now, and hastily gave the address of Racker’s Costume Shop.

“Now we’re making progress,” Colfax told himself. “Mr. Racker will be able to tip me off on who came in and asked for the same things I bought. I’m wearing the stuff now—I’ll tell him I’m going to a costume party this evening.”

The excuse would sound logical, Colfax reasoned. For as the cab drew up to a curb along one of the tangled streets, he realized that dusk had fallen. The red sunset crept off to die behind the looming walls of the squalid tenements that huddled along the street.

In the twilight, Colfax hurried along to the fly-specked window bearing the sign of Racker’s Costume Shop. He descended the steps to the basement entrance and opened the door.

A pasty-faced blonde girl was leaning over the stained counter in the gloomy little shop. Colfax approached her.

“I’d like to speak to the gentleman who waited on me last week,” he began. “Mr. Racker, that would be?”

“He’s out,” said the girl. “Can I help?”

“Perhaps.” Colfax forced a smile. “Do you happen to know of any customer who has come in during the past seven days and bought a pair of hornrimmed spectacles like these? And a false mustache like the one I’m wearing? And hair-dye—ash blond dye?”

The girl noted his disguise now and shrugged disdainfully. “Uh-uh,” she grunted. “I don’t remember. Racker might know, but he’s out. Whyn’cha come back tomorrow?”

“Guess I’d better.” Colfax smiled and turned away. The girl’s watery blue eyes followed his retreating shoulders.

“Screwball,” she muttered.

Colfax emerged upon a darkening street. The cab had departed. Should have told the driver to wait. Now he’d have to walk. And the prospect of a walk through this deserted slum area was depressing.

Tomorrow he’d come back bright and early and talk to Racker. Too bad Racker was out. Wonder where he’d gone to.

And then—Colfax knew.

It hit him like that. All at once.

He remembered Lou Racker. A tall man. About his own height. A man in his early forties. His own age. A man who knew what disguise he was planning to assume.

A man who could assume that disguise himself!

The fake “Rufus Tate” might he Lou Racker!

Colfax was passing the alley behind the costume shop as the thought struck him.

It hit him with such a staggering force of realization that he didn’t notice the figure creeping behind him; the figure slinking along the alley with blackjack poised to strike.

And so it happened.

The thought hit him—and then, out of the gathering twilight, the blackjack hit him.

Colfax spun around, saw the crouching figure raise a long arm to strike again. He tried to dodge, but too late. The blackjack came down in a vicious arc, and Colfax fell.

His last conscious vision was of the coffin in the cemetery—the waiting coffin of Stanley Colfax which would be filled now, after all.

CHAPTER V

The Suspense Is Killing

WHEN "Rufus Tate" returned to the Colfax mansion, it was well after dark. He adjusted his mustache before ringing the bell, and patted the bulge at his hip pocket reassuringly. That blackjack sure came in handy!

He smiled.

There was no copper on the door. Good. The excitement was all over. There had been a brief questioning period, and then the cops had taken Henshaw off to a cell. Obviously, since he served the drinks, he planted the poison.

After that, everybody was free to depart. Just enough time to go back to the shop, wait for Colfax to show up—as he surely would, after seeing another "nephew" appear—and slip him the business.

Everything clicked. And now to show up again, just to nose around. Lull suspicion a little. And find out a few things—see how the rest of them felt, if they were still hanging around.

And they were. "Rufus Tate" found the entire gathering intact in the parlor. Of course, Henshaw wasn't there to serve any drinks. And Doctor Daroff was busy attending a post-mortem. His own.

"Rufus Tate" suppressed a grin and adjusted his spectacles as he entered the parlor.

He had to match the funereal air reflected by the others. And it *was* thick in there.

"Rufus, you're back!" Regina Basset swayed up to him. The fat woman had been crying, and her powder was streaked with mascara stains.

"Yes, Aunt Regina." He sighed, heavily.

"I know how you feel, dear boy. That horrible scene—coming right on top of Stanley's death! Poor Stanley!" The woman sighed. "I can't stop thinking about him."

She lowered her voice. "I'm afraid we weren't very good to him when he was alive. I was always nagging him about getting married, or coming in to keep house myself. I didn't realize the poor man wanted to be alone. He was an introvert. No wonder he left you his money—you were the only one who didn't pester him."

"Rufus Tate" stared at Regina Basset. There was no trace of envy in her voice. Apparently being cut out of a two-million dollar will didn't bother her in the least.

"How do you feel, Rufus?" Andrew Basset, her husband, joined them in the doorway. "Better get some rest. This must come as a shock." His weak chin wobbled. "Stanley was a wonderful character. Wouldn't think he'd have such a double-crossing sneak as Henshaw around."

Not a word about the will from him, either. "Rufus Tate" was surprised. You'd think they'd hate the old guy's guts—his guts, too. Well, that's life for you. And a good break. They weren't suspicious.

DELIBERATELY he walked toward the table where the three children sat. Towheaded Bill, curly-haired Tommy and the girl, Cynthia, flashed him a sad smile. Their grief seemed genuine, and therefore harmless.

Out of the shadows rustled Professor Crowley. "Mr. Fuller is expecting you," he said. "He's upstairs in the private study, going over the papers of the estate. I suppose he wants to clear up the final details."

“Thanks,” said “Rufus Tate.” He eyed the elderly scientist closely. What did this old bird think about it all?

Unexpectedly the answer came. A birdlike claw was thrust into his palm.

“I know how you feel, my boy,” whispered the oldster. “Your Uncle Stanley was a great man. We all miss him. But it’s up to you to carry on now, as head of the family. Good luck.”

“Tate” turned away, moving towards the stairs. A funny bunch. Apparently they had all admired Stanley Colfax—God knows why. He hadn’t done anything for them, and he’d cut them all out of his will. Too bad he couldn’t reconsider the matter. But it was too late now. Much too late.

“Rufus Tate” smiled as he went up the stairs.

So Jeremy Fuller was in the private study, eh? Going over papers, was he? Well—it was time for him to take a hand in this business of “settling the estate.” He’d settle a few other matters with Fuller, too.

Brushing the slick gray hair from his forehead with his long-nailed fingers, Jeremy Fuller regarded his visitor with a detached amusement glinting in slanted eyes.

His purring voice was bland.

“I’ve been expecting you,” he said. “Close the door and sit down. Everything—work out?”

“Perfect job,” said “Rufus Tate.”

“Thanks to me.” Jeremy Fuller rose. “Lucky I saw that reflection in the hall mirror and realized old Colfax was hiding behind the curtains this afternoon when the will was read. God knows what he might have tried to pull off. I still don’t know how he popped out of the grave, though.”

“He’s ready to be popped back into it,” chuckled “Rufus Tate.”

“Fine.” Fuller rubbed his hands. “Are you sure?”

“Sure as I’m alive. I slugged him back of the costume shop, dragged him in, and tied him up—out like a light.”

“You’ve been busy. Well, so have I,” smiled the lawyer. “I managed to pin the poison job on Henshaw and cleared the law out in a hurry. Nobody suspects and the whole family is ready to forget all about it."

"YOU haven't told me yet how you got rid of Daroff," said "Rufus Tate," sitting down beside Fuller.

"Didn't you guess? It was simple," the lawyer grinned.

"To begin with, I've never told you my original plan, have I? That was before you came into the picture.

"Colfax had worked out this scheme to disguise himself as his own nephew after pulling off a fake death. Daroff and I planned it for him, of course. But I got to thinking. Why not let him really die, and then hire somebody to pose as the nephew and split the loot with him?

"Naturally, I thought of you, and sent Colfax to your shop to buy his disguise so you could size him up nad see if you could carry it off. I knew you used to be an actor and were the same build as Colfax. So—"

"Skip the ancient history," snapped "Rufus Tate." He rose. "What's this about the Doctor, now?"

"Well, you know how we figured it. Doctor Daroff would simply give Colfax real poison instead of the sleeping potion. To make doubly sure, I'd nail down his coffin-lid. Which I did.

"But Daroff must have had a plan of his own. He didn't administer the real poison after all. Of course, he didn't know I'd nailed down the coffin-lid, but apparently it worked out the same way. Colfax got out, somehow, and showed up.

"At that time Daroff planned to go to him and tell him that I wanted to double-cross him and poison him. He thought Colfax would reward him for exposing the scheme.

"But I'd found the real poison here in the house that morning. I knew it hadn't been used. A pinch would do the trick. I kept the pinch in my pocket.

"When I saw the reflection of Colfax in the hall I knew he'd storm in pretty soon. Daroff would speak up and we'd be cooked. So you suggested a drink. Henshaw brought it in—but I helped him pass the glasses. And I made sure that the poison was in Doctor Daroff's glass. Simple?"

"Very. And clever."

"Thank you." Jeremy Fuller smiled his feline smile.

"After that it was all routine. Of course I knew Colfax would head for the costume shop sooner or later when he left here. So when the cops left I sent you to follow him. The rest is history.

"But now let's talk about more pleasant things." Again Jeremy Fuller rubbed his fat hands together. "With your acting ability and my brains we can go a long way. A very long way on two million dollars! We'll make a very jolly twosome."

"Rufus Tate" towered over the lawyer.

"Not so fast," he whispered. "There's one flaw in your plan."

"What's that?" Jeremy Fuller's purr had disappeared.

"Guess, master-mind!"

"I don't see—"

"Then I'll tell you." The voice of "Rufus Tate" was harsh. "I don't need you any more. I've got the money now, through the will, and you're through. If you want to tell the police, go ahead. You'll go to jail for murder. And you can't implicate me for anything except impersonation."

"Yes? What about Colfax?" Fuller spoke through trembling lips.

"How can you prove I murdered him? Where's the body?"

JEREMY FULLER was no longer a cat. He was a tiger. He launched himself through the air, but "Rufus Tate" was ready. The blackjack whirled, and Fuller fell across the chair, holding his jaw.

"Now," said "Rufus Tate."

"What do you want me to do?" whispered Fuller.

"Just write it all out—everything you told me here. Sign a little confession."

Fuller's eyes darted helplessly. He gazed at the waving blackjack as though hypnotized. Slowly, he fumbled for a pen, drew blank paper before him. He wrote.

"Rufus Tate," waving the blackjack, stood over him.

And then, without warning, the door opened behind him. Fists flailing, young Bill Basset charged.

"I heard you," he grunted. His fist swung upward and "Rufus Tate" ducked just in time. The blackjack came up.

Jeremy Fuller scuttled around to grab him from the rear. But "Rufus Tate" turned and brought his weapon down on the lawyer's skull. There was a sickening thud, and the fat attorney dropped.

But Bill Basset and his brother Tommy closed in.

"Let him have it—the filthy swine!" Bill grunted.

"Rufus Tate" dropped the blackjack, held up both hands.

"No," he gasped. "Don't! Can't you see—I'm your uncle, Stanley Colfax!"

CHAPTER VI

Where There's a Will, There's a Way

THE gathering in the parlor was considerably more cheerful half an hour later. Jeremy Fuller was not present. He had left, escorted by blue-clad figures summoned by phone. The blue-clad figures had also taken a neat document along—Fuller's confession, ornamented by a shaky signature. Henshaw would soon be released on the strength of it.

And now Stanley Colfax, minus mustache and glasses, and with a hint of natural darkness at the roots of his dyed hair, was finishing his story.

"You can see how it happened," he said. "Fuller's plot worked perfectly. His stooge, Racker, posing as 'Rufus Tate' actually did knock me out and tie me up in back of the costume shop. That is—he started to tie me up, when I recovered consciousness. As he bent over me I got the blackjack out of his pocket and turned the tables. When I left the shop, *he* was unconscious and tied. The police will find him there now, I'm sure.

"Then, naturally, I had to come here. I planned to pose as Racker posing as *me*—knowing that the instigator of the plot, whoever he was, would betray himself.

"It worked. I've told you how Fuller disclosed the whole story. I had him up to the point of writing this confession without revealing my identity. Then the boys came in, and that's that."

"Nice work, Uncle Stanley," grinned Bill.

Stanley Colfax shook his head.

"It wasn't so nice," he said. "I'm ashamed to tell you these things. As I look back on it now, my whole plan was the greedy concept of a small, suspicious mind.

"I thought to spite my own relatives, my own flesh and blood, with the help of a shady doctor and a crooked lawyer. That's pretty contemptible, when you come to think of it, isn't it?

"But I've learned my lesson—the hard way. When I came here tonight as 'Rufus Tate' not one of you had anything but honest sorrow in your hearts over my supposed death. I'd been fooling myself all along that you were after my fortune. What an imbecile I've been!"

Stanley Colfax smiled.

"From now on things will be different," he promised. "Tommy—"

"Yes, Uncle Stanley?"

"Tommy, you're a lawyer. I want you to do something for me."

"What is it?"

"Draw me up a new will," said Stanley Colfax. "And leave plenty of room for bequests—because you'll all be in it!"

1944

Lefty Feep's Arabian Nightmare

Ali Ben Alikat had eight snakes and a mission in life. Since he was not able to handle both at the same time, Lefty Peep got the reptiles!

MEOW!" yelled Lefty Feep. "Take it away!"

I stared up at the tall, thin racketeer *raconteur* as he stood trembling before my table in Jack's Shack.

"Grab loose," pleaded Feep. "Remove it out of here."

"What's the matter?" I asked. "Why are you so upset when you see me eating spaghetti?"

"Spaghetti?" Feep breathed a sigh of relief. "I am nearly beating it when I see you eating it."

"Why should spaghetti affect you?" I asked, as Feep sat down at the table beside me. "Doesn't it agree with you?"

"It is not a question of my digestion," said Lefty Feep. "I take one look at the spaghetti and I think I am seeing snakes."

"Snakes?"

"Snakes give me the shakes," Feep muttered. "I am not in hep style over a reptile."

"Don't like snakes, eh?"

"A boa constrictor is not a pretty picture, and I am not much fonder of an anaconda."

I shook my head. “I don’t understand this, Lefty. Have you been drinking and seeing snakes—is that it?”

Feep nodded slowly.

“When I’m drinking, from snakes I’m shrinking,” he admitted.

I smiled. “Then if I were you, I’d stop drinking. If you stop drinking you won’t see any more snakes.”

Feep frowned. “But I do stop and I still see snakes,” he told me. “I see serpents in the present tense.”

A peculiar gleam came into Lefty Feep’s eyes. I recognized it only too well. Lefty Feep had another story. When Feep gets a gleam in his eyes, I generally get a pain in my ears. This time I decided to make my escape in a hurry. I rose from the table.

“I must be going,” I remarked.

“Exactly,” said Mr. Feep, pushing me back in my chair. “You are going to hear my story.”

“But—”

“I must tell you this,” said Feep. “I have a snake tale.”

“Sorry,” I murmured. “I am not interested in your peculiar anatomy.”

“Allow me to twist this tale for you,” said Lefty Feep. He held me very firmly in place.

I sighed. There was nothing else to do but sit there while Feep began to wail his tale.

“It all starts,” said Lefty Feep—

ALL starts the other day.

I am feeling down in the dumps the other day, which is not surprising, because I am down in a dump—a place called the Oasis.

The Oasis is a little tavern located in a desert of clip joints. It has a sort of oriental atmosphere—because it is never aired out.

Part of the desert charm lies in the fact that it is usually deserted. Then, of course, there is the sand and the palms.

The sand is in the cuspidors, and the palms belong to the waiters, who are always holding them out for a tip.

The owner of the Oasis is an oriental character generally known as the Sneak of Araby.

I do not know why I mention all this, because I am not particularly interested in the atmosphere of this joint. I am in here trying to drown my sorrows—only from the rate at which I inhale, I am more likely to drown myself. The more I spin the bottle, the soberer I get.

Do not get the wrong impression. I am not a drinking man. I seldom drink any more—any more than I can get. But there is a reason.

To speak rankly and frankly, I am in love with a dove—but she flies too high for me. The ginch in question is a burlesque cutie; a beauty but very snooty. Her name is Fanny, and for a while she and I are closer than Siamese twins.

But a few days ago she comes and tells me that she is going to abandon her art and try for a job in a classical ballet. She is getting persnickety about terpsichore, and sure enough, she lands a spot in the rehearsals of a ballet troupe.

Right away she starts putting on the dog about going from Minsky to Nijinsky in one easy lesson, and I can see that she is giving me the colder shoulder.

I question her and find out she has a new flame—none other than the personality who is backing the ballet. He is Herman Sherman, an overgrown hunk of vermin.

I do not like Herman Sherman, or classical dancing, or her attitude. But instead of punching Herman Sherman in the nose and spoiling Fanny’s chances, I walk out of her life like a gentleman. I am really gone on the damsel, and so I bow out gracefully and head for this Oasis tavern like I say. And there I stand all alone at the bar in the afternoon, trying to drown my sorrows.

I am just going down for the third time when I happen to notice this whisker standing next to me at the bar.

He comes in very quietly, because I do not hear him approach at all. The first thing that attracts my attention is when I reach for a glass and get a handful of beard instead.

I put the beard back on the bar, not being a beard-drinker, and stare at the face attached to it. It is a dark brown face, hiding in back of a big nose. It is not exactly the kind of a face you find on bar-room floors, so I examine the owner more carefully.

He is dressed in a long white night gown and has a towel wrapped around his head. Unless he is a fugitive from a Turkish bath, I cannot place him.

Then I notice he carries a big, long wicker basket. And I think I figure things out.

He must be the Oasis version of a cigarette girl. I know there is a shortage of help these days—they can't get cigarette girls because they are all working as welders.

THE whisker smiles at me, but I pay no attention you can mention to this clown in the nightgown, because I am too busy drinking. In fact, I am getting wobbly. Almost at the stage where I expect to see snakes.

I do.

Suddenly, on the bar in front of me, I see the snakes gliding along. They are lean, mean, and green.

I mutter and utter a swell yell, then cover my face with my hands. I do not like to see snakes. I wish that they would go away.

But they don't.

When I look again, the snakes are still there.

I cover my eyes once more and brace myself. It can't be true. I sneak another peek, very meek and weak. And then I shriek.

Because the snakes are more than just wriggling on the bar, now. They are coiled up. Coiled up in front of me. Coiled up, five of them in a line. They twist and turn and then lie still. And I see they are coiled up in a *word.*

Yes, those snakes are lying on the bar, each with its body twisted to spell out a letter. All together, they spell out the word—"S O U S E."

I can’t understand it.

And I can’t stand it!

Five snakes, spelling out the word, “SOUS E,” in front of me on the bar!

One flash and I am ready to dash. I get myself braced to run out of the joint.

At this moment the guy in the night gown suddenly notices the snakes. Fie just blinks and winks. Then he bends down and whispers to them.

Yes, he whispers through his whiskers at the snakes!

“My little green friends,” he croons, “It is very naughty of you to escape once more.”

Naughty is no word for it—revolting is my idea. But the whisker is not revolted. He grins at the serpents and then he reaches into his nightie and pulls out a little two-by-four tuba and begins to blow it.

He begins to blow this tuba, and it is lucky for him that there is nobody in the joint and the bartender is sweeping the floor, because he really sets up a squeaking that is reeking.

The tune he plays is certainly an eerie earful, but it is evidently number one on the snakes’ Hit Parade, because they suddenly uncoil and wriggle back into the wire basket from which they emerge. The snake that makes the “E” in “SOUSE” almost fractures its pelvis trying to uncoil again.

I almost fracture my neck staring at this far from delectable spectacle.

The whisker notices my noticing, and when he finally puts the lid back on the basket, he blinks his lids at me with a smile. At least I think there is the sunshine of a smile lurking under the silver lining of his beard.

“Ten thousand apologies, my honored and esteemed sir,” he says, in a high voice. “I am humbly sorry if my little friends in any way disturb you. You like my little friends?”

“They are no friends of mine,” I tell him. “I do not care to have any friends that crawl around on their bellies and make fun of honest drunks.”

“Allah willing, it shall not happen again, I assure you,” says the whitey in the nightie.

THEN curiosity gets the better of me. “Am I nuts,” I inquire, “or do I see these snakes spell out a word?”

“Your sanity is sublime and beyond question,” the dark man assures me. “The serpents do indeed spell out a word.”

And he goes ahead talking, introducing himself to me. He is Ali Ben Alikat, an ornamental oriental from Iraq and Mesopotamia. An Arab, in other words. He claims that back in the East he is a sort of priest—only in his country the term is “dervish”. He is one of these whirling dervishes, and according to him, he certainly gets around, until Axis gunfire disturbs his sleep one Arabian night.

I ask him why the Axis should bother him, and he bows and tells me.

“It is because of the treasure, of course,” he whispers, waggling his beard and looking around to see if we are still alone.

“What treasure?”

“The sceptre,” he mutters, from under his beard. “The sceptre of the great Caliph, Haroun Al Raschid.”

“Come again?” I invite him. “Haroun Al Raschid, Caliph of Bagdad,” he tells me. “It is a sacred relic, hidden and guarded by dervishes throughout the centuries. If the Axis could but lay hands on it, they would boast of this possession. Legend has it that he who owns the sceptre is a conqueror none can stand before. And my simple countrymen, learning that the Axis has the sceptre, would bow before German agents and give in. As a dervish, it is my sacred duty to guard that sceptre with my worthless life.”

He goes on to mention that he flees to this country with the sceptre and also takes the snakes. The sacred snakes.

“Sacred snakes?” I inquire.

“Ah, but yes, *effendi,”* he answers. “Feep is the name,” I come back. “But what is this about sacred snakes?”

“Hatched under the Kaaba stone,” he whispers. “In the holy of holies. Raised in the mosques by the followers of the Prophet. Full of the wisdom of the serpent.

“Direct descendants of the serpent in the Garden of Eden.”

“What good are they?”

“Ah, *effendi,* they constitute what you in the west would call oracles. They can be used in soothsaying. When I play to them the music of the dervishes, they will give warnings and foretell the future by spelling out words,” explains this Bagdaddy.

“Wait a minute, now,” I object. “That I cannot swallow. I hear a lot about snake-charmers, I admit, but I still think I have hallucinations when I see them spell out a word.”

“Behold, then,” drones Ali Ben Alikat. “By the beard of the Prophet, observe.”

And he whips the cover off the wire basket. I take a look. Then I wish to take a powder. Eight snakes are coiled there on the side and bottom of the basket.

“By the sacred cuticle of Mohammed,” says the dervish, “this is not the work of *djinn* or *efreet.* There is no sorcerous enchantment involved. These are the veritable serpents of wisdom, who foretell the future and act as auguries, divinators, and—”

“Snakes alive,” I interrupt. “Kindly close the basket. I don’t like the way they look at me.”

“They will not harm you,” says Ali Ben Alikat. “Wait, and I will introduce you. My little ones, meet Lefty Feep.”

“Hello,” I gulp, having nothing else to say.

THE snakes writhe into a heap and suddenly they are lying coiled up in the bottom of the basket, spelling out the word, “H E L L O.”

Absolutely, that’s what they do!

And as the snakes coil, I recoil.

“Why do you carry them around?” I gasp.

“Merely to warn me if the Axis or its agents get on my trail,” explains Ali Ben Alikat.

"But you're not a Bagdad lad any more," I reason with him. "You escape, don't you?"

"The Axis has agents everywhere," Alikat sighs. "And they still wish to secure this sceptre. I am going to give it to a museum for safe-keeping, I believe. But I have not made arrangements to turn it over. Consequently it is still in my possession."

"Where is it?" I ask.

"Here," says Ali Ben Alikat. He whips up the corner of his nightie. I bend down and see it strapped to his leg. Sure enough, it is a long golden sceptre, with beautiful designs on it.

"The serpents will warn me and tell me when to turn this over to authorities in your country," the dervish explains. "They are my spiritual guides. Are you not, my little green brothers?"

He smiles at the snakes in the basket and lowers his nightie again.

Suddenly he frowns. He stares down and points at the snakes with a skinny finger. I look at them. The serpents coil up furiously and I read their message. "LOOK OUT," is what seven of the snakes spell, and the eighth one is just trying to form itself into an exclamation point when—

The lights go out.

So do I, almost. Because I hear a swish and a thud behind my ear. I duck just in time. I hear Ali Ben Alikat screeching in the darkness, and know he is fighting some one or some thing. I turn and grapple with a figure. And when I grapple, I really grap. There is a lot of howling and yelling and cursing, and then the lights go on again and I am standing there with my foot caught in a cuspidor.

Ali Ben Alikat is leaning against the bar, clutching his basket of snakes. His turban is a little unravelled, and he is breathing hard, but he is not hurt. He gives me the old glare and stare.

"Dog of a dog!" he howls. "Pig of a pig! Mule of a mule!"

"Make up your mind," I suggest.

"You are a spy," he accuses. "You put the frame around me, eh?"

"I don't frame you," I object.

"You turn out the lights and let them attack me," he wails. "Then they steal my sceptre."

"Nobody steals a sceptre," I tell him.

"Look," yells Ali Ben Alikat, lifting his skirts. "It is gone from my leg. It *is* stolen!"

"It is not stolen," I reply. "When the lights go out, I take the sceptre from your leg, yes. And I use it to hit the attackers over the head. That's how I drive them away. Take a look."

AND I show him the sceptre in my hand. It is not damaged, even though I do use it to work on our mysterious enemies, whoever they are.

"Allah be praised!" gasps the dervish. "You are indeed my preserver, my benefactor. I rub my forehead in the dust to you, oh brave *effendi* Feep."

"Think nothing of it," I say, handing him the golden sceptre, which he stows away once more in his garter.

"This settles it," he sighs. "It proves the Axis is on my trail. Tomorrow I shall go to the museum—there is to be a director's meeting—and I shall turn the sceptre of Haroun Al Raschid over to them in the name of my government."

"Very sensible idea," I agree.

"Until that time," says Ali, "you must keep the snakes."

"Me? But why?"

"Because you are now in danger. This attack proves it. Since you save me and the sceptre, they will be on your trail too. I insist that you keep the snakes to warn you, to protect you from our evil assailants."

He hands me the basket.

"Tomorrow night we will go to the museum together," he says. "Now I shall leave and make arrangements. I am staying at the Ardlore Hotel. Call me there, and I shall be your humble servant in any enterprise you desire. Until then, farewell."

Before I know it, this dervish has me whirling. Half an hour ago I never set my orbs on him in my life. Now I am already mixed up with Axis spies, a golden sceptre, and a nest of snakes. More than that, he is ready to leave me holding the bag.

Or holding the wire basket, rather. I stand there trying to figure things out, and he slips the tin tuba in my hand.

“When you desire information from the sacred snakes,” he says, “then you will blow upon this. Do you know how to blow?”

“Yes,” I assure him. “I know how to blow.”

So I pick up the tuba and the basket, and while he is bowing and scraping, I blow.

I blow out of the Oasis and wander down the street, hugging the tuba and lugging the basket of snakes under my arm.

I walk down the street, pretty glad that it is a quiet evening by this time, and there is no one to notice me and what I am carrying.

But I do not get very far before I go from glad to bad. I am in fact also sad and mad—because coming down the sidewalk towards me is none other than that fascinating female, Fanny.

Sure enough, my ex-girl friend is waddling and toddling in my direction. It is too dark to see her face, but her wiggle is familiar.

And here I am, stuck with a basketful of snakes! A mess from Mesopotamia!

I HAVE a sneaking hunch that Fanny is not fond of serpents. And I don’t dare to ditch the sacred snakes. Being a woman, she will ask me what I have in the basket, and I can not think of a quick answer unless I say, “I am taking some food to my Grandma.”

This will not do either, since Fanny knows my Grandma and anyone who knows my Grandma will realize that she does not care for any food except gin.

So I am definitely on the spot.

There is only one thing to do and that is to get rid of the basket.

As I see Fanny coming down the block, I duck into a doorway and open the basket. I grab a handful of snakes and stuff them into my pockets and then throw the basket away.

I do not know if you ever have a pocketful of snakes in your life, but take it from me, you feel very wormy and squirmy.

But I do not mind, because I am really hot to patch things up with Fanny. I step out on the sidewalk and give her a big smile.

She is in a good humor, because she smiles right back.

"Why Lefty Feep, of all people," she giggles. "How are you?"

I take her arm and tell her how I are, and steer her into a conversation, to say nothing of a hot-dog stand on the corner.

"This meeting calls for a celebration," I tell her. "How about a hamburger?"

We sit on a couple of stools and order, and she begins to exert tongue and lung about her ballet dancing.

"The final rehearsal is over," she tells me. "We open tomorrow night. I am dancing in Schtunkowski's ballet, *La Spectre de la Retch.* And guess who the conductor is?"

Me, I do not care who the conductor is, or the motorman either, but I can see she is very excited about her professional debut as a ballet hoofer. So I listen to her and nod my head over the hamburgers.

"You will want to see the performance," she tells me. "Here is a complimentary ticket, Lefty. I get them from Herman Sherman."

I take the ticket, but even though it is a front row seat, my eyes do not pop over it.

My eyes are popping over something else.

When Fanny mentions the name of Herman Sherman, something happens. Two snakes slither out of my pocket and wriggle to the floor. And they coil themselves into the shape of a swastika.

"Herman Sherman," she says, and the snakes make a swastika on the floor of the hamburger joint.

My eyes pop and my heart starts to hop. But nobody notices the serpents, and in a minute they crawl up the side of the stool and get back into my pocket.

STILL, I am doing a lot of thinking.

These snakes are supposed to warn me. And if they make a swastika—

“Pardon me, honey,” I say to Fanny. “But this fellow who is backing the ballet—”

“You mean this impresario?”

“That is not a very nice thing to call a guy,” I tell her, “but maybe you are right. What I mean to ask—is this Herman Sherman by any chance a German?”

“Why, yes, I think he is,” Fanny tells me. “Why?”

“I don’t know,” I answer. But I do know. “Herman the German,” I mutter, under my breath. I have this hunch. Can it be that Fanny’s new boy friend is one of the Axis agents Ali Ben Alikat is afraid of?

“What is the matter with you, Lefty?” asks Fanny. She notices that I am squirming around in my seat. Of course I cannot tell her that the snakes are getting warm in my pocket and doing a little exploring.

“Nothing at all,” I tell her. And just to keep her from noticing too much, I slip the little tin tuba out of my coat pocket and wave it around.

“Why Lefty, don’t tell me you are a musician,” Fanny gurgles.

“All right, I won’t tell you,” I say.

“I never know you are artistic,” says Fanny. “I adore artists, you know. Poor boy, no wonder you are nervous and fidgety. You must have an artistic temperament.”

What I really have is snakes in the shorts, but I don’t dare mention it. Still, if Fanny likes artists and musicians, then that’s my cue.

“I do a little something along that line,” I admit.

“Then we are twin souls,” Fanny sighs. “Lefty—you must play something for me.”

“Not now,” I stall. “Not here.”

“Why not?” she coaxes. “There are no other customers.”

“But I can’t—”

“You play something or I’ll never speak to you again!” she says, temperamental—though she is more temper than mental.

“All right,” I sigh.

But I do not have to play the tin tuba. There is an unexpected interruption.

As I reach for the tuba, Fanny reaches for her hamburger. Only a snake gets there first. When she looks down, there is a serpent, nibbling at her bun.

“Eeeeeeek!” she comments.

She grabs for her purse to run, but there happens to be another snake crawling around there. It is staring into the pocket mirror as if it wants to powder its nose.

I STARE around and see that my snakes are breaking loose. The whole hamburger stand seems to be full of them. They smell food and they are wriggling and writhing all over the place.

“Great snakes!” yells the guy behind the counter. He dives for them with his cleaver.

I do not know if he is attacking them or stealing them on account of the meat shortage.

I swing into action, chasing them and trying to stuff the snakes back into my pockets.

“What are you doing?” Fanny shrieks.

“Can’t you see?” I gasp. “I’m trying to get them back into my trousers.”

She hits me over the head with a bottle of ketchup.

“I’ll have nothing to do with a man who keeps snakes in his trousers,” she rages.

“But Fanny—” I yell. It is too late. Jumping over the snakes on the floor she starts bawling while they are crawling, and then she runs out of the joint.

I watch the hamburger stand attendant do a little snake dance behind the counter, and then swing into action to catch the wrigglers.

By the time I stuff them back into my pockets I am tired and perspired. I pay for the hamburgers and march out. “A fine kettle of fish,” I think. “A fine nest of snakes.”

I stumble wearily and drearily home to bed. I take off my clothes and hit the hay without delay. I am in bed a few minutes and then the snakes crawl in with me to keep warm. I am too fagged out to object, and fall sound asleep.

Drinking and fighting and excitement really get me down, I guess, because when I wake up it is very late the next morning. In fact it is so late it is almost twilight of the afternoon.

I bound out of bed, partly because I realize I oversleep, and partly because one of the snakes is trying to coil up in my pajama trousers.

“I must call Ali Ben Alikat,” I remember, and dial the Ardlore Hotel and ask for him.

“Mr. Alikat is out,” says the room clerk.

“Where is he?” I persist. I must tell him at once that I suspect Herman the German.

“He is meeting a Mr. Herman Sherman,” says the room clerk.

“What?” I yell, my heart sinking.

“Mr. Herman Sherman, director of the Cosmopolitan Museum,” the clerk adds.

My heart sinks still further. It would take a diving bell to get it back up. Because now I know Herman Sherman must be the guy responsible for this mess. There is no Cosmopolitan Museum in town, and he is luring Ali Ben Alikat into a trap.

I hang up and hang my head.

What can I do?

I must find Ali Ben Alikat. But where? Where is he meeting Herman the German? How can I find out my next move?

Glancing down at the floor, I notice one of the snakes, coiling around the little tin tuba.

And I get an idea.

Ali Ben Alikat tells me to play the tuba when I want a warning or some advice from the serpents!

I may not know which way to turn, but the snakes do.

So I pick up the tuba and begin to blow.

The snakes glide off the bed and onto the floor. I really let go with a blast of reptile hep style.

SURE enough, the snakes glide around for a while and then head in a body for the carpet. All eight of them.

I watch while they form out a word. Just one word.

"F A N N Y."

It fascinates me to see them arch their backs to form the angles. Then I stare at the message.

"FANNY."

What does it mean? I want to know where to go to find Ali Ben Alikat and they spell out the name of my ex-girl friend. She is mad at me. How can she help? Besides, she is appearing in a ballet tonight at the theatre.

Then I remember—she gives me a ticket to the show. Can it be that I am supposed to go there?

It's a hunch.

I dress in a hurry and then ponder. Should I take the snakes with me? Remembering what happens last night, I don't want to. But from now on I'll need lots of advice.

So I stuff the sacred serpents in my pockets again, grab the tuba, and rush out to the street to grab a cab.

Off to the theatre I go, to catch Fanny before the show starts. She will give me information, if the snakes do not double-cross me.

I head for the stage door and the first person I run into is Fanny's maid, Sciatica.

"Oh Mistah Feep!" yaps Sciatica. "Ah nevah been so glad to see anybody like Ah is you."

"What kind of talk is that—'I is you' ?" I ask.

But Sciatica doesn't bother to explain.

"Sump'n awful's done gone an' happened," she bawls. "Miss Fanny's havin' a hystericals all ovah de place. Mistah Herman Sherman don' show up foh de perfohmance at all so fah. An' he ain't got no orchestra comin' foh to play tonight, neithah. We is in a mess. Maybe you-all can help Miss Fanny to calm down."

"Lead me to her," I say, and she does.

Fanny is in her dressing-room, in costume, and when I come in she is gnawing at her rhinestones and crying.

"Oh, Lefty!" she sobs. "Isn't it awful? Herman Sherman has left the show in the lurch. We are going on in ten minutes and there's no music. Who ever hears of a ballet without music?"

"Never mind that," I snap. "Where is Herman Sherman?"

She doesn't know.

"Does he ever speak of Ali Ben Alikat?" I ask.

"Lefty!" squeaks the girl. "I am in trouble and you ask me about alley rats!"

I frown. Evidently the snakes make mistakes when they direct me here. Fanny does not know anything about Herman the German and his plans.

All she can do is blow about the show.

"Almos' curtain time. Miss Fanny," says Sciatica.

Fanny bawls again. Then she notices that I am carrying my tuba.

"Lefty," she says. "You can save us! This is a modernistic ballet. I am going to be Scheherazade. All I need is a little oriental music. Now if you will play your tuba—"

"But I can't," I pant. "You don't know—"

"Just fake it," she pleads. "Interpretive stuff. Just to please the audience. To save the ballet. My reputation is at stake. Oh you must do this for me, Lefty."

SHE FALLS on my neck. Meanwhile Sciatica falls on me from behind. The two of them just about carry me out to the orchestra pit. They shove me down the steps in the darkness.

I can't escape. I hear the warning buzz. The house is packed. I sit there clutching my tuba, getting ready to run. It all happens too quickly for me—I am bewildered.

Then the curtain rises.

Six chorus girls scamper out against an oriental backdrop and begin to exhibit their oriental backdrops, kicking their legs in unison.

I pick up the tuba and begin to blow into it softly, trying to keep the snakes in my pocket from hearing it.

Meanwhile I watch the stage. After a little scampering around, Fanny makes her appearance—and that is just what she makes, in the little pile of beads they string together for her costume. She might just as well be back in burlesque.

But the audience gives her a hand and I give her the old tuba. Fanny really works on this, I can tell, because she begins to dance like mad all over the place, jumping and bouncing around.

I realize how hard she is trying and how much this means to her, so I warm up and try to pick out a real tune on the tuba. I blow until I glow, and put my heart and both lungs into my work, until I am blasting away and making as much noise as a whole orchestra.

It is too bad I get so wrapped up in my work. Because when I look at the stage again, it is too late.

Without my noticing it, the snakes creep from my pockets, all eight of them. They head for the stage. Of course they are flat behind the footlights and the audience cannot see them, but the six girls can.

Suddenly their dancing changes. They begin to run. And the snakes chase them. The snakes crawl up their legs while they dance.

In a minute there is no ballet going on any more. There is a good old-fashioned shimmy and hula-hula contest.

Fanny gets her share of attention from the reptiles, too. She screams and shakes, and in a minute Fanny is really wiggling ditto.

The audience begins to howl and hoot and whistle and applaud and the girls begin to shake and quake and quiver and shiver and the snakes begin to worm and squirm and there is one swell riot. Really hell to pay for the ballet.

I stop the tuba but too late. The house comes down with applause.

Then the curtain comes down, and so do the girl's costumes.

The jig is the only thing that is up.

While the girls run screaming from the stage, I dash up, cursing, and corral the eight snakes.

I have only one idea, and that is to get out of there. Now I know where I stand with Fanny, and all I can do is rave. Those snakes queer my life for me with their bum advice, and I figure the hell with what they spell.

I emerge from the stage-door entrance with only one ambition—to go home and make some snake soup.

But in the alley there is something else cooking.

As I step out, a fat man comes up behind me and begins to scrape at my ribs with a wicked-looking razor.

“Kindly do not sharpen your razor on my spine,” I say, mildly.

BUT the guy does not go for this suggestion. Instead he goes for my liver with his knife.

"Hold very still," he advises me. "You are Lefty Feep, are you not?"

"How do you guess?" I ask.

"Herman tells me to keep on the lookout for a stupid-looking jerk," he comes back.

"Herman!" I exclaim the name. "Herman Sherman?"

"None other, brother," says the fat man. "He sends me to find you."

"I am looking for him, too, I tell the fat party. "And I am looking for Ali Ben Alikat."

The fat man chuckles softly, like an erupting volcano. "You are looking for him, eh?" he remarks. "Well, you will never find him. And it is better for you if you forget there ever is such a person."

"Don't tell me you kill him," I gasp.

"What makes you think that?" inquires the oversized guy.

"I know all about Herman Sherman," I blurt out. "I know he is after that sceptre of Haroun Al Raschid. I know he is an Axis agent and that he wants to steal the sceptre and take it back to Iraq to impress the natives there. I know he lures Ali Ben Alikat somewhere by pretending to be the director of a museum."

"You know a lot of things," says Fatty. "In fact you know almost too much. But I know a couple of things about you, too."

"For instance?"

"For instance, you have the sacred snakes that come from under the Kaaba stone," the guy tells me. "And you play a tuba so that the snakes will spell out words and give advice. That is why I am here to interview you. I must take those snakes with me."

He reaches into my pockets and grabs a handful of squirmers. I do not object, because he keeps his razor very close to my spinal cord.

"Why do you want the snakes?" I ask, politely.

"Because I will take them to this Ali Ben Alikat and tell him you are really the Axis agent who is on his trail. I will tell him you engineer that attack in the tavern last night. I will help Herman Sherman to convince him he should turn over the sceptre to us. You see, right now he believes Herman Sherman is from the museum. Once he hears you are the Axis agent he will be so grateful to us that we will get the sceptre without any violence. And we hate violence," says the guy, jabbing me with the razor and laughing.

I shiver and look down the deserted alley as he takes the rest of the snakes.

"Now hand me the tuba," suggests Fatso. I do so.

"That takes care of things, I think," he tells me. "Oh, just one thing more. I owe you this for hitting me with the sceptre in the tavern last night."

And he raps me over the skull with the tuba.

Never before do I know a tuba can produce such music. There is a ringing and a roaring in my ears and I go down for the count in the alley as the fat party scrams.

He waits until a car drives up and then hops in and beats it to the hideout of Herman the German. This turns out to be the cellar of an old house over on 22nd Street.

The reason I know this is because I am hanging on to the spare tire and rear bumper. I manage to crawl on my hands and knees when the car pulls up in the alley, and I hang there for dear life as we drive through the dark streets. I am woozy and weak, but I know I must go through with this.

WE PULL up in front of this dark house. It looks sleepy but creepy. Fatty and the chauffeur get out and go down the steps to a cellar entrance. I quietly fall off my perch and crawl up to the cellar window on my hands and knees.

I look in and see a candle flickering on a table in the dingy cellar room.

Fatty and the chauffeur are inside talking to a little baldheaded lout who is strictly from sauerkraut. I guess this must be Herman the German. He is waving his arms, and when he sees the snakes and the tuba he rubs his hands and glances at a wristwatch.

Evidently AH Ben Alikat does not arrive yet, because I do not see him on the premises.

After a little pantomime, the three of them leave the room. The snakes and the tuba are on a table. The snakes crawl around, and so do I.

I crawl up and test the cellar window. It gives. In a moment I am inside the cellar room. I reach for the tuba and pocket it. Then I grab for the snakes, but there are footsteps outside. The Axis axes are returning.

Up to and out of the window I go, with just the tuba, and I hide in the bushes. But they are in the room before I can close the cellar window again.

Herman the German notices it is open.

“Himmel!” he yells. “Somebody in here sneaking is! Somebody crawls the window through and the tuba steals.”

“Looks that way,” says the fat party. “Wonder why?”

“Dumkopf, do you not standunder?” yells Herman the German. “When Ali Ben Alikat here comes this enemy will the tuba play so the snakes will him warn, *nein?”*

“You mean you believe that wild story about these snakes?” asks the fat lug. “That they can curl themselves up into letters and spell out a warning?”

“They can of course so do,” says Herman. “But Ali Ben Alikat must not a warning get. He will in a few minutes arrive and we must before then the snakes gefix.”

“How do you intend to gefix the gesnakes?” asks the chauffeur, a thin droop.

“Thus and so,” says Herman the German. He stares at the snakes and produces a bottle of whiskey.

“Whiskey?” gurgles the fat personality. “That’s for snake-bites, isn’t it? These snakes can’t bite anybody.”

“I dunno,” says the chauffeur. “They look like adders to me.”

“They can’t do mathematics too, can they?” asks the fat party.

“Never mind,” Herman the German snarls. “I am going to the snakes gefix so they will give a warning won’t, *nein?”*

Staring at the snakes, he pours a part of the whiskey on the table in a pool.

I get his idea and I am horrified.

The snakes are petrified. At least, they are in a few minutes. Because they begin to lap up the whiskey. In a few minutes more they will be too drunk to spell any words, no matter how I play the tuba. My little scheme is knocked flat.

And it looks like I will be knocked flat myself.

Because Herman the German turns to the fat party and says, “Now you will out go and the grounds search. If the party who crawls through the window you find, you will please his throat cut. *Nein?”*

And Fatty nods and brings out his razor. He heads for the door. But as he does so, Ali Ben Alikat, wearing his nightie, walks up the path and down the cellar steps.

FATTY is at the door so I dare not call out. Ali Ben Alikat goes into the den of thieves.

The jig is definitely up.

Herman Sherman gives him a bow and a nod and a greasy smile and Ali Ben Alikat gives him the sceptre.

At least he pulls it out of his garter and holds it up. The golden sceptre of Haroun Al Raschid glitters in the dim light and so do the eyes of the three Axis agents.

Then he notices the snakes, lapping whiskey on the table. Fatty starts to tell him the fake story—how I am really an Axis agent and arrange this attack on him, and how he finds me and takes the snakes away again. Ali doesn’t know what to believe, but I can see he is falling for it.

“I appreciate your kindness,” says Ali. “Making this meeting a secret so Feep and his gang will not discover us. And on behalf of my government I present you, as Director of Cosmopolitan Museum, with this sacred relic—the veritable sceptre of Haroun Al Raschid, Caliph of Bagdad, Protector of the Poor, Lord of—"

"What is?" yells Herman the German, suddenly.

Because I am crouching outside the window, blowing the tuba. I know the snakes are drunk, but I hope against hope. It is all I can do, against three men.

And my effort is in vain. The snakes are really woozy by now. Nobody could read their writhing.

They squirm a bit when they hear my tune, but all at once they just lie still. They do not form any words. Some are all curled up in a ball and others just lie out straight, full length.

But no words.

No hope.

Nothing!

The dervish squints at them when he hears the music. The Axis agents stare at Ali Ben Alikat. He shrugs, stares at the snakes, and smiles.

Then he hands them the sceptre.

Herman the German reaches for it.

And suddenly the dervish starts to whirl!

I never see a whirling dervish in action before, and it is something to behold.

Ali Ben Alikat spins himself like a top. He stands there, turning around faster and faster until you can not see his face or figure—just a whirling body with a blowing beard. And as he whirls he moves. He moves forward, fast.

His figure, like a human top, careens into Herman the German and knocks him over a table. Fatty gets out his razor, but somehow Ali Ben Alikat, still whirling, grabs the sceptre and bounces it off the fat party's skull.

The chauffeur has a pistol in his hand by this time—and I come through the window just in time to grab it.

Ali Ben Alikat, whirling like mad, pockets the snakes as they lie coiled up and stretched out. He waves the sceptre in farewell. Maybe it is just a dervish trick, but he spins faster and faster and faster—and then he isn't there any more.

Yes, the dervish disappears into thin air. One last twist and he is gone.

I am left holding a pistol, pointing it at the three Axis agents on the floor.

So it works out, after all.

I turn them over to the authorities right away. Ali Ben Alikat saves his sceptre. Everything is strictly on the up and up once more.

The way it turns out later, I discover that Fanny isn't even sore at me about the snakes.

It seems the owner of the Oasis—the Sneak of Araby—happens to be in the audience at the ballet and when he sees her shimmy he signs her up at a big salary for the cafe.

So she is practically back in burlesque after all, and I am tops with her again.

Yes, everything works out for the best, because those clever snakes warn Ali Ben Alikat.

* * *

LEFTY Feep sat back, but not for long.

I grabbed him by the collar.

"Listen," I snapped. "How could those snakes warn the dervish? I thought they were drunk."

"Only pretending," Lefty told me. "They are smart, see?"

"You mean they spelled out a word when you played the tuba outside the window?"

"Right," Feep told me. "When I play the tuba, they tell Ali Ben Alikat to beware."

"But you said the Germans didn't see any word," I persisted.

Feep smiled. "Of course not," he chuckled. "The snakes are very clever. They know they are in the hands of the enemy. So this time they don't spell out a word regularly. Remember, I mention some of them are curled up in a ball and others are stretched out full length?"

"You mean—?"

"Exactly," said Lefty Feep. "The sacred snakes spell out their warning in a new way I teach them before they are stolen. They give Ali Ben Alikat an S.O.S.—but this time they do it in Morse Code!"

THE END

It's A Small World

For two tiny, bewildered people, it was a struggle for survival in a world of toys

IT WAS Christmas Eve. Family men in their cozy bungalows hummed cheerfully as they put the finishing touches on Christmas trees. Men of affairs slapped each other affably on the back and toasted the season in the lounges of exclusive clubs. Merrymakers crowded the public streets and filled the taverns to overflowing. Children caroled gayly in church services. Mothers smiled their secret smiles as they wrapped presents.

And Clyde Hilton worked like a lousy dog in Propper's toyshop.

The funny part of it was, Clyde didn't care. He was as happy as the rest. Twelve hours on his feet today—facing mobs of customers gone frantic with the necessity of making last-minute purchases—that was Clyde's lot, but he was still smiling.

From time to time the redheaded young man grinned and patted the left-hand pocket of his suitcoat. Deep down inside reposed a little plush-covered box. The box contained an engagement ring.

Clyde fingered it and grinned—grinned at the girl behind the counter across the aisle.

Gwen Thomas was worth grinning at. A pert, trim, dark-haired girl with milk-white skin and perfectly modeled features—she had the delicacy of a china doll. “Exquisite” is a somewhat precious word, and yet it exactly described Gwen’s miniature-like beauty.

Clyde waited for the moment that he would slip the ring on her dainty finger. This would be a Christmas they’d both remember. To top it off, Old Man Propper had promised Clyde a raise. He’d winked indulgently at this romance between his two clerks, and the holiday spirit had him in its grip. They’d have a little party after closing-time, and then Clyde would give Gwen the ring and Old Man Propper would say, “Bless you, my children.” Just a slice out of Dickens.

Meanwhile, Clyde scribbled furiously in his order book, wrestled with the wrappings of a hundred packages, tangled himself in yards of twine and ribbon, punched the cash-register until his fingers were blistered, and kept up a running fire of sales chatter.

He had just sold a toy train to the fat lady and her husband when he saw the man.

It had been a job, selling this expensive model, but Clyde was something of an expert in the train field and he rejoiced in the opportunity of turning on high-pressure tactics. So he was quite elated, and finished his wrapping with deft fingers.

But he almost dropped the twine when the man came in.

The door opened. The toyshop was crowded, and ordinarily an entering customer couldn’t be detected in the throng—but this man was plainly visible.

Clyde stared.

The man wore a black overcoat with a turned-up collar that reached his chin. He was hatless, and his wiry gray hair stood up in a bushy mop upon his skull.

The man had a great beaked nose, and a curiously red mouth. Despite gray hair, his face was absolutely unlined. Not a wrinkle disturbed the pristine pallor of his long face. It was a perfectly blank background for the blazing intensity of his eyes.

If his hair denoted age and his unlined face indicated youth, then his eyes were—eternal.

They were black, but shining—shining radiantly with a penetrating fire. Two fountains of strength. Clyde saw the eyes before he saw anything else, and the rest of his scrutiny was just incidental. He gaped, fascinated. For some reason a strange fancy occurred to him. During his lifetime, he mused, he must have seen a million pairs of eyes—but never until now had he realized what *power* the eye could contain. Black, blazing fountains.

There was one other slight excuse for Clyde's interest in the stranger.

The man was seven feet tall.

He was not a giant, in the ordinary sense of the word—not one of those tall, thin glandular monstrosities. The man was adequately proportioned to his height. His shoulders spanned the doorway. The chest bulging under the overcoat was massive. Clyde saw the man reach up and adjust his collar—and his hand was the size of a dinner plate.

CLYDE watched the massive figure move through the milling crowd towards his counter. It was only as the gigantic bulk loomed directly before him that Clyde realized he was leading a small boy.

The child was an insignificant midge, contrasted to his huge companion. His tousled head scarcely reached the big man's knees, although he was large for a boy of seven.

Abruptly, Clyde tore his attention away from the ponderous stranger and concentrated on the boy. That was sensible sales psychology—experience had taught him that a clerk must study the child and try to anticipate his wants.

Clyde got another shock when he scrutinized the boy. Here, in miniature, was as strange a creature as the giant.

For one thing, the boy's clothing was adult. Not a smart boy's shop imitation of "grown-up" attire—but *adult.* His little topcoat was an authentic replica of his immense companion's garb. The boy's hands were buried deep in the pockets, and he walked with truly adult nonchalance. His carriage and demeanor were adult.

But the boy’s face presented the strangest paradox.

Clyde couldn’t remember seeing a child whose face didn’t light up immediately upon entering the toyshop. Even the children of the rich would squeal and giggle, their eyes would roll, and they would gesture with frantic excitement.

This boy was different. His stare was cold, unemotional. His pale face was as unwrinkled as the curious face of the huge man beside him.

And—his eyes were the same! Deep, black, disturbing eyes; the eyes of an adult in the face of youth.

Now giant and infant faced the counter before Clyde. He quickly mastered his curiosity and assumed his professional poise.

“Good evening,” said Clyde. “Can I help you?”

“I wonder,” said the tall man. His voice had a curious depth; it rolled sonorously down upon Clyde’s ears. Clyde stared up into the white face and the glittering eyes.

But the big man had turned to the child.

“What would you like, son?” he asked.

The child shrugged. It was a strangely sophisticated shrug, a shrug of boredom.

“There is nothing here that interests me,” he lisped in a childish treble.

CLYDE did his best to hide his strange irritation at the child’s nonchalance. He smiled down.

“Isn’t there anything you’d like Santa Claus to bring you?” he asked.

“Santa Claus?” said the boy. He gazed at Clyde. And then he laughed.

The laugh did something to Clyde. Perhaps he was tired. Perhaps he was overwrought. Perhaps his imagination was playing tricks.

But the laugh was adult. Sardonic. More than sardonic. It was—evil.

An evil, knowing chuckle from the lips of a child . . .

No. It couldn't be. Clyde knew he was weary, confused. He fought down the feeling of frustration.

"How about an electric train?" he coaxed.

"I've got one, thank you."

"A sled?"

"Hardly."

"We have some wonderful new chemistry sets——"

"I think not."

Curiously, the boy and the old man exchanged glances. The boy didn't laugh but his eyes twinkled mockingly.

Clyde stood there with obvious bafflement written on his face. The giant stranger seemed to sense it.

"Perhaps we'd better not detain this young man, Roger," he said. "We'll look around for ourselves, sir. We might find something we fancy."

"Very well."

Clyde moved down the counter.

The crowd had thinned out in one of those temporary lulls that inexplicably occur in any shop. Clyde saw that Gwen was unoccupied at the moment. He stepped around the side of the other counter and joined her. Her tiny hand found his under the concealing counter and they stood together, smiling.

Then Gwen gestured at the curious pair on the other side of the shop. Her eyes clouded, and she repressed a hasty gasp.

"There he is again!"

"Who?"

"The giant;—the tall man."

"You've seen him before?"

"Yes. He came in several days ago, when you were out on a delivery."

"Who is he?"

"I don't know. I watched Mr. Propper wait on him. He said he didn't want anything—he was just looking around. And then he stared at me."

"Stared at you?"

"Yes. Did you notice his eyes? They're awful, Clyde. Like the eyes of a statue. His eyelids don't blink, did you notice?"

"Maybe he takes drugs," Clyde grinned. But he didn't feel any amusement. Gwen had noticed the eyes, too. . . .

"Oh! There it is again—that stare——"

It was true.

Turning, Clyde saw that the tall man was peering across the room. His gaze fastened upon the girl at Clyde's side. Intense, penetrating, beating down like a palpable weight, his stare consumed the girl.

And the tiny eyes of the boy added to the barrage of scrutiny. The two of them were smiling—giant and dwarf, smiling alike, as they stared. And now, unobtrusively, the giant bent his massive head and listened as the boy whispered something to him. His stubby finger gestured their way. The man smiled, shook his gray mane.

"Clyde, I don't like that man," whispered the girl.

"Never mind, darling. He's just a screwball. I'll get rid of him now." Clyde patted Gwen's shoulder and stepped briskly around the counter. He marched over and confronted his unusual customers.

"Did you find anything?" he asked. It was hard to keep his voice from quivering, strangely difficult to keep his face from betraying the repulsion he felt.

THE tall man bent his great head and smiled benevolently at Clyde. That is, his *face* smiled. His eyes merely flamed.

"Not for Roger, here," he said. "But there's another little boy I'd like to select a gift for. I think I'll take that tricycle over there."

A finger the size of a wax taper stabbed suddenly in the direction of a tricycle.

"Yes," piped Roger. "We'll take that." The child's face was suddenly animated, purposeful.

"Good. That will be $10.95. Shall I wrap it up for delivery?"

“If you will please. I notice you have facilities for gift-wrapping in the back room. Would you mind——?”

“Not at all.”

Clyde grasped the tricycle and lugged it back to the room behind the curtains. As he passed Gwen he flashed her a smile. Her responding glance held a nuance of peculiar entreaty.

Nerves. Clyde pondered on the question as he wrapped the gift. Long hours and grueling work took their toll. He’d reached the point where he was imagining things. Just because an unusually tall man had a bored brat of a son, he had let his fancy run riot.

Maybe the old boy did take drugs. Perhaps the kid was a prodigy, or at least precocious. What was so unusual in that? Much ado about nothing.

Well, in an hour the toyshop would close and he’d give the ring to Gwen, and they’d go somewhere and have a quiet holiday drink together—forget all this nonsense about giant’s eyes.

There!

Deftly, Clyde completed the giftwrapping, his red hair hanging over his forehead as he frowned in concentration. Brushing back the loose strands, he grasped the package and marched back into the shop.

The crowd was thicker now. But as his eyes moved over the confines of the toyshop, Clyde realized that the old man and his son were gone.

They had disappeared!

A curious tingling crept along his spine. Hastily, he glanced behind the counters on either side of the toyshop. Where was Gwen?

The tingling merged into a lurching shudder.

Gwen had vanished!

Mustering his confidence, Clyde strode down the counter. Old Propper’s bald head gleamed as he bent over a tray of toy soldiers.

“Pardon me, Mr. Propper,” Clyde murmured. “Have you seen Gwen?”

“Gwen? She was over there just a minute ago. Talking to the big man.”

“But he’s gone.”

“I know, Clyde. I saw him go out with the little boy.”

“Gwen didn’t leave with them, did she?”

Clyde felt foolish as he asked the question, but he couldn’t hold it back.

Propper stared at him. “Of course she didn’t,” he snapped. “She must be in the back room. Where else?”

Clyde didn’t answer. He knew Gwen wasn’t in the back room. Still, he stepped through the curtains once more.

The room he had just quieted was still empty. And over on the wall were the hangers. Hangers that held Gwen’s fur coat and perky little green hat.

She couldn’t have run out into the snow without putting them on.

Heart pounding, Clyde retraced his steps. He surveyed the toyshop quickly. He tried to recollect his movements.

He had gone in to wrap the tricycle. He had left the giant standing there, behind that counter near the corner. And Gwen had been across the aisle.

All very simple. And what did it matter? The giant wasn’t an ogre, or a demon. He couldn’t have whisked Gwen through the walls. Besides, Mr. Propper had seen the tall man and the little boy go out of the shop—alone.

Still, Gwen was gone.

And the tall man and the child had whispered together and pointed at her . . .

CLYDE knew he was behaving like a fool as he rounded the counter in the corner. Here was an alcove hidden from the rest of the shop. A little recess in the wall.

The giant had stood near here. If he beckoned Gwen over, they’d be standing unobserved.

Still, what good would that do? What did it mean ?

Then Clyde’s moving left foot encountered a soft, tangling encumbrance.

He almost stumbled over the pile. Hastily he glanced down. Glanced down and saw the disheveled bundle on the floor.

Gwen’s clothes!

There was her black dress. Yes, and beneath it her stockings, still in her shoes! And beneath that, a brassiere, a slip.

Clyde knelt and fingered the garments.

They were still warm, still bore the imprint of Gwen's body.

Gwen's clothes, in a tangled heap on the toyshop floor.

And where was Gwen?

Clyde's groping fingers encountered a small, hard length lying against the counter. He grasped a hidden object, held it up.

A pencil stub. A pencil stub from Gwen's order book.

He ran his right hand in swift exploration across the floor near the pile of garments.

In a moment he found Gwen's order book, raised it.

The top sheet was covered with a sprawling scrawl—not the neat lettering of Gwen's precise handwriting on an order—just an awkward scribble.

But as Clyde read it, his senses spun.

Merely a name, and an address. But somehow, Clyde know there was a connection. He deciphered the wobbly lettering:

"Simon Mallot. 4954 Archmore Court. Clyde——"

Just that, and nothing mor*e. "Clyde,"* was the last word. The end of the "e" had been abruptly drawn out in a jagged slash across the page. As though Gwen had been interrupted in her message.

As though Gwen had shrieked for help just as a hand closed over her mouth. A hand like a dinner plate. The hand of a giant!

CHAPTER II

The Giant's Castle

THE streets of Manhattan were thronged with holiday revelers. Scarcely ten minutes had elapsed since Clyde had read the peculiar scrawl on

Gwen's order book, and yet swift strides had already carried him far uptown, towards Archmore Court.

Old Man Propper had accepted his hastily-worded excuse and let him go with a curt nod of his bald head. Now, his overcoat wrapped tightly around him as a shield against the fine-spun snow, Clyde forced his way through the mob with flailing arms.

It was impossible to find a cab, and his impatience brooked no delay. His pace increased, his stride lengthened.

Curious thoughts churned through his head.

Christmas Eve!

Bells tolled their rejoicing in his ear, and yet Clyde heard only the resonance of a funereal note—a note of doom.

Holiday merrymakers called their cheery greetings—Clyde listened to a voice within himself: the voice of Gwen, screaming his name.

Christmas time . . . festival time! Clyde thought of older, pagan festivals. Festivals dedicated net to a kindly Christ-child, but to older, darker gods. Gods of blood and sacrifice. Gods that granted black booms—and took a grisly toll. Gods that were worshipped by pale-faced men with set and staring eyes. Deep-set, fanatical eyes . . . like the eyes of the giant . . .

Simon Mallot.

That was his name. But *who* was he, really? And *what* was he?

4954 Archmore Court.

Where was it, and *what* was it?

Clyde clutched the order book in his pocket and hurried along.

His way led him now through quieter side streets. Streets where no Yuletide lights shone in the windows. Streets given over to winter wind and midnight shadow. Streets that coiled and twisted their snowy surfaces beckoning down to darker depths.

Clyde felt like a pigmy running along on the back of some fabulously enormous serpent. A snow-serpent wound around between the looming buildings. Soon he would reach the serpent's head, the serpent's fangs, the serpent's blazing eyes.

Blazing eyes——

Clyde saw the lights before him. He knew, instantly, that this was the place. The great house stood set back from the street. A stonewall guarded the tree-girdled grounds. But the huge structure loomed above it on a little eminence of land. From a block away, Clyde could see the glittering lights in the lower windows.

Fantastically enough, the brightest cluster radiated from a rainbow-hued Christmas tree set fully visible against broad French windows on the ground floor.

Clyde paused before the outer gate long enough to read the numerals. 5954. This was it!

He marched up to the steps, faced the outer door. Then, and only then, did he pause.

What would he do?

Clyde knew how to gain admittance. He had Gwen's scrawled order slip with Simon Mallot's name on it. And he'd hastily wrapped a small package. He was there to "deliver" it.

But after that Clyde didn't know. Would he accuse Mallot of murder? Kidnaping? Forcing Gwen to do a strip-tease?

It didn't make sense. Only his hideous hunch made him persist. It might all be a hysterical fantasy, a delusion. But he had to find out. He had to get inside this house and see Mallot. Maybe there'd be a clue—or, on the other hand, a perfectly sensible and obvious explanation. Maybe he'd end up in jail for creating a scene and making ridiculous accusations.

HE HAD to take the chance.

His fingers, numb with cold, reached out and groped for a bell buzzer.

The great oaken door was smooth.

Stabbing pain lanced his finger-tips. Pain? Cold. Icy coldness, as he felt a round object under his palm.

A door-knocker.

Clyde raised it, let it fall. A hollow clang resounded.

The wind drowned all sound of approaching footsteps from within. But suddenly the door swung open, a fan of light poured forth.

Clyde looked up automatically, anticipating the seven-foot bulk of the giant.

But it was a small man who answered his summons. A small man dressed in discreet evening clothes. A butler.

"Yes sir?"

"I'm from Propper's toyshop," Clyde explained. "I've this package for Mr. Mallot." He extended his slip and revealed the brown parcel in his pocket.

"Very good." The butler took it and prepared to turn away.

"It—it isn't paid for," Clyde mumbled. "I was told to wait."

The butler frowned. "This is rather unusual," he said. "Mr. Mallot left no instructions." He coughed. "I'll call him."

The door began to close.

Clyde stepped forward hastily. His foot wedged in the doorway with all the dexterity expected of a Fuller Brush man.

"Could I wait inside?" he asked. "It's rather brisk out here."

The butler hesitated, shrugged.

"Very well," he said. "You may wait in the hall if you like."

Clyde entered the spacious hallway.

Burdened by suspicion, Clyde was prepared for almost anything. He expected a long, dimly-lighted corridor; gloomy, paneled walls, ancient tapestries.

Instead, he stood in a completely modern hallway, brilliantly illuminated to highlight cream-colored walls. Silver mirrors added a cheerful touch.

The butler faded from view. Clyde stood there, fidgeting and gazing down at the French blue of the carpeting.

There was a sliding door open at one side. A still greater brilliance coruscated from the room beyond. Clyde stepped to the doorway.

He stared into a spacious side parlor. The room was immense, with high walls running up to an adroitly domed ceiling. One side only was graced with long French windows. Against the windows reared the dazzling ornamentation of a tremendous Christmas tree.

The tree cast glowing benediction over the room. Sparkling lights were strung through the pine bows. Great globular and pendant ornaments flashed and shone on the branches. Icicles and tinsels festooned each twig.

There was something soothing and reassuring in the sight of this holiday emblem. Clyde's unformulated fears fell away. Surely there was some mistake. There was nothing but Christmas in this house.

As if to confirm this judgement, the rest of the room offered mute testimony in corroboration. Clyde saw that the floor was covered with gift packages and parcels in gay wrappings. Toys were scattered about in abundance. Blocks, tin soldiers, roller skates—he recognized the familiar offerings of the Yuletide. Around the entire room ran a border of steel in the form of tracks for a toy railroad train.

This must be Roger's playroom. The typical playroom of a rich man's son. Now it was cheery and homelike, in keeping with the Christmas spirit.

CLYDE sighed. There *must* be some mistake! Could it be that the giant had given the wrong name and address? Could he have been clever enough to know that Gwen might leave it as a clue?

It was probably so. Clyde had been sent off on a wild-goose chase. He must retrace his steps to the shop, start all over again. For surely there was no evil *here.*

He'd only be making a fool of himself if he stayed. When a stranger came down to pay him, he'd be in a mess. He could sneak out right now. No one would notice. Perhaps . . .

Then Clyde heard the voice.

It was like the voice of Conscience—faint and far away. High and shrill, from inside his brain.

“Clyde!” the voice wailed. “Clyde. I’m here. Save me!”

Nerves. He was tired. Hallucinations mast be shaken off, ignored.

“Clyde!”

No! The voice was not illusion. He *did* hear it; a tiny wailing from far away. Heard and recognized the thin cry.

“Clyde! Look at me here—here I am.”

He whirled around, startled. His eyes searched the room. Of course there was no one visible.

Could it be coming through the floor, the ceiling, the walls? No. It wasn’t muffled. The sound, however faint, was clear and unblurred.

“Over here! Hurry!”

The voice came from near the windows. Clyde moved closer to the tree. The brilliant light threw every inch of the room there into high relief. He saw nothing.

Clyde stared dully at the tree, and the voice wailed higher and higher.

“Here I am, darling. Here,” the voice implored. “Here I am—on the tree!”

Suddenly the world exploded. Through the mist came a crimson flash of comprehension. Clyde stared at the Christmas tree and *saw.*

Hanging from an upper branch of the Christmas tree, midway between an ornament and a candy cane, was a cellophane envelope. It dangled by a length of blue ribbon and swung to and fro.

Within that envelope, neatly wrapped in cellophane, was the writhing figure of Gwen.

Gwen—shrunken to two inches in height!

CHAPTER III

The Tall Man Again

“CLYDE, I knew you’d come! Thank heaven you found me in time!”

Clyde struggled to control his voice and features as he stared at the incredibly tiny figure on the tree. “What happened?” be muttered hoarsely.

“It was the tall man,” answered the girl. Her voice came faintly through the cellophane. Clyde bent closer and scowled.

“I knew it!” he sighed.

“He sent you into the back to wrap a package. That was a trick. He must have planned it that way. Because he beckoned for me to come over.

“He and the boy were standing next to the alcove in the far corner. He had a toy in his hands and he asked me how much it cost.

“All the while he kept staring at me with those eyes of his. Those eyes! I told you how I remembered them from the time he’d come in before. Deep, burning eyes.

“But as I stood there, I realized he had never *really* looked at me until now. He gazed at me . . . and through me . . . and then *into* me.

“I could feel it! His eyes *reached* inside of me and plucked out my consciousness. I knew it. Knew he was hypnotizing. But all the while another part of me knew that he was going right on talking, smiling, behaving normally in case anyone happened to look into the alcove. Only his eyes held me, and gloated and stared.

“I couldn’t look away. I swear it—I’d have given my soul to look away, but I could not. And once he looked at me, I no longer had a soul to give. He was drawing it into his eyes. Into those deep, dark glowing pools, as he stood there with His red lips smiling in his huge white face . . . I felt the world swim around me . . .

“His long, slim hands reached into his pocket and pulled out something. I couldn’t see what it was.

“I managed to choke out something. I had to speak, pretend I didn’t know what we both knew—that his eyes held me so.

“I asked him for his name and address and if he wanted this toy delivered.

“He answered, and my hand wrote it down on the pad. You see, I knew already that I must warn you. Of what, I couldn’t guess. But those eyes had me and I knew they wouldn't let me go.

"So I scrawled it off, but he only grinned, and I know the child was grinning too. And then his eyes seemed to get larger, like two burning moons. They rocketed up towards my face and I know my order book dropped out of my hands and then he ran his long fingers across my arm.

"I felt something pinch me. There was a tingling sensation near my elbow and then—I fell into those two burning moons. They rushed up and became one solid lake of orange fire, and I—I drowned.

"When I came to, I was here—on the tree."

CLYDE stared at that tiny, incredible body. It couldn't be true, and yet it was. The girl was Gwen. Cellophane-wrapped, yet nude save for the blue ribbon fastened about her hips. She looked exactly the way Clyde had always teased her about—like a doll. A human, living doll!

How had it happened? And why?

No time to consider that now. For Gwen's diminutive face puckered in utter panic.

"What can we do?" she whispered.

Clyde straightened up. The scowl seemed a permanent part of his features now.

"The first thing to do is get you out of here," he declared. "Quickly, before Simon Mallot comes back."

He stretched out his left hand cautiously and unfastened the cord of blue ribbon from the tree-branch. He lifted down the cellophane pouch containing the tiny living girl.

Gently, he; eased it into his coat pocket.

"Plenty of air for you," he murmured. "Just be still and don't worry. I'll get you out of here and then—we'll see."

Clyde turned on tiptoe and headed for the open door. He moved swiftly, silently.

Something swifter and more silent slithered through the doorway and ran across his path.

A black cat melted into the room. Clyde glanced down at it, startled: glanced into the cat’s great, green, glowing eyes.

Then Clyde looked up—and stared into the great, glowing eyes of Simon Mallot!

The giant towered in the doorway. He stood there quietly and smiled.

Clyde returned no answering smile as he surveyed the gigantic figure of the tall man. Simon Mallot was wearing a long white lounging robe, blending uncannily with his pale skin. But his lips shone redly and his eyes glared blackly as he stooped and clasped his elongated fingers about the body of the cat.

He lifted the black cat to a perch on his shoulders, but all the while he riveted his glance on Clyde. The cat added its baleful stare. Both cat and man wore a smirk of feline malice.

“Were you leaving?” asked the giant. The deep voice droned mockingly.

“Yes—I must get back to the shop.” Clyde essayed a smile.

“Not so hastily, I hope,” said Simon Mallot. “Won’t you stay and share our holiday hospitality?”

“Sorry, but I haven’t time,” Clyde muttered. “I must do my own celebrating later.”

“Very well—if you insist.”

To his surprise, Clyde saw the giant step aside from the doorway. A huge arm swooped outward in a gesture of polite dismissal.

Clyde walked from the room.

He’d made it!

“One moment.”

THE voice was even, but there was a sardonic undertone.

Clyde turned.

"Before you leave," said Mallot, smoothly, "you might return my property to me."

"Property?"

"Exactly." Mallot smiled.

"What might that be?"

"Just a little thing—a mere toy—an ornament from my Christmas tree."

Clyde couldn't control his voice, any more than he could control the goose-flesh on his neck.

"I don't know what you're talking about," he gasped.

"Ah. Then perhaps—this—will stimulate your memory."

"This" proved to be a gun. Mallot pulled it from the pocket of his white robe. It was a big Luger, but it looked like a child's cap-pistol in the great hand of the giant. Still, it was large enough for Clyde. And it did impress him—particularly when Mallot pointed the muzzle at his heart. Mallot's grin was as cold as the steel of the gun-barrel.

"You know I'll kill you instantly if you don't obey," said Mallot.

Clyde knew.

There was nothing else to do. Hand trembling, he groped in his overcoat pocket and drew out the cellophane package—the little package that (grotesque thought!) contained all that he loved in the world.

Gwen's fear-filled face starred up at him in a perfect miniature of horror.

Then the great hand extended and swept the cellophane from Clyde's palm. Fingers thick as dynamite sticks squeezed the tiny body of the girl. She squirmed helplessly in the giant's grasp.

Mallot grinned, baring tusk-like teeth in a smile that held only gloating mirth.

"My little boy would be so disappointed if he found his new toy missing. He had his heart set on Miss Thomas for a pi ay tiling."

"Plaything?" Clyde choked out the word.

"Yes." Casually, the Luger moved forward, forcing Clyde back into the great room. Mallot closed the door and then turned to the Christmas tree. Three enormous strides took him over to the window. Carefully, gently, he hung Gwen’s cellophane pouch back on the branches. Then he turned to the young man once more.

“Roger is a most unusual child, as you will discover. He has quite eccentric tastes—and it is my pleasure to encourage them.”

Clyde couldn’t hold it back any longer. Forgetting the Luger, forgetting all caution or diplomacy, he burst out in frantic rage.

“You monster! I don’t know how you did this, or what you intend, but you can’t get away with it!”

Mallot laughed. The windows rattled.

“A rather melodramatic speech,” he observed. “It might sound more convincing if you had this to emphasize your sentiments.” He glanced at his Luger significantly. He began to come closer, and Clyde saw the outthrust muzzle of the weapon level at his heart once more.

“Naturally, now that you have been so—frank—I would be foolish to allow you to depart,” said the giant, suavely. “So perhaps I had better——”

The great eyes flickered. Mallot halted. “No,” he purred. “Perhaps I’m just a sentimental fool. The season, you know—holiday spirit and all that sort of thing. But I won’t kill you. Besides, it might spoil Roger’s Christmas if he knew.”

He stared at Clyde. Again, the gloating smile.

“You have red hair,” he commented. “Roger should find you amusing.”

The giant stalked closer. “Yes,” he said. “It would be a surprise, too.” Clyde watched and waited. He tried to look at the black cat perched on Mallot’s shoulder. But out of the corner of his eye, he watched the approaching muzzle of the gun. It was so small, compared to the vast bulk of the giant. But there was a chance. If he could leap forward, grab the gun, turn it on Mallot, now Clyde waited. He stared at the cat’s glaring eyes. The gun came close. The giant smiled. Clyde stood poised, ready. Pie tensed to spring.

More quickly than the eye could follow, Mallot’s free hand darted forward. Clyde went for the gun, but as he moved he felt the giant’s great paw brush his elbow. There was a faint prickling sensation in his arm.

The sensation rose, magnified with incredible acceleration. For an instant Clyde felt his sweaty palms close about the Luger's muzzle. For a fraction of a second he knew he was struggling forward. Then everything whirled and there was nothing but the eyes of the cat on Mallot's shoulder—eyes looming up larger and larger. Great, green liquid eyes.

Clyde fell forward, fell into the eyes, drowned deep in an emerald lake.

CHAPTER IV
The Enormous Room

IT'S hard to awaken from a nightmare.

The darkness has tentacles, and the inky strands are imbedded deep in your brain, trying to pull you back—trying to pull you down once more into the screaming depths.

Clyde fought the tentacles, fought the clutching filaments of fear, struggled into consciousness.

He blinked, opened his eyes fully.

It was morning.

He couldn't see clearly, but he recognized daylight around him. He turned his head, shook away the confusion. Now his body tingled with awareness once more. He could feel a constriction under his armpits, a tension.

Clyde looked down. A great bolt of yellow cloth swathed his body. The ends of the bolt were drawn under his arms, passed up somewhere behind his head. He was hanging suspended by the bolt of cloth. No wonder there was pressure!

Yes, he was hanging—but from what?

Clyde glanced down. And then he knew.

He was hanging from the Christmas tree—hanging from the tree as Gwen had hung there the night before!

With a thrill of horrified recognition he stared down—down past a million swirling constellations—down past the glacial splinters of a thousand icicles—down through a forest of bristling spears—down at the far-away floor of the enormous room.

Miles away he discerned the gleaming tracks of a railroad line and the huge cluster of yards and terminals. Columns of soldiers marched across the great plateau in the center of the open area, marched towards the rearing towers of a mighty city.

Of course! The city was made of building blocks. The soldiers were lead and tin. The railroad was a toy train and the tracks against the wall were not miles away, but a mere fifty feet.

The sky so far above was just the domed ceiling. But if that was so—why did the sun hurt his eyes?

It blazed with fiendish intensity as he squinted off into the distance.

Then Clyde realized that the brilliance came from the lights on the Christmas tree from which he hung. The swirling constellations were glittering ornaments. The glacial icicles were merely tinfoil decorations. The forest of bristling spears was made up of pine needles on the branches of the tree.

He had suffered Gwen's fate. He was a mannikin, two inches high. A doll, hanging by a yellow ribbon, on a Christmas tree. The way Gwen had hung. . . .

Gwen!

He turned. The ribbon swayed gently as he moved his neck.

Gwen hung there, almost at his side. She was sleeping—her head hung in litter exhaustion as he gazed at her through her protective wrapper of cellophane.

"Gwen!" he whispered. She did not stir.

Then he realized that the volume of his tiny voice no longer mattered.

"Gwen!" he shouted.

Her blue eyes opened. She stared, recognized him.

“Clyde, darling! I saw him do it to you—he had a needle in his hand. A very tiny needle. He jabbed it into your elbow—you fell, and then——”

“Yes?”

Her faint voice trembled and she turned away. He could hear her murmuring faintly.

“Oh, it was horrible! It happened so suddenly, so quickly! You just seemed to *shrivel up* inside your clothes. One minute you were standing there, and the next—you were gone. Your clothes just fell to the floor. Stockings still in the shoes, shirtsleeves still tucked into your trousers, and the overcoat still covering your suit.

“Mallot reached down and plucked you out of your own trouser-cuff! You lay there like a tiny doll, and he wrapped you in the yellow ribbon and hung you on the tree here.

“He must have used the needle on me, too—after hypnotizing me in the shop. It just takes an instant. No wonder nobody noticed, and he could walk out so easily—with me in his pocket! And now he’s done it to you. Oh, darling, what can we do? What can we do?”

CLYDE would gladly have given his life for the answer, but it was not forthcoming. And as he groped for words, for consolation and reassurance, there was an interruption.

A wind swept through the tree. And then, ponderously from below, the tremor of an earthquake rocked and vibrated.

It took Clyde a moment to realize that the wind came from the opening of the door, and the earthquake tremor was the thud of footsteps.

A giant thundered into the room.

A giant? Clyde recognized the boy, Roger.

Last night he had been a little child. This morning he was a huge creature, massive as a mountain.

He ran into the room, uttering a boyish whoop that smote Clyde’s tiny eardrums like the drums of death.

“Where is it?” he yelled. “Where’s the surprise?”

A face like a billboard illustration loomed before the figures on the tree.

Clyde stared at the great ridged nose, the flaming open-hearth furnace of the mouth, and the great bloated globes of Roger’s rolling eyes. They were huge white balloons with dark centers. A network of red veins crawled like serpents across the milky white portions.

Clyde stared into the pupils as though viewing the reflecting mirrors on a gigantic telescope. Stared at his own image.

“Look! They’re alive!” yelled Roger.

His gigantic paws reached out. His hand almost brushed Clyde’s body, but reached past it as the boy took Gwen from the tree. His clumsy fingers tore away the cellophane. Clyde writhed in fury as her body wriggled in the pudgy palm of the boy.

Then the world reeled as Clyde felt himself lifted from the tree by his yellow ribbon. He heard booming laughter from above, then sickened as his body took a roller-coaster dip through space. He had been deposited on the floor.

His bare feet sank into the carpet. Fringes rose like grass about his ankles.

A few feet away—inches, really—Gwen was tottering along. Circulation was slowly being restored to her numbed limbs. Clyde moved towards her, thankful as he felt the blood surge painfully to the soles of his feet.

“Gwen. Are you all right?”

Suddenly something red blocked his path. Clyde turned and a heavy weight struck him behind the knees. He fell.

The boy had tripped him with his finger.

Booming laughter came from blocks above them in empty air.

“I’ll build you a house,” roared Roger’s voice.

The hand scooped down, grasped them both, and took them for a dizzying elevator ride. Up and down again on another portion of the carpet. They tumbled out, gasping.

The hand came down once more, depositing a six-foot wooden wall at their backs. Clyde turned. Wall? It was merely a 2-inch building block with the letter B raised on its surface.

"A house," echoed the voice.

Another block appeared before them. And another. In a few seconds, a score of blocks were solidly piled on all four sides of the tiny figures. The light was blotted out and they crouched in the gloom. The second and third tiers of blocks trembled.

So did Clyde.

If that crazy kid made a mistake and one of the blocks wasn't properly balanced—it would slip down and kill them both!

What a fate . . . to be crushed to death by an alphabet block!

A VOICE boomed from above them—a voice with echoes that reverberated more deeply than Roger's tones.

"Breakfast, Master Roger."

It was the voice of the butler. Clyde recognized it, distorted as it was, and magnified a hundred-fold.

He heard Roger grumble from outside the block-house.

"All right," he said. "I'm coming. Just as soon as I put a roof on this house."

A block appeared in the opening above their heads and wedged itself down tightly, balancing on three sides of the walls. A faint crevice of light remained on the fourth side which the roof block didn't touch.

The roof-block trembled as Roger's footsteps thudded across the room. Then, silence.

"He's gone," whispered Gwen. "Now what?"

"Watch me." Clyde almost grinned. This was his chance and he was ready.

"You can't possible push these heavy blocks aside," Gwen sighed, anticipating a move on his part.

“I don’t intend to,” Clyde answered. “But the letters on these blocks are raised. I can climb up on the lettering. If I get to the top, I can topple that roof-block off. It’s resting pretty loosely.”

“But it’s twenty feet to the top—you’ll fall!” Gwen objected.

“Worth trying,” Clyde grunted.

The redheaded young man glanced around in the gloom. The letter B loomed at his left.

“Here goes,” he announced.

Hands found a lodging, toes a foothold, and Clyde wriggled his way up the side of the block.

L was the next step, and Clyde managed to literally “shinny” his way up the angular six-foot letter. The 0 above it was much easier to follow. Clyde hung to the upper rim and slowly forced his head and shoulders through the crevice open at the roof.

“Gwen!” he called. “Stand back against the wall. I’m going to rock this block off by its own momentum—but it may fall inside. Look out!”

Bracing his legs against the upper loop of O, Clyde grasped the rough, splintered edges of the roof-block and tugged. It gave perceptibly. He swayed back and forth. Soon the block teetered on a widening arc. He felt it tremble, sway outwards.

“Here goes!” he shouted.

With a thunderous crash, the block hurtled down to the carpet below.

Clyde trembled. That noise!

Then he realized that the noise was proportionately inaudible to normal human ears. He grinned.

“Now we’re dear, darling,” he called. “Climb up the letters. I’ll reach down and pull you up.”

GWEN joined him, gasping for breath. Her lovely black curls hung in bewitching disarray across her bared shoulders. Clyde pulled her up to the top of the block-heap and took her in his arms.

There was a single blissful moment—but that was all.

“Now, down the sides,” Clyde commanded. “Hurry!” He slid down C, clambered down an H, and finally stood on the topmost loop of an R as he assisted Gwen in her descent. At last they stood safely outside the block-house once again.

“Now where?” asked the girl.

Clyde bit his lip. Her words merely echoed his own confusion. They were free of the wooden prison—but how to attain greater freedom?

The vast green expanse of the carpet stretched endlessly before them. The white door was a mile away. And as they walked, their tiny feet sank deeply into the nap of the carpet. Sharp ends bit into their heels.

“Clyde—I can’t go any further——”

Panic and desperation made the girl blurt out the words.

Panic and desperation gave Clyde his inspiration.

His eye had caught the gleam of metal against the wall, where the carpet ended. A huge contrivance rested there—a great metal cart on gleaming wheels, ponderous as a juggernaut.

“A roller-skate!” Clyde murmured. “Come on.”

Grabbing Gwen’s hand, he dashed toward the edge of the carpet.

“Climb aboard,” he directed. “You see how the floor slants here a bit down to the door? I’ll just give this skate a shove, climb on behind, and we’ll coast down to the door in a jiffy.”

It was a struggle for Gwen to mount the skate, and her blue ribbon was shredded before she reached the top. By that time Clyde was bracing his shoulder against the left rear wheel of the skate, wisely gauging it as the one most likely to be set in motion.

Straining, his muscles bulging with effort, Clyde pushed. The skate moved slowly . . . then gathered speed. It began to roll down the incline.

Clyde clambered aboard at a trot, swinging up just as the skate gathered momentum. They whirled down toward the open door.

“We’ll go right through,” Clyde exulted. “Right down the hall outside! And then——”

The black shape loomed before them even as he spoke. The black sabretooth, twenty feet tall—eyes glaring green fire, jowls slavering for the kill, yellow fangs gaping, claws raised to rend and destroy . . . It was the cat!

A single bound carried it through the doorway. It paused, hissed, and then bore down upon the two figures crouching on the flat top of the moving roller-skate.

“Quick!” yelled Clyde. “Jump off!”

Gwen obeyed. Clyde didn’t move. The skate rolled directly towards the oncoming cat. Clyde saw it raise a paw, ready to rake him off as the skate passed. He crouched low as the paw swooped down.

He felt the shaggy blanket of fur brush his back and twisted to one side.

The cat had missed!

And now the skate had carried him beyond. He had almost reached the door. The black cat whirled. A single bound brought it forward. Another leap and it would be upon him.

CLYDE slipped from the moving skate, eyes roving frantically around the enormous room.

Then he spied it, scarcely three inches away—a long green blade with a sharp point.

A fallen needle from the Christmas tree!

But it was a weapon. Clyde grasped it and rose to face the charging cat. The gigantic head rose above him, and the huge jaws yawned. A paw swept out.

Clyde thrust the sharp point of the pine-needle upwards. It pricked the cat’s paw. The feline yowled and withdrew its claws. Then it leaped.

Clyde felt, rather than saw it soar over his head. The wind grazed his hair. And now, in a single instant, the great cat was behind him. The black bulk of its body moved down on him. A ranking claw thrust out. Clyde jabbed with his weapon.

Quick as lightning, the other paw came down. The pine-needle was brushed from his hand, and a numbing shock traveled up his arm.

Clyde stooped to pick up the needle. It was broken—he was weaponless! Now he was ready prey, and so was Gwen.

And the cat charged.

There was no escape this time. Clyde darted to one side, dodged. The cat landed on its forepaws a good foot away. But as it landed, its long black tail coiled out in a lashing blow.

Clyde felt it strike his knees from behind, felt it coil around his waist as he fell. Trapped, he waited as the cat turned, with out-flexed paws, and launched itself at his throat——

The blackness bore down upon him and he felt the hot breath of the gaping mouth as the fangs ripped towards his head.

CHAPTER V

The Wreck of the Number Nine

THE fangs never reached their goal.

As Clyde prepared himself for that final stab of blinding pain, the darkness seemed to lift from before him.

It *did* lift—for a hand came out of the air and grasped the black cat by the scruff of the neck.

"Scat!" thundered a voice.

Clyde lay there looking up as Roger picked up the feline and carried it from the room. Roger closed the door and returned.

"Tried to hurt my playthings," mumbled the boy. He stared down at Clyde.

"But how did you two get out of the block-house?" he asked.

Clyde shrugged his tiny shoulders in reply.

"You were trying to get away, weren't you," Roger accused. "You tried to hide from me! Maybe I'd better hang you up for safe-keeping while I finish breakfast.”

Roger suited his actions to the words. He stooped down and Clyde rose on his palm. A stride carried the boy over to where Gwen lay. She tumbled into the moist, slippery surface of Roger’s hand and clung to Clyde as they swayed towards the tree.

Roger adjusted the ends of the blue ribbon and the yellow ribbon. Once more the two mannikins dangled like ornaments on the great Christmas tree.

Clyde groaned inwardly as he found himself right back where he had started. Once more the door—escape—freedom—all were miles away.

Rogers smiled down on the two hanging figures.

“Be quiet, now,” he said. “I’ll come back as soon as I finish eating.”

His footsteps thundered from the room. Once again there was silence.

Clyde turned his head. Gwen smiled at him bravely. His heart wrenched as he realized the effort she was making to appear cheerful.

But suddenly her assumed optimism faded. “Oh, darling,” she sighed. “I guess it’s hopeless. We’ll be here forever. And——”

Her dainty little body shook in a sudden spasm of sobbing.

“What’s the matter, honey?” Clyde whispered.

“Oh—it’s so terrible! And I’m all scratched and bruised, and I’m practically starving.”

Clyde forced a smile. “Good for you to go without food,” he told her. “You always said you wanted to reduce.”

“Reduce!” A fresh burst of tears coursed down her doll-like cheeks.

Clyde frowned as he realized the ironic cruelty of his remark. She was reduced indeed!

Then his eyes lighted on a vast object hanging directly before him.

“Cheer up, small fry,” he called. “I think I can get you a bite to eat, anyway.”

HE BEGAN to pump his legs outward, swinging his body forward and back. The movement caused the ribbon by which he was suspended to swing in a slow arc. Clyde, at the bottom of this pendulum, swung forward with increasing speed. Soon he was approaching the great white object with every swing.

It hung there, like a ten-foot snowball, right in his path. His tiny fingers clawed at its rough, corrugated surface.

Nothing happened. On the next swing he dug into it deeply. There was a crackling sound, and a huge lump of the white substance broke off in his hands. He swung back and ceased his movements.

Slowly, he broke the white lump and extended a section of it to Gwen. She could just reach out and grab it.

"Go ahead and eat," Clyde told her. "Lucky for us there's a popcorn ball on the tree."

The popcorn was nourishing. Clyde had never thought two people could make a satisfying meal out of a single kernel from a popcorn ball, but this was ample to still his hunger. It didn't take much to fill a tiny stomach. A little condensed milk, now—

As Gwen nibbled her popcorn, Clyde abandoned his fancies and concentrated on another train of thought.

He had swung outward and back to reach the popcorn ball. Then he had stopped. Suppose he kept it up? Suppose he swung in wider arcs until the ribbon on the branch above him loosened?

He might fall, plunge to his death on the jagged pine-splinters below. Still, it was a chance. And it was his only chance.

Thankful that Gwen was occupied only with her food, he began to rock cautiously once more. Soon he swung out to the popcorn ball again; then beyond it. He swooped forward and back. His head reeled, he grew dizzy, but he could feel a movement on the ribbon over his head.

He plummeted up and down, up and down. Now Gwen saw him, and she screamed as he rocketed past. Clyde was giddy, breathless. The world spun around him—the glittering constellation of tree ornaments whirled.

And then—the ribbon came free!

With a gasp, Clyde took the fall. He plunged down, down—shooting through interstices between the bristling branches. Far below him he saw the huge, shining bulk of a crystal globe.

An ornament—he was heading straight towards it! In an instant he would crash, the ornament would shatter, its jagged splinter pierce his body and hurl his bleeding carcass to the floor below.

Clyde's arms flailed wildly. The deadly polished surface rushed up to meet him, and then his right hand found a hold.

With an arm-wrenching lurch, his descent halted. Clyde clung desperately to the strand of tinsel that sustained his weight. For a long moment he could only pant and wheeze. Slowly he drew himself up to a perch on the tinsel.

"Clyde, are you all right?"

Gwen's voice came from above. She hung about forty feet higher—in reality, about fifteen inches over his head.

"Of course I am," Clyde answered. "Hold on and I'll climb up and get you loose."

NOW it was easy to mount the branches, picking footholds and hanging on to tinsel strands and candy-cane lengths. In a very few minutes Clyde had crawled to a niche above Gwen's head and slowly loosened the strand of blue ribbon.

"Grab that branch tip," he directed. "I'll get you free in a moment."

The operation was swiftly accomplished.

"Now what?" Gwen voiced the question as Clyde joined her on the branch. "You aren't going to make me climb down to the floor, are you? I get dizzy just looking at it."

Clyde shook his head.

"No sense in trying the floor again," he said. "Too dangerous, and it's too far to the door. Besides, once in the hall, we'd need to get the outer door open as well.”

“Could we get to a telephone?”

“Not likely,” Clyde decided. “Besides, how’d we ever get the receiver off the hook? It would be an engineering problem to dial a number, and I doubt if our voices would carry. Too much danger of detection, anyway. No—that’s out.”

“Then what can we do?”

“Just keep calm. Look, we have French windows right in back of us. And I’ve a hunch the one on our left is open a bit. I’ve felt a breeze for some time. If that window is ajar, we can slip directly outside. All we need do is climb around the side of the tree here and slide down to the window ledge. Can you crawl?”

“I can do anything if it means getting out of here,” Gwen declared. Her eyes flashed. Clyde gave her a grin. The girl had spirit and courage.

“All right. Better not waste time, then. The brat is likely to show up at any minute. Suppose we swing down this light-cord?”

Clyde pointed at one of the green strands linking a string of tree lights.

“Just swing across it and move down,” he said. “But watch out for the lights. They’re hot.”

The tiny figures began their journey. Time and time again they clambered across branches to avoid the burning incandescence of a Christmas tree bulb.

“Swing across that tinsel,” Clyde grunted. “We’re making progress.”

Gwen, despite cruelly-smarting hands—giggled.

“What is it?” Clyde turned his head.

“I can’t help it! You look so cute in your blue ribbon, swinging along the branches. Just like Tarzan of the Apes.”

“He does, does he?”

The voice came from behind them.

Both Gwen and Clyde turned their heads quickly back towards the room.

Standing before the tree, still on tiptoe from his stealthy entrance, was Roger. The boy wore a frown of displeasure.

“At it again?” he said. “Trying to get away!”

There was no hiding-place, no escape.

Advancing quickly, Roger reached forward and plucked Gwen from the tree.

“Let her alone!” Clyde yelled.

“Huh!” grunted the child. “I ought to throw her away.” He made a gesture as if to hurl Gwen’s body to the ground, and Clyde groaned.

But the gesture was not completed. A smile appeared on the vast bulk of Roger’s face.

“I’ve got a better idea,” he said. “I’ll really punish you both.”

HE TURNED his back and swiftly carried Gwen across the room. Clyde clambered up a branch and strained his eyes, trying to follow the boy’s movements.

Roger stooped down on the far side of the room. His hands groped and fumbled before him, but his back hid Gwen from view.

What was he doing to her?

Abruptly, Roger rose. His body still blocking the view on the far side, he approached Clyde with empty hands. Clyde couldn’t dodge the searching fingers.

His ribs were crushed between thumb and forefinger as Roger carried him down to the floor.

“In you go,” said Roger.

Clyde felt himself being lifted to an iron stand. He glanced down.

Roger had placed him on the cab of his toy train’s locomotive!

The locomotive rested on the wide track that ran the full square bordering the room against the walls.

Clyde stood in the iron cab of the engine. It was a Lionel special model —the *“New York Central* to be exact, with a Hudson-type locomotive. Clyde knew. He had sold them in the toyshop.

He gazed at the shining track stretching ahead, and at the curve near the wall.

Why had Roger put him here?

“I’m going to punish you,” said the boy. “The way they did it in the old movies.”

“What do you mean?” Clyde shouted.

“Look and see.”

Far above, the child’s arm extended across the room.

Clyde stared.

Half-way around the circle, on the track directly opposite, lay Gwen’s writhing body.

Roger had tied her to the track.

“Notice how I did it?” asked the precocious little monster. “I’ve tied her to only one of the rails. Only her head extends between. If I laid her directly across she’d be electrocuted when I switch on the transformer.

“As it is, we’ll do it like the movies. I’ll start the train and you’ll run over her.”

Roger laughed. It was a cruel laugh, not at all boyish. Clyde shook his head. How could he appeal to this heartless, inhuman creature?

“But you don’t want to kill her,” he stammered. “A helpless girl——”

“You’re my toys,” Roger snapped. “I can play with you any way I want.”

Abruptly the boy turned. He squatted in the corner, next to the black bulk of the transformer.

There was a whirring hum. And suddenly, Clyde felt the train-wheels turn. The engine was moving beneath his feet!

Slowly, the locomotive gathered speed. Clyde stared out of the cab. He was rushing down the rails, heading for the bend. In miniature time-scale, he was plunging forward at about sixty miles an hour. The engine would take this curve, take the next, go down the straightaway, and in the middle—decapitate Gwen!

The locomotive lurched as it whizzed around the first curve. Clyde braced himself. He couldn’t jump. The second curve loomed ahead. The

Hudson type was speedy. A few seconds more, now—

Roger was at the transformer, generating power. Power!

Clyde saw Gwen's body far down the tracks. The locomotive rushed with deadly swiftness.

Clyde gulped. He had the clue, if there was still time. He turned to the cab. Yes, this was the Hudson type. A miniature poker stood in the tender, and next to it was the fire-box door. If that door was opened—

He tore a strand from the blue ribbon about his waist and yanked the tiny poker free. He wrapped the handle of the poker with the ribbon and jerked at the fire-box door.

Peering out the window of the cab he saw Gwen only a little way ahead. The train rumbled on.

Gasping, Clyde jammed the poker through the open door. The end caught. It had to catch, make contact.

It did.

Clyde knew his locomotives. The poker would short on one of the motor terminals against the frame.

The result was spectacular.

The locomotive halted with a lurch, just a few inches from Gwen's tiny form.

At the same moment came a puff of smoke from the transformer, and Roger fell backwards in a cloud of acrid fumes.

CHAPTER VI

Out of the Mouths of Babes

IT WAS the work of an instant to jump down and release Gwen. Clyde yanked the twine free and helped her to her feet.

"Come on," he whispered.

Over in the corner, Roger's coughing spasm had subsided, and now tears came in a surprising cascade. The boy was crying. The sheer, unexpected shock of the short-circuit had frightened him. Gwen turned and stared at him across the room.

“Gwen—let’s go!” Clyde tugged at her shoulder.

Gwen tossed her black curls. “No,” she said. “I’m going to talk to Roger.”

“Are you crazy?” stormed the redheaded young man.

For answer, Gwen began to stride towards the looming bulk of the boy in the corner.

“Gwen—come back!”

She neither turned nor paused. In sheer amazement, Clyde watched her as she reached the crying child and deliberately tugged at his sleeve. In a moment she was crawling up his arm.

Clyde shuddered.

She sat there, perched on the boy’s shoulder!

Roger looked up. Abruptly, his tears ceased falling. Gwen sat on her strange perch and gently patted his neck with one tiny hand.

Roger stared at her. He smiled.

“Blow your nose,” said Gwen. “You’re a sight!”

Roger blushed, fumbled in his pocket.

“Use your other hand,” the girl commanded. “You’re likely to shake me off.”

Roger obeyed without hesitation.

“There, that’s better,” she commented. “Now, young man, I’d like to have a talk with you. First of all, you’d better apologize for what you just did.”

Roger stared down at her. His brush. deepened. Then he looked away at the wall.

“All right,” he mumbled. “I’m sorry I tried to kill you. I guess I didn’t understand that you are human, too.”

Gwen shook her head.

“Don’t you know any better?” she chided. “You’re a pretty bright-looking boy, it seems to me. Hasn’t your mother ever told you not to do such things?"

Roger stared at the wall more intently than ever.

"I—I have no mother."

"Well, what about your father, then?"

"My father's dead, too. I'm an orphan."

Gwen frowned. "But that man who brought you to the toyshop—Simon Mallot. Isn't he your father?"

"No. He adopted me when I was a baby."

"When you were a baby?"

"Yes. After he killed my mother and father."

Roger's voice did not tremble or alter as he spoke the words. His tone was unemotional.

"Simon Mallot killed your parents?" There was horror enough in Gwen's voice.

"Yes. He was in love with my mother many years ago. She wouldn't marry him, because of his size. So after I was born, he killed her."

GWEN was silent, but only for a moment. To Clyde he seemed to be driving at something. She had taken psychological advantage of the boy, and now she was cleverly pressing that advantage. She sat there maternally, possessively—the eternal woman engaged in her eternal problem of mastering man.

"How did Mallot kill her?" asked Gwen.

Roger did not hesitate over an answer. The words came quickly.

"He did it with the dolls. He made dolls and baptized them and then drove pins into their hearts. He's promised *to* show me how, soon. He's a wizard, you know."

"I didn't know." Gwen was striving to keep calm.

"That's why he adopted me. He's going to make me his apprentice. He'll teach me all he has learned about sorcery. He says that since my appearance is normal, I can be a greater wizard than he is, if I'm properly trained."

The boy spoke as though becoming a sorcerer's apprentice was the most natural course in the world. Gwen tried to match his nonchalance.

"Do you like that idea?" he asked.

Roger frowned. "No—not exactly," he confessed. "There are some things he wants me to do that give me nightmares, and I won't do them.

"I like to play with my toys here, but he is always making me take lessons in his laboratory. And when he finally lets me play, he gives me toys I don't like. I won't keep them here."

"No?"

"There's a book he has . . . and the pictures in it move. They move like people, and they do strange things. It makes your head ache to watch them, but he wants me to study it.

"Then we play games, sometimes. Not with marbles or anything like that, but with little houses and boats and things made out of wax. And he makes me recite pieces in Latin. I get all crawly inside sometimes at the way they sound. When I say them right, the shadows change on the wall, and once I saw the wall's move.

"Next year he's going to take me to a meeting. They call it a coven, and I must meet someone there and sign a book in blood. Does it hurt when they prick your finger and take blood?

"I hope it doesn't. Because I don't want to go anyway. I wish he wouldn't make me do those things."

Gwen was white-faced, shaken. The picture she had formed from these childish revelations was ghastly in its implications.

"He won't let me play with other kids," said the boy. "He keeps me locked up here all the time. Once in a while, for a special treat, he lets me play with my regular really-and-truly toys in this room.

"I studied hard last month, so he promised to give me a present. Anything I wanted. And last night, in the toyshop, I asked for you. That's how I got you."

Clyde had approached Roger's feet. Now he spoke.

"How did you know that Simon Mallot could—give—us to you?" he asked.

"He can do anything," said the boy, gravely. "Much more than this. He's a sorceror. And I'll be one too." The boy sighed. "But I don't want to be, really. Besides, I'm afraid when I grow up I might get too big like he is, too."

"How did he get to be so big?" asked Gwenn.

"Just glandular abnormality, he says," the boys answered.

IT WAS fantastic to hear such words from the lips of a seven-year-old child. But then, the whole affair was unearthly.

"He's working on hormone extracts now," Roger confided. "That's how I knew he would be able to shrink you. When I asked to have Gwen for a doll, he knew what I meant. And he did it. Because that hormone formula is wonderful."

"Yes," said Clyde, eagerly. "Can you explain it a little more than that, Roger?"

"Well, I don't know. He started years ago, trying to experiment on something to use on himself—somethings that might bring him down to a normal size. Then he must have hit on something off the trail with his reduction formula. Because the drug he perfected overdoes the job. Things get very tiny if you aren't careful."

The boy spoke gravely, but Clyde hung on to every word.

"There are lots of specimens upstairs in his laboratory," Roger volunteered. "But I guess he's never used it on human beings until last night. I just begged him to give me Gwen for a toy, and he'd promised me, so he had to do it. But I'm sorry I tried to kill you," he concluded.

Clyde took over. "You should be," he scolded. "And what do you think it feels like to be two inches tall? How would you like it?"

Roger hung his head.

"We don't want to be this way all our lives," Gwen sighed. "How can we get out of this?"

"You two are in love with each other?" Roger's eyes sparkled. "Gee, it's like a story, isn't it? And you're trapped here and everything?"

"You needn't be so enthusiastic about it," observed Clyde, bitterly.

"But it's exciting. And maybe I can help you."

That was the opening Gwen was waiting for. "Yes," she said, quickly. "By all means. You could phone for the police——"

"No good!" Clyde interrupted. "If Simon Mallot found the boy phoning, he'd know. He'd hide us away and punish Roger. Besides, we've got to do something about our size."

"Yes," said the child, eagerly. "That's what I mean. I can find the antidote for you, perhaps."

"Antidote?" Clyde seized upon the word. "There is an antidote?"

"Yes. A sort of by-product or antitoxin you get when you distill the formula. He keeps a bottle of it in the laboratory."

"Could—could you get it for us, do you think?"

Roger's face clouded. "Maybe. I don't know."

"What do you mean? It's a matter of life or death."

"I know. But—honest, I'm afraid to go up there, though. It's a horrible place."

Gwen patted his shoulder.

"There, now. Don't be afraid. I'll come along with you."

Surprisingly enough, the suggestion did the trick. Roger beamed.

"Well, if you two will come along."

"Sure we will. It's safe, isn't it?" Clyde answered.

"Yes. He's asleep now, in the left wing. I can get the bottle. Just a few drops on the end of a pin will work, I think. But you'll come with me?"

"Right." Clyde took command. "Just slip us into your jacket now. Then head for those stairs. We're going to the laboratory."

CHAPTER VII
The Devil’s Toyshop

UP THE dark stairs, down the long hall, and through the outer chambers—Roger tiptoed cautiously into the weird world beyond the laboratory doors.

Gwen and Clyde clung to the edge of his jacket pocket and peered out into the realms of nightmare.

Here in the vast, sky-lighted room, science and sorcery had met and mated—to produce a hellish amalgam.

Gleaming white laboratory tables, modern as tomorrow, bore a host of ghastly objects straight from medieval myths.

Bell-jars filled with the root of fabled mandrake; trays of herbs and powdered distillates ground from the bones of animals and corpses; all the paraphernalia of mantic mummery was here.

Oh the shelves the black books mouldered, iron-hasped tomes with crumbling yellow pages illumined with Gothic lettering of another day. Clyde read exotic titles in Latin—*De Vermis Mysteriis,* and the unspeakable *Necronomicon* of Abdul Alhazred.

Glass cabinets guarded instruments and laboratory machines; a switchboard towered incongruously beside a mummy-case; a zodiacal chart lettered in Greek stood next to the latest model of an X-ray unit.

Bunsen burners and powdered bat’s blood, test tubes and the hearts of toads, hypodermic needles and corpse-fat candles—all in a gargantuan jumble before the eyes of Gwen and Clyde.

The room was filled with evidences of thaumaturgy. A blue chalk tracing of a pentagon still covered a part of the floor. A pile of smouldering incense fumed sullenly in a covered brazier near the further wall.

But all this was as nothing to the sights Roger pointed out.

The child, with his terrifying mixture of normal boyishness and hideous familiarity with forbidden things, wasted no time in directing the attention of his tiny guests to a strange spectacle.

A tier of glass cubicles stood along one of the big tables. At first glance they appeared to be a row of rectangular aquariums—but there was no water inside, and no fish.

Still, the glass prisons contained living forms.

“Look!” prompted Roger, moving closer. The two little humans gazed down at an incredible spectacle.

In one glass compartment, a rat padded ceaselessly to and fro, red eyes glaring through the transparent walls of its prison.

“Why, it’s the right size!” Gwen exclaimed. Suddenly a hand went to her mouth in a gesture of horrified realization.

For the rat *was* the right size in proportion to her present state. But in reality, the rat was a shrunken creature—a living rat the size of an ant!

In the next compartment a guinea pig squatted; a common laboratory guinea pig, no bigger than a human finger!

Beside it, on the left, was a tiny black object that mewed piteously and clawed at the glass as they approached.

“A black cat,” whispered Clyde. “A black cat the size of a baby mouse.”

“He injected them with the reduction formula,” Roger told the two. “These were his first successes. That cat is the mother of the black cat downstairs. At first, when it was just a kitten, it seemed to know what he had done and clawed and spit at him. Now the cat is grown and doesn’t remember. He calls it his ‘familiar’. He says all wizards have familiars.”

Gwen shuddered. “I don’t like it here,” she murmured. “Let’s get out.”

Clyde nudged the boy’s chest with a diminutive fist. “Yes,” he urged. “Where’s the antidote? Let’s get it and leave before he wakes up.”

“All right.” Roger moved quickly. The shrunken humans tumbled back into his pocket.

“Here,” he said, reaching into a cabinet set next to a microscope. “Here’s where he keeps the bottle.”

IS hand emerged grasping a vial of colorless fluid, stoppered by a cork.

H “The needles are on a tray,” he said. “I’ll take one and we’ll sneak back downstairs.”

“Good,” Clyde muttered. “Quickly, now!”

Roger moved quickly—then halted.

A sound rumbled from below.

A sound crashed through the corridor, to shatter the tiny eardrums of the imprisoned humans with the knell of death.

“He’s coming!” gasped the boy.

“Hide us!” Clyde commanded.

“But where?”

“Set us down on the table.”

Roger lifted them free. They landed on one of the big laboratory tables.

“Where shall we go?” Gwen panted.

Clyde gazed around, quickly calculating. He grasped her arm.

“Over here,” he beckoned. “Climb inside that skull.”

To their left the grisly object loomed—a yellowed skull, big as a house contrasted to their present size.

The great hollow eye-sockets stared their eternal eyeless stare. The grinning, fanged jaws leered their eternal mirthless leer.

“Through the jaw,” Clyde panted. “Hurry!”

Crawling inside a human skull—the journey was a nightmare. But it meant escape from a more hideous reality outside.

For Simon Mallot entered the room.

The giant wore black, and black was his frown, black the glitter in his piercing eyes as he recognized Roger’s presence in the room.

“What are you doing up here?” he demanded, scowling at the boy.

“Just playing,” Roger answered slowly, mastering with an effort the urge to tremble.

Clyde and Gwen, peering through the eye-sockets of the skull trembled freely.

“Playing, eh?” The tall man stared down at the little boy with a kindly smile.

“I thought you didn’t like it here in the laboratory,” he observed.

“I—I guess I’ve changed my mind.”

“That is gratifying news.” The wizard shook his gray-maned head. His unlined face was bland. “But tell me, Roger—how did you leave your little playmates downstairs?”

“Why, all right, I guess. I hung them back on the tree.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

“That’s odd.” Simon Mallot grinned. “You see, I’ve just been inspecting the Christmas tree. And they seem to have disappeared.”

“Really?” The boy’s self-possession was remarkable. He’d learned a lot from his monstrous teacher—but not enough.

For Simon Mallot’s grin broadened unpleasantly.

“You don’t seem to be very upset about their absence,” he purred. “Perhaps you don’t like them any more. Perhaps you’re tired of them.”

“No—no, I think they’re wonderful gifts. I want to keep them always.”

“And yet when I tell you they’ve disappeared, you show no surprise. Can it be, Roger, that you are not surprised? Can it be that you know where they are? Can it be that they are here—right now—in this room?”

SIMON MALLOT towered above the child, his great hands clenched.

“Of course not,” gasped the boy. “No——”

His hands fumbled nervously at his jacket. A bulge in the pocket caught the wizard’s eye.

One great paw darted forward convulsively. There was a ripping sound as the huge fingers tore away part of the jacket, pocket and all.

Simon Mallot held up the vial of reduction-antidote.

“This is not a plaything,” he murmured. “Why did you take it?”

Roger was silent.

The giant nodded. “Shall I tell you why?” he whispered. “I think I know. You have been talking to your toys. They have given you bad advice. They have corrupted you, Roger—corrupted you with stupid, human chatter. Isn't that true?"

The child did not answer.

"They asked you to steal this and restore them to normal size, didn't they?"

Still Roger kept silence.

"I'm disappointed in yon," observed Simon Mallot. "Haven't I trained you? Haven't I taught you to be calm, unemotional scientifically detached? They're stupid little pawns, filled with petty human desires, Roger. Not worth noticing. Fit only to be toys. That's what people are, Roger. Toys. Puppets.

"I've given you tiny ones to play with now. But as you grow older, I'll show you, how to play with humans without the necessity of reducing their size. I can turn the whole earth into a plaything for you, Roger.

"You have failed me, and I must teach you once again. But I'm willing to start over anew. I will put this vial away, you will tell me where your toys are hidden, and we'll just forget this little incident. Is it a bargain?"

The giant beamed benevolently.

And for the first time, the boy spoke.

"No!" said Roger. "No—I won't tell you! You'll kill them, that's what you'll do. I won't listen to you—you're a monster, an ogre——"

Simon Mallot laughed, but his eyes blazed.

"I see," he muttered. "Yes, I see. They *have* corrupted you, indeed. Already their stupid viewpoints have changed your childish outlook. Now I'm an ogre, am I? You're talking like a character in a fairy tale.

"Very well, Roger. You're not going to be of any use to me in the future. I can see that. My work has been wasted. And so—if your fairy tale imagery is to be carried out, I'm willing.

"From now on, I'm what you called me. An ogre. And you're just a little boy. A little boy in an ogre's castle. Remember your fairy tales, Roger. Do you know what ogres do to little boys?"

THE last words ended suddenly as the massive arms encircled the child's body. Roger screamed once, then subsided as Simon Mallot bore him to the table and began to strap him down efficiently with strips of gauze.

"I'm going to let you join your new friends," he whispered, bending close to the child's face. "You can go back into the miniature universe where petty humans belong, since you're not fit to be a titan, either physically or mentally. Maybe you'll learn something. At least," he chuckled, "at least, I can keep you under my thumb this way."

The giant turned from the bound boy. "Where's the needle?" he grumbled. "It should be next to the formula powder here, in the tray."

Clyde could have answered that question easily.

For midway in the conversation between the tall man and the child, Clyde slipped carefully through the left eye-socket of his hiding place and tiptoed cautiously along the table. He moved from beaker to retort unobserved, until at least he reached the spot where the jar of yellowish powder lay—the jar Roger had pointed out as containing the reduction formula.

"Only a few grains of the powder on the end of a needle," Clyde remembered.

And there, in the glass tray, was a needle.

As the wizard bound the boy, Clyde tugged the needle free. In his arms it was a heavy four-foot spear. But he raised it, drove the point into the yellowish powder until a few granules clung to the end.

Then he was ready. He staggered under the burden of the heavy needle as he made his way from behind one object to another. Gwen watched his progress with fascinated horror, but Simon Mallot did not see him.

Closer and closer he came—stealing along to the edge of the table.

Now Mallot turned and groped in the tray for his tiny needle.

"Where is the cursed thing?" he growled.

Clyde, poised behind a retort on the edge of the table, stared up, up to the incalculable height where the wizard's pale white face loomed and leered.

The great globed eyes burned down. The red lips writhed. And a groping finger swept along the table.

Clyde braced himself, held the needle pointed out, and then he ran. His running plunge carried him toward the wizard's white, spatulate finger.

Clyde charged with his spear—and then Simon Mallot saw, stared down at the incredibly tiny figure racing towards his hand with outthrust needle.

"So!" he roared.

His hand swept forward, a wall of flesh to sweep Clyde's puny body into oblivion.

But Clyde didn't falter. He held the needle up, felt it strike home as the hand came down. Then the white and bony horror of the hand closed over him, to smother and crush, and Clyde's world fell away. . . .

CHAPTER VIII

Reductio Ad Absurdum

"CLYDE! Wake up, darling!"

Gwen's voice came somewhere through the mists. Clyde tried to locate it. He succeeded, with an effort, and blinked his way to consciousness. Clyde looked up at Gwen, who pillowed his head in her lap as she bent over him on the table's edge.

"Are you all right?" the girl murmured.

"Guess so." Clyde sat up and rubbed his aching shoulder. Abruptly he stiffened, pushed her away.

"Mallot!" he snapped. "Where is he?"

"Down there."

Gwen's tiny finger indicated the floor far below.

"You jabbed him with the needle," she said. "He tried to knock you off the table, but the drug took hold. He begin to shrink immediately."

Clyde peered over the table edge. On the floor, far below, lay a tangled heap of clothing. Mallot's garments. Lying across the bottom of Mallot's robe lay a tiny white figure, scarcely three inches long. It represented all that remained of the giant’s seven-foot bulk.

“He’s still unconscious,” Gwen said.

“Good. Now, our first job is to get Roger free.”

Clyde rose and began walking across the table. Gwen followed. Roger lay strapped to another table a few feet away—but a shelf stretched in a natural bridge between.

“Roger, are you all right?” called the redheaded man.

“Yes—but get me loose,” said the boy, through trembling lips. “Quick, before he wakes up.”

“He can’t harm you,” Gwen reminded the child. “After all, he’s only three inches tall. Just a little bigger than we are.”

The crossed along the shelf and soon descended to the table beside Roger’s bound body. Clyde had lugged a needle with him.

“You—you aren’t going to inject anything into me?” the boy asked.

“Certainly not; But this may help to pry away the knots. He’s got the gauze around you pretty tightly.”

Indeed, Roger’s body was swathed in cloth ropes, and the knots would tax the ingenuity of any number of two-inch high Boy Scouts.

Nevertheless, Clyde and Gwen set to work, tugging away at the recalcitrant cloth, shredding bit by bit with the needle. It was a laborious task. They had scarcely managed to sever a single strand in a full fifteen minutes of effort.

“Maybe we’d better get the growth formula first,” Clyde sighed. “He left the bottle of antitoxin on the table over there, I think. If we could use that and regain our normal size once more, the rest would be easy.”

It was a good idea—but Clyde wasn’t the only one who thought so. For at that moment, Gwen tugged frantically at his arm.

“Look!” she gasped. “He’s come to!”

SIMON MALLOT had indeed recovered consciousness. Clyde turned to stare at the tiny figure—a little whiteskinned mouse, cautiously clambering up the rungs of a chair. Mallot was climbing to the table top where the antidote rested. Even as they stared, he gained the seat of the chair, ran swiftly across it, and started to crawl up the wicker back, hand over hand. In just a minute or so he would reach the vial of the precious fluid, and then——

“No you don’t!” Clyde shouted.

Turning, he headed back-across the shelf-bridge to the other table. He bore the heavy needle as a weapon. Gwen followed more cautiously.

Clyde clattered down the shelf, overturning a jar that stood in the path of his flying feet.

He reached the table-top—and so did the wizard.

Simon Mallot’s shrunken visage had lost none of its malignancy. The powerful body of the sorcerer still towered—comparatively—over Clyde’s frame.

With swift strides, the miniature giant made for the vital vial.

Levelling his needle as a spear, Clyde bore down upon him.

Mallot looked up and scowled his dismay. He backed away from the small bottle.

Clyde pursued him. If he could pin that tiny monster to the table, destroy the evil that animated him——

Mallot scurried away. Clyde gained on him, poised for the throat.

And then Mallot spun to his left, caromed against a small glass beaker.

The beaker swayed, tipped, and suddenly fell forward. Directly in Clyde’s path a stream of bubbling acid poured forth, smoking and hissing as it churned towards his ankles.

Clyde swerved to one side as the deadly stream sizzled its way across the table-top.

Mallot had stopped ahead of him—stopped and stooped. He had picked up a needle of his own from a tray, and now he brandished it above his head.

A needle in Clyde's hands was a spear. Mallot, a larger figure, could use it as a sword.

And use it he did. With a roar he charged down upon the young man.

It was Clyde's turn to back away—back and parry the deadly thrusts of the glittering blade. The giant was a fencer, and he flourished the needle with fatal precision.

Clyde retreated, bringing his needle up and down to take the blows of Mallot's weapon. But Mallot stabbed and struck. The needle whistled past Clyde's left ear, then whizzed under his armpit.

And as he went back, Clyde's feet struck a solid base. Something hot and hissing roared behind him. Parrying desperately, he turned.

Mallot was forcing him—forcing him back against the glowing blue flame of a Bunsen burner!

The wizard laughed and his sword-blade swirled down. Clyde ducked. He tried to dodge around the flame, but Mallot pressed his advantage. The needle flitked out, inexorable, relentless.

Suddenly Mallot raised his weapon and brought it down. Clyde felt the impact of the blow shiver against his own needle. And then it fell from his grasp, and rolled to one side.

He was weaponless!

MALLOT bounded in for the kill.

Clyde crouched against the base of the Bunsen burner, felt the searing flame just above his neck. He dodged, ran around to the further edge of the table. A portable sink unit was beyond. He hurtled across a chasm fully five inches in extent and landed on the sink.

But the wizard was at his heels. He jumped, brandishing his needle.

Clyde turned, ran along the moist sink, and then slipped.

Too late, he realized his error when he saw what loomed before him in the sink. Too late to move, he heard the roar of mighty waters.

A waterfall cascaded across his path.

Mallot thundered behind him. His blade swept out in an arc of shining death.

Clyde jumped, jumped straight at the waterfall.

And went down under the thundering avalanche, down to the bottom of the sink, gasping and drowning—drowning in the flow from a turned-on water faucet!

Mallet's laugh rose in his ears, and then Clyde went under. The white wall of water enveloped him. He gulped, choked, felt his lungs burn and fill. He rose, fighting for breath. The water churned around him. His hands gasped at a non-existent hold.

Clyde went down again. The water at the bottom of the sink swirled fiercely, carrying him in its circling eddy until he felt himself battered and scraped against the bottom of the porcelain.

He rose to his knees, groping his way from under the direct impact of the faucet flow above. For a moment he stood there, then fell again.

Once more he gained his feet, and this time he managed to blunder blindly to one side.

He stood in water up to his waist, but he was dear of the main stream. He looked up, expecting to see Mallot waiting with poised blade.

The wizard was gone!

Clyde wasted no time. His arms went up, clawing for a hold against the top of the shallow sink. He found it, lifted himself, hung for a straining instant, and pulled himself over the rounded rim.

He lay panting on top of the sink for a moment, utterly exhausted.

When he looked up once more, he was revivified with a thrill of horror.

SIMON Mallot stood on the adjacent table top. Gwen crouched at his feet. The wizard's sword's sword was menacing, forcing her back—back into the gaping mouth of an empty test-tube that lay on its side!

Even as Clyde watched, the girl was lowering her body and wriggling backwards into the tube. Mallot was forcing her with the sword, grinning in hellish anticipation.

Gwen's body, oddly elongated through the glass walls of the test tube, now lay inside the round glass. Mallot turned, stooped.

Clyde realized what he was doing. He was going to roll the test-tube over the edge of the table!

Gwen, dropped to the floor below—the glass prison shattering about her ——

The tube rolled. And Clyde darted forward. Again he hurtled the chasm between sink and table, tie paused only long enough to retrieve his needle weapon.

Then, with a shout, he bore down upon the wizard from the rear.

Mallot looked up, wheeled. Abruptly he halted. The tube rocked on the table edge, rested there.

Mallot looked at his own needle, resting at his feet. There was no time to pick it up. Clyde was almost upon him. And now the pursuer became the pursued as Mallot ran back along the table towards the vial of antidote.

What did he intend to do—make a last stand beside the bottle? Clyde followed, puzzled by the action.

But Mallot halted only for an instant. He stooped and grasped something in his hand, then ran forward once more to the edge of the table and clambered down the back of the chair towards the floor below.

Clyde didn't hesitate. He meant to follow—but what about his needle? It was too heavy to carry. For an instant he pondered. Then he dropped it over the edge to the floor below.

Perhaps Mallot would reach it first—but he had to take that chance.

Clyde reached the chair, crawled down the back. Mallot was below him. Clyde almost slid part-way, in a desperate attempt to narrow the distance between himself and the wizard.

But Clyde was still on the lower rungs as Mallot reached the floor. And then, from his perch, Clyde saw what it was the tiny giant had stooped to pick up.

It was a thread—a simple length of white thread. Simon Mallot held it in in his hand, and Clyde saw that the skein rose above his head. The other end was attached to something on top of the table.

What was it?

The answer came. Mallot tugged on the end of the white thread. And from above, with a hurtling crash, dropped—the bottle containing the growth reduction antidote!

It dropped past Clyde's head and fell with a shattering thump.

But it did not break.

Mallot looked up at his enemy as Clyde clung to the rung of the chair. Then he grinned. Carefully he stooped and untied the thread from around the vial.

Clyde panted as he turned to continue his descent. He had to reach the floor and find the needle before Simon Mallot realized one was there.

He knew Mallot had another scheme, but he didn't dare stop to gaze. A few more movements and he'd reach the floor. He climbed on——

Then it happened.

The white noose coiled out, sailed in an arc around Clyde's shining head, and dropped in a hangman's knot around his neck.

CLYDE'S hands rose to tear at the rope—for that was what the thread amounted to.

As he released his hold, he fell. And the rope tightened, the wizard tugged, Clyde felt the red haze rise around him as he gasped for breath.

Floundering helplessly, Clyde saw Simon Mallot run towards him with a grin of evil triumphant. In one brawny hand he held the glittering needle. The wizard had found it, then!

This was the end. Bruised, battered, a strangling victim of the sorcerer's cunning, Clyde stared up at the descending point of the needle.

Simon Mallot's white face loomed. The eyes flamed, the red lips parted. And the silver death slashed towards Clyde's breast.

The growl rose with startling swiftness. The deep, purring moan of menace caused both wizard and victim to turn their heads.

It was the black cat. It had slipped into the room quite stealthily—but stealth turned to lightning speed.

All in an instant Mallot turned, stared at the great black body before him, then shrieked and tried to dodge.

But the razored claw raked out, the sleek head bent forward.

One dreadful, gurgling scream—one indescribable gulping sound—and then the black beast was slinking from the room.

Clyde stared, then looked away. A tiny leg dangled limply from the black cat's jaws . . . like the paw of a white mouse . . .

CHAPTER IX

A Sizeable Problem

THE noose was gone from Clyde's neck. Gwen, shaken but smiling, had joined him on the floor. Now, together again, they tugged at the end of the needle. Its point was imbedded in the cork stopper of the vial.

"Once more," Clyde urged. "We'll yank it out."

They did. The cork gave, and the precious fluid flowed across the floor. Swiftly Clyde loosened the needle.

"Wonderful thing," he commented grimly. "A weapon, then a corkscrew, and now a hypodermic needle."

"Clyde." Gwen's eyes clouded.

"Yes, darting?"

"Aren't you afraid to use that stuff? After all, you don't know if it will work—and the needle is so big——"

Clyde smiled and shrugged.

"What else can I do?" he said. "It's a chance I must take." He dipped the needle point in the pool of fluid on the floor.

"Oh, Clyde!"

She ran to him then, and they clung together—two grotesque tiny little figures, ragged and bruised and infinitesimal.

But there was reality in their embrace—perhaps the last reality in a fantastic world.

"All right, darling," Clyde whispered. He stepped back. One hand held the needle forward, tipped the point in. He placed his arm against the point, forced it down. The point was wet.

A trickle of crimson—a groan——

Clyde fell. But even as he fell, he felt himself shoot upwards.

This time there was no drowning sensation; only a surprising feeling of *expansion.* It was as though he flew upwards instead of dropping—as though he soared to meet the room about him.

And then he was standing on his feet once more, standing and leaning against the laboratory table.

But he was alive again—alive, and fully-grown to his natural size!

The rest was easy.

The requirements of modesty were easily fulfilled with the aid of the wizard's discarded garments. And then Clyde was cradling the tiny figure of Gwen between his fingers, pressing the needle gently home.

Within a few moments a normal girl lay in his arms.

There was another embrace. An embrace, this time, of joyous reunion in a properly proportioned world.

"Hey—what about me?"

Clyde whirled.

"It's Roger!" he grinned. "We almost forgot about him."

Stepping to the table, Clyde untied the child. The gauze knots were no problem to his fingers now.

"Thanks," said the boy.

"Save it," Clyde advised. "Let's get our things and get out of here. Gwen, slip on Mallot's robe. My own clothes must be downstairs."

"What about the butler?" Gwen asked.

“Mallot sent him out for the day,” Roger informed her. “After all, it’s Christmas.”

“So it is,” Clyde grinned. “Though I’d hardly say we’ve had much of a holiday.”

HE TURNED and guided Gwen out of the laboratory. Roger lingered behind the doors for a moment, then joined them on the stairway.

In the hall, Clyde dressed once more. Gwen wrapped the robe around her, a smile on her doll-like cheeks. Suddenly her pert nose wrinkled.

“Don’t I smell smoke?” she asked.

Roger nodded. “Yes,” he whispered. “I—I started a fire in the laboratory upstairs. Such things should be destroyed.”

Clyde looked at the boy, but there was wisdom beyond youth in his eyes.

He nodded. “Yes,” he agreed. “Perhaps it’s for the best.”

He bent his red head down as Gwen whispered in his ear. The girl pointed at Roger and smiled.

“What are you whispering about?” the boy demanded.

Clyde smiled. “Nothing much,” he declared. “It’s just that we’re going to be married, and Gwen suggested that she’d like to adopt you as our boy.”

Roger glowed and shuffled his feet. “Good enough,” he agreed, as they left the house.

Gwen sighed. “Of course it’s going to be an awful job to change some of those weird ideas Mallot has given you. But we’ll bring you up properly.”

“Bet we will,” said Clyde grimly. He grasped Roger’s arm grimly. “The first step in your education starts now,” he told the boy. He glanced at the smoke pouring from the roof of the house behind them.

“I’ll have to teach you not to play with matches,” he muttered.

“What are you going to do?” Gwen cried.

Clyde grinned as he slowly bent the boy forward in an ageless gesture. “Nothing at all,” he said. “Nothing at all. I’m just going to give the kid a good, old fashioned spanking!”

Lefty Feep Does TIme

The wrong answer sent Lefty into the future. The right questions got him out . . .

"WHAT do you want to take me here for?" asked Bill. "I thought you were my friend. But when I come to town you immediately try to steer me into the most awful-looking restaurant I've ever seen. I'll bet the food is terrible!"

I smiled at Bill. "I'm not taking you to Jack's Shack for the food," I told him, as we entered the place.

"Then what?" Bill persisted.

"There's a party here I'd like to have you meet," I explained. "I think you'll be interested."

"Who is he?"

"His name is Lefty Feep. And he tells some of the damndest yarns you've ever heard in your life. He's just an innocent bystander at life's little accidents—but to hear him talk, he has more adventures than Baron Munchausen."

"You mean he's a professional liar?" Bill asked me.

I shrugged. "I wouldn't call him that. In fact, I wouldn't know exactly how to describe him. Lefty Feep is—well, I'll introduce you now and you can judge for yourself."

I took Bill by the arm and steered him over to a table. Lefty Feep sat there, nonchalantly trimming his fingernails with a butter-knife. As he saw us approach, Mr. Feep waved and beckoned. There was a genial smile on his usually melancholy face.

"Hello," he called. "Accept my greeting at this meeting and what are you eating?"

I introduced Bill, we sat down, and gave our orders to the waiter. Bill shielded his eyes, and I didn't blame him.

Lefty Feep, in addition to his dazzling smile, was wearing a blinding costume. A sort of super-zoot suit with bolder shoulders, and trousers that were wowsers. The whole garment was done in a sort of subdued scarlet with yellow stripes. A purple shirt and orange-and-green necktie added to the general effect—which was nauseating.

I sympathized with Bill. His eyes hurt him now, and I knew that in a few minutes his ears would hurt him as Lefty Feep pulled another one of his stories.

Sure enough, the tall teller of taller tales cleared his throat for action.

"Lucky you contrive to arrive," he told us. "It so happens I have a terrific adventure yesterday about which I have things to say."

I nudged Bill. "But Lefty," I objected. "Are you sure it was yesterday this adventure took place? I saw you, yesterday, all day."

Feep never blinked. "Yesterday," he insisted. "And I am away all day."

"But I saw you!" I insisted.

"What you see is me to a degree," said Feep. "But while I am here I am also somewhere else. Only that is another time."

I perked up my ears and poked Bill. "Bill," I said. "This ought to be a problem for you. After all, you're a writer of science-fiction."

That did it. Feep crouched over the table, eyes bulging.

"You write science-fiction?" he gasped. "Then indeed I must ask you to heed as I proceed. Because I got a truth that's stranger than science-fiction. Listen——"

"Make it short," I interrupted. "Bill and I haven't got much time."

“That’s what happens to me,” declared Lefty Feep. “Boy, what a time I don’t have yesterday!”

Feep opened his mouth. We opened our ears . . .

WHENEVER I am on the beach I go to see Skeetch and Meetch. Sylvester Skeetch and Mordecai Meetch are two giants of science who run the HORSECRACKER INSTITUTE—a laboratory where they conduct experiments on the stuff in various things. You see, when I am broke I often go up there and they give me a chance to put dough in my pants by helping them with their experiments.

That’s the way it is yesterday. I am very broke because my ex-wives are pulling some phoney baloney about alimony, so I feel moany and groany and being definitely broke but stoney, I root and toot over to the HORSECRACKER INSTITUTE.

Sylvester Skeetch and Mordecai Meetch are sitting in the gloom of a big room. But their two fat little faces go through the paces when I march in. They smile and exchange looks—which is no bargain for either of them.

“Lefty Feep!” exclaims Skeetch. “Just the personality we wish to see!”

“What brings you here at this propitious moment?” asks Meetch. “Hunger,” I explain.

Fat little Skeetch and Meetch shake hands with me and lead me to a chair. I sit and stare at the blank walls of the laboratory with a look to match.

“Why are you glad to see me?” I ask. “And where is all your scientific apparatus?”

“Come with me,” says Mordecai Meetch. “I will explain.”

Skeetch and Meetch lead me down a hallway into a large white-tiled room which looks as though it should have a GENTS sign on the door.

This room is also bare, but there is a large object, very big for its massive size, right smack in the middle of the floor. It is covered by a black curtain, and also by my curious glance.

Suddenly, from around in back of the covered object steps a new personality.

He is wearing a white coat like Skeetch and Meetch, and he sports the same kind of thick goggles. He could pass as a double of theirs, or a triple.

"Lefty," says Skeetch, waving a fat finger at the stranger, "I would like to introduce our new scientific associate. Meet Cosmo Creetch."

Cosmo Creetch puts out his hand and makes with the shakes.

"Pleased to meet you," he mumbles. "Any colleague is always welcome. You have scientific standing?"

"I take mine sitting down," I answer.

"But," he persists, "are you interested in physics?"

"No," I tell him. "I just drink a glass of warm water every morning."

"You don't understand," Creetch murmurs. "I don't mean that kind of physics. This deals with higher figures."

"Speaking of higher figures, I meet a tall blonde once——"

"No!" sighs Creetch. "Not that. We are discussing mathematics."

"Well, I might be interested in mathematics," I confess. "You see, I owe a lot of dough."

"Then you're just the man I'm looking for. Perhaps you can earn some money by helping me do this."

I cheer up. "Watch me holler for a dollar," I tell him. "What can I do for you?"

"First let me ask you a question," says Cosmo Creetch. "Do you know what a Time Machine is?"

"Yeah. An alarm clock."

"No!" Creetch scowls. "Here, I'll show you." He walks over and pulls the cloth off the big object in the center of the room.

I STARE at a big steel cylinder, covered with metal bumps and shaped like an overgrown cucumber. There is a door at one end and Creetch pushes me over to the entrance.

"Step inside," he invites. I look in at a bare room inside the cylinder. It resembles a cell for solitary confinement.

"Looks like a jail," I comment. "You mean a guy should be put in here when he does time?"

"You don't do time, you pass through it," Creetch explains.

"Pass through it?"

"Of course. This is a vehicle. It can be steered ultrasiderally," he tells me. "Observe the panel board."

He points to one wall, covered with switches and dials. The dials are numbered, and there are little slide inserts under them. "Months" and "Days" and "Years" and Centuries" and even one that says "Eons". There is also a calendar built right into the steel wall. Under each slide is a dial and a switch.

"It's very simple," Creetch insists. "You turn the dial to any year, month or day you desire and you can travel backwards in time."

I shake my head. "Travel backwards in time? I don't see any future in it."

"Why it's got a great future! You can travel into the future any time you want and to any time you want," Creetch tells me. "Here is the future feature fixture."

He indicates another blob of knobs. "Understand," he confides. "This machine operates on a very logical basis—a mere process of molecular acceleration, synchronized so as not to disturb the normal metabolic process of the human body inside, which is protected by the insulation of the machine itself. This molecular acceleration will carry you forward through the spacetime continuum and you will emerge undamaged at the precise point indicated by rhomboidicality as governed by the process."

"Sure, sure," I answer. "Why bother with such childish details? I figure it out the minute I see it. Why don't you buy yourself a zoot straitjacket and forget it?"

Creetch gets mad. "I'm not deceiving you, Mr. Feep!" he snaps. "This machine will take a human being forward in time. All we need to prove it is to get the services of a human being. And if that's impossible—well, maybe we can use you."

"Yes," adds Skeetch. "We want you to try out this Time Machine."

"Nobody is taking me for a ride!"

I yell.

"Of course not," says Skeetch. "You'll go alone."

"I refuse to be two-timed!"

"For $100?" purrs Cosmo Creetch. That changes my mind. The way I am sitting financially, I will take a climb into time for a dime.

"How about right now?" Creetch urges. "Just take a blast into the past. I'll set the sight for about a hundred years back."

I FOLLOW him into the hollow of the machine. He shows me the two types of dials—foresight and hindsight—and explains what I am to do. Merely turn on the machine, which will transport me through time in a juicy jiffy. Then get out and grab something to bring back—proving I make the trip. That is all there is to it. He tells me how to operate the crate so there will be no slip on a return trip.

"Set the dial for a trial," he advises me.

I study the switches to avoid hitches.

"You know, the past does not appeal to me," I confess. "How about peering into the future?"

"You're steering, so do your own peering," Creetch agrees. "Just set a course to suit yourself."

I fiddle with the dials and turn the "Years" and "Months" and "Days" knobs.

"There!" I exclaim. "Exactly five hundred years! February 29th, 2544. Leap year—it works out."

"Give it a *workout*, then," Creetch tells me. "Here's your $100. Let me get out of here, turn that master-switch, and bon voyage!"

He leaves. I shut the big silver door.

I am all alone in the steer cylinder. I go up to the panel and reach for the master-switch.

I pull it. There is a hell of a howl and five hundred years blast past my ears. I fall to the floor as I feel the machine churning and turning. My stomach matches it.

Then, all at once, the machine seems to land with a bump, and my stomach settles back into place with a thump.

Everything is a riot of quiet.

I make a score with the steel door. I open it slowly and stick my noggin outside. And I do mean outside!

Because I am not in the HORSECRACKER INSTITUTE any more.

MY TIME Machine lands me in a deserted street. All around me are huge skyscrapers and a lot of planes cutting capers. But the buildings are taller and the planes are smaller. I nearly break my neck trying to see the top of these edifices, and I shiver as I watch a lot of wingless little planes dart in and out of the buildings above.

Then I realize that the street is deserted because everybody is flying. Most people’s affairs seem to be conducted on a very high level these days.

Sure as I’m alive, this is 2544, or I miss my score!

I take a few steps away from the Time Machine and gander at the building nearest at hand. There are a couple of stores on this ground floor and I notice a sign—“DAN DRUFF’S BARBER SHOP.”

As I stare, the door of the barber shop opens and out steps the shape of an ape!

I blink as this big furry gorilla strolls out and down the street. What kind of monkey business goes on here?

The ape shape approaches me and I try to hide in the shadow of the Time Machine. But it spots me and comes closer. I see its slavering jaws, its great brawny arms. I shudder and cringe. The ape seems to growl. I retreat. The ape lowers its head. Its hideous mouth opens. In a moment it will charge and——

"Pardon me, buddy," lisps the gorilla. "You got a match?"

I nearly elapse into a collapse.

"A talking ape?" I yell. "What goes on here?"

The ape shrugs. "Sure, why not?" asks this simple-minded simian.

"But apes can't talk!" I object.

"Who says they can't talk?" snaps the ape. "Don't you ever read THE HOWLING BABOON COMES BACK? Apes talk in that story. So do I!"

He reaches for a match I hold out and pulls a cigarette from behind one furry ear.

"You smoke?" I gasp.

"Of course. Nothing like a smoke when you climb out of a barber chair. I just step in there to get my fur singed."

I shake my head. "How can it be possible?" I mutter. "A talking ape. Why?"

"Why?" echoes the ape. "I talk because I have a human brain in an ape's body. My name is Andy the Anthropoid."

"Human brain in an ape's body?" This begins to sound like a vaudeville routine, but I am really curious now. "Who would do such a trick?"

"Why the Mad Scientist, of course! He makes me—he makes everybody these days, in his laboratory. He just looks into one of the books of wisdom and then experiments."

I look at Andy the Anthropoid in some astonishment. "What books of wisdom?" I inquire.

"Don't tell me you never hear of books of wisdom," sighs the talking ape. "You must be a stranger."

"I am a stranger and I feel stranger and stranger," I tell my furry friend. "But what are the books of wisdom?"

"I never see any, understand," says Andy the Anthropoid, lowering his voice and looking over his shoulder to be sure we are alone. "Nobody ever does, except the Mad Scientist. He locks them up in his laboratory and it is forbidden to discuss them. But I hear rumors, of course.

"In the old days the books of wisdom are called 'mackascenes,' or something."

"You mean 'magazines' ?" I suggest.

"That's it. Magazines. Science-fiction magazines, in the ancient past. I remember I even hear some of the titles of the forbidden volumes. There is *Superdooper Science.* And *Gory Stories.* And *Flabbergasting Tales* And *Staggering Imagination*, and *Impossible Adventures."*

I shake my head. "Never hear of them," I confess.

"Can it be possible that there is anyone alive in 2544 who never knows of the books of wisdom?" he demands.

"Can be," I admit. "If this is really 2544."

"Are you crazy?" asks the ape.

"No. Just a stranger. I'd like some kind of proof of where I am and when this is."

"Well, it's 2544, all right," Andy the Anthropoid insists. "Wait—I'll get a paper and show you the date to prove it."

HE STEPS over to a lamp post. I wonder what he is going to do, because there is no paper-box attached to it.

But he merely presses a button set in the post and comes back.

"Where's the paper?" I ask.

"Be patient," he tells me. "We want the latest edition, don't we?"

He squints up at the sky. "Here it comes," he yells. "Stand back."

Out of the air whizzes a little silver cone. It looks like a miniature rocket, landing at our feet. Andy the Anthropoid picks it up and opens one end. Out drops a folded newspaper.

"See the date?" he says. "2544, all right."

So it is. But I pay no attention. My eye happens to light on the advertising columns—the want ads.

I read a few items at random.

"Space Suits For Sale—With two pairs of pants."

"Ray Guns and Atomic Blasters from private collection of an ex-rocketeer."

"Used Space Ship, late 2543 model, in good condition. Only 5,000,000,000,000,ooo miles on it. With two spare fliers."

"Sale—Green Cheese, direct from the moon."

I gasp for air, also for information. "Is it all true?" I ask the garrulous gorilla. "Are all these things really existing? These inventions?"

"Of course," sniffs Andy the Anthropoid. "They all come from hints in the books of wisdom. But here's a fellow now who can tell you all about it," he says, pointing down the street.

I look for the fellow, but I don't see anyone.

Until I spot it—gleaming in the sun. Then I nearly fall down. The hinge slips on my jaw, I am so astonished.

Walking towards me is a hunk of animated junk. A piece of live metal in fine fettle, with a tin grin and a shining body. A living mechanical man, so help me!

Andy the Anthropoid introduces us. "I want you to meet Adam Clink, the robot," he tells me. "What is your name, sir?"

"Mud!" I reply. "No—my name is Lefty Feep."

"Lefty Feep? A pleasure I treasure," squeaks the robot in a tinny voice. He grabs my hand and it makes a perfect fit in his steel mitt. I look at his skinny steel frame and shudder.

"I suppose the Mad Scientist dreams you up, too?" I ask.

"Of course," says Adam Clink. "Straight from *Impossible Adventures.* A direct steal in steel."

"I am trying to explain such matters to Mr. Feep," chimes in Andy the Anthropoid. "Perhaps you can give him a short history. He seems to be a stranger and he doesn't even know what happens here on earth."

"Yes, what on earth happens?" I ask.

ADAM Clink turns his shining face and gleaming smile towards me. Then he begins to deliver a lecture on history.

To condense it for the dense, here is the way things happen in the past couple hundred of years.

It seems that war is the original score. A big war that wipes out almost everything—buildings and people both. When. the shooting stops it is for a simple enough reason—there is nothing left to shoot at and darn few people left to pull the triggers, anyway.

So many buildings are gone that there are no longer any laboratories or factories or stores or offices or libraries. Nearly all the knowledge and science in the world is blown away.

After peace gets under way, the survivors take a look around and try to rebuild the world. But there is very little left to go by, and the war continues so long that no one is left who remembers how things are run in the old days.

In a word, the world starts from scratch all over again.

Or almost from scratch. Because, digging around in the ruins, somebody runs across a stack of the books of wisdom.

A screwy coincidence, that's all it is—but the science-fiction magazine library of a fan name of Orville Fuzz is all they find left in the matter of printed matter.

Of course there are doctors and engineers and professors left who can remember various facts and figures, but when they get to talking, they decide something like this:

"The world is always on the wrong track, somehow. Maybe we better listen to some of the prophecies and forecasts of the future in this science-fiction stuff. Let us rebuild the world according to such ideas and see what happens. At least, it is worth trying."

Which is just what they do. Using science-fiction stories for models, they set to work. At first they do not get very far. And then the Mad Scientist comes on the scene, just a few years ago, and he changes everything.

That's what Adam Clink tells me, anyhow.

"Ever since the Mad Scientist takes control we do all right," he tells me confidentially.

"How come he is put in charge?" I ask.

"Why don't you know what the books of wisdom say?" Adam Clink comes back. "The stories about the future almost always have a Mad Scientist in them. So it is only natural that we allow such a personality to rule. He does all right, too.

"Of course, the first thing he does is hide all the books of wisdom in his laboratory. No one else ever sees or reads those science-fiction tales any more. They are his property. He reads them and then invents things they suggest. Like me, for example."

"He invents you?"

"Yes, and a whole race of robots. We do the work in the new world."

"And in his spare time he turns out rocket ships and space suits and skyscrapers and planes and little things like Andy the Anthropoid, here?" I persist.

"Right." Adam Clink stares at me. "Say, you are pretty uninformed," he tells me. "Who are you and where do you come from?"

"But I tell you, I'm Lefty Feep," I stall.

"But where do you come from?" insists the robot. "And what is that contraption over there?"

I give up trying to conceal the deal. "I come from 1944," I announce. "And I arrive in a Time Machine."

ADAM Clink rattles all over in excitement.

"A visitor from the past!" he squeaks. "In a real Time Machine?"

This surprises me. "I always figure those science-fiction stories are full of Time Machines," I say. "Don't tell me you haven't got any."

"We have, once," Andy the Anthropoid growls. "But the Mad Scientist won't let us use them. He doesn't want anyone to escape into the past or future because he is afraid they will get their tenses mixed. So he gets rid of all of them."

"How does he do that?"

"Oh, he seals them up in a time capsule," the ape explains. "But say—you'll have to come and meet the Mad Scientist," he tells me. "He will want to talk to such an unusual visitor."

This does not appeal to me. Visiting a crazy guy who hates Time Machines 500 years in the future is not exactly my idea of a way to spend the day.

But Adam Clink's iron hand grabs my shoulder, and Andy the Anthropoid drapes his ape shape across my back, so off we go.

We walk down the street and turn the corner.

"Better take a cab," suggests the ape. Adam Clink nods his metal head. He pulls a little gadget from a belt around his waist and paints it up in the air. A streak of flame shoots out.

From above darts a gleaming, wingless plane. It swoops straight for our heads, but makes a perfect landing only a few feet away.

"Atomic generation," whispers Adam Clink.

We walk over and the driver sticks his head out. "Where to, gents?" he pipes. "Venus—Mercury—the Bronx?"

I roll my retinas at him—because when I say the driver sticks his head out, I mean he really sticks it out. About five feet.

He has a neck like a rubber band, and I rubber at it. On top of the neck is a face I don't want to face. Something like a balloon with teeth. I goggle at this gargoyle.

Adam Clink and the ape notice it as we get in the cab.

"What's the matter, does the sight of a stratotaxicab upset you?" asks Clink.

"No, it's the sight driving it that upsets me," I answer.

"Him?" growls Andy the Anthropoid. "Why, that's just a man from Mars."

"Mars?"

“Sure. A man from Mars—like the ones in the books of wisdom.”

The driver hears us and turns his long neck around.

“The books of wisdom are foolish!” he declares.

I expect my companions will object to such a statement, but they don’t.

“These Martians are always criticizing,” explains Adam Clink. “They do it in all the stories. Pay no attention.”

The driver hears this. “What do you mean, pay no attention?” he yells. “Just like you robots. Got no emotion, no feeling. *Oo-yay are an ump-chay.”*

“Must be speaking in his strange Martian tongue,” mumbles the ape.

“I can speak better English than you can, you simian simpleton!” yaps our driver. “My name is Martin the Martian.”

“Pleased to meet you,” I reply politely.

“I don’t blame you,” answers Martin the Martian. “Now, where do you want to go?”

“Take us to the Great Laboratory,” directs Adam Clink.

“Aw, what do you want to go there for?” objects Martin the Martian. “Why don’t you go where you can have some fun?”

“Always criticizing,” grumbles Adam Clink to me. Then he raises his voice to the Martian driver. “Pull in your neck and take us to the Great Laboratory at once,” he orders.

OFF we go in a cloud—or into a cloud. Because the stratotaxicab suddenly soars straight up into the air. I cling to the strap in the back seat and look down at the map at the back street.

And in a split second we are down and out again. This time we land on the roof of a skyscraper. Martin the Martian opens the door for us. A rubbery tentacle helps us alight.

“Here you are,” he grumbles. “You earthlings are certainly crazy. As we say on Mars, just an *unchbay of erksjay.”*

Leaving the driver gibbering in his weird Martian dialect, Adam Clink, Andy the Anthropoid and I take an elevator from the roof down to the 400th floor.

After a lot of preliminaries with white-robed attendants and bearded elders—“All the books of wisdom have bearded elders attending the scientists,” explains Adam Clink—we are walking into the great white-domed laboratory of the Mad Scientist.

There, under the glow of carbon arcs, calmly splitting an atom with a simple electro-divisory-atomic-bisector-oscope, stands the Mad Scientist himself!

He doesn’t notice us, being so busy trying to split this atom into equal parts. So I get quite a chance to stare at the baldheaded man with the red face and angry frown as he bends over his work.

“He doesn’t look so crazy to me,” I whisper to the ape.

“Crazy? Who says he’s crazy?” answers Andy the Anthropoid.

“But you call him the Mad Scientist, don’t you?”

“Of. course. And that’s why we choose him. The books speak of a mad Scientist and he is mad.”

“Then he must be crazy.”

“Not crazy,” the ape repeats. “Just mad. You know—angry!”

I get it, then. When they read the science-fiction magazines they misunderstand. They think a Mad Scientist is a guy with a bad temper. The idea makes me laugh.

My laugh makes the Mad Scientist notice us.

He stares and glares.

“What the devil are you doing in my laboratory?” he shrieks. “Get out of here—I hate you!”

“But, sir——”

“Shut up before I lose my temper!” screams the Mad Scientist, throwing a test-tube at Adam Clink.

“Please sir, we have a visitor—Lefty Feep—”

"Get out of here before I disintegrate the lot of you!" howls the irate investigator. "I suppose he's another hero type, come to marry my daughter. I am sick and tired of heroes running around making love to my daughter. Just because her father is a Mad Scientist, they seem to think it's expected of them. I've got a good mind to melt your molecules, Adam Clink! And as for you, ape man, I'll sic some fleas onto your fur in a hurry if you don't remove that below-zero hero type!"

"But he's not a hero—he's got a Time Machine!" explains Adam Clink.

THE Mad Scientist opens his mouth and stops at mid-froth.

"A Time Machine!" he groans. "Why don't you tell me this before? Of course I want to talk to him. Clear out, you two. Leave me alone with Mr.—Gleep, isn't it?"

"Lefty Feep," I tell him, as the robot and the ape leave the laboratory.

"Well, well," purrs the Mad Scientist, wiping his bald head. "Won't you sit down? Try that table over there. Just move that jar with the human head in it, will you?"

I move the jar. "Take it easy!" yaps the human head. "You're jolting my solution out of balance."

I drop the jar with the head in a hurry.

"What a thump!" the head complains. "Now I've got a headache. Would you mind slipping an aspirin into my mouth?"

"Yes, I would mind very much," I gulp.

The Mad Scientist fixed up the head with a bromo seltzer as I sit down and try to relax. Then he turns to me.

"Now what's all this about a Time Machine?" he asks.

So I tell him my story, sketching in my past but fast.

"Very interesting," he remarks when I finish my recitation of explanation.

He paces the floor. "You know, sometimes I think I make a mistake when I seal up all the Time Machines and plans for making them in a time capsule where nobody can discover them," he tells me. "A device like that can be valuable."

That is where I see a chance to do myself some good.

"Bet your life!" I grin. "For instance, I am doing a lot of thinking just now and I get a very neat idea."

"What is your idea?"

"How about you and I going into business?" I suggest.

"What business?"

"Well, you might call it the travel business. Time travel!"

He frowns. It is a new idea to him. "Sure," I assure him. "You are the big shot in these parts and I have the Machine. What say we rent it out to various parties who want to take trips into the past and future? Why, in a scientific age it will be all the rage! We can make millions!"

I am very hep with pep over this notion, and so I do not notice at first when the Mad Scientist starts turning lavender around the jowls. But in a second he is positively deep purple in the puss and I cannot help but notice it. Besides, he is yelling very softly, like a moose caught in a moose-trap.

"Thunderation!" he howls. "By Einstein, quit talking about that infernal machine of yours. I almost forgot who might hear us."

"Hear us?" I ask. "Why do you care who hears us?"

"Well, Adam Clink and Andy the Anthropoid know already," mutters the Mad Scientist. "That's bad enough."

"Why is it bad?"

"Because they are jealous of me, that's why," he tells me.

"Almost all of my creations want to rule earth, you know. Adam Clink is only one of thousands of robots. The robots feel they should run things instead of just working in factories. And my other creations, like the ape men, are also restless. Then there's those ungodly carping critics, the Martians."

"I meet one," I admit.

"Blue blazes!" curses the Mad Scientist, hopping up and down in a rage. "Then they know about it, too! Almost any of them will be trying to get hold of your Time Machine and use it as a means of getting control of the others—and the earth.”

“I have the key safe in my pocket,” I reassure him. “Nobody can operate it.”

“But they know,” grumbles the Mad Scientist, “They know. And you mustn’t talk so loud or *they* will hear you.”

“They?”

“Yes,” whispers my eccentric experimenter. “They will hear you, and then——”

“I hear you!”

IT IS not a voice that tells me this.

It is a thought. Yes, inside my skull I can feel the words. *“I hear you!”* comes the message.

“Too late!” groans the Mad Scientist, tearing the place where he once has hair. “The jig is up!”

“What is that?” I inquire. “What is that message I just get?”

“It comes from the Great Brains,” the Mad Scientist sobs.

“Great Brains?”

“By telepathy,” he tells me. “You see, when I rebuild the world according to the books of wisdom, I try to get everything right. According to Hoyle, or Binder, or Hamilton, or Cummings, or Burroughs, or O’Brien and McGivern—all those authorities, who write in ancient times.

“So I invent rocket ships and super-skyscrapers and atomic blasters and all that stuff. And I conceive of a society composed of layers.

“First I invent robots, like Adam Clink, to work in factories and build buildings. That’s all they do—work.

“Then I make a few apes like Andy the Anthropoid, just to keep animal life going with more intelligence. Pets, sort of, you might say.

“On top of that, I permit the Martians to land here to take over a few jobs and stand around and criticize everything. I hate criticism, but that’s all

Martians ever do when they come to earth—except, of course, when they invade it. But that's another story, or a couple hundred other stories in the books of wisdom. Anyway, the Martian criticisms sometimes give me ideas for improvements.

"So there we are. Robots for work, apes for local color, and Martians for criticism."

"What about people?" I ask. "People? What people?" sneers the Mad Scientist. "Don't you notice that yet? There are no people, except for my daughter—and she's always getting herself kidnaped to other planets or some place. I am the only living person on earth that I know of. We don't need people any more."

I blink. "Then what about that telepathy we just hear?" I ask.

"Oh, yes—I am coming to that. After inventing all these types, I decide to complete the world with my masterpiece—straight from the books of wisdom. So I invent the Great Brains."

"What are they and why?"

"They are the ones who help me with my thinking," the Mad Scientist declares. "That's all they do—sit around and think. Just like Great Brains always think in the science-fiction stories. They can use telepathy. They have remarkable powers of concentration and perception. They know everything. And now it seems they sense your presence and the presence of the Time Machine. So we might as well visit them at once and see what they have to say."

He opens a door at the far end of his laboratory.

"Come," he suggests.

I FLING myself down a long hallway, following at his heels. We stop before another door and he opens *it.*

"Lefty Feep," says the Mad Scientist, "meet the Great Brains."

I enter a dark velvet-draped room. And there I am, face to face with the Great Brains.

Only I am not face to face—because the Great Brains have no faces!

There are three of them in this room—perched on three separate pedestals Three enormous blobs of wrinkled gray. There are no arms, legs, bodies, or faces attached to the giant jelly-heads. All I can see are brains—three brains, the size of barrage balloons.

Looking closer, I notice that they are not mounted on pedestals but on five-foot bookshelves.

"You are in the presence of intelligence," whispers the Mad Scientist. "Be very humble. They have their pride—a very overweening pride."

"Swelled heads, eh?" I whisper. "Well, in a matter of gray matter I myself am dumb in the cerebrum. But perhaps I can teach the Great Brains a new wrinkle."

"You are Lefty Feep?" comes a telepathic thought from my left.

I turn to the enormous gray mass and nod.

"You have a time machine?"

I nod again.

"We want it."

"But wait a minute——" I object.

"Do we get it peacefully or must we hypnotize you? We can destroy you with the power of our thought. Do not try to trick us, Mr. Feep—we know all, see all, hear all, and are superior to everything. We cannot be bailed."

"So this is what happens to Quiz Kids when they grow up," I mutter.

"We are waiting" the thought comes. The gray masses bend forward on their bookshelves and I get queazy but uneasy. I am hot on the spot. I must answer——

The door opens behinds us. The Mad Scientist wheels and reels.

Adam Clink stands there, waving a monkey-wrench.

"I just come from a mass-meeting of robots down at Automaton Hall," he announces. "Robot Workers Union Number Nine votes that you must turn over the Time Machine to us immediately or we will throw this"—and he points to the monkey-wrench—"into your machinery."

"They mean it!" rasps the Mad Scientist. "I always know they will stage a revolt eventually.

"We also demand more oiling," continues Adam Clink, waving a steel finger in the air. He points his rigid digit at the Mad Scientist's nose. "We always want more oil—it lubricates us and we work faster. So remember, give us oil and the Time Machine or there'll be trouble."

"We get the time machine now," telepaths the thought from the Great Brains.

I am now on a double spot.

AND the door opens again. This time only a head sticks through the opening—sticks through about five feet. It is Martin the Martian.

"Mars calling Earth," yells Martin. "We Martians just confer and wish to report that we feel ourselves—as superior beings from another planet—to be entitled to the use of the Time Machine Lefty Feep brings here. In the words of our Martian proverb, unless we get that Time Machine at once, *our-yay oose-gay is ooked-kay."*

A triple spot!

"Nobody gets to use that machine but me!" thunders the Mad Scientist. "I'll blast everybody if you cross me—I'm getting very angry, I warn you! Feep—give me that key to the Time Machine!"

A quadruple spot!

I am jumping around from one spot to another in a hurry. What do I do now?

I clear my throat and turn to the whole crew.

"Men, metal, Martian, and mental!" I address them. "You all demand the Time Machine. There is only one solution. You must give me time! Time to decide—time to choose which one of you deserves to have this wonderful device. Give me six hours to think."

"Very well," comes the thought from the Great Brains. "*But meanwhile we will be thinking too—thinking up a pretty nasty fate for you unless you*

give us the machine.”

“Six hours,” squeaks Adam Clink. “Then we get our oil and the Time Machine or you get this,” and he brandishes the monkey-wrench near my noggin.

“I’ll wait,” promises Martin the Martian. “But if we don’t get satisfaction, Mars invades earth! You and your Time Machine will be *up-ay the eek-cray,* as we Martians say.”

“Give me that Time Machine in six hours or I’ll get so mad I’ll tear down the Empire State Building and hit you over the head with it,” snarls the Mad Scientist. “That’s the way they do it in the books of wisdom.”

“Quiet!” I yell. “Let me think! Clear out of here, all of you!”

They leave me and this does not grieve me, believe me!

I stand in the room with the Great Brains, trying to figure out where to start.

Running back to the Time Machine and using my key and getting the blazes out of here is a good idea—but I am sure Adam Clink’s robots are watching it and will not permit me to escape.

So I am racing and pacing from facing this situation filled with aggravation.

If I cannot get out of here, I must get out of my problem. I must use my brain.

Better still, why not use *their* brains? The thought strikes me. Here are the Great Brains. Perhaps I can trick them into helping me somehow without their knowing it.

But how?

Maybe they can answer questions for me. Questions about the other groups, for example.

That’s it! They will not hesitate to tell me the weaknesses of their rivals—the Martians, the robots, and the Mad Scientist, for example.

TURN to the Brains and smile. “Who is the head man around here?” I ask.

I

“You mean which one of us is the wisest?” telepaths a thought.

“Yep. Which skull is the least numb?” I inquire.

“We are all wise,” they telepath. *“No thought eludes us and no problem deludes us. We can answer all questions on any subject.”*

“Good.” I flash a face that is smiling and beguiling. I turn to the nearest of the three Great Brains and aim my words right at the center of the massive mass of this terrible but cerebral creature.

“How can I get rid of the Martian menace?” I ask.

The Great Brain seems to sense my purpose and naturally this seems like a good way to dispose of a rival group. So the Brain telepaths.

“A simple matter. What do the Martians do on earth?”

“Why, I hear all they do is criticize.”

“Precisely. Therefore, in order to rid the earth of the Martians, first rid it of everything they criticize. If there is nothing left to criticize they will get bored and go away. Simple solution for a superiority complex.”

Maybe it is, but it is no solution for me. How can *I* get rid of everything? Ridiculous answer!

So I turn to the second Great Brain and ask, “How can I destroy Adam Clink and his robot race?”

“The robots are making demands. Satisfy their unwise demands and they will destroy themselves.”

This doesn’t sound like a hot plan from the brainpan either. In fact I can’t figure it out.

So I yammer, stammer, and clamor at the third Great Brain.

“How can I get rid of the Mad Scientist?” I inquire.

“Simplicity itself! Merely see to it that there is nothing for him to get angry about. Then he will no longer be a mad scientist

Another screwy answer! By this time I begin to think my own thoughts about how wonderful the Great Brains are.

“Assorted almonds, pecans, cashews and other nuts to you guys!” I yell. “You’re just a bunch of overstuffed fakes! You claim to have all the wisdom in the world, and I’ll bet you can’t even answer a simple question,” I jeer.

"We answer anything," the first Brain telepaths.

I am so mad I don't know what I'm saying. "Oh yeah?" I yell. "I bet you can't even tell me why firemen wear red suspenders."

"Firemen wear red suspenders?" the first Brain flashes. *"Wait a minute now . . . is it because fire engines are red?"*

"Wrong!" I snicker.

"Wait . . . why do firemen wear red suspenders? . . . There must be a reason . . ."

The first Great Brain swells up and I can see it folding and unfolding as it attempts to think that one out. I grin and turn to the second Brain.

"As for you," I chuckle, "perhaps you can answer this question—why does a chicken cross the road?"

"Chicken? Road? Why does a member of the genus gallus traverse a public thoroughfare? Wait a minute . . . there must be a mathematical or ornithological catch to this . . . why does a chicken cross the road? I—I ——"

"Ha!" I shout. I turn to the third Great Brain. "As for you, answer me this —how high is up?"

"How high is up? How HIGH is up? How High IS up? HOW high is up? How high is UP?" telepaths the baffled Brain.

BY THIS time all three Great Brains are racking themselves all over the shelves. They swell and puff and contract and expand and I can see their cells revolving.

"Oh what a headache I have!" telepaths one Brain. *"What's the answer?"* telepaths another. *"My migrane is killing me!"*

I get a tremendous hunch about this bunch. They are being confronted with problems they cannot answer and it hurts. I think of a super question.

"Listen, all of you!" I yell. "Here's one that will really bother you. What's the difference between a duck?"

"What's the difference between a duck?" the Great Brains telepath.

"Yes, what's the difference between a duck?" I repeat.

"Difference—Duck?—Oh, I can't think straight! It hurts to consider it! My poor aching head!" the great Brains telepath me.

They swell and jell, and as I watch, the Brain on my left suddenly flows off the shelf.

"I'm afraid," it telepaths, *"that I have a splitting headache!"*

It is all too true. In a second the Great Brain splits right in half!

The second Brain wobbles a moment and then it also falls and splits. The riddle is too much for its mentality.

"What's the difference between a duck?" telepaths the last Great Brain, writhing in agony. *"There must be an answer."*

"Guess," I insist. "Guess, if you're so smart."

The Brain turns positively black with effort. Then, *"I've got it!"* comes the message. *"What's the difference between a duck? Answer—One leg is both the same!"*

Of course, this is the right answer. But the effort is too much for the Great Brain. As the telepath comes, the last Brain gives one leap into the air and explodes all over the room.

The Great Brains are through.

By using my brain, I destroy their brains.

Now for the Mad Scientist, the Martians, and Adam Clink's robots.

How to cope with them in a few hours?

I keep remembering the advice the Brains give me—the screwy advice. About the robots now—don't they tell me to satisfy their unreasonable demands?

What unreasonable demands? Asking for the Time Machine is reasonable, if they want power. But do they ask for something else, too?

Then I remember. They want oil. They ask to be oiled more in order to work faster.

Robots always want more oil.

Suppose I give it to them?

It's a wild hunch, but I can try it.

In ten minutes I go to the Mad Scientist back down the hall in his laboratory. In ten more minutes he listens to my scheme and agrees with me. Ten minutes later I have the key to the oil storage tanks. Ten minutes after that I am confronting Adam Clink with the key, as he sits in the Robot Workers Union headquarters at Automaton Hall.

"Oil," I tell him. "I bring you the keys for the oil you want. Am I your pal or am I not? Eh, Adam?"

Adam Clink grins his grin of metallic mirth.

"Great work, Feep!" he squeaks. "Now we can have all the oil we want. We can speed up production in the factories and build our buildings faster. We robots will really go to town. I'll release the grease to all the robots."

He issues orders over a televisocastor and I accompany him on his oil distribution.

IT IS a thrilling sight to see five hundred robots drain the big oil tanks into huge containers and then drive the containers to the gates of the skyscraper factories. Here the robots line up in queues, each with its oil-can extended, to be filled from the spigots of the tanks.

In about an hour all the robots are are well-oiled.

"It's great to lubricate!" yells Adam Clink, in triumph, as the last robot gets his share. "Now let's really work full speed ahead."

The robots wave their dripping oilcans in a salute and their cheers hurt my ears.

Then they move back into their jobs.

"Robots are happy when they work," says Adam Clink, oiling up his joints liberally. "And the more they can work the happier they are. The Mad Scientist won't give much oil—claims if he does the robots speed up too much and wreck everything they touch. How foolish! We like to work fast!"

I peer through the window of the nearest factory and see things are really humming. Robots, just dripping oil at every joint, are hammering and clanging and banging away. But there is something peculiar-sounding about their pounding. A discordant note. A frantic rhythm. They are off the beam. They sound as if they are well-oiled.

That's it! They are well-oiled. Oil to robots is like liquor to humans. It takes the rust out of their frames, they think. But it also loosens them up, makes them careless and wild.

And even as I watch, the robots start to show the symptoms. They reel. They wield hammers and drop crowbars all over the place. They don't throw the switches on their machinery. They do everything at such top speed that in a few minutes machines are exploding and factories are shaking.

But they are too oiled up to stop or even notice. From far away comes a clang and a thundering roar as a building topples over. Robots working on it misplace some girders, I suppose.

And now the whole superskyscraper city is shaking as the thundering factories go haywire.

"Satisfy their unwise demands and they will destroy themselves," the Great Brains tell me. And it's true!

Adam Clink reels off drunkenly down the street. Buildings fall before him. He pays no attention. He looks to me as though he has a couple of screws loose.

It is all too true. A few screws do come off his well-oiled neck and in a minute Adam Clink is falling to pieces. His arms drop off as he flounders around.

Now the robots are fleeing the factories in droves as explosions drive them out. They lurch around, and I see that the oil loosens their nuts and bolts until the poor nuts are bolting all over the place.

The robots are being destroyed.

I get out of that section of the city, but fast. The Great Brains and robots are done for now. But I still have the Martians and the Mad Scientist to reckon with.

And time is short.

I head for the building where the Mad Scientist has his laboratory. I head for it fast, dodging falling masonry as I go.

But I am too late. Out of the sky swoops a gleaming plane.

MARTIN the Martian sticks his head out a few feet and spots me. Then he sticks his tongue out a few feet.

“Nyaaah!” he says. “We Martians won’t wait. We are coming to invade this stupid earth.”

I shrug. I lose after all. Martin the Martian points up at the sky.

“They are here, just clear of the stratosphere,” he tells me. “When I give the signal, they will swoop down with their greater disintegrators, and wipe everything off the map.”

“Why?” I ask. “Why do you want to do that? What is earth worth?”

“Nothing,” the Martian admits. “But we superior beings don’t like to see it run so stupidly. All these Brains and robots now—they’re silly. They offend us.”

I fake a laugh. “Well go away,” I suggest. “Your troubles are over. I destroy the robots and the Great Brains.” And I tell him how.

His face falls about five feet on his long neck when he hears this. His Adam’s apple wobbles on its long stem.

“You mean they no longer exist?” he mourns. “We cannot have the fun of destroying them and all their civilization?”

“That’s right. There’s nothing left for you to invade or criticize,” I tell him. “Nothing on earth. You are welcome to come down and rebuild it to suit yourselves, though,” I add. “You criticize so much, I figure maybe you want a chance to run things of your own way.”

Martin the Martian scowls. “No!” he sighs. “We are destructive critics only. If there is nothing we can destroy or feel superior to, we aren’t happy.

Just for that, we won't invade earth after all. I'll go back and tell the gang. I think we'll leave earth and invade some place else."

"Why not try Mars?" I call after him, as his plane soars aloft again.

"Good idea!" he yells.

And that is the last I see of the Martian menace.

I run upstairs to the laboratory where the Mad Scientist waits. And he is waiting for me, definitely.

As I come through the doorway he stands up. His bald head gleams. So do his teeth. So does the horrible ray-gun he holds in his hand.

He points the ray-gun at me. I stop dead in my tracks, wondering how soon it will be.

"So," he snarls. "You destroy my Great Brains. You ruin my robots. You drive away the Martians. The whole city is crashing to ruins. I am furious!"

"Calm down," I advise him. "Be very calm."

I sit down next to a bookshelf and pretend to smile.

In a minute I do smile, because I remember what the Great Brains tell me. They advise me correctly about getting rid of the robots. And they tell me that the Martians will leave when there is nothing to criticize—which they do.

And now I recall what they say about the Mad Scientist. He will be all right when he has nothing to get mad about, they prophesy.

So I open my mouth and tell the Mad Scientist what happens.

"You see?" I conclude. "You are always mad about the robots and the Martians rivaling you—and they are gone, now. You are mad about having to run the city—and it is almost in ruins. You are angry with the Great Brains. They will never trouble you again. So what is there to be mad about? Be happy and forget it!"

BUT the Mad Scientist doesn't look happy. From what I can see of his face behind the foam on his mouth, he is frothing with rage.

"You—you——!" he shrieks. His hand whips out. The ray-gun blazes.

I duck, just in time.

The ray-gun passes over my head and blasts into the bookshelves behind me. There is a searing, sizzling sound, a single flash, and then the bookshelves disappear!

“Yeeeooooow!” screams the Mad Scientist. “Now look what happens!”

“What?” I ask.

“Those bookshelves I blast—you know what they contain?” he yells.

“No.”

“The books of wisdom, that’s all!” he yammers. “I just blast the precious books of wisdom in that bookshelf!”

I grin. “So what?” I shrug. “Doesn’t that solve everything? Stop and think a moment—what makes you so irate of late? Just having to invent all of those things you read about in the science-fiction magazines.

“Now there are no magazines. No more rules and regulations for you to live up to. You can sit back, relax, be yourself. Why don’t you leave this stuffy laboratory and get out in the open and live?”

The Mad Scientist smiles.

“You can get a little farm,” I continue. “Plant a few acres and putter around. That’s the way for a man to live. All this super-stuff is super-silly.” He beams at me. He puts the ray-gun down.

“You aren’t mad any more?” I ask. “No,” he chuckles. “I feel great.”

“Then you’ll let me take the Time-Machine back to my own day and age?” I ask.

“Go ahead, and bless you,” he tells me.

He sits there humming as I go out the door.

I prowl through the twisted streets until I find the Time Machine, still shining and spotless, on the pavement where I leave it early in the day.

I open it up with the key, press the dials on the panel, and then I’m off.

Off into unconsciousness. Off into oblivion. Off into the past. Off——

And on again. I wake up sitting on the floor in the laboratory of Skeetch and Meetch. Funny thing is, the Time Machine I sit in has no panel in it.

I open the door and rush out. “Hey, boys!” I yell. “I don’t do it! Honestly——I don’t remove the panel from the Time Machine.”

Skeetch and Meetch stare at me in the other room, and Cosmo Creetch looks up.

“There is no panel on the Time Machine,” he tells me. “I will not finish it until tomorrow.”

“Won’t finish it?” I ask.

“And how do you know about the Time Machine?” snaps Cosmo Creetch. “Who are you, anyway?”

“How do I know? Who am I? Why I’m the guy you hire to take a trip into the future in the Time Machine.”

“When do I do that?”

“Earlier today.”

“But how can I?” Creetch insists. “I never see you before in my life. And the Machine is not completed yet so how can you take a trip?”

“Are you kidding?” I inquire. But Skeetch and Meetch nod their heads. They agree with Creetch. As far as they are concerned, I never come up to their laboratory at all.

So I tell my story and they all shake their heads.

“Don’t understand it,” Creetch murmurs. “Unless you make a mistake when you come back in such a hurry. Maybe you set the panels for one day before the time you are supposed to.”

“What do you mean?”

“When you are in the future, do you set the return switch for the same date five hundred years earlier—for February 28th, 1944?”

“Yes,” I insist.

“Well—then I don’t understand it.

Unless, of course——”

I interrupt him. “No,” I gasp. “I set it for the 29th of February. Because I leave here on the 29th.”

“But that’s tomorrow!” objects Creetch.

“I’ve got it!” yells Skeetch. “You leave here on the 29th, of course. But 500 years from now—in 2544—they must abolish the extra day in February for Leap Year. So 500 years from now is falling on February 28th. When you come back you arrive on the 28th, one day earlier than you start.

“Consequently you never start at all!”

I sigh. “I give up, boys,” I tell them. “But it certainly is an exhausting trip I don’t take.”

* * *

LEFTY FEEP finished his story and sat back. His beady eyes darted from my face to Bill’s.

“So you see,” he concluded, “Truth is stranger than science-fiction, after all. And you see me yesterday even if I am not here. Understand?”

“No, I don’t,” I confessed. “Anyway, there’s one consolation. If you never went into 2544, then the civilization won’t be so bad, because it doesn’t exist and never will.”

“Please,” said Lefty Feep, raising a hand. “Do not confuse me any further. I do not wish to think about science-fiction any longer.”

“I don’t blame you,” murmured my friend, Bill. “But say, it’s been a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Feep. You certainly have the most remarkable adventures.”

“Yes,” grinned Lefty Feep. “And I think this is one of the most remarkable adventures I ever had in all my life.”

Iron Mask

From the spires of an ancient haunted castle to the subterranean caverns of the Underground winds the sinister trail of a myth-turned-monster!

"WHERE is she?" demanded Eric Drake, hoarsely. "What have you done with Roselle?" The tall, bald-headed man shrugged. "Sit down, Eric," he murmured. "There is no need to become excited."

"Tell me where she is," the young man insisted, gray eyes flaring in accusation.

Pierre Charmand met his stare directly. "I have sent Roselle to the Chateau D'Ivers," he answered.

"To the chateau? But you couldn't. Don't you know what they're saying? The Chateau D'Ivers is—"

Pierre Charmand interrupted with a bitter laugh. "I know," he said. "They say the Chateau. D'Ivers is haunted. Do you believe it? And do you believe I would send Roselle—my own daughter—to such a place if I believed it?"

Eric Drake stared at Pierre Charmand through a veil of candle-light. They were a strange pair, here in the secret quarters of the Underground.

Tall, elderly Pierre Charmand, former Mayor of Dubonne, met the gaze of young Eric Drake, former AP correspondent. A strange pair indeed, and in a strange alliance.

For Pierre Charmand, since the coming of the Nazis to Dubonne, was mayor no longer. He was local head of the Underground movement.

Drake, too, had left his former post with the arrival of the Germans. Now he served the Underground for the sake of two loves—love of Charmand's daughter, Roselle, and love of freedom.

They had been partners together in this movement to free France, but now—"Why did you send Roselle to the Chateau?" Eric Drake demanded.

Again Pierre Charmand was evasive. "Are you afraid of the ghosts, too?" he mocked.

"Nonsense," Drake snapped. "It's not ghosts she's likely to run into there. It's Germans!"

Charmand chuckled.

"I know," he replied. "And that is precisely why I sent her. The news has come to me that *gauleiter* Hassman plans to visit the Chateau tonight. It is necessary for one of us to arrive before he does."

Both men were silent for a moment, thinking of Hassman. Hassman, the new *gauleiter,* was instituting a reign of terror in the little town of Dubonne. He took French machinery, and French gold, and now he was planning to take French manhood to ship to Germany. His troops, his Gestapo squads, his spies were everywhere. Charmand and his Underground movement had been sadly subdued under the iron rule of Hassman.

"What does Hassman want at the chateau?" Drake asked, breaking the silence. "Can't you guess?" Charmand replied. "There's nothing of value there," Drake mused. "The old castle has been deserted since the family was killed in the French Revolution. The peasants say their ghosts still haunt the spot—but I'd guess it's probably filled with dust, cobwebs, and bats. Nobody would care to visit it."

"Exactly." Charmand shrugged "And that is why I thought of it as an ideal hiding-place."

"Hiding-place?"

"Yes. When the Germans came here to Dubonne, my last official act as mayor was to dispose of the state papers. Not the ordinary documents, you understand, but the secret files—just a few sheets of value buried away in the archives at the City Hall.

"These I determined to preserve at any cost, for their historical significance. So I cast about for a suitable hiding-place. While you were so busily sending dispatches on Nazi troop movements to your newspaper, I was scurrying up the hill to conceal those papers at the Chateau D'Ivers."

"You hid them there?"

"Yes, there. I placed them in an iron casket and concealed them in a spot I alone knew—a secret drawer in the mantel over the old fireplace.

"I thought they would be safe. But somehow Hassman must have learned, because I received word today that he is sending a squad to the chateau this evening "Naturally, they must not be allowed to find those papers. That is why I sent Roselle this afternoon."

Drake scowled.

"But why did you send your own daughter—a girl—on such a risky mission?"

"Because of the risk," Charmand explained. He rose and went to the window. Drawing aside the blinds he pointed at the streets outside. "Look, my friend," he said. "Look at the streets of Dubonne. Every block patroled by Nazi swine. What one of our people could walk unchallenged through those streets and up to the Chateau in broad daylight? Certainly not you or I, nor Marcel, Antoine, Phillipe, Jean—none of our men. No, only a woman could go forth on such an errand; a woman we can trust. So I sent Roselle."

"But it's twilight now," Drake objected. "She should be back, shouldn't she? And the Nazis will be going up there—"

Pierre Charmand bit his upper lip and turned away.

"You're worried now, aren't you?" Drake accused. "You know it was a foolhardy scheme. That's why you didn't let me in on it. Why, she might be —"

"Don't say it," Charmand whispered.

"Fool!" Drake strode toward the door, fists swinging angrily.

"Where are you going?" muttered the old man.

"I'm going up to the chateau after her," Drake answered.

"But the patrols—"

"Damn the patrols! It's dark, I can slip through them. And I'm going to slip through them. Roselle's up there in that deserted ruin, alone. I'm going to her, now."

DRAKE'S pace never slackened when he reached the cobbled street outside. He thrust his hand deeply into the pocket of his battered trench-coat and gripped the metal of a gun-butt. Scowling, he tramped down a deserted street in grim haste, his eyes intent on the vistas of the deepening twilight.

A telltale clank of metal warned him to draw back into the shadows beside the trees. A Gestapo man passed in gaunt silhouette.

Drake waited until the German had turned the corner, then hastened on.

The upturned collar of his coat served to hide his face—a face already too well known by the German invaders. For Drake, like all the others in the Underground, was marked for death by the Nazis. It was a dangerous game he played here—a game of hide-and-seek in nighted streets; the stakes, his life itself.

The game went on, quietly; silent as death. And Drake worked his way up the street toward the hill beyond. Every stop, each delay, each moment spent in hiding or eluding a patrolman, was torture to the man. For Roselle was up there on the hilltop. He must get to her at once.

But a rising moon peered with bloating face over the ruined walls by the time Drake hastened up the pathway that led to the Chateau D'Ivers. The mouldering walls masked a mystery—a mystery shrouded in silence. Drake's ears heard no sound from within. His eyes saw no light save that of the cold and grinning moon above.

Drake pressed through the tangled weeds overrunning an ancient pathway.

He moved warily now, keeping well under the shadows of the gnarled trees.

If the Germans were here—

But there were no Germans.

There was only silence and decay. A fetid stench seemed to emanate palpably from the great, moss-grown stones of the chateau’s walls. The ruined spires leered at the moon, and broken windows, like the eyeless sockets of skulls, stared blindly at the night.

Drake neared the doorway, observed with a start that the great carved door swung open on creaking hinges. He caught a glimpse of yawning vistas beyond.

Roselle must be in there, now. Unless—

Drake stifled an oath as he caught the flutter of movement from behind the door.

Something was emerging!

Eric Drake’s hand went to his gun. He jerked the muzzle upwards, held it ready, and then—

A cloud of black horror spiraled from the doorway and streamed upwards to the sky.

“Bats!” he muttered.

As the squeaking and chittering column soared aloft, Drake repressed a shudder. He thought of ancient legends, of the monstrous rumors that clustered thicker than the moss about the walls of the chateau.

And Roselle, all alone there in the darkness—

But what if she were not *done?*

The thought was a lash. Drake half-ran up the stone steps, dashed through the open doorway.

“Roselle!” he whispered.

THERE was no answer—no answer save for a sibilant echo that slithered from the cold walls of the hallway in which he stood.

Here, in the lair of darkness, Drake pondered which way to turn. Where was the room with the fireplace? Where was Roselle? Should he risk calling her?

He hesitated for a moment—and then his doubts were resolved.

For silence shattered in a single scream. Drake knew the voice. Roselle!

A shot rang out from the left. Its echo boomed through the corridors, and Drake went into action.

He darted toward the doorway to his left, entered the room, and reeled back a step.

Yes, the fireplace was there, and the mantel above it. Faint moonlight revealed the scene—but Drake had eyes only for the slim, alluring body of the girl on the floor. It was Roselle.

And above her a shape hovered in the semi-darkness; such a shape as is born only in the depths of nightmare. Black, cloaked, hooded, it bent over the girl in an attitude of gloating menace. A black paw clutched something to the cloaked breast, and then—the figure was gone.

Even as Drake dashed forward, the shape seemed to melt into the shadows against the farther wall and disappear.

Then Drake was kneeling beside the girl, raising her head, whispering to her.

Roselle opened her eyes. She was unhurt; Drake saw that. The girl was conscious, too—but not wholly so, for she screamed again. “Eric!” she cried. “Eric, you’re here!”

“Yes,” he whispered. “Everything’s all right.”

“But where is he?” sobbed the girl. “Where is the thing I saw—*the thing in the Iron Mask?”*

2. The Man without a Face

MOONLIGHT streamed through the ruined windows.

Drake stared deep into the girl's eyes and read her fear. He shook his head. The fear was plain to see, but there was no hysteria.

"He wore an iron mask over his face," Roselle repeated, softly. "I saw him as plainly as I see you. He wasn't a ghost."

Eric Drake nodded thoughtfully.

"That's plain to see," he murmured. "Ghosts don't steal valuable papers. And ghosts don't leave footprints."

He pointed to the floor, where moonbeams glittered upon the silver carpet of the dust. The mouldering motes had been disturbed by footprints—the prints of Roselle's high-heeled slippers and the flat, broader prints of a man's shoes.

Drake saw the incoming tracks, and his gray eyes swerved to observe the prints retreating once more along the castle halls beyond the chamber.

"He went that way," Drake snapped, rising to his feet.

"Eric—you're going to follow?"

"I must." Drake drew Roselle to her feet, placed his hands on her shoulders in a gesture of reassurance.

"You've got to get out of here before Hassman's men show up," he told her. "Go back and report to your father. Tell him what happened—and tell him I'm on the track of those papers. I'll see him at the meeting later tonight."

"But Eric—you're not going to follow him alone?"

"He has the papers. We must get them back. And he can't have gone far in the past five minutes. If I hurry—"

"But you can't go!" There was more than fear in Roselle's dark eyes. Eric laughed.

"He's only a man, no matter what kind of a disguise he's wearing. And I've got a gun."

"Guns won't help you," she whispered.

"What do you mean?"

"I didn't want to tell you this—but I shot at him. And hit him."

"There's no blood," Drake observed.

"Yes, that's right. There's no blood. I shot him in the head—and there was no blood. He didn't stop. He's a monster, I tell you—"

"Stop it, Roselle!" Drake shook her shoulders. "You hit the iron mask, of course. I tell you, nothing supernatural leaves footprints like these. And as long as I see footprints, I'll follow. Now—get out of here, fast."

A long kiss belied the harshness of his command. Then Drake stepped back, wheeled, and plunged into the dark passage beyond the castle chamber. His eyes followed the blurred tracks in the dust.

Ahead was only darkness and silence—deep darkness, deeper silence. Drake never wavered. As he entered the musty corridor the moonlight faded. He snapped on a pencil-flash and groped his way around a turn in the corridor.

The way led down, but the tracks were still plainly visible in the beam of the flash. Drake plodded along.

A winding passageway turned the castle ruins into a veritable maze—a black, forbidding maze that reeked of ancient decay, lurking death. But Drake followed the footprints; footprints that lured him ever deeper into the nighted depths where dwelt the strange silence and the sable shrouds woven by shadows.

Crumbling walls loomed and leered in the heart of the dank inner chambers. The pencil-flash disclosed tunnel mouths and openings on every side, but Drake's eyes were fastened on the plain trail of the fugitive's footprints.

They led him on, they led him down—they might lead him to the gates of hell—but where they went, he could follow. And he must follow.

He increased his pace. Was the attacker hurrying to some chosen spot? Was there a grim purpose in this plainly marked trail?

Would Drake round a bend and be confronted with a waiting presence? Did something lurk in the shadows, crouching to spring?

He strained his ears against silence, but could not read the secret prisoned by the night.

And then—

Abruptly Drake turned the corner at the end of the winding passageway. The footprints led him to a wall and halted; halted against a blank expanse of gray stone.

Drake's pencil-flash swept the flagstones at his feet. Drake's eyes swept the expanse of wall.

Then he fathomed the secret.

"Subterranean exit," he muttered. "Probably another concealed opening."

His surmise proved to be correct. His groping fingers, running swiftly over the surface of the wall above the spot where footprints ended, soon encountered the press-pivot.

A section of wall opened silently—surprisingly, for a mechanism undoubtedly worn by age and rusty with disuse.

Drake stood on the threshold of the tunnel only long enough to play his pencil-flash on the flooring ahead. He saw the footprints, and followed.

Damper, deeper darkness . . . secret, sepulchral silence . . . and ever the footprints beckoning him on to the brink of unguessable gulfs beyond.

And then, quite suddenly, he emerged. A bend in the tunnel brought him abruptly to a slanting fissure of rock—a fissure through which moonlight streamed. The secret passageway led out of the castle to the lower hillside beyond!

Now there were no footsteps to follow. But Drake saw something better—a figure!

THERE in the bright moon's rays wound the road down the hillside; and on the road Drake discerned the black, grotesquely bobbing shape of the fugitive.

Although, the moon was bright, Drake saw no glitter of steel from the head of the fleeing man; at this distance it seemed as though his head, like his entire body, was shrouded in black. Black, crawling like a spiderous shape, the figure moved through moonlight down the road ahead.

Drake reached for his automatic, at the same time pocketing his pocket-flash once more. The action was symbolic. All in a moment the man was transformed from a searcher to a hunter.

He started down the hillside road at a steady trot. The figure didn't turn back. Perhaps the fugitive hadn't heard him. Exulting in his luck, Drake pressed forward, closing the gap between them. His eyes, ever alert for sudden movement, came to abrupt and unexpected focus—not on the fugitive, but on the road far below him.

Other figures were crawling up the hillside from below!

Other figures were swarming purposefully along the hill. Drake, even at this distance, recognized the ugly outlines of military helmets.

Gauleiter Hassman's men—the Gestapo squad was coming to ransack the chateau!

Drake stepped back momentarily.

This was a situation he was not prepared for. The Gestapo would reach the stranger before he could. And perhaps the fugitive was in their employ. He hesitated.

But the black-clad fugitive did not hesitate.

He must have seen the Gestapo squad at the same time Drake glimpsed them. Now he crouched in the center of the road, against a pile of rocks. The road slanted steeply down before him, and the Germans were toiling upwards just below. The fugitive tugged at the jumble of rocks, pried a boulder free—

Drake gasped.

With a single gesture, the fugitive lifted the gigantic boulder over his head and sent it crashing down upon the helmets of the Nazis below!

The missile struck with crushing accuracy. A Nazi dropped, pinned and writhing under the gigantic stone.

The rest of the squad glanced up, perceived the solitary figure standing with black silhouette against the sky. The Gestapo men scattered, seeking cover behind crags and between crevices in the path below.

Swiftly, unhesitatingly, the fugitive tore another rock free from the face of the cliff beside the path. Once again he raised it, hurled it crashing toward the head of the nearest Nazi.

It missed, and hurtled down the hillside, striking with a force that sent echoes of doom reverberating through the night.

Now the Nazis had produced revolvers. Flame spat toward the black figure in five angry jets. But the fugitive sought no shelter. He stooped again, deliberately, and lifted another huge chunk of granite.

He dropped it squarely on an iron helmet below. There was a scream. And the shots rang out in redoubled tempo. The fugitive, standing amidst a hail of lead, calmly groped for another rock.

There was something magnificent about his lone fight against these odds—something magnificent and not wholly sane.

But that didn't move Drake to subsequent action. His calculations were shrewd.

The fugitive was one man: the Nazis numbered four. The Nazis had guns, while the fugitive had only the rocks. The fugitive still had the casket—Drake could see it hanging in a knapsack strapped to his black back.

If the Nazis won and took the casket, Drake would be fighting against greater odds. If he sided with the fugitive and helped beat the attackers off, he'd have one man to deal with—if he were an enemy and not a friend.

Besides, enemy or friend, the fugitive was killing Germans. And Drake approved of the idea.

He sent the stamp of his approval crashing through the night as his gun spoke.

Bounding forth from cover, Drake joined the solitary stranger in the road, and as the stranger hurled his rocks, Drake aimed and fired each time an iron helmet was exposed from cover on the roadside below.

The stranger turned. For a moment Drake stared into a black hole where a face should be—then realized that his information was correct. The stranger did wear a mask, but not of iron. His features were covered with a black velvet cloth, with two slits for the eyes. From head to foot the fugitive wore black, and he towered like a gaunt ghost in the moonlight.

Drake was conscious of intent scrutiny, but the mysterious one did not speak. He merely grunted, then turned and pried another rock from the hillside. Again he hurled it down with an incredible display of strength. And Drake aimed at a helmet as a Nazi rose from below and fired at them.

Drake could almost swear he saw the stranger flinch as a bullet struck home, but it could not be. For the fugitive stooped stolidly like an automatom, grasped another boulder, and sent it spinning on its deadly mission. Another Nazi screamed, then fell along the hillside as the boulder bounded over his body.

Drake aimed once more. And his aim was true. Another Nazi fell. And his remaining companion suddenly turned and scuttled back down the road. The stranger rolled another boulder down—Drake fired at the running target—but the solitary surviving Gestapo man vanished far below.

Then, and only then, the fugitive turned his fantastically masked visage toward Drake and extended a black-gloved hand.

"Merci beaucoup," he whispered.

THE voice was curiously soft, the French phrasing curiously stilted.

"My thanks, *Monsieur,"* whispered the stranger in the mask. "How can I ever repay you?"

In an instant Drake was at his side, the muzzle of his gun pressing into the stranger's back.

"That's simple," Drake grinned. "You can repay me by handing over the casket in your knapsack—the casket you stole from the chateau."

For a moment the stranger stood silent. Then, abruptly, a whispering chuckle rose from the depths behind the black velvet mask.

"What's so amusing?" Drake snapped. "But this is too incredible!" chuckled the stranger. "Can it be that you also wish to secure this casket?"

"Can be," said Drake, laconically. "Hand it over."

The stranger didn't move.

"It is all right," he whispered. "I know about the papers it contains. I was merely set on rescuing it from the Nazis." Drake's gun dug deeper, emphasizing his impatience.

"Never mind that," he insisted. "Hand it over. I happen to know that you stole this casket from a girl in the chateau."

"Was she one of our people?" whispered the stranger. "I did not know, or else I should not have interfered. I thought I was the only one who suspected the Nazis were coming."

Drake hesitated only a moment.

"Who are you?" he snapped.

"You know we don't ask for names," parried the stranger. "But I can give you the password."

"Give it to me, then."

"Silence."

Drake heard the whispered word and lowered his weapon.

He could not doubt the watchword of the Underground.

This stranger was one of the organization, working for the freedom of France. And in accordance to the code of the Underground he need not reveal any compromising information as to his identity.

Still, Drake could not free himself from misgivings. He stared again at the masked features, the gloved hands of the mysterious man in black.

The stranger turned, shrugged.

"Why do I wear a mask? Why do I conceal my hands with gloves?" His whisper came faintly.

"The explanation is simple, if unpleasant. I was a soldier, *Monsieur.* A soldier of France—yes. It happened during the retreat from the Maginot line. The tanks came over and the men with the *flammenwerfers*—the flame-throwers. They burned my face and body.

"When I was found, I was given up for dead. But at the hospital in Paris they worked to save my life. In this they succeeded, but they could not save my face. You understand? That is why I conceal my hands and body, because of the scars. And I must conceal what they gave me in place of a face."

The whispering voice was bitter, harsh, intense.

"They wanted to keep me there, an invalid. But I have work to do. I have a debt to repay to the Nazi horde. I left the hospital, made contact with the Underground. They could not use me in Paris, because of my—deformity. So I have been fighting alone, in my own way.

"I came here. By chance I learned the local *gauleiter* had ordered a raid on the chateau. I did not know his purpose, but I came, thinking to anticipate his search. I found the girl taking this casket. I could not stop to make inquiries. I took the casket, fled—and you know the rest." Drake nodded. "Ours is a fortunate meeting," he said. "You are mistaken if you think the Underground has no place for you. You have great strength and greater courage. I shall be happy to accompany you to our headquarters tonight—we are holding an important meeting. Let me introduce you to Charmand, our leader. He'll find a place for you."

"But I can't," the stranger whispered. "If they should see me—"

"Perhaps your features are repulsive," Drake answered, cautiously. "But it does not matter, I assure you. No matter what they did to your face—"

"You don't understand," groaned the stranger. "I have no face. They gave me *something else.* You fool, don't you realize what they did to me? Look, then!" A black-gloved hand rose to the stranger's swathed throat. A single convulsive gesture ripped the black velvet covering from his head.

Drake stared at what leered forth in the gleaming moonlight; stared at the glaring horror that rose from the stranger's shoulders, stared at the dreadful reality of what Roselle Charmand had hinted.

For the stranger had no face. Set in an iron grin, brazen as doom, was a grimacing iron mask!

3. The Gauleiter Strikes

"WHAT is the word?" demanded Pierre Charmand. The tall, bald-headed old Frenchman stared at the masked stranger, a glitter of proud challenge flashing from his stern blue eyes.

"Silence," whispered the voice from behind the black velvet covering.

Dubonne's Underground leader nodded slowly. Then Pierre Charmand turned to Eric Drake, standing at the masked man's side.

"Who is this man and where did you encounter him?" he asked.

Drake told the story, simply and without hesitation. "I think that he can help us," he said. "And he has brought the casket."

Pierre Charmand's eyes sparkled.

"That is well!" he said. "It is very important that we of the Underground retain possession of those documents in the casket. All of the ancient official papers of Dubonne are contained here—some of them were rescued from the days of the Revolution. *Gauleiter* Hassman would give his right arm to possess them."

He rose and extended his hand. It was grasped by the black-gloved hand of the burned soldier in the iron mask.

Drake stood watching the weird tableau—and weird it was.

For the three of them were in the headquarters of Dubonne's Underground—the warehouse of the local brewery.

Surrounded by mountains of barrels, they crouched in a vast chamber; the light of a single candle rising to cast eerie shadows over casks and tuns. It was as though they were met in the great wine-cellar of some fabled ogre—these three incongruous figures; old Frenchman, young American, and creature garbed in the black nightmare of his cloak and hood.

Appreciation of the grotesque scene sounded in a sudden scream.

All three wheeled and faced the doorway.

Roselle Charmand stood there, one hand covering her red lips as she cut short the sound that might betray them to the world outside.

But her blue eyes were wide with horror as she saw her father shaking hands with the creature that had attacked her.

"Mon pere," she gasped. "He is here!"

Pierre Charmand nodded and stroked his mustache as he gave her a reassuring smile.

“Do not be alarmed, my daughter,” he said. “Drake can explain everything.”

“Drake—oh, Eric, you’re safe! And you’ve captured the attacker!”

“Well, not exactly,” Drake grinned. “Let me tell you what’s happened.”

He did so, sitting on an overturned cask at the girl’s side. She listened, and gradually the fear left her face.

Meanwhile Pierre Charmand conferred with the man wearing the mask. Drake concluded his story just in time to catch the purport of the Underground leader’s remarks.

“And so you see,” he was concluding, “I have called a meeting for tonight—here. Within the hour all members of the Underground in Dubonne and the surrounding countryside will be assembled.

“We have word that *gauleiter* Hassman is about to issue an order summoning all able-bodied males to forced labor in Germany. Naturally, we must act at once. We must plan an effort to sabotage that campaign.”

The iron mask bobbed up and down in agreement.

Pierre Charmand sighed. “There is but one disappointment,” he admitted. “I had hoped tonight to have a full report on just when Hassman would strike, and where; how many men he was going to conscript and what method he would use. Two or three of our people have attempted to intercept such a report. But I must confess failure. Now, with the meeting set for midnight—and only an hour to go—I have no report on which to base our plan of campaign.”

“Midnight,” whispered the man in the mask. “One hour to go.”

He rose, suddenly, purposefully.

“Where are you going?” asked Pierre Charmand.

“You say there is an hour,” came the whisper. “Perhaps I can do something.”

“You mean you can get the report?” breathed Pierre Charmand. “But how?”

The iron-masked man shrugged, heaving his shoulders clumsily. “Do not inquire as to methods,” he whispered. “I have developed a certain—technique—in such matters. Rest assured, I shall return with the information you desire.”

There was a flurry of black, and the man disappeared from the brewery vault.

Charmand stared at his daughter and Drake and slowly duplicated the departed man’s shrug.

“Who knows?” he said. “Perhaps it can be done.”

Roselle trembled in Drake’s embrace. “He frightens me,” she whispered. “Somehow, I have the feeling that he’s holding something back—something he hasn’t told us.”

“We must have faith,” Drake reassured her. “But now, there’s work to be done.”

THE three of them put their heads together in the candlelight; Pierre Charmand’s grizzled bald dome, Drake’s straight-haired sandy head, and Roselle’s cascaded cloud of dark curls all bent forward over the table, and Pierre Charmand began to issue instructions in a low murmur.

As he spoke, the door at the end of the room began to open and close swiftly as Underground members suddenly filtered singly into the room.

They came and came, but always they walked alone. Pious housewives, staid old business men, grinning laborers and gnarled, sunburned farmers appeared and silently took seats on upturned casks in a semi-circle about the table.

Soon a score of them were assembled, waiting for the moment of meeting. Drake lifted his gaze from the papers on the table, glanced at his wristwatch.

Midnight.

“It’s time,” he told Charmand. “And our friend has not returned.”

But even as he spoke the words, the door at the end of the room swung open, and the black cloak of the masked man swirled into the room.

Ignoring the stares of the assemblage, he strode to the table with thundering tread.

A gloved hand swept out, and a white paper fluttered down.

“Here is a report of Hassman’s proposed operations,” he muttered, in his peculiarly husky voice.

Pierre Charmand raised his eyebrows. “Good work,” he said. “Was it—safe?”

“Do you mean, have I been discovered? The answer’s no. And I don’t think I’ve been followed, either. The sentry posted outside of the entrance upstairs says that we’re all here. You can call the meeting, then. We’re safe.”

The masked figure sat down awkwardly upon an upturned cask near the table. Drake and Roselle found seats, and Pierre Charmand rose and confronted the meeting of the Underground.

“Comrades,” he began. “You all know for what purpose we are met tonight. Ordinarily I’d call for your reports and and then take up the matter at hand.

“But I have just received information of vital importance concerning our next plan of operations. A new comrade has succeeded where others have failed—you saw him come in just now.

“Therefore I beg leave of you to examine the information he has just brought in. I should like to be able to pass it on to you immediately, for it concerns our future.”

There were nods of assent and murmurs of approval from the audience.

Slowly, Pierre Charmand unfolded the paper the cloaked man had brought to him.

And then—

Hell broke loose.

Without warning came the thundering on the stairs outside the door. Without warning, the rattle of machine-gun fire resounded through the hollow brewery vault.

The door guarding the warehouse crashed in splinters and into the room poured a swarm of gray-clad figures.

“Hassman!” screamed Roselle Charmand.

A DOZEN pairs of eyes had recognized the burly figure in the doorway.

The squat, bullet-headed *gauleiter* was a familiar figure in Dubonne—a figure of terror. Terror stood in that doorway now, and his pudgy hands held two spitting Lugers.

A woman’s wail of fear died in a spatter of bullets. And then the Underground acted. With a flick of the wrist, Pierre Charmand struck the candle from the table, plunging the vault chamber into total darkness. Men and women ran like rats.

But the darkness was not complete. Red bursts of machine-gun fire spat deadly lightning into the room. The surprised Underground members crouched behind tuns and vats. A few were armed, and they returned the fire of the Nazis as the soldiers swept into the room, raking the walls with their portable machine-gun units.

Over and above the chatter of death rose the screams of the trapped Frenchmen and the guttural commands and curses of *gauleiter* Hassman.

The Nazis advanced, groping their way as the Underground defenders rolled beer barrels in their path and toppled casks. Vats pierced by bullets gushed forth amber streams. Soon the Nazis waded ankle-deep on their errand of death.

But they came on. Several fell, crushed by barrels or riddled by the answering bullets of the Underground. Yet they advanced, and it was a ghastly game of hide and seek played there in the darkness as the machine-guns barked, and their tongues of flame lapped out to lick the bodies of the French in a caress of death.

Drake grasped Roselle by the shoulders, drawing her behind the nearest sheltering pile of barrels. “Stay here,” he yelled above the din.

Then he stole forth to the center of the room, groping his way toward the table.

The casket from the chateau rested there; he had seen the masked man place it next to the candle before he sat down.

His hand went out, encountered its cold outlines. He grasped it. An iron grasp encircled his wrist.

Drake lashed out. His fist struck velvet—then iron beneath the velvet.

“Oh, it’s you!” he exclaimed. “Had the same idea, eh?”

The hand relaxed its grip on his wrist but did not let go.

“It’s me—Drake!” yelled the American.

“Oh.” The whisper came and the hand fell away as Drake grasped the casket.

“Come on,” Drake said. “Follow me. I think there’s another exit. We’d better get out of here fast—there’s no hope of resisting.”

It was grim truth he spoke.

THE tide of battle was flowing unmistakably in favor of the Nazis. Through the darkness they advanced squad on squad, wading through the spilled liquor in a relentless search for the few remaining Underground members yet alive.

Drake groped his way back to Roselle’s side. “Follow me,” he commanded. The three of them stole cautiously along a row of tuns against the wall.

“There’s an emergency loading chute set somewhere in the wall, as I remember,” Drake shouted, above the din of battle. “Wait—I think I’ve got it.”

His outstretched hand rested on an iron handle. He would tug it open and then—“What about Father,” gasped Roselle. “Where is he?”

The answer came grimly.

A sudden hail rattled above their heads. Bullets thudded into the wall. Running feet rounded the corridor of tuns to their left.

Pierre Charmand, panting and exhausted, stumbled blindly into his daughter’s arms.

“Mon pere—we’re safe! Follow us to escape,” the girl shouted.

Drake raised the door by the iron handle set in the wall. “We’ll have to crawl through,” he warned them.

His admonition was drowned out by the thunder of booted feet thudding down the corridor toward them. Another burst of machine-gun fire swept the air above their crouching figures.

“Now!” whispered Drake.

Quickly, he pushed Roselle Charmand through the doorway. She crawled ahead on hands and knees. Drake bent to follow. Then came the ghastly horror of the light.

Gauleiter Hassman had found a flashlight—and its cold beams swept over the bent bodies of Drake, Charmand, and the iron-masked man.

And with the beam, came bullets. The Nazis behind Hassman opened fire.

“Quick!” Drake warned. He rose and kicked out at the nearest pile of barrels. They fell to barricade the corridor. Pierre Charmand straightened up. His great arms encircled another column of stacked barrels, sent it crashing.

THE iron-masked man also rose. Together he and Charmand heaved against a row of kegs. They began to topple. If they fell, the Nazis would be crushed beneath the kegs. If they fell—

But the bullets fell first.

A red knife cut through Pierre Charmand’s waist. A score of slugs tore the grizzled Frenchman almost in two. Sick with horror, Drake saw him fall.

The bullets swerved, and now the iron-masked man was raked by the missiles of death.

But he did not fall!

Drake saw the red line cross his body as the bullets struck—but the man stood like a statue, straining at the row of kegs and casks.

And even as Drake watched, the stranger in the iron mask gave a single massive wrench of his shoulders and sent the entire column of kegs crashing down upon the heads and shoulders of the Nazi gunners.

Then, “Come on,” he whispered, and dived through the open loading entrance. Drake followed, before the booming echoes of the fallen barrels had ceased resounding through the vault behind them.

The door clanged shut and they crawled forward in utter darkness. Soon they had overtaken Roselle.

“What happened?” she whispered. “Where is Father?”

“Don’t talk,” muttered Drake, fiercely. “Keep moving. They may follow.”

Through the stifling confines of the loading chute they moved on hands and knees. Drake clutched the casket to his breast. He heard Roselle’s strident breathing, heard his own gasps. But the iron-masked stranger was silent.

And then, at last, their bursting lungs knew relief as Drake reached the other end of the chute and cautiously pushed up the hatchway leading to the alley behind the brewery.

He stared out at a moon-drenched, deserted expanse of streets. The Nazi trucks were around the corner in front of the brewery.

“Come on,” he urged. “We can get away now.”

“Where are we going?” Roselle muttered.

“Follow me—no time to explain,” Drake flung over his shoulder as he started down the alley at a steady trot. Girl and stranger joined him.

Wordlessly, Drake led them on; led them surely and unerringly. They toiled up a steep hillside, Drake in the lead.

Suddenly the girl put a hand across her mouth to stifle a gasp of fear. She pointed to the pathway ahead.

“Look there!” she whispered. “A Nazi!”

“A dead Nazi,” said Drake, grimly.

"We killed him earlier this evening."

"We?"

The masked stranger nodded at the girl. "We're climbing the path where Drake and I fought off the Gestapo squad," he explained.

"There's a cave leading out of the chateau at the top," Drake told her. "I think we'll be safe there for a while."

Only when they reached die cavern did he permit the girl and the masked stranger to halt. It was several minutes more before they were able to speak.

SLOWLY, gently, Drake went about the unpleasant task of explaining Pierre Charmand's absence.

"He died for France," Drake said. "And so did the others. We alone are left to carry on the fight. And we should not be here now if our friend had not acted." Drake turned to the masked stranger. "That was a heroic stunt of yours," he commented. "Standing there in the direct line of machine-gun fire to pull down those kegs on Hassman's men."

An awkward shrug was his only answer. But this did not satisfy Drake. His eyes rested on the masked man intently.

"There is just one detail you might explain," Drake drawled.

"And what is that, *Monsieur?"* came the whispering response.

"Just how you pulled that little trick and still managed to remain alive," Drake challenged. "Because—I *saw* at least fifty bullets strike your body!"

There was a moment of tense silence. Again, an awkward shrug from the stranger. He raised his arms, slowly. Drake and the girl followed his movements. Once again, the masked man removed-the black velvet covering from his face. Once again, in the light of the moon streaming through the mouth of the cavern, they gazed on the iron horror of the mask he wore.

Drake noted the silvery surface of the metal, and his keen gaze encompassed many details he hadn't remembered. The mask was not covering the face alone, but extended like a brazen helmet over his entire head, terminating tightly at the neck where the cloak reached up to cover its edges.

And the iron mask bore—bullet scars. Fully a dozen indentations were visible on the battered surface of the grisly monstrosity.

Drake's gaze never wavered. A deep sigh came from behind the mask.

"Very well," whispered the stranger. "I can no longer conceal the truth from you. I am not human—but immortal."

"Immortal?"

The iron visage bobbed in assent.

"Then—who are you, really?"

"I? the whisper came. "I am—*The Man in the Iron Mask!"*

4. Masque de Fer

"YOU are the Man in the Iron Mask?" gasped Drake.

Incredulity shone in his eyes. Roselle's piquant features contorted in puzzled disbelief.

But the stranger shook his iron visage slowly in assent.

"I am," he whispered.

"But the Iron Mask legend is hundreds of years old," Drake objected.

"So am I," whispered the stranger. "And I can assure you that the story is no legend. While the truth is known to me alone, it is still a matter of historically accepted fact that I lived. All that remains unknown is the fact that I am still alive. Yes, alive—and here to save France in her hour of need!"

Drake and the girl were silent. The Man in the Iron Mask hunched forward oddly until he squatted directly before them on the floor of the cavern.

"Naturally I couldn't tell you this before, Drake. I told you that I was a soldier with a burned face—because it was more believable. But now that you've guessed part of my secret by seeing bullets strike me without injuring my body, you may as well know the rest. Know that I am immortal—and why."

"Yes—why?" Drake persisted.

"This is my story," whispered the stranger. "But first, I shall help you to recall the accepted historical version.

"In 1679, a man wearing an iron mask—a *masque de fer*—was sent to the fortress of the Isle Ste. Marguerite, off the coast of Provence.

"He arrived in a closely-guarded coach, escorted by the king's men all the way from Paris—and he was imprisoned on royal order.

"The soldiers caught furtive glimpses of his masked face, and marveled at the curiously-wrought ironwork that screened it. Slits for eyes and nostrils and a hinged jaw for a mouth were all that broke the hideous metal prison that held a human head. Naturally they whispered and wondered.

"At the fortress, the Man in the Iron Mask was received by the Governor, Benigne D'Auvergne de Saint-Mars. Saint-Mars had furnished a special room where the Man in the Iron Mask was to be held captive—a room sumptuously appointed with fine furnishings and luxurious hangings.

"He and he alone had charge of the prisoner's welfare, but rumors leaked out—about the fine food provided for this unusual captive, and the plates of silver and pewter that adorned his table.

"It was also rumored that King Louis XIV's minister, Louvois, was a regular visitor; although no one else was allowed to see this prisoner. Saint-Mars guarded his charge well.

"In 1681 the prisoner, accompanied by Saint-Mars, went to Exiles, near Pignerol, traveling in a closed litter. From 1687 to 1698 he was incarcerated at Pignerol. By this time wild stories were whispered, but although many sought to fathom the identity of the captive, little was learned. He was said to pass his time playing the guitar, or pacing in his cell—always wearing this curious mask of iron over his face and head.

"In 1698 he went to the Bastille with Saint-Mars. Here, in 1703, he died. Keepers scraped and whitewashed his prison walls. The doors and window frames were burned. All of the vessels used in his service were melted down. There was nothing left as evidence to show that for 24 years a prisoner had actually been a captive of Saint-Mars.

“Since that date, the strange story of the Man in the Iron Mask has become a fascinating plaything for historians and theorists; a great mystery, indeed.

“Was the Man in the Iron Mask really Fouquet, the disgraced minister of finance under Louis XIV? Was he an obscure Armenian patriarch who preached heresy against the throne? Could he have been Comte de Vermandois, the son of Louis XIV and Mademoiselle de la Valliere?

“Was he the Due de Beaufort? The English Duke of Monmouth? An Italian adventurer named Count Ercolo Matthioli? Or as Dumas would have it, was the Iron Mask really Louis’s twin brother?

“In 1789, with the fall of the Bourbons, the records of the Bastille were opened to the public.

“Every prisoner’s name and history was inscribed on a register at the time he entered the prison. Surely the secret of Iron Mask would be revealed here!

“But the page bearing the date of his admittance had been carefully torn out of the register!

“The identity of the Man in the Iron Mask has remained a great mystery.

“And well it might be. For I am the Man in the Iron Mask—and I am immortal.”

The whispering voice paused momentarily.

Drake glanced at the brazen horror of that head, but he couldn’t read a trace of human emotion in the iron, immovable face.

“But you say that the Iron Mask died, was buried in 1703,” he objected.

A low chuckle came from under the mask.

“That was all part of the plot,” came the answer. “But now, my friends, you shall learn the truth. Who I am—and what I am.”

ROSELLE nestled closer to Eric Drake as the Iron Mask again took up his tale.

"My name I shall not reveal, for it was a great one in the annals of France.

"Sufficient to say that I am the son of an alchemist—an alchemist both famous and infamous.

My grandfather was none other than Michel de Notre-Dame."

"Nostradamus!" whispered Eric Drake. "Nostradamus, the prophet!"

"I see you too know history," came the whisper. "Yes, he was indeed the prophet. And my father knew the arts of prophecy which he had learned from Nostradamus. Those arts of divination he taught to me, for I was destined for a brilliant career.

"That was how my father planned it. He was a true seeker of forbidden secrets, a lurker in darkness. But I was to profit from his learning. Young, handsome, equipped with all of his own knowledge and skill, he visioned a great future for me at the court of the Grand Monarch of France.

"Alchemists and prophets were popular, and with my looks I could surely go far.

"I left his home after drinking a toast to the future in mantic brew. And in a short time I arrived in Paris, armed with letters of introduction to those in high places.

"Within a year I was famous. Working only behind the scenes, I gained the confidence and grateful friendship of all the king's ministers. I advised Colbert, the minister of home affairs. Lionne the diplomat sought me out to predict a course of future state policy for France. I knew Louvois, minister of war, and Fouquet the minister of finance.

"In a quiet way, I was really ruling France! It was only a short time until both de la Valliere and later Madame de Maintenon were coming to me for advice on how to rule King Louis himself!

"But the Grand Monarch learned of this somehow. Through the trickery of a rival, a charlatan, he was told that I had exercised my good looks, youthfulness, and wizard's knowledge to fascinate Madame de Maintenon.

"And Louis, maddened by jealousy, devised this hideous jest of his. I was to be imprisoned, suddenly and quietly—and forced to hide my face behind a mask of iron!

"So it came to pass. I had no trial, no hearing. Although Louvois pleaded for me, the furious Grand Monarch would not heed.

"I was seized, made a captive of Saint-Mars, and condemned to wear the Iron Mask for the rest of my days.

"It was a gruesome sentence indeed—but even Louis didn't realize its true meaning. For the rest of my days would constitute a great span indeed—because I was immortal!

"Yes, immortal. The letter from my father reached me secretly; by some tragic irony it arrived only a few hours before I was imprisoned.

"In it my father, who was at the point of death, recalled to me the toast we had drunk together on the day I left for Paris.

"He had given me an alchemic solution—the fabulous goal of his research—an elixir that meant eternal life.

"It sounds fantastic. It did, then. Yet as time went on in that ghastly prison, I realized that I had lost none of my youthful energy. The iron mask was soldered to my face, and I could not remove it to see if my features were aging, but I felt no older after twenty long years than I had on the day I was made a prisoner.

"I shall not dwell on those years—on the frantic, futile efforts I made to escape. Louvois still visited me for advice, and I gave it to him. But King Louis would not hear of my release. He was fanatically determined to keep me under this unnatural punishment until I died.

"Therefore, I determined to die. Saint-Mars, my jailer, had been specially selected by Louis XIV for his unswerving loyalty. He was my only, and constant companion.

"It took me 24 years to wear down his loyalty to the crown. It took me 24 years to persuade him to end this hideous imprisonment of mine, and permit me to escape.

“At last, in the Bastille, he consented. And the opportunity arose. A disgraced Italian secret agent was brought to his care. No one knew that this Matthioli had been made a captive and there was no record. The outside world thought he had disappeared. So I persuaded Saint-Mars not to enter his name on the register. And when Matthioli died, Saint-Mars took word to the king that the Man in the Iron Mask was dead.

“His face was unknown. Louis himself could not be expected to recognize the features of a man shut away for 24 years, his head covered by a mask of iron. The body was accepted, and buried secretly. Then the jailers tore down the room I had occupied and destroyed all evidence of my existence.

“As for me, I was far away.

“I shall never forget that first day of freedom. I bribed a blacksmith with gold, made him remove the hateful mask that hid my features. And then I stared into a mirror—stared and saw the ghastly caricatured lineaments of an old man’s face. The face of an ancient madman staring back at me. An old man’s face on a young man’s body!

“That I was youthful could not be denied. The mysterious elixir was potent in my veins. But my face, concealed by the iron mask, had aged atrociously.

“Then and there I swore to resume the iron mask that had been my badge of secret shame—resume it and wear it until I could bring glory to France; and in bringing that glory, make the Iron Mask a symbol for the ages.

“Again, I shall omit the greater part of my adventures. I left France and bitter memories and traveled far. I became a sort of Wandering Jew. I shall not speak of the long years, for it is not pleasant to remember them. Living for centuries is not a boon—it is a nightmare.

“Money I found, and my art of prophecy had not deserted me. And always I kept to my vow. Always when France was in peril I appeared.

“Secretly I sought out Louis XVI to disclose Marie Antoinette’s intrigue with Count Fersen. As an Egyptian priest I talked with Napoleon in the shadow of the Sphinx; helped him plan his conquests.

"Again, I visited Napoleon III when he languished in a foreign prison as a middle-aged failure. I gave him the plans whereby he later triumphed and became master of the Empire.

"Secretly, I have made history. And now—in this hour of need—I am in France again. I am here to help the Underground and make France free. I must help in my own way. There are certain things I can do.

"One asset is the fact that I cannot die. On the other hand, I cannot remove this iron mask—for centuries have turned the horror of my face into a mummy's death-grin. I must work silently, and from below. That is why I am in the Underground."

The furtive whisper ceased, and there was a moment of profound silence in the cavern.

Then Roselle sighed.

"But the Underground is dead here in Dubonne," she said. "We are the only ones who escaped. It is true, we are awaiting word from headquarters in Paris—"

"Word from headquarters?" whispered Iron Mask.

"Yes," Drake assented. "Charmand told me we could expect an important message shortly. There is to be a general plan of revolt to aid the invasion of the Continent. All Underground units in France and Belgium, Holland, Denmark—everywhere—will be given instructions on a course of procedure."

Drake shrugged. "Of course, that means little now, as Roselle says. Hassman has virtually wiped out our unit. We have no headquarters any more, no means of reorganizing and waiting for this message." The Iron Mask nodded.

"I think I can solve our problem," he whispered. "I have taken steps to arrange matters in anticipation of an emergency like this."

Roselle turned to the immortal one, bewilderment in her eyes.

"But where can we go?" she murmured. "Hassman's men are searching for us now. They'll come here soon to find us—and they'll cover any possible future meeting place we might select. Where can we establish the Underground now?"

"Underground," said Iron Mask. "Underground? Where?"

"Underground," repeated Iron Mask. "From now on we will establish our headquarters—under the offices of *gauleiter* Hassman!"

5. Under the Nazi Heel

DAWN came, and daylight, brilliant noon, and then twilight once again —but Drake and Roselle slept. Iron Mask stolidly declined to rest, but stood guard at the entrance-way until darkness fell.

Only once did he slip away during the day, returning shortly with food.

A meal of sorts awaited man and girl when they awoke. "Help yourselves," came the whisper from behind the mask. "I've already eaten."

"Where did you get the food?" Roselle inquired. Iron Mask shrugged.

"I'm an old hand at this sort of life," he replied. "But come—finish your meal. We've got to move to our new headquarters tonight."

"About that matter," said Drake, "I still don't see what you mean by saying we can go under the *gauleiter's* offices."

Iron Mask rose awkwardly and waved an arm, stiffly. "Surely you know that Hassman and his men are quartered in the old city hall?"

"Yes," said Roselle. "When my father was mayor, he—" The girl stopped, her voice choking as she remembered the death of Pierre Charmand.

Iron Mask compassionately ignored her distress. "Very well. Beneath the city hall is the cellar regulating the sewerage system installed here back in the 1870 era of the Republic. You must remember? They built the city hall over it; some idea of municipal building with the controls all emanating from a central point.

"Of course, since the Nazis have come, the municipal sewerage system has been abandoned. I doubt very much if they are even aware that there is a sub-cellar under the city hall. Certainly no one ever goes down there.

"I investigated today, and it is quite safe. Of course, the tunnels and pipes aren't very safe any more, but we shall be in the cellar itself."

Drake turned, eyebrows raised in objection.

"Just how do you propose we get to the cellar?" he. asked. "Are we to march through the city hall under Hassman's nose and ask to be directed to the cellar stairs?"

"We'll get there in the same manner that I did this afternoon," Iron Mask explained. "We'll crawl through the empty pipes. There's an outlet right below this hill. The damned-up sewage still in the pipes is trapped in a second parallel pipe. Our pipe is dry and free—it's fully seven feet in diameter, and we can walk through it."

"Just like Jean Valjean in *Les Miserables!"* exclaimed Roselle.

Iron Mask nodded gravely. "We must be careful, though. The pipe is brittle with age and rust. A sudden shock might cause it to burst and the parallel pipe would discharge its flow and flood us out. I'm afraid, on second thought, that it's no place for a young lady."

"Nonsense! exclaimed Roselle. "I'm going with you and Drake. There's work to be done. At least we'll have a safe place to wait until we get word from Paris tomorrow. Then we can make other plans."

"Come, then," said Iron Mask.

They left the cavern and descended the hillside cautiously. The moon was bright again, and they clung to the shadowed surface of the rocks lest a passing patrol note their moving figures.

Black-cloaked Iron Mask led them to the forbidding mouth of the pipe, jutting out of the base of the hill above the bank of the river that wound below Dubonne. Once again his great strength came into play as he lifted a huge iron cylinder covering the opening.

"I don't know why they didn't drain the parallel pipe when they shut off the sewerage system," he whispered. "It was probably abandoned very hastily. But this pipe is free. Come on—Drake, use that pencil-flash of yours to guide us. It's dark in here."

It was dark. It was also hot, and unbearably fetid. But somehow, the trio managed to flounder through the long passageway, walking inside a pipe bored in the earth.

Now they were truly "Underground" in every sense of the word!

Relief came at last as they reached the end of the straight span of pipe, rounded a curve that sloped upwards. The going was slow, but they made it. Eventually Iron Mask lifted the huge disk overhead and they clambered up the iron rungs of a ladder.

"The head of the pipe is connected directly with the drainage pool under the streets," Iron Mask explained. "But this exit leads to the floor of the cellar in the city hall."

And so it did. They climbed the iron rungs of the ladder to emerge in the musty cellar.

"Oh!" Roselle exclaimed, "you've prepared for our coming!"

It was true. From somewhere, Iron Mask had unearthed several cots, some blankets, and a few cartons containing a stack of provisions. There was even an old, battered oil lamp which he proceeded to light, his gloved fingers moving clumsily as he struck a match and held it to the wick.

"What's that?" muttered Drake, as an ominous creaking sounded overhead.

IRON MASK uttered a rasping chuckle.

"Probably Hassman pacing the floor and worrying over our escape," he whispered. "Don't forget, we're in the cellar directly beneath him."

"Then those stairs must lead to a door in the city hall," Drake decided, pointing to a dusty flight across the cellar.

"True, but the door is barred. They have never come down here and never will," muttered Iron Mask. "We're safe here. And now—"

"And now it's time for me to keep my appointment," Drake snapped, glancing at his watch and re-winding it.

"Drake—do you know where to go?" Roselle asked, anxiously.

“Yes. I have my instructions.” From the folds of his trench jacket Drake produced the casket of official papers.

“I am to turn this over to the Paris Underground agent and receive my instructions,” he said.

“But Drake, how will you recognize him? Where will you meet?”

“Your father gave me full details,” Drake assured her.

“But they must have men out watching for us,” Roselle objected. “They know we escaped them the other night. It’s broad daylight outside, Eric. They’ll hunt you down.”

Drake smiled and patted her shoulder.

“Tell you what we’ll do,” he said. “We’ll beat them at their own game and try a bit of spying ourselves.

“My man will be waiting to make contact with me at Antoine’s bistro down the street. Roselle, you go through the pipe and come into town from the south. Keep your face down and be sure to step inside the nearest house if you see a Nazi patrol on the streets. But if you can get to Antoine’s, just look in and see if you can notice a *cure* carrying a yellow valise. That’s my man.

“And you, my friend, can come into town from the north.” Drake nodded at Iron Mask. “Naturally, with your cloak and mask you’ll be conspicuous. But I’m relying on that. I want the Nazi patrols to spot you—because you can draw them away.

“Owing to your rather peculiar gift of immortality, I don’t suppose you fear their bullets. And after witnessing your cleverness and resourcefulness these past hours, I am sure you can elude your pursuers without great danger.

“At any rate, the Nazis will continue to hunt you. If you and Roselle return and Roselle tells me my man is waiting—then I can go up myself to keep the appointment. The Nazis will be off on a wild goose chase in the hills north of town, looking for a man in a mask and a cloak. Right?”

They nodded.

“Then off you go,” Drake urged. “Back through the pipe.”

They left.

Drake pulled out one of his few remaining cigarettes from a precious package and lit it slowly. Then, quite deliberately, he took out a pack-knife and pried the lid of the metal casket cradled in his lap.

He rummaged through the papers inside until he found a folded yellow sheet. This he read, frowning and muttering to himself as his eyes squinted in the murky lamplight.

Carefully he stuffed the documents back in the casket and lowered the lid.

He doused his cigarette, looked at his watch, frowned again. His head cocked forward as he listened intently for sounds in the city hall above. All was silent. Drake smiled, nodded.

Suddenly he snapped his fingers, sent one hand diving into the pocket of his trench coat and produced a gun.

It cocked with a click.

Drake rose and walked deliberately toward the dusty stairway that led to the city hall above. He climbed the stairs, set his shoulder to the door at the head of the stairway, and stepped into the lair of *gauieiter* Hassman.

6. The Sewer

PURE chance had it that Roselle and Iron Mask should meet at the moment both returned to crawl through the sewer pipe.

“Is he waiting?” Iron Mask whispered.

“Yes,” said the girl. “I saw him. But the patrols are everywhere. Only a few minutes after I entered town, I saw them swarming down the steps of the city hall. Even Hassman himself came out. I wonder who informed him something was stirring?”

“I did probably,” whispered the man in the cloak.

“I let myself be seen very plainly. I’ve been leading at least three patrols a merry chase across the hills. I managed to dodge down here, but I urge that we hasten out of sight before we’re seen.”

Again he clumsily lifted the great lid and the two retraced their footsteps through the sewer pipe, moving delicately lest the brittle metal shatter under the impact of their tread.

It was Iron Mask who was the first to emerge in the cellar once again—but it was Roselle who uttered the first gasp of astonishment.

“Eric!” she cried. “Eric’s gone!”

Iron Mask whirled in astonishment.

“The fool—he must have left while we were away!”

He strode awkwardly toward the room’s end where the lamp glowed fitfully, throwing his grotesque shadow across the wall.

“The casket’s gone, too,” he announced. “There’s something queer going on here.”

As though stifled by its confining folds, Iron Mask suddenly ripped the black velvet covering from his metal visage and revealed the brazen shield covering his face. His gloved hands went to his iron temples in perplexity.

Roselle, despite her familiarity with the grim mask, couldn’t repress a slight tremor of distaste. There was something unnatural about this immortal adventurer. His husky voice, his clumsiness, and his penchant for cloaking his body and features in black—this, coupled with the brazen, leering mask that served to hide his face, caused her to feel a chill of repulsion.

Suddenly, Iron Mask lumbered toward her.

“Where is he?” came the whisper. “It’s a conspiracy, isn’t it? You and he have something planned. He took the casket and deserted me, didn’t he? Admit it.”

“No,” muttered the girl. “He wouldn’t do such a thing! Erie is—”

The reply was cut short by an ominous thudding from overhead. Muffled but audible, a revolver shot echoed through the cellar. And then—

The door at the head of the cellar stairs burst open. Eric raced down the steps, panting.

“Come on,” he shouted. “Through the sewer pipe. Hurry! Roselle.

"Tell you later," Drake grunted. "Hassman's back. Get into the pipe, quick!"

One hand grasping the metal casket, the other flourishing a revolver, Drake prodded Roselle and Iron Mask toward the floor opening. The clambered down the iron rungs of the ladder until they stood in the dark tunnel of brittle pipe.

Drake followed, and just in time.

Thunder shook the stairs. Hassman was leading his pack into the cellar!

The fat *gauleiter* caught sight of Eric's head as he descended, and before Drake could pull the iron lid into place, the Nazis were upon him.

No time to descend the ladder—Eric leaped to the bottom of the pipe and began to run forward. Iron Mask and Roselle clambered ahead in the utter darkness.

And behind them came the Nazi horde.

There was a scene ripped from nightmare's darkest depths—the three fugitives groping their way through the black, twisted interior of the slippery iron pipe. They ran lightly, lest their tread shatter the brittle surface. Iron Mask had warned them about the danger of break-throughs from the parallel pipe over their heads.

Panting, gasping, sobbing for breath, the trio floundered on. And behind them, the Nazis charged.

Hassman at the head, the entire column clambered down the ladder into the pipe.

And then began the race through darkness . . . the mad, incredible race, punctuated by bursts of flame from Nazi Lugers.

"Hurry!" panted Drake. Roselle clutched his arm as he half-dragged her forward. "They're gaining!" he muttered, as they rounded the bend leading to the end of the pipe.

Iron Mask suddenly stumbled and fell. Drake bit his lip. "Get up!" he hissed. "You're blocking our path—"

He tugged at the fallen figure. Iron Mask rose. But too late.

FOR the great figure of Hassman loomed out of the murky twilight as he rounded the bend in the pipe. Behind him came the gray-clad hunters, and their Lugers spoke—

“Down!” shouted Drake, tugging at the shoulders of his companions. Flame jetted over their heads and an ear-splitting echo resounded throughout the brittle interior of the pipa. Resounded and magnified.

There was a roar and a rumble; a shuddering convulsion that shook the metal under their feet.

“Earthquake!” screamed Roselle.

“No,” Drake muttered. “The pipe’s broken!”

His words were hardly spoken before dreadful confirmation came.

Whether caused by weight of their running bodies or by the force of concussion reverberations, the pipe had shattered—and now the parallel pipe poured forth its hideous burden.

With a rush and a roar, a torrent of acrid liquid gushed down upon the heads of the Nazis.

They turned, screaming, but there was no escape. In a moment the entire length of pipe behind them filled with a raging flood of boiling, churning debris.

“Run!” yelled Drake.

There was no need to command. The trio took to their heels and not a moment too soon. They clambered along the pipe as the roaring waters engulfed the Nazis behind them.

And then they were clambering out of the pipe mouth on the hillside, racing up the road toward the cave.

But Hassman and his men did not follow. As they ran up the road, Drake glanced over his shoulder. He saw the torrent surge out of the pipe mouth and spout down in a stream to the river. Gray bodies whirled in its crest—and he knew that Hassman and his men would no longer patrol the streets of Dubonne. They had drowned in the sewer, like the rats they were.

Panting with exhaustion, Drake and Roselle entered the safety of the cavern. Iron Mask strode stolidly beside them.

Roselle forced a smile to her lips.

"It's wonderful, Eric," she murmured. "We seem to be spending our entire life just running from one underground hole to another. And all because of this silly casket—"

"I can solve that."

Iron Mask stood in the doorway, blotting out the exit. The whisper came from between metal-shrouded lips.

"What's that?" Drake said.

"I can promise you that this is the last refuge you need ever seek," he whispered. "Just give the casket to me."

"But I'm to turn it over to the Paris representative—"

"Give it to me, now."

Iron Mask's voice was still a whisper, but it was hard—hard as iron.

"Wait a minute, now."

"I wait no longer." The whisper was cold—cold as steel.

The man in the cloak moved down upon the two. The metal mask leered its frozen grin, and there was neither human mirth nor human emotion in its set and steely features.

"Give me that casket."

Drake reached for his revolver.

"Stand back," he warned. "I don't know what you mean by all this, but if you come a step further I'll blast a hole through you."

A chuckle burbled from beneath the immovable iron lips.

"You forget I am immortal."

"Stand back!"

But Iron Mask came on. His great arms reached forward—and Drake fired. Drake saw the bullet strike the black cloak and rip through the cloth covering the shoulder. But Iron Mask was immortal, and he loomed closer —

DRAKE fired again. This time the bullet tore through the cloth above the chest, and Drake saw the shreds part to reveal a patch of skin—of *silver* skin!

A dry, rattling laugh came from the throat of Iron Mask. “You see?” he whispered. “Yes, you see, but don’t understand, do you? Then—*look, you fool!”* Gloved hands raked out awkwardly, sweeping the top of the cloak from Iron Mask’s head and revealing his entire skull. It was bare now, rising in a great, silvery dome. And Drake saw that this creature had no iron mask—its entire head was iron!

Drake was stunned into immobility. Chuckling, the creature drew the concealing gloves from gleaming. metal hands—hands that now ripped off the black cloak and the garments beneath it.

Iron Mask stood stripped and revealed for what he was; an entity whose head and body were constructed entirely of burnished, deathless metal!

“Robot!” Drake gasped.

Roselle’s shriek and Iron Mask’s rattling chuckle mingled in mocking reply.

Drake watched the metal monster as it lunged toward him. He fired blindly, wildly; saw the bullets ricochet from the body of the iron robot. He knew then that there was no hope, no solution.

Then the robot was upon him, and its great shaft-like metal arms embraced him. He felt the cold chill of its iron embrace, it crushed him close and squeezed. The world was turning red, spinning madly—

Drake lifted his revolver, brought it down on the robot’s shoulders. The chuckling horror bent him back. Agony lanced up Drake’s spine. The creature bent its iron head—

Drake struck, then. His eyes focussed on the gleaming expanse of exposed iron skull. And he brought the butt of his revolver down with crushing force on the back of the robot’s head.

The blow could not shatter iron—but there was a sudden splintering crash, and the revolver-butt bit deeply into a gaping hole in the ruined cranium.

A whistling scream rose from iron lips and the robot tottered back on its heels. Arms fell, releasing Drake.

He stepped back just in time. With a crash, the robot dropped to the cavern floor. Iron limbs writhed in a last, delirious spasm. Carefully-fashioned jointures were strained and wrenched as though in death-agony as arms and legs twisted convulsively.

And then the ruined head rolled back, and from the opening poured a thin, yellowish ichor.

Drake stooped and peered into the depths of the shattered metal skull. He poked the muzzle of his revolver inside, then stepped back just in time.

A shower of tiny cogs and wires emerged in a writhing tangle, accompanied by the acrid smoke of a miniature explosion.

There was no further movement from the metal body on the floor after that.

Drake stooped and picked up the casket, then joined the sobbing girl.

“Dry your eyes,” he said, brusquely. “It’s all over now.”

“Yes—but—”

“The Nazis are wiped out, the casket is safe, and now the Underground’s greatest menace has been removed.” Drake’s gray eyes stared sombrely at the figure on the cavern floor, but his lips held a tight grin.

“So it’s the end,” he half-whispered. “The real end of a living legend—the Man in the Iron Mask is no more.”

7. The Final Irony

FOR a long moment, Drake stood staring down at the gleaming silver body of the robot; then Roselle was in his arms and he was comforting her, whispering.

The girl’s eyes never left the twisted, inhuman frame of metal that had walked the earth in the guise of man. The cleverly articulated limbs of the metal monster looked oddly grotesque now—Roselle could recall the Iron Mask's clumsy movements.

Here was the explanation, together with the reason for his imperviousness to bullets, and great strength.

But there were many other matters not explained. Roselle turned to Drake, and her lips framed questions.

"When did I first suspect?" Drake answered. "Probably at the very start. You fired at his head and the bullet struck. Even a wounded soldier with a steel faceplate would be injured by a bullet. Besides—did you notice he never slept or ate?

"Then, too, the matter of the casket bothered me. Why was he so anxious to find it and keep it on his person? Obviously because it contained something of vital importance—perhaps a clue as to his real identity.

"Even when we heard the story of the Man in the Iron Mask, my suspicions were not allayed. Granting that his story was true, and he was immortal—I still couldn't swallow this business about his being a savior of France.

"It didn't ring true. A savior of France would not counsel Napoleon to conquer. A savior of France would not restore the Empire. A savior of France would certainly be active during World War I.

"Right then and there I reasoned that, immortal or not, he was an enemy. An enemy to watch. And he betrayed us—you see that now, don't you?"

"Yes," said Roselle, slowly. "I think I do."

"He was after the casket from the start," Drake told her. "That's why he attacked you. He wanted to get the casket and the information it contained, before either the Underground or the Nazis would lay hands on it.

"So he took it from you and made off with it. He ran into the Gestapo squad on the road, and there was nothing to do but fight. Although he was working for the Nazis, he didn't want them to discover his secret, either. So he fought them. And I helped him.

"Then, when we came to headquarters, he left to secure information before the meeting. Obviously, he had an easy way of securing that information—he merely went to Hassman and asked for it. At the same time he led Hassman back to attack the Underground meeting.

“He meant to wipe us out, but when I got the casket in the darkness he followed me when we escaped. Then we told him there was news coming from Paris regarding future Underground activities.

“That’s when he fed us the story about his immortality. He wanted us to believe him. And he wanted us to keep alive until we got the news from Paris. Then we could die, when the information was in his hands.

“Naturally, he selected our new headquarters under the *gauleiter’s* offices. Not alone because it was a clever idea from our point of view, but also because he could lead Hassman to us at any time.

“He almost succeeded, but not quite. What he didn’t know is that I took advantage of our headquarters to do a little spying on my own.

“When I went out to meet the Underground emissary from Paris, he tipped off Hassman. The whole force went out to wait for me and the Paris Underground agent. They planned to seize us as we met.

“But I didn’t go to the rendezvous. Instead, I went upstairs, to Hassman’s office. I searched through his papers and found—the truth about the Man in the Iron Mask! Who he was and what he was doing!

“I learned then and there that he was a spy of Germany, and an important one.

“Then I opened the casket and read the papers within. One of them was what he was looking for.

“You remember him telling us that the Bastille record of the Man in the Iron Mask was missing? Well, that paper is in the casket. No wonder he wanted it—and didn’t want either the French or Germans to find it! For it told the rest of his story, and in it I read the secret of how to destroy him.”

ROSELLE shook her head. “I still don’t understand,” she said. “Just who and what was he? Who created him and what was he doing?”

Drake grinned.

"I'll be brief. After putting two and two together—piecing together his story, the papers in Hassman's office, and the Bastille registry, I can tell you this:

"He was a robot, created by Roger Bacon, in the 13th century. The Bastille record says 1287, but we can't be sure."

"Roger Bacon? The English monk?"

"Exactly. He was an alchemist who dabbled in science and what was then called sorcery—though if he created this marvelous mechanism, he was no sorceror but a genuine savant. There is an old legend about a 'Brazen Head' Bacon made, which could prophecy the future. I never gave the story credit for having any significance—but now I can see. Roger Bacon didn't create a 'Brazen Head' at all; he made this robot. By alchemic means he endowed it with perpetual life, and human intelligence.

"He fashioned it during the years he was imprisoned for heresy—in France. Yes, the French put him in prison, and he languished there nourishing a hatred. A hatred for France.

"So he made the robot, as an instrument of vengeance. The robot was animated by a single purpose—not to save France, but to destroy it.

"That much we know, for the Bastille entry tells us so. What the robot's activities were after Bacon's death we can only surmise. It turned up almost four hundred years later at the court of Louis XIV.

"From that point on, the story roughly corresponds to what he told us when he claimed to be the Man in the Iron Mask, He did appear in court as a prophet and soothsayer, and the king's ministers did seek his advice. Louis XIV did order his imprisonment; but he didn't order that his prisoner wear an iron mask.

"He had always worn the iron mask—for it was his head! No wonder they hid him away in secret. He must have been clever even then, to keep them from finding out that he was an automaton, instead of a man wearing a mask. No one suspected, however.

"And even as a prisoner, no one suspected his advice. He did give advice, but not advice to save France. He plotted her downfall. Historians agree that the actions of Louis XIV were directly responsible for the policies leading to the French Revolution 200 years later. And the robot dictated those policies!

"He escaped just as he said he did, and disappeared again. If he indeed betrayed Marie Antoinette he did so to further the disruption of the king. And if he advised Napoleon he did it maliciously, to injure France.

"When the Bastille fell he came there to find the place in the register where his secret was revealed. Someone—we will never know who it was—got there ahead of him and took the register leaf. He must have searched for it high and low; all we know is that it finally ended up here at Dubonne, buried away in an obscure file of old official papers.

"Now we come to the part of the story pieced together from Hassman's reports.

"The robot had not destroyed France by revolution, or by Napoleonic domination. And yet the deathless urge persisted. Friar Bacon's magic was strong, and although we will never understand why it worked, we can see how it worked.

"The robot was in Germany between 1860 and 1870. We do not know what story he used to account for his disguise—always the robot posed as a man in a mask. But we can guess that he wormed his way into high places. Probably he consulted and advised Bismarck himself. It is not *too* much to suppose that the robot's advice and cunning led to the Franco-Prussian war!

"Now there comes another gap in history. There is no record of the robot's activities in the following years. France was humbled but not destroyed. Perhaps cunning old Bismarck had imprisoned the robot, just as Louis XI did in the old days. Whatever happened, we know the robot had no connection with World War I that we know of—though it seems highly probable that he was at work, fighting against France. And he almost succeeded, then.

"But Hassman's papers do tell us one important thing—they record the meeting of the robot and Adolf Hitler."

Roselle drew back, startled.

He met Hitler?” she gasped.

DRAKE smiled.

“Of course. That is obvious. Think for a moment. Haven’t you heard all stories about Hitler consulting with fortune-tellers and soothsayers? Don’t you realize all those are blind rumors to disguise the presence of a master plotter? Who but the robot would exercise the cunning and savage hatred necessary to plan the downfall of France?

“And when France fell, who but the robot would exact such a monstrous price? The robot hated France, animated by Roger Bacon’s will. And now France had fallen, hence the price.”

“What price?” asked the girl.

Drake leaned forward.

“The robot came here to rule France,” he whispered.

“Rule?”

“Yes. Hassman’s papers reveal that he was taking orders from the robot. That all *gauleiters* took their orders from him. The real *gauleiter* of France was our robot. That was its price for helping Hitler!”

Again the two humans stared at the twisted metal figure on the floor.

Drake shook his head. “Who knows where it might have ended?” he mused. “Luckily, the robot blundered. Discovering a clue as to the whereabouts of the papers explaining his true origin, the robot came here from Paris. Getting Gestapo information, including Underground passwords, was simple. Then he set out, double-crossing both the Germans and French, in an effort to secure that tell-tale Bastille entry. He fell in with us, and the rest is—history.”

Roselle snuggled closer to Drake as they moved past the grisly, gleaming shape on the ground and sought the outer entrance on the hillside.

“I still don’t see how you destroyed the robot,” the girl murmured. “I saw you strike the iron head, but it wasn’t a severe blow.”

“The Bastille register entry gave me the secret,” said Drake. “It transcribed Roger Bacon’s own words—probably discovered by some researcher who had suspected the truth and delved back into ancient chronicles of Bacon’s time.

“Bacon hated France, but he was a great scientist and a just man at heart. He never realized what a horror he was unleashing on the world—but he must have suspected that some day the horror would have to be checked. So he wrote down a due.

“Achilles had, a heel—and the iron chain of Tyranny hath always a weak link. That’s what Bacon wrote, and what I saw in the register.

“I never guessed the weakness in the Iron Mask until the robot confronted me with bared head. Then I knew that Bacon must have built it with a flaw. My eye caught a subtle difference in the jointures on top of its skull. Bacon had built it so that if need be it could be destroyed.

“When I struck that vital spot on the skull, the head was smashed. For although the Man in the Iron Mask really had an iron head—a narrow strip across the top of the skull was just plain, ordinary *tin!”*

Together, man and girl strode forward into the light streaming across the earth above.

The Beasts of Barsac

Old Barsac was too fat to be a vampire, too indolent to become a werewolf —but there are other things!

IT WAS twilight when Doctor Jerome readied the ogre's castle. He moved through the fairy-tale land of a child's picture book; a realm of towering mountain crags, steeply slanting roads ascending to forbidden heights, and clouds that hovered like bearded wraiths watching his progress from on high.

The castle itself was built of dream-stuff. Nightmare qualities predominated in the great grey bulk, rearing its crumbling battlements against a sullen, blood-streaked sky. A chill wind sang its weird welcome as Doctor Jerome advanced towards the castle on the hilltop, and an autumn moon rose above the topmost tower.

As the moon stared down on man and castle alike, a black cloud burst from the ruined battlements and soared squeaking to the sky. Bats, of course. The final touch of fantasy.

Doctor Jerome shrugged and trudged across weed-choked flagstones in the castle courtyard until he reached the great oaken door.

Now to raise the iron knocker . . . the door would swing open slowly, on creaking hinges . . . the tall, gaunt figure would emerge. . . . "Greetings, stranger. I am Count Dracula!"

Doctor Jerome grinned. "Like hell," he muttered.

For the whole fantasy collapsed when he thought of Sebastian Bar sac. This might be an ogre's castle, but Barsac was no ogre.

Nine years ago, at the Sorbonne, he'd made friends with shy, fat little Barsac. Since then they had taken different paths—but it was impossible for Doctor Jerome to imagine his old companion as the ideal tenant of a haunted castle.

Not that Barsac didn't have some queer ideas. He'd always been a little eccentric, and his theories on biological research were far from orthodox—but Jerome could bank on one thing. Barsac was too fat to be a vampire, and too indolent to become a werewolf.

Still, there was something strange about this invitation, coming after a three years' lapse in correspondence. Merely a scribbled note, suggesting that Doctor Jerome come down for a month or so to look over experimental data—but that was Barsac's usual way of doing things.

Ordinarily, Doctor Jerome would ignore such a casual offer, but right now it came as a life-saver. For Doctor Jerome was strapped. He'd been let out of the Foundation, he owed three installments on his rent, and he had—literally—no place to lay his head. By pawning the remnants of his precious equipment he'd managed to cross the Channel and reach Castle Barsac. A month in a real castle with his old friend—it might lead to *something.*

So Jerome had seized Opportunity before the echo of its knocking had died away. And now he banged the iron knocker, watched the castle door swing open. It *did* squeak, a bit.

Footsteps. A shadow. And then—

"Delighted to see you!" Sebastian Barsac embraced his friend in the French fashion and began to make Gallic noises of enthusiasm.

"Welcome to Castle Barsac," said the little man. "You are tired after your long march from the railroad station, no? I will show you to your room—servants I do not retain. And after a shower we shall talk. Yes?"

UP THE winding stairs, pursued by a babble of incoherent conversation, Doctor Jerome toiled, bags in hand. He found his oak-panelled chambers, was instructed in the mysteries of the antique mechanical shower arrangement; then was left to bathe and dress.

He had no time to marshal his impressions. It was not until later—after a surprisingly good dinner in a small apartment downstairs—that Jerome was able to sit back and appraise his host.

They retired to a pallor, lit cigars, and sat back before the grateful warmth emanating from the stone fireplace, where a blaze rose to push back the shadows in the room. Doctor Jerome's fatigue had lifted, and he felt stimulated, alert.

As Sebastian Barsac began to discuss his recent work, Jerome took the opportunity to scrutinize his friend.

LITTLE BARSAC had aged, definitely.

He was fat, but flabby rather than roly-poly. The dark hair had receded on his domed forehead, and his myopic eyes peered from spectacles of increased thickness. Despite verbal enthusiasm, the little lord of Castle Barsac seemed oddly languid in his physical movements. But from his talk, Doctor Jerome recognized that Barsac's spirit was unchanged.

The words began to form a pattern in Jerome's mind—a pattern holding a meaning he did not understand.

"So you can see what I have been doing these nine years past. All of my life since I left the Sorbonne has been devoted to one end—discovering the linkage between man and animal through the alteration of cell-structure in the brain. It is an evolutionary process, this thing I seek—an evolutionary process wherein the cycle occurs in the lifespan of the individual animal. And my key? My key is simple. It lies in the recognition of one fact—that the human soul is divisible."

"What is all this?" Doctor Jerome interrupted. "I don't see what you're driving at, Barsac Where's the connection between biology, alteration of cell-structure in the brain, and evolution? And what part does a divisible human soul play in all this?”

“I will be blunt, my friend. I believe that human characteristics can be transferred to animals by means of mechanical hypnosis. I believe that portions of the human soul essence or psyche can be transmitted from man to animal—and that the animal will then begin to ascend the evolutionary scale. In a word, the animal will show *human* characteristics.”

Doctor Jerome scowled.

“In the nine years that you’ve been dabbling in tin’s unscientific romanticism here in your castle retreat, a new word has come into being to describe your kind, Barsac,” he said. “The word is ’screwball.’ And that’s what I think of you, and that’s what I think of your theory.”

“Theory?” Barsac smiled. “It is *more* than a theory.”

“It’s preposterous!” Jerome interrupted. “To begin with, your statement about the human soul being divisible. I defy you to *show* me a human soul, let alone prove that you can cut it in half.”

“I cannot show you one, I grant,” said Barsac.

“Then what about your mechanical hypnosis? I’ve never heard it explained.”

“I cannot explain it.”

“And what, in an animal, *are* human characteristics? What is your basis of measurement?”

“I do not know.”

“Then how do you expect me to understand your ideas?”

Sebastian Barsac rose. His face was pale, despite the fire’s ruddy glow.

“I cannot show you a human soul,” he murmured, “but I can show you what happens to animals when they possess part of one.

“I cannot explain mechanical hypnosis, but I can show you the machine I use to hypnotize myself and the animals in order to transfer a portion of my soul.

“I cannot measure the human characteristics of the animals undergoing my treatment, but I can show you what they look like and let you judge.

"Even then you may not *understand* my ideas—but you will see that I am actually carrying them out!"

By this time, Doctor Jerome had also risen to his feet. "You mean you've been transferring your soul to an animal body?"

Sebastian Barsac shrugged. "I have been transferring *part* of what I *call* my soul to the bodies of many animals," he amended.

"But you can't—it's biologically impossible. It defies the laws of Reality!"

BEHIND the bulging spectacles, Barsac's eyes gleamed oddly.

"What is Reality and who makes its laws?" he mocked. "Come, and see for yourself the success of my experiments."

He led the way across the chamber, down the hall, and up the great circular staircase. They readied the second floor on which Jerome's room lay, but did not pause. Selecting a panel switch from the open box on the wall, Barsac threw it and illumined the upper stairs. They began to climb again.

And all the while Barsac was talking, talking. "You have seen the gods of ancient Egypt?" he said. "The anthropomorphic stone figures with the bodies of men and the heads of animals? You have heard the legend of the werewolf, of lycanthropic changes whereby man. becomes beast and beast becomes man?

"Fables, all fables. And yet behind the fables lurked a truth. The truth lurks no longer, for I have found it. The seat of evolution lies in the soul, and in the soul's human instrument of expression, the brain. We have grafted cellular structures of one body onto another—why not graft portions of one soul to another? Hypnosis is the key to transference, as I have said.

"All this I have learned by much thought, much experimentation. I have worked for nine years, perfecting techniques and methodology. Many times I failed. To my laboratory I have brought animals, thousands of animals. Many of them died. And I procured others, working endlessly towards one goal. I have paid the price, myself, dying a thousand mental deaths with the failure of each mistaken attempt. Even a physical price I have paid. A monkey—*sale cochon*!—took from me my finger. So."

Barsac paused and held up his left hand in a dramatic gesture to reveal the stump where his left thumb was missing.

Then he smiled. "But it is not my wounds of battle I wish to display to you—it is the fruits of victory. "Come."

They had reached the topmost tower at last. Doctor Jerome gazed down the dizzying spiral of the stairs they had ascended, then turned his head forward as Barsac unlocked the panelled door of his laboratory and gestured him inside.

The click of a wall switch heralded the coming of light. Doctor Jerome entered and stood dazzled in the doorway.

Set in the mouldering tower of the old castle was a spacious, white-tiled, completely modern laboratory unit. A great outer room, filled with electrical equipment, was displayed before him. All of the appurtenances necessary to micro-biology were ranged on shelves and cabinets.

"Does it please you, Jerome?" asked Barsac. "It was not easy to assemble tills, no. The very tiles were transported up the steep mountain passways to the castle, and the shipping of each bit of equipment was costly. But behold—is it not a perfect spot in which to work?"

DOCTOR JEROME nodded, absently.

His inward thoughts were tinged with definite envy. Barsac here was squandering his genius and his wealth on this crazy dabbling, and he had every scientific luxury at his command, While he, Jerome, a capable scientist with a sound outlook, had nothing; no job, no future, nothing to work with. It wasn't right, it wasn't just. And yet—"Even an electrical plant," Barsac was exclaiming. "We manufacture our own power here, you see. Look around. All is of the finest! Or perhaps you ate eager to see what I promised to show you?"

Doctor Jerome nodded again. He couldn't stand the sight of this spotless laboratory because of the jealousy it aroused. He wanted to get it over with, get out of here.

Now Barsac opened the door of a second room, beyond. It was nearly as large as the first, but the walls were untiled. The original castle stones lent startling contrast to the great gleaming metal cabinet which dominated the center of the chamber.

"This room I had not the heart to change," Barsac explained. "It is here, according to family tradition, that my great-great grandfather conducted his experiments in alchemy. He was a sorceror."

"So is his great-great grandson," Doctor Jerome murmured.

"You refer to the machine?" Barsac stepped over and opened the metal door in the side of the cabinet. Within the large exposed area was a chair, fastened with clamps from which led a number of convoluted tubes and metal valves which in turn were fastened to a switchboard bearing an imposing number of dials and levers.

THE chair faced a glass prism—a window in the metal that had the general appearance of a gigantic lense. Before this prism was a wheel of radiating wires, so fine as to be almost transparent. Various tubes from the chair led to the tips of the wires at different points of the wheel-rim.

"This is not magic but science," Barsac said. "You see before you the mechanical hypnotic device I have perfected. The human subject is seated in the chair, so. The attachments are made, the adjustments calculated. The cabinet is closed. The power is turned on—to be automatically generated for a time-span set beforehand. The subject gazes into the prism. The wires before the prism revolve and various arcs are actuated across its surface. Mechanical hypnosis results—and then, by means of electrical impulse, something of the life-essence, the soul itself, is released. It flows through the glass prism, a vital force, and impinges upon the animal subjects set before the cabinet in the focal range of the glass. The animals receive the essence and—change. The transference is complete. Something of the human goes into the animals. By graduating the focal range I can work with a dozen animals at once. Naturally, each experiment drains my strength and taxes my vitality.”

“It taxes my credulity,” Doctor Jerome interjected.

Barsac shrugged dolefully. “Very well. I could explain minutely the workings of my machine, but I see you demand visual proof of. its work. Come with me.”

The third door was opened and Doctor Jerome stood in the last chamber.

It was hot in here, and a sharp scent smote his nostrils. An animal reek permeated the bare room. Lining the walls were cages—dozens of cages. Some held rats, some white mice, and there was tier upon tier of glass containers housing guinea pigs. Rais squealed, mice squeaked, and guinea pigs chittered.

“Experimental subjects,” Barsac commented. “Alas, the supply is continuously being exhausted. I work on batches of twenty or more at once. You see, not all animals are—responsive—to the treatment.

Out of one batch I could hope for two or three—reactions. That is, until recently. Then I began to find that almost all of my subjects showed changes.”

Barsac moved towards the fourth wall, where no cages loomed. Here w-ere shelves filled with jars. Preserving jars. Doctor Jerome decided.

He moved closer for another look, but Barsac turned. He halted him, left hand on Jerome’s shoulder, so that Doctor Jerome looked down upon the trembling stump where the thumb had been.

“Before I show you this,” he whispered, “are you sure that you will not be shocked? I do not wish to startle you unduly.”

“Let me see,” muttered Doctor Jerome.

“I shall only permit you to gaze upon the last experiments,” Barsac whispered. “I could show you dogs with human legs, mice with human skulls and no tails, monkeys that are hairless and possessed of human faces.

But you would mock at me and say they were freaks, hybrids—or tell me I could produce monstrosities by using infra-red or gamma rays.

“So I shall show you my last experimental results only. The ones that prove not only that human characteristics can be transferred to animals—but that *my* characteristics have been transferred. The transference of my *mental* powers cannot be measured. I shall let you judge the *physical* results only.

“Perhaps they will not excite you very much, these creatures of mine. They are not as grotesque as the earlier ones, but the reproduction of an *exact* characteristic excites me more than the semi-anthropomorphic structures in the earlier bodies. It shows me that I am on the right track at last. My next step will produce not creatures that are changed and dead, but creatures changed and living I—”

“Show me!” Doctor Jerome commanded.

“You will not be impressed.” Barsac insisted. “They are only rats and you may not even notice—”

“Show me!”

“Then, look.”

Barsac stepped aside and Doctor Jerome gazed down at the jars. The bodies of twenty rats floated in the preserving fluid. Jerome stared. They were rats and only rats—their dead grey bodies were unchanged. Barsac was mad, quite mad.

And then Doctor Jerome saw it. He stared at one rat and saw the left forepaw that was not a forepaw—but a tiny dessicated hand!

He stared at the other rats in the other jars and saw that each left forepaw was alike. Each forepaw was like a human hand—*like the left, hand of Sebastian Barsac on which the thumb was missing!*

2.

SOMETHING was climbing the ivy outside the castle walls. Something was peering through the castle window—peering with little red-rimmed eyes that held a light of gleeful and atrocious gloating. Something chuckled as it scrambled through the open window and dropped to the floor of the castle bedroom on tiny paws; paws that scraped and padded as they advanced towards the great bed.

Suddenly Jerome felt it crawling up the counterpane. He writhed and twisted, striking out with his hands to dislodge it; but the creature crawled upwards, and now he could hear it chuckling in a voice that was a shrill mockery of human laughter.

Then its head rose on a level with Jerome's eyes, and he saw it—saw the furry figure, the monkeylike body and the mannikin head of a witch's familiar—saw and recognized the hideous little monster for what it was . . . an animal, but with Barsac's face!

He screamed, then, and knew without any further indication that the creature was not alone.

The room was full of them. They were crawling out of the shadows in the corners, they were creeping along die panelling of the walls; they crowded through the door and slithered through rat-holes in the worm-riddled flooring.

They were all about him now, chattering and squealing as they climbed towards him.

Then through the door came the man-sized figures; the man-sized figures with the shaggy bodies and flaming eyes and the acrid scent of the werewolf seeping forth from between their carrion fangs. And beneath their shaggy bodies was the flesh and form of Barsac, and within their flaming eyes was the laughing gaze of Barsac, and Jerome recognized them for what they were and screamed again.

But screaming did not stop them. Nothing stopped them as the mannikin-horde and the wolf-horde flowed in a furry flood towards his writhing body on the bed. He Felt the touch of their horrid paws everywhere, tensed himself for the moment when he would feel their claws, their jaws—

A shriek wrenched from his throat as Jerome sat bolt upright in the bed.

Moonlight streamed tranquilly through the castle window, and its bright pattern was etched upon a bare floor and unshadowed walls.

The creatures were gone. They had never existed, save in his own disordered dreams.

Doctor Jerome sighed and dropped back as the hot perspiration trickled down into his eyes. He drifted off to sleep again.

It seemed to him as though the oaken door opened as he slept, and Barsac crept into the room. The little fat man was smiling a secret smile as lie advanced on the bed. In his arms he held a rabbit—a white rabbit. He stroked the furry head until the ears lay flat and the pink-rimmed eyes were open and alert. Then Barsac's eyes opened and he gazed on Jerome and he fixed Jerome's gaze with unshakable intensity. Barsac's bulging eyes held a command and a ghastly promise, and Jerome could not turn away. Barsac's very being seemed concentrated in his eyes, and as he stared, Jerome felt his own being rise to meet that ghastly gaze.

He felt himself flowing out . . . out . . . and somehow he knew that he was no longer staring at Barsac but at the white rabbit. The white rabbit was absorbing his personality through the hypnotic stare.

Jerome felt weak, giddy. His head reeled, and through a blurred mist he saw the figure of the white rabbit. The white rabbit was *growing*. The furry body was larger. It slipped out of Barsac's hands and crouched on the floor, looming upwards as it swelled and grew.

Its long white ears were melting into a skull that in itself was changing. The pink muzzle blended back into the face. The rabbit's eyes were moving farther apart and a mouth sprang into prominence above a suddenly protruding chin. The rabbit had a *face*.

There was something terribly familiar about the rabbit's face. Jerome strove to cleanse his mind of loathing and concentrate upon recognition. He had seen that face before and he knew that he *must* remember whose it was.

Then, in. a wave of supreme terror, he recognized the face upon the rabbit.

It was *his own*—

3.

DOCTOR JEROME didn't tell Barsac about his dreams. But Barsac must have noted his pallor and the dark pouches under his eyes, and drawn his own conclusions.

"I fear my accommodations are not of the best," he said, over the breakfast table. "It is my hope that you will soon become accustomed to the simple life. After we begin working together, things will probably adjust themselves, no?"

"No," said Doctor Jerome. "And what makes you think I'm going to work with you?"

"But of course you arc going to work with me, my friend," Barsac declared. "It was for this reason I asked you to come here. I appreciate your brilliance, my friend, and I need your talents badly here.

"I have waited for you before resuming my experiments so that we could complete the final steps together. I realize that you were shocked by what I showed you last night, but I trust your reason has prevailed over your emotions.

"Together we can carry this experiment to its ultimate conclusion. Up to-now I have produced monstrosities—and then managed to reproduce my own physical characteristics in a group of animals. I can go further than that, I think. I have evolved a refinement of my technique. Using other animals than rats, I hope to make the changes and keep them alive.

"Then I can determine whether I have transmitted a portion of my *mind* as well as a force that changes the bodies to resemble me. You perceive the significance?"

Doctor Jerome did not look as though he perceived anything except a most unpleasant prospect. He shook his head slowly. "I—I can't," he murmured.

“Wait, you misunderstand! I shall not ask you to submit to hypnosis if you do not wish to. I shall take that risk myself. All I desire is that you remain here and help to supervise the work, take notes, and act as a scientific witness to corroborate my findings.”

“It’s no use, Barsac.” Doctor Jerome did not attempt to disguise the disgust that worked in his features. “I can’t stand it—I won’t set foot in that laboratory again.” Barsac clucked sympathetically. “You will get over your aversion,” he predicted. “And, I hope, soon. For I shall now proceed with the last experiment. If it succeeds—and I know it will—you must be convinced. And if you are convinced, you can carry on alone.”

“Carry on? Alone?”

Barsac lowered his head. The little fat man addressed the wall rather than his breakfast companion.

“Yes. I am not long for this earth, my friend. The doctors, they tell me of my heart. The strain of long experimentation has taken its toll. And this last one may well prove to be the end of further work, if not of my life itself. My vital energy is drained by the hypnosis. No, Jerome, a man cannot give of his soul and retain life for long.” Doctor Jerome stared at Barsac’s earnest face. Barsac avoided his gaze and continued.

“That is why I invited you and asked you to consider working with me. When I die, I wish that you will carry on my work. For the sake of our friendship, and because of my respect for your abilities and brilliance. Have no fear, whether you choose to enter the laboratory or not, I have compiled all of die notes and data necessary for you to take over.

“And one thing more.” Barsac’s voice was quite faint. “I have made the other arrangements. I have seen my advocate and prepared my will. You will be left everything when I die; my entire estate goes to you to continue in this work.”

Jerome rose. “It’s no use,” he said. “I won’t go into that laboratory with you.”

“Very well. I understand. But this I ask of you—please stay here with me during the next two days. I shall proceed at once with the operations I have in mind. I hope to be able to give you complete proof of success—living animals that will not only bear a physical resemblance to me, but inherit my mental processes as well."

Doctor Jerome shuddered slightly.

"Please," said Barsac. "Do not leave me during these next two days. I shall stay in the laboratory and work if you will prepare the meals. You understand, I cannot keep servants here. They are ignorant, superstitious fools—easily frightened. And I must have some one here to rely on. You will stay?"

Jerome was silent for a long moment. Then he nodded. "Yes," he whispered. "I will stay."

Barsac clasped his hand. Doctor Jerome felt the cold, flabby fingers and drew back involuntarily. To him, the light of gratitude in Barsac's bulging eyes was too reminiscent of the look he had glimpsed there in his dreams.

"I shall not wait," Barsac promised. "I go now to prepare. I will be in the laboratory—you need only to bring meals to the outer door. Within forty-eight hours I hope to announce success. Meanwhile, you are at liberty to amuse yourself as you will."

He turned. "I will leave you now. My gratitude, Jerome."

Barsac left the room.

Doctor Jerome smiled grimly as he gazed up at the forbidding stone ceiling.

"Amuse myself as I will," he muttered.

HE FINISHED his cigar, then rose and walked aimlessly clown the hall. His footsteps rang eerily through the empty corridors. At a turn in the hail Jerome saw the figure standing against the wail in the shadows and started back.

Then he recognized the outlines of a suit of armor. Of course—Castle Barsac would have suits of armors. And all the trimmings, too. Perhaps he could amuse himself for a few hours, exploring the castle.

Doctor Jerome set about his explorations with scientific precision. He covered the ground floor thoroughly, entering a score of dusty chambers and apartments—being careful in each instance to turn on the lights before venturing into a strange room.

He found much to interest and delight him. Massive Regency furniture, elaborate tapestries, a full gallery of oils. The family portraits of the Barsac line gazed down austerely from a long chamber at the rear of the castle, and Jerome speculated as to the identity of that great-great grandfather with the sorcerous proclivities.

Everything hinted of great age and great wealth. If the castle was haunted, it was haunted by the past alone. Again Jerome was reminded of the story-book atmosphere. All that was needed was a family vault in the cellar.

A vault? Why not?

Jerome explored. He discovered the stairs that descended to the lower levels and here he found the catacombs.

Catacombs they were in truth. On marble slabs lay the stone sarcophagi of the Barsacs. Row on row they rested in eternal slumber here below. Now only Sebastian Barsac remained, the last of his line, and soon he too would join these ranks of the dead.

The last of the Barsacs, and he was mad. Mad and soon to die.

How soon?

There in the dank and silent catacombs, the thought came to Jerome.

He *could* die *quite* soon.

Why not? Let him die soon, and quietly.

Then there would, no longer be a Castle Barsac. Jerome would have the castle, have the laboratory, have the money. And why not? Barsac was mad. And he was all alone. The doctors had said he would die, and it need hardly be called murder. Perhaps a strong shock would do it.

Yes, a shock. Barsac would weaken himself in these crazy experiments. And then it would be so easy to precipitate a stroke, a seizure. He could be frightened.

The will was made, and all that remained was the deed. Mad Barsac would lie here on the last empty slab, and it would be ended.

Doctor Jerome ascended the stairs slowly. He went out and walked through the hills, returning only at dusk. He had wrestled with temptation and put it aside. There was no thought of putting poison in the food he took upstairs at dinner. He left the tray outside the laboratory door and knocked. He descended quickly before Barsac opened the door, and ate a solitary supper in the great castle kitchen below.

He was resigned to waiting, now. After all, in a few weeks Barsac might die a natural death. Meanwhile, let his work go on. Perhaps he might succeed.

Jerome listened to the reveberation from the laboratory above his head. A steady humming sounded, accompanied by a rhythmic pulsing. Barsac must be in his cabinet now, working the focal prism and hypnotizing himself and his animals. Doctor Jerome wondered what sort of animals he was using in these "improved" experiments.

On second thought he didn't care to know. The vibrations were beginning to affect his nerves. He decided to turn in early. One more day and it would be over. If he could get a good night's sleep, now, his morbid fancies would vanish.

Accordingly, Jerome ascended to bed, switching off the lights as he proceeded down the hall. He undressed, donned pajamas, plunged the castle bedroom into darkness, and sought sleep.

Sleep came.

AND then Barsac came. He wheeled in the cabinet, the great metal cabinet, and once again his bright eyes caught and captured Jerome's astonished stare. Jerome's will slipped away and he entered the cabinet. He was clamped into the seat as a prisoner is clamped in the electric chair. Like a prisoner, Jerome knew he was facing the execution of a death-sentence.

Yet his will was a prisoner—and now, as Barsac turned the dials, his soul was imprisoned too.

Jerome stared through the great glass prism that loomed before his eyes. He could not look away, for the gigantic lense was in itself a hypnotic agent, pulling at his retina, impelling him to gaze ahead into the hugely magnified world of the focal field. He waited for the animals to appear in the field—but there were no animals.

There was only Barsac. For suddenly a great face loomed through the glass—a monstrous face with the bulging eyes of Barsac, and the great domed forehead.

Barsac was smiling and his yellow teeth were exposed, but Jerome could only see the eyes. The eyes that glared and pulled at his own eyes, at his brain behind them.

Pulled his being into the glass, for as the humming rose insanely about him, Doctor Jerome felt himself plunging forward. His body was clamped to the seat, but his soul soared through the weird prism and lost itself in Barsac's mad eyes—

Doctor Jerome awoke. It was daylight at last, but he did not sit up to greet its coming. He felt weak, drained.

Drained.

A dreadful suspicion was forming in Jerome's mind. He knew that he had dreamed—but he did not know what he hadn't dreamed. Could it be that there was a distorted truth in his symbolic nightmare?

Was Barsac lying to him? Perhaps his machine *could* drain some of the vital essence from a man's soul. Perhaps Barsac wanted him to assist in the experiments so that a part of his soul would be removed—not to be incorporated into animals, but into Barsac! Hypnotic, scientific vampirism!

Had Barsac been in this room last night while he slept and dreamed? Had Barsac hypnotized him in his sleep, seeking to snare his soul?

Something had happened. Jerome felt weak.

And then he was strong—strong with sudden purpose. The thoughts of yesterday came back, but they came now as a resolution.

He would kill Barsac, today.

Fie would kill him before he died himself. He would kill Barsac because he was a madman, because his experiments were blasphemous, because he deserved to die.

Doctor Jerome would kill Barsac for the sake of Science.

That was it. For the sake of Science.

Doctor Jerome rose, dressed, prepared breakfast, took Barsac’s tray upstairs, returned to the castle chambers below, and began to plan anew.

Madman or genius, Barsac would die. He had to die. Suppose he were *really* doing what he claimed? Suppose he actually managed to create animals with human physical attributes and with human minds? Minds like Barsac’s mind?

Wouldn’t that be the ultimate horror? And shouldn’t that horror be avoided, stamped out?

Of course. He, Jerome, would save humanity from this monstrous affront to the laws of life. He would do the deed as he had planned, by shock. Tonight.

Yes, tonight. He’d short the electrical current in the castle, go up to the laboratory in the dark, and shock Barsac to death. Never lay a hand on him. A simple plan, and it would succeed. It must succeed.

Jerome knew it must succeed by late afternoon—for when the vibrations sounded from above he realized he couldn’t wait much longer. He couldn’t stand the sound or the visions it conjured up. Barsac, draining his soul into the bodies of a horde of animals—it was impossible to bear the thought.

What were the animals? Not rats, he had said. Jerome remembered the rats. Barsac had refused to show him the other monstrosities. He only showed the rats with the deformed paws. The paws with the missing finger or missing claw.

Jerome prepared dinner and laughed. His apprehensions faded away with the memory of his dream.

THE paws. Of course! How foolish he was, letting Barsac's crazy talk and the morbid atmosphere of the castle affect him. Because of that and a few bad dreams he'd tricked himself into swallowing the grotesque claims of an obvious lunatic.

There *was* a machine—but any lunatic, given the funds and a scientific training, can build an imposing machine. That didn't prove that it actually worked as Barsac claimed it did.

There had been no other monstrosities for Jerome to see—for they didn't exist. Barsac's talk about previous experiments was merely talk.

There were the rats, but what of it? Barsac had been cunning. He had taken twenty rats, killed them, and removed their individual claws on the left forepaws.

That was all there was to it.

Barsac was crazy, and there was nothing to fear.

Doctor Jerome laughed again. That made it easier. He would kill the madman and take over. No more nightmares, no more fears.

His laughter blended with the thunder. A storm was breaking. It shattered in fury over the castle, and the rumbling swallowed the noise of the vibrations from the laboratory upstairs.

Jerome peered out of the window as jagged lightning slithered between the mountain crags.

The thunder grew louder.

Doctor Jerome turned back to get Barsac's tray ready. Then he paused.

"Why bother?" he whispered. Yes, why bother? Why wait any longer. He'd go upstairs now, shut off all the lights, knock on the laboratory door. Barsac would appear, expecting his dinner-tray. Instead, he'd find death.

Yes. He'd do it now, while the resolution held.

As the thunder mounted, Doctor Jerome walked up the stairs on his grim errand.

Lighting flickered as he reached the second landing. Jerome moved towards the switch panel on the wall. Then came the blinding bolt, and as thunder followed, the lights went out.

The storm had struck. It was an omen. Jerome exulted.

Now he moved up the spiral staircase leading to the laboratory landing at the top of the great castle tower. He groped his way slowly, in utter darkness, tensing himself for the moment when he would reach the oaken door and knock.

Then he listened, above the howling of the storm, for the vibrations from behind the door.

They had ceased, abruptly, when the lightning struck.

Jerome reached the top of the stairway. He edged towards the door. He was ready, now—

The door opened, swiftly.

Doctor Jerome heard Barsac's labored breathing.

"Jerome!" called Barsac. The voice was faint, but filled with overtones of triumph. "Jerome—where are you? I've succeeded, Jerome, I've succeeded beyond my wildest dreams!"

Jerome was very glad Barsac had called out. It enabled him to locate Barsac's body in the darkness.

Now he glided forward and brought his cold hands up to Barsac's neck. Sudden shock, a fright—

But Barsac did not scream with fear. He screamed with anger.

"Jerome, it's you!" he shouted.

So he knew. Knew Jerome meant to kill him. Therefore he must die. Jerome's hands, which had risen merely to frighten, now remained to strangle.

He tightened his grip about Barsac's throat. Barsac tried to claw him off, but he could not see, and his gestures were pitifully weak.

Now Barsac did not cry out. He merely gurgled as Doctor Jerome pressed his windpipe and then dragged him back along the corridor. He dragged him swiftly, purposefully, and with his own feet he felt for the edge of the great staircase.

Then he thrust Barsac forward. There was a single shriek as Sebastian Barsac reeled in darkness, and then only a dreadful series of rubbery thumps as he plunged down the black well of the spiral staircase.

Doctor Jerome stood there as the thunder came again. When its muttering reverberation died away, the thumping had ended.

Barsac was at the bottom of the stairs.

Cautiously, Doctor Jerome descended the staircase. His feet groped for the next stair, and groped for the feel of Barsac's body. But it was not until he reached the bottom that his shoes met the resistant flesh of Barsac.

Jerome knelt and passed his hands over that flesh, finding it quite cold. As cold as death.

So it was done. Barsac was dead. Long live the new ruler of Castle Barsac!

Doctor Jerome straightened up with a grin. It was easy, after all. "Gentlemen, it was an unavoidable accident. Sebastian Barsac was at work in his laboratory when the lights went out. He came out into the hall, evidently with the purpose of descending the stairs. In the dark he must have made a misstep and fallen down the staircase."

He whispered the words aloud, just the way he meant to repeat them at the inquest. He heard their echoes rustle and die away.

And then he heard the *other* rustling.

It came from far overhead, from a room at the top of the stairs. A room at the top of the stairs—a rustling from the laboratory!

Jerome bounded up the stairs.

The animals were loose. He'd better lock the laboratory door, at once.

He heard the shrill squeaking as he made the second landing and turned to climb the last flight to the tower level.

Then he paused. For there was a drumming from the floor above—a padding and a scraping as small bodies moved down the hall. They had already left the laboratory.

For the first time he detected the ominous note in the squeaking sounds. Shrill little cries of anger resounded from the head of the stairs. They were angry, as Barsac had been angry when he had died. Barsac, who had come out, crowing in triumph that his experiments were successful beyond his wildest dreams.

His experiments were successful!

"I will transfer the physical attributes of myself, and also the mental attributes."

Jerome knew the meaning of fear, then.

THE creatures of Barsac's experiments were loose. The creatures whose bodies he had changed. Whose minds were a part of Barsac's mind.

They knew and they were loose. Loose and coming after him to seek revenge!

Jerome heard them creeping down the stairway. They were after him. They knew he was there—they could see in the dark! he turned in blind panic down the hallway. He'd hide in his room. That was it, his room. He stumbled through the pitch-black corridor, and heard them at his heels.

The beasts were swift. He reached the door, groped for his key. He fumbled in his pockets, cursing. The key wasn't on his ring. And the door was locked.

Perhaps he'd dropped it now, dropped it on the floor. He stooped to feel around.

And his hand encountered the warmth of flesh. Flesh that was furry, but not furry enough. Flesh that wriggled through his fingers.

The creatures had come!

Fangs nipped at his thumb. He stood up, hastily, and kicked out at the furry beast. But another body brushed his other ankle, and then they were all around him. Their squealing rose. One of the tiny monstrosities was crawling up his leg, and he felt the touch of minute fingers dinging to his body.

Jerome screamed, and knew Barsac had spoken the truth. The monsters he had created with his mind were going to kill him in revenge for Barsac's death. And there was no escape.

Their squealing filled the corridor and their bodies blocked it completely. They swarmed around Doctor Jerome like ravening rats, but. they were not rats. Jerome knew that if he should see them he would go mad. And if he did not see them they would crawl up his body and sink their horrible little mouths in his throat, stroke his face with their ghastly fingers.

Jerome wheeled and charged down the corridor again. The nightmare ranks broke for a moment and he sped down the black corridor of the haunted castle with the beasts of Barsac at his heels. He was playing tag with death in a nighted lair,-and death ran behind him on purposeful paws. Death squealed and chattered, and Jerome fled.

He had to get out before they reached him, touched him, took him. He had to.

Gasping in agony he reached the corridor's end, knowing that the horde was keeping pace. He turned again, ran forward. He never gave a thought to the stairs.

And then, as the squealing rose.?nd echoed in his ears, Doctor Jerome tumbled down the castle staircase and landed with a sickening little crunch that he never heard. His head lolled grotesquely on the broken stem of a neck. He lay next to the body of Sebastian Barsac, and like Barsac, he was quite dead.

It was casual irony that chose this moment for the castle lights to flicker on again.

They revealed nothing but the two bodies lying at the foot of the stairs. Mad Barsac jay dead, and so did mad Jerome.

On the landing above, the twenty escaped guinea pigs blinked down with stupid, uncomprehending eyes.

Death Is a Vampire

KILLERS ON A RAMPAGE BRING A REIGN OF EERIE MYSTERY TO A SECLUDED ESTATE!

CHAPTER I

Won't you Walk into My Partial?

THE gate handle was rusty. I didn't want to touch it. But that was the only way of getting in, unless I wanted to climb the high walls and leave part of my trousers on the iron spikes studding the top.

I grabbed the handle, pushed the gate open and walked down the flagstone path to the house.

If I were a botanist, I'd have been interested in the weeds growing along that path. As it was, they were only something to stumble over. I ignored them and stared at the mansion ahead.

The Petroff house was not quite as big as a castle and not quite as old as Noah's Ark. It looked like the kind of a place the Phantom of the Opera would pick for a summer home.

As far as I was concerned, it was something to donate to the next scrap drive.

But that was none of my business. My business was to sneak inside and wangle old Petroff into giving me an interview about his art treasures. The Sunday supplement needed a feature yarn.

I walked up to the big porch, climbed the stairs, and jangled the old-fashioned door pull. Nothing happened, so I did it again. Same result. It looked as though the Butler's Union had pulled its man off this job.

Just for fun I edged over and turned the door-knob. As I did, I noticed a garland hanging down from the metal projection. It was a wreath of smelly leaves. Not a funeral wreath—just leaves.

That was none of my business, either. I was interested in whether or not the door was unlocked.

It was. So I walked in.

Why not? When Lenehan gave me the assignment, he told me it was a tough one. He had talked to old Petroff over the phone, and Petroff had refused to meet the press or drool over his art treasures.

I expected to be met at the door by a bouncer with a shotgun. But this was easy, and I took advantage of it. It wasn't polite, but newspaper reporting isn't a polite occupation.

THE door swung shut behind me, and I stood in a long hallway. It was hard to see anything specific in the afternoon twilight, but I got a musty whiff of stale air, mothballs, and just plain age and decay.

It made me cough. I coughed louder, hoping to rouse my host.

No results. I started down the hallway, still coughing from time to time. An open door led into a deserted library. I ignored it, passed a staircase, walked on.

Behind the stairs was another door. I halted there, for a faint light gleamed from underneath it. I groped for the handle and coughed again. Once more the cough was genuine—for hanging on the door-knob was another garland of those leaves.

Inside here the smell was terrific. Like a Bohemian picnic. Suddenly I recognized the odor. Garlic.

According to the stories going around, old Petroff was a bit of a screwball. But it couldn't be that he had turned the house into a delicatessen.

There was only one way to find out. I opened the door and walked into the parlor where the lamp burned.

It was quiet inside—quiet enough to hear a pin drop. In fact, you could tell which end hit the floor first: the head or the point.

But a pin had not hit the floor in this room. Petroff had.

He looked like his photo, all right. He was tall, thin, with black hair, curled and gray at the temples. A beaked nose and thick lips dominated his face.

He lay there on the floor, his nose pointing up at the ceiling. I got to his side in a hurry, and the floor creaked as I bent over him.

It didn't matter. The noise wouldn't bother him. Nothing would ever bother Igor Petroff again.

His hand was icy. His face was paper-white. I looked around for a mirror but didn't spot any. I pulled my cigarette case out and put it against his lips. The shiny metal clouded slightly. He was still breathing, at any rate.

Probably he'd had a stroke. I lifted his head and stared into his bloodless face. His collar was open. I felt for a pulse in his neck, then took my hand away, quick.

I stared down at his throat, stared down and saw the two tiny punctures in his neck, shook my head and stared again.

They looked like the marks of human teeth!

There was no use asking if there was a doctor in the house. I got up and dashed out into the hall to get to the phone. I got to it. I jiggled the receiver for nearly a minute before I noticed the dangling cord trailing on the floor. Whoever had bitten Petroff had also bitten through the cord.

That was enough for me. I made the two miles back to town in about ten minutes and five hundred gasps. I still had a gasp left in me when I ran into Sheriff Luther Shea's office at Centerville and knocked his feet off the desk. "Accident out at the Petroff place!" I wheezed. "Get a doctor, quick!" Sheriff Luther Shea was a fat little bald-headed man who seemed to enjoy keeping his feet on the desk. He put them right back up and scowled at me over his Number Elevens.

"What'sa big idea of bustin' in here? Who are you, anyhow?"

I faced my genial quiz-master without a thought of winning the sixty-four-dollar question.

"Can't you hear?" I yelled. "Call a doctor! Mr. Petroff has been injured."

"Ain't no doctor in this town," he told me. "Now state your business, fella." I stated it, but loud. He perked up his ears a little when I told him about Petroff, but he didn't take his feet off the desk until I flashed my press badge. That did it.

"No sense trying to find a doctor—nearest one's back in L.A.," he decided. "I'm pretty handy at first-aid. I'll get the car and we'll go out and pick him up."

Sheriff Shea banged the office door behind him, and I grabbed a phone. I got hold of Calloway right away and he promised to send the ambulance out to Centerville. Somehow, after having had a good look at Petroff, I didn't have much confidence in Sheriff Shea's "first-aid."

THEN I put through a call to the paper.

Lenehan growled at me, and I barked right back.

"Somebody bit his throat? Say, Kirby—you drunk?"

I breathed into the phone. "Smell that," I said. "I'm cold sober. I found him lying on the floor with two holes in his neck. I'm still not sure he wasn't dead."

"Well, find out. Keep on this story and give me all you've got. We can hold three hours for the morning edition. Looks like murder, you say?"

"I didn't say a blamed thing about murder!" I yelled.

"Come on, quit stalling!" Lenehan yelled back. "What's your angle on this?"

I lowered my voice to a whisper. "Confidentially," I said, "my theory is that old Petroff bit himself in the throat just for the publicity."

Lenehan apparently didn’t believe me, because he launched off into a discussion of my ancestry that was cut short when Sheriff Shea appeared in the doorway. He wore a rancher’s black Stetson and a shoulder holster. On him it didn’t look good.

“Come on, fella,” he said, and I hung up.

His rattletrap Chewy didn’t deserve a C card, but we made time down Centerville’s single street and chugged out along the highway.

“From the L.A. papers, huh?” he grunted. “Whatcha doing up at Petroff’s?”

“My editor gave me an assignment to write a feature story about the art treasures of the Irene Colby Petroff estate. Do you know anything about them?”

“Don’t know nothing, fella. When old man Colby was alive, he and the missus would come into town and do a little trading once in a while. Then he died and she married this foreign gigolo, Petroff, and that’s the last we seen of them in town. Then she died, and since then the place has gone to pot. This business don’t surprise me none. Hear some mighty funny gossip about what goes on out at Petroff’s place. All fenced off and locked up tighter’n a drum. Ask me, he’s hiding something.”

“I got in without any trouble.”

“What about the guards? What about the dogs? What about the locks on the gate?” I sat up. “No guards, no dogs, no locks,” I told him. “Just Petroff. Petroff lying there on the floor with the holes in his throat.”

We rounded a bend in the highway and approached the walls of the Petroff estate. The setting sun gleamed on the jagged spikes surmounting the walls. And it gleamed on something else.

“Who’s that?” I yelled, grabbing Sheriff Shea’s arm.

“Don’t do that!” he grunted. “Nearly made me go off the road.”

“Look!” I shouted. “There’s a man climbing up the wall.”

Sheriff Shea glanced across the road and saw the figure at the top of the wall. The car ground to a halt and we went into action. Shea tugged at his shoulder holster.

“Stop or I’ll shoot!” he bawled.

The man on the wall considered the proposition and rejected it. He turned and jumped. It was a ten-foot drop but he landed catlike and was scuttling across the road by the time we reached the base of the wall.

“After him!” Shea grunted.

The man ran along the other side of the road, making for a clump of trees ahead. I dashed along behind. The fugitive reached the grove a few steps ahead of me and I decided on a little football practice.

It was a rather ragged flying tackle, but it brought him down. We rolled over and over, and on the second roll he got on top. He didn’t waste time. I felt powerful fingers dig into my throat. I tore at his wrists. He growled and twisted his neck. I felt his mouth graze my cheek. He was trying to bite me.

I got his hands loose and aimed a punch at his chin, but he ducked and pressed his thumbs in my eyes. That hurt. I aimed another punch, but that wasn’t good either. By this time he had those hands around my neck again, and things began to turn red. The red turned black. I heard him growling and snarling deep in his throat, and his fingers squeezed and squeezed.

This was no time for Queensbury rules. I kicked him in the tummy. With a grunt of appreciation he slumped back, clutching his solar plexus.

CHAPTER II

They Fly By Night

SHERIFF SHEA arrived, wheezing, and together we collared our prisoner and dragged him to his feet.

He was not pretty. He wore one of those one-piece overall outfits, and between the spikes on the wall and the tussle, he’d managed to destroy its integrity. Patches of his skin showed through, advertising the need of a bath.

His yellow hair was matted and hung down over his eyes, which was just as well. They were as blue as a baby-doll's—and just as vacant. His lips hung slackly, and he was drooling. A prominent goitre completed the ensemble.

"Why, it's Tommy!" said the Sheriff. "He's a little touched," he whispered, "but harmless."

He didn't have to tell me the kid was touched. That I could easily believe. But the "harmless" part I doubted. I rubbed my aching eyes and neck while Shea patted Tommy on the back.

"What were you doing on the wall, Tommy?" he asked.

Tommy lifted a sullen face. "I was looking at the bats."

"What bats?"

"The bats that fly at twilight. They fly out of the windows and you can hear them squeaking at each other."

I glanced at Sheriff Shea. He shrugged.

"Ain't no bats around here except the ones in Tommy's belfry."

I took over. "What else were you looking at, Tommy?" I inquired.

He turned away. "I don't like you. You tried to hurt me. Maybe you're one of them! One of the bad people."

"Bad people?"

"Yes. They come here at night. Sometimes they come as men, wearing black cloaks. Sometimes they fly—that's when they're bats. They only come at night, because they sleep in the daytime."

Tommy was in full cry, now. I didn't try to stop him.

"I know all about it," he whispered. "They don't suspect me, and they'd kill me if they thought I knew. Well, I do know. I know why Petroff doesn't have any mirrors on the walls. I heard Charlie Owens, the butcher, tell about the liver he sends out every day—the raw liver, pounds of it. I know what flies by night."

"That's enough," said Sheriff Shea. "Whatever you know, you can tell us inside."

"Inside? You aren't going in there, are you? You can't take me in there! I won't let you! You want to give me to him. You'll let him kill me!"

Again, Shea cut him off. Grasping his arm, he guided the half-wit across the road. I followed. We made straight for the gate.

Shea halted. “Push it open,” I said.

“It’s locked.”

I looked. A shiny new padlock hung from the rusty handle.

“It was open half an hour ago,” I said.

“He always keeps it locked,” Shea told me. “Usually has a man out here, too—a guard. And dogs in the kennels back of the house.” He eyed me suspiciously. “You sure you were up here, Mr. Kirby?”

“Listen,” I advised him. “I was up here a little over half an hour ago. The gate was open. I went in and found Petroff on the floor. He had two holes in his throat and I’m not sure whether he was still breathing or not. I’ll give you every explanation you want later, but let’s go inside, quick. He may be dead.”

Shea shrugged. He stood back and drew his revolver. The shot resounded, the lock shattered. I held Tommy tightly and pushed him through the gateway.

After that I took the lead. Up the steps, through the door, down the hall. It was slow going in the gathering twilight. We stumbled along toward the room behind the staircase.

“Here,” I said. “Here’s where I found him.” I opened the door. The light was still on. I pointed to the floor. “Here,” I said.

“Yeah?” grunted Shea. “Where is he?”

The room was empty. The rug was on the floor, but Petroff was not. I stared, and the room began to whirl. I took a deep breath and inhaled fresh air.

It was coming from the open French windows at the end of the room.

Of course! The windows were open. I had made some kind of a mistake. Petroff had been breathing. He had fainted, or something. After I left he recovered, went for a stroll on the porch beyond the open windows, and locked his gate. The holes in his throat. Maybe he’d cut himself while shaving.

I WAS a fool. A glance at Sheriff Shea confirmed the suspicion. He grinned at me.

But Tommy was not grinning.

“You were here before,” he murmured. “You saw him lying here with holes in his throat.”

“I—I made a mistake,” I mumbled.

“No. When you were here it was still daylight. Now it’s dusk. When you were here he was still asleep. But he comes alive at night.”

“What do you mean? Who comes alive at night?”

“The vampire,” he whispered. “He comes alive. And at night he flies. Look!”

Tommy screamed. His finger stabbed at the dusk beyond the opened windows.

We stared out into the night and saw the black shadow of a bat skimming off into the darkness, a mocking squeak rising from its throat.

In just a little while there was the devil of a lot of activity. The ambulance I had sent for finally arrived, and Shea had to stall them off with a trumped-up excuse about a fainting fit. Then Shea wanted to play detective and go over the place. Personally, I think he was dying to case the joint merely to collect some gossip.

I won’t bother remembering the bawling-out he handed me. I had to take it, too. After all, my story sounded pretty phony now.

Tommy was the only one who believed me. And his support was not much help. A half-wit’s comments on vampires doesn’t make good testimony.

While Shea handled the ambulance men, Tommy kept talking.

“Look at the garlic wreaths on the doors,” he said. “He must have been trying to keep them out. They can’t bear garlic.”

“Neither can I,” I answered. “And I’m no vampire.”

“Look at the books,” Tommy exclaimed. “Magic.”

I stepped over to the built-in bookshelves. This time Tommy really had something. There were rows of blackbound volumes, musty, crumbling treatises in Latin and German. I read the titles. It was indeed a library of demonology. Where there's smoke there's fire.

But what did that prove? Occultism isn't a rare hobby on the Coast. I knew half a hundred crackpots who belonged to "secret cults," and down Laguna way there was a whole colony of them.

Still, I ran my eyes and fingers along the rows. One of the books on the lower shelf protruded a bit more than was necessary. It offended my sense of neatness. As I reached in to push it back, a card slipped out from between yellowed pages. I palmed it, turned around just as Sheriff Shea reentered the room.

"Come on," he sighed. "Let's get out of here."

Driving back to town, with Tommy wedged between us on the front seat, Shea gave me another going over.

"I don't understand all this monkey business," he declared. "I don't know what you were doing in that house in the first place. Least I can do is hold you on suspicion of illegal entry. As for Tommy here, he's liable to get booked on the same charges. I'm gonna see his folks about this. But what I want to know is—where's Petroff?"

"I shot him." I grinned. "But the bats flew off with his body."

"Never mind that," Shea snapped. "You smart-aleck reporters aren't tampering with the law down here. I'd like to get the D.A. in on this, but there's nothing to go on, yet. Maybe after I hold you on suspicion a few days you'll be ready to talk. I want to know how you cut those telephone wires, too."

"Now listen," I said. "I've got work to do. I'm willing to play ball on this thing and help straighten matters out. If Igor Petroff has disappeared and I'm the last man who saw him alive—or dead—that's important to me, too. The paper'll want the story. But I'm down here on an assignment. I've got to move around."

"No, you don't. Case I didn't mention it, you're under arrest right now, Mr. Kirby."

"That," I sighed, "is all I want to know."

I eased the car door open gently and swiftly. We were going thirty, but I took my chances. I jumped and hit the road.

Shea swore. He brought the rattling Chewy to a halt, but by that time I was running along the ditch on the other side of the road. It was good and dark.

SHEA bawled and waved his revolver, but he couldn't spot me. Then he turned the car around and zoomed back up the road. I went into the field, kept going. In a few minutes the road was far behind me, and I headed across to the other side of the field and another dirt road running parallel.

Here I found the truck that took me back to L.A. I hopped off downtown, found a drug store, and called Lenehan at the office.

"Where in thunder are you?" he greeted me. "Just had this hick sheriff on the wire. He's bawling you're a fugitive from justice. And what's all this business about a disappearing body? Give."

I gave. "Hold the yarn," I pleaded. "I've got a new angle."

"Hold it?" yelled Lenehan. "I'm tearing it up! You and your disappearing Dracula! Petroff was drunk on the floor when you found him and you were drunk on your feet. He had the decency to wander off and sober up, but you're still drunk!"

I hung up.

Then I fished around in my pocket and pulled out the card I had snatched from the book in Petroff's library.

It was nicely engraved:

HAMMOND KING
Attorney at Law

I turned it over. A man's heavy scrawl spidered across the back read:

You may be interested in this volume on vampirism.

H.K.

The plot was thickening. Hammond King? I knew the name. A downtown boy. Wealthy attorney. What was the connection?

I called Maizie at the office.

“Hammond King,” I said. “Check the morgue.”

She got me the dope. I listened until she came to an item announcing that Hammond King was attorney for the Irene Colby Petroff estate. I stopped her and hung up.

It was eight o’clock. Not likely that Hammond King would still be at his office, but it was a chance worth taking. The phone book got me the number and I deposited my third nickel.

The phone rang for a long time. Perhaps he was going over a tort or something. Then a deep voice came over the wire.

“Hammond King speaking.”

“Mr. King—this is Dave Kirby, of the Leader. I’d like to come over there and talk to you.”

“Sorry young man. If you’ll phone my office tomorrow for a more definite appointment—”

“I thought we might have a little chat about vampires.”

“Oh.”

That stopped him.

“I’ll be right over,” I said. “So long.”

He didn’t answer. I whistled my way out of the phone booth, ordered a ham sandwich and a malted milk, disposed of same, and took a cab downtown. .

The night elevator brought me to Hammond King’s office. The door was open and I walked into one of those lavish layouts so typical of wealthy attorneys and impecunious booking agents.

I ignored the outer office and made for the big door marked “Private.”

King was examining a bottle of Scotch with phony nonchalance.

My nonchalance was just as phony as I examined him.

He was a short, stocky man of about fifty-five. Gray hair and mustache to match. His eyes slanted behind unusually thick bifocals. He wore an expensive gray suit, and I admired his taste in ties. He looked like a hundred other guys, but he sent books on vampirism to his friends. You never know these days.

"Mr. Kirby?" he inquired, getting up and extending his hand. "To what do I owe this pleasure?"

"I told you over the phone," I said. "I'd like to have a little chat with you about vampires."

"Oh."

The phony nonchalance faded away and the hand dropped to his side.

"I'd rather have talked to Mr. Petroff about it," I continued. "Matter of fact, I dropped in on him this afternoon. But he wasn't there. That is, he was there, and then he wasn't. You know how vampires get restless about twilight."

"What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean, King," I said. "I just thought I'd warn you. In case anybody tries to bite you in the throat, it's your old client, Igor Petroff."

"How'd you know he was my client?"

"I know a lot of things," I told him, wishing it were true. "And what I don't know you'd better tell me, but fast. Unless, of course, you want it splashed all over the front page of the Leader."

"Let's be reasonable," Hammond King pleaded. "I'll be glad to help you all I can. Anything involving my client—"

The phone rang. King reached for the receiver, then drew his hand back.

"Pardon me, please," he said.

He got up and went into the outer office and shut the door.

CHAPTER III

The Bat's Kiss

I WOULD have given my left arm to know who King was talking to. But I didn't have to give my left arm. All I needed to do was reach out with it and gently pick up the receiver. Call it eavesdropping, if you wish. You do a lot of things in this business.

"Mr. King?" a girl's voice came over the wire. "This is Lorna Colby. I'm at the Eastmore Hotel, Room Nine-nineteen. . . . No, Igor sent for me. He wanted to talk about a settlement on the will."

"Have you seen Petroff?" Hammond King barked into the phone at this end.

"No, not yet."

"Well, I'll be around in the morning, at ten. We've got to work fast, you understand? Something's happening that I don't like."

"What is it?" asked Lorna Colby.

"I can't talk now. See you tomorrow. Good night."

He hung up. I hung up. It was my turn to look at the Scotch bottle as he came in.

"Where were we?" he asked.

"You were just going to spill the beans," I said.

Hammond King smiled. "Was I? Lucky for me I got called away. I'm afraid I can't talk this matter over with you just at present. That call was from a client in Pasadena. I've got to take the train tonight."

I rose. One of his desk drawers was half opened. I reached in and scooped up a handful of garlic leaves.

"You had these left over from decorating the Petroff house, I presume," I told him. "Too bad you didn't think to put these on the French windows."

I slipped the garlic wreath into his hand and left the room. He stood there with his mouth open, giving a poor imitation of a stuffed moose.

I rode downstairs and walked around the corner and across the block to the Eastmore Hotel. I didn't bother to send my name up, but rode in person to the ninth floor. Nine-nineteen was down the hall to my left. I found the room and knocked on Lorna Colby's door.

There was no answer—except a sudden, ear-shattering scream.

I jerked the door-knob. The door opened on a tableau of frozen horror. A blond girl lay slumped on the bed. Crouching above her was a shadowy figure out of a nightmare. Its head was bending toward her neck. I saw lean, outstretched fingers claw down, saw the mouth descend—then the shadow straightened, turned, swooped across the room and out through the open window.

Lorna Colby lay there, clutching her throat and staring in wide-eyed terror. I stared, too. For the intruder had been Igor Petroff.

When I reached the window, the fire-escape outside was empty. Perhaps it had never held a figure. Perhaps I'd have done better to look for something flying in the sky.

I turned back to the bed. Lorna Colby was sitting up. There was still fear in her hazel eyes as she looked at me.

"Who are you?" she demanded.

I introduced myself. "Dave Kirby, of the Leader. You're Lorna Colby, of course?"

She nodded. "Yes. But how did you know? And what made you come here?"

"Hammond King sent me," I lied.

It was the right hunch.

"Then maybe you can tell me," she said, "what's wrong with my uncle? He sent me a wire to come down and talk about the estate. I waited to hear from him tonight. I was getting sleepy and lay down on the bed. When I opened my eyes again, he was in the room."

"Petroff?"

"Yes. You recognized him, too?"

I nodded.

"He must have come through the window some way. He just crouched over me, staring, and there was something wrong with his face. It was so white, but his eyes glared, and I couldn't look away. Then I felt his hands come down toward my neck, and I screamed, and then—"

I shook her, not gently. It was fun, but this was no time for amusement.

"Stop it!" I snapped. "Relax."

She cried a little. Then she sat up and fished around for her make-up. I took the opportunity to study her more closely.

LORNA COLBY was tall, blond, and about twenty-two. She had a good face and a better figure. All in all, the kind of a girl worth whistling after.

That noise like a ton of bricks was me, falling. She didn't notice it. After a while she patted her hair back and smiled.

"Your uncle is—ill," I said. "That's what Hammond King asked me to tell you. We're trying to keep things quiet until we can take him away for a rest."

"You mean he's crazy?"

I shrugged.

"I've always thought so," Lorna declared. "Even when Aunt Irene was alive, I knew there was something wrong with him. He led her an awful life."

She halted, bit her lower lip, and continued.

"After she died, he got worse. He kept dogs at the house, guarding it. He wanted to guard her tomb, he said. I haven't seen him now for almost a year. Nobody has seen him since the day she died. She had a heart attack, you know. He buried her in the private vaults on the estate. He wouldn't even let me see her or come to the funeral.

"I knew he hated me, and it came as a surprise when I got his wire yesterday, asking me to come down from Frisco to talk about the will. That didn't make sense, either. After all, Aunt Irene left him the whole estate, even though he can't touch the money for a year."

Something clicked into place. I decided to follow it up.

“By the way, who was your aunt’s physician?” I asked.

“Dr. Kelring.”

“I’d like to talk to him,” I told her. “It’s important.”

“You think he might know what’s wrong with Uncle Igor?”

“That’s right.” I nodded. “He must know.”

I looked him up in the book. Dr. Roger Kelring. I called his downtown office, not hoping for much of anything. Still, this gang seemed to work late. Hammond King was on the job, and Igor Petroff was a regular night-owl. Or was he? “They fly by night.”

The phone gave off that irritating sound known as a busy signal. That was enough for me.

“Come on, Miss Colby,” I said. “We’re going over to Dr. Kelring’s office.”

“But you didn’t talk to him,” she objected.

“Busy signal,” I explained. “On second thought, I’d just as soon not say anything to him in advance.”

“What do you mean? Do you think he’s mixed up in all this?”

“Definitely,” I assured her. “I wouldn’t be a bit surprised if your uncle was up there with him now.”

Lorna put on her coat and we went downstairs. In the lobby, she halted indecisively.

“Wait a minute, Mr. Kirby. Aren’t we going to report seeing Uncle Igor in my room? After all, if he’s sick somebody should be looking after him. He may be—”

“Dangerous? Perhaps. But let’s not start something we can’t finish. It’s my hunch that he’s over at Dr. Kelring’s office. Don’t ask me why, but I’ve got reasons. Besides, you don’t want to get mixed up in a lot of cross-questioning, do you?”

She agreed. I was relieved. What could I do if we called some Law? Tell them that a suspected vampire was running around attacking girls in hotel rooms?

Besides, I didn't think Igor Petroff was "running around." He might be flying around. Or he might be working according to a plan. Dr. Kelring would know the plan.

We took a cab to Kelring's office, in a building off Pershing Square.

"What's the doctor like?" I asked Lorna.

"He's a rich woman's doctor," she told me. "You know—smooth, quiet, genial. He's about fifty, I guess. Bald-headed, with a little goatee. I only saw him once, at Aunt Irene's, a few months before she died. He was pleasant, but I didn't like him."

Lorna's voice betrayed her inner tension. I understood. It's not every night that a girl is attacked by a vampire, even if he's a member of the family.

Partly for that reason and partly for personal pleasure, I held her arm as we took the elevator up to Kelring's office. A light burned behind the outer door. I opened it and stepped in. I had no gun, but if there was anything doing, I counted on the surprise element.

There was one.

SEATED at the desk in the reception room was a man of about fifty, baldheaded, and wearing a small goatee. His hand rested on the telephone as though he were going to pick it up and make another call.

But Dr. Kelring would never make another call. He sat there staring off into space, and when I touched his shoulder his neck wobbled off at an angle so that his goatee almost touched the spot between his shoulder-blades. Roger Kelring was quite, was definitely, was unmistakably dead.

I was patting Lorna's shoulder and making with the reassurement when the phone rang. Its sharp note cut the air, and I jumped. For a moment I stared at Dr. Kelring, wondering why his dead hand didn't lift the receiver and hold it to his ear.

Then I got around the desk, fast, and pried his cold fingers from the receiver.

"Lorna," I said, "how did—he—talk?"

"You mean Dr. Kelring?" She shuddered.

"Yes."

"Oh, I don't remember. . . . Yes, I think I do. He had a soft voice. Very soft."

"Good."

I whipped out my handkerchief and covered the mouthpiece. Just a hunch.

"Hello," I said lifting the receiver.

"Hello. That you, Kelring?"

I jumped as I recognized the voice. Hammond King!

"What is it?" I said, softly.

"Kelring, I must talk to you." He sounded frightened. Too frightened to analyze my voice.

"Go ahead. What's on your mind?"

"Did you ever read 'The Fall of the House of Usher' ?"

"What?"

"You know what I'm talking about, Kelring. She's alive out there. I know it!"

"Who's alive?"

"Mrs. Petroff. Don't stall me, Kelring. I'm desperate."

"What makes you think so, man?"

"It happened two months ago. I was out there at the house with Petroff, arguing about the will. You know he's been trying to get me to turn over the estate before the time stipulated. I won't bother with details, but I heard a noise. A woman's voice, coming from behind the wall. It came from the private staircase behind the bookshelves—the one leading down to the family burial vaults in the hillside."

"Get to the point, King," I said.

"He tried to hold me off, but I made him take me down there. I don't know how to tell you this—but beyond the iron grille entrance, in the vaults, I caught a glimpse of Irene Colby Petroff. Alive."

"But I pronounced her dead of heart failure," I said, remembering what I'd been told.

"She was alive, I tell you! She ran into one of the passages, but I recognized her face. I tried to get Petroff to open the grille and go in, but he dragged me back upstairs. Then he told me the story."

"What story?"

"You know, all right, Kelring. That's why I didn't call before. I wanted to investigate on my own. Now I need your help."

"Better tell me all you know, then."

"I know that she's a—vampire."

I held my breath. King didn't wait for any comment.

"Petroff broke down and confessed. Said he knew it and you knew it. She'd been mixed up in some kind of Black Magic cult in Europe when he met her. And when she died, she didn't really die. She lived on, after sundown, as a vampire."

"Preposterous!"

"I wasn't sure myself, then. I wanted to call in the police. But Petroff pleaded with me. Said he had the guard and the dogs and kept people away.

He had her locked up down there, fed her raw liver. Because you were trying to work on a cure. He asked for a little more time. And he explained it all. Gave me books on demonology to read. I didn't know what to believe, but I promised to wait. Then, three nights ago, he called and told me that she had tried to attack him. He asked me to come out this afternoon and talk things over.

"I went out there about four today. Maybe I was a fool, but I took some garlic with me. The books say garlic wards them off. When I arrived, I found Petroff lying on the floor. There were two holes in his throat—the marks of a vampire's teeth. So he has become a vampire now!

"I got frightened and ran. I knew he had sent for his niece, Lorna Colby. I wanted to talk to her before I did anything. Then, tonight, a young man called on me. Said he was from the newspapers. He knows something, too.

"Kelring, I've made up my mind to act. I won't call the police. I—I can't. They'd laugh at me. But there's a monster loose tonight, and I can't stand waiting any longer. I'm going out to the Petroff place now."

"Wait!" I said.

His voice was shrill as he replied. "Do you know what I've been doing, Kelring? I've been sitting here molding silver bullets. Silver bullets for my gun. And I'm leaving now. I'm going out there to get him!"

"Don't be a fool!" I yelled, in my natural voice.

But he had hung up.

"Come on," I snapped at Lorna. "I'll call the police and report on Kelring now. But we're getting out before they come."

"Where are we going?"

"To Petroff's house," I answered.

She nodded. I moved around the table. As I did, I saw something on the floor. It was a spectacle-case. I picked it up, turned it over. It was an expensive case, with an engraved name. The silver signature read:

Hammond King

CHAPTER IV

Vampire's Teeth

AS THE cab driver grumbled about the long haul, I told Lorna what I thought was wise.

I was too groggy to think clearly. Lenehan thought I was drunk, I'd jumped arrest, I'd eavesdropped, and impersonated, and messed up a murder. And it looked like an even busier day tomorrow unless I could straighten this tangle out tonight.

That’s my only excuse, I guess. I was a punch-drunk fool to take Lorna to that house, with only a crazy hunch to guide us, and armed with nothing but my suspicions.

But I did it. We rolled up to the black, forbidding portals of the Petroff place. We walked up the porch of the Petroff mansion and the cab waited in the driveway. I didn’t see Hammond King’s car, and I was glad we had arrived first.

He was wrong, I thought. Petroff was not here. And if he wasn’t, we could find that staircase, take a look into the vault, and see for ourselves whether Irene Colby Petroff walked or slept forever.

Never mind the details. The garlic odor choked us in the creaky hall. It flooded the parlor as I lit the lamp, tapped bookcases, and found the button that opened a section of the wall. Lorna shivered at my side. The setup looked like something out of “The Cat and the Canary.”

I kept listening for sounds. All quiet on the Western Front. With the light streaming from the parlor behind us, we took the secret staircase in stride. Down below was another panel in the wall. I switched on the light and walked down a long corridor. It was damp. King had said the private vaults of the family were out under the hillside.

We rounded a turn and came to the iron grille barring the hall. A perpetual light burned behind it. I tried the door. It was open. It squeaked as I pushed.

The squeak was drowned in a scream.

I turned.

Something black scuttled around the corner of the passageway. Something swooped down on Lorna, engulfed her in a sable cloud. I saw glaring eyes, red lips—Igor Petroff was here!

I made a dive for him. Petroff didn’t dodge. He stood there, and as I came on, his arm lashed out. The blow caught me off balance and as I wavered, his hand moved out. Something flashed down, and then I fell.

There was a blurred impression of movement, screaming, and scuffling. Petroff had dragged Lorna through the grille, down into the vaults.

I lurched to my feet as another figure raced around the bend. More blamed traffic down here, I thought, dazedly.

It was Hammond King.

He didn't see me. He stared, glassy-eyed, as he ran past into the gloom of the corridor beyond. He was carrying a gun. Silver bullets!

I dashed after him. As we took another flight of stairs, I gazed over his shoulder at the family vaults beyond.

Lorna stood in a corner, crouching against a wall. The cloaked figure of Igor Petroff glided towards her, and I thought of Dracula, and of childhood terrors, and of nightmares men still whisper about.

Hammond King didn't think. He began pumping shots from his gun, firing in maniac fury.

Petroff turned, across the room. And then, he smiled. He didn't fall down. He smiled. He smiled, and started to run toward Hammond King with his arms extended, and Hammond King gave a little choking gurgle and fell down.

I didn't fall. As Petroff advanced, I ran to meet him. This time I was not off-balance. I let him have one right on the point of his white chin. He grunted, but his arms swept up and then I felt the cold embrace as he clawed at me. I hammered into his ribs, but he was hard, rigid. Rigor mortis is like that, I thought madly.

He smelled of dampness and mold and ancient earth. His arms were strong and he was squeezing me. I dropped to the floor and he began to reach for my throat. He chuckled, then, deep in his throat; an animal growl. A growl of hunger, the growl of a carnivore that scents blood.

He had me by the neck, and I reached out with one hand and scrabbled frantically against the floor until I felt the cold steel of the gun Hammond King had dropped.

PETROFF wrenched my arm back, trying to tear the gun from my fingers. I wanted to fight him off, but his other hand was at my neck, squeezing. I felt myself falling back, and I pulled my arm free and brought the gun-butt up against his head, once, twice, three times.

Igor Petroff wobbled like a rundown mechanical doll and dropped with a dull thud.

I got up and slapped Lorna's face. She came out of her trance, crying. Then I went over to Hammond King and slapped him around. Just a one-man rescue squad.

"Go upstairs, you two," I said. "The cab-driver's waiting outside. Tell him to go into Centerville and bring back Sheriff Shea. I'll meet you in a moment."

They left.

I went through the vault until I came to what I wanted to find. When I was quite finished with my inspection I went back upstairs.

Lorna and Hammond King were waiting in the parlor. She had fixed her hair again, and he looked well enough to smoke a cigarette.

"The police should be here in five minutes," King said.

"Good."

"Perhaps I'd better look outside," he suggested. "I'm expecting Dr. Kelring."

"Kelring isn't coming," I said, gently. "He's dead."

"But I talked to him over the phone."

I told him who he'd talked to. And then I decided to tell him a few other things.

"You should have gone to the police the night you saw Mrs. Petroff here," I said. "Then all this wouldn't have happened."

"But I saw her. She was alive."

"Right. But she wasn't a vampire. Too bad you believed that crazy story Petroff concocted. When you stumbled onto her existence, he had to think of something and the vampire story just popped out. After you half-swallowed it, he planned the rest. He had to convince you completely, and he was good at planning."

"What do you mean?"

"It all started, I think, when Petroff and Dr. Kelring decided to fake Mrs. Petroff's death. They were in on it together, to split the inheritance. They didn't have the nerve to kill her outright but drugged her, held a private funeral, and faked the death certificate. Then Petroff kept her a prisoner down here in the vaults. That's why he had dogs and a guard. She was alive until about three days ago."

"How do you know?"

"I just found her body in the vault," I explained. "And I've seen her living quarters—a room beyond. She's dead now, all right, and I'd say she died of starvation."

"I don't understand," Lorna sighed.

"Simple. When her fake death was accepted, Petroff and Dr. Kelring were all set to divide the spoils. But there were no spoils—not for a year, according to the terms of her will. They hadn't counted on that. So Petroff was trying to get King, here, to advance money against the inheritance.

"King, being a smart attorney, would do no such thing. But after he saw Mrs. Petroff alive and heard this vampire line, he began to weaken. Petroff took advantage of it, showing him books on demonology, and telling wild stories about secret cults."

Hammond King nodded miserably. "He was wearing me down," he admitted. "But I wouldn't release any money. I couldn't, legally."

I took over again. "Then, three days ago, Mrs. Petroff actually died. Perhaps he deliberately starved her, perhaps not. In any event, she was dead, and his extortion plot and fake death was now actually murder. He wanted that money at once, needed it desperately.

"So he phoned you, King, and asked you to come out today, planning to show himself lying on the floor as the victim of a vampire attack. He had it figured that you'd be too shocked to call the police at once. Then, after dark, he would call upon you as a supposed vampire, threaten you with his bite, and get you to advance personal funds against the estate."

KING was looking bewildered.

"But I'd never do that," he protested. "He must have been mad!"

"He was—and desperate, too." I grinned. "Here's where I come into the story. Dave Kirby, the Boy Reporter. I got here today just after you left in the afternoon. I blundered in before Petroff could escape, so he lay there on the floor, hoping to fool me. When I left for the sheriff, he took a powder.

"Now the jig was up, but Petroff decided to carry the plan through. If he worked fast, he might still succeed. He'd called Lorna, asked her to come to town. He had only one idea—to appear before her as a supposed vampire and thus further bolster his story when he saw King arid demanded money. This he was doing as I arrived at Lorna's room. He fled, and undertook his next step in the plan—the murder of Dr. Kelring."

"But why would he murder Kelring?" King asked.

I shrugged. "There were several reasons. The first is the one that led me to the scene. You remember, I came out to the house for an interview on the Petroff estate art treasures, an interview Petroff had already refused to grant."

"Yes?"

"There was a reason for my coming and a reason for his refusal. You see, my editor had a tip that several valuable vases recognized as part of the Petroff collection had been offered for sale at private auction. Get it?

"Petroff was already raising money by illegally disposing of art treasures belonging to the estate. Kelring must have just discovered this and demanded his cut. Otherwise, he would squeal about the fake death certificate. So Petroff had to kill him. Just as an added touch, he left a little souvenir after strangling him in his office."

I handed King his spectacle case.

"You nearly had credit for that piece of work," I said. "I'm sure he would have threatened to turn you in had you refused him money when he demanded it this evening. So it's lucky I had you on the phone and can support an alibi."

King blinked.

"After killing Dr. Kelring he scooted out here to wait for you. He knew you'd be out to check up. He hadn't counted on Lorna and me arriving, but when we showed up first, he was ready. After that you dashed in, made your bang-bang with the silver bullets, and passed out. You aren't a good shot, King. Those bullets are in the walls, not in his body. But it wouldn't have mattered much. He wore a bullet-proof vest under the cloak. Felt it when I tackled him."

Lorna looked at me.

"You tackled him," she whispered. "That was wonderful. Even if he might be a vampire, you took the chance."

"But he wasn't a vampire. I knew that."

"Didn't you find him with holes in his throat?"

"Right. But he made them himself. Shallow cuts with a paper-knife, no doubt. You see, a vampire's bite will drain all blood. And there was no blood. I know something about superstitions myself, Lorna."

Sirens punctuated my sentence. The law was arriving in full force.

Suddenly I was very tired and very contented. Lenehan would get a story after all. And I'd get some sleep.

Lorna kissed me.

"What's that for?" I asked.

"For being brave. I don't care what you say, he might have been a vampire."

"Not a chance." I grinned. "I knew that from the beginning. When I looked at him on the floor this afternoon, his mouth was open. That was the tip-off."

"What do you mean?"

"He couldn't be a vampire because he couldn't bite anyone. After all, darling, who ever heard of a big, bad vampire with false teeth?"

The Devil's Ticket

An innocent person must not be delivered into the hands of that black being masquerading as a pawnshop proprietor

HECTOR VANE'S cape flapped forlornly as he trudged along toward the pawnshop. It was a familiar route; Vane had followed it many times before on the same errand. At the beginning, his burdens had been light—his rings, a watch, a gold-headed cane, silver candlesticks. Then, bit by bit, everything had gone. Everything but his pictures. The paintings he would not pawn. Not his portraits. It would never come to that.

But it had come to just that. Hector Vane was carrying a portrait under his bedraggled black cape. Marie had found some old newspaper and a bit of string, and she had tied it up for him. Vane sat staring at the package for almost an hour before he summoned the resolution necessary to pick it up and leave the garret.

There was simply no choice in the matter. Neither he nor Marie had eaten anything for twenty-four hours, and it was cold in the attic studio.

So he took the picture. He had to. It was one of his early favorites—a portrait of an old friend, as a matter of fact—and it was easily worth $10,000, despite the opinions of stupid critics and money-grubbing art dealers.

He thought that perhaps the pawnbroker would give him $10 for it.

Old Spengler didn’t know art, but he knew desperation when he saw it. Yes, he might give $10 for it—and Vane would gladly take the money.

Vane’s eyes did not measure the artistic qualities of the slum setting through which he walked. Instead he peered anxiously at the dull basement windows of Spengler’s pawnshop. The junk-cluttered windows mirrored the myriad misfortunes of those who entered here. Spengler’s place was a repository for the souvenirs of human woe; mementoes of miseries.

Hector Vane sighed, held the paper-wrapped picture tightly against his cloak, and descended the dirty stairs. As he opened the pawnshop door, the bell jangled a note of complaint and warning.

Vane blinked through semi-darkness as he approached the counter. The darkness held a musty smell, and released it now to his nostrils as he waited for Spengler to appear from the back of the shop. Spengler was an old man. He liked to doze on a gloomy afternoon. Perhaps he was still asleep—

No, footsteps heralded his approach. A shuffling figure emerged from the rear of the establishment and moved along behind the counter in the shadows.

“Yes?”

It was a soft voice; not Spengler’s habitual croak.

Hector Vane tried to get a clear view of the stranger, but shadows obscured. “Where’s Spengler?” he asked.

“He’s finished. I’ve taken over.”

NOW Vane could see the speaker. He was an old man; a very old man, at first glance. His hair was the color of yellowed ivory, and his skin had the parchment texture of incunabula. Flaring from the sides of his skull were curiously pointed ears, which lent the sole distinguishing touch to his aged visage. That touch, and the brightness of his eyes, impressed Vane. There was something beyond incongruity here, and Vane felt that if he stared long enough, searched long enough, he might discover the key to a peculiarly complicated enigma.

But enough of that. He wasn't here to analyze. He was here to sell a painting.

"I would like a loan," he said. "On this." His voice faltered slightly as he spoke, and in order to conceal his confusion, Vane quickly and clumsily tore the newspaper wrappings from the portrait.

His hands trembled slightly as he held it up toward the counter.

"Perhaps if we had more light—" he muttered.

The old man shook his head.

"I do not need the light," he said. He stared at the portrait with an enigmatic smile—or was it merely the fixed expression of senility?

"You have great talent," said the old man, softly. "Genius, perhaps."

Vane smiled. He had an artist's love of praise, and he was thinking that the $10 would soon be his.

"What will you offer me for it on a loan?" he asked.

"Nothing."

"Nothing?"

The old man shrugged. "I cannot pay you what it is worth," he murmured. "Besides, I do not want paintings. I deal in other things."

"But it's all I have to pawn," Vane pleaded.

"I'm not so sure. Put the picture down. Let me look at you."

VANE laid the picture on the counter, and then the old man's stare seized him. It seized, held, drained. Vane tried to stare back, but all he could see was the eyes. The very bright eyes, knives in darkness that stabbed into his being. It was silly imagery—but it was real. And the old man was whispering, softly.

"Hector Vane, you are a great artist. You do not belong in a garret, yoked to a plain woman. You were not shaped for suffering. You should be rich, famous. I think . . . yes . . . I am certain . . . I can give you the things you desire. Riches . . . and fame. . . ."

"What do you want of me?"

"Your soul."

It didn't sound fanciful—not with those eyes; staring, reading, searching and finding. The eyes were real. They were reality and all else was illusion. Vane knew it, felt it. "I must sell you my soul?"

"No. You may pawn it. The usual ticket, for ninety days. In return, fame and riches, all that you have desired. And at the end of that time, you can redeem your pledge."

"How?"

"By painting a picture for me. That's all I want . . . a picture. For my—private collection." The old man smiled, and Vane could see his face again. "But we will not talk about that now. I can see that you're wondering if I might be a little—eccentric, shall we say? So I'd best proceed to prove my claim to you. Is it agreed?"

Hector Vane nodded, slowly.

From that point on, things moved swiftly; too swiftly for memory to follow. The old man gave him a blue pawn-ticket, the necessary form was filled out, Vane signed something, the old man wrapped the picture for him, and in a twinkling he was out on the street again. The wrapped portrait was under his arm and the blue ticket was in the inside pocket of his cloak. Vane was trudging home.

He was almost at the doorway before he realized his situation. He was coming home without the money, without anything except a blue pawn-ticket made out to him by a crazy old man. What could he tell Marie? She'd nag him for not bringing the money, and if he told her the truth she'd do more than nag—she'd cry. And Vane couldn't stand the sight of her weeping; weeping quietly, with her face contorted in an ugly grimace of despair.

Vane paused on the curb before the squat frame tenement in which he lived. It was late, but perhaps he could try another pawnshop. Perhaps he could—

"Hector!"

Vane whirled. Marie came running through the doorway, her brown hair tumbled on her neck. Her eyes were wide.

"Hector! He just called—on the landlady's phone—he wants to see you right away—tonight—"

"Who?"

"Eppert! Lanson wants to give you a one-man show at the Gallery. Eppert says he's prepared to buy six of the big oils now, and he knows that after the showing he can dispose of a dozen more, at least."

So this was *it.* This was the way *it* happened. Hector Vane blinked and clutched the blue pawn-ticket in his pocket. It couldn't be real. But the ticket was real.

II

IT HAPPENED like that. Things began to flow like a movie montage as thirty days sped by. The triumphal showing. The reviews. The 14 sales. And then Lanson's market tip. Aircraft stocks, and a rise of 30 points in a few weeks.

Came the new bank account, came the dinners and parties, came the big studio near Washington Heights.

Came Nadja.

Nadja was the model for the new portrait. She was a tall, shapely blonde. She had a face that was all slanted eyes, protruding cheekbones, and pouting lips. There was a sensual quality in Nadja that Vane meant to capture for the picture—and for himself.

Of course he knew better. Artists and models—that sort of thing just didn't work out. But Nadja was different. She was necessary to complete his position. The money, the fame, the success; nothing mattered unless Nadja rounded out the picture.

Marie just didn't fit. That was the cold truth, and Vane discovered it immediately. The faithful wife, the patient nagger, the plain woman with the heart of gold—that was a garret role she could fulfil perfectly. But she couldn’t stand up to the part in the galleries, or at the parties, or in the gay Bohemian atmosphere that is maintained by moneyed intelligentsia who are neither gay nor Bohemian.

It wasn’t just a question of looks. Beauty parlors and *couterieres* accomplished miracles. But nothing could alter Marie’s temperament, and she remained a mocking reminder of former failure in this atmosphere of newfound success. A ghost-wife.

Vane talked to her, reasoned with her, argued with her. And then, when Nadja came, he forgot her.

Nadja’s body was a golden flame burning before secret altars, Nadja’s lips were shaped for strange kisses, and her eyes mirrored fugitive visions from the dark side of the moon.

Nadja was a vulgar floosie, too, but Vane ignored that. It didn’t matter, as long as she completed the picture.

So he made her pose for him. During that second month he tried to capture her spirit on canvas and strove valiantly to capture her flesh.

In neither venture was he wholly successful. As an artist, Vane sensed difficulties at every turn. Whether he reproduced her features with photographic fidelity or allowed his brush to express the abstract feeling inherent in her face and body, the results were unsatisfactory. This was strange, for Vane could paint portraits. Yet whatever he did, he ended with a sketch or a half-finished portrait of a vulgar floosie. It wasn’t right, it couldn’t be right. But there it was.

As a man, his difficulties multiplied. Nadja was not responsive to his endearments. She wanted a star sapphire she’d admired, and she thought it would be nice to have a place of her own—you know, with that blond finish on the furniture to match her hair. And she wished Hector would stop pawing her during the sittings. She didn’t think much of artists anyway, they were a bunch of spoiled brats. And did he have to wear that corny cloak?

After such a tongue-lashing from lips that were shaped for strange kisses, Vane would turn in despair to the relief of alcohol.

His love was not blind, merely myopic; and it took liquor to blot Nadja's imperfections from his view.

Weeks blended into months; flying by in a bewildering blur of intoxication.

Then, one afternoon, Vane sat blinking in his studio apartment. The north light was clear, but the room reeled before his gaze. Vane pressed slim fingers to his aching temples and stared.

Something rose before his eyes; something black and crawling; something that writhed and wriggled with thick coils holding a cryptic shape and meaning.

Vane gazed again, and then realized what it was he saw—it was the heavy black-numeral date on his calendar pad.

Without knowing it, his lips moved and made vocal his secret thought.

"Two and a half months gone," he whispered. "That means . . . yes . . . only two weeks more to go. Two more weeks, and then . . ."

Then what?

Vane sat bolt upright. Yes, then what?

INTOXICATION of fame, intoxication of flesh, intoxication of alcohol; all had blotted out that which he now remembered.

Somewhere an old man was waiting, waiting for him to appear and redeem a blue pawn ticket. A ticket for a human soul. He must paint a portrait, quickly, for he had but two weeks left in which to carry out the bargain.

Vane groaned aloud.

Perhaps he was a fool. Perhaps the old man was mad, and coincidence had brought him that for which he had bargained.

And yet, Vane was afraid. He remembered the shop now, and the shadows, and the way the old man's eyes had gloated. He remembered the secret smile, and the pact he had sealed. He knew then that he must take no chances. He must make the painting.

Unless—

There was a wild hope in Vane's heart. Perhaps, if he were to seek out the old man, talk to him reasonably, he might find another solution. It could all be a joke, really. His dissipation had warped his thinking, cost him his nerve. Better to go down there now and bargain.

Vane put on his tattered black cape, incongruous though it was in contrast to his new, expensive suit.

Once again he trudged through mean streets, searching for the shop in the shadows.

Once again the bell tinkled into musty darkness as Vane entered the pawnshop.

He groped his way toward the counters, alone in the gloom save for the host of shadows the bell had summoned. They clustered deeply behind the empty counters and Vane stared into a well of blackness.

Something emerged from the well—something white, grubby, incredibly old. The face of the aged stranger loomed. His eyes slitted curiously as he recognized Vane.

"Back again," he whispered. "Well, Mr. Vane, you're a bit early. Perhaps the punctual arrival of your good fortune urges you to be equally prompt in keeping your end of our agreement."

Vane nodded absently. He noted, with sudden, inexplicable horror, the way the old man's hands had begun to twitch and dart forward over the counter. His fingers were like long yellow talons, and they rasped across the wood outstretched as though avid to grasp, to clutch, to possess.

BEHIND the withered yellow mask of a smile Vane could sense a dreadful hunger that was more than mortal hunger—a yearning, a consuming desire to take that which must not be taken, to receive that which should not be given.

Then the voice came, holding the same hunger, throbbing with the same black thirst.

“The picture, Mr. Vane—where is my picture?”

Choking back his revulsion, Vane shook his head.

“—I haven’t finished it yet. That’s why I came here. I wanted to talk to you about the picture.”

The claws on the counter curled. The slitted eyes blazed upwards. Vane recoiled from the gaze.

“There is nothing to talk about. We made a bargain. I have kept my part of it. You must keep yours. Where is the picture?” Van forced a smile. “Well, it’s a fair question,” he said. “You mentioned that you would like to own one of my paintings, and that’s why I stopped by just now. I’d like to know if you have any choice. Now I was thinking that you might prefer some of my earlier works—a nice landscape, perhaps?” The old man cackled suddenly. It was as though a shriek had ululated up from the Pit.

“Landscape? That’s very clever of you, my dear sir. Very clever, indeed. Landscape!”

“But—”

“Our agreement, Mr. Vane, was for a portrait. A portrait of a human being. One of those portraits you alone can paint; one that captures the *soul.”*

There was no mirth in the voice now. And there was no hope in Vane’s heart.

“The soul,” he whispered. “Why do you keep insisting on the soul?”

“For a very good reason.” The old man was whispering now, but the words thundered in Vane’s ears. “Because I hold your soul in pawn. Unless it is redeemed in two weeks by another soul, I shall claim possession. Full possession.”

“But that means somebody else will be—”

“Mine, eternally,” nodded the creature behind the counter. “Yet a bargain was made. It’s your soul against another’s. Whose portrait you give me does not matter in the least. I will take anything, but you cannot cheat. You must paint faithfully, so that your genius will mirror the essence of the sitter.

"As a matter of fact, Mr. Vane, it's a good bargain for you. Perhaps there is someone you would like to get rid of. Paint me that person's portrait and we'll both be satisfied. Bring me the picture and the ticket and everything will be legally acceptable."

Vane reeled.

"There is no other way?" he murmured, "No other way. I shall expect you in two weeks, then. Good day."

Vane turned and stumbled blindly toward the door.

A cough sounded behind him.

"Oh, by the way. I've been observing your progress, and I'm well satisfied. Just a friendly suggestion, though—don't entangle yourself too deeply with women. They have long been allies of mine."

Another chuckle rasped in Vane's ears as he groped his way out of the shop.

He wandered back through twilit streets.

Now there was nothing more to do. Nothing to do but paint the portrait in which the soul of the sitter must shine. He must give the portrait to the old man, give him the soul that he thirsted for with a thirst older than earth.

Who would sit for the portrait?

He couldn't sacrifice any of his completed paintings. They were all in the hands of the dealers, and meant money. Besides, an innocent person must not be delivered into the hands of that black being masquerading as a pawnshop proprietor.

No, there must be a new subject. As the old man had hinted, it would be best if the subject's removal benefited Vane.

Yes, that was it. He had no doubts as to what would happen if he delivered the picture—the person it represented would vanish from earth.

Who would it be?

For a wild moment, Vane toyed with the notion of taking Nadja's portrait. He remembered the latest oil he'd attempted—remembered the sensual mouth, the greedy eyes, the feral brow. It was a mirror held to Nadja's selfish soul, no doubt of that.

But he couldn't give her up. No matter what she was, he wanted her. If only his wife weren't in the way, he'd have her forever.

If only his wife—

Vane blinked, shook his head.

He hastened up the stairs to the apartment door, flung it open. His wife was resting in the bedroom. He stalked across the floor, coughed.

"Marie!" he called. "Would you come here for just a moment? I think I have a marvelous idea."

III

MARIE was thrilled to think that Hector Vane had chosen to paint her portrait Her humble love and gratitude shone from her face as she sat; it would have taken a much more clumsy artist to avoid reflecting her soul as it poured forth in her adoring smile.

Hector Vane was not clumsy. His strokes were swift and sure. A few sittings and he had completed preliminary sketching; then he fell to painting. A week sped by. Vane realized that he was creating his masterpiece. The work flowed forward. Marie was never tired; her cooperation was endless.

On the ninth day the sittings ended, and Vane stood back and gazed upon Marie; *his* Marie, faithful to life.

He had done it.

The next two days he spent in finishing the background. Then and only then did he pause to rest, sleeping the clock around for the first time in twelve days.

Marie, after one look at the finished portrait, burst into tears of happiness.

Vane couldn't meet her eyes. He turned away, and remorse burned within him. Still, it had to be.

During that week he'd neglected Nadja. Now he wanted to see her. She'd called several times.

He turned to his wife, handed her a roll of bills.

"Darling, this has been a great strain. You'll never know how much I appreciate what you've done for me. Now I want you to run downtown and buy yourself something—hats, dresses, whatever you like."

"But Hector—"

"Run along now. Please. I want you to."

Vane turned away. He couldn't stand seeing her, seeing the light of love in her eyes.

Marie dressed, left the apartment. And Vane called Nadja.

Her voice, over the telephone, was querulous.

"Where have you been? I've waited for over a week and you haven't called. I know you'll have some miserable excuse to make, but I don't want to hear it."

"Come over and I'll show you my excuse," Vane exulted.

An hour later she arrived. Vane ushered her in with a grin of exultation.

"I *have* been busy," he said. "But I won't tell you why. I'll let you see for yourself, instead."

He led her to the portrait on the easel near the window, then pulled the drapes aside.

Nadja stared.

"What do you think? Isn't it the best thing I've done? Look at the life, the coloring."

Nadja turned. On her face was written a loathing Vane was never to forget.

"So that's it," she gasped. "You painted her. You've never been able to paint me decently, but you painted her. You painted her because you love her, and always have loved her."

"Nadja, I—"

She was gone. The slam of the door cut Vane's protest off in midair.

Vane stared at the portrait. She had said he loved his wife. And he didn't. Still, she had gone away believing it, and now he was alone. It wasn't working out.

So Vane did what he had learned to do when things weren't working out. He left the apartment and got drunk.

IT WAS late when he returned.

Marie met him on the outer stairs. There was an odor in the air, and a look on her face. He sensed the truth as he gazed into her tear-filled eyes.

"That woman—the clerk downstairs says she came here this afternoon after you left. He let her in, she said it was all right. And then she set fire to—oh, Hector!"

Vane rushed into the apartment, stared at ruined walls, charred furnishings. And he stared at the blackened heap of ashes that had once been his precious paintings.

Nadja had taken her revenge.

Marie's portrait was gone. And so were all the rest, all the oils he still had on hand in the studio. Burned to ashes. His last work was gone, and with it, his last hope.

Grimly he recalled a similar incident in a book. "Of Human Bondage," wasn't it?

In this case, the deed was condemning him to bondage that wasn't human.

Tomorrow was the thirteenth day. And the old man had whispered, "Bring me my portrait."

Well, there was no portrait for the old man. There was nothing. On the fourteenth day he would go to the shop and the old man would say, "Where is my portrait?" and—

Wait a minute!

The thought that crossed Vane's mind was diabolical. Yes, it might well be so described—for it was diabolically inspired.

He turned to Marie.

"Go and get me some fresh canvas," he commanded.

"Now? But your work—it's ruined!" she protested.

"Exactly," Vane whispered. "That's why I must start over again immediately. Get me the canvas—I'm going to paint."

"But what would you paint at this hour?"

Vane shrugged, turned his eyes away.

"I cannot tell you," he declared.

"But you have no one to pose for you. Where is your model?"

Vane tapped his forehead.

"Here," he murmured. "My model is here. Now hurry. I've only twenty-four hours. Twenty-four hours for a masterpiece!"

TWENTY-FOUR hours for a master piece. . . .

Vane worked all alone in the studio worked as night faded into dawn, dawn burst into daylight, daylight blended into twilight, and twilight fled before the blackness of another night.

Marie did not disturb him, nor did she seek to discover what shaped itself on the canvas before him. Twice during the day she tiptoed in to bring sandwiches and coffee. He dismissed her with the food untouched.

She did not attempt to restore the ravaged room, but crept silently through the house while Vane painted furiously. He stared raptly at the canvas on the easel, and though his eyes were trance-like in their fixity, his cunning fingers moved in bold, sure strokes.

It was dawn of the fourteenth day, the fatal day. Vane stepped back, gazed at the completed portrait; shuddered, and drew a cloth over the undried picture.

Then he moaned and collapsed.

Marie half-supported, half-dragged him in to the bed. She sat there watching throughout the morning as he slept. In the afternoon he stirred long enough to take hot soup, then collapsed once more. But his eyes were sane again, and Marie did not fear.

She smiled at his sleeping face, smiled to see that it no longer bore the ravages of hidden care or dread.

Yes, it was safe. She could leave now. It was dark when she returned, carrying a package under her arm. She put it down in the parlor and then heard Vane stirring on the bed.

"Marie!" he called. "Where are you?"

"Here, darling."

She entered the bedroom. Vane was sitting bolt upright. His face was carefree no longer.

"Where were you? Why didn't you wake me?"

"I went out. You needed rest."

"But my appointment—"

"What appointment?"

"I must deliver this new painting today."

"Deliver it? To whom?"

"Never mind."

Vane was fumbling for his clothes, dressing in frantic haste.

"I'll be too late," he muttered.

Marie laid a hand on his shoulder. "What is it, dear? What's troubling you? Is it—is it that—woman?"

Vane turned, smiled.

"No, Marie. That woman is out of my life, out of our lives, forever. Thank God she did what she did. *Re* told me that women were *his* allies. Now I believe it. When I think of what I planned to do—"

He kissed her, swiftly, unexpectedly.

"You've stood by me, at any rate. Even when you didn't understand, you were faithful and kind. Now, when I've dealt with *him,* we shall be happy."

Marie didn't understand what he was saying. But she understood his kiss, and was grateful. She smiled up at him, and then—The bell rang, sharply.

Marie went to the door.

"There's a visitor for you, dear," she called.

"Visitor? Who is it?"

Marie came into the bedroom immediately.

"I don't know," she breathed. "He won't give me his name. Says he has business with you. An old man—"

Vane stalked out into the parlor.

There was a shadow in the hallway. The shadow moved, emerged into the parlor.

It was the ivory-skulled ancient from the pawnshop.

"Good evening, Mr. Vane," he murmured. "If the mountain will not come to—ah—Mahomet, then—ah—Mahomet must come to the mountain."

"I was detained."

"I accept your apology. But now, to business. I have come for my portrait. Is it ready?"

Vane was thankful for the dim light. Marie couldn't read the avid lust that flickered in those ageless, evil eyes.

He turned toward the window. "Yes, it's ready," he muttered.

"Excellent. And may I—see it?"

"You may. I'll snap on a light. Lift the covering on that easel if you will."

The light snapped on. A bony finger stabbed convulsively toward the cloth, tore it aside. The portrait leaped into view.

The old man stared into the bony-painted countenance of *himself.*

PAINTED from an image seared on memory, line for line . . . it was a living death's head. And yet it captured the foulness, the charnel horror that might be called a soul.

"You fool! What trickery is this?"

The words welled forth and Marie shuddered. But Vane laughed.

“You asked for a portrait of any living person. *Any* living person. And you said to me, ‘Give me my portrait.’ The words inspired me. Here, then, is *your* portrait. Of you. Don’t deny that I’ve painted your soul. It’s leering right out of the canvas at you. Take your hideous soul and be gone, then. I’ve given the devil his due.” The old man stared, then shrugged.

“I didn’t believe it possible,” he said. “That a mortal should trick me thus—”

“You admit you’re outwitted, then?” Vane shouted in triumph. “You admit it?”

“Yes.”

“Thank you for the tribute. I’m sure it was wrung from your lips. Next time you’ll be a little more cautious. You thought you had me, didn’t you? Thought I’d sell my own soul or that of my wife, eh? You warned me against women—well a woman saved me at the end. She burned the other portraits and I did this. You’ve done me a great service.”

Vane took Marie in his arms and stared at the convulsed mouth of the ancient one.

“Yes, a great service,” he repeated. “Not only have I outwitted you and gained fame and power—you have served to bring me and my wife together again. At last I know the true values. Ironic as it may be, you have been the cause of my spiritual regeneration. Makes you wince, doesn’t it?”

Vane chuckled again. “All right, what are you waiting for? There’s your portrait. Take it.”

The fiendish countenance glaring out of the canvas was matched by its living counterpart.

The old man grasped the easel, then he turned.

“By the way,” he said, “one little detail remains. In order to legalize this transaction, I should like you to return to me that little blue pawn-ticket I gave you.”

“All right. And then, off with you.”

Vane re-entered the bedroom.

"Marie!" he called. "Where did you hang my cloak? There's a ticket in the pocket, inside—"

Marie went to the doorway.

"I've a surprise for you," she said. "While you slept I went out and bought you something."

She opened the package she had carried in.

"A new cloak," she smiled. "That old one was so shabby, and I thought you deserved—

"Marie! *What did you do with my old cloak?"*

"I—I—burned it—"

"Burned it?"

The old man appeared in the doorway. "Yes," he whispered. "Women, as I have said before, are often my allies. And your cloak is gone. The ticket is gone, too. And only the ticket redeems you from me."

"But—"

The room had grown very still. The old man glided forward. He pushed Marie aside and closed the door.

"You have done your part," he croaked. "You burned it. And now—"

Vane retreated to the wall. As the old man advanced, his claws began to work convulsively. His eyes flamed. Vane tried to scream as the claws came up and the eyes came down.

There wasn't a scream left in him.

He knew now that the cloak wasn't the only thing destined to burn.

The Bat Is My Brother

Have you ever wondered why there are not more vampires—for every victim of a vampire becomes one in turn!

IT BEGAN in twilight—a twilight I could not see.

My eyes opened on darkness, and for a moment I wondered if I were still asleep and dreaming. Then I slid my hands down and felt the cheap lining of the casket, and I knew that this nightmare was real.

I wanted to scream, but who can hear screams through six feet of earth above a grave?

Better to save my breath and try to save my sanity. I fell back, and the darkness rose all around me. The darkness, the cold, clammy darkness of death.

I could not remember how I had come here, or what hideous error had brought about my premature interment. All I knew was that I lived—but unless I managed to escape, I would soon be in a condition horribly appropriate to my surroundings.

Then began that which I dare not remember in detail. The splintering of wood, the burrowing struggle through loosely-packed grave earth; the gasping hysteria accompanying my clawing, suffocated progress to the sane surface of the world above.

It is enough that I finally emerged. I can only thank poverty for my deliverance—the poverty which had placed me in a flimsy, unsealed coffin and a pauper's shallow grave.

Clotted with sticky clay, drenched with cold perspiration, racked by utter revulsion, I crawled forth from betwixt the gaping jaws of death.

Dusk crept between the tombstones, and somewhere to my left the moon leered down to watch the shadowy legions that conquered in the name of Night.

The moon saw me, and a wind whispered furtively to brooding trees, and the trees bent low to mumble a message to all those sleeping below their shade.

I grew restless beneath the moon's glaring eye, and I wanted to leave this spot before the trees had told my secret to the nameless, numberless dead.

Despite my desire, several minutes passed before I summoned strength to stand erect, without trembling.

Then I breathed deeply of fog and faint putridity; breathed, and turned away along the path.

It was at that moment the figure appeared.

It glided like a shadow from the deeper shadows haunting the trees, and as the moonlight fell upon a human face I felt my heart surge in exultation.

I raced towards the waiting figure, words choking in my throat as they fought for prior utterance.

"You'll help me, won't you?" I babbled. "You can see . . . they buried me down there . . . I was trapped . . . alive in the grave . . . out now . . . you'll understand . . .

I can't remember how it began, but . . . you'll help me?"

A head moved in silent assent.

I halted, regaining composure, striving for coherency.

"This is awkward," I said, more quietly. "I've really no right to ask you for assistance. I don't even know who you are."

The voice from the shadows was only a whisper, but each word thundered in my brain.

"I am a vampire," said the stranger. *Madness.* I turned to flee, but the voice pursued me.

"Yes, I am a vampire," he said. "And . . . *so are you!"*

II

I MUST have fainted, then. I must have fainted, and he must have carried me out of the cemetery, for when I opened my eyes once more I lay on a sofa in his house.

The panelled walls loomed high, and shadows crawled across the ceiling beyond the candlelight. I sat up, blinked, and stared at the stranger who bent over me.

I could see him now, and I wondered. He was of medium height, gray-haired, cleanshaven, and clad discreetly in a dark business suit. At first glance he appeared normal enough.

As his face glided towards me, I stared closer, trying to pierce the veil of his seeming sanity, striving to see the madness beneath the prosaic exterior of dress and flesh.

I stared and saw that which was worse than any madness.

At close glance his countenance was cruelly illumined by the light. I saw the waxen pallor of his skin, and what was worse than that, the peculiar corrugation. For his entire face and throat was covered by a web of tiny wrinkles, and when he smiled it was with a mummy's grin.

Yes, his face was white and wrinkled; white, wrinkled, and long dead. Only his lips and eyes were alive, and they were red . . . *too* red. A face as white as corpse-flesh, holding lips and eyes as red as blood.

He smelled *musty.*

All these impressions came to me before he spoke. His voice was like the rustle of the wind through a mortuary wreath.

"You are awake? It is well."

"Where am I? And who are you?" I asked the questions but dreaded an answer. The answer came.

“You are in my house. You will be safe here, I think. As for me, I am your guardian.”

“Guardian?”

He smiled. I saw his teeth. Such teeth I had never seen, save in the maw of a carnivorous beast. And yet—wasn’t *that* the answer?

“You are bewildered, my friend. Understandably so. And that is why you need a guardian. Until you learn the ways of your new life, I shall protect you.” He nodded. “Yes, Graham Keene, I shall protect you.”

“Graham Keene.”

It was my name. I knew it *now*. But how did *he* know it?

“In the name of mercy,” I groaned, “tell me what has happened to me!”

He patted my shoulder. Even through the cloth I could feel the icy weight of his pallid fingers. They crawled across my neck like worms, like wriggling white worms—

“You must be calm,” he told me. “This is a great shock, I know. Your confusion is understandable. If you will just relax a bit and listen, I think I can explain everything.”

I listened.

“To begin with, you must accept certain obvious facts. The first being—that you are a vampire.”

“But—”

He pursed his lips, his *too* red lips, and nodded.

“There is no doubt about it, unfortunately. Can you tell me how you happened to be emerging from a grave?”

“No. I don’t remember. I must have suffered a cataleptic seizure. The shock gave me partial amnesia. But it will come back to me. I’m all right, I must be.”

The words rang hollowly even as they gushed from my throat.

“Perhaps. But I think not.” He sighed and pointed.

“I can prove your condition to you easily enough. Would you be so good as to tell me what you see behind you, Graham Keene?”

“Behind me?”

“Yes, on the wall.”

I stared.

“I don’t see anything.”

“Exactly.”

“But—”

“Where is your shadow?”

I LOOKED again. There was no shadow, no silhouette. For a moment my sanity wavered. Then I stared at him. “You have no shadow either,” I exclaimed, triumphantly. “What does that prove?”

“That I am a vampire,” he said, easily. “And so are you.”

“Nonsense. It’s just a trick of the light,” I scoffed.

“Still skeptical? Then explain this optical illusion.” A bony hand proffered a shining object.

I took it, held it. It was a simple pocket mirror.

“Look.”

I looked.

The mirror dropped from my fingers and splintered on the floor.

“There’s no reflection!” I murmured. “Vampires have no reflections.” His voice was soft. He might have been reasoning with a child.

“If you still doubt,” he persisted, “I advise you to feel your pulse. Try to detect a heartbeat.”

Have you ever listened for the faint voice of hope to sound within you . . . knowing that it alone can save you? Have you ever listened and heard nothing? Nothing but the silence of *death?*

I knew it then, past all doubt. I was of the Undead . . . the Undead who cast no shadows, whose images do not reflect in mirrors, whose hearts are forever stilled, but whose bodies live on—live, and walk abroad, and take nourishment.

Nourishment!

I thought of my companion’s red lips and his pointed teeth. I thought of the light blazing in his eyes. A light of hunger. Hunger for what?

How soon must I share that hunger? He must have sensed the question, for he began to speak once more.

“You are satisfied that I speak the truth, I see. That is well. You must accept your condition and then prepare to make the necessary adjustments. For there is much you have to learn in order to face the centuries to come.

“To begin with, I will tell you that many of the common superstitions about—people like us—are false.”

He might have been discussing the weather, for all the emotion his face betrayed. But I could not restrain a shudder of revulsion at his words.

“They say we cannot abide garlic. That is a lie. They say we cannot cross running water. Another lie. They say that we must lie by day in the earth of our own graves. That’s picturesque nonsense.

“These things, and these alone, are true. Remember them, for they are important to your future. We must sleep by day and rise only at sunset. At dawn an overpowering lethargy bedrugs our senses, and we fall into a coma until dusk. We need not sleep in coffins—that is sheer melodrama, I assure you!—but it is best to sleep in darkness, and away from any chance of discovery by men.

“I do not know why this is so, any more than I can account for other phenomena relative to the disease. For vampirism is a disease, you know.”

HE SMILED when he said it. I didn’t smile. I groaned.

“Yes, it is a disease. Contagious, of course, and transmissible in the classic manner, through a bite. Like rabies. What reanimates the body after death no one can say. And why it is necessary to take certain forms of nourishment to sustain existence, I do not know. The daylight coma is a more easily classified medical phenomenon. Perhaps an allergy to the direct actinic rays of the sun.

“I am interested in these matters, and I have studied them.

"In the centuries to come I shall endeavor to do some intensive research on the problem. It will prove valuable in perpetuating my existence, and yours."

The voice was harsher now. The slim fingers clawed the air in excitement.

"Think of that, for a moment, Graham Keene," he whispered. "Forget your morbid superstitious dread of this condition and look at the reality.

"Picture yourself as you were before you awoke at sunset. Suppose you had remained there, inside that coffin, nevermore to awaken! Dead—dead for all eternity!"

He shook his head. "You can thank your condition for an escape. It gives you a new life, not just for a few paltry years, but for centuries. Perhaps—forever!

"Yes, think and give thanks! You need never die, now. Weapons cannot harm you, nor disease, nor the workings of age. You are immortal—and I shall show you how to live like a god!"

He sobered. "But that can wait. First we must attend to our needs. I want you to listen carefully now. Put aside your silly prejudices and hear me out. I will tell you that which needs be told regarding our nourishment.

"It isn't easy, you know.

"There aren't any schools you can attend to learn what to do. There are no correspondence courses or books of helpful information. You must learn everything through your own efforts. Everything.

"Even so simple and vital a matter as biting the neck—using the incisors properly—is entirely a matter of personal judgment.

"Take that little detail, just as an example. You must choose the classic trinity to begin with—the time, the place, and the girl.

"When you are ready, you must pretend that you are about to kiss her. Both hands go under her ears. That is important, to hold her neck steady, and at the proper angle.

"You must keep smiling all the while, without allowing a betjrayal of intent to creep into your features or your eyes. Then you bend your head.

You kiss her throat. If she relaxes, you turn your mouth to the base of her neck, open it swiftly and place the incisors in position.

"Simultaneously—it *must* be simultaneously—you bring your left hand up to cover her mouth. The right hand must find, seize, and pinion her hands behind her back. No need to hold her throat now. The teeth are doing that. Then, and only then, will instinct come to your aid. It must come then, because once you begin, all else is swept away in the red, swirling blur of fulfillment."

I cannot describe his intonation as he spoke, or the unconscious pantomime which accompanied the incredible instructions. But it is simple to name the look that came into his eyes.

Hunger.

"Come, Graham Keene," he whispered. "We must go now."

"Go? Where?"

"To dine," he told me. "To dine!"

III

HE LED me from the house, and down a garden pathway through a hedge.

The moon was high, and as we walked along a windswept bluff, flying figures spun a moving web across the moon's bright face. My companion shrugged.

"Bats," he said. And smiled.

"They say that—we—have the power of changing shape. That we become bats, or wolves. Alas, it's only another superstition. Would that it were true? For then our life would be easy. As it is, the search for sustenance in mortal form is hard. But you will soon understand."

I drew back. His hand rested on my shoulder in cold command.

"Where are you taking me?" I asked.

"To food."

Irresolution left me. I emerged from nightmare, shook myself into sanity.

"No—I won't!" I murmured. "I can't—"

"You must," he told me. "Do you want to go back to the grave?"

"I'd rather," I whispered. "Yes, I'd rather die."

His teeth gleamed in the moonlight. "That's the pity of it," he said. "You can't die. You'll weaken without sustenance, yes. And you will appear to be dead. Then, whoever finds you will put you in the grave.

"But you'll be alive down there. How would you like to lie there undying in the darkness . . . writhing as you decay . . . suffering the torments of red hunger as you suffer the pangs of dissolution?

"How long do you think that goes on? How long before the brain itself is rotted away? How long must one endure the charnal consciousness of the devouring worm? Does the very dust still billow in agony?" His voice held horror.

"That is the fate you escaped. But it is still the fate that awaits you unless you dine with me.

"Besides, it isn't something to avoid, believe me. And I am sure, my friend, that you already feel the pangs of—appetite."

I could not, dared not answer.

For it was true. Even as he spoke, I felt hunger. A hunger greater than any I had ever known. Call it a craving, call it a desire—call it lust. I felt it, gnawing deep within me. Repugnance was nibbled away by the terrible teeth of growing need.

"Follow me," he said, and I followed. Followed along the bluff and down a lonely country road.

We halted abruptly on the highway. A blazing neon sign winked incongruously ahead.

I read the absurd legend.

"DANNY'S DRIVE-IN."

Even as I watched, the sign blinked out. "Right," whispered my guardian. "It's closing time. They will be leaving now."

"Who?"

"Mr. Danny and his waitress. She serves customers in their cars. They always leave together, I know. They are locking up for the night now. Come along and do as you are told."

I followed him down the road. His feet crunched gravel as he stalked towards the now darkened drive-in stand. My stride quickened in excitement. I moved forward as though pushed by a gigantic hand. The hand of hunger—

He reached the side door of the shack. His fingers rasped the screen.

An irritable voice sounded.

"What do you want? We're closing."

"Can't you serve any more customers?"

"Nah. Too late. Go away."

"But we're very hungry."

I almost grinned. Yes, we were *very* hungry.

"Beat it!" Danny was in no mood for hospitality.

"Can't we get any tiling?"

Danny was silent for a moment. He was evidently debating the point. Then he called to someone inside the stand.

"Marie! Couple customers outside. Think we can fix 'em up in a hurry?"

"Oh, I guess so." The girl's voice was soft, complaisant. Would she be soft and complaisant, too?

"Open up. You guys mind eating outside?"

"Not at all."

"Open the door, Marie."

Marie's high heels clattered across the wooden floor. She opened the screen door, blinked out into the darkness.

My companion stepped inside the doorway. Abruptly, he pushed the girl forward.

"Now!" he rasped.

I lunged at her in darkness. I didn't remember his instructions about smiling at her, or placing my hands beneath her ears. All I knew was that her throat was white, and smooth, except where a tiny vein throbbed in her neck.

I wanted to touch her neck there with my fingers—with my mouth—with my teeth.

So I dragged her into the darkness, and my hands were over her mouth, and I could hear her heels scraping through the gravel as I pulled her along. From inside the shack I heard a single long moan, and then nothing.

Nothing . . . except the rushing white blur of her neck, as my face swooped towards the throbbing vein. . . .

IV

IT WAS cold in the cellar—cold, and dark.

I stirred uneasily on my couch and my eyes blinked open on blackness. I strained to see, raising myself to a sitting position as the chill slowly faded from my bones.

I felt sluggish, heavy with reptilian contentment. I yawned, trying to grasp a thread of memory from the red haze cloaking my thoughts.

Where was I? How had I come here? What had I been doing?

I yawned. One hand went to my mouth. My lips were caked with a dry, flaking substance.

I felt it—and then remembrance flooded me.

Last night, at the drive-in, I had feasted. And then—

“No!” I gasped.

“You have slept? Good.”

My host stood before me. I arose hastily and confronted him.

“Tell me it isn’t true,” I pleaded. “Tell me I was dreaming.”

“You were,” he answered. “When I came out of the shack you lay under the trees, unconscious. I carried you home before dawn and placed you here to rest. You have been dreaming from sunrise to sunset, Graham Keene.”

“But last night—?”

"Was real."

"You mean I took that girl and—?"

"Exactly." He nodded. "But come, we must go upstairs and talk. There are certain questions I must ask."

We climbed the stairs slowly and emerged on ground level. Now I could observe my surrounding with a more objective eye. This house was large, and old. Although completely furnished, it looked somehow untenanted. It was as though nobody had lived here for a long time.

Then I remembered who my host was, and what he was. I smiled grimly. It was true. Nobody was *living* in this house now.

Dust lay thickly everywhere, and the spiders had spun patterns of decay in the corners. Shades were drawn against the darkness, but still it crept in through the cracked walls. For darkness and decay belonged here.

We entered the study where I had awakened last night, and as I was seated, my guardian cocked his head towards me in an attitude of inquiry.

"Let us speak frankly," he began. "I want you to answer an important question."

"Yes?"

"What did you do with her?"

"Her?"

"That girl—last night. What did you do with her body?"

I put my hands to my temples. "It was all a blur. I can't seem to remember."

His head darted towards me, eyes blazing. "I'll tell you what you did with her," he rasped. "You threw her body down the well. I saw it floating there."

"Yes," I groaned. "I remember now."

"You fool—why did you do that?"

"I wanted to hide it. . . . I thought they'd never know—"

"You *thought!"* Scorn weighted his voice. "You didn't think for an instant. Don't you see, now she will never rise?"

"Rise?"

"Yes, as you rose. Rise to become one of us."

"But I don't understand."

"That is painfully evident." He paced the floor, then wheeled towards me.

"I see that I shall have to explain certain things to you. Perhaps you are not to blame, because you don't realize the situation. Come with me."

He beckoned. I followed. We walked down the hall, entered a large, shelf-lined room. It was obviously a library. He lit a lamp, halted.

"Take a look around," he invited. "See what you make of it, my friend."

I SCANNED the titles on the shelves—titles stamped in gold on thick, handsome bindings; titles worn to illegibility on ancient, raddled leather. The latest in scientific and medical treatises stood on these shelves, flanked by age-encrusted incunabula.

Modern volumes dealt with psycopathology. The ancient lore was frankly concerned with black magic.

"Here is the collection," he whispered. "Here is gathered together all that is known, all that has ever been written about—us."

"A library on vampirism?"

"Yes. It took me decades to assemble it completely."

"But why?"

"Because knowledge is power. And it is power I seek."

Suddenly a resurgent sanity impelled me. I shook off the nightmare enveloping me and sought an objective viewpoint. A question crept into my mind, and I did not try to hold it back.

"Just who are you, anyway?" I demanded. "What is your name?"

My host smiled.

"I have no name," he answered.

"No name?"

"Unfortunate, is it not? When I was buried, there were no loving friends, apparently, to erect a tombstone. And when I arose from the grave, I had no mentor to guide me back to a memory of the past. Those were barbaric times in the East Prussia of 1777."

"You died in 1777?" I muttered.

"To the best of my knowledge," he retorted, bowing slightly in mock deprecation. "And so it is that my real name is unknown. Apparently I perished far from my native heath, for diligent research on my part has failed to uncover my paternity, or any contemporaries who recognized me at the time of my—er—resurrection.

"And so it is that I have no name; or rather, I have many pseudonyms. During the past sixteen decades I have traveled far, and have been all things to all men. I shall not endeavor to recite my history.

"It is enough to say that slowly, gradually, I have grown wise in the ways of the world. And I have evolved a plan. To this end I have amassed wealth, and brought together a library as a basis for my operations.

"Those operations I propose will interest you. And they will explain my anger when I think of you throwing the girl's body into the well."

He sat down. I followed suit. I felt anticipation crawling along my spine. He was about to reveal something—something I wanted to hear, yet dreaded. The revelation came, slyly, slowly.

"Have you ever wondered," he began, "why there are not more vampires in the world?"

"What do you mean?"

"Consider. It is said, and it is true, that every victim of a vampire becomes a vampire in turn. The new vampire finds other victims. Isn't it reasonable to suppose, therefore, that in a short time—through sheer mathematical progression—the virus of vampirism would run epidemic throughout the world? In other words, have you ever wondered why the world is not filled with vampires by this time?"

"Well, yes—I never thought of it that way. What is the reason?" I asked.

He glared and raised a white finger. It stabbed forward at my chest—a rapier of accusation.

“Because of fools like you. Fools who cast their victims into wells; fools whose victims are buried in sealed coffins, who hide the bodies or dismember them so no one would suspect their work.

“As a result, few new recruits join the ranks. And the old ones—myself included—are constantly subject to the ravages of the centuries. We eventually disintegrate, you know. To my knowledge, there are only a few hundred vampires today. And yet, if new victims all were given the opportunity to rise—we would have a vampire army within a year. Within three years there would be millions of vampires! Within ten years we could rule earth!

“Can’t you see that? If there was no cremation, no careless disposal of bodies, no bungling, we could end our hunted existence as creatures of the night—brothers of the bat! No longer would we be a legendary, cowering minority, living each a law unto himself!

“All that is needed is a plan. And I—I have evolved that plan!”

His voice rose. So did the hairs upon my neck. I was beginning to comprehend, now—

“Suppose we started with the humble instruments of destiny,” he suggested. “Those forlorn, unnoticed, ignorant little old men—night watchmen of graveyards and cemeteries.”

A SMILE creased his corpse-like countenance. “Suppose we eliminated them? Took over their jobs? Put vampires in their places—men who would go to the fresh graves and dig up the bodies of each victim they had bitten while those bodies were still warm and pulsing and undecayed?

“We could save the lives of most of the recruits we make. Reasonable, is it not?” To me it was madness, but I nodded. “Suppose that we made victims of those attendants? Then carried them off, nursed them back to reanimation, and allowed them to resume their posts as our allies? They work only at night—no one would know.

“Just a little suggestion, but so obvious! And it would mean so much!”

His smile broadened.

“All that it takes is organization on our part. I know many of my brethren. It is my desire soon to call them together and present this plan. Never before have we worked cooperatively, but when I show them the possibilities, they cannot fail to respond.

“Can you imagine it? An earth which we could control and terrorize—a world in which human beings become our property, our cattle?

“It is so simple, really. Sweep aside your foolish concepts of *Dracula* and the other superstitious confectionery that masquerades in the public mind as an authentic picture. I admit that we are—unearthly. But there is no reason for us to be stupid, impractical figures of fantasy. There is more for us than crawling around in black cloaks and recoiling at the sight of crucifixes!

“After all, we are a life-form, a race of our own. Biology has not yet recognized us, but we exist. Our morphology and metabolism has not been evaluated or charted; our actions and reactions never studied. But we exist. And we are superior to ordinary mortals. Let us assert this superiority! Plain human cunning, coupled with our super-normal powers, can create for us a mastery over all living things. For we are greater than Life—we are Life-in-Death!”

I half-rose. He waved me back, breathlessly.

“Suppose we band together and make plans? Suppose we go about, first of all, selecting our victims on the basis of value to our ranks? Instead of regarding them as sources of easy nourishment, let’s think in terms of an army seeking recruits. Let us select keen brains, youthfully strong bodies. Let us prey upon the best earth has to offer. Then we shall wax strong and no man shall stay our hand—or teeth.”

He crouched like a black spider, spinning his web of words to enmesh my sanity. His eyes glittered. It was absurd somehow to see this creature of superstitious terror calmly creating a super-dictatorship of the dead.

And yet, I was one of them. It was real. The nameless one would do it, too.

"Have you ever stopped to wonder why I tell you this? Have you ever stopped to wonder why you are my confidant in this venture?" he purred.

I shook my head.

"It is because you are young. I am old. For years I have labored only to this end. Now that my plans are perfected, I need assistance. Youth, a modern viewpoint. I know of you, Graham Keene. I watched you before . . . you became one of us. You were selected for this purpose."

"Selected?" Suddenly it hit home. I fought down a stranglehold gasp as I asked the question. "Then you know who—did this to me? *You know who bit me?"* Rotting fangs gaped in a smile. He nodded slowly.

"Of course," he whispered. "Why—*I* did!"

V

HE WAS probably prepared for anything except the calmness with which I accepted this revelation.

Certainly he was pleased. And the rest of that night, and all the next night, were spent in going over the plans, in detail. I learned that he had not yet communicated with—others—in regard to his ideas.

A meeting would be arranged soon. Then we would begin the campaign. As he said, the times were ripe. War, a world in unrest—we would be able to move unchallenged and find unusual opportunities.

I agreed. I was even able to add certain suggestions as to detail. He was pleased with my cooperation.

Then, on the third night, came hunger. He offered to serve as my guide, but I brushed him aside.

"Let me try my own wings," I smiled. "After all, I must learn sooner or later. And I promise you, I shall be very careful. This time I will see to it that the body remains intact. Then I shall discover the place of burial and we can perform an experiment. I will select a likely recruit, we shall go forth to open the grave, and thus will we test our plan in miniature."

He fairly beamed at that. And I went forth that night, alone.

I returned only as dawn welled out of the eastern sky—returned to slumber through the day.

That night we spoke, and I confided my success to his eager ears.

“Sidney J. Garrat is the name,” I said. “A college professor, about 45. I found him wandering along a path near the campus. The trees form a dark, deserted avenue. He offered no resistance. I left him there. I don’t think they’ll bother with an autopsy—for the marks on his throat are invisible and he is known to have a weak heart.

“He lived alone without relatives. He had no money. That means a wooden coffin and quick burial at Everest tomorrow. Tomorrow night we can go there.”

My companion nodded.

“You have done well,” he said.

We spent the remainder of the night in perfecting our plans. We would go to Everest, locate the night watchman and put him out of the way, then seek the new grave of Professor Garrat.

And so it was that we re-entered the cemetery on the following evening.

Once again a midnight moon glared from the Cyclopean socket of the sky. Once more the wind whispered to us on our way, and the trees bowed in black obeisance along the path.

We crept up to the shanty of the graveyard watchman and peered through the window at his stooping figure.

“I’ll knock,” I suggested. “Then when he comes to the door—”

My companion shook his gray head. “No teeth,” he whispered. “The man is old, useless to us. I shall resort to more mundane weapons.”

I shrugged. Then I knocked. The old man opened the door, blinked out at me with rheumy eyes.

“What is it?” he wheezed, querulously. “Ain’t nobuddy suppose tuh be in uh cemetery this time uh night—”

Lean fingers closed around his windpipe. My companion dragged him forth towards nearby shrubbery. His free arm rose and fell, and a silver arc stabbed down. He had used a knife.

Then we made haste along the path, before the scent of blood could divert us from our mission—and far head, on the hillside dedicated to the last slumbers of Poverty, I saw the raw, gaping edges of a new-made grave.

He ran back to the hut, then, and procured the spades we had neglected in our haste. The moon was our lantern and the grisly work began amidst a whistling wind.

No one saw us, no one heard us, for only empty eyes and shattered ears lay far beneath the earth.

We toiled, and then we stooped and tugged. The grave was deep, very deep. At the bottom the coffin lay, and we dragged forth the pine box.

“Terrible job,” confided my companion.

“Not a professionally dug grave at all, in my opinion. Wasn’t filled in right. And this coffin is pine, but very thick. He’d never claw his own way out. Couldn’t break through the boards. And the earth was packed too tightly. Why would they waste so much time on a pauper’s grave?”

“Doesn’t matter,” I whispered. “Let’s open it up. If he’s revived, we must hurry.” We’d brought a hammer from the caretaker’s shanty, too, and he went down into the pit itself to pry the nails free. I heard the board covering move, and peered down over the edge of the grave.

He bent forward, stooping to peer into the coffin, his face a mask of livid death in the moonlight. I heard him hiss.

“Why—the coffin is empty!” he gasped. “Not for long!”

I drew the wrench from my pocket, raised it, brought it down with every ounce of strength I possessed until it shattered through his skull.

AND then I leaped down into the pit and pressed the writhing, mewing shape down into the coffin, slammed the lid on, and drove the heavy nails into place.

I could hear his whimperings rise to muffled screams, but the screams grew faint as I began to heap the clods of earth upon the coffin-lid.

I worked and panted there until no sound came from the coffin below. I packed the earth down hard—harder than I had last night when I dug the grave in the first place.

And then, at last, the task was over.

He lay there, the nameless one, the deathless one; lay six feet underground in a stout wooden coffin.

He could not claw his way free, I knew. And even if he did, I'd pressed him into his wooden prison face down. He'd claw his way to hell, not to earth.

But he was past escape. Let him lie there, as he had described it to me—not dead, not alive. Let him be conscious as he decayed, and as the wood decayed and the worms crawled in to feast. Let him suffer until the maggots at last reached his corrupt brain and ate away his evil consciousness.

I could have driven a stake through his heart. But his ghastly desire deserved defeat in this harsher fate.

Thus it was ended, and I could return now before discovery and the coming of dawn—return to his great house which was the only home I knew on the face of the earth.

Return I did, and for the past hours I have been writing this that all might know the truth.

I am not skilled with words, and what I read here smacks of mawkish melodrama. For the world is superstitious and yet cynical—and this account will be deemed the ravings of a fool or madman; worse still, as a practical joke.

So I must implore you; if you seek to test the truth of what I've set down, go to Everest tomorrow and search out the newly-dug grave on the hillside. Talk to the police when they find the dead watchman, make them go to the well near Danny's roadside stand.

Then, if you must, dig up the grave and find that which must still writhe and crawl within. When you see it, you'll believe—and in justice, you will not relieve the torment of that monstrous being by driving a stake through his heart.

For that stake represents release and peace.
I wish you’d come here, after that—and bring a stake for me. . . .

1945

Son of Rasputin

He claimed to be the son of Rasputin, and he proved it in a very horrible way—with a werewolf pack!

"ISN'T it romantic?" sighed Olivia Winthrop. She surveyed the Christmas-card panorama of snow through which she walked.

The short young man at her side nodded. His eyes, peering behind steelrimmed spectacles, rested absently on the scenery but very attentively on Olivia.

"Very romantic," he declared. "When you stop to consider that each one of these trillions of snowflakes has a distinct, individual pattern, not duplicated by any other, and—"

Olivia's lips parted in a scarlet pout.

"Oh, that!" she sighed. "Harry Crane—can't you stop being scientific about things for just a moment and merely appreciate the snow because it's pretty?"

"It gets on my glasses," Harry Crane complained. "Then I can't see you so well."

"I'm glad," Olivia declared. "Sometimes I think that even when you look at me, you're being scientific. Studying me as if I were some kind of guinea-pig."

The young man did not reply. Rounding a corner, he led the girl up the snow-covered steps of an imposing stone structure.

His eyes did sparkle now, as brightly as the girl's. She caught his glance.

"Glad to get back to the museum?" she almost mocked. "I guess that's where you really belong, Harry. In a museum, with a lot of old fossils from the past—not out here in the real world."

"Let's not quarrel, Olivia." Crane's voice was soft.

But the blonde girl was not to be denied. "If you lift your nose out of a book once in a while you might breathe a little fresh air or even perfume. There are such things in the world, you know. But you prefer this old, musty museum smell."

"Now, dear—your father wouldn't approve of that sort of talk."

"Oh, Harry Crane, you make me sick!"

Olivia tapped briskly down the hall in the direction of a large brown door, inscribed *Wesley Winthrop, Curator.* Crane followed swiftly.

They entered together.

Wesley Winthrop turned his bald head inquiringly.

"Hello, daughter," he greeted the girl. "And Harry." He cleared his throat. "Ah—would you two excuse me for a few moments longer? As you see, I am—ah—busy with a—visitor."

Both Crane and Olivia saw all too plainly. Indeed, they could stare at nothing else.

Seated opposite the table was a huge figure of a man. His black-clad bulk alone might easily dominate the room, but even his extraordinary hugeness paled in consideration with the strength of his features.

A bullet-shaped head, covered with long, curling black hair matting over sloping brows—and beneath it a face. Hawk nose, high cheekbones; the rest of the features were buried beneath a bushy black beard. Incongruous amidst the hairy mass, two full red lips parted voluptuously to reveal wide yellow teeth.

But bulk and head and beard and features all were dwarfed by the giants eyes.

Deep and black, they seemed rooted not in socket, but in the man's very skull. Their stare was serpent-like, and like a snake, the gaze seemed to wriggle into the very brain of the beholder. Here was a power beside which that of the great body itself paled.

FOR the first time. Crane noticed that Mr. Winthrop was badly shaken. And well he might be, for if he had been forced to look at this mam for any length of time.

“You will excuse us. I’m sure?” Winthrop repeated, jerkily. “Just a few moments more—”

“Let them stay.”

The voice was as deep as the eyes, as big as the body.

“They might as well hear what I have told you, and hearing, bear witness.” One huge white hand waved Crane and Olivia to the couch.

“Ah very well.” Winthrop blinked unsteadily. This is my daughter, Olivia, and her *fiance,* Mr. Crane. He is my assistant and secretary here at the museum. Olivia, this is Mr.”

“So.” Again the white paw waved, brushing aside Winthrop’s introduction. “I take it that I am to be introduced, *nyet?* Allow me to perform that service myself.

“I,” boomed the great voice, “am Nicolai Gregorovitch, son of Rasputin.”

“Rasputin?” Crane blurted.

The bearded man smiled. *“Da.* The name is familiar to you, I see, and well it might be.” There was a touch of bitterness in the smile; a stain of rust on iron.

“Oh, I wasn’t thinking of it historically. exactly. I was thinking of the Icon of St. Basil we have here at the museum,” Crane hastened.

Black eyebrows arched. “Exactly. Then you too know that this holy relic was once the property of my father. That is exactly what I was telling Mr. Winthrop, here.”

Winthrop turned troubled eyes to the bespectacled young man.

“Mr. Mr. Gregorovitch, as he calls himself, claims that the Icon belongs to him by right of descent, and he is—ah requesting that I give it up to him.”

“Requesting?” The booming voice cut in. “I am not requesting. I am demanding my property. Now. immediately, at once, do you hear?”

“Wait a minute,” said Harry Crane. “That Icon was purchased by the mu scum from the Soviet Government. It belongs here.”

“There is no Soviet Government,” the black-bearded man snapped. “There is only Holy Russia.” His pale hands made the sign of the cross, but with a curious reversal. “It was given my father by the Little White Father himself, in Petersburg And I have come here to claim it as is my right.”

“Well, Mr. Winthrop.” Crane said mildly turning to the bald headed curator. “If this man can show credentials. I’m afraid he has us there. Of course. I was under the impression that the monk who called himself Rasputin had no son. but if he has proof, then the Icon is his.”

“PROOF?” The giant Russian rose to his feet. “I show no proof to thieving dogs.” His voice lowered, as he turned his livid stare on the three in the room.

“But there is another kind of evidence I can furnish you to show that I am truly the son of Rasputin, master of wonders, and Little Grey Brother.

“They laughed at my father once, and scorned him as you scorn me when he came to Moscow and claimed his right to holy relics. They said he was a *kulak.* a peasant boor who had set himself up as a priest. They said he was a fanatical monk, and a madman. And they shut him up for years in Siberia, prisoned him in the deep white forests where only wolves and madmen howl across the Arctic steppes.

“But he came back! Ah, he came back! He had grown wise in the northland, where he had talked to the wizards and the *shamans,* the mystic hermits of the snows. He learned strange powers in the long nights, and he used them.

"Da, it is history. For he wrote history, in blood! He went to the Czar, when the little Czarevitch was dying of haemophilia, and he cured the boy with his arts. After that the Czar and the Czarina and all Russia was at his feet.

"They flocked to him for cures, for advice, for prophecy. He was famous as a wonder-worker. He, a peasant with mystic powers, was the real ruler of Russia. Behind the throne he played his game; using Czar, Czarina, grand dukes and duchesses, generals and prim es as Iris chessmen and pawns.

"Finally they had to betray and kill him, scoundrels that they were. But it was suicide they committed, not murder—for when Rasputin died, so died Russia!"

"Bunk!" Surprisingly, it was Harry Crane who spoke. Olivia gazed at him in astonishment as the short young man rose to his feet, polishing his glasses with nervous fingers.

"Rasputin was an ignorant peasant, an epileptic with a diseased mind. His mowings and gibberings while in a fit. were looked on as evidences of an oracle inspired by a trance. The stupid, thrillseeking nobility made it the rage to bow down to the savage clod whose wanderings while exiled to Siberia had deranged him. He was a hypnotist and a schemer, too, but he was no more a mystic or a holy man than you are. If, indeed, you are his son."

"So, you are very wise, young man. Perhaps too wise," mocked the deep voice. "I see that you will have to be shown, as I have told you.

"I was born in Siberia, during Rasputin's exile. My mother died, and when my father returned to Moscow he left me in the care of the *shamans* from whom he had learned his powers.

"They reared me, and for many years I have studied their secrets until I am a greater adept than even my father. I too am a Little Grey Brother."

The eyes were quite bright now, too bright for sanity.

"They called him that, you know. Little Grey Brother. But they never knew what it meant. They never knew that it meant *Little Grey Brother of the Wolves."*

"PLEASE—" Winthrop was on his feet. "Can't you see that you're upsetting my daughter? If we could talk alone—"

"Talk? I do not talk now. I command. Give me the Icon of Holy St. Basil, or I shall call down upon your heads my curse and the curse of my father. The curse of the Wolf!"

The black-bearded giant was grim. "They taught me, the wizards of the north, how to command the grey brothers of the forest. The wolves that are not wolves—the wolves that once were men—the shadows of the night. You know them as *werewolves."*

"See here." Winthrop regained some dignity. "If you think you can frighten us with silly superstitious stories, you're badly mistaken. This isn't Russia, this is America, and you are talking to educated men. not children."

"Exactly!" Catlike, the Russian moved towards the window. "I will not frighten you with superstitions. I will show you!"

One hand raised the window. A blast of wintry air poured in. bringing the chill of snowy dusk from outside. The great figure turned, hands framing his lips as he called into the gathering darkness beyond.

"Ho! My Brothers—come!" The great voice boomed. Then silence as the Russian turned. Silence, save for the rustling wind—and another rustling. A padding. A crunching of feet on snow.

Not *feet,* wearing shoes. Not normal *steps.* East, padding paws!

"I will show you," repeated the Russian. "Here!"

Rising above the window ledge, rising suddenly so that the head was framed squarely in the light, rising like a black bulk from the depths of nightmare, came the gigantic canine head.

Red eyes glared, red tongue lolled, white teeth bared in panting breath.

Peering into the room was a gigantic wolf!

Its little wicked eyes ravened as they rested on the figures of the two men. Then it saw the girl. From the shaggy throat came a howl of savage delight, and the head jerked forward. Two paws rose to the window-sill, the body poised—

And the son of Rasputin slammed the window down, in frantic haste.

"Wait, Oh Brother!" he snapped.

Slowly the dark head was withdrawn from the pane outside. It disappeared. But the shuddering three heard, faint and faraway, the keening howl that rose in the night.

"Now," said the Russian. "Do I get it?"

FOR a moment there was silence.

Again it was Harry Crane who spoke.

"No," he answered. "You don't."

Winthrop and the girl looked up in astonishment. The bearded man glowered.

"Very well. You've had your warning. Now you shall have your curse." The voice droned. "May the curse of the Wolf be upon thee all! May the Little Grey Brothers tear thy throats, may they rend and destroy thy bodies until ye howl like the wolves thou shalt become!"

His mocking eyes rested upon the girl. "Yea, verily," he smirked, and his Biblical speech was horribly shocking to hear from those full red lips. "Even thee, my sister. Thy white flesh shall be given over to yellow fangs to tear, and thy full body shall shrink and shrivel until thou runnest upon all fours and bay the moon like the very wolf thou shalt become."

"Harry!" The girl stood close to the short young man. her eyes brimming with hysteria He gulped, but smiled boldly.

"Nonsense! "he maintained.

Once more the Russian smiled. "Of course. *Du,* you would say that, just as Winthrop says it. You are educated men. not superstitious children. And so are your police, and your friends. They too will laugh at the story of the Wolf curse, and so they will do nothing.

"They will not believe when you come running to them with stories of wolves peering in windows at you at night. 'Not in America' they will say, and chuckle knowingly. And they will not believe when wolves lurk and attack you in the snow.

"They wall not believe even when your mangled bodies are found.

"They will not believe when, as wolves, you come whining and yelping to their doors, trying vainly to speak and tell the tale.

"And because they will not believe, I am safe. Your police will not lock me up because I have put a silly curse on you. What is the charge? Disorderly conduct? Your so wise legislators have no laws against witchcraft any more. So I boast openly. You have defied me—therefore, I curse you with the Wolf curse!"

He backed from the room.

THE three looked at one another in something bordering very close to dismay.

Then, "The Icon—is it safe?" Crane whispered.

Winthrop nodded. "I put two men on it this afternoon when this Gregorovitch came. You see, he's written me letters demanding it before."

"Ooooh—Daddy—" It was Olivia, her calm broken at last. "That wolf —"

"There was no wolf," Crane snapped.

"No wolf?"

"Of course not," said the young man, glibly. "Mental suggestion. Hypnotism. Did you notice his eyes?"

"But I saw it—heard it—" the girl, whispered.

"Afraid to take a look?" Crane challenged.

"Of course not. If a timid soul like you will, then I certainly can."

Together the two left the room, retracing their steps to the door.

Opening it, Crane stared out into darkness.

The Russian had gone. There were no prowling figures in the snow.

"You see?"

"Yes," the girl whispered faintly. "I see."

Crane followed her downward stare to the snow on the steps.

There were footprints on the steps Footprints leading down and away from the door.

One gigantic set was unmistakably the Russian's. The other at his very side, and leading away with his own—was made up of pawprints. The huge pawprints of a giant wolf!

CHAPTER II

The Werewolves Strike

THE mummy's face leered up in darkness. Madly the great ape crouched, poising to spring. A coiling snake lashed its head upwards, poison-soaked fangs adrip with venom. And Harry Crane tensed in the black museum, waiting.

King and Fletcher, the two guards, were at his side. The three men patrolled the nighted halls in silence.

"Wish Winthrop had let me call the police," Crane muttered. "Even if they would laugh at it."

"Huh," snorted Fletcher, a short stocky man with a phlegmatic face. "Some guys are afraid of their own shadows."

"You saw the footprints, didn't you?"

"Aw, he must of had a dog with him.

Crane, you make me tired. If it wasn't for you I could be settin' home with the missus, smokin' my pipe in peace, instead of walking up and down this morgue at night."

"Yeah," chimed in King. "Mean to say we got to stand guard here until morning just so some crackpot doesn't break in and steal that Icon?"

Crane smiled through the darkness.

"I'm sorry, boys; you know that. Still, I think it best to—what was that?"

"Oh, quit jumping." Fletcher was openly scornful.

"I heard it outside, I tell you. A howling."

"Nonsense. Storm coming up again. We're liable to be snowbound."

There it is again. Listen!”

This time all three men halted their pacing. And now, distinctly, though from afar, came the moaning cry from outside the locked building.

It was answered, and from a closer spot.

Crane didn’t hesitate.

“Come on, boys.” He drew a revolver from his pocket. “Down the hall. We’ll stand guard around the Icon case.”

They wheeled, quickened as the howling rose. Seemingly it came from the very side of the museum itself. As they walked, a new sound took its place.

The sharp brittle clatter of breaking glass!

“Hurry!” Breaking into a run, the three men raced down the hall and into the chamber where the Icon of St. Basil rested in its case.

Or had rested. For as they entered, Crane snapped on his flashlight and shot the beam towards the center of the room.

“Gawd!” breathed Fletcher.

Bounding over the sill, through the shattered windowpane, three great furry forms hurled themselves into the room.

Three sets of fangs were bared in bestial fury, red eyes glared, and a howl echoed and reechoed down the sable corridors.

“There!” Crane levelled his revolver at the first of the charging forms and fired. The shot blazed through darkness but the wolves came on.

Not for the men, but for the glass case!

STUNNED, the three stood momentarily staring at an unbelievable sight. Even as they watched, the foremost of the wolves reached the case and rose erect on hind paws.

Rose—and *walked!*

Walked on shaggy paws too thin to conceal legs. Walked on wolf-feet, wolfarms raised as it shattered the glass and grasped the Icon with a single gesture.

For a moment the glaring head turned in a hideously *human* fashion, to stare over its shoulder. The contorted wolfish features grinned in glee, and a wild howl of triumph rose.

Crane's weapon spoke again, and the two guards rushed forward.

The wolves turned. The one with the Icon ran on *hind feet only* to the window. And then its companions wheeled. Fletcher and King were in the lead, guns in hand, when the sudden move occurred.

Two shaggy forms hurtled through the air and leapt for the guards' throats. King threw up one hand, dodging, and the beast landed beyond him, directly in Crane's path.

The other went down in a thrashing heap with Fletcher. Crane heard the man's screams, heard shots and growls intermingled.

And then he faced the snarling monster in his path. He whirled his revolver, but too late.

Grey horror sprang, howling for the kill.

Harry Crane felt the impact of the hairy body as it launched itself against his chest, felt the rasp of acrid breath in his face, as the yellow fangs gaped for his neck. He went down, arms clawing vainly as the giant wolf worried for his jugular. The teeth grazed his shoulder. In the background he heard howls, screams, a thunderous crash, and shots. But that was but the setting for nightmare—nightmare ravening for his blood.

He squirmed free, arms fumbling loose, fumbling for the revolver. Again the beast sprang as he rose, and he smashed the blunt butt of his weapon against the dripping snout.

With a yelp of pain the wolf bounded away. Crane's shot seared darkness as the beast turned tail and launched itself back through the window.

Shakily, Harry Crane tottered erect. King stumbled to his side, eyes wide in the flashlight's beam.

"They got the Icon," he whispered. "I—I think I got one of them as it went out the window. But look, Harry—look what it did to Fletcher."

He pointed to the body that lay crumpled on the museum floor. The two men looked into each other's faces for a long moment. But they did not look into the face of the dead guard, for Fletcher's face was gone. There was only a red mask, grinning madly up at the museum ceiling.

"Call the police," Crane whispered. King nodded and ran down the hall.

"Don't say a word about this until I get back," Crane shouted.

"Are you leaving?"

"Of course. I don't want to be held for questioning just now. I must get to Olivia and her father. If," and for a moment Crane's voice faltered, and his eyes paled behind his spectacles, "if I get there—in time."

CHAPTER III

Hell at Their Heels

"I NEVER would have dreamed it," Wesley Winthrop kept murmuring. His thin fingers dug into his bald scalp. "Of course I didn't want the police—all that publicity would be bad for the museum. So undignified. But even so, I meant to call on the Soviet consul tomorrow and find out about this man Gregorovitch."

"Perhaps that's why he struck so soon," Crane suggested. "He couldn't stand investigation."

"Struck!" Winthrop shuddered at the word. "What you tell me is—incredible." He sighed. "And he has the Icon."

Crane opened his mouth, but Olivia put a finger to her lips.

"Don't say any more," she whispered. "He's too upset." Rut it was Olivia herself who trembled, whose blue eyes fluttered like the wings of frightened doves.

She led Crane into the hall.

"Harry," she murmured. "I—I want to tell you something. For about ten minutes before you came I had the funniest feeling that something was watching me through the window. And I heard—those noises again."

"Absurd!" Crane smiled tensely. He patted the girl's shoulders, and his hands rose to caress her hair. "There's a pretty bad storm raging outside, and the wind is howling a lot. I scarcely made it through to your place here."

"Wolves—run fast," the girl whispered. "And the Curse is still on us—"

Thunder flooded the hall.

"Someone's at the door!" Olivia trembled. "Oooh—don't open it—"

Crane stepped forward. One hand reached for the doorknob, the other for his revolver.

Door opened and revolver flashed.

Badge flashed, as Patrolman Dever entered the hall.

"You Crane?" demanded the big cop, abruptly.

"I am."

"Come with me."

"What's the matter, officer?"

"Plenty's the matter. I've got orders to bring you and Winthrop and Miss Winthrop back to the museum for questioning. So get a move on, before we're all snowbound. We had a hell—beggin' your pardon, Miss—of a time making it here in the first place."

"You—you didn't see anything lurking around outside, did you, officer?" Olivia blurted. "Any—wolves?"

PATROLMAN DEYER shot her a long glance.

"Then you *know?"* he said. His fingers mechanically made the sign of the cross.

"Know what?" Crane demanded.

"Why, about the body—the one they found in the snow outside the museum window. One of you plugged him when he was getting away."

"Go on."

"Well, sir—" Dever's voice rose to a curious break. "Malone, he's the Coroner, you know', got there right away with us. And he took a quick look at the body.

"I don't get all he said, but he was pretty excited."

Again Dever's voice broke. Then it sank to a whisper before continuing.

"He told the sergeant that it wasn't rightly a wolf at all. Said it was like nothing he'd ever seen before. When he heard that stuff about one of them walking on its hind legs, he let out a yap, and then he said—he said—"

"What, man?"

"He said this wolf was a wolf all right, *but it had human bones and a human skull!"*

A flash of fire glanced from behind Crane's spectacles. Again Dever crossed himself. "It's a black night." he sighed. "Best to come along, all of you. The squad car's waiting outside."

"What's the trouble?" Winthrop appeared.

"We're going back to the museum," Crane answered. "All of us. We'll be safer there. And we can get to the bottom of this."

The three donned their garments in the hallway. Dever flung open the door and the storm's fury beat at their bodies as they walked the dark pathway to the snow-covered squadcar.

Olivia's eyes searched the darkness.

"Something's moving out there!" she declared. "I can see it against the snow."

"Get in." Crane pushed her forward, curtly cutting her off.

much difficulty, Dever managed to start his motor. The car teetered slowly out of its rut.

"Terrific weather," he grunted.

Winthrop turned to Crane.

"My boy, you haven't told me everything. I can feel it," he declared. "Surely you must have some explanation for it all. There are no such things as werewolves—"

The ghastly answer came, not from Crane, but from outside the slowly-moving car.

"Oh!" Olivia gasped. Her wide eyes peered through the blurred windows. The others turned.

There, in the swirling snow that whipped the country road, there, limned against the deserted white hills, stood the wolf-pack.

Stood? Raced!

As if by signal, the threatening shapes broke into a lope. Crane counted one—two—three—four. Four grey nightmares, pursuing their car down the road!

Again the howl.

"Holy Mother!" Dever shouted. "I can't get any speed on this road!" The car floundered forward.

And the wolves came on. Racing, gleaming eyes bobbing closer, the howling horde descended.

Crane thought of the snowy steppes, of sleighs filled with travellers that were attacked by wolves.

Now the shaggy forms—the incredibly huge forms—loomed alongside the car. Crane drew his revolver. "Your gun, man!" fie shouted to Dever. Dever stopped the car, drew swiftly. The wolf-pack ringed the squadcar on all sides. Dever opened the door and thrust his weapon forward. Without hesitation the pack charged.

A shot thundered, and another. With a snarl of pain one wolf dropped back, but the other three came in in a grey wave—a grey wave that flooded the front seat as Dever went down under the fangs.

"Quick!" Crane shouted. "Duck!" He flung the robe over Olivia's head and forced her and Winthrop below the seat level. His revolver spat death as the wolf-heads turned to him, jaws adrip with red.

A grey snarler lunged forward and went down with a bullet between its horridly human eyes. A second, manlike, attempted to crawl over the seat. Again Crane shot, again scored a hit. The third wolf growled low. Crouching over Dever's body, its eyes moved warily.

"Yaa—uuuur," it growled. Then—"fggg—*fool!"*

The human word crashed against Crane's consciousness as the beast sprang. He pressed the trigger, felt the snarling face meet his own, and then from behind came the hoarse laugh and the shattering blow on the skull that plunged him into darkness.

CHAPTER IV

Little Grey Brother

CRASH of waves against seashore. Crash of columns into dust. Crash of light against eyes groping in blackness. . . . Complete and cold.

Then, light.

Harry Crane blinked into consciousness, hands searching for glasses that were no longer there. His hands confined to press his features, reassured to feel no gaping wounds in neck or cheek. Rising upwards to his scalp, his fingers encountered a livid welt that explained his descent into oblivion. Knocked on the head he assuredly had been. But by whom?

And where was he? Where was Winthrop—and above all—where was Olivia?

Crane's slightly blurry gaze provided no definite answer as to his exact whereabouts. His eyes met walls of solid stone on three sides of his body, and a row of bars on the fourth. He was penned in a cell. And the chill dampness hinted at subterranea. A basement of some sort.

Stepping to the bars, he peered down an expanse of dimly-lighted corridor. His hands automatically grasped the cold steel of the barred doorway, rattled the solid iron. It did not give. He was securely penned, and in the power of the werewolves, in the power of their master.

And so was Olivia.

The thought quickened his pulses to a frenzy. What were they doing to her? A fantastic curse—but its truth had been furnished with ghastly proofs. Crane's eyes searched the cellar twilight. Bitt other organs brought response. To his ears came suddenly the faroff cry he had grown to know and dred. A faint howling, as though from an adjoining room. A wolfish howling, and above it a shriek of laughter that might have been animal, might have been human. Or might have been—*neither.*

He muttered an oath, then ceased abruptly. For the howling had been succeeded by another sound.

From a distance, the creak of a door slowly opening. And then, a crawling noise.

Something was rustling, creeping into the corridor beyond. Something was moving down towards him, moving slowly and slyly. Crawling, crawling, as a wolf crawls on its belly when it inches forward to spring.

Scraping through the darkness, crawling through the night. Crane saw the black bulk moving through the shadows. And he heard it—heard now the painful breath, the panting.

What was crawling towards him, and why? Was it—hungry? The thought gripped him, but he held close to the bars.

SLOWLY, it crept into his line of vision. Now he saw the foremost limb reach the bars outside his cell. He saw the limb in the dim light, and recognized the whiteness with a gasp of suppressed relief.

It was a human hand!

Above the wrist, a flash of blue cloth. Crane knew who it must be.

"Dever!" he whispered, elated. "Is that you?"

No answer. But the crawling came again, with another gasp, and the body slid forward along the floor. Now the bulk was visible. The torn blue uniform. It was Dever, all right.

Or—was it?

The thing grasped the bars and pulled itself up to its knees, and then Harry Crane covered his eyes to shield away the sight of what gasped and wheezed upon its knees in that dark corridor.

The hands were white and human, and the face was whiter still in its mask of pain. But in between—across the chest and the shoulders, where wolf fangs had ripped the blue uniform to rags—in between, humanity ended.

Torn, bleeding image of nightmare, the mangled chest of Patrolman Dever was covered with a thick grey growth of *wolf fur!*

Blood dabbled the lupine shagginess, and agony shone from his tortured eyes as he slumped against the bars, staring mute and exhausted up at Harry Crane.

And Crane could only whisper, “What did they do?” over and over, knowing all the while what the answer must be.

“I—don’t know—” wheezed the thing in the corridor. “I remember those things biting me—taking the car. A big man with a black beard climbed in after them—guess he hit you. The things went out again—he drove us to this place—house in the hills—passed out.”

The white hands nearly lost their grip on the bars. Crane bent lower, held the wounded man close.

“Go on.”

“When I came to I was on a table. The man with the black beard was standing over me—guess he tried to doctor me up—heard him say—no use.

“Then I looked down and saw—this!”

A SOB broke from the horrid furry chest. But Dever’s tortured face set as he struggled to continue.

“That’s where wolves—bit me, you know. When wolves like *they* bite you, you—change. “That’s the legend. But it’s true! Getting—hairy like wolf.

“He said no use and dragged me to one side. Carried me into another room.” Dever’s words came interspersed with jerks of pain.

“What about Olivia and Winthrop?” Crane prompted.

“He sent for them next—the wolf things brought them in. They walk, you know—like men. Like I might walk, if I lived. Change has started—but guess I'm too badly done up to keep going. Just as well this way—don't want to be one of *them."*

The dying man bent closer.

"He carried me into side room—I wasn't all the way out—got my hand in his pocket and took—keys. One of them must fit lock here. Crawled down—while they're busy.

"Get out. Get out and do something before they get *too* busy. Because the old man and the girl are in there!"

The white hands fumbled to the side, pulled out a silver key chain. Glazing eyes turned to Crane as he snatched the keys. Then, with a sob, the great grey chest heaved up, a wolfish snarl coughed into the throat, and Patrolman Dever pitched forward against the floor of the corridor. One white hand made a feeble gesture. The sign of the cross.

Crane's hands made frantic gestures. Two keys failed in the huge lock which held the barred doorway. The third clicked.

But Harry Crane didn't hear the clicking. He heard only the howl from the shut-off room down the corridor. Heard only the howl—and the answering scream.

CRANE'S hands wrenched the open lock free, and then he ran swiftly down the corridor—ran towards the sounds of Olivia's frantic cries.

Rounding the passageway, he faced the half-ajar doorway to another chamber. Light streamed out, and he shrank back into the shadows as he stared at the revelation within.

The huge cellar chamber blazed in the glare of surgical lamps. The livid light streamed down upon the figures of the room's inmates, as the flames of Hell reveal the forms of demons in the Pit.

Ringed in a half-circle about a white table, three great hairy forms squatted on furry haunches, as though they were appreciative spectators of the scene before them.

Bound to a pillar at their side, Crane recognized the frail form of Wesley Winthrop. His eyes were as bright as the wolves', but bright only with fear.

Wolves and Winthrop alike stared at the white table. Standing over it was the huge bulk Crane recognized only too well. The black-bearded son of Rasputin loomed against his gaze.

His face held madness, and his great paw held a knife. But he also stared down at the white table—the surgical table.

Crane stared, too. Stared at the bared, blonde body of Olivia, arms pinioned behind her head, the smooth contours of her flesh exposed to the piercing gaze—and the still more piercing knife.

It was a scene born in the dreams of a demon. A Witch's Sabbath. The naked sacrifice, the knife, and a modern surgical table as the altar. The black- bearded servant of Satan, and the attendant forms of beasts and familiars.

Werewolves and their Master—the son of Rasputin about the work of the Devil!

Fantastic—yes, fantastic as the curse, fantastic as the wolves that walked on their hind paws, fantastic as the wolf that had uttered a human word, fantastic as the furry chest of Dever.

But the truth. Yes, the incarnate truth behind all ancient whispers—whispers of beasts become men, and men become beasts. Whispers of teeth that were fangs, and fingers that were claws. Whispers of a dreadful linkage between animal and humanity—a linkage made possible by worship of Evil.

And the son of Rasputin knew Evil, as he had boasted. He had learned the secrets in the northland.

THE fragmentary thoughts flooded Crane's brain, but over them came the sharp realization of the immediate horror of what he saw.

For the bearded giant was turning his face to the bound Wesley Winthrop.

"Now," he boomed. "Once more, I shall ask it. Do I get it, or does your thirst for forbidden secrets urge me to go on?"

Winthrop's lips worked.

"I tell you," he whispered, "I know nothing about it."

The Russian thrust his face forward.

"Very well. Then I will proceed."

He turned again to the girl. Crane saw that Olivia's face was but a pallid background for the bright dread shining from her eyes.

The Russian's smile was like an obscene caress as he gazed at her slim body under the searing lights. "You remember," he almost whispered, "how I placed upon thee the curse of the Wolf, O my sister?"

The girl nodded, striving for words that would not come.

"Thy white, full body shall shrink and shrivel until thou runnest upon all fours and bay the moon like the very wolf thou shalt become." He quoted with sadistic relish, and all the while Olivia stared upwards at the knife that hung in his hand, hung and did not waver its point from her breasts.

The Russian's other hand reached under the table and drew forth a limp form. Dragging out the bulk by the scruff of the neck, he revealed the carcass of one of the dead wolf-things.

"Here is a Grey Brother that shall not run again," he declared. "Is it not so?" And he flung the question to the three wolves.

A growl of hellish assent arose. They understood!

"But I shall give you a Grey Sister, instead!" Gregorovitch chuckled.

"Ah yes, Winthrop, assuredly I shall do it. Woman she is, but wolf she shall be unless you confess."

"I have—nothing to confess," Winthrop choked.

"Then, behold! You shall see the secret of my werewolves, yes—see the creation of one. And your daughter is chosen!"

The knife flashed down, into the body of the wolf. It lay on the table at the girl's shuddering white side, and as the knife struck home, the dark carcass was stained with red.

With swift, practiced strokes, Gregorovitch flayed a strip of furry skin from the dead hide.

He stepped back, to a cabinet beside the table. His huge hands fumbled for gauze, for antiseptic, for a long needle threaded with catgut.

And then he grasped the knife again, eyes bright as a priest preparing for infernal sacrifice, and the knife flashed down—into the body of the girl!

CHAPTER V

Beauty and the Beast

"DEVIL!" The word came as a gasp from Harry Crane's chest—a gasp flung from a moving body. Crane hurled himself into the cellar chamber in a single movement that caused the son of Rasputin to raise eyes and knife from the white form before him.

The bearded face snarled in surprise. Crane drew back his arm, grasping the lock removed from his cell door, and let fly. The iron missile caught the giant Russian squarely in the center of the forehead, and he went down with a crash.

Crane leaped to the side of the fallen madman, grasped the knife from inert fingers, and slashed Olivia free.

"All right," murmured the girl, in answer to his frantic gaze. "He—stopped in time."

Turning, Harry Crane repeated the office for Mr. Winthrop. Freed of their bonds, the two stepped to his side. They turned for the door, only to recoil in sudden realization.

Silently, crouched to spring, the three grey wolves leered up from the doorway.

Crane raised the knife.

"Back!" he commanded. "Get back." The largest wolf grinned, grinned in almost human mockery. Then it rose in nightmare fashion to its hind paws and stood manlike.

“Mmm—uuuh—Mas-ter—urr—hurt,” it growled. “Kill!”

And two more shaggy forms rose, in a single movement, and launched themselves for Crane’s throat.

“Duck!” panted the short young man, pulling the others down. The first wolf landed in a growling heap on the floor behind them. The second hurtling body was deflected by Crane’s arm.

Then he had raced around the surgical table, pulling the others with him.

“Take knives,” he ordered, pointing to the cabinet. The girl and her father armed themselves.

The three wolves came on slowly across the floor, led by the largest. As they neared, Crane hurled a scalpel. It missed its mark, but the beasts retreated, if beasts they were.

If beasts they were—

Even in peril, Harry Crane’s eyes noted the horror of these creatures. The hideously *familiar* quality of those skulls. Manlike contours under the fur. Ad the almost *human* expressions of the snouted faces. And the way the paws bent, like elbows and knees; on limbs too thin to be human. Paws that were almost hands!

Once again fangs came on—fangs whose bite meant death, or the worse fate Dever had hinted at. The bite of a werewolf. Crane tensed, waiting for the spring.

Abruptly the large wolf halted, turned. “Guuu—guu—get uuu-uuuh-thers,” it croaked. In a flash, the three raced from the chamber, their padding paws thudding back out the corridor.

“Come on,” Crane whispered. “Let’s get ourselves out of here while the way is clear.”

“They’re getting others,” Olivia faltered. Then her eyes took on resolution. “All right. I’m—with you.” Stepping cautiously, they made for the opened door. And then, from behind them boomed the voice that spelled doom.

“Stand where you are!”

RISING shakily to his feet, blood streaming from the gash at his hairy temple, Gregorovitch stood facing them behind the muzzle of a pistol.

"You will wait," he hissed. "I foresee that my Grey Brothers have prepared a welcome for you."

Padding feet announced the return. But there was a greater volume in the approaching clatter. And the deep growls of the wolves held overtones. Faltering whines, whimpers, fresh cries. The door opened, and into the room flooded a horde of grey terror before which the two men and the girl recoiled in utter loathing.

The shocking vision of this atrocity was too much for sane eyes to see.

There were more wolves in this pack now—but not completely.

There was a thing that was wolf from head to waist—fur above, and naked human flesh beneath. It whimpered as it stumbled into the room, and fresh half-healed scars in the grey wolf-trunk attested to its pain. There was another monstrosity with furry legs and a human torso, and a final, unbelievable ghastliness that was human but for a wolf's head. This creature crawled, upon arms and legs unbelievably thin; bent and twisted beyond the point of emaciation.

But the horde never hesitated. Led by the three monsters in the van, the roaring things born of blackest myth surged upwards about the trapped three.

Furry forms hurled themselves against Crane's body. He turned, grappling, and went under. Teeth tore at his arm, but he broke free, lurching to his feet. His sudden rise caught the bearded Russian behind him unwares, and he staggered for a moment. Crane wrestled for the pistol, but great arms were around him, pinning his wrists. And then, with a roar of rage, the Russian lifted Crane over his head in a burst of mania strength, and hurled him forward into the racing wolf-pack.

Crane's slight body fell, but the forms leaping up to reach him did not reach their goal.

WITH the crack of revolvers thundering through the cellar's walls, the blue-coated figures charged into the room. Shots streaked into the furry- mass, and wolves died screaming in madly human voices. Gregorovitch, son of Rasputin, raced catlike towards the door. His arms rose and fell amidst the swarm of officers, but the strength of his fury made them give way. Crane rose to his knees, hand clutching the Russian's discarded pistol. He shot once, and the huge body toppled forever.

Gunfire, howling, panic died away.

Silence settled on the cellar—the silence of grey death.

Winthrop and Olivia faced their rescuers.

"Had a hard time finding your trail in this storm," the officer in charge panted. "When Dever didn't bring you back, we came on out in another squad.

Picked up your trail, and saw the fresh trail when the Russian took over. Slow following you here in the storm. But now," and the officer's eyes strayed with a flicker of genuine fear towards the grotesque forms on the floor, "Now, what's all this about?"

Crane stepped forward.

"I think perhaps I can tell you," he said.

"Our Russian friend here has been trying to threaten Mr. Winthrop into handing over the Icon of St. Basil from the museum. Knowing it had once been the property of the monk Rasputin, he claimed to be Rasputin's son. When Mr. Winthrop refused to give it to him, he planned to rob the museum and make his story of having power over werewolves explain the theft."

"Story?" Olivia turned pale. "But these are werewolves!"

Crane shook his head with a tired smile. "No," he declared. "They aren't. They're men."

"Men? But how would they be? Look at those fangs, those faces and paws, those thin arms—"

"Let me explain. Our Russian friend, whoever he really was, did spend some time in Siberia, evidently. And he did learn some very terrible things.

It is the custom there, as in some parts of China and Tibet, to produce artificial monsters from human children by altering their bodies.

“By means of surgery, the hide of a wolf or a wild dog is grafted on to human flesh after the human skin is removed. Piece by piece, until the body is completely furred. Then comes a period of torture, when the creatures are placed in casts and confining devices which stretch the bones of arms and legs, deforming the limbs. Children are usually taken, for the process takes several years.

“The cruel monsters who perpetrate such abominations usually alter the vocal chords of the unfortunate child, train it to walk upon all fours, and allow the natural horror of the treatment and transformation to derange their creation. After years, the being itself no longer realizes its humanity. It is mad. It lives and thinks like a wolf or wild dog. And it can be trained in its madness to kill.

“Thence spring the legends of werewolves. The Siberians and the Chinese sometimes worship such creatures as gods, or use them to frighten the ignorant peasantry.

GREGOROVITCH mastered this art, and put it to use. Knowing that a story of werewolf robbery would be laughed at by police, if Mr. Winthrop allowed them to find out about it at all, he felt safe in deluding us with a curse and stealing the Icon.

“Then he sent his creatures out again to track our car and pick us up to bring us here. He was ready to force Mr. Winthrop to watch his daughter tortured, her skin removed and wolf-fur put in its place, unless he got what he wanted.”

“But what did he want?” Winthrop interrupted. “He stole the Icon. Why did he capture us and take such a risk?” Again Crane grinned. “He never got the Icon. After he made his threat, I took it out of the case on my own hunch and put in a fake. That’s why we were captured; that’s what he wanted you to tell to save Olivia.

"I got my hunch about the fake werewolves when Dever crawled in to release me. The wolves had bitten him, and he thought his furry chest was the result of a werewolf's bite. I could see at once that it was simple skin-grafting. Gregorovitch did it, not to change him into a wolf, but in an attempt to save his life by substituting wolf-skin for his own lacerated flesh."

Crane indicated the ugly monstrosities. "These other creatures were wolf- men still undergoing the 'change' and not completely transformed. I am sure that you'll find cages and apparatus somewhere in this house where the things were kept during these experiments."

"It beats me," Winthrop declared. "But why should he go to all this fuss just to steal an Icon?"

"We'll probably never know the full story," Crane told him. "Perhaps he was the son of Rasputin, though I have my doubts. It is certain he was unbalanced. But I know why he wanted the Icon so badly as to take fantastic risks.

"When I removed it from its case, I examined it. The Icon has a false top, and in the cylindrical hollow there is a map, showing the location of Rasputin's secret treasure-hoard. He must have stolen millions in gold and jewels from the Imperial Government, and hidden it away. This map gives the location. That's why Gregorovitch wanted the Icon. With such information he could return to Russia and become rich."

"I'd like to return to bed and become rested," Winthrop said, beaming. He turned to Olivia. Her arms, around Crane's neck, told that she personally was right where she wanted to be.

Suddenly Crane broke away and stooped to the floor.

"What's wrong?" asked Olivia. "Trouble, darling?"

"I'm looking for my glasses," the young man answered. "Uh—what did you call me?"

He rose and took her in his arms again. It was a full minute before he spoke.

“Never mind the glasses,” said Harry Crane. “At this rate it looks like I won’t get much chance to wear them from now on. Perhaps it was Gregorovitch’s influence—but you know, I’m beginning to feel a little bit like a wolf myself!”

THE END

Lefty Feep Gets Henpecked

Lefty got himself lit on Rooster Booster, and woke up with a splitting chicken headache—and identity!

"QUIT pickin' at that chicken!" Lefty Feep's voice rattled the crockery in the restaurant. The tall, thin man stood glaring at me, and I looked up in astonishment. His voice was almost as loud as his clothes.

"Do not pull anything with that pullet!" said Mr. Feep, snatching a chicken-leg from my plate and hiding it under a napkin.

"What's the matter?" I asked. "Sit down and explain yourself. Why are you objecting to my chicken dinner?"

Feep sighed and sat down at the table next to me.

"The sight of fowl makes me howl," he muttered. "After the experience I have, even a pheasant is unpleasant, and a sparrow chills my marrow. But a hen is worse again!"

"You don't like chickens, eh, Lefty?" Mr. Feep began to tremble violently. "Please do not even mention the name of same," he implored. "Don't I ever tell you about the time somebody gives me the bird?"

I began to feel uneasy. "Now don't tell me it reminds you of another story," I snapped.

"How do you guess?" beamed Lefty Feep. "Did you ever hear the one about the traveling salesman and the farmer's daughter?"

"Now listen, Lefty—"

"No. You listen to me. It is not the kind of a story you are thinking of. Because the traveling salesman happens to be me, and the farmer's daughter is—but wait, I'll give you the lowdown."

"Not now," I said, getting up hastily. "I've got to duck off."

"Ducks!" moaned Lefty Feep. "There you go again! More poultry! Just for that, I insist on telling you the fowl story."

"I'll bet that's just what it is," I mumbled.

But Lefty Feep didn't hear me. He had already opened his mouth and started to tell his tale. . . .

I AM walking down the street the other day, reading a time-table and trying to find out if I can make reservations on the next freight-train out of town.

You see, I really need a little vacation right now, and if I do not arrange to take it myself, then my creditors will arrange a vacation for me—probably at Alcatraz.

To be frank but rank, I am stuck over money—I cannot haul it from my wallet. Right now I am down at the heels, and the sheriff is on them.

So I scan the fable in this time-table and move my feet down the street.

Suddenly a hand reaches out and yanks me by the shoulder.

"Oh, oh!" I think. "The sheriff catches up to me!" I am all set to yammer and stammer when, I turn around and see that it is not the sheriff who puts his fingerprints on my clavicle.

"Why, it's Lefty Feep!" pipes a voice.

I find myself inspecting the spectacles of Sylvester Skeetch.

"What happens to you?" I gasp.

Little Sylvester Skeetch stares up at me with a broad grin.

"Nothing happens," he shrugs.

"Oh yes it does," I insist. "You suffer a severe amputation, don't you?"

"What do you mean?" Skeetch asks.

"Why—you are practically cut in half," I reply. "That is, I never see you alone before. You are always with your partner, Mordecai Meetch!"

This is an exact fact. Sylvester Skeetch and Mordecai Meetch go together always, and they are never farther apart than twenty beers are from a hangover. Skeetch and Meetch are inventors, and very terrific with things scientific. In the past I always find them working their Laboratories, which they call the HORSECRACKER INSTITUTE.

So now I am astonished to see little inventor Skeetch walking down the street without his partner.

"What gives?" I inquire.

"Oh, I just leave Meetch back at the laboratories, working on a patriotic assignment."

"Patriotic?"

"With all this meat rationing," says Skeetch, "we decide to perfect an elixir that will stimulate growth and fecundity in poultry. Something that will increase the size and habits of chickens, then we will sell it to chicken-raisers and help provide more poultry and eggs."

"Good idea," I remark. "Are you successful?"

"Absolutely," says Sylvester Skeetch. "That is why I leave just now. I am going down to the newspaper office now and insert an advertisement, offering our elixir for sale.

"Listen to this," Skeetch commands. He hauls out a piece of paper and recites his ad.

"WHY BE A DUMB CLUCK? DON'T SCRATCH FOR DOUGH WHEN YOU CAN MAKE BIG MONEY RAISING CHICKENS!

"Why does a chicken cross the road? To get to a chicken farm operating in this new, revolutionary way. Do you want to rule the roost? Then send for a sample bottle of this new elixir—WOOSTER'S ROOSTER BOOSTER."

I LISTEN with growing suspicion.

"Who is this guy Wooster?" I ask.

“Oh that’s just a trade name we think up,” Skeetch explains.

“What does this elixir do for chickens?” I persist. “The ad doesn’t tell.”

“Very simple,” says the inventor. “The elixir is a glandular extract which has an effect on the hormones of the *gallus* species, modifying the endocrinological functions so that increased metabolic rate is resultant in excessive growth of fowl and—”

“You don’t say!” I exclaim. “In other words, chickens get bigger and better. So why don’t you say so in the ad?”

Skeetch’s face falls, but he picks it up from his collar. “Don’t you think this ad is any good?” he sighs.

“I will not say it is no good,” I console him. “I merely say that it is lousy. No, you cannot explain all this in an ad. Besides, city people read this, and you want to reach farmers.”

“But how can we?” wails Skeetch. “We can’t talk to the farmers. We can’t leave town and—”

I get a mental commotion that results in a notion.

“Hey! I say. “Why not forget this ad and send me out on the road to peddle this elixir of yours? I can sell it to farmers direct. I will do the vocals to a bunch of local yokels.”

“You mean, you’ll become a sort of traveling salesman?” Skeetch asks.

“Why not? I can hand out the guff to sell this stuff.” I begin to boil him the old oil, figuring that this is a chance to get out of town and make a little of what ain’t hay, at the same time.

In a few minutes, Skeetch begins to listen to my proposition. “Come on up and we’ll talk to Meetch,” he says.

So I go up to the HORSECRACKER INSTITUTE, where Meetch is toiling and boiling up a batch of this Rooster Booster.

It’s hot in the pot, and I notice that the elixir is dark brown, odorless, and full of bubbles.

“This is the incubator bait you are going to peddle?” I inquire.

“Right,” says Mordecai Meetch. Mordecai Meetch, by the way, looks just like Sylvester Skeetch, only more so.

I tell the man my plan, and in a little while he sees and agrees.

"By the way," I mention. "Can't you tell me a little more about this chicken-juice? Does it make the hens and roosters bigger? Does it mean they lay more eggs?"

"Eggzactly," says Skeetch. "According to our formulae it removes the inhibitory reflexes and causes exhydration to occur—"

"Never mind that," I snap. "What I mean is, do you try this out on any chicken to see if it makes it thicken or merely sicken?"

"Where would we get a chicken?" asks Meetch, shrugging. "No, strictly speaking, we never actually experiment. Or should I say, egg-speriment?"

"You should not."

"You can test it on the road," Meetch tells me. "Now what you must do is take our car and load it up with bottles of the elixir. I have labels made up and you can peddle the stuff at one dollar a bottle. When can you leave for your trip to the country.

"How about right now?" I come back.

And so it is arranged.

THAT night I am already wending my way over hill and dale, driving upstate at a great rate in a car filled with ample samples of Wooster's Rooster Booster.

It is my intention to peddle this invention up north and gradually work my way back downstate again. So I drive the car but far, and when it gets dark I do not park.

But along about seven a seven rolls out of heaven. I blunder into some thunder that makes me wonder. In half an hour begins a shower.

I see a light in a farmhouse off the road, and being a wandering boy, I wonder if it is for me. Perhaps I can dash helter-skelter for shelter.

So I drive into the yard, and climb out, wetting my brain in the rain. I buckle a knuckle against the door.

Then the door opens and I am staring at a ginch.

Now according to me, a pretty girl is my favorite form of femininity. And speaking of favorite forms, this ginch certainly has one. There is an air of beauty about this cutie; she has the right eyes and size, cute lips and hips, fair hair and a smile with style. Just the type of blonde of which I am fond.

So I stand there in the drizzle and smile at her.

"Pardon me," I say, "but it is raining outside."

She grins. "Is that so? Are you from the Weather Bureau?"

"No, honey," I answer, very courteous. "I am strictly speaking only from hunger. My name is Lefty Feep and I am a traveling salesman."

She giggles. "Well, that a coincidence! My name is Daisy Falfa and I'm a farmer's daughter."

"Good day, Daisy," I greet her. "Is there any chance of me coming in out of this storm or must I learn to swim here on your doorstep?"

"Come on in, by all means," says Daisy. So I enter the farmhouse.

"Who's this?" grunts a voice. The voice belongs to a tall, red-faced old whisker sitting at the kitchen table. He is obviously the farmer himself.

Daisy leads me up to him. "This is my father, Al Falfa," she tells me. Al Falfa sticks out a horny hand and I am stuck with it.

"We chicken farmers don't see many salesmen these days," Al Falfa tells me. "Sit down and have some supper, Mr. Feep. Daisy will fix you up a plate."

I brighten up when he mentions supper. Also I am happy to learn he is a chicken farmer. Sure enough, staring out of the window I notice the yard is full of hen pens and cackle cottages.

Maybe I can make a sale, to say nothing of a hit with Daisy. So I sit down and put on a nice smile, and Daisy puts on a nice hot supper, and we begin to chatter of this and that matter.

Everything is going swell, just as it always does in the stories about traveling salesmen. Daisy is looking at me over the cooking and Al Falfa is laughing at the gags I pull and then—

There is a score at the door.

Comes a knock that rattles the lock, and Daisy gets up and opens the door.

INTO the room comes a country boy wearing a city slicker. A big overgrown goat in a raincoat—he stands over six feet tall until he sits down. This towheaded lout wears a mean grin on his chin as he nods to Al Falfa and puts his arm around Daisy. She breaks loose but he doesn't seem to notice.

"Hiya, Pop!" he greets Al Falfa. "How's my future father-in-law?"

"Huh!" grunts Al Falfa. I can see this idea does not please him. As for Daisy, she sniffs. "I never say I'll marry you," she tells the bumpkin. "Don't count your chickens before they hatch."

"Ha, that's a good one!" laughs the bumpkin. "You should talk about hatching chickens! That's just the trouble, isn't it?—your chickens don't hatch. And they get stolen. So you have no money. So I hold the mortgage on the farm here. So you can't pay. So, I'm willing to call off foreclosure if you marry me, Daisy."

I wink and blink. I never believe such things actually happen—villains foreclosing mortgages unless farmers' daughters will marry them. Unless I get my directions mixed, this is EAST LYNNE.

"Uh—pardon me," says Al Falfa, interrupting the lout. "This is Mr. Lefty Feep, Luke. Mr. Feep, meet our neighbor Luke."

The bumpkin gets up and slaps me on the back, not quite hard enough to break it. "Yep, that's me," he says. "Luke the Duke they call me in these parts. On account of I'm such a snappy dresser. Look," he says, pulling his raincoat open. "I got zoot overalls!" I nod politely—politely, that is, for a guy with a back-ache—and Luke the Duke laughs again. "Yep," he chuckles. "I'm the richest farmer in these parts.

Got more acres of corn than anybody in the county."

"I believe you," I mutter. "I can tell the minute I see you just how corny you are."

Luke the Duke ignores this penetrating remark and leers at Daisy.

"Come on, gal," he says. "Let's you and me go set in the parlor." Daisy shakes her head.

"Well, how about a movie in town?" asks Luke the Duke. "You won't get caught in the rain. I got the hog truck outside. Real class, huh?"

Al Falfa tips his daughter a wink. She frowns but gives in. "All right, Luke," she sighs. "Let's go."

Daisy leaves to get her coat and purse.

Luke the Duke stares at Al Falfa. He is not smiling now. "How about it?" he grunts. "Have you got the money for the interest payments? Installment's due day after tomorrow."

"I'm sorry, Luke. If you can give me just a little more time—I'm gonna take some chickens in to town and—"

"Nothing doing," Luke snaps. "I want my dough. Unless of course, you can get Daisy to listen to reason and marry me."

"But—"

"She'd better make up her mind right quick," Luke tells him. "I got a nice wedding ring for her and she ought to be wearing it before it turns green."

"That's up to Daisy," says Al Falfa. "She's got a mind of her own. Maybe she'll marry you and maybe she won't."

"I'll ask her just once more, tonight," Luke the Duke answers. "Got no time to waste courting. Should be doing something useful, like butchering a shoat."

Daisy comes in and she and Luke the Duke leave for the show. Daisy doesn't look happy when she leaves me, and Al Falfa doesn't either. As for me, I am very down in the mouth.

AS IT turns out, this is a very appropriate place to be. For no sooner does the door close, than Al Falfa hauls out a big jug of liquor.

"Applejack," he tells me. "Have a drink?"

Well, I very seldom drink any more—any more than I can get. So we start to battle the bottle.

“This situation drives me to drink,” Al Falfa confesses. “What am I going to do? I must either pay off to Luke the Duke or let him marry my daughter. And the chickens are like a bunch of absentee workers these days—laying off instead of laying. It’s terrible.”

Quite a mess, is my guess. Of course, this is the cue for me to come out and try to sell Al Falfa some of my product.

But he seems like a nice guy, and I do not have the heart to spring Wooster’s Rooster Booster on him.

We take another drink.

“You want to know something?” demands Al Falfa. “To make matters worse, somebody is all the time stealing my chickens.”

The applejack is getting him. I am getting the applejack.

“Yep,” he sighs. “AH the time stealing my chickens, somebody is. Every time I get a nice batch up to take to market, somebody robs my hencoops.”

We take another drink on that. Al Falfa thinks about his lost chickens, and I think about that little chicken, Daisy.

“Honest,” hiccups Al Falfa. “I can’t help but feel that on this chicken farm a dastardly plot is hatching!”

On that we kill the bottle. And the bottle almost kills us. At least, I am very groggy. Groggy enough to remember that I also smuggle a pint along in the car.

“Next drink’s on me,” I announce, to cheer Al Falfa up. “Got it out in the car. I’ll bring it in.”

“But it’s wet outside.”

“I’m wet inside. Who cares? Just be a minute.”

And I am. I flounder outside to the car, grope around in the dark, and find my bottle.

Coming back through the yard I start to shiver, so I pull out the cork and gargle a gurgle.

Then I walk in and park the pint on the table.

“Here it is,” I tell Al Falfa. “Help yourself.”

“Not that stuff!” growls the farmer.

“No? What’s wrong with it?”

“Read the label,” he tells me, waving his finger at the bottle.

I read the label and understand all. In the dark I grab the wrong bottle. What I bring in is a pint of Wooster’s Rooster Booster!

“Whooie!” I mention, in a loud voice.

Because I just remember that when I am in the yard I drink a terrific swig of this elixir.

“What’s the matter?” yells Al Falfa.

“Uggglllooofffff!” I explain. “Guffonkk!”

All at once I feel my stomach going round and round. And then my head. A reeling feeling that makes me hit the ceiling.

There is a queer sensation buzzing under my belt—and then I know I am done for. I think I am hitting the ceiling, but I really hit the floor.

I am out, but icy.

WHAT happens after that I can only guess. Al Falfa must carry me up to bed. A fine way for a traveling salesman to spend the night!

All night long I am moaning and groaning and turning and burning.

And when I come to and open my eyes, I see something I never expect to see in all my life.

Dawn.

Yes, I am staring out the window at the cold, gray light of dawn. That elixir must have a strange effect to wake me up at this unearthly hour. I open my mouth to yawn at dawn.

But I do not yawn.

My mouth opens and a sound comes out, but it is not a yawn. It is a *crow!*

“Cockadoodle-doo!” I hear myself state. “Cockadoodle-doo!”

I am startled. What in the world am I cockadoodle-doing? I hop out of bed and lurch over in front of a mirror.

I stare at my reflection. That is, I stare at the spot where my recollection should be—but ain't! I do not see myself reflecting in the mirror at all. Instead I gaze at the image of a big rooster.

Yes, a big rooster, three feet tall in his stocking claws! That is what I see —and it is me!

I open my mouth to utter an appropriate comment, but all that comes out is a cackle.

And in the mirror, the rooster opens its beak.

There it is. I drink Wooster's Rooster Booster and I am now a foul-looking fowl.

Either that, or it's all a hangover. Only I simply can't be hanging that far over. I look down at my body—at the feathers and wings. They say fine feathers make fine birds, but I feel far from being in fine feather.

Like it or not, I'm a rooster. What can I do?

The mere thought of being a chicken makes me sicken. I am madder than a wet hen.

I remember that Skeetch and Meetch never actually experiment with this stuff yet. All they know is that it makes chickens grow and lay eggs. But what it does to human beings—!

I start hopping around the room, clucking and waving my feathers. They are lovely black feathers, and I find I can even jump a few feet by using my wings. I stare again at the mirror—at my red comb and yellow beak, at my spurs and my swelling chest. I am certainly the biggest rooster I ever expect to see, but the idea does not please me. I don't want to win prizes at a Poultry Show. I am not a chicken-fancier, and I do not fancy being a chicken. It sticks in my craw.

I must do something about all this, but quick.

I hop around the room, hopping mad, when a tap comes on the door.

"Who is it?" I mean to say, but all that I can show is a crow.

THE tap turns into a knock and the knock turns into a bang, and then the door opens and I see Daisy standing there.

“Mr. Feep!” she calls. And then she sees me.

“Why, where is Mr. Feep?” she asks herself. “And what is this rooster doing in his room?”

She advances on me and there is a glitter in her gorgeous eyes that I do not like.

“Who lets you out of the coop?” she mutters. “Shoo! Get out!”

All at once she is coming after me with a broom-handle, and I hop down the hall, and she chases me downstairs and out into the yard.

I can’t talk, and she does not understand my squawk, so I am helpless.

She stands there in the doorway and scratches her lovely head.

“What a big rooster,” she says. “I never realize *we* have such a huge thing! Why, it’s a freak! Maybe I ought to tell Dad—he’ll take it in and sell it to a butcher.”

For some reason this idea does not appeal to yours truly. I must make her understand who I am, somehow.

I stare at the gravel in the yard. Perhaps, if I cannot talk to her, I can write her a message. So I stretch out my claws and try to write in the gravel.

But as I travel through the gravel, I see that it is no use. I cannot write. I can only make hen-tracks.

Daisy doesn’t even watch me. She is still puzzling her pretty head.

“Now what becomes of Mr. Feep?” she sighs. “He couldn’t leave—his car is still outside. I do hope he’s all right. Perhaps that big black ugly rooster annoys him in his room.”

I stand there, but what can I do? Everything seems to be lost. I cannot hope to win Daisy’s affection in my present state. She is not going to share a love-nest with a chicken.

I stare around the yard and spot the nearest hen-coop. It is surrounded by barbed wire, but the gate is open. I figure that if I am a rooster I might as well make the best of it and examine the new world in which I must live. Perhaps I will find something to help me.

So I head for the coop and pass the barbed wire. It gives me a little panicky feeling to do so—but after all, this is not the first time I am in the pen.

I wander around and hear a lot of clucking from inside the henhouse. I waddle up to the door and stick my head close to it. The clucking is quite loud.

And the funny part of it is—I can understand it!

Yes, it doesn't sound like barnyard clucking to me any more. I can understand chicken talk!

That at least cheers me up a little. I am not going to be all alone. So I march into the henhouse and stand there, clearing my throat and crowing a little.

A bunch of chickens are squatting in the straw against the wall. They stop clucking and stare at me.

"Who is that big black brute?" clucks an old biddy in the comer. "I don't remember seeing him before."

"Isn't he a monster?" sniffs a Plymouth Rock. "Must be a freak of some kind. It fairly gives me goose-flesh to look at him."

A SPECKLED hen whispers something under her wing and they all stare at me and cackle.

I feel highly embarrassed. Even these chickens look on me as an outsider. I am neither flesh nor fowl.

"Why doesn't he go away?" sniffs the Plymouth Rock, again. "I am not used to associating with such queer birds. Why, he looks like he is brought up in a barn."

They all laugh. I am ready to sink through the floor. My comb turns red as I blush.

"Imagine," the Plymouth Rock goes on. "Such an indignity! How can he stay in the same farmyard with me, whose ancestor comes over on the Mayflower and hatches the first egg a chicken ever lays in this country."

“Well, what are we waiting for?” snaps a little bantam rooster, strutting into the center of the group of hens. “Let’s throw him out of here! We don’t want any intruders. This is our barnyard and we got no use for strangers. Down with strangers, I say—down with strangers!”

He talks like a Communist, but this does not surprise me when I notice he is a Rhode Island Red.

“I’ll fix the chicken-livered squab!” yaps another rooster. He is a big white puffed-up old bird, and his red eyes are angry as he stares at me in the doorway. “Watch me, girls.”

He stalks past the hens and comes up to me.

“Out of this hen-house, stranger,” he clucks.

I get mad. “Aw, cut the cackle,” I tell him. “This isn’t a hen-party.”

“Why you—” squawks the rooster. “I’ll twist your tail-feathers, you buzzard!”

This is about all I can stand. So much happens to me that I am overwhelmed. I am not a man any more, and now even the chickens won’t accept me. I feel like fighting. So I hand this bird a leer and a sneer.

“Are you a Leghorn?” I ask.

“Why, yes.”

“Then blow!” I suggest.

For answer, the white rooster digs his legs into the gravel and straw and then flies into a rage—at me. His sharp beak bends in a peck of trouble.

I duck. And then the rooster flies over my head and lands and starts to chase me around the hen-house. He fights with his head and beak, and I am not used to this style of argument.

He chases me and the other hens cackle and the whole place is filled with screams. It sounds like the WLS Barn Dance on a rainy night. They laugh at me while I run.

But all the while I am dodging the rooster’s pecks and figuring out a system. He corners me next to the feed-pan and then I turn.

The rooster makes a dive at my throat with his beak. And I merely balance on one claw and smack out with the other.

This is a kind of fighting a rooster isn't prepared for. I give him one hearty smack in the jaw—or craw. There is a crow, the sound of a blow, and then he starts to go.

In another moment he is a cold chicken.

I stand there and crow in triumph.

The hens are quiet. They shrink back. I stalk over to them.

"Now we'll see who rules the roost around here," I snarl. "Let's get organized."

"Yes, sir," mumbles the Plymouth Rock.

"Whatever you say," says the speckled hen.

I flash her a look. "What are you brooding about?" I demand.

"Just a nest of eggs."

"Aha! That's what I'm interested in. Eggs. Let's get the lay of the land around here. How's production?"

"Not so hot," confesses a little red hen. "As a matter of fact—"

"Shhh!" I interrupt.

Because I hear voices in the yard. Human voices.

I SNEAK out of the hen-house and stick my beak through the barbed wire for a peek.

Sure enough, Daisy and her father, Al Falfa, are standing in the yard. They are holding a violent conversation, with that big lout, Luke the Duke, on the violent end.

He has on his zoot overalls and a barnyard homburg hat.

"Well, here I am," he is saying. "Last night Daisy says she will give me her answer today. What's it going to be—will you marry me or not?"

Daisy gives him a long look. Then she stamps her foot. "No!" she snaps. "I will not marry you because (a) I do not love you and (b) I hate you." Luke the Duke turns red. He also turns to Al Falfa. "All right," he growls. "Then tomorrow I foreclose on this farm."

“But can’t you wait?” sighs Al Falfa. “You don’t need the money. And you won’t run this chicken farm anyway. You are just doing it out of spite.”

“Never mind,” sneers Luke the Duke.

“I have the law on my side and I’m getting what’s coming to me.”

“I hope so,” whispers Daisy. “That’s what they have a devil for.”

Al Falfa takes a look around the farmyard and shrugs his shoulders. “Very well,” he says. “Tomorrow morning I will get up early and take all the chickens and eggs into town and sell them, at a loss, if I must. I will raise some money if it’s humanly possible. Because I would hate to lose this farm.

“It’s a good farm. I can’t understand why I have such bad luck with chicken-thieves and such, but I know if I stay here long enough, I will win out. But—”

He shrugs again and turns away. “You have until tomorrow,” snaps Luke the Duke. “Pay up or shut up.” Daisy glares at him. She stamps her foot again—this time right on his instep. Luke the Duke howls, curses, and limps away to his car. He climbs in and drives off.

Daisy starts to cry and Al Falfa comforts her. They go into the house.

“That’s the guy,” whispers the little red hen, under her beak.

“Who? What?” I inquire.

“That guy there—that fellow who drives off in the car.”

“What about him?”

“He’s the one who comes in here at night,” the little red hen tells me. “He steals the eggs, and he runs off with dozens of the girls.” She shivers. “I’m afraid of him!”

“You mean he robs the henhouse?” I gasp. “He steals chickens?”

“Right,” cackles the hen.

It is all clear to me now. No wonder Al Falfa is in debt to Luke the Duke! Every time he is ready to pay off by selling eggs or chickens, Luke the Duke sneaks in and steals birds or eggs. Luke the Duke is a racketeer, a hijacker—a chickenlegger! That’s what he is, a chickenlegger!

Now Daisy and Al Falfa will be thrown out on their ears as a result.

Unless—

I DO some winking, blinking, and plain and fancy thinking. I remember that Al Falfa promises to sell all the chickens early tomorrow morning. If not, it's his neck. I understand that.

But if he does sell the chickens—it's my neck! I will be sold, and a big rooster like me won't last long in a poultry market!

It is a bad spot, and I am on it, all right.

I pace the barnyard floor. It gets to be twilight, then dark.

I am still thinking. The hens all brood, and the other roosters keep away. I know they share my fear.

There must be something we can do. But what?

Late at night I am still up and stewing. Who knows, by tomorrow night I may really be stewing!

Comes midnight, and no idea.

Comes midnight and comes—the truck.

I hear the motor chugging far away. Al Falfa and Daisy are in bed long ago in the house. But this motor comes from the road.

"Oh, oh!" cackles a Buff Orpington. "It looks like trouble!"

It looks like Luke the Duke to me. He parks a truck on the side of the road near the farmhouse and tiptoes into the barnyard. Behind him comes a little colored personality—evidently his assistant roost-robber, because he is carrying a wire-clippers and a lot of gunnysacks.

"I'm a dead pigeon!" wails the little red hen. Which is not so far from the truth. "I'm a gone goose!" she moans. "Can't you think of anything we can do?"

I do not answer this remark, because to tell the uncouth truth, I can already see myself lying across a butcher's block.

We huddle there in the henhouse while Luke the Duke and his colored helper cut the wires.

“Maybe if we all cackle at the top of our lungs they will be scared away,” suggests the Rhode Island Red.

“Uh-uh,” I hastily disagree. “All that will happen is Luke the Duke will wring our necks and drop us into the gunny-sacks. Better keep quiet and hope for the best.”

The best is none too good.

In a minute, Luke the Duke is inside the hencoop. He beckons to his shadow.

“Come on, Whitey!” he whispers. “Grab a handful of hens!”

Which is just what Whitey does. We run around the roost, dodging and fluttering our wings, but Whitey piles chicken after chicken into the gunny-sacks. He carries them out to the truck. Meanwhile, Luke the Duke starts loading eggs into crates.

I hide in the back with the little red hen, the Rhode Island Red rooster, the Buff Orpington, and the speckled hen. The last gunnysack is filled up and the last egg is crated away, and I breathe a sigh of relief. Maybe they will go away and leave us behind.

Whitey says, “We all loaded, boss. De truck is filled up. We gonna mosey along now?”

Luke the Duke scratches his head—a job I would like to do for him, with an axe—and then he frowns. “We must take the rest of the birds,” he decides, pointing at us in the darkness. “Don’t want that old fool to have anything left tomorrow. I want that big rooster there, particularly. Never saw such an overgrown hunk of white meat in my life.”

He points at me and I shiver. I can just feel him plucking at my wishbone.

“We can’t do it nohow, boss,” drawls Whitey. “Room is one thing we ain’t got nothing of left.”

“Wait a minute,” hisses Luke the Duke. “What about that car I see parked in the yard? It must belong to that dumb jerk salesman I meet here the other evening. We can take that. Just load the rest of these chickens in the back and off we go.”

“Good idea,” says Whitey.

I DO not think it is such a good idea. To be taken to the butcher in a car stolen from me is somehow a little unjust, I figure.

But I have nothing to say. I can only tackle a cackle as Luke the Duke makes a dive and tackles me.

I race around the coop and he chases me around the group. Finally he embraces me and I’m in the soup. He carries me out to the car and dumps me in the back seat.

“What a bird!” he whispers. “Big and fat—he’ll make a real meal.”

Whitey comes along with the speckled hen, the Buff Orpington, the Rhode Island Red, and the little red hen. They also get a thumping and a dumping in the back seat. When we are safe inside, Luke the Duke says, “Let’s go.”

“Go?” says Whitey.

“Sure. You drive this car and I’ll drive the truck. Follow me and I’ll meet you.”

“Meet me where, boss?”

“Up the highway at the black market.”

“Black market?” quavers the colored personality. “You-all don’t mention we is gonna sell these birds to no black market.”

“Sure,” Luke the Duke answers. “I got a friend who pays good prices. Name of Blucher the Butcher. By sunrise this morning he’ll have these birds dead, cleaned, plucked and on their way to town.”

That is really something to look forward to. I always know I will be dead some day, but getting cleaned and plucked is not exactly what I expect. I may go to town after that, but I doubt if I will feel like it.

But there it is, and there am I. In the back seat of the car, as Whitey drives off and we fly away down the highway.

“Poor Al Falfa!” sighs the little red hen. “How he will miss us!”

“Poor us!” I groan. “How we will miss ourselves!”

The Rhode Island Red cackles to me. “What’s the matter with you, you chicken-hearted lummox? Why you’re almost four times as big as any of us birds. Why don’t you put up some kind of a fight?

“I remember you tell us you will try to save us from this monster. And what do you do? Nothing! You won’t let us cackle or run away or peck at those thieves, or anything. No—we just get caught and now we will be killed. A lot of good you’re doing, big as you are.”

FOR SOME reason his words make me just a little bit ashamed. And for another reason his words make me just a little bit inflamed. Because I get a sudden idea.

It is true I am bigger than any other chicken. Even if it does not help me, I am big.

Why am I big? Because I drink Wooster’s Rooster Booster. If I, a human, turn into a big chicken—what will happen if chickens drink the stuff? It is an elixir to increase their size. And we are now riding in the back seat of my cat—the car where I store my stock of the elixir!

“Cockadoodle-doo!” I yell, in triumph. “I get a great idea!”

“What are you crowing about?” sniffs the Buff Orpington.

“Listen,” I cackle. “Down on the floor of this car is a suitcase filled with bottles. I am going to peck it open now. I will take out a bottle and use my beak for a corkscrew. I want you all to take a drink from that bottle.”

“Huh!” scoffs the Rhode Island Red. “I ask for help and he tells us to get drunk! You think I want to face the last day of my life with a big head?”

“How would you like to face it with a big body?” I come back.

“What do you mean?” the rooster inquires.

I explain. Before I am finished, they cackle with joy, and swoop down on the suitcase. I start to work my beak and peck the lock.

Then I manage to pry the cork out of a big bottle of Rooster Booster. Meanwhile we bump down the road and Whitey drives and sings, not paying any attention to our clucking and jumping.

“Drink,” I whisper to my feathered friends.

They gulp and ulp.

“Again!” I command. They nuzzle and guzzle.

The bottle is empty. The chickens are full.

And then I look out of the car window at the pale light of dawn—

“Too late!” I gasp. “We’re here.”

And here we are. Ahead of us, Luke the Duke is swinging his truck into a yard. We turn into the driveway behind the truck.

Standing there in the yard of a big farmhouse is at least 900 ration-points of pork in the shape of Blucher the Butcher. At least I guess this bald-headed buzzard is the black sheep of the black market:—partly because fie wears white, and party because he carries a big axe in one hand. He looks entirely too cleaver to suit me.

My hen friends let out a wail and turn pale. It looks like we fail and I start to quail.

Luke the Duke is whispering to Blucher the Butcher. First he shows him the truck full of gunnysacks and egg crates. Blucher opens up a few crates and sacks and pulls out a chicken or two and pinches them hard. They squawk and Luke the Duke starts to talk, and Blucher the Butcher takes a walk—in our direction.

Whitey climbs out of the car and joins them and they are bargaining. I can see that.

I can also see something else. “Look!” gasps the little red hen. I stare at her.

The little red hen is not so little any more. Even as I watch her, she starts to swell. Her head and body bulges. I stare at the Buff Orpington. She grows, too. She is almost as big as I am. Then the speckled hen puffs up. They shoot up all around me.

Skeetch and Meetch will be pleased to see how their elixir works on real chickens, I figure. In a few moments all of the chickens are bigger than I am—and they don’t stop at that!

The Rhode Island Red is growing and growing. And all at once I must crane my neck to look up at him.

“Success!” I cackle. I get ready to issue orders, but I see there is no need to. They know what to do.

LOOKING out the window again, I see Luke the Duke pointing at our car. He is probably winding up his sales talk, telling Blucher the Butcher what a wonderful big rooster he has to sell him. Blucher the Butcher waves his big arms in the air and then walks our way. Whitey runs ahead to open our car door.

He arrives and pulls the door open.

“Here’s de rooster, boss,” he announces. Then he looks in. “Eeeyaa-ah!” he comments. “De chickens done begin to thicken!”

It is all too true.

Out of the car pours a horde of giant chickens—six feet tall!

I hop behind—because I cannot keep up with either the chickens or Whitey. Whitey starts to run behind the Buff Orpington, then the Rhode Island Red kicks him in the head.

Luke the Duke and Blucher the Butcher take one look and then to their heels. And at the heels of those heels are my fine feathered friends.

They chase the two racketeer black marketeers around the yard and there is plenty of cackling and feathers flying—only this time the cackling comes from the two men, not the chickens.

And feathers fly when the chickens start kicking them into the ground.

“Monsters!” howls Luke the Duke. “Help!”

Blucher the Butcher swings his axe at the speckled hen, but I jump up and peck him from the rear. His swing goes wild and so does he as he falls down and the little red hen points a beak at his beak.

To make a long story shorten a few seconds it is all over for the roost-robbers.

The birds are excited enough to murder these guys, but I put a stop to it. “Let’s not have any fowl play,” I tell them. “Just grab these bum’s shirt collars in your beaks and haul them into the truck.” Which they do, in a flurry of hurry.

After that we all lay down for a nap and several of the little chickens lay down for an egg.

When we shake awake the sun is around seven in the heavens. I raise my hands and rub my eyes.

This surprises me.

Because I now have hands to rub my eyes with!

I glance down at my body.

I am still a chicken. But a chicken with arms.

As I glance further, I ntoice that I am moulting, or something. Either that or somebody plucks me while I am asleep. Because I am losing my feathers—or my mind, or something.

Anyhow, I am not much of a chicken any longer.

“Look at him!” cackles the Plymouth Rock. “I never see such an odd-looking bird!” The other chickens wake up and stare.

“Never mind me,” I snap back. “Look, now—we’ve got to decide what to do. Those crooks are captured, but now you must make up your minds about your Own futures. Where do you want to go?”

“Back to Al Falfa, of course,” suggests the Rhode Island Red. “Pie’s a good old scout and he won’t harm us. Besides, he needs the eggs and stuff. Also—we’re not safe running around loose and when you’re six feet tall the way I am, you have to scratch for a living. I vote we go back there and get something to eat.”

“Good idea!” adds the Buff Orpington. The others join in.

This suits me. Having arms, I can now drive the truck. So I load the birds back into the truck. Some of them ride in the front with me and the rest make a nest on the bodies of Luke the Duke, Whitey, and Blucher the Butcher, in the back.

In a few minutes we glide off and ride off down the road.

MY FEET are numb, but when I look down I can see toes instead of claws. I shed feathers faster than a punched-out pillow, and looking in the mirror I see that my beak turns into a nose and my wattles are getting epiglottal. The further we go the further I go towards returning to manhood.

By the time we pull into the farmyard I can say "Today I am a man," without crowing about it. Matter of fact, I am so human I can't even talk to the chickens any more or understand them.

It is hard enough for me to understand what happens. I finally decide on the ride that something must happen to me inside.

Wooster's Rooster Booster is not for men anyway, and the dose I take probably wears off. On the chickens it still looks becoming—but with me it is very temporary. Which suits me swell.

It suits Al Falfa swell too when I turn up with his chickens and the knocked-out crooks. When he sees me he thinks I disappear a few nights ago just to hide out and capture Luke the Duke—so I let him believe that yarn.

Then when he sees the big chickens he is a pushover to buy the rest of my stock of Rooster Booster.

So the way it turns out, everybody is happy. The chickens are back in the roost, Al Falfa is back on the farm, Luke the Duke is back in the county jail, and I am back in the bucks. Also Daisy is back in my affections—after I manage to drape my shape in a blanket from the truck seat.

Of course I come back to town today to report to Skeetch and Meetch. All the way down I keep worrying, expecting to crow instead of talk, but I guess I am one hundred per cent a gent. . . .

LEFTY FEEP finished his yarn-spinning and I sat there, still dizzy from trying to follow it.

"I guess you are one hundred per cent a lunatic!" I told him. "Eve stood for a lot of unbelievable stories from you in my time, but this is the most fantastic. Lefty—do you expect me to swallow the idea that you turned into a chicken?"

Lefty Feep shrugged.

"There is nothing to swallow," he insisted. "Except Wooster's Rooster Booster. It changes me to a chicken but I am now completely normal again."

"I just can't believe it," I muttered. "Surely you couldn't turn from man to bird to man again without leaving some kind of evidence or clue."

Feep rose from his chair.

"Sorry," he said. "Too bad I cannot prove or improve my tale's details. But I do change from a chicken to a man again without leaving a trace."

He beamed and winked. "I am glad I am no longer a chicken, too!"

"I'm not so sure of that," I gasped. "What do you mean?"

I pointed a trembling finger at the seat of Lefty Feep's chair. "There's your evidence," I groaned. "Now I believe it—I believe you were a chicken, but I'm afraid you're not back to normal quite as much as you think. Look what happened while you told your story!"

We stared together at the seat of the chair—the seat of the chair where Lefty Feep had sat telling his story and . . . laying an egg!

THE END

The Man Who Cried “Wolf !”

She was half Indian and half goddess—but wholly evil!

THE moon had just come up. It was shining across the lake, and when Violet came in it cast a silver web Over her hair.

But it wasn’t moonlight that shone in sullen pallor from her face. It was fear. “What’s biting you?” I asked.

“A werewolf,” said Violet.

I put down my pipe, got up out of the armchair, and went over to her. All the while she kept staring at me; standing and staring like a big china doll with glass eyes.

I shook her shoulders. The stare went away.

“Now, then,” I said.

“It was a werewolf,” she whispered. “I heard it following me through the forest.

Its paws padded over the twigs behind me. I was afraid to look back, but I knew it was there. It kept creeping closer and closer, and when tire moon came up I heard it howl. Then I ran.”

“You heard it howl?”

“I’m almost positive.”

“Almost!”

Her eyes dropped into hiding, beneath lowered lashes. She bent her head and sudden color flamed in her cheeks. I kept watching her and nodded.

“You heard a wolf howling near the cabin?” I insisted.

“Didn’t—you—” she got out, in a strangled wheeze.

I shook my head, slowly and firmly. “Please, Violet. Let’s be sensible. We’ve been over this thing half a dozen times in the past week, but I’m willing to try again.” I took her by the hand, quite gently, and led her to a chair. I gave her a cigarette and lighted it for her. Her lips shook and it wobbled in her mouth.

“Now listen, darling,” I began. “There are no wolves here. Wilds of Canada or not, they haven’t seen a wolf in these parts for twenty years. Old Leon down at the store will bear me out on that.

“And even if, by some strange chance, a stray has wandered down here from the north, skulking around the lake, that doesn’t prove anything about a werewolf.

“You and I have enough common sense to he above such silly superstitions. Try to forget your Canuck ancestry and please remember that you’re now the wife of an expert in die field of legend.”

That crack about Canucks was pretty brutal, but I wanted to shock her out of the mood.

It had the opposite effect. She began to tremble.

“But, Charles, surely you must have heard something?” she sighed. Her eyes were pleading now. I had to look away.

“Nothing,” I murmured.

“And when I’ve heard it prowling around the cabin at night, you heard nothing?”

“Nothing.”

“That night I woke you—didn’t you see its shadow on the wall?”

I shook my head and forced a smile. “I’d hate to think you’ve been reading too many of my stories, darling,” I told her. “But I don’t know how to explain your—er—mistaken notions.”

VIOLET puffed on her cigarette and the glowing tip flared up. But her eyes were dead.

“You have never heard this wolf? It has never followed you in the woods? Not while you were up here alone?” Her voice entreated.

“I’m afraid not. You know I came up here a month ahead of you to write. And I wrote. I saw no werewolves, ghosts, vampires, ghouls, jinns or efreets. Just Indians and Canucks and other citizens. One night, after coming home from Leon’s place, I thought I saw a pink elephant, but it was a mistake.”

I smiled. She did not smile with me. “Seriously, Violet, I wonder if I made a mistake, having you up here. But I thought it would be like a bit of old times for you. After all, to a French-Canadian girl, this wilderness should be a treat. But now, I wonder—”

“You wonder if I’m insane.”

The words crawled from between her lips.

“No,” I muttered. “I never said that.”

“But that is what you’re thinking, Charles.”

“Not at all. We all get these—spells. Any medical man will tell you that errors of perception do not necessarily indicate any—mental unbalance.”

I spoke hastily, but I could see she was not convinced.

“You can’t fool me, Charles. And I can’t fool myself, either. Something is wrong.”

“Nonsense. Forget it.” I put the smile back on my face, but it didn’t seem to stick very well. “After all, Violet, I should be the last one to even hint at such a possibility. People who live in glass houses, you know. Don’t you remember, before we were married in Quebec, how I used to speak of you as a witch? I called you the Red Witch of the North, and I used to write those sonnets and whisper them to you.”

Violet shook her head. “That was different. You knew what you were doing. You didn’t see things, hear things that do not exist.”

I cleared my throat. “I’m going to make a suggestion to you, dear. You haven’t told anyone besides me about this, have you?”

"No."

"And it's been going on, you say, about two weeks?"

"Yes."

"Well, I don't want it to go on any longer. I can see that you're worried. For that reason, and for that reason only—remember—I recommend that we call in Dr. Meroux. Purely as a consultant, of course.

"I have a lot of faith in his ability, not only as a physician but as a psychiatrist. You know psychiatry is his hobby—of course, he's only an amateur stuck away here in the woods, but he's a man of repute. I'm sure he'd respect your confidences. And he might be able to make a diagnosis that would clear the whole matter up in a jiffy."

"No, Charles. I will not tell Dr. Meroux."

I frowned. "Very well. But I'm interested in your ideas about a mysterious werewolf. I'd like to find out what you heard about *loup-garous* in childhood. That grandmother of yours—she was part Indian, wasn't she? Didn't she ever scare the daylights out of you with some wild yarns?" Violet nodded. *"Out*—yes, I mean."

I noted her reversion to the speech of her childhood, but pretended to ignore it.

"Did she tell you about the wolf-men, the *lycanthropes* . . . who change their shape when the moon calls and run baying on all fours, their bodies shaggy shadows in the night? Did she tell you how they prowl for prey, tearing at the throats of their victims who in turn become inocculated with the dread virus of the werewolf?"

"Yes. She told me, many many times."

"Ah. And now, when you return to the wilderness, the image of your childhood fears arises. The werewolf, my dear, is merely a symbol of something you dread. Some inner guilt, perhaps, is personified in the hallucination of a beast-presence that lurks awaiting the time to reveal itself.

"I'm not even an amateur psychiatrist like Dr. Meroux, but I think I can safely hazard that such a delusion is natural enough. Now, if you'll be frank with me, perhaps we can dissect the nature of your fear, arrive at the real terror that disguises itself a snarling monster, a mythological hybrid that slavers at your neck in the forest—"

"No! Stop! Please, not now—I cannot stand to talk of it further."

Violet sobbed. I comforted her, crudely.

"Sorry. I imagine you're nervous enough as it is. We'll just forget about it for the time being, dear, and wait until you feel that you can face the problem. Better get some rest."

Patting her shoulder, I led her to the bedroom.

We undressed, got into bed. I dimmed the lamp, extinguished it.

The cabin was in utter darkness, save for the filtered moonlight that trickled through surrounding tree-tops. The lake beyond was a sea of silver fire, but I turned from its radiance and sank into sudden slumber.

Violet lay tense beside me, but as I drifted off I felt her relax, gradually and slowly.

We slept.

I do not know what time it was that I awoke. Violet's hand bit into my shoulder, and I heard the harsh inspiration of her breath.

"Listen, Charles!" she gasped.

I listened.

"Do you hear that? Outside the cabin—hear it scuffling against the door?"

I shook my head.

"Wake up, Charles—you must hear it.

It's been snaffling around under the window and now it's scraping at the door. Do something!"

I swung out of bed, grabbed her arm.

"Come on," I said. "Let's take a look."

I banged into a chair searching for the flashlight.

"It's going away," Violet sobbed. "Hurry."

Flash firmly gripped in one hand, I dragged Violet across the floor towards the door. I halted, released her, snapped the lock free.

The door flung open. I swung the flashlight in a wide arc. The forest clearing about the cabin was empty of all life.

Then I tilted the beam down towards our feet.

Violet screamed.

“Look, Charles! There, in the earth outside the doorway! Don’t you see the tracks—the tracks before the door?”

I looked.

There, clearly defined in the earth at our feet, were the unmistakable paw-prints of a gigantic wolf.

I turned to Violet and gazed at her a long time. Then I shook my head.

“No, dear,” I whispered. “You’re mistaken. I don’t see anything. I don’t see anything at all!”

II

THE next morning Violet stayed in bed and I went down towards town to see Lisa.

Lisa lived near the crossroads with her father. The old man was paralyzed, and Lisa supported him by doing Indian bead-work and basketry for the tourist trade.

That’s how I’d met her, last month when I came up alone. I stopped by the roadside stand, intending to purchase a bracelet to send to Violet.

Then I saw Lisa, and forgot everything else.

Lisa was half Indian and half goddess. Her hair was black. You couldn’t imagine a deeper, more lustrous darkness—until you gazed into her eyes. They were two oval windows opening upon Night. Her face and features were delicately moulded in faintly burnished copper. Her body was slim and strong, but strangely melting when clasped in an embrace.

I found that out very soon. Two days after I met her, in fact.

I hadn’t meant to be so precipitate. But Lisa was half Indian and half goddess.

And she was all evil.

Evil as the night that perfumed the sable splendor of her hair . . . evil as the gulf-deep gaze of her eyes . . . the very pagan perfection of her body was instinct with the substance of sin.

She offered me the bittersweet corruption of that ancient and forbidden fruit known to Lilith. She came to me on moonless night, silent as a succubus, and I feasted on night and darkness.

When Violet came up, our meetings halted. I told Lisa that we must be careful, and she merely laughed.

"For a little while, then," she agreed.

"A little while?"

Lisa nodded, her eyes sparkling. "Yes. Only as long as your wife remains alive."

She said it quite naturally. And after a moment I realized that it was quite a natural remark to me. Because it was true, logical.

I did not want Violet any more. I wanted this other thing—this thing that was not love nor lust, but a wedding of my soul with an utter wickedness.

And if I would have it, then Violet must die.

I looked at Lisa and nodded. "Do you want me to kill her?" I asked.

"No. There are other ways."

"Indian magic?"

A month ago I would have snickered at the mere suggestion. But now, knowing Lisa, holding Lisa, I knew the suggestion was quite valid.

"No. Not exactly. Suppose your wife did not die. Suppose she had to go away?"

"You mean if she left me—got a divorce?"

"You do not understand, I see. Is it not true that there are places where they keep the insane?"

"But Violet isn't crazy. She's quite levelheaded. It would take something very extraordinary to drive her mad."

"Like seeing wolves?"

"Wolves?"

“A wolf will follow your wife. It will plague her, torment her, haunt her when she is alone. She will come to you for explanations, for help. You must refuse to believe her. In a little while her mind—

Lisa shrugged.

I asked no questions. I merely accepted what she told me. If Lisa went to the woods and consulted the *shamans,* or whispered prayers to darker dispensers of doom, I did not know.

All I know is that a wolf came to follow my wife. And I pretended not to hear anything, see anything. It was working as Lisa predicted. Violet was going mad. From somewhere she had acquired the notion that her nocturnal nemesis was a werewolf. So much the better. Ker mind was going, fast.

And Lisa was waiting, smiling her secret smile.

Lisa waited for me this morning, in the little roadside stand near the crossing.

HERE in the sunlight she looked like a simple Indian beadworker. Only when her face was veiled in shadow did I see her eyes and hair, black and unchanging as her secret self.

She put her hand on my arm, and a touch of ice and fire shivered up my spine.

“And how is your wife?” she whispered. “Not so well. Last night she found wolf-tracks beside our door. She had hysterics.” Lisa smiled.

“She thinks it’s a werewolf, you-know-.” Lisa smiled.

“I wish you’d tell me the truth, darling. How do you make the wolf come and follow her?”

Lisa smiled.

I sighed. “I suppose I shouldn’t be too inquisitive.”

“That is right, Charles. Isn’t it enough to know that our plan is working? That Violet is going mad? That soon she. will be gone and we can be together—always?” I stared at her. “Yes, that is enough. But tell me, what happens next?”

"Your wife will see the wolf. Actually see it. She will become quite frightened. You will refuse to listen to her, as before. Then she will go to the authorities. She will come to the village here and try to make people believe her. Everyone will think her mad. And when they ask you, you know nothing. In a short time the doctor will be forced to examine her. After that —"

"She will see the wolf?" I echoed. "Actually see it?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"Tonight, if you like."

I nodded, slowly. Then a doubt came. "But she's almost overcome. She'll be too afraid to walk in the woods."

"In that case, the wolf will come to her."

"Very well. I shall erase the tracks, just as I erased them this morning."

"Yes. And you had better plan to go away from the cabin tonight. You are a sensitive person, Charles. You would find it painful to endure the sight of your wife's terror."

The image of Violet came to me—the image of her frightened face, her bulging eyes, her wide mouth opened in a scream of utter fear as the monster of her fancies crouched before her. Yes, that is how it would be, and very soon.

I smiled.

Lisa grinned back. As I turned away I could hear her laughing, and it came to me that there was something unnatural in her mirth.

Then, of course, I realized the truth. Lisa was not altogether sane herself.

III

WE ATE dinner in silence that evening.

As the moon came up over the lake, Violet rose and pulled the shades with a grimace she could not conceal.

“What’s the matter, dear? Is it too bright for your eyes?”

“I hate it, Charles.”

“But it’s beautiful.”

“Not to me. I hate the night.”

I could afford to be generous. “Violet, I’ve been doing a little thinking. This place—it’s getting on your nerves. Don’t you believe it might be helpful if you went back to the city?”

“Alone?”

“I could join you there when I finish my work.”

Violet brushed a lock of auburn hair from her forehead. I noticed with a shock how the fire had faded from her curls. The luster was gone; her hair was dead and dull. Just as her face, her eyes, were dead and dull.

“No, Charles. I couldn’t go alone. It would follow me.”

“It?”

“The wolf.”

“But wolves don’t come to the city.”

“Ordinary wolves, no. But this one—”

“Why do you think this wolf you—uh—see is not ordinary?”

She caught my hesitation but desperation overrode all reticence. She went on, hurriedly.

“Because it comes only at night. Because there are no *real* wolves here. Because I can sense the evil of the beast. It is not stalking me, Charles—it is haunting me. And me alone. It seems to be waiting for something to happen. If I went away, the creature would follow. I can’t escape it.”

“You can’t escape it because it’s in your mind,” I snapped. “Violet, I’ve been very patient. I’ve neglected my work to take care of you. I have listened to your fancies for two weeks now.

“But if you can’t help yourself, then others must help you. I took the liberty this afternoon of discussing your case with Doctor Meroux. He wants to see you.”

She crumpled physically before my direct accusation and statements.

“Then it’s true,” she gasped. “You do think I’m—out of my mind.”

"Werewolves don't exist," I said. "I find it easier to believe in the presence of a mental aberration than that of a supernatural entity."

I rose.

Violet looked up, startled.

"Where are you going?" she whispered. "Leon's," I told her. "I need a drink. This affair plays the devil with my nerves."

"Charles. Don't leave me alone—tonight."

"Afraid of imaginary wolves?" I asked, gently. "Now really, my dear! If you want me to retain any faith in your mental stability, you'd better show me that at least you can be trusted to stay by yourself a few hours without collapsing."

"Charles—"

I went to the door, opened it. She winced as the moonlight trickled across the floor in a silver pool. I stood there, smiling at her.

"Violet, I feel that I've been most patient with you. But if you will not see a doctor, insist upon staying here, and refuse to admit that you're mentally upset—then prove it."

I turned, went out, slammed the door, and walked briskly down the path.

It was a beautiful night and I inhaled deeply as I swung along towards the crossing a mile ahead.

Impatience set the pace for me. I was in a hurry to reach my destination. Actually, I had no intention of visiting Leon's tavern.

I went to Lisa.

Lisa's little cabin was dark, and I wondered if she bad retired. Her aged father was already asleep, I knew. There would be no trouble from that source.

As I approached the cabin, I had already determined to arouse her, should she be in bed. A night like this was not meant for slumber.

A SUDDEN sound arrested me a short distance from the doorway. The door was opening, slowly. Instinctively I stepped back into shadow as a figure emerged from the cabin.

"Lisa!" I whispered.

She turned, came towards me.

"So you had the same idea," I murmured, taking her in my arms. Come on, let's get away from here. We'll go down towards the beach."

Silently, she walked beside me as I led her along the path that led to the water.

We stood staring up at the moon for a long moment. Then, as my arms tightened about her waist, Lisa turned to me and shook her head.

"No, Charles. I must go now."

"Go?"

"I have errands at the crossroads."

"Let them wait."

I cupped her face, bent to kiss her. She drew away.

"What's the matter, Lisa?"

"Let me alone!"

"Is there something—wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong. Go away, Charles." I really stared at her, then. And staring, saw. Saw that her face was unnaturally flushed, her eyes overly luminous, her lips parted more in protest than in passion.

She wasn't looking at me. She was looking through me, looking at the moon behind my body. Twin moons were mirrored in her eyes. They seemed to expand, enlarge, then replace red dark pupils with globes of silver fire.

"Go away, Charles," she muttered. "Go—quickly."

But I didn't go.

It isn't every day that one has the unusual opportunity to witness the spectacle of lycanthropic metamorphosis. And I was watching a woman turn into a wolf.

The first indication came in the form of respiratory change. Her breathing turned to panting; the panting to hoarse gasps. I watched her bosom rise and fall, rise and fall, rise and fall—and *change.*

Her shoulders sloped forward. The body did not stoop, but seemed to *grow* outward at a slant. The arms began to telescope into the shoulder sockets.

Lisa had fallen to the ground now: she writhed partly in shadow and partly in moonlight. But the moonlight no longer gleamed against her skin. The skin was darkening, coarsening, putting out hairy tufts.

Hers was an agony akin to that of parturition—and in a sense, it was parturition. She was giving birth, not to a new soul but to another aspect of her own. Agony and action alike were purely reflex.

It was fascinating to watch her skull change shape—as though the hands of an invisible sculpture were kneading and moulding the living, clay, squeezing the very bony structure into new conformations.

The elongated head seemed miraculously shorn of curls for a moment, and then the fine fur sprang up, the ears flared outward, the pinkish tips twitched along a thickened neck.

Her eyes slitted upward, while the features of the face convulsed, then converged into a protuberant muzzle. The grimace of involuntary rictus became a snarl, and fangs jutted forth.

Her skin darkened perceptibly—so that her image was akin to that on an overdeveloped photographic print "coming up" in the hypo bath.

Lisa's clothing had dropped away, and I watched the melting of the limbs as they foreshortened, furred, and flexed anew. The hands that had pawed the earth in agony now became paws.

The whole process occupied about three and a half minutes. I know, because I timed it with my watch.

Oh yes, I timed it carefully. I suppose I should have been frightened. But it is not given to every man—this opportunity of seeing a woman turn to a wolf. I regarded the transformation with what might well be called professional interest. Fascination precluded the presence of fear.

Now the metamorphosis was complete. The wolf stood before me, poised and panting.

OF COURSE, I understood. Understood why Lisa had few friends, why she spent so many evenings alone, why she had urged me to go away—and why she could so confidently predict the movements of the phantom wolf.

I stood there and smiled.

The feral eyes searched mine imploringly. I suppose she had expected me to exhibit shock, dread, or at the least a definite repulsion.

My smile was an unexpected answer. A whimper rose in the furry throat, changed to almost a purr. She was reassured now. “You’d better go,” I whispered.

Still she hesitated. I reached down and patted the lupine brow, still clammy from the pangs of transmutation. “It’s all right,” I said. “I understand, Lisa. You can trust me, you know. And it doesn’t make any difference in my feelings about—the two of us.”

The purring subsided deep in the great wolf’s shaggy breast.

“You’d better hurry now,” I coaxed. “Violet is all alone. You promised to surprise her.”

The gray beast turned and padded off into the forest behind.

I walked down to the lake and watched the moonlight play over the water.

All at once the delayed emotional reaction came. Everything was dear—too dear.

I was in league with a girl to drive my wife mad. The girl herself was not wholly sane. And now I had learned she was a werewolf. Perhaps I was a little cram myself.

But there it was. I couldn’t think of an answer. I couldn’t back down now. Things would go on according to plan. And in the end I’d get what I wanted. Or—would I?

Suddenly I began to sob.

It wasn’t remorse, and it wasn’t self-pity and it wasn’t fear. It was merely a thought that came to me—the thought of holding Lisa in my arms and feeling her change; of kissing Lisa's red lips and suddenly finding, pressed against my mouth, the leering muzzle of a wolf.

My sobs were cut short by the far-off, mocking howl from the depths of the woods.

I put my hands over my ears and shuddered.

IV

ALL at once I found myself running through the woods. I couldn't hear any howling, but the sound of my own gasps roared in my ears. I ran madly, blindly, tearing my face and hands as I careened toward the cabin.

The place was dark. I panted towards the door, tried it and found it locked.

Violet screamed from within, and I was glad to hear her. At least she was —alive.

For the thought had come to me suddenly.

Werewolves not only frighten . . . they *kill.*

So her screams was welcome, and when I opened the door she ran sobbing into my arms; and that was welcome, too.

"I saw it!" she whispered. "It came tonight, peered into the window. It was a wolf, but the eyes were human. They stared at me, those green eyes—and then it tried to open the door—it was howling—I think I fainted—oh Charles, help me—help me—"

I couldn't go through with it. I couldn't carry out my plans in the face of her utter terror. Instead I took her in my arms and whispered what I could to comfort her.

"Yes, dear," I murmured. "I know you saw it. Because I saw it too, in the woods. That's why I came. And I heard it howling, too. I know now that you were right—there is a wolf."

"A werewolf," she insisted.

“A wolf, anyway. And tomorrow I’ll go down to the crossroads and we’ll get up a party and find the beast.”

She smiled at me, then. She couldn’t control her trembling, but she managed to smile.

“There’s nothing to be afraid of, darling,” I told her. “I’m here with you now. It’s all right.”

We slept that night in each other’s arms, like frightened children.

And that’s just about what we were, at that.

It was past noon when I awoke. Violet was calmly preparing breakfast.

I rose and did things to my haggard face with a razor. The food was ready when I sat down, but I couldn’t eat much.

“The tracks are all around the cabin,” Violet told me. Her voice didn’t waver as she spoke—my belief gave her strength.

“All right,” I answered. “I’m leaving for the crossroads now. I’ll tell Leon, Doctor Meroux, some of the boys. Perhaps I’ll go to the Mountie Headquarters if I can get a ride over there.”

“You mean you’ll join the hunt?”

“Certainly. I’m going to be in at the kill. It’s the least I can do—or I’d never forgive myself for misjudging you.”

She kissed me.

“You won’t be afraid of staying alone, now?” I asked.

“No. Not any more.”

“Good.”

I left.

I did a lot of thinking during my walk to the crossroads. But my meditations were rudely interrupted when I walked into Leon’s tavern at the crossroads and demanded a drink.

Fat Leon was talking to little Doctor Meroux down at the end of the bar. His arms were flying and his eyes were rolling, but when he saw me he halted and came up to where I was standing. He leaned across the bar and stared.

“Ah, *Meestaire* Colby, it is good to see you.”

“Thanks, Leon. Been pretty busy lately—couldn’t get in here very often.”

“Is it at your cabin that you have been busy?”

Again the stare. I hesitated, bit my lip. Why should I hesitate to answer?

“Yes. My wife hasn’t been feeling so well, and I’ve spent most of my time with her.”

“It is lonely where you are, eh?”

“You know how it is,” I shrugged. “Why?”

“Nothing. It is merely that I wondered if you chanced to hear anything these nights.”

“Hear anything? What could I hear? Frogs and crickets, and—”

“Wolves, perhaps?”

I blinked. Fat Leon stared at me.

“Have you heard the howl of *le loup?”* he whispered.

My head shook. I hoped he was watching that instead of my trembling hands.

“Strange. One would think that across the lake the cries would echo.”

“But there are no wolves around here—”

“Ah!” breathed Leon. “You are mistaken.”

“How do you know?”

“Do you remember Big Pierre the guide—that dark one who lives across the lake from you?” asked Leon.

“Yes.”

“Big Pierre left yesterday with a party bound for the river. His daughter, Yvonne, stayed behind to tend to the cabin. She was alone in the night. It is because of her that we know about the wolf.”

“She told you?”

“She did not tell us, no. But this morning the good Doctor Meroux chanced to pass her door and paused to bid her good day. He found her lying in the yard. *Le loup* attacked her in the night, may her soul rest in peace.”

“Dead!”

"Assuredly. One does not like to think of it. Doctor Meroux lost the tracks in the forest, but when Big Pierre returns he will hunt the beast down, yes."

Doctor Meroux edged along the bar, his mustache fairly bristling with excitement.

"What do you think of that, Charles? A renegade wolf loose in this territory—a killer. I'm going to notify the Mounted Police and see that a warning is given. If you could have seen that poor girl's body—" I downed my drink and turned away hastily.

"Violet!" I muttered. "She's all alone. I must get back to her."

I hurried out of Leon's tavern, half-ran down the sunlit street.

NOW I knew where Lisa had gone after she left Violet. Now I knew that werewolves do more than change their shape.

I swung towards her roadside stand. It was closed. Abandoning caution, I hastened towards her door. The only response to my knocking was the querulous mumble of the paralytic old man within.

But as I turned away, the door swung open. Lisa stood there, blinking against the sunlight. She was pale, drawn, and her hair hung loosely down her bare back.

"Charles—what is it?"

I pulled her over to the shade of the trees behind the house. She stood there, staring up at me, her face haggard and her eyes dull with fatigue.

Then I slapped her, hard. She jerked, tried to dodge, but my other hand gripped her shoulder. I hit her again. She began to whimper softly, like a dog. Like a wolf.

I hit her again, with all my might. I felt a choking sensation in my throat and the words wouldn't come clearly.

"You little fool!" I muttered. "Why did you do it?"

She wept. I shook her fiercely.

“Stop that! You think I don’t know about last night? Well, I do. And so does everybody around here. Why did you do it, Lisa?” Then she understood, and knew that she could not hope to deceive me.

“I had to,” she whispered. “You don’t know what it’s like. After I left your wife at the cabin I went back around the lake. It was then that it—came over me.”

“What came over you?”

“The hunger.”

She said it simply.

“You can’t understand that, can you? The way the hunger comes. It gnaws at your stomach and then it gnaws at your brain, so that you cannot think. You can only—act. And when I passed Big Pierre’s cabin, Yvonne was at the well, drawing water in the darkness. I remember seeing her there and then—I forget.”

I shook her until her teeth rattled.

“You forget, eh? Well, the girl’s dead.”

“Thank *le bon Dieu!”* Lisa breathed.

I gasped. “You thank God for—that?”

“Certainly. For if she did not die—if she survived the bite of one like myself—she would become such an unfortunate being as I am.”

“Oh.” I scarcely whispered the word. “Don’t you understand? These things I do are not of my choosing. It is the hunger, always the hunger. In the past when I felt the—change—coming, I went far away so that no one would know. But last night the hunger came swiftly and I could not help myself. Still it is better that she is dead, poor child.”

“That’s what you think,” I muttered. “Except for one slight detail. It ruins our plans.”

“How so?”

“My wife won’t be frightened by thoughts of an imaginary wolf any more. When she comes babbling of a haunting beast, no one will think her crazy. Everybody knows that there *is* a wolf, now.”

“I see. What do you propose?”

“I propose nothing. We’ll have to let matters rest.”

Her arms were around me, her bruised face pressed to my own. “Charles,” she sobbed. “You mean we won’t be together—”

“How can you expect that, after what you did?”

“Don’t you love me, Charles?”

She was kissing me now, and her lips were soft. It was not the kiss of a wolf but the warm, vibrant kiss of a lovely woman. Tier arms were soft. I felt myself responding to her embrace, felt against the incredible crescendo of desire this girl could rouse in me. And I weakened.

“Well think of something,” I told her. “But you must promise me—what happened last night will never happen again. And you must not go near my wife.”

“I promise.” She sighed. “It is a hard thing to keep, that promise. But I shall do my best. You will come to me this evening, no? Then we can be together, and I will have you to protect me from my—hunger.”

“I’ll come to you tonight,” I said.

Her eyes flickered with sudden fear. “Charles,” she whispered. “You had better come *before* the moon rises.”

V

WHEN I got back to the cabin, Violet was waiting for me outside the door. “Have you heard?” she said.

“How do you know?” I parried. “There’s a man here to see you. He told me. He asked me about the wolf, and I mentioned what has been happening lately, he’s in there now, waiting for you.”

“You told him,” I said. “And he wants to see me.”

“Yes. You’d better go in alone. His name is Craigin, and he’s with the Mounted Police.”

There was nothing else to do but go inside.

I had never met a member of the Northwest Mounted Police before. Except for his uniform, Mr. Cragin might have been a big city copper. He had the manner and the mind.

“Mr. Charles Colby?” he said, rising from the armchair as I entered.

“Yes sir. What can I do for you?”

“I think you know. It’s about the death of that little Yvonne Beauchamps, across the lake.”

I sighed. “They told me at the crossroads. Wolf, wasn’t it? Wanted to know if I’d seen any signs of one.”

“Have you?”

I hesitated. That was a mistake. The big man in uniform looked up at me and smiled.

“It doesn’t matter. Anyone who bothers to take a look around this cabin will see wolf-tracks galore. Matter of fact, there’s a trail leading from here right around the lake to the Beauchamps place. I followed it from there this afternoon.”

I couldn’t say anything. I tried to light a cigarette and wished I hadn’t.

“Besides,” said Cragin, “I’ve been talking to your wife. She seems to know all about this wolf.”

“Really? Did she tell you she saw one here last night?”

“She did.” Cragin stopped smiling. “By the way, where were *you* last night when the wolf appeared?”

“I was in town.”

“At the tavern?”

“No. Just walking.”

“Walking, eh?”

The dialogue was far from sparkling, but it held my interest. I could see Cragin was leading up to something. And he did.

“Let’s drop that angle for a moment,” he suggested. “I have all the facts in the case anyway, just checking now to see if we can discover the habits of this renegade. We’re getting up a hunting party, you know. Don’t suppose you’d be interested in joining it—out of your line, isn’t it?”

I said nothing.

"Well, isn't it?" he repeated. "You're a writer."

I nodded.

"I'm told you do a lot of yarns about the supernatural. You just finished one about some kind of invisible monster, your wife says."

I nodded again. It was easy enough to keep nodding.

Cragin stood up, casually. "Do you ever get any funny ideas?" he asked me.

"Meaning?"

"Seems to me that an author like yourself would naturally be a little bit—different. If you'll pardon my saying so, I'd imagine that a man who writes about monsters must get a pretty queer slant on a lot of things."

I GULPED, but covered it up with a quick grin. "Are you inferring that when I write a story about a monster it's part of my autobiography?" I asked.

That wasn't exactly what he expected. I followed through.

"What's the matter with you?" I drawled. "Do you think I look like a vampire?" Cragin forced a laugh. "It's my business to be suspicious. Let me see your teeth before I answer."

I opened my mouth and said, "Ah!"

He didn't like that, either.

I saw my advantage and seized it.

"Just what are you driving at, Cragin?" I demanded. "You know that my wife has seen a wolf around here. You know that it appeared last night. You know that it left here and apparently went around the lake, killed the girl, and disappeared.

"We've given you all the information you wanted. Unless, of course, you have a vague idea that I might be some kind of a monster myself. Maybe your scientific police theory points to the notion that I change myself into a wolf, frighten my wife, and then go out and murder a victim in the dark."

I had him on the ropes now. “I’m not used to you backwoods Dick Tracy characters,” I said. “Of course I knew that some of the half-breeds around here believe in ghosts and werewolves and demons, but I didn’t think members of the Mounted Police adopted such superstitions.”

“But really, Mr. Colby, I—”

My hand was on the door. I pointed, smiling pleasantly. “My advice to you, sir, is to *go* chase your wolf.”

He took it, and departed.

I sat down and allowed myself the luxury of a good sweat as Violet came in.

For the first time, I was behaving sensibly. My direct attack had certainly dispelled any vagrant notions Cragin might have harbored. I had shamed him out of any faith he might possess in the element of truth behind werewolf-whisperings.

I decided to follow it up by doing the same for Violet. Casually, I recounted the details of our interview.

She listened in silence.

“Now, dearest, you see the truth,” I concluded. “The wolf is real enough—but it’s only a wolf. You thought it might be something more, because it exhibited intelligence. Doctor Meroux tells me that renegades like that are used to human beings and are much more cunning.

“But when it killed, it killed like an animal. It’s a wolf and nothing more. Tonight they’ll hunt it down and you can rest easier.” Violet put her hand on my arm.

“You’ll stay here?” she asked.

I frowned.

“No. I’m going back to the crossing and join the hunting party. I told you I would last night. And it’s a point of honor with me to be in on the kill.”

“I wish you wouldn’t—I’m frightened—”

“Lock the doors. A wolf can’t unbolt locks.”

“But—”

“I’m going hunting. Believe me, you’ll be safer if I’m away tonight.”

VI

THE moon had almost risen when I came to Lisa under the trees behind her doorway.

She stood there in shadow, and something caught at my throat as I realized, with relief, that a woman waited for me and not a wolf.

Her smile reassured me, as did her quick caress.

“I knew you’d come,” she said. “Now we can be together. Oh, Charles, I’m afraid.”

“Afraid?”

“Yes. Haven’t you heard? That Cragin—the Mounted Policeman—he has been talking. He came to see me today and asked if I knew anything about the wolf. Leon, down at the tavern, has been gossiping like an old woman about the way I go out at night. And he has been carrying tales of werewolves.”

“You needn’t worry,” I soothed. Briefly, I repeated the substance of my interview with Cragin.

“But they are hunting tonight,” Lisa insisted. “Leon has closed his place, and most of the men are following Cragin. They left at dusk, to go around the lake. They will start from Big Pierre’s cabin and try to track down the wolf.”

“Why should that worry you?” I responded, smiling. “There is no wolf. Tonight you and I will be together.”

“That is right,” Lisa answered. “I am safe as long as I’m with you.” She gestured me towards the bluff beyond the trees.

“Shall we sit here and talk?” she suggested. “Leon is closed, but I went there earlier in the day and bought some wine. You like wine, don’t you, Charles?”

She produced a jug and we sprawled on the grass.

The wine was sweet but strong. As the moon rose in the east, I drank.

Suddenly she gripped my shoulder.

“Listen!”

I heard it from far away—far away across the lake. The faint yelling of human voices intermingled with a shrill, monotonous yapping.

"They're hunting, and they have hounds."

Lisa shuddered. I drank deeply, drew her close'.

"There's nothing to fear," I comforted her. Nevertheless, as I stared at the sky I felt a rising fear; rising in proportion to the increased clamor from across the lake.

They were hunting a werewolf—and she was in my arms.

Lisa's proud pagan profile was limned against the pale and half-gnawed face of the moon above.

Moon face and girl face, staring at each other. And I, staring at both. . . .

When ye moon waxeth, so doth ye accursed taint in ye veins of ye werewulf—"Lisa," I whispered. "Are you all right?"

"Of course, Charles. Here, drink!"

"I mean, you don't feel as if something is going to happen to—you."

"No. Not tonight. I'm all right. I'm with you now."

She laughed and kissed me. I drank to drown the dread I could not drive away.

"You won't bother Violet again? You'll stop prowling by night until this dies down?"

"Yes, of course." She held the bottle up to my lips.

"You'll be patient? You'll wait until I can think of another plan?"

"Whatever you say, lover."

I FACED her. "It may take time. Perhaps we can't be together as quickly as I'd planned. There may be no way out except divorce. Violet's strict about such things and she'll fight. The legal angle might take several years to work out before I was free. Can you stand waiting that long?"

"Divorce? Years?"

"You must promise me that you'll wait. That you won't harm Violet or—anybody. Otherwise we can't go on together."

She faced me, face in shadow. Then she bent low and sought my lips “with her mouth.

“Very well, Charles; if that is the only way, I can wait. I can wait.”

I drank again. Everything was very clear. Then it blurred. Then it was clear again. Yapping of hounds roared in my ears, then faded into a distant buzzing. Lisa’s face loomed large, then swam out of sight.

It was the wine, but I didn’t care. I had Lisa’s promise, and Lisa’s lips. I couldn’t stand the tension any longer. These last few days had been perpetual nightmare to me.

I drank my fill of lips and wine.

Some time later, I slept. . . .

“Wake up!”

The voice rasped urgently in my ears. Suddenly I was being cuffed on the neck. “Wake up, Colby! Hurry!”

I opened by eyes, sat up. The moon was high overhead, and its pallid rays fell upon the face bending towards mine—the face of Doctor Meroux.

“Sleeping,” I muttered. “Where’s Lisa?”

“Lisa? Nobody’s here but yourself. Wake up, man—come with me.”

I rose, lurched a moment, regained my balance.

“You all right?”

“Yes, Doc. What is it?”

“I don’t know if—”

There was indecision in his voice and a hint of dread. I caught the hint, held it. Suddenly I was sober and shouting.

“Tell me, Doctor. What has happened?”

“It’s your wife,” he said, slowly. “The wolf came to your cabin tonight while you were away. I happened by and stopped in to see if everything was all right. When I arrived the wolf had already departed. But—”

“Yes?”

“The wolf had tom Violet’s throat!”

VII

WE RACED in darkness, in a black blur born of the night without and the fear within.

Lisa had lied. She had given me wine, waited until I slept, and then struck—

I could think of nothing else.

We reached the cabin. Doctor Meroux knelt beside the bed where Violet lay. She turned and smiled at me, weakly.

"She's still alive?" I gasped.

"Yes. Her throat was torn, but I arrived and stopped the bleeding. It isn't too serious, but she's been badly frightened. Keep her quiet for a day or so."

I knelt beside my wife, pressed my lips to her cheek above the bandaged neck. "Thank God for that," I whispered. "Don't question her," Meroux advised, "Let her rest now. Evidently I arrived just after the attack. The wolf must have come in through the window. You'll notice the shattered glass. When I came near it bolted out again and scampered off. The tracks are all around."

I walked outside the cabin with him. It was as he said.

"The hunting party will be here shortly," he told me. "They can pick up the trail easily enough now, I think."

I nodded.

Suddenly the baying sounded from the forest. The voices of frantic men blended with the equally frenzied ululations of the dogs.

Doctor Meroux tweaked his mustache and turned. "They must have found it!" he cried. "Listen!"

Shouts and and murmurs. Sounds of scrabbling in the underbrush. A shrill cry. And then—

A volley of rifle shots.

"Nom de Dieu! They have it!" the doctor exulted.

Baying of hounds, closer now. Running footsteps snapped twigs in the brush beyond. Voices sounded near.

And then, out of the clearing before the cabin, crawled the wolf.

THE great gray beast was panting, spent. It dragged its broken body across the open space, leaving a black trail of blood. The huge head was lolling, fangs agape, and it wheezed painfully as it made its way toward us.

Meroux pulled out a revolver, cocked it. I held his hand.

“No,” I whispered. “No!”

I walked toward the wolf. Its eyes met mine, but they held no recognition—only the glaze of descending death.

“Lisa,” I whispered. “You couldn’t wait.” The doctor didn’t hear my mutterings, but the wolf did. The head jerked up, and for a moment a strangled sound issued from the shaggy throat.

Then the wolf died.

I saw it die. That was simple enough. Its paws stiffened, the head came down, and the wolf lay prone.

I could stand watching the wolf die. What came next was not so easy to endure.

For Lisa died.

When I had witnessed the change from woman to wolf, I coldly timed it with my watch.

Now, watching the transformation of wolf to woman, I could only shudder and cry out.

The body expanded, writhed, flexed. The ears sank into the skull, the limbs elongated, put forth white flesh. Dr. Meroux was shouting beside me, but I couldn’t hear what he said. I could only stare as the wolf-form vanished and Lisa’s nude loveliness burst into view like a blossoming flower—a pale white lily of death.

She lay there, a dead girl in the moonlight. I sobbed and turned away.

“No—it cannot be!”

The doctor’s harsh voice recalled me. He pointed with a palsied finger at the white form at our feet.

I stared and saw—*another* change!

This change I cannot bear to describe. I can only remember, now, that Lisa had never told me just how or *when* she had become a victim of lycanthropy. I can only remember that the feast of the werewolf preserves an unnatural youth.

For the woman at our feet aged before our eyes.

Woman to wolf—such a metamorphosis is hideous enough to behold. But more shocking still was this final abomination. The lovely girl became a raddled hag.

And the hag became—worse.

At the end, something incredibly old lay lifeless on the ground. Something wrinkled and shrivelled gaped up at the moon with a mummy's grin.

Lisa had assumed her rightful shape at last.

THE rest must have happened very swiftly. The men came, with the dogs. Dr. Meroux bent over the thing that had been wolf and woman, and now was neither. I fainted.

When I awoke the following afternoon, Dr. Meroux was dressing Violet's wound. She was well enough to be up, and she brought me some soup. I slept again.

The following morning Meroux came again. I felt strong enough to sit up, and to question him. What he had to report reassured me.

Apparently, Dr. Meroux had been wise. He had confirmed the werewolf story, but he did not identify the dead creature as Lisa. With Cragin's help, the matter was being hushed up. After all, there was no point in any further investigation. For the sake of local policy, it was best for all concerned to let it drop.

Violet was almost her old self again.

Last night I made a full confession to her.

She only smiled.

Perhaps, when she is rested, she will return to the city and divorce me. I do not know. She had not offered forgiveness, nor any comment. She seems restless, perturbed.

Today she went out for a walk.

I have been sitting all afternoon, typing out this account. I imagine now, since the sun had set, that she will return. Unless she had already slipped off quietly to the city. Still, with that wound still half-healed, she probably wouldn’t travel yet.

The moon is coming up across the lake, but I don’t want to look at it. I can’t seem to bear any reminder of what happened. By writing this, I hope to cleanse myself of the memories.

Perhaps I can find a measure of peace in the future. I’m sure now that Violet hates me, but she will get her divorce and I shall carry on.

Yes. She looked as if she hated me. Because I sent a werewolf to kill her—

But I’m rambling. I mustn’t think of that. No.

And yet I have to think of something. I don’t want to stop writing, yet. Then I’d be forced to sit here alone, while the night comes down like a dark shroud over a dead earth.

Yes, I’d have to sit here and listen to the stillness. I’d have to watch the moon rising over the lake, and wait for Violet to reborn.

I wonder where she has wandered today? With that wound in her throat, it isn’t good for her to be out.

That wound in her throat—where Lisa bit her.

There’s something I’m trying to remember about *that.* I can’t seem to think clearly. But I know I’m trying to recall a point about her wound. It all ties in with my fear of the moonlight and being alone here.

What is it?

Now I know!

Yes, I remember.

And I pray that Violet has wandered off, that she does not come back.

She was restless today, and she went off alone in the *woods.* I know why she left. The wound is *working.*

I RECALL what Lisa said when I told her that little Yvonne had died. She thanked God—because if Yvonne had survived her bite, she too would have become a . . .

Violet was bitten. Violet didn't die. Now the wound is working. And the moon is high, high over the lake. Violet, running through the forest, is a . . .

There! Outside the window—I can see her!

I can see—*it.*

It is creeping toward the cabin as I write. I can see it in the moonlight; the moonlight that glistens on the sleek fur along its back. The moonlight is gleaming on the black snout, too, and on sharp, pointed fangs. Violet hates me.

Violet is coming back. But not as—a woman.

Wait! Did I lock the door? Yes.

Good. She can't enter. Look at her pawing at the outside of the door. Scratching. And whining, deep in her throat. That throat—those jaws!

Perhaps Cragin will come, or Dr. Meroux. If not, I'll spend the night sitting here. In the morning she will go away. Then, when she shows up again I can have her put away.

Yes, I'll wait.

But listen to that howling! It gets on my nerves. She knows I'm in here. She can hear me typing. She knows. And if she could get at me—

She can't. I'm safe here.

Now what is she up to? She isn't at the door any more. I can hear those paws padding, moving around under the window. *The window.*

The pane of glass was shattered when Lisa came the other night. There is no glass in the window—

She's howling. She's going to lean in. Yes.

I see it now . . . the body of a leaping wolf against the moonlight . . . Violet . . . no . . . Vio . . .

One Way to Mars

JOE GIBSON was higher than hell and he didn't know where he was and he didn't care as long as the bar was in front of him and he was laughing and somebody was singing in a sad voice very far away and he said sure he'd have another one and then—There was this character in the brown overcoat.

He was an odd little whack and he kept his pockets and his collar turned up and his hat-brim pulled down low like an extra in a gangster movie.

The whack was talking to him but it took a minute before the words reached him and made sense.

"Trouble with you, friend, you need a little vacation," said the whack. "Sort of a get away from it all."

"Sure, sure," said Gibson, trying to find his glass. It was lost down there somewhere in the fog.

"I've been watching you, friend," said the whack. "Said to myself, there's a man with trouble. There's a man who needs to get out of all this. You look lost, friend."

"Sure," said Gibson. "Sure. I'm a lost soul. Will you have a drink or kindly get the hell out of here?"

The little whack didn't pay any attention. He went right on talking in an earnest voice. A Dutch uncle.

"I'm with the Ace Travel Bureau, buddy. How'd you like to buy a ticket?"

"Where to?" asked Gibson, as if he gave a damn.

The whack in the brown overcoat shrugged.

“How about a ticket to Mars?” he asked.

Gibson let that one sink in for a minute. Then he grinned.

“Mars, eh? How much it cost me?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Make it cheap for you. Let’s say $2.88.”

“$2.88 to Mars? Sounds very reasonable.” Gibson paused. “Is this a round trip or just one way?”

The whack coughed apologetically. “Uh—one way. You see, we haven’t been able to figure out how to make a return trip yet.”

“Bet you don’t sell many tickets,” said Gibson.

“We have our customers,” said the character in the overcoat. “You interested?”

“I don’t think so.” Gibson found the glass, drew it up through the fog and swallowed the scotch with a shudder.

“You will be interested some other time, perhaps?” coaxed the whack.

“Listen, you—” said Gibson, suddenly.

“I’ve had you on my list for quite a while, friend,” the whack mumbled, not noticing how Gibson’s fist closed around the glass in his hand. “I know we’ll do business sooner or later.”

“How about right now?” said Gibson, softly.

He drew his hand back, intending to smash the whack in the face. He was set for it, his body began to pivot, and he braced himself for the moment when the blow would land solid, hard.

And then he followed his fist and the fist shot out, out past the stars and into the darkness beyond. Joe Gibson went with it and fell through the darkness as it tunnelled down . . . deep down . . .

2

“JEEZ what a beaut you had last night,” said Maxie, stirring the cup before he placed it to Joe Gibson’s lips. “Were you stinko but completely.”

"Shut up," said Gleason.

"The face on the bar room floor. Out cold," said Maxie, forcing the contents of the cup down Gibson's unwilling throat.

"Forget it," said Gibson, as soon as he could talk.

Maxie shrugged.

"OK, pal," he said. "I'll forget it.

You're riding high. I line you up a five hundred a week deal with the hottest name combo in the business and what do you do? Go out and plaster yourself over half the brass rails in town and pass out in front of the guy who does the pillar for *Billboard.* You tell me to forget it. So I'm willing to forget everything—and that includes you." Gibson sat up in bed. He moved very quickly for a man with a hangover.

"No Maxie," he said. "I didn't mean it. Honest I didn't. I'm sorry. And I never would of socked the guy if he hadn't gone and cracked wise about this Mars stuff. I'm just standing and minding my own business when he ups with his wise lip about a trip. So I let him have it and went out on my face."

Maxie stared at him.

"I saw it happen, Joe," he murmured. "You're standing at the bar with nobody within ten feet of you on either side. You start mumbling to yourself, and then you turn around and haul off and go down for the count. Hitting air."

"But the whack in the brown overcoat—" Gibson began.

"I didn't see any whack in a brown overcoat," said Maxie, slowly. "All I see is a whack named Joe Gibson doing a nose-dive with a snootful."

Gibson sighed, "That's how it was?"

"That's how it was."

"I had the snakes," Joe Gibson shuddered.

Maxie sat down on the bed. "Remember the old days, Joe?" he asked. "You was a punk from K.C. when I picked you out of the Rialto pit. Playing non-union dates at stags. I spotted you, got you the bookings. Made you work. Brought out your style."

“Where’s your violin?” asked Gibson. “You need soft music for this line.”

“I’m not handing you a line,” said Maxie. “I’m just telling you.”

“What you telling me?” Joe Gibson sat straight up and he brushed Maxie’s hand off his shoulder. “So all right. You picked me up in the gutter and you made a big horn out of me. Not a side man, a big horn. Big enough for Goodman, Shaw, Miller, anybody.

“Like hell you did! It’s me, Joe Gibson—I’m the guy who blows his heart out through the tube. You know a good thing when you see it so all right, you build me up. But you get your ten per cent out of it, don’t you? I’m the musician. You’re just the flesh peddler.” Maxie didn’t move. His smile was slow and sad.

“It’s not that, Joe,” he sighed. “I don’t want the credit. You was a good kid. You worked hard. But not any more.”

He rose. “I don’t figure it,” he said. “First there’s the lush act you pulled in Scranton, when you got stinko on the stand. And the way you run out on that combo I set for the Rainbow Room, almost. And the time I hauled you out of the jam in Chi when you didn’t show for the Decca recordings.

“Between that wrongo babe of yours and the rotgut you’re getting a pretty good reputation for yourself, huh? Joe Gibson, one of the best boys on trumpet in the business. But don’t buy him! Because he’s also one of the best boys on blondes and bourbon.”

Joe Gibson was sitting almost bent double. His head hung in his lap and he sobbed.

“Awright,” said Maxie. “I don’t know what’s got into you. I don’t know what you’re scared of. Maybe you’ll snap out of it all of a sudden. Don’t make me promises, though.

“I’m gonna see what I can do. Maybe I can square that booking. The rest is up to you. Get some rest. Call you tomorrow.”

Maxie went out.

Joe Gibson slid back under the covers. His face gradually stopped twitching. He prepared to sleep.

The phone rang.

Joe Gibson slid one hand over to the bedside cradle phone.

“Hello,” said a familiar voice. Gibson couldn’t place it so he grunted softly.

“I was just wondering,” said the voice, “about our little talk last night. Made up your mind yet about that trip to Mars?”

Joe Gibson slammed the receiver down with a bang. His head disappeared under the covers and he lay shuddering and sobbing for a long time.

3

OPENING night was solid.

It had to be. The week before it was just pure hell. Maxie had worked like a dog sewing the contract up again. Joe Gibson sweated the alcohol out of his system in rehearsal.

Now he sat on the bandstand waiting for the downbeat and he had the trumpet poised in his lap. He knew it was all right.

There was just one thing wrong. His eyes. Joe Gibson’s eyes hurt him. They hurt him because of all the squinting he’d done for the past week. Squinting at faces in crowds, faces he saw from bus tops or through the windows.

Joe Gibson was looking for somebody. A little whack in a brown overcoat. He was afraid of seeing him. And somehow he was more afraid because he *didn’t* see him.

Now he gazed down at the dim dance floor, blinded by the harsh spot from overhead, and he squinted again.

So his eyes hurt, and all the time he kept kidding himself that it was all right, he was all right, this was just another opening—

But he prayed for the moment when he’d put the horn to his lips, and blow out all the fear and the worry, blow out the thought of squinting and the thoughts that lay behind the squinting.

The hands holding the trumpet trembled and little beads of sweat dropped along the sides of the horn.

One last hasty glimpse of the tables bordering the dance floor. No brown overcoat.

Downbeat.

Joe Gibson raised his horn.

Then it was all right for sure.

The crowd was dancing. Joe Gibson didn't even bother to look for the whack any more. His eyes were closed. He was out of this world. Riding for the stars on a trumpet, sweeping up with a boogie beat.

It was hot, solid; something to hang onto. He twisted each note, reluctant to let it go. He wanted a solo ride, wanted to play his horn, keep his eyes closed, keep his brain closed to everything except the sending sound. Out of this world.

He was all right at last. Completely grooved through each number until intermission.

Then Joe Gibson sat back after the signature and realized for the first time that his shirt and dickey were wringing wet and his new tux was ripped under the left arm. He had been too solid to notice. And now the other boys were leaving the stand for a smoke and the crowd drifted off the dance floor.

Joe Gibson got up. He saw Maxie waiting for him over behind the bandstand. He tucked his horn into the case and stood up straight, took a quick stride to the steps behind the stand.

He lanced out at the deserted floor. The deserted floor that was not *quite* deserted.

A brown blur spun out there beyond the glare of the lights. A solitary figure weaved into a solo dance of its own. And the figure whirled up to the platform in a strutting glide, and Joe Gibson saw the face under the pulled-down hat brim and then he heard the words rustle up.

“Enjoyed your playing. You’re almost ready for your Mars’ trip now, I believe.”

Joe Gibson cleared the bandstand in a leap. He wasn’t quite fast enough. The brown overcoat bobbed off between the tables. Nobody seemed to notice it at all.

But almost everybody saw Joe Gibson jump from the bandstand and run screaming out of the room into the streets beyond.

4

JOE was all right as long as Max stayed in the room with him but then the croaker told him to step outside and he began to talk to Joe alone.

The croaker was a smooth soft-speaking guy and he seemed to know his business. Maxie said he was the best psychiatrist in the racket and Maxie knew about those things.

But now Maxie bad stepped out and Joe was lying down on the couch with a light shining in his eyes, and the croaker was telling him to relax, take it easy, stop thinking and just say whatever popped into his head.

It reminded Joe too much of those gangster pictures where they give a guy the third degree. But at that it was better to lie down than to have the croaker tapping him on the knee and making him stretch out his arms with his eye? closed. That was supposed to test your reflexes, but Joe Gibson didn’t give a damn about his reflexes. He was afraid of the man in the brown overcoat. The man he couldn’t catch, the man he couldn’t even see on the street the night he chased him out of the cafe and lost his job.

Joe began to explain this to the croaker, choosing his words very carefully, because after all he didn’t want this psychiatrist to think there was anything the matter with his *really*.

It wasn’t as if he heard voices, or stuff like that. There was nothing wrong with him except seeing that whack.

But the croaker kept asking questions, and pretty soon he had Joe admitting all kinds of stuff—not so much admitting as remembering. Dizzy ideas he had when he was a kid. Screwy things.

Like when he used to sneak off to sit in the coal cellar after his old man had a fight with his old lady. He'd fall asleep down in the basement and dream that he wasn't in a coal cellar at all—that he wasn't really *anywhere.* There was no coal cellar in those dreams and no upstairs, either. No outside and no people. There was just the dark and Joe Gibson.

Joe told the croaker a lot of dizzy things like that. He could remember more and more as he lay there under the lamp. He told about getting his first horn and practicing indoors all the time so he wouldn't have to play with the gang outside.

He told about getting his first job and the way he'd run off without collecting his dough from the stick, and then he got to telling how he loved music—particularly the kind where you didn't have to read notes but just played it out of your own head and it did something to you, the way liquor did.

Then Joe realized he was getting his story pretty close to *now*, and he would have to tell about the man in the brown overcoat and he didn't want to do that, so he talked louder and faster to keep the thoughts back, but it didn't work, and then he was spitting it all out and the croaker was firing questions in a very low voice, and he said yes, he'd seen the man at the bar and no, he wasn't queer-looking and yes, he did have a face and the skin around the mouth was like crumpled tissue-paper.

Funny . . . Joe didn't know he remembered about the skin around the whack's mouth until the croaker asked him.

Now it felt kind of good to get it off his chest. So he told all about it, what he said and what the guy said about the Ace Travel Bureau and the $2.88 ticket to Mars, one way only, and about the other customers the man said they got, and he told about passing out.

Then he explained about the phone call and the dance floor. Only he kept insisting to the croaker that he didn't have anything to drink this last time, and he saw the little whack in the brown overcoat just as plain, and he could hear his voice, so he wasn't—nuts.

The croaker smiled and said Joe was all right and then he called Maxie back and they stood talking together for a while in the next room and Joe couldn't catch anything of what they said.

The croaker came in again and showed him a telephone book. It was the Classified one, and he opened it up to where the travel bureaus were and there was no Ace Travel Bureau in the list.

That made Joe feel a little better until the croaker began to ask him what he knew about the planet Mars. Then he realized what the guy was driving at, and shut up like a clam. The croaker asked him what the number 288 meant to him and Joe played dumb like a fox.

So the croaker smiled and told him to get up and he should come back in a couple days when they checked the physical tests.

Maxie told Joe to run along to the hotel alone, he'd be up in a few minutes after he settled the bill with the psychiatrist.

So Joe got up and walked out.

There was a patient in the waiting room reading a National Geographic, but when Joe walked through, the patient put his magazine down and Joe saw the little man in the brown overcoat.

"I've got your ticket all made out," said the whack. "You can leave today if you like."

Joe didn't say anything. He just stood there, staring down at the crinkly crumpled skin around the whack's lips and the little eyes under the shadow of his hat brim. Joe looked at the brown overcoat with the stains on it, and the big ragged moth holes along the collar.

He took a deep breath and he could smell the coat and something else—something old and stale and sour.

So Joe knew he could see and hear and smell this thing and all the while the little guy was grinning up at him and then he reached into his pocket and Joe knew he was fumbling around for his ticket to Mars.

This time Joe was ready. He jumped him in a flash, and he felt his fingers close around something and choke and choke and everything turned red and black and back to red again and somebody was screaming, way off in the distance and it was Joe screaming but he didn't know that any more because he went out cold.

5

WHEN Joe Gibson woke up he was lying in bed again and he felt good. Very good.

At first he couldn't figure it out and then he remembered why. Because he'd jumped the whack, of course. He wondered if he'd killed him. He couldn't have or he would be in jail now, not in his hotel room.

Still, it was a good feeling. He wanted to celebrate.

Maxie came in. He didn't look as though he felt so good.

Joe began to tell him he was all right now, but Maxie kept mumbling something about the fit he'd thrown in the croaker's office.

Joe proved he wasn't crazy right then and there. He admitted he had thrown a fit and he didn't say anything about choking the whack in the brown overcoat.

"I think I'll get dressed and go out for a. walk," Joe said.

He knew Maxie wouldn't like this, but he felt too good to care.

But Maxie didn't try to stop him. He said, "OK," and sat down on the bed and lit a cigar while Joe dressed. He stared at the carpet and frowned when Joe began to whistle.

"Joe," he said.

"Yeah?"

"You aren't gonna take a walk."

“Who says?”

“You got to take things easy.”

“Sure. I am taking things easy. I’ll be bade early.”

“No. That’s not what I mean, Joe. You’re going to rest up in bed. In a sanatorium.”

“What the—”

“I been talking to the Doc. They’re coming for you in half an hour. It’s nothing to get excited about now, you’ll be out again in—”

That’s the way it was going to be. He understood the setup now.

Joe walked over to the bureau.

“Where are you going?” asked Maxie.

“Got to get my cigarettes. Don’t worry. It’s all right. I understand everything.”

“After all, it’s for your own good,” said Maxie, still not looking at Joe.

“Of course it is,” Joe said. He opened the drawer.

“No hard feelings,” said Maxie.

“No hard feelings,” said Joe.

He turned away from the bureau and shot Maxie twice through the stomach with the gun he’d pulled from the drawer.

6

JOE wasn’t crazy and he’d never felt better in his life, or else he couldn’t have figured it so perfect.

He went downstairs and checked out, paid his bill with the dough he found on Maxie, and grabbed a cab. If he could get over to Jersey in the supper rush, they’d never find him.

So he went to the station and got his ticket and ran for the 5:14 and made it just as the train started to pull out.

He walked down the aisle and laughed because he remembered that the little whack in the brown overcoat was dead. There was nothing to worry about now except this crowd, all these people. He wanted to get away for a while and think out his next move.

So he looked for the washroom at the end of the car and opened the door and walked in. The light wasn't working and it was dark in there, but Joe could see out of the window.

It took a minute for his eyes to focus right, but then he saw what was outside. Just a big black emptiness with stars sweeping past, glaring and winking.

Then the door opened, and Joe knew it was the conductor. But the conductor was wearing a brown overcoat and his hat had a pulled-down brim. A hand reached out for Joe's ticket.

He stared at it in the light from the stars, and read his name and the price and the destination—and then there was nothing for Joe Gibson to do but stand there and wait while he rushed on and on, out of this world.

The Skull of the Marquis de Sade

For he was the Apostle of Pam and those who knew his caresses came to prefer even those of his-rival, Death!

CHRISTOPHER MAITLAND sat back in his chair before the fireplace and fondled the binding of an old book. His thin face, modelled by the flickering firelight, bore a characteristic expression of scholarly preoccupation.

Maitland’s intellectual curiosity was focussed on the volume in his hands. Briefly, he was wondering if the human skin binding this book came from a man, a woman, or a child.

He had been assured by the bookseller that this tome was bound in a portion of the skin of a woman, but Maitland, much as he desired to believe this, was by nature skeptical. Booksellers who deal in such *curiosa* are not overly reputable, as a rule, and Christopher Maitland’s years of dealing with such people had done much to destroy his faith in their veracity.

Still, he hoped the story was true, it was nice to have a book bound in a woman’s skin. It was nice to have a *crux unsaid* fashioned from a thigh-bone; a collection of Dyack heads; a shrivelled Hand of Glory stolen from a graveyard in Mainz. Maitland owned all of these items, and many more. For he was a collector of the unusual.

Maitland held the book up to the light and sought to distinguish pore-formation beneath the tanned surface of the binding. Women had finer pores than men, didn't they?

"Beg pardon, sir."

Maitland turned as Hume entered. "What is it?" he asked.

"That person is here again."

"Person?"

"Mr. Marco."

"Oh?" Maitland rose, ignoring the butler's almost grotesque expression of distaste. He suppressed a chuckle. Poor Hume didn't like Marco, or any of the raffish gentry who supplied Maitland with items for his collection, Hume didn't care for the collection itself, either—Maitland vividly remembered the old servant's squeamish trembling as he dusted off the case containing die mummy of the priest of Horus decapitated for sorcery.

"Marco, eh? Wonder what's up?" Maitland mused. "Well—better show him in."

Hume turned and left with a noticeable lack of enthusiasm. As for Maitland, his eagerness mounted. He tan his hand along the reticulated back of a jaddle *tao-tieh,* and licked his lips with very much the same expression as adorned the face of the Chinese image of gluttony.

Old Marco was here. That meant something pretty special in the. way of acquisitions. Perhaps Marco wasn't exactly the kind of chap one invited to the Club—but he had his uses. Where he laid hands on some of the things he offered for sale Maitland didn't know; but he didn't much care. That was Marco's affair. The rarity of his offerings was-what interested Christopher Maitland. If one wanted a book bound in human skin, old Marco was just the chap to get hold of it—if he had to do a bit of flaying and binding himself. Great character, old Marco!

"Mr. Marco, sir."

Hume withdrew, a sedate shadow, and Maitland waved his visitor forward.

Mr. Marco oozed into the room. The little man was fat, greasily so; his flesh lumped like the tallow coagulating about the guttering stump of a candle. His waxen pallor accentuated the simile. All that seemed needed was a wick to sprout from the bald ball of fat that served as Mr. Marco’s head.

THE fat nun stared up at Maitland’s lean face with what was meant to be an ingraciating smile. The smile oozed, too, and contributed to the aura of uncleanliness which seemed to surround Marco.

But Maitland was not conscious of these matters. His attention was focussed on the curious bundle Marco carried under one arm—the large package, wrapped in prosaic butcher’s paper which somehow contributed to its fascination, for him.

Marco shifted the package gingerly as he removed his shoddy gray ulster. He did not ask permission to divest himself of the coat, nor did he wait for an invitation to be seated.

The fat little man merely made himself comfortable in one of the chairs before the fire, reached for Maitland’s open cigar case, helped himself to a stogie, and lit it. Meanwhile the large round package bobbed up and down on his lap as his rotund stomach heaved convulsively.

Maitland stared at the package. Marco stared at Maitland. Maitland broke first. “Well?” he asked.

The greasy smile expanded. Marco inhaled rapidly, then opened his mouth to emit a puff of smoke and a reply.

“I am sorry to come unannounced, Mr. Maitland. I hope I’m not intruding?”

“Never mind that,” Maitland snapped. “What’s in the package, Marco?”

Marco’s smile expanded. “Something choice,” he whispered. “Something tasty.” Maitland, bent over the chair, his head outthrust to throw a vulpine shadow on the wall.

“What’s in the package?” he repeated.

“You’re my favorite client, Mr. Maitland. You know I never come to you unless I have something really rare. Well, I have that, sir. I have that. You’d be surprised what this butcher’s paper hides, although it’s rather appropriate. Yes, appropriate it is!”

“Stop that infernal gabbling, man! What is in the package?”

Marco lifted the bundle from his lap. He turned it over gingerly, yet deliberately.

“Doesn’t seem to be much,” he purred. “Round. Heavy enough, Might be a medicine ball, eh? Or a beehive. I say, it could even be a head of cabbage. Yes, one might mistake it for a head of common cabbage. But it isn’t. Oh no, it isn’t. Intriguing problem, eh?”

If it was the little man’s intention to goad Maitland into a fit of apoplexy, he almost succeeded’.

“Open it up, damn you!” he shouted.

Marco shrugged, smiled, and scrabbled at the taped edges of the paper. Christopher Maitland was no longer the perfect gentleman, the perfect host. He was a collector, stripped of all pretenses—quivering eagerness incarnate. He hovered over Marco’s shoulder as the butcher’s paper came away in the fat man’s pudgy fingers.

“Now!” Maitland breathed.

The paper fell to the floor. Resting in Marco’s lap was a large, glittering silver ball of—tinfoil.

Marco began to strip the tinfoil away, unravelling it in silvery strands. Maitland gasped as he saw what emerged from the wrappings.

It was a human skull.

Maitland saw the horrid hemisphere gleaming ivory-white in the firelight—then, as Marco shifted it, he saw the empty eye-sockets and the gaping nasal aperture that would never know human breath. Maitland noted the even structure of the teeth, adherent to a well-formed jaw. Despite his instinctive repulsion, he was surprisingly observant; It appeared to him that the skull was unusually small and delicate; remarkably well preserved despite a yellow tinge hinting of age. But Christopher Maitland was most impressed by one undeniable peculiarity. This skull was *different,* indeed.

This skull did not grin!

THROUGH some peculiar formation or malformation of cheekbone in juxtaposition of jaws, the deathshead did not simulate a smile. The classic mockery of mirth attributed to all skulls was absent here.

The skull had a sober, serious look about it.

Maitland blinked, and uttered a self-conscious cough. What was he doing, entertaining these idiotic fancies about a skull? *It* was ordinary enough. What was old Marco's game in bringing him such a silly object with so much solemn preamble?

Yes, what *was* Marco's game?

The little fat man held the skull up before the firelight, turning it from time to time with an impressive display of pride.

His smirk of self-satisfaction contrasted oddly with the sobriety set indelibly upon the skull's bony visage.

Maitland's puzzlement found expression at last. "What are you so smug about?" he demanded. "You bring me the skull of a woman, or an adolescent youth—"

Marco's chuckle cut across his remark. "Exactly what the phrenologists said!" he wheezed. "Damn the phrenologists, man! Tell me about his skull, if there's anything to tell."

Marco ignored him. He turned the skull over in his fat hands, with a gloating expression which repelled Maitland.

"It may be small, but it's a beauty, isn't it?" the little man mused. "So delicately formed, and look—there's almost the illusion of a patina upon the surface."

"I'm not a paleontologist," Maitland snapped. "Nor a grave-robber, either. You'd think we were Burke and-Hare! Be reasonable, Marco—why should I want an ordinary skull?"

"Please, Mr. Maitland! What do you take me for? Do you think I would presume to insult your intelligence by bringing you an ordinary skull? Do you imagine I would ask a thousand pounds for the skull of a nobody?"

Maitland stepped back.

"A thousand pounds?" he shouted. "A thousand pounds for *that?*"

"And cheap at the price," Marco assured him, "You'll pay it gladly when you know the story."

"I wouldn't pay such a price for the skull of Napoleon," Maitland assured him. "Or Shakespeare, for that matter."

"You'll find that the owner of this skull tickles your fancy a bit more," Marco assured him.

"Enough of this. Let's have it, man!" Marco faced him, one pudgy forefinger tapping the osseous brow of the deathshead.

"You see before you," he murmured, "the skull of Donatien Alphonse Francois, the Marquis de Sade."

II

GILES DE RETZ was a monster. Torquemeda's inquisitors exercised the diabolic ingenuity of the fiends they professed to exorcise. But it remained for the Marquis de Sade to epitomize the living lust for pain. His name symbolizes cruelty incarnate—the savagery men call "sadism." Maitland knew de Sade's weird history, and mentally reviewed it.

The Count, or Marquis de Sade was born in 1740, of distinguished Provencal lineage. He was a handsome youth when he joined his cavalry regiment in the Seven Years' War—a pale, delicate, blue-eyed man whose foppish diffidence cloaked an evil perversity.

At the age of 23 be was imprisoned for a year as the result of a barbaric crime. Indeed, 27 years of his subsequent life he spent in incarceration for his deeds—deeds which even today are only hinted at. His flagellations, his administration of outre drugs, and his tortures of women have served to make his name infamous.

But de Sade was no common libertine with a primitive urge towards the infliction of suffering. He was, rather, the "philosopher of pain"—a keen scholar, a. man of exquisite taste and breeding. He was wonderfully well-read, a disciplined thinker, a remarkable psychologist—and a sadist.

How the mighty Marquis would have squirmed had he envisioned the petty perversions which today bear his name! The tormenting of animals by ignorant peasants . . . the beating of children by hysteric attendants in institutions . . . the infliction of senseless cruelties by maniacs upon others or by others upon maniacs . . . all these matters are classified as "sadistic" today. And yet none of them are manifestations of de Sade's unnatural philosophy.

De Sade's concept of cruelty had in it nothing of concealment or deceit. He practised his beliefs openly, and wrote explicitly of such matters during his years in prison. For he was the Apostle of Pain, and his gospel was made known to all men in *Justine* . . . *Juliette* . . . *Aline et Valcour* . . . the curious *La Philosophie dans le Boudoir,* and the utterly abominable *Les Journees*.

And de Sade practised what he preached. He was a lover of many women—a jealous lover, willing to share the embraces of his mistresses with but one rival. That rival was Death, and it is said that all women who knew de Sade's caresses came to prefer those of his rival, in the end.

Perhaps the tortures of the French Revolution were indirectly inspired by the philosophy of the-Marquis—a philosophy that gained circulation throughout France following the publication of his notorious tomes.

When the guillotine arose in the public squares of the cities, de Sade emerged from his long series of imprisonments and walked abroad among men maddened at the sight of blood and suffering.

He was a gray, gentle little ghost; short, bald, mild-mannered and soft-spoken. He raised his voice only to save his aristocratic relatives from the knife. His public life was exemplary during these latter years.

But men still whispered of his private life. His interest in sorcery was rumored. It is said that to de Sade, the shedding of blood was a sacrifice. And sacrifices made to certain beings bring black boons. The screams of pain-maddened women are as prayer to the creatures of the Pit.

The Marquis was cunning. Years of confinement for his "offenses against society" had made him wary. He moved quite cautiously, and took full advantage of the troubled times to conduct quiet and unostentatious burial services whenever he terminated an amour.

Caution did not suffice, in the end. An ill chosen diatribe directed against Napoleon served as „an excuse for the authorities. There were no civil charges, no farcical trial was perpetrated.

De Sade was simply shut up in Charenton as a common lunatic. The, men who knew his crimes were too shocked to publicize them—and yet there was a satanic grandeur about the Marquis which somehow precluded destroying him outright. One does not think of assassinating Satan, But Satan chained—

Satan, chained, languished. A sick, half-blind old man who tore the petals from roses in a last gesture of demoniac destructiveness, the Marquis spent his declining days forgotten by all men. They preferred “to forget, preferred to think him mad.

In 1814, he died. His books were banned, his memory desecrated, his deeds denied. But his name lived on; lives on, an eternal symbol, of innate evil. . . .

SUCH was de Sade, as Christopher Maitland knew him. And as a collector of *curiosa.* the thought of possessing the veritable skull of the fabulous Marquis intrigued him.

He. glanced up from revery; glanced at the unsmiling skull and the grinning Marco. “A thousand pounds, you said?”

“Exactly,” Marco nodded. A most reasonable price, under the circumstances.”

“Under what circumstances?” Maitland objected. “You bring me a skull. But what proofs can you furnish me as to its authenticity? How did you come by this rather unusual *memento mori?”*

“Come, come Mr. Maitland—please! You know me better than to question my source of supply. That is what I choose to call a trade secret, eh?”

“Very well. But I can’t just take your word, Marco. To the best of my recollection, de Sade was buried when he died at Gharenton, in 1814.”

Marco’s oozing grin expanded.

“Well, I can set you right about *that* point,” he conceded. “Do you happen to have a copy of Ellis’s *Studies* about? In the section entitled *Love and Pain* there is an item which may interest you.”

Maitland secured the volume and Marco riffled through the pages.

“Here!” he exclaimed triumphantly. “According to Ellis, die skull of the Marquis de Sade was exhumed and examined a phrenologist. Phrenology was a popular pseudo-science in those days, eh? Chap wanted to see if die cranial formation indicated the Marquis was truly insane.

“It says he found the skull to be small and well formed, like a woman’s. Exactly your remark, as you may recall!

“But the real point is this. The skull wasn’t re-interred.

“It fell into the hands of a Dr. Londe. but around 1850 it was stolen by another physician, who took it to England. That is all Ellis knows of the matter. The rest I could tell—but it’s better not to speak. Here is the skull of. the Marquis de Sade, Mr. Maitland.

“Will you meet my offer?”

“A thousand pounds,” Maitland sighed. “It’s too much for a shoddy skull and a flimsy story.”

“Well—let us say eight hundred, perhaps. A quick deal and no hard feelings?”

Maitland stared at Marco. Marco stared at Maitland. The skull stared at them both.

“Five hundred, then,” Marco ventured. “Right now.”

“You must be faking,” Maitland, said; “Otherwise you wouldn’t be so anxious for a sale.”

Marco’s smile oozed off again. “On the contrary, sir. If I were trying to do you, I certainly wouldn’t budge on my price. But I want to dispose of this skull quickly.”

“Why?”

FOR the first time during the interview, fat little Marco hesitated; He twisted the skull between his hands and set it down, on the table. If seemed to Maitland as if he avoided looking at it as he answered.

“I don’t exactly know. It’s just that I don’t fancy owning such an item, really. Works on my imagination. Rot, isn’t it?”

“Works on your imagination?”

“I get ideas that I’m being followed. Of course it’s all nonsense, but—”

“You get ideas that you’re followed by the police, no doubt,” Maitland accused: “Because you stole the skull. Didn’t you, Marco?”

Marco averted his gaze. “No,” he mumbled. It isn’t that. But I don’t like skulls—not my Idea of ornaments, I assure you. Squeamish I am, a bit. “Besides, you live in this big house here. You’re safe. I live in Wapping, now. Down on my luck at the moment and all that. I sell you the skull. You tuck it away here in your collection, look at it when you please—and the rest of the time it’s out of sight, not bothering you. I’ll be free of it knocking around in my humble diggings. Matter of fact, when I sell it, I’ll vacate the premises and move to decent lodgings. That’s why I want to be rid of of, really. For five hundred, cash in hand.”

Maitland hesitated. “I must think it over,” he, declared. “Give me your address. Should I decide to purchase it, I’ll be down tomorrow with the money. Fair enough?”

“Very well.” Marco sighed. He produced a greasy stub of pencil and tore a hit of paper from the discarded wrappings on the floor.

“Here’s the address,” he said.

Maitland pocketed the slip as Marco commenced to enclose the skull in tinfoil once more. He worked quickly, as though eager to obscure the shining teeth and the yawning emptiness of the eye-sockets. He twisted the butcher’s paper over the tinfoil, grasped his overcoat in one hand, and balanced the round bundle in the other.

“I’ll be expecting you tomorrow,” he said. “And by the way—be careful when you open the door. I’ve a police dog now; a savage brute. He’ll tear you to pieces—or anyone else who tries to take the skull of the Marquis de Sade.”

III

IT SEEMED to Maitland that they had bound him too tightly. He knew that the masked men were about to whip him, but he could not understand why they, had fastened his wrists with chains of steel.

Only when they held the metal scourges over the fire did he comprehend the reason—only when they raised the white-hot rods high above their heads did he realize why he was held so securely.

For at the fiery kiss of the lash, Maitland did not flinch—lie convulsed. His body, seared by the hideous blow, described an arc. Bound by thongs, his hands would tear themselves free under the stimulus of the unbearable torment. But the steel chains held, and Maitland gritted his teeth as the two black-robed men flogged him with living fire.

The outlines of the dungeon blurred, and Maitland’s pain blurred, too. He sank down into a darkness broken only by the consciousness of rhythm—the rhythm of the savage, sizzling steel flails that descended upon his naked back.

When awareness returned, Maitland knew that the flogging was over. The silent, black-robed men in masks were bending over him, unfastening the shackles. They lifted him tenderly, and led him gently across the dungeon floor to the great steel casket.

Casket? This was no casket. Caskets do not stand open and up-ended. Caskets do not bear upon their lids the raised, moulded features of a woman’s face.

Caskets are not *spiked,* inside.

Recognition was simultaneous with horror.

This was the Iron Maiden!

The masked men were strong. „ They dragged him forward, thrust him into the depths of the great metal matrix of torment. They fastened wrists and ankles with clamps. Maitland knew what was coming.

They would close the lid upon him. Then, by turning a crank, they would move the lid down . . . move it down as spikes drove in at his body. For the interior of the Iron Maiden was studded, with cruel barbs, sharpened and lengthened with the cunning-of the damned.

The longest spikes would pierce him first as the lid descended. These spikes were set so as to enter his wrists and ankles. He would hang there crucified as the lid continued its inexorable descent. Shorter spikes would next enter his thighs, shoulders, and arms. Then, as he struggled, impaled in agony, the lid would press closer until the smallest-spikes came dose enough to penetrate his eyes, his throat, and—mercifully—his heart and brain.

Maitland screamed, but the sound served only to shatter his ear-drums as they closed the lid. The rusty metal grated, and then came the harsher grating of the machinery.

They were turning the crank, bringing the banks of spikes closer to his cringing body. . . .

Maitland waited, tensed in darkness, for the first sharp kiss of the Iron Maiden.

Then, and then only, he realized that he was not *alone* here in the blackness.

There were no spikes set in the lid! Instead a figure was pressed against the opposite iron surface. As the lid descended, it merely brought the figure closer to Maitland’s body.

The figure did not move, or even breathe. It rested against the lid, and as the lid came forward, Maitland felt the pressure of cold and alien flesh against his own. The arms and legs met his in unresponsive embrace, but still the lid pressed down, squeezing the lifeless form closer and closer. It was dark, but now Maitland could see the face that loomed scarcely an inch from his eyes. The face was white phosphorescent. The face was—*not a face!*

And then, as the body gripped his body in blackness, as the head touched his head, as Maitland's lips pressed against the place where lips *should* be; he knew the ultimate horror.

The face that was *not* a face was the skull of the Marquis de Sade!

And the weight of charnel corruption stifled Maitland, and he went down into darkness again with the obscene memory pursuing him to oblivion.

Even oblivion has an end, and once more Maitland woke. The masked men had released and were reviving him. He lay on a pallet, and glanced toward the open doors of the Iron Maiden. He was oddly grateful to see that the interior was empty. No figure rested against the inside of the lid. Perhaps there had been no figure.

The torture played strange tricks on a man's mind. But it was needed, now. He could tell that the solicitude of the masked ones was not assumed. They had subjected him to this ordeal for strange reasons, and he had come through unscathed.

They anointed his back, lifted him to his feet, led him from the dungeon. In the great corridor beyond, Maitland saw a mirror. They guided him up to it.

Had the torture changed him? For a moment, Maitland feared to gaze into the glass.

But they held him before the mirror, and Maitland stared at his reflection stared at his quivering body, on which was set the grim, unsmiling death's head of the Marquis de Sade!

IV

MAITLAND told no one of his dream, but he lost no time in discussing Marco's visit and offer.

His *confidante* was an old friend and fellow-collector, Sir Fitzhugh Kissroy. Seated in Sir Fitzhugh's comfortable study the following afternoon, he quickly unburdened himself of all pertinent details.

Genial, red-bearded Kissroy "heard him out in silence.

"Naturally, I want that skull," Maitland concluded. "But I can't understand why Marco is so anxious *to* dispose of it at once. And I'm considerably worried about its authenticity. So I was wondering—you're quite an expert, Fitzhugh. Would you be willing to visit Marco with me and examine the skull?"

Sir Fitzhugh chuckled and shook his head.

"There's ho need to examine it," he declared. "I'm quite sure the skull, as you describe it, is that of the Marquis de Sade. It's genuine enough."

Maitland gaped at him.

"How can you be so positive?" he asked. Sir Fitzhugh beamed. "Because, my dear fellow—that skull was stolen from me!"

"What?"

"Quite so. About ten days ago, a prowler got into the library through the French windows facing the garden. None of the several ants were aroused, and he made off with the skull in the night."

Maitland rose. "Incredible," he murmured. "But of course you'll come with me, now. We'll identify your property, confront old Marco with the facts, and recover the skull at once."

"Nothing of the sort," Sir Fitzhugh replied. "I'm just as glad the skull was stolen. And I advise you to leave it alone.

"I didn't report the theft to the police, and I have no intention of doing so. Because that skull is—unlucky."

"Unlucky?" Maitland peered at his host. "You, with your collection of cursed Egyptian mummies, tell me that? You've never taken any stock in such superstitious rubbish?"

"Exactly. Therefore, when I tell you that I sincerely believe that skull is dangerous, you must have faith in my words."

Maitland pondered. He wondered if Sir Fitzhugh had experienced the same dreams that tormented his own sleep upon seeing the skull. Was there an associative aura about the relic? If so, it only added to the peculiar fascination exerted by the unsmiling skull of the Marquis de Sade.

"I don't understand you at all," he declared. "I should think you couldn't wait to lay hands on that skull."

"Perhaps I'm not the only one who can't wait," Sir Fitzhugh muttered.

"What are you getting at?"

"You know de Sade's history. You know the power of morbid fascination such evil geniuses exert upon the imagination of men. You feel that fascination yourself; that's why you want the skull.

"But you're a normal mail, Maitland. You want to *buy* the skull and keep it in your collection of *curiosa.* An abnormal man might not think of buying. He might think of stealing it—or even killing the owner to possess it. Particularly if he wanted to do more than merely own it; if, for example, he wanted *to worship* it."

Sir Fitzhugh's voice sank to a whisper as he continued, "I'm not trying to frighten you, my friend. But I know the history of that skull. During the last hundred years it has passed through the hands of many men. Some of them were collectors, and sane. Others were perverted members of secret cults; worshipers of pain, devotees of Black Magic. Men have died to gain that grisly relic, and other men have been—*sacrificed to it.*

"It came *to* me quite by chance, six months ago. A man like your friend Marco offered it to me. Not for a thousand pounds, or five hundred. He gave it to me as a gift, because he was afraid of it.

"Of course I laughed at his notions, just as you are probably laughing at mine, now. But during the six months that the skull has remained in my hands, I've suffered.

I've had queer dreams. Just staring at the unnatural, unsmiling grimace is enough to provoke nightmares. Didn't you sense an emanation from the thing? They said de Sade wasn't mad—and I believe them. He was far worse; he was *possessed.* There's something *unhuman* about that skull.

Something that attracts Others, living men whose skulls hide a bestial quality that is also unhuman or inhuman.

"And I've had more than my dreams to deal with. Phone calls came, and mysterious letters. Some of the servants have reported lurkers on the grounds at dusk."

"Probably ordinary thieves, like Marco, after a valuable object," Maitland commented.

"No," Sir Fitzhugh sighed. "Those unknown seekers did more than attempt to steal the skull. *They came into my house at night and adored it!*

"Oh, I'm quite positive about the matter, I assure you! I kept the skull in a glass case in the library. Often, when I came to see it in the mornings, I found that it had been moved during the night.

"Yes, moved. Sometimes the case was smashed and the skull placed on the table. Once it was on the floor.

"Of course I checked up on the servants. Their alibis were perfect. It was the work of outsiders; outsiders who probably feared to possess the skull completely, yet needed access to it from time to time in order to practise some abominable and perverted rite.

"They came into my house, I tell you, and worshiped that filthy skull! And when it was stolen, I was glad—very glad.

"All I can say to you is, keep away from tire whole business! Don't see this man Marco and don't have anything to do with that accursed graveyard relic!"

Maitland nodded. "Very well," he said. "I am grateful to you for your warning."

He left Sir Fitzhugh shortly thereafter.

Half an hour later, he was climbing the stairs to Marco's dingy attic room.

V

HE CLIMBED the stairs to Marco's room; climbed the creaking steps in the shabby Soho tenement and listened to the curiously muffled thumping of his own heartbeat.

But not for long. A sudden howl resounded from the landing above, and Maitland scrambled up the last few stairs in frantic haste.

The door of Marco's room was locked, but the sounds that issued from within stirred Maitland to desperate measures.

Sir Fitzhugh's warnings had prompted him to carry his service revolver on this errand; now he drew it and shattered the lock with a shot.

Maitland flung the door back against the wall as the howling reached the ultimate frenzied crescendo. He started into the room, then checked himself.

Something hurtled toward him from the floor beyond; something launched itself at his throat.

Maitland raised his revolver blindly and fired.

For a moment sound and vision blurred. When he recovered, he was half-knee ling on the floor before the threshold. A great shaggy form rested at his feet. Maitland recognized the carcass of a gigantic police dog.

Suddenly he remembered Marco's reference to the beast. So that explained it! The dog had howled and attacked. But—why?

Maitland rose and entered the sordid bedroom. Smoke still curled upward from the shots. He gazed again at the prone animal, noting the gleaming yellow fangs grimacing even in death. Then he stared around at the shoddy furniture, the disordered bureau, the rumpled bed—

The rumpled bed on which Mr. Marco lay, his throat torn in a red rosary of death.

Maitland stared at the body of the little fat man and shuddered.

Then he saw the skulk It rested on the pillow near Marco's head: a grisly bedfellow that seemed to peer curiously at the corpse in ghastly *camaradie.* Blood had spattered the hollow cheekbones, but even beneath this sanguinary stain, Maitland could see the peculiar solemnity of the death's head.

For the first time, he fully sensed the aura of evil which clung to the skull of de Sade. It was palpable in this ravaged room; palpable as the presence of death itself. The skull seemed to glow with actual charnel phosphorescence.

Maitland knew now that his friend had spoken the truth. There *was* a dreadful magnetism inherent in this bony horror . . .

a veritable Elixir of Death that worked and preyed upon the minds of men—and beasts.

It must have been that way. The dog, maddened by the urge to kill, had finally attacked Marco as he slept, and destroyed him. Then it had sought to attack Maitland when he entered. And through it all, the skull had watched; watched and gloated just as de Sade would gloat had his pale blue eyes flickered in the shadowed sockets.

Somewhere within the cranium, perhaps, the shriveled remnants of his cruel brain were still attuned to terror. The magnetic force it focussed had a compelling enchantment even in the face of what Maitland knew.

That is why Maitland, driven by a compulsion he could not wholly explain or seek to justify, stooped down and lifted the skull. He held it for a long moment in the classic pose of Hamlet.

Then he left the room, forever carrying the death's head in his arms.

FEAR rode Maitland's shoulders as he hurried through the twilit streets. Fear whispered strangely in his ear, warning him to hurry lest the body of Marco be discovered and the police pursue him. Fear prompted him to enter his own house by a side door and go directly to his rooms so that none would see the skull he concealed beneath his coat.

Fear was Maitland's companion all that evening. He sat there, staring at the skull on the table, and shivered with repulsion.

Sir Fitzhugh was right, he knew it. There. *was* a damnable influence issuing from the skull and the black brain within. It had caused Maitland to disregard the sensible warnings of his friend—it had caused Maitland to.

steal the skull itself from a dead man—it had caused him now to conceal himself in this lonely room.

He should call the authorities; he. knew that. Better still, he should dispose of the skull. Give it away, throw it away, rid the earth of it forever. There was something puzzling about the cursed thing—something he didn't quite understand.

For, knowing these truths he still desired to possess the skull of the Marquis de Sade. There was an evil enchantment here; the dormant baseness in every man's soul was. aroused and responded to the loathly lust, which poured from the death's head in waves.

He stared at the skull, shivered—yet knew he would not give it up; could not. Nor had he the strength to destroy it. Per-; haps possession would lead him to madness in the end, The skull would incite others to unspeakable excesses.

Maitland pondered and brooded; seeking a solution in the impassive object that confronted him with the stolidity of death.

It grew later. Maitland drank wine, and paced the floor. He was weary. Perhaps in the morning he could think matters through and reach a logical, a. sane conclusion.

Yes, he was upset. Sir Fitzhugh's outlandish hints had disturbed him; the gruesome events of the late afternoon preyed on his nerves.

No sense in giving way to foolish fancies about the skull of the mad Marquis . . . better to rest.

Maitland flung himself on the bed. He reached out for the switch and extinguished the light. The moon's rays slithered through the window and sought out the skull on the table, bathing it in eery luminance. Maitland stared once more at the jaws that should grin and did not.

Then he closed his eyes and willed himself to sleep. In the morning he'd call Sir Fitzhugh, make a clean breast of things, and give the skull over to the authorities.

Its evil career—real or imaginary—would come to an end. So be it.

Maitland sank into slumber. Before he dozed off he tried to focus his attention on something . . . something puzzling . . . an impression he'd received upon gazing at the body of the police dog in Marco's room. The way its fangs gleamed.

Yes. That was it. There had been no blood on the muzzle of the police dog. Strange, For the police dog had bitten Marco's throat. No blood—how could that be?

Weil, that problem was best left for morning, too. . . .

It seemed to Maitland that as he slept, he dreamed. In his dream he opened his eyes and blinked in the bright moonlight. He stared at the table top and saw that the skull was no longer resting on its surface.

That was curious, too. No one had come into the room, or he would have been aroused.

IF HE had not been sure that he was dreaming, Maitland would have started up in terror when he saw the stream of moonlight on the floor—the stream "of moonlight through which the skull was rolling.

It turned over and over again, its bony visage impassive as ever, and each revolution brought it closer to the bed.

Maitland's sleeping ears could almost hear the thump as the skull landed on the bare floor at the foot of the bed. Then began the grotesque progress so typical of. night fantasies. The skull climbed the side of the bed!

Its teeth gripped the dangling corner of a bedsheet, and the death's head literally whirled the sheet out and up, swinging it in an arc which landed the skull on the bed at Maitland's feet.

The illusion was so vivid he could feel the thud of its impact against the mattress.

Tactile sensation continued, and Maitland felt the skull rolling along up the covers. It came up to his waist, then approached his chest.

Maitland saw the bony features in tine moonlight, scarcely six inches away from his neck. He felt a cold weight resting on his throat. The skull was moving now.

Then he realized the grip of utter nightmare, and struggled to awake before the dream continued.

A scream rose in his throat—but never issued from it. For Maitland’s throat was seized by champing teeth: teeth that bit into his neck with all the power of a moving human jawbone.

The skull tore at Maitland’s jugular in cruel haste. There was a gasp, a gurgle, and then no sound at ail.

After a time, the skull righted itself on Maitland’s chest.

Maitland’s chest no longer heaved with breathing, and the skull rested there with a curious simulation of satisfied repose.

The moonlight shone on the death’s head to reveal one very curious circumstance. It was a trivial thing, yet somehow fitting under the circumstances.

Reposing on the chest of the man it had killed, the skull of the Marquis de Sade was no longer impassive. Instead, its bony features bore a definite, unmistakably *sadistic* grin.

Soul Proprletor

If somebody wants to sell his soul why shouldn't he advertise? That's sound business!

> "FOR SALE—One human soul, in reasonable condition, to highest bidder. Owner must dispose of same at once. What am I offered?—BOX 418."

PETE RYAN read the damp proof-sheet of the advertisement and whistled.

"You aren't going to run this ad in our *Personal* column are you?" he objected.

"Why not?" Editor Lesser raised his head and met Pete Ryan's scowl with a grin.

"But it's screwy," Ryan protested. "I mean, the whole thing's obviously some kind of fake."

"The $4.60 paying for this ad is genuine currency," replied Lesser. "And we must give value received. We have no editorial control over the advertisers in our paper. Ethically, we can't refuse to take an ad, either, unless the message is obscene or offensive."

"Don't you think this ridiculous hoax is offensive?" stormed Pete Ryan. "It's a case for the Better Business Bureau, that's what it is!"

The older man pushed back his chair and shook his head as he confronted Ryan's scowling gaze. Lesser tried hard to suppress a strangely youthful twinkle in ms eyes. Clearing his throat, he ventured a reply.

“I hardly think so,” he mused, putting his finger-tips together and staring down at the desk.

“If somebody wants to sell his soul, why shouldn’t he advertise? That’s sound business, you know. It pays to advertise.”

“But how can anyone sell their soul?” complained Ryan.

“I don’t know,” Lesser admitted. “But if he can produce the merchandise when he gets paid for it, there’s no hoax involved. Certainly the Better Business Bureau hasn’t got an investigator in occultism—”

Lesser halted. A twinkle came into his eyes.

“That’s it!” he chuckled. “An investigator in occultism!”

“Meaning what?”

“Meaning *you,* my boy!”

“Me?”

“Exactly.” The older man bundled elbows over the desk and talked rapidly. “What do you think those dogs on the city desk will do when they see this item in the bladder? They’ll send out a leg man to cover the yarn. Find out who inserted the ad and try to build up a godawful human interest story.

“Well, we’ll just beat them to the pundi. We’ll go out and interview this advertising client. We’ll get there first and sew the story up. We’ll build a little feature to promote the sale of want ads. We’ll get the jump on all of them. We’ll—”

” We?” interrupted Pete Ryan, skeptically. “Uh—not exactly. *You* will cover this story.”

“You know what you can do with—” The twinkle disappeared, and Editor Lesser’s eyes narrowed. “That’s an assignment, Ryan,” he snapped.

Young Pete Ryan had been with the Want Ad Department long enough to know when to keep his mouth shut This was definitely one of these times.

“That’s settled, then,” his boss went on. “Early edition will hit the street. Better get started tomorrow morning. Meanwhile I’ll warn the city desk to lay off—it’s our baby for promotion angles.”

He burrowed among the papers on his desk.

"Here's the address," he said, holding out a crumpled slip of stationery.

"Be on the spot tomorrow morning—bright, early, and sober. Inquire for the party who inserted this ad. Ask if there have been any answers."

"But suppose they won't tell me anything?" asked Ryan.

"Listen to what wants to be a reporter!" sneered Editor Lesser. "You talk like that and you'll be selling want ads all your life."

HE BIT his lip for a moment. "Here's your angle," he suggested. "Tell the party you're with our sales force, and it's part of the service to see if the ad pulls any results. Keep talking. Get all the story you can.

"Ten to one, it's just some crackpot. But there's a chance we might really dig up a great yarn."

Pete Ryan frowned. "You should talk about crackpots," he grumbled. "Of all the screwball ideas, this takes the cake. Souls for sale!"

"Don't be childish," said Editor Lesser. "Be broadminded, like I am. Why I'd sell my own soul, if I could get a fair offer!" Pete Ryan faced his boss, grinning. "If you ever insert an ad offering your soul for sale," he declared, "you could be sued for fraud!"

The door closed behind him, just in time to deflect the inkwell that Editor Lesser hurled at his departing head.

II

PETE RYAN walked up the steps to the door of the big brownstone house. The morning sun beamed, but not Ryan.

"A fine assignment," he muttered. "Oh well, here goes."

His index finger pressed the buzzer. Footsteps pattered along the hall beyond, and he braced himself.

"Bet two bits it's Dracula," he murmured. "Nope, I'm wrong. It's a zombie."

That was hardly an accurate description of the pert, smiling colored maid who opened the door.

"Yes, sir?"

"Pardon me, but I'm looking for the party who inserted an advertisement in yesterday's paper."

"Step in, please."

Ryan stepped along a mahogany-panelled hallway. The maid led him toward a parlor down the hall.

He went in, trying a repress a stare of admiration as he gazed at the handsome interior. The furniture was dated, but it consisted of opulent period pieces that hinted of luxury and good taste. Deep carpeting almost clung to his ankles as he set his feet down firmly and sank into an overstuffed chair.

"No screwball put that ad in," he mused. "Anyone rich enough to afford this stuff deserves to be called eccentric, anyway." The maid left the room, and Ryan waited. He was getting strangely nervous. There was something definitely suspicious about all this. . . .

There was a moment of silence. Ryan strained his ears for the sound of approaching footsteps. Right now he didn't know *what* to expect. A decadent old millionaire, hoping to play Faust . . . a cynical amateur diabolist . . . a foreign nobleman . . . a degenerate younger son out of Huysmans. . . .

Footsteps.

Ryan braced himself.

A figure appeared in the doorway, and Ryan almost whistled.

The girl was gorgeous. Sheer brunette perfection. Ryan's eyes admiringly catalogued her charms—shimmering black hair, coiled at the nape of a shapely, creamy neck—blue eyes, piquantly slanted—full, sensitive, scarlet lips—a body moulded from the stuff which dreams are made. She was a dream come true.

Young Ryan had had little experience with dreams. Not knowing what to say, he blurted out the thought foremost in his mind.

"You're not the person who inserted that ad about the soul, are you?" he gasped.

"Yes. What do you offer for it?" replied the girl, calmly.

Ryan flushed. "Well—you see—that is, I'm not a prospective purchaser," he stammered.

"Then what is the meaning of this visit?" persisted the girl. The smile had vanished from her face. "Who are you, and how did you find my address? I listed a box number in the ad."

ONCE again Ryan, unprepared for duplicity, replied with the truth. He gave his name and occupation and ran through the little prepared speech about dropping around to see if the ad had "pulled" results. But by the time he had finished, the girl was smiling once more.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I misunderstood you." Her lips shaped a sigh. "But I was hoping you were a genuine customer."

"Then you haven't had any results?" Pete Ryan attempted to assume a professional attitude and interest.

"Well, I've just come from the letter box now," said the girl. "I found letters of protest from two religious organizations, one utterly insane scribble from a fanatic, a note from a would-be wolf, an anonymous threat, and a bottle of Pluto Water from a practical joker."

Ryan grinned. "But honestly now, isn't this whole thing some sort of practical joke on your part?"

"Not at all, Mr. Ryan." The brunette beauty faced him squarely. "I'm deadly serious about this matter."

"But why, Miss—er—"

"Cabot. Lucille Cabot," she answered. She sat down on the sofa and crossed her shapely legs as she lit a cigarette. "Is your interest in my affairs personal or professional?" she asked.

YAN shrugged and smiled. "Both, I'm afraid," he answered, softly.

R“Well, then. The story’s simple, really. Father had a lot of money. Mother died when I was still a baby, and I’ve spent most of my time in private schools. When I graduated two years ago I came back here to live with Father. Then he passed away. The lawyers went over his estate and found out he’d made bad investments. I was left with the house, a load of debts, and some bad securities.”

“But that doesn’t explain anything!” Ryan protested. “After all, selling one’s soul for the sake of a few debts—if you can sell such a thing as a soul—it’s utterly fantastic!”

“Really? Then I’m afraid there’s nothing further to discuss. Good day, Mr. Ryan.” Her tones were icy.

“Now wait a minute! Don’t take it that way,” Ryan soothed. “I’m anxious to listen. It’s only that all this strikes me as a little strange.”

“There’s nothing strange about it,” said Lucille Cabot. “What can a girl in my position do? I have two choices. I can take a sordid job, for which I am not suited. Not a very pleasant choice, that one. Or I can do my best to find a wealthy husband. And that’s all.”

“What’s wrong with that?” demanded Ryan. “Millions of women face those choices every day. Some of them take their sordid jobs and mould splendid careers out of them. Others marry, and not necessarily for money, either. Strikes me as a pretty good solution. With your schooling and beauty you’re better off than most. Why not settle down, make up your mind to—”

“Are you quite done?” Lucille Cabot rose. Her slanted blue eyes flashed fire. Yet her voice was gentle, almost maternal.

“You stupid, petty fool,” she sighed. Her tender tones lent incongruity to her words. “Look at me,” she said, coming close. Ryan didn’t miss the opportunity.

“No, don’t stand there goggling like a sick calf,” breathed the girl. “Look into my eyes. Look into my eyes and tell me if you think I was meant to be a clerk, or a stupid housewife.”

Ryan stared into cerulean depths. There was something about this girl, something vital and intense, that swept aside all doubts.

She *was* sincere.

"I was destined for greater things," die whispered. "Haven't you ever dreamed of power—riches—reaching the heights?"

Ryan nodded dumbly. There was a tightness in his throat.

"Haven't you ever wanted to reach out and shake down the stars?" Her voice was low, vibrant. "Aren't there ambitions, hidden desires, which if realized are worth the price of the human soul?"

She stood close to him, very close. He could feel her aura, the pulsation of power emanating from her lovely presence.

"In olden times, men conjured up demons and received boons," she said. "I am not a sorceress. I cannot cast spells. I cannot call up the Devil. But perhaps there exists, somewhere, somehow, a man who can. A man with which to bargain. For I swear to you, to gain what I desire, I'd deal with the Devil himself."

"But—" said Mr. Ryan.

The buzzing doorbell cut through his objection. The maid appeared in the hallway.

"Gentleman to see you, Miss Lucille," she said softly.

"Show him in," commanded the girl.

It was as simple as that.

Into the room walked his Satanic Majesty—the Devil.

III

"YOU have a soul to sell?" asked the devil, politely.

"I have."

"I would like to purchase it," he purred.

"What am I offered?"

"What do you desire?"

He came close to Lucille Cabot, but the girl did not flinch. For a long minute he stared directly into her oblique eyes.

“You shall have all that and more,” he smiled.

Then Lucille broke. Her composure drained away as she shuddered and drew back from die tall man in black—the man with the two horned forelocks of raven hair, the pointed mustachio and waxed goatee—the man with the sabre eyebrows, the deep-set, burning red eyes and cleft chin of the Devil.

“Wh-who are you?” she quavered.

“Who do I look like?”

“The Devil himself—but you can’t be!”

“Why can’t I?”

“There’s no such person as die Devil.” He smiled. “If I adopted such a skeptical attitude, I might reply that there is no such thing as a human soul.”

Ryan interrupted. “Let’s get down to cases,” he snapped.

The black eyes turned and fixed upon the young man’s face. “Who are you?” Lucille opened her mouth to intervene, but Ryan stepped forward. “I’m with the sales department of the *Daily Press,”* he offered. “I’m representing Miss Cabot in this matter.”

The girl turned away, eyes twinkling at his impudence. But she did not stop him.

“Now,” said Ryan, “what I want to know is—just who are you and what are your credentials for making an offer to purchase a soul?”

“All right, wise guy,” said the stranger. “I’ll give. My name’s Sam Bolman, but I travel under the stage name of the Mighty Mephisto.”

“You’re that stage magician?” asked Pete Ryan.

“Yeah, that’s right. Now here’s the angle. I’m opening a new vaude unit for a tour, see? I see this ad in the paper and I say to myself, here’s a hot idea for a publicity tie-up. I’ll look up this bozo and hire him as an assistant or something. Now that I find out the party who put in the ad is a pretty dame, it’s all the better, get me? We can work up a nifty of a stunt. Miss Cabot we’ll announce that you sold your soul to me, understand? Then we go out on tour. I’m willing to pay—”

“Sorry. We’re not interested,” said Ryan, curtly.

“Hey, wait a minute, fella!”

“We’re after bigger game,” Ryan explained. “This isn’t a gag. This is on the level.”

“You mean you actually want to sell a soul to Satan?” breathed the Mighty Mephisto.

“Or to anyone else who will pay the price,” said Ryan. “Now, if you happen to know Of any way to evoke a demon—”

“I’m getting out of here,” announced the magician. “You’re stark, raving screwy, that’s what you are!”

As the outer door banged Shut behind him, Lucille Cabot sighed. Her big eyes clouded as she faced Ryan once more.

“It’s hopeless, I’m afraid. They’re all alike. Either they’re crazy or they think I am. This was my last foolish effort, but I can see it’s no use. Now what will I do?” Pete Ryan grinned. “I’ve decided that quite a while ago,” he announced. “I guess you’ll just have to marry me!”

IV

THE funny part of it was that she did. It took two weeks—two frantic, fantastic weeks of courtship.

Lucille had ordered him from the house at once, naturally. He called that night, the next day, and the next. He wrote letters, sent flowers, telegrams, and inserted ads in the *Personals* column of the paper. He wined, dined, and wooed her. He did all the usual foolish things.

There were no further repercussions on her advertisement. And before the week was up, the incident of their meeting was almost forgotten; at least by Pete Ryan.

He talked to her very candidly, very sincerely, very earnestly. He told her of his own ambitions to reach the top, but insisted that one must move sanely, serenely. He informed Lucille that she was a little off balance, a little introverted. When Ryan learned of her love for bizarre jewelry, outlandish dress, fantastic music, and odd books, he took her to task.

“We’ll get out and live,” he promised her. “What you need is a little laughter, a little gayety. You’ve been alone too much. You brood, get morbid too easily. It isn’t right that a beautiful girl like you should have such weird notions.”

No YMCA lecturer could have done a better job. Ryan felt as if he had “converted” her when she consented to dine and dance that second week.

The marriage itself was a little more difficult to bring off, but he managed it. One night after they returned to her home, they sat in her father’s old library and talked before the dying fire. She snuggled into his arms.

“All right,” she sighed. “Right away, then, if you want me.”

The usual embrace punctuated the discussion for a while.

“But it must be a civil ceremony,” she insisted. “No fuss or bother.”

“Anything you say,” he agreed. “Just so it’s quick. I’ll get the license tomorrow. We can be married Saturday. I’ll take two weeks off and we’ll go south for the honeymoon.”

He rose, radiant of eye, and paced the floor in growing enthusiasm and excitement.

Abruptly he halted before bookshelves.

“What’s all this?” he demanded.

“Why, just some of father’s old books.”

Ryan stared at the brown and black-backed tomes. Thick, ponderous volumes. Iron-hasped books with yellowed, crumbling pages. Thick, illuminated Gothic texts. Titles in Greek and Latin.

“Demonalatra,” he read. *“Ye Complete Grimoires.”*

He stared at her. “I thought you said you didn’t have any of these books?” he said. “This stuff deals with sorcery, doesn’t it? Black magic?”

“Oh, darling, those books are no good. Father made a hobby of collecting such items. But it’s all nonsense. I admit that’s where I got the idea for inserting the ad, though.”

He grasped her slim shoulders with ruthless fingers. He stared deeply into her slanted blue eyes.

“Promise me one thing,” he whispered. “I don’t know much about all this. I’m not asking you to tell me. But you must promise me this much—never try to sell your soul to the Devil or anyone or thing else.”

“I promise.”

She offered the red seal of her lips. And Ryan knew she told the truth, and was content. And so they were married and—

SATURDAY night was hectic. The afternoon wedding was followed by a dinner. Editor Lesser had insisted on that, and Lucille bore it with good grace. After all, at ten they would be departing on the train for New Orleans. She knew how much it meant to Ryan to display her before his boss and his friends. She sparkled at dinner.

At eight-thirty they broke away.

“We must dash for the house,” she said. “I’ve got to Change and finish packing.”

They dashed.

It was a rather wavering dash on Pete Ryan’s part. There had been champagne at dinner, and Scotch and soda had played a part in the celebration.

Lucille, he noticed, was a little “high” herself. But her radiance was of the spirit rather than “spirits.”

They clung to each other in the hall as they entered the house.

“Now I must get busy,” Lucille told him.

“Wait—let’s have a drink first,” Ryan suggested.

“No, darling. There isn’t time. I’ll pack. If I’m done promptly we’ll have one together before we leave.”

He pouted a bit. She kissed the pout. “Why don’t you sit down here?” she suggested. “Pour yourself some Scotch. I’ll be down in a jiffy.”

Ryan sat down and poured. Then he poured again. The stuff was potent. Potent enough to make him whimsical.

"I'll sneak up and surprise her," he decided.

He tiptoed up the stairs. The light burned in her room and he headed down the hall.

"Confound it," he muttered. "I never did believe all those gags about women taking so long to dress. Guess I'm in for it."

Cautiously, he poked his head around the bedroom door.

Lucille Cabot was not dressing.

She stood stark naked in the shadow of a single lamp. Her magnificently moulded body was debased in an attitude of adoration on the floor.

The rug had been carefully rolled back. The. polished surface of the floor held strange markings in green chalk. Triangles, and a pentagram.

There was an acrid odor of incense in the room, commingled with a musty, sour smell of death. It was hot in the wavering shadows.

THE shadows were everywhere. They concealed the furniture, the prosaic outlines of the walls. They played weird tricks with normal vision.

It seemed to Ryan, as he gaped, that he saw nothing but the naked woman, the shining green design, and the shadows. The weaving, growing shadows. The shadows that crept and crouched like black beasts, moving as if in response to the summons from the scarlet lips of the nude girl.

For she was chanting, chanting—chanting into the darkness and the shadows. Chanting a summons.

Ryan opened his mouth to speak, then let it hang.

For as he watched, the summons were *answered.*

There was a flicker, elusive as heat lightning—just a flicker that filled the room with a momentary glare. And then the shadows on the wall *congealed.* Congealed into a Presence.

Ryan didn’t see it with his eyes. His mind perceived it, tried to encompass the hideous, distorted outline of that ebony shape that emerged, squatting, and thrust a leering muzzle into the light. The thing was not meant to be seen, save with die eye of dreams.

Yet it squatted there, and the girl raised her eyes and praised it in a shrill voice, calling it by a name that Ryan dared not hear. And it moved closer to her, and Ryan saw its jaws part as it mewed and mewed—

He moved, then. He forced himself into the room. Every step was agony, but he moved. And then he stood before her, trying to keep his physical balance, his mental balance.

“Lucille,” he muttered. “You’re—a——”

He couldn’t say it. But she said it for him, with a smile.

“A sorceress. Yes. And my father practised the mantic arts, and now you know.”

She spoke rapidly, without defiance. There was nothing but candor in her voice, and a curious amusement.

“But your promise,” muttered Ryan, his world reeling. “You made me a promise. A promise that you would never sell your soul.”

“Oh, that.” She stepped close, and the witchery of her presence encompassed him. “But I am keeping that promise,” she whispered, softly.

“Then why—this—?” He dared say no more, dare not indicate the thing that waited with them in that tiny room.

She ignored him and went on swiftly. “Besides, you silly boy, I never had any intention of selling my soul. If you recall the way I worded the ad in the paper, I merely said that I would have *a* soul for sale. And I have, now.”

Ryan turned. The Presence blocked the doorway, and he saw Lucille nod toward it quickly. As he stood there, powerless to scream or move, the black horror glided swiftly toward him—and then at last, Ryan understood whose soul was for sale.

C.O.D.—Corpse on Delivery

Mae didn't like going away alone, but I couldn't go where she went. For I had a date with a redhead—and she had one with death!

When I came in, the living room was empty. I set the trunk down in the middle of the rug and lay down next to it.

I was too bushed to move. I lit a cigarette and panted on it. My coat was sweated under the arms, so I took it off and used it for a pillow.

After a while I got up and went over to the window. I pulled back the shade and looked across the street to the cigar store. That's where I figured he'd be, if he'd picked me up again.

He was there, all right. Just loitering in the doorway with a waiting-for-a-streetcar look. Well, maybe he thought it was going over. It might have, if I lost my nose. But outside of that, I can smell a shamus a mile off—and cheap dicks like Logan I can smell from here to Hoboken.

I peeked just long enough to make sure he wasn't going to move for a bit. Because while he was playing cigar-store Indian, I had work to do.

I walked back, doused my cigarette, took another look at the trunk on the floor, and headed for the bedroom. Sure enough, Mae was asleep in there. She was lying on her stomach with her kimono all tangled up under her. Quite a dish, all right. But this was no time for sentiment.

I reached down and slapped her in a likely spot. She snorted and opened her eyes.

"Hello, honey. When'd you get in?"

"Little while ago. Figured I'd let you rest. You don't know it, but you got a long stretch ahead of you."

"Huh?"

"Rise and shine, baby. You're pulling out of this dump." She sat up and stared at me, pushing her hair out of her eyes.

"What's cooking, Tony?"

I smiled. "Plenty. It's all lined up. You're taking a little trip, starting tonight. Chicago."

"Alone, you mean?"

I nodded.

She got that sulky look. "What's the big idea? You trying to pull a fast one?"

"Come here, baby," I said.

I pulled her off the bed and over to the window. You could see the cigar store from here, too. Logan was still standing in the doorway, trying to look inconspicuous. His feet stuck out a mile.

I pushed the curtains back and pointed him out to her.

"Copper?"

I shrugged. "Logan. He's been tailing me all over town today. I shook him for a little while, but he must have picked me up again. He. doesn't know enough to put the finger on me yet, but he sure as hell won't like it if he sees us scramming out of town together. That's why you're going alone."

She gave me one of those searching looks. I didn't mind. When it came to reading my mind, Mae needed glasses.

"What about you?" she asked. "How do I know you aren't pulling a fast one?"

I heaved a sigh. "I can't figure this, baby. We hook up together. We plan the slickest heist you ever saw. You case the job for me, but I pull it off alone. Why? Just so they can't pin anything on you if something goes wrong."

She didn't say anything.

"I plant the ice in a safe place until we can turn it into cash," I went on. "Then I run around town brushing dicks off the trail. Now we're being tagged. So what do I do? Before I get the dough, I take all kinds of chances just to figure a way to get you out of town ahead of me, in the clear. And then you ask me if I'm pulling a fast one!"

I sighed, just for emphasis.

"Aw, gee, Tony. You know I trust you."

"You better trust me," I said. ' You're getting on a train tonight. Alone. Logan may tail us, but he'll stick to me. Tomorrow, sometime, I'll manage to shake him. Then I'll get the cash. It's coming through; don't worry about that."

"Honest?"

"Sure." I grinned. "I saw Fat Frisco today. He's made a connection."

"How much?"

"Eighteen."

Her eyes got wide.

"Eighteen grand?"

I nodded. "In cash. Strictly. Three days from now I'm joining you in Chi with the folding. After that we're hitting for the big time. Okay?"

"Okay," she said. But she didn't sound as if she meant it.

I grabbed her by the shoulders.

"Look, Mae. You're dumb. Suppose I don't show up? What then? You know all about the job, don't you? You know just how I stuck up the joint—you ought to, because you used to work there. You got the time, the details, everything. You even know I planted the ice with Fat Frisco. So if I don't show up, you run to the law and sing. Do you think I'd turn a canary like you loose ahead of me if I didn't intend to play it square? Look at your hand, baby—you've got aces."

She grabbed me and kissed me. I could tell that she was sold, all right. We fooled around for a minute and then I pushed her away.

"Better start packing," I said. "The train leaves at eight."

"Packing?" she said. "What'll I pack in?"

“I got it all fixed,” I told her. “Brought you a trunk.”

SHE followed me into the living room and I pulled down the shades. It was getting dark outside and I figured the bright lights from the living room would dazzle Logan’s eyes. When I turned them on, Mae got a load of the baggage.

“Where did you get that crummy outfit?” she complained “It’s second-hand.”

“I know it. I’m sorry, baby. I told you how Logan’s been sniffing my heels all day. I didn’t dare shake him to go into a luggage store, or he’d get panicky. Had to ditch him down along Fourteenth and duck into Fat Frisco’s. He gave me the trunk. It was the best he had.”

She looked at the big green old-fashioned trunk and shook her head.

“After all,” I said. “What does it matter? After you hit Chi and I come out, you’ll get the damnedest set of luggage you ever laid eyes on. Airplane luggage, baby. From now on we travel in style.”

“Sure, Tony. It’s all right.”

“That’s a good girl. Well, snap into it. I’m going out and have a drink. It’s been a tough day.”

I went into the kitchen and poured a shot. I needed it. After I got it down I figured I needed another, so I took it. Then I began to sweat, so I had a third one.

That did it.

I reached down for a pile of old newspapers. Mae was always after me to throw them out, but I’d kept saving them. I knew they’d come in handy at a time like this.

I put them under my arm and walked back into the living room.

Mae had opened the trunk, but she wasn’t packing yet. She just stood there looking sick.

“Brought you some papers to line the bottom with,” I said. “Keep your clothes clean.”

"Oh, honey, I don't like this. Going away and leaving you all alone with that dick following you."

"Cheer up. It's just for a few days."

I patted her shoulder.

"But it's such a long trip. I don't like long trips, Tony."

I stood behind her and breathed down her neck. It made the little blonde curls jump up and down.

"Well, it's just one long trip you've got to take," I told her. "We all have to take things as they come."

"Did you get my ticket?" she asked.

"Yeah," I said. "I got your ticket. Lucky you reminded me. Here you are, going away on a trip and I almost forgot to give you your ticket. Here it is."

I reached under the bundle of newspapers and gave Mae her ticket.

A hatchet in the back of the neck.

IT WAS funny about those newspapers. They'd helped me all the way through.

Reading a story in one of them about a murderer had given me the idea in the first place.

Carrying them in when I talked to Mae helped to hide the hatchet I used.

And now they kept the blood off the rug.

It took me quite a long time to do what I had to do, in order to fit Mae into that trunk. A couple of times I stopped and went out for a drink. The sweat just poured off me. Even though the hatchet was plenty sharp, I had to work. There were five separate jobs to do before I got her to fit the way I wanted. Sort of like a jigsaw puzzle, except for the thumping.

I hoped Mrs. Callahan downstairs wouldn't notice the noise. But after some of the drunken brawls Mae and I used to throw, she ought to be used to it. Besides, this was the last time I'd be bothering her.

When I was all finished, I used the newspapers again, this time to pack around Mae inside the trunk. I should have used salt, I guess, but it didn't matter. She wasn't going on a very long trip, after all, and the newspapers would keep her in pretty good shape. Damned good shape for the shape she was in.

Just for good luck I went through the bureau drawers and dumped in all of her clothes I could find. I wrapped dresses and blouses around each loose part and then put more newspapers over the top. That made it perfect.

I threw the hatchet in, slammed down the top, and locked the trunk tight.

After that I took one more drink, a double shot this time, and stepped over to the window. Sure enough, Old Faithful was still doing sentry duty.

I looked at my watch. A little after eight now. I had to get moving.

I went into the bedroom and looked around for a clean shirt. There was a pile of stuff in the top drawer—mostly a lot of bills, unopened. Mae's work. I always gave her enough to pay the bills, but she couldn't be bothered.

Well, it didn't matter. Another day or so in this town and after that they could all whistle. Bill collectors, coppers, the whole pack.

I found a white shirt from the laundry, right next to Mae's purse. She wouldn't be needing that anymore. I opened it and looked for loose change.

She had it, all right. A wad of small bills, not exactly big enough to choke a horse but plenty to choke a Shetland pony.

One hundred and eighty-eight bucks, I counted. Plus—a ticket to Palm Beach dated for just two days ago.

That set me back on my heels a little.

No wonder she wasn't paying bills! Holding out a roll and buying a ticket to Palm Beach—it was as plain as the nose on what used to be her face.

Evidently I'd done the right thing just in time. No wonder she wasn't sold on the idea of blowing for Chicago. She had her own plans. Probably meant to squeal on me and get a cut for the return of the ice. Only thing holding her up was she didn't know where I'd planted the stuff.

I may have felt a little sorry for her, particularly while I was doing some of the messier work with the hatchet, but I didn't anymore.

She got what was coming to her, all right. Got it in the neck.

I put the bills and the ticket in my pants pocket and then slipped into the new shirt. I chose a tie, went in the closet and got my sports jacket, turned out the bedroom light and walked back into the living room.

Eight-thirty.

I hoped it wasn't too late. But the Ace Express ad in the phone book said "Night or Day Service," and I hoped they meant it.

I dialed their number.

"Hello? Ace Express? This is Mr. Anthony Carello, four-one-six-three, Hyde Mount Avenue. Apartment twenty-five. Got it?"

The voice on the other end got it.

"I want you to pick up a trunk over here right away. Yes, a trunk. It goes to Mr. Sid Frisco. Frisco, F-r-i-s-c-o, one-eight-one-eight Fourteenth Street. That's right. Frisco's Auction Shop. Collect. He's expecting it before eleven tonight. Yes. What's in it? Oh . .. books. Books. Uh-huh. Tell you what you do. I won't be here when you come. I'll leave it sitting right in the front room. You can get the passkey from my landlady downstairs. Apartment one. Mrs. Callahan. Right? Thank you."

I hung up.

You could bet I wouldn't be here. That was part of the gag. My cue was to scram out now and let Logan follow me. Then he wouldn't be around to see the trunk when it came down.

Eight forty-five. Almost time to go.

I had it all timed down to the split second, almost. You got to do it that way in this business. Nothing can go haywire, or the whole thing falls apart.

This was a perfect setup.

I'd send the body to Fat Frisco in the trunk. He was wise, of course. He'd promised to get rid of it for me in a hurry.

That's why I liked old Frisco—he was so good at getting rid of stuff. Anything from hot ice to cold meat.

I couldn't take a crazy chance and dump the body myself. That's the mistake the guy made I read about in the paper. He sent his trunk off in care of General Delivery or something. And sure enough, it turned up.

But I was sending it to Frisco. He'd quicklime it in the cellar of his auction joint. He'd quicklime anything for a cut of eighteen thousand bucks.

Tomorrow he'd pick up the ice and give me the cash. By tomorrow night, if I ditched Logan, I could hit out of town. Maybe I could use Mae's ticket to Palm Beach. Thoughtful of her to pick it up for me.

By the time Logan found out I was gone for good, there would be no loose ends. The trunk would be gone, Mae would be gone, I would be gone. If Logan investigated, he'd find out that Mae had worked for the jeweler. And since she wasn't around, he'd probably figure she had copped the ice in the first place.

Neat, very neat. Now I'd go out, get Logan to follow me, and then ditch him. I just wanted him at my heels long enough to get the trunk away during his absence.

* * *

Five to nine. Time to go.

I pushed the trunk next to the door where they couldn't miss it. They'd get the passkey from old lady Callahan downstairs.

I could have left my key, but I knew what that meant. The old dame might come up and sniff around. It wouldn't be smart.

It was cold when I hit the street. Logan saw me and drifted along behind as I walked toward the comer, slowly. He wasn't taking any chances of losing me.

I grinned.

The next hour was just good clean fun. I took a taxi, rode on the subway, ducked down an alley. Logan had an interesting time, but I finally got tired. Fun is fun, but there's a limit. Besides, I had a heavy date.

I ditched Logan uptown in a bar I knew. It had a long back corridor leading to the washroom. What Logan didn't know is that a side door led out to the street again.

I took the side door, and ten minutes later I was in the Ace of Clubs, watching Connie in the floor show.

Connie did one of those military numbers, wearing a big fur hat. Shako, they call it. And she certainly knew how to shake.

After her act was over, she headed back to her dressing room. I followed.

I didn’t bother to knock, just walked right in. She turned, and when she saw me she made a big red “O” with her mouth.

“Tony,” she said. “You’ve come back.” She put her hands on my shoulders. “Remember what I said, Tony. Nothing doing until you get rid of that woman.”

“I remember.” I kissed her. “And—I got rid of her. For good.”

“Honest?”

“Cross my heart. From now on, it’s just you and me, kid.”

I walked over to the dressing table and picked up her big fur shako. I reached inside the lining and pulled out a lot of stuff that gleamed and glittered. It was the ice, of course. I’d planted the jewels here for safekeeping a week ago.

“Tony! Where did that come from?”

So I told her. Not about Mae, of course—I just explained that Mae had gone away forever. But I gave her the pitch on the jewels. We’d get the money tomorrow and head for Florida.

Connie clung to me. She got powder all over my lapels, but I didn’t care. “Darling, you’re wonderful,” she whispered.

That was the start of a very big evening.

But the next morning. . . .

THE next morning I came walking up to Fat Frisco’s auc-tion joint, very fast, and almost bumped into a man in the doorway.

It was Logan. He stood there, big as life, pretending to read a paper. His big face was blank and his puffy eyelids only flickered as I brushed past him.

This was bad. He must have been nosing around trying to pick up my trail and found out I visited Fat Frisco recently. So he was hanging around here on the chance I'd show.

Well, his dumb hunch paid dividends.

Now I couldn't head for the back room and see Frisco. Not with Logan tagging me.

I decided to stall. The easiest way was to sit down and make like an auction hound.

It was almost noon, and the joint was crowded with live ones. I never figured the deal that gets them into these places, but they come. There was a bunch of women and a lot of old whiskers in the dump, and I noticed one or two quaint faces in the lot—Frisco's shills, of course, planted to heist the bidding. The auctioneer was up on the platform, spieling. He was a tall skinny wallio with a smooth line. Rico Zucconi—one of Frisco's boys. He had on a morning coat and his hair was plastered down. He looked like a waiter in a clip joint, but he could make with the tongue.

I sat there listening to him raffle off a grandfather's clock—a genuine antique that Frisco probably made over in Jersey—and he raised the ante on bidding to $145.

Easy dough. But then, that's what Fat Frisco liked. Easy dough.

I looked around for him out of the comer of my eye, but couldn't spot him. Instead, I spotted somebody else.

Logan.

The big dick was sitting two rows behind me. He still looked half asleep, but when I gave him the eye, his cigarette flared up and I knew he was breathing hard.

I didn't breathe so easy myself.

I had to see Frisco, get the dough, and catch the night train with Connie. But I didn't have any extra ticket for Logan.

It was a bad spot. I turned my head back to the auction platform and sat half-listening to Rico Zucconi's patter.

Then it was as if somebody had stepped up the volume on me. All at once his voice came booming out.

“And now we come to Lot Four-fifty-six. Lot Four-fifty-six, ladeez an’ gen’mum, consistin’ of one trunk, locked and sealed, contents unknown. To be sold for storage charges ...”

I looked at Lot 456. It was a big secondhand green trunk, all right. Rico Zucconi hadn’t lied about that. But he did lie when he said the contents were unknown.

I knew what was in that trunk.

Mae was!

No, there was no mistake about it. I saw the trunk I’d brought home last night—sitting up there on the platform, waiting to be auctioned off right now!

Zucconi was giving with the heat.

“A sporting proposition,” he said. “Who knows what this trunk contains? Clothing, bonds, jewelry—even cash. There is no key. The lucky owner can break the seal himself. All right, what am I offered for this trunk, contents absolutely unknown—what am I offered for this treasure chest? Who has the feeling that this is his lucky day?”

“Ten dollars!” yelled a voice.

I looked around, gulped. It was my voice that yelled.

Zucconi spotted me, gave me a grin. “Gen’mum bids ten dollars! A ridiculous offer! Think of it, friends, this trunk may be worth a fortune—”

He was telling me!

“Fifteen!”

The bid came from behind me. Two rows behind me. From—Logan.

He wasn’t playing possum anymore. He was sitting up straight, staring right at the trunk.

“Twenty!” I snapped.

“Twenty-five!” Logan again.

Zucconi was a little confused, but happy about the whole thing.

“Twenty-five from the sporting gentleman—a man who knows a good thing when he sees it!”

I could tell Zucconi was excited, because he remembered to pronounce that “t” in “gentleman.” Well, he wasn’t the only one who was excited.

“Thirty!” I yelled.

“Forty.”

“Fifty!”

When I said it, sweat ran into my mouth. I just couldn’t figure it out. I sent the trunk to Frisco. Now he was auctioning it off. What was this—a double-cross?

“Seventy-five,” said the voice behind me. And Zucconi was chanting, “Seventy-five once, seventy-five twice—”

“One hundred!” I said, but my throat choked up, so that it was only a gasp. I put air into my lungs to shout, but before the words came out, Zucconi had done it.

“. . . seventy-five three times, and—sold!”

Logan got up and walked briskly down the aisle.

I couldn’t scream now, either—because there was something new in my throat. My heart.

Logan walked down the aisle to the side of the platform and slipped bills to Zucconi’s assistant at a little table. He didn’t wait for a receipt.

Zucconi was working on Lot 457, and nobody bothered to watch Logan when he took out his pocketknife and began to pry the lid off the trunk.

That is, nobody watched him except me. I watched from way over next to the door. I should have run, but I had to look. I had to.

Logan was prying at the lock, and he was so excited the knife kept slipping. I didn’t blame him—I was excited, too.

Then at last the lid gave, and there was a loud creak, and the trunk opened.

Logan looked down inside it. I couldn’t see his face.

All at once he slammed the lid back down with all his might. He shrugged, and walked up the aisle toward me. I didn’t run, just waited. I put my hands behind me, holding the blackjack very tight.

Logan drew abreast of me, but he didn't stop. He didn't even look at me. He just walked straight out of the store and disappeared down the street.

I went down that aisle in five steps and tore the lid off the trunk.

It was full of old books.

IT'S too bad there were no track officials around to watch me. I broke the world's record for the one-hundred-yard dash, getting into Frisco's back room.

Fat Frisco was hunched over his desk. He didn't look so hot to me, because he resembled a big fat killer shark.

Then he smiled, and that was better. He still looked like a killer shark, but a happy killer shark.

I didn't return his smile. I grabbed him by the nearest roll of fat on his neck and pulled him to his feet.

"All right," I said. "Spit it out. Where's the body?"

"Body? What body, Tony?"

I shook him into quivering blubber. "I sent it to you in the trunk. I know you got it, because you just auctioned the trunk off now."

"I never got any trunk with a body in it, Tony. So help me—"

He was going to need help before I got through with him. The help of a licensed embalmer. Two kills come as easy as one.

"Cut it. I saw the trunk auctioned off out there. The big green trunk I bought from you yesterday to hide Mae's body in. I had the express company deliver it last night to you here and—"

"We didn't get any trunks in." He blinked his eyes and shook. I helped him shake a little.

"Now I understand," Frisco wheezed. "That trunk I sold you yesterday was part of a job lot I bought. All green, all alike. I filled the rest with junk: old books and stuff. You saw one of them out on the platform. But I didn't get any trunk by express from you."

I dropped Frisco in a hurry and picked up the phone.

What Ace Express had to tell me didn't help much. Sure, they called for my trunk. But the landlady was out. Nobody there to let them in. They figured on picking it up again this noon—

"Cancel the order!" I yelled and hung up, sweating.

This was sweet. Very sweet. The trunk was still sitting in my apartment. We still had to get it out without Logan seeing it.

I explained matters to Fat Frisco. He shrugged.

"What can I do?" he said.

"Plenty. That is, if you're interested in these items."

I fished the ice out of my inside pocket. It made a very pretty glitter on his desk. But it had to go some to match the glitter in Fat Frisco's eyes.

"Well, I'll be damned!" he whispered.

Why should I contradict him? It seemed like a pretty sure prediction.

"All right," I snapped. "Where's the moola?"

He opened a drawer in his desk. When I saw the big bills, my eyes made the glitter unanimous.

"Everything's okay, then?" he asked. "It's a deal?"

"Just one little detail left. You have to help me dispose of that body. But fast."

He started to shrug again, but I was tired of that routine. I picked up the jewelry, and let him grab my arm.

"All right, Tony. I've got it figured. We can get the body ourselves. Right now. We'll take my truck. Pick up the trunk and bring it back here."

"What about Logan?"

"You'll be inside the truck, won't you?" Frisco reminded me. "And he won't pay any attention to my truck pulling out."

Frisco was right, it turned out. Because when we drove out of the alley ten minutes later, Logan wasn't around to pay attention. I couldn't spot him anywhere on the street.

I got a little happier as we drove along. I was beginning to figure things straight, now. There was nothing to worry about.

Logan didn't know about a body. He didn't know there was a body. The dumb shamus was just tagging me until he could spot those jewels. When I bid on the trunk, he figured the ice was inside—so he outbid me. After he saw what he'd bought, he went back to headquarters to sulk.

Well, by the time he got over his little pet, it would be too late. Quicklime would have the body, Frisco would have the ice, and I would have my eighteen grand and a ticket south for Connie and me.

It was perfect. When we went through the hall and upstairs without meeting anybody, it was still perfect.

I opened the door of the apartment and walked in. The trunk still stood in the center of the rug, lid down. That was perfect, too.

"Everything set?" Frisco asked.

"I'll make sure," I told him. I took a quick look around the place. Nothing had been disturbed. We were clear.

We lifted the heavy trunk and carried it down to the truck. I slid it in back and then climbed in next to Frisco. The motor started.

I looked at the street ahead and smiled into the bright sunshine. It looked so pretty—I couldn't understand how all at once everything turned black.

* * *

I can't understand it even now, when I'm sitting here, with the D.A.'s reporter taking the whole confession down in shorthand.

Of course, Logan is here too, and he explained a lot.

He said he didn't get suspicious at all until he saw me bidding on that trunk at the auction. He figured the jewels were planted there, and he was disappointed, of course.

But when he marched out, he got to thinking. Guess he'd read about the trunk murders, too, in his day.

Because he started calling the express companies in town—and when he hit the Ace Express, it was the tip-off. So he beat it over to my place and found the stuff.

They had already picked Mae up—a lot less of her than I'd once picked up—when Frisco and I arrived.

Then we came, carried the trunk out to the truck, put it in, and started away.

That's when Logan sapped us, of course. And here we are.

Still, it bothers me. How could Logan sneak up behind and knock me over the head? I know for a fact he wasn't hiding outside, and he wasn't crouching down in back of the truck when I put the trunk in. I know, because I looked.

I just asked Logan that question, and he told me.

I might have known the answer.

He was hiding inside the trunk.

1946

". . . but doth suffer . . ."

The love story of a man of science in a not-likely future.

The first time I saw Lorraine she was combing her hair in front of a mirror. The movements of the comb made little golden ripples against the smooth white shores of her brow.

Sometimes the little things like that hit you the hardest. But what's the use of explaining? I fell in love with her.

We were introduced immediately, of course. It's never hard to get acquainted at one of Sid's parties. Usually I felt like an outsider there, but with Lorraine present everything changed.

Apparently Sid had been talking, because she seemed to know all about me, and about the work I had been doing. She was friendly, casual, but with a certain intensity. I suppose that's what really attracted me -- the vibrant quality, the enthusiasm and sheer vitality of her personality. Again, there's no use attempting to analyze her power. I was hopelessly infatuated from the start.

Lorraine had been assigned to a Rocket Sector in New City and she was eager to talk about her work. The party ebbed and flowed around us while we talked. I don't think either of us was conscious of the passage of time.

It came as a shock when the darkhaired man tapped her on the shoulder.

"Time to go, darling," he said.

"Hello, Matt." She turned. "Matt Collins, this is Don. You've heard Sid speak of him, I suppose?"

Matt nodded, a bit curtly. I sensed jealously -- and something else.

Many of Sid's guests disapproved of his asking me, and I knew it. But his parties are always a bit unconventional, and Sid's not the type to let prejudice govern his friendships.

Matt was obviously uncomfortable. He had to force himself to respond. "Oh yes, Don. Sid's always talking about your brilliant work. Dehydration, isn't it? I've seen some of your graphs. We use them in Transport."

He didn't look at me. He looked at Lorraine -- at the golden waves cascading down her back.

"We really must be going, dear," he said. Lorraine rose. She smiled, held out her hand. I pressed it. Purely a gesture, of course. But Matt Scowled.

They left together. I started after them, and Sid drifted over.

"Gorgeous, isn't she?" he murmured.

I nodded.

"But not for you, Don."

I nodded again. But something inside me rebelled. Why not for me? Why not?

Back at quarters, I went through the routine mechanically. All the next day I thought of her, doing my work in a daze.

Feld noticed it too.

He was watching me carefully all day, and about four o'clock he made up his mind.

"Better get a check-up, Don. You're not functioning up to standard."

Feld is probably the only man in the world who can order me around, but I've never known him to take advantage of it. He knew as well as I did that it was an order, but he was decent enough to make it sound like a suggestion.

I had hoped to contact Lorraine that evening, but I knew it was useless arguing with him. It's his job, after all, and he's responsible. He took me over right away in the giro.

It was just the usual routine. I hate it, the blackout worst of all. Sometimes it brings peace, but this time I fought it. It robbed me of my memories of Lorraine, robbed me of any chance to thin about her.

Perhaps I'm a little bitter about the whole thing. Dr. Tal and the whole lab staff have done wonders for me. Certainly I felt refreshed, invigorated, afterwards. It had help, you see.

Fortunately, they didn't use the probe. They decided it was all mechanical; and when consciousness flooded back they knew no more than they had before.

But I remembered Lorraine.

It didn't take me long to teleflash her. We arranged to meet that evening. Sid was giving another party and it would less conspicuous that way. I had sense enough not to want to attract any attention; and she was tactful enough to leave the responsibility to me.

She came, and without Matt. That proved she was interested after all; it wasn't hopeless.

We talked. We walked, after the affair was over. We planned to meet again. Already the conversation had assumed an intimacy. We no longer spoke of our work, but of ourselves.

Lorraine was wonderful. No self-consciousness, no embarrassment, nothing to mar the communion of minds.

It was the first of several meetings. I can remember every detail with a clarity that is at once precious and painful. No sense in going over the whole story . . . probably dull enough to an outsider.

Only the climax is important. It came one afternoon during Rest Day. It had to come.

After all, she had encouraged me. I knew she did not share the general prejudice; knew she was generous, understanding, and kind. She liked me, wanted to be with me . . . and I could hope for the rest.

Of course I told myself it was impossible, fought against it. But it had to come. And so . . . I told her that I loved her.

We were sitting on a bench over looking the Flight Ground, high above the field. I remember how she pulled away me and stood up, turning her head so I couldn't see the look on her face.

The wind whipped the golden curls across her shoulders as she faced me once more, and I saw there were tears in her eyes. She couldn't speak, but she was crying.

I couldn't cry. I could only watch her as moved her hands pitifully in ivory patterns of bewilderment and fear.

"No, Don," she whispered. "No, we can't . . . don't you see? We can't . . . ever . . ."

The Matt appeared, out of nowhere. He didn't speak, nor did I. Maybe he'd been spying on us. I didn't know, and it didn't matter.

What mattered was the way Lorraine turned to him instinctively, and held out her arms.

He led her away. Neither of them looked back. Neither of them said a word.

I never saw Lorraine again. They said she had been transferred the next day. Matt went with her. I don't go to Sid's parties anymore. I've learned my lesson; I just keep working.

After all, I should have known it was hopeless. What Lorraine did was natural, inevitable, and I don't suppose I ever really expected it to turn out any other way.

They can use all the high-sounding phrases they like, but admiration and respect don't add up to anything more than . . . admiration and respect. They have gone to great deal of trouble to praise and honor my brain, but they can never know what it is to live in my body.

I understand it all. But it doesn't make any difference in the way I feel about Lorraine. I will always love her, always endure the torment of that love.

Or perhaps not always. The brain they thought enough of to seal it up in this perfect plastic body must surely learn some day to control the glands and organs that, after all, depend on it. Eventually it must learn to banish the emotions that have lingered so unaccountably long after the flesh.

But in the meantime there is memory, that perfect valency made the brain to too valuable to lose, to keep me from forgetting even a single moment of the rapture, or the pain.

Satan's Phonograph

An instrument of the devil, its contents created in hell!

THIRTY-THREE revs a minute. Thirty-three revs. Thirty-three revolutions. That's the way it plays—night and day, night and day. The black disc on the playback of the recording machine, whirling around and around. Thirty-three times every minute . . .

It looks just like an ordinary machine for making home recordings. But it isn't! You won't find any tubes or wires inside. I couldn't begin to guess what *is* inside. The box is sealed—and its contents were created in hell.

Take a look at the record. You'd think that was ordinary, too. But you're wrong. Because when you play the record, you don't hear a human voice. You hear—*a human soul!*

You think I'm crazy, eh; babbling like this? Well, I don't blame you. I thought he was crazy, too, when he brought me that instrument of the devil—Satan's phonograph.

Yes, I thought Gustav Frye was mad.

I always knew he possessed the eccentricities of a genius, of course. Ever since he taught me the piano—as only Gustav Frye could teach it. One of the greatest virtuosos in the world; this little, shriveled-up old man. He made a concert pianist out of me, and a good one. But even in the old days he was moody, filled with queer ideas.

He didn't concentrate on technique. "Let your soul express itself through the music," he would tell me.

I laughed, then. I thought it was just an affectation. But I know now that he believed it; and surely he taught me to go beyond mere mastery of the keyboard, into the realms of the spirit. He was a strange teacher, and a great one.

After Carnegie Hall, my first successes, I didn't see Gustav Frye any more. I went out on tour—traveled abroad for several years. It was on my European trip that I met and married Maxine.

When we came back here together, I heard startling news of my old teacher. Gustav Frye had gone mad, they said—he had been put away in an institution. I was shocked, sorry, and anxious for further details. But nobody seemed to know the exact circumstances, and in the pressure of settling down once more, I overlooked the news for the moment.

Maxine and I took a little studio apartment uptown, and we were happy for a while.

And then—Gustav Frye came back!

I'll never forget the night. I was home alone. Maxine had gone out to spend the evening with friends, I remember that I was sitting before the fire stroking the black fur of Tiger, our cat.

Suddenly, the cat arched its back and hissed. Then silently, out of nowhere, Gustav Frye glided into the room.

He was little, and wrinkled, and old. He was clad in rags. But somehow, he looked terribly impressive. Perhaps it was his eyes—perhaps something that seemed to peer from *within* his eyes or *behind* them.

HE STARTLED me. I stammered out something trite, but he didn't respond. He kept looking at me and nodding his head as though marking the beat of some strange inward rhythm.

Oh, he was mad enough, and no mistake! I discovered that as soon as I ventured to comment concerning the big black case he carried under his arm.

I remember what he said as he set the case down and opened it.

"So, Roger, my old pupil—you want to know what this is, *ja*? You shall never guess! Twenty years I work to perfect this thing—this machine. I call it a machine because there is no other word you could understand; but it is not mechanical, *nein!*

"They laugh at me, Roger, when I tell them of my work. They call me crazy. They even lock me up; perhaps you hear of this?

"But I work. And I finish it. When I finish it, I break out of that place where they shut me away—and I come here to you. Now, look at this!"

I looked at the open case; at the two turntables, the cutting arm, the playback arm, the package of discs.

"Why, it's a phonograph," I said. "A home-recording machine."

Gustav Frye nodded—kept time, rather, to invisible music.

"And how do you make such a home-recording, as you call it?" he asked.

"Why, it's very simple," I faltered. "I don't know the technical process, but—you talk into a microphone, and the sound waves of your voice are electrically reproduced on the record. It's just a matter of vibrations impressed on the surface of the record; that's all. And when you play it back, you hear your voice."

Gustav Frye chuckled. Even his chuckle seemed to accent the rhythm to which his nodding head responded.

"Very good! You always were a smart pupil, Roger. But you are wrong. This is not an ordinary recording phonograph. It does not capture voices alone. It captures—souls."

I gaped at him. "Souls?"

"Yes, souls." He regarded me so earnestly that I felt pity for him in his delusion. "Sound is vibration," he said. "Well, vibration is the source of life. The atoms and molecules of your body are all moving, vibrating in certain set rhythms. They put out electrical impulses—wavelengths which can be recorded. They have recorded heartbeat and thought-waves. But suppose you could invent a machine that would pick up the vibrations of your soul, or your life-beat itself?"

"Impossible!"

He nodded again, faster. "I have such a machine here," he whispered. "A machine to capture and record the human soul. Mind you, I said *capture* and record."

How I laughed at him, then! I thought if he knew I was skeptical he might stop his tirade and go away. But the old man insisted. He said he had always tried to capture the essence of the soul in music—but never succeeded. That is why he had worked on the machine. He wouldn't explain what he had learned or done; I might steal the secret, he said.

Oh, it was fantastic! In the end, I told him so to his face.

Then he became stubborn. He insisted on giving me a "demonstration"—with Tiger, the cat.

What could I do? One humors madmen, eh? So I humored Gustav Frye.

I ALLOWED him to set up his recording microphone there before the fireplace. It was just an ordinary microphone—in fact, the whole set appeared to be quite ordinary, though it bore no manufacturer's label. I wondered where he had obtained it.

He attached the mike to the machine, and put the cutting arm in place above a fresh disc. He had no brush, and I noticed that there were no sound-level controls visible to my eye. The mike extended on a cord, and when he lifted it, I saw that a tiny red light seemed to glow from the mike head.

That was curious—the light glowed; he appeared ready to cut a record, and yet he hadn't plugged any wire into a wall socket. Apparently the machine did not operate on electric current.

I started to question him, then checked the impulse. It would only provoke a harangue on his mad theories. And I wanted him to get it over with, go away before Maxine returned. It was embarrassing and disturbing. Better to humor him, now.

So I held Tiger, writhing in my arms, as he placed the mike before the cat's eyes. The red glare rose from the mike in inexplicable phosphorescence, and Tiger stared at it, spitting and hissing.

Then Gustav Frye started the cutting arm moving across the black record. Tiger howled into the microphone.

It only took a minute.

After that, old Frye lifted the arm, switched the record over to the playback turntable, and played the recording. I could hear Tiger howling—howling hideously with nerve-wracking clarity.

It disturbed me—that dreadful squalling. I told him to stop the record. He shrugged and lifted the needle.

Then I looked around. Everything was unchanged in the room. I still held Tiger under my arm. But Tiger wasn't struggling.

Tiger was limp. Tiger was cold. Tiger was—dead.

Yes. The cat was dead.

I can hear old Frye chuckling now, as I protested in sudden, incoherent rage.

"But of course, your cat is dead! Didn't I tell you that my machine *captures* the soul as well as records it? The sudden shock; the translation of soul-essence into vibration—that does it. So, you see, it isn't Tiger's voice you hear. It is his *soul!"*

I threw him out, then. Yes, literally threw him out. The old lunatic had frightened my cat to death—and I admit he scared me, too—with his crazy talk of putting souls on phonograph records!

I hustled him out of there in a sort of unreasoning fury. He protested with the fervor of the madman that he was. He had made me rich and famous, he said. Now he wanted me to protect him while he perfected his infernal machine. He had great plans; he and I could share the rewards.

I lost my head completely. I shouted at him to go away, to stay away.

Then he cursed me. He cursed me and swore revenge.

I hardly heard him. I was too busy hustling him downstairs. He scuttled off with his bulky machine under his arm, his head still nodding frantically as he wheezed threats under his breath.

I shouted after him that he'd better not let me catch him around here again—and I meant it.

But he came back. Yes—he came back!

I found that out the next afternoon.

You see, I hadn't told Maxine about the madman. I knew it would only alarm her. I got rid of poor Tiger's body before she returned that night, and said nothing about the incident.

Then—the next afternoon—when I came back from a stroll after lunch, I opened the door and heard Maxine scream.

"Roger!" she shrieked. "Roger! Roger!"

I rushed into the studio. I saw Maxine there, lying on the floor. She was pale and lifeless.

But how could that be?

For I still heard her voice. She was screaming.

"Roger! Roger! Roger!"

She screamed my name over and over again, without a change of inflection; screamed it in utter agony.

Heaven help me, I knew *then!* I saw that accursed instrument over on a table, saw the record whirling and the needle pressing down.

The phonograph—Satan's phonograph—was grinding away. I knelt beside Maxine's body and kissed her cold, dead lips—while on the record she screamed her endless torment.

"Roger! Roger! Roger!"

I knew how it must have happened, of course. Gustav Frye had sworn revenge. While I was away he had come here, talked to Maxine; probably persuaded her to record her voice as a joke. "To surprise Roger," he must have said.

Yes, Frye had lured her before the microphone—and captured her soul on the record!

I rose, took the record off. It was an ordinary black disc, and its surface seemed grooved in the usual manner. I held it and it felt cold; cold as

Maxine’s body. I couldn’t think, couldn’t comprehend what had happened.

After that I just sat there for a long time. It was quite a long time, because twilight crept into the room as I stared into the shadows and tried to think.

What could I do?

The police would laugh at me if I called them. The whole story was so incredible. But it was true!

Perhaps I had better destroy the machine, then find Frye. But that’s when Frye came back.

Yes, I must have fallen asleep. And that’s when Frye came back. Yes, he must have tiptoed into the room in the twilight, nodding his head in that alien rhythm. And Frye must have seen me sleeping and hypnotized me.

Do you hear? He came to me in sleep and hypnotized me! He changed the records, put on a new disc, and held the microphone before my lips.

Then, as I slept, he commanded me to speak.

He made me speak these words—the words that put my soul on a record like all the rest.

Do you hear me? Do you hear my voice? Then *do* something!

Find that man.

Find Gustav Frye, wherever he may be—and destroy him. Destroy that hideous machine, too, before it is too late. And do something to get me off this record.

Yes. . . get me off this record, do you hear?

Get me out of here . . . out of here . . . out of here . . . out of here . . . out of here . . .

The Noose Hangs High

Kay's light was on, all right, when I stopped by her house, but the silhouette of the hanging corpse on the shade should have warned me of the silent, ghastly passenger waiting in my bus, who had already punched my ticket for the hungry gallows!

CHAPTER ONE

Hangman's House

THE FAT lady got off the bus. I looked at the part of her that got off last and thought, accurately enough, "This is the end."

That cleaned up my last run for the night. End of the line—nothing to do now but haul the empty bus down to the garage.

I looked at my watch. Exactly midnight. I wasn't due in at the garage until 12:20. That left me with just enough time to drive out of my way four blocks and pass Kay's house.

I always try to pass her house after I finish my last run, just to see if there's a light in her window. That means she's home from the modeling school. If everything's okay, she's waiting for me and waves out of the window. Then, after I take the bus in I walk back and pay her a visit.

Not exactly an ideal method of calling on your girl friend, but that's the way it is. She runs the school at night and I ran my bus.

I pulled away from the stop and rounded the corner. It was dark out here. No streetlights. I didn't go for the idea of Kay living all alone in the middle of nowhere, but her folks had left her the bungalow, so there it was.

I was hoping there'd be a light in the window for her wandering boy tonight. There hadn't been any lately, and I was beginning to get worried.

Joe Slade, the night man down at the garage, didn't help any, either. He had passed a few hints, very delicately—like hitting me over the head with the Empire State Building—about other visitors. Larry Keeler, in particular.

That got me where it hurt. Larry Keeler had an early night run and got off around 10. He could be paying social calls on Kay. Except that he happened to be my best friend.

But they say your best friends don't tell you. And nobody was telling me. All I knew was: no signals the last few nights. So I worried. And hurried.

Kay's house loomed through the darkness up ahead, to the left of the road. I wondered if I would find somebody hanging around there tonight.

I slowed down and stared at the house across the field that separated it from the road. The light was on tonight, but the shade was down. Funny. I squinted out at the window. Then I saw it.

Shadowed against the shade was a black blur, moving back and forth as the shade flapped and bulged. The shadow was sharp, distinct. There was a long line—and depending from it, a dangling form. I stopped the bus, and my hands trembled.

Somebody was hanging around Kay's house, all right—hanging on the end of a rope!

THERE was only one thing to do. I turned off the bus lights and opened the door. Before I jumped out, I groped around under the seat until I found what I wanted. My sweating palm closed around the cold, reassuring heft of a wrench.

As I groped through the darkness of the field, I circled to the right, trying to hit the path that led to Kay's door. This was complicated, Because my legs had a tendency to moved backwards instead of forward. But I got a grip on that wench. By the time I reached the porch, I was all right, but I couldn't step sweating.

I went up the porch steps quietly and rang the bell. It sounded loud. Too loud. No answer.

I rang again, leaving plenty of sweat on the buzzer. Still no answer.

I didn't really expect one. A guy who has just been hanged is probably too busy to bother with answering doorbells. The door was locked, too.

That was that. I could break the door in with my shoulders, if I had a pair of shoulders built for door-breaking. But it wouldn't work. I ran down the steps and circled around to that window. Then I got another shock. The light had been switched off. The window was open, but the shade had been rolled up. My spine began to roll up, too.

Hanging men that don't answer doors I can understand. But lights that go out by themselves and shades that roll up, that's out of my line entirely.

Somebody pulled the switch and rolled the shade. Somebody made a noose and tied the hangman's knot. Not a Boy Scout, either. Somebody in Kay's house—now!

That was *it.* This was Kay's house. I had to find out. The window was open, and I had the wrench in my hand. There was no turning back.

So the fly stepped into the spider's parlor. Not stepped, exactly. I clambered, crawled, and dropped. I tried to be quiet. I very much *wanted* to be quiet. But my teeth were rattling in conga rhythm, and it didn't much matter. My feet touched the floor and I moved away from the windowsill slowly. It was blacker than the inside of a goat and silent as hell.

A board squeaked beneath my feet. There was a sudden sound of breathing—mine. Whatever was hanging in that room didn't breathe.

I edged along the wall. I didn't want to bump into a lurking figure. Even more than that, I didn't want to bump into that dangling thing.

My right hand kept the wrench in readiness. My left left perspiration along the wall as I groped for the light switch. Now was the moment. I knew what I'd have to look at when I turned it on. By this time I was almost certain that whoever had turned out the light had left by the window before I arrived. But that dangling shape was still there.

Suddenly I wanted to scream bloody murder. For the first time the thought crossed my mind.

That hanging thing! What if it was *Kay?*

No. It couldn't be. Please God it couldn't! The thick rope around that lovely throat of hers, those eyes bulging out, and her tongue . . .

I turned on the light—and stared.

The room was empty.

No rope, nobody hanging from the low crossbeam of Kay's living room. Nothing. I wasn't afraid any more. I walked across to the door and kicked it open. The hall was dark, empty. I went into the dinette, the kitchen. Empty. There was still the bedroom. That was empty, too. I didn't miss the closets. Nobody. No body, living or dead. Then I was back in the living room, all alone. Just me and my problem.

How could a guy turn out the light, cut a body down, drag it out of the window and sneak off, all in the two minutes it took for me to cross the field and beat a tatoo on the front door?

I made for the front door, unlocked it, and stepped out on the porch. My head was beginning to hurt. It had been a hard day. I was worried about Kay. My eyes were tired. Maybe I had made a mistake. Everybody has hallucinations. Guys in nut factories have them all the time.

But this was no asylum. It was Kay's house. And the body I saw—or thought I saw—was missing. Whoever sneaked it out in such a hurry would have provided a getaway. A car, perhaps. It would be parked in back of the house. I walked over to the driveway, bent down and lit a match.

For the first time I got somewhere.

No hallucination had put those fresh tire marks in the dust. There *had* been a car here, recently. It might still be here. As the match flickered out, I rose and started walking along the driveway. I walked quietly, very quietly. And then, all at once, it wasn't dark any more. Because a handful of stars rushed down and hit me over the head. . . .

AFTER that it was dark again. Very dark.

Something kept throbbing in the darkness. I knew what it was. My head. I reached out and touched it, then wished I hadn't. There was more than sweat on my fingers when they came away again. I'd been sapped.

There was a pleasant little thought. I lay there and contemplated it for a few minutes. It didn't seem worthwhile to do any more. After a while I got enough energy to look at my watch. Twelve twenty-two by the radium dials.

That couldn't be right. It must have been twelve-fifteen when I left the house and started along the driveway. And I felt I'd been out for a lot longer than seven minutes.

I found out that I had what it takes to get up, and even to stay up, once I reached my feet. There was a small hole in my head, but apparently my brains hadn't fallen out through it. The house was still dark. I held on to the side of it as I completed my little sentimental journey around to the rear.

No car. But there were tire marks in the yard.

I wondered why the driver hadn't made a good job of it and run the car over me as he backed out. *He* backed out? Suppose it had been *she* who backed out? No. Not Kay. She wasn't hung, and she wouldn't hang anyone.

But where in hell was she? Where was the body? Where was the guy who slugged me?

I didn't care any more. All at once I could think of just one thing: to stagger back to my bus and drive it down to the garage.

I can drive in my sleep, and this time I practically did. The whole thing was a dream. I didn't wake up until I drove up the ramp.

Joe Slade was waiting for me, sitting in his usual spot next to the door. He was lettering an "EXPRESS" sign for a bus.

But when he saw me, he dropped the brush and bent down until his black mustache nearly touched his watch. What you call a "significant" gesture.

"What's the big idea?" he grumbled. "You're fifteen minutes late."

I didn't answer.

Slade got up, wiping his hands on a rag. I watched the black paint stains form. Joe Slade watched me.

“Calling on the girl friend again, eh?” he muttered.

I sat there, weak and dizzy. Too weak and dizzy to leave the bus.

Slade came over to the door, eyeing me. “Listen, Collins,” he said, “I’m gonna have to report you. I don’t mind if you drive by her house every night. Yeah, I know all about that. But when you decide to park and run in for a midnight snack—”

I stood up. “Cut it out, Slade,” I said. “Something’s happened.”

He stared at me. My face was in the light for the first time.

“Yeah,” he muttered. “I’ll say. You look all mussed up. That gal been clawing you up?”

I shook my head.

“You get into a fight with Larry Keeler?” I must have showed something in my face when he mentioned *that* name, because he shrugged.

“Oh, I know all about Larry, pal. I know he’s been beating your time. Over there nearly every night. Jealous, huh?”

I shook my head again. Not exactly a brilliant come-back, but it kept me from thinking.

I didn’t want to think. The whole thing was just a dream. Nothing was real from the moment I saw the fat lady’s posterior disappear from the bus. I wished it was back again.

Joe Slade climbed in and stood over me. Real concern lined his forehead now. “What’s the matter, Collins? You sick or something?” I did that routine with my head again. Slade spotted the wrench lying on the seat next to me. “Car trouble?”

I was tired of shaking my head. This time I nodded. I had to answer him, had to explain, had to decide what to do. But I couldn’t think clearly.

Slade sighed. “All right, pal. Never mind. Why don’t you beat it and get some rest? You can tell me in the morning. I’ll clean up the seats and check receipts for you.”

He turned and walked down the aisle of the bus behind me. I was too woozy to watch. I heard his footsteps as he moved. Then he stopped.

“Collins,” he said.

I didn't like the way he said it.

I got up and walked back to him. He was bending over the long seat in the rear of the bus. He was bending and staring at something. I bent and stared, too.

Lying on the floor beneath the rear seat was the body of a man.

He was cold, but he wasn't stiff yet I found that out as we turned him over.

No need to ask how he died. The front of his head had been crushed by what they love to call a "blunt instrument."

I even knew what that instrument was. So did Joe Slade. Because the bloody initials T & L stood out on the wound in reverse. There was no mistaking them.

We both recognized those initials. They're stamped on all Company property. They're stamped on those big, heavy steel wrenches, like the wrench I had next to me on the front seat. We knew what killed him, all right. And we knew who he was, too.

The dead man lying in the back of my bus was Larry Keeler!

CHAPTER TWO

Sign of the Rope

I LOOKED at Joe. He looked at me. Then he pulled out a gun. That was all right. As night man at the garage, he always carried a gun, for burglars. But he wasn't pointing it at a burglar now.

He was pointing it at me. "All right, Collins," he said.

I didn't answer.

We got off the bus and marched into the garage. Slade picked up the phone from the wall bracket. He dialed with one hand, the other kept that gun levelled at my chest.

He was phoning for the cops. I didn't listen. I had other problems.

Who did it? Who killed Larry and put his body in my bus? How was I going to tell my story?

> *Accused appeared at garage in dishevelled condition, unable to give coherent account of his activities. When questioned by night attendant he told fantastic story of seeing a hanging figure —*

No. That was out. I could never explain. And it was going to be pinned on me. I'd find out plenty about hanging, soon. The hard way.

Slade hung up.

"Not that it's any of my business, understand," he said, "but would you mind telling me why you did it?"

"I wouldn't mind," I answered. "But I didn't do it. The kid was my best friend. You know that, Slade! Larry was my friend."

"He seems to have been Kay's best friend, lately," said Joe. He tugged at his mustache and there was a long pause.

I felt that rope tighten around my neck. I swallowed hard. If I couldn't get a guy like Slade to believe me, how could I ever convince the law? Or a jury? Or the governor, who might grant the reprieve?

"Larry wouldn't cheat on me, Slade. Neither would Kay. I didn't do it. I didn't see either of them tonight at all. I stopped at Kay's house. She wasn't home. When I came back to the bus I just got in and drove here. I didn't see any body. I don't know how it got here. Somebody planted it. If you'll wait until I get things straight in my own mind, I can explain."

"Better make it a good one," Slade advised. "The cops like to have it good. And not too complicated. If I were you, I'd try and keep Hummell out of it, too."

"Hummed?" I said. "That old goat? Kay never had anything to do with him. He was chasing her ever since he sent his niece to the modeling school, but she brushed him off. I know. She hasn't seen him in months."

"Larry told me different," Joe informed me. "After all, he's a millionaire. It's only natural if a girl like Kay takes a shine to him."

> *Accused had previously displayed insane, jealousy, forbidding the young woman to associate with James B. Hummell, prominent industrialist. . . .*

Yes. Slade was right. I'd have to keep Hummell out of it. And Kay, wherever she was, she'd be. dragged into this mess, too. What if they tried to make her out as an accessory? What if she *was* an accessory?

But nobody would bother with that one. I was the real killer. Slade thought so. The cops would think so. Even Kay would probably think so. I almost thought so myself.

That rap on the head! Was I really out? Hadn't it all been a weird nightmare, a distortion of my own? I *thought* I saw a hanging body. I went into the house and *thought* it was empty, then came out and *thought* I got slugged.

Suppose I went into the house, actually, and it wasn't empty? Suppose Larry had been there, and I had the wrench and we fought and I got knocked out but I hit him with the wrench, first, and got him into the bus and then the frenzy died and I was my normal self again, forgetting all about it and driving the bus here?

Accused pleads temporary insanity. . . .

But it didn't matter. Larry was dead, and I was waiting for the cops to come, and Slade had his gun. I was on the spot.

Slade leaned against the wall, watching me.

"Tough, brother," he said.

"I wish you believed me," I answered. "I've always thought you were a square shooter, Slade. You liked Larry. You know Kay and me. We're all in this mess together. If you'd only help me, I could figure this thing out. I want to find the killer."

"Are you suggesting I let you get away?" Slade asked. "No dice, Collins. You know better than that. It would look swell if the cops arrived and found me holding the gun—and the bag. Sorry."

I glanced at the phone on the wall and shrugged. "All right. I understand. But you could give me a little break."

"Such as?"

"Such as letting me call up Firestone before the law takes over. You remember, he's Kay's lawyer, and he knows me. I want legal counsel, Slade. I'm going to need it, bad. Come on, be a pal."

Slade hesitated, twisting his mustache. He got paint on it.

"Hurry up. They'll be screaming up in a squad car any minute now. Just let me call. I'm entitled to a lawyer."

"All right. But no funny business. I'm standing right behind you with the gun. And this gun hasn't got any friends, understand?"

"I understand. Thanks, pal."

I moved over to the phone. Slade moved right behind me. He breathed over my left shoulder as I moved to take the receiver off the hook.

"Got a nickel?" I asked.

He nodded.

While he nodded, I grabbed the receiver on its cord in my right hand. I raised it, turned suddenly, and brought it down on Slade's head.

He slumped, out cold.

I grabbed the gun out of his hand. I was going to need it more than he did.

Then I ran out of the garage. I spotted Slade's little coupe at the curb. He always left the keys in.

It was convenient, all right. I gave her the gun, and over the motor I heard the high, thin wailing of the squad car coming down the road behind me.

I'd be a post office pinup, all right. Or else, another kind of pinup. The rope grew tighter. . . .

I SKIDDED down the side roads. Evidently the squad car boys hadn't spotted my get-away, but I took no chances. I made for town by a roundabout route.

It was after one o'clock when I got around to looking at my watch again. I stepped on the gas, heading for the Lyon School of Modeling. Don't ask me why. Kay worked there, and I had to find Kay. She wouldn't be sitting there at this hour. Nobody would. But I had nowhere else to go.

The cops would be camping on my doorstep. Let them camp. They could pitch pup tents and build a bonfire for all I cared.

I had to find Kay. Maybe there'd be a message for me at the school, a call. Something. There must be an explanation to this whole business. It just didn't make sense to me.

A hanging body, and then no hanging body. A sap on the skull. Larry, lying dead in my bus, his skull crushed. Kay and Hummell.

Yes, Hummell. James B. Hummell, prominent industrialist.

Where did he fit into the picture?

Slade had mentioned Hummell's name. Said Larry spoke of him. Could Hummell kill Larry? Why?

I began to think about Hummell. I never met the guy, but I'd heard of him. Kay had told me. He'd sent his niece to the Lyon School, just a crazy kid who wanted to become a model. Kay was a good teacher; ran a nice little business with her school. Hummell made sure of this before he enrolled his precious niece. He came down and talked to Kay personally.

Quite personally, it seems. Because he came back, and not to-discuss his niece, either. He was rich, retired, a widower. Kay's a pretty girl. She's got personality and what it takes. What it takes to take a guy like Hummell.

She didn't tell me she was seeing him. I found it out by accident. Then she said she wasn't serious. She promised to give him up. The big limousine didn't drive her home any more. I know, because I had Kay's word for it and I trusted her. As far as she was concerned, it was all over.

But was it all over as far as Hummell was concerned?

This I didn't know.

A rich, lonely old man. An old man used to commanding what he desired. Thwarted now, and brooding. Perhaps a bit cracked. It happens in the best of families.

Suppose he investigated, learned about the steady boyfriend? Only he made a mistake and thought Larry was the steady, not me? So he hits Larry over the head with a wrench . . .

No. That still didn't make sense. Neither did the hanging body I'd seen. That could be Hummell's work, too. That could be Hummell.

It wasn't Larry. I knew that now. No rope marks around his neck. But there would be rope marks around mine if I didn't find Kay and straighten this thing out.

I drove up to the Brice Building and parked. The Lyon School of Modeling was on the third floor. The building was open all night. I could ask the caretaker. . . .

Uh-uh.

I forgot. My days for asking caretakers were over. Fugitives from the law talk to nobody.

So there went my plan of inquiring about Kay, or about a message for me. I was stuck. My sweating palms were stuck to the wheel.

I looked at them under the light. Nothing clicked.

I sat there a moment, waiting. My eyes crawled up the outside of the building, boosted themselves on the ledge of the third floor, and looked at the windows of the Lyon School. Everything was dark. This was my night for dark windows. Still, I had to find out.

I left the car and walked up to the door. I stared through the glass. The lobby was empty, but well-lighted. The elevator door was closed. I squinted at the indicator. It read "Twenty." Good. That meant the caretaker was up on the top floor. Probably reading a detective magazine. I walked in and took the stairs.

The third floor hall was dimly lighted, but there was no light shining behind the panelled door marked Lyon School of Modeling.

That didn't stop me—Jim Collins, ace investigator (formerly employee T & L Bus Company) wanted for a slight charge of murder.

I walked up to the door and tried the doorknob. I swear I wasn't even surprised when the knob turned and the door opened. But I was surprised a moment later—when the voice whispered out of the darkness, "Oh, Larry! Thank God you've come!"

It was Kay.

CHAPTER THREE

Key to Hell

AS I closed the door, I reached over and switched on the lights. Kay stood there, her mouth working curiously.

“Jim!”

“Yeah,” I said. “It’s Jim. Larry couldn’t make it tonight.”

“But what are you doing here? What do you know about Larry?”

It was brutal, but I told her.

She began to sob, very quietly, and she kept on sobbing all through my story. When I finished, she managed to pull herself together.

“Jim, I’ve been a fool! I can’t explain it, but I know this is all my fault.”

“What you mean, you can’t explain it? You’ve got to explain it. Perhaps to a jury.” She put her head on my shoulder. It seemed to belong there, and somehow it felt pretty good. But I could still feel that rope biting into my neck. I jerked away.

“Let’s have it,” I said. “There’s no time to lose. Why was Larry hanging around your place tonight? Did you expect anyone else to pay you a visit? What about that body?” Her blue eyes clouded. She dabbed at them with a handkerchief designed to be used by a mosquito with sniffles. Then she faced me again, with everything under control. Her voice didn’t waver.

“Before I answer your questions, let me ask you one. If you’re telling me a straight story—”

I couldn’t choke my anger back on that one. “You mean to say *you* don’t like the way I tell it either? Do you think I killed him?”

She hung her head. Everything seemed to be hanging tonight.

“No, Jim,” she whispered. “I believe you. But I thought you might still be able to answer my question. It’s important.”

“Ask me.”

"I wanted to know if you had the key."

"Key? What key?"

"Oh. Then you still don't know."

"You bet your life I don't. And I want to find out. Now, let's have a few answers from you."

"All right. But they won't help any," she sighed. "You ask me why Larry was at my place. I don't know. He called me about seven, between runs, and said he'd meet me here at 11:30. That's why I've been waiting."

"But he gets off at 10. What would keep him for an hour and a half longer?"

"He was going to do something for me. Well get to that later."

"All right. Larry said he'd meet you here. Are you sure it was Larry who called?" Yes-s—no, I'm not. It was a public phone booth, and there was a lot of noise. But it sounded like him."

"Hiraran. Well, that's something to go on. If it was Larry, then he was still—alive—at seven."

Kay's mouth started to twitch again, but she got it turned off in time. "You wanted to know if I expected anyone else to visit me at the house tonight. The answer is no. I thought I'd meet Larry here, go home, and be there in time to give you the shade signal." She said it as if she meant it. I wanted to believe it.

"And about the body," she murmured, "I don't know anything."

"You and me both," I answered. "But there's one other thing you do know and I don't. The key."

I GRABBED her by the shoulders and shook her. "Come on," I said. "Tell me. Don't you realize they're looking for me right now? It's murder! They're breathing down my neck. They pay the hangman a hundred bucks in this state to do his job. You want him to earn a C note the easy way, with me?"

"All right," she said, faintly. "Maybe you'll hate me for it. But you ought to know, even if it doesn't help.

"It's Mr. Hummell's key."

"Hummell again!" I said. Then, as she stared at me, "Never mind. I'm listening."

"You know I'm all through with him, darling," Kay told me. "But when I went to him and told him I wouldn't see him any more, he gave me the key.

"You see, all during the time that I—that I saw Mr. Hummell, I refused to take anything from him. Gifts, I mean. There was a bracelet, and other things. He'd show them to me and I refused. Believe me, darling, I've been waiting for you."

"Cut the violins," I said. "Let's have the rest."

"But when we broke up, he asked me to take the key. Just for old times' sake. He's really a very nice old man, you know."

"We were talking about a key," I reminded her.

"He told me that he'd drawn up his will. He wouldn't embarrass me by mentioning my name, but he'd thought of another way. He had left instructions with the lawyer in charge of his estate, and with the bank, that anyone presenting this key would have access to a safety deposit vault box after he died.

"He didn't tell me what was in the box, and I didn't ask. I wanted to refuse the key, but he insisted. I took it to avoid a scene."

I nodded. "Then you changed your mind and decided you didn't want the old boy's present. Right? So you decided to give it back."

"Yes, Jim. That's what happened. I felt—well, I felt that the key would stand between us. If something happened to Hummell and I opened the box, and you heard about it—well, I'd have to explain. The way I'm explaining now. I would feel ashamed. And I do feel ashamed, now."

"So you gave the key back."

"I wish I had. But don't you understand, Jim? I wanted to give it back without a scene. I didn't want to see Hummell again. And so I asked Larry to take the key back for me and deliver it to Hummell in person, so no one would ever know."

"Larry," I said.

She put her arms around me. "Yes. Poor Larry. No, Jim, I didn't love Larry. But he was a friend. Yours and mine. And now somebody has—"

I felt her shudder as she broke off.

"Take it easy," I said. "I can guess the rest. You gave the key to Larry. He promised to take it to Hummell tonight and meet you here afterward. That's why you were waiting.

"But somebody else was waiting, too. Somebody who knew about the key."

I got a brainstorm. "Did Slade know about it?"

"Slade?" Her brow wrinkled.

"Joe Slade at the garage. Friend of Larry's."

"No. How would he know?"

"Larry could have told him, casually. But let's drop that for a moment. To your knowledge, just who *did* know?"

"Well, Hummell. And of course, his lawyer."

"What's his name?"

"Mr. Kinsella, I think. Yes, Avery Kinsella. I've never seen him."

"But neither of these men knew that you were giving the key back, did they?" I demanded.

"Of course not."

"Well, I'm just thinking out loud. Suppose there was a reason—a strong reason—for wanting that key again. Wouldn't they try to get it?"

"And—you mean they would *kill* for it?"

"Somebody killed Larry. And somebody killed someone else, before that. Hung him. Or it could have been suicide."

I walked over to the door and turned out the light. "My eyes hurt," I said. "I can't think any more. This whole thing is too complicated for a bus driver. Let's get some fresh air, kid."

I spoke loudly. Kay winced, but led the way to the door and opened it.

I stayed behind long enough to pick up a paperweight from the office desk. Then I walked out of the door as she held it open.

But I didn't walk out in a straight line. I swerved. Then I brought the paperweight down on the wrist of the man who crouched next to the door.

He had a gun.

But he didn't have it long. I knocked it to the floor. He swung. I swung. We both connected. And then we were locked together, rolling over and over on the floor.

He was good. He began to squeeze on my windpipe. It felt tight—like a rope. Everything began to blur. I gave him my knee but he wasn't taking any. He kept on squeezing. The lights were going out. . . .

THEY went on again, fast. Good old Kay—she had the gun. The man saw it and had sense enough to let go of me. He stood there with his hands in the air, as if he were asking double permission to leave the room. I'll bet he felt like it at that.

I got up and brushed myself off. I don't know how long he'd been standing there. I noticed him, or rather, his shadow, about the time Kay started crying. It was a good idea to pick up that paperweight when I left.

Kay didn't look in character, holding that heavy gun. I took it away from her, but kept it pointing at our friend.

He was a tall, husky-looking guy in a blue suit that wasn't meant to be rolled around the hallway of an office building. He had a nice hat, too, but it was crushed. And. so was his self confidence.

That suited me.

"Pardon me, stranger," I said, politely. "Would you mind telling me just what in hell you're doing around here?"

"Sure. I'm supposed to be capturing you." He grinned.

I grinned back. I grin very cheap. "Detective?"

He nodded. "Homer Thatch, Homicide. Card in my pocket, if you search me. You Jim Collins?"

"Check. Pleased to meet you. My fiancee, Kay Lyons."

He nodded. "Heard of you. After we got to the garage we sort of figured out where you'd head for. At least, I did. Guess I'm. a bum guy at figuring or I'd had sense enough not to come up here all alone."

"Live and learn," I said. "We all make mistakes. I take it you heard our conversation in there?"

"That I did," said Thatch, Homicide. "Very interesting."

"Any other comments to make?"

"Only that I don't believe a word of it. Collins, you're caught red-handed."

"I agree with you," I answered, "Except for a couple of little details. My hands are white, and I'm not caught. You are. Come on."

"Where we going?"

"Out."

Kay bit her lip. "But there'll be more cops downstairs, waiting. Probably a squad car at the curb."

"We're going out the back door," I said. "Forward, march!"

Our little military procession went down the back stairs and out through the Service Entrance. The street was deserted. There was a squad car around the corner, I knew, but the car was parked here at the curb.

We got in. Kay and Thatch took the jump seats in the rear, and I gave Kay the gun again, just to keep her company. I drove.

I backed up as quietly as possible, turned around and purred past the corner. Safe.

"Where are we going, Jim?" Kay's voice was troubled.

"Don't you worry about that," I told her. "Everything is under control."

Oh, yeah? Wanted *for kidnapping an officer of the law. . . .*

But I couldn't think about that. Instead, I began to talk to Thatch. I told him the whole story all over again, in detail.

"And so," I concluded, "we're going back to Kay's house, now. I slipped up on something when I searched the first time. There's a bare chance I can find what I'm looking for now—and I have to take it, tonight. Tomorrow will be too late; cops swarming all over the joint. I'm on the spot."

"You can say that again," Thatch muttered.

"I'm on the spot," I repeated. "There. You satisfied?"

"What are you looking for, Jim?" Kay seemed puzzled. "Is it the key? Or another—body?"

"Both," I answered. "And Thatch, here, is going to help me."

Thatch cleared his throat. "You know, Collins, that story of yours is so cockeyed I could almost believe it. But who do you suspect?"

"You're the detective," I reminded him. "Maybe we'll find some answers."

We were getting out into the darkness now. I drove slowly, peering ahead along the road. There might be a lot of law hanging around Kay's place now—late as it was.

The house was dark. We parked half a block down and got out. I took the gun back and kept Thatch in front of me.

We were halfway up the drive when I saw it—the big black bulk of a car, parked in the rear.

"Go on ahead, Kay," I whispered. She did. We waited there, quietly.

"I don't recognize it," she said. "It isn't a police car. Now what do we do?"

"We go right ahead," I answered. "This time I've got a friend with me." I hefted the gun.

For a wonder, the boards in the porch steps didn't squeak. The door wasn't locked; I remembered leaving it open when I went out of there, way back dim centuries ago.

We moved through the utter darkness of the hall. Not a sound from us. Not a sound from anyone else.

Then we were at the parlor threshold. Thatch went ahead of me. I wasn't taking any chances.

Kay switched on the light.

A tall, gaunt man rose from the depths of the armchair. One bony hand reached towards his coat pocket.

"Drop that," I snapped.

"Why—Mr. Hummell!" Kay gasped.

CHAPTER FOUR

Killer's Date

"NEVER mind who we are and what we're doing here," I said, anticipating his question. "Just concentrate on sitting down again, and keep your hands in your lap. Thatch, you sit down, too. It makes me nervous to see you all standing around."

"What are you doing here?" Kay asked the gaunt man.

Hummell coughed and shifted uneasily.

"It's all right," Kay assured him. "This is Jim Collins. You remember, I've spoken of him. And this is Mr. Thatch. He's a detective."

"But why is Collins pointing that gun at us?" Hummell whined.

"I told you I'm a nervous man," I said.

"We'll explain later," Kay promised him. "But you can talk. They both know about you."

Hummell's pasty face went whiter. He bit his lip and sighed. I kept looking at him. The gun looked at him, too.

"It's very simple, my dear," Hummel said. "I had to see you right away. I know it's very late, but this matter couldn't wait. When I found you were gone, I took the liberty of trying the door. Finding it open, I came in to wait. I kept the lights out because I was worried about attracting attention. And I was worried about you."

"Very thoughtful," I interrupted. "But what is this matter that couldn't wait?"

Hummell ignored me and talked to Kay. "I got a phone call at the house tonight from a young man who said he was a friend of yours. Larry Keeler was the name. He said he was coming out to see me, but he'd been detained and probably couldn't make it until tomorrow."

"Yes?"

"He said it was highly important. Something about you . . . and me."

"I see."

"I was—well, frankly, a bit frightened. I thought of blackmail. You know I've always tried to protect your name, my dear. I began to wonder if you knew anything of this matter. So I decided to take a chance and come to see you. And here I am."

"Better tell him about the call," I suggested.

Kay told him.

"Yes," Hummell said. "He was just planning to return my key. I understand, now. But what are these men doing here?"

"Looking for a body," Thatch interrupted. "The body of a man who was hung in this room some time before midnight tonight. All right, Hummell, where'd you hide it?"

"Body? But I didn't get here until nearly two o'clock. I don't know anything about a body."

"Then maybe you can tell us how you killed Keeler," Thatch suggested.

Hummell's face worked. He was sweating. It felt good to watch somebody else sweat for a change.

"You came here to look for that key tonight, didn't you?" Thatch said. "After you discovered Kay was really through with you for keeps, you decided to get that key back, right? So you came here, ran into Larry Keeler, somehow, and—"

"But what about the hanging?" Kay interrupted.

I used to watch it in the movies, and I never believed it. The tense, dramatic moment, and then, suddenly—the entrance of the cops.

I believed it now.

"Drop that gun, you! Everybody stay where they are." The voice barked, the feet thudded, and the room filled with law.

I dropped the gun. It was all over, now.

THERE was a cop standing behind me and another one at my side. There was a cop next to Hummell, and even one to escort Kay. Thatch stood over near the door with another man in a grey suit, and Joe Slade. Slade tossed me a feeble wave. It didn't help much.

Thatch mumbled to the man in gray very quickly. He nodded, then shook his head. Just a guy who couldn't make up his mind, I guess.

"All right, folks," said the man in gray, stepping suddenly forward a pace and giving us all a great big smile. "I'm Lieutenant Olson, Homicide."

I wondered if he expected us to applaud. "We've been over at the garage checking with Slade, here," he explained. "Just on our way back downtown to run him in as a material witness, but when we passed here we saw lights. And here we are."

Kay moved closer to me. She was trembling. I patted her arm. I wished I had somebody to pat mine.

"So I guess we'll all go along together," Olson concluded.

"Hey," I said. "Wait a minute."

"You can talk down at the station," said Olson.

"Give him a chance," Thatch urged. "Maybe he's decided to sing."

"All right," Olson shrugged. "Start singing."

Something happened in the room. Eyes turned towards me. The cops stared. Hummell stared. Slade stared, Even Kay stared.

I looked out of the window and began talking, in a low voice.

"Guess you all know what happened here tonight. I saw that body hanging here. The shade was down and I only caught the shadow. I don't know yet who was hung. When I came in, the body was gone.

"I walked around in back, spotted a car, and got slugged. When I recovered, the car was gone. I drove to the garage, met Slade, and he found Larry Keeler's body in the back of my bus. Keeler was killed with a blow from a wrench. I got away, picked up Kay downtown, ran into Thatch and disarmed him. We came here and found Hummell waiting."

"We know all that," Olson snapped. "Get on with it."

I got on with it. I told the story of the key. Slade's eyebrows went up. So did Olson's.

"Anybody presenting that key had access to the vault after Hummell's death," I said. "That establishes the motive for Larry's murder. He had the key and somebody else wanted it."

I looked at them all for the first time. "That's important, because it lets Hummell out," I said. "He wouldn't kill Larry for the key. If he wanted to get into the vault or fix it so nobody else could, he'd merely instruct his lawyer to change his will. You're clear, Hummell."

Hummell gasped, but whether in relief or indignation, I couldn't tell.

"That leaves only two possibilities we know of, besides myself," I said. "And since I *know* I'm innocent—"

Olson snorted. "Keep talking," he said.

"Two other suspects," I said. "Slade—and Kay."

I got more gasps on this one. The act was going over.

WHOEVER wanted to kill Larry for the key also wanted to pin the rap on me. It would be someone who knew my habits and Larry's habits. Knew that I drove past here every night looking for a signal to come in. Knew that Larry was coming here to Kay's house.

"It was all damn smart. Larry was killed some time before I arrived. When I came in, I was sapped, as planned, and the body planted in the car. I was to be left with a wild story of a hanging man when the cops arrived to pick me up for murder. The key never would enter into the story at all. And the killer had good reason to suspect that Hummell would never open his mouth about it if he knew; because Hummell wanted to protect Kay's good name."

I paused. Slade chewed his mustache. Kay bit her lip.

"Now there's only a little more to decide. Which of these two could do the planning, set the wheels in motion?

"Somebody had to phone Larry and tell him to be here early in the evening to see Kay. Some last minute plan changes would be the excuse. Something about not taking the key up to Hummell after all. That would bring Larry here in time to be murdered.

"Then, somebody had to come out here and murder him, take the key, and set the trap for me. When I came, I was sapped and the plant was complete."

"But Slade, here, was at the garage," Olson objected. "And Kay was down at the school."

"I've been thinking about that," I said.

I walked over to Kay and nodded. "You could run out here after school closed at ten and get back to the office again without anyone noticing it."

Kay's eyes widened. "Jim, what are you saying?"

"You could call Larry and get him to come here, too. You knew about my habit of passing the house.

"But you couldn't sap Larry with a company wrench and kill him. Besides, you didn't need to. If you changed your mind and wanted the key back, you'd merely ask for it and he'd give it to you."

I pointed at Slade. "Looks like you're it!"

"You're crazy, you murdering fool!" he snapped. "I was at the garage. I got witnesses all evening to prove it."

"Yes," I said. "You were at the garage at seven when you called Kay and imitated Larry's voice. You told her to wait down at the school, just to make sure she wouldn't come home and blunder into the killing.

"Then, when Larry got off his run, you told him Kay had called the garage and left a message for him. Said he was to meet her here instead of downtown.

"That got Larry over here in a hurry. But you weren't far behind. After eleven, nobody comes to the garage but me. You had to take a chance on that one, but it was worth taking, wasn't it? Because of the key and the vault. Because you were certain the murder would be pinned on me.

“You hopped into your car, raced out here behind Larry, and slugged him with a wrench. Then you planted the trap for me. When I came you let me have it, lugged the body into my bus while I was still out, and raced back to the garage to wait for me.”

I turned to Olson. “I suggest you check the tire marks in the driveway against Slade’s coupe,” I said. “They’ll match.”

“What does that prove?” Slade shouted. “You’ve driven my car in here too tonight.”

“You’d like more proof?” I said. “I’ll oblige. First of all, I’ll have Olson examine all our fingernails. A chemist might make something out of what he finds underneath your nails, Slade. Do you want me to show them the hanging man?”

“Why, you dirty—”

HE CAME at me in a blur. There were six guns in the room, but they didn’t dare fire.

Slade was on top of me, and we went back over a chair together. There was screaming and shouting, but I was too busy to notice.

Slade’s hands were around my windpipe. They felt like a hangman’s knot. I tore at them and then punched upwards. I put my shoulders behind every blow. Something sagged, gave. The hands went limp. The noose wasn’t around my neck any more.

I picked Slade up and dusted him off.

“Here you are, Lieutenant,” I said. “Don’t forget to get a chemical analysis of the stuff under his nails. You’ll find paint. The same paint he uses to make signs with at the garage.”

Thatch stepped over to me. “One thing still puzzles me,” he said. “About that hanging figure?”

“That’s where the paint comes in,” I told him. “You see, Slade’s entire scheme depended on pinning the rap on me He had to figure out a way of luring me to the house. So he showed me the hanging man.”

I stepped over to the window and pulled down the shade. “There it is.”

And there it was. Olson let out a low whistle.

Painted on the windowshade was the cleverly executed figure of a man, dangling from a rope. The figure I saw as a shadow when I stopped the bus at midnight.

“Slade probably intended to come back and switch the shades later on,” I hazarded. “But now he won’t get the chance.”

I put my arm around Kay. “Cheer up, kid,” I said. “I’ll buy you a new windowshade tomorrow.”

The idea seemed to appeal to her. She looked up at me, but I looked at Slade. They were taking him out now. He glanced at the dangling figure on the windowshade as it swayed back and forth, flapping in the night breeze.

He shuddered a little. I knew what Slade reminded me of, then. He looked like a man who has come to the end of his rope.

THE END

The Bogy Man Will Get You

He was so very different from other men!

THE first time Nancy met Philip Ames, he didn't even *notice* her. Of course, you really couldn't blame him. After all, she was only fifteen—just a *kid.* But that was last year, and this time it was different.

Nancy's folks went back to Beaver Lake for the summer in June, and she could hardly wait to find out if Philip Ames still had his cottage down the road.

Hedy Schuster said he was up, all right. She said Mr. Ames lived at the cottage *all* year. Everybody knows how cold it gets at the lake in winter—practically out of this world. But Hedy Schuster knew, because she talked to Mr. Prentiss down at the store and he said so. That Prentiss was like an old woman, he had his nose in everybody's business.

The first chance she got, Nancy took a walk up the road past Philip Ames' cottage. The door was closed and there were curtains on tire windows, so she didn't see anything. But then, Mr. Ames wasn't around much in the daytime. Practically a hermit. Hedy Schuster said it was because he was writing his Ph.D. thesis for the university. He only shined around at night.

"But after all, that's the best time, isn't it?" Hedy Schuster said. It was just like her to make such a snotty remark to Nancy, knowing how it would burn her up.

Not that Nancy ever tried to hide the way she felt about Philip Ames. Why *should* she? After *all,* she was sixteen, she had a mind of her own. And Philip Ames was really *something.*

Nancy always liked tall men, and Philip Ames was positively *statuesque.* He had such luscious black hair and dark eyes and his skin was so white. That came from not getting any sun at the lake. She wondered how he would look in bathing trunks and if he would spend much time with her folks again this year. He was very friendly with them the last season. He seemed to like Ralph—but then, everybody liked her Dad. And Laura was glad to have company.

Of course, if her mother even *suspected* how Nancy felt about the man she would be positively *furious.* But she needn't know, yet. Not unless that Hedy Schuster gave it away, and she'd better not or Nancy would *kill* her.

Hedy knew some boys around on the other side of the lake who had a roadster, and she wanted Nancy to double-date some night, but the first few evenings Nancy stayed at the cottage. Of course she was hoping Philip Ames would come over, and she dressed very carefully; no bobby-socks or kid stuff, only her best slacks and one of those luscious sweaters Laura bought for her at Saks. Those sweaters really *did* something for her, and it was about time Mr. Philip Ames found it out.

But he didn't come over and he *didn't* come over, and it was almost a week now and Nancy was going stark raving goony because Hedy kept telling her what she was missing not coming along.

And then, Philip Ames came over. He was even better than she'd remembered—she'd forgotten all about that deep voice of his. A real *man's* voice, and he didn't *laugh* all the time like those repulsive young icks Hedy was so excited about. He really was reserved; you could tell he was deep. He was glad to see Ralph and Laura, but he didn't smile.

Then Laura said, "You remember our Nancy, don't you, Phil?" and he looked at her and nodded and then he just looked.

Honesty, it just sent *shivers* through her. You'd think she was a mere infant, standing there and trying to keep from blushing. But he didn't seem to notice that. He noticed other things, though, because when they all went out on the porch and sat down, he sat next to her and asked her all sorts of questions.

It wasn't that he was trying to be *polite.* Nancy could tell the difference. For the first time he was *looking* at her as a *woman;* she *knew* it. And she would never forget it, never. Some day they would both remember this moment together. Some day—

RALPH and Laura kept interrupting Philip with questions about his thesis. He said it was coming along and he hoped to finish it this summer. Then Ralph *insisted* on telling him about his old construction job, and Nancy knew he was just enduring it all. He wasn't really interested a bit.

Philip asked her why she didn't have much of a tan, and she said she wasn't going out much these days.

"I don't know what's gotten into her," Laura butted in. "She just mopes around the cottage all day, reading. I wish she'd get some fresh air."

"Oh, mother!" Nancy said. You'd think Laura was talking about a ten-year-old child or something.

"I don't get out very much myself these days," Philip said, rescuing her. "We serious students have to stick together. What say we go for a hike tomorrow evening? Like to see what's going on at the pavilion across the lake, Nancy?"

Would she? Imagine showing up with Philip when Hedy Schuster and her crowd was around. Why it would be—

"No objections, I hope?" Philip was asking Ralph and Laura now and it was OK, of course.

"All right, young lady. See you about eight, then."

That was all that mattered. Of course Ralph had to kid her later about her new boy-friend, and the next afternoon Laura made her promise on her bended knees that she'd be back before eleven. "After all, we don't really *know* very much about Mr. Ames. He seems like a very fine young man, but —"

"Please, mother! I hope you don't tell me about the bees and flowers."

Laura looked just a little bit shocked, but she didn't say any more, and Nancy went back to work on her hair.

She scarcely took time out for supper because the upsweep was so difficult. Her hair wasn't really long enough for an upsweep yet, but it added *years* to her appearance and it was worth it. After all, Philip *was* older. Twenty-seven? Twenty-eight? *Certainly* not thirty. Maybe she could ask him tonight. Or in a couple of nights. Because there would be other nights. The whole summer was ahead of them. *Their* summer.

At quarter to eight, Nancy was out on the porch, waiting. It would be just childish to pull that old gag about not being ready yet. Philip didn't *deserve* such treatment. So she was all ready when he came up the path.

"Good evening, my dear."

Yes. He said it. "My dear." Nancy was glad he couldn't see her face plainly in the shadows. The sun was just setting.

She started down the path to join him. "I'm all ready," she said.

Philip sort of backed away and looked down.

"I—I'm sorry," he mumbled. "Came around to tell you I couldn't make it tonight. Something came up all of a sudden—"

"Oh!"

"I hope you understand—"

Why did he keep backing away from her? What was the matter?

"Well, I'll have to be running along now. Some other time, perhaps."

Nancy just stood there with her mouth open. It was a brushoff, all right.

Who did he think he *was,* anyway? Was he *crazy?*

She wanted to say something but couldn't seem to think. It made her so mad she almost cried. The tears came into her eyes and she saw Philip sort of swimming away from her. The moon was just rising over the lake now, cutting the darkness. Philip was disappearing down the path.

All at once he was gone, and then she noticed this thing flying low, along the trees. It squeaked at her and came for her head.

It came straight from where Philip had been standing, and when it got close she could smell it, all rubbery, and see its little red glaring eyes.

It was a black bat.

Nancy didn't scream. She didn't make a sound, just ran straight into the house and up to the bedroom. She didn't begin to cry until she had her mouth biting into the pillow.

LAURA was really swell about the whole thing. She didn't say a word. She pretended she never even *noticed.* Nancy would have *died* if she did.

Besides, what was there to say?

The brush-off wasn't so bad. Nancy got over that. But when she was lying there in bed, in the middle of the night, she got the *other* idea. And you wouldn't even dare *whisper* about things like that.

But it *had* to be that way. He couldn't have just stood her up on the spur of the moment. He *wanted* to be with her.

Oh, she was being silly. Frightened of a bat. Just because Philip Ames lived up there all year and nobody saw him in the daytime and he broke a date when the moon came up and all at once this bat—

Maybe somebody would *know* something. That old woman of a Mr. Prentiss down at the store. Of course you couldn't come right out and ask him *that.*

Then Nancy thought of a way. The next morning she went down to the store and gave Mr. Prentiss the works.

"We're going to have Mr. Ames over for dinner this week and Mother wanted to find out if there's something special he might like—you know, some kind of canned stuff—"

Mr. Prentiss said it, then. She *knew* he would.

"He don't trade here at all. Never seen him in my place."

Yes. Philip Ames lived here all the year round, but he never came out in the daytime. And he never bought any food. Never. And it was a lie about having him over for dinner because come to think of it, Nancy had never seen him eat anything.

That proved it.

But—she had to be sure. Weren't there other tests?

In the afternoon Nancy made a date with Hedy Schuster to visit the boys across the lake. She was glad, because when she got home after dark, Ralph said he'd met Philip. Philip was coming over tonight for a while.

So Nancy was able to tell him she already had a date and wouldn't be there because she just simply *could not* break it.

Yes, she was glad. She couldn't face him tonight, after what happened and after—what she thought.

And also, that meant tonight would be a good chance to do what she planned. If Philip was out, she could go to the cottage.

IT WASN'T easy. Hedy was just ready to *blow her top* when Nancy broke the date. But she didn't ask any questions, and it was only about nine when Nancy sneaked back past the cottage.

Philip was in there, all right. Nancy went up the path then to his place. It was dark, and there were clouds over the moon. She almost fell flat on her face before she got to the door.

It was locked, anyway. But the window was open. Nancy took off the screen and crawled inside.

The cottage was just a cottage. She had a pencil flashlight and held it down low while she looked around. But there was nothing to see. Nothing!

Of course, the bed hadn't been slept in. At least, it was *made* pretty well for a man. And he didn't have any dishes or stuff. Not even a camp stove in the place. There were suits in the closet and a drawer full of clothes.

It gave Nancy a funny feeling to open his bureau and feel the shirts and socks and stuff, all lying there in stacks. Most of it was brand new.

There was no mirror above the bureau. There was no mirror in the bathroom, or anywhere else. Of course there wouldn't be, if—

But she had to be *sure.*

Nancy finally went over to the work table. There was a typewriter on it, and a big stack of manuscript on one side. Maybe he *was* writing a thesis, after all.

She ruffled through the pile of papers, looking for the title page. It was there.

"Some Notes Upon the Empirical Approach to Demonology in the Modern World."

Somehow, that shocked her more than anything else. It seemed to all tie in. Demonology. In the modern world, today. He was writing about demons, and—

things.

Nancy knew now that she'd have to *do* something, tell somebody.

Yes. That was it. Tonight, after Philip left, she'd tell Laura. Tell her that Philip didn't eat and there were no mirrors and he was so pale and nobody saw him in the daytime and a bat flew out of the sum set.

Tell her that Philip was . . . a vampire.

NANCY never knew how she managed to get through that night after she told Laura. Laura was afraid she would go into *hysterics,* until she managed to deadpan. If Laura wanted to take it that way, let her. Some people are just too superior for their own good.

But Nancy wouldn't stop now. She couldn't. If her own mother acted that way, how could you expect anyone else to—?

There was only one thing left to do and that was see it through. At least Laura wouldn't *say* anything—she positively wouldn't *dare.*

So the next night, when she heard that Philip might drop it again, Nancy excused herself just in time. She waited outside until she saw Philip come up the path. It was cloudy again, but that suited her. Then she headed straight for the cottage down the path.

After she finished there, Nancy came back to their place. Philip was still talking with Laura and Ralph. She could hear him through the window.

"You're afraid of the dark, aren't you?

"Oh, but you are. I know all about you, do you understand? You were afraid of the dark when you were a child. Not because of robbers . . . or thieves . . . or murderers. Children don't think of such things. You were afraid of the dark because of . . . the Bogy Man!

"That's the term your parents used. Bogy Man. One of those smart, sophisticated, grown-up terms, designed to hide the terror behind it. But the terror exists.

"Because, when you were a child, you knew what the Bogy Man looked like. You would see him in your dreams—that black, grinning face with the wicked red eyes. You heard-,his buzzing voice mumbling to you in sleep, when you had nightmares. And you'd wake up, screaming for your mother.

"Admit it. You *did* scream, didn't you? And now that you're grown up, you laugh about it. Now you're ashamed of your fear.

"But—you're *still* afraid. You may have learned to sneer at witchcraft and demonology. You read slick, scientific explanations dismissing the basic phobias with a psychiatric phrase. Mythology, folklore, primitive ignorance—that's what tales of witches and wizards are, aren't they? There is no Satan, no Hell. Right?

"Yet somehow, you can't keep away from such thoughts. You *will* buy books about the supernatural and patronize horror movies, and visit spiritualists, and listen to ghost stories, and talk about your dreams, and speculate on the Faust legend. Even though you parrot the arguments you've learned—you can't keep away from the mysteries. And ever so often, you'll find yourself in the darkness with that deep fear; the fear which all bravado and pretending cannot drive from your soul.

"Because you know it's true. There *are* such things, such forces, such Evil. And . . . the Bogy Man will get you if you don't watch out!"

Philip laughed. “Now—in the face of all that—is it so difficult for you to understand why your daughter might think I’m a vampire?”

They all laughed. But Nancy didn’t laugh. She crouched under the window and bit her lip.

Laura *had* opened her trap, after all. And—to *him!* Probably blabbed everything; about the food and the bat and all the rest. Now they were having a good time over it.

“Damn them!” she muttered.

Philip had keen ears. She heard him get up and come to the window. There was no use in trying to hide. Nancy walked around to the porch and opened the door.

“Why, hello, my dear.”

“Nancy—back so soon?”

They were all grinning at her at once. She couldn’t look at them. Philip had a big smile on his face, and for the first time she noticed his teeth. His big, white teeth; the points hidden under his full red lips. That was all she could see—Philip’s teeth, gleaming at her.

Nancy made the sign of the cross and ran sobbing into her room.

HE next day they had it out.

Laura told her she was acting like a *child.* She had just embarrassed them to *death.*

“But why did you have to tell him about it?” Nancy wanted to know.

“Because he asked us.”

“Asked you?”

“Yes. Somebody told him you were making inquiries about him at the store.”

So *that* was it. *That* was why he came up with his long line about the Bogy Man. Oh, he w-as clever, all right. Making them think she was just pulling some kid stuff. Making them laugh at her.

It was no use talking to Laura at all, after that. She was just waiting to fly off the handle about the whole thing.

“Let’s skip it,” Nancy said, and went out.

She sat under the trees for a long time that afternoon, just trying to think things out.

After all, she *could* have made a mistake. There were lots of bats flying around at sunset. A man doesn't have to keep house for himself—he can always eat in restaurants. Maybe he *did* work all day on his thesis. You don't have to be a vampire to write about demonology. Many people have gleaming white teeth. And nobody had been bitten in the throat, or killed, or stuff like that. . . .

But *something* was wrong. She *felt* it. Nancy knew what Laura thought . . . that she was just burned up because Philip had brushed her off on the date. That she had been reading too much silly stuff in books. That she invented the whole thing just to make Philip notice her.

Well—it was true. She *did* want him to notice her. He was the most *attractive* man she'd ever met. If only it wasn't true. It *couldn't* be true. But Philip had no mirrors. . . .

She went on like that for *hours*. It was getting dark before she pulled herself together. Laura and Ralph would be going ahead with supper by now.

Nancy got up and started along the path near the lake. She had the jitters, all right; the shadows kept jumping around so, and she walked fast.

All at once something moved out of the Shadows up ahead. She nearly jumped out of her skin.

"Did I startle you?"

He was standing there.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to frighten you, my dear."

Just standing there, smiling at her.

"But say, I've been up at the house looking for you."

"For—me?"

"Yes. I wanted to talk to you. Let's take a walk, shall we?"

"Oh, I'm sorry. I have a date—"

"Too bad. I was hoping we might get together. You aren't angry with me about the other night, are you?"

“Not at all.” Nancy couldn’t figure out what the score was. Philip sounded like an ordinary drip, now. Well, she could handle *that* one.

They kept walking along the path. It was getting darker now, and she wondered if the clouds would lift. Not that she was *really* frightened, but—

Philip was rubbing his eye.

“What’s the matter?”

“Got a speck in my eye, or something. Have you got a mirror in your purse, my dear?”

“A—*mirror?”*

“Yes. If you please.”

NANCY’S hands trembled so she nearly dropped the purse. But she got the mirror out and gave it to him.

He looked straight into it and rubbed his eye.

Nancy leaned over his shoulder and saw his reflection. He *had* a reflection.

She didn’t know what she was doing, what she was saying. The words just blurted out. “You—you looked into the mirror!”

Philip smiled and handed the mirror back to her.

“Of course I did. And I found that sprig of hemlock on my doorknob last night, too. The one you put there when you sneaked off before coming into the cottage to make the sign of the cross at me.”

“Why—I—”

“Oh, don’t look so startled, Nancy! I know all about your ideas. You thought I was a vampire, didn’t you?”

She couldn’t say a word. She felt as if she would sink right into the *ground.*

But Philip grinned.

“Just because I work all day and eat in restaurants and walk at night, you wondered about me. My thesis had you puzzled too, didn’t it?

"But you're wrong, you know. Vampires wear long black cloaks and during the day they sleep in coffins or grave-earth. You didn't find any cloaks or coffins when you searched my cottage."

"But I—"

"I'm not angry with you, my dear. I just wanted you to get things straight. I wanted you to know that I can touch hemlock and look in mirrors and all the rest."

Nancy looked away. The clouds were lifting from the moon. Like the weight was lifting from her heart.

"I see," she whispered. "I guess you think I'm an awful dope, Philip."

"Not at all." He took her hand. A vampire's hand is cold, but his touch was warm. "I think you're a very lovely girl. You have beautiful hair, Nancy. Did you know that? Look—the moon is rising. Gleaming on your hair. I can see you, now. Nancy—you aren't afraid of me any more?"

"No, Philip. I never *was* afraid. Not really. I—I guess Laura was right. It was my subconscious."

"Subconscious? Scientific, aren't we?"

"You know. I must have thought up all this vampire stuff just to make you *notice* me. And besides, vampires are supposed to be tall, dark and handsome—like you—" Philip held her very close, then. "You're a very clever little girl, Nancy. Very clever. It's a pity you had to stir up such a fuss over nothing."

"But I didn't mean it, *really.* And it's all over now. Only Laura and Ralph know."

PHILIP didn't kiss her yet. He shook his head. "I'm afraid it isn't that simple after all. Like throwing a stone into a pool. Ripples."

"Ripples?"

"Laura and Ralph will talk to people.

Make a joke out of it. Laura has, already—she said something to Prentiss. Pretty soon people will start whispering. Wondering. A stranger is always a suspect, Nancy. A reputation is a very flimsy thing. It's no use, my dear. I shall have to clear out of here."

Nancy couldn't believe her ears.

"What do you care?" she whispered. "Let them talk. We'll just laugh at them."

"I'll laugh at them," said Philip. "You won't."

He held her very close and she couldn't see his face. He mumbled against her shoulder.

"Too bad you were such a meddling little fool, Nancy. But I can't let you get away now. It would spoil everything. You've guessed too much."

Nancy pulled away, but he held her. He was very strong.

"Philip! Let me go!"

He kept pulling her closer—closer—there was no escape.

The moonlight was full on his face now, and for the first time Nancy noticed the *change.*

"Philip—it's true, then! You *are* a vampire!"

"Oh no, my dear," he whispered. "I'm not a vampire. I'm . . . just a *werewolf!"*

Frozen Fear

You don't realize 'til you try how hard *it is to chop up the human body*

WALTER KRASS used to cut his fingernails over the kitchen sink.

Ruby would give him hell if she found any nail parings lying around. Ruby was like that. She enjoyed giving him hell in one form or another.

Krass was used to that, after four years of marriage.

But one afternoon he came home early from the office and found that Ruby had gone out. While rummaging around in a bureau drawer, looking for a tobacco pouch, Walter Krass happened to find some old nail parings.

They were imbedded in the body of a little wax doll—a tiny mannikin with a mop of brown hair and a curiously familiar face.

Walter Krass recognized his hair in the doll, and the features had been moulded to resemble his own.

Then he knew that Ruby was trying to kill him.

He looked at the little wax figure for a long moment, then dropped it into the drawer again and covered it with a pile of Ruby's handkerchiefs.

Krass padded out of the bedroom and sat down in the parlor. His pudgy little body slumped in the easy chair, and he ran stubby fingers through his sandy brown cowlick.

He felt shocked, but not surprised. Ruby had Cajun blood, and in her hatred of him she would resort to Cajun superstitions. He knew she hated him, of course.

But this attempt on his life was another matter.

It could mean only one thing. Somehow, Ruby had found out about Cynthia.

Yes. She knew. And her reaction was typical. Ruby would never think of a separation, or a divorce. She'd rather kill him.

Krass shrugged. He wasn't worried about wax images, or herb-poisons, or any of the childish Cajun methods she might employ. He could destroy dolls and avoid eating unusually flavored foods.

But he couldn't destroy her intention—her purpose. And sooner or later she would abandon her silly beliefs and resort to direct action. A knife, or a bullet. Yes, Ruby would do just that.

Unless—

Unless he acted first.

Suppose he just quietly turned his assets into cash and left town with Cynthia some night?

It was a tempting notion, but of course it wouldn't work. Ruby would find him. She'd put them on his trail; ruin him, ruin Cynthia. She'd make trouble for him as long as she lived.

As long as she lived—

Walter Krass snapped his fingers. They made a curious echoing sound in the room. Like a death-rattle.

Ruby's death-rattle, for instance. . . .

RUBY was out shopping again in the night Walter Krass brought the deepfreeze unit home.

He hauled it over on the trailer and sneaked it down to the cellar. It was hooked up and working by the time she arrived.

Ruby was all set to fix supper, but he suggested she come down to the cellar with him.

"I have a surprise for you," he announced.

Ruby loved surprises.

She lost no time following him down the cellar stairs. For once, she fairly bubbled with high spirits, and it pleased Krass to see her in such good humor.

“Oh Walter, I’m so excited! What can it be?”

Krass gestured and pointed around the cellar. “Take a look, Ruby. Notice anything different?”

Then she saw it.

“Walter! Not really? A deep-freeze unit—just what I’ve always wanted!”

“Like it?”

“Oh, it’s a wonderful surprise, darling!”

Krass stepped back as she bent over the unit. Then he cleared his throat.

“But that’s not the real surprise,” he said.

“Isn’t it?”

“No. I have another surprise for you, Ruby.”

“Another one? What is it?”

“This,” said Krass.

He gave her the real surprise, then. A poker, in the back of the head.

IT TOOK Krass a long time to do what he had to do—even though the cleaver was sharp. He had a pile of old newspapers and some butcher’s paper. It was necessary to make six separate bundles before he could fit Ruby’s remains into the freezing compartment of the small unit.

Krass was glad when he finished and put the packages in the deep-freeze. He turned the lock handle and sighed. He had never realized that chopping up a woman’s body would be such hard work.

Well, live and learn. . . .

Krass turned and surveyed the cellar. Everything was in order. A bit of mopping had done the trick as far as any stains were concerned. The poker was back in place, the cleaver was tucked away in the corner once more, and the papers disposed of down die drain.

The deep-freeze hummed away, squatting and purring in the gloom like some monstrous beast that has just dined well.

Walter Krass hummed a bit himself as he went upstairs. He was sweating, but merely from exertion—not from fright. Strange. He'd expected fright, shock, revulsion. Instead, there was just a sense of relief. Relief at the thought of escaping Ruby forever; escaping her animal vitality, her overwhelming energy, her frenzied possessiveness which used to assume the proportions of a positive aura.

Well, it was over now. And why should he be afraid? After all, he had a plan, and a good one.

Now it was time to put that plan into action.

Krass went straight to the telephone and called Cynthia.

She answered immediately; she had been waiting for the call.

Their conversation was short but sweet. Krass hung up the receiver knowing that all was well. They were rolling, now.

Early in the morning, Cynthia would be taking the train for Reno. She had papers, photographs, all the necessary items; even some of Ruby's clothes that Krass smuggled out for her. Cynthia had practised Ruby's mannerisms for hours, just as she concentrated on imitating her handwriting.

It was set. Cynthia, travelling under the name of Mrs. Ruby Krass, would arrive in Reno, establish residence, and obtain a divorce. Exit, Ruby.

And at this end—

All Krass had to do was wait. Wait for the summer to end. Wait for house-heating time. Then, a nice little fire in the furnace, stoked by six packages from the deep-freeze unit.

Exit, Ruby.

That was that. Sell the house, clear out, join Cynthia on the Coast. Everything was neatly wrapped up—just as neatly as those packages downstairs in the deepfreeze.

Krass took a drink on that.

It was too early to go to bed, so he had another. Then a third. After all, it *had* been a strain. He could admit that to himself, now. He deserved a little relaxation. Another drink, for instance—

That fourth drink brought relaxation. Krass leaned his head back in the armchair. His eyes closed. His mouth opened. Everything was quiet . . . very quiet. . . .

Except for the *bumping.*

THE sound seemed to come from the stairs—the *cellar* stairs. The noise didn't resemble footsteps at all; just a *bumping.* Something was flopping and thudding, and then it was rolling, rolling closer and closer.

Ruby's head rolled into the room.

Just her head.

It stopped about a yard away from where Krass was slouching in his chair. He could have stretched out his leg and touched the upturned face with his foot, if he wanted to.

He didn't want to.

The face glared at him, and then the lips parted. Lips don't part when the head is severed—but then, severed heads don't roll, either.

But here it was. And the lips *were* parted.

Krass heard her whispering.

"Can you hear me, Walter? You think I'm dead, don't you? You think you killed me and locked me away, forever. Well, you're wrong, Walter. You couldn't kill me. You couldn't lock me away.

"Oh, you killed my body all right, and locked that away. But you couldn't kill my hate. You can't lock my hatred away. It will seek you out, Walter—seek you out and destroy you!"

SHE was talking nonsense, melodramatic nonsense. Yes, the head Off the dead woman was talking nonsense, all right. But Krass listened, anyway.

He listened as Ruby's voice told him *everything.* All about his plans with Cynthia. All about her trip, and the divorce, and selling the house, and going away. She knew everything, it seemed.

"You meant to keep my body in the deep-freeze until fall, until you could build a fire in the furnace and burn it. That was a clever idea of yours, Walter.

"But it won't work. Because I'm not staying in that deep-freeze. My hatred won't let me. We Cajuns know how to hate, Walter. And we know how to kill—even from beyond the grave!

"You don't dare run away from this house and leave my body here. And you don't dare to build a fire until fall comes. It would arouse suspicion.

"So you're trapped here, Walter. Trapped, do you hear?"

Walter Krass didn't hear. The words were lost in the sound of his own gasping. It was the gasping that caused him to awake.

The minute he opened his eyes he knew it was a dream. There was nobody there with him—no head staring up.

But he had to be sure, quite sure.

That was why he went back down into the cellar. He cursed himself for a drunken, over-imaginative fool the minute he switched on the light down there. Naturally, everything was all right.

The deep-freeze hummed its merry little song over in the corner. The lock was still set.

Just out of curiosity, Krass turned the lock handle and slid the door back.

A wave of cold air hit his face as he bent and examined the packages. Nothing was missing, of course. All six of the bundles were still there.

Except that the big package . . . the *round* package . . . the one Krass had put on the bottom . . . was now right on top!

KRASS got out of the cellar, fast, but not until he made sure that the deepfreeze was securely locked once more.

By the time he got upstairs again he knew it was just a mistake. It *had* to be. It was just a nightmare—the voice of his own conscience.

The next morning Krass felt all right again. He phoned Cynthia's apartment. No answer. That was good—it meant she had really left for Reno. Things would work out now, if only he kept his nerve.

He put down the telephone and went out to the kitchen to make breakfast.

It was then that he saw it, lying on the floor near the cellar steps.

It wasn't much to look at. Just a little strip of butcher's paper—a little, bloody strip of butcher's paper that might have come off a bundle of meat!

Krass was a brave man. He didn't gasp, or faint, or hide under the bed.

He marched down the steps into the cellar and opened the deep-freeze unit. He didn't have to unlock it—it was unlocked.

There were only *five* packages in the unit now.

One of the bundles was missing!

Krass turned away, hanging onto the edge of the deep-freeze for support. He locked it and walked over to the corner to pick up the cleaver.

Then, cleaver in hand, he began to search the cellar.

He didn't even dare admit to himself just *what* he was looking for. It had been a long, thin package—and he could imagine something crawling around in the cellar shadows like a big white snake. But he couldn't find it.

After a while, Krass went upstairs. He still carried the cleaver, just in case. But *it*

wasn't upstairs. It wasn't *anywhere.* It was hiding. Yes, hiding.

Sooner or later, he'd fall asleep. Then it would come out. It would slither across the floor, wind around his neck and strangle him.

Yes—it was no dream. Ruby's body was still alive down there; alive and filled with hate.

She was right. Krass couldn't go away, because they'd break in sooner or later and find her there. He couldn't light a fire, either, in midsummer.

So he would have to-stay here. That's what she wanted. He would stay here and fall asleep, and then she'd—

No. It mustn’t be that way.

Better to take the risk and run away. If he was clever, perhaps they wouldn’t find him. Ruby’s absence was accounted for by Cynthia, posing as her in Reno.

Maybe if he spread the story of the “divorce” around and said he was leaving to follow Ruby and persuade her to return—that might do the trick. Then he could meet Cynthia there and they’d hide out together. They could go to Mexico, anywhere.

Yes. That was the way. The only way. And he’d better not wait any longer.

“Trapped, do you hear me?”

Well, he wouldn’t stay trapped. He’d get out, now.

Krass went upstairs and started packing his suitcase. There was no time for a careful selection—he took what clothes and articles he really needed and let the rest go. He’d travel light and travel fast.

The case held everything he needed, except money. That was in the wall-safe in the dining-room he’d converted into a “library.”

He lugged his suitcase downstairs to the hall, set it down, and went into the library to get the cash. There was about eight hundred dollars in small bills, plus his bonds, insurance policies, and bank book. He’d stop at the bank on his way to the office. Better think up a good sob-story for the bunch down there.

It seemed to him, as he turned the corner, that a shadow scuttled across the floor. But shadows don’t scuttle. And shadows don’t make a *thumping* noise. . . .

Walter Krass stared down at his suitcase. It wasn’t locked and closed any more. It was open. Open—and *unpacked!*

His clothing lay littered all over the hall floor.

And from the cellar stairs came the sound of thumping . . . a faint, receding thumping. . . .

Yes. Something was crawling back into the cellar. He couldn’t let it get away this time. It could open the windows, it could follow him. But he wouldn’t permit it to escape!

Krass ran upstairs to the bedroom. He’d left the cleaver on the bed. This time he’d make a thorough search. First of all, he’d take all the rest of the packages out of the deep-freeze and chop them to bits. Then he’d find the missing bundle and give it the same treatment.

Chop everything into little bits. That was the way!

Panting heavily, he ran down the stairs and made for the cellar steps. He shifted the cleaver to his left hand as he clicked on the cellar light switch. Now he could see everything down there. Nothing would escape him. Nothing would escape the cleaver.

The deep-freeze unit hummed. The droning seemed to blur into a mocking frenzy of sound as Krass slid the lid open and peered down into the cold depths.

It was empty.

The packages were gone. *All* the packages were gone!

Krass straightened up. He gripped the handle of the cleaver and whirled around to face the cellar walls.

“I’m not afraid,” he shouted. “I know you’re down here! But I have the cleaver. Before I leave, I’ll find you—and chop you into bits!”

A sharp click put a period to his words.

It was the click of the wall-switch at the head of the stairs. The lights had been turned out!

“Ruby!” he shrieked. “Ruby—you’ve turned out the lights. But I’ll find you! I can still hear you, Ruby!”

It was true. He *could* hear.

The rustling was all around him. A soft, brittle sound, like the unwrapping of paper from a parcel. From several parcels.

There was a slithering, too, and a thumping.

Krass edged back until he stood against the wall. He whirled the cleaver around in darkness. He began to swing it in a wide arc across the floor at his feet.

But the thudding and bumping went on. It came closer, and closer.

Suddenly Krass began to chop at the floor with his cleaver. He rasped out great racking gouts of laughter as he hacked away at the air.

Something was slithering around behind him. He felt the coldness all over him now . . . the touch of icy fingers, the kiss of frigid lips, the clammy caress of a frozen hand. And then the icy band was tight around his neck.

The scream was cut off. The cleaver clattered to the floor. Krass felt the coldness constricting his windpipe, felt himself falling back into a greater coldness. He fell into the coldness but he didn't know, because everything was freezing, freezing. . . .

IT WAS weeks later when Cynthia was exposed as an impostor in Reno, and almost a month had passed before they actually broke into the Krass residence.

Even after entering the house, it took fifteen minutes of preliminary searching before Lieutenant Lee of the Homicide Squad went down into the cellar.

Another fifteen minutes were spent in frantic conjecture and incredulous surmise.

It was then, and only then, that Lee put through his phone call.

"Hello . . . this Burke? Lee, Homicide. Yes . . . we're at the house now. Found a body in the cellar—locked in a deep-freeze unit.

"No . . . it was a man. Walter Krass. "His wife? Yeah . . . we found her, all right. Chopped into pieces, lying all around the deep-freeze. All but her right arm.

"Missing? No, it isn't missing. It's on top of the deep-freeze. I said, it's on top of the deep-freeze, holding the lock shut.

"I don't know how to tell you this . . . but it almost looks like that arm pushed Walter Krass into the deep-freeze and then—locked him in!"

The Man Who Told The Truth

Have you ever sat on the edge of your bed and talked to a green mist?

WHEN Hartwood came in, it seemed that a smothering presence filled the room.

He figured it must be a combination of the liquor and the closed windows that affected him. But when he threw the windows open, the oppression continued. It was like a heavy weight pressing him from all sides.

Hartwood sat down on the bed, his head cupped between his hands. He noticed by the alarm dock on his dresser that it was already past two o'clock. He should have been in bed four hours ago. If he had a hangover tomorrow, and showed it, old Brenner would be on his neck harder than ever.

He tried to get up and could not. It was much pleasanter to sit on the edge of the bed with his head in his hands. Dreamily, he watched the hands on the alarm clock creep ahead another five minutes.

Then he glanced up, sharply, head clearing abruptly. There *was* something wrong with the air in his room. He couldn't see anything—but he felt it. A definite, palpable vibration. Heaviness. Pressing down. It wasn't a heaviness in his head. It came from *outside.*

Intense, intolerable *pressure.*

And then . . . it was gone.

Yes, just like that.

The sense of oppressive heaviness departed, as though whatever had come into the atmosphere was gradually adjusting itself to conditions there. Within a few minutes Hartwood felt light, gay, happy.

If he could only feel like this all the time, instead of having to drudge eight hours a day at Swazey and Sloan’s for thirty bucks a week! He had been born for better things, but he never got toe breaks.

Hard-luck Hartwood. That was him, all right. No justice at all. No wonder he was drinking more and more lately.

But now, he felt good. It was as though he had a hunch; a hunch that tomorrow would bring better things. Of. course it was all a lot of malarkey. Tomorrow he’d be back where old Brenner could get at him.

Old Brenner, his boss, just loved to ride him. Hartwood had to admit that he was afraid of Brenner. The old crab could have Hartwood fired any time he felt like it. He knew it and Hartwood knew it.

Hartwood often dreamed of what he would do to Brenner if he ever got him in his power.

“Brenner,” he said aloud, “is a dirty, stinking rat.”

“That’s right,” a voice said. “That’s a hundred per cent right.”

Hartwood jumped from toe bed.

HE LOOKED around. The room was empty, of course, save for his presence. There was nobody else there. There couldn’t be.

The closet door was open. He peered inside. The closet was untenanted, too. Hartwood chuckled, harshly.

“That rye’s got a helluva kick,” he murmured.

“It’s not the rye, Hartwood,” said the voice. “Look towards the door.”

Hartwood blinked at toe door. Gradually he made out a greenish mist. It was about three feet high, cone-shaped, with the big end at the top and toe point on the floor. At times it faded so that he could not see it at all, and never was he able to see it dearly. It swayed back and forth with a gentle, oscillating motion.

The voice came from this cone. It was a high voice, and it carried no echo. It was almost as though toe voice came from within Hartwood's head. But he *saw* toe mist—

"Who are you?" Hartwood whispered. "Never mind who I am," toe voice said. "I want to talk to you, and if you'll listen, you'll profit."

Hartwood shook his head. It was a dream, but a honey! Sitting on the edge of his bed talking to a green mist! Old Brenner had always said he was crazy. But he might as well see toe dream through.

"What gives?" he asked.

"You don't like your life, do you, Hartwood? That job—that thirty-a-week job—gets you down, as you would say? You would like to be rich, powerful?"

"Sure. I'd give anything—"

"We need not discuss giving. I do not take gifts," said the voice. "That is merely an unkind rumor. I prefer to *bestow* gifts . . . to those I feel deserving of them. You are such a man, Hartwood. I have decided to give you riches and power."

"How?"

"From this night on everything you say, provided that it can take place in the future and has not already happened, will happen. All you need to do is say it."

"Everything I say is going to come true," Hartwood repeated cynically. "Do you know any more fairy tales?"

"That's not a fairy tale. I can give you that power, but it will have to be without reservations. Everything you say is going to come true. You might test it by saying you won't have a hangover in the morning."

"I won't have a hangover in toe morning," Hartwood said, and fell over asleep.

2.

THE next morning Hartwood jumped out of bed with toe first tinkle of toe alarm clock. He ran across the room, shut the alarm off, and closed the window before he realized that he had been drinking heavily last night and had had only three hours sleep. He should be very tired and have a headache. Instead, he had never felt keener or more alive.

Thoughtfully, as the dream of last night came back to him, he sat down on the edge of the bed and took his pajamas off. It had, of course, been a dream—but what a wow of a dream! Everything he said, he remembered, was going to come true. He'd have to go back to the same place tonight for more of the same rye. It couldn't be bad if it left this kind of an effect.

But, by the time he had shaved and washed, thoughts of the day ahead brought depression. It would be another endless eight hours at Swazey and Sloan's under the carping watchfulness of Old Brenner. Hartwood groaned. He had worked nine years for Swazey and Sloan, and should be doing something besides menial tasks. Other people got better things.

It had never occurred to Hartwood that he might possibly get something better if he wasn't too lazy to work for it.

Dressed, he left his room and walked down to Joe's lunch wagon. He was hungry, and had just remembered that he had wanted one more drink last night and couldn't buy it because he had no more money. He already had enough on the cuff at the lunch wagon so that Joe wouldn't trust him with any more. But he would see if he couldn't work one more dodge. He'd order something to eat and jump for the door when he was finished. He'd have to move fast, though. Joe had told him the last time he pulled a swifty what would happen if he tried it again—and Joe weighed a hundred and ninety pounds.

Hartwood entered the lunch wagon and sat down at the counter. He tried to look as though he had money, but felt that he was not putting it across. Joe had been too many years in the business not to be able to size a moocher up pretty accurately. Still, Hartwood was hungry.

“Bacon and eggs and a cup of coffee,” he said.

Joe slid the plate down the counter, shoved a cup of coffee at him, and strolled out from behind the counter to take a stance in front of the door. Hartwood watched him from the corner of his eye as he ate. Joe knew what he intended to try, and was there to see that he didn’t try it. Hartwood dawdled over his food in a desperate effort to gain time. When he was finished, Joe still stood. Hartwood plunged his hand deep into his inside coat pocket for some papers he had there. By looking at them he might stall until another customer came in and Joe had to go behind the counter again.

“Wish I had four bits,” he muttered.

But—what was this? Hartwood’s fingers touched a hard round something and he drew out half a dollar! He sighed in relief. He must have put it in there and forgotten it. Casually he dropped the coin on the counter, noting with malicious pleasure the chagrin on Joe’s face as he rang it up and handed back fifteen cents change.

Hartwood returned to the street, so pleased with this little triumph that the entire day assumed a brighter hue. He did not in any way connect the propitious finding of the half dollar with the events of last night. They existed for him now only as an amusing memory induced by too much whiskey.

He halted at an intersection waiting for the light to change. There was no policeman there. When the light was in his favor Hartwood stepped from the curb—and instantly leaped back to escape by inches a taxi that was cutting through the light. Hartwood glared at it as it careened down the street.

“I hope you break your neck!” he muttered viciously.

The words were scarcely out of his mouth when the taxi swerved in its wild flight, seemed to hang in the air for the fraction of a second, and with a thunderous crash and a shattering of glass went head on into a concrete light pole. Hartwood ran down. The driver of the cab sat hunched over his wheel, his head hanging at a grotesque angle.

Hartwood stared until he was waved on by one of the blue uniformed police, a half dozen of which seemed to have appeared from nowhere. For a few minutes he walked silently, overawed as he remembered what the cone of green mist had said to him. He shrugged. There couldn't be anything to it. The lack of a hangover, the finding of the half dollar, and the wrecking of the taxi were all coincidence. Well, whether he'd had anything to do with it or not, one fresh taxi pilot had got what was coming to him.

But he was at Swazey and Sloan's now. In guilty panic he glanced up at the clock in the hall and realized that he was ten minutes late again. But maybe he could still get in without being seen by Old Brenner. Hartwood opened the door quietly, and made no noise as he hung his hat and coat on the rack. He tried to slip down to his desk, but just then Old Brenner came out of his office. Hartwood grabbed a ledger and Old Brenner was standing over him.

Hartwood!" he snapped. "This is the third time in three weeks you've been late."

Hartwood looked down to conceal the hate and loathing in his eyes.

"Yes, sir," he said meekly.

"This is your last chance," Old Brenner went on. "If you're late again, you'll be needing another job."

"Yes, sir," Hartwood said again.

"Such things aren't necessary. You know it and I know it."

"Yes, sir."

But, when Old Brenner had gone, Hartwood thrust his tongue to the side of his cheek.

"What you know," he growled. "You don't know a damn thing."

3.

ALL MORNING Hartwood worked hard without speaking. He wasn't popular in the office, but that was all right with him because he didn't like anybody there either. They were all fools, Hartwood thought. They worked hard without complaining, studied in their spare time, and thought to get somewhere by pushing pencils up and down Swazey and Sloan's ledgers. Swazey and Sloan took all the profits. They had the summer homes, the stables of horses, the chauffeur-driven limousines. All the rest of them did was make the money for Swazey and Sloan.

It was quarter to twelve when Swazey stepped to the door of his office—Sloan was on the road most of the time. Hartwood glanced at Swazey from under his eye shade. The old horse pretended to be quite democratic. He called all the office force by their first names and slapped them on the back at Christmas time. But he ruled Swazey and Sloan with an iron hand. What Hartwood wouldn't give to be in his place!

"Will somebody tell Mr. Brenner that I'd like to see him?" Swazey called.

Pretense, Hartwood decided. Old Swazey had a secretary to run his errands for him, and a buzzer that he could have used to call Brenner, but he preferred to do things this way so the office force would think him a regular fellow and give the last ounce of sweat they had for the glory of Swazey and Sloan. Hartwood saw a girl get up and open the door of Brenner's office. He heard her call.

"Mr. Brenner."

There was no answer. Hartwood saw the girl go a little farther into the office and heard her call again. Then she screamed, and came screaming out of the office with her hands covering her face. Old Swazey appeared again, bent over the girl who had sunk down in a chair and was moaning incoherently. She raised a trembling hand, and pointed at Brenner's office. Then Hartwood found himself, along with the seven other men in the office and Swazey, entering Brenner's office. The girls made an anxious ring in the background.

Old Brenner slumped in his swivel chair with his hands trailing down the sides. His eyes were open and staring, and except for the spasmodic heaving of his chest, he was absolutely motionless. Swazey bent over him.

“Brenner!” he shouted.

There was no answer. Swazey felt his pulse, then together with Hartwood and Jack Dom lifted Old Brenner from his chair and carried him to a couch in an adjoining office. The old man lay full length and motionless there. Hartwood stared at him, puzzled. Swazey shook his head.

“It looks like a sudden stroke. Did any of you notice whether he seemed to be feeling ill this morning?”

“He talked to Hartwood,” Jack Dorn said.

“I didn’t notice anything unusual about him,” Hartwood said. “He seemed all right when he talked to me.”

A bustling little doctor with a black instrument bag in his hand came into the office. He took Old Brenner’s temperature, checked his heart and reflexes.

“I can’t understand it,” he said, his brow wrinkling in a frown. “Physically he seems perfect. I never saw a case exactly like it fore. It’s just as though a black shade has been drawn over his mind and shut out everything. He doesn’t know enough to raise a hand, or turn his head, or speak—he’s exactly like a new-born baby. He breathes and his heart beats because that’s involuntary.”

AN ELECTRIC shock stung Hartwood.

He remembered the words he had muttered when Brenner left him. “You don’t know a damn thing.” Brenner didn’t know a thing! Hartwood gasped, and staggered to the window. He threw it open; let the cool air caress his perspiring cheek. The hangover, the half dollar, and the taxi wreck could have been coincidence. But were they? And, if they were, could this possibly be? Hartwood seemed to be sitting in his room watching with cynical eyes a cone of green mist. Again he heard a voice emerging from that cone.

“From this night on everything you say is going to come true.”

Hartwood felt Swazey's arm across his shoulders, heard Swazey's sympathetic voice.

"I know how you feel Hartwood. The firm will have suffered a severe loss if Mr. Brenner doesn't recover. But, after all, such things happen. I would suggest that you take an hour or two off until you feel better." Dazed, Hartwood walked out of the office. He must be crazy, he told himself. He was crazy. This couldn't have happened. Before long he would wake up in his room with a hangover and have to hurry to get to work on time. He looked uneasily to the right and left as he walked out to see if anybody would look at him and comment. Nobody did. The sudden trance that had stricken Old Brenner was so much the topic of conversation that nobody had time for anything else.

Hartwood was not hungry and did not even think of food as he descended to the street. His whole mind was occupied with the cone of green mist and what it had said to him. He slid a hand into his pocket to pinch himself. The pain was real enough. A traffic cop in the middle of the street shouted at him.

"Oh shut up," Hartwood muttered.

The cop halted in the middle of his tirade and swung to halt another line of cars. Hartwood gasped again. Everything *couldn't* be just happening this way. A man didn't encounter that much coincidence in an entire life. There had to be something to it!

Hartwood continued to a park and sat down on a bench facing a lagoon. He was mightily thrilled, but more confused. He would have to have time to think. If he, Charles Hartwood, could make something real simply by saying it—If everything he said came true—The possibilities were so dazzling that his mind could not grasp any of them.

Vaguely he saw a couple of swans swimming about on the lagoon. For a moment Hartwood was tempted to say that the biggest swan would sink into the water, but he checked himself. If it didn't work the disappointment right at this moment would be too keen.

Crazy or not, he was going to be a little king for the next hour. He was going to believe that anything he said would come true. But he was not going to delude himself for very long. Of the men and women in the office, there were at least twenty whom Old Swazey would pick to fill Brenner's job before he got around to Hartwood. If by saying he was going to get Brenner's job, Hartwood got it, he would know that what had happened last night was more than a drunkard's dream. If he didn't get it, he would know that everything that had happened today would have happened anyway.

"I'll get Brenner's job," he said.

4.

HARTWOOD was still breathless and shaken when he got back to the office. He sank down at his desk, but opened no ledgers. Around him the office hummed busily. Brenner was just another man in a fairly big organization, and that organization could not pause for very long because another man had gone out of it. Hartwood thought of the far flung offices and factories of Swazey and Sloan. This office was only the headquarters, the brain cell that sent impulses out to other offices who in turn transmitted them to twenty thousand people. For nine years Hartwood had been just another little cog in this big machine. This afternoon he might take his first step up in it Tomorrow—Who knew what could happen tomorrow?

Nevertheless Hartwood was surprised when Swazey's secretary came out of the office to his desk.

"Mr. Swazey would like to see you," she said.

Hartwood's face colored when he stood up, and his heart was pounding. He saw about him the faces of the people he had worked with all these years. They were surprised, resentful, amused. All of them knew that Swazey would have to appoint somebody to carry on in Brenner's place. None of them thought it could be Hartwood.

The secretary led Hartwood through her office into Swazey's and returned to her desk. Hartwood was nervous when he faced Swazey alone. Maybe Old Brenner had said something before he passed out.

"Mr. Hartwood," Swazey said finally, "you have been with the firm a fairly long time?"

"Nine years," Hartwood murmured.

He sensed something here that was not as it should be. In the first place Old Swazey had called him Mr. Hartwood. Never before had Hartwood heard him call anybody mister. But that wasn't all. Swazey, ruler of millions of dollars, actually seemed afraid of him! Hartwood looked for the trap. Surely he was not important enough and had never done anything important enough to warrant fear on Old Swazey's part. Maybe this was the way men got promoted—or fired.

"Nine years is a long time to work without recognition," Swazey said. "But this firm rewards its faithful workers. Mr. Hartwood, do you think you could take Mr. Brenner's place?"

"Yes!"

"Hm—m," Old Swazey sat back. "Then the place is yours, Mr. Hartwood."

Hartwood watched him through narrowed eyes, but his mind was a leaping, exulting, mad thing. Swazey was not offering him this job because he wanted to or because he thought Hartwood was the best man for it. There was something pushing Swazey, and Hartwood thought he knew what it was. He hadn't the least idea as to the identity of his extraordinary visitor last night. It was enough that it was watching over Hartwood, was powerful enough to make Old Swazey afraid of him.

"Thank you," he said dryly.

"Very well, Mr. Hartwood. Probably you are already acquainted with (be policies of the firm, but I'll review them for you. It's always been our aim to pay our employees a living wage. We consider it fair to demand efficiency, but we pay for it. And, which is very important, we ask that no man in a key position do anything to injure the unity of the firm as a whole. Your job—"

"Listen," Hartwood said gruffly, "if I'm in charge, I issue my own orders. Got it?" Hartwood sat back, amazed and a little appalled by what he had said. But something had told him that now or never was the time to cast the die. With the acquired shrewdness of one who all his life has barely skinned through by seizing every little advantage, he had sensed that Old Swazey had some reason to fear him. When a man was afraid of another anything could be done with him. Breathlessly he awaited Old Swazey's reaction.

"That's quite all right, Mr. Hartwood," he said at last. "You're in full charge." Hartwood's brain was a dizzy whirl when he left Old Swazey to go into the office that until this morning had been occupied by Brenner. He still didn't know what had happened, couldn't realize that it had happened. He knew only that, after a lifetime of resenting those in authority, at last he was in authority himself!

He still hadn't any definite plans when, at six o'clock, he left the office. The sudden respect for him that had overtaken Jack Dorn and the rest of the office force was scarcely noticed. Hartwood wanted to be by himself, wanted seclusion so that he could think and plan.

His pocket was full of money now. Hartwood dropped into the lunch wagon and ordered and ate a plate of beans. Absently he laid a twenty-dollar bill on the counter, and told Joe to take out what Hartwood owed him. Ordinarily the bill would have been a matter for bitter quibbling. Now Hartwood paid no attention to it. He wanted no liquor tonight. He was already drunk with this new power that was his.

Hartwood climbed to his room, and sat on the edge of bed staring at the wall. His mind was a tangle of so many things that he could not separate one from the other. They came running and leaping at him and went away again. Hartwood wanted them all. But at the same time a thread of caution ran through the disordered pattern. If he asked for too many things at once there might be a conflict and he would lose all. Big things—Big things—

What were they? The biggest thing he could even begin to have any clear grasp of was Swazey and Sloan. He didn't know exactly how big that was, but he decided that he would get it first.

"Tomorrow," he said, "I'll be boss of Swazey and Sloan."

HE WAS out of bed very early. Again he felt fresh and alert, but again he was inclined to doubt that anything like this had happened or was happening. Oh, yes—he knew all about yesterday. But that was merely one day that would stand forever cameo clear against the drab pattern of a man's life. All those things would have happened anyway. He could have gotten the promotion simply because he had worked a long time for Swazey and Sloan, and Old Swazey could have considered that he was the best man for the job.

He had thought that Old Swazey was afraid of him because the offer of promotion had come like a bombshell and he hadn't been able to see straight or think clearly. Swazey hadn't fired him because he had realized that Hartwood, naturally, would be excited about his new job.

Hartwood forced himself into some restraint, but in spite of that he was at the office half an hour early. Because of long established habit he nearly dropped info the chair at his old desk. But he remembered in time and continued on to Brenner's office. There he sat down in the swivel chair and waited.

He was calm now, had full possession of himself. Yes, everything had happened naturally. If it had been a little startling, that was not surprising. But at least he was in charge of the office and all those snakes who had jeered at him for years could start watching their steps. His secretary came in, greeted him, and went to her own desk.

Hartwood opened his door a few minutes before eight, but closed it disappointed. Everybody had come in on time and he hadn't any excuse for bawling anyone out.

Well, he would have an excuse for tying into somebody before the day was finished or his name wasn't Hartwood. Absently he pulled open a drawer of the desk and began to thumb through the papers there. The buzzer on the secretary's desk shuddered. Hartwood saw her pick up the listening tube.

"Yes?" All right. I'll tell him, Mr. Swazey."

She turned to Hartwood.

"Mr. Swazey would like to see you, Mr. Hartward."

For a moment Hartwood remained in the swivel chair. Swazey wanted to see him, did he? Well, all right, but it had been fun while it lasted. Besides, the most Swazey would probably do was send him back to his old job. Hartwood stamped out of his office into Swazey's.

Old Swazey sat behind his desk. Hartwood looked at him sharply. The old man's face was gray and his eyes were red and very weary. Dozens of cigarette butts lay on trays on the desk. He had probably been here all night.

"Mr. Hartwood," Old Swazey spoke in a husky whisper, "I don't want you to think there's been any plotting against you."

"I don't think so," Hartwood said, puzzled.

Old Swazey smiled tiredly. "Very well, Mr. Hartwood. I had hoped you'd take it in this spirit and are able to forgive an old man. But Mr. Sloan and I built this business up. Mr. Hartwood, listen to me just a few minutes before you take over. There are undeniable advantages to being in a position like mine and Mr. Sloan's. But there's a broader view than that.

"We have twenty thousand people in various capacities on our payrolls. That means we take care of approximately eighty thousand. If you'll continue to take care of those people as we have, to maintain the good wages we pay them, and to help them maintain the standard of living they are accustomed to, both Mr. Sloan and myself offer to place ourselves at your disposal without recompense."

Hartwood leaped to his feet. "Are you crazy?" he demanded bluntly.

Another shade of weariness seemed to shroud those already on Old Swazey's face.

"I'm sorry, but I had to say it, Mr. Hartwood. Of course, you may do as your judgment decides. I now turn over to you fifty-one per cent of die stock of Swazey and Sloan. I might add that yesterday afternoon I was quite sure you were going to get it. Congratulations, Mr. Hartwood."

Harfwood's jaw hung slack. His eyes bulged as he stared past Swazey's head through the window.

It worked! It was so! Everything he said came true!

Suddenly everything speeded up, as though a film were unreeling through his brain. He was thinking now of the things he could say . . . the things that could come true. . . .

"I will live forever."

"I will rule the world."

"Everybody on earth becomes my slave."

"I am greater than G—"

It was too much. His mind couldn't encompass it. Perhaps because the atmosphere was suddenly so heavy, so very heavy. . . .

Hartwood blinked at Old Swazey, trying to grope for a word, a phrase, something fitting to the newly-created Lord of the World. But all he could do was bring his hand down on the desk and call forth one of his stock expressions.

"Well, I'll be damned!" said Hartwood. The next instant he was on the floor, and Old Swazey was staring at a dead man who had been alive a minute ago. Hartwood's face held the look of one who knew, just before he died, that his soul must suffer all the torments of hell.

Tree's a Crowd

Lefty Feep had never experienced such an unhappy experience as this —he became a tree; believe it or not!

WHEN people ask me, "What brings you to Jack's Shack?" I usually answer, "A bicycle."

This is not strictly true. But I certainly don't want to admit I go there for the food they serve. And of course, I can't say I go there to meet Lefty Feep.

Not that I have anything against Mr. Feep. It's just that if I go to Jack's Shack and order a beef sandwich, Lefty Feep is sure to be there. So instead of beef, I get tongue. Lefty always has plenty of tongue in his cheek. Plenty of cheek, too.

That's why I've come to sneak into the restaurant at odd hours, hoping Lefty Feep won't be around to strike up a conversation.

The other day I decided on an early breakfast. Knowing Mr. Feep loves his night life, I figured he wouldn't be up and around at 7 a.m. I strode into Jack's Shack, ordered my meal, and began to eat.

"Is this seat vacant?" chirped a familiar voice.

"Vacant as your mind," I snapped, recognizing the tonsil-splitting tones of Lefty Feep.

Feep grinned and sat down opposite me. I raised my eyes cautiously—a good policy, for his clothes are apt to blind the unprepared eyes of a beholder.

But today Feep had gone conservative. He wore a neat purple hat with a green band, a yellow shirt, orange tie, and a very mild sky-blue suit with pink stripes.

“Where do you stare?” he inquired, noting my shocked glance at his clothing. “Appraise me of your gaze.”

I covered up hastily. “Why, I’m not staring at you,” I protested. “I was just wondering what on earth you are doing up at such an early hour in the morning.”

“The early worm catches the bird,” grinned Feep. “It is all a part of my new system.”

“New system?”

“Of course. It is very sensible to get up early,” Feep told me. “These mornings I am out of bed by 6 o’clock.”

“Really?”

“Of course. I am up at 6. I am shaved, dressed, and down here eating breakfast by 6:30. By 7 o’clock I am all through, and back in bed again. Very sensible.”

I blinked and shrugged. “Oh well,” I sighed. “What are you eating today?”

“I do not pick my starting selections yet.”

“How about some nice breakfast food?” I suggested.

Feep winced and half-rose from his seat, glaring wildly.

“I do not wish to be rude or crude, but I will not touch breakfast food!” he yelled.

“Why not? Everybody eats it.”

“Never!” Feep groaned. “I do not wish to start a feud about the food. Let me tell you just why I scorn such corn in the early mom.”

“Don’t tell me there’s a story connected with it,” I sighed.

“There is a story disconnected with it,” Feep replied.

“Some other time,” I said hastily. “I’m not in the mood, just now. I didn’t sleep so well last night and—”

“This is a bedtime story,” insisted Lefty Feep. “So just lie down and listen.”

“I’ll do the listening if you’ll do the lying,” I answered.

Lefty Feep commenced to grin and wobble his chin. I closed my eyes and listened, wishing I could close my ears.

Feep told his tale.

ONE morning a couple of months ago I am running up a high score on the snore when a telephone rings and brings me one of those things.

I shake and awake and grab the receiver in a fever.

“Hello?” I suggest.

“Lefty Feep, you lowdown, good-for-nothing hound! Do you know who this is?”

“I do not recognize the name, but the manner is familiar,” I reply.

“This is Joyce.”

“All right, Joyce—make with the voice,” I groan.

“Listen to me, you scoundrel! You’re three months behind on your alimony payments, and unless you send me a check, I’ll put you in jail. Make up your mind now. Which do you prefer—checks or stripes?”

“I will be only too happy to take care of you, dear,” I mutter. “With an axe.” This last I repeat under my breath. But Joyce is so busy giving me the loose abuse that she doesn’t notice. I hang up on her and hang my head.

There is no more reason to lay in the hay. I sit there thinking that everybody makes mistakes, but I do worse than that. I not only make mistakes, I marry them. And Joyce is my ex-wife. Now she is handing me the phoney boloney about alimony, and I am in a tight spot. I have large quantities of no money at all, so how will I send her a check? With the rubber shortage, I cannot even give her one that bounces.

I am so discouraged by all this that I get dressed and start to shave. Just as I am about to gather my lather, the phone rings again. I answer.

“Hello?” I improvise.

“You dog—you cur—you no good hound!” screams a voice.

“You must have the wrong number, lady. This is not the Animal hospital.”

“Listen, Lefty Feep, I’m going to bend you so far out of shape you’ll have to change your name to Righty.”

“With whom have I the displeasure of shrieking?” I inquire.

“This is your darling ex-wife, Gloria,” yells the voice.

“Is that so?” I answer. “Well, what’s on your mind besides a henna rinse?”

“You know very well what is on my mind,” Gloria squawks. “You are five months behind on your alimony payments to me. Unless I get my money today, I’ll wheel you into the Bastille.”

“Oh is that all you want?” I purr. “Why, honey, I’ll be glad to flash some cash. Think nothing of it.”

“I do,” she assures me: “I think nothing of your promises, and less of you. Send me that dough or prepare to despair.”

I hang up the receiver and wonder whether to do the same with myself.

After all, Gloria is my ex-wife too, and she is entitled to a little consideration, to say nothing of a little strychnine. There is nothing wrong with the woman except that before she is born her mother is frightened by Secretary Morgenthau—and ever since, Gloria is fond of money. Somebody else’s money.

I FINISH shaving and decide the razor blade is too dull to cut my throat with. So I apply a necktie, rest my chest in a vest, and tote a coat ready to go outside.

The bell rings and I answer the phone.

Nobody there.

I breathe a sigh of relief.

The bell rings again, and I realize it is the front door.

“Who’s there?” I yell, before opening.

"Open up, you snivelling skunk!" squeals a voice.

"Why, Aileen, darling!" I say, recognizing her friendly greeting.

"Open up the door and I will break your thick skull."

"That is your best offer?" I inquire.

"Don't you stall around with me, Lefty Feep! I'm here to collect six months of back alimony! Pay up or lay down—because I'll plug you, you thug!"

"Give me a day of grace," I plead.

"Leave her out of it," snaps my third ex-wife. "You'll give me that check or I'll stretch your neck. How would you like to go to jail?"

"I'd love it," I confess. "At least I will not be listening to you women all the time."

"All right, I am going down now to swear out a warrant."

"Wait," I call through the door. "Give me until tomorrow. I'll see to it that you get what's coming to you."

"That goes double," says Aileen. "Unless you pay me."

I hear her footsteps go away down the hall, and pull my head out from under the covers again.

Then I race my pace out of the house and straight to the office of my lawyer—Bernie the Attorney.

If there is one man who can advise me what to do, it is Bernie the Attorney. He is a legal eagle who lays a lot of eggs—but he is also good at hatching plots. So I fly up to his nest.

Bernie's office door is closed and I can tell he is busy with a client, so I sit down in the reception room and wait.

I fidget and fume, because there is nothing to read but magazines and newspapers—not a Racing Form in the joint.

I am just opening my mouth to bite the two nails I save for an emergency like this, when the door opens and a guy walks in.

He is a little round butterball with a shiny noggin bare enough to slide a toboggan. He is carrying a brief-case with his name stamped on it in gold. I sneak a peek and read it.

"Herman Hormone."

He sits down, pays no attention to me, and begins to peer into his briefcase with a happy smile.

I am too fidgety to keep still. I must make conversation.

"Pardon me, Mr. Hormone," I say. "I know it is none of my business, but what do you have that is so fascinating in that short-case of yours?"

This is a very crude and rude of me and I expect Mr. Hormone will tell me to go peddle my popsicles, but instead he flashes me a big smile with teeth that do not go off the gold standard.

"I am so glad you are interested, sir," he tells me, giving me an exhibition of his dentition. "You may not be aware of it, but I am Herman Hormone, the inventor."

RIGHT then and there I am sorry I mention the whole thing. In the past I have enough trouble with screwball inventors like my friends Sylvester Skeetch and Mordecai Meetch. And here is another one. I realize he is probably not carrying a brief-case but a grief-case. Still, it is too late to wiggle out of it, and he is giving me his upper and lower plates in a smile.

"My name is Lefty Feep," I say, tipping my cigar politely. "And I am afraid I do not know very much about inventions. They are a little too scientific for me."

"Well, I will be glad to explain," says Herman Hormone, drawing his chair closer. His eyes begin to gleam like a couple of electric eels at mating time.

"I have here," says Mr. Hormone, "the breakfast food creation of the ages."

"Breakfast food?"

"A new creation, an innovation that will be the sensation of the nation for the duration, an inspiration that will require no demonstration for universal acclimation, according to my intimation, but will receive an ovation to stagger the imagination."

My imagination is staggering for some time before he finishes all this. But I manage to force a smile.

"What is this?" I ask.

"Reekies!" says Herman Hormone.

"Reekies?"

"The new breakfast food." He scrabbles in his brief-case. "Here, take a look at it. I bring it down to get my patents from Bernie, and to consult about marketing it. He is very much interested and wants to start a company with me. We will advertise nationally and over the radio. Reekies will be a big thing."

Herman Hormone fishes out a handful of flakes from his brief-case.

"Go ahead and try a little," he says, all excited and delighted. "Here." He reaches into the case again and comes up with a bowl, a spoon, a bottle of cream and a little package of sugar.

"Try it this way," he insists, putting the crumbs into the bowl and pouring milk and sugar into the mess.

Well, I wish to humor this crackpot, and besides I have a hummock in my stomach from not eating any breakfast yet, so I gulp down some of the stuff and play a tune with the spoon for this goon.

It has a very remarkable flavor—quite different from any breakfast food I know. Leafy, like a vegetable, with just a touch of fertilizer.

"How do you like it?" asks Herman Hormone, rubbing his bald noggin and jumping up and down.

I manage to choke the stuff into my system and force a grin to my chin.

"I never taste anything like it in all my life," I declare.

"Do you think I can make a success of this new breakfast food?" he asks.

"They say the public will swallow anything," I tell him.

"Look here," says Herman Hormone, fishing into his brief-case again. "How do you like the package I design?"

He flashes a big box with the Reekies label stamped all over it.

"Why not make the box top bigger?" I suggest.

"Bigger?"

“Sure. Easier to tear off. Every cereal has big box tops. When somebody buys a box they tear off the top and send it in to enter prize contests with.”

“A fine idea,” Hormone comments. “I will remember it. You are quite a practical man, Mr. Feep.”

AT THE moment I do not feel so practical. In fact, I feel a little sick. My stomach is buzzing like a bee-hive during the honey-making season.

But I pile on a smile full of guile.

“Of course I am practical,” I tell the inventor. “I know all about marketing, because I play the markets for years. I know all about the things women buy, because I am married three times. Why right now I have women just hounding me to death to handle financial affairs.”

I wince when I think of it. But I brush the idea aside and continue with my sales talk.

“Maybe you can use a guy like me to help you on the practical end of this business,” I suggest. “Promoting and building up sales and thinking of slogans and such. With your inventions and my intentions we can put Reekies into the stomachs of each and every lummox!”

“Very well,” says Herman Hormone. “You can consider yourself as general manager of the Reekies Breakfast Food Company, if you like.”

I like very much indeed. All at once I manage to solve my biggest headache—now I will be able to draw a salary and pay up on that alimony.

All I wish now is to solve my biggest stomach-ache, because the strange breakfast food has me in a most peculiar mood. I secretly wonder if anybody will ever eat such rough, tough stuff. My stomach churns and burns. I try to imagine what Herman Hormone must make the flakes out of. Probably he uses a lot of old mattressstuffing he pulls out of condemned Japanese army cots.

But there is no time to let my mind wander and ponder. Because just then the door opens and out dashes Bernie the Attorney.

His mustache bristles in the breeze when he sees Herman Hormone. He ignores me and pumps the inventor by the hand.

"Ah, here you are!" he booms. "Come right in, my dear fellow—we're all set to go! I'm lining up our radio program right now. Matter of fact, I'm auditioning."

"Auditioning?"

"No matter what kind of a show we put on, everybody knows that breakfast foods are really sold by the commercials. And what do you need for commercials? Announcers! And who is the best announcer in the world? J. Selwyn Spellbinder, that's who! So who is auditioning for you right now?"

"What kind of a quiz program is this?" I interrupt. "You ask the questions and give the answers too. How can you lose?"

But nobody notices me. They are hot to go into the private office and listen to this J. Selwyn Spellbinder drool through some sample commercials.

So I follow the leader and head for the private office.

MR. SPELLBINDER turns out to be a fatso in a tuxedo, only his belly sticks out where his tuxedo junction should be. He is full of hair-oil and looks like a well-greased hub-cap.

We sit down, and this yard of lard gets up in the middle of the room and rattles some papers and makes some capers.

"I will read you some sample commercial announcements," he says. "Naturally, we have no copy on Reekies as yet. But these samples will give you some idea of the style of advertising I advise over the air."

Twirling his tonsils, Spellbinder gazes down at an imaginary microphone and croons.

"This program is sponsored by the makers of FOOD, spelled F-O-O-D! Eat FOOD, it's good for you! FOOD, that new taste sensation, is the ideal nourishment for everyone! FOOD is good for men, women, and children!

Eat FOOD for that extra pep and energy you all need. Doctors recommend using FOOD as often as three times a day! Everybody likes FOOD—it will not harm the tiniest infant! Amazing scientific tests show that lack of FOOD is one of the chief causes of starvation! Are you one of the many people who suffer from hunger? Correct your difficulties with FOOD! FOOD is rich in vitamins, and comes in many delicious flavors. The next time you go into a restaurant, order some FOOD. You'll like it! Or better still, why don't you run down to your neighborhood grocer's right away and order some FOOD? Remember the name, folks—FOOD—that important part of everyone's diet. Serve a little FOOD at every meal!"

J. Selwyn Spellbinder mops his brow and pants.

"How do you like it?" he asks. Some style, eh? Would you like to hear another sample?"

"No!" I yell. But it is too late. He whips out another script and he is off.

"Everybody's doing it! Doing what? Why, BREATHING! Yes sir, millions everywhere are finding new satisfaction in that great American pastime of BREATHING. Why not do as your doctor does and breathe a little air every day? BREATHING brings you that rich oxygen content so necessary to a healthy bloodstream—it exercises the lungs—promotes new vigor. You'll be delighted at the thrilling pep life affords to those who make BREATHING a daily habit! BREATHING is a great aid to digestion, too! And yet it's so simple that millions can do it in their sleep! Send for our free booklet today, filled with complete instructions on how to breathe, with full, simple diagrams that will delight young and old. Prominent society leaders everywhere endorse BREATHING. BREATHING carries the Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval. So why not start in right now, folks? Learn to breathe, and soon you'll be saying, with millions of others, "I just can't live without it!"

Spellbinder is so red in the face when he finishes this that he has to sit down and fan himself.

"There," he pants. "That gives you an idea of how to put across a product with a spot announcement. I will get up a series like that for Reekies and in no time at all everybody will buy them."

"Sounds good," agrees Bernie the Attorney. "Everything you say about food and breathing is true. If you can say as much for Reekies, we're made."

"I agree," squeaks Herman Hormone.

"Very well, we'll sign you up right now," the lawyer says.

"Wait a minute," I interrupt, very abrupt. "You forget the most important thing—the program that goes with the announcements."

"Program?" says Bernie the Attorney. "Who cares?" he sniffs.

"Well; you must have a show that will appeal to the women. Women buy breakfast food, you know. And what do women want to hear? Serials. So why not put on a serial to sell cereal?"

"Okay by me," agrees J. Selwyn Spellbinder. "We have a real tear-jerking soap opera down at the station, just waiting for a sponsor. It is called GLORIA GOOHAMMER—GIRL HOGBUTCHER."

"Will it really appeal to women?" I inquire. "Does it have lots of divorces and accidents and funerals and deathbed scenes? Do the actors wail and sob and scream?"

"Exactly," says J. Selwyn Spellbinder. "It has everything." He makes a face. "But I guarantee you that if it goes on the air, I will stop breathing."

"Just what we want!" exclaims Bernie the Attorney. "Feep, that is a very right and bright idea."

Little Herman Hormone beams up at me. "Let us go now, Mr. Feep," he suggests. "You and I have a lot of work to do."

WE SEEK the nearest exit and clatter down the stairs. Herman Hormone carries his briefcase full of Reekies and I carry my stomach full of same.

Only I do not seem to be carrying it so well. As a matter of fact, I feel a little dizzy going downstairs. My legs ache and my head feels heavy.

Something like a bad morning after—but I do not have any night before. It is vexing and perplexing.

However, I figure I need a little fresh air and so I huff and puff along the street.

Herman Hormone trudges along, using his lung and tongue to describe how we will set up a factory to turn out Reekies and so forth.

Me, I am still weak in the physique. I feel my forehead. The skin is rough and scaly.

"What's the matter?" asks Herman Hormone. "You look a little queer."

"I feel funny," I answer. "But not like laughing."

I get out my handkerchief to wipe my forehead. It is difficult for me to move my arms or bend them. But I wipe my forehead because I am sweating—and then I look down at my handkerchief and see—

"Sawdust!" gasps the little inventor. "You are sweating sawdust!"

I stare at it. Yes, little flakes of sawdust trickle from my brow! I am so staggered that I stagger, and reach out to grab hold of an iron fense rail to keep my feet. My finger is scraped and begins to bleed.

One look at my finger is enough. I am not bleeding red blood—but something mean and green!

"Chlorophyl," whispers Herman Hormone. "It's chlorophyl."

"Like trees?" I whisper.

"Yes, like trees," breathes Hormone.

I stand there, feeling like a sap, and looking at the sap that flows out of my hand. My fingers are stiff, numb.

"It can't be," I mutter. I try to raise my hand. It jerks up very stiffly, but I manage to grab my hat and take it off to cool my head.

"Youoooffff!!!" Herman Hormone remarks, in a slight scream.

"Now what?" I wail.

"Your hair—it's green and stringy—like vines!"

Hormone stares at me with bulging eyes. "What can it be?" he pants. "Something you inherit from a branch of your family?"

"No vines in my branches," I tell him.

But Herman Hormone thinks otherwise. He stares at me as I stand there, stiff as a board. Others notice my peculiar condition, too.

A bird comes sailing around my head. A dog moseys up and begins to sniff at my feet.

“Take me to a doctor!” I yell, trying to beat off the bird and kick the dog with wooden arms and feet.

“What doctor?” asks Hormone.

“Better make it a tree surgeon!” I gulp.

To make it so you can take it, I am suffering from a bad case of stiff limbs. I am afraid I am going to blossom right there in the street. I feel aged in the wood.

All I can do is lumber along.

AS HORMONE guides me down the sidewalk, I bump into a guy accidentally. The guy turns to me and growls, “Where do you think you’re going, bud?”

Then he screams.

Because I *do* bud. Buds spring out of my ears.

“Something in the Reekies,” Herman Hormone wails, pulling me away and trying not to look at me. “Something must cause a change in your system! You eat it and you turn into a—”

“Don’t say It,” I beg him. “Get me to the doctor, quick!”

Finally Herman Hormone guides me up the stairs to the office of a tree surgeon.

This branch-butcher doesn’t need to take a second look at me to tell what the matter is. As a matter of fact, he refuses to take a second look. One glimpse is enough, and he hides his face in his hands and moans.

I make a pass at a looking glass and understand. I am a pretty weird specimen. My hair is green, and my skin seems to be covered with scales or bark. My arms and legs are stiff and little buds are shooting out from my ears, from under my sleeves, and at the bottom of my trouser legs. I look like a cross between a bad tree and a good camouflage job.

My stomach is heavy, my head is light, and I am losing all feeling. Except for a sort of pulsing inside—which must be the sap coagulating in my veins.

“Come on, Doc, do your stuff,” urges Herman Hormone. “My friend here is in need of attention.”

“Take him away and plant him,” groans the Doc.

“I’m not dead,” I rasp. “But I will be unless you do something.”

“What can I do?” says the Doc, looking away from me and trembling. “Do you want me to comb the bird’s nests out of your hair? How can I help you? I think I’m going mad. This is the first time I ever see such a thing.”

“But there must be something you can do,” I yell. “Don’t leave me out on a limb.”

“I’d like to saw off your limbs,” says the Doc. “To think that I should ever hear a tree bark!”

“I’m not a tree,” I tell him. “I’m a man who is turning into a tree.”

“When does this condition begin?” asks the Doc, in a quavering voice. “I suppose you start out as a little shaver?”

“Not at all,” I inform him. “Kindly do not cast any aspersions on my family tree! All this starts about an hour ago.”

I TELL him the story and Herman Hormone nods. At last the tree surgeon is convinced.

“It must be a case of hamadryadism,” he says.

“Which?”

“Hamadryadism,” he insists, sticking to his story. “A hamadryad, in ancient legend, is a tree-spirit, or a human being imprisoned in a tree. Usually it is the result of a supernatural occurrence.”

“Super or natural,” I rave, “do something for me!”

“What can I do?” shrugs the Doc. “I am just a tree-surgeon.”

"Prune me," I suggest. "Get these buds and twigs off me. And remove the bark from my skin. I do not wish to be a walking caterpillar cafeteria."

"It may hurt," the Doc warns me.

It may and it does, but I grin and bear it as he stretches me out on the table and chops away at the buds and vines. Then he sandpapers my skin and removes the bark with a plane. By this time I am stiffer than ever, and I cannot feel the sandpaper or planing job at all.

"There," sighs the Doc. "That's that."

"But I'm still stiff," I object. "I feel more wooden than ever. What can I do to change?"

The Doc shrugs again. "I don't know," he sighs. "Speaking as a tree surgeon, I must admit the problem stumps me."

I pay him off with money I borrow from Herman Hormone.

"All you can do is go home and go to bed," the Doc tells me. "Maybe it will wear off in time."

Herman Hormone and I take our leave. Hormone has to carry me home, I am so rigid. And when I get there he leaves me, sighing and shrugging and promising to analyze the Reekies and see if he can discover some clue as to what makes the change and what can help me out of my fix.

There is nothing left for me to do but follow the tree surgeon's advice and go to bed.

I do.

I sleep like a log.

The next thing I know, I hear a banging and a thumping and a pounding outside my room. I open my eyes and somebody opens my door. Rather violently—with an axe.

The axe smashes through the panel, followed by the hatchet face of my ex-wife, Joyce.

"There he is, girls!" she squeals. She rushes through the opening, and I see that Gloria and Aileen are right behind her.

My three ex-wives give me a stare and a glare.

"Here it is tomorrow!" Gloria reminds me, in a mild tone of yell. "Where is our alimony?"

I do not answer. I merely keep a very wooden face.

It is not hard for me to do so—because when I try to move, I suddenly discover that I can't! I am stiff and solid—solid wood!

The tree surgeon removes my buds and bark, but that does not halt the process which goes on in my sleep. Now I am a wooden man—and with a slight amount of horror I realize I cannot stir a bit.

The three alimony moaners stand over my bed and shriek at me.

"Get up out of bed, you lazy goon!" suggests Aileen.

"He's too drunk to move," Gloria guesses.

"He's positively stiff!" Joyce sneers.

She reaches out a finger and touches my cheek. "Eeeek!" she complains. "He *is* stiff! Maybe he's dead."

AILEEN reaches into her purse and pulls out a little bottle of whiskey. She waves it in front of my nose.

"Yes," she shudders. "He's dead all right, if he doesn't make a grab for that."

"Wait a minute." Gloria runs her hand along my shoulder. "Wait a minute, girls. This isn't Lefty."

"No?"

"No—it's just a dummy."

"How do you tell the difference?" Aileen wants to know.

"Really," Gloria insists. "This is a dummy made up to look like Lefty." She taps my chin. "See, it's wood!"

"Just a chip off the old block, eh?" Aileen remarks.

"The dirty dog," says Gloria. "He must skip town when he can't pay us our alimony, and leave this dummy for a decoy to fool us."

"A vile trick," Aileen declares. She raises the axe. "I'm going to chop this dizzy-looking dummy to splinters. At least we'll have some kindling to split up for our furnaces, girls."

It looks like I'm going to have a hot time in a little while. But I cannot move to avoid the axe, and I must lie there and listen. This talk about chopping me up gives me a splitting headache, too.

Aileen swings the axe. This is it. But—

"Hold it!" Gloria yells. "I've an idea! Why ruin a perfectly good dummy?"

"What's good about it?" demands Joyce. "It looks like Feep."

"Even so, a dummy is a dummy. Why can't we sell it to a department store? They ought to pay something for clothing dummies. We can split up the dough and at least get something for our troubles breaking in here."

"Why not?" Aileen lowers the axe. "Grab hold of it and we'll carry the dummy out to the car."

I lie there. I would like to quake with horror, but I cannot make with a shake. I would like to yell like hell, also, but I cannot talk or squawk. It is frightful, and far from delightful.

Just as the girls are about to grab me, I hear footsteps on the stairs. At least I can still hear, and what I hear makes me hope.

But the footsteps turn out to belong to J. Selwyn Spellbinder and Bernie the Attorney. They stick their necks through the hole in the door.

"Pardon me," says Bernie, "but we are looking for Lefty Feep."

"You and the sheriff," snaps Aileen. "We want him too. But the big lug skips town on us and leaves a dummy as a decoy."

"Dummy?" asks J. Selwyn Spellbinder. "What dummy?"

"This one here," says Aileen. "We are going to take it and sell it to a department store."

Spellbinder gazes at me. Then he claps his hands together.

"I've got it!" he shouts.

"What?" gasps Bernie the Attorney.

"I tell you, I've got it!"

"Well, get rid of it if it makes you holler so," Bernie advises him.

“Wait until you hear this,” says Spellbinder. “I’ve got a terrific idea for our Reekies show.”

“We already have a show,” Bernie reminds him. “A serial program.”

“Nuts to the serial! Grape nuts to it!” says Spellbinder. “Listen to this! A serial show appeals only to women. Why not a show that will appeal to everyone? I mean a comedy program.”

“Comedy program?”

“Certainly—like Bergen and McCarthy, for instance. Take a look at that dummy. What a character! It’s much goofier looking than Charlie McCarthy. I’ll go on the air in a ventriloquist act with this life-sized dummy. We’ll change our opening program, build it around this act, play it up big! We can hold a big banquet for the opening, with lots of ballyhoo. We’ll cram Reekies down the throat of the nation.”

BERNIE the Attorney catches some of the enthusiasm. I just lie there and catch the dirty digs.

“You know radio, Spellbinder,” he says. “If you say that’s the thing to do, we’d better do it.” He turns to the women. “How much do you want for this dummy?” he asks.

“$100 in cash,” pipes Gloria.

“Don’t be silly, we can get more than that,” whispers Joyce.

“I doubt it—the thing is too sillylooking,” Gloria says.

I wince.

Bernie the Attorney beams. “Sold!” he says. He pulls out a handful of bills and the girls get busy fondling the currency.

“Come on,” says Spellbinder. “We have no time. First show is scheduled for tomorrow night. I’ll have to bat out a script and rehearse. You know, I always figure I want to be a radio comedian.”

They grab me and tote me down the stairs. I am helpless. The ideas these people have fairly makes the sap run cold in my veins.

I will not bark a remark about what happens when I get to the broadcasting station. I am propped up against the wall while Spellbinder and a bunch of continuity writers go into a muddle and huddle and grind out some comedy dialogue between a ventriloquist and a dummy. Then Spellbinder holds a rehearsal with me on his lap.

I cannot say a word—except for the awful stuff Spellbinder's ventriloquism puts into my mouth. He rehearses and curses and I just give him my wooden stare.

It is late at night before the practising is over. Spellbinder puts me down and gets ready to leave. Bernie the Attorney comes in to pick him up and check over last-minute plans for the show.

"How's the Reekies manufacturing going?" asks Spellbinder.

"I don't know," says Bernie. "I do not see Herman Hormone all day. And Feep skips town. But Hormone must be busy."

Hormone is busy.

As a matter of fact he is busy coming through the door right now. And he is still busier staring at me.

"Lefty Feep!" he screams.

Bernie turns and laughs.

"No," he tells Hormone. "This is just a dummy of Feep."

Herman Hormone comes over and touches me with a shaking finger.

"No," he says. "This is no dummy. This is Lefty Feep."

"Why it's nothing but wood," chuckles Spellbinder.

"You are mistaken." Herman Hormone sighs. "It is Lefty Feep. He turns to wood after eating the Reekies."

"No—you're crazy!"

"Look at this." Herman Hormone fumbles in his bulging briefcase and pulls out something. It is a wooden dog.

"I have a pet dog," he says. "Last night I feed it some Reekies. Today I have a wooden toy."

"But why—how—?"

HERMAN HORMONE explains everything. He tells what happens to me yesterday. The two high-pressure artists listen and gape.

"Last night I go home and experiment," Hormone tells them. "I find that the vegetable substances I make my Reekies out of cause a strange reaction on the system of any form of animal life. Anyone who absorbs Reekies assumes the characteristics of vegetable life—particularly of trees. Feep eats Reekies and turns to wood. So does the dog. That proves something."

"Maybe it proves Feep is a dog," says Bernie, unkindly.

"I always figure only God can make a tree," adds Spellbinder.

"Reekies can make a tree," Hormone insists. "I swear to you this is not a dummy but Lefty Feep."

Bernie the Attorney looks at me and shrugs. "Well," he mutters, "he can't talk or move. No harm in him. We'll just go ahead as we plan, put the program on and forget about it."

He smiles. "Of course you must go to work and change that Reekies formula again before the show tomorrow. Otherwise everybody will turn to wood from eating Reekies. Not that I mind that, either—but wooden people won't buy a second package."

He laughs. Herman Hormone stares at him. I stand there, feeling like an overgrown toothpick.

"You don't mean it!" wails the inventor. "You can't be so cold-blooded. This is a man—we must help him to get out of this terrible situation somehow! And I certainly can't revise my Reekies and invent a new breakfast food in just one night."

"Listen," says Bernie the Attorney, chewing on a cigar. "You're doing what I say. I have a contract with your signature on it. Get busy and keep your mouth shut."

Spellbinder nods and looks very smug. Little Herman Hormone knows he can expect no sympathy from him.

"I—I won't do if," he says, sticking out his chin. "It's too inhuman."

"Oh yes you will," chuckles Bernie. "Because if you don't, I will tell the police you feed breakfast food to Lefty Feep and turn him to wood. That's murder.”

Hormone steps back in horror. The two men nod at him and wink.

“Obey me or fry,” Bernie tells him. He scowls at my wooden face. “As for you, Feep—if you can still hear me—you’d better behave too. Or I’m liable to turn some woodpeckers loose on your face.”

“We’ll kick his slats for him,” grins Spellbinder.

“We’ll set him up as a cigar-store Indian!” Bernie guffaws. “But Feep will behave, I’m sure. And so will Herman, here. And nobody will ever know.”

“Knock on wood,” laughs Spellbinder, hitting me on the head.

“Uh—er—” Hormone gulps.

“What is it?”

“I would like to take Lefty home with me,” suggests the little inventor. “Maybe if I study his condition I can hit on a clue in changing the Reekies formula.”

“All right,” says Bernie the Attorney. “But no funny business—or you’re up for murder.”

Hormone is almost down for the count when he hears this. But he picks up my wooden body in trembling hands and lugs me out to a car.

We drive home.

“Can you hear me, Lefty?” Hormone wails. I cannot answer him. He just looks at me and shakes. I wish I could.

“This is an awful spot,” he sighs. “I will never forgive myself for this. How can I get you out of this mess? And how can I get myself out of it?

“I do not tell Bernie the Attorney that almost all our money is being spent right now—I have a batch of Reekies waiting to be put in boxes that will cost us at least $50,000.

“So if I change the formula tonight and throw the stuff away, we are broke. And they will kill me when they hear about it tomorrow.”

I wish I could help him. I wish I could help myself. But I just sit there like the dummy I am until we arrive at Herman Hormone’s hangout.

HE LIVES in a big house with a long shed in the back yard. He carries my stiff body out to the shed and we enter a big open space. Set along the walls are a lot of machines—for mixing and sifting and sorting. Piles of Reekies boxes are lying next to conveyor belts. Big vats in the center of the room are filled with breakfast food flakes.

"Here is where I manufacture the Reekies," he says. "The workers will be here tomorrow ready to box and ship to the wholesalers who place orders already. Now what can I do?"

His bald head looks like Niagara Falls as he sweats.

"I can check and re-check my formula," he sighs. "But I know I cannot isolate one element that makes people turn to wood. The whole batch is no good, that's all. My money is lost and we are ruined. I have 200,000 boxes to fill with Reekies and no Reekies to put into them."

He paces the floor. "And that isn't the worst," he sighs. "It is what I do to you that hurts. Changing you into wood! If there is only some way—"

Herman Hormone approaches me and touches my head. "No use," he says. "You're wooden from head to toe. An overgrown clothespin. No—wait—"

He grabs my wrist. I can't feel anything, but he can.

"Your heart," he gasps. "Your heart is still beating! That means you must be alive. Alive, but with a wooden shell. You are not completely wood fiber. The Reekies must act like the erratic chromosone agent that turns some people to stone. Petrification, calcification, ossification—only in your case, it's woodenification!"

He grabs me and picks me up.

"Maybe this will work," he gasps. He carries me to one of the big metal vats. It is empty. He dumps me inside.

"I will soften up the pulp that covers you, if I can," he says. He turns a spigot on the side of the vat and hot water starts to bubble into it. Soon I am swirling around in a steam bath. I float like a celluloid duck.

"Look!" he murmurs. "The outer layers of vegetable fiber are peeling off."

Sure enough, I see slivers falling away from my body. My eyes are clouded with steam. And all at once, I can move!

My movements are stiff, but I actually feel blood circulating in my veins! I try to speak. I can’t, yet.

But a minute later I feel the boiling water, and I open my mouth and let out a yowl, and then I break the world’s record for a broad jump as I dive out of the vat.

“Feep—you’re alive!” shouts Herman Hormone.

“Boiled alive!” I howl.

TO MAKE a long story short, in a few minutes I am absolutely normal once more, except for a few blisters where the water burns me.

“Saved,” Hormone sobs. “I am so happy I am not a murderer.”

I put on one of his old suits and pat him on the back.

“Hormone,” I say, “I like you. You are more interested in saving me than you are in your investment—even though those crooks are out to ruin you.”

He looks grim. “That is right,” he admits. “I still lose all this money on Reekies. I cannot buy stuff for a new formula, even if I prepare it tonight. There is no dough to make new cereal.”

I grin.

“Am I still your general manager?” I ask.

“Yes—why?”

“Then I will save you. I have an idea that will make our fortune—and fix Bernie the Attorney and J. Selwyn Spellbinder for good. If you promise to do exactly what I say, I’ll take charge.”

“You’re the boss,” says Herman Hormone, holding out his hand.

Then I tell him what I plan, and we get busy.

We work all night. When the employees come to the factory shed the next day, we make them hustle. By the time it is ready to show up at the broadcasting studio for the first program, we are all set.

Herman Hormone goes in alone, just as we plan it out. Everybody is ready for the show. In a private office, Bernie the Attorney and J. Selwyn Spellbinder are celebrating. The setup is perfect.

To make everything complete, they invite my three ex-wives to the performance. Aileen and Joyce and Gloria are there ready to see their wooden dummy of a husband perform a ventriloquist act.

As Hormone enters, Bernie is just telling my heartless spouses how it is really me that turns to wood and is mistaken for a dummy.

“Ha, that’s good!” cackles Aileen. “You mean we actually sell Lefty for that hundred bucks? I know we will get some dough out of his worthless carcass some day! Now I will get a real laugh out of the show.” Everybody chuckles.

“Ahem,” says Herman Hormone.

“Ah, there you are. Do you succeed in changing the Reekies formula?” asks Spellbinder.

“Yes. I bring some for this banquet,” Herman Hormone announces.

Bernie the Attorney sniffs at the package suspiciously. “No tricks now,” he says. “You don’t bring us anything that will change *us* into wood,” he snarls.

“How can you think of such a thing?” asks Hormone, with an innocent smile. “It would spoil the program, wouldn’t it?”

“Well, let’s have some,” says Spellbinder. “We are celebrating with these charming ladies, after all—and we might as well sample our new product. I hope the new Reekies are better than the old ones.”

“See for yourself,” Hormone suggests.

Everybody eats a bowl of Reekies with milk and sugar.

Bernie the Attorney grunts. “Tastes like dried leaves,” he complains. “We’ll have to work to dump this junk on the public. Say—by the way—where’s our dummy? Where is Lefty Feep, that wooden-headed termite’s delight?”

“Here I am,” I say, walking into the office.

There are howls and scowls.

I grin through the din.

"What happens? How come you are not aged in the wood?" they shout.

"Yeah, and what happens to our program—who will be the ventriloquist's dummy?" squawks J. Selwyn Spellbinder.

"You will," I tell him.

"What the—?"

"You just eat a bowl of the old Reekies," I inform the mob. "Double strength, too. I have Hormone mix up an extra-severe batch of it. You should be turning to wood much faster than I do. In fact, you should be wood right now, but good."

TO THEIR horror, they find that what I say is true. My ex-wives feel themselves becoming numb. Aileen's hair is green. Joyce has a bud on her neck. Gloria looks like a factory throwout from a sawmill. Bernie the Attorney has a face like a cigar box.

Spellbinder tries to get up and tackle me, but his legs are too stiff to carry him.

They sit there and gawk instead of talk.

"Yes, you are wood," I repeat. "And you will stay wood for several days. I find out the secret of recovery. And if you all behave, I will release you in due time."

"But this is treachery!" gasps Bernie.

"Call it tree-son," I grin. "Because that's what you will be in a few minutes—a tree, son. So just relax and save what's left of your voice.

"We go on the air in a little while. I will do the announcing and carry on with Spellbinder's part. Spellbinder will be *my* dummy in the comedy act."

"But—"

Bernie's complaint comes from far away. His voice is going fast. "But, what happens? You can't sell Reekies that turn people to wood."

"Of course not. We change the material we make Reekies out of. I think of something sensational last night after I recover. I guarantee people will eat this stuff up. But wait—you'll hear about it on the program in a little while."

And that is just what they do. We carry the wooden wives and the two leafy gentlemen out to the studio. They sit there and listen with budding curiosity—as they bud all over the place.

I step up to the microphone with my dummy and read the script. Then I launch into my commercial announcement.

"Remember, folks—this program is sponsored by the makers of Reekies . . . Reekies, that amazing new breakfast food! The breakfast food to end all breakfast foods!

"Friends, why do you eat breakfast food? Why, for bulk and roughage, of course. And what has more bulk and roughage than the average breakfast food? Why—the boxes out of which breakfast food is made! Reekies is the first breakfast food made entirely out of breakfast food boxes! Good nourishing cardboard has plenty of bulk and roughage! Remember to buy Reekies, folks—Reekies, made from ground-up breakfast food boxes. It's the new taste sensation of the nation."

That ends the first program, and it of course explains what I do. In order to save Hormone the money it costs to manufacture an entirely new product, I merely advise him to grind up the 200,000 cardboard boxes. They taste as good as most breakfast food does, and I figure they are just as nourishing.

Funny thing, the public thinks so too. After that first program they buy like mad.

In a few days I give Spellbinder, Bernie, and the three women a good hot bath and they come out all right. But from this time on, I am the boss.

My wives never bother me for alimony. Bernie and Spellbinder dare not squawk because they are making too much money on the new Reekies.

Herman Hormone is happy.

So am I. But I do not eat breakfast food any more.

LEFTY FEEP grinned at me.

“You are done with your story?” I asked.

He nodded.

“Well, I’m not done with you,” I told him. “To begin with, the whole idea of your breakfast food is more than I can swallow. You say you changed to wood and back again. Maybe. And you say you decided to make your breakfast food out of the cardboard boxes it came in. Well, I’ll stand for all that. But there is one thing you did not and cannot explain.”

“What is that?” asked Lefty Feep.

“If you used all the boxes to make breakfast food out of,” I purred, “then will you kindly tell me what you used for boxes to put the breakfast food into?”

“Very simple,” said Mr. Lefty Feep. “A breakfast food box must be solid and durable. So I merely suggest to Herman Hormone that he make them out of all his old Reekies.”

“Then you—?”

“Exactly.” Feep smiled. “We make our breakfast food out of the boxes. And we make our boxes out of pressed breakfast food!”

THE END

Enoch

My business? Killing people . . . so step right up!

I ALWAYS starts the same way.

First, there's the *feeling.*

Have you ever felt the tread of little feet walking across the top of your skull? Footsteps on your skull, back and forth, back and forth?

It starts like that.

You can't see who does the walking. After all, it's on top of your head. If you're clever, you wait for a chance and suddenly brush a hand through your hair. But you can't catch the walker that way. He *knows.* Even if you clamp both hands flat to your head, he manages to wriggle through, somehow. Or maybe he jumps.

Terribly swift, he is. And you can't ignore him. If you don't pay any attention to the footsteps, he tries the next step. He wriggles down the back of your neck and whispers in your ear.

You can feel his body, so tiny and cold, pressed tightly against the base of your brain. There must be something numbing in his claws, because they don't hurt—although later, you'll find little scratches on your neck that bleed and bleed. But at the time, all you know is that something tiny and cold is pressing there. Pressing, and whispering.

That's when you try to fight him. You try not to hear what he says. Because when you listen, you're lost. You have to obey him, then.

Oh, he's wicked and wise!

He knows how to frighten and threaten, if you dare to resist.

But I seldom try, any more. It's better for me if I do listen and then obey.

As long as I'm willing to listen, things don't seem so bad. Because he can be soothing and persuasive, too. Tempting. The things he has promised me, in that little silken whisper!

He keeps his promises, too.

Folks think I'm poor because I never have any money and live in that old shack on the edge of the swamp. But he has given me riches.

After I do what he wants, he takes me away—out of myself—for days. There are other places besides this world, you know; places where I am king.

People laugh at me and say I have no friends; the girls in town used to call me "scarecrow." Yet sometimes—after I've done his bidding—he brings the riches of the world to me.

Just dreams? I don't think so. It's the other life that's just a dream; the life in the shack at the edge of the swamp. That part doesn't seem real any more.

Not even the killing. . . .

Yes, I kill people.

That's what Enoch wants, you know.

That's what he whispers about. He asks me to kill people, for him.

I don't like that. I used to fight against it—I told you that before, didn't I?—but I can't any more.

He wants me to kill people for him. Enoch. The thing that lives on the top of my head.

I can't see him. I can't catch him. I can only feel him, and hear him, and obey him.

Sometimes he leaves me alone for days. Then, suddenly, I'll feel him there, scratching away at the roof of my brain. I'll hear his whisper ever so plainly, and he'll be telling me about someone who is coming through the swamp.

I don’t know how he knows about them. He couldn’t have seen them, yet he describes them perfectly.

“There’s a tramp walking down the Aylesworthy Road. A short, fat man, with a bald head. That makes it easier.”

Then he’ll laugh for a minute, and go on.

“His name is Mike. He’s wearing a brown sweater and blue overalls. He’s going to turn into the swamp in about ten minutes when the sun goes down. He’ll stop under the big tree next to the dump.

“Better hide behind that tree. Wait until he starts to look for firewood. Then you know what to do. Get the hatchet, now. Hurry.”

SOMETIMES I ask Enoch what he will give me. Usually, I just trust him. I know I’m going to have to do it, anyway. So I might as well go ahead at once. Enoch is never wrong about things, and he keeps me out of trouble.

That is, he always did—until the last time.

One night, I was sitting in. the shack eating supper when he told me about this girl.

“She’s coming to visit you,” he whispered. “A beautiful girl, all in black. She has a wonderful quality to her head—fine bones. Fine.”

At first I thought he was telling me about one of my *rewards.* But Enoch was talking about a real person.

“She will come to the door and ask you to help her. To fix her car. She has taken the side road, planning to go into town by a shorter route. Now the car is well into the swamp, and one of the tires needs changing.”

It sounded funny, hearing Enoch talk about things like automobile tires. But he knows about them. Enoch knows *everything.*

“You will go out to help her when she asks you. Don’t take anything. She has a wrench in the car. Use that.”

This time I tried to fight him. I kept whimpering, “I won’t do it, I won’t do it.” He just laughed. And then he told me what he’d do if I refused. He told me over and over again.

"Better that I do it to her and not to you," Enoch reminded me. "Or would you rather I—"

"No!" I said. "No. I'll do it."

"After all," Enoch whispered, "I can't help it. I must be served ever so often. To keep me alive. To keep me strong. So I can serve you. So I can give you things. That is why you have to obey me. If not, I'll just stay right here and—"

"No," I said. "I'll do it."

And I did it.

She knocked on my door just a few minutes later, and it was just as Enoch had whispered it. She was a pretty girl—with blonde hair. I like blonde hair. I was glad, when I went out into the swamp with her, that I didn't have to harm her hair. I hit her behind the neck with the wrench.

Enoch told me what to do, step by step.

After I used the hatchet, I put the body in the quicksand. Enoch was with me, and he cautioned me about heel-marks. I got rid of them.

I was worried about the car, but he showed me how to use the end of a rotten log and pitch it over. I wasn't sure it would sink, too, but it did. And much faster than I would have believed.

It was a relief to see the car go. I threw the wrench in after it. Then Enoch told me to go home, and I did, and at once I felt the dreamy feeling stealing over me.

ENOCH had promised me something extra special for this one, and I sank down into sleep right away. I could barely feel the pressure leave my head as Enoch left me, scampering off back into the swamp for *his* reward. . . .

I don't know how long I slept. It must have been a long time. All I remember is that I finally started to wake up, knowing somehow that Enoch was back with me again, and feeling that something was wrong.

Then I woke up all the way, because I heard the banging on my door.

I waited a moment. I waited for Enoch to whisper to me, tell me what I should do.

But Enoch was asleep now. He always sleeps—afterwards. Nothing wakes him for days on end; and during that time I am free. Usually I enjoy such freedom, but not now. I needed his help.

The pounding on my door grew louder, and I couldn't wait any longer.

I got up and answered.

Old Sheriff Shelby came through the doorway.

"Come on, Seth," he said. "I'm taking you up to the jail."

I didn't say anything. His beady little black eyes were peeping everywhere inside my shack. When he looked at me, I wanted to hide, I felt so scared.

He couldn't see Enoch, of course. Nobody can. But Enoch was there; I felt him resting very lightly on top of my skull, burrowed down under a blanket of hair, clinging to my curls and sleeping as peaceful as a baby.

"Emily Robbins' folks said she was planning on cutting through the swamp," the Sheriff told me. "We followed the tire tracks up to the old quicksand."

Enoch had forgotten about the tracks. So what could I say? Besides.

"Anything you say can be used agin you," said Sheriff Shelby. "Come on, Seth."

I went with him. There was nothing else for me to do. I went with him into town, and all the loafers were out trying to rush the car. There were women in the crowd too. They kept yelling for the men to "get" me.

But Sheriff Shelby held them off, and at last I was tucked away safe and sound in back of the jailhouse. He locked me up in the middle cell. The two cells on each side of mine were vacant, so I was all alone. All alone except for Enoch, and he slept through everything.

It was still pretty early in the morning, and Sheriff Shelby went out again with some other men. I guess he was going to try and get the body out of the quicksand, if he could. He didn't try to ask any questions, and I wondered about that.

Charley Potter, now, he was different. He wanted to know *everything*. Sheriff Shelby had left him in charge of the jail while he was away. He brought me my breakfast after a while, and hung around asking questions.

I just kept still. I knew better than to talk to a fool like Charley Potter. He thought I was crazy. Just like the mob outside. Most people in that town thought I was crazy—because of my mother, I suppose, and because of the way I lived all alone out in the swamp.

What could I say to Charley Potter? If I told him about Enoch he'd never believe me anyway.

So I didn't talk.

I listened.

Then Charley Potter told *me* about the search for Emily Robbins, and about how Sheriff Shelby got to wondering over some other disappearances a while back. He said that there would be a big trial, and the District Attorney was coming down from the County Seat. And he'd heard they were sending out a doctor to see me right away.

SURE enough, just as I finished breakfast, the doctor came. Charley Potter saw him drive up and let him in. He had to work fast to keep some of the oafs from breaking in with him. They wanted to lynch me, I suppose. But the doctor came in all right—a little man with one of those funny beards on his chin—and he made Charley Potter go up front into the office while he sat down outside the cell and talked to me.

His name was Dr. Silversmith.

Now up to this time, I wasn't really *feeling* anything. It had all happened so fast I didn't get a chance to think.

It was like part of a dream; the sheriff and the mob and all this talk about a trial and a lynching and the body in the swamp.

But somehow the sight of this Dr. Silversmith changed things.

He was real, all right. You could tell he was a doctor by the quiet way he talked; he sounded like a the doctor who wanted to send me to the institution after they found my mother.

That was one of the first things Dr. Silversmith asked me—what had happened to my mother?

He seemed to know quite a lot about me, and that made it easier for me to talk.

Pretty soon I found myself telling him all sorts of things. How my mother and I lived in the shack. How she made the philtres and sold them. About the big pot and the way we gathered herbs at night. About the nights when she went off alone and I would hear the queer noises from far away.

I didn't want to say much more, but he knew, anyway. He knew they had called her a witch. He even knew the way she died—when Santo Dinorelli came to our door that evening and stabbed her because she had made the potion for his daughter who ran away with that trapper. He knew about me living in the swamp alone after that, too.

But he didn't know about Enoch.

Enoch, up on top of my head all the time, still sleeping, not knowing or caring what was happening to me. . . .

Somehow, I was talking to Dr. Silversmith about Enoch. I wanted to explain that it wasn't really I who had killed this girl. So I had to mention Enoch, and how my mother had made the bargain in the woods. She hadn't let me come with her—I was only twelve—but she took some of my blood, pricking me with a needle and dropping it into a little bottle.

I don't know exactly what she did, but when she came back in the morning, Enoch was with her. I couldn't see him, of course, but she told me about him—and I could feel him when he perched on my head.

He was to be mine forever, she said, and look after me and help me in all ways.

I told this very carefully and explained why it was I had to obey Enoch, ever since my mother was killed. Enoch protected me, just as my mother had planned, because she knew I couldn't get along alone. I admitted this to Dr. Silversmith because I thought he was a wise man and would understand.

That was wrong.

I knew it at once. Because while Dr. Silversmith leaned forward and stroked his little beard and said, “Yes, yes,” over and over again, I could feel his eyes watching me.

He had the same kind of eyes as Sheriff Shelby. Beady eyes. Mean eyes. Eyes that don’t trust you when they see you. Prying, peeping eyes.

THEN he began to ask me all sorts of funny questions. You’d think he’d ask me about Enoch, since *he* was the explanation of everything. But instead, Dr. Silversmith asked me if I ever heard any *other* voices. If I ever saw things that I knew weren’t there.

He asked me how I felt when I killed Emily Robbins and whether I—but I won’t repeat that question! Why, he talked to me as if I was some kind of —crazy person!

I just laughed at him, then, and shut up tighter than a clam.

After a while he gave up and went away, shaking his head. I laughed after him because I knew he hadn’t found out what he wanted to find out. He wanted to know all my mother’s secrets, and my secrets, and Enoch’s secrets too.

But he didn’t, and I laughed. And then I went to sleep. I slept almost all afternoon.

When I woke up, there was a new man standing in front of my cell. He had a big, fat smiling face, and nice eyes.

“Hello, Seth,” he said, very friendly. “Having a little snooze?”

I reached up to the top of my head. I couldn’t feel Enoch, but I knew he was there, and still asleep. He moves fast, even when he’s sleeping.

“Don’t be alarmed,” said the man. “I won’t hurt you.”

“Did that doctor send you?” I asked.

The man laughed. “Of course not,” he told me. “My name’s Cassidy. Edwin Cassidy. I’m the District Attorney, and I’m in charge here. Can I come in and sit down, do you suppose?”

“I’m locked in,” I said.

“I’ve got the keys from tire sheriff,” said Mr. Cassidy. He took them out and opened my cell; walked right in and sat down next to me on the bench.

“Aren’t you afraid?” I asked him. “You know, I’m supposed to be a murderer.”

“Why Seth,” Mr. Cassidy laughed, “I’m not afraid of you. I know you didn’t mean to kill anybody.”

He put his hand on my shoulder, and I didn’t draw away. It was a nice, fat, soft hand. He had a big diamond ring on his finger that just twinkled away in the sunshine.

“How’s Enoch?” he said.

I jumped.

“Oh, that’s all right. That fool doctor told me when I met him down the street. He doesn’t understand about Enoch, does he, Seth? But you and I do.”

“That doctor thinks I’m crazy,” I whispered.

“Well, just between us, Seth, it did sound a little hard to believe, at first. But I’ve just come from the swamp. Sheriff Shelby and some of his men are still working down there. Digging, you know.

“They found Emily Robbins’ body just a little while ago. And other bodies, too. A fat man’s body, and a small boy, and some Indian. The quicksand preserves them, you know.”

I WATCHED his eyes, and they were still smiling, so I knew I could trust this man.

“They’ll find other bodies too, if they keep on, won’t they, Seth?”

I nodded.

“But I didn’t wait any longer. I saw enough to understand that you were telling the truth. Enoch must have made you do these things, didn’t he?”

I nodded again.

“Fine,” said Mr. Cassidy, pressing my shoulder. “You see, we do understand each other now. So I won’t blame you for anything you tell me.”

“What do you want to know?” I asked. “Oh, lots of things. I’m interested in Enoch, you see. Just how many people did he ask you to kill—all together, that is?”

“Nine,” I said.

“And they’re all buried in the quick Sand?”

“Yes.”

“Do you know their names?”

“Only a few.” I told him the names of the ones I knew. “Sometimes Enoch just: describes them for me and I go out to meet them,” I explained.

Mr. Cassidy sort of chuckled and took out a cigar. I frowned.

“Don’t want me to smoke, eh?”

“Please—I don’t like it. My mother didn’t believe in smoking; she never let me.”

Mr. Cassidy laughed out loud now, but he put the cigar away and leaned forward.

“You can be a big help to me, Seth,” he whispered. “I suppose you know what a District Attorney must do.”

“He’s a sort of a lawyer, isn’t he—at trials and things?”

“That’s right. I’m going to be at your trial, Seth. Now you don’t want to have to get up in front of all those people and tell them about—what happened. Right?”

“No, I don’t, Mr. Cassidy. Not those mean people here in town. They hate me.”

“Then here’s what you do. You tell me all about it, and I’ll talk for you. That’s friendly enough, isn’t it?”

I wished Enoch was there to help me, but he was asleep. I looked at Mr. Cassidy and made up my own mind.

“Yes,” I said. “I can tell you.”

So I told him everything I knew.

After a while he stopped chuckling, but he was just getting so interested he couldn’t bother to laugh or do anything but listen.

“One thing more,” he said. “We found some bodies in the swamp. Emily Robbins’ body we could identify, and several of the others. But it would be easier if we knew something else. You can tell me this, Seth. Where are the heads?”

I stood up and turned away. “I won’t tell you that,” I said, “because I don’t know.”

“Don’t know?”

“I give them to Enoch,” I explained. “Don’t you understand—that’s why I must kill people for him. Because he wants their heads.”

Mr. Cassidy looked puzzled.

“He always makes me cut the heads off and leave them,” I went on. “I put the bodies in the quicksand, and then go home. He puts me to sleep and rewards me. After that he goes away—back to the heads. That’s what he wants.”

“Why does he want them, Seth?”

I told him. “You see, it wouldn’t do you any good if you could find them. Because you probably wouldn’t recognize anything anyway.”

Mr. Cassidy sat up and sighed. “But why do you let Enoch do such things?”

“I must. Or else he’d do it to me. That’s what he always threatens. He has to have it. So I obey him.”

MR. CASSIDY watched me while I walked the floor, but he didn’t say a word. He seemed to be very nervous, all of a sudden, and when I came close, he sort of leaned away.

“You’ll explain all that at the trial, of course,” I said. “About Enoch, and everything.”

He shook his head.

“I’m not going to tell about Enoch at the trial, and neither are you,” Mr. Cassidy said. “Nobody is even going to know that Enoch exists.”

“Why?”

"I'm trying to help you, Seth. Don't you know what the people will say if you mention Enoch to them? They'll say you're crazy! And you don't want that to happen."

"No. But what can you do? How can you help me?"

Mr. Cassidy smiled at me.

"You're afraid of Enoch, aren't you? Well, I was just thinking out loud. Suppose you gave Enoch to me?"

I gulped.

"Yes. Suppose you gave Enoch to me, right now? Let me take care of him for you during the trial. Then he wouldn't be yours, and you wouldn't have to say anything about him. He probably doesn't want people to know what he does, anyway."

"That's right," I said. "Enoch would be very angry. He's a secret, you know. But I hate to give him to you without asking—and he's asleep now."

"Asleep?"

"Yes. On top of my skull. Only you can't see him, of course."

Mr. Cassidy gazed at my head and then he chuckled again.

"Oh, I can explain everything when he wakes up," he told me. "When he knows it's all for the best, I'm sure he'll be happy."

"Well—I guess it's all right, then," I sighed. "But you must promise to take good care of him."

"Sure," said Mr. Cassidy.

"And you'll give him what he wants? What he needs?"

"Of course."

"And you won't tell a soul?"

"Not a soul."

"Of course you know what will happen to you if you refuse to give Enoch what he wants," I warned Mr. Cassidy. "He will take it—from you—by force."

"Don't you worry, Seth."

I stood still for a minute. Because all at once I could feel something move. Enoch was waking up!

"He's awake," I whispered. "Now I can tell him."

Yes, Enoch was awake. I could feel him crawling over my scalp, moving towards my ear.

"Enoch," I whispered. "Can you hear me?"

He heard.

Then I explained everything to him. How was I giving him to Mr. Cassidy.

Enoch didn't say a word.

Mr. Cassidy didn't say a word. He just sat there and grinned. I suppose it must have looked a little strange to see me talking to—nothing.

"Go to Mr. Cassidy," I whispered. "Go to him, now."

And Enoch went.

I felt the weight lift from my head. That was all, but I knew he was gone.

"Can you feel him, Mr. Cassidy?" I asked.

"What—oh, sure!" he said, and stood up. "Take good care of Enoch," I told him. "The best."

"Don't put your hat on," I warned. "Enoch doesn't like hats."

"Sorry, I forgot. Well, Seth, I'll say goodbye now. You've been a mighty great help to me—and from now on we can just forget about Enoch, as far as telling anybody else is concerned.

"I'll come back again and talk about the trail. That Dr. Silversmith, he's going to try and tell the folks you're crazy. Maybe it would be best if you just denied everything you told him—now that I have Enoch."

That sounded like a fine idea, but then I knew Mr. Cassidy was a smart man.

"Whatever you say, Mr. Cassidy. Just be good to Enoch, and he'll be good to you." Mr. Cassidy shook my hand and then he and Enoch went away. I felt tired again. Maybe it was the strain, and maybe it was just that I felt a little queer, knowing that Enoch was gone. Anyway, I went back to sleep for a long time.

It was night time when I woke up. Old Charley Potter was banging on the cell door, bringing me my supper.

He jumped when I said hello to him, and backed away.

"Murderer!" he yelled. "They got nine bodies out'n the swamp. You crazy fiend!"

"Why, Charley," I said. "I always thought you were a friend of mine."

"Loony! I'm gonna get out of here right now—leave you locked up for the night. Sheriff'll see that nobuddy breaks in to lynch you—if you ask me, he's wasting his time." Then Charley turned out all the lights and went away. I heard him go out the front door and put the padlock on, and I was all alone in the jailhouse.

All alone! It was strange to be all alone for the first time in years—all alone, without Enoch.

I ran my fingers across the top of my head. It felt bare and queer.

THE moon was shining through the window and I stood there looking out at the empty street. Enoch always loved the moon. It made him lively. Made him restless and greedy. I wondered how he felt now, with Mr. Cassidy.

I must have stood there for a long time. My legs were numb when I turned around and listened to the fumbling at the door.

The lock clicked open, and then Mr. Cassidy came running in. He was all out of breath, and he was clawing at his head.

"Take him off me!" he yelled. "Take him away!"

"What's the matter?" I asked.

"Enoch—that thing of yours—I thought you were crazy—maybe I'm the crazy one—but take him off!"

"Why, Mr. Cassidy! I told you what Enoch was like."

"He's crawling around up there now. I can feel him. And I can *hear* him. The things he whispers!"

"But I explained all that, Mr. Cassidy. Enoch wants something, doesn't he? You know what it is. And you'll have to give it to him. You promised."

"I can't. I won't kill for him—he can't make me—"

"He can. And he will."

Mr. Cassidy gripped the bars on the cell door. "Seth, you must help me. Call Enoch. Take him back. Make him go back to you. Hurry."

"All right, Mr. Cassidy," I said.

I called Enoch. He didn't answer. I called again. Silence.

"It's no use," I sighed. "He won't come back. He likes you."

Mr. Cassidy started to cry. It shocked me, and then I felt kind of sorry for him. He just didn't understand, after all. I know what Enoch can do to you when he whispers that way. First he coaxes you, and then he pleads, and then he threatens—

"You'd better obey him," I told Mr. Cassidy. "Has he told you who to kill?"

Mr. Cassidy didn't pay any attention to me. He just cried. And then he took out the jail keys and opened up the cell next to mine. He went in and locked the door.

"I won't," he sobbed. "I won't, I won't!"

"You won't what?" I asked.

"I won't kill Dr. Silversmith at the hotel and give Enoch his head. I'll stay here, in the cell, where I'm safe! Oh, you fiend, you devil—"

He slumped down sideways and I could see him through the bars dividing our cells, sitting all hundred over while his hands tore at his hair.

"You'd better," I called out. "Or else Enoch will do something. Please, Mr. Cassidy—oh, hurry—"

Then Mr. Cassidy gave a little moan and I guess he fainted, because he didn't say anything more and he stopped clawing. I called to him once but he wouldn't answer.

So what could I do? I sat down in the dark corner of my cell and watched the moonlight. Moonlight always makes Enoch wild.

Then Mr. Cassidy started to scream. Not loud, but deep down in his throat. He didn't move at all, just screamed.

I knew it was Enoch, taking what he wanted—from him.

What was the use of looking? You can’t stop him, and I had warned Mr. Cassidy.

I JUST sat there and held my hands to my ears until it was all over.

When I turned around again, Mr. Cassidy still sat slumped up against the bars. There wasn’t a sound to be heard.

Oh, yes, there was! A purring. A soft, faraway purring. The purring of Enoch, after he has eaten. Then I heard a scratching. The scratching of Enoch’s claws, when he frisks because he’s been fed.

The purring and the scratching came from inside Mr. Cassidy’s head.

That would be Enoch, all right, and he was happy now.

I was happy, too.

I readied my hand through the bars and pulled the jail keys from Mr. Cassidy’s pocket. I opened my cell door and I was free again.

There was no need for me to stay now, with Mr. Cassidy gone. And Enoch wouldn’t be staying, either. I called to him.

“Here, Enoch!”

That was as close I’ve ever come to really *seeing* Enoch—a sort of a white streak that came flashing out of the big red hole he had eaten in the back of Mr. Cassidy’s skull.

Then I felt the soft, cold, flabby weight landing on my own head once more, and I knew Enoch had come home.

I walked through the corridor and opened the outer door of the jail.

Enoch’s tiny feet began to patter on the roof of my brain.

Together we walked out into the night. The moon was shining, everything was still, and I could hear, ever so softly, Enoch’s happy chuckling in my ear.

Lizzie Borden Took An Axe . . .

Yes, horror comes at midnight, born of whispers out of dreams

"Lizzie Borden took an axe
And gave her mother forty whacks
When she saw what she had done
She gave her father forty-one

* * * * * *

MEN SAY that horror comes at midnight, born of whispers out of dreams. But horror came to me at high noon, heralded only by the prosaic jangling of a telephone.

I had been sitting in the office all morning, staring down the dusty road that led to the hills. It coiled and twisted before my aching eyes as a shimmering sun played tricks upon my vision. Nor were my eyes the only organs that betrayed me; something about the heat and the stillness seemed to invade my brain. I was restless, irritable, disturbed by a vague presentiment.

The sharp clangor of the phone bell crystalfized my apprehension in a single, strident note.

My palms dripped perspiration-patterns across the receiver. The phone was a warm, leaden weight against my ear. But the voice I heard was cold; icy cold, frozen with fear. The words congealed.

"Jim—come and help me!"

That was all. The receiver clicked before I could reply. The phone slid to the desk as I rose and ran to the door.

It was Anita's voice, of course.

It was Anita's voice that sent me speeding towards my car; sent me racing down that desolate, heat-riddled road towards the old house deep in the hills.

Something had happened out there. Something was bound to happen, sooner or later. I'd known it, and now I cursed myself for not insisting on the sensible thing. Anita and I should have eloped weeks ago.

I should have had the courage to snatch her bodily away from this atmosphere of Faulkneresque melodrama, and I might have, if only I had been able to *believe* in it.

At the time it all seemed so improbable. Worse than that, it seemed *unreal.*

There are no legend-haunted houses looming on lonely hillsides. Yet Anita lived in one.

There are no gaunt, fanatical old men who brood over black books; no "hex doctors" whose neighbors shun them in superstitious dread. Yet Anita's uncle, Gideon Godfrey, was such a man.

Young girls cannot be kept virtual prisoners in this day and age; they cannot be forbidden to leave the house, to love and marry the man of their choice. Yet Anita's uncle had her under lock and key, and our wedding was prohibited.

Yes, it was all sheer melodrama. The whole affair struck me as ridiculous when I thought about it; but when I was with Anita, I did not laugh.

When I heard Anita talk about her uncle, I almost believed; not that he had supernatural powers, but that he was cunningly, persistently attempting to drive her mad.

That's something you can understand, something evil, yet tangible.

There was a trust fund, and Gideon Gadfrey was Anita's legal guardian. He had her out there in his rotting hulk of a house—completely at his mercy. It might easily occur to him to work on her imagination with wild stories and subtle confirmations.

Anita told me. Told me of the locked rooms upstairs where the old man sat mumbling over the mouldering books he'd hidden away there. She told me of his feuds with farmers, his open boastings of the "hex" he put on cattle, the blights he claimed to visit upon crops.

Anita told me of her dreams. Something black came into her room at night. Something black and inchoate—a trailing mist that was nevertheless a definite and tangible presence. It had features, if not a face; a voice, if not a throat. It whispered.

And as it whispered, it caressed her. She would fight off the inky strands brushing her face and body; she would struggle to summon the scream which dispelled spectre and sleep simultaneously.

Anita had a name for the black thing, too.

She called it an *incubus.*

In ancient tracts on witchcraft, the incubus is mentioned—the dark demon that comes to women in the night. The black emissary of Satan the Tempter; the lustful shadow that rides the nightmare.

I knew of the incubus as a legend. Anita knew of it as a reality.

Anita grew thin and pale. I knew there was no magic concerned in her metamorphosis—confinement in that bleak old house was alchemy enough to work the change. That, plus the sadistically-inspired hintings of Gideon Godfrey, and the carefully calculated atmosphere of dread which resulted in the dreams.

But I had been weak. I didn't insist. After all, there was no real proof of Godfrey's machinations, and any attempt to bring issues to a head might easily result in a sanity hearing for Anita, rather than the old man.

I felt that, given time, I would be able to make Anita come away with me voluntarily.

And now, there was no time.

Something had happened.

The car churned dust from the road as I turned in towards the tottering gambrels of the house on the hillside. Through the flickering heat of a midsummer afternoon, I peered at the ruined gables above the long porch.

I swung up the drive, shot the car past the barn and side-buildings, and parked hastily.

No figure appeared at the open windows, and no voice called a greeting as I ran up the porch steps and paused before the open door. The hall within was dark. I entered heedless of knocking, and turned towards the parlor.

Anita was standing there, waiting, on the far side of the room. Her red hair was disheveled about her shoulders; her face was pale—but she was obviously unharmed. Her eyes brightened when she saw me.

“Jim—you’re here!”

She held out her arms to me, and I moved across the room to embrace her.

As I moved, I stumbled over something.

I looked down.

Lying at my feet was the body of Gideon Godfrey—the head split open and crushed to a bloody pulp.

2.

THEN Anita was sobbing in my arms, and I was patting her shoulders and trying not to stare at the red horror on the floor.

“Help me,” she whispered, over and over again. “Help me!”

“Of course I’ll help you,” I murmured. “But—what happened?”

“I don’t—know.”

“You don’t *know?”*

Something in my intonation sobered her. She straightened up, pulled away, and began dabbing at her eyes. Meanwhile she whispered on, hastily.

“It was hot this morning. I was out in the barn. I felt tired and dozed off in the hayloft. Then, all at once, I woke up and came back into the house. I found—him—lying here.”

“There was no noise? Nobody around?”

“Not a soul.”

“You can see how he was killed,” I said, “Only an axe could do such a job. But—where is it?”

She averted her gaze. “The axe? I don’t know. It should be beside the body, if somebody killed him.”

I turned and started out of the room. “Jim—where are you going?”

“To call the police, naturally,” I told her. “No, you can’t. Don’t you see? If you call them now, they’ll think *I* did it.”

I could only nod. “That’s right. It’s a pretty flimsy story, isn’t it, Anita? If we only had a weapon; fingerprints, or footsteps, some kind of clue—”

Anita sighed. I took her hand. “Try to remember,” I said, softly. “You’re sure you were out in the barn when this happened? Can’t you remember more than that?”

“No, darling. It’s all so confused, somehow. I was sleeping—I had one of my dreams—the black thing came—”

I shuddered. I knew how *that* statement affected me, and I could imagine the reaction of the police. She was quite mad, I was sure of it; and yet another thought struggled for realization. Somehow I had the feeling that I had lived through this moment before. Pseudo-memory. Or had I heard of it, read of it?

Read of it? Yes, that was it!

“Try hard, now,” I muttered. “Can’t you recall how it all began? Don’t you know why you went out to the barn in the first place?”

“Yes. I think I can remember. I went out there for some fishing sinkers.”

“Fishing sinkers? In the barn?” Something clicked, after all. I stared at her with eyes as glassy as those of the corpse on the floor.

“Listen to me,” I said. “You’re not Anita Loomis. You’re—Lizzie Borden!”

She didn’t say a word. Obviously the name had no meaning for her. But it was all coming back to me now; the old, old story, the unsolved mystery.

I guided her to the sofa, sat beside her. She didn't look at me. I didn't look at her. Neither of us looked at the thing on the floor. The heat shimmered all around us in the house of death as I whispered the story to her—the story of Lizzie Borden—

3.

IT WAS early August of the year 1892.

Fall River, Massachusetts lay gasping in the surge of a heat-wave.

The sun beat down upon the home of Tail River's leading citizen, the venerable Andrew Jackson Borden. Here the old man dwelt with his second wife, Mrs. Abby Borden; stepmother of the two girls, Emma and Lizzie Borden. “The maid, Bridget “Maggie” Sullivan, completed the small household. A house guest, John V. Morse, was away at this time, visiting. Emma, the older Borden girl, was also absent.

Only the maid and Lizzie Borden were present on August 2nd, when Mr. and Mrs. Borden became ill. It was Lizzie who spread the news—she told her friend, Marion Russell, that she believed their milk had been poisoned.

But it was too hot to bother, too hot to think. Besides, Lizzie's ideas weren't taken very seriously. At 32, the angular, unprepossessing younger daughter, was looked upon with mixed opinion by the members of the community. It was known that she was “cultured” and “refined”—she had travelled in Europe; she was a churchgoer, taught a class in a church mission, and enjoyed a reputation for “good work” as a member of the WCTU and similar organizations. Yet some folks thought her temperamental, even eccentric. She had “notions.”

So the illness of the elder Bordens was duly noted and ascribed to natural causes; it was impossible to think about anything more important than the omnipresent heat, and the forthcoming Annual Picnic of the I Fall River Police Department, scheduled for August 4th.

On the 4th the heat was unabated, but the picnic was in full swing by 11 o'clock—the time at which Andrew Jackson Borden left his downtown office and came home to relax on the parlor sofa. He slept fitfully in the noonday swelter.

Lizzie Borden came in from the barn a short while later and found her father asleep no longer.

Mr. Borden lay on the sofa, his head bashed in so that his features were unrecognizable.

Lizzie Borden called the maid, "Maggie" Sullivan, who was resting in her room. She told her to run and fetch Dr. Bowen, a near neighbor. He was not at home.

Another neighbor, a Mrs. Churchill, happened by. Lizzie Borden greeted her at the door.

"Someone has killed father," were Lizzie's words.

"And where is your mother?" Mrs. Churchill asked.

Lizzie Borden hesitated. It was hard to think in all this heat. "Why—she's out. She received a note to go and help someone who is sick."

Mrs. Churchill didn't hesitate. She marched to a public livery stable and summoned help. Soon a crowd of neighbors and friends gathered; police and doctors were in attendance. And in the midst of the growing confusion, it was Mrs. Churchill who went directly upstairs to the spare room.

Mrs. Borden rested there, her head smashed in.

By the time Dr. Dolan, the coroner, arrived, questioning was already proceeding. The Chief or Police and several of his men were on hand, establishing the fact that there had been no attempt at robbery. They began to interrogate Lizzie.

Lizzie Borden said she was in the barn, eating pears and looking for fishing sinkers—hot as it was. She dozed off, was awakened by a muffled groan, and came into the house to investigate. There she had found her father's hacked body. And that was all—

Now her story of a suspected poisoning was recalled, with fresh significance. A druggist said that a woman had indeed come into his shop several days before and attempted to procure some prussic acid—saying she needed it to kill the moths in her fur coat. She had been refused, and informed by the proprietor that she needed a doctor's prescription.

The woman was identified, too—as Lizzie Borden.

Lizzie's story of the note summoning her mother away from the house now came in for scrutiny. No such note was ever discovered.

Meanwhile, the investigators were busy. In the cellar, they discovered a hatchet with a broken handle. It appeared to have been recently washed, then covered with ashes. Water and ashes conceal stains. . . .

Shock, heat, and embarrassment all played subtle parts in succeeding events. The police presently withdrew without taking formal action, and the whole matter was held over, pending an inquest. After all, Andrew Jackson Borden was a wealthy citizen, his daughter was a prominent and respectable woman, and no one wished to act hastily.

Days passed in a pall of heat and gossip behind sweaty palms. Lizzie's friend, Marion Russell, dropped in at the house three days after the crime and discovered Lizzie burning a dress.

"It was all covered with paint," Lizzie Borden explained.

Marion Russell remembered that dress—it was the one Lizzie Borden had worn on the day of the murders.

The inevitable inquest was held, with the inevitable verdict. Lizzie Borden was arrested and formally charged with the slayings.

The press took over. The church members defended Lizzie Borden. The sob-sisters made much of her. During the six months preceding the actual trial, the crime became internationally famous.

But nothing new was discovered.

During the thirteen days of the trial, the bewildering story was recounted without any sensational development.

Why should a refined New England spinster suddenly kill her father and stepmother with a hatchet, then boldly "discover" the bodies and summon the police?

The prosecution was unable to give a satisfactory answer. On June 20th, 1893, Lizzie Borden was acquitted by a jury of her peers, after one hour of deliberation.

She retired to her home and lived a life of seclusion for many, many years. The stigma had been erased, but the mystery remained unsolved with her passing.

Only the grave little girls remained, skipping their ropes and solemnly chanting:

"Lizzie Borden took an axe
And gave her mother forty whacks
When she saw what she had done
She gave her father forty-one."

4.

THAT'S the story I told Anita—the story you can read wherever famous crimes are chronicled.

She listened without comment, but I could hear the sharp intake of breath as I recounted some singularly significant parallel. *The hot day . . . the barn . . . the fishing sinkers . . . a sudden sleep, a sudden awakening . . . the return to the house . . . discovery of a body . . . took an axe. . . .*

She waited until I had finished before speaking.

"Jim, why do you tell me this? Is it your Way of hinting that I—took an axe to my uncle?"

"I'm not hinting anything," I answered. "I was just struck by the amazing similarity of this case and the Lizzie Borden affair."

"What do you think happened, Jim? In the Lizzie Borden case, I mean."

"I don't know," I said slowly. "I was wondering if you had a theory."

Her opal eyes glinted in the shadowed room. "Couldn't it have been the same thing?" she whispered. "You know what I've told you about my dreams. About the incubus.

"Suppose Lizzie Borden had those dreams, too. Suppose an entity emerged from her sleeping brain; an entity that would take up an axe and kill—"

She sensed my protest and ignored it. "Uncle Gideon knew of such things. How the spirit descends upon you in sleep. Couldn't such a presence emerge into the world while she slept and kill her parents? Couldn't such a being creep into the house here while I slept and kill Uncle Gideon?"

I shook my head. "You know the answer I must give you," I said. "And you can guess what the police would say to that. Our only chance now, before, calling them, is to find the murder weapon."

We went out into the hall together, and hand in hand we walked through the silent ovens that were the rooms of this old house. Everywhere was dust and desolation. The kitchen alone bore signs of recent occupancy—they had breakfasted there early in the day, Anita said.

There was no axe or hatchet to be found anywhere.

It took courage to tackle the cellar. I was almost certain of what we must find. But Anita did not recoil, and we descended the dark stairwell.

The cellar did not yield up a single sharp instrument.

Then we were walking up the stairs to the second floor. The front bedroom was ransacked, then Anita's little room, and at last we stood before the door of Gideon Godfrey's chamber.

"It's locked," I said. "That's funny."

"No," Anita demurred. "He always kept it locked. The key must be downstairs with—him."

"I'll get it," I said. And I did so. When I returned with the rusty key, Anita stood quaking in the hallway.

"I won't go inside with you," she breathed. "I've never been inside his room. I'm afraid. He used to lock himself in and I'd hear sounds late at night—he was praying, but not to God—"

"Wait here, then," I said.

I unlocked the door, opened it, stepped across the threshold.

GIDEON GODFREY may have been a madman himself. He may have been a cunning schemer, bent on deluding his niece. But in either case, he did believe in sorcery.

That much was evident from the contents of his room. I saw the books saw the crudely drawn chalk circles on the floor; literally dozens of them, hastily obliterated and repeated endlessly. There were queer geometric configurations traced in blue chalk upon one of the walls, and candle-drippings covered walls and floor alike.

The heavy, fetid air held a faint, acrid reek of incense. I noted one sharp instrument in the room—a long silver knife lying on a side-table next to a pewter bowl. The knife seemed rusty, and the rust was red. . . .

But it was not the murder weapon, that was certain. I was looking for an axe, and it wasn't here.

I joined Anita in the hall.

"Isn't there anywhere else?" I asked, "Another room?"

"Perhaps the barn," she suggested.

"And we didn't really search in the parlor," I added.

"Don't make me go in there again," Anita begged. "Not in the same room where *he* is. You look there and I'll go through the barn."

We parted at the foot of the stairs. She went out the side entrance and I walked back into the parlor.

I looked behind the chairs, under the sofa. I found nothing. It was hot in there; hot and quiet. My head began to swim.

Heat—silence—and that grinning thing on the floor. I turned away, leaned against the mantel, and stared at my bloodshot eyes in the mirror.

All at once, I saw it, standing behind me. It was like a cloud—a black cloud. But it wasn't a cloud. It was a *face.* A face, covered by a black mask of wavering smoke; a mask that leered and pressed closer.

Through heat and silence it came, and I couldn't move. I stared at the swirling, cloudy smoke that shrouded a face.

Then I heard something swish, and I turned.

Anita was standing behind me.

As I grasped her wrists she screamed and fell. I could only stare down at her, stare down as the black cloud over her face disappeared, oozed into air.

The search was over. I'd found the murder weapon, all right; it rested rigidly in her hands—the bloodstained axe!

5.

I CARRIED Anita over to the sofa. She didn't move, and I made no attempt to revive her.

Then I went out into the hall, carrying the axe with me. No sense in taking any chances. I trusted Anita still, but not that thing—not that black mist, swirling up like smoke to take possession of a living brain and make it lust to kill.

Demoniac possession it was; the legend spoken of in ancient books like those in the room of the dead wizard.

I crossed the hall to the little study opposite the parlor. The wall telephone was here; I picked it up and rang the operator.

She got me the Highway Police headquarters. I don't know why I called them, rather than the sheriff. I was in a daze throughout the entire call. I stood there holding the axe in one hand, reporting the murder in a few words.

Questions rose from the other end of the wire; I did not answer them.

"Come on out to the Godfrey place," I said. "There's been a killing."

What else *could* I say?

What would we be telling the police, half an hour from now, when they arrived on the scene?

They wouldn't believe the truth—wouldn't believe that a demon could enter a human body and activate it as an instrument for murder.

But I believed it now. I had seen the fiend peering out of Anita's face when she tried to sneak up behind me with the axe. I had seen the black smoke, the conjuration of a demon lusting for bloody death.

Now I knew that it must have entered her as she slept; made her kill Gideon Godfrey.

Perhaps such a thing had happened to Lizzie Borden. Yes. The eccentric spinster with the over-active imagination, so carefully repressed; the eccentric spinster, sleeping in the barn on that hot summer day—

"Lizzie Borden took an axe
And gave her mother forty whacks"

I leaned back, the verse running through my head.

It was hotter than I had believed possible, and the stillness hinted of approaching storm.

I groped for coolness, felt the cold axe-blade in my hand as I leaned the weapon across my lap. As long as I held on to this, we were safe. The fiend was foiled, now. Wherever that presence lurked, it must be raging, for it could not take possession.

Oh, that was madness! The heat was responsible, surely. Sunstroke caused Anita to kill her uncle. Sunstroke brought on her babblings about an incubus and dreams. Sunstroke impelled that sudden, murderous attack upon me before the mirror.

Sympathetic hallucination accounted for my image of a face veiled by a black mist. It had to be that way. The police would say so, doctors would say so.

"When she saw what she had done
She gave her father forty-one."
Police. Doctors. Lizzie Borden.
The heat. The cool axe.
Forty whacks. . . .

6.

THE first crash of thunder awakened me.

For a moment I thought the police had arrived, then realized that the heat-storm was breaking. I blinked and rose from the armchair. Then I realized that something was *missing.*

The axe no longer rested across my lap. It wasn't on the floor. It wasn't visible anywhere. The axe had disappeared again!

"Anita," I gasped. I knew without conscious formulation of thought how it must have happened. She had awakened while I slept—come in here and stolen the axe from me.

What a fool I had been to sleep!

I might have guessed it . . . while she was unconscious, the lurking demon had another chance to gain possession. That was it; the demon had entered into Anita again.

I faced the door, stared at the floor, and saw my confirmation scrawled in a trail of red wetness dotting the carpet and outer hall.

It was blood. Fresh blood.

I rushed across the hall, re-entered the parlor.

Then I gasped, but with relief. For Anita was still lying on the couch, just as I had left her. I wiped the sudden perspiration from my eyes and forehead, then stared again at the red pattern on the floor.

The trail of blood ended beside the couch, all right. But did it lead *to* the couch—or *away* from it?

Thunder roared through the heat. A flicker of lightning seared the shadows of the room as I tried to puzzle it out.

What did it mean? It meant that perhaps Anita was not possessed of a demon now while she slept.

But I had slept, too.

Maybe—maybe the demon had come to *me* when *I* dozed off!

All at once, everything blurred. I was trying to remember. Where was the axe? Where could it possibly be, *now?*

Then the lightning came again and with it the final confirmation—the revelation.

I saw the axe now, crystal-clear—the axe—buried to the hilt in the top of Anita’s head!

1947

Sweets to the Sweet

You can't bring up all children the same way. For instance, take a little witch. . . .

IRMA didn't look like a witch.

She had small, regular features, a peaches-and-cream complexion, blue eyes and fair, almost ash-blonde hair. Besides, she was only eight years old.

"Why does he tease her so?" sobbed Miss Pall. "That's where she got the idea in the first place—because he calls her a little witch."

Sam Steever bulked his paunch back into the squeaky swivel chair and folded his hammy hands in his lap. His fat lawyer's mask was immobile, but lie was really quite distressed.

Women like Miss Pall should never sob. Their glasses wiggle, their thin noses twitch, their creasy eyelids redden, and their stringy hair becomes disarrayed.

"Please, my dear, control yourself," coaxed Sam Steever. "Perhaps if we could just talk this whole thing over sensibly—"

"I don't care!" Miss Pall sniffled. "I'm not going back there again. I can't stand it. There's nothing I can do. The man is your brother, and she's your brother's child. It's not my responsibility. I've tried—"

"Of course you've tried." Sam Steever smiled benignly, as if Miss Pall were foreman of the jury. "I quite understand. But I still don't see why you are so agitated, dear lady."

Miss Pali removed her spectacles and dabbed at her eyes with a floral-print handkerchief. Then she deposited the soggy ball in her purse, snapped the catch, replaced her spectacles, and sat up straight.

"Very well, Mr. Steever," she said. "I shall do my best to acquaint you with my reasons for quitting your brother's employ."

She suppressed a tardy sniff.

"I came to John Steever two years ago in response to an advertisement for a housekeeper, as you know. When I found that I was to be governess to a motherless six-year-old child, I was at first distressed. I know nothing of the Care of children."

"John had a nurse the first six years," Sam Steever nodded. "You know Irma's mother died in childbirth."

"I am aware of that," said Miss Pall, primly. "Naturally, one's heart goes out to a lonely, neglected little girl. And she was so terribly lonely, Mr. Steever—if you could have seen her, moping around in the corners of that big, ugly old house—"

"I have seen her," said Sam Steever hastily, hoping to forestall another outburst. "And I know what you've done for Irma. My brother is inclined to be thoughtless, even a bit selfish at times. He doesn't understand."

"He's cruel," declared Miss Paul, suddenly vehement. "Cruel and wicked. Even if he is your brother, I say he's no fit father for any child. When I came there, her little arms were black and blue from beatings. He used to take a belt—"

"I know. Sometimes I think John never recovered from the shock of Mrs. Steever's death. That's why I was so pleased when you came, dear lady. I thought you might help the situation."

"I tried," Miss Pall whimpered. "You know I tried. I never raised a hand to that child in two years, though many's the time your brother has told me to punish her. 'Give the little witch a beating,' he used to say. 'That's all she needs—a good thrashing.' And then she'd hide behind my back and whisper to me to protect her. But she wouldn't cry, Mr. Steever. Do you know, I've never seen her cry."

SAM STEEVER felt vaguely irritated and a bit bored. He wished the old hen would get on with it. So he smiled and oozed treacle. "But just what is your problem, dear lady?"

"Everything was all right when I came there. We got along just splendidly. I started to teach Irma to read—and was surprised to find that she had already mastered reading. Your brother disclaimed having taught her, but she spent hours curled up on the sofa with a book. 'Just like her,' he used to say. 'Unnatural little witch. Doesn't play with the other children. Little witch.' That's the way he kept talking, Mr. Steever. As if she were some sort of—I don't know what. And she so sweet and quiet and pretty!

"Is it any wonder she read? I used to be that way myself when I was a girl, because—but never mind.

"Still, it was a shock that day I found her looking through the *Encyclopedia Britannica.* 'What are you reading, Irma?' I asked. She showed me. It was the article on Witchcraft.

"You see what morbid thoughts your brother had inculcated in her poor little head?

"I did my best. I went out and bought her some toys—she had absolutely nothing, you know; not even a doll. She didn't even know how to *play!* I tried to get her interested in some of the other little girls in the neighborhood, but it was no use. They didn't understand her and she didn't understand them. There were scenes. Children can be cruel, thoughtless. And her father wouldn't let her go to public school. I was to teach her—

"Then I brought her the modelling clay. She liked that. She would spend hours just making faces with clay. For a child of six, Irma displayed real talent.

"We made little dolls together, and I sewed clothes for them. That first year was a happy one, Mr. Steever. Particularly during those months when your brother was away in South America. But this year, when he came back—oh, I can't bear to talk about it!"

"Please," said Sam Steever. "You must understand. John is not a happy man. The loss of his wife, the decline of his import trade, and his drinking—but you know all that."

"All I know is that he hates Irma," snapped Miss Pall, suddenly. "He hates her. He wants her to be bad, so he can whip her. 'If you don't discipline the little witch, I shall,' he always says. And then he takes her upstairs and thrashes her with his belt—you must do something, Mr. Steever, or I'll go to the authorities myself."

The crazy old biddy would do that, Sam Steever thought. Remedy—more treacle. "But about Irma," he persisted.

"She's changed, too. Ever since her father returned this year. She won't play with me any more, hardly looks at me. It is as though I failed her, Mr. Steever, in not protecting her from that man. Besides—she thinks she's a witch."

Crazy. Stark, staring crazy. Sam Steever creaked upright in his chair.

"Oh, you needn't look at me like that, Mr. Steever. "She'll tell you so herself—if you ever visited the house!"

He caught the reproach in her voice and assuaged it with a deprecating nod.

"She told me all right, if her father wants her to be a witch she'll be a witch. And she won't play with me, or anyone else, because witches don't play. Last Halloween she wanted me to give her a broomstick. Oh, it would be funny if it weren't so tragic. That child is losing her sanity.

Just a week ago I thought she'd changed.

That's when she asked me to take her to church one Sunday. 'I want to see the baptism,' she said. Imagine that—an eight-year-old interested in baptism! Reading too much, that's what does it.

"Well, we went to church and she was as sweet as can be, wearing her new blue dress and holding my hand. I was proud of her, Mr. Steever, really proud.

"But after that, she went right back into her shell. Reading around the house, running through the yard at twilight and talking to herself.

"Perhaps it's because your brother wouldn't bring her a kitten. She was pestering him for a black cat, and he asked why, and she said, 'Because witches always have black cats.' Then he took her upstairs.

"I can't stop him, you know. He beat her again the night the power failed and we couldn't find the candles. He said she'd stolen them. Imagine that—accusing an eight-year-old child of stealing candles!

"That was the beginning of the end. Then today, when he found his hairbrush missing—"

"You say he beat her with his hairbrush?"

"Yes. She admitted having stolen it. Said she wanted it for her doll."

"But didn't you say she has no dolls?"

"She made one. At least I think she did. I've never seen it—she won't show us anything any more; won't talk to us at table, just impossible to handle her.

"But this doll she made—it's a small one, I know, because at times she carries it tucked under her arm. She talks to it and pets it, but she won't show it to me or to him. He asked her about the hairbrush and she said she took it for the doll.

"Your brother flew into a terrible rage—he'd been drinking in his room again all morning; oh, don't think I don't know it!—and she just smiled and said he could have it now. She went over to her bureau and handed it to him. She hadn't harmed it in the least; some of the hair from his head was still in it, I noticed.

"But he snatched it up, and then he started to strike her about the shoulders with it, and he twisted her arm and then he—"

Miss Pall huddled in her chair and summoned great racking sobs from her thin chest.

Sam Steever patted her shoulder, fussing about her like an elephant over a wounded canary.

“That’s all, Mr. Steever. I came right to you. I’m not even going back to that house to get my things. I can’t stand any more—the way he beat her—and the way she didn’t cry, just giggled and giggled and giggled—sometimes I think she is a witch—that he made her into a witch—”

II

SAM STEEVER picked up the phone. The ringing had broken the relief of silence after Miss Pall’s hasty departure.

“Hello—that you, Sam?”

He recognized his brother’s voice, somewhat the worse for drink.

“Yes, John.”

“I suppose the old bat came running straight to you to shoot her mouth off.”

“If you mean Miss Pall, I’ve seen her, yes.”

Pay no attention. I can explain everything.”

“Do you want me to stop in? I haven’t paid you a visit in months.”

“Well—not right now. Got an appointment with the doctor this evening.”

“Something wrong?”

“Pain in my arm. Rheumatism or something. Getting a little diathermy. But I’ll call you tomorrow.”

“Right.”

But John Steever did not call the next day. About supper time, Sam called him.

Surprisingly enough, Irma answered the phone. Her thin, squeaky little voice sounded faintly in Sam’s ears.

“Daddy’s upstairs sleeping. He’s been sick.”

“Well, don’t disturb him. What is it—his arm?”

“His back, now. He has to go to the doctor again in a little while.”

“Tell him I’ll call tomorrow, then. Uh—everything all right, Irma? I mean, don’t you miss Miss Pall?”

"No. I'm glad she went away. She's stupid."

"Oh. Yes. I see. But you phone me if you want anything. And I hope your daddy's better."

"Yes. So do I," said Irma, and then she began to giggle, and then she hung up.

There was no giggling the following afternoon when John Steever called Sam at the office. His voice was sober—with the sharp sobriety of pain.

"Sam—for God's sake, get over here. Something's happening to me!"

"There's a client in the office, but I'll get rid of him. Say, wait a minute. Why don't you call the doctor?"

"That quack can't help me. He gave me diathermy for my arm and yesterday he did the same thing for my back."

"Didn't it help?"

"The pain went away, yes. But it's back now. I feel—like I was being crushed. Squeezed, here in the chest. I can't breathe."

"Sounds like pleurisy."

"It isn't pleurisy. He examined me. Said I was sound as a dollar. No, there's nothing organically wrong. And couldn't tell him the real cause."

"Real cause?"

"Yes. The pins. The pins that little fiend is sticking into the doll she made. Into the arm, the back. And now heaven only knows how she's causing *this.*"

"John, you mustn't—"

"Oh, what's the use of talking? It's the doll all right, the one she made with the candle-wax and the hair from my brush. Oh—it hurts to talk—that cursed little witch! Hurry, Sam. Promise me you'll do something—anything—get that doll from her—get that doll—"

III

HALF an hour later, at four-thirty, Sam Steever entered his brother's house. Irma opened the door.

It gave Sam a shock to see her standing there, smiling and unperturbed, pale blonde hair brushed immaculately back from the rosy oval of her face. She looked just like a little doll. A little doll—

"Hello, Uncle Sam."

"Hello, Irma. Your daddy called me, did he tell you? He said he wasn't feeling well—"

"I know. But he's all right now. He's sleeping."

Something happened to Sam Steever; a drop of ice-water trickled down his spine.

"Sleeping?" he croaked. "Upstairs?"

Before she opened her mouth to answer he was bounding up the steps to the second floor, striding down the hall to John's bedroom.

John lay on the bed. He was asleep, and only asleep. Sam Steever noted the regular rise and fall of his chest as he breathed. His face was calm, relaxed.

Then the drop of ice-water evaporated, and Sam could afford to smile and murmur, "Nonsense," under his breath as he turned away.

As he went downstairs he hastily improvised plans. A six-month vacation for his brother; avoid calling it a "cure." An orphanage for Irma; give her a chance to get away from this morbid old house. . . .

He paused halfway down the stairs. Peering over the banister through the twilight he saw Irma on the sofa, cuddled up like a little white ball. She was talking to something she cradled in her arms, rocking it to and fro.

Then there was a doll, after all.

Sam Steever tiptoed very quietly down the stairs and walked over to Irma.

"Hello," he said.

She jumped. Both arms rose to cover completely whatever it was she had been fondling. She squeezed it tightly.

Sam Steever thought of a doll being squeezed across the chest—

“Daddy’s better now, isn’t he?” lisped Irma.

“Yes, much better.”

“I knew he would be.”

“But I’m afraid he’s going to have to go away for a rest. A long rest.”

A smile flittered through the mask. “Good,” said Irma.

“Of course,” Sam went on, “you couldn’t stay here all alone. I was wondering—maybe we could send you off to school, or to some kind of a home—”

Irma giggled. “Oh, you needn’t worry about me,” she said. She shifted about on the sofa as Sam sat down, then sprang up quickly as he came close to her.

HER arms shifted with the movement, and Sam Steever saw a pair of tiny legs dangling down below her elbow. There were trousers on the legs, and little bits of leather for shoes.

“What’s that you have, Irma?” he asked. “Is it a doll?” He extended his hand.

She pulled it back.

“You can’t see it,” she said.

“But I want to. Miss Pall said you made such lovely ones.”

“Miss Pall is stupid. So are you. Go away.”

“Please, Irma. Let me see it.”

But even as he spoke, Sam Steever was staring at the top of the doll, momentarily revealed, when she backed away. It was a head all right, with wisps of hair over a white face. Dusk dimmed the features, but Sam recognized the eyes, die nose, the chin—

He could keep up the pretense no longer. “Give me that doll, Irma!” he snapped. “I know what it is. I know *who* it is—” For an instant the mask slipped from Irma’s face, and Sam Steever stared into naked fear.

She knew. She knew he knew.

Then, just as quickly, the mask was replaced.

Irma was only a sweet, spoiled, stubborn little girl as she shook her head merrily and smiled with impish mischief in her eyes.

"Oh, Uncle Sam," she giggled. "You're so silly! Why, this isn't a *real* doll."

Irma giggled once more, raising the figure as she spoke. "Why, it's only —candy!" Irma said.

"Candy?"

Irma nodded. Then, very swiftly, she slipped the tiny head of the image into her mouth.

And bit it off.

There was a single piercing scream from upstairs.

As Sam Steever turned and ran up the steps, little Irma, still gravely munching, skipped out of the front door and into the night beyond.

A Head For His Bier!

Down at Homicide, they said I had a good head on my shoulders. But I wasn’t sure how long I could keep it there after I looked at that bobbing, nodding thing in the alcohol jar, that used to stand on Gustav Myers’ neck!

CHAPTER ONE

Head Start

THERE WERE three of us in the room: Tiny Tim, myself, and the guy without a head.

Tiny Tim talked, I listened, and the guy without a head just sort of took it slow and easy.

“Somewhere in this city,” said Tiny Tim, “a man sits in a little room. It’s a very private sort of a room, and the door is locked to visitors. Visitors just wouldn’t understand about this room.

“They wouldn’t understand about the man, either, because he’s an unusual type. Odd. Secretive. Eccentric. A man with a hobby. You might call him a collector.

“It isn’t stamps he collects, or antiques, or rare jewelry. He collects human heads!”

I opened my mouth, but before I could put my foot in it, Tiny Tim rattled on.

"Think of it, Johnny. He's probably sitting in his room right now, admiring his collection. Most likely he keeps them in jars lined along the walls—his specimens, I mean. Dozens of human heads, floating in alcohol. Bald, shrivelled heads of old men. Heads of young girls, haloed by coils of golden hair. The tiny heads of infants in small jars.

"I can see them bobbing and nodding, see the sightless eyes peering out, bulging and distorted by the glass. I can see him gloating as he caresses his latest trophy, fondling it, feeling its contours before he places it in a jar to float forever in alcohol."

"You're floating in alcohol!" I snapped.

Tiny Timothy Higgins looked hurt. His small features twisted in confusion as he ran a hand through carroty hair.

"I'm only trying to help," he said. "I've got a theory."

"You've got a lot of things," I told the little man. "A persecution complex, a bad hangover, and no darn business in a room where a murder has been committed."

"Take it easy," Tiny Tim begged. "You know I'm not a lush. I wasn't bumped off Homicide for that. Captain Leeds just got a fool notion in his head that I'm too small to make a good detective. After six years on the force, this big ape has to take charge and bounce me out because of a whim."

"Sure, I know, you got a tough break," I agreed. "I was only needling you. And I'd like to help you out. But it's more than your size that's against you. Leeds knows about those wild ideas you get."

"Wild ideas?" Tim yelped. "Such as what?"

"Don't look so innocent," I told him. "Every time some Chinese got run over by a beer truck, you smelled a new Tong war. A dame got knocked off in a bathtub and you wanted to pin the crime on a sea serpent. No wonder you were kicked out. And if Leeds knew you sneaked up here on a case with me, he'd kick me out, too."

"I've got to work with you, Johnny," Tim protested. "Give me a break. Maybe if I can crack this case and you mention it, I can get back on the

Department payroll."

I shrugged. "All right, I'm a sucker. Stick around, but don't let any of the other boys see you. And don't feed me those screwey theories. Now you're telling me there's a maniac loose in the city who cuts off human heads for his private collection."

Tiny Tim pointed at the floor. "What more proof do you need?" he asked.

The headless body of a man lay spread-eagled on the rug of the dingy little room. The cheap suit and the soiled carpeting beneath it were drenched with blood from the carotid artery.

"What else can you make of it?" Tim asked. "No friends. No enemies. No clues. No head. Only a mad killer would—"

"Stop that! You see too many movies!"

"All right, you reason it out," Tim suggested. "Here's a guy named Gustav Myers. He's middle-aged, lives all alone in this attic room, comes and goes without a word. Doesn't even speak to the landlord—unless the landlord's lying. No friends, no mail, no phone calls.

"You told me what happened. The landlord hadn't seen him around for a couple of days, the rent was overdue, and Myers didn't answer the door. So the landlord used his pass key and what did he find? Gustav Myers, lying here on the floor with his head chopped off, and taken away. Obviously the work of a fiend."

"Then I come along," I continued for him. "And before I as much as get into the house, you buttonhole me on the street, sneak in, and foul up the whole case with a loony hunch."

"All right," Tim muttered. "You'll see."

"I'm going to see, right now. I want to case this joint before the coroner and his little pals swarm all over the place. We have about five minutes left, and then you'll scram out of here. I don't want anyone else to spot you."

I BEGAN to move around the room, taking care not to stumble over the body and wreck my new shoe-shine. Tim sat down on the bed and regarded me glumly.

"Why look for anything?" he asked. "I already told you there's no clues. This guy Myers must have been a queer old duck. Did you notice how bare the room is? Not a magazine, or a newspaper, or a book in the place. No radio, no deck of cards, no tobacco, no collection of old string, no letters."

"Maybe somebody cleaned the joint out," I said.

"Would he take a pipe? Or cigarettes and ashtrays? Or magazines? No. The whole setup is screwy."

"You're right at that," I told him. "It certainly isn't natural for an old recluse to just sit in a room for two or three months with absolutely nothing around for amusement. Unless that's a clue in itself."

"Maybe the old boy was sick," suggested Tim. "You can tell from the way he's lying on the rug that he was in bed when when he got his. Tumbled right off and the cover is mussed where his body must have pressed on the mattress."

"Fine," I said. "Very fine! A mad fiend knocks on the door. Myers is in bed. 'Who's there?' he calls. 'It's only me, the mad fiend.' 'All right, I'll let you in.' So he gets up, lets the mad fiend in, then lies down on the bed again and waits for the killer to hit him with an axe. Oh, you've got a great theory there."

Tiny Tim looked hurt. Fie was good at that.

"Your five minutes are up," I said. "Get out of here."

"But Johnny—"

"You heard me. The coroner should arrive any minute now, and I've got work to do."

"Don't I get a look-in on the case at all?"

"Tell you what I'll do," I said. "I'll phone you later."

"When?"

"About two weeks after I solve the case. Now beat it—you and your mad fiends!"

It was tough on the little guy but I had to do it. He straggled out forlornly and closed the door.

I took a fast case of the room, but it was absolutely barren of anything that might be considered a hint, let alone a clue.

There was another threadbare suit hanging in the closet, a battered hat, a pair of shoes. A few shirts and some underwear scarcely filled the top drawer of the old bureau. Otherwise the room was empty of personal possessions.

It didn't look lived in at all. With the body on the floor, it merely looked died-in.

"Let me see now," I muttered. "He must have been lying on the bed like this—"

I lay on the bed, like that.

The pillow was hard. Too hard. I took it away. I lifted the grimy sheet beneath.

A black and dog-eared old photograph album rested next to the mattress. I pulled it out and opened the thick old covers.

It was empty. No pages. Maybe he just bought the cover and intended to purchase loose-leaf pages.

That was out, because the binding cords were cut. The pages of the photo album had been removed. Did the killer remove them? If so, why hadn't he carried the entire album away?

Then the realization hit me—the album covers were bulky. And the killer had another bulky burden to carry: His victim's head.

But why had he taken it? Tiny Tim thought he knew. Me, I wasn't so sure. The whole setup was screwy.

Perhaps I should have stayed in the room and kept Gustav Myers company until the coroner's squad arrived, but somehow I didn't feel very sociable.

I eased out and went downstairs to see the landlord. Mr. Rummell's apartment was on the first floor, rear, and I had no trouble finding it—merely followed my nose and allowed it to lead me to the source of one of the foulest odors I've ever sniffed.

Mr. Rummell was going to have boiled cabbage for dinner, and he probably had it for lunch, too. From the odor, he might have eaten it for breakfast, not only today, but every day for the past ten years.

The hallway stunk. His apartment stunk. Mr. Rummell stunk too. I'd like to say something kinder, but I can't.

Mr. Rummell answered the door, then stood aside and permitted me to enter. I managed to squeeze past his stomach and into the room.

"Now who'd you wondt, huh?" he asked. "More snoobping aroundt? You fellers give me a pain in the neck."

"Sorry, Mr. Rummell," I said. "Business, you know. And so far you haven't been of too much help. When you called, you merely said there was a body in your place. We've got to know more about it. Who was this man Myers? You say he came here about three months ago. Surely you found out something about him in all that time."

"I don't findt oudt," Rummell said. "I run boardting house, see? I mindt mine businesses, boardters mindt dere businesses, see? Dot's how it iss."

"Good idea," I told him. "Nice friendly little setup. Is that why you keep a gun on the table all the time? Or were you planning to kill off some of the bedbugs in this dump with it?"

"I godt to prodect mineself," Rummell grumbled, hastily shoving the weapon into a drawer.

"From bedbugs, eh? Well, never mind that now. Let's play like I don't see the gun. Let's play like you're going to tell me all about your boarder, Gustav Myers."

"But I don't know," Rummell protested. "Nobody don't come in. Nobody don't go oudt."

"He had no job," I persisted. "Where did his money come from? Did he pay you in cash? Did he get any checks?"

Rummell looked at me. Suddenly he began to sweat. It stopped me cold to see a big fat man perspire like that, over nothing at all. Or was there something?

Then I got it. Rummell was listening to a noise. A noise, coming from under our feet. It *thumped.* "What's that?" I asked.

"Huh?"

"That noise. It's coming from the cellar, isn't it?"

"I don't hear no—"

There were footsteps in the cellar. Rummell could play dumb if he wanted to. Let him sit here and sweat. I wanted to find out *something* on this case. Captain Leeds expected it. I made for the door.

"Here—where you t'ink you going?"

"You know where."

"Wait—come back. I tell you." He got up and tried to grab my shoulder. I wrenched free and bolted. The cellar door was under the hall steps. Down I went, expecting Rummell to follow. He didn't move. I looked over my shoulder once and saw him silhouetted in the doorway. His flabby mouth worked convulsively.

I couldn't find a light, so I took the steps in darkness. Darkness and silence. For as the cellar door clicked open under my hand, the noise ceased.

There was no thumping. There was only darkness, stillness, and a damp, musty odor of decay. It was worse than boiled cabbage.

At the foot of the stairs I groped again for a light switch. None met my fingers. I lit a match and examined the wall. The switch was off to one side. I clicked it. No light. I clicked it again. Still no go.

Burned out? Or turned out? And if so, by whom? Who was thumping around down here? Cellar. Axe. Mad fiend—

Tiny Tim was crazy. Except that there *are* psycopathic murderers who lurk at the scene of the crime and await new victims.

I pulled out the gun, just for luck. Just for luck, I saw to it that it was loaded. Just for luck I groped my way into the blackness very quietly. All this I did for luck, and what did luck do for me? Absolutely nothing.

Because I hadn't taken ten steps when something came out of the darkness, something that howled and gibbered; howled and gibbered as it struck me over the head and sent me down into a private darkness of my own.

CHAPTER TWO

Headway

"COLLINS—WAKE up! Come on, Johnny, snap out of it."

It was good advice, so I took it. I opened my eyes. The lights were on at last. Captain Leeds bent over me as a couple of the boys propped me up on the cellar steps.

"Lucky we got here," Leeds said. "Otherwise the young moron might have gotten away."

"What young moron?"

"The maniac."

I blinked and stood up, fast. "Maniac?"

"Of course. What other kind of a guy lurks around in dark cellars carrying a butcher knife? He must be the kid who did the job upstairs, too. We were just coming in when we heard the scuffle. We ran down here and found you. The kid was trying to beat it out the back after hitting you with this poker. When we cornered him he had a knife in his hand—must have been a foot long. Funny he hit you with a poker."

"Very funny," I said. "I got a big bang out of it." I rubbed the painful egg on the side of my skull.

"He's upstairs now," Leeds told me. "So far he hasn't admitted killing Myers, but he'll talk downtown."

"Who is he?" I asked.

"The landloard's son. Henry Rummell. Got his mug on file—broke out of reform school last week. Sent up last year for using a knife in a brawl, but there's nothing in his record that would lead anyone to suspect he was a mental case. Still, you never know, do you?"

"Ouch," I remarked. The egg was still swelling.

"So that clears everything up," Leeds told me. "Coroner's upstairs. We'll take the kid downtown and get the confession."

"But why should he kill a harmless old man?"

"Moron," Leeds grumbled. "You don't understand psychology, do you, Collins? Come to think of it, you don't understand enough to keep out of a dark cellar. Didn't do so well on this case. Nearly muffed the whole thing. Maybe Tiny Tim isn't the only one who needs a little vacation from the Department. Remind me to see you later."

Still grumbling, Leeds marched upstairs. I followed, not too happily.

This time the hall was full of squad men. I spotted Henning. "Going back upstairs?" he asked.

I shook my head. It nearly came off. Something told me that the less Captain Leeds saw of me right now, the better it would be.

I headed for the front door. Fresh air helped. For a minute I stood on the stoop, eyeing the empty squad cars at the curb.

"Hey!" whispered a voice.

"What's that?" I looked around. There was no one behind me.

"Hey—down here!"

Peering through the grating under the stoop I gazed into the unlovely little face of Tiny Tim.

"It's me," he explained.

"I figured that out, thanks. But what are you doing under the porch?"

"Hiding. Do you think I wanted Leeds to spot me?"

"Didn't I tell you to clear out of here?" I snapped. "Look, go away. I'm in enough trouble already."

"Look. Come closer. I've found a clue for you."

"Keep it. According to Leeds, the case is solved already. They've found your mad fiend."

"But it wasn't a mad fiend," Tiny Tim said.

"It wasn't?"

"No. I just figured it out. You were right. A mad fiend would never surprise a man in bed with the door locked that way. It must have been somebody who knew Myers. Like the guy who wrote this letter."

"What letter?"

Tiny Tim smiled triumphantly and waved a white envelope under my nose.

"The clue," he announced. "I told you I had one."

"But where did you get it?"

"Just as I was coming out the door a while back, the mailman turned in here. And I had my hunch. I asked if there was anything for Gustav Myers. He gave me this."

I bent closer to the small face peering through the grating.

"Meant to bring it up, but then the boys arrived so I hid here. But I didn't open the letter yet. Saving it for you."

"OK, hand it over," I said. "Probably just an advertisement for trusses."

He extended the envelope. I took the oblong and examined it. No return address. Myer's name and address typed. Precancelled stamp. Mailed in town. I noted these facts and then slit the envelope open. A small sheet fluttered out between my fingers. I unfolded it and wrinkled my nose.

"Wasn't so far off at that," I sighed. "Just a doctor bill."

"Doctor bill?"

"Sure. Ten dollars for treatments, August 4th and 7th. Doctor L. P. Klow. Banker's Building. Old boy probably had a goiter."

"Not on your life!" exclaimed Tiny Tim, climbing up and joining me. "This is a *real* break. Now we can find out something about our mysterious friend, the late Mr. Myers." He beckoned to me. "Come on."

"To see Dr. Klow?"

Tiny Tim nodded.

"Sorry, pal," I said. "You're not going."

"But it was my idea."

"I know. And I appreciate it. Only Captain Leeds wouldn't, if he found out about it. You'll have to keep out of sight."

"Don't you want to hear about my new theory?"

“Later,” I nodded. “Why don’t you call me up Tuesday. I’m going to Europe Monday.”

It was the brushoff. I knew and Tim knew it; but there was no other way. The whole thing might be a wild goose chase. Leeds thought the landlord’s son had done it. Then, again—

Then, again, I went to call on Dr. Klow.

HE HAD a nice layout in the Banker’s Building, big offices filled with the most modern thing in decor. His tiles were glass, his mahogany was bleached, his Venetians were blind. And his nurse was plenty fast on the curves.

When I finally looked at her face I discovered she had red hair, blue eyes, and a snub nose made for freckles.

“What can I do for you?” she asked.

I said I wanted to see Dr. Klow.

“Have you an appointment?”

“Afraid not. I’m here on business.”

“So sorry. You chose a bad time. Dr. Klow left about an hour ago on a month’s vacation.”

“Would I be able to catch him at his house?”

“That would be impossible. I called him myself just a few minutes ago, and he doesn’t answer.”

It sounded phony. How would any guy go on a month’s vacation without taking a dish like this with him? I gave her about twenty six teeth in a smile.

“Well, perhaps you can help me then. I’m checking up on a patient of yours name of Gustav Myers.”

“I’m not permitted to—”

I showed her the badge. With Leeds on the warpath I might not have it much longer, so I might as well use it now.

She nodded.

“Offhand I don’t recall the name. But I can look it up for you in our files.”

Her red head bent over the cabinet next to the desk. I sat there, staring at the door of the inner office. I wondered what lay behind those doors.

So I pulled the old gag. I raised my hand. Then I asked a personal question.

“It’s in there,” she told me. “Go right through the office. First door to your left.” Thanking her courteously, I bounded to my feet and entered the sacred portals.

Dr. Klow’s private office was disappointing. No bodies lying around, no buckets of blood, no incriminating papers or mysterious notes scribbled in code.

But on top of his desk rested a large package. It was oval—about the size and shape of *a human head . . .*

I lifted it gingerly. It was heavy, quite heavy. The brown wrapper had a label attached, addressed to Klow. The printed return address bore the name of LELAND CHEMICAL SUPPLY COMPANY and the typed notation: *Contents—Plaster-of-Paris.*

Disappointed, I turned away. Then I realized there was something underneath the package on the desk. Papers, black papers. No, not papers. Pages from a photograph album. Gustav Myers’ album!

I knew it had to be, just as I knew that the dime-store photographs so carefully pasted into place on the sheets were photographs of Gustav Myers.

For the first time I saw the man who had lost his head. He was gaunt, lantern-jawed, graying. Profile views showed a beak nose. Somehow, the pictures disappointed me. I’d expected an unusual countenance, but Myers seemed fairly ordinary. I registered the features in memory, replaced the pages and the package, and returned to the outer office.

“There you are. I think I’ve found the patient you refer to.”

She read off a list of dates to me extending three or four months back.

“Thanks,” I said. “Now tell me all about him.”

"But there's nothing to tell."

"Don't you have a chart, a case history?"

"No. Dr. Klow must keep it in his private files at home. He sometimes takes cards with him for study and research."

"I see. Well, maybe you can tell me what you know about Myers personally. What does he look like? What kind of a guy is he?"

She shook her head, giving the effect of a small brush fire in action.

"Really, I can't help you. You see, I've never set eyes on the man. He came for his treatments at night when the doctor is here alone." She caught my expression and pouted. "There's nothing unusual in that, you know. Many patients work days and can only visit an office in the evening."

"I understand. It isn't important." I turned away. "Just one thing more. Do you happen to know what Myers was being treated for?"

"Yes, I do. Dr. Klow said he had amnesia. And that's all I know about it."

I blinked. Things were beginning to fit, now. A man with amnesia has no friends, no callers. He wouldn't be in a mental condition to enjoy books, newspapers or the radio. He wouldn't keep a lot of mementoes in his room, either. That was obvious.

But why should a man who loses his memory also lose his head?

I probably could have figured it out in about three years, but I never got the chance.

The door opened, and somebody came in, natch. Somebody was short, dark, ferret-faced. Somebody had a goatee. Somebody had a most peculiar Continental accent.

"Excuse, please. I have come for zee package. You have eet, no?"

"Oh, yes—the doctor told me. I believe it's on his desk in the other office."

Ferret-face gave her a smile, and me a blank look. Then he scuttled into the other room and emerged bearing the plaster-of-paris—and the black pages from the photo album.

"Zhank you so very much." He scuttled out.

A little birdie told me to scuttle after him. “Zhank you so very much,” I murmured to the redhead, and left.

Ferret-face was waiting for the elevator, bulking his package under one arm and stroking his goatee with the free hand.

When he saw me, he gave a little jerk and nearly pulled the goatee off. Then the elevator arrived and we rode down together in silence. He was poised and ready when the door slid open. He slithered out and made for the exit. I had to move fast to catch a glimpse of him outside on the street.

There happened to be a big black sedan moored to the curbing. He headed for it at Constellation cruising speed. Then a tiny figure stepped out of a doorway and hailed the fugitive.

“Benny!” shrilled a familiar voice. “Long time no see!”

Ferret-face whirled. I was startled to see his free hand scrabble at his throat, then realized he was making the sign of the cross.

“Don’t worry, it’s only me!” exclaimed Tiny Tim.

A sickly smile spread across the face of the man called Benny. It didn’t even travel down as far as his beard. “Oh,” he sighed. “ ’Ow are you?”

“In the pink, chum. When’d they spring you?”

“Last week. But I am not wanted for anytheeng. You cannot touch me. So you weel please excuse now, I most go.” Benny turned away, but Tiny Tim blocked his path.

“That was a nice face-lifting job you did a couple years ago,” he commented. “The one they sent you up for, I mean.”

“I do not weesh to discoss the past,” Benny told him. “I am now—how you say?—virtuous. So excuse—”

This was the signal for my majestic entrance. I emerged, giving Tiny Tim the office.

“Johnny!” he yelled. “This *is* a surprise! Say, I want you to meet a friend of mine from across the pond. This is Benny Konstantine, one of the best little——”

“Nots to you, copper!”

The pronunciation was bad, but the sentiment was there. Benny glared at me. “For why you follow me, copper?”

I played it straight. “Because I want to see Klow.”

“Doctair Klow has gone away.”

“Don’t stall, Benny. I’ve got to see him, but fast. He tipped me off a while back that if it looked like a jam I should get in touch with him.”

“He nevair mentioned thees to me.” Benny was dubious.

I was convincing. “Lots of things he never told you,” I said. “You’ve only been working with him a week. Who do you think he’s been playing with before you came?”

It was a bluff, but I talked fast. Benny tried to figure it out. At last he shrugged.

“Very well. Come along. Bot no funny beezness!”

We walked over to the car. Tiny Tim trailed behind.

“You’re not going,” I told him. “The Doc doesn’t know you. He’ll blow his top if we show up with a stranger.” I slipped him a wink and he nodded.

“All right, Johnny.”

So we climbed in the car and Benny drove off, and I sparred around for an opening to pump him.

Benny turned down a side street and a breeze hit us, and he asked me to please close the window.

So I turned around and started to pull down the window and Benny sapped me over the head.

CHAPTER THREE

Head Man

WHEN YOU get conked on the skull twice within four hours, you don’t feel so good. First of all, it hurts. Secondly, you begin to wonder if you’re not just a little bit of a sucker. Of course, nothing bothers you until you wake up, but then—

I woke up in an alley off Fourteenth Street. No bones broken, except possibly my entire skull. Everything was rosy. Not only rosy, but spinning around. And on top of that, somebody was hollering about a "mad fiend" in my ear.

At first I thought it was Tiny Tim. But he wasn't around. So it had to be a nightmare. That raucous voice, yelling about mad fiends and killing. The rosy spinning, the darkness, the screaming, all nightmare or concussion.

I got up. The voice wasn't yelling right next to me. It came from a distance. It guided me as I groped my way out of the alley, inhaling painfully until some of the rosy fog cleared away and the spinning stopped. But I could still hear the voice on the street.

"Extraaaa! Ree dalla boutit! Mad Fiend Slaying! Extraaa!"

I bought a paper and it plunged me right back into the nightmare again.

It was the Gustav Myers case, all right. I'd expected that. Apparently Captain Leeds hadn't solved it after all. According to the gentlemen of the press, he had taken landlord Rummell's son away and left the scene of the crime around four P.M.

Shortly thereafter a Mr. Hugo Rummell, landlord of the premises, was discovered in the basement. He had nothing to say for publication, owing to the fact that his throat had been cut.

The head hadn't been removed, but in spite of this mitigating circumstance the reported advanced the theory that the killing was the work of a "Mad Fiend".

I reread the hastilly worded lines of the story and it still didn't make sense. Was Tiny Tim right after all? Then where did Dr. KIow fit in? And Benny?

And for that matter, where did I fit in—just horsing around, playing for time until somebody wanted to bop me over the noggin again?

I found a phone booth and put through a fast call. I asked for Henning.

"Give it to me fast," I said. "I've got a date."

He gave it to me, but it didn't help much. There had been a man on the spot, naturally, but he was upstairs in Myers' room all the time. Rummell apparently was preparing to go down to the station and see his son. The man thought Rummell was in his room.

Around four he went down to check up and found the body. No weapon, no signs of struggle. Just a body in the blackness of the cellar.

The filling station attendant across the way said a black sedan had been cruising around the block about 3:30.

“That’s enough!” I yelled, and hung up.

I came out of the phone-booth sweating with excitement. Sure, Benny had bumped the landlord just before he came down to the doctor’s office. But why? That’s what kept biting me. Why? I crumpled the paper and began to shred it. Then I stopped.

A photograph stared up at me from page 7. A very familiar face it was, too. The face of Gustav Myers!

But the story wasn’t about Myers. I had to read it twice before the details sank in. It concerned one Randolph J. Edwards, missing heir to the Edwards estate. Edwards went to Europe in 1933 as a student, was caught in the Middle East in ’44, but managed to sail on a Red Cross ship in ’45 and landed in New York. There he disappeared and for the past two years his whereabouts remained unknown. An intensified search for Edwards was now under way, since he had just inherited the bulk of his father’s estate—valued in excess of $3,000,000. No other surviving relatives . . .

Now everything really began to fit! And I began to fit myself right back in the phone-booth. I got Henning again and asked him to put me through to Brophy—Missing Persons.

“See if the record shows anyone checking on Edwards—Randolph J. Edwards. He’s been listed now about two years.”

I waited patiently until Brophy returned to the phone.

“Only one inquiry.”

“Who was it?” I asked.

“A Dr. L. P. Klow, M.D., 2611 Fairfax Boulevard.”

“What did he want?”

"Just looked at the photograph on file. Then he said it was a mistake, not the party he was looking for."

"Good. Thanks, Brophy."

Now I had everything, including Klow's address. Everything, that is, except a case.

A doctor discovers a missing heir with amnesia. So he kills him. Why? And how could I prove it? And what was Benny doing in the picture? Why was the landlord knocked off?

I could call Captain Leeds and take a squad out to 2611 Fairfax, if the Doc was hiding out there—and it wouldn't mean a thing. Except that I would probably lose my job.

No. There was no alternative. I'd have to follow it up alone.

I TOOK a taxi, carefully sizing up the driver to see if he was likely to give me another rap on the skull. We bounced out through the twilight streets, up the winding hill of Fairfax and landed in front of 2611, a large, tree-shaded house set well back from the road on a hill of its own.

I paid the hackie and started up the path. The house was dark. The grounds were dark. I stumbled.

Something rustled in the bushes behind me as I turned towards the porch. Something slithered closer.

This time I was ready. I took one more step, wheeled, ducked. A flying figure hurtled against my shoulder and sprawled flat on the ground at my feet. I tackled the man, fast.

"All right," I gasped. "Drop it."

A blackjack dropped from limp fingers. "Why does everybody try to conk me on the noggin today? I muttered.

"Johnny—it's you!"

Tiny Tim sat up and rubbed a bruised shoulder.

"What are you doing here?" I asked.

"Rescuing you. After you drove off with Benny I figured he might steer you into a mess of trouble at the Doc's house. So I called Physician's Service Bureau and got the address and hotfooted it over. Never know what you'll run into with all these bad fiends lurking around."

"Shut up and listen to me."

I told him what had happened, every bit of it.

"There's your mad fiend theory knocked to bits," I concluded. "Klow isn't crazy. But I can't figure out why he did it, or what he's up to now."

"Benny knows."

"That's right. He must know. But he won't tell. If I go in there and poke a gun at the two of them, they'll laugh at me. They won't talk."

"Benny'll talk. He's dumb."

"Why should he?"

Tiny Tim's grin shone dimly in the darkness. "I'll tell you why, Johnny. I've got a theory."

He told me why.

"You're crazy," I sighed. "Even if it's true, I still can't make him admit anything."

"Yes you can."

And then Tiny Tim told me what to do. It was screwy. It was as whacky as any idea he'd ever had. It wasn't according to professional ethics. It was dangerous, too.

I should have forgotten the whole thing. Maybe it was the sappings that made me lose my judgment. Maybe I realized there was no other way than this long chance. Maybe it was the idea of Tiny Tim begging me for the one opportunity he'd have to reinstate himself. Maybe I was just a screwball myself at heart. Anyhow—

I left Tiny Tim standing there in the shadows and walked up the drive. The car, Benny's black sedan, was parked next to the porch. He was there, all right, and the doctor must be inside, too. The absence of lights showing meant nothing.

But I didn't bother to knock on the door.

I preferred to do things the hard way.

There was a nice shaky trellis against the side of the house. It had ivy on it, and might have stood the additional weight of a small mouse. I shinnied up it.

Halfway up, the thing began to crack and give. I climbed faster. There was a window ledge above me. If I could make it—

The wood splintered. It gave off a sound no louder than an atomic bomb explosion.

I wriggled up. The trellis began to bend outwards. I clawed air. It was no use. The frame tottered. It was falling. One more hoist, and the wood gave way.

My arms rose over my head. I stepped off, jumped. Then the trellis crashed to the ground, and I hung there, clinging with both hands to the window ledge above my head. I dangled, kicking both feet, striving for purchase, trying in vain to boost myself up.

No use. The ledge splintered my hands as my fingers slid off. I braced myself for the fall.

Then the window opened above me and two pairs of hands grasped my arms and hoisted me into the room.

I stood there and faced the three of them: Benny, Doctor Klow, and the revolver.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Man Without A Head

IT WAS good to feel something firm beneath my feet. It was good to realize that I wasn't going to be sapped again. It was good to see old Benny once more, and to meet Doctor Klow at last. But the revolver, that wasn't good.

Klow held it, and he knew just where to point it. I looked at it while Benny closed the window behind me, and then I turned my attention to my medical friend.

He was tall, thin, with graying hair and the usual rimless glasses sported by prominent M.D.s everywhere, in the best advertisements.

Doctor Klow in no way resembled a mad scientist. And yet the room in which I stood might have come straight off the Universal Pictures lot.

It was large, white-walled, brilliantly lighted by overhead arcs. Curtains and blinds concealed the windows completely now, and they too were white. I saw white cabinets, white tables, and a white leather-covered operating table. Both Benny and the doctor were dressed in keeping: white gowns. Here and there was a touch of silver to relieve the monotony. The revolver, for instance, and knives, scalpels, surgical trays. There were only two incongruous objects in the room.

The first was the plaster-of-paris, now removed from its package and resting on a long table next to the wall.

But it was the other object that sent my scalp crawling back into my spine, the object that was in the jar of alcohol. Directly before me on the table it rested, only it didn't rest, it bobbed and nodded, to and fro.

It was a severed human head. The head of Gustav Myers. The kind of a head Tiny Tim had whispered about.

All of this talk about mad fiends came echoing back to me as I stared at the rolled-back eyes, the gaping mouth, the hideous point where the head just—*ended.*

"That's heem!" Benny snapped, pointing at me.

Doctor Klow shrugged. "I thought as much," he said. "Go into the storeroom and get me a sack. One of the big white ones."

"Bot he eez a detective."

"I know what he is! You can rely on my medical knowledge when I say a detective dies as easily as anyone else. And if you'll get me that sack, I'm prepared to give you a demonstration."

"Not here, Doctair! Please. We cannot!"

"All right. In the woods, then. Near the stone quarry. But I'll need that sack."

Benny edged out of the room, his beady little eyes blinking in excitement. The doctor stared at me. I stared at the bobbing head in the jar.

Curiosity still kills cats. It led me into this mess, and it affected Doctor Klow, too. He broke first.

“Why did you come here?” he muttered. “How did you find out?”

“I didn’t,” I answered. “Not until I arrived and saw the head. I knew you killed Myers, of course, and that Benny must have killed the landlord. But until I saw this setup, I wasn’t sure why.”

“And now you’re sure. Is that it?”

“Yes. It adds up. You get this guy Myers as a patient, suffering from amnesia. You treat him, and meanwhile you try to check up on him. You discover that he’s really Randolph J. Edwards. But you don’t tell him that, because you start thinking.

“Here’s an unusual setup, a man missing so long that in all probability his own father wouldn’t recognize him. A man without friends or connections. A man, and this is the clincher, who will some day inherit a huge fortune.

“You saw the possibilities, didn’t you? So you nursed him along. And when Edwards’ father died and Benny showed up out of stir at the same time, the rest was obvious.

“You killed Myers and cut off his head. Probably set the deal by giving him sedatives to take, so he’d be drugged when you arrived. Somehow the landlord either saw you or had his suspicions. So you sent Benny back to kill the landlord. And then you were ready to go to work.”

“Was I?” Klow smiled pensively. He looked like a little boy with his hand caught in a cookie jar. Only little boys don’t point revolvers at you.

“Of course. You rigged up your yarn about taking a month’s vacation. Actually, you planned to spend the month here and never show up again. Not as Doctor Klow.

“Because Benny is a plastic surgeon. A good one, with European training. That’s what he was sent up for, wasn’t it—for remodelling gangster’s faces?

"Now he's out and you're all set to give him a refresher course. Using Myer's head for a model and your face for the surgery. In a month, according to the plan, you'd emerge with the face of Randolph J. Edwards and claim the estate. You could back it up with all the information he'd given you while under treatment. And with his face instead of your own."

"Sounds logical," Klow commented. "As a matter of fact, that's just what I'm going to do."

BENNY scurried back into the room dragging a large sack. It looked like a laundry bag but I didn't like the material, or the idea of being taken to the cleaners in it.

Nobody asked me if I liked it. Klow just held the revolver in line with my chest and grinned. "All right," he said. "Climb into the sack."

Benny sidled up. He was sweating. "Yess. Hurry opp, no sense makeeng thobble, eh?"

I stared at the head of Gustav Myers. This was it. I gulped. Then I faced them. I kept talking to Klow, but Benny heard me.

"Listen to me," I said. "Do you think I'd pull a foolish stunt like this unless I had a reason?"

"What do you mean?" Benny asked.

"I wouldn't come here alone and walk into a trap unless I knew it was necessary. I came here to tell you this before it's too late—give yourselves up. I'm warning you!"

"Warneeng?" Benny whispered.

"Sure. Klow didn't tell you *that,* did he? I suppose he just offered you a split to do this job. He let you think Gustav Myers was just an ordinary man—that he's really dead."

"He ees dead. Hees head ees there, een the jar." Benny scowled. "What you call that, eh?"

"He's waiting," I whispered.

"Waiting?"

Yes. Waiting for his body to come and claim it again."

Klow gestured with the revolver. "Stop that nonsense," he commanded. "Into the sack or I shoot."

"Wait!" Benny stepped forward. I had him, now.

"Never mind," I told him. "You won't listen. Klow won't let me talk, anyway. He's afraid. He knows you wouldn't touch this deal if you know what Myers really was—what he really *is*—that he cannot die—"

"You are lunatic, no?"

"Read the papers," I said, wearily. "It's in the late extra. We lost the body, Benny. Get that? We *lost* the body?"

"How do you mean?"

"Remember, I discovered it. I saw them carry it into the meat-wagon. Only it never arrived at the morgue. All we got is the driver, strapped up in the psycho ward, raving about the headless body that got out of the wagon and *walked away!"*

Benny crossed himself. Klow grunted, but Benny shook his head. "Yes," he said.

"Klow was stringing you." I talked fast, desperately. "Edwards didn't have amnesia. He spent 15 years in Europe and came home under an assumed name because the police were after him there. In Hungary. Transylvania.

"You know what comes from Transylvania, don't you, Benny? Vampires. The undead. The blood drinkers who can't be killed. Edwards was bitten in Europe and became one of them. Klow wasn't treating him for amnesia. He was treating him for vampirism!"

"Don't listen to the fool! He's tricking you!"

But Benny was listening, eyes goggled.

"That's all, Benny. Klow has this scheme going and he cut off Edwards' head and brought it here. But he didn't kill Edwards. You know that. You can't kill a vampire except with a stake through the heart, or a silver bullet. The body is still alive. Deathless, eternal. And it's seeking its head, now.

“It will find the head, Benny. It will come here, thirsting for vengeance. I’m warning you. Give yourself up before that thing comes to claim its own.”

Klow had enough. He threw Benny aside, then clubbed his revolver, ready to swing it against my skull for the third rap of the day.

Then we heard it.

Glass splintered far away, downstairs. Klow wheeled. Benny’s mouth gaped open.

“You’re a lunatic,” he whined. But he wasn’t speaking to me. He was trying to convince himself. Trying to fight against the heritage of centuries of superstition. Trying to fight against the sound we all heard . . .

The sound of heavy footsteps, slowly clumping up the stairs. The sound of footsteps, groping, feeling their way, through the hall.

We faced the door. We all saw the knob turn. And we all saw the door open.

Then *it* came into the room, walking slowly towards us.

It was tall and gaunt, gaunt as Death. *It* wore a faded black overcoat, and arms protruded from the ragged sleeves, outstretched to paw at nothingness. *It* walked towards us, slowly, blindly.

It had no head.

The high, upturned collar of the coat ended in nothingness. *It* was just a walking, headless corpse, bony fingers scrabbling towards the missing head that bobbed in the jar.

It was the walking dead, the vampire.

Klow wheeled, desperately levelling the revolver.

“Don’t!” screamed Benny. “You can’t kill it!”

Klow threw him aside as the figure loomed.

It was only a gesture, but the interval was all I needed. I lunged, catching up the laundry bag as I moved. Klow turned towards me, aimed and fired.

The shot went wild. But the sack descended squarely over his shoulders, and I bore him to the floor. Benny didn’t bother about us. He had troubles of his own. As the headless corpse bore down upon him he screamed again and raced out of the room.

I sat down hard, using Klow for a sofa. The air was knocked out of him and he didn't make a very good seat, but I needed a rest.

There was no reason to chase after Benny. Voices in the hall below proclaimed that he had run smack into the boys from the squad who were waiting—the boys I had Tiny Tim call for me.

I turned towards the headless man, just in time to see him reach up, unbutton the overcoat, and allow his face to protrude at shoulder level. Tiny Tim's grin emerged triumphantly.

"You see?" he crowed. "Benny's dumb. I told you he'd fall for that gag. The Doc would never have admitted a thing, but Benny will babble the whole story to the boys downstairs right now. Full confession. It worked out like I said it would. I scared him silly."

"Right," I admitted. "You almost had me going for a minute."

"Be sure to tell Captain Leeds," Tiny Tim reminded me. "Tell him this was one case where a short guy really came in handy."

"I will. And I guess we owe you an apology about your crazy theories, too. They cracked the case."

The headless man sat down in the chair. Tiny Tim scowled out at me from under the overcoat.

"What do you mean, crazy theories?" he complained. "Can't you see—all I was doing was using my head!"

THE END

The Mad Scientist

Professor Lippert’s puffballs wore made for one purpose—to kill.

“THE hell you say!” snorted Rick Hanson.

“No.” Professor Lippert raised a pudgy hand in protest. “That isn’t what I said at all. I said that the writer of science-fiction is the world’s most potentially dangerous type.”

Rick Hanson’s eyebrows formed a sardonic hirsute arch.

“You giving me the needles?” he asked. “Just because I write science-fiction, does that mean I’m not human?”

“Probably.” Lippert shook his leonine head until the grey curls dropped over his forehead. “The reactions of a science-fiction writer are not human, in the psychiatrically normal sense of the word.”

Rick Hanson poured another drink. It seemed to help. “All right, pal,” he drawled. “Let’s you and me have a good old drunken and profound discussion about science-fiction writers, huh? Then I’ll remember all the good cracks and stuff ’em into my next yarn. You’re the Professor—go ahead and get brilliant on me.”

Lippert’s buddha-like bulk shook with suppressed mirth. “I mean it,” he protested. “Men like you are dangerous.”

“Lean and hungry, eh?”

Lippert smiled ruefully. “Don’t rub it in. I’ve aged a lot in ten years and you look as fit as ever. But stick to the point. I’m still talking about you as a science-fiction writer."

"And I'm not a human being."

"Right. Not an adult one. Look at it this way. The science-fiction writer is dangerous because his mind knows no barriers. His imagination is not curbed by any normal rules."

Rick Hanson sat up, suddenly interested. "Rave on," he urged.

"Look at it this way. Most children grow up and learn to curb the extravagances of their imaginations. So-called 'imaginative' adults manage to confine their fantasies to recognized art forms or prescribed culture patterns. Even when fantasy is translated into antisocial behavior, it generally follows accepted psychotic lines.

"But the science-fiction writer is an exception to all these rules. He's a grownup with a child's imagination. He's an opium-smoker with a perpetual supply of opium, and no recognizable stigma or deterrant. physical decay to hamper him. He's a super Jack the Ripper with a wide background of knowledge. What in others is regarded as juvenile daydreaming, or hasheesh visions, or sadistic mania is merely the accepted stock-in-trade of the average science-fictioneer.

"Now do you get what I'm driving at? You and your kind are the only ones on earth who can, with perfect safety, indulge in perpetual flight from reality—of the most dangerous sort. You brood on destroying the world, the universe. You hatch fiendish plots, plan gruesome crimes. You create weird monstrosities, actuated by no human emotion or purpose. You cultivate your abnormality as a matter of course, seek to justify the aberrations in your stories—and worse than that, attempt to develop a *modus operandi* for your death-rays and blastors and disintegrators."

RICK HANSON raised both hands above his head and grinned. "All right, pal—you got me. I admit I'm nuts. I buried the body under the cellar floor. You'll find the head in the furnace."

"Many a true word spoken in jest." Lippert leaned forward, without returning the grin in kind. "I'm glad the army is taking your kind into G.I. units. Better to have your imaginations working for authority than against it.

"But I'm just afraid that when the barricades are built, science-fiction writers will stand on them in the van—armed with deadly weapons of their own creation. Science-fiction writers, if they ever awaken, will stop writing horrible fiction and start making history. Horrible history."

Rick still grinned, but he wasn't listening. He was studying Lippert, in disappointment.

His old school friend wasn't a good professor at all. He was too fat for the part. His pudgy face was too benign. He had no charming eccentricities. He didn't seem to be fanatical. His language was too commonplace, his word-choices too non-technical. And he didn't marshall his arguments with the scholarly logic Rick would employ if he were writing him into a story.

Rick the fantasy-writer examined Professor Lippert and discarded him. No possibilities here.

And then, Sheila walked into the room.

Sheila was something different.

Sheila was young, slim, an angel with a halo of copper hair.

Her eyes sparkled—either in appreciation of her husband's argument, or in admiration of Rick.

Yes, Sheila was definitely in character. Just the type for a heroine. The old Professor's girl-wife in one of those triangle plots.

Rick lost no time in mentally casting himself in the hero's role. Lippert, of course, would be getting the short end of the triangle.

"And another thing." Rick heard the words and realized, with a jolt, that Professor Lippert was still hammering away with his heavy-handed humor.

"And another thing—I've got a personal score to settle with you science-fiction writers. Look what you do to professors like myself in your yarns! According to you, we're all a bunch of crackpots. Either we're elderly eccentrics with a lot of absent-minded mannerism or we're mad scientists. Do I look like a mad scientist? I'll leave it to Sheila to decide."

The girl in the doorway stepped forward and put her arms around Lippert's neck. Rick watched the play of her slim fingers, wondered if they would be warm to the touch or cool and soothing. Rick looked at her sensual mouth as it curved in a smile. No question there—that mouth would be hot. Hot, and clinging.

The words evoked other images in Rick's brain, but he maintained a sardonic smile. Sheila spoke.

"Of course you're not a mad scientist, darling," she giggled. "Except when you lose a collar-button or something."

HER eyes met Rick's. "On the other hand, I've been listening to your little discussion, and I'm inclined to agree with you about science-fiction writers. They *are* dangerous, I'm sure." She didn't sound very afraid to Rick, and what he read in her eyes was not fear, but a challenge.

"Why would I be dangerous?" Rick asked, calmly. "After all, Lippert and I are good friends. We went to school together ten years ago. He drifted into this and I went into writing. But I think our interests are still similar. I know him and he knows me. Where's the danger?"

"Plagiarism."

"What do you mean?"

"I know you writers," Sheila laughed. "I'm willing to bet you'll try to steal my husband's ideas for your stories."

Rick, gazing at her, knew very well that if he wanted to steal anything of her husband's, it wouldn't be his ideas. But he remained bland.

"Wasn't aware he had any ideas," he said, pitching his voice to mock sarcasm.

"Darling!" Sheila stared at Professor Lippert. "Don't tell me you've been talking to Rick all this time and haven't even mentioned your hydroponics?"

"His *what?"*

“His hydroponics! You know—water gardening. He’s gone positively dizzy over it. We have the whole lab. rigged up with the apparatus. Usually all he does is buttonhole visitors about his hobby. Perhaps he had a hunch himself that you’d steal his theories.”

“Quit kidding, my dear.” Lippert rose from the chair. “I’m not worried about Rick, here. Hydroponics is a definite science. And there’s no science in Rick’s yarns. Matter of fact, I doubt if he’d understand my work.”

Rick took the ribbing in good grace, returned smile for smile.

“Now I’m interested,” he said. “What’s with your hydro-whatever-it-is?”

“You see?” Lippert smirked triumphantly. “Told you he doesn’t have any real background. Doesn’t even know what hydroponics might be.”

“Of course, I’ve got a few hunches.” Rick stared at Sheila and forced an elaborately casual tone of voice as he drawled on.

“I imagine you are referring to what is known as chemiculture, or water-culture of plant life. This method of growth employs a large tank of metal, wood, glass or concrete—the material does not matter if the tank is watertight. The tank is generally covered with a perforated plate holding a foot or more of sawdust, shavings, excelsior, or peat moss. Above this layer is a rack or frame trellis arrangement to guide the growth of the plant organisms.

“The tank is filled with water, properly aerated by a syringe or pressure pump, and the water contains chemicals and salts of elements, placed there in correct proportions to insure the growth of the seeds used.

“Among common ingredients are auxin, the plant growth hormone; boron, phosphorus, potassium, calcium, magnesium, nitrogen, sulphur—and other forms of nitrates, sulphates and phosphates, depending on the formula required for the growth of a particular variety of plant.

“The seeds arc placed in the shavings on the rack above the tank. Roots, naturally, grow down until they are suspended in the liquid from which they derive nourishment. Growth occurs due to a process of capillary attraction.

“Experiments have been made with electricity, with ultra-violet and infrared rays. Budding and grafting are accepted techniques in the process, and by employing high temperatures and extra chemicals, a number of amazing hybrids and monstrosities can be produced at will.

"But generally, hydroponics merely accelerates speed of growth, size of the plant organism, and stimulates profusion."

Rick stopped and made a mocking bow. "I rest my case," he murmured.

LIPPERT'S mouth formed an astonished oval. Sheila brushed coppery curls from her forehead and giggled.

"I guess he told you that time, honey," she said.

Professor Lippert simulated despair. "After such a lecture, a visit to the laboratory is mere redundancy," he told Rick.

"Like to see it anyway."

"Come on, then." Lippert bustled ahead in a fatherly fashion as Rick and Sheila brought up the rear. At least Rick thought of Lippert's movements as "fatherly." He wondered if the same idea wasn't shared by the girl. Surely, after comparing her husband with himself, she couldn't help but see that Lippert was getting to be an old man. And—

Abruptly, Rick forced the notion away. Lippert was carrying on a running tirade as they moved down the hall towards the laboratory door.

"—must admit you fooled me completely. Never knew you had to have an actual scientific basis of knowledge for those nightmares you dream up. Of course, while you've given the rudimentary explanation of hydroponics, you haven't even touched the theoretical aspect—the really significant points.

"Do you realize what hydroponics will mean to the human race? Right now it's all experimental dabbling, but in a few years, with large-scale development, hydroponics will actually revolutionize our way of living. Matter of fact, it will exercise greater potentialities for change than the invention of the steam-engine."

"Who's dreaming now?" Rick asked.

“It’s no dream, my lad. The essential fact hydroponics brings forth is that plant life can be controlled. Utterly controlled.

“Man has always been chained to the soil. His life pattern, his culture, his basic philosophy has been eternally earth-bound. Hydroponics brings true relief, new freedom to all humanity! Freedom from manual labor, for plants grown hydroponically require only a minimum of care. Freedom from the very laws of Nature—for plants can be grown anywhere, in any climate, all the year round. Hydroponic planting will give you bananas at the North Pole.”

“And bananas at the North Pole brings the new Utopia,” Rick chuckled. “I get it.”

“Don’t say such things,” Sheila chided him. “He’s such a fanatic he might cut your throat.” She pressed Rick’s arm as though in warning, but her slim fingers remained on his left bicep as Lippert unlocked the laboratory door.

“That’s not what I mean,” Lippert answered. “Can’t you see the possibilities? We’ll get better food, more food, cheaper food—for the whole world. Think of the social implications! No longer will four-fifths of the population be reduced to agrarian slavery. The coolie hordes of the east, the peasantry of Europe, freed at last from their earthly bondage, will be able to attain their rightful status as mature human beings. No more hunger, no more want, no more caste system!

“Think of the eugenic possibilities! A proper diet for all! Scientifically-controlled nutrition; with proper nourishment bred into the vegetables and fruit. Disease will be banished—”

“Who writes your stuff—Henry Wallace?” Rick winked at Sheila. She winked back. Rick shook his head in feigned despair. “Don’t understand you, Lippert—you always talk in exclamation points and italics.”

“You always talk,” Lippert rejoined, shortly. “But step in and see for yourself.”

They entered the laboratory proper.

PROFESSOR LIPPERT, when not engaged at the University, had made good use of his time. He had chosen to house his hobby in an actual greenhouse, converted from the left wing of the building.

Here, under a transparent roof, set against the background of glassed-in walls, stood the hydroponic equipment which constituted Lippert's botanical laboratory.

A row of tanks stood against the farther walls, each carefully segregated from its fellows. Rick noted the details; the thermometers, pressure-guages, aeration pumps, and other apparatus. He saw the charting table before each tank, littered with scribbled notes and calculations.

Over against the near wall was a huge rack filled with bottles and stoppered decanters containing liquids and powdered chemicals. The table below it was strewn with utensils for the measurement and treatment of the substances employed.

But a single glance sufficed Rick for the moment. He stared at the plants.

Rising from the tanks in nodding rows, the bulbous heads of gigantic vegetables seemed to peer and stare through the moist heat of the glass-enclosed jungle. Flowers extended petals like the livid lips of huge Ubangis, thrust forth flaming dragon's tongues from ensanguined mouths.

Rick's imagination kindled at the sight. Giant vegetables! Monster plants! Yes, and you could create hybrids at will. Monstrosities.

Something of his thoughts seeped through his intent stare, for Lippert suddenly laughed.

"I know what you're thinking! You're looking at my cabbages and squash and wishing I had human heads growing in their place. You're wondering why I haven't tried to produce mutants and biological sports.

"You're thinking about a plot, aren't you?"

Rick nodded. "Yes," he muttered. "That's one reason I came up for a visit, you know. I wanted to get a plot from you."

He turned to Sheila. The girl stood quite close, and her arm brushed his. He tried to read her smile as Lippert chuckled beside him.

"I know just what you're thinking about, too," Lippert persisted. "What you're cooking up runs something like this.

"Typical mad scientist, interested in hydroponics, gets Venus fly trap or some invented variant of a carnivorous plant, and raises it hydroponically. Result—the plant becomes seven or eight feet tall in short order; just the right size to eat the hero alive when he comes to pay court to the scientist's daughter. In a vicious battle, during which the laboratory is wrecked, the hero feeds the mad scientist to the giant fly trap and runs off with the scientist's daughter. Right?"

Rick shrugged slowly. "Maybe," he said. "You're pretty close." Again he smiled at Sheila.

Lippert was close at that, Rick realized. It was just the plot he'd had in mind, except for one detail. He wasn't thinking about using a scientist's daughter—he was thinking of a scientist's wife.

Now, all he needed was the fly-trap.

RICK put on his slack suit and did things to his black hair. He grinned at his reflection in the mirror. The reflection grinned back.

"Not bad," he said. "Not bad at all."

The verdict covered more than his appearance. He was thinking of the way he was making time with Sheila.

She was taking him on a "picnic" this afternoon—just a little basket lunch affair on the bluff above the river outside of town.

Lippert was up at the University. Faculty meeting had been announced at the last moment, and he'd found it necessary to go. The picnic could have been postponed. But Sheila hadn't postponed it. That meant she was glad to be alone with him.

A nice romantic setting . . . a picnic in the woods . . .

"Ready?"

Sheila stuck her head in the bedroom door with an impudent toss of her curls. In her gingham play suit she looked almost like a little girl. Almost—

but not quite. Rick appreciated the differences.

"Uh huh," he said. "Let's go."

They went. Rick carried the basket. Out of the house, down the side street, across a lot to the winding country road leading to the river-bank and the bluff above.

Sheila clasped Rick's free hand as they swung along. It was an artless gesture, deliberately calculated. Both of them were playing the game now; indulging in the most minute of small talk, but losing no nuance of expression, no tactile gradation of bodily contact.

Rick's grin was a permanent fixture now. This was going to be easy—and very pleasant. A casual affair, no harm done. He'd make the proper overtures when they reached the bluff and spread their lunch. Better not use the "I love you" theme. That was much too serious a note. He'd tell her that she was attractive, instead. That he found her stimulating. Yes. That was the cue. Stimulating. An inspiration. The old line. And then—

He was still waiting for the moment as they reached the top of the bluff. Panting slightly from the climb, Rick surveyed the river stretched below. The setting was an idyllic pastoral. It might have been Grecian if the landscape had not been marred by the cluster of University buildings to the left, and the dotted dwellings comprising campus-town that lay within the shadow of the academic halls.

Rick turned his back on civilization and began to contemplate the beauties of nature. Sheila, now, bending on one dimpled knee as she spread out the table-cloth. The flaming aureole of her hair swept forward, and a curl brushed his forehead.

NOW was the time. He'd take her in his arms and make with the hearts and flowers. She'd put on the surprise act, fake a little resistance, and then everything would be rosy. Rick had it all figured out.

So he reached for her, and she closed her eyes and fell into his arms and whispered, "Darling—I love you."

Then she was kissing him, and Rick held her tight and close, and she kept whispering, “Rick, I love you so, I love you so!”

It wasn’t supposed to be this way at all. but Rick didn’t object. After that first kiss he had no resistance left. The second kiss removed scruples as well as resistance. And the third kiss did things to his sanity, so that Rick found himself murmuring, “I love you too—Sheila, darling—”

The dialogue was definitely corny. But somehow, it seemed to carry conviction.

And there was so much to talk about, so much to confess and to confide. Sheila told him about Lippert; how he bored her, how she despised his heavy-handed pleasantries, his pedantic mannerisms, his middle-aged romanticism.

Rick, in return, told her that her hair was a splintered shaft of sunlight, her eyes twin glimpses of a dream, her lips a fountain of eternity. He hoped he’d remember some of the stuff to write down later. But at the moment he was quite content.

He readily agreed that Lippert was a bore, and that he, Rick, was wonderful. In all modesty he admitted that Sheila’s opinion of his charm and talent was wholly justified by the facts.

“I feel as though I’ve always known you,” the girl sighed, nestling in his arms. “I’ve read your stories ever since I can remember. I always wanted to meet you. I knew you’d be like this—clever, and whimsical, and—”

Rick was momentarily irritated when she hesitated. He could have thought of a dozen descriptive words to add.

But irritation faded. Sheila was murmuring on.

“Take me away with you, darling,” she pleaded. “Let’s get out of here, now.”

It was just the type of thing Rick had meant to avoid. No scenes, no dramatics, no rash moves of any kind. And yet—she loved him. And she was a gorgeous armful. Rick hesitated a moment.

“But what about Lippert?”

"He has his work. He doesn't care about me, I swear it! He buries himself in that laboratory of his, with those awful plants. I've tried to understand, but it's no use. Don't you see, Rick? I'm young, I'm like you, I want fun and excitement and—"

It was strictly soap-opera, but Rick ate it up. And loved every word of it.

A momentary flash of common-sense intruded.

"Let's try to think this thing out, darling," said Rick. He sat up and watched Sheila pin up her hair.

"It's all very well to talk about running away and starting a new life. But this isn't the second act of a play. We don't want to start a lot of fuss and unpleasant scandal. Whatever we do, we'll do quietly and sensibly, after planning it out. After all, I'm staying here through the end of the week."

"End of the week? That reminds me." Sheila became abruptly practical. "We're throwing a party for you Saturday evening, you know."

"Party? I didn't know."

"His friends. From the faculty, of course. And their foolish wives. It'll be an awful bore, but we'd planned it before you came. Now we'll have to go through with it, so he won't suspect anything."

Rick helped himself to a hardboiled egg and balanced it delicately on two fingers. When he spoke his voice was low.

"Uh—what do you think he'd do if he—suspected?"

"Darling, don't worry. He's never been the suspicious type, or jealous either. We could be kissing right under his nose and he'd still putter around in that lab of his. But what are we talking about? He isn't going to suspect. The trouble with you is you're thinking of what would happen if you were writing one of your stories. It's just the way you look at things. He was right, you know. You'd picture him as one of those mad scientists. He isn't at all mad—just dull.

"Well, what are you waiting for?"

THERE was only one answer to this last question. As Sheila extended her arms, Rick forgot about the hard-boiled egg and went into love’s old sweet song.

It was some time later that they became aware of the gathering twilight.

“We’ll be late,” Sheila whispered. “Darling, from now on we must be careful. We’ll have to decide what we’re going to do, and meanwhile he can’t be allowed to see that anything is wrong. Let’s think of an excuse for staying out here all this time.”

“Shall we gather some flowers?” Rick suggested.

“No—wait! I’ve got a better idea. Let’s pick some of these mushrooms for dinner.”

The girl indicated a nearby cluster of mushrooms, interspersed with puffballs, fringing the border of the bluff beneath the trees.

Rick glanced at the large redtopped growths and shook his head.

“For a scientist’s wife and a science-fiction writer’s sweetheart you aren’t very well educated,” he chuckled. “If we gather these for dinner he certainly will suspect. You see, honey, these mushrooms are poisonous.”

“How do you know?”

“Simple botany. Note the reddish tops. *Aminita muscaria.* Most deadly of them all. The poison works peculiarly, destroying the red corpuscles. In a word, it turns your blood to water. Death results in a few days after horrible suffering. There is no antidote.”

Sheila shivered. Then she giggled. “Maybe we’d better pick some anyway.”

Rick stared at her, hard. “That’s not the way,” he murmured. “That’s not the way.”

But as they picked up the lunch basket and descended the slope of the bluff, Rick glanced back. The round, bloated mushroom tops nodded like tiny heads as though in agreement with his secret thoughts . . .

OT your plot yet?”

“G Professor Lippert glanced up absently from his lab table as he decanted a calcium solution.

Rick shrugged. “I don’t know,” he confessed. “I think I’m on the right track.”

“Going to do a yarn about hydroponics?” asked Lippert. “Want any special information?”

“Why?”

“Just asked, I’m expanding, you know.”

“Expanding?”

Lippert swung around on his stool. “Yes. The tanks out here are all filled. I’m putting two new ones in the cellar. Going to try something with puffballs. Be glad to explain my methods as I go along if it will help you to formulate a few ideas.”

Rick shook his head. “I’m not going to write about hydroponics,” he declared.

“Well, I don’t know where else you’ll find any inspiration around here. I admit I’ve been too busy to see much of you these past two days, and I’m sure Sheila’s company is pretty boring. Tells me she’s giving a party Saturday. Well, you might find a few quaint character types in that assemblage. Or have you taken up my suggestion about the mad scientist?”

Lippert chuckled genially and slapped Rick on the back. “Cheer up,” he said. “I think I know what’s troubling you.”

Rick blinked. “What do you mean?”. Lippert’s voice was soft. Sheila. She’s making a play for you, isn’t she, boy?”

“Why—you—I—”

“Don’t bother!” Again the chuckle, a bit self-conscious this time. “I’m not blind, you know. And after being married to the woman for five years, I ought to know something about her. You aren’t the first victim, by any means. She’s bored. Doesn’t seem very interested in my work, or in me, for that matter. So she plays around.

I hope you haven’t taken her seriously.” Rick thought it best to do a little chuckling himself. Inner tumult was stilled as he met Lippert’s level gaze.

"Matter of fact, that's what I meant when I said I was getting an idea for a story. Sheila would make a great character; don't you think so?"

"Perhaps. Though what you want to write about a spoiled, selfish woman for I don't know. And where's your plot? If I were a jealous husband, now —"

"That would help." Rick smiled. "That, and a scientific angle of some sort. But we'll work it out, somehow."

"Yes." Lippert turned to his decanting once more. "Better run along and study your source-material now, Rick. I've got work to do."

"Maybe you're making a mistake," Rick said, softly. "Maybe you ought to be applying your efforts to another field."

"Meaning what?" The pudgy Professor wheeled around on his lab stool.

"Sheila isn't the only character I've studied. I've been watching you.

Don't you think that if you devoted more time to her, developed common interests—"

"Quite the match-maker, aren't you?" Lippert sighed. "It's no use, Rick. She and I are worlds apart." Now was the time. Rick took a deep breath. He hoped desperately that he'd put it over. He had to. He opened his mouth.

"Then why don't you divorce her?" he asked, striving to keep his voice pitched low. "If she's what you say she is, there isn't much hope of salvaging anything from your marriage. You're both intelligent people. Why not lead your own lives without restrictions? You can work without worrying and she can—well, she can find the companionship she needs."

Lippert frowned.

"Quit talking like a writer," he said. "This isn't some cheap love-story plot you're working out. It happens that I don't want to divorce Sheila. I need her to manage the house, take care of social duties here at the University."

HIS frown deepened incongruously as a curious smile creased his lips. "Besides, it amuses me to watch her squirm," he confessed. "I find it relaxing to contemplate her little deceptions. You might just as well forget your sociological impulses, Rick. I'll never divorce Sheila."

"Suit yourself, pal," Rick shrugged. "Merely a suggestion."

Rick left the laboratory. Once outside, inward tumult seethed upwards in boiling rage.

He had thought he was so clever in handling this affair. But Lippert had known all along! He had known, and laughed about it—laughed at him!

And Sheila was probably laughing, too. This wasn't the first time, Lippert said. And he had come along, actually fallen hook line and sinker for that "take me away from it all" line of hers.

Angrily, Rick strode into the living room. Sheila looked up from the davenport as he entered and put down a notebook.

"Darling—what's the matter?" she whispered.

Rick began to tell her, in no uncertain terms.

Then Sheila cried. She cried, wringing her hands like a hurt and pitiful child. Great sobs racked and shook her girl-body.

"The beast!" she sobbed. "And you—believed him! Rick, how could you? I love you—you're the only one I've ever told that to—look at me, Rick—look at me—"

So of course Rick looked at her and of course he took her in his arms and of course the first caress of consolation became an embrace of glowing ardor.

"Let him come in," Sheila murmured. "Let him see us, if he likes. I don't care, as long as you're here. Oh, darling—"

Caution conquered and Rick released the girl as the maid's footsteps sounded in the outer hall.

They were sitting there primly when the maid entered. Rick was lighting a cigarette and Sheila studied the list on her lap.

"Did you finish with the list, m'am?" asked the maid. I'm to order the things for the party this afternoon."

"It's all done, except for the liquor," Sheila said. "I'm running into town to buy that myself. Shaw's is the only place where you can still get gin, and

Professor Lippert won’t touch anything but a Tom Collins.”

SHE turned to Rick with a covert smile. “Want to come along?” she asked.

Rick shook his head. “No, I don’t think so. I’m going to take a walk. Want to work out my plot. Yes, that’s it.”

He left the room.

It always happened that way with Rick. A story would take weeks to jell. All the elements had to be arranged subconsciously. And then a single chance word or phrase would resolve the situation and a plot would seemingly spring fullblown into being.

Now, after just three days, it had happened again. Everything had whirled around. The Professor’s ribbing about the scientist and his daughter and the hero. The scene on the bluff. Lippert’s sly admission of his wife’s infidelities. And Rick’s own picture of himself and Sheila as hero and heroine, with Lippert as the villain who must be removed. Then there was that insidious suggestion of Sheila’s about the mushrooms. He had tried to reject the thought, but after Lippert’s mocking he knew what he must do. The great question was—how to do it and get away with it?

Then Sheila had supplied the word necessary to complete the plot. The word and the phrase.

It. echoed now, as Rick toiled up the slope towards the bluff.

“Gin,” was the word. The phrase—“Professor Lippert won’t touch anything but a Tom Collins.”

The *aminita muscaria,* most deadly of them all. The poison works peculiarly, destroying the red corpuscles. Turns the blood to water. Death results in a few days, after horrible suffering. There is no antidote.

And the poison is . . . *undetectable.*

You pick the mushrooms and macerate them, decant the poison and place it in a Tom Collins.

Simple. Undetectable.

Rick smiled as he neared the bloated cluster against the edge of the bluff. You pick the mushrooms . . .

WHERE do you macerate the mushrooms? Where do you decant the poison?

Not in the greenhouse laboratory. Anybody might walk in. You must choose a more deserted part of the house, take the chosen bottle of gin along, and make certain that it reaches your intended victim only. Rick had the latter move figured out. He'd hide the bottle, sneak out to the kitchen during the party on Saturday, and mix a special drink for Lippert. If Lippert was ill immediately, the crowd would blame it on over-indulgence.

But this business of macerating the mushrooms, now . . .

He thought about it all the way back to the house, while his bulging jacket-pockets brushed his thighs.

Then, as it always did, inspiration came suddenly as he remembered another phrase.

Lippert had told him he was putting two extra tanks in the cellar. If he had, there would be laboratory apparatus down there, along with the chemicals. He could macerate the mushrooms, decant, fill his bottle, and return undetected. It was unlikely that anyone would look for him in the basement.

Rick hastened into the house. The maid was in the kitchen. Sheila had just returned, left her gin on the hall table, and was upstairs taking a bath. Rick heard the water being drawn. A glance down the hall showed that Lippert was still in his greenhouse lab.

Rick made for the cellar stairs. He groped along a hall, found a light. A large room to the left proved to be the improvised hydroponics laboratory. Rick stared through a glassed-in slit set high in the oak door and saw the empty tanks. There was another lab table with a stock of chemicals and utensils.

He entered hastily, turned on the light. He began to dump the mushrooms from his pockets and hunted around for the necessary apparatus.

Then—almost as if on cue—footsteps sounded on the stairs above. Rick heard the ponderous tread, recognized it.

There was no time to cram the mushrooms back into his jacket-pockets. He could only sweep them under the table. Rick kicked an unopened box of bottles into place, hiding the red-topped mushrooms, just as Lippert entered the chamber.

"So you're taking a look at my new lab after all," Lippert said. "Like it?"

"I don't know. After all, you haven't started to work here yet."

"Well, I ought to be able to show you something in a couple of days," Lippert answered. "I'm going to start experiments tonight. You'll notice this room is heavily insulated. I can control the heat better. Have a separate heating unit—want to get it up to a constant of eighty in here. Ought to work well with some new solutions I've got in mind. You see, I'm taking your advice. Going to dabble with hybrids a bit." Professor Lippert glanced at his watch. "Say, it's nearly dinner time. Let's get going."

He ushered Rick from the room. Rick bit his lip as the Professor stooped and inserted a key in the door. It locked with a sharp click.

ROT there was nothing to do but put a brave face on the matter and go upstairs with the man he meant to kill, eat dinner with his future widow, and chat merrily of other things.

Lippert didn't seem to notice. But Sheila was oddly silent during dinner.

Did she suspect? How could she?

"Must leave you two," the Professor announced, pushing his coffee-cup away. "Going to get started tonight. I imagine you can find something to occupy your time."

The hidden leer in his eyes made Rick wince.

But he had no time to muse. For Sheila held his arm and dragged him out on the porch.

"Rick," she said. "This afternoon—I did something."

"What do you mean?"

"Come here."

She pulled him to the edge of the porch, stooped down and brushed aside a pile of leaves in the shrubbery.

Rick stared down at a handful of red-topped mushrooms. Then he looked at Sheila. After that there was nothing more to say.

ANY interruption in the act of creation is torment for the writer. Rick found the next few days to be nightmares. For the perfect plot was hung suspended in midair. His act of creation—act of destruction, rather—was incomplete.

Here it was, Friday evening, and he hadn't been able to get downstairs to the cellar. In the mornings the door was locked. Afternoons and evenings, Lippert worked down there in the new lab.

Rick was in an agony of suspense. Had Lippert found the mushrooms? Apparently not. And even if he had, he'd never reconstruct Rick's plans.

Luckily, he had thrown Sheila's mushrooms away. Lippert didn't suspect anything, and that was well.

But the other problem, the real problem, still remained to torture Rick. How to get into the downstairs lab, make the poison and mix it with the gin —

He tried everything. He talked to Sheila. Couldn't she fake an excuse to make Lippert go into town? Couldn't a call come from the University? Couldn't she become ill, force him to go for a doctor?

"It won't work, darling," she sighed. "He's arranged for complete freedom the rest of this week. He's working on this new project, and he'll work right through until the cocktail party tomorrow afternoon."

As Rick paced up and down on the sun porch Friday evening he felt as though he had reached the breaking point.

It had all gone so smoothly up to now. The perfect crime, the perfect setting, and now he was helpless to bring his plot to a logical conclusion.

He must depend on that which all writers refuse to consider as a plot element—coincidence.

A wry smile twisted his lips as he remembered Lippert's description of science-fiction writers.

The world's most dangerous individuals, eh?

How smugly the fat Professor had pulled that one off! And here he was, balked by the man's plodding, persistent devotion to a stolid study of hydroponics.

Rick muttered curses, then halted as Sheila joined him.

The girl was pale, shaken.

"Have you found a way?" she whispered. "Tell me, Rick—I can't stand the suspense much longer. You don't know what it means to me now just to see him, feel him near me. That fat, stupid face of his—the way he bumbles around—I'll kill him myself unless we—"

Rick held her close as the tears came.

"Hang on," he whispered.

"I know. But when I think of how an idiot like him can stand between us—not because he's clever, but because he's so stupid—I can't bear it."

"Hold it," Rick muttered. "Here he comes."

Lippert's heavy tread announced his approach. But tonight the tread was not so heavy. The bulky body moved rapidly across the parlor, reached the porch entry.

"Here you are."

THE Professor yawned, then smiled.

"Excuse me. I've been at it too long, I guess."

"Through for the night?" Rick nudged Sheila sharply as he spoke. She caught her cue.

"You do look tired, darling. Why don't you run up and turn in? We've got the party to face tomorrow."

“I will, in a minute.” Lippert lit a cigarette, extended the pack to Rick. “Wait until I calm down, though. Rick, I’ve got to apologize to you.”

“What for?”

“The way I’ve neglected you these past three days. A fine visit, I must say—you come up to see me and I bury myself down in the basement. But I think it’s been worth it.”

“Got something, eh?”

Lippert nodded. “Yes. I think I really have. I’m going make an announcement tomorrow at the party, I believe. Some of the men from the University will be interested. My work has taken a remarkably productive turn.”

“Just what is it you’ve been up to?” Lippert shrugged. “It’s a secret. Tell you tomorrow.”

Rick had a flash of inspiration. “Now wait a minute, pal,” he said. “After all, you just admitted you felt like a heel for neglecting me all week. The least you can do to make amends is to show me what you’ve done.”

“You really want to see it?”

“Of course. In fact, I insist.”

“All right, come on then.”

Lippert turned and walked back into the parlor. Rick hesitated on the threshold until he could whisper into Sheila’s ear as he passed.

“Now’s our chance. We’re going downstairs. When we get in, I’ll pretend to be enthusiastic about his damned plants or whatever they are. You fake an excuse to make him go upstairs for a while. Tell him to celebrate—mix us all a drink for a toast. Then you sneak out, bring a bottle of gin down before he comes. Meanwhile I’ll stay and macerate the mushrooms.”

“What’s keeping you?” Lippert called.

“Just finishing the cigarette,” Rick answered. “We’re coming now.”

The stairway resounded to the thumping of their feet as they descended. Rick noticed that his heart thumped curiously in rhythm.

This was it. Now, in a little while—Lippert unlocked the door, ushered them in as he switched on the light. “Take a look,” he said.

Rick stared. The two tanks against the farther wall were empty no longer. The racks were in place, and both tanks held a greenish liquid that bubbled perceptibly.

BUT the center of attraction consisted of the objects towering from the tanks along the metal framework rising to the ceiling.

Great gossamer blobs waved slowly in midair; blobs of fantastic size. “What are they?” Rick asked. “Puffballs.”

“But the size—”

“Mutation. And special stimulation. A new process I’ve devised. I’ll explain it fully tomorrow. For the first time I pursued lines dear to your melodramatic heart, Rick. Used electric shock treatment and infra-red, the works. Plus a little grafting to produce a totally new variety.”

Sheila twisted a damp coil from her forehead.

“It’s awfully hot,” she sighed.

“I know, dear. Temperature is 90 degrees or thereabouts. It makes for growth, ripens the puffballs. I wanted to do this in time for tomorrow’s party.”

Lippert yawned again. “Well, there it is. Now let’s catch some shut-eye.”

Sheila interrupted quickly.

“Wait, darling. I don’t know what you’ve done, of course, but I’m sure it’s terrifically important and scientific. Don’t you think we ought to have a drink to celebrate?”

“Certainly. Come on upstairs and we’ll mix a round.”

“No. You mix them, darling. Rick wants to look around for a moment, I’m sure. Bring our drinks back down.”

“All right.”

Lippert shuffled out wearily.

As his footsteps receded down the hall, Rick galvanized into activity.

"Get that mortar and pestle out," he snapped. "I'll find the mushrooms. I hid them under the table, behind that box."

He bent down, scrabbled in the welter of boxes and racks.

He was still stooping when the lab door closed. As it banged shut he straightened up.

"Open it," he commanded. "Then run up the back steps and get me the gin."

Sheila tugged at the handle.

"It's locked," she whispered.

Rick made a move towards the door, then halted.

The little glass slit set in the panel now framed a face.

Professor Lippert was peering into the chamber from the cellar outside.

"The door is locked!" Rick called.

Lippert's voice came faintly through the glass.

"I know."

"Open up."

"Not just yet."

"What's the big idea? I—"

"just wanted to give you a little more time."

"Time for what?"

"Time to find the mushrooms. Though I don't think you will, even though they're right before your eyes."

"Mushrooms? What mushrooms?" Sheila's voice cut in shrilly.

"The mushrooms your lover picked to poison me with."

FOR once the gift of improvising dialogue failed Rick. He could only stare at the face in the glass, stare into Lippert's inscrutable eyes.

"I'll save you the trouble, Rick," said Lippert. "You see, I found the mushrooms the other day. They came in very handy for my experiments. Quite so. Matter of fact, I used them in the tanks. You're looking at them now.” Man and girl gazed at the gigantic puffballs that swayed forth from the frames.

“Mushrooms and puffballs are botanically allied,” Lippert called. “Of course, there were difficulties in making a fusion, but I conquered them. I had to conquer them. Because I wanted to surprise you. And you are surprised, aren’t you?”

“Let me out!” Sheila broke, ran to the door, and began to pound with her fists. Lippert waited patiently until she subsided.

“In a little while, darling,” he answered. “But first there is another surprise waiting for you.”

“What do you mean?”

“I needn’t explain about the mushrooms, Rick. You undoubtedly know the effects of *aminita muscaria* well enough and were prepared to demonstrate them on me. I believe you intended to distill a poison and then arrange for me to swallow it. Of course the result is death—hideous death. The blood dissolves in your veins, you know, and—”

“No! No—” Sheila shrieked until shrill echoes resounded through the locked chamber.

“I thought of another way. A simpler way. Suppose the mushrooms were to become puffballs? Suppose the puffballs were to burst? A single breath of the pollen, in heavily concentrated form, introduces the poison throughout the system. This is the method I selected. And you two are the subjects I have selected.”

“Lippert—stop this—let us out!” Rick shouted.

“In just a moment, now. According to my calculations the puffballs are about ready to burst. After they burst I will release you within five minutes. Yes, in less than five minutes. Because by that time you will have inhaled enough to make the results quite certain. There is no antidote.”

“I’ll go to the police,” Sheila sobbed. “You’ll be hung for this.”

“I doubt it, my dear. In the first place, I could tell them about your little scheme of poisoning me. In the second place, the whole thing is a horrible accident. The door swung shut, I was upstairs. Don't you see? And I was experimenting, I didn't know my hybrids were poisonous.

"But why pretend? The toxic effects will be much stronger this way. By the time I open this door the two of you will be screaming in agony. Your motor reflexes will be affected. You couldn't grasp a telephone in your lovely little hand, Sheila, and if you did so you'd tear it in half."

"Lippert, listen to me—you must listen—" Rick gasped.

"I have listened to you. To your lies about you and Sheila. You think I didn't know? You tried to steal her from me. You plotted to kill me. But I won't die. A posturing, empty-headed writer of cheap fiction and a stupid, cheating woman will die. And I will live. Live to carry on my work, my experiments. I shall rule science with a weapon of life, a weapon of death!" Lippert was silent.

A faint popping sound reverberated through the locked room. Rick and Sheila turned and stared at the huge puffballs. One of the blobs had burst.

Reddish clouds of pollen poured forth with an acrid scent. Rick smelled the odor of death.

It was welling up now. In a moment it would reach their nostrils.

He turned for the last time to stare at Lippert's face in the glass.

With a curious shock he recognized the meaning of the intent eyes, the fixed grin. He should have known it from the first, but he hadn't, and that was his mistake.

Staring at Lippert's face he realized that he was looking at a typically mad scientist.

The Cheaters

Spectacles, you know! Makes you see things better!

1. Joe Henshaw

THE way I got those spectacles, I. bought a blind lot off the City for twenty bucks.

Maggie hollered fit to raise the dead when I told her.

"What you wanna load up on some more junk for? The store's full of it now. Get yourself a lot of raggedy old clothes and some busted furniture, that's what you'll get. Why, that dump's over two hunnert years old! Ain't nobody been inside it since Prohibition, it's padlocked tight shut. And you have to throw away twenty bucks for whatever you find for salvage."

And on and on, about what a bum I was, and why had she ever married me, and who wanted to be stuck away for life in the junk and second-hand business. Same old phonograph record she's played for years. Maggie always had a temper.

Well, I just walked out on her and let her keep right on jawing to Jake. Jake, he's willing to listen to her. He'll sit back of the shop for hours, drinking coffee in the kitchen when he should be working, and let her rave about me.

But I knew what I was doing. Delehanty at the City Hall gave me the tipoff about this old house and told me to *get* in my bid, he'd take care of it.

They were pulling down this here old dump near the wharf. Must have been a classy dive once, even though they made a speak out of it back in Prohibition days and then slapped a padlock on it since Delehanty told me that upstairs, where nobody ever went while it was a rummy hangout, there was all kinds of old furniture—a dozen bedrooms full of clothes, everything from way back.

Maybe Maggie was right about it being junk, and then maybe she was wrong. You never can tell. Way I figured, there might be some real antique pieces up there. One good haul and I stood to make two-three hundred iron men “selling to a downtown auction house. That’s the way to get ahead in this racket. You got to take a chance once in a while.

So anyhow, I slapped my bid in, and nobody bid against me, so I got the lot City gave me three days to move the stuff out before they started razing. Delehanty slipped me a key.

I walked out on Maggie, climbed in the truck, and went down there. Usual thing, I have Jake drive and help me load, but this time I wanted to case the joint myself. If there really was something valuable in there—well, Jake’s my junior partner, sort of—and he’d want a cut. If he saw the stuff. If I saw it first and moved it out, he’d never know. So let him stay back there and listen to Maggie. Maybe I am a dried-up old jerk like she tells it. And maybe I’m a pretty smart guy. Just because Jake likes to dress up Saturdays and go down to the Bright Spot—

Anyway, I’m not talking about that, I’m talking about these spectacles, these here cheaters I found.

Like I say, I drove down to the wharf on Edison and found the dump. It sure was a crummy-looking pile. Easy two hundred years old. Fancy gables, all rotted; no wrecker would get much out of that heap.

THE lousy padlock was so rusty I almost had to jimmy the door, but the key finally worked and I went inside. Dust fit to choke a pig, all over everything: Downstairs was just rubbish and slats. They must have ripped the bar and fixings out when the Feds raided it. I kind of counted on finding bar stools and maybe some metal laying around, but no soap.

So I tried the stairs. Tried is right. They almost rotted right under my feet, going up. Fancy banister, some kind of mahogany—that was in good shape, but no use to me. Even under all the dirt, I could see that this dump had class, once. About the time George Washington slept there, maybe.

Upstairs was even worse. Eight big rooms, all dust, and broken sticks of furniture. Busted beds. Canopy beds, mostly. Springs all broken. Bedding, just rags. I poked around but didn't find anything unless you count the crockery under the beds.

There were some chairs with nice wood to them, the frame parts, but springs and stuffing were absolutely out. Couple tables around, too, but strictly from lumber.

I WAS beginning to burn up. I'd figured the least there would be was maybe some pictures on the walls; you know, some classy old masters kind of paintings like Rembrandt and so on. But I got rooked, and now I knew it for a fact.

Closets were full of clothes, though. Lucky I hadn't brought Jake because he'd blab to Maggie and then she'd know for sure she'd been right. The clothes were all rotted and raggedy like she said they would be. And stink!

I poked around and got to wondering. You don't run into old clothes much in a deserted house. Or bedding, either. Why had they took a powder in such a hurry, the people? So long ago, too! Why, them clothes was way before the Civil War, the styles of them. Fancy pants for men. Couple rotted shoes with nothing left but buckles.

I picked some up. That was a break. Silver. Silver buckles. I went around the bedroom closets and got maybe, a dozen. That was OK with me. I found a sword, too. Real fancy stuff, in one of those scabbards that was maybe silver, too. I'd find out about that—it sure was a genuine antique piece all right:

Funny about those people having left all this junk. Delehanty tipped me off this was supposed to be a haunted house. Of course in my line that's strictly a gag. I salvaged maybe two hundred haunted houses in my time—every old house is supposed to be haunted. But I never seen a ghost in thirty years, nothing ever alive in those places but maybe some cockroaches.

Then I come to this end room with the big door. All the other bedrooms was open fact, some of the doors was loose on their hinges. But this door wasn't sprung. It was locked. Locked tight.

I had to use a crowbar from the truck on it. Got kind of excited, because you never can tell what a locked door means. Worked and sweated, and finally got it open.

Dust hit me in the face, and a stink. An awful stink. I was carrying a flashlight, of course; wasn't dark out, but the house was gloomy and there wasn't any lights, it being so old and all.

So I coughed and turned on the light and took a look. It was a big room with mounds of dust all over the floor and under that a big rag that was maybe a carpet once upon a time. There was some oak panels in this room too, and the wreckers could maybe get something for that because it was prime lumber still, even under the dust you can tell when a place is really built.

"But I wasn't interested in dust and rags and panels. I wanted to know why the room was locked. And the flashlight told me. It showed me the walls.

Bookshelves.

From the floor to the ceiling, bookshelves, all around the whole lousy room.

There must of been a thousand books in that room, no kidding, a regular library some guy had up there.

I waded through the dirt and pulled out a couple of the nearest books. The bindings were some kind of leather—that is, they was leather once.

Now the things just sort of crumpled in my hands and so did the pages. All yellow and musty, which is why the stink was so bad in here.

I began to swear. I'm no *schmoe,* I know there's dough in old books. But not unless they're in good condition. And this stuff was rotten.

Then I spotted some stuff in iron bindings. That's right, so help me, iron bindings! Big clasps you had to unbuckle before you opened them. I took one down and got it open. It was some kind of foreign stuff, Greek maybe, I don't know. But I recollect the name on the front page—*De Vermis Mysterius.* Screwy.

Still you never know, and I decided I would haul all the good ones down to the truck and see what Segall would give me for the lot. Maybe there Was something valuable here after all.

Then I took another look around the room. No furniture. No tables or chairs in here at all, like in the bedrooms. Except over in the corner—

OVER in the corner was this here table.

A sort of a desk-table, for writing, I guess. And right on top of the table, smack in the center, was a skull.

So help me, it was a human skull, all yellow and grinning up at me under the flashlight beam, and for a minute I almost went for that haunted house stuff.

Then I notice how the top is bored out for one of them old-fashioned goose-quill pens. The guy who collected all these foreigner-type books used the skull for an inkwell. That's a screwball for you, hey?

But the table is what interested me, really interested me that is. Because it was antique all right. Solid mahogany, and a job of carving—all kinds of fancy scrollwork and little goofy faces carved in tire wood.

There was a drawer, too, and it wasn't locked. I got excited, figuring you never can tell what you find in such places—maybe a lot of valuable documents, who knows. So I didn't waste much time pulling the drawer open.

Only it was empty. Nothing in it whatsoever.

I was so mad I let out a couple words and kicked the side of the table.

That's how I found them. The cheaters, that is.

Because I hit. one of the little goofy faces and a sort of panel in the side of the table at the left just swung open and there was this drawer.

I readied in and pulled out the spectacles.

Just a pair of glasses, is all, but real funny ones. Little lenses, square shaped, with big heavy ear-pieces—books, I guess is what you call them. And a thick bridge for over the nose; that was silver too.

I didn't get it. Sure, there was silver in the frames, but they couldn't be worth more than a couple bucks. So why hide the cheaters away in a secret drawer?

I held the glasses up and wiped some specks of dust off the lenses, which was yellow glass instead of the regular, clear kind, but not very thick. I noticed little designs in the. silver frames, like engraved lines. And right across the bridge for the nose was a word carved into the silver. I remember that word because I never saw it before.

"Veritas" was the word, in funny square letters. Some more Greek, I guess. Maybe the old guy was Greek. The guy who had the locked library and the skull for an inkpot and the glasses in the secret drawer, I mean.

I had to squint some at the lettering in the gloom there because my eyes weren't too good and—that gave me an. idea.

Get to be my age, you get kind of shortsighted, sometimes. I always figured I'd go down to the opt—to the eye-doctor—but I never got around to it. But looking at the cheaters I said to myself, why not?

So I put them on.

The bows, or stems, whatever you call them, were pretty short for me. And like I said, the lenses were small. But I didn't feel uncomfortable wearing them. Only my eyes hurt.

My eyes hurt. Not hurt, exactly, but something else like hurting inside of me. Like I was being all pulled and twisted.

Sounds screwy? Well, it felt screwy, too. Because the whole room went far away for a minute and then it came up close, and I blinked fast.

After that it was all right, and I could see pretty good. Everything was sharp and clear.

I left the cheaters on and went downstairs, because it was getting dark and I figured on coming back with Jake tomorrow and loading up the truck. No sense in me doing it all by myself. Jake being so much younger, he could lift the heavy stuff.

So I went home.

I come in the shop and everything was OK and, Jake and Maggie were sitting in the back having coffee.

Maggie kind of grinned at me. Then she said:

“How did you make out, Joe, you lousy, old baboon? I’m glad we’re going to kill you.”

No, she didn’t say *all* that.

She just said, “How did you make out, Joe?”

But she was *thinking* the rest.

I *saw* it.

Don’t ask. me to explain. I *saw* it. Not words, or anything. And I didn’t *hear.* I saw. I knew, by looking at her, what she was thinking, and planning. Like what was coming next, almost.

“Find a lot of stuff?” Jake asked, and I *saw,* “I hope you did because it’s all mine as soon as we bump you and we’re gonna bump you for sure tonight.”

“What you look so funny for, Joe, you sick or something?” Maggie said, and she also said, to herself, “Who cares, he’s gonna be a lot sicker soon all right, all right, does he suspect anything, no, of course not, he couldn’t, the old goat never got wise to us for a whole year now, just wait until Jake and I own this place together and his insurance too, it’s all planned.”

“Yeah,” I said. “I was lifting stuff over to the house, and I don’t feel so hot. Guess I better sit down.”

“What you need, you need a little drink to warm you up,” Jake said to me, and to himself he was., saying, “That’s the way, we’ll start it like we figured, get him drunk and then when he gets upstairs I’ll push him down and if that don’t finish him Maggie will with the board, it leaves the same kind of bruise. Everybody knows he drinks, it’s just an accident like and I can swear to it.”

I made myself smile.

“Where’d you get the cheaters?” Maggie asked, saying, “God, what a homely mug on him, I get sick just looking at that face but it won’t be long now.”

“Picked them up over at the house,” I said.

Jake got out a fifth. He opened it and got some water glasses. “Drink up,” he said.

I sat there, trying to figure it out. Why could I read their minds? Why did I know what they were planning? I didn’t know. But I could see what they were up to. I could *see* it. Gould it be—the cheaters?

Yes, the cheaters. *They* were the cheaters. Carrying on behind my back. Getting ready to finish me off. Tumble down the stairs. Never mind how I knew. I knew, that was the main thing.

I KNEW what, they were thinking while they sat there drinking with me, laughing with me only really laughing at me and waiting until I got drunk enough so they could kill me. Pretending to drink a lot while they got me loaded, until I made them drink shot for shot with me.

I couldn’t get drunk, not as long as I was *seeing* them. The thoughts going through their heads, your blood would run cold and no liquor could make you drunk if you knew such things.

Everything turned to ice. it was all cold.

and I knew just what to do. I made them drink with me and they began to get loud, only the thoughts kept getting worse. I listened to them talk, but all the time I saw their thoughts.

"We'll kill him, just a little while now, why doesn't he pass out, he's drinking like a fish, mustn't take too much, got to keep him from suspecting, God how I hate that ugly puss of his. I want to see it smashed open, wait until he's out of the way and I have Maggie all to myself whenever I want to, he's going to die, I could sing it, he's going to die, die, die—"

Everything turned to ice.

I knew just what to do.

They were laughing and singing and it was way after dark when I went out to the truck to put it into the garage for the night. They stayed behind, thinking about how to do it now, how to keep people from suspecting them.

Me, I didn't worry about that. Suspecting, I mean. I was all set.

I put the truck away and then I came back to the kitchen, carrying the crowbar from the truck that I'd used up at the house.

I came into the kitchen and locked the door. They saw me with the crowbar, standing there.

"Hey, Joe—" said Jake.

"Joe, what's wrong?" said Maggie.

When they put the black hood over my head, just before they hung me.

2. Miriam Spencer Olcott

I DISTINCTLY remember it was on Thursday afternoon, because that's when Olive has her bridge club over, and of course she simply *must* have Miss Tooker help with the. serving.

Olive is much too diplomatic to lock me in my room, and I always wondered why it was that I seemed to get so sleepy on Thursdays, just when I might have a chance to slip out without anyone noticing. Finally I realized that she was putting something into my luncheon—more of Dr. Cramer's work, no doubt.

Well, I'm not a complete fool by any means, and this Thursday I simply made up my mind. When the tray came up I just nibbled a bit at some toast —that seemed safe—and poured the rest down the you-know-what. So Olive was none the wiser, and when I lay down upon the bed and closed my eyes she felt satisfied.

I must have rested about an hour until I heard the front door open and the voices drifted up the stairwell. Then I knew it was safe for me to get up.

I put on my dress and powdered my nose, and then I took ten dollars out of the pincushion where I keep what's left of the cash. After that there was nothing to do but tiptoe down the stairs very quietly and slip away.

Olive and her friends were in the parlor with die door closed. I had to rest a moment at the foot of the stairs because of my heart, you know, and for an instant I had the most peculiar temptation to open the parlor door and stick my tongue out at her.

But that wouldn't have been very ladylike. After all, Olive and her husband Percy had come to live with me and take care of me when Herbert died, and they got Miss Tooker to help when I had my first heart attack. I mustn't be rude.

Besides, I knew Olive would never permit me to go out alone any more. So it would be wiser if I didn't disturb her now.

I went out very quickly and walked north, away from the parlor windows. I turned down Edgewood and decided to take a bus at the corner. It cost a dime, but I couldn't be choosy.

There were several people on the bus and they kept staring at me. People seem so rude nowadays; I can't help but notice. When Herbert was alive we had the electric runabout and I never was forced into contact with the masses, but now I'm old and all alone, and there's no one to protect me.

I know my clothing is not in the latest, style, but it is fresh and neat and there is no call for rude and vulgar curiosity. I wear highbutton shoes for the support they afford my ankles, and if I chose to be sensible regarding draughts, that is my affair. I mean, about the gray muslin stockings and the scarf. My coat is fur and very expensive; it needs relining and possibly some mending, that is true, but for all strangers know I might be quite impoverished. They need not be so rude. Even my bag comes in for its, share of attention on the part of boors. My fine reticule, which Herbert brought back for me from abroad, in '22!

I didn't like the way they stared at my bag. It was almost as if they knew. But how could they know? No one had ever suspected.

I sniffed and sat back. I had to plan, now. I must get off east of the river. Then I could walk either north or south. I wasn't quite sure yet what I planned to do. I had ten dollars, remember.

If I walked north, I needed my bag.

If I walked south, like the last time—

No. I couldn't do that. The last time was frightful. I remember being in that awful place, and the men laughing, and I had been singing, I believe, was still singing when Percy and Olive came for me in the taxicab.

How they found me, I'll never know. Perhaps the tavernkeeper telephoned them. They got me home, and I had one of my attacks and Dr. Cramer told them never to even mention it to me again. So there were no discussions. I hate discussions.

But no. I couldn't walk south again today.

I left the. bus east of the river and walked north *X* began to get that tingly feeling all over. It frightened me but it felt—nice.

It felt even nicer when I went into Warram's and began to look at the cameos. The clerk was a man. I told him what I wanted and he went, to look for it. He brought back a wide selection and I tried to make up my mind. I told him, about my trip to Baden-Baden in T6, and what Herbert and I had seen in the jewelry stores during the war. abroad. He was very patient and understanding. I thanked him politely for his trouble and walked out, tingling. There was a brooch, a really lovely tiling, in my reticule.

At Slade and Benner's I got a scarf. The girl was an impertinent young snip, and so I felt I really must buy a corsage to distract her attention. They were vulgar things,. and cost 39 cents. Not nearly worth it. But the scarf in my bag was of imported silk.

IT WAS very exciting. I walked in and out of the shops, and the bag began to fill. I bought. One must be very discreet, you know. None of my purchases were extravagant, but I managed to spend over four dollars. Still, I had the little figurine, and the locket, and that perfectly enormous jar of shaving cream. That seemed silly, but the opportunity was there, and perhaps Percy might find a use for it.

Then I started going into these secondhand shops and antique stores near, the City Hall. One never knows. My reticule was almost full, but I could still make purchases.

I saw a lovely escritoire in the window of a place called Henshaw's. Obviously solid mahogany and beautifully carved. There was a slight chance that it might be available for a trifling sum.

The proprietor was a fat man. I smiled at him.

"I noticed that escritoire in your window, Mr. Henshaw," I began.

He shook his head.

"It's sold, madam. Besides, I'm not Henshaw. He's dead. Didn't you read about the case in the papers? Hanged him."

I held up my hand and sniffed.

"Please," I said. "Spare me."

"My name's Burgin. Bought the place out. We got a lot of nice things here, though, besides that writing table."

"I'll glance around a bit, if I may."

"Sure, madam."

I had seen the table with the ceramics, and now I approached it. But he never let his eyes stray from me. I was tingling and felt nervous. There was one piece I simply adored. I had the bag open and it only needed an instant —

He was right behind me. He had seen my hand move.

"How much is this?" I said, very quickly, picking up an object at random from one of the trays.

"Two bits!" he snapped.

I fumbled in my pocket and gave him a quarter. Then I marched out of the store, very quickly, and slammed the door.

It was only when I reached, the street that I stopped and examined the object in my hand.

A pair of spectacles. How in the world had I ever managed to snatch eyeglasses from that tray?

Still, they were rather unusual—quite heavy, and obviously silver.

I held them up to the light and in the sunset I noticed a word etched across the bridge.

"Veritas." Latin. Truth. Strange.

I slipped them into my pocket and walked briskly down the street. I was tired, yes, but I felt the need of leaving this disreputable neighborhood before sunset Besides, Olive would be bidding goodbye to her guests shortly, and I must return before my absence was discovered.

GLANCING at the City Hall clock I was astounded to find out that it was past five. This would never do. I should be found out, and there might be a distressing scene—A taxicab ride to the house costs fifty cents. But this was an emergency. I beckoned to a cab-driver and entered his vehicle.

As we drove, I grew more and more apprehensive. Even the thought of my successful expedition, of what I had in my bag, didn't console me.

Suddenly I remembered something else. Olive and Percy were dining out tonight! And Dr. Cramer was to come over and examine me!

Surely they would have ascertained my absence. How *could* I explain it?

I fumbled in my pocket for the fare. My hands encountered a cold object.

The spectacles.

That was the solution. I. placed them firmly on the bridge of my nose and adjusted the bows, just as we turned in at the driveway.

When the cab stopped the tingling feeling seemed to rush back, and for a moment I felt that I might have another attack. But I mastered it. Perhaps the glasses were “drawing” on my eyes a bit. In a moment I could see clearly and the tingling drained away.

I paid the driver and walked quickly towards the house, before he had time to comment on the lack of a “tip.” Then I took out my key and opened the door.

The glasses seemed to make it easier. Perhaps I really *did* need spectacles. Dr. Cramer had once commented upon the fact that I was slightly astigmatic. At any rate, everything seemed clear, quite clear.

Everything *was* clear.

Let me express myself properly, now, so that you will be sure to understand.

I OPENED the door. Olive and Percy were standing there. Olive so tall and thin and Percy so short and fat. Both of them had pale skins. Like leeches.

Why not? They were leeches. I looked at them, and it seemed to me as though I were meeting them for the first time. They smiled, but they were strangers.

Not *quite* strangers. Because I knew them. I could *see* them. The leeches.

Moving info my house when Herbert died. Using my property. Living on my income. Getting Miss Tooker to come and. keep her eye on me. Encouraging Dr. Cramer to make an invalid out of me. Ever since Herbert died. Now they were waiting for *me* to die.

“Here’s the old one——now.”

I won’t *repeat* the word.

For a moment I was shocked beyond all belief. To think that mild little Percy would stand there smiling and *say* such a thing to my face!

Then I realized that he wasn’t saying it. He was *thinking* it. I was reading his mind.

He said, “Mother, darling, where on earth did you disappear to? We worried so.”

"Yes," said Olive. "We didn't know what, to think. Why you might have been run over." Her tone was the familiar one of daughterly affection. And behind it, the thought, "Why wasn't she run over, the old——"

That word again!

So that is what she thought of me. That's what they both thought of me!

I began to tremble.

"Sit down, dear. Tell us all about it." Percy, smirking. Puffy-mouthed leech. Sucking my blood.

I summoned all my strength.

"Yes, Mother. Where *were* you?", Olive, smiling. Prim-mouthed leech. Thinking, "Did you go out on another bat, you doddering old fool? Or were you making trouble for us, stealing from the shops again? The times Percy has had to go down and make good on merchandise—"

I caught that thought and blinked behind the spectacles. I hadn't suspected *that.* Did *they know,* in the stores, what I. did? And permitted it as long as Percy—?

But then I wasn't profiting at all! They were all against me, I saw it for the first time. Spectacles.

"If you must know," I said, very rapidly. "I went downtown to be fitted for a pair of, glasses."

Before they had time to consider that fully, I marched up the stairs, entered my room, and slammed the door. Not angrily, but quite firmly.

I was really quite upset. Not only by their thoughts, but because, of the fact that I could read their thoughts. They were waiting for me to die. I knew it—but how?

Perhaps it was all my imagination. Maybe. I was really ill. They always said so. Miss Tooker treated me as an invalid. Dr. Cramer came regularly twice a week.

He would be coming tonight. He was very nice. Let him tell me what was wrong.

Because it couldn't be the spectacles. It couldn't be. Such things aren't really possible.

It was only that I was so very tired and so very old—

I took off the glasses and lay down on the bed and suddenly I was crying. I must have fallen, asleep, fox when I awoke it was quite dark.

The door had slammed downstairs. Now footsteps ascended the stairs. Miss Tooker.

She opened the door with one hand. She carried a tray. A teapot and some biscuits. Part of Dr. Cramer’s diet. He knew how I loved to eat and he wouldn’t permit it.

I made a face at Miss Tooker. “Go away,” I said.

She smiled weakly. “Mr. and Mrs. Dean have left for their dinner engagement,” she said. “But they thought you might be wanting your supper now.”

“Go away,” I repeated.

“Are you sure you’re feeling quite yourself?” she asked, setting down the tray on the table beside the bed. “Dr. Cramer should be coming soon, and —”

“Send him up and go to bed,” I snapped. “But keep, out of here.”

HER smile faded and she started for the door. For a moment I had the queerest desire to put on the spectacles and look at her through them. But that was all an illusion, wasn’t it? I watched her depart, then sat up and reached for my bag.

I began to go through my treasures. It took quite some time. I became so engrossed that I was unaware of Dr. Cramer’s arrival.

His knock startled me. I hastily stuffed my collection back into the bag and dropped it at the side of the bed. Then I lay back and called, “Come in.”

Dr. Cramer was always the soul of courtesy. He entered quietly, despite his portliness, and sat down in the “boudoir chair near my dressing table.

“What’s all this I hear about you, young lady?” he chuckled. He always called me “young lady.” It was our private joke.

“What do you mean?” I smiled at him pleasantly.

“I hear you took a little trip this afternoon. Mrs. Dean mentioned something about spectacles—”

I shrugged. He leaned closer.

“And you haven’t been eating. You were crying.”

He sounded so sympathetic. A wonderful personality, Dr. Cramer. One couldn’t help but respond.

just wasn’t hungry. You see, Olive and Percy just don’t understand. I do so enjoy getting out into the air, and I hate to trouble them. I can explain about the glasses.”

He smiled, and winked.

“First, some tea.”

“I’m afraid you’ll find it cooled by now.”

“That’s easily remedied.”

He turned and set the teapot on the little electric hotplate over in the corner. He worked quickly, efficiently, humming under his breath. It was a pleasure to watch him, a pleasure to have him visit. We would sit down now and have a cup of tea together, and I would tell him everything. He knew. He would understand. Everything would be all right.

I sat up. The glasses clicked on the bed beside me. I slipped them on.

Dr. Cramer turned and winked at me.

When he winked I closed my own eyes and felt the glasses pulling on them.

Then I opened my eyes and I knew. I knew that Dr. Cramer was here to kill me.

HE SMILED at me and poured out two cups of tea. He got the second cup from the table where my luncheon tray still rested. I watched him pour. I watched him stoop over the cup to the left and slip the powder into the hot tea.

He brought the tray over to the bed, and I said, “Doctor—a napkin, please.” He got the napkin, sat down next to me, and politely lifted his cup as I raised mine.

We drank.

My hand didn't tremble, even though he watched me. I emptied my cup. He emptied his.

He winked again. "Well, young lady—feel better?"

I winked right back at him. "Much better. And you?"

"First rate! Now, we can talk, eh?"

"Yes," I said. "We can talk."

"You were going to tell me something?"

"That's right," I replied. "I was going to tell you something, Dr. Cramer. I was going to tell you that I know all about it." He blinked again. I kept smiling as I went on.

"Yes. I know just how it is supposed to go. Percy and Olive put you up. to it. They will inherit and give you one-third.

The time was indefinite, but when I came home distraught tonight they thought it a good idea if you acted at once. Miss Tooker knew I might have an attack, anyway, and she would act as a witness. Not that a witness would be needed. You would certify as to the cause of death. My heart, you know."

Dr. Cramer was perspiring. The tea had been quite hot. He raised a hand. "Mrs. Olcott—"

"Please do not interrupt. I am not finished. I was telling you about the plan. In half an hour, or less, I will have a seizure. You will go downstairs and tell Miss Tooker to phone the Deans at their dinner party. Then you will return and endeavor to help me. Naturally, it will be too late. By the time my beloved daughter and her husband arrive, I shall be dead. That's the way it is, isn't it?"

"But—"

I stared at him. "You wonder how I know? So do I. I cannot explain the power I have. It is enough that I possess it. I can read your mind."

"Then—"

I inclined my head. "Please do not trouble yourself to speak. Reading your mind, I know what you meant to say next. You wondered why, knowing these things, I permitted you to poison me. You. wonder why I would trust you, knowing that you are a treacherous, hypocritical——

HERE I used the masculine form of the epithet Percy had thought of in connection with me.

His eyes bulged. Apparently he wasn't used to such language. He had turned red as a beet.

"Yes," I whispered, "You wonder why I allowed you to poison me. And the answer is—I didn't."

He tugged at his collar and half-rose from the chair.

"You didn't?"

"No." I smiled sweetly. "When you brought me the. napkin, I switched our teacups."

I do not know what poison he employed, but it was efficacious.

Of course, his excitement helped speed the process along. He managed to stand erect, but only for an instant, and then sank back into his chair.

He died there.

I watched him die. For fifteen minutes I observed the process of disintegration. His voice failed almost immediately. His head wobbled. He. frothed and retched. His eyes dilated and his face was purple, except around the mouth, where he bit his lips.

I WANTED to read his thoughts, but there were no coherent thoughts any more. Only images. Words of prayer and blasphemy commingled, and images of desperation. Vile things. And then the overpowering mastery of pain blotted out everything. It hurt my head to read his mind, so I took off the glasses and just watched.

It made, me tingle all over to see him die.

At the end he had convulsions. He tried to claw his: own throat out. I stood over him and laughed right down his gaping maw. Not a very ladylike thing to do, I admit, but there was justification. Besides, it made me tingle.

Afterwards I went downstairs. Miss Tooker was sleeping and there was no one to stop me. I deserved a little celebration. I raided the ice-box and took up a tray loaded with turkey and dressing and truffles and kumquats—oh, they feasted well downstairs, my loving daughter and son-in-law! I brought the brandy decanter, too.

I carried everything into my room. It was enough to make me quite giddy, climbing the stairs with that load, but once the door was closed behind me, I felt better.

I filled my teacup with brandy and toasted the figure sprawled in the chair before me. I mocked him silently as I ate. I inquired politely if he cared for a snack, did he want some brandy, it was delicious, and how was his heart behaving these days?

The brandy was strong. I finished all tire food, every last bit of it, and drank again. The tingling was mixed with warmth. I felt like singing, shouting. I did both.

The teacup broke. I drank out of the decanter. No one to see me. I reached out and closed his eyes. Bulging eyes. My own eyes ached. Spectacles. Shouldn't have worn them. But if I hadn't, I'd be dead. Now he was dead. I was alive. Very much alive. Tingling alive.

More brandy. Heartburn. Too much food. The brandy was burning, too. I lay back on the bed. Everything went around and around. Burning. I could see him sprawled there with his mouth open, laughing at me.

Why did. he laugh? He was dead. I was the one who should laugh. He had poison.

I had brandy. "Liquor is poison to you, Mrs. Olcott."

Who said that? Dr. Cramer said that, the last time. But he was dead. I wasn't poisoned. So why did it hurt when I tried to laugh?

Why did it hurt my chest so, and why did the room go around and when I tried to sit up and fell face downwards on the floor why did I tear at the rug until my fingers bent backwards and snapped one by one like pretzel sticks, but I couldn't feel them because the agony in my chest was so much stronger, stronger than anything, stronger than life itself.

Because it was death.

I died at 10:18 p.m.

3. PERCY DEAN

AFTER the whole affair was hushed up, Olive and I went away for a while. We could afford to travel, now, and I made arrangements to have the whole place remodeled while we were gone.

They really did a beautiful job—money was no object. I told him—and the results did us proud. It was about time, too. All those years wasted, sitting, around and waiting for the old lady, to die; yes, it was about time.

Now Olive, and I could really hold our heads up in the community. No more snubs, no more covert insults, no more gossip about, "Mrs. Olcott's. son-in-law . . . *parvenu* . . . not altogether the sort of person who belongs."

I swore to myself that all this would be changed., Olive and I would take our rightful place in society, at last. We had the background, surely, and now there was ample money to move in the best circles, to entertain.

To entertain. That was the first step.

The costume party was really Olive's idea, although I was the one who tied it in with our "house-warming."

"There's a certain atmosphere of gaiety and informality about a costume party," I told her. "It will distract from the awareness of the guests; so many of them know about the—uh—unfortunate occurence six months ago, and an ordinary dinner party would be strained. But a costume party is just the thing."

"Maybe I could get that little dance troupe to entertain," Olive mused. "The Puerto Ricans, you know. They're all the rage this season. And we could use the garden, too."

IT PLEASED me to see her respond so enthusiastically. We fell to planning, determining whom to invite. Here is where my superior acumen came into play. For years I had been balked, frustrated by my ignominious position as a “hanger-on”; unable to associate on a plane of equality with the business and financial leaders of the community.

I seemed to attend their dinners and parties under sufferance, and was unable to reciprocate with invitations in kind. In consequence I was never able to broach certain ventures I had in mind regarding real estate and bond issues. I knew the key men and my propositions were completely worked out. All I wanted was *entree.* I could make money in this city; quite a bit of money. Now was the time.

“Thorgesen,” I said, checking off the list. “Definitely yes. “Harker, if he’ll come. And Dr. Cassit. Pfluger. A repulsive person, but I need him. And the Misses Christie. Hattie Rooker. Very good.”

“If we have Hattie we must invite Sebastian Grimm,” Olive reminded.

“Grimm? Who’s he?”

“The novelist. Summering in town here. He’s invited everywhere—simply *everywhere!”*

“As you wish.”

We planned it all, sent out our invitations, and had a most gratifying response. The week beforehand was filled with endless details which engaged our time. As a matter of fact, it was the day of the party before Olive brought up a highly important matter.

“Our costumes, Percy,” she said.

“Costumes?”

“This is a costume party, silly! And we’ve forgotten to select our own.” She smiled. “You’d go well as a pirate.”

I frowned. I dislike levity. The thought of wearing a costume repelled me.

“But they’ll all be in costume,” Olive told me. “Even dignified old men like Harker. And Mrs. Loomis has spent weeks, simply weeks, on her Watteau shepherdess. The. dressmaker told me.”

"What shall you wear?" I asked.

"Something Spanish; with a mantilla. Then I can wear the earrings." She peered at me quizzically. "But you're going to be a problem. Frankly, Percy, you're too tubby for the usual thing. Unless you choose to dress as a clown."

I almost spoke harshly to her. But it was true. I regarded my portliness in the mirror; my receding hairline, my double chin. She peered over my shoulder.

"Just the thing!" she announced. "Percy, I have it! You shall be Benjamin Franklin."

Benjamin Franklin. I had to admit it wasn't a bad idea. After all, Franklin was a symbol of dignity, stability and wisdom—I am inclined to discount those absurd rumors about his mistresses—and that was the note I was seeking. I depended upon this evening to impress the guests. It was a highly important first step.

The upshot of the matter was that I went down to the costumer, told him my needs, and returned that evening with a Colonial costume, including a partial wig.

Olive was ecstatic over the results. I dressed hastily after dinner, for our guests were expected to arrive early, and Olive merely glanced into the master bedroom and inspected me at the last moment.

"Wonderful!" she said. "But didn't Franklin wear spectacles?"

"So he did. Unfortunately, it's too late now to secure a pair. I trust the guests will forgive me this oversight."

The guests did.

I spent a most enjoyable evening. Everyone arrived, the liquor was good and plentiful, the costumes added the proper note of frivolity, and the entertainment—although vulgar—seemed most well received.

ALTHOUGH a total abstainer myself, I nevertheless saw to it that the proper persons imbibed. Men like Thorgesen of the bank, old man

Harker, Dr. Cassit, and Judge Pfluger. I managed to keep them around the punchbowl and their cordiality increased as the evening progressed.

I was particularly interested in getting Thorgesen's friendship. Through him I could gain membership in the Gentry Club, and sooner or later I'd worm my way into Room 1200—the fabulous "poker club" room where the really big "deals" were decided; millions of dollars in contracts casually assigned as the powers-that-be dealt their cards.

Sebastian Grimm put the thought into my head. "Party seems to be going nicely," he drawled. "Almost think it would be safe to leave the ladies to their own devices for an hour or so. You haven't a poker table available, have you, Dean?"

Poker. The very thing. A game in my house. Wouldn't it be natural to suggest another meeting at the conclusion of this, game? Perhaps Thorgesen would suggest the Gentry Club next time, and I could remind him that I was not a member. "That's easily remedied," he would boom. "Tell you what you do, Dean—"

Perfect!

"There's a big table upstairs," I ventured. "Away from the crowd and the noise. If you gentlemen are interested—" They were. We ascended the stairs.

I hate poker. I dislike all games of chance. I do not regard them as immoral, but. I instinctively dislike a speculative venture where the element of risk is dependent upon chance.

But this was an exception.

I secured chips and cards. Thorgesen, Dr. Cassit, Judge Pfluger, Harker, Grimm and myself were seated around the table. I would have excluded Grimm if possible—the tall, thin sardonic writer was a disturbing element and his presence was of no value to me. But it had been his suggestion, and I couldn't very well shake him off.

Olive tapped on the door before we started our play.

"So there you are," she said. "I wondered where you'd disappeared to, Percy." She smiled at the group. "I see you're in good company, however.

Would anyone care to have a luncheon sent up? We're serving buffet style downstairs in a few moments."

There was an awkward silence. I "felt annoyance.

"Very well, then. I shan't disturb you. Oh, Percy—I found something for you. In—in mother's old room." She came up behind me and slipped something over my ears and nose.

"Spectacles," she giggled. "You remember, we couldn't find them for your costume. But mother had a pair in her drawer. Now." She stood back and surveyed me. "That does it. He really looks like Benjamin Franklin, don't you think?"

I didn't want the spectacles. They hurt my eyes. But I was overcome with embarrassment. I forced a smile and waved her from the room. The men were intent upon distribution of chips. Thorgesen was the banker. I pulled out my wallet and placed a hundred dollar bill on the table. I received a stack of twenty white chips.

They played for "blood." Very well. I smiled. "Now for some reds," I said. I placed five more hundred dollar bills on the table and received twenty red chips.

"That's better," I commented. And it was. For I meant to lose. A thousand dollars or so invested properly tonight in a losing game would almost guarantee that my membership be looked upon with favor by the other players. There was a deal of sound psychology behind my reasoning. I meant to lose, and more than that, to lose gracefully. Amiably. Like a gentleman.

But it didn't work.

I HAVE heard of clairvoyance, of telepathy, of sixth sense, of "card sense." These phenomena I have always discounted. Yet *something* was at work this evening.

For as I squinted through my spectacles at the cards, I could read the hands of the other players. Not their hands, but their minds.

"Pair of eights under. Raise. Get another. Two queens. Wonder if he's got a straight? Better stay in. Never make an inside with those tens showing. Flush. Raise again. Bluff the others out."

It came to me in a steady stream. I knew when to drop, when to stay, when to raise, when to bluff.

Of course *I* meant to lose. But when a man *knows* what to do, he's a fool to drop the advantage. That's logic, isn't it? Sound business. They respected shrewdness, good judgment. How could I help myself?

I do not wish to dwell upon the actual incidents of the game. Suffice to say that I won almost every hand. That I was able to raise, to bluff, to "sandbag" as I believe they call it, and all with this marvelous flow of intuition, this veritable psychic sense which never deserted me.

I was over nine thousand dollars ahead when Harker cheated.

The strain of concentration was terrific. I paid no heed to time, to any extraneous circumstance or thought or movement. It was only the game—reading their minds—calculating my bets.

And then: "I'll keep the ace until the next hand," Harker thought.

I could *feel* that thought. Feel the strength, the desperate avariciousness behind it. Old man Harker, worth three million, cheating over the poker table.

FOR a moment I was dismayed. The next hand was being dealt. I concentrated. Harker had the ace of spades under his left sleeve on the table. He received a seven and an ace down, and an ace up. Three aces, if he could switch the seven.

I had queens, back to back, the down queen paired with a four. The cards were distributed—the fourth, the fifth. The others had nothing; Grimm a possible straight. Harker kept raising. I got another queen on the fifth card. I raised him back. Grimm stayed. Harker re-raised. He was gloating. The conversation grew animated. This was a vital hand; the pot was large. The sixth card brought me another four. Full house, queens up. A sure winner in almost any seven-card stud game. Harker had his aces. My pair of queens on the board bet—the limit. He raised the limit. I re-raised. Grimm dropped out.

They hung upon our last cards as the deal went out. I got a jack. Harker received the fourth ace. It almost hurt my head to feel the wave of exultation possessing him. He raised, I raised, he raised, I hesitated—and Harker switched cards. The fourth ace went under. The seven slid beneath his sleeve. That was what I had been waiting for.

I raised.

Harker raised.

"Six thousand dollars in the pot!" somebody murmured.

I raised. Harker raised.

Then, very deliberately, I called. I laid down my hand triumphantly.

"Full house. Queens over fours." I started to rake in the chips.

Harker's old man's monkey-face creased into a grin.

"Not so fast, my friend. I have"—he licked his thin lips eagerly—"four aces."

Everybody gasped.

I coughed. "Sorry, Mr. Harker. But has it come to your attention that you also have—eight cards?"

Silence.

"An oversight, no doubt. But if you will be good enough to raise your left arm from the table—there, underneath your sleeve—"

The silence deepened.

And suddenly it was filled with a clamor. Not a clamor of words. A clamor of *thoughts.*

They weren't thinking about cards any more. But I could still read their minds!

"The cad—the cur—accusing Harker—probably planted the card there himself—cheating—no gentleman—*nasty* little fat-faced fool—never should have come—barred from decent society—vulgar—moneygrubber—drove her to her grave—"

My head hurt.

I thought if I could talk, the hurting would go away. So I talked and told them what I knew, and what I thought of them, and they only stared. So I thought if I could shout, it might relieve the strain, and I shouted and ordered them out of my house and named them for what they were, but they looked at me as if I were mad. And Harker thought things about me no man could stand. No man could stand such thoughts, even if his head weren't splitting and he didn't know it was all lost, they all hated him, they were laughing and sneering.

So I knocked over the table and I took him by his wizened throat, and then they were all on me at once, and I wouldn't let go until I had squeezed out the hurting, all of it, and my glasses fell off and everything seemed to go dim. I just looked up in time to see Thorgesen, over my shoulder, aiming the water carafe at my head.

I tried to move to one side, but it was too late. The carafe came down and everything went away.

Forever.

4. Sebastian Grimm

THIS will be brief. Very brief.

When I picked up those peculiar yellow-lensed spectacles in antique frames from the floor-slipping them into my pocket, unobserved in the confusion attendant upon calling the doctor and the police—I was motivated by mere curiosity.

That curiosity grew when I chanced to overhear a remark at the inquest regarding the disappearance of the glasses. The widow, Olive Dean, spoke of her mother, and how she had brought the glasses home with her upon the night of her tragic death.

Certain aspects of that poker game and Dean's behavior had piqued my fancy. The statements at the inquest further intrigued me.

The legend, Veritas inscribed. upon the bridge of the spectacles, was also interesting.

I shall not bore you with my researches. Amateur detection is a monotonous, albeit sometimes a rewarding procedure. Sufficient for me to say that I undertook a private inquiry which led me to a second-hand store and eventually to a partially-razed house on Edison Street. Research with the local historical society enabled me to ascertain that the spectacles had originally been the property of Dirk Van Prinn, he of unsavory repute. Legends of his interest in sorcery are common property and can be easily corroborated in any volume dealing with the early history of this city. I need not bother to underscore the obvious.

At any rate, my rather careful investigation bore fruit. I was able, taking certain liberties based upon circumstantial evidence, to “reconstruct” the thoughts and actions of die various persons who had inadvertently worn the spectacles since the time of their discovery in the secret drawer of old Dirk Van Prinn’s escritoire.

These thoughts and actions have formed die basis of this narrative, in which I took die liberty of assuming the characters of Mr. Joseph Henshaw, Mrs. Miriam Spencer Olcott, and Mr. Percy Dean—all deceased.

Unfortunately, a final chapter remains to be written. I had no idea that it would be necessary at the time I opened my investigation. Had. I suspected, I would. have desisted immediately. For I knew, as Dirk Von Prinn knew when he shut the spectacles away in that drawer, that they were objects accursed; that his heritage of wisdom from his ancestor, die infamous Ludwig Prinn, was evil wisdom; that the lenses were, ground, almost literally, in Hell.

Yes, I knew that the truth is not meant for men to see; that knowledge of the thoughts of others leads only to madness and destruction.

I mused upon the triteness and die obviousness of this moral, and not for anything in die world would I have emulated poor Joe Henshaw, or Mrs. Olcott, or Percy Dean, and put on the spectacles to gaze at other men and other minds.

But pride goeth before a fall. And as I wrote of the tragic fate of these poor fools whose search for wisdom ended in disaster, I could not help but reflect upon the actual purpose for which these singular spectacles had been created.

"Veritas."

The truth.

The truth about others brought evil consequences.

But—the truth about one's self?

"Know thyself."

Could it be that this was the secret purpose of the spectacles? To enable the wearer to look *inward?*

Surely there could be no harm in that. Not in the hands of an intelligent man.

I fancied that I "knew" myself in the ordinary sense of the word; was perhaps more aware, through natural predeliction and introspection, than most men, of my inherent nature.

I fancied, I mused. I believed.

But I had to *know.*

Yes, I had to know.

And that is why I put them on, just now. Put them on and stared at myself in the hall mirror.

I stared at myself. And I saw myself. And I *knew* myself. Completely and utterly.

There are things about subliminal intelligence, about the so-called "subconscious," which psychiatry and psychology long to discover. I know these things now, but I shall never speak. And I know a great deal more.

I know that the actual agony undergone by Henshaw and Mrs. Olcott and Percy Dean in reading the minds of others is as nothing compared to that which is born of reading one's own mind.

I stood before the mirror and *looked into my mind*—seeing there the atavistic memories, the desires, the fears, the self-deceit, the spawning madness, the lurking filth and cruelty, the slimy crawling secret shapes which dare not rise even in dreams; seeing the unutterable foulness beneath all the veneer of consciousness and intellect which is my true nature. Every man's nature. Perhaps it can be suppressed and controlled. But merely to realize that *it is there* is the supreme horror.

It must not be permitted.

I shall finish this account, presently. Then I shall take the "cheaters," as Joe Henshaw so appropriately called them, and destroy them forever.

The cheaters!

I shall use a revolver for. that purpose; aiming it quite steadily and deliberately at those accursed instruments, and shatter them at a single shot.

And I shall be wearing them at the time. . . .

1948

Strictly From Mars

No such thing could exist! But it did, and it was linked with an eight-year-old child in an orphanage . . . with death.

THERE were three of us in the room—me, Bunny Hartwick, and the pink elephant.

Hartwick and I did all the talking. The pink elephant said nothing. He just sat there and looked at us. I knew that look. I've been drunk with Hartwick before.

We've never had the usual arrangement between editor and author. Bunny wouldn't buy my yarns if he didn't think they stood up, and I wouldn't send them to him if I didn't believe his magazine had something on the ball. But, professional relations aside, Hartwick and I were always good friends, and I looked forward to my trips to town.

Tonight, as we sat in his apartment and held our little session over the Scotch, we'd reached the stage of kidding our own stuff. The pink elephant, not getting any attention, went away.

"You science-fiction hacks are all crazy," Hartwick snorted. "How do you get that way?"

"Associating with editors," I told him. "It's catching."

"I'm sane enough. I work for a living. Get a salary and everything," Hartwick answered. "But you writers—ye gods! Ought to hang out a sign. 'Worlds conquered while you wait—1c a word and up.' " He chuckled.

"Sometimes 2c a word, under a pseudonym." Hartwick raised his angular body from the sofa and strode up and down before the artificial fireplace. I had to shout my rejoinders as he paced.

"What would you s-f editors do without us?" I inquired. "You'd have to go back to digging ditches where you belong."

"That's more than you writers could do," he insinuated. "Ditch-digging is too practical for your kind. A science-fiction writer is a guy who knows everything about interstellar space but hasn't got enough common sense to find his way out of a phone booth."

Hartwick was in rare style. He not only handed me a rib; he barbecued it.

"What crummy specimens you authors are," he chanted. "Petty little introverts, crouching over your typewriters in flight from reality. Achoo!"

"Gesundheit!" I snapped. "What would the fans say if they heard you handing out such a line?"

"They'd probably agree with me. You see, it's not real fantasy or science-fiction itself that gets me down. It's just the type of person writing it. I'm a great believer in science-fiction, but the authors are utterly incredible. Achoo!"

"God bless you and nuts to you," I replied. "Kindly quit walking and talking in circles. You like science-fiction, then, but you don't like the way we write it—is that the argument?"

"No argument about it. Self-evident. What is science-fiction today? A never-never land where all the Martians call their planet 'Mars'. A marijuana nightmare where brains grow big as watermelons and worlds collide in a game of cosmic billiards. That's the sort of thing you authors turn out. While all around us move marvels far greater than your poor concepts.

"I'm serious." Hartwick sat down, facing me with an intent stare. "For example, I recently ran across a woman who runs an orphanage and she told me—"

"Skip it." I stood up, swaying slightly. The pink elephant had suddenly returned, and I had a definite urge to get out of there before it stepped on me. “I’m going back to the hotel,” I announced.

“Don’t go, Dan.” Hartwick was suddenly earnest. “I want to talk to you. Seriously.”

“Not now. You win the argument.

I agree with you. Science and fiction don’t mix. Neither do Scotch and straight gin. I’m going to bed.”

“But—”

“We’ll discuss it tomorrow,” I said. “Goodnight.”

“Achoo!” said Hartwick.

On which remark we parted. I rode back to my hotel in a cab, laughing in a rather inane and befuddled fashion as I thought of our discussion. Of course Hartwick had won the argument. There was nothing to argue about. We science-fiction writers did deal in fairytales. Our situations were incredible, utterly falsified.

“Just a fake,” I mumbled to myself, as I stooped and inserted my key in the lock of the hotel-room door. I walked in, switched the light on in the empty room.

And then the voice rustled forth—the voice, whispering from empty air in my hotel room.

“Mars calling Earth,” it whispered. *“Mars—calling—Earth!”*

CHAPTER II

YOU know how it is. It just doesn’t happen that way. You write it a hundred times. Sure. There’s only one way to do it. You have a lovable old Professor, see? And he’s sitting in his laboratory with this young jag—a college athlete with a remarkably high I.Q. Boy, what an I.Q. he has! They’re waiting for the Professor’s beautiful daughter, lovely goldenhaired, laughing-eyed Sandra Mefoofsky.

And then the college jag points to the big silver doo-hickey in the corner and naively inquires, “What’s that there stuff, hey?”

The Professor, with a $64 gleam in his eye, replies (in a page and a half of bowdlerized scientific terminology) that it's a receptor-disk communicating with Mars.

So the college jag remembers his I.Q. and says, "Don't hand me none of that stuff," and then the beam goes on and the squeaky voice says, "Mars calling Earth."

Get the old dramatic buildup? That's the way it happens when you write it.

But I wasn't writing it, I was living it.

And the voice was whispering, *"Mars calling Earth,"*

I heard it. I might have been drunk when I opened the door, but I was sober now. Sober enough to search the room for wires. There was no inlet, no outlet. No concealed amplifier.

I opened the window. Nothing there but the drop to the street below.

So I stopped being sober and was drunk again. I had to be. Now I understood. Up at Hartwick's place it had been a pink elephant. Now it was a whispering voice from Mars.

"Mars calling Earth. Mars calling Dan Kenny."

My name! Why not? Why shouldn't a hallucination know my name? It was my hallucination.

It didn't frighten me a bit. I decided to answer it.

"Sorry. The line is busy."

"Mars calling Dan Kenny."

"You must have the wrong number." The voice was patient. So very patient. "Mars calling—"

"All right! I'm Dan Kenny. What the hell do you want?"

"Your help."

"Help for what?"

"Conquering the world."

I began to wish the pink elephant would show up again. Pink elephants I can handle. I can understand them. But when a corny plot comes to life —"Listen," I said, feeling foolish as I addressed the empty air. "Listen, you cheap practical joker, whoever you are—show your foolish face or I'll call the desk. I'll call the cops."

So far it was all regulation. Strictly formula. Any hero would have said and done the same things.

But from that point on, things went wrong. You see, I didn't call the cops. I didn't move. I stood there, swaying, while the voice whispered to me.

It whispered to me from far away; just a voice buzzing in my brain, telling me secrets; secrets from beyond the stars.

That sounds good, but it wasn't good. It wasn't the sort of thing for a man in my condition. But I had to listen. The voice compelled, even though my head reeled beneath a weightless burden of impalpable evil. For the voice told me things, and when I could understand, when I got a grip on myself again, I listened to the message.

"—from Mars, of course. Just a scouting party, as it were. But we are equipped to transform our activities to those of an advance guard, an engineering corps, and lay the groundwork. Naturally, it is helpful to have spies in the enemy's camp. That's why we thought of you."

"Why me?" I choked.

"Because you have the type of intellect we need. An imaginative temperament. Your work has pre-conditioned you to the alien. You're not hidebound by prejudice, afraid of the seemingly unknown. And your creative ability will be of use in planning our moves. As a writer of science-fiction—"

"Hold on a minute." It seemed silly to be arguing with a nightmare, but what would *you* do?

"In the first place," I said, "if you think I'm going to be of any help in building disintegrator machines or operating death-ray guns, you've had a bum steer, friend. I'm just a fantasy writer, see? And—"

"We know." The voice rustled on. "And it does not matter. Our plans do not involve any such childish concepts. What we have in mind is definitely within your compass. You have been thoroughly investigated. And you come well recommended."

"Recommended? Who rec—?"

"I cannot say at this time."

"What's all this about an 'investigation' ?"

"We know all there is to be known about you." The voice began to drone, as though reading from a written report. "Daniel J. Kenny, age 29, single, height 6 feet, two inches, weight 182, eyes blue, hair black, complexion—"

THAT was only the beginning. For fully five minutes the voice continued, giving a minute physical description, followed by an accurate and painstaking summary of the circumstances of my birth, childhood, youth, education, career, and present status.

I let the whispering subside and assumed a belligerence I did not feel.

"Wonderful!" I shouted. "You must have been reading my mail!"

"Your mind."

The whisper came. And then the voice began to tell me things. Things I'm ashamed to repeat. About my thoughts . . . my secret thoughts. I don't like to remember that part. I've always hated the idea of psychoanalysis. I've always been afraid to get too drunk, or go under ether, or submit to hypnosis. But this was worse. Much worse.

Let me see if I can explain it, put it across. Because the way the voice talked to me—that was responsible for my subsequent belief in it. When the voice told me *everything* about my secret self, I *knew.* Knew it wasn't a dream. Knew that its fantastic hintings had a basis, some kind of basis, in reality. I began to believe that it—and what it represented—could conquer the world. With my help, or without it. And then my dreams crystallized.

The voice from Mars had investigated, all right. It knew that under the drunken masquerade of my conversation with Hartwick lay a real and burning rebellion. A hatred of the world, of its conventions, its smug money-is-power standards.

The voice was subtle, persuasive. It told me of my hidden lust for conquest, for revenge. Revenge against the petty frustrations of existence. Revenge against the real world which I had despised. That's why I had written stories of other, imaginary worlds.

And now a voice from another world—a world I had always regarded as imaginary—was talking to me. Urging me to join with it and take my real revenge.

Why not? I was drunk, reckless. Footloose and fancy-free, with a burning desire for power. Now, miraculously, my chance had come. A voice, greater than the voice of Mephistopheles that tempted Faust, offered me everything.

So I answered. "I'll see you in hell first!" I shouted. "Damn and blast you, wherever and whatever you are! You'll never take earth—get out of here and leave me alone. You—"

I exhausted my self and my vocabulary of profanity until I realized that I was swaying around in a hotel room, cursing the empty air.

There was no reply. I blinked, rubbed my bleary eyes, and realized that it must have been a dream. I reeled over to the open window and gulped the fresh night air.

The swaying beam of the fire-escape above the window caught my eye.

Could some damned practical joker have crept out on that beam and crouched there to whisper through my window?

It had to be that way. Unless it was all a drunken fancy. Or—unless it was *real.*

But it couldn't have been real.

I went to bed fully convinced of that. Then I fell asleep and began to dream. And the voice came to me again in dreams, and I woke cold with sweat, screaming, "No—I won't—no!"

I was behaving like a science-fiction hero, after all.

CHAPTER III

WHEN Bunny Hartwick called from downstairs I was still in bed. I got up, put on a bathrobe, and had just finished ducking my head in the wash-basin when he came in.

Bunny, immaculate in a summer suit, lifted an eyebrow as he took in my ensemble.

“Hangover?” he inquired.

“Worse than that,” I answered.

“What’s up?”

“Sit down and I’ll tell you,” was my suggestion.

So Bunny Hartwick sat down. So I told him. I told him everything and waited for the explosion.

It never came. Bunny Hartwick leaped forward, gazed at me with baby-blue eyes peering deeply into mine, and said, “Why didn’t you take the offer?”

“Are you kidding?”

“No. But I hope you are. Here’s the biggest opportunity of a lifetime—the biggest opportunity in all history—and you’re throwing it away. Just throwing it away.”

“Listen, pal,” I drawled. “Did you by any chance happen to be hanging outside my hotel-room window, on the fire escape, making like a voice from Mars?”

Hartwick shook his head, gravely. “No.”

“All right. I believe you. But don’t you think that somebody else was? You don’t mean to say that you believe this monkey-business?”

“Of course I believe it,” Hartwick coughed delicately, then sneezed. “As a matter of fact,” he said, “I sent that messenger to you.”

“You did *what?”*

“I sent the voice from Mars. Or rather, that entity which manifested itself to you as a voice.”

“But—”

“I thought it over very carefully before deciding to do so. I attempted to analyze your personality in the light of your probable reaction. I trust that I haven't misjudged my man."

"You mean, then, that you're actually in league with these things—whatever they are—in an attempt to—"

"Conquer the world? Of course." Hartwick's eyes were no longer baby-blue. The sapphire stare was cold, piercing.

"I'm not the only one, either. There are others waiting; other authors, in particular. The voice came to me, you see, and I sent it to the others. We are laying the groundwork now. And I'd like to see you on our side when the time comes. The time is coming, swiftly; never doubt that! We have plans.

"You will remember our conversation last night. I spoke of the difference between your writer's concept of the incredible and how it pales when contrasted with true incredibility made actual. I wasn't just garbling metaphysics. I meant it. Right now, all around you, our little plans are working. I mean today, this very moment! We are operating, hastening the day when the structure of the world will collapse and the Martians take over." I might have doubted his sanity, but I couldn't doubt his sincerity. He believed it—and for the moment, I believed it, too.

"You'd sell out the world, sell out mankind then, to these monstrosities from outside?" I muttered. I rose to my feet and clenched my fists. The gesture was maudlin but sincere.

Hartwick shrugged, stood up "Why not? They'll need help in running the new world. They'll want some of us, then. And in return, we shall have power. Power undreamt of by a Hitler, a Napoleon. You and I, with minds broad enough to think in ultra-terrestrial terms, with vision encompassing more than the petty scope of earth, can assume our rightful places in the new regime. A few of us, kindred spirits, will rule it all. What you sweated out at a penny a word will become a reality bringing riches beyond compare. And it won't be hard, Dan. We have our plans all laid. Nothing can stop us. It's reached that stage. That's why I wanted to talk to you. Let me explain just what it is we mean to do, how we are going to do it. Let me —"

“You—you—cosmic quisling!” I exploded. “Get out of here. Get out before I break your neck!”

I was really angry, because you don’t talk to editors that way.

“Dan—listen to me. Be sensible. I want you to see this thing, recognize its inevitability. Perhaps if I tell you how it all started, rip away the veil of cheap mystery, you’ll understand.”

“I understand it right now.” I grabbed Hartwick by the collar and backed him across the room. “You’re insane, that’s what I understand. Whether this Martian threat is real or imaginary, you’re insane to consider it. You want to betray mankind, do you?

Perhaps the authorities ought to hear about this.”

A SNEER twisted across his distorted features as he struggled to free himself from my grasp. “What will you tell the authorities?” he mocked. “That you came home drunk last night and heard voices in your room? That a man from Mars asked you to help conquer the earth? You know where that will get you, Dan.”

“Nevertheless, I’m going to try it.” I released Hartwick, turned, strode towards the phone.

Hartwick moved behind me. He passed the writing desk. His hand swooped down, came up with a pointed object. Then he lunged.

I turned just in time. I jerked my head aside as the point of a paper-knife shredded the collar of my pajamas.

Hartwick gasped, struck again. I clawed at his face with my left hand, and gripped his wrist with my right. The hand holding the paper-knife twisted down. We struggled together, as he stabbed out at me. His hatred crawled across his face like a livid flame.

“You won’t tell,” he panted. “You won’t tell!”

I bent his wrist. He kneed me. His free hand sought my jugular. He squeezed my neck. I saw his face blazing up through red haze.

My hand bent his wrist. He had to drop that knife. He had to. And then—his hand was free. The knife rose, slashed down. My elbow went out. I caught his arm, wrenched it. The knife continued in its vicious arc. It stabbed.

But it did not stab me. My blow sent the point of the blade into Hartwick's throat.

Hartwick uttered a little moan. Pink bubbles formed at the corners of his mouth. The paper-knife hung suspended in his neck, moving up and down like a delicate little teeter-totter. I watched it dully, as Hartwick sank to his knees. Then he fell over. The knife stopped quivering. So did Hartwick.

That's when I began to quiver. My eyelids quivered as I knelt beside him and felt for a non-existent pulse. My hand quivered as I picked up the cradle phone. My voice quivered as I croaked to the room clerk, "I'm coming down. There's a dead man in my room."

My legs quivered as I made the trip downstairs in the elevator. I was shaking all over as I told my story to the room clerk. I gasped it out between chattering teeth to the house dick.

"Accident, you understand," I kept saying. "It was an accident." Not very heroic, I must admit. But very, very true to life.

"Let's have a look," grunted the house dick. He peered at the room clerk. "Meanwhile, keep it quiet." The room clerk nodded.

Then the house dick grasped my elbow and we went upstairs.

I began to tell my story again as we went up. I couldn't stop talking. As I poured it out, I realized how unconvincing the whole thing sounded.

That's because my mind was on other things. Little details involving judge, jury, a lawyer, and beyond that, the shadow pattern of bars in a death-house corridor.

The house dick nodded, grunted, led me out of the elevator and down the hall to room 1415.

I had trouble getting my key in the lock. He stooped down, reached for his own key-ring, opened the door.

I walked into the room and he followed.

"There he is," I said. "On the floor. You see—"

"I don't see," said the house dick.

I stared.

There was no body lying on the floor.

CHAPTER IV

YOU'VE seen it in the movies.

I went through the whole routine. I looked for the paper-knife, and it wasn't there. I searched for bloodstains on a rug that held no bloodstains. And all the while I kept muttering, "But I killed him—I killed him, I tell you."

After a while, I stopped muttering and began to yell.

I suppose that's why they took me to Bellevue.

Oh, they were very polite about it, and quite efficient. And I tried to look at it with a sense of humor. But there was nothing funny in the glances they exchanged, the quiet orders dispatched, or the strong-arm methods in smuggling me out of the hotel by the back entrance.

In the ambulance I began to rave a little, and I told my story again at the top of my voice.

Then I was sitting at the doctor's desk, and he was smiling at me and nodding his head and listening in reasonable agreement. Of course I didn't have the d.t.'s. Naturally, somebody must have come in and moved the body while I was downstairs. The doctor could see that, he said. But now, if I'd just lie down and take it easy for a while—

That made me scream again. Or feel like screaming. I was just opening my mouth when an orderly came in and whispered something to the doctor. He, muttered, shrugged. I caught an exchange.

". . . released to his custody. Of course there are no charges. So . . ."

The doctor turned to me. "Mr. Kenny, this whole thing will be straightened out. Meanwhile, there's a friend of yours waiting to take you home. He’s in the outer office.”

I went to the door, opened it.

Then I passed out.

The last image impinging on my consciousness was too vivid to bear.

Sitting in-the outer office, clad in a bright sports-jacket, checkered scarf, and Calcutta straw hat, was Bunny Hartwick!

He was rising to his feet, walking toward me, smiling.

“There you are,” he said. “I was worried about you. I—”

The man I killed caught me in his arms as I pitched forward into a black vortex.

CHAPTER V

AS CONSCIOUSNESS returned, I fought. Fought against it. I wanted to stay down there in the dark, the friendly dark—the dark where there were no voices from Mars, no walking dead men.

I knew we were in a car, but I didn’t want to know where we were going. I knew Bunny was holding me upright in the seat but I didn’t want to open my eyes and see him. I didn’t want to talk to him, because if I heard his voice I’d know. Know that I was crazy. Know it hadn’t happened, except in my head. And when those things start happening in your head—

All the while, Bunny was talking to me in a soft voice. “When I tried to get you this morning, they told me at the desk. I rushed down to the hospital and did some plain and fancy talking. Don’t know what this is all about, but I’m not going to bother you with questions now, Dan.”

That was enough for me.

Hartwick hadn’t been in my room at all this morning. And if he hadn’t been there, I couldn’t have killed him. And that meant I *was*—

“—a little upset,” Bunny Hartwick was saying. “So I’m taking you up to Doc Anton’s place. You’ll like the Doc. Great character. He runs a little private san—rest home, on the edge of town. I’ve been there myself when the going got tough. I figure a day or two there will put you back in shape. After all, Dan, you're a valuable property. Got to take care of my authors, you know."

I listened, and still I wouldn't allow myself to fully awaken and face him. I sensed vaguely that there was something wrong with Hartwick's attitude. His colloquialisms struck a jarring note. I felt that he was forcing himself to assume a character role.

Then I realized that he must be humoring me.

All right. I was willing to be humored. I was willing to meet lovable old Doc Anton and spend a few days on his nut ranch, recuperating in a soft, downy straitjacket. I was willing to do anything if I could only go down into the black vortex again and forget. Perhaps when I snapped out of it I could figure the score. Something was rotten in Denmark, all right—but at the moment, I wasn't in condition to smell it.

"Here we are. Now pull yourself together, Dan."

The car stopped. I opened my eyes. We were parked at the head of an inner driveway. Behind us, a wide garden, sparkling in the afternoon sunlight. I caught a glimpse of high walls shielding the garden from the street.

Before us was a large, almost imposing brick house; three stories high, modern, but reminiscent of Colonial architecture.

Bunny rang the buzzer. The door opened. A tall man, dressed like an intern in the *Dr. Kildare* series, ushered us into a hall.

"Wait here," said Hartwick. "I'll talk to Doc."

I had a qualm. Of misgiving, naturally. A hell of a qualm. It made me tremble, jump forward, grab Hartwick by the lapels of the bright sports-coat. That was something, anyway—to feel solid flesh beneath my fingers. He wasn't a phantom.

"Bunny," I gasped. "It's all right, isn't it? You wouldn't kid a guy, would you?"

Hartwick smiled. "Sure it is. Take it easy, Dan." There was a normal light in his eyes, a reassuring smile. Could this be the same man who had whispered of obeying the voice from Mars?

Of course it couldn't. Because he hadn't whispered it—it was a figment of my imagination.

"You'll explain to this Doctor Anton? Tell him I'm not—"

"Sure. I'll stick by you. Just relax, now."

He turned to enter the room off the hall. I clutched his scarf.

"Don't go yet. I want to tell you—"

HE SHRUGGED me off. And I let go. My mouth closed suddenly, and my hands fell limply to my sides. I stared at his retreating figure and I couldn't move for a long time. I must have stood there for five minutes. All the while I was screaming—but I kept the scream inside my head.

I was very calm when the door opened and a soft voice said, "Please come in, Mr. Kenny."

I walked into the office-study of Doctor Anton and sat down. I was calmer than ever.

"You are Doctor Anton?" I asked. "Where is Mr. Hartwick?"

"He left by the other door."

"But—"

I never seemed to get a chance to finish my remarks any more. For Anton cut in. "I advised him to. I felt that it would be better if he did not see you again for a day or so. A painful association, no?" v

The "no?" caused me to look at Doctor Anton, scrutinize him carefully. I might be crazy, but I still was interested in good characters.

My scrutiny was well-rewarded. For Doctor Anton was definitely a type. He was a small, dark-haired little man, with a hyperthyroid bulge to his eyes.

Imagine Peter Lorre in a beard and you have Doctor Anton to the life. The accent, however, was missing. It was just as well. I had enough troubles without working Peter Lorre in on the deal.

"How do you feel?" asked Doctor Anton.

"Lousy," I replied. "It might help if you'd ask me to sit down and offer me a cigarette."

Anton chuckled and bustled around the desk. He indicated an armchair and pulled out a pack of straw-tipped Virginia Rounds.

"Mr. Hartwick has just told me an interesting story," he said, watching my fingers tremble as I lit a match.

"I'll bet he has," I answered.

"Naturally, I should be happy to hear the story in greater detail from your own lips," Doctor Anton told me. "That is, if you feel up to it."

"I'm up to it, all right," I snapped. The screaming had died away inside me. I *knew* now that I could speak with some conviction. So I did.

I told him. I began at the beginning and worked clear through to the end. Or almost to the end.

He sat there nodding and bobbing. He didn't take notes with a pencil, but my remarks were indelibly inscribed in his eyes. I told him about the drunken argument, the voice in my room, the visit of Hartwick, Hartwick's death, my trip to Bellevue, Hartwick's rescue.

Doctor Anton put his fingers together and pressed his left hand into his right in the best Charles Atlas manner. Dynamic tension and everything.

"I think I have a key to your—hallucinations," he told me. "Have you been working hard lately?"

That was my cue.

I let him have it right between the eyes.

"No. I haven't been working hard. And I haven't had any hallucinations. Throw your key away."

"What do you mean?"

"I thought I had hallucinations, until just a few minutes ago. Everybody *wanted* me to think I had them. I wanted to, myself.

"But now I know that everything I have told you actually happened. It's all true. About the voice from Mars, Hartwick's visit to me, and the—murder. I tell you, I killed Bunny Hartwick."

Doctor Anton leaned forward. His hand moved towards a buzzer, but I ignored that. Let him ring—I still meant to tell the truth.

“But Mr. Kenny, that’s impossible! Both of us saw Mr. Hartwick alive not fifteen minutes ago. He brought you here!”

“If he’s alive, then he’s a walking dead man,” I whispered.

“What do you mean?”

“He left me in the hall, to come in here. And I grabbed him to pull him back. I grabbed him by the neck, and his scarf came loose. I saw what that scarf concealed, Doctor Anton—*Bunny Hartwick’s throat, cut from ear to ear!”*

CHAPTER VI

AFTER that, of course, there was nothing left to do but lock me up.

It was a pleasant enough little room, if you don’t mind the bars on the windows. I was glad it was on the second floor. The two attendants had enough trouble dragging me up one flight of steps as it was. I was sorry for them, and sorry for Doctor Anton. Obviously he didn’t like these violent cases.

But he talked to me through the door and promised to bring Mr. Hartwick to see me, and yes, he would notify the authorities, and he himself would be up to see me tomorrow.

I guess I was ticketed for a hypo and the jacket, but a buzzer sounded in the hall and that seemed to mean something to both Anton and the gorillas who were wrestling with me on the bed.

They left in a hurry, and I stared at the twilight through the bars.

The struggle had been refreshing. I didn’t feel jittery any more. Telling the truth had brought emotional catharsis. Even though the truth was incredible.

Or was it? If you accepted the first principle—that a power from another world had entered this sphere—the rest was easy to take.

If Martian entities were indeed operating in a conspiracy to conquer the earth, then these developments were simple enough.

A voice had made me a proposition. Hartwick had vouched for its validity. Both voice and Hartwick told me that the Martian menace was real, unconquerable. I refused to play ball. I killed Hartwick.

Certainly, Martian science, Martian magic, Martian intelligence was probably equal to simple reanimation of the dead.

The invisible entity was in my room when Hartwick came this morning. I'd killed Hartwick, so naturally it upset plans a bit. The body had been removed, revived, and sent after me at Bellevue—for obvious reasons. It did not pay to have even a maniac babbling about a scheme of world conquest; particularly if the babbling could be tied up with the actual disappearance of a man implicated in the story.

Hartwick had to be revived, to make my story completely false. To prove that I was crazy—both to the authorities and to myself.

It was a sound scheme and it had almost worked—until I accidentally saw what was under the scarf.

Now I was here, a prisoner of Doctor Anton. Was he in on the scheme? If so, why hadn't he killed me already? Or—to make it mote interesting—how soon would he kill me?

I had a lot to think about during the next two hours. I thought on my feet, testing the bars on the windows and tugging at the door.

Definitely, I had a growing feeling that I wanted out.

But bars and door were more immovable than my determination.

Well, there I was. Strictly on ice in a private laughing-academy. What to do?

What would one of my heroes do under similar circumstances? Bend the bars, I suppose. But not for me—I couldn't write myself a grip of steel. As for battering down the door with my shoulder, that wouldn't work either. All I had in my shoulders was the padding put there by the tailors.

Besides, there was nothing very heroic about my actions up to now. I'd blundered into this mess like a dumb cluck, and only made it worse by acting without deliberation. If I'd had a brain in my skull, I'd never have told Doctor Anton the truth. On thinking it over, perhaps he wasn't in league with the Martians after all. In which case, if I'd only behave, he might release me after I became "normal" and "rational" again.

That was probably the best out. For me.

But was it the best out for—humanity?

After all, I *knew*. Perhaps I was the only man alive who did know of the existence of this thing, this threat hanging over the world. The only man alive who wasn't a part of the conspiracy and still had the facts.

IT WAS my hunch that I wouldn't be alive much longer. Moreover, it was my hunch that the "plan", whatever it was would be breaking soon. The blow might fall. If *they* could reanimate the dead; if *they* had leagued themselves with the best human brains and were employing human help—then the blow might fall swiftly.

The only way to prevent that was to get out of here.

How?

Maybe I wasn't so hot on the brute force angle, but I could use brains. Heroes sometimes use their brains, don't they? It all depends on editorial requirements, I guess. Hartwick was the kind of an editor who liked his heroes to use brains.

But I didn't care to think about Bunny Hartwick right now.

I began to plot. What about the old gag of luring an attendant in here by some ruse, then overpowering him and stealing the keys?

Out. That took muscles again, and my experience with the two gorillas had taught me I couldn't hope to win. Of course, in the usual story pattern, I'd bop the attendant over the head with a blunt instrument. Only Doctor Anton didn't believe in leaving blunt instruments around in his deep-freeze units for cuckoos. My room contained an iron bed, an iron dresser, and an iron chair, all bolted to the floor. The wash-stand in the corner was also a permanent fixture.

Wait a minute, now!

I bent and examined the washstand carefully. Sure enough, it had one of those gimmicks in the drain-pipe underneath. I've lost my plumber's union card, and I don't know what you call them, but there was a removable section of the drain-pipe which I could unscrew with my fingers. I did so. In a few minute's I was hefting about four inches of hollow steel, thick and heavy enough to dent the close-cropped skull of any attendant I'd seen.

Now to move over to the door and start a-whooping and a-hollering . . .

I moved over to the door, took a deep breath, and opened my mouth.

Then I let the air out with a gasp.

For a key clicked in the lock, the door opened swiftly and silently, then closed quickly.

A girl stood in my room.

"Shhh!" she whispered. "They're after me!"

CHAPTER VII

EVEN in a bedraggled and much-wrinkled housedress, I saw that she was a very pretty blonde.

I wouldn't have cared if she was a Hottentot.

"You're Dan Kenny?" she whispered.

I shook my head, up and down, up and down. It didn't look so good with my mouth open, so I stopped.

"Come away from the door," she murmured. "I want to talk to you."

"It would be a pleasure," I said.

"But why not wait until we get outside?"

"We can't go outside," she told me. "I've only got the key for this floor. Besides, I'm not so sure I want to go outside just yet. Not until I know."

"Know what?"

"That's why I want to talk to you. To find out whether or not I'm crazy."

"You might ask Doctor Anton about that," I suggested.

The blonde began to tremble. She sat down on the bed and her shoulders moved up and down in a hysterical rhythm.

"Not—him. He's a fiend."

I was glad to hear it. It sounded so reassuring.

But there were other things I had to hear.

"How did you get out?" I muttered.

"You mean—escape?" The girl looked up. She had brown eyes, a snub nose, even a few freckles. A sweet kid. In fact, one of the sweetest I'd ever met in a looney-bin.

"I noticed that there's a detachable section of pipe under my washstand," she told me. "So—"

"—you took the pipe, stirred up a rumpus until an attendant came in, and batted him over the head. Then you stole his key."

She almost smiled. "How did you know?" she asked.

"I was going to do it myself," I answered. And I *did* smile. Maybe she was nuttier than a fruitcake, but I admired her ingenuity. Great minds run in the same channels, and all that sort of thing.

Speaking of great minds—

"How did you know my name?" I asked.

"I heard Doctor Anton talking down the hall," she answered. "He said you had come here with a story about hearing a voice from Mars, and when I heard that I knew I must talk to you. At once. I must warn you, because I think they will try to kill you soon. Don't let him hypnotize you, whatever you do, and if the voice comes again, don't listen to it."

She got this out in about ten seconds flat. I took her arm and squeezed, hard. "Easy does it," I said. "Relax!" She blinked, but her breathing gradually subsided. I listened until the respiration sounded normal, then proceeded gently.

"Let's take it slow," I began. "Why do you think Doctor Anton would try to kill me?"

"Because you've heard the voice."

"Have you heard it too?" I asked. "Yes. I've heard it. Now I know. Up until I learned about you, I thought it was all part of my—symptoms. I thought I was crazy and there was no voice? Don't you see? If we both heard the voice, the same voice telling the same things, then we can't be crazy. And then the rest wasn't a delusion, either. It really happened to me, all of it. And that means—"

"What happened to you?" I asked. "From the beginning, now."

I LISTENED to her with one ear, the other intent for sounds in the hall outside. All was quiet, and her whispered words traced a pattern in the twilight around us. The pattern took shape, grew. I didn't like the shape, or the growth.

But I listened.

"My name is Muriel Esterly. I am—was—superintendent in the Martha Peterson Orphan's Home. It's a private orphanage and school."

Orphanage? Who had told me something about an orphanage? I tried to think, then abandoned my evocative efforts to listen.

"We have about forty boys. It's small. Doctor Parrish is in charge of it, really; I'm just an assistant. And of course, I teach in the school. That's where the trouble started—in class. When they began writing things on the blackboard."

"Who?"

"Some of the boys. It had to be some of the boys. Though where those children—they're only ten or eleven years old, the oldest of them—ever got such ideas—"

"What did they write?"

"I don't know."

"Don't know?"

"I mean, I've never seen things like that. Some kind of picture writing. You won't understand when I tell you, but it *frightened* me to look at it. Because is wasn't just childish scribbling. It wasn't the stick-arm art that children always attempt with chalk. And it wasn't Egyptian or Indian or anything like that. I know, because I looked it up.

"But I'd come into the classroom in the morning and find those scrawls on the board. Whole series of them—lines and curlicues interspersed with figures. Figures of men with extra arms, and a sun and moon in conjunction, and pictures of animals and knives—I'm not telling this very well, but there was something *wrong* about those drawings. They were *arranged.* They formed a definite pattern. You couldn't look at them without knowing that they were a message."

"Message?"

"Yes. A cipher code message, a whole blackboard-full. Written in a language no child's mind could invent, but scrawled in a childish hand. As though one boy were telling all the others something which we grownups were not meant to hear."

"Did you—?"

Muriel Esterly anticipated my question with an impatient twitch of her blonde curls. "Of course. I tried everything. Some of my best boys were called in. I treated it as a game. But they were absolutely adamant. I couldn't get any of them to admit that they knew who did it. And they wouldn't even admit that it had been *done!* In fact, one of the boys told me that there was simply nothing on the blackboards at all!

"That was the beginning. I asked Doctor Parrish, of course. I invited him to come in with me, on the fifth day, to see for himself.

"He did! And when we entered the classroom that morning, the blackboard was empty!

"They had erased it. I tried to show Doctor Parrish the marks of erasure—but of course it didn't prove that these queer figures had been erased. He looked at me rather strangely and went out.

"And the boys laughed. Later that day I told Mr. Hartwick, and he laughed, too."

Hartwick!

IT CAME back to me, then. That first evening—God, was it only twenty-four hours ago?—he had been trying to talk to me seriously. What was it he had said when I cut him off and announced my departure?

"For example, I recently ran across a woman who runs an orphanage and she told me—"

So Hartwick figured in this matter, too! Whatever Muriel Esterly was about to reveal, I knew she wasn't crazy. I listened intently.

"Mr. Hartwick is a friend of Doctor Parrish. He's an editor of a chain of magazines here in town. You know, those nauseating, lurid blood-and-thunder things."

I knew, and I winced at the description. Sitting here in a madhouse, she was denouncing fantasy magazines to me! Life's little jokes, number 131313.

"He comes to visit Doctor Parrish quite often, and brings stacks of his magazines for the children. Naturally, I don't approve of such literature for the young, but Doctor Parrish doesn't object, so he passes them out regularly. The children are quite fond of him."

I didn't think they'd be so fond of him from now on. A man walking around with his throat cut isn't likely to win many popularity contests. But I kept my ears open and my mouth shut.

"Mr. Hartwick was quite interested. He didn't seem to think it at all odd when I told him about the blackboard writing. So that encouraged me to tell him about the other things I was beginning to notice. The games, for instance.

"During the recess periods and the yard-play after school, I'd happen by and see that some of the boys were playing strange games."

"Strange? How do you mean?" Her hands fluttered helplessly. They didn't flutter like wounded birds. They fluttered like hands, helplessly.

"I can't explain it at all well. Except that when you're around children a lot, you make it your business to know them, you subconsciously come to know the games they play. Hide-and-seek, Red Light, all the others. But now some of them were playing *new* games. They would squat on all fours and run around the yard while others followed them and kicked at them.

"For a while I suspected that the squatting ones were emulating prisoners-at-war, but I soon discovered my error. Because they were talking queerly, too. Gibberish. Utter gibberish. But gibberish that sounded like those blackboard scribbles looked."

It was a poor sentence, but I caught the thought. Caught it and didn't like it.

"Then, all at once I realized the truth. Realized that whatever they were doing, it wasn't *play.* They didn't smile or laugh or shout. They were serious, and they whispered. They were *learning* something."

That's where Muriel broke down.

I consoled her and shook her and listened, all at the same time.

"I can't tell you," she sobbed. "It just got worse and worse. They wouldn't talk to me any more, none of them would. And at night they would whistle and the whistles were signals. Doctor Parrish thought there was something wrong with *me.* They hid it from him, of course.

"But I told Mr. Hartwick and he seemed to understand. That is, until I came to the part about the voices."

This was what I was waiting for, too. I paid close attention.

"You see, I had to know what was going on. So the night before, I waited until they were all in bed for the night, up in the big dormitory. Then I climbed up to the transom and eavesdropped. You see, I thought that if somebody had introduced a secret society or a 'club' of some kind, they might hold a meeting after lights were out. They might talk then.

"But all I heard was a lot of whispering sounds, and then a sobbing. The sobbing suddenly became a shriek. I looked over the transom and saw them. There were five or six around one bed and they were—they were trying to kill Peter!"

It was the cue for another breakdown, but she controlled herself. Watching her swallow I said to myself, this girl has guts. And answered, inwardly, she'll probably need them!

Aloud, I said, “Peter is one of the boys?”

“Yes. A special favorite of mine. He’s only eight, and the cutest little towhead. But—”

A LOOK came back into her eyes, a quaver came into her voice, and she went on, slowly. “They had him down on the bed, and Tommy, he’s the oldest, almost twelve, was swinging a water-pitcher at his head, and I jumped down and jerked open the door, and they scuttled away and I picked Peter up and—”

She couldn’t stop until I grabbed her shoulders.

“I know,” I whispered. “It must have been pretty dreadful.”

“I carried Peter, still sobbing, into my own room. And he told me about the voice. Doctor Parrish wasn’t in, yet, or he would have heard it, too.

“They were killing Peter because he wouldn’t obey the voice, he said. What voice? The voice that came into the room every night and whispered to them while they were asleep. It was a voice from another world, and it promised them things. Promised them that if they learned certain things now, they would grow up to be big and strong and powerful. The voice told them that it would come down and play with them. But it couldn’t come unless they would go to sleep and let it in.

“I asked Peter what he meant by letting it in, and he said that Tommy and lots of the other boys let it into them, so that when they woke up in the middle of the night, for a little while they would act strange, as though the voice were inside of them. Then they would go down and write on the blackboard and they would wake up the others and tell them about new games to play and teach them to talk in a funny way. After that they wouldn’t remember anything about it—about the voice being part of them, that is.”

Muriel glanced up. “Do you know what he was trying to tell me?” she whispered.

“Yes,” I said. “Demoniac possession. The entrance of another spirit into the body of a small child.”

“Do you understand how I felt then?” the girl panted. “Hearing these things from the lips of an eight-year-old boy? It was mad, it was fantastic—but they’d tried to kill him because he wouldn’t join in.

“He wouldn’t learn the language, or the games, or the signals. He’d threatened to tell me. And so they were going to kill him. Do you understand?”

“I understand.”

“Mr. Hartwick didn’t. He looked at me very strangely. Then he mumbled something and went off to speak to Doctor Parrish. I wanted to see Doctor Parrish myself, before the day’s classwork began. I wanted to tell him about Peter, who had slept the rest of the night in my bed. I don’t know what I expected him to do—but I knew we had to do something.

“So I followed Mr. Hartwick and broke in on his meeting in Doctor Parrish’s study. And I told Doctor Parrish just what I’m telling you, now.

“They kept looking at each other, and then Mr. Hartwick suggested we go and find Peter.

“We did. But Peter wasn’t in my room. He was in class, with the other boys. And when we went in everything was all right. Do you hear me? Peter was smiling and happy, and when I asked him to tell us about last night he laughed, and when I repeated my story in front of him he said I was lying, and Tommy and the other boys all said I was lying. They said there were no games, and no whistles or signals and no blackboard writing or anything.

“So Mr. Hartwick said perhaps I’d better come along here with him and meet Doctor Anton.”

I FROWNED into the darkness. The rest I knew. She had come here and they had convinced her that she was screwy and locked her up. Here we were. Two birds in a gilded cage.

"At first Doctor Anton was very kind and polite. He let me go downstairs to eat with the orderlies—there are three of them here, you know.

"But after *I* heard the voice, everything changed."

"You actually heard the voice?"

"Yes. It came at night, to my room. It whispered to me a lot of things about Mars."

Right back where I started again. Mars.

"Let me tell you now," I suggested. So I told her that the voice had whispered that her suspicions at the orphanage were correct. Something was talking to the kids, something was even taking temporary possession of their bodies. Entities from Mars were planning to conquer the earth. And part of that plan involved the training of children. Get them while they're young. Get orphans, without family ties. Train them for the new world to come. Teach them the language, the secrets, the elementary principles of the new science, the new magic.

This last was just a guess. But she nodded.

"And it offered you a chance to participate, didn't it?" I asked. "And you refused. So you told Doctor Anton and he locked you up."

"Not just yet." Muriel whispered hoarsely and leaned forward. "First he hypnotized me. When he learned that I had refused, he hypnotized me. At the time I believed him when he said he was trying a psychiatric technique. Now, of course, I know that he was in league with the voices. Because he hypnotized me and made me do something."

"Do what?"

Muriel turned away. "I can't tell you that. But after it was done, he locked me up.

"I thought I was crazy, until I heard him talking about you tonight, in the hall. And now—"

"What's that?"

Footsteps sounded outside. They didn't halt before my door, but padded on down the hall.

"I must go," the girl gasped. "I'll slip the key back in his pocket."

"Leave this door unlocked," I commanded. "I'll come for you after awhile."

She nodded, raced across the room, and whirled out in the darkness. A second later I heard the lock click again. She'd locked me in.

"Muriel!" I whispered. "Come back."

The hall without was utterly silent. The girl was gone. Somewhere up the corridor a voice began to howl. A laughing hyena joined in the chorus from upstairs. In a moment the place was shaking beneath the ululating impact of madness given tongue.

I went back to the iron bed, threw myself down on the sagging mattress, and drifted off to dreamland as my demented companions gibbered their serenade.

CHAPTER VIII

"WAKE up!" The voice barked in my ear. A hand shook my shoulder. I blinked, opened my eyes to the sunlight.

A fine hero I was. Instead of quickening into life at the first intimation of a tread outside my door, I let a heavy-footed attendant lumber into my room and grab me around the neck without even becoming conscious.

I woke up now with a start as the attendant bent over me and mumbled, "How about some breakfast?"

It wasn't a bad idea, at that.

He brought in a tray, propped it up against my knees, then sat down in the iron chair and watched me eat.

I breakfasted, wondering whether or not to reach under my pillow, drag out my pipe, and part his hair with it.

Better not. Muriel had said that they only carried keys for the rooms of a single floor. Somebody would be waiting downstairs, in all probability, to block my exit. Besides, if I left now, what would happen to the girl? More important, what would happen to me?

I'd be free, for a while, but the moment I tried to tell my story I'd get the same reception I received from the hotel dick or the boys at Bellevue.

No, there was only one way out of this mess. I had to get to Doctor Anton and make him sing.

How?

The attendant stood up, scratching a bristly chin. He yawned, blinked, shuffled his feet. An engaging performance all around.

"Come on," he said. "Doctor Anton wants to see you now."

I almost kissed him. Then I remembered the bristly chin and let it go. But I did flash him a great big smile.

"Let's go," I said, climbing out of bed. My clothes were a trifle wrinkled, but he didn't offer any valet service. Doctor Anton would have to endure my sartorial disarray somehow. And a few other things, too.

We took a stroll down the hall. I tried to sneak a look into the other cells as we passed, but I seemed to have mislaid my X-ray vision this morning. I didn't see Muriel, or the hyena boys of last night's concert.

We tripped lightly down the stairs, and there I was, back in Anton's office once more. The attendant closed the door behind me, and locked it. I made a dive for the desk.

Then another door opened, I jammed the desk drawer shut, and dived for a chair. I was sitting very quietly as Doctor Anton stepped into the room.

Anton wore a new white jacket, but he still had the same old beard. He had the same old smile, too, but it didn't impress me so favorably today.

"How do you feel this morning, Mr. Kenny?" asked Anton, as he sat down and went into his finger-pressing exercises.

"Very well, thank you."

The fingers intertwined on the desktop.

"And how did you enjoy your little visit with Miss Esterley?"

I gulped. "Uh—oh, *that.*"

Doctor Anton shrugged. "I'm sorry about that, Mr. Kenny. She wouldn't have bothered you if it hadn't been for a bit of carelessness on the part of one of my orderlies. I have taken steps to see that there will be no more such carelessness."

This I could well imagine. But I said nothing.

"A pitiful case, that girl." Doctor Anton didn't look as though he thought it was so pitiful. Delusions of persecution, you know."

"She sounded sane enough to me," I answered.

"Sane? But my dear sir, she's a murderess, and—"

"Murderess?"

"Oh, didn't she tell you that?" Anton got up and reached around to open the top drawer of a file, labelled *A-F.*

"It happened after she came here," said Doctor Anton, rummaging around in the files. "She escaped, went back to the orphanage, and killed a little boy named Peter."

I KNEW it was a lie. But at the same time I remembered something Muriel had told me at the last. "He hypnotized me and made me do something."

"Do what?" I had asked. And her answer, "I can't tell you that. But after it was done, he locked me up."

This exchange moved through my memory as Doctor Anton went on talking.

"Fortunately, your friend Hartwick was on hand when the—tragedy—occurred. He understood and showed remarkable presence of mind. Instead of turning her over to the authorities, he brought her back here. You see, she was not responsible, poor girl. Here she can be cured. But the shock of arrest, a trial, and subsequent incarceration in a state asylum would permanently derange her. I do not hold with the methods employed in state institutions."

I was willing to bet he didn't. Doctor Anton had his own methods, and the state institutions wouldn't care for them, either.

"So that's what happened," I said.

"That's what happened." Doctor Anton smiled, sorrowfully, wistfully.

I was just as wistful as I stared at him. “The hell it did,” I told him. “Muriel Esterley never killed anyone in her life. You hypnotized her, allowed her to escape, planted the suggestion in her mind that sent her to the orphanage. She probably believed she was killing somebody—you’d see to that. And Hartwick didn’t just “happen” to show up there and bring her back, either. It was all part of your damned scheming. Nobody died, Doctor Anton.”

“Oh, didn’t they?” He turned from the file, extended a newspaper clipping.

“TRAGEDY AT ORPHANAGE” I read. The story was simple. Peter Ericson, age eight, found strangled in room of Muriel Esterley, former assistant superintendent . . . Miss Esterley had been missing for a week . . . police seeking clue as to her whereabouts . . .

There was a lot of it. And it made me shake.

“You see?” shrugged Doctor Anton.

“Yeah. I see. And it doesn’t prove a thing. If the child died, you killed him. Or Hartwick. Or one of the others. And arranged it so that the police—and Muriel—would believe she had done it. You can stick that newspaper clipping in your files, Doctor Anton. I’ve found out what I wanted to know. You’re in on this Martian deal, like the others.”

Anton sat down. He began his finger-pressing act once more.

“I’m sorry to hear that, Kenny. Yesterday you had some delusions about a voice from Mars and Mr. Hartwick. Another persecution complex. Today your condition seems to be worse. Now I am included in your list of imaginary enemies. I am afraid there is only one thing to do. We must resort to psychotherapeutic technique. A little mild hypnosis—”

“You want me to kill somebody, too?” I grated. “To hell with that noise.”

The answer lacked dignity, but carried conviction.

“You can’t hypnotize me unless I am willing to cooperate,” I told him. “And I’m not cooperating. I’m not going to touch any food, either. You can’t shoot any dope into me. I’m on guard now, Anton. You can’t harm me.”

“Oh no?” The hands stopped playing. A pudgy finger pressed a buzzer. The assistants would be on their way in a moment—

I PULLED a gun out of my pocket and showed it to Doctor Anton. He examined it curiously, noting that the muzzle was directed at his fat little belly.

“Found his in your desk drawer before you came in,” I explained. “It seems to be loaded. When your gang gets here, I’d advise you to shout at them through the door and tell them not to disturb us.”

Anton looked into my eyes, looked into the muzzle of the gun, sighed, nodded, and fell silent. Footsteps echoed outside the door.

“It’s all right,” he called. “I don’t need you.”

The footsteps moved off.

Anton shrugged. “Now what do you intend to do?” he asked.

“You are coming with me,” I ordered. “You will release Miss Esterley and myself. The three of us will step down to police headquarters and I’m going to do the talking.”

Doctor Anton stood up. “Very well. But I must warn you. It isn’t exactly safe for you to enter police headquarters. You forget that you’re a murderer yourself.”

“What do you mean?”

“You killed Mr. Hartwick. Bunny Hartwick.”

I gasped. “Wait a minute. Yesterday you pointed out to me that Hartwick was alive. You said I couldn’t have killed him, because he brought me here. You said it was a delusion. You said—”

“That does not matter. Would you be convinced if I showed you the body?”

“Yes,” I whispered. “But no funny stuff.”

Doctor Anton moved toward the second door. I had the gun ready. I was prepared for any trap lying beyond that doorway. None of these damfool hero blunders for me. I’d written too many to be taken in by one just now.

We entered the room beyond. It was, at first glance, a small laboratory with closets lining the walls. Then, as I stared more closely at the stone slab serving as a table, I revised my judgment. This was no private laboratory—it was a private dissecting room and morgue!

I had been prepared for any trap, but not for this. Not for this, lying cold and stiff on the table, lying cold and stiff in death, with the handle of the paper-knife still buried in the throat.

Rigid with *rigor mortis,* the body of Bunny Hartwick lay stretched on the stone table, and I met the ghastly grin of the man I killed!

CHAPTER IX

I DIDN'T grin back.

There are limits you know. First I was crazy, then I wasn't crazy—it had been going on this way for thirty hours. The hand holding the gun began to tremble. I looked at it. But I couldn't make it stop trembling. The gun wobbled.

"Put it down," murmured Doctor Anton.

I put it down.

"Look at me," said Anton.

I looked at him.

Now I'd told him myself it couldn't be done. According to all the orthodox tenets of medical science, one human being cannot hypnotize another human being against his will.

I was confident of that. But—

"Look at my eyes," Doctor Anton whispered. "Look into my eyes. Look deeply."

And I looked.

For the first time I really stared at Anton's hyperthyroid eyes, and as he directed, I looked *into* them.

I saw . . . the voice.

The shell, the body, was Anton. But I saw the voice. And I heard the voice.

Behind those eyes was an incredible emptiness that was not empty, a silence that was not still, an absence that constituted a presence. Enigma, but a chilling, compelling enigma.

I began to understand, now. Doctor Anton was a masquerader. Hartwick must have been one, too. In reality it was the entity, the voice. I began to understand, but went no further.

For the eyes held me, transfixed my gaze, transfixed my thought.

One human being cannot hypnotize another against his will—but what was hypnotizing me was not a human being!

My body fell away. Anton's body fell away. The room fell away. There was only my brain, and those eyes. The eyes of the entity, boring into my being. The roaring around me was the mighty sussuration of empty space through which I plunged.

I felt the weight of a force—a force strong enough to conquer earth—directed against my psyche. And I succumbed. I knew that the voice was speaking, somewhere, and that my body was moving out of the room. We were climbing stairs, walking down the corridor of the second floor. Doctor Anton had the gun and he was leading me—but both Anton and I were just pictures. The real Anton, the real me, were still locked in a battle of eye and brain.

And now we were in a room and there was somebody else there, too, and a hand belonging to Anton's body was putting a gun in a hand belonging to my body, and a voice was telling me to shoot the other occupant of the room, and all the while the eyes and brain hung out there, a million miles away in roaring space. So that it did not matter what my body was doing at all—nothing mattered as long as I was away out there—and I raised the gun—

Empty space split asunder under the echo of the shot. The reeling universe dissolved as the eyes winked out. My brain hurtled back a million miles into my skull.

I opened my eyes.

Muriel Esterley stood at my side. In her hand she held the gun she'd snatched from between my fingers. A wisp of smoke coiled from the muzzle. Muriel was staring at the door.

The white-coated figure of Doctor Anton was stumbling out into the hall. A growing red stain had appeared between the shoulders.

There were little crimson stains on the floor, too—

"Dan! Are you all right?" gasped the girl.

"Yeah. What happened?"

"You came in with him and he gave you a gun. He told you to shoot me. He kept staring at you and you looked as if you were walking in your sleep. You took the gun and pointed it at me. I grabbed it from your hand and pointed it at Doctor Anton, and it went off."

"Hold it!" I grabbed her and shook her shoulders until her eyes opened again. Then I turned. "Come on. He went down the hall."

We followed. How Doctor Anton had ever made it down the stairs I'll never know. When we found him, back in the private morgue, there was a hole in his chest big enough to hold a cannon ball.

He'd slumped down on the floor next to the stone slab, and he was dead, quite dead. In fact, he was a little worse than dead. His skin was blue and cold—blue and cold as if he had been dead for months rather than minutes.

The thought hit me then. "Maybe he has. Maybe he *has."*

Then I turned away. I had to consider Muriel. Standing there, probably looking at the body of Hartwick up on the table—

I glanced at her. She was quite calm. Good girl. She looked at the stone slab stolidly.

I looked, too. But not stolidly.

For Bunny Hartwick's body was gone!

CHAPTER X

IT WAS lucky I sent her out of the room. “Search the files,” I commanded, hoarsely. “Dig up everything you think will be interesting. I’ll look in here.”

She left.

She could search for documents. I had other things to search for.

Those closets, now. Hartwick’s body must be in one of the closets lining the walls.

I opened the nearest one.

A body fell out.

It wasn’t Hartwick. It was the corpse of a woman in her early forties. She was wearing a tweed suit. She had been dead for perhaps a month. There was a refrigeration unit coil in the closet, and that had helped.

I opened another closet, and another. I found bodies all right. Eight of them. They were propped-up, glassy-eyed, cold as mackerel. Six men and two women. I didn’t recognize any of them. I didn’t care to be introduced, either.

There was a picture running through my brain, leaving its ghastly little footprints behind to scar my sanity. A picture of Doctor Anton standing in this room, with the closet doors open, looking at the bodies lined up against the refrigeration coils. Looking at them, and picking out a choice. The way a man chooses a suit, or a woman selects a hat. “Which body shall I wear today? My business body or my sports body, or just a casual body to lie around in.”

It was like something out of the Oz books. For my money, it could just as well have stayed in them.

But here I was, and here Hartwick wasn’t. I knew, now. The dying shell of Anton had dragged itself down here in order to transfer the entity to Hardwick’s body. Hartwick’s body had gone forth again into the world.

I looked around the room. Cased the joint. Saw that it was built for my purpose. Then I did something, and ran out of there, slamming the door behind me.

Muriel rose from her inspection of files and desk.

"These files are empty, blank," she exclaimed. "Just this—" And she looked away as she held out the orphanage clipping. I took it, crumpled it up. "Never mind. I've seen it. It's a fake." I hoped my voice carried conviction.

"These files are a blind, then," I went on. "He—or it—must carry all the information in his head. But where did he keep the dope on all the patients?"

"There are no patients."

"What?"

"I was the only one. I know. Those attendants told me."

"But last night—I heard them howling—"

"The attendants did that. When I got back, the fellow I'd hit had come to. He tied me down and went out. I could see them down the hall, talking to Anton. Then they went and howled before your door. To fool you. You see, this isn't a real sanatorium at all."

I SAW, all right. I wondered if some of the bodies in the other room had once belonged to actual patients.

"Where are they now?" I snapped.

"The attendants? I think they've gone." Muriel nodded. "The noise would have brought them in long before this."

"Good. Then I won't have to warn anybody, if the joint is empty."

"Warn them about what?"

"I've just set fire to this dump." I pointed at the door. Smoke was already curling out from under it.

I grabbed Muriel's elbow. "Let's go," I said. "We must get out of here."

She grabbed something from the desk.

"What's this?"

"A diary, I think. I found it in the desk drawer. There was nothing else."

"Good. Come on, then."

I stopped once, in the hall, to set fire to some drapes.

Muriel didn’t ask me why I was burning the place down. She didn’t need to.

We managed the lock on the front door and headed down the walk. But the gateway door proved impossible as a means of egress.

Smoke had begun to billow from the windows of the left wing.

“Around the back,” I panted. I led her across the lawn, through the back yard. Weeds choked the lawn. Evidently the grounds had not been tended for a long time.

One patch of earth, down in the corner, was curiously bare. The grass was seared away in a wide swath, and within the swath, ploughed earth was scarred and blackened as though a pit had been dug and a fire built within it. But there was no charcoal. Looking closely, I seemed to see a series of convolutions whorling the sides of the pit, as though something had bored down and into the earth.

Then Muriel hurried me along. We reached a latched gate in the high wall at the back. The gate was locked. The lock was rusty. I was desperate.

The lock broke, and my fingers nearly followed suit. But then we were out, and running down a pathway through a vacant stretch of wooded land. We reached a road and crossed it, ran down another street. Smoke smudged the horizon behind us. The place was burning, and I was glad.

The bodies—the bodies used in a grisly masquerade—were gone forever. But Hartwick still walked . . .

CHAPTER XI

WE SAT there as dawn filtered into the dingy double room of a cheap hotel downtown. Our faces loomed pallid in the sickly light, but we felt no weariness. There was only a gnawing dread and a strange strength born of panic.

Muriel looked at me. “I don’t understand it,” she said. “There’s nothing wrong with that diary. Nothing at all. Doctor Anton talks about his daily work quite openly, and about his patients, too. But we know he had no daily work and no patients. It doesn't add up."

"Yes it does," I said. "The last entry in that diary is dated two months ago."

Muriel's eyes registered blue bewilderment.

"Don't you get it? Two months ago, Doctor Anton died. Two months ago the entity—whatever it is and whenever it came from—killed Anton and entered his body.

"The patients were gotten rid of in a hurry. That private sanatorium became the lair of the voice from Mars. We must presuppose intelligence transcending all mundane order; intelligence great enough immediately to orient itself on earth. The voice in Anton's body passed itself off as human, masqueraded as Anton.

"Now we can gradually see a pattern. This entity's plan—as announced to us—involved the conquest of the earth. He must have contacted Hartwick, and others. At least, Hartwick told me so, when he was still—alive.

"What the plan is, we still cannot guess, but there are hints. Gradually the entity was seeking to build up a group of human allies. Renegades like Hartwick, and weak, susceptible minds—like your orphans."

"You mean?"

I told her about my theory of the orphanage being used as a sort of "training school" for the implantation of alien ideas.

Then I broke down and told her about the bodies I'd found.

She took it calmly.

"Now we can see that it was playing a double game with Hartwick and the others. Trying to make them believe that it was not one, but many creatures. By changing bodies frequently, it gave the illusion of having many human allies already. And probably, wearing the different forms at different times, it approached a number of groups and individuals—just as it tried to approach me.

"What happened to me is intelligible now. The voice must have come from the fire-escape, after all. One of those bodies housed it as it whispered to me in my drunken stupor.

"The next day, when Hartwick visited me, the entity must have accompanied it in a human body, lurking in the background to await the outcome of our interview.

"When I accidentally killed Hartwick, the entity left its other human body and entered his, in order to remove it as evidence from the hotel room.

"When I went to Bellevue, the entity—now posing as Hartwick—brought me to the sanatorium. Remember, I didn't see Hartwick and Anton together. Hartwick went into the office and Anton came out to greet me, saying my friend had left by another door. In reality, the entity switched bodies in the morgue room.

"Obviously, after you escaped and talked to me, both of us were ticketed to die. The entity hypnotised me, and I almost shot you. I suppose I'd have been turned over to the police if it had worked out that way.

"Instead, you killed Anton's body and the entity managed to enter Hartwick's and escape."

I SHUT up, then. I was fully conscious that this was no time to be making with the logical explanations—with the whole outcome of the story in midair.

The outcome of the story, hell! What interested me was a much more vital matter—what was going to happen to us with that thing still loose on the world?

Muriel wasn't helpful.

"But I still don't understand," she sighed. "Where did the entity come from? How did it enter into Anton's body? What plan has it for conquering the world?"

I grunted. "Continued next week," I said. But the questions haunted me. I had the usual visions of the destructions of the earth. The Empire State

Building falling down. The blowing up of the White House. An army of rocket-ships descending from Mars, and the warriors of the Red Planet—a bunch of crimson spider-men with goggled eyes—rushing around in the ruins and grabbing up a lot of half-naked women for souvenirs.

I would be somewhere in the background, a damp forelock plastered against my brow as I operated a ray-gun and tried to save Muriel from the clutches of a green monstrosity with three heads—Ex-pectah-Rayt, High Priest of Spitoon.

Such was my vision. But it was blotted out by an uglier reality.

Hartwick. Hartwick's body, gaunt and white, striding about the streets on a mission of death. Killing again and again, until it had many more bodies to enter. Finding a new lair, spinning a new web. Growing and growing, aided by misguided human tools. Gradually finding men in key spots, usurping positions in our highly mechanized world until a few hundred slaves in the right places, throwing the right monkey-wrenches simultaneously into the right machines at the right time, could actually plunge the planet into chaos.

The earth could really be conquered, that way. It was simple—if you transfer bodies at will. And with human help, it could be done soon. In a few weeks, perhaps.

And it would be done, unless—

"We've got to figure this out," I stormed.

"We can't go to the police." Muriel's voice broke. She was thinking of the clipping, of Pete—

"That's out," I snapped, hastily. "No, there's only the two of us, against it. Against whatever is in Hartwick's body."

I stopped. Then I said it again.

"Hartwick's body!"

"Yes?"

"Where would that body go now?"

"Why—"

"To the orphanage, of course. Don't you see? It will go back to the Martha Peterson Orphan's Home and start anew from there. That's its other base, its other lair."

"But why do you think it will go there?"

I stared at Muriel. I had to say it, but the words nearly choked me. "Because it thinks we will go there. And before it can go on, it must dispose of us. It will go to the orphanage to kill us.

"And when it comes—we must be there!"

CHAPTER XII

BRIGHT morning sunshine streamed into Muriel's private office at the Orphan's Home. I sat at the desk, trying to find a gun or a paper-knife, or something. Right now, it looked as though I'd have to fight my battle with a hairpin and two erasers.

"I wish Doctor Parrish were here," said Muriel.

"Lucky he isn't or we'd never have sneaked in," I grunted. "Never mind that. Arrange those flowers. We haven't any time to lose."

"But these flowers—"

"Do as I say," I snapped. "And don't interrupt. I'm thinking out loud. I plot better that way."

Muriel bent over the yellow blooms as I mumbled to, myself.

"One point is definite. There is one, and only one entity, and it's in Hartwick's body. I've got to count on that.

"Secondly, it appears the entity can change bodies only if the corpse it enters is newly dead or preserved in some way.

"Thirdly, and most important—in order to make a change, the two bodies must be in the same room. When Anton's body was shot, the entity had to drag the dying form downstairs until it was in the same room as Hartwick's corpse. Why? Obviously because the entity cannot survive in a bodiless state, and the exchange must be made at once.

"This same example would tend to prove that if you were to kill a dead body housing the entity—kill it *again,* that is—the entity cannot remain in it. It must seek another corpse at once. That's important.

"Now, when Hartwick comes here—if I only had a gun—"

"What would you do?"

I whirled. Muriel whirled. The room whirled.

The corpse of Bunny Hartwick stood in the doorway. I saw the gun I had been searching for—in Hartwick's hand.

It directed the two of us to the center of the room. We stood posed against the background of yellow blooms.

Hartwick's corpse shut the door. We were trapped. The small room was close, stuffy. A heavy scent filled the air. It came from the flowers—and from the corpse.

I began thinking of all the stories I'd read or written, where the villain holds the hero at bay with a gun. He usually begins to gloat over them and spill his guts about what a clever guy he is. Then the hero pulls a blackjack, or the cops arrive in the nick of time.

Only the cops weren't coming, and I had no blackjack—and the thing in Hartwick's body wasn't willing to play ball. I saw a cold, dead forefinger squeeze against the trigger—

"Wait a minute!" I gasped. If it wouldn't talk, I'd have to. I began to tell it, in a few words, just what I knew; knew and guessed.

The corpse of Hartwick stood there and I talked on, staring into those empty eyes through which blazed the burning essence of the alien entity itself.

"You see," I concluded. "I know it all. There are only two points I don't understand completely. One of them I can guess. You hypnotized Muriel here, and sent her out. When she returned, you told her that she had killed little Peter. But actually, the way I figure it, you had Hartwick kill Peter, to shut him up about the orphanage episodes. Then you planted clues leading to Muriel. Right?"

THE corpse-head bobbed solemnly in agreement. It was hideous to watch, but the smile that came to Muriel's quivering lips repaid me. At least she'd die knowing she was innocent.

The gun came up again—

"One thing more," I panted. The air was sticky, and an odor welled. "Just one thing more. The most important thing. I know you cannot exist without a human body, and I know that you cannot enter a living body. How did you ever take possession of Anton's body?"

The voice came, then.

"When I came from—"

I heard the word. I knew its meaning was "Mars." But the word was not "Mars" nor anything intelligible to human ears.

"You see," the voice hissed, "I was condemned."

"Condemned?"

"Condemned to extinction for a crime. My body was destroyed, but you cannot destroy the essence. We are eternal. So the essence had to be exiled, too. As essence, I was placed in a rocket-tube and catapulted into space.

"What you call 'Chance' caused the rocket to land on earth. In landing, it burst.

"You can guess where it landed, can't you? In the garden back of Doctor Anton's sanatorium. He was in the garden. The force of the explosion, right next to him, caused concussion and death. As I was liberated from my metal shell, I flowed into Anton's dying body. The rest you know."

I knew, now. I remembered our flight through the garden, and the peculiar scarred hole in the earth. That's where the rocket shell must have landed, the rocket shell that had brought the entity from Mars. And now that entity, in Hartwick's body, was—

I saw the finger press, and knew that this time nothing would intervene. The gun was at my breast, the finger squeezed the trigger, and—

"Achoo!"

It had come, and I was ready. I lunged across the room as the creature shuddered in its sneeze. The gun barked, but the bullet went wild. Then I went wild, and wrested the weapon from the corpse-cold fingers, twisted the muzzle towards the sneeze-racked throat, and fired. One, two, three shots blasted into the contorted body at close range. And Hartwick's body fell.

"Look!" gasped Muriel.

CHAPTER XIII

IT WASN'T exactly a sight for sore eyes.

From the riddled body of Hartwick, writhing in a second death, a milky phosphorescence welled in a coalescing stream.

I thought of de Maupassant's *Horla.*

I thought of screaming, too.

The image wavering in midair looked like a figure on a photographic negative. But what a figure!

There was a central blob, and attached to it, four pseudopods. Two appendages extended from the lower part and two rose from the middle of the trunk—if it was a trunk, and not just a great head. It might have been a head. I saw a huge maw, with serrated edges that were not lips. The eyes hung on twin stalks from the upper pseudopodic arms, and there seemed to be grasping suckers lining the inner surfaces of the lower appendages.

The whole body glimmered before my eyes, and I saw the entity—the voice—the essence from Mars.

It swooped closer to the desk. I saw the milky strands dissolve against its surface, as though seeking to filter into the desk. Then the figure turned and dashed against a chair. It moved sluggishly, but I somehow had the impression of a frantic haste.

The thing was seeking another haven, another shape to enter.

Then it flowed toward Muriel, and she cried out as the phosphorescence enveloped her. But it could not enter inanimate objects, or the living—

The jelly-like blob hung motionless for a moment. Then, abruptly, its transparency increased. The entire form seemed to dissolve into strands, then cobwebs. I saw it fading, breaking up into particles. The particles became motes. The motes became atoms. The atoms disintegrated. The ghost of a smoke-ring floated up towards the ceiling and vanished.

The entity was gone.

It was the cue for Muriel to pass out. It was the cue for me to remember that I was a hero, take her in my arms, and revive her.

We played our parts well.

Until, at last, I was murmuring to her, *“It’s* all over, baby. Pull yourself together, now. It’s all over.”

Muriel opened her eyes and gave me the business. It should have made me happy, but I scowled.

“What’s the matter, darling?” she whispered.

“I don’t like the ending,” I said.

“What ending?”

“Well, if I was writing this and putting myself in the role of hero, I’d have figured out a slick scientific trick to beat the villain and have the world. But my method was so crude.” I shrugged. “Still, it was the only thing that would have worked, I guess.

“The entity was too clever for us. I couldn’t cope with its ultra-mundane intelligence. But there was one thing it didn’t know that I did know.

“It was wearing Hartwick’s body, and I knew more about Hartwick than it did.

“So that’s where I took a chance. I made you put all this goldenrod around, and stalled here until it sneezed. And just in time, too. Lucky for all of us Hartwick suffered from hay fever.”

I sighed again and shook my head. “As an editor, the real Hartwick would never have approved of it. As I write, I don’t approve of it. But damn it all—hay fever has just saved the world!”

THE END

Catnip

The old woman and the cat, they were both ageless, both evil

I

RONNIE SHIRES stood before the mirror and slicked back his curly hair. He straightened his new sweater and stuck out his chest. Not bad! Had to watch the way he looked, with graduation only two weeks away and that election for class president coming up. If he could get to be class president, then next year, in high school, he'd swing a little weight maybe. Go out for second team or something. But he had to look sharp—"Ronnie! Better hurry or you'll be late!" Ma came out of the kitchen, carrying his lunch. Ronnie wiped the smile off his face. She walked up behind him and put her arms around his waist.

"Darling—I only wish your father were here to see you—"

Ronnie wriggled free. "Yeah, sure. Say, Ma."

"Yes?"

"How's about letting me have another buck, huh? I got to get some things today."

"Well, I suppose. But try to make it last, son. This graduation costs a lot of money, seems to me."

"I'll make it up to you some day, Ma." He watched her as she fumbled in her apron pocket and produced a wadded dollar bill.

“Thanks. Be seeing you.” He picked up his lunch and ran outside. He walked along, smiling and whistling, knowing Ma was watching him from the window.

Then he turned the corner, halted under a tree, and fished out a cigarette. He lit it and sauntered slowly across the street, puffing deeply. Out of the corner of his eye he watched the Ogden house just ahead.

Sure enough, the front screen door banged and Marvin Ogden came down the steps. Marvin was fifteen, one year older than Ronnie, but smaller and skinnier. He wore glasses and stuttered when he got excited, but he was valedictorian of the graduating class.

Ronnie came up behind him, walking fast. “Hello, Snot-face!”

Marvin wheeled. He avoided Ronnie’s glare, but smiled weakly at the pavement.

“I said hello, Snot-face! What’s the matter, don’t you know your own name, jerk?”

“Hello—Ronnie.”

“How’s old Snot-face today?”

“Aw, gee, Ronnie. Why do you have to talk like that? I never did anything to you, did I?”

Ronnie spit in the direction of Marvin’s shoes. “I’d like to see you just try doing something to me, you four-eyed little—” Marvin began to walk away, but Ronnie kept pace.

“Slow down, jag. I wanna talk to you.”

“Wh-what is it, Ronnie? I don’t want to be late.”

“Shut your yap.”

“But—”

“Listen, you. What was the big idea in History exam yesterday when you pulled your paper away?”

“You know, Ronnie. You aren’t supposed to copy somebody else’s answers.”

“You trying to tell me what to do, you sucker?”

"N-no. I mean, I only want to keep you out of trouble. What if Miss Sanders found out, and you want to be elected class president? Why, if anybody knew—"

Ronnie put his hand on Marvin's shoulder. He smiled. "You wouldn't ever tell her about it, would you, Snot-face?" he murmured.

"Of course not! Cross my heart!"

Ronnie continued to smile. He dug his fingers into Marvin's shoulder. With his other hand he swept Marvin's books to the ground. As Marvin bent forward to pick them up, he kicked Marvin as hard as he could, bringing his knee up fast. Marvin sprawled on the sidewalk. He began to cry. Ronnie watched him as he attempted to rise.

"This is just a sample of what you got coming if you squeal," he said. He stepped on the fingers of Marvin's left hand. "Sucker!"

MARVIN'S snivelling faded from his ears as he turned the corner at the end of the block. Mary June was waiting for him under the trees. He came up behind her and slapped her, hard.

"Hello, you!" he said.

Mary June jumped about a foot, her curls bouncing on her shoulders. Then she turned and saw who it was.

"Oh, Ronnie! You oughtn't to—"

"Shut up. I'm in a hurry. Can't be late the day before election. You lining up the girls?"

"Sure, Ronnie. You know, I promised. I had Ellen and Vicky over at the house last night and they said they'd vote for you for sure. All the girls are gonna vote for you."

"Well, they better." Ronnie threw his cigarette butt against a rose-bush in the Eisner's yard.

"Ronnie—you be careful—want to start a fire?"

"Quit bossing me." He scowled.

"I'm not trying to boss you, Ronnie. Only—"

"Aw, you make me sick!" He quickened his pace, and the girl bit her lip as she endeavored to keep step with him. "Ronnie, wait for me!"

"Wait for me!" He mocked her. "What's the matter, you afraid you'll get lost or something?"

"No. *You* know. I don't like to pass that old Mrs. Mingle's place. She always stares at me and makes faces."

"She's nuts!"

"I'm scared of her, Ronnie. Aren't you?"

"Me scared of that old bat? She can go take a flying leap!"

"Don't talk so loud, she'll hear you."

"Who cares?"

Ronnie marched boldly past the tree-shadowed cottage behind the rusted iron fence. He stared insolently at the girl, who made herself small against his shoulder, eyes averted from the ramshackle edifice. He deliberately slackened his pace as they passed the cottage, with its boarded-up windows, screened-in porch and general air of withdrawal from the world.

Mrs. Mingle herself was not in evidence today. Usually she could be seen in the weed-infested garden at the side of the cottage; a tiny, dried-up old woman, bending over her vines and plants, mumbling incessantly to herself or to the raddled black tomcat which served as her constant companion.

"Old prune-face ain't around!" Ronnie observed, loudly. "Must be off some place on her broomstick."

"Ronnie—please!"

"Who care's?" Ronnie pulled Mary June's curls. "You dames are scared of everything, ain't you?"

"Aren't, Ronnie."

"Don't tell *me* how to talk!" Ronnie's gaze shifted again to the silent house, huddled in the shadows. A segment of shadow at the side of the cottage seemed to be moving. A black blur detached itself from the end of the porch. Ronnie recognized Mrs. Mingle's cat. It minced down the path towards the gate.

Quickly, Ronnie stooped and found a rock. He grasped it, rose, aimed, and hurled the missile in one continuous movement.

The cat hissed, then squawled in pain as the rock grazed its ribs.

“Oh, Ronnie!”

“Come on, let’s run before she sees us!”

They flew down the street. The school bell drowned out the cat-yowl.

“Here we go,” said Ronnie. “You do my homework for me? Good. Give it here once.”

He snatched the papers from Mary June’s hand and sprinted ahead. The girl stood watching him, smiling her admiration. From behind the fence the cat watched, too, and licked its jaws.

II

IT HAPPENED that afternoon, after school. Ronnie and Joe Gordan and Seymour Higgins were futzing around with a baseball and he was talking about the outfit Ma promised to buy him this-summer if the dressmaking business picked up. Only he made it sound like he was getting the outfit for sure, and that they could all use the mask and mitt. It didn’t hurt to build it up a little, with election tomorrow. He had to stand in good with the whole gang.

He knew if he hung around the school-yard much longer, Mary June would come out and want him to walk her home. He was sick of her. Oh, she was all right for homework and such stuff, but these guys would just laugh at him if he went off with a dame.

So he said how about going down the street to in front of the pool hall and maybe hang around to see if somebody would shoot a game? He’d pay. Besides, they could smoke.

Ronnie knew that these guys didn’t smoke, but it sounded bigshot and that’s what he wanted. They all followed him down the street, pounding their cleats on the sidewalk. It made a lot of noise, because everything was so quiet.

All Ronnie could hear was the cat. They were passing Mrs. Mingle's and there was this cat, rolling around in the garden on its back and on its stomach, playing with some kind of ball. It purred and meeowed and whined.

"Look!" yelled Joe Gordan. "Dizzy cat's havin' a fit 'r something, huh?"

"Lice," said Ronnie. "Damned mangy old thing's fulla lice and fleas and stuff. I socked it a good one this morning."

"Ya did?"

"Sure. With a rock. This big, too." He made a watermelon with his hands.

"Weren't you afraid of old lady Mingle?"

"Afraid? Why, that dried-up old—"

"Catnip," said Seymour Higgins. "That's what she's got. Ball of catnip. Old Mingle buys it for her. My old man says she buys everything for that cat; special food and sardines. Treats it like a baby. Ever see them walk down the street together?"

"Catnip, huh?" Joe peered through the fence. "Wonder why they like it so much. Gets 'em wild, doesn't it? Cats'll do anything for catnip."

The cat squealed, sniffing and clawing at the bail. Ronnie scowled at it. "I hate cats. Somebody oughta drowned that damn thing."

"Better not let Mrs. Mingle hear you talk like that," Seymour cautioned. "She'll put the evil eye on you."

"Bull!"

"Well, she grows them herbs and stuff and my old lady says—"

"Bull!"

"All right. But I wouldn't go monkeying around her or her old cat, either."

"I'll show you."

Before he knew it, Ronnie was opening the gate. He advanced toward the black tomcat as the boys gaped.

The cat crouched over the catnip, eyes flattened against a velveteen skull. Ronnie hesitated a moment, gauging the glitter of claws, the glare of agate eyes. But the gang was watching—

“Scat!” he shouted. He advanced, waving his arms. The cat sidled backwards. Ronnie feinted with his hand and scooped up the catnip ball.

“See? I got it, you guys. I got—”

“Put that down!”

He didn’t see the door open. He didn’t see her walk down the steps. But suddenly she was there. Leaning on her cane, wearing a black dress that fitted tightly over her tiny frame, she seemed hardly any bigger than the cat which crouched at her side. Her hair was gray and wrinkled and dead, her face was gray and wrinkled and dead, but her eyes—

They were agate eyes, like the cat’s. They glowed. And when she talked, she spit the way the cat did.

“Pul that doivn, young man!”

Ronnie began to shake. It was only a chill, everybody gets chills now and then, and could he help it if he shook so hard the catnip just fell out of his hand?

He wasn’t scared. He had to show the gang he wasn’t scared of this skinny little dried-up old woman. It was hard to breathe, he was shaking so, but he managed. He filled his lungs and opened his mouth.

“You—you old witch!” he yelled.

The agate eyes widened. They were bigger than she was. All he could see were the eyes. Witch eyes. Now that he said it, he knew it was true. Witch. She was a witch.

“You insolent puppy. I’ve a good mind to cut out your lying tongue!”

Geez, she wasn’t kidding!

Now she was coming closer, and the cat was inching up on him, and then she raised the cane in the air, she was going to hit him, the witch was after him, oh Ma, no, don’t, oh—

Ronnie ran.

III

COULD he help it? Geez, the guys ran too. They'd run before he did, even. He had to run, the old bat was crazy, anybody could see that. Besides, if he'd stayed she'd of tried to hit him and maybe he'd let her have it. He was only trying to keep out of trouble. That was all.

Ronnie told it to himself over and over at supper time. But that didn't do any good, telling it to himself. It was the guys he had to tell it to, and fast. He had to explain it before election tomorrow—

"Ronnie. What's the matter? You sick?"

"No, Ma."

"Then why don't you answer a person? I declare, you haven't said ten words since you came in the house. And you aren't eating your supper."

"Not hungry."

"Something bothering you, son?"

"No. Leave me alone."

"It's that election tomorrow, isn't it?"

"Leave me alone." Ronnie rose. "I'm goin' out."

"Ronnie!"

"I got to see Joe. Important."

"Back by nine, remember."

"Yeah. Sure."

He went outside. The night was cool. Windy for this time of year. Ronnie shivered a little as he turned the corner. Maybe a cigarette—

He lit a match and a shower of sparks spiralled to the sky. Ronnie began to walk, puffing nervously. He had to. see Joe and the others and explain. Yeah, right now, too. If they told anybody else—

It was dark. The light on the corner was out, and Ogdens weren't home. That made it darker, because Mrs. Mingle never showed a light in her cottage.

Mrs. Mingle. Her cottage was up ahead. He'd better cross the street.

What was the matter with him? Was he getting chicken-guts? Afraid of that damned old woman, that old witch! He puffed, gulped, expanded his chest. Just let her try anything. Just let her be hiding under the trees, waiting to grab out at him with her big claws and hiss—what was he talking about, anyway? That was the cat. Nuts to her cat, and her too. He'd show them!

Ronnie walked past the dark shadow where Mrs. Mingle dwelt. He whistled defiance, and emphasized it by shooting his cigarette butt across the fence. Sparks flew and were swallow by the mouth of the night.

Ronnie paused and peered over the fence. Everything was black and still. There was nothing to be afraid of. Everything was black—

Everything except that flicker. It came from up the path, under the porch. He could see the porch now because there was a light. Not a steady light; a wavering light. Like a fire. A fire—where his cigarette had landed! The cottage was beginning to burn!

Ronnie gulped and clung to the fence. Yes, it was on fire, all right. Mrs. Mingle would come out and the firemen would come and they'd find the butt and see him and then—

He fled down the street. The wind cat-howled behind him, the wind that fanned the flames that burned the cottage—

Ma was in bed. He managed to slow down and walk softly as he slipped into the house, up the stairs. He undressed in the dark and sought sanctuary between the bedsheets. When he got the covers over his head he had another chill. Lying there, trembling, not daring to look out of the window and see the glare from the other side of the block, Ronnie's teeth chattered. He knew he was going to pass out in a minute.

Then he heard the screaming from far away. Fire engines. Somebody had called them. He needn't worry now. Why should the sound frighten him? It was only a siren, it wasn't Mrs. Mingle screaming, it couldn't be. She was all right. He was all right. Nobody knew . . .

Ronnie fell asleep with the wind and the siren wailing in his ears. His slumber was deep and only once was there an interruption. That was along towards morning, when he thought he heard a noise at the window. It was a scraping sound. The wind, of course. And it must have been the wind, too, that sobbed and whined and whimpered beneath the window-sill at dawn. It was only Ronnie's imagination, Ronnie's conscience, that transformed the sound into the wailing of a cat. . . .

IV

"RONNIE!"

It wasn't the wind, it wasn't a cat. Ma was calling him.

"Ronnie! Oh, Ronnie!"

He opened his eyes, shielding them from the sunshafts.

"I declare, you might answer a person." He heard her grumbling to herself downstairs. Then she called again.

"Ronnie!"

"I'm coming, Ma."

He got out of bed, went to the bathroom, and dressed. She was waiting for him in the kitchen.

"Land sakes, you sure slept sound last night. Didn't you hear the fire engines?"

Ronnie dropped a slice of toast. "What engines?"

Ma's voice rose. "Don't you know? Why, boy, it was just awful—Mrs. Mingle's cottage burned down."

"Yeah?" He had trouble picking up the toast again.

"The poor old lady—just think of it—trapped in there—"

He had to shut her up. He couldn't stand what was coming next. But what could he say, how could he stop her?

"Burned alive. The whole place was on fire when they got there. The Ogdens saw it when they came home and Mr. Ogden called the firemen, but it was too late. When I think of that old lady it just makes me—"

Without a word, Ronnie rose from the table and left the room. He didn't wait for his lunch. He didn't bother to examine himself in the mirror. He went outside, before he cried, or screamed, or hauled off and hit Ma in the puss.

The puss—

It was waiting for him on the front walk. The black bundle with the agate eyes. The cat. Mrs. Mingle's cat, waiting for him to come out.

Ronnie took a deep breath before he opened the gate. The cat didn't make a sound, didn't stir. It just hunched up on the sidewalk and stared at him.

He watched it for a moment, then cast about for a stick. There was a hunk of lathe near the porch. He picked it up and swung it. Then he opened the gate.

"Scat!" he said.

The cat retreated. Ronnie walked away. The cat moved after him. Ronnie wheeled, brandishing the stick.

"Scram, before I let you have it!"

The cat stood still. Ronnie stared at it. Why hadn't the damn' thing burned up in the fire? And what was it doing here?

He gripped the lathe. It felt good between his fingers, splinters and all. Just let that mangy tom start anything—

He walked along, not looking back. What was the matter with him? Suppose the cat did follow him. It couldn't hurt him any. Neither could old Mingle. She was dead. The dirty witch. Talking about cutting his tongue out. Well, she got what was coming to her, all right. Too bad her scroungy cat was still around. If it didn't watch out, he'd fix it, too. He should worry now.

Nobody was going to find out about that cigarette. Mrs. Mingle was dead. He ought to be glad, everything was all right, sure, he felt great.

The shadow followed him down the street.

"Get out of here!"

Ronnie turned and heaved the lathe at the cat. It hissed. Ronnie heard the wind hiss, heard his cigarette butt hiss, heard Mrs. Mingle hiss.

He began to run. The cat ran after him.

“Hey, Ronnie!”

Marvin Ogden was calling him. He couldn’t stop now, not even to hit the punk. He ran on. The cat kept pace.

Then he was winded and he slowed down. It was just in time, too. Up ahead was a crowd of kids, standing on the sidewalk in front of a heap of charred, smoking boards.

They were looking at Mingle’s cottage—Ronnie closed his eyes and darted back up the street. The cat followed.

HE HAD to get rid of it before he went to school. What if people saw him with her cat? Maybe they’d start to talk. He had to get rid of it—

Ronnie ran clear down to Sinclair Street. The cat was right behind him. On the corner he picked up a stone and let fly. The cat dodged. Then it sat down on the sidewalk and looked at him. Just looked.

Ronnie couldn’t take his eyes off the cat. It stared so. Mrs. Mingle had stared, too. But she was dead. And this was only a cat. A cat he had to get away from, fast.

The street car came down Sinclair Street. Ronnie found a dime in his pocket and boarded the car. The cat didn’t move. He stood on the platform as the car pulled away and looked back at the cat. It just sat there.

Ronnie rode around the loop, then transferred to the Hollis Avenue car. It brought him over to the school, ten minutes late. He got off and started to hurry across the street.

A shadow crossed the entrance to the building.

Ronnie saw the cat. It squatted there, waiting.

He ran.

That’s all Ronnie remembered of the rest of the morning. He ran. He ran, and the cat followed. He couldn’t go to school, he couldn’t be there for the election, he couldn’t get rid of the cat. He ran.

Up and down the streets, back and forth, all over the whole neighborhood; stopping and dodging and throwing stones and swearing and panting and sweating. But always the running, and always the cat right behind him.

Once it started to chase him and before he knew it he was heading straight for the place where the burned smell filled the air, straight for the ruins of Mrs. Mingle's cottage. The cat wanted him to go there, wanted him to see—

Ronnie began to cry. He sobbed and panted all the way home. The cat didn't make a sound. It followed him. All right, let it. He'd fix it. He'd tell Ma. Ma would get rid of it for him. Ma.

"Ma!"

He yelled as he ran up the steps.

No answer. She was out. Marketing.

And the cat crept up the steps behind him.

Ronnie slammed the door, locked it. Ma had her key. He was safe now. Safe at home. Safe in bed—he wanted to go to bed and pull the covers over his head, wait for Ma to come and make everything all right.

There was a scratching at the door.

"Ma!" His scream echoed through the empty house.

He ran upstairs. The scratching died away.

And then he heard the footsteps on the porch, the slow footsteps; he heard the rattling and turning of the doorknob. It was old lady Mingle, coming from the grave. It was the witch, coming to get him. It was—

"Ma!"

"Ronnie, what's the matter? What you doing home from school?"

He heard her. It was all right. Just in time, Ronnie closed his mouth. He couldn't tell her about the cat. He mustn't ever tell her. Then everything would come out. He had to be careful what he said.

"I got sick to my stomach," he said. "Miss Sanders said I should come home and lay down."

Ronnie lay in bed and dozed as the afternoon shadows ran in long black ribbons across the bedroom floor. He smiled to himself. What a sucker he was! Afraid of a cat. Maybe there wasn't even a cat—all in his mind. Dope!

"Ronnie—you all right?" Ma called up from the foot of the stairs.

"Yes, Ma. I feel lots better."

Sure, he felt better. He could get up now and eat supper if he wanted. In just a minute he'd put his clothes on and go downstairs. He started to push the sheets off. It was dark in the room, now. Just about supper-time—

THEN Ronnie heard it. A scratching. A scurring. From the hall? No. It couldn't be in the hall. Then where?

The window. It was open. And the scratching came from the ledge outside. He had to close it, fast. Ronnie jumped out of bed, barking his shin against a chair as he groped through the dusk. Then he was at the window, slamming it down, tight.

He heard the scratching.

And it came from *inside the room!*

Ronnie hurled himself upon the bed, clawing the covers up to his chin. His eyes bulged against the darkness.

Where was it?

He saw nothing but shadows. Which shadow moved?

Where was it?

Ronnie didn't know. All he knew was that he lay in bed, waiting, thinking of Mrs. Mingle and her cat and how she was a witch and died because he'd killed her. Or had he killed her? He was all mixed up, he couldn't remember, he didn't know what was real and what wasn't real any more. He couldn't tell which shadow would move next.

And then he could.

The round shadow was moving. The round black ball was inching across the floor from beneath the window. It was the cat, all right, because shadows don't have claws that scrape. Shadows don't leap through the air and perch on the bedpost, grinning at you with yellow eyes and yellow teeth . . . *grinning the way Mrs. Mingle grinned.*

The cat was big. Its eyes were big. Its teeth were big. It crouched there, hunching to spring.

Ronnie opened his mouth to scream.

Then the shadow was sailing through the air, coming at him, at his face, at his open mouth. The claws were fastened in his cheeks, forcing his jaws apart. And the head dipped—

Far away, under the pain, somebody was calling.

“Ronnie! Oh, Ronnie!”

Everything was fire. Ronnie lashed out, and suddenly the shadow went away.

“Ronnie! What’s the matter with you?”

He sat bolt upright in the bed. His mouth worked, and he opened it to scream, but no sound came out. Nothing came out except that gushing red wetness.

“Ronnie! Why don’t you answer me?”

A horrible guttural sound came from deep within Ronnie’s throat. But no words. There never would be any words.

“Ronnie—what’s the matter? *Has the cat got your tongue?”*

Change of Heart

It had been the sun, the moon, the stars to me—a whirling planet of silver, held to its orbit by a glittering chain. Uncle Hansi would twirl it before my eyes on those long, faraway Sunday afternoons. Sometimes he let me press the icy surface against my ear, and then I heard from deep within it the music of the spheres.

Now it was only a battered old watch, a keepsake inheritance. The once gleaming case was worn and dented, and a deep scratch crossed the finely etched initials below the stem.

I took it to a jeweller's on the Avenue, for an estimate, and the clerk was frigidly polite. "We've hardly the facilities to handle such repair work here. Perhaps some small shop, a watchmaker of the old school—"

He laid it carelessly on the counter, for he did not know that this was a dying planet, a waning world, a star that flamed in first magnitude in the bygone eons of my childhood.

So I put the world in my pocket and went away from there. I walked home through the Village and came, eventually, to the establishment of Ulrich Klemm.

The basement window was grimy with the dust of years, and the gold lettering had flecked and moted, but the name caught my eye. "ULRICH KLEMM, WATCHMAKER."

I descended five steps, turned the doorknob, and walked into a seething symphony of sound. Whispers, murmurs, frantic titterings. Deep buzzings and shrill cadences. Muted, measured, mechanical rhythms, set in eternal order—the testament of Time.

Against shadowed walls the faces loomed and leered. They were big, they were small, they were round or oval or broad; high and low they hung, these clock-faces in the shop of Ulrich Klemm, ticking and staring at me in darkness.

The white head of the watchmaker was haloed in the light of his workbench. He turned and rose, then shuffled over to the counter, his padding feet weaving in counterpoint to the rhythms of the clockwork on the walls.

"There iss something?" he asked. I stared into his face—the face of a grandfather's clock; weathered, patient, enduring, inscrutable.

"I want you to have a look at this," I said. "My uncle Hansi willed it to me, but the regular jewellers don't seem to know how to put it in working order."

As I put Uncle Hansi's watch on the counter, the face of the grandfather's clock leaned forward. All of the faces on the wall gazed and gaped while I explained.

Ulrich Klemm nodded. His gnarled hands (do all grandfather's clocks have gnarled hands? I wondered) carried the battered old timepiece over to the light above the workbench.

I watched the hands. They did not tremble. The fingers suddenly became instruments. They opened, revealed, pried, probed, delicately dissected.

"Yess. I can repair this, I think." He spoke to me, to all the faces on the wall.

"It will not be easy. These parts—they are no longer made. I shall have to fashion them especially. But it iss a fine watch, yess, and worth the effort."

I opened my mouth, but did not speak. The faces on the wall spoke for me.

For suddenly the sound surged to a crescendo, sharp and shrill. The faces laughed and gurgled and shrieked; a hundred voices, accents, tongues and intonations met and mingled. Six times the voices rose and fell, proclaiming—

"It's six o'clock, Grandfather."

No, it wasn’t my imagination. The voice said that. Not the mechanical voice, but the other one. The one that came from the long, slim, incredibly white throat of the girl who emerged from the rear of the shop.

“Yess, Lisa?” The old man cocked his head.

“Dinner is ready. Oh, excuse me—I thought you were alone.”

I stared at golden hair and silver flesh. Lisa. The granddaughter. The clocks ticked on, and something leapt in rhythm deep in my chest.

She smiled. I smiled. Ulrich introduced her. And I became crafty, persuasive. I leaned over the counter and artfully led the conversation along, encouraging him to talk of the marvels of clockwork, of old days in Switzerland when Ulrich Klemm was a horologist of renown.

It wasn’t difficult. He extended an invitation to share the meal, and soon I was in one of the rooms behind the shop, listening to further reminiscences.

He spoke of the golden days of clockwork, of automata—mechanical chessplayers, birds that sang and flew, soldiers walking and sounding trumpets, angels in belfries chorusing the coming of day and brandishing swords against Evil.

Ulrich Klemm showed me the picture on his wall—the picture he had salvaged ten years ago when he and Lisa fled from Europe to the refuge of this tiny shop in the Village. The picture was a landscape, with railroad tracks running through a mountain pass. He wound a spring at the side of the frame and the train came out and raced through a tunnel, climbed the grade and disappeared again. It was a marvelous picture, and I told him so.

But no picture, however animated, could satisfy me as did the sight of Lisa. And while my tongue responded to the old man, my eyes answered the girl.

We didn’t say much to one another. She cut her finger while serving the meat, and I bandaged it as the blood flowed. We spoke of the weather, of trivial things. But when I departed I had wrung an invitation to come again from Ulrich Klemm. Lisa smiled and nodded as I left, and she smiled and nodded again that night in my dreams.

So it was that I came often to the little shop, even after my watch had been repaired and restored to me. Ulrich Klemm enjoyed an audience—he dreamed and boasted before me for long hours. He told me of the things he had created in the old country; of royal commissions, mechanical marvels, medals and awards.

"There iss nothing I cannot fathom once I turn my hand to it," he often said. "All Nature—just a mechanism. When I wass a young man, my father wished for me to become a surgeon. But the human body iss a poor instrument, full of flaws. A good chronometer, that iss perfection."

I listened and nodded and waited. And in time, I achieved my goal.

Lisa and I became friends, bit by bit. We smiled, we spoke, we went walking together. We went to the park, to the theatre.

It was simple, once the initial barriers were surmounted. For Lisa had no friends, and her schooldays were an alien memory. Ulrich Klemm treasured her with morbid jealousy. She and she alone had never failed him; she responded perfectly to his will. That is what the old man desired—he loved automatons.

But I loved Lisa. Lisa the girl. Lisa the woman. I dreamed of an awakening, an emergence into the world beyond the four walls of the shop. And in time I spoke to her of what I planned.

"No, Dane," she said. "He will never let me go. He is old and all alone. If we can wait, in a few years—"

"Wake up," I said. "This is New York, the twentieth century. You're of age. And I want you to marry me. Now."

"No," she sighed. "We cannot do this to him." And shook her head, like an automaton.

It was like something out of the Dark Ages. It was a world apart from my office uptown, with its talk of surveys and projects and a branch managership opening for me in Detroit.

I told her about the Detroit assignment. I insisted on speaking now. Lisa wept then, and Lisa pleaded, but in the end I went to the old man and told him.

"I'm going to marry Lisa," I said. "I'm going to take her with me. Now."

"No-no-no-no," ticked the clocks on the wall. "NO—NO—NO," boomed the chimes. And, "You cannot take her!" shouted Ulrich Klemm. "She iss all I have left. No one will ever take her from me. Never."

It was useless to argue. And when I pleaded with Lisa to elope, to run away, she turned the blank perfection of a clock-face towards me and ticked, "No." For Lisa was the old man's masterpiece. He had spent years perfecting her pattern of obedient reaction. I saw that I could never tamper with Ulrich Klemm's delicate adjustments.

So I went away, carrying my silver watch on a chain in my pocket; knowing that I could never find a chain that would link Lisa to me. During the months in Detroit I wrote frequently to the shop, but there was no answer.

I instructed a friend of mine to stop by and deliver messages, but I heard no word. The silver watch in my pocket ticked off the days and the weeks and the months, and finally I returned to New York.

Then I heard that Lisa was dead.

My friend had stopped by and found the shop shuttered and deserted. Going around to the rear, he roused Ulrich Klemm from his vigil. The haggard, sleepless old man said that Lisa had suffered a heart attack. She was dying.

Returning several days later, my friend was unable to rouse anyone. But the wreath on the door of the locked shop told its own grim story.

I thanked my informant, sighed, nodded, and went out into the wintry streets.

It was a bitterly cold day. My breath plumed before me, and I stamped the snow from my shoes as I descended the steps to Ulrich Klemm's door. The glass was frosted like a wedding-cake; I could not see into the shop through the sheet of ice.

My gloved hand tugged the doorknob. The door rattled, but did not open. I knocked. The old man was a little deaf, yet he must hear, he must answer. I knocked again.

Quite suddenly the door opened. I stepped over the threshhold, into a vacuum of darkness and silence. No light shone over the workbench, no chimes heralded my entrance. And the clockfaces were invisible, inaudible. The absence of the familiar ticking struck me like a physical blow. It was as though a world had ended.

Everything had stopped. And yet Ulrich Klemm's crazed fanaticism would not permit a stopping, an ending—

"Klemm!" I shouted. "Ulrich Klemm!"

Something stirred in the darkness before me. I heard the tread of light, hesitant footsteps.

"Klemm," I said. "Turn on the lights. It's Dane."

Then I heard the voice, the soft voice murmuring up at me. "You've come back. Oh, I knew you would come back."

"Lisa!"

"Lisa!"

"Yes, dearest. I have been waiting for you here, all alone. So long it has been, I do not know—ever since he died."

"He died? Your grandfather?"

"Did you not know? I was ill, very ill. My heart, the doctor said. It was I who should have died, but Grandfather would not hear of it. He said the doctor was a fool, he would save me himself. And he did. Yes, he did. He nursed and took care of me, even after I was in a coma.

"Then, when at last I was awake again, Grandfather failed. He was so old, you know. Caring for me without thought of himself—going without food or rest—it weakened him. Pneumonia set in and I could do nothing. He died here in the shop. That was a long time ago, it seems."

"How long?"

"I cannot remember. I have not eaten or slept since, but then there is no need, I knew you would come—"

"Let me look at you." I groped through the darkness, found the switch for the lamp over the workbench. The halo of light blossomed against the silent clockfaces on the walls.

Lisa stood there quietly, her face white and waxen, her eyes blank and empty, her body wasted. But she lived. That was enough for me. She lived, and she was free forever of the old man's tyranny.

I wondered what he had done to save her, he who had boasted that nothing would ever take her away from him. Well, he had lavished the last of his skill and genius upon preserving her from death, and it was enough.

I sighed and took Lisa in my arms. Her flesh was cold against mine, and I strove to melt the icy numbness against the heat of my body. I bent my head against her breast, listened to the beating of her heart.

Then I turned and ran screaming from that shop of shadows and silence.

But not before I heard the hellish sound from Lisa's breast—that sound which was not a heartbeat, but a faint, unmistakable *licking*.

The Indian Spirit Guide

Spook hunting is a peculiar kind of business with peculiar results

ORLANDO CROWN was a spook-hunter.

If you're a reader of magazines and the Sunday supplements of newspapers, you'll remember-his name. Orlando Crown—amateur magician, amateur occultist, and professional ghost-buster. The man who made a standing offer of $25,000 to any medium or mystic producing satisfactory evidence of life beyond the grave. His articles and *exposes* of fraudulent psychic phenomena are famous.

Accordingly, when I determined to do a book on spiritualism, it was only natural that I take a little trip down to San Diego and seek out Orlando Crown.

"Show me a ghost," I said.

Crown laughed. He threw back his close-cropped gray head and brayed.

"Just like that, eh?" he chuckled. "The man wants me to show him a ghost. Now take it easy, friend—"

I took it easy. I explained everything; who I was, my purpose in coming to him, and the theme of my projected book. He stopped laughing and began to exhibit interest.

"Naturally, I wanted to get my material first hand from an expert," I told him. "So I came to you."

“Naturally,” he agreed. “There is no one else qualified. And I assume you’d credit me with the data?”

That was the key, the clue I needed. I’d always wondered why a wealthy man like Orlando Crown bothered with the pursuit of such a peculiar hobby. The answer was—vanity.

“Credit you?” I said. “Why, if you’ll do me the honor of serving as my instructor, I’ll dedicate the book to you.”

Crown beamed. He stood up and extended the slim, soft elegance of his hand. “Come back tomorrow at two,” he murmured. “I think I’ll have something interesting for you.”

II

CROWN’S roadster turned south, and the afternoon sun smote my eyes. We bumped along an unpaved street that looked like the butt-end of Tobacco Road. Lawns of brown weeds and sand suffered under the sun, unprotected by the withered palmettos which served as attractions only to the local dogs. Houses sagged behind rusted iron fences. On porches sun-blistered and paint-peeled, unlovely women rocked and fanned futilely. Towheaded brats peered from behind phlegm-green window shades. Heatwaves lent a wavering distortion to the flight of myriad flies, but did nothing to cut the stench of shriveled vegetation, rotting wood, sweat, garbage, and the frying odor of garbage soon to be.

“There’s the place,” said Orlando Crown, indicating a house. He might have been a psychic sensitive at that; I couldn’t have distinguished this particular shack from any of the others. It was a wide two-story affair which might once have been painted yellow. The shades were drawn, the door was shut, and the only sign of occupancy was a battered blue coaster wagon which lay on its side against the steps. Its name was SPEEDY, according to the lettering on its frame, but when I stumbled against it I called it something else under my breath.

I fancied I saw the shades move slightly in a window to the left as we ascended the porch stairs, but I may have been mistaken. Orlando Crown pressed the buzzer and a sour whine echoed from within the house.

A sallow-faced Mexican girl opened the door. She brushed the perspiration from her mustache, wiped her hand on a strand of stringy hair, and said, “Yes, please?”

“Mrs. Hubbard. We have an appointment.”

“I tell her. Wait here.” Orlando Crown followed her into the hall, and I followed him. The corridor was dark and narrow, like a closet. And like a closet it smelled of mothballs and mustiness. There were doors on either side of the hallway, and the girl entered the one at our right.

We settled down in wicker chairs and waited. My chair was next to an end-table piled high with tattered magazines. I picked one up. It was a copy of *Film Fun* for January, 1932.

Orlando Crown smiled at me.

“This looks as if it might be interesting,” he confided in a whisper. “There are usually two kinds of operators, you know. The first is the old-fashioned racketeer—the kind that puts up a big phony front, black drapes and brass gongs and music on the organ. The second group goes in for disarming simplicity; the ‘natural medium’ gag. From this build-up, I guess Mrs. Hubbard belongs to the second group.”

“How did you happen to select her?” I asked.

“Haven’t much choice,” Crown shrugged. “You see, most of the spook workers in this part of the country know me by sight or reputation. Hate me like poison, of course. But this Mrs. Hubbard is a newcomer.”

He found and lit a cigarette. I sat back and looked at “gag” pictures of such current comic celebrities as Harry Langdon, Jimmy Finlayson, Andy Clyde and Slim Summerville.

The silence was emphatic. It grew hotter, mustier. The hall became an oversized coffin. Time passed, but what’s time when you’re inside a casket?

Crown stepped on the butt of his cigarette. I sat there and listened to the worms bore through the woodwork. Then the door opened, we jumped, and the Mexican girl said, “In here, now.”

Beyond the doorway was an ordinary parlor—“sitting-room” in the day when this house was built—filled with the usual scrolled oak furniture unholstered by a contemporary of Queen Anne. The wallpaper was Paris green, obscured in many places by large chromoes of the Saviour in meditation, exaltation and agony.

The center of the room was occupied by a “dining-room suite”; six chairs and a round table. Mrs. Hubbard sat in one of the chairs, her elbows on the table top.

She wasn’t exactly Mrs. Hubbard—“Mother Hubbard” would be a more accurate tag. A fat, blowsy, red-faced woman in her mid-forties, with pork bristles on her arms and chin. Coarse brown hair nestled in a bun against the back of her high-necked black dress. There was something tragic about her deep-set eyes—here, if ever I saw one, was a woman who suffered. From a hangover.

“Greetings.”

Her voice was as big as her body. It bounced off the walls and exploded against our eardrums.

“You are prompt, Mr. Bloch.”

I nodded. Orlando had given my name as a cover-up, of course.

“And you have brought a guest, I see.”

“Yes. I thought you wouldn’t mind. “This is—”

“I know.” Mrs. Hubbard smiled slightly. “Please be seated, and I will endeavor to convince the skeptical Mr. Orlando Crown that I am indeed a psychic sensitive.”

Crown’s eyebrows lifted as his posterior lowered into a chair. He started to reply, but the Mexican girl opened the door again and ushered four more people into the room. We turned and stared at the fat, little-red-faced man with the mustache, the portly matron in the flowered print dress, the pale, bespectacled blonde girl, and the gaunt gray-haired woman who fiddled with her coral beads.

Mrs. Hubbard, unsmiling, waved them to places at the table. They sat down with the ease and assurance of regular customers who had been here many times before. The Mexican girl brought in an extra chair and disappeared again.

NOBODY said a word. Orlando Crown watched Mrs. Hubbard. I watched Orlando Crown. Mrs. Hubbard didn’t appear to be watching anybody. The whole affair had much of the quaint charm and jollity of an old-fashioned inquest.

I waited for something to happen. I waited for the closing of the blinds, the whisperings in the darkened room, the rappings and the wailings, the screech of chalk moving across a slate, the phosphorescent phantom issuing from the mouth of a moaning woman.

Instead, the Mexican girl appeared again. She carried a tablet of cheap, blue-ruled paper, a package of envelopes, and a handful of yellow pencils. This assortment made a nice little mess in the center of Mrs. Hubbard’s dining-room table.

We watched as the girl rotated chunky thighs toward the door. The red-faced man fingered his mustache, the matron played with her purse, the girl with die glasses coughed, the gray-haired woman used her coral beads for a rosary.

“Will everybody take a pencil, a sheet of paper, and an envelope, please?”

Mrs. Hubbard was ready to go into her routine. We all groped for tire props as directed.

“Because our group today is a little larger than usual, and because there is a natural reticence in the presence of strangers, I fee! it best to have you put your problems in writing.” Mrs. Hubbard patted her brown pug and smiled.

“I suggested that each of you write down one question, to begin with. If we have time, I shall be glad to work with your further inquiries personally

—and privately, if you wish.

“At the moment, the important thing, frankly, is to gain your confidence. Without it, you will have no faith in my power, nor in my ability to help you. Since some of you are visiting me for the first time today, I’m going to make use of a rather spectacular device to convince you of my extra-liminal perception.”

The deep, intelligent voice rolled smoothly, easily, persuasively, from the coarse mouth of that fat, sweating old woman.

“I’m not much of a showman—I cannot offer you a dark room, table tipping, ghostly presences. But if each one will write a question on a piece of paper, fold it up, and personally seal it in an envelope, perhaps I can demonstrate an interesting psychic phenomenon.”

There was a pause, a shared feeling of hesitation. Mrs. Hubbard didn’t have to be a mystic to sense it.

“Please. It’s very simple. I am going to read your questions back to you as you have written them, without opening the envelopes.”

Mrs. Hubbard smiled. “There will be no trickery. You can examine the paper, the pencils, the envelopes. You won’t find any carbon, or wax, or acid treatments to bring out the writing. There will be no waiting.

I’ll read your questions back to you and then open your envelopes, one at a time. That should serve as convincing proof of the powers that work through me. Then I’ll give you the answers.

“So if you’ll write—please do, and make your questions sincere—whatever is closest to your mind and heart—”

The red-faced man scrawled something on his ruled sheet and folded it carefully four times. The matron licked the tip of her pencil and frowned. I shielded my paper and wrote: “Will my new book be written by fall?”

Mrs. Hubbard couldn’t possibly have read our writing. She had risen and walked over to a small card-table set in. the corner of the room. She drew up the extra chair and sat down behind the table, waiting until we folded the sealed and rustled.

"Bring your envelopes over personally, please," she called. "I don't want to be accused of switching."

We filed past the table and sat down again, all of us watching her as she collected the six envelopes, shuffled them carefully, and then placed them on the corner of the table.

She spread them out fanwise before her and frowned. Our chairs scraped back as we faced her. She switched on a lamp behind her and produced a wire filing basket.

There was no switching, no sleight-of-hand, no wires or buzzers, or gimmicks of any kind. We stared at Mrs. Hubbard and she stared down at the envelopes.

Her forehead corrugated. A fat hand reached out at random and lifted an envelope from the center of the fan. She placed it against the corrugations above her eyes. Her eyes closed.

Then she was speaking, and her voice came from far away—far away inside herself, far away inside the envelope.

"Should I sell my property to the syndicate or hold out for the original figure?" she whispered.

The red-faced, mustached little man popped up like a Jack-in-the-box. "That's it!" he shouted. "By Golly, that's my question!"

Orlando Crown never blinked. Everyone else was leaning forward, tense with excitement.

Mrs. Hubbard, eyes still closed, smiled at us. "Please, control your enthusiasm. It makes it more difficult to concentrate." She opened the envelope now, opened her eyes and glanced carelessly at the sheet, and then placed it in the wicker basket. And all the while she continued to talk.

"As it comes to me, Mr. Rogers, this property that you speak of consists of a bloc of eight lots situated just south of San Juan Capistrano, on 101-A, the coast drive. This syndicate of which you speak, the—"

Rogers opened his mouth and she paused. "Of course, I will not mention names if you prefer. But it is true, isn't it, that they plan to build a hotel on this site? And that yesterday they offered you $18,000 cash for an outright sale, while you are holding out for $25,000? I thought so. It appears that if you refuse, they will offer you $20,000 on Thursday. If you still refuse, on Monday they will meet your price.”

Without pausing, the plump hand sought another envelope, pressed it to the red forehead. Eyes closed and mouth opened.

“Will my new book be written by fall?” She was reading my question without opening the envelope!

I TRIED again to pierce Orlando Crown’s bland stare. I tried to figure it out. There must be an angle, there was some kind of fakery somewhere, but it was too much for me. She had read my question without seeing it.

My mouth dropped open as I watched Mts. Hubbard now carelessly unseal the envelope and slowly withdraw the folded paper. She unraveled it and then—her mouth opened.

Something red fluttered to the table; something bold and brazen, with a picture of a half-naked girl emblazoned on its crimson background.

It was the cover of the *Film Fun* magazine I’d been reading in the hall!”

Orlando Crown was on his feet, snatching at the cover. “My question, I believe,” he said.

Mrs. Hubbard’s mouth gulped for words. When they came, they sounded in a sweetly audible cadence.

“Why you dirty, stinking, lousy skunk!” said Mrs. Hubbard.

III

SHE couldn’t escape. We crowded around the table and Orlando Crown, inarticulate no longer, held forth.

“You see, it’s very simple. The whole trick is old as the hills. While the audience is looking for mirrors, radio-electronic eyes and all kinds of elaborate devices, the fake mystic merely uses the old ‘one ahead’ system. All she needs for that is a stooge. In this case it was Rogers here.”

The red-faced man who had popped up like a Jack-in-the-box now looked as though he would collapse like one. But the astute Mr. Crown now held his arm firmly.

“Here’s how it works. The stooge writes his question and seals it like all the others, but he marks his envelope—just a nick with a fingernail, here at the flap. The medium looks for it and can recognize at a glance which one belongs to her confederate. Here.”

He held up one of the unopened envelopes.

“This envelope she saves to the last. What she does is call out the stooge’s question, which has been agreed upon in advance. He jumps up and makes a big fuss about hearing his question and she opens the envelope she’s held to her forehead. Naturally, it’s one of the envelopes containing a legitimate question. She reads it and puts it in the basket. While answering Mr. Roger’s question—in convincing detail—she was actually reading Mr. Bloch’s question from the envelope she opened. Then with the next envelope she would answer Mr. Bloch and open mine.

“But when she called Mr. Bloch’s question, she opened my envelope and that was her mistake.”

“You crummy rat,” muttered Mrs. Hubbard. “What do you want from me?” Crown shrugged. “Nothing at all, really, from you—except your promise to quit working a racket on people who are in need of genuine assistance from reputable consultants. I don’t think you’ll be trying these tricks around here very much longer.”

“Why you damned—”

“Careful, now! Watch your language. You aren’t very ladylike, Mrs. Hubbard. Of course, appearances are so deceptive, you folks must all remember that. For example, Mrs. Hubbard here does not use ladylike language, because she really isn’t much of a lady. In fact—”

Orlando Crown’s hand descended to pat Mother Hubbard’s head. It rose again, clutching a brown-burned wig. We gaped down on a fat, bald-headed man who gripped the edge of the table with brawny knuckles and cursed in a hoarse voice that drove us all from the room.

Crown turned to the group as we reached the sidewalk and made a courtly bow. “My friends,” he said. “I think our little session with the supernatural is over.”

“Well, I never!”

“Of all the things—” They spilled across the street, chattering and goggling. All but the old girl with the coral beads. She edged closer as Crown and I headed for our car.

“Pardon me,” she sniffed. “I—I just wanted to thank you for what you did in there.”

“No thanks necessary.” Crown smiled and opened the car door.

“Oh, but you helped me a great deal. That horrid woman—person, I mean—had me almost convinced. I’d been coming to her for weeks for advice and she had nearly taken me away from Mrs. Prinn.”

“Mrs. Prinn?”

“Yes. She’s a *real* medium. I mean a genuine one, not a fake.”

Crown winked at me, but the look he offered the woman was grave.

“Madam, if you will permit me to say so, all mediums are fakes.”

“Oh, no!” The old lady put her hand to her cheek. “Maybe there are a lot of frauds like this one here, but not Mrs. Prinn! She doesn’t try to fool you with tricks—she just summons up the spirits of the departed. She has a spirit guide, you know.”

CROWN glanced impatiently at his watch.

“Very interesting,” he said. “But I assure you, as an investigator of long standing, that I have never encountered a genuine medium, a genuine apparition, or a spirit guide.”

“You ought to meet Little Hatchet,” the woman told him. “He’s an Indian.”

“An Indian spirit guide?” I asked. “You know, I’ve always wondered about that. Why do all the mediums seem to work through Indian spirit guides?”

Orlando Crown coughed. “We must be running along,” he said. Then, to the woman, “We’re going back downtown. If you’d care for a lift—”

“Thank you.” The old lady made a prim little obeisance and opened the rear door of the roadster. “I think, under the circumstances, an introduction is warranted. I am Mrs. Celia Brewster.”

We gave our names. Crown did the honors as he drove.

“No,” said Mrs. Brewster. “Not really! I should have recognized you from your pictures in the paper—Orlando Crown! Why, everybody knows about you.”

The Achilles’ heel again. Crown positively smirked with pleasure.

“Yes, even Mrs. Prinn has spoken of you to us.”

“Not favorably, I trust.”

“Well—” The old lady had an embarrassed session with her beads. “Naturally, being a true medium, she rather resents some of the statements you’ve made about spiritualism.”

“I shouldn’t imagine so,” I murmured. “But if you could only see what she does, I’m sure you’d take back all of those remarks about fakery,” Mrs. Brewster continued. She paused. “Come to think of it, why can’t you see what she does? Yes, why don’t you visit Mrs. Prinn as my guest?”

“Dear lady—” Crown began.

“It would be such an honor,” the dear lady rattled on. “Such a distinct honor to have a great investigator present at one of her seances.”

She had found the right note again. Crown glanced at me. “Well, I’m not really very interested. But Bloch here is looking for some material and I promised to take him around. What do you say? Would you like to see one of the old-fashioned spook sessions, with table-tipping and skeletons and musical trumpets, the works?” He wanted me to say yes. I said yes. “Very well. Of course, you mustn’t let my name out to Mrs. Prinn. I don’t know her and she wouldn’t care to meet me.”

"Just as you say, Mr. Crown. It will be a rewarding experience for both of us, I'm sure. I know you'll be Convinced, once and for all, of the genuineness of communication from beyond."

"Or you will be convinced, once *aid* for all, that it's a stupid fake," Crown retorted. "Indian spirit guides, eh? Chief Wahoo, is that it?"

"Little Hatchet." Mrs. Brewster corrected him with a dour smile. "He was an Oglalla Sioux, in mundane life. He first manifested himself to Mrs. Prinn in 1924, when she was just a girl. Since that time he has served as her spirit guide, bringing messages from those who have passed over—"

"At so much per message," Crown interrupted. "By the way, how much is the old fraud into you for?"

"Why several thou—oh, please, Mi. Crown, I wish you wouldn't talk like that! Can't you at least suspend judgment until you meet Mrs. Prinn?"

"Sorry. By the way, when do you plan this excursion?"

"Why, I have an appointment tomorrow evening at nine. Would that be convenient?"

"Certainly." Crown slid the car over to the curb and opened the door. "We park here, if that's convenient. Suppose I pick you up at eight-thirty, tomorrow evening. Where can I find you?"

Mrs. Brewster gave an address and Crown nodded as she stepped out of the car.

"Goodbye, now," she said, waving her beads.

"Goodbye," Crown called. And muttered, under his breath, "Don't take any wooden Indians."

IV

CROWN was in fine form the following evening. As we drove over to pick up Mrs. Brewster he regaled me at length with accounts of fake apports, telekinesis involving magnets, and the use of reaching-rods. Nor did he moderate his remarks when Mrs. Brewster joined us and we headed for the medium's apartments.

"You were asking me about Chief Running Nose—"

"Little Hatchet," Mrs. Brewster interjected, patiently.

"Whatever you call him, then. Anyway, Bloch here raised the question of why most mediums seem to have Indian spirit guides."

"It bothers me," I said. "Why pick on the poor Indians all the time?"

Mrs. Brewster sniffed, but subsided as Crown answered with a grin devoid of malice.

"Years and years ago, when spiritualism first flourished commercially on the Continent, mediums hit upon the Noble Red Man as an ideal personification. To begin with, the Europeans were infatuated with the works of Cooper; later generations avidly devoured the lurid thrillers built around the exploits of Buffalo Bill. Indians were exotic to Europeans, just as Hindus would be to us. And weren't all Indians pictured as 'guides' in western romances of the day? The reasoning was simple—if Chief Hot Foot could find his way through the trackless wastes of Waukegan, surely he could lead the path through the realms of the spirit world.

"Besides, when the Indian guide spoke through the mouth of a medium, he could converse in gibberish. Nobody understood Indian languages, so the medium could bark out almost anything and sound authentic.

"So you see, it's just an old ghostly custom to use an Indian spirit guide. Nobody seems to wonder why good Indians—dead ones, that is—want to hang around fat old ladies and help them get through to spookville."

"But Mrs. Prinn's guide isn't an invention," Mrs. Brewster said, softly. "Little Hatchet really lived. If you've read anything on Indian ethnology, or the history of the Sioux, you'll find his name. He passed over at the Battle of the Little Big Horn. Custer's Massacre, you know. He can give you details, absolutely authentic proofs that—"

"That your Mrs. Prinn read about in books at the public library," Orlando Crown finished for her.

“I wish you’d refrain from condemning Mrs. Prinn in advance,” said the old woman, rattling her coral beads in nervous earnestness. “Because I know you are going to be pleasantly surprised.”

“I think she’ll be surprised,” answered Orlando Crown, grimly. “And I doubt if she’ll find it pleasant.”

“I haven’t told her your name, but even if she finds out, it won’t matter. Mrs. Prinn welcomes tests of her mediumship. If you only knew what she’s told me about those who have passed over! And the very first time she knew all about me without my saying anything; she told me things that I’d never revealed to anyone. Oh, this is going to be a wonderful experience for a skeptic like yourself, Mr. Crown!”

“Apparently it begins now,” he observed, as the car entered the driveway of an ornate apartment building. An attendant took the wheel and parked the roadster as we headed for the chromium-splashed foyer and took an elevator to the seventh floor.

“What have you got there?” I whispered, indicating the small black satchel Crown carried in one hand.

“You’ll see,” Crown answered. “It’s all part of that wonderful experience we’re going to have. I don’t think Mrs. Prinn will go for it, and I know Little Hatchet will be mad as hell.”

The elevator dumped us in front of a modernistic blonde oak door. Mrs. Brewster rang the bell and got chimes; the expensive, eight-tone kind. The sound alone told me that this seance would be quite a contrast to the sordid session of yesterday.

My assumption was correct. From the moment that the turbaned servant opened the door and bade us enter, we moved in an exotic world.

ONLY a Hollywood extremist could have designed that parlor. Everything was black. Black velvet drapes covering the walls, black mohair covering the low, modernistic furniture with the ebony frames, black velour rugs covering the black-tiled floor. There were niches set in the walls at intervals, and they housed statuettes—black, of course—which I recognized as coming straight from primitive mythology or an Oriental art jobber. Dim light illumined the forms of many-armed Kali, grinning Bast, and a goggling Tibetan thunder god. I smelled incense and perfume. I also smelled money, and a rat.

Crown winked at me in the gloom, but Mrs. Brewster was properly impressed. We sat there and fidgeted as the chimes rang again, the Hindu opened the door, and several other seekers after Mystery entered the parlor. They eyed us nervously, but no one spoke.

Kali waved. Bast grinned. The Tibetan figure goggled. And the incense sent sinuous strands of scent through the draped darkness.

Drugs, hypnosis, auto-suggestion? Perhaps all played a part, but after a little while I forgot that this was all a phony stage setting, I forgot that I was sweating under the arms, I forgot that there are no supernatural manifestations. I closed my eyes and then the music came stealing from far away, the gong sonorously sounded, and I was walking with the rest into another parlor, where the spider waited.

She sat behind the gigantic octagonal table, a wooden web spun to ensnare foolish flies. She sat there, dressed in darkness, and as she bowed her black head I saw a white part that curved like an eternal question mark.

Her eyes were deep pools, and her voice seemed to issue from them rather than from her mouth. Her hands made strange, Sybilline gestures as she greeted us and urged us to take our places around the table. Eight places, eight people.

I came out of it long enough to look at Crown. Orlando Crown was obviously immune to exotic influences. His little eyes toured the room and blinked acknowledgment of all they saw. He noted the drapes, the candle-light, the deep recess at the far end of the chamber, the thick rug on the floor, the high ceiling with its beams set so as to obscure the faint, flickering flame of the candles.

Then he looked at Mrs. Prinn. He inspected her black velvet gown, eyeing the long, puffed sleeves. He glanced at her full skirt and at the loose slippers she wore And then he jostled against me as the others took their places and managed to whisper, “This is going to be a pushover! Why, she’s got the whole joint rigged up, you can see that—just an old-fashioned spook worker with enough props in her clothes to supply a whole tribe of Indians.”

I nodded and then, as Mrs. Prinn glanced at us, sat down nest to Crown.

There was a moment of coughing, a moment of rustling, a moment of settling back. Then came a long minute of complete silence. No organ music now, no gong, no chimes. Nothing but the soundless stirring of shadows in a room that was out of this world.

Mrs. Prinn sat there. Her gown was ebony, her flesh carved of marble. We waited for the statue to speak.

“Greetings. There are strangers amongst us this evening.”

Mrs. Brewster opened her mouth, but a glance from the medium sufficed to still her.

“That does not matter. We welcome the presence of new converts. Even the presence of disbelievers does not disconcert us. There is no greater good for the Cause than the conversion of a skeptic to the truth.

“I see that the gentleman on the end”—she nodded at Orlando Crown—“has taken the liberty of bringing a black bag. From previous experience, I assume that he has some test in mind.” She stared at Crown with a bleak smile.

“Oh, I’m sorry about this, Miss Prinn. Perhaps I should have told you. These gentleman—”

“No need to explain, Mrs. Brewster. The fact that they are your guests is enough for me.” The smile was less bleak. “If our skeptical friends wish to test this seance in any way, I shall be only too happy to cooperate.”

Crown placed his satchel on the table.

Everybody gaped.

“What is it you wish?” purred Mrs. Prinn. “Do you want to tape the doors, seal them? Sprinkle the floor with powder? String ropes across the room, or nets? Would you like to bind my hands and feet? Consider me a willing martyr at the altar of Science."

THERE was a subtle mockery in her tone, and Orlando Crown responded.

"Nothing so elaborate, I assure you. I merely thought it might be interesting to vary the usual procedure—the joining of hands customary at a seance."

"What do you propose instead?"

"These."

Orlando Crown dumped a pile of gleaming silver onto the table top.

"Handcuffs!" breathed Mrs. Brewster. "Oh, you aren't going to handcuff her, are you?"

"Not only her, but all of us. You see, I brought a dozen pair; enough and to spare."

"But—"

"Quite all right," said Mrs. Prinn. "We welcome tests. I assume you wish to place them upon our wrists at once. So if there are no objections, I'll ask Chardur to oblige."

"I'd rather see to it myself," Crown murmured.

"As you wish."

Orlando Crown was a fast man with a pair of cuffs. He passed around the table, linking wrist to wrist, trying and testing each set of cuffs and locking them into place quite securely. We sat chained to one another with but a single missing link.

"Now call Chardur, if you please." Crown sat down. "He can put the bracelets on me and complete the circle."

Chardur appeared, handcuffing Crown into place between Mrs. Brewster and myself.

"Does sahib wish me to keep the key?" inquired the Hindu.

"Not on your life! Sahib wishes you to put the key in his mouth."

"In his—?"

"You got me, brother! Put it in my mouth; I want to know where it is when the lights go out."

Orlando Crown grinned widely, and the key slipped into the grin.

"You may leave and lock the door, Chardur," called Mrs. Prinn. "But please extinguish the candles before you go."

"And after that," Crown called, "have die goodness to show yourself in the doorway as you go out. Just for the sake of skeptics."

THE candles went out. So did Chardur.

Eight of us sat in darkness around a table, handcuffed together like prisoners in the black hull of a slave ship.

I don't know what it's like inside the hold of a slave ship, but I imagine the air is filled with squeaks and groans, with hoarse breathing and the creaking of wind and sea and the forces outside.

The forces outside—

We weren't in a slave ship, but there *were* forces outside. Creaks, Groans. A chill wind, sighing and swirling. And Mrs. Prinn's voice from far away. A deep voice, in deeper darkness.

"Can you hear me? Can you hear me? I'm calling . . . calling . . . can you hear?"

Silence.

"I'm trying to make you hear . . . we are waiting. . . . I'm trying to lose . . . hard to fight against . . . lose my . . ."

Silence.

"I *come."*

It wasn't her voice. I've heard imitators, ventriloquists, and drunken sluts in taverns—but no woman can truly mimic the deep bass of a man.

This was a man's voice, guttural and strained through black barriers.

"Hard to find way. Someone fighting Someone evil."

It spoke like an Indian. It sounded like an Indian. And then—it looked like an Indian!

The whitness gathered over Mrs. Prinn's head. It wasn't phosphorescent, or filmy;, it gave forth no glow to light up a single inch of surrounding space. It was merely a formless whiteness that assumed form. I saw a man's head and arms emerge as though from a hole in the darkness—a hole that might have been Mrs. Prinn's open mouth.

Indian? I couldn't be sure, even when I saw the single braid on the shaven skull, th? single plums surmounting the dangling lock. The beaked nose emerged, and then the scarred or painted cheeks.

"Me Little Hatchet."

I was waiting for that, and I expected it to be corny. But it wasn't. Because I saw the face, emerging from nowhere; heard the voice emerging from nowhere. Or from somewhere not in this world.

"I come to warn. Evil here. Heap plenty. Enemy."

The handcuffed wrist attached to my own left hand now moved slowly. Crown was jerking my arm upwards.

"I see him. Gray-haired man. make trouble. I know name. Orlando Crown."

A great sigh went up, and this time I could recognize it as coming from Mrs. Prinn's mouth. The others were breathing hard. I listened, but at the same time I felt Crown's wrist moving mine up, up toward his mouth. Suddenly I understood his plan. He kept the key in his mouth for a purpose.

He now intended to unlock his own wrists from the handcuffs and creep over to investigate the Indian spirit guide. A clever man, Orlando Crown.

But apparently Little Hatchet didn't share my sentiments towards him. For the guttural voice droned on.

"He no believe. He no want truth. He want to make trouble, boast and lie. Spirits know. Spirits bate. Spirits send me to warn."

Fake or not, Mrs. Prinn knew Crown's name, all right. But how could she possibly know that—?

"He take off handcuffs now!"

The guttural voice was a triumphant shout.

"He come to find me. Must not do. Stay back!"

Crown had slipped away from my side at the table. There was a muffled murmur of movement in the darkness. The white blur swirled and swooped.

"Back! No—it is forbidden!"

I heard Crown gasp, knew that he was retreating to his chair again as the white figure of Little Hatchet soared forward, forcing him. The guttural voice was almost in my ear.

"Spirits command vengeance!"

THOSE were the last words I heard. But not the last sounds.

I heard a scream, and then something else—a sound I am sure that has not been uttered for over half a century on the face of the earth.

There was another scream, a groan, and then shrieks rose from all around the table. The white blur hovered over Crown; I tried to clutch at it, but felt nothing save the wave of ice that slithered up my arm, down my spine.

The first scream came from Crown, the shrieks came from the rest of the sitters, and now Mrs. Prinn was shouting in a normal voice.

"Lights! Hurry—lights!"

The shocking shape wavered into nothingness. There was a moment of darkness, and then Chardur entered the room and snapped a switch.

I've told it just the way it happened, or just the way I thought it happened there in the darkness with the distraction of phantom shape, phantom voice, and the final moment of madness to blot out all reasonable remembrance.

I've told it just the way I told it to the police, and nothing anyone else can say that; added to the story. Mrs. Brewster knows more, Mrs. Prinn cannot explain.

The police do not wish to believe that the seance was genuine. The police do not wish to believe in the existence of an Indian Spirit Guide. But there is nothing else to account for what happened—for that final ghastly sound which I identify as a war-whoop, and for what we saw when the lights went on. . . .

Yes, the lights went on and I saw Orlando Crown sitting in his chair once more. I stared at his head, which was like a bucket of blood and brains that had overflowed.

Maybe there is an Indian Spirit Guide and maybe there isn't. But as I stared at the red ruin of Orlando Crown's head, I believed at last.

For Orlando Crown had been scalped!

1949

Satan's Servants

> "Satan's prevalencie of this Age is most clear in the marvellous number of Witches abounding in all places. Now hundreds are discovered in one Shire; and, if Fame deceives us not, in a village of Fourteen Houses in the North, are found so many of this Damned Brood
>
> —Cotton Mather I

I

IT WAS QUITE evident that the inhabitants of Roodsford(1) did not come over in the *Mayflower* or any of her sister ships; that, indeed, they had not sailed from an English port at all. Nor is there a known and reputable record of their coming to that barren region of the north coast They simply entered the land unnoticed and without charter, permission or proviso, set up their simple dwellings.

They were let alone because their haven lay beyond the Massachusetts Bay's officious reach—in Maine, where the Puritan's autocratic hand did not descend till 1663. The first mention of the place occurs in the *Chronicles of Captain Elias Codworthy, His Trips & Explorations upon the Continent of North America,* printed by Haverstock in London, in 1672.(2) He describes it as "a fishing Towne of fourteen Houses, the Inhabitants of which wear doleful, ungodly Look in Keeping with Their meagre Dwellings.(3)

The good Captain had made but a cursory inspection whilst passing up the coast in a sloop bound for Nova Scotian shores, and evidently no one cared to follow up his testimony, for the name of Roodsford does not recur in Colonial history until the atrocious witchcraft days of ‘92. Then came investigation with a vengeance.

So for a time the people and the ways of Roodsford were to the outer world very largely unknown. Even in Portsmouth they were only an unsavoury legend, while at York all mention of them was avoided by common consent.

How Gideon Godfrey of Boston gleaned his story is as yet undetermined. Perhaps he had heard some of the queer hints and furtive, whispered rumors circulated by the savages or traders(4) who made occasional trips down the coast with supplied of furs, or perhaps something had come out in the closer surveys of Maine which accompanied its fusion with the Massachusetts Bay in 1690. Whatever the source, Gideon must have known or suspected a great deal—for only the most urgent contingency could have caused this man of God to do what he subsequently did.

In the early autumn of 1693 he moved lock, stock and barrel to a dirty little village of foreigners, in a barren wilderness seventy miles up the coast as the crow flies and fully ten miles more by the winding, ferry-broken land route. He left behind him a wife, two children, and a goodly Boston pulpit to ride, univited and unannounced, to Roodsford.

Gideon was a pillar of the Church. His fiery sermons, fanatical devotion to the cause of the Puritans, and stoical stamina under the rigors and hardships of a new land were belied, however, in his ascetic countenance and asthenic physique, which gave him the outward appearance of a gangling parson. Only in his fiery, unflinching eyes was there a hint of the ardour which made him the veritable embodiment of the Orthodox Church of the Massachusetts Bay(5) asherode into the wilderness to do battle with the heathen.

His going caused much comment. Although he had gained the approval of his superiors, most folk deemed it a rash venture. Gideon, the wise ones declared, was a Fool. And in the minds of the elders there was more of apprehension than approbation.

Nevertheless, Gideon Godfrey left Boston on horseback one morning in late September, 1693, amidst the lamentations of Friends and Family. Before departure he had outlined his route of travel to the Pasquanlog sachems who knew something of the region through which he would journey. His plan was to ride to Newbury and spend the night, then go on to Portsmouth the following day before turning west. After that, save for a brief pause at the little village of York, Gideon would be riding straight through the unblazed forest byways feared by settlers and savages alike.

When Gideon thus charted his journey, the Indians shook their heads. Strange horror, they whispered, crept through those ancient woods and leered down from the brooding hills. They warned him of the perils of riding alone, or venturing into certain secluded forest byways after the coming of night. They counseled him to keep to the coast and stay within a circle of fire if forced to stop between towns betwixt dusk and dawn.

Gideon was most eager to secure more details concerning his destination, but when he asked the Pasquantogs what they knew of Roodsford they shook their heads and pretended not to understand his questionings. Wakimis, the elder sachem, begged him to abandon his journey, and finally proferred the services of two guides who would travel on foot.

Thus they started out, and for the first two days their schedule was maintained with fair ease—Newbury was reached, then Portsmouth, then York.

The next day they plunged at dawn into an unknown world. There was a blue mist over the western hills and a grey fog on the sea. The chill of autumn lay light upon the air, and russet leaves would soon carpet the ground(6). After Kittery and York were left behind they turned inland, though the guides again echoed the warnings of Wakimis when they contemplated the blackly wooded route before them. The sea was soon lost to view, and the booming voice of its waters was stilled in their ears.

They journeyed now in forest twilight. Blue shadows hung athwart the twisted pathway, or lurked beside the boles of immemorially ancient trees. Strange rustlings echoed from far-off tangled byways, bringing to Gideon's mind the sachem's tales of fabled presences in the forest. Once there came the remote evil laughter of a trickling brook, whereat the guides drew back, and Gideon's horse whinnied piteously; but Godfrey himself gave no sign of having heard.

Their way led them through a wood forever denser, vet with deceptive suggestions of brandling paths which gave rise to temporary loss of bearings. Again and again time was lost, till at length Gideon's carefully arranged daylight travelling schedule seemed likely to prove of no avail.(7)

Fording a swiftly-charging stream shortly after midday, they came upon a still more forbidding expanse of forest where the path was merely a vague outline in shrouding gloom. Here all was silent amidst the darkness, and the small familiar voices of bird and animal were unnaturally mute. Indeed, bird and animal life seemed singularly absent, nor were there the usual insects. Even the vegetation was oddly altered; they saw neither leaves, grass, nor ordinary shrubbery—only the great black shadows of old and withered trees.

One of the savages whispered that the woods were known in Pasquantog lore; he spoke of fissures and seams in the earth near certain of the denser swamps, and of queer voices that answered when the medicine-men called. Tribal legend hinted at these beings, half-animal and halfhuman, who held conclaves in the grottoes and glibbered rituals deep in the earth. The White Ice—by which he meant the glaciers—had done away with many of these things, but surviving presences existed still, hidden and waiting in the forest fastness.(8) That was why the animals and birds had fled to safer preserves in the north, where the tribe usually hunted.

“Turn back now,” the guide counselled. “Soon conies night, and we shall be lost. We are brave men, and you carry mighty medicine in your Black Book, I know. But what good is the White God’s magic against the demons that thunder in the earth?”

The other guide eagerly assented and urged that they at least cut across to the coast if they could not reach Kittery or York before darkness.

Gideon listened, tightlipped and Silent, and his hand searched out the great Bible in his left saddle-pack.

He clutched the book to his bosom and sat erect in the saddle.

“Hear me out,” he said. “It is in my mind that much truth lies in your heathen wisdom, for we dwell in an unknown and unhallowed land. Have not Increase and Cotton Mather, as well as other godly and eminent divines, affirmed that ibis America is the Devil’s paradise? Have not we discovered witchcraft in the very centers of civilization, hanging(9) the wizards in Boston and Salem? And are not these self-same witches and warlocks the minions of Satan who is lately be-stirred the entire continent of Europe?

“I have had some slight experience in these matters. I was present at the trial of the notorious Mary Wright and talked to a pious and famous witch-finder, Jeremy Edmunds; he who has told us in his sermons of the geography of Hell—finding it to be exactly four thousand, three hundred and twenty-seven miles in circumference. It was he who urged me to dedicate myself to this journey.”

As he spoke, Gideon was conscious of his inability to translate and transmit Edmunds’ message to these simple savages. The great man had indeed spoken at length of the witchcraft menace; of the foul plague of sorcery which was even now ravaging Europe as well as the colonies. He told Gideon of the damage these creatures had wrought—of storms conjured up at sea, of children deranged, of cattle ravaged by disease. He spoke of the witches and their familiars; bats, mice, ousels, cats and animals unknown to any Bestiary, creatures of evil in animal form bestowed upon witches as counselors and protectors by the Devil. Edmunds mentioned the various tests then in fashion whereby witches might be detected—trial by water, the search for witch-marks, and other scientific means of determining guilt.

“Since I learned of the extent of Satan’s hold over this land, I have sought unceasingly to discover the source of this peril to our people,” Godfrey continued. The Indians listened stolidly enough, but their shifting feet and the sidelong covert glances they bestowed upon the forest’s surrounding shadows gave token of their unease.

Gideon tried to explain his mission—how he had preached his sermon against the Adversary and corresponded extensively with witch-finders in England, meanwhile meeting with brother parsons in Salem, Plymouth, Newport and the inland towns. All references in the Bible had been most assiduously studied, and from obscure sources he had secured dogeared and decaying copies of strange and terrible books. He had read the blasphemous accounts in the cryptic *Necronomicon* and the queer verse-sequence of Heber’s *Daemonic Presences* with its sly hints and subtle allusions to the *Fable of the Tree and the Fruit.* In a manner befitting the true scholar, he endeavored to lay hands on all that had been written concerning the subject at hand, and he listened, as well.

Gradually, Gideon’s interest had shitted to the direct study of those about him. He traced down rumors, sought the sources of stories told by isolated farmers in the far-off hills. There were the Indian myths to ponder upon as well; incredible legends of creatures who had lurked in the lands to the west and fled at the coming of the whites. The Pasquantogs held ancient beliefs concerning presences who had come to the earth from the sky or crawled out of caverns upon suitable evocation.

Many of these legends were far too fantastic for credence, but others ominously paralleled normal Christian dogma.

Horned entities—creatures with wings and hoofs—cloven footprints found in swamps—giant stags speaking in the voices of men—black beings dancing in forest glens to the sound of drums deep within the earth—these things the savages feared even as Christians did. Such stories fired Gideon with fresh zeal, and more momentous still were the actual reports of specific instances which he gleaned from visitors and hunters who dealt with isolated and half-for gotten settlements.

Here in New England whole villages had mysteriously disappeared, not through famine or Indian attack, but by the simple process of evaporation. One day they existed and the next day nothing remained but a cluster of empty houses. Other communities held dark communion under midnight moons, and children of neighboring villages were known to have vanished mysteriously just before such occasions. Sometimes a minister reached a neighboring town with an account of his rejection by parishioners in favor of new and secret ways of worship. There was talk of ceremonies in which both white men and savages adored a common altar; of isolated, towns grown suddenly and amazingly prosperous in barren wilds.

More dreadful still were the mumbled accounts of strange happenings in isolated graveyards; of open graves, of coffins seemingly burst from within, of graves that were not deep enough for their purpose and of graves there were far too deep, leading to tunnels beneath the earth.

These tales and others of like nature, together with the written testimony he gathered, increased steadily during the year or more of Gideon’s investigation. But appeals to authority for the commissioning of a crusade into the hinterlands met with no success. The courts were overburdened with local witchcraft trials. Storm as he would that the evil must be stamped out at its source, Gideon’s sermons and appeals fell upon deaf ears. Slowly he realized that he could look for no outside aid in his battle with the Adversary.

“I have but one ally,” he concluded, to the Pasquantog guides. “The Almighty attends me in this mission.

“For whilst the courts labor against a few aged men and women who practise sorcery in Salem or Boston Town, the gravest source of Evil still testers here in the wilds, crouches in the forest and broods on these silent and secret hills. Gallows Hill(10) cannot accommodate all the minions of Satan. This I have long since concluded.

“It has been in my mind that even as the godly have their houses of worship in which to gather and to spread the Gospel unto all, so must the spawn of Satan have budded an unsanctilied sanctuary of their own. If this could be found, reached, and destroyed, then the forces of Evil could he dissipated and the hand of the Devil lifted from the land.

“Lately there came to me news of the lone village where the black northern forest pressed down on a desolate coast—this Roodsford. And it was as though revelation were made; surely, I thought, this must be the very center of sin I seek!

“I have ridden forth to destroy it, and I shall not turn hack. For the Lord is with me, and with you, and there is nothing to fear. No, my friends, we shall go on and do what must be done. Let us not speak again of returning until our task is accomplished.”

So saving, Gideon lifted his Bible in a blessing, and with his left hand he cocked a pistol which he pointed at the guides for added emphasis. Thus assured of his earnest conviction, the guides offered no further protest when Gideon hid them move forward down the trail into the gathering night.

Gideon, despite his outward show of assurance, felt his stomach quake with trepidation, for he knew full well the dangers amongst which he placed himself. He feared the aspect of this night-wood almost as mightily as did the guides, and he was not reassured to sense the body of his horse trembling as if taken with a sudden fever. But he still had his Bible and his prayers, plus the small comfort of a new lantern which he now lit and tendered to one of the Pasquantogs who led the way.

Unexpectedly, they came upon an open glade in the midst of the forest. Here, beneath a turbulent sky, dimly illumined by a cloud-choked moon, Godfrey and his two companions prepared to spend the night. Reaching Roodsford this evening was obviously out of the question, and the savages seemed oddly relieved when Gideon called a hall and tethered his horse.

Silently the Pasquantogs gathered dry wood for afire and kindled it, Indian fashion, at the base of a cairn in the center of the clearing. There followed a brief repast of salt pork and-corn bread(11) taken from one of Gideon's capacious saddlebags. The horse was fed and watered—for one of the guides discovered a brook that crawled in sluggish murk along one side of the clearing—then tethered again to a sapling at the edge of the glade.

There was little conversation, for the spoken word seemed to sling to the vast, silent pool of the surrounding night The Pasquantogs lay down upon their blankets and gave themselves up to uneasy prayers to the guiding Manitou. Gideon paid them no heed, but sat lone by the lantern-light, his pistol across his lap and his Bible in hand, reading aloud softly and steadfastly from the tale of Jehu the witch-hunter.

After a time he closed the book and placed it beneath his head for a pillow. Then he extinguished the lantern and the night came down. He lay there for long moments in the darkness, fighting the panic which came with the baleful blanketing of blackness. Steadfastly, Gideon prayed himself to sleep. So the long night passed, and slowly the flame of dawn kindled the heads of the giant trees.

As Gideon awoke from dream-bedazzled sleep, he stared about the clearing with new comprehension. In last night's gloom he had not taken cognizance of the unnatural and *artificial* aspects of the glade. Now for the first time he noticed how smooth was the turf surrounding the great triad of white stones at its center. He regarded the peculiar geometrical conformation of the rocks themselves; the carefully chipped and pointed angles which bore such a calculated relation to the positions of certain of the major stars upon summer nights. There were a few grotesque carvings at the base of the stones which were obviously the product of human handicraft; crude designs which resembled the signs and symbols Gideon had seen in some of the mouldering books of elder lore.

Could he have unwittingly chosen to pass the night in one of the meeting-places the Indians had spoken of with such dread? If so, perhaps it was only his prayers which had protected him.

Thus Gideon mused, his eyes roving the glade. Then he sat bolt upright with a sudden start, as he realized that he was now the sole occupant of the clearing.

His horse and the two guides were gone.

II

ALONE IN THE WILDERNESS, Gideon Godfrey took counsel with himself. He had but two possible alternatives; the first being to retrace his foot-steps and endeavor to overtake the Pasquantogs and his horse and either reclaim his property by force or join them on the trip back to civilization. The second alternative, obviously, was to continue on to Roodsford alone.

To a man of sense, the first course was undoubtedly advisable. But Gideon was not a man of sense—lie was a man of God. As such, he determined, he would complete his mission. Without food, water, steed or guide he meant to travel today through the forest and reach Roodsford before nightfall. He still had his pistol and his Bible but these were as nothing compared to his faith.

He drank and washed at the brook, then rose, gave one last parting glance to the singular altar-stones within the clearing, and turned his eyes resolutely forward to woods.

As Gideon tried the cryptic byways of the lonely fastness, his thoughts were far away. He was endeavoring now to formulate a new plan of procedure. It had been his original intention to ride into Roodsford on horseback and proceed immediately to go about the business of exorcising the spot with certain efficacious incantations as he had gleaned from the forbidden volumes over which he had pored so diligently. He was confident that he had transcribed spells of fearsome potency which would dispel the evil-doers before they could overcome him either physically or through magical means. Now all this must be abandoned, for the copies of the runes reposed in one of the saddlebags on the back of the missing horse.

Gideon's faith in the righteousness of his cause remained unshaken, even though hunger grew in his belly with the rising sun. His stride lengthened as he passed through a grove of bearded trees that muttered in the morning breeze like sage elders in some secret council. Then he emerged upon the bank of a goodly river which he must wade, then swim across, wetting himself to the skin and all but perishing in the turbulent concourse of waters. The tidal margin was high, but Gideon managed to clamber through, holding Bible and pistol alike aloft, at no small peril to his own safety.

He did not pause to dry his garments, but walked briskly along the opposite bank, for an empty stomach makes for haste. He covered several miles—many, however, on side-trails on which he had to backtrack his way(12)—before the shortened rays of the sun betokened the approach of late afternoon. It was then that he came upon the jutting peak of a lone hill, rising out of the encircling forest like a newly-emerged island from the green waves of the sea. This was the place where he turned in a northeasterly direction to the coast, and he quickened his pace so that he might come to his destination well before nightfall. But there were other mistakes made without the service of a guide, and he wandered again and again from the path, so that night descended all too soon.

Strange shadows haunted the New England dusk. The drowsy hum of autumn was in the air, and the landscape shimmered in a wan mist, borne on a moaning night wind from the waters to the east.

It was dark when Gideon saw a deep inlet of the sea. A gibbous moon hung over the fog-wreathed waters, and by the pallid light above the high bluff, Gideon Godfrey first beheld the village of Roodsford.

At first glance there was nothing extraordinary about the sight of the little community set against the background of ancient forest. Fourteen tiny two story frame houses(13) stood huddled about the needle-like spire of a crude church in prosaic and orthodox fashion. Gideon peered at them and wondered what there was about their aspect and setting which was awry. Perhaps it was the crazy slant of their gables to the sea; mayhap he sensed the strangeness in the absence of friendly lights in the gaping windows and upon the jutting wharf below the bluff. But all this was commonplace enough. Gideon stared and pondered at the spectacle.

Then it came to him that no road wound cheerily away amongst the hills; no figures moved along the single street. The town was silent, desolate and lone.

Gideon stood for long moments contemplating the scene, and for longer moments contemplating his own plight. Enter Roodsford he must, but neither Bible nor pistol would serve to rout any evil he might encounter there. No; this was a situation which called for cunning and stratagem; one must fight fire with fire and Gideon knew he was face to face with the Adversary, the Father of Lies.

Gideon Godfrey, servant of the Lord, would not be welcome in Roodsford, if rumor and repute held truth. But a stranger, lost in the forest, might find shelter. He might be given an opportunity to spend some time in the village; to observe and overhear, to plan a strategy.

Yes, that was now the only way. Gideon walked a few paces until he found a large stone beside the path. Here he knelt and scrabbled at the hard earth, hollowing out a place of concealment for his Bible. He rose, gripping his pistol, then made a wry face as he considered its uselessness. He might fire it once, but he lacked powder and ball for any further use. With a sigh, he placed the pistol alongside the Bible and then covered the hiding-place with loose earth, replacing the rock. He noted the spot well, before striding down toward the village in the gloom of night.

No dogs howled at his coming, but the wind whispered strangely as he approached the end of the little crooked street between the huddled dwelling-places. The first house loomed ahead in shrouded darkness to his left, far back from the dusty, unpaved street. Gideon paused and considered whether or not to continue his progress, then shrugged. For his purpose, one house was as good as another; as a lone wanderer, lost In the forest, he would be most apt to seek shelter at the first door along his path.

Gideon walked up to the black, iron-knockered door set between two shuttered windows. He plied the knocker against the timbers until a booming resonation filled the brooding stillness of the street(14) For a long moment he stood there, sensing naught but the diminution of the echoes, and then, with a screech and a shudder, the door swung open.

“Welcome,” said a voice from the inner gloom. “Welcome to Roodsford.”

Gideon stepped over the threshold and into another world.

III

FOR A MOMENT GIDEON STOOD engulfed in darkness and silence, then started violently as the darkness was broken by lantern-light and the silence shattered by the screech of the closing door.

Eyes and ears affrighted by sudden sensation, Gideon steeled himself against any revelation. Yet nothing he might have imagined was comparable to the shock of actuality—for he now beheld himself standing in a room that was utterly normal in its aspect.

It was the low-raftered parlor of a typical New England farmhouse, complete with stone fireplaces, hand-hewn furniture, rough flooring covered by the skins of animals. Gideon’s gaze encountered naught but the familiar fixtures of family existence in die wilderness; he even noted a spinning-wheel near the window alcove to his right.

Nor was he able to detect anything unusual in the aspect of his host, who turned now, lantern in hand, to confront him with a welcoming smile. The man before him was stooped and bent, with lined face and grizzled beard. He squinted up at Gideon with a cheerful grin and extended a gnarled hand in greeting.

"I fear you roused me from slumber," he said. "I am alone here and it is my custom to retire early, for It is not often that visitors honor me with their presence." He glanced self-consciously at his homespun shirt and breeches. "I must make shift with what garment I possess," he continued, "for there is no one to tend to my needs. You will excuse my appearance."

Gideon nodded, then cleared his throat. "It is I who must apologize. I have gone astray in my journeyings, I fear."

"We see few travelers here," the old man observed, eyeing Gideon closely. "You must have strayed far indeed."

Gideon met his stare and smiled. "I would gladly tell you of my journey. At the moment I am somewhat tired and more than a little hungry—"

The hint did not pass unnoticed.

"Of course. You are welcome to sup and spend the night here."

Thus prosaically began Gideon's stay in Roodsford; as the house guest of old Dorcas Frye. Dorcas was a widower who had come here in 74; he lived alone, hunted and fished, kept his own household. This Gideon learned during the serving of a simple repast—this, and nothing more, although he attempted to draw out his host with remitting patience. But Dorcas Frye proved taciturn and evasive by turns.

Ordinarily, Gideon would have accepted stich reticence as normal and natural—for it was not the way of the Puritan to be overly friendly with casual strangers. But suspecting what he did, Gideon read a baleful meaning into his host's unwillingness to talk about himself.

Yet there was nothing to justify any suggestion of hidden secrets or closely-guarded mysteries. The house looked typical, Dorcas seemed a harmless enough elderly settler, and there wasn't even a hint of abnormality, until—

There came a scratching and scrabbling. Gideon's spoon clashed against the pewter bowl as he started erect, but his trepidation was as naught compared to that of his host. At the sound, old Dorcas seemed transfixed with terror. And yet, even in the brief moment of awareness, Gideon sensed that the terror was not directed towards the scratching noise, or what might produce it—the old man was afraid because Gideon *heard* the sound.

A scratching and a scrabbling. Gideon turned towards the door, noting that his host made no move to open it. At the same time he realized the reason; the very nature of the sound itself told him that it did not come from the direction of the door. Whatever person, or animal, or demon of the night might be rasping nail or claw to produce the noise, the resultant product was not caused by a scraping against wood. This was the sound of scraping against metal, or against stone—and it did not come from the direction of the door.

Gideon Godfrey's gaze encompassed the room. Was there a panel, a compartment? But how could there be, and of stone or metal? Then he noted Dorcas Frye's stare. The old man was peering at the floor under the table.

The scraping sound grew louder, became a tangible presence in the room. It was no longer possible for one to pretend not to hear, and in a moment it became impossible to pretend not to see.

For the floor *rose.*

A portion of the hardpacked earthern floor beneath the table was moving upwards. Gideon's glance pierced into the shadows, noted for the first time that there was a solid stone surface, a moving surface; recognized the rectangular outline of a trapdoor.

Dorcas was on his feel, and a moment later Gideon stood up—stood up and retreated to the wall as the trapdoor continued to rise.

Without a glance at his guest, the old man stooped and tugged the edge of the door. Gideon saw a black, well-like opening, from which issued further blackness; a moving, tangible blackness that was alive.

The blackness had a red mouth and yellow fangs, red eyes and grey, pointed claws; it was too large for a cat and too small for a wolf, and most men would have identified it as a hound. But Gideon knew that this was no ordinary black dog—anyone well-versed in the ways of witchcraft could recognize a familiar.

The beast emerged from the cistern-like opening in the earth and squatted, panting and slavering, blinking in the candlelight. For a moment it seemed unaware of Gideon's presence, and then a low growl issued from the crimson cavern of its throat. Dorcas instantly grasped it by its forepaws and restrained it, but the growling increased in volume and accelerated in tempo.

Gideon continued to press against the wall. He stood there, staring at man and beast squatting before him, stood there listening to the baying of the hound, stood there sensing the *wrongness* of it all. For unless he were completely bemused, something was hideously awry. The cadence of the growling was almost *conversational,* and Dorcas bent his head in a pose that could only be construed as that of a *listener.* The great dog growled, and the old man listened, and then they both sat and stared at Gideon.

He knew, then. There was no longer room for any possibility of doubt. Each witch, each wizard or warlock dedicated to the Devil, is assigned a familiar; an imp or sprite or evil spirit sent by Satan in the guise of an animal to counsel and advise, to assist and abet, to watch and to warn. Nourished by blood from the body of the master, the creature serves and protects always. This was Dorcas Frye's familiar—the hound of Hell.

Gideon Godfrey knew, and they knew that he knew. The moment for pretense was past for all of them. Nothing remained but to act. If Dorcas acted, it would be to release the great beast, release it to tear at Gideon's throat. And in a moment he Would act, unless—

Gideon spoke.

"I see I have indeed found sanctuary," he said.

"Sanctuary?" The echoed reply was an incredulous curse in Dorcas Frye's mouth, but he held the hound still.

"Until I saw the trapdoor I was not sure, but now I know." Gideon forced a smile to his lips, but Dorcas averted his gaze in confusion.

"I do not understand," he said. "I am but a simple Farmer. As you see, the beast is ill-trained; he is of use to me in hunting but I find I must keep him in restraint at other times. Hence I digged this pit—"

Gideon saw his host’s hesitancy displayed in his gnarled hands. Gradually they were loosing their grip about the dog’s neck. In an instant, should hesitancy give way to decision, he would let the creature spring. Gideon moved quickly.

“Come,” he said. “There is no need to deceive me. I know, else I would not have come at this time. I should like to see what lies beneath the house.” Unhesitatingly, he walked towards the table, pushed it back, and knelt by the rim of the pit.

As he had surmised, crude footholds had been fashioned in the slanting earth beneath. Gideon was prepared for the domination of the darkness, but the waft of mephitic fetor from below was almost unbearable. Still he smiled as he glanced over his shoulder at Dorcas and the hound.

“Light my way,” he urged. “Can it be that you are afraid to accompany me?”

The taunt was sufficient. Dorcas gripped a candle with one hand and held the dog by the scruff of the neck with his other hand. Slowly, he knelt and placed his feet gingerly, dragging the black beast behind him. Gideon prepared to follow.

For a moment he felt an irresistable impulse to take flight. It would be simple now to slam down the stone covering to the pit, place the stout table squarely upon the trapdoor and flee into the night. The night was dark and foreboding, but a deeper darkness lurked here below. It would be simple, it would be easy—but Gideon had a mission.

He breathed deeply, then lowered himself into the pit.

They clambered down; the wrinkled wizard, the hound of Hell, and the man of God, descending into the blackness of the bourne. The candle cast shadows on the earthen walls; shadows that crept and capered their way towards inner depths. Gideon counted fifty footholds, then felt solid shale beneath his feet.

Now they were in a corridor; now they walked silently along until they reached a large chamber carved out of the solid stone. The air was cleaner, moistly cool, and Gideon surmised they must be close to the inlet of the sea.

Dorcas led the way, tugging the hound behind him, and Gideon followed, followed until they rounded a corner of the cavern and emerged into the great dazzling center of light.

The huge chamber was empty, or seemed so at first glance. Gideon saw a vast circular expanse, an underground grotto of stone, with perhaps a dozen lesser entrances spaced at intervals around the walls—entrances similar to the one in which they stood, and undoubtedly reached from other houses in the street above by the same means; trapdoor and tunnel. He saw the carvings on the walls and recognized them, then turned his gaze to the center of the cavern and saw the altar, which he likewise recognized as similar to the stone in the forest clearing.

There were two figures lying across the top of the altar stone.

Gideon moved forward, peering, eyes dazzled by the light which he now perceived came from tapers set in niches along the grotto walls. He moved forward, Dorcas and the hound at his heels, watching, waiting, hesitating. There was something about the figures on the altar which Gideon wanted to verify.

Half-way across the stone floor of the cavern he halted. A sudden rush of sound assailed his ears, coming from *behind* and *below* the other side of the altar. It was a noise composed of many individual noises; rustlings, cheepings, chitterings, cachinnations in cacophony. And then the sound became a sight; a sight rising over the rim of the altar. Again, the sight was composed of many things.

A black, arched furry back . . . a flaring of leathery wings . . . a lashing, tiny tail . . . a fanged grimace . . . a diadem of yellow eyes . . . an arc of curving claw . . .

They crawled atop the altar in a wave; the cat, the bat, the ousel, the rat, the grinning grimalkin risen from haunted dreams. They spat and snarled and leered and mocked at Gideon as he recognized them for what they were—brothers of the dog behind him, minions of the pit, the familiars of the witches of Roodsford. They squatted on the altar, clawing at the two all-too familiar figures that lay silently there. They squatted and they stared at

Gideon, as if daring his further approach. They hissed at him and threatened with eyes and teeth and paws.

Dorcas and the hound were very close behind. Gideon could hear the rasp of the old man’s breath, the deep panting of the black beast. Still there was nothing to do but peer at the altar; peer and finally recognize the truth.

The two atop the altar were dead, but Gideon knew them now. He saw the two Indian guides who had deserted him in the forest.

How stalked, how slain, how brought here for sacrifice? How prepared now to shock him into admission of identity?

Gideon could not ponder. His every move was studied as he stood within a circle of yellow eyes.

Then the voice of Dorcas Frye croaked out, echoing through the vaulted arch of the pit.

“You have seen. Have you naught to say?”

Gideon stood silent a moment. This was the crisis. He thought of invocation and of prayer, cast the thought aside. It was not the time. But there never would be a time unless he spoke and spoke aright. Inwardly, he prayed for guidance.

They watched him for a long moment, watched him as he turned to Dorcas Frye and smiled.

“Everything is as I would desire,” he said. “You have slain the two Pasquantogs and disposed of the horse as well, I note. That is good. No one could possibly have noted my coming. I shall stay with you now until the Sabbat. You are a wise and faithful servant.”

Dorcas Frye’s eyes widened as Gideon spoke. The mention of the horse was an inspiration on Gideon’s part—and at the utterance of the words “Sabbat” and “servant,” the old man’s mouth gaped.

“Who—who are you?” he whispered. There was silence in the cavern as he bent forward for a reply; silence as the creatures of the night peered up at Gideon and awaited an answer.

Gideon smiled and shrugged. His hands signed the cross in reverse.

“Do you not recognize me?” he asked. “I am the Messenger of the Master, sent to prepare the way for his coming. I am Asmodeus—Prince of Hell!”

IV

LATER—MUCH LATER—Gideon slept, in the chambers alcove, upon a couch of deerskin. But not before he explained that his coming was but a test of Dorcas Fry’s fidelity to Satan; not before he had perjured his way into complete acceptance; not before the fawning hound had licked his fingers.

The seventy-odd inhabitants of Roodsford had been summoned to the dark chamber to greet him, and toasts were drunk in a strange wine. Gideon chose to be silent in his new role, and to play the listener. His choice was accepted, nor did the strangers he met find it unusual or unseemly that a demon in human form should be reserved and demanding.

He spoke only enough to convey the pretense that all he heard was already known to him, but inwardly he quaked, and when finally he sought slumber he found only a delirium of dreams.

The days that followed seemed but a continuation of initial nightmare. Gideon deemed it wise to remain, as Dorcas Frye’s guest although he came and went as he chose, as befitted a Prince of Hell. None durst question him closely, although he asked questions in plenty. Ready respect and ready answers were accorded him always.

He learned of the growth of Roodsford, of the initial coming to these bleak and barren shores at a date which sounded incredible to his ears. Still, that alone could explain the mouldering antiquity of their houses—so seemingly decrepit and poorly-fashioned on the exterior, but possessed of the labyrinthian passageways to the secret vaults beneath.

Gideon was told why the Indians had fled, but why the hunting and fishing were so good despite the fears of the animals who wisely shunned the spot; he learned, too, why crops grew lushly in rocky soil, and from whence came the exotic herbs used in charm and philtre.

There were those who spoke to him of the storms raised at sea, so that two stout and goodly ships had foundered off these shores. These had been salvaged, and some of the passengers saved, only to be given later in sacrifice. Food and luxuries had been procured from the vessels, but his informants were most pleased that some of the bodies of the drowned had been delivered from the sea.

When told of the uses to which these corpses had been put, Gideon's mask slipped badly, but there was worse to come.

He learned, gradually, why there were no children amongst the inhabitants of Roodsford, and he wondered at the absence of a common graveyard.

And then, one night, he learned—

" 'Tis good you came," Dorcas Frye told him, between gulps of the dark, heavy rum he'd been consuming throughout the early evening.

"For as your Master knows, our plans are near completion. Long have we bided on this bleak coast, abuilding for the future; living in hovels mean and small to avoid suspicion, and conducting our worship under ground. And now the time of reckoning draws nigh."

Gideon nodded as the old man poured a brimming beaker.

"I'm the leader, you might say, of the Coven. As such, I owe responsibility to none but the Master himself. I'm honored that you were sent to help me plan the Sabbat, for it means we are ready. Ready at last! Ready to rise and rule."

Ready to rise and rule. Gideon was on the track at last, and he drew his host out at length. Nor was the drunken oldster reluctant to babble freely.

The domain of Satan must expand, he said. Cotton Mather had not been far wrong when he said America was the witches' paradise. But it could never be held by ignorant old women or queer rural wizards. It was true that some thousands of these folk resided in New England, but they were for the most part isolated and unorganized. They limited their activities to clumsy attempts at brewing potions, or casting minor spells and afflictions on their enemies. Even the flying trips through the wild and smoke-crowned hills resulted in naught but nocturnal revels and a few meaningless ceremonies which could bring naught of pleasure to Satan the All-Lowest.

Besides, the persecution of witches had resulted in a sad diminution of worship. It was time for Roodsford to act, and to this end had its people builded and abided.

Once let an organized band of believers fall upon the cities and claim them for the Master—then all would give way before them. There was unrest in the Colonies today; many people were tired of the restrictions of the Church and the taxes of the King. They would rise if given encouragement. For the others, there would be plague and pestilence, storm and famine, with the Devil's help.

It needed only bold action. A foray on a village, a descent upon a town, a gradual encroachment and engulfment, and within a year or two the country would be won. It was unlikely that Mother England would take much note of her recalcitrant colonial possessions, and if so, there were always storms and mistrials, and strange creatures awaited a summoning from sea-slimed depths.

Then would America become truly the land of Satan! The Antichrist would overcome the Kingdom of Heaven, and the unholy federation of the new world might even in time rise and smite the churches of the old.

"But there are so few of you," Gideon objected, knowing as he spoke that there was some mystery unrevealed.

"Yet as you realize, we cannot be harmed," Dorcas Frye chuckled in reply. "In that lies our strength. Once our enemies in town and village realize this, they will flee before us. Surely, you understand how it will be."

"Surely," Gideon nodded.

"And now we must prepare for the Sabbat, prepare for the coming of the Master. He will proclaim the day of his rule, order and instruct us from the Great Hill."

They could not be harmed.

Gideon pondered that as Dorcas droned oil Soon would come All-Hallows Eve and the night of Sacrifice. Then would(15) they strike and with a vengeance.

They had come here over a hundred years ago and there were no children.

Gideon pieced together the hints, and Dorcas told him of the coming festival, of the sacrifices of cattle awaiting, of the children to be taken from the village of Wells.

They could not be harmed and there were no graveyards in Roodsford,

Gideon gazed as Dorcas, who spoke like a man, drank like a man, looked like a man, but who was more, or less, than any man alive.

Alive The people of Roodsford were living dead.

That was the secret. For this they had sold their souls to Satan, so they could live past their appointed time without harm. In a flash Gideon recalled not only the absence of children, but the predominance of oldsters. He recalled the glee with which they told of the recovery of drowned bodies—new habitations for the lost souls, the damned souls. Soon as army of undead would be abroad in the land, striking terror and bringing death to the godly. Soon. Very soon.

“We’ll learn on Sabbat-Even,” Dorcas droned.

Gideon knew that Sabbat-Eve was but three nights distant.

He excused himself, shortly thereafter, but not until the moon was high over the domed hills.(16) He already knew that he had been assigned the seventh place in the Coven(17) upon the coming night, but there yet remained the problem of what to do about it.

As he slipped through the darkness towards the trees that loomed beyond Roodsford, Gideon remembered only one thing.

There were only three nights until the Sabbat . . .

V

THE SUN SANK SULLENLY in the hovering western hills, and murky darkness fell upon New England. Prayers were muttered in ten thousand homes, services offered up in a hundred hamlets, charms recited and spells inscribed upon amulets, doors barred and churches bolted.

Was it not Hallow-Mass, the Night of the Mack Lord? It was the night of the eldritch vision, of mildewed magic, of the flying ointment, of the heart torn bloody and dripping from the breast, of the black bullock of sacrifice, of the whimpering child ravished from the home, of the horned moon, of the fire of sacrifice.(18)

The Pasquantogs offered up strange prayers, and the squaws jumbled knowingly in the wigwam darkness. Old crones and hoary grand-sires were absent from their hovels, and heifers and cats alike seemed to have disappeared. As for the great Cotton Mather, he was sick abed with a colic, devil-sent.

It was Hallow-Mass, and drums thundered on the northern hills, throbbing and pulsing, chanting of the Sabbat. Sometimes they whispered of secrets buried beneath stark New England crags that were old when man was young and *others* shambled through the blackness and howled worship in the autumn night. Sometimes they roared out a challenge of defiance to all sanity. Sometimes they beat out messages to listeners from Beyond, invitations to attend the revels to come.

Roodsford lay deserted beneath the gloating moon, but beyond the forest, at the Great Hill, all had assembled. The women leading the bullocks, the men smeared with the unguents of evil, the celebrants from afar had gathered to squat upon the mildewed turf within the circle of stones. Crouching and nestling beside them were pawing, furry hordes of night; the familiars, imp-spawn of Abaddon.

Gideon Godfrey stood beside the altar-stone, staring into the blackness ringing the circling hills. His was a signal honor, for he was one of the three appointed to lead the bullocks unto sacrifice. The tethered beasts lowed dolorously, shaking their massive heads. Black candles had been attached to their horns and scent sprinkled over their glossy bodies. Their hooves were gilded, manes braided, and they stood now inhaling the reek of Sabbat ointment rising from the half-naked throng of celebrants below the altar mound.

Gideon was grateful for his place apart with the bullocks, for the revels had started in earnest. Nameless bayers yammered through the echoing hills. The throng milled and shrilled and clamored, dancing and shrieking in honor of Lucifer as the drums beat on, shaking the firmament with their promise of greater abandon to come.

Wine was passed, wine was drunk, wine was spilled and mingled with blood. Torches flared and faded through tableau after tableau of obscene celebration. Gideon stood impassive beside the bullocks, and at his side was Dorcas Frye, face enmasked with a hooded cowl from which goat-horns rose to signify his priesthood in the Sabbat ritual.

Neither spoke. Gideon had avoided Frye for three days now, and lie wondered if the old man suspected what it was he had done here in the forest when he stole away at midnight. Gideon wondered if he had a plan of his own—and Gideon waited, glancing from time to time at the altar-stone, on which a black cloth had been placed to hold the silver bowl and the silver knife of sacrifice.

But there would be no time for waiting, no time for wondering. The drums were building something in the darkness; something that throbbed and vibrated, something that soared and summoned. And now Dorcas was stepping up to the altar, wearing the Crown of Horns, and the first bullock was led forward, lowing, to kneel beneath the knife. The deed was done, the bowl was passed, and the drums thundered a litany to the Elder Shepherd.

Dorcas Frye stood alone now on the altar-top. Before the sacrifice of the other bullocks, the Summons would be made.

Dorcas held aloft the silver knife and the silver bowl. He signalled to the drummers in darkness and they fell silent.

Silently the celebrants moved forward, to gather below the altar mound and the altar stone. Dorcas bowed before the black cloth and began to chant.

Gideon recognized words, recognized syllables, recognized Latin cadence. But he did not recognize the response. The response was a drumming not made by drummers, a thunder not created by clouds. It was a roaring from *beneath* the very hills encircling them. And it rose, as Dorcas Frye's voice rose, as the faces of the Coven rose in expectation of the Coming. In a moment now—

Dorcas Frye's voice faltered. The thundering cadence missed a beat. He stared at the black altar-cloth in puzzlement. Gideon knew it was the time. He stepped forward, walked to the altar, stooped and came up in a single gesture with the silver knife. It Hashed out, ripping at Frye's chest.

The oldster recoiled in sudden amazement, and a howl arose from the throng. As they hesitated, Gideon stabbed again, but saw no stain of blood appear. It was as he had dreaded.—Dorcas Frye was dead, yet alive.

There was one other way. He snatched the black covering from the altar and grasped the bulk beneath it—the bulk he had placed there three nights before. He raised, it aloft and brought it down on Frye's horned head. There was a crunching sound, the sound made by the splinter of rotted bones.

Frye fell, and the cowling brushed from his face, revealed the wormy countenance of a thing long dead.

The crowd screamed, not only at the act but at the sight of Gideon Godfrey's weapon—the bulk of the great Bible he had rescued from its burial place beneath the stones and put on Satan's altar.

"Yes!" Gideon's voice rose exultant above their cries. "It's the Holy Bible, the Word of the Living God. And I am His Messenger, whom none may harm!"

Thunder echoed—true thunder, this lime, from the clouds above. Out of the swirling sky came the blinding bolt, followed by the torrential tempest of sudden rain. And Gideon, crying the name of his God, descended from the altar, smiting and laying about him with the Bible for a weapon—and none that he touched could either flee or withstand him.

Only corpses remained to litter the altar-base, to lie rotting in the rain. Gideon fought the fiends in a frenzy, fought them in darkness, touching them with God's word, muttering prayers that were curses and curses that were prayers. And in the end it was all over. He stood alone upon the field as the torrent washed away all but the foul odor of decay.

Then he fell upon his knees and gave thanks before setting out on the trail that led to the south. In die morning there would be clean light over the peaceful spires of Portsmouth and he would tell the good folk there that he had wandered lost in the wilderness these long weeks past.

Of Roodsford and its ways, of the peril just averted, Gideon would never speak. He knew that the village had fallen with its people and that birds and beasts would soon return there to claim as their own a land made free from the shadows of a fearsome blight. Soon Roodsford's very memory would be forgotten.

And that was as it should be, for come what may, witchcraft was now forever broken in New England. Satan's Servants were gone forever.

Index of Lovecraft's footnotes

(AUTHOR'S NOTE: This is necessarily only a partial listing of HPL's notations. Some of them exist in the form of addenda and sentences which he inserted in the text of the story. Others are indications for word-changes, insertions or deletions, all of which have been made in the text and are therefore unnecessary to repeat here. And true to form, HPL also added marginal comments of praise from time to time. The notations listed here are sufficient indication of the Lovecraft scholarship, passion for exactitude, and virtual omniscience.)

[1] The original mss. gives the name as Rood-ford. HPL suggests "Roodsford" saying, "The hyphenated place name would not have occurred in early New England."

[2] HPL says “Be careful about your archaisms. Certain antique spelling had vanished by 1672. Nouns were chiefly capitalized in ordinary text.”

[3] HPL noted that the book was printed in Boston in my original mss. and changed it to London, saying, “I doubt if Salem had a printing press as early as 1672. Nor were works of a general, non-theological character printed so early anywhere in the colonies.”

[4] The “or traders” was added by HPL who comments, “Savages didn’t do much coastal navigation. Whites traded considerably.”

[5] HPL noted that I spoke of the “Church of New England” and altered it, saying, “There was no officially recognized Church of N. E. The two fully Puritan colonies-Mass, and Conn.-supported the orthodox church known eventually as the Congregational. R. I. represents a revolt against and a repudiation of this theocratic dominance.”

[6] HPL-“There would not be fallen leaves even in Southern Maine till well over the line in October. The height of autumn foliage in central New England is about Oct. 10 to 15.”

[7] The previous sentence was inserted by HIM, with comment. Travel was very slow in 1690.” And on the obverse side of the mss. page, he lists four ferry passages by name, followed by such estimates as “on horseback-av, 5 MPH. With guides on foot-av. 3 MPH. Boston-Newb.—40M. Newb.-Ports.-20 M. Ports-Roodf.—20 M. Time from Ports, to Roodf. should be 8 or 9 h., allowing for rest, delays. Starling 6 AM, intending to arrive at 3 PM, delays add 5 to 6 hours mor—hence twilight or nocturnal advent would be correct.” This is an excellent ex ample of HPL’s perfectionist approach to his own work.

[8] HIM, comments, “Probably no Indians in America before the post-glacial era—but let imagination-have free scope!”

[9] HIM, reminds me of what I had forgotten and hence miswritten when he changes a word and says, “No witchcraft suspects were ever *burned* in North America”

[10] HPL—“Gallows Hill, Salem, not so named till 1692 witchcraft.” Since I revised chronology of story, it is now correct to refer to it.

[11] Mss. originally spoke of venison and dried pemmican, but HPL changed, saying, “Venison not so common, and journey not long enough for pemmican.”

[12] HPL—“We have to be careful about geography, picking a part of the coast not thickly settled in 1690.”

[13] I spoke of log houses, but HPL—“Log houses not used in New England and never any cross on Puritan churches.”

[14] “Panels” in ms. HPL—“No panelled doors at this period in small cottages.”

[15] I wrote "wouldst" but HPL struck it out, explaining, "Wouldst is second person singular. Beware of false archaisms, lest you fall into the misleading patios of some of Hodgson's stuff."

[16] Orig. "Merrimack hills." But: "Merrimack too far south, or, in upper reaches, west, unless long-distance flights are intended."

[17] HPL inserted "place in," saying, "A coven is a whole local unit of the cult. Roodsford would have but one."

[18] HPL asks, "How local do you assume the Roodsford celebration to be? Is it a Sabbat confined to the one village coven or do others come from afar to participate? If the latter, insert on the evil travellers abroad in the night."

The Sorcerer's Apprentice

He was more than just a magician; he had the Power

I WISH you would turn off the lights. They hurt my eyes. You don't need the lights. I'll tell you anything you want to know. I'll tell you all about it, everything.

But turn off the lights.

And please don't stare at me. How can a man think, with all of you crowding around and asking questions, questions, questions—

All right, I'll be calm. I'll be very calm. I didn't mean to shout. It is not like me to lose my temper. I am a gentle man. You know I'd never hurt anyone.

Why are you laughing? There is nothing to laugh about. It was all an accident., yon know that. I lost the Power.

But you don't know about the Power, do you? You don't know about Sadini and how he sold his soul to Satan for a black gift.

No, I'm not raving. That is the truth) gentlemen. I can prove it. "Here, listen to me. I'm going to tell you all about it, from the very beginning. If only you'll turn off the lights—

My name is Hugo. No, just Hugo. That's all they ever called me at the Home. I lived at the Home ever since I can remember, and the Sisters were very kind to me. The other children, they would not play with me because of my back and my squint, but the Sister's were kind. They didn't call me

"Crazy Hugo" and make fun of me because I couldn't recite. They didn't get me in the corner and hit me and make me cry.

No, I'm all right. You'll see. I was telling you about the Home, but it's not important. It all started after I ran away.

You see, I was getting too old, the Sisters, told me. They wanted me to go with the Doctor to another place, a County place. But Fred—he was one of the boys who didn't hit me—he told me that I mustn't go with the Doctor. He said the County place was bad arid the Doctor was bad. They had rooms, with bars on the windows in this place, and the Doctor would tie me to a table and cut out my brain. He wanted to operate on my brain, Fred said, and then I would die.

So I could see that the Sisters really thought I was crazy too, and the Doctor was coming for me the very next day. That's why I ran away, sneaking out of my room and over the wall that night.

But you're not interested in what happened after, that, are you? I mean, about when. I was living under the bridge and selling newspapers and in winter it was so cold—

Sadini? Yes, but that's part of it; the winter and the cold, I mean. Because it was the cold that made me faint in that alley behind the theatre, and that's how Sadini found me.

I remember the snow in the alley and how it came up and hit me in the face, the icy, icy snow just smothering me in cold, and I sank down in it forever.

Then, when I woke up, I was in this warm place inside the theatre, in the dressing-room, and there was an angel looking at me.

I thought she was an angel, anyway. Her hair was long, like golden harp strings, and I reached up to feel it and she smiled.

"Feeling better?" she asked. "Here, drink this."

She gave me something nice, and warm to drink. I was lying on a couch and she held my head while I drank.

"How did I get here," I asked. "Am I dead?"

"I thought you were when Victor carried you in. But you'll be all right now, I guess."

"Victor?"

"Victor Sadini. Don't tell me you haven't heard of the Great Sadini?"

I shook my head.

"He's a magician. He's on now. Good heavens, that reminds me, I'll have to change!" She took the cup away and stood up. "You just rest until I get back."

I smiled at her. It was very hard to talk, because everything was going round and round.

"Who are you?" I whispered.

"Isobel."

"Isobel," I said. It was a pretty name. I whispered it over and over again until I went to sleep.

I don't know how long it was until I woke up again—I mean, until I woke up and felt all right. In between times I would be sort of half-awake, and sometimes I. could see and hear for a little while.

ONCE I saw a tall man with black hair and a mustache bending over me. He was dressed all in black, too, and he had black eyes. I thought maybe it was the Devil coming to carry me down to Hell. The Sisters used to tell us about the Devil. I was so frightened I just fainted again.

Another time I could hear voices talking, and I opened my eyes again and saw the man in black and Isobel sitting over on the side of the room. I guess they didn't know I was awake, because they were talking about me.

"How much longer do you think I'm going to put up with this, Vic?" she was saying. "I am sick and tired of playing nursemaid to a lousy tramp. What's the big idea? You don't know him from Adam, anyway."

"But we can't just throw him out in the snow to die, can we?" The man in black was walking up and down, pulling on the ends of his mustache.

“Be reasonable, darling. The poor kid’s been starving to death, can’t you tell? No identification, nothing; he’s in trouble and needs help.”

“Nuts to that noise! Call the wagon—there’s charity hospitals, aren’t there? If you expect me to spend all my time between shows cooped up with a mangy—”

I couldn’t understand what she meant, what she was saying. She was so beautiful, you see. I knew she must be kind, and it was-all a mistake, maybe I was too sick to hear right.

Then I fell asleep again, and when I woke up I felt better, different, and I knew it was a mistake. Because she was there, and she smiled at me again.

“How are you?” she asked. “Ready to eat something now?”

I could only stare at her and smile. She was wearing a long green cloak all covered with silver stars, and now I know she must be an angel for sure.

Then the Devil came in.

“He’s conscious, Vic,” said Isobel.

The Devil looked at me and grinned.

“Hi, pal! Glad to have you with us. For a day or so there, I didn’t think we’d have the pleasure of your company much longer.”

I just stared at him.

“What’s the matter, my makeup frighten you? That’s right, you don’t even know who I am, do you? My name’s Victor Sadini. The Great Sadini—magic act, you know.”

Isobel was smiling at me, too, so I guessed it was all right. I nodded. “My name is Hugo,” I whispered. “You saved my life, didn’t you?”

“Skip it. Leave the talking till later. Right now, you’ve got to eat something and get some more rest. You’ve been camping here on the sofa for three days now, chum. Better get some strength, because the act closes here Wednesday and we jump to Toledo.”

On Wednesday the act closed, and we jumped to Toledo. Only we didn’t really jump, we took a train. Oh yes, I went along. Because I was Sadini’s new assistant.

This was before I knew he was a servant of the Devil. I just thought he was a kind man who had saved my life. He sat there in the dressing-room and explained everything to me; how he grew the mustache and combed his hair that way and wore black just because that's the way stage magicians are supposed to look.

He did tricks for me; wonderful tricks with cards and coins and handkerchiefs that he pulled out of my ears and colored water he poured from my pockets. He could make things vanish too, and I was afraid of him until he told me it was all a trick.

ON THE last day he let me get up and stand behind the stage while he went out in front of the people and did what he called his "act" and then I saw wonderful things.

He made Isobel stretch out on a table and then he waved a wand and she floated up in the air with nothing to hold her. Then he lowered her down and she didn't fall, just smiled while all the people clapped. Then she would hand him things to do tricks with, and he would point his magic wand at them and make them vanish, or explode, or change. He made a big tree grow out of a little plant right before my eyes. And then he put Isabel into a box and some men wheeled out a huge steel blade, with teeth in it, and he said he was going to saw her in half. He tied her down, too.

I almost ran out on the *stage then,* to stop him, but she wasn't afraid, and the men-who pulled the curtains behind the scenes were laughing too, and so I guessed it must be another trick.

But when he turned on the electric current, and began to saw into the box I stood there with the sweat popping out all over me because I could see him cutting into her. Only she smiled, even when he sawed right through her. She smiled, and she wasn't dead at all!

THEN he covered her up and took the saw away and waved his magic wand and she jumped up, all in one piece again. It was the most wonderful thing I'd ever heard of, and I guess it was seeing the show that made me decide I'd have to go with him.

So after that I talked to him, about how he'd saved my life and who I was, and not having any place to go, and how I'd work for him for nothing, do anything, if only. I could come along. I didn't tell him I wanted to go just so I could see Isobel, because I guessed he wouldn't like that. And I didn't think she'd like it either. She was his wife, I knew that now.

It didn't make much sense, what I told him, but he seemed to understand.

"Maybe you can make yourself useful at that," he said. "We have to have someone to look after the props, and it would save time for me. Besides, you could set them up and pack them again."

"Ixnay," said Isobel. "Utsnay." I didn't understand her, but Sadini did. Maybe it was magic talk.

"Hugo's going to be all right," he said. "I need somebody, Isobel. Somebody I can really depend on—if you know what I mean."

"Listen, you cheap ham—"

"Take it easy, Isobel." She was scowling, but when he looked at her she just sort of wilted and tried to smile.

"All right,-Vic. Whatever you say. But remember, it's your headache, not mine."

"Right." Sadini came over to me. "You can come along," he said. "From now on you're my assistant."

That's how it was.

That's how it was for a long, long time. We went to Toledo, and to Detroit and Indianapolis and Chicago and Milwaukee and St. Paul—oh, a lot of places. But they were all alike to me. We would ride on a train and then Sadini and Isobel would go to a hotel and I would stay behind and watch them unload the baggage car. I would get the trunks filled with props (that's what Sadini called the things he used in his act) and hand a slip of paper to a truck driver. We would go to the theatre then, and the truck driver took the props into the alley where I'd haul them up to the dressing-room and backstage. Then I unloaded props and that's how it went.

I slept in the theatre, in the dressing-room most of the time, and I'd eat with Sadini and Isobel. Not often with Isobel, though. She liked to sleep late at the hotel, and I guess she was ashamed of me at first.

I didn't blame her, the way I looked, with my clothes and my eyes and back.

Of. course Sadini bought me new clothes after a while. He was good to me, Sadini was. He talked a lot about his tricks and his act, and he even talked about Isobel. I didn't understand how such a nice man could say such things about her.

Even though she didn't seem to like me, and kept away from. Sadini too, I knew she was an angel. She was beautiful the way the angels were in the books the Sisters showed me. Of course, Isobel wouldn't be interested in ugly people like myself or Sadini, with his black eyes and his black mustache. I don't know why she ever married him in the first place when she could find handsome men like George Wallace.

She saw George Wallace all the time, because he had another act in the same show we traveled with. He was tall, and he had blonde hair arid blue eyes, and he was a singer and dancer in the show. Isobel used to stand in the wings (that's the part on the side of the stage) when he was singing, and look at him. Sometimes they would talk together and laugh, and once when Isobel said she was going to the hotel because she had a headache, I saw her and George Wallace walk into his dressing-room.

MAYBE I shouldn't have told Sadini about that, but it just came out before I could stop it. He got very angry, and he asked me questions, and then he told me to keep my mouth shut and my eyes open.

It was wrong for me to say yes, I know that now; but all I could think of then was that Sadini had been kind to me. So I watched Isobel and George Wallace, and one day when Sadini was downtown between shows, I saw them again in Wallace's dressing-room. It was on the balcony, and I tiptoed up to the door and looked through the keyhole. Nobody else was around, and nobody could see me blushing.

Because Isabel was kissing George Wallace and he was saying, "Come on, darling—let's not stall any longer. When the show closes, it's you and me. We'll blow out of here together, head for the coast and—

"Quit talking like a schmoe!" Isobel sounded mad. "I'm nuts about you, Georgie-boy, but I know a good deal when I see it. Vic's a headliner; he'll be pulling in his grand a week when you're doing a single for smokers. Fun's fun, but there's no percentage in such a deal for me."

"Vic!" George Wallace made a face. "What's that phony got, anyway? A couple of trunks full of props and a mustache. Anybody can do a magic act—I could myself, if I had the stake for the gimmicks. Why, hell, you know all his routines. You and I could build our own act, baby. How's that for any angle? The Great Wallace and Company—"

"Georgie!"

She said it so fast and she moved so fast, I didn't have time to get away. Isobel walked right over to the door and yanked it open, and there I was.

"What the—"

George Wallace came up behind her and when he saw me he started to reach out, but she slapped his hands down.

"Can it!" she said. "I'll handle this." Then she smiled at me, and I knew she wasn't angry. "Come on downstairs, Hugo," she said. "Let's you and I have a little talk."

I'll never forget that little talk.

WE SAT there in the dressing-room, just Isobel and me, all alone. And she held my hand—she had such soft, sweet hands—and looked into my eyes, and talked with her low voice that-was like singing and stars and sunshine.

"So you found out," she said. "And that means I'll have to tell you the rest. I—I didn't want you to know, Hugo. Not ever. But now I'm afraid there's no other way."

I nodded. I didn't trust myself to look at her, so I just stared at the dressing-table. Sadini's wand was lying there—his long black wand with the golden tip. It glittered and shone and dazzled my eyes.

"Yes, it's true, "Hugo. George Wallace and I are in love. He wants me to go away."

"B-but Sadini is such a nice man," I told her. "Even if he does look that way."

"How do you mean?"

"Well, when I first saw him, I thought he was the Devil, but now—"

She sort of caught her breath. "You thought he looked like the Devil, Hugo?"

I laughed. "Yes. You know, the Sisters, they said I wasn't very bright. And they wanted to operate on my head because I couldn't understand things. But I'm all right. You know that. I just thought Sadini might be the Devil until he told me everything was a trick. It wasn't really a magic wand and he didn't really saw you in half—"

"And you believed him!"

I LOOKED at her now. She was sitting up straight, and her eyes were shining. "Oh, Hugo, if I'd only known! You see, I was the same way, once. When I first met him, I trusted him. And now I'm his slave. That's why I can't run away, because I'm his slave. Just as he is the slave of—the Devil."

My eyes must have bugged out, because she kept looking at me funny as she went on.

"You didn't know that, did you? You believed him when he said he just did tricks, and that he sawed me in half on the stage for an illusion, using mirrors."

“But he does use mirrors,” I said. “Don’t I pack them and unpack them and set them up just so?”

“That’s only to fool the stagehands,” she said. “If they knew he was really a sorcerer, they’d lock him up. Didn’t the Sisters tell you about the Devil and selling your soul?”

“Yes, I have heard stories, but I thought—”

“You believe me, don’t you, Hugo?” She took my hand again and looked right at me. “When he takes me out on the stage and raises me from the ground, that’s sorcery. One word and I would fall to my death. When he saws me in half, it’s real. That’s why I can’t run away, that’s why I’m his slave.”

“Then it must have been the Devil who gave him the magic wand that does the tricks.”

She nodded, watching me.

I looked at the wand. It was glittering away, and her hair glittered, and her eyes glittered.

“Why can’t I steal the wand?” I asked.

She shook her head. “It wouldn’t help. Not as long as he’s alive.”

“Not as long as he’s alive,” I repeated.

“But if he were to—oh, Hugo, you must help me! There’s only one way, and it wouldn’t be a sin, not when he’s sold his soul to the Devil. Oh, Hugo, you must help me, you will help me—”

She kissed me.

She *kissed* me. Yes, she put her arms around my back, and her golden hair wound round and round me, and her lips were soft and her eyes were like glory, and she told me what to do, how to do it, and it wouldn’t be a sin, he was sold to the Devil, no one would ever know.

So I said yes, I would do it.

She told me how.

And she made me promise never to tell anyone, no matter what happened, even if things went wrong and they asked questions of me.

I promised.

And then I waited. I waited for Sadini to come back that night. I waited until after the show, when everyone went home. Isobel left, and she told Sadini to stay behind and help me pack because I was sick, and he said he would. It all worked just as she promised it would.

We started packing, and there was nobody, left in the theatre but the doorman, and he was way downstairs in the room next to the alley. I went out into the hall while Sadini was packing, and saw how dark and still it was. Then I came into the dressing-room again and watched Sadini putting away his props.

He hadn't touched the wand, though. It glittered and glittered, and I wanted to pick it up and feel the magic of the Power the Devil had given him.

BUT there was no time for that, now. Because I had to walk up behind Sadini as he bent over the trunk. I had to take the piece of iron pipe out of my pocket and raise it over his head and bring it down once, twice, three times.

There was an awful cracking sound, and then a thump, when he fell to the floor.

Now all I had to do was lift him into the trunk and—

There was another sound.

Somebody knocked on the door.

Somebody rattled the doorknob as I dragged Sadini's body over to the corner and tried to find a place to hide it. But it was no use. The knocking came again and I heard a voice calling, "Hugo—open up! I know you're there!"

So I opened the door, holding the pipe behind my back. George Wallace came in.

I guess he was drunk. Anyway, he didn't seem to notice Sadini lying on the floor at first. He just looked at me and waved his arms.

“Hugo, I gotta talk t’you.” He was drunk all right, I could smell the liquor now. “She told me,” he whispered. “She told me what was up. Tried to get me drunk, but I’m wise to herr I sneaked away. Gotta talk t’you ‘before you do ’nything foolish.

“She. told me. Gonna frame you, that’s what. You kill Sadini, she’ll tell the cops, deny everything. You’re supposed t’be—well, kinda soft in the head. ’N when you spill that hooey about the Devil they’ll figure you’re crazy for sure, lock you up. Then she wanted us to run away, take the act. I hadda come back here, warn you before—”

Then he saw Sadini. He just sort of froze up, standing there stiff as a board with his mouth open. That made it easy for me to come up behind him and hit him with the ‘pipe; hit him and hit him and hit him.

Because *Y* knew he lied, he was lying about her, he couldn’t have her, he couldn’t run away, I wouldn’t permit it. I knew what he really wanted—he wanted the wand of Power, the Devil’s wand; And it was now all mine.

I walked over and took it up in-my hands, felt the Power surging along my arm as I looked at the glittering tip. I was still holding it in my hand when she came in.

She must have followed him, but she was too late now. She could tell, when she saw him lying there on the floor with the bade of his head laughing up like a big red mouth.

She was frozen for a moment, too, but then before I could say anything, Isobel slid to the floor. She just fainted.

I stood there, holding the wand of Power, looking down at her and feeling sorry. Sorry for Sadini, burning in Hell. Sorry for George Wallace because he had come here. Sorry for her, because all the plans had gone wrong.

Then I looked at the wand, and I got this wonderful idea. Sadini was dead, and George was dead, but she still had me. She wasn’t afraid of me—she had even kissed me.

And I had the wand. That was the secret of the magic. Now, while she was still asleep, I could find out if it was true. And then when she woke up, what a surprise for her! I would tell her, “You were right, Isobel. It does work. And from now on, you and I will do. the act. I have the wand and you need never be afraid again. Because I can do it. I already did it when you were asleep.”

THERE was nothing to interfere. I carried her out to the stage. I carried the props, too. I even turned on the spotlight, because I knew where it was. It felt funny, standing there all alone in the empty theatre, bowing into the blackness.

But I was wearing Sadini’s cloak, and I stood there for a moment with Isobel lying before me. With the magic wand in my hand I felt like a new person like Hugo the Great.

And I was Hugo the Great.

That night, in the empty theatre, I was Hugo the Great. I knew just what to do, how to do it. There were no Stagehands so I didn’t need to bother with the mirrors, and I had to strap her and turn on the electric current myself. The blade didn’t seem to turn so fast, either, when I put it right up against the board box covering her, but I made it work.

It buzzed away and buzzed away, and then she opened her eyes and screamed, but I had her strapped down, and besides there was nothing to be afraid of. I showed her the magic wand, but she just screamed and screamed until the buzzing drowned out her voice and the blade came through.

The blade was red. Dripping red.

It made me sick to look at it, so I closed my eyes and waved the magic wand of Power very quickly.

Then I looked down.

Everything was—the same.

I waved the wand again.

Still nothing happened.

Something had gone wrong.

Then I was screaming, and the doorman finally heard and ran in, and then you came and took me away.

So, you see, it was just an accident. The wand didn't work. Maybe the Devil took the power away when Sadini died. I don't know. All I know is that I'm very tired.

Will you turn off the lights now, please?

I want to go to sleep. . . .

The Unspeakable Betrothal

Robert Bloch, whose first serious novel The Scarf *is now available in a popular thirty-five cent Avon edition, has rung up a remarkable record for a young writer. It is with pleasure that we state that "The Unspeakable Betrothal" is a brand-new story, here published for the first time. The tale of a beautiful girl marked by the stars for an outré destiny, it will be a find for the army of Bloch fans. It was written originally for an Avon pocket-size anthology of new fantastic stories . . . from which space restrictions were to bar it. This new anthology, entitled* The Girl with the Hungry Eyes, *edited by the editor of the* Avon Fantasy Reader, *is now available on newsstands—or it may be purchased direct from us for a quarter, plus five cents handling charges. It features really excellent original fantasy stories by Fritz Leiber, Jr., Manly Wade Wellman, William Tenn, P. Schuyler Miller, Stephen Grendon, and Frank Belknap Long. Look for it.*

"Not far thence is the secret garden in which grow like strange flowers the kinds of sleep, so different one from the other . . . the sleep induced by datura, by the multiple extracts of ether, the sleep of belladonna, of opium, of valerian; flowers whose petals remain shut until the day when the predestined visitor shall come and, touching them, bid them open, and for long hours inhale the aroma of their peculiar dreams into a marvelling and bewildered being."

Proust: Remembrance of Things Past

AVIS knew she wasn't really as sick as Doctor Clegg had said. She was merely bored with living. The death-impulse, perhaps; then again, it might have been nothing more than her distaste for clever young men who persisted in addressing her as *"O rara Avis."*

She felt better now, though. The fever had settled until it was no more than one of the white blankets which covered her—something she could toss aside with a gesture, if it weren't so pleasant just to burrow into it, to snuggle deeply within its confining warmth.

Avis smiled as she realized the truth; monotony was the one thing that didn't bore her. The sterility of excitement was the really jading routine, after all. This quiet, uneventful feeling of restfulness seemed rich and fertile by comparison. Rich and fertile—creative—womb.

The words linked. Back to the womb. Dark room, warm bed, lying doubled up in the restful, nourishing . . . lethargy of fever . . .

It wasn't the womb, exactly; she hadn't gone back that far, she knew. But it did remind her of the days when she was a little girl. Just a little girl with big round eyes, mirroring the curiosity that lay behind them. Just a little girl, living all alone in a huge old house, like a fairy princess in an enchanted castle.

Of course her aunt and uncle had lived here too, and it wasn't a really truly castle, and nobody else knew that she was a princess. Except Marvin Mason, that is.

Marvin had lived next door and sometimes he'd come over and play with her. They would come up to her room and look out of the high window—the little round window that bordered on the sky.

Marvin knew that she was a sure enough princess, and he knew that her room was an ivory tower. The window was an enchanted window, and when they stood on a chair and peeked out they could see the world behind the sky.

Sometimes she wasn't quite sure if Marvin Mason honest and truly saw the world beyond the window; maybe he just said he did because he was stuck on her.

But he listened very quietly while she told him stories about that world. Sometimes she told him stories she had read in books, and other times she made them up out of her very own head. It was only later that the dreams came, and she told him *those* stories, too.

That is, she always started to, but somehow the words would go wrong. She didn't always know the words for what she saw in those dreams. They were, very special dreams; they came only on those nights when Aunt May left the window open, and there was no moon. She would lie in the bed, all curled up in a little ball, and wait for the wind to come through the high, round window. It came quietly, and she would feel it on her forehead and neck, like fingers stroking. Cool, soft fingers, stroking her face; soothing fingers that made her uncurl and stretch out so that the shadows could cover her body.

Even then she slept in the big bed, and the shadows would pour down from the window in a path. She wasn't asleep when the shadows came, so she knew they were real. They came on the breeze, from the window, and covered her up. Maybe it was the shadows that were cool and not the wind; maybe the shadows stroked her hair until she fell asleep.

But she would sleep then, and the dreams always came. They followed the same path as the wind and the shadows; they poured down from the sky, through the window. There were voices she heard but could not understand; colors she saw but could not name; shapes she glimpsed but which never seemed to resemble any figures she found in picture books.

Sometimes the same voices and colors and shapes came again and again, until she learned to recognize them, in a way. There was the deep, buzzing voice that seemed to come from right inside her own head, although she knew it really issued from the black, shiny pyramid-thing that had the arms with eyes in it. It didn't look slimy or nasty, and there was nothing to be afraid of—Avis could never understand why Marvin Mason made her shut up when she started telling about those dreams.

But he was only a little boy, and he got scared and ran home to his Mommy. Avis didn't have any Mommy, only Aunt May; but she would never tell Aunt May such things. Besides, why should she? The dreams didn't frighten her, and they were so very real and interesting. Sometimes, on gray, rainy days when there was nothing to do but play with dolls or cut out pictures to paste in her album, she wished that night would hurry up and come. Then she could dream and make everything real again.

She got so she liked to stay in bed, and would pretend to have a cold so she didn't have to go to school. Avis would look up at the window and wait for the dreams to come—but they never came in the daytime; only at night.

Often she wondered what it was like *up there.*

The dreams must come from the sky; she knew that. The voices and shapes *lived* way up, somewhere beyond the window. Aunt May said that dreams came from tummy-aches, but she knew that wasn't so.

Aunt May was always worried about tummy-aches, and she scolded Avis for not going outside to play; said she was getting pale and puny.

But Avis felt fine, and she had her secret to think of. Now she scarcely ever saw Marvin Mason any more, and she didn't bother to read. It wasn't much fun to pretend she was a princess, either. Because the dreams were ever so much realer, and she could talk to the voices and ask them to take her with them when they went away.

She got so she could almost understand what they were saying. The shiny thing that just hung through the window now—the one that looked like it had so much more to it she couldn't see—it made music inside her head that she recognized. Not a real tune; more like words in a rhyme. In her dreams she asked it to take her away. She would crawl up on its back and let it fly with her up over the stars. That was funny, asking it to fly; but she knew that the part beyond the window had wings. Wings as big as the world.

She begged and pleaded, but the voices made her understand that they couldn't take little girls back with them. That is, not entirely. Because it was too cold and too far, and something would change her.

She said she didn’t care how she changed; she wanted to go. She would let them do anything they wanted if only they would take her: It would be nice to be able to talk to them all the time and feel that cool softness; to dream forever.

One night they came to her and there were more things than she had ever seen before. They hung through the window and in the air all over the room—they were so funny, some of them; you could see through them and sometimes one was partly inside another. She knew she giggled in her sleep, but she couldn’t help it. Then she was quiet and listening to them.

They told her it was all right. They would carry her away. Only she mustn’t tell anyone and she mustn’t be frightened; they would come for her soon. They couldn’t take her as she was, and she must be willing to change.

Avis said yes, and they all hummed a sort of music together, and went away.

The next morning Avis was really and truly sick and didn’t want to get up. She could hardly breathe, she was so warm—and when Aunt May brought in a tray she wouldn’t eat a bite.

That night she didn’t dream. Her head ached, and she tossed all night long. But there was a moon out, so the dreams couldn’t get through anyway. She knew they would come back when the moon was gone again, so she waited. Besides, she hurt so that she didn’t really care. She had to feel better before she was ready to go anywhere.

The next day Dr. Clegg came to see her. Dr. Clegg was a good friend of Aunt May’s and he was always visiting her because he was her guardian.

Dr. Clegg held her hand and asked her what seemed to be the matter with his young lady today?

Avis was too smart to say anything, and besides there was a shiny thing in her mouth. Dr. Clegg took it out and looked at it and shook his head. After a while he went away and then Aunt May and Uncle Roscoe came in. They made her swallow some medicine that tasted just awful.

By this time it was getting dark and there was a storm coming outside. Avis wasn’t able to talk much, and when they shut the round window she couldn’t ask them to please leave it open tonight because there was no moon and they were coming for her.

But everything kept going round and round, and when Aunt May walked past the bed she seemed to flatten out like a shadow, or one of the things, only she made a loud noise which was really the thunder outside and now she was sleeping really and truly even though she heard the thunder but the thunder wasn’t real nothing was real except the things that was it nothing was real any more but the things.

And they came through the window it wasn’t closed after all because she opened it and she was crawling out high up there where she had never crawled before but it was easy without a body and soon she would have a new body they wanted the old one because they carried it but she didn’t care because she didn’t need it and now they would carry her *ulnagr Yuggoth farnomi ilyaa*. . . .

That was when Aunt Mary and Uncle Roscoe found her and pulled her down from the window. They said later she had screamed at the top of her voice, or else she would have gone over without anyone noticing.

After that Dr. Clegg took her away to the hospital where there were no high windows and they came in to see her all night long. The dreams stopped.

When at last she was well enough to go back home, she found that the window was gone, too.

Aunt May and Uncle Roscoe had boarded it up, because she was a somnambulist. She didn’t know what a somnambulist was, but guessed it had something to do with her being sick and the dreams not coming any more.

For the dreams stopped, then. There was no way of making them come back, and she really didn’t want them any more. It was fun to play outside with Marvin Mason now, and she went back to school when the new semester began.

Now, without the window to look at, she just slept at night. Aunt May and Uncle Roscoe were glad, and Dr. Clegg said she was turning out to be a mighty fine little specimen.

Avis could remember it all now as though it were yesterday. Or today. Or tomorrow.

How she grew up. Flow Marvin Mason fell in love with her. How she went to college and they became engaged. How she felt the night Aunt May and Uncle Roscoe were killed in the crash at Leedsvilie. That was a bad time.

An even worse time was when Marvin Mason had gone away. He was in service now, overseas. She had stayed on all alone in the house, for it was her house now.

Reba came in days to do the housework, and Dr. Clegg dropped around, even after she turned 21 and officially inherited her estate.

He didn't seem to approve of her present mode of living. He asked her several times why she didn't shut up the house and move into a small apartment downtown. He was concerned because she showed no desire to keep up the friendships she had made in college; Avis was curiously reminded of the solicitude he had exhibited during her childhood.

But Avis was no longer a child. She proved that by removing what had always seemed to her a symbol of adult domination; she had the high round window in her room unboarded once more.

It was a silly gesture. She knew it at the time, but somehow it held a curious significance for her. For one thing it re-established a linkage with her childhood, and more and more childhood came to epitomize happiness for her.

With Marvin Mason gone, and Aunt May and Uncle Roscoe dead, there was little enough to fill the present. Avis would sit up in her bedroom and pore over the scrapbooks she had so assiduously pasted up as a girl. She had kept her dolls and the old fairy tale books; she spent drowsy afternoons examining them.

It was almost possible to lose one's time-sense in such pastimes. Her surroundings were unchanged. Of course, Avis was larger now and the bed wasn't quite as massive nor the window as high.

But both were there, waiting for the little girl that she became when, at nightfall, she curled up into a ball and snuggled under the sheets—snuggled and stared up at the high, round window that bordered the sky.

Avis wanted to dream again.

At first, she *couldn't.*

After all, she was a grown woman, engaged to be married; she wasn't a character out of *Peter Ibbetson.* And those dreams of her childhood had been silly.

But they were *nice.* Yes, even when she had been ill and nearly fallen out of the window that time, it had been pleasant to dream. Of course those voices and shapes were nothing but Freudian fantasies—everyone knew that.

Or did they?

Suppose it was all real? Suppose dreams are not just subconscious manifestations; caused by indigestion and gas pressure.

What if dreams are really a product of electronic impulse—or planetary radiations—attuned to the wave-length of the sleeping mind? Thought is an electrical impulse. Life itself is an electrical impulse. Perhaps a dreamer is like a spiritualist medium; placed in a receptive state during sleep. Instead of ghosts, the creatures of another world or another dimension can come through, if the sleeper is granted the rare gift of acting as *a filter.* What if the dreams feed on the dreamer for substance, just as spirits attain ectoplasmic being by draining the medium of energy?

Avis thought and thought about it, and when she had evolved this theory, everything seemed to fit. Not that she would ever tell anyone about her attitude. Dr. Clegg would only laugh at her, or still worse, shake his head. Marvin Mason didn't approve either. Nobody wanted her to dream. They still treated her like a little girl.

Very well, she would be a little girl; a little girl who could do as she pleased, now. She would dream.

It was shortly after reaching this decision that the dreams began again; almost as though they had been waiting until she would fully accept them in terms of their own reality.

Yes, they came back, slowly, a bit at a time. Avis found that it helped to concentrate on the past during the. day; to strive to remember her childhood. To this end she spent more and more time in her room, leaving Reba to tend to housework downstairs. As for fresh air, she always could look out of her window. It was high and small, but she would climb on a stool and gaze up at the sky through the round aperture; watching the clouds that veiled the blue beyond, and waiting for night to come.

Then she would sleep in the big bed and wait for the wind. The wind soothed and the darkness slithered, and soon she could hear the buzzing, burring voices. At first only the voices came back, and they were faint and far away. Gradually they increased in intensity and once more she was able to discriminate, to recognize individual intonations.

Timidly, hesitantly, the figures re-emerged. Each night they grew stronger. Avis Long (little girl with big round eyes in big bed below round window) welcomed their presence.

She wasn't alone any more. No need to see her friends, or talk to that silly old Dr. Clegg. No need to waste much time gossiping with Reba, or fussing over meals. No need to dress or venture out. There was the window by day and the dreams by night.

Then all at once she was curiously weak, and this illness came. But it was all false, somehow; this physical change.

Her mind was untouched. She knew that. No matter, how often Dr. Clegg pursed his lips and hinted about calling in a "specialist", she wasn't afraid. Of course Avis knew he really wanted her to see a psychiatrist. The doddering fool was filled with glib patter about "retreat from reality" and "escape mechanisms".

But he didn't understand about the dreams. She wouldn't tell him, either. He'd never know the richness, the fullness, the sense of completion that came from experiencing contact with other worlds.

Avis knew *that* now. The voices and shapes that came in the window were from other worlds. As a naive child she had invited them by her very unsophistication. Now, striving consciously to return to the childlike attitude, she again admitted them.

They were from other worlds; worlds of wonder and splendor. Now they could meet only on the plane of dreams, but someday; someday soon, she would bridge the gap.

They whispered about her body. Something about the trip, making the "change". It couldn't be explained in *their* words. But she trusted them, and after all, a physical change was of slight importance contrasted with the opportunity.

Soon she would be well again, strong again. Strong enough to say "yes." And then they would come for her when the moon was right. Until then, she could strengthen the determination, and the dream.

Avis Long lay in the great bed and basked in the blackness; the blackness that poured palpably through the open window. The shapes filtered down, wriggling through the warps, feeding upon the night; growing, pulsing, encompassing all.

They reassured her about the body but she didn't care and she told them she didn't care because the body was unimportant and yes, she would gladly consider it an exchange if only she could go and she knew she belonged.

Not beyond the rim of the stars but between it and amongst substance dwells that which is blackness in blackness for Yuggoth is only a symbol no that is wrong there are no symbols for all is reality and only perception is limited ch'yar ul'nyar shaggornyth . . .

It is hard for us to make you understand but I do understand *you can not fight it* I will not fight it *they will try to stop you* nothing shall stop me for I belong *yes you belong* will it be soon *yes it will be soon* very soon *yes very soon . . .*

Marvin Mason was unprepared for this sort of reception. Of course, Avis hadn't written, and she wasn't at the station to meet him—but the possibility of her being seriously ill had never occurred to him.

He had come out to the house at once, and it was a shock when Dr. Clegg met him at the door.

The old man's face was grim, and the tenor of his opening remarks still grimmer.

They faced each other in the library downstairs; Mason self-consciously diffident in khaki, the older man a bit too professionally brusque.

"Just what is it, Doctor?" Mason asked.

"I don't know. Slight, recurrent fever. Listlessness. I've checked everything. No TB, no trace of lowgrade infection. Her trouble isn't—organic."

"You mean something's wrong with her mind?"

Dr. Clegg slumped into an armchair and lowered his head.

"Mason, I could say many things to you; about the psychosomatic theory of medicine, about the benefits of psychiatry, about—but never mind. It would be sheer hypocrisy.

"I've talked to Avis; rather, I've tried to talk to her. She won't say much, but what she does say disturbs me. Her actions disturb me even more.

"You can guess what I'm driving at, I think, when I tell you that she is leading the life of an eight-year-old girl. The life she *did* lead at that age."

Mason scowled. "Don't tell me she sits in her room again and looks out of that window?"

Dr. Clegg nodded.

"But I thought it was boarded up long ago, because she's a somnambulist and—

"She had it unboarded, several months ago. And she is not, never was, a somnambulist."

"What do you mean?"

"Avis Long never walked in her sleep. I remember the night she was found on that window's edge; not ledge, for there is no ledge. She was perched on the edge of the open window, already halfway out; a little tyke hanging through a high window.

“But there was no chair beneath her, no ladder. No way for her to climb up. She was simply *there.”*

Dr. Clegg looked away before continuing.

“Don’t ask me what it means. I can’t explain, and I wouldn’t want to. I’d have to talk about the things she talks about—the dreams, and the presences that come to her; the presences that want her to go *away.*

“Mason, it’s up to you. I can’t honestly move to have her committed on the basis of material evidence. Confinement means nothing to *them;* you can’t build a wall to keep out dreams.

“But you love her. You can save her. You can make her well, make her take an interest in reality. Oh, I know it sounds mawkish and stupid, just as the other sounds wild and fantastic.

“Yet it’s true. It’s happening right now, to her. She’s asleep up in her room at this very moment. She’s hearing the voices—I know that much. Let her hear your voice.”

Mason walked out of the room and started up the stairs.

“But what do you mean, you can’t marry me?”

Mason, stared at the huddled figure in the swirl of bedclothes. He tried to avoid the direct stare of Avis Long’s curiously childlike eyes; just as he avoided gazing up at the black, ominous aperture of the round window.

“I can’t, that’s all,” Avis answered. Even her voice seemed to hold a childlike quality. The high, piercing tones might well have emanated from the throat of a little girl; a tired little girl, half-asleep and a bit petulant about being abruptly awakened.

“But our plans—your letters—”

“I’m sorry, dear. I can’t talk about it. You know I haven’t been well. Dr. Clegg is downstairs, he must have told you.”

“But you’re getting better,” Mason pleaded. “You’ll be up and around again in a few days.”

Avis shook her head. A smile—the secret smile of a naughty child—clung to the corners of her mouth.

"You can't understand, Marvin. You never *could* understand. That's because you belong here." A gesture indicated the room. "I belong somewhere else." Her finger stabbed, unconsciously, towards the window.

Marvin looked at the window now. He couldn't help it. The round black hole that led to nothingness. Or—something. The sky outside was dark, moonless. A cold wind curled about the bed.

"Let me close the window for you, dear," he said, striving to keep his voice even and gentle.

"No."

"But you're ill—you'll catch cold."

"That isn't why you want to close it." Even in accusation, the voice was curiously piping. Avis sat bolt upright and confronted him.

"You're jealous, Marvin. Jealous of me. Jealous of *them.* You would never let me dream. You would never let me go. And I want to go. They're coming for me.

"I know why Dr. Clegg sent you up here. He wants you to persuade me to go away. He'd like to shut me up, just as he wants to shut the window. He wants to keep me here because he's afraid. You're all afraid of what lies—out there.

"Well, it's no use. You can't stop me. You can't stop *them!"*

"Take it easy, darling—"

"Never mind. Do you think I care what they do to me, if only I can go? I'm not afraid. I know I can't go as I am now. I know they must alter me.

"There are certain parts they want for reasons of their own. You'd be frightened if I told you. But I'm not afraid. You say I'm sick and insane; don't deny it. Yet I'm healthy enough, sane enough to face them and their world. It's you who are too morbid to endure it all."

Avis Long was wailing now.; a thin, high-pitched wail of a little girl in a tantrum.

"You and I are leaving this house tomorrow," Mason said. "We're going away. We'll be married and live happily ever after—in good old storybook style. The trouble with you, young lady, is that you’ve never had to grow up. All this nonsense about goblins and other worlds—”

Avis screamed.

Mason ignored her.

“Right now I’m going to shut that window,” he declared.

Avis continued to scream. The shrill ululation echoed on a sustained note as Mason reached up and closed the round pane of glass over the black aperture. The wind resisted his efforts, but he shut the window and secured the latch.

Then her fingers were digging into his throat from the rear, and her scream was pouring down his ear.

“I’ll kill you!” she wailed. It was the wail of an enraged child.

But there was nothing of the child, or the invalid, in the strength behind her clawing fingers. He fought her off, panting.

Then, suddenly, Dr. Clegg was in the room. A hypodermic needle flashed and gleamed in an arc of plunging silver.

They carried her back to the bed, tucked her in. The blankets nestled about the weary face of a child in sleep.

The window was closed tightly now.

Everything was in order as the two men turned out the light and tiptoed from the room.

Neither of them said a word until they stood downstairs once again.

Facing the fireplace, Mason sighed.

“Somehow I’ll get her out of here tomorrow,” he promised. “Perhaps it was too abrupt—my coming back tonight and waking her. I wasn’t very tactful.

“But something about her; something about that room, frightened me.”

Dr. Clegg lit his pipe. “I know,” he said. “That’s why I couldn’t pretend to you that I completely understand. There’s more to it than mere hallucination.”

“I’m going to sit up here tonight,” Mason continued. “Just in case something might happen.”

"She'll sleep," Dr. Clegg assured him. "No need to worry."

"I'll feel better if I stay. I'm beginning to get a theory about all this talk—other worlds, and changes in her body before a trip. It ties in with the window, somehow. And it sounds like a fantasy on suicide."

"The death-impulse? Perhaps. I should have thought of that possibility. Dreams foreshadowing death—on second thought, Mason, I may stay with you. We can make ourselves comfortable here before the fire, I suppose."

Silence settled.

It must have been well after midnight before either of them moved from their place before the fire.

Then a sharp splinter of sound crashed from above. Before the tinkling echo died away, both men were on their feet and moving towards the stairway.

There was no further noise from above, and neither of them exchanged a single word. Only the thud of their running footsteps on the stairs broke the silence. And as they paused outside Avis Long's room, the silence seemed to deepen in intensity. It was a silence palpable, complete, accomplished.

Dr. Clegg's hand darted to the doorknob, wrenched it ineffectually.

"Locked!" he muttered. "She must have gotten up and locked it."

Mason scowled.

"The window—do you think she could have—?"

Dr. Clegg refused to meet his glance. Instead he turned and put his massive shoulder to the door panel. A bulge of muscle ridged his neck.

Then the panel splintered and gave way. Mason reached around and opened the door from inside.

They entered the darkened room, Dr. Clegg, in the lead, fumbling for the light-switch. The harsh, electric glare flooded the scene.

It was a tribute to the power of suggestion that both men glanced, not at the patient in the bed, but at the round window high up on the wall.

Cold night air streamed through a jagged aperture, where the glass had been shattered, as though by the blow of a gigantic fist.

Fragments of glass littered the floor beneath, but there was no trace of any missile. And obviously, the glass had been broken from the outer side of the pane.

“The wind,” Mason murmured, weakly, but he could not look at Dr. Clegg as he spoke. For there was no wind, only the cold, soft breeze that billowed ever so gently from the nighted sky above. Only the cold, soft breeze, rustling the curtains and prompting a sarabande of shadows on the wall; shadows that danced in silence over the great bed in the corner.

The breeze and the silence and the shadows enveloped them as they stared now at the bed.

Avis Long’s head was turned towards them on the pillow. They could see her face quite plainly, and Dr. Clegg realized on the basis of experience what Mason knew instinctively—Avis Long’s eyes were closed in death.

But that is not what made Mason gasp and shudder—nor did the sight of death alone cause Dr. Clegg to scream aloud.

There was nothing whatsoever to frighten the beholder of the placid countenance turned towards them in death. They did not scream at the sight of Avis Long’s face.

Lying on the pillow of the huge bed, Avis Long’s face bore a look of perfect peace.

But Avis Long’s body was . . . gone.

The Strange Island of Doctor Nork

Where do nightmares come from? Take a look

I

BETWEEN the Greater Antilles and the Lesser Antilles rises a little group of islands generally known as the Medium-Sized Antilles.

Mere pimples on the smiling face of the Caribbean, they remain unsqueezed by the hands of man.

Far off the usual trade routes, their shores are only infrequently desecrated by a banana peeling washed off a United Fruit Lines boat.

It was here that I came on the fateful day in August, my monoplane circling until it descended upon the broad, sandy beach of the central island—the strange island of Doctor Nork.

II

HOW Sidney Dearborn ever heard of Doctor Nork, I cannot say. The old dingbat, doddering around the confines of his palatial estate, seldom pays much attention to his news magazine, let alone interesting himself in the doings of a mere individual.

But probably even a man like Dearborn, who is devoting most of his time to becoming an octogenarian—has been for the past eighty years—

occasionally pauses and reads the papers.

Quite possibly, Dearborn read an article about Doctor Nork in one of his own magazines. I can see him calling my editor in New York.

“Hello—this is Dearborn. Get me an exclusive feature interview on Nork.

“Nork. Nork! No, I’m not sick. Fella’s name. N-o-r-k. Big scientist. Lives all alone on an island someplace, doing experiments.

“How do I know what kind of experiments? Find out for me. Tell our readers. That’s what I’m paying you fifty grand a year for—to find out facts.

“This story on Nork is drivel. Pure drivel. No facts. It says he’s endowed by a lot of foundations. Endowed for what? Can he split an atom? Get me all the dope.

“Know what I think? I smell Communism, that’s what I smell. What would a big scientist want to hide out on an island for if he wasn’t afraid? The American people deserve to know.

“Well, send a man down to see him. Interview him. I want a complete writeup on Nork within ten days. And say—hello, hello—I want you to be sure and find out where he stands on the oleomargarine tax!”

That’s the way the conversation probably went. I can only guess. All I know is that the managing editor called me into the front office and gave me the assignment.

“Charter a plane,” he said. “Get there, get the yarn, and get back. Get it?”

I got it, but good.

III

THE smooth yellow beach on which my monoplane had landed evidently girdled the island, which was approximately a mile in diameter. Inland, palmettos clustered thickly in a dense jungle that ended abruptly at the foot of a gigantic cliff occupying the island’s center. Monkeys, macaws, toucans and parakeets set up a Disney-like clatter as I toted my suitcase and portable typewriter across the sands, but there was no evidence of human life—not even a Burma-Shave sign.

For a moment I wondered if I had made a mistake. I felt like Robinson Crusoe, and remembered the stirring episode where he discovers in the sand the imprint of a naked human foot.

Then I gasped. I *was* Robinson Crusoe. For there, before me in the golden sand, was the symbol of life itself! Not the raw imprint of savage life, but the very essence of civilization.

It was an old Pepsi-Cola bottle.

I stooped down to pick it up and then noted, with a sudden shock, that the bottle was not empty.

A SOGGY, crumpled sheet of paper had been stuffed down the neck, which was sealed with a battered cap. I pried it loose, then fished out the parchment and unfolded the sheet. The message was written in a childish scrawl.

To Whom It May Concern:

Doctor Nork is a mean, nasty old thing, so there!

(Signed) A True Friend

So I *was* on the right island, after all.

My elation subsided as I realized “A True Friend’s” warning about my future host. Well, it was no concern of mine. For all I knew, “A True Friend” might be a far meaner and nastier old thing than Doctor Nork.

At any rate, I wasn’t here to sit in judgment; I was here to get a story on the mysterious medico.

Resealing the message in the bottle, I tossed it into the water. Apparently that had been “A True Friend’s” intention, but his aim was bad.

I toted my luggage towards the palmetto forest as the macaws formed a screaming rainbow round my head.

Oh, those living flames of beauty! Oh, those lovely, lambent—"Oh, for crying out loud!"

I muttered.

Apparently it was safer to walk under the shelter of the trees.

IV

I WAS still wiping my pith helmet when I felt a hand tap my shoulder. I wheeled, then recoiled in horror. It hadn't been a hand on my shoulder, after all. I beheld a paw.

Crouching, confronting me, was the shaggy, shambling figure of a gigantic great ape. Gorilla-eyes glared, and a tusked maw gaped wide in slavering dread. A growl rumbled up into the threatening throat. "You want handkerchief?" said the ape. The intonation was bestial, but the words were human, intelligible. I stared, gulped, and shook my head in amazement.

"Who you fella?" the ape demanded. "You fella come safari?"

I shook my head again, but the hallucination didn't disappear.

"You come in jungle, hunt for diamonds, gold, no? You seek Elephant's Graveyard, maybe, heap much ivory?"

I could only goggle.

"You *bwana* search for White Goddess?" I shrugged my heart back out of my mouth and down to where it belonged. Then I found my voice again. "You—you can actually talk!" I gasped. "I—I never thought I'd live to hear a gorilla talk like that."

The ape grimaced dreadfully.

"Sounds pretty corny, eh, Jack? I think so, too—all that pidgin English and fake native lingo. Strictly from hunger. But you know how It is with the Doc—he makes me talk that way, says it's what they want to hear.

Sometimes I get pretty ashamed when I think that an anthropoid of my education has to go around making like a *schmoe,* but I got my orders. Like I say, you know the Doc."

"But I don't know the Doc," I answered. "That's just what I came down here for; I want to meet him."

"You from the publishers?" asked the gorilla.

"News magazine," I replied. "I'm here for an interview."

"Might have known it," the ape muttered. "You don't have a mustache. Thought you were a villain at first; but the villains all have mustaches, don't they?"

I was getting confused again.

The anthropoid ignored my bewilderment and courteously relieved me of my luggage. "Come on," he growled. "Follow me."

He led a path through the palmettos. "Reporter, eh?" he mused. "What do you do evenings?"

"How do you mean?"

"Fly, hurtle, sail, batter, flame, or blast?"

"I don't understand," I confessed. "You must have me mixed up with somebody else. Evenings, I go home. Sometimes I look up a friend and play a little Gin Rummy."

"Tell you what you do," the gorilla suggested. "When you get done with the Doc, look me up and I'll take you on for a few hands."

V

THE cliff-top was a broad, flat plateau overlooking the beach and sea below. The wind blew cold and clear across the treeless expanse, and borne upon its eddies the seagulls wheeled and circled.

Remembering the macaws, I made an instinctive grab for my solar topee and jammed it down over my forehead. Then I peered out under its brim at the domicile of Doctor Nork.

Nork's residence sprawled across the plateau like some gigantic concrete wheel. A white-domed central structure acted as the hub, from which extended a half-dozen radii in the shape of wings attached to the main building. The outer circumference was rimmed by a high stone fence, broken by a single gate. The ape led me towards it while I stared up and marveled at the elaborate structure set upon a lonely tropical isle.

Then we were standing before the gate, which apparently served as a front door. I noted a neatly lettered sign reading:

ERASMUS NORK, M.D.
Doctor is in—Please be Seated

I had nothing to sit on but my valise. The gorilla opened the front door and bid me enter. He shambled into a spacious white hallway, its antiseptic decor reminiscent of an old Doctor Kildare movie. I followed him as we walked along the corridor, passing half a dozen closed doors in succession.

Finally we paused before a large double-door at the end of the hall.

"I'll announce you," the ape suggested. "Doctor Nork is conducting an experiment."

He slipped through the half-open doorway and disappeared. I stood in the hall and listened to the drone of a faraway dynamo. It accented the eeriness of this white palace set in the heart of a tropical jungle. Weird scientific experiments and talking apes—

"Come right in, my friend!" The booming voice resounded from the room behind the door. "Welcome to the Island!" I stepped forward into the laboratory of Doctor Nork.

A great arc-light glared from the domed roof, glared down upon a scene of horror. A huge steel operating table occupied the center of the room, and it was in use. Strapped securely to its surface with a half-clad girl, hair streaming, mouth contorted, eyes wide with terror.

Towering above her was a tall, thin, red-bearded man with a beaked nose and slanted eyes. Like a surgeon, he wore a white gown. Like a surgeon, he brandished a glittering knife. Even as I watched, he raised the cruel blade and his arm swooped down to the girl's bare white bosom.

The red-bearded man grinned exultantly. “How’s tricks?” he whispered. The knife came down—

“Stop!”

I plunged forward frantically. Hairy arms pinioned me from behind. The ape held me fast.

“Hold it!” snarled the red-bearded man. “There—got it?”

“Swell, Boss!” squeaked an unfamiliar voice from the corner of the room. I twisted my head and saw a little man with a smock standing before an easel. Even as I watched, he did things to the tripod stand, folding it under his arm, and gathering the board up, scuttled from the room.

The tall man dropped the knife and fumbled with the cords binding the girl.

“Curse these knots!” he grumbled. “Ought to use the disintegrator. There you are, Toots.”

The girl stood up and fluffed out her hair. She smiled at me—no, past me, over my shoulder where the ape stood.

“How’s for a little Gin?” she said.

The gorilla nodded and released me. Linked arm in arm, girl and gorilla ambled from the room. And the tall, red-bearded man gestured towards me with his knife.

“Sit down, my friend,” he said. “You must be tired after your trip. Maybe you’d prefer to lie down—how about right here, on the operating table?”

“No thanks,” I gulped. “You’re Doctor Nork, I presume?”

“Of course. Glad to see you. It isn’t often we get a chance to converse with a representative of civilization. You must tell me all that’s happening in the world. Has the atomic bomb blown up any continent’s lately?”

“I don’t know—I left New York yesterday,” I answered.

Nork shrugged. “So you came all the way down here just for an interview, eh? I suppose you want to discuss the new slants we worked out?”

“Slants?” I fumbled for his meaning. “I was sent here to find out something about your experiments. I hear you are conducting some mysterious investigations.”

“Mysterious investigations? Experiments? My dear sir, you’ve been badly misled. I’m a business man. This is a business office,” Doctor Nork took out a strop and began to sharpen his knife, splitting hairs from his beard to test the keen edge of the blade.

“But I heard—”

“You were mistaken.” Nork spoke curtly.

At that moment the door opened and the gorilla entered.

“Hey, Doc, those guys are here for the experiments,” he announced.

Nork blushed and avoided my accusing stare.

“Tell them I’m busy,” he barked. “Tell them they’ll have to wait.”

“But the subject is already strapped down. The stenographer is ready. Everything is set up.”

“Confound it!” muttered the Doctor. “Oh, very well!”

“You don’t have to come down, Doc,” the ape said. “Just give me the equipment and I’ll take it to them.”

Doctor Nork shrugged and stepped over to one of the blank, gleaming white laboratory walls. He pressed a tile and something clicked. A section of the wall slid back and revealed a long rack. Objects hung from thongs, dangled from hooks.

I stared at the display. There were long black whips, short cats-of-nine-tails, blackjacks, bludgeons, truncheons, clubs, assegais, knobkerries, shillelaghs.

The gorilla lumbered over and selected an armful at random.

“This oughta do the trick, eh, Doc?”

Nork nodded. Another click and the wall slid back into place. He pressed a second tile. A grating wheeze echoed through the room as a portion of the floor moved to disclose a secret stairway descending into black depths below. The ape clambered down the steps, bearing his homicidal burden. With a loud clang, the floor closed behind him.

I reeled, bewildered. Whips, weapons, concealed passages, and a nameless experiment—what did it mean?

Nork feigned nonchalance as he faced me.

"Come on," I said. "Quit stalling. My editor sent me down here for a feature story and I intend to get it. Now I—"

My words were cut short, then drowned out by a ghastly shriek. It came from beneath my very feet; rising in a weird wail, an ululation of utter agony.

"What's that?" I gasped.

"I didn't hear anything," purred Nork.

Again the dreadful scream tore the air to ribbons.

"What's going on here?" I panted. "What does it all mean? What kind of experiment needs whips and bludgeons? What are they doing down there?"

"Oh, all right, I suppose I'll have to tell you," Nork sighed. "But it's really nothing at all. They're just beating the living hell out of a guy."

VI

I MADE a dive for the Doctor's Bearded throat. "You fiend!" I shrieked. "Now I know what you are—a mad scientist!"

"Hey, cut it out!" yelled Nork. "You're tearing my beard!"

Indeed, the red beard came loose in my hands, revealing a smaller black beard beneath it.

"Don't touch the black beard—that's genuine!" warned the scientist. "I just wear the red for sketches. Red seems to be all the thing this season. Wait, let me explain things to you."

"Explain things? While you're torturing that poor devil down there in the cellar?"

"What poor devil He's a volunteer. Also a confirmed masochist; he likes to be beaten up. Besides, I'm paying him five hundred dollars for his trouble."

"You're paying him five hundred dollars—?"

"Didn't I tell you this was business? Come on, I'll let you see for yourself."

The Doctor pressed the wall, the steps below were revealed, and I followed him down into the noisome darkness. As we passed into the nighted depths, the screams and groans rose hideously. The hair on my scalp followed suit.

We groped along a damp stone corridor until we reached a dimly lit room. It was a sight I never expected to see—a sight no man of the twentieth century should see—a medieval dungeon.

Torchlight flared on rack and strappado, on boot and Iron Maiden and wheel. Torchlight flickered down on the table where the groaning man writhed beneath the blows of two gigantic blackamoors.

The ape stood by silently, hand resting on the shoulders of a small man who sat perched on a high stool. Head cocked attentatively as though listening, the little man was frantically scribbling down shorthand jottings.

Thuds, curses, screeches, blows, moans and gasps filled the air—but they faded into a sort of background noise as the little man beamed ecstatically and babbled at each fresh sound.

"WHUUP!" he yelled. "OOFFLE!"

"Huh?" I murmured.

"GUTCH! Boy, didja hear dat one, hey? GUTCH; Tha's a new one, huh, Doc?" He peered over his spectacles and addressed the blackamoors. "Hey, how's fer usin' the brass knucks now? We ain't had no brass knucks lately."

"OK," grunted the biggest of the Negroes. "Dat is, if'n it's OK wid de victim."

"OK, don't mind me," piped the man on the table, grinning up through the black-and-blue blur of his ravaged face. "I can take it." Surprisingly, he giggled. "Lay on, MacDuff!"

The Negroes began to assail his midriff with brass knuckles. He howled and granted at every blow.

"SPLATT!" yapped the stenographer on the stool. "Oh, Boy, lissen to him! URRK! BLIPP! WHIZZLE! Hey, you witha lead pipe—rap him onna noggin again, I did’n catch it the firs’ time. There! SPOOOIIINNNGGG!!!”

Doctor Nork tapped me on the shoulder. “Had enough?” he whispered. I nodded.

“Let’s go.” He led the way back to the stairs, calling over his shoulder, “Don’t overdo it, boys, and be careful how you hit him. Last time you broke three whips and a truncheon. Those things cost money, you know.”

“BOING!” yelled the stenographer. “BOINGA-BOINGA-BOINGA!”

As we plodded up the steps, Nork sighed. “There’s so much to worry about,” he confided. “So much to do. It isn’t easy, being the mastermind of all the comic books.”

VII

WE SAT in another chamber, now—Doctor Nork’s spacious and imposing library. A hundred shelves, rising to the dizzying height of the ceiling, encircled us on all sides. Every shelf was packed, crammed, jammed full of paperbound books with lurid covers. Nork reached over to an end-table and selected one at random, riffling the pages as he spoke.

“Of course, you can understand what we’re doing down there, now,” he said. “Just setting our blurbs, that’s all. Filling the old balloons.”

“Filling the what?”

“The balloons. You know—the things coming out of the characters’ mouths in comic books. When a crook gets hit by the hero, he makes a noise. Or the weapon makes a noise. Sometimes they both make noises.”

“Like BANG and OUCH?”

“There—you see?” Doctor Nork beamed. “We can’t use BANG and OUCH all the time. Or WHAM and ZOWIE and POW. They’re corny. Besides, the Flushing Chain of Comic Books covers about twenty titles a month—that means roughly five thousand separate panels or drawings. Now you figure that at least four thousand of those panels in every comic book represent somebody getting hit, lashed, flayed, burned, punched, beaten, shot, stabbed, or run over with a steamroller—that takes a lot of different noises and sounds for balloons.

“We strive for variety, understand? But variety alone is not enough. My boss, the publisher, Bloodengore Flushing, is a stickler for realism. He wants accurate sounds. So that’s why we hold experiments. We beat up a victim and take down the noises for our balloons. Get it?”

I got it, but couldn’t handle it. “You mean to say your comic books are drawn from real life?”

“More or less. That’s where I come in. Mr. Flushing pays me a fortune, my dear sir, to mastermind the Flushing Chain. He endowed this laboratory, set up a fund for research, took me under contract for that purpose alone—to make sure that the sixty million readers of such famous comics as *Captain Torture* and *Hatchet Man* get only the finest and most realistic literature.

“Why, would you believe it, when I took over he only published three comic books and two of them were actually funny?

“It was ridiculous, and I told him so. Everybody knows that there’s no point in a comic book that’s funny! Why, people will laugh at it! What they want is thrills; girls with big busts and men with big muscles.”

“I don’t know much about comic books,” I confessed. “I had rather a sketchy education. I thought people just wrote and drew them into some kind of an office.”

“That’s the old-fashioned way,” Nork laughed. “Since I went to work for Flushing, we’ve changed all that. Ours is a great humanitarian enterprise; catering to sixty million readers as we do, bringing them romance; adventure, murder, arson, insanity, fratricide, bestiality. That’s a great responsibility, my boy, and I am keenly aware of it.

“When I went to work for the Chain, I was just a broken-down old Nobel Prize winner, puttering around in a laboratory. I smashed a few atoms, that’s just about all I did. Now I am engaged in a great crusade to bring comic-book culture to the masses.

“That’s why Flushing hired me. Up to the time I came here, comic books were put out just about the way you said they were: in offices, by artists and writers who worked solely with their imaginations. They kept thinking up new variants of Superman and that’s about all they could do—occasionally they did a sort of Tatzan takeoff or a Dick Tracy imitation. But it was stale, flat, repetitious.

“You see, the trouble was that they lacked *facts* to go by. They went stale because they didn’t know anything about their subject matter. None of them had ever been to the jungle, let alone lived with gorillas. None of them had ever used a ray-gun or split a Jap spy’s head open with a butcher’s cleaver. None of them could walk through walls, or put on a suit of red underwear and fly through the air.

“That’s where I came in. I brought the scientific method to bear, the experimental approach. Now all the artists and writers work from rough sketches and material supplied by me, here in my laboratory. Everything you see in Flushing Comics has been pre-tested and is guaranted accurate.”

“You mean you’ve created a comic book world?” I gasped.

“More or less. Who do you think taught that gorilla to talk? I worked with him ever since he was a tiny rhesus; made him listen to Linguaphone records, everything. And why do you think our drawings are so accurate? Because I have an artist here sketching night and day; you saw me posing as the Mad Doctor with that girl when you came in. That’s why I wore the false red beard—it looks better in color reproduction. Many people have been kind enough to tell me that I make tire best and most convincing Mad Doctor they’ve ever seen.”

“I’m sure you do,” I said, politely.

“Take those fellows downstairs—they’re working on the sound effects, as I told you. All over this great laboratory experiments are going on concurrently, and trained observers are noting the results; roughing out sketches, transcribing bits of dialogue, thinking up plots. The result is obvious—Flushing Comics today are beyond all doubt the most realistically gruesome, hideous, ghastly, sanguinary and horrible comics in the world;”

“But what about all those super-characters?” I asked. “You can teach gorillas to talk and pose for pictures and beat people up, but where do you get the ideas for those invincible heroes with the wonderful powers?”

“I give them the powers,” purred Doctor Nork. “My experiments in nuclear physics, chemo-biology, endocrinology and mopery have borne fruit. Strange fruit. As you shall presently see. Speaking of fruit, it’s time for luncheon. And now you’ll have an opportunity to meet some of the actual characters I have created for Flushing Comics.”

VIII

DOCTOR NORK and I dined in palatial splendor. For the first few minutes after our entry into the huge hall, we were alone, save for the silent servants; tall, white-faced men who stared straight ahead in impassive obeisance as they offered us our choice of delicacies.

“How well trained they are,” I whispered, as one of the black-liveried footman served me with a helping of jugged flamingo and pickled eland tongues. “They never say a word, do they?”

“Not remarkable at all,” said Doctor Nork, as he carved the *piece de resistance*—a huge baked wildebeeste head with an enormous apple in its mouth. “How can they say anything? Some of them are zombies and the rest of them are dead. I reanimated them myself, you know.”

“I didn’t know,” I gulped. “And I’m not so sure I want to. You actually raised corpses up to be your servants?”

“Sure. Don’t you read the comics? Scientists are always going into their laboratories and shooting a lot of electrical arcs through bodies. Had to try it myself just for the sake of accuracy. It worked. And after I had these cadavers animated again, and I had no other use for them except as servants. Still it worries me.”

“Worried me, too,” I agreed. “I don’t like their looks.”

"Oh, that doesn't matter, Nork replied. "I just don't want the Waiter's Union to find out." He gnawed a yak-leg and offered me some jellied eel.

"Where are the other I was supposed to meet?" I asked.

"Others? They'll be along, I'm sure. Matter of fact, here they come now."

His remark was unnecessary. My bursting eardrums and bulging eyes attested to the arrival of some exceedingly strange strangers.

The first one to enter wasn't so bad—he was obviously human, despite his red cloak and the helmet he wore, which resembled an inverted *commode.* The only tiling that disconcerted me in the least was the fact that he didn't walk in. He *flew.*

Behind him was a hopping figure. It might have been a gigantic frog with a human face. It might have been a gigantic human with a frog's body. Whatever it was, I didn't care for it.

Right behind the batrachian being stalked a tall man who displayed remarkable stoicism, in so far as his hair seemed to be on fire.

Even as I stared, my attention was arrested, tried, and condemned by another gentleman whose exceedingly long neck seemed to be made of wood. This neck was surmounted by a most unconventional head—flat on top, hooked in the rear, and round in front. There were no features visible in the round surface, which was shiny and metallic.

My eyes were still fighting the battle of the bulge when the girl came in. She was tall, slim, alluring; her. body a pale shaft of moonlight and her hair a shimmering simulacrum of the sun. She wore a combination of leopard-skin bra and shorts that was very pretty, in spots.

I saw no reason why she needed to also wear a large boa-constrictor for a scarf—but she did. One would also assume that a wench with such long, lithe, lovely limbs might be satisfied to walk; but no, she had to ride on the back of a lion.

"Greetings!" said the girl, as the lion halted before us and began to slaver over my shoes.

“Hi,” chirped Doctor Nork. He beamed at me. “Meet my daughter, Albino—the White Goddess of the Jungle.”

“Your daughter?”

“Brought her up among the animals to be useful in my work. Decided to make a female Tarzan out of her at an early age, when she showed signs of inheriting my own fondness for wild game. You may not know it, but I used to be quite a sportsman myself. Earned quite a reputation as a deer-hunter in my youth—I was a fast man with a buck.”

Albino sat down, unwound her snake, and replaced it with a napkin. She began to feed her lion from m) plate.

“Pass the salt,” she said.

I did so, trembling—a human salt-shaker. She noticed my tremor and sniffed disdainfully.

“Where’d you find this jerk, Pa?” she asked. “You know I don’t like sissies.”

I was all set to give her a snappy comeback, but something choked off my flow of conversation. That something was the boa-constrictor, which now began to twine around my neck. I removed it hastily and wiped my hands on what I thought was a napkin. But napkins don’t roar.

I took my hands out of the lion’s mane and turned to Doctor Nork. “What an aggregation,” I murmured.

“All normal people,” he assured me. “At least, they were until I got to work on them. You see before you, my dear sir, the results of years of experiments. My daughter was just a plain, ordinary little girl until I taught her how to behave like a monkey. In her case, all that was required was a little child psychology. Instead of giving her a doll to play with, I gave her a talking gorilla. The rest followed easily.

“In some of the other cases, surgery was necessary. Take Water Boy, for example.”

“Who?”

HE INDICATED the frog-man. “One of Flushing Comics’ most popular characters. I made him; raised him from a tadpole, as it were. As a result of a unique series of experiments, he’s now more frog than human. It was a risky business to turn a man into a frog—more than once I thought he’d croak. But you can see for yourself how successful I’ve been.” Nork pointed at the man with the flaming hair. “That’s Fire-Bug,” he told me. “The Human Torch. Goes around giving criminals the hot-foot. I developed his metabolism to the point where he can actually live on fire.”

“That’s why he’s eating coal, eh?”

“Precisely. And as for our flying man, Rogers—”

“Buck Rogers?”

“No. Two-Dollar Rogers, we call him. He’s twice as good as Buck.”

I turned away in bewilderment. “Let me get this straight once and for all,” I said. “You experiment on people and develop superhuman or unusual characteristics. Then you watch their actions and use what you see as the basis for plot-material in comic books.”

“Right. Now—”

A violent pounding interrupted him. The strange being with the long wooden neck and the metallic head was using the blank spot where his face should be—using it as a walnut-cracker.

“Hammerhead,” explained the Doctor. “Our readers get a bang out of him.” He giggled. “Did you see our last issue featuring him? Had a sequence where he uses his head as an atom-smasher.”

I tried to ignore the scientist’s remarks and make a little time with Albino. But she obviously despised me for a weakling; just a poor coward who was probably secretly afraid of rhinocerii.

“Ow!”

THE shout came from down at the end of the table. Hammerhead had accidentally banged the fingers of Fire-Bug.

“Look what you’re doing, clumsy!” he yelled.

“Don’t get hot under the collar,” retorted Hammerhead.

For answer, Fire-Bug opened his mouth, but no remarks came out. Instead, a six-foot tongue of living flame belched forth. Hammerhead ducked just in time, but Two-Dollar Rogers got smoke in his eyes. Rising, cloak whirling about him in red fury, the superhuman flier whipped out a strange, gleaming weapon and leveled it at the human torch.

“I’ll blast you!” he yelled. Lightning crackled from the muzzle, and Fire-Bug ducked as an atomic beam disintegrated the chair in which he had been sitting. At the same time, he let go with another burst of flame.

Water Boy opened his frog-mouth and extinguished the blaze, inelegantly but effectively.

“Wet smack!” screamed Rogers, leveling his weapon. Fire-Bug turned toward him, ready to blaze away. Hammerhead poised himself to pound him down.

“Quiet!” screamed Doctor Nork. “Cut it out—get out of here, all of you. If you can’t learn to behave and get along with one another, I’ll—I’ll turn the Faceless Fiend loose on you!”

There was a deathly silence.

“There,” said the Doctor. “That’s telling them, eh? But where are you?”

“Here,” I gasped. “Right here—“under the table.”

Albino sniffed.

“I—uh—dropped my fork,” I said.

“You’re scared,” she accused. “I can tell by the way your hand trembles.”

“What hand?”

“The one on my ankle. Take it off.”

I ROSE and took my place again. “All right,” I said. “I *am* scared. Who wouldn’t be with all this blasting and firing and pounding going on?”

“If you think these characters are bad, you ought to see the Faceless Fiend,” she told me.

“Who is he? I noticed everybody shut up when his name was mentioned.

Nork’s face clouded. He sighed heavily and reached for a platter of breaded horse-kidneys. “One of my few failures,” he murmured. “Some of my agents spirited away a mass-murderer from the penal colony in French Guiana. That’s where I get most of my subjects—you’ll find that comic book characters are best when they have criminal minds.

“Anyhow, this time I intended to create a super-criminal for a new book. The man was frightfully disfigured, and as a first step I attempted to remedy his condition with plastic surgery. At the same time, I began psychiatric treatment with deep hypnosis; my aim was to uncondition all his reflexes and hibit all his inhibitions. This I did, while working on his face to remove the scars.

“ALAS, I did my work too well. I had him in a state of complete abandon, psychically, long before his features were rebuilt by plastic surgery. As a matter of fact, I had just finished removing his old features and hadn’t gotten around to building new ones when he—escaped. Ran away.

“Of course, when the poor fellow removed the bandages, he found that he had no face left at all. This, coupled with his mental unbalance, resulted in the creation of the perfect super-criminal: the Faceless Fiend.

“Nobody knows what he looks like, because he doesn’t look like anyone. He has no scruples—just hatred of society. Gifted with superhuman cunning, he has managed to evade capture and even now is lurking somewhere on this island. I’ve sent my staff out time and time again to comb the jungles for him. I imported several beachcombers just to comb the beaches. But he eludes me.

“Meanwhile he swears vengeance on me and all my work. He threatens me in a million ways. I am convinced it is he who writes letters to the press denouncing comic books.”

“Say, wait a minute,” I said. “I wonder if he wrote that note?”

I told him about the message I'd found in a bottle on the beach.

"That's his work," Nork nodded. "A dangerous adversary, my friend."

The gorilla shuffled into the room and tapped the Doctor on the shoulder.

"Sorry to interrupt," he said, "but it's time for you to come down to the crocodile pits.

We're getting ready to draw that sequence where Wonder Child ties their tails into Boy Scout knots. If we get that out of the way this afternoon, we can go right on to the scene where he strangles his grandmother—right?"

"Right." Nork rose. "Excuse me," he said. "The press of business affairs. Perhaps you're tired. I'll ask Albino to see you to your room."

"Follow me," the girl urged. "Do you want to ride my lion?"

"No thanks, I'll walk."

We left the banquet hall and ascended a spiral staircase. The blonde girl led me into a handsomely furnished bedroom.

"Maybe a little sleep will quiet your nerves," she observed. The scorn in her voice was evident.

"I'll be all right, thanks," I said. "Gh—what's that?"

A rumbling rose, and the air was suddenly suffused with blue flame.

"Nothing at all, scaredy-cat," she snickered. "Just a little hurricane coming up, I suppose."

"Hurricane?"

I stared out of the window and saw that she spoke the truth.

IX

THE storm was gathering over the tropical isle. Water boiled lake lava across the beach. The palmettos prostrated themselves before the fury of the storm. Wind roared from all points of the compass, and the currents clashed overhead to tear the very air to ribbons.

A kaleidoscopic cloud of macaws blew across the island, followed by a white cumulus of seagulls—borne ruthlessly away by the violence of the elements.

“Quit shaking, you coward!” taunted the girl. “I’ll turn on the the lights.” She did so. I collapsed across the bed, watching the onslaught of the storm. The walls trembled and I followed suit.

“Oh, you’re impossible,” she told me, “Just like all the other men I’ve ever met—afraid of everything.”

“You can’t blame me,” I replied. “After all, not everybody has had your advantages. Being brought up by a gorilla, and all that.”

“Never mind the excuses,” Albino said. “It doesn’t matter. I’ve been the White Goddess of the Jungle here for five years, and I’m getting pretty darn sick of it, too. Always waiting for some strong, handsome, virile he-man to come along and woo me, like they do in the comic books. And what do I get? A bunch of weaklings, namby-pamby characters who are afraid of everything—lions, snakes, hurricanes.”

“And you’re not afraid of anything?”

“Of course not.”

“You’re sure?”

There was a crash overhead and suddenly the lights went out. The room was black—an inky vacuum in the dark womb of storm.

I winced, but the girl’s voice rose strong and clear in the darkness.

“I fear nothing,” she told me. Not even the Faceless Fiend himself.”

“That’s very good to hear. I’d hate to have caused you any discomfort.”

“What’s that?” I yelled. “Who said that?”

“Me. The Faceless Fiend.”

“You’re here—in this room?”

“Just came in through a secret staircase,” the slow voice hissed. “I’ve been waiting to get my hands on you ever since you arrived.”

“You don’t say,” I answered, hurling myself in the direction of the door. Thunder boomed and wind howled.

“Don’t try to escape,” chuckled the unseen presence. “You can’t see in the dark, but I can. And I’m going to get you.”

“Help!” I yelled. “Albino—save me!”

“Stay where you are,” the girl commanded. “I’m coming.”

“So am I!” cackled the menacing voice.

I whirled, then cried out.

“Ouch!” I yelled. Something hit me in She back of my neck.

It was the ceiling.

X

WHEN I opened my eyes, I was lying strapped to a table in a long, narrow underground chamber. Blue light flickered in mephitic gloom. Crouching above me was a cloaked figure. I stared up and was rewarded only by a blank look. This creature, this monster, this being with an empty gap between neck and hairline, was something not to be countenanced. It was beyond all doubt the Faceless Fiend. His chuckle sounded out of emptiness, slithering off the slimy walls.

“Don’t look so unhappy, my friend,” he purred. “You ought to thank me for rescuing you. Here you are, safe and sound in a nice, comfortable sewer, while above us the entire laboratory has collapsed.”

“Collapsed? Was it lightning?”

“No, just rain. The place just melted away.”

“How could that be?”

“Simple,” explained my captor. “Doctor Nork built it all out of guano. Apparently he didn’t feed the seagulls enough cement. At any rate, the entire structure has been demolished—and your friends have all perished. No one is left but the two of us.”

“Dead?” I cried. “All of them—you’re sure?”

“Beyond a doubt. It’s an end to the whole insane scheme; the comic books will go out of existence, and Doctor Nork will no longer be free to perpetrate his wicked experiments in the name of science.”

“But the girl,” I persisted. “Albino, she was in the room with us—”

"I snatched you through the trapdoor and down the secret staircase just in time. I'm afraid you'll have to face it. We're alone. And now, speaking of facing it—"

The cloaked figure stooped to the side of the table and rose again. One hand clutched a small saw. "Speaking of facing it," he continued, "I am about to perform a small experiment of my own. Ever since I lost my face, I've waited for a chance to find another. I hid down here in the sewers under the laboratory and bided my time. I didn't want to take a stupid mug like Nork's and I certainly wouldn't appropriate the visage of any of his monsters.

"But when you flew in to the island this morning, I knew my long vigil was over. Sorry, I cannot offer you any anesthetic, but time is short."

"You—you mean you're going to steal my face?" I screamed.

"I prefer to think of it as a little facelifting job," answered my captor. "Please now; just relax."

The Faceless Fiend bent forward, saw in hand. It was a typical scene from a comic book story—as such, it probably would have delighted ten million dear little kiddies throughout the land. But it didn't amuse me in the least.

The saw grazed my neck—

A roar shattered the walls. A tawny blur bore the cloaked figure backwards into the shadows. There were screams, and growls, and other less pleasant noises generally heard only at presidential conventions or in zoos.

"Good work!"

Albino was at my side, using the saw on the ropes that bound me. She gestured towards the shadows of the sewer beyond, where the lion was now creating a Bodiless Fiend.

"We got through the trapdoor in time, just behind you. Then part of the walls gave, and we were delayed—but not too long."

"Then it's true," I said. "The laboratory is destroyed?"

“Everything’s gone,” she sighed. “Even this sewer isn’t safe much longer. Let’s get out of here.”

A crash accented her words. Turning, I saw that the shadowed portion of the sewer had disappeared, hiding both the lion and the Faceless Fiend from view forever beneath fresh debris.

“This way,” Albino urged, pulling me along the corridor. “There should be a sewer outlet to the beach.”

“Thanks for rescuing me,” I panted.

“Think nothing of it,” the girl answered. “That’s just a reflex action, you know. Been rescuing people for years now for the comics.”

The damp walls of the sewer twisted and turned. We raced along, Albino taking a lithe-limbed lead. She rounded a curve ahead of me and I blundered forward.

Suddenly she screamed.

I turned the corner and grasped her arm.

“What’s tire matter?” I said.

The girl stood there shaking in a frenzy of fear.

“Eeeeeh!” she shrieked. “Take it away!”

“Huh?” I said.

For answer, she clung to me and threw herself forward and upward into my arms. I held her close.

“Look!” she sobbed. “Down there—make it go away!”

“Where?” I asked.

“There.”

“But—it’s only a mouse,” I said.

She began to cry. I stepped forward, carrying her in my arms, and the mouse retreated to its burrow with a shrill squeak.

Albino was weeping hysterically, and the more she cried the more I grinned.

“There, there,” I said. “Don’t you worry. I’ll protect you.”

There isn’t much more to tell. By the time we emerged upon the broad expanse of the beach, the hurricane had blown away and only a gentle rain fell upon the ruins of the big laboratory on the cliff.

Despite my fears, I found the plane quite undamaged, save for a minor accident that had crumpled part of the landing gear. As it was, I managed a takeoff and a subsequent landing some hours later in the airport at Jamaica.

Within a day Albino and I were back in civilization. I managed to sell her on the notion, while *en route,* that her brand of courage was of no value in New York.

“People seldom encounter lions and tigers in the city,” I told her, “but the place is simply lousy with mice. What you need is someone like me to protect you.”

She agreed, meekly enough. And that’s why we were married, even before I reported to my editor with the story.

That episode is still painful in my memory. Being called a liar and a drunkard is bad enough, but when he accused me of opium-smoking, there was only one course left open to me.

“I resign!” I shouted, as he booted me down the stairs.

Still, it’s all over now, and Albino doesn’t mind. I have a new job—bought a little newsstand over on Seventh Avenue. I don’t make much money selling newspapers, but there’s always enough to buy a few mousetraps for the house.

Besides, I manage to sell quite a lot of comic books. . . .

Floral Tribute

There's one sure place where old kin and friends can get together—forever

THEY always had fresh flowers on the table at Grandma's house. That's because Grandma lived right in back of the cemetery.

"Nothing like flowers to brighten up a room," Grandma used to say. "Ed, be a good boy and take a run over. Fetch me back something pretty. Seems to me there was doings yesterday afternoon near the big Weaver Vault—you know where I mean. Pick out some nice ones and, mind you, no lilies."

So Ed would scamper off, climbing the fence in the back yard and jumping down over the old Putnam grave and its leaning headstone. He'd race down the paths, taking shortcuts through bushes and behind statues. Ed knew every inch of the cemetery long before he was seven—he learned it playing hide-and-seek there with the gang, after dark.

Ed liked the cemetery. It was better than the back yard, better than the rickety old house where Grandma and he lived; and by the time he was four, he played among the tombs every day. There were big trees and bushes everywhere; lots of nice green grass, and fascinating paths that wound off endlessly into a maze of mounds and white stones. Birds were forever singing or darting down over the flowers. It was pretty there, and quiet, and there was nobody to watch, or bother, or scold—as long as Ed remembered to stay out of the way of Old Sourpuss, the caretaker. But Old Sourpuss lived in another house; a big stone one, over on the other end, at the big cemetery entrance.

Grandma told Ed all about Old Sourpuss, and warned him against letting the caretaker catch him inside the grounds.

"He doesn't like to have little boys playing in there," she said. "Especially when there's a funeral going on. Way he acts, a body'd think he owned the place. Where's nobody's got a better right to use it as they see fit than we have, if the truth were known.

"So you go ahead and play there all you want, Ed, only don't let him see you. After all, a body's only young once, I always say."

Grandma was swell. Just plain swell. She even let him stay up late at night, and play hide-and-seek with Susie and Joe, behind the headstones.

Of course, she didn't really care, because at night was when Grandma had her company over.

Almost nobody came to see Grandma in the daytime any more. There was just the ice-man and the grocery boy and sometimes the mailman—usually he just came about once a month with Grandma's pension check. Most days there was nobody in the house except Grandma and Ed.

But at night, she had company. They never came before supper, but along about eight o'clock, when it got dark, they started drifting in. Sometimes there were only one or two, sometimes a whole bunch. Most always, Mr. Willis was there, and Mrs. Cassidy, and Sam Gates. There were others, too, but Ed remembered these three the best.

Mr. Willis was a funny man. He was always grumbling and complaining about the cold, and quarreling with Grandma about what he called "my property."

"You have no idea how cold it gets," he used to say, sitting over in the corner next to the fireplace and rubbing his hands. "Day after day it seems to get colder and colder. Not that I'm complaining too much, mind you. It's nothing as bad as the rheumatism I used to have. But you'd think that they'd at least have given me a decent lining. After all the money I left them, to pick out a cheap pine job like that, with some kind of shiny cotton stuff that didn't even last through the first winter—"

Oh, he was a grumbler, that Mr. Willis. He had a long, pale old man's face that seemed to be all wrinkles and scowl. Ed never really got a good look at him, because right after supper when they went into the parlor, Grandma would turn out all the lights and just keep the fire going in the fireplace. "We got to cut down on bills," she used to tell Ed. "This little widow's mite of mine is hardly enough to keep body and soul together for one, let alone an orphan, too."

Ed was an orphan; he knew that, but it never bothered him. Nothing seemed to bother him, the way things bothered people like old Mr. Willis.

"To think I'd come to this in the end," Mr. Willis would sigh. "Why, my family owned this place. Fifty years ago it was just a pasture—nothing but meadowland. You know that, Hannah."

Hannah was Grandma's name; Hannah Morse. And Grandpa's name had been Robert Morse. Grandpa had died a long time ago in a war and Grandma never even knew where he was buried. But first he had built this house for Grandma. That's what made Mr. Willis so mad, Ed guessed.

"When Robert built this house, I gave him the land," Mr. Willis complained. "That was fair and square. But when the city came in and took over—made me take a price for the whole shooting-match—there was nothing fair and square about that. Bunch of crooked lawyers, cheating a man out of his rightful property, with all their gib-gab about forced sales and condemning. Way I see it, I still got a moral right. A moral right. Not just to that itty-bitty little plot where they planted me, but to the whole shebang."

"What do you plan to do," Mrs. Cassidy would say, "Evict us?"

THEN she would laugh, real soft, because all of Grandma's friends sounded soft no matter how happy or mad they got. Ed liked to watch Mrs. Cassidy laugh, because she was a big woman and she laughed all over.

Mrs. Cassidy wore a lovely black dress, always the same one, and she was all powdered and rouged and painted up. She talked to Grandma a lot about something called “perpetual care.”

“I’ll always be. grateful for one thing,” Ed remembered her saying. “And that’s my perpetual care. The flowers are so pretty—I picked out the design for the blanket myself. And they keep the trim so nice, even in winter. I wish you could see the scrollwork on the box, too; all that handcarving in mahogany. They certainly spared no expense, let me tell you, and I’m mighty grateful. Mighty grateful. Why, if I hadn’t forbid it in the will, I’ll bet they’d have put up a monument. As it is, I think the plain Vermont granite has a little more restraint—you know, dignity.”

Ed didn’t understand Mrs. Cassidy very well, and besides, it was more interesting to listen to Sam Gates. Sam was the only one who paid much attention to Ed.

“Hi, sonny,” he would say. “Come over and sit by me. Want to hear about the battles, sonny?”

Sam Gates was a young-looking man, always smiling. He’d sit there in front of the fire, with Ed sprawled out at his feet, and then there would be wonderful stories to hear. Like the time Sam Gates met Abe Lincoln—not President Lincoln, but just plain Abe, the lawyer from down in Springfield, Illinois. Then there was the story about General Grant and the story about something called the Bloody Corner, where the boys in blue really gave ’em the cold steel.

“Wisht I could have lasted out to see the finish,” Sam Gates would sigh. “Course, by ’64 wasn’t one of us on either side didn’t know how it would end. After Gettysburg we had ’em on the run. And maybe it’s just as well I didn’t have to go through all that messing around with Reconstruction, or whatever they called it. Nosiree, sonny, I guess I was lucky in a way at that. Leastways, I never had to grow old, like Willis here. Never had to marry and settle down and raise a family and end up mumbling in the corner, trying to gum my porkchops. I’d have come to the same thing at the last, anyhow—isn’t that so, friends?”

And Sam Gates would look around the room and wink. Sometimes Grandma got mad at him.

"Wish you wouldn't carry on that way," she said. "Watch your language, please. Little pitchers have big ears. Just because you're all sociable and come around on account of this house being more or less a part of the property—so to speak—that's no reason you got to go putting ideas in the head of a six year old. It ain't decent."

That was a sure sign Grandma was mad; when she said "ain't." And at such times Ed usually got up and went out to play with Susie and Joe.

Thinking back, years later, Ed couldn't remember the first time he played with Susie and Joe. The moments they spent together were quite fresh in his memory, but other details escaped him; where they lived, who their parents were, why they only came around at night, calling under the kitchen window.

"Oh Ed-*deeee!* C'mon out and play!"

Joe was a black-haired, quiet kid of about nine. Susie was Ed's age or even a little younger; she had curly, taffy-colored hair and always wore a ruffled dress which she was careful not to stain or dirty, no matter what games they-played.

Ed had a crush on her.

They played hide-and-seek all over the cool, dark graveyard, night after night; calling faintly and giggling quietly at one another. Even now, Ed recalled how quiet the children were. He tried vainly to remember other games they played, like tag, where they'd touch each other. He was sure, somehow, that he had touched them, but no single instance came in recollection. Mainly he remembered Susie's face, her smile, and the way she called in her little-girl voice.

"Oh Ed-*deeee!"*

ED NEVER told anyone what he remembered, afterwards. Because afterwards was when the trouble started. It began when the people from the school came and asked Grandma why he wasn't attending first grade.

They got to talking with her, and then they talked to Ed. There was a lot of confusion—he remembered Grandma crying, and a big man with a blue suit on came in and showed her a lot of papers.

Ed didn't like to think about these things, because they marked the end of everything. After the man came there were no more evenings around the fireplace, no more games in the cemetery, no more glimpses of Joe or Susie.

The man made Grandma cry, and talked about incompetence and neglect, and something called a sanity hearing, just because Ed had been dumb enough to tell him about playing in the graveyard, and about Grandma's friends.

"You mean to tell me you got this poor kid so mixed up that he thinks he sees them too?" the man had asked Grandma. "That can't go on, Mrs. Morse; filling a child's head with morbid nonsense about the dead."

"They ain't dead!" snapped Grandma, and Ed had never seen her quite so mad, even though she'd been crying. "Not to me they ain't, and not to him, nor anyone who's friendly. I've lived in this house nigh all my life; ever since Robert was taken from me in that foreign war in the Philippines, and this is about the first time a stranger ever marched into it. What you and your kind would call a living stranger, that is. But the owners—they come around regular. Seeing as how we share the same property, so to speak. They ain't dead, Mister; they're just *neighborly,* is all. And to Ed and me they're a darn sight more real than your kind ever was!"

But the man didn't listen to Grandma, even though he stopped asking questions and began treating her nice and polite. Everybody was nice and polite from then on; the other men that came, and the lady who took Ed away on the train to the orphanage in the city.

That was the end. There were no fresh flowers every day at the orphanage, and while Ed met plenty of kids, he never saw anyone like Joe or Susie.

Not that everyone, kids and grownups alike, weren't nice to him. They treated him just so, and Mrs. Ward, the Matron, told him that she wanted Ed to think of her as his own mother—that being the least she could do, after his harrowing experience.

Ed didn't know what she meant by harrowing experience and she wouldn't explain. She wouldn't tell him what had happened to Grandma, either, or why she never came to visit him. In fact, any time he asked any questions about the past she had nothing to say except that it was best to try and forget all that had happened before he came to the orphanage.

Gradually, Ed forgot. In the score of years that followed, he forgot almost completely—that was why it was so hard to remember, now. And Ed wanted to remember, very badly.

DURING the two years in the hospital at Honolulu, Ed spent most of his time trying to remember. There was nothing else for him to do, lying flat on his back that way, and besides, he knew that if he ever got out of there he'd want to go back.

Just before he went into the Service, after getting out of the orphanage, he'd received a letter from Grandma. It was one of the few letters Ed ever received in his lonely lifetime and at first the return address on the envelope and the name, "Mrs. Hannah Morse," had meant nothing to him.

But the letter itself—just a few scrawled and spidery lines written on ruled notebook paper—brought a rush of confused memories.

Grandma had been away, in a "sanotarium," as she put it, but she was back home, now, and had found out all about the "put-up job they worked to get you into their clutches." And if Ed would like to come back home—

Ed wanted very desperately to come back home. But he was already in uniform and waiting orders when the letter came. He wrote, of course. He wrote all the while he was overseas, and sent her an allotment, besides.

Sometimes Grandma's answers reached him. She was waiting for his leave to come. She was reading the papers. Sam Gates said it was a horrible thing, this war.

Sam Gates—

Ed told himself that he was a grown man now. Sam Gates was a figment of the imagination. But Grandma kept writing about her figments; about Mr. Willis and Mrs. Cassidy, and even some "new friends" who came to the house.

"Lots of fresh flowers these days, Ed boy," Grandma wrote. "Scarcely a day goes by without them blowing taps over yonder. Of course a body isn't so spry any more—I'm pushing seventy-seven, you know, but I still get over for flowers same as always."

The letters stopped coming when Ed got hit. For a long while, everything stopped, for Ed. There was only the bed and the doctors and the nurses and the hypo every three hours and the pain. That was Ed's life—that, and trying to remember.

Once Ed nearly told a skull doctor about the whole deal, but he caught himself in time. It was nothing you could talk about and hope to be understood, and Ed had enough trouble without bucking for a Section Eight.

When he was able to, he wrote again. Nearly two years had passed and the war was long since over. So many things had happened that Ed didn't even dare to hope very much. For Hannah Morse would be "pushing eighty" by now, if—

He got an answer to his letter a few days before his medical discharge came through.

"Dear Ed." The same spidery scrawl, probably a sheet from the same ruled notebook. Nothing had changed. Grandma was still waiting and she'd just known that he hadn't given up. But there was a funny thing she wanted him to know about. Did he remember old Sourpuss, the caretaker? Well, old Sourpuss was hit by a truck last winter, and ever since then he'd taken to dropping in with the rest of them evenings, and now he was friendly as could be, nice as pie. They'd have so much to talk about when Ed came back—

So Ed came back.

AFTER twenty years, after a new lifetime, Ed came back. There was a long month in Honolulu, waiting for sailing—a month filled with unreal people and events. There were nights in a barroom, there was a girl named Peggy and a nurse named Linda, and there was a hospital buddy of Ed's who talked about going into business with the dough they'd saved up.

But the barroom was never as real as the parlor back in Grandma's house, and Peggy and Linda weren't in the least like Susie, and Ed knew he would never go into business.

On the boat, everybody seemed to be talking about Russia and inflation and housing. Ed listened and nodded and tried to remember some of the phrases Sam Gates used to use when he told about Old Abe down in Springfield-Illinois.

Ed took a plane from Frisco, wiring ahead to Mrs. Hannah Morse. He got in at the airport in mid-afternoon, but he couldn't catch a bus for the last forty-mile ride until just before supper. He grabbed a bite to eat at the station and then jolted into town along about twilight.

A cab took him over to Grandma's. Ed was trembling when he got out in front of the house on the edge of the cemetery. He handed the driver a five and told him to keep the change. Then he stood there until the cab drove away, before he got up enough nerve to knock on the door.

He took a long, deep breath. Then the door opened and he was home. He knew he was home because nothing had changed. Nothing at all.

Grandma was still Grandma. She stood there in the doorway and she was little and wrinkled and beautiful. An old, old woman, peering up at him in the dimness of the firelight, and saying, "Ed, boy—I declare! It is you, isn't it? Land, what tricks a body's mind can play. I thought I'd still be seeing a little shaver. But come in, boy, come in. Wipe your feet first."

Ed wiped his feet on the mat, same as always, and walked into the parlor. The fire was going in the fireplace and Ed put on another log before he sat down.

"Hard to keep it up, boy," Grandma said. "Woman gets to be my age." She sat down opposite him and smiled.

“You shouldn’t be alone like this,” Ed told her.

“Alone? But I’m not alone! Don’t you remember Mr. Willis and all the others? They sure enough haven’t forgotten you, I can tell you that. Hardly talk about another thing except when you were coming back. They’ll be over, later.”

“Will they?” Ed said, softly, staring into the fire.

“Of course they will. *You* know that, Ed.”

“Sure. Only I thought—”

Grandma smiled. “I understand, all right. You’ve been letting the other folks fool you; the ones who don’t know. I met a lot of them up to the sanotarium; they kept me there for nigh ten years before I caught on to how to handle them. Talking about ghosts and spirits and deelusions. Finally I just gave up and allowed they were right and in a little while they let me come home. Guess you went through the same thing, more or less, only right now you don’t know what to believe.”

“That’s right, Grandma,” Ed said. “I don’t.”

“Well, boy, you needn’t worry about it. Or about your chest, either.”

“My chest? How did you—”

“They sent a letter,” Grandma answered. “Maybe it’s right, what they said, and maybe its wrong. But it doesn’t matter, either way. I know you aren’t afraid. You wouldn’t have come back if you were afraid, would you, Ed?”

“That’s right, Grandma. I figured that even if time was short, I belonged here. Besides, I wanted to know, once and for all, if—”

He was silent, waiting for her to speak. But she merely nodded, face bowed and dim in the shadows. At last she replied.

“You’ll find out, soon enough.” Her smile flashed up at him, and Ed caught himself remembering a dozen familiar gestures, mannerisms, intonations. Come what may, that was something nobody could take away from him—he was home.

“Land, I wonder what’s keeping them?” Grandma said, rising abruptly and crossing over to the side window. “Seems to me they’re pretty late.”

"Are you sure they're coming?" Ed could have bitten his tongue off a moment after he uttered the question, but it was too late then.

Grandma turned stiffly. "I'm sure," she said. "But maybe I was wrong about you. Maybe you ain't sure."

"Don't be mad, Grandma—"

"I ain't mad! Oh, Ed, have they really fooled you after all? Did you go so far away that you can't even remember?"

"Of course I remember. I remember everything; even about Susie and Joe and the fresh flowers every day, but—"

"The flowers." Grandma looked at him. "Yes, you do remember, and I'm glad. You used to get fresh flowers for me every day, didn't you?"

She glanced at the table. An empty bowl rested on the center.

"Maybe that will help," she said. "If you'd go get some flowers. Now. Before they come."

"Now?"

"Please, Ed."

WITHOUT a word, he walked out into the kitchen and opened the back door. The moon was up, and there was enough light to guide him along the path to the fence. Beyond, the cemetery lay in silver splendor.

Ed didn't feel afraid, he didn't feel strange, he felt nothing at all. He boosted himself over the fence, ignoring the sharp, sudden pain below his ribs. He set his feet upon the gravel path between the headstones and he walked a little ways, letting memory guide him.

Flowers. Fresh flowers. Fresh flowers from fresh graves. It was all wrong, it was Section Eight for sure, but at the same time it was all right. It had to be.

He saw the mound over at the side of the bill, near the end of the fence. Potter's field, bat there were flowers on one grave; the single bouquet rested against a wooden marker.

Ed stooped down, scenting the freshness, feeling the damp firmness of the cut stems as he lifted the cluster from the marker. The moon was bright.

The moon was bright, and he read the plain block-letters.

HANNAH MORSE
1870-1949

Hannah Morse was Grandma. The flowers were fresh. The grave wasn't more than a day old—

Ed walked back along the path very slowly. He found it very hard to get back over the fence without dropping the bouquet, but he made it, pain and all. He opened the kitchen door and walked into the parlor where the fire had burned very low.

Grandma wasn't there. Ed put the flowers in the bowl anyway. Grandma wasn't there, and her friends weren't there, either. But Ed didn't worry any more.

She'd be back. And so would Mr. Willis and Mrs. Cassidy and Sam Gates, all of them. In a little while, Ed knew, he might even hear the faint, faraway voices under the kitchen window, calling.

Oh, *Ed-deeee!"*

He might not be able to go out tonight, the way his chest was acting up. But sooner or later, he'd go. Meanwhile, they would be coming, soon.

Ed smiled and leaned back in the chair before the fire, just making himself at home and waiting.

1950

All Else Is Dust

Nobody quarrels particularly with the idea that the dead turn to dust. But what if it starts to happen *BEFORE* you die?

THEY HAD taken the cover off the target box preparatory to making a new run and the beam from the cyclotron was spurting into the air. Through the periscope in the control room, the beam looked like a death ray. In the control room, graduate research assistant Nick Zehr waited for Ed Freuhoff's entrance into the chamber that housed the cyclotron. A frown puckered Nick's forehead. In this place of transition, in this place of hurtling change, a frown was no new sight. Every man who worked here habitually wore one. But Nick Zehr's frown was something special.

Once before he had seen this thing happen, when the target box was disconnected and the beam was spurting into the air, and he had simply refused to believe his eyes. Even in this place of high magic where a new world was in the making—or an old one being destroyed—even in this place where almost anything might happen, there were limits to what one was willing to believe he had seen. Pink elephants, yes. Green diamonds, yes. But this—No!

Freuhoff entered the operating chamber. In the control room, Nick Zehr, aware of the big man's entrance, glued his eyes to the periscope and held his breath.

Freuhoff shambled as he walked. Slow of speech and slow of movement, he looked a little like an ape that had decided to become a man and then had changed his mind about the whole business when he discovered what being a man meant—but could not quite make up his mind to go back to apehood again. Not too keen, not too alert, what Freuhoff lacked in native intelligence, he made up by plodding work. Day and night, the man worked.

He walked across the operating chamber. As he moved past the purple beam from the cyclotron, the beam curved in an arc and snapped at his back.

In the control room, Nick Zehr froze.

The beam didn't touch Freuhoff. It snapped out behind him and seemed to follow him from the space of inches. When he started to turn his head, it promptly snapped back into its normal position. By the time he got his head around far enough to see it, the beam was again a purple glow of ionized air exploding outward from the open target box.

In the control room Nick Zehr said, "This beats the hell out of me!" There was shock and surprise and wonder and awe in his words. And in him was fear.

"The beam snapped at him. But when he turned around to look at it, it jumped back into place."

This was the impression he had gotten. The beam seemed to have taken intelligent action, whether to strike at Freuhoff or to examine him, out of curiosity, Nick Zehr couldn't determine.

Nor could he understand how the beam *could* take intelligent action. The glow was simple ionization, the beam itself was composed of accelerated particles. Neither the beam nor any part of it was intelligent. Not if man really knew anything about the universe! Therefore the beam could not, like a turtle, become curious about a man and stick its head out from under its shell for another look, jerking back under the shell when it was about to be caught in the act of looking.

Nick Zehr shivered and a cold wave seemed to pass over his body. He had seen the beam lick at Freuhoff, not once but twice! What did it mean?

Here in this laboratory they were exploring the fringes of the universe. This cyclotron had been part of the Manhattan Project, it had helped produce the hell that had exploded over Hiroshima and Nagasaki: the atom bomb. But the bomb was not important, not really. At best, it could only be considered a gadget, important only in the fact that it was a landmark on the new voyage of discovery, a signboard pointing the way to new lands that lay afar, a compass to guide a new Columbus. Compared to the things that might follow it, the atom bomb was about as important and breathtaking as the operation of a mechanical cigarette lighter, the scrape of steel on flint.

The beam licking at Freuhoff could mean anything. Or nothing. But one thing was certain—Ed Freuhoff and everybody else who worked this lab, had to be warned. Nick Zehr reached for the toggle switch on the squawk box, but before his fingers reached it, the telephone buzzed on his desk. He picked up the telephone—and forgot all about Freuhoff and the erratic purple beam spurting from the cyclotron.

HIS WIFE'S voice sounded in his ear. "Nick! Nick! Come home quickly! Oh, Nick—" The voice was suddenly muffled and choked. "Something terrible is happening! Nick—" A clatter came over the wire. Then silence.

"Nancy, what on earth is wrong with you?"

No answer. The line hummed softly to itself, a chorus of drowsy elfin voices humming unknown songs.

"Nancy!" His voice was a shout echoing through the control room. Frantically he jiggled the receiver on the hook. "Nancy! Nancy! Operator, what's wrong with this connection? You cut me off! Operator!"

"I'll check the connection for you," came the cool voice of the operator. The receiver clicked and hummed. "The connection is all right, sir. The trouble seems to be at the other end; the receiver is off the hook."

"Nancy!" Nick Zehr screamed.

There was no answer.

“Shall I try again for you?” the operator asked.

“No. No. I’ll go see.” He flung the telephone back on its cradle and paused just long enough on his way out to yell at Ray Schmidt to take over the control panel. Nick’s shift was almost over anyhow and Schmidt was just coming on duty.

Nick and Nancy Zehr lived in an efficiency apartment with a pulldown bed. They considered themselves lucky to have even that. Both worked, he as a graduate assistant while he completed the dissertation for his Ph. B., Nancy as a lab assistant in the biology department. As members of the staff of Gilbert University, both enjoyed their work and the way they lived. Until now, there had been no shadow between them and nothing had ever threatened the even tenor of their life together. He could not begin to guess what might have happened to Nancy to force her desperate call to him. “Something terrible is happening!” Her words rang in his ears. He tried to imagine what might have happened to her but his imagination failed him.

Their apartment was on the third floor of a 30-unit building. He almost ran the wheels off his ancient jalopy reaching it. The thought had come to him that perhaps the building might be on fire, but when he reached it he saw with relief that there was no sign of smoke. So far as he could tell, everything was normal in the building. He went up the stairs three at a time.

As he went by on the run, Mrs. Keeney was bringing her baby buggy out of her apartment. She stared at him as if wondering what on earth was the matter. Fuller, the musician, was practicing on his violin. In one of the apartments a child was yelling and in another a dog was barking. The smell of hamburger being fried with onions was in the air. The building, the people, the sounds, even the smells, were normal. In this place where completely sane people led completely sane lives, what could have happened to Nancy?

Unlocking the door, he yelled for her.

There was no answer.

The room, he thought, was strangely full of dust. It struck in his throat, threatening to choke him, and he coughed. He expected to find his wife slumped down fey the telephone in the dressing alcove just off the bathroom. She wasn't there. The bathroom door was open, revealing a tub half filled with soapy water. The telephone, uttering burping squawks, hung from the top of the dresser. Dust covered the floor, dust hung in the air. It spurted up around his feet as he moved. Choking, he opened a window. "Nancy!" he screamed.

The echo of his own voice answered him.

CHAPTER II

HIS WIFE was not in the apartment. He ran into the hall, hoping to find someone who might have seen her. Mrs. Keeney was down at the far end of the hall, waiting patiently for the self-service elevator.

"Mr. Zehr, is something wrong?"

"Have you seen Mrs. Zehr?"

"No. No, I haven't." The elevator arrived. She began automatically to open the doors. The sound of Fuller's violin caught Nick's ears. He knocked on the musician's door. Fuller, in his socks and shirt sleeves, said: "Hello, Zehr. What? No, I haven't seen her." He called over his shoulder. "Honey, have you seen Mrs. Zehr?"

Mrs. Fuller was a bosomy blonde, calendar type. No, she hadn't seen Mrs. Zehr. Was anything wrong?

"I don't know," he admitted. He explained what had happened. They followed him back to his apartment. "Dinner's cooking," Mrs. Fuller said, pointing to the electric roaster in the kitchenette. "Maybe she stepped out for a salad or for a dessert."

"And maybe she didn't. You don't scream that something terrible is happening and then go trotting off to get a dessert for dinner."

"Maybe—" Mrs. Fuller's breast heaved at the thought. "Maybe—well—maybe she was attacked."

"She wouldn't call up about it," her husband said. He coughed. "Where the hell did all this dust come from, Zehr?"

"I don't know and don't give a damn."

"You better call the police," Fuller said. "If there's nothing wrong, you won't lose anything."

Notified by radio, the police cruiser needed less than ten minutes to reach the building. A sergeant and a corporal came through the open door of the apartment. "Woman missing?" the sergeant said. His attitude indicated that this was an old story. In his days on the force he had heard hundreds of husbands report missing wives, or vice versa. Usually it meant that the little woman had overstayed her time in the local gin mill or in the horse parlor or had stepped out with some lad with wavy hair. If the husband was missing, it might mean a sympathetic blonde or it might mean that he had simply gotten sick and tired of looking at the same woman all the time. Men walked away, so did women. Usually nobody really gave a damn, including the other spouse and the police. Sometimes the walkers stop over at their lawyers' office and go on to the divorce court, sometimes they don't even bother about the lawyer.

All of this was included in the sergeant's attitude and in his voice when he said, "Woman missing? Your wife, huh? Let me have the name and description, please."

His attitude changed a trifle when Nick Zehr told him about the telephone call. "Something was happening to her, huh? She calls you and tells you its happening? But when you get here, she's gone?"

"That's right."

"Did she say what was happening?"

"No."

The sergeant sneezed violently. "Lot of dust in here." He searched the apartment. "Well, she ain't here, that's a cinch. Anything else missing?"

"Not so far as I can tell."

"All of her clothes here?"

Nick searched. “A tan suit seems to be gone but she might have taken it to the cleaners.”

“Uh—” The sergeant hesitated. “She—uh—have any boy friends?”

“Listen—”

“Skip it,” the sergeant said. “I got to ask questions. Did she have any boy friends?”

“No,” Nick said hotly.

THE SERGEANT scratched his head. “Well, she ain’t here and I don’t see any evidence to prove anything is wrong. Except for all the dust, the place is in order, nothing missing, no sign of a scrap. What kind of a housekeeper was she, to leave all this dust around?”

“She worked. I guess she hadn’t had time to clean it up.”

“Okay.” The sergeant moved toward the door.

“Is this all you’re going to do?” Nick demanded.

“I’ll report it,” the sergeant answered. “Give me a picture of her. We’ll put out a description of her. Chances are, she’ll turn up herself in an hour or so. If she don’t come back by tomorrow, get in touch with Lieutenant Cogwell, of the Bureau of Missing Persons.”

Taking the photograph Nick gave him, he went out the door.

“Well, if this don’t beat anything I ever heard of!” Mrs. Fuller said. Her breasts heaved. “Why, she could have been killed—” She broke off quickly, glancing at Nick. “I shouldn’t have said that. I’m sorry. I’m sure nothing has happened to her. I mean—there may have been somebody she liked—I mean—”

“Madge, you talk too much,” her husband said.

Nick took a firm grip on his temper. “She may have run off with another man,” he said. “But I don’t believe it. She wouldn’t have called me. She wouldn’t have left her things. There’s her purse on the dresser, dinner was cooking, her clothes are here, except for one suit—I just don’t believe it. I don’t. I don’t.” He was almost in hysterics.

"She'll turn up all right," Fuller said soothingly "Mix yourself a big drink and eat your dinner. If there's anything we can do to help, give us a call. Come on, Madge." They left.

"I must be calm," Nick told himself. "I'm just worrying about nothing. She stepped out for a little while. Maybe some friend called and asked her to come over, maybe Jean had an accident, or Helen, and they called her. Maybe that's what she meant when she said something terrible had happened—"

Maybe!

By midnight the *maybe* had become a frightened voice whimpering in the far corners of his mind. He had covered the neighborhood, he had called all the hospitals, he had called her boss who had said she had complained of a headache and had left early, he had called her friends and had gotten negative answers. For the hundredth time, he had searched the apartment.

Under the dresser, he found something he had missed in his previous searches—a ball about a quarter of an inch in diameter, apparently made of brass. It looked a little like a ball bearing except that bearings were usually made of steel. He rolled it in the palm of his hand, noting its extreme lightness. "Must be hollow," he thought.

A knock sounded on the door. Thinking it might be Nancy, he almost broke a leg getting to the door to open it. "Nancy—"

But it wasn't Nancy. It was Ed Freuhoff.

"Hello, Nick. I couldn't sleep." The man seemed dazed or maybe a little drunk. "May I come in? I—" He put his hand on the back of his head and rubbed his scalp as if something pained there. His eyes were a little out of focus and Nick had the impression that Freuhoff looked at him and through him to worlds far away. He was pathetically glad to see Freuhoff, he would have been glad to see the devil himself. "Come in, Ed."

"Thanks. Uh—" The vacant gaze went around the apartment. "Where's Mrs. Zehr?"

"I wish to hell I knew!" Nick brought glasses and whiskey and told the story. Freuhoff's face showed amazement. "That's too bad," he said. He sipped at his drink. His eyes went over the apartment seeking something, came to rest on the little brass ball which Nick had laid on the end table. He picked-it up. “What—what is this?”

NICK ZEHR was silent. And cold.

The impression of cold seemed to come from some well inside of him. He felt like a blind man who has been dropped into a den of snakes and dares not move hand or foot for fear he will be struck. “How—how did you happen to come over, Ed?” he blurted out.

Freuhoff’s eyes were on the little brass ball. “I—I couldn’t sleep,” he said. He turned the ball in his fingers. “An odd thing.” His voice was thick and heavy. He glanced sideways at Nick and Nick again had the impression he was a blind man in a den of snakes. The wrong move, the wrong word, and anything might happen. He lit a cigarette and drew smoke into his lungs, wondering why he was scared. He had no reason to be afraid of this big ape. Or did he have a reason? How much did he actually know about this man?

“Do you want to keep this?” Freuhoff asked. He turned the ball in his fingers.

“No,” Nick answered. He shrugged, forced a casual note into his voice. “I found it on the floor. It’s a ball bearing, or something. It isn’t important.”

He suspected the moment he spoke that he had betrayed himself, that he had somehow overplayed his casual indifference, that, like the blind man among the snakes, he had not been able to sit completely still. He had moved, he had made a sound, the wrong sound.

But he didn’t know where he had failed or how or what difference it made. Some center of his brain, shouted a warning to him.

The snake struck.

Very gently Freuhoff laid the brass ball back on the end table. His ham-sized fist moved in a short arc and jammed savagely home against the base of Nick Zehr’s jaw.

CHAPTER III

NICK ZEHR regained consciousness to find himself lying on the floor of his apartment. A bronzed face he had never seen before was looking down at him. “Feeling better?” the mouth in the bronze face asked.

Nick sat up. Two men, strangers, were in the room. One was quietly phoning from the dressing nook. The other was looking down at him.

Freuhoff, a slow writhing passing through his heavy body, was lying on the floor. His hands were caught in an odd position behind his back. As Freuhoff twisted trying to get free, Nick caught the glint of steel on the man’s wrists. Handcuffs!

“Zehr? Nicholas Zehr?” the bronze faced man asked.

Nick nodded.

“Joswell. FBI.” He held a cupped hand in front of Nick’s eyes. A badge was visible in the palm. “FBI,” Nick muttered. “What—what do you want?” His eyes went to Freuhoff, sitting up now and staring vacantly at him. “He—he slugged me,” he said.

Joswell nodded. “We heard it,” he said.

“Heard it?”

“Uh-huh. How would you like to take a little ride?”

“Huh?” The situation was somehow moving too fast for Nick to grasp it. Where had these men come from? What were they doing here? What did they want? “Am I—under arrest?”

The agent pursed his lips. “That depends on how you want it. Right now you are not under arrest. We want to talk to you and we can arrest you for questioning, but actually we don’t want to arrest you at all. If it will make you feel any better, you’re not the fish we’re trying to fry, but you may—or may not—know something important about those fish. So we want to talk to you. Okay?”

“Sure. I guess so. But—my wife—”

Joswell nodded, as if he understood exactly what Nick wanted to say. “We know she’s gone. She is one of the people we want to talk to you about.”

“Huh? What—?”

“We’ll talk later,” the agent said.

At headquarters, the agent Joswell took Nick to a plainly furnished office. Freuhoff was taken elsewhere. “Sit down, Mr. Zehr,” Joswell said. Nick slid into the chair. “First of all, where is your wife?”

“I wish to hell I knew. I’ve been going crazy—” Remembering who this man was, he caught himself. “Do you think I know where she is?” Anger sounded in his voice.

With his hands, Joswell made little apologetic gestures. “Take it easy, Zehr. I’m trying to find out something. When did you see her last?”

“This morning. What difference—”

“When did you talk to her last?”

“This afternoon about four-thirty.”

“You haven’t seen her since this morning, you haven’t talked to her since four-thirty?”

“That’s right.”

“Has she, in the past few months, dropped any hints that she might be leaving?”

“No. What are you getting at?”

“I wish I knew.” The agent sighed. “Has she seemed in any way unusual to you during recent months?”

“No. Look—”

“Take it easy, Mr. Zehr.”

“My wife is missing. You seem to know something about her. At any rate, you’re damned curious. If you have any information about her, I want it. Right now.”

Joswell was silent, the bronze face impassive and quietly sympathetic.

The agent took a deep breath. “I don’t know where your wife is. I wish I did. I’m trying to find her. She’s a spy.”

“A *WHAT?*” Nick Zehr gasped. The word hit him harder than had Freuhoff’s ham-sized fist. As a worker in atomic energy, he knew the care and caution exercised to keep new discoveries from reaching improper sources. There was no secret of the bomb, maybe not even any secrets of the know-how, but there was a chance that new discoveries were being made. Hence—spies. No intelligent person doubted that spies existed. But Nancy was not an enemy agent. He would bet his soul on her innocence. “You’re crazy as a loon! You’re talking like a man with his head under water! You’re—” Rising from the chair, he shook his fist in Joswell’s face.

“Take it easy,” the agent said. “It is barely possible that I know what I am talking about. For three months, we have been watching your wife. If you thought it strange that we turned up so quickly after Freuhoff slugged you, it might interest you to know that we’ve had a hidden mike planted in your apartment for the past six weeks. We were in an apartment in the building. When Freuhoff hit you, I thought it was time to move in; otherwise we might lose an important witness.”

His tone left no doubt that the identity of that witness was Nick Zehr.

“You’ve had our apartment wired? You’ve been spying!”

The bronze face showed traces of an embarrassed red. “Counter-spying is a better word.” From his pocket he took a bright object which he laid on the desk. “Did you ever see this before?” he asked.

Nick stared at the object. “Sure. It’s one of Nancy’s compacts.” She loved compacts and bought a new one almost every month, it seemed. But this one she had kept longer than usual. “Where did you get it?”

“From her purse before you regained consciousness,” Joswell said. “Did you ever see her set this compact, open, on the end table beside the sofa and read aloud her notes on the day’s work?”

Nick nodded. “Many times. But what has that got to do with—”

Joswell shrugged. “It’s not a compact, it’s a miniature radio transmitter,” he said.

"What?" Cold shock waves passed up Nick Zehr's back. "Are you certain of that?"

"Dead certain. It's a short range ultra high frequency transmitter of an unusual design. And if you doubt that it is a transmitter and that it has been used as such, we have recordings of your wife's voice sent out over this gadget." His finger tapped the brilliant vanity case.

Nick Zehr was past the stage at which his emotional equipment could respond to additional shock. Or as he thought. "Who was she communicating with?"

"We don't know," Joswell answered.

"Where did she get this transmitter? I didn't pay much attention to the compact but I thought she had Drought it."

"She didn't buy it," the agent said. "She got it from Freuhoff."

"What?" Nick discovered that his emotional equipment was still capable of registering additional shock. "Are you sure about that?"

"Certain. We saw him slip it to her."

Nick was silent. "I find all of this hard to believe," he said.

JOSWELL'S EYES regarded him with sympathy and compassion. "I'm sorry it has to be this way," he said, and meant it.

"Do you know where she is?" The agent shook his head. He swore fretfully under his breath. "The part I can't understand is how she knew we were going to arrest her."

"What?"

"If she hadn't skipped out on us, we would have arrested her within the next fifteen minutes. Somehow she got wind of it and pulled the neatest, most successful job of skipping I've ever seen. We heard her make a call to you. Then we heard you arrive and start yelling for her. Right then and there I started five men looking for her. Not one of them got a trace of her. Between the time she called you and the time you arrived, she managed to vanish, not only from you but from us."

"It doesn't make sense!" Nick Zehr whispered.

"You weren't the only one looking for her," Joswell said. "Right now I've got a dragnet out over the whole city. By tomorrow, if we don't find her, the net will go out over the whole country."

"What about Freuhoff?" Nick interrupted. "You've got him. He gave her the radio. Ask him where she is."

"We are asking him," the agent answered. "Right this minute he is being asked—" He broke off as a knock sounded on the door. "Come in."

The man who entered glanced at Nick Zehr. Joswell nodded. "Okay, Wilkinson. It's all right to talk. Has he begun to open up yet?"

Wilkinson said, "He has admitted he gave the radio to Mrs. Zehr. That's enough to hang both of them—" Behind him the door was thrust open.

The man who entered had not bothered to knock. "Chief, come quick!" he gasped.

Like a shot out of a gun, Joswell leaped from the chair. He went through the door. The two agents followed him. Nick Zehr brought up the rear. There was something strange about the man who had entered last, he saw, but in the emotional storm already swirling within him he had difficulty in isolating that strangeness. Then he saw what it was.

From head to toes, the man was covered with golden dust.

At a run, Joswell went down the hallway. From an open door ahead of him, a man looked out, beckoning. His face, his clothes, his hands, were covered with golden dust. He was trying to brush it from his clothes, mechanically, his mind obviously entirely on something else. He stepped aside and they passed through the door.

IT WAS a plain room, with four stiff chairs, a high barred window, and a single ceiling light so bright it hurt the eyes—a room such as countless law breakers know, not as a place of torture, but as a room where a prisoner may be kept and grilled until the hours turn into days and the days turn into nightmares.

The bright light shining from the ceiling was hazed with golden dust. The room seemed filled with a fog, this too was dust. Nick Zehr was aware of men coughing and sneezing, felt a familiar tickle grow in his own throat.

Lying on the floor in front of one of the chairs were two shoes. Lying across the chair and on the floor were a shirt and trousers. Dust-covered, the clothing gave the impression of being riddled with some kind of fast-spreading dry rot so that now it would crumble at a touch.

"What is it, Kilgore?" Joswell said to the man who had beckoned to them from the door.

Kilgore left off the mechanical brushing of his clothes. He pointed to the chair. His voice rasped mechanically, like a robot reapeating to its master the things its eyes had seen. "He was sitting in that chair. Suddenly it looked like dust was spurting out all over him." He stopped speaking and licked dry lips with a nervous tongue.

"Go on," Joswell said.

"By God, right in front of my eyes, he turned to dust!" Kilgore blurted out the words. "It looked like he had turned to dust and then somebody had punched the switch on a million little electric fans inside of him. The fans started turning and blew him away. By God, Chief, that's exactly what it looked like!"

CHAPTER IV

ON KILGORE'S face sweat was turning the yellow dust into mud. He rubbed his hands over his cheeks, stared at the smear on his palms. "This damned stuff, Chief, this is Freuhoff—all that's left of him."

"Damn it, that's not humanly possible!" Joswell said and stopped as Nick Zehr spoke without realizing he was speaking.

"But maybe it's inhumanly possible."

Eyes turned toward him as the words left his lips. The room was silent. Again he felt like a blind man in a snake pit. He stood very still, hardly daring to breathe and not daring to move. Yellow dust swirled through the room. Joswell looked at him. “I was thinking that,” the agent said. “I didn’t dare say it.”

Joswell’s face was gray. A vein throbbed visibly in his forehead. His gaze went around the room as if he was looking for something he suspected might be here, yet afraid he would find it. “All the time I’ve thought we were chasing a bunch of spies trying to crack our atomic set-up. What a mistake that was!”

Outside was the night, the distant honk of a taxicab. Somewhere tires screeched on asphalt. Again Nick Zehr found himself thinking of alien intelligences using human beings to probe the secrets of a world they could not investigate directly. Human robots! Had Freuhoff been such a robot? Had Nancy—He couldn’t even think it.

He had loved her, he had held her in his arms, he had lived with her. He knew everything about her. Or he thought he had known everything.

Joswell’s eyes searched the room for something invisible, something intangible, something hidden from the senses, for some alien creature present here invisibly. Knots formed at the corners of his jaw. “Kilgore, set a guard on this room. Roust the chemists out of bed and get ’em up here. I want an analysis of this dust. I want this room searched, walls, ceiling, floor, door, chairs, lights. Don’t miss a thing. Move!”

Kilgore was gone.

“Wilkinson, bring all the records on Freuhoff to my office. Move.” Wilkinson moved.

Nick Zehr followed Joswell back to the agent’s office. “You saw the room, you heard what happened,” the agent said. “What do you think?”

“I don’t think. I can’t think. It’s not possible.”

“I know it’s not possible. But it happened. Why did Freuhoff come to your apartment?”

“He said he couldn’t sleep.”

“Why did he slug you?”

“I have no idea. It was completely unexpected.”

Joswell's bronze face had a gray pallor. His eyes were hard and cold. "You and he weren't very friendly, were you?"

"As a matter of fact, we weren't. But we weren't unfriendly either."

"Do you have any information that might help?"

"So far as I know—none."

"Why did you say it might be inhumanly possible for a man to be turned to dust?" Joswell's stare was unwinking.

"I had no reason. The thought just popped into my mind."

For a moment Joswell watched him, then the cold eyes were hooded and the gaze was turned away. "Well, there's no use trying to lick this thing in an hour or two. If I get the job done during the rest of my life, I'll figure I'm lucky. Zehr, where do you want to stay, here or at a hotel? We've got some rooms fitted up with bunks here. You can use one of them if you wish."

Apparently he was giving Nick complete freedom of choice. "Can't I go home instead?" Nick asked.

"That's out," the agent answered. "Personally, if I were in your shoes, I wouldn't go back to that apartment for a million dollars—though I'm damned if I can suggest any other place that's much safer."

"I'll stay here," Nick said.

"Good. You'll at least have somebody within calling distance."

JOSWELL personally took Nick to the room he was to occupy. It was fitted with a double-decker bunk. Lying down, Nick sank instantly into a deep, drugged slumber through which, like phantoms out of a nightmare, writhed the impossible shapes of alien monsters. At ten o'clock the next morning, Nick was back in the agent's office. "Got anything yet?" he asked.

Joswell looked like a man who has not had much sleep. "A lot of nothing," he said. "I've got two chemists at work on that dust. I had three at first but when I told them what the dust was, the third quit on me. I think he figured the day of Judgment was at hand." Joswell shook his head. "I don't know that he's not right. I've been talking to doctors, physicists, chemists, to any scientist who would hold still long enough to listen to me, and they all say there is no known force—ray, radiation, disease, or what have you—that will turn a man into dust within the space of minutes."

"Did you tell them you had seen it happen?"

"Hell, no!" the agent answered. "I'm not likely to tell that to anybody yet. If the story got around that there is something loose in this town that is turning people into dust we'd have the damnedest panic on our hands you ever saw. People are already scared, of the atom bomb, of bacteriological warfare, of the next depression, of this, that, and something else. I haven't got anything except this, and I don't know what *it* is."

From his desk drawer he took a small box. Opened, it revealed a brass ball. "I know what *that* is," Nick said. "I found it under the dresser in my apartment. I didn't know you had brought it with you."

"I didn't."

"No? Then where did you get it?"

"Found it in Freuhoff's clothes."

"The devil! Say he *had* been looking at that just before he slugged me. I got the idea he thought it was important, though I don't know why. Maybe he brought it along."

"And maybe he didn't," the agent mused. He picked up the phone on his desk, gave a number to the switchboard operator.

"That's my number you just called," Nick spoke.

"Uh-huh. I've got a man staked out in your place. He doesn't much like being there, either." The receiver rattled and he spoke rapidly into the mouthpiece. He listened, then hung up. "There's another one of these balls at your place," he said.

"Well—" Nick said. He picked up the little brass ball and held it between his thumb and forefinger. Twist and turn it as he might, he could see no importance that could be attached to it. "I don't know. I don't understand. I—" His voice trailed off. His hunch was that the ball was important. But how? He did not know. "What do you want me to do?" he said.

"There are two things I don't want you to do. One is to go back to your apartment, the other is to go back to your job."

"But—" Nick twisted uncomfortably. There was a thought in his mind, a thought he had been trying to avoid. "My wife—"

Joswell nodded. "I know," he said. His voice dropped a notch. "As I recall it, there was a lot of dust in your apartment."

Nick Zehr was on his feet. "No! No! No!"

"So far as my chemists can tell, it is essentially the same as the dust that came from Freuhoff," Joswell said quietly.

"Do you think that Nancy—" But Nick got no farther. His mind blanked out on him and refused to function. He had been trying to avoid this thought, had been trying to avoid it ever since he had seen the dust in the room where Freuhoff had been questioned. He could avoid it no longer.

"Here's a number," Joswell said. "Call it if you think of something."

He scribbled something on a piece of paper. Nick Zehr took it, turned and walked dumbly from the room.

"Keep in touch with me," Joswell said.

WITH JOSWELL'S words lingering in his ears, he walked out of the gray stone Federal building. Nancy—dust. Nancy—gone. Nancy—dead. Why did he want to stay alive if Nancy was gone? There was nothing left, not even his work. He knew enough about the functioning of security to know that he would not be allowed near a radiation laboratory until Joswell had cleared him. Joswell wasn't going to clear him until the agent was sure of his ground. It was not that Joswell suspected him of being a spy—apparently he was convinced of his innocence—but he had been too close to a woman who operated an illegal transmitter for him to be entirely clear of suspicion. Joswell wouldn't take any chances.

Joswell was a badly scared man. He had seen the equivalent of a ghost and he walked in terror. Somewhere in this city there was an alien creature and Joswell knew it. But where? Or was the alien somewhere else, in some other space-time, manipulating his controls across the gulf of chaos? Who knew? Were the people passing along the street, driving automobiles, riding in street cars, were they walking robots controlled by some creature hiding in another space? Not all of them certainly, but perhaps *some* of them were such robots. Who knew which was which? Were they real people, controlled by an alien intelligence, or were they imitations of real people? Nick Zehr had always thought his wife was a real woman but now he was not certain. There had always been something mechanical about Freuhoff's actions. Seen in the light of his new knowledge, Nick realized that Freuhoff had always acted as if he was under the control of some other power. But where was this power hiding? And was he in danger from it?

Inside his mind he was aware of groping pressures. Then a voice whispered far away, "I am your friend. I will help you."

"What?" he said automatically. It was in his mind that someone near him had spoken.

"I am the alien," the whisper said.

A shudder passed over Nick Zehr. He jerked his head around to look behind him. He was on the steps of the Federal building. Story on story, the tall structure rose above him. Pigeons fluttered around the roof. A flag drooped languidly in the still mid-morning air. Cars passed on the street, their tires singing against the asphalt. A man was sniping for cigarette butts along the gutter.

The whole scene looked completely commonplace. There was no person and no thing in sight that could have spoken to him. He reached the immediately obvious decision. "I'm nuts," he thought.

"You are not insane," the prompt answer came. "I exist. I am speaking to you."

"Where are you?"

A WILD light had appeared in Nick Zehr's eyes. He began walking along the street. Somewhere ahead of him a police whistle shrilled and traffic moved in response. He bumped into a woman and got a curt, “Why don’t you look where you’re going?” and did not hear a word she said. He was listening to the voice speaking to him.

It was a calm, soothing voice. It said, “I am very near you but you cannot see or feel me. You can hear me speak in your mind. That is all.”

Nick Zehr stumbled. The police whistle shrilled again, sharp and indignant. Rubber screamed and a horn blared. He caught a glimpse of a bright chromium bumper swerving to avoid him, the face of the frightened and indignant driver glaring at him from behind the wheel. A hand grabbed his shoulder.

“God damn it, are you trying to commit suicide?” It was the traffic cop. “Watch where you’re going!”

Without noticing what he was doing, Nick had walked into the flow of traffic. “I’m sorry—”

“What the hell’s the matter with ya? Ya drunk?”

“No. I was thinking. I—wasn’t noticing.”

“Ya better notice! Get on now. And look where you’re going!”

Nick crossed the street. He had scarcely heard the policeman. In his mind a far-away voice was screaming. “You idiot! You almost got yourself killed just the minute I established contact!”

Nick walked on. He kept his eyes rigidly to the front. All over his body, the flesh crawled. He had the impression he was being followed, he was being watched. There was a drug store on the corner. Joswell had said to call him if anything happened. Something certainly had happened. He turned into the drug store to call the Federal agent.

“What are you going to do?” the voice snapped at him.

“Uh—I’m going to make a phone call. It’s something I have to do.”

“You’re going to call that Joswell!” As the agent’s name flowed into his mind, there came with it a blast of burning hate.

“No. That is—”

“You fool, I can read your thoughts! You were going to call Joswell and tell him about me.”

"I sure as hell am!" Nick thought. "Try it and see!"

Nick started toward the phone booths at the rear. In mid-stride, he halted. Something seemed to reach into his mind and seize his will. Desperately he tried to move toward the phone booths. His heart beat climbed, he panted from the effort he was exerting but he didn't move an inch closer to the phones. From her cage, a girl cashier stared wonderingly at him.

"Turn around and walk out of here," the voice said.

He found himself turning around and walking out of the drug store. The far-away voice chuckled—the alien gloating over him. "Call a cab," the voice ordered. "That man Joswell is dangerous. He has to be stopped, quickly. Stopping him is your job and you are going to do it."

CHAPTER V

TWENTY minutes after he hailed the cab and gave the address to the driver, the cab stopped in an old section of the city. All during the ride the alien had been silent. Now Nick hoped that somehow contact had been broken.

It was a frail hope. As soon as the car stopped moving, the voice spoke again. "Get out of the cab."

Nick paid the driver. Completely lost, he stared around him. To his left was a warehouse, apparently abandoned. Directly in front of him was a small stucco house with a *No*

Trespassing sign in front of it.

"Go down the alley beside the warehouse and enter by the side door," the voice said. Nick obeyed. "How—how can you speak my language?" he asked.

"I learned it from you," was the reply.

Nick reached the door of the warehouse, rattled the knob in his hands. The door was locked.

"Unlock it," the voice said.

"How?"

"You have the key on your key ring. It's the same as the key to your apartment. It was made that way, in case you or anybody else got curious. An extra key that seemed to fit nothing might have been hard to explain to Joswell, or to somebody like him, but a key to your own apartment needed no explanation."

Nick fitted the key in the lock. The bolt moved back.

"To the basement," he was ordered.

"This is as far as I am going," Nick said. He planted both feet firmly, intending to move no farther. To his surprise he found himself walking down the basement stairs while a shrill voice like the screaming of an angry bird scolded him. "You utter fool! I can force you to obey me. I can block off your conscious mind so that you will never remember you have obeyed me. You are a robot, a slave. I am your master."

Slave! Robot! The words echoed in his mind. He walked into the basement of the warehouse, unlocked a door that seemed to lead into the furnace room. He was not surprised to discover that the key to the cyclotron lab fitted the furnace room door. Nor was he surprised to discover a well-concealed opening that looked to be a part of the wall of the coal bin across the big room.

He was now in the basement of a small stucco house next door to the warehouse, in what looked to be a completely equipped laboratory.

"Whose lab is this?" he asked.

"Freuhoff's," the answer came. "And yours."

"Mine?" he gasped. "But I've never been here before. I know nothing of this."

"Consciously you know nothing," the voice said. "But you rented this house and the warehouse, under my control, fitted the locks on the doors and set up the equipment here."

"When was this?" he gasped.

"You did it last summer when Nancy went home to visit her mother," the voice said. "Remember, you had a vacation then but you said you couldn't go with her because you were busy at the lab. This is the lab you were working on. Freuhoff joined you later, after you had completed setting up the equipment here. After Freuhoff joined you, he did all the work and you did not come near the place again, until now." Far away a laugh sounded, not a laugh really, but a feeling of mirth flowing into his brain.

His eyes went around the laboratory seeking the laughter.

"There is no point in trying to find me," the voice whispered in his ear. "If you live a thousand years, you will never find me."

"Where are you?" he whispered hoarsely.

"You will never know."

"Are you in this room?"

"Yes."

"Were you in the cab with me?"

"Certainly."

"Were you with me yesterday?"

"I have been with you for over four of your years. I have watched from your eyes, heard from your ears, puzzled out the language that you use, studied your emotions and feelings until I know you better than you know yourself."

"Are you matter as we know matter?"

"Perhaps." A cautious note was creeping into the voice.

"Then why can't I see yon? Why can't I feel you?"

"For two reasons—because I am hidden, and because I don't want yon to see me. In fact, your seeing me would be disastrous for both of us."

Nick Zehr took a deep breath. "Where are you hidden?" he demanded.

"You asked that once before," the answer came. The voice changed. "This is enough talk. There is work to be done."

"What kind of work?"

"We have to stop Joswell. He knows more than he has hinted to you."

"Maybe you have to stop him, but I don't," Nick Zehr thought. The idea flashed across his mind and was instantly gone as he tried to control his thinking. He was too slow. The alien had caught the thought impression.

"You will obey orders," the cold voice said. "Or else! Turn the current into that generator."

THE GENERATOR was a complicated apparatus that looked something like a high frequency, high power radio transmitter. "I don't understand this thing," Nick Zehr muttered.

"You ought to understand it: you built it." The alien laughed. "Of course, you have no memories of building it."

If he had done this, what else had he done? He didn't know and couldn't think. "What does it do?"

"It projects control spheres into the brain of any person I wish to control," the alien explained.

"Control spheres?" Nick Zehr muttered. Something floated up from his subconscious mind, a description of the control spheres, a mental picture of them. He shivered. "The little brass balls," the alien said. "I see some of your memories are becoming conscious. You found two of them. One came from Freuhoff, after he was disintegrated; the other came from your wife."

A hard core of pain throbbed in Nick Zehr's heart. "Don't be concerned about her," the voice said. "You can get another woman, a hundred if you wish. All you have to do is project a control sphere into their minds and they will come to you, under my direction."

"What?" Nick whispered. The potentialities of this thing were horrifying.

"I needed to use your wife for experimental purposes," the voice went on. "She was the only person whom I could seize that I could also observe, regularly, through your eyes. She was the first person I seized by the control spheres. After her came Freuhoff. Also, I wanted to use her to test the effectiveness of the radio transmitter. The transmissions that the agent detected were actually messages to me, from her. It was an experiment, and a mistake. If those transmissions had not been detected, Joswell would never have known I existed."

“These brass balls are actually placed inside a person’s brain? How can you do that?”

“They are synthesized there. A mild anaesthetic is also synthesized at the same time so that no pain is felt. Through the spheres I establish direct contact with the brain of the person I wish to seize. He has no idea that I am controlling him, reading his mind, ordering his actions. In the case of Freuhoff, I went a little wrong somewhere.” Worry crept into the voice. “You noticed the beam of the cyclotron flick toward him as he walked past it. Actually the beam was attracted in some unknown way to the control sphere. When he turned his head, the sphere was out of focus and the beam snapped back into place. I don’t understand how this happened but in some ways Freuhoff was a failure. He actually succeeded in thinking in a way that I could not detect, though his thinking led him to the wrong conclusion. He thought you were his enemy and he came to your apartment, determined to kill you. This was the wrong conclusion he had reached, that you had caused something to happen to him.”

For a moment, Nick Zehr felt a wild sympathy for Ed Freuhoff. How the man must have struggled, first to grasp the idea that something had happened to him, then to find out what had happened, then to do something about it! Actually he was trying to detect the existence of a control sphere inside his brain. “Was that why he slugged me?” he whispered.

“He meant to do more than slug you,” the answer came. “Somehow the control sphere that had come from your wife gave him the final clue he needed.”

“And you killed him?”

“I disintegrated him, through the control sphere. He was telling the agents too much and he was about to betray his suspicions of you.”

“You sound as if you really want to protect me,” Nick said.

“I do,” the voice answered.

“And these control spheres, I assume that I—” His voice and his thoughts faltered. “That I—I have one in my brain, too?”

“What do *you* think?” the answer came.

NICK KNEW what he thought.

What else *could* he think? He had been seized, he was a robot, a slave. He did not know how it had happened, only that it *had* happened. Like a sick dog creeping away to die, desperation moved through his mind. Meanwhile his fingers worked at the generator, largely without conscious direction from him. In effect, he seemed to stand off and watch his fingers work, to see himself as another, different person doing violence against his will. He closed switches. The tubes in the generator warmed to life. In the center of a special tube that seemed to be the heart of the apparatus—caught and held in a vortex of radiation that seemed to pour in on it from a separate source—a tiny brass ball began to take shape—a control sphere in the process of synthesization. The voice was silent. The alien seemed to withdraw from him and to concentrate its attention on the functioning of the generator.

What was this alien that rode him like the Old Man of the sea? Where had it come from? Where was it hidden? He did not know. He had imagined that some humans were robots probing his space-time continuum for information to be radiated back to masters located in other universes. He was familiar with the theory of plural universes, of the fourth, and higher, dimension. Perhaps the alien that controlled him came from some such universe.

How could he seek out and find an alien who might be hidden in some lost infinity? How could he destroy such a creature? He did not know how, all he knew was that there was in him the fierce desire for destruction. This alien had killed Nancy. Between Nick Zehr and the alien there would never be anything except deadly enmity. He kept such thoughts out of his conscious mind but under the surface they boiled with hurricane violence. Hidden below the threshold of perception, the hate in him was as violent as a miniature atom bomb. Freuhoff must have felt something like this, when he detected that something—he probably never knew exactly what—had seized control of him.

As to what would happen to him, eventually, Nick Zehr had no doubts. He would die. Deep in his mind was the knowledge that he wanted to die.

Inside the tube, the brass ball began to grow to proper size. Nick was aware of irritation. The alien was irked, maybe worried. Something had gone wrong somewhere. The ball stopped growing. Held in the vortex out of which it grew, it remained a waiting bronze ball.

“What is it?” Nick whispered.

The alien spoke. “Joswell is not in his office.”

How the alien knew this, Nick did not know. Nor was it explained to him. Perhaps a form of telepathy or clairvoyance was involved. “It is best done when the subject is asleep,” the alien spoke. “But asleep or awake, I have to know where the subject is.”

“And you don’t know where Joswell is?”

“No.”

“Too bad,” Nick said. Inwardly he was thoroughly glad but he kept his gladness, like his hate, below the surface of his mind. Freuhoff must have operated in this manner, keeping his real thoughts and his real feelings well hidden.

“We will have to wait until I can find him,” the alien said.

From behind Nick Zehr came a soft creak, the sound of an opening door. He spun around.

JOSWELL stood in the door. He had a .45 automatic in his hand. Behind Joswell came two other men, both with drawn guns.

“Get your hands up,” Joswell said quietly. He came into the room.

“You—you found me?” Nick Zehr whispered.

“We found this, too,” Joswell answered. His glance took in the basement laboratory. “We knew this had to exist somewhere and we suspected you knew where. We thought, if we turned you loose, you would lead us to it.”

“Me?” Nick said. He saw that Joswell did not understand. Finding him here in this place, Joswell had assumed he had come here of his own free will. Joswell thought him guilty. He was caught here in this lab. No amount of persuasion would ever offset the fact of his being here.

Nick Zehr knew the consequences of being caught here. Years in prison would be the best he could hope for. It was a fate he could not face. Not now. Somewhere in his soul he found the courage to smile. He knew what he was going to do.

“To hell with you!” he said to Joswell. “You haven’t got me yet!” From the workbench he snatched a pair of pliers. With all his strength, he flung them at the agent.

Joswell dodged.

In Nick Zehr’s mind the voice of the alien screamed. “Stop it, you fool. You idiot, you will get both of us killed!” He felt the controls in his mind reach for his will.

“You’ll never get me alive,” he shouted, and flung himself straight at Joswell.

In the lab, a gun thundered. Nick felt the bullet hit him. It was not Joswell who had fired. Joswell wanted him alive, for questioning. It was Wilkinson who pulled the trigger of the gun. The heavy bullet struck him, spun him backwards, knocked him down. Blood spurted from his chest.

In his mind a frantic voice screamed: “You fool! I could have saved you!”

Nick Zehr answered, “To hell with you!” Here in these last few seconds he had discovered the hiding place of the alien. Its identity he did not know but he knew its hiding place and had horrible suspicions of its real nature. “To hell with you! I got you anyhow!”

Joswell was bending over him. “What?” he asked.

“Not me—” Nick Zehr gasped. “Not me who did this, but something else.” The feeble gesture of his hand indicated the equipment in the laboratory. “I found him, Joswell.” Something of triumph sounded in his voice. “I found him—the alien—and did all I could.”

In the back of his mind the raging voice of the alien was shouting at him. It was growing weaker. Nick knew what that meant. He had licked his enemy. If he had to lose his own life doing it, at least the sacrifice was worth while. In his mind a feeling of triumph came, grew stronger.

"I—I finished the job," he whispered to Joswell. Inside of him the feeling of triumph built up to a paen of victory. As he died, a smile formed on his lips.

CHAPTER VI

IN HIS OFFICE, the amazed agent fumbled sheets of paper. The whole record of Nick Zehr was here before him, complete in every detail. His birth, the names of his parents, his high school and college records, a photostat of his army service record, the circumstances under which he had met and married his wife—everything. It was as complete and as careful a dossier as could be compiled on any man. There was no hint of disloyalty in it.

Reading the record, Joswell reluctantly let go of the idea that Nick Zehr had been a spy. Whatever he was, whatever he had been, he had hot been that. Nor had his wife.

Then what was he?

Again and again the agent read over a single sheet of paper. It was the report of the medical examiner giving the results of the autopsy. The examiner had thoughtfully stripped it of its technical language. One line held Joswell's complete attention.

"Subject was revealed to have been suffering from cancer of the brain. Exploration revealed a mass of extraneous brain tissue big enough to have filled a tea cup."

Nick Zehr had worked in a radiation laboratory and cancer was sometimes known to result from exposure to excessive amounts of radiation. There was nothing in the case history to indicate that Nick Zehr had known he had cancer, which proved nothing. Many people do not know they have cancer.

In effect, this cancer, this extraneous growth, could have been the equivalent of an extra brain. It had formed within the other brain, which meant that normal brain cells had begun to multiply excessively. Therefore the growth was abnormal brain tissue, possibly capable of thought, of rationalization, of other activities.

"I wonder—" Joswell thought. In this moment he was very close to making the discovery that Nick Zehr had made just before he died—the hiding place of the alien. The agent knew nothing of the voice that had spoken to Nick Zehr but be suspected that something inhuman had been involved in this case. Remembering what had happened to Freuhoff, he felt chill waves pass over his body, as if some alien monster from another universe had paused for a moment, opened his brain and peeped in before passing on into the mysterious void that gave it birth.

Rising from his chair, he strode to the window and stood looking out over the roof tops of the city. "He said he had got the job done," he thought. "Did he deliberately throw himself at me, hoping I would kill him? Was that the way—the only way—he could destroy the thing that seemed to control him?"

Joswell did not know the answer. If it were true, then Nick Zehr had been a brave man, one of the bravest. Dying, he had taken his enemy down to death with him. Somehow or other, Joswell thought that this was the true solution. If it was true, then his job was complete. Thinking this, he, and a lot of other people could sleep sounder of nights. Abruptly, he turned back to his desk to begin the task of writing his report.

THE END

Girl From Mars

"*THE WILD Man from Borneo—he eats 'em dive . . . he eats 'em alive —*"

Ace Clawson leaned against the side of the platform and listened to Lou, the spieler. Somebody had to listen to him, and there was no crowd in this lousy drizzle.

The rain was letting up now as it got dark, but the afternoon storm had made mudpies in the Midway. Ace stared up the deserted carny street as the lights came on over the soggy tents and the drooping banners of the world of wonder shows. He shivered. This was a stinking climate—no wonder these Georgia crackers got malaria.

Maybe it would stop raining soon. Maybe the marks would come down after supper. They'd better. Only two days left to play here and Ace wasn't off the nut yet. Well, that's the way some seasons went, just one bad break after another.

Ace scratched his chin. Better shave. Ah, phooey on that. And phooey for Lou, too—blatting his brains out for nothing up there. He looked at the gawky spieler on the platform and grinned. Punk kid, his first season out, and he needed practice. Ace cocked his head and called.

"Hey, Lou!"

"Yeah?"

"Shut up!"

Lou shut up and climbed down. He tossed his head and Ace ducked the spray of raindrops. "You damn' fool, barking at nobody! Stuff it. Go inside and take the gang over to Sweeney for chow. We won’t see a sucker around here for an hour yet.”

“Sure, Ace.”

Lou went inside and rounded up the Strange People. They came out single file; Fat Phyllis waddling along with little Captain Atom, Hassan the fire-eater puffing on one of his rancid shoe pegs, Joe the Alligator Boy wearing a raincoat, Eddie in his wild man outfit.

Ace stood behind the ticket stand. He didn’t feel like talking to them. Somebody was bound to make a crack about Mitzie and Rajah. Nuts to that noise!

He watched them plod through the red clay of the Midway, then squinted up at the banners behind the platform. All the Strange People squinted back with their painted eyes—Phyllis, Captain Atom, the World’s Smallest Man, the Mighty Hassan, the Alligator Boy, the Wild Man from Borneo, Rajah the Magician and the Girl from Mars.

Rajah the Magician, dressed in evening clothes and wearing a turban on his head, was sawing a woman in half. The Girl from Mars spread her batwings over the sky. Ace scowled at them and cursed.

They had to take a powder on him, did they? Had to run out—and together! That’s what hurt. They ran off together. Rajah and Mitzie. It was probably her idea, the tramp. Just giving him the old double-X behind his back. Laughing at him. Bad weather, a poor take, and on top of it she had to run out on him too!

Ace bit into his lower lip. That was all the supper he needed. That and a drink.

HE SAT down on the edge of the platform and pulled out his pint. Almost full. He pulled out the cork and threw it away. It wouldn’t be needed again for this bottle.

Tilting his head back, he swallowed. One swig for the rain. One swig for the lousy Georgia crackers. One swig for Rajah and Mitzie. Yes, and one swig for what he'd do to that broad if he ever caught up with her.

Out of the comer of his eye he noticed that the rain had stopped. And then, he saw the girl.

She came wandering up the Midway, walking very slow. She was wearing some kind of grey playsuit, but he could tell it was a girl all right, even from far away, because the lights showed off her blonde hair.

Blonde hell, she was platinum; as she got closer he saw the bush on her head was almost white. Her eyebrows, too. Like one of those—what did they call 'em—albinos. Only her eyes weren't pink. They were kind of platinum too. Starey eyes. She gawked at everything as she went past the pitches.

Ace watched her coming; he had nothing else to do. Besides, she was worth watching. Even with that outfit on, he could see that she was really stacked. But built! Long legs, and plenty of meat on the torso. A disheroo.

He slicked back his hair. When she passed the tent he'd step out and walk over, sort of smiling. Then—

Ace hesitated. Because the girl wasn't passing the tent. She came up to the end of the platform and stopped. She looked up and began to read the banners, moving her lips. She stood kind of funny, swaying a little as if she had a load. Maybe she did, at that. Anyhow, she rocked on her heels and stared up. She kept looking at one banner and mumbling to herself.

Ace turned his head. She was staring at the Girl from Mars. Yes, and that's what she was mumbling out loud, too; he could hear it.

"The Girl from Mars," she kept saying. She had a kind of a foreign accent. Blondie. Maybe a Swede or something.

"Something I can do for you?"

Ace swung over and came up behind her. She jumped about a foot.

"Teker—"

Swede all right. But built. She didn't wear any makeup. She didn't need to. Ace smiled at her.

"I'm Ace Clawson. Own this show. What can I do for you, sister?"

She sized him up and then looked back at the banner.

"The Girl from Mars," she said. "Is that truth?"

"Truth?"

"There is such a one? Inside there?"

"Uh—no. Not now. She scrammed."

"Kep?" The girl swallowed quickly. "I mean—what do you say?"

"She ran away. What's the matter, you don't talk English so good, huh?"

"English? Oh. Speech. Yes, I talk it." She spoke slowly, frowning. At least her eyebrows frowned, but her forehead didn't wrinkle. Her skin was grey, like the playsuit. No buttons on the suit and she wasn't carrying a purse. Foreigner.

"She did not po—possess wings?"

Ace grinned. "No. Fakeroo." She was beginning her frown act again and he remembered she was probably drunk. "It was a gag, see? There is no Girl from Mars."

"But I am from *Rekk."*

"What?"

"I am from *Re*—from Mars."

She was lushed to the gills. Ace stepped back. "Oh, yeah. Sure. You're from Mars, huh?"

"I came today."

"Well, well. Just like that, huh? Pleasure or business?"

"Kep?"

"Skip it. I mean, what's on your mind? What can I do for you?"

"Hungry."

Not only a lush, but a mooch, yet. But she *was* built. And when Ace put his hand on her shoulder, she didn't move away. Her shoulder was warm. The heat just poured off her. Hot stuff. And she was hungry—

ACE GLANCED at the tent flap behind him. He was beginning to get an idea. It came to him when he put his hand on her shoulder. To hell with Mitzie. This was just what the doctor ordered. And the Midway was deserted. The gang wouldn't be back from Sweeney's for forty-five minutes yet.

"Hungry," the girl repeated.

"Sure. We'll get you something to eat. But let's talk first. Come on inside." Ace got another grip on her shoulder. Warm. Soft. Good stuff.

The lights inside were dim. Lou had switched off when he left. The flaps were down over the platforms against the tent walls, as they were during the grind when only one freak performed at a time. Ace led her over to the Girl from Mars platform. There was a cot inside and he could lower the flap. Take it easy first though.

She walked on her heels until he held her still and pushed her down on the steps on the side of the platform. Touching her made him want to hurry it up, even though he knew he had to be careful. The heat came off her in waves, and he was warm from the whisky.

"So you're from Mars," he said, huskily, bending over her but remembering to keep a grin on his face. "How did you get here?"

"Ertells. The—machine. With the others. *Hydron,* very swift. Until we land. Then this, we did not expect. In the atmosphere. Electric."

"The storm? Lightning?"

She nodded, expressionless. "You understand. The *kor*—the machine split. Broken. All *flerk.* All but I. I fell. And then I did not know. Because I had no orders. *Pre* was ended. You understand?"

Ace nodded. She was hot. God, she was hot. And built. He stepped back, still nodding. Let her finish. Maybe she'd sober up a little.

"So I walked. Nothing. Nobody. Dark. Then I saw light. This place. And the words. And you. I read the words."

"And here you are." Humor them. You got to humor them, dames and drunks. "How come you read English, and talk?"

"Pre did it. Education. Because he—planned we must come. Much I cannot know. I will understand. Now hungry."

There was no expression on her face. Lushes always twist their faces a lot. She didn't stagger, just walked on her heels was all. And there was no liquor smell from her. So—she wasn't drunk!

Ace stared.

He stared at the expressionless face, at the platinum hair and eyebrows. He stared at the sandals she wore, at the grey suit without any pockets, without any buttons. No buttons. That was it. *She didn't have all her buttons.*

Yeah. Sure. She was a whack. She came here this afternoon, all right. Busted out of the county nuthouse in the storm. No wonder she didn't carry a purse or anything. Just a lousy whack on the lam from the san.

Wouldn't that have to be the kind of break he got? A screwball with an empty gut and an empty noggin. That's all he needed. But she was *built.* And that's all he needed—

Why not?

ACE FIGURED fast. Half an hour, maybe. Long enough. He'd hustle her out of here right away. Nobody would know. It was a dirty trick, maybe. What the hell, he'd been getting the dirty end long enough himself; rain, no take, that damned Mitzie running out on him, no woman. He needed a change of luck. And besides, it wouldn't hurt her, maybe do her good. Nobody would find out anything and even if they did, she was a whack. Didn't know what she was saying, even. Why not?

"Hungry."

"Wait a minute, sister. I got a great idea. Come on back here for a second."

He motioned her to her feet, led the way up the steps, and lifted the flap. It was dark on the platform behind the canvas curtain. He groped for the couch, found it.

"Sit down here." He made his voice soft. She stood right next to him, not backing away, and when he pulled her down, pulled down all that heat and softness, she came without a sound.

He made himself wait, kept talking first.

“Yeah, I got a great idea. Why not? You’re from Mars, ain’tcha?”

“Yes. From *Rekk.”*

“Sure. And my Girl from Mars skipped. So the way I figure it, why don’t you come along with the show? You can have the same setup, sixty a week and chow, travel around and see the country. Nobody to tell you what to do or when to do it, see? Your own boss. Free. Get it—free?”

He wanted it to sound good. Sort of subtle, about being free. Even if she was a whack, she had enough sense to bust out and probably knew she’d have to keep moving. Not that he’d let her tie up with the show, that was all con, but he wanted her to go for the deal. Then he could start.

“But that is not what you speak. Hungry—”

Ah, to hell with it! You don’t waste your breath on a screwball. And here in the dark she wasn’t a screwball. She was a disheroo, a tall blonde, hot, better than Mitzie, damn Mitzie anyhow, she was here and he could feel her, feel the warmth just busting out of her—

Ace put his hands on her shoulders.

“Hungry, huh? Well, don’t you worry about that, sister. I’ll take care of you. All you gotta do is co-operate.”

Damn it! He heard the mumbling now, the gang was coming back, filing into the tent, climbing up on platforms and scraping chairs. He wouldn’t have time.

But what the hell, he was behind the curtain, it was dark, he’d keep quiet and make her keep quiet and they could sneak out later. Besides, his hands were on her shoulders. Ace felt her lean against him, felt those curves, solid. Instead of drawing back, she kept coming in, she wasn’t whacky, she knew what she was doing, this was all right.

SOMEBODY in the outer tent flicked up the lights, and a thin glow filtereed through the canvas curtain. He grinned at her upturned face. Her eyes were wide, shining. He ran his hands down her back. She was strong, eager.

"Don't you worry about being hungry, baby," he whispered. "I'll take care of you."

The heat poured out of her as she pressed his shoulders. He bent his head to kiss her. She opened her mouth, wide, and in the dim light he saw her teeth. They were platinum-colored, too.

Then he wanted to draw back, but something about the heat pouring off her made him feel dizzy. Besides, she held on to him so tight, and she kept whispering "hungry" over and over again, and now she was drawing him down on the cot and he saw the teeth coming at him. They were long and pointed. He couldn't move, she held him, the heat came out of her eyes to blind him, and the long, sharp teeth were coming closer and closer—

Ace hardly felt any pain. Everything turned to heat and whirled away. Somewhere in the distance a voice began to chant. It was Lou, standing outside, standing under the Girl from Mars banner and beginning his chant. That was the last thing Ace heard or knew. The chant, the spiel.

"The Wild Man From Borneo—he eats 'em alive—he eats 'em alive—"

Tell Your Fortune

THE scales aren't here any more.

Look, Buster, I don't want any trouble. I run a nice quiet little place here, no rough stuff. I'm telling you—the scales aren't here. You must be the twentieth guy this week who come in looking for those scales. But they're gone. Damned good thing, too, if you ask me.

No, I'm not the bouncer. I'm the manager. So help me, I am. If you're looking for Big Pete Mosko, he's gone. Tarelli's gone too, and the girl.

Didn't you read about it in the papers? I thought everybody knew it by now, but like I said, guys keep coming in. The heat was on here for a month before I bought the place and made the fix. Now I run it strictly on the percentages; I level with the customers. Not like Mosko, with his crooked wheels and the phoney cubes. Look the house over. No wires, no gimmicks. You want to make a fast buck at the table, you get your chance. But the sucker stuff is out. And I wouldn't be caught dead with those scales in here, after what has happened.

No, I don't think you're nosey. I'll take that drink, sure. Might as well tell you about it. Like I say, it was in the papers—but only part of it. Screwiest thing you ever heard of. Matter of fact, a guy needs a drink or two if he wants to finish the story.

If you come in here in the old days, then you probably remember Big Pete Mosko all right. Six feet four, three hundred pounds, built like a brick backhouse, with that Polack haircut and the bashed-in nose. Don't like to give anyone the finger, but it looks like Pete Mosko had to be that big to hold all the meanness in him. Kind of a guy they'd have to bury with a corkscrew, too. But a very smart apple.

He come here about three years ago when this pitch was nothing but a combination tavern and bowling alley. A Mom and Pop setup, strictly for Saturday nights and a beer license. He made his deal with tire county boys and tore out the bowling alley. Put in this layout downstairs here and hired a couple of sticks to rua tables. Crap games only, at first. A fast operation.

But Mosko was a smart apple, like I say. The suckers come downstairs here and dropped their bundles one-two-three. Mosko, he stayed upstairs in the bar and made like your genial host. Used to sit there in a big chair with a ten-dollar smile plastered all over his ugly mush. Offering everybody drinks on the house when they come up from die cleaners. Let everybody kid him about how fat he was and how ugly he was and how dumb he was. Mosko dumb? Let me tell you, he knew what he was doing.

Way he worked it, he didn't even need to keep a bouncer on the job. Never any strong-arm stuff, even though business got good and some of the Country Club gang used to come out here and drop maybe a G or so at a time on Saturdays. Mosko saw to that. He was the buffer. A guy got a rimming on Mosko's tables, but he never got sore at Mosko. Mosko stayed upstairs and kidded him along.

Show you how smart he was, Mosko played up his fatness. Played it up so he could be ribbed. Did it on purpose—wearing those big baggy suits to make him look even, heavier—and putting that free lunch in front of himself when he sat in his chair at the end of the bar. Mosko wasn't really what you call a big eater, but he kept nibbling away at the food all evening, whenever somebody was around to look. Suffered something awful from indigestion, and he used to complain in private, but he put on a good show for the marks.

That's why he got a scale put in the tavern, to begin with. All a part of Mosko's smart act. He used to weigh himself in front of the suckers. Made little bets—fin or a sawbuck—on what he weighed. Lost them on purpose, too, just to make the marks feel good.

But that was an ordinary scale, understand. And Mosko was running an ordinary place, too—until Tarelli came.

Seems like Mosko wasn't content just to rim suckers on the dice tables. If his appetite for food wasn't so good, he made up for it in his appetite for a fast buck. Anyhow, when he had the bowling alleys ripped out downstairs, the carpenters built him a couple of little rooms, way in back. Rooms to live in.

Of course Mosko himself lived upstairs, over the tavern. These rooms weren't for him. They were for any of Mosko's private pals.

He had a lot of private pals. Old buddies from Division Street in Chi. Fraternity brothers from Joliet. Any lamster was a pal of Mosko's when the heat was on—if he had the moola to pay for hiding out in one of those private rooms downstairs. Mosko picked up a nice hunk of pocket money hiding hot items—and I guess he had visitors from all over the country staying a week or a month in his place. Never asked about it; you didn't ask Mosko about such things if you wanted to keep being a good insurance risk.

Anyhow, it was on account of those rooms that Tarelli come here. He was out of Havana—illegal entry, of course—but he wasn't a Cuban. Eytie, maybe, from the looks of him. Little dark customer with gray hair and big brown eyes, always grinning and mumbling to himself. Funny to see a squirt like him standing next to a big tub of lard like Mosko.

I saw him the day he arrived. I was working for Big Pete Mosko then, bouncing and keeping the customers quiet. Mosko never talked about his little private deals handling hot characters in the back room, and I clammed up whenever I was with him—it was strictly business between us. But even though I kept my mouth shut, I kept my eyes open, and I saw plenty.

Like I say, I saw Tarelli arrive. He got off the five-spot bus right in front of the tavern, just at twilight. I was out front switching on the neon when he ambled up, tapped me on the shoulder, and said, "Pardon. Can you inform me if this is the establishment of Signor Mosko?"

I give him a checkup, a fastie. Funny little guy, about the size of a watch-charm, wearing a set of checkered threads. He carried a big black suitcase, holding it stiffarmed in a way that made it easy to tell he had a full load. He wasn't wearing a hat, and his gray hair was plastered down on his head with some kind of perfume or tonic on it which smelled like DDT and was probably just as deadly.

"Inside, Buster," I told him.

"Pardon?"

"Mosko's inside. Wait, I'll take you." I steered him towards the door.

"Thank you." He gave me the big grin—full 32-tooth salute—and lugged the keister inside after me, mumbling to himself.

WHAT he could possibly want with Mosko I didn't know, but I wasn't being paid to figure it out. I just led him up to Big Pete behind the bar and pointed. Then I went outside again.

Of course, I couldn't help hearing some stuff through the screen door. Mosko had a voice that could kill horse-flies at five hundred feet. He talked and Tarelli mumbled. Something like this:

"Finally made it, huh? Rico fly you in?"

"Mumble-mumble-mumble."

"All set. Where's the cash?"

"Mumble-mumble."

"Okay. Stay as long as you want. Rico tells me you can do a few jobs for me, too."

"Mumble-mumble-mumble."

"Brought your own equipment, eh? That's fine. We'll see how good you are, then. Come on, I'll show you where you'll bunk, But remember, Tarelli—you stay out of sight wheel customers are here. Don't want you to show your profile to any strangers. Just stick downstairs and do what you're told and we'll get along fine."

That told me all I needed to know, except what Tarelli was going to do for Big Pete Mosko while he hid out from the law in the basement back rooms. But I found out the rest soon enough.

Couple of days later, I'm downstairs stashing liquor in the storage room and I come back through the crap table layout. First thing I see is a couple of roulette wheels, some big new tables, and little Tarelli.

Tarelli is sitting on an orange crate, right in the middle of the wheels and furniture, and he's having himself a ball. Got a mess of tools laying around, and a heap more in his big black suitcase. He's wiring the undersides of the tables and using instruments on the wheels, squatting on this crate and grinning like a gnome in Santy Claus's workshop. I hear him mumbling to himself, and I figure it's only sociable I should stop by and maybe case the job a little.

He pays me no attention at all, just keeps right on with his waring, soldering connections and putting some small batteries under the wheels. Even though he grins and mumbles, I can tell when I watch his hands that Tarelli knows what he is doing. The little foreign character is a first-class mechanic.

I watch him slip some weights under the rims of the three roulette wheels and it's easy to see that he's bored holes through them for an electric magnet below the Zero and Double-Zero, and then—wham!

Something smacks me in the back of the neck and I hear Big Pete Mosko yelling, "Whaddya think you're doing here? Get out before I break your lousy neck!"

I took the hint and ducked, but I learned something, again. Big Pete Mosko was putting in three crooked roulette wheels, and business was picking up.

Sure enough, less than a week later the tables were installed and ready for action.

I kept out of the basement as much as possible, because I could see Mosko didn't want anybody around or asking questions.

I made it my business to steer shy of Tarelli, too. There was no sense asking for trouble.

MUST have been all of ten days before I saw him again. This was just after the wheels were operating. Mosko brought in two more sharpies to run them, and he was taking them into town one afternoon, leaving me and the day bartender on duty. I went downstairs to clean up, and I swear I wasn't getting my nose dirty. It was Tarelli who started it.

He heard me walking around, and he come out from his room. "Pardon," he said. "Pardon, signor."

"Sure," I said. "What's the pitch?"

"Ees no pitch. Ees only that I weesh to explain that I am sorry I make trouble between you and Signor Mosko."

"You mean when he caught me watching you? That's all right, Tarelli. He loses his temper—I'm used to it. Guess I shouldn't have butted into his business."

"Ees dirty business. Dirty."

I stared at him. He was grinning and nodding, but he wasn't kidding.

"Feelthy!" He grinned harder. "I hate of myself that I do thees for Signor Mosko. For cheating people. Ees feelthy! That I, Antonio Tarelli, would come to such an end—"

"Take it easy, Buster. We all gotta live."

"You call thees living?" He shrugged at me, at the tables, at the cellar, at the whole damned world. "I come to thees country to make new life. Rico, he tells me I can do good here. Signor Mosko, I pay him the monies, he weel arrange. Ees no good. I am—how you say?—without help. I must do as Signor Mosko tells. He discovers I am craftsman, he makes me do thees dirty work."

"Why don't you blow out of here, then? I mean, it's none of my business, but why don't you just scram right this afternoon? Even if Mosko plays it below the belt and hollers copper, you can get away into town and take a room. Nobody would find you. Lotsa guys in this country on illegal entry; they make out. Like I say, Tarelli, I'm not trying to advise you. But if you don't like crooked dealing, better leave and leave fast. How about it?"

TARELLI cocked his head up at me and grinned again. Then he squeezed my arm.

"You know sometheeng? I like you. You are honest man."

That was a laugh. But who was I to argue with a dumb foreigner? I just grinned back.

"Look," he mumbled. "Come, I show you why I not leave here right away now."

He took me down to his little room—an ordinary little room, with a rickety old bed, a straight chair, a second-hand dresser, and a dirty rug on the floor. "Come een," he said, and I stepped inside.

I wish somebody had cut my legs off, instead.

Tarelli went to the closet and dragged out his big black suitcase. He opened it up and pulled something out—a little picture, in a frame.

"Look," he said, and I looked.

I wish somebody had torn my eyes out, instead.

"Rosa," he mumbled. "Ees my daughter. Eighteen years. You like?"

I liked, and I said so.

I wish somebody had cut my tongue off, instead.

But I walked into his little room and looked at the girl with the black hair and the black eyes, and I told him she was beautiful and I sat there staring at her and he grinned and he spilled it all out to me. Everything.

I can remember almost every word, just as I can remember almost everything that happened from that afternoon on until the end.

Yeah, I learned a lot. Too much.

Let me boil it down, though. About Tarelli—he wasn't a lamster, in the old country. He was a Professor. Sounds screwy, but the way he pitched it, I knew he was levelling with me. He was a Professor in some big college over there, university, I don't know what they call it. Had to blow during the war, got as far as Cuba, got mixed up in some mess down there, and then met Big Pete Mesko's pal, Rico. Rico got him into this country, which is what he wanted, and now he was looking for a way to latch onto a bundle.

"I am what you call financial embarrass," he said. "Rico, for breenging me here take all I have save up."

This I could understand. Any pal of Big Pete Mosko would be apt to be like that. A grabber.

"So now I work. Mosko employs the physicist, the most eminent of metaphysicians, to—rig, they say it?—games of chance. Ha! But I weel do anytheeng to earn money, to have Rosa here."

The deal was all set, I gathered. All Tarelli needed to do was scrape together a G-note and Rico would fetch Rosa on the plane. Easy as goniffing candy from a brat.

"So you're saving your pennies, huh?" I said, taking another look at Rosa's picture. "What's Mosko paying you for this machine job?"

"Twenty dollar."

Twenty dollars for a piece of work Mosko would have to pay easy two-three grind for if he got it done by any professional. Twenty dollars for three crooked wheels that would pay off maybe a grand or more a week clear profit. Big-hearted guy, Mister Mosko. And at that rate, Tarelli would have his Rosa over here just in time to collect on her old-age pension.

I took another look at Rosa's picture and decided it wasn't fair to make poor old Tarelli wait that long. Matter of fact, I didn't want to wait that long, either.

It wouldn't do much good to tell Tarelli that Mosko was playing him for a sucker. The thing to. do was figure an angle, and fast.

I put Rosa's picture away. "We'll work something out," I said. "We got to."

"Thank you," said Tarelli.

Which was a funny thing for him to say, because I was talking to the picture.

II

I DIDN'T have much time to talk to pictures the next couple weeks. Because Mosko had his roulette wheels operating, and the take was good. I kept busy quieting the squawkers, hustling out the phonies, and handling the guys who were sauced up. The two hotshots he hired to handle the wheels kept rolling.

Mosko was busy, too—just sitting in his office and counting the take. Must have been about two-three weeks after the wheels went in that I happened to pass his little private back office when Tarelli went in and gave him a pitch.

I couldn't help but hear what they were saying, because both of them were yelling pretty loud.

"But you promise," Tarelli was saying. "Rosa, she ees all alone. Ees not good for young girl to be alone. She must come here."

"That's your worry. Blow now, I got things to do."

"Theengs to do like counteeng monies? Monies you make from the crooked wheels I feex?"

"Never mind. Get outta here before I lose my temper."

"Ees worth plenty, thees job I do for you. Get Rosa for me. I pay you back. I work long, hard. Anytheeng you say."

"Blow."

"You must do sometheeng. You must!" Tarelli was almost bawling, now. "How you like, I tell somebody about crooked wheels?"

"Listen. One peep outta you and I tell somebody," said Big Pete Mosko. "I tell somebody about a guy who sneaked into this country without a passport. Get me?"

"You would not do thees!"

"Wait and see."

Everything was quiet for a minute. Way I figured it, things would stay quiet. Mosko had Tarelli, but good. If the little guy didn't watch his step, Mosko could turn him over to the Feds. There was nothing anybody could do about it. Except—

"One theeng more—" Tarelli said.

"Blow."

"No. Leesten. Suppose I construct for you something very special?"

"How special?"

"Sometheeng—how can I tell you?—no one ever has before."

"Gambling device?"

"Perhaps."

"Cost money to make?"

"A few pennies."

"New, huh?"

"Special."

"All right, go ahead. We'll see."

"Then you weel send for Rosa?"

"We'll see."

Mosko let it go at that, and I didn't butt in. I was willing to see, too. And in another couple of weeks, I saw.

I was there the morning Tarelli took the wraps off his big secret. It was on a Sunday, and Mosko and the four sharpies who worked his wheels for him were downstairs, divvying up the take from the big Saturday night play.

Me and Al, the bartender, were sitting around in the tavern upstairs all alone, chopping the heads off a couple glasses of beer. There weren't any customers—never were on Sunday—so Al looked kind of surprised when he saw this little truck drive up and stop outside.

"We got company," he said.

"Company? Why, it's Tarelli," I told him.

SURE enough, little Tarelli hopped out of the truck and made some motions to the big lug who was driving it. The lug went around back and then he and Tarelli lifted down a big weighing machine. Before I knew what was happening, they dragged it into the tavern and set it up right in the corner.

"Hey," says Al. "Whatsa big idea?"

“Ees no idea. Ees scales. For weighing,” Tarelli said, turning on his grin.

“Who ordered scales around here?”

Al come around the bar and we walked up to the weighing machine.

“I order,” Tarelli told him. “I promise Mistair Mosko to find sometheeng wonderful.”

“Don’t see anything wonderful about a penny scale machine,” I said, giving it a fast case.

And there wasn’t anything wonderful to see. It was just a regular weighing machine with a round clock-face glass front, and a pointer that spun up to 400 pounds, depending on who stood on it and dropped a penny in the slot. It was made by the Universal Scale Company of Waterville, Indiana, and the decal on the back said, “This machine property of Acme Coin Machine Distributors.”

I NOTICED all this stuff kind of quick, without paying too much attention—but later, I memorized it. Checked up on it, too, when the time came, and it was all true. Just an ordinary weighing machine, made at the factory and rented out to Mosko for ten bucks a month plus 30 per cent of the take in pennies.

Oh, one other thing. Besides the big glass front over the dial showing the weight, there was another little hunk of glass and a spinner knob you turned when you dropped your penny. This knob turned about 20 slides up, for fortune-telling. You know, the regular questions you always find on scales. Like, “WILL I MARRY RICH?” Then when you dropped your penny, out comes a card with a gag answer on it, like “NO, YOU WONT MARRY RICH. YOU’LL MARRY EDDIE.” Corny stuff. And on top of the machine it said, “TELL YOUR FORTUNE—1¢. HONEST WEIGHT, NO SPRINGS.”

Al and I looked at the scales and the guy driving the truck went away from there. Tarelli kept grinning up at us and at last he said, “How you like?”

"Phooey!" said Al. "Whatsa matter with you, Tarelli? You oughtta know better'n to louse up the joint with a penny machine. We got customers come in here to drop a big wad at the tables; you think they gonna fish out pennies to get their weight told?"

"Yeah," I said. "Does Mosko know you ordered this?"

"No," Tarelli answered. "But he find out fast."

"And he'll get sore faster," I told him. "No he don't. You see."

"I'm gonna hate to see, Tarelli. When Big Pete sees this phoney fortune-telling gimmick he'll go through the roof. He thought you were coming through with something big."

"Right. Thees ees of the most wonderful. Wait until I feex."

Tarelli waved at me and went downstairs. Al and I got back to our beers. Every once in a while Al would look ever at the big, ugly white scales in the corner and shake his head. Neither of us said anything, though.

In a little while Tarelli come upstairs again. This time he was lugging his suitcase and a big canvas tarp. He set his suitcase down right next to the scales and then he got out a hammer and nailed up the tarp, right across the corner. It hid the scales and it hid Tarelli and his suitcase.

"Hey, now what you up to?" Al yelled.

"No questions. I feex. You cannot see."

"Lissen, you sawed-off little jerk—who you giving orders to around here?" Al hollered.

He got up, but I held his arm. "Take it easy," I said. "Give the little guy a chance. He's doing this for Mosko, remember? Maybe he's got some angle. Look what he did for the wheels."

"All right. But what's the big idea of the tarpaulin?"

"Secret," Tarelli called out. "Nobody must know. Three weeks I work to do. Ees miracle. You see."

We didn't see anything. We didn't even hear much of anything; some banging and clanking around, but not much. I guessed Tarelli was working on the weighing-machine with special tools from his suitcase, but I couldn't figure the angle. All I know is he worked on and on, and Al and I kept drinking beers and waiting for Big Pete Mosko to come upstairs and bust up the act.

But Mosko must have been plenty busy counting the take. He didn't show. And the fidgeting went on behind the curtain until Al and I were going screwy trying to figure things out.

"I got it!" Al says, at last. "Sure, I got it. Plain as daylight. Tarelli fixed the wheels downstairs for the big-time marks, diden' he? Well, this is for the little sucker—Mr. Bates, who comes in upstairs for a drink. We work the old routine on him, see? Plant a steerer at the bar, get him into an argument about what he weighs, work him into a bet. Five, ten, twenty bucks. I hold the dough, get it? Then we take him over to the scales. Mr. Bates knows what he weighs, because before the showdown the steerer goes away to wash his hands, and I say to Mr. Bates, 'Quick, hop on the scales before he gets back. Then we'll know what you weigh for sure.' So the chump weighs himself and lets say he weighs 165. The steerer comes back and this time Mr. Bates offers to double or triple the bet. He can't lose, see? So the steerer falls for it and we have Mr. Bates for fifty or a hundred bucks. Then we weigh him official. And of course the scales says 170 or 175—whatever I want. Because I got my foot down on the pedal that fixes the scales. Get it? A natural!" Somehow it didn't seem like such a natural to me. In the first place, no Mr. Bates was going to be dumb enough not to see through the routine with the crooked scales, and he'd raise a holy stink about being cleaned. Secondly, Tarelli had promised Mosko something really wonderful. And for some funny reason I had faith in Tarelli. I knew he was working to get Rosa over here—and he'd do anything for her. After seeing her picture, I could understand that. No, I expected Tarelli to come through. A big scientist, physicist or whatever kind of Professor he was in the old country, would do better than fix a weighing machine.

SO I WAITED to see what would happen when Tarelli finished and took the tarp down.

Finally he did, and I saw—exactly nothing. Tarelli ripped down the canvas, carried his bag back downstairs, and left the scales standing there, exactly like before. I know, because Al and I rushed up to look at the machine.

Only two things were changed, and you had to look pretty hard to realize that much. First of all, the little selector knob you could spin to choose your fortune-telling question just didn't spin any more. And second, the small glass-covered opening above it which gave the questions was now blank. Instead of printed questions like "WILL I MARRY RICH?" there was now a sort of black disk behind the glass. It kind of moved when you got up close to it, as though it was a mirror, only black.

I know that sounds screwy and it was screwy; but that's the only way I can describe it. It was a little black disk that sort of caught your reflection when you stood on the scales, only of course you can't get a reflection off something dull and black.

But it was as if the scales were *looking at you.*

I hopped up and fished around for a penny. Closer I stood, the more I felt like something or somebody inside the scales was giving me a cold, fishy stare. Yes, and there was, come to think of it, a soft humming noise when I stood on the platform. Deep down humming from inside.

Al went around back and said, "Little jerk opened up the machinery here, all right. Soldered the back on tight again, though. Wonder what he was up to? Coin company's sure gonna squawk when they see this."

I found my penny and got ready to drop it in. I could see my reflection in the big glass dial where the weight pointer was. I had a kind of funny grin, but I guess that came from looking at the black disk below and listening to the humming and wondering about the wonderful thing Tarelli had done.

I held my penny over the slot, and—

Big Pete Mosko come running up the stairs. Tarelli was right behind him, and right behind Tarelli were the four sharpies.

"What's the pitch?" Mosko yelled. "Get off that machine and throw it out of here."

I got off the machine, fast. If I hadn't, Mosko would of knocked me off.

"Wait," Tarelli chattered. "Wait—*you* see—ees what I promise you. Wonderful."

"Scales!" Mosko grabbed Tarelli by the collar and shook him until his hair flopped all over his face. "What do I need with scales?"

"But they tell fortunes—"

"Tell fortunes?" Mosko began to shake Tarelli until it looked like his hair would be torn right out of his head. "What do I need with phoney fortunes?"

"Ees—ees not phoney fortunes like you say. That ees the wonderful. The fortunes, they are true!"

"True?"

Mosko was still yelling, but the shaking stopped. He put Tarelli down and stared at him, hard.

Tarelli managed another one of his grins. "Yes, true. You get on machine. You put een penny. Fortune card comes out. Ees really true fortune. Tell your future."

"Malarkey!"

One of the sharpies, character named Don, started to laugh. He was a lanky blond guy with buck teeth, and he looked like a horse. In a minute we were all laughing. All but Tarelli.

"Take it easy, Tarelli," said Don, grinning and sticking out his big yellow teeth. He walked over to the little old man and stood looking down at him. It was funny to see the two of them together; Tarelli in his old overalls, and this sharpie Don in a handsome set of threads; new blue pinstripe job that matched the color of his convertible parked outside in the driveway. It was funny, and then it wasn't so funny, because the grin on Don's face was mean, and I knew he was just working up to something nasty.

"Look, Tarelli," Don said, still grinning. "Maybe you're a big scientist back in the University of Boloney or wherever you come from. But for my money, over here, you're just a schmoe, see? And I never heard that any scientist could invent a machine that really reads a person's future." Don reached down and patted Tarelli on the shoulder. “Now you know Mister Mosko here is a busy man,” he said. “So if you got anything else to say, spit it out fast-like. Then I won’t waste any more time before I kick you out in the road.”

“Huh!” Mosko grunted. “I got no time for screwballs at all, Don. Telling what’s gonna happen to you by science—”

“Ees not science.” Tarelli talked real soft and looked at the floor.

“Not science?”

“No. I do anytheeng to get Rosa here, remember, I tell you that? I do what science cannot do. I make pact. Make vow. Make bargain.”

“What kind of a bargain? With who?”

“I not say. My business, eh? But eet work. So I can build what I need for machine. Ees not science work here. Ees magic.”

“What the—”

Mosko was yelling again, but Tarelli’s soft voice cut him right off. “Magic,” he repeated. “Black magic. I don’ care who you are, what you are. You get on scales. Scales read your soul, your past, see you like you really are. Drop penny, scales tell your fortune. Read your future. Here, try eet—you see.”

Then Don cut loose with his horse-laugh. Only this time he laughed alone. And when he shut up, Tarelli turned to Mosko again.

“Understan’ what I tell you? Thees scale read the future. Tell anybody’s fortune. Ees worth much money to have here. You can make beeg business from thees. Now you get Rosa for me?”

“Sure,” said Mosko. “I’ll get Rosa. If it works. Hey, Tarelli, whyn-cha get on the machine and see if it tells your fortune about Rosa? Maybe it’ll say she’s coming. Ha!”

Mosko was ribbing him, but Tarelli didn’t know it. He turned kind of pale and stepped back.

“Oh no, Meestair Mosko. Not me! I not get on thees machine for anytheeng. Ees cursed, black magic. I do it only for Rosa—but I fear.”

“Well, what we all wasting time standing around for?” Don snickered. “Tarelli’s chicken. Afraid he’ll get on the scales and nothing will happen, so we boot him out. Well, I’m not scared. Here, gimme that.”

He snatched the penny out of my hand, hopped on the scales, and slid the penny down. I could hear the faint humming, and then when the penny disappeared I could hear the humming a little louder. The black disk on the scales got cloudy for a second. The pointer on the big dial behind the glass swung over to 182. Don stood on the scales, 182 pounds of what the well-dressed man will wear, including his nasty grin.

“So?” he shrugged. “Nothing happens.”

There was a click, and a little white card slid out of the slot below the black disk.

Don picked it up and read it. He shook his head and passed the card to Mosko and the others. Eventually it got to me.

It was a plain white card with plain lettering on it—but it wasn’t regular printing, more like a mimeograph in black ink that was still damp. I read it twice.

WHEN THE BLACK CAT CROSSES
YOUR PATH YOU DIE.

That’s all it said. The old superstition. Kid stuff.

“Kid stuff!” Don sneered. “Tell you what. This faker musta gummed up the machinery in this scale and put in a lot of phoney new fortune-telling cards of his own. He’s crazy.”

Tarelli shook his head. “Please,” he said. “You no like me. Well, I no like you, much. But even so, I geev you the warning—watch out for black cats. Scales say black cat going to breeng you death. Watch out.”

Don shrugged. “You handle this deal, Mosko,” he said. “I got no more time to waste. Heavy date this afternoon.”

Mosko nodded at him. “Just make sure you don’t get loaded. I need you at the tables tonight.”

“I’ll be here,” Don said, from the doorway. “Unless some mangy alley-cat sneaks up and conks me over the head with a club.”

For a little while nobody said anything. Tarelli tried to smile at me, but it didn’t go over. He tugged at Mosko’s sleeve but Mosko ignored him. He stared at Don. We all stared at Don.

We watched him climb into his convertible and back out of the driveway. We watched him give it the gun and he hit the road. We watched him race by towards town. We watched the black cat come out of nowhere and scoot across the highway, watched Don yank the wheel to swerve out of its path, watched the car zoom off to one side towards the ditch, watched it crash into the culvert, then turn a somersault and go roiling over and over and over into the gully.

There was running and yelling and swearing and tugging and hauling, and finally we found all that was left of 182 pounds and a brand new suit under the weight of that wrecked convertible. We never saw Don’s grin again, and we never saw the cat again, either.

But Tarelli pointed at the fortune-telling card and smiled. And that afternoon, Big Pete Mosko phoned Rico to bring Rosa to America.

III

SHE arrived on Saturday night. Rico brought her from the plane; big Rico with his waxed mustache and plastered-down hair, with his phoney diamond ring and his phoney polo coat that told everybody what he was, just as if he had a post office reader pinned to his back.

But I didn’t pay any attention to Rico. I was looking at Rosa. There was nothing phoney about her black hair, her white skin, her red mouth. There was nothing phoney about the way she threw herself into Tarelli’s arms, kissing the little man and crying for joy.

It was quite a reunion downstairs in the back room, and even though she paid no attention when she was introduced to me, I felt pretty good about it all. It did something to me just to watch her smiling and laughing, a few minutes later, while she talked to her old man. Al, the bartender, and the sharpies stood around and grinned at each other, too, and I guess they felt the same way I did.

But Big Pete Mosko felt different. He looked at Rosa, too, and he did his share of grinning. But he wasn't grinning at her—he was grinning at something inside himself. Something came alive in Mosko, and I could see it—something that waited to grab and paw and rip and tear at Rosa.

"It's gonna be nice having you here," he told her. "We gotta get acquainted."

"I must thank you for making this possible," she said, in her soft little voice—the kid spoke good English, grammar and everything, and you could tell she had class. "My father and I are very, very grateful. I don't know how we are going to repay you."

"We'll talk about that later," said Big Pete Mosko, licking his lips and letting his hands curl and uncurl into fists. "But right now you gotta excuse me. Looks like a heavy night for business."

Tarelli and Rosa disappeared into his room, to have supper off a tray Al brought down. Mosko went out to the big downstairs pitch to case the tables for the night's play. Rico hung around for a while, kidding with the wheel operators. I caught him mumbling in the corner and dragged him upstairs for a drink.

That's where Mosko found us a couple minutes later. Rico gave him the office.

"How's about the dough?" he said.

"Sure, sure. Justa minute." Mosko hauled out a roll and peeled off a slice for Rico. I saw it—five Cs. And it gave me a bad time to watch Rico take the money because I knew Mosko wouldn't hand out five hundred bucks without getting plenty in return.

And I knew what he wanted in return. Rosa.

"Hey, what's the big idea of this?" Rico asked, pointing over at the scales in the comer.

I didn't say anything, and I wondered if Mosko would spill. All week long the weighing machine had stood there with a sign on it, "OUT OF ORDER." Mosko had it lettered the day after Don got killed, and he made sure nobody got their fortune told. Nobody talked about the scales, and I kept wondering if Mosko was going to yank the machine out of the place or use it, or what he had in the back of his head.

But Mosko must have figured Rico was one of the family, seeing as how he flew in illegal immigrants and all, because he told Rico the whole story. There wasn't many around the bar yet that early—cur Saturday night players generally got in about ten or so—and Mosko yapped without worrying about listeners.

"So help me, it'sa truth," he told Rico. "Machine'll tell just what's gonna happen to your future. For a stinkin' penny."

Rico laughed.

"Don't give me that con," he said. "Business with Don and the cat was just a whatchacallit—coincidence.

"Yeah? Well, you couldn't get me on those scales for a million bucks, brother," Mosko told him.

"Maybe so. But I'm not scared of any machine in the world," Rico snorted. "Here, watch me."

And he walked over to the scales and dropped a penny. The pointer went up. 177. The black disk gleamed. I heard the humming and the click, and out came the white card. Rico looked at it and grinned. I didn't crack a smile. I was thinking of Don.

But Rico chuckled and handed the card around for all of us to see. It said:

YOU WILL WIN WITH RED

"Good enough," he said, waving the card under Mosko's nose. "Now if I was a sucker, I'd go downstairs and bet this five hundred smackers on one of your crooked wheels, red to win. If I was a superstitious jerk, that is."

Mosko shrugged. “Suit yourself,” he said. “Look, customers. I gotta get busy.” He walked away.

I got busy myself, then. The marks started to arrive and it looked like a big Saturday night. I didn’t get downstairs until after midnight and that was the first time I noticed that Rico must have kidded himself into believing the card after all.

Because he was playing the wheel. And playing it big. A new guy, name of Spencer, had come in to replace Don, and he was handling the house end on this particular setup. A big crowd was standing around the rig, watching Rico place his bets. Rico had a stack of chips a foot high and he was playing them fast.

And winning.

I must have watched him for about fifteen minutes, and during that time he raked in over three Gs, cold. Played odds, played numbers. Played red, and played black too. Won almost every spin.

Mosko was watching, too. I saw him signal Spencer the time Rico put down a full G in blue chips on black to win. I saw Spencer wink at Mosko. But I saw the wheel stop on black.

Mosko was ready to bust, but what could he do? A crowd of marks was watching, it had to look legit. Three more spins and Rico had about six or seven Gs in chips in front of him. Then Mosko stepped in and took the table away from Spencer.

“See you in my office,” he mumbled, and Spencer nodded. He stared at Rico but Rico only smiled and said, “Excuse me, I’m cashing in.” Mosko looked at me and said, “Tail him.” Then he shook his head. “Don’t get it,” he said. He was working the wire now, finding everything in order.

OUT of the corner of my eye I saw Rico over at the cashier’s window, counting currency and stuffing it into his pocket. Spencer had disappeared. Rico began walking upstairs, his legs scissoring fast. I followed, hefting the brass knucks in my pocket.

Rico went outside. I went outside. He heard my feet behind him on the gravel and turned around.

“Hey,” I said. “What’s your hurry?” Rico just laughed. Then he winked. That wink was the last thing I saw before everything exploded.

I went down on the gravel, and I didn’t get up for about a minute. Then I was just in time to see the car pull away with Rico waving at me, still laughing. The guy who had sapped me was now at the wheel of the car. I recognized Spencer.

“It’s a frame, is it?” Big Pete Mosko had come up from downstairs and was standing behind me, spitting out pieces of his cigar. “If I’da know what those dirty rats would pull on me—he was working with Spencer to trim me —”

“You did know,” I reminded him.

“Did I?”

“Sure. Remember what the fortune-telling card said? Told Rico, ‘YOU WILL WIN WITH RED’, didn’t it?”

“But Rico was winning with both colors,” Mosko yelled. “It was that dog Spencer who let him win.”

“That’s what the card said,” I told him. “What you and I forget is that ‘Red’ is Spencer’s nickname.”

We went back inside because there was nothing else to do—no way of catching Rico or Spencer without rough stuff and Mosko couldn’t afford that. Mosko went back to the tables and took the suckers for a couple hours straight, but it didn’t make him any happier.

He was still in a lousy temper the next morning when he cut up the week’s take. It was probably the worst time in the world to talk to him about anything—and that’s, of course, where Tarelli made his mistake.

I was sitting downstairs when Tarelli came in with Rosa and said, “Please, Meestair Mosko.”

“Whatcha want?” Mosko would have yelled it if Rosa hadn’t been there, looking cool and sweet in a black dress that curved in and out and in again.

“I want to know if Rosa and I, we can go now?”

"Go?"

"Yes. Away from here. Into town, to stay. For Rosa to get job, go to school nights maybe."

"You ain't goin' no place, Tarelli."

"But you have what you weesh, no? I feex machines. I make for you the marvelous scale of fortune, breeng you luck—"

"Luck?" Rosa or no Rosa, Mosko began to yell. He stood up and shoved his purple face right against Tarelli's button nose. "Luck, huh? You and your lousy machine—in one week it kills my best wheel man, and lets another one frame me with Rico for over seven grand! That's the kind of luck you bring me with your magic! You're gonna stick here, Tarelli, like I say, unless you want Uncle Sam on your tail, but fast!"

"Please, Meestair Mosko—you let Rosa go alone, huh?"

"Not on your life!" He grinned, then. "I wouldn't let a nice girl like Rosa go up into town without nobody to protect her. Don't you worry about Rosa, Tarelli. I got plans for her. Lotsa plans."

Mosko turned back to the table and his money. "Now, blow and lemme alone," he said.

They left. I went along, too, because I didn't like to leave Rosa out of my sight now.

"What is this all about, Father?" Rosa asked the question softly as we all three of us sat in Tarelli's little room.

Tarelli looked at me and shrugged.

"Tell her," I said. "You must."

So Tarelli explained about being here illegally and about the phoney roulette wheels.

"But the machine—the scales of fortune, what do you mean by this?"

Again Tarelli looked at me. I didn't say anything. He sighed and stared down at the floor. But at last, he told her.

A lot of it I didn't understand. About photo-electric cells and mirrors and a tripping lever he was supposed to have invented. About books with funny names and drawing circles in rooster blood and something called evocations or invocations or whatever they call it. And about a bargain with Sathanas, whoever that is. That must have been the magic part.

I guessed it was, because of the way Rosa acted when she heard it. She turned pale and began to stare and breathe funny, and she stood up and shook Tarelli's shoulders.

"No—you did not do this thing! You couldn't! It is evil, and you know the price—"

"Nigromancy, that ees all I can turn to to get you here," Tarelli said. "I do anytheeng for you, Rosa. No cost too much."

"It is evil," Rosa said. "It must not be permitted. I will destroy it."

"But Mosko, he owns the machine now. You cannot—"

"He said himself it brought bad luck. And he will never know. I will replace it with another scale, an ordinary one from the same place you got this. But your secret, the fortune-telling mechanism, must go."

"Rosa," I said, "you can't. He's a dangerous customer. Look, why don't you and your old man scram out of here today? I'll handle Mosko, somehow. He'll be sore, sure, but I'll cool him off. You can hide out in town, and I'll join you later. Please, Rosa, listen to me. Look, kid, I'll level with you. I'm crazy about you. I'll do anything for you, that's why I want you to go. Leave Mosko to me."

She smiled, then, and stared up into my eyes. She stood very dose and I could smell her hair. Almost she touched me. And then she shook her head. "You are a good man," she said. "It is a brave thing you propose. But I cannot go. Not yet. Not while that machine of evil still exists. It will bring harm into the world, for my father did a wicked thing when he trafficked with darkness to bring it into being. He did it for me, so I am in a way responsible. And I must destroy it."

"But how? When?

"Tonight," Rosa said. "Tomorrow we will order a new scale brought in. But we must remove the old one tonight."

"Tarelli," I said. "Could you put the regular parts back in this machine if you take out the new stuff?"

"Yes."

"Then that's what we'll do. Too dangerous to try a switch. Just stick the old fortune-telling gimmick back in and maybe we can get by for a while without Mosko noticing. He won't be letting anybody near it now for a while, after what happened."

"Good," said Tarelli. "We find a time."

"Tonight," Rosa repeated. "There must be no more cursed fortunes told."

But she was wrong.

IV

SHE was wrong about a lot of things. Like Mosko not having any use for the fortune-telling scales, for instance. He lied when he told Tarelli the machine was useless.

I found that out later the same afternoon, when Mosko cornered me upstairs in the bar. He'd been drinking a little and trying to get over his grouch about the stolen money.

"I'll get it back," he said. "Got a gold mine here. Bigges' gold mine inna country. Only nobody knows it yet but you and me." He laughed, and the bottles rattled behind the bar. "If that dumb guy only could figure it, he'd go crazy."

"Something worked up for the fortune-telling?" I needled.

"Sure. Look, now. I get rich customers in here, plenty of 'em. Lay lotsa dough onna line downstairs. Gamblers, plungers, superstitious. You see 'em come in. Rattling lucky charms and rabbits-foots and four leaf clovers. Playin' numbers like 7 and 13 on hunches. What you think? Wouldn't they pay plenty for a chance to know what's gonna happen to them tomorrow or next year? Why it's a natural, that's what—I can charge plenty to give 'em a fortune from the scales. Tell you what, I'm gonna have a whole new setup just for this deal. Tomorrow we build a new special room, way in back. I got a pitch figured out, how to work it. We'll set the scales up tomorrow, lock the door of the new room, and then we really operate."

I listened and nodded, thinking about how there wasn't going to be any tomorrow. Just tonight.

I did my part. I kept pouring the drinks into Mosko, and after supper he had me drive him into town. There wasn't any play on the wheels on Monday, and Mosko usually hit town on his night off to relax. His idea of relaxation was a little poker game with the boys from the City Hall—and tonight I was hot to join him.

We played until almost one, and I kept him interested as long as I could, knowing that Rosa and Tarelli would be working on the machine back at the tavern. But it couldn't last forever, and then we were driving back and Big Pete Mosko was mumbling next to me in the dark.

"Only the beginning, boy," he said. "Gonna make a million off that scales. Talk about fortunes—I got one when I got hold of Tarelli! A million smackers and the girl. Hey, watch it!"

I almost drove the car off the road when he mentioned the girl. I wish I had, now.

"Tarelli's a brainy apple," Mosko mumbled. "Dumb, but brainy—you know what I mean. I betcha he's got some other cute tricks up his sleeve, too. Whatcha think? You believe that stuff about magic, or is it just a machine?"

"I don't know," I told him. "I don't know nothing about science, or magic, either. All I know is, it works. And it gives me the creeps just to think about it—the scales sort of look at you, size you up, and then give you a payoff. And it always comes true." I began to pitch, then. "Mosko, that thing's dangerous. It can make you a lot of trouble. You saw what it did to Don, and what happened to you when Rico had his fortune told. Why don't you get rid of it before something else happens? Why don't you let Tarelli and Rosa go and forget about it?"

"You going soft inna head?" Mosko grabbed my shoulder and I almost went off the road again. "Leave go of a million bucks and a machine that tells the truth about the future? Not me, buddy! And I want Tarelli, too. But most of all I want Rosa. And I'm gonna get her. Soon. Maybe—tonight."

What I wanted to do to Big Pete Mosko would have pinned a murder rap on me for sure. I had to have time to think, to figure out some other angle. So I kept driving, kept driving until we pulled up outside the dark entrance to the tavern.

Everything was quiet, and I couldn't see any light, so I figured whatever Rosa and Tarelli had done was finished. We got out and Mosko unlocked the front door. We walked in.

Then everything happened at once.

I heard the clicking noise from the corner. Mosko heard it, too. He yelled and grabbed at something in the dark. I heard a crash, heard Tarelli curse in Italian. Mosko stepped back.

"No you don't!" he hollered. He had a gun, the gun had a bullet, the bullet had a target.

That's all.

Mosko shot, there was a scream and a thud, and then I got the lights on and I could see.

I could see Tarelli standing there next to the scales. I could see the tools scattered around and I could see the queer-looking hunk of flashing mirrors that must have been Tarelli's secret machinery. I could see the old back of the scales, already screwed into place again.

But I didn't look at these things, and neither did Mosko and neither did Tarelli.

We looked at Rosa, lying on the floor.

Rosa looked back, but she didn't see us, because she had a bullet between her eyes.

"Dead!" Tarelli screamed. "You murder her!"

Mosko blinked, but he didn't move. "How was I to know?" he said. "Thought somebody was busting into the place. What's the big idea, anyhow?"

"Ees no idea. You murder her."

Mosko had his angle figured, now. He sneered down at Tarelli. “You’re a fine one to talk, you lousy little crook! I caught you in the act, didn’t I—tryin’ to steal the works, that’s what you was doing. Now get busy and put that machinery back into the scales before I blow your brains out.”

Tarelli looked at Mosko, then at Rosa. All at once he shrugged and picked the little box of mirrors and flashing disks from the floor. It was small, but from the way he hefted it I could tell it was heavy. When he held it, it hummed and the mirrors began to slide every which way, and it hurt my eyes to look at it.

Tarelli lifted the box full of science, the box full of magic, whatever it was; the box of secrets, the box of the future. Then he smiled at Mosko and opened his arms.

The box smashed to the floor.

There was a crash, and smoke, and a bright light. Then the noise and smoke and light went away, and there was nothing but old Tarelli standing in a little pile of twisted wires and broken glass and tubes.

Mosko raised his gun. Tarelli stared straight into the muzzle and grinned.

“You murder me too now, eh? Go ’head, Meestair Mosko. Rosa dead, the fortune-telling maching dead, too, and I do not weesh to stay alive either. Part of me dies with Rosa, and the rest—the rest was machine.”

“Machine?” I whispered under my breath, but he heard me.

“Yes. Part of me went to make machine. What you call the soul.”

Mosko tightened his finger on the trigger. “Never mind that, you crummy little rat! You can’t scare me with none of that phoney talk about magic.”

“I don’t scare you. You are too stupid to un’rstand. But before I die I tell you one theeng more. I tell your fortune. And your fortune is—death. You die too, Meestair Mosko. You die, too!”

Like a flash Tarelli stooped and grabbed the wrench from the tools at his feet. He lifted it and swung—and then Mosko let him have it. Three slugs in a row.

Tarelli toppled over next to Rosa. I stepped forward. I don't know what I'd of done next—jumped Mosko, tried to kill him with his own gun. I was in a daze.

Mosko turned around and barked. "Quit staring," he said. "Help me clean up this mess and get rid of them, fast. Or do you wanna get tied in as an accessory for murder?"

That word, "murder"—it stopped me cold. Mosko was right. I'd be in on the deal if they found the bodies. Rosa was dead, Tarelli was dead, the scales and their secret was gone.

So I helped Mosko.

I helped him clean up, and I helped him load the bodies into the car. He didn't ask me to go along with him on the trip, and that was good.

Because it gave me a chance, after he'd gone, to go to the phone and ring up the Sheriff. It gave me a chance to tell the Sheriff and the two deputies the whole story when they came out to the tavern early in the morning. It gave me a chance to see Big Pete Mosko's face when he walked in and found us waiting for him there.

THEY collared him and accused him and he denied everything. He must of hid the bodies in a good safe place, to pull a front act like that, but he never cracked. He denied everything. My story, the murders, the works.

"Look at him," he told the Sheriff, pointing at me. "He's shakin' like a leaf. Outta his head. Everybody knows he's punchy. Why the guy's off his rocker—spilling a yarn like that! Magic scales that tell your fortune! Ever hear of such a thing? Why that alone ought to show you the guy's slug-nutty."

Funny thing is, I could see him getting to them. The Sheriff and his buddies began to give me a look out of the corner of their eyes.

"First of all," said Mosko, "There never was no such person as Tarelli, and he never had a daughter. Look around—see if you can find anything that looks like we had a fight in here, let alone a double murder. All you'll see is the scales here. The rest this guy made up out of his cracked head."

"About those scales—" the Sheriff began.

Mosko walked over and put his hand on the side of the big glass dial on top of the scales, bold as you please. "Yeah, what about the scales?" he asked. "Look 'em over. Just ordinary scales. See for yourself. Drop a penny, out comes a fortune. Regular stuff. Wait, I'll show you."

WE ALL looked at Mosko as he climbed up on the scales and fumbled in his pocket for a penny. I saw the deputies edge closer to me, just waiting for the payoff.

And I gulped. Because I knew the magic was gone. Tarelli had put the regular works back into the scales and it was just an ordinary weighing machine, now. HONEST WEIGHT, NO SPRINGS. Mosko would dial a fortune and one of the regular printed cards would come out.

We'd hidden the bodies, cleaned up Tarelli's room, removed his clothes, the tools, everything. No evidence left, and nobody would talk except me. And who would believe me, with my crazy guff about a magic scales that told the real future? They'd lock me up in the nut-house, fast, when Mosko got off the scales with his fortune told for a penny.

I heard the click when the penny dropped. The dial behind the glass went up to 297 pounds. Big fat Mosko turned and grinned at all of us. "You see?" he said.

Then it happened. Maybe he was clumsy, maybe there was oil on the platform, maybe there was a ghost and it pushed him. I don't know. All I know is that Mosko slipped, leaned forward to catch himself, and rammed his head against the glass top.

He gurgled once and went down, with a two-foot razor of glass ripping across his throat. As he fell he tried to smile, and one pudgy hand fumbled at the side of the scales, grabbing out the printed slip that told Big Pete Mosko's fortune.

We had to pry that slip out of his hands—pry it out and read the dead man's future.

Maybe it was just an ordinary scale now, but it told Mosko's fortune, for sure. You figure it out. All I know is what I read, all I know is what Tarelli's scale told Mosko about what was going to happen, and what did happen.

The big white scale stood grinning down on the dead man, and for a minute the cracked and splintered glass sort of fell into a pattern and I had the craziest feeling that I could see Tarelli's face. He was grinning, the scale was grinning, but we didn't grin.

We just pried the little printed slip out of Big Pete Mosko's hand and read his future written there. It was just a single sentence, but it said all there was to be said . . .

"YOU ARE GOING ON A LONG JOURNEY."

Tooth and Consequences

A good dentist can always fill a tooth. But how would he fix molars that weren't even there?

DOCTOR KING rose to his feet abruptly. His lonely vigil as night physician in the clinic was interrupted by a curious sound. A very curious sound. A *clicking* sound.

Harry Spencer stood in the doorway. He was the young dentist from the office down the hall. King knew him well, but now he stared curiously, wondering if Spencer had a pair of dice in his hand.

No dice. But Spencer moved slowly into the office, a look of dismay on his usually cheerful face.

"Do you hear that noise, Doctor?"

"Yes," said King. "Sort of a clicking, isn't it?"

"Clicking, hell!" gasped Harry Spencer. "That's my teeth chattering!"

"A dentist with chattering teeth," chuckled King. "That's a novelty." But his eyes held no smile as he scrutinized the agitated Spencer.

"Sit down—I'll get you a drink," he promised. And he did. Spencer gulped the whiskey gratefully. His teeth now clicked only against the glass.

"Better?"

"Much better, thank you. But Doctor—I didn't come in here for a drink. I need your help."

"Suppose you tell me the story," King suggested.

Spencer shrugged. “You may think I’m crazy. I wonder myself. But—you asked for it.”

King sat back as the young dentist began to speak.

“I had only one patient tonight. He came in about an hour ago. I’d dozed off in my chair, and when I looked around, this stranger was standing in front of me, smiling. He was a tall, dark man.”

“Mae West type, eh?”

“You wouldn’t joke about this guy if you saw him, Doctor. Or heard him talk. He looked—funny to me. Oh, nothing I could put my finger on. Just that he made me nervous, because he was so calm, so deliberate, so *cold.*

“He said his name was Vonier. Claimed to be a mill-worker. He was off the job at night, and he heard about the clinic so he came here to get some cavities filled.”

“What’s wrong with that?” asked King.

“Nothing. But he had a few ideas on how he wanted to be treated. He refused to fill out a patient’s card with his name and address. He said that if he could Come to me twice a week with no questions asked, he’d pay double for my work.”

“Just an eccentric,” King commented.

“Perhaps. But that no questions asked idea—that’s bad. I realized that the minute I got him into the chair and took a look at his mouth. Then I wanted to ask questions.” Spencer shuddered.

“I wanted to ask him why his teeth were so large. So abnormally developed. Particularly the *biting* teeth.” Spencer shuddered.

King smiled. “Little Red Riding Hood and her grandmother?” he suggested.

“I told you it sounds crazy,” Spencer murmured. “But there was nothing funny about that stranger’s teeth.

Like the fangs of a wolf, or a dog. That’s what they were, I tell you! Fangs. Fangs in the throat of a stranger with cold, deep eyes.”

“Have you been having trouble with your nerves recently?” asked King, smoothly.

"No—but I will have from now on. You see, I haven't told you the worst part yet. The part that made my own teeth misbehave.

"After I took my first inspection I got my hand-mirror to examine a bicuspid. I thrust it into his mouth for a back view."

"Go on."

"I put it into his mouth to see the reflection—*and there was nothing there!"*

"Nothing?"

"No reflection at all! It may sound foolish, but have you any idea of how horrible it was at the time? You do the natural thing and get the unnatural. Like—like turning on your cold water faucet and having a snake wriggle out.

"I backed away from the chair and told him to go away. Told him to come back tomorrow night—I wasn't feeling well. He just smiled and left, because he could see it was true. I *wasn't* feeling well at all. That's why I ran down the hall to you."

Doctor King grunted. Then he went to work.

"Hallucinations, eh?" he mumbled, as he helped remove Spencer's shirt. "Dizzy spells," he commented, busying himself with a stethoscope. "Delusions," he chanted, applying arm-bands.

Then—"Aha, just as I thought! Nothing wrong with you at all Spencer, except perhaps a little high blood pressure. Here—take these. Three a day, one after every meal. Ought to fix you up perfectly."

"What are they?"

"Garlic pills. Perfectly harmless. Now, don't worry. Come in again at the end of the week. You ought to come around nicely if you'll just forget this little incident."

Spencer thanked him, pocketed his pills, and left the office. King had given him back his courage, and his pills were easy to swallow. His advice, though—that wasn't easy to swallow.

Spencer did his best to forget, but that night he had a dream. It was a dream about a stranger with deep dark eyes, and long, pointed teeth. The teeth chattered, and Spencer woke up and listened to the clicking in his own mouth.

HARRY SPENCER breezed into Doctor King’s office with a hearty, “Hello, Doc!”

“Well, how’s it going?”

“Swell. No trouble at all.”

“Glad to hear it. No more—spells.”

“Not at all. This Vonier fellow came in again this evening. I examined his teeth with the mirror.”

“Reflection O.K.?”

“Of course. Say, Doc, I must have sounded like a fool when I came babbling in the other night.”

“Nonsense. I appreciate your little problem. Now, perhaps, you can help me with one of mine.”

“Certainly—what’s up?”

“Nothing much. But maybe you could help me. It seems something has happened to our blood plasma stores.”

“Your what?”

“You know we keep canned blood for transfusions here at the clinic. In case of factory accidents at the mill. Well, during the last week they tell me some of the cans have been disappearing.”

“Stolen?”

“Apparently. And at night. There’s plenty of staff people on duty all day, but in the evenings there’s no one here in the clinic but you and myself. The refrigerator is down in the annex corridor. Haven’t noticed anyone prowling around, have you?”

Spencer shook his head.

“No. But that’s funny. Stealing cans of blood. Could it be a practical joke?”

King turned to his desk as he spoke. “No—I don’t think so. You see, I found one of the cans outside in the alley last night. It had been ripped open. Here, take a look. Tell me what you think.”

He held out the gleaming metal container to Spencer.

Spencer stared at the corrugated edges of the can for a long moment.

“Somebody has been feeding wolfhounds,” he said. “There are toothmarks on this can.”

“Thought so,” said King. “Well, there’s nothing to worry about. I’m putting a new lock on the refrigerator.”

“No,” said Spencer, edging out of the office. “Nothing to worry about at all.”

But on the way home he worried, just the same.

During the last week, blood had disappeared.

During the last week, Vonier had come to the clinic.

The long arm of coincidence?

Granted. The long arm of coincidence might sweep away a few cans of blood. But the long arm of coincidence didn’t have any teeth in it. Teeth, biting into can tops. Long, pointed teeth, like the ones in Vonier’s mouth.

The following evening Spencer took a look at those long, pointed teeth again.

Vonier came in quietly, sat down in the chair. Spencer tried to smile professionally as he produced his mirror and made his inspection.

Then he gulped.

The mirror thrust in Vonier’s mouth showed nothing, again. Nothing at all.

He went dizzy, for a moment, because he remembered there was a new lock on the refrigerator down the hall. And now there was no reflection in the mirror.

Vampires have no reflections.

After drinking blood, after absorbing the *humanity* of blood, they might become normally visible in mirrors for a short time. Vonier, sneaking in and ripping open cans with his teeth; drinking deep. Then coming into the office for dental work. Once before he had missed, somehow, and there had been no reflection. Now the refrigerator was locked, and again there was no reflection.

SPENCER stared down into the thin, pale face in the chair. His mind whirled as he stepped back. He nicked his thumb accidentally as one hand brushed the instruments on his table.

“You’ll—you’ll have to excuse me,” he murmured. “Another spell, I’m afraid. You’d better come in again tomorrow.”

The tall, dark man smiled, shrugged, arose from the chair.

Spencer couldn’t help it. He sat down, closed his eyes. He heard Vonier’s footsteps across the floor. His eyelids flickered momentarily—but he saw.

He saw Vonier bending over the white tile table, his head darting like a serpent’s to the spot where the tiny red jet lay. His tongue lapped—and then Vonier grimaced with a look of curious pain.

Spencer sat there, trying to control his shudderings as Vonier left the room.

Now it couldn’t be denied.

The dark stranger with the long teeth, the bad teeth, was a vampire.

Abnormal teeth because of an abnormal diet. Why not?

It explained the decay, too. There was another explanation for the decay—an explanation involving sleeping all day in a terrible way. In a coffin, packed in grave-earth, hidden somewhere in the city, Vonier, who came only at night. Who drank blood from cans. Whose reflection vanished when he had no nourishment.

“The blood is the life.”

Of course he wouldn’t allow his teeth to be pulled! A toothless vampire?

Naturally he wouldn’t give his address. If Spencer tracked him down by day he knew what he’d find.

Certainly he had to grimace when he encountered the spot of Spencer’s blood. Spencer was taking garlic pills, and vampires cannot endure garlic.

Some authorities—Spencer shuddered when he thought of a demonolatrist as an *authority*!—said that garlic killed vampires. Why should it have such an effect?

Well, why is an allergy?

So there it was.

Spencer didn't sleep that night. Early in the morning he went down to the public library. He wanted to read certain books.

About silver bullets and stakes through hearts, and crucifixes and holy water.

About bodies that decay not in the tomb, and rest not.

About things that never die, that walk by night and drink deep from the throats of men.

About sunset to sunrise and pointed fangs and the legends of all nations in all times.

Early that evening he went in to Doctor King's office. He didn't have the courage to speak. King would accuse him of madness, in the stupid, melodramatic way in which people actually do accuse others of madness. The police would do nothing, and Spencer must keep still, keep the lock on the refrigerator door, keep thinking.

Doctor King gave him something to think about, all right.

"I'm out of those garlic pills right now, Spencer. Get another batch in Monday, I expect. It won't hurt you to wait a few days, I guess."

He guessed.

No garlic pills. No garlic in the bloodstream. And a *hungry* vampire!

Spencer backed out of the office, hurried down to his own quarters. "I must keep that refrigerator locked," he whispered. "I must. What if there's an accident and they need blood in a hurry and it's gone?"

Yes. But—*what if Vonier is hungry and goes for your neck?*

There was a solution to this problem, Spencer realized. He could run like hell.

He opened his office door with that resolve.

And the vampire walked in.

VONIER was tall, dark, thin.

That’s the way vampires are supposed to be—but so are a good third of all normal males.

Vonier was a foreigner with an accent. But there are many such in a mill town.

Vonier was pale. But Spencer was even paler, just now.

Now, it wasn’t height, weight, complexion or accent that marked the vampire for what he was. It wasn’t even the teeth, or the peculiar *faded* quality of his dark suit.

It was something about his lips. Lips that were thin, yet full. A paradox, unless you saw it. Lips that were used too much in partaking of nourishment, and became overly developed.

And of course, Vonier’s eyes remained. Remained, staring sightlessly in death for twelve hours out of every twenty-four. Staring sightlessly at—what? No wonder they were dark and deep and knowing. No wonder they glared in hunger greater than human hunger. How long had they stared and hungered? How old was this creature?

Vampires are ageless and deathless until stake or silver strike their hearts into corruption. How many throats had been ripped before this thing discovered the blood transfusion cans in the refrigerator? How many would be ripped again, now that the cans were protected by a stout lock? And how soon?

Very soon, Spencer thought, unless he could act. For Mr. Vonier was quite pallid tonight. He was slow in his movements, almost drunkenly deliberate. Only his eyes were quick. Quick and hot, as they gazed at the dentist’s throat with a desire he had never seen in human eyes before. An unimaginable desire.

“You’re—late,” Spencer choked out.

“I was held up,” Vonier answered, with a little smile. “I had to do some shopping.”

Shopping. That’s what you do when you’re *hungry.*

“Well, let’s get started.”

Vonier slid into the chair.

“What must you do tonight, Doctor?”

Spencer’s voice trembled. He had to put this over. He had to.

“I’m afraid, Mr. Vonier, that some of those teeth must come out. If you’ll let me make a cast of your mouth now—just a wax impression—I can tell you in a jiffy where the trouble is.”

“Please, no. I am very sensitive. I do not wish for you to place anything in my mouth.”

What? No nice little plaster of paris cast that Spencer had worked on? No nice little plaster of paris cast, treated with liquid air, to harden immediately in the vampire’s mouth and clamp his teeth together forever?

That *was* a disappointment.

But there was plan number two. Spencer’s voice mastered a tremor. “Still, you’ll have to have a few extractions. Those lower left molars are pretty bad.”

“I do not wish—”

“I’m the Doctor! I’ll give you gas, so it won’t bother you. Those teeth are probably dead, anyway.”

Dead.

Vonier smiled, but Spencer didn’t like it. He got the gas going, fumbled with the tube and cone.

“Breathe deeply.”

Do dead men breathe?

The gates of Hell closed. Eyelids fluttered down over them.

He—it—was sleeping.

Now! Spencer was stern. Sure, they’d call it murder. But he must chance it.

HE FUMBLED with the drill. Put in the new head. The long steel bit he’d bought specially. The steel bit that was like a sharp splinter. Sharp as a stake. A stake to drive into the heart.

The drill buzzed. Spencer fed more gas into the creature that lay all white and still under the cold blue light; lay like a slick and glassy corpse in the morgue. Fill it with gas, and then drive that drill home into the heart—

Pulses pounding, he guided the drill towards the rotten chest. One swift stab, now.

“Just a moment.”

The eyes flickered. Lightning. More lightning in the steel clutch of the long, cold hands.

“My teeth are not there, Doctor. You know that.”

“You know a lot more, too. Don’t you, Doctor?”

Vonier sat up. The smile was full now, the long fangs exposed.

“You know why the blood was stolen, don’t you? You know about my teeth, too. You know why your garlic kept me off last night. Isn’t that so, Doctor?”

“Y-yes.” Spencer said it the way men used to when the Inquisitors tightened the rack.

“Ah. Then don’t you know that one of—us—cannot be killed by poison, or bullet, or sword? That fire does not consume us when we walk, nor gas drug our senses?”

Spencer realized the truth too late. Much too late.

“Who has locked the refrigerator?” A soft voice. Soft as the clinging caress of a serpent. And as cold.

“I don’t know. The clinic doctors must have the key.”

“Get it for me tomorrow. You know why. I will have it or you will provide me with nourishment.”

“Garlic—” Spencer began. It took courage to say anything without screaming.

The vampire smiled. “I think not. Something has happened to your supply of garlic, hasn’t it?”

“How do you know?”

Mr. Vonier’s answer was quite dreadful. “The *carnivorae,* my dear Doctor, have a very acute sense of smell.”

The black-clad figure slid from the chair, moved towards the door. Then Vonier turned. Spencer looked into a haggard white face. There was hunger there—but for the first time he read something inherent in all starvation. A kind of pathos.

"I don't like this," Mr. Vonier said, softly. "You must believe that, Doctor. I was—normal—once. It's what psychiatrists might call a compulsion, you know. A compulsion. Something driving you.

"But that's beside the point, isn't it? You are not interested in the long years. The long nights. The longer days—"

Spencer stared, but Vonier regained his composure swiftly.

"I tried to fight it. I took blood from the cans, instead of in my *regular* way. But when you are denied food too long, you get hungry.

"Remember that. Give me the key tomorrow night—or I shall force my way to nourishment with my teeth. They are very sharp teeth, aren't they, Doctor? Good night."

The door closed.

Spencer didn't follow. He could have taken that last chance, trailed the vampire to its lair somewhere in the city, waited until daylight and entered with a stake.

But human beings are human beings. Sometimes they faint. Spencer did when the door closed.

IT WAS dawn when he came to.

Dawn—of the last day.

Spencer didn't waver. If it wasn't his neck tonight, it would be somebody else's neck. He had to protect the blood supply, for he had seen the injured workmen roll in, their families clustering about them in moaning groups. They could not be denied. There was no way out unless he could find it himself.

The priest couldn't help him. It was noon when Spencer went to Father Donnelly and gave him the refrigerator key to keep. He wanted to confess, but at the last moment he knew it would be no use. He just told Father Donnelly to keep the key for him.

He took a crucifix, too.

That might hold *it* off for a little while. The crucifix could not destroy, but like garlic, the shape held an allergy.

Then Spencer went home, took out his revolver, and began to mould a silver bullet.

The stake had failed. Garlic had failed. Gas had failed. Poison and fire wouldn't work. He couldn't pull the teeth or trap the mouth.

So mould a silver bullet.

Why should silver affect *them?* Perhaps it was the contact of silver with the blood stream. The blood circulates in 46 seconds. That is, in normal men. The physiology of vampires must be strange enough. Silver poisoned, silver might disturb elements of dead blood mingled with living blood.

The physiology of vampires . . .

Spencer believed in the silver bullet. He had to. It was the last resource of vampire legends and it had to work.

But it didn't.

Evidently legend was legend—legend from a day of rough pistols and muzzle-loaders. It was already dusk when Spencer realized he was beaten by ballistics. Mould and file as he would, the bullet wouldn't fit for firing.

And he had melted down the silver crucifix for the bullet!

It was the old story. Science against the Powers of Darkness, that sort of thing. And this time science had failed. Spencer smiled wryly. He wished he had the crucifix now. But with it or without it, he had his rendezvous to keep.

How he walked to the clinic he never knew. Every step was a battle. But Vonier would be there, and if he didn't show up, Vonier would stalk abroad. Stalk abroad and drink—

Spencer hurried in. No weapons now. He knew what this meant. He was walking the Last Mile when he went down the hall to his office.

He sat there counting the minutes. Silver bullets shooting into Time. Silver bullets and a silver key and a silver crucifix. 46 seconds, and the physiology of a vampire.

The door opened.

Vonier.

He didn't say anything. He didn't need to. Spencer read it in his eyes, read the hunger blazing there.

The smile in the pale face, the ageless face, was sardonic.

"I have two cavities to fill tonight, Doctor. One in my teeth and one in my stomach."

Spencer almost laughed. There was a jest—with teeth in it.

"Before we proceed, please, will you take a look at this one here? It's very painful."

Harry Spencer's most difficult patient climbed into the chair, and like an ordinary mortal, indicated a yellow fang. His long, talon-like finger fumbled in his mouth.

"Zhiz un eer."

Just another patient, indicating the source of his pain. Just another—

Spencer looked at the infected incisor. Enamel decay. Cavity. Against the roots, deep.

Fill the teeth of the creature that was to kill him? Anything! Just to stall, stall for time, stall against the question of where the key was. Perhaps the creature thought he had brought the key. Perhaps these last few moments might suggest a way out.

Harry Spencer was, after all, a professional man. He gave his patient's teeth a professional examination. He would give this tooth a professional filling.

"Lose the fear in routine. It's just another patient."

Spencer's brain mumbled to him, then shivered in fear as he looked into the deep eyes of Vonier, saw what waited there, what lurked in hunger.

HIS FINGERS didn't tremble as he drilled. How he longed to plunge that drill down the red throat—into the lungs from which welled an odour of unspeakable corruption! But it would do no good. Vampires do not die by steel.

His fingers didn't tremble as he turned away and compounded the filling.

But they did tremble as he packed it into the enlarged cavity. For a moment his pick slipped, and he cut a tiny nick in the gum of the creature as he finished the job. A little gout of blood welled, and Vonier winced in pain. But the filling was in place.

Vonier sat up. "There, now." His voice was hoarse with a hunger no longer concealed. "And now, Doctor—if you'll just hand over that key?"

He read the answer in Spencer's eyes, read it in Spencer's beaded forehead.

The vampire rose swiftly.

Arms wound about Spencer's body, tight as the grip of shrouds. Fingers like white worms writhed into Spencer's throat, bending him back.

Clothes smelling of grave-earth, a breath of carrion, and through it all the white face burning bright, bending closer. Spencer saw the yellow fangs gleam, saw the teeth descend to his neck.

He fought desperately—but Vonier held him as though he were a puppet with flailing arms. Vonier held him and the teeth descended.

Even at this last moment he could think about how long they were, and how sharp, and how they could sink into a throat and tear the life away.

The vampire ripped his head backwards, stabbed that mouth down into Spencer's neck—

And fell.

Spencer went down, too, when the grip was released. The creature was somewhere beneath him, groaning. Or was he? Groans died away, and Spencer stared at a litter on the rug.

Less than a minute since it had risen from the chair and gripped him. Less than a minute, and it was gone. Even the rotted clothing . . .

And it was less than a minute later that Doctor King walked into the room.

“Hello, Spencer. Just closed up the office for the night. Thought I’d drop in and see how you felt.”

Spencer was busily engaged with a broom, sweeping up a little pile of powdery dust on the floor.

“Had a patient tonight?” King asked.

Spencer nodded. “He’s gone though. Filled a tooth for him.”

He stooped and picked something gleaming from the dust at his feet.

“Funny thing—the filling seems to have dropped out when he left. Careless of me.”

“You’re a bad dentist, eh?” King chuckled.

“No,” said Spencer. He stared for a long moment at the tiny silver filling he held amidst the dust in his hand.

“No—I’d say I’m a damned good dentist, at that!”

Let's Do It My Way

Facing a ruthless foe is bad enough; but when your leader is a coward, if not worse . . . then what can you do?

LIEUTENANT RAK FENTON was master of the APOLLO when she slashed past the orbit of Mars, her jets flaring great yellow thrusts of power. For the faint span of time that the planet showed in the scope a cloud of memory blurred his mind. He knew the Low Canals of Mars too well, and memory laid its bleak hand across his heart.

Then the APOLLO was beyond. He set the controls on automatic, and turned toward his crew. Grimly he surveyed them. They were young and eager and as yet unaware of the true nature of their mission.

He said bluntly, “Effective today we go on three-quarter rations.”

“But—” The mate, Miller, forgot himself in surprise. Then he stopped the protest and said smartly, “Yes, Sir.” Smitty, the mechanic, and Wurtz, the radioman, stood with loose-jawed amazement, then stiffened themselves into resentful ramrods.

They were a good crew. The communications man, Wurtz, was as capable as any. Moreover, it was said that Smitty, the mechanic, could take two pipe cleaners and a welding torch and nurse a washtub around the triplanet route.

The three saluted, too smartly to be this far out in space, and turned back to their stations. Rak knew what they were thinking. It was as clear as if they had spoken: “The Lieutenant is afraid. The easiest mission of them all and already he’s lost his nerve.”

The easiest mission! Rak smiled grimly and stared at the visiscreen. They were nearing the Asteroid Belt and he pressed the buttons that energized the supplementary meteor repellers.

The screen showed the lights of a fleet of fisher ships, searching for the rare asteroid jewels. As the fishers hung near the edge of the Asteroid Belt Rak could see the tiny flashes of their rocket powered nets.

In some measure, the sight of the asteroids cheered him. The crew would be eager, seeing them, for Solo Maneuvers in the “Belt” were a patrolman’s joy. These maneuvers consisted normally of a month’s time, spent in weaving in and out among the asteroids, blasting the smaller fragments out of existence with quick bursts from the pom pom rays in the bow, or hiding behind some mile thick asteroid, then pouncing forth to blow some imagined enemy to bits. By Terra! That was sport. That was hunting fit for a spaceman.

And so their work began. In addition to keeping them on three quarter rations, Rak kept his crew in battle suits. They roamed the near edge of the asteroid belt for a week. At the end of that time the ship was like a hunting dog to his will.

He came upon two of his crew the eighth evening, without intent to eavesdrop. Wurtz was hunched down, smoking a pipe of fragrant Venusian tobacco, and Rak paused a moment, unnoticed, to savor the smoke.

He heard Smitty saying, “First three-quarter rations and now this damned haste. The Lieutenant will play things so safe he’ll get in a week early, with half his rations left. I hate to blast off with a man afraid to take chances.”

Wurtz took the pipe from his mouth. “I hear rumors of trouble with Mars. Could we be getting ready?”

Unwilling to listen longer, Rak moved; and when his motion caused them to look up in surprise, he said shortly, “You’re both wrong.” He singled out Wurtz for attention and added, “There’s a cargo of special equipment in the aft hold. Break it out and figure how to mount it. It’s mostly electronic and photoanalytic instruments.” He moved on, aware of their astonishment.

He was satisfied now. They were as ready as time permitted. He moved to the controls, and accelerated the ship outward, toward the outer fringe of the Belt. Then he rang the bell that summoned the crew.

LOOKING at the assembled crew, Rak could feel their distrust as if it had been a physical thing. Fie ordered quickly, “Make yourselves at ease, gentlemen. I suggest you sit down.”

When they were seated he said, “Your mission here is not the normal Solo Maneuver. Nothing could be farther from the truth. You were not told at the time of departure for routine security reasons. With the Martian unrest it has been doubly necessary to exercise care.” He broke off. Miller, the mate, was staring wide-eyed, past his right shoulder. He turned quickly, seeing the visiscreen. In the upper corner of the screen a space ship moved.

And what a ship! It was shaped like a truncated cone, as smooth as polished ebony. It was black, all black, and should have been invisible in the eternal night of space, except that a faint silver rim showed around it, like the silver at the dark edge of a cloud, outlining it in weird and awesome beauty. No triplanet ship looked like that.

A chill unease filled the room. Rak smiled grimly. “That ship is the reason for our presence here. You see on the screen the strange ship mentioned in the last intelligence summary. Gentlemen, that ship is an *Alien.”*

He could hear Smitty suck in his breath, then silence fell again. Wurtz stared at the screen, fascinated. Rak said harshly, “Our mission is to use our photo- and wave-analyzers on that Alien ship, and to use them at the time the Alien is using her own weapons.” Stunned, the crew seemed rooted to the ship’s floor.

Rak said coldly, “The odds are not so great as you might think. We have perhaps one chance in a hundred. Let me review the facts as we have them:

"We are not at war with the Alien. She is not likely to fire at us unless fired upon, or until we attempt to photoanalyze her. No communication with the Alien has been established. The life form is unknown.

"Our speed and maneuverability, using the Harkness Accelerator, is much greater than that of the Alien. We can successfully run away. The report of the first contact proves that.

"The screens of the Alien are proof against any weapon mounted on this ship. They are not proof against planetary-based weapons. The first Alien ventured near Terra after the brush with our patrol ships. She failed to answer challenge, and was destroyed.

"The Alien's weapon is a strange vibratory ray which will penetrate our defenses. If we are under that enemy ray as long as ten seconds you and I and this ship will be nothing but glowing dust.

"The range of our detectors is far greater than that of the Alien," Rak concluded. "Are there questions, gentlemen?"

There were no questions. The task was impossible; they all knew that. They had to approach closely an invulnerable ship, draw the fire of a weapon against which they had no defense, photoanalyze the ship and weapon, and get away.

Smitty said, quickly, "Look! There's another ship, a Martian spacer. The kind important officials use." The Martian ship showed on the far corner of the screen. That meant the APOLLO, the Martian and the Alien were all some hours apart.

Rak said quickly, "Plot me all courses as quickly as you can. If that Martian ship is to come into detector range of the Alien, we must warn her."

Miller began the problem at the calculators. Rak sat at the screen watching the Martian ship grow. From the type of ship it was obvious that some important figure was aboard.

Miller said swiftly, "The two courses will come within forty-three Rudd units of each other. That should be well within range of even crude detectors. Our own course will intersect the Martian somewhat sooner."

Rak thought rapidly. Action, swift action, would be necessary. He ordered, “Get the crew in battle suits.

I’m going to use the Harkness Accelerator and intercept the Martian quickly. Wurtz, get them on the commo and make a rendezvous as soon as Miller can give you some co-ordinates.”

Then he moved to the locker and donned his own battle suit, a rubberlike creation designed to protect the body against the tremendous acceleration of the Harkness.

THE TENSION in Rak’s mind gave way to a feeling of satisfaction as the rendezvous with the Martian ship was accomplished without mishap. The Martian ship was the Phobos.

He took Wurtz with him, leaving Miller in charge of the APOLLO, and crossed to the Phobos in a space dory.

On the way Wurtz said thoughtfully, “The Phobos? Where have I heard that name?”

“It was in a telecast last week. She’s the official ship assigned to Urgan.”

Wurtz turned away and spat.

Rak said coldly, “Urgan’s position entitles him to be treated with respect, whatever your personal opinion. Also remember that no mention of the Alien as such should be made.”

They entered the lock of the Phobos, and minutes later were in the large command-and-instrument room of the Martian ship.

The captain of the ship was unimportant. Urgan was in control here and he left no doubt of that. His faint gray fur raised in anger and he roared at Rak in bitter Terran oaths. Rak could feel the anger rising in himself, felt the rigid stiffness of Wurtz beside him.

He said politely, “As you know, our patrol detector screens are much more sensitive than those of Martian ships. Your present course will bring you in contact with a contraterrene drift. I suggest you modify your course.”

“Contraterrene!” Urgan roared. He looked at Rak keenly and Rak wondered if he had really accepted the lie. He seemed more relieved than frightened. Rak wondered what devil’s work was in process. He studied the Martian for a moment.

Urgan, with some differences, might have well been a Terran man. He was a big, light-boned example of the Martian homo, covered entirely with a faint gray fur. His eyes were as hard and bright as black diamonds. Urgan was the speaker of the Martian assembly. His power in political circles was equalled by his notoriety along the Low Canals.

Urgan asked, “You were on Solo Maneuvers here in the Belt?”

Rak said shortly, “Yes.” Any other answer would have created a curiosity he wished to avoid.

“Good! Then as Speaker of the Martian Assembly I request that your ship accompany mine until this drift has passed beyond the asteroid belt. Obviously you have the equipment to safeguard us.”

RAK’S MIND whirled. He was neatly trapped. He wondered if the trap had been intentional, or had grown by chance out of his lie. If he refused Urgan he would create an incident, and draw curiosity as to his real mission. If he obeyed the request he would lose the Alien.

As he pondered he heard the Martian captain ask quickly, “Do you think that is wise?”

The question had been asked in one of the obscure dialects of the Low Canals. Rak held his face wooden as though he had not understood. In truth not ten earthmen would have known that tongue. Rak had grown up along the Low Canals, for he was the son of one of the first Martian colonists.

He knew the dialects, the rages, the mad-dog nature of the Low Canal tribes.

Urgan said swiftly, also in dialect. “Of course, what can these fools suspect? We can still get the jewels before *The Day.”*

Then Urgan was all smiles. He said in Terran, “Will you grant my request, Lieutenant?”

Rak said coldly, “You leave me little choice.” Unable to conceal his irritation he whirled and said, “Let’s go, Wurtz.”

He heard Urgan’s voice whispering after him in that dialect no Earthman was supposed to understand, “These Terran dogs. When I am Emperor such insolence will stop.”

Rak entered the lock with Wurtz beside him. Wurtz said bitterly, “Nursemaid to that piece of space jetsam. What do we do now, Lieutenant?”

Rak stared at the controls of the space dory. As a commander he should never let his crew know he was without a plan. He said, “I’ll let you know what to do when the time comes.”

He pressed the controls, and the dory leaped out of the lock across space to the APOLLO.

RAK’S MIND was still whirling as he arrived at his station back on the APOLLO. He believed he understood the basic elements of Urgan’s plan. Urgan planned a *coup d’etat* of the Martian government on *The Day*. For that day he would need money quick money. He had come to the Asteroid Belt to get it, in the form of the tremendously valuable jewels. Rak thought he knew how Urgan planned to get the jewels.

The Asteroid fishers were well armed with small arms. However if a ship like Urgan’s were to suddenly ray the after parts of a fisher ship, that would open the fisher like a plugged watermelon, and unless the persons inside happened to be in space suits—Rak shuddered. Of course detection of such a crime and armed pursuit would be inevitable. But if *The Day* were soon, as soon as Urgan returned, then the patrol would not be fighting a pirate, but would come against The Emperor of Mars. The entire Martian battle fleet would then protect him.

It was a desperate gamble, but Urgan was known to be without fear, and the rewards for success would be the whole of Mars.

All that evening Rak wrestled with the problem, and dreamed of it that night. When he awoke he was no nearer a solution. He was awakened by the rattling of the space locks, and he rose quickly.

A knock sounded on his door. Curious at this early visit, he called, “Come in.”

Urgan came in. He thanked Miller, who had shown him the way, then closed the door carefully and stood looking at Rak. Then he drew a needle gun and leveled it.

There was death behind that apparent nonchalance, Rak knew well.

Urgan said, in the Low Canal dialect, “I radioed the Martian Intelligence for a report on you. I understand you grew up along the Low Canals. That is unfortunate; you must have understood too much yesterday.”

Rak’s mind whirled, seeking some escape. His crew would be unsuspecting. A determined man could probably ray the three of them before they suspected treachery.

Rak said swiftly, also in the dialect, “A gardener does not break his spade. You have need for me.”

The needle ray did not waver. “What do you mean?”

“You will need space captains in the weeks to come, you will need commanders who are loyal—” Rak’s voice lowered, “loyal and *ambitious.”*

Urgan grinned. “You are a Lieutenant, you want to be a Captain, is that it?”

Rak understood that grin. It meant that Urgan was sure he was bluffing. He said bluntly, “I want to be a Colonel.”

That took the grin off of Urgan’s face and made him consider. Urgan said slowly, “Considering your birth place, I think I believe you. It is unfortunate that I cannot afford to take chances.” The needle ray aimed more carefully, and apprehension touched Rak with chill fingers. He said swiftly, fencing death with words, “About the jewels. You need those at once. You take quite a chance attacking the Asteroid fleet. I can show you how to avoid that chance.”

Urgan said softly, “Keep talking.”

“I was at the controls coming in. I saw a meteorite at the edge of the belt, a ruddy one like they found last year. You could see the edge of a jewel sticking out.”

Urgan laughed. “And you didn’t stop to try to pick it up? Do I look like a fool?”

“Should I have shared it with the crew? Why should I be so generous? I plotted its drift. On my watch last night while the crew was asleep I was going to pick it up. Then you asked us to stay on until the contraterrene drift had passed.”

Rak could see the Martian considering that. Urgan said slowly, “You were irritated by my request. I remember that.”

In his moment of hesitation Rak plunged forward, low and hard, his life riding on that surprise motion. He slashed at Urgan’s wrist with the edge of his hand. The needle ray fell from Urgan’s grip, and Rak put his foot on it. Urgan crouched, catlike, waiting to use his foot in a swift jaw breaking kick when Rak stooped for the weapon.

Rak said, “I can call for my crew. You know that.”

Urgan seemed to be weighing that. “Why don’t you call them?” he asked.

Rak smiled meaningfully, “I would, but you see, I want to be a Colonel.”

Urgan considered. The threat about the crew was true. “All right.” He took one step backwards, and seated himself. He smiled at Rak quietly, as if they had been discussing the latest telebook.

Rak picked up the gun. He said, “I’ll keep this,” then he drew a notebook from his pocket and began to copy something therein. He gave Urgan this copy saying, “The equation is that of the Asteroid’s path. As you can see there is only drift to consider.”

Urgan grunted and rose from the chair. He thrust the paper into a pocket of his clothing and asked, “How will you land the asteroid fragment. Have you a net?”

“No. I hoped to jockey alongside it and get it in the locks.”

"We have one net aboard. Suppose you follow us. After all, your ship is armed, and you have the Harkness Accelerator. If I planned to steal the jewel I could hardly run away."

"That makes sense," Rak agreed.

"And now, my weapon." Urgan extended his hand for the piece.

"Sorry."

Urgan's eyes showed the faintest flicker of disappointment. Rak knew what he had hoped. He had hoped to ray Rak, and his crew, now that he had the location of the jewel.

Urgan turned to go back to his ship. Rak followed, watching him until he had cleared his space dory out of the APOLLO'S lock.

When Rak returned to his cabin he found his crew waiting for his return.

Rak could feel their animosity as he waited for an explanation. Miller said, "As the crew of this vessel we have no right to demand an explanation of the master's actions. But as members of the patrol, we have the right to protect it from treachery. We ask you, therefore, to answer a few questions."

Rak asked coldly, "What questions?"

"When Urgan came aboard he had his hand on 'a concealed weapon. I stood by outside your cabin in case I might be needed. You talked in Low Canal, you argued and then you agreed. I could tell that much from the tone of your voices. Last night you talked in your sleep. When I came to awaken you for watch you were raving about stealing asteroid jewels and making emperors."

Miller leaned forward. His voice was filled with suspicion. "We all ask you, what is your connection with Urgan? What have you to do with theft and emperors?"

Time was running thin. The sands were slipping down the glass. Rak drew out Urgan's weapon and said, "Here is my connection with Urgan. Consider yourselves all under arrest, for insubordination."

The crew stared back at him with hard eyes. Miller said quietly, "You dirty traitor."

Rak ordered quickly, “Put your weapons on the table. Miller, take the crew and begin immediate search of the outside of this ship and the lock, and any place that Urgan could have reached. Search for any form of sabotage. Hurry now, for we may have only minutes.”

Then he thrust the captured weapons in his pockets and went out to take over manual control of the APOLLO.

The Phobos had already set out on the course that Rak had indicated. A chill wind blew over him. That meant Urgan was putting distance between them. Probably Urgan had left a Magno bomb somewhere in this ship.

He began to play a game of hare and hounds with the Martian ship, following by leapfrogging from the cover of one asteroid to another.

This navigation was doubly difficult because he had to be alert for treachery on the part of his own crew. They would mutiny if given the chance. He had their weapons, and the key to the arms room. However; in time they could break in and get weapons.

Rak’s stomach grew queasy. He wondered if it were the sudden changes in the ship’s course, or if it were the thought of the desperate gamble he was taking. He heard Miller’s feet behind him and whirled, hand on weapon.

Miller was puzzled. His attitude toward Rak was uncertain rather than dangerous. Miller said, “We found a magno bomb just outside the lock. I defused it.”

Rak smiled. “Good. Now get the crew into battle suits and to their stations.”

Puzzlement grew into wonder on Miller’s face. From long habit he said, “Yes, Sir.”

That posed another problem. Rak could not put on his own battle suit. As he donned the cumbersome suit he would be at the mercy of his suspicious crew, yet he would need the suit badly. If he had to use the Harkness Accelerator—He shuddered. He had seen bodies that had been unprotected against the Harkness.

He gave all his attention to this game of hare and hound he was playing. Tension grew in him. The time for action had come.

Behind him Miller reported, “Crew ready for action. I brought your suit, Sir.”

For the faint span of a moment Rak considered. Had the finding of the bomb and his present obscure action brought Miller back to loyalty? He would need the suit, no doubt of that.

And then the visiscreen resolved his doubt. The dark bulk that had filled the screen slipped away as they rounded the asteroid that had been momentary cover.

Miller’s breath was gasp of comprehension. Ahead of them the Phobos had swerved like a frightened hare.

She had, as Rak planned, intercepted the *Alien*. In the instant of sighting, Urgan had recognized that this was a trap, and the Martian ship swung broadside and let go all weapons in a coruscating flash of power. The *Alien* ship glowed in this power, undamaged, and aloof. A ray came out from the black ship, traveling slowly, so that the end of it could be seen, like a great fingertip reaching. It was an odd color, yellow green, like grass too long away from the sun, and it pulsed as it reached out. The reaching finger touched the Phobos then winked out. The Phobos was gone, yet her shape remained. Gases faintly phosphorescent, laid a ghostly outline against the inked background of space.

In that instant Rak turned on the Harkness. He felt as if a giant hand seized him, and crushed him until his chest was a million spears of pain. His voice shrill with unbearable agony, he screamed once before the blackness came.

Dimly, out of aeons of agony, light came to his eyes. He blinked up at the light, and set his teeth as pain twinged again. He could discern Miller above him; then he felt the touch of a needle in his shoulder, and drowsiness pushed against the pain, moving it back in a slow tide.

The second time he opened his eyes the pain had dropped into a gnawing background. He could see Miller this time, but was unable to speak.

Miller smiled down, answering the unspoken question. “You’ve been here a week. You’re in bad shape, but you’ll make it. We’re on the way to

Base hospital.”

Rak struggled with the question, but the rawness of his throat would not let the words come. He begged Miller with his eyes.

Miller understood. He said, “Wurtz was at the analyzer when the *Alien* fired. We have everything, photographs, spectra, wave analyses, even some of the residue of the Phobos. Wurtz got it all, just before you used the Harkness. With luck our scientists will be able to figure out the *Alien’s* weapon and her screens.” Miller smiled, “Mission accomplished.” Then he thrust another needle into Rak’s arm, and drowsiness crept gradually back.

Dimly, Rak heard the voices of the crew at the door to his room. In the no man’s land of drowsiness he heard Smitty’s voice, and the words told him that he had done more than accomplish his mission. The words told him that now and forever, this was his ship and his crew.

“How is the skipper,” Smitty asked. “How’s the Old Man?”

THE END

Head Man

His name was Otto Krantz, and he was the greatest actor in Berlin. And was not Berlin the capital of the entire reasonable world?

He appeared before the public every day in the same drama, in the same role. Now, in 1937, it appeared as though the show might run forever, but no one seemed bored by his performance. And Otto Krantz did his best to keep it this way. He was never satisfied, but continued to rehearse and seek improvements in his part.

Take the matter of costume, for example. Krantz always appeared in evening clothes, but of a very simple cut. This sober garb was a surprising contrast, for many of the minor players wore gaudy uniforms or sought attention by wearing outlandish rags. But Krantz, after much study, realized his modest attire brought him more popular approval than the extravagant outfits of the others.

Again, the other actors were given to impassioned gestures as gaudy as their clothing. They shouted at the audience, they ranted, raved, wept, scowled, went into hysterics.

The spectators were never impressed. They much preferred the business-like approach of Otto Krantz, who said little but acted with the finesse of a master. He never played to the gallery. While on stage, he went through the "business" as if the audience didn't exist. For this reason, Krantz remained the most popular actor in Berlin, playing over and over again the selfsame role in the selfsame Comedy.

The Comedy was entitled *The Third Reich*.

The stage was the platform of the public executioner.

Otto Krantz filled the role of Official Headsman.

Each performance boasted a new supporting cast and a growing audience to cheer the Comedy on.

It was always the same. Every morning Krantz made his grand entrance in the bleak courtyard, instructed the new players in a stage whisper, and graciously conducted them to the center of the platform. With becoming modesty, the great actor allowed each a moment alone in the spotlight in which to receive the tribute of the spectators.

After this, the show proceeded swiftly. Capable assistants did the placing and the binding—but it was Otto Krantz who tested the straps, bowed politely to the military escort, and then raised the bright, shining blade of the headsman's axe from its place in a block of ice.

Then came the glorious moment of climax; the moment that never failed to move both the minor players and the crowd. And when it was over, Otto Krantz lifted the head from the basket and held it up to his applauding audience with an honest smile of workmanlike pride.

This happened not once, but as often as ten or a dozen times in a single morning. Yet Krantz never faltered, never grew tired, never missed a line or a cue.

A sneering Prussian of the old school, the sniveling young son of a lower-class family, a withered *hausfrau* or a rosy-cheeked beauty—all received the same efficient courtesy at the hands of the executioner; hands, that grew stained and red with the drops that fell as each head was lifted from the basket.

At the end of the performance, Otto Krantz bowed, retired, and washed his hands like a common laborer. Democratic, was the Official Headsman.

Outside of his public appearances, Krantz led a quiet life. A glass of *schnapps* when work was through, perhaps a little beer to wash down dinner at some humble *bierstube*; a stroll through the street to hear the news, and then home to the big upstairs room near SS District Headquarters. In the evening there might be a Party meeting to attend, or a summons notifying him of tomorrow's labors.

It was a simple existence, for Otto Krantz did not share the hysteria of the times. He served the Reich with no thought of personal pleasure or profit. Let others raise the rabble and bluster in public meetings. In his time, Krantz had cut short a good many of these speakers—cut them short by a neck. These days might bring honors to a wiser head—but many wiser heads fell into his basket.

Krantz was content. A year ago he had been a humble butcher. Since leaving the slaughterhouse for a public post, he had seen enough of the world and its ways, and had met many people. Officially, in the past year, he had met several thousand. Each acquaintance was of painfully short duration, but it was enough.

He had gazed into the faces of the best families of Germany. He had held those faces in his hands—those proud, proud faces that would never smile again. And he knew that the blue-bloods stained his axe with gore as red as that of the lowest thief.

So Krantz was content. Until, gradually, the faces came *too fast*. It was impossible to ignore them any longer. He felt himself becoming interested in them because they passed in such an endless variety before his eyes. For each face masked a secret, each skull held a story. Young, old, pure, debauched, innocent, guilty, foolish, wise, shamed, defiant, cringing, bold—ten a day, twenty a day, they mounted the platform and bent their necks to the yoke of Death.

Who were these people he conducted into eternity? He, a simple butcher, was shaping the destiny of Germany. Shaping it with the axe. What was the nature of that Destiny? These faces knew.

Krantz tried to find out. He began to peer more closely at each prisoner in turn. Without realizing it, he gazed deeper into dead eyes, felt the shapes of skulls, traced the texture of hair and skin.

One day after work he entered a bookstall and bought texts on phrenology and physiography. That had been two months ago and now he had gone farther in his speculations.

Now, when work was through, he went home quickly and threw himself down on the bed. With eyes closed he waited for the faces of the day to pass in review.

They came—pallid, noble faces molded in sadness or rage; three thousand death masks, and the end not yet! And with them came a message.

“You, Otto Krantz, are our Master! You are the most powerful man in the Reich. Not Hitler, not Goebbels, not Himmler or the others. You, Otto Krantz, hold the real power of life and death!”

At first, Krantz was afraid of such thoughts. But every day came a dozen new reminders, a dozen new faces to review in darkness, to remember, to relish.

To relish? But of course, it was a pleasure now. To be quiet. To dress in black. To wear a mask. To hide the secret thoughts and then come home to revel alone with three thousand memories!

For weeks now his memories had seemed to center around one particular moment—the moment when he held up the head and gazed into the face. Lately he had been forced to hold himself sternly in check as he did so, lest he betray his excitement. This was the supreme thrill, to hold the heads. If there was only some way to recapture that thrill, that sensation of power, at will! If only he could—

Steal the heads.

No. That was madness. If he were discovered, he would die. And for what? The foolish face of a gaping old wastrel?

Not that. Not a gray old head with a cruel, stupid face. It was not worth the risk. But there were other heads—strange heads of debauchees, golden heads of beautiful ladies that hung before him in dreams. These were worth possessing, worth the risk. To sit in his room and behold forever such symbols of his secret glory—there was a dream!

He must find a way, Krantz decided. It would be necessary to visit the condemned cells nightly, when the lists of execution were given out. Then he could inspect the crop and make his choices. He might make an arrangement with old Fritz, the scavenger who did the burials of all the unclaimed bodies. For a few marks Fritz would do anything. Then Otto Krantz could go home with a burlap bag slung over his shoulder. Nobody would be the wiser.

Krantz thought it all out carefully. He had to be careful, make sure no one suspected, for if they knew they would not understand. They might think he was crazy and shut him away. Then he wouldn't have his axe any more. He wouldn't be able to polish the heavy, gleaming blade every morning before work started. And he couldn't see the heads every day. That must not be permitted to happen.

So he was very careful the next few times he went to work. Nobody who noticed the tall, broad-shouldered man with the close-cropped mustache and bald head would suspect that behind his stern, impassive countenance there lurked a dream.

Even his victims didn't realize it when he stared at their faces each morning. Perhaps the black mask he wore helped to disguise the hideous intensity of his searching stare. It also concealed his disappointment.

For none of these traitors had the face that would satisfy him. None seemed to hold the symbol of power he desired. There was nothing but a succession of commonplace countenances. Krantz was disappointed, but he didn't give up.

He went to Gestapo headquarters one evening late in the week. He passed up the broad stairs and received the salute of the sentinel Troopers with the dignity befitting an official of the Reich. He had no trouble in the outer offices.

The man at the desk chuckled when he heard Krantz make his request.

"You want to see the list for tomorrow? Here, it's ready. Only seven of the swine, for high treason. You can probably do the job with one hand."

Otto Krantz didn't laugh. He spoke again, smoothly. "If you please, I should like to see the prisoners."

" *See* them?"

"Yes."

The man at the desk shrugged. “That is very irregular. I’m afraid you’d have to ask Inspector Grunert for permission.”

“But can’t you—?”

“One must obey orders, you know. Let me announce you.” The desk official buzzed the intercom, spoke briefly and then raised his head. “You may go right in,” he said, nodding toward the door behind him.

Krantz forced a rigid smile. He had to go through with this, carry it off. If only he could get permission, it would be easy to make further plans.

As he entered Inspector Grunert’s office, the rigid smile became suffused with incredulous delight. For there, sitting on the bench before the Inspectors desk, were the two prisoners he wanted—the answers to his prayers, his dreams.

Otto Krantz stared at them closely, noting with growing pleasure each detail of their faces.

The man was old, for only the old have long white hair. The man was young, for only the young have smooth, delicately pointed features unwrinkled by the years. The man was ageless, for only the ageless have great green glowing eyes that burn upwards from unthinkable recesses of the brain behind.

Then he looked at the other prisoner, the woman.

The woman was a wanton, for only wantons have wildly burnished locks that flow like flame above their brows. The woman was a saint, for only a saint has the white, ecstatic purity of a face transfigured by suffering. The woman was a child, for only a child has eyes that beam in beauty.

“ *She is the woman I want*,” droned the voice within Otto Krantz.

He couldn’t tear his eyes from them. The long white hair, the long red hair. The slim necks. The greenish glow of their eyes. Father and daughter? Father and daughter of Mystery. Creatures of another world, a world of dreams.

And tomorrow they would become *his* dreams. His to possess. Symbols of his power, the power of the headsman’s axe. These were the two he wanted. . . .

“Ah, Krantz, here you are.” Smiling, Grunert rose and extended a fleshy palm. “Just in time to meet two future clients.” The fat Inspector bowed sardonically in the direction of the prisoners. “Allow me to present Joachim Fulger and his daughter, Eva.”

They did not stir. Neither man nor girl looked at Otto Krantz. Their eyes rejected the presence of the Headsman, the Inspector, and the room itself.

Grunert chuckled. “Cool heads, eh?”

“ *Wonderful heads*,” purred the voice inside Otto Krantz, but his lips remained closed.

“Yes,” continued the Inspector. “One runs across all types in line of duty. Queer fish. Take these two specimens, for example.”

"I’m going to,” whispered the inner voice.

Grunert could not hear it as he went on. “What do you suppose these two have been doing?” he inquired. “You’ll never guess, so I’ll tell you. They just signed the confession, in case you don’t believe me.”

“What?” asked Otto Krantz, knowing it was expected of him.

“Practicing sorcery against the Reich—can you imagine such a thing in this day and age? Sticking pins in images of our *Fuehrer*

Grunert scowled reflectively. “Their block leader got wind of it last month. Sounded fantastic, but he checked them just as a matter of routine. Everyone in the neighborhood seemed to know they were queer ones—selling love philtres, telling fortunes, and all that.

“But when the block leader dropped in to pay them a visit—all very pleasant, not in an official capacity or anything—this swine of a magician and his unnatural offspring put an ice pick into his throat!”

The two prisoners did not stir. Inspector Grunert nodded at Krantz and tapped his head significantly. “You see how it is,” he shrugged. “They could get the camp or a firing squad. But I decided the sorcery charge was the one to press. Make it high treason, I said. Herr Goebbels is always looking for a story—and here is a good example to set before those who work secretly against the *Fuehrer*.”

He rose and confronted the silent, unblinking pair. “Cool as cucumbers, aren’t they? But they cursed enough when we had them brought in, I can tell you! A few days here and they signed the confessions without a murmur.

“Crazy fanatics! Trying to kill men by sticking pins in photographs and dolls. Why, it’s barbaric!”

A laugh crawled up out of Joachim Fulger’s white throat. The voice that followed it was curiously disturbing.

“Do you hear, Eva, my child? *We* are barbaric, says this barbarian in his murderer’s uniform! He sits here in his torture chamber and explains our barbarism to the brutal savage whose axe will shear our heads from our necks tomorrow morning.”

Again, the laughter.

Otto Krantz watched it well out of the white throat. The axe would bite there—so—

The girl’s voice came now. “We are sorcerers, too, by his standards. But our magic is cleaner than the spells of these madmen with their chanting slogans, their howling worship of ancient gods. Our crime is that we have fought evil with evil, and apparently we have lost.

“But the day will come. Those who take the sword must perish by the sword; those that take whips shall die beneath them, and those who wield the axe will lie beneath it.”

The words moved Krantz until he remembered she was possessed; a witch, a lunatic. But she was beautiful. That long white throat—he’d strike it there—

“Let them rave,” Grunert chuckled. “But you wanted to see me about something, Krantz?”

“It does not matter. Some other time,” muttered the Headsman.

“Very well.” Grunert faced the prisoners. “You will meet Krantz again tomorrow morning. Perhaps then he can match your sharp tongues with something sharper. Eh, Otto?”

“Yes,” Krantz whispered. He couldn’t tear his eyes from them. The long white hair, the long red hair. The slim necks. The greenish glow of their eyes. Creatures from another world, a world of dreams. And tomorrow they would become his dreams. His to possess. Symbols of the power of the axe. These were the heads he wanted. . . .

Abruptly, Otto Krantz turned and stumbled out of the room. He had remembered a duty to perform. A most important duty. He had to get back to his room and begin.

It wasn’t until he busied himself at the vital task that Krantz permitted himself to feel the thrill of anticipation again. But then it could no longer be held back, and Otto Krantz grinned in glee as he sat in the darkness of his room and delicately sharpened the headsman’s axe.

2

“You want I should let you have the heads from those two bodies and bury the corpses secretly? *Nein!*”

Fritz the scavenger shook his head in bewildered but emphatic denial.

“But nobody has registered to claim the bodies. No one will know if you quicklime them with the heads or not,” Krantz wheedled.

“I cannot do this thing,” Fritz grumbled.

Otto Krantz smiled.

“Fifty marks in it for you,” he whispered. Fritz blinked. But still he shook his head.

“I can get you extra butter rations,” Krantz murmured. “I will talk to the District Leader tomorrow.”

Fritz sighed. “I would do it for you without pay,” he said. “But I cannot. You see, the Fulgers are not going to be beheaded after all.”

“What?” Krantz reacted with a shocked grimace. “But the Inspector himself told me—”

Fritz shrugged. “I have just come from Headquarters. It was decided to drop the sorcery charge as foolish. The murder charge was upheld. They will die early in the morning, before a firing squad. Shot, not beheaded.”

Then and only then did Otto Krantz realize how much the possession of those two heads meant to him.

He had come away from his room in the middle of the night, carrying his axe in its velvet case. He had scurried through the streets, his official evening dress gaining him free passage from any SS troopers encountered on the way. He had hurried here to the little room beneath the cell blocks where Fritz the scavenger dwelt. And all the while he had been hugging the thought of what was to come, gloating over the attainment of his goal. Now the opportunity had slipped away.

With it, something slipped in Otto Krantz ’s brain. He could feel it, the usurpation of his consciousness by that single pulsing urge. He couldn’t define the sensation. He knew only one thing—he must get those heads.

They hung before him in midair, those mocking twin faces. One with long white curls, one with red. They were laughing at his confusion, his dismay, his defeat.

His defeat? Never.

Krantz thought fast, spoke rapidly.

“It is still true that no one has claimed the bodies?”

“Yes, that is so.”

“Then after the Fulgers are shot, you will still take them to the lime vats?”

“I suppose.”

“Who has signed the papers for execution?”

“No one, of course. You remember. Inspector Grunert always does that when he arrives, first thing in the morning.”

Krantz rubbed his hands. “So no orders have actually been issued yet. No firing squad is appointed, no time has been set?”

“That is true.”

“Very well, then. Fritz, I offer a hundred marks to you for the heads.”

“But there will be no heads, I tell you—they’ll be shot.”

Krantz smiled. “No they won’t! I’m taking the Fulgers out to the yard right now. I’ll get the job over with before the official ceremony begins at dawn.”

“But the orders—”

“Who will know? I’ll tell Grunert I picked up the order along with the rest at his office and took the liberty of assigning a squad to do the job, just to save him the trouble. He’ll sign the order afterwards and forget about it. He’ll never bother to ask who did the shooting, and since the bodies are unclaimed, you can cart them away.”

“The risk, they’ll see you do it—”

“No one will see. I shall bring them here myself.”

“Here, to my room?”

“I’ll tidy it up again for you, my fastidious friend.”

“No, I won’t permit it. We’ll be caught!”

“*Fritz!*”

Krantz’s voice was very soft when he uttered the name. But his face was hard. His hands, his butcher’s hands, were harder as they closed about the throat of the old scavenger.

Fritz fell back, choking. “Yes—yes—but hurry. It’s nearly dawn now.”

Krantz hurried.

He picked up the necessary papers in the Inspectors office. He raced down the silent, night-lined halls to the cell blocks, located a blinking guard, and bawled orders to the surprised fellow in convincing tones.

“Where’s the escort?” the guard protested.

“Upstairs, waiting,” snapped Krantz.

“You’re going to take them up alone?”

“You saw the orders. Get the Fulgers for me. At once, *dummkopf!*”

Befuddled, the guard led him to the cell.

“ *Raus!*”

The Fulgers were waiting. Yes, they were waiting, and their green eyes gleamed in the murky dawn.

There was no trouble. They preceded Krantz up the stairs without a word. The Headsman followed, slamming the outer door in the guard’s face.

“This way,” said Otto Krantz. He indicated a door.

Fulger and his daughter obeyed. The outer halls were deserted and Krantz, with a pounding heart, knew that they would reach Fritz’s quarters without being seen.

They did.

Fritz had everything in readiness. He’d hauled out an extra block of ice, and the axe was imbedded deeply therein, to keep the edge sharp. He had set up the official block as well. The basket and sawdust were waiting. It was all done in the proper regulation manner, just as it would be outside. He handed Otto Krantz the Headsman’s mask.

Krantz donned it.

Joachim and Eva Fulger stood against the wall of the little room under the cell blocks and stared. The old man turned to Krantz.

“But the court decreed that we be shot,” he murmured. “Why the axe? And why here, inside? Where are the guards, where are the officials—”

The bony fingers of Otto Krantz raked across his mouth.

“Silence!”

Eva’s expression did not change. She merely opened her mouth a trifle and screamed.

Krantz stopped that. Her curls helped. Twisted expertly about her throat, they muffled further outcry.

Fritz had the old man kneeling now. He kicked the block into place.

Krantz drew the axe from the ice.

There was a deathly silence in the little room.

A deathly silence. . . .

“I warn you,” murmured Joachim Fulger. “As ye sow, so shall ye reap.” Krantz had a sharp retort for that. The axe—

The nightmare was over. Cleaning the room, hiding the bodies until they were ready for the lime, getting the burlap sack—Fritz tended to all that.

Otto Krantz appeared in the courtyard promptly at dawn, ready for his official duties. Grunert was there, and some others. The seven victims were led out. Krantz labored.

It was all a red blur. He plodded through his task mechanically now, as he had in the slaughterhouse long ago. The significance was gone from the moment. Sheep bleated, sheep died.

He could hardly wait to get home. . . .

Grunert casually inquired about the Fulgers, after the executions were over. Krantz mentioned taking the liberty of arranging for the firing squad on his own authority, then quite indifferently presented the order for signing. Grunert shrugged, signed without reading, and sent it along with the rest for the official files.

It was over, then.

Fritz had his hundred marks in a wallet.

And Otto Krantz—he had his sack. He hugged it to his breast as he sped through the streets toward home. No need to stop for food or drink today. There was a substitute for food and drink in the sack—for here were dreams come true.

Krantz ran the last few blocks, his feet moving in rhythm with his pulsing heart.

When he locked himself in the room, he was almost afraid to look, for a moment.

Suppose they had *changed!* But they had not changed.

White-haired Joachim and auburn-tressed Eva stared up at him with glowing green eyes. Their faces were set in grimaces of undying hate.

And Krantz stared, stared as Perseus stared into the countenance of Medusa.

He gazed at their Gorgonic grinning and laughed aloud. Someone seeing him right now might think him mad, he reflected. But he was not mad. Not he, Otto Krantz, Official Headsman of the Third Reich. No madman could have been as clever, as cunning, as crafty as he.

These two had been mad. Mad, with their babbling of sorcery and witchcraft. They had not even had the sense to be afraid of death. They had mocked him, ridiculed him, called him a crude barbarian.

Well, perhaps he was a barbarian. A headhunter, maybe. Like those Indians in South America—Jivaros, weren't they? That's what he was, a headhunter!

Krantz laughed.

They had mocked him, so now he mocked them. He talked to the heads for a long time. He flung their words in their teeth. 'Those that live by the axe shall perish beneath it," they had said. And, "as ye sow, so shall ye reap."

Krantz told them what he thought of that. He told them a great deal. After a while he no longer realized that he was talking to the dead. The heads seemed to nod and shake in answer to his words. The grins expanded sardonically.

They were laughing at him again!

Krantz grew angry. He shouted at the heads. He shouted so loudly that at first he didn't hear the knocking on his door.

Then, when it rose to thunderous crescendo, he turned.

With a start, he realized it was already dusk. Where had the day gone to?

The knocking persisted.

Krantz got out the burlap bag, filled it, and shoved it under his bed. Then he answered the door, straightening his collar and striving to control the trembling of his lips.

" *Lieber Gott*, let me in!"

It was Fritz, the scavenger. He stood quivering in the doorway until Otto Krantz dragged him across the threshold by the scruff of the neck. "What is it?"

"The Fulgers—their bodies have been claimed by a relative. A cousin, I think. He comes tonight to take them for burial."

"No, he can't do that!"

"But he is, he has received permission. And we shall be found out, and it will mean the axe for us."

Krantz managed to control his voice. He thought fast, frantically. Desperation blossomed into inspiration.

"Where are the bodies now?" he whispered.

"I have them out at the lime pits, behind the walls—near the old quarry."

"And this cousin of the Fulgers will not come for them until late tonight?"

"That is right. He has received permission to bring a hearse and two coffins."

Otto Krantz smiled. "Good. We shall be all right, then. This cousin of the Fulgers will not examine the bodies too closely, I think. He will not even bother to search for bullet wounds."

"But they are headless—"

"Exactly." A smile crept over Krantz's face. Even in the twilight Fritz could see that smile, and he shuddered. "What is it you will do?"

"Do you remember the last words of Joachim Fulger?" Krantz whispered. "Yes. As ye sow, so shall ye reap. That's from the Bible, isn't it?"

"Exactly." Krantz grinned. 'The old fool meant it as a warning. Instead, it will be our salvation."

"But I don't see—"

"Never mind. Go at once to the shop down the street. Purchase five yards of strong catgut and a surgical needle. I will meet you at the lime pits tonight at eight. I'll bring the sack with me. Now do you understand?"

Fritz understood. He was still shuddering as Krantz pushed him out into the hall toward the stairs.

It was a grisly ordeal. They worked in darkness, lest a light betray their presence to SS troopers on guard in the pits beyond.

They crouched in the little shed in utter blackness and groped their way about the business in silence. Fortunately, there was no trouble in locating the bodies. Fritz had carefully set them aside for immediate interment.

The rest was up to Krantz. He was no surgeon, but his fingers held a skill born of utter desperation. If he bungled the task, his life was forfeit, and he knew it. He strung the catgut and sewed.

The needle rose and fell, rose and fell, rose and fell in darkness as Otto Krantz pursued his fanciwork.

And then it was done—done amidst the shuddering whimpers that rose from Fritz's frantic throat.

But Krantz held his nerve to the last. It was he who added the final touch—binding the high collars about the two white throats and carefully patting the prison shirts into place beneath. His sense of touch served him well in this last gesture of precaution. At last he sighed, signifying that the task was complete.

Fritz wanted to bolt for it then. Krantz whispered that he must wait, must hide by the wall across the way from the shed, until they saw the cousin actually come and take the bodies away. Then and only then would he be certain of their safety.

So they waited, waited until midnight in the darkness. What phantasms it held for Fritz, Otto Krantz could not say. But as he stared into the night he saw the grinning faces of Joachim and Eva Fulger hanging bodiless in midair, their eyes alive with undying mockery.

Krantz pressed his eyelids together, but the faces remained, their leering mouths twisted as though in an effort to speak from beyond the barrier of death.

What were they trying to tell him?

Krantz didn't know. He didn't want to know. The hands which had wielded the surgical needle so expertly now hung limply at his sides as he waited.

Then the hearse came. The cousin, escorted by a guard, went into the little shed. Two mortician’s assistants brought the coffins. Krantz held his breath as they disappeared inside the shed.

They were not inside long. Soon they reappeared, carrying the closed coffins. They did not speak, there was no sign of agitation. The coffins were placed inside the hearse and the car drove away.

It was then that Krantz broke and ran, sobbing, from the scene.

He was safe. Everything was over, and he was safe. The heads were back on their bodies.

He got to his room somehow. Perhaps he might snatch a few hours of sleep before dawn. Then he must get up and return to duty as though nothing had happened. But now, to sleep—

But Otto Krantz did not sleep.

The heads were back on their bodies, yet they would not go away. They were waiting for Krantz in his room. He saw them hanging in the shadows, even when he turned on the lights.

They hung there—the head of the old man with the long white hair, and the head of the girl with her flaming curls—and they laughed at Krantz. They laughed at him.

Krantz bared his teeth.

Let them laugh! He was Otto Krantz, Headsman of the Reich. Krantz, the executioner, whom all men feared.

He had outsmarted them after all. Now they would be buried away in a grave and no one would ever know that Krantz had murdered them.

Krantz told them this in whispers, and they nodded to each other, sharing secrets. But Krantz did not mind. He was no longer afraid.

He almost welcomed the coming of dawn in this changed mood. He donned his immaculate evening dress carefully. He brushed his stiff collar into place before the bureau. The heads laughed at him over his shoulder in the mirror, but he didn’t care about that now.

He swaggered through the street on his way to Headquarters, cradling the axe in its case against his brawny chest. A passing guard drew stiffly to attention as Krantz marched by.

Krantz laughed. There—wasn't that proof of his importance, his cleverness? Let the heads understand that he was a man of position, of power.

Otto Krantz knew he had nothing to fear. He would go about his duties today without question. He squared his shoulders and marched up the steps, into the outer office. He wasn't worried. He knew no one else could see the heads but himself.

He smiled at the man behind the desk. That was the way—brazen it out! "I'd like to see Inspector Grunert, please. About today's orders. Is he here yet?"

"The Inspector left word for you to go right in."

There. The Inspector was waiting for him! That's the kind of a man Otto Krantz was. Inspectors waited for his arrival. He smiled derisively at the heads. Then he strutted into Inspector Grunert's office. The Inspector *was* waiting.

Krantz realized that just as soon as the two Gestapo men stepped from behind the door and pinned his arms close to his sides. They took the axe, they held him tightly, he could not struggle, he could only gape, he could only pant, he could only listen to what Grunert was saying.

"Otto Krantz, I arrest you in the name of the Third Reich, for the murder of Joachim and Eva Fulger."

But what was he talking about? The Fulgers were in their graves by now, buried.

No—they weren't.

The Inspector was pulling the sheet from the table over in the corner.

And Otto Krantz stared. He saw the heads again, and this time everyone could see them. They were grinning up at him now from over the tops of the sheets.

Somehow he dragged his captors forward with him. He bent over the bodies. He wanted to know how, know why they had been discovered.

They looked all right. The heads had been sewed on tightly. Perfectly. The high collars were still in place. Nothing was wrong with his work, nothing looked suspicious. Why, the collars hadn't even been pulled back to disclose any of the sewing!

Then what was wrong?

Krantz gazed at the still bodies, trying to read the secret. He didn't hear any of Inspector Grunert's mumblings about madmen, about murder. He was trying to remember what had happened.

"As ye sow," the old man had warned. "As ye sow—"

Then Otto Krantz's gaze traveled up again to the heads of the dead wizard and his daughter. He screamed, once.

"Too bad you didn't have any light to work with in that shed," Inspector Grunert purred.

Otto Krantz didn't hear him.

He was staring madly at the grinning heads of the old man and the girl—the heads he had sewed back on in the darkness and inadvertently *switched*.

End of Your Rope

Any time you get the urge to pick on a Hindu, remember that he knows how to use a rope as more than just a lethal necktie!

HAVE YOU EVER been desperate for a meal? Willing to do anything for food? Well, I was. And so I went to Jack’s Shack to eat. You can see how starved I was to risk a dinner at Jack’-s Shack. Because as a cook, Jack takes up where the Borgia family left off.

But I did it. Ordered a chicken dinner and actually ate it. I was just banging my way through the drumsticks when I heard a cackle. This didn’t surprise me—from the toughness of the chicken I could easily believe it was still alive.

Then the cackle came again. I wiped the gravy out of my eyes and looked up.

Sure enough. There he was—the tall man with the tall tales—Lefty Feep. In person, and in a new suit, as usual. A very glad plaid, in an orange and green combination which matched his yellow tie, purple shirt, and the blue circles under his eyes. Sometimes, when I see Feep I wish I were colorblind. And after he starts talking, I’d just as soon be deaf, too. Heaven knows I’m already dumb—from listening to him.

But there was Lefty Feep, and I had to make the best of it.

“Hi, Bob, what’s with the mob?” he greeted me.

“Sit down,” I invited. “I’m just finishing dinner.”

"Is that a chicken you are picking?" he asked.

"It must be—it's too small for a vulture," I answered. "Here, how about a wing?"

"A wing?" Lefty Feep's voice rose with his eyebrows. "A wing is not the thing!"

"What's the matter, aren't you hungry?"

"Absolutely. But please—no wings!"

"What's the trouble?" I persisted. "Don't you like chicken wings?"

"It is not that I do not like wings—I merely hate them," Feep explained. "Every time I think of them I think of Arthur Arthur. And every time I think of Arthur Arthur I think of a rope. And every time I think of a rope I get ready to hang myself."

"Why, what happened?"

I ought to have known better than to ask that question. Lefty Feep leaned across the table and shook a wishbone in my face.

"It is a very gory story," he whispered. "It is a tale to make you pale and quail without fail. A narration of damnation."

"Some other time, Lefty," I said, hastily. "Right now I'm all tied up. I'm at the end of my rope."

"You are at the end of your rope? Wait until you hear about the rope my pal is at the end of."

"Later," I pleaded. "I have a heavy date."

"Tell her to reduce," snapped Lefty Feep. "You must hear about what happens to my pal."

"Must I?" I said.

And then, as Lefty Feep pushed me back into the seat and held me firmly in place with both hands, I knew that I must.

Lefty Feep opened up his mouth, I opened up my ears, and the story came.

THE OTHER day I suddenly wake up with a terrific craving to have some fruit. So naturally, when I get dressed I head down the street to a tavern. There is naturally no better place to find the fruit I crave—such as the cherries at the bottom of Manhattan and the lemons on the side of Tom Collins. Otherwise I seldom go into a tavern, unless, of course, I want a drink.

Any kind of how, there I am in this alcohol hall, just stepping up to the bar, when I spot an old pal of mine. To be exact, he spots me—with a couple drops from the drink he is holding in trembling fingers.

"Why, hello Arthur," I say, surprised.

"Well cut off my allowance and call me broke, if it ain't Lefty Feep!" bawls this personality. "Have a drink, fink! Come on, pal."

I take a not so good look at my pal Arthur and see that he is not exactly over on the alkaline side. He is, to be candid, at least three sheets and a pillowcase in the wind.

The bartender evidently agrees with me, because he suddenly leans over and taps Arthur on the shoulder.

"Arthur," he says, "why don't youse go home? Youse is drunk."

"Give me another drink," Arthur insists.

The bartender shrugs. "Lissen, my boy," he says, "why do youse get drunk, anyway?"

Arthur sneers. "You put twelve scotches in front of me and then you ask why I get drunk?" he shrieks, sarcastically. "You might as well cut off my head and ask me why I'm bleeding."

I stick my tongue out at the discussion.

"Arthur," I tell him, "the bartender is right. You're a good newspaper reporter, aren't you? Why waste your time hanging around taverns? You look like a bar rag."

"I have two reasons," Arthur sighs. "The first is my name. Arthur Arthur! There's a name for you. Arthur Arthur! With a name like that I should live in Walla Walla and eat tutti-frutti until I get shot by a dum-dum bullet! I hate my name, but every day I have to see it all over a newspaper as the byline of the stories I write."

"But you write good stories for the papers," I console him.

"I am coming to that," moans Arthur Arthur. "My second reason. I have pretty good luck for a while—lots of accidents, drownings, murders—all that a man could ask for. But what happens this week? Nothing! Not even a teensy-weensy little axe slaying! I tell you, the peace and quiet around this town makes me sick."

He stares at me. "Give me a torso!" he pleads. "Just a single torso! Stick a few knives in it. Wrap it in brown paper and leave it at the railroad station for the cops to find it. That's all I ask!"

"I am sorry, Arthur," I tell him, "I am very sorry, but I do not have a spare torso."

Arthur Arthur ignores me and blobbers on.

"This morning my editor gives me an assignment to go down and meet a customer arriving on the *S.S. Leukemia* or some such boat. This customer is some kind of Hindu fakir on his way to confer with Einstein about the theory of relativity.

"Just imagine! Me, a crack feature writer, getting such an assignment! I am not meeting Paulette Goddard, either. This Hindu will show plenty of limb, but he won't be any Marlene Dietrich. Can you figure me picking up some little brown midget in a bath towel and jabbering to him in good old Bronx Hindustani?"

Arthur Arthur takes another drink. I pat his shoulder.

"You shouldn't be so sensitive, my boy," I tell him.

"All artists are sensitive," grunts Arthur Arthur. "Give me a good murder!"

"There, there. Maybe you will get a murder tomorrow," I console him. "We can't all have murders whenever we want them, see?"

"Well, I want one now," insists Arthur Arthur. "You don't know how it is with me. I got to have one."

"Listen," I squawk. "Don't be childish. You and your murders! Why not go down to the boat and get this thing over with? You don't want to get thrown out on your assignment."

"Maybe—" says Arthur Arthur.

"I know it hurts your professional pride," I coax, "but we all have our ups and downs. A Hindu today, but who knows? Maybe a great big passion slaying for you tomorrow."

"All right," says Arthur Arthur, "I'll do it. Call me a taxi."

"You're a taxi," I tell him. But bum gags aside, Arthur Arthur calls a cab and then sails out of the joint for his interview.

THE REST of the story I get later from him, but I will carry on from here.

Arthur Arthur drives down to the dock and flashes his press card. He goes up the gangplank of the ship and asks a steward for directions.

"Where," he inquires, "can I find Omar Khayyamer?"

The steward gives him a dirty look and then a cabin number on another deck. Arthur Arthur plods up to the stateroom. He stands in front of the door. Here it is now. A meeting with a little Gandhi in triangle trousers. Oh well!

The door opens. A tall drip in evening clothes smiles out. He has straight dark hair and grey eyes. Perhaps he is the butler.

"Pardon me," pipes Arthur. "I'm looking, for Omar Khayyamer."

"Don't look any further," says the tall drip.

"But I'm a reporter—I'm here for an interview—I must see him."

"Well, take a good look, then."

"You mean, you're the swami. the Hindu whatchamacallit?"

"I'm not Andy Hardy," says the guy.

"But you speak English and you don't look like a Hindu," objects Arthur Arthur.

"Come in and sit down," says Omar Khayyamer.

So in goes Arthur and down he sits, still staring at the good-looking man in evening clothes.

"Say," he mumbles, "I'm pretty sorry I doubt your word. My name is Arthur Arthur, and I want an interview—"

"And probably a drink," suggests Omar, smiling. "Will scotch do?"

"Always does."

So they drink.

"I want to explain why I am so skeptical," Arthur says. "I expect to meet some old skinny dried-up guy with a pair of diapers on. I figure he will keep a goat in the room, or something."

"Sorry to disappoint you," says Omar. "But I suppose I could buy a goat."

"Where?"

"Why almost anywhere. I'm a stranger here, but maybe you could help me."

"Now you're kidding me, Mr. Khayyamer."

"Just call me Butch."

"Butch?"

"They do at Cambridge." Omar smiles. "Yes, and at Oxford and the Sorbonne too, I'm afraid I'm not a very picturesque figure for a Hindu swami. Too civilized for a good story. I'm just in this country to interview Einstein and discuss certain mathematical formulae and postulates. It's all here in the briefcase, but it won't interest your editor and readers."

Omar points at a little dark case on the table.

Arthur sighs. "Too bad," he remarks. "I was kind of hoping for a little excitement."

Just as he asks for it, he gets it.

All at once a terrific series of revolver shots rattles through the walls from the next stateroom.

Arthur jumps to his feet like he is being shot out of an invisible cannon.

But quick as be is, Omar is quicker.

He runs to the door connecting with the other stateroom. He tugs at it. It is locked. Then Omar smiles and holds out his hands.

He walks *through* the door!

Maybe it is an illusion or maybe it is the scotch, but Arthur Arthur gasps. He runs over to the door and tugs it. This time it opens fast. So fast that Arthur can't figure out whether he just sees a mirage or not.

All he knows is that he is standing in the stateroom doorway and watching a very active scene.

There are four men in the room. Three of them are very busy. The fourth man is very dead.

He lies on the floor, and standing over him is a bearded big guy, holding a smoking revolver.

This shocks Arthur not a little, because there is a sign on the wall which definitely says NO SMOKING.

The other two bearded men are pulling out drawers and peering under the mattress, looking for something.

They are not exactly expecting to see swami Omar and Arthur coming in on them so suddenly. So they are startled for a moment.

Then they turn on the heat. The guy with the gun jumps.

Two bullets sing a merry tune over Arthur's head.

The other two lugs have no guns, so they just point their beards at the swami Omar and then dive for him in a flying tackle.

Arthur Arthur dives on the bed.

When he does, he trips over the carpet on the floor. He lies there, expecting any minute to feel a bullet in his back, or what he has sticking out from under the bedclothes in place of his back.

But nothing happens. He turns around and sees the guy with the gun bending down where the carpet is turned over. He is grabbing what lies underneath it. A briefcase.

MEANWFIILE the swami Omar is pretzel-bending the two hoods who tackle him. He has them both tied into knots, and his bright eyes sparkle when he notices the third guy picking up the briefcase he finds.

“Arthur,” yells Omar. “Quick—get that briefcase!”

Arthur Arthur does a very brave thing. He actually obeys Omar and charges down on the guy with the briefcase. He snatches it and runs back into the swami’s stateroom.

The bearded guy with the gun chases after him. And Arthur Arthur, crossing into the other stateroom, trips again. He feels the big lug bearing down on him. He feels the iron butt of the revolver crack his head.

And then he feels from nothing. Arthur Arthur definitely gets deprived of his consciousness. He is knocked very far out.

When he wakes up he is sitting on the floor of swami Omar’s stateroom. Omar is bending over him. Arthur sits up. His hand trembles. Omar puts the scotch bottle in it.

“What happens?” Arthur asks, between gulps.

The swami shakes his head. “They depart with the briefcase,” he explains. “Fortunately, they do not make a mistake and take mine.”

“But who are they?” asks Arthur Arthur.

“Enemy agents, I believe. Evidently they follow our friend next door across the ocean in order to gain possession of his brief-case. And they want it enough to turn him into our *late* friend.

“When you get knocked out I come in here on the run, but the man with the gun skips out the door with the briefcase. Meanwhile my two playmates also vanish from the other cabin. Now that place is filled with reporters, police, and all the other parasites that come to prey on the bodies of the dead.”

Arthur Arthur hears a pounding outside the swami Omar’s door. Omar also listens.

“Arthur,” he whispers, “you must help me get out of here. I don’t want to run into a lot of publicity—it will be a poor reflection on my forthcoming visit with Einstein. How can we get away unobserved?”

Arthut Arthur smiles. “Why don’t you just walk through the solid door like you do before?”

Omar sighs. “You notice that, do you?” he murmurs. “Well, I’ll have to explain about it later. But how can we get out now?”

Arthur strolls over to the stateroom door and opens it a crack. He sticks out his arm and jerks two white-coated stewards into the room. The stewards start to yell, but Arthur knows from experience that the best way to gag a man is to stuff dollar bills down his throat. So in a few minutes the stewards consent to take off their white jackets and give them to Arthur and Omar.

“Come on,” says Arthur. “Out we go, and don’t say a word.”

When they reach the door Omar turns around.

“I nearly forgot my briefcase!” he yells. He picks it up from the floor where it falls in the excitement, and they elbow their way out, disguised as stewards.

Passengers and boat officials collar them.

“Who’s in there? What are the cops doing? Do you see that Hindu guy?”

Arthur Arthur smiles. “I don’t know anything,” he says. “I just go in to change the bath towels.” Then he dives through the mob, pulling Omar after him. They get down the gangplank and into a taxi.

“Where are we going?” asks Omar.

“Some place where I can get an exclusive story from you on all this,” Arthur tells him. “That’s what I am sent out to do by my editor.”

“But I don’t want to go to a newspaper office,” objects the swami Omar.

“Who says anything about an office?” Arthur comes back. “We are going to a cafe and relax. There is nothing I rather do than sit back and relax on my expense account. It is very comfortable, being padded.”

Sure enough, Arthur takes Omar to a very classy night spot. Nothing less than the Herring Room of the Bismark Hotel.

A blast of elegant perfume hits them as they enter.

“Ah,” sighs Arthur, recognizing it with delight. “Gin!”

THEY DOFF their hats to the check-room girl and then go out on the dance-floor where people are scraping shins to the orchestra tooting of Blue Serge and his Musical Mothballs.

"Very elegant and impressive," breathes Omar, staring around at the host of gay, sophisticated celebrities from Nebraska and Oklahoma.

They take a table. The waiter ambles over.

"One scotch," Arthur orders.

"One scotch for two gentlemen?" sneers the waiter.

"One bottle of scotch, dummy!" yells Arthur Arthur.

One bottle of scotch it is, and it does strange things to both of them.

"Now what about this trick of walking through doors?" asks Arthur, a couple of drinks later. "Are you one of these Hindu mystics? One of those guys that uses a bed of nails for a sofa and eats butterflies?"

Omar smiles. "I pick up a little occult ability, yes," he admits. "It is just a case of mind over matter. And speaking of matter—can't we order some food?"

"Wait a minute," suggests Arthur Arthur. "Let me take a squint at the bill so far. This is one of the biggest gyp joints in town."

Arthur calls the sneering waiter and takes a look at the bill. He whispers to swami Omar. "Cover charge—$15. Service charge—$10. Scotch—$10."

He turns to the waiter who is ready to take an order.

"Bring us a couple glasses of water," he says.

The waiter sneers again, but he brings them the water and a very dirty look.

"Too bad," whispers Arthur to Omar. "Me taking you to such a place. We can only afford water now on my expense account."

The swami Omar smiles at Arthur. Then he smiles at the waiter, who is still standing around hoping to give these two dead-beats the bum's rush.

The waiter doesn't like to see Omar smile. But there is something else he does not like to see either. Because Omar suddenly waves his hand over the glass of water and the water disappears. Instead something yellow and bubbling takes its place.

Then Omar does the same pass over Arthur's glass. Same result.

"Have some champagne," Omar suggests.

Arthur has some champagne.

The waiter had a fit.

Omar smiles up at him, winking at Arthur Arthur on the sly. "Now about that food," he says. "I'm still hungry."

He turns to the wall. There is a potted plant sitting there for decoration. Omar just reaches out and begins to pluck fruit from the fern. He gets grapes, bananas, peaches, oranges, and cherries.

The waiter gets convulsions.

All at once a pineapple appears in Omar's hand.

"I don't order this—take it back!" Omar yells at empty air. The pineapple disappears.

So does the color from the waiter's face.

Then Omar turns to the waiter very politely. "Have a banana?" he urges.

The waiter finds his voice. "I don't want no banana," he gasps. "Youse is a witch!"

He scuttles off. Omar smiles and peels an orange.

"How do you do it?" Arthur Arthur marvels.

"Simple for a *yogi* adept," Omar explains. "I know the planes and angles. Planes and angles seem to divide matter into far separate physical entities, when in reality all corporeal structure is homogenous."

"The hell you better!" remarks Arthur Arthur.

"Now take this fruit. It's real, isn't it? Just as real as the fern which is standing here all the time. The only trick is to make the fruit appear on the fern. Merely a matter of conjunction. Proper understanding of the physical laws behind metaphysics does the trick. Planes and angles, that's all."

BUT ARTHUR ARTHUR is not listening. He is looking at the planes and angles exhibited by two young damsels who now stand before the table.

One of these damsels is a redhead. Her hair is so vivid that all she needs is roller skates to look like hell on wheels.

The other tomato is a blonde, athletic type. The kind that can run the gamut of emotions and still be plenty speedy.

Arthur Arthur, being a gentleman, knows what to do when two unescorted young ladies appear on the scene.

“Hello, babe,” he says, politely.

The blonde damsel, also very polite, sits down in his lap. The redhead drapes herself around Omar.

“What a pleasant American custom,” he remarks, pulling two more glasses out of nowhere and snapping his fingers. A bottle of champagne thumps dowfi on the table.

“Who throws that?” asks the blonde, looking up.

“It comes out of nowhere,” says the redhead, with a puzzled look.

“But it’s right here,” Arthur Arthur grins, filling up the glasses.

“Do you do this?” the redhead persists, looking at Omar. “Are you some kind of a magician or such?”

“That’s right,” Arthur breaks in. “We are both magicians. He’s the kind that makes the drinks appear. I am the kind that makes them disappear.” And he swallows very quickly.

“Why what have you got here?” asks the redhead, picking up Omar’s briefcase and beginning to open it.

“Put that down!” Omar yells. The redhead giggles and puts it down.

But Arthur Arthur notices her glance off to another table and wink.

He looks at that table on the other aide of the room. Looks and sees the three bearded men who have the fight in the stateroom!

Arthur turns to Omar. “Grab that briefcase!” he yells. “These dames are sent here by those crooks from the boat!”

But he warns too late. The redhead jumps up, running with the briefcase. Meanwhile the blonde pulls out another briefcase from under her evening wrap and slaps it on the table.

“Fair exchange is no robbery,” she mutters, then beats it after her friend. The three bearded bozos are waiting for the girls at the end of the room.

All at once Omar stands up. He stretches out his hands and makes history in the Herring Room. The Herring Room served a lot of bad liquor in its time and not a few Mickey Finns, but this is the first evening when all the customers see snakes at once.

And that is exactly what they see when Omar stretches out his pinkies.

Directly in front of the two fleeing damsels, little wiggling green crawlers appear. They slither around the ankles of the dancers and make unpleasant sounds. So do the dancers.

“Snakes!” yells the redhead. She turns around and runs back to the table. Arthur intercepts her pass and grabs the briefcase again. Now he and Omar have two briefcases.

The customers have snakes and hysterics. They are running to and fro, and the ones that run to, bump into the ones that run fro.

Arthur notices that the biggest of the three beards is pulling out a revolver again. It seems to be a habit with him.

“This is where we come in!” he yells to Omar.

They hold the briefcases very tightly and plunge towards an exit. A path is opened up by a whistling bullet scooting overhead. They use the path. The beards chase after them out the door.

“Taxi!” yells Arthur Arthur, hitting the street. They hurl into a waiting cab.

“Where to, buddy?” asks the driver.

“Anywhere that’s the hell out of here!” screams Arthur.

IN THE nick of time they whizz away. Behind them the bearded bozos jump up and down on the pavement.

“What is all this?” Arthur asks Omar, shivering against the cab seat.

“Evidently our friends make a mistake this afternoon,” Omar explains.

"In the haste of their escape they take my briefcase instead of the one they are searching for. When they discover this, they trail us to the Herring Room and get the girls to try and switch briefcases again."

"Must be something pretty important in that briefcase to take all these chances," Arthur suggests.

The swami Omar nods. He opens the zipper of the second case, then whistles. "Naval plans!" he murmurs. "No wonder. They are spies, all right."

"And what's in your own briefcase?" asks Arthur.

"Something even more important, that I wish to show to Professor Einstein," Omar tells him.

Suddenly the cab stops.

Arthur blinks. "Say, where are we?" he mumbles.

The cab driver sticks his nose around. "From the tenor of your remarks," he says, "I infer that youse wish to visit another jernt."

Sure enough, they are parked in front of a little dingy tavern way out in the sticks.

Omar shrugs. "Might as well go in," he suggests. "This place looks quiet. You and I must decide what to do about all this."

They pay the driver and go into a very ordinary-looking little bar-room. It is quite deserted. There is a balcony and stairway in back.

The only personality in the joint is a little bartender with an outsize schnozz.

"Evening, gents," he drawls. "What's it gonna be?"

They order scotch and sit at a table, eyeing the two briefcases.

"Now what to do about all this?" Arthur begins.

His question is answered for him right away.

Because the door of the tavern opens very quickly. Then it shuts and locks very quickly. And the three bearded bozos are in the tavern.

"So!" gasps Arthur Arthur. "That cab driver—"

But there is no time for conversation. The biggest beard is already doing his usual trick—pulling out the revolver.

The swami grabs his briefcase. The other one lies on the table, but Arthur Arthur does not stop to pick it up. He races for the balcony stairs after the swami.

The three spies charge them. When Omar gets to the head of the stairs he turns. He yanks out at the rails and wrenches the wooden steps loose. They crash to the floor.

Arthur and the swami Omar stand on the balcony. The three whiskers stand below. A gun barks.

Arthur ducks down. But the bullet doesn't even come close. It hits—of all things—the tavern chandelier. The lights go out.

Arthur and Omar peer into the darkness. Down below the spies are lighting matches, fumbling at the briefcase on the table.

"It's the wrong one, by Gar!" comes a thick voice. "We got to get upstairs somehow."

Then Omar does a very surprising thing. He walks to the edge of the balcony and calls down at them.

"Gentlemen—you will find a rope in my briefcase. Throw it up here and I will tie it to the balcony rail. Then you can climb up and get your briefcase."

One of the beards calls back.

"What kind of trick are you making with us? Why do you change your mind?"

"What else can I do?" answers Omar. "I don't think the briefcase is worth the cost of my life. We'll make a bargain. If you climb up on a rope you can't shoot me. I will give you the briefcase and we will go our separate ways and forget the whole thing."

They go into a huddle downstairs. Finally the voice calls out again.

"We agree. I've got the rope from your briefcase. Here it comes."

THERE IS a swish and a thump, and the rope lands across the balcony rail. Omar's hands do things to the rope in the darkness.

“Are you selling out to these crooks?” Arthur whispers.

“This is the only way,” Omar tells him. He calls over the edge of the balcony. “Ready, now?”

Arthur can hear grunting as the bearded man climbs up the rope. Then the grunting dies away.

A voice comes from below. “Are you safe up there, Peter?”

“Quite safe.”

But it is swami Omar who speaks. The man on the rope says nothing.

“You two come up now,” Omar says, in a deep voice.

Arthur Arthur blinks in the dark as he hears the other two men climbing the rope. But where is the first man?

Suddenly the climbing and breathing sounds are gone.

And Omar laughs.

“See that?” he chuckles. “All three of them climb the rope.”

“What is all this?” asks Arthur.

Omar reaches into his pocket and pulls out a flashlight. He plays it on the rope. A most peculiar rope.

It is not tied to the balcony at all. It just stands straight up in the air.

There are no three spies on it. There isn’t even one spy.

On top of that, there is no top on the rope. No visible top. It just stands straight in the air and seems to go up into a kind of grayish cloud and fade away.

“What?” gulps Arthur Arthur, taking this all in.

“This is what I have in my briefcase,” Omar answers. “What I intend to take and show Professor Einstein.”

“But—”

“It’s the old Hindu rope trick!” explains Omar. “I just trick our three friends into climbing up a rope which makes them disappear into nowhere.” He smiles at Arthur Arthur: “This is the kind of thing you westerners refuse to believe. Now you can tell your editor you see it happen with your own eyes. And that’s that. Now we will climb down, take the rope, and then take this briefcase with the naval plans along to the authorities.” Omar glances down at the floor of the balcony where the briefcase is. Only it isn't, any more.

"I am robbed!" yells Omar. "One of those dogs must reach out when he passes the balcony level here and grab the briefcase. Now they've got it up there with them."

He faces Arthur Arthur with a slow stare.

"Those papers are very important," he says. "We must get them back."

"How?"

"Arthur, there is just one thing to do. You must climb up that rope and get back the second briefcase."

Arthur shudders. "Not on your life. I'm not going to be roped into climbing that thing!"

"But you must!"

"Why not climb up and get it yourself?"

"If I do, how would you get me down?" asks Omar.

"If I do, how would you get me down?" Arthur snaps back.

"Leave that to me," says swami Omar.

Arthur Arthur eyes the dangling rope. It is thick and brown, and it stands straight up in the air from the floor below. He can see every strand and thread in it, but when he stares up the rope just blurs off into nothing.

"Just what is up there?" he asks Omar.

Omar shrugs. "That is what I intend to discuss with Einstein," he says. "This rope is woven by the holy contemplants in the temple where I study metaphysics. Every strand is a prayer to the Infinite. All I know is that the rope is a link with that part of existence beyond our five senses. According to the theories of Einstein and the physicists, it could be a gateway to the Fourth Dimension."

Arthur shakes his head. "What you are giving me is not exactly a road map," he says.

"Why not climb up and find out?" the swami Omar coaxes. "I think beyond that rope lies the realm of what we call Imagination. It is from here that I get the champagne and the fruit and the serpents that apparently come from nowhere. I imagine them and they come from Imagination to existence. That is all I know. The rest is up to you.”

“Up to me?”

“Yes. Up the rope, which you will climb. You will find the three spies and get back the briefcase.”

“I rather be hanged with your lousy rope than climb it,” screams Arthur Arthur, passionately.

BUT OMAR steps forward suddenly. His hands shove out. Arthur Arthur topples backwards across the balcony rail. He tumbles, grabs empty air. Grabs the rope.

He hangs there. Then, with a groan, he tries to slide down. But he can’t! The rope tangles up under his feet in invisible knots.

Still groaning, he climbs up. He sticks out his hands pleading to Omar, like an organ-grinder’s monkey asking for pennies.

But Omar shakes his head. “Good luck!” he calls out. “I suggest that wherever you go, you stick close to the rope at all times.”

Arthur Arthur climbs a few feet more without knowing it. And then the rope seems to move of its own accord beneath his hands. The swami’s voice gets very faint and far away. The world turns to a gray mist, like the mist at the top of the rope.

Arid all at once Arthur feels himself shooting up—up through a ceiling that isn’t there, through a sky that doesn’t exist, and into the world beyond.

He stops in the middle of a cloudy plain. Nothing but mist all around him. He seems to be standing on something, but he can’t see it. He seems to be holding the rope with one hand, but he can’t see it. Looking down, he can’t even see himself!

He can’t see his own feet or his own hands!

Arthur closes his eyes and shudders. But there is nothing to shudder, because his body appears to disappear.

Only his mind is left. Omar is probably right. This is a world of pure Imagination.

There is nothing to rely on but his thoughts.

That's it! Maybe if he *thinks* of his body, he will see it! Arthur imagines himself. And sure enough, looking down, there he is. Right in the middle of the mist.

It is too much for Arthur Arthur. "I need a drink!" he thinks.

Sure enough, out of the mist comes a glass of scotch. Just like it does for swami Omar back on earth.

Arthur can see it. And he certainly can drink it.

Then he feels better. All at once he remembers his mission up here—somewhere there must be the three bearded bozos with the briefcase. But where? Where in this mist?

And how can he find them?

Then he thinks of it. He merely has to *imagine* that they are standing right next to him.

He imagines.

Nothing happens.

Then he remembers he forgets to think of them as being *visible.*

So he does. And there, standing on little clouds of mist at his left, are the three spies.

But without any briefcase!

Arthur remembers he must imagine the briefcase, too.

And there it is, in the leader's hand.

Here is where Arthur makes his mistake. "Hey!" he yells out, "throw that briefcase over to me!"

The bearded leader shakes his head.

"All right then," says Arthur Arthur. "I can *think* that you give me the briefcase."

Suddenly a gleam appears in the biggest beard's eye.

He catches on.

In two seconds Arthur suddenly plunges head over heels into space, falling down into the depths of the mist. A wind screams in his ears.

“He *thinks* I am falling,” Arthur realizes. He closes his own eyes and concentrates hard.

“I’ve got wings—I can’t fall,” he imagines.

Sure enough, a thump knocks against his shoulder blades. He stops falling and begins to flap. Looking around, he sees a lovely pair of white wings on his shoulders.

He flies back to the cloud of mast.

THE THREE are standing just as he leaves them. Quickly, Arthur Arthur imagines that the leader throws him the briefcase.

And the briefcase sails for his arms.

Then the leader’s eyes glitter again.

Arthur Arthur stretches out his arms to catch the briefcase. But it is not a briefcase that dives for his arms. It is a snarling lion!

Crazy like anything, Arthur forces himself to think fast. It is not a lion, he imagines. It is a balloon. The balloon lands gently on his shoulder—

And turns into an octopus!

Arthur feels the coils of the tentacles around his neck. He imagines they are not there.

“I wish those rats would strangle in their own beards!” he mutters.

And they do! The three spies reel back clawing at their necks as the barber-bushes rear up and choke them. The leader, Peter, just manages to gurgle, “Think yourselves free!”

In a second the three are facing Arthur once more. And he knows now that the game is up. There is only one way out of this. They understand, and they have three brains to work with against his one. If they all attack him—

Arthur shudders as a dozen arrows suddenly sink into his back, a bolt of lightning strikes his chest, and a big rock bounces on his skull.

He thinks just in time. “I can’t be hurt.”

As he tears the arrows out of his unwounded body, the three blink in astonishment. For a second he has them off guard with surprise.

He turns them into butterflies.

They turn themselves into machine guns.

Arthur Arthur makes himself transparent so the bullets go through him.

They turn him to steam. He evaporates, thinking wildly.

“This can’t go on,” he realizes. “They are too many for me. Wait—

I’ve got it!”

A second later there are a hundred Arthur Arthurs flapping wings in the air. The trio is surrounded.

But not for long. Another second and a thousand bearded spies appear.

Arthur Arthur turns into a thousand men, each fifty feet tall. But it is too much. He cannot hold such a thought and still act. Neither can the bearded bozos.

They return to their normal single bodies again. The spies stare at Arthur Arthur in a daze.

Quick as a flash, he wills that the briefcase come to his hands.

Then the leader of the anti-razor gang goes back to normal with a vengeance. He whips out the old familiar revolver of his.

Before he can shoot, Arthur Arthur wilts the barrel down to asparagus.

But he can’t go on. He can’t think. Desperate, he gets one last spurt of energy.

“We are all back at the bottom of the rope again!” he thinks.

There is a crash, a flash, and a smash.

IT IS A long time later that he wakes up on the tavern floor. Omar is bending over him with the bottle ready.

Arthur sits up. All around him are familiar objects. The coil of rope. Three bearded bodies. A briefcase. Omar picks up the rope and the briefcase.

"The police will arrive soon," he says. "Our three friends are unconscious and they can pick them up. Let us get out of here now, though. I must not delay my visit with Einstein."

Omar leads Arthur out. Arthur shakes his head. "Tell me it doesn't happen," he begs. "Those three lugs get tangled up in the rafters, don't they? I go up after them and we all fall down. I just imagine the rest."

Omar stares at him and shakes his head. He shrugs and smiles.

"Well, if it makes you feel any better," he says.

"Nothing makes me feel any better," Arthur answers. "Except maybe a drink."

"Get it yourself then," Omar tells him. "I must be on my way."

So Omar heads off in one direction and Arthur tails into the tavern where I meet him that afternoon.

I am still there, absorbing my fruit, and when he sees me he makes me sit down in a booth and tells me this story I tell you. Strange, is it not?

* * *

Lefty Feep sat back, shaking his head.

"Very strange," I admitted. "But I still don't understand why you won't eat chicken wings, or why Arthur Arthur is afraid of ropes, and all that. After all, he merely suffered from a little hypnotic experiment."

"Maybe," said Lefty Feep.

"No maybe about it," I answered. "It was pure hallucination. You and I know that the so-called Hindu rope trick is a fake. And certainly you don't believe any of that stuff about a world of Imagination lying at the other end of it, where whatever you think comes true."

"Of course I do," Feep told me.

"But even Arthur Arthur didn't believe it," I persisted.

Feep grinned.

"That is right. When he tells me the story he says he doesn't believe it really happens. Only when I take him to the doctor does he realise it is all a fact."

"You took Arthur to the doctor? Why?"

Feep grinned again.

"Because he makes one mistake when he wishes himself back down the rope in such a hurry. I must take him to the doctor right away, because he doesn't come down the same as when he went up."

"Meaning?"

"He has to go to the doctor and get those wings amputated!"

THE END

The Weird Tailor

Either he was working for a crazy man . . . or a practitioner of Black Magic.

I

ONLY a connoisseur of horrors would have appreciated Erik Conrad's window dummy.

It had been a cheap model to begin with—and the passage of twenty years had not improved its crudely moulded features, its awkward stance, or the general air of clumsiness inherent in face and form. There was something grotesque about the dummy, as if it had been created by the alien art of another world; as though a life-term from Outside had deliberately set about to model a "man" from a poor woodcut in an ancient book.

The brash smile, the jaunty little mustache, and the open candor of the staring blue eyes had all suffered the gnawings of Time, so that now the figure was minus an upper lip, the left corner of the mustache, and the entire right eye. A crack extended from the empty eye-socket up to the crown of the head and split the marcelled hair directly along the indented part. A chipped finger and a nick in the left wrist contributed to the gruesome aura of decay.

Certainly the suit Erik Conrad had draped over the dummy was just the garment which would be selected for the cheap client of a cheap mortician.

It was eminently appropriate to the corpse-like pallor of the window dummy, but the effect of the ensemble was well calculated to disturb the eyes of the sensitive observer.

Fortunately, Erik Conrad was not overly imaginative. He didn’t mind the sight of the leering dummy slumped in the shadows at one corner of his dingy little tailoring establishment. He was not affected by the spectacle of its hideously progressive decay, any more than he was affected by his own.

For the years had not dealt kindly with Erik Conrad, merchant tailor. He had suffered a disintegration comparable to that of the dummy since setting up a shop of his own on this side street. His blue eyes were faded from endless peering, his fingers twisted and calloused from stitching, his shoulders bent from stooping over the pressing table. The sparse brown hairs plastered against his sloping skull were slowly turning gray, and hence were almost invisible against the gray pallor of his skin.

Erik Conrad was not conscious of these changes. He noted and bewailed only the steady decline, of his business. Conrad’s window dummy slumped a trifle with the years, and Conrad himself stooped more than a bit—but the business itself tottered on its last legs. Time had dealt most harshly with little independent merchant tailors. The popularity of the readymade suit, the competition of stylish downtown tailoring establishments, the inroads made by modern cleaning and dyeing concerns—all had contributed to his loss of revenue.

Conrad saw it happen, and he found no solution. His only relief lay in cursing and grumbling as he went about his steadily decreasing daily tasks.

Then, a year ago, he had married.

Anna was a refugee; a young woman of great physical attraction and shy personal charm. A stranger in a new world, she readily consented to marriage, even though Erik Conrad was middle-aged and none too successful. She was grateful enough to stand in the steam-filled back room and assist in the pressing which now formed the bulk of Conrad’s existing business.

CONRAD, for his part, gave up cursing and grumbling after his marriage to Anna. Now, when he was discouraged or out of sorts, he merely smiled and shrugged, took his wife by the throat, and throttled her. Not too hard, of course, for she had her work to do. Anna did not complain too greatly, nor did she give way to tears. It is difficult to either scold or cry when one’s throat has been thoroughly choked by gnarled and twisted fingers.

At first she had longed for a child to keep her company, but after coming to know her husband better, she was glad that there was no little one to suffer Conrad’s mistreatment. Sometimes, when the tailor was out delivering pressed garments, she grew lonely in the deserted shop, and it was then that she talked to herself, in German. Sometimes, when she became self-conscious or apprehensive about this habit, she pretended that the window-dummy was a person, and talked to it.

She even invented a name for it—“Otto”, after her cousin, the one who had been killed in the air-raid over Dresden, so many years ago. Otto had worn a mustache, too, and they would have been married. But a bomb had fallen from the sky, and when they found Otto in the ruins his head had been cracked like the dummy’s—so—and on his face was the little wooden smile, beneath the waxen pallor.

Anna told Otto all about it, and Otto listened, looking at her through the steam-clouds with his one good eye. Anna knew there was harm in this pretending, but she needed something.

And so life went on, its currents diverted from the tiny side-street where the little tailoring shop stood. The window dummy crouched corpse-like in the corner, Conrad choked his helpless, hopeless wife, and Anna’s beauty faded and disappeared in wisps of hot steam. A fine cloud of gray dust descended to settle over bolts of doth, racks of unclaimed garments, corners of the floor where no feet trod. The dust settled on the shoulders of the window dummy, sifted through Conrad’s hair.

No connoisseur of horrors came to stare at the dummy or examine the sadistic secrets lurking behind the dingy exterior of the shop. Things might have gone on that way for years longer—the dummy could have continued to deteriorate, Conrad's fingers might have eventually left a permanent indentation in Anna's throat, and Anna would gradually have become a whining, half-mad harridan. The cloud of dust might have grown to an inch-deep layer upon the floor. The process could have been carried on indefinitely—but it didn't.

Mr. Smith saw to that.

Mr. Smith stepped into the tailoring shop one bright and sunny afternoon. Anna happened to be behind the counter in the outer room, and when she saw the stranger, one of her hands stole instinctively behind her head to tuck in the straggling hairs on her neck.

For Mr. Smith inspired that sort of self-concsiousness.

Mr. Smith looked prosperous. His sleek, smooth, well-shaven features wore a smile of benevolent affluence. His manicured nails and carefully clipped little gray Van Dyke beard hinted of riches, and his heavy tweed suit fairly shouted wealth to the beholder. The heavy, confident tread of his custom-made shoes was somehow transformed into the merry tinkle of jangling gold-pieces.

He placed one plump hand carefully on the dusty counter, so that the errant sunbeams played over the massive diamond ring upon his third finger, and drummed authoritatively.

"Is the proprietor in?" he asked.

Anna smiled. She looked at his face, looked at the ring, then looked at his face once more.

"I'll call him, sir."

Her step was strangely buoyant as she walked into the steam-filled back room. Conrad was dozing in a chair.

"Erik, there is a customer outside."

He blinked and grunted in annoyance.

"Quickly. He is a very distinguished gentleman, I think."

"Bill collector!" snarled Conrad. But he rose, brushed lint from his shabby coat, and shuffled out.

When he saw the stranger, he straightened up. He tried to look dapper and alert.

"Yes? What can I do for you, Mr—?"

"Smith. Mr. Smith," said the man in tweeds. "Do I understand correctly when I assume that you are prepared to custom-tailor a garment from material of my own selection?"

IT TOOK Erik Conrad several seconds to comprehend that this distinguished elderly gentleman was asking him if he could make a suit.

Then he understood, and immediately his mind conjured up visions of fabulous profits—ten dollars here, fifteen there, another twenty over-all on the basis of the fine fancy words this stranger had used.

"That is right, sir. You would like me to make you a suit? I imagine you'd want something special—"

"Correct. I want something very special."

Mr. Smith smiled with his eyes as well as his mouth when he answered the last question.

"Very well. If you'd give me an idea of what you have in mind, I could show you some very fine material. I've got a wonderful stock of woolens here."

Conrad gabbled on, wondering to himself how he could possibly dare to show any of his shabby bolts to such a rich and elegant customer. He tried to remember fragments of sales-talk long since fallen into disuse; he stalled for time, he perspired, he grew red and impassioned.

Mr. Smith interrupted with an airy wave of the hand. The diamond sparkled as it flashed through the air, and Conrad's faded eyes followed it thirstily, as if seeking to draw fresh fire from its ageless brilliance.

"That won't be necessary," said Mr. Smith. "I have the material already selected. Here, in my bag. Would you care to examine it?"

"Of course," said Conrad. He was relieved and disappointed at the same time; relieved at being spared the ordeal of displaying his meagre stock, but disappointed because he could not profit on the sale of material.

Still, he could make enough on tailoring the garment itself. This was a piece of luck. He eagerly awaited an inspection as Mr. Smith opened the bag and spread a bolt of cloth on the counter. Conrad switched an overhead light into position.

“Take a look,” said Mr. Smith. “There’s enough here for a suit, I believe.”

The cloth was gray. No, it couldn’t be gray, because it had little flecks that reflected the light. It was gold. But gold does not shimmer in rainbow hues. It was a peculiar offshade of tan. But tan is not green, and there was green in this cloth, also some red and blue. No, it was gray. It had to be gray.

Conrad stared at it, stared at the iridescent surface. Mr. Smith seemed to notice nothing unusual, so Conrad forced himself to remain silent—but he had never looked upon this material before, in all his years of tailoring.

HE SPREAD the bolt out and fingered the material. It tingled to the touch, sliding through his hands with an electric crackling. It was not wool, or flannel, or cotton. The more Conrad saw of it, the less sure he became of what he saw. He could not discern a definite weave or texture. Neither eye nor finger could isolate a single thread for examination. Staring at it, Conrad began to experience a peculiar sensation—a tightness in his head.

But it was cloth, and Conrad was a tailor. He could make a suit from it, for this distinguished customer.

The distinguished customer eyed him closely as he examined the garment, and Conrad strove to remain impassive. “It will be difficult to work with so unusual a fabric,” he commented. “Still, I can promise you a suit. Now, if you’ll slip off your coat, sir, I will take the measurements—”

Mr. Smith held up his hand. The diamond’s dazzling reflection gleamed from the single eye of the window dummy in the corner.

"The suit is not for me," he told Conrad.

"No? Then what is it that you wish?"

"The suit is for my son," the elderly man told him.

"Will he come in for a fitting, then?"

"No. It's to be a surprise. You see, I have all of his measurements written down here. Quite exact, they are. I shall require a most unusual fit for this garment."

"And the style?"

"That, too, is noted." Mr. Smith pulled out a sheaf of papers, covered with fine, crabbed script. "You understand all this must be done in strictest confidence, and exactly as I have indicated. I require a special suit. Of course, if you cannot handle it—"

Again the diamond described its glittering arc.

"I'm sure I can," said Conrad, hastily. "Anything you want, I'll give you."

"Money is no object." Mr. Smith smiled confidentially. "I expect you to bill me for your trouble. But these instructions, while they may seem peculiar to you, must be followed to the letter."

Conrad nodded, and the two men bent over the sheaf of papers. Mr. Smith read aloud, slowly, emphasizing certain matters and enlarging upon other details. The measurements must be thus and so. The cut must conform in this wise to the diagram. There must be no lining—none whatsoever—the technical problem involved here would have to be solved by Conrad's own ingenuity. Yes, and another thing; no vest would be required. Of course it might look a bit odd, but again Conrad must strive to turn out a suit of superficially conventional appearance and at the same time work within these limitations. Oh, and here was material for the buttons. Bone, to be turned and bored by hand.

Bye-the-bye, that was another very important stipulation. All work on this suit must be done by hand; no machine shortcuts were permissible. Of course Mr. Smith realized what this entailed, and he expected to pay for the extra attention.

Conrad listened, comprehended finally the physical rudiments of what he must do, if not the reasons inherent in the instructions. But then, understanding was not required of him—merely strict obedience.

"And here are the dates," Mr. Smith concluded. "The times during which you can work. As you see they are most carefully worked out; the hours and even the minutes calculated to a nicety. I beg of you to keep faith with me and sew on this suit only as directed. That is most important."

Here Conrad could not withhold his curiosity. "I can work only at these times?" he asked. "But why?"

Mr. Smith started to frown, then bit his lip until it curled back in a smile. "It is natural that you should ask, I know. All I can tell you is that I happen to be a believer in astrology. As such, I am sure you will humor me in these requests. Set your own price for the service."

Conrad shrugged. So be it. Perhaps this Mr. Smith was mad. But no, with his fine clothes and big diamond—he was only eccentric. The rich are often so.

"Please, not a word to anyone," the customer said, as he turned away from the counter. "Take a month, six weeks, but conform to my schedule and keep silent. I am reposing my trust in you."

"It shall be as you wish." Conrad bent his head in the immemorial obeisance of servant to master, of artisan to aristocrat, of craftsman to burgher, of artist to patron.

So master-aristocrat-burgher-patron Mr. Smith went away from the little shop and Conrad carefully wrapped and put away the strange bolt of cloth.

"Conrad, what is all this?" asked Anna, timidly slipping into the shop from the pressing room at the rear. "Who was that man?"

"Never mind, woman, it doesn't concern you," he told her.

"But I listened—I heard him talking to you about sewing at funny hours —"

"Be silent! It is nothing to you."

"Conrad, I'm afraid. There is something not right in all this, something that will make trouble."

"Trouble!" Conrad went over to her and gripped her thin shoulders. "It is you who makes trouble for me, you little fool!"

He beat her, then, until she whimpered and broke away to huddle in the corner of the shop. Conrad went out and sought the tavern where for a long time he sat mumbling to himself over his beer. In the beer-foam he saw the sparkling of diamonds.

Anna whispered to herself in the darkness, then whispered to Otto the dummy. In Otto's eye she saw not diamonds but the cold, empty glitter of glass.

II

THE spider began to spin.

Squatting in the gloom, the web was woven with crabbed cunning, with squinting skill. Silent and ceaselessly the weaving went, the pattern emerged from fashioning fingers. Days, hours, minutes threaded past on single strands.

There were interruptions and distractions, of course. Conrad did not proceed with his work without making a futile effort to analyze the nature of the peculiar fabric. He placed it under a strong light, even used a pocket magnifying glass in order to observe the threads—but all he could conclude was that this was some cloth foreign to his knowledge. He tried wetting the material and found that moisture left no stain. There was no real reason for his inquiry, of course; but Conrad was curious and the mystery surrounding the making of the suit disturbed him.

He was more violently disturbed, during these weeks, by the sudden appearance of collection agents and small creditors, including the tavern-keeper down the street. He fobbed them off with promises or curses as suited their temperaments, and told himself that he must hasten and complete the garment. Often as he sewed he amused himself by idle computation. Should he charge two hundred dollars for the suit? Or three hundred? Why not—five hundred?

One or twice he tried to hasten his task by working on the suit at times unspecified by Mr. Smith's schedule. Strangely enough, he could not sew—not literally, but his stitches went awry, the cloth slipped through his fingers with that peculiar crackling feel of static electricity, and there were other mishaps. Insensitive as he was, Conrad felt a touch of fear as he considered the nature of the unusual garment he was fashioning. The hints about astrology were a clue, but Conrad guessed at other things. This was a most peculiar job, and a most peculiar suit. It began to take shape under his fingers, and as it did so, fears took shape in Conrad's mind.

Whatever Mr. Smith intended, whatever his plans for the suit, Conrad meant to be out of the deal. All he wanted was to finish it and collect his—yes—five hundred dollars.

There were only two possible answers; either he was working for a crazy man or for a practitioner of Black Magic. Conrad relished neither speculation, and after long hours of toiling and brooding, it was small wonder that at times he lost his temper and raised his hand against Anna.

His wife received another, more thorough beating when at last the suit was completed. It hung from the hook, a strange, shimmering garment with high collar, unusual peaked lapels, a curious button arrangement, and no pockets whatsoever—sleeves of practically simian length, and curiously cuffless trousers. But it was the cloth more than the cut which contributed to the strangeness. In bolt form that fabric had disturbed Conrad's eyes. Now, in the shape of a suit, there was something quite odd and yet impelling to the eye. Conrad found himself glancing again and again at the new suit, trying to visualize it as it might appear when actually worn.

"Looks funny," Anna commented.

"Of course," Conrad nodded. "That's because it isn't pressed. So get busy, woman."

It was after this, when Anna returned and told him the suit just "wouldn't take a press," that Conrad gave his wife a severe beating. When he took the garment and attempted, in vain, to do the job himself, he was tempted to strike Anna again.

Instead, he reminded himself that it would be wise to deliver the suit and collect his payment as soon as possible.

Placing the peculiar coat and trousers in a box, Conrad set out for the address Mr. Smith had entrusted to him. It was in an unfamiliar section of the city, and he decided it would probably be best to go by taxi.

JOLTING through the streets in the cab, Conrad conjured up a vision of the mansion in which Mr. Smith must live. He would open a wrought iron gate, go up a long, tree-bordered walk to the big front door, grasp the bronze knocker and summon a butler. The butler would ask him to wait in the hall, then return to usher him into the big drawing room. And there was Mr. Smith—so—seated before the huge open fireplace. Ah, it was a wonderful house, that one!

The cab jerked to a halt and Conrad was jarred out of his musings. He started as he peered out at the doorway of the ramshackle tenement dwelling huddled between two warehouses on the mean street. For a moment he considered cursing the cab driver, then hastily checked the address. No mistake, this was his destination.

Conrad paid the driver and darted through the entrance, lugging the garment box under his arm. At the tenant register in the hall he pressed the buzzer for 4A. He paused, buzzed again, waited. Sighing, he prepared to trudge up the stairs.

It was not a pleasant ascent; leg-muscles protested, hands clung to rickety railings, nose inhaled the stairwell reek of a dozen compounded unpleasantness. Conrad cursed the eccentricity of his customer. Why should a wealthy man choose to affect such poverty? Unless, of course, he was hiding out here.

There was some mystery connected with this whole affair, and it might very well be that Mr. Smith had his reasons for choosing this squalid lodging.

Was that the answer?

Conrad considered the possibilities as he knocked on the door of 4A. He might be getting mixed up in some dirty business. Then again—

"Come in," said Mr. Smith. "I've been expecting you." The bright smile glittered.

the diamond glittered, and Conrad's forebodings dissipated in the dazzle.

Yet there was nothing bright about the room. Toiling up the stairs, Conrad had wondered if perhaps his client might be concealing a luxurious hideaway beneath a grimy exterior. But this room was as filthy as the tenement in which it rotted.

Conrad noted a wooden table, a cot, a few chairs and a battered second-hand trunk in the corner beneath the single window overlooking the courtyard. A tattered curtain concealed a shallow alcove niche on the far side of the room. There was absolutely no sign of a fireplace, a butler, or any other figment of his day-dreams.

Mr. Smith, however, seemed real enough; and his eagerness at the sight of the box under Conrad's arm was quite genuine.

"You have brought it!" he boomed. "Splendid! I can hardly believe that you managed, with all the difficult stipulations I found it necessary to impose."

"It wasn't easy," Conrad replied. "Mighty strange, that material. And you wouldn't believe the trouble I had—"

"On the contrary, I would readily believe every word." Mr. Smith smiled and rubbed his hands, While the diamond zigzagged through the gloom. "I hadn't really dared to hope for success, and yet you say the suit is complete?"

"Just like you ordered."

"Fine. You have no idea how I've waited, what this means to me. And to my son."

"Your son—where is he?" Conrad inquired.

"That does not matter, does it?"

“But don’t you want a fitting, to make sure everything’s all right?”

“I’ll take your word for it,” said Mr. Smith. “If you followed instructions, the fit will be perfect. As a matter of fact, if you hadn’t done exactly what I directed, you wouldn’t have been able to complete the garment. So I know it’s right.”

“Thanks.” Conrad bowed his head in acknowledgment. “I did my best to turn out a good job.”

“I know you did, and it is I who should be thanking you.” Mr. Smith also bobbed his head, at the same time extending both hands. “Now, if you’ll be good enough to leave the suit with me—”

The diamond came dose to the box, but Conrad drew back. “Wait a minute,” he said. “What about money?”

“Ah, yes, the fee. How much did you say it was?”

Erik Conrad took a deep breath of musty air. “Five hundred dollars,” he murmured.

“Very reasonable,” commented his customer. “Send the bill along and I’ll take care of it.”

“But—”

“Yes?”

“I have the bill made out, right here.” Conrad fumbled in his pocket. “And if you don’t mind, I need the money badly, and I was hoping that maybe today—”

Mr. Smith shook his head, slowly but emphatically. “I’m afraid that’s out of the question. After all, it’s not customary for one to pay tradesmen on delivery, is it? Why not mail your bill in the regular fashion—you’ll get your money, never fear.” Again he sought to take the package from Conrad, but the tailor retreated to the curtained alcove. “I must have my money first,” he persisted. “Look, if this was a regular job I wouldn’t mind, but I’ve spent all these weeks working. And I have bills to pay. You wouldn’t understand, because you’re rich, but it’s different with me. I got to eat.”

“My dear fellow.” Mr. Smith advanced, cordially confidential. “On the contrary, I can understand your situation only too well. For it so happens that at the moment, I am in the same fix."

"You?"

"Precisely." Mr. Smith grinned as if he had just told the biggest joke in the world. "Oh, don't misunderstand. In a very short while I should be in funds again. As soon as my son and I are re-united, in fact. But until then, I'm far from rich. In fact, I have no money, no money at all. So you'll have to wait—"

"But how can you say that?" Conrad wailed. "A man like you, wearing a big diamond?"

Mr. Smith drew the ring from his finger and tossed it on the table. It glinted its way over the wood, then rolled to the floor.

Mr. Smith did not bother to pick it up. "A fake," he said. "A cheap, synthetic fake. Oh, at one time I had another, and the stone was real enough. But I was forced to place it in pawn, along with almost everything I possessed, in order to continue my studies. I have spent every penny on my son. Now, please, be reasonable and give me that suit."

Again he reached for the package and again Conrad retreated—this time backing through the curtain veiling the alcove until his progress was halted by a waist-high obstruction.

Conrad turned and found himself confronting a gleaming refrigerator—a big one, and obviously brand new.

"What's this?" the tailor accused. "If you're so hard up for money, why do you need a big new refrigerator?"

"It's not for me," Mr. Smith placated, hastily. "I had to buy it for my son. Like the suit. Now if you'll come over here and show me—" and he attempted to grasp Conrad by the arm and draw him away.

But Conrad shrugged him off, still staring at the gleaming refrigerator with a look of mingled puzzlement and disdain.

"Poor!" he muttered. "Why, I'll bet it's full of fancy food and—"

Impulsively, the little tailor yanked at the handle. The door opened and he stared inside. An icy blast fanned his face.

There were no shelves in the refrigerator. The six-foot high interior consisted of bare walls framing a single object. That object was the rigid, frozen body of a man.

The corpse stood upright, a blue and naked horror with a youthful face congealed into the age-old grimace of death.

“Close that door!” screamed Mr. Smith.

Conrad released the handle and jumped away. He pressed his back against the wall and bared his teeth. “Murderer!” he gasped. “So that’s it!”

“No, you don’t understand. I’m no murderer. He died a natural death. Can’t you see? He is my son. He is the one I was working for, planning for. That’s why I had you make the suit. It’s for him. You can’t stop me now, no one can stop me.”

Mr. Smith advanced. His hands worked at his sides, then rose. “Give me the suit,” he said. “Give it to me.”

Conrad tried to move away, but Mr. Smith blocked his path. “Give it to me,” he repeated. And his hands moved out.

IT HAD grown dark in the murky little room. Erik Conrad saw a diamond eye wink up through the shadows on the floor. It was watching him—watching him as he stood there with a dead man behind him and a madman before him. The dead man had grimaced, and now the madman was grimacing, too. Grimacing, and reaching for Erik Conrad in the dark, as the diamond eye stared.

There was nothing else. There was no five hundred dollars. There was no butler. There was no justice or mercy or hope. Only this maniac trapping him in the blackness and now he was hitting him across the side of the face, and from far away a panting voice said over and over again, “Give it to me, you fool, give it to me, you fool, give it to me, you fool—”

Until Erik Conrad struck back. The pudgy madman tried to choke him, tried to kick him, tried to squeeze him, and there was nothing else to do but strike back. Conrad said, “Let me go,” but Mr. Smith didn’t even hear him because he began to scream and claw at Conrad’s eyes. There was nothing else to do but strike back and it was only natural that Conrad pick up the wooden chair and swing it. He felt it land on Mr. Smith’s head and Mr. Smith’s scream died to a moan. Conrad raised the chair again and brought it down. Mr. Smith’s moan died to a gurgle. Conrad struck again, and again, and again, feeling the chair splinter and come apart in his hands. Mr. Smith’s gurgle died.

And so did Mr. Smith.

Erik Conrad didn’t know that until afterwards, of course. Not until he shook off his hysteria and turned on the light and bent down, panting, to examine Mr. Smith? crushed and battered features as he la; sprawled on the grimy floor. Then the tailor understood.

He was a murderer.

The diamond eye had seen it all. The diamond eye knew it was a mistake, an accident. The diamond eye knew that Mr. Smith was a madman who preserved his son’s body in a refrigerator and had ordered a suit made up out of his own insane impulses. The diamond eye understood what ad happened.

But the diamond eye was a fake. And the murder was real. Soon the police would come—

Erik Conrad rose, grabbed at the suit package, and headed for the door. He had to get out of here. Everything was ruined now, everything was spoiled, there was no money, and he had risked his life forever in coming here. It was—

At the door, Conrad halted. He noted once again the presence of the battered trunk in the comer. A wild hope rose, and Conrad knelt.

The trunk was unlocked and opened easily. Conrad threw back the lid. This was the treasure-chest, the secret hiding-place, the source of riches; it had to be, it was only logical and right and just. Eagerly he surveyed the contents of the old trunk.

“Books!” Conrad groaned. “Nothing but books!”

But wait—some of them were quite old. Some of them had iron hasps and locks. Some of them had worn vellum inserts. Didn’t people collect old books? Conrad seemed to remember reading about auctions and sales at one time—there were people who foolishly paid a lot of money for things like that.

He stacked an armful hastily and stood up. After all, it wasn’t really stealing. Mr. Smith owed him five hundred dollars which he would never collect. Surely Conrad was entitled to a few wormy old books. These volumes were no longer of any use to Mr. Smith. Dead men read no tales.

Conrad stepped into the hall, carrying the suit box and the books. The hall was dark and still as he tiptoed downstairs. No one had seen him come in, no one saw him leave. The taxi-driver wouldn’t remember him, would never connect Conrad with the killing in the ordinary course of events.

The ordinary course of events—

In that phrase Conrad recognized the key to salvation. He must only remember to behave naturally as if nothing had happened, to return to the shop and go about his business in the normal way, and there would be no trouble at all.

Conrad walked down the street, a little tailor carrying his bundles. He paused at corners, jostled and was jostled in return, obeyed traffic signals like the good citizen he was, and eventually arrived at his shop. Strangely enough, he was trembling.

The place was dark and nobody saw him enter. Nobody except Otto, the window-dummy. And Otto’s eye, like Mr. Smith’s diamond, was glass.

Conrad smiled as he shuffled down the hall into the bedroom, Glass. It was all glass, everything was a fake. And if everything was a fake, then nothing had happened. He hadn’t killed anyone.

“It’s a fake, just a fake,” Conrad murmured to himself as he fell face downward on the bed. “Nothing to worry about—it was all a fake!” Then he began to cry.

III

CONRAD wasn't conscious of the exact moment of transition from tears to terror. Sometime he must have roused himself and switched on the bedroom light. Somehow he must have begun to paw idly through the stack of battered books. Somewhere he must have noticed the volume printed in heavy black-letter German, and he had begun to read the text.

It was then that he remembered his early speculations concerning Mr. Smith; the possibilities of the mysterious stranger's interest in Black Magic. Mr. Smith had proven himself a madman, to be sure, but still, these volumes were books on sorcery. The treatise Conrad was reading dealt with spells and charms, with formulae and incantations designed to raise up demons. Erik Conrad found himself stumbling over the pronunciation of strange names—Azaziel, Samael, Yaddith. There was nothing particularly disconcerting about the way in which the book was written; everything was set down in a straightforward, matter-of-fact style. Only the subject-matter itself was grotesque and irrational.

Perhaps it was this very circumstance which caused Conrad's hands to tremble as he held the tome. This treatise on the summoning of evil entities was written in the style of a cookbook, filled with recipes. *Take the maiden's blood, take the heart torn from the infant's breast, take the eyes of the hanged man—mix and stir in the cauldron, add the corpse-fat, and evoke your friend.* Simple. Easy. Anyone can do it.

It was absurd, it was insane, it was—convincing. Men had written this book, men had read dais book, men had used this book for centuries. Men like Mr. Smith, whatever his real name might be. They had used this book to produce—*what?*

It was then that Erik Conrad began to tremble. And it was then that Anna returned from her evening shopping; returned quietly and tiptoed into the room so as not to disturb Conrad as he read.

"Erik—" she murmured.

The tailor’s face contorted with startled fear. He rose from the bed with a gasp which, as he faced and recognized the intruder, became transformed into a snarl of rage.

“What do you mean by sneaking in like that?” he choked. “You stupid fool!”

“But what is wrong? I only wanted to ask about the suit. You sold it, eh?”

Conrad indicated the box on the bed. “Does this look like I sold it?” he demanded.

“Was something wrong, then?”

“No, nothing was wrong. Don’t bother me, woman!”

“But the money—I thought—”

“Be quiet!” Conrad glowered at her, but Anna persisted.

“After you left,” she continued, “I told Mister Schwenk the butcher—he come after the money for the meat, you know—that he should come back tomorrow because you were getting paid by a customer. So—”

“You told him!” The tailor gripped Anna by the shoulder. “But I warned you to say nothing to anyone. Nobody should know about the suit, understand? Do not mention it to a soul, do not mention it to me again, ever. And get it out of my sight, quick.”

Anna sank, gasping with incomprehension, in this torrent of violence. But Conrad’s clawlike fingers bore her up. “Not a word!” he screamed. “Now take the suit and burn it, woman! Burn it in the furnace. And never speak of it again. Forget everything. Forget that I made it, forget Mr. Smith, forget that I went out today!”

He raised the box from the bed and thrust it into Anna’s arms. Then he slapped her across the face once, twice, three times. The third time he brought his hand away wet with tears. A fourth blow would bring blood, and for a moment he was tempted to deliver it.

Then suddenly all purpose left him. “Get out!” he screamed. “Get out and leave me alone.”

Anna stumbled out and closed the door. Conrad slumped to the bed once more and returned to his reading. He read for a long time. There were many subjects of outré interest.

Evocations—the runes of pestilence—the resurrection of vanished youth —the cloak of invisibility—the raising of the dead—the preservation of corpses and the use of mantic arts in restoring a semblance of life—the weaving of the cloth of Fate—

Conrad read the last sections again. It was all explained in prosaic detail. The bargain with the Powers. The sacrifice. The granting of the boon, the woven strands of Immortality with which to cloak the preserved corpse; The finished garment to impart life to any wearer bearing human guise. Conrad read it, and Mr. Smith had read it, too. He had read it and acted on it.

NOW at last, Erik Conrad knew the secret of the suit, the secret of the frozen corpse, the secret of the weaving and the shaping. Mr. Smith had hoped to bring life back to his son.

Of course the old man had been mad, just as the author of this book had been mad. Best now to burn the book, and the other volumes, in case there should ever be any tracing, any questions.

Conrad loaded his arms with the ancient tomes and plodded down the dark hall to the basement stairs. He descended, knelt before the furnace, opened the door, recoiled momentarily before the blast of heat; then tossed the books into the fire.

There was no trace, no single shred left of the strange suit. Apparently there had been no burning cloth odor, either. Anna had done her job well.

Anna—where was Anna? Conrad climbed the stairs, peered into the kitchen. Deserted. And the hall was dark. Was she out in the shop? She must be, but why?

Quietly, Erik Conrad walked down the hall. Yes, she was in the shop, he could hear her whispering. Talking to herself. He could distinguish words, phrases.

“. . . hates me, Otto. You’re the . . . friend I’ve got . . . going crazy . . . you had lived. Wish . . . could talk . . . tonight . . . hit me. Sometimes . . . dead.”

She was in there, talking to that window-dummy again! Was the whole world going mad?

He moved quickly into the shop, switching on the light. Anna turned. She was huddled in a heap at the feet of the wax dummy. Conrad stared at her, then at the mannikin. There was something strange about it, something different. It took a moment for him to comprehend and then he realized that Anna had put the crazy suit on the dummy.

“What are you doing?” Conrad was surprised when his voice came out so quietly. “Didn’t I tell you to burn the suit?” Why he was talking calmly, sensibly.

“I was going to. I didn’t mean any harm. I just wanted to look at it again—you acted so funny about it all that I wondered if there was a secret.”

Conrad nodded, still very quietly. He even helped Anna to her feet as she continued.

“So I thought I could see it better if I put it on Otto—I mean, on the dummy here. Did you notice it in the dark, Erik? It looks queer—so glowing—”

Conrad was gentle with her, quite gentle. “Anna,” he said, “this is not wise of you. To disobey my orders. To pry into things that do not concern you. To talk to clothing dummies. Are you sure you feel all right, Anna?”

She hid her face. “I know,” she sighed. “Sometimes I wonder if I’m out of my mind. But you are cruel, Erik. You beat me.”

“I will not beat you now,” said Conrad. “If you will burn the suit at once. I only hit you because I was afraid. Perhaps if I tell you, you can understand.” It was odd how calm he felt, how quietly he could talk like this to her now.

“You see, the suit must be burned. And no one must ever hear about it, or about Mr. Smith. Because this afternoon we quarreled, and I killed him.”

“You killed—?”

"An accident. Yes, an accident. He tried to take the suit away, it was self-defense, Anna. Mr. Smith was crazy. He had his son's body in a refrigerator and he thought the suit would bring the boy back to life." Anna stared into his eyes. Conrad nodded gravely. "So you see, it just happened that way. But the police wouldn't believe me if they knew. That's why I wanted the suit burned. That's why I wanted you to forget. Now. Do you understand me?"

"Yes." Anna came dose. "And I'm sorry, I didn't know what was upsetting you, Erik. Only—"

"Only?"

"Only I think you should tell the police. Tell them the truth, tell them everything. I'll make them believe you. Please, Erik! You cannot carry such a sin on your soul forever. For my sake, Erik, tell them what happened, that it was self-defense. I—I couldn't bear to go on living with a murderer."

As she spoke, Conrad stared over her shoulder at the clothing dummy. It slumped ridiculously in the corner, its cracked waxen features stolid, its glass eye gleaming. The impossible suit hung in ill-fitting folds across its shoulders, giving an apelike aspect to the arms. All this Erik saw, and at the same time he was conscious of listening to Anna. Obviously she was losing her sanity. Obviously she would never cease to urge him to confess and might even end up by going to the police herself with the story.

SO, OBVIOUSLY he must remain calm.

Remain calm now as he moved back to the wall and switched off the light. There. Now the shop was pitch dark. No one could see in from the street. No one could see as he did the obvious thing—take Anna by the throat and squeeze, so, and squeeze and squeeze—

"Help!" The gasp came out, and he had to squeeze harder, not so calmly. "Erik—stop—oh—save me—Otto—save me!" Crazy, to call on the dummy for help. Erik squeezed until she sagged and he could stare over her shoulders, stare into the pitch dark, which wasn't really pitch dark at all because something was glowing over there in the corner. Something with arms and legs. It was the suit, of course, Anna had said the suit glowed in the dark, and it did. Like phosphorus, like silver, like gold, glowing brighter and brighter, and every time that Erik squeezed the glow increased.

It was only the crazy suit, the crazy suit ordered by the crazy man for a crazy purpose; there was nothing to fear. Erik Conrad could bring death to Anna, but the suit could not bring life. It couldn't!

But Conrad wasn't calm any more. Not when he saw the silver arms stretch, saw the silver legs race forward, saw the leering eye of glass gleaming and flashing with a light that pierced brain and being.

He let Anna go, and turned to flee. Something caught him in the dark, then. There was nothing left to do but scream, and he tried that, but too late. There was a gleaming and a pressure and a spangle of silver fire that burst into final blackness.

Then there was nothing.

Only a connoisseur of horrors would have appreciated Erik Conrad's window-dummy as it loomed over him, clad in the silver suit of enchanted Life—with its waxen fingers clamped in a grip of death about Erik Conrad's throat.

"The Devil With You!"

When the magicians descended on the Hotel Flopmoor for their annual convention they decided to raise hell—literally! . . .

IT MUST have been the fickle finger of Fate.

There is no other explanation possible. It was the fickle finger of Fate, moving at random over the map, which descended upon Davenport, Iowa, plunged through the roof of Moe Hare's Furniture Factory, tapped Bill Dawson on the head and granted him a two-week vacation with absolutely nothing to do.

Destiny's capricious phalange pointed the way to New York, and Bill went there. After all, why not? He was twenty-six, an orphan, unattached, and he'd been reading back issues of *The New Yorker* at the public library for years. It might be a fine place to spend a vacation. So Bill reasoned, or thought he reasoned—but actually, it was Fate's fingernail scratching away inside his brain.

It followed him on his trip, sat up with him on the day-coach, yanked him into a taxicab at Grand Central, and directed him at random to one of the big city's famed hostelries—the Hotel Flopmoor by name. The fickle finger guided his hand as he registered, indicating room 522. It notched into his collar, guided him through the streets that first evening, and turned his head away from any sights that might prove interesting.

Fate had plans for Mr. Bill Dawson—big plans. And the finger was very definitely on him. It rode back up with Bill on the elevator that night, after a stroll down 42nd Street. It almost helped him undress, in its eagerness to get him into bed. As a last gesture, it was the fickle finger of Fate that tucked the covers around Bill's neck and stroked his forehead into a dreamless sleep.

At least, Bill thought it was dreamless, until he opened his eyes. It seemed as if his wristwatch indicated midnight. It seemed as though somebody had switched on the bedlamp. It seemed as though there was a stranger in bed with him.

Bill lay on his side and stared. Yes, there was a man lying in bed beside him—a long, thin man whose long, thin legs were desperately tangled in the blankets.

The long, thin man had a long, thin face, and his sardonic grey eyes snapped behind gleaming spectacles as he favored Bill with a long, thin smile.

"Pardon me," said the intruder. "I don't believe we've met. My name is Marmaduke Hicks."

BILL GOGGLED, but not for long.

For a second voice came from somewhere behind his back. Bill whirled in the bed. To his utter dismay he found himself staring into another face lying on that side; a fat, moon-face, supported by a pudgy body. The smiling little fat man brushed a chubby hand through a tangle of red hair. He ignored Bill's gaze and peered over at the thin gentleman.

"Hicks!" he shouted, cordially. "How did you get here?"

"Crawled through the transom, Tubby."

"Good for you," said Tubby. "I've been hiding in the closet for ever so long. Think he's spotted us?"

"Who? You mean old Bipple? He's too drunk."

“I wish I was,” said the fat man, wistfully. “I’ve never been too drunk.” He smiled at Bill. “Pardon me, stranger, but you don’t happen to have a little something around, do you?

Bill sat up in bed and grimaced.

“Anti-social, eh?” grunted Mr. Hicks. “Guess there’s nothing we can do about it, then.”

“You can get out of my bed,” Bill suggested. “I want to go to sleep.”

“Hear that, Hicks?” asked the fat man. “He wants to sleep.”

“Well, let him. I’m sure I won’t disturb the lazy swine. But it’s a fine thing, I must say, when a host hasn’t the simple courtesy to stay awake and entertain guests when they drop in on him.”

“We could sing him a lullaby,” suggested Tubby, with elaborate irony. “Or tell him a bedtime story.”

“Listen here,” Bill grated. “I don’t know who you are or what you’re doing in my room, but you’ll have to get out. You two are either drunk or crazy, and I don’t care which.”

“I care,” replied Mr. Hicks. “And I’d much rather be drunk. Come to think of it, I am.”

“Now, look,” Bill began—but his tirade was interrupted. An ominous knocking shook the door of the room.

“Open up in there!” shouted a voice.

“Good Lord,” whispered Mr. Hicks. “It’s Bipple!” He slithered down in the bed and pulled the covers over his head. The fat man attempted to follow suit, but too late. For a key grated in the lock and a man entered the room. He switched on the light, revealing his harsh, square-jawed countenance to Bill and Tubby.

“Aha!” The square jaw waggled accusingly. “Caught you! Telbertson, what are you doing in that bed?”

He addressed the fat man, who timidly squeaked out a reply. “That’s a very personal question,” he said, “But if you must know, I’m having a baby.”

"Thieves! Swindlers! Deadbeats!" The manager's voice rose with each word. "For two years you've been sneaking from room to room in this hotel, moving in with guest after guest, ducking the house detective, ducking me. You have ruined my temper, broken my health, driven me to the horrors of drink."

As if to prove his point, Manager Bipple produced a flask from his side pocket and gave a convincing imitation of a man being driven to drink. It needed no glance at his flushed face to see that this was not his first drink; only rage had kept him sober.

Tubby Telbertson and Marmaduke Hicks rose from the bed as one man and approached the manager. "Let's settle this affair man to man," Hicks coaxed. "Over a friendly drink."

He took the flask, used it, and passed it to Tubby. After a long time, the flask returned to Bipple, who drank again.

"You're a good sport," Hicks said. "Am I?" asked the manager, with a tipsy giggle.

"Best sport I know. And I've got a sporting proposition for you. We owe you for two years of room rent. What say we play you for it—double or nothing?"

"Oh no you don't!"

Tubby patted the manager on the shoulder. "Come now, that isn't sportsman Bipple talking. Here, have another drink. You got the dice, Hicks?" Hicks nodded.

"Well, suppose you phone room service for a quart of rye and some ginger ale?"

BIPPLE RAISED his hand to protest, but Hicks waved him aside with a gracious leer. "It goes on our bill, naturally," he explained. "Drinks on us. Well, let's get started."

Bill Dawson clambered out of bed and gathered his pajama tops about him in a flurry of righteous indignation. "You mean you're going to play dice here in my room?” he asked. “I demand that you get out and let me go to sleep. I don’t know whose idea of a joke this is, but it’s my room and I want you to leave.”

“It’s not your room.” This, surprisingly enough from Bipple. “It’s my room. I own this hotel and I can shoot dice wherever I please.”

“Good old Bipple! Spoken like a true host!” Hicks patted the inebriated manager on the back, then squatted on the floor and produced a pair of dice. “Now, how much do we owe you?” he asked.

“Let’s see.” Bipple fumbled for a bill as Tubby phoned room service. “Ah, here we are. Comes to exactly four thousand, six hundred and forty-three dollars and fifty cents,” Bipple droned. “That includes the liquor you just ordered, of course.”

“Fair enough. Shall we say double or nothing?”

“Well—” Tipsy as he was, the manager hesitated. Bill chose that moment to open his mouth again.

“Get out of here!” he yelled. “Don’t be a fool!”

“Nobody tells me what to do,” Bipple retorted. “Of course I’ll make it double ’r nothing. Whose dice?” Hicks, Bipple and Tubby knelt and peered at the cubes. Tubby scooped them up in one pink paw and rattled them, rolled them in an ivory pattern across the rug.

“Seven!” the fat man shouted. And seven it was. “You lose, Bipple.”

A tap on the door sent Bill on his way. He half-expected to see a couple of uniformed men bearing strait-jackets, and in his present confusion he would probably have donned one himself. But it was only the bellboy bringing up the drinks.

The bellboy poured expertly, and before Bill could protest he found a tall glass of rye and soda thrust in his hand. He gulped air, then his drink. The bellboy stood smirking at him.

“Will that be all, sir?” he inquired. Tubby nudged Mr. Hicks. “Wants his tip, I guess,” he whispered.

Hicks nodded, “Look, boy,” he began. “I’ll shoot you for the tip. My dollar against your quarter.”

“Well—” The bellboy hesitated.

“Go ahead,” Bipple boomed, downing his rye with more alacrity than ginger-ale. “See what a sport I am? Just lost over four thousand to my good friends here. Go ahead and shoot!”

THE BELLBOY squatted. Dice rolled. Bill edged closer. This was madness, but interesting.

“Three!” yelled Tubby. “You lose the quarter. Shoot you for another, same odds.” The bellboy lost a dollar as fat little Mr. Telbertson’s fingers thumped the dice in a savage wardance to the Congo Goddess of Fortune.

And the rye changed hands. Bill, dazed, automatically accepted another drink. It descended on his stomach like a blazing meteor and he looked on with new interest. Thin Mr. Hicks was shaking now, and the bellboy had just lost his uniform.

Manager Bipple drew a roll of bills from his pocket and they disappeared as the dice were cast.

“Roll them?” offered Hicks to Bill. The young man took the dice in nerveless fingers.

“Drink up!” Bipple urged. “What you shooting for?”

“How about his hotel bill?” asked Hicks.

Bill cast a seven.

“You win!” Tubby nudged him and whispered, “Say fifty dollars on this one. Bill shot and made a six, then failed to make a nine. And Tubby had the dice again.

“I’ve got no money,” Manager Bipple confessed, downing a drink. “You boys have cleaned me.”

“Shoot you for the bridal suite,” Tubby offered. “And two brides.” He cast and threw an eleven.

“What a lucky dog!” moaned the manager. “I’ve lost our best rooms.”

“Take the dice,” Tubby urged; pressing the now overheated cubes into Bill’s hand. “We’ve got to hold this winning streak.”

"Nothing to bet any more," Bipple sighed, in drunken woe.

"Shoot him for the hotel," Hicks suggested to Bill. "Come on, Bipple, be a sport."

"Wager my hotel—are you crazy?" Bipple pleaded.

"Your hotel won't look much good after Tubby here tears out the bridal suite," Hicks reminded him. "Better get it back or lose the whole thing."

"All right," Bipple conceded. "It's a bet."

"Shoot him for the hotel, Bill," Tubby yelled. "Go ahead."

Bill's gaze was blurred, his hand was shaky. He threw the dice and watched them hit the rug through a haze. Four and—three.

"Seven!"

"You won!" Hicks exulted. "You won the hotel!"

"Well, isn't that nice," said Bill.

And promptly fainted.

WHEN BILL opened his eyes he expected everything to be all right. He'd be back in his comfortable bed, the two drunks and the manager would be gone, and the dream would be over.

As it happened, things proceeded a bit differently. To be exact, when Bill opened his eyes he got an ice-bucket of cold water full in the face.

"That'll bring him around," he heard Tubby mutter. "A little water always does the trick."

"Trick!" grumbled a voice identified as belonging to Manager Bipple. "Don't mention that word to me."

Bill sat up and brushed the water from his face and pajama-tops with a towel Hicks thrust into his hand.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"For passing out?" Tubby chuckled. "Think nothing of it. I do it every night—eventually."

"No, not that." Bill strode over to Mr. Bipple. "I mean, about the dice game. Winning your hotel from you. Of course I wasn't serious. I have no intention of holding you to the bet." Manager Bipple shook his head and smiled. "On the contrary, my dear boy, I insist! You won the hotel fair and square and it's all yours."

Bill blinked as he saw that Bipple was serious. Not so Mr. Hicks.

"This calls for a little drink," he said. "All that water makes me thirsty. Tubby, do the honors."

Tubby did. By the time Bill had donned dry pajama-tops the fresh highballs were ready, and so were his companions.

"Here's to our new manager!" Tubby toasted. "May he enjoy his stay here as much as we do."

"That's very generous of you," Bill said, thoughtfully, "but I'm not so sure. You see, I know nothing at all about running a hotel. It must be a pretty big job."

"Nothing to it," Hicks told him. "Calls for no intelligence at all. Look at Bipple here—he got away with it for years."

"But there's five hundred rooms in the Flopmoor. A ballroom and a banquet hall and dozens of bellboys and waiters and cooks and chambermaids—"

"—and millions of cockroaches," Tubby finished for him. "So what? They all know their jobs. All you have to do is sit back and watch the money roll in. My boy, you're in business."

"We'll stick around and help you out, too," Mr. Hicks offered. "I happen to be on friendly terms with most of the staff here—"

"—particularly the chambermaids," Tubby again concluded. "Yes, Bill, we won't let you down. So stop worrying and drink up, I say."

BILL DRANK up, but he didn't stop worrying. He turned to Mr. Bipple, painfully aware of a smug smile on that worthy's face.

"See here, Mr. Bipple," he said. "I may be the new owner of this hotel, but that doesn't mean I want to be the active manager. Suppose I make you a deal? You can name your own terms, if you like. How about staying on here as manager?"

To everyone's surprise, Bipple shook his head. The smile faded from his face and for a moment he seemed almost sober.

"No!" he declared. "Absolutely no! I'm getting out of here before tomorrow morning and that's that!"

"Wait," Marmaduke Hicks broke in. "What's the big idea? Why all the rush?"

"The Convention starts tomorrow," Bipple explained. "And I want no part of it."

"What Convention?"

"The Magician's Convention, that's what. And I'm getting out of here before they get in. You won't catch me going through what I did last year. Whassa matter, don't you remember it?"

"Come to think of it, Tubby and I weren't around that week last year. We went to Florida for a change and a rest."

"The nightclubs got our change," Tubby explained, "and the racetracks got the rest." He peered thoughtfully at Mr. Bipple over the top of his glass. "So that's it! I thought it was funny—you giving up the hotel so gracefully. You wanted to get away from this Convention, eh? Why?"

"You'll find out," Mr. Bipple assured him.

"But please," Bill broke in. "You can't rush off this way and leave me holding the bag."

"What bag?" asked Mr. Hicks, with sudden interest. But Bill continued his plea.

"Surely it can't be so bad that you won't even tell me what to expect," he went on.

"It can!" Bipple shivered. "Why do you suppose I started drinking tonight? Even thinking about those awful magicians is enough to give me the shakes. You wanna know something? I'm glad I lost the hotel—glad, I tell you! Glad, glad, glad!" With each repetition of the word, Manager

Bipple had edged closer to the door. Now he opened it and darted out into the hall.

"Goodbye!" he called. "And watch out for Dritch! Whatever you do, beware of Dritch!"

The door slammed behind him. Hicks stared at Tubby, who passed the look along to Bill.

"What's a Dritch?" he asked.

"I don't know," Hicks confessed. "But we'll find out. We'll find out lots of things; don't worry."

"But I am worried. I can't run this hotel alone."

"Tubby and I will help you. First thing to do, of course, is go down to the wine-cellar and take inventory."

"Never mind the wine-cellar. What I want to do is sit down and have a long talk with somebody who really knows the score about this hotel. The assistant manager or the *maître de hotel,* some one like that. If we're expecting a convention tomorrow I should be prepared. And I'd like to find out what made Bipple so frightened of these magicians."

"This is no time of night to be thinking about conventions," Tubby grumbled. "Besides, all those people you mentioned must be home in bed. Or somewhere in bed, anyway."

"How about Annabel?" suggested the thin partner.

"The very thing!" Tubby exclaimed. "She's not in bed anywhere, is she? I mean, she's on duty downstairs all night."

"Well, call her and tell her to come on up."

"She might misunderstand."

"That wouldn't stop Annabel. Besides, you can always say the manager wants to see her."

Tubby wobbled over to the telephone and called.

Hicks offered Bill another drink. Bill's acceptance was almost automatic. Only a part of his mind seemed to be functioning; just enough for him to ask, "Who is this Annabel?"

“Old Bipple’s niece. She runs the cigar counter in the lobby. One of our favorite people, that girl—you’ll like her, wait and see.”

“But why drag her up to my room in the middle of the night?”

“I could think of several reasons, all good,” Hicks observed. “However, right now you want to talk to somebody about running this hotel. Annabel’s your girl. She’s been here for over a year and she knows the whole routine inside and out.”

“She said she’ll be right up,” Tubby called, from the phone. “So we’d better mix another drink, fast.”

THE PARTNERS mixed another drink, fast. Bill sat down on the bed and began to dress with equal haste. He felt, somehow, as though he were beginning to learn a lot about life in the raw, and wondered what he’d learn about life with clothes on.

He had learned about drinking, about gambling, about the pleasures of taking things easy. His education, however, still lacked one most important feature. No man is really educated until he knows about women. Therefore some schools of thought maintain that no man is really educated.

At any rate, Bill Dawson was now about to discover an entire new section of existence—the eternal, infernal feminine.

There was a soft knock and the door opened. A girl entered the room.

“Hello, Annabel,” Hicks cried, genially. “What took you so long?”

“Just stopped on the way for a drink and a chaser.”

“Ten minutes just for a drink?”

“No. But it took me a while to get rid of the chaser. He was very persistent.”

“Hi!” piped Tubby. “Just in time.” He handed her a glass which she accepted eagerly. She peered over the rim at Bill.

“Who’s the new face?” she inquired, casually.

“Excuse me,” said Bill, rising. “My name’s Bill Dawson.”

“I’m Annabel Bipple.”

“Pleased to meet you.”

“You should be,” the girl observed. For a moment they stood eyeing each other in appraising silence.

Bill saw that the girl was tall and slender, with the type of figure which is described by female fashion authorities as “interesting” and more exactly characterized by men in the form of a shrill whistle. Annabel’s hair had evidently been offered a choice of becoming either blonde or auburn, and had finally adopted the best of both shades. Her face contained the usual combination of eyes, lips and nose. But behind that tilted nose was determination, beyond those full red lips was character, and beyond those deep violet eyes lay a strange new world of hidden, whimsical beauty. A lovely girl but somehow dangerous, Bill decided.

Annabel, meanwhile, was critically interested in this strange staring creature before her. He was tall, blond and young—but there are many men who answer to that description. Yet for some inexplicable reason, Bill intrigued her. She decided it must be his face. There was something incomplete, unfinished, about it; something missing in the man’s eyes. He looked unawakened and lonely.

Among Annabel’s many weaknesses was a liking for unfortunates. Despite her carefully-calculated air of hardness and sophistication, she was a sucker for pigeons, alley-cats, and lost dogs. And this was surely one of the lost dogs of the world. The realization that she felt an instant attraction towards this man caused her to adopt an air of defensive mockery. She knew she had designs on this man, and she was a finished artist. Consequently, Bill was already a finished man.

Annabel broke the silence at last. Furious with herself for feeling sympathetic, she disguised her attitude in an outward insolence. “Well,” she asked, “have you finished your inspection? Or must I go into my dance?”

“You were staring at me, too,” Bill flashed, defensively.

“Was I? Well you can hardly blame me. Who is this creature, Hicks? Did you suddenly decide to start a rescue mission?”

“Not at all,” the tall gentleman assured her. “As a matter of fact, Bill is the new manager of the Flopmoor.”

CAREFULLY, Hicks explained to her just what had happened earlier in the evening. Annabel listened closely and nodded.

“What a tragedy,” she mused. “My poor uncle out of a job and the whole hotel at the mercy of this—this—”

“Hey,” Bill interrupted. “It’s not that bad. After all, I’m not a complete idiot.”

“You mean there’s something missing?”

“Please, no insults. After all, this may come as quite a shock to you—I mean, about your uncle and all—but at least you might be courteous about it.”

“I am courteous,” Annabel observed, deliberately goading him into a rage. “Otherwise I’d probably burst out laughing whenever I looked at you, you long-legged squirt.”

“Who’s a long-legged squirt?”

“You are.”

“Listen,” said Bill, goaded by alcohol and exasperation alike. “Nobody can get away with calling me a name like that. I have half a mind to do something about it.”

“You may have half a mind,” the girl retorted, “but what can you do about it?”

Bill stepped forward, grabbed the bewildered Annabel by the shoulders, propelled her to a chair, sat down, turned her over, and applied the palm of his hand repeatedly to the most likely available spot.

“This is what they do in the movies,” he muttered, grimly.

“Well, I’ll never go to the movies with you,” the girl gasped. Then, “Ouch—you’re hurting me!” Her hardboiled exterior was breaking down rapidly. So, she feared, was something else.

"Squirt, eh?" Bill muttered. "I'll show you!" He emphasized each word with a hearty whack.

"Oh," fumed the enraged girl, "You'll pay for this!"

Bill released her suddenly and she slid to the floor. For a moment Annabel sat there stupefied, then her violet eyes misted and she indulged in the common feminine reaction. Somewhat awkwardly, Bill knelt beside her and proferred his handkerchief.

"Blow," he suggested, chivalrously.

When Annabel's eyes were clear again she looked at the young man with deeper insight. She had never expected anything like this, and it knocked out her plans for casual dalliance completely. This man might be a lost dog, but he knew his way around. He had, she mused, rising and patting herself gingerly, left his mark on her.

"I'm sorry," Bill said. "Guess I lost my temper."

"That's all right. I deserved it." The words came out before she could stop them.

"Let's be friends," Bill placated. "Forget all about this."

"Right." Annabel turned to Tubby. "Quit staring at me, you little rounder, and mix up some drinks."

"Coming right up," Tubby announced. Hicks, whose mouth was never closed except around the neck of a bottle, looked amiably at Bill and Annabel.

"Glad you two have decided to make up," he said. "Looks like you hit it off all right."

"Let's forget about hitting, if you don't mind," Annabel begged. "It brings back all-too tender memories."

"We have other problems," Hicks agreed. "Such as running this hotel. Don't forget, the convention arrives tomorrow—for that matter, I'll bet most of the magicians checked in tonight. We'll have to figure out what to do."

"The Magician's Convention?" Annabel jumped up. "No wonder my uncle left so suddenly."

"Then you know something? All we could get out of him was a few hints."

"That's plenty. Plenty for me." The girl started for the door. "Excuse me, I have to pack."

"Please—you can't run out on us now," Tubby begged.

"I'm relying on you to show me the ropes," Bill added.

"It would be a pleasure," declared the girl. "But this convention is another matter. Whenever I think about last year, I feel like going to bed and pulling the covers over my head."

"A fine idea," Hicks leered. "Go right ahead."

"Never mind that. I'm serious."

"But what about those magicians?" Bill persisted. "What did they do that's so awful?"

"What didn't they do? For three days this hotel was full of rabbits and white mice and black cats and pigeons. The cats chased the mice and the pigeons chased the people."

"What about the rabbits?"

"They chased each other. It was a mess. And all those prestidigitators, pulling knives and forks out of their sleeves in the dining room and changing the color of peoples' drinks in the bar, and making the potted palms in the lobby grow before your eyes—you never saw anything like it."

"Sounds like fun," Bill mused. "Why is everybody so scared of a thing like that?"

"Dritch," sighed Annabel.

"Dritch? Seems to me Mr. Bipple was using that word. What on earth is a Dritch?"

"It isn't *a* Dritch, it's Mr. Dritch. And I'm not so sure he's on earth."

"Huh?"

"He's a terrible little man—or maybe not a man."

"I'm getting more confused every minute," Bill declared.

"So were we, during the last convention. He showed up and took a room, him and his beard. And his friends. I don't know which was the worst—his beard or his friends. We tangled with both of them. The important thing is, nobody has been able to use that room since."

"Why?"

"Because," whispered Annabel, "it's haunted!"

SEVERAL drinks later, the party went down to the lobby and approached the night clerk at the desk.

"It's my duty as manager," Bill had persisted. "Besides, if this Dritch shows up again this year, I want to know what he's been doing."

As for Hicks and Tubby, they were only too willing to co-operate, particularly after the last of the whiskey was gone.

Annabel stayed discreetly in the background. Not seeing her, the clerk assumed the men to be strangers.

"I'm sorry," he said, looking up from his ledger. "I'm afraid I'm out of rooms."

"Aren't you in one now?" Hicks quibbled.

"No, gentlemen, you don't understand. There's a convention in town and we're all full."

"So is the convention," muttered Tubby, unhelpfully. "But never mind that now. We want the key to the haunted room."

"What?"

"I'm the new manager," Bill offered. "Didn't Mr. Bipple tell you?"

"Oh—Mr. Dawson!" The clerk beamed. "Yes, Mr. Bipple did mention your name in passing. But he passed awfully fast. I never saw a man leave this hotel in such a hurry. You'd have thought the Devil himself was at his heels. And come to think of it, with this particular convention coming up —" The clerk shrugged eloquently. "Seeing as you're the new manager, I'd better warn you. These magicians are a pretty queer bunch. Particularly Mr. Dritch, that little man with the beard. Mr. L. Dritch, he called himself, and —"

"Blast Mr. Dritch!" Bill exploded. "That's all I hear around here. All I want is the key to the haunted room."

"Please, don't go up there," warned the clerk. "It hasn't been opened for a year. The chambermaids say there's something terribly wrong with the furniture, and other things."

"I've been in plenty of hotel rooms," Hicks remarked, "and none of them were haunted by anything worse than bedbugs."

"Remember, sir, I warned you. I take no responsibility."

"Pooh to your ghosts," Tubby sneered, brandishing a bottle. "Look, we're bringing our own spirits."

"Very well, then." The clerk produced a key. "But let me know if you see any astral phenomena. Or anything that might be construed as partly astral."

"Half-astral, even," Hicks nodded. "Very well, as you say. Let's go." Brandishing the key to Room 1013, Bill and the partners joined Annabel and made for the elevator. A bellboy stepped forward and accosted Bill.

"Carry your baggage, mister?" he inquired.

"No thanks." said Annabel. "I'll walk." The party whisked into the elevator and ascended. Bill found himself suddenly quite nervous; partly because of the nature of their coming adventure and partly because of the close proximity of Annabel. The lively young lady and her livelier companions had already done strange things to him, and he feared that if they sowed any more wild oats he might be ploughed under in the process.

Room 1013 proved on first glance to be a spacious apartment with a large number of chairs, several handsome tables, and a fine sofa. There was also a massive bed.

"Looks comfortable enough," Tubby commented. "Certainly can't see anything wrong with this set-up."

"Speaking of set-ups," Hicks said, "that reminds me. Where's the bottle?" Tubby produced a fifth; Bill switched on all the lights and closed the door, and Annabel pulled the shades. The room was still for a moment as they instinctively waited for something to happen. Nothing did. Silently, Hicks passed the bottle around. Gurgling, then more silence.

“Well,” sighed Bill, “let’s make ourselves comfortable and wait for developments.” Suiting action to word, he lowered himself into the nearest chair.

“Hey, be careful!” came a voice out of nowhere. “Who do you think you’re sitting on?”

Bill hastened to rise. “What’s this?” he gasped.

“An order, buddy,” continued the soft, deep voice. “Don’t sit on me.”

Bill appealed to his companions. “Am I crazy, or did that chair just speak to me?”

“I wouldn’t vouch for your sanity, brother,” purred the voice, “but I certainly did speak to you. I’m sick and tired of having strangers flop all over my lap.”

The partners goggled. “A talking chair,” said Annabel. “So that’s what’s been going on here.”

“You can sit on my lap anytime, sister,” the chair beguiled.

“Why not?” A new voice chimed in, from the direction of the sofa in the corner. “Drape yourself all over, if you like. This one is on me.” The invitation was followed by a gurgle of low laughter.

THE MEN listened to this unusual suggestion with mounting apprehension. Only Annabel showed no dismay. She turned to the sofa in defiance. “One more crack like that,” she warned, “and I’ll knock the stuffing out of you.”

She had scarcely finished speaking when a pillow detached itself from the sofa and sailed through the air, striking her smartly on the head.

“Hold it, sister,” the sofa advised, calmly. “I’m liable to get rough.”

Annabel huddled in the center of the room. “I’m beginning to understand what they meant by a haunted room, all right.”

“I’m not,” Tubby complained. “But I’m afraid I will unless I have another drink.” He set the fifth of whiskey on a small table and turned to his companions. “Have a shot,” he invited.

“Thanks,” said a voice behind him. “Don’t mind if I do.” Tubby turned just in time to see the bottle upset itself and pour whiskey on the table’s surface, which absorbed the liquor rapidly.

“Wheeee!” chortled the voice. “This is better than furniture polish. Now have one on me.”

Tubby was trembling, but he managed to snatch the bottle before it emptied further. He drank and the others quickly followed his example.

“I don’t understand it,” Bill whispered. “Could we possibly have a ventriloquist in the crowd?”

“No,” said the chair. “It’s a pity, though—you’d make a lovely dummy.”

Bill’s temper gave way for a second time that evening. “Shut up!” he told the chair. “I’d like to break your legs.”

“You and who else?” jeered the furniture.

“Yes,” added a large, feminine-looking bureau in the corner. “Lay off the rough stuff,” it continued in a girlish voice.

Bill regarded the bureau with a menacing eye. Then, “How would you like a good kick in the drawers?” he demanded.

A shrill burst of laughter greeted this remark. “Why you fresh thing!” taunted the bureau. “That’s no way to speak to a lady.”

Goaded beyond belief by this insane conversation with wood-work, Bill forgot what he was saying or doing. “Lady indeed!” he shouted. “Look at those drawers. Great knobby things! Besides, they’re half-open.”

“What a thing to say!” shrieked the voice.

Bill turned to his friends. “Let’s get out of here,” he panted. “Talking furniture—haunted rooms—I’ve had just about all I can take for one evening.” At that moment came a furious knocking at the door. Half-suspecting a trick, Mr. Hicks gingerly turned the knob. Two women promptly entered.

“Is this the room where they’re holding the party?” demanded the taller of the two. “Somebody called the bar and invited us up—some magician, he said it was.”

"Called himself the Great Little," volunteered the second girl. "Great Little what, he didn't say."

"Oh Lord!" groaned the spectacled man, and turned to his friends with a hasty whisper. "We can't let word get around about the furniture, I suppose. Might as well invite them in for a minute or they'll get suspicious." He faced the women again with assumed gaiety. "All right, come on in," he invited. "This is the party, and we're always glad to have company." He indicated Tubby. "Meet the Great Little himself. The other two are his assistants. As for me, I'm Marmaduke the Magnificent. And that thing over there is a bottle of whiskey. Shall we get acquainted with it?"

Introductions were accomplished and drinks were poured, while the furniture remained mercifully silent. Tall blonde and short blonde gravitated to Hicks and Tubby, and Hicks and Tubby gravitated towards the furniture, soon forgetting their recent experiences as the drinks went round.

WITHOUT thinking, Tubby invited the short blonde to sit on the sofa with him. Bill tried to signal, but Tubby didn't notice.

"My," murmured Tubby's girl, patting the mohair. "What an elegantly upholstered sofa."

"You're pretty well upholstered yourself," muttered a muffled voice from somewhere below.

"What was that?" asked the girl.

"Oh, nothing," Tubby gasped. "I think my voice is changing—getting much lower, lately."

"So are your topics of conversation," the girl told him.

Hicks had escorted his blonde to a large chair. When she was seated, he twined his angular body over the side and put his arm around the girl. Suddenly the young lady uttered a shrill squeak.

"Why, what a way to act!"

"Did I do anything wrong?" Hicks asked, innocently.

The girl regarded him with a strange glint in her mascara-laden eyes. “You didn’t do anything any good,” she confessed. In a moment she squealed again and jumped up from the chair.

“Am I offending you, somehow? Hurting your feelings?”

“You hurt more than that,” the girl declared, furiously. She stared down with a puzzled expression. “You couldn’t have, though,” she mused. “I was watching this time, and you didn’t pinch me. Unless—say, it couldn’t have been the *chair* now, could it?”

She appealed to Hicks, but the chair supplied its own answer.

“You bet it was, baby,” it chuckled. “I haven’t had so much fun since the time I caught a Congressman.”

The blonde gaped at the laughing furniture with awe in her eyes. Then she turned to Hicks again.

“Pinch me quick to see if I’m dreaming,” she begged. Then, hastily, “No—don’t. I’ve been pinched enough as it is!”

The chair guffawed.

The other blonde rose and approached her companion. “Let’s get out of here,” she suggested. “This place is creepy.”

Her companion shrugged. “It’s all a gag,” she decided. “Don’t forget, these fellows are magicians.” And in a lower voice, she quickly added, “Besides, they have plenty of liquor. What can we lose. Let them have their fun.”

Hicks and Tubby were by this time sufficiently bottle-weary to accept any situation, and Annabel seemed content to be anywhere as long as Bill was present. As for Bill himself, he was in no condition to object. Each outburst from the furniture had been an excuse for him to refresh himself from the bottle; now he no longer cared if the furniture talked or not. In fact, it was beginning to seem natural.

Since the women didn’t appear to be upset by the queer room, the party made up its mind after another drink. “It’s a nice place we have,” Hicks announced, stubbornly. “We’ll stay here, and phooey to the furniture!”

“The same to you, buddy,” boomed a voice from the washroom.

"Aw, shut your trap!" rejoined the thin man.

"Let's order more drinks," his blonde girl-friend now suggested. "This looks like a real party."

Bill went to the phone and jiggled the receiver.

"Let go of me!" the mouthpiece scolded.

Bill ignored its chattering as he contacted room service—a brunette switchboard operator he remembered seeing in the lobby.

"Hello," he began', brightly. "This is Room 1013. Send us up a fifth of rye, if you please."

"Make that two fifths, you cheapskate," the phone cut in.

"What?" asked the switchboard operator.

"I didn't say anything."

"Do you ever?" This from the phone.

"See here," Bill shouted. "One more remark out of you and I'll disconnect your wiring. I'll tangle your batteries."

"What's that?" asked the switchboard girl.

"Pm not talking to you," Bill explained. "I mean, I am talking to you, but —"

"Is there another party on the line?" the girl asked.

"This party is bad enough in itself." the phone put in, promptly. "At least it's as bad as it could be without you being present, you trull!"

"See here," said the girl at the desk, in repressed fury. "Are you trying to insult me?"

"That's pretty hard to do over the phone, baby," shot back the voice. "However, if you must be insulted, come on up."

This was too much for Bill. With an oath he ripped the offending telephone from the wall and tottered away.

HIS COMPANIONS weren't making out much better, he discovered. The chairs refused to be sat on. Whenever one of the gathering attempted to lodge in a seat, they were promptly booted from behind and thrown to the floor, where the sofa pelted them with cushions.

Bill tried to sit on the latter with Annabel, and it promptly overturned, grumbling in a loud voice about "lounge lizards!"

Panic gripped the party, and almost by instinct the three men and the three girls huddled together in the center of the room as the furniture laughed and jeered in wooden accents.

Suddenly the table rose and sailed gracefully over their heads. Everyone ducked until it landed against the other wall.

"Maybe it serves us right," Tubby whispered. "I've smashed a lot of furniture in my time—can't blame furniture for wanting to smash me."

"Certainly turning the tables on us," Hicks agreed. "If some of those spiritualist mediums could only see this!"

Bill was not taking matters so calmly. "Let's get out of here," he snapped.

He crawled over to the door and tugged at the knob. The door refused to budge.

"Open up!" he shouted.

"Closed for the night," echoed a hollow voice from the keyhole. Bill tugged desperately, but nothing happened.

"Trapped!" he groaned. A vase detached itself from the mantel and winged straight at Tubby's head. The little man ducked just in time, then rose and ran for the bed.

"Golly!" he panted. "I've been driven out of bed by those things before, but this is the first time I've ever been driven into one."

The sailing table now zoomed forward, and Hicks rose from the floor and joined his partner in the bed. "They're ganging up on us," he panted. "They want to kill us!"

Chairs began to scrape across the room menacingly, stiff-legged and strong-armed, and the girls retreated to the safety of the big bed.

Bill put his arms around Annabel protectingly as a pillow struck him in the head. The furniture continued its eery march. Suddenly the lamp flickered and went out, and in the darkness the legs of the chairs scraped in grumbling whispers, the drawers banged squeakily, and the blackness was filled with creaking laughter.

Bill turned and propelled Annabel towards the bed, diving under the sheets with the other four. It was cozy but crowded, and there was little time to consider the proprieties or even the improprieties of the situation.

For as if Bill's arrival were a signal, the entire bed began to rear up on its base, sliding the scrambled sextette to the bottom, where they lay in a confused heap.

"Ouch!" competed with "Eeeek!" and was overridden by "Hey!" and "Golly!" and "Help!" but the bed paid no heed. The head now rose, and they tumbled back and forth.

"I'm getting seasick!" Tubby moaned. He rose and tried to race for the door in the darkness. Immediately, the bureau carommed across the room and barred his path. Then the chairs closed in. Inch by inch, Tubby was forced back into the bed.

Deep, mocking howls filled the blackness. "Fve taken a lot of punishment in my time," observed the mattress, in a rather stuffy voice. "Yes sir. Bruised springs, broken cords." The bed-frame itself interrupted.

"That's nothing," it complained. "You ought to see my bolster. My poor, cracked bolster!"

"The blazes with you, and your bolster too—whatever that is!" Bill replied.

"We're talking about punishment," the bed resumed. "No more taking it. I'm going to give a little in return."

So saying, the bed lifted itself about a foot in the air and came down with a rousing thump. What it did to the sextette was definitely unnerving.

"Listen, sister," came Tubby's wail, from the bottom of the tangled, fleshy pile. "Just because we have no chairs, you don't have to use my face for a substitute."

"Oh, then those must be your teeth! I thought for a moment I was sitting on a mouse-trap."

Laboriously, the frightened party disentangled while the bed continued its soliloquy.

"What a life I've led," it whined, in self-pitying tones. "The things I've stood for!"

"We quite understand," Hicks said, hastily. "You needn't go on. How did you and the furniture come alive in the first place?" he asked, trying to change the subject.

"At the Magician's Convention last year," the bed explained. "One of the magicians—guess he was a friend of Dritch—happened to sleep in this room. He talked in his sleep, and while talking he repeated a magic spell of some kind that brought us to life."

"What became of him?" Hicks asked.

"He snored too much," said the bed, quite horridly. "So I smothered him under the mattress."

"Quit talking to the furniture," one of the blondes begged. "We want to get out of here!"

"Out, eh?" muttered the familiar voice from below. "Good idea. Hang on everybody—here we go!"

SUDDENLY the bed began to move. Before anyone in the party had realized their predicament the bed slid gracefully over to the door. Now the door obligingly opened, allowing the bed and its dazed occupants to proceed out into the hall corridor of the hotel. They rolled along towards the end of the hallway with startling speed.

"Stop it, somebody!" Annabel screamed, clinging to Bill's neck.

"Yes!" Tubby added frantically, "Can't somebody pull the throttle?"

"You're thinking of a runaway train," Hicks shouted above the clatter of rolling casters. "This is a runaway bed."

"Runaway?" Tubby wailed. "If anybody sees us it'll be a giveaway!"

"I'm getting off right here," said one of the blondes. But she could not. In some mysterious fashion the covers had managed to twine themselves around the various members of the party, who were now held in a tenacious grip.

"These damned things are holding us like the octuples of a tentapus," Hicks muttered.

"You mean the tentocts of a pulipus, don't you?" Annabel corrected, sweetly.

"Never mind the details!" Mr. Hicks shrieked. "Look where we're going now!"

The mad bed had clattered down the hall as far as the staircase. Now, despite the loud protests of its inmates, it began to descend the stairs. Immediately the scrambled sextette slid again to the bottom of the bed where they lay groaning at every bump.

"Oh!" sighed Bill, whose long silence had been due to a pillow that was wedged in his mouth. "If I ever get out of this, I'll be an invalid for life."

"A bed-ridden one," added Tubby, "From now on, I sleep in a hammock, if at all."

"Or a nice cool grave," Hicks babbled. "Oh Lord—here we go again!"

And so they did. Ten flights of stairs were clatteringly covered. Fortunately, nobody else in the hotel seemed aware of the noise; the hour was late and the convention guests probably believed the sounds were caused by their own members coming home. So the ten flights of stairs were painfully descended by the bed and its reluctant passengers, and at last the strange, vehicle bounced right out into the lobby.

It was two A.M., but the sound of the tumult served to awaken the ever-watchful house detective from his slumbers.

He ambled over as Bill nudged his companions. "Know him?" he whispered.

Hicks shook his head. So did Tubby. Even Annabel tossed her curls. "A new one," she explained. "Hired yesterday, I think. The old house dick quit when he heard the Magician's Convention was coming."

"Then let's get out of here," Bill implored. "Bed, do your stuff! Keep right on moving!"

But the bed, for reasons of its own, stopped right smack in the center of the lobby as the Law approached.

CONSEQUENTLY, all that gentleman witnessed was a lone bed occupying the deserted lobby. Its six occupants immediately pretended slumber. Annabel cradled her face in her hands, Tubby snored, and Hicks hid under the blankets. But the detective was not convinced. He strode up to the bed and poked Hicks in the side. “What have we here?” he demanded. “Huh?” Hicks assumed drowsiness. “What do you mean, waking a man out of a good sound sleep?”

“Get up, you,” barked the house dick, slapping Hicks sharply on the bottom of his feet.

“Here, now,” Hicks objected. “Why not let sleeping dogs lie?”

“You picked a fine place for it, brother,” the detective snarled. “Right here in the middle of the lobby.”

“A fine place for what?” inquired the smaller of the two blondes.

“Never mind, lady. All I want to know is, why did you decide on the lobby?”

“Just trying to advertise the hotel,” Tubby offered, weakly.

“I suppose these ladies constitute a portion of your advertising matter?” the detective wanted to know. “One thing I’d like to find out before I run you all in. Just how did you get the bed all the way down those stairs?”

“This I can’t answer,” Tubby answered. “But I’d like to give it a good kick in the slats.”

“We’re not responsible,” the larger blonde added. “We just rode down.”

“Well, all out—this is the end of the line.” The detective gestured at them with his cigar. “Rise and shine.”

“We can’t,” said Annabel, in a small voice.

“You mean you won’t?” asked the house dick, menacingly.

“No, we can’t. We’re—we’re not dressed for the lobby.” She attempted a blush.

"Get up anyway."

"No," Tubby broke in. "I have my alarm set for seven. I need my rest."

"Out!" the detective insisted.

"We paid for this bed and we're staying in it," Hicks replied. "How do you like that?"

"How do you like this?" countered the detective, drawing a nasty-looking black revolver. "HI give you just ten seconds."

"But we're not dressed, either," Bill protested, stoutly defending Annabel's story.

"You mean to tell me all six of you are—?" The man could go no further. "All in one bed, too!"

"We're Scotch, mister," Annabel explained.

"Listen," said the detective, despairingly. "Any more of this talk will drive me screwy. I want you all to wrap some blankets around you and come into the office. There's an awful lot of funny business going on around here."

"But we can't come," Bill said, deciding to tell the truth. "The bed won't let us go."

The detective groaned and Bill subsided.

"You see, sir," Tubby went on. "It seems like we made our bed and now we have to lie in it."

"I'll call the manager!" yelled the detective.

"But—" Bill blurted out, "*I* am the manager!"

THAT WAS too much for the house dick. Gibbering insanely, he discharged his gun at the bedsheets, which immediately burst into flame. The bed, angered at this sudden attack, began to roll after the detective. With a scream of horror, the poor man fled before the ill-tempered bed's charge, as the flaming sheets parted to release the six bed-partners.

Bill, completely unnerved, headed for the elevators. The last thing he saw was a backward vision of the bed knocking down the detective and jumping frantically around on his prostrate form.

Reaching the open, empty elevator, Bill slammed the door shut and glided upwards. He meant to stop at the second floor, but through the glass he saw that the halls were now crowded by pajama-clad people, all aroused by the revolver shots and the general bedlam over the bed that took it on the lam.

Bill didn't care to face people for a long, long time to come. For this reason he sped the dark elevator up to the twelfth and topmost floor. Here was a stairway corridor that led up to the roof garden. Bill opened the elevator door and stepped out.

"Now for a little air," he whispered.

"Just what I needed," said a musical voice from behind him. Bill whirled suddenly, half-expecting to see the elevator stool rising to beat his head in.

Instead he encountered Annabel.

"How did you get here?" he demanded.

"I was here all the time," said the girl, demurely. "But you didn't even bother to look around. If you had, we might have taken more time to get up here."

"What?"

"Not very bright tonight, are we?" the girl jeered. "Very well, let's stroll around the roof."

Bill agreed. It was the worst thing he possibly could have done under the circumstances. These circumstances included the deserted roof-garden, the wicker sofa, the night breeze, and the moon.

The garden looked down on the elfin lights of a great city—a city of enchantment when viewed from this height. The wicker sofa invited watchers to sit down, whereupon the night breeze, cooling their cheeks, caused them to gaze upwards. And then, of course, they could not help but notice the moon.

It floated serenely in the sky, a white witch among ghostly clouds. Moonbeams tangled in Annabel’s hair, melted into Annabel’s eyes.

bill gazed at her silently, and she gave him back a mocking smile. Any other man, under similar circumstances, would have embraced his opportunity—that is to say, Annabel. But Bill’s innocent reaction made her feel strangely tender. This, the girl did her hardboiled best to disguise.

“You great big chivalrous square!” She moved closer to him and Bill moved away. “What’s the matter—am I really so repulsive?”

“Of course not,” Bill confessed. “I can’t trust myself when I get near you.”

“You sound like the second act of a lousy play,” she told him. And moved still closer.

“I wonder what’s become of the boys,” Bill quavered. “Perhaps we’d better go downstairs.”

“We will,” Annabel promised, a gleam in her violet eyes. “We will, eventually.”

And, eventually, they did . . .

WHEN Bill Dawson awoke in his own room some hours later he was not, strictly speaking, a new man. But he was not an old man, either.

Whatever had happened to him in his peculiar nightmare, it had all been for the best, he decided, as he dressed and faced the morning. He felt refreshed, alert, confident, ready to face New York and his vacation with renewed zest. The vividness of his weird dream seemed to add to his well-being this morning.

Actually, as he remembered it, the mental images of Mr. Marmaduke Hicks and Tubby were more vivid than those of the people he had known back at the furniture factory. He could recall the details of their dress with greater clarity, the intonations of their voices, the peculiarities of their expressions. He fancied he could almost smell their breath.

Bill remembered, too, that he had been quite drunk in this nightmare, and happily so. He had behaved in an uncouth, uncivilized way, and found it all surprisingly attractive. He recalled the exuberant antics of his dream companions. And he remembered Annabel.

Annabel! A vision of her white slimness, honeyed hair and violent violet eyes crossed his mind. A dangerous girl, but a delectable one. What a dream *that* had been, he mused. But now, to face reality—

Bill was just ready to go down for breakfast when the phone rang. He picked it up. A male voice came across the wire.

"Hello, is this the manager?"

"No. This is Mr. Dawson's room."

"That's who I'm looking for. Mr. Dawson, the new manager."

"New—manager?"

"Yeah. Aren't you the 'gent what won the hotel last night in a crap game?"

Bill almost dropped the phone.

Then it *wasn't* a dream. It was *real!* That meant Annabel was real. And Hicks, and Tubby—

The door opened. Hicks and Tubby marched in.

Bill's grasp on the phone wavered. "What do you want?" he murmured.

"This is Janus," said the voice on the phone. "I'm the doorman. And if you're the new manager, I figure you'd wanna know that—"

"Yes, I'm the new manager, I guess," Bill admitted, more to himself than to the doorman. "What was it you wanted me to know?"

"Only that somebody just brought a wolf into the hotel."

"A wolf?"

"Yeah. One of them magicians, I guess. So what do I do?"

"I'll be right down," Bill promised. He hung up hastily and turned to face Marmaduke Hicks and Tubby Telbertson. Both the tall and the short gentlemen were attired in spotless morning clothes; black tailcoats and grey, striped trousers.

“How do we look?” Tubby piped. “Thought we’d better get into these outfits and pretend to be assistant managers or something.”

“Wonderful,” Bill agreed. “But I thought you two were broke. Where’d you get the wardrobe?”

“There was a mortician’s convention here last month,” Hicks explained. “Things were pretty dead, but we managed to get hold of these undertaker’s suits.”

“Well, change into some zookeeper’s costume,” Bill sighed. “We’ve got a wolf in the lobby.”

“I told you these magicians played rough,” Tubby said, not at all perturbed. “Let’s go see about this.”

“Annabel’s downstairs,” Hicks added, as they moved to the door. “Just drank breakfast with her. She told us you hit the roof last night.”

“What happened to you?” Bill changed the subject, hastily.

“Oh, we were around. Which reminds me, we have a date to meet Mrs. Pratt and Susan Foster at the Convention Meeting this noon.”

“Who are they?” Bill asked, as they entered the elevator.

“Our little playmates of last night. The blondes,” Hicks explained. “Mrs. Pratt’s ex-husband is President of International Legerdemainiacs. That’s the official name of the Convention, you know. She doesn’t like him, but she came here hoping some other magician might give her a job. She used to be Pratt’s assistant in the magic act—he worked under the name of Houdonit, you know—and she claims he did a lot of prestidigitation with her.”

“You seem to have found out a lot,” Bill observed.

“Oh, we did,” Tubby assured him. “Susan Foster wants to get in a magic act, too. She used to be in burlesque, and she has a wonderful idea for a strip-tease. After she removes her clothing, she vanishes completely.”

THE PARTY emerged from the elevator on the lobby floor. The first person Bill saw was Annabel. She flew into his arms, and if Bill had any doubts as to her reality, they were quickly and firmly dispelled. Bill lost himself in a long kiss, but he was called into awareness by a terrible thing.

The thing was a sound. A howling.

“The wolf!” Tubby exclaimed. Nor was he alone. An excited knot of guests clustered along the lobby wall, out of harm’s way. Over at the registration desk stood two men—and the wolf.

Bill stared at the great shaggy beast, then turned his attention to its companions. They were equally strange and equally dismaying. One of them was tall and gaunt, a cadaverous figure muffled in a long black cloak. The other was a walking beard.

Never in his life had Bill seen such a beard. It was shaggier than the wolf; a huge white Fuller Brush of a beard that swept the floor. Somewhere behind the beard a face must have been concealed, because a red nose protruded through it about four feet from the floor. Bill judged the beard’s wearer must be a small man. How he was attired could not be told. He might have gone nude if he chose—for no one could appear naked with that beard.

Wolf, cloak and beard were now confronting the desk clerk, and an argument seemed to be in progress.

“I’m sorry,” the desk clerk was saying. “I can’t register a wolf.”

“You don’t need to register him,” came a voice from behind the beard. “This is not a dog show.”

“We do not permit animals, sir. Everyone who stays here must be registered.”

“But it’s for the Convention,” the beard argued. “I’ve told you a hundred times.”

“Wolves do not belong at Conventions,” was the answer. “I am sure the rest of the magicians would not approve. Think of the publicity—the press will be here, and we’ll even have a broadcast over the radio tonight. We can’t afford to have a wolf in the hotel—suppose he howled when we went on the air? Wolves and radio don’t mix.”

“On the contrary,” persisted the beard, “This wolf may come in handy on the radio. We could use his paws for station identification.”

“Sorry, but I cannot give a room to the wolf,” the desk clerk snapped.

“Let me speak to the manager!” It was the cloak who spoke now.

“Here I go,” Bill muttered, removing Annabel’s arms from his shoulders.

“No, Bill—keep away!” warned the girl. “That wolf looks dangerous. Remember what my uncle said about this Convention. Lots of queer things happen. Be careful!”

“I’m the manager,” he said. “I’ve got to take care of these problems or the hotel will get a bad name.”

He strode resolutely towards the desk.

“Manager!” yelled the cloaked man. “We want the manager!”

“That’s me,” Bill announced. Cloak, beard and wolf turned and stared at him. The wolf made a low noise in its throat and opened a big red mouth.

Bill quickly dodged to one side and entered the desk clerk’s cage. “What’s the trouble?” he asked.

“These gentlemen have just registered here, and they insist we give a room to the wolf,” the clerk explained. “It’s the Convention, of course.”

“I see.” Bill glanced at the ledger and noted the names of the cloak and beard.

“You are Pseudo W. Nym?”

The cloak bowed, and the long white face creased into a smile. “That’s my stage name, of course,” explained the cloak. “My real name is Onymous. N. Onymous, to be exact.”

“Greek?”

“From Transylvania. Triladelphia, Transylvania.”

Bill noted the second name on the ledger—the beard’s—and his heart sank.

“Mr. L. Dritch?”

“That is correct.” The beard bowed.

“Dritch. Weren’t you here last year?”

"That is correct," said the beard. "I made a preliminary investigation of the premises. My findings were satisfactory, so this year—as you can see—I have returned with my friends."

"Very decent of you, I'm sure," Bill quavered, eyeing the gigantic wolf.

"More of them will be arriving this evening," Mr. L. Dritch purred, through the beard. "Some of my friends do not—er—care to be seen in daylight."

"This I can understand."

"What's that?"

"I mean—it will be nice to have them here. Are they all magicians?"

"Definitely, my dear sir. Thaumaturgists, necromancers, adepts, cabalists, goetists and evocators. To say nothing of mages and wizards and other practitioners of the mantic arts. This will be, unless I greatly err, a real Convention." A chuckle filtered through the beard—a chuckle filled with malice and dandruff.

"We'll try to make you feel at home," Bill promised, wondering whether it would be best to keep the mysterious Mr. Dritch happy until he thought of a way to get rid of him. "Anything you want, just ask me."

"I will do so," Mr. Dritch nodded. "Perhaps you could begin by finding me some raw meat."

"Raw meat?"

"For the wolf, here. He's hungry."

"Never mind that," the cloaked Mr. Nym interrupted. "Are there any children around?"

Bill turned pale.

"He's very fond of children," Dritch explained.

"Raw children, that is," added the cloak.

BILL DECIDED that pleasing these peculiar guests was out of the question.

“Now see here,” he said. “One thing you simply must understand. We can’t have a wolf staying at this hotel.”

The beard shrugged, and Mr. Dritch shrugged with it. “But that is just what I’ve been trying to tell this stupid room clerk,” he said. “This isn’t an ordinary wolf.”

“He’s not?” Bill glanced down at the great slavering beast as it sniffed hungrily at his leg.

“Certainly not. He’s really a werewolf!”

“A were—but that’s impossible, there are no such things!” Bill turned and appealed to the group loitering fearfully in the lobby. “You heard what he said, folks. Tell him there are no such things as werewolves.”

The group was silent, but every eye stared glassily at the shaggy creature at Bill’s side.

“You see,” Bill laughed, weakly. “Nobody believes in a silly superstition like werewolves any more.”

The wolf opened red jaws.

“All right,” said the wolf. “Have it your own way, then, smarty. So I’m not a werewolf. *Boo!”*

“Good heavens!” Bill peered at the lobby spectators. “Did you hear what I heard?”

Apparently they had, because there wasn’t anybody in the lobby any more.

“Now do we get that room?” purred Mr. L. Dritch, dusting the carpet with his long white beard.

“Give them the room,” Bill sighed. “Give them anything they want, just so they get that—monster—out of sight.”

“Fine,” said the cloak. “I want to go up to my room right away and change for the Convention meeting. It must be started in the ballroom by now.”

“I want to change, too,” remarked the werewolf.

“Not in the lobby,” Mr. Dritch warned.

The desk clerk extended a pen with a trembling hand. The wolf grasped it between its teeth and laboriously scratched a signature in the register.

“Mr. W. Wolf,” it wrote.

Sighing, the room clerk extended keys to the trio and they marched away. Nobody offered to carry their baggage, and Bill, feeling that the hotel must extend some courtesy even to such unusual guests, tagged along to the elevator.

“What about your luggage?” he inquired.

The man in the cloak turned and smiled. “Never mind,” he said. “Two men will bring it up later.”

“Two men?”

“Well, you can’t expect one man to carry such a load alone,” the cloak explained. “Ordinarily it takes six, three to a side. Plus the honorary pallbearers, that is.”

Bill didn’t care to ask any more questions. He went for the corridor, to find his new assistants and Annabel. The last he saw of Mr. Dritch, Mr. Nym and Mr. W. Wolf was when they entered the elevator. The hairy trio looked as if they belonged at a Barber’s Convention, and Bill heartily wished that’s where they’d gone.

“Looks like trouble ahead,” he sighed.

“Right,” said Mr. Hicks, grabbing him at the hall door and yanking him through. “Come on into the ballroom. The Convention’s just started, and all hell is busting loose!”

THE SEVENTH Annual Convention of the International Legerdemainiacs at the Hotel Flopmoor, New York, opened promptly in the Grand Ballroom at 10 A. M. the morning of October 30th.

The magicians, some two hundred in all, including professional stage and nightclub performers and a large group of skilled amateurs and hobbyists, were welcomed to the two-day session by Oswald Pratt, better known to the public as “Houdunit”.

He promised them a business meeting in the afternoon and an election of officers that night; a free tour of the city next morning, and a Grand Hallowe'en Ball for the following evening to wind up the Convention.

But this morning's session, said Mr. Pratt, was to be devoted to introducing a number of prominent and internationally famous practitioners of illusion and deception, who would speak on new tricks and variations of old ones.

"The first distinguished guest I wish to present," said Mr. Pratt, peering down from the stage at the audience of bearded, goateed and mustached stage magicians who sat stiffly in the evening clothes and turbans usually associated with their deceptive calling, "is that celebrated mentalist, star of stage, screen, radio and television—none other than the famous Dumbinger—who has arranged to give us a demonstration of his mind-reading powers and his remarkable feats of memory. As you all know," Mr. Pratt informed his hearers, "Dumbinger is the man who never misses, the man whose mental concentration is the marvel of the world today. It is a pleasure and a privilege to present the one and only Dumbinger—in person!"

There was loud applause. A spotlight flashed on the stage, Mr. Pratt bowed and gestured, and—

Nothing happened.

Nobody appeared. Mr. Pratt peered up at the platform as the crowd stamped and whistled. He walked back on the stage. "Mr. Dumbinger!" he called.

A pimply-faced bellboy suddenly raced down the aisle and whispered up at the stage. Mr. Pratt nodded and faced the audience. He held up his hands for silence.

"I'm sorry," he said. "There has been an error. It seems Mr. Dumbinger forgot his appointment this morning. As a matter of fact, he has registered at the wrong hotel. He just phoned and said he will be down later as soon as he can find his trousers, which he seems to have mislaid." Jeers and hoots from the magicians. Mr. Pratt, a large, red-faced man, became if anything larger and more red-faced. "In his absence," he said, "I will carry on myself. Since this morning session is devoted to illusions, I'll show you how I perform one of my own. It's a variation of that famous old standby—sawing a woman in half."

Pratt stared into the darkness of the hall. "I have my own equipment here," he said, "But I need a volunteer. I'm wondering if my former wife happens to be present. She is familiar with the trick and may be kind enough to assist me."

"Here I am, Oswald," called the tall blonde who had entered Tubby's life the night before. "I'll be right up."

She took the stage, and there was more whistling as she bowed to the onlookers. Pratt rushed to the wings and presently returned, wheeling a huge table and a circular saw attached to an electrical turbine.

"I thought you'd be here, Mabel," he whispered to his ex-wife. "And I hope you're behaving yourself. Remember our agreement—if I ever catch you with another man, I cut off your alimony."

"You can saw me in half," retorted the blonde, "But if you cut off my alimony you'll be sorry."

BOTH NOW presented smiling faces to the audience, and the stunt began. Mrs. Pratt lay down on the table. Pratt went into his patter routine. He placed a box over the blonde's body and then set his electric saw above her midriff. He turned on the current. Spotlights flashed on the gleaming circle of steel as the motor hummed and the saw rasped. It bit into the board, cut through the wood, sliced through the blonde's body, sliced through the table beneath. There was a hiss and a roar.

Pratt moved the two halves of the table apart, showing Mrs. Pratt's head and bust separated from her legs and torso. There was loud applause.

Presently he covered the two halves with a cloth, waved a small wand, and caused a cloud of smoke to cover the entire table. When the cloud wafted away he lifted the cloth and Mrs. Pratt jumped down from the table, smiling and exhibiting a whole body once again.

There was louder and prolonged applause.

And at this moment a voice in the audience cried, “Fake!”

“Fake?” gasped Mr. Pratt.

“Fake!” yelled the voice. “A great big fake!”

At this juncture, Hicks had noticed the uproar and dragged Bill down the hall towards the ballroom. As he entered it with Annabel and Tubby tagging along, the cries of “Fake!” grew louder and more furious. The entire meeting was in a tumult.

“Who calls me a fake?” Pratt demanded, staring into the darkness and trying to locate the voice.

“I do!”

“And who, pray tell, are you?”

“Archie!” yelled the voice. “Archie the Archfiend!”

“Never heard of you,” Pratt snapped. “Who books you?”

“Nobody. I’m on my own.”

“Where’d you appear last?”

“I never perform in public,” Archie yelled back. “People don’t appreciate my type of magic.”

Mr. Pratt forced a laugh. “You see, gentlemen?” he asked the crowd. “Here is a rank amateur, who has never even appeared on the stage, challenging my illusion. I suppose you object to my timing?”

“I object to the whole thing,” Archie called up. “It’s all a fake. That big saw and that box and black cloth—all a lot of hooey, that’s what it is. You can’t saw a woman in half and make it look real.”

“Perhaps you can do better?” challenged Mr. Pratt, in a fine red rage that went nicely with his white gardenia.

“Sure I can. Matter of fact, I will.” The small figure came down the aisle and clambered up to the stage. Bill and his companions saw a little portly man with a snub nose who looked more like a burlesque comic than a magician. He peered tauntingly up at the huge Mr. Pratt.

“Well, here I am,” he said. “Ready to go. Of course, I didn’t bring a girl with me, you know.”

“Excuses,” snorted Pratt. “I thought so! Cheap excuses! Well, you won’t get out of this so easily. We can get you an assistant from the crowd, can’t we?”

“You mean some girl would be willing for me to saw her?” asked Archie, incredulously.

“Why not? How about my ex-wife, here?”

But Mrs. Pratt shook her head. “Sorry. Once is enough. Besides, I’m afraid of this character. He looks like a schizophrenic to me.”

“Like a what?” demanded Archie, red hair bristling.

“Schizophrenic,” repeated Mrs. Pratt. “You know—split personality.”

“Lay on the table and I’ll split your personality for you,” Archie offered. But the tall blonde moved away. “You see?” said Archie. “I can’t do it without a volunteer.”

“I’ll take a chance.” A feminine voice rose from the darkness of the hall.

A MOMENT later the girl appeared—a slim, blackhaired young woman clad in slacks. “I ain’t a professional,” she explained, “but I’ve always wanted a chance to go on the stage on account of my friends all say I’m lousy with talent.” She snapped her gum roguishly at Mr. Pratt.

“Will she do?” Pratt demanded of Archie.

“Why not? No great loss.” Archie rubbed his hands. “Now for the equipment.”

“Want to use my table and box and saw?”

“No. Who needs all that crud?” Archie shrugged. “That’s just what I mean about fakes. I want to show you all how to really do a saw routine. All I need is a chair and a saw. A regular hand saw.”

“Hand saw?”

A bellhop was fetched and dispatched to bring back a saw from the basement. Archie strutted before the crowd.

“You never saw an act like this before,” he told them. “This will give you a real thrill. I learned my magic the hard way—no props for me, no siree!

Hero, stretch out, honey, and relax while I cut up." The girl bent back over a low chair, resting her trunk against the seat.

"This is awfully nice of you to help," Archie crooned at her. "You sure you don't mind?"

"Not if it helps me professionally," the girl assured him. "It—it won't hurt, will it?"

"Of course not. I told you I'm a real magician. So I'll make sure you don't feel a thing."

The bellboy returned with a handsaw—a gleaming, wicked little thing. Archie hefted it. "Used to play one like this back on the farm," he mused. "That was before I got on the Arthur Godfrey Amateur Show."

"Never mind the autobiography," snarled Pratt. "You made some dirty remarks about my trick. You promised to show us how you saw a woman in half. Now get going, and let the chips fall where they may."

"Hips," corrected Archie the Archfiend, sweetly. "All right, here we go."

He picked up the saw and poised over the young lady's midriff.

"Hey, wait!" Pratt exclaimed. "No cloth? No patter to the audience? No misdirection or sleight of hand?"

"Naw!" Archie grunted. "That's the beauty part of my trick. I just saw her, see? See-saw. Right out in front of everybody. Like—this."

And he took the saw and began to saw the girl in half.

There was no noise, no smoke, no black cloths fluttering, no music, no drama. Just a stout little man sawing a shapely brunette across the middle with a plain carpenter's handsaw. The saw sliced into her, the little man worked away, and pretty soon the saw came out the other side.

"Hey!" yelled the girl. "I'm chilly!"

"Fresh air blowing on yer stomach," Archie explained. "You're open at the middle now, see? In two pieces.

"But it didn't hurt—it's a trick," the girl persisted.

"Sure, that's the trick, doing it so it doesn't hurt, and so you're still alive. But you're in two pieces, all right."

The audience rose.

It was true. The girl was in two pieces, all right or all wrong. One piece consisted of head, bust and arms. The other piece was legs and torso.

"There you are," called Archie the Archfiend. "That's what I call really sawing a woman in half."

"Good Lord!" yelled Pratt. "He—he did it! I can see she's been bifurcated."

"Watch yer language, buddy," cautioned Archie.

"You—you mean I'm really cut in two?" wailed the brunette. "Actually?"

"Actually."

"But I didn't know—and how will this help me professionally—ooh, it's true!" gasped the girl, looking down and seeing her legs wiggling on the floor as her torso moved independently of her own volition.

SCREAMS rose from the audience. Annabel grasped Bill's arm tightly. "See what I mean about magicians?" she whispered.

"Do something!" yelled Mr. Pratt at Archie, who stood smiling and pointing at the divided girl.

"What more do you want?" asked Archie. "I told you what I'd do and I did it."

"Put me back together, quick!" gasped the girl.

"Yes—hurry up and put her back together!" Pratt moaned.

"Sorry. That's not part of the trick," Archie smiled. "I never said I would put her together again. Matter of fact, I don't know how to. Never got any instructions, and like I say, this is the first time I really tried to saw a woman in half."

"But I can't stay like this," the girl screeched.

"Why not? You're alive, and nothing hurts you, does it? Why beef?"

"Oooh!" The girl tried to sit up but failed, since she no longer had anything to sit up with, let alone on. "Why, you sawed-off little squirt—"

"Look who's calling me sawed-off!" chuckled Archie.

"Stop him!" yelled Pratt, as the little man walked away.

"Yes—stop him!" the girl echoed.

The audience still wasn't quite sure if the whole thing was a gag or not. Now they learned the ghastly truth. For as Archie walked away, the girl followed him.

To be exact, the legs followed him. The legs and torso got up from the chair and began to chase him through the hall.

The sight of the trunkless torso moving through the darkness was a little too much for the magicians at large. They began to run, too. So did Bill and Annabel and Hicks and Tubby.

As for Mr. Pratt, he stood on the stage and stared at the head and arms of the sawed-up girl.

"I can't make heads nor tails out of all this," Pratt sighed.

"Do something!" she yelled.

"Yeah," Pratt muttered, to himself. "I guess I'd better." Picking up the gavel, he banged lustily and yelled, "Meeting is adjourned."

But nobody heard him. The darkened hall was completely empty. Pratt's last glimpse of the audience consisted of a vision of Archie the Archfiend, struggling to worm his way through the crowd at the rear exit, while the animated torso of a woman kicked him in the pants.

"NOW WHAT do we do?" Bill groaned, as Annabel dragged him along the corridor.

"Relax," the girl advised, panting and lashing out at the crowd. "Be like me," she told him punching one of the fleeing magicians in the ribs, "Keep calm and cool."

"Yes," Hicks shouted, above the din, as he ripped the coat of the man ahead of him, "Don't get excited!" Tubby, who was running interference, grunted in assent as they moved out into the lobby.

"But this will ruin the hotel's reputation Bill objected. "We'll lose all our business."

“Take it easy. In a couple of hours everybody will have forgotten about the whole thing. The story will be twisted around until everyone thinks it was all a gag. These magicians are a wild bunch anyway. Look—they’re not checking out. They’re just heading for the bar to drown their memories.”

The girl spoke truly. Bill could see the guests crowding into the cocktail lounge.

“We’ll have to make plans, though,” he warned. “Remember those awful creatures who checked in this morning with Mr. Dritch? Wait until they get loose—”

“We’ll think about that problem later,” Hicks promised. “When we’re equipped to handle it.”

“He means when we’re drunk,” Tubby supplied, unhelpfully. They halted before the elevators and Bill peered around, trying to locate Archie the Archfiend and his pursuer. But the little redheaded sorcerer and his unusual better half were nowhere to be seen.

“Time to go,” Hicks remarked, glancing at his watch. “We have a date for lunch with Mrs. Pratt and Susan Foster, remember? Are you two joining us?”

“Not at the moment,” Bill sighed. “I couldn’t stand the thought of eating lunch while the bottom half of a woman is running loose in this hotel.”

“That sounds a little odd, but I guess I get what you mean,” Annabel conceded. “You and I will stay here, then. See you boys later.”

She waved farewell to Hicks and Tubby as the twosome took their leave, and the elevator went up.

“Come on,” Bill said, grabbing Annabel’s arm. “I’ve got work to do.”

“What sort of work?”

“Well, I’m the manager. I’d better find out what this is all about.” He led Annabel to the offices behind the registration desk. There he introduced himself to the hotel steward, the comptroller, the assistant manager, a Mr. Al Gonquin, and several other dignitaries who had all been informed of Bill’s new job by Manager Bipple before he left.

Bill said as little as possible. He asked polite questions about how things were going, indicated his approval of arrangements for the day, and rejoiced in the knowledge that news of the terrible scene in the ballroom had not yet come to their attention.

"Why, running a hotel seems to be easy," Bill confided to the girl as they left. "All you need is a lot of guests and some beds."

"A great theory," Annabel agreed. "I'm all for it, myself. Shall we go upstairs and relax a bit?"

"Not yet." Bill was grimly determined. "I've got to solve this business about the sawed-up woman. Go to the desk and ask Al Gonquin to call a meeting over in the service room. I want to speak to all the bellboys, and also to the house detective."

TEN MINUTES later a dozen bellboys and the house detective faced Manager Bill Dawson in the small room off the lobby. The house dick was properly apologetic for events of the previous evening.

"I didn't know you was the manager," he explained, "or else I wouldn't have paid no attention how many people you had in bed with you." The bellboys exchanged wondering smirks at this.

"Thank you," said Bill, with a pained smile. "Let's consider the incident closed. I trust it will not happen again."

"Oh that's all right," the house dick beamed. "You can do it again tonight if you like. Round up a whole bunch and climb into bed right in the lobby if you like, it's OK with—"

"Kindly shut your fat mouth," Bill snapped. "Now, men, let's get down to business. I have called this meeting for a very serious reason. The good name and reputation of the Flopmoor is at stake. No guest should be informed of what I have to say here, and it will be your duty to conceal the facts wherever possible."

"You can trust us, boss," said the head bellhop.

"Good. Briefly, I want to warn you all about a certain woman, or rather, a certain portion of a certain woman. Her bottom half is running around loose."

"What?"

"I mean—oh, how can I explain it? I want you all to conceal the bottom half of this woman. Don't let it get out whatever you do."

"Please, sir," said one of the bellboys. "I don't quite understand. Do you want us to find this loose woman for you and bring her here?"

"No. Just the bottom half is what interests me—I mean, it's chasing after the guests and I want it to stop."

"What's its name?" asked the house detective. "I don't recall us registering half a woman before."

"We didn't," Bill gulped, desperately. "She was all right when she came in. It's just that somebody cut her in two in the ballroom recently—"

"Then it's murder!" shouted the detective. "I'll call police—homicide—we'll tail the guy that cut her—"

"He's already being tailed," Bill explained. "By her lower limbs. Can't you understand? This bottom half isn't dead, it's very much alive, and—oh, Annabel, help me!"

Annabel patted the stricken man on the shoulder and took over. In a few words she explained the unusual situation to the bellhops and the detective. They promised faithfully to keep on the lookout for the animated torso and try to bring it back to the upper portion of the woman in the ballroom. "Don't let that half get away, either," Annabel warned. "You'd better split up; some of you look for one section, some for the other."

Then Annabel led Bill away, as the bellhops tossed coins, heads or tails, to determine which half they would look for.

"You need a drink after all this," she suggested. "And some rest. Let's go up to your room and take things easy for a while."

"All right," Bill agreed. "But we can't stop work now. I want to be prepared for those magicians—no telling what Mr. Dritch will be up to. If he animated furniture last year, Lord knows what to expect now."

The lobby was quiet once more. Bill stopped at the desk to order sandwiches and a bottle of rye sent up to his room, and then escorted Annabel to the elevator.

“Wonder what Hicks and Tubby are doing?” she mused, as they ascended. She was not long in finding out.

The elevator came to rest on the second floor and two men entered, casting nervous glances over their shoulders. Both of them wore violent bathrobes and still more violent frowns. The elder of the two, disregarding Bill and Annabel completely, grumbled to his companion in low tones.

“There I lay,” he muttered, “when all of a sudden the door opens and these two women come running in like all hell was at their heels. Into the washroom they go and turn on the showers, just like that.”

“You don’t say!” commented his companion.

“I do say. So I yelled through the door and asked them what they thought they were doing. ‘We’re taking a bath’ one of them yells back. So I asked ‘Why?’ and she says ‘Because we’re drunk, that’s why, and we want to sober up fast so we can drink some more. And don’t come in, because the tub is crowded and besides, we’re only half-dressed. Then they started to laugh and I got out of there.”

“Lucky I came along in the hall,” remarked the second man. “What are you going to do about it all?”

“I’m going to find the manager and complain about those half-dressed women.”

“That’s going to sound funny complaining about half-dressed women, I mean,” mused the second man.

“Well, I’ll make the manager find them and throw them out, whoever they are.”

“How will you recognize them if they’re only half-dressed?” his friend pondered. “I mean, they all sort of look alike that way, don’t they?”

“Don’t tell me there’s any more of them in this hotel,” said the first man, hastily. “I came here for a rest. And there’s darn little rest with those half-dressed women around.”

“Or any half-dressed women,” his companion added thoughtfully.

BILL SHRANK back in the corner and hid his face. The elevator paused on the fourth floor and allowed another passenger to enter—a scantily-clad man who was attired quite simply in a small bath towel. He looked bewildered and apologetic as he addressed the occupants of the car.

“Have you noticed any half-dressed women running around?” he inquired.

“Do you want a half-dressed woman?” asked Annabel, curiously.

“Gawd no, lady—I’ve had my fill of them!” groaned the small man.

“Frank, aren’t you?”. Annabel replied. “You and your half-dressed Women.”

“Quit saying that word, lady,” begged the man. “Half-dressed women have ruined my day. And that’s not the worst.”

The elevator-boy was so engrossed in this story that he failed to start the car. The little man in the bath towel buttonholed him and continued his tale of woe. “I came into my room a little while ago and there they were, two women lying right on my bed, fast asleep.”

“They’re pretty fast awake, too,” Annabel offered. But the little man ignored her. “So I went over to wake them up and all of a sudden I stumbled on something lying on the floor. I was standing on a man’s stomach.”

“Go on,” said Bill, softly, although he was beginning to realize who the man was talking about.

“By this time I was a little confused, I guess. Because I kicked this man quite hard in the face. He slid under the bed, but believe it or not, as soon as he disappeared another man stuck his head out from down there and began to curse me. By this time the women woke up and the other man crawled out and all four of them began chasing me around the room, drunk as coots.

“I tried to talk to the tall man, the one who wore glasses—and he said they were unfrocked members of the Ku Klux Klan and if I would undress they would make me Supreme Kleagle. Then I could join them in the big hunt.

"So I asked what they were hunting for, only half-dressed like that, and what do you think they told me?"

"What?" asked Annabel.

"They said they were looking for half a woman. Half a woman, mind you—and just the bottom half at that. Said she, or it, was running loose somewhere in the hotel and they had to find her. Told me to be on the lookout for a pair of green slacks with nothing up above.

"And all the time they were telling me this, they kept pulling off my clothes—said they were going to use me for a decoy for this half-whatzis.

"So I told them they were crazy, and drunk, and to get out of my room. I even went over to the door and opened it. And then—"

The little man gulped and shuddered. He nearly dropped the bath-towel in his agitation.

"So help me, when I opened the door, in marched half a woman! A pair of green slacks and nothing else. Just a torso—but even more so, if you know what I mean!

"They all jumped on her, or it, and it tried to kick, but they wrapped it up in a sheet, and I saw my chance and ran for the elevator. And here I am."

"And here we are," said Annabel, as the elevator stopped on their floor. She turned to the elevator operator. "Boy, take these gentlemen downstairs and see that valet service provides them with fresh wardrobes. Then send them all into the bar for some refreshment. On the house, of course, compliments of the management. We'll see that the rooms are cleaned up for them again."

"Thanks, lady," said the little man. "Are you the manager?"

"He is," Annabel indicated Bill. "And those drunks are just relatives. You know how it is with relatives—got to put up with them, can't kick them out. I trust you'll pardon the whole affair."

"All right with me," agreed the big man in the bathrobe. "I'd pardon anything for a drink right now." He peered at Bill. "So they're your relatives, eh?" he mused. "Well, if I may ask just one question—what relation are you to that half of a woman?"

"Oh, she's my half-sister," Bill replied.

"Of course, now I get it," the man said, as they exited. A slow look of doubt crept over his face. "But wait—" he cried.

Bill and Annabel didn't wait. They hastened to his room.

"I hope they sent up that bottle," he sighed. "I need a drink right now more than those men. What a panic this turned out to be—and imagine, me, wanting a drink!"

"Do you good, Annabel said.

IT DID. The bottle and sandwiches waited, but not for long. Bill and the girl sat down and ate. And drank. And drank some more. It was getting on towards afternoon, and Bill felt the need of relaxation. Once more life had resumed its unreal quality; things were happening much too fast, and there seemed to be no solution save an alcoholic one. One drink led to another.

Annabel sat down on the edge of Bill's chair and stroked his hair as he poured into the glasses.

"It may be a little strange to you, all this excitement, but I hope you're having fun," she murmured.

"Yes, I am, heaven help me!" Bill sighed. He *was* having a good time, and it bothered him. Bill, like most sedentary souls, had always looked on pleasure as something that one watched, not as something one. One was offered the pleasure of music, reading, seeing entertainment—but the idea of participation was something new. And yet here he was, plunged into a whirl of pleasurable events. It was too much to cope with, so he took refuge in drink. The liquor warmed and worked in him.

"So much has happened," he told the girl. "Up to a few days ago all this was strange to me. Believe it or not, in the town I come from, I'd never stayed out all night. I’d never had anything to drink but a glass or two of beer. And I’d never—well, I mean—”

“You’d never met a girl like me,” Annabel supplied, helpfully. “Sorry now?”

“How can you say that?” Bill took another drink, a big one. He felt very flushed and feverish, but pleasantly so. “You’re wonderful, Annabel. You and Hicks and Tubby—I suppose I shouldn’t approve of the things you say and the things you do, but I like it. Every bit of it. Take this drinking, now. You know, I’m almost getting drunk.”

“Almost?” Annabel giggled. “I’d say you were quite drunk, pet. Quite, quite drunk.”

Bill scowled defiantly. “Wrong,” he said. “Changed my mind. I’m all right.”

“How could you tell?” Annabel teased.

“Well, for instance—if I started to see funny animals. Like, maybe penguins. If I saw a penguin walk into this room I’d be drunk.”

“Penguins don’t walk,” Annabel said. “They waddle.”

“So does my Aunt Minnie,” Bill answered. “And she’s no penguin.”

“My Uncle George is a Moose,” Annabel offered.

“Don’t confuse me,” said the tipsy young man, taking another big swallow from his glass. “We were talking about something else. Drunks and penguins.”

“Did you ever see a drunken penguin?” asked Annabel, innocently. “They have Arctic circles under their eyes.”

“How true,” Bill murmured. “How too, too true.”

“Now I know you’re drunk,” said the girl. “Come and let me put your head under the faucet. You’ve got to sober up.”

“Oh, no—I’m sober’s a judge!”

At this ill-favored moment the door of the room opened.

“Quick!” Bill sprang to his feet. “The police must be here!” But it was not a policeman who entered the room. It was a duck.

A large, white, fat duck waddled into the room and sanity fled before it.

Bill bounded away to the wall.

“Good Lord! I must be drunk—it is a penguin!”

Annabel stared calmly at the duck as it waddled across the carpet, but Bill howled.

“Yes, I am drunk, all right. Get me a doctor!”

“That’s no penguin, dear. That’s only a duck.”

“Then get a quack!” Bill, unnerved by the notion of being under the influence of alcohol, suddenly dropped to his hands and knees and crawled hastily towards the door. The duck waddled behind him, seeming to examine his retreating flanks in sly silence. Suddenly the bird extended its beak and Bill rose with a wild squeal. He darted at the bird, but it waddled into the washroom.

Bill sighed in relief. “Thank heavens it’s gone,” he breathed. “Give me a drink.” He started across the floor, then half-tripped over an object lying on the carpet. It was round, and white, and shiny.

“A duck egg!” yelled the harassed young man. “It laid an egg on my carpet!”

Annabel laughed, then stopped as her eyes encountered an apparition peering through the open doorway.

IT WAS a face—a big, coarse face, followed by an even bigger and coarser body. The coarse face had a coarse voice, too.

“Pardon me, folks,” said the face, in an offensive manner. “But have youse happened to see my duck?”

“Do you want to show us a duck?” asked Annabel, politely.

“No,” the face denied. “I’m lookin’ fer one. Is it loose in here, my duck?”

“I’ve seen your duck, all right!” Bill suddenly yelled. “And if I ever see it again, I’ll knock the stuffing out of it.”

“But it ain’t a stuffed duck, Mister,” whined the face. “It’s a live one.”

“I’ll say it’s a live one,” Bill panted. “Look at this.” And he thrust the newly-laid egg under the nose of the face in the doorway.

“What’s the matter with it?” the face inquired. “That there’s a good egg. Duck eggs is worth money. Don’t get sore, Mister—just tell me where my duck is and I’ll go away.”

“What do you want with the duck, anyway?” Annabel asked.

“I’m a poultry-fancier,” replied the face, proudly.

“Well, we didn’t fancy this particular specimen.”

The face became suspicious. “Come clean now, folks. Where’s my duck? What did youse do with it?”

“What can a person do with a duck anyway?” Annabel inquired.

The face was not convinced. “Did youse kill my duck?” it accused.

“Do we look like a couple of duck-murderers?” gibbered Bill.

“Well, somethin’ happened to it,” mused the face. “Been plenty of funny business in this hotel today, I hear. Duck busted outta the crate downstairs when I brung it to deliver to some magicians for the convention here. It’s a trained duck, see? Does tricks. Magicians said they wanted a duck so as they could make it vanish. Well, it vanished, all right. So I follers it up here. Somethin’ happened to it, and you folks had better pay the bill.”

“What bill?” Annabel wanted to know in an insistent voice.

“Why, the bill for my duck.”

“But your duck already has a bill,” Annabel argued. “I saw it.”

“And I felt it,” Bill grated, rubbing his memento painfully.

This tipsy argument did none of the participants any good. The face became irate. “Come on, youse killed my duck and youse know it. Pay up and quit squawking!”

As if to refute his words, an agonized squawk now issued from behind the washroom door. Bill raced over.

The duck was swimming merrily about in the bath-tub.

Something snapped inside Bill at the sight. He reeled forward and plunged into the tub, seeking to strangle the mocking bird.

He slipped and struck his head—and went out, cold.

Bill came to five minutes later, on the sofa, with Annabel’s arms around him.

“It’s all right now,” she soothed. “The duck is gone. And guess who’s here?”

“The half-woman,” Bill groaned. “Wrong!” Hicks peered over the side of the sofa. “It’s me and Tubby. We captured the half-woman and took her downstairs to be glued together or something. Anyway, she’s out of the way, now, and everything is quiet. Aren’t you glad we fixed things?”

“Sure,” Bill sighed. “I heard about it in the elevator. You and those women. Such vulgar antics!”

“What you need, friend—aside from a drink, which is coming right up, that is—is a vacation from the hotel business,” Tubby told him.

“Right, an excellent idea,” Hicks chimed in. “Let’s all go away from here and relax. We’ll pick up the girls and find a spot to drink in.”

“Now stop that!” Bill raged. “I’m through with vulgarity! I’d like something cultured and refined.”

“The very thing,” Annabel exclaimed. “Let’s take Bill to the library. Or maybe a museum.”

“Why not?” Hicks agreed. “I’ll call Mrs. Pratt and Susan and tell them to meet us downstairs. Let the Magician’s Convention run itself this evening. We’ll get away from it all and have some nice, cultured, refined fun.”

Bill groaned as Annabel assisted him to his feet. “This sounds too good to be true,” he sighed. “I’ve got a sneaking hunch we’re heading for trouble.”

“What kind of trouble can you have in a museum?” Tubby wanted to know.

He soon found out.

THE PARTY met Mrs. Pratt and Susan Foster in the lobby.

“What’s up?” asked Mrs. Pratt, sweetly.

“We’re going to acquire culture,” Hicks told her. This remark did not exactly kindle a look of enthusiasm on the blonde’s face, and Marmaduke Hicks hastened to ask, “What’s the matter? Don’t you girls want to be cultivated?”

“Certainly,” Susan Foster agreed. “My room number is—”

“Never mind!” Bill broke in. “I’m thinking of education.”

“I’ll handle your education,” Annabel said. “You’re my star pupil.”

“I don’t like this,” Mrs. Pratt remarked, as Tubby hailed a taxi. “That ex-husband of mine is very jealous, you know. He’s been trying to get something on me for years. Wants to stop paying alimony. And I think he’s been spying. If he finds me running around with strange men—”

“Oh, we’re not strangers,” Hicks assured. “We’ve been introduced.”

“Nevertheless, I’m worried.”

“Come on,” Tubby coaxed, as the cab pulled up. He gave an address to the driver as the party took seats. Annabel climbed in last, completely ruining Bill’s shoe-shine, and seated herself on his lap, ruining his morale. The taxi jolted along.

In a few moments the vehicle halted before a large cafe. “Here we are,” Tubby announced. The *Cafe de Paree,* Run by a little Frenchman named Le Vinsky.”

“Here, this is no museum!” Bill protested.

“Don’t be impatient. We’ll get there. Just thought we ought to have a little refreshment first to tide us over.”

“Have you no appreciation of art?” Bill raged. “They tell me the Metropolitan is showing a glassware collection from ancient ruins.”

“They have some ancient bottles in here,” Tubby soothed. “I appreciate them very much. And their contents will turn you into a magnificent ruin.” Bill, protesting, found Annabel dragging him in after the rest of the party, and soon the six were seated at a table near the orchestra. The noise depressed Bill so that he drank several stiff highballs without thinking. The others needed no encouragement. It was some time before a now befuddled Bill rose in determination.

"Enough of this," he announced. "We're going to a museum if it kills us. Come on, you promised!"

Another taxi took them down to the Metropolitan, which appeared to be closed for the night. "Too late," Tubby informed them. "We might as well go back to the cafe."

"No you don't!" Bill was stubborn. "If we do that, we'll just get into trouble. I want a museum—any museum will do."

"Okay, buddy." The cab-driver entered into the conversation abruptly. "Museum it is. Let's go."

They went.

"Here you are, Buster!" The cab driver ground-to a halt and gestured up at a large, dingy-looking structure over which hung the legend, *Imperial Wax Museum*.

"But this isn't a regular museum," Bill groaned. "Let's go somewhere else."

"Yes," Hicks agreed. "No wax museum for me. Who wants to look at a lot of candles?"

"Only one open this time o'night," the driver argued.

"All right. Come on in." Bill disembarked and helped the girls alight. They approached the door and paid admission to a dyspeptic and doleful doorman.

"Why so sad, friend?" Tubby asked, with alcoholic amiability.

"You'd be sad, too," the man replied, "if you had nothing else to do all day but look at a lot of dummies."

"Here, now, no insults."

"I mean the waxworks," assured the doorkeeper. "Give me the creeps, they do. Dummies all day long, that's all I see."

"Don't take it so hard—look what it did for Edgar Bergen."

This remark was lost on the doorkeeper. "It ain't so much the job itself," he babbled. "It's the bloodiness of the thing. Regular chamber of horrors. I get the shakes just thinking about it."

THE PARTY passed inside, then regretted it. For it was a chamber of horrors they entered, and no mistake. Some sweet, sadistic soul had executed the wax figures, and they were fiendishly calculated to inspire shudders. After looking around, Bill decided the designer should have been executed himself. The place was a domicile of dread.

At this evening hour the dim rooms were deserted, save for the sextette, and the wax figures assumed added terror in the silence.

“Have a drink,” Tubby whispered, producing a pint bottle from his inside pocket. For once, Bill did not object, but swallowed as eagerly as the rest. In a moment, confidence restored, the party proceeded.

Jack the Ripper—Landru—Gilles de Retz—Dr. Crippen—Salome with the head of John the Baptist—Blackbeard the Pirate—the beheading of Anne Bolyen—the assassination of Marat—the murder of Rasputin—the Inquisition—the Cleveland Torso Slayings—all passed in review.

By now the party was growing gruesomely gay. A few nips from the bottle primed them against horror, and Mrs. Pratt giggled a trifle hysterically. Annabel clung to Bill and her nearness did things to his heart and head. He was almost content to give up the goal of culture. A certain recklessness rose in him, an urge to plunge madly into the sea of life and battle the waves until he reached the Happy Isles. Annabel did this to him and he no longer wanted to fight against it. He was ready for anything; or almost anything except what happened.

It was at this dangerous moment that another party entered the museum. It consisted of two heavy-set, thick-jowled men Bill remembered having seen back at the cafe they had stopped at for a drink. One of the big fellows seemed even more familiar; Bill did his best to remember his name.

“I could swear they came here,” said the taller and fatter of the two to his companion. “I wonder what she’s pulling off now?”

“Heavens!” whispered the divorcee, suddenly ducking behind a pillar. “That man is my ex-husband, Mr. Pratt.”

At the mention of the man’s name, Tubby giggled.

“Don’t laugh!” breathed the woman, furiously. “He’s got his lawyer with him. They’re after my alimony, all right.”

“What’ll we do?” Hicks asked. “We don’t want to let him get his hands on that.”

“Shut up and get out of here, fast,” Mrs. Pratt hissed.

It seemed that everybody took an immediate dislike to Mr. Oswald Pratt. The beefy magician was much more like a typical big business man: big-muscled, big-shouldered, big-voiced and big-headed. The type of man who smoked expensive cigars, told cheap jokes, and knew only one master—the Almighty Dollar, which he ambiguously referred to as “Success”. Mrs. Pratt, in fact, had divorced him mainly because he insisted on referring to her as “the little woman.”

All this she hastily explained to her friends in a whisper as the two men peered about the gloomy corridors of the wax museum. “Now, let’s sneak out before he sees me,” she concluded.

HICKS PRODUCED the bottle again and passed it hastily. “Wait,” he told them, “I have a great idea.” He proceeded to explain it quickly in muffled tones. It was received with subdued but inebriated enthusiasm. A moment later the little group scattered off into the dimness, each bent on his or her own errand.

Meanwhile Mr. Pratt and his legal friend, “Honest John” O’Toole, paced rapidly down the center corridor.

“See anybody?” Pratt snapped impatiently. “Don’t know where they could have gone to.”

“If they’re here, we’ll find them,” the legal eagle assured him. He glanced intently about him in the gathering gloom, but his professional eye was attracted by the fascinating parade of criminal activity displayed here. Before he realized it, O’Toole had taken up a position before the Gilles de Retz display and was gazing happily at the spectacle of Monsieur de Retz assaulting one of his wives with a long, sinister-looking knife.

"What's this?" demanded Pratt, halting beside the exhibit.

"Gilles de Retz," the lawyer explained. "French guy who killed his wives. Regular Bluebeard, that baby was."

"Good for him," Pratt muttered. "I wish to heaven I'd handled mine that way." He chewed his cigar viciously as he considered the last statement. "Yes," he continued, "I should have tried this on Dorothy."

"Why not?" said O'Toole, humoring his employer. "They say this was quite common in them old royal families."

"I come from a very old family," observed Pratt, proudly.

"Yeah?" sneered a voice out of nowhere. "Which one—the Jukes or the Kallikuks?"

Pratt, thinking this remark came from his companion, became indignant. "HI have you know," he snapped, "that my ancestors came over on the Mayflower."

"Is that so?" mocked the voice. "Well, it's a good thing the immigration laws are stricter now."

Pratt became livid. "What's that?" he demanded, collaring O'Toole.

"I didn't say anything. Not a word."

"Come on," Pratt rejoined. "There's something screwy going on here. Ever since I thought I saw that torso moving this morning, I've been a little punch-drunk, you know." He walked on, followed by his friend. Suddenly he halted beside the Salome exhibit.

"So help me," he observed, "if I didn't know that was a dummy, I'd swear this figure was my wife."

He pointed at Salome, who stood regarding the head of John the Baptist, which rested on top of a large cabinet.

"Not a bad figure," commented the lawyer, "for your wife."

"Ah, she wore falsies," sneered her ex-husband.

The Salome image trembled violently.

"Do my eyes deceive me," Pratt said, suddenly, "or did that dummy just quiver?"

"Must be the light."

“My wife used to quiver like that all the time,” Pratt mused. “It was due to drinking, of course. That bat was always lushed up.”

This was too much for the figure to bear.

“I can’t blame her,” said a furious feminine voice. “A woman would have to drink in order to stand living with you.”

PRATT HAD the eyes of an insane fish. “Am I mad?” he asked. “Torsos running this morning. Now a statue, moving and talking. Let’s go back to the Convention—I want to lie down.”

“No,” said O’Toole, a baffled look in his own bulging eyes. “You’re not crazy. I heard a voice too.” Suddenly he reached out and tapped the figure of Salome with his cane. The response was instantaneous, although it did not come from Salome.

Instead, the head of John the Baptist began to squirm hideously on the cabinet. The eyes opened and bearded lips writhed into a horrid life. It was a nasty-looking head with a brown beard and incongruously red hair. There seemed to be a lighted cigar between its lips.

“Lay off the lady,” the severed head whispered. “And put down that cane, you squirt, before I bite it in half.”

With shrill gasps, the two men turned and fled down the aisle. In their confusion, they ran in the wrong direction.

“It spoke to me,” O’Toole kept mumbling. “It spoke to me!”

“Did you notice the cigar?” Pratt panted. “I wonder how it could inhale?” Then, “Now what?” he cried, caroming into a hooded figure that blocked the passage with upraised sword.

“Just a dummy,” he sighed, in relief. The figure, on inspection, proved to be part of the group depicting the death of Rasputin. It was a realistic scene—too realistic for Pratt’s jangled nerves. He gazed at it in mute horror for a moment while regaining his breath. Suddenly he spotted something peculiar.

“Funny,” he observed. “I never knew that guy Rasputin wore glasses before.” He pointed a shaking finger at the Mad Monk who was lying on the floor in a pool of red paint. Rasputin was indeed wearing glasses—and his beard had a tendency to sag rather foolishly to one side.

“Everything’s wrong in here,” whispered O’Toole. “Rasputin with glasses, Salome with the quivers, and John the Baptist getting his voice back after that throat operation. Think it’s all a trick? After all, you’re a magician.”

“Since that torso business this morning I’m not so sure,” Pratt replied. “Did you notice all the strangers at the Convention? Funny-looking characters I never saw or heard of before. Some of them came in tonight, and I swear something terrible’s going to happen before long. This is all a part of it, too. Maybe I’d better resign, get out of this racket, turn in my wand to the union.”

“Don’t let it get you, pal,” said O’Toole. “We’re still out to find your ex-wife. I mean business and nothing is gonna scare me off her trail.” Suddenly Pratt was tapped on the shoulder by a hand out of nowhere.

He whirled and confronted a very tall thin gentleman who wore a streetcar conductor’s uniform.

“Right this way, gents—I’m the guide,” said the man.

Perhaps the guide might have explained why somewhere down the line was a naked window dummy which had once worn the streetcar conductor’s uniform in a scene depicting *Murders of the Mad Motorman Who Went Off His Trolley*.

BUT MR. HICKS did not choose to reveal this. Instead he led his unsuspecting victims easily along the aisle, drowning out their protests in a flood of conversation.

“Wonderful museum we have here,” he babbled. “Never saw a more splendid set of waxworks. Speaking of wax-works,” and he turned to address O’Toole, “do you wax your mustache?”

"I haven't got a mustache."

"But would you wax it if you had one?" inquired Hicks, earnestly.

"Certainly not!"

"Then how about a nice mustache *made* of wax?" pursued Hicks. "Would you care to buy one? I could steal it for you off that statue of General Grant over there."

"I don't want any of your lousy mustaches," O'Toole said, wearing the look of confusion Hicks had made for him. "I'm here on business. I'm a criminal lawyer."

"What did they throw you in for?"

"You don't understand," Mr. O'Toole managed to answer, in a strained voice. "Everything I do is within the law."

"Well, I know just the place for a lawyer like you," Hicks babbled, stalling for time. "You ought to see our mounted police exhibit."

"Canadian Northwest?" inquired O'Toole, more out of desperation than any desire to know.

"New York mounted police," Hicks answered.

"How did you get the horses?"

"What horses?"

"Why, for the mounted police."

"There are no horses," said Hicks.

"Then what are the policemen mounted on?"

"Why, on a platform, of course."

"Phooey on all this," interrupted Mr. Pratt. "See here, I'm in this place looking for my wife."

"What would she be doing in this museum?" parried the false guide, with a disarming smile. "Don't tell me you married one of the waxworks?"

"No," Pratt forced himself to reply. "But I think she's hiding here. As a matter of fact," he continued, "she might be right over there." And he pointed to Mary, Queen of Scots.

Before Hicks could stop him, Pratt bolted over the railing and began to shake the wax figure violently. But he was wrong—the dummy did not move.

“You’re crazy,” the guide assured him.

“Beginning to think so myself,” Pratt muttered. He laughed shrilly. “Perhaps we’re all crazy. Maybe I’m Napoleon.”

“No!” boomed a voice. “7 am Napoleon!”

At the sound of these words Pratt wheeled suddenly, then collapsed. Tubby, in the costume of the Little Corporal, stood at his side. “I’m Napoleon,” he announced. “You must be nuts!” Then he stared at O’Toole. “Don’t start telling me you’re King Tut, either, because this gentleman can prove it.”

And Mr. O’Toole was forced to confront Bill, who leered at him madly from inside an open mummy-case.

Where the girls had found the Wooden Horse of Troy will never be known. It is enough they had, and somehow managed to struggle into it.

Now this beast put in an untimely appearance.

There is nothing worse than the sight of a wobbly wooden horse in a wax museum—a big wooden horse that is unexpectedly alive. As this nightmare loped drunkenly down the corridor on six legs, Mr. Pratt and Mr. O’Toole suddenly decided that they had suffered enough.

With low animal moans they fled for the door, just as the horse suddenly split in the middle and pursued them. The head charged Mr. O’Toole and the terrifying other end bounded after Mr. Pratt. Neither of these gentlemen stopped running until the museum was several blocks behind them.

Here a policeman halted them and asked the reason for their haste.

“The head of a wooden horse was chasing me,” gasped O’Toole.

The policeman sneered, and looked at Mr. Pratt. “And just what was chasing you?” he asked.

But for some reason, Mr. Pratt wouldn’t tell. He just sat down on the sidewalk and strangled himself.

"GREAT WORK!" said Mr. Hicks, surveying his companions. "I'm proud of you."

"Splendid," Mrs. Pratt agreed, emerging from the wooden horse-head. "You frightened that wretch almost to death. Let's all have a drink on that."

The bottle changed hands. Annabel handed it to Bill, who was helplessly fumbling in his mummy-wrappings.

"Baby want?" she inquired. "You know, you look cute that way."

"Get me out of here," demanded the struggling young man. He took a long drink that didn't do him any good, and a long look that helped a great deal.

"Why, Bill, you're helpless," exclaimed the girl. She placed her arms about the man, and in a moment Bill was investigating the claims set forth by the advertisements of a popular lipstick.

The experiment was pleasant and prolonged. By the time it was finished, Tubby had an idea.

"Let's give our wax friends here a break," said the fat man, with a tipsy leer. "Don't forget, they were a big help to us and they deserve a reward."

"What can you do for a wax dummy?" demanded Susan Foster, who had a practical mind about some things.

"Well, we could take them out and buy them all a drink."

"Fine!" Hicks agreed, without knowing why. "I'll handle the doorman."

He went out into the corridor and approached the dour fellow who stared stolidly into the night, ignoring all uproar from within the museum.

"Nice place you have here," Hicks said. "We enjoyed it a lot."

"That's funny," mused the doorman. "Two other guys went in for a while and then they came running out like the devil hisself was at their heels."

"They weren't frightened," lied Hicks, valiantly. "Just killing time for a while and then they had to leave in a hurry." He lowered his voice. "You see, one of them expected to become a father."

"He picked a funny place for it," snorted the doorman, sourly.

"Don't be silly," Hicks argued. "One can become a father almost anywhere."

"I'd hate to become one in a wax museum," said the doorman. "The kid might be born with two heads." Suddenly the dour man warmed up and became talkative. "My cousin's wife once had a baby in a movie theatre. Twins."

"Oh," Hicks murmured. "A double feature."

"Right," said the doorman. "But she only had a chance to see one show. Later she went back and got her money refunded."

Now Hicks had intended to confuse the doorman, but he was more than a little confused himself by this conversation. "Here," he said, producing the bottle, "Have a drink."

The doorkeeper accepted. As he tilted his head back, his neck gurgled and contorted in a revolting fashion.

Hicks stopped the foul spectacle by deftly winding a scarf around the man's neck. He produced another and tied his hands and feet. Then he deposited him safely on a couch inside the hall, and reclaimed his bottle.

"Hereafter don't drink strange liquor," he warned the writhing man. "It's liable to gag you." On this remark he turned and rejoined his companions inside.

His friends were drunkenly selecting their waxwork escorts. Tubby took to another redhead—Queen Elizabeth. Mrs. Pratt seemed to find comfort in that divorce-fiend, Henry the Eighth. Susan Foster, for no reason at all, decided on Rasputin. Bill merely grabbed the first dummy available—which unfortunately proved to be Lady Godiva. Annabel sniffed at him and turned to something called a *Chinese Hatchet Victim.* Hicks lifted down Madame Pompadour.

The result was quaint, to say the least. Tubby still wore the Napoleon costume, Bill's mummy-wrappings were intact, and Hicks changed the guide outfit for a convict suit. The three women wore their street clothes. Thus arrayed, the party crept out the front entrance, each dragging a silent wax companion.

Convict and French courtesan; Napoleon and the Virgin Queen; the overdressed dummy and the over-exposed Lady Godiva; followed by three girls escorting a bloody corpse, a bloody king and a bloody monk—it was a ghastly procession.

Two taxis were summoned—for a cabdriver will carry Death Himself, provided that gentleman has the fare—and the motley assemblage whizzed back down the street to the Cafe de Paree.

IT WAS THE after-theatre dinner hour as they entered, and tables were crowded. A harrassed head waiter met them in the doorway. When his eyes had feasted upon the costumes of these unusual customers, his overworked smile sagged dreadfully. It was only by straining his suavity to the utmost that he was able to meet the commanding gaze of Mr. Hicks.

“Well?” challenged the gentleman in the convict suit. “What are you staring at?”

“Nothing, M’sieu,” the waiter assured, in a voice that entirely lacked conviction. “Nothing at all.”

“Get us a table,” Hicks ordered. “A big table.” Then, “Don’t mind us, we’re going to a masquerade party,” he explained, “and besides, we’re all awfully drunk.”

This last statement was heartily endorsed by the head waiter. Never had he seen a more dreadfully drunken crowd. Fully half of these people seemed incapable of walking at all, but were supported by their partners. Some of them seemed to stare quite hideously, with eyes void of all expression. Unless he escorted them to a table at once, it was quite possible that a number of his guests would collapse on the lobby floor, and this would be a bad advertisement for the cafe.

Accordingly, Francois, forcing a fixed and frozen smile, bowed to Hicks and choked forth a despairing, “Follow me, M’sieu.” The halfdummy, half-drunken cavalcade trailed across the empty dance floor.

The bodies of the wax dummies dangled from their partner’s arms, and the feet trailed loathsomely behind. Once or twice the living members of the party got their own legs tangled up, or tramped viciously on waxen toes.

But the expression on the dummy faces never altered. Dorothy Pratt finally became so enraged at the antics of Henry the Eighth that she picked him up bodily and slung him across her shoulder.

This remarkable procession did not pass unnoticed by the patrons of the cafe, who gazed in wonder at the group's peculiar progress.

"Gawd!" breathed a lady from Brooklyn to her escort. "What is this, a circus? That must be the strong woman."

"Lordy!" muttered a wellknown Broadway columnist, "What will Billy Rose think of next?" He shook his head. "If they're celebrities, I don't know them. Unless that fellow with the beard is one of the Smith Brothers."

"Don't say that," pleaded his companion. "Because if you tell me that little fat guy is really Napoleon, I'm going to collapse."

Several other customers seemed prepared to follow his example. Fortunately for their shattered nerves, the group finally found places at a table on the far side of the dancefloor.

Francois stood by while the group seated themselves, then wished he hadn't. The six drunkest of the lot—which were, of course, the dummies—were brutally dumped into chairs by the more lively members of the party. The sight of Susan Foster daintily affixing a napkin to Rasputin's beard was almost too much for the head waiter's sanity. Casting professional dignity to the winds, Francois stared aghast.

"What's the matter, man, are you crazy?" asked Hicks. The head waiter refused to answer that one. He had too many doubts.

"Bring us twelve champagne cocktails," Hicks ordered. "The way your hands tremble, you can probably shake them up yourself."

FRANCOIS regarded his hands intently for a moment. They were indeed shaking most violently. He attempted to stop them by clenching his fists, which gave him the appearance of a man trying to shake two pair of dice at once.

"Well," barked Hicks, "what's the matter—St. Vitus Dance?" He turned to his comrades. "What a dive! The management is so destitute they have to employ a head waiter with palsy!"

Stifling a sob, Francois hurried away. "Twelve champagne cocktails," he told the bartender. "And don't spare the arsenic!"

From which it might be concluded that Francois was very upset indeed, for the Cafe de Paree had never served anything remotely resembling arsenic since the days of the wartime liquor shortage.

Bill and his friends were now settled at the table and they had time to glance around. The other patrons were engaged in the good old American custom of having a "big evening." The place was filled with sophisticated cosmopolites from Omaha, while at the bar crouched a few native New Yorkers, who gazed timidly at their more daring big-city cousins.

It was an unusual spectacle for Bill and a common one for Annabel. She didn't laugh, because she pitied these people and their philosophy. They were trying so hard to snatch a little happiness and paying so dearly for the privilege. Tomorrow many of them would be on their way home—back to their offices, their household drudgery, their children, and the long winter nights.

Life was pretty much routine for most people, Annabel decided. She and her carefree companions were among the elect. If she could only make Bill understand that; learn the secret of living without worrying about appearances. Not like these pathetic couples who would return tomorrow to eternal monotony with nothing but the memory of this synthetic evening to comfort them. They were so brave about it, too; so eager to go through the motions of enjoyment. Willingly they endured the outlandish cover charges, the hideous music, the indigestible food, the watered liquor, the veiled insults of sneering head waiters and condescending check-room girls. They were paying the price of their fun—and Annabel wished them luck.

These musings were interrupted by the appearance of the waiter, bearing the cocktails. He set them down without comment, although his eyes bulged, when he reached the Chinese Axe Victim.

“Something seems to be the matter with this gentleman,” he chattered, indicating the dummy’s throat, which had been gruesomely gored by the artist to show the spot where the hatchet had struck.

“Why, he’s just drunk,” Annabel assured him, tranquilly.

“But—but look at his neck!” the waiter wailed, indicating the cut throat.

“Oh, that?” laughed the girl. “I guess he must have cut himself. He’s always been so careless about shaving.”

The waiter received this explanation with a horrified stare. “Your friend must use an awfully big razor,” he ventured, thoughtfully.

“Yes,” Annabel answered. “He carries it around with him to use on people who ask impertinent questions.”

This was enough to send the waiter tottering away. That night he dropped seventeen plates and three brandy glasses. The next day the unfortunate man quit his job and entered a monastery, where he remained in his cell and refused to shave all the rest of his life.

Meanwhile the inscrutable workings of alcohol were having their usual effect on the group.

“Now that we’ve got our drinks,” Susan Foster remarked, in a practical voice, “just what do you intend to do with them? The dummies don’t really drink, you know.”

“We’ll each drink two,” Tubby decided. “And order some more, fast. Don’t want anyone to get suspicious.”

They drank and re-ordered. “Not much fun for the dummies,” Hicks remarked. “Let’s at least act sociable and talk to them.”

So presently the staring patrons of the Cafe de Paree had to watch six lively drunks conversing with six dead ones.

“Why, I’ve never seen anything like it in my life!” said an angular lady from Idaho. “Half those people look as if they were dead.”

Her companion, a travelling salesman from Baltimore, gazed at the group with distaste.

“They should be dead,” he muttered. “If I had a gun, I’d shoot them myself. Especially that fellow in the beard. I wouldn’t care to be living with that thing on."

"Neither would I!" said the lady, emphatically.

HICKS noticed the stares and whispered, "I'm afraid they're getting wise to us. We'd better make it look as if these dummies were alive, or some fool will come over and investigate."

Consequently the lady from Idaho had to watch while the dummies were manipulated by their companions; forced to bow and nod in their seats. Wax arms were raised and lowered with most astonishing haste. Rasputin was operated so that it appeared as if his corpse-like fingers were actually stroking the hairs of his nauseating beard. Henry the Eighth bounced up and down in his seat. Madame le Pompadour sat on Hicks' lap, and that callous gentleman pretended to kiss her. Queen Elizabeth had her napkin tucked in by Bill. Unfortunately he shoved it into her bodice a trifle too far and it began to disappear down the front of her gown. Absent-mindedly enough, Bill reached down and grabbed it.

This sight was too much for the lady from Idaho. She fainted on the spot. Her companion rose abruptly and strode over to the table.

"What's coming off here?" he demanded.

Bill looked up, letting go of the napkin in surprise.

"Why, nothing at all," he answered, brightly. Then he glanced down at the floor. "At least, I hope not."

"Then what are you doing to the lady?"

"Well," Bill considered. "It appears she dropped her napkin. I was just being a gentleman and picking it up for her."

As he spoke, Bill noticed the napkin had again disappeared inside the dress. He reached for it once more. The salesman stood and goggled at the sight until Bill had finally captured the napkin, rolled down his sleeve, and waved the cloth around like a flag of victory.

"Got it at last!" he exclaimed, happily.

"So I see," replied the salesman. Then, in a lower voice, "Doesn't the lady object to your familiarity?"

"Too drunk," Bill told him, gravely. "She wouldn't know it if I dropped a table-cloth down her chest." He thought about it for a moment. "But I'd sure hate to have to go after a thing like that."

"I'd sure hate to watch you," the salesman assured him.

"But that's a mere trifle," Bill improvised, wishing the man would go away. "When she gets going, there's no stopping her. Sometimes she loses knives and forks that way, or even dishes. Once it was a whole leg of lamb."

The man looked quite sick, now.

"Yes sir!" cried Bill, gaily. "When this little lady gets really drunk you never know what will drop next. Sometimes I get so tired of fishing for things, I'd like to send down a diver."

This final concept was entirely too much for the salesman. He turned and dragged back to his table where he proceeded to collapse alongside the body of his unconscious partner. It is not definitely known whether either of them ever got up again.

Meanwhile Annabel, in a vain effort to make her dummy look alive, had unfortunately bumped its head against the back of a chair. It cracked open on one side, and a thin trickle of powdered wax and sawdust now streamed down onto her plate.

At this point the waiter returned with fresh drinks. He stood watching the little mound of sawdust for some time. At last his bewilderment burst all bounds.

"Pardon me, miss," he said, curiously, "but. isn't that sawdust there on your plate?"

"Sawdust?" flared Annabel, noticing it for the first time. "Why—certainly not, It's—it's breakfast food!" she announced, defiantly.

"I'd have sworn that was sawdust, lady," pursued the waiter, thoughtfully. He was an observant, scientific-minded soul.

"Well, it's not sawdust," retorted the girl. "I always bring my breakfast food with me when I go out. Doctor's orders."

"I'd have to be pretty sick to eat that stuff, lady," said the waiter. "And without cream or sugar, either."

"I like it that way," said Annabel, wildly. To prove her words she took a spoon and forced herself to choke down a mouthful. Then she smiled, bitterly.

THE WAITER, however, was still unsatisfied. Glancing around, he noticed the marks of sawdust in the Hatchet Victim's hair.

"What's this, if I might ask?" he queried, suddenly. "More breakfast food on the gentleman's head?"

"Dandruff," Annabel explained.

"I see," mused the waiter. "I see." He kept staring.

"Come on, everybody," Annabel said, in a desperate attempt to get away. "Let's all dance."

Had the partners been sober, they would have avoided this suggestion like the plague. But acting on drunken impulse, they all decided to drag their inanimate partners 'out on the dancefloor and mutilate their arches to the raucous rhythm.

The cafe, by this time, was jammed to the eaves by a vast throng of pleasure-benders, and the dance-floor was correspondingly crowded. Many of the newcomers had not yet seen the partners and their queer companions. Now they got a generous eyeful.

The wax dummies made poor dancing partners. Bill and Annabel soon abandoned Lady Godiva and the Chinese Hatchet Victim, and danced with each other. Hicks managed rather well with Madame Pompadour, since her long skirt hid the dragging feet.

Tubby and Queen Elizabeth, however, had their troubles. Elizabeth's legs dragged along the floor almost a foot behind her as the little fat man twirled her torso. The dragging feet soon attracted attention from the other dancers, and Tubby began to get embarrassed. Finally he hit upon a solution. Opening up the coat of his Napoleon costume, he shoved the dummy's feet into his pockets and contented himself by dancing with the upper half. The result was loathsome to look upon. From a distance it looked as if the Virgin Queen was using her partner for a step-ladder.

"What a deal!" observed an opulent brunette, indicating the two. "Look—that woman is actually dancing with her feet in that man's pockets."

"Must be a new step," her partner told her.

"Well, I don't want to learn it," declared the brunette.

Others were of the same opinion. A small redhead, however, stopped in the middle of the floor and watched the performance eagerly.

"What will that Arthur Murray think up next?" she breathed to her companion. "We ought to try and learn that one." And she, in turn, attempted to put her feet in her escort's pockets.

"Cut it out," gasped the man. "This is no place for horseback riding."

Mrs. Pratt waltzed by with Henry the Eighth. The merry monarch was a heavy armful for the blonde divorcee, but she was game to the finish. She had never been known to lose a man unless she wanted to, and this was no time to begin. Accordingly she danced furiously, jiggling the dummy in her arms and kicking its waxen feet vigorously. About this time one of the legs detached itself from the body. Mrs. Pratt failed to notice its loss immediately, but others did.

A fat woman and her escort were the first to make the discovery. Under the impression that it was merely one of her partner's corns, the fat woman trod on the loose limb heavily. It squished. She glanced down and recoiled in horror.

"Yaaaah!" she screeched. "Look! It's a man's leg!" Her companion, who was more than a little bottle-fatigued, looked down with bleary eyes.

"Whassa matter?" he mumbled. "Aintcha never seen a man's leg before?"

"But there's no body with it," explained the fat woman, hysterically.

"Why should there be anybody with it?"

“I mean there’s nobody attached to this leg,” the woman sobbed.

“Who ever heard of someone bein’ attached to a leg?” demanded the drunken gentleman, impatiently. “People seldom fall in love with legs, honey,” he assured her. So saying, he lurched forward and stumbled over the revolting white limb.

“It’s a leg!” he screamed. “A bloody human leg!” A second later both he and the woman fell to the floor in a dead faint. Fortunately, they both rolled off the dance floor and under a table.

BUT NOW, for the first time, Mrs. Pratt realized what had happened to her dummy. Uttering a little shriek of dismay, she hastily dropped Henry the Eighth to the floor, whereupon the other limb fell off. Hastily, she dragged the wax carcass to the table. A number of dancers around her decided they had better return to their tables at the same time and take quick drinks. There was muttering and mumbling, staring and pointing. But the orchestra kept on playing, and Bill, Annabel, Tubby, Queen Elizabeth, Susan Foster and Rasputin, Hicks and Pompadour kept on dancing in apparent unconcern.

Susan Foster was finding that Rasputin was not an ideal partner, either. In some fashion or other she had managed to get her hands tangled in the waxwork’s beard. Now, try as she might, she could not release her fingers. Finally, in desperation, she began to shake the dummy violently from side to side.

The dance floor being almost entirely empty, this spectacle was clearly observed by all. The effect was that of a young woman earnestly endeavoring to strangle her escort on the spot.

Amidst a chorus of horrified groans, Miss Foster succeeded in dislodging her hands at last—and with them, her partner’s head.

Rasputin’s skull slipped to the floor with a dreadful thud, and Susan, blushing as well she might, dragged the headless corpse back to her table.

Hicks, Tubby and Dorothy Pratt raced after her and got ready to make a fast exit.

For the tumult by now had attracted the attention of an excited knot of waiters, and the police would doubtless be called any minute. The majority of the patrons remained glued (or in some cases, plastered) to their seats. Word had gone around that this whole thing must be part of the regular floor-show, which was a brutal enough performance in itself. So the spectators stayed and waited for developments.

Bill and Annabel, blissfully unaware of these last horrors, danced on with eyes only for each other. They circled the empty dance-floor gracefully, and might have gone on forever if Bill hadn't made a startling discovery.

Looking down, he noticed that his mummy-wrappings were loosened by the dancing and starting to unwind. Once started, they unravelled quickly. So the patrons of the Cafe de Paree were treated to still another illuminating exhibition—a most revealing spectacle. Annabel, in a vain attempt to keep Bill's costume intact, grabbed one loose end of the bandage and hung on, grimly. At the same time Bill tried to turn. The result was devastating.

For Bill, unable to stop, spun around like a whirling dervish. The wrappings kept unwinding. The harder Annabel tugged, the faster Bill was forced to spin. Like a maddened top he revolved while the bandages rolled away. Finally, like a shot out of hell, Bill catapulted across the room, naked to his shorts, and dropped right at the foot of his own table. The crowd, now convinced this was all part of the show, applauded wildly. Annabel bowed and stalked off.

The management, hearing the applause of the audience, might have been content to let the matter drop without starting trouble, if things hadn't suddenly taken a new turn—and for the worse.

AT THIS critical moment a waiter conducted two drunken gentlemen to a nearby table. These gentlemen happened to be Mr. Oswald Pratt and Mr. O'Toole. The two victims of the wax museum had ceased their flight at last in a tavern and thereupon sensibly drowned their painful memories in drink. By successive stages of locomotion and intoxication they had worked their way back to the Cafe de Paree.

Now they sat directly opposite the friends, who did not notice their arrival at the moment. Bill and his companions were talking about leaving.

"Why go?" Hicks asked. "These people think it's all a gag, anyway."

"Well, I'm not so sure," said Bill. He had salvaged a table-cloth and pow stood shivering beside his chair.

"Somebody is certain to ask questions."

Opinions flowed pro and con, and so did drinks. But it was Mr. Pratt who decided the matter for them. His bloodshot eyes suddenly hit the next table.

"Ye gods!" he bellowed. "They're back again, O'Toole—the dummies are back again and they *are* alive!"

O'Toole stared. "There's your ex-wife!" he yelled, pointing frantically, "See her over there with that convict?"

The two men rose and ran towards the table, but the partners saw them coming. Pratt, shouting hoarsely, tried to grab for Dorothy. Instead he received the body of Queen Elizabeth full in the face. He went down, strangling in a sea of petticoats.

O'Toole received Madame le Pompadour—in fact, he was given practically an entire harem as Bill added Lady Godiva and somebody contributed the legless Henry the Eighth. Throwing a tablecloth over the two prostrate men, the party rushed for the exit.

It all happened so quickly that they met with little resistance. Two waiters, however, tried to block the doorway as they rushed out. One of them was the suspicious fellow who had served them.

"Don't let them get away," he warned his companion. "They're all a bunch of trunk-murderers, if you ask me."

As if to corroborate this statement, he received a hearty blow on the head with the trunk of the Chinese Hatchet Victim which Bill now wielded as a battering ram. The other waiter caught a similar clout. His skull was hard enough to break the body of the dummy as the blow landed. Consequently, the horrified patrons of the cafe seemed to see one man broken in half on another man’s head.

After this there was no opposition. The three girls, the convict, the drunken Napoleon, and the man in the table-cloth reached the exit in safety and disappeared immediately into a convenient taxicab.

That evening the Cafe de Paree closed its doors forever, and did not reopen until the following Monday, when it became the Paree Cafe. Such was the devastating effect of this unusual incident upon Broadway night life.

“So much for culture!” Bill raged, as the cab carried them back to the Flopmoor. “I hope you’re all satisfied, now.”

“What’s the trouble?” Hicks inquired. “Didn’t you learn anything?”

“I learned what it feels like to be chased and assaulted and stripped practically naked in a public place,” Bill retorted, bitterly.

“But you were so clever, so brave,” Annabel consoled, snuggling close. “When you hit that waiter over the head I was proud of you.”

“Were you, really?” asked the poor dope, with a silly grin on his face.

“We were all proud of you,” Tubby asserted, drunkenly. “It’s a pleasure to live in the same hotel with a manager like you.”

“Good heavens, the hotel!” Bill sat upright again. “You boys were right about one thing—I did manage to forget the hotel worries for a while. But I wonder what’s been happening tonight while I was away?”

HE FOUND out soon enough. As soon as they entered the lobby, the house detective rushed up and grabbed Bill by the table-cloth.

“Thank goodness you’re here, boss, he breathed. “Hey, what happened—you been playing strip poker?”

“Never mind,” Annabel cut in.

“What’s the trouble?”

“Everything,” sighed the detective. “First off, there’s all them phoney names.”

“What phoney names?”

“Right after dark, characters started coming in to register. All of them had the same pitch—they was with the Convention, of course. Looked like magicians, acted like magicians, so I paid no attention. I’m just about used to screwballs by now.” He eyed Hicks and Tubby for a moment before continuing. “But then I got a gander at the names they signed in the register. Here, take a look.” He dragged Bill over to the desk and Bill read the list of recent arrivals.

“Cagliostro,” he said. “Why, wasn’t that some charlatan who lived back in the Eighteenth Century?”

“Don’t ask me,” Hicks replied: “I wasn’t around.”

“Comte de St. Germain,” Bill continued. “Merlin, Why, that’s impossible! Merlin, indeed!”

“Real old pappy guy with a long white beard,” the desk-clerk informed him. “Talked a funny line of English, he did. Carried one of those sticks with a star on top.”

“A wand,” Tubby muttered. “Just like at King Arthur’s Court. Notice anything else queer about him?”

“Well, he went into the grill to eat,” the clerk said. “And I understand he kicked up an awful fuss because they wouldn’t seat him at a round table.”

“It can’t be!” Bill muttered. “It can’t be!”

“They all asked the same thing,” the house detective went on. “Wanted to know the room number of that guy, L. Dritch. Guess they’re friends of his.”

“Any friend of his is no friend of mine,” Bill declared. “This looks like trouble to me. All these abnormal arrivals.” He scanned the register again.

“Well, at least we seem to have had one normal customer. This Dr. Stein.”

“Dr. Frank N. Stein,” the desk-clerk corrected.

“No—not *that!”*

“Shall we go up and interview some of these guests?” Hicks asked.

“Good idea,” said Bill. But he was interrupted. Employees began to arrive in the lobby.

THE FIRST was an elderly charwoman. She waddled up to Bill and sobbed on his table-cloth. “Yer the manager, aintcher?” she snivelled. “Well, I got er report ter make. They been stealin’ my brooms out er the broom-closets, that’s what. Stealin’ all my brooms.”

“Who stole your brooms?”

“Old ladies. Whole bleedin’ snag er them old ladies. Come with er Magicians, they said. Nasty, foul-mouthed old biddies they was, too. Opened up the broom closets on all er floors an’ grabbed the brooms. Said they was goin’ up to er roof and go for a ride. Never saw er bunch of drunken old ladies like them before.”

“Cats!” interrupted a bellhop, angrily. “Hotel’s full of black cats. Women brought ’em in. Want me to walk their dizzy cats for ’em.”

“What about that wolf up in 711?” complained another bell-boy. “Not the one with the blonde, I mean the *real* wolf. He tried to take a bite out of my leg just ten minutes ago.”

“That ees of no useless,” spluttered a man in a chef’s hat and apron, who appeared, brandishing a ladle. “The deep-freeze, she is occupied. I weesh to make an ask, who rents room in the deep-freeze, no?”

“What’s all this?” The desk-clerk shrugged. “I didn’t rent. the deepfreeze. Somebody parking their luggage in there?”

“A customer, he requests the crabs.

I hasten to procure of same from the deep-freeze. I open the door and—low and beheld—ees a man, sleeping on inside. I inform him to take the hell out of there. ‘Shut up’ he explains to me. ‘You weel capture your death of coldness’ I venture. ‘Ha ha!’ he remarks. ‘I like eet here. Eet reminds me of a tomb.’ And I swear by *bleu* he appears as one who belongs in a tomb. He sports of a long black cloak—”

“Pseudo W. Nym,” Annabel said. “Remember? Another of Mr. Dritch’s friends.”

“I do not get friendly with such,” the chef assured her. “I shake of my head. I slam of the door. I run as though hell. The customer, let him go to another hotel for crabs.”

"They're lousing up the ballroom," proclaimed the steward, emerging from the elevator. "Old fella in a long beard is in there—claims he's on the Entertainment Committee for the Grand Hallowe'en Ball tomorrow night. Found him drawing a lot of stars and circles all over the floor with blue chalk. And two of our oldest guests just checked out because one of them found a coffin in her closet."

"Was the coffin empty?" Bill managed to ask.

"Yes, it was empty, all right. But there was a sign pinned on the cover that said, BACK IN TEN MINUTES," the steward replied.

"Tell him about the bats," the desk-clerk reminded. "Whole top floor of the hotel seems to be filled with bats."

"The whole place is filled with bats," Bill declared. "But it's after midnight. I can't settle all these things now without disturbing all the guests. Better let it ride until morning. Just do what you can. As I recall, the Magicians are going out on a sightseeing tour all day. That will leave the hotel pretty well deserted. We can decide on a plan, go through the hotel room by room if we must, and get rid of all these queer characters. Clean the place up in time for the Ball tomorrow night. In that way we won't arouse any more talk than we need to, and we'll solve the problem sensibly. Now—for heaven's sake—let's all try to get some sleep."

HE TURNED to his companions. "I advise you to do the same." he said. "No more carousing tonight, please. We seem to be up against something mighty strange here. I don't want to have to call the police or get us involved in a public scandal, so let's take it easy. Tomorrow we'll track down the mystery. Tonight, we rest."

There was a lot of head-shaking and shrugging, but in the end Bill won them over. The house-detective and room-clerk promised to keep their eyes open for disturbances; the bellboys were alerted, and the party dispersed.

Bill kissed Annabel goodnight in the lobby.

"You know something?" she whispered. "This is all doing you a world of good."

"Because the hotel is being ruined?" he asked, "or because I am?"

"Don't talk that way. Two days ago you wouldn't have had the courage to face anything like this. You'd have turned and run away. Now—thanks to my cooperation—you're ready for anything."

"That's what I'm likely to get." Bill told her, "Anything and everything. But you're right. I'm enjoying myself, for the first time in my life."

"I'm glad," said the girl, and meant it.

They parted, and Bill sought his room and bed. He had imagined himself to be much too upset for slumber, but the moment his head touched the pillow he drifted off into a deep and dreamless sleep.

He slept for several hours. And then—

When Bill lifted his eyelids he thought for a moment he hadn't wakened. Then he suddenly realized his bed was on fire.

The ringing in his ears didn't come from an alarm clock but from a fire-engine in the street below. Bill blinked and got out of the smoking bed very quickly. It was turning dawn outside, but the flaming bolster of the bed lent light to the room—and speed to Bill's progress towards the window.

As he reached it, the window opened from outside and a fireman thrust his face in. He was a pale, gaunt fireman with a sleepy look in his eyes. Even his mustache drooped with boredom.

"Good morning, Mister," drawled the fireman.

"Who are you?" demanded Bill, still dazed. "A Peeping Tom?"

"You got the wrong party," said the helmeted man. "My name's Charlie Jenkins."

"Never mind the introductions," answered the now frantic young man in pajamas. "I've got a fire on my hands."

"Don't see any there," observed Fireman Jenkins, peering at Bill's hands.

"In my room, then. My bed's burning."

"Oh," observed the blinking intruder. "Kinda thought I smelled smoke." Slowly he crawled through the window. "How'd you start it?" he lazily inquired.

“I’m a Boy Scout,” Bill raged. “I rubbed a couple of bed-posts together and there it was.”

The fireman gazed down at the bed, which now burst into active flames.

“You suppose I better put it out?” he said, at last.

“What do you want to do?” Bill demanded, “Roast some marshmallows over it?”

“Don’t care for marshmallows,” shrugged the fireman, as he dragged a hose through the window. He pointed the nozzle and allowed a thin stream of water to play over the rapidly-burning bed. He had the expression of a man watering a garden full of pansies.

BILL DANCED about him in a frenzy. “Put it out!” he screamed. “Hurry up—don’t let the hotel burn down!”

“I’m putting it out,” retorted the fireman, wearily. “Fast as I can, too. Maybe you’d like to help by spitting on the flames?” he suggested, in a bitter voice.

“Don’t waste time—the whole place will burn down around our ears.”

“Might burn down farther than that,” Fireman Jenkins said, glancing at Bill. “It’s lower than your waist right now.”

Sure enough, sparks had ignited Bill’s pajama pants. “Put me out!” he yelled, and the fireman turned the hose on him, sending him backwards over the still-smouldering bed. Jenkins continued to play water over the blaze until it was extinguished. Then he handed the hose to a companion on the ladder outside and picked up an axe. He headed for the door.

“Never mind!” Bill screamed, “The door isn’t locked.”

But Jenkins battered the door down, then stooped and retrieved a bright object from the floor.

“Here’s the key,” he mused. “Must have fell out while I was breaking down the door.”

He trotted down the hall and called back, “Next time don’t go eating firecrackers in bed.”

Bill sank down on the ruined bed, speechless with rage. It was a fine way to start the day.

“This burns me up,” he said.

“Me too!”

The voice came from under the charred bed. Bill blinked and stared down. A haggard figure now crawled out from below.

“Sorry about the fire,” said the little man.

Bill recognized the amateur magician from yesterday morning—Archie the Archfiend.

“What are you doing in my room?” he raged.

“Hiding,” whispered Archie. “I had to see you, so I came to your room last night. You weren’t here and I waited around. Then I heard noises and I was afraid, so I crawled under the bed. Guess I fell asleep waiting.”

“And the fire?”

“It’s a curse, probably.”

“Curse?”

“L. Dritch is out to kill me. Undoubtedly he wove a spell around me that would make me burst into flames. Tried to give me the supernatural hotfoot, understand?”

“I don’t understand. Why should L. Dritch want to kill you?” Bill asked. “I thought you were a friend of his.”

“I was,” sighed Archie the Archfiend, taking a chair. “Until I found out what he was up to. When he invited me to join him at this hotel I didn’t realize what he meant to do.” Archie riffled his hands through his carroty hair. “Then he told me and I refused to get in the act, so he cursed me. I had to hide out and I wanted to warn you. You see, I don’t mind a little hell-raising now and then, but big hell-raising—that’s another story!”

“Hell-raising?”

"HERE'S THE deal. I guess you figured out by now that L. Dritch is a real sorcerer. Dabbles in Black Magic. Dabbles? He practically wallows in it. An old friend of Black Art, the magician. You know him?"

"Uh-uh."

"You're lucky. Anyway, L. Dritch is a wizard. He sold his soul to the Devil years ago, and if you ask me, the Devil got himself a rotten bargain when he took it. But in return the Devil gave L. Dritch all kinds of magical power—to cast spells, work enchantments, call up demons and reverse the charges. Stuff like that. And all L. Dritch had to do in return to keep the pact alive, and himself alive too was to hold a sort of Witches' Sabbath once a year on Hallowe'en.

"As long as he did this, he wouldn't die. And our old bearded friend also found out he wasn't the only one who had made the same deal with Satan. There are others in the world, lots of others. Some of them have been around for a long, long time—never dying and always remembering to have their little Hallowe'en Party on schedule. L. Dritch got chummy with a lot of them on Witches' Sabbaths in the past. Most of them, you know, are held out on lonely mountain-tops in the deep woods, where it's dark and quiet."

"How do you know so much about all this?" Bill demanded. "Did you sell your soul to the Devil, too?"

"Nah," protested Archie the Archfiend, hastily. "I just rented it to him. Sort of a five-year contract, with options. I only deal in small magic, like the trick I pulled this morning. You see, I just wanted the power to be a real magician and show up those stage phonies. Always been crazy about it since I was a little fella, just knee-high to a skeleton. I wouldn't sell my soul outright—why that would be dishonest!"

"Glad to hear it," Bill observed. "But L. Dritch—?"

"He's wicked. He has all kinds of power. Raising the dead, turning people to stone, finding free downtown parking places—big stuff like that. So all the other damned souls respect him like a leader. And he met plenty of them on other Hallowe'ens—witches and warlocks and vampires and ghouls and werewolves—"

“But what are they doing in the Hotel Flopmoor if they meet on lonely mountain-tops?”

“That’s the big idea L. Dritch came up with. Last year he sort of stopped, in at the Magician’s Convention to get a few laughs and he suddenly came up with this bright notion.

“Way he figured it, why should he and his supernatural side-kicks have to dance around in the cold night air way out in some deserted spot in the country when they could all hold their Black Sabbath inside a nice warm, bright, modern air-conditioned hotel—with plenty to eat and drink, room service, and everything? Since the Magicians hold a Masked Ball, all these witches and vampires might get away with it as if they were only wearing costumes. They could mingle with the regular guests and nobody would notice. Besides, with all the hotel guests around, there wouldn’t be any trouble finding a human sacrifice or two.”

“Sounds sensible to me,” agreed Bill. Then, “What am I saying? It’s madness!”

“That’s what I told him,” Archie the Archfiend nodded. “And he got sore at me. Then, when I wouldn’t have any part of his other plan, he cursed me.”

“What other plan?”

“Well, at these Witches’ Sabbaths they do all sorts of things. It’s kind of hard for me to remember because I haven’t been to one since my Ma took me when I was a little boy. But anyhow, one of the things they have to do is summon up the Devil and a bunch of fiends.”

“This is difficult?” Bill asked. “Hard as hell. Because hell is where they come from. It takes a lot of dancing and chanting and praying, and they burn incense and raise an awful stink—the whole thing is a mess, So L. Dritch figured another way.”

“What way?”

“Well, he has magic powers. And your hotel has elevators.”

“So?”

"He's going to put the two together, that's all. This morning, when most of the guests are out for the day. L. Dritch and his fiend friends are going to use their magical arts to take one of your elevators and dig a shaft below it that runs down to Hell."

"Hell, you say?"

"Hell, I do. They'll run an elevator to Hell and bring back a crew of imps and demons on it for the Hallowe'en Night celebration."

"But they can't do this!"

"That's what I told them. Said I wanted no part of it and L. Dritch said I was a heel and cursed me. And they're going to do it—today."

"Come on," panted Bill, panting and shirting himself quickly. "Let's find the others. We've got to put a stop to this!"

"Yes," added Archie the Archfiend. "Before all Hell breaks loose!"

MR. L. DRITCH was entertaining guests in his suite—if you can call it entertainment to watch a hirsute wizard combing his beard with a small gardener's rake.

There were other bearded men in the room, and several bearded women. There was also a shaggy wolf, a thin old man in a peaked cap and a robe covered with cabalistic designs and moth-holes.

Dritch regarded the company from behind his hairy barricade and started to call the roll.

"Cagliostro?"

"Present."

"Monsieur le Comte de St. Germain?"

"Oui."

"Merlin?"

"Prithee, I am indeed in attendance. I wot."

"You what?"

"I wot, that's what."

“Oh.” Mr. Dritch identified various and sundry witches, hags, crones, beldames, enchantresses and sorceresses, plus a number of necromancers and Mr. W. Wolf, who was busily gnawing open a can of dog-food. All responded to the roll-call.

“Then we’re ready for action,” Dritch announced. “But wait a minute—where’s Pseudo W. Nym?”

As his name was spoken, the cloaked figure glided into the room. “Sorry to be late, boss,” said the vampire. “I just went out for a bite.”

“Well, time is short,” snapped L. Dritch, testily. “We have much to do.” He turned to the witches and smirked. “You girls are ready?” he asked.

“Ready,” croaked the eldest of the crones, stroking her horrid little familiar. Mr. Dritch regarded the familiar with curiosity. A witch’s familiar, of course, is a tiny demon sent by Satan to attend her—usually a cat, rat, bat, weasel or goat. But this particular familiar was most unfamiliar; it was a mole, and it *had* moles.

“We’re supposed to prepare the Grand Ballroom, eh?” rasped the witch. “Sweep it out with our brooms, and place the herbs on the altar. Then we’re to sprinkle the walls with fresh blood.”

“I’ll help you,” promised Pseudo W. Nym, quickly. Mr. Dritch wagged a finger at the vampire.

“Uh-uh,” he said. “You’d be snitching a taste all the time. I know you, my carnivorous chum. You’ve got other work to do. Guard the Ballroom doors with the wolf, here.”

He turned to the assembled wizards. “As for us, we’ve got to dig in and work. And I do mean just that—we’re digging that elevator shaft down to Hell.”

“But the guests—they’ll see us—” objected Cagliostro.

“Mayhap I can cast a spell of invisibility,” Merlin offered, with a smirk.

“I’ve got it planned,” assured L. Dritch. “We’ll take the big freight and service elevator at the back of the hotel here. It will hold more passengers, and it’s out of the way of the guests. Now you know what our plans are. We get down in the shaft, under the car, where we won’t be noticed—and then we start working.

“Each of us has mantic power capable of penetrating the earth to a depth of a thousand feet. So we’ll take turns in chanting and conjuration. First I shall chant and lower us a thousand feet. Then Merlin. Then Cagliostro. Then St. Germain here, and you others. In that fashion, we should be halfway to Hell before noon, and we ought to reach the Pit by nightfall. Then it should be a simple matter to evocate an elevator shaft which will be merely a continuation of the one now used in the hotel—we’ll conjure up ropes and cables and steel guiding rods in a jiffy—send the car down before midnight tonight—and bring up our distinguished guests. What a jolly surprise it’s going to be for Beelzebub! What a novel way of bringing the Prince of Darkness to his hour of triumph! I am sure he will reward us handsomely.”

“I PRAY naught goeth amiss,” Merlin grumbled. “For as ye knowest, should we fail to fulfill our bond with Satan and do not invoke him to our revels ere midnight, we lose our right to eternal life. Full thirteen hundred and thirteen years have I walked this earth—and I have no intent to depart now.”

“Thirteen hundred and thirteen years!” marvelled one of the wizened witches. “I should think you’d be mighty tired of living by this time. Why do you want to hang around, anyway?”

“It so happeneth that I am an elderly man,” Merlin explained, “and of late years I have come to treasure the boon of radio. I am a loyal fan of that program hight *Portia Faces Life,* and I wish to continue to hear the daily installments.”

Even these hardened fiends turned pale at this vile admission by the old wizard.

“Well, Portia will have to face Life without you today,” declared L. Dritch, sternly. “We’ve got work to do. Come, now, let’s get started. It’s getting on towards noon already.” The little knot of hell’s bedlams gathered up broomsticks and trudged off to the ballroom, accompanied by the vampire and the werewolf. Comte de St. Germain minced along behind them, to assist in placing the herbs. This left Cagliostro, Merlin, Mr. L. Dritch, and two minor wizards named Carelton Doppleganger and Dead Earnest.

“I guess we’re all familiar with the Ritual of Penetrability,” Dritch told them. “First finger of left hand extended downwards, Lord’s Prayer backwards, then into Latin—the Vulgate version of Chant 33 from *A Child’s Garden of Curses.* I don’t want any slip-ups . . . nobody is going to raise a lot of dust and dirt, and we’ll have to watch out if we strike water . . . this whole thing must be done scientifically. Now, let’s synchronize our watches.”

They were carefully adjusting their chronometers when the door opened and a group of determined figures catapulted into the room.

There was Marmaduke Hicks, Tubby, Annabel, and a grim-faced Bill, followed by the house detective.

“Sorry,” Bill said, stiff-lipped. “I’m afraid as manager of this hotel I’ll have to ask you folks to pack up and leave immediately.”

“Leave? But that’s impossible. We’re here for the Convention,” purred Mr. Dritch, suavely. “Have you any reason to complain of our presence here?”

“That wolf,” said the house detective. “And those women stealing brooms, and the guy in the deepfreeze, and—”

“You know what Conventions are like,” chuckled L. Dritch, deftly shutting the door. “Boys will be boisterous, and all that sort of thing. Surely a few minor cut-ups don’t bother you.”

“If you mean that minor cut-up who sawed a woman in half, such things do bother us,” Bill replied. “There’s no use arguing, you’ll have to go. And at once.”

“But this puts us in an awful hole,” Dritch shrugged, still unperturbed. “I can see there is only one solution.”

"And what's that?"

"To put you in an awful hole, too. I'm speaking of a grave." Mr. Dritch suddenly waggled his beard hideously and lunged at the young man.

"No you don't!" yelled the house detective, producing a revolver. "Stand back or I'll shoot!"

BUT L. DRITCH continued to advance. The maddened house detective raised the revolver, aimed it, and fired. At this close range, point-blank, he couldn't miss. The bullet struck L. Dritch squarely between the eyes—and bounced off.

"Yow!" screeched Tubby. "Here they come!"

And they came. The five wizards raced towards them in a flying phalanx, and in a moment the room was a melee. But only for a moment. For the magicians mumbled as they moved, Mid the eyes of Cagliostro wove a hypnotic web.

Bill tried to strangle L. Dritch in his own beard. Hicks and Tubby grappled with Merlin. Annabel and the house detective scrabbled at Doppleganger and Dead Ernest. But Cagliostro's evil eye rested lightly on each in turn, and in a few seconds the five humans were standing stone-still, in statuesque immobility.

"Got them," Cagliostro breathed. "All right, let's strike 'em dead!" croaked Dead Ernest. "I'll go up oil the roof-garden and dig some graves. Lots of nice flowers up there, too. We can have a lovely funeral."

The little necrophile regarded Annabel with avid eyes. "I'll be glad to handle all the arrangements," he offered.

"Not now." L. Dritch raised a restraining hand. "We've got to dig that elevator shaft; no time for graves. And I'll need the girl."

"What for?" rasped Merlin.

"For tonight. Surely you haven't forgotten that we'll want a human sacrifice. Why, she's made to order!"

"And the rest of them?"

"We'll leave them here. They can't move a muscle until Cagliostro releases them. Perfectly safe—and from now on we can't afford to arouse suspicion from the guests. I don't want five bodies laying around in this room or anywhere else in the hotel. There'll be plenty of that this evening."

He moved towards the door, his beard sweeping a path before him. "Come on," he commanded. "Let's start digging. Merlin, you'd better stay here and keep an eye on them."

"But I wouldst assist thee—" protested the ancient magician.

"Cheer up," Mr. Dritch soothed. "Be a good boy, and tonight I'll let you go to Hell."

Mr. L. Dritch, beard, and company left the room. Merlin sighed, selected a cigar from a humidor, and struck a match on a portion of Tubby's anatomy.

It looked like the end.

FOR HOURS the five frantic figures stood stock-still in L. Dritch's room, guarded by the ancient mage, Merlin. Alert, alive, anguished, but unable to move a muscle, the human statues felt minutes melt away. Helplessly, hopelessly, they waited.

Waited and wondered—about the hotel, the Convention, the witches, the wizards working in the shaft beneath the elevator. They fretted, they fulminated, they feared, but made no movement except for the ceaseless susurration of their breathing.

Meanwhile, for others, life went on.

Mr. Oswald Pratt and his fellow-Conventioneers were gaily touring New York in chartered sight-seeing busses. They lunched well and ended the afternoon in a tour of a large brewery. By the time darkness fell, several of the magicians were ready to follow suit. They prepared to lurch back to the hotel for the Grand Hallowe'en Ball.

Other hotel guests went about their accustomed or unaccustomed ways. There was nothing out of the ordinary left to disturb them. Archie the

Archfiend had departed from the Flopmoor after telling Bill of the plans afoot for the evening. He fled hastily, fearing the wrath of L. Dritch, but he took with him the two halves of the woman he had so disastrously divided; promising her to put her together again as good as new once he had time to study the proper invocation. “I guarantee it,” he told her, stifling her protests. “I’m not one to do things by halves, you know.”

With the torso gone, and the various evil-doers occupied in doing their evil elsewhere, the hotel guests noticed nothing wrong. No wolves loped the corridors, no bodies filled the deepfreeze. Doormen summoned cabs, bellboys fronted and centred, waiters waited normally enough.

Upstairs in the Grand Ballroom, the hags haggled their way through the preparations for the Black Sabbath. While the wolf and the cloaked figure guarded the door against intrusion, the crones groaned as they raised an altar, spread foul-smelling herbs about, and sprinkled the walls and floor with chicken-blood.

“Hustle it up, girls,” commanded the eldest witch. “We got to git ready. Looks like there’ll be a hot time in the old town tonight.”

And in the black bowels of the elevator shaft, four sinister figures gestured and intoned, chanted and scrabbled at the noisome air. Steeped in darkness, they droned and descended, tunnelling their way into the earth at regular intervals—dropping down, down, down.

Each completed a ritual in turn, lowering them further and further, until they were drowned in darkness. The shaft sank straight, mile after mile. There was no stopping, no rest, no diversion—save for a brief sensation at around twilight, when Carleton Doppleganger completed an incantation and they sank another thousand feet into a gushing fluid that spurted upwards in a cloying cascade.

“We’re rich, fellas!” he shouted. “Rich!”

“What’s all this?” demanded L. Dritch, crossly.

“Don’t you understand? We’ve struck oil!”

BUT L. DRITCH was not impressed. Hastily he chanted anew, sinking them down beneath the level of the gusher. “No time for that now,” he exhorted. “We must hurry and prepare for the coming of Satan. He will reward our zeal.”

And so they burrowed in the blackness, burrowed incredible depths to unfathomable pits; burrowed until the stench of brimstone and boiling lava issued from the very center of the earth. And then the crust gave way and they clung to the sides of the pit while gazing down at a blazing core of fire.

“Hell!” exulted Dritch. “We made it!”

“Now what?” asked Cagliostro. “Do we walk through the fire and ask to see the Boss?”

“We’ll be burned to a crisp,” wailed Dead Ernest, gazing down at the crimson chaos of Hades below.

“Nonsense,” Mr. Dritch told them. “We don’t even try to get past those flames like this. That’s why we’ve got the elevator. We go right back up again, using Formula 819, the one for Levitation. It’s much faster. And as we go, we try 622—Fabrication of Metallic Objects. To reproduce the elevator shaft here all the way along the pit. And the cables. I’ve retained a visualization of the construction—I can imagine the correct design, and the Formula will do the rest. Once we reach the top, we wait for the proper moment and then we’ll get up a welcoming committee and go down to blazes together.

“The elevator will take us safely through the flames—our speed will keep us from burning or melting the cage—and we can step out and surprise the Old Boy himself. Won’t he be thrilled when we invite him to come up and join in the fun?”

“Fun,” cackled Dead Ernest. “It’s going to be lots of fun, with that human sacrifice of ours. What a dame! One look at her and I sort of forget who I am.”

“I’m weary,” sighed Doppleganger. “This has taken quite a toll of all of us. Let’s hurry, so we can renew our pact tonight. I long for new youth and vigour.”

“Me too,” Dead Ernest agreed, “Whatta dish that dame is—”

“Formula 819,” Mr. Dritch commanded, sternly. “Come on, everybody. Up we go. It’s hot as Hell down here, if you’ll pardon the expression.” Gesturing and chanting, the wizards worked their way back up the shaft. Elevator cables and steel beams blossomed behind them, and the shaft shook and shuddered at the evocation of material force. Ions unnaturally altered, electrons wrenched from their orbits, atoms energized with unholy abandon, all merged and coalesced into an appearance of actuality. The elevator shaft to Hell was complete.

IT WAS dark in L. Dritch’s room. Merlin the Magician turned on a light, but the living statues didn’t even blink. Bill and Annabel, Hicks, Tubby and the house detective had been standing still for so long that Merlin was completely accustomed to their supernatural stasis. The old goetist puttered around as though oblivious to their presence, pausing only to dust the friends from time to time. He seemed to do a most thorough job on Annabel.

The friends regarded him helplessly as he doddered and pottered about, singing blasphemous madrigals under his breath in a cracked voice. Obviously he was practising for tonight’s ceremonies.

“One-two, tear him in two
Three-jour, sprinkle with gore”

sang the wizard, as he opened up an old portmanteau and dumped a pile of bones on the bed, which he proceeded to sort.

“Five-six, poke his eyes out with sticks,
Seven-eight, put his brains on a plate”

hummed Merlin, rummaging around under the bed until he located a human skull (dolichocephalic) which he added to the disarticulated array on the counterpane.

"Nine, ten—"

began the thaumaturge, but was interrupted by a resounding rapping on the door.

Before Merlin could summon the strength to shuffle over and turn the key in the lock, the door swung open and in marched Susan Foster and Mrs. Pratt. Both of the blondes caught sight of their friends simultaneously, but neither of them batted more than .000 in the Eyelash League.

Bill tried desperately to make some sound or sign, but the women didn't offer even a down-payment of attention. They greeted Merlin effusively.

"Oh, there you are!" gushed Susan Foster. "We've been looking all over for you."

"Yes, we've gone from room to room for hours," Dorothy Pratt added.

"Looking for me?" Merlin was genuinely astonished. "But why, prithee?"

"Dorothy," corrected Mrs. Pratt.

"We'd heard so much about you," Susan Foster continued. "We felt we simply had to meet you. What in the world are you doing?"

Merlin indicated the jumble of bones on the bed. "Just inspecting some old souvenirs," he said. "If it pleaseth you ladies."

"It don't pleaseth me none," murmured Susan Foster. She turned and regarded the enchanted friends. "But what have we here—statues?"

"Nay, they are but hapless wights laboring beneath a mighty rune that binds them to the spot, ensorcelled," Merlin explained. He peered suspiciously at the two blondes. "But why dost thou inquire, and what is the reason ye seek me out?"

"Oh," simpered Dorothy Pratt, "everybody in the hotel is talking about the fake magician up here and we wanted to see for ourselves what you looked like."

"Fake?" cried Merlin. "Ye imply I am a charlatan, a fraud, an imposter, a deceitful humbug?"

"Couldn't have said it better myself."

"But I am the mighty Merlin!"

"Mighty like a rose," sneered Susan Foster. "I'll bet you're just another Hallowe'en masquerader like all the rest."

MERLIN frowned. The girls had divined his weak spot—pride. He would show these intruders a thing or two. Accordingly he reached a skinny hand into empty air and drew forth a pack of cards. Approaching Susan Foster he extended the deck invitingly.

"Pick a card," he murmured. "Any card."

Susan did so.

"Is it the king of clubs?" asked Merlin.

"Yes," the girl replied, grabbing the deck. "And so are all the rest of them, you cheap prestidigitator."

Merlin, unabashed, then reached into the loathsome depths of his chin-foliage and triumphantly brought forth a rabbit.

"Behold a hare!" he proclaimed.

"Ugh!" observed Mrs. Pratt. "Hares in his beard."

"Why shouldn't a beard have hairs?" asked Susan Foster, reasonably. But Mrs. Pratt was not convinced.

"My ex-husband could do that," she said. "And he's a fake. Why, he could even pull a rabbit out of a mustache.".

"Oh, yea?" Merlin was incensed. "Watch me." He went over to the trunk and pulled out an empty birdcage. Deftly concealing the cage in his fungoid beard for a moment, he brought it back into view—and it now contained a large, passionate-looking canary.

"Child's play!" Mrs. Pratt jeered. "Now if *you* could get in a bird cage and let the canary make you disappear, that would be a trick."

“Or,” continued Susan Foster, innocently, “if you could make these enchanted people come to life—”

“I can,” Merlin averred, testily. “Anything Cagliostro doth perform I can achieve.”

“Let’s see you do it, then.”

“Nay. I am not to be tricked thusly. These ones are needed shortly for tonight. I may not release them.”

“Oh, you mean for that stupid old sacrifice?” asked Dorothy Pratt. “I heard all about that.”

“Will ye attend?” asked Merlin. “I had not recognized ye as a witch.”

“Well, I am. And so’s my girlfriend, here. Two of the witchcraftiest dames you ever did see. So how about proving to us that you’re on the up and up? Let’s find out if you can get these statues to move.”

“Nay,” grumbled Merlin. “Absolutely nay.” Fie stroked his beard. “For such comely damsels I wot it difficult to resist such a request, but I dare not. If my companions should discover it—”

“They won’t know!” urged Susan Foster. “Just do it for a minute, so we can see. Then we’ll be satisfied, and you can date us up for tonight at the Sabbath.”

“Tell you what,” added Mrs. Pratt, “you’ll have to do it anyway before you sacrifice them, so you might as well let us see. I mean, you’re going to feed them first, aren’t you? They always feed the condemned a last meal.”

“Sure he will.” Susan stroked Merlin’s beard, almost having a stroke herself as she did so. “Come on, Merly, be a sport. Gee, Dorothy, doesn’t he look distinguished? Just like Monty Wolley.”

That did it. Merlin smiled and drew himself up to his full four feet ten. “Behold!” he said. “No, wait. I shall permit them to sup, but naught else. Hence, be so good as to order meals and then I shall release them.”

Dorothy Pratt stepped to the phone and called room service to order food. Then she and Susan sat back and waited fearfully.

BILL AND his companions shared their fear. The moment the two blondes had gone into their routine it was evident that they were acting according to a preconceived plan to release them. But now, on the verge of success, too many things might go wrong.

It was late. L. Dritch and his fiendish friends might return at any moment to take them to their doom. Merlin could easily become suspicious. And even if they were released to eat, it was doubtful if Bill or the others could defeat the magic of the sorcerer. Despite his senility, he had power.

The bellboy arrived and Susan Foster relieved him of his tray at the door. Dorothy Pratt had never left the wizard's side—in order to make sure that he didn't slip away, she kept a tight hold on his beard: according to her reasoning, a beard in the hand was worth two in the bush.

"Here's the food," Susan reminded the wizard. "Now let's see you do your stuff."

"I like not the looks of this," Merlin reconsidered. "It would go ill with me should any harm befall my prisoners."

"Aw, give them a break," Mrs. Pratt urged. "Look at them, practically starving to death. After all, you want to make a good impression tonight, don't you? What will old John J. Beelzebub say if you show him a bunch of scrawny, emaciated sacrifices? I understand he likes Grade A meat."

Susan Foster got in her barb. "He's just stalling because he doesn't know how. Isn't that so, Merly, you old buzzard?"

"A pox on you!" sniffed the sorcerer. "Behold! I call upon the Powers of Belial, Azaziel, Asreal, Samiel, Seth and Asmodeus!"

"Sounds like a big advertising agency to me," whispered Dorothy Pratt to her companion.

But no advertising agency, however fiendish, could have provided the response the wizard got for his invocation. For suddenly the darkness of the hotel room was illumined by a reddish glow. A cloud of pungent vapor gathered at the ceiling and then coalesced about the bodies of the enchanted quintet. It whirled around them, enveloping them in smoke, and then disappeared.

With gasps and groans, Bill and his companions moved.

Merlin raised his scrawny arms. “Avaunt!” he called. “By the Powers, ye cannot harm me! Sup, but durst not approach me.”

Bill, Annabel, Hicks, Tubby and the house detective obediently walked over to the table and lifted dishes from the tray.

“Thanks, pal,” whispered Annabel to Dorothy Pratt. “But where do we go from here?”

“Straight to Hell, if the old geezer has his way,” murmured Bill, bitterly.

“Hasten!” Merlin called out. “Before my comrades return to find ye thus released. And please—do not make use of the silverware.”

“Silverware? Why not?”

“I had the same complaint in the dining hall of this hostelry yester-eve,” Merlin explained. “Tis but a foolish allergy of mine. I dislike contact with aught of silver.”

“So I’ll eat with my fingers,” Tubby agreed. “Who cares? I’m dying for a meal.”

“More truth than poetry,” Hicks commented. “If the old creep doesn’t like silverware, who am I to knife him?”

“Who are you to *what?”* said Bill, almost to himself. Then, “That’s right. The legends all say it. The undead can’t stand silver. Silver bullets, so why not silver-plated knives and forks and spoons?”

“What are you talking about?” asked Annabel.

“Watch and see,” Bill answered. “Here goes.”

Scooping a handful of spoons from the table, Bill turned suddenly and flung them at the wizard.

Merlin ducked hastily and cried out. “Cease! A foul murrain upon thee! Cease or I—”

HE RAISED his hands to start a spell, then nearly had one as Bill sailed a fork at his ear.

“Grab the knives,” Bill yelled. “He can’t stand contact with silver.”

Hicks and Tubby acted. Bill sailed silverware at Merlin, who wavered, weaved, and dodged—but not for long.

A clatter of table utensils echoed on the floor, and as Merlin’s flesh came into contact with the cold silver, the unnatural life-force ebbed within his wizened frame. There was a single flash of flame, and then—no Merlin.

On the floor rested an empty robe and a tangle of white beard; nothing more. Merlin the magician had retired.

“It worked!” Bill cried. “Come on, everybody!”

“Now where?” Tubby gasped.

“To that service elevator, of course. We’ve got to stop that crew from going to Hell. And if Merlin could be destroyed with silverware, so can they.”

“Pick up the knives and forks and bring them along,” commanded Annabel. “Bring the tray, too. We’ll serve them something they aren’t expecting.”

The crew gathered up their culinary weapons quickly, then dashed for the door.

“Down the hall,” Hicks panted. “It’s after nine. They should be ready to start by now.”

From around the corner at the end of the hall they could hear a babble of voices, interspersed with cackles and howls.

“The wolf,” Bill guessed. “And those witches. Why, the whole crew must be going down as a welcoming committee.”

“Got to stop them—” began Tubby. Then, as the little fat man rounded the corner, “Too late!”

The clang of the elevator door told its own story. That plus L. Dritch’s triumphant shout of, “Going down!”

With the roar of a rocket-blast, the hell-born crew went Hell-borne. The elevator plummeted down before the eyes of Bill and his companions, and with shouts of frustrated rage they tossed silverware into the shaft.

Flames and fumes shot out of the pit as the elevator plunged endlessly into the earth. Whatever the supernatural agency used to build the shaft extension, it was apparent that the elevator was travelling at amazing speed. There was a whoosh and a rush and then a dull thud echoed from far off.

“Good heavens, what was that?” asked Annabel.

“It means they’ve already arrived,” Bill told her. “In a moment they ought to be back with their guests.”

“Guests?”

“Sure. That crew of demons for the Black Sabbath. Headed by none other than Satan himself.”

“And no silverware will stop *him,”* Hicks sighed. “Even if we had any, which we haven’t any more.”

“The cables are moving!” Tubby breathed. “They must be coming up.”

“I can’t see through the smoke,” said Mrs. Pratt. “Let’s get out of here—those flames and fumes—” She subsided into a fit of coughing.

“Bill, what can we do?” wailed Annabel.

“Nothing. Get back, all of you,” Bill commanded. The party retreated before the smoke billowing from the elevator shaft. Stumbling and lurching, they fled down the corridor as the sound of the rising elevator rose in their ears.

“Here they come!” yelled Hicks. “Every man for himself, now!”

“Bill, where are you?” Annabel stared at the smoke. “Hey, Bill’s gone!”

He was indeed gone. They peered at each other, shuddering at the sounds rising from the shaft. There was a humming and a triumphant howling, like the voices of the damned. And now came a banging and a rattling.

“Goodbye, all,” Tubby observed, racing down the hall. The blondes and the house detective followed suit. Hicks hesitated, then took to his heels. Annabel wavered, then plunged into the madness of smoke, flame and sound around the corner.

“Bill, darling, where are you?”

SHE GROPED along the hall. The yammering rose in frenzied pitch and the banging increased in volume. Suddenly the smoke parted and a glare of infernal light shone from the shaft. Annabel caught a single glimpse of the elevator cage rising—caught a glimpse of the wizards, the witches, and an incandescent flashing of fiery red forms. It was just a vague impression of horned heads, gleaming snouts, black scales and lashing pointed tails, of claws reaching out to clutch and talons poised to tear and rend.

Then the smoke rose again, there was a single final crash and the elevator wobbled.

A roar filled Annabel's ears. Something seemed to explode before her eyes, and then there was a rumbling crash that died away in a series of receding echoes.

Bill staggered out of the smoke.

"Darling, are you all right?" gasped the girl.

^Yeah. I guess so."

"But what happened? Where's the elevator?"

"Back in Hell," Bill told her. "And forever. I took a fire-axe and cut the cables."

"But can't L. Dritch conjure up new ones?"

"Not in the midst of a sea of flame he can't," Bill grinned. "They came through fast going down and coming up—but this time they landed long enough. I judge that fire will melt the cage and those wizards in about three seconds. As for the fiends, there they are and there they'll stay, forever."

One by one, the fugitives trailed back along the corridor—first Hicks, then Tubby, then the blondes, and finally the house detective.

"Bill saved us," Annabel triumphantly informed them. "Isn't he wonderful?"

The house detective shook his head ruefully. "Mebbe so," he grunted. "But we're cooked, anyway. After what's been going on here the past few days, this hotel won't have a customer left by tomorrow morning."

"Afraid he's right," Hicks said. "Down the hall those magicians are packing suitcases like crazy. Guess the Flopmoor is ruined forever."

"My uncle won't care," Annabel said. "But after all, he was only the manager. The hotel stockholders will probably sue Bill for all this. Maybe I wasn’t so good for you after all, darling.” Surprisingly enough, the girl began to sniffle. “Oh, Bill,” she sobbed. “I didn’t mean to get you into all this trouble.”

Bill tilted her head up and smiled at her.

“What do you mean, trouble?” he asked. “This is the luckiest thing that ever happened to me in all my life. And in all your lives. Can’t you tell by looking at me?”

Annabel and the others stared at him in bewilderment. At last she found her voice.

“What’s so lucky about the way you look?” inquired the girl. “You’re just all covered with smoke and grease and—”

“Something else,” Bill finished for her. “When I cut those cables and the elevator went down, it *splashed.* Something splashed all over me. Can’t you see what it is?”

“It’s oil, folks. We don’t need a hotel. We’re all rich. We’ve struck oil in that shaft—and it’s a gusher!”

Annabel gazed at him tenderly. “I’ve always wanted to marry a millionaire,” she said.

“Well, then, what are you waiting for?” Marmaduke Hicks took charge. “Come on, let’s dig up a minister tonight and get it over with. Then we can have a nice wedding celebration.”

“Not a bad idea.” Tubby led them along the hall to the elevator. He pressed the buzzer and the car whizzed up.

“Nothing doing,” Bill said. “No more elevators for me. I’m walking down. And another thing—I’m through with all this helling around.”

Annabel gave him a long look.

“That’s what *you* think,” she said.

THE END

The Shadow From The Steeple

. . . emeshed in a horror greater than any envisioned by his imagination.

WILLIAM HURLEY was born an Irishman and grew up to be a taxicab driver—therefore it would be redundant, in the face of both of these facts, to say that he was garrulous.

The minute he picked up his passenger in downtown Providence that warm summer evening, he began talking. The passenger, a tall thin man in his early thirties, entered the cab and sat back, clutching a briefcase. He gave an address on Benefit Street and Hurley started out, shifting both taxi and tongue into high gear.

Hurley began what was to be a one-sided conversation by commenting on the afternoon performance of the New York Giants. Unperturbed by his passenger's silence, he made a few remarks about the weather—recent, current, and expected. Since he received no reply, the driver then proceeded to discuss a local phenomenon; namely the reported escape, that morning, of two black panthers or leopards from the traveling menagerie of Langer Brothers Circus, currently appearing in the city. In response to a direct inquiry as to whether he had seen the beasts roaming at large, Hurley's customer shook his head.

The driver then made several uncomplimentary remarks about the local police force and their inability to capture the beasts. It was his considered opinion that a given platoon of law enforcement officers would be unable to catch a cold if immured in an ice-box for a year. This witticism failed to amuse his passenger, and before Hurley could continue his monologue they had arrived at the Benefit Street address. Eighty-five cents changed hands, passenger and briefcase left the cab, and Hurley drove away.

He could not know it at the time, but he thus became the last man who could or would testify to seeing his passenger alive.

The rest is conjecture, and perhaps that is for the best. Certainly it is easy enough to draw certain conclusions as to what happened that night in the old house on Benefit Street, but the weight of those conclusions is hard to bear.

One minor mystery is easy enough to clear up—the peculiar silence and aloofness of Hurley's passenger. That passenger, Edmund Fiske, of Chicago, Illinois, was meditating upon the fulfilment of fifteen years of questing; the cab-trip represented the last stage of this long journey, and he was reviewing the circumstances as he rode.

Edmund Fiske's quest had begun, on August 8, 1935, with the death of his close friend, Robert Harrison Blake, of Milwaukee.

Like Fiske himself at the time, Blake had been a precocious adolescent interested in fantasy-writing, and as such became a member of the "Lovecraft circle"—a group of writers maintaining correspondence with one another and with the late Howard Phillips Lovecraft, of Providence.

It was through correspondence that Fiske and Blake had become acquainted; they visited back and forth between Milwaukee and Chicago, and their mutual preoccupation with the weird and the fantastic in literature and art served to form the foundation for the close friendship which existed at the time of Blake's unexpected and inexplicable demise.

Most of the facts—and certain of the conjectures—in connection with Blake's death have been embodied in Lovecraft's story, *The Haunter of the Dark,* which was published more than a year after the younger writer's passing.

Lovecraft had an excellent opportunity to observe matters, for it was on his suggestion that young Blake had journeyed to Providence early in 1935, and had been provided with living-quarters on College Street by Lovecraft himself. So it was both as friend and neighbor that the elder fantasy writer had acted in narrating the singular story of Robert Harrison Blake's last months.

In his story, he tells of Blake's efforts to begin a novel dealing with a survival of New England witch-cults, but modestly omits his own part in assisting his friend to secure material. Apparently Blake began work on his project and then became enmeshed in a horror greater than any envisioned by his imagination.

For Blake was drawn to investigate the crumbling black pile on Federal Hill—the deserted ruin of a church that had once housed the worshippers of an esoteric cult. Early in spring he paid a visit to the shunned structure and there made certain discoveries which (in Lovecraft's opinion) made his death inevitable.

BRIEFLY, Blake entered the boarded-up Free Will Church and stumbled across the skeleton of a reporter from the *Providence Telegram,* one Edwin M. Lillibridge, who had apparently attempted a similar investigation in 1893. The fact that his death was not explained seemed alarming enough, but more disturbing still was the realization that no one had been bold enough to enter the church since that date and discover the body.

Blake found the reporter's notebook in his clothing, and its contents afforded a partial revelation.

A certain Professor Bowen, of Providence, had traveled widely in Egypt, and in 1843, in the course of archeological investigations of the crypt of Nephren-Ka, had made an unusual find.

Nephren-Ka is the "forgotten pharaoh," whose name has been cursed by the priests and obliterated from official dynastic records. The name was familiar to the young writer at the time, due largely to the work of another Milwaukee author who had dealt with the semi-legendary ruler in his tale, *Fane of the Black Pharaoh.* But the discovery Bowen made in the crypt was totally unexpected.

The reporter's notebook said little of the actual nature of that discovery, but it recorded subsequent events in a precise, chronological fashion. Immediately upon unearthing his mysterious find in Egypt, Professor Bowen abandoned his research and returned to Providence, where he purchased the Free Will Church in 1844 and made it the headquarters of what was called the "Starry Wisdom" sect.

Members of this religious cult, evidently recruited by Bowen, professed to worship an entity they called the "Haunter of the Dark." By gazing into a crystal they summoned the actual presence of this entity and did homage with blood sacrifice.

Such, at least, was the fantastic story circulated in Providence at the time—and the church became a place to be avoided. Local superstition fanned agitation, and agitation precipitated direct action. In May of 1877 the sect was forcibly broken up by the authorities, due to public pressure, and several hundred of its members abruptly left the city.

The church itself was immediately dosed, and apparently individual curiosity could not overcome the widespread fear which resulted in leaving the structure undisturbed and unexplored until the reporter, Lillibridge, made his ill-fated private investigation in 1893.

Such was the gist of the story unfolded in the pages of his notebook. Blake read it, but was nevertheless undeterred in his further scrutiny of the environs. Eventually he came upon the mysterious object Bowen had found in the Egyptian crypt—the object upon which the Starry Wisdom worship had been founded—the asymmetrical metal box with its curiously hinged lid, a lid that had not been closed for countless years. Blake thus gazed at the interior, gazed upon the four-inch red-black crystal polyhedron hanging suspended by seven supports. He not only gazed *at* but also *into* the polyhedron; just as the cult-worshippers had purportedly gazed, and with the same results. He was assailed by a curious psychic disturbance; he seemed to “see visions of other lands and the gulfs beyond the stars,” as superstitious accounts had told.

And then Blake made his greatest mistake. He closed the box.

Closing the box—again, according to the superstitions annotated by Lillibridge—was the act that summoned the alien entity itself, the Haunter of the Dark. It was a creature of darkness and could not survive light. And in that boarded-up blackness of the ruined church, the thing emerged by night.

Blake fled the church in terror, but the damage was done. In mid-July, a thunderstorm put out the lights in Providence for an hour, and the Italian colony living near the deserted church heard bumping and thumping from inside the shadow-shrouded structure.

Crowds with candles stood outside in the rain and played candles upon the building, shielding themselves against the possible emergence of the feared entity by a barrier of light.

Apparently the story had remained alive throughout the neighborhood. Once the storm abated, local newspapers grew interested, and on the 17th of July two reporters entered the old church, together with a policeman. Nothing definite was found.

although there were curious and inexplicable smears and stains on the stairs and the pews.

Less than a month later—at 2:35 a.m. on the morning of August 8th, to be exact—Robert Harrison Blake met his death during an electrical storm while seated before the window of his room on College Street.

During the gathering storm, before his death occurred, Blake scribbled frantically in his diary, gradually revealing his innermost obsessions and delusions concerning the Haunter of the Dark. It was Blake’s conviction that by gazing into the curious crystal in its box he had somehow established a linkage with the non-terrestrial entity. He further believed that closing the box had summoned the creature to dwell in the darkness of the church steeple, and that in some way his own fate was now irrevocably linked to that of the monstrosity.

All this is revealed in the last messages he set down while watching the progress of the storm from his window.

Meanwhile, at the church itself, on Federal Hill, a crowd of agitated spectators gathered to play lights upon the structure. That they heard alarming sounds from inside the boarded-up building is undeniable; at least two competent witnesses have testified to the fact. One, Father Merluzzo of the Spirito Santo Church, was on hand to quiet his congregation. The other, Patrolman (now Sergeant) William J. Monahan, of Central Station, was attempting to preserve order in the face of growing panic. Monahan himself saw the blinding "blur" that seemed to issue, smokelike, from the steeple of the ancient edifice as the final lightning-flash came.

Flash, meteor, fireball—call it what you will—erupted over the city in a blinding blaze; perhaps at the very moment that Robert Harrison Blake, across town, was writing, "Is it not an avatar of Nyarlathotep, who in antique and shadowy Khem even took the form of man?"

A few moments later he was dead. The coroner's physician rendered a verdict attributing his demise to "electrical shock" although the window he faced was unbroken. Another physician, known to Lovecraft, quarreled privately with that verdict and subsequently entered the affair the next day. Without legal authority, he entered the church and climbed to the windowless steeple where he discovered the strange asymmetrical—was it golden?—box and the curious stone within. Apparently his first gesture was to make sure of raising the lid and bringing the stone into the light. His next recorded gesture was to charter a boat, take box and curiously-angled stone aboard, and drop them into the deepest channel of Narragansett Bay.

There ended the admittedly fictionalized account of Blake's death as recorded by H. P. Lovecraft. And there began Edmund Fiske's fifteen-year quest.

Fiske, of course, had known some of the events outlined in the story. When Blake had left for Providence in the spring, Fiske had tentatively promised to join him the following autumn. At first, the two friends had exchanged letters regularly, but by early summer Blake ceased correspondence altogether.

At the time, Fiske was unaware of Blake's exploration of the ruined church. He could not account fot Blake's silence, and wrote Lovecraft for a possible explanation.

Lovecraft could supply little information. Young Blake, he said, had visited with him frequently during the early weeks of his stay; had consulted with him about his writing, and had accompanied him on several nocturnal strolls through the city.

But during the summer, Blake's neighborliness ceased. It was not in Lovecraft's reclusive nature to impose himself upon others, and he did not seek to invade Blake's privacy for several weeks.

When he did so—and learned from the almost hysterical adolescent of his experiences in the forbidding, forbidden church on Federal Hill—Lovecraft offered words of warning and advice. But it was already too late. Within ten days of his visit came the shocking end.

Fiske learned of that end from Lovecraft on the following day. It was his task to break the news to Blake's parents. For a time he was tempted to visit Providence immediately, but lack of funds and the pressure of his own domestic affairs forestalled him. The body of his young friend duly arrived and Fiske attended the brief ceremony of cremation.

Then Lovecraft began his own investigation—an investigation which ultimately resulted in the publication of his story. And there the matter might have rested.

But Fiske was not satisfied.

His best friend had died under circumstances which even the most skeptical must admit were mysterious. The local authorities summarily wrote off the matter with a fatuous and inadequate explanation.

Fiske determined to ascertain the truth.

BEAR in mind one salient fact—all three of these men, Lovecraft, Blake and Fiske—were professional writers and students of the supernatural or the supranormal. All three of them had extraordinary access to a bulk of written material dealing with ancient legend and superstition. Ironically enough, the use to which they put their knowledge was limited to excursions into so-called "fantasy fiction" but none of them, in the light of their own experience, could wholly join their reading audience in scoffing at the myths of which they wrote.

For, as Fiske wrote to Lovecraft, "the term, myth, as we know, is merely a polite euphemism. Blake's death was not a myth, but a hideous reality. I implore you to investigate fully. See this matter through to the end, for if Blake's diary holds even a distorted truth, there is no telling what may be loosed upon the world."

Lovecraft pledged cooperation, discovered the fate of the metal box and its contents, and endeavored to arrange a meeting with Doctor Ambrose Dexter, of Benefit Street. Doctor Dexter, it appeared, had left town immediately following his dramatic theft and disposal of the "Shining Trapezehedron," as Lovecraft called it.

Lovecraft then apparently interviewed Father Merluzzo and Patrolman Monahan, plunged into the files of the *Bulletin,* and endeavored to reconstruct the story of the Starry Wisdom sect and the entity they worshipped.

Of course he learned a good deal more than he dared to put into his magazine story. His letters to Edmund Fiske in the late fall and early spring of 1936 contain guarded hints and references to "menaces from Outside," But he seemed anxious to reassure Fiske that if there had been any menace, even in the realistic rather than the supernatural sense, the danger was now averted because Doctor Dexter had disposed of the Shining Trapezehedron which acted as a summoning talisman. Such was the gist of his report, and the matter rested there for a time.

Fiske made tentative arrangements, early in 1937, to visit Lovecraft at his home, with the private intention of doing some further research on his own into the cause of Blake's death. But once again, circumstances intervened. For in March of that year, Lovecraft died. His unexpected passing plunged Fiske into a period of mental despondency from which he was slow to recover; accordingly, it was not until almost a year later that Edmund Fiske paid his first visit to Providence, and to the scene of the tragic episodes which brought Blake's life to a close.

For somehow, always, a black undercurrent of suspicion existed. The coroner's physician had been glib, Lovecraft had been tactful, the press and general public had accepted matters completely—yet Blake was dead, and there had been an entity abroad in the night.

Fiske felt that if he could visit the accursed church himself, talk to Doctor Dexter and find out what had drawn him into the affair, interrogate the reporters, and pursue any relevant leads or clues he might eventually hope to uncover the truth and at least clear his dead friend's name of the ugly shadow of mental unbalance.

ACCORDINGLY, Fiske's first step after arriving in Providence and registering at a hotel was to set out for Federal Hill and the ruined church.

The search was doomed to immediate, irremediable disappointment. For the church was no more. It had been razed the previous fall and the property taken over by the city authorities. The black and baleful spire no longer cast its spell over the Hill.

Fiske immediately took pains to see Father Merluzzo, at Spirito Santo, a few squares away. He learned from a courteous housekeeper that Father Merluzzo had died in 1936, within a year of young Blake.

Discouraged but persistent, Fiske next attempted to reach Doctor Dexter, but the old house on Benefit Street was boarded up. A call to the Physician's Service Bureau produced only the cryptic information that Ambrose Dexter, M.D., had left the city for an indeterminate stay.

Nor did a visit with the city editor of the *Bulletin* yield any better result. Fiske was permitted to go into the newspaper's morgue and read the aggravatingly short and matter-of-fact story on Blake's death, but the two reporters who had covered the assignment and subsequently visited the Federal Hill church had left the paper for berths in other cities.

There were, of course, other leads to follow, and during the ensuing week Fiske ran them all to the ground. A copy of *Who's Who* added nothing significant to his mental picture of Doctor Ambrose Dexter. The physician was Providence born, a life-long resident, 40 years of age, unmarried, a general practitioner, member of several medical societies—but there was no indication of any unusual "hobbies" or "other interests" which might provide a clue as to his participation in the affair.

Sergeant William J. Monahan of Central Station was sought out, and for the first time Fiske actually managed to speak to some one who admitted an actual connection with the events leading to Blake's death. Monahan was polite, but cautiously noncommittal.

Despite Fiske's complete unburdening, the police officer remained discreetly reticent.

"There's really nothing I can tell you," he said. "It's true, like Mister Lovecraft said, that I was at the church that night, for there was a rough crowd out and there's no telling what some of them ones in the neighborhood will do when riled up. Like the story said, the old church had a bad name, and I guess Sheeley could have given you many's the story."

"Sheeley?" interjected Fiske.

"Bert Sheeley—it was his beat, you know, not mine. He was ill of pneumonia at the time and I substituted for two weeks. Then, when he died —"

Fiske shook his head. Another possible source of information gone. Blake dead, Lovecraft dead, Father Merluzzo dead, and now Sheeley. Reporters scattered, and Doctor Dexter mysteriously missing. He sighed and persevered.

“That last night, when you saw the blur,” he asked, “can you add anything by way of details? Were there any noises? Did anyone in the crowd say anything? Try to remember—whatever you can add may be of great help to me.”

Monahan shook his head. “There were noises aplenty,” he said. “But what with the thunder and all, I couldn’t rightly make out if anything came from inside the church, like the story has it. And as for the crowd, with the women wailing and the men muttering, all mixed up with thunderclaps and wind, it was as much as I could do to hear myself yelling to keep in place let alone make out what was being said.”

“And the blur?” Fiske persisted.

“It was a blur, and that’s all. Smoke, or a cloud, or just a shadow before the lightning struck again. But I’ll not be saying I saw any devils, or monsters, or whatchamacallits as Mister Lovecraft would write about in those wild tales of his.”

Sergeant Monahan shrugged self-righteously and picked up the desk-phone to answer a call. The interview was obviously at an end.

And so, for the nonce, was Fiske’s quest. He didn’t abandon hope, however. For a day he sat by his own hotel phone and called up every “Dexter” listed in the book in an effort to locate a relative of the missing doctor; but to no avail. Another day was spent in a small boat on Narragansett Bay, as Fiske assiduously and painstakingly familiarized himself with the location of the “deepest channel” alluded to in Lovecraft’s story.

But at the end of a futile week in Providence, Fiske had to confess himself beaten. He returned to Chicago, his work, and his normal pursuits. Gradually the affair dropped out of the foreground of his consciousness, but he by no means forgot it completely or gave up the notion of eventually unravelling the mystery—if mystery there was.

IN 1941, during a three-day furlough from Basic Training, Pvt. First Class Edmund Fiske passed through Providence on his way to New York City and again attempted to locate Dr. Ambrose Dexter, without success.

During 1942 and 1943, Sgt. Edmund Fiske wrote, from his stations overseas, to Dr. Ambrose (Dexter, c/o General Delivery, Providence, R. I. His letters were never acknowledged, if indeed they were received.

In 1945, in a U.S.O. library lounge in Honolulu, Fiske read a report in—of all things—a journal on astro-physics which mentioned a recent gathering at Princeton University, at which the guest speaker, Dr. Ambrose Dexter, had delivered an address on "Practical Applications in Military Technology."

Fiske did not return to the States until the end of 1946. Domestic affairs, naturally, were the subject of his paramount consideration during the following year. It wasn't until 1948 that he accidentally came upon Dr. Dexter's name again—this time in a listing of "investigators in the field of nuclear physics" in a national weekly newsmagazine. He wrote the editors for further information, but received no reply. And another letter, dispatched to Providence, remained unanswered.

But in 1949, late in autumn, Dexter's name again came to his attention through the news columns; this time in relation to a discussion of work on the secret H-Bomb.

Whatever he guessed, whatever he feared, whatever he wildly imagined, Fiske was impelled to action. It was then that he wrote to a certain Ogden Purvis, a private investigator in the city of Providence, and commissioned him to locate Doctor Ambrose Dexter. All that he required was that he be placed in communication with Dexter, and he paid a substantial retainer fee. Purvis took the case.

The private detective sent several reports to Fiske in Chicago and they were, at first, disheartening. The Dexter residence was still untenanted. Dexter himself, according to the information elicited from governmental sources, was on a special mission. The private investigator seemed to assume from this that he was a person above reproach, engaged in confidential defense work.

Fiske's own reaction was panic.

He raised his offer of a fee and insisted that Ogden Purvis continue his efforts to find the elusive doctor.

Winter of 1950 came, and with it, another report. The private investigator had tracked down every lead Fiske suggested, and one of them led, eventually to Tom Jonas.

Tom Jonas was the owner of the small boat which had been chartered by Doctor Dexter one evening in the late summer of 1935—the small boat which had been rowed to the "deepest channel of Narragansett Bay."

Tom Jonas had rested his oars as Dexter threw overboard the dully-gleaming, asymmetrical metal box with the hinged lid open to disclose the Shining Trapezehedron.

The old fisherman had spoken freely to the private detective; his words were reported in detail to Fiske via confidential report.

"Mighty peculiar" was Jonas' own reaction to the incident. Dexter had offered him "twenty smackers to take the boat out in the middle o' midnight and heave this funny-lookin' contraption overboard. Said there was no harm in it; said it was just an old keepsake he wanted to git rid of. But all the way out he kep' starin' at the sort of jewel-thing set in some iron bands inside the box, and mumblin' in some foreign language, I guess. No, 'tweren't French or German or Italian talk either. Polish, mebbe. I don't remember any words, either. But he acted sort-of drunk. Not that I'd say anything against Doctor Dexter, understand; comes of a fine old family, even if he ain't been around these parts since, to my knowing. But I figgered he was a bit under the influence, you might say. Else why would he pay me twenty smackers to do a crazy stunt like that?"

There was more to the verbatim transcript of the old fisherman's monologue, but it did not explain anything.

"He sure seemed glad to git rid of it, as I recollect. On the way back he told me to keep mum about it, but I can't see no harm in telling at this late date; I wouldn't hold anythin' back from the law."

Evidently the private investigator had made use of a rather unethical stratagem—posing as an actual detective in order to get Jonas to talk.

This did not bother Fiske, in Chicago. It was enough to get his grasp on something tangible at last; enough to make him send Purvis another payment, with instructions to keep up the search for Ambrose Dexter. Several months passed in waiting.

Then, in late spring, came the news Fiske had waited for. Doctor Dexter was back; he had returned to his house on Benefit Street. The boards had been removed, furniture vans appeared to discharge their contents, and a manservant appeared to answer the door, and to take telephone messages.

Doctor Dexter was not at home to the investigator, or to any one. He was, it appeared, recuperating from a severe illness contracted while in government service. He took a card from Purvis and promised to deliver a message, but repeated calls brought no indication of a reply.

Nor did Purvis, who conscientiously "cased" the house and neighborhood, ever succeed in laying eyes upon the doctor himself or in finding anyone who claimed to have seen the convalescent physician on the street.

Groceries were delivered regularly; mail appeared in the box; lights glowed in the Benefit Street house nightly until all hours.

As a matter of fact, this was the only concrete statement Purvis could make regarding any possible irregularity in Doctor Dexter's mode of life—he seemed to keep electricity burning twenty-four hours a day.

FISKE promptly dispatched another letter to Doctor Dexter, and then another. Still no acknowledgment or reply was forthcoming. And after several more unenlightening reports from Purvis, Fiske made up his mind. He would go to Providence and see Dexter, somehow, come what may.

He might be completely wrong in his suspicions; he might be completely wrong in his assumption that Doctor Dexter could clear the name of his dead friend; he might be completely wrong in even surmising any connection between the two—but for fifteen years he had brooded and wondered, and it was time to put an end to his own inner conflict.

Accordingly, late that summer, Fiske wired Purvis of his intentions and instructed him to meet him at the hotel upon his arrival.

Thus it was that Edmund Fiske came to Providence for the last time; on the day that the Giants lost, on the day that the Langer Brothers lost their two black panthers, on the day that cabdriver William Hurley was in a garrulous mood.

Purvis was not at the hotel to meet him, but such was Fiske's own frenzy of impatience that he decided to act without him and drove, as we have seen, to Benefit Street in the early evening.

As the cab departed, Fiske stared up at the panelled doorway; stared at the lights blazing from the upper windows of the Georgian structure. A brass name-plate gleamed on the door itself, and the light from the windows played upon the legend, Ambrose Dexter, M.D.

Slight as it was, this seemed a reassuring touch to Edmund Fiske. The doctor was not concealing his presence in the house from the world, however much he might conceal his actual person. Surely the blazing lights and the appearance of the name-plate augured well.

Fiske shrugged, rang the bell.

The door opened quickly. A small, dark-skinned man with a slight stoop appeared and made a question of the word, "Yes?"

"Doctor Dexter, please."

"The Doctor is not in to callers. He is ill."

"Would you take a message, please?"

"Certainly." The dark-skinned servant smiled.

"Tell him that Edmund Fiske of Chicago wishes to see him at his convenience for a few moments. I have come all the way from the Middle West for this purpose, and what I have to speak to him about would take only a moment or two of his time."

"Wait, please."

The door closed. Fiske stood in the gathering darkness and transferred his briefcase from one hand to the other.

Abruptly, the door opened again. The servant peered out at him.

“Mr. Fiske—are you the gentleman who wrote the letters?”

“Letters—oh, yes, I am. I did not know the doctor ever received them.”

The servant nodded. “I could not say. But Doctor Dexter said that if you were the man who had written him, you were to come right in.”

Fiske permitted himself an audible sigh of relief as he stepped over the threshhold. It had taken him fifteen years to come this far, and now—

“Just go upstairs, if you please. You will find Doctor Dexter waiting in the study, right at the head of the hall.”

EDMUND FISKE climbed the stairs, turned at the top to a doorway, and entered a room in which the light was an almost palpable presence, so intense was its glare.

And there, rising from a chair beside the fireplace, was Doctor Ambrose Dexter.

Fiske found himself facing a tall, thin, immaculately dressed man who may have been fifty but who scarcely looked thirty-five; a man whose wholly natural grace and elegance of movement concealed the sole incongruity of his aspect—a very deep suntan.

“So you are Edmund Fiske.”

The voice was soft, well-modulated, and unmistakably New England—and the accompanying handclasp warm and firm. Doctor Dexter’s smile was natural and friendly. White teeth gleamed against the brown background of his features.

“Won’t you sit down?” invited the doctor. He indicated a chair and bowed slightly. Fiske couldn’t help but stare; there was certainly no indication of any present or recent illness in his host’s demeanor or behavior. As Doctor Dexter resumed his own seat near the fire and Fiske moved around the chair to join him, he noted the bookshelves on either side of the room. The size and shape of several volumes immediately engaged his rapt attention—so much that he hesitated before taking a seat, and instead inspected the titles of the tomes.

For the first time in his life, Edmund Fiske found himself confronting the half-legendary *De Vermis Mysteriis,* the *Liber lvonis,* and the almost mythical Latin version of the *Necronomicon.* Without seeking his host's permission, he lifted the bulk of the latter volume from the shelf and riffled through the yellowed pages of the Spanish translation of 1622.

Then he turned to Doctor Dexter, and all traces of his carefully-contrived composure dropped away. "Then it must have been you who found these books in the church," he said. "In the rear vestry room beside the apse. Lovecraft mentioned them in his story, and I've always wondered what became of them."

Doctor Dexter nodded gravely. "Yes, I took them. I did not think it wise for such books to fall into the hands of authorities. You know what they contain, and what might happen if such knowledge were wrongfully employed."

Fiske reluctantly replaced the great book on the shelf and took a chair facing the doctor before the fire. He held his briefcase on his lap and fumbled uneasily with the clasp.

"Don't be uneasy," said Doctor Dexter, with a kindly smile. "Let us proceed without fencing. You are here to discover what part I played in the affair of your friend's death."

"Yes, there are some questions I wanted to ask."

"Please." The doctor raised a slim brown hand. "I am not in the best of health and can give you only a few minutes. Allow me to anticipate your queries and tell you what little I know."

"As you wish." Fiske stared at the bronzed man, wondering what lay behind the perfection of his poise.

"I met your friend Robert Harrison Blake only once," said Doctor Dexter. "It was on an evening during the latter part of July, 1935. He called upon me here, as a patient."

Fiske leaned forward eagerly. “I never knew that!” he exclaimed.

“There was no reason for anyone to know it,” the doctor answered. “He was merely a patient. He claimed to be suffering from insomnia. I examined him, prescribed a sedative, and acting on the merest surmise, asked if he had recently been subjected to any unusual strain or trauma. It was then that he told me the story of his visit to the church on Federal Hill and of what he had found there. I must say that I had the acumen not to dismiss his tale as the product of a hysterical imagination. As a member of one of the older families here, I was already acquainted with the legends surrounding the Starry Wisdom sect and the so-called Haunter of the Dark.

“Young Blake confessed to me certain of his fears concerning the Shining Trapezehedron—intimating that it was a focal point of primal evil. He further admitted his own dread of being somehow linked to the monstrosity in the church.

“Naturally, I was not prepared to accept this last premise as a rational one. I attempted to reassure the young man, advised him to leave Providence and forget it. And at the time I acted in all good faith. And then, in August, came news of Blake’s death.”

“So you went to the church,” Fiske said.

“Wouldn’t you have done the same thing?” parried Doctor Dexter. “If Blake had come to you with this story, told you of what he feared, wouldn’t his death have moved you to action? I assure you, I did what I thought best. Rather than provoke a scandal, rather than expose the general public to needless fears, rather than permit the possibility of danger to exist, I went to the church. I took the books. I took the Shining Trapezehedron from under the noses of the authorities. And I chartered a boat and dumped the accursed thing in Narragansett Bay, where it could no longer possibly harm mankind. The lid was up when I dropped it—for as you know, only darkness can summon the Haunter, and now the stone is eternally exposed to light.

"BUT that is all I can tell you. I regret that my work in recent years has prevented me from seeing or communicating with you before this. I appreciate your interest in the affair and trust my remarks will help to clarify, in a small way, your bewilderment. As to young Blake, in my capacity as examining physician, I will gladly give you a written testimony to my belief in his sanity at the time of his death. I'll have it drawn up tomorrow and send it to your hotel if you give me the address. Fair enough?"

The doctor rose, signifying that the interview was over. Fiske remained seated, shifting his briefcase.

"Now if you will excuse me," the physician murmured.

"In a moment. There are still one or two brief questions I'd appreciate your answering."

"Certainly." If Doctor Dexter was irritated, he gave no sign.

"Did you by any chance see Lovecraft before or during his last illness?"

"No. I was not his physician. In fact, I never met the man, though of course I knew of him and his work."

"What caused you to leave Providence so abruptly after the Blake affair?"

"My interests in physics superseded my interest in medicine. As you may or may not know, during the past decade or more, I have been working on problems relative to atomic energy and nuclear fission. In fact, starting tomorrow, I am leaving Providence once more to deliver a course of lectures before the faculties of eastern universities and certain governmental groups."

"That is very interesting to me, Doctor," said Fiske. "By the way, did you ever meet Einstein?"

"As a matter of fact, I did, some years ago. I worked with him on—but no matter. I must beg you to excuse me, now. At another time, perhaps, we can discuss such things."

His impatience was unmistakable now. Fiske rose, lifting his briefcase in one hand and reaching out to extinguish a table-lamp with the other.

Doctor Dexter crossed swiftly and lighted the lamp again.

"Why are you afraid of the dark, Doctor?" asked Fiske, softly.

"I am not af—"

For the first time the physician seemed on the verge of losing his composure. "What makes you think that?" he whispered.

"It's the Shining Trapezehedron, isn't it?" Fiske continued. "When you threw it into the bay you acted too hastily. You didn't remember at the time that even if you left the lid open, the stone would be surrounded by darkness there at the bottom of the channel. Perhaps the Haunter didn't want you to remember. You looked into the stone just as Blake did, and established the same psychic linkage. And when you threw the thing away, you gave it into perpetual darkness, where the Haunter's power would feed and grow.

"That's why you left Providence—because you were afraid the Haunter would come to you, just as it came to Blake. And because you knew that now the thing would remain abroad forever."

Doctor Dexter moved towards the door. "I must definitely ask that you leave now," he said. "If you're implying that I keep the lights on because I'm afraid of the Haunter coming after me, the way it did Blake, then you're mistaken."

FISKE smiled wryly. "That's not it at all," he answered. "I know you don't fear that. Because it's too late. The Haunter must have come to you long before this—perhaps within a day or so after you gave it power by consigning the Trapezehedron to the darkness of the Bay. It came to you, but unlike the case of Blake, it did not kill you.

"It used you. That's why you fear the dark. You fear it as the Haunter itself fears being discovered. I believe that in the darkness you look *different.* More like the old shape. Because when the Haunter came to you, it did not kill but instead, *merged. You* are the Haunter of the Dark!"

"Mr. Fiske, really—"

"There is no Doctor Dexter. There hasn't been any such person for many years, now. There's only the outer shell, possessed by an entity older than the world; an entity that is moving quickly and cunningly to bring destruction to all mankind. It was you who turned 'scientist' and insinuated yourself into the proper circles, hinting and prompting and assisting foolish men into their sudden 'discovery' of nuclear fission. When the first atomic bomb fell, how you must have laughed! And now you've given them the secret of the hydrogen bomb, and you're going on to teach them more, show them new ways to bring about their own destruction.

"It took me years of brooding to discover the clues, the keys to the so-called wild myths that Lovecraft wrote about. For he wrote in parable and allegory, but he wrote the truth. He has sot it down in black and white time and again, the prophecy of your coming to earth—Blake knew it at the last when he identified the Haunter by its rightful name."

"And that is?" snapped the doctor.

"Nyarlathotep!"

The brown face creased into a grimace of laughter. "I'm afraid you're a victim of the same fantasy-projections as poor Blake and your friend Lovecraft. Everyone knows that Nyarlathotep is pure invention—part of the Lovecraft mythos."

"I thought so, until I found the clue in his poem. That's when it all fitted in; the Haunter of the Dark, your fleeing, and your sudden interest in scientific research. Lovecraft's words took on a new meaning:

And at last from inner Egypt came
The strange dark one to whom the
 fellas bowed."

Fiske chanted the lines, staring at the dark face of the physician.

"Nonsense—if you must know, this dermatological disturbance of mine is the result of exposure to radiation at Los Alamos."

Fiske did not heed; he was continuing Lovecraft's poem:

"—That wild beasts followed him
and licked his hands.
Soon from the sea a noxious birth
began;
Forgotten lands with weedy spires
of gold.
The ground was cleft and mad
auroras rolled
Down on the quaking cities of man.
Then crushing what he chanced to
mould in play
The idiot Chaos blew Earth's dust
away."

Doctor Dexter shook his head. "Ridiculous on the face of it," he asserted. "Surely, even in your—er—upset condition, you can understand that, man! The poem has no literal meaning. Do wild beasts lick my hands? Is something rising from the sea? Are there earthquakes and auroras? Nonsense! You're suffering from a bad case of what we call 'atomic jitters'—I can see it now. You're preoccupied, as so many laymen are today, with the foolish obsession that somehow our work in nuclear fission will result in the destruction of the earth. All this rationalization is a product of your imaginings."

FISKE held his briefcase tightly. "I told you it was a parable, this prophecy of Lovecraft's. God knows what he *knew* or *feared;* whatever it was, it was enough to make him cloak his meaning. And even then, perhaps, *they* got to him because he knew too much."

"They?"

"They from Outside—the ones you serve. You are their Messenger, Nyarlathotep, You came, in linkage with the Shining Trapezehedron, out of inner Egypt, as the poem says. And the fellahs—the common workers of

Providence who became converted to the Starry Wisdom sect—bowed before the ‘strange dark one’ they worshipped as the Haunter.

“The Trapezehedron was thrown into the Bay, and soon from the sea came this noxious birth—your birth, or incarnation in the body of Doctor Dexter. And you taught men new methods of destruction; destruction with atomic bombs in which the ground was cleft and mad auroras rolled down on the quaking cities of man. Oh, Lovecraft knew what he was writing, and Blake recognized you, too. And they both died. I suppose you’ll try to kill me now, so you can go on. You’ll lecture, and stand at the elbows of the laboratory men urging them on and giving them new suggestions to result in greater destruction. And finally you’ll blow earth’s dust away.”

“Please.” Doctor Dexter held out both hands. “Control yourself—let me get you something! Can’t you realize this whole thing is absurd?”

Fiske moved towards him, hands fumbling at the clasp of the briefcase. The flap opened, and Fiske reached inside, then withdrew his hand. He held a revolver now, and he pointed it quite steadily at Doctor Dexter’s breast.

“Of course it’s absurd,” Fiske muttered. “No one ever believed in the Starry Wisdom sect except a few fanatics and some ignorant foreigners. No one ever took Blake’s stories or Lovecraft’s, or mine for that matter as anything but a rather morbid form of amusement. By the same token, no one will ever believe there is anything wrong with you, or with so-called scientific investigation of atomic energy, or the other horrors you plan to loose on the world to bring about its doom. And that’s why I’m going to kill you now!”

“Put down that gun!”

FISKE began suddenly to tremble; his whole body shook in a spectacular spasm. Dexter noted it and moved forward. The younger man’s eyes were bulging, and the physician inched towards him.

“Stand back!” Fiske warned. The words were distorted by the convulsive shuddering of his jaws. “That’s all I needed to know. Since you are in a human body, you can be destroyed by ordinary weapons. And so I do destroy you—Nyarlathotep!”

His finger moved.

So did Doctor Dexter’s. His hand went swiftly behind him, to the wall master-lightswitch. A click and the room was plunged into utter darkness.

Not utter darkness—for there was a glow.

The face and hands of Doctor Ambrose Dexter glowed with a phosphorescent fire in the dark. There are presumably forms of radium poisoning which can cause such an effect, and no doubt Doctor Dexter would have so explained the phenomenon to Edmund Fiske, had he the opportunity.

But there was no opportunity. Edmund Fiske heard the click, saw the fantastic flaming features, and pitched forward to the floor.

Doctor Dexter quietly switched on the lights, went over to the younger man’s side and knelt for a long moment. He sought a pulse in vain.

Edmund Fiske was dead.

The doctor sighed, rose, and left the room. In the hall downstairs he summoned his servant.

“There has been a regrettable accident,” he said. “That young visitor of mine—a hysteric—suffered a heart attack. You had better call the police, immediately. And then continue with the packing. We must leave tomorrow, for the lecture tour.”

“But the police may detain you.”

Doctor Dexter shook his head. “I think not. It’s a clear-cut case. In any event, I can easily explain. When they arrive, notify me. I shall be in the garden.”

The doctor proceeded down the hall to the rear exit and emerged upon the moonlit splendor of the garden behind the house on Benefit Street.

The radiant vista was walled off from the world, utterly deserted. The dark man stood in moonlight and its glow mingled with his own aura.

At this moment two silken shadows leaped over the wall. They crouched in the coolness of the garden, then slithered forward towards Doctor Dexter.

They made panting sounds.

In the moonlight, he recognized the shapes of two black panthers.

Immobile, he waited as they advanced, padding purposefully towards him, eyes aglow, jaws slavering and agape.

Doctor Dexter turned away. His face was turned in mockery to the moon as the beasts fawned before him and licked his hands.

1951

The Hungry Horse

It was silly to be afraid of the house. And yet it wasn't really the house —it was the evil thing living there—hungry for tenants . . .

AT first there were just the two of them—he and she, together. That's the way it was when they bought the house.

Then *it* came. Perhaps it was there all the time; waiting for them in the house. At any rate, it was there now. And there was nothing they could do.

Moving was out of the question. They'd taken a five-year lease, secretly congratulating themselves on the low rental. It would be absurd to complain to the agent about it, and impossible to explain to their friends. For that matter, they had nowhere else to go; they had searched for months to find a home.

Besides, at first neither he nor she cared to admit that they were aware of its presence. But both of them knew it was there.

She felt it the very first evening, in the bedroom. She was sitting in front of the high, oldfashioned boudoir mirror, combing her hair. They hadn't settled all their things yet, and she didn't trouble to dust the place very thoroughly. In consequence the mirror was cloudy. And the light above it flickered.

So at first she thought it was just a trick of shadows. Some flaw in the glass perhaps. The wavering outline behind her seemed to blur the reflection oddly, and she frowned in distaste. Then she began to experience what she often called her “married feeling”—the peculiar awareness which usually denoted her husband’s entrance to a room she occupied.

He must be standing behind her now. He must have come in quietly, without saying anything. Perhaps he was going to put his arms around her, surprise her, startle her. Hence the shadow on the mirror.

She turned, ready to greet him.

The room was empty. And still the odd reflection persisted, together with the sensation of a presence at her back.

She shrugged, moved her head, and made a little face at herself, in the mirror. As a smile it was a failure, because the warped glass and the poor light seemed to distort her grin into something alien—into a smile that was not altogether a composition of her own face and features.

Well, it had been a fatiguing ordeal, this moving business. She flicked a brush through her hair and tried to dismiss the problem.

NEVERTHELESS she felt a surge of relief when he suddenly entered the bedroom. For a moment she thought of telling him, then decided not to worry him over her “nerves.”

He was more outspoken. It was the following morning that the incident occurred. He came rushing out of the bathroom, his face bleeding from a razor-cut on the left cheek.

“Is that your idea of being funny?” he demanded, in the petulant, little-boy fashion she found so engaging. “Sneaking in behind me and making faces in the mirror? Gave me an awful start—look at this nick I sliced on myself.”

She sat up in bed.

“But darling, I haven’t been making faces at you. I didn’t stir from this bed since you got up.”

“Oh.” He shook his head, his frown fading into a second set of wrinkles expressing bewilderment. “Oh, I see.”

“What is it?” She suddenly threw off the covers and sat on the edge of the bed, wriggling her toes and peering at him earnestly.

“Nothing,” he murmured. “Nothing at all. Just thought I saw you, or somebody, looking over my shoulder in the mirror. All of a sudden, you know. It must be those damned lights. Got to get some bulbs in town today.”

He patted his cheek with a towel and turned away. She teak a deep breath.

“I had the same feeling last night,” she confessed, then bit her lip.

“You did?”

“It’s probably just the lights, as you said, darling.”

“Uh huh.” He was suddenly preoccupied. “That must be it. I’ll make sure and bring those new bulbs.”

“You’d better. Don’t forget, the gang is coming down for the housewarming on Saturday.”

Saturday proved to be a long time in coming. In the interim both of them had several experiences which served to upset their minds much more than they cared to admit.

The second morning, after he had left for work, she went out in back and looked at the garden. The place was a mess—half an acre of land, all those trees, the weeds everywhere, and the dead leaves of autumn dancing slowly around the old house. She stood off on a little knoll and contemplated the grave gray gables of another century. Suddenly she felt lonely here. It wasn’t only the isolation, the feeling of being half a mile from the nearest neighbor, down a deserted dirt road. It was more as though she were an intruder here—an intruder upon the past. The cold breeze, the dying trees, the sullen sky were welcome; they belonged to the house. She was the outsider, because she was young, because she was alive.

She felt it all, but did not think it. To acknowledge her sensations would be to acknowledge fear. Fear of being alone. Or, worse still, fear of *not* being alone.

Because, as she stood there, the back door closed.

Oh, it was the autumn wind, all right. Even though the door didn't bang, or slam shut. It merely closed. But that was the wind's work, it had to be. There was nobody in the house, nobody to close the door.

SHE felt in her housedress pocket for the door key, then shrugged as she remembered leaving it on the kitchen sink. Well, she hadn't planned to go inside yet anyway. She wanted to look over the yard, look over the spot where the garden had been and where she fully intended a garden to bloom next spring. She had measurements to make, and estimates to take, and a hundred things to do here outside.

And yet, when the door closed, she knew she had to go in. Something was trying to shut her out, shut her out of her own house, and that would never do. Something was fighting against her, fighting against all idea of change. She had to fight back.

So she marched up to the door, rattled the knob, found herself locked out as she expected. The first round was lost. But there was always the window.

The kitchen window was eye-level in height, and a small crate served to bring it within easy reach. The window was open a good four inches and she had no trouble inserting her hands to raise it further.

She tugged.

Nothing happened. The window must be stuck. But it wasn't stuck; she'd just opened it before going outside and it opened quite easily; besides, they'd tried all the windows and found them in good operating condition.

She tugged again. This time the window raised a good six inches and then—something slipped. The window came down like the blade of a guillotine, and she got her hands out just in time. She bit her lip, sent strength through her shoulders, raised the window once more.

And this time she stared into the pane. The glass was transparent, ordinary window glass. She'd washed it just yesterday and she knew it was clean. There had been no blur, no shadow, and certainly no movement.

But there was movement now. Something cloudy, something obscenely opaque, peered out of the window, peered out of itself and pressed the window down against her. Something matched her strength to shut her out.

Suddenly, hysterically, she realized that she was staring at her own reflection through the shadows of the trees. Of course, it had to be her own reflection. And there was no reason for her to close her eyes and sob as she tugged the window up and half-tumbled her way into the kitchen.

She was inside, and alone. Quite alone. Nothing to worry about. Nothing to worry him about. She wouldn't tell him.

He wouldn't tell her, either. Friday afternoon, when she took the car and went into town for groceries and liquor in preparation for tomorrow's party, he stayed home from the office and arranged the final details of settling down.

That's why he carried up all the garment bags to the attic—to store the summer clothes, get them out of the way. And that's how he happened to open the little cubicle under the front gable. He was looking for the attic closet; he'd put down the bags and started to work along the wall with a flashlight. Then he noticed the door and the padlock.

DUST and rust told their own story; nobody had come this way for a long, long time. He thought again of Hacker, the glib real-estate agent who'd handled the rental of the place. "Been vacant several years and needs a little fixing up," Hacker had said. From the looks of it, nobody had lived here for a coon's age. All the better; he could force the lock with a common file.

He went downstairs for the file and returned quickly, noting as he did so the heavy attic dust. Apparently the former occupants had left in something of a hurry—debris was scattered everywhere, and swaths and swirls scored the dust to indicate that belongings had been dragged and hauled and swept along in a haphazard fashion.

Well, he had all winter to straighten things out, and right now he'd settle for storing the garment bags. Clipping the flashlight to his belt, he bent over the lock, file in hand, and tried his skill at breaking and entering.

The lock sprung. He tugged at the door, opened it, inhaled a gust of mouldy dampness, then raised the flash and directed the beam into the long, narrow closet.

A thousand silver slivers stabbed at his eyeballs. Golden, gleaming fire seared his pupils. He jerked the flashlight back, sent the beam upwards. Again, lances of light entered his eyes.

Suddenly he adjusted his vision and comprehension. He stood peering into a room full of mirrors. They hung from cords, lay in corners, stood along the walls in rows.

There was a tall, stately full-length mirror, set in a door; a pair of plate-glass ovals, inset in old-fashioned dresser-tops; a panel glass, and even a complete, dismantled bathroom medicine cabinet similar to the one they had just installed. And the floor was lined with hand-mirrors of all sizes and shapes. He noted an ornate silver-handled mirror straight from a woman's dressing table; behind it stood the vanity-mirror removed from the table itself. And there were pocket mirrors, mirrors from purse-compacts, mirrors of every size and shape. Against the far wall stood a whole series of looking-glass slabs that appeared to have been mounted at one time in a bedroom wall.

He gazed at half a hundred silvered surfaces, gazed at a half a hundred reflections of his own bewildered face.

AND he thought again of Hacker, of their inspection of the house. He had noted the absence of a medicine cabinet at the time, but Hacker had glossed over it. Somehow he hadn't realized that there were no mirrors of any sort in the house—of course, there was no furniture, but still one might expect a door panel in a place this old.

No mirrors? Why? And why were they all stacked away up here, under lock and key?

It was interesting. His wife might like some of these—that silver-handled beauty mirror, for example. He'd have to tell her about this.

He stepped cautiously into the closet, dragging the garment bags after him. There didn't seem to be any clothes-pole here, or any hooks. He could put some up in a jiffy, though. He piled the bags in a heap, stooping, and the flashlight glittered on a thousand surfaces, sent facets of fire into his face.

Then the fire faded. The silver surfaces darkened oddly. Of course, his reflection covered them now. His reflection, and something darker. Something smoky and swirling, something that was a part of the mouldy dampness, something that choked the closet with its presence. It was behind him—no, at one side—no, in front of him—all around him—it was growing and growing and blotting him out—it was making him sweat and tremble and now it was making him gasp and scuttle out of the closet and slam the door and press against it with all his waning strength, and its name was—

Claustrophobia. That was it. Just claustrophobia, a fancy name for nerves. A man gets nervous when he's cooped up in a small space. For that matter, a man gets nervous when he looks at himself too long in a mirror. Let alone fifty mirrors!

He stood there, shaking, and to keep his mind occupied, keep his mind off what he had just half-seen, half-felt, half-known, he thought about mirrors for a moment. About looking into mirrors. Women did it all the time. Men were different.

Men, himself included, seemed to be self-conscious about mirrors. He could remember going into a clothing-store and seeing himself in one of the complicated arrangements that afforded a side and rear view. What a shock that had been, the first time—and every time, for that matter! A man looks different in a mirror. Not the way he imagines himself to be, knows himself to be. A mirror distorts. That's why men hum and sing and whistle while they shave. To keep their minds off their reflections. Otherwise they'd go crazy. What was the name of that Greek mythological character who was in love with his own image? Narcissus, that was it. Staring into a pool for hours.

Women could do it, though. Because women never saw themselves, actually. They saw an idealization, a vision. Powder, rouge, lipstick, mascara, eye-shadow, brilliantine, or merely an emptiness to which these elements must be applied. Women were a little crazy to begin with, anyway. Hadn't she said something the other night about seeing him in her mirror when he wasn't there?

PERHAPS he'd better not tell her, after all. At least, not until he checked with the real-estate agent, Hacker. He wanted to find out about this business, anyway. Something was wrong, somewhere. Why had the previous owners stored all the mirrors up here?

He began to walk back through the, attic, forcing himself to go slowly, forcing himself to think of something, anything, except the fright he'd had in the room of reflections.

Reflect on something. Reflections. Who's afraid of the big bad reflection? Another myth, wasn't it?

Vampires. They had no reflections. "Tell me the truth now, Hacker. The people who built this house—were they vampires?"

That was a pleasant thought. That was a pleasant thought to carry downstairs in the afternoon twilight, to hug to your bosom in the gloom while the floors creaked and the shutters banged and the night came down in the house of shadows where something peered around the corners and grinned at you in the mirrors on the walls.

He sat there waiting for her to come home, and he switched on all the lights, and he put the radio on too and thanked God he didn't have a television set because there was a screen and the screen made a reflection and the reflection might be something he didn't want to see.

But there was no more trouble that evening, and by the time she came home with her packages he had himself under control. So they ate and talked quite naturally—oh, quite naturally, and if it was listening it wouldn’t know they were both afraid.

They made their preparations for the party, and called up a few people on the phone, and just on the spur of the moment he suggested inviting Hacker, too. So that was done and they went to bed. The lights were all out and that meant the mirrors were dark, and he could sleep.

Only in the morning it was difficult to shave. And he caught her, yes he caught her, putting on her makeup in the kitchen, using the little compact from her purse and carefully cupping her hands against reflections.

But he didn’t tell her and she didn’t tell him, and if it guessed their secrets, it kept silent.

He drove off to work and she made canapes, and if at times during the long, dark, dreary Saturday the house groaned and creaked and whispered, that was only to be expected.

THE house was quiet enough by the time he came home again, and somehow, that was worse. It was as though something were waiting for night to fall. That’s why she dressed early, humming all the while she powdered and primped, swirling around in front of the mirror (you couldn’t see too clearly if you swirled). That’s why he mixed drinks before their hasty meal and saw to it that they both had several stiff ones (you couldn’t see too clearly if you drank).

And then the guests tumbled in. The Teters, complaining about the winding back road through the hills. The Valliants, exclaiming over the antique panelling and the high ceilings. The Ehrs, whooping and laughing, with Vic remarking that the place looked like something designed by Charles Ad dams. That was a signal for a drink, and by the time Hacker and his wife arrived the blaring radio found ample competition from the voices of the guests.

He drank, and she drank, but they couldn’t shut it out altogether. That remark about Charles Addams was bad, and there were other things. Little things. The Talmadges had brought flowers, and she went out to the kitchen to arrange them in a cut-glass vase. There were facets in the glass, and as she stood in the kitchen, momentarily alone, and filled the vase with water from the tap, the crystal darkened beneath her fingers, and something peered, reflected from the facets. She turned quickly, and she was all alone. All alone, holding a hundred naked eyes in her hands.

So she dropped the vase, and the Ehrs and Talmadges and Hackers and Valliants trooped out to the kitchen, and he came too. Talmadge accused her of drinking and that was reason enough for another round. He said nothing, but got another vase for the flowers. And yet he must have known, because when somebody suggested a tour of the house, he put them off:

"We haven't straightened things out upstairs yet," he said. "It's a mess, and you'd be knocking into crates and stuff."

"Who's up there now?" asked Mrs. Teters, coming into the kitchen with her husband. "We just heard an awful crash."

"Something must have fallen over," the host suggested. But he didn't look at his wife as he spoke, and she didn't look at him.

"How about another drink?" she asked. She mixed and poured hurriedly, and before the glasses were half empty, he took over and fixed another round. Liquor helped to keep people talking and if they talked it would drown out other sounds.

The strategem worked. Gradually the group trickled back into the living room in twos and threes, and the radio blared and the laughter rose and the voices babbled to blot out the noises of the night.

He poured and she served, and both of them drank, but the alcohol had no effect. They moved carefully, as though their bodies were brittle glasses —glasses without bottom—waiting to be shattered by some sudden strident sound. Glasses hold liquor, but they never get drunk.

Their guests were not glasses, they drank and feared nothing, and the drinks took hold. People moved about, and in and out, and pretty soon Mr. Valliant and Mrs. Talmadge embarked on their own private tour of the house upstairs. It was irregular and unescorted, but fortunately nobody noticed either their departure or their absence. At least, not until Mrs. Talmadge came running downstairs and locked herself in the bathroom.

HER hostess saw her pass the doorway and followed her. She rapped on the bathroom door, gained admittance, and prepared to make discreet inquiries. None was necessary. Mrs. Talmadge, weeping and wringing her hands, fell upon her.

“That was a filthy trick!” she sobbed. “Coming up and sneaking in on us. The dirty louse—I admit we were doing a little smooching, but that’s all there was to it. And it isn’t as though he didn’t make enough passes at Gwen Hacker himself. What I want to know is, where did he get the beard? It frightened me out of my wits.”

“What’s all this?” she asked—knowing all the while what it was, and dreading the words to come.

“Jeff and I were in the bedroom, just standing there in the dark, I swear it, and all at once I looked up over my shoulder at the mirror because light began streaming in from the hall. Somebody had opened the door, and I could see the glass and this face. Oh, it was my husband all right, but he had a beard on and the way he came slinking in, glaring at us—”

Sobs choked off the rest. Mrs. Talmadge trembled so that she wasn’t aware of the tremors which racked the frame of her hostess. She, for her part, strained to hear the rest. “—sneaked right out again before we could do anything, but wait till I get him home—scaring the life out of me and all because he’s so crazy jealous—the look on his face in the mirror—” She soothed Mrs. Talmadge. She comforted Mrs. Talmadge. She placated Mrs. Talmadge. And all the while there was nothing to soothe or calm or placate her own agitation.

Still, both of them had restored a semblance of sanity by the time they ventured out into the hall to join the party—just in time to hear Mr. Talmadge’s agitated voice booming out over the excited responses of the rest.

“So I’m standing there in the bathroom and this old witch comes up and starts making faces over my shoulder in the mirror. What gives here, anyway? What kind of a house you running here?”

He thought it was funny. So did the others. Most of the others. The host and hostess stood there, not daring to look at each other. Their smiles were cracking. Glass is brittle.

“I don’t believe you,” Gwen Hacker’s voice. She’d had one, or perhaps three, too many. “I’m going up right now and see for myself.” She winked at her host and moved towards the stairs.

“Hey, hold on!” He was too late. She swept, or wobbled, past him.

“Halloween pranks,” said Talmadge, nudging him. “Old babe in a fancy hairdo. Saw her plain as day. What you cook up for us here, anyhow?”

He began to stammer something, anything, to halt the flood of foolish babbling. She moved close to him, wanting to listen, wanting to believe, wanting to do anything but think of Gwen Hacker upstairs, all alone upstairs looking into a mirror and waiting to see—

THE screams came then. Not sobs, not laughter, but screams. He took the stairs two at a time. Fat Mr. Hacker was right behind him, and the others straggled along, suddenly silent. There was the sound of feet clubbing the staircase, the sound of heavy breathing, and over everything the continuing high-pitched shriek of a woman confronted with terror too great to contain.

It oozed out of Gwen Hacker’s voice, oozed out of her body as she staggered and half-fell into her husband’s arms in the hall. The light was streaming out of the bathroom, and it fell upon the mirror that was empty of all reflection, fell upon her face that was empty of all expression.

They crowded around the Hackers—he and she were on either side and the others clustered in front—and they moved along the hall to her bedroom and. helped Mr. Hacker stretch his wife out on the bed. She had passed out, and somebody mumbled something about a doctor. and somebody else said no. never mind, she'll be all right in a minute, and somebody else said well. I think we'd better be getting along.

For the first time everybody seemed to be aware of the old house and the darkness, and the way the floors creaked and the windows rattled and the shutters banged. Everyone was suddenly sober, solicitous, and extremely anxious to leave.

Hacker bent over his wife, chafing her wrists, forcing her to swallow water, watching her whimper her way out of emptiness. The host and hostess silently procured hats and coats and listened to expressions of polite regret, hasty farewells, and poorly formulated pretenses of, "Had a marvelous time, darling."

Teters, Valliants, Talmadges were swallowed up in the night. He and she went back upstairs, back to the bedroom and the Hackers. It was too dark in the hall, and too light in the bedroom. But there they were, waiting. And they didn't wait long.

Mrs. Hacker sat up suddenly and began to talk. To her husband, to them.

"I saw her," she said. "Don't tell me I'm crazy, I saw her! Standing on tiptoe behind me, looking right into the mirror. With the same blue ribbon in her hair, the one she wore the day she—"

"Please, dear," said Mr. Hacker.

She didn't please. "But I saw her. Mary Lou! She made a face at me in the mirror, and she's dead, you know she's dead, she disappeared three years ago and they never did find the body—"

"Mary Lou Dempster." Hacker was a fat man. He had two chins. Both of them wobbled.

"She played around here, you know she did, and Wilma Dempster told her to stay away, she knew all about this house, but she wouldn't and now—oh, her face!"

MORE sobs. Hacker patted her on the shoulder. He looked as though he could stand a little shoulder-patting himself. But nobody obliged. He stood there, she stood there, still waiting. Waiting for the rest.

“Tell them,” said Mrs. Hacker. “Tell them the truth.”

“All right, but I’d better get you home.”

“I’ll wait. I want you to tell them. You must, now.”

Hacker sat down heavily. His wife leaned against his shoulder. The two waited another moment. Then it came.

“I don’t know how to begin, how to explain,” said fat Mr. Hacker. “It’s probably my fault, of course, but I didn’t know. All this foolishness about haunted houses—nobody believes that stuff any more, and all it does is push property values down, so I didn’t say anything. Can you blame me?”

“I saw her face,” whispered Mrs. Hacker.

“I know. And I should have told you. About the house, I mean. Why it hasn’t rented for twenty years. Old story in the neighborhood, and you’d have heard it sooner or later anyway, I guess.”

“Get on with it,” said Mrs. Hacker. She was suddenly strong again and he, with his wobbling chins, was weak.

Host and hostess stood before them, brittle as glass, as the words poured out; poured out and filled them to overflowing. He and she, watching and listening, filling up with the realization, with the knowledge, with that for which they had waited.

It was the Bellman house they were living in, the house Job Bellman built for his bride back in the sixties; the house where his bride had given birth to Laura and taken death in exchange. And Job Bellman had toiled through the seventies as his daughter grew to girlhood, rested in complacent retirement during the eighties as Laura Bellman blossomed into the reigning beauty of the county—some said the state, but then flattery came quickly to men’s lips in those days.

There were men aplenty, coming and going through that decade; passing through the hall in polished boots, bowing and stroking brilliantined mustachios, smirking at old Job, grinning at the servants, and gazing in moonstruck adoration at Laura.

Laura took it all as her rightful due, but land's sakes. she'd never think of it, no. not while Papa was still alive, and no, she couldn't, she was much too young to marry, and why, she'd never heard of such a thing, she'd always thought it was so much nicer just being friends—

Moonlight, dances, parties, hay-rides, sleighrides, candy, flowers, gifts, tokens, cotillion balls, punch, fans, beauty spots, dressmakers, curlers, mandolins, cycling, and the years that whirled away. And then, one day, old Job dead in the four-poster bed upstairs, and the Doctor came and the Minister, and then the Lawyer, hack-hack-hacking away with his dry, precise little cough, and his talk of inheritance and estate and annual income.

THEN she was all alone, just she and the servants and the mirrors. Laura and her mirrors. Mirrors in the morning, and the careful inspection, the scrutiny that began the day. Mirrors at night before the caller arrived, before the carriage came, before she whirled away to another triumphal entry, another fan-fluttering, pirouetting descent of the staircase. Mirrors at dawn, absorbing the smiles, listening to the secrets, the tale of the evening's triumph.

"Minor, mirror on the wall, who is the fairest of them all?"

Mirrors told her the truth, mirrors did not lie, mirrors did not paw or clutch or whisper or demand in return for acknowledgement of beauty.

Years passed, but mirrors did not age, did not change. And Laura did not age. The callers were fewer and some of them were oddly altered. They seemed older, somehow. And yet how could that be? For Laura Bellman was still young. The mirrors said so, and they always told the truth. Laura spent more and more time with the mirrors. Powdering, searching for wrinkles, tinting and curling her long hair. Smiling, fluttering eyelashes, making deliciously delicate little *moues.* Swirling daintily, posturing before her own perfection.

Sometimes, when the callers came, she sent word that she was not at home. It seemed silly, somehow, to leave the mirrors. And after a while, there weren't many callers to worry about. Servants came and went, some of them died, but there were always new ones. Laura and the mirrors remained. The nineties were truly gay, but in a way other people wouldn't understand. How Laura laughed, rocking back and forth on the bed, sharing her giddy secrets with the glass!

The years fairly flew by, but Laura merely laughed. She giggled and tittered when the servants spoke to her, and it was easier now to take her meals on a tray in her room. Because there was something wrong with the servants, and with Doctor Turner who came to visit her and who was always being tiresome about going away for a rest to a lovely home.

They thought she was getting old, but she wasn't—the mirrors didn't lie. She wore the false teeth and the wig to please the others, the outsiders, but she didn't really need them. The mirrors told her she was unchanged. They talked to her now, the mirrors did, and she never said a word. Just sat nodding and swaying before them in the room reeking of powder and *patchouli,* stroking her throat and listening to the mirrors telling her how beautiful she was and what a belle she would be if she would only waste. her beauty on the world. But she'd never leave here, never; she and the mirrors would always be together.

AND then came the day they tried to take her away, and they actually laid hands upon her—upon her, Laura Bellman, the most exquisitely beautiful woman in the world! Was it any wonder that she fought, clawed and kicked and whined, and struck out so that one of the servants crashed headlong into the beautiful glass and struck his foolish head and died, his nasty blood staining the image of her perfection?

Of course it was all a stupid mistake and it wasn't her fault, and Doctor Turner told the magistrate so when he came to call. Laura didn't have to see him, and she didn’t have to leave the house. But they always locked the door to her room now, and they took away all her mirrors.

They *took away* all her mirrors!

They left her alone, caged up, a scrawny, wizened, wrinkled old woman with no reflection. They took the mirrors away and made her old; old, and ugly, and afraid.

The night they did it, she cried.

She cried and hobbled around the room, stumbling blindly in a tear-some tour of nothingness.

That’s when she realized she was old, and nothing could save her. Because she came up against the window and leaned her wrinkled forehead against the cold, cold glass. The light came from behind her and as she drew away she could see her reflection in the window.

The window—it was a mirror, too! She gazed into it, gazed long and lovingly at the tear-streaked face of the fantastically rouged and painted old harridan, gazed at the corpse-countenance readied for the grave by a mad embalmer.

Everything whirled. It was her house, she knew every inch of it, from the day of her birth onwards the house was a part of her. It was her room, she had lived here for ever and ever. But *this*—this obscenity—was not her face. Only a mirror could show her that, and there would never be a mirror for her again. For an instant she gazed at the truth and then, mercifully, the gleaming glass of the window-pane altered and once again she gazed at Laura Bellman, the proudest beauty of them all. She drew herself erect, stepped back, and whirled into a dance. She danced forward, a prim self-conscious smile on her lips. Danced into the window-pane, half-through it, until razored splinters of glass tore her scrawny throat.

That’s how she died and that’s how they found her. The Doctor came, and the servants and the lawyer did what must be done. The house was sold, then sold again. It fell into the hands of a rental agency. There were tenants, but not for long. They had trouble with mirrors.

A man died—of a heart attack, they said—while adjusting his necktie before the bureau one evening. Grotesque enough, but he had complained to people in the town about strange happenings, and his wife babbled to everyone.

A school-teacher who rented the place in the twenties "passed away" in circumstances which Doctor Turner had never seen fit to relate. He had gone to the rental agency and begged them to take the place off the market; that was almost unnecessary, for the Bellman home had its reputation firmly established by now.

Whether or not Mary Lou Dempster had disappeared here would never be known. But the little girl had last been seen a year ago on the road leading to the house and although a search had been made and nothing discovered, there was talk aplenty.

Then the new heirs had stepped in, briskly, with their pooh-poohs and their harsh dismissals of advice, and the house had been cleaned and put up for rental.

So he and she had come to live here—with it. And that was the story, all of the story.

MR. Hacker put his arm around Gwen, harrumphed, and helped her rise. He was apologetic, he was shame-faced, he was deferential. His eyes never met those of his tenant.

He barred the doorway. "We're getting out of here, right now," he said. "Lease or no lease."

"That can be arranged. But—I can't find you another place tonight, and tomorrow's Sunday—"

"We'll pack and get out of here tomorrow," she spoke up. "Go to a hotel, anywhere. But we're leaving."

"I'll call you tomorrow," said Hacker. "I'm sure everything will be all right. After all, you've stayed here through the week and nothing, I mean nobody has—"

His words trailed off. There was no point in saying any more. The Hackers left and they were all alone. Just the two of them. Just the *three* of them, that is. But now they—he and she—were I too tired to care. The inevitable letdown, product of overindulgence and over-excitement was at hand.

They said nothing, for there was nothing to say. They heard nothing, for the house—and it—maintained a sombre silence.

She went to her room and undressed. He began to walk around the house. First he went to the kitchen and opened a drawer next to the sink. He took a hammer and smashed the kitchen mirror.

Tinkle-tinkle! And then a crash!

That was the mirror in the hall. Then upstairs, to the bathroom. Crash and clink of broken glass in the medicine cabinet. Then a smash as he shattered the panel in his room. And now he came to her bedroom and swung the hammer against the huge oval of the vanity, shattering it to bits.

He wasn't cut, wasn't excited, wasn't upset. And the mirrors were gone. Every last one of them was gone.

They looked at each other for a moment. Then he switched off the lights, tumbled into bed beside her, and sought sleep.

The night wore on.

IT was all a little silly in the day-light. But she looked at him again in the morning, and he went into his room and hauled out the suitcases. By the time she had breakfast ready he was already laying his clothes out on the bed. She got up after eating and took her own clothing from the drawers and hangers and racks and hooks. Soon he'd go up to the attic and get the garment bags. The movers could be called tomorrow, or as soon as they had a destination in mind.

The house was quiet. If it knew their plans, it wasn't acting. The day was gloomy and they kept the lights off without speaking—although both of them knew it was because of the window-panes and the story of the reflection. He could have smashed the window glass of course, but it was all a little silly. And they'd be out of here shortly.

Then they heard the noise. Trickling, burbling. A splashing sound. It came from beneath their feet. She gasped.

"Water-pipe—in the basement," he said, smiling and taking her by the shoulders.

"Better take a look." She moved towards the stairs.

"Why should you go down there? I'll tend to it."

But she shook her head and pulled away. It was her penance for gasping. She had to show she wasn't afraid. She had to show him—and it, too.

"Wait a minute," he said. "I'll get the pipe-wrench. It's in the trunk in the car." He went out the back door. She stood irresolute, then headed for the cellar stairs. The splashing was getting louder. The burst pipe was flooding the basement. It made a funny noise, like laughter.

He could hear it even when he walked up the driveway and opened the trunk of the car. These old houses always had something wrong with them; he might have known it. Burst pipes and—

Yes. He found the wrench. He walked back to the door, listening to the water gurgle, listening to his wife scream.

She *was* screaming! Screaming down in the basement, screaming down in the dark.

He ran, swinging the heavy wrench. He clumped down the stairs, down into the darkness, the screams tearing up at him. She was caught, it had her, she was struggling with it but it was strong, too strong, and the light came streaming in on the pool of water beside the shattered pipe and in the reflection he saw her face and the blackness of other faces swirling around her and holding her.

He brought the wrench up, brought it down on the black blur, hammering and hammering and hammering until the screaming died away. And then he stopped and looked down at her. The dark blur had faded away into the reflection of the water—the reflection that had evoked it. But she was still there, and she was still, and she would be still forever now. Only the water was getting red, where her head rested in it. And the end of the wrench was red, too.

For a moment he started to tell her about it, and then he realized she was gone. Now there were only the two of them left. He and it.

And he was going upstairs. He was walking upstairs, still carrying the bloody wrench, and he was going over to the phone to call the police and explain.

HE sat down in a chair before the phone, thinking about what he'd tell them, how he'd explain. It wouldn't be easy. There was this madwoman, see, and she looked into mirrors until there was more of her alive in her reflection than there was in her own body. So when she committed suicide she lived on, somehow, and came alive in mirrors or glass or anything that reflected. And she killed others or drove them to death and their reflections were somehow joined with hers so that this thing kept getting stronger and stronger, sucking away at life with that awful core of pride that could live beyond death. Woman, thy name is vanity! And that, gentlemen, is why I killed my wife . . .

Yes, it was a fine explanation, but it wouldn't hold water. Water—the pool in the basement had evoked it. He might have known it if only he'd stopped to think, to reflect. Reflect. That was the wrong word, now. Reflect. The way the window pane before him was reflecting.

He stared into the glass now, saw it behind him, surging up from the shadows. He saw the bearded man's face, the peering, pathetic, empty eyes of a little girl, the goggling grimacing stare of an old woman. It wasn't there, behind him, but it was alive in the reflection, and as he rose he gripped the wrench tightly. It wasn't there, but he'd strike at it, fight at it, come to grips with it somehow.

He turned, moving back, the ring of shadow-faces pressing. He swung the wrench. Then he saw *her* face coming up through all the rest. Her face, with shining splinters where the eyes should be. He couldn't smash it down, he couldn't hit her again.

It moved forward. He moved back. His arm went out to one side. He heard the tinkle of window-glass behind him and vaguely remembered that this was how the old woman had died. The way he was dying now—falling through the window, and cutting his throat, and the pain lanced up and in, tearing at his brain as he hung there on the jagged spikes of glass, bleeding his life away.

Then he was gone.

His body hung there, but he was gone.

There was a little puddle on the floor, moving and growing. The light from outside shone on it, and there was a reflection.

Something emerged fully from the shadows now, emerged and capered demurely in the darkness.

It had the face of an old woman and the face of a child, the face of a bearded man, and *his* face, and *her* face, changing and blending.

It capered and postured, and then it squatted, dabbling. Finally, all alone in the empty house, it just sat there and waited. There was nothing to do now but wait for the next to come. And meanwhile, it could always admire itself in that growing, growing red reflection on the floor . . .

THE END

Notebook Found In a Deserted House

FIRST off, I want to write that I never did anything wrong. Not to nobody. They got no call to shut me up here, whoever they are. They got no reason to do what I'm afraid they're going to do, either.

I think they're coming pretty soon, because they've been gone outside a long time. Digging, I guess, in that old well. Looking for a gate, I heard. Not a regular gate, of course, but something else.

Got a notion what they mean, and I'm scared.

I'd look out the windows but of course they are boarded up so I can't see.

But I turned on the lamp, and I found this here notebook so I want to put it all down. Then if I get a chance maybe I can send it to somebody who can help me. Or maybe somebody will find it. Anyway, it's better to write it out as best I can instead of just sitting here and waiting. Waiting for *them* to come and get me.

I better start by telling my name, which is Willie Osborne, and that I am 12 years old last July. I don't know where I was born.

First thing I can remember is living out Roodsford way, out in what folks call the back kill country. It's real lonesome out there, with deep woods all around and lots of mountains and hills that nobody ever climbs.

Grandma use to tell me about it when I was just a little shaver. That's who I lived with, just Grandma on account of my real folks being dead. Grandma was the one who taught me how to read and write. I never been to a regular school.

Grandma knew all kinds of things about the hills and the woods and she told me some mighty queer stories. That's what I thought they was, anyway, when I was little and living all alone with her. Just stories, like the ones in books.

Like stories about *them ones* hiding in the swamps, that was here before the settlers and the Indians both and how there was circles in the swamps and big stones called alters where *them ones* use to make sacrefices to what they worshiped.

Grandma got some of the stories from her Grandma she said—about how *them ones* hid in the woods and swamps because they couldn't stand sunshine, and how the Indians kept out of their way. She said sometimes the Indians would leave some of their young people tied to trees in the forest as a sacrefice, so as to keep *them* contented and peacefull.

Indians knew all about *them* and they tried to keep white folks from noticing too much or settling too close to the hills. *Them ones* didn't cause much trouble, but they might if they was crowded. So the Indians give excuses for not settling, saying there weren't enough hunting and no trails and it was too far off from the coast.

Grandma told me that was why not many places was settled even today. Nothing but a few farmhouses here and there. She told me *them ones* was still alive and sometimes on certain nights in the Spring and Fall you could see lights and hear noises far off on the tops of the hills.

Grandma said I had an Aunt Lucy and a Uncle Fred who lived out there right smack in the middle of the hills. Said my Pa used to visit them before he got married and once he heard *them* beating on a tree drum one night along about Halloween time. That was before he met Ma and they got married and she died when I come and he went away.

I HEARD all kinds of stories. About witches and devils and bat men that sucked your blood and haunts. About Salem and Arkham becauses I never been to a city and I wanted to hear tell how they were. About a place called Innsmouth with old rotten houses where people hid awful things away in the cellars and the attics. She told me bout the way graves was dug deep under Arkham. Made it sound like the whole country was full of haunts.

She use to scare me, telling about how some of these things looked and all but she never would tell me how *them ones* looked no matter how much I asked. Said she didn't want me to have any truck with such things—bad enough she and her kin knew as much as they did—allmost too much for decent God fearing people. It was lucky for me I didn't have to bother with such ideas, like my own ansestor on my father's side, Mehitabel Osborne, who got hanged for a witch back in the Salem days.

So they was just stories to me until last year when Grandma died and Judge Crubbinthorp put me on the train and I went out to live with Aunt Lucy and Uncle Fred in the very same hills that Grandma use to tell about so often.

You can bet I was pretty excited, and the conductor let me ride with him all the way and told me about the towns and everything.

Uncle Fred met me at the station. He was a tall thin man with a long beard. We drove off in a buggy from the little deepo—no houses around there or nothing—right into the woods.

Funny thing about those woods. They was so still and quiet. Gave me the creeps they was so dark and lonesome. Seemed like nobody had ever shouted or laughed or even smiled in them. Could'nt imagine anyone saying anything there excep in whispers.

Trees and all was so old, too. No animals around or birds. Path kind of overgrown like nobody used it much ever. Uncle Fred drove along right fast, he didn't hardly talk to me at all but just made that old horse hump it.

Pretty soon we struck into some hills, they was awfully high ones. They was woods on them, too, and sometimes a brook come running down, but I didn't see no houses and it was always dark like at twilight, wherever you looked.

Lastly we got to the farmhouse—a little place, old frame house and barn in a clear space with trees all around kind of gloomy-like. Aunt Lucy come out to meet us, she was a nice sort of little middle-aged lady who hugged me and took my stuff in back.

But all this don’t hold with what I’m supposed to write down here. It don’t matter that all this last year I was living in the house here with them, eating off the stuff Uncle Fred farmed without ever going into town. No other farms around here for almost four mile and no school—so evenings Aunt Lucy would help me with my reading. I never played much.

At first I was scared of going into the woods on account of what Grandma had told me. Besides, I could tell as Aunt Lucy and Uncle Fred was scared of something from the way they locked the doors at night and never went into the woods after dark, even in summer.

But after a while, I got used to the idea of living in the woods and they didn’t seem so scarey. I did chores for Uncle Fred, of course, but sometimes in afternoons when he was busy I’d go off by myself. Particular by the time it was fall.

And that’s how I heard one of the things.

It was early October, I was in the glen right by the big boulder. Then the noise started. I got behind that rock fast.

You see, like I say, there isn’t any animals in the woods. Nor people. Excep perhaps old Cap Pritchett the mailman who only comes through on Thursday afternoons.

So when I heard a sound that wasn’t Uncle Fred or Aunt Lucy calling to me, I knew I better hide.

About that sound. It was far-away at first, kind of a dropping noise. Sounded like the blood falling in little spurts on the bottom of the bucket when Uncle Fred hung up a butchered hog.

I looked around but I couldn’t make out nothing, and I couldn’t figure out the direction the noise was from either. The noise sort of stopped for a minute and they was only twilight and trees, still as death. Then the nose started again, nearer and louder.

Sounded like a lot of people running or walking all at once, moving this way. Twigs busting under feet and scrabbling in the bushes all mixed up in the noise. I scrunched down behind that boulder and kep real quiet.

I can tell that whatever makes the noise, it's real close now, right in the glen. I want to look up but dassn't because the sound is so loud and *mean.* And also there is an awful smell like something that was dead and buried being uncovered again in the sun.

All at once the noise stops again and I can tell that whatever makes it is real close by. For a minute the woods are creepy-still. Then comes the sound.

It's a voice and it's not a voice. That is, it doesn't *sound* like a voice but more like a buzzing or croaking, deep and droning. But it *has* to be a voice because it is saying words.

Not words I could understand, but words. Words that made me keep my head down, half afraid I might be seen and half afraid I might see something. I stayed there sweating and shaking. The smell was making me pretty sick, but that awful, deep droning voice was worse. Saying over and over something like "E uh shub nigger ath ngaa ryla neb shoggoth".

I can't hope to spell it out the way it sounded, but I heard it enough times to remember. I was still listening when the smell got awful thick and I guess I must have fainted because when I woke up the voice was gone and it was getting quite dark.

I ran all the way home that night, but not before I saw where the thing had stood when it talked—and it *was* a thing.

No human being can leave tracks in the mud like goat's hoofs all green with slime that smell awful—not four or eight, but a couple *hundred!*

I DIDN'T tell Aunt Lucy or Uncle Fred. But that night when I went to bed I had terrible dreams. I thought I was back in the glen, only this time I could see the thing. It was real tall and all inky-black, without any particular shape except a lot of black ropes with ends like hoofs on it. I mean, it had a shape but it kep changing—all bulgy and squirming into different sizes. They was a lot of mouths all over the thing like puckered up leaves on branches.

That’s as close as I can come. The mouths was like leaves and the whole thing was like a tree in the wind, a black tree with lots of branches trailing the ground, and a whole lot of roots ending in hoofs. And that green slime dribbling out of the mouths and down the legs was like sap!

Next day I remembered to look in a book Aunt Lucy had downstairs. It was called a mythology. This book told about some people who lived over in England and France in the old days and was called Druids. They worshiped trees and thought they was alive. Maybe this thing was like what they worshiped—called a nature-spirit.

But these Druids lived across the ocean, so how could it be? I did a lot of thinking about it the next couple days, and you can bet I didn’t go out to play in those woods again.

At last I figgered it out something like this.

Maybe those Druids got chased out of the forests over in England and France and some of them was smart enough to build boats and come across the ocean like old Leaf Erikson is supposed to have. Then they could maybe settle in the woods back here and frighten away the Indians with their magic spells.

They would know how to hide themselves away in the swamps and go right on with their heathen worshiping and call up these spirits out of the ground or wherever they come from.

Indians use to Believe that white gods come from out of the sea a long time ago. What if that was just another way of telling how the Druids got here? Some real civilized Indians down in Mexico or South America—Aztecs or Inkas, I guess—said a white god come over in a boat and taught them all kinds of magic. Couldn’t he of been a Druid?

That would explain Grandma’s stories about *them ones,* too.

Those Druids hiding in the swamps would be the ones who did the drumming and pounding and lit the fires on the hills. And they would be calling up *them ones,* the tree spirits or whatever, out of the earth. Then they would make sacrefices. Those Druids always made sacrefices with blood, just like the old witches. And didn't Grandma tell about people who lived too near the hills disappearing and never being found again?

We lived in a spot just exactly like that.

And it was getting close to Halloween. That was the big time, Grandma always said.

I began to wonder—how soon now?

Got so scared I didn't go out of the house. Aunt Lucy made me take a tonic, said I looked peaked. Guess I did. All I know is one afternoon when I heard a buggy coming through the woods I ran and hid under the bed.

But it was only Cap Pritchett with the mail. Uncle Fred got it and come in all excited with a letter.

Cousin Osborne was coming to stay with us. He was kin to Aunt Lucy and he had a vacation and he wanted to stay a week. He'd get here on the same train I did—the only train they was passing through these parts—on noon, October 25th.

For the next few days we was all so excited that I forgot all my crazy notions for a spell. Uncle Fred fixed up the back room for Cousin Osborne to sleep in and I helped him with the carpenter parts of the job.

DAYS got shorter right along, and the nights was all cold with big winds. It was pretty brisk the morning of the 25th and Uncle Fred bundled up warm to drive through the woods. He meant to fetch Cousin Osborne at noon, and it was seven mile to the station. He wouldn't take me, and I didn't beg. Them woods Was too full of creaking and rustling sounds from the wind—sounds that might be something else, too.

Well, he left, and Aunt Lucy and I stayed in the house. She was putting up preserves now—plums—for over the winter season. I washed out jars from the well.

Seems like I should have told about them having two wells. A new one with a big shiny pump, close to the house. Then an old stone one out by the barn, with the pump gone. It never had been any good, Uncle Fred said, it was there when they bought the place. Water was all slimy. Something funny about it, because even without a pump, sometimes it seemed to back up. Uncle Fred couldn't figure it out, but some mornings water would be running out over the sides—green, slimy water that smelled terrible.

We kep away from it and I was by the new well, till along about noon when it started in to cloud up. Aunt Lucy fixed lunch, and it started to rain hard with thunder rolling in off the big hills in the west.

Seemed to me Uncle Fred and Cousin Osborne was going to have troubles getting home in the storm, but Aunt Lucy didn't fret about it—just made me help her put up the stock.

Come five o'clock, getting dark, and still no Uncle Fred. Then we begun to worry. Maybe the train was late, or something happened to the horse or buggy.

Six o'clock and still no Uncle Fred. The rain stopped, but you could still hear the thunder sort of growling off in the hills, and the wet branches kep dripping down in the woods, making a sound like women laughing.

Maybe the road was too bad for them to get through. Buggy might bog down in the mud. Perhaps they decided to stay in the deepo over night.

Seven o'clock and it was pitch dark outside. No rain sounds any more. Aunt Lucy was awful worried. She said for us to go out and post a lantern on the fence rail by the road.

WE WENT down the path to the fence. It was dark and the wind had died down. Everything was still, like in the deep part of the woods. I felt kind of scared just walking down the path with Aunt Lucy—like something was out there in the quiet dark, someplace, waiting to grab me.

We lit the lantern and stood there looking down the dark road and, "What's that?" said Aunt Lucy, real sharp. I listened and heard a drumming sound far away.

“Horse and buggy,” I said. Aunt Lucy perked up.

“You’re right,” she says, all at once. And it is, because we see it. The horse is running fast and the buggy lurches behind it, crazylike. It don’t even take a second look to see something has happened, because the buggy don’t stop by the gate but keeps going up to the barn with Aunt Lucy and me running through the mud after the horse. The horse is all full of lather and foam, and when it stops it can’t stand still. Aunt Lucy and I wait for Uncle Fred and Cousin Osborne to step out, but nothing happens. We look inside.

There isn’t anybody in the buggy at all.

Aunt Lucy says, “Oh!” in a real loud voice and then faints. I had to carry her back to the house and get her into bed.

I waited almost all night by the window, but Uncle Fred and Cousin Osborne never showed up. Never.

The next few days was awful. They was nothing in the buggy for a clue like to what happened, and Aunt Lucy wouldn’t let me go along the road into town or even to the station through the woods.

The next morning the horse was dead in the barn, and of course we would of had to walk to the deepo or all those miles to Warren’s farm. Aunt Lucy was scared to go and scared to stay and she allowed as how when Cap Pritchett comes by we had best go with him over to town and make a report and then stay there until we found out what happened.

Me, I had my own ideas what happened. Halloween was only a few days away now, and maybe *them ones* had snatched Uncle Fred and Cousin Osborne for sacrefice. *Them ones* or the Druids. The mythology book said Dmids could even raise storms if they wanted to with their spells.

No sense talking to Aunt Lucy, though. She was like out of her head with worry, anyway, just rocking back and forth and mumbling over and over, “They’re gone” and “Fred always warned me” and “No use, no use.” I had to get the meals and tend to stock myself. And nights it was hard to sleep, because I kep listening for drums. I never heard any, though, but still it was better than sleeping and having those dreams.

Dreams about the black tiling like a tree, walking through the woods and sort of rooting itself to one particular spot so it could pray with all those mouths—pray down to that old god in the ground below.

I don't know where I got the idea that was how it prayed—by sort of attaching its mouths to the ground. Maybe it was on account of seeing the green slime. Or had I really seen it? I'd never gone back to look. Maybe it was all in my head—the Druid story and about *them ones* and the voice that said "shoggoth" and all the rest.

But then, where was Cousin Osborne and Uncle Fred? And what scared the horse so it up and died the next day?

Thoughts kep going round and round in my head, chasing each other, but all I knew was we'd be out of here by Halloween night.

Because Halloween was on a Thursday, and Cap Pritchett would come and we could ride to town with him.

Night before I made Aunt Lucy pack and we got all ready, and then I settled down to sleep. There was no noises, and for the first time I felt a little better.

Only the dreams come again. I dreamed a bunch of men come in the night and crawled through the parlor bedroom window where Aunt Lucy slept and got her. They tied her up and took her away, all quiet, in the dark, because they had cat-eyes and didn't need light to see.

The dream scared me so I woke up while it was just breaking into dawn. I went down the hall to Aunt Lucy right away.

She was gone.

The window was wide open like in my dream, and some of the blankets was torn.

Ground was hard outside the window and I didn't see footprints or anything. But she was gone.

I guess I cried then.

It's hard to remember what I did next. Didn't want breakfast. Went out hollering "Aunt Lucy" and not expecting any answer. I walked to the barn and the door was open and the cows were gone. Saw one or two prints going out the yard and up the road, but I didn't think it was safe to follow them.

Some time later I went over to the well and then I cried again because the water was all slimy green in the new one, just like the old.

When I saw that I knew I was right. *Them ones* must of come in the night and they wasn't even trying to hide their doings any more. Like they was sure of things.

Tonight was Halloween. I had to get out of here. If *them ones* was watching and waiting, I couldn't depend on Cap Pritchett showing up this afternoon. I'd have, to chance it down the road and I'd better start walking now, in the morning, while it was still light enough to make town.

So I rummaged around and found a little money in Uncle Fred's drawer of the bureau and Cousin Osborne's letter with the address in Kingsport he wrote it from. That's where I'd have to go after I told folks in town what happened. I'd have some kin there.

I wondered if they'd believe me in town when I told them about the way Uncle Fred had disappeared and Aunt Lucy, and about *them* stealing the cattle for a sacrefice and about the green slime in the well where something had stopped to drink. I wondered if they would know about the drums and the lights on the hills tonight and if they was going to get up a party and come back this evening to try and catch *them ones* and what they meant to call up rumbling out of the earth. I wondered if they knew what a "shoggoth" was.

Well, whether they did or not, I couldn't stay and find out for myself. So I packed up my satchel and got ready to leave. Must of been around noon and everything was still.

I went to the door and stepped outside, not bothering to lock it behind me. Why should I with nobody around for miles? Then I heard the noise down the road. Footsteps.

Somebody walking along the road, just around the bend.

I stood still for a minute, waiting to see, waiting to run.

Then he come along.

HE WAS tall and thin, and looked something like Uncle Fred only a lot younger and without a beard, and he was wearing a nice city kind of suit and a crush hat. He smiled when he saw me and come marching up like he knowed who I was. “Hello, Willie,” he said.

I didn’t say nothing, I was so confuzed. “Don’t you know me?” he said. “I’m Cousin Osborne. Your Cousin Frank.” He held out his hand to shake. “But then I guess you wouldn’t remember, would you? Last time I saw you, you were only a baby.”

“But I thought you were suppose to come last week,” I said. “We expected you on the 25th.”

“Didn’t you get my telegram?” he asked. “I had business.”

I shook my head. “We never get nothing here unless the mail delivers it on Thursdays. Maybe it’s at the station.”

Cousin Osborne grinned. “You are pretty well off the beaten track at that. Nobody at the station this noon. I was hoping Fred would come along with the buggy so I wouldn’t have to walk, but no luck.”

“You walked all the way?” I asked. “That’s right.”

“And you come on the train?”

Cousin Osborne nodded.

“Then where’s your suitcase?”

“I left it at the deepo,” he told me. “Too far to fetch it along. I thought Fred would drive me back there in the buggy to pick it up.” He noticed my luggage for the first time. “But wait a minute—where are you going with a suitcase, son?”

Well, there was nothing else for me to do but tell him everything that happened.

So I said for him to come into the house and set down and I’d explain.

We went back, in and he fixed some coffee and I made a couple sanwiches and we ate, and then I told him about Uncle Fred going to the deepo and not coming back, and about the horse and then what happened to Aunt Lucy. I left out the part about me in the woods, of course, and I didn't even hint at *them ones*. But I told him I was scared and figgered on walking to town today before dark.

Cousin Osborne he listened to me, nodding and not saying much or interrupting.

"Now you can see why we got to go, right away," I said. "Whatever come after them will be coming after us, and I don't want to spend another night here."

Cousin Osborne stood up. "You may be right, Willie," he said. "But dont let your imagination run away with you, son. Try to seperate fact from fancy. Your Aunt and Uncle have disappeared. That's fact. But this other nonsense about things in the woods coming after you—that's fancy. Reminds me of all that silly talk I heard back home, in Arkham. And for some reason there seems to be more of it around this time of year, at Halloween. Why, when I left—"

"Excuse me, Cousin Osborne," I said. "But dont you live in Kingsport?"

"Why to be sure," he told me. "But I did live in Arkham once, and I know the people around here. It's no wonder you were so frightened in the woods and got to imagining things. As it is, I admire your bravery. For a 12 year old, you've acted very sensibly."

"Then lets start walking," I said. "Here it is almost 2 and we better get moving if we want to make town before sundown."

"Not just yet, son," Cousin Osborne said. "I wouldn't feel right about leaving without looking around and seeing what we can discover about this mystery. After all, you must understand that we can't just march into town and tell the sheriff some wild nonsense about strange creatures in the woods making off with your Aunt and Uncle. Sensible folks just won't believe such things. They might think I was lying and laugh at me. Why they might even think you had something to do with your Aunt and Uncle's—well, leaving."

"Please," I said. "We got to go, right now."

He shook his head.

I didn't say any more. I might of told him a lot, about what I dreamed and heard and saw and knew—but I figgered it was no use.

Besides, there was some things I didn't want to say to him now that I had talked to him. I was feeling scared again.

First he said he was from Arkham and then when I asked him he said he was from Kingsport but it sounded like a lie to me.

Then he said something about me being scared in the woods and how could he know that? I never told him *that* part at all.

If you want to know what I really thought, I thought maybe he wasn't really Cousin Osborne at all.

And if he wasn't, then—who was he?

I stood up and walked back into the hall.

"Where you going, son?" he asked.

"Outside."

"I'll come with you."

Sure enough, he was watching me. He wasn't going to let me out of his sight. He came over and took my arm, real friendly—but I couldn't break loose. No, he hung on to me. He knew I meant to run for it.

What could I do? All alone in the house in the woods with this man, with night coming on, Halloween night, and *them ones* out there waiting.

WE WENT outside and I noticed it was getting darker already, even in afternoon. Clouds had covered up the sun, and the wind was moving the trees so they stretched out their branches, like they was trying to hold me back. They made a rustling noise, just as if they were whispering things about me, and he sort of looked up at them and listened. Maybe he understood what they were saying. Maybe they were giving him orders.

Then I almost laughed, because he *was* listening to something and now I heard it too.

It was a drumming sound, on the road.

"Cap Pritchett," I said. "He's the mailman. Now we can ride to town with him in the buggy."

"Let me talk to him," he says. "About your Aunt and Uncle. No sense in alarming him, and we dont want any scandal, do we? You just run along inside."

"But Cousin Osborne," I said. "We got to tell the truth."

"Of course, son. But this is a matter for adults. Now run along. I'll call you."

He was real polite about it and even smiled, but all the same he dragged me back up the porch and into the house and slammed the door. I stood there in the dark hall and I could hear Cap Pritchett slow down and call out to him, and him going up to the buggy and talking, and then all I heard was a lot of mumbling, real low. I peeked out through a crack in the door and saw them. Cap Pritchett was talking to him friendly, all right, and nothing was wrong.

Except that in a minute or so, Cap Pritchett waved and then he grabbed the reins and the buggy started off again!

Then I knew I'd have to do it, no matter what happened. I opened the door and ran out, suitcase and all, down the path and up the road after the buggy. Cousin Osborne he tried to grab me when I went by, but I ducked around him and yelled, "Wait for me, Cap—I'm coming—take me to town!"

Cap slowed down and stared back, real puzzled. "Willie!" he says. "Why I thought you was gone. He said you went away with Fred and Lucy—"

"Pay no attention," I said. "He didn't want me to go. Take me to town. I'll tell you what really happened. Please, Cap, you got to take me."

"Sure I'll take you, Willie. Hop right up here."

I hopped.

Cousin Osborne came right up to the buggy. “Here, now,” he said, real sharp. “You can’t leave like this. I forbid it. You’re in my custody.”

“Don’t listen to him,” I yelled. “Take me, Cap. Please!”

“Very well,” said Cousin Osborne. “If you insist on being unreasonable. We’ll all go. I cannot permit you to leave alone.”

He smiled at Cap. “You can see the boy is unstrung,” he said. “And I trust you will not be disturbed by his imaginings. Living out here like this—well, you understand—he’s not quite himself. I’ll explain everything on the way to town.”

He sort of shrugged at Cap and made signs of tapping his head. Then he smiled again and made to climb up next to us in the buggy seat.

But Cap didn’t smile back. “No, you don’t,” he said. “This boy Willie is a good boy. I know him. I don’t know you. Looks as if you done enough explaining already, Mister, when you said Willie had gone away.”

“But I merely wanted to avoid talk—you see, I’ve been called in to doctor the boy—he’s mentally unstable—”

“Stables be damned!” Cap spit out some tobacco juice right at Cousin Osborne’s feet. “We’re going.”

Cousin Osborne stopped smiling. “Then I insist you take me with you,” he said. And he tried to climb into the buggy.

Cap reached into his jacket and when he pulled his hand out again he had a big pistol in it.

“Git down!” he yelled. “Mister, you’re talking to the United States Mail and you don’t tell the Government nothing, understand? Now git down before I mess your brains all over this road.”

Cousin Osborne scowled, but he got away from the buggy, fast.

He looked at me and shrugged. “You’re making a big mistake, Willie,” he said.

I didn’t even look at him. Cap said, “Gee up,” and we went off down the road. The buggy wheels turned faster and faster and pretty soon the farmhouse was out of sight and Cap put his pistol away, and patted me on the shoulder.

"Stop that trembling, Willie," he said. "You're safe now. Nothing to worry about. Be in town little over an hour or so. Now you just set back and tell old Cap all about it."

SO I TOLD him. It took a long time.

We kep going through the woods, and before I knew it, it was almost dark. The sun sneaked down and hid behind the hills. The dark began to creep out of the woods on each side of the road, and the trees started to rustle, whispering to the big shadows that followed us.

The horse was clipping and clopping along, and pretty soon they were other noises from far away. Might have been thunder and might have been something else. But it was getting night-time for sure, and it was the night of Halloween.

The road cut off through the hills now, and you could hardly see where the next turn would take you. Besides, it was getting dark awful fast.

"Guess we're in for a spell of rain," Cap said, looking up. "That's thunder, I reckon."

"Drums," I said.

"Drums?"

"At night in the hills you can hear them," I told him. "I heard them all this month. It's *them ones,* getting ready for the Sabbath."

"Sabbath?" Cap looked at me. "Where you hear tell about a Sabbath?"

Then I told him some more about what had happened. I told him all the rest. He didn't say anything, and before long he couldn't of answered me anyway, because the thunder was all around us, and the rain was lashing down on the buggy, on the road, everywhere. It was pitch-blade outside now, and the only time we could see was when lightning flashed. I had to yell to make him hear me—yell about the things that caught Uncle Fred and come for Aunt Lucy, the things that took our cattle and then sent Cousin Osborne back to fetch me. I hollered out about what I heard in the woods, too.

IN THE lightning flashes I could see Cap's face. He wasn't smiling or scowling—he just looked like he believed me. And I noticed he had his pistol out again and was holding the reins with one hand even though we were racing along. The horse was so scared he didn't need the whip to keep him running.

The old buggy was lurching and bouncing, and the rain was whistling down in the wind and it was all like an awful dream but it was real. It was real when I hollered out to Cap Pritchett about that time in the woods.

"Shoggoth," I yelled. "What's a shoggoth?"

Cap grabbed my arm, and then the lightning come and I could see his face, with his mouth open. But he wasn't looking at me. He was looking at the road and what was ahead of us.

The trees sort of come together, hanging over the next turn, and in the black it looked as if they were alive—moving and bending and twisting to block our way. Lightning flickered up again and I could see them plain, and also something else.

Something black in the road, something that wasn't a tree. Something big and black, just squatting there, waiting, with ropy arms squirming and reaching.

"Shoggoth!" Cap yelled. But I could scarcely hear him because the thunder was roaring and now the horse let out a scream and I felt the buggy jerk to one side and the horse reared up and we was almost into the black stuff. I could smell an awful smell, and Cap was pointing his pistol and it went off with a bang that was almost as loud as the thunder and almost as loud as the sound we made when we hit the black thing.

Then everything happened at once. The thunder, the horse falling, the shot, and us hitting as the buggy went over. Cap must of had the reins wrapped around his arm, because when the horse fell and the buggy turned over, he went right over the dashboard head first and down into the squirming mess that was the horse—and the black thing that grabbed it. I felt myself falling in the dark, then landing in the mud and gravel of the road.

There was thunder and screaming and another sound which I had heard once before in the woods—a droning sound like a voice.

That’s why I never looked back. That’s why I didn’t even think about being hurt when I landed—just got up and started to run down the road, fast as I could, run down the road in the storm and the dark with the trees squirming and twisting and shaking their heads while they pointed at me with their branches and laughed.

Over the thunder I heard the horse scream and I heard Cap scream, too, but I still didn’t look back. The lightning winked on and off, and I ran through the trees now because the road was nothing but mud that dragged me down and sucked at my legs. After a while I began to scream, too, but I couldn’t even hear myself for thunder. And more than thunder. I heard drums.

All at once I busted clear of the woods and got to the hills. I ran up, and the drumming got louder, and pretty soon I could see regular, not just when they was lightning. Because they was fires burning on the hill, and the booming of the drums come from there.

I got lost in the noise; the wind shrieking and the trees laughing and the drums pounding. But I stopped in time. I stopped when I saw the fires plain; red and green fires burning in all that rain.

I saw a big white stone in the center of a cleared-off space on top of the hill. The red and green fires was around and behind it, so everything stood out clear against the flames.

They was men around the alter, men with long gray beards and wrinkled-up faces, men throwing awful-smelling stuff on the fires to make them blaze red and green. And they had knives in their hands and I could hear them howling over the storm. In back, squatting on the ground, more men pounded on drums.

PRETTY soon something else come up the hill—two men driving cattle. I could tell it was our cows they drove, drove them right up to the alter and then the men with the knives cut their throats for a sacrefice.

All this I could see in lightning flashes and in the fire lights, and I sort of scooched down so I couldn't get spotted by anyone.

But pretty soon I couldn't see very good any more, on account of the way they threw stuff on the fire. It set up a real thick black smoke. When this smoke come up, the men began to chant and pray louder.

I couldn't hear words, but the sounds was like what I heard back in the woods. I couldn't see too good, but I knew what was going to happen. Two men who had led the cattle went back down the other side of the hill and when they come up again they had new sacrefices. The smoke kep me from seeing plain, but these was two-legged sacrefices, not four. I might of seen better at that, only now I hid my face when they dragged them up to the white alter and used the knives, and the fire and smoke flared up and the drums boomed and they all chanted and called in a loud voice to something waiting over on the other side of the hill.

The ground began to shake.

It was storming, they was thunder and lightning and fire and smoke and chanting and I was scared half out of my wits, but one thing I'll swear to—the ground began to shake. It shook and shivered and they called out to something, and in a minute something came.

It came crawling up the hillside to the alter and the sacrefice, and it was the black thing of my dreams—that black, ropy, slimy jelly tree-thing out of the woods. It crawled up and it flowed up on its hoofs and mouths and snaky arms. And the men bowed and stood back and then it got to the alter where they was something squirming on top, squirming and screaming.

The black thing sort of bent over the alter and then I heard droning sounds over the screaming as it come down. I only watched a minute, but while I watched the black thing began to swell and *grow.*

That finished me. I didn't care any more. I had to run. I got up and I run and run and run, screaming at the top of my lungs no matter who heard.

I kep running and I kep screaming forever, through the woods and the storm, away from that hill and that alter, and then all at once I knew where I was and I was back here at the farmhouse.

Yes, that’s what I’d done—run in a circle and come back. But I couldn’t go any further, I couldn’t stand the night and the storm. So I run inside here. At first after I locked the door I just lay right down on the floor, all tuckered out from running and crying.

But in a little while I got up and hunted me some nails and a hammer and some of Uncle Fred’s boards that wasn’t split up into kindling.

I nailed up the door first and then boarded up all the windows. Every last one of them. Guess I worked for hours, tired as I was. When it was all done, the storm died down and it got quiet. Quiet enough for me to lie down on the couch and go to sleep.

Woke up a couple hours ago. It was daylight. I could see it shining through the cracks. From the way the sun come in, I knew it was afternoon already. I’d slept through the whole morning, and nothing had come.

I FIGURED now maybe I could let myself out and make town on foot, like I’d planned yesterday.

But I figgered wrong.

Before I got started taking out the nails, I heard him. It was Cousin Osborne, of course. The man who said he was Cousin Osborne, I mean.

Fie come into the yard, calling “Willie!” but I didn’t answer. Then he tried the door and then the windows. I could hear him pounding and cussing. That was bad.

But then he began mumbling, and that was worse. Because it meant he wasn’t out there alone.

I sneaked a-look through the crack, but he already went around to the back of the house so I didn’t see him or who was with him.

Guess that’s just as well, because if I’m right, I wouldn’t want to see.

Hearing’s bad enough.

Hearing that deep croaking, and then him talking, and then that croaking again.

Smelling that awful smell, like the green slime from the woods and around the well.

The well—they went over to the well in back. And I heard Cousin Osborne say something about, “Wait until dark. We can use the well if you find the gate. Look for the gate.”

I know what that means now. The well must be a sort of entrance to the underground place—that’s where those Druid men live. And the black thing.

They’re out in back now, looking.

I been writing for quite a spell and already the afternoon is going. Peeking through the cracks I can see it’s getting dark again.

That’s when they’ll come for me—when it’s dark.

They’ll break down the doors or the windows and come and take me. They’ll take me down into the well, into the black places where the shoggoths are. There must be a whole world down under the hills, a world where they hide and wait to come out for more sacrefices, more blood. They don’t want any humans around, except for sacrefices.

I saw what the black thing did on the alter. I know what’s going to happen to me.

Maybe they’ll miss the real Cousin Osborne back home and send somebody to find out what become of him. Maybe folks in town will miss Cap Pritchett and go on a search. Maybe they’ll come here and find me. But if they don’t come soon it will be too late.

That’s why I wrote this. It’s true, cross my heart, every word of it. And if anyone finds this notebook where I hide it, come and look down the well. The old well, out in back.

Remember what I told about *them ones*, Block up the well and clean out them swamps. No sense looking for me—if I’m not here.

I wish I wasn’t so scared. I’m not even scared so much for myself, but for other folks. The ones who might come after and live around here and have the same thing happen—or worse.

YOU just got to believe me. Go to the woods if you dont. Go to the hill. The hill where they had the sacrefice. Maybe the stains are gone and the rain washed the footprints away. Maybe they got rid of the traces of the fire. But the alter stone must be there. And if it is, you'll know the truth. There should be some big round spots on that stone. Round spots about two feet wide.

I didn't tell about that. At the last, I did look back. I looked back at the big black thing that was a shoggoth. I looked back as it kep swelling and growing. I guess I told about how it could change shape, and how big it got. But you can't hardly imagine how big or what shape and I still dassn't tell.

All I say is look. Look and you'll see what's hiding under the earth in these hills, waiting to creep out and feast and kill some more.

Wait. They're coming now. Getting twilight and I can hear footsteps. And other sounds. Voices. And other sounds. They're banging on the door. And sure enough—they must have a tree or a plank to use for battering it down. The whole place is shaking. I can hear Cousin Osborne yelling, and that droning. The smell is awful, I'm getting sick, and in a minute—

Look at the alter. Then you'll understand what I'm trying to tell. Look at the big round marks, two feet wide, on each side. That's where the big black thing grabbed hold.

Look for the marks and you'll know what I saw, what I'm afraid of, what's still waiting to grab you unless you shut it up forever under the earth.

Black marks two feet wide, but they aren't just marks.

What they really are is *fingerprints!*

The door is busting————

Hell's Angels

It was the Mardi Gras, and an angel could walk the streets unnoticed . . . by mortal eyes! . . .

"I'VE always wanted to ask you why it's so hard for a man to get to see you," said Paul Hastings.

The Devil smiled blandly. At least, the smile would have appeared bland enough on any other face. In this case it was slightly disturbing to see.

"My dear fellow," said the Devil, leaning forward in a confidential manner and anchoring his tail to the chair-leg. "My dear fellow, the answer must be obvious to a man of your intelligence. After all, with due modesty, I must admit Pm rather an important personage. You will agree?"

Paul Hastings nodded.

"Naturally, if you understand my position, you can easily see I cannot be bothered with every Tom, Dick and Harry—or Harriet—who gets the notion of communicating with me. If I did there would be no time left to myself. And aside from tempting mortals, you know, I have other souls to fry."

The Devi) shook his head to accentuate his point. "And so you see, my dear sir, I've had to make it difficult to reach me. My chief detractors—members of the clergy and the like—would have it that I am continually in search of souls to snare. Why, badness me, nothing could be further from the truth!"

The Devil laughed heartily until sparks flew out of his mouth. “Matter of fact. I have souls aplenty—souls to burn, you might say. No need to tempt most mortals. They pave their own road to perdition without the need of assistance from me, I assure you.

“The only cases that interest me personally any more are chaps like you —men and women clever enough to dig through tangled and abstruse spells, and wise enough to interpret them. If they are intelligent enough and eager enough to go to all the bother of summoning me, then I am happy to appear. Besides, it is a simple matter to do business in such cases. Obviously such persons are eager to sell their souls to me. I don’t have to haggle and persuade and coax, like a used car salesman.”

“What do you know about used car salesmen?” asked the young man.

“Why, everything,” said the Devil. “You might have guessed that I get them all, sooner or later.”

SATAN sat back and stroked his spade beard, while Paul Hastings marvelled once again at his appearance. For the Devil looked exactly the way the Devil had always looked in pictures. He was the Devil of song and story and laxative bottle labels, to the life. And now he was sitting here in Paul Hastings’ little garret, just as comfortable as you please, purring and beaming and pulling his beard.

“Speaking of selling souls,” the Devil murmured, “we might as well get down to business right away. I presume you had something of the sort in mind when you evoked me?”

Paul Hastings blushed and hung his head. “Well, yes,” he murmured. “You know how it is. Times are tough, a fellow has to get along, and the finance company won’t loan me anything without security. So I was wondering if—”

The Devil raised a delicate hand so that the black claws gleamed in the light of the tallow candles Hastings had set on the floor.

"No need to go into embarrassing details," he said, kindly. "I quite understand. I've been handling cases like yours for years. Once made a deal with a chap by the name of Faust who—but I digress. What I mean to say is, I'm prepared to make a handsome offer for your soul. A clean-cut intelligent chap like you doesn't often come my way. I'd be happy to place my resources at your disposal if only you'd tell me what it is you have in mind."

Paul Hastings shrugged. It wasn't much of a gesture, but somehow it managed to include his shock of unruly, uncut blonde hair, his wrinkled, shabby suit, his frayed shoelaces, his scuffed shoes, and the floor of the Bourbon Street garret in which the shoes and their owner stood.

"I see very well what you have in mind," said the Devil. "It's something like the letter 'S' with two lines drawn through it. Am I correct?"

"Right," answered the young man. "You don't want eternal life, or three wishes, or any of that nonsense?"

"Certainly not. I've figured it all out. I have youth, and good health, and I needn't ask for such things."

"Hmm." The Devil stroked his beard until it almost purred. "Think it over carefully before you make your decision, though. What about power? Lots of men like power, you know. And then some chaps have a fondness for feminine companionship. Without appearing to boast, I think I could arrange anything you might want along those lines—or curves."

"I'm way ahead of you," Hastings answered. "Give me the money and the power and the women will take care of themselves."

"Very true." The Devil nodded and exhaled softly, so that a faint reek of sulphur filled the room. He extended a claw and pulled a parchment out of the air, then extended his tail and proffered the point wrapped around a fountain pen. "Here, we are," he murmured. "Think I remembered to fill this pen before I left—nice, fresh blood, everything legal—so if you'll just sign here, we'll have our contract."

"Uh-uh." Paul Hastings shook his head.

"What's the matter? You aren't—what is the current phrase?—chicken, are you?" The Devil pouted a bit and struck his cloven hoof against the floorboards.

"No. But the point is, I have no intention whatsoever of selling you my soul."

THE cloven hoof stamped sharply, and the ancient boards gave off a shower of dust and sparks. "Then why, might I ask, did you summon me in the first place?"

"Well, it's like this," Hastings explained. "I moved in here about two weeks ago. Came to New Orleans expecting to get a job—I'm a public-relations man, you know—"

"Press agent!" snapped the Devil. "Don't tell me, we get plenty of your kind where I come from."

"All right, press agent," Hastings agreed. "But I'm not the kind you'd get. That's probably my trouble. I was, and am, an honest one. And my job fell through. Moved out of the hotel to this attic in the French Quarter and spent the days pounding the pavements looking for a job."

"Get on with it," urged the Devil. "I want to go out for some fresh air—stuffy as hell in here."

"Well, to make it simple, I couldn't find any job. But I did find something else, right here in this room."

"What?"

"These books, under the bed," Hastings produced a handful of tattered, battered old volumes. "Latin, you can see. Turned out to be textbooks of demonology—old books on sorcery, with spells and incantations. Must have belonged to whoever lived here years ago. I asked the landlady and she didn't know; thinks she remembers an old man who owned the house once in the days before the war—he was interested in Voodoo or some such thing—and when they took him away to the asylum and turned this place into a rooming-house he must have left his books behind."

"I know who you're speaking of," muttered the Devil. "The man's name was Red—lied Grimoire, I think, a Frenchman. He's boarding with me, now."

"So I read the books," Hastings continued, "and decided to try out some of the spells. Naturally, I decided to try and call you up."

"Which you did. And quite a lot of trouble you went to," commented the Devil, glancing around the tiny room. "All this blue chalk, and chicken-blood, and candles in pentagrams, and the rest of the mess—but why did you go to such bother when you had no intention of selling your soul to me?"

"Because I still had hopes we might do business."

"How?"

"Well, don't you buy anything except souls? Services, perhaps?"

"What service could you possibly offer me?" asked the Devil.

"Oh, I don't know. Seems to me as if Hell could use some good public relations. I mean, human beings don't seem to think too kindly of the place, or of yourself either, if you'll pardon my frankness."

"You'd make Hell popular?" jeered the Devil.

"I'm not saying what I'll do. But I still want money without selling my soul for it, and I wondered if there wasn't something a human being might do for you which you couldn't do yourself."

"Something a human being might do——"

THE Devil stared at Hastings until his face burned from the intensity of the gaze. Noting this, the Devil shifted his glance and stared at the wall until two holes began to char and smoke. Then, "I've got it!" he snapped.

"You have?"

"Yes, and so have you—a task, I mean! My dear chap, you were right in calling me. There *is* something very special you might do, as a straight business deal. Right in your line, too. I've had a pet project in mind for a long time, and I believe you can carry it out. It will mean money galore for you, and help me immeasurably."

"And I won't be selling my soul?"

"Of course not."

"Then I'll do it." Hastings held out his hands. "But cash in advance, please. Not that I don't trust you, but one hears so many rumors——"

"Competitors give me a bad name," sneered Satan. "But you'll have to wait a while. You see, I can't *give* you the money. I can only give you the chance to earn it."

"But I thought—"

"Don't believe all you hear. I have no power to produce gold out of nowhere, and besides we're off the gold standard. I can't make dollar bills because if I created too many it would disrupt our present economy—and I like our present economy the way it is; took a lot of trouble to build it up. And besides, if I counterfeited the money, it would be dishonest."

"You disappoint me," Hastings sighed. "Here I thought you were capable of just waving your hand or your—your tail, maybe—and there it was."

"Very few people make money waving either object," commented the Devil, dryly. "You see, they tell so many lies about me. For instance, there are stories about me appearing in all kinds of shapes and forms at will, but you see me as I really am. It isn't true that I can change into human appearance, for example. And that's why I need a human being for this job I suggest. The job that will make you fortune."

Hastings stood up. "Just what is it you want me to do?" he asked.

"Very simple," said the Devil. "I want you to kidnap an angel."

"Huh?"

"You heard me," repeated Satan, patiently. "Just kidnap an angel. Steal one from heaven, as it were."

"But—"

"I know what you're going to say, and it's all arranged. I have the means of getting you transported to heaven and back again. I have a plan for capturing an angel. There is nothing for you to worry about. As tie vulgar expression has it, the job is all cased." Satan smiled. "You see, I've had this plan in mind for centuries, but there was nobody to carry it out. Naturally, a fiend can't get into heaven, and most men—in spite of the fact that they're always talking about the joys of heaven—seem strangely reluctant, to go there. But I've wanted an angel for ages, and you're the chap to bring one back for me."

"LET me get this straight," Hastings sighed. "You want me to kidnap an angel and bring it down to Hell?"

"No, not to Hell. To earth. The angel will live on earth. That's the whole point of the scheme."

"What scheme?"

"The one that makes your fortune."

"Aren't you going to let me in on the details?"

The Devil shook his horns. "I shall assuredly do so—the very moment that you and the angel return. It is all arranged and perfectly safe."

"I don'; know."

"It's a billion-dollar proposition," said the Devil. "Guilt-edged." Again the tail waved the fountain-pen. "Here's the contract. Look it over, and sign at the bottom."

Paul Hastings took the contract. Words appeared on the parchment as he read. Yes, it sounded perfectly legal. He was to kidnap the angel and in return was guaranteed a fortune not to exceed one billion dollars, by means to be explained. No soul was to be sold. Whereas, hereinafter, aforesaid, and etcetera.

"Looks OK to me," he commented.

"Then sign. Be careful with that pen, though. It leaks at times. Wouldn't want you to get corpuscles all over the table." The Devil watched considerately as Paul Hastings affixed his name to the document. Then Satan in turn wrote his signature.

“Fine,” he said, folding up the parchment. “I’ll just file this away in Limbo for safekeeping.” A whisk, and the contract disappeared.

“All right, what next?” asked the young man.

“Meet me at midnight tomorrow night at the amusement park out at Lake Pontchartrain,” said the Devil.

“What for?”

“Go to heaven!” said the Devil. “And please don’t ask so many questions. Er—I suggest that you air the room out after I leave. It’s quite stuffy.”

The Devil disappeared in a puff of smoke. Paul Hastings, coughing, ran to the window and opened it wide. He hung his head over the sill and gulped down air. Then he shook his head.

“So I’m going to heaven tomorrow night. Isn’t that a hell of a deal?”

LAKE Pontchartrain glittered beneath a February moon as Paul Hastings—his battered coupe wheezing away its last gallon of gas (regular, of course: he hadn’t been able to afford Ethyl for months) rattled towards the amusement park. The gleaming white skeleton of a huge prehistoric monster loomed ahead—and with a shock, Hastings recognized it as the outline of a roller coaster.

He parked the car almost directly beneath it, and the little auto made a lonely black dot on the empty road. He shivered as he crunched down the gravel pathway, eyes alert for his partner in crime.

“Hello there!” came a voice. “Here I am! No—look up!”

Sure enough, the Devil was sitting on top of the roller coaster, waving his tail in a friendly greeting.

“What are you doing up there?”

Paul called.

“Waiting for you, of course. Climb up—don’t be afraid.”

Now there was certainly no reason for Paul Hastings to be afraid of climbing up the sides of a rickety roller coaster at midnight in order to keep a rendezvous with the Devil. So up he went, clambering shakily but steadily, until he reached the top. From that vantage point he could see the lights of New Orleans, the Navy landing and training field, the airport, and the peculiar incandescent luminence of the Devil's eyes.

The Devil was sitting in the front car of one of the roller-coaster vehicles. He helped Hastings to climb in beside him.

"Hope you like it," he said.

"Like what?"

"This. It's your plane, of course." The Devil indicated the car in which they sat.

"I'm going to heaven in this?"

"Certainly. You expected to fly, didn't you? I mean, it's millions of miles high, you know."

"I know," sighed Paul Hastings. "And I don't like your altitude. However —"

"However, you signed a paper," the Devil continued, for him. "And it's time to go."

"But how can I fly in this flimsy car?"

"It's not a flimsy car. It's a plane besides which your current developments in jet-propulsion appear infantile; its simplicity of design and function are such that you need do nothing but act in the capacity of a passenger."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning it's fueled, there's an automatic pilot to guide you to heaven and back, an automatic timing device to function during your stay; the course is accurately charted and all you reed to do now is wave goodbye."

"I still claim it's a lousy rollercoaster car," said Paul Hastings. "And I wouldn't go over the tracks in it, let alone to heaven and back." His companion stepped out of the car.

"What do you say to this?" asked the Devil. "And this? Also this—and this and, at the risk of becoming boringly repetitious—this?"

HE punctuated his remarks by deft movements of hands and tail; reaching under the car and elongating it abruptly, smoothing it over until the surface assumed a silvery sheen, pulling at the sides until wings were extended, fumbling with the interior and drawing out an instrument panel, waving across the seat and enclosing it in a glass bubble.

Hastings now sat in a streamlined silver cylinder, a winged projectile that looked like something designed by Hannes Bok. The bubble over his head served both to insulate and isolate him; he had to raise his voice to make himself heard.

“Why didn’t you show me this in the first place?” he shouted. The Devil balanced his cloven hoof delicately on the roller-coaster track and shrugged discreetly.

“Somebody might have driven by and seen it,” he said. “As it is, you’re going to leave in a moment—just as soon as you pull the left-hand switch.”

Paul Hastings surveyed the instrument panel. “Looks complicated,” he yelled. “How about some instructions? And what do I do to capture an angel?”

“It’s all planned for you,” the Devil answered. “Now just listen to me and you’re on your way.” The young mar listened. From time to time he nodded—from time to time his head fairly spun—but in a few moments he comprehended the Devil’s plan.

“You’ll find the bottle inside the glove compartment,” Satan concluded. “Now, it’s time to go. Follow instructions and you ought to be back here, safe and sound, within the hour.”

“I still don’t understand why you’re so confident,” Hastings sighed. “That angle on the angel—” For answer, the Devil closed the plastic bubble over the young man’s head and zipped the insulation tight around the interstices. “No more questions,” He said. “Time to go. By the way, don’t worry if there’s a lack of scenery on the trip. You’ll be travelling much faster than the speed of light and you’ll see nothing except yourself and the vehicle.

But there’s not much worth seeing between here and heaven, anyway.”

“Sour grapes,” muttered Hastings, to himself. Actually, he was badly frightened. The prospect of his journey was far from intriguing—he had no intention, originally, of going to heaven in anything except a nice, comfortable coffin; and that would be in the distant future. But now—

“Off you go!” snapped the Devil. “Pull the lever.”

Hastings pulled the lever and closed his eyes. When he opened them again, he was alone.

Alone.

IT’S a funny word, doesn’t mean much to anyone, and didn’t to Hastings. Alone is when there’s nobody home and you turn on the radio. Alone is when you’re sitting at the end of the bar, nursing a drink and wishing you were drinking with a nurse. Alone is looking out of the window on a rainy day and waiting for the telephone to ring, only it’s disconnected. Alone is a lot of things.

At least, Paul Hastings had always believed that. But now he found out that alone is—nothing.

That’s what he saw when he opened his eyes—nothing. He sat inside the plane, looked out through the sides and top of the plastic bubble, and saw—nothing.

No earth. No moon. No sun. No stars. No clouds. No air. No color. It was like gazing into a transparent sheet of glass that was also opaque—an endless sheet, without sides, or top, or bottom; a sheet of glass that caught neither reflection nor absence of light. It was like looking into emptiness; an experience probably known to brain surgeons when they open a politician’s skull.

Hastings didn’t like it. He closed his eyes and waited for it—or the absence of it—to go away. After a moment, he raised his eyelids again.

Nothing, and more of it. Pressing around the bubble, pressing around the walls of the ship as it soared or seared or shredded dimensions in its flight upwards. Only there was no upwards. Paul Hastings was all alone.

He felt too motion, heard no sound. There was only the psychic pressure from outside, the surge of imponderable emptiness.

He felt that unless he thought about something quickly he would go mad; the emptiness would be absorbed into his brain. He tried to think about the Devil and about heaven and about catching an angel, but that seemed madness, too.

So he thought about himself.

Paul Hastings, all alone in outer space, thinking about himself. About the foolish, honest kid who got out of service and decided to use his college training and natural savvy to get into public relations work. About the two years and more of fruitless effort, culminating in this trip to New Orleans and ending up in the garret.

TWO years ago—two months ago—perhaps even two weeks ago—he would never have thought of calling up the Devil. He had been so honest, so naive. He'd tried so hard to get a job, any job. But the South was a funny place. Everything was "family" and "connections" and "contacts." You had to know somebody who knew somebody who knew somebody who knew Jefferson Davis.

Oh, once in a while, there had been minor assignments; temporary jobs working for some established publicity man during the peak of a campaign. But it had never lasted. And inevitably a crisis would come up when it was necessary to soft-pedal a story, or misrepresent certain facts, or tone down an angle for a client. And Paul Hastings of two years, two months, two weeks ago—fool that he was—would never tell a lie. Not even for a client, not even for business, not even for a buck, no: even for a very fast buck.

That, Hastings now realized, is why he had ended up in that garret on Bourbon Street. Fourth floor rear, high above the nightly noises from LaFitte's, Dan's International, Prima's and the other pleasure-palaces. Ten dollars a week in advance to Madam Adam, who ran the place, for the privilege of sitting there and rotting in his honest way.

And that, Hastings also realized, is why he called up the Devil. Perhaps the Mardi Gras was the last straw. The gay carnival had just begun, and four flights down Paul could see the revellers, night after night, laughing and dancing and drinking and spending money; a myriad masked figures. Masked, mysterious, but merry. Nobody could tell rich from poor, honest from dishonest. They all wore masks.

Nobody could tell the true from the false, and nobody cared. So Paul had made up his mind, cast up his spoils, called up his Devil, signed up his bargain.

Isolated, eyes elated, Paul thought it all through. Truth and falsehood were relative after all. Two days ago he hadn't believed in the Devil, but now he'd met him. Two days ago he hadn't even been too sure about the existence of heaven as a geographical location—but he was going there.

Come to think of it, according to infernal calculations, he should be arriving shortly. Hastings decided to take a chance and open his eyes once more.

He remembered that his speed exceeded the velocity of light—and it was this factor which would enable his craft to soar over the gates of heaven without being detected. The Devil had told him of the automatic slow-down which would occur once the vessel came into contact with the atmosphere and the cloudbanks of the celestial realm. The Devil had sneered about that in a fine fashion.

"Heaven is vastly overrated," he had said. "Clouds everywhere. More smog than Los Angeles. As a matter of fact, heaven isn't very much better than Los Angeles—and some Los Angeles folks have told me it's worse. All they have is a strong Chamber of Commerce up there. So don't be disappointed when you arrive. Look for the clouds."

PAUL Hastings looked for the clouds. And suddenly, he saw them. Simultaneously he became aware of motion. "It's because the plane is slowing down," he told himself. His voice sounded hollow as it reverberated against the sides of the bubble. But most of his attention was focussed through his eyes rather than his ears.

He gazed out at endless acres of clouds; white, fleecy clouds made out of lamb’s wool, baby bunting, Christmas tree cotton. They were plump bulgy clouds, cuddling up against a blue sky in the best tradition of greeting card artists’ handiwork; in a word, heavenly clouds. As a matter of fact, Hastings almost caught a glinting glimpse of golden walls in the distance—almost, but not quite. The clouds intervened, sailing serenely by through celestial space.

Hastings felt the plane easing in, floating down. It was heading, almost as if by volition, towards a small fragment of cloud that had just become detached from a larger mass; a little isolated island.

The logic of a heavy plane landing on a cloud didn’t bother Paul Hastings very much. There was nothing at all logical about the plane itself, or his mission. He knew the plane would land and that was enough.

Now he had to think about the immediate future. How do you catch an angel?—that was the major problem.

How do you catch an angel? Sprinkle salt on its tail? Use a butterfly net? Lasso it by the halo? Take a saxophone under one arm and pretend you’re Gabriel?

Hastings didn’t know.

“Open the glove compartment,” the Devil had said. “And take out the bottle.”

As the plane settled down on the cloud-bank, the young man opened the glove compartment and took out the bottle. It was a small bottle bearing a plain label.

“Then press the third button on the panel.” The Devil’s instructions, again. Hastings decided to obey. He pressed the button.

There was a crackling and a sputtering and a thin, eery whine as of women bawling out their husbands for coming into the house without wiping their feet.

“Hastings!”

The voice cut through the whining with a sudden clarity, and Hastings jumped.

“Don’t be frightened, my dear chap,” the voice reassured him. “This is just the Devil. Sorry I’ve only one-way deception set up, so you can’t talk back to me. But listen now for the rest of your orders.”

Hastings nodded to nobody in particular and bent an ear over the instrument panel.

“Press the fifth button to open the side of the plane,” the Devil instructed him. “Step out on the cloud. It’s a little damp, but you won’t catch cold. They tell me the air of heaven is filled with antihistamine.

“Walk across the cloud until you come to an angel. Then go into your story. If you’re as persuasive and convincing as I have reason to believe, you can lure it back to the plane. Then use the bottle and you’ll be ready to take off on the up-lever. Better get started now—you have, according to my chronology, seven minutes.”

THE voice blended into the crackling and the crackling blended into silence. Paul Hastings blinked, shook his head, squared his shoulders, took a deep breath, and—unable to think of any other way of stalling—pressed the fifth button.

The side of the plane opened. A step automatically dropped from the base of the door to the topmost layer of cloud Paul stepped out and landed up to his ankles in slush.

So this was heaven!

Slush. Nothing but slush. Hastings moved his feet, lifting them up and down. It was hard going. If you’ve ever walked on a cloud, you’ll understand.

Hastings never had, and he didn’t particularly like it. The precious seconds were fleeting by and still he was slogging along. Snowbanks of cloud loomed all around him; it seemed funny that he couldn’t see his breath. Icebergs and glaciers floated off in the blue distance, and his little island of cloud drifted away from them. Everything was steeped in snowy silence, everything—

Then he heard it and his feet found wings.

It was music, *heavenly* music. How often he'd heard the phrase, heard it applied to everything from brassy dance-bands to broken-down accordion players. But this was the first time he'd ever heard the reality, and it was *heavenly.*

Little ripples of pure sound that entered the ears, caressed them, and then slid slowly down the spine, melted against his heart. A tune that was soft as a mother's tears, carefree as a child's laugh, buoyant as the breeze on which it was borne.

Hearing it, he could walk in ease and grace. Hearing it, he could no more restrain his pace than his very pulse-beat. Paul Hastings rounded the corner of the cloud and came upon the angel.

The angel, of course, was playing a harp; a small, simple instrument in the Grecian tradition. And the music, close at hand, was even more exquisite.

But somehow, Hastings lost all interest in the music when he beheld the musician.

For the angel was a girl.

To say that she was a blonde is an understatement. To say that her eyes were blue is an insult. To say that her skin was cream-white is absurd. Hastings could see all that for himself, and his own eyes told him that her hair was more golden than the halo above it, her eyes bluer than the sky of heaven, her skin whiter than the angel-wings which sprouted from her back. She was, in a word, a series of *cliches* incarnate; the most beautiful *cliche* ever known.

HE surveyed her carefully, and despite her overpowering beauty he was able to make a critical observation. He noted the sleeveless, almost diaphanous gown she wore, with its television neckline; it seemed finer than silk, more shimmering than nylon. He observed with interest the rakish tilt of the small halo which gave off a concentrated glow similar to that of a strong neon tube. He took cognizance of her large and powerful wings; silver-feathered pinions which sprouted from the shoulder-blades. These were surely not the token wings usually seen on the angels in the story books—one look convinced him that they were meant for flying and were capable of carrying her weight for great distances.

And yet halo and wings did not detract from her beauty, did not even seem incongruous. They belonged, they were a part of her angelic being, and therefore natural.

But there were one or two features which shocked him. To begin with, the angel's feet were bare—and her nails were not painted! Her fingernails weren't painted, either, and—horror of horrors—the wave in her golden hair seemed natural, as did the coloring! Strangest of all, she wore neither rouge nor lipstick, and there wasn't a trace of eye-shadow or eyebrow pencil!

In all his life Paul Hastings, like millions of other men, had never once seen a beautiful girl who wore no makeup. *That* was the clincher. Wings may be faked, haloes might be contrived, but beauty without make-up was surely impossible to feign. Without doubt, here was proof positive that this girl was a real angel.

He stood there, staring at her silently, and she sat there strumming the harp. Gradually the music increased its potency and appeal; hearing it, Hastings almost forgot his mission. The soaring sweetness invaded his being, absorbed it, so that he seemed to become a part of a vast serenity, a pulsating peace.

Paul Hastings shook his head, shook off the spell. He stepped forward, uttering one of those polite little coughs.

The hands stopped moving, the harp tilted back into the silken folds of the lap, and the music ceased. The angel looked up at him with wide eyes, and then opened her mouth.

Her voice was fresh music, a fresh spell.

"Oh! I didn't know anyone was here. I'm sorry if my music disturbed you."

"It didn't," Hastings said. "I liked it."

"I was just practicing," the angel explained. "I really can't play very well yet—you see, I'm new here. So I like to fly over to one of these outlying clouds, where I can be alone, and rehearse a bit."

She glanced at Hastings curiously. "But you must be new here, too. Why, you don't even have your wings yet!"

"I'm not an Engel," Hastings told her.

"You're not? Then what are you doing up here?"

"I get around. As a matter of fact, my dear Miss—"

THE angel roted his hesitation and giggled. "Miss? We have no titles here, you know. You may call me Angela."

"All right, Angela. My name's Paul Hastings, and I happen to be a traveling salesman."

"A traveling salesman in heaven? My, you fellows certainly seem to get around."

"That's progress." Hastings stepped closer, marvelling at her credulity. But, he remembered, all angels are innocent.

"Came in a plane," he explained. "We've got a lot of new developments since you left. Radar, jet-propulsion, atomic bombs. We're really civilized."

"I've often wondered what the world was like these days," the angel sighed. "You see, I left in such a hurry—"

"When was this?"

"We don't talk about such things up here," reproved the angel, gently. "We put aside all worldly memories. And I still don't quite understand why a human being, even a traveling salesman, would venture here."

"Business," Hastings assured her. "Always opening up new territories. And I felt that heaven would be just the place for me. Because of what I'm selling."

He reached over and picked up the harp from her lap. “Take this article, for instance,” he said. “Mighty pretty little thing. Brand new, you said?”

“Almost,” said the angel.

“Sparkles beautifully.” Hastings held it up and inspected it. “But wait a while. Wait until the damp air gets in its world. Pretty soon the finish will begin to tarnish. And that’s where I come in.”

“What are you selling?” asked the angel.

“Metal polish!” Hastings proclaimed. “The finest metal polish in the world—in the universe, for that matter. Guaranteed to preserve the sheen and lustre of gold, silver, any precious metal. Ideal for harps, perfect for haloes. Cherubim cry for it!”

“But nothing ever changes here,” protested Angela. “I’ve seen the heavenly choir, and their instruments are always bright.”

Hastings considered the statement for a moment. Then he shrugged. “I can see you’re new here,” he told her. “Otherwise you’d realize that I’m not the first traveling salesman to reach heaven. Why, I’ll bet that my company has sold more metal polish up here than anywhere else. No wonder the older angels keep everything bright and shiny! They all use my polish.”

“I don’t know. It sounds all right, but—”

“Why not take advantage of my free demonstration? Here, step right over to my plane and let me show you a bottle. No charge or obligation.”

“Well—”

“Come on!” Paul Hastings reached down and took the angel’s hand. An electric tingling ran up his arm and rang a buzzer in his heart.

SHE rose to her dainty feet, then continued to rise. The great wings spread automatically, and she flapped them slowly, floating forward through the cloud mass. Hastings stumbled along behind her.

In a moment they reached the plane. And here, for one moment, Paul Hastings faced disaster.

It had been the Devil's plan, of course, to have Hastings pose as a salesman of metal polish. He was to lure an angel to the plane, show it the bottle, and entice it inside the bubble. Then Hastings was to slam the door, press the lever, and whizz away. A simple plan—diabolically simple, in fact—and it looked as though it might work. Except for one simple little error.

The angel's wings would never fit inside the bubble!

Hastings surveyed the cramped, transparent compartment, then noted that majestic span of angelic pinfeathers.

"Two minutes left," he reminded himself. But what to do?

"Come over and take a look at the plane," he invited. "I'll get the bottle—it's right inside."

Trustingly, the angel permitted him to take her hand and lead her over to the silver cylinder. She gazed at it in pleased wonder.

"Beautiful!" she said. "And to think you could fly all the way up here in this machine."

Paul Hastings walked towards the door and entered the cabin, sliding into position under the domed roof. "Notice how it shines," he told her. "That's our polish, of course." Angela ran her hand appreciatively along the silver sides.

"My, it's so light," she marvelled. "I can't see how such a delicate machine could come so far."

"Not delicate at all," Hastings assured. "Here, you can prove it. Just hop up and sit on it. You'll see how easily it bears your weight."

Obediently, without question, Angela flapped her wings and rose in midair. She landed delicately on the top of the plane, right behind the bubble, and settled herself in place with a pleased smile.

Hastings glanced at her through the transparent dome. She was sitting on the plane, all right. And now, he had only to close the door, adjust the automatic insulation, and use the up-lever. Travelling at far greater than the speed of light, the angel would never be able to leave her perch until they reached earth. And it couldn't harm her—you can't, as the Devil had reminded him, kill an angel!

He glanced back at Angela, and for a momemt his heart failed him. She was beautiful, innocent, trusting. The thought of her shining radiance disturbed him.

He closed his eyes and another vision of shining radiance came to him—the shining radiance of gold, of silver coins heaped up in stacks and rows. It was a hellish vision, and it drove ill thoughts of heaven from his mind.

Still—this was wrong, he mustn't do it—he mustn't.

AT that moment a crackling emerged from the instrument panel and a voice emerged from the crackling.

"What are you waiting for?" grated the voice. "Pull the switch!"

Paul Hastings pulled the switch.

There was a drone, a blur, a moan, a whirr, and then he was back in nothingness. But this time he was not alone.

Glancing back, he saw Angela, still visibly perched on the plane; hair flying, wings flapping, harp dangling wildly from a golden cord looped around her neck. Angela, teetering madly on infinity's brink, her halo askew, her mouth agape. Angela, her fane transfixed not by fear but by complete incomprehension.

She couldn't fall, and she didn't. She couldn't speak, and if she could, Hastings would not have been able to hear her. As a part of the moving mechanism that droned through the dimensions and sundered space, she was still visible. But that was all. And the vision of her helplessness again tore at Hastings' heartstrings, until he turned away and examined the instrument panel.

Kidnapping an angel, eh? Well, he was doing it. And he'd get his reward. But why must he feel so guilty?

After all, he wasn't really harming Angela. Matter of fact, this little trip would probably do her some good. Get her out of a rut. Otherwise she'd be sitting around in heaven for an eternity, with nothing to do but strum her harp.

She was much too pretty to spend the rest of her afterlife as a nonunion musician. A girl her age needed a little fun, a little excitement. Once on earth, Angela could get rid of her white nightgown and step into some modern clothes. And she'd never run the risk of catching cold by sitting on a damp cloud all day.

Yes, Hastings was doing her a favor. He closed his eyes and waited for the vessel to hit the gaseous orbit of exhaust fumes, cigarette smoke, factory smog, sewer gas, profanity and atomic radiation which made up the aura surrounding earth.

SLOWLY the space-ship settled down over the world, over the continent, over the country, over the state of Louisiana, over New Orleans parish, over the amusement park, over the topmost track of the roller coaster.

It landed with scarcely a jar.

Hastings pressed the proper button and the side door opened. He stepped out on the track, gazing up at the sky. The moon had moved perhaps an hour's distance across the cloud-gaps, and the entire area around the park was quite deserted. This was a good thing, because there was no one to see him approach the winged figure which huddled up in the rear of the curious contraption.

"Where are we?" asked the angel, in a small voice. "What happened?"

"On earth," he answered. "Just outside New Orleans, to be exact. That's Lake Pontchartrain over there. And as to what happened—" He hesitated, and a lie formed in his mind. It was a small lie, and if not altogether white, it seemed to be only slightly gray.

"As to what happened," he repeated, "I guess I just pressed the wrong lever by accident. And we came back to earth."

"But this will never do!" wailed the angel. "I've got to return to heaven at once. They'll miss me, and there'll be the very devil to pay."

"The devil to pay," Hastings murmured. "That reminds me—" He glanced around, expecting to catch sight of the friendly fiend. But there was no one in sight. He turned back and regarded Angela.

She was a forlorn little figure, despite her imposing wings, and he felt curiously ashamed of himself. He couldn’t bear to tell her the real reason for her presence here—and now, as a matter of fact, he could scarcely bear the knowledge himself. If only he might take her back to heaven and forget about the whole thing—but he couldn’t.

“I’m sorry,” he murmured. “I can’t take you back. Not just yet, anyway. You see, there’s not enough fuel.”

“Oh.” She sighed. “But I shouldn’t burden you with my troubles. After all, it was an accident, as you say. It’s not your fault.”

Her smile was sweet, and it stabbed Paul Hastings to the quick—wherever that was Now, he knew, he could never tell her.

“But what are we doing up here?” asked Angela. “Isn’t this an amusement park?”

“Er—yes. Guess I made a slight miscalculation when we landed.”

“But why don’t we get down? I mean, you weren’t intending to spend the rest of the night here, were you?”

“Hardly.” Again Hastings glanced around, expecting to see the Devil materialize. But there was only the night and the silence, and the beautiful girl with the wings and the halo.

“Guess we might as well try climbing down,” he sighed—and wondered, as he said it, what would happen next. Here he was, just back from heaven and as far as he knew, the first mortal ever to make a two-way trip. The least he might expect was some kind of welcoming committee; if not a brass band, then a chorus of imps and demons. Instead, no Devil, nonothing. And what weald he do now with an angel on his hands?

COME to think of it, he had other problems to confront.

The simple one of climbing down from the roller coaster was enough to baffle him momentarily. But Angela solved that. Noting his indecision she rose and extended her hands.

"Grab hold," she invited. "We'll fly down."

And that is exactly what they did, coming in on her wing and his prayer, as he felt himself swoop down through empty air. But in a moment they landed on the ground and Hastings escorted her in the direction of his parked car.

"Climb in and sit down," he suggested. "I want to have a look at that rear left tire of mine. Got a hunch it's flat."

He breathed a sigh of relief as Angela disappeared inside the car. There was no one around but still, a chance night driver might happen by, and the sight of an angel would cause comment. Angels were scarce in this neck of the woods.

Hastings walked around behind the car lo take a look at the tire. Yes, it *was* a bit flat; no puncture, but it probably needed a good ten pounds more of pressure. He regarded it. thoughtfully for a moment.

"Wonder if we could make it into town all right?" he mused.

"Sure you can."

He whirled at the sound of the unexpected voice. There was no one behind him.

"Climb in," the voice continued, in a sort of rasping whine. "Let's get moving, brother."

Paul Hastings shook his head violently from side to side, then up and down. As his head went down he noticed the black, furry object crouching at his feet. It was a cat.

"It isn't polite to stare, brother," purred the cat.

"But you spoke to me!"

"There's maybe a law against speaking to you?" the cat asked, twirling its whiskers sarcastically. "No—I mean—it's just that—"

"Oh, I get it; your mother taught you not to speak to strangers. Well, let me introduce myself, brother. The name is Brimstone. And you're Paul Hastings."

"How on earth do you know that?"

"Not 'on earth'," the cat corrected. "In hell would be more accurate. Because I'm your familiar. The name is Brimstone."

"A talking cat, eh?"

"Not a talking cat. Your familiar. His Nibs sent me."

"I suspected as much. What happened to him? Why didn't he meet me here as agreed?"

"The Devil was called away unexpectedly," the black blasphemy explained. "It seems he had an urgent meeting with Joe Stalin."

"So?"

"So he sent me to keep you company, brother."

"Why must you call me 'brother' ?" demanded Hastings.

"Because that's what you are.

I'm your familiar, your brother in damnation."

"But I'm not damned. I didn't sell my soul!"

PAUL Hastings had never heard a cat laugh before. He heard it now, and didn't like it.

"Of course you didn't sell it," the cat chuckled. "But you damned yourself without knowing it by agreeing to steal an angel. Don't you know that's a terrible offense?"

"Never thought of it," Hastings answered.

"Well, you'll have a lot of time to think about it in the future. All eternity, in fact. How His Nibs roared when he told me about the fast deal he'd pulled! You, thinking you were so smart, taking such pains not to sell your soul—and then practically giving it away by agreeing to commit an unpardonable sin! Don't you know that you can't get the best of the Devil in a bargain?"

"Then I'm finished," Paul Hastings sighed, bitterly. "I'm cheated."

"Not at all," Brimstone said, flicking his long black tail in a gesture of deprecation. "You'll still get your money; a bargain's a bargain. And all you have to do is hang on to the angel here until the Big Boy returns tomorrow."

Hastings shivered, and it wasn't because of the night air.

"Come on," coaxed the cat. "Introduce me to the angel. I've never seen one, you know."

"And you're not going to, either!" the young man declared. "Why don't you go away?"

"Because I'm your brother, that's why—and I have orders to go wherever you go. As a matter of fact, the Big Wheel told me to watch you very carefully, just in case you changed your mind about delivering the angel."

"So you're a spy, eh?"

"Right," answered the cat. Hastings shivered again. The Devil had thought of everything; there would be no turning back for him now. Still, the thought of revealing his treachery to Angela was the worst part of it. He looked for some way out. He turned to the cat with a gesture of appeal and appeasement.

"All right. You have your orders, I suppose. But just do me one favor and we'll get along without any trouble."

"What's the deal?"

"When you're around the angel, pretend that you're just an ordinary cat. Don't talk."

"Suits me, brother." The cat waved its tail in assent. Then it squinted up at the roller coaster in the background. "Which reminds me," purred Brimstone. "I've got a little job to do, first."

"What's that?"

"Can't leave your plane sitting up on top there in sight of everyone, can we? The Big Noise gave me strict orders."

PAUL Hastings sighed. Somewhere in the back of his brain, a plot had been hatching—but now he knew he had merely laid another egg. He'd entertained a wild notion of escaping from the familiar demon, taking

Angela to the plane, and somehow discovering how it operated so that he could pilot her back :o heaven. But now, with the plane gone—

And it was gone.

Even as he watched, Brimstone turned and meowed up at the moon, then waved his tail in mystic cadence as he whis-purred.

“Retsaoc rellor otni nrut, enalp!” The plane became a roller coaster car once more. Arching his back significantly, Brimstone minced forward towards the door of the car.

Paul Hastings followed. He found Angela sitting patiently in the front seat, her wings folded.

“Sorry to be so long,” he apologized. “I had that tire to look at. And besides, I found a stray cat—”

“You did!” The angel smiled, glancing down at Brimstone. “Oh, isn’t it pretty—so black and soft—come on, kitty, jump up on my lap. Come on, there we are!”

As Hastings closed the door and started the car, Angela scooped Brimstone into her arms and snuggled him into her lap, petting and stroking the inkblot body. The young man looked, shuddered, but said nothing.

And thus it was that Paul Hastings returned to New Orleans, sitting next to a real live angel holding a real live demon on its lap.

TWO o’clock in the morning, on Bourbon Street, is the time when the amateurs leave and the regulars take over. The marks have goggled at their last floor show; the savages have departed in the taxicabs for attractions in other fields; the tourists have left the bars and hit the mattresses of the Roosevelt, the Jung, the St. Charles or the Monteleone.

And that’s when the fun begins. That’s when the boys in the band drift across the street and sit in with the rival combo to really beat it out until dawn. That’s when the spielers leave the doorways of the night spots and go inside to have a drink with the strippers at the bar. That’s when the artists and the Vieux Carre regulars drift into their private patios or the little isolated night spots deep in the heart of the Quarter where aching tourist feet seldom dare to tread. That's when the drinks and the talk gets bigger at LaFitte's.

Tonight, with the Mardi Gras in full swing, it was the same only more so. The Crewes were out in strength, and paraders and spectators alike now met and mingled in masked mirth. Everyone was drunk—drunk on liquor, drunk on dollars, drunk on excitement, drunk on the sheer drama of the carnival.

Canal Street, on the west border of the Vieux Carre, was deserted as Paul Hastings steered his way through the tangle of confetti, empty pint bottles and full owners of same who still wandered forlornly through the ruins.

Angela peered out of the window. "What's been happening here?" she gasped. "War?"

"Carnival," Hastings explained, shortly. "It's like this every year, they tell me. I wouldn't know. Oh, now what's happened?"

The last remark was addressed not to the angel but to the engine of the car. It wheezed, sputtered, and then seemed to obey some mysterious cease and desist order.

The car swayed to a halt at the entrance to Bourbon Street.

"Out of gas!" the young man sighed. "Come on, we'll have to walk. It's only about six blocks down, more or less."

He opened the car door, then hesitated. For the first time he realized what he was doing. He was coming into one of America's largest cities with a live angel in tow—a live angel, with big wings.

"Wait a minute," he called to Angela. "I—I just want to check that rear tire again." He shot a significant glance at the cat, and Brimstone caught it. Tipping him a wink, the fiendish feline bounded from Angela's lap and sauntered around in back of the car with him.

"A fine mess!" Hastings commented. "Now what do I do? I can't walk an angel down Bourbon Street."

"Why not?" whispered Brimstone. "There's maybe a law against angels?"

“It isn’t that,” Hastings sighed. “It’s just—oh, how can I explain it? If it happened to be the Devil, now, I wouldn’t hesitate for a moment. He’d feel right at home on dear old Bourbon. All I’d have to worry about is that somebody wouldn’t take advantage of his innocence.”

“What are you worrying about?” sniffed the cat. “Take a look at what gives.” He pointed his tail in the direction of the narrow entrance to Bourbon Street.

WHAT gave was simple. Teetering along the edge of the sidewalk and emerging upon the broad expanse of Canal Street was an African Zulu in full war dress, ostrich-plumes waving. The Zulu brandished a knobkerry in one hand and an assegai in the other. Supporting him on either side in his drunken progress was, reading from left to right, a ghost and a crocodile.

“Mardi Gras, stupid!” purred Brimstone. “Everybody’s in costume. They’ll think she’s wearing a costume, too.

Hastings smiled and nodded. “Come on, then. Once we get to my room, our troubles are over.”

He walked around the car and helped Angela out and across the curb. The cat trailed primly behind.

“Hope you aren’t freezing,” Hastings remarked. “It’s pretty chilly tonight.”

“I’m warm enough, thank you,” said Angela. Then, “Who are those strange-looking people?”

“Mardi Gras masqueraders. Remember, you’re supposed to be one, too. It wouldn’t do for them to know that you’re a real angel.”

“I understand.” Angela squeezed his arm. “You’re so clever, Paul—the way you think of everything.” Paul Hastings smiled, and the cat gave him an unlaundered look.

The crocodile, the ghost and the Zulu gave them scarcely a glance as they passed by and started to walk down Bouroon on the north side of the street. The first block, flanked by the sides of Canal Street stores, was deserted—but up ahead the neon lights blazed fiercely and the mingled shrieking of voices and clarinets rose of what Bourbon Street uses instead of the air.

Angela stared straight ahead and took in a deep breath, compounded equally of bar whiskey fumes, *odeur de oyster-shell*, perfume, perspiration, and fresh garbage—which gives the French Quarter what the Chamber of Commerce likes to describe as a "quaint old world atmosphere."

"Oh!" she sighed. "I'm so excited! You know, it may be sinful of me to even think of such things, but I'm really almost glad you made a mistake and brought me back to earth again. I've missed so much—for instance, I've never been in a place like this before. As a matter of fact, I've never even stayed up so late! I don't know what's going to happen because I've come down here, but even if I'm punished, it's worth it. Thank you, Paul, for taking care of me like this."

AGAIN the young man smiled and the cat returned a soiled grimace—but this time there was pain beneath Hastings' grin. To think that she trusted him; thanked him for taking her to a Bourbon Street garret in the company of a fiend, in order that he could sell her out to the Devil!

"But what else *can* you do?" he asked himself, despairingly. "You can't get her back to heaven. You can't run away with her on earth because Brimstone will follow you. And you can't go away yourself and leave her at the mercy of the Devil—or the local citizens here, who might be worse. No, you'll just have to go through with it. And as long as she's having a good time, you might as well see that she enjoys herself for as long as possible. Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow—"

"Nobody dies," whispered the cat, finishing the thought for him. "Not if they obey orders."

"Who said that?" asked Angela.

"I didn't hear anything," Hastings lied. He quaked inwardly, and his heart made seismographic vibrations, as he suddenly realized that the infernal cat could, and did, read his mind. From now on even his thoughts were known to the Devil. So how could he possibly escape?

They crossed the street, jaywalking over to the southeast corner and continued on down. Now they were passing the garish doorways of bars and dives, dens and dumps, eateries and cheateries. A milling throng was milling and thronging, moving in a frantic orbit between to and fro. A clown rushed hither, two laughing, bottle-spinning senoritas ran thither, and a party of men and women in formal evening attire were going yon. There was screaming and shouting, and much tossing of confetti and lunch. Serpentine streamers rained down from the second-story balcony of a private residence, and from either side, bands blared through saloon doorways.

Nobody paid any attention to the young man, the black cat, and the girl in the realistic angel costume.

“She’d be safe here if we could only escape,” Hastings told himself. Then, “Damn! I must be careful what I think or Brimstone will be angry.”

He glanced down at the cat, but the familiar padded along serenely as though it hadn’t caught his thought.

Then Hastings realized a curious phenomenon—the cat couldn’t read his mind as long as there were noises around to distract his attention!

“That’s something to remember,” he told himself. “If the chance ever comes—”

They kept walking, jostling their way through the crowds, exchanging grins and winks at masked revellers, listening to snatches of music and song, shouts and laughter. People were blowing horns, beating on drums, reeling along and singing their praise of Momus, Comus and the other ancient lords of Saturnalia.

Hastings was alarmed, but Angela seemed enchanted. She drank in the raucous shouts as if they formed a melody; she beamed on the inebriate horde as though they were her dearest and oldest friends. Moochers, panhandlers, grifters, steerers, and just plain bums and crooks got the same admiring stare as did the swanky celebrants from uptown. She loved every bit of it because it was life and she was now a part of it. From time to time her wings fluttered in appreciation.

They called to her in passing. “Hi, beautiful!” and “Hello, angel!” and “When did you leave heaven?” They blew horns in her ear and poked, at her with canes, and tossed confetti.

But no one questioned her person or her presence here, and Hastings heaved a sigh of relief as they approached the doorway of Madam Adam’s establishment, the Blue Pig.

“Thank goodness our troubles are over!” he exulted. But the black cat merely smiled.

THINGS were warming up inside the Blue Pig. They always did around this time of night, and on this particular evening the atmosphere was. particularly torrid. The various permanent guests who occupied apartments, suites, rooms, cubicles or just plain holes in the wall upstairs lad all drifted down into the enclosed patio on the first floor, with its small bar presided over by the genial landlady, Madam Adam herself, in the flesh.

Madam Adam certainly had an abundance of flesh to be in. A short crop of dyed red hair surmounted a long, genuinely red face. The face, in turn, rested on two hundred and fifty pounds of foundation, enclosed in a foundation garment. To say that the little Frenchwoman was fat is superfluous—and superfluous fat is hardly a proper description of her imposing bulk.

Madam Adair was more than two hundred and fifty pounds of flesh; she was two hundred and fifty pounds of movement, of quivering, of mirth, of agitation, of excitement. She bounced through life like a big red rubber ball.

Right now she was laughing and beaming fondly on her “guests”. All of the regulars were present, and some of them had been present for six or seven hours; many of them glued to the bar stools and many of them just plastered.

Most of them were in costume, and they hardly bothered to look up as Paul Hastings entered the little patio bar flanked by an angel and a black cat.

Only Madam Adam took note of the new arrivals. She hadn't paid much attention to her latest boarder, principally because he, in turn, hadn't paid much rent—but tonight, what with the Mardi Gras spirit and the brandy, she felt cordial in every sense of the word.

"*Alors!"* she greeted the young man. "Is the *habitant* of the garret, I comprehend? And with such charming companionship! Permit me to perform the honors of the house. Come, have to partake of a drink upon me."

Hastings, who was doing his best to head for the back stairs without attracting attention, tried to pull Angela along. But Madam Adam waddled out from behind the bar and wagged her finger at him—together with other portions of her anatomy.

"Please! I insist! Mount upon a stool and construct yourself at home. I am about to confuse up a drink."

"Stuck!" Hastings groaned, under his breath. He smiled at his landlady and beckoned Angela to a bar stool. She sat down willingly enough, and the cat jumped up into her lap. Madam Adam, true to her word, took an enormous shaker and poured the contents of several half-empty bottles into its capacious maw. Then she shook it violently. Grabbing three glasses at random she filled them from the shaker and then beamed on her young friends.

"Here is dirt in your eye!" she cried. *"A bas le hatch!"* Seeing Angela's puzzled look she added, "Make your bottom up!"

HASTINGS took a swig, and a mixture of brandy, cognac and vodka exploded Bikini-fashion in his stomach. Angela sipped her drink sedately.

"My, it's strong, isn't it?" she said. "I'm so used to drinking nothing but ambrosia or nectar."

"Who necked her?" demanded a raucous voice. A fat little figure in a pirate's costume came up to the bar, followed by a masked clown and a lady who wore a kimono which may or may not have been a costume.

"My dear sir—" Hastings began, but the fat man wasn't having any of that.

"Don't be so formal," he boomed. "It's Mardi Gras, we're all friends here, right? I got that jewelry store over on Royal—seen you pass the place a dozen times. The name is Onyx John."

His friend, the masked clown, put his hand on Angela's arm.

"This heah's a rare pleasuh," he said. "Ah do declah, such a ohahmin' lil ole gal! Permit me to intraduce mah self. Dixon's the name—Mason Dixon."

"I know your line," observed Hastings, bitterly. "But please don't rush the young lady—she's a stranger in town."

"That calls for a drink," Mason Dixon told tnem. "Madam Adam, mix up ancthah round of mint juleps or whatevah mah lil ole friends been havin' here."

"I'm not your lil ole friend," Hastings said. "And I wish you'd go away."

Instead, Mason Dixon and the fat jeweler, Onyx John, sat down on bar stools and regarded Angela with the rapt fascination of wolves running after a Siberian sleigh.

"This drink is making me woozy," Angela giggled. To his horror, Hastings noted that it was doing just that. Even as he watched, Angela's halo tilted forward about an inch and wobbled tipsily over her head. It was beginning to give off a noticeable glow.

"What's that lil ole thingamajig?" demanded Mason Dixon. "Look, it's shining."

"She's just lit up," Hastings explained. But the two drunken men wouldn't accept his answer. Onyx John noticed the halo for the first time and reached out a pudgy finger to examine it.

"Quite a costume," he said. "Mighty fine! That looks like real gold to me." His finger probed. "By Arthur Godfrey, it *is* real gold. Twenty-four carat or I miss my guess."

"Of course it's gold," Angela told him. "I'm a real angel, too." Paul Hastings stared at her in horror. But the drunks weren't taking her seriously.

"Have another drink," Onyx John chuckled. "Then we'll see."

HE stared at her owlishly. "Funny, I can't see where it's attached to your head."

"You can't see any lil ole thing," Mason Dixon chuckled. "You got a load on, man!" He inspected Angela blearily. "I can't see nothin', eithah. Htah, have a drink."

They drank. The cat shifted uneasily in Angela's lap. Paul Hastings nudged the angel girl. "Take it easy," he said. "This stuff is deadly."

"But I like it," Angela protested. "And I'm having so much fun."

"We've got to get out of here," Hastings resisted.

"But no!" Madam Adam bustled up and caught his remark. "It is that you are my guests. I cannot permit of your leaving. The evening, she is still juvenile. Observe, we are about to make of the music." Sure enough, Hastings turned and beheld an accordionist entering the Blue Pig, followed by a seedy-looking man who planted himself before the battered piano and proceeded to grow a melody on the keys, watering them from time to time with the sloshed contents of a beer glass.

The accordionist shifted his stomach Steinway into high and they began to play together.

Onyx John and Mason Dixon banged their glasses on the bar, keeping time. Angela, swept up by the rhythm, fluttered her wings.

"Wow, what a breeze!" Onyx John declared. "Somebody left the door open." Then he noticed Angela. "Hey—are you doing that?" He stared at her closely. "How's it work? You got some wires under your nightie?"

"Of course not," Angela told him, with a seraphic smile. "I just wiggle my shoulder blades. Anybody can do it."

"Real feathers!" Onyx John felt one pinion with a clumsy paw. "Say, I'm beginning to believe you really are an angel."

"Of course I am," Angela beamed. She turned and waved a finger under the jeweler's nose. "Want to see me fly?"

Both she and Hastings were now so preoccupied that they failed to notice the behavior of Brimstone. The cat had crept up on the bar and was lapping up the rest of Angela's drink.

Madam Adam saw the feline for the first time.

"Ek bien, observe the pussy!" she cooed. "It believes it is drinking of milk, no?"

BRIMSTONE gave her a look of woozy malice. "No!" said the cat. "I believe I am drinking of rotgut. This stuff'd kill a real cat, and fast!"

"Helas!" Madam Adam began to quiver rapidly in all directions. Eyes rolling, she gripped Hastings by the shoulder. "The puss—do you not hear of it speaking to me?"

"No," Hastings lied. "I don't hear anything."

"You must be drunk," the cat told her. "You know darn well I can't talk."

"Oh," said Madam Adam, reassured.

"But I heard!" Onyx John wheeled suddenly. "Say, just what's coming off here? A talking cat, and a gal with wings like an angel—what gives?"

"Yes," added Mason Dixon. "And bless mah lil ole soul, if she isn't carryin' a hahp."

"A what?"

"A hahp."

"He means 'harp', stupid!" the inebriated cat explained.

"You play the harp?" asked Onyx John. "Where?"

"Why up in—"

"—up in Shreveport," Hastings finished, quickly. "And that reminds me, we've got ten minutes to make a train. Come on, Angela, let's go!" He tugged her from the bar-stool, but the slightly flushed angel was too excited to pay attention. She took the harp from around her neck and, after noting the beat of the pianist and accordionist, began to accompany them in a perfect rendition of their current selection—which happened to be "Basin Street Blues."

"Good Lord!" gasped Onyx John. "I never heard anything like *that* before!"

"She *is* an angel!" agreed his companion.

"*C'est incroyable,"* wheezed Madam Adam.

"Not bad at all," hiccuped the cat.

And their comments were justified. Because when Angela let loose with her harp, boogie beat or no, things happened. The celestial tones filled the ears of the listeners and came out of their eyes in the form of moisture.

Within half a minute the women, the regular patrons in the background, the accordionist, the pianist, and the group at the jar were all contributing to a puddle of tears.

Crying with delight, they harkened to the harpist. Paul Hastings sniffled, then realized this was his one chance of escape. Noting the rapt absorption of all present, he seized the opportunity to take Angela by the arm. "Come on," he whispered. "Now let's make a break for it out of here."

"Where are we going?" whispered the girl, without missing a note.

"To my room, of course."

"And where's that?"

"Four flights up," Hastings told her. "It's a long climb, but I can't help it."

"I can," said Angela. Still strumming the harp, still smiling serenely, Angela fluttered her wings. "Grab hold," she commanded.

HASTINGS, having no other choice, grabbed hold. Brimstone leaped from the bar and landed on Angela's shoulder. Still playing, still entrancing the drunken audience with a magic born of immortal melody, the angel flapped her wings and rose from the ground.

Straight up in the air she went, carrying Paul Hastings and the cat with her. Up above the palms of the patio, past the second and third story windows—Angela reached the fourth floor, swooped lightly over to the glass pane high in Hastings' garret, and pushed it open.

Madam Adam, mouth agape in astonishment, eyes blurred by a combination of tears, brandy, cognac and vodka, watched the flying trio disappear into Hastings' tiny room. The music faded and died.

"Maybe she *is* an angel!" whispered Onyx John.

"Maybe we're goin' crazy!" gurgled Mason Dixon.

"Maybe we should imbibe of another drink," sighed Madam Adam.

And that's just what they, and the rest of the patrons of the Blue Pig, proceeded to do. In fact, fortunately for Paul Hastings and his little bundle from heaven, the patrons proceeded to drink so quickly and so much that within an hour they had managed to completely forget the whole incident. No one was certain of just what had been seen and heard, and memory of the episode was submerged in alcohol.

By the time the sun rose over Bourbon Street and cast a disapproving eye on the Blue Pig, its occupants had drifted away to dreamland. Which is as good a place to leave them as any . . .

AS for Paul Hastings, he would just as soon have stayed in dreamland forever. But when he opened his eyes the following afternoon and rose from the armchair in which he had slept, he realized that things were not solved that simply.

Angela lay on the bed, wings folded sedately over the side. Brimstone nestled alongside her—and it was obvious that she hadn't heard the cat conversing last night, because she still cuddled the tiny fiend closely to her bosom.

There they were, the angel and the demon, ready to face the coming day—or the coming night. For twilight was slipping and getting ready to fall.

Hastings tiptoed down the hall to the community washroom and shaved. He hated to look at himself in the mirror—hated to see the face of the man who was going to betray an angel to the Devil.

But nothing had altered overnight. Sleep had not knit the ravelled sleeve of his care. His care didn't have any sleeve; it was like a straight jacket that bound him in its grip no matter how he struggled and raved.

He couldn't face his face, and he couldn't face his problem. He still had to go through with it, like it or no. The angel was on earth with no way of returning, and he was scheduled to play a long future engagement in Hell. Meanwhile, eat, drink and—

"Be wary," purred a familiar voice from behind him. Brimstone had tiptoed through the door. "Good afternoon, brother. Getting yourself slicked up for Old Nick?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that come sundown, we're off to see the Big Dealer. Just got a telepathic communication a moment or so ago—woke me up. We're going out to keep a date with him over in Jefferson Parish. If you listen, I'll tell you how to get there."

Hastings listened—what else could he, do?—and the cat gave him the route to follow.

"No tricks, now," warned Brimstone. "This is a very important matter to the Big Casino. I'll be watching every move you make and one slip—" The cat drew its tail across the black throat and made a snicking noise.

Hastings cut himself on the lip with the razor and nodded soberly. "All right," he said. "I'll go through with it. But in return, remember—no more of that talking. I can't bear to have Angela find out what you are."

"Or what you are," purred the cat. "I understand. Come on, let's wake her."

They returned to the garret, but Angela was already sitting up and stretching her wings.

"How do you feel?" asked Hastings, solicitously.

"Just heavenly," the angel told him. "My but we had fun last night, didn't we, Paul?"

"Oh—sure. You have no hangover or anything?"

"Certainly not. Look at the way my halo is shining."

PAUL looked and a glow brighter than that of the halo suffused his being. She looked very young and very lovely there, and he opened his mouth to tell her the truth—but Brimstone arched his back and hissed, and his tail formed a big black question mark.

"Come on," Hastings said. "Let's go."

"Where?"

"For a ride." He felt like cutting his tongue out, but there was no escape. "Thought maybe we could see the sights."

"Fine." Paul opened the door. "Is the cat coming too?" she asked.

"I'm afraid so." The cat ran past him and led the way to the back stairs.

"Good idea," Hastings noted. "We'll take this route and avoid being seen."

They tiptoed down the stairs and into the twilight. Hastings stationed Angela and the cat in the doorway. "I forgot!" he exclaimed. "The car is somewhere on Canal. Now what?"

"Taxi, Mister?"

The harsh voice came out of nowhere. Paul Hastings blinked as a redfaced man suddenly bobbed up in the doorway.

"Well—I don't know—we'd planned on going for a ride, but—"

"I know just where to take you," leered the cabby. He tilted his cap slightly and Hastings caught a glimpse of two little black horns growing out of his forehead. "I've come to get you specially," the cabby continued. "Understand?"

"Yes." Hastings beckoned to the girl. "We might as well go."

The redfaced cabby led them to a red cab—certainly unlike any other cab Hastings had ever seen in town—and the trio of animal, human and angelic beings settled themselves on the back seat.

The cab bounced down Bourbon, out Esplanade, and away. Soon the city stretched behind them in the dusk, and the silver sweep of the Huey Long Bridge shimmered in the distance to their left.

"Lovely," Angela exclaimed. "I'm so glad I came. You know, I scarcely remembered how wonderful it was to be alive—and what I missed when I left earth."

"Look, honey," Paul began. "I may be out of line, asking this, but I'm still interested. What were you, I mean when you were alive, and what happened to you when—" He stopped, embarrassed.

ANGELA drew in her lower lip and the hint of a furrow ploughed its way across her brow. "It isn't considered right to talk about the past up there, you know. But I've been back on earth for almost a day now, and nobody seems to have noticed anything, yet."

"I wondered about that," Hastings admitted. "Here you are, AWOL, and I should think somebody would be worried about you."

"Well, I'm not worried. Maybe it's wrong for me to say it, but I'm glad you brought me back. I like it here. Why, I've had more fun in the last day than I had in the whole twenty years that I was—"

She paused and looked away into the darkness rushing past outside the cab.

"Go on," whispered the young man.

"There's really nothing to tell. I was just a girl, an ordinary girl living in an ordinary small town. I went to high school, lived with my folks, and when school ended I got a job. It was the last year of the war, and the government had a big chemical factory outside of town. So I worked there, and one day was like another.

"I never went out on dates, because all the young fellows were in service. I used to wish I'd meet somebody some day—somebody to talk to, to have fun with. Somebody," and here her voice dropped, "like you, Paul."

Hastings shifted uneasily in his seat, but the angel came closer.

"As a matter of fact, that's what I was wishing when it happened."

"What happened?"

"The explosion. At least, I guess that's what it must have been. Because when I woke up again—" She made a little gesture that managed to include the robe, the harp and the halo.

"That's all," she said. "Maybe I shouldn't have told you, but I feel better now, whatever happens."

"Whatever happens." Hastings stuck out his jaw. He glanced down at Brimstone, but his jawline remained firm. "All right. I've got something to tell you, too—whatever happens. It's about me, and the reason you're here. Angela, here's the truth. You're not back on earth by any accident. Right now we're on our way to—"

"Quiet, brother!"

Brimstone rose from the angel's lap and glared.

She stared at the cat and her mouth formed a little red hole filled with astonishment.

"You're talking!"

"Of course I'm talking. And you listen to me, not to my servant."

"Your servant?" Paul cried. "But you're supposed to be *my* servant!"

THE cat chuckled, and each note tingled against Hastings' spine. "Do you think for one moment that the Big Gun would trust you that far? He planned all this, and he knew something would happen with a weakling like you. That's why we're taking no chances."

"Bettcha!" The cab-driver turned around and thrust his red mask over the seat. His hat had slipped off, and the two knobby black horns rose in menacing spires from his rounded forehead. “We’ve got you right where we want you, and you’d better keep your mouth shut!”

“Paul! What’s happening? What kind of a creature is this?” gasped the angelic girl.

“I’m not a creature,” snarled the cab driver. “I’m a hard-working, respectable demon.”

“And I’m a hard-working, respectable fiend,” the cat told her. “The only phoney in the crowd is this weak-kneed mortal, whose soul belongs to Satan.”

“But I don’t understand—”

“You will, soon enough. And if you don’t believe that he’s sold you out lock stock and halo to the Devil, you can ask His Unholiness himself in about five minutes, when you see him!”

Angela turned to Hastings. “No!” she whispered. “Say it isn’t true—it can’t be true.” Hastings averted his eyes as she continued. “What does the Devil want of me?”

“I don’t know,” he answered. “That’s the truth, Angela. I really don’t know. And I’m trying to explain to you how it all happened, but—”

“Not another word,” rasped Brimstone. “Or I’ll claw your eyes out.”

Hastings ignored the cat. He gripped the angel by the shoulders. “Haven’t you some power to overcome evil?” he muttered. “Isn’t there something about this you can do?”

She shook her head, halo and all. “Not. on earth. I have no power here. You’re the only one who can save me.”

“Then I’ll save you!” Hastings threw himself back and opened the door of the moving cab. “Quick—jump for it! Spread your wings and fly!”

“No you don’t!” Tae cat barred the way, back arched, claws extended, eyes twin fountains of flame.

Paul Hastings faced the cat, ready to do battle, but Angela grabbed his arms.

“Don’t, Paul. I know you didn’t mean to get me into this fix, but we’re in it together, and I won’t leave you now. Whatever happens, we’ll both stay together and see it through."

"That's the spirit," approved the cat. "Close the door, brother—we're almost there."

THE cabby drove like a demon (and who had a better right?) and they whirled along a side-road, over a slight rise, and descended to a private driveway. At the end stood a vast, deserted barn-like structure; its unligbted windows staring like blind eyes into the night.

They passed under an arch that had once borne an incandescent sign. Paul Hastings could just make out the lettering.

"DEAL ME INN," he read, aloud. Then, "I know where we are! This used to be a gambling casino, but it's closed now."

"Not to the Devil," the cat explained. "He's a good friend of the owner. Borrowed it for the meeting."

The cab stopped on a hypothetical dime before the unlit entrance to the DEAL ME INN and the cabby ran around to the side and opened the door. Brimstone and Angela stepped out, then Hastings. The cabby grabbed his arm.

"Not so fast," he said. "That'll be three bucks, even."

"You mean on top of everything I have to *pay* for the ride?" Hastings complained.

"Why not? Even a demon's got to eat," the cabby explained. He opened his mouth and for the first time displayed the long ivory razors of his teeth. "Unless, of course, you'd like to see me scrounge around for my own food."

Paul Hastings paid him quickly, without a word.

"All right, let's get going." The cabby stepped to the darkened doorway, followed by Brimstone, who kept his slitted eyes upon the mortal and the immortal alike.

"Got a key?" the cat demanded.

For answer the cabby bent his head forward and slipped one knobby horn into the door lock. There was a grating click and the door swung open upon a black abyss.

They moved forward slowly into the barn-like building. The DEAL ME INN had been a typical gambling casino in its gaudy day; half a block long and almost again as wide—an expanse built on the general dimensions of a roller rink.

In the darkness, Hastings' eyes gradually discerned the dim outlines of the covered green tables, the roulette wheels shrouded by dust-cloths, the octagonal poker and black-jack layouts, the empty chuck-a-luck cages. He could almost imagine the casino as it had used to be; alight and alive with hundreds of gambolling gamblers, dozens of dealers, spotters, steerers; he could hear the shouts, the murmurs, the invocations and imprecations directed to Fortune, mingled with the clink of silver and the rich rustle of greenbacks.

But now it was quiet, quiet and dark. They stumbled along through the sable silence, with the cat's eyes to guide them in the gloom. The cat's eyes —and the cabby's, which were worse. They glowed redly as Hastings and Angela tiptoed along up to a platform at the end of the room. They mounted it and stood staring out at the empty expanse of the casino. It held nothing but darkness.

THEN, suddenly, the darkness was dispelled by a glow, a gleam, a glare from the eyes of a thousand cats, a thousand cabbies. As if on signal, the entire casino was filled with rubies, living jewels that floated in pairs six feet or more from the floor.

There came a murmur and a whisper, a grumble and a growl, and beneath it the sulphurous sussuration of baleful breathing.

"The boys have arrived," grunted Brimstone. Hastings strained his eyes to see that which he did not desire to behold; but it was no use. All he saw was the eyes—hundreds and hundreds of red eyes ravening in darkless.

They stood on the platform and Angela shivered close to him. The cat hissed and the cabby had disappeared now, disappeared to join the black brotherhood on the floor below.

“This is it,” Brimstone purred.

This was indeed it, or rather, him.

He came out of darkness, out of nothingness, out of the everywhere into the here. One minute the platform beside them was empty and the next it was filled; filled with a red and raging fire that shimmered and sealed, then coalesced into a cohesive flame. The flame sent out six shoots—two arms, two legs, a head and a tail.

Glowing, literally glowing, with pleasure, the Devil stepped forward on the stage.

“Meeting will please come to order,” he mumbled. “And all that sort of rot.”

A cheer arose from the darkness, but the Devil raised his tail for silence.

“No time for nonsense,” he drawled. “Right down to business here. We’ve work to do.” For the first time he turned to Paul Hastings and a smile lit up his fiery countenance. “I see you’ve brought our angel,” he said. “Good!”

“Not so good.” Each word was a dead weight forced up from deep down inside him, but Hastings managed. “I’m not going to let you harm her.”

“Harm her? But my dear chap, I have no intention of harming her—none whatsoever! I merely want to sketch her!”

“Sketch her?”

“Precisely,” answered the Devil. He extended his tail in Angela’s direction. Flame shot from the tip, a circle of flame that limned her beauty and made it visible to all the hungry eyes down in the darkness. He traced the angel’s outline in fire.

“That’s a hot sketch!” wheezed Brimstone, from somewhere down around Paul Hastings’ feet.

HASTINGS stared at the girl angel as she stood within the circle of fire, noted that her halo still glowed with a luminance of its own. That alone gave him a faint irrational vestige of hope.

A chorus of hoots and howls greeted the glowing apparition of the angel on the platform.

Satan stepped forward again and signalled for silence with his allpurpose caudal appendage.

“I told you chaps I had a surprise,” he began. “And here it is! Yes, I assure you it’s quite real. A real angel.”

Again the yammering from the infernal legions. Again the signal for silence.

“At this time,” said the Devil, “I should like to express my personal appreciation to Mr. Paul Hastings, who has gone to great lengths—literally moved heaven and earth, as it were—to supply us with an angel. I am sure we all tender Mr. Hastings our very warmest regards.”

“But I don’t want your warm regards,” Hastings protested.

“You’d better get used to the heat, brother,” observed Brimstone. “When you’re one of us, you’ll get a lot of it.”

Angela was staring at the young man from within the circle of fire. He couldn’t meet her eyes. Better to face the Devil himself than that. So he faced the Devil.

“You can’t harm her,” he gasped. “You can’t!”

“I could,” Satan answered. “But I won’t. As I said, I merely want to sketch her. But you’ll understand everything, if only you’ll cease this—pardon the expression—infernal racket, and listen to what I am about to tell the audience.”

The Devil stepped forward and stood poised on the cloven hoof. The omnipresent tail flicked forward and pointed at Angela.

“Why is the angel here?” he asked. “And why the mortal man? The answer is also the answer to one of my most cherished dreams. For I must confess it, I too have my dreams. How often have I twisted and turned on my bed of coals o'nights, envisioning this moment—the moment when I could exchange my dominion over demons for sovereignty o'er angels!"

"Did I get your double-talk right?" spluttered Brimstone, indignantly. "Did you say you were going to chuck us fiends and get angels instead?"

"Exactly!" Satan smiled.

A low groan rose from the darkness, gathering into a rumbling roar of protest. Once more the Devil stilled it with the talisman of his tail.

"But wait! You're not abandoned. My dream runs thusly; to procure an angel, inspect it at firsthand, study its celestial metabolism, analyze, and reproduce its veritable aspect by means at my command. Then I shall reproduce it, reproduce it a thousand-fold, by creating in essence an authentic disguise. A disguise all of you present will wear. You, all of you, shall become my angels!"

Laughter screeched upwards, slashing the darkness into shrieking ribbons.

" 'Tis not a jest. Angels you'll become, at of you, properly attired in robes, of whitest damask. Wings will sprout from your backs, haloes glitter above your heads. And thus accoutred, you'll have all earth to walk—all earth to rule."

THERE was a certain majesty in Satan's utterance that Hastings could not help but acknowledge; the grotesqueness of the entire nightmare became real when embodied in that ancient evil voice. He puzzled over it as the Devil continued.

"Aye, that's the dream, and this is the realization of it! To own an angel, copy it, superimpose its shape on fiends, and then loose them upon earth!

"And that's where mortal help is needed. For we live, as you know, in a decadent age. No longer do most miserable humans seek me out for black boons or sell their souls for favors. We, all of us—the legion of the damned —are passe, if you please: 'old hat' and 'figments of the imagination' to the vulgar. But there are many mortals who likewise scoff at heaven and its works, who have discarded seraphim and cherubim from their new theology.

"So I have contrived a way of snaring these skeptical souls. A modern, mortal way, with modern, mortal help. You fiends disguised as angels will not walk the earth as such: no, one step further is contemplated. You will appear as robots in the shape of angels, and you'll not be *given* to the mortals—you'll be *sold!"*

The Devil paused to allow the meaning of his words to sink in. But even Hastings was puzzled, until Satan continued.

"Yes, sold! By the modern magic of advertising. By the modern deviltry of a human invention called 'public relations' which is far fouler than anything I could devise.

"This young man here," and the Devil indicated Hastings, "is an expert in this evil art. With certain monies I have obtained from the former owner of the gambling—you'll pardon the expression—hell, he will proclaim to the world that he has launched a new business. Using the powers of air and darkness united in mortal sins called radio, television, and newspapers, he will let it be known that he has invented and is manufacturing a new kind of robot—a mechanical servant.

"It is a robot, he will tell the world, that is attuned by electronic impulse to the brainwaves of the individual. It is a robot that acts as a part of the brain itself, independent of the body, and serves as a mechanical monitor. In other words, a friendly advisor, wiser than the mind itself, who will direct the efforts of the individual to praiseworthy and profitable ends. A mechanical conscience. Truly, a Guardian Angel!"

AGAIN the Devil paused and waited for his meaning to permeate the darkness behind the red and winking eyes.

"Yes, a Guardian Angel! What man would not welcome the latest scientific miracle—a second brain attuned to his own, a brain that is guaranteed to keep him from harm, keep him from evil action, direct him to pleasure, peace, security, and (since we are dealing, remember, with human beings) profit?

“Not every man, of course, will be able to afford the luxury of a Guardian Angel. A thousand, perhaps, will be in a position to buy. From the flood of requests which I anticipate, *we* shall select that thousand. A thousand of the highest-minded, noblest men and women of the world; a thousand we could never hope to reach by any other enticement. They will come to us willingly, pay this young man handsomely, for the privilege of undergoing an electronic-psychoanalysis and having a personal Guardian Angel constructed to guide them! Savor the delicious humor of it all—they’ll heap a fortune on this young man to obtain a Guardian Angel, and the Guardian Angel will be one of you in disguise!

“Can you imagine how you will guard your human charges? How you will direct their destinies? How you will act as a Conscience and rule their actions?

“Within a year, those thousand mortals who possess you will have the world turned topsy-turvy. Their damnation will in turn damn millions of others, in a widening circle of corruption. War, pestilence, red ruin—and all of us in power!”

They understood, now, and the screams rising from the darkness clawed along Hastings’ spine and burrowed into his brain. For he understood now, too; knew how he would get rich on the Devil’s dream, and at what cost to himself and the world.

“Begone!” Satan continued. “Avant! And—for the benefit of you newcomers who have never sat at the feet of Avon’s Bard, scram out of here! When next I call you, it will be to don the angelic robes. But now, farewell, fare ill!”

The eyes winked out like fireflies dying in the darkness, and Satan turned to Angela and Hastings on the platform.

“There you have it,” he said. “My dream, your riches. It is a simple scheme, but sound. We live in an age where the wildest fantasy of yesterday is but today’s commonplace. Now, I shall instruct you fully in your duties.”

"Don't bother," Hastings murmured.

"What's this? Do I detect a note of insubordination in your voice?"

"In plain English," Hastings said, "I advise you to go to hell."

"Home?"

"Call it that if you like. But I won't cooperate. Take me with you if you wish—I understand from Brimstone that you've tricked me into losing my soul anyway, so I might as well go. But I'm not going lo stay here and act as front man for your dirty schemes!"

HASTINGS faced Angela. "Now you know what I did," he said. "I'm to blame for everything, and there's nothing I can say to help you now. Except that I'd count myself well damned if only all this had never happened to you."

Angela mustered a smile. "I know," she answered. "And it's not your fault, really. You *did* try to protect me, once you realized the truth. And you're sorry, now. I—I still have faith in you, Paul." The Devil tugged at his spade beard, and a sardonic grin flared forth and glowed.

"Very touching," he commented. "So you'd refuse to help me, now that plans are all arranged?"

"Why not?" Hastings retorted. "I've found out one thing—there are limits to what I'll do for money. Besides, why should I help you? I'm damned if I do and damned if I don't."

"Shall I tell you why you should help me?" asked Satan, gently. "Shall I tell you why you are going to help me, willingly, as much as I wish?"

"Why?" asked Hastings, in spite of himself.

For answer, the tail reared itself towards Angela "That's the reason," the Devil said. "I told you to harm would befall her, and I meant it. All I need do is use her as a blueprint on which to pattern my angelic disguises; study her, copy her, and release her. So go my plans.

"However, if you prove stubborn and refuse to cooperate—I'll not stop there. I'll not release her. I'll drag her down beyond your reach, beyond the each of heaven itself, to mine own kingdom!"

There was a moment of pregnant silence which soon gave birth to horrified realization of his words.

"Now," snapped Satan. "What say you? Will you cooperate? Or—"

Hastings glanced at Angela. "No," whispered (Lie angel. "You can't consent! I'll be all right, I'd gladly go with him rather than let him do this to the world. Don't do it, Paul."

"I must," Hastings sighed, "I owe it to you."

The Devil smiled. "Then we're agreed! We start tomorrow to make plans. Money shall be provided. This place will be transformed, outwardly, into a factory. I, unfortunately, cannot attend you in this matter—there are wars to be waged elsewhere, requiring my presence. But Brimstone wit remain with you as my own personal representative. He shall give counsel, lend his aid.

One month is all I require; at the end of that time, Angela is free and you will be rich. It can all be arranged very quickly if you follow the plan, and Brimstone.

"Within a month, then—GUARDIAN ANGELS, INCORPORATED will be launched upon the world!"

THE month passed swiftly; too swiftly. It passed in a blur, passed in a kaleidoscope, passed in a whirlwind of activity, unreality, and pure nightmare. It was all a dream—indeed, a diabolical dream come true.

The money was on the table in the garret when they returned; thousands of dollars in nice, crisp bills. Hastings never saw the gambler who provided it; he saw nothing but Angela's predicament and his own, talked to no one about it but Brimstone.

For Brimstone was always present, always on hand to break up any opportunity to discuss an escape or a solution. At first Hastings entertained a wild hope that heavenly powers might somehow take note of this blasphemous scheme and intervene; as the days passed without a sign, his hopes faded.

And then the mad whirl took over. The gambling casino, made over in Hastings' name now, became a factory to all outward appearances. GUARDIAN ANGELS, INCORPORATED was really incorporated. Hastings moved to a suite of offices uptown, and he and Angela shared a suite in a hotel; Brimstone chaperoning, of course.

The presence of an angel caused comment, naturally, and Hastings capitalized on that. He swung into action as a public relations man.

No, Angela was not an angel. She was a robot, a mechanical creation. Yes, he was the inventor. No, there was nothing at all supernatural about this electronic development. Plastic body, synthetic flesh, a mechanism intricately contrived. Secret formula? Well, he couldn't say just yet. But manufacturing had started and within a month he would be ready for an important announcement.

Thus for the *Times-Picayune* and the *New Orleans Item* and the AP and the UP and the INS, and for the eager beavers from *Time* and *Life* and *Newsweek* who tried without success to get past the barbed wire and into the factory, who tried to ferret out the details of Hastings' singularly anonymous past, who tried to interview Angela alone, who speculated and puzzled and scoffed and predicted and hinted until the entire nation, the entire world had heard about this mysterious GUARDIAN ANGELS, INCORPORATED that was about to revolutionize human life.

The pastors denounced and the scientists screamed and the commentators yelled. Within two weeks the airwaves were polluted with angel jokes, twelve songwriters had turned out numbers with the word "angel" in the title, three movie studios were working on quickies embodying the angel theme, and the firms that specialized in making toys with Hopalong Cassidy tie-ups were bidding for rights on angel dolls, angel dresses, angel wings, and angel sub machine guns.

AT first it was all a gag, something to talk about, something to feed the readers and the listening audience; a new distraction from war and worry. At first it was a wild rumor, a bad joke, a crazy notion. Then, as pictures of Angela appeared, complete with wings and halo—as the newsreels and the television screens showed carefully-staged interviews which ended with Angela actually flying through the air—‘then and only then did people begin to wonder. And wondering, believe.

Yes, people believed. They believed because they wanted to believe.

Paul Hastings, working as he had never worked before, working as no publicity or advertising man had ever worked—with a genuine product to sell—began to find out things about his fellow-man.

Of course ho was still cynical about motives. Folks, he realized, were out after the dollar. They were gullible, easily deceived.

But that had nothing to do with their belief in GUARDIAN ANGELS, INCORPORATED. They had faith in the notion because they wanted to have faith. The whole world, he discovered, was searching for security. Security against others, and security against themselves.

For as the campaign moved into high, Hastings dispelled the element of mystery. Working with Brimstone’s coaching, he gradually “planted” stories and interviews in the proper places.

He began to “explain” the theory behind GUARDIAN ANGELS; gave out releases dealing with the idea of a mechanical brain acting as a conscience which could do no wrong.

Using scientific gobbley-gook coated with metaphysical jargon, he let it be known to all the world that there *was* a solution to mankind’s problems after all—a solution far beyond orthodox religion, orthodox science, beyond the psychiatric approach. A thousand GUARDIAN ANGELS would soon be available for use: a thousand people would be initially selected as a mass experiment to undergo conditioning which would make them eligible to employ a personal Conscience.

Statesmen, scientists, military and religious leaders, business men, creative artists were invited—if they could pay the fee, of course—to participate in this earth-shattering new development which might logically result in a new and better world.

The response convinced Hastings beyond all doubt that the world was basically a far better place than he had dreamed; that people were far better than he'd ever imagined.

For the letters and requests poured in. Letters from the great, letters from the rich, letters from the high and mighty of the world. They came in a steady stream, the stream became a torrent, but the torrent was merged in the oceans of mail and communications from ordinary men and women.

THE poor wrote. The sick wrote.

The broken in spirit and the despairing, the lost and lonely ones. "I haven't got much money, but if there's only a chance, you see my father is a good man but he's got an awful temper and he beats up on my mother and us kids all the time and if he had one of those angels now, well—"

"I never knew it," Hastings told Angela, over and over again. "I never realized it. People really *want* to be good, they'll do anything to be good. It's only that they don't know *how.* They're weak, bewildered, afraid of themselves. All they want is peace and security—these letters show that.

"I don't have to sell this idea to the world. The world wants to buy it. People know what's wrong with each other, and with themselves. If only it were true!"

This last thought always brought Hastings up short. Again and again, during the last few days, he told Angela, "We must think of some way out. We *must!* We can't let this thing go through!"

And Angela only smiled. "I have faith, Paul," she said. "You must have faith, too."

Which was poor consolation, whenever Hastings got through with yet another session of lies to the press, or returned from another conference with Brimstone.

The fiendish cat was exultant. “Wonderful!” he purred. “Everything going according to schedule. They think we’re turning out angels at the factory, and when the time comes we’ll produce ’em right as promised. We’ll select our thousand suckers, run them through that silly test with the machines I’m rigging up; give them three days of buzzing noises and electric arcs straight out of those old mad-scientist movies. And then we tell them they’ve passed, the adjustments are made synchronizing them with the robots, and they’ll get their angels. Oh, will they get theirs!”

The cat chuckled, and Hastings shuddered. He shuddered still more during the last two days.

For it was then that anticipation mounted to almost unprecedented heights; the papers abandoned their panic over wars and rumors of wars and concentrated on Hastings, the miracle-man, the man who was going to solve the problems of the world.

April 1st was the deadline; and it almost became, in the popular mind, “National Angel Day.”

ON March 31st came the crowning event—the personal phone call from the White House, asking for a private conference, followed quickly by a secret invitation from the UN to address the delegates at Lake Success. The highest powers, aroused at las., were in one accord—if the world could beg, borrow or buy a Conscience for its leaders, then government would pay the price.

FBI was moving in. A special plane landed at Maisant International Airport, ready to transport Hastings, Angela, and Brimstone—“My mascot,” as Hastings always told the press—to the capitol. Before the historic meeting, still other initial-studded authorities made their request. NBC, CBS, ABC wanted a combination radio and television broadcast to the world from the airport.

Oh, it was a crazy month, and no mistake. An gel-food cake became a popular article of diet. *The Wall Street Journal* hinted at a communist plot, and the *Daily Worker* muttered about capitalist conspiracy. The Kiplinger letter dealt with a rumored "mass production of angels in the low-price field by GM, with models scheduled to go on sale in chain stores throughout the country." Bookstores sold Modern Library editions of *Look Homeward, Angel* to the profit of Thomas Wolfe's estate; little theatre groups were playing *Angel Street* in revival, and the usual idiocies of popular taste were again demonstrated.

But over and above it was the White House request, the UN meeting, the radio broadcast, and the unleashing of the Devil's dream upon the world.

A haggard Hastings, eight pounds lighter than the month before, rode in an unlicensed automobile to the airport. Brimstone sat snugly, smugly, on his lap—Brimstone wasn't taking any chances, with the FBI man driving and the two network vice-presidents in the back seat. Angela sat between them, peering forward at Hastings, and trying to act like an angelic robot for the benefit of the other passengers.

"Mind if we touch it?" asked the first v. p., nervously, as he poked Angela with a stubby finger.

"My, feels just like flesh!" commented his companion. "And those wings —it really flies, doesn't it?"

"Careful," cautioned the driver, an FBI man who had seen too many Lloyd Nolan movies. "I've got my orders, remember—no tampering with the angel. Security measure."

"This all seems incredible to me, Mr. Hastings," worried the second v. p. "Now about that broadcast. It's scheduled for 2 PM, right before your take-off, and if you'd only consent to use our script, we'd be okay. I mean, we've had the very best staff men in to do the writing, and it's timed down to the split second."

"No script," Hastings muttered, grimly. "As a matter of fact, I have no idea what I'm going to say."

BRIMSTONE'S claws dug into his ribs in silent, painful reminder that he'd better say the right thing, and Hastings subsided in his seat.

"Beats me how you do it," marvelled the first v.p. "I hope you'll explain everything over the air. I mean, how you get this halo effect, and the reason for the harp and stuff like that."

"I get it," mused the second v.p. "Actually, he could of made any kind of robot he wanted; man, or woman, or one of these metal men. But the angel idea, that ties in with most peoples' notion of what a conscience looks like—get it? The old symbolism! Mighty clever! You're going to make a fortune with this idea, Mr. Hastings."

"You're going to make History!" breathed his companion.

Hastings nodded.

Yes, he was going to make History, all right. Had there ever been a more fantastic situation in all the world, in all the age-old war between heaven and Satan? He, one man, held the balance now—and he'd be holding it, in just a few moments, before the eyes of all the world, the ears of all the world.

Eyes, ears. Red eyes of fiends. Ears of Brimstone the cat, perked to catch the wrong word, even the wrong inflection. Eyes of Angela, blue and trusting, angelic. Ears off his own, his real private and personal conscience.

They were all riding with him now, riding in the big black limousine, riding with him to his doom. There was the airport, there was the field, there was the plane—a real plane, this time, not the Devil's dream-ship. The plane that took him to Washington, to New York, to the high places of the world which he would drag down to Hell.

Yes, and there were the microphones and the booms and the TV cameras and the trucks. And pop! went the flashbulbs, and the cops held the crowds back, and now he was getting out of the car with Angela and the cat minced on behind. . . . and the FBI man was moving him forward and the network directors were ushering him to the mike and the cameramen were sighting. . . . and somebody was introducing him, saying something about "Hastings" and “GUARDIAN ANGELS,” and now, this was it, he was on the air, on camera, he was facing the world.

He stared straight ahead and he opened his mouth and he said:

“This is Paul Hastings. I’ve come here today to tell the world that it’s all a fake.”

THERE were noises now, noises all around, and from the crowd murmurs he picked out an angry hissing from between his feet which meant Brimstone was there, spitting in protest.

But Angela was also there, holding his hand, and Hastings continued.

“Yes, let me say it again. I’ve deceived you. It’s a fraud, a hoax. There are no mechanical Consciences to guide you. GUARDIAN ANGELS, INCORPORATED is a myth.

“But you mustn’t be disappointed. If I cannot give you what I promised, I can give you something better, something greater. The knowledge that you don’t need me!

“No, you don’t need an artificial conscience. Nobody does. For each of you has something much more important—a *real* conscience. You cannot buy it, and I implore you not to sell it. Just listen to it, use it, act according to its dictates. If each of you does that, then the world will be the kind of a place you want it to be. A good place, a place in which to live rather than a place in which to fight and kill and be killed.

“You’re puzzled now, and confused. You’re wondering, for one thing, what this means.” Hastings indicated Angela for the benefit of the television cameras. “Well, she’s no fake. She *is* an angel. A real angel. You’ve seen her fly, and I’ve men here who have touched her, known her reality. She’s as real as the angel that dwells inside all of you, and you must believe in her just as you must believe in yourself!”

“Liar!” It sounded human, but it was—Hastings realized—Brimstone’s voice.

“It’s true!” Angela stepped forward now. “Every word of it is true. If I could only make you understand somehow, make you believe—” She hesitated, and her fluttering hands fell to the harp-strings about her neck. Suddenly she smiled and took the harp in her hands. Her fingers moved across the strings.

Angela played.

There are no words to describe her playing. It was April Fool’s Day, and the crowd at the airport, the millions huddled around their radios and television sets had just been dealt the cruellest April Fool joke of all. But Angela played, and they listened. Angela played and they cried. Angela played—and as heaven’s own harmony soared forth, they *believed.*

The world could doubt Hastings, doubt Angela’s appearance, doubt the halo and the wings. But the world could not doubt the ear-borne evidence of the heavenly music.

Angela played, and Hastings knew that somehow, he had won. His hand patted his coat-pocket, feeling the straight razor he’d concealed there, concealed against failure. He wouldn’t use it now. He’d live. The world would live. That was the promise of the celestial music, soaring in triumph against all evil.

Then the music was blotted out in a black blur of nightmare. Something leaped, something hissed, something clawed, tearing the harpstrings to shreds.

It was Brimstone, ripping at the harp with frantic, frenzied hate. Angela gasped, but her cry was drowned in the squalling rage of the cat-fiend.

HASTINGS pulled the little black monster away, but it was too late. The strings were gone, the music lost forever. And (then Hastings was pulled away himself, pulled away by the FBI agents. Before he quite realized it, he and Angela and the spitting cat were being hustled aboard the waiting plane.

He caught a last glimpse of the confusion and consternation seething through the crowd at the airport—a last glimpse of the bewildered network officials—a last glimpse of the earth and sky—and then the motors were roaring, the door of the little private plane was sealed—and he felt the shaking and shuddering taxi down the long runway.

Hastings looked around. He and Angela were sitting in the rear seat of the small cabin; the two black-hatted FBI men occupied the front seat with Brimstone. The pilot ahead was invisible. The young man glanced through the small cabin window and saw the ground move away, saw New Orleans fade behind the clouds.

"I don't get it," he muttered, to Angela. "We told them it was a fake. Why are we going to Washington, then?"

"Washington?" It was the cat who spoke. "Who said anything about Washington?"

Hastings goggled. "You're talking!" he warned. "And in front of those FBI men—"

For answer, the two men turned and removed their black hats. Hastings saw twin sets of horns rising from bald brows. They grinned at him, exposing serrated fangs.

"We have our own version of the FBI," Brimstone purred, complacently. "Just a precaution. The Big Guy had a hunch you might somehow try to double-cross him."

"I'm not afraid," said Angela. She patted Hastings' arm. "I'm proud of you, Paul."

"But where are we going?" Hastings murmured.

His voice was scarcely audible above the roar of the engine. The plane dipped alarmingly, and the engine-roar became a tortured scream. Air whined past them. The plane began to spiral, and to nose down, down—

"We're crashing!"

Paul Hastings held the angel in his arms. Somewhere Brimstone was laughing like the fiend he was, somewhere the air and earth were torn with the impact of explosion, somewhere flames rose to receive them in a fiery embrace—then all of it ended in blackness.

BLACKNESS. Blackness and flames. That's all Hastings saw when, after a long moment, he opened his eyes. Gradually he managed to differentiate between the two. The blackness was omnipresent, eternal. The flames rose out of it, cleaving the darkness again and again without dispelling it. They came from the bottom of the blackness, from lakes and pools and oceans of fire.

Hastings felt searing heat. He breathed it, inhaled the acrid odor. And then his hearing returned, but it was scarcely a welcome addition to his senses. Because he heard the screams. The ageless, endless screams.

Quickly he sat up, realizing automatically that he was unhurt, but not caring—for his first thought was of Angela.

Angela wasn't screaming. She sat beside him on the rocky ledge. Beyond her stood the two pseudo-FBI men, and Brimstone. There was no plane, nor any wreckage of a plane in sight. Only the blackness beyond, with the flames rising up in rhythm with the screams.

Hastings didn't say, "Where are we?" He knew. He *knew*, long before the cat minced forward over the glowing ashes and purred.

"Welcome home, brother!"

The young man rose, helping Angela to her feet. "So it was a fake crash, too," he commented. "Just staged to fool the world and account for our disappearance."

"Right," acknowledged the cat. "You aren't really dead, and of course, she can't be killed. But I have a feeling you'll soon wish you were dead. I've never seen the Big Dealer quite so hot—if you know what I mean."

"All right, let's *git* going," said one of the members of the Fiendish Bureau of Investigation.

There was no question of refusing. Hastings and Angela picked their way over the rocks, hand in hand. The nearness of Angela gave him a comforting feeling. With his free hand he patted the razor, but its presence brought no relief. What good is a razor in Hell?

"You won't need a shave here, brother," remarked the cat. With a start, Hastings realized that Brimstone could still read his mind whenever there were no outward noises to interfere.

Shortly, however, the noises began. They constituted a racket; literally an infernal racket.

Dante Alighieri, who claimed to have paid a visit tc Hell during the early years of the fourteenth century, left a very definitive account of the shrieks of the damned, the moans and outcries of lost souls, the cacaphony of fiends. John Milton, a later commentator who whitewashed Satan under the guise of Lucifer, paid his respects to the pitfalls of the Pit. Jonathan Edwards made his additions to the edition of perdition, and a host of lesser luminaries cad their best—or worst—to describe the infamy of the Inferno.

BUT there are no words to describe the utter reality, or the uttered reality of the shrieks; no words to describe the intensity of fear and fright which rose from the darkness in a form as tangible as the odor of sulphur and brimstone.

It was, Hastings decided quite simply, a Hell of a place.

Not that he had much time for either observation or decision. The fiends were leading him a far from merry chase—stumbling over rocks, leaping over fissures filled with live steam, bypassing streams of molten lava, circling around miniature volcanoes.

Angela clung to him, wings throbbing with alarm; yet her smile and her halo glowed as brightly as ever. For some reason she still retained the battered, stringless harp—but whether it gave her any more comfort than the razor did Hastings he could not say.

Brimstone frisked along happily, obviously pleased at his homecoming. The way became torturous and they threaded through murky tunnels, passing through larger chasms and caverns where even the voices of the damned and the doomed were drowned out by the roar of flames.

“Don’t hesitate,” Brimstone smirked. “The flames can’t hurt you as long as you’re alive.” The cat began to sing *Chloe* in an offkey wail. Then it switched to *Smoke Gets in Your Eyes* with equally dismal results.

They entered a long slanting tunnel that suddenly spiralled and wound down interminably. Hastings and Angela slipped and floundered until the two fiends were forced to half-support them in their progress. Finally, they emerged.

Finally, they emerged into the great vaulted cavern circled by a rim of fire. The two fiends melted unobtrusively into the shadows, leaving them in the dubious custody of Brimstone. They stood there, dwarfed under the domed igneous arena, and stared at the whirling ball of flame in the center of the cavern. The whirling ceased and disappeared.

The Devil stood before them.

“So,” he observed, calmly. “Where angels fear to tread, eh?”

“H’m not afraid!” Surprisingly enough, it was Angela who spoke.

“Then you’re a fool, like the young man,” answered Satan. “And the time has come to pay for your folly.”

“It was worth it, to stop your scheme,” Angela retorted.

“Was it? I wonder if you’ll still (believe that after you pay the price.”

“What are you going to do to us?” demanded Hastings.

“A fair question. Which demands a properly foul answer.” The Devil tugged at his beard in a gesture Hastings had learned to dread. “I must confess that I haven’t given the matter sufficient thought, as yet. You see there are a number of delicate legal and theological questions to iron out. By rights, I am not supposed to have jurisdiction over an angel—even a fallen angel.” A reminiscent look crept into the flaming eyes. “A fallen angel,” he mused. “I’d almost forgotten the heights from which I myself descended. So much has happened since. So many things. I remember Prosperine, and Orpheus—”

HE shook his head. The beard shed a shower of sparks. “But I digress. We were speaking of punishment; a subject which I may lay claim to handle with some authority.

“Hastings, you are my property to deal with as I see fit. I’m in no hurry; eternity is my kingdom and your prison. As for the angel, she’s beyond the reach of any aid, mortal or immortal.”

Brimstone purred his way into the presence, arching his back and rubbing his tail against the cloven hoof of his master.

“Let me have them,” he mewed. “I’ve put up with a lot from these two, and I deserve a chance.”

“Perhaps. At least, until I devise a device, I can remand them to your custody.” Satan smiled. “Good enough. Take charge of them as you wish.”

Hastings and Angela stood irresolute as the cat moved forward, blackly, bale fully.

“You’d best obey Brimstone,” the Devil advised. “There is no possibility of resistance and no escape. A thousand fiends will rise as quickly as the flames.”

Again, Satan smiled. “Oh, I admit it’s all a little old-fashioned,” he said. “There are times when I too get sick of fire and brimstone, horns and tails and cloven hooves. But we have our traditions to maintain—and you will find that fear and agony are oldfashioned, too.” He turned tail abruptly with a gesture of dismissal. “We shall meet again,” said Satan. “Now, go and be damned.”

“This way, please.” Brimstone mocked and beckoned to a dark corridor. Without a word, the angel and the mortal followed.

“No sense running away.” Brimstone read their thoughts with savage accuracy. “The fiends will find you, soon enough.” He purred complacently. “Nothing can stop them, you understand. In all the ages, I know of only one man who stopped them, even for a time.”

Hastings stumbled on. He tried not to think of what he was wanting to think. Something the Devil had mentioned, something Brimstone had mentioned now—but the cat would read his mind.

Then Hell itself came to his rescue. The tunnel widened for a moment and turned off so that once again they walked through a large cavern filled with flames—and from the flames rose the deafening cries of the damned.

Brimstone couldn't read minds when there were noises!

"Lag behind," Hastings whispered to Angela. "Lag behind until I call you." Angela shot him a mystified glance, but obeyed. As the cat led Hastings into still another maze of subterranea, Angela imperceptibly lingered at the entrance. Hastings went on ahead, into the darkness, into the howling and shrieking Inferno.

WHAT thoughts went through her angelic head will never be known. The moments were eternities of exquisite agony; the waiting was an eon of painful, anguished anticipation.

And then Hastings emerged, running, from the tunnel ahead. Without a word he grasped the harp from about her neck, and ran back to the tunnel. The ravaged instrument with its shredded strings disappeared into the blackness.

Again Angela waited. Again the agonized ages passed. The flames shot higher, the howling rose to crescendo, and Hell's own fury rose in infernal majesty to dwarf and mock the white-robed figure of the winged girl.

There was a muted murmuring that grew to a raging roar. Suddenly, from the darkness beyond the flames, Angela saw the rising ring of red eyes, rimming her in on all sides. They were the eyes of fiends, the eyes that brooded in the blackness. Now they crept forward, and from behind them came the evil echo of a titanic tittering. They were crouching, slinking, closer and closer and closer—something had alarmed them, something had alerted them, something had summoned them. Black paws padding, curved claws raking, the dark demons closed in upon their chosen prey.

"Paul!"

Suddenly he was there. Suddenly he emerged from the tunnel and raced to her side. He thrust the harp into her hands. "Play!" he shouted. "Play—

it’s our only chance! Never mind them, they can’t touch us if you play!”

Angela looked down at the restrung harp, then up into the darkness. Automatically her hands moved over the strings. And the angel played.

The music rose, rose above the rustling, rose above the panting, rose above the roaring of flames and the crying out of the damned.

The music rose and the voices fell, the flames subsided. A new sound took their place—an accompaniment to the celestial music. It was the sound of weeping.

“Come on,” Hastings said, leading Angela into a fissured cavity in the rock. “We’ll find our way out of here. There *is* a way, you know. If you have faith.”

Angela had faith. There was faith in her fingers, faith in the melody they produced, faith in the strength of the soaring strains.

Paul Hastings led her, but he himself was lost—lost in the music. Tears blinded him until he saw clearly, but what he saw he could never recall.

THEY walked unharmed through the halls of Hell, down corridors of dark despair, through pits of utter degradation, and still Angela played.

Wherever they passed, flames fell back, fiends fawned, and the cries of the doomed became a paen of remembered beauty.

Of Satan, of Brimstone, there were no signs. There was only the walking and the music, the endless wandering through corridor after corridor.

Ages afterwards the way led upward. Through cooler caverns they climbed, and still Angela’s harp made melody. The fires faded so that they toiled through darkness, and time itself was melted in the molten music.

And thus it was that they came at last—the man and the angel—to the cavern with the cool stalactites; the cavern that was somehow familiar to Hastings; the cavern where for the first time his skin tingled with recognition of the familiar air of earth.

“Don’t look back, Angela,” he shouted, above the sound of the strings. “But I think we’re safe, now. Out of it!”

But Angela did look back. She looked back, and she screamed. “Look out! The roof is falling in!”

Music—vibration—tremor—whatever it was, the result was the same.

A portion of the pointed rocks over the cavern plunged to earth, to block the entrance of the tunnel from which they had emerged.

Hastings noted it, and at the same time noted their own peril. He threw himself forward, hurling Angela aside. But the rocks came down, and once again Hastings sank into blackness.

“PAUL! Paul!” It was Angela’s voice, and somehow it carried a sweetness greater than the music to his ears.

He opened his eyes. She was shaking him, dragging him from the debris “that littered the floor of the cavern.

“Are you all right?”

“I think so.” He stood up, shakily. “Yes, I’m all right. But—what happened to you?”

He stared at Angela. Something *had* happened, but at first he could not comprehend the nature of the change. Then he realized it. The white-robed girl who stood before him, clung to him, and then kissed him was just *that* and nothing more. A white-robed girl, minus halo, harp and wings. And there was nothing angelic about her kiss, however heavenly it might seem.

“They’re gone!” he whispered. “Yes—did you sea them?”

“Who?”

“My visitors. You were knocked out. They came at last to tell me that I was not forgotten, you were not forgotten.”

Paul Hastings nodded, numbly. His head still whirled, whether from the shock of the blow or the shock of Angela’s transformation, or the added shock of her words.

“I’ve got good news, Paul. At least, I think it’s good news,” the girl told him. “Your soul is saved. What you did, speaking the truth and defying the Devil, atoned for the evil. But there was a price to be paid.”

"What price?"

"I forfeited my right to return to heaven. In order to return, I must stay on earth and live through another life, virtuously."

She gazed up at Hastings. "So now I'm just a girl," she concluded. "And you'll have to act as my guardian angel."

Hastings managed a rock-scarred grin. "I'll keep you virtuous," he promised. "But not too virtuous." It seemed like a nice tag-line for a clinch, but before they could manage it, a sallow, sour-faced man clambered down through the cavern and approached them.

"Hey, what's the big idea?" he demanded. "Smooching around hyar in a nightie—reckon you'uns'll catch your death of cold."

"Just where are we, anyway?" Hastings demanded.

The sour-faced man squirted tobacco-juice at the rocks. "This here's Mammoth Cave," he said.

Hastings shrugged. He and Angela followed their self-appointed guide up towards the entrance, up towards the world of what passes these days for reality.

"So we start a new life," he observed. "No wings, no halo, no harp."

"About that harp," Angela said. "That was a pretty wild inspiration—having me play music to keep off the damned."

"Not my idea at all," Hastings confessed. "Fellow name of Orpheus thought of it ages ago. Lucky thing the Devil mentioned it and Brimstone reminded me of it again as we passed through. I got to thinking, if I could distract his attention long enough we might have a chance to re-string the harp and escape. And that's just what we did."

"One thing more," Angela ventured.

"Yes?"

"About Brimstone—whatever happened to him;"

Hastings grinned. From his pocket he produced the straight razor.

"I took care of him when we got into the noisy darkness of that tunnel, where he couldn't read my thoughts. That was the end of the cat—and the beginning of your music. After all, where do you think I got the new harpstrings? You may not know it, my dear, but you were playing on poor old Brimstone!”

They emerged from the cave. It was evening. Hell was below, heaven was above. Except, of course, for the little portions of both which they would carry forever in their hearts.

THE END

The TIn You Love to Touch

"BANISH HOUSEWORK CARES FOREVER" the ad promised and lo Roscoe it was like the promise of Paradise. But when he answered the ad he didn't expect to receive a robot by return mail—he knew Agatha wouldn't stand for such a thing.

"GOOD morning, Madam," It said the travelling salesman. "Are you the lady of the house?"

The slight figure in the apron and gingham dustcap moved forward in the doorway. "Kindly scram out of here," growled the voice from under the dustcap.

"But lady—"

"Don't you 'lady' me!" snarled the voice. "Now get out before I kick your sample-case for you!"

The salesman turned hastily away and the door slammed behind him.

Inside the bungalow, the figure in cap and apron sat down wearily on the chair nearest the door of the hallway.

"Oh for heaven's sake!" growled Roscoe Droop. "What in blazes can I do?"

Neither Heaven nor Hell gave Mm a reply as Mr. Droop flung his apron in the corner and tore the cap from his head. Without his domestic disguise, Roscoe Droop was revealed as a small, sallow-faced man with a slight body and gentle blue eyes.

Right now his eyes were clouded with rage and baffled indignation.

"What can I do?" he sighed, wearily. "That makes the third time this week some jerk salesman has mistaken me for a woman. What a spot to be in!"

He blushed and reached for a cigar. But he didn't light the stogie. Just in time he remembered—Agatha hated cigar smoke.

Agatha!

She was to blame for all his troubles. Agatha Droop. Sometimes Mr. Droop wondered why he had ever married her. Then the realized that he hadn't, really. *She* had married *him.*

Agatha was like that. Domineering. Six feet of solid muscle. Arms like steel cables. Just what they wanted down at the Hercules Steel Mill.

No wonder she'd found it easy to get a job as a welder! That had started all the trouble—Agatha's welding job. Mr. Droop recalled the announcement perfectly.

"I'm going to be a welder," she had told him, one evening. "I'll make about seventy bucks a week, plus overtime."

"But honey," he protested.

These were the last words Mr. Droop ever uttered on the subject. Because Agatha started in.

"You'll have to quit your job, of course," she said. "Quit it at once. I can earn more money than you, so it's only common sense. You're too frail for factory work, and nobody wants a runt like you around anyway. So you can stay home and take it easy from now on.

"All you need to take care of is the housework, the gardening, firing the furnace, mowing the lawn, marketing, washing, cleaning, scrubbing, mopping, dusting and getting my meals."

Mr. Droop started to open his mouth again to say, "But honey" and then he stopped. Because Agatha hit him over the head with a teapot.

And so Agatha went to work and Mr. Droop stayed home and took care of the house.

It was humiliating. It was infuriating. It couldn't go on. Mr. Droop would have gone mad if it weren't for his hobby.

His hobby had always managed to save him, somehow. When he got married, Roscoe Droop was an enthusiastic putterer. He loved to mess around with tools and woodcarving jobs, and he had a home workshop in his basement. That is, he had it for about a month—and then Agatha made him give it up.

Now, in moments of strain, Mr. Droop had nothing to turn to but his hobby magazine.

Like many an enthusiastic amateur, Mr. Droop was an avid reader of a magazine called UNPOPULAR SCIENCE. Its pages were crowded with monthly hints on how to build a yacht in your basement, how to run a model pig-pen in our garage, and other such fascinating topics.

Not that it did Mr. Droop any good. Right now he could have used, a washing machine or a vacuum cleaner more than anything else. But he had no money to buy such household aids.

Roscoe Droop simply wasn't the domestic type. He hated his washing and dusting and cooking. And these episodes with salesmen humiliatec him. In times like these he turned tc the consoling pages of UNPOPULAB SCIENCE.

It was with black despair (and hi: hands) that he now picked up the latest issue and riffled through the pages of the magazine.

He read the ads.

"YOU TOO CAN TURN YOUR ATTIC INTO A MODEL AQUARIUM."

"BUILD A SUBWAY IN YOUR BASEMENT."

It was no use. Roscoe Droop would never build an aquarium or a subway. He riffled through the classified advertisements and thought of his housekeeping tasks to come.

Housekeeping.

The little square ad in the fine print fairly leaped out at him.

"BANISH HOUSEWORK CARES FOREVER," the headline proclaimed. "Startling new discovery eliminates all household duties!"

It sounded like a blurb for a new brand of soap chips to Mr. Droop. But he read on.

"Prominent scientist has perfected the ideal women's home companion," the ad stated. "Working models now in experimental stage. A limited number available for immediate trial. These models will not be sold—merely loaned out for six months' free trial to responsible parties. If you desire to take advantage of this offer, kindly submit complete character references in first letter. Write Dr. PEDRO MOKE, B.S.: S. O. L. BOX 13, UNPOPULAR SCIENCE."

Mr. Droop sat up. Maybe this might prove to be a solution to his unpleasant domestic difficulties. This invention, whatever it was, could relieve him of his work.

But Agatha would object, of course—

"Roscoe!"

The soft voice, gentle as the cry of a bull walrus, smote Mr. Droop's ear. A moment later the same ear was smote by a brawny fist.

"What are you loafing around for, you lazy bum?" growled a voice.

Mr. Droop looked up—way up—at Agatha.

Agatha Droop stood six feet tall in her Safety-Toe work shoes. The slacks covering her massive frame would have made an excellent pup-tent for a large troop of Boy Scouts.

She was not exactly a sight for sore eyes, although she was able to hand out sore eyes to those who didn't jump fast enough to suit her.

"What gives?" Agatha bellowed, flinging her lunch pail to the floor. "Isn't my dinner ready yet?"

"Just a minute, darling," sighed Mr. Droop.

"Well, hurry it up," his wife grumbled. "Here I work hard at the shop all day and you sit around the house taking things easy. I'm a working woman and I want my food."

Mr. Droop went into action. He brought Agatha the evening paper and her house slippers, and then finished up preparing the dinner in the kitchen.

Agatha snorted and grumbled her way to the table. She sat down and helped herself to the meat, the potatoes, the asparagus, the peas, the salad, the coffee, the pie.

Mr. Droop waited for comments. He'd worked hard at this meal.

One bite was enough.

"Where'd you get this stuff?" demanded Agatha, chewing her steak.

"Why, at the butcher's, darling."

"At the shoe-maker's, you mean! It's as tough as leather!"

"But—"

Agatha swung and Mr. Droop ducked. Gravy splattered the top of his head as the meat sailed across the room.

"One more mistake like that and I'll fix you," growled Agatha, stalking from the table.

Mr. Droop crept away. In the hall he noticed his discarded copy of UNPOPULAR SCIENCE. His lips tightened in a grim smile.

"All right," he murmured. "We'll see."

It was only a matter of minutes before he had written his letter to Dr. Pedro Moke—Inventor. He mailed it that same evening.

He didn't know what to expect, but he had a naive hope that his troubles would soon be over. That night he slumbered in bed quite peacefully.

On Mr. Droop's face was the gentle, trusting look of a little child—and the black eye that Agatha gave him just before they went to sleep.

IT WAS nearly a week later that the expressman arrived with the package. Mr. Droop had almost forgotten about his letter by this time.

But the doorbell rang and he answered it, and one of the expressmen tipped his cap and said, "Pardon me, Madam—"

Mr. Droop almost slammed the door in his face when he noticed the big package the men had carried up the stairs. It was a heavy wooden crate, and bore his name and address on the side in bold black crayon lettering.

"That's for me!" he exclaimed. "Where do I sign?"

In his excitement he lighted a cigar, and the expressmen scratched their heads as the "housewife" puffed on a fat stogie while signing the receipt.

Then they went down the steps and drove away, and Mr. Droop approached the bulky crate and tried to lift it.

Too heavy. It wouldn't budge.

Mr. Droop bent down to try again, wondering if he ought to answer a truss advertisement in UNPOPULAR SCIENCE. He strained and swore. The crate remained immovable.

"Now what the hell do I do?" be groaned.

"Why not open me up here?" said a voice.

"Fine idea—*what's that?"* snapped the startled man.

"Unwrap me here, silly," the voice advised.

"Where are you?" asked Mr. Droop, whirling around.

"Inside the crate, of course. Hurry up—it's no picnic being cooped up this way."

"It's no picnic listening to strange voices from packing-crates, either," observed Mr. Droop, a little bitterly. Still, he scurried away for a hammer and chisel.

When he returned, he approached the task of removing nails a little hesitantly. He was somewhat afraid of what might be inside the crate. These screwball inventors, now.

"What are you waiting for?" complained the shrill voice.

"Why—it's just that—who are you, anyway?" he demanded suddenly.

"I don't know."

"You don't know?"

"Of course not, silly."

"Where did you come from, then?"

"From Dr. Moke, naturally. He made me."

"Then who are you?"

"I'm not a who, I'm a what," said the voice.

“Animal, vegetable or mineral?.” inquired Mr. Droop.

“Neither.”

“But—”

“Oh, open the crate, Mister! I won’t bite you.”

This wasn’t much of a promise, but Mr. Droop was beginning to worry lest neighbors observe him carrying on a conversation with a packing-crate. Those old hens were gossipy enough, anyway.

With a deep sigh, Mr. Droop set to work. He pried away the boards and got tangled up in a bale of excelsior beneath. Then he began to remove a number of packages, wrapped in brown paper. Some were big, some small, some were long and some short. He set them down carefully on the porch.

He stooped again and his hands encountered—the bottom of the crate!

Where was the person who had spoken to him?

Outside of the small packages, the crate was empty!

“Hey!” said Mr. Droop. “What’s happened to you?”

“I’m right here,” said the voice, patiently. “Here, at your feet.”

Mr. Droop jumped to one side. A large round brown-paper parcel rested before him.

“Come on, unwrap me,” coaxed the voice.

His trembling fingers had quite a time, but Mr. Droop did the job. Then he stared down at the heavy, shining object in his hands.

It was a head—a metal head!

At least, it resembled a head. There was a sharp steel chin, a jutting aluminum nose, two eyesockets and a mouth set on a hinged jaw. The top of the silver skull was smooth and gleaming, but the base was corrugated, and a pipe extended under the chin.

“Hello,” said the metal face. “Who are you?”

“God only knows,” gasped Mr. Droop wildly. “I’m a guy that never expected to be talking to a steel head.”

“I know,” said the gleaming face. “You’re Mr. Droop, the man I’ve come to work for.”

"I guess so," Mr. Droop sighed. He watched in morbid fascination as the steel hinge slipped up and down on the jaw.

"How do you talk?" he asked.

"Quite well, thank you," answered the head. "But come on, quit stalling. Put me together, will you please?"

"Put you together?"

"Of course. Assemble me. You'll find the rest of my parts in the other packages."

"What kind of crazy talk is this?" he wondered wildly.

"Are you by any chance accusing me of not being all there?" snapped the head, coldly. "If so, you're mistaken. Dr. Moke personally dismembered me and packed me up. He would have sent you complete instructions for putting me together again, but there was no need. I can give you the directions personally. Come on, get busy. It's really very simple, you know. A three-year old child could do it."

Mr. Droop turned hastily away.

"Where are you going?" asked the head.

"To find you a three-year-old child. Let him do it. I don't want to."

The head burst into metallic laughter. "Come on, now. Just put me together. You'll find nuts and bolts in that small parcel, next to my arms and legs. And oh yes—that looks like my torso over there."

Cautiously, Mr. Droop set about his unusual task. Aided by the expert direction of the metal head, he began to assemble what soon proved to be a complete metal body. Two arms and two legs—beautifully hinged and articulated in the smallest detail—were easily attached to a shapely torso. Small openings in the metal sides were provided for the reception of a number of loose wire ends which made automatic connections somewhere inside the steel frame.

Little aluminum pins were set in place, and the head lowered onto an opening at the top of the torso. A telescoping connection evidently served as a neck.

Finally, Mr. Droop affixed wonderfully designed hands and feet to the ends of the metal limbs. The fingers and toes were quite the most remarkable features of the entire body.

"There," said the head, with some satisfaction. "At last! Hope all my wires are in place. You men are so clumsy." A surprising giggle came from the hinged jaws. "You lack the feminine touch."

"Feminine touch? Are you—female?"

"Of course, silly," tittered the head. "Aren't house servants supposed to be female?"

"Then what's your name?"

"I have none. That's up to you, Mr. Droop. Now—would you mind helping me up?"

Mr. Droop gingerly assisted the metal creature to its—or *her*—feet. Surprisingly enough, the five-foot body stood there in a perfect simulacrum of humanity.

Just like the Tin Woodman of Oz, Mr. Droop thought, wildly. Abruptly, he opened his mouth.

"That's it," he exclaimed. "I'll call you Tinnie."

"Tinnie? That's very nice—if not strictly accurate," said the metal creature. "After all, Dr. Moke might not like it if you inferred his robots were made out of tin."

"You're a robot," said Mr. Droop. "A real, sure-enough robot."

"Of course I am," said Tinnie. "And you can talk and walk and think and —everything?"

"Not quite 'everything,' I'm afraid," Tinnie giggled. "You needn't worry about feeding me or a place to sleep. A little oiling now and then, and a little attention to my wiring is all I need."

Tinnie walked across the porch and Mr. Droop followed her metallic movements with astounded eyes. Aside from a slight clattering and swaying, the robot moved with remarkable precision. Whatever the miracle behind sight, hearing, thought, and mechanical coordination—the robot was real. And definitely a perfect working model.

As he watched, Tinnie bent down and scooped up brown paper and boards.

"Better clear this up right away," said the robot.

"Wait—I'll help you," said Mr. Droop, out of habit.

"Never mind," the robot told him. "This is my job. That's what Dr. Moke told me before I was packed. I came here to do the housework. So if you'll just show me around and tell me what you want done . . ."

Shaking his head in bewilderment, Mr. Droop followed Tinnie into the house.

It all sounded too good to be true. In his elation, he could have hugged the metal mademoiselle, kissed her squarely upon the hinges of her shiny silver jaw. But Mr. Droop was a highly moral man.

He compromised by giving Tinnie the house apron and dust-cap to wear.

The robot stood before the mirror, adjusting the garments.

"How lovely," Tinnie sighed. "You're so thoughtful, Mr. Droop. I know I'll enjoy working here for you. Is there anything you want before I go out and prepare supper?"

Mr. Droop paused, then grinned.

"Why yes," he said. "Yes, there is. Would you mind running into the bedroom and bringing me out a cigar?"

THE next few days were perfect—almost too perfect.

Mr. Droop made up his mind on one point, right away. Agatha must never know. Long before she arrived home that first evening, Mr. Droop had carefully instructed Tinnie on her expected chores and warned her to keep out of sight when Mrs. Droop was around.

He offered no explanation, and was thankful when the robot demanded none.

"Lie down under the bed," he suggested. "Stay there all night. Agatha goes to work at seven. Then you can get up."

Tinnie obeyed. The next day Mr. Droop showed her around and told her what was necessary for her to know about running the house.

It was sheer delight to watch Tinnie work. She never tired, never questioned, never complained. She swept, mopped, dusted. She washed and cleaned. And she cooked beautifully.

Dr. Moke had wrought wonders, all right. Mr. Droop could ask for nothing more. Tinnie stayed out of sight whenever the doorbell rang.

Agatha was more than pleased at the way the household was run. She asked no questions, but she grunted her surprise at Mr. Droop when she inspected the carefully dusted parlor and ate the well-cooked meals.

Mr. Droop had never been so happy before in his life—his married life, that is.

He couldn't help but tell Tinnie as much.

One afternoon, as the robot was sweeping the carpets and Mr. Droop stretched out on the sofa reading UNPOPULAR SCIENCE and puffing on a cigar, he suddenly shook his head.

"Is something wrong?" asked Tinnie, cocking her metallic head.

"Not at all," said Mr. Droop. "Quite the contrary. I was just marvelling at your efficiency. You're really quite wonderful, you know."

"Thank you," said the robot. "Dr. Moke would be pleased to hear that, I'm sure."

"What kind of a man is Dr. Moke?" asked Mr. Droop.

"He's a very famous scientist," Tinnie told him. "He's been working on his robot models for many years."

"He ought to be proud of creating you," Mr. Droop declared. "But I don't quite understand just how he managed to do it."

"Would you like to hear how I was made?" inquired Tinnie.

"Well—" said Mr. Droop. For no reason at all, he blushed a little.

"What's the matter?" Tinnie asked. "Didn't you ever hear about how to make a girl?"

"Uh—not exactly," admitted Mr. Droop, turning redder by the moment.

"It was an awful problem," the robot sighed. "To begin with there were the radio-frequencies to establish. How that man sweated over my wiring! Then he devised the artificial larnyx, the balance and coordination centers, and my chromium receptors. Even designing a steel and aluminum body was a problem. I'll never forget how he hid me in the basement during the scrap drive!"

Tinnie sighed reminiscently, and her toes rattled.

"Well, he did a swell job," Mr. Droop declared. "You look perfect."

"You really think so?" Tinnie giggled coyly. "Sometimes I think so myself." She swayed closer. "Have you noticed my chassis?" she murmured.

"Indeed I have," said Mr. Droop. "You have a lovely chassis, my dear."

Tinnie tittered.

"I mean it," said Mr. Droop. "I like you, Tinnie. I like everything about you. You're quiet and sensible and hardworking. You never nag or bully. I like your shining face and your—

"Awk!" said Tinnie.

"Whassat?" yelped Mr. Droop.

"Awk."

Tinnie suddenly stood rigid. Her metal arms dropped to her side and her head hung forward.

"What's the matter?" Mr. Droop asked, springing to his feet.

"I don't know." Tinnie's jaw moved laboriously on its hinges. "Your flattery got me so upset—I think maybe I've blown a fuse."

"Great heavens!" Droop exclaimed. "Maybe I'd better send for a doctor."

"A garage mechanic would be better," squeaked the robot. "No—don't. I know now. One of the wires in my neck is loose. I can feel it dangling. You'll have to slip it back into my batteries, that's all. Just reach in and set the loose end back where it belongs."

Mr. Droop approached the robot and found the dangling wire. He bent down, put his arms around Tinnie's neck and held her back as his hands fumbled with the loose connection.

"Roscoe!"

Mr. Droop whirled suddenly.

Agatha stood, in the doorway. Her blazing eyes consumed the scene before her.

"Roscoe—what are you up to?" rasped Mrs. Droop. "What is this—this animated garbage can?"

"It's a robot," Mr. Droop whispered. "Her name is Tinnie."

"Her name?" Agatha bristled. "A woman, eh?"

"No, you don't understand," Mr. Droop protested. "She's only a housemaid. She's been helping me out around the house . . ."

"So I see."

Agatha stared bleakly at Mr. Droop's pose. He still held Tinnie in his arms, and his left hand was poised at her neck in what appeared to be an impassioned caress.

"But you don't see!" wailed Mr. Droop. "I wasn't doing anything, Agatha—I swear it! I was merely tinkering with her batteries—"

"Tinkering with her batteries?" Agatha was shocked.

"I mean, she asked me to examine her chassis—"

Mr. Droop waved his arms pitifully. "I can't explain," he sighed. "But it's all right. She's harmless. Not like you and I. No mother or father—"

"Go on," snapped Agatha. "Go on. Tell me how you took advantage of this poor orphan while I was away. I ought to tear you limb from limb."

"Please don't make a mess," piped Tinnie. "I've just cleaned the carpet."

"You see?" exclaimed Mr. Droop, triumphantly. "She's a robot. A scientist sent her here to do the housework. She's a perfect servant."

"Humph!" remarked his wife. Then she shrugged. "We'll look into all this later," she promised. "I'd tend to this little affair now, but there's something more important on my mind."

"What is it?" asked Mr. Droop.

"I'm bringing the boss home for dinner tomorrow night," Agatha announced.

"The boss?"

"Yes sir," Agatha declared, triumphantly. "If I make a real impression I can go places at the Hercules Steel Mill. My dinner guest is none other than George Musclebinder himself."

"The Steel King?" said Mr. Droop, impressed in spite of himself.

"Nobody else but. Tomorrow night you'll prepare dinner for one of the biggest steel men in the country and I want you to remember that. You and your Tin Lizzie kitchen maid had better turn out a good meal, or else."

"We'll do it," Mr. Droop promised.

"Of course we will," said the robot.

Mrs. Droop glared at Tinnie malevolently.

"None of your tricks now," she muttered. "I'm going to let you stay until tomorrow and help out. But after that—"

"You aren't going to send her away, are you?" whispered Mr. Droop.

Agatha nodded.

"Certainly am," she told him. "After tomorrow night, she goes out of here on her tin can!"

MR. Droop had a miserable time of it that night and throughout the following day. He himself tended to the dusting and cleaning while Tinnie busied herself in the kitchen, preparing the meal for Agatha and her special guest.

"You'll have to serve," she told him. "Your wife won't let her boss see me. I don't think Agatha likes me very well."

"She'll get over it," Mr. Droop assured her, none too convincingly. "Agatha is like that. Just fix a good meal, now, and I'm sure she'll forgive you and let you stay."

"You want me to stay?" said Tinnie. A melting gleam appeared in the reflected corners of her eyesockets.

"More than anything in the world," said Mr. Droop. "It's been just heavenly having you here—for the first time I know what peace and comfort means."

Tinnie giggled. Mr. Droop stared at her. For the first time he noticed that her jaw-hinges made dimples in her cheeks. A most becoming phenomenon.

"Well." He cleared his throat. "We'd better hurry. They should be arriving any minute now."

Mr. Droop set the table and Tinnie retreated to the kitchen. He could hear her fussing with pots and pans on the stove.

Then the doorbell rang and Agatha entered.

George Musclebinder followed her into the hallway.

The Steel King was as rugged as his nickname implied. He was as tall and muscular as Agatha herself, and his bulldog features lent him an air of formidable pugnacity. At the moment, however, he was chuckling playfully and slapping Agatha on the back.

Agatha, coy and red-faced, snorted merrily and lighted his cigar for him.

Mr. Droop stood in the doorway amazed. Agatha acting playful! Agatha permitting someone to smoke in her house!

"Hello there," she called to him. "George and I are a little late, I guess. We stopped in for a couple boilermakers on the way home."

"Shot and a beer," Musclebinder explained. "Puts hair on your chest, eh, Aggie?"

Mr. Droop fully expected his wife to strike the Steel King dead. The idea of anyone calling her "Aggie" was unthinkable.

But Agatha did nothing of the sort. Instead she giggled, gave Musclebinder a dig in the ribs, and then sneered at Mr. Droop.

"What are you goggling at?" she demanded. "Take George's hat for him and get ready to serve dinner. We're starving."

Mr. Droop reached for Musclebinder's hat. The big man surveyed him with a chuckle.

"So this is your better half, eh, Aggie?" he said. "Well well well. Pleased to meet you—Droop."

He suddenly seized Mr. Droop's hand and began to grind it to a pulp. Mr. Droop's arm became totally numb up to the shoulder.

Musclebinder, evidently making up his mind whether or not to remove the arm from its socket, suddenly decided against it and dropped Mr. Droop's hand again.

"Let's see what you've cooked up for us working folks," he roared, with hideous heartiness. "Aggie tells me you're quite a good cook. Guess that's why she married you, huh?"

Mr. Droop would gladly have killed the man on the spot. Instead, a withering glance from Agatha sent him off to the closet with Musclebinder's hat. Then he stood aside as his wife and the Steel King made for the dining room.

They sat down. Agatha stared at the neatly-decorated table.

"What's the idea of three places?" she demanded.

"Well, there's Musclebinder, and you, and myself—"

"There's George and I," she corrected. "You can eat in the kitchen after we've finished. Hurry up now, start serving."

She turned to Musclebinder with a cloying smile. "Don't mind him—he's such a dope," she declared.

Mr. Droop stumbled out into the kitchen. He sighed.

"What's the matter?" asked Tinnie, solicitously, as she covered the *entree* with a silver lid.

"Nothing, nothing at all," lied Mr. Droop desperately. He knew how hard Tinnie had worked preparing this meal and he hadn't the heart to spoil things for her now.

"Everything will be all right," he lied. "I'm going to eat out here with you and keep you company."

The robot flashed him a look of gratitude not unmixed with maternal anxiety.

"I do hope her boss likes what I've prepared for him," she said. "Here's Agatha's plate. But this dish is specially for him."

"Swell," said Mr. Droop.

He took soup into the dining room. Agatha and Musclebinder were laughing uproariously. At the sight of Mr. Droop, his wife's jaw set.

"What's this?" she demanded.

"Why—soup."

"That's not what I mean, stupid! What's the idea of serving food without being properly dressed? Go back in the kitchen and put on your apron."

"Haw haw!" laughed Musclebinder. "That's a hot one! Got him trained, haven't you?"

"You can bet who wears the slacks around this family!" Agatha boasted. "He toes the line, just like the men do down at the shop."

"That's right," Musclebinder declared. "In all my years as a steel man I've never seen anyone who could handle men the way you could. That's what I wanted to talk to you about, Aggie. How'd you like to be promoted to foreman?"

Mr. Droop didn't hear her answer. He humbly cleared away the soup plates, and returned from the kitchen with the main dishes.

Agatha's plate contained meat and potatoes.

Musclebinder received a bare platter and the silver-lidded entree dish.

"Something special for you," Mr. Droop told him.

"Swell! Say, I'll bet you're the sweetest little housekeeper," snickered Musclebinder, roguishly pinching. Mr. Droop's cheek.

He swept the lid off the platter and helped himself liberally to the gravy-covered contents.

"Gawd, I'm starved," he bellowed. "I'm gonna eat and eat and—"

He speared a forkful from the mass on his plate and gulped eagerly.

Suddenly his eyes goggled.

"Gazawp!" he spluttered. "Oookle. Mfffuggg! Ulp!"

"What's the matter?" Agatha murmured.

"Urgle! Pluppff! Aaaargh!" groaned Musclebinder. His face turned a deep purple and he began to choke and cough.

"George—what in the name of—"

"Yeeeeoooowww!!!"

With a gasping shriek, Musclebinder managed to expectorate the obstruction in his throat.

Objects fell with a hideous clank on his plate.

Wide-eyed, Mr. Droop stared at what lay there. A gravy-covered collection of nuts, bolts, and pieces of sheet metal!

“What the hell?” croaked Musclebinder.

“Come here—*you!”* yapped Agatha.

Mr. Droop made a dash for the kitchen door. Agatha pounded at his heels.

“Who did it?” she screamed, bursting into the kitchen to confront her husband and the robot.

“Did what?” asked Tinnie, calmly.

“Who served my boss that dish of hardware?”

“Why I did, of course,” Tinnie told her. “What’s the matter, did you want some too? I hardly thought I should give nuts to you.”

“Nuts to who?” yelled Agatha. “Quit insulting me! What I want to know is—why serve George Musclebinder a plate of metal?”

“Isn’t that what he likes to eat?” asked Tinnie. “I thought you said he was a big steel man.”

“Steel man?”

Agatha went berserk.

She made a dive for the robot across the room. Half-way in her charge she scooped up the can-opener from the kitchen table. Brandishing the deadly weapon, she bore down on Tinnie with murderous intent.

“You metal-brained moron,” screamed Agatha. “I’ll chop you up into tin cans!”

She slashed out with the can-opener as Tinnie retreated around the kitchen table.

Mr. Droop stood paralyzed for an instant. But only for an instant. Then something snapped inside him. He growled.

“Let her alone!” yelled Mr. Droop.

Agatha turned. “How dare you interfere, you worm?” she demanded.

“Let her alone!” commanded Mr. Droop. “Don’t you dare harm the woman I love.”

"Love?" Agatha gasped.

So did Mr. Droop. The words came unbidden to his lips—but when he spoke them, he realized he was telling the truth.

"You love this walking junk-heap?" rasped Agatha.

"Yes," said Mr. Droop, desperately. "And if you harm her, I'll—no you don't!"

Agatha turned and struck out at Tinnie.

As she did so, Mr. Droop went into action. Grabbing up a rolling pin, he brought it down firmly on Agatha's head. The rolling pin broke, but Agatha stopped.

At that moment, George Musclebinder lurched into the kitchen.

"What's all this?" roared the Steel King.

His eyes goggled as he saw Tinnie. The robot, seeking to escape, tottered toward him. Musclebinder saw the gleaming steel-body, the metallic face, the outstretched clawing arms advancing.

"A monster!" he gurgled. "Help—it's witchcraft—take it away!"

Shaking with sudden fright, Musclebinder dashed from the kitchen.

Agatha followed.

"Wait for me, George," she wailed. "I'm coming with you."

She paused in the doorway and sniffed at Mr. Droop.

"I suppose you know this is the end," she told him. "I'm leaving you for good. You've made a wreck out of poor George. And if you prefer the company of a walking garbage-can to me—well, it's your funeral!"

Mr. Droop made a gesture with his rolling-pin and Agatha closed the door hastily.

He stood there, listening to the sound of retreating footsteps.

Tinnie was at his side, her jaw-hinges moving in a slow smile.

"Thank you," she said. "Thank you for saving me."

"Nothing at all," muttered Mr. Droop, in an embarrassed voice. "Forget it."

"I can't forget it," said Tinnie. The robot moved closer. Her voice was soft. "Did you mean what you told Agatha?" she asked.

“What?” gulped Mr. Droop.

“About—about the woman you love.” Tinnie turned her face away shyly as she spoke.

“I—I guess I did,” admitted Mr. Droop, slowly.

“Then I can stay here,” said Tinnie. “And cook for you and keep house and everything.”

Mr. Droop turned with new resolution. He held the robot close. “I’ll say you can,” he muttered. “I’ll go out and get a job and feel like a man again. And you can run the household. Tinnie, I’ve always wanted a girl just like you.”

And so it was arranged. Mr. Droop wrote to Dr. Moke and got permission. The two of them have settled down quite happily.

As to whether a union between a man and a robot can work out, only time can tell.

But at the moment both Tinnie and Mr. Droop are looking forward to the day they can celebrate their tin wedding anniversary.

THE END

The Dead Don't Die!

Just because that lovely girl smiled at you, does that mean she's alive? Better take another look—she may be a walking corpse named Vera LaValle . . .

THIS IS a story that never ends. This is a story that never ends, but I know when it started. Thursday, May 24th, was the date. That night was the beginning of everything for me.

For Cono Colluri it was the end.

Cono and I were sitting there, playing two-handed stud poker. It was quiet in his cell, and we played slowly, meditatively. Everything would have been all right except for one thing. We had a kibitzer.

No matter how calmly we played, no matter how unemotional we appeared to be, we both were aware of another presence. The other, the kibitzer, stayed with us all night long.

His name was Death.

He grinned over Cono's shoulder, tapped him on the arm with a bony finger, selected the cards for every shuffle. He tugged at my hands, poked me in the back when I dealt.

We couldn't see him, of course. But we knew he was there, all right. Watching, watching and waiting; those big blind holes in the skull sneaking a look at the clock and counting the minutes, those skeleton fingers tapping away the seconds until dawn.

Because in the morning, no matter what cards turned up and no matter how much money changed hands, Death would win the game. The game, and Cono Colluri.

It's funny, looking back on it now, to figure out how the three of us happened to get together that particular evening—Cono, myself, and Death.

My story's straight enough. About six months beforehand I'd taken a Civil Service exam and ended up for a probationary period as a guard at State Pen. I wasn't too excited about the job when I got it, but I felt it might give me routine, a small but steady income, and a chance to turn out a book on the side. By the time a few months had passed, I knew I was wrong. The idea of turning out a novel in a background of security sounded fine when I started, but there was no security in a guard's life. I found I couldn't write. The bars and the concrete penned me in just as much as any of my charges. And I began to develop my own sense of guilt.

I guess my trouble was too much empathy. That's a big word—meaning the ability to put yourself in the other fellow's place. "There but for the grace of God go!"—you know that feeling. I had it, but double. Instead of writing at night, I tossed around on my bunk and suffered the torments of the thousand men under my charge.

That's how I got friendly with Cono, I guess—through empathy.

Cono came to the death cell in an awful hurry. His had been a short trial and a merry one—the kind of thing the newspapers like to play up as an example of "quick justice". He'd been a professional strong man with a carnival—the James T. Armstrong Shows. The story was that he got too jealous of his wife and one of the other performers. At any rate, one morning they found Cono lying dead drunk in his trailer. His wife was with him, but she wasn't drunk—merely dead. Somebody had pressed two thumbs against the base of her neck, and something had snapped.

It was an ideal setup for "quick justice" and that's just what Cono Colluri got. Within three weeks he was on his way to the death-house, and for the past two weeks he'd been a guest of the state. A temporary guest. And he was moving out tomorrow morning—for good.

THAT, OF course, explains why Death showed up at our little card party. He belonged there.

Oh, perhaps not for the entire night. He undoubtedly had rattled down the short—oh so terribly short!—corridor to the little room with the big chair. He'd probably peered and eavesdropped on the electricians who tested the switches. He'd certainly have stopped in at the warden's office to make sure that the mythical pardon from the Governor wasn't on its way.

Yes, Death must have checked all those things to make certain that this was really a farewell card party. And now the uninvited guest was kibitzing as Cono and I dealt our hands.

I knew he was there, and Cono knew it too, but I have to hand it to the big man. He was cool. He'd always been cool; on the stand, swearing his innocence, he'd never lost his temper. Here in the cell, talking to the warden, to the other guards, to me, he'd never broken down. Just told his story over and over again. Somebody had slipped a Mickey in his drink and when he woke up, Flo was dead. He'd never harmed her.

Of course, nobody believed him at the trial. Nobody believed him in the prison, either; the warden, the guards, even the other convicts knew that he was guilty and ready to fry.

That's why I had the honor of spending the last night with him—he'd made a special request for my presence. Because, believe it or not, I believed him.

Blame it on empathy again, or on the very fact that I noticed he never lost his temper. The way he talked about the case, the way he talked about his wife, the way he talked about the execution—everything was out of character for a "crime of passion" murderer. Oh, he was a big brute, and a rough-looking one, but he never acted on impulse.

I guess he took to me right away. We used to talk, nights, after I drew guard assignment on his bloc. He was the only prisoner awaiting execution, and it was natural that we'd get to talking.

"You know I didn't do it, Bob," he'd tell me—over and over again, but there was nothing else to talk about, for him—"It must have been Louie. He lied at the trial, you know. He had been drinking with me, no matter what he says, and he offered me a slug out of the bottle behind the cookhouse, after the last show'. That's the last thing I remember. So I figure he must have done it. He was always hanging around Flo anyway, the little crumb. The Great Ahmed warned me, said he saw it in the crystal. But of course, he came into court with this alibi and—oh what's the use?"

There was no use at all, and he knew it. But he told me over and over again. And I believed him.

NOW THIS last night, he wasn't talking. Maybe it was because Death was there, listening to every word. Maybe it was because they'd shaved his head and slit his trouser legs and left him to wait out these last few hours.

Cono wasn't talking, but he could still grin. He could and he did—smiling at me and looking like a great big overgrown college boy with a crew haircut. Come to think of it, he wasn't much more than just that; only Cono had never gone to college. He went with his first carney at fifteen, married Flo when he was twenty-three, and now he was going to the chair two days before his twenty-fifth birthday. But he smiled. Smiled, and played poker.

"My king is high," he said. "Bet a quarter."

"See you," I answered. "Let's have another card."

"King still high. Check. Funny thing, aces aren't coming up much tonight."

I didn't answer him. I didn't-have the heart to tell him that I was cheating. I'd taken the Ace of Spades out of the pack and put it in my pocket before the game started. I didn't want him to get that particular card on the table tonight of all nights.

"Fifty cents on the king," said Cono.

"See you," I said. "I've got a pair of nines."

"Pair of kings." He turned up his cards. "I win."

"You're just naturally lucky," I told him—and wished I hadn't.

But he smiled. I couldn't face that smile, so I looked at my watch. That was another mistake, and I realized it as soon as I made the gesture.

His smile didn't alter. "Not much time left, is there?" he said. "Seems to be getting light."

"Another hand?" I suggested.

"No." Cono stood up. Shaved head, slit trousers and all, he was still an impressive sight. Six feet four, two hundred and ten pounds, in the prime of life. And in just an hour or so they would strap him into the chair, turn on the juice, twist that smile into a grimace of agony. I couldn't look at him, thinking those thoughts. But I could feel Death looking; gazing and gloating.

"Bob, I want to talk to you."

"Shall we order breakfast? You know what the warden said—anything you want, the works."

"No breakfast." Cono put his hand on my shoulder. The fingers that were supposed to have broken a woman's neck barely pressed my skin. "Let's fool 'em all and skip the meal. That'll give the nosey reporters something to talk about."

"What's up?"

"Nothing much. But I got things to tell you."

"Why me in particular?"

"Who else is there left? I got no friends. Got no family I know of. And Flo's gone. . . ."

FOR THE first time I saw a look of anger flicker across the big man's face. I knew then that whoever had killed Flo was lucky when Cono got the chair.

"So it has to be you. Besides, you believe me."

"Go on," I said.

“It’s about the dough, see? Flo and me, we were saving for a house. Got better’n eight grand stashed away. Somebody’s gonna get it, so why not you? I wrote this here letter, and I want you to have it.”

He pulled the envelope out from under his bunk. It was sealed, and scrawled across its face in the sprawling handwriting of a schoolboy was the name, “The Great Ahmed”.

“Who’s he?”

“I told you, he’s the mitt reader with the carney. A nice guy, Bob. You’ll like him. He stuck up for me at the trial, remember? Told about Louie hanging around Flo. Didn’t do any good because he couldn’t prove nothing, but he was—what did the lawyer say?—a character witness. Yeah. Anyhow, he banks for all us carneys with the show.

“Take the letter. It says to give you the money. He’ll do it, too. All you got to do is look him up.”

I hesitated. “Wait a minute, Cono. You’d better think this over. Eight thousand dollars is a lot of money to pass out to a virtual stranger—”

“Take it, pal.” Again he smiled. “There’s a string tied to the bundle, of course.”

“What do you want?”

“I want you to use some of that dough to try and clear me. Oh, I know you haven’t got much of a chance, and nothing to work on. But maybe, with the dough, you’ll get an angle, turn something up. You’re leaving this joint anyway.”

I jerked my head at that. “How did you know?” I asked. “Why, I only told the warden yesterday afternoon—”

“Word goes around,” Cono smiled. “They give me the office that you’re springing yourself out of here this Saturday. That you aren’t satisfied to be a screw the rest of your life. So I says to myself, why not give him the eight grand as a kind of going-away present? Seeing as how we’re both going away.”

I BALANCED the envelope on my palm. “The Great Ahmed, eh? And you say he’s with the show?”

“Sure. You’ll find their route in *Billboard.”* Cono smiled. “They must be somewhere around Louisville right now. Heading north as it gets warmer. I’d sort of like to see the old outfit again, but . . .”

The smile faded. “One more favor, Bob.”

“Name it.”

“Scram out of here.”

“But—”

“You heard me. Scram. I expect visitors pretty soon, and I don’t want you to stick around.”

I nodded, nodded gratefully. Cono was sparing me that final ordeal—the warden, the priest, the mumbling farewell, the shuffling down the corridor.

“Goodbye, Bob. Remember, I’m depending on you.”

“I’ll do what I can. Goodbye, Cono.”

The big hand enveloped mine. “I’ll be seeing you around,” he said. “Sure.”

“I mean it, Bob. You don’t believe this is the end, do you?”

“Maybe you’re right. I hope so.” I had no intention of getting into a discussion about the after-life with Cono, in his situation. Personally, I had a pretty good idea that once the juice was turned on, Cono would be turned off—forever. But I couldn’t tell him that. So I just shook hands, put the letter in my pocket, unlocked the cell, and walked out.

At the end of the corridor I turned around and looked back. Cono stood against the bars, his body outlined against the yellow light but blending into the shadows that come with dawn. There was another shadow behind him—a big, black shadow outlining a ghost of a figure.

I recognized the shadow. Old Man Death.

That was the last I saw—just the two of them, waiting together. Cono and Old Man Death.

I went downstairs, then, to my bunk. The night shift came off and the day shift went on. They were all talking about the execution. They tried to pump me, but I didn’t say anything. I sat there on the edge of the bunk, looking at my watch and waiting.

UPSTAIRS they must have gone through the whole routine, just the way you always see it in the B movies. Opening the door. Handcuffing him to a guard on either side. Marching down the corridor. Yes, just about now it would be happening. The night shift went outside to get the news, leaving me alone on my bunk. I looked at my watch again. Now was the time.

They’d be strapping him down now, putting that damned black cloth over his eyes. I could see him sitting there; a big, gentle hulk of a man with a tired smile on his face.

Maybe he was guilty, maybe he was innocent—I didn’t know. But the whole stupid business of execution, of “justice” and “punishment” and “the full penalty of the law” hit me in the pit of the stomach. It was cruel, it was senseless, it was wrong.

The seconds ticked away. I watched the little hand crawl around the face of the watch and tried to figure it out. One minute Cono would be alive. A jolt of electric current and he’d be dead. Trite idea. But it’s the eternal mystery all of us live with. And die with.

What was the answer? I didn’t know. Nobody knew. Nobody except the kibitzer. Old Man Death knew the answer. I wondered if he had a watch. No, why should he? What’s Time to Death?

Thirty seconds.

Sure, I’d quit my job. I’d try to clear Cono. But what good would it do him? He’d never know. He’d be dead.

Twenty seconds.

The hand crawled around, and the thoughts crawled around. What’s it like to be dead? Is it a sleep? Is it a sleep with dreams? Is it just dreams but no rest, no peace?

Ten seconds.

One moment you're alive, you can feel and hear and smell and see and move. And the next—nothing. Or—something. What's the change like? Like suddenly turning out the lights?

Now.

The lights went out.

First they dimmed, then they flickered, then they went out. Only for a second, mind you. But that was long enough.

Long enough for Cono to die.

Long enough for me to shudder.

Long enough for Death to reach out, grinning, and claim his prey in the dark . . .

I WAS STILL in a daze when I hit the railroad station on Saturday morning. So much had happened in the last two days I still couldn't figgure it out.

First of all, there was that business about Cono's body. I'd gone to the warden, of course, with the story about the money, and I more or less expected to handle funeral expenses from Cono's funds when I got them.

"His cousin will bury him," the warden told me. "Got a call this morning."

"But I thought he had no relatives."

"Turns out he has, all right. Fellow named Varek. Oh, it's legitimate, we always check. The Doc insists—makes him mad every time somebody shows up and cheats him out of an autopsy."

The warden had chuckled, but I didn't laugh.

And the warden hadn't chuckled long. Because the next day, Louie had confessed.

Louie the contortionist, that is—the man Cono claimed had given him the knockout drops in his drink. The warden got a wire, of course, but the whole story hit the papers that afternoon. It seems he'd just walked into the station-house in Louisville and confessed. Came out with the entire statement without a sign of emotion. Said he just wanted to clear his conscience once he knew Cono was dead. He'd hated Cono, wanted Flo, and when she repulsed him he rigged up the murder to get revenge on both of them.

The story was lurid enough, but it had gaps in it. The report I read claimed Louie was a hophead. He was too calm, too unemotional. "Glassy-eyed" was the way they put it. They were going to give him a psychiatric test.

Well, I wished them luck, the whole lot of them—psychiatrists and district attorneys and smart coppers and penologists. All I knew was that Cono was innocent. And he was dead.

By this time I'd already checked on the Armstrong Shows through *Billboard.* They were playing Louisville this week, all right. I sent through my wire Friday afternoon. Saturday morning I got a telegram signed by the advance agent in Paducah.

> "GREAT AHMED LEFT SHOW THREE WEEKS AGO STOP OPENING OWN MITT CAMP IN CHICAGO STOP WILL CHECK FORWARDING ADDRESS AND NOTIFY LATER"

So I was on my way to Chicago and eight thousand dollars. I'd hole up in some hotel and wait for news on the Great Ahmed. And after that—well, with the money, my writing problems would be solved.

ACTUALLY, I should have been happy enough at the way it had all turned out. Cono's name was cleared, I was out of the whole sordid grind forever, and I had eight grand coming, in cash.

But something bothered me. It wasn't just the irony of Cono Colluri's innocence. It was the inexplicable feeling that things weren't settled, that they were only beginning. That I had somehow been caught up in something that would sweep me along to—

"Chicago!" bawled the conductor.

And there I was, in the Windy City at 5 PM on Saturday, May 25th. It wasn't windy today. As I lugged my grip out of the LaSalle Street Station I walked straight into a pouring rain.

There's something about a storm in Chicago. It seems to melt all the taxicabs away. I stood there, contemplating the downpour, watching the cars inch along under the El tracks. The sky was dark and dirty. The water dribbled inkstains along the sides of the buildings. I couldn't stand watching it in my present mood.

So I walked. I turned corners several times. Pretty soon there was a hotel. It wasn't a good hotel. It was located too far south to be even a decent hotel. But that didn't matter. I needed a place to stay in for a couple of days until the money was located. And right now, I had to get out of the rain. My suit was soaked, and the cardboard in the luggage had taken a beating.

I went in, registered. A bellboy took me up to my room on the third floor.

Apparently he hadn't expected me. At least, he didn't know about my coming in time to shave. But he opened my door, deposited my luggage and asked if there'd be anything else now. Then he held out his hand. It would have taken me all day to give him a decent manicure, so I put a quarter in his palm instead. He was just as happy with that.

Then he left, I opened my grip, changed clothes, and went out to eat. The rain had moderated to a drizzle. I stopped in the lobby long enough to get eyed by the night clerk, the house dick, and a woman with improbable red hair.

During the pause I managed to send off a telegram to the advance man of the carney, giving him my new address and requesting action on locating the Great Ahmed. That concluded my business for the day.

At least, I thought it did at the time.

Nothing happened to change my mind during supper. I ate at a fish joint and contemplated the delightful prospect of returning to my crummy room and holing up for the weekend.

I DON’T know if you’ve ever spent a Sunday alone in downtown Chicago, but if you haven’t, I offer you one word of advice.

Don’t.

There’s something about the deserted canyons on a Sunday that tears the heart out of a man. Something about the gray sunlight reflected from grimy roofs. Something about the crumpled bits of soiled paper flopping listlessly along empty streets. Something about the mournful rattle of the half-empty elevated trains. Something about the barred shop-windows and chained doors. It gets to you, does things to your insides. You start wondering whether or not, in the midst of all this death and decay, you’re really alive.

The prospect didn’t please me at all. I finished my meal, put another quarter in another palm, and wandered out down the street.

After all, it was still Saturday night. And Saturday night was different. The rain had definitely stopped now, and the street was black and gleaming. Neon light reflections wriggled like crimson and gold serpents across my path.

You know what serpents do, of course. They tempt you. These particular neon serpents were saying, “Come in. Have a drink. You’ve got nothing to do tonight anyway, and nobody to do it with. Sit down. Place your order. Relax. You’re due for a little relaxation after six months in prison. It’s a long sentence. You know what a con does after he’s sprung. You’re entitled to a little fun.”

There were serpents all around me. Serpents spelling out the names of taverns, night-clubs, come-on joints, clips, dives. All I had to do was take my choice.

Instead, I walked back to the hotel, went in the lobby, and checked with the night clerk to make sure my telegram was really on the way to the carney. Then I went up to my room and rid myself of all money except for a ten-dollar bill. I wasn’t taking any chances on getting rolled.

The night was still young. I’d probably feel young myself with a few drinks in me. I went back down to the lobby and toyed with the notion of the hotel bar.

The improbable redhead had disappeared, and so had the house dick. The place was almost deserted now. Almost, but not quite. There was a blonde sitting in a chair near the elevator. I'd looked at her once when I'd come downstairs and now I looked at her again.

She was worth a second look.

Genuine. That's the only word to describe her. Genuine. To begin with, she was a real blonde. No peroxide glint, no unnatural accent in makeup. The fur she wore was real, and so were the diamonds.

Those diamonds really stopped me. The ring was too big to be phoney. Even if the stone were flawed, it must have set her (or somebody) back a pretty penny. And the same went for the big choker that clung to her neck in a glittering caress.

Her smile seemed genuine, too.

And that was the phoney part.

Why should she smile at me? Me, with my forty-dollar suit and my ten-dollar bill tucked away in its watch pocket?

I didn't get it. And I didn't want it. I walked towards the lobby entrance to the hotel bar. She stood up and followed.

I walked into the dimly-lit bar, around it, and out the front door to the street. I'd do my drinking somewhere else, thank you.

THERE WAS a little place across the street down the block. I ran into it, crossing in mid-traffic. Before I opened the door I glanced back to make sure that she wasn't following. Then I went in.

The joint was small—an oval bar and five or six booths grouped on either side of a juke-box. The bartender on duty was lonesome.

"What'll it be, Mac?"

"Rye. Top shelf."

He poured. I drank. Just like that. Fast. The stuff was bonded, like a bank messenger.

"Refill, please."

He poured. I watched his black bowtie. It was beginning to wobble in anticipation of the conversation forming in his larynx. Abruptly it stopped wobbling.

Because the door opened and she came in. Big as life, and even blonder. The neon on the juke-box did things to her diamond choker.

There was no place to hide. No real reason for me to hide, for that matter. She came right over, sat down, motioned to the bartender-. “The same,” she said. Nice, rich, husky-voice.

She watched the man pour, then transferred her gaze to me. Her eyes matched the diamonds she was wearing.

“Let’s sit in a booth,” she suggested.

“Why?”

“We can talk there.”

“What’s wrong with right here?”

“If you prefer.”

“What’s the proposition?”

“I want you to come with me, to meet somebody.”

“You’ll have to talk plainer than that, lady.”

“I said we should take a booth.”

“Nothing wrong with mentioning names right here in the open.”

“No.” She shook her head. Those diamonds shed enough light to blind a pedestrian walking across the street. “I am not permitted to mention names yet. But it will be to your advantage to come with me.”

“Sorry, lady. I’d have to know more about it.” I looked down at my glass. “For example, who sent you to me. Flow you found me. Little details like that. Maybe they’re nothing to you. Me, I find them fascinating.”

“This is no time to make jokes.”

“I’m serious. And I say I’m not playing unless you tell me the name of the team.”

“All right, Bob. But—”

That did it. The name. Of course, she could have picked it up off the hotel register easily enough. But it jarred me more than anything else up to that point. It jarred me right on down to my feet.

"Good-night," I said.

She didn't answer. As I walked out, she was still staring at me. Blue diamond eyes winked me out of the tavern.

I walked out. I didn't go back to my room and I didn't go to another tavern. I headed north, crossed under the El tracks into the Loop. There was a burlesque show. I bought a ticket and sat through a dreary performance of which I remember nothing except the old blackout skit about the photographer in the park who complained that the squirrels were nibbling his equipment.

I spent my time trying to fit the pieces together. Who was this girl? A friend of Cono's? A friend of Flo's? A friend of the Great Ahmed's? A friend of the carney advance man? Or just a friend?

Cono was dead and Flo was dead. They couldn't tell her where to find me. Ahmed didn't know I existed, let alone where I was. The carney advance man wouldn't know my address until the telegram arrived.

Could it be that she had a line into the prison and had learned I was about to receive eight thousand dollars?

Was she simply working the hotel, picking my name from the register at random?

But if so, what was this story about a proposition, and meeting somebody?

It didn't make sense. I sat there a while and tried to figure the deal out, then I left.

ELEVEN O'CLOCK. I headed back to the hotel. This time I peeked into the lobby before entering. She wasn't around. I slid unobtrusively past the entrance so the night clerk wouldn't pay attention. He was reading a science-fiction magazine and didn't look up.

The elevator operator took me to the fifth floor without removing his eyes from the Racing Form. Quite a bunch of students in this hotel.

Probably working their way through mortician's school.

I walked down to the door of my room very quietly. I listened at the keyhole before I unlocked the door. Then I opened it fast and switched on the light.

No blonde.

I examined the closet, the washroom. Still no blonde. Then and only then I went to the phone, called room service, and ordered a pint of rye and some ice.

It was still Saturday night and I was still entitled to a drink, without strange blondes butting in.

But when the drinks came, I found the blonde was still with me. Prancing around inside my skull, making propositions, winking her diamonds at me.

It didn't take me long to finish the bottle and it didn't take the bottle long to finish me.

Somewhere along the line I managed to undress, don pajamas, and slump across the bed. Somewhere along the line I drifted off to sleep.

And that's when it started.

I was back in the burlesque house, sitting in the crummy seat, watching the stage. This time the performance was more interesting. There was a new comic in the cast—a tall fellow with a shaved head. He looked something like Cono. In fact, he was Cono. Big as life. A chorus line danced out behind him; eight, count 'em, eight nifty little numbers. They danced, kicked, whirled. Cono noticed them. He did a little shuffling dance of his own, gyrating to the end of the line. Then he reached out—in the old familiar gesture used by the late Ted Healy in chastising his stooges—and flicked them across the neck. One by one. As his fingers touched each girl in turn, she changed.

Heads dangled limply from broken necks. The eight dancing girls became eight dancing cadavers. Eight, count 'em, eight. The dancing dead. The dancing dead, with skulls for heads. Skulls with diamond eyes.

Dead arms reached out and scrabbled in dead skull-sockets. They picked out the diamonds and threw them at me. I twisted and turned, sweated and squirmed, but I couldn't dodge. The diamonds hit me, seared me with icy fire.

Cono laughed. The girls danced off stage and he was all alone. All alone except for the chair. It stood there in the center of the stage and the lights went down. As the spotlight narrowed, Cono moved towards its center, closer to the chair. He had to stay within the circle of light or die.

THEN THE circle narrowed still further and he was sitting in the chair. As if by magic, squirrels danced out on the stage. They each carried a tiny thong, and each bound the thong around Cono's arm or leg, or neck until he sat there crisscrossed with thongs that lashed him to the chair.

I don't have to tell you what kind of a chair it was. What else would it be?

And I don't have to tell you what was going to happen next. Even in my dream I knew it, and I struggled frantically to wake up.

But I couldn't. I couldn't even leave my seat in the theatre. Because while I had been watching Cono getting bound into the chair, somebody had bound me!

Now I was sitting in an electric chair, hands tied, feet tied, electrodes clamped and ready. I tugged and tore, but I couldn't move. They had me, all right. It had all been a trick, a dirty trick to get my attention away from myself.

I knew that now. Because suddenly Cono burst his bonds with a flick of his fingers, the same fingers that had killed the dancing girls. He stood up and laughed because it was a joke. A joke on me.

He wasn't going to die. I was. He'd live. He'd get the eight thousand dollars and the blonde, and I'd fry. Just as soon as they turned on the juice. The bonded juice. The neon lights were winking now and the bartender was ready to pull the switch as soon as the conductor called out "Chicago!" and now they were getting ready to give the signal. While waiting, Cono stood on the stage and amused me with card tricks. He pulled the Ace of Spades out of his mouth and held it up for me to see.

Then it was time. Somebody came onstage and handed him a telegram from the carney and that was the signal for them to yell "Chicago!"

The switch was ready. I felt the cold sweat running down my spine, felt the electrodes bite into the side of my leg, the side of my head. And then, they pulled the switch—

I woke up.

I woke up, sat up in bed and stared out the window.

Through the windowpane, the blonde stared back at me.

I could only see her face, and that was funny, because it was a full window. Then I realized it was because she wasn't vertical, but horizontal. And only her face was pointed towards me.

Shall I make it plainer?

I mean she was floating in empty air outside my window.

Floating in empty air and smiling at me with her icy eyes aglitter.

Then I really woke up.

The second dream, or the second part of the dream, was so real I had to stagger over to the window and convince myself that there was no one outside. It took me a minute before my trembling legs would support me and carry me that distance, so if she really had been at the window there'd have been enough time for her to get back down the fire-escape and disappear.

Of course she wasn't there.

And she couldn't have been, because there was no fire-escape. I gazed down at a sheer drop of five floors to the closed and empty courtyard below. It was black down there, black as the Ace of Spades.

I don't know what I should have done under the circumstances; all I know is what I did do.

I shoved my head under the cold water faucet, towelled my face dry, dressed, and rushed out of my room in search of a drink.

And that's when the next nightmare started.

THERE WAS this little joint three blocks south of the hotel. I ran all the way, couldn't stop running until I'd covered that much distance. The street was deserted and it was dark, and only this little joint had a rose light burning in the window. It was the light that drew me, because I was afraid of the dark.

I opened the door and a blast of smoke and sound hit me in the face but I ploughed through it blindly to the bar.

"Shot of whiskey!" I said, and meant it.

The bartender was a tall, thin man and he had a glass eye that almost fell out as he bent his head while pouring my drink. I didn't pay very much attention to it at the time; I was too busy getting the drink down.

Then it fascinated me. I didn't want to stare at it, so I looked away—looked down the bar, into the seething center of smoke and sound.

That was a mistake.

Sitting on the stool next to me was a little man who was sipping a glass of beer. He had to sip, because he had no arms. He lapped at the glass the way a cat laps at a saucer of cream. Watching him was a blind man. Don't ask me how I knew he could see, but I got the impression of watching from the tilt of the head, the focus of the dark glasses.

I whirled around and nearly collided with the man on crutches. He was standing there arguing with the man on the floor—the one without legs. Down the bar a way, somebody was banging with a steel hook affixed to his elbow. I could scarcely hear the thumping because the juke box was playing so loudly. Sure enough, there were dancers present; the inevitable two women, both of them engrossed in their movements. They had to watch carefully, because both of them were on crutches.

There were others present, too—others in the booths. The man with the bandaged head. The man with the hole where his nose should be. The man with the great purple growth bulging over his collar. The lame, the halt, the blind.

They didn't pay any attention to me. They were having fun. And in a moment I realized what I'd stumbled into. It was a street beggar's tavern. I saw the tin cup set alongside the shotglass, the placard resting against the beer bottle. What was the name of that dump in Victor Hugo's *Notre Dame de Paris?* "The Court of Miracles" he called it. And this was it.

They were happy enough, drinking. They forgot their physical ills. Maybe liquor would cure me of my mental ills. It was worth a try. So I had another drink.

Along about the third drink somebody must have slipped out. Along about the fourth drink somebody must have come back. And in a minute or two, she walked in.

I DIDN'T SEE her, at first. The reason I sensed her presence was because the noise cut down. The juke box stopped and didn't start again. The conversation dropped to a hush.

That's when I looked around and noticed her. She was sitting in a booth, all alone, just watching me.

She made a little gesture of invitation and I shook my head. That was all. Then she raised her glass and offered me a silent toast.

I turned, noted my re-filled glass, and toasted her. Then I downed my drink. The bartender with the glass eye had another waiting for me.

"On the lady," he said.

"No thanks, chum."

He looked at me. "Whatsa matter? She's a nice lady."

"Sure she is. Nobody's questioning that."

"So whyn'cha drink it?"

"I've had enough, that's why." I had, enough and to spare, I suddenly realized. The room was beginning to spin a little.

"Come on, drink up. We're all friends here."

The bartender didn't look friendly. Neither did anyone else. For the first time I grew aware of the fact that everyone was looking at me. Not at her—at me. The legless, the armless, the blind. In fact, the blind man took off his dark glasses in order to see me better, and one of the cripples leaned his crutch on the bar and walked a little closer.

The Court of Miracles! Where the blind see and the lame walk! Of course it was; and half of these beggars were fakes. They were as sound as I was—sounder, perhaps.

And there was a whole roomful of them, all looking at me. None of them seemed happy any longer. They were quiet; so quiet I could hear the click of the key in the lock as the armless man locked the door.

Oh, he had arms now; they'd emerged from beneath a bulky vest. But I wasn't interested in that. I was interested in the fact that the door was locked. And I was here, inside.

She stared and they stared.

The bartender said, "How about it, chum?"

"Not today." I stood up. That is, I tried to stand up. My legs were wobbly. Something was wrong with them. Something was wrong with my eyes, too.

"What's the trouble?" drawled the bartender. "Afraid of being slipped a Mickey?"

"No!" It was hard to talk. Only gasps came out. "You already slipped me one the drink before this. When she came in, and gave you the signal."

"Wise guy, huh?"

"Yes!" I managed to spin around, fast. Fast enough to grab the whiskey-bottle off the bar and hold it cocked. My other hand supported me.

"Now—open that door or I'll let you have it," I panted. "Come on, move fast."

The bartender shrugged. There was neither fear nor malice in his glass eye.

My own eyes were turning to glass. I tried to focus them on the bartender, tried not to look at the creeping, crawling cripples that slithered closer all around me, brandishing canes and crutches and uttering little grunts and whimpers and moans.

“Open that door!” I wheezed, while they crept closer and closer, stretching out their arms and tensing to spring.

“All right, chum!”

That was the signal for them to rush me. Somebody swung a crutch, somebody clawed at my legs. I began to spin and go down.

I swung the bottle, clearing an arc, and they fell back, but only for a moment. The bartender aimed a punch, so I swung the bottle again.

Then they came back. It was like fighting underwater, like fighting in a dream. And this was a dream, a nightmare of crawlers, of slithering shapes tearing at me, dragging me down.

The bartender hit me again, so I raised the bottle and brought it down. It landed on his head with a dull crunch.

For a moment he stood there, and the glass eye popped out of its socket and rolled along the bar. It stared up at him and watched as he sagged slowly and fell.

Then it stared at me as the man with the artificial arm hit me across the neck with the hook.

I felt the blow land and melt my spine.

The glass eye watched as I collapsed into roaring darkness and when I went down, it winked.

WHEN I woke up, she was stroking my forehead.

Not bad. Lots of men would have traded places with me at the moment—lying there in the cool dusk, on a comfortable bed, with a beautiful blonde stroking my forehead.

Too bad some other guy didn’t show up, because I would have traded him in a flash.

I’d have thrown in a splitting headache, free of charge, and a taste in the mouth like the bottom of the Chicago Drainage Canal.

But nobody showed up to take my place, so I just stayed there. When she said, “Drink this,” I drank. When she said, “Close your eyes and wait for the pain to go away,” I closed my eyes and waited.

Miraculously, the pain went away.

The headache and the taste vanished. I opened my eyes again, wiggled my fingers and toes.

I was lying on this bed in a darkened room. The shades were drawn, but enough light filtered through to bring life to the diamond choker and the diamond ring and the diamond eyes. The diamond eyes regarded me candidly.

“Feel better now?”

“Yes.”

“That’s good. Then there’s nothing to worry about.”

How right she was. Nothing to worry about except where I was, and why. I suppose a little of my bitterness crept over into my reply.

“Thanks,” I said. “Thanks for everything you’ve done for me. Including getting me knocked out.”

“That’s no way to look at it,” answered the blonde. “After all, I saved your life.”

“You mean those beggars would have killed me?”

“No. But the police might.”

“Police?”

“Yes.” She drew a long breath. “After all, you did murder that bartender.”

“What?”

“You hit him with the bottle. He’s dead.”

I sat up, faster than I would have believed possible. “Come on, let me out of here,” I snapped.

“They’ll be on the lookout for you,” she told me. “It’s not safe for you to go just now. You’re among friends here.”

“Friends!”

“Don’t misunderstand. If you’d only listened to me in the first place and come along sensibly, all this would never have happened.”

I HAD NO answer for that one. All I knew was that if she spoke the truth. I was a murderer. And I knew what they did to murderers. They sat them down in a chair and turned on the juice and fried them. A faint odor of singed flesh tainted my nostrils.

“How do I know you’re not lying?” I asked.

“I can furnish proof if you like, later. Right now, I want you to meet a friend.” She put her hand on my shoulder and even through the shirt I could feel the icy coldness of her flesh. She was cold and hard, like a diamond.

“As long as I’m meeting friends, we might as well establish a few facts,” I suggested. “You know my name. Now, what’s yours? And where am I?”

She smiled and stood up. “My name is Vera. Vera LaValle. We are in a home on the South Side. And, although you didn’t think to ask me, it’s Monday evening. You’ve been unconscious for almost forty-eight hours.”

I stood up, then. It wasn’t a spectacular performance. I glanced down at myself in the dim light and what I saw wasn’t pretty.

“Why don’t you go in and bathe, clean up a bit?” Vera suggested. “I’ll go out and bring back some food. You can eat it before our meeting.”

Without waiting for my reply, she went out. Went out and locked the door.

It was getting to be a habit. Everybody that I met locked me in. Of course, that’s what you do with murderers. Dangerous people to have around. Always killing bartenders, for instance. And if I was a murderer . . .

I doubted it. The whole thing was phoney from start to finish. Things like that just didn’t happen to me. I was the original timid soul. Couldn’t lick my weight in wild flowers.

Then, again . . .

There was blood on my suit. Blood on my shirt. Blood on the back of my neck, crusted blood from where the steel hook had landed.

I went into the bathroom, filled the tub, undressed, bathed. There was a nice array of soap and towels, all laid out and waiting for me. I even found an electric shaver to plug in. I felt a lot better once I was cleaned up.

When I dressed, I was surprised to discover a fresh white shirt conveniently placed on top of a clothes hamper. My genial host or hostess thought of everything.

By the time I stepped out of the bathroom she had returned. She had four sandwiches wrapped in cellophane, a double cardboard cup of coffee, and a wedge of pie. She didn't say anything while I ate. It only took me about six minutes to dispose of the meal and latch onto a cigarette from my pocket. I offered her one. "No, thanks. I do not smoke."

"Funny. I thought all women did nowadays."

"I tried it once. Many years ago. Of course, it wasn't a cigarette."

This didn't seem to be getting me anywhere. "About that friend I was going to meet. Where is he?"

"Waiting outside the door," she said. "Shall I ask him in?"

"By all means. Don't keep the gentleman waiting." My tone was facetious, but I didn't feel very gay. I don't know what I really expected. Years of reading—and writing—horror fiction had conditioned me to almost everything. A Mad Doctor, perhaps, coming to recommend a certain brand of cigarettes. A Mad Scientist with a beaker-full of monkey glands. A Mad Professor with a driver's license for a flying saucer.

THE LAST person I expected to see when the door opened was a friend. But it was a friend who walked in.

It was Cono.

Cono Colluri. The man who died in the electric chair.

He stood there in the twilight and looked at me. He wore a battered trench-coat with the collar turned up, and he had a hat pulled down over his eyes like a movie gangster, but I recognized him. It wasn't a double, or a stooge, or somebody made up to resemble him. It was Cono. Cono in the flesh. The dead flesh—reanimate and alive!

Changed? Of course he had changed. There was a dreadful facial tic, where the muscles had been pulled and torn by the convulsive spasm of the shock. And he was pale. Pale as death. But he lived. He walked. He talked. . . .

"Hello, Bob. I've been waiting for you."

"She—she told me."

"Too bad you wouldn't come at once. I should have used more sense, let her tell you who wanted to see you. But I figgered you wouldn't of believed her."

"Yes. I guess that's right." I fumbled for words while he stood there, stood there looking at me. "How—how are you?"

That was a fine thing to ask. But he didn't seem to mind.

In fact, he smiled. The smile creased the side of his face and got tangled up in the tic, but he made it. "Oh, I'll live," he said. "I'll live forever."

"What?"

"That's the pitch, Bob. That's why I had to see you. I'm going to live forever. Varek fixed that."

Varek? Where had I heard that name before?

"He's the one who claimed my body. You remember."

Yes, I remembered. The mysterious cousin. "But how did he know you weren't dead, and how did he revive you?"

"I was dead, Bob. Deader'n a doornail. And he fixed me up. He can fix anybody up, Bob. Bring them back. Make it so's they never die. And that's where you come in."

"Me?"

"I been telling him about you. About how smart you are, all that stuff you write. He needs somebody like you for the outside—to front. Somebody with brains. Young. And alive."

ALIVE. I was alive, all right, but I wondered if I was awake and sane. Talking to a dead man . . .

"Come here, Bob. I can see you don't believe me."

I moved closer to Cono.

"Feel my skin. Go ahead."

I put my hand on his wrist. It was cold. Cold, but solid. Up close I could see the waxen pallor of Cono's face. Cono's death-mask. The tic rippled across it and he smiled again.

"Don't be scared. I'm real. It's real. He can do it. He can bring back the dead. Don't you see what it means? What a big thing it is, if it's handled right?"

"I see. But I still can't understand where I fit in."

"Varek will tell you all about it. Come on, I want you to talk to him." I followed Cono Colluri out of the room. Vera smiled and nodded as we left, but she didn't accompany us as we walked down the long corridor to a stairway. Descending the stairs into the soft, subdued light of the parlors below, I became conscious of a peculiar odor. It smelled like stale air, steam heat and the scent of mingled flowers.

"Say, just where are we, anyway?" I asked.

"Funeral home," Cono answered. "Didn't you know?"

I hadn't known. But I might have guessed. Living quarters upstairs and down here the parlors. The parlors, the soft lights and the scent of flowers.

We walked across a carpeted hallway, and I glanced around me. It was the way Cono had said; this was a funeral home, and a rather shabby one. Perhaps that's why there were no bodies lying in state, no mourners. Varek had set this up for a front, and I rather suspected that if I made a dash for it and tried the front door I would find it locked.

But I didn't make a dash for it. I followed Cono into the darkened parlor to the left, to meet Mr. Varek.

I walked in and Cono lumbered over to the corner. He walked stiffly, awkwardly. The muscles in his body were taut with shock. But he did pretty well for a dead man.

He was turning on a lamp in the corner, he was closing the door behind us. I paid no attention. I was staring down at the coffin on the trestle. Staring down at the body in the coffin. The body of the man with the glass eye.

It was the bartender I'd killed.

HE LAY there on the cheap satin, dressed in a worn black suit. Somebody had put the glass eye back in place and it stared up at me sardonically. The other eye was closed, and the general effect was that of a wink.

There we were—me and the man I'd killed. I looked at him, and he looked at me.

He looked at me!

Yes. It happened. The eyelid rolled back. The eye opened. It focussed on me. And the mouth, the bound mouth, relaxed its smirk. The lips parted.

And from the corpse came the voice: "Hello, Bob. I'm Nicolo Varek."

"You—"

"Oh, I'm not the bartender you killed. He's dead enough, as you can set for yourself. His body isn't breathing."

It wasn't, either. The corpse was still a corpse, but something was alive, something lived inside it. Lived and looked and talked.

"I'm just taking temporary residence. So that I can talk to you, without having to travel a great distance. You can appreciate the convenience."

I couldn't, at that moment. I could only stand and gape and feel the sweat trickling down under my arm-pits.

"You've been a long time coming, Bob. But it was inevitable that we should meet. Cono has told me all about you, and of course I have other ways of gaining information. Many ways."

"I'm sure." It came out before I could stop it, but the corpse chuckled. The sound was a death-rattle.

"How typical of you to say that. How characteristic! Ah, yes, I've studied your background, your work. You interest me greatly. That is why I have gone to all this trouble to arrange our meeting."

I nodded, but said nothing. I was waiting.

"I'm inclined to give Cono credit for finding you. It's quite true, I can use you."

"Dead or alive?" That remark came out before I could stop it, too.

"Alive, of course. But don't think I'm not appreciative of the distinction. You're a man of keen wit, sir. And I admire you for it. One seldom finds acerbity in these decadent days."

"Look," I said, beginning to recover a little composure. "I'm not used to indulging in character analysis with a corpse. Just what do you want of me?"

"Your services, sir. Your professional services. For which, needless to say, you will be generously rewarded. In perpetuity, I might add."

"Cut the double-talk. I've had enough from Vera, and from poor Cono —"

"Poor Cono? I would hardly endorse the adjective. Were it not for me, my dear sir, Cono would be languishing in an unmarked grave. Whereas, thanks to my efforts, he is among the quick rather than the dead. And if you wish plain talk, sir, you shall have it.

"I am Nicolo Varek, man of science. I have perfected a means, a methodology, a therapy if you like, which defeats what men call death. Defeats death? It goes beyond that, far beyond. For those whom I revive also possess the boon of eternal life. Eternal life!"

CRAZY TALK. But it was coming from the mouth of a corpse, and I believed it. There was no hint of fakery or collusion—no ventriloquist could open that cadaver's eye, manipulate his dead lips. I saw, and I heard. And I believed.

"Yes, I can give life to the dead. As to the how and the why of it, well, that's my secret. My priceless, precious, perfect secret.

"And what do you think the use of that secret is worth, sir? What is the proper fee for the boon of eternal life? A million dollars, perhaps?

"There are many men with a million dollars in this world, my friend. Do you think any of them would hesitate to part with that sum if I could assure them of continued existence?

"But there's the rub. They must be assured. And at the same time the secret must remain a secret. For this reason I must continue to operate anonymously. There is nothing men would stop at in order to extract my secret from me—if I were known to them as its possessor. How often I've faced torture and death myself at the hands of those who suspected I might save them!

"You say I have helpers aplenty? That I can summon up an army of the dead, if need be, to assist me in my aims? That is true—but only within certain limits. The dead must be controlled. And I cannot carry out my plans completely without the aid of living humanity. I need a man of prescience, a man of integrity. Such as yourself, sir."

"I don't see what you're driving at."

"A business arrangement. You might even go so far as to call it a partnership. With myself as the silent partner, you as the go-between. Our product: Eternal life. Our goal: Unlimited wealth, unlimited power."

"Sounds a bit too easy."

"Do not mistake it, my friend. There are innumerable obstacles to overcome, many problems to face and to solve. I can provide for them all, however. This has been a cherished dream of mine for centuries. Yes, centuries."

"Who are you, anyway?"

THE CORPSE chuckled. "So many men have asked that question of me, so many times! Yet I find it best not to answer. My handiwork is proof that I speak truth, and that is all you need. Trust me, and we shall rule.

“Yes, rule! Surely you can see what power lies in my secret. The hold it will give us both over the great ones of this world, now and forever! We’ll seek our fortunes first, and the rest shall come.

“I have the plans well laid. You will be able to go forth and proclaim the gift of eternal life to the world. Nor shall you lack for assistance. I can summon a host to your command, to do your bidding and mine. We shall broadcast the tidings: There is no more death, for those who can pay the price! Eternal life, and more; special powers, new powers.

“But you’ll learn all this and more in time to come. You’ll learn the methods I’ve devised for bringing the news to the world. Of course, it would never do to make a really public announcement or statement; it must all be cloaked in mysticism and the proper formulae. We’ll start a cult, attract the wealthy, and reveal the truth only to the select few.

“Now, sir, how does my proposal strike you? Eternal life, eternal riches, eternal power?”

I didn’t say anything for a long moment. I stared at the corpse that told me men could live forever.

“Silence means consent,” said the voice.

“Not necessarily. I was just wondering—what if I refuse?”

“I’m sorry you even mention the possibility. For it forces me to remind you that you really have no choice in the matter.”

“You mean you’ll kill me if I don’t? Kill me and animate my corpse, I suppose?”

“Come now, surely you give me credit for more subtlety than that? I’ve already gone to a great deal of trouble and risk to bring you here, as you know. I cannot jeopardize my plans to any further extent. And you would be of no use to me as a corpse. Besides, there is no need for me to kill you. If you walk out of here, you’re as good as dead anyway.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning that you are wanted for murder. For killing this poor one-eyed citizen of a free republic. The bartender.”

"But he's. alive, you've revived him—"

"Not like the others! It's purely temporary, you understand. I can keep him animated as long as I choose, and I will do so if you consent. I'll even put him back to work in the bar." Again the chuckle. "It won't be the first time a dead man has walked abroad with none the wiser. If only you knew or even suspected how many of the dead presently mingle with the living, thanks to the Varek method!"

I SHUDDERED. The single eye of the corpse was omniscient. The voice purred on: "If you refuse, he becomes a corpse again. With a dozen witnesses to swear you killed him. I'll not wreak vengeance—the full majesty of the law will attend to that. And your story of mysterious women and corpses that talk and a walking dead man will not help you or save you. I believe you realize that.

"But you won't refuse. Because you can see what I'm offering you. Wealth and power. The goals, the dreams of every man. A chance for eternal life yourself, such as I enjoy. Think it over, sir, think well upon it. Life or death?"

I thought. I thought well upon it. And everything within me clamored for assent. Oh, it's easy enough to be a hero when there's no temptation. But the cynic who said every man has his price knew human nature. There aren't many who wouldn't settle for eternal life, eternal wealth and eternal power even at the price of their souls—and the souls of everyone else, for that matter.

The souls of everyone else . . .

I looked at Cono. My friend, Cono Colluri. The *late* Cono Colluri who went to his death looking like an overgrown college boy. Cono, who left me eight thousand bucks and a promise to clear his name.

Where was Cono now?

He wasn't here in this room. His body was here, and it moved and it talked, but the soul . . .

There was a tic, there was torment, there was twisting torture. Not real life. This was a stranger, a hulking walking corpse. No emotion, no warmth, no *humanity.*

Sure, I could sell myself out. But I couldn't sell out the world.

So I stared down at the corpse and I said, "No. I'm sorry, Varek. I've got to refuse, and take my chances."

"The decision is final?"

"Final."

"Very well. You've had your chance."

The mouth shut. The eye closed. The dead bartender was truly dead again. I saw the light fade away from the countenance, then I moved back. Back, into Cono Colluri's arms.

I might have known Varek would lie. That he'd never let me out of that room alive. If I hadn't realized it before, I knew it now. Because the cold arms wrapped around me. And the great thumbs rose up to my neck, ready to press and squeeze.

"Cono!" I gasped. "It's me—your friend—don't—"

You can't argue with a corpse.

You can only fight. Fight and pant, and try to keep the strangling hands away from your throat. I hit him with everything I had. Nothing happened. Nothing happened, except that he bent me back, back. . . .

I sagged then. Sagged so suddenly that he went-down with me. As I fell, I twisted. His grip broke. I rolled under the trestle. He groped after me. I dumped coffin and all on his head. He went down. Blind corpse-eyes sought me. I ran. I made it down the hall with no one to stop me. He lumbered to his feet, came groping after me.

I knew the front door would be locked. But there was a glass panel, and next to it in the hall somebody had placed a large urn.

I grabbed it up, smashed the glass, and stepped through.

Then I was out on the street, running. It was night. The air was cool.

It was good to be free.

Free, and wanted for murder.

HAVE YOU ever wondered what it feels like to be a murderer?

I can tell you.

It feels like rabbits who hear the baying of a hunting dog. It feels like lying in bed with the covers pulled over your head and Pa coming up the stairs to give you a spanking. It feels like waiting for the Doctor to sterilize the instruments.

You don’t walk down the street when you’re a murderer. You skulk through the alleys. You don’t take the streetcar and you don’t pass any cops. And when you finally get downtown to your hotel, you wait a long time before you go inside the lobby. You look around very carefully to make sure it’s deserted.

And when you do go in, you don’t ask for the key to your room. The police might be waiting up there. Or somebody else. Somebody that’s dead, but alive. Waiting to grab you and—

I had the feeling, but I kept it out of my face and voice long enough to ask the clerk at the desk whether or not there had been any message for me.

You see, I had to play one hunch; that the hotel hadn’t been tipped off. Varek wouldn’t, as long as he thought I was coming in with him. And now, there was still that chance. If I could only get the message. . . .

It was waiting for me, the precious little yellow envelope stuck in the pigeonhole. The telegram from the carney. I ripped it open and read: “GREAT AHMED AT FORTY THREE EAST BRENT STREET UNDER NAME RICHARDS.”

That was all, and it was enough. Brent was a street on the near North side. Walking distance. I could take an El and bypass the Loop, if I was willing to risk it.

I was. Ahmed, or Richards, had the money.

I had to. Ahmed, or Richards, could save me.

I did. Ahmed, or Richards, was the answer.

Brent Street was about a mile across the bridge after I left the El. It was a long, hard mile. I kept to the shadows, kept my face averted from passersby. But nothing happened. I stopped in front of the dingy old brownstone front that was graced with the numerals 43, lit my last cigarette, and went up the steps to press the buzzer.

Then I waited.

It was a good two minutes before the door opened. During that time I speculated quite a bit about the man I was going to meet.

WOULD IT be the Great Ahmed in a turban? A swarthy man with a pointed beard, deepset burning eyes and a singsong voice?

Would it be the suave, cultivated, cosmopolitan Mr. Richards, a con man from the carney, dressed a little too garishly, with a voice too soft and smooth?

It was important for me to know. Because I'd have to throw myself on the man's mercy.

The door opened to answer my question.

"The Great Ahmed?" I asked.

"Yes. Please come in."

I came in. Into the light of the hallway, where I could see my host.

He wasn't Ahmed and he wasn't Richards, either.

He was nobody.

A small man of about fifty, with thin, graying hair. Wrinkled face, watery blue eyes, almost gray. Come to think about it, his skin was gray, too. And he wore a gray suit. Quiet and inconspicuous. About as far away from a carney type as I could have possibly imagined.

How to describe him? In Hollywood, he'd be what they'd call a Barry Fitzgerald type without the smile and the brogue. Somebody's uncle. The kindly bachelor uncle.

I hoped he'd be mine.

"You are the Great Ahmed?" I asked, still not sure, still not sold.

"Yes. You want a reading?"

"Uh . . . yes."

I might as well stall for a while until I was sure. The way things had been happening, I wouldn't have trusted my own brother.

It was a big house, an old house, one of those places built for people to live in at a time when most families had eight or nine children instead of a television set.

The Great Ahmed led me down a long hallway, past two or three doors leading, inevitably, to a sunporch, a parlor, a library. The room he ushered me into was a sort of secondary parlor, towards the rear of the house. It had plenty of solid mahogany in it; old pieces, but durable. There was a massive center table and the inevitable grouping of chairs as if for a seance. But there was nothing of the medium's workshop or the clair-voy-ant's clip-joint about this place.

I TOOK advantage of the light in the room to study my host a little more closely, but I can't say I learned much. He was just a tired, middle-aged man, and I wondered how he managed the grift with a tough carney outfit. He didn't look the part of an Oriental mystic at all.

Even when he told me to sit down and produced a crystal ball from a cupboard, I wasn't impressed. The ball itself was small, and a trifle dusty. As a matter of fact, he brushed it off with his sleeve, smiling sheepishly as he did so.

Then he sat down, stared into the ball, and smiled again.

"The reading is three dollars," he said. "An offering, you understand, not a fee. Fee's against the law here."

"Shoot the three bucks," I said.

"Very well." His eyes left my face. They focussed on the ball. Gray eyes, a trifle bloodshot.

I sat very quietly while he stared. He cleared his throat. He fidgeted. Then he spoke.

He told me my name.

He told me where I'd been working.

“You are a friend of the late Cono Colluri,” he said, his eyes downcast. “And you are here to collect his money. A sum amounting to eight thousand, two hundred and thirty-one dollars.”

He paused. I felt the perspiration running along the collar of my nice white shirt—the one from the funeral parlor, probably stolen off a stiff.

He paused, and I stared at him. Nice little man in gray, but he knew too much. I’d never believed in “occult powers”, and yet here he was, telling me these things.

After what I’d gone through in the past three days, I felt that I couldn’t take much more. My whole concept of the universe was shattering, and along with it, my sanity. Dead men walking, me a murderer, and now a man who actually reads minds. It was too much. . . .

“Take it easy, friend.” The Great Ahmed stood up, slowly. “I didn’t mean to upset you so. It was a cheap trick, I guess.”

His hands moved upwards from under the table. They held an envelope and a sheet of paper.

With a start, I recognized Cono’s letter.

“Picked it out of your pocket when I brushed against you in the hall,” smiled the little man. “Then held it under the table and read it while you thought I was reading the crystal. Old bit of business, but effective.”

I nodded, and tried to smile in a way that conveyed my relief.

“So you’re Cono’s friend,” said the Great Ahmed. “He wrote me about you, you know. A couple of weeks ago. Didn’t mention the money, though. It was a tragedy, wasn’t it?”

“Then you know about the confession?”

“Yes. Louie was a rat.” The smile left his face. “Too bad, a messy business. I’m glad I left the show.”

He walked around to the cabinet, stooped, and opened the lower drawer with a small key. He took out a big black tin box. Another key opened it. He began to pile bills on the table—big bills, hundreds and thousands.

“Here’s your money,” he said, sorting a pile and pushing it across to me.

“But . . . don’t you want some kind of paper, some kind of identification or signature?”

“You’re Cono’s friend. I trust you.” He smiled shyly, and his hands made a gesture of dismissal.

“You trust me, eh?”

“Why not?”

I TOOK a deep breath and came out with it. I had to come out with it to somebody, or go crazy. “Because I’m wanted for murder, that’s why!” The Great Ahmed sat down again, still smiling. “And you want to tell me all about it, is that it? Well, go ahead. I’m listening.”

I went ahead, and he listened. It took up a long time, but I told him the whole story—from the time I hit town until the time Cono hit me.

He sat there, a little gray idol, quietly gazing off into the gloom.

“And so now you want to clear your name, eh? And rescue Cono, I suppose? And put the finger on this man Varek, whoever he may be?”

I nodded.

“That’s a big order. A mighty big order, friend. You know, of course, that your whole story sounds a bit implausible?”

“It sounds screwier than blazes,” I told him. “But it’s true. Every word of it.”

“Granted. So the problem arises, where do we go from here?”

I glanced at the eight grand plus, lying before me on the table. Suddenly I shoved it back across to him.

“Will this help you to figure things out for me?” I asked. “Because if it will, take it. Part of it or all of it. Whatever it may cost to clear me, to save Cono. To pin a rap on that rat, Varek.”

“You trust me to come in with you?” he asked.

“I’ve trusted you with my story. With my life. The money isn’t important. If you’re Cono’s friend, you’ll help.”

"Good enough." The Great Ahmed sorted the bills and stacked them up next to the tin box. "From now on, I'm your man. Full time. Now to our problem." He pushed the crystal ball aside. "This won't help us any, I'm afraid. We have to face facts."

"Fact number one," I said, "is that the heat is on me."

"Which means you'll have to lay low. That makes me the outside man," he said.

"Correct. So it's your move."

"My move is to the hotel," Ahmed answered. "To your room. Sooner or later somebody is going to show up there, looking for you. The law will be around. But so will your blonde charmer, and some of the rest of Varek's friends. Perhaps even Cono himself. At any rate, chances are I'll find someone to tail; someone who will lead me to the funeral home or wherever else Varek hides out. He probably has a dozen or more places to hang his hat. If he wears a hat."

"I keep wondering," I mused.

"What kind of a creature is this man? And his secret of eternal life—"

"He may have it," Ahmed retorted, "but you don't. And from the looks of you, a little sleep is in order. I'll take you upstairs to a bedroom. You might as well get a good night's rest while I go to work."

I DIDN'T argue with him. The weariness pulled at my knees as I followed him up the stairs.

"You'll have to trust to me and to luck," said the little gray man. "Right now all I can tell you is I'm playing a hunch. That I can go back to the hotel, pick up the trail, and somehow have it lead me to Cono. He's the weak spot in the whole setup, for us. If I can handle him, he'll tell me what we have to know about Varek. Then we'll figure out how to deal with him."

"Sounds logical," I said, as we entered a small bedroom at the end of the corridor.

“Sounds mighty weak and flimsy, to tell the truth,” replied my host. “But it’s all we have to work on right now. I hope that by the time I return there’ll be a little more to work on. Now—here we are. You don’t fit into my pajamas, but I think you’ll find the bed is comfortable enough. I’ll be on my way. Go to sleep, and pleasant dreams to you.”

He waved and went out. I sank back on the bed, scarcely mindful of the click of the key in the lock. Then I sat up. “Here we go again!” I muttered.

My voice must have carried, because he called from beyond the door. “Locking you in. Got a cleaning woman who gets here in about an hour, and I don’t want to take any chances. If your description has been broadcast, that is.”

“Good enough,” I answered. “But you’d better come back.”

“I’ll be back. And with good news. Don’t you worry about a thing. When the Great Ahmed takes over, he takes over.”

I lay back, kicked off my shoes, loosened my tie and belt, and then crawled under the covers. His footsteps receded into silence.

Here I was, in a strange house, in a strange bed, my future dependent on the integrity and the ability of a man I hadn’t known a half hour.

Somehow, though, I trusted him. I had to trust him. of course, because there was nobody else. I wondered about the Great Ahmed, or Richards—that was his real name. What he’d been doing hanging around a carney. Why he’d set up a three-dollar-a-throw crystal reading parlor here. Little colorless middle-aged nobody, without even a good line of patter to hand out. But the son-of-a-gun knew how to pick pockets!

That reassured me. He wasn’t the schmoe he appeared to be. But was he good enough to handle a man who raised the dead?

I couldn’t answer that one now. There was nothing to do but wait. Wait and rest. Rest and sleep.

The room was dark. The night came in at me through the window. I got up and pulled the shade. I didn’t want the night. It contained too much that could hurt me. Police, detectives, Varek and the walking dead. Better the special darkness of the room, the special darkness behind my closed eyes. The darkness of sleep.

The darkness of dreams. . . .

FUNNY, the people you run into when you're asleep. Like this negro, for instance. He was just a common citizen, like hundreds of thousands of others on Chicago's South Side. He was riding on the El and I was riding on the El, hanging on to the strap next to him.

I wouldn't have even given him a second glance, except for one little thing.

He was dead.

Yes, he was dead. When the El lurched, and he toppled against me, and I saw the rolling whites of his empty eyes, felt the cold, the ebon coldness of his black skin, I knew he was dead. A black corpse, hanging to a strap in the El.

I knew he was dead, and he knew I knew it. Because he smiled. And the deep bass voice rumbled up from the depths—from the depths of his empty grave, his plundered and cheated grave—and he said, "Don't look at me. 'Cause I ain't the only one. They's a lot of 'em dead around heah. A lot of 'em. Look!"

I looked. I gazed down the aisle of the lurching El and I saw them, recognized them. Some of the passengers were alive, of course, and I could tell that at a glance. But there were others. Many others. The quiet ones. The ones with the fixed, cold stares. The ones who didn't talk. Who sat alone. Who carefully avoided touching other bodies. They were pale, they were stiff, they were dead.

Most of the men wore their good suits, because that's the way they were dressed in the undertaking parlors. Most of the women wore too much powder and rouge, because the morticians fixed them that way. Oh, I recognized them. And the Negro nudged me with his icy finger and grinned a grin that held neither mirth nor malice nor any human emotion.

"Zombies," he said. "Tha's what they calls us. Zombies. Walkin' dead. Walkin', talkin' dead. Walkin' and talkin' because the Man say so. The Man. The Big Voodoo Man."

"Varek!" I said.

The El lurched again. The lights went out. Something was happening to the power. Maybe because I'd spoken the name.

The black corpse thought so. In the darkness all I saw was eye-white and tooth-white, flashing at me. "You went and done it," the voice rumbled. "Sayin' the name!"

And all the corpses in all the cars groaned and murmured, "He said the name!"

SUDDENLY THE car gave a sickening lurch and I knew we were going off the track, going over. The corpses rolled against me in waves, and we were twisting and turning, falling, falling . . .

I landed. You're supposed to wake up before you land, but I didn't. Because I went too deep. The car crashed down into the sewers. I wasn't hurt. I was flung free. And I crawled along in the darkness, without eye-white and tooth-white flashing. Just red, this time. Little red lights.

"Rats," I told myself. "Rat eyes."

"We take the form of rats, yes. And of bats. And of other things. But we are not animals. We are not men either." The voice at my ear was soft but imperative. "They call us—vampires!"

I couldn't see him, or the others, but I heard the chittering laughter rise all around me, rise and turn to metallic mockery as it boomed off the sewer walls.

"Vampires. He raised us from the dead, he made us. In the big church up on Division Street, Father Stanislaus makes the Holy Sign against us. But we do not care. He is fat and old, that priest, and he will die. We can never die. We walk the night, we feast, and we own the world below."

Another voice droned in: “It’s like this under the whole city, did you know that? And under every city. There’s always places to hide, if you’re clever. You can tunnel from place to place, come and go as you please, and nobody knows. Nobody sees. Nobody hears. And you can lift the manhole covers, drag down what you want, and dispose of what’s left, without leaving any evidence. Oh, it’s clever and no mistake, and we can thank the Master for it all.”

I nodded. “You mean Varek,” I said.

They howled at that, and the sound nearly tore my head in two as the echo hammered from the metal walls. They howled, and then they scrabbled towards me in the darkness, but I ran. I ran and waded and crawled and swam through muck and filth, seeking an opening, seeking a light, seeking an escape from the world of death and darkness here below.

I found it, found it at last. The round metal lid above my head which led to safety. Safety and the cool darkness of a cellar. A chink of light guided me to a stairway and the door above. I came out into a kitchen, moved past to the bedroom, and peered through the door.

Edgar Allan Poe sat by the bedside and made strange motions with his slim white hands. Two doctors were in attendance, and all focussed their gaze on the apparition lying on the bed; the gaunt, skeletal countenance peered up from the pillows with glazed and glassy eyes.

The patient had white whiskers and incongruously black hair; outside of the animation in his eyes he might have passed for dead, and none would be the wiser.

But Poe’s hands moved, commanding the sleeper to awake, and as I watched, he awakened.

Ejaculations of “Dead! dead!” absolutely burst from the tongue and not the lips of the sufferer, and his whole frame at once—within the space of a single minute or even less, shrunk—crumbled—absolutely rotted away. Upon the bed, before that whole company, there lay a nearly liquid mass of loathsome, of detestable putridity.

THEN I fled, screaming, from the house of M. Valdemar.

But wherever I went, there were the dead.

Poe couldn't raise Valdemar. But Varek could. And he had. In my dream, I saw the proof. I tramped the streets of Chicago and recognized the faces. That stiff-lipped, unsmiling doorman in front of the ritzy Gold Coast hotel—he was dead. The blackhaired girl on the end of the switchboard at the Merchandise Mart, the one who said, "Number please?" in such a mechanical fashion—she was Varek's puppet, too. There was an elevator operator at Field's and three men who worked the night shift at a big steel plant out near Gary. An old precinct sergeant over in Garfield Park was a walking corpse and even his wife didn't suspect. But what the precinct sergeant didn't know was that his captain was also a cadaver, and neither of them knew the secret of one of the Cook County judges.

The dead—there were hundreds of them. Maybe thousands. Because Chicago isn't the only city in the world, and Varek had been everywhere.

I walked along, and then I ran. Because I couldn't stand it any longer, couldn't stand to see the faces, the empty eyes. I couldn't stand being jostled by a corpse in the crowded Loop. I ran and I ran until I came to the Great Ahmed's house and I came up to the bedroom, battered down the locked door, and crawled in bed here with myself again, knowing that I was safe at last, I was here, I could wake up into a world of reality—*where dead men still walked!*

"And they have other powers, too."

Who had told me that? Varek himself, in the bartender's body. *Other powers.* Powers like levitation—like floating through space, through windows high off the ground . . .

It had happened once before in a dream, and now it was happening again.

I could see her face at the bedroom window. Vera's face. The pale blonde hair. The diamond choker. Floating outside the window, bumping against it. Her hands groped out. She was opening the window from outside.

Funny that I should see it that way, because I'd pulled the shade down, and it was up now. So was the window. She was coming into the room, floating in gently, softly, ever so quietly. And now she landed, without a bump or a thump or a shudder, on the tips of her delicate toes. She was dead, too, of course. I knew it now. Her stare was glassy. She moved by automatic compulsion only. It was like a hypnotic trance, with every motion directed by an outside, an alien force.

GLASSY-EYED, like a drugged Assassin. And like an Assassin, she drew the dagger from her waist. It was a long, slim, femininelooking weapon, but it was deadly. The steel was diamond-bright. Why did she remind me of diamonds? Because of the choker. I gazed at the choker now as she tiptoed over to the bed. I wanted to watch it.

Better than watching the dagger. Because the dagger was a menace. It was coming up over my throat. In a moment it would come down, the point would bury itself in my neck, over the jugular.

All I had to do was watch the diamonds in her choker. And in a minute it would be all over. The knife was coming down, the knife that would end my life, the knife that would make me one with Varek's army—the army of the dead.

It came down, fast.

The glitter of that frantically falling blade broke the spell. Instantaneously, I realized that I was seeing it. There was a knife, and it was coming down at my throat.

I jerked my head to one side on the pillow and slammed my body forward, upward. My hands closed around solid flesh. Cold flesh.

Vera LaValle twisted wildly in my arms.

I sat up, hands moving to her wrist. I pressed it back until the knife dropped to the carpet. She fought me silently, her face a Medusa's mask, blonde curls tumbling like serpents over her cold, bare shoulders.

Suddenly her head dropped. I caught a glimpse of strong white teeth grimacing towards my neck. Vampire teeth, seeking my jugular.

I tore at her throat. My hands ripped the choker, dug beneath it. It came free, and fell. My hands closed around her neck, then came away.

I could not touch the thin red line, the scar that encircled her neck completely.

My hands came away, and I slapped her, hard.

Abruptly, she sank to the bed. The glassiness left her eyes and something like recognition flooded her face.

"Where am I?" whispered Vera LaValle.

"In a bedroom on Brent Street," I answered. "The Great Ahmed's place. You floated through the window and tried to kill me."

"He put me under," she murmured. "Then he sent me here and levitated me. I didn't know."

I nodded, but said nothing.

"YOU BELIEVE me, don't you?" she implored. "I didn't know. He promised me that he'd never make me do that again. But he did. He always does. Even now, I can't trust him. He can do anything he likes with me, because I'm—"

She stopped abruptly, and I filled it in for her.

"Because you're dead," I told her. "I know."

Her eyes widened. "How did you find out!"

For answer, I pointed at her throat. She noticed then that the choker had been torn away. Her hands covered the red scar on her neck and she stared at me for a long moment. Then, with a sigh, she swept her hair back into place.

"Tell me about it," I said. "Maybe I can help."

"Nobody can help. Nobody."

"I can try. And the more you tell me, the more I have to work with. That is, if it's safe to talk."

She thought that one over for a moment. "Yes, it will be, for at least a half hour now. He goes into a sort of coma when he levitates one of us; it requires terrific concentration. But if he comes out of it and discovers I've failed, anything can happen."

The fear was coming back into her eyes, and I sought to capture her attention again, quickly.

"Half an hour," I said. "That's time enough. Tell me about it from the beginning. What happened to you?"

Vera LaValle sighed. Her hands stroked the scar, softly. "All right," she said.

I lighted a cigarette and sat up, offering her the pack. She shook her head and I said, "Oh, that's right, I remember now. You don't smoke, do you?"

"I can't," said Vera LaValle. "I haven't been able to smoke, or drink, or eat. Not since I was beheaded—in 1794."

IN 1794, the Terror ruled France.

You could run into almost anything under the Terror. You might encounter a Citizen Robespierre or a man called—ironically enough—St. Just.

If you did so, the chances were that they would introduce you to still another man with a more apt name—Samson, the executioner.

And Samson, in turn, would direct you to La Guillotine.

Everybody in France knew La Guillotine. Despite the feminine appellation, La Guillotine was not a giddy female—although she turned a lot of heads.

La Guillotine was the Terror incarnate. The head-chopping Terror. The beheading blade that waited until you were ripe for it, then chopped and filled the basket beneath it with rich and rotting fruit.

In 1794, the Terror ruled France, and you might run into almost anything. If you were Vera LaValle, age 20, daughter of Lucien LaValle the wealthy merchant, you walked in constant danger of your life.

Wealthy merchants were not popular these days. Wealthy merchants had to twist and turn, fawn and cringe, resort to almost any stratagem in order to try and escape from Paris before the order came—the fatal summons to the Tribunal. Better to ride out of the city in a dung-cart than to the Place de la Concorde in a tumbril.

No wonder Lucien LaValle betook himself of desperate measures and consorted with strange people in an effort to procure a means of deliverance before it was too late. Paris was aswarm with rogues and adventurers, thieves and sharpers who fattened on the misery of the remaining members of the nobility or the well-to-do. Some of them, for a price, could procure passports or arrange an unauthorized passage across the border or the English Channel.

Lucien LaValle, wealthy widower with a handsome, marriageable daughter, thought that he had found a solution.

Somewhere, somehow, in heaven knows what den or dive or stew, he encountered Nicolo Varek. Varek, the friend of the illustrious Comte St. Germain. Varek, the *confidante* of the mighty Cagliostro. Varek, the alchemist, the mystic, the seeker of the Philosopher's Stone. Varek who boasted of powers greater than those of the two great charlatans he claimed to have known—and taught. Varek, the unsmiling, the cold, the ageless. But —and this was the crux of the matter—Varek the foreigner. Varek, the holder of the priceless possession, the Russian visa. The passport to freedom for himself and family.

VAREK HAD no family, now. But Vera LaValle was young, she was *chic,* she was eminently well dowered. If she were a wife, and Lucien LaValle an official member of Varek's family—then what would there be to stop the *menage* from leaving France?

It was a reasonable proposition, and Lucien LaValle presented it to Varek on many occasions.

He shrugged. There was work to be done here in Paris, he said. Great things were afoot. He had never been presented to Mademoiselle LaValle, and no doubt she was all her fond father proclaimed her to be but still . . . A man in Varek’s position is above matrimony and the calls of the flesh. And as to money (and here Varek shrugged again), he fortunately was in a position to command a fortune whenever he wished. No, it would not be advisable to leave the country now. As a matter of fact, everything depended upon remaining.

Lucien LaValle was eloquent. When eloquence fell upon deaf ears, he was insistent. When insistence failed, he resorted to tears. He sank to his knees. He wept and implored. And in the end, Nicolo Varek consented to meet the merchant’s daughter, to talk to her.

That was enough for LaValle. He returned home elated, and put his case to Vera.

“Consider now how much depends upon your conduct,” he told her. “Be charming—sprightly—gay. This Varek, he has a long face. He needs cheering. He needs your youth.”

Vera LaValle nodded dutifully. No need to instruct her in coquetry. Long before he revealed his hopes and plans, she was miles ahead of her father. He had found a man who could save them—at a price. What the price was did not matter. Her father would pay his share and she would gladly pay hers.

She bathed, dressed, perfumed and painted for the interview. The meeting took place in the parlor and it was unchaperoned. A carriage drove up in the dusk, and Vera LaValle met Nicolo Varek under candlelight.

And it was thus that Varek, the friend of the nobility, the mentor of magicians, the peer of alchemists—Varek, the man who was above matrimony or the commonplace emotional reactions of ordinary men—fell in love.

Candlelight and coquetry definitely won the day, and the night. The sauve, cold middle-aged man became a stammering, intense importuner. As to the matter of age, Varek was quite explicit on that point.

“Do not think of me as old, my dear,” he reassured her. “For I am truly ageless. There are secrets I possess, secrets you shall share with me. Oh, we will share a great deal, you and I!”

HE BEGAN to boast then, like any love-sick youth, and to confide.

Varek was Russian by birth, but the date of that birth and the details of his parentage would (he smirked) astound her. Suffice for him to say that he came of noble blood. He had been educated at the leading universities of Europe, but the bulk of his learning came from extended sojourns in Mongolia and Hindustan where he had studied occultism and the forbidden mysteries. Upon his return to Europe, he had visited Italy and imparted some of his wisdom to Cagliostro—wisdom which Cagliostro misused in his unscrupulous career. Varek, still seeking disciples, later gave instruction to the Comte de St. Germain, whose mastery of mass illusion and the principles of levitation enabled him to win fame and fortune.

But he, Varek, was not interested in such trivia. True, as an alchemist he had sought to transmute baser metals to gold. But he soon realized that cultivation of other powers was more important. Once he had developed them, fame and fortune would be his for the asking.

There were two secrets, and two only, which were worth possessing. One of them was the secret of eternal youth, and the other, the secret of eternal life.

To the discovery of these secrets, Varek had dedicated himself for scores of years.

It was a costly study, an expensive search. In order to finance himself he had, at times, resorted to base means. As an alchemist he was acquainted with the group that centered around La Voisin, and he admitted assisting that notorious female in her preparation of poisons. He had also been familiar with the clique surrounding the infamous de Montespan.

“But that was ages ago!” cried Vera, when she heard him. “Over a hundred years!”

Nicolo Varek, the unsmiling one, smiled. “Exactly,” he said. “You see, I succeeded in at least part of my quest. I did discover the secret of eternal youth. Discovered it and possessed myself of it.”

“You are over a hundred?” Vera murmured.

Varek inclined his head. “I assure you, time is a relative concept. You will not find me less ardent a lover due to my age, no less honorable a man because of my past associations. As you realize, we who seek the mysteries have always been on the fringes of society. We skulk in darkness, we consort with the underworld, we compound with the charlatans simply because we have never been accepted by the scholars and the savants. They are jealous of our achievements, these so-called “men of science”—although virtually all they know or hope to know has come from our work.

“Yes, it is we alchemists who have given them their chemistry, we sorcerers who have preserve what little is known of medicine and physiology and biology, we mystics who have the only knowledge which can develop into a science of the mind.”

“I don’t understand,” Vera said. “What are you trying to tell me?”

“I’m telling you not to be afraid of me,” he answered. “It has been said that I am a cheat, a liar, a fraud, a scoundrel, a magician, a murderer. Very well—I am all these things, but to a purpose. That purpose is power, power greater than you can dream!

“I’ve played my part behind the scenes these years past, my dear—and you’ve seen the result! I’ve had my interview with Mademoiselle Charlotte Corday, and Marat died. I’ve talked to Citizen Robespierre’s brother, and Danton is no more. I’ve ways and means to pull the strings and make the puppets dance. And the end will be power. Great power. Once France is properly disrupted, there are other lands ripe for revolution.

“Revolution, my dear, always ends in dictatorship. Dictatorship, my dear, always ends in megalomania on the part of those who rule. And what would a megalomaniac do for the secret of eternal youth or the secret of eternal life—or both?

“Ah, yes, it will end only one way: My way. I shall rule the rulers! Think of that, my dear. Within a few years, Nicolo Varek will be the unseen ruler of the world. And you, his empress, his queen.”

VAREK CAME closer, and Vera could see the paper thinness of his bloodless lips. He might have been forty, he might have been four hundred. “The secret of eternal youth. How does that please you, my little one? To be always young, always as you are today? To live, to rule, to enjoy the senses to the full forever? I have that gift for you, that dowry.

“And soon—sooner than I dare tell you—I shall have the other, too. The Great Secret. Eternal life! I’ve a laboratory here—you must see it—where I experiment. In times like these, there is no shortage of subjects. Samson sells me the unclaimed ones every day.” The bloodless lips formed a bloody smile. “I’m getting closer and closer to the solution,” Varek told her. “And once it’s gained, the world is mine. Ours!”

It was mawkish melodrama, but it was also naked nightmare. For the little lisping, whispering, sniggering creature came closer and closer, and then he was no longer braggart or stammerer but merely a lustful automaton. He pawed at Vera LaValle and she endured his carrion breath upon her neck for a moment. But only for a moment. Then she wrenched free, and Varek, losing his balance, tumbled grotesquely to the floor.

Vera LaValle laughed.

She didn’t refuse his offer of marriage. She didn’t call him an old man, a liar, a murderer, a repulsive fool. She didn’t do anything but laugh.

Her laugh said all those things.

Nicolo Varek rose, tugged at his ruffled clothing, and bowed coldly. *“Adieu,”* he said. And left.

Vera LaValle waited. She waited for Lucien to scamper in, rubbing his hands briskly in anticipation. She waited for the effect of her story upon him; his crestfallen stare, his agitation, his frantic reiteration of, “Why, why, why? He was our only hope, our only chance! Why?”

She waited, then, for the summons. It came soon enough.

Somebody had denounced Citizen LaValle and his daughter. As usurers, as enemies of the People.

She waited for the trial, and it was short. Lucien sobbed when he heard the verdict, but she shrugged.

She waited, then, for the tumbril.

Waited, those last few days, alone. For Lucien LaValle hung himself one gloomy Sunday morning and she was left alone.

She was alone, and waiting, that last night when Varek came.

Citizens were not allowed to visit with prisoners in their cells on the eve of execution. But Varek was not a citizen. He was not a man at all in the ordinary concept of the word. He was a mocking shadow that glided silently to her cell.

ONE MOMENT nothing, and the next, Varek was there. Whispering in the darkness.

"Vera, Vera LaValle, listen to me! I have news for you. Great news!"

Silence, as he waited for a reply. But she said nothing. After a moment, he continued: "Remember what I told you? About the laboratory, the experiments, the secret of eternal life? I have it at last, Vera—I have it at last! Oh, it's not exactly all I'd hoped, and much remains to be done in refining the method. But it's the goal of sorcery through the ages, the dream of science. And I have it. For you. For us!"

Silence once more. Vera LaValle did not move. He spoke again: "Eternal life, Vera! I swear it's the truth; I can give you eternal life. All you need do is say the word and you're free. I can get you out as easily as I got you in. And now you can be young forever, alive forever! You must believe me, you must!"

Vera turned and faced him through the bars of the cell. She could not see his face in the darkness of the corridor, but he could see her countenance—and the lineaments of loathing.

"I do believe you," she said. "And I tell you that I prefer to die tomorrow morning rather than spend eternity—or a single living moment—with you."

Varek's laugh grated through the gloom. "A plain answer, Mademoiselle LaValle. But I wonder if you have rightly considered what's in store for you. When the tumbril rolls and the sun is gleaming, gleaming on the bright blade of the guillotine. Have you seen the heads in the basket, Mademoiselle? Have you seen Samson lift them by the hair and exhibit them to the crowd?”

“You can’t frighten me,” she whispered.

“Do you know what it’s like to be dead? Dead forever and ever? They’ll put you in the ground, Mademoiselle, in the cold wet ground. You’ll lie there in eternal darkness, lie there and rot and decay into slime and dust. And the lips that you withhold from me will feed kisses to the worms.

“Aren’t you afraid of death, Mademoiselle LaValle?”

She shook her head and smiled into the blackness beyond the bars. “Not as much as I fear life with you,” she said. “Now, go and leave me in peace.”

He broke down, then. The creature cried and begged. “I don’t understand, it’s never happened before—that a woman, a girl, a mere child should do this to me! I thought I was immune to folly, but since the moment I laid eyes on you I cannot endure the thought of not possessing you. You are a burning in my “blood, you must know that, and you cannot refuse—you cannot! But you must be mine of your own free will, not by force. I want you willingly, and I must have you.” Varek sobbed, and it was the dry and dusty sobbing of a reanimated mummy, rustling in the darkness.

Once again, Vera LaValle shook her head. “No,” she said.

VAREK’S SOB held not grief but rage. “Good enough,” he cried. “If I’m not fit for you, I commend you to a new lover. To Death! Death shall embrace you, twine his bony fingers in your curls, take your head as a souvenir of his conquest. *Adieu*—I leave you to hold tryst with your beloved. He’ll not be long now!”

And he left her.

Then and only then did Vera break down. For she had lied. She did fear death. The thought of dying terrified her past all comprehension, and now in the darkness she could almost see the grinning presence of Death incarnate; the skeleton in the black cloak, the grinning skull covered with a cowl.

He was still with her the next morning, when the guards came. He walked with her to the tumbril, and as she and five other weeping and bedraggled women took their places, Death climbed in beside them.

Death grinned at Vera LaValle as she rode through the streets of Paris to the site of execution. Death pointed his finger at the roaring crowd, the prancing Citizen Samson and his grimacing assistants. Death showed her the shrieking silhouette of the knife against the dawn-drenched sky.

Death was with her as she walked to the platform. Death helped her up the stairs, and it seemed to Vera in the delirium of the last few moments that not Samson but Death himself was the executioner—removing her cloak, binding her arms, forcing her to kneel and gaze down at the bottom of the basket when all the time she wanted to gaze up; gaze up at the knife, the bright blade of the knife which was the only real thing left in the world.

Then, as the roar of the crowd came up, the blade of the guillotine came down.

Death took Vera LaValle in his arms.

And—released her!

"You want to know what it's like, of course," she told me, sitting there on the bed, thousands of miles and lifetimes later. "But I don't remember. There was no pain, no sensation, and yet I *felt,* I was conscious in a new way. There was no sense of duration, either.

"Then the pain came back, and I was alive.

"I had this pain in the throat, and in the head.

"I opened my eyes. I saw the bandage on my neck. I saw the silver tube coiling to the top of my spine. And I saw Varek.

"You know what happened, of course. Samson had sold me. to Varek after the execution. He took me to his laboratory and brought me back to life.

"I realized it, naturally, at once. But I can never convey to you the horror of that moment—when I discovered that he had sewed my head back on my body!

“It was grotesque, it was ludicrous, and it was somehow blasphemous. But despite it all, in the weeks to come, I learned to respect the power, the wisdom, the genius of Nicolo Varek.

“My convalescence, if you can call it that, was slow. It was not easy, with the crude techniques he had painfully evolved, for Varek to keep me alive and nurse me back to a semblance of health and sanity. But he did it. Since that time I’ve learned a great deal about what he does to reanimate the dead, and still I haven’t grasped the true secret.”

SHE PAUSED, and I cut in: “You say he sewed your head back on? But that’s . . . incredible.”

Vera pointed at the scar and smiled wanly. “Would you find it equally incredible if I told you that there’s a metal plate covering half of my skull—that there is metal, some sort of machinery, extending down the neck and into the upper spine? That Varek, in 1794, was using electrical voltage and a sort of miniature dynamo for metabolic regulation? That the control he exercised and still exercises is a combination of hypnotism and an extension of brainwaves transformed into electric current? Yet it’s true, all of it. I am an automaton—operating on the power generated from within plus the current fed me by Varek, at a distance. I’m alive yet not alive. I do not age or change, I do not eat or sleep. But there’s something worse than sleep.

Something much worse.” She shuddered. “That’s when he *turns me off.”*

Either she was crazy or I was. Or both of us. This I knew. But I believed her. I believed the cold-eyed, cold-skinned creature with the livid scar who talked to me across the centuries.

“He’s done it to me, many times, temporarily and to suit his convenience Or his needs. But I’ve seen him do it to others—permanently. It’s horrible. They die, then; die a second death. A hideous death, forever.

“That’s the hold he has over me, over all of us. The ability to turn us off. Because there’s something inside that wants to live, fights to live. Oh, how can I tell you the story of what took a hundred and sixty years to live?” Vera glanced around the room, and for a moment her agitation seemed completely human. “There’s not time; he’ll come out of it now, hear us.”

I pressed her. I had to know the rest. “Quickly, then,” I urged. “What happened after you recovered?”

“He was still experimenting. I was his first complete success. There were other . . . corpses . . . that he revived temporarily. But they were damaged, warped. Completely insane. At the time, he hadn’t perfected his methodology of control. Several escaped. There was an ugly scandal. And Robespierre’s dictatorship fell. He went to the guillotine himself. Varek no longer had protection in Paris. So we fled.

“The Embargo was on, and the only ship we could find was bound for the colonies. We ended up in Haiti, just the two of us.

“It was a strange relationship. He no longer desired me, of course—and I think he almost regretted his monstrous act of revival. Gradually he set about to make me his servant. And of course, he succeeded. I was alone, helpless, literally dependent on him for my existence.

“I offer no apologies for serving Varek. I had no choice. And he was master.

“It didn’t take long for him to establish himself in Haiti and in San Domingo. He had brought money and jewels. We took a mansion; he posed as a planter. And immediately set about fomenting an insurrection. You know what happened to Haiti a few years later, when Touissant L’Ouverture, Dessalines and Christophe revolted against the French. Varek played his part. Blood flowed, and there were bodies for Varek’s new laboratories. Black bodies to experiment upon. Black bodies to toil on the plantations.

“It was at this time that a new superstition arose. The one about zombies. The walking dead. Can you understand now just why and how this belief was born?”

NODDED, thinking of my dreams.

I There was a horrid logic and conviction behind her words. Varek had created the concept of the zombie. His creatures walking the world.

“The blacks were primitive, simple. Varek bungled often. He was still groping, evolving methods and techniques. The botched jobs were the zombies.

“And the vampires—that was Hungary, of course.”

I raised an eyebrow. “But Varek isn’t responsible for the belief in vampires. That’s an ancient superstition.”

“Correct,” answered Vera. “But we went to Hungary from Haiti because of the belief. Because, there, tales of the walking dead would be ascribed to superstition and no one would investigate too closely if some of Varek’s experiments moved freely over the countryside. Also, Varek wished to follow the latest developments in European scientific research. Even before the Revolution, he had worked briefly with Anton Mesmer in the development of hypnotism. Now he was interested in the new psychology.

“You see, attaining the power he dreams of is a long and a complicated process. It involves much more than merely the ability to control the reanimated bodies of the dead. At first, Varek could not keep a corpse alive except by constant hypnotic control. He had to focus his own energies every moment. Then he reached a stage where he could fix a behavior pattern for hours, or days, and turn to other matters. But that is not enough.

“Each reanimated corpse must be provided for—given a new identity, a new life, a new *role* to play. Varek moulds the puppets, breathes life into them, and then he must manipulate the strings. Dozens, scores of puppets, on dozens of separate stages; all play their part in one involved drama.

“He had to enter into scientific fields, enter into politics. How much of the intrigue behind the Third Empire in France was due to his work, I’ll never know. For in 1847 I rebelled; I tried to get away. And as punishment he *turned me off for seventy years!”*

Vera’s white death-mask contorted in remembered agony. “For seventy years I followed Varek across the world as baggage—in an ice-packed coffin. And meanwhile he meddled with science, he pulled strings, and he waited. What’s time to Varek?

“I awoke in Russia, during the Revolution. By this time he’d come to realize that he needed living allies; men to work in front of the public. Dupes and spies. He’d made some connection with a monk, Rasputin. There was a plan to kill the young Tsarevitch and then bring him back to life again; the Czar and Czarina would be at his mercy, from that point on. But somebody murdered Rasputin, and we fled Russia for a spell. That’s when I was reanimated again.

“Varek believes in Revolution, you know. A time of turmoil and disruption is what he needs; it gives him an opportunity to profit by confusion. New and untried leaders arise, and he comes to them with hints of what he can do. He presents plans and attempts to gain control of those who form governments.

“We returned to Russia, and I aided him. I had no choice. It was that or lying in darkness—refrigerated darkness, now, thanks to modern conveniences.” She smiled wryly. “You can guess what he’s been up to since then. You can guess who was behind the scenes in some of Pavlov’s experiments. Varek reached members of that group. You can guess that sooner or later the Comintern got wind of it. But what you do not know—and what history does not show—is just how perilously close Russia came to developing a truly mechanized army in the 1930’s. An army of the dead!”

I LIT A cigarette and tried not to look at the clock on the bureau; the clock that was ticking the minutes away.

“We were in Germany, then, and Varek attempted to sell his notion to the New Order. But his spokesmen fell out of power, and in 1939 we fled again. We were in Canada for a few years, in Manitoba and further north. Varek waited out the war. But he has infinite patience, infinite cunning.

“He can afford to wait—wait for centuries, if necessary. He’s a strange man, Varek. He has possessed vast wealth, and lost it time and time again fleeing from country to country. He has a chameleon-like ability to alter his personality his appearance. He is—But what's the use of telling you? You're doomed."

I crushed out the cigarette.

"Now let's get down to cases," I suggested. "He sent you to kill me. Why?"

"Because you know about Cono. His offer was genuine, at first. He is still looking for a man, for many men, who will serve him as living allies. But you refused, and because you understand his power, you must die."

"Yet, Cono is such an insignificant cog in his machine," I persisted. "A dumb strong-man from a carnival. I can't see why a man with Varek's gigantic plans would bother with such a trivial matter."

"Then you don't know Varek. He has plans within plans. He's not lived quietly for the past few years for nothing. He's been waiting—waiting for the next war. The big one. The one his plans have indirectly fomented.

"There's a great laboratory set up already, somewhere in Sonora. It is capable of . . . processing . . . the dead almost on a factory assembly line. Its services will be offered to the highest bidder when the time comes. Whichever side runs out of manpower and needs a new army of workers, a new army of fighters. Don't you understand? That's where it all leads to, Varek's dream; to create a world run by slaves—by the dead!"

"He'll never get away with it."

"I'm not so sure. The past few years have brought the scientific developments he needs. There are new methods of controlling bodies *en masse.* Radio, electronics, blood plasma all play a part in his schemes.

"For years now he's been in the background, waiting for the right time. When war comes he will have emissaries ready to approach the new leaders. He knows how to get to the wealthy, the powerful, and intrigue them. That has been my job in the past. He intended to have your help, too—and probably the help of a hundred men like you."

"That's the one point that isn't clear to me yet," I told her. "Just exactly how does he manage to insinuate himself into the confidence of the men on top?”

VERA SMILED. The ghost of a smile, the smile of a ghost. “Simple. Have you ever heard of the Fox sisters? Or D.D. Home or Angel Annie or Madame Blavatsky?”

I nodded. “Spiritualist mediums or mystics, weren’t they?”

“Yes. During my., sleep . . . Varek was able to hit on that gambit. The same one used earlier by St. Germain and Cagliostro. Through the ages the wealthy, the powerful have always had one weakness. A belief in superstition. A longing to pierce the veil of the Mysteries. They’ve always followed the seers, flocked to the occultists, confided in them. No need to explain the phenomenon. It exists.”

“True enough,” I said. “So Varek allies himself with the mediums. They act as his front men. They attract the rich. And Varek watches, waits, chooses those he wants or can use, and then steps into the picture and reveals his plans.”

“Exactly.” Vera sighed. “It was that way with Rasputin, if you remember. He was the key to the Czar’s influence. And he’s ready to start again.”

“But the mediums aren’t trustworthy, many are frauds,” I argued.

“And many are not. Take D.D. Home, for example! No less a scientist than Crookes verified the fact that Home levitated himself out of a third storey window and floated back in through another. It actually happened, time and time again. But what Crookes didn’t know is that little, tubercular, wan Mr. Home had been dead for a year—and Varek animated him, hypnotized him, and then levitated him by concentration. Just as he levitated me tonight and sent me to kill you.”

Vera paused. I stared at her white face in the gloom. And as I stared, something happened. A spasm contorted her countenance, the same dreadful tic that had afflicted Cono. I watched her as her mouth opened and a voice came out. But it was not Vera LaValle’s voice. It was the voice of the dead bartender, the voice of Varek.

"Yes," it told her, as much as it told me. "I sent you to kill him. And you failed. Failed and then talked. I cannot afford to have you talk any more, Vera. I'm going to turn you off. *Forever."*

The voice shut off abruptly. It had to shut off, for there was no longer a means of utterance. The spasm in Vera's face swept down over her body in a single hideous horripilation. For a moment she swayed there, shuddering convulsively. Then—she *melted.*

There was a change, and it wasn't a collapse. It was a running together, as though flesh were falling in on splintering bone. She shrank, dwindled before my eyes—and then she crumbled.

Somebody had taken the wax doll that was Vera LaValle, and held it over a roaring flame. In an instant she ran together, fused.

I stared at the floor, stared at the heap of fine white ash surrounding a charred and twisted cluster of wires linked to a metal plate.

Vera LaValle was gone.

VERA WAS gone and I was alone in the bedroom. Or was I?

If I'd had any doubts about Varek's power, they were gone now. They'd vanished with Vera, and taken a part of my sanity with them.

Let's face it; I was panicked. Varek knew where I was, and that meant I would no longer be safe here. Not safe from him, not safe from the police. I wondered what had happened to Ahmed. For all I knew, Varek had attended to him, too. And I couldn't stick around and wait.

I went over to the door. It was locked, of course, and I'd have to force it. I gave it the old college try. You see them do it every day in the movies and on television. Brawny, broad-chested hero puts his shoulder to the locked door. The door gives way. Simple.

Try it sometime. Desperate as I was, all I managed to gain was a bruised shoulder. Then I picked up a chair. That was a better deal. The panel splintered. I broke the lock.

Then I was running down the hall in darkness, groping at the head of the stairs, clumping down them, racing through the hall to the front door. If a cleaning-woman had showed up, she didn't show.

I made the door, opened it. The night air hit me. So did a hand.

"What's the rush, friend?"

I gasped with panic, then with relief.

Ahmed bustled in, rubbing his hands. "Hold it," he said. "I've got news for you."

I shook my head. "I've got news for you, too," I said.

"What do you mean?"

I decided to risk it. He had to be shown. I took him by the arm and steered him back up the stairs. If you think it wasn't hard for me to force myself into that room again, you've got another guess. But it had to be done that way.

"Take a look," I said.

His little gray eyes examined the charred ashes on the floor. He stooped and picked up the metal plate, contemplated the dangling wires protruding from it.

"What's this?"

"All that remains of Vera LaValle. She visited me with a knife. I got her to talk and then she was . . . shut off."

"I don't follow you."

"Sit down," I sighed. "I'll have to explain, but I want to make it fast."

I DID. The Great Ahmed nodded.

He wasn't upset, he wasn't alarmed, he wasn't horrified. Somehow, his very calmness managed to reassure me.

"It ties together," he said, as I concluded. "It fits. Every bit of it."

"How do you know?"

"Because I've seen Cono. You were right about the hotel, friend. He came back. And when he found me hiding in the closet he tried to kill me."

Ahmed smiled and held up a skeleton key. "I needn't tell you how I got in the room," he grinned. "But to make a long story short, the same thing happened as must have happened to you and Vera here. I managed to calm him down—he recognized me, of course. To be brutally frank, I resorted to an old Varek trick; a little hypnosis of my own. Varek must have been directing his own energies elsewhere, possibly to levitate Vera LaValle.

"At any rate, Cono talked. Of course, he's newly reborn, as it were, and he doesn't have too many details. Also, he's not the best example of a scientific mind." Ahmed smiled, briefly. "Still, he told more than he thought he was telling.

"Did you know that Varek has hideouts established in almost every principal city in the world? And that each of them contains anywhere from a dozen to several hundred bodies under refrigeration, ready for reanimation at any time? A sort of dead storage.

"Also, there are the walkers. More of them than you'd suspect. Although it's really quite easy to detect them because they all have one thing in common—the red scar on the neck."

I started at that. "You mean, he cuts off their heads before he revives them?"

Ahmed shrugged. "Not completely, now. But an operation is performed. A deep incision is made at the base of the brain. The metal plate is grafted into place and the wires"—here he picked up the charred mass from the floor and waved it—"are put into place. Meanwhile, the hypnotic control is being established."

"It's a form of hypnotism, then? But I don't get it."

The Great Ahmed shook his head. "It isn't easy. But then, what do any of us understand about the life process? We don't know what governs our physiological continuity; makes our hearts beat and our lungs take in and expel air without conscious control. You might say we operate our own bodies through autohypnosis and that keeps us alive.

"And what's death? Various organs 'die' at different times after the heart stops. We can understand the process of decay, but we can't define or truly measure death. Why, I defy anyone to tell me exactly what sleep is, let alone death!

"Sleep—that's a form of hypnosis, too.

"And, somehow, Varek has harnessed that portion of the mind which functions automatically in life, in sleep; kept it going in the state we describe as death. The common denominator is electrical energy; brainwaves, which can be measured electrically, you know. Varek has managed to apply hypnotic principles to the electric current of the body; magnetism controlling magnetism. That's why he performs the operation, inserts the metal plates in the brain and the spine. To alter the 'hookup', you might say."

THE LITTLE man spoke earnestly, as though he were lecturing a backward pupil. I listened with equal earnestness now as he waved his finger at me.

"Let me put it simply. You might compare the human body to a radio set, and Varek to a radio station. His operation consists of putting in the proper tubes and condensers to make the set forever receptive to his hypnotic wave-length. It's all electrical. Once control is established, he can broadcast impulses forever. That's a vast oversimplification, but you get the idea."

"Not completely," I said. "What about the bartender?"

"Oh, there are exceptions. The bartender was one. There Varek resorted to a temporary hookup. Probably gave his entire concentration to animating him temporarily, just to talk to you. As he concentrated entirely to levitate Vera. Those special things require special efforts. But with the vast army of dead, Varek—to return to our little analogy of a radio station—merely sends out a host of previously prepared '-transcriptions' in the shape of hypnotic suggestions. The dead then 'play' the hypnotic suggestions through for hours. And Varek need pay no more attention to them than an engineer who puts on long-playing records for broadcasting. They operate automatically.

"And that, of course, is the weakness. Sometimes Varek doesn't pay attention; or he watches the wrong body. Then it's possible for someone else with a stronger hypnotic wave length to 'jam' reception in a corpse—capture its attention, divert its purpose. As I did with Cono tonight at the hotel. And as you did with Vera."

"Lucky for both of us we did," I said. "But what else happened? What else did you find out? Why is Varek operating in Chicago now? And—this is the jackpot question—what's the secret of his own eternal life?"

The Great Ahmed smiled. "You want a lot for a few hours' work, friend," he answered gently. "Some of those questions you'll have to find out about for yourself. All I can do is give you that opportunity."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning I made a deal with Cono. And I think he can be trusted—as long as Varek doesn't get to him. Cono has promised to lead you direct to Varek himself tonight."

"Now?" I was genuinely startled. Ahmed glanced at his wristwatch. "In about three quarters of an hour. You're to meet him in the lobby of the Wrigley Building at eleven-thirty. Alone."

I didn't like that at all, and he could see it even before I spoke. "What's the big idea?" I asked. "Why aren't you coming along?"

The little man returned my gaze with unmoved composure. "For a very obvious reason; it might be a trap. Then Varek'd have both of us. As it is, you'll have to take your chances. And if anything does go wrong, I'll still be able to carry on, to follow through. After all, that's why you hired me. And I aim to finish the job."

HE WAS silent for a moment.

"Think it over," he said. "You don't have to go, you know. And I don't mind telling you I'd hesitate before taking such a risk."

I nodded. "Somebody's got to do it,——" I said. "So if you'll call a cab for me . . ."

Ahmed smiled and held out his hand. “Good boy,” he said. He turned and led the way downstairs. He phoned for a cab in the hall.

“I don’t know where you’re going or what you’ll get into,” he mused. “And of course, under the circumstances, you can’t have the cops tagging along. You’ll just have to use your head. Try and keep in touch with me, tip me off what’s going on and what to do.”

“Why don’t you follow me in another cab?” I suggested. “Then, no matter where Cono takes me, you’ll at least have the address.”

“Good idea.” Ahmed stepped to the phone and put in another call. Then he nudged me. “And here’s a little idea of my own,” he said.

He held out his hand next to my pocket and dumped something cold and hard. I reached for it. and came up with a .38, fully loaded.

“Just in case,” he told me. “I’ll feel better if you have something along for company.”

I grinned my gratitude as we walked out of the door of 43 East Brent and waited for the cabs to arrive. Mine rolled up first, but his turned the corner a moment later.

“Let’s go,” he said. “Be careful now.”

“Same to you,” I answered. Then, “Wrigley Building,” I told the driver. And we were off.

It was a nice, warm, moonless night. I leaned back in the cab as we jolted downtown and tried to relax. I’ll give you three guesses how well I succeeded.

We kept stopping at corners, corners with cops on them. I hid my face and thanked my lucky stars there was no moon.

WHEN WE hit Chicago Avenue and a red light, I took a long chance. I leaned out of the cab, yelled at a newsboy, and bought a paper. Just idle curiosity. I wanted to see if they had my picture in today. With some of the latest gossip. Such as the offering of a reward, dead or alive.

I riffled through the pages rapidly, but no success greeted my efforts. Maybe they didn't care. Maybe they were used to killing bartenders in Chicago.

Killing—

The little squib caught my eye. With the Louisville dateline. James T. Armstrong Shows . . . Louis Preusser, 43 . . . Confessed murderer of . . . Psychiatrists declared under influence of hypnosis and drugs . . .

It was the follow-up on the story of Louie's confession. He'd walked in, glassy-eyed, and confessed. I wondered what the whole deal was. The Great Ahmed would know. Maybe I'd better ask him before I went on.

I glanced behind to see if his cab was trailing mine. Nothing was in sight. Maybe his driver had taken Clark Street instead. He'd catch up to me. Nobody seemed to have any trouble at all catching up to me whenever they wanted to.

Take Vera LaValle, for instance. She'd found me at the Great Ahmed's after I'd been there for less than an hour. That was one question I needed an answer for. How did she—and Varek—know I was there?

I'd remember to ask Ahmed that.

But—*would he tell me?*

Maybe you're a scientist, a great scientist. Maybe you're a sorcerer too, a wizard. You can raise the dead, and you stay alive yourself. But it's still quite a trick to pick one person out of four million and send a killer right to his door. Unless somebody tips you off.

The tipoli. That was it.

Ahmed goes out. Ahmed sells out.

Of course! He went to the hotel, just as he said he would, with the eight grand in his pocket. Maybe he saw Cono there, maybe he saw somebody else. Maybe he even saw Varek himself. And he made a deal. He told Varek where I was. Varek sent Vera to kill me.

When enough time had passed, Ahmed came back to see if the job was accomplished. It must have surprised him to find me alive.

So he came up with the story about meeting Cono. Why? It hadn't, come to think of it, sounded too good at the time. This business about winning Cono over with hypnosis. And Cono leading me to Varek.

But seeing me alive, he'd told me the story for a purpose. Ahmed was a great guy for purposes, all right. He must even have given me the gun for a purpose.

I tried to figure it out as we roared down Michigan. I could see the gleaming lighted spire that chewing gum built, right ahead. I'd be there in a minute now.

What had Varek said? Something about not bothering to kill me because the law would do it.

AND HERE I came riding up to the Wrigley building, with a gun in my pocket. An armed murderer.

I knew what to look for now. It wouldn't be Ahmed's cab; he wouldn't show up at all, I was sure. I was looking for a black prowl car.

I wouldn't see Cono standing in the lobby with a white carnation in his buttonhole, ready to guide me on a conducted tour of Varek's snug harbor. I was more likely to see a couple of downtown boys with their hands in their topcoat pockets. The reception committee from the downtown station.

We started to edge towards the curb, and I added up my score. Exactly 100 per cent right. There was the squad car, there were the boys. They stood patiently, just waiting for somebody to show up. If I knew Ahmed, I felt sure he'd furnish them with a very good description.

We nosed in, slowing down. "Here we are—" the driver began.

"No, we're not," I cut in. "Back to 43 East Brent. And fast. I have another appointment."

We kept going, over the bridge. Nobody looked up. Nobody followed. I kept my hand on the butt of the .38 all the way back. I didn't want to lose it, you see.

It was the Great Ahmed's, and I intended to make sure that I gave it to him.

THE HOUSE was dark, but then it was always dark. I had the cab park around the corner because I didn't mind walking. In fact, I preferred it. Preferred it so much I went around to the back of the house—the long way around, mind you. Didn't bother me a bit. Nor did it bother me to climb in through a rear bedroom window on the first floor.

I was quiet. Very quiet. Sort of a slow, seething quiet. Little thoughts kept bubbling up in me about what I'd do to Ahmed when I got my hands on him.

So he wasn't the type for a carney grifter, eh? Well, he'd taken me in soon enough. And sold me out even sooner.

I landed on the bedroom floor and padded out, down the hall. No cleaning-woman was around and I knew now that there never had been. Ahmed had locked me in to keep me on ice for Vera LaValle or whoever Varek might send.

Ahmed and Varek—a good team. Maybe Ahmed was the guy Varek needed for a front man!

Of course, he wouldn't look quite so presentable after I got through with him. . . .

I tiptoed down the hall, peeked into the library. It was dark. The whole house was dark. I stopped, listened. After a long moment, I became convinced of the truth. I was alone. Ahmed had gone out in his cab but he hadn't returned.

I reached a stairway going up—that led to the bedroom and the other rooms on the second floor. But behind it was another set of stairs, going down. I decided to have myself a look. Curiosity killed a cat of course—but *this* cat carried a .38.

The basement was big and dusty. Old fashioned furnace, the usual stationary washtubs, a coal-bin, a fruit-cellar. I pushed open the door and stared at the usual assortment of dusty, empty jars in the light thrown by a naked bulb dangling from the center of the small room.

Nothing in the cellar to interest me. My hunch was cold.

I was cold!

Standing in the deserted fruit-cellar a little past midnight of a warm May evening, I was cold. Cold as ice! I felt the cold air all around me. But where was it coming from?

A draft blew against my trouser cuffs. I looked down.

There was a round metal lid set in the floor of the fruit-cellar. I stooped, touched it. The iron was icy. I groped for the ring, lifted the lid. I gazed down into darkness.

Then I walked away, making a circuit of the cellar until I found what I needed and expected to find—the inevitable handy flashlight.

I returned to the fruit-cellar and pointed the beam down. It focussed on the iron rungs of a ladder. I took the flashlight in one hand, the gun in the other, and left enough fingers free on both for me to cling to the rungs as I descended.

I lowered myself into icy cold—the coldness of a vast black refrigerator. I went down, down, rung after rung. Finally my feet hit slimy, damp stone. I joggled the flashlight until it bisected a wall with its beams. Eventually I located a light switch.

I flicked it. The light went on, and I saw everything.

I was standing in the center of Varek's laboratory.

Varek—Ahmed. Ahmed—Varek.

It all added up now.

More lights went on.

THEY WENT on in the little room with the big filing cabinets. I pried open a lot of drawers that night; the drawers containing the certificates, the visas, the affidavits, the fake credentials, the diplomas, the letters of identity (hadn't Varek convinced the warden he was Cono's cousin?) and all of the mingled memorabilia of hundreds of years of impersonations, imposture, and disguise. Floods, tons of paper. The dust fairly flew.

And more light was shed. I found the long closet with the wardrobe; the Ahmed wardrobe, the sportsman's garments, the shabby workman's garb complete even to the battered tin initialled lunchbox and the union button. The accoutrements of Varek the wealthy man of the world were there, too—and a box containing diamonds and other gems that reminded me of poor Vera LaValle.

Then there was another room, with more files. Letters and newspaper clippings. Ads from the *Personal* columns of ten thousand papers, in a score of languages. *Help Wanted* notices. Lonely Hearts messages. And letters, letters, letters—messages from the millions who later turned up missing. Those who answered Varek's appeal for a wife, a husband, an employee. I got a picture of him sitting there, year after year, sending out his letters, interviewing prospects, recruits for his army of the dead. Recruits who would not be missed, searched for.

There were more lights in other rooms. The big surgery, with the gigantic autoclave; completely modern, completely equipped. I wondered how he'd managed to assemble it here, and then I thought of the dead; the tireless dead who steal, who strain, who slave day and night.

Beyond the modern surgery was medieval horror.

The round, dungeon-like room, dominated by the huge table on which rested the alembics and retorts of an ancient alchemist. The beaker filled with the brownish-red, crusting liquid. The herbs and powders on the shelves; the dried roots in bottles, and the great jars filled with monkeys floating in a nauseous liquid, and other things that looked like monkeys but weren't. The stock of chalk and powders. The great circle drawn upon the floor with the zodiacal signs inscribed in blue before it. The jar of combustible powder—that was used to make the circle of fire inside a pentagon, according to the thaumaturgists. And on the iron table rested the iron book; the *Grimoire* of the sorcerer.

SORCERY AND science! Surgery and Satanism! That was the link, the combination! Sorcery had led to science, as Varek said. His original alchemic experiments had brought him to actual research and enabled him to perfect his method of reanimating the dead.

But that didn't explain his own continued life, his boasts of eternal youth. That was sorcery. That was selling your soul, after lighting the fires and invoking the Author of All Evil.

The rooms, the lighted rooms, seemed to present a panorama of Varek's entire existence across the centuries. Everything was here—and I wondered, now, if he'd told me the truth. If in every great city, unsuspected, beneath a house or a factory or a tenement there existed a duplicate of this place. What had he said? A sort of "dead storage", that was it.

"Dead storage." But where were the dead?

There was another room, beyond the alchemic chamber. I entered it, and the coldness engulfed me. This was *it.* The refrigerator storage space. Where you keep the cold meat.

The cold meat . . .

They lay on slabs, but they weren't sheeted. I could see them all, see their staring faces. Men, women, children, young, old, rich, poor—lavish your categories upon them, they were all here. A host, a hundred or more. Silent but not sleeping, inert but not immovable, rigid without *rigor.* They lay there, waiting, like toys that would soon be wound up by cunning hands and set about to walk in make-belief of life.

It was cold in that room, but cold alone did not make me shiver. I walked through rows of dead, staring into the faces that stared into mine. I don't know what I expected to see. None of them looked familiar—except, perhaps one little blonde who reminded me of someone I'd run into before somewhere.

Then, all at once, I knew what I must do. There was fire outside, and it would serve more purposes than that of conjuring up demons. It could also be used to put them to rest.

I walked back into the other room and picked up the powder box which, when its contents were kindled, traced a pattern of flame on the floor. A circle of fire protected you from demons, it was said, after you evoked them.

I ripped the lid off the box and began to sprinkle the powder about. I worked quickly, but not quickly enough.

Because when I looked up, somebody was standing in the room. He only stood there for a moment, and then he started for me.

It was Cono.

HE DIDN'T say anything and I didn't say anything. He came on and I backed away. The cold arms reached out; I'd felt them before. The tic-like grimace leered, and I knew it would keep on leering no matter how many bullets I might waste.

Because the dead don't die.

Because this was the end.

Because he was coming at me like a demon.

But demons can be warded off with fire.

I pulled out the .38 and pressed the trigger. I didn't aim at Cono; I aimed at the powder on the floor.

A circle of flame shot up, almost in Cono's face. He stopped. Dead or alive, fire destroys flesh. And he couldn't get through. Not as long as the fire flared.

I wondered how long that would be. When would the powder's potency be exhausted? Ten minutes, five, two? Whatever the time, I had that long to live and no longer—unless I could convince him.

I talked then. Told him what I thought he'd understand. About Varek being the Great Ahmed, hiding out with the carney for a while and perfecting plans. About seeing Cono and deciding to make him a recruit, then rigging up the murder charge by hypnotizing Louie, getting him to drug Cono and kill Flo.

I told him something about what Varek was, what he planned, what he'd do to Cono, to me, to the whole world if he wasn't stopped and stopped soon. I told him about the sorcery and the science and the bodies that walked everywhere in every city.

The fire began to flicker, to fade, to die down. I talked louder, faster.

And it didn't do any good.

It was like talking to a stone wall.

It was like talking to a dead man.

With a sickening feeling, I realized I'd been in this spot once before. I'd tried then, tried to tell Cono I was his friend, tried to reach his heart, his soul. But dead men have no hearts. Varek was his heart. And I knew of nothing that could touch his soul. Nothing he cared for, nothing he loved. Except Flo!

Then I remembered, remembered the next room and the blonde on the slab. The little blonde with the familiar face—Flo!

"Cono," I said. "Listen to me. You've got to listen. She's in there, too. You didn't know that, did you? He didn't tell you. But he's greedy, he wants them all. He not only took your body, he took Flo's too. She's in the next room, Cono. He cut off her head, put in his damned wires and plates, and now she'll walk for him forever!

He was blind. Blind and deaf. The flames died, he moved towards me, he caught me up in his arms. I waited for the squeezing strength of his fingers to wrench my life away. But he merely held me, held me and lumbered across the ashes into the next room.

"Show me where," he said, and the tic rippled horribly across his face.

I pointed. Pointed at the face I remembered from a photograph he'd shown me.

Cono saw her. He released me, and his hands went to his head. He kept staring at her, staring and staring, even after Varek came into the room.

THAT'S HOW it happened. One second we were alone and the next moment he was there—little gray shadow, silent and suave.

No emotion, no surprise, no tension.

Just his soft, quiet voice saying, "Kill him, Cono."

He might have been asking the big man for a match.

But as I stared at Varek—stared at the quiet little middle-aged man with the paper-thin lips—I saw many things.

I saw a vulgar charlatan in a carnival who was in turn a gypsy in Spain who was in turn a Polish count who was in turn a Haitian planter who was a London barrister who was a Polynesian trader who was a Tulsa wildcatter who was a physician in Cairo who was a trapper with Jim Bridger who was a diplomat of Austria who was—it went on and on that way, a hundred incarnations and a hundred lives and all of them were evil.

He faced us with all of that evil, the evil of a hundred and a thousand men, concentrated but quietly so, and he said to Cono again in the voice that could not be denied because it was the voice of mastery, the voice of life over death—"Kill him, Cono."

Cono set me down and I felt his arms close about my body, his hands grasp my throat. He was a robot, an automaton, he could not refuse; he was a zombie, vampire, all the evil legends, all the fear of the dead that return, the dead that never die.

Cono bent me back. And Varek, with a look in his eyes that was a gray ecstasy, came closer and waited for Cono to finish.

That's what Cono wanted, too.

For when Varek came close, Cono moved. One instant he held me—the next, I was free and those huge arms had reached out to engulf Varek.

The little gray man rose, shrieking, in the air. Cono squeezed—there was a sound like somebody stepping on a thin board—and the body of Varek writhed and twisted on the floor like a snake with a broken back.

Cono helped me with the powder, then. There were chemicals, too; enough to start a good-sized blaze.

"Come on," I said. "Time to get out of here."

"I'm staying," he said. "I belong here."

I had no answer to that one. I turned away.

"You got to go now," Cono told me. "Leave me the gun to start the fire. I give you five minutes to get out."

THE THING on the floor was mewing. Neither of us looked at it.

"One thing," Cono said. "I want you should know it so you'll maybe feel better. About that bartender. You didn't knock him off. You hit him with a bottle, but that didn't kill him. Varek killed him, later, when they dragged him in back to see how bad he was hurt. But he was going to pin the rap on you. I found out at the funeral home."

"Thanks," I said.

"Now go away," said Cono.

And I went. I walked through the rooms and didn't look back. I climbed the ladder back to the basement. When I reached the top I heard the muffled sound of a shot from below me, far away.

Long before the flames spread, I was out of the house and on my way to the Loop.

Next morning I read about the place burning to the ground, and that was the end.

But this is a story that never ends.

I keep thinking of those "dead storage" places in other cities. I keep wondering if Varek had turned everybody off that night—or if others walked in other places. The way he and Cono and Vera had all told me. "If you only knew how many . . ."

That's what frightens me.

That's why, wherever I go now, I'm afraid of women wearing high collars and chokers. Men in turtleneck sweaters or even a clergyman's collar. I think of the red scar under the scarf. And I wonder.

I wonder when someone or something will float through my window again. I wonder what walks abroad at night and waits to drag me down.

I wonder how I, or you, or anyone can tell, as we go about our daily rounds, which are the living and which are the dead. For all we know, they may be all around us. Because:

The dead don’t die!

THE END

Hornbrook For The Atomic Age

A is for Atoms, those cute little things
B for the bomb that oblivion brings
C for the Calm that comes in its wake
D is for Doomsday which shortly shall break
E for Eternity, quite a long time
F’s for the Future, the theme of this rhyme
G is for Gun; a weapon outmoded
H--Hiroshima, a city exploded
I is for Irony, hardly an element
J--Jeremiah, predicting all hell, he meant
K is the symbol of sweet Kingdom Come
L for the Learning that’s making things hum
M for the Masters of Unholy Science
N for the Neutron that aids in alliance
O is for “Ouch!”--a most popular cry
P for Plutonium--blows you sky high
Q is for Quantum, a sort of a theory
R—its Results, which no one dare query
S for the Science which brings the new day
T is for Trouble that’s now on its way
U for Uranium-235
V--the next Victory, with no one alive
W is Woe, in accents sabbatical
X is a symbol that’s quite mathematical

Y is for You, who will soon blow away And
Z for the Zeal that now hastens the day

My Struggle

By Floyd Scrilch
As told to Robert Bloch

"SRILCHIE," said my wife. "Why aren't you like other men?"

"What do you mean, honey?" I asked, expecting the usual sarcastic answer.

"Well, take like Bill Smith down the block," said my wife. "Two months ago he was just a common clerk like you. Then he started to take a course in DIANETICS, and only yesterday he stepped into a Big Paying Job."

"I know what Bill Smith stepped into," I retorted, bitterly. But she had started me thinking. Here I was, stuck in a rut, no Get Up and Go, no Aggressiveness, no Dynamic Personality. Why couldn't I convince a Big Employer that I was Valuable?

The next day I went out and bought a copy of DIANETICS FOR EVERYBODY AT HOME IN YOUR SPARE TIME, and I began to study. Yessir, if other fellows could become new personalities, if other people could be "cleared" and find new success, so could I. I was serious about it. So serious that I read the book down at the office and the boss heard about it and fired me.

But I didn't care. My wife yelled bloody murder when I told her, but I knew I was going to make the little woman Proud. So I just sat around the house reading the book. I read it in bed and at the table, and by the time she grabbed it away from me and threw it in the garbage, I was ready to go to a Psychiatric Clinic and undergo a DIANETICS treatment. The landlord said he'd throw us out if we didn't pay the rent, but I had to use the money for my treatments. I didn't worry. Pretty soon we were going to be on Easy Street!

After two months I was "cleared". Not only "cleared" but I knew all the proper Psychological Approaches to Handling My Life. I took a lot of notes, but I had to bum them for fuel on account of we didn't have any coal. But my memory was perfect now and I knew everything—the Proper Way to Enter an Office, and the Approach, and How to Appear Successful and How to Interest an Employer and Clinching the Deal. I felt aggressive and self-confident. I determined to see the head of the biggest firm in town.

The Big Day arrived. I awoke, took 50 deep breaths, a cold shower, and I was off. Oh, yeah, I dressed, too.

I entered the office confidently. The girl at the desk quailed before my masterful glance and led me straight to the boss's private office.

The boss was busy, but I swept the papers off his desk, sat down, and fired my proposition at him like a shot. I held his interest from the first; my glance never wavered until he dropped his eyes. I felt a surge of power, dominance, confidence. I couldn't lose with DIANETICS!

"How about that job, now?" I said, laughing boldly. I knew it was the Psychological Moment.

The boss eyed me and I could see him trying to resist, to be firm. I just gave him that old confident, aggressive grin. He stared at my shined shoes, my creased trousers, my natty tie, my clean fingernails, my well-groomed hair, my gleaming smile. For a long moment I held him helpless. Then he rose with a sheepish grin.

And he kicked me out on my face.

THE END

The End of Science-Fiction

Ormsbee got up at the science fiction convention to warn of approaching horror—but the horror itself spoke in a strange way!

I know I shouldn't be telling you this, because we are all pledged to secrecy. I guess the publishers were afraid of what might happen in the news leaked out.

"Let it ride," said one of the editors at the meeting where the decision was made. "Of course, their'll be talk about it at first. But we can fix it with the trade papers and the public press. The only trouble is that the fans will do a Int of complaining and investigating. I hey will wonder why science-fiction magazines aren't going to be published any more.

"Well, let them wonder. We'll just keep quiet. We must. And after a while the readers will forget, they'll find something else to think about. Of course the whole thing is awkward, but we have no choice not after what happened." That's the way it was finally decided. And up to now, nobody has breathed a word. Nothing has leaked out concerning the reasons for discontinuing all science-fiction publications—forever.

I'm breaking the pledge of silence now for the first time.

I'm going to tell you what happened on that last day—the day when science-fiction ended forever.

Naturally, I have my reasons for speaking out. I'll give them to you cold.

First of all, I owe it to Richard Ormsbee to tell the truth. I know he'd want it that way, and as his friend I must do it.

Secondly, I think you should be warned. Yes, I said "warned". Bemuse already I've heard rumors that some fan groups are agitating for the return of science-fiction magazines. Several publishers who never put out a fantasy book are thinking of entering the field. This must not happen.

There's a third reason, too. A most important reason.

This nation, this world, is in a bad enough situation without the addition of further madness and confusion. We are in no shape or condition to beat back new enemies—particularly the enemies I have in mind.

Does that sound peculiar to you? A little whacky, perhaps? I wish it were just that. But there's a grim truth behind my words.

Even now, these same words may be read by others. Others who read not for pleasure but for information. Others who might plagiarize, just as they plagiarized on that final, fatal day when science-fiction died.

When you finish this, you'll understand what I mean. And I want you to understand, for a reason.

I want you to go up into your attic or down into your cellar, whenever you've stacked or saved back issues of science-fiction and fantasy magazines. Go and find them, and destroy them. Destroy them instantly and utterly. Destroy them before they fall into the wrong hands and destroy you.

Remember, now—it's a bargain.

In return, I'm telling you the whole story. Here is the way it happened—the way that science-fiction died . . .

THE Tenth World Science Fiction Convention was scheduled for Labor Day Weekend. As a fantasy reader, you probably know all about the Conventions—organized on an annual basis by fans in various cities, they have become an institution. Each year, several hundred fans, editors and authors meet for three days in the selected city, attending regular sessions of speeches, lectures and discussions at a convention hall. This last year was

New York's turn to play host, and Labor Day Weekend had been eagerly awaited by fandom.

I pulled into Penn Station on Friday afternoon and lugged my grips down the platform. I kept my weather eyed peeled for a glimpse of Richard Ormsbee. He'd promised to meet me at the train, but there wasn't hide, hair nor mustache of Dick as I made my way through the crowd.

Instead, a short, pudgy-faced young man jostled toward me and stared upward. He hesitated for a long moment, then spoke.

"Pardon me, but are you Robert Bloch?"

"What did you expect?" I asked. "A gorilla?"

"No—it's just that you don't look the way I expected you to look—I mean—"

"I understand," I shrugged. "It's true that I used to have two heads, but one of them was amputated last year. I carry it in my suitcase. Want to see it?"

How far I might have succeeded in driving him crazy I'll never know. Larry Fisher came along at that moment and grabbed my arm. He's my agent, and he handled my arm gingerly so as not to injure the muscles I use in typing stories.

"Good to see you, Bob!" he greeted me. "By the way, meet George Selby. He's a fan of yours." Larry gestured toward the moon-faced young man. I started to apologize for my rudeness and attempt to put him at his ease, but Larry took charge of the situation.

"Let's get your things over to the hotel," he suggested. "Then we'll grab something to eat." He waved Selby aside. "See you at the Convention tomorrow," he promised. "You'll have plenty of time to talk to Bloch then."

He hustled me over to the cabstand and we ploughed through traffic toward the hotel.

"Where's Ormsbee?" I inquired, as we shot up Broadway with the speed of a rheumatic snail on crutches.

"Haven't seen him for the last few days," Larry told me. "Of course he's pretty busy—guest of honor at the Convention and all that. He's probably typing the final draft of his speech right now."

"He promised to meet me," I said.

"We'll call him from the hotel," Larry suggested. "I know he's anxious to see you."

I was anxious enough to see him. Richard Ormsbee and I had been friends for a dozen years. When I'd met him through correspondence he'd been a fan. Then he'd turned writer, and within a few years his reputation was established not only in the field of fantasy but beyond. He sold to the slicks, turned out books, did radio and TV work, and at the same time managed to retain his warm and unassuming friendliness. Where I come from in the writing business, that's no mean achievement, and I liked Dick for it. As a matter of fact, it was the news of his selection as guest of honor that drew me to this Convention.

So here I was. But no Ormsbee!

There was no answer when we phoned his house from my hotel room. That puzzled me. We'd made plans to meet by mail. What was wrong?

I didn't have much time to puzzle over the problem. Otto Binder and some of the New York gang arrived about five, and then Ackerman called—just in from the Coast—and Bob Tucker came up looking for a deck of cards.

We had dinner somewhere eventually, and drinks. We kept running into other Conventioneers, and more drinks. Gradually I forgot about Ormsbee.

BY the time I got back to the hotel, there was no room for anything in my head except the trip-hammer that seemed to be operating up there.

Then I went into my suite and found—Richard Ormsbee.

He was sitting on the bed. Or rather, he *had* been sitting there. But when I opened the door he jumped up.

"Oh—it's you!"

"Expecting a blonde?" I asked.

“No. Not exactly.” He smiled, but as we shook hands I noticed that he seemed tired. What had become of the usual Ormsbee banter that had charmed so many people across (and under) the table in days gone by?

I thought I had an obvious clue. Dick must be suffering from a bad case of stage-fright. The idea of making a speech tomorrow had him stymied.

“Convention got you down?” I asked. “Thinking about your speech?”

He shook his head. “It’s not my speech, Bob,” he said. “I’ve got that part figured out. Would you like to hear it?”

“Sure, Dick. Of course I would. Shoot.”

Ormsbee hunched forward on the bed and began to talk. He never cracked a smile, but what he said was oddly grotesque.

“Mr. Chairman, friends, and science-fiction fans of the world:

“What I have to say to you today is not very pleasant. You will not particularly enjoy listening to it, and I certainly do not enjoy telling it to you.

“But I have no choice, so I’ll try to make it short and to the point. Friends, my message to you is simply this—

“Science-fiction must be destroyed!

“What do I mean by that? I mean that all writers must stop writing science-fiction stories. Stop immediately, and forever.

“I mean that all publishers of fantasy magazines must give up publications—immediately, and forever.

“I mean that all fans must abandon their interest in the field. They must destroy all current and back issues of magazines, and amateur publications. They must burn—yes, *burn*—all books and pamphlets pertaining to fantasy.

“I mean that this must be the last World Science Fiction Convention. I mean that the name, the very memory of science-fiction must perish from the earth. I mean—*“What’s that?”*

The last two words were a shout. Ormsbee jerked his head towards the window, his face white with sudden shock.

I headed for the open window and peered out. I saw nothing beyond except the lights of Manhattan.

"I'm pretty shaky," Ormsbee murmured. "For a minute I thought it might be *them*."

He pulled out a cigarette, stuck it between his lips, but didn't light it. I faced him grimly.

"Listen, Dick, what is all this? What's with this screwball speech of yours? What's all the melodrama about 'them' ? Are you kidding?"

He shook his head. "I could give you the rest of the speech," he sighed. "That would explain it. But I'll boil it down. In the speech I give details, because I must be convincing. I want them to believe me. But I'll just give you bare facts."

He sat down once more and lighted the cigarette. "It started on the day they called me up to tell me about making the speech at this Convention.

"Naturally, I was pleased. I decided to knock off work and take a stroll. I went down to a little bookbinder by the name of Breutsch. He had a copy of H. P. Lovecraft's *The Outsider* that he was re-binding for me.

"I walked into Breutsch's little basement shop and the old man shuffled out of the back room. When he saw me, his face fell a bit.

" 'Isn't it ready yet?' I asked.

"He shook his head. 'Mr. Ormsbee—I don't know how to explain this to you—but your book has been stolen.'

" 'Stolen?'

" 'Either that, or the rats got it. There's prints like rat's paws in the dust near the window. And the window's broken.'

"He led me into the back room and showed me.

" 'Must have happened last night! he said. 'I had your book in clamps over there on the window-edge, drying. When I opened up shop this morning, here's what I found.'

"I stared at the dusty ledge. There were clamps setting against the wall. They had been pried open. And all around the clamps were prints. Prints in the dust. They looked like the marks of rodent claws, or the lines etched by scraping fingernails. But with one peculiarity. Each disturbance of dust came in a regular pattern of six marks. Not four, like a rat’s claws. Not five, like fingerprints. Six. Six indentations in a pattern, repeated a dozen times.

“Above the ledge was the window. The pane had obviously been shattered, but there was no broken glass. The opening was not jagged, but quite neat. A glass-cutter does that kind of a job. Then an arm might have reached down, a hand pried open the clamps, and taken the book.

“Very simple. Except that the marks were *not* made by fingers.

“I stared again at the disturbed dust. And then I began to shudder. Don’t ask me why. It wasn’t anything like your yarns, Bob. No feeling of ‘hovering horror’ or ‘evil presences’. But the skin crawled against my neck and my mouth went dry and I thought of my lost Lovecraft anthology and shuddered.

“Who—or what—had stolen this book? Why had this particular volume been chosen? It wasn’t a regular robbery.

“Breutsch said something about insurance and paying me back and notifying the police. I mumbled something about accidents and petty thieves. But we were both lying. As I left the shop I stared into his eyes and saw that *he* knew.

“Then, when I got home, I found the apartment had been searched.”

ORMSBEE doused the cigarette and continued. “There was no dust in the place, and I saw no unnatural prints. Somehow I was glad of that. But evidences of search were unmistakable. They’d pried a window up—don’t ask me how, since I’m on the fourth floor with a sheer drop to the courtyard below—and they’d gone through the place thoroughly.

“No money or jewelry was missing. That was strange.

“My clothes had been jumbled about a bit in the closet. And there was a gap in my bookshelves. Some back issues of magazines were gone. Also I missed a photograph from the dresser. But that was all.

“I could have called the police, but I didn’t. I merely straightened things out and took a drink. But I couldn’t straighten out my thoughts.

"And when at last I went to bed and tried to sleep off my forebodings, I had this dream."

Ormsbee's voice was low. It deepened as he went on.

"I dreamed that I had fallen asleep and left the radio going. Now, in my sleep, the radio spoke to me. From the blare of late dance-band music, a voice slithered out. It came from far away—and it called to me in accents that weren't formed in a human throat.

"That's what disturbed me, I guess. Because the words, as I half-heard them, were soothing. *'Sleep'* said the voice. *'Sleep and rest'* Gentle, beguiling words. The words of a hypnotist. And from a throat that wasn't meant to form words. Even in slumber I could tell that about the voice. It wasn't a foreign accent, it was an *alien* one. *'Sleep and rest'* it droned.

"I might have obeyed at that. I might have sunk into a deeper coma. But then everything coalesced. Something about the prints in the dust and my disturbed room and the theft of that particular book seemed to add up at the sound of the alien voice. Something clicked into place. I knew, suddenly, what it was that I suspected and feared. And I woke up with a scream.

" *'The Whisperer!'* I shrieked. *'The Whisperer in Darkness!'*

"I awoke. There was a glowing in my room, but it didn't come from a light, or anything inside. It came from the open window just beyond. Something was hanging out there, something suspended before the opening. It appeared—in the brief glimpse I got of it—to be a shiny metal cylinder of surprising dimensions. I had the vague impression of sudden, blurred movement. Then the thing faded, or moved away before the echo of my shout had time to reverberate.

"I was out of bed at a bound. The sky beyond the window was clear. But so was the realization that haunted me now as I guessed the truth.

"Since that time, nothing has happened. Nothing *definite,* that is. I'm taking some sedative the doctor made up, and there are no dreams. It's bad enough to live with my thoughts while I'm awake.

"Not that I'm afraid. *They* must have what they were after, anyway—the Lovecraft book and the magazines. That should give them all the information they need. Of course, I'm bothered by their taking my photograph. It's utterly fantastic. But so is the whole business.

"So, you see, I must make the speech I gave you. I must make that speech tomorrow and warn them—warn the other writers and the editors. Tell them that *they* are here and plan on taking over. And we must do our part in preventing it."

Ormsbee's monologue ended, but my bewilderment had just begun.

"I don't see anything," I confessed. "Who are *they?* What is this warning you want to make? What's the clue of *The Whisperer in Darkness?"*

"Don't you remember the story?" asked Ormsbee. "Lord knows where Lovecraft got the idea—if it *was* only an idea, even then. It's about the things that came from beyond; from Pluto, the dark planet. They had a queer, superior intelligence, and planned to rule Earth through renegade humans who acted as their spies.

"They stole human intelligence, too, when they needed it. And gradually, by means of hypnotism, deception and outright violence, they planned to take control of mankind. When a man suspected the secret or knew too much, he was—eliminated."

"Now wait a minute," I said. "Fun's fun, but you aren't trying to tell me that good old HPL's story is fact and the monsters from Pluto are on your trail."

"Of course not. But something is," Ormsbee said, earnestly.

"Huh!" I snorted. "Sounds like something out of Eric Frank Russell or a hundred other science-fiction yarns I've read. Trouble with you is that you've been reading too much science-fiction!"

"That's the point," said Ormsbee. "Now you're getting it. Only, *I'm* not reading science-fiction. They are!"

"What do you mean?"

"Suppose," said Ormsbee, slowly, "that beings do exist. Beings from another dimension, or another planet. Beings forming part of a life-pattern alien to Earth.

"Suppose, again, that these creatures—whatever their purposes or desires—have suddenly found a way of communicating with Earth. Or even of *coming* to Earth in what we writers have spoken of so glibly for so many years: a space-ship.

"Suppose, for the sake of argument, that this is the truth behind the so-called flying Saucers, as has often been suggested. Grant that it's true. Outsiders with a superior intelligence arrive on this planet—what will they do?"

"Wreck the Empire State Building," I sneered. "They try it in every story."

"Exactly!" Ormsbee declared. "It's from those stories that they get their information!"

"Now, wait a minute—"

"DON'T you see?" he persisted "Picture these aliens, these outsiders, arriving through a gap in the continuum of space or time. They have no direct kinship with humanity or human thought. The strongest link would naturally be through the minds of those who are at least conditioned—however unwittingly—to the possibility of their existence. To be specific, the writers of fantasy and science fiction, whose brains can conceive of such beings.

"That's how they were drawn to me, I suppose. And through my mind they learned of the books and the magazines.

"Suppose you were a spy in enemy territory. Wouldn't you want to secure plans, maps, theories of strategy? Of course! And the theories of strategy for those outside of earth are—science-fiction stories!

"Where else would you find ideas on how to destroy the earth, or rule the human race? Where else would you find such detailed consideration of just how the world might be successfully invaded from outside?

"They took the Lovecraft book containing that *Whisperer* story. And then they came to my place for magazines. There's some psychic connection with my unconscious mind, and it guides them. Of course, I can't guess what they want, or what they plan to do. Why they tried to get to me in sleep. What that half-waking vision of a silver cylinder signifies.

"All that I'm sure of is that a menace does exist. And I'm making my speech tomorrow. I'm telling the science-fiction world everything I've told you. We've aided an enemy unconsciously for years, and it must stop.

"For whoever they are, and whatever they plan, we mustn't help them any longer. We must stop writing the stories. We must seal our imaginations to those images of *outside* that seem to aid them.

"Perhaps they will come out in the open, soon. It may be that we can make plans, anticipate their movements, learn more about them. But come what may—I'm giving my speech."

Ormsbee concluded abruptly, forcing a grin as he rose to his feet.

"Now I must rush," he said. "Maybe you think I'm crazy, and maybe everyone will think I'm crazy, after tomorrow. But please promise me one thing—not a word to anyone until I appear at Convention hall. Good night. See you tomorrow."

I fumbled for words, but there was nothing to say. He left the room, left me standing by the open window.

For a long time I stared down at the lights of the city below. Then I stared upward at the distant stars, and at the gulfs of blackness between the stars.

And I wondered—

LONG before the official opening of the Convention at 10 AM, the penthouse hall was crowded. There must have been over four hundred in attendance. Everyone! milled around, and I had a hard time spotting familiar faces. But the whole fantasy field was out in force: editors, authors, and fans.

Then George Selby, perennial fan, grabbed my elbow and steered me into the hall outside. He began to pump my arm and also me, for information. What did I write? How did I write? Why did I write?

The more he talked, the more I wondered. Meanwhile, the speeches of welcome had already started in the hall and the seats were filled. By the time I managed to shake friend Selby and get back into the hall there was nothing left but standing room against the wall, near the door. And Ormsbee's name was being announced as the next speaker.

There was applause as Richard Ormsbee stepped out from the back of the raised platform and approached the lectern and microphone. Knowing what I did, it was easy to detect signs of strain on his rigid features. He looked pale, and his lips were compressed beneath his mustache. He walked slowly, and kept his hands in his pockets. I could imagine how nervous he must be, but his face was stolid, immobile.

The applause subsided. A building attendant peered into the room, glanced around curiously, and withdrew. I hunched against the wall and prepared to listen.

Ormsbee had already begun to talk. His voice sounded dully over the microphone. Hall acoustics were not all they should be. But then, neither was his speech.

For Ormsbee was not delivering the speech he had recited to me the night before!

I listened intently as I heard the unfamiliar sentences pour out.

"The peculiar irony of it," he was saying, "is that you—who are presumedly authorities on the subject—know nothing about it. Absolutely nothing!

"What do you know about space, for example? Not as much as Columbus knew about the western hemisphere before he sailed. Not as much as the ancient Phoenicians, rather. For early sailors at least ventured out to sea.

"But no man has ever risen more than a few dozen miles into what you call the stratosphere. No man-made instrument has ever risen much higher and returned.

“And yet, in your ignorance, you presume to set forth ‘laws’ about space. A stupid Einstein, using the formalized gibberish you call mathematics, tries to compress the entire universe into a concept bounded by three-dimensional figures and equations.

“You and your scientific postulates! They are not based on actual observations of physical reactions, but on hollow philosophic attitudes toward those reactions. You *name* rather than explain; yours is a system of labelling.

“Exactly what is the ‘cosmic ray’ ? What is ‘corpuscular radiation’ and ‘auroreal streamers’—what is this jargon about ‘E’ layers in electronics? Just words, gibberish of little men who don’t even dream of what electricity really is. Men who claim to chart the universe while squatting on an Earth so faultily weighed and measured that there is ho mathematical certitude anywhere. And if a phenomenon presents itself that is not in line with your hollow theories, you ignore it.

“You pitiful, deluded ones, who don’t even dream of what goes on under your very noses, who-sneer at Fort, scoff at the few thinkers who dared to speculate on the truth—”

Ormsbee’s speech wasn’t exactly making a hit. Even though he delivered it stolidly enough, there were growing murmurs, grumblings and mutterings rising to open complaints.

“Still, you have unwittingly served your purpose. Ignorantly, you have opened the way to the very abysses of which you complacently scribble in your childish fantasies—”

I felt an arm jab into my back, and turned. The building attendant who had peered into the room was staring at me, now. There was no curiosity in his face, only a grimace of horror.

“Let me through,” he whispered. “Got to make an announcement, right away—”

“Wait a minute,” I began. He shook his head. Suddenly he opened his mouth and began to yell, in a voice that drowned out Ormsbee’s words from the platform.

“It was you fellers done it!” he shouted. “You and your crazy tricks!”

HEADS turned, craned. The attendant faced his audience.

“Get it off the roof right away!” he yelled. “Get it off, or I’ll have the whole gang tossed out of the hotel!”

“What’s on the roof?” I snapped.

“That damned silver cylinder—it come down from the sky and it’s humming and purring—”

Silver cylinder? Hadn’t Ormsbee told me?

I took sudden command of the situation.

“Where’s the stairs?” I yelled. I’m afraid my own voice held a note of hysteria. “Come on, let’s see this thing.”

We turned. The speech was forgotten as the crowd poured out at our heels. Half of them must have thought it was a gag—but nobody likes to miss a gag.

The jam on the staircase to the roof was terrific. But I was still right behind the attendant when we reached the top.

I stared at the empty roof.

“It’s gone!” His jaw hung slackly.

“No it isn’t,” I muttered. “There!”’, And I pointed toward the horizon.

Faint and far away the flicker of light shown down. Something spun off into space—spun like a silver top against the sun. Something that might have been a great round metal cylinder. Something that might have been a flying saucer. Something that might have been a space-ship from a story.

I don’t know how many of the others saw it. But I saw it. And then—

“Where’s Ormsbee?”

The familiar voice whispered at my side. It was Larry, my agent. He stared at me as I bent my head. “I called him this morning to pick him up on the way to the Convention. But he wasn’t home. Then I came over here alone. Just got in and saw the crowd up on the roof—”

"It's all right," I said. "Ormsbee's here. Downstairs making a speech when this interruption came." I steered Larry back downstairs, through the throng of excited fans, all babbling at once.

Ormsbee was not a part of the crowd here or on the corridor below, so I assumed he was still on the platform, patiently waiting for his audience to return.

We entered the hall. It was deserted. Only then, as I stared up at the platform did the monstrous conjecture form in my mind.

They—

They had taken the Lovecraft book. That story—*The Whisperers in Darkness*—would give them an idea. No wonder Ormsbee had feared it. As he said, we writers could tell them what to do.

So they took the book. And they took his magazines. And inspected his clothing. And stole his picture. And when they couldn't get to him in jeep, they waited.

Waited until last night—

Why? Because he was going to make a speech. A speech about destroying science-fiction. A speech warning science-fiction and the world about invaders from outside.

So they had taken steps, moving in their great metal globe, to see that Ormsbee wouldn't make that speech.

But he had just spoken. Or else—

I didn't say anything to Larry. I just thought of the strange mockery of the speech I had heard, and I thought of how curiously immobile Ormsbee's face had been, and how he had held his hands in his pockets, walked woodenly, and talked in a drawling drone.

Then I was running down the aisle, clawing my way up to the lectern. I knew what I was looking for, of course. Anybody who had read Lovecraft's story would guess.

I was looking for a rubber mask—the kind that can be fitted over the head. A rubber mask moulded in the features of Richard Ormsbee.

I didn't find it.

It wasn't until I stumbled backstage that I found something—and promptly passed out.

EVER since that discovery I've been waiting for other things to be found. Waiting for other manifestations of those presences from outside.

I don't, know when they will move again. I don't know exactly what they want. If they plagiarized the ideas in Lovecraft's story they can plagiarize any horror, make it real.

All I can do is plead with you, implore you to abandon science-fiction forever. Don't give them any more help!

All I can do is tell you what I stumbled over when I went backstage.

It was Ormsbee's body. Or certain *parts* of it.

They had sewed up the head again very cleverly, and it wasn't until the doctors arrived and made their examination that the *changes* could be detected.

It took a complete autopsy to determine how the brain had been removed and the spinal column altered. Even now they cannot account for the tangle of wires, coils and metal filaments that filled the empty skull and extended through the body.

Some say it was a mechanical brain, substituted to animate a corpse. There have been learned comments about the use of unclassified metals and alloys.

On only one point are they agreed—whatever the mechanism animating the body of Richard Ormsbee on that fatal day when science-fiction died—*it wasn't made on earth!*

The End

The Man Who Collected Poe

Would, Edgar Allan Poe be able to sell his stories if he were writing today? This is a question which has long intrigued editors, authors, readers and critics of fantasy. It is a question I have sought to answer in the only possible way—by writing a story of Poe in the manner which Poe himself might have written it. I do not claim a tenth of his talent or a tithe of his genius but I have proposed deliberately, in so far as possible to recreate his style. Poe scholars will recognize my deliberate inclusion of sentences and sections from "The Fall of the House of Usher", and the casual reader will quite easily discover them. The result is, I believe, a "Poe story" in a rather unique and special sense and one which it gave me great pleasure to write as a tribute to a figure to whom I, like every other writer of fantasy, must own indebtedness—Robert Bloch.

DURING the whole of a dull, dark and soundless day in the autumn of the year, when the clouds hung oppressively low in the heavens, I had been passing alone, by automobile, through a singularly dreary tract of country, and at length found myself, as the shades of the evening drew on, within view of my destination.

I looked upon the scene before me—upon the mere house, and the simple landscape features of the domain—upon the bleak walls—upon the vacant eye-like windows—upon a few rank sedges—and upon a few white trunks of decayed trees—with a feeling of utter confusion commingled with dismay. For it seemed to me as though I had visited this scene once before, or read of it, perhaps, in some frequently re-scanned tale. And yet assuredly it could not be, for only three days had passed since I had made the acquaintance of Launcelot Canning and received an invitation to visit him at his Maryland residence.

The circumstances under which I met Canning were simple; I happened to attend a bibliophilic meeting in Washington and was introduced to him by a mutual friend. Casual conversation gave place to absorbed and interested discussion when he discovered my preoccupation with works of fantasy. Upon learning that I was traveling upon a vacation with no set itinerary, Canning urged me to become his guest for a day and to examine, at my leisure, his unusual display of memorabilia.

“I feel, from our conversation, that we have much in common.” he told me. “For you see, sir, in my love of fantasy I bow to no man. It is a taste I have perhaps inherited from my father and from his father before him, together with their considerable acquisitions in the genre. No doubt you would be gratified with what I am prepared to show you, for in all due modesty, I beg to style myself the world’s leading collector of the works of Edgar Allen Poe.”

I confess that his invitation as such did not enthrall me, for I hold no brief for the literary hero-worshipper or the scholarly collector as a type. I own to a more than passing-interest in the tales of Poe, but my interest does not extend to the point of ferreting out the exact date upon which Mr. Poe first decided to raise a mustache, nor would I be unduly intrigued by the opportunity to examine several hairs preserved from that hirsute appendage.

So it was rather the person and personality of Launcelot Canning himself which caused me to accept his proferred hospitality. For the man who proposed to become my host might have himself stepped from the pages of a Poe tale. His speech, as I have endeavored to indicate, was characterized by a courtly rodomontade so often exemplified in Poe’s heroes—and beyond certainty, his appearance bore out the resemblance.

Launcelot Canning had the cadaverousness of complexion, the large, liquid, luminous eye, the thin, curved lips, the delicately modelled nose, finely moulded chin, and dark, web-like hair of a typical Poe protagonist.

It was this phenomenon which prompted my acceptance and led me to journey to his Maryland estate which, as I now perceived, in itself manifested a Poe-etic quality of its own, intrinsic in the images of the gray sedge, the ghastly tree-stems, and the vacant and eyelike windows of the mansion of gloom. All that was lacking was a tarn and a moat—and as I prepared to enter the dwelling I half expected to encounter therein the carved ceilings, the sombre tapestries, the ebon floors arid the phantasmagoric armorial trophies so vividly described by the author of *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque.*

Nor, upon entering Launcelot Canning's home was I too greatly disappointed in my expectations. True to both the atmopheric quality of the decrepit mansion and to my own fanciful presentiments, the door was opened in response to my knock by a valet who conducted me, in silence,. through dark and intricate passages to the study of his master.

The room in which I found myself was very large and lofty. The windows were long, narrow, and pointed, and at so vast a distance from the black oaken floor as to be altogether inaccessible from within. Feeble gleams of encrimsoned light made their way through the trellised panes, and served to render sufficiently distinct the more prominent objects around; the eye, however, struggled in vain to reach the remoter angles of the chamber or the recesses, of the vaulted and fretted ceiling. Dark draperies hung upon the walls. The general furniture was profuse, comfortless, antique, and tattered. Many books and musical instruments lay scattered about, but failed to give any vitality to the scene.

Instead they rendered more distinct that peculiar quality of quasi-recollection; it was as though I found myself once again, after a protracted absence, in a familiar setting. I had read, I had imagined, I had dreamed, or I had actually beheld this setting before.

Upon my entrance, Launcelot Canning arose from a sofa on which he had been lying at full length, and greeted me with a vivacious warmth which had much in it, I at first thought, of an overdone cordiality.

Yet his tone, as he spoke of the object of my visit, of his earnest desire to see me, and of the solace he expected me to afford him in a mutual discussion of our interests, soon alleviated my initial misapprehension.

Launcelot Canning welcomed me with the rapt enthusiasm of the born collector—and I came to realize that he was indeed just that. For the Poe collection he shortly proposed to unveil before me was actually his birthright.

Initially, he disclosed, the nucleus of the present accumulation had begun with his grandfather, Christopher Canning, a respected merchant of Baltimore. Almost eighty years ago he had been one of the, leading patrons of the arts in his community and as such was partially instrumental in arranging for the removal of Poe's body to the southeastern corner of the Presbyterian Cemetery at Fayette and Green Streets, where a suitable monument might be erected. This event occurred in the year 1875, and it was a few years prior to that time that Canning laid the foundation of the Poe collection.

"Thanks to his zeal," his grandson informed me, "I am today the fortunate possessor of a copy of virtually every existing specimen of Poe's published works. If you will step over here"—and he led me to a remote corner of the vaulted study, past the dark draperies, to a bookshelf which rose remotely to the shadowy ceiling—"I shall be pleased to corroborate that claim. Here is a copy of *Al Aaraaf, Tamerlane and other Poems* in the eighteen twenty-nine edition, and here is the still earlier *Tamerlane and other Poems* of eighteen twenty-seven. 'The Boston edition, which, as you doubtless know, is valued today at fifteen thousand dollars.' I can assure you that Grandfather Canning parted with no such sum in order to gain possession of this rarity."

He displayed the volumes with an air of commingled pride and cupidity which is oft-times characteristic of the collector and is by no means to be confused with either literary snobbery or ordinary greed. Realizing this, I remained patient as he exhibited further treasures—copies of the *Philadelphia Saturday Courier* containing early tales, bound volumes of *The Messenger* during the period of Poe's editorship, *Graham's Magazine,* editions of the *New York Sun* and the *New York Mirror* boasting, respectively, of *The Balloon Hoax* and *The Raven,* and files of *The Gentleman's Magazine.* Ascending a short library ladder, he handed down to me the Lea and Blanchard edition of *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque,* the *Conchologist's First Book,* the Putnam *Eureka,* and, finally, the little paper booklet, published in 1843 and sold [or 12½¢, entitled *The Prose Romances of Edgar A. Poe;* an insignificant-trifle containing two tales which is valued by present-day collectors at $50,000.

CANNING informed me of this last fact, and, indeed, keep up a running commentary upon each item he presented. There was no doubt but that he was a Poe scholar as well as a Poe collector, and his words informed tattered specimens of the *Broadway Journal* and *Godey's Lady's Book* with a singular fascination not necessarily inherent in the flimsy sheets or. their contents.

"I owe a great debt to Grandfather Canning's obsession;" he observed, descending the ladder and joining me before the bookshelves. "It is not altogether a breach of confidence to admit that his interest in Poe did reach the point of an obsession, and perhaps eventually of an absolute mania. The knowledge, alas, is public property, I fear.

"In the early seventies he built this house, and I am quite sure that you have been observant enough to note that it in itself is almost a replica of a typical Poeesque mansion. This was his study, and it was here that he was wont to pore over the books, the letters, and the numerous mementoes of Poe's life.

"What prompted a retired merchant to devote himself so fanatically to the pursuit of a hobby, I cannot say. Let it suffice that he virtually withdrew from the world and from all other normal interests. He conducted a voluminous and lengthy correspondence with aging men and women who had known Poe in their lifetime—made pilgrimages to Fordham, sent his agents to West Point, to England and Scotland, to virtually every locale in which Poe had set foot during his lifetime. He acquired letters and souvenirs as gifts, he bought them, and—I fear—stole them, if no other means of acquisition proved feasible."

Launcelot Canning smiled and nodded. "Does all this sound strange to you? I confess that once I, too, found it almost incredible, a fragment of romance. Now, after years spent here, I have lost my own objectivity."

"Yes, it is strange," I replied. "But are you quite sure that there was not. some obscure personal reason for your grandfather's interest? Had he met Poe as a boy, or been closely associated with one of his friends? Was there, perhaps, a distant, undisclosed relationship?"

At the mention of the last word, Canning started visibly, and a tremor of agitation overspread his countenance.

"Ah!" he exclaimed. "There you voice my own inmost conviction. A relationship—assuredly there must have been one—I am morally, instinctively certain that Grandfather Canning felt or knew himself to be linked to Edgar Poe by ties of blood. Nothing else could account for his strong initial interest, his continuing defense of Poe in the literary controversies of the day, and his final melancholy lapse into a world of delusion and illusion.

"Yet he never voiced a statement or put an allegation upon paper—and I have searched the collection of letters in vain for the slightest clue.

"It is curious that you so promptly divine a suspicion held not only by myself but by my father. He was only a child at the time of my Grandfather Canning's death, but the attendant circumstances left a profound impression upon his sensitive nature. Although he was immediately removed from this house to the home of his mother's people in Baltimore, he lost no time in returning upon assuming his inheritance in early manhood.

"Fortunately being in possession of a considerable income, he was able to devote his entire lifetime to further research. The name of Arthur Canning is still well known in the world of literary criticism, but for some reason he preferred to pursue his scholarly examination of Poe's career in privacy. I believe this preference was dictated by an inner sensibility; that he was endeavoring to unearth some information which would prove his father's, his, and for that matter, my own, kinship to Edgar Poe."

"You say your father was also a collector?" I prompted.

"A statement I am prepared to substantiate," replied my host, as he led me to yet another corner of the shadow-shrouded study. "But first, if you would accept a glass of wine?"

He filled, not glasses, but veritable beakers from a large carafe, and we toasted one another in silent appreciation. It is perhaps unnecessary for me to observe that the wine was a fine old Amontillado.

"Now, then," said Launcelot Canning. "My father's special province in Poe research consisted of the accumulation and study of letters."

Opening a series of large trays or drawers beneath the bookshelves, he drew out file after file of glassined folios, and for the space of the next half hour I examined Edgar Poe's correspondence-letters to Henry Herring, to Doctor Snodgrass, Sarah Shelton, James P. Moss, Elizabeth Poe—missives to Mrs. Rockwood, Helen Whitman, Anne Lynch, John Pendleton Kennedy—notes to Mrs. Richmond, to John Allan, to Annie, to his brother, Henry—a profusion of documents, a veritable epistolary cornucopia.

During the course of my perusal my host took occasion to refill our beakers with wine, and the heady draught began to, take effect—for we had not eaten, and I own I gave no thought to food, so absorbed was I in the yellowed pages illumining Poe's past.

Here was wit, erudition, literary criticism; here were the muddled, maudlin outpourings of a mind gone in drink and despair; here was the draft of a projected story, the fragments of a poem; here was a pitiful cry for deliverance and a paean to living beauty; here was a dignified response to a dunning letter and an editorial pronunciamento to an admirer; here was love, hate, pride, anger, celestial serenity, abject penitence, authority, wonder, resolution, indecision, joy, and soul-sickening melancholia.

Here was the gifted elocutionist, the stammering drunkard, the adoring husband, the frantic lover, the proud editor, the indigent pauper, the grandiose dreamer, the shabby realist, the scientific inquirer, the gullible metaphysician, the dependent stepson, the free and untrammeled spirit, the hack, the poet, the enigma that was Edgar Allan Poe.

Again the beakers were filled and emptied.

I drank deeply with my lips, and with my eyes more deeply still.

For the first time the true enthusiasm of Launcelot Canning was communicated to my own sensibilities—I divined the eternal fascination found in a consideration of Poe the writer and Poe the man; he who wrote Tragedy, lived Tragedy, was Tragedy; he who penned Mystery, lived and died in Mystery, and who today looms on the literary scene as Mystery incarnate.

And Mystery Poe remained, despite Arthur Canning's careful study of the letters. "My father learned nothing." my host confided, "even though he assembled, as you see here, a *collection* to delight the heart of a Mabbott or a Quinn. So his search ranged further. By this time I was old enough to share both his interest and his inquiries. Come," and he led me to an ornate chest which rested beneath the windows against the west wall of the study.

Kneeling, he unlocked the repository, and then drew forth, in rapid and marvelous succession, a series of objects each of which boasted of intimate connection with Poe's life.

There were souvenirs of his youth and his schooling abroad—a book he had used during his sojourn at West Point—mementoes of his days as a theatrical critic in the form of playbills, a pen used during his editorial period, a fan once owned by his girl-wife, Virginia, a brooch of Mrs. Clemm's; a profusion of objects including such diverse articles as a cravat-stock and—curiously enough—Poe's battered and tarnished flute.

Again we drank, and I own the wine was potent. Canning's countenance remained cadaverously wan—but, moreover, there was a species of mad hilarity in his eye—ail evident restrained hysteria in his whole demeanor. At length, from the scattered heap of curiosa, I happened to draw forth and examine a little box of no remarkable character, whereupon I was constrained to inquire its history and what part it had played in the life of Poe.

“In the *life* of Poe?” A visible tremor convulsed the features of my host, then rapidly passed in transformation to a grimace, a rictus of amusement. “This little box—and you will note how, by some fateful design or contrived coincidence it bears a resemblance to the box he himself conceived, of and described in his tale, *Berenice*—this little box is concerned with his death, rather than his life. It is, in fact, the self-same box my grandfather Christopher Canning clutched to his bosom when they found him down there.”

Again the tremor, again the grimace. “But stay, I have not yet told you of the details. Perhaps you would be interested in seeing the spot where Christopher Canning was stricken; I have already told you of his madness, but I did no more than hint at the character of his delusions. You have been patient with me, and more than patient. Your understanding shall be rewarded, for I perceive you can be fully entrusted with the facts.”

What further revelations Canning was prepared to make I could not say, but his manner was such as to inspire a vague disquiet and trepidation in my breast.

Upon perceiving my unease he laughed shortly and laid a hand upon my shoulder. “Come, this should interest you as an *aficionado* of fantasy,” he said. “But first, another drink to speed our journey.”

He poured, we drank, and then he led the way from that vaulted chamber, down the silent halls, down the staircase, and into the lowest recesses of the building until we reached what resembled a donjon-keep, its floor and the interior of a long archway carefully sheathed in copper. We paused before a door of massive iron. Again I felt in the aspect of this scene an element evocative of recognition or recollection.

Canning’s intoxication was such that he misinterpreted, or chose to misinterpret, my reaction.

“You need not be afraid,” he assured me. “Nothing has happened down here since that day, almost seventy years ago, when his servants discovered him stretched out before this door, the little box clutched to his bosom; collapsed, and in a state of delirium from which he never emerged. For six months he lingered, a hopeless maniac—raving as wildly from the very moment of his discovery as at the moment he died—babbling his visions of the giant horse, the fissured house collapsing into the tarn, the black cat, the pit, the pendulum, the raven on the pallid bust, the beating heart, the pearly teeth, and the nearly liquid mass of loathsome—of detestable putridity from which a voice emanated.

“Nor was that all he babbled,” Canning confided, and here his voice sank to a whisper that reverberated through the copper-sheathed hall and against the iron door. “He hinted other things far worse than fantasy; of a ghastly reality surpassing all of the phantasms of Poe.

“For the first time my father and the servants learned the purpose of the room he had built beyond this iron door, and learned too what Christopher Canning had done to establish his title as the world’s foremost collector of Poe.

“For he babbled again of Poe’s death, thirty years earlier, in eighteen forty-nine—of the burial in the Presbyterian Cemetery—and of the removal of the coffin in eighteen seventy-four to the corner where the monument was raised. As I told you, and as was known then, my grandfather had played a public part in instigating that removal. But now we learned of the private part—learned that there was a monument and a grave, but no coffin in the earth beneath Poe’s alleged resting place. The coffin now rested in the secret room at the end of this passage. That is why the room, the house itself, had been built.

“I tell you, he had stolen the body of Edgar Allan Poe—and as he shrieked aloud in his final madness, did not this indeed make him the greatest collector of Poe?

"His ultimate intent was never divined, but my father made one significant discovery—the little box clutched to Christopher Canning's bosom contained a portion of the crumbled bones, the veritable dust that was all that remained of Poe's corpse."

My host shuddered and turned away. He led me back along that hall of horror, up the stairs, into the study. Silently, he filled our beakers and I drank as hastily, as deeply, as desperately as he.

"What could my father do? To own the truth was to create a public scandal. He chose instead to keep silence; to devote his own life to study in retirement.

"Naturally the shock affected him profoundly; to my knowledge he never entered the room beyond the iron door and, indeed, I did not know of the room or its contents until the hour of his death—and it was not until some years later that I myself found the key among his effects.

"But find the key I did, and the story was immediately and completely corroborated. Today I am the greatest collector of Poe—for he lies in the keep below, my eternal trophy!"

This time I poured the wine. As I did so, I noted for the first time the imminence of a storm; the impetuous fury of its gusts shading the casements, and the echoes of its thunder rolling and rumbling down the time-corroded corridors of the old house.

The wild, overstrained vivacity with which my host hearkened, or apparently hearkened, to these sounds did nothing to reassure me—for his recent revelation led me to suspect his sanity.

That the body of Edgar Allan Poe had been stolen—that this mansion had been built to house it—that it was indeed enshrined in a crypt below—that grandsire, son, and grandson had dwelt here alone, apart, enslaved to a sepulchral secret—was beyond sane belief.

And yet, surrounded now by the night and the storm, in a setting torn from Poe's own frenzied fancies, I could not be sure. Here the past was still alive, the very spirit of Poe's tales breathed forth its corruption upon the scene.

As thunder boomed, Launcelot Canning took up Poe's flute, and, whether in defiance of the storm without or as a mocking accompaniment, he played; blowing upon it with drunken persistence, with eery atonality, with nerve-shattering shrillness. To the shrieking of that infernal instrument the thunder added a braying counterpoint.

UNEASY, uncertain and unnerved, I retreated into the shadows of the bookshelves at the farther end of the room, and idly scanned the titles of a row of ancient tomes. Here was the *Chiromancy* of Robert Flud, the *Directorium Inquisitorum,* a rare and curious book in quarto Gothic that was the manual of a forgotten church; and betwixt and between the volumes of pseudo scientific inquiry, theological speculation, and sundry incunabula I found titles that arrested and appalled me. *De Vermis Mysteriis* and the *Liber Eibon,* treatises on demonology, on witchcraft, on sorcery mouldered in crumbling binding. The books were old, but the books were not dusty. They had been read—

"Read them?" It was as though Canning, divined my inmost thoughts. He had put aside his flute and now approached me, tittering as though in continued drunken defiance of the storm. Odd echoes and boomings now sounded through the long halls of the house, and curious grating sounds threatened to drown out his words and his laughter.

"Read them?" said Canning. "I study them. Yes, I have gone beyond grandfather and father, too. It was I who procured the books that held the key, and it was I who found the key. A key more difficult to discover, and more important, than the key to the vaults below, I often wonder if Poe himself had access to these selfsame tomes, knew the selfsame secrets. The secrets of the grave and what lies beyond, and what can be summoned forth if one but holds the key."

He stumbled away and returned with wine. "Drink," he said. "Drink to the night and the storm."

I brushed the proferred glass aside. “Enough,” I said. “I must be on my way.”

Was it fancy or did I find fear frozen on his features? Canning clutched my arm and cried, “No, stay with me! This is no night on which to be alone; I swear I cannot abide the thought of being alone, I can bear to be alone no more!”

His incoherent babble mingled with the thunder and the echoes; I drew back and confronted him. “Control yourself,” I counseled. “Confess that this is a hoax, an elaborate imposture arranged to please your fancy.”

“Hoax? Imposture? Stay, and I shall prove to you beyond all doubt”-and so saying, Launcelot Canning stooped and opened a small drawer set in the wall beneath and beside the bookshelves. “This should repay you for your interest in my story, and in Poe,” he murmured. “Know that you are the first, other person than myself, to glimpse these treasures.”

He handed me a sheaf of manuscripts on plain white paper; documents written in ink curiously similar to that I had noted while perusing Poe’s letters. Pages were clipped together in groups, and for a moment I scanned titles alone.

“The Worm of Midnight, by Edgar Poe,” I read, aloud. *“The Crypt,”* I breathed. And here, *“The Further Adventures of Arthur Gordon Pym*“—and in my agitation I came close to dropping the precious pages. “Are these what they appear to be—the unpublished tales of Poe?”

My host bowed.

“Unpublished, undiscovered, unknown, save to me—and to you.”

“But this cannot be,” I protested. “Surely there would have been a mention of them somewhere, in Poe’s own letters or those of his contemporaries. There would have been a clue, an indication, somewhere, some place, somehow.”

Thunder mingled with my words, and thunder echoed in Canning’s shouted reply.

“You dare, to presume an imposture? Then compare!” He stooped again and brought out a glassined folio of letters. “Here—is this not the veritable script of Edgar Poe? Look at the calligraphy of the letter, then at the manuscripts. Can you say they are not penned by the selfsame hand?"

I looked at the handwriting; wondered at the possibilities of a monomaniac's forgery. Could Launcelot Canning, a victim of mental disorder, thus painstakingly simulate Poe's hand?

"Read, then!" Canning screamed through the thunder. "Read, and dare to say that these tales were written by any other than Edgar Poe, whose genius defies the corruption of Time and the Conqueror Worm!"

I read but a line or two, holding the topmost manuscript close to eyes that strained beneath wavering candlelight; but even in the flickering illumination I noted that which told me the only, the incontestable truth. For the paper, the curiously *unyellowed* paper, bore a visible watermark; the name of a firm of well-known modern stationers, and the date-1949.

Putting the sheaf aside, I endeavored to compose myself as I moved away from Launcelot Canning. For now I knew the truth; knew that, one hundred years after Poe's death a semblance of his spirit still lived in the distorted and disordered soul of Canning. Incarnation,. reincarnation, call it what you will; Canning was, in his own irrational mind, Edgar Allan Poe.

Stifled and dull echoes of thunder from a remote portion of the mansion now commingled with the soundless seething of my own inner turmoil, as I turned and rashly addressed my host.

"Confess!" I cried. "Is it not true that you have written these tales, fancying yourself the embodiment of Poe? Is it not true that you suffer from a singular delusion born of solitude and everlasting brooding upon the past; that you have reached a stage characterized by the conviction that Poe still lives on in your own person?"

A strong shudder came over him and a sickly smile quivered about his lips as he replied. "Fool! I say to you that I have spoken the truth. Can you doubt the evidence of your senses? This house is real, the Poe collection exists, and the stories exist—they exist, I swear, as truly as the body lying in the crypt below!"

I took up the little box from the table and removed the lid. “Not so,” I answered. “You said your grandfather was found with this box clutched to his breast, before the door of the vault, and that it contained Poe’s dust. Yet you cannot escape the fact that the box is empty.” I faced him furiously. “Admit it, the story is a fabrication., a romance. Poe’s body does not lie beneath this house, nor are these his unpublished works, written during his lifetime and concealed.”

“True enough.” Canning’s smile was ghastly beyond belief. “The dust is gone because I took it and used it—because in the works of wizardry I found the formulae, the arcana whereby I could raise, the flesh, recreate the body from the essential salts of the grave. Poe does not *lie* beneath this house—he *lives!* And the tales are *his posthumous works!”*

Accented by thunder, his words crashed against my consciousness.

“That was the end-all and the be-all of my planning, of my studies, of my work, of my life! To raise, by sorcery, the veritable spirit of Edgar Poe from the grave—reclothed and animate in flesh—set him to dwell and dream and do his work again in the private chambers I built in the vaults below—and this I have done! To steal a corpse is but a ghoulish prank; mine is the achievement of true genius!”

The distinct, hollow, metallic, and clangorous, yet apparently muffled reverberation accompanying his words caused him to turn in his seat and face the door of the study, so that I could not see the workings of his countenance—nor could he read my own reaction to his ravings.

His words came but faintly to my ears through the thunder that now shook the house in a relentless grip; the wind rattling the casements and flickering the candle-flame from the great silver candlebra sent a soaring sighing in an anguished accompaniment to his speech.

“I would show him to you, but I dare not; for he hates me as he hates life. I have locked him in the vault, alone, for the resurrected have no need of food nor drink. And he sits there, pen moving over paper, endlessly moving, endlessly pouring out the evil essence of all he guessed and hinted at in life and which he learned in death.

“Do you not see the tragic pity of my plight?

I sought to raise his spirit from the dead, to give the world anew of his genius—and yet these tales, these works, are. filled and fraught with a terror not to be endured. They cannot be shown to the world, he cannot be shown to the world; in bringing back the dead I have brought back the fruits of death!”

• • •

Echoes sounded anew as I moved toward the door—moved, I confess, to flee this accursed house and its accursed owner.

Canning clutched my hand, my arm, my shoulder. “You cannot go!” he shouted above the storm. “I spoke of his escaping, but did you not guess? Did you not hear it through the thunder—the grating of the door?”

I pushed him aside and he blundered backward upsetting the candlebra, so that flames licked now across the carpeting.

“Wait!” he cried. “Have you not heard his footstep on the stair? *Madman, I tell you that he now stands without the door!”*

A rush of wind, a roar of flame, a shroud of smoke rose all about us. Throwing open the huge, antique panels to which Canning pointed, I staggered into the hall.

I speak of wind, of flame, of smoke—enough to obscure all vision. I speak of Canning’s screams, and of thunder loud enough to drown all sound. I speak of terror born of loathing and of desperation enough to shatter all my sanity.

Despite these things, I can never erase from my consciousness that which I beheld as I fled past the doorway and down the hall.

There without the doors there *did* stand a lofty and enshrouded figure; a figure all too familiar, with pallid features, high, domed forehead, mustache set above a mouth. My glimpse lasted but an instant, an instant during which the man—the corpse—the apparition—the hallucination, call it what you will—moved forward, into the chamber and clasped Canning to his breast in an unbreakable embrace. Together, the two figures tottered toward the flames, which now rose to blot out vision forevermore.

From that chamber, and from that mansion, I fled aghast. The storm was still abroad in all its wrath, and now fire came to claim the house of Canning for its own.

Suddenly there shot along the path before me a wild light, and I turned to see whence a gleam so unusual could have issued—but it was only the flames, rising in supernatural splendor to consume the mansion, and the secrets, of the man who collected Poe.

My Further Struggles by Floyd Scrilch

(as told to Robert Bloch)

Now that was the funny part about it. They laughed at Columbus, and Einstein, and Edison, and Marconi. They even laughed at Milton Berle.

But when I came up with the screwiest idea in the world, they didn't laugh at all.

Nobody tried to put me in the asylum. Nobody tapped his forehead and pointed at me. Nobody stoned me in the streets. I get a patent right away. I didn't have to suffer. Eighteen millionaires offered me contracts. Everybody admitted I was a genius. It was all as easy as pie. The newspapers didn't scoff. They printed big headline articles about me.

"FLOYD SCRILCH INVENTS PERPETUAL MOTION MACHINE"
"INTERNATIONAL COMMITTEE OFFERS SCRILCH BILLIONS FOR RIGHTS TO HIS INVENTION," said the papers.

It was as perfect as that.

So, there I was in my laboratory, with the 97 committee members (it was pretty crowded and they were standing three deep, with the guys from the little countries like Siam and Norway on the bottom) and they were all waiting for me to demonstrate my perpetual motion machine.

I signed the contract, the most tremendous contract in the world, which stated that once I started the machine (it couldn't, of course, ever be turned off) I'd turn it over to all the nations to use in their industries.

Then I stepped over to the gleaming metal platform of my machine and bowed as my voice rand out over 11 networks.

"Gentlemen," I said. "This is the dawn of the Golden Age. I have never tried the machine, because as you know, it can never be stopped; nothing can be changed or removed. But now I've made my deal and I'll pull the switch. Thanks to my years of reading science fiction magazines, I give you —perpetual motion!"

Some of the scientists yelled, "Yaaaaaay Scrilch!"

I went to the machine. "I just hook this band over my shoulder," I said, doing so. "And this band over my leg. Then I press this here switch and—"

The machine started, just as I'd predicted. I stood there as the cogs revolved. My leg shimmied up and down and my shoulder jiggled. The machine was a success. Perpetual motion worked!

The applause was deafening. I stood jiggling in the machinery. Then workmen stepped forward. "Let's take it away now," they said.

"Hey, wait!" I yelled. "What about me? I'm inside here."

The head of the committee smiled. "Yes," he said. "And you can't stop the machine. But the contract sold the machine to us, and I guess you're part of it. Those two bands on you can't be removed, so you'll just have to stay in there and keep it running. Come on boys—take it away!"

And that's what they did. Carted me away inside the machine. I've been here ever since, jiggling up and down, 24 hours a day, working like a dog. And they've got a guard with a bayonet to see that I don't stop or get out.

I've got a hundred billion dollars and I'm stuck in this machine for the rest of my life. I don't even get out to go to the movies. Or anywhere else.

You know, sometimes I wish I was crazy.

The NIght They Crashed the Party

. . . the television screen showed it, but where was the wire connection?

THE whole thing came as a surprise, Nobody expected anything like it—but then, that's the way it was at Rudy's parties. You never could tell what might happen next.

It started just the way those things always did, Rudy called me up and said, "You'd better drop over, Having a gang in, just for laughs."

"For laughs, count me in," I told him, "But remember, I'm on the wagon. Ever since that last brawl of yours, when somebody socked that Senator—"

"Forget it," laughed Rudy, "In our business, you gotta drink. And once in a while you gotta sock a Senator or two, A Navy contract is a Navy contract. Which reminds me, put on a clean shirt when you cameo We're having Admiral Cribber and a lot of brass. Also some models."

"Models? For them I'll find a dean shirt," I promised. "See you later."

I found my clean shirt and got started for Rudy's place along about nine.

Nine o'clock of a summer Saturday night, I'm not likely to forget it. Walking down the street and watching the new cars go by—station wagons, town-and-country models, convertibles from Chevy Chase, Cars threading between tall buildings—neon signs stabbing red fingernails at the sky—and people crowding, jostling, pushing, hustling along. No, I won't forget it.

Most particularly, I remember the people. It seemed to me at the time that they looked different. Changed, somehow, from the way they looked a year or so before.

I kept thinking back to the time when Rudy and I had been broke. I wasn't on my way to any penthouse parties in those days, because Rudy didn't have a penthouse. And I didn't often have a clean shirt wear, either. It hadn't been easy, breaking into this manufacturing agent's racket—we'd hocked everything just to keep going.

Then along came the war scare and Rudy and I nosed into these Navy purchasing deals. All at once we were signing orders, taking on new accounts, playing around with high brass and big shot scientists and people from show business. Rudy did the fronting. I did the estimating, and we both made money. It was all right, of course; it was what we had been looking for, but sometimes I wondered what it all stacked up to in the end.

Because, like I say, people seemed to have changed. A year ago they would have been strolling along this street on a balmy summer night. There would have been a lot of couples, holding hands; a lot of families out with the kids running circles around their legs. There'd have been girls in slacks, giggling along to the movies and young fellows whistling after them. It was always that way on a warm Saturday night.

But not any more. Tonight I could feel it as I moved along. I could feel the difference, see the difference. The change had come, all right. Not only with Rudy and myself, but with everybody. Maybe it was all this war talk, and the stuff about secret weapons—maybe that's what got people down. That's what wiped the smiles off their faces, wound them up and set them off to brush, shove, elbow, bump and march along.

Anyhow, they were rushing and the cars were whizzing and even the neon signs seemed to flicker faster. Everything jerked and speeded up, like an old silent movie film.

Somehow, it got to me, bothered me. I was glad to get off the street, glad to turn into the big apartment hotel, glad to take the elevator up to Rudy's penthouse.

RUDY met me at the door. The party was already going strong. I could see it hear it, smell it.

"Here you are at last!" Rudy said. "Come in and meet the gang." And he winked and whispered, "Cribber's been here for an hour and he's loaded, *Tm* gonna brace him. for that radar contract later."

He didn't have to tell me. I knew the routine by heart. And I could see for myself what he'd done to the Admiral. The big front room was filled with people and the people were filled with liquor and conversation to the point where both frequently spilled over. Cribber was standing in front of the fireplace with a model named Kitty. He was a handsome, distinguished-looking old gent in a beautifully tailored uniform, and she was a gorgeous brunette. But somehow, together, they didn't make a very pretty picture tonight.

"Don't give me any of that high brass stuff," the Admiral was saying. He poked Kitty right in the V of her dress. "I'm just telling you the straight scoop." His finger left a red mark on her neck, and he tried to focus both eyes on it as he swayed back on his heels. "I'm just telling you they're ready to attack."

"Blah!" That was Chester Garland, the news commentator, horning in. "Can't you guys ever stop talking business? Every time I take a story off the wire, it's one of you monkeys making a statement. I go to the movies to relax with Danny Kaye and I get a newsreel with somebody in uniform making another statement. I come up here to relax and you're on hand, sounding off."

"I'm telling you—"

"Blah! You and the whole gang's been telling me for years now. But nothing ever happens. Nothing's gonna happen. So forget it. Here, have another drink."

Rudy came up and pulled Chester away. "Lay off," he said. "Pass around these Martinis like a little man, will ya?" He handed Chester a tray.

I went up to Kitty. "What's the good word?" I said.

"Don't know any good words." She pouted. "One of those lousy Treasury department snoops showed up today. Hit me with a bill for a G in back taxes. How he ever found out about those stocks I don't know! And with this inflation and all—"

She grabbed a drink, clung to it desperately. I wandered around this gay, pleasure-seeking, carefree crowd of very important persons, celebrities, and leading intellectuals, and drank in their words of wisdom,.

"I tell you we've consistently underestimated the possibilities of chain-reaction." That was old Professor McKittridge. To the average citizen knew the potentialities of fissionable materials we wouldn't be so smug."

"I disagree," Doctor Sanbrenner always disagreed, no matter how drunk he got. In fact, the drunker he was, the more disagreeable he became. "It's biological warfare that will turn the trick. The next war will be won or lost within 24 hours. The proper use of chemical bombs planted over a widespread area in a hundred leading cities could wipe out 25 per cent of our population in a day, and another 25 per cent would probably die as a. result of the universal panic. Now if we can only get to them first and do the same thing—"

"Damned government controls," said another voice at my elbow. "Ruining free enterprise, What's the man in the street need control for? Wait until next election's over—we're introducing some bills that will fix all that."

". . . but the psychiatrist told me to stop using them and switch to nembutal or something milder. I'd give anything for ten hours' sleep, simply anything, my dear!"

I felt the words bounce off my eardrums—all the gay, carefree words of wisdom so typical of the conversation of very important persons, celebrities and leading intellectuals everywhere today. Oh, it was a lovely party, thank you!

So I tried not to hear what they were saying, and gradually I succeeded. The only trouble was, I could still see them, watch what they were doing.

DURING the next half hour or so, I saw Kitty slap Doctor Sanbrenner in the face and break his glasses. I saw old Professor McKittridge shake his fist at Chester Garland. I saw Chesters wife get sick, and I saw the lady who couldn't sleep pass out on the sofa near the fireplace. I saw Rudy steer Admiral Cribber into the back room. I saw everything—including my own puzzled, frightened face in the mirror. I wondered why my face was puzzled, frightened. I also wondered just what it was doing here at all.

The room got hot and stuffy. Reek of smoke, reek of liquor, reek of breath and perspiration and talcum powder and perfume and cologne and depilatory and running mascara.

I passed another tray of drinks for Rudy and then wandered over to the window, staring out at the sky. Somewhere off in the distance, over the Potomac, a storm was gathering,. I tried to imagine what it was like up there, in the coolness of the clouds. There'd be wind, and rain, and the eternal movement of the night. Yes, night after night everything was the same up there. And night after night, everything was the same down here. Down here, where I was. Where—

"The taxes keep going up year after year."

"Honestly, there's no place for children to play any more, if you insist on having the little beasts."

"But what will it matter, if only we can drop the bombs first?"

Yes, night after night, that's the way it went down here. And—

"Let's all have another drink."

It was Rudy, the life of the party. Pumping alcohol into the veins of the corpse, Trying to make it get up and dance.

Tonight, it wasn't working so well. Too many quarrels, too many complaints, too many drinks. Rudy must have sensed that, and he was anxious to make the evening a success. He had to, if he wanted that Navy contract.

I was still watching the stormclouds gather when I heard Chester Garland talking to Kitty.

“What say we all go down there? Wed still be in time for the main event.”

“Go where? Nobody’s going anywhere.” Rudy’s voice, genial but with an undercurrent Of dismay.

“Sure. Let’s get up a gang and go,” Chester, again.

“Where?”

“To the wrestling matches, that’s where. I’m tired of all this fighting—le’s go watch somebody else fight for a change.”

Kitty chimed in. “Sure, why not? Come on, everybody—let’s see the wrestling.”

There was a general babble and flurry. *I* could see the idea was catching on, Rudy saw it too. Because he stepped in front, of the fireplace and raised his hands and voice.

“I have a better plan,” he shouted. “Well bring the wrestlers here!”

“Here? You mean real live wrestlers in oar very own front room? Hooray!” It was Chester’s wife. She’d come to at the mention of strange men. “Ooh, those big hairy brutes—”

“Shut up!” Rudy suggested, with the *savoir faire* of a true host. “I mean we can bring them here with television.”

“That’s right,” Chester agreed. “The bouts ate being televised tonight. But I didn’t know you had a set, Rudy.”

“I haven’t,” Rudy improvised. “But we can get a TV set up here in twenty minutes. There’s an ad in tonight’s paper. They’ll deliver and install a TV set, no aerial needed the minute you call the store.”

“Call ’em!” That was Admiral Cribber, “Your wish is my command,” said Rudy. “It shall be done.”

And it was done. We all settled back, most everybody had a drink, and Rudy made his phone arrangements in the other room. In order to pass the time of waiting, Kitty took off her shoes and did a dance, although it wasn’t the sort of a dance where taking off her shoes made any difference. Professor McKittridge shook his fist at Admiral Cribber. The lady who had passed out on the sofa sat up and slapped Doctor Sanbrenner, breaking his extra pair of glasses. Rudy steered Chester Garland into the back room. Chester's wife, quite recovered, had two more Martinis and then got sick again. Oh, they managed to pass the time, all right.

I watched the freak storm. More clouds had gathered and there were a number of isolated lightning flashes, still off in the distance. Once or twice I could even hear thunder above the braying of the crowd, but there was no sign of rain in Washington proper—or improper, as the case might be.

Nobody else paid any attention to what was going on outside. The men with the television set must have knocked about five minutes before Rudy went to the door. Finally, he let them in.

The crowd let up a yelp of simulated delight as the two came in, carrying a heavy 16-inch console model.

"Right in here," Rudy said, indicating the dining room. "It'll be easier to set up chairs. How about the corner?" He went in there with the men and dosed the door. The rest of the crowd got busy on a fresh tray of drinks.

"He'd better hurry." Chester Garland glanced at his watch. "It's almost eleven. We'll miss the main bout."

"I just love wrestling," said the woman who slapped faces. "Last time George and I went, there was one of them, some Indian I think it was, named Chief Thundercloud or something, and he had one of those brown torsos that was out of this world, I mean, well anyway, he broke this man's arm and you could just hear the bone go crunch, I thought I'd pass out it was so exciting, really it was."

"Did you ever see the lions at work on a bunch of Christians?" I murmured, but she didn't seem to hear me. Maybe it was just as well.

By this time everybody was herding towards the dining room. *The* two workmen seemed to have slipped away, and Rudy was stooping and fiddling with the controls as we came in. The lights snapped out, and in the darkness I could hear the thunder of the distant storm.

"Nice looking set—what'd they charge you?"

"What make is it?"

“Didn’t they tell you how to work it? Having trouble getting the channel?”

“Here—let me show you.”

Rudy ignored the queries. He stooped and fiddled, grinned drunkenly, stooped and fiddled some more. Then there came an incandescent glare from the screen and a blast of sound from the speaker.

Everybody scrambled for seats facing the screen. “Here we go,” whispered Kitty.

A face filled the screen, a voice filled the room. For some reason, we all seemed to hear the voice before we saw the face. I was a sing-song voice, droning but penetrating.

“. . . landing at eleven p.m. earth time . . .”

“Blah! Missed the wrestling!” That was Chester, interrupting. Somebody said, “Quiet, there,” and the voice came through again.

“. . . over what is regarded as the western hemisphere of the planet.”

I guess that’s what the voice said. I can’t be sure, for most of the words were drowned out by shouts and conversation from Rudy’s guests.

They were seeing the face for the first time.

The face on the screen was like a metal mask. It showed up as gray, and might have been almost any color which would reproduce that way on television. It *was* an oval and contained the usual features, although the nose seemed flat. There was nothing too grotesque about it except its absolute hairlessness; the head was round and bald, and the face itself lacked eyebrows, eyelashes or hint of beard. The result was a gray, metallic sexless countenance that might have been utterly unremarkable as a mask, except for the fact that the lips moved.

And the lips of Rudy’s guests moved, now—shouting in incomprehension.

Suddenly something blocked the screen. It was Admiral Cribber, getting to his feet. “Where’s the phone?” he bellowed. “Were being attacked!”

“Nonsense,” Rudy shouted. “It’s a program. Siddown.”

“But they’re attacking us—”

“Wait a minute.”

He waited. The face flickered out. Now the screen showed the sky. It was pinpointed, but not with stars. Moving patterns of light skyrocketed across the horizon.

The voice singsonged through. “Landings will be made shortly. There is no organized opposition. Complete control will be established immediately upon landing.”

“Look!” Kitty was squealing and pointing at the screen. “Flying saucers.”

“The sky gives it away,” Chester Garland told her. No clouds moving, it’s a studio backdrop.”

“But what’s it all about?” his wife wailed.

“just one of those invasion shows. Remember Orson Welles on the radio?”

The screen showed a metropolitan skyline, pinpoints of light flickering like glowworms over the enormous concrete stalks of skyscrapers. Lightning crackled and part of the skyline disappeared.

“. . . proceeding according to plan. Landings will be effected immediately. . . .”

“That’s no play!” Kitty exclaimed, “Listen, you can hear the explosions.”

“Thunder,” Rudy howled, “Can’t you see there’s a storm coming up? Reception is bad.”

Reception *was* bad. The screen flickered again, and we caught a glimpse of the metallic mask, then of another. Thunder boomed louder, and Admiral Cribber lurched to his feet once more.

“Gotta put through a call,” he said. “I still think they’re attacking.” He stumbled out of the room.

There was another flurry of conversation, all jumbled together, and I caught only fragments. “Norman Corwin . . . documentary . . . lot of science-fiction . . . another station . . . need a drink. . . .”

Then the roaring from the television set drowned out all other sound, and the images came up. In one monstrous visual upheaval they spewed forth.

The thunder rose.

We saw a horde of metal faces moving down an enclosed ramp that led to a city street. We saw something flicker and explode in midair.

We saw a shot of what was obviously a table-top miniature of the city of Washington, dominated by the monument. Lights played upon it momentarily and it broke in half like a stick of candy.

We saw—

“Turn it off!” snorted Chester Garland. “We need a drink!”

A half-dozen voices seconded his proposal. I added my own plea, I admit. The room was hot, steamy; thunder and darkness enveloped us, and the incessant nightmare of the television poured forth. For a moment I reflected upon its meaning. I couldn’t exactly put my finger on the point, but my thoughts ran something like this:

All over the country, millions of people were sitting at their television sets, watching some paid technicians stage a lurid melodrama about the destruction of a civilization which had degenerated to the point where millions of people just sat at their television sets, watching some paid technicians stage a lurid melodrama about the destruction of a civilization which had degenerated—

And so on, over and over again. There was a hideous kind of truth buried somewhere in all this, and I tried hard to think about it coherently.

BUT it only took a moment. They were still yelling for another drink, the set was still blaring forth its explosions, a voice was still rasping, “Landings have now been made successfully at all designated points,” and now Rudy was responding to the almost hysterical insistence of his guests.

“Turn the stinking thing off!”

He rose, marched up to the set, stooped and fiddled. The crowd rose and half-turned to re-enter the living room. Rudy was still stooping and fiddling, but the thunder increased in volume and tempo, and now the screen flickered forth in a scene of inferno.

A city was disintegrating before our eyes. Beams played from the pinpoints in the sky. People fled between a labyrinth of buildings. People vanished. So did the buildings. The beams played on. And the metal-faced monsters marched on metal legs, unscathed by beams. Screams rose above the thunder.

"What's the idea?" hooted Chester Garland. "Turn it off!"

Rudy stood up.

"I—I can't," he said.

"Can't?"

"No. Look." He raised one hand. It held a wire ending in a wall-plug. "I can't because it isn't turned on. It was never turned on in the first place."

"Never turned on?"

"Then what's all this we saw?"

"Is it some kind of gag?"

Abruptly, there was a crescendo of thunder and the screen went dead. Somebody snickered.

"What you trying to do, Rudy—throw a scare into us?"

"I swear the set wasn't connected."

"Blah!" Chester Garland and his wife pushed towards the door to the living room. Kitty and the others crowded after them.

"Fooled me for a minute," said Doctor Sanbrenner.

"But—" Rudy's reply was drowned by another burst of thunder. It came not from the set but from outside. The walls began to vibrate.

"There *is* a storm," said Kitty. As everyone crowded up to the bar, she walked across the room to the window. I watched her as Rudy took down a couple of fresh bottles.

"Well, soaks," he chuckled, "What'll it be? Might as well get on with the party." I watched Kitty peer out of the window, saw her eyes widen, saw her hands grip the sill.

"The party's over," I murmured.

But nobody heard me. For suddenly, above the thunder that resounded from the streets below, Kitty began to scream.

She was still screaming as we all rushed to the window and gazed down at what was happening in the world outside.

The Tchen-Lam's Vengeance

There in the Gobi the miracle of transference of bodies took place; but the real horror came when it happened in an American beauty parlor.

NEVER mind how I got to Lhassa. I did a lot more than shaving my head, learning six dialects and studying up on Tantric Buddhism as formulated by Padmasam Ghava. I spent three years in planning, and before I reached the city of pantheons I had passed as a Buriat, a round-hatted Chakhar, a Khalka, and a half-dozen incarnations of disguise. I drank thick tea in a hundred *yurts* before I got into the particular temple I had my eye on. The lamas are wise and cruel and relentless, and they have spies everywhere.

But finally I succeeded, and then turned my three camels into the desert on the endless trek through the Gobi. The most evil city in the world lay behind me, and the malign sands stretched before me—the desert, staring up like a great yellow face.

But it was worth it.

I had stolen the Lotus of Lhassa. The Supreme Emerald, the sacred stone of Gautama, rested in my belt. It was worth a quarter of a million—and my life.

Now I must pass through the desert and reach the coast if I valued safety. I drove the camels on.

It wasn’t so bad the first week. Exultation buoyed me up, triumph was a cloak to shield me from the scorching sun. But then loneliness came, and thirst, and exhaustion. I wandered through the eternal dust of a demon’s graveyard.

I began imagining things.

The mountains were all around me, and they grinned against the horizon, their jagged edges like the teeth in the mouth of a mad dog. At dusk a wind would bay from the black throat of the night, and I could feel those teeth yawning for me.

But it was worse by day, when I trudged through a sea of ochre flame that was the desert, and the sun blazed down like a finger-ring stone on the hand of an angry god.

Sometimes the rocks were black dwarfs that danced around me; sometimes the dust was a yellow dragon that coiled across my path.

I slept under boulders white as the sun-bleached bones of giants, and I huddled in the Cyclopean ruins of cities dead five thousand years.

After a while there were no more cities nor boulders nor mountains, and nothing was left which I could compare to humanity. The buzzards had stopped following me, and the beetles were gone. I walked under a burning sun that filled the sky and hissed down in molten rays upon the empty, endless sand. Then I got that terrible feeling of *aloneness.* There was nothing in the world but torture of sun and sand, with me between. The sand burned my feet and the sun burned my head, and then little rays of fire lanced through my body, and I walked on and on and on.

My body was covered with horrible sores, and my blood was black as it ran from my nose and mouth. My feet were swollen into shapeless blobs of agony. The skin rolled from my face like mummy-flesh exposed to the outer air. My head was an iron bowl filled with the venomous stewing juice of fever.

But I still had the Lotus . . .

I didn’t rave or curse or mumble or sing. It was worse than that. I didn’t think about water, or food, or sleep. The expression on my face never altered. I just tottered on, like some ghastly marionette. When the camels blackened and died, I left them where they fell, without taking up the knapsack or water-skins. When I thought I was going to die I dropped in my tracks, but I always got up again.

This was it. This was what I had expected. And it was worth the horror. I had the Lotus. I'd make it.

The desert was a vast, lonely room I had to cross—a single great room a million miles long. I was all alone in that room, and I kept plodding.

THEN one day I sensed the presence of another in the room. It was just like that. If somebody comes into a room you know it, even if the room is a million miles long. Another had come in. Perhaps he was a hundred thousand miles away, but I felt him.

And I knew fear. From that moment on I didn't mind sun or fever or the cancer of weariness which gnawed at my heart. I had a greater dread.

The *tcken-lam.* The *tchen-lam* are the Guardians of the Lotus. They are the spies of the temples of Lhassa, and they are the most evil men in the world. They are the Hunters, and at the twilight Hour of Mutilation they set forth on missions of vengeance.

All Tibet fears the *tchen-lam,* the magic ones. They know the Black and the Red and the White Secret, and they control winds and water and desert sand. Offenders against the faith are marked for doom in the secret temples, and then the *tchen-lam* go forth to bring that doom.

If my theft had been discovered, and they were on my trail, I could never escape. This I knew, and that is why I was afraid.

The *tchen-lam* are cruel.

Khalka Mongols will hang you up by the nose on iron hooks, and tie weights to your legs. Chakhars are slightly more imaginative. They will stake you out under the desert sun, cut off your eyelids, and set beetles on you. The Torgots flay you alive and thrust you into a sack filled with wild dogs. The subtle Soyots may amputate your arms and legs, and then place you in a pit with the rats.

But the *tchen-lam* are worse.

I heard of a man who was captured for blasphemous profanation of a temple. There are over a hundred bones in the human body, and the *tchen-lam* broke every one, slowly, and kept him alive. Then he was skinned, and his bones were removed, one by one. He lived until he had nothing left but two ribs, a pelvis, and a spine. It took months.

This was only one of their punishments.

And the *tchen-lam* crept behind me as I fled.

At last one day fell, like a molten tear-drop from the eyes of agony. I had crouched in the sand all night, burrowed deep, and when I tried to rise with the coming of the sun I could not stir. I sensed the presence of the other close behind me, but I could not stir. Could not stir, even with the ghastly inspiration of approaching doom.

I lay there shuddering, and the presence stole closer, and then I felt it upon me hours later.

A shadow stained the searing sand. I rolled over and looked up into a yellow face.

I blinked. There was nothing else to do. The fate bent closer. Thin lips nibbled at my ear and a voice rustled.

"You are the American?"

I tried to nod.

"I have been seeking you."

I blinked again.

"I have heard much of you and you are the man I want."

I couldn't move. The face smiled, and then the whispering came again.

"You must not die, you know."

There was enough left in me for irony. "Why not?" I gasped.

"Because you and I are going back to America to start a beauty parlor."

Because you and I are going back to America to start a beauty parlor.

Never in fact, fiction, or fancy were words as mad as these.

I had stolen the Lotus of Lhassa, I was pursued over a desert hell by the crudest beings in the world, I lay dying of exhaustion, in the middle of the Gobi—and a yellow face bends over me and whispers, “You and I are going back to America to start a beauty parlor.”

Of course I must be mad. I had to be. I began to laugh and laugh and laugh.

THE yellow-faced man thrust a jug of water into my mouth and stopped my laughter, and he stroked the papyrus of my forehead and he propped me up in his arms. I became sufficiently revived to gaze up into his skeletal visage. His head was like a rotten, wrinkled apricot, and only his eyes were alive. The man was further gone than myself, and I sensed that indomitable will alone kept him on his feet. Those eyes blazed at me more forcefully than the sun, and they filled me with a peculiar power. I stood up.

“Who are you?” I whispered. “A *tchen-lam?”*

He shook his head slowly. “No. I am called Dagur. I come from the Deccan, and my mission in Lhassa can be spoken of later. I heard of you there and followed you through the desert.”

“Heard of me?” I gasped. “Then it was known—”

Again he shook his rotten, wrinkled head. “I gain my wisdom in stranger ways,” he said. “But I know you are the man I am seeking—international adventurer, grave-robber, treasure-thief. I want to take you with me when we go to America and start a beauty parlor.”

I was getting used to this by now, and didn’t reel at the weird statement. But I was still afraid.

“The *tchen-lam,”* I muttered. “Did you see them?”

“One follows us now,” answered Dagur, calmly. “He wants the Lotus of Lhassa, which you stole.”

I sank to the ground again. “What shall we do?” I whispered.

“Wait for him, of course,” answered Dagur. “And when he comes we will give him the Lotus.”

“What?”

“It will be for the best. The *tchen-lam* cannot be avoided. He will seek you to the ends of the earth. We might as well face him here and strike a bargain.”

“A bargain? But he’ll kill me, I’ll lose the jewel—”

“The Lotus of Lhassa cannot be profaned,” Dagur answered. “It must not be taken by force, the priests believe. Therefore he will not kill you for it. It would be sacrilege. You must give it to him outright.”

“It’s worth a quarter-million,” I protested. “I spent three years planning this, and I’ve gone through hell here on the desert. Why should I give it to him?”

“Because a quarter-million is nothing. Because it is a mite compared to the fortune you and I will make together—if we live. And because you’ll die here on the desert with the jewel unless we bargain.”

“What kind of bargain will you strike?”

“Listen. You are weak, dying. So am I. But the *tchen-lam* will be a strong man, with a body trained to withstand the rigors of the desert. So I will bargain with him in this wise—I shall take his body in exchange for the jewel and give him my body in return. Then we shall have strength enough, between us, to reach the coast.”

“You’re mad,” I mumbled, but I thought *I* was. “You cannot exchange bodies with another.”

“I am Dagur. I have studied in the secret places, and I have a magic. By concentration my astral can invade the body of another, and I can place men in new bodies at will, if they be submissive. Extended hypnosis, your science calls it. So if the emissary from Lhassa agrees, so be it.”

“You can change bodies,” I repeated.

“Of course. That is how we will make our fortune,” insisted Dagur.

I lay back for good. I knew I was delirious. There was no Dagur, no mad scheme. I was dying alone. No reality. There couldn’t be anything so fantastic. And yet—

Far down the shimmering way I saw the figure approaching. It plodded leadenly, like a wound-up doll. I recognized the tall yellow hat, the great otter collar, the huge skirt. It was a *tchem-lam!*

THE figure headed straight for us, unerring and relentless. I made out the features; the ivory mask of cruelty in which emerald eyes were set.

But Dagur did not flinch. The man approached, never hastening. Dagur raised a hand in greeting.

"We will bargain," he said.

The *tchen-lam* turned his basilisk-gaze toward me and nodded. "It is the one," he said, in clipped English. "And you speak for him?"

"I do," Dagur replied.

"So. Your bargain?"

"He will give you the Lotus of Lhassa in exchange for your body."

I expected the Tibetan to strike Dagur dead. His expression didn't alter, but there was a heightening intensity in his stare.

"Think," argued Dagur. "You could follow him until he dies on the desert, this is true, and then take the jewel. But this way it is easier, simpler. You take the jewel, give your body, and use my weak form to return to Lhassa. Time counts; every moment the Lotus of Lhassa is away from its shrine is an affront in the eyes of the gods. Give your body and take the jewel."

"Thieves must be punished," said the *tchen-lam.* He said it softly, but I thought of my bones being broken and torn out, and trembled.

"Natural death is no punishment," insisted Dagur. "Perhaps there is another way."

"Yes, another way!" The Tibetan's voice trembled with exultation. "I shall accept, yes, I shall accept your offer. My brothers in Lhassa will think it a capital jest, a capital jest."

Dagur looked puzzled, and so did I. But my new friend persisted. "Very well, then. It is done. You must submit your will to mine. Then our spirits will mingle, and each seek the other's flesh. We will use the veritable Lotus of Lhassa for our focal point. Give it to me."

I gave him the jewel. The sparkling drop of emerald brilliance shone in the sunlight. The grotesque Hindu knelt, and the yellow monk knelt facing him. The jewel lay on the sand between, Roth bowed their heads and stared.

And I lay there, racked with fever, dying in the desert as I watched two magicians, or two madmen, sealing an unholy bargain which was to decide my fate.

"Submit," whispered Dagur. "Your will is strong, friend, and you must submit to aid me." The *tchen-lam* nodded. Suddenly both men became motionless. Rigid as puppets, eyes closed, they knelt in the sand. The jewel flamed. Then both bodies shuddered.

This was horror from High Asia, I knew. I was either dying or crazy. But I stared as the men fell and writhed on the ground; stared as they opened their eyes and blinked, sat up.

"Done!" The high-pitched voice of the *tchen-lam* came from Dagur's withered throat.

"Yes, done," whispered Dagur—from the body of the *tchen-lam.* It was unbelievable, but unmistakable.

I was too weak, too sick, to realize the full import of what I had just seen; the substantiation of the East's oldest myth. Transference of souls, the original and most ancient of all beliefs, just accomplished before my fevered eyes.

"Now I am strong enough to reach the coast with my friend," announced Dagur, rising and shaking himself—for all the world like a poodle emerging from water. "And you, is your withered body capable of dragging itself back to Lhassa?"

The wrinkled face reared up and I got a shock as I saw the *tchen-lam's* blazing eyes. "It is my will, not my body, which shall take me," he announced. "But now, the bargain. Give me the jewel. No—you hand it to me." And he pointed at me.

I picked up the jewel dumbly and held it out to him. A claw grasped it.

“A bargain is a bargain,” said the *tchen-lam,* gravely. “But I have also sworn to my brothers that you shall know our vengeance. No one, from the dawn of time, be he beggar or Khan, has ever escaped us once he is marked for doom.”

“You cannot harm him,” Dagur reminded. “Your promise.”

“I know. But my personal vengeance shall overtake him just the same, though I shall never raise a hand to strike him. He shall suffer at my hands nonetheless, as was sworn. That is why I consented to the bargain, because I know I can make him suffer in spite of it. I am a *tchen-lam,* and the *tchen-lam* are the greatest wizards in all Asia.” He held up the jewel, and his eyes blazed through its fire, mingled with it in an emerald haze. I stared, and cold crept up my spine. “The greatest wizards in all Asia,” muttered the *tchen-lam.*

“The greatest fools in all Asia,” hissed Dagur. I never even saw the knife flash down, but suddenly the Tibetan crumpled to the ground and lay still. Dagur rose, wiped the blade, and pocketed the jewel.

“I am the greatest wizard,” he laughed. “I have cheated him, gained life, and the Lotus of Lhassa is still ours.”

“But you told me you couldn’t—” *I* began.

“I did not dare say otherwise, or when our souls met and mingled he would have known the thought,” Dagur replied. “But now we are free, and you shall have no curse on you. He is dead, though I still have his body. And we go to the coast, to make our fortunes in a beauty parlor.”

AT that moment I myself crumpled. It had all been too much. Desert nightmare, ending in incredible horror. I went out, and stayed out. He must have carried me. I don’t know. How he fed us, kept me alive, went on—these things I cannot say. I awoke weeks later in a Canton hospital. Dagur was beside me, and he thrust a fortune into my hands. He’d sold the jewel, of course.

We were rich, and I was going to get well. It was all over. Dagur was in the yellow body of a Tibetan monk, and I nearly went out again when I saw that horrid reminder of reality I longed to forget. But I was well, and rich.

Dagur smiled.

“Up in a week,” he said. “Then we book passage to America. My entrance is all arranged, thanks to the money. We shall make fortunes.”

“How? What?”

“Why, as I told you. We shall go to America and start a beauty parlor.”

I was sick of mystery.

“Let’s have it straight,” I began, sitting up. “Who are you, and where did you hear of me?”

Dagur smiled. Or rather Dagur smiled with the face of the *tchen-lam.*

“I am Dagur, as I told you. I was born in India. My father was Rajput, exiled by the British Raj. He studied ceremonial magics in the temples. I grew up with priests. I learned many things—levitation, hypnotism, things Western science still calls magic. *Sakhyati,* the tree of teachings from which *Yogi* springs as the merest branch, I have mastered. One of the powers I gained is that of transferring bodies.”

Now I’ve met *fakirs* before, and fanatics, and charlatans doing rope tricks. But I could not scoff at Dagur, because of what I’d seen in the desert. Because of what I saw now—Dagur’s eyes in the hatefully yellow face of the *tchen-lam.* He was a wizard.

“I went to Lhassa on your errand,” Dagur continued. “I too meant to have the Lotus for my own. I must have followed your trail, because when I camped I heard stories of a lone Khalka pilgrim, a Buriat wanderer, and a Chakhar. Each place saw only one man, never all three. Therefore I reasoned that someone was travelling in disguise. At first I meant to overtake you and kill you. Then, my friend, as time went on I began to marvel at your cleverness. When my idea came, I saw that you would make a living ally instead of a dead rival. So I allowed you to steal the Lotus and followed you into the desert. The rest you know.”

"You saved my life," I mumbled. "Nothing." Dagur raised a yellow claw of deprecation.

"But this mumbling about a beauty parlor?"

"Simple. In India I am a holy man, yes. I can perform small magics, I can steal. But I want my heritage. My father, the Rajput, once lived in palaces. I want those riches. I can never earn them by petty thievery. I cannot become wealthy exercising my powers for fools. But in America, with your aid—ah!"

"Beauty parlor?" I persisted.

"I have studied your Western culture, as you call it—a culture of decadence, a woman's civilization, founded on outward deception and falsehood. The beauty parlor is a symbol of occidental deceit; a mask of loveliness over rotten decay."

"The devil with your sophomore philosophy," I countered. "Facts."

"Here they are, then. Every year American women spend billions, yes, billions of dollars on beauty culture. They go to be massaged and marcelled and manicured, to be kneaded and sweated and pounded into youthfulness. Thousands of wealthy women spend fortunes endeavoring to recapture their lost charms. Do they succeed?"

"Well—no. I suppose not. But they still go, still pay."

"Exactly. And don't you think more of them would go, and pay greater sums if they did succeed, turning their ugly bodies into young, attractive forms once more?"

"Yes."

"That is where we come in, my friend. Oh, I could start out as a fortune-teller, a *swami,* a cult-leader. My knowledge would be of service there. But there isn't enough in it. I want riches, quickly. And I shall have them, making old women young again."

"But how? By giving them some of *yngi* treatment or exercise? Have you got a philtre, or a rejuvenating secret?"

Dagur smiled, and again that yellow face was creased.

“No. Simpler than that. You saw my secret on the desert. If the subjects be willing, I can hypnotize them and change bodies.”

I sat bolt upright in bed.

“Yes, change bodies. Instead of pounding some foolish old woman into a tight corset and charging her exorbitant fees, I shall give her the real boon she craves—a young, fresh body of her own.”

“How? With whom shall these old women exchange their worn-out frames? Where do the young women come from?”

Dagur’s creased smile grew evilly insinuating.

“Come now, my friend; I picked you because you are cleverer than that. You are something of a rogue yourself, I have reason to believe. And surely the answer to the question is easy.”

I almost sickened. “You mean we abduct young girls and force them into such an unholy exchange?” I asked.

“Force? No—I have told you I cannot force anyone into hypnotic surrender without their mental consent. But in beauty salons, there are machines, surely? For fixing the ladies’ hair, perhaps? Metal clamps on the head, I believe.”

“Yes.”

“And in western scientific classrooms there are machines on which a subject gazes at lights or colored objects until his will surrenders.”

“I guess so.”

“We merely combine the two. Adjust the clamps on the two women. The young girl surrenders her will after a time; so does the unbeautiful lady. They fall asleep—quite sound asleep. Then I concentrate. Their astrals are pliant. The exchange is made, and it is done. Simple?”

“Fantastic!” I muttered. “We’ll never get away with it!”

But we did.

THE last week in bed I spent in planning. We figured it all out. We had money enough to splurge at the start. Rent an exclusive salon. Advertise discreetly. Build up an atmosphere of scented refinement like an ordinary beauty and health parlor. Curious women would come. Then, after procuring the girl?, the first experiment. If it succeeded, the news would spread like wildfire. We could charge ten, twenty, fifty thousand dollars for a genuine rejuvenation.

Of course, there would be difficulties. An old friend of mine, never mind his name, would handle the girl angle for me. That was no problem. But the difficulties lay in making the sudden change plausible.

Dagur and I worked out our scheme quite carefully.

Dagur was to be a Hindu. Of course his skin was yellow, but that wouldn't matter. All Orientals with "new" discoveries are Hindus as far as Americans are concerned. Dagur was to be a Hindu with a new "thought rejuvenation" process, supplemented by the use of "secret oils and formulas known to the *devi-dasi* of Hindu temples." The old come-on stuff. We'd get the women, give them a few preliminary treatments in the old style, make them think that oils and perfumes and exercises were aiding their rejuvenescence. Then we'd work up to the big moment; put them under a machine and go to work.

That's where the subtle part came in. It might be difficult for an old battle-axe to fall asleep under a dryer and wake up an hour later in an entirely new body. If she was a brunette and woke up with blonde hair it might be doubly hard to convince her. I had a secret hunch most of the old girls weren't so confident in their treatments anyway; just wanted to be flattered and pampered. Actual changes in their unlovely figures might shock rather than please them—unless it was worked properly.

Well, I figured out a way to work it properly. To begin with, we wouldn't exchange bodies with just any young and fairly pretty girl we might get hold of. During the preliminary treatments we'd study our case. Try to visualize what the middle-aged dowager looked like twenty years ago. Was her hair brown, or black, or red, or a certain shade of blondness? Was it straight or curly? How tall was she? What was her weight? The color of her eyes? Yes, and what kind of a voice did she have? Get all the actual details.

And then, go out and find the right young woman to fill the bill. Perhaps we couldn't always get an exact duplicate. But we could come close. Then we might do a little adjustment work; plastic surgery on the nose, for example. Removing a mole, or adding one as the case might be. Then our plan might well be foolproof.

"I've got it—the final touch!" I yelled, the last day. "We keep the old dames on the premises during their entire course of treatments and never show them a mirror for a week. Keep at them every day during the fake preliminary treatments, kidding them along that they're getting younger gradually. Psychological suggestion, that they are losing five years a day. Naturally, they can't see themselves. A little dope might do wonders, too. Lead them up to the final phase, effect the transfer, and there they are. Fully convinced. Young, beautiful, and satisfied. Why, it's a humanitarian business, Dagur! We'll really be doing a great good!"

Dagur smiled, and I didn't care for his wolfish leer. I knew that he was thinking of the young girls for whom we would *not* be doing good; kidnapping them, forcing them into old, withered bodies, and then disposing of them once and for all.

But why quibble? Thousands of girls disappear every year, and suffer worse fates. Perhaps. And at any rate, why bother? There was millions in this idea, millions.

There was. We sailed, made New York, established connections. It was all easy—and I could use ease after my gruelling experience in the land of nightmares.

No more *tchen-lam* to fear. No more desert. Sitting in a penthouse and calling up this party about the girls; renting an elegant suite of offices, arranging with soft-voiced secretaries about advertising and rates. It was a picnic.

Dagur wore a turban, and a satisfied smile. We were ready to open. I was surprised at the roguery rampant in fine professions; we hired some broken-down quacks who could spout about "hormone injections" and the "rejuvenatory function of glands" who lent excellent pseudoscientific atmosphere.

There was no hitch of any kind. Our first client was quite a wealthy woman—I shall not mention names, for she is still prominent. At this time, she was prominent only about the hips. A distinct matron type, on the verge of matriachry.

FOR the first time we put our scheme into operation. It clicked. We had no trouble getting data on her appearance in 1923. We decided that a reduction to the age of 28 would be spectacular enough without bringing too much suspicion and incredulity into play. We got our data, and I arranged for the right girl.

My party brought the girl over, and we kept her locked up in the special rooms downstairs. We didn't treat her badly; just held her. Meanwhile, the staff went to work on our client, planted the build-up. Finally the afternoon arrived and it was all up to Dagur. Sink or swim, success or failure—Dagur must make good his boast or we were lost.

We brought the bewildered, half-drugged old woman into the room of mirrors we'd chosen. Dagur made a very impressive speech—it was truly a masterpiece. I know, because I wrote it for him. She was credulous. She was more than willing to submit to a trance.

Dagur had her out in the chair in five minutes. Then we brought in the girl. She was hysterical, a little, but Dagur injected morphine and then got her under the dryer. I hadn't inspected the apparatus he used, but it was only a matter of moments after he snapped the switch before her eyes closed.

Dagur turned out the lights and only a flame behind the mirrors blazed up. His yellow eyes closed. He rocked back and forth. I sat quietly. The sleeping old face and the sleeping young face contorted in agony as though both women suffered nightmares.

I felt the silence, felt what stole through the silence. Waves beat down in darkness. I stared at Dagur's face, thought of the *tchen-lam,* his curse on me which would never be fulfilled. I shuddered. Perhaps we'd fail; that was the curse the monk had meant. I began to. perspire. And still the three silent figures sat in darkness. Then the lights clicked up, Dagur opened his eyes wearily, clapped his hands. The two women stirred. I got the old one out of there, into the locked room adjoining. Then we went back. The young brunette was stretching herself lazily.

This was the moment. Suppose nothing had happened? Suppose it was the same girl, after all?

She spoke.

Then I knew. Even before Dagur handed her the mirror and she gasped in incredulous joy, I knew we had done it.

I went into the room where the trembling, half-crazed old woman lay; the kidnapped young woman who awoke bewildered in a strange body. I felt a certain pity for her, but then she was obviously suffering this way; so I did what had to be done.

Afterward I came out in time to hear our newly rejuvenated patient raving with joy. I saw her hand over the check. Fifteen thousand.

Right there I got clever on my own hook. I told Dagur about the restrictions on banking laws which applied to aliens. I deposited the money under my own name. All money would hereafter be deposited.

There was plenty of money. The woman went out. She told her story to her friends—but her new body fairly shrieked the news for her. We had a flood of clients.

We didn't take them all. It was too great a risk. A few each week, ones we could duplicate easily with young girls. Our fees rose and rose. In six months we cleared three hundred thousand, profit exclusively. There was never a hitch, never a bit of trouble.

So it was. Success at last, success with the maddest scheme of all. I should have been the happiest man in the world—but I wasn't.

No, my conscience didn't bother me. I've never had one, I suppose. I got qualms, occasionally, when I had to dispose of old bodies; but then it came to be a routine thing. Like changing a window display in a department store, and throwing out the old dummies.

I didn't have compunctions about how we got the girls, either. I'm no sentimentalist. But there were other things bothering me—more subtle disturbances.

They say the desert does something to you. Perhaps that was it. I'd been three years in the East on my mission. I'd gone to the most fearful city in the world and bearded the demons in their lair. I'd nearly died in the worst inferno on the face of the globe. It might have done something queer to my mind.

Because in the middle of the night I'd wake up and think about the *tchen-lam's* curse. Foolish? Of course; the man was dead.

But then again, he wasn't dead. Dagur's body was dead, and the *tchen-lam's* spirit. Still, the body of the *tchen-lam* lived, and I saw it every day, with Dagur's eyes peering out at me.

The modern beauty salon, the cooing women attendants, all served as a pitiful mask for secret sorcery; for the mysteries of High Asia. I walked in the Twentieth Century atmosphere of high-geared business, but I looked into the face of a Mongol priest who had cursed me. I beheld the most incredible of all magics—the transference of souls. And it got me.

I'd think more and more about Tibet; dream of the lame, goitred women in their brocaded shirts, of the green-coated Torgots, of the diseased beggars in the streets of Lhassa. That was it, I ran a beauty parlor, but I dreamed of filth, squalor, disease, vermin. The Tibetans are a filthy race, and I'd remember their pitted faces, their scrofulous bald heads. Looking into the yellow face of Dagur I saw horrid markings.

ONE day I read a squib in the paper. About the death of an antique merchant in Canton. I thought of the Lotus of Lhassa, and shuddered. Had the *tchen-lam* taken it back? If so, why didn't they learn where I had gone? Why hadn't they followed me to exact the vengeance the priest had sworn on me?

Perhaps they had followed me. Perhaps they were coming now. I got to sneaking into my apartment at night, peering behind me on the street, eyeing everyone who came into our reception room at the beauty salon.

But there was no one. There was only Dagur, with his hateful yellow face—the face of the man who cursed me; the man who was a member of the cruelest sect in the world.

When my fears about the *tchen-lam* coming after me abated, I began to center my hatred on Dagur and his face. I didn't like it, or him. We never quarreled openly; too busy making money, but I fancy he disliked me as much as I did him.

Now we rarely met save at the salon, when there was work to be done or planned. I couldn't stand that yellow face, reminding me of my ancient guilt and my prophesied doom. If it weren't for that I would have been able to forget; to think of myself merely as a successful business man. But the face haunted me.

Maybe I could get rid of it. Dagur was clever, I knew that. He was an evil man, and a wise one. He'd defied the masters of Asia. But in picking me for a partner he'd unwittingly acknowledged that I was his equal if not his peer.

I was his peer. The money was all in my name.

I thought about this a lot lately. I could get the money and get rid of the *tchen-lam's* face with one quick stroke—a stroke to Dagur's heart. Perhaps my friends who brought the women could arrange it. Perhaps I could do it myself.

No. Dagur was famous now, because of the business. His sudden disappearance would stir up trouble. But—if the business fell . . .

Four hundred thousand dollars was enough for me. Dagur wasn't needed any more.

I could wreck the business, perhaps, and expose Dagur. He'd take the rap. As a mere partner, not implicated in the actual transference, I'd be safe.

And the money was mine.

Then I wouldn't see the *tchen-lam's* face, or worry about a ridiculous curse. Why did that savage's silly threat haunt me? He couldn't hurt me, dead, even though his body lived. He couldn't . . .

But he made me sweat at night in dreams. And I had to stop that.

Dagur stopped it for me. I guess I under-rated the wisdom of the East, which is indeed the wisdom of ageless serpents. *He* must have planned, too, and his mind was subtle. I never suspected the trap.

One day he called me into conference.

WE met in the room where the soul-transference was effected. It was private there, and quiet. We sat down. Dagur began to talk to me about quitting the business.

"Oho," I thought. "He wants money."

But Dagur never mentioned money. He just talked on and on about how he was sick of the racket, and now that we were both wealthy we might retire. He talked like a friend, like a brother. He talked until it grew dark and the room became dim.

He snapped on the lights behind the mirrors and I saw his yellow face; the *tchen-lam's* face that I had grown to hate and fear. It unnerved me, that grim reminder of unbelievable days, but I could not help staring at it. Staring at Dagur's eyes in that yellow face; staring as he talked on and on in a gentle drone and his eyes got bigger, and I saw that face loom up. It came to me across a burning desert, that face stalked me over the Gobi once more. But I didn't resist. I was caught in the mirror light and the voice-drone and the staring eyes. I was lost in Dagur's eyes.

The face was big as the desert now. I was lost in the face. I was lost. The *tchen-lam* was all about me, and I couldn't resist. I felt myself sinking.

Myself. What was myself? A dark blur, a liquid blur that could flow. Flow out of my body, into that face. Flow out, because all my being was concentrated on that face. Flow out into mirror-gleam and voice-drone and yellow face. I was ooze in darkness, I was flowing, flowing . . .

Then the chuckling laughter woke me, shook me into sanity. I opened my eyes, shocked to realize they had been closed. Dagur was laughing at me. He snapped up the lights and he was laughing. Dagur was laughing.

No—*I* was laughing!

But how could I be? I was sitting here, and the laughter came from my *face* across the room.

Then I knew. Dagur had tricked me. Like he tricked the old women. He'd put me into a receptive state, subtly hypnotized me—and changed bodies. Changed bodies. The body he stole from the *tchen-lam* he now gave to me, and stole my own.

Dagur laughed. I could only tremble as he mocked.

"I know your mind, my friend. I know what you were planning for me. But I beat you to the draw, as you would say. The money is all in your name—well it is in *my* name, now. I am you. It was written from the first that this must happen, and you didn't know, of course."

I stood up. Or my body did. The *tchen-lam's* body. I couldn't think, or hear, or feel. I staggered to a mirror. I stared down at the lean, emaciated form. I stared into the hateful yellow face I feared and dreaded—the face that was now my own for all time.

I began to laugh, uncontrollably. Within a week, staring at the face, I should go completely mad. Was this the *tchen-lam's* vengeance?

"I shall leave you now," Dagur was saying. "Of course, there is nothing you can do. I am glad of your assistance. I thank you for the money, and for ridding me of a body I was beginning to dislike for certain obvious reasons. The Tibetans are so filthy, you know?"

What did he mean?

"Yes." Dagur was opening the door. "It is all in the stars, my friend. In giving you the body I am unwittingly carrying out the curse of the *tchen-lam,* I suppose. He is dead, but remember what he said about making you suffer by his own hands? It seemed impossible for him to fulfill that threat, but I fancy he has. Yes, you are going to suffer at his hands."

Dagur left. I was standing in the twilight, brain reding. It was too sudden, too mad; the climax of a nightmare.

But the real climax was yet to come. "You will suffer at his hands," Dagur said. Filthy Tibetans? Glad to get rid of the *tchen-lam's* body? How could that body harm me when I was in it?

Then I glanced down at the strange yellow claws that were now my own and I understood everything, quite completely and quite horribly. I was going to suffer at the *tchen-lam's* hands, truly so. For I stared at those hands, and knew the truth, knew the dead man's vengeance.

I was in the body of the *tchen-lam*. And the *tchen-lam* had leprosy!

THE END

1952

Lucy Comes to Stay

. . . the scissors? . . . only to cut the telephone wires, my dear.

“YOU can’t go on this way.”

Lucy kept her voice down low, because she knew the nurse had her room just down the hall from mine, and I wasn’t supposed to see any visitors. “But George is doing everything he can—poor dear, I hate to think of what all those doctors and specialists are costing him, and the sanatorium bill, too. And now that nurse, that Miss Higgins, staying here every day.”

“It won’t do any good. You know it won’t.” Lucy didn’t sound like she was arguing with me. She *knew.* That’s because Lucy is smarter than I am. Lucy wouldn’t have started the drinking and gotten into such a mess in the first place. So it was about time I listened to what she said.

“Look, Vi,” she murmured. “I hate to tell you this. You aren’t well, you know. But you’re going to find out one of these days anyway, and you might as well hear it from me.”

“What is it, Lucy?”

“About George, and the doctors. They don’t think you’re going to get well.” She paused. “They don’t want you to.”

“Oh, Lucy!”

“Listen to me, you little fool. Why do you suppose they sent you to that sanatorium in the first place? They said it was to take the cure. So you took it. All right, you’re cured, then. But you’ll notice that you still have the doctor coming every day, and George makes you stay here in your room, and that Miss Higgins who's supposed to be a special nurse—you know what she is, don't you? She's a guard."

I couldn't say anything. I just sat there and blinked. I wanted to cry, but I couldn't, because deep down inside I knew that Lucy was right.

"Just try to get out of here," Lucy said. "You'll see how fast she locks the door on you. All that talk about special diets and rest doesn't fool me. Look at yourself—you're as well as I am! You ought to be getting out, seeing people, visiting your friends."

"But I have no friends," I reminded her. "Not after that party, not after what I did—"

"That's a lie." Lucy nodded. "That's what George wants you to think. Why, you have hundreds of friends, Vi. They still love you. They tried to see you at the hospital and George wouldn't let them in. They sent flowers to the sanatorium and George told the nurses to burn them."

"He did? He told the nurses to burn the flowers?"

"Of course. Look, Vi, it's about time you faced the truth. George wants them to think you're sick. George wants you to think you're sick. Why? Because then he can put you away for good. Not in a private sanatorium, but in the—"

"No!" I began to shake. I couldn't stop shaking. It was ghastly. But it proved something. They told me at the sanatorium, the doctors told me, that if I took the cure I wouldn't get the shakes any more. Or the dreams, or any of the other things. Yet here it was—I was shaking again.

"Shall I tell you some more?" Lucy whispered. "Shall I tell you what they're putting in your food? Shall I tell you about George and Miss Higgins?"

"But she's older than he is, and besides he'd never—"

Lucy laughed.

"Stop it!" I yelled.

"All right. But don't yell, you little fool. Do you want Miss Higgins to come in?"

"She thinks I'm taking a nap. She gave me a sedative."

"Lucky I dumped it out." Lucy frowned, "Vi, I've got to get you away from here. And there isn't much time."

She was right. There wasn't much time. Seconds, minutes, hours, days, weeks—how long had it been since I'd had a drink?

"We'll sneak off," Lucy said. "We could take a room together where they wouldn't find us. I'll nurse you until you're well."

"But rooms cost money."

"You have that fifty dollars George gave you for a party dress."

"Why, Lucy," I said. "How did you know that?"

"You told me ages ago, dear. Poor thing, you don't remember things very well, do you? All the more reason for trusting me."

I nodded. I could trust Lucy. Even though she was responsible, in a way, for me starting to drink. She just had thought it would cheer me up when George brought all his high-class friends to the house and we went out to impress his clients. Lucy had tried to help. I could trust her. I must trust her—

"We can leave as soon as Miss Higgins goes tonight," Lucy was saying. "We'll wait until George is asleep, eh? Why not get dressed now, and I'll come back for you."

I got dressed. It isn't easy to dress when you have the shakes, but I did it. I even put on some make-up and trimmed my hair a little with the big scissors. Then I looked at myself in the mirror and said out loud, "Why, you can't tell, can you?"

"Of course not," said Lucy. "You look radiant. Positively radiant."

I stood there smiling, and the sun was going down, just shining through the window on the scissors in a way that hurt my eyes, and all at once I was so sleepy.

"George will be here soon, and Miss Higgins will leave," Lucy said. "I'd better go now. Why don't you rest until I come for you?"

"Yes," I said. "You'll be very careful, won't you?"

"Very careful," Lucy whispered, and tiptoed out quietly.

I lay down on the bed and then I was sleeping, really sleeping for the first time in weeks, sleeping so the scissors wouldn’t hurt my eyes, the way George hurt me inside when he wanted to shut me up in the asylum so he and Miss Higgins could make love on my bed and laugh at me the way they all laughed except Lucy and she would take care of me she knew what to do now I could trust her when George came and I must sleep and sleep and nobody can blame you for what you think in your sleep or do in your sleep.

. . .

It was all right until I had the dreams, and even then I didn’t really worry about them because a dream is only a dream, and when I was drunk I had a lot of dreams.

When I woke up I had the shakes again, but it was Lucy shaking me, standing there in the dark shaking me. I looked around and saw that the door to my room was open, but Lucy didn’t bother to whisper.

She stood there with the scissors in her hand and called to me.

“Come on, let’s hurry.”

“What are you doing with the scissors?” I asked.

“Cutting the telephone wires, silly! I got into the kitchen after Miss Higgins left and dumped some of that sedative into George’s coffee. Remember, I told you the plan.”

I couldn’t remember now, but I knew it was all right. Lucy and I went out through the hall, past George’s room, and he never stirred. Then we went downstairs and out the front door and the street-lights hurt my eyes. Lucy made me hurry right along, though.

We took a streetcar around the comer. This was the difficult part, getting away. Once we were out of the neighborhood, there’d be no worry. The wires were cut.

The lady at the rooming house on the South Side didn’t know about the wires being cut. She didn’t know about me, either, because Lucy got the room.

Lucy marched in bold as brass and laid my fifty dollars down on the desk. The rent was $12.50 a week in advance, and Lucy didn’t even ask to see tire room. I guess that's why the landlady wasn't worried about baggage.

WE GOT upstairs and locked the door, and then I had the shakes again.

Lucy said, "Vi—cut it out!"

"But I can't help it. What'll I do now, Lucy? Oh, what'll I do? Why did I ever—"

"Shut up!" Lucy opened my purse and pulled something out. I had been wondering why my purse felt so heavy but I never dreamed about the secret.

She held the secret up. It glittered under the light, like the scissors, only this was a nice glittering. A golden glittering.

"A whole pint!" I gasped. "Where did you get it?"

"From the cupboard downstairs, naturally. You knew George still keeps the stuff around. I slipped it into your purse, just in case."

I had the shakes, but I *got* that bottle open in ten seconds. One of my fingernails broke, and then the stuff was burning and warming and softening—

"Pig!" said Lucy.

"You know I had to have it," I-whispered. "That's why you brought it."

"I don't like to see you drink," Lucy answered. "I never drink and I don't like to see you hang one on, either."

"Please, Lucy. Just this once."

"Why can't you take a shot and then leave it alone? That's all I ask."

"Just this once, Lucy, I have to."

"I won't sit here and watch you make a spectacle of yourself. You know what always happens—another mess."

I took another gulp. The bottle was half-empty.

"I did all I could for you, Vi. But if you don't stop now, I'm going."

That made me pause. "You couldn't do that to me. I need you, Lucy. Until I'm straightened out, anyway."

Lucy laughed, the way I didn’t like. “Straightened out! That’s a hot one! Talking about straightening out with a bottle in your hand. It’s no use, Vi. Here I do everything I can for you, I stop at nothing to get you away, and you’re off on another.”

“Please. You know I can’t help it.”

“Oh, yes, you can help it, Vi. But you don’t want to. You’ve always had to make a choice, you know. George or the bottle. Me or the bottle. And the bottle always wins. I think deep down inside you hate George. You hate me.”

“You’re my best friend.”

“Nuts!” Lucy talked vulgar sometimes, when she got really mad. And she was mad, now’. It made me so nervous I had another drink.

“Oh, I’m good enough for you when you’re in trouble, or have nobody else around to talk to. I’m good enough to lie for you, pull you out of your messes. But I’ve never been good enough for your friends, for George. And I can’t even win over a bottle of rotgut whiskey. It’s no use, Vi. What I’ve done for you today you’ll never know. And it isn’t enough. Keep your lousy whiskey. I’m going.”

I know I started to cry. I tried to get up, but the room was turning round and round. Then Lucy was walking out the door and I dropped the bottle and the light kept shining the way it did on the scissors and I dosed my eyes and dropped after the bottle to the floor. . . .

WHEN I woke up they were all pestering me, the landlady and the doctor and Miss Higgins and the man who said he was a policeman.

I wondered if Lucy had gone To them and betrayed me, but when I asked the doctor said no, they just discovered me through a routine checkup on hotels and rooming-houses after they found George’s body in his bed with my scissors in his throat.

All at once I knew what Lucy had done, and why she ran out on me that way. She knew they’d find me and call it murder.

So I told them about her and how it must have happened. I even figured out how Lucy managed to get my fingerprints on the scissors.

But Miss Higgins said she'd never seen Lucy in my house, and the landlady told a lie and said I had registered for the room alone, and the man from the police just laughed when I kept begging him to find Lucy and make her tell the truth.

Only the doctor seemed to understand, and when we were alone together in the little room he asked me all about her and what she looked like, and I told him.

Then he brought over the mirror and held it up and asked me if I could see her. And sure enough—

She was standing right behind me, laughing. I could see her in the mirror and I told the doctor so, and he said yes, he thought he understood now.

So it was all right after all. Even when I got the shakes just then and dropped the mirror, so that the little jagged pieces hurt my eyes to look at, it was all right.

Lucy was back with me now, and she wouldn't ever go away any more. She'd stay with me forever. I knew that. I knew it, because even though the light hurt my eyes, Lucy began to laugh.

After a minute, I began to laugh, too. And then the two of us were laughing together, we couldn't stop even when the doctor went away. We just stood there against the bars, Lucy and I, laughing like crazy.

Once a Sucker

There's one born every minute, and that's what I was—in a business where I thought that title belonged to everyone else

I WAS FINISHED. I had never actually begun, but that didn't matter. I was finished. In Hollywood I was a failure, and it hurt.

I walked into my agent's office and sat down to wait for the privilege of telling the great man to go to hell. That wouldn't get me anywhere, but at least I'd have the satisfaction of doing something constructive: Tell Larry Rickert to go to hell; then get drunk.

I was still waiting outside Rickert's office when Peter Lorre walked in. It wasn't Lorre, of course—Rickert didn't have any top names—but the resemblance was there, and strong. He walked deliberately over to the reception window. He wasn't much: Black suit, unusual for out here, but nothing special. White shirt, quiet foulard tie. Flashy ring on little finger of left hand—probably a fake stone. And a monocle. That's right—a monocle. I ignored him until Larry Rickert condescended to see me.

I walked down the hall to the big layout in the back and Larry smiled at me across the desk and waved me to a chair.

"What can I do for you?" he asked. "That's exactly what I want to know," I told him.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean I came in here two months ago because your ads say you're a good agent, and that's what I needed. You didn't sign me up or anything like that, but you did manage to get over three hundred bucks out of me for a retainer fee and for photographs and the transcriptions I did for audition disks. What I want to know is, when do I see a little action?"

HE gave me the same grin he used for his advertising photos.

"Take it easy, Eddie. Relax."

"I've *been* taking it easy—for ten weeks now. I want to know why you haven't sold me, or my show." Rickert stopped smiling. He leaned forward and waved the chewed end of his cigar at me.

"Listen, son," he said, "this isn't Iowa. That package idea of yours—the Radio Psychologist—may have sounded pretty good when you dreamed it up back there. And I was willing to give it a whirl. I sent audition disks out for you to all the network reps. I've been in there pitching. But it's just no dice."

"So I stink, eh?" I stood up. "All right, Mr. Rickert. But it's a pity you didn't tell me so before I spent three hundred bucks with you."

"Hold on, now—"

I was holding on, hard. I knew there was no use getting mad. He'd given me the answer: I was washed up but good. Now I didn't even feel like telling him to go to hell.

"No hard feelings, Eddie," said Rickert. "Go on home and think it over. Maybe something will still break. I'll let you know."

I went out and through the hall, back to the outer office. The little man with the monocle, was still sitting there. He looked up and started to open his mouth.

"Pardon me," he said.

I didn't stop; I opened the door and emerged on the sunlit street.

He padded after me. "Please—" he murmured.

“Go away.” I shook him off. “Go away. Can’t you see I’m busy? I have to kill somebody.”

Hurrying around the corner, into the crowd, I wondered who it was I meant to kill.

The sunshine swept around me, and so did the people, hurrying along. But I had nowhere to go. I searched my pockets: crumpled bills and some change—four dollars and thirty-five cents.

Why had I ever come out here, anyway? I was just a hick, like all the other Iowa farmers who dream of it for years, save up for years, finally travel two thousand miles to get here, and then have nothing but a souvenir to send the folks back home—a miniature wooden outhouse with the name of the city stamped on it.

I was a fool. But I couldn’t go back; they’d laugh at me. My brother would laugh at me. I was laughing at myself.

EDDIE HAINES, the Boy Wonder—the star of the senior play. Just a high-school kid who never grew up. I used to think I was pretty good. They all thought so, then: “You ought to be in the movies. Or on the radio.”

Why not? It sounded great—in high school. Then I wasn’t in high school any more, and after a while they all got jobs and I was still bumming around, waiting for my big chance.

Then I got the idea for this Radio Psychologist program, and I thought I was all set. I read and studied and worked out a format for presentation and it was in the bag. Yeah, sure it was!

Now all I had left was four dollars and thirty-five cents. Not enough to get drunk on, but I tried. When that didn’t work, I went home.

Then I remembered Charlie—my big brother, Charlie. Always ready to hand out advice. But one thing he had told me I’d never forgotten:

“There’s two things a man should always take straight—his whisky and his razor.”

Well, I’d taken the whisky. And I had my razor. It was time to cut the comedy; time for the unkindest cut of all . . . Shakespeare . . . High-school plays . . . To hell with that. To hell with everything—

A headache began to blind me, sending sharp pains against my eyes. But it wasn’t sharp enough—not nearly as sharp as the straight edge of my razor, pressing against my throat. As I moved my hand I was thinking that the edge of a razor is the sharpest thing in the world.

It was the only thing in the world.

Chapter Two

THERE WAS SOMETHING ELSE in the world, after all: Noise. Knocking. Persistent knocking. Rattling. Knocking on my door, rattling the knob.

“Go away!” I yelled.

The doorknob rattled again. The voice was plainly audible as I moved into the living-room.

“Open up, please. I want to see you.”

“Go away!”

Silence.

I stood there, waiting for the sound of receding footsteps. Another moment now, and I’d be alone again. Another moment and I could go back into the bathroom and—

Rustling. . . . Something was sliding under the door; something green slithered into view.

It was a hundred-dollar bill.

I bent down and picked it up in my left hand. Then I turned the bolt, opened the door.

He came in—the little Peter Lorre guy again. Only this guy was bald. He took his hat off and the light from the bathroom shone on an absolutely hairless skull.

All I could do was stand there and look at him, stand there and try to slip the straight razor into my pocket without his noticing, or without cutting off my leg.

He turned on the living-room light, walked over to the sofa, sat down, and pulled out the monocle. Then he looked up at me and smiled.

“You’re Eddie Haines,” he said. “Pleased to meet you. I am Professor Hermann.”

My left hand held the money, and my right hand stayed in my pocket with the razor. So I only nodded at him. All at once I felt I had to sit down. He watched me, still smiling.

“You will pardon my intrusion. I tried to call, but it seems your telephone has been disconnected. And it was important that I see you at once.”

“How did you—”

He waved his hand, the one with the diamond ring on the little finger. I wasn’t so sure any more that it was a fake diamond.

“Mr. Rickert gave me your name and address. You recall, I think, that I was in his office this afternoon?”

“But—”

Again the wave. “I happen to have heard your voice, on a record.”

“Are you in radio, Mr.—uh—Professor Hermann?”

“No. But I am greatly interested in voices. And I have something in mind which may interest you.”

I was sobering up, fast. I needed a cigarette. I moved my hand in my pocket.

“Ouch!” I’d cut my finger on the straight edge of the razor. I pulled the hand out of the pocket without thinking. He was looking at me, and I forced a grin as I swabbed at the blood with my handkerchief.

“Afraid I must apologize to you,” I said. “You see, I happened to be shaving when you rang, and I got a little confused. I carried my razor out with me and forgot I’d stuck it into my pocket.”

The Professor nodded gravely. “I see there are a few things I must teach you. For example, you haven’t yet learned how to tell a lie.”

"What do you mean by that crack?"

His gravity disappeared with a chuckle.

"My dear young man! You'll find it's no use trying to deceive me. I happen to know you weren't shaving; you were getting ready to cut your throat."

I gaped at him, and again he chuckled.

"That would have been very silly of you, my friend. Very, very silly. Because you and I are going to make a million dollars—together."

IT was hard for me to realize that so much had happened in so short a time. But the clock in the little restaurant told me that it was only nine. We'd been sitting here a good hour already, eating and talking.

That is, I'd been doing the talking. The Professor didn't say much. He nodded, smiled, shook his head—all on cue. It wasn't until I had several jolts of coffee inside of me that I came out of my talking jag long enough to realize that I was a fool to let him pump me without knowing what he wanted.

I lit a cigarette and pushed my cup away.

"Seems to me I'm doing the talking."

His bald head bobbed. "Go ahead. I like to listen to you. You have a wonderful voice."

"Tell that to the radio executives. They won't listen to me."

"Radio executives!" I caught the familiar wave of the hand, the glittering arc of the diamond swirling through space. "Your voice is too fine an instrument for radio. It must not be wasted in an effort to sell laxatives and gasoline. That would be sheer prostitution."

I took the bull by the horns. "Speaking of prostitution," I said, "you haven't yet told me what you're interested in. Why did you get hold of me in such a hurry?"

"But I did tell you! Because of your voice. I've spent several weeks now, listening to voices. Auditioning, I believe they call it. I have heard recitations in the offices of agents, recordings and transcriptions of available talent. I heard your voice quite by accident, just the other day, in an advertising agency. Apparently Mr. Rickert had sent them the record.

"Right then and there I was almost certain I had found my man. Because you do have a very fine voice, Mr. Haines. I'm not speaking of diction or phrasing; I'm speaking of pitch and timbre. You have a persuasive voice; you sound sincere, convincing. Women like your voice, don't they, Mr. Haines?"

What was the matter with this guy? I stared at him—a fat, ugly, baldheaded little stranger who tossed around hundred-dollar bills and talked about voices. Was he looking for another "Continental" ?

He smiled. "You don't understand, of course. But you will—I'm sure of that. I think that with proper training, you will go far. You have the voice, the personal attributes, and the youth. It was no accident that brought us together; it was Destiny."

HE wasn't smiling now. He hunched forward over the table and his eyes were glittering to match that diamond.

"Cut out the violin music," I said. "What's your proposition?"

He glanced at the restaurant clock and rose quickly. "We haven't time to discuss that now," he said. "It's getting late. We're due at the meeting."

"What meeting?"

"Come and see. It's important that you arrive before the testimony starts."

The Professor led me down the street for about half a block and halted before my idea of a beautiful animal—a handsome new black Jaguar convertible.

"Climb in," he said.

We pulled away, headed down the boulevard, then northwest toward Beverly Hills. Neither of us said anything for a while, and the Jaguar just purred.

The Professor glanced at the dashboard clock. “Right on time,” he said. “We’ll pick her up and then go to the meeting.”

“Her?”

“Oh, I forgot to mention that we’re bringing a guest. You will probably like her—I don’t imagine you’ve ever met a movie star before.”

“Movie star?”

“Well, featured player. Seven hundred and fifty a week. Lorna Lewis—you know of her?”

Lorna Lewis—of the glamorous gams. The censor’s delight. I’d heard of her, all right. This was going to be interesting after all.

“The movie colony is particularly impressionable,” remarked Professor Hermann. “I expect great results from them in our future work. For example, consider their interest in astrology. I can name you dozens of actors, actresses, producers, executives, who won’t make a move unless the stars are right.

“I always think of one top name out here—she’s been in pictures since the original Lassie was a pup—who lives according to a carefully plotted horoscope based on her date of birth. Ridiculous, of course. As she gets older she keeps moving her birth-date forward. She’s changed her age four times now, and each time she gets a new astrologer and a new horoscope. Yet she won’t as much as sleep with an assistant producer without consulting the stars.”

“This Lorna Lewis,” I said. “Is she gone on astrology too?”

Professor Hermann shook his head. “No. Spiritualism.”

I blinked and sat up. “Mean to tell me that’s what you have in mind for us—some kind of spook racket?”

“Far from it. My dear boy, don’t underestimate me. You and I will not be engaged in any such vulgar fakery. Our paths lead to a higher destiny. But we’ll speak of all that at another time. Right now your cue is to observe—and be silent.”

We entered the driveway on a hillside. Beyond the palm-bordered path rose a rambling California-Spanish hacienda. I caught a glimpse of a side terrace and a swimming-pool in the back. Then we drew up before broad stone steps.

Professor Hermann led me to the door. The usual buzzer produced the usual chimes, and we waited.

“Come in,” said a voice. I recognized it immediately. I recognized the black curls, the full thick lips, the slim sweep of perfectly modeled legs. It was Lorna Lewis.

“Come in. Be with you in a minute.” She waved us to a love-seat in the hall alcove and then dashed up the stairs, treating us to a rear view of the finest pair of peach-colored slacks I’d ever seen.

“Don’t stare!” hissed the Professor. “And from now on, take your cues from me.” He produced his monocle and bent forward to polish it with a handkerchief, as though it were a rare scientific lens.

“Remember, now, not a word. Let me do the talking.”

“But—”

She was running down the stairs again, still wearing the peach-colored slacks and a green blouse. I hadn’t fully appreciated the blouse before, but it was even better than the slacks.

“Ready? Let’s go, then—our appointment’s for eight and we mustn’t be late.” Suddenly she seemed to notice me. “Who’s he?” she asked.

“Miss Lewis—Judson Roberts.”

That was me, apparently. I rose and started to open my mouth, but the Professor coughed.

“Mr. Roberts cannot answer you. He is committed to silence until midnight.”

This time her blink was genuine. “Oh—a vow, or something?”

PROFESSOR HERMANN smiled. “Certainly not, my dear child! Mr. Roberts is no fake mystic. He’s a scientist. As such he is engaged in an experiment of psychological conditioning. He has just arrived from the

University of Lima and plans to collaborate with me in my work. I'd like to have him tell you about it sometime—I'm sure you would be interested."

"I know I will." She gave me a long look and seemed to mean it.

"I've invited Mr. Roberts to accompany us as an observer this evening, if you don't mind."

"That's fine with me. But I don't know if Mrs. Hubbard will approve. I hear she's very particular about who she admits."

"More than likely." The Professor led us outside and slid behind the wheel of the car. Lorna Lewis followed and I edged into the front seat beside her. The peach-colored slacks pressed against my thigh. I pressed back.

The Professor was doing most of the talking as he nosed the Jaguar south, then east. "Your Mrs. Hubbard probably doesn't care for strangers at all. I wouldn't, either, if I were working a nice, soft racket—preying on motion-picture people with phony spiritualism."

Lorna Lewis tossed her head.

"You'll see! Mrs. Hubbard is different; she doesn't try to fool anyone with tricks or hocus-pocus."

"No ectoplasm or apparitions? What about rope escapes and raps? Does she produce apports?"

"You're making fun of me." Her slim hands caressed a silver cigarette-case. "Mr. Roberts?"

"Mr. Roberts does not smoke," snapped the Professor. That was news to me. I wondered if I also did not drink. Probably I fasted a lot, too. Certainly I had nothing to do with women.

Eyeing Lorna Lewis, I decided that was one rule to be changed in a hurry.

"My dear Miss Lewis," purred the Professor, "I am by nature a skeptic and by profession a psychologist. As such I have devoted much time to the investigation of so-called psychic phenomena. I am sorry to report that I've never seen a genuine medium."

"But Mrs. Hubbard doesn't put on a show," the girl protested. "Why, I've only been there once before and it was just like sitting down for a visit. The lights were on and everything. But the things she told me, the things she knew about me—it was simply uncanny!

"She knew my name—my real name, that is—and my age, and where I lived, and who my folks were, and what my next picture would be and who would direct. She even told me I'd get Lester Vance opposite me and I didn't hear about it from the studio until three days later!"

The Professor chuckled. "You're in pictures, my child. Such information is virtually public property."

"But my real name, and my real age—"

"It's all listed somewhere. Your birth certificate is available by mail. And certainly an unscrupulous woman would be willing to spend a few dollars on investigation. She probably has a line into the studio, paying someone to feed her advance tips on activities. She hopes to make you a regular client and attract others. Didn't you say your hairdresser told you to go there in the first place? It's very obvious."

I SUDDENLY realized he was talking to me more than he was to her, trying to tell me the angles. I listened carefully.

"If you are gullible enough, I predict that sooner or later your little five-dollar readings won't satisfy Mrs. Hubbard. She'll give you some good advice about the future and some even more intimate information about yourself, feed it to you bit by bit just to keep you coming back for more. She'll enmesh you more and more. Sooner or later she'll find out that you too have mystic powers, that you're clairvoyant, clairaudient, a natural medium. She'll give you slate-writing and then the old psychic-force routine."

"Psychic force?"

"Moving inanimate objects without touching them. Waving her hand over fruit, walnuts, coins. They'll obey her, move and follow her hand.

Psychic force. I’ll show you sometime how it’s done.”

“Tell me.”

“Simple. She wears a magnetized ring. There’s another magnet inside the walnut or fruit or fake coin. Naturally, it moves. By varying the weight of the object she can produce just a stir or a pronounced movement. It sounds stupid and simple, but wait until she gives you the buildup—in a dim, quiet room with her voice pitched low, and the spirits abroad.”

Lorna Lewis shook her head. “No, Mrs. Hubbard isn’t like that at all. You’ll see.”

“Very well. But remember, I’m here to protect you. Just introduce us as friends; I promise not to interfere in any way, but I want to observe what happens.”

“That’s right, Professor,” said Lorna Lewis, with the roguish smile that endeared her to millions. “Just keep your eyes open.”

Chapter Three

WE TURNED INTO A STREET that looked like the butt-end of Tobacco Road. Lawns of brown weeds and sand, withered palmettos decorated by dogs, houses sagging behind rusted iron fences. We parked and then walked across the sidewalk in single file. I fancied I saw the shades move slightly in a window to the left of the porch, but I was more interested in the movement of Lorna’s peach-colored slacks. We followed the slacks up the porch steps.

She pressed the buzzer and a sour whine echoed from within the house.

A sallow-faced Mexican girl opened the door. She brushed the perspiration from her mustache, wiped her hand on her stringy hair and said, “Yes, please?”

“We’ve come to see Mrs. Hubbard. We have an appointment.”

“I tell her. Wait here.”

She ushered us into the hallway and left us.

We settled down in wicker chairs and waited. Lorna Lewis found a cigarette. The Professor polished his monocle. I sat and read a copy of an ancient fan magazine.

The silence was emphatic. It grew hotter, mustier. The hall became an oversized coffin. Lorna Lewis stepped on her cigarette. The Professor put his monocle into the left orbit. I put down the fan magazine and sat there listening to the worms bore through the woodwork.

Then the door opened, we jumped, and the Mexican girl said, “In here, now.”

The center of the room was occupied by a “dining-room suite”—six chairs and a round table. Mrs. Hubbard sat in one of the chairs, her elbows on the table top.

She wasn’t exactly *Mrs.* Hubbard—“Mother Hubbard” would have been more accurate. A fat, blowsy, redfaced woman in mid-menopause, with pork-bristles on her arms and chin. Coarse brown hair nestled in a bun against the back of her high-necked black dress. There was something tragic about her deep-set eyes. Here, if I ever saw one, was a woman who had been suffering. From a hangover.

“Greetings.”

Her voice was as big as her body. It bounced off the walls and exploded against our ears.

“You are prompt, Miss Lewis. And I see you have brought guests.”

“I thought you wouldn’t mind. This is—”

“I know.” Mrs. Hubbard smiled slightly. “Please be seated, and I will endeavor to convince the skeptical Professor Otto Hermann, Ph.D., that I am indeed a psychic sensitive.”

We selected chairs and sat around the table. The Mexican girl opened the door again and ushered four more people into the room. We turned and stared at a fat little red-faced man with a mustache, a portly matron in a flowered print dress, a pale, bespectacled blonde girl, and a gaunt, gray-haired woman who constantly fiddled with her coral beads.

Mrs. Hubbard, unsmiling, waved them to places at the table. The Mexican girl brought in some extra chairs, and then produced a card-table which she set up in the corner of the room. Mrs. Hubbard retreated to a seat behind the card-table and we sat around the larger one, facing her in a semicircle.

Nobody said a word. Lorna Lewis watched Mrs. Hubbard. I watched Lorna Lewis. The Professor was watching me. Mrs. Hubbard didn't appear to be watching anybody. The whole affair began to take on the charm of an inquest.

I was waiting for something to happen. I was waiting for the closing of the blinds, the whisperings in the darkened room, the rappings and the wailings, the screech of chalk moving across a slate, the phosphorescent phantom issuing from the mouth of the moaning woman.

THE Mexican girl appeared again. She carried a tablet of cheap blue-ruled paper, a package of envelopes, and a handful of yellow pencils. This assortment made a nice little mess on Mrs. Hubbard's card-table.

We watched and waited as the Mexican girl rotated chunky thighs toward the door. The red-faced man fingered his mustache, the matron played with her purse, the girl with the glasses coughed, the gray-haired woman used her coral beads for a rosary. The Professor had his monocle to divert him, and I had Lorna Lewis. That black hair had a living luster; I wondered how it would feel to dig my hands into those curls, press that head back, and—

"Will everybody please take a pencil, a sheet of paper and an envelope?"

Mrs. Hubbard was ready to go into her routine. We filed past the bare card-table, took up pencils and paper, and returned to our places.

"Because our group today is a little larger than usual, and because there is a natural reticence in the presence of strangers, I feel it best to have you put your problems in writing." Mrs. Hubbard patted her brown pug and smiled.

“I suggest that each of you write down one question, to begin with. If we have time, I shall be glad to work with your further inquiries personally—and privately, if you wish.

“At the moment, the important thing, frankly, is to gain your complete confidence. Without it, you will have no faith in my power, nor in my ability to help you. Since some of you are visiting me for the first time today, I’m going to make use of a rather spectacular device to convince you of my extra-sensory perception.”

The deep voice roiled smoothly, easily, persuasively.

“I’m not very much of a showman—I cannot offer you a dark room, table-tipping, ghostly presences. But if each one of you will write on a piece of paper a question you’d like answered, fold the paper up as much as you like, and personally seal it in, an envelope, perhaps I can demonstrate an interesting psychic phenomenon.”

There was a pause, a shared feeling of hesitation. Mrs. Hubbard didn’t have to be a mystic to sense the indecision.

“Please! It’s very simple. I am going to read your questions back to you as you have written them, without opening the envelopes. There’s no trickery. You can examine the paper, the pencils, the envelopes. You won’t find any carbon, or wax or acid-treatments. There will be no waiting and no switches. I’ll read your questions back to you immediately, right here at this table. Then I will give you your answers. So if you’ll write whatever is closest to your mind and heart—”

The red-faced man scrawled something on his ruled sheet and folded it carefully four times. The matron licked the tip of her pencil and frowned. Lorna Lewis pouted. I watched her lips pucker as if seeking kisses—or bites. The spectacle suggested several questions to my mind: but not the kind I cared to have read back to me in public.

I shielded my paper and wrote, “Will my new venture be successful?” It sounded corny, but I wanted to know.

There was much business of folding and sealing. Lorna Lewis ran her tongue across the flap, drawing it in and out like a kitten lapping cream.

Mrs. Hubbard lumbered around the table and took up the sealed envelopes. I watched her, for obvious reasons; we all did. But I could detect no sleight-of-hand. She collected seven envelopes, shuffled them carefully, and placed them on the table, in the corner. She spread them out fanwise before her and frowned. Our chairs scraped back as we faced her. She switched on a lamp behind her and produced a wire filing basket.

"I'll read your questions and answer them one at a time," she told us. "In order that the answers be confirmed, I shall ask the writer of each question to raise his or her hand and let me know if my reading is correct. Then I'll open the envelope. Is that agreeable?"

We nodded. I looked at Professor Hermann. His face was utterly immobile. I wondered what he was making out of this—what he would do if Lorna Lewis seemed sold on Mrs. Hubbard. So far he hadn't opened his mouth.

Mrs. Hubbard stared down at the envelopes. Her forehead corrugated. A fat hand reached out at random and lifted an envelope from the center of the fan. She placed it against the corrugations above her eyes. Her eyes closed.

Then she was speaking, and her voice came from far away—far away inside herself, far away inside the envelope.

"Should I sell my property to the syndicate or hold out for the original figure?" she whispered.

A red-faced Jack-in-the-box popped up. "That's it!" he shouted. "By golly, that's my question!"

Professor Hermann never blinked. Everyone else was leaning forward, tense with excitement.

Mrs. Hubbard smiled. "Please, control your enthusiasm. It makes it more difficult to concentrate." She opened the envelope, unfolded the sheet, glanced at it carelessly, and placed it in the wicker basket. And all the while she continued to talk.

"As it comes to me, Mr. Rogers, this property that you speak of consists of a block of eight lots situated just south of San Juan Capistrano, on 101-A, the coast drive. This syndicate of which you speak, the—"

Rogers opened his mouth and she paused. “Oh, of course, I will not mention their names, if you prefer. But it is true, isn’t it, that they plan to build a hotel on this site? And that yesterday they offered you $18,000 cash for an outright sale, while you are holding out for $25,000? I thought so. It appears that if you refuse, they will offer you $20,000 on Thursday. If you still refuse, on Monday they will meet your price.”

Without pausing, the plump hand sought another envelope, pressed it to the red forehead. Eyes closed and mouth opened.

“Will Mike leave me?”

Lorna Lewis leaned forward. “Yes,” she murmured. “That’s my question.”

Mrs. Hubbard nodded, slitting the envelope. She tossed the unfolded paper into the basket, nodding again as she glanced at it.

“Mike will leave you soon—forever. He is preparing for a long journey right now. He hasn’t told you yet, because he does not know about it himself. But I see him going away from you, far, far away—”

The girl’s mouth opened. Mrs. Hubbard was apparently used to this reaction, for she hurried on. “I could tell you much more, but it would not be discreet. Alone, perhaps, and later, if you desire me to.”

I tried again to pierce Professor Hubbard’s bland stare. I tried to figure it out. There must be an angle, there was some kind of fakery somewhere, but—

“Will my new venture be successful?”

She was reading my question!

My own mouth opened now. I sucked in air as I watched Mrs. Hubbard carelessly unseal the envelope and withdraw the folded paper. She unfolded it—and then her mouth fell open.

Something red fluttered to the table: something bold and brazen, with a picture of a half-naked girl emblazoned on its crimson background.

It was the cover of the fan magazine I’d been reading in the hall!

Professor Hermann was on his feet. “My question, I believe,” he said.

Mrs. Hubbard’s open mouth gulped for words. When they came, they were short and sweet.

“You son of a bitch!” said Mrs. Hubbard.

SHE couldn’t escape. We were crowded around the table and the Professor, inarticulate no longer, was holding forth.

“You see, it’s very simple. The whole trick is old as the hills—while the audience is looking for mirrors, radio-eyes and all kinds of elaborate devices, the fake mystic is merely using the old ‘one-ahead’ system. All she needs for that is a stooge. In this case it was Rogers, here.”

The red-faced, mustached man who had popped up like a Jack-in-the-box now looked as though he would collapse like one. But the Professor held his arm firmly.

“Here’s how it works. The stooge writes his question and seals it like all the others, but he marks his envelope—with his fingernail, here at the flap. Just a nick. The medium looks for it and can tell at a glance, naturally, which one belongs to her confederate. Here—”

He held up an envelope—unopened. “This envelope she saves until the last. What she does is call out the., stooge’s question, which has been agreed upon in advance. Then he jumps up and makes a big show about hearing the correct question and she opens the envelope she’s held to her forehead. Naturally, it’s one of the other envelopes with a legitimate question, which she reads as she puts it in the basket. While answering the stooge’s question, in convincing detail, she was actually reading Miss Lewis’ question from the envelope she opened. Then, with the next envelope, she answered Miss Lewis; opened the Hap and found Mr. Roberts’ question.

“But when she called Mr. Roberts’ question, she opened my envelope—and that was her mistake.”

“You clever bastard,” muttered Mrs. Hubbard. “What do you want?” The Professor shrugged. “Nothing at all, really, from you—except your promise to quit working a racket on people who are in need of genuine assistance from reputable consultants.

I don’t think you’ll be trying these tricks around here very much longer.”

“Why, you goddam—”

“Careful, now! Watch your language. You aren’t very ladylike, Mrs. Hubbard. Of course, appearances are deceptive; you ladies and gentlemen must always remember that. For example, Mrs. Hubbard here does not use ladylike language because she really isn’t a lady. In fact—”

The Professor’s hand descended to pat Mother Hubbard’s head. It rose again, clutching a brown-bunned wig. We gaped down on a fat, baldheaded man who gripped the edge of the table with brawny knuckles and cursed.

Professor Hermann ignored his victim as he turned to us with a little bow.

“My friends,” he said, “I think that our little session with the supernatural is over.”

Chapter Four

WE DROVE LORNA LEWIS HOME. It was hard for me to remember that I was “Judson Roberts,” and that I was under a vow of silence. But the Professor was in the driver’s seat. He drove, I fidgeted, and Lorna Lewis babbled.

“You were so right,” she kept repeating to him. “And I’m so grateful to you. If that racketeer had found out about me—I mean, if I’d trusted him and really told him a lot of things I need advice on—”

She shivered. It felt good against me.

Professor Hermann smiled. “Perhaps in the future you will be more discreet. Only a reputable consultant should be trusted with your intimate problems.”

"That's what Mike tells me." She lit a cigarette, and it was agony for me to sit there and smell the smoke. "About Mike—there's something I must know."

"Bothering you, is he?"

"Yes. And I want you to help me; I can trust you, now. When could we talk about it?"

"Miss Bauer makes all my appointments. Call her at my office whenever you wish."

HE left it at that, and we dropped Lorna at the house. She said good-by to me and hoped that we'd meet again. I nodded calmly. Then, as her peach-colored posterior wriggled its way up the walk, I was tearing open a package of cigarettes, fumbling at the matches. I got a light as we drove west.

"Can I talk now?" I asked.

The Professor nodded, grinning.

"I don't get the pitch yet, but I can see that you've sold her a bill of goods."

He nodded again, carelessly.

"That was a sweet idea, using the magazine cover. But what if it had been some other racket—were you sure of being able to expose it anyway?"

"Certainly. There is no possibility of failure, the way I work. You will learn that in due time."

"Where are we heading for now?"

"You shall see."

"When are you going to tell me about those plans of yours?"

"Soon."

I shut up and watched the lights of Santa Monica flash by. We kept going. A lemon moon was in the sky as we neared the flickering streetlights of Long Beach. Flic Professor parked on a side-street and led me down a ramp to. the Boardwalk. We jostled through the late evening crowd and emerged on the midway.

“Come along,” he said, and led the way to a stand near the entrance.

Sideshow banners proclaimed the presence of Seero the Mystic-Secrets of Past, Present and Future. Gaudy horoscopes decorated the sides of the ticket-booth. A horsefaced woman with yellow hair—and teeth to match—smiled at us from behind the glass.

“Is he here yet?” asked the Professor, returning the smile.

“Just came in. There’s nobody with him yet.”

We entered the pitch, going through a short passageway and emerging into a darkened, banner-draped room. A man sat behind a covered table, peering into a crystal ball. He wore a bathrobe and a turban. When he saw us he rose, went to the door, latched it, and returned to his seat at the table.

No one spoke for a moment. I stared at the mystic, wondering where I’d seen that fat face before. He must have caught my thought, because he took his turban off and laid it on the table. I saw the bald head, and then I knew. The man was “Mrs. Hubbard.”

“You got here fast.” he said.

“I always keep my promises.” The Professor smiled. “Is everything all right, Jake?”

“Yeah, sure. All fixed but the payoff.” Jake gave me the kind of stare that would have cracked his crystal ball. “Who’s the savage?”

“This is Judson Roberts, my new associate. He’ll be working with me from now on.”

Jake favored me now with his normal smile. “Please to meet up with you. You a dummy?”

“I can talk,” I said. “But I learn more just from listening.”

“A wisey, huh?” Jake swung around to the Professor. “Rogers said for me to collect his split, too.”

“Very well.” Professor Hermann reached for his wallet and laid three portraits of Benjamin Franklin on the table. Jake covered them with a big fist.

“Thanks,” he said.

We left. The Professor walked out to the beach and headed for the water’s edge. He stood frowning off into the darkness.

“Now I understand,” I said. “You rigged the whole thing up, didn’t you? Planted a phony medium just to pull that stunt, so there really wasn’t a chance of anything going wrong.”

The wind tore the chuckle out of his mouth and carried it away across the water. “Of course. I never permit the possibility of an error. And this little affair tonight was more important than you know. Lorna Lewis had to be convinced. She is my opening wedge into the movie colony and the big money beyond that.

“You will find that I plan everything perfectly. Everything we do must be planned in detail, in advance. That way we cannot fail. I want your complete confidence and I am prepared to justify it—and pay for it. Not with hundred-dollar handouts; I’m talking about important money now—thousands, or perhaps millions. For me. For you.”

His white face stared up at me. “We can take over this town, you and I. Not with a phony cult or a fly-by-night racket. We’re going to go after the top, the cream. We’ll get right next to them, get under their skin, get into their minds. We’ll start out by advising and analyzing them—but we’ll end up by actually running their lives. We’ll own them, body and soul.

“Today you saw me arrange events so that Lorna Lewis would ask me for help. If my plans work out, six months from now I’ll be able to tell her—and dozens of others—to do anything I wish. And they’ll do it.

“That’s why I need you. That’s why I found you. Because this calls for a front man—young, good-looking, persuasive—to work with the women and with the men, too. Of course, you must be trained and it will take time, and it will not be easy. There is much that you must know: Metaphysics. Psychiatry. Theology. The arts of social presence. Your personality must be molded for aggression and command. I am the guiding hand—you will be the instrument, ground to perfection for our work.

"I shall demand strict obedience, strict adherence to the program of study I will lay down for you. But in return you shall receive everything you've always wanted: Fame, wealth, power.

"You'd like that, wouldn't you? I can sense it in you—the same drive, the same urge for power that I feel. Power over them all; the sleek, slim women you've never been able to have, the hard, smug, domineering men who've always ignored you. You can rule them if you wish; make them do anything you desire. There will be no laws you cannot break. Judges, doctors, politicians, financiers—the whole pack will come fawning at your heels, licking your fingers and whimpering for what you can give them."

I HAD to say something. "But look, you can't just do that to people. Maybe they'll fall for a line, but sooner or later they find out. I don't feel right, selling a bill of goods."

He laughed. "And yet you wanted to become a radio announcer."

"That's different."

"Is it? Is it any more honest to read off gaudy lies about the nonexistent benefits of soap and toothpaste than it is to advocate self-help? You'd be perfectly willing to tell millions of pimply, bloated hags that they will become lovely and alluring if they buy a cake of perfumed fat to drop into their bathwater. Isn't that the same thing?"

"Well, not exactly. I mean—"

"Be honest with yourself, now. You'd have no scruples about trying to run people's lives as a radio anouncer, would you? You'd sell anything, use any method. Fill little adolescent know-nothings with self-conscious fear, droning horrible warnings about acne and bad breath and perspiration odors. Frighten old folks with grave hints about the dreadful dangers of constipation and upset stomach. You'd promise wealth, success and happiness by implication to *anyone* who obeys your commands—who runs down to the corner druggist or the neighborhood grocer, who buys this, uses that, eats whatever it is you want to sell. Yes, and if your studio handed you the script, you'd use your best voice to proclaim the merits of a crooked politician, the virtues of a dishonest business policy. And yet you talk against running people's lives!"

It sounded good. I wasn't completely convinced, but I nodded. "Maybe you're right. But I still don't think you can get away with it. There may be a few screwballs who want to be fooled—who go for all the *isms* and *ologies* that come along. But most people are pretty sensible and normal. I don't see —"

"You will. Come along and I'll show you."

He led the way back across the beach. It came alive all around me:

A cannibalistic circle huddled around a small fire, gorging on halfraw hot-dogs and dill pickles. Troglodyte faces gaped in the firelight—a wrinkled, wizened old man's head with white, bushy hair and beetling black brows that moved convulsively as he chewed with his whole face at a tongue sandwich. There was a fat, blobby woman with stringy hair and a red neck; the rest of her flesh hung in dead-white folds, broken here and there by bulging purplish veins that stood out like mountain ranges on a relief map. She slapped at a screaming brat with one beefy hand. A bullet-headed youth squatted next to a portable radio, fiddling with the volume control and scratching the hairy recesses of his armpits.

"Welcome to the world," chuckled the Professor.

There was sand in my shoes. I was hungry. I stepped through a tangle of crumpled paper, greasy paper plates and broken pop-bottles. A small dog rushed up and nipped at my ankles.

"You see?" murmured the Professor. "Here are your normal people."

"All right," I said. "They stink. I hate 'em. But that doesn't prove anything. It doesn't prove they'll fall for a line of hooey about their lives and futures."

The wind sent a dirty newspaper flying against my leg. I bent down and pushed it away, glimpsing the red letters of the headline: *Sex Maniac*

Sought in Hatchet Slaying.

“Perhaps this will help,” the Professor told me. We turned onto the midway.

Fluorescence and incandescence blinded me. My lungs gulped in popcorn oil, lard, the reek of frying meat, the stink of decayed fruit, and a rancid stench composed of tobacco, sweat and whisky.

Banners swirled all around me—before me, behind me, on either side, overhead. Congress of Freaks. Flea Circus. Arcade. Eats. Fun House. Learn Your Future. Three Shots for a Dime. Play the Winners. Man-Eaters. Red-Hots. A dozen juke-boxes blared and boomed. A merry-go-round seethed. Against this background rose the whirling, rattling, clanking and grinding of the Whip, the Dodger, the plane-rides and the roller-coaster. The sharp crack of rifles echoed from the shooting gallery. Barkers shouted in command, and amplifying systems carried exhortations, roars, and raucous bawlings of invitation. From the rides overhead I heard screams, shrieks, wails, and high, hysterical laughter.

“Close your eyes,” said the Professor. “Don’t look at them. I won’t even make you look at them. Just listen. What do you hear?”

I closed my eyes and stood there, jostled and pitched by the crowd.

The harsh music in the background suggested bands; the *boom-boom* beat was in marching tempo. War. Yes, war—with rifle-shots and shouted orders. Grinding of machinery; tanks and planes and armored cars, artillery going into action. And over that, the screams: the screams of the wounded, the dying; the screams of the killers, boring for blood with their bayonets.

I DON’T know whether the Professor was a “psychic sensitive” or not, but abruptly he said, “Dachau.”

“Huh?”

“Dachau. The prison-camps in Germany, during the last war. The victims shrieked that way, I should imagine.”

“Funny, I was thinking of war, myself.”

"Not funny. Perfectly natural. Normal. As normal as these people and their actions. Look around you—see what they're doing. They're seeking entertainment—having fun, as they call it.

"This is an amusement park, my friend. People come here to find what they want out of life—entertainment. They put their pennies into the peep-show slots because they want to. They know they're being swindled—and they love it. They love the phoniness, the lies, the cheats. They know the freak shows are fakes, that the barkers lie. They know the spielers are conning them about stepping up and winning the electric clocks. They don't believe in our friend Sefro the Mystic, but they pay their money and go inside because they want to be fooled.

"This is not a new concept. Your showman, Barnum, said it long ago—and it was known and spoken of in ancient Egypt. But it is a truth that survives, for the desire tor self-delusion never dies.

"People long for escape. Some of them pay their pennies to find it here. Others are able and willing to pay fortunes for something a little more convincing—for the sort of escape we will give them. Those are the ones we shall rule: the seekers."

"Suckers," I said.

"The seeker is always a sucker," said Professor Hermann.

Chapter Five

THERE HAD NEVER BEEN any question about my going through with it. Why not? I had nothing to lose. If it got bad, or risky, I could always pull out.

That's the way I thought when I left the Professor. That's the way I thought when I went to his office the next morning.

Somehow I'd never pictured him in a downtown office. But there was the sign on the door, in neat, discreet lettering:

OTTO HERMANN Ph D. Ps.D.
Psychological Consultant

The waiting-room was cool and dark, well-furnished without the flash of Larry Rickert's fake modern layout. The receptionist's desk stood right out in the open. Behind it sat a plump, middle-aged brunette wearing a loose white smock and a tight red smile. She smiled up at me and her words filtered through a thick accent.

"You would be Mr. Haines?"

"I would."

"The Professor is expecting you. Please to enter."

I pleased to enter the private office. The Professor sat in a chair at the side of his desk. He was wearing the same black suit, or a reasonable facsimile. He glanced at his watch.

"Good morning. You are late."

"Sorry. I overslept. Yesterday took a lot out of me, I guess."

"You are rested now?"

I nodded.

"Good. Then we can proceed to business." He opened a drawer of his desk and drew out a thick sheaf of legal-bond typing paper.

"What's that?" I asked.

"Your book. The one you wrote." I stared at the title page and read.

Y-O-U
by
Judson Roberts

"Take it and read it," he said. "Memorize it. After all, you wrote it. Remember, you're Judson Roberts." I riffled the pages and sat back. "What's it all about?"

"Did you ever read Dale Carnegie? Walter Pitkin? Stuart Chase? They're all in there. And Doctor Frank Crane and Elbert Hubbard. Also Madame

Blavatsky, Mrs. Eddy, plus a touch of Thorstein Veblen. And of course, Herr Freud, and Jung, and Aldous Huxley and Ouspensky and Spengler—a bit of everyone."

"Did you actually write it?"

"No. Rogers wrote it—you remember, the little man with the mustache at the seance. He has talent, when controlled. I had him start it a year ago, when I began to plan all this."

"What's the point?"

"Perfectly obvious. Now that I've found my Judson Roberts, the book will be published. I can arrange for printing and for distribution—but there will be more profit in selling it ourselves. Rogers can set up a direct-mail campaign, and over a period of years the book will make money—a small, steady income, although that's not important at all. But a published book is needed to establish Judson Roberts as an authority. That is most desirable. By the way, I've already sent in your name for a course and a diploma."

"Diploma?"

"You're going to be a Doctor of Psychology, just as I am. There's a correspondence school in the East. Fifty dollars gets you a degree, and no questions asked. . . . What are you grinning about?"

"It just struck me funny. All of a sudden I'm a Doctor of Psychology and the author of a book."

"There's nothing funny about that. It's window-dressing. And speaking of window-dressing—" The Professor rose and surveyed me critically. "Watch your posture. You have a tendency to slouch, your shoulders aren't squared. And you slump when you sit in a chair. We'll correct that. You'll need a wardrobe, of course, but that will come later. Hold your head a trifle higher and emphasize your height. You gain a certain advantage when people have to look up to you during a conversation. You might experiment with a different hair style. Those sideburns are all right for a cheap salesman, but I want more dignity. Ah, well, we'll come to these matters in due time. But right now, you have work to do."

"Such as?"

Reading your book."

I picked up the manuscript. "I'll run through it tonight," I promised.

THE PROFESSOR shook his head. "Only the beginning," he said. "You'll read it again—and again—and again. The content is the key to our whole system. It must be correlated with your other reading. For the next three months you're going to sit in that apartment of yours and read. I'll see that you eat, meanwhile."

"Sounds pretty soft."

"It won't be. You're going to study and sweat. I'll quiz you. You'll take tests. By the time I'm done, you'll be able to hold your own conversationally with any metaphysician, real or phony, and sound convincing."

"Okay. You're the Professor."

"And you're Judson Roberts."

That's how it started. I walked into the office as plain Eddie Haines, and I walked out as Judson Roberts, with my book under my arm.

Judson Roberts took his book home and studied it. Then he studied the basic, selected writings of Freud, Adler, Jung, Brill, Moll, Stekel. He subscribed to the *Journal of Psychiatry.* He read Swedenborg and *Isis Unveiled.* He read Frazer in bed, Charles Fort at the lunch-counter. Briffault in the bathroom. He waded through it all, the good and the bad alike—Lully, Flammarion, Toynbee, Nietzsche.

At first I couldn't make sense out of it all; nothing seemed related.

But gradually, Judson Roberts made sense of it. For as I read, Judson Roberts took shape. He was born out of the books, weaned on the Professor's nightly question-sessions.

JASON ROBERTS answered questions, written and oral. He learned to discourse on effects and autistic phenomena. He could give a Rorschach test. He could explain the symbolic derivatives of a matriarchic culture-pattern and analyze the inherent masochism of Kafka's works. Roberts could improvise a relationship between the Sung Dynasty, Apollonius of Tyana, and enuresis.

It takes a few minutes to read, but it took months to do. Eight hours of reading a day, seven days a week, plus two or three hours of talk, questions, answers. But wading through theories and ideas, I began to understand people a little better: Motivation and compulsion and compensation. Sublimation and projection. And not all of it came from college texts and reference works, either. I got some excellent insights from the *Seventh Book of Moses*. And even some from hex- and voodoo-supply catalogues.

The Professor kept taking me around to astrologers, palmists, phrenologists, spiritualists—men like Jake on the boardwalk and top operators working out of mansions in the hills north of Hollywood.

I learned that suckers are all alike, and the methods of handling them basically the same.

And through it all, he kept after me with questions. One afternoon toward the end of the third month, for example—

"What are the twelve divisions of normal interest?" droned Hermann.

"Time, personal magnetism, sex and marriage, investments, friends, obstacles, enemies, health, money trouble, changes and trips, surprises, and warnings."

"What is Yoga?"

"Yoga means unity, right action. Yogi is the practice of Yoga by a Guru, or teacher, and a Chela, or pupil. There are five divisions of Yoga:

"Raja-Yoga, the development of consciousness. Jnana-Yoga, or knowledge. Katma-Yoga, right action, and Bhakti-Yoga, right religious action. Then Hatha-Yoga, or power over the bodily functions. Govern your body and you govern the universe through Asana, the system of bodily posture, breath control, and control of the circulation and nervous system."

"Good enough. Now, define Turi-ya, Dharma, Kalpa, Manvantara. And recite the laws of Mann."

"Hey, take it easy! You've got me so full of that stuff it's coming out of my ears."

"I know. But there is so much to do, so little time. You must be ready soon."

"Yeah. Ready for Utter McKinley's embalming staff! Have a heart, Professor, I'm only human."

"You must be more than human for this job. You might apply some of the principles of Hatha-Yoga for exercise."

"I don't need exercise. I need a rest, a chance to get out of this damned hot apartment. I haven't had a drink for months, haven't seen anybody to talk to but you."

"That was our bargain."

"Our bargain was for me to make a million dollars, to have anything I wanted. And what do I get? A little cigarette-money and enough studying to kill Einstein! Look—I'm not Judson Roberts *all* the time, you know. I like a little fun once in a while."

"SO!" The Professor's fat fingers crawled over the nakedness of his skull. "How would you like to go to a party tonight?"

"What kind of a party—another seance in Pasadena?"

"No, I'm talking about the real thing. As a matter of fact, you're invited to attend. She's been inviting you for weeks, but I didn't tell you."

" 'She' ?"

"Lorna Lewis. She has inquired about you frequently. Yes, maybe that would work out—if you're interested."

"Count me in. I'll be there with bells on."

"No bells. You'll be there in a nice, conservative gray Palm Beach suit. You'll behave yourself and do the job I've laid out for you."

"But—"

"You'll do one thing and one only: Be nice to Lorna Lewis."

"That," I said, "is just ginger-peachy. I might even teach her a few Yoga positions."

Chapter Six

At the party the Professor planted me on the sofa; then he wandered away, after acknowledging a nod from our hostess. I was a little disappointed with the nod—I didn't expect Lorna Lewis to throw herself into my arms and nibble my ears, but even so, her cool reception didn't sit well with me after so much of a buildup. After the Professor vanished, I fidgeted. All I'd got from that greeting was a distinct letdown.

Plump little Miss Bauer from the Professor's office accompanied us, and it was she who identified the stocky, freckled, curly-haired man who dug his fingers possessively into Lorna Lewis' forearm.

"Mike Drayton. Iss her husband."

"Husband? Didn't know she was married."

"Yess. He iss a professional player."

"Playboy?"

"No, player. Of hockey."

"Oh, sure. I remember, now." I remembered Lorna Lewis' references to "Mike." Some problem of hers. Well, he looked like a problem to me; if we tangled, I'd be a dead duck.

But now it appeared that I'd never reach the tangling stage. Lorna was flitting around, greeting sports-jackets and evening wraps, offering glasses to Aloha shirts and gabardine slacks at the bar, being kittenish with a tall, red-haired man who was obviously a producer and obviously aware of it.

Mike Drayton, the husband, had disappeared. So had Miss Bauer and the Professor. I caught a glimpse of him as I went to refill my highball glass; he was stalking Lorna Lewis on the terrace. Maybe he'd steer her over to me.

The highballs were good, and after my long layoff, the second drink took hold. I had a third, but I was too nervous to enjoy it.

A trio of Filipinos wandered around making noises on mandolins and ukeleles—very corny. But most of the guests seemed to be far past the third drink, and they shouted requests. A small group gathered around a blonde who kicked off her shoes for a hula. Another, much smaller group, sat out on the stairs and talked shop. Through an archway I saw a fringe of bald, partially bald and gray heads huddled over a card-table.

It looked too damned typical, too pat and according-to-formula for me. Too much like the Hollywood party you read about. I don't know what I'd been expecting—certainly anything but this. And on top of it, I was all alone, ignored, off in a corner with no Lorna Lewis to finger the lapels of my Palm Beach suit.

I thought I'd better get drunk in a hurry and forget it.

I thought I might as well get out of here.

I thought—

She had hair the color of ripe apricots. She even smelled like apricots—well, apricot brandy, then. Because she was carrying a load.

She sat down beside me, and smiled up with green eyes. They were nice eyes, but right now a bit on the glassy side.

"Hello."

"Hello, yourself."

"What's the angle?"

"Angle? There's no angle."

"Come, now—everybody's got an angle. Are you trying to get Himberg's eye?"

"Who's Himberg?"

"The redheaded personality—the producer. You're trying to break into pictures, aren't you?"

"Not me, sister."

"I could never feel like a sister toward you, pal. And you aren't exactly the brotherly type, yourself. So why the gloom act?"

"Sorry. I was just watching the show."

"Well, you might get me a drink. And seeing as how you're getting so intimate and making advances, my name is Ellen Post."

"No relation to Emily?"

"I'm going now; I can see I misjudged you. You didn't look like the type to pull *that* one."

"Sorry. No, please, sit down. I'll get you a drink. Bourbon, straight?"

"Extremely straight, if you please."

"I please."

"Quit your bragging and run along." I went up to the bar and got a straight shot and another highball. Ellen Post watched me as I crossed the room toward her.

"So you're Judson Roberts."

"Who told you?"

"A little bird. A little baldheaded bird, with a monocle. A little sparrow, hopping after Lorna Lewis."

"I see you don't think much of psychological consultants."

"Not much." She gulped her shot. "You in pictures?" I asked.

"No. This is my line." She tapped her glass. "Prescribe me another, Doc."

I finished my drink and made my way back to the bar. Professor Hermann was sitting on the terrace with Lorna Lewis. They glanced up as I passed and the Professor winked. I didn't know what that was supposed to mean, so I ignored it. I liked apricots better, anyway.

"Here we are." I gave Ellen Post a glass and clicked my highball tumbler against its rim. "Forbidden fruit."

"What kind of a toast is that?"

"You be the psychologist and figure it out. Anyway, I was thinking of apricots."

"Apricots?"

"Yes. You—your hair, your skin." She chuckled. It was a husky sound, from deep within the throat, but it sounded surprisingly feminine.

"I've been called a lot of things in my time, but that's a new approach. I might add that I like it, Dr. Roberts. Or is it Judson? Or Judd?"

"Whichever you prefer."

She frowned and rose. "God damn it!"

"What's the matter?"

"I'm going."

"Have I said something wrong?" She shook her head. A scent came from her hair; it was a pleasant scent, but it didn't match her mood. Her face was depressed and strained.

"No—you didn't say anything wrong. That's the trouble, they never do. It's always the right thing, and I have the right answer, and the drinks get good and the conversation gets better. It's no use. I'm going home."

"Could I—"

"You could. But I won't let you." She walked swiftly, a little uncertainly, toward the terrace. "Good-by, Dr. Roberts. See you in Alcoholics Anonymous."

"But—"

"There you are!" Another scent, behind me. Not perfume, but something more vital than that—heavier. Tiger-lily. Not golden, but white. I didn't have to turn to know that Lorna Lewis was smiling up at me.

"I was coming to rescue you," she said.

"From what?"

"The Post. Miss Pillow-to-Post. Did she ask you to go to bed with her? She always does when she gets a few quick ones into her. Drinks, I mean."

"What kind of a person is she?"

"Can't you tell? A lush. One of those rich-bitch society types—she always crooks her little finger, even when she drinks out of the bottle. I can't stand her; but Mike likes her. He would—he's a rummy himself."

I looked around for the Professor, waiting for a cue, a signal. He'd tell me just how nice I was supposed to be. But the Professor had disappeared. That meant I was on my own.

Maybe I should have remembered that I now was Judson Roberts, Ps.D. Maybe I should have figured out how to play it carefully, watch my step. Instead I looked down at those white legs, looked up into the blue, blazing insolence of Lorna's eyes.

"It's hot in here," I said.

"It might be even hotter, outside."

"You mean, your husband?"

"Don't call him that. He hasn't been my husband since the Toronto game, when somebody hit him with a stick. All he wants now is his bottle—understand?" She leaned close.

I understood, all right. I understood that she was a cheap, two-timing little tramp. But she had those legs and she was a movie star, or almost a star. And I was Eddie Plaines, a nobody from nowhere. I was Eddie Haines, trying like hell to hold my liquor, trying like hell to remember my name was Judson Roberts.

There was only one answer.

"Let's go outside." I said.

Dark curls tumbled from side to side. "No, not now. I'm the hostess, remember? Wait until later, when I get rid of this gang. I'll throw them out and check on Mike."

"When?"

"Tell you what: It's after eleven, so you come back about twelve-thirty. I'll be waiting for you dawn at the coach-house. You know where it is—on the side, behind the swimming-pool."

"Right."

"Clear out, now. I don't want us to be seen together—you understand."

I understood. She squeezed my arm and rose. I made one last attempt to find the Professor. He wasn't in the big room, and he wasn't on the terrace. The night air was cool. I breathed slowly, deeply, evenly—but inside my chest, my heart was going like a dynamo.

There was nothing to do for an hour and a half. Just nothing to do but wait—and drink.

I found a little place down the road and stopped in for a quick one. It had to be quick; the bars close at twelve. When I found that out, I had another, and another.

Then I staggered out into the night. It was a good night. Cool, but not too cool, and very clear. Stars. Millions of them.

The house was dark. Too damned much shrubbery on the lawn. And the swimming-pool—mustn’t stumble and fall in the swimming-pool! Show up all wet. Stars in the swimming-pool, too. . . . Star light, star bright, first star I see tonight, wish I may, wish I might—

I found the door to the coach-house and it opened and somebody was waiting for me. Sure enough, I could see her; she was waiting, and now she came forward and what was I waiting for?

“Everything all right?” I asked. “Sure. Mike was upstairs. He’s out cold.”

“*You’re* not cold.”

“You’re not sober.”

“Do you mind?”

“What do you think?” She laughed.

I wanted to stop that, so I did. My mouth closed down on hers, and through the doorway I could see the stars; and then a faint sliver of a pale moon that rose over the black outline of the terrace.

“Wait a minute. What’s that?”

“Forget about it, honey.”

“No. I hear something outside. Somebody’s coming.”

Now I heard it too, the crunch of gravel and then the fumbling, and the squeaking of the door.

“Mike!”

He stood there in the doorway. I tried to focus on him. He was a big man, and it was hard to see him clearly or separate his bulk from the monstrous, menacing black shadow.

He stood there and cursed us—cursed us in a low, steady, monotonous voice, ripping his words off back-alley fences, off privy walls. He said other things, too.

"I'm gonna kill ya. I'm gonna rip out ya guts an'—"

He was in the light, I was in the dark, and now was the time, if ever.

I WENT toward him; he reached out those hairy ape-arms of his, and I hit him, hard. But not hard enough. He backed away, and then he came up with one on the side of my head. I felt it, soft and far-away, and as I wobbled he hit me again.

Then we were outside and Lorna said, "No! Stop—please—" But it was phony, cheap-movie dialogue; it was a corny scene, a couple of drunks fighting over a tramp.

That made me mad, so I hit him again. He swung—not to hit, this time, but to gouge at my eye with his thumb. He was good at it. I pushed my knuckles against his mouth, hard. He grunted and tried to tackle me.

He was heavy, he was strong, and he pushed me back toward the edge of the pool. I could see him gritting his teeth in the moonlight, and the blood running out of the corners of his mouth looked bright and heavy as quicksilver.

Then everything went dim and I felt something tightening around me. He had my neck; he was choking me. Lorna yelled and he yelled; but I could only gasp from far away.

I kicked up and in. The tightness suddenly relaxed. I could get to my feet and watch him. He stood doubled-up at the edge of the pool, waiting for the pain to ease, waiting to come in again and kill me.

I couldn't wait. I moved toward him. He was ready, now. He spread his hands and poised. I closed my eyes and swung from the waist.

My hand hurt. I wobbled there, rubbing my fingers, watching him fall backward into the pool. It took a million years before the splash came when he hit the water.

Lorna stopped yelling. Everything got very quiet.

I walked over to the pool and looked down. There was nothing to see but bubbles—pretty little silvery bubbles, gleaming in the moonlight.

Chapter Seven

THE WATER STABBED ME with a million novocained needles. I gulped, paddled, then dived. Silver pressed my eyeballs, but I could see through silver. I could see something dark and huddled, bobbing down there at the bottom of the pool.

I reached it, tugged at it. Heavy . . . Heavy as the weight inside my lungs, my head. I went up for air, got it. Then I dived again, tugged again.

This time I could lift; we came to the surface together, live and dead weight. Dead weight! He couldn’t be—I had to get him out.

“Help me lift him up!” I yelled.

Lorna stared over the edge of the pool. Her lips twitched, and then her mouth tried to run away from her face. But she reached down and held Mike’s collar as I pulled myself over the side and then grabbed him under the arms.

I tugged and lifted. He was heavy as lead. Lead. . . . Dead. No—he was all right. He must be all right.

Then he was sprawled out on the grass, face down, and I was kneeling over him, pressing his back and lifting him, pressing and lifting—

“Iss wrong, perhaps?”

I jerked and Lorna jerked. Mike just lay there.

We stared up at the plumpness of Miss Bauer.

“What are you doing here?”

“She’s with me.”

Professor Hermann emerged from the shadows of the walk. “What goes on here? We’ve been looking all over for you. When the party broke up we left, and I called your apartment from a filling-station. No answer, so I came back. Apparently it was wise that I did.”

“We were fighting,” I said. “I hit him and he fell into the pool. I fished him out. But—”

The Professor pushed me aside. He knelt and took off his hat. The bald moon of his skull shone down over Mike's face as he turned Mike over on the grass. A fat hand fumbled beneath the soggy wet shirt.

It rested there; the wind stopped moving, the grass stopped rustling, the stars stopped twinkling. The trees bent forward, listening—listening for a heartbeat.

"He's dead," said Professor Hermann.

Then everything was moving again, fast—too fast.

"Steady up!" Miss Bauer was holding me.

"But he can't be! We've got to work on his lungs, get the water out! He couldn't have been under more than a minute or so—"

"He was unconscious," the Professor said. "It is too bad."

"Too bad?" We all looked at Lorna. "I'll say it's too bad! Wait until the papers get hold of this, wait until Lolly finds out! I'm through—Himberg will tie a can to me—and the cops—Christ—somebody do something—"

I shook her. It only jumbled the sounds together.

"Oh, Christ—Himberg—gotta—"

I slapped her mouth shut. "Cut that out!"

The Professor put on his hat, rose, and put his hand on Lorna's shoulder. "He's right. Hysteria will not help, now. We must be calm. We must think."

"Think? What good will thinking do? Mike's dead and they'll find out, they'll get us—"

"No; not if we're calm. Listen to me, Miss Lewis. I may have a solution, but you'll have to help me."

"How?"

"By answering questions. Here—"

HE gave her a cigarette, lit it for her. He watched it wobble between her lips, then steady as she inhaled.

"There! Now listen to me, and answer. Are there any servants in the house?"

“No. I told Frieda to clear out when the gang left. And George is on vacation this week.”

“Good. Can you remember what Mike did at the party?”

“Mike? No—I don’t want to talk about him—”

“You must. It’s important. Your life, your career.”

He knew how to get to her, all right—not with “life,” but with “career.” She sobered.

“What time did Mike go upstairs with his bottle?”

“How did you know about that?”

“I saw him. Miss Bauer saw him. Others must have seen him—that group on the stairway.”

“That’s right. Let me see; it was around eleven, I guess.”

“Was he drunk?”

“No more than usual.”

“He drank frequently?”

“You can say that again. The last six months he’s always been lushed up.”

“And people know that? Your friends?”

“He pulled that stunt at every party I’ve given, or every one we ever went to. Not that he’d come with me very often, the louse. And when he did, he generally sneaked off in the middle of the evening and took the car with him.”

“You say he’d get drunk and then leave a party—drive off somewhere alone?”

“Sure. He wrecked the station-wagon about four months ago. Drove it into a piling near Santa Barbara. How the hell he ever got ’way up there, I don’t know. *He* didn’t know, he was that stiff. It was in the papers.”

“That time he wrecked the car—how long was he gone?”

“Two days, nearly. The cops picked him up. He wasn’t hurt, but I had a hard time helping him beat the rap. Himberg fixed it somehow.”

“Your friends know his habits?”

“They should. Please, Professor, don’t ask me anything more. I think I’m going to be sick.”

She weaved away and was sick—very sick—over near the trees. I turned and watched Miss Bauer as she worked silently, furiously, over Mike.

“Please,” said the Professor. “That is useless. Besides, I have a plan.”

He turned to me. “Did anyone else know of your—your visit—here at the coach-house?”

I shook my head. “I stopped in a tavern below the hill here, but there was no one around except the bartender. I didn’t spill anything to him, either.”

“Good. Then will you please take my car and drive yourself home? I will get in touch with you tomorrow.”

“But Mike—the police—”

“I am taking care of Mike. And there will be no police, if you do what I say. Go, now. I must talk to Miss Lewis alone.”

Miss Bauer tugged at the Professor’s sleeve.

“I do not like this,” she said. “Let me continue; the water iss leaving the lungs. If we send for a rescue squad, he may yet be alive.”

The Professor faced her. “That is for me to decide.”

It was more than a statement; it was a command. Miss Bauer bowed her head. The Professor went over to Lorna and took her arm. She sobbed against him and he began whispering to her. His voice was soft, soothing, gentle. I couldn’t hear anything he said.

I walked to the car, climbed in, drove away. I went home, walked up to the apartment, closed the door. I ripped off my damp clothes and fell down on the bed and slept. . . .

Then, coming up out of the darkness, into the sunlight, I felt like a new man. A man who needed a shower, a shave, breakfast, a cigarette.

I had them all. But when I lit the cigarette, my hand trembled. The old Yoga wasn’t working for Judson Roberts today.

I wondered if Professor Hermann was working. I wondered whether he had dumped the body in the ocean, tried to make it look like suicide. I wondered if something had gone wrong, if they were looking for me. . . . Better pull down the blinds, quick, and—

No, that was wrong. I must trust him; I had to trust him. He had told me to wait, that he'd get in touch with me. So I'd wait.

I picked up Flugel's "Psychology of Clothes" to read about canes as symbols of personal extension, and wondered what Ellen Post was doing this fine day. Did she have a hangover? Did she remember me? I tried to picture her, place her in a setting. A hall bedroom? Obviously not the place. An apartment like this one? Wrong, again. A big house? Room next to her parents? Did she have money, live alone?

Why hadn't I found out more about her, got her address, made a date?

This was no time to think about it. This was no time to read about canes as phallic symbols, either. I wanted to know what was going on. It was already past noon.

I dialed the Professor's office. He'd paid up my phone bill for that reason, last month.

"Yess?"

"Miss Bauer, this is Judson Roberts. Did he—Is the Professor back?"

"No."

"Have you heard—anything?"

"No."

"I see. If he should come in, you'll ask him to call me at once?"

"Certainly."

"Thanks."

I hung up. As I reached for a cigarette, the doorbell rang.

I started to get up, then sank back. Once before, the doorbell had rung and I'd been afraid to answer it. I'd waited, and a hundred-dollar bill had slid under the door for me.

What would happen if I waited now?

I decided to find out. I sat there, as the bell sounded again. Then came an eternity of silence. I stared at the door.

Something rustled, crept, slithered under the door. It wasn't green, like money. It was white, like paper.

A newspaper.

I rose and walked over to the door on tiptoe. I looked down. The newspaper had been reduced to a single sheet, and the top portion of a column was inserted under the door upside down. I cocked my head and read a headline:

HOCKEY STAR VICTIM IN TRAIN
SMASHUP.

I opened the door and let Professor Hermann in.

Chapter Eight

"I DON'T SEE how you did it!" I shook my head and tried not to shake anything else.

"It was simple. The newspaper tells the story, does it not? Drunken driver, stalled on the tracks near the curve at La Placentia, just outside of town. The express hit the car, dragged it for a quarter of a mile. Michael Drayton, thirty-one, husband of Lorna Lewis, Imperial starlet. Wife hysterical at news of accidental death. End of story." The Professor put down the paper and shrugged.

"Didn't they find water in his lungs?"

"There was no water left, thanks to Miss Bauer's work. I checked on it. Lorna's story about smashing the station-wagon gave me the idea. I told her it would cost her a car. She gave it to me without question. I bundled the body into the back and drove over in time to catch the train that pulls through at 4:10 a.m. It was still dark and the side road was deserted. I got out, stalled the motor, and propped Mike up in the front seat. Then there was nothing to do but wait for the express to come, and watch it hit. The car was smashed to bits, and I suppose that Mike—"

He saw my face, and broke off without finishing the sentence. "I walked a few miles and caught a bus," he concluded. "Then I phoned Lorna and told her what to say when she was notified. After that I went home to sleep. I slept until I knew it was time to get up and look at the papers." The Professor told it that way, without inflection, without emotion. I began to feel cold all over.

"You make it sound so simple," I told him. "But if you hadn't figured it out, I'd be finished. The whole thing is like a nightmare, from the beginning. It was all an accident, you know that. But I never could have proved it. Maybe he was no damned good, maybe he had it coming—but I'm still guilty of his death. And you saved me. I don't quite know how to say it—"

He sat there, smiling at me. "Never mind. I understand. You can forget last night. It was just lucky that I happened to be there."

The black hat came off. The bald head looked like a skull. I shuddered, and lit a cigarette. He was right, better drop it. I was lucky, lucky he happened to be there.

Luck . . . Happened. Something clicked.

"What's the matter?" he asked. "Nothing. I was just thinking—how come you didn't give me any instructions last night?"

"I don't understand."

"You remember, you were going to build me up with Lorna."

"I did. I spent much time talking of you."

"Yes. But you didn't tell me what to do with her. You left me alone, disappeared."

"I saw you were getting along all right. There was no need to stay."

"But you came back."

"I phoned you from the filling-station, after midnight. I got worried when there was no answer."

"Didn't you figure I might be keeping a date with the lady?"

"Yes, of course. But I wanted to check on you." He smiled. "You know, I am very careful about everything I plan."

"You must have been."

"What do you mean?"

I stood up. "I mean, the whole thing looks queer to me now. How did you know where to find us when you returned? How did you know we weren't in the house, upstairs? Yes, and Mike Drayton—he was supposed to have passed out, with a bottle. What made him come to the coach-house and surprise us?"

The top of his head had the dull luster of old ivory. I stared down at him, panting.

"You've told me yourself you never leave anything to luck. Things don't just happen when you have a hand in them. You went upstairs and woke Mike. You told him where we'd be. You sent him to us, knowing there'd be a quarrel, a fight. Perhaps you even planned on murder."

"Sit down. You sound like Lorna. now."

"Well, I'm not Lorna; I'm not a hysterical little tart. I know what I'm saying, and I know you. You did plan it this way, didn't you?"

HE looked up at me and smiled. His mouth smiled, but his eyes didn't change. They looked blank, empty; they seemed just holes in an old ivory skull.

"Yes. There is no reason why you shouldn't know. I planned it this way."

"But why—why would you do such a thing?"

"Sit down. Keep your voice low. I'll tell you. Better still, I'll show you—on the first of next month, when I get a check from Lorna Lewis for a thousand dollars. . . . Consultation fee. There will be such a check, every month, from now on."

"Blackmail!"

"I do not like that word."

“I don’t like what you did. I don’t like the way you messed me up in this deal.”

“It just worked out that way. It seemed—”

“Never mind how it seemed! Nothing just works out around you. You had a reason. I want to know.”

“Very well, my young friend. You will know. I’m sorry you forced me to say this, but perhaps it’s for the best.” The skull leaned forward. The eyes, dead no longer, bored through my scowl.

“I have plans for you, big plans. I have taught you many things, and you will learn more. When we start our project, you will be perfectly equipped to handle any problem that arises. And you will meet the public, not I. I’ll stay in the background.

“If things had gone along without any trouble, you’d take your place as Judson Roberts, gain a reputation, make contacts. In a little while you’d start getting delusions of grandeur. You’d begin to wonder why you couldn’t run the show alone, why you must continue to play *Trilby* to my *Svengali.* And you’d try to dump me.

“Mind you, I don’t say you’d succeed; but you’d try. I know you better than you know yourself.

“So I planned this, and it worked. Now you won’t try to step out of line. You’ve killed a man. You know it, and Lorna Lewis knows it. But more important still, *I* know it—and I’m not afraid to talk, if I must.”

I laughed harshly. “I can just hear you talking, Professor. You’re an accessory—”

“Perhaps. It might cost me a year or two in prison. But *you* would burn for it! And, as you so aptly remarked, I leave nothing to chance. That’s why I brought Miss Bauer along. She’s a good witness; an innocent bystander who saw it happen.

“So now you know, my friend. And now you will never try to cross me, you will never attempt to take over. You will do just as I say, and not try anything rash, like running away.”

I stood up again. “You think of everything,” I whispered. “But did you ever think that I might try to—kill you?”

I was lightning; I struck from the side. My hand went down, aiming for the fat crease in his neck—

Something was wrong. I stumbled. His foot was out. I was going down. And then there was a pressure on the back of my own neck, an intolerable pressure, crushing the spine up into my brain—

His voice found me in the darkness.

“You’re a fool! Don’t ever try that again. I warn you, I have powers you’ve never dreamed of! Now, get up—if you can.”

I DRAGGED myself over to the chair. My head rested on a red-hot lance that bored through my backbone.

“I told you once before to forget everything that happened last night. That was good advice. You had better follow it. Forget today, too; because we’re starting over again.”

He was still sitting there, perfectly calm.

“Yes, we’re starting,” he repeated. “The time has come. I’ve got the office lined up, and the decorators hired. Next month we’ll be on our way, both of us—on our way to the top.

“That’s why you must forget all this. The past is dead, safely dead. Only the future is alive. I’m going to make those promises come true, for both of us.

“I am your friend, Eddie—believe that. I’m the only friend you ever had. You can trust me—you must trust me—you *will* trust me.”

It was like something you hear in a dream, something you hear when you’re under ether, something you hear when you’re under hypnosis. Hypnosis! Those slitted eyes of his, staring and staring at me—

“You’ll have everything,” droned the voice. “I’ll stay in the background and you’ll get the glory, the fame, the money, the power. That’s the way it’s going to be. Never doubt it for an instant. You're Judson Roberts, remember? And I'm just—nobody."

I shook off the voice, shook off the stare, and looked at "nobody," sitting there in the chair. His head was like a skull. . . . And then it changed. Maybe it was the slitted eyes and the slitted mouth; maybe it was something else. But all of a sudden, it hit me.

For the first time I realized that Professor Hermann looked like the Devil.

He sat there, and his pudgy hands closed over a shadow. It was only a shadow, but he held it tightly and I knew he would never let it go.

It was my soul.

Chapter Nine

A TALL YOUNG MAN with wavy hair and a professionally precise mustache stared at a tall young man with wavy hair and a professionally precise mustache, who stared at a tall young man with wavy hair and a professionally precise mustache, who—

But you get the idea.

It went on that way, endlessly. The man wearing the soft, sand-colored suit, the white shirt and the solid black knit tie gazed at himself in each of the eight mirror surfaces covering the octagonal office walls.

This octagonal inner office was as big as a barn, with a high ceiling and recessed lighting. The degree of brightness was controlled by a knee-switch behind the desk. That desk and its chair, set in the center of the room, was the only visible furniture. The rest was all space, light and mirrors—mirrors multiplying the presence and personality of Judson Roberts. Mirrors that dazzled and confused the client.

The mirrors caused self-consciousness, and self-hypnosis, too. Of course, I wasn't susceptible any more. Three months here had made me acquainted with the layout, and with the man in the mirror that I had become—Judson Roberts.

It had cost Professor Hermann a lot to set up Y-O-U—“Your Opportunities Unlimited.” There was a big nut in the overhead, too, but already it was starting to make ample return.

I sat behind the desk and studied myself in those mirrors. Mr. Judson Roberts smiled back at me from all over the room.

And why not? The book was selling through direct mail, there was a big play for the weekly lectures at the hotel, the appointments poured in regularly. Strangers kept calling, mail arrived. And Judson Roberts was taking the suckers over the jumps, just as the Professor had predicted.

I didn’t resent the Professor any more, either. He was right, and our successful operation proved it. The Lorna Lewis mess was forgotten; I never saw her any more.

FOR that matter, I saw very little of the Professor. As he had promised, he got me started and then left me alone. He handled his own office and I handled mine.

Of course, he’d assigned little Sid Rogers to help steer me over the hard spots—and to keep an eye on me too, I suppose. Rogers even took an upstairs room in the new house I’d rented on New Hampshire near Wilshire. But he didn’t intrude, and his assistance was welcome at the office.

He briefed May, our secretary. He ghosted my weekly lectures. He made the appointments, sized up clients, checked on the backgrounds of potential prospects. He offered sensible advice:

“Always dress conservatively; flash is out—this isn’t the Boardwalk. Remember to keep your voice soft, low—make it just a little hard for them to hear you . . . then they’ll have to concentrate, and that’s half the battle. Never turn your back on a sucker, don’t give him a second to think about anything else.”

Tricks, gimmicks, angles. Always something to learn, something to remember, something to try out.

At first I had been afraid, wondering if the bluff would work. Now I wondered why I'd ever wondered. The Professor was right—the seeker was always a sucker. And I wasn't finding it difficult to keep up a front any more. The face smiling back at me from the mirrors was different now, somehow. Poised. It wasn't only that I wore a new mustache; I wore a new look of confidence. I looked like Judson Roberts now, I felt like Judson Roberts, I *was* Judson Roberts.

The phone rang. I lifted the receiver from the concealed alcove inside the round desk.

May's voice, crisply confident: That meant business was in the office.

"Mr. Roberts? A Mr. Caldwell to see you. He wishes to make an appointment."

"Wishes" was a code-word. It meant money. "Appointment" was another code-word. It meant a ten- or fifteen-minute stall, until Rogers could check on the client.

"O.K.," I said, softly. "Tell Mr. Rogers to give me what he can. I'll buzz you when I'm ready. Meanwhile, give Caldwell the consultation routine."

That meant that May would phone the Professor's office and ask for Doctor Altschuler. There would be a discussion of psychiatric treatment over the phone. "Mr. Roberts advises—Mr. Roberts recommends that the patient—Mr. Roberts finds indications of fixation." All for the benefit of the poor guy fidgeting in the handsome but contrivedly uncomfortable chair in the outer office.

I knew what Rogers was doing, too. He was working on Caldwell's name in the little office down the hall. He and the girl we hired to play "nurse" were tracing Caldwell's history with the aid of three telephones and an entire wall-cabinet full of city directories, phone books, detailed city and county street maps. They were looking for biographical sketches in "Who's Who," in business directories, fraternal publications, school annuals. They were phoning for credit-ratings, phoning newspaper morgues. They were checking cross-indexed files furnished by the Professor's friends in similar rackets. And they would get results fast—almost spectacular results.

GIVEN a little luck, Rogers could work even without a sucker's name. All he needed was a glimpse of the license plate of the car he drove. In fifteen minutes, working according to plan and system, he could come up with name, address, occupation, age, financial status—wife's name, names of children and ages, names of parents and close relatives—present residence and previous residences from date of birth on. In addition, there were the little convincing touches; hobbies and club memberships, school background and nickname, and a fairly detailed description of his home and its landmarks. From this it was often easy to guess the character and present problems of the sucker. Yes, Rogers was a good man.

He came in through the hidden entrance behind the rear-wall mirror and laid the typewritten cards on my desk.

"Got a live one, it looks like," he said. "Airlines corporation counsel; inherited money, too. But it's all down here."

"Thanks, Sid. You're a fast worker."

"Good luck."

He vanished. I read the dossier very carefully. Then I read it again. I looked at my watch. Fourteen minutes since May had called. Time enough.

I put the cards down next to the phone, picked up the receiver, and buzzed May.

"Send him in," I said. I leaned back and pressed the light-switch. The mirrors seemed to rise out of the walls, glaring and pressing forward.

The door opened and Edgar Clinton Caldwell stepped into the room.

THERE are three ways to use the information I'd just received from Sid Rogers. The first is to put on the old mystic act—telepathic impressions. It works well with women, and with swishes. The second method is the "arch, inscrutable" gag: "yes, we have our own sources of information, you know." That's for the wise guys, the blusterers.

Looking at Edgar Caldwell, I decided to use the third routine.

He stood there, fat and frightened under the blinding light, gazing at his rumpled reflection in the mirror. He had been sweating, and his coat hung soggily from broad, stooped shoulders. The lower button was open, revealing a wrinkled white triangle with a broad base over a protruding stomach. His gray hair was plastered back over a high, ruddy forehead. He was fat, and he was also big—all his features seemed a little larger than life-size.

I could tell he was frightened, but he didn't know I could tell. He thought he was looking fierce. His eyes glowered; his chin, and its accessory folds, thrust forward aggressively.

But I was watching his hands: large, red, knob-knuckled hands, the hands that clenched and unclenched in unconscious, uncontrolled apprehension. Those hands were looking for something to hang on to in a room of emptiness. Those hands wanted to smash out at the mirrors that multiplied and distorted their reflections. Those hands wanted to come up, cover the eyes and shut out the glare of light, shut out the spectacle of my complacency. The hands could not grasp, they could not destroy, they could not conceal.

I looked at Caldwell's hands and knew the third approach would work.

"You are Edgar Clinton Caldwell?" *Soft voice, but phrase the question as though the man is on trial.*

"Yes. Mr. Roberts?"

Good! His voice trembled a little on my name. Got him!

"I am Judson Roberts. Won't you come in?"

Get him to cross the room. Make him sweat and falter as he tries not to watch himself in all those mirrors. He'll notice everything he's tried to hide from others and himself—the way he looks from the side, the unflattering angles of his head, his poor posture, his ridiculous waddling butt sticking up behind. Get him to cross the room and he's licked before he starts.

"Trick layout you got here."

Start the third gambit. Frank, open smile. Look up. Let him feel superior, for just a moment.

"It's meant to impress the credulous. I must apologize to you, sir. There's obviously no need of stage-effects with *you."*

I dimmed the lights. He blinked his relief, standing there and waiting for me to confide in him.

Third gambit, now.

I reached into the desk-recess and drew out the typed notes. I held them out to him.

"Here, Mr. Caldwell—I'm going to ask you a small favor before we go any further. Will you please verify the accuracy of these statements?"

He took the cards and I watched them disappear in the red folds of his huge hands. I watched him read, watched his eyes dilate, watched the eyebrows as they tried to climb his forehead.

"What the—Where the devil did you get all this dope?"

Smile. Let it hit him, let it sink in. Wait until he's sold.

"I could make it sound mysterious, Mr. Caldwell, but the whole thing is really quite simple. I have a trained research staff, you know. The moment your name was announced, they went to work on the files. Naturally, a man in your position has left his mark in many places; newspapers, trade publications, directories. Our references yielded this preliminary data. Undoubtedly a more comprehensive checkup would afford us much more information on your background and position.

"Now the reason for all this is obvious to you, Mr. Caldwell. I am a professional psychologist and as such, a business man. I conduct my affairs on a business basis, just as you do. Naturally, it is helpful for me to know as much as possible about a client before I see him; just as you endeavor to find out what you can about a prospect. I'm sure that you, too, have your sources, Mr. Caldwell."

WATCH *him grin. He isn't frightened. now. He thinks you're taking him into your confidence. He's flattered. You wouldn't pull any tricks on him, he can see that; you've sized him up as an equal. In a word, the poor fish is hooked.*

"I might as well be perfectly frank with you, Mr. Caldwell. Our relationship to come will demand such frankness, mutual frankness. Don't you agree?"

He nodded. I wanted to keep him nodding, now.

Build up a dependency. The patient develops a fixation upon the analyst. Keep it in that stage. Flatter him with questions, inquire after every detail, endlessly. Everyone wants to talk about himself. That's Y-O-U, the whole secret of it. Complete catharsis.

"And now, Mr. Caldwell, let's talk about you and your problems. You have a problem, don't you, Mr. Caldwell?"

Problems. They all have problems. Every one is different, and they're all the same. Always a common denominator—the basic fear:

The rabbity little man, Mason, who came on Thursday afternoons. He was afraid of his own desires. Mrs. Finch, Mondays and Fridays by appointment in her home, feared what happened to her when she tried stopping or cutting down the dosage of her sleeping-powders. Maxwell Solomon, very confidential ("apt to call you any time I need you"), attempted to conceal in pyrophobia his dread of Divine retribution for saving himself rather than his wife and child in the crash of their private plane. Miss Eudalie Vinyer was afraid of me because I was all men and all men were her brothers and at thirteen she had been too young to derive any enjoyment from the opposite sex. Baker feared his boss; Klotscher feared God; Mrs. Annixter feared tuberculosis, which was a polite term for her more deep-seated neurosis, which was a polite term for the fact that her husband was steadily driving her to the brink of a genuine and frustrating nervous breakdown. By a strange coincidence, Mr. Annixter came too. He feared Mrs. Annixter.

It was all very simple, and all very complicated. Some of them knew, and some of them didn't know. Some of them had to be told, some of them couldn't be told. Some of them needed a doctor, some a psychiatrist, some a lawyer, some a priest, some an executioner. But all of them needed me. They needed an audience, a father-confessor, a child, a mother, a lover to listen and understand and flatter and cajole and condone.

They needed Y-O-U.

Detail—endless detail; they wanted to tell everything.

They wanted every test I could give them—co-ordination, color determination, mnemonics, word-association and free fantasy sessions, work with charts, slides, ink-blots and anything else I could think up.

I would send them to a pal of ours, Dr. Sylvestro, for a complete preliminary physical checkup, and they loved that too.

That was the answer. They feared, and they wanted love. Love in the form of attention, interest, an affirmation of their own self-importance.

Y-O-U gave it to them. For Y-O-U, with all the metaphysical and practical psychology hokum boiled away, was simply an extension of the old saws, "Know thyself" and "Be yourself." The whole routine was built up to flatter the individual, make him think about himself. There were touches of the "charm school" and the "expand your personality" routine here; we sent people to beauty parlors and plastic surgeons and dress designers and dancing schools. But in the end, we took them to the cleaners.

It was fascinating to watch the spectacle. There was only one difficulty—I kept wanting to go outside and vomit.

Now here was Mr. Caldwell and *his* problem. Edgar Clinton Caldwell, 57. Wealthy, father of three, a "successful business man," a typical example of middle-class respectability and sublimated eroticism.

Dr. Sylvestro had recommended me to him. "Nerves." Hemorrhoids and constipation. "But there are some things you can't tell even a doctor—you understand that, Roberts. Like the string. Sounds silly; I wouldn't mention it even to Mrs. Caldwell. But I save twine and old string—every bit. I have boxes full of it down in the office, in the safe. It's just a habit; I know it's nothing serious—but why do I do such a thing?"

I knew why. But I didn't tell him. I let him do the talking, twice a week. First a routine probing. Then a gradual, almost imperceptible hypnotic technique. That's something I was picking up from Professor Hermann. I suspected he used it on Miss Bauer, and that he had been tempted to try it with me.

It worked with Caldwell. He grew to depend on the sittings. And I kept taking notes: notes about him—notes about his business dealings. I wasn't quite sure what the angle would be, yet. Those things I left to the Professor.

When I had enough, I asked Hermann.

He read, listened, and twirled his monocle. Then:

"Get him to retire. Liquidate his holdings. We'll need cash for this."

"Retire? But he loves his business—I can't take that away from him. Oh, I can probably force the issue, but the results will be bad. He'll just go to pieces. Inside of six months he'll be a wreck."

"I know that." The bald head bobbed, the monocle twirled. "Get him to retire."

"BUT I don't want to retire, man!" Caldwell expostulated. "It isn't that I don't place any faith in you, Roberts; you know better than that. But here I am, in the prime of life, with a fine position—why, I own better than fifteen per cent of the airline stock. I've worked years to get where I am; and now you advise me to chuck everything. Why?"

"Because you're not happy."

"Dammit, man, who says I'm not happy? I've got a net worth of upward of two hundred thousand, no debts; a house in town and one at the beach. Marge and I get along great—the sex part doesn't bother me, you know; I told you about Eve—and those boys of mine—"

"You're not happy."

"Don't keep saying that! Just because of those goddam piles, and a few dreams—"

"I'm sorry to keep interrupting you, Mr. Caldwell. I'm sorry to keep repeating myself. But you are not a happy man. And you know it. Your very defensive attitude reveals it. Happy men are under no compulsion to save string. Happy men do not wash their hands until the flesh is red and chafed, the knuckles constantly rubbed raw from frequent cleansing with strong abrasive soaps. Happy men do not require sexual stimulation from a mistress."

"Please, let's not mention that part again; I wish I'd not let *that* slip out."

"You will be thankful some day that you were utterly frank with me. And you will be thankful that I am utterly frank with you. I want you to retire. These sessions are stimulating, but they are not enough. In order to remake your life, you must devote your life to the task.

"Your present habit-patterns and associations keep you chained to the reflexes and conditioning which make you unhappy. You'll never be free, never emancipate your personality, until you are willing to start afresh.

"I don't want to be an alarmist, Mr. Caldwell, but unless you undertake the step now, it may be too late ever to escape. You aren't getting any younger, you know. What you can do today, voluntarily, you will be unable to do five years, three years, or even one year from now. This is your last chance."

"I don't see it, Roberts—don't see it at all. You talk as though I were a sick man. Just because I get down in the dumps once in a while, same as everybody—"

"Are you the same as everybody, Mr. Caldwell? Can you say that honestly to me, to yourself? After what we both know about those dreams, about your relations with Eve, about what happened at that fraternity initiation—"

"That was an accident!"

"But your impulses, your desires; those were not accidental. They were fundamental, implicit in your disorder."

“You can’t frighten me, Roberts.”

“Please—I’m not trying to frighten you. Have I ever resorted to any mumbo-jumbo or trickery, since the first time you came to me? Have I ever been anything but straightforward and sincere? I haven’t preached or lectured or put on any of the cheap front you despise. I haven’t attempted to delude you in any way. That’s what makes it so hard for me to impress you now. But you must be impressed with the importance, the necessity, of taking this step. Or else—”

“Else what? What are you driving at?”

“There’ll be a psychosomatic reaction, to begin with. The old-fashioned ‘nervous breakdown.’ You’ve seen it happen to others. In your case, with an sex fixation, it will be painful. And Eve will take over. She’s almost done so now; from what you say, she’s practically blackmailing you as it is. Suppose your wife finds out? Suppose something else happens? It could, easily enough. Remember the Arbuckle affair—”

WHEN a fat man trembles, his flesh quivers all over. Acres of gray jelly, quaking and oozing perspiration—

“But what do you want me to do? Suppose I retire, then what?”

“I’m going to take you back forty years. We’ll start all over again. We’ll go back to the time before the initiation and the scandal, before you had to leave school. You know what your ambitions were then. We’ll recapture that personality, make it dominant once more, make a young man of you, a new man.”

“How?”

“I’ll work with you personally. Every day. Oh, nothing spectacular, and nothing drastic. You love Marge, and the boys; I won’t take them away from you. But you must make a major alteration and adjustment. You need help.

“And you can afford it. Even if you weren’t in need of treatment, I’d advise retirement on the general principle that any man who is financially independent should retire from business and begin living. You’ve tried to retreat from life into your work, and it isn’t successful. So now you must retreat from work into life again.”

“So that’s it, eh? I can afford it, you say—meaning here is where you make a killing. Big fees, is that the angle, Roberts?”

“Please! You’re antagonistic—not to me, but to the truth. You know my fees: twenty dollars a consultation. That is not exorbitant! I shall not be able to give you more than three days a week. Our program will take about a year. Say three thousand dollars, at the most. I assure you I do not need your money, nor would I particularly care to undertake this treatment if the prognosis were not favorable. Besides, frankly, I have a personal interest in your problem, Mr. Caldwell. And you know I can help you.”

“Yes, I do. I’m going to think over what you said—think it over very seriously. It would be worth it, just to get rid of Eve. Do you think—”

“That you will be strong enough to give her up? Yes, I can definitely promise you that, Mr. Caldwell. Quite definitely.”

Chapter Ten

THERE WERE EMTPY GLASSES and filled ashtrays all over the small apartment. I could smell Scotch and smoke and Tabu and stale food and Lysol—everything but fresh air. Fresh air wouldn’t have suited Eve Ireland, anyway.

I didn’t exactly suit her, either.

I sat facing her on the sofa, pretending to examine my drink while I sized up the tall blonde with the brunette’s complexion. Her hair was dark at the roots, her eyes were red at the corners, her mouth was lined at the edges where the lipstick tapered off.

She gave me a look that would have made her a fortune as a glass-cutter and said, “Well, now that you’re here, what’s the big idea?”

"No big ideas. Just a little one."

"Cut the cute stuff. Speak your piece and get out."

"I'll bet you didn't handle your old customers this way."

"Say, what is this?" She stood up, bracelets jangling.

"Sit down. Don't be afraid."

"Afraid? Listen, you—"

That told me all I wanted to know. Not a clever woman—not subtle; just a pushover. And I knew how to handle her. I kept my voice loud, made it harsh.

"You've come up in the world, haven't you, kid? This guy Caldwell must treat you all right."

Her eyes narrowed as my mouth widened.

"Of course he goes for your little tricks," I went on. "Where'd you pick up those fancy ideas, anyway—when you worked Las Vegas?"

Her earrings quivered and danced. "So it's a shakedown, huh? Well, let me tell you—"

"No—I'll tell *you,* instead. This isn't a shakedown, Edith—"

"Eve."

"Edith Adamowski. I know your name; I know all about you. Don't get excited, this isn't a frame. If you want to know who told me, it was Caldwell himself."

"Caldwell? What kind of a gag is this, anyway?"

I told her what kind of a gag it was.

SHE sat down, after a while, and drank her drink. She nodded. I went right on talking.

"The important thing is, he doesn't know anything about it. He mustn't know. Like I told you, he's willing to pay five grand to get rid of you for good. He thinks he's a new man, that he can frighten you into it. All you have to do is let him. Take the five grand, and blow. Then stand by for orders and the big killing. That's five grand more for you."

“Well—I dunno. I got a good setup here.”

I walked over to her and sat down. I smiled into her eyes. “Do you mean to tell me you like it?” I asked softly. “Do you like it when Caldwell—”

“Shut up! Goddam you, don’t say it! I hate the filthy dog; why the hell you think I’m on the sauce all the time if it isn’t because of him? He gives me the creeps, but—”

“Then do as I tell you. There’s ten grand in it for you. Five now, and five in a little while.”

“How can I make sure you don’t double-cross me on the other five?”

“How can I be sure you don’t double-cross me by taking his first five and then spilling your guts?”

She grinned. “Yeah! Yeah, I never thought of that.”

I grinned right back at her. “Well, don’t start thinking of it, either. Because, if you do sing to him, you’re going to have an awfully sore throat.”

“Huh?”

“Come here.” I led her to the window, pushed aside the gray strand of a curtain that had once been white. “See that man down there? The big one, standing next to the car?”

She saw him. She saw Jake, waiting for me.

“I see him. What about him? Who is he?”

“I’m not going to introduce you. I hope I never have to. But he’s the man who has orders to kill you if you don’t play ball.”

“So that’s it, huh?”

“That’s it. Are you in?”

Eve Ireland gulped the rest of-her drink. She drank fast, man-fashion. She was furious, through and through. If Jake didn’t kill her, some cop or thug surely would. I watched her mouth dispose of the drink and waited for it to form the words I knew would come.

“All right. Count me in.”

"My God, Roberts, you were right! I did it!" Caldwell's knobby knuckle slammed against the desk.

"I knew you would, Ed. Did you say what I told you?"

"Bet your life! And it was just the way you predicted it would be. She turned on the tears, and then she tried to get me hot again, and then she had hysterics, and then she threatened me. But I remembered what you said, and it worked out."

"Good for you."

"You know something? I almost couldn't go through with it. When she started loving me up, I—"

He went into details, and I tried to keep from shuddering. It wasn't easy, but I managed. I even kept the smile on my face and remembered to nod in the right places.

"But the important thing is, she's gone now, Roberts. Left town today. I paid her off in cash."

"That isn't the really important thing, Ed."

"No?"

"The important thing is what you've proved to yourself. That you have the courage to start over, start fresh. That you are already beginning to become the kind of man I want you to be—and that *you* want to be."

I stood up and looked down at him. "I'm anxious to get started. How soon will you be through winding up your affairs?"

"Be about three weeks more. They took it pretty hard down at the office, you know. And I don't know what I'd have done if you hadn't told me how to handle Marge. But I'll be a free man in three weeks."

"Except for the stock."

"You can't talk me out of that one, Roberts. That's one setup where I'm the expert. Dumping fifteen per cent of the company stock on the market right now would sink them. The Imperial outfit is just waiting to close in and reorganize. Besides, as it is, the stuff keeps bringing in dividends. It's a sound investment. And I won’t have to watch it, just let it sit. I’m going to be a free man.”

“That’s right,” I said. “In three weeks you’ll be a free man.”

WE stood on the corner of Wilshire and Western, bucking the breeze.

“What’s the big idea of the briefcase?” Caldwell asked. “I don’t get it.”

“You will, soon enough. Just follow me and obey orders.”

“Right. Oh, damn it to hell—”

His hat blew off. I watched it swirl away over the car tops, then spiral into the street. It rolled. He started to rush after it.

I grabbed his arm. “Wait a minute, Ed. Let it go.”

“Let it go? But that’s a twenty-dollar panama! I’m not going to—”

“Hold it. Your first lesson in living begins right now. Look, Ed: Never chase your hat in the street. You might be killed by a car. Besides, who wants to get sweated up and out of breath chasing a hat?”

“But—”

“Let the other fellow do it for you, Ed. Don’t you understand? There’s always somebody else who’s willing to chase your hat. Willing? He’s crazy to death to do it for you. It makes him a hero. And if you thank him for it, he’ll fall all over you.”

I turned and gestured.

“You see? That man without a coat, between those two sedans. He’s getting it for you. Wait here.”

“THIS yours, mister?” said a voice. “Yes, it is. Thank you very much. I appreciate your kindness.”

“Oh, that’s all right.”

“Look at him blush,” I murmured, as we turned away.

Caldwell held back. “I ought to give him something for—”

"Certainly not. As it is, he's happy. He's done his good deed for the day. He feels superior. If you offered him a dollar it would be like kicking him in the face. He's on top of the world now, and you have your hat back without exertion. Just remember that in the future."

He nodded. "Guess your theories aren't as impractical as they sound."

"Well, we'll test another one right now. Follow me down this block." We walked quickly, without speaking. At the corner I halted and led him to my car.

"Get in."

"We going somewhere?"

"Not yet. First, you've got a job to do. Take this pencil and paper."

"Yes."

"Now, write down everything you can remember seeing during our walk down the block."

"How's that again?"

"It's very simple. Just write down everything you saw as we walked. People. Costumes. Faces. The names of stores. What was in the windows. Everything."

"Why?"

"Don't ask questions. I'm trying to find out something about your powers of observation, and association."

He grumbled, and he sweated, but he wrote. And he was flattered at the attention. *This* was something like it!

Here was somebody who really took an interest in what a man thought, what he could do, what made him tick. Nobody had ever cared about those things before—Marge didn't, that slut Eve didn't, the fellows at the office didn't, even his friends. In the old days his teachers, his father, his own mother hadn't cared.

I watched him, knowing what he was thinking, knowing what he was doing, knowing what I was doing.

In a way I almost felt sorry for the man. He looked so pathetic, so eager, as he sat there scribbling away like an anxious schoolboy. I was giving him something nobody else had ever bestowed upon him in his lifetime—something few men ever get or ever realize they want—personal interest. I suddenly realized that I *could* do what I had said I would; remake him, remold him into a better, more integrated, healthy personality.

But to hell with that! Suddenly it all came back to me: a picture of Caldwell, dozens of men like Caldwell, and what they had done to *me* in the past.

"Sorry, Mr. Caldwell is busy now and cannot be disturbed. . . . Afraid there's nothing doing right now—if you'd care to leave your name. . . . No, I have no time to discuss it with you—"

Yes, there were a lot of Caldwells, a lot of fat, well-fed brutes ready and waiting to push little guys around. Ready to play Boss—and play God, if you let them.

Well, I wasn't having any more. From now on, I was Boss, I was God. and the Caldwells would dance!

"All right, that's enough," I snapped.

"But I'm not finished yet."

"Sorry, another time." I looked at my watch. "I've got an assignment for you."

And so we started.

I GAVE him assignments galore—I went through the whole bag of tricks.

I supplied him with a card, an order-pad, and a briefcase full of sample neckties and sent him into a haberdashery, cold, to pose as a tie salesman and get an order.

Another day I got him lost in the canyons and made him drive us back.

I kept him awake for two days and two nights; denied him food or water for twenty-four hours; ordered him to grow a beard.

It was silly, it was pathetic, it was as simple as A-B-C, and he loved it—because I kept up a fast line of patter about personality development, exposing one’s self to new experience variants, developing dormant skills and realizing and utilizing psychic potential.

The very simplicity of the methodology is what made it so effective. I was always at his side, always ready with a new problem, always eager to discuss his reactions, listen to him talk about himself. He was completely sold.

As a matter of fact, it didn’t hurt him a bit—as therapy. He dropped about ten pounds in three weeks, took on some color, stopped washing his hands. He was still a string-saver, but the change of pace and the absence of Eve combined to restore his sex-drive and focus it upon more normal goals.

It surprised me, at first, to see him benefit. But why shouldn’t he benefit? The fake religions, the fake healers, the fake mystics, all have a history of success with sufferers and seekers. The fact that this success is often illusory or temporary, the fact that in the end most converts plunge still further into a morass of maladjustment, just doesn’t seem to matter to anyone.

Certainly, the notion never occurred to Caldwell. He felt free, uninhibited, readjusted.

“I’m ready to get started now,” he kept telling me. “And thanks to you, I know what I want to do. I was never happy in corporation law, anyway. Handling other people’s affairs, other people’s funds—that’s living your life second-hand. You’ve shown me I know how to sell, how to analyze a situation. And I do have a background of business experience. Seems to me I ought to take advantage of it.”

“What did you have in mind, Ed?”

“Real estate. There’s a boom building up again in the south, you know. Beach development, housing. I’ve had my eye on some property for a long time now. But I was always too cautious, too afraid. I kept putting it off. Now I’d like to try my hand. Why don’t you take a run down south with me one of these days? I’ll show you what I have in mind.

“And here’s something else, Roberts: You’ve done a lot for me. Don’t think I’m not appreciating it. I’d like to cut you in on this little deal.”

"But remember, your funds are tied up," I reminded him. "That stock you own—"

He laughed. It was a surprisingly energetic laugh, in which his chins and belly joined. "That was a lot of damfool nonsense. I was talking like an old woman in those days! Sure, if I sell the company will probably have to reorganize, and Imperial will take over. But what's that to me? It's my money; I can pull out whenever I please.

"Don't get me wrong, Roberts. I'm not going back into business—no more ten-hour days for me. You showed me the light. But this investment proposition is different: it calls for less time, and it's something I've always wanted to try my hand at. What do you say?"

"Well, I don't know if you're ready yet. Give me a little time to analyze the elements involved. I trust you won't do anything rash until we work things out."

"Naturally, I wouldn't make a move without your say-so. But I want action."

"All right." I nodded. "I think I can promise you some action very shortly." And he agreed to this.

My new place on New Hampshire was a white frame affair, seven rooms, fireplace—conventional enough, because I didn't operate from here. Rogers had a bedroom on the second floor and he kept out of my way. I wasn't home much, anyhow; ate out, and the night work didn't give me a chance to try out the fireplace-and-slippers act. Once in a while we used the front room for a little private conference.

This time the Professor, Rogers, and Doc Sylvestro joined me. I had all my stuff in waiting, and they kept passing around the notes and making notes of their own.

I sat there and watched my companions: little Rogers, with his hypersensitive twitchings; the Professor, an ivory Buddha in a black suit; and Dr. Sylvestro, a gaunt gargoyle whose specialty was silence.

"Good." The Professor's soft voice addressed me. "You say he will sell the stock?"

"Tomorrow."

The Professor was speaking to Rogers, now.

"I'm depending on you to handle this deal. Buy Imperial, preferred, as soon as the sale is completed. Get all the cash you can lay your hands on. Buy Imperial."

"Check."

"That leaves our string-saving friend in possession of a cool hundred and fifty thousand in cash, does it not?"

Sylvestro's deep voice: "You have plans for that money too, haven't you, Hermann?"

The bald head inclined slowly. "Naturally. In fact, my plans are already in effect. When Jake arrives—"

"Wait a minute," I said. "I've got an idea for you, Professor. As I told you, Caldwell wants to go into real-estate speculation. You know I have his complete confidence. He'll follow my advice. Now suppose you were to arrange a tie-up with some promoters who own beach property, and we could split the profits—"

A fat hand rose and pushed the rest of the sentence back down my throat.

"That is too risky, too uncertain. I'd considered it, of course, but I have found a better way—with your friend, Eve Ireland."

"Eve? But I paid her off; she went away."

"Before Caldwell broke with her, before the payoff, there was a lapse of two weeks during which he continued to see her. You know that."

"Yes."

"But what you do not know is that Rogers also contacted Eve Ireland."

"Meaning you didn't trust me to pull off the agreement?"

"No. We checked on you, naturally. That is my policy. But we had something else in mind. We anticipated this situation. Has it ever occurred to you, my friend, that if a man is willing to pay five thousand dollars, he will also be willing to pay a great deal more?"

"I don't get it."

"Let Jake tell you. That sounds like his ring."

I got up and answered the bell. It was our Neanderthal friend, all right—the man whose forehead was voted most likely to recede.

"How's tricks?" he grunted.

"You're the mystic," I told him. "Come on in."

Our little family circle watched impatiently as he extracted an envelope from the pocket of his sports shirt. "Here they are," he said.

The Professor opened the envelope. Five 3¼ x 4¼ negatives and an equal number of prints were shuffled fan-wise through his fingers. His face bore the blankness of a professional poker-player. The others leaned forward.

"What'd he get?" Rogers asked. "See for yourself."

Rogers grabbed at the photos. Doc Sylvestro got up and leaned over his shoulder.

"Jesus!" Rogers whispered. "How the hell did you manage this?"

"The babe co-operated."

"I'll say she did! But I mean, you must have been pretty close."

"Bathroom. I used that new-type flash the Professor got me. No light, see? When she heard how much the take would be, she fixed me up. Got 'em all the same night."

"Jesus!" Rogers repeated. "Hot stuff."

Sylvestro's gargoyle grimace deepened. "Care to look?" he asked.

I looked, then turned away. I hoped the Professor wouldn't see my face. I heard myself saying, "But what are you going to do with this?"

"What are we going to do? We're going to shake down your pal Caldwell for about fifty Gs, to start with. I bet he'll think it's worth it not to have his wife see what he does in his spare time—why, they put guys away for less than this! Them ropes—"

"Never mind." The Professor silenced Jake and retrieved the photographs.

"I think you understand our plan now," he told me. "Here's what's going to happen—"

I listened and nodded. Then I shook my head. "No," I said. Pleads jerked around in surprise. "You aren't going to pull a dirty trick like that. You don't expect me to take a hand in such a stinking, rotten setup!"

"Oh, yes, I do." The Professor smiled. "Remember Mike." Everybody smiled. After a moment, I smiled, too. But all the while I kept saying to myself: *It's all right, this isn't real, it's just a nightmare, it's going to end, it's got to end. . . .*

"MY God, Roberts, say something!" Caldwell shook my shoulder. Maybe he just put his hand on it, but he was trembling so that he shook anything he touched.

"Don't you understand?" he panted. "This woman, she came back; she wants fifty thousand, she says she'll go to Marge with those pictures—"

I shrugged his hand off. "I can't help you. If you'd only taken my advice and broken with her immediately after I suggested it, this wouldn't have happened."

"But it *has* happened! Something must be done." He gulped. "Couldn't you see her again, talk her out of it?"

"Please, Ed! Obviously she's determined. And I can't afford to get mixed up in anything like this. You understand."

"But can't we fix up a trap, or something, with the police?"

"Then they'd see the pictures, wouldn't they? And Marge would hear the whole story."

"God, what can I do? What *can* I do?"

"I'm afraid you'll have to pay her off."

Silence.

"Look, Roberts, you're sure there is no other way? I'd make it worth your while."

"It's too late now."

"Well, will you come with me tomorrow night when I meet her?"

I gave him a refrigerated smile. "That would be very unwise. And I'm afraid, until this matter clears up, that we had better not see one another."

"But who can I go to? Who is there to help me?"

He waited, but I didn't answer. I couldn't answer. There was no answer left for him.

I could only sit there and watch him cry, watch his jelly-flesh dissolve in his clothes, watch the red hands as they scrabbled and twisted across my desk, endlessly raveling and unraveling a piece of dirty string.

The buzzer sounded, by prearrangement, and I left the room. When I returned, ten minutes later, Edgar Caldwell was gone.

I never saw him again. . . .

Of course, I heard all about it, later. Imperial put through their consolidation act, and the Professor's newly acquired stock went up twelve points before he sold.

They took Caldwell for his fifty grand, and then after a while they put the bite on him for another fifty, using a set of duplicate negatives.

He phoned me and tried to see me at the office, but I was always out. This was several weeks after, and I was working on Orlando Lightwick, Mrs. Penworthy, and Benny Cole, the gambler. Even if I had wanted to, I couldn't have seen Caldwell right then.

Besides, the job was over. The Professor was satisfied, Jake and Rogers and Sylvestro were happy. I suppose Eve Ireland was happy, too—even though she took all the risk and they finally chiseled her down on her percentage of the take. But that was no concern of mine. I didn't know and I didn't care.

It must have been about six weeks later that the Professor broke the news to me.

"Did you see the papers?" he asked. "Caldwell is dead."

"Dead?"

"He committed suicide—down at his beach-house, last night.

"How?"

"Can't you guess? The string fixation, the ropes in the photographs—remember? He hung himself."

"No!"

"Curious, isn't it, how we follow an unconscious pattern? But that's the way it goes. Once a string-saver, always a string-saver."

Chapter Eleven

IT WAS AFTER Caldwell's death that everything began to go wrong. Everything, and nothing. Perhaps it was only I who went wrong.

Strangely, Mike's death had upset me, but not like this. That had been an accident and somehow I couldn't accept the complete guilt or responsibility-even though the Professor held it over me as a threat.

With Caldwell, things were different. Oh, he was no great loss to the world—he'd lied and cheated and stolen, and his behavior with Eve Ireland was bestial enough to be punished.

But I hadn't the right to do the punishing—or to execute him. He saved the string, but I tied the hangman's knot, I placed the noose around his neck, I kicked the chair away and left him dangling there, gray jelly quivering on the end of a rope, gray jelly jerking and then the rope cutting into his chin, cutting into his neck and stretching it long and thin. They say, sometimes, when they cut down a corpse, the neck is no bigger around than a child's wrist—

Thoughts like that were what made me start to sit in the house and drink, just like Rogers, going upstairs to his room with a pint every night. Maybe *he* had something to drink about, too. Like Ellen Post, the apricot girl. I wondered about her, but there was no sense wondering. I couldn't think clearly. There was always the rope, dangling and twisting back and forth, to and fro. . . .

That's the way I was thinking, that's the way I was living after Caldwell died. I happened to be going through my *Hamlet* act one night when the doorbell rang. It was the Professor.

"Good evening."

"Hello. I didn't expect you."

"That is obvious."

"You mean the whisky? I was just having a nightcap."

He sat down at the table and crossed his arms. The sleeves made a black X on the tablecloth. X marks the spot. Black suit again—all that money coming in and he still dressed in the same clothing. Like a minister. Or an undertaker. . . .

"What's the matter with you?"

"Not a thing. Should there be?"

"Rogers tells me you do a lot of this."

Rogers was a little rat. I raised my glass and drank to holes in his cheese. "Not so much. Besides, what else is there for me to do?"

"You might keep up your studies. There is no end to learning, you know."

"I'm doing all right. The money's coming in, isn't it?"

"Yes. I really cannot complain on that score."

"Then I'm entitled to my own way of amusing myself."

"Amusing yourself!" The Professor ran a hand across his gleaming skull and stared at me across the table. "So you are still interested in amusement, eh? That's the end-all and be-all of everything you do: your sole purpose in living is to justify and pay for your amusement, as you call it. In other words, you have the psychology of a garage mechanic."

"That would pretty accurately describe my income and my status, too." The word-choice was that of Judson Roberts—but the bitter intonation was strictly Eddie Haines.

"You're dissatisfied?"

"A shrewd analysis," I said.

"But when you think of where you were just eight months ago—"

"I'd rather think about the big promises you made me. Fame, fortune, anything I wanted. You remember?"

"Yes. Those things will come, if you desire them. Although for a while, I had hoped they would not be necessary. That you would reach a stage where you'd no longer desire them."

"I don't know how you figure that angle."

"It was only a hope on my part. I thought perhaps, in your reading and study, you might develop a genuine interest in some phases of metaphysics. Then you and I might have gone on to the next phase together. But I misjudged you—you want, as you term it, amusement."

"Let's call it more money and be done with it. You'll never get to me with any nonsense about 'spiritual riches,' if that's what you thought." He smiled. "I've trained you too well, I see. You're always sure of an ulterior motive, aren't you?"

I could smile, too. "Well, you certainly aren't going to try to sell me on the idea that you've gone overboard on theosophy yourself, are you?"

"No, Eddie. I'm not going to try to sell you anything. Some day, perhaps, you will learn, as I have, that there are certain truths behind ageless symbols, a reality beyond all allegory, an attainment—" He stopped. "But I bore you."

"Not at all." I reached for the bottle. "Nothing bores me, as long as I have this."

He took the bottle from my hand, set it down.

"That's out."

"Look, now—"

"Would a guarantee of five hundred a week help to keep you on the wagon?"

"Look. It's not just the money part that gets me down."

"I know. You didn't like what happened to Caldwell, did you?" He took out his monocle and began to polish it with the same careful attention they bestow on lenses at Mount Palomar. "Well, I think I can reassure you on that score. We won't be trying extortion again; it's far too risky. Besides there's no longer any need. From now on things will run smoothly, on the momentum we've gained.

“Here is another thing. I shall be devoting less and less time to this operation in the future. If you keep away from liquor, I promise to give you a free hand. Run things as you choose. The clients are coming in and you know how to handle them. You see, you’ll be earning your money.”

I stood up. “That suits me. Just as long as I can run things my way. Without threats, without frame-ups.”

“It’s a bargain.” The Professor didn’t shake hands. He never shook hands. Somehow, that suited me. He had hands like fat blind spiders. . . .

“By the way, I’ve been thinking. It might not be a bad idea to put you on the air.”

“Radio?”

“A fifteen-minute program, once a week. To sell the book, sell your name. I’m having Rogers check into the costs and possible time. Then you might work up an expansion program; train a few assistants for this personal-supervision stuff. We’ll discuss it all some other time. Right now I have another appointment.”

He left us alone then, and there we sat—the bottle and I. The bottle was half-empty; I was half-full.

I looked at it. “Did you hear what he said?” I asked. “Five hundred a week. And I’m going on the radio! That’s a laugh. I came out here to get on the air, but Rickert said I wasn’t good enough. And now—”

The bottle didn’t answer me. . . .

There was another bottle sitting on another table, a couple of nights later. I was drinking club soda, straight, in a little bar off the Strip.

That was the Professor’s idea—I’d meet him here and we’d go over our radio plans.

But he was late. He was always late, these days. I talked to him on the phone but I never saw him. Rogers reported that business was slack; Miss Bauer kept the office open as a matter of policy, although the Professor had cut his own practice down to a minimum.

Nobody seemed to know just what he did or where he went. Doc Sylvestro was with him a great deal of the time, but it was all very hush-hush.

Everything the Professor did was hush-hush stuff. I found myself doing a little objective thinking for the first time in months.

Professor Hermann was a type—a West Coast type; more specifically, a Southern California type. He would not be tolerated anywhere else; he wouldn't exist, let alone flourish, in another setting.

But this was a land of Messiahs and miracles; of Peter the Hermit and Isaiah the Evangelist; a land where red flowers and green skyscrapers sprang up overnight. A land of fabulous fertility, luxuriant lushness.

THE rod smote the rock and gold gushed forth in 1849. The rod waved as a magic wand and lo, there was Hollywood. The rod smote the rock again, and oil spewed fortunes to the skies. The rod pointed and there was real estate, and aircraft factories, and an entire civilization that bought cars from Madman Muntz and cemetery lots at Forest Lawn. At night, the flying red horse heralded the Apocalypse in advertising from a dirigible. The searchlights stabbed at heaven to proclaim the presence of a new fruit-stand.

But the sky was too blue, the sun too radiant, the exaggeration of all natural phenomena too pronounced. It led to extremes in individuality—eccentricism rampant. Its ultimate end was the Professor, and those who accepted and believed in him.

Sitting there, trying to figure it all out, I suddenly realized that I was as deluded as the rest of the seekers out here. The sun-worshipers, the gold-worshipers, the sudden success-worshipers. I had accepted the distortion of values and attitudes as normal. If the rod suddenly pointed at the rock and called forth the fury of an earthquake, I'd rush to the Professor for salvation.

He couldn't help me. He was just a faker in a black suit, a self-acknowledged charlatan. Yet I depended upon him for my way of living. He had made me, created Judson Roberts. My life was in his hands. Yes, quite literally—my life was in his hands.

Why had I never attempted to find out anything about him? It was important that I know who he was, what he wanted. I tried to utilize the Judson Roberts technique, but it was hard to do an analysis on club soda.

I looked around the quiet bar. Perhaps I could order just one drink before he—No. He had forbidden it. Yet who was he to forbid? Yes, who was he?

Otto Hermann, Ph.D. Not listed in "Who's Who" or any professional directory. The degree had never been granted by an American university.

German, perhaps Austrian. Age, forty-odd. When had he come to this country? And why?

Miss Bauer would know. But who was Miss Bauer? Why did he keep her around?

Every answer was a new question.

Professor Hermann, the man who wore black. Why black? What was the symbolism? Black, in a land of light. Deliberate exhibitionism might be the answer. That big diamond ring he wore—

No, that was out. Because he didn't wear the ring all the time; only when keeping an appointment with strangers, or at the office. And he never added to or augmented his jewelry, despite increased income. That diamond was merely for misdirection—he wanted you to watch its glitter as he did something else with his other hand, or with his voice. A focal point for hypnosis.

Hypnosis. Mastery. Superiority. He was always the leader, the director, the dominator. Why?

Why did he want wealth and power? Not for obvious display or to satisfy obvious compulsions. I wondered about his sex-life. Apparently it was nonexistent. That was the key: Sublimation, some physical defect?

The bald head—not shaven, but hairless. What disease-process might result in permanent depilation, absence of nictation? Encephalitis? But there were other stigmata of degeneration, and nictation usually increased.

Disease. Mania. Megalomania. I wasn't being objective. Because he reminded me of some movie villain. That didn't brand him as psychotic or even as a potential psychotic. Everything he did seemed actuated by a high degree of logic—*too* high a degree, perhaps. There was an abnormal degree of conscious and unconscious emotional inhibition.

There was an abnormal degree of half-baked phrase-making in my analysis too. Judson Roberts, the great psychiatrist! Nevertheless, if I could find the clue to the Professor—

I grinned at the bottle of club soda. The glass circle of its mouth remained motionless. "It's a hard job," I told the bottle. "A hard job, trying to psychoanalyze the Devil."

"What you need is a drink," the bottle said.

I blinked, then realized the words hadn't come from the bottle. They were spoken by Ellen Post.

Chapter Twelve

I STUDIED HER OVAL FACE. That exotic look was caused by a doublefold of the upper eyelids—a simple explanation. made by the practised observation of Judson Roberts, but it didn't keep Eddie Haines from admiring her features.

Right now I felt more like Eddie Haines than I had felt in a long time. "Your order?"

I looked at the waiter. I looked at her. Then, "Two apricot brandies." She smiled. Judson Roberts could have analyzed that smile before you could say "Mona Lisa"—but I wasn't Judson Roberts tonight. She smiled, and that was enough for me.

"So you remembered?"

"Like an elephant. A pink one." I took another look at her. She was sober, and that made a difference. She seemed taller than I'd remembered her as being, and her voice was softer. "What brings you here?" I asked. "A convertible."

"Nuts."

"Ooh, Doctor Roberts, what you said!"

"I mean it. Let's not be smart tonight. I want to know all about you. I've been wondering who you are, where you live, why I've never seen you since that party—"

The drinks arrived. She stared at her glass with the same concentrated awe usually bestowed on the Grand Canyon. When she spoke, her voice was almost a whisper.

"That party—when I heard about Mike, it did something to me. Not that I cared about him especially. It was just that—oh, to make a long story short, I quit drinking. For quite a while. I went down to the beach and took some more lessons."

"What kind of lessons?"

"Singing. But I didn't stick at it this time, either. I'm just not good enough. As with everything else, I'm a might-be. That's not even as good as a has-been. I just can't do anything well, except drink."

"So you're back here."

"Yes and no. I haven't gone out for months; this was just an impulse. I cut the crowd and the parties completely. You know poor Lorna has gone completely batty."

"I didn't know."

"She's mixed up in some cult or other; your friend the Professor is in on it too." Her gaze was candid. "You really don't know?"

"That's right. I haven't seen much of the Professor lately. I was supposed to meet him here tonight, but he hasn't showed. Now about this cult—"

"Oh, I really don't know anything but gossip. There is some kind of secret meetings going on. Lorna just hints things to her friends. But if I know her, there's an orgy in the background somewhere."

I watched her pick up the drink. Apricot brandy, apricot lips. . . . She swallowed, made a face.

"Brrrrr!"

"Then why do you do it?"

"What else is there?"

"You were going to tell me about yourself," I said patiently. "About the house you live in, the clothes you buy, the things you like to eat. How you wore your hair when you were a little girl. Do you like fireplaces—and sunsets? And does your nose get red when you have a cold?"

"Really, I'd like to, but I have to run along now." She rose.

"Sit down."

"Say—you really mean it, don't you?" She sat down again.

"Why do you always run away when somebody asks you about yourself?"

"That's my business."

"You told me once that drinking was your business. Is that part of the running away, too?"

"Good old Doctor Roberts! Do you think, in your benevolent, homespun way, that you're going to *help* me? I've heard that line before, too."

"All right, so it's a line," I said. "I can't help you. Nobody can help you; you help yourself. Either that, or you keep on drinking. And in two hours you'll be up at the bar, telling everything you wouldn't tell to me. Spilling drinks and intimacies in front of the bartender. He'll help you."

"YOU know something?" She wrinkled her nose. "I like you when you get mad. You drop that phony front, then. I made a mistake when I walked out on you. We could have had a lot of fun together."

"Sure," I nodded. "A lot of nice clean drunken fun. We're adults, aren't we? We know what we want—a great big bottle, and a chance to suck on it. A chance to drool our way back to infancy. Babies don't know what they're doing, they're not responsible if they go to bed with each other and make messes. Yes, we could have had a lot of fun. And I’m damned glad we didn’t.”

“So am I.”

She leaned forward. I smelled apricots. The suntan had ripened her.

“Another drink?”

“No. Let’s talk. If you’ve been trying to scare me off drinking, you’re succeeding.”

“Good. Try to pretend that I’m God for a change.”

“I don’t get it.”

“Your god is the bartender. The bartender is always God, or haven’t you noticed?”

“I hadn’t, but go on. You will, anyway.”

“Drinkers are all alike. They go to the bartender for peace, for release. They tell him their troubles in confessional. Like God, he dispenses wisdom, judgment, guidance. He rules supreme in his own world. He is quick to punish the transgressor. He can also reward with his favor—or with free drinks. He is omniscient and all-powerful. He knows everything about everybody within the microcosmic universe of the tavern. He is father-confessor, mediator, dispenser of solace and consolation. And he is worshiped in libations, with sacramental wine that produces divine intoxication. He is also, I might add, the father-image. Or more exactly, an idealization of the father. The infantile regressions of the dipsomaniac fit into this pattern of unconscious symbolism.”

“Funny you should say that. I never drank until Dad was killed. He was one swell guy. Drank a lot himself, though. Geoffrey Post, industrial designer—you recall the name? He got into plane-building in the ’thirties. That’s how he died; piloting one of his own planes. Cracked up.”

“So you cracked up. No mother, and the father-image. He drank, so you drank. You couldn’t have anything to do with men, sober, because of the part he played in your sexual imagery. You drank, and then the men you slept with became identified with him, and that made you feel guilty so you drank again. And—”

“Wait a minute. I’m not crazy.”

“They call it ‘dipsomania’, you know, and rightly so. Most psychotic states have their inception in some sexual deviation. Unconscious homosexual urges, incestuous desires—”

“Why do *you* drink, then? Are you in love with your mother?”

“I’m an orphan.” I grinned. “But seriously, doesn’t it make some kind of sense to you?”

She nodded. The empty glass between her fingers nodded with her.

“I suppose it does. I was beginning to figure some of those things out for myself. We were always together, he and I; traveling around, never stopping long enough in one place to make friends. When I was eighteen he’d take me dancing; we went to parties together. Strangers took us for—” she bit her lip—“lovers.”

“They were right, weren’t they?”

“In a way, yes. Although neither of us knew, consciously, that we had those feelings. It wasn’t until after Dad died that it hit me. Then I went to pieces, and now I’m trying to put those pieces back together.”

“You can’t do it alone very easily. You’ll need help.”

“Are you suggesting professional treatment?”

“Nonprofessional. Please, Ellen—I want to help you.”

“But the Professor—he’s your friend, and he’s a—”

“I’m not like that. You can trust me. You must trust me.”

“We’ll see. I want to think things over, first.” She rose, and this time there was no dissuading her.

“When will I see you again?”

“I’ll call you. At your office.”

“Good night, Ellen.”

“Goodnight—Judd.”

“THAT girl, who is she?” The Professor shot up out of a trapdoor, or appeared in a burst of flame—I didn’t particularly notice his arrival, because I was thinking of apricots.

"Her name's Ellen Post. We met at the Lorna Lewis party."

"That's right. She was attracted to you, I remember. Have you seen much of her since?"

"This is the first time, and our meeting was accidental. But I hope I'll be seeing more of her."

"I do, too. She might be useful."

"Useful?"

The Professor slid into the booth, removed his hat, and gave me a glimpse of how his skull looked under dim blue neon lighting.

"I've checked on her. Something Lorna Lewis let drop one day aroused my interest. She's Geoffrey Post's daughter, isn't she?"

"Yes."

"Well fixed?"

"I don't know." I was weary. "She probably has a small income from the estate."

"That doesn't matter. But she's Leland Post's niece—his only niece. He takes an interest in her; put her on the cure last year."

"On the cure?"

The Professor grinned. "She's a rummy—you must have found that out. And it helps. Leland Post is a State Senator, with ambitions. He'd do a lot, out of love for her and self-interest, to keep her from getting mixed up in any scandal."

I scowled.

"Now, wait a minute!"

"Please. Restrain yourself and hear me out. Leland Post is owned by one of the oil syndicates from Long Beach. He's going to try for Congress next year. Right now he's very much in the public eye."

"Hold it, Professor. I've got a—a personal interest in this kid. No funny business."

Those eyes, those unblinking eyes, burned up at me. They burned a hole through the upholstery behind my head. But I met the gaze.

"Very well," he said softly. "It was only a tentative thought—nothing important. We'll abandon that gambit, as long as you have a personal interest."

We talked of other things: the radio program, which was to be temporarily shelved due to time-shortage: the current cases, and the problem of Rogers, who was getting out of line. There was much to discuss.

But it was Judson Roberts who talked with the Professor. Eddie Haines just sat there, wondering if Ellen Post would call, when she'd call, when he'd see her again.

There were definitely two of us to consider, now—Eddie Haines and Judson Roberts, just a couple of the boys. Eddie Haines hadn't been around very much lately. He was stuck on Ellen Post, but he never came around any more.

Judson Roberts was always available, though. He was everywhere—seen in the best places these days. A fast, smart operator, Roberts. He knew how to handle himself—and everybody else too.

Telling the old ladies at the lectures, "Remember the first principles of Y-O-U: Your Opportunities, Unlimited. Cultivate yourself. Allow the seeds of your personality to flower. If your soul is thirsty, drink deeply." Straight out of the old seed-catalogue, that's the way Judson Roberts worked.

But why worry? Everything was sailing along smoothly now. Sailing along on the S.S. *Schizophrenia*—passengers Judson Roberts, First Class, and Eddie Haines, Steerage: sometimes known as Messrs. Jekyll and Hyde.

That's the way it was, and that's the way I thought about it, until Ellen Post finally did call me up.

She was at her beach-house, at Malibu, and would Mr. Judson Roberts care to run down for the afternoon?

"I'll be seeing you," said Eddie Haines.

Chapter Thirteen

THE SUN WAS WARM at Malibu, so Ellen and I sat in the shade of the little beach-house. Only three days had passed since our meeting in the tavern, but here we sat, and I had my arm around her waist.

Just a whirlwind romance. Only there was no whirlwind about it, no romance. We merely sat and talked. We had a lot to talk about, Ellen Post and Judson Roberts and—

She called me "Judd" because she thought I was Judson Roberts and if I were Judson Roberts I'd tell her something. It wouldn't be the truth but she'd believe it, and then she'd put her arms around me, those soft sun-ripened arms and I'd taste apricots and I'd have what I wanted. Only I wouldn't have it really because I wasn't Judson Roberts. Eddie Haines would rather tell her the truth and take his chances. Right now, I wanted to be Eddie Haines again.

I took a deep breath and exhaled. Then everything came out. . . .

Half an hour elapsed between the time I said, "My name is Eddie Haines." and my last sentence. "Here I am."

In between there were two cigarettes—the second left in the ashtray to burn unheeded—and a grateful deepening of dusk that hid my face in shadows.

I didn't want her to see my face. There was enough nakedness as it was, because I held nothing back: The suicide attempt, the meeting with the Professor, the Y-O-U setup, and what we did to people like Caldwell, everything.

Everything except the facts about the death of Mike Drayton, that is. I couldn't tell her that. I wanted to, but I knew what her reaction would be. What I did spill was bad enough, and I expected the awkward silence when I finished, the stiff, impersonal phrases, the cold "We'd better go" with which she'd conclude our relationship.

What I didn't expect was the scent of apricots, the slim arms around me, the leaping fire of her lips.

"You poor guy," she whispered. "And I thought I had troubles."

“Then you don’t—”

Her lips answered me first, then her voice. “Of course not. Oh, I’m so glad you told me, Eddie! I knew I’d never get used to the idea of marrying a man named Judd.”

It got dark fast, after that. . . .

It was midnight when I came home. There were no lights shining inside the house, not even from Rogers’ upstairs room. I let myself in and clicked the living-room switch.

Immediately, the phone jingled. I answered.

The Professor’s voice snapped across the wire: “Where have you been? I’ve called many times.”

“Sorry. Just got in.”

“He’s gone, isn’t he?”

“Who?”

“Rogers. Jake told me he’d walked out on us. He was to meet me this evening—very important matter—and he never showed up. I checked and found out that he hadn’t been at the office in two days. Did you see him?”

“No. He comes and goes. He has his own key, uses the back entrance.

But you know that. What’s the matter—did you have an argument?”

“Certainly not. I can’t understand it. Unless he got frightened. He’s been drinking a lot more lately, hasn’t he?”

“Hard to tell. You know how he can hold his liquor. But what’s all this about being frightened? What’s there to be afraid of?”

“Nothing. Nothing at all.” The Professor spoke too quickly. Judson Roberts was alert: he caught things like that. But he made no comment as the Professor continued:

“You know what to expect from a chronic alcoholic. Delusions, sudden erratic deviations in conduct-pattern. Anyway, he’s gone. I thought I’d check with you.”

“I’ll see what I can find out at the office tomorrow,” I promised. “Call you then—unless you care to come over now.”

“No. I’m busy. Good night.”

He hung up; I hung up.

The Professor was busy at midnight. And Rogers was running away because he had been frightened—

I went upstairs slowly, very slowly. I turned on the hall light and walked down to Rogers' bedroom.

IT was empty: Rogers was gone. I felt no emotion except vague curiosity. He was a strange little man. I'd never really known him. He was furtive, a solitary drinker and uncommunicative with me, but he probably mumbled to himself. Sitting up in this room, night after night, cradling a pint bottle in his arms and whispering to it.

Yet he had talent. A curious genius, almost. He wrote for the Professor, he did my lectures, he wrote *Y-O-U.*

Why? Where did the ability spring from? And what did he want? He was well-paid, but he had no interests, no hobbies, and his only apparent vice was drinking. He liked to stay in the background: neither fame nor power seemed to matter. He had worked with Jake, I knew, but he had no friends.

It might have been interesting to cultivate him, find out about him. But there was no use in thinking about it now. Rogers had gone. And he was frightened.

What would frighten him, outside of the loss of his liquor supply?

I walked over to the typing-table, stooped, and pulled the wastebasket out from under it. The wastebasket was newspaper-lined, and there was a thin film of cigarette ash at the bottom, filling the newspaper creases with grit. I turned the basket upside down on the floor. The ashes powdered the rug. The newspaper dropped. A piece of paper wedged against it, fluttered loose.

I picked it up.

I read a few typewritten lines, just cryptic notes. But they told me what I wanted to know—why Rogers was frightened. I read:

Thirteen in Coven.

Sig. in blood.

Ointment or unguent for flying dreams—compound contains aconite, belladonna and—? Check.

The Black Man—

That was all. But Rogers was frightened. And now so was I.

Chapter Fourteen

THE USUAL TREMOR was felt the next morning around 10:30. It rattled the mirrors in my office, and my reflection shook momentarily. But it wasn't a temblor, and besides I had no time for earthquakes; Professor Hermann was shaking *my* firmament.

The mere fact of his unexpected presence was enough to upset me. I had to work hard keeping that Judson Roberts mask from slipping when I heard his pitch.

"About Rogers," he said: "I've located him, at last."

"Good."

"Not good. He's gone completely berserk. Jake found him holing up in a Skid-row joint down on Main. Sick drunk. He won't pull out of this for months. At least, Sylvestro doesn't think so."

"Where is he?"

"Sylvestro recommended a sanatorium, run by a friend of his. It's up near Santa Barbara. They're taking him there today. Naturally, I'll handle the expenses." He took off his hat. I saw eight skulls in the mirrors.

"He never said anything to you about what was troubling him?" the Professor asked.

"Not a word."

"Did he take his belongings with him when he left?"

"The room is empty."

"Mmmm. There was nothing with him when Jake picked him up. I wonder—well, no matter. Poor Rogers! He looked very bad. I hate to say this, but from what I saw and what Sylvestro said, he may never come out of the sanatorium."

The Professor sighed, and I held tight to the Judson Roberts mask. I could picture the kind of a rest-home run by Sylvestro's "friend." It was probably quite small—about six feet long, three feet wide and three feet deep. It would fit into a shallow hole quite easily, and its occupant would be assured of plenty of rest—eternal rest.

"And that reminds me," Hermann said. "What are you doing about Ellen Post?"

"Why, nothing. We talked it over, remember?"

"Oh, yes. But you see, there has been a change in plans. Due to this unfortunate business with Rogers, I find it necessary to go East for a while. Private affairs. In the meantime, I am in need of funds. I'm drawing what I can out of your Y-O-U setup here, but we could use more. And this Ellen Post connection with the Senator is too good to overlook. I am afraid I shall be forced to ask you to withdraw your objections and proceed during my absence."

"Just what does that mean?"

"It calls for no drastic action on your part. Just go along, cultivate her as you have been. But see to it that she drinks. When I return, I'll handle matters from that point on."

"What's the setup?"

"That's my affair. I've told you what you need to know. Take her out and get her drunk—regularly. And take her to the best places. I want her seen, identified. I understand she hasn't been around much, lately. It's your duty to remedy that situation."

"Suppose I don't want to play?" Eight skulls grinned. Sixteen ivory hands crawled across my desk.

"You'll play. Because I'm playing with you. And I can play rough unless you let me set the rules."

I nodded. “All right. Anything else?”

“That’s all.”

“You say you’re leaving. When will you be back?”

“I don’t know. A week, ten days, perhaps. Don’t worry—Miss Bauer will communicate with me, should the necessity arise. And I’ve told Jake to keep an eye on you.”

“That was thoughtful.”

“You ought to know by this time that I think of everything.”

He rose and walked to the door. The man in black, who thought of everything. The *Black Man*—Roger’s notes.

As soon as he was out of the office, I buzzed May.

“Yes, Mr. Roberts?”

“Anybody out there?”

“No. Oh, yes, Jake’s here.”

“What’s he doing? Does he want to see me?”

“I’ll ask.”

There was a pause; the voice coming through to me deepened. Jake was talking. “I’m gonna stick around for a while, if you don’t mind. The Professor’s going away, and he sort of hinted you might need a little protection. If it’s all right with you.”

It wasn’t all right with me. But the Professor made the rules—

“Sure, Jake. But you needn’t bother. I can call you when I go anywhere.”

“Oh, I’m okay here. I like it. That May, she’s a dish all right.”

“Suit yourself.”

I switched off, picked up the phone, and dialed Ellen at the beach-house.

“Darling, when can I see you? About two be all right? No, I’ll come on out. Something I’d like to discuss with you. No, I’m not upset. Everything’s all right. Good-by.” No, I wasn’t upset. Everything was all right. Everything was swell.

Judson Roberts wouldn’t have minded. But I wasn’t Judson Roberts any more. After yesterday, with Ellen, I knew I’d never be Judson Roberts again. I was Eddie Haines.

I looked at Eddie Haines in the mirrors. He was there, for the first time in months. Not a particularly fetching sight; his hair was in his eyes, and his mouth was drawn.

But I could recognize him, recognize myself. That was something. I waved to the mirrors as I went out. Eddie Haines waved back. Whatever happened now, I knew I could count on him.

JAKE had a time keeping up with me in his battered Ford, but he managed.

"Why you dragging me off to Malibu?" he grumbled.

"I'm going to see a woman. And you're going to sit out in the hot sun and sweat. Professor's idea, remember?"

He called me a name, and I gave him a sweet smile. Then we were off.

The same sun shone over the beach today, shimmering in Ellen's hair. Jake stayed up on the road, but even if he'd seen us, it wouldn't have stopped me from taking her in my arms.

"Whew! You *did* want to see me. didn't you?"

"Let's go inside."

"Good idea."

"No—I must talk to you."

"You disappoint me greatly, sir," she said.

"Listen, Ellen. This is serious."

"All right. What's the matter, Eddie?"

Funny how the little things count. Even then, I wasn't sure if I'd have the nerve to go through with it. But she called me "Eddie." That was enough. That did it.

I told her everything; what the Professor planned, what he said, what I suspected.

"But that's utterly insane! People don't go around doing such things—imagine him thinking that you would go for such a scheme."

"I did go for it, Ellen. I'm taking you out tonight and getting you drunk."

"You're *what?"*

"It's the only way. Trust me. I've figured an angle. If we go to some place like the Gin Mill—"

I explained my angle to her. She nodded.

"Jake's up on the road now in his car. He'll follow us. He'll be watching. That's why I had to choose the Gin Mill. From now on he'll watch me night and day, particularly when I'm with you. We must be careful, and clever. Are you game?"

"Of course. You know I'll help. Only, Eddie—"

"Yes."

"There's one thing I don't understand—one thing you haven't told me." She hesitated.

"Go on."

"Why do you have to obey the Professor? Why don't you just quit the racket and go away?"

I didn't answer. I couldn't.

"He has something on you, hasn't he? Something you didn't tell me."

It was my turn to hesitate. "Well—"

"Eddie, darling, you said you'd trust me. Don't you know that you can tell me anything and it won't matter? Please, dear. Maybe I can help."

"Maybe you can. But not now. I'll tell you later, I promise. Meanwhile, I'm going to think of a way out of all this, but fast." I kissed her. "All right, young lady, change your clothes. You've got an important date to go out and get stinking drunk."

The Gin Mill was one of those fake "atmosphere" joints—with singing waiters, complete with false mustaches; steins of beer, a "free lunch" which you paid for, and sawdust on the floors. There were also cuspidors in the booths.

That's what I needed—the cuspidors. Jake shambled over to the bar and roosted there for three hours, while Ellen and I kept the waiter rushing to our booth with refills on Scotch.

We drank a lot; at least Jake thought we did. He'd glance in the mirror out of the corner of one bloodshot eye and catch a glimpse of us raising glasses. But he never noticed us emptying the shots into the cuspidor.

As the evening progressed, our voices rose, and we began to muss each other up. That part was fun—and there was no need to fake.

Around ten I suggested a little singing. Ellen had a nice voice, but when she cut loose on some old favorites it was murder. Even I couldn't stand it.

"Can that, you're overdoing the act," I whispered. But she kept right on singing. She was singing as I dragged her out of there. We staggered over to the car. Jake sauntered behind at a discreet distance.

I drove Ellen up Wilshire to the apartment hotel where she stayed when she planned to be in town. I watched Jake's Ford in the rear-view mirror, but Ellen pulled my head around.

"Don't try anything foolish, darling. That big gorilla would tear you to pieces."

I shook my head. "I'm not going to bother Jake at all. He'll see me home, watch me stagger up the steps, and call it a day."

My prediction proved correct. I dropped Ellen, helped her lurch into the lobby, returned to my car and started toward home.

Jake pulled up behind me.

"How'm I'm doin', huh?" I yelled. "Some number, isn't she? Some number, isn't she? Some—"

"Not so loud!" Jake said. "Look, you better turn in. You're loaded to the eyeballs."

"Good idea. See you tomorrow, same time, same stashun. 'by now."

He watched me locate the keyhole. I stepped inside, switched on the light, then went upstairs and turned on the bedroom light.

Then I went into the darkness of the bathroom and peered out of the window. Jake's car was pulling away from the curb.

Good. So far, everything checked. I looked at my watch: 11:05. Late, but not too late.

It would be a long drive to Vista Canyon. But that's where the Professor lived. At least, he was supposed to live there. I'd never been invited out; how I would locate his place in the dark, I didn't know. But he was out of town, Jake was gone, and now was the time. . . .

Now was the time to park the car on the shoulder, out of sight; to crunch through gravel and inspect the crooked signboard at the roadway's fork.

Names, meaningless names; names of the wealthy, names of the reclusive. No Hermann.

Little beads of conversation began to string themselves on a single thread of recollection.

"It's on the very top of the hill. The windlass and cable is convenient. We lower a little car down for groceries. You can even ride in it yourself if you like. Built back in the Prohibition days. Porch on three sides, wonderful view, completely private. Fox-pen just below the house. Bootleggers had to have a place to cache the liquor, and so they set themselves up as running a fox-farm."

IT hadn't seemed important, when I heard it. But now sentences came back to me. Hillside. Look for a cable down the hill. Three-sided porch. A fox-pen in back, just below the level of the house.

I began to climb, to crawl. Crickets stopped their chirping and listened. I hit a winding path that ended up before the door of a three-car garage. An owl hooted—derisively, I thought.

I went back down to the road and started up another path. Look for the cable.

I found it and I followed it through a tangle of scrub. I clung to the heavy wire as the going got tough. Then the house looked down at me over the edge of the hillside, and I stared back.

There were no lights on the porches, or inside. I walked around to the front door, using the gravel path as little as possible. The door was locked, of course. I contemplated the wire mesh of the screened-in porch. I felt for my pocket-knife. Once a Boy Scout, always a Boy Scout.

Supposing the Professor hadn't left? What if somebody else was here—Doc Sylvestro, for instance?

It takes about twelve seconds to break-and-enter a house, according to the movies. Working without director, lights, or camera, I managed it in a half hour, with the aid of scraped and bleeding fingers. My trouser legs ripped as I wriggled through and dropped to the porch floor with a dull thud.

I got up and waited for an echo, a response from within the darkened house. Silence, punctuated by crickets.

I opened the door and went inside, groping for a light-switch. I found it, hesitated. *A Scout is brave . . .*

The light went on.

I don't know what I expected to see. A bubbling cauldron, a heap of skulls, the heads of children floating in alcohol—

It was a perfectly conventional room in a perfectly conventional summer cottage.

I walked toward the hall; then abruptly altering my course, I went out to the rear porch. I switched the light off as I departed, and allowed the moon to guide me. I stared down at the leveled area in back of the hilltop house.

More wire netting, thin-meshed and held together by strutwork. A concrete flooring. This was the fox-pen, all right. I didn't see any foxes inside. I didn't see the Professor, either.

Going down the porch steps, I listened carefully to the frogs. Were they trying to tell me something? If they were, they gave it up. As I fumbled with a latch and entered the fox-pen, the croaking ceased.

Silence. Silver silence. I stood inside the pen, but I didn't feel very foxy. I didn't know anything—didn't even know what I was looking for.

"The bootleggers had to have a place to cache the liquor, so they set themselves up as running a fox-farm."

They stacked it right out here in the open, in the fox-pen. No, of course not. There'd be foxes in the pen, but—

I saw it over in the corner, shadowed by the house above. A black circle: the metal lid covering a cistern.

Of course! That's where they hid the liquor in the old days—down below, in the hollowed-out hillside! Lift the lid and climb down the stairs to the storage-rooms, the vaults.

That's where they hid the liquor, and that's where the Professor would hide whatever it was he wanted hidden.

The frogs croaked a triumphant chorus as I walked over to the iron cistern-cover, bent down, and reached for the ring in the center.

I tugged. It was heavy, and I had trouble. I couldn't seem to move my shoulder. I glanced around at my shoulder and saw a hand . . .

Chapter Fifteen

"MR. ROBERTS—what are you doing?" said a voice.

I looked up into the plump white face of Miss Bauer.

"Come away," she whispered. Her hand left my shoulder, traveled to her lips. "He will hear you."

"He?"

"Otto. He works down in the vaults tonight, making ready." She urged me to my feet. "Be not afraid. He will sleep below. Come to the house!"

I followed her out of the pen, up the porch steps. She kept whispering. She had been asleep in the bedroom, she said, and when she heard me prowling around it was natural to assume I was the Professor. Then she finally tiptoed out to investigate and found me.

All this I learned in the kitchen, over coffee. Gradually the story filtered through her thick accent, her idiom, her fear.

For Ottilie Bauer was afraid.

She did not know, at first, what crazy business Otto had in mind when he urged her to come and live with him here in the canyon. This Doctor Sylvestro, he was at the bottom of things, really. It was he who had planned, who got poor Mr. Rogers to work out the ceremony, who interested Otto in the idea.

"Black arts, isn't it?" I said.

"Worse. Much worse. It has to do with the Anti-Christ."

"Devil-worship?"

She nodded.

That was the new racket, then: Satanism. The Black Mass ritual. Gathering, orgy, sacrifice.

I listened to her story, filling in the gaps for myself.

At first it was just a new thrill to sell to "clients"—with emphasis on the orgy. I could see Lorna Lewis and some of the others going for that. There had been rumors of such esoteric *erotica* in the past. Sylvestro and the Professor had Rogers cook up a ritual, a ceremony, and then spread the word.

Miss Bauer had warned. She had coaxed. She had pleaded. But the project was carried out. They had gone on from there.

"Now I do not know what will come. Because, you know, he believes in this thing."

The Man in Black. The man who was above ordinary vices, ordinary sins. Everyone is a seeker. And every seeker is a sucker. The Professor, a sucker for Satanism. He even had the Devil's appearance.

Her fear-filled voice was going on: "I wanted so to see you, to warn you. This must be stopped."

He was down in the vault now, preparing for another meeting. He had "gone away," all right. Gone down to the Pit, down to Hell. . . .

"But you cannot stop him. Better to go away while you can. While he iss —"

We both heard a sound, both turned. But it was only the wind. I smiled at her, but my hands clenched. She smiled at me in return, but her lips quivered.

"I can't go away," I said softly. "You see, the Professor knows I killed Mike Drayton. You know it too." Her lower lip quivered again.

"No. You did not kill him. That was a lie."

"But—"

"He made you go away. You saw nothing after that: How I worked on the lungs, how he revived."

"He—revived?"

"He sat in the car, and Otto, he drove him away. For air, he told me, and I must go home to bed. It would be all right. Then I did, the next day, in the papers—"

I stood up. "So the Professor murdered him, and pinned the raj) on me! You're a witness, you can testify, you're sure that's what you saw?"

She nodded. "Yes. I can testify. I do not wish to tell this, but he must be stopped. You go away."

"You bet I'll go away! And fast!" I stepped around the table, then halted.

"But what about you—isn't it dangerous for you to stay? Something's happened to Rogers, and from what you tell me, the Professor is wacky enough to try anything. If he knew that you had tipped me off—"

"He will not harm me, Mr. Roberts." She smiled: it was an old smile, borrowed from the Sphinx. "You see, he iss my brother." . . .

I drove back at dawn, slept until noon, then called Ellen.

"Go home and start packing," I said. "We're getting out of here."

"When?"

"In a few days, soon as I can clear up a few odds and ends."

"You really mean it?"

"Cross my heart and hope not to die. Have you ever wanted to go to Niagara Falls for your honeymoon? Or do you prefer the Zambezi? That's in Africa, Southern Rhodesia, I think."

"You sound high."

"I'm right up there. And you'll be. too."

"Coming over?"

“Not now. Got to get started at the office. I’ll call you and we’ll get together—in every sense of the word.”

“That’s a promise.”

“Scout’s honor.”

“Since when did you become a Boy Scout?”

“Since last night. Tell you all about it when I see you. Meanwhile, in case you happen to be interested, I love you.”

“You say the nicest things.”

I hung up, still feeling high, still feeling clever. I got my hat, went out, locked the door, and met Jake sitting on the steps.

When you lose altitude in a plane, it does something to your ears. I didn’t feel anything, but I wasn’t high any more. I no longer felt clever, either.

“You sure must’ve hung on a beaut, the way you slept today,” Jake greeted me.

I nodded. “Been here long?”

“About two hours.”

“You needn’t have bothered.”

“Boss’ orders—wants to see you.”

“The Professor? I thought he was out of town.”

“Me too. But he called this morning, big as life. He’s going to be waiting for us at your office.”

He was sitting at the desk when I opened the office door.

“Come in,” he said.

Yes, come into my parlor, said the spider to the fly . . . the black spider with the white skull, the black spider who knew by the tiniest tremor just what had wandered into the web he spun.

Or did he know? The stolid face told me nothing.

“Flow does it happen that you’re here?” I asked.

“I had to change my plans. I’ll be leaving today, instead. Sit down.”

I sat down on the edge of the desk and swung a leg. It felt good, even though it looked too much like a pendulum, ticking off the minutes, the seconds before he came out with it—

"Jake tells me you did a good job last night."

"If you had my hangover, you'd know what kind of a job I did."

"That's fine. I want you to keep it up: tonight, again, and tomorrow night. I shall be back sooner than I expected. On Friday I'll take over."

"Take over?"

"Yes. I know how you feel about this, and I want to spare your feelings as much as possible. Friday you will take Miss Post out for the last time."

"I will?"

"You will pass out. A friend of hers will be present to take her home. That's all."

"Only she isn't going home; I get it."

"There's no need for you to worry. She won't be harmed, I promise; nor will she blame you for—what happens. But her uncle will prove to be very helpful after that episode, I can assure you."

He stood up. "So, that is all I have to tell you. Take her out tonight. tomorrow night. Then, on Friday, I'll get in touch with you and give final orders." He smiled. "Jake will keep an eye on you meamwhile."

I smiled right back at him. "You certainly think of everything," I said. "That's correct."

"Well, think of this for a minute. I'm not taking Ellen Post out—tonight, tomorrow, or Friday. And Jake isn't going to play Boy Detective with me any more, either. Because I am quitting this business, as of today."

"So?"

"Just so. And get this, while we're on the subject—if you try any funny stuff on Ellen Post I'll rip your head off and stuff it down your throat."

"Dear Doctor Roberts!" He grinned slowly. "Is this all you have learned of tact, the diplomatic approach, the psychology of personal relationships? You need a refresher course in Y-O-U."

"Never mind the funny stuff. I mean what I said."

"That is quite apparent. But may I remind you that you are acting under my orders? And for a very good reason?"

I watched him, now. I wanted to see his face.

"Mike Drayton's murder? But I didn't kill Mike Drayton. You did." I wanted to see his face, and I did. But it wasn't worth it—there was no reaction at all.

Then, and only then, did I realize the value of his advice. I should have been tactful, diplomatic—but no, it was too good to miss, telling him off. And in telling him, I had told all.

He knew where I got my information. And now—

There was a paperweight on the desk. I slid off the edge slowly, meeting his blank stare. Then I grabbed, grasped, swung.

He toppled forward in the chair, very slowly, like a big, baldheaded doll. The doll was bleeding from a cut behind the ear.

I stepped over to the door and peeked out. May was behind the glass, and beyond it I could see Jake, lounging on a sofa and reading a magazine.

"Jake," I called, "come in here a minute. The Professor would like to see you."

He came over, waddled through the door, waddled right into the paperweight. He didn't fall like a doll—he fell like a ton of bricks.

I left them decorating the inner office and walked over to May. It was a big risk, hanging around here now, but I had to get my call through. I owed it to Miss Bauer.

"Get me the Professor's house," I said. "Hurry it up."

She dialed and handed the phone to me.

"Hello?"

It was Ottilie Bauer's voice.

"This is Doctor Roberts," I said. "Don't ask any questions. Just come down to Ellen Post's apartment at once. Yes, right away. Don't stop for anything." I gave her the address and hung up.

"What's the matter?" May asked. "Where are the others?"

I patted her shoulder. "In conference. I'm going out now, but you might call the sign-painter for me, the one who does the lettering on the office doors."

She looked puzzled.

"You have a job for him?"

"Right, sister. Tell him to scrape my name off. I'm quitting."

Chapter Sixteen

I DROVE UP WILSHIRE about twice as fast as the law alllow's, parked in front of Ellen's apartment-hotel, buzzed her from the desk, and went up to the third floor.

There wasn't much time for planning, but I'd managed to work a few things out. First, I must get a written, witnessed statement about the Drayton murder from Miss Bauer. Second, I must warn her and help her decide what she could do. Third, I must grab Ellen and get the hell out of town with her.

Ellen was playing the phonograph when I arrived, singing arias in accompaniment to some operatic recordings. She opened the door on a high C, slightly flat.

"Hello," I said. "Where's Ottilie?"

"Who?"

"Miss Bauer. I told her to meet us here. She should have made it before I did."

"Well, she hasn't come."

"Damn!"

"What's the matter?"

I told her what the matter was, fast.

THERE was no reason to hold back anything. I gave the murder to her cold, then my interview with Ottilie Bauer, and my recent caper with the Professor and Jake. She heard me out, making appropriate sounds and gestures—not the least of which was her final comment, "All right, Eddie. I'm with you on this, whatever you want."

“I want Miss Bauer here to sign a statement, just in case. Then I want to figure things out with her to prevent—something—from happening. Then you and I are leaving. When the Professor and Jake wake up, they’re going to want to see me.”

I glanced at my watch. I’d been here twenty minutes. Ottilie Bauer should have been here long ago. Unless the Professor had come to in a hurry—

“Where’s the phone?” I asked.

She indicated it, and I used it. I got through the switchboard and dialed the Professor’s house. If there was no answer, I could assume Miss Bauer had left. If there was an answer—

“Hello.”

A voice—not Miss Bauer’s, but a man’s. There was something familiar about it. I hesitated until I placed the speaker: Doctor Sylvestro!

“Hello,” he repeated.

I hung up without answering. Sylvestro was out there. And if the Professor had revived, and called Sylvestro before Miss Bauer could leave, then everything was haywire. “Did you get her?” Ellen asked. “No, but I’m going to.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean I’ve got to get out to the Professor’s house, right away. She may be coming, delayed en route. There are such things as flat tires, you know. But I can’t take any chances. Sylvestro answered the phone just now. That can mean anything. So I’m on my way.”

“I thought you weren’t taking any chances. What do you call this? If they find you there, you’ll never get away!”

“I’ve no choice. Miss Bauer is my alibi. Besides, I can’t leave her in the soup.”

Ellen put her arms around my neck. They seemed to belong there.

“All right, Eddie. But I’m coming with you.”

“No, you’re not. You can’t. If I’m wrong, then Miss Bauer may still show up here. You’ll have to be on hand when she arrives. Tell her what’s happened, get a written statement, and wait for me to call. I'll call you, as soon as I can."

"If you can."

I kissed her. "Yes, darling—*if* I can."

It wasn't very heroic, and there was nothing heroic about the way I kissed her. I didn't want to go, didn't want to stick my neck out, or in.

But I had to, and I went.

I went, fast. The walls of Vista Canyon flashed by, the roadside signs blurred before me. "Drive Slowly" meant nothing to me. And "Danger—Falling Rocks" was kid stuff.

I wasn't afraid of falling rocks. I was afraid of seeing the Professor's car, or Jake's, in the rear-view mirror. I was afraid of seeing Doc Sylvestro waiting for me in ambush with a sawed-off shotgun.

As I approached the heart of the canyon I slowed down. Just before the turn which brought me to the crossroads beneath the hillside, I pulled over to the shoulder and stopped the motor. I climbed out and walked cautiously around the bend.

A car was parked up against the trees—a strange car. I inspected it, noted the familiar AMA seal. Doctor Sylvestro's heap, all right: That meant he was still up there.

I returned to my car and started the motor. A U-turn was dangerous here, but it was more dangerous to leave the car standing where it could be seen.

So I drove back slowly down the road until I hit another sidepath in the canyon. I drove the car up the dirt roadbed until I found a spot under some trees, out of sight. I parked here and walked back on foot. I kept looking back over my shoulder, in case somebody came along. And I kept looking ahead, anticipating Doc Sylvestro. I came abreast of the crossing again, glanced up at the hillside house far above me, and then found a clump of bushes to screen me.

Then I sat down, lit a cigarette, and let the sand-fleas have dinner. The cigarette-smoke didn't rise above the bushes, nor did I. I sprawled out and watched the sunset. I leaned back and closed my eyes. I began to doze—

Muffled sound from far away: Door slam; crunching; footsteps. Doctor Sylvestro descended interminable stairs. I caught glimpses of him through the trees. He minced down, carrying the inevitable black bag, stopped at the bottom, mopped his forehead, and pulled out a cigarette. He lit it, and a little red eye moved through the dusk toward his car.

I crossed over to the wooden stairway and climbed. There was no hand-rail, and the canyon depths loomed below. The sky darkened. I sweated.

Up, and up, and up. I looked down at the gray ribbon of road. No cars. I went on.

Then I stood on a small patio, below the porch. The house ahead of me was dark. This time I knew what to do. I went around to the porch and looked for the place where I'd slashed the screen. I entered and walked into the parlor.

The house was more than dark—it was empty. There were no signs of struggle, nothing to indicate what Doctor Sylvestro might have been doing.

Perhaps I'd been mistaken. Perhaps Miss Bauer had left; she might be at Ellen's place right now'. Best thing to do was call and find out, right away.

I looked around for the phone. There were two, standing on the table in the corner. I started over to the table.

No—wait a minute. Miss Bauer had said something about the bedroom. I could just peek in, first. I peeked.

Nothing there. The bed was made, no signs of packing or confusion. I was relieved rather than disappointed.

Of course, I might just as well try the kitchen too before calling. . . .

I walked into the kitchen.

Even before I entered, I could smell it; the strangely familiar odor, the instinctively recognized reek.

An attempt had been made to mop up. But there were stains on the table, on the floor all around it. I thought of a butcher-shop, an operating-room—

Operating-room. . . . Doctor Sylvestro and his black bag! But then, where —

A humming sound from the corner. Something huge and white and gleaming was there—something that hummed and purred next to the refrigerator. I walked over to the deep-freeze, tugged the handle, raised the lid.

I saw the packages wrapped in butcher's paper; six of them. I lifted out the top one, the round one.

I unwrapped Miss Bauer's head. . . .

There was nothing else for me to do, then. I closed the deep freeze and left the kitchen, left the humming, the odor, the stains. I walked over to the table and picked up the nearest of the two phones. There was nothing else for me to do.

My finger, clicking the receiver. My voice, saying, "Give me the police department, please."

An answering voice, a hollow voice, *Jake's* voice: "What are you doing here?"

Here? I dropped the mouthpiece. Jake wasn't *here.* How did he get on the phone?

But I had dozed off for a little while when waiting out there in the bushes . . . he *could* have come . . . and the phone . . .

That phone was connected with the vaults under the fox-pen!

I knew it now, knew there wouldn't be time to take the other phone and call the cops for Jake was climbing out of the cistern. I heard a clang as I ran toward the porch door.

I stood on the patio, at the head of the stairs. I gazed down into darkness, and something moved—something blacker than darkness. A black suit? The Professor, coming up the stairs.

Jake's feet thudded through the house. Jake's voice bounced off the mountains.

"Hey, come back here!"

“What’s the matter?” The Professor’s voice, from below; not very far below’, either.

Jake didn’t reply. He made tor the porch. “Stop!”

I hesitated.

Then I saw the flash, heard the sound of the shot. It went *spa Jig!* And it was close, too close.

I ran forward in darkness. The windlass loomed. They were shouting now. Jake ran after me. I jumped into the cable-car, tripped the windlass.

There was another shot, another flash and a *spang!* But the car was grating down, I was crashing through a gantlet of branches that stabbed at my face. I crouched low, racing in darkness.

“Get him!” *Spang!* “The rope, you fool—cut that cable!”

Clattering, ripping, roaring . . . must be halfway down now . . . the flimsy wooden car like an orange-crate, swaying. . . .

It was black, no moon shone, and the trees clawed me. I fell into darkness. And then the car lurched; something snapped. For a moment I hung there, grabbing air. Behind me something rumbled and crashed. Somebody had started a boulder down. And somebody had cut the cable.

The rock came. The car tipped. And I hurtled down through the tree-tops. I could see them coming closer and closer, and I closed my eyes; then it didn’t matter it I closed them or not, because the blackness was everywhere.

Chapter Seventeen

I OPENED MY EYES. My neck ached, my head ached. For a moment I lay still while I sorted and catalogued the varieties of pain.

Opening my eyes hadn’t helped much. There was still darkness all around me, but gradually I could focus. I raised my head, bracing myself on my hands. I was on the ground, with needles lacerating my palms. Pine needles.

Yes, that would be right. I had crashed through the trees and now I was lying in the canyon. Above me—Muffled voices. Footsteps. Then a gleam, from far away, flashlight beam. Jake and the Professor were hunting for me, hunting in the night. And they'd find me here, in a matter of moments.

There seemed to be a tree-trunk, far away. I hunched forward. My fingers clawed bark, braced the broad surface.

I got to my knees, embracing the tree-trunk. It must have looked silly, and it hurt like hell. The big pain centered in my head and neck. . . . Voices came closer. I could hear something snap.

Then I was walking away from the voices. Walking very slowly, walking very softly. I bumped into bushes, and it hurt. I bumped into trees, and it hurt. But I kept right on walking, through the underbrush.

They would be watching the road. I'd better not try to climb out of the canyon. I couldn't make it, anyway. The main job was to keep walking, keep from falling down and letting the pain smother me in sleep.

Deep darkness and crickets all about me. No voices, now. I was walking along the dry bed of a little gully. It was dusty. I smelled the dust when I stumbled and fell. I coughed, got up and walked again. I wiped dust from my face, and something sticky came away in my hand.

The ground sloped. I clung to branches and crawled upward. Then I could see the road. It might be safe to cross here, if there were no lights. I didn't see a flash. I felt gravel under my feet, felt it grind against my knees as I pitched forward again.

I sprawled there, waiting for them to come and get me, waiting for a car to run over me, waiting for the next wave of pain. There was nothing else to do, so I tried to think. That hurt worse than anything else.

There was something I had to do, now. Something about a call, and a car. . . . Yes. My car. Up the side-road, if I could find it. If they hadn't found it.

I got up and walked. I found the side-road. I found the car. I even managed to open the door and climb inside. Then I blacked out again.

I opened my eyes and fumbled at the dashboard. Lights. There were keys in my pocket. The pain was mounting, but I could see. I had to see, in order to drive.

I drove. I drove very slowly, and then I drove fast. The road kept winding and winding and I wound with it.

The sky turned gray. Dawn. This was Saturday. . . . Saturday morning. Nobody would be at the office. I couldn't go to the house; they'd think of that. But the office—

Yes. That's where I was going. Because the files were there, the files and the records. I had to burn them before I called the police.

The police would know what to do about my head. First burn the records, let them burn in hell, and then sleep. They could all burn in hell, just as long as they let me sleep.

Driving burning hurting driving stopping burning walking falling lying sleeping sleeping sleeping. . . .

When I woke up I felt fine.

I was sitting in a chair behind a desk in a big room lined with mirrors, and I felt fine.

I looked at the mirrors, at the face in the mirrors, a face, covered with dirt and blood. At first I didn't recognize the face, and then I remembered.

Ottilie Bauer and the deep freeze. . . . Mike Drayton and the swimming-pool. . . . Edgar Clinton Caldwell and the rope. . . . Ellen Post and . . . what?

That was enough to make anyone blow his stack. I emptied the desks and file cabinets and set a match to the papers, using a chair as a poker to make sure that everything burned. I jabbed and heaved and ripped until I began to sweat and some of the anger drained out me, then I went outside.

Even then I kept seeing the round package in the freezer. By the time I got to the street I was blowing my stack again and the earthquake seemed entirely appropriate. The earth shook and trembled; fissures opened in the street, and buildings swayed and cracked hideously.

My car was half-smothered under a large sign that had fallen, and I was too impatient to be bothered, so I went to Ellen's apartment on foot. I had my finger on the bell when I hesitated. Then I searched my pockets and used the key she had given me.

I needn't have bothered being careful. The apartment was empty, just as it had been the last time I was there, except for a small table in the foyer that was overturned. I took off on a run back to the car and started tearing at the debris until I could get one door open. I squeezed in, started the motor, rocked the car back and forth until I was out from under the sign, then sped back to the Professor's fox-farm.

If he had done anything to Ellen—

I parked at the bottom of the stairs and started climbing. Jake would be on guard somewhere, and as soon as I could I left the steps and worked through the underbrush around to the fox-pen. I climbed dowm the iron steps into the cistern.

The Professor would be there, and Ellen—that much I knew, but nothing more. If Miss Bauer had been right, if the Professor actually had swallowed his own line and really did think that he was the Devil—I shuddered.

I moved along the passageway toward the sound of voices from beyond. Cadenced chanting rose at my approach.

I steeled myself for what I might see: Satan, with the silver bowl, the silver knife of sacrifice, crouching over the altar and the body of Ellen. Then a sound arrested me; a chink of light guided my footsteps to a side of the corridor. There was a small room beyond. I approached it, peered through the inch-open door.

Ellen!

She lay upon a couch and black velvet bore the naked jewel of her loveliness. Great lights blazed down upon her flesh, but her eyes were closed in sleep or in death.

And there was a hooded one who crouched behind a chromed tripod, making strange vague fumbling gestures—

I remembered. Once there had lived a man named Caldwell and he was photographed. The hood and tripod, the lights, the nakedness—

I opened the door, rushed into the room. The hood fell away from the gargoyle face of Sylvestro.

He turned, but I moved very quickly. I grabbed the tripod and struck him across the head, not once but many times. He fell as blood gushed forth from his twisted mouth.

I bent over Ellen, caressing her warm, living flesh. She didn't move. She slept as one drugged. I slapped her face. Finally eyelids fluttered, flickered, parted. She awoke.

"You're here," she whispered. "Eddie!"

"Your clothing—find it," I said.

She found the garments in a cubicle at the side of the room. She was dazed, submissive.

I stared at the interior of the cubicle; shelves lined the walls and upon them were jars and bottles and packets.

"It's their darkroom," she said. "Photographic supplies: chemicals, paper, film, old negatives. They have curtains in the other room, and they take pictures of the fools with dark light flashes. That's the racket. But how did you get here?"

I shook my head. This was not the time to explain. I was mad clean through.

"This other room," I said. "There is an altar?"

"Yes." She came close to me. "But let's get out of here. We can phone the police—"

"They are assembled now? And one can enter behind the curtains, with space to stand concealed?"

"What's that got to do with us? Eddie, I'm scared. That man Hermann—you were right about him, he really thinks he's the Devil. Come on, let's hurry."

I entered the cubicle. She followed me.

"What are you going to do?" she whispered.

I told her how to plant the negatives and film near the curtains and set them off when I gave the signal as I approached the altar.

"But you can't get away with it! It's so much easier to get out and let the police come."

"Trust me," I said.

"All right, Eddie, whatever you say."

Then I went back into the corridor, where the chanting rose, and into the room with the altar. The chamber was low and broad beneath a domed rock ceiling. Upon the red-draped walls the shadows danced by candlelight. Tapers blazed down upon the hordes of Hell.

I moved silently to the side, slipped behind the drapes and found a space between wall and hanging which was like a little corridor extending all around the room. I walked down and saw that Ellen followed at a distance, her arms laden. She deposited her burden and withdrew. She would return, I knew, to carry out my instructions. I hoped it would work. Even if it didn't, I would have the satisfaction of destroying the negatives he was using for blackmail.

There were slits at intervals in the drapery, and I peered through an opening and contemplated the scene.

All wore cloaks and some were cowled, but I knew many of them from the days of Judson Roberts. I saw Lorna Lewis. She faced the altar, swaying upon her haunches as she chanted and waved a goblet. All were chanting, all held goblets, all adored the altar and the Black Goat of the Sabbat.

The tethered kid bleated upon the dais, and goat-stench mingled with the reek of candle-wax and wine. The crucifix inverted—the bowl and the knife—these were symbols of the Devil's Mass. I had read of them and I recognized them, just as I now recognized the man in black who led the chanting from the altar-stone.

The Devil stood incarnate before me; the white skull bobbed and the white hands wove evil glamour over all. I got mad all over again.

Ellen came up behind me and nodded. I waved her back and moved along the wall, edging up to the hangings near the altar.

Walls vibrated with the litany, for the sacrifice was at hand. The Devil would slay the kid, they would partake of mingled blood and wine. Then came Saturnalia, the orgy of vice.

I stepped out from the hangings and stood before them. The chanting ceased.

The man who had been Professor Hermann gazed at me, and there was nothing of humanity in his eyes or face, for the mask had been stripped away. Now he was the Devil. I saw him come toward me, watched him raise the knife. Then I smiled. This was the moment.

Once this man had been Otto Hermann. Once he had been a man like anyone else. Now he was insane with delusions of Satan, with altars and sacrifices and silver knives. He blinked and came forward, still holding the knife. He must have seen it in my eyes.

"So that's it," he whispered. I signaled to Ellen with a gesture behind my back. "I'm Satan and you're the avenging angel. Strange that it should come to this! But what I have created I can destroy."

The knife swept up. I smiled and waited and hoped and waited. I watched the silver sweep of the blade as it started down—then saw it blotted out in a blanket of fire. The Devil jumped back, caught off-guard by the sudden burst of flame from the fastburning negatives. I started to lunge at him, then saw a drapery catch fire and fall forward, burning furiously, cloaking his body in a solid sheet of flame. It wrapped around him and he screamed; then he fell back and smoke rose and swirled to blot out his writhing body. Satan was returned to Hell.

My eyes hurt and it was hard to breathe. I groped for the door amidst the dense smoke. I choked, gasped, stumbled through the corridor in darkness. I found the iron stairs, climbed frantically and gulped fresh air at the top.

Now it was ended, I couldn't think, couldn't remember. I began to stagger to the bottom of the hillside, clinging to the trees. Lights flashed past me in the night. The others—the would-be Satans—were fleeing below.

I came to the car, waiting on the side of the road. I got the door open, somehow, and there she was! Ellen, with her face and hands oddly blackened. She gasped when she saw me.

"It worked, then? And Hermann—"

"The Devil is dead," I told her. Then I collapsed.

She put her arms around me.

"Go to sleep, Eddie," she said. "It's all right now. Go to sleep."

Chapter Eighteen

SHE DROVE ME to the beach-house and put me to bed. I stayed in bed for the next three days. I don't remember much of that at all. Gradually I managed to pull out of it.

As it was, I had been up two days before she'd even let me talk about what had happened.

"When you got away in the cable car, they must have figured you were dead," Ellen decided. "Anyway, they had to take a chance on it. The earthquake kept them from coming into town and finding out whether you were alive and had returned to the office.

"I was so startled when the temblor came that I dropped a phonograph record," she told me. "It must have been Sylvestro who imitated your voice over the phone to me. He said I was to come right out to the canyon. They had all been killed in the quake, and you wanted me to help you because your car had been hit by falling rocks. I went right out there—"

"And they grabbed you," I finished. "You see, that Black Mass deal had to go through, earthquake or no earthquake. They were determined to frame you immediately. They wanted photographs of you to show to your uncle at once. Unless they could make a deal with him within the coming week he'd be named a candidate and they couldn't apply the necessary pressure to him personally. Even the Professor could work on your uncle only as an individual, beforehand.

"So they got you out there and doped you and set things up for their photos. The Professor was smart. He held the ceremony too, as planned—and was ready to work with black-light photography on the others during the ritual. It must have taken him a long time to sell Satanism to the chosen few. He had the whole scheme worked out, and what a sweet blackmail it would have been if he could have carried it off! He was a smart one—smart as the devil."

It wasn't until the next day that Ellen let me see the newspapers, and I read about what they found in the house out at Vista Canyon.

They didn't know very much, even after all this time. The quake had kept the authorities busy enough, and naturally nobody who had been mixed up in the ceremony did any talking to the police.

There was no mention of poor Miss Bauer, and I could only assume her remains had been disposed of right after I had found the deep-freeze.

Apparently nobody had tumbled to that cistern in the abandoned fox-pit behind the house. Everything that it contained—all the burned and charred remnants of the past—remained hidden and would probably never come to light. But "police were investigating rumors of a mysterious cult" and they were "seeking the missing owner, Otto Hermann, well-known psychological consultant, who disappeared during the time of the quake."

My name wasn't mentioned. Judson Roberts wasn't tied in to this deal, and Eddie Haines never had been.

He never need be.

Even if they do get down into the hillside and find Sylvestro and the Professor—even if they finally start a full-dress investigation—I'm still in the clear. I burned the Judson Roberts record file at the office, and there is no connection between him and Eddie Haines at all.

Ellen and I can go away, today. Or I can stay here and face the music, risk taking a rap if they want to pin one on me for what happened.

Writing it all down here, the way I have these past weeks, I can turn it over to the authorities tomorrow. Or I can burn it, the way the Professor was burned, the way the past was burned.

I think I'm going to leave it up to Ellen to decide. She'll know what's best. Yes, I'll ask her, and whatever she says, I'll do.

As long as she remembers to call me "Eddie."

1953

The Lighthouse

The editors of FANTASTIC *are proud to present, for the first time in the pages of any magazine, the story on which Edgar Allan Poe was at work when he died. Now, over one hundred years later, it has been completed by a modern-day master of the horror story. His name is Robert Bloch, author of such classic tales of terror as* Yours Truly—Jack the Ripper*,* The Cloak*, and many other spine tinglers.*

Here's your chance to be a literary detective! Tell us, if you can, where the old master put down his pen for the last time, and where the young man from Milwaukee took over for him a century later.

Jan. 1—1796. This day—my first on the lighthouse—I make this entry in my Diary, as agreed on with DeGrat. As regularly as I *can* keep the journal, I will—but there is no telling what may happen to a man all alone as I am—I may get sick or worse. . . .

So far well! The cutter had a narrow escape—but why dwell on that, since I am *here*, all safe? My spirits are beginning to revive already, at the mere thought of being—for once in my life at least—thoroughly *alone;* for, of course, Neptune, large as he is, is not to be taken into consideration as "society". Would to Heaven I had ever found in "society" one half as much *faith* as in this poor dog;—in such case I and "society" might never have parted—even for a year. . . .

What most surprises me, is the difficulty DeGrat had in getting me the appointment—and I a noble of the realm! It could not be that the Consistory had any doubt of my ability to manage the light. *One* man has attended it before now—and got on quite as well as the three that are usually put in. The duty is a mere nothing; and the printed instructions are as plain as possible. It would never have done to let Orndoff accompany me. I should never have made any way with my book as long as he was within reach of me, with his intolerable gossip—not to mention that everlasting meerschaum. Besides, I wish to be *alone*. . . .

It is strange that I never observed, until this moment, how dreary a sound that word has—"alone" ! I could half fancy there was some peculiarity in the echo of these cylindrical walls—but oh, no!—that is all nonsense. I do believe I am going to get nervous about my insulation. *That* will never do. I have not forgotten DeGrat's prophecy. Now for a scramble to the lantern and a good look around to "see what I can see". . . . To see what I can see indeed!—not very much. The swell is subsiding a little, I think—but the cutter will have a rough passage home, nevertheless. She will hardly get within sight of the Norland before noon tomorrow—and yet it can hardly be more than 190 or 200 miles.

Jan. 2. I have passed this day in a species of ecstasy that I find it impossible to describe. My passion for solitude could scarcely have been more thoroughly gratified.

I do not say *satisfied;* for I believe I should never be satiated with such delight as I have experienced today. . . .

The wind lulled after daybreak, and by the afternoon the sea had gone down materially. . . . Nothing to be seen with the telescope even, but ocean and sky, with an occasional gull.

Jan, 3. A dead calm all day. Towards evening, the sea looked very much like glass. A few seaweeds came in sight; but besides them absolutely *nothing* all day—not even the slightest speck of cloud. . . . Occupied myself in exploring the lighthouse. . . . It is a very lofty one—as I find to my cost when I have to ascend its interminable stairs—not quite 160 feet, I should say, from the low-water mark to the top of the lantern. From the bottom *inside* the shaft, however, the distance to the summit is 180 feet at least:—thus the floor is 20 feet below the surface of the sea, even at low-tide. . . .

It seems to me that the hollow interior at the bottom should have been filled in with solid masonry. Undoubtedly the whole would have been thus rendered more *safe:*—but what am I thinking about? A structure such as this is safe enough under any circumstances. I should feel myself secure in it during the fiercest hurricane that ever raged—and yet I have heard seamen say that, occasionally, with a wind at South-West, the sea has been known to run higher here than anywhere, with the single exception of the Western opening of the Straits of Magellan.

No mere sea, though, could accomplish anything with this solid iron-riveted wall—which, at 50 feet from high-water mark, is four feet thick, if one inch. The basis on which the structure rests seems to me to be chalk. . . .

Jan. 4. I am now prepared to resume work on my book, having spent this day in familiarizing myself with a regular routine.

My actual duties will be, I perceive, absurdly simple—the light requires little tending beyond a periodic replenishment of the oil for the six-wick burner. As to my own needs, they are easily satisfied, and the exertion of an occasional trip down the stairs is all I must anticipate.

At the base of the stairs is the entrance room; beneath that is twenty feet of empty shaft. Above the entrance room, at the next turn of the circular iron staircase, is my store-room which contains the casks of fresh water and the food supplies, plus linens and other daily needs. Above that—again another spiral of those interminable stairs!—is the oil room, completely filled with the tanks from which I must feed the wicks. Fortunately, I perceive that I can limit my descent to the store-room to once a week if I choose, for it is possible for me to carry sufficient provisions in one load to supply both myself and Neptune for such a period. As to the oil supply, I need only to bring up two drum every three days and thus insure a constant illumination. If I choose, I can place a dozen or more spare drums on the platform near the light and thus provide for several weeks to come.

So it is that in my daily existence I can limit my movements to the upper half of the lighthouse; that is to say, the three spirals opening on the topmost three levels. The lowest is my “living room”—and it is here, of course, that Neptune is confined the greater part of the day; here, too, that I plan to write at a desk near the wall-slit that affords a view of the sea without. The second highest level is my bedroom and kitchen combined. Here the weekly rations of food and water are contained in cupboards for that purpose; here, too, is the ingenious stove fed by the selfsame oil that lights the beacon above. The topmost level is the service room giving access to the light itself and to the platform surrounding it. Since the light is fixed, and its reflectors set, there is no need for me ever to ascend to the platform save when replenishing the oil supply or making a repair or adjustment as per the written instructions—a circumstance which may well never arise during my stay here.

Already I have carried enough oil, water and provender to the upper levels to last me for an entire month—I need stir from my two rooms only to replenish the wicks.

For the rest, I am free! utterly free—my time is my own, and in this lofty realm I rule as King. Although Neptune is my only living subject I can well imagine that I am sovereign o’er all I see—ocean below and stars above. I am master of the sun that rises in rubicund radiance from the sea at dawn, emperor of wind and monarch of the gale, sultan of the waves that sport or roar in roiling torrents about the base of my palace pinnacle. I command the moon in the heavens, and the very ebb and flow of the tide does homage to my reign.

But enough of fancies—DeGrat warned me to refrain from morbid or from grandiose speculation—now I shall take up in all earnestness the task that lies before me. Yet this night, as I sit before the window in the starlight, the tides sweeping against these lofty walls can only echo my exultation; I am free—and, at last, alone!

Jan. 11. A week has passed since my last entry in this diary, and as I read it over, I can scarce comprehend that it was I who penned those words.

Something has happened—the nature of which lies unfathomed. I have worked, eaten, slept, replenished the wicks twice. My outward existence has been placid. I can ascribe the alteration in my feelings to naught but some inner alchemy; enough to say that a disturbing change has taken place.

Alone! I, who breathed the word as if it were some mystic incantation bestowing peace, have come—I realize it now—to loathe the very sound of the syllables. And the ghastliness of meaning I know full well.

It is a dismaying, it is a dreadful thing, to be alone. Truly alone, as I am, with only Neptune to exist beside me and by his breathing presence remind me that I am not the sole inhabitant of a blind and senseless universe. The sun and stars that wheel overhead in their endless cycle seem to rush across the horizon unheeding—and, of late, unheeded, for I cannot fix my mind upon them with normal constancy. The sea that swirls or ripples below me is naught but a purposeless chaos of utter emptiness.

I thought myself to be a man of singular self-sufficiency, beyond the petty needs of a boring and banal society. How wrong I was!—for I find myself longing for the sight of another face, the sound of another voice, the touch of other hands whether they offer caresses or blows. Anything, anything for reassurement that my dreams are indeed false and that I am *not*, actually, alone.

And yet I *am*. I am, and I will be. The world is two hundred miles away; I will not know it again for an entire year. And it in turn—but no more! I cannot put down my thoughts while in the grip of this morbid mood.

Jan. 13. Two more days—two more centuries!—have passed. Can it be less than two weeks since I was immured in this prison tower? I mount the turret of my dungeon and gaze at the horizon; I am not hemmed in by bars of steel but by columns and pillars and webs of wild and raging water. The sea has changed; gray skies have wrought a wizardry so that I stand surrounded by a tumult that threatens to become a tempest.

I turn away, for I can bear no more, and descend to my room. I seek to write—the book is bravely begun, but of late I can bring myself to do nothing constructive or creative—and in a moment I fling aside my pen and rise to pace. To endlessly pace the narrow, circular confines of my tower of torment.

Wild words, these? And yet I am not alone in my affliction—Neptune, Neptune the loyal, the calm, the placid—feels it too.

Perhaps it is but the approach of the storm that agitates him so—for Nature bears closer kinship with the beast. He stays constantly at my side, whining now, and the muffled roaring of the waves without our prison causes him to tremble. There is a chill in the air that our stove cannot dissipate, but it is not cold that oppresses him. . . .

I have just mounted to the platform and gazed out at the spectacle of gathering storm. The waves are fantastically high; they sweep against the lighthouse in titanic tumult. These solid walls of stone shudder rhythmically with each onslaught. The churning sea is gray no longer—the water is black, black as basalt and as heavy. The sky’s hue has deepened so that at the moment no horizon is visible. I am surrounded by a billowing blackness thundering against me. . . .

Back below now, as lightning flickers. The storm will break soon, and Neptune howls piteously. I stroke his quivering flanks, but the poor animal shrinks away. It seems that he fears even my presence; can it be that my own features betray an equal agitation? I do not know—I only feel that I am helpless, trapped here and awaiting the mercy of the storm. I cannot write much longer.

And yet I will set down a further statement. I must, if only to prove to myself that reason again prevails. In writing of my venture up to the platform—my viewing of the sea and sky—I omitted to mention the meaning of a single moment. There came upon me, as I gazed down at the black and boiling madness of the waters below, a wild and willful craving to become one with it. But why should I disguise the naked truth?—I felt an insane impulse to hurl myself into the sea!

It has passed now; passed, I pray, forever. I did not yield to this perverse prompting and I am back here in my quarters, writing calmly once again. Yet the fact remains—the hideous urge to destroy myself came suddenly, and with the force of one of those monstrous waves.

And what—I force myself to realize—was the meaning of my demented desire? It was that I sought escape, escape from loneliness. It was as if by mingling with the sea and the storm I would no longer be *alone*.

But I defy the elements. I defy the powers of the earth and of the heavens. Alone I am, alone I *must* be—and come what may, I shall survive! My laughter rises above all your thunder!

So—ye spirits of the storm—blow, howl, rage, hurl your watery weight against my fortress—I am greater than you in all your powers. But wait! Neptune . . . something has happened to the creature—I must attend him.

Jan. 16. The storm is abated. I am back at my desk now, alone—truly alone. I have locked poor Neptune in the store-room below; the unfortunate beast seems driven out of his wits by the forces of the storm. When last I wrote he was worked into a frenzy, whining and pawing and wheeling in circles. He was incapable of responding to my commands and I had no choice but to literally drag him down the stairs by the scruff of his neck and incarcerate him in the store-room where he could not come to harm. I own that concern for *my* safety was involved—the possibility of being imprisoned in this lighthouse with a mad dog must be avoided.

His howls, throughout the storm, were pitiable indeed, but now he is silent. When last I ventured to gaze into the room I perceived him sleeping, and I trust that rest and calm will restore him to my full companionship as before.

Companionship!

How shall I describe the horrors of the storm I faced *alone*?

In this diary entry I have prefaced a date—*January 16th*—but that is merely a guess. The storm has swept away all track of Time. Did it last a day, two days, three—as I now surmise—a week, or a century? I do *not* know.

I know only an endless raging of waters that threatened, time and again, to engulf the very pinnacle of the lighthouse. I know only an eternity of ebony, an eon of billowing black composed of sea and sky commingled. I only know that there were times when my own voice outroared the storm—but how can I convey the cause of *that*? There was a time, perhaps a full day, perhaps much longer, when I could not bear to rise from my couch but lay with my face buried in the pillows, weeping like a child. But mine were not the pure tears of childhood innocence—call them, rather, the tears of Lucifer upon the realization of his eternal fall from grace. It seemed to me that I was truly the victim of an endless damnation; condemned forever to remain a prisoner in a world of thunderous chaos.

There is no need to write of the fancies and fantasies which assailed me through those unhallowed hours. At times I felt that the lighthouse was giving way and that I would be swept into the sea. At times I knew myself to be a victim of a colossal plot—I cursed DeGrat for sending me, knowingly, to my doom. At times (and these were the worst moments of all) I felt the full force of loneliness, crashing down upon me in waves higher than those wrought by water.

But all has passed, and the sea—and myself—are calm again. A peculiar calmness, this; as I gaze out upon the water there are certain phenomena I was not aware of until this very moment.

Before setting down my observations, let me reassure myself that I am, indeed, *quite* calm; no trace of my former tremors or agitation yet remains. The transient madness induced by the storm has departed and my brain is free of phantasms—indeed, my perceptive faculties seem to be sharpened to an unusual acuity.

It is almost as though I find myself in possession of an additional sense, an ability to analyze and penetrate beyond former limitations superimposed by Nature.

The water on which I gaze is placid once more. The sky is only lightly leaden in hue. But wait—low on the horizon creeps a sudden flame! It is the sun, the Arctic sun in sullen splendour, emerging momentarily from the pall to incarnadine the ocean. Sun and sky, sea and air about me, turn to blood.

Can it be I who but a moment ago wrote of returned, regained sanity? I, who have just shrieked aloud, "Alone!"—and half-rising from my chair, heard the muffled booming echo reverberate through the lonely lighthouse, its sepulchral accent intoning *"Alone!"* in answer? It may be that I am, despite all resolution, going mad; if so, I pray the end comes soon.

Jan. 18. There will be no end! I have conceived a notion, a theory which my heightened faculties soon will test. I shall embark upon an experiment. . . .

Jan. 26. A week has passed here in my solitary prison. Solitary?—perhaps, but not for long. The experiment is proceeding. I must set down what has occurred.

The sound of the echo set me to thinking. One sends out one's voice and it comes back. One sends out one's thoughts and—can it be that there is a response? Sound, as we know, travels in waves and patterns. The emanations of the brain, perhaps, travel similarly. And they are not confined by physical laws of time, space, or *duration.*

Can one’s thoughts produce a reply that *materializes*, just as one’s voice produces an echo? An echo is a product of a certain vacuum. A thought . . .

Concentration is the key. I have been concentrating. My supplies are replenished, and Neptune—visited during my venture below—seems rational enough, although he shrinks away when I approach him. I have left him below and spent the past week here. Concentration, I repeat, is the key to my experiment.

Concentration, by its very nature, is a difficult task: I addressed myself to it with no little trepidation. Strive but to remain seated quietly with a mind “empty” of all thought, and one finds in the space of a very few minutes that the errant body is engaged in all manner of distracting movement—foot tapping, finger twisting, facial grimacing.

This I managed to overcome after a matter of many hours—my first three days were virtually exhausted in an effort to rid myself of nervous agitation and assume the inner and outer tranquillity of the Indian *fakir*. Then came the task of “filling” the empty consciousness—filling it completely with *one* intense and concentrated effort of will.

What echo would I bring forth from nothingness? What companionship would I seek here in my loneliness? What was the sign or symbol I desired? What symbolized to me the whole absent world of life and light?

DeGrat would laugh me to scorn if he but knew the concept that I chose. Yet I, the cynical, the jaded, the decadent, searched my soul, plumbed my longing, and found that which I most desired—a simple sign, a token of all the earth removed: a fresh and growing flower, a *rose l*

Yes, a simple rose is what I have sought—a rose, torn from its living stem, perfumed with the sweet incarnation of life itself. Seated here before the window I have dreamed, I have mused, I have then concentrated with every fibre of my being upon a *rose.*

My mind was filled with redness—not the redness of the sun upon the sea, or the redness of blood, but the rich and radiant redness of the rose. My soul was suffused with the scent of a rose: as I brought my faculties to bear exclusively upon the image, these walls fell away, the walls of my very flesh fell away, and I seemed to merge in the texture, the odour, the color, the actual *essence* of a rose.

Shall I write of this, the seventh day, when seated at the window as the sun emerged from the sea, I felt the commanding of my consciousness? Shall I write of rising, descending the stairs, opening the iron door at the base of the lighthouse and peering out at the billows that swirled at my very feet? Shall I write of stooping, of grasping, of holding?

Shall I write that I have indeed descended those iron stairs and returned here with my wave-borne trophy—*that this very day, from waters two hundred miles distant from any shore, I have reached down and plucked a fresh rose?*

Jan. 28. It has not withered! I keep it before me constantly in a vase on this table, and it is a priceless ruby plucked from dreams. It is real—as real as the howls of poor Neptune, who senses that something odd is afoot. His frantic barking does not disturb me; nothing disturbs me, for I am master of a power greater than earth or space or time. And I shall use this power, now, to bring me the final boon. Here in my tower I have become quite the philosopher: I have learned my lesson well and realize that I do not desire wealth, or fame, or the trinkets of society. My need is simply this—Companionship. And now, with the power that is mine to control, I shall have it!

Soon, quite soon, I shall no longer be alone!

Jan. 30. The storm has returned, but I pay it no heed; nor do I mark the howlings of Neptune, although the beast is now literally dashing himself against the door of the store-room. One might fancy that his efforts are responsible for the shuddering of the very lighthouse itself, but no; it is the fury of the Northern gale. I pay it no heed, as I say, but I fully realize that this storm surpasses in extent and intensity anything I could imagine as witness to its predecessor.

Yet it is unimportant; even though the light above me flickers and threatens to be extinguished by the sheer velocity of wind that seeps through these stout walls; even though the ocean sweeps against the foundations with a force that makes solid stone seem flimsy as straw; even though the sky is a single black roaring mouth that yawns low upon the horizon to engulf me.

These things I sense but dimly, as I address myself to the appointed task. I pause now only for food and a brief respite—and scribble down these words to mark the progress of resolution towards an inevitable goal.

For the past several days I have bent my faculties to my will, concentrating utterly and to the uttermost upon the summoning of a Companion.

This Companion will be—I confess it!—a woman; a woman far surpassing the limitations of common mortality. For she is, and must be fashioned, of dreams and longing, of desire and delight beyond the bounds of flesh.

She is the woman of whom I have always dreamed, the One I have sought in vain through what I once presumed, in my ignorance, was the world of reality. It seems to me now that I have always known her, that my soul has contained her presence forever. I can visualize her perfectly—I know her hair, each strand more precious than a miser's gold; the riches of her ivory and alabaster brow, the perfection of her face and form are etched forever in my consciousness. DeGrat would scoff that she is but the figment of a dream—but DeGrat did not see the rose.

The rose—I hesitate to speak of it—has gone. It was the rose which I set before me when first I composed myself to this new effort of will. I gazed at it intently until vision faded, senses stilled, and I lost myself in the attempt of conjuring up my vision of a Companion.

Hours later, the sound of rising waters from without aroused me. I gazed about, my eyes sought the reassurance of the rose and rested only upon a *foulness.* Where the rose had risen proudly in its vase, red crest rampant upon a living stem, I now perceived only a noxious, utterly detestable strand of ichorous decay. No rose this, but only seaweed; rotted, noisome and putrescent. I flung it away, but for long moments I could not banish a wild presentiment—was it true that I had deceived myself? Was it a weed, and only a weed I plucked from the ocean's breast? Did the force of my thought momentarily invest it with the attributes of a rose? Would anything I called up from the depths—the depths of sea or the depths of consciousness—be *truly* real?

The blessed image of the Companion came to soothe these fevered speculations, and I knew myself saved. There *was* a rose; perhaps my thought had created it and nourished it—only when my entire concentration turned to other things did it depart, or resume another shape. And with my Companion, there will be no need for focussing my faculties elsewhere. She, and she alone, will be the recipient of everything my mind, my heart, my soul possesses. If will, if sentiment, if love are needed to preserve her, these things she shall have in entirety. So there is nothing to fear. Nothing to fear. . . .

Once again now I shall lay my pen aside and return to the great task—the task of "creation", if you will—and I shall not fail. The fear (I admit it!) of loneliness is enough to drive me forward to unimaginable brinks. She, and she alone, can save me, shall save me, *must* save me! I can see her now—the golden glitter of her—and my consciousness calls to her to rise, to appear before me in radiant reality. Somewhere upon these storm-tossed seas she *exists*, I know it—and wherever she may be, my call will come to her and she will respond.

Jan. 31. The command came at midnight. Roused from the depths of the most profound innermost communion by a thunderclap, I rose as though in the grip of somnambulistic compulsion and moved down the spiral stairs.

The lantern I bore trembled in my hand; its light wavered in the wind, and the very iron treads beneath my feet shook with the furious force of the storm. The booming of the waves as they struck the lighthouse walls seemed to place me within the center of a maelstrom of ear-shattering sound, yet over the demoniacal din I could detect the frenzied howls of poor Neptune as I passed the door behind which he was confined. The door shook with the combined force of the wind and of his still desperate efforts to free himself—but I hastened on my way, descending to the iron door at the base of the lighthouse.

To open it required the use of both hands, and I set the lantern down at one side. To open it, moreover, required the summoning of a resolution I scarcely possessed—for beyond that door was the force and fury of the wildest storm that ever shrieked across these seething seas. A sudden wave might dash me from the doorway, or, conversely, enter and inundate the lighthouse itself.

But consciousness prevailed; consciousness drove me forward.

I *knew*, I thrilled to the certainty that *she* was without the iron portal—I unbolted the door with the urgency of one who rushes into the arms of his beloved.

The door swung open—blew open—roared open—and the storm burst upon me; a ravening monster of black-mouthed waves capped with white fangs. The sea and sky surged forward as if to attack, and I stood enveloped in Chaos. A flash of lightning revealed the immensity of utter Nightmare.

I saw it not, for the same flash illumined the form, the lineaments of *she* whom I sought.

Lightning and lantern were unneeded—her golden glory outshone all as she stood there, pale and trembling, a goddess arisen from the depths of the sea!

Hallucination, vision, apparition? My trembling fingers sought, and found, their answer. Her flesh was real—cold as the icy waters from whence she came, but palpable and permanent. I thought of the storm, of doomed ships and drowning men, of a girl cast upon the waters and struggling towards the succor of the lighthouse beacon. I thought of a thousand explanations, a thousand miracles, a thousand riddles or reasons beyond rationality. Yet only one thing mattered—my Companion was here, and I had but to step forward and take her in my arms.

No word was spoken, nor could one be heard in all that Inferno. No word was needed, for she smiled. Pale lips parted as I held out my arms, and she moved closer. Pale lips parted—and I saw the pointed teeth, set in rows like those of a shark. Her eyes, fishlike and staring, swam closer. As I recoiled, her arms came up to cling, and they were cold as the waters beneath, cold as the storm, cold as death.

In one monstrous moment I *knew*, knew with uttermost certainty, that the power of my will had indeed summoned, the call of my consciousness *had* been answered. But the answer came not from the living, for nothing lived in this storm. I had sent my will out over the waters, but the will penetrates all dimensions, and my answer had come from *below* the waters. *She* was from below, where the drowned dead lie dreaming, and I had awakened her and clothed her with a horrid life. A life that thirsted, and must drink. . . .

I think I shrieked, then, but I heard no sound. Certainly, I did not hear the howls from Neptune as the beast, burst from his prison, bounded down the stairs and flung himself upon the creature.

His furry form bore her back and obscured my vision; in an instant she was falling backwards, away, into the sea that spawned her. Then, and only then, did I catch a glimpse of the final moment of animation in that which my consciousness had summoned. Lightning seared the sight inexorably upon my soul—the sight of the ultimate blasphemy I had created in my pride. The rose had wilted. . . .

The rose had wilted and become seaweed. And now, the golden one was gone and in its place was the bloated, swollen obscenity of a thing long-drowned and dead, risen from the slime and to that slime returning.

Only a moment, and then the waves overwhelmed it, bore it back into the blackness. Only a moment, and the door was slammed shut. Only a moment, and I raced up the iron stairs, Neptune yammering at my heels. Only a moment, and I reached the safety of this sanctuary.

Safety? There is no safety in the universe for me, no safety in a consciousness that could create such horror. And there is no safety here—the wrath of the waves increases with every moment, the anger of the sea and its creatures rises to an inevitable crescendo.

Mad or sane, it does not matter, for the end is the same in either case. I know now that the lighthouse will shatter and fall. I am already shattered, and must fall with it.

There is time only to gather these notes, strap them securely in a cylinder and attach it to Neptune's collar. It may be that he can swim, or cling to a fragment of debris. It may be that a ship, passing by this toppling beacon, may stay and search the waters for a sign—and thus find and rescue the gallant beast.

That ship shall not find me. I go with the lighthouse and go willingly, down to the dark depths. Perhaps—is it but perverted poetry?—I shall join my Companion there forever. Perhaps . . .

The lighthouse is trembling.

The beacon flickers above my head and I hear the rush of waters in their final onslaught. There is—yes—a wave, bearing down upon me. It is higher than the tower, it blots out the sky itself, everything. . . .

The Proxy Head

Every time there is a lull in the news, the newspapers begin highlighting the reports of strange objects and "flying saucers seen in the skies, and embellish their stories with wild conjectures as to the existence of these objects, their possible origin and their purpose. A most popular theory suggests that they are extraterrestrial observers. Actually, a really intelligent nonhuman race might have means of getting their information a lot closer to the source and with great authenticity. Consider Mr. Bloch's views on the possibility.

THE TALL YOUNG MAN stalked through the hotel lobby and headed for a door marked MEN.

Once inside the washroom he stood indecisively for a moment, then went over to a cubicle and deposited a nickel. The door swung open.

He entered, shut the door, listened to the click.

The click echoed a different click . . . click . . . click . . .

The tall young man reached up, removed his wig, and opened the top of his head.

He stood there, concealed in the cubicle, and his long slim fingers worked with the precision of delicate instruments. They made certain adjustments inside his skull, testing and setting and manipulating.

Sonic a little off, he registered. *Visio good but sonic reception poor.* The street-noises tended to knock out the adjustment, sometimes. *Change* *blueprints on next model,* he registered. *Allow wider range of compensation.*

Vibrationary reception worked perfectly, though. The orders from the control vessel came through constantly and with no interference. He knew what he had done, what he was doing, what he must do at all times.

His instrument-fingers completed their work inside his cranium. For the final check, he pressed the voice-box and uttered a few experimental sounds. A cough, a sigh. The noises echoed in the hollow washroom. Perfect.

Satisfied, he closed the slot in his head and carefully adjusted the wig once more. It was a handsome wig—real human hair, blond and wavy. He didn't know were the Hostiles had acquired it; probably from the raiding expedition last month when they came down to the desert and picked up those three men. What were they called?

Prospectors. The message came through vibrationary reception immediately. That reassured him. His guardians were with him every minute, watching him and guiding him. They knew men, studied men, and would supply him with whatever information and instructions he needed under any circumstances. They were exactly aware of what they were doing at all times.

Although the Alien roboteers were in the ship, a hundred miles no, they would always be with him through the medium of the vibrationary receptor built into his body.

The young man smiled. Rubberized, synthetic epidermal tissue, carefully coated with plastic, responded instantly. The pseudo-lips parted, disclosing the gleaming perfection of false teeth. A soundless mechanism simulated muscular action. The smile, like everything else about the young man, was perfect.

A great surge of confidence came to him through the receptor. The Hostiles were proud of him, proud of their work. And well they might be. Wasn't he entirely their creation? Hadn't they studied human anatomy, duplicated it perfectly and with utmost cunning? He could go anywhere, do anything, and never be suspected.

Never be suspected. That was the big thing. *A spy must be careful.*

That was part of the receptor's work, of course. To he careful for him. He was a mere machine. His consciousness was itself an illusion; actually he was only a highly evolved and complicated sending-receiving-registering mechanism. The combination gave him, in the aggregate, a sort of individuality, but it was neither necessary nor important.

Like the consciousness of men. That wasn't important, either. Stupid, imperfect men—how simple it was to deceive them! His creators, up there in the ship, knew just how to do that. Men are easy to fool. Yon can do anything you please on this planet if you know how.

Last night, when he was dropped, for example—dropped in an adaptation of mankind's own "parachute." He was given no conditioning or instructions; all he had to do was follow the orders and impulses coming through the receptor.

He'd landed in a condition described as—?

Naked, The word was supplied to him immediately (they knew everything, everything).

He landed naked. That is to say, without the customary body-covering. According to the rules of mankind, this was wrong. He'd be noticed. So the receptors sent him into the city under the cover of darkness. Told him how to skulk, to hide, to creep ever so cautiously up to the window of the clothing store on the dark, deserted street. And the receptors guided him so that he used his brand-new body to smash the window, smash the sign reading, money to loan—we buy and sell. And he found the clothing, put it on. Mechanical fingers mastered the new intricacies of dressing, of putting on shoes and tying a tie.

That would have looked odd to men, if there were one around to see. A life-size mechanical doll, dressing itself in a pawnshop . . . grotesque—frightening.

The receptor interrupted, now. *You mustn't frighten them,* it communicated. *Not unless ordered. You are to be quiet. Do nothing to attract attention. Your job is to observe, react, record. That is all. And remember the dangers.*

Remember the dangers?

It was hard for his mechanism to translate "remember" into a process and "dangers" into a realized phenomenon. He stood there in the dark cubicle and waited for awareness to come. It came.

Hastily, he backed away from the bowl. That was one of the dangers. Water. Water and oil and any liquid. His eyes, his nostrils, his mouth, the aperture under the wig must be protected from moisture. Even dampness would destroy the delicate balance that enabled him to function.

There would be no rain for forty-eight hours. That was known. No danger there. But he must *avoid moisture.*

He looked down at the water in the bowl. It looked so harmless, but it was dangerous. Dangerous to him. Not to the Hostiles. They had no such makeups to have to protect. For *them,* this planet was quite suitable. They had waited and watched and experimented and spied for a long, long time now, until certain that everything would be ideal here.

All that remained was to assess and analyze the present occupants—mankind. Mankind was many, and the Hostiles were few. The single ship possessed potential power and they could do almost anything, but the sheer weight of numbers promised victory to mankind, provided that mankind was ready to exist.

That was his job, now. To react and record. To move among men and assess them, analyze their—*psychology,* the word came from the receptor, together with a complete file of meaning.

He would spy on men. He would determine, or rather, the Hostiles would determine through him, whether mankind would resist a sudden surprise attack. Were men aggressive enough to put up determined resistance—or, as they presently surmised, would mankind flee from unknown terrors in blind panic?

It would not take long to find out, now. The ship was up there, ready. They were ready. And he was ready. Ready to go out, to react and record.

HE LEFT THE CUBICLE. There was water in the outer washroom, but he avoided it. He avoided strong lights, too, as directed; he had to avoid places and situations where he'd be expected to—what was it?—*eat* and *sleep.* Yes, and he must not *touch* anyone or he touched. He knew these things, and many more.

The receptor guided and directed him. It did not furnish explanations until necessary. Then explanations and proper reaction-patterns were instantly available.

Right now, for example, in the pocket of his *suit-coat* was a silver object. He had been directed to put it there last night when he broke into the pawnshop. He didn't comprehend why. He had been given no further instructions or orders. Those would come when needed.

He walked across the deserted washroom.

Then the door opened. Two men came in. A fat old man and a thin young man. *(Old* and *young;* he knew about that, how to recognize and distinguish all physical types.) They looked at him with the blank impersonality, almost as if they knew that he was a machine, and continued their conversation.

The communication came to him.

Walk over to them.

He walked, heels clicking hollowly on the washroom floor.

Put your right hand in your pocket.

The hand moved on its errand.

Pull out the object and display it.

The hand came out.

Speak as directed, soft voice.

He said, "Put up your hands!"

They looked at him, eyes goggling in sudden shock. The older man said, “Look, he’s got a gun!” They raised their hands.

Get their money.

The communicator told him what *money* was, its appearance and purpose as a medium of exchange; in a single instant, all of the data on currency was transmitted to him.

And at the same time, the communicator directed him to get the money; told him how to search their pockets, how to find wallets and loose change.

He got the money quickly, visio functioning and sonic on, in case of interruptions. But there were no interruptions. The two men stood there, breathing heavily, eyes fixed on the gun in his right hand as his left hand moved inside their pockets.

For one paradoxical moment, the two humans were standing like machines while he was animate, purposeful, alive. Their roles were reversed.

Something made a calculation, observed their reactions and estimated. The message came. *They are afraid of you. This is fear. This is what to look for in men. Find fear.* And when he came into their aura, when his pneumatic fingers touched them, instantly another mechanism located where a stomach would normally be, caught and recorded their respiration-rate, their pulse-rate, the delicate glandular reactions. This was fear. He would recognize it in the future.

Commands came to him and he carried out orders. He told the men to remove their trousers. He deposited another nickel, herded them into a cubicle and slammed it shut. He opened the washroom window and dropped the trousers into the outer, empty courtyard.

Then he left the washroom. The money jingled in his pocket, and the bills rustled against his chest. He walked quickly out of the hotel.

It was getting dark (a lengthy astronomical explanation was flashed to him so that he’d understand) and he had duties to perform.

He made a handsome figure as he strode down the street, tall, blond, youthfully erect, walking stiffly and confidently. Men stepped aside as he marched forward, and women turned their heads. A girl remarked to her friend—"I sure would like to know where they make guys like that."

But there was no room for humor, or irony, or any temperament whatsoever. He had duties to perform. They were to *react and record.*

Up above, in the ship, a complicated apparatus traced his progress through the streets. A disc recorded the sound which his sonic detected. A screen flashed the sight encompassed by his visio. What he heard, the Hostiles heard. What he saw, they also saw. They guided him now.

Something in his chest, where a heart would normally be, pulsed a warning of *Danger.*

They noted it, up in the ship, watching the street before him. He got orders. *Off the street. Dampness. Humidity count rising. Hurry.*

Yes. The legs moved slowly, and visio blurred a bit. And now he was nearing the place he was directed to find.

A large, brilliantly-lighted building. Signs out in front. He recorded, rather than read. FIGHTS TONIGHT.

Crowds, milling and pushing.

Don't touch anyone. Don't let them touch you.

He was to buy a *ticket.* Automatically, he knew what buying was, what tickets were, the entire procedure.

The voice came from inside, and he said, "One, please" and pushed the money forward.

The girl in the box-office (that was hard to comprehend, *box-office:* no data available on the term, but no matter) gave him a smile, a ticket and some change. It tinkled out of a slot and he stood there, waiting, until the communicator directed him to pick it up.

Then he went into the arena. Carefully, he avoided physical contact with the crowd. Somebody took his ticket, tore it in half, gave him a stub. Somebody else guided him to a seat.

Sit down. People were sitting down. That was a curious concept, although he understood. People had to *eat* and *drink* and *eliminate* and *sleep* and *rest.* Their bodies demanded constant care and accommodation. They sat down, they relaxed, they turned off part of their functions and turned on another.

That's what was wrong with people. They were imperfect. Not permanently functional. People became *sick* and had *accidents,* while he on the other hand operated perfectly. Eventually, all people *died.* But he wouldn't let anyone turn him off!

Yes, they were weak and imperfect and that is why people would be easy to overcome. The Hostiles knew. And his job was to corroborate by watching.

So he sat there and watched. The lights blazed in the ring, and the announcer bawled and the referee climbed through the ropes. And then two men, naked except for trunks, appeared in corners. (*Corners* in a *ring*—mathematical concept awry: no data. Just observe.)

He observed. He registered the howling of the humans around him. He registered shrieks and yells, and deep inside he registered the mass aura of the crowd.

The two men in the ring began to hit at one another with gloved hands. One of them started to bleed at the nose. *Blood* meant *injury.* And the crowd, with one great voice, yelled "Kill him!"

He knew what *kill* meant. It meant what the Hostiles would do when they took over. And here humanity paid money (which was valued) to watch two people attempt to kill each other.

He reacted and recorded as the fight went on. Up in the ship, they computed. And their computations reached him.

These were average specimens of mature humankind. Old, young, male, female, rich, poor. And they were animals, suddenly swayed by fear, hate. Mass impulses gripped them completely. Mass reactions were easily registered. It would not be difficult to instill mass panic into such as these. So far the findings were favorable.

The fight was only in the second round (*round*—no data, apparently an arbitrary time-interval for this activity) when the signal came for him to leave.

He stood up and made his way out. It was hard to avoid contact with human knees and feet. Eyes stared at him curiously for a moment, then returned to the spectacle in the ring. From over the arena came the registered intensity of mass excitement, of hysteria, of illogical emotional reaction. It pleased them in the ship. But they were careful. They were going to check further. He had other duties to perform.

IT WAS STILL EARLY in the evening when the tall, blond young man came out on the street once more. The humidity count was not dangerous to the mechanisms operating inside the slotted skull. The mouth was closed, the nostril-openings protected, the artificial irises contracted. And the synthetic body moved perfectly.

Meanwhile, in the ship, his creators were calculating quickly and constantly upon the basis of his observations. Mature adults, as they styled themselves, would not be a problem—if a fear-reaction could be properly provoked. There was one danger; an aggressive reaction might be aroused, and then there would be mass resistance. Plans were laid and co-ordinated accordingly. But mature adults constituted only a portion of humanity. There were many old people.

Old people—

He was being directed, now. Directed to the park. Here in the warmth of an early spring evening, people were strolling. And here was—*Danger!*

Just in time, the Hostiles caught it and he caught it. He stepped back from the sidewalk, flattened against the doorway of a building as the huge machine lumbered down the street, spraying water against the curbing.

Water-sprinkler. Avoid. Danger.

He was safe, again. He continued, turned into the park path. Old people were here.

Old people; lame, halt, blind. Aged and infirm. They huddled on benches, they stood and sat and shuffled around in the world of nothing-to-do-but-wait-for-the-end.

And many of them were clustered around the soap-box speaker near the deserted bandstand. He was pouring it on.

He stood close, but not too close. The phrases registered, although the meaning was not clear until the communicators sent along data. Something about “pension plan . . . can’t earn a living . . . work hard all your life and die in poverty . . . wrong system . . . legislation . . . I’m old and you’re old . . . what can we do?”

The speaker *was* old; old and ragged. He spoke with fervor, and the fervor was recorded. The crowd of elderly people reacted, and the reaction was recorded. The reaction was that of the two men in the washroom—it was *fear.*

That’s what he was looking for—fear. And he felt it here. The old people, all of them, were afraid. Afraid of their future. Afraid of death. *Old people afraid* was duly registered.

And one hundred miles away, one hundred miles straight up, a sort of bodiless glee hummed inside the odd ship.

The Hostiles sent him walking on, then, down the street, into the bright lights. Then they put the most delicate of all devices into operation—selective recording apparatus that could beam in on individual passers-by.

It was a mechanical-chemical synthesis, it was telepathy and psychoanalysis combined, and raised to the highest power.

All kinds of people, thinking: *Wonder if I will get two weeks notice today for so much sick leave . . .*

God, but I’m sick and tired of working. Work, work, work . . .

Let’s see, it’s almost the first of the month. Time for the bills . . .

What will Peter say when he sees my new hat. He’ll murder me . . .

Guess I’ll stop in for a drink on the way home. I sure need one . . .

All shades of feelings and emotions. Boredom, fatigue, complacency, hope, chagrin, despair, panic, hysteria. And keening through all of it, in wave after wave—fear. Partial awareness, partial functioning, and all because of fear. Everywhere spread fear.

Up in the ship, they had data on fear, data gathered over many months, many years of observation. He wasn't the first spy. They were careful, because there would be only one chance to. use weapons, only one chance to strike. It must come, could come, at only the exactly proper moment. And the moment was—probably, almost certainly—now.

The data was reviewed, re-evaluated. Surprising data, some of it. Orson Welles . . . atomic bomb . . . communism . . . flying saucers . . . inflation . . . depression . . . war . . . strikes . . . incidence of psychotic disorder . . . juvenile delinquency . . .

The Hostiles checked that source now. Youth. He had another errand to perform. Plans were almost ready to go into operation, but there was this final survey to make. It would be made right now, tonight.

He clattered down the street. The neon lights reflected from his waxy, too-handsome face. His too-perfect features, his window-dummy smile seemed oddly artificial. But nobody noticed him. Humans took everything for granted; they were completely wrapped up in their own thoughts, their own fears.

Something began to hum, audibly, inside his chest, up near the shoulder-blades in the back.

The Hostiles caught it. He marched into an alley, groped into a dark, deserted areaway. A cat saw him and suddenly arched its back, snarled and spat.

Animals were aware. They knew what he was. But that didn't matter. Animals would be destroyed, along with the human animals, when the Hostiles came.

He didn't wonder about what would happen when they came. He knew. They might assume bodies like his, for a while—because those bodies could easily function in the present mechanical pattern of this planet. But once the buildings came down, once the crude human-built machines were replaced by their products of science, old bodies would be discarded in favor of improved ones. He would be discarded, too, of course.

But it didn't matter. He felt no emotion concerning this, because they hadn't provided him with emotion. He could contemplate his own extinction with the same lack of reaction with which he contemplated, now, the extinction of two billion, four hundred and seventy-four million human beings and all their animals. Yes, animals, birds, reptiles and insects. *(Balance of Nature: data, an anthropomorphic myth. New pattern of survival already set up. Human and animal life unnecessary.)*

The cat howled and fled. He stood in the darkness and his hands opened the slot in his skull under the wig. A tiny wire had jarred loose. He adjusted it as directed. Everything was so delicate. The slightest jar, the slightest moisture might cause complete malfunction. Dangerous. But only one task more, now, and he could be safely discarded. The Hostiles would come. One task more.

The handsome young man walked out of the alley and headed for the Penny Arcade. It was out near the beach, on a pier.

It was noisy, very noisy. Inside the young man's head the machinery hummed, made minute, instantaneous adjustments in sonic reception.

The lights glared and dazzled. Visio accommodated to the glitter.

And he began to react and record.

This was the haunt of youth. The young people were all around; giggling, laughing, shouting, pushing, shoving. They draped across the counter of the soda-fountain. They put nickels into juke-boxes, dimes into automatic games, quarters into self-photographing booths. They riffled the pages of comic books and magazines.

He registered something on visio that caused the Hostiles to take heed. Some words about "science-fiction" and a colored picture of a vessel. It was crude, but there was a vague, recognizable similarity between the unknown artist's concept and the actual vessel that poised one hundred miles above.

React and record. There was no fear here. Receptor mechanisms searched for it, but could not find it. Even out here in the arcade on the end of the pier, near the water. The rear of the arcade had a rickety balcony, and the dark water of the lake swirled directly below it. But these young people were not afraid.

Of course not; they were human, and humans did not dread moisture. But what about the other fears? Illness, poverty, death? The receptors searched.

No. Youth was not afraid.

UP IN THE SHIP they calculated. So many millions and so many millions in this particular age-group. Physical characteristics thus and so. Enough of a menace to forestall attack? Perhaps, if they were not afraid. But they were human, and the human is susceptible to panic. Particularly when confronted with surprise elements, with the unknown. Fear of the unknown. That might he the key. Investigate.

They sent him closer to the group at the end of the pier, at the magazine-stand. He stood there quite silently and inconspicuously.

All around him was the noisy neon fantasy of humanity at play. Below the pier was an amusement park where roller-coasters swooped and soared and shuddered down; where *papier-mâché* monsters goggled in the glitter of torchlight; where fantastically-costumed clowns and freaks grimaced at the crowds. Weird architecture, crazy lighting, and exhortations of barkers blended into a complete illusion of unreality.

And here, too, in the Penny Arcade, where the machines clanged, the air of unreality persisted. Teenagers in their curious costumes, milled and thronged. Their speech-pattern was oddly filled with “cool” and “extremely George” and the later neologisms.

So that he, standing there in his conservative suit, appeared quite normal in contrast—he was, in appearance, utterly real. He was real and the softly sounding waters without were real. There was a definite dampness in the air, and his vision blurred momentarily. Then the Hostiles made some adjustments.

The tall young man walked over toward the group of youngsters near the magazine-stand. Their conversation flowed casually, loudly, erratically. Their statements were positive, eager, exaggerated.

No fear. But no menace here, either. They were only children in the bodies of near-adults. Bobby-socks and blue-jeans and leather jackets and beanies formed a pattern of immaturity, of over-emotional self-dramatization.

“Here’s a new one.” A skinny lad held up the magazine with the space-ship on its cover. “Lend me a quarter, Marty. I want to buy this.”

Marty wore glasses. He was trying to grow a mustache; a brave effort begun too soon. “Haven’t got it, Dave.”

Dave turned to the two girls. “Come on, you two—fork over! You owe me two bits from the ferris wheel. Make with the moola, Bea.”

The taller of the two girls giggled. “Cool your heels! Ask Pat.” The skinny youth went up to the shorter girl and pretended to talk out of the side of his mouth. “Come on, sister—let’s have it.” He grasped her arm, and she pulled away. His hand went to his jacket pocket, emerged.

For a moment the observer flinched. The youth had a *gun.* Like his *gun.* But no—the communicator estimated—it was only a toy.

Only a toy. They were children. They knew no fear, but in turn there was no need to fear them. Overgrown children.

Up above, they were satisfied.

The four young people scuffled good-naturedly before the magazine rack. The skinny boy still wanted his magazine. The taller girl protested. “You and your science-fiction! All you guys are gone on that kick. You have enough magazines!”

“But it’s a new book, I want to see who’s in it!”

“I’m weepin’ for ya!” The magazine went back on the rack.

“Come on, let’s see it.” Marty grabbed at Dave’s beanie and was threatened with the toy gun.

The spy watched, waited for the command to come; waited to turn away, his mission completed.

Instead, the communicator ordered him, *“Pick up the magazine.”*

He walked over, reached between the scufflers, took the magazine from its place. The Hostiles were curious. They wanted his visio to inspect the contents, see what puerile pseudo-science could possibly appeal to these immature minds.

“Hey, wait a minute, mister!” The taller girl, Bea, was protesting. “That’s our magazine!”

“Yeah, it’s ours. What’s the score?” This from bespectacled Marty.

He did not find words, for words were not supplied. He reached in his pocket. *Pay for it. The cashier takes money, over there.*

He turned away without answering. He was quiet, his face was calm, there was no indication of concern.

The boy called Dave grabbed his arm. “Now, listen, Mister—give us back our magazine.”

He was angry. All four of them were angry, and despite their previous scuffling, suddenly united. Something new was communicated to the receptors—determination.

A signal now came to the spy: Don’t *answer. Go away. Quickly.*

But now Marty took hold of his arm. He had to get away, he had to move back. He stepped hack cautiously, stopped as the four surrounded him. Dave was waving his little toy gun, and they were all yammering idiotically. Stupid human reactions, but he must be careful.

The message came. *Give them the magazine and get out.*

He raised his hand, extending the magazine. But Pat was excited, angry. She yelled, “Let him have it, Dave!”

And suddenly Dave leveled his ridiculous, childish weapon.

He pulled the trigger.

A stream of water shot out and hit the handsome young man in the face. It flooded his eyes, entered the opened mouth. He turned—everything was blurred—and as they laughed and shouted, another stream of water caught him squarely on the back of the neck. It saturated the wig, trickled through the slot.

Something flashed through the receptors but he lost contact. Moisture—dampness—wet—once you ceased to function it was forever! His damaged communicator sent out the same message he'd received from humans. He wasn't human, he was only a machine, but the message was plain.

Stark, utter fear.

A hundred miles away, the Hostiles saw and sensed. In a moment the computations were revised, conclusions drawn, a course of action chosen. They could attack, but youth would not fear them. And science or pseudo-science, somebody would discover the water weapon. No, this was not the time. Accept defeat and go. The curious vessel lifted suddenly, accelerated to incredible speed, was gone.

On the pier, the magazine slipped from a plastic-pneumatic grip. Instrument-hands rose to cover the dripping face.

The youngsters paid no attention. They bent and scrambled for the gaudy book, with no thought for the handsome young man. Their attention was easily diverted—humans were just like animals. Unconquerable animals.

He turned and staggered away. There was a peculiar lurch to his gait. He couldn't see. Drops of water were eating away inside his skull. Circuits disintegrated. Visio and sonic mingled in a roaring blur of vivid color and sound. Red noises and howling darkness.

If he could only wipe the droplets out of the slot, The Hostiles were gone. It was so hard to move! He tried. As he stumbled out of the Penny Arcade on to the railing walk of the pier's end, the youngsters caught one last glimpse of him; both hands raised and fumbling at the back of his head.

Then he was gone. They didn't see him hit the railing in his blindness, didn't hear the wood give way, didn't hear the splash as he—disordered, discarded machinery—tumbled into the obliterating waves below.

"What was the matter with him?" Dave asked. "I wouldn't of let him have it if I knew he'd take it so big."

"Aw, forget it!" Marty counseled. "So you made like Buck Rogers with a zap-gun and he got sore. Some people haven't got any sense of humor."

“Check,” said Bea. “And people without a sense of humor aren’t human!”

“Yeah,” Pat sighed as they turned to open the magazine. “He looked like he was ready to blow his top!”

Constant Reader

Dale liked to read, so he brought along books—nice, safe books.

ONCE upon a time they were called straitjackets. When you put one on, you were "in restraint" according to the polite psychiatric jargon of the day. I know, because I've read all about it in books. Yes, real books, the old-fashioned kind that were printed on paper and bound together between leather or board covers. They're still available in some libraries, Earthside, and I've read a lot of them. As a matter of fact, I own quite a collection myself. It's a peculiar hobby, but I enjoy it much more than telo-learning or going to the sensorals.

Consequently I admit I'm a little bit maladjusted, according to those same psychiatric texts I mentioned. That's the only possible explanation of why I enjoy reading, and why I pick up so many odd items of useless information.

This business about straitjackets and restraint, for example. All I ever got out of it was a peculiar feeling whenever we hit grav. on a Rec. Flight.

I got it again, now, as Penner yelled, "Act alert, Dale—put down that toy and strap up!"

I dropped my book and went over to the Sighter Post. Already I could feel the preliminary pull despite the neutralizer's efforts. I strapped up and hung there in my cocoon, hung there in my straitjacket.

There I was, nicely in restraint, in our own little private asylum—Scout #3890-R, two months out of Home Port 19/1, and now approaching 68/5 planet for Reconnaissance.

Before looking out of the Sighter, I took another glance at my fellow inmates. Penner, Acting Chief, Temp., was strapped in at Mechontrol; all I could see of him was the broad back, the bullet head bent in monomaniac concentration. Swanson, Astrog., 2nd Class, hung at his side, cakeknife nose in profile over the Obsetape. Little Morse, Tech., was stationed at my left and old Levy, Eng., hung to my right. All present and accounted for: Penner, Swanson, Morse, Levy—and myself, George Dale, Constant Reader and erstwhile Service Observer, hanging in his straitjacket after two months in a floating madhouse.

Two months of anything is a long time. Two months of Rec. Flight is an eternity. Being cooped up with four other men in a single compartment for that length of time is no picnic, and our strait-jackets seemed singularly appropriate.

Not that any of us were actually psycho; all of us had a long record of similar missions, and we had managed to survive. But the sheer monotony had worn us down.

I suppose that's why Service gave us the extra seven pounds per man—Lux. Allotment, it was called. But the so-called luxuries turn out to be necessities after all. Swanson usually put his poundage into solid food; candy, and the like. Chocolate capsules kept him sane. Morse and Levy went in for games—cards, dice, superchess and the necessary boards. Penner, amazingly enough, did sketching on pads of oldfashioned paper. And I had this habit of my own—I always managed to bring three or four books within the weight limit.

I still think my choice was the best; candy-munching, freehand sketching and the delights of dicing and superchessmanship palled quickly enough on my four companions. But the books kept me interested. I had a peculiar background—learned to read as a child rather than as an adult—and I guess that's why I derived such queer satisfaction from my hobby.

Naturally, the others laughed at me. Naturally, we got on each other's nerves, quarreled and fretted and flared up. But now, resting quietly in our straitjackets as we entered grav., a measure of sanity returned. With it came anticipation and expectation.

We were approaching 68/5 planet.

New worlds to conquer? Not exactly. It *was* a new world, and therein lay the expectation. But we weren't out to conquer; we on Rec. Flight merely observed and recorded. Or, rather, our instruments recorded.

At the moment we slid in on Mechontrol, about five hundred miles above the surface. 68/5 was small, cloud-wreathed; it had atmosphere apparently, as did its companions. Now we were moving closer and we peered through the Sighters at a dull, flat surface that seemed to be rushing toward us at accelerating speed.

"Pretty old," little Morse grunted. "No mountains, and no water, either—dried up, I guess."

"No life." This from old Levy. "That's a relief." Levy was what the books would have called a misanthrope. Although his mis wasn't confined to anthropes. He seemed to have a congenital aversion to everything that wasn't strictly mechanical—why he didn't stick to robotics, I'll never know.

We came down faster. Fifty miles, forty, thirty. I saw Swanson making arrangements to drop the roboship. Penner gave the signal as he righted us above the surface. The roboship glided away, guided by Swanson at the Obsetape. It drifted down, down, down. We followed slowly, dropping below the cloud barrier and following it closely.

"Hit!" snapped Swanson. "Right on the button." We waited while the roboship did its job. It was our star reporter, our roving photographer, our official meteorologist, our staff geologist, our expert in anthropology and mineralogy, our trusted guide and—most important, on many occasions—our stalking-horse.

If there was life present on a planet, the landing of the roboship generally brought it forth. If there was death on a planet, the roboship found it for us. And always, it recorded. It was, in a way, a complete expedition encapsulated, a non-human functional without the human capability of error or terror.

Now it went into action, cruising over the surface, directed by Swanson's delicate manipulation of the Obsetape unit controls. We waited patiently, then impatiently. An hour passed, two hours.

"Bring it in!" Penner ordered. Swanson moved his fingers and the roboship returned.

Penner snapped on the Temporary Balance. "Everybody unstrap," he said. "Let's take a look!"

We went down the ramp to the lower deck and Swanson opened the roboship. The photos were ready, the tapes were spooled. We were busy with findings for another hour. At the end of that time we had all the preliminary data necessary on 68/5 planet.

Oxygen content high. Gravity similar to Earthside—as seemed constant in this particular sector and system. No detectable life-forms. But life had existed here, once, and life of a high order. The photos proved that. City ruins galore.

And the planet was old. No doubt about that. Morse had been right; mountains were worn away to dust, and the dust did not support vegetable life. Strange that the oxygen content was still so high. I'd have supposed that carbonization—

"Let's snap out," Penner said. "We don't need Temporary Balance or straps according to the gravity reading. Might as well go in for a landing right away. The day-cycle here is 20.1 hours—computer gives us a good 5 hours to go, right now. So we can all take a look around."

We filed back upstairs and Swanson brought us in.

IT WAS only a dead planet, a desert of dust without trees or grass or water; a flat, slate-colored surface where everything was the same, same, same. But it was solid; you could put your feet down on it, you could walk across the sand for miles and feel the air flow against your face.

And there were ruins to explore. That might be interesting. At least, it was a change.

I could feel the tension and excitement mount; it was as palpable as the momentary shock and shudder of landing. We crowded around the lock, struggling out of our suits and putting on the light plastikoids, buckling on the gear and weapons as prescribed by regulation. Morse handed us our equipment and we zipped and strapped and adjusted in a frenzy of impatience. Even Penner was eager, but he remembered to grab his sketch-pad before the lock was opened.

Normally, I suppose he would have insisted on maintaining a watch on board, but in the absence of life it didn't really matter. And after two months, everybody wanted out.

The lock opened. The ladder went down. We inhaled, deeply, turned our faces to the warmth of the distant orange sun.

"Single file—keep together!" Penner cautioned.

It's the last day of school, and dismissal is sounded, and the boys rush out onto the playground. So the teacher warns, "Single file—keep together!" and what happens?

Just what happened now. In a moment we were racing across the soft sand, grinning and tossing handfuls of the fine grains high into the clean, dry air. We ran across the brand new world on our brand new legs.

We moved in the direction we couldn't help thinking of as west—because the orange sun hung there and we turned to the sun as naturally as flowers recently transplanted from a hothouse.

We moved buoyantly and joyfully and freely, for this was vacation and picnic and release from the asylum all in one. The smiles on the faces of my companions bespoke euphoria. It was all good: the gritty, sliding sand under our feet, the pumping of legs in long strides, the grinding ball-and-socket action of the hips, the swinging of arms, the rise and fall of the chest, the lungs greedily gasping in and squandering recklessly, the eye seeing far, far away. Yes, it was good to be here, good to be alive, good to be free.

Once again we measured minutes in terms of movements, rather than abstract units of time-passage we must endure. Once again we consciously heightened our awareness of existence, rather than dulled it to make life bearable.

It seemed to me that I'd never felt so completely alive, but I was wrong. I was wrong, because I didn't notice the blackout.

None of us were aware of it: even now, I can't begin to comprehend it. I don't know what happened. It was just that—blackout.

Before it happened, we marched toward the sun—Penner, Swanson and Morse a little in the lead, Levy and I a pace or two behind, all of us trudging up a slight incline in the sand.

And then, without any seeming transition at all, we were marching in darkness—Penner, Swanson, Morse, Levy and I in a solid group, trudging down into a valley.

"What happened?"

"Eclipse?"

"Where's the sun?"

"Where are we?"

"How long we been walking? I feel like I passed out!"

We halted and exchanged comments.

"Something wrong here. We're going back. Get out the beamers." Penner issued orders swiftly.

We broke out the beamers, adjusted the slow-strobes, put pathways of light before us. There was nothing to see but slaty sand. Only Swanson's bearings with the scope guided us in retracing our steps. We moved swiftly through the pall of a purple night. A mist shrouded the stars; a mist mantled our memories.

That's when we compared notes, realized for the first time that the phenomenon had occurred to all of us simultaneously. Gas, shock, temporary dislocation—we argued about the cause for hours, and all the while we marched on the alert, up hummocks and down into little valleys between the dunes.

And we were tired. Unused muscles strained, hearts pumped, feet blistered. And still we marched. I was hungry and thirsty; more than that, I was puzzled and a little bit afraid. I didn't understand just what had happened—how could we, all of us, go on walking that way while we were out on our feet? How could we lose almost four hours? And what did it mean?

At the moment we were in no danger of being lost, and it was more and more obvious that this planet contained no life, hostile or otherwise. But why the blackout? It puzzled me, puzzled all of us.

Swanson took the lead. His beadlike profile loomed on a rise in my beamer's path. He turned and yelled, "I can see the ship now!"

We toiled up the slope and joined him. Yes, the ship was there, snug and safe and secure, and the adventure was over.

Or—was it?

"Look down there!" Levy swivelled his beamer to the left. "We must have missed it on the way out."

Five rays played, pooled, pointed in a single beam. Five rays found, focused and flooded upon the objects rising from the sand. And then we were all running together toward the ruins.

Just before we reached them, Penner yelled, "Stop!"

"What's wrong?" I said.

"Nothing—maybe. Then again, you never know. That blackout bothers me." Penner put his hand on my shoulder. "Look, Dale, I want you and Morse to go back to the ship and wait. The three of us will take a trip through the ruins. But I want at least two men on ship at all times, in case there's any trouble. Go ahead, now—we won't move until we see you're on board. Flash us a signal to let us know everything's all right when you get there."

Morse and I trudged off.

"Just my luck." Little Morse grumbled under his breath and waved his beamer in disgust. "Run around for hours in the sand and then when we finally hit something it's back to the ship. Huh!"

"He's right, though," I answered. "Got to be careful. And besides, we can eat and take our shoes off."

"But I want to see those ruins. I promised my girl some souvenirs—"

"Tomorrow we'll probably get our turn," I reminded him. He shrugged and plodded on. We reached the ship, boarded, and took a quick look around. All clear.

Morse went over to the panel and pushed the blinker. Then we sat down next to the Sighter and stared out. All we could see at this distance was a purple blur, through which three beams moved and wavered.

I opened foodcaps and we swallowed, still straining to see. The lights moved separately at first, then coalesced into a single unit.

"Must have found something," Morse speculated. "Wonder what?"

"We'll find out soon enough," I predicted.

BUT they didn't come back, and they didn't come back—we sat for hours, waiting.

Finally the beams moved our way. We were waiting as Penner, Swanson and Levy boarded. An excited babble wavered into words and the words became sentences.

"Never saw anything like them—"

"Smaller than dwarfs; couldn't be, but I'd swear they were human."

"Gets me is the way they disappeared, just like somebody had scooped them all up at once."

"Wasn't their city, I'm sure of that. First of all, it was ages old, and secondly it wasn't built to their size-scale at all—"

"Think we just imagined the whole thing? That blackout was peculiar enough, and then, seeing them this way—

I raised my voice. "What's all this about? What did you find?" The answer was more babbling in unison, until Penner signalled for silence.

"See what you make of this, Dale," he said. He pulled out his sketch-pad and went to work, swiftly. As he worked, he talked.

Story and sketches emerged almost simultaneously.

He passed the first drawing to me.

“Ruins,” he said. “Ruins of a city. All we really saw were the rooftops, but they’re enough to give you some idea of the probable size of the place. You’ll note everything was solid stone. Plenty of broad, flat surfaces. Here’s a sketch of me standing between two rooftops. Probably a street in between, at one time. What do you make of it?”

I studied his sketch; it was crude, but graphically explicit. “They must have been humanoid,” I said. “If we accept functionalism in architectural representation—”

“Never mind the book words,” Penner interrupted. “Look at the width of that street. Would you say that the inhabitants were large or small?”

“Large, of course.” I looked at the sketch again. “Must have been much taller than we are, perhaps seven or eight feet if they worked according to our proportions. Of course, that’s just a rough guess.”

“Good enough. And we geigered the stones a bit. Levy, here, places them at fourteen thousand years.”

“The very least,” Levy broke in. “Possibly older than that.” Penner was sketching again. He passed the second drawing over to me. “Here’s what we found wandering around in the ruins,” he told me. “I’ve shown two of them standing next to me, but there must have been hundreds.”

I looked. There stood Penner, and—at his feet—two tiny manlike beings.

“You actually saw these things?”

“Of course. We all did, there’s no doubt about it. One minute we were climbing around among the stones, and then they appeared. Just like that, out of nowhere, you might say. And not one or two, but hundreds of them.” He turned. “Isn’t that right, Swanson?”

“Correct.”

I gazed at the sketch again. Penner had an eye for detail. I was particularly impressed with the way the creatures were dressed.

“These look like ancient earth-garments,” I said. “They’re wearing little armored breastplates, and helmets. And they carry spears.”

"That's exactly how they looked," Levy corroborated. "Some of them had those—what were they called?—bows and arrows."

Penner eyed me. "You've got a theory, Dale?"

"No, but I'm getting one. These little thing never built the city. They don't live in the ruins, now. They couldn't possibly wear earth-garments like these. They appeared suddenly, you say, and disappeared just as suddenly."

"Sounds silly, the way you sum it up," Penner admitted.

"Yes. Unless you accept one over-all theory."

"And that is—?"

"That they don't exist! They never existed at all, except in your imagination."

"But we all saw them. Saw them, and heard them!"

"We all went through a blackout together, a few hours ago," I reminded him. "And I'm beginning to think that ties in, somehow. Suppose 68/5 isn't uninhabited. Suppose it does contain life."

"That's out of the question!" Swanson interrupted. "The roboship tapes are infallible. Any sign of existence would have been detected and recorded. You know that."

"Yet suppose there were no signs," I answered. "Suppose we're dealing with an intangible intelligence—"

"Absurd!" This from Penner. "No more absurd than the story you've told me. Suppose the intelligence can control our minds. It blacked us out and planted hypnotic suggestion. A little while later you saw little men—"

"No. It doesn't add up," Levy insisted. "There's a flaw." He pointed at the second sketch. "How would your intelligence know about earth-garments such as these? I'm sure none of us were aware of such things. You're the bookworm around here—"

"Bookworm!" I paused. "Wait a minute. You say these creatures talked to you?"

"That's right," Penner answered.

"Do you remember any of the words?"

“I think so. They had little shrill voices and they were shouting to each other. Sounded something like *Hekinah degul* and *Langro dehul san.”*

“One of them pointed at you and said *Hurgo* over and over,” Swanson reminded him.

“*Hurgo*,” I repeated. “Wait a minute.” I walked over to my shelf and pulled down one of my books. “Look at this,” I said. “No pictures in this edition, of course, but read this page.”

Penner read slowly as the others crowded around. He raised his head, scowled. “Sounds like our creatures,” he said. “What is this?”

I turned to the frontispiece and read. “Gulliver’s Travels, by Jonathan Swift. Published, 1727.”

“No!” said Penner.

I shrugged. “It’s all in the book,” I told him. “Descriptions, words, phrases. Some intelligent force out there tried to read our minds and—I think—failed. So it read the book, instead, and reproduced a part of it.”

“But what possible force could exist? And how could it read the book? And why did it reproduce the—” Penner halted, groping for the word which I supplied.

“Lilliputians.”

“All right, why did it reproduce Lilliputians?”

I didn’t know the answers. I couldn’t even guess. All I had was a feeling, which I expressed in one short sentence. “Let’s get out of here.”

Penner shook his head. “We can’t. You know that. We’ve stumbled across something without precedent, and it’s our job to investigate it fully. Who knows what we might learn? I say we get some rest and go back tomorrow.”

There was a mumble of agreement. I had nothing more to say, so I kept quiet. Swanson and Morse and Levy sought their bunks. I started across to mine, when Penner tapped me on the shoulder.

“By the way, Dale, would you mind letting me have that book of yours? I want to read up on those creatures—might come in handy tomorrow.”

I gave him the book and he went forward. Then I lay down and prepared to sleep. Before closing my eyes I took a last look out of the nearest Sighter. The planet was dark and dead. There was nothing out there—nothing but sand and ruins and loneliness.

And something that made up Lilliputians, something that read in order to learn, and learned in order to plan, and planned in order to act—

I didn't get much sleep that night.

THE sun was lemon-colored the next morning when Swanson roused us.

"Come on," he said. "Penner says we're going out again. Two of us will stay on ship, but we'll take turns. Morse, you and Dale can get ready."

"Orders?" I asked.

"No. I don't think so. It's just that it's really your turn to see the ruins."

I faced him. "I don't want to see the ruins. And my advice is that we all stay on ship and blast off, right now."

"What's the trouble?" Penner loomed up behind Swanson.

"He doesn't want to go out," Swanson said. "Thinks we ought to leave." He smiled at Penner, and his smile said, "Coward".

Penner grinned at me and his grin said, "Psycho."

I didn't let my face talk for me. This was serious. "Look, now," I began. "I've been awake most of the night, thinking. And I've got a hunch."

"Let's hear it." Penner was courteous enough, but over his shoulder he said, "Meanwhile, you men get into your suits."

"This intelligence we talked about last night—we all agreed it must exist. But it can't be measured or located."

"That's what we're going to try to do this morning," Penner said.

"I advise against it."

"Go on."

"Let's think about intelligence for a moment. Ever try to define it? Pretty difficult thing to do. We all know there are hundreds of worlds that don't contain intelligence but do contain life. New worlds and old worlds alike have a complete existence and cycle independent of conscious intelligence."

"What's this, a book-lecture?" asked Morse.

"No, just my own ideas. And one of my ideas is that what we call intelligence is a random element, arising spontaneously under certain conditions just as life itself does. It isn't necessary for the existence of a world—it's extraneous, it's a parasite, an alien growth. Usually it uses brain-cells as a host. But suppose it could evolve to the point where it isn't limited to brain-cells?"

"All right, then what?" Penner snapped.

"Suppose, when life dies on a planet, intelligence finds a means of survival? Suppose it adapts itself to something other than the tissue of the cortex? Suppose the highest point of evolution is reached—in which the planet itself, as host, becomes the seat of intelligence?"

"Mean to say that 68/5 can think?"

"It's worth considering. Remember, when intelligence enters brain-calls it identifies itself with its host, and tries in every way to help its host survive. Suppose it enters, finally, into the planet—when life dies out—and tries to help the planet survive?"

"Thinking planets! Now I've heard everything!" This from Swanson. "Dale, you read too many books."

"Perhaps. But consider what's happened. We can't locate any life-form here. Nevertheless, we black out. And something creates, out of reading and imagination, a duplicate of Gulliver's Travels. Think in terms of a combined number of intelligences, fused into a single unit housed in the body of this world itself. Think of its potential power, and then think of its motives. We're outsiders, we may be hostile, we must be controlled or destroyed. And that's what the planet is trying to do. It can't read our minds, but it can read my books. And its combined force is enough to materialize imaginative concepts in an effort to destroy us. First came Lilliputians with bows and arrows and tiny spears. The intelligence realized these would not be effective, so it may try something else. Something like—"

Penner cut me off with a gesture. “All right, Dale. You don’t have to come with us if you don’t want to.” It was like a slap in the face. I stared around the circle. The men had their suits on. Nobody looked at me.

Then, surprisingly enough, Levy spoke up. “Maybe he’s right,” he said. “Somebody else has to stay behind, too. Think I’ll keep Dale company here.”

I smiled at him. He came over, unfastening his suit. The others didn’t say anything. They filed over to the stairs.

“We’ll watch you through the Sighters,” Levy said. Penner nodded, disappeared with the others.

MINUTES later we caught sight of them toiling up the sunbaked slope of the ridge leading toward the ruins. In the clear light now the ruins were partially visible. Even though only rooftops were clear of sand, they looked gigantic and imposing. An ancient race had dwelt here. And now a new race had come. That was the way life went. Or death—

“What are you worrying about?” Levy asked. “Stop squirming.”

“I don’t like it,” I said. “Something’s going to happen. You believed me too or you wouldn’t have stayed.”

“Penner’s a fool,” Levy said. “You know, I used to read a few books myself, once upon a time.”

“Once upon a time!” I stood up. “I forgot!”

“Where are you going?”

“I’m looking for my other two books,” I said. “I should have thought of *that.”*

“Thought of what?” Levy talked to me, but he was watching the others, outside, through the Sighter.

“If it read one book, it can read the others,” I told him. “Better get rid of them right away, play it safe.”

“What are the other two books?” Levy asked the question, but I never answered him. Because his voice changed, cracked, and he said, *“Dale,* *come here, hurry!"* I stared through the Sighter.

I adjusted the control and it was like a closeup; I could see Penner and Swanson and Morse as if they were standing beside me. They had just reached the top of the ridge, and the ruined stones of the cyclopean city rose before them. *Cyclopean.*

The word came, the concept came, and then the reality. The first giant towered up from behind the rocks. He was thirty feet tall and his single eye was a burning beacon.

They saw him and turned to flee. Penner tugged at his waist, trying to draw his tube and fire. But there wasn't time now, for the giants were all around them—the one-eyed monsters out of myth.

The giants laughed, and their laughter shook the earth, and they scooped great rocks up from the ruins and hurled them at the men, crushing them. And then they lumbered over to the crushed forms and began to feast, their talons rending and tearing the bodies as I now tore the pages from the book I was holding.

"Cyclops," Levy whispered. *"The Odyssey,* isn't it?" The torn fragments of the second book fell from my fingers as I turned away.

Levy was already working at the panels. "Only two of us," he said. "But we can make it. Takeoff's automatic once we blast. I'm pretty sure we can make it, aren't you, Dale?"

"Yes," I said, but I didn't really care.

The floor was beginning to vibrate. In just a minute, now, we'd blast.

"Come on, Dale, strap up! I'll handle the board. You know what to do."

I knew what to do.

Levy's face twitched. "What's the matter now? Is it the third book? Are you going to get rid of the third book?"

"No need to. The third one's harmless," I said. "Here, I'll show you."

"What is it?" he asked.

I stepped over to the Sighter for the last time and he followed me. I adjusted for closeup very carefully.

"Look," I said.

We stared out across the barren plain, the plain which no longer held life because it had *become* life for this planet.

The Cyclops had disappeared, and what was left of Penner and Swanson and Morse lay undisturbed in the dreaming ruins under an orange sun.

Somewhere, somehow, the reader turned a page—

“The third book,” I whispered. “Watch.”

It scampered out from behind one of the stones, moving swiftly on tiny legs. The Sighter brought it so close that I could see the very hairs of its whiskers, note the design of its checkered waistcoat, read the numerals on the watch it took out of the waistcoat pocket. Before I turned away, I almost fancied I could read its lips.

That wasn’t necessary, of course, because I knew what it was saying.

“Oh dear! Oh dear! I shall be too late!” it murmured.

Mincing daintily on thin legs, the White Rabbit scampered among the bodies as we blasted off.

The Thinking Cap

As a writer, Barnaby was a has-been until the redhead gave him the Thinking Cap and the advice "Never look a gift-horse in the mouth." But there are other old sayings about paying the piper and Greeks bearing gifts.

HE opened the cupboard door.

An empty gin-bottle tilted forward and crashed to the floor. He ignored it, and groped inside the cupboard, his fingers scrabbling air. As die did so, he began to talk to himself. A nasty habit, but one he seemed to have acquired.

"But when she got there, the cupboard was bare, and so the poor dog had none. Poor dog. That's me, all right. Poor, poor dog." He paused. "Eureka!"

At the very end of the cupboard his hand encountered and closed around a can. He pulled it out and inspected the label. "Not Eureka after all. Beans. That's better. And so the poor dog had beans."

He put the can of beans on the table and switched on the little electric grill that rested on the wash-stand. He bent down, found a small pan—it wasn't really too dirty—and set it on the glowing grid.

"Can-opener," he muttered. "Can't open her without a can-opener. Canopius. Canopy. Canopy soup." He stood there for a moment and all the words rushed through his head, rushed in riot uncontrolled. "Soup. Super. Superman has found a can. Can he open? Open sesame. Sesame seed.

Sesame seed something. Sesame seed a can of beans. Baked beans. Human beans. Norman Bean—that's the name Edgar Rice Burroughs used at first. When he was still poor, and trying to get a break, and eating beans. Like me. Nobody likes me. Nobody loves me. I don't even have a can-opener."

Suddenly he stopped, and his voice sank to a whisper. He didn't know who he'd been talking to *before,* but now he was really talking to *himself.* And he whispered, very softly, "Look now, you've got to stop this. You've got to get hold of yourself. You don't want to go crazy, do you? Or do you?"

He abandoned the search for the can-opener and stepped over to the mirror. It didn't take him long. The whole room was only ten by fourteen, plus the closet. Grill, cupboard, washbowl, bed, two chairs, end-table with the cheap portable radio, and of course the card-table with the portable typewriter resting on it. That was the inventory; the inventory of the room's contents.

Now he stood in front of the mirror above the washbowl and took inventory of himself.

The long, thin face was even longer and thinner today. The cheeks seemed to be slightly sunken—where had he seen that particular conformation before?

The eyes were bright blue, but slightly glazed, and this phenomenon, too, was familiar.

His brown hair was plastered back on his forehead, and it lay dully and without lustre. Somehow, he recognized a similarity here, also.

His skin was pale. Waxy pale. He knew that pallor. It was somehow tied in with the sunken cheeks and the glazed eyes and the duly plastered hair, because it was associated with the look of a—

"Corpse!" he whispered. "You look like a corpse. You're dead. Dead, or dying. Got to do something. Got to."

Yes, he had to do something, but what? Drinking hadn't helped. And he couldn't drink any more, anyway, because the last of the money was gone.

He couldn’t get out of this dingy little furnished room, either—not until the end of the month. Then he’d be thrown out.

And worst of all, he couldn’t write.

That was the crux of the problem. He couldn’t write. The portable typewriter rested on the card-table. It rested. But he didn’t rest. He couldn’t rest. He couldn’t rest because he couldn’t write, and then he drank because he couldn’t rest, and when he drank he couldn’t write, either. Not writing led to drinking which led to not writing which led to—looking like a corpse. Becoming a corpse. If he didn’t go mad first.

“Save me,” he whispered to himself in the mirror. “Save me!” But the face staring back was impassive. The face knew all there was to know about him.

Barnaby Codd, aged 30. Occupation, writer. Status, single. Future, dubious. Or all too certain.

And the face knew the facts behind the facts. Knew about the seven years of work, the stories rejected, the stories sold, the brave beginnings and the bitter end. It knew about Peggy and the broken engagement—about the furnished apartment with its five rooms when the writing came easily. It knew about the cases of bonded whiskey when the stuff was selling to the better markets, and it knew about the empty bottle of the cheapest gin (going crazy, how can there be an *empty* bottle of cheapest anything?) when he hit the slump. When the slump hit him, which was now, now, now. When he couldn’t rest, couldn’t keep from drinking, couldn’t start the writing. When he got into this horrible habit of talking to himself and his brain ran away with the words and the thoughts and left nothing but a morass of maudlin self-pity.

Barnaby Codd stared at himself in the mirror and himself stared back with the impassivity of death. He was calm, now. Calm as if in a coma. Coma, comma, Lake Como, Lake Perry Como, comme ci, comme sa, come wind, come rain, come hell or high-water, come Dunder and Blitzen and Prancer and Rudolph the Rednosed Can-Opener. Damn it to hell, where was the can-opener, where was the magic key that opened the silver portals that led to the regal banquet of beans for His Majesty's pleasure?

It was very funny. No reason for him to cry. And yet he was crying, suddenly. The mirror was blurring, the room was beginning to spin, and there was a ringing in his ears.

"Telephone!" Mrs. Bixby, calling him. "Telephone, Mister Codd!"

Barnaby Codd rubbed his eyes, groped his way down the hall, answered the phone. "Hello . . . yes . . . yes . . . why, sure . . . yes, that would be fine . . . glad to . . . thanks."

He hung up. This was it, this was the reprieve, this was the last-minute call from the Governor as they strapped him into the chair.

He was going to a party. A cocktail party, with a buffet supper. There'd be food, food, food—lots of food. And there'd be drink, drink, drink—lots of drink. And people. People like Hank Olcott, who'd invited him.

People who still thought of him as a creative talent, who would introduce him, with a certain flourish of pride; "This is my friend Barnaby Codd, the writer."

Yes, he still had a clean suit. And he could shave the hollow cheeks. He would go, and he would glow, and he could talk to others instead of to himself, and he could eat something better than beans and drink something better than cheap gin.

So Barnaby Codd washed and shaved and dressed and combed his hair. He turned off the electric grill. He picked up his hat and started for the door. Then he paused, turned back.

He went over to the wash-stand, grabbed up the can of baked beans, and hurled it into the waste-basket.

HANK OLCOTT led him across the room and introduced him with a certain flourish. "This is my friend, Barnaby Codd, the writer." He did it once, he did it twice, he did it half a dozen times.

Codd kept feeling better and better. All that food, all that liquor, all these people milling around. A chance to talk, to notice and be noticed. Everything was becoming quite *real* once more, and Codd felt very much alive.

There must be at least forty people in the apartment, he estimated—they kept arriving and departing; the elegant, the effete, the eccentric and the egocentric. Where Olcott picked them up he didn't know. He had some odd friends, Codd mused. He himself was a good example.

As time passed, the character of the crowd changed. Some strangers had appeared; apparently the word was going around. It was the old story. Olcott told his friends he was holding a party, and they told *their* friends, and *they* told their friends, acquaintances, even their enemies.

Hank Olcott wasn't introducing him to very many people now. He didn't know very many people in this crowd. Codd speculated about making his departure. He felt very good, quite self-assured. Better quit now while he was ahead. Another drink might be one too many. Another introduction might be boring. But—

Then he saw the crimson poppy.

It swayed on its long green stem, its scarlet petals unfurled. It stood in slender splendor near the far windows, and Codd felt irresistibly drawn to its aura. He bent his head as if to inhale the perfume of its presence.

"My name is Barnaby Codd." he whispered.

"I'm Cleo Fane," said the crimson poppy.

Codd stared at the sheathing green gown, at the flowing red hair. This was no poppy, but a far more exotic flower. Face of Grecian marble, eyes cut from Chinese jade—Codd checked himself abruptly. He was letting go again, he realized; all this business of flowers, sculpture, purple prose. She was the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen—wasn't that enough?

And she was staring up at him with something very much like admiration in her slanted oval eyes.

"Do you belong here?" she was asking.

"Belong here?"

"Do you know these people?"

"Why—yes. That is, I know Olcott, our host. Great patron of the arts, dilettante, really. That's how I got in. I'm a writer."

She nodded. "I know."

A warm glow came over Codd. He smiled. "What do you do?" he asked. "I don't belong here."

"Then let's leave, shall we?"

She put her arm on his. "Very well."

And that's all there was to it. In one minute he'd met the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen and walked away with her.

Olcott was standing at the portable bar, surrounded by an assortment of longhairs and crewcuts, and Codd made no effort to bid him goodbye.

Instead he walked out, floated out, flew out into the night with the ravishing redhead. Ravishing—

"Won't you be my guest for a few moments?" she was asking. "I have a place. It isn't far."

Codd had difficulty in comprehending her invitation. It was just too good to be true. This was the way it happened in stories; the way it happened in some of the stories he used to write.

Elation combined with alcohol within him to produce a strange alchemy. He knew he was drunk, he knew he couldn't walk very well, he knew that he had only a blurred awareness of the street, of movement, of entering a tall building and being ushered into a large room. A dim lamp glowed in the corner. Codd smelt a perfume that might have been incense, might have been the woman who stood close beside him, sat close beside him now on the long, low divan.

And then she turned to him, and it was like the surge of the sea, the warm tide flowing over him and bearing him up on its crest, and all at once he could talk and the formless phrases and wild words made a certain sense.

". . . don't know how long I've been looking for someone like you . . . not someone *like* you, but *you,* though I never knew it . . . never thought anyone like you existed . . . never believed in Fate . . . or that Fate was a woman with red hair and green eyes and lips shaped as strange gateways to dreams . . .”

“What do you write?” She sat up suddenly, and her voice was almost crisp.

“Why—I—I—” Codd fumbled for reality. “What do I write? That’s an odd question. I write many things. Poetry, and short stories, and there are two novels, half of a third—but that was over a year ago, when I stopped.” He gulped, then took the plunge. “I’ll be honest. I *was* a writer. But I can hardly claim to be one now. For a year I’ve been in a slump. Something happened to me, I don’t know how to explain it. I can’t write any more.”

Cleo nodded, in private affirmation. “That’s why I wanted to meet you. I knew you needed help.”

“What do you mean?”

For answer, Cleo rose. She disappeared somewhere in the dimness of the room. Codd sat there, wondering and waiting. He felt quite drunk, now. Things were happening too quickly, and he had no way of evaluating the reality of events. On one level, it seemed like years since he’d been crying in front of the wash-stand mirror. On another, no time had elapsed at all.

Then Cleo was back. She was holding something in her hand, but the hand was below the level of the divan and Codd couldn’t see anything from where he sat.

“This writing problem,” she said. “Would you say you had established some sort of mental bloc?”

Codd sat up stiffly. “Say, what is this—are you a lady psychiatrist?” Cleo laughed, a soft laugh of darkness and musk. “No. But I understand something about creation and its problems.” Her voice became a persuasive purr. “I want to help you, you know.”

“I know. And I’m trying to answer honestly. I just can’t seem to function, as a writer any more. I can’t seem to grasp ideas properly, coherently. Everything flies apart into words, phrases, sentences. There’s nothing consistent or coherent—I can’t seem to concentrate.” Codd’s voice sunk to a whisper. “Sometimes, lately, I wonder if I’m losing my mind.”

“Losing your mind.” Cleo smiled a smile of her own. “Odd that yo should use that particular phrase.”

“Why is it odd?”

“Have you ever stopped to think of what it means, what image it conveys? If you *lose* your mind, that indicates it has been mislaid—that it’s *somewhere else.* Where is your mind now, Mr. Barnaby Codd?”

“Lost in flames,” Codd whispered, as intoxication flooded over him again. “Lost in the flames of your hair and your eyes and your lips and ——”

“Not now.” She pushed him away. “This is important. To you. To me. And to someone else.”

“Someone else?”

“Of course. I’m only what you might call an emissary. An agent. I couldn’t invent something like this.” The hand came up from below the divan’s level, now. It came up in all its shining silver slimness, holding the odd-looking object.

“What in the world—or out of the world—is that?—” Codd breathed. “What does it look like?”

“Well, I’d say it was some kind of headdress, or helmet.”

“You’re correct. It is meant to be worn on the head.”

“And those antennae, with the coiled tubing between them—make me think of television, and space-pilots, and all that kid stuff.”

“Let me assure you there is nothing childish about this invention. As you will soon learn, to your profit.”

“I still don’t understand.”

“You will. I was directed to go out and find a subject for the experiment. A creative artist—painter, sculptor, musician, writer. Someone possessing a sensitive imagination, but unchanneled, undisciplined. To be blunt, an unsuccessful creative artist. A successful artist, in any field, wouldn’t want or need to wear the helmet. You will.”

“You mean, somebody invented this and wants me to put it on my head?”

“Exactly.”

“Now, wait a minute.” Codd was Suddenly quite sober. “This doesn’t make sense. I may be going crazy, but I’m not *that* crazy. A beautiful woman comes to me and asks me to wear a Buck Rogers helmet invented by some mysterious screwball, and I’m supposed to go along with the gag.”

“This is serious. You cannot begin to imagine just how serious. However, I am beginning to see I made a mistake. Yours is not the temperament I had judged it to be. I think you had better leave, now.”

Cleo stood up, moved away. And every inch of retreat was agony to Codd, every movement of withdrawal was poignant with pain. He couldn’t lose her, he’d do anything, anything—“Wait! Perhaps if you’d explain to me what this is all about, what the helmet is supposed to do, I’d understand.”

“No. You are not the man I want.”

“Please!” He was frankly begging her now. “I’ll do anything you ask, anything.”

She smiled and came closer. “That’s better. Much, much better.” She held out the helmet. “Here, put it on.”

“Now?”

“Exactly.”

He held it in his hand. The metal was cool, but oddly light and malleable. In the dim light he could not discern the nature of the coiled tubing or the antennae to which it was attached.

“What—what am I supposed to do when I wear it?”

“You’ll understand everything. Just put it on.” Her smile was mocking, now. “What’s the matter? Afraid I’m going to harm you?”

It was the proper challenge for the moment. Barnaby Codd lifted the helmet. He placed it on his head firmly—Napoleon grasping the coronet from the Pope and crowning himself emperor. The helmet fitted snugly over his skull. At the point where the two antennae were based, something began to bore into his brain.

He stared ahead for a moment, looking at Cleo. Her face was rapt, her eyes closed. He had the oddest sensation that her eyes were in the antennae, that the antennae were in his brain, that his brain was in another world. He stared at her hair, and the flames leapt up, and Barnaby Codd drowned in their fire.

Then he didn't feel the helmet, didn't see her any more. He was in another world . . .

THE sky was green.

The moons were green, too—and there were three of them. The trees and grass and rocks were green. In the distance the green lake rippled, and Codd could see the curious emerald reflection coursing across it.

He gazed up at the source of the reflection and perceived the green girl riding the green dog. The dog was something like a poodle, with enormously exaggerated ears. But then, everything about the dog was enormously exaggerated—it must have been five feet high and fifteen feet long. The dog wore one of the curious helmets, too, and it bounded in twenty-foot leaps across the greensward.

Riding on the dog's back was a green girl. A helmet rested on her green curls, and her green eyes glittered lividly. Yes, she had green curls—but she was Cleo!

Codd stared. That was all he could do; simply stare. He wanted to move towards her, wanted to cry out, but he couldn't He willed his feet to move. Nothing happened.

Then he glanced down and saw the answer. He had no feet. He had no feet, no legs, no torso, no arms, nothing. He was wearing the helmet but he had no head. He could see, but he had no eyes.

There was nothing to do but watch and wait—watch and wait as the green girl bounded past on the green dog. Then the rocket roared across the green sky, and Codd blinked. *Codd* blinked; his eyes didn't, for he had none.

The rocket was not green. It was silver, and an orange jet blasted behind it. If the rocket was not green, that meant it was not of this world. It came from somewhere else. It swooped across the horizon, disappeared. Then, abruptly, it reappeared over the lake. It was lower, now, ready to make a landing.

Codd wanted to be close to it when it landed.

Abruptly, he *was* closer. He watched the landing, watched the men emerge.

Cleo and the dog had disappeared. There were only the men, now: the earthmen of the future on a strange green planet. He found that he could *will* himself to move closer or away at will; they could not see him although he could see them. He found that he could hear them, too, faintly or plainly as he desired. The sensation was similar to that of watching a motion picture and photographing it simultaneously; choosing the camera angles he wished.

And during the next hour, he saw the picture unreel. The planet was explored by the rocket ship's crew. The captain and the three leading crew-members enacted a private drama of their own. The crew was going mad. It was the color that did it—the effort of adjusting to a world where everything was green. They mutinied. They tried to steal the ship. The captain alone did not crack. He fought them off. They succumbed, one by one, to the green lure of the lake, to the call of the green jungle, to the green death of the swamp. It was, in a way, an absorbing psychological study—the unpredictable effect of subjecting a normal mind and a normal pair of eyes to a single, unvarying constant color.

The last crew member died in a crazy attempt to paint the rocket ship green. He succeeded—and failed, for the captain shot him.

And now the captain was alone. Alone, and sane, for he wouldn't yield to his environment. He was stronger than the planet, stronger than the mysterious force of chlorophyll or radiation or combination of both that made everything on its surface conform to its greenness.

His will did not break, his mind did not give way. He prepared to return to earth alone. It was only when he reached the end of his ordeal and found the safety of his cabin that he stared in the mirror—and saw that he had turned green.

The film ended there. Or rather, the green came up. Codd felt himself falling away from it, falling into greenness, falling into blackness, falling into redness . . .

Her hair, covering his face. And her voice whispering, “Wake up, now. Wake up. I’ve taken it off.”

He was awake, and she *had* taken off the helmet. He sat there, dazed, and she handed him a drink. Outside the windows a false dawn paled, then was blotted out in final darkness.

“What happened?” he whispered.

“You tell me,” she suggested. *“You* wore the helmet.”

Barnaby Codd told her. She nodded from time to time, nodded thoughtfully.

“But I don’t understand it at all,” he concluded. “You were in the dream, and there was a dog, and a space ship, and everything was green, yet it made a story.”

“That’s the whole point,” said Cleo. “The experiment was successful, because it made a story. Do you think you could write that story, now, and sell it?”

Codd stood up. “Why—yes, I guess so. I’ve never tried anything in science-fiction or fantasy before, but the market is there. And this psychological angle, about the effects of color, would work in.”

“Then why don’t you do it?” the woman suggested.

“Because I’ve got to know what happened, first. I’ve got to understand this thing. Where did the story come from?”

“From your own mind, of course,” Cleo told him. “The helmet merely organized the various subconscious images in a coherent form. I don’t pretend to know the mechanism—but the helmet integrates thought patterns. Some of the elements you observed are simple enough to figure out.”

“Such as?”

"Well, myself, for example. I belonged in the prelude to the story because I was 'on your mind,' you might say. And the dog—" she hesitated.

"Go on," he prompted.

"The dog was probably a symbol of yourself. You *have* felt like a dog lately, even told yourself that you were a 'dog,' haven't you?"

Codd smiled. "Tell me more."

"The rocket-ship? Well, you spoke of the helmet as if it was a science-fiction gadget. Pure association there."

Codd nodded. "And the color green?"

Cleo sighed. ".I must admit to a little cheating, there. I had to do something that would help me check. So while you wore the helmet and stared off into nothingness—"

"Is that what I did all that time?" Codd interrupted.

"Yes. You just sat in a trance, eyes open, until it was over. And while you stared, I held this in front of your eyes."

The girl extended her hand and Codd stared at the jewel blazing up at him. An emerald, of course.

"Then it's all a matter of suggestion, of self-hypnosis?"

"Perhaps. But the helmet is the agent. You wear it and your thoughts weave a pattern. It will help you to create. You speak of losing your mind. The helmet permits you to find it again."

"But how does it work?"

"I cannot answer that. And you must not question me too closely. This much, and this much only need you know. I am empowered to offer you the loan of the helmet for an indefinite period, for experimental purposes.

"You can wear it whenever you want, write whatever you want as a result of your experiences while wearing it. I believe you are going to find this a most profitable Undertaking."

"And what do you—and your mysterious inventor friend—get for this privilege?"

"Merely the opportunity to test the helmet and observe its effects.

The record of effects will be found in the stories you write."

"But where's the catch?"

"There is no catch. Perhaps, some day, we will want you to go on record as to the way in which the helmet performs. We may patent and market it on a wide scale. We may find other uses for it. I cannot say at present." Codd paced the floor. "I don't know. It sounds crazy."

"Can you sell the story?"

"Certainly."

"Then remember this—you'll write other stories. Tonight your mind was at singularly low ebb; you were confused, half-drunk. What do you suppose you'll be capable of once you're clearly confident, once you begin to organize your talent and utilize all your creativity with the helmet's aid? Why, you'll be able to turn out bestsellers! You'll be rich, famous, perhaps immortal. Wouldn't you like that?"

Wouldn't he? An abrupt vision of the frowsy furnished room came unbidden to his brain. Codd nodded. Of course he wanted to be rich and famous. And what had he to lose, what had he to fear?

"Suppose I accept," he said. "Are there any restrictions?"

"None. Of course, you will keep this secret. You'll have to, at first—you know as well as I do what people would say if you came to them with such a fantastic explanation."

"Agreed," said Codd.

"And you are further instructed not to tamper with the helmet in any way. If you have any notion of running off to some scientific testing laboratory and discovering the 'secret' of its mechanism, I can assure you that the attempt will end in disaster. You'll end up with a damaged, useless instrument—and know nothing. Because today's science does not operate in a frame of reference sufficient to make this phenomenon intelligible to mankind." She smiled. "But I become ponderous. All I mean to do is to use that old phrase—what is it again?—'Never look a gift-horse in the mouth.' "

She extended the helmet. Codd grasped it, moved towards the door.

"And when do I see you again?" he asked.

“Soon. Quite soon.” Cleo Fane smiled. “I’ll see you in my dreams.”

BARNABY CODD wrote *The Green Planet* as a novelette, in three sittings. He sold it, first trip out, for three hundred dollars. It was printed, and successfully received, four months later, and the editor asked for more. The editor had illustrated it with a cover showing four or five colors instead of just green, but nobody seemed upset about that. Codd wasn’t upset either, because by the time the story appeared he was already out of the science-fiction field.

He was out of the furnished room, too, and established in a pleasant apartment once more. The actual mechanics of locating a new place and furnishing it proved tiresome—but then, for several weeks after writing the story, everything was tiring to Codd. He felt oddly drained and depleted of energy.

Yet he had energy enough to make an effort to locate Cleo Fane. He tried the phone-book, of course, and to no avail. Then he consulted the city directory and drew a blank. So he went to Hank Olcott.

“Cleo Fane?” Hank considered for a moment. “No, can’t say that I recognize the name.” He tapped a cigarette and leaned back. “Should I?”

“Well, she was at your party,” Codd persisted. “Surely you remember her—tall redhead in a green dress.”

Hank shook his head slowly. “Sorry. I don’t recall seeing her. Of course, there were so many strangers barging in and out all night long. I can ask some of the gang.”

“I wish you would,” Codd urged. “I must find her.”

Hank Olcott chuckled. “I thought you told me you went out together. Don’t you know where she lives?” Codd tried to, explain. He didn’t know, he’d had too much to drink, he’d tried to retrace his steps and couldn’t find the building on the side street. Olcott listened patiently, promised to make inquiries, and did so. But he learned nothing.

Nor did Codd, in the days that followed. He sat at home, waiting for a call that never came. He might have had a few drinks to pass the time, but he found he no longer wanted to drink. He might have turned to the typewriter and done some work, but he found that he couldn't work. In that respect his status was unchanged—he was still in a writer's slump. The novelette had been an accident, after all.

But it wasn't an accident. It was merely the result of wearing the helmet. The helmet gave him the story. Why not use it now? Besides, what had she told him at the last?

"I'll see you in my dreams."

Codd took the helmet out of its place of concealment, at the bottom of his suitcase. He cradled it, examining it curiously. The light, malleable metal was silver, and its surface held the tarnish of age. The peculiar antennae and tubular filament between defied his analysis. This apparatus had not been sewed or rivetted or soldered on—it seemed to be an inherent part of the whole. How the helmet was made or what process had been used in its contrivance it was beyond his power to determine. It was all a mystery.

And so was its power, and so was the woman, and so was her power over him—mystery.

Codd sighed. He switched off the lamp, sat in darkness. The helmet gave off a faint phosphorescent glow. He raised it to his face, then placed it on his head. The phosphorescent glow flooded the room, flooded his brain and being.

Codd was back on the green planet, now. He stood against the hillside and stared down. Cleo came bounding past, on the back of a gigantic wolf. The wolf looked up at him and howled. Cleo waved, once—at least, he thought she waved. Then she disappeared.

And now. oddly, the planet disappeared. Codd was somewhere else; in a modern city. He was watching another story unfold.

This was the story of David Harris, a man on the ragged edge of sanity. Codd knew the man, knew his thoughts, because he found he could get *inside* the man and read his mind. Not that alone; to a certain extent he could *be* the man if he so desired.

He watched Harris, discharged from the asylum, roaming through the city and seeking companionship, seeking a friend to save him from loneliness. For loneliness was the source of his aberration, being alone would drive him mad once more. He followed Harris through the drabness of his days, the empty impersonality of his contacts in a strange city. He suffered all the defeats which Harris met in his efforts to establish even a small acquaintanceship with his fellow men. He fought, as Harris fought, the terrifying hatreds that welled up in him; hatreds directed against all living things. He tried to conquer the delusion that all men were his enemies.

And he followed Harris to the tavern the night he met the girl. The girl was Cleo, of course—but this time she was a blonde, and he discovered she was a waitress out of a job and down on her luck. She was lonely, too. Then Harris took her to his room, and they spent the night, and Harris made the discovery of communication; of freedom from loneliness and fear. It seemed to Harris that this was too much to bear, that his mind would burst with the realization of his love, that his love was a torment worse than loneliness, that by losing himself in love he lost his identity which was that of a man to whom all men were enemies.

As Harris, he slept, and awoke in the morning to find the girl gone. Then he followed Harris through the streets, followed him in his search for the girl who had become to him the symbol of salvation. He must find her now or go mad forever. And he searched and he searched, and his panic grew, and he knew that he was on the borderline, on the ragged edge, and he couldn't endure it without her. And he tried to think back to last night and couldn't, and the hatred came welling up in him again, and he went back to his room and then he sensed her presence there.

The mere thought of her presence was enough to save him; he realized now, for the first time, how close he had come to the brink last night when he'd met her. It had only been a matter of hours, or perhaps even minutes, before he would have cracked, if he hadn’t found her. No wonder he’d blacked out there at the last as they made love.

But now her presence was strong, she was with him, somehow, and he knew she would be with him always. He’d done something—he couldn’t remember what it was, just now—to insure that. He’d done something to save himself by keeping her with him forever.

Harris couldn’t remember. Not until he decided to go out, and went to the closet and opened the door, and found her propped stiffly in the corner with his knife in her throat . . .

Then Harris went mad, phosphorescently mad; and Codd got out of him quickly, got out of the phosphorescence and ripped off the helmet.

He sat there panting in the dark for a long moment before he was able to stand up, switch on the light, and walk over to the typewriter.

That night he wrote *The Ragged Edge* in one sitting.

DURING the next three months, Barnaby Codd wrote nine short stories and two novelettes. Both of the novelettes and the last six stories sold to the slicks, and Codd acquired a bright, brisk agent named Freeman who negotiated a motion picture sale for one of the novelettes and sold TV rights to three of the stories. He kept urging Codd to tackle a novel now, and talked about “deals” and “percentages” and “building up a name while things are hot.”

Things were hot, all right. Too hot. Codd had new furniture and a new car. He had a bank balance of over seven thousand dollars. He was in a position to satisfy his gregarious instincts and aggrandize his ego. There was no need to wait for a phone-call from the Hank Olcotts of this world—he could give his own parties whenever he chose.

He tried it, once. The party was not a success. Oh, Hank came and the rest of the crowd came, and they seemed to have a good time. They complimented him, and joined with Freeman in marveling over his sudden, unprecedented success. But Codd didn't enjoy himself. He kept waiting for a scarlet poppy to blossom in the corner—and of course, it didn't.

Then he tried to drink, and found he hadn't the taste for it any longer. Nor the energy. The party tired him. He was glad when they all went away, finally, and he could turn out the lights and put on the helmet.

Because when he put on the helmet, she came. She always came, and always in the same way. He'd find himself back on the green planet under the three green moons. An instant of waiting, and then she'd bound across the landscape on an animal. Each time the animal was different—a lion, tiger, stallion, boar. Each time the action was the same—the creature bounded, she waved, then disappeared. And he'd be off in a dream-plot. The plots inevitably were a product of some previous reality; twisted, inverted, expanded and projected. *The Ragged Edge* had been the result of his own search for Cleo. Other plots had been remotely based on subsequent daily incidents in his life.

Tonight, his dream concerned a party—a charity ball. Cleo was there (odd, she seemed to turn up in disguise as a character, regularly) and this time she was a brunette. A reigning movie queen, internationally famous, a symbol of scandal and sophistication.

There was a raffle, and she danced with the holders of the winning tickets. Codd knew the winners—he *became* the winners, each in turn. And he followed their lives.

He was Homer Johnson; meek little bespectacled Homer Johnson, the bookkeeper with the nagging wife. And as a result of his moment of glory, his dance with a dream, he found the courage to leave his wife, tell off his boss, and go on to his romantically-cherished ambition of life in the merchant marine. The dance made him a hero.

He was young Derek; Derek, the fortunate. Blond, handsome rich man's son, with an assured future and a girl who worshipped him. But he danced with a dream and thereafter the girl meant nothing to him, and no woman was good enough. He went down, down, to an inevitable end. The dance destroyed him.

He was Geoffrey Farr, a once great name on the legitimate stage and now an extra voice, a bit character actor in soap-operas. He'd wangled his invitation, taken his last five dollars to buy a raffle ticket because he couldn't afford to be shamed in front of the "public." And he'd won a dance, too; won it in his rented tuxedo, danced with splitting seams, danced with a tearing pain in his chest—because he was old, too old for the constant strain of "keeping up appearances" and too old for the excitement.

The star had been nice to him when they danced, and some LIFE photographer had remembered his name and taken a shot on the off-chance that this was a good "human interest angle" to play up. And the ballroom buzzed.

Before the night was over, Geoffrey Farr had been "re-discovered" by two agents, a producer casting a Broadway show, and the star's personal director. There would be contracts in the morning and Geoffrey Farr would be back on top again.

Before the night was over, Geoffrey Farr died of a heart attack, brought on by the strain and the excitement. He had danced with a dream and the dream was death.

Codd died, took off the helmet, and began to set down the complete outline of *The Dancers.* It was going to be quite a novel—some of the touches were pure corn, he realized, but the kind of corn that sells. The kind that logically lends itself to rental library circulation, to mass motion picture audience appeal. "A" corn. Fie had the angle, now. A sort of combination of *Grand Hotel* and *Letter to Three Wives.*

He could write it in a month, he knew that.

And he did.

Freeman was enthusiastic when he saw the finished manuscript. "This is it!" he kept crowing "I knew you'd do it, Barnaby. You've been getting further and further away from all that morbid fantasy stuff. Now you've got the commercial angle. I'm going to get busy on this tomorrow. Don't worry about a thing. I'd suggest you go home and take a good long rest. You look tired, man. This job must have knocked you out."

Codd drove home. The new car handled perfectly, but driving was an effort. Everything had been an effort during the past month. He hadn't worn the helmet while writing, but the effects were there. Aside from work, he moved in a daze. Action and reaction were oddly altered. Of course, that often happened when he was working on a story—the story became more real than the external world. But even the story hadn't seemed real.

The dreams were real.

That was the way he'd felt. The dreams were real. The rest was ephemeral, unimportant. Only the dream-world existed. Cleo had been the bait to get him to wear the helmet. The stories and the success were the bait that kept him wearing the helmet. Somebody or something wanted him to do that, and it was real.

Codd went up to the apartment. He realized that he was in a bad state, and realized—sensibly enough—that he was letting his mind run away. Freeman was right; he was just tired from overwork.

Well, he didn't have to work that hard any more. Somehow he knew he had a winner; Freeman confirmed it. He'd sell the novel, get a decent motion picture sale, and take things easy. After all, he was a writer in his own right—he didn't have to depend on the helmet. The whole thing was beginning to prey on his mind; guilty secrets, and all that sort of rot. From now on it might be a good idea to forget about everything that had gone before.

Cleo, whoever she was, had disappeared. Nobody knew about the helmet. Nobody had come to blackmail him or accuse him or threaten him. Why not call the whole thing off and start all over, start fresh, as his own man?

His own man . . .

Barnaby Codd stood in front of the mirror and took inventory of himself. The Brooks Brothers suit was immaculate. The Sulka tie had a certain subdued resplendence. But the long, lean face was thin, the cheeks were sunken, the brown hair was lustreless, the skin was waxy pale, and the glazed eyes held the glitter of horrified recognition.

Nothing had changed. He was still a walking corpse.

And if he could still walk, it was time for the head-shrinker.

IT was very comfortable on the leather couch.

Sometimes it's nice to be a corpse, to be laid out in state with hands folded peacefully over the chest, eyes open and unseeing, ready for eternal rest.

When you accept death, nothing else matters any more, and it's easier to talk. So much, much easier.

Barnaby Codd told Doctor Fine all about this feeling. It was not difficult to talk to the quiet little psychologist. Olcott had recommended him; seemed to think it was a good idea. And it was a good idea, so far.

Fine was willing to dispense with all the preliminaries, to take Codd's word for it that he understood his problem. And with that encouragement, Codd talked.

He'd been talking now for almost an hour. He told the whole story—about the writing, and meeting Cleo Fane, and the curious aftermath to that evening. He told about the helmet and the dreams. He held nothing back.

Doctor Fine listened attentively, patiently. Codd felt a growing conviction that he could be helped here, that Doctor Fine knew the answers.

He concluded on a hopeful note. "What do you think? What does it all mean to you, Doctor?"

Codd sat up and fished for a cigarette. Little Doctor Fine sat back and smiled. "It doesn't matter, really, what it means to me. The important question is—what does it mean to you? How would you explain it?"

"I—I can't explain it."

"Then, make a guess."

"Are you serious?"

"Naturally. Are you? Then make a guess."

"Well." Codd lit the cigarette and sought significant symbolism in a spiral of smoke. "One theory would be that when I want to the party, I was already cracking up. Alcohol worked upon me auto-suggestively.” He paused.

“Go on. This is interesting.”

“I remember that Olcott never saw this woman. His friends don’t seem to know her. So perhaps there was no woman—perhaps I imagined the whole thing; manufactured a stimulus, an excuse to continue writing. You might say that I hypnotized myself.”

The Doctor nodded. “It’s theoretically possible,” he conceded.

“Except for one thing.” Codd stood up, walked over to the coat-rack, fished in the pocket of his overcoat. “She gave me the helmet. Here it is.”

He extended the curious metallic headpiece and Doctor Fine inspected it carefully.

“You couldn’t make it yourself,” he mused. “I don’t suppose—”

“I don’t suppose, either,” Codd answered. “Supposition won’t help me. And I suspect that no laboratory on earth could accurately analyze the component structure of a magic helmet. She warned me against trying to find out—I’m wondering now whether or not it might be a good idea to at least make the attempt. At least it could help convince me of my own sanity.”

Doctor Fine gazed at the antennae, at the coils, at the odd patina of the silver. “If you’ll permit me, I’d be glad to have it examined for you,” he said. “But before you resign yourself to believing, in the power of the helmet, why not ‘think this thing through a little further?”

Codd finished his cigarette, crushed it out. “All right. Let’s take the other tack. Cleo Fane exists. I did see her. She did give me this helmet, for her own mysterious purposes. And the helmet—”

“Ignore the helmet,” Doctor Fine suggested. “Suppose the helmet was, and is, just a costume-piece. What then?”

“But I had the dreams,” Codd objected. “I had the first dream there in her apartment. And when I woke up, she was still there, with the emerald. She seemed to be in the dream and to know all about it—”

“Think!” insisted Doctor Fine. “What could that mean?”

“It could mean—it could mean that I didn’t hypnotize myself—that I did dream—but that *she* hypnotized me. Darkness and quiet and fatigue and alcohol and suggestion. She made me believe that I’d dream when I put the helmet on. And then she used the emerald as a focal point. No wonder she knew my dream—she was planting it in my mind, telling me what I was dreaming all the time!” Doctor Fine purred like a plump little cat. The canary had gone down nicely, it seemed. But—

“Wait!” exclaimed Codd. “That wouldn’t work, either. Because I dreamed again. And again. Whenever I wore the helmet, I had a dream. She wasn’t present to suggest anything, not once. And so—”

“Did you ever hear of post-hypnotic suggestion?” asked the Doctor.

“I get it! She did it all at the one sitting—told me that from that time on, whenever I wore the helmet, I’d dream. Perhaps planted the whole series in my subconscious. From that time on the helmet itself was the focal agent for hypnosis. And it’s still working!”

From the sound of the deep purr, the Doctor had found another canary.

“Two more questions, Doctor. It’s clearer to me now, and I feel better once I realize there are other explanations than crazy, supernatural ones. But two questions have to be answered. The first is—”

“Why should anyone attempt such a thing?” Doctor Fine was creeping up on his third canary, and he couldn’t wait. “Because, unfortunately, you are not alone in the need for analytical therapy, my friend. The world is full of disorganized personalities. Your Cleo Fane, with her calculated air of mystery, her fabricated helmet and fabricated story, may well be acting compulsively and dramatizing her own private fantasies of power. She was ‘looking for a creative artist, she told you. An instrument of masculinity, perhaps, a surrogate for—”

Then followed five minutes of abstruse terminology, all of which added up, reassuringly, to the fact that Cleo Fane was nuttier than a fruitcake. It was good therapy for Barnaby Codd—to be told that *she* was the crazy one, not he.

But there was still a second question. He asked it, now.

“How can I get rid of the dreams?” he pleaded. “How do I escape from this posthypnotic suggestion business?”

Doctor Fine smiled. “You’re already more than half-free now,” he said. “Just analyzing matters this way is a great step forward. You’ll see. The final step is simple. It merely lies in re-evaluating the helmet.”

“Yes?”

“Realizing, objectively and subjectively, completely, that it’s all a trick. That the helmet in itself has no magical power over your mind. The next time you wear it, you’ll not wait for the dream to end. You’ll take it off, of your own volition, right in the middle of the so-called dream sequence. And that will be that. Simple.” He smiled. “Then, if you still want to, we’ll have the gadget examined and come up with answers. Chances are, it was manufactured somewhere in New Jersey. We can attend to all that later this week.”

“But, wait a minute—I can’t take the helmet off in the middle of a dream! She warned me, she wouldn’t let me, I’m not able to command my actions when I wear it—”

Doctor Fine listened to him, and from the expression on his face it was plain he was hearing the chirps of the fourth canary. He smiled cheerfully.

“Of course you can take the helmet off,” he said. “It’s all a matter of suggestion. Of counter-hypnosis, if you wish. Now if you’ll just stretch out on the couch once more, I think I can promise you that next time you’ll be able to remove the helmet.” He hummed. “It’s all a matter of suggestion.”

It was.

CODD didn’t feel like a corpse any more. Corpses don’t have six months of solid booking with psychoanalysts. They don’t have the hopeful feeling that their problems are all on their way to being solved, that they are about to be helped, to get rid of their delusions, and can walk unaided on their own feet, on a path of their own choosing.

Codd had these feelings strongly, now. It was all so simple. The Doctor would cure him of his bloc against writing, would enable him to summon new strength and resolution instead of depending on suggestion and a weird belief in "magic."

Back at the apartment he looked at himself in the mirror once again, and that was the clincher. He was smiling, self-possessed, and there was some color in his cheeks. He was Barnaby Codd—not the old Codd, but the new Codd. The successful Codd. The Codd who had just written a novel which might well be a best-seller. The Codd who was going to have all the things he'd ever dreamed of having. The Codd who could—and it wasn't at all unthinkable now—write masterpieces.

The phone rang. He groped for it in the gathering dusk.

"Codd? This is Freeman. Got news for you. It looks like we've hit the jackpot." Codd listened, nodded at the mouthpiece. The book had sold. Freeman named the publisher, named the advance. One of the big book clubs was reading the carbon of the manuscript. The second carbon had been requested by the New York office of a major movie studio. Codd must appear at Freeman's office tomorrow morning and go through the pleasant motions of signing contracts.

Codd made the usual elated answers and hung up. He floated over to a chair in the dusk of the parlor.

This was it. This was real living. And only the beginning. From now on he'd enjoy it as a whole man, as his own master. He would break this foolish fixation, this morbid dependency on a crazy girl and her crazy story. His conscious mind was already free. And once he removed the helmet during a dream, his subconscious resolution would be made, thanks to Doctor Fine and the powers of suggestion. The powers of suggestion—fight fire with fire—science was wonderful—what a romantic, melodramatic fool he had been—now was the time to end it.

Yes, now was the time to end it. Get it over with. He couldn't wait, shouldn't wait. Perhaps that was Doctor Fine's hypnotic command, too.

That he should don the helmet at once and go through with the traumatic incident.

At any rate, the urge was strong. The urge was overpowering, irresistible. Codd got the helmet from his coat. He felt the coolness against his palms. He felt the coolness against his skull as he sat back on the sofa and adjusted the helmet It fitted snugly.

And that was all.

It just rested on his head. Nothing happened. Doctor Fine was right—perhaps he'd done a better job than he'd dared hope to do. Already the power of the helmet was gone. Codd didn't believe in it. He was his own man. He wasn't in the power of the helmet, in the power of Cleo Fane. He wasn't her man. He wasn't her man. He wasn't—

Codd fell asleep naturally. His head slipped down and he dozed. The phosphorescence was coming, now, and the familiar sense of seeing without being, of moving without body.

He waited for the three moons to appear. Strange, now that he had visited Doctor Fine, how he could analyze what was happening. That green planet had become not only familiar to him but natural, accepted. It had truly seemed more real to him than actual surroundings in his waking state. And the inevitable prelude to his visions—Cleo riding across the green landscape on a strange beast—that was accepted and expected too. He expected it now, but he wouldn't accept it this time. Only a dream.

Oddly enough, this time there was no green planet and no glimpse of Cleo riding an animal. He was somewhere else. He was many places else, at many times. He was in her mind, or she was in his.

A glimpse of her face, looming out of the sky, blotting out the horizon with the blinding redness of her hair. And her voice whispering.

"You tried to disobey. You weren't content with my gifts, so you tried to disobey. Didn't I give you enough? You wanted the ability to create, you wanted the rewards of creation. I gave them to you freely. Was that, then, not enough?"

It was a question, but he did not answer. She knew the answer. She knew everything. Her voice held an ageless grief. “It was not enough. It’s never been enough for any of them. They want to *know,* also. They want to pry, and meddle. It is their nature, because they are only men. You are only a man. You do not understand the gods.

“And like a man, you believe yourself greater than the gods, stronger than their spells. So you tried to disobey. You wanted to know.”

Her face faded away, and now was the time to take off the helmet. Or could he wait another minute?

He waited, tense even in sleep, and the voice came again. “Very well. You shall know. Not because you desire it, but because I *permit* it. For the first thing you must know is that this is *my* dream—not yours. I make the dream, the dreams of men who have the helmets. Did you think you were the only one I have sought through the centuries? Did you believe yourself the sole favorite of the gods, the sole creator whose creations come through the dreams I grant?

“That is the secret—and some there are who have been content with it and have not sought to disobey. They have learned their lesson, guarded their helmets as a sacred secret. They created masterpieces.”

Codd’s mind was a kaleidoscope now, a montage of fugitive, fleeting fragments. He saw—and to his startled horror—recognized the faces and features of a dozen Titans. Great composers, famous artists, renowned writers, immortal sculptors. In an instant they embraced the redhaired essence of womankind, wore their helmets, created, lived, died. He comprehended everything, and the melange melted, merged, went back into Time for thousands of years.

How long had it been going on, and why, and who was Cleo Fane or that which called itself Cleo Fane?

“I grant you all answers,” came the thought-voice. “Behold, if you dare.”

Then he was on the island and he knew it for Aeae, and knew her for what she was—the eternal sorceress of all legend, the immortal, the undying, the symbol of creation and destruction known to blind Homer.

Redhaired Circe, whose delight it was to ensnare the souls of men. And men were unworthy of that embrace, they sinned against the gods, and became beasts. Swine and stallions, lions and wolves; she took from them the creative power they despised and left them only the animal. They became animals.

So had Homer sung the story—and ceased. But the story did not end. It could never end, for the gods are immortal. And when Aeae sunk into the sea, Circe sought refuge. Not on earth—for what is Time or Space to an immortal?—but far, far beyond.

Now Codd was back on the green planet once more, the far green planet with the three moons. This was Circe's new island; her island in space. Here men did not visit her, so she went among men from time to time.

"Always I seek ecstasy," the voice echoed. "Always I seek the thrill which comes only in participating in the act of creation. And it is my eternal curse that I cannot create of myself. I can only transform. I must go to men, to half-beasts who possess but do not appreciate this power, in order to awaken them. And when they reject their power, deny me a share of their soul's surrender, I avenge myself. I transform them into the animals they deserve to be. For they reject the gift of the gods, the helmet—"

Codd comprehended, and with a thrill of recognition, comprehended that he comprehended. This dream was different; a part of him was aloof, analytical. He wasn't in her power, wasn't in the helmet's power. He had the armour of Science, the weapons of Doctor Fine. He was invulnerable. He could listen, accept or reject at will. This was a new plot, perhaps. If he liked if he'd use it when he awoke; if not, he'd throw it away. Just as now, at any time he chose, he'd rip off the helmet and leave the crazy woman with her garbled dreams.

She was a woman, all right, and insane. And she'd given him hours of free fantasy while he was under hypnosis—all her mad delusions had been impressed on his brain. That's where the plots had come from, and no wonder he'd felt depressed while he was writing them! And now, ultimately, came the final product of her suggestions; the central core of her fixation. She was a sorceress, Circe, no less. And a streamlined, modern Circe who lived on a planet of her own, far out in space. Three moons, indeed! And all men were beasts, and she was greater than men, and she lured artists to their doom—

He saw her with the animals around her, now, and they wore helmets too. And they fawned on her and licked her naked feet, and she chose a mount and bounded off across the weird landscape that was no landscape but merely a reflection of the twisted convolutions of her own disordered brain.

She was pleading with him now, and shouting at him, and threatening him. He must not try to find out about the helmet, he must not resist the dreams, he must not see Doctor Fine. If he would keep on wearing the helmet and writing, she would never seek any vengeance.

"I'll give you dreams to weave wonders," she whispered. "You shall be famous, your name will live for all time. And all I ask is that I share. That I share the ecstatic moments of creation with your soul."

Codd pitied her, then; pitied her as she must have been when she sat beside him in the darkness and poured out her madness to his sleeping mind.

"But if you disobey, you know your punishment," the voice threatened. "And you cannot escape. You cannot escape, ever. It will go on, forever and ever, as long as the three moons wheel. So choose, choose! Would you be one with the gods, or a base and craven dog, a howling cur in the wilderness of a faraway world? Yours is the power of choice—mine the power to punish or reward. So choose, choose!"

There was pity in Codd's mind, but there was also a growing revulsion. He couldn't stand the morbidity much longer. He must remove himself from this source of aberration, return to sanity as a whole man. And he could do it. He heard her voice, saw the green world—and at the same time realized that he sat in his own apartment, wearing the absurd helmet. Doctor Fine had told him what to do. The Doctor was Fine, everything was fine, everything would be all right once he removed the helmet, removed the crazy notion from his head. Beast, was he? Dog, eh? He was a man, his own man.

And he could prove it. He could feel and he could act. Act as he acted now. Barnaby Codd lifted his hands to his head. He felt the helmet—it was real. And he could take it off.

She was screaming, now; screaming and laughing. Probably she had done so at the last, when she broke down completely in her delirium and cast her final "spell." In her way, the poor woman had actually been "possessed"—she thought of herself as a sorceress and so she had been.

But spells must be broken. Dreams must end.

He reached up and took off the helmet.

The screaming stopped. It stopped inside his head, stopped outside his head.

The helmet was off. He was free.

This was reality.

He was crouching now, panting, but he knew he had broken the spell. This was real. It was over, irrevocably over.

Barnaby Codd opened his eyes. Then *she* came over and patted his head, mounted his back. He lifted up his shaggy head and howled to the three moons. . . .

The Dream Makers

They were living memories—walking, living, breathing memories—and that's just what they intended to remain!

I'VE got the right lead for it. That's easy. I can start out with all the usual blah—Hollywood is a crazy town, filled with crazy people, and the craziest things happen there. I can rehash some of the weird and whacky and wonderful stories that have appeared in the news, and add a few which didn't appear, for obvious reasons. I can give this yarn the old buildup.

But there's only one trouble—it isn't a yarn and it happened to *me*.

So let's just start it slow and easy, with me climbing into my car that afternoon and heading out Wilshire Boulevard toward Restlawn. It was just another job and if *Filmdom* wanted me to do a series on "Grand Old-timers of the Movies," I was their man. Their hungry man, let's add.

I headed out past the Miracle Mile and into Beverly Hills, taking it slow. I didn't particularly like this assignment.

Grand Old-Timers. That's what started me off. I knew what I was getting into—nosing around the Actor's Home and Central Casting, following leads that ended up in cheap flophouses and the gutters of Main Street.

That's where the grand old-timers were, most of them. The men and women who "grew up with the Industry" until the Industry outgrew them. Oh, Pickford, Goldwyn, Chaplin, deMille, Ford and a few others didn't have to worry. They'd survived or retired gracefully on their savings.

Valentino and Chaney and Fairbanks didn't have to worry, either, because they died at the height of their success.

But what about the ones who weren't lucky enough to die while they were famous—Griffith, and Langdon, and Barrymore, struggling along until the all-too-bitter end? And what about those who hadn't died yet—Sennett and Keaton and Gish and a dozen others? They'd be considered Grand Old-timers, too.

WITH a sigh, I turned off Wilshire past Westwood Village, seeking the smaller side-streets. I knew all about the Grand Old-timers. The "special awards" trotted out for them at Academy banquets, and the doors slammed in their faces the next day. The humiliating "bit roles" played in occasional way-back-when films; the overpublicized "comebacks" that puffed them up for one picture, then deflated them again to extra status.

It would be painful for them to be interviewed by me—and equally painful for me to do the job.

But a man must eat. And a man must dream . . .

They'd never be Grand Old-timers to me, because of the dreams: the dreams they'd manufactured for my wonder thirty years ago. My dreams are still very much alive and so are their creators.

Right now, riding down into Santa Monica, I found myself back in one of the great dreams—the great nightmare.

It's a warm fall Wednesday night in Maywood, Illinois. The year is 1925 and tonight is its climactic moment, because you're eight years old and you're going to the Lido, all by yourself at night, just like a grownup. Sure, there's school tomorrow, but, gee, Ma, just this once, you promised, I won't be home too late, and I want to see it so bad.

You have eight blocks to walk, eight exciting blocks through autumn darkness, with the dime for the show in the right hand and the nickel for the candy bar in the left hand, and with every step, your heart pounds harder.

The Lido is a Palace. Its doors are guarded by marble columns a hundred feet high, but you don't just go right in. First you must look at all the pictures outside—the big ones in color and the little ones that are like photographs. There's this beautiful woman with the long hair and the man with the mask. And here the woman is standing on top of a tall building with another man in a soldier's uniform. Since he's got a trim little mustache, he must be the hero. Villains often wave mustaches, too, but they're bigger and blacker and nastier ones.

There's the man with the mask, spying on them. You can't see his face. He's up on some big statue and he looks mad, even with the mask on. That must be him, all right. It must be.

But it's almost seven and the show is going to start, so you go up to that glittering cage and give your dime to the pretty girl with the lovely costume on. She smiles, and punches some machine, and out comes your ticket. Then you walk in and give your ticket to the man at the door. He smiles, too. You've already bought your candy bar at the store next to the show, so you're all set.

It's wonderful in the Lido. Even the lobby is wonderful. All red carpets and fancy chairs and a big bubbler with the water running all the time—not like at home where you have to turn the water off on account of the water bill being so high.

And it's even better inside, in the dark, because there must be a thousand seats to choose from, all plush and soft. When you sit down right spang in the center of the show and count the rows ahead and the rows behind, and look to see if any of the kids from school are there to see you sitting all alone like a grownup—why, then, you just naturally look up at the sky.

SURE, they've got a sky at the Lido, just as blue as outside at night, and it has stars in it! Honest, it has regular stars that twinkle! And all along the walls are statues, lighted up kind of dim, and the stars are shining, and it's more beautiful than any real place you've ever seen.

Then the light goes on up at the left side of the stage and it's the organ. A real pretty lady plays the organ. She has gold hair that sparkles or shines when the light hits it. But you don't look now; you listen.

You sort of skooch down in your seat, all soft and snug, and look at the blue sky and the stars, and let the music ooze over you. That organ must be just about the most wonderful kind of thing to play, and it plays everything. "Valencia" and "Blue Skies" and "Avalon" and that song, "Collegiate," that they played when Harold Lloyd was in *The Freshman.*

But now the light is going out, except for the little one right over the keys, and the music is changing to a sort of loud exciting noise, and the curtain is going back, just like magic, and the side lights blink off, and there is the movie.

First off, it's *Topics of the Day,* which is just a lot of grownup jokes one after the other, in too-small printing on the screen. The organ makes fiddle-around noises, but it isn't very interesting, not like pictures. But then comes *Felix the Cat* and that little mouse is in it and the old farmer guy with the bald head and the beard. Funniest part is where Felix chases him through the haystack with the pitchfork and he falls in the well and comes up and spits out the water and a fish comes right out of his mouth.

But the real comedy is even better. It's got Billy Dooley in his sailor suit. Billy Dooley is one of the best, better than Bobby Vernon or Al St. John, but not quite as good as Lloyd Hamilton or Larry Semon or Lupina Lane. This one is real funny and everybody laughs. Billy Dooley, he jumps up in the air and sort of wigwags his feet three times before coming down again.

How do they do that?

Then the music pounds away and the comedy is over and they turn the lights blue for a minute. The big picture is coming the one you've been waiting to see. You can tell by the lights and the kind of music that it's a real spooky picture.

There's this man in the mask and he wants to get the girl and he hangs this one guy in the cellar. Then he does get her and takes her down to his secret hiding place where he sleeps in a coffin and plays the organ. He's sitting there playing with his mask on, and the girl sneaks up behind him, and you know what she's going to do now and you're tense and afraid.

All at once she does it—she pulls off the mask! And the face comes up to fill the screen, rushes out of the screen and blots out everything until there's nothing else in the world but that grinning flesh-covered skull with the rotting fangs and the glaring eyes that you're going to dream about tonight and every night.

And that's a dream you got from Lon Chaney.

OH, they made real dreams in those days. There's never been a monster since to equal Chaney, never a villain as arrogant as Stroheim, never a heroine as lovely as Barbara La Marr or a hero as rugged and determined as William S. Hart, who would go out alone in the hills to make his plans.

All of it came back from a million years ago, and then it was gone and I was riding down Caprice Drive and the sun was shining.

The sun shone on the Restlawn sign. I parked, walked up the drive, poked the buzzer. Chimes sounded.

The woman who opened the door wore a starched uniform. Her hair was starched and her eyes were starched, too. Stiff sanatorium face, stiff sanatorium voice. "I beg your pardon. I'm from *Filmdom* magazine. To see Mr. Franklin."

"Have you an appointment?"

"I called this morning."

"Room 216. That's on the second floor, front."

I took the stairs. I walked slowly, not relishing this, dreading what I might expect to find. A white-haired old man, sitting at the window of a private hospital room; sitting and staring out at the living in the streets and then staring back at the pictures of the dead lining his walls. *To Jeffrey Franklin, the world's greatest director.* Signed—Mickey Neilan, Mabel Normand, Lowell Sherman, John Gilbert.

Well, supposing they were dead, and supposing he was sick and old? He was still the world's greatest director. For my money and a lot of other people's money. Hadn't made a picture since that last floppola in '29, when sound really came in. But before that, he'd been one of the true dream makers.

Let's see, that was twenty-four, almost twenty-five years ago. Hard to imagine him still alive. Must be older than God. This was going to be sad, very sad. But a man must eat . . .

I knocked discreetly on the door of 216. The voice called "Come in." I opened the door and entered.

And the new dream began.

II

IN the publicity shots I'd seen of him a quarter-century ago, Jeffrey Franklin had appeared as a tall, black-haired man, smoking a curved-stem pipe. He was always pictured standing, legs apart, feet firmly planted, chin jutting forth aggressively.

Seeing Jeffrey Franklin in the doorway now was quite a shock.

He was a tall, black-haired man, smoking a curved-stem pipe. He stood with his legs apart, feet firmly planted, chin jutting forth aggressively.

I guess I stared.

"Come in and make yourself comfortable," he said in a deep, commanding voice.

It wasn't difficult to make myself comfortable, because 216 turned out to be a suite. There were at least two other rooms leading off the big parlor, and the parlor itself was more than spacious.

No hospital bed, no tattered clippings or faded photos on the walls, no institutionally uncomfortable furniture. Instead, I found myself in a modern, masculine decor that deserved to be called luxurious. The whole atmosphere was very definitely present-time. And so was Jeffrey Franklin.

"Get you a drink?" he asked. "Here?" I said, surprised.

He smiled.

"I'm a paying guest, not a patient. A little alcohol tones the system, I find. Keeps a man from getting old."

"It certainly seems to work." I blurted it out tactlessly, but he smiled again.

"Type-casting would put you down for scotch and water. Right?"

"Right."

"Speaking of type-casting, what did you think of Frisbie?"

"Who?"

"Miss Frisbie. The dragon who guards the portals. Isn't she perfect for the role?"

I nodded. Even before he placed the drink in my hand, I felt at ease.

I chose a lounge chair and Jeffrey Franklin made a gracefully self-conscious picture on the sofa across from me. He looked a bit like those man-of-distinction ads they used to run a few years back, and (as my thoughts grew still more remote) like one of the old-time Shakespearean hams. Come to think of it, hadn't he started out a rep player in legit?

THE question reminded me of my errand, and abruptly I felt embarrassed once again. He sensed it immediately; his perception was remarkable for a man his age. (Good Lord, how old *was* he? He had to be close to seventy.)

"It isn't easy, is it?" His voice, like his smile, had grown soft. "What isn't easy?"

"Being a ghoul." He raised his hand. "I don't mean it unkindly, son. I know you're just doing a job, getting your story. But I wish I had a nickel for every inquiring reporter who has come out here, spade in hand, to dig up the remains during the past twenty-odd years."

"You've been here that long?" He nodded. "Right here. Ever since *Revolution."*

"Your last picture."

"My last picture. The flop." There was no discernible emotion in his voice.

"But why—"

"I like it here."

"But you're not sick, and if you'll permit me to say so, it doesn't look as if you're broke, either. And you could have had other pictures. There were contracts waiting for you and—"

"I like it here." He leaned forward. "I'm afraid I can't give you much of a sob-story. And neither can Walter Harland, or Peggy Dorr, or Danny Keene, or any of the other regulars in my old company. None of us were forced out; none of us are on relief. You'll have a hard time squeezing the tears for this scene."

It was my turn to lean forward. "Mr. Franklin, I'd like to set you straight on one thing. I'm not looking for a sob-story. I wouldn't write it if I found it. Believe me, nothing pleases me more than to know you're here by choice. I don't like anything to happen to my dreams."

"Your dreams?" He dropped the man-of-distinction pose. The long hands joined across his knees, and I noted with vague satisfaction that the backs were free of the mottled markings of age. "What do you mean by dreams?" he asked.

So I told him, or tried to tell him. About Chaney in *The Phantom of the Opera.* The dream about Keaton in *The General.* Doug sliding down the drape in *Robin Hood,* Charlie eating the shoe, Renee Adoree stumbling after the truck in *The Big Parade*—a hundred memorable moments that somehow stick in my mind with a greater sense of reality than most contemporary events of my childhood.

I guess I talked a long while. About the films, and the actors, and the directors of the silent days. About the effect of the organ music, the autohypnosis which was rudely shattered by the theatrical phoniness of sound. I wondered out loud whether or not I was alone in my experience or viewpoint; how many hundreds or thousands or millions of others (trending along toward middle age, now, and it’s hard to realize that) might share the illusions of the great days when the “silver screen” was really silver and shimmered with a strange enchantment.

I tried to figure why it had changed. Was it that I was no longer a child, had grown up? No, because I’ve seen some of the films again, since then, at special showings—*Caligari,* of course, *Zorro, Intolerance,* a dozen others. And the last reels of *The Strong Man* are just as funny, the scene in *The Thief* where Doug conjures up the army from the dust is still pure enchantment.

Well, was it radio, or television, or the smart-aleck “inside stuff” attitude adopted generally in a world where everybody was busy dispensing the “lowdown” on celebrities?

Was it the war, the postwar era, the new age of fear? Had the Bomb done more than split the atom? Had it also shattered the dreams?

“Such stuff as dreams are made of.” Yes, Franklin was an old repertory ham, all right. He rolled out the quotation with sonorous relish, but I sensed the sincerity behind it.

“Odd that you’ve speculated along those lines,” he mused. “I didn’t think anyone else but ourselves had noticed the change.” He noted my look. “Walter Harland and Tom Humphrey and some of the others still get together and reminisce. You’ll probably be talking to them, if you’re planning a series of articles. They’ve aged pretty gracefully, you’ll find.”

I took the opening. “I hope you won’t be offended if I report the same thing about you,” I said. “Frankly, I can’t get over seeing you like this. I admit I expected—”

“This?” Jeffrey Franklin rose and abruptly seemed to shrink. In his place was a bent, hobbling oldster with withered, clawlike fingers scrabbling at a wobbly chin. Once again I remembered that he’d been an actor—remembered, too, that one of his tricks as a director was to play every role for the benefit of his actors before doing a take.

He straightened up, resumed his seat. “The years have been kind. Everything has gone well since *Revolution.* That was my only mistake, thinking I could go against their wishes. I haven’t tried to change the plot since, and neither has Walter or Tom or Peggy, or any of the others.”

My ears stood up, my forepaw raised, my tail straightened out, or would have if I had one. I smelled *story* here.

“Plot?” I said. “Then there is something to all those rumors—they did try to force you out when sound came and the studio reorganized. I suppose they threatened the company with the blacklist and pushed you out with a stock reshuffle?”

Jeffrey Franklin looked up at the ceiling for a moment before he answered. Once a ham, always a ham.

But his answer, when he gave it, was casual. “Sorry to disappoint you once again. I told you we weren’t forced out, and that’s the truth. Check with the others. They all had offers, plenty of offers. Most of them had legitimate stage experience and they could have switched to the talkies without any trouble. But we decided it was time to quit while we were ahead of the game. As I say, *Revolution* flopped. And there were other examples: people who didn’t have sense to quit when they should.”

“You mean Gilbert and Lew Cody and Charles Ray, people like that?”

“Perhaps. But I was thinking specifically of Roland Blade, Fay Terris, Matty Ryan.”

FUNNY how the names took on long-forgotten meanings to me. Roland Blade, whose name belonged up there with Novarro and LaRoque and Ricardo Cortez—yes, he’d done a talkie or two, and then he went over the cliff in his fancy car. Fay Terris was vintage stuff, a sort of American Pola Negri. Come to think of it, she’d made a few sound films before the fire in her beach-house, Ryan I didn’t recall very well. He’d been an independent producer and a rather big one; something like Thomas Ince. Let’s see, whatever happened to him? Suddenly I remembered the headlines. He’d been one of the early aviation enthusiasts, like Mary Astor’s first husband. He crashed, and they found his body cut almost in two—

Odd. Very odd. They all met violent deaths. And now I could recall a half-dozen more, all around that time. Some were mysterious suicides. One had been the victim of a still unsolved murder. Others perished in freak fires, drowned, disappeared.

“Do you mean you were superstitious about going along with the new era and making talking pictures?” I asked.

Franklin smiled. “Once a reporter, always a reporter,” he said. “Putting words in peoples’ mouths. Please don’t quote me to that effect, because I don’t mean any such thing at all.”

He paused, and once again his eyes sought the ceiling before he continued.

“If anything, I mean that we were all at the same point when the change came to Hollywood. We’d all started around the turn of the ’twenties, made our names together, did our best work and reaped the rewards at the same time. The best times were past, for most of the silent stars, directors, producers. All that remained was the struggle to stay on top, the resultant strain, the recklessness which would inevitably invade our personal life-patterns and which resulted in tragedy for those who chose to stay on. They used to call it ‘going Hollywood.’ You remember the stories of Lloyd Hamilton’s fancy parties, and Tom Mix with his sixteen-thousand-dollar car, and the things that happened to people like poor Wally Reid, Arbuckle, and the rest of the crowd.

“No, we just decided to quit, that’s all. I’m afraid it’s not a very sensational lead for you.”

I made one last try. “Didn’t you say something about ‘going against their wishes’ and something about a ‘plot’ ?”

Jeffrey Franklin rose. “You misunderstood me,” he said. “I was speaking of our wishes, as a group, to leave films. And I’ve already told you there was no conspiracy. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’m rather tired. But I’ve enjoyed this interview very much.”

He was lying and I knew it.

But there was nothing else to do except shake hands and head for the door.

III

I WALKED into the little book-store, still wondering if I had the right address. Nobody was out front, and only a single bulb burned over the table at the rear of the shop. A stocky, middle-aged, bespectacled man dropped his book on the table and looked up at me.

“Yes?”

“I’m looking for Walter Harland.”

The man stood up. He was taller than I’d thought and not nearly as old as he seemed at first glance. He took off his glasses and smiled. And there, of course, stood Walter Harland.

There was something quite dramatic in the very simplicity of the revelation. And something else, something vaguely frightening. He was too young. Franklin was also too young. They looked the way they had back in ’29 or ’30.

I wrestled the thought, two falls out of three, while I introduced myself, explained my errand, and alluded to my visit with Jeffrey Franklin.

Walter Harland nodded. “I expected you,” he said. “Mr. Franklin w—told me that you might visit me.”

“It was kind of Mr. Franklin to w—tell you,” I answered.

He got it, and lowered his eyes.

“Don’t say anything,” I went on. “I can understand. This sort of thing isn’t exactly my idea of good taste, either.”

That got a smile out of him and an invitation to sit down. I went through the same routine with him as I had with Franklin and got virtually the same answers. I began to wonder if Franklin hadn’t given them all mimeographed copies of a script to memorize.

Yes, he'd had other offers when Franklin's production unit disbanded. No, he hadn't wanted to continue. Yes, he had plenty of money to live on; he'd bought this bookstore and was quite content. He had discovered it was much more pleasant to read other people's plots than to act them out.

I had to make the effort, then. "What's all this about plots?" I asked. "There's a rumor going around that you're the victim of some kind of plot to force you into obscurity."

It would be appropriately dramatic, at this moment, to report that Walter Harland gasped and turned pale. But actually he merely choked on his cigarette smoke—and if he had any dermatological reaction at all, the light was much too dim to disclose it.

"Don't believe everything you hear," he said, when his brief choking spell was over. "This isn't a B-movie, you know. I assure you, we talked it over sensibly and we agreed it was time to quit."

"Because you were all at the height of your fame, and you had reaped the rewards and didn't want to go downhill," I finished for him. "Is that it?"

"Precisely." He was happy now. We were back on the script again. I wished I could leave him there, but a man has to eat. So I gave him my friendliest smile and let him have it right between the eyes.

"I've heard that song before," I said, "and I don't buy it. Not a note rings true. You were good and everybody knows it. But you were a ham, like all the rest. You always played it big because you loved it that way. Signing autographs. Posing in those satin dressing gowns, with the initials on the lapels yet. Attending premieres in your Rolls, with the flappers kissing the tires. Dragging those wolfhounds into the Montmarte. That was your meat, wasn't it?"

HARLAND chuckled; a good, hearty actor's chuckle. "I suppose so. But a man gets older. He grows up."

"Actors never grow up in that sense of the word, and you know it! Nothing could make a matinee idol like you give up the glamor routine.

Nothing except, perhaps, an awful scare of some kind. Come on now, what was it?”

I felt pretty proud of my D.A. routine, because it seemed to work. He sat there, breathing heavily for a long while.

“All right,” he said softly then. “There was a scare. An awful scare. Remember the films I played in? The fencing sequences, the fights, the acrobatics—Fairbanks stuff? That’s what I was identified with. One day I went to the doctor for a routine check-up. He got excited, took cardiagrams. You know the answer. My ticker was going bad. He warned me to take things easy if I wanted to be around for encores.”

For a moment, I was a little ashamed of myself. Then that word “warned” cropped up again. And I remembered that if I could play the D.A., Walter Harland could play the part of a man with a bad heart. And I realized that before he’d spoken, he’d looked up at the ceiling.

Maybe there was a fly up there, buzzing around. But something else kept buzzing in my brain.

I didn’t say a word. I just shook my head.

He was already on his feet, ready to finish the script that Jeffrey Franklin had so carefully prepared. He held out his hand, then hesitated.

“You really want to know, don’t you?” he said. “Not just to get an article, but because it means something to you.”

I nodded.

“I’m afraid there’s no way of explaining.” He led me to the door, paused, put his hand on my shoulder. “Do you enjoy reading?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“So do I. I’ve had a lot of time for it these past twenty years and more. I was particularly impressed with the writings of a man named Charles Fort. You know his work? Good. Well, Fort had an idea about cycles and events. Almost Spenglerian. He once said that when it’s *steam-engine* time, people suddenly begin to *steam-engine.* Nothing much can be done to hasten that time. But, on the other hand, nothing much can be done to retard it. Maybe we all did the right thing because we recognized it was the right time.”

I was back out on the street, looking up at the sky. And Walter Harland was back in his shop, looking at the ceiling. Or was it the ceiling?

IV

LET'S save the rest for the kindergarten class. I found Peggy Dorr in Pasadena. Danny Keene had a boat at Balboa. Tom Humphrey—of all people!—operated a TV service repair shop not far from Farmer's Market.

And you know what else I found when I located them. Too-young faces, too-evasive answers, too-uniform a story. And that faraway look in their eyes.

It all added up to one big puzzle. Unfortunately, detective stories aren't my line. I was Out after stories I couldn't get. The whole assignment was turning out to be one grand and glorious fiasco.

Where was the drama in it, the old heart-throb, the pathos, the violin-music in the background? Everything had stopped for them in 1930, and the whole story belonged in the era before then when they made—literally *made*—the movies.

And nobody cared about that any more.

Or did they?

Riding back from the visit with Tom Humphrey, the notion hit me.

By Louis B. Mayer and all the saints, here was a story!

Not a lousy article, or a series of articles. This was a movie!

Look at how they flocked to the Jolson pictures, the life of Will Rogers, and all these phony stage-biography films. What about using the same gimmick on the life of Jeffrey Franklin? The whole silent-picture story, in glorious Technicolor, Warner color, Cinecolor, who cares?

Sure, Twentieth did *Hollywood Cavalcade,* but that was more than a dozen years ago. Besides, I had the kicker. Call it coincidence, fate, or just a happy accident for the benefit of yours truly, I had something that would really sell such a film. No more working with imitators and fakes—with the aid of a little modern lighting and makeup, the film could actually be done with the original cast playing real-life roles!

Natural. Socko. Boffo. The whole *Variety* lexicon flashed through my mind, and then the plot started to take shape, and before I knew it, I was sitting at the typewriter banging out a movie treatment.

It was a good one. I didn't have to take my word for it. I had Cy Charney's word. I sat in his office and braved the blasts fired by two complete cigars as he read through it, then had the satisfaction of seeing one of the biggest agents on the Strip going crazy over my idea.

"I can sell this tomorrow," he said. "It's completely copasetic. Of course you're not a name, but the idea is big enough. I think I can start the bidding at—lemme see now—thirty-forty Gs. And maybe a writing assist for you on the real script. You free to take an assignment, boy?"

I damn near broke my neck nodding.

"Keep in touch," said Charney. "Now get outta here and let me use my fine Eyetalian hand on this deal."

I got out of there, but things were happening so fast, I couldn't quite believe my ears. Then again, I wasn't depending on my ears in this deal. I had Mr. Charney's fine Eyetalian hand.

AND what a fine hand it was, too! He called me exactly twenty-six hours later.

"All sewed," he said. "Freeman is crazy about it and Jack wants it, too. And I can get fifty from one of them if the other knows he's got competition. I'll have a contract in my office before the week is out. Can you line them up by that time?"

"Line who up?"

"The cast, boy! Old Franklin and Harland and the rest. I'm taking your say-so on this that they're still what you say they are instead of strictly for the glue-factory. Of course, they'll have to be tested and all, but I'm selling the story that they're still full of p. and v. Right? Now I'm asting you to line 'em up. 'Course, if you want me to come with you and put on the old pressure—"

"No, that won't be necessary. Let me handle it."

"Tell 'em not to worry about figures." Charney said. "I'll represent 'em. They oughta know what that means in this town. And, say, be sure you wangle a release out of old Franklin. It isn't exackly his life-story, but it's close enough so maybe you gotta cut him in on the story price. You work it out with him, hah?"

"Yes," I said. "I'll work it out with him."

But as I hung up, I wondered. I sat back and glanced up at the ceiling. There was no answer up there—not for me.

But, then, I wasn't superstitious. Maybe that was the answer: actors were superstitious, actors were always "on," actors were always hams.

Hams! I had it.

First thing I did, I sent a copy of the treatment, marked *PERSONAL,* to everybody I'd interviewed. Sent it special delivery, with an accompanying confidential letter. Gave it the complete buildup, including what a wonderful opportunity this would be to recreate the real art of the motion picture as it existed in the old days. I also hinted (and hoped I could actually make good on it, too) that a portion of the film's profits might be donated to the welfare funds for the benefit of less fortunate old-timers. And in each letter I stressed what a tremendous part was waiting for the recipient.

I gave the deal just twenty-four hours to get rolling. Then I went around to Walter Harland's bookshop.

The first thing I noticed as I came in was that he didn't wear his glasses any more. And he had on a suit that had nothing in it to attract or impress the bibliophile. He'd sharpened up, which was fine.

"Well?" I said.

"Congratulations. It's tremendous. I had no idea what was in back of all this. Your cagy interview approach fooled me completely."

He not only offered, he ushered me, to a chair. And he pushed a package of Players my way.

"Did me good to read it," he said. "I feel twenty years younger."

"You look it," I told him, truthfully. "And that's what a new generation of movie fans are going to say when they see you on the screen."

HE beamed. "Danny and Tom called me last night. And Lucas—remember him? Used to do the heavies, with the long cigarette holder, the sideburns and all? They're so excited—"

Something small stumbled into the bookshop; something old and withered and trembling like autumn's last leaf. It had a piping whiskey tenor, and it bleated, "Wait, I dowanna in'errupt you, but I just gotta talk t'you a minute."

"Sure, Tiny." Harland got up, walked over to the counter. The little man bleated in his ear for a moment. Harland went to the cash-register, rang up a NO SALE, and palmed something in the rummy's hand. "Now, if you'll excuse me—"

"Yeah, Walt. Yeah. God bless you." And autumn's last leaf blew away.

"Sorry." Harland came up to me, smiling.

"You don't have to be sorry," I said.

"Yes, I do."

"Meaning?"

"I can't do it. We can't do it. Your picture."

"But—"

"Spare me the sales talk. You know I'm dying to do it. So are the others. I wouldn't fool you. Why, it would be like starting life all over again. What I wouldn't give to see my name up there, show all these young punks how a real actor can project!"

"Then why—"

He was onstage and it was his scene all the way. "Because I told you we agreed to quit, all of us. And we did. There were one or two exceptions, but they aren't around any more. You didn't know it, but you just caught a glimpse of somebody who tried the other way. He only did one job for

Franklin, and it was a minor comedy role, so I guess he got off easy in consequence. But it's no go. We couldn't take the risk."

"What risk?" I argued. "It's bound to be a smash. You can't lose a thing, and look what you stand to gain."

He shook his head. "Remember what I said about steam-engine time? We're horse-and-buggy people and we've got to stay where we belong." He smiled, because he was doing *Pagliacci* now. "Besides, here's one thing you can bet on—there's no picture without the old man and he'll never go for it. Never."

I shrugged myself out of the store, fast. I had a reason. I was looking for the last leaf. I knew him now—Tiny Collins. Never a big-name comic, but an old reliable, on a par with Heinie Mann, Billy Bevan, Jack Duffy.

One look at him, and at the little act he'd put on with Harland in the store, and I could figure out where to find him.

It was just four doors down the street.

COLLINS was up there at the end of the bar, all alone with a small shot and a large beer for company. He'd stopped trembling, now that he was back home again.

I uttered the magic formula. "Aren't you Tiny Collins? I'll buy."

It just so happens that I was able to dredge up the names of several of his pictures. Just so happens that I was able to dredge up several more shots and beers. Just so happens that got him into the back booth and steered the conversational boat into my particular idea of a snug harbor.

Tiny was funny: Drinking sobered him up. He stopped slurring his sentences and became thoughtful. I didn't mention the picture at all, but I did set the scene for him. I hinted that I might do an article on him, and that was enough. We were pals. And you can ask a pal anything, can't you?

"Level with me, now," I said. "What's got into all your old friends? Why are they so publicity-shy and why did they quit?"

"You're asking me? Question I been asking myself for twenny years—why they quit. Different with me. I got the old axe. But they didn't have to quit. Seems like they all got together at once and decided."

"I know, Tiny. And I was wondering why. It just doesn't make sense."

"Nothin' makes sense," he agreed. "They wanna quit, so they get offers. I dowanna quit and right—like *that—l* can't get a job. Me, Tiny Collins, that's played with Turpin and Fields and whatzisname and—"

"I know, Tiny. I know. Here, let's have another." We did, and I waited for the gulping to subside before I continued. "But surely you have a theory."

" 'Course I have a theory. Lotsa theories. First one is, they're all dead."

"Dead?"

"Sure. They got together and formed one of those—whatcha call 'em—suicide pacts. When they heard about Blade and Terris and Ryan and Todd and all the others bumping at the same time, they figured they hadda go, too. So they made a agreement and killed themself."

He meant to laugh, but midway it turned into a cough. I rode that one out, too.

"Only they're not dead, Tiny," I said.

"What? Oh, sure. They're not dead. Only they look like they're dead. Didn't you notice? Now take me, frinstance. I'm same age as Tom Humphrey. But look at the diffrence. I'm all beat up and him—he looks just like he did in *The Black Tiger.* That was his last one, for First National 'r somebody. And all of them are alike.

They look like they stopped when they stopped making pictures. Like they died and somebody stuffed 'em and wound 'em up."

I considered the theory a moment. I also considered that Tiny's shot-and-a-beer routine might have something to do with the difference in appearances.

"You have any other theories?" I asked.

Tiny looked at me. That is, he made a good effort. But he was weaving again.

"Yes. Yes, I got a theory. You won't tell anybody?"

"Honor bright."

"Good enough. Because—well, I know it sounds screwy, but I think they got scared." He groped for the beer-glass.

"Scared," I prompted.

"Good and scared. The old man, Franklin, he done it. He filled 'em full of the old juice. I heard stories. I ain't the one to confirm or deny. Confirm or deny." He-liked the phrase.

"What stories?"

"The old man. He went off his trolley. After *Revolution.* The talkies comin' in and everybody croakin'. He got scared bad it might happen to him. And he was like God to the others. What he said—says—goes. He says quit, they quit. Also, you know how screwy they can get out here. Way I personly dope it out, maybe the old man he got roped into one of those phony cults. You heard about phony cults?"

I assured him I had heard about phony cults.

"Suppose they got to him and sold him a billa goods on one of them religions-like? And the high potentate or whoever said it's not in the cards for you to make pictures no more. It's just not in the stars—"

Something clicked. *Stars. The ceiling.*

"Thanks, Tiny." I rose.

"Hey, where you goin' ?"

"I've got a date."

"But I was just gettin' ready to buy a round—"

"Some other time. Thanks. Thanks very much." And I meant it.

After I got out of there, I headed for home. I drove slowly, because I had a lot to think about. Tiny made sense to me; the others didn't.

Pieces began to form and fit together. I remembered a lot I'd forgotten about Jeffrey Franklin. His acknowledged superstitions. The way he'd hold up a scene for days until he got exactly the right actor for a walk-through bit. The way he'd junk whole sequences, just like Stroheim, because something didn't look right. The way he handled his actors; never cursing them, but praying for them instead. *Praying* for them. And (I remembered now) he had this trick of looking up in the air as if seeking divine guidance.

Now just suppose he had been sneaking off to astrologers—Lord knows, plenty of them did in the old days and were still doing it today—and one of them gave him the word that Gemini was in Uranus or wherever. And he stopped, just like that.

Could be. And could be, I might find out who his personal stargazer was and make a little deal. Or switch him onto another astrological or half-astrological quack. It was a cinch I had to do something.

I got home, let myself in, and prepared to go to work. The astrologers had listings in the phone book. I'd call every single one if necessary and—

It wasn't necessary. *My* phone rang, instead. And the voice said:

"This is Jeffrey Franklin. I received your communication and I was wondering when I could see you."

"Why, tonight if you like, Mr. Franklin."

"Good. We have a lot to talk about. I'm going to do your picture."

V

WE sat in the suite, drinking scotch. The sun went down in the Pacific, courtesy M-G-M, and then Universal put the moon up in Technicolor.

Franklin did the talking. "So you see, it wasn't your story idea that convinced me, although I admit I was tempted. But when he called me up—the head of the studio, mind you!—and said his own car was on the way . . ."

I nodded, suddenly realizing that I'd underestimated Mr. Charney's fine Eyetalian hand.

". . . and you can't imagine how it felt, just being back on a lot once more! Of course, many things are different, but I'm quite sure I have a grasp of technique. I've kept up on all the technical data would you believe it, I still read every issue of *The American Cinematographer—and* I see everything that's released. And he has faith in me. He knows what it means to have me back in the Industry, actually directing—"

"Directing?"

"Certainly!" Franklin's smile outshone the moon. "That's the biggest surprise of all. I'm to direct as well as act in my own story." *What* a fine Eyetalian hand! There was no mistaking what this meant to Franklin. He was drunk on his own adrenalin.

"I never realized they still remembered me," he said. "Of course, there was this Academy dinner thing, a few years ago, but I thought that was merely a gesture. And then, today, sitting there in the Executive Office, with everybody on the lot—I mean just that, everybody of any importance—literally begging to get in and meet me! You can't begin to realize what it means, son. You get used to the idea that it's all over, you even think of yourself as a has-been."

He sighed. "But I'm ready now. For the first time in years, I'm being honest with myself when I say that I've always been ready. And I think, working together, all of us, that we can come up with a few tricks that will surprise the Industry."

Intoxication is contagious. I began to get a little high myself now. Fifty thousand less ten per cent is forty-five thousand, knock off half for taxes and it's still over twenty thousand clear, plus an assist on the screenplay—Franklin would go to bat for me on that, I knew—and I'd be working on an A-budget special, and who knows where it might lead to?

Three cheers for the Grand Old-timers! Yes, and three cheers for—

The phone rang. Jeffrey Franklin walked over and picked it up in that very special way the graceful actor's way. And his inflection, his modulation, was impeccable.

"Yes, this is Jeffrey Franklin speaking."

I watched him do the scene, noted the sudden faltering, the sag.

"No! Not really . . . terrible!

“. . . When? . . . Of course, certainly, anything you think he needs . . . Friday afternoon? Yes . . . Where will it be? . . . Yes. Tomorrow . . . Thanks.”

THE phone clicked. Franklin sat down. For a moment, he almost looked his age.

“Bad news,” he said. “An old friend of mine was killed early this evening. He was run over by a truck. The funeral will be Friday afternoon, and naturally I’ll attend. Our studio conference must be delayed until Monday.” He shook his head. “It’s hard to see them go, one by one. You’ll understand that, son, when you’re my age.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. “Was it anyone I know?”

“I don’t think so. Just somebody from the old days. He once did a bit in one of my productions. Tiny Collins.”

This was my cue. I took it and kept my mouth shut. I kept it shut after I left Franklin, kept it shut all the next day. Of course there was a meeting with the gleeful Mr. Charney, during which he paced the floor and waved both of his fine Eyetalian hands in ecstasy over our good fortune. But I kept away from Harland and the others. They mustn’t know that I’d talked to Tiny Collins.

They mustn’t know what I was beginning to suspect—because I didn’t want to admit it, even to myself.

But Friday afternoon was the time set for the funeral, and I was there. And so was Danny Keene and Peggy Dorr and Tom Humphrey and Walter Harland and four other people whose names I never did learn. The local press and the *Reporter* had inserted routine squibs; but Tiny Collins, alive or dead, wasn’t news. He wasn’t even a Grand Old-timer, or the studios would have sent flowers, charged off to the public relations fund.

I sat with Jeffrey Franklin as the hired reverend went through the stock routine with the assistance of the hired undertaker and the hired pallbearers. It was a poor performance. Two of the four strangers present were fat old ladies and they cried the way fat old ladies always cry—loudly and unconvincingly. The cheap chapel set looked as though it might be struck right in the middle of the scene, and the lighting was inferior—the kind rented by a quickie unit on a *per diem* basis.

And that was the funeral given Tiny Collins, who had played with Turpin and with Fields and with whatzisname, who had literally sunk to the gutter and was now making his final comeback, playing his one big scene as the star of the show. Too bad it was such a turkey. He wouldn't have approved.

The organist did routine things—why did that remind me so strongly of the old silents?—as we filed out. We had to finish the production at the cemetery.

IT didn't take long. The sky was overcast, and the approaching storm was so visible that even the Chamber of Commerce would have scuttled for cover. The reverend mumbled his lines, performed his inevitable gestures, and then they lowered the body.

It was a single take and they muffed it—let it down too fast. But nobody seemed to mind. Everyone started walking back to the path. The little group broke up, seeking their cars and eying the clouds whirling in from the west.

I stuck close to Jeffrey Franklin. Both of us had been pretty quiet throughout. He strode along the path, puffing on his pipe. As I followed, I realized he wasn't joining the group at the cars.

We walked over a little knoll into another part of the cemetery. There were more trees here and plenty of monuments. A turn in the path took us into the exclusive residential district—for every cemetery out here has its own miniature Beverly Hills.

He climbed another knoll. There was a stone bench on top: a stone bench facing an imposing monument which featured a D'Artagnan figure heroically poised atop a marble globe.

I looked twice at the figure, and recognition came to me before I read the name.

“Roland Blade!” I said.

“Yes.” Jeffrey Franklin sat down on the stone bench facing the monument. He refilled his pipe as I joined him. The wind whistled through the treetops and I didn’t like the tune.

This was the time to use the old psychology. I felt the need of a fine Eyetalian hand of my own—to grab Franklin by the scruff of his neck and raise his spirits. Not knowing exactly how to do it, or what to say, I blurted out what was on my mind.

“The funeral certainly wasn’t much of a production, was it?”

He shrugged. “Why should it be? Tiny wasn’t important enough to be worthy of a script. The whole scene was done off the cuff.”

That was odd. He must have been thinking the same way I was—comparing the funeral to a motion picture. I remembered his comment on the *Restlawn* nurse and his references to “type-casting.” Peculiar.

“Look, son,” said Franklin, “I’d better talk to you.”

“Go right ahead. It won’t rain for a while.”

“Depends on the script.”

“What script?”

Franklin emptied his pipe. “That’s what I’m going to tell you. It isn’t easy, but now that we’re going ahead with the movie, chances are that you won’t like it. I don’t.”

I steadied myself. *Here it comes, boy. Here’s your astrology or whatever it is, and you’d better not argue or laugh in his face.*

“Omar Khayyam must have known when he wrote those lines about a chess game. In Omar’s time it might have been chess. Shakespeare put it down when he said, ‘All the world’s a stage.’ And perhaps it *was* a stage when he lived. For us, it’s motion picture production. *Steam-engine* time. *Movie time.* And it amuses them to write a script, cast it, produce and direct.”

E paused just long enough for me to say, “*Them?”*

H “Them. They. It. One or many. Call the forces what you will—gods, demons, Fates, or cosmic intelligences. All I know is that *they* exist, have always existed, will always exist. And it amuses them to select certain mortals to enact roles in the little dramas they devise.” I forgot my good resolutions and burst out, “Are you trying to tell me that the whole world is being run as a movie plot, with some superhuman forces directing everyone’s actions?”

He shook his head. “Not everyone’s. Just a few, a select few. The superior ones, and those brought into contact with them by the necessity of the plot. Omar must have known, Shakespeare must have known, for they were superior. The majority of mankind goes along, shooting off the cuff and conducting affairs in the usual shoddy, shabby manner. Even their crimes, their love affairs, their deaths are undramatic and unconvincing. Their lines are pedestrian and uninspired, and they never *create.*

“Don’t you see it now? That’s the whole criterion—if you’re creative, you have some affinity with *them. They* notice you and write you into the script. You spoke of me and some of the others as being dream makers. We are. We were, rather, in the old days, because it was a part of the plot.” The wind was roaring in from the ocean, but it didn’t bother me any longer. I had other things to worry about, now. Franklin was batty and—

“I wish I could get you to understand,” he said. “Because it’s really quite important, you know. Once you accept the fact, you’ll learn how to adjust. You won’t make the mistake of going against the Producer or the Director or the Writer. You won’t run the risk of being edited out of the film. Because you’re an actor now, like it or not, and you can’t fight the script. If you do, the Director will catch you. And he’ll have the Cutter slice your scenes. That’s what happened to Blade and a lot of the others.”

You can’t reason with a loony, but I tried. “Mr. Franklin, you just aren’t getting through to me. You sound more like Tiny Collins the other night, when he—”

It slipped out, just like that. *Was it supposed to? Was it in the script?*

“You knew Tiny Collins?”

“Well, I talked to him.” And I told him what had happened. He listened, shaking his head. He glanced up at the sky, at the scudding clouds. Was he waiting for another cue before he spoke?

“Then perhaps Tiny’s accident wasn’t an—accident. He got back in the script again.”

“I wish you wouldn’t talk that way. This idea that all the important people in the world are part of some cosmic movie just doesn’t make sense.”

“What does make sense?” he shot back. “World wars, atom bombs, plagues, famines? Perhaps it isn’t a movie for everyone, just for movie makers. Maybe *they* play War up there for generals and statesmen. And *others* might run a Business for executives. If you ever get to know any military leaders or high politicians or industrial tycoons, you might ask them. If it’s true, they’ll know. They’ll find out when they try to drop the script and run their own show.”

A PUNCTUATION of distant thunder stopped Franklin for a little while.

“Omar knew. He wrote what he was supposed to write—perhaps that’s why *they* do it; *they* might feed on creative energy in some way we’ll never comprehend—and then he stopped. Never wrote another line, but retired to obscurity. Because *they* tired of the scene and set a new one. *Rubaiyat time* was over. And Shakespeare stopped writing, too. Think about it for a while; think of the names, the big names, who flourished for a given period and then dropped out of the picture forever. They were still at the height of their powers, too.” I tried to use logic. “But think of all the others who have kept going,” I said. “The thousands who didn’t quit.”

“Some of them weren’t big enough to be directed,” Franklin answered. “Some of them undoubtedly knew, but were defiant. Napoleon’s script ended at Elba, but he fought the Producer and came back. Well, you don’t make comebacks in this world. They end in disaster. *Napoleon time* was over. He knew it before he died on St. Helena.”

The sky was dark. Franklin lit his pipe and a thousand tiny red eyes winked out in the wind.

"But I'm not talking theory, son. I'm talking reality. I'm talking myself, and my company, and a dozen others who must have learned the secret in the days when we made the silent dreams. The script was right for us to succeed then and our success was sudden and spectacular. That was *silent time.* But *talkie time* came, and there was a new script, calling for new players. We had our choice—get out or be cut out. The wise ones retired. The Cutter got the rest. Now do you see?"

I saw. "Maybe. But why are you telling me this?"

Franklin smiled. It was a ghost-smile in ghost-light, but I sensed it. "Because in the last few days, I've found out that I'm more than an actor. I'm a man. And a man must lead his own life. I thought, at one time, that I could take my bow and sit in the audience for the rest of the show. And for more than twenty years, I did. Then you came along, with your script. Your script, not *theirs.* And I want to do it. I want to direct it. I'm a director, too."

"Good." And it *was* good, I thought. "We'll do the picture."

He patted my shoulder. "Of course we will, son. But it wouldn't be fair to go ahead without warning you. There are the Cutters to consider. If the Director spots us ad-libbing and raises his finger—"

So help me, the old ham lifted his own finger and pointed dramatically at the statue of Roland Blade. And the thunder came booming in, right on cue!

FOR a moment, he almost had me sold. I thought of Blade, of Fay Terris, Matty Ryan and all the others who defied the coming of sound, who died before their time, died in sudden and inexplicable violence. Died before their time? Cut off after their time.

I wondered if *they* were watching us now, listening in on the scene, appreciating the gestures. I wondered if *they* had just sent out a signal to turn on the rain-making machine.

The downpour came. I rose hastily from the bench and started off down the path. I looked back, expecting Jeffrey Franklin to join me.

“In a minute,” he said. “I’m just thinking.”

“Now, look,” I called. “You promised.”

Jeffrey Franklin straightened up. He stood there in the rain, legs apart, feet firmly planted, chin jutting forth aggressively.

“You have my word. I promised you, I promised myself, and I promise *them.* From now on, I direct and act my own life. I’ll make the picture.”

I was a hundred feet away, the night was dark, and the rain a deluge; but even so, I caught his face. The chin was tilting up now.

Jeffrey Franklin was staring at the sky again.

It was lightning, of course—a single sharp bolt that chopped down Jeffrey Franklin and the picture, my hopes, everything. As the papers said later, and as I desperately told myself over and over again, even as I ran toward the dismembered corpse, it was only a freak accident.

But I couldn’t hide from myself, as I ran, the final revelation or realization. Oh, it was a lightning bolt, all right—but to me, in the single instant that I saw it, it was more like the blade of a gigantic scissors.

The Dynamics of an Asteroid

Honestly, some of the patients you get are a scream. Positively a scream!

Not that I’d want any other kind of work - where else can you make up to twenty dollars a day, and all you do, really, is sort of play nursemaid for a couple of hours? Compared to a hospital or working in some G.P.‘s office, it’s nothing at all. But the *types* you run into!

Take this last one I had - I didn’t tell you about him, did I? He was a hundred years old.

One hundred years *old!* Can you *imagine?* No, I’m pretty sure of it, the way he talked and all. And to hear him tell it, up to three months ago he was dressing and feeding himself and handling everything in the house out of his wheelchair. Of course, he ordered what he needed over the phone and the hotel sent it right up, meals and everything. But think of that - one hundred years old and all alone ‘in a wheelchair, and he did everything himself!

Of course, you might, guess it just to look at him. He’d been some kind of professor of arithmetic or mathematics, whatever they call it, but that was when he was young. Imagine, sixty years ago or so! And then he was in this accident and his left side was paralyzed and he went into a wheelchair. Sixty years, that’s a long time to live in a wheelchair. Doctor Cooper, he was handling the case, just stopping in once a week, he said it was amazing.

But the old boy was tough, I got to say that for him. Just one look at him was enough to let you know. Of course when I was put on the case he was in bed already, but sitting up. And when he sat up you couldn’t tell he was paralyzed at first. He had a big bald head and a bulgy forehead and his eyes were sunk way hack, like they sometimes get. But he wasn't shriveled or even very wrinkled.

He'd stick that head out and his face would move from side to side but all the while those little eyes would stare at you to make sure you were listening.

He talked a lot. Talked and wrote. He was forever having me mail stuff for him. A lot of it went abroad to foreigners in colleges over there - professors, I guess. And people in the government over here, and fellas like this Einstein.

That's what I wanted to tell you about - he wrote to Einstein! Did you ever hear of such a thing in all your life?

At first he didn't talk about what he was doing, at least not very muck. But he kept getting weaker and weaker and along about the last month he couldn't write. And of course it was hard for him to sleep. Doctor Cooper was all for giving him hypos but he wouldn't take them. Hot him! He was tough.

But some nights he'd call me in - I slept in the other room on the couch - and he liked for me to read to him. He got all kinds of crazy-sounding magazines; scientific ones, I guess. And some of them were in German and French and I don't-know-what-all. Of course I couldn't read those, and when I tried to read the regular English ones he got mad because of course I didn't know all those two-dollar words.

So mostly he had me read the papers. And that's where the crazy part started.

Take like the crime news. You know, there's been a lot of killings lately, all these G.I. murderers and that. And I'd get to reading about them and all of a sudden he'd be laughing.

At first it bothered, me. I thought he was just plain se-nile. The way they get sometimes, you know.

But once, about two weeks before he died, he was listening to me read about one of those crime syndicates; I mean where they all gang up and plot like blackmail extortions and things.

And he gave this chuckle of his and he said, “Strange, isn’t it, Miss Hawes?”

So I said, “What’s strange?”

And he said, “To think that it’s still going on. It takes one back, Miss Hawes. It takes one back.”

I said, “You mean they used to have gangs like this when you were –” I stopped real quick, because I’d almost said, “alive.”

And the funny thing happened, because he finished the sentence for me and he said, “alive?” Then he laughed again. “Yes, they had gangs when I was alive, and master criminals and workers behind the scenes. I was one myself, although you may find that hard to believe. Just as it may be hard for you to believe that I died over sixty years ago.”

Then I knew for sure he was getting se-nile. And it must have showed on my face.

“Perhaps you might be interested in my story,” he said. And of course I said, “Yes,” even though I wasn’t. To tell you the truth I kept right on reading the paper all the while he was talking, but I wish now I’d listened a little more because some of it was real wild.

So he kept on rambling about how it was when he was a young man in college or university or wherever, and he was studying all this fancy mathematics stuff, and then he got out and he couldn’t get a job. I guess he finally got to teaching for a sort of a small private school and then he was a tutor, like, for rich kids over in England.

And he wrote some books but nobody paid any attention because he was ahead of his time, whatever that means.

Well, to make a long story short, I gather he wanted to get married and his girl turned him down for a richer fella, and he just went all to pieces. That’s how he became a criminal, to hear him tell it.

And, to hear him tell it, he was a real big-shot.

He was like one of those super-criminals you hear about; never did anything himself but just gave advice. He would plan things for the rest to do and get a commission.

He said he had a logical mind and because of all that studying he did, he knew just how to organize things. Pretty soon he was working for gangs all over Europe, too, and he made a fortune. That part of it I can believe, because even now he was living in this big hotel suite and he hadn’t worked for over sixty years, being in a wheelchair and all.

But all the while he told me this he kept working in names and dates and places that didn’t make any sense to me, and I just couldn’t be expected to pay too much attention.

Finally he saw I wasn’t listening and he shut up. That suited me, except that I wondered what he’d meant about him dying, like he said.

A couple of nights later that came up again. I was reading about some doctors out west, keeping somebody alive massaging the heart during an operation - you know. They did it over at Sinai a few months ago, didn’t they?

Anyhow, he said, “Doctors! Call themselves medical authorities and they don’t know the first thing about life. If I’d listened to them, I’d be dead and buried these sixty-odd years past.”

Well, it just happened that I was pretty tired, and I guess I must have dozed off right in the middle of what he was saying. But 1 remember him starting out with this story about how he got tangled up with the police and some detective was out to get him, only he got him first. After they had a big fight somewhere, I forget the name, he was left for dead. Only he wasn’t dead, he was just paralyzed.

This was over in Europe someplace, and he decided to stay there when he got patched up. He had plenty of money put away in a dozen different banks, and nobody was looking for him; being crippled up, he was glad to get out.

Besides, this detective was supposed to be dead and he was wanted for killing him if he ever showed up.

So it was a good idea to retire. After that he just moved around from place to place all over Europe.

Once hie thought he'd go back home, but the funniest thing happened, to hear him tell it - the man he was supposed to have killed wasn't dead after all, but still alive.- And if he went back it would start all over again.

So he stayed dead, as far as anyone knew. I guess he came over to this country from where he lived in Germany, when the Nazis got started there.

"It's a strange experience, being dead for so many years," he said. "But I see I'm boring you, Miss Hawes . . ."

That's when I knew I must have dozed off. I apologized all over the place, but he just chuckled. Didn't bother him a bit.

No, that's not all. Wait a minute, there's one thing more I want to tell you about. That's this crazy business about the asteroid. You know what an asteroid is? Neither do I. Some kind of a planet, I guess - only he wasn't even talking about a real one, but just a fake one. Galled it a man-made sat-some- thing. Oh yes, a satellite, that was it. A manmade satellite.

It was the newspaper that started him off. Remember, last week, when they ran this story about how at last the government is going to build a space-platform for launching rockets to the moon? Did you ever hear anything so crazy in all your life? But I guess they- re going to do it.

Well, I was reading him this story - he was pretty weak, you know, and Doctor Cooper said it wouldn't be long - and I was just reading along, when all at once I noticed he was sitting up. He hadn't sat up for nearly a week, and he wasn't eating very much or anything any more, but here he was, sitting up straight. And he said, "Would you mind reading that over again, Miss Hawes? Slowly, please?" He was always very polite like that, I will say that for him.

So I read it over, and-he began to chuckle again, and he got the funniest look on his face. It wasn't exactly a smile, but you know, like that. His cheeks were all sunk in the way they get before the end, but for a minute I'd swear he looked positively young again.

"I knew it!" he said. "I knew they'd do it! That's the news I've been waiting for."

Then he began to talk a blue streak. I said, “Please, you know Doctor Cooper said you mustn’t exert yourself. You must rest.”

And he said, “I’ll have a long time for resting now. And in peace, I trust.” And he kept right on talking.

How I don’t know how much of this he was making up, because it sounds so utterly ridiculous, but of course he *did* send those letters out and he’d get answers, too. They all knew him, all these scientists.

But the way he told it, after the time he fell and nearly died, he decided to reform. He wanted to do something for the world, I guess, and he got to studying his mathematics again. He said he’d written this book with the crazy title - I remember that part all right - it was called *The Dynamics of an Asteroid.*

And it was about these space-platforms.

“Yes, that’s right, Miss Hawes,” he told me. “Over sixty years ago. No wonder nobody took it seriously; I was ahead of my time. And I spent years of pioneering work, simply trying to get a hearing from the proper authorities in the field. Bit by bit, I managed.”

The point is, 1 guess he kept working out these theories of his and writing to scientists and feeding them ideas, like this Einstein and a whole lot of others.

He didn’t want any credit, just so long as they would work on his notions. And after a long time, they did. He said he had this idea for building a space-platform or an artificial whatchamacallit all these years, and he pounded away and pounded away and even sent diagrams.

In Germany he made experimental models or whatever they do and donated them to universities and the government - but he never let them use his name. All he wanted was to do some good for humanity.

“It was the least I could do to atone, Miss Hawes,” he said. “I wanted, in my small way, to help man reach the stars. And now, I see, the work has borne fruit. What more reward could I ask?”

Of course I knew enough to humor him, it was the least I could do for the. poor old fella, the way he was. So I told him how wonderful I thought it was and how he ought to be getting his name in the newspapers, too, along with these other big-shot scientists.

"That can never be," he said. "And it no longer matters. My name will live only as a symbol of infamy." Whatever that is.

Well, I don't know how we ended up, but it was the same night, quite late, that the crisis came. I'd been sleeping on the sofa in the- other room when I heard him sort of gasping and I went into the bedroom quick and took one look and then called Doctor Cooper.

By the time he got there, though, it was all over. It wasn't what you call a painful death. He just got delirious and then went right off with just a short coma. Heart gave out, Doctor Cooper said.

But for a few minutes, there, while he was delirious, he came out with some of the most awful stuff.

It was as if he was another person - probably the way he'd been when he was a criminal back in the 'nineties or whenever, if he'd told me the truth.

He kept cursing away at somebody or other; this detective fella, I guess. He wasn't so much mad at the fella as he was jealous because the detective was famous and he wasn't. You see, like I told you before, he was supposed to have killed him only he revived and got away. And now the poor old guy acted as though he was right there in the room - and did he swear!

Then he started to wrestle with him; you know how it is when they go out of their head. Only I figured it out that he thought he was back fighting with him at the time when he was left for dead.

They were fighting on some cliff, and there was a waterfall or something - this was in Germany or the Alps or around there, I guess - and this detective was using jiu-jitsu and he threw the old guy off into the water and he hit his head and bounced and swam away. But the detective didn't notice because he was climbing up the cliff himself in order not to leave any footprints, so people would think he was dead. Oh, it doesn't make any sense, but that's the way it came out.

Then, just before the coma, he was sitting up in bed after all this wrestling around, and I was trying to hold him down. But he didn't even know I was in the room, you see - he just saw the detective.

And he said, “Keep your glory! Keep your cheap notoriety, and your fame! I’ll die unhonoured, unmourned and unsung, but in the end I triumph. My deeds will bring men to the stars! One thing you must admit - there’s nothing elementary about my deductions!”

Real crazy stuff, I tell you!

And then he went off into the coma and died. Just like that. But can you imagine, such a mixed-up business?

I wonder how much of it was really true? I mean, about him being a master-criminal and reforming and then helping scientists invent these space-platforms.

I never heard of that book, *The Dynamics of an Asteroid*, or whatever.

Maybe I’ll look it up sometime. I wish I knew the name of that detective he hated so much; that would help.

But I’ve got *his* name, anyway. Irish. Moriarity, I think it was - Professor Moriarity.

Let's Do It For Love

Joe Stevens, an inquisitive chemist, was not satisfied with partial success, His spot-remover took soup off your vest and also, the spots off a leopard. His hair-restorer sent billiard balls to the barber shop. But it seemed that no one wanted hairy billiard balls or spotless leopards. So, one day Joe said to himself: How nice it would be if everybody loved everybody else! No more war. No more hate. Joe went to work, bent upon spreading love throughout the world. And did the world appreciate it? Oh, brother!

SOMETIMES they come crawling out of the woodwork. Sometimes they wear Napolean hats and ride in on invisible white horses. Sometimes they're equipped complete with little green men who keep pulling your socks down when they're not looking.

But this one was different. He looked completely normal. I guessed his age at thirty, his weight at about 160, stripped. Only he wasn't stripped. He was wearing the kind of blue suit that this kind of guy always wears whenever he takes his wife along with him to pick out a gray one.

He had brown hair, rimless glasses, and one of those sincere faces you usually see painted on expensive Mamma dolls. Oh yes, he had a name, too—Joe Stevens. Nothing alarming about any of these things, nothing to make me think that he was a fugitive from the laughing academy.

But it was what he said that set me off higher than a rocket to the moon.

"Mr. Mortimer, you're a public relations man," he yacked.

“What kind of a job can you do to promote love?”

I opened my mouth, but for a minute nothing came out. And when nothing comes out of my mouth for a whole minute, I get worried. Finally I reached inside and dragged out a few words.

“Love?” I said. “You mean, boy-meets-girl kind of love?”

“Not exactly. Perhaps I’d better explain.”

“Sit down,” I suggested. He picked out a chair, which wasn’t too difficult, seeing as how I only have one chair in my office. And then it started.

When it finished, about fifteen minutes later, I was in full possession of the following facts, any or all of which I would gladly have traded for a two-cent stamp.

Joseph Stevens, my visitor, was a chemist employed by the Wagtail Dog Biscuit Company, Inc., of this city. Married, and the father of two children, he was wont to slip down into the basement of his modest little mortgage-covered cottage during the evening and perform experiments.

At a time when all decent, respectable Godfrey-fearing citizens are usually huddled around their TV sets, Joe Stevens would be found somewhere behind the furnace, either working out or testing a chemical formula he had invented.

“I thought if I sort of puttered around long enough,” he explained, in his erudite, scientific way, “I might hit on something that would make me some money. I’d be just as happy to do it for the fun of experimenting but Dorothy—that’s my wife—seems to prefer money.”

I nodded.

“You do understand,” said Stevens. “I take it you’re married, too?”

“Yes. I understand perfectly,” I told him. “And that is one of the reasons I very definitely am *not* married.”

“Oh. Well, anyway, I perfected quite a few compounds during the last few years of work. I rigged up a very complete little laboratory in the cellar, and managed to perfect a number of products. But none of them, so far, have appealed to any manufacturer.”

"Just what did you come up with?"

"Well, for example, there was my spot remover. It looked to me like a sure-fire proposition."

"But there are plenty of spot removers on the market right now, aren't there?"

"Not like mine. This was no ordinary naphtha compound. My Spot Remover would actually remove any spot. I thought it might be kind of dramatic to hold a demonstration for some possible buyers, so I took a bottle of the stuff out to the Zoo and tossed some on a leopard. Sure enough, it worked."

"You took the spots right off a leopard?"

"Absolutely. But all that happened was the zoo officials wanted to sue me for damaging their property—because without spots their leopard looked like a common mountain lion. My buyers got scared, and Dorothy made me give up the idea. I haven't even tried to use that Spot Remover again, except the time I put some on my youngest child when she had the measles."

"Is that all you perfected?"

"No. The next thing was a headache powder. That really worked, too. But the trouble was, most people would rather have a headache than sprinkle this powder on their heads."

Right at this point I could have used a little of the stuff myself. But I determined to carry on to the bitter end. "What else did you invent?"

"Oh, plenty of things. Like my hair restorer. It actually would grow hair on a billiard ball. But then I found out that nobody wants to buy billard balls with hair growing on them."

"Life is cruel," I told him. "But when do we get to the love part?":

"Only after about two years more of compounding and mixing and stirring and blending. But the important thing is, once I got the basic concept, I worked night and day, every weekend and holiday, to concoct this formula. And finally, I got it. This isn't a fluke—I tell you, it's going to revolutionize the world!"

“But what is it, exactly? What does it do?”

“It’s simply a glandular stimulant which produces an endocrinological readjustment of the metabolic factors affecting personality mutation, thus increasing normal empathy.”

“There’s just one little point that bothers me.”

“Namely?”

“What does it mean?”

“It means I have produced a chemical compound that makes people love one another. Simple, isn’t it?”

“You are—I mean, it is,” I gulped. “But aren’t there already such chemicals in use? Regular aphrodisiacs?”

“That’s just the point. My concoction is *not* an aphrodisiac. It does not stimulate sexual activity or arouse the senses.”

“Too bad,” I sighed. “I was kind of thinking of a big advertising and promotion campaign, maybe with a picture of some guy holding a violin and smooching some broad who’s playing the piano—like a perfume, see?” And then we—”

“This is not a perfume, Mr. Mortimer. It can be taken orally, by injection, or direct cutaneous application.”

“Watch your language, son.”

“I mean, it can be applied to the surface of the skin and the pores will absorb it.”

“Like a beauty cream?”

“No. It doesn’t change the appearance. But it does alter behavior patterns. It eliminates hatred, prejudice, dislike, antipathy. People exposed to this potion feel nothing but pure affection for others—all others.”

“Now, wait a minute! You mean to tell me you’ve invented something that will actually win friends and influence people? What about hangovers?”

“There is no hangover, as you call it, Mr. Mortimer. Depending on the amount administered and the method of absorption, the effects of this formula vary from a few hours’ duration to lifetime permanency.”

“You take enough, the right way, and you love everybody the rest of your life?”

“Exactly!”

“Even neighbors with loud radios, and guys who try to pass your car on the right, and income tax collectors?”

“Certainly.”

“This I’ve got to be convinced of.”

For a moment I stared at the floor, trying to find the two pieces of the infinitive I’d just split. Also, to be perfectly frank, I was also looking for a way to get rid of Mr. Stevens. A good, fast way, because I had done business with screwballs before and found it wise to get rid of them before they started to bounce.

“I’m willing to convince you,” Mr. Stevens was saying, “if you agree to take me on as your client.”

This was all the opening I needed. “Well, as a matter of fact, I’ve got a pretty tight schedule—loaded with assignments, you might say. Besides, I expect I’ll have to be going down to Washington next week for one of the big oil companies, and—”

Joe Stevens rose and stuck out his hand. “I guess I shouldn’t have bothered you, Mr. Mortimer. A big man like you, I know how it is—you wouldn’t be interested in someone like me with only a measly three hundred dollar retainer—”

I grabbed his hand and held on, tight. Very, very tight. “Now, wait a minute! I was just about to say, money isn’t everything, you know. Even though I’m running a business, I still have time for sentiment. And your notion of spreading love appeals to my idealistic side. Definitely! Er—do you happen to have the three hundred bucks with you?”

“Here it is.”

With his free hand he drew a roll of small bills out of his pocket. With my free hand I managed to count and tuck the money away in my vest. And all the while I was giving him the old fraternity grip and the old college try.

"I see great possibilities in your love serum, Stevens," I told him. "Should have no trouble at all selling it to the right parties. This isn't a matter of shoving propaganda at the public—what you want is to interest a few people with money and get this thing rolling. But first, I'd still feel better if I had a little demonstration."

"Whenever you like," he agreed. "Just come out to the house. If you weren't so busy and all, I'd have invited you to come home right now, for supper."

I grinned. "Like I say, Stevens, I'm a man of sentiment. Let's go."

Half an hour later I was standing on the doorstep of the Stevens bungalow and Stevens was doing the honors.

"Dorothy," he said, "I have a guest for dinner."

"So I see. Why didn't you call and let me know ahead of time?"

"Well, it was all so sudden. I mean, Mr. Mortimer here just got together with me and—"

"Together where? In some bar?"

"Now you know I don't drink, honey. This is business."

Dorothy Stevens sniffed. She wasn't a bad-looking tomato for a housewife-type, but that sniff told me all I wanted to know about Joe Stevens and his home-life. "What kind of business?" she asked, as the two kids ran out and grabbed Joe by the legs.

"You know, darling. The love potion. Mr. Mortimer is in public relations and he's going to promote it for me. He thinks there's a lot of possibility in it."

"Huh!" Tomatoes can be awfully sour.

"Now, sweetheart—we can tell you all about it at dinner."

"I suppose." She stood back and let us get past her into the living room. Joe Stevens dragged his kids along—they had their hands in his pockets and I kind of got the idea they had learned this particular tricks from watching Mama at work.

Dorothy Stevens went out into the kitchen as we sat down at the table and began to rattle pots and pans—which is a woman's way of swearing.

"Say," she called, "what did you do about the car?"

"What?" A look came over Stevens' face and I glanced around to see if I was on a rocking boat—because he certainly seemed to be seasick all of a sudden.

"You know perfectly well what," Dorothy called out. "I gave you three hundred dollars just before you left the house for the down-payment—all the money we got from Aunt Imogene's will. What did the man say? Will he take it on a trade-in?"

"I didn't get to the car-dealer."

"You didn't?" The rattling of pots turned into a banging and crashing. "Then hand back the money—it isn't safe to carry so much around with you in cash."

"I—uh—haven't got the money."

The banging stopped. "You haven't? Then who has?"

"Well, Mr. Mortimer here needed a retainer if he's going to work on the formula, and so—" There was a loud crash.

Joe Stevens rushed out into the kitchen and closed the door. I sat there and tried not to listen. The two kids were watching a cowboy kill fifty Indians on television, and the noise almost but not quite drowned out the sounds of murder from the kitchen.

Finally it was all over and Stevens tottered back into the room. He didn't look seasick any more. He looked drowned.

"Dorothy has a headache," he said. "We'll be eating alone, I guess. If you don't mind."

So we went into the kitchen and ate alone. The kids did all the talking during the meal, and most of the eating. But after we finished, I managed to drag Stevens back to business.

"Don't be discouraged," I told him. "Women just don't understand these things. But once we get rolling, and the money starts coming in, she'll be all right."

He cheered up, a little. "Thanks for being so patient with me," he said. "You know, Dorothy is really a fine wife—I couldn't ask for better. It's just that she hasn't got the faith I have in my inventions. Now, this compound —"

"Yes, let's see it," I told him. "You say you work in the cellar?" He took me down there, and I got to admit he'd rigged up the best little laboratory I ever saw outside of a Universal Pictures horror movie. He had electric gadgets and test-tubes and coils and retorts; everything except Boris Karloff in a white robe and an old pair of rubber gloves. And he had a nice, pint-sized vial of bubbling yellow stuff that sparkled when he held it up to the light. "Here it is—the compound." I squinted at it. "Very pretty. Haven't seen anything like it since I served a hitch in the Army Medical Corps. But I got only one question—does it work?"

"Does it work? Of course it works. Take my word for it. I've tried it out. Here, you drink some and see for yourself."

"Not me, brother. I'm in public relations, how can I love people? But I insist on a demonstration."

There was a squawk from outside the cellar door.

"What's that?" yelled Stevens, jumping about a foot and almost spilling the liquid out of the vial.

"Oh, just some alley cat, I suppose."

"Alley cat?" A gleam came into his eye; one of those genuine 18-karat Mad Scientist gleams. "Wait here."

He tiptoed to the door. There was a shriek and a scuffle and a snarl, and he came back with the cat in his arms. "Help me hold it now while I fill this hypodermic syringe," he panted. "There. Just a drop will do. Don't let it claw you! My, it's a fierce beast, isn't it? Now—let me make the injection here in the shoulder."

The cat jumped about a foot and landed on the table, back hunched and claws ready for action. It spit and snarled and—smiled. And then its tail began to wave. It purred. It came over and rubbed against my shoulders.

"See? Just one drop."

I shrugged.

"Want more proof? Wait a minute." He raced up the stairs and in a minute he was back with a cage in one hand. Something tiny and yellow fluttered and squeaked inside the cage, and when it saw the cat, it beat against the bars. He reached in with the hypodermic needle, and the canary quieted. It began to sing.

Then he set the cage down on the laboratory table and opened the door. The cat went over to the cage. The canary came out. The cat opened its mouth. It raised its paws. Then it purred and stroked the canary. The canary jumped up and perched on its head, chirping. The mewing and the chirping blended until they were doing a duet that sounded very much like half of a barbershop quartet singing *I Love You Truly.*

I stared, but there it was, right in front of my own eyes. One drop for each and they made beautiful mew-sic together.

"You win," I said. "I'm sold. And you mean to say this will work on anything? Animal or human?"

"Of course. It's all a glandular reaction, as I told you. The basic components—"

"Yeah. I know. And it's permanent, doesn't wear off?"

He frowned. "I can't answer that one fully, yet. I haven't had enough opportunity to experiment. Injections are all I've tried, and they seem permanent enough. It seems to me that spraying the entire skin surface would be even more of a guarantee of a permanent reaction. The oral method is another way of absorbing the compound. This I haven't been able to work with."

"Well, I hope you won't get me wrong," I said. "But it might be a good idea to test that idea right here at home. I mean, slipping a drink of this stuff to your wife—" His frown got frownier. "I know what you mean," he sighed. "And I'd thought of it, even suggested it. But Dorothy won't cooperate. And she won't let me use it on the kids."

"You could sort of sneak it into her coffee or something, couldn't you?" I suggested. "No worse than a bad Mickey Finn."

"No, Mr. Mortimer, that's out. It isn't ethical. It violates the true spirit of Science."

I shrugged. "Okay, just a thought. And speaking of thoughts, now that I've seen it in action, what you want me to do with this stuff? I can promote it, but what's the gimmick? You must have some idea in mind."

"I have a purpose. A very serious purpose," he assured me.

"Making money is always serious," I agreed. "And I'm here to help. Is your idea to get this made up like some kind of a perfume and use it in an atomizer? So that a tomato can get the old love-light working in her boy friends' eyes? Or do you want it for salesmen only—slip it into customers' drinks so they'll love that product, huh? Or is it for political campaigns? Blow it out through the air-conditioning system in a meeting hall and have all the voters fall in a swoon for the candidate?"

"You can stop right there, Mr. Mortimer."

"Okay. But I got a million more ideas. When I go into action for a client, I really go into action."

"You have the wrong slant entirely. This discovery of mine will never be used commercially.

While there may be money in it for me eventually, I do not intend to prostitute it commercially. This is a serious and important finding. I told you it could revolutionize the world, and that is what I plan it to do."

"Like how, for instance?"

“Mr. Mortimer, I need your help in only one thing; to enlist the attention of important people all over the nation. We must tell them about this discovery and promote its use. It is my hope that the government itself will take over the manufacture of my preparation and prepare bombs.”

“Bombs?”

“Yes. Love-bombs, you might call them. A complete stockpile of bombs which can be dropped on foreign soil, exploded in quantities large enough to cover the face of the earth, and spread love throughout the entire world.

“Do you understand now what this means? It can be the end of wars, the end of hatred, the end of suspicion and enmity and fear. Men will love one another and my work will be done.”

I blinked. “But won’t it cost a fortune? What about the machinery to produce them? How about time?”

“It won’t cost a fraction of what it costs us currently to maintain armaments,” Stevens declared. “Regular detonating mechanisms can be used, filled with this concoction in fluid or gas form, and they could be turned out in quantity within a period of two or three weeks. No, the whole thing is simple. All I need now is your advice and help in bringing this whole miraculous discovery to the attention of those in authority. And I hope you’ll agree with me that it’s a job worth doing.”

He didn’t look like a Mad Scientist any more. He looked like the starry-eyed idealist.

I thought about it for a minute. The whole notion was screwy, but it might work. Anyhow, the chemical *did* work. And it had great possibilities. Suppose the government would go for it? An exclusive contract to supply them with this elixir of love might run into a pretty penny or a beautiful buck. Stranger things have happened. Great nuts from little acorns grow, and when some dumb old Greek name of Archimedes or something invented the lever, little did he reck that some day from this simple discovery would spring the entire mighty slot-machine industry.

“I’ll do it!” I said. “Meet me tomorrow morning, nine o’clock, in Bert Bugle’s office.”

"Bert Bugle?"

"The attorney," I explained. "First thing we gotta do is get this mixture patented. Protect it against anyone else stealing the formula. He knows his way around in Washington and he can steer us to the right guys to see. Cut through all this red tape, take us through to the President, maybe."

"Fine. I knew I could rely on you, Mr. Mortimer."

"See you at nine, then? Goodnight."

"Goodnight," said Stevens. The cat and the canary gave me a farewell serenade, and as I went out the door I could see the canary pecking at the cat's claws. The canary wasn't hurting the animal; just giving it a manicure.

Come nine o'clock. Came Stevens and I to Bert Bugle's office in the Banker's Building.

I went in ahead of Stevens and paved the way.

"Hi, Bert. How's life from the back of an ambulance? Have you habeased any good corpuses lately?"

"Mortimer! I've been looking for you! What are you doing about Mountain Dew? Six months ago I gave you a thousand-dollar retainer to promote it for me, and where are we? Halfway to bankruptcy, that's where!"

"But Bert—"

"I've got a lot of money tied up in that company. Everybody in Blue View is laughing at me because we can't sell the lousy stuff. I'll admit it's a vile-tasting bottled water, but you assured me you could put it on every table in the suburb for your fee. I've got a good mind to slap a lawsuit on you!"

"Bert! Listen a minute, will you? Never mind about the Mountain Dew. I've got something big for you in the outer office. Something really *big!*"

"Animal, vegetable, elephant?"

"This is real, this is *really* real. Come on out and meet a million dollars!"

At the mention of a million dollars, Bert Bugle calmed down. I led him out to meet Joe Stevens and commenced talking.

The whole pitch went just the way I'd planned. I told him what I had, what we wanted. Then I pulled the trump card. I sent Joe out for an alley-cat and told him to buy a canary in the pet shop downstairs. In five minutes he was back with a mangy, spitting tomcat and an anemic-looking canary. Out came the vial and the hypodermic syringe. In went the compound. And thus did Love come to Bert Bugle's office.

"There," I said. "Now do you understand?"

Bugle's eyes goggled. "Do I? Indeed I do! Mortimer, I want to talk to you for a moment, privately. If you'll excuse us, Mr. Stevens."

Bugle dragged me into his private office and slammed the door. Then he grabbed my collar. "Man," he panted. "Do you know what this means?"

"It means you're tearing my collar," I informed him.

"Never mind that. This love philtre, or whatever it is, works!"

"Of course it works, and it's going to be worth millions."

"Millions to Stevens, perhaps. But for me, it's plain bankruptcy."

"How do you figure that?"

"Well, suppose his scheme goes through—and it might, very easily. They start dropping love-bombs all over the place and what happens? People begin loving each other, that's what!"

"Is that bad?"

"It's awful!" Bugle groaned. "Eight years I went to school, ten years I spent building up a law practise. And now people are going to love each other. No more lawsuits! No more divorces! No more thefts, no more murders, and that means no more need for lawyers! Yes, and no need for judges, or sheriffs, or police. What kind of a deal is this, that I should cut my own throat?"

"But you'll be assured of a good fee for handling our work."

"Maybe so." Bugle stuck out his chin. "But after all, I owe something to the legal profession. I have ethics to maintain, and because I'm ethical, I can't stand by and see a man deliberately and coldbloodedly set out to ex-exterminate rape, arson, fraud, and all the things we attorneys hold so dear. No, I'm afraid I not only refuse—I must also go ahead and fight your scheme with every force at my command."

He turned to go back into the other room where Joe waited.

"Just a minute, Bert. This guy Stevens is sincere, he's sacrificing everything for an ideal. Maybe you won't help us, but you can't fight us. It isn't fair!"

"Sorry. But I have no choice. And as for you, if you'd spent your time promoting Mountain Dew instead of running around with crackpots, I might have listened to you."

"All right," I sighed. "You win. But please, don't *tell* Stevens you're going to fight him. Just say you have too much other work or something."

"You talk like a crackpot yourself," Bugle sneered, "but that's your affair. Go on out and tell him I'm too busy to handle the deal. But I warn you, I'm going to get up a legal committee to pull strings in Washington against this. And as for you, I'm suing you for that thousand dollar retainer on Mountain Dew. Now, good day to you."

If that was Bert Bugle's contribution to a good day, I'd hate to see what he'd come up with for a bad one. I shuffled out, collected Stevens, the cat and the canary. In the car I told him a sob story about Bugle's health breaking down.

"But don't worry, we'll get somebody else. The world is full of lawyers."

"We'd better hurry. I haven't much time, and my money is running out. Lawyers cost a lot."

"But you've got a steady job."

"Oh, didn't I tell you? I quit yesterday. Figured this would be taking all our time from now on. Dorothy is plenty burned up about it, so it's up to you."

"Great!" I managed to keep the car on the road, but I was beginning to sweat a little. So far, in one day on the assignment I'd accomplished a lot. I'd made a man quit his job, set things up for his wife to leave him, and lined myself up for a lawsuit.

"You know, I have a lot of confidence in you, Mr. Mortimer. You sure know how to get things done." Stevens gave. me that trusting look and I winced. "Now where are we going?"

"Where—? Why, to the newspaper, of course."

“Newspaper?”

“We need publicity, don’t we? What’s a better way of getting Washington to notice an important discovery? Why, this is front page news here—world-wide news.” As I talked, I began to see the sense of that. Why hadn’t I thought of it in the first place? Once we got our headlines, lawyers would come running to represent us. It was that simple.

“Here,” I said. “You wait in the car. I’m going up and see the editor. Not the city editor—the managing editor, the big boy himself. Give me that vial, and the cat, and the canary.”

I marched in. I knew my way around, and within five minutes I was sitting in Tom Mason’s office. The vial was in my hand, the cat was on my lap, and the canary was sitting on my left ear.

“Now listen, Mortimer, if this is another one of your crazy stunts.” Mason began to make noises like an executive. I cut him short and launched into my story. Thirty seconds of it was enough to quiet him down, and a minute had him gasping.

The cat meowed, the canary chirped, I talked, and Mason gurgled. Finally his gurglings turned into words.

“And it really works?” he choked. “You can drop love-bombs on the whole world, even Russia?”

“I personally guarantee it.”

“It’s a miracle!” wheezed Mason.

“Then you’ll give it a frontpage spread? I’ve got the guy downstairs in my car right now, ready for pictures. You can play up the local boy angle, get it on the wire services!”

“I’d sooner run my own obituary!”

“What?”

“Get out of here before I throw you out!”

“You mean you don’t believe me?”

"Of course I believe you. And that's just why I won't touch the story with a ten-foot pole. Can't you see what would happen if they did drop love-bombs? War would stop, wouldn't it? And crime, too. There wouldn't be any stories for newspapers to run any more, and I'd be out of business in a year."

"But couldn't you run stories about *nice* things? About the good, constructive actions people would be engaged in? Isn't that news, too?"

"My boy, always remember one thing. Good news is no news. No, I'll have no part of it. And don't try any of your publicity stunts because they won't work. I'll give orders to kill any story mentioning love-bombs. And that's final."

His secretary stuck her beak through the door, thus completing her resemblance to Woody Woodpecker, and sniffed. "Mr. Mason, there's a Mr. Bugle on the phone for you."

"Bert Bugle?" I asked.

"Neighbor of mine out in Blue View. Wonder what he wants." Mason moved towards the phone and waved me out. "Get out of here, Mortimer, but remember what I said. No story. Not now, or ever!"

I got out. Down and out. No story, and already Bugle and Mason would be getting together. They had to be neighbors, yet! How could I lick this thing? Every step took me closer to the edge of ruin. Nobody wanted love, so go fight City Hall. Tell it to your Congressman.

"Knocklewort!" I shouted.

Joe Stevens blinked at me as I opened the car door.

"Knocklewort! That's our answer! We're going to see Congressman Knocklewort!"

"But what about the papers?"

"Oh, that." I gulped. "The editor was afraid to break the yarn without an official OK. Security measures, you know; talk about dropping bombs and stuff might upset people. Have to clear it with the government.

Knocklewort's our man. He's Congressman for this district, he's in town this week, and besides, I once handled his campaign for him. We'll tell him the story and let him take it right to Washington."

We were off to the Hotel Tippmore, vial, cat and canary. And when I got through to Gifford Knocklewort's suite, I took the whole menagerie upstairs with me, including Joe Stevens.

Once again I went into the now familiar pitch. I told old Knocklewort the whole story, watching his face through a cloud of cigar smoke. One thing about Knocklewort—even though he is a Congressman, he very seldom blows out anything but smoke. He kept his mouth shut until I'd finished, and I waited very anxiously for a reaction. Finally, it came.

"Sorry, I'd like to help you, but it's out."

"Think of the publicity, Congressman! You, as sponsor of this idea, taking it to the President. Why, you'll be hailed as the saviour of the world! This thing is big! I'll bet you could be the next President yourself, with this deal."

"President of what?" asked Knocklewort. "A bankrupt nation?"

"But it wouldn't cost much to make these bombs," Joe Stevens explained. "I have the formula all worked out, ready to go."

"Isn't that just lovely?" Knocklewort spread his palms upward. "Now work out another formula showing how people can get along in this country after you drop your bombs. Your cat here, and your canary can get along—they've got others to feed them. But people can live only by working. Working means business. Business means competition. Competition means progress. Progress won't exist once folks start to love each other. They won't want to step on each other's toes, take advantage of one another.

"Why, in six months business would be at a standstill and this nation would be ruined. For that matter, if folks start to live in harmony, they won't need any government—and I'll be out of a job!"

I couldn't stand to look at Stevens' face, so I sat down. The young chemist was getting a new formula into his head—a formula of what makes the world go around.

"Sorry, young man." Knocklewort put his arm around Joe Stevens' shoulders. "I'm as much in favor of love as the next man—kiss a lot of babies when I campaign—but there just isn't any place for it in business, or politics either. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have a dinner engagement to keep. Old friend of yours, Mortimer. Tom Mason. Know him well, don't you?"

"Yes," I sighed. "I know him. Well, come on, Joe. Let's go."

We went. Stevens was scowling, and even the cat and the canary seemed to have lost their sex appeal for each other. But in the car, Stevens turned to me with every tooth gritted.

"I'm not licked yet," he said. "Can you leave for Washington with me next week?"

"Why, you don't want to do that, my boy. First of all, it costs too much money."

"Never mind. Dorothy's going to leave me. Oh, don't think I haven't realized that! She'll leave the minute she hears we aren't getting anywhere. So I might as well sell the house. And I'll take the money to finance us. We'll go to Washington and see the President himself!"

"Now look, son." I faced Joe Stevens and for a moment it was as if I actually were facing a son of mine. "You might as well know the truth. Bert Bugle isn't sick. He just won't touch your problem because he thinks love will ruin the legal profession. And Tom Mason isn't afraid of censorship. He believes love will kill newspaper circulation. You heard what the Congressman told you. And you're going to get the same story everywhere. It will be the same in Washington.

"So you had better realize one thing right now. This world doesn't want love. It isn't ready for love yet on a large scale. Oh, it might work for individuals. It always has, you know. And it might even work for a small community. But not for the masses."

"I can't believe it," Stevens sighed.

"You'd better believe it. Because you're going to be fought tooth and nail. As I left Mason's office, Bert Bugle was already calling him on the phone to warn him about your love-bomb menace. And now, the Congressman is dining with Mason. They're probably all going to get together and run you out of town. I advise you to forget this scheme, go back to Dorothy, take your old job. And—much as it hurts me to do this—here's your three hundred bucks back."

Stevens managed to find a smile and spread it over his face. It didn't quite reach. "Never mind the money," he said. "You stuck by me, and you tried your best to help."

"Please take it. I don't want your dough."

He shook his head and I was surprised that nothing rattled. "No, it's yours. I'm going home now and see what Dorothy is going to do." Stevens made a gesture that included the cat, the canary, and the vial of love potion. "You might as well keep these as souvenirs. I won't be needing them."

I nodded, then plodded up the street. The cat followed me, purring, with the canary hitching a free ride on his back. I held the vial in my hand and looked for a sewer. No sense keeping this stuff. It was just bad medicine. Nobody wanted love. Bert Bugle was right. I should have stuck to Mountain Dew Water.

Then the thought sneaked up and kicked me in the pants. I stopped plodding and started running.

I didn't stop running until around ten o'clock that night, when I ended up panting on Joe Stevens' doorstep.

He opened the door and I breezed in.

"Mortimer. What brings you here?"

"A taxi. But never mind that. I came to tell you that we're saved."

"Saved?"

"Just came from Mason's house. He and Congressman Knocklewort and Bert Bugle have agreed to call off their feud. Bert Bugle isn't going to sue me either. We can have all the publicity we want, Bugle will get us our patent protection, and Knocklewort himself will go to Washington for us to see the President!"

"Wait a minute. How did all this happen?"

"You did it! Or, rather, your love potion did it. Remember the vial you left with me?"

Stevens nodded.

"Well, I got to thinking. All three of these birds were having dinner together. If a delivery man showed up at the back door with some Mountain Dew Table Water. And if they drank it at dinner—and if this water happened to contain the love potion."

"You did it!"

It was my turn to nod. "Then, when I figured the stuff had plenty of time to get in its licks, I showed up at the front door. The rest was easy as pie. They loved me. They loved you. They loved the idea. They loved everybody. So we're all set. Now we can begin our campaign." I paused, waiting for the applause. "What's the matter, Joe? Doesn't it get you excited?"

Stevens stared out of the window. "You forget what I told you," he said. "If my potion is injected, the effect is permanent. If it's sprayed on to the skin surface it's also sure to last forever. But if you just drink a small amount, it wears off, perhaps in a matter of a few hours. Tomorrow those men will be free of its influence and they'll go back to opposing us."

"But we can keep them hopped up with the water forever if needs be," I argued. "I can manage to slip them drinks all day long."

"It's no use. They're not the only ones who have to be sold. No, Mortimer, you've shown me today that you can't sell love to the world. Everybody in Washington will be the same way and you can't change human nature."

"Guess I never thought of that angle." I glanced at him closely. "But that isn't all you have on your mind, is it?"

Stevens pointed towards the door. "See those suitcases? Dorothy packed up when she heard the news. She's ready to leave now. Don't know what's keeping her.”

“That’s tough,” I said. “If there’s anything I can do to help—” I stopped and sniffed. “You smell anything burning?”

“You’re right, there is something burning!” Stevens wheeled around. “It’s the cellar! The house is on fire. Come on!”

We clattered down the basement steps and into the smoky cellar. But the house wasn’t on fire. I saw only two things burning down there. Stevens’ wife, Dorothy, and a little pile of papers on the laboratory table.

Since Dorothy seemed to be burning only with rage, I turned my attention to the pile of papers. “Get some water!” I yelled. Stevens ran to the laundry tub, filled a pail, and splashed the contents over the charred fragments on the table.

“What’s the big idea?” he asked. Dorothy made a little sound that might have been a laugh and might also have been a sob.

“It’s too late,” she said. “I did it.”

“Did what—?” Stevens stopped and stared.

“I burned the formula. The formula for the love potion.”

“But—”

“Love potion!” She *was* sobbing, now. “All it ever caused was trouble. And even though I’m leaving,—yes, I *am* leaving and for good, so don’t try to talk me out of it—I wanted to get rid of that horrible elixir forever!”

Stevens sat down and covered his face. “Two years of work shot to pieces!” he groaned. “Nothing to show for it but the little flask on the table.”

Dorothy was over to the table and back again before I’d noticed it. She thrust the flask into my hands. “Here, Mr. Mortimer!

A little farewell gift for you. A token of my personal appreciation for busting up my family, busting up my husband’s life. Now, get out of here! Get out of here and take this damned love with you!” I held the flask and stared at the yellowish liquid. I held love in my hands and it was cold and pale. I didn't like it, because nobody loves love. It doesn't work for the masses, only for individuals.

"Here," I said to Dorothy. "A little farewell gift for you, too!" Lifting the flask, I broke it over the top of her head. She went down in a heap, with the love potion splashing all over her.

"You $#%&@(i!*!!!," yelled Stevens—only, he yelled it much more plainly than that. "Trying to kill my wife, huh? Just let me get my hands on you—"

The proposition didn't appeal to me. I turned and ran. The last I ever saw of Joe Stevens, he was sitting on the cellar floor holding his wife in his arms, trying to revive her.

Yes, that was the last I ever saw of Stevens. But I heard from him once, since then.

About a week afterwards, he called me on the phone.

"I'm the happiest man in the world," he told me. "And I can never thank you enough for all you did for me."

"It was nothing, really."

"First of all, you showed me that this business of reforming the world is a lot of foolishness. No one man or one idea is big enough to do the trick. So I went around and got my old job back again. From now on, I'm sticking to Dog Biscuits."

"And your wife?" I asked. "Ever since you hit Dorothy on the head she's been a new woman. She adores me. And you deserve the thanks for it."

I smiled to myself. "Sort of thought that would do the trick," I said. "Couldn't figure out a better use for the last of the love potion than to spray her with it. You said it would be permanent."

"I guess it is." Stevens hesitated. "Just one thing you should know, though—only don't ever let my wife hear about it."

"What's that?"

"She made a mistake. There really was none of the love potion left at all."

"But the stuff I splashed on her from the flask—"

The happiest man in the world chuckled. “That was some cleaning fluid I had lying around.”

He hung up, and I suppose that’s the way the story ends. But there really *was* a love potion, and I can prove it. Come around to my office anytime and take a look at my cat and my canary.

Or, if you’d prefer to wait about a month or so, I think I’ll be able to show you the only kittens in the world with wings.

1954

The Pin

Do we live and die by some great Cosmic law? Or do we survive or perish by vague and casual chance involving things no more awesome than a pin and a telephone book?

SOMEHOW, somewhere, someone would find out. It was inevitable. In this case, the *someone* was named Barton Stone. The *somewhere* was an old loft over a condemned office building on Bleeker Street.

And the *somehow*—

Barton Stone came there early one Monday morning as the sun shone yellow and cold over the huddled rooftops. He noted the mass of the surrounding buildings, rearranged them into a more pleasing series of linear units, gauged his perspective, evaluated the tones and shadings of sunlight and shadow with his artist's eye. There was a picture here, he told himself, if only he could find it.

Unfortunately, he wasn't looking for a picture. He had plenty of subjects in mind; right now, he was looking for a place in which to paint. He wanted a studio, wanted it quickly. And it must be cheap. Running water and north light were luxuries beyond his present consideration. As for other aesthetic elements, such as cleanliness—Stone shrugged as he mounted the stairs, his long fingers trailing dust from the rickety railing.

There was dust everywhere, for this was the domain of dust, of darkness and desertion. He stumbled upwards into the silence.

The first two floors of the building were entirely empty, just as Freed had told him. And the stairs to the loft were at the end of the hall on the second floor.

"You'll have it all to yourself," the rental agent had promised. "But remember to stay in the loft. Nobody'd ever bother looking up there. Damned inspectors come around, they keep telling us to raze the building. But the floor's safe enough. All you got to do is keep out of sight—why, you could hide out there for years without being caught. It's no palace, but take a look and see what you think. For twenty bucks a month, you can't go wrong."

Stone nodded now as he walked down the debris-littered hall towards the loft stairs. He couldn't go wrong. He sensed, suddenly and with utter certainty, that this was the place he'd been searching for during all of these frustratingly futile weeks. He moved up the stairs with inevitable—

Then he heard the sound.

Call it a thud, call it a thump, call it a muffled crash. The important thing was that it sounded from above, from the deserted loft.

Stone paused on the second step from the top. There was someone in the loft. *For twenty bucks a month you can't go wrong*—but *you could hide out there for years without being caught.*

Barton Stone was not a brave man. He was only a poor artist, looking for a cheap loft or attic to use as a studio. But his need was great; great enough to impel him upwards, carry him to the top of the loft stairs and down the short corridor leading to the entry.

He moved quietly, now, although there was thunder in his chest. He tiptoed delicately towards the final door, noted the overhead transom; noted, too, the small crate in the corner against the wall.

There was silence beyond the door, and silence in the hall now as he carefully lifted the crate and placed it so that he could mount the flat top and peer over the open transom.

No sense being melodramatic, he told himself. On the other hand, there was no sense rushing in—Barton Stone was not a fool and he didn't want to become an angel.

He looked over the transom.

The loft was huge. A dusty skylight dominated the ceiling, and enough light filtered through to bathe the room in sickly luminance. Stone could see everything, everything.

He saw the books, stacked man-high; row after row of thick books. He saw the sheafs bulked between the books; pile after pile of sheafs. He saw the papers rising in solid walls from the floor. He saw the table in the center of the loft—the table, bulwarked on three sides by books and sheafs and papers all tossed together in toppling-towers.

And he saw the man.

The man sat behind the table, back to the wall, surrounded on three sides by the incredible array of printed matter. He sat there, head down, and peered at the pages of an opened book. He never looked up, never made a sound, just sat there and stared.

Stone stared back. He understood the source of the noise, now; one of the books had fallen from its stack. But nothing else made sense to him. His eyes sought clues, his mind sought meaning.

The man was short, fat, middle-aged. His hair was graying into white, his face lining into wrinkles. He wore a dirty khaki shirt and trousers and he might have been an ex-GI, a tramp, a fugitive from justice, an indigent book-dealer, an eccentric millionaire.

Stone moved from the realm of might-have-been to a consideration of what he actually saw. The little fat man was riffling through the pages of a fat, paper-bound book which could easily be mistaken for a telephone directory. He turned the pages, apparently at random, with his left hand. Very well, then; he was left-handed.

Or was he? His right hand moved across the table, raised and poised so that the sunlight glittered in a thin line of silver against the object he held.

It was a pin; a long, silver pin. Stone stared at it. The man was staring at it too. Stone's gaze held curiosity. The little fat man's gaze held utter loathing and, more than that, a sort of horrified fascination.

Another sound broke the stillness. The little man sighed. It was a deep sigh that became, with abrupt and hideous clarity, a groan.

Eyes still intent on the pin, the little man brought it down suddenly upon the opened pages of his book. He stabbed at random, driving the point home. Then he hurled the book to the floor, sat back, buried his face in his hands, and his shoulders shook with a silent sobbing.

A second sped. Stone blinked. And beyond the door, in the loft, the little man straightened up, reached for a long sheet of paper that might have been a polling-list, and scanned its surface. The pin poised itself over the center of the sheet. Again the sigh, the stab, the sob.

Now the little man rose, and for a frantic moment, Stone wondered if he'd been detected. But no, the pin-wielder merely wandered down the row of books and pulled out another thick volume. He carried it back to the table and sat down, picking up the pin with his right hand as his left turned page after page. He scanned, scrutinized, then sighed, stabbed, sobbed.

Barton Stone descended from the top of the crate, replaced it carefully in the corner, and tiptoed down the stairs. He moved carefully and silently, and it was an effort to do so, because he wanted all the while to run.

His feeling was irrational, and he knew it, but he could not control himself. He had always experienced that sudden surge of fear in the presence of the demented. When he saw a drunk in a bar, he was afraid—because you never know what a drunk will do next, what will enter his mind and how he will act. He shied away from arguments, because of what happens to a man's reaction-pattern when he sees red. He avoided the mumblers, the people who talk to themselves or to the empty air as they shuffle down the street.

Right now he was afraid of a little fat man, a little fat man with a long, sharp, silver needle.

The needle was crooked at one end, Stone remembered—and he could see that needle sinking into his own throat, right up to the crooked angle. The fat man was crazy and Stone wanted no part of him. He'd go back to the rental agency, see Mr. Freed, tell him. Freed could evict him, get him out of there in a hurry. That would be the sensible way.

Before he knew it, Stone was back in his own walkup flat, resting on the bed and staring at the wall. Although it wasn't the wall he was seeing. He was seeing the little fat man and studying him as he sat at his big table. He was seeing the books and the sheafs and the long rolls and scrolls of paper.

He could group them in the background, so. Just sketch them in lightly, in order to place the figure. The khaki shirt hung thusly—and the open collar draped in this fashion. Now the outlines of the head and shoulders; be sure to catch the shrewd intensity, the concentrated concentration of the pose.

Stone had his sketch-pad out now, and his hands moved furiously. The sunlight would serve as a highlight over the shoulder. It would strike the silver pin and the reflection would fleck the features of the face.

The features—the face—most important. He began to rough it in. If he could only capture the instant before the sob, if he could only fathom the secret of the eyes as the pin stabbed down, he'd have a painting.

What *was* that look? Stone had unconsciously catalogued and categorized the features. The proportions of nose to forehead, ears to head, chin to jaw; the relationship of brow and cheekbone to the eyes; he knew them and reproduced them. But the expression itself—particularly that look around the eyes—that was the key to it all.

And he couldn't get it down. He drew, erased, drew again. He made a marginal sketch and rubbed it out. The charcoal smeared his palm.

No, it was wrong, all wrong. He'd have to see him again. He was afraid to go, but he wanted that painting. He wanted to do it, he *had* to do it. There was a mystery here, and if he could only pin it down on canvas, he'd be satisfied.

Pin it down. The pin was what frightened him, he knew it now. It wasn't the man, so much. Granted, he was probably insane—without the pin he'd be harmless, deprived of weapons.

Stone stood up. He went out, down the stairs, walked. He should have gone to the rental agency first, he told himself, but the other need was greater. He wanted to see his subject once more. He wanted to stare into the face of the little fat man and read the secret behind it.

And he did. He climbed the stairs silently, mounted the crate quietly, directed his soundless gaze over the transom.

The fat man was still at work. New books, new papers bulked high on the big table. But the left hand turned the pages, the right hand poised the pin. And the endless, enigmatic pantomime played on. Sigh, stab, sob. Stop and shudder, shuffle through fresh pages, scan and scrutinize again, and then—sigh, stab, sob.

The silver pin glared and glistened. It glowed and glittered and grew. Barton Stone tried to study the face of the fat man, tried to impress the image of his eyes.

Instead, he saw the pin. The pin and only the pin. The pin that poised, the pin that pointed, the pin that pricked the page.

He forced himself to concentrate on the little man's face, forced himself to focus on form and features. He saw sorrow, read resignation, recognized revulsion, found fear there. But there was neither sorrow nor resignation, revulsion or fear in the hand that drove the pin down again and again. There was only a mechanical gesture, without pattern or meaning that Barton Stone could decipher. It was the action of a lunatic, the antic gesture of aberration.

Stone stepped down from the crate, replaced it in the corner, then paused before the loft door. For a moment he hesitated. It would be so simple merely to walk into the loft, confront the little man, ask him his business. The little man would look up, and Stone could stare into his eyes, single out and scrutinize the secrets there.

But the little man had his pin, and Stone was afraid. He was afraid of the pin that didn't sob or sigh, but merely stabbed down. And made its point.

The point—what was it?

Well, there was another way of finding out; the sensible way. Stone sidled softly down the stairs, padded purposefully up the street.

Here it was, *Acme Rentals.* But the door was locked. Barton Stone glanced at his watch. Only four o'clock. Funny he'd be gone so early, unless he'd left with a client to show some property or office-space.

Stone sighed. Tomorrow, then. Time enough. He turned and strode back down the street. He intended to go to his flat and rest before supper, but as he rounded the corner he saw something that stopped him in his tracks.

It was only a brownish blur, moving very fast. His eye caught a glimpse of khaki, a suggestion of a bowed back, a white-thatched head disappearing into the doorway of a local restaurant. That was enough; he was sure, now. His little fat man had taken time out to eat.

And that meant—

Stone ran the remaining blocks, clattered up the rickety stairs. He burst into the loft, raced over to the table. Then, and then only, he stopped. What was he doing here? What did he hope to find out? What was he looking for?

That was it. He was looking for something. Some clue, some intimation of the little fat man's perverted purpose.

The books and papers billowed balefully all about him. There were at least half-a-hundred presently on the table. Stone picked up the first one. It was a telephone directory, current edition, for Bangor, Maine. Beneath it was another—Yuma, Arizona. And below that, in a gaudy cover, the city directory of Montevideo. At one side a long list of names, sheet after sheet of them, in French. The Town Roll of Dijon. And over at one side, the electoral rolls of Manila, P. I. Another city directory—Stone guessed it must be in Russian. And here was the phone-book from Leeds, and the census sheets from Calgary, and a little photostat of the unofficial census of Mombasa.

Stone paged through them, then directed his attention to another stack on the right-hand side of the table. Here were opened books aplenty, piled one upon the other in a baffling miscellany. Stone glanced at the bottom of the collection. Another phone-book, from Seattle. City directory of Belfast. Voting list from Bloomington, Illinois. Precinct polling list, Melbourne, Australia. Page after page of Chinese ideographs. Military personnel, USAAF, Tokyo base. A book in Swedish or Norwegian—Stone wasn't sure which, but he recognized that it contained nothing but names; and like all the others it was recent, or currently published and in use.

And here, right on top, was a Manhattan directory. It was open, like the others, and apparently the choice of page had been made upon random impulse. Barton Stone glanced at the heading. FRE. Was there a pin-mark? He stared, found it.

Freed, George A. And the address.

Wait a minute! Wasn't that *his* rental agency man? Something began to form and fashion, and then Stone pushed the book away and ran out of the room and down the stairs and he rounded the corner and found the newsstand and bought his paper and clawed it open to the death-notices and then he read the name again.

Freed, George A. And the address. And on another page—Stone's hands were trembling and it took him a while to find it—was the story. It had happened this morning. Accident. Hit by a truck crossing the street. Survived by, blah, blah, blah.

Yes, blah, blah, blah, and this morning (perhaps while Stone had been watching him the first time) the pin had pointed and stabbed and a name in the directory was marked for destruction. For death.

For *Death!*

Nobody'd ever bother looking up there. You could hide out there for years without being caught. Yes, you could gather together all the lists, all the sources, all the names in the world and put them into that deserted loft. You could sit there, day after day and night after night, and stick pins into them the way the legends said witches stuck pins into effigies of their victims. You'd sit there and choose book after book at random, and the pin would point. And wherever it struck, somebody died. You could do that, and you *would* do that. If you were the little fat man. The little fat man whose name was *Death.*

Stone almost laughed, although the sound didn't come out that way. He'd wondered why he couldn't get the little man's eyes right, wondered why he couldn't search out their secret. Now he knew. He'd encountered the final mystery—that of Death itself. Death, *himself.*

And where was Death now? Sitting in a cheap restaurant, a local hash house, taking a breather. Death was dining out. Simple enough, wasn't it? All Stone need do now was find a policeman and take him into the joint.

"See that little fat guy over there? I want you to arrest him for murder. He's Death, you know. And I can prove it. I'll show you the pinpoint."

Simple. *Insanely* simple.

Maybe he was wrong. He *had* to be wrong. Stone riffled back to the death-notices again. Kooley, Leventhaler, Mautz. He had to make sure.

Kooley, Leventhaler, Mautz.

Question: how long does it take for Death to dine?

Question: does Death care to linger over a second cup of coffee?

Question: does one dare go back and search that directory to find the pinpoints opposite the names *Kooley, Leventhaler* and *Mautz?*

The first two questions couldn't be answered. They constituted a calculated risk. The third question could be solved only by action.

Barton Stone acted. His legs didn't want to move, his feet rebelled every step of the way, and his hands shook as he climbed the stairs once more.

Stone almost fell as he peered over the transom. The loft was still empty. And it was shrouded.

now, in twilight. The dusk filtering through the skylight provided just enough illumination for him to read the directory. To find the names of Kooley, Leventhaler and Mautz. And the pinpoints penetrating each, puncturing the *o,* the *v,* the *u.* Puncturing their names, puncturing their lives, providing punctuation. The final punctuation—period.

How many others had died today, in how many cities, towns, hamlets, crossroads, culverts, prisons, hospitals, huts, *kraals,* trenches, tents, igloos? How many times had the silver pin descended, forced by fatal fancy?

Yes, and how many times would it descend tonight? And tomorrow', and the next day, and forever and ever time without end, amen?

They always pictured Death wielding a scythe, didn't they? And to think that it was really just a pin—a pin with a curve or a hook in it. A long, sharp silver pin, like *that one there.*

The last rays of the dying sunset found it, set its length ablaze in a rainbow glow'. Stone gasped, sharply. It was here, right here on the table, where the little fat man had left it when he went out to eat—the silver pin!

Stone eyed the sparkling instrument, noted the hooked end, and gasped again. It *was* a scythe, after all! A little miniature scythe of silver. The weapon of Death which cut down all mankind. Cut down mankind without rhyme or reason, stabbed senselessly to deprive men forever of sensation. Stone could picture it moving in frantic rhythm over the names of military personnel, pick, pick, picking away at lives; point, point, pointing at people; stick, stick, sticking into human hearts. The fatal instrument, the lethal weapon, smaller than any sword and bigger than any bomb.

It was *here,* on the table.

He had only to reach out and take it—

For a moment the sun stood still and his heart stopped beating and there was nothing but Silence in the whole wide world.

Stone picked up the pin.

He put it in his shirt-pocket and stumbled out of the room, stumbled through darkness and tumbled down the flights of the night.

Then he was out on the street again, and safe. He was safe, and the pin was safe in his pocket, and the world was safe forever.

Or was it? He couldn't be sure.

He couldn't be sure, and he couldn't be sure, and he sat there in his room all night long, wondering if he'd gone completely mad.

For the pin was only a pin. True, it was shaped like a miniature scythe. True, it was cold and did not warm to the touch, and its point was sharper than any tool could ever grind.

But he couldn't be sure. Even the next morning, there was nothing to show. He wondered if Death read the papers. He couldn't read *all* the papers. He couldn't attend *all* the funerals. He was too busy. Or, rather, he *had* been too busy. Now he could only wait, as Stone was waiting.

The afternoon editions would begin to provide proof. The home editions. Stone waited, because he couldn't be sure. And then he went down to the corner and bought four papers and he knew.

There were death-notices, still; of course there would be. Death-notices from yesterday. *Only* from yesterday.

And the front-pages carried further confirmation. The subject-matter of the stories was serious enough, but the treatment was still humorous, quizzical, or at best, speculative and aloof. Lots of smart boys on the wire-services and the city desks; too hard boiled to be taken in or commit themselves until they were certain. So there was no editorial comment, yet; just story after story, each with its own "slant".

The prisoner up at Sing-Sing who went to the chair last night—and was still alive. They'd given him plenty of juice, and the power worked, all right. The man had fried in the hot seat. Fried, literally, but lived. Authorities were investigating—

Freak accident up in Buffalo—cables snapped and a two-ton safe landed squarely on the head and shoulders of Frank Nelson, 42. Broken back, neck, arms, legs, pelvis; skull completely crushed. But in Emergency Hospital, Frank Nelson was still breathing and doctors could not account for—

Plane crash in Chile. Eighteen passengers, all severely injured and many badly burned when engines caught fire, but no fatalities were reported and further reports—

City hospitals could not explain the sudden cessation of deaths throughout Greater New York and environs—

Gas main explosions, automobile accidents, fires and natural disasters; each item isolated and treated as a freak, a separate phenomenon.

That's the way it would be until, perhaps, tomorrow, when the hardboiled editors and the hardheaded medical men and the hardshelled Baptists and the hard-nosed military leaders and the hard pressed scientists all woke up, pooled their information, and realized that Death had died.

Meanwhile, the torn and the twisted, the burned and the maimed, the tortured and the broken ones writhed in their beds—but breathed and lived, in a fashion.

Stone breathed and lived, in a fashion, too. He was beginning to see the seared body of the convict, the mangled torso of the mover, the agonized forms that prayed for the mercy of oblivion all over the world.

Conscience doth make cowards of us all and *no man is an island.* But on the other hand, Stone breathed and lived, after a fashion. And as long as he had the pin, he'd breathe and live forever. Forever!

So would they all. And more would be born, and the earth would teem with their multitude—what then? Very well, let the editors and the doctors and the preachers and the soldiers and the scientists figure out solutions. Stone had done his part. He'd destroyed Death. Or at the least, disarmed him.

Barton Stone wondered what Death was doing right now. Death, in the afternoon. Was he sitting in the loft, pondering over his piles of useless papers, lingering over his lethal ledgers? Or was he out, looking for another job? Couldn't very well expect to get unemployment compensation, and he had no social security.

That was *his* problem. Stone didn't care. He had other worries.

The tingling, for example. It had started late that morning, around noon. At first Stone ascribed it to the fact that he hadn't eaten or slept for over twenty-four hours. It was fatigue. But fatigue gnaws. Fatigue does not bite. It doesn't sink its sharp little tooth into your chest.

Sharp. Chest. Stone reached up, grabbed the silver pin from his pocket. The little scythe was cold. Its sharp, icy point had cut through his shirt, pricked against his heart.

Stone laid the pin down very carefully on the table, and he even turned the point away from himself. Then he sat back and sighed as the pain went away.

But it came back again, stronger. And Stone looked down and saw that the pin pointed at him again. He hadn't moved it. He hadn't touched it. He hadn't even looked at it. But it swung around like the needle of a compass. And he was its magnetic pole. He was due North. North, cold and icy like the pains that shot through his chest.

Death's weapon had power—the power to stab him, stab his chest and heart. It couldn't kill him, for there was no longer any dying in the world. It would just stab him now, forever and ever, night and day for all eternity. He was a magnet, attracting pain. Unendurable, endless pain.

The realization transfixed him, just as the point of the pin itself transfixed him.

Had his own hand reached out and picked up the pin, driven it into its chest? Or had the pin itself risen from the table and sought its magnetic target? Did the pin have its own powers? He wondered.

Yes. That was the answer, and he knew it now. Knew that the little fat man was just a man and nothing more. A poor devil who had to go out and eat, who slept and dozed as best he could while he still stabbed ceaselessly away. He was only a tool. *The pin itself was Death.*

Had the little man once looked over a transom or peered through a window in New York or Bagdad or Durban or Rangoon? Had he stolen the silver pin from yet another poor devil and then been driven by it; driven out into the street by the pin that pricked and pricked at his heart? Had he returned to the place where all the names in the world awaited their final sentencing?

Barton Stone didn't know. All he knew was that the pin was colder than arctic ice and hotter than volcanic fire, and it was tearing at his chest. Every time he tore it free, the point inexorably returned and his hand descended with it, forcing the pin into his chest. Sigh, stab, sob—the power of Death was in the pin.

And the power of Death animated Barton Stone as he ran through the nighted streets, panted up the midnight stairs, staggered into the loft.

A dim light burned over the table, casting its glow over the waiting shadows. The little fat man sat there, surrounded by his books, and when he saw Barton Stone he looked up and nodded.

His stare was impersonal and blank. Stone's stare was agonized and intent. There was something Stone had to find out, once and for all; a question which must be answered. He recognized its nature and the need, sought and found his solution in the little fat man's face.

The little fat man *was* a man, and nothing more. He *was* merely the instrument, and the pin held all the power. That was enough for Barton Stone to know. It was all he could know, for the rest was only endless pain. He had to be relieved of the pain, had to be released from it, just as the poor devils all over the world had to be relieved and released. It was logic, cold logic; cold as the pin, cold as Death.

Stone gasped, and the little fat man stood up and moved around from behind the table.

"I've been waiting for you," he said. "I knew you'd come back."

Stone forced the words out. “I stole the pin,” he panted. “I’ve come to give it back—back where I got it.”

The little fat man looked at him, and for the first time, Stone could read his eyes. In them he saw infinite compassion, limitless understanding, and an endless relief.

“What is taken cannot be returned,” murmured the little man.

“I think you know that. When you took the pin, you took it forever. Or until—”

The little man shrugged and indicated the seat behind the table.

Silently, Stone sat down. The books bulked before him; the books, the directories, the papers and scrolls and lists that contained all the names in the world.

“The most urgent are on top,” whispered the little man. “I sorted them while I waited.”

“Then you knew I’d be back?” The little fat man nodded. “I came back, once, too. And I found—as you will find—that the pain goes away. You can remove the pin now, and get to work. There’s so much work to do.”

He was right. There was no longer any stabbing sensation in Stone’s chest. The little scytheshaped pin came away quite easily and balanced in Stone’s right hand. His left hand reached for the topmost book. A small piece of paper, bearing a single scribbled name, rested on the opened volume.

“If you don’t mind,” breathed the little fat man. “This name first, please.”

Stone looked at the little fat man. He didn’t look down at the scribbled name—he didn’t have to, for he knew. And his right hand stabbed down, and the little man sighed and then he fell over and there was only a wisp of dust.

Old dust, gossamer-light dust, soon blows away. And there was no time to look at the dancing, dissipating motes. For Barton Stone was sighing, stabbing, shuddering, sobbing.

And the pin pointed and pricked. Pricked the convict up in Sing-Sing and Frank Nelson in Buffalo Emergency, and the crash victims in Chile. Pricked Chundra Lai of Bombay, Ramona Neilson of Minneapolis, Barney Yates in Glasgow, Igor Vorpetchzki in Minsk, Mrs. Minnie Haines and Doctor Fisher and Urbonga and Li Chan and a man named John Smith in Upper Sandusky.

It was day and it was night and it was summer and it was autumn and it was winter and it was spring and it was summer again but you could hide out there for years without being caught.

All you did was keep shuffling the books, picking at random. That was the best you could do, the only fair way. Sometimes you got mad and took a lot from one place; sometimes you just kept going, plodding along and leaving it up to the pin.

You sighed, you stabbed, you shuddered and you sobbed. But you never stopped. Because the pin never stopped, the scythe was always swinging.

Thus it was, and thus it would be, forever. Until the day came, inevitably, when somehow, somewhere, someone would find out . . .

Mr. Steinway

Dorothy loved a genius and wanted only to be loved in return. This certainly seemed the natural thing for a girl to ask. The Steinway thought differently.

THE first time I saw Leo, I thought he was dead. His hair was so black and his skin was so white—I'd never seen hands so pale and thin. They lay crossed on his chest and, I suppose, concealed the rhythm of his breathing. There was something almost repulsive about him; he was so thin, so still, and there was such a *nothingness* on his face. It was like a death-mask that had been made a little too late, after the last bit of the living personality has fled. I stared down at Leo, shuddered a little, and started to move away.

Then he opened his eyes, and I fell in love with him.

He sat up, swung his legs over the side of the enormous sofa, grinned, rose. At least, I suppose he did. All I really noticed was the deep brown of his pupils and the warm, rich hunger that poured from them into me, the hunger that poured and found a feeding-place somewhere in my heart.

I know what it sounds like. But I'm not a schoolgirl, and I don't keep a dairy any longer, and it's been years since I've had a mad, mad crush. I'd been going around for years, assured that I was emotionally mature. Until he opened his eyes and I fell in love with him.

Harry was making the introductions, now.

Dorothy Endicott. She heard you play in Detroit last week and she wanted to meet you. Dorothy, this is Leo Winston." He was quite tall, and he managed a little bow, or rather an inclination of his head, without once moving his gaze. I don't know *what* he said. "Charmed" or "delighted" or "pleased to meet you"—it didn't matter. He was *looking* at me.

I did all the wrong things. I blushed. I giggled. I said something about how much I admired his playing, and then I repeated myself and tripped over the words.

But I did *one* right thing. I looked back. All the while Harry was explaining how we'd just happened to stop up and we didn't mean to disturb him but the door was open so we walked right in. And he wanted to remind Leo about placing the piano for tomorrow night's concert, and the ticket-sales were going good according to the latest report this noon. And now he had to run along and arrange for the puffs for tomorrow's papers, so —

"There's no reason for you to hurry off, is there, Miss Endicott?"

There was, I agreed, no reason at all. So Harry left, like the good little Samaritan he was, and I stayed and talked to Leo Winston.

I don't know what we talked about. It's only in stories that people seem able to remember long conversations *verbatim.* (Or is it long *verbatim* conversations? It's only in stories that people have perfect control of grammar, too.)

But I learned that his name was once Leo Weinstein . . . that he was thirty-one years old . . . unmarried . . . he liked Siamese kittens . . . he broke his leg once, skiing up at Saranac . . . couldn't stand Chopin or Poulenc . . . he liked Manhattans made with dry vermouth, too.

It was over the second of these, after I told him all about myself (and nothing, unless he could read my eyes) that he asked me if I wanted to meet Mr. Steinway.

Of course I said yes, and we went into the other room, the one behind the sliding doors. There sat Mr. Steinway, all black and polished to perfection grinning a welcome with his eighty-eight teeth.

“Would you like to hear Mr. Steinway play something for you?” asked Leo.

I nodded, feeling a warmth far beyond the power of two Manhattans to inspire—a warmth born of the way he said it. I hadn’t felt that way since I was thirteen and in love with Bill Prentice and he asked if I’d like to see him do a Full Gaynor off the high board.

So Leo sat down on the bench and he patted Mr. Steinway on the leg the way I sometimes pat Angkor, my Siamese kitten. And they played for me. They played the *Appasionata* and the *berceuse* from *The Firebird* and something very odd by Prokofieff and then several things by the two Scotts—Cyril, and Raymond. I suppose Leo wanted to show his versatility, or perhaps that was Mr. Steinway’s idea. Anyway, I liked it all, and I said so, emphatically.

“I’m glad you appreciate Mr. Steinway,” Leo said. “He’s very sensitive, I’ll have you know, like everyone in my family. And he’s been with me a long time—almost eleven years. He was a surprise from my mother, when I made my debut at Carnegie.”

Leo stood up. He was very close to me, because I’d been sitting on the piano bench beside him ever since the *berceuse,* and that made it easier for me to see his eyes as he closed the black lip over Mr. Steinway’s teeth and said, “Time for a little rest, before they come and get you.”

“What’s the matter?” I asked. “Is Mr. Steinway ill?”

“Not at all—I thought he sounded in the best of spirits.” Leo grinned (how could I ever have imagined him dead, with his incandescent vitality?) and faced me. “He’s going over to the concert hall this evening—he has a date to play with me tomorrow night. Which reminds me, will you be there?”

The only answer for that one was, “Silly boy!” but I restrained it. Restraint did not come easy with me when I was with Leo. Not when he looked at me like that. With his eyes holding such hunger, and the long slim fingers caressing the panelling as they had caressed the keys, as they could so easily caress—

I trust I’m making myself clear?

Certainly I was transparent enough the following evening. After the concert we went out, just the four of us; Harry and his wife, Leo, and I. And then just Leo and I, in the candlelight of the apartment, in the big room that looked so bare and empty without Mr. Steinway squatting there where he belonged. We watched the stars over Central Park and then we watched the reflections in each other’s pupils, and what we said and what we did are not meant for sharing.

The next day, after we read the notices, we went for a walk in the Park. Leo had to wait until they’d moved Mr. Steinway back into the apartment, and it was lovely in the Park, as always. As it must have been for millions who, somewhere in their memories, hold an instant when they walked in Central Park in May and owned it all—the trees, the sunshine, the distant laughter rising and falling as transiently as the heartbeat quickened by a moment of ecstasy.

But—“I think they’re on the way over,” Leo said, glancing at his watch and rising from the bench. “I really ought to be there when they move him in. Mr. Steinway’s big, but he’s quite delicate, actually.”

I took his hand. “Come on, then,” I said.

He frowned. I’d never seen him frown before, and it seemed out of character to me. “Maybe you’d better not, Dorothy. I mean, it’s a slow job up those stairs, and then I’ll have to practise. Don’t forget, I’m booked for Boston next Friday, and that means four hours a day for the next week—Mr. Steinway and I must get our program in shape. We’re doing the Ravel Concerto, the Left-Hand one, with the Symphony, and Mr. Steinway isn’t fond of Ravel. Besides, he’ll be leaving on Wednesday morning, so there really isn’t too much time.”

"But you aren't taking the piano with you on tour, are you?"

"Certainly. Where I go, Mr. Steinway goes. I've never used another instrument since Mother gave him to me. I wouldn't feel right about it, and I'm sure it would break Mr. Steinway's heart."

Mr. Steinway's heart.

I had a rival, it seems. And I laughed about it, we both laughed about it, and he went away to his work and I went back to my apartment to sleep, perchance to dream . . .

I tried phoning him about five. No answer. I waited a half-hour, and then I grabbed the nearest rosy pink cloud and floated over to his apartment.

As usual—as was customary with Leo, whose mother had literally kept "open house" out on the Cape—the door was unlocked. And I naturally took advantage of the situation to tiptoe in and surprise Leo. I pictured him playing, practising, absorbed in his work. But Mr. Steinway was silent, and the sliding doors to the other room were closed. I got my surprise in the anteroom.

Leo was dead again.

He lay there on the huge couch, his pallor almost phosphorescent in the gathering twilight. And his eyes were closed and his ears were closed and his very heart seemed closed until I bent down and blended the warmth of my lips with his own.

"Dorothy!"

"Sleeping Beauty, in reverse!" I exclaimed, triumphantly, rumpling his hair. "What's the matter, darling? Tired after your rehearsal? I don't blame you, considering—"

It was still light enough for me to recognize his frown.

"Did I—startle you?" It was a B-movie line, but this was, to me, a B-movie situation. The brilliant young concert pianist, torn between love and a career, interrupted in his pursuit of art by the sweet young thing. He frowns, rises, takes her by the shoulders as the camera pans in close and says—

“Dorothy, there’s something you and I must talk about.”

I was right. Here it comes, I told myself. The lecture about how art comes first, love and work don’t mix—and after last night, too! I suppose I pouted. I make a very pretty pout, on occasion. But I waited, prepared to hear him out.

And he said, “Dorothy, what do you know about Solar Science?”

“I’ve ever heard of it.”

“That’s not surprising. It’s not a popular system; nothing in parapsychology has gained general acceptance. But it works, you know. It works. Perhaps I’d better explain from the beginning, so you’ll understand.”

So he explained from the beginning, and I did my best to understand. He must have talked for over an hour, but what I got out of it boils down to just a little.

It was his mother, really, who got interested in Solar Science. Apparently the basis of the concept was similar to Yoga or some of these new mental health systems. She’d been experimenting for about a year before her death—and during the past four years, since her passing, Leo had worked on it alone. The trance was part of the system. Briefly, as near as I could make out, it consisted of concentration—“but effortless effort of concentration, that’s important”—on one’s inner self, in order to establish “complete self-awareness.” According to Solar Science one can become perfectly and utterly aware of one’s entire being, and “communicate” with the organs of the body, the cells, the very atomic and molecular structure. Because everything, down to the very molecules, possesses a vibration-frequency and is therefore alive. And the personality, as an integrated unit, achieves full harmony only when complete communication is established.

Leo practised four hours a day with Mr. Steinway. And he devoted at least two hours a day to Solar Science and “self-awareness.” It had done wonders for him, done wonders for his playing. For relaxation, for renewal, for serenity, it was the ultimate answer. And it led to an *extension* of awareness. But he'd talk about that some other time. What did I think?

What *did* I think?

I honestly didn't know. Like everyone else, I'd heard a lot, and listened to very little, about telepathy and extra-sensory perception and teleportation and such things. And I'd always associated these matters with the comic-strip idea of scientists and psychologists and outright charlatans and gullible old women given to wearing long ropes of wooden beads which they twisted nervously during seances.

It was something different to hear Leo talk about it, to feel the intensity of his conviction, to hear him say—with a belief that burned—that this meditation was all that had preserved his sanity in the years after his mother died.

So I told him I understood, and I'd never interfere with his scheme of living, and all I wanted was to be with him and be *for* him whenever and wherever there was a place for me in his life. And, at the time, I believed it.

I believed it even though I could only see him for an hour or so, each evening, before his Boston concert. I got a few TV leads during the week—Harry arranged some auditions, but the client postponed his decision until the first of the month—and that helped to pass the time.

Then I flew up to Boston for the concert, and Leo was magnificent, and we came back together with nary a thought or a word about Solar Science or anything except the two of us.

But on Sunday morning, we were three again. Mr. Steinway arrived.

I dashed over to my own apartment and came running back after lunch. Central Park shimmered in the sunlight, and I admit I shared something of its radiance.

Until I was in the apartment, and heard Mr. Steinway rumbling and growling and purring and screeching and cachinnating, and I hurried in to Leo and the piano stopped.

He frowned. It seemed I was developing quite a talent for making an unexpected entrance.

"I didn't expect you so soon," he said. "I was just practising something new."

"So I heard. What's the rest of it?"

"Never mind, now. Did you want to go out this afternoon?" He said it just as if he didn't see the new shoes, the suit, the hat I'd bought from Mr. John just to surprise him.

"No. Honestly, darling, I didn't mean to interrupt. Go on with your playing."

Leo shook his head. He stared down at Mr. Steinway.

"Does it bother you to have me around when you practise?"

Leo didn't look up.

"I'll go away."

"Please," he said. "It isn't me. But I'm afraid that Mr. Steinway doesn't—respond to you properly."

That tore it. *That* ripped it to shreds. "Now wait a minute," I said, coolly (if white-hot rage is cool). "Are we doing a scene from *Harvey,* now? Is this some more of your Solar Science, and am I to infer that Mr. Steinway is alive? I admit I'm not very bright, not overly perceptive, and I couldn't be expected to share your sensitive reactions. So I've never noticed that Mr. Steinway had an existence of his own. As a matter-of-fact, to me, it's just another piano. And its legs don't begin to compare with my own."

"Dorothy, please—"

"Dorothy doesn't please! Dorothy isn't going to say one more word in the presence of your—your—incubus, or whatever it is! So *Mr.* Steinway doesn't *respond* to me properly, is that it? Well, you tell *Mr.* Steinway for me that he can go plumb to—"

Somehow he got me out of the apartment, into the sunlight, into the park, into his arms. And it was peaceful there, and his voice was soft, and far away the birds made a song that hurt me in my throat.

“. . . so you weren’t far wrong at that, darling,” Leo told me. “I know it’s hard to believe for anyone who hasn’t studied Solar Science or ultra-kinetic phenomena. But Mr. Steinway *is* alive in a way. I can communicate with him, and he can communicate with me.”

“You *talk* to it? It *talks* to you?”

His laughter was reassuring, and I desperately wanted to be reassured, now. “Of course not. I’m talking about vibrationary communication. Look at it this way, darling. I don’t want to sound like a lecturer—but this is science, not imagination.

“Did you ever stop to think what makes a piano? It’s a highly complicated arrangement of substances and materials—thousands of tiny, carefully calculated operations go into the construction of a truly fine instrument. In a way, the result is comparable to the creation of an artificial being; a musical robot. To begin with, there’s a dozen different kinds of wood, of various ages and condition. There’s special finishes, and felt, gut, animal matter, varnish, metal, ivory—a combination of elements infinitely complex. And each has its own vibrationary rate, which in turn forms part of the greater vibrationary rate of the whole. These vibrations can be sensed, contacted and understood.”

I listened, because I wanted to find sense and sanity and serenity somewhere in it all. I wanted to believe, because this was Leo talking.

“Now, one thing more, and that’s the crux of the matter. When vibration occurs, as it does in all being, electronic structure is disturbed. There’s an action sequence—and a record of that action is made on the cellular structure.

“Now if you record many messages on a single piece of tape at different speeds, you’d have to play them back at these speeds in order to understand the message as a whole. Inability to do so would keep you from knowing or comprehending these messages. That’s what ordinarily bars our communication with non-human life forms and gives us the impression that they have neither thought nor sentience.

"Since we humans use the development of the human brain as criterion, we aren't aware of the intelligence of other life-forms. We don't know how intelligent they are because we, most of us, don't realize that rocks and trees and everything in the material universe can 'think' or 'record' or 'communicate' at its own level.

"That's what Solar Science has taught me—and it has given me the method of entering into communication with such forms. Naturally, it isn't simple. But from self-awareness I have slowly proceeded into a more general awareness of vibrationary rates. It's only logical that Mr. Steinway, so much a part of my life and a part of me, would be a logical subject for an experiment in communication. I've made that experiment and succeeded, at least partially. I can share communication with Mr. Steinway; and it's not all one-way, I assure you. You remember what the Bible said about 'sermons in stones'—it's literally true."

Of course he said more than that, and less, and in different words. But I got the idea. I got the idea only too well. Leo wasn't altogether rational.

"It's really a functional entity, too, darling," he was saying. "Mr. Steinway has a personality all his own. And it's a growing one, thanks to my ability to communicate with him in turn. When I practise, Mr. Steinway practises. When I play, Mr. Steinway plays. In a sense, Mr. Steinway does the actual playing and I'm really only the mechanism that starts the operation. It may sound incredible to you, Dorothy, but I'm not fooling when I say there are things Mr. Steinway refuses to play. There are concert halls he doesn't like, certain tuning practises he refuses to respond to or adjust to. He's a temperamental artist, believe me, but he's a great one! And I respect his individuality and his talent.

"Give me a chance, darling—a chance to communicate with him until he understands you and your place in our lives. I can override his jealousy after all, isn't it natural that he'd be jealous? Let me attune our vibrations, until he senses the reality of your presence as I sense it. Please, try not to think of me as crazy. It's not hallucination. Believe me."

I stood up. "All right, Leo. I believe you. But the rest is up to you. I shan't be seeing you again until—until you've made some arrangements."

My high heels clip-clip-clipped up the path. He didn't try to follow me. A cloud covered the sun, wrapped it in a ragged cloth, torn and dirty. Torn and dirty—

I went to Harry, of course. After all, he was Leo's agent and he'd know. But he *didn't* know. I found that out at once, and I cut myself off before I said too much. As far as Harry was concerned, Leo was perfectly normal.

"Except, of course, you may be thinking of that business with his mother. The old lady's death hit him pretty hard you know what show business moms are like. She ran the whole shooting-match for years, and when she kicked off like that, he kind of went haywire for a while. But he's all right now. A good man, Leo. A comer. Thinking of a European flier next season—they think Solomon is such hot stuff. Wait until they hear Leo."

That's what I got out of Harry, and it wasn't much. Or was it?

It was enough to set me thinking, as I walked home—thinking about little Leo Weinstein, the boy prodigy, and his adoring mother. She watched over him, shielded him, saw to it that he practised and rehearsed, regulated the details of his life so he came to depend upon her utterly. And then, when he made his debut like a good boy, she gave him Mr. Steinway.

Leo had cracked up, a bit, when she died. I could imagine that very easily. He had cracked up until he turned to his mother's gift for support. Mr. Steinway had taken over. Mr. Steinway was more than a piano, but not in the way Leo said. In reality, Mr. Steinway had become a surrogate for the mother. An extension of the Oedipus-situation, wasn't that what they called it?

Everything was falling into a pattern, now. Leo, lying on the couch and looking as though he were dead—returning, in fantasy, to the womb. Leo “communicating” with the vibrations of inanimate objects—trying to maintain contact with his mother beyond the grave.

That was it, that must be it, and I knew no way of fighting the situation. Silver cord from the mother or silver chord from the piano—it formed a Gordian knot either way, and I was weaponless.

I arrived at my apartment and my decision simultaneously. Leo was out of my life. Except—

Lie was waiting for me in the hall.

Oh, it’s easy to be logical, and reason matters out coldly, and decide on a sensible course of action. Until somebody holds you in his arms, and you have the feeling that you *belong* there and he promises you that things will be different from now on, he understands, he can’t live without you. He said all the tried and true things, the trite and true things, the right and true things. And all that had gone before faded away with the daylight, and the stars came out and spread their splendour . . .

I must be very exact now. It’s important that I be exact. I want to tell just how it was the next afternoon when I walked around to his apartment.

The door was open and I came in, and it was like coming home. Until I saw that the sliding doors to the other room were closed, until I started towards them, until I heard the music. Leo—and Mr. Steinway—were playing again.

I called it “music,” but it wasn’t *that,* any more than the sudden anguished scream thrust from a human throat is normal communication. All I can say is that the piano was playing and the sound came to me as vibrations, and for the first time I understood something of what Leo had meant.

For I heard, and understood that I heard, the shrill trumpeting of elephants, the slow groaning of boughs in the nightwind, the crash of toppling timber, the raw rumble of ore filling a furnace, the hideous hissing of molten metal, the screech of steel, the agonized whine of sandpaper, the tormented thrum of twisted strings. The voices that were not voices spoke, the inanimate was animate, and Mr. Steinway was alive.

Until I slid the doors open, and the sound suddenly ceased, and I saw Mr. Steinway sitting there alone.

Yes, he was alone, and I saw it as surely as I saw Leo slumped in the chair on the far side of the room, with the look of death on his face.

He couldn't have stopped in time and run across the room to that chair—any more than he could have composed that atonal *allegro* Mr. Steinway played.

Then I shook Leo, and he came alive again, and I was crying in his arms and telling him what I'd heard, and hearing him say, "It's happened, you can see that now, can't you? Mr. Steinway exists—he communicates directly—he's an integrated personality. Communication is a two-way affair, after all. And he can tap my energy, take what he needs from me to function. When I let go, he takes over. Don't you see?"

I saw. And I tried to keep the fear from my eyes, tried to banish it from my voice, when I spoke to him. "Come into the other room, Leo. Now. Hurry, and don't ask questions."

I didn't want questions, because I didn't want to tell him that I was afraid to talk in Mr. Steinway's presence. Because Mr. Steinway could hear, and he was jealous.

I didn't want Mr. Steinway to hear when I told Leo, "You've got to get rid of it. I don't care if it's alive or if we're both crazy. The important thing is to get rid of it, now. Get away from it. Together."

He nodded, but I didn't want nods.

"Listen to me, Leo! This is the only time I'll ask it, and your only chance to answer. Will you come away with me now, today? I mean it—pack a suitcase. Meet me at my apartment in half an hour. I'll phone Harry, tell him something, anything. We haven't time for anything more. I know we haven't time."

Leo looked at me, and his face started to go dead, and I took a deep breath, waiting for the sound to start again from the room beyond—but his eyes met mine, and then the color came back to his face and he smiled at me, *with* me, and he said, “I’ll see you in twenty minutes. With suitcase.”

I went down the stairs swiftly, and I know I had perfect control. I had perfect control out on the street, too, until I heard the vibrations of my own high heels. And the sound of tires on the pavement, and the singing of the telephone wires in the wind, and the *snick* of traffic-lights, and the creaking of an awning, and then came the sense of the sounds *under* the sounds and I heard the voice of the city. There’s agony in asphalt and a slow melancholy in concrete, and wood is tortured when it splinters, and the vibrations of a piece of cloth twisted into clothing weaves terror from a threnody of thread. And all around me I felt the waves, the endless waves, beating in and pulsing over, pouring out their life.

Nothing looked different, and everything was changed. For the world was *alive.* For the first time, everything in the world came alive, and I sensed the struggle to survive. And the steps in my hallway were alive, and the banister was a long brown serpent, and it hurt the key to be twisted in the lock, and the bed sagged and the springs complained when I put down the suitcase and crushed my protesting clothes into its confines. And the mirror was a silver shimmer of torment, and the lipstick was being bruised by my lips, and I could never, never eat food again.

But I did what I had to do, and I glanced at my watch and tried to hear only the ticking, not the cries of coils and the moan of metal; tried to see only the time and not the hands.

Twenty minutes.

Only, now, forty minutes had passed. And I hadn’t even phoned Harry yet (the black mouthpiece, the bakelite corroding, the wires nailed to the crosses of telephone poles) and I couldn’t phone because Leo wasn’t here.

To go down again into the street was more than flesh could bear, but the need was stronger than the needs of flesh. And I went out into the seething symphony where all sound was vibration and all vibration was life, and I came to Leo’s apartment and everything was dark.

Everything was dark except Mr. Steinway’s teeth, gleaming like the tusks of elephants in forests of ebony and teak. Leo couldn’t have moved Mr. Steinway from the inner room to the outer room. And he hated Chopin. He wouldn’t sit there in the dark playing the *Funeral March* . . .

Mr. Steinway’s teeth were spotted with little drops and they gleamed, too. And Mr. Steinway’s heavy legs were wet. They brushed against me, because Mr. Steinway was rolling and rumbling towards me across the room, and he was playing and playing and telling me to look, look, look at the floor where I could see Leo dead, *really* dead, and all the power was Mr. Steinway’s now, the power to play, the power to live, the power to kill . . .

Yes, it’s true. I scraped the box and liberated the sulphur and released the flame and started the fire and let its roaring drown out the vibrations, drown out the voice of Mr. Steinway as he screamed and gnashed his eighty-eight teeth. I set the fire. I admit it. I killed Mr. Steinway. I admit it.

But I *didn’t* kill Leo.

Why don’t you ask *them? They’re* burned, but *they* know! Ask the sofa. Ask the rug. Ask the pictures on the wall. *They* saw it happen. *They* know I’m not guilty.

You can do it. All you need is the ability to communicate with the vibrations. Just as I’m doing it now. See? I can hear everything they’re saying, right in this room. I can understand the cot, and the walls, and the doors, and the bars and the ceiling.

I don’t have anything more to say. If you don’t believe me, if you won’t help me, then go away. Let me just sit here and listen. Listen to the bars . . .

The Goddess of WIsdom

After six months on Galactic Service a five-day leave seemed hardly time to solve the mystery of a lovely stranger from far Outside.

Only the irrepressible Robert Bloch could write this story. An uncautiously candid Dr. Kinsey report on Love of the Future Female. And wrapped around the legend of Minerva about whom the always-romantic graphic Greeks had the right word. Myth or maid—was she something desirable?

LET'S NOT pull any punches. The first thing I wanted after I landed at Skyport was a female. Yes, that's right. I didn't say *woman.* I said *female*. There aren't any women at Skyport, except for one or two of the Officials, and there's no sense in wishful thinking.

But I'm not making any excuses for the way I felt. If you're one of the narrow-minded kind that's never left Earth nothing I'd say would convince you. But if you've ever been Outside you can understand. Particularly if you've been far Outside.

That's where I'd been—far outside the Galaxy—for six long months. Simple little phrase, isn't it? *Six long months.* But it doesn't mean to you what it means to me. It couldn't unless you've spent that length of time in prison or an asylum on Earth, or in a space ship Outside.

Maybe you swallow all that stuff about the glamor of the Galactic Service; maybe you think of a stretch of patrol or exploratory duty in terms of a luxury cruise in a 60-passenger Moon-liner. Well, you're wrong. If you'd just gone through six months such as I'd been through you'd want female company and want it bad.

So here I was at Skyport, back after my six long months of imprisonment in an artificial cell, eating artificial food, breathing artificial air, living under artificial gravity. Six long months of monotony, of loneliness, of boring routine and enforced discipline. Six long months with nothing to see but the six long faces of my equally bored companions. You get so you know every thought in their heads, anticipate every word they can utter. Anticipate? You get so you *dread* the next thought, the next word!

Of course there's some relief when you land—if you can call risking your neck on some science-forsaken asteroid a relief. If you enjoy wearing a protectelope against blazing heat or bitter cold or deadly gas, you can actually get out and stretch your legs sometimes. All too often you have to stretch them pretty fast, before some new, unclassified denizen decides you'd make a good *entree* for dinner.

But I've got nothing to sell. So that's all I'll say about those six long months. Now I was back. I'd landed, taken the Decontamination routine, got my shots, my tests, my orders for the next trip out, and now I was ready for my five-day leave.

Five-day leave on Skyport! What a break that was! I'd been looking forward to it for so long.

I've already mentioned the absence of women. Now I can throw in a remark or two about the presence of Service Officials, Service Technicians, Service Observers and Service Police. Add a smattering of gouging, chiselling merchants and a good number of criminal riffraff, squeeze them all together into three square miles of tin-topped magnificence, and you have Skyport.

Think I'm griping? Well, let me tell you right now that it looked mighty good to me. Mighty good. I stepped out of Barrack No. 5 and headed past the gates, down toward the center of town. Dark-hour was due, and the incs began to blaze in the streets. It was a sight for space-sore eyes, and no mistake. Just to see lights, any kind of lights, was momentarily enough. Just to breathe air, fresh air, all the air I wanted, was wonderful! Just to feel marsh under my feet, to feel marsh and imagine it was earth—paradise!

New uniform on my back, a full exchange-clip in my pocket, and five full days of freedom; that was the setup. Five Mars-days, not Earth-days, but why quibble? This was no time for quibbling. I had a lot of things on my agenda.

I was going to hole up in one of the three Stopovers, just like a private citizen, and sleep in a real bed. A real bed, with soft silk sheets brought all the way from Earth . . .

I was going to hit the best tavs and drink the best Earth beer; beer in cans, beer fresh from the pressurized reefer-units, beer from a place called Milwoky, umpteen million miles away . . .

I was going to look up Harley and some of the others, if they were around, and yarn about the good old days, and gripe about the Service . . .

But first of all, I wanted a female.

I walked down the street into town, gawking and marvelling the the way the old cowboys did in early times on Earth, five hundred years ago when they were just settling the west and entered some frontier outpost after a stretch on the range.

Come to think of it, this *was* frontier. This was the jumping-off place for Earthmen these days—the Last Frontier. Full of soldiers, Service people, crooks, gamblers, chisellers, brinkers and drifters. It was noise and bustle and cheating and drinking and it was tough as plutonium and crude as gerk—and I loved the sight and the sound of it at Dark-hour.

And more important still, I loved the thought of the contrast to come—the soft serenity, the palpable presence of an actual female. A man can relax, a man can lose his tensions, a man can find himself again, if there’s a female around who can talk, who can listen, who can give him back those old illusions of grace and beauty. I wasn’t seeking flesh, I was seeking spirit.

You get those ideas Outside. And when you come back, and you're in Skyport, you go to Ottar. You go to fat Ottar at his bar in the House of All Planets. You get yourself a room in his hotel, and you ask Ottar if he has any female guests. Females, transients waiting to take the space liners out again; females you can eat with, drink with, talk with.

You go to Ottar with hunger in your eyes. You find him sitting at the downstairs desk next to the bar and you say, "Long time." And fat Ottar grins and holds out his hand. It isn't a nice hand—particularly if you believe that rumor about his having Marty blood—but you grasp it like a drowning man grasps a rope. And what fat Ottar could give me was much better than a rope.

I said, "I've got the shakes. I was wondering—"

He cut me off with a nod. "Too bad you weren't here about three months ago. A woman came here—"

"A *real woman?"*

"I wouldn't brink you. Young, too. With that yellow hair—what you call it?"

"Blonde."

"Yes. Like yours. Only longer. And she looked so." His fat hands made fat gestures.

"What happened?"

"Run off with a Chief."

I said something under my breath. Just my luck. Ottar shuffled to the reefer, got out a can of beer, pulled a posturchair up to the bar. He opened the can for me.

The beer was cold. Cold and *real*. I could actually taste it going down. That sense of reality was what I craved now more than anything else.

"Where's everybody?" I asked. "How's business?"

Ottar shrugged. "They're all like you," he said. "When the liners bring females they come in to see them, to talk. Otherwise, no." Then he leaned forward. “But there is a female here for you to see. You, only.”

“What do you mean?”

“Just arrived, off Harley’s unit.”

I gaped. “Harley? You mean the old so-and-so is in town?”

“Yes and no.”

“Don’t brink me, Ottar. Where is he?”

“Death-side.”

“No!” I stood up. “Of all the rotten, lousy news—”

“He was your friend. I am sorry.” Ottar shuffled away and came back with more beer. He opened the cans with his nails. “Poor, poor Harley.” He lifted the cans, extending one to me, and we drank to Harley. It wasn’t much of a gesture, a grotesque way of showing sorrow and saying goodbye. But it was genuine. The beer, as I drank it, tasted sour. Poor old Harley gone death-side! Not good.

“What happened?” I asked. Ottar said, “I can trust you?”

“I’m not in uniform now, Ottar. This is between friends—about a friend.”

“All right. I’ll level. Harley and I, we were partners. I put up the money for his unit. Prospecting, off-bounds. No permits.”

“I thought he was freighting.”

“That was the front. He wanted to wildcat for metals on unstaked asteroids. I got him clearance through the Chiefs.”

“Don’t tell me how you did it,” I cut in. “It’s all right. There must be dozens in the same game.”

“Whatever he brought back, we split. I sold it for him, split the take fifty-fifty. And he was paying off on the unit. You know the job? Brand new, Foss model, auto-control.” Ottar sighed. “You should see what it looks like now.”

“Where it is?”

“Edge of the Private Strip. Right where it crash-landed two days ago. I got the signal on my tape, of course, when the unit hit grav. And I knew what that meant—something had gone very much wrong. I was out to the Strip in five *likhs*. Got there just as it came down. Luckily there was no explosion. Sometime or other he's set auto-control, and a Foss unit is tough. But the nose caved in, and everything buckled.

The Emergency was on the way, and I had to do some fixing in order to get on board first. But as part-owner I made out all right."

"What did you find?"

Ottar gulped beer. "Harley must have hit something. Maybe he had a heart attack or a stroke. He must have just had time to set auto-control before he dropped. Dropped and hit something at grav. It was bad. Worst I've ever seen."

"You sure?"

"What other answer is there?" Ottar didn't look at me. "There was blood all over the cabin. And he was wide open, ripped apart, wedged there in the corner with his head blown off, nothing above the neck—"

"Damned fool would go out in a solo unit," I grumbled. I could see poor old Harley lying there mangled and I felt like crying.

"Here." Ottar pushed beer my way. "You wanted me to tell you about the female."

"She was on the unit?"

"Sitting there, strapped, staring at him. She must have strapped herself when they hit grav. She was all spattered with his blood."

"Did she kill him?" I snapped it out.

"Impossible. No weapons. And nobody could have done a job like that on a man. He was torn apart, I tell you, with his head exploded into nothing. Maybe he picked up something on the trip, something Emergency has never heard about; they're investigating, of course. Something to burst a man's head and insides wide open . . . Oh, forget, it!"

"What did the female say about it?"

Ottar shrugged. "Nothing. She doesn't talk."

"You mean she doesn't understand? Or is it shock?"

"No shock. She just doesn't talk. Can't. No sound at all."

"Where'd Harley pick *her* up?"

"How would I know? The Service is decoding his tape-records. But they're faked. Harley always faked them so he could sneak off to unstaked asteroids. He told me where he'd been when he came in each time. But now, of course, I'll never find out where he was this last trip. . . . It must have been way off the course, wherever he was. No specimens or metal in the unit—which is lucky for me, of course, with the Service investigating."

"What about the female?"

"Don't ask too many questions. I got her off the unit without anyone seeing her."

"But that's impossible!"

"They looked the other way." Ottar grinned. "Understand?" I understood. And it wasn't any of my business. If some of the officials took graft, that was their department. I was sick of the Service, sick of hearing about Harley's death. I had five days' leave, and time was wasting.

I stood up. "This female—tell me, Ottar, what's she like?"

"I'll show you." Ottar rose, led the way. We went to the stairs and a little man came out of the back and took Ottar's place at the desk in case any customers came in while he was away.

Then we climbed the stairs.

I don't know how many rooms Ottar has in his establishment—more than anyone would suspect, from the looks of the place. All I know is that they're on both sides of a long hall, and each one has a glass panel set in the top of the door. There's a blind which drops from inside, for privacy. But unless the need for privacy exists the blinds stay up and you can look into the rooms as you pass.

"I knew you were scheduled back," Ottar was saying. "That's why I took her off the unit. Also, because I figured she might talk some day and then the Service would find out what Harley and I had been doing. But mostly I was hoping you could see her and try to find out something about what had happened."

I nodded. We went down the corridor, rounded a corner, reached the room at the further end of the hallway.

Ottar said, “She cannot—or will not—talk to me. She will not smile. She will not eat. She merely sits and looks at me as if she didn’t like what she saw. And it hurts me because she is so lovely.”

This was strange talk, coming from old Ottar. He wasn’t usually susceptible to females, any females. Nor, for that matter, was Harley. There was something very odd here, and Ottar was right—I *did* want to find out what had happened to Harley.

“But what do you expect me to do?” I asked.

Ottar shook his head. “I do not know. All I ask is that you try.” He led me to the door, halted before the glass panel. I looked inside. Ottar was right. Wherever she was from, whoever and whatever she was, she was lovely.

The female sat on the couch in the small room, sat to one side almost directly below my line of vision so that I stared down at her from above. She was wearing some kind of sheer smock that Ottar must have provided, but I paid no attention to that. I looked at *her*—at the smooth sweep of her limbs, at the white slope of her shoulders, at the classic contours of a face I’d seen many times before in dreams.

Her hair was woven darkness and her eyes had never known anything but light. Her mouth was a moulded magnet, and—well, Ottar was right. She was lovely.

“She looks like a woman,” I whispered. “What’s the catch here, Ottar? Is she dangerous? Does she bite? A carnivore?”

Ottar shrugged. “I don’t think so. She made no attempt to resist when I found her, brought her here. It is just that she will not communicate. Perhaps you cannot even make her understand. But you can try.”

“I’ll try,” I said.

“You are not afraid, then? Good. I see you are armed, in case she proves unexpectedly hostile. But I do not think she will trouble you in that way.”

I didn’t think she would trouble me in *that* way, either.

“Go ahead,” Ottar said. “I’ll be downstairs at the bar. Somebody may come in. Call if you need me. And try to find out about Harley. It is important that I know.”

He shuffled down the hall. I opened the door, stepped into the room, closed the door behind me. Locked myself in and locked reality out.

That was the feeling. Standing on the other side of the door, looking at her, everything had been real. But once I was inside the room with her reality faded. We faced each other, total strangers. And I was suddenly a stranger to myself!

A stranger and afraid! Who said that? I used to read the classic tapes when I was earth-side. I used to go out for six months at a time on Service assignments. I used to dream about females. I used to talk to Ottar about Harley's death. I used to look through a glass door at living dreams. . . .

That was reality, the Past. Now I stood in the Present. In the room with her. I looked down and she looked up. A moment, a minute, an hour, a century slipped by. The Present was infinity.

A faint, foolish, far-off part of me was wondering, "Now what do you do? She doesn't talk. She doesn't even understand what you're here for. And what *are* you here for, anyway?"

Yes, what *was* I here for? My original purpose, my past purpose, was gone. She wasn't just a female. She was somehow less than that and somehow much, much more.

I can say that her hair was black and her skin was white and her lips were red, but that doesn't begin to describe the *intensity*, the pure depths of the color that clashed and flamed and blended, the colors that offered the beauty of her body to my eyes.

I can say that she was proud, that her every attitude and gesture made a measure of that pride. But I cannot describe how that pride seemed to be a part of her very being.

And I can say that, sitting there, she lifted *her* head and looked into my eyes. Gazed into my eyes. Stared into my eyes. *Flowed* into my eyes.

Her eyes were like warm suns, far away. Her eyes were like blazing suns, close at hand. Her eyes burned inside me. . . .

She was inside me, a part of me. And her mind was inside my mind communicating with me. . . .

“I am here. What do you wish of me?” her mind said to me.

Telepath? Perhaps. Whatever it was, it worked. She didn’t talk, she communicated. And what *did* I wish of her?

“What’ll I call you?” I thought.

“Minerva. That would be closest.” Her mind grasped thought, replied.

“Minerva?”

The goddess of wisdom.” Where did you learn that?” From your mind, now. You decided that I was the—equivalent—to Minerva.”

It wasn’t a voice inside my head. It was a sort of flowing. She did it with her eyes, I knew. They stared at me, hypnotized me. Yes,” she assented.

Yes, what?”

“You may sit down beside me.” I sat down very close to Minerva on the sofa. Close to midnight, ice and fire. “Where are you from?

The communication I got in return was not formed in words but came to me in a familiar picture. Grass, trees, clouds, flowers it was Earth!

Earth?” I spoke aloud.

“No. Not Earth. I cannot tell you. There is nothing in your mind that would be a counterpart of the place I came from.”

At least she was honest. I framed my next question. “Where did you meet Harley?”

“Harley?” She waited for me to form the concept of Harley.

Then she shook her head. The flow came. “I do not know this Harley.”

“But you do! You came here with him on his unit!” I thought of Harley, lying dead with his smashed head, of her sitting strapped in a seat beside him . . . I pushed the thought away quickly, but she caught it.

“Yes. There was such a man on the unit. Was that Harley?”

I nodded. “How did you get on the unit?”

For a moment, blankness. Then, “I do not know. It happened to him before I was there.” “Before you were there? That doesn’t make sense.”

“It happened before I was there. I do not lie.”

I believed her. But I did not understand.

“I am sorry,” the flow came. “But there is no way of explaining.”

“Then you can’t tell me about Harley, and about the trip? About where he was going, where he’d been, how he died?”

Her eyes answered. “I am truly sorry. It all happened before I was there.”

Suddenly I realized what I was doing—sitting here with the most beautiful female I’d ever known, asking questions with my mouth and getting answers from her eyes! It was crazy. It was interesting and it would have made somebody from Research Control very happy. But it was also a waste of my time. A complete waste of the five days leave I wanted to make the most of.

So she didn’t know about Harley, and I believed her. So Harley was dead. Harley was dead and he’d stay death-side. And I was alive. Alive, after six months Outside. I’d come here in the first place wanting the company of a female. Wanting more than that, but not daring to hope—wanting love.

“Love?” She’d read my thoughts again. And she understood all of them, except the last. “What is this love?”

All right. I thought about love. About all kinds of love. And I thought about her. . . .

“No! It is not possible!”

She was honest. This wasn’t a brink-job; there must be a reason. I asked for it. “Why?”

“There can be nothing of what you think between you and me. It is impossible. You are a *man.* But I am not a—you call it—*woman.* You understand?”

I didn’t. All I could understand was that I was in the presence of perfection; that woman or no, she was more completely and utterly female than anything or anyone I had ever known or imagined. She was the essence of everything I wanted and needed. And we were alone together yet eternities apart. . . .

There must be some way of bridging eternity! There had to be! I asked the only question I could ask. “Are there other ways of expressing love for your kind?

“Yes.”

“And what are those ways?”

She hesitated a moment before communication came. It was as though she were learning, too. “With the eyes, I know. Or *through* the eyes. Mind to mind. Or my *being* to your mind.

“I do not understand.” And a part of my mind said, “You’re lying.”

Her eyes answered. “I do not lie. It is an ancient way of love the first way—which your kind have forgotten.”

Mind to mind. Her being to my mind. “Then how do you reproduce?”

The concept formed, the answer came swiftly. “Being to mind. Thought is the seed, but not as you know it. The male is the host.”

“Host? You mean the male carries the child?”

“Not the way you understand. The male carries the seed within him for—your time—a week, perhaps. And we are born as you see me now.”

“Full-grown? But how?”

“I cannot tell you. We are of a different order than mankind. *More*. I am today as I arrived here, as I will be forever. I can communicate, learn if I desire, but it is not necessary. I am complete in myself without adding anything further.”

It didn’t make sense, but it was self-evident. Whatever she was trying to tell me I already knew. She *was* complete. I couldn’t imagine her as she might be *before*, and I couldn’t imagine her changing. She was past, present, future—all incarnate. A beautiful statue, but alive. But this gibberish about gestation, parturition. . . .

“I cannot explain. You have no parallel concept to give me the words. There is my thought which is seed to that part of you which accepts it. And the—cells, you’d call them, although they are not cells—multiply swiftly. They grow in the warm, soft darkness. They feed and grow, feed and grow. And then—I am born. Always new, always the same. Forever and ever. This I know, although I was not told. There was no one to tell me.”

She sounded like a class in metaphysics, or whatever they used to call it. But she looked like the most desirable woman ever created. And that’s what she was to me. I moved closer to her; it was almost agony to be so close and not touch her.

"No," came the message. "It is not for you. You do not understand what it means. . . ."

I didn't. All I understood was that I wanted her, wanted her in any way possible; wanted love with the eyes, the mind, anything. I was once told that there are times when the merest touch is worth ten nights in a harem, and I'd laughed. I wasn't laughing now. Looking at her, I knew it could be true. It would be true, must be true for me.

"There's more to love than lips and loins may learn."

Was that her thought or mine? I did not know. All I knew was the need. And was it her need or mine?

She was staring at me now, and suddenly I sensed that she shared my sensation. She understood what I wanted, what I desired, because she desired it too. She'd warned me because she loved me. And because she loved me, she'd give herself in her own way.

"Yes." Her eyes said that. And her hands sought mine, the hands of marble, the hands of fire. We sat there in silence and our eyes met.

She gave me her eyes and all that lay behind them. And the first gift was loneliness. All the loneliness of endless space, all the loneliness of endless time. It surged into me, surged through me until I was filled with all that is empty. Now I understood why she held my hands—that was all she could do to keep my being from losing itself in the frozen void. As it was, I remained retained my identity, and took the loneliness from her. It was her gift, and it became part of me.

Her second gift was memory. Not her memory but the memory of all who had gone before her. It was not words, it was not images, it was not thoughts; it was a whirling, incredibly flashing blend and blur of sense-impressions in which I found earth and marble columns, moons and craters, shattered stars and blazing suns set in a continuity which had nothing to do with time. It came to me swiftly, and incorporated without identifying. Again it was only the touch of her hands that saved me.

The third gift was warmth. Heat. Fire. Her warmth, her heat, her fire. It was love as I knew it, love as I had never known it, loved as I'd never dared dream it. Worlds were split apart to make mountains. Mountains ripped asunder to spew lava. And the molten mass of it flowed to fuse us into pure flame. This was the love of the gods, which is fire. And out of fire comes life.

Her hands fell away. I sat back, gasping, trying to focus my eyes and my thoughts. I felt exhausted, but there was no feeling of emptiness. The incredible conviction came to me that perhaps she had spoken the literal truth—that I might now be carrying the seed. . . .

"Yes. Oh, yes! It is done now, as it was ever done, as it must always be done."

I closed my eyes. There was a churning inside me. I had to sleep, sleep, sleep without dreams or desire. . . .

When I opened my eyes again she was gone. The key was missing from the table and the door was open. I peered into the emptiness of the dawn-gray hall. Then, slowly I found my way through the corridor and down the stairs.

Ottar slept at his desk, his big head cradled in his arms. He jumped when I poked him.

He did more than jump when I told him that she was gone.

"But how could she go? I was here. I didn't see anyone. I didn't hear a sound. All at once I was asleep and that's all I remember."

I tried to smile. "That makes sense. She's a telepath, among other things. Which means she can probably use her mind as a hypnotic weapon, too. She put you to sleep and went on her way."

Ottar grabbed my shoulder. "What happened? What did you find out about Harley? Tell me."

"There's nothing to tell. She didn't know Harley. That's what she claims, and I believe her."

"How could that be? It doesn't make sense."

"Not our kind of sense." I sighed. "But there are other kinds of sense and other kinds of life in the universe."

Ottar said, "Will you find her?"

I nodded. There was no sense saying any more. No sense tell him that I'd never find her, never bring her back. Some man would see her soon, walking in the dawn, gaze into her eyes, then take her for himself whatever the risk. Before the day was out, I knew, she'd be in a unit bound for another world. She, or those before her, had known many worlds and would know many more as long as there are men who dare to desire a dream come true.

I thought about it all through the day, after I'd taken a room here at the Unit-el. It's Dark-hour again and I'm writing it down.

Gradually, I've figured it out. About poor old Harley and what happened to him, and about what happened to me. Harley hit some spot and landed, over a week ago. And he met Minerva's mother, if you can call her that. And they loved, if you can call it that. *"It happened before I was there,"* she had said to me.

Then he took off again in the unit. Alone. But he wasn't really alone. Because *"the cells multiply swiftly. They grow in the soft, warm darkness. They feed and grow, feed and grow."*

She told the truth when she said she didn't know Harley. Of course she didn't. And she didn't know her mother because she never saw her mother.

When she was born she was already on the unit—and Harley was already dead. Harley died when his head ripped open—and she was born.

I understand how, in searching my mind for concepts, she found the name Minerva. The seeds travel from world to world, from universe to universe, and man is the carrier and the host. In ancient times a man who could make such a journey was called a god. His offspring were gods or goddesses. It must have happened on Olympus, when Minerva was born. Yes, that was it.

I remember the legend of the goddess of wisdom now, of Minerva who *sprang fullbloom from the head of Jupiter.*

So it wasn’t a legend. *“My being meets your mind. The cells feed and grow, feed and grow. . . . One week. . . . Full grown.”*

And the seed grew in Harley’s brain, where it has been planted. And in one week his head burst out there in space, and Minerva was born. My Minerva.

In a week, now, she’ll reproduce again. But this time it’s feeding and growing in *my* brain. It absorbs the bony parts of the skull and the skin expands incredibly. It drinks the blood and eats the soft gray nourishment and waxes fat in godliness as it sups on the wisdom of men. And then it springs, fullblown . . . In just one week. . . .

I can’t write any more. My head is beginning to ache. . . .

The Communist

SHOWS US THE MAN IN THE CELLAR. WHO IS HE? HE COULD BE YOU, OR ME - - - OR ANY OF US, WHEN WE ARE ALL CALLED. . . . .

I took a good look around before I went in, to be sure nobody was following me. Apparently the coast was clear, but you've got to be careful.

Snow was coming down and the streets were utterly deserted. I went into the bar and closed the door behind me, letting the grateful warmth come up as I waited for the steam to clear from my glasses.

Apparently I was the only customer tonight. Nobody came here when there was a District Meeting, and that's what I'd counted on. The bartender gave me a funny look -- he must have been wondering why I wasn't over at the Armory with the rest of them.

I walked up to the bar and stood there.

"What's yours?" he asked.

"Make it straight," I said.

"Wash?"

"Blood."

He stared and leaned over. "What type?"

"702," I told him.

Now it was his turn to look around. He put his mouth close to my ear. "In back here," he murmured. "Thought you was never coming."

"How is he?" I asked.

The bartender shrugged. "I dunno. I haven't been down for a while. Last time I looked, not so good."

"Drinking?"

The bartender nodded. "Whaddya expect?"

"Think he can make it if I bring the car around?"

"Dunno. See for yourself. Coma on, now, hurry before somebody comas in. Damn Security was around about six."

I stiffened. He put his hand on my shoulder. "It's all right. They didn't notice nothing." He stopped, raising the trapdoor in the floor under the back-bar. "Here you go -- take the flashlight. I'll give you the office three times with my foot, like this, if anybody comes in."

He stamped in demonstration as he handed me the flashlight. I clicked it on and clambered down the steps as he closed the trapdoor over me.

I went down the short passageway and opened the cellar door. It wasn't the regular cellar -- just a room hollowed out behind the coalbin, I guess. Hardly the place to spend the weekend, with its single naked light bulb dim and dangling down over the table, the chair, the cot and the toilet.

The big man stood up when I came in. That is, he tried to stand up, but he couldn't quite make it. He trembled a little -- but that might have been the whiskey, too. I could see the empty fifth-bottle on the floor and the half-filled one resting next to his right hand. If that wasn't evidence enough, I had only to look at his eyes. They were rolling around in the sockets like a couple of bloodshot marbles.

"Hello," I said. "All ready to go?"

He gulped. "Jesus, you frightened me when you came in. I thought it was ---"

I nodded. "Nothing to worry about. Everything's set."

"But they said this afternoon some time ---"

"I got held up. Or rather, we couldn't find our pilot. This isn't exactly the night for a trip to Canada, you know." I smiled at him. "But we're all straightened out now. Got a car down the street, take you right to the field.

He thinks he can make it if he gets above the storm ---- he's taken off without lights before."

"Field?" He gulped again. "That's dangerous, isn't it?"

"Everything's dangerous. But you can't expect him to risk the airport. You packed?"

He glanced down at a battered briefcase. "Sure. All I've got."

"Don't worry. There's some money waiting for you in Winnepeg. And a job."

"Organization?"

I hesitated. "Well, not exactly. I mean, we know what you've been through -- we figured you ought to rest up for a while before trying any more writing. A couple of months at some routine job in a store ought to put you back in shape."

"Sure. That's what I need. Little rest." He reached for the bottle.

"Better hurry," I told him. "You're expected."

"Just one more." He tilted the bottle, passed it to me. "How about you?"

I shook my head. He looked at the bottle, started to set it down, then raised it again. "Cold outside," he said. "Better have another for the road."

"For the road." I noticed the scars on his neck when he put his head back to drink. I guess they beat him up pretty bad.

He caught me staring at him and said, "How's Tuck?"

I didn't answer.

"What's the matter?"

I sighed. "You know we can't talk. The minute we start exchanging information ---"

"Yeah, I know. But I been out of touch for so long. Did you ever hear what they did to Campbell?"

"Please, you know I can't tell you."

"But dammit, I want to know! I got a right to know!"

"Nobody has rights any more," I said. "Just duties."

"Quit stalling," he wheezed. "I'm no kid, I can take it. I know what happened to Hank and Kat and to Fritz and some of the others in town here.

Hell, I was there when they got Bea ---"

"Forget it," I said. "Let's go."

He reached for the bottle again. "You!" he said. "You act like you were in Security yourself. Won't talk, won't tell a guy anything ---"

I leaned over and took the bottle out of his hand. "Look," I murmured. "You've had enough."

"Sure. I've had enough." He grinned, and I could see the black crevice of his mouth, and the place where they'd knocked his lower teeth out. "I've had enough sitting in cellars, waiting and watching and wondering. I've had enough of this 'forget it' stuff, too. You think a man can forget? God knows, I tried. But liquor's no good, and when I sleep the dreams come, and then I'm back there at the Hearing and they're working me over, asking me about the magazine ---"

"Come on," I said. "You can sleep on the plane. Tomorrow morning you'll be in Winnipeg, ready to—

He shook his head. "Ready to what? I'm not ready for anything any more. I ought to be locked up, with the rest of them, or down under with George 0. and Mel and Ted and Judy."

"Don't talk like that," I said. "We're still fighting."

"Fighting? How ---- and what for? Sending out those damn mailings from Canada. You know the Post Office confiscates half that stuff——the Censor Division has it all spotted. And what if it gets through? Half the people on our lists are dead. The other half won't be around long either if they're ever caught reading what you send. Who the hell does Phil think he is, anyway -- Tom Paine? You can't start a revolution by mail. And who wants one around here? People like Security."

"You're just tired. You'll talk differently after a rest."

"No." His hand went to the bottle again. "Don't try and stop me. It's no use. I made up my mind," "Please, we must go now ---"

"I made up my mind, I told you. I'm not going."

"But ---"

“Sorry. I know you went to a lot of trouble, you and the whole Movement. But I’m not worth saving anyway.”

“Of course you are. Why, you’re one of the Big Names, look at what you’ve done.”

“You look at it. If you can find anything to look at.” He laughed, burbling into the bottle. “Sure, I wrote a lot. Edited, too. Used to go to all the Conventions. You remember those Conventions, Bob?”

“Sure,” I said. “I remember.”

“Thousand people. We had a thousand people at Chicago. And Philly and Frisco -- remember how Jerry used to play the piano? And this guy Ed Wood, we used to sit there and argue about ---” He slammed the bottle down. “Ah, to hell with it! What’s the use of thinking about the past?”

“Now you’re talking,” I said, “We’ve got to think about the future.”

“No you don’t!” He leered drunkenly. “ ’Gainst Security to remember? When their damn Committies figured out it was subversive -- all this stuff about space-travel and rockets. Said we were prying around in Top Secret information. Then they stopped the magazines and the books and they got after the fan organizations. Said they were all Communist Front. Said we were all Communists, too. Big laugh, isn’t it? But they proved Orwell was, and they said Huxley and H. G. Wells and Russell and all the others had Commie ideas -- so that made us Commies too. And with this war scare and everything ---”

I glanced at my watch. “We haven’t much time,” I said.

“We haven’t _any_ time. Our time ran out long ago,” He sloshed the last inch in the bottom of the bottle, then drained it. “Time ran out for Lucky and Doc and Cliff and all the boys. I saw a picture of Marty after they got through with him ---”

He began to shake now, and I saw that he was crying, “We never hurt anybody,” he said. “We did our best, and if Bradbury wrote about burning books he never figured it would make trouble. Ray wasn’t any Communist, nor Horace and Evelyn, nor Sam. It was all right until after election and then they got tough.”

"But you can't take it lying down," I told him, "We've got to fight as best we can."

"There's no fight left in m," he whispered. "Not after the Hearing, not after they confiscated everything and tossed me out, and they did what Ray said -- they burned the hooks, they burned the house, they burned all my manuscripts, that novel I was writing, they burned it and they might as well burn me too ---"

I looked at my watch again.

"Qo ahead," he murmured. "Shove off. I'll be all right."

"Tell them to save some other poor sucker. Matheson, maybe, or Sturgeon -- oh, I forgot what happened to Ted. Tell them not to worry about me. I'll be leaving here tomorrow."

"You're sure that's the way you want it?"

"I'm sure," He waved his hand. "Goodbye. And good luck!"

"Goodbye," I said.

I went out, closed the door, and climbed the steps. Then I tapped on the trap-door. The bartender let me out. The place was still deserted, "Where is he?" asked the bartender. "What happened?"

I told him.

"But what'll I do with him?" he sighed. "If he's in the shape you say he is, he's liable to go wandering around shooting off his mouth and ---"

It was my turn to sigh. Sigh, and think of the past; of who he had been and what he had bean to me, of the times we had together in the old days. And then it was my turn to forget it. Forget it and tell the bartender, "We'll be sending somebody around. Earl, or maybe Frank Robinson. Got to do it -- it's the only way."

"Guess so."

"There won't be any trouble," I said.

"Right."

I went to the door. "Have another customer for you one of these days. But in case I don't see you beforehand. Happy New Year." "Yeah," said the bartender, "Happy 1965!"

FINIS

Grandma Goes to Mars

Grandma knew nothing of space ships, but she could run pump back on the farm and the pilot was darn glad she could!

I'M NOT saying it's true and I'm not saying it's false.

All I know is that Joe Saunders is the man who told me. And you wouldn't think he'd lie about a thing like that. Not Captain Joseph Saunders, the first man to ever set foot on the planet Mars—and the only man who has ever piloted three successful round trips.

After the last one, General Electronics threw a big homecoming banquet for him at the Waldorf-Astoria. It was a tremendous affair, but of course the whole idea was General Electronics' baby. I guess everybody knows that, though.

Joe Saunders and three men made the first trip. Then he and the high brass made the second trip, a year later. Finally came this third expedition, testing an improved rocket with accommodations for twenty—a trip designed to prove that fullscale interplanetary flight was possible.

It couldn't have been more successful. The whole thing was over and done with in just under three weeks—no hitches, no problems, and everybody back safe and sound in time for the big banquet and gala celebration.

Speaking for myself, I thought it was terrific. I got a big charge out of being toastmaster—introducing everybody from Joe Saunders himself way on down to the Vice President of the United States. The crowd had a good time. The TV cameras worked perfectly. The publicity was sensational.

And after it was all over, I went upstairs to the company suite and found Joe Saunders sitting on the bed, crying in his beer.

I mean exactly what I said. He sat there with his shoes off, cradling a case of beer on his lap, and he was crying. This obviously had been going on for quite some time now—he was on his sixth bottle.

“Hey,” I said. “What’s with the conquering hero?”

He just looked at me and sniffled. Captain Joseph Saunders, the greatest celebrity in the world, sniffled at me. “Lock the door,” he sobbed. “And find me an opener, quick.”

“Haven’t you been using that doohickey behind the door?” I asked.

Joe Saunders stopped sniffling and glared. “Cut out that kind of talk,” he said. “You sound like Grandma Perkins.”

“So what’s wrong with that?” I grinned at him. “Too bad she didn’t stick around for the big banquet. But she said she had to get back home before her hens started to set. Funny old gal.”

“Yeah.” Saunders took a swig of beer. “Very funny.”

“What’s the matter? You sound as if you didn’t much care for her?”

He sighed. “Oh, it’s not her, exactly. You’re the guy I really ought to kill. It was your idea that started everything.”

“Started what?” I asked him.

And that’s when he told me.

It all began with my contest. Yes, the contest was my idea, and a good one. Everybody thought so. “WIN A FREE TRIP TO MARS! JUST COMPLETE THIS STATEMENT IN 50 WORDS OR LESS. ‘I LIKE GENERAL ELECTRONICS PRODUCTS BECAUSE’—”

A natural, that’s what it was, a natural. We got over two million entries. Don’t ask me how they handled the job of selecting the winner. That was up to the judges. All I know is that the lucky party was a lady. Mrs. Hester Perkins, of Armadillo, Iowa.

General Electronics sent a private plane out to get her at their expense. We were all waiting at the airport when she came in. The press was there, too, of course, and when she hopped out of the plane with the pilot, the bulbs went off and blinded us all for a good minute.

Then we could see, and I guess Joe Saunders summed up the general reaction pretty accurately. All he said was, “Oh, no!” but that was enough.

Hester Perkins was a little old lady with white hair and rimless glasses. She wore a black silk dress and a black hat with red cherries all over the top. And so help me, she carried a bag of knitting.

President Benson swallowed twice, took a deep breath, and walked over to her. “Permit me to introduce myself,” he said. “I’m Thaddeus Benson, of General Electronics. And you, I presume, are Mrs. Hester Perkins?”

“That’s right, young man.” She beamed and held out her hand. “But you can call me Grandma. Everybody does. Where’s the General?”

“General?”

“General Electronics. I thought he’d be down to meet me—”

The press closed in, and not a moment too soon. I thought Mr. Benson was going to flip his very expensive toupee. He turned to Farley, the pilot. “What’s the meaning of this? Why didn’t you warn me?”

“But what could I do, Mr. Benson? My orders were to bring back the lady who won the contest. That’s her, all right. And I might say, she’s a good passenger. Never been up in a plane in her life but she took it calm, even when we ran into a storm over Cleveland. Just knitted away for dear life—she’s finishing some doilies for her daughter-in-law, you know, and —”

“I don’t want to know!” Benson groaned. “This is awful! Saunders, what are we going to do?”

Joe Saunders shrugged. “We’ll have to talk her out of it,” he said. “I’m not taking an old lady on any space-flight. Why, she’s over sixty! Can you imagine us sitting around in the cabin for ten days each way, watching her knit doilies?”

“We’ll talk her out of it,” I said. “Offer her a cash award, something like that. Give the trip to the runner-up.”

“That’s right,” Mr. Benson agreed. “Once she finds out what she’s in for, she’ll settle for cash.”

But Grandma Perkins had other ideas.

We told her about the hazards of the trip that night, and it didn’t faze her a bit. We even showed her through the rocket and pointed out the cramped quarters, the limited accommodations.

“Why, I think everything is perfectly scrumptious,” she told us. “You should see the farm, since Homer passed away! Not that I don’t keep things tied up, but we ain’t got furniture like this, nor all these doohickeys. What are them straps for?”

Joe Saunders told her about the straps. He explained about the takeoff and the 10-G pressure. He went on to describe how the ship was in free-fall for nine days each way, going and coming.

“Sounds real interesting,” Grandma Perkins said. “I never get dizzy or nothing. Once at the Fair I went up in one of them Ferris Wheels and I liked it so much I rode twice. Homer, he thought twenty cents was a heap to pay, but—”

“Fifty thousand dollars, cash!” Mr. Benson said. “I forgot to tell you about that, didn’t I? If you don’t take the trip, there’s an alternate prize of fifty thousand. Tax free.”

Grandma Perkins laughed. “Lands sakes,” she said. “I don’t need money. Body gets to be my age, what do they want with money? It’s the experience that counts, I always say. You just keep that money in the bank, young man. Never can tell when it might come in handy.”

“Dangerous,” Joe Saunders said. “Very dangerous. And a woman your age—”

“My age? I’m only sixty-three, and I’ve never been sick a day in my life. ’Centing when I had Martha and Homer Junior, of course. You just ask the doctor, he’ll tell you how spry I am.”

“That’s just what we intend to do,” Joe Saunders told her. “You’ll have to get a complete physical examination. We certainly can’t risk taking you without a medical okay.”

“I’m in better shape than you are, young man,” Grandma Perkins said. “You’ll see.” We did, too. The first specialist couldn’t find anything wrong, and neither could the second, nor the third. And by that time the publicity was out.

“Looks like we’re stuck!” Benson groaned, when he told me the findings.

“Stuck?” I crowed. “Look at these headlines! I tell you, we couldn’t have made a better choice if we planned it this way. The whole idea of a typical American grand-mother taking a space-flight is just perfect. Did you see the editorials? All that stuff about Youth and Age, and Grandma Moses, and the pioneer spirit? We’re not stuck!”

“No.” Joe Saunders sighed. “You’re not. But *I* am!”

And he was.

Of course all I know about the flight is what he told me there in the hotel room after the banquet. But that was enough. Nineteen men in the rocket, taking the 10-G pressure and then floating around or walking with weights, hanging on to straps from the sides and ceilings for nine days out. Nineteen men and Grandma Perkins.

Grandma Perkins didn’t walk and she didn’t hang. After she got used to the sensation, she spent most of her time floating. Joe said it was an awful thing to see her floating across the cabin, knitting away without missing a stitch.

“Got to get these doilies done before we get back,” she said. “I promised.” And then she’d look out of the port window. “Where are we now?”

I guess she drove the men crazy with her questions. Nineteen scientists and technologists, trapped in a cabin in space with one little old lady, and they couldn't escape.

"What's that doofunny over there?" and "How much gasoline you reckon it takes to keep this thing going?" and "What happened to all the blue in the sky?"

They answered her, of course, and that's what made them wild—because she didn't quite believe them. It was obvious she hadn't the faintest idea of how a rocket operates, or why. Saunders tried to give her a briefing on the elementary laws of physics and astronomy and the difficulties involved in going into space. He tried to impress her with the immensity of Space and the importance of the flight itself. But Grandma Perkins didn't impress very easily.

"Seems to me you could have figgered out a way to keep that engine quiet," she sniffed. "Sounds just like the electric motor Homer put on my pump. Whenever it gets out of whack, I mean. There's a sort of doobiddy on it and I have to give it a lick with my hand to make it quiet down or the water just overflows. Seems to me you could have put a muffler or whatever on that engine."

"It isn't an engine," Saunders told her. "It's a space-drive." And he explained again, until she nodded and floated away, smiling over her doily.

That's the way it went, for nine days. Nine days, with the men not daring to swear or even grumble. Not that they got much chance to get a word in edgewise. For Grandma Perkins was interested in conversation. She talked about her grandchildren, about the rations—"Call this cooking? Why, I turned out better meals on my old wood-stove back home!"—and about the best way to cure a cold. By the end of the first week the men were nervous. The thought of an approaching landing didn't lessen their tension. Finally, on the morning of the ninth day, Joe Saunders took over.

He issued instructions and told Grandma something about the landing problems. She didn't seem much impressed.

"All you mean is we strap ourselves down again, isn't that right, young man? So why tell me about those doo-jiggers of yours?"

"Just thought you'd be interested. After all, you must have some mechanical aptitude. You won the contest."

"Yes, that's right." Grandma Perkins sighed. "But what I really want to know is, will I have time to finish this here doily before we get strapped down again?"

She had time. And after they landed, she was all ready to start on a fresh one. Saunders said she didn't even bother to look out of the observation port as they came down.

But they got her into an extra suit and gave her an oxygen tank and took her out with them. There wasn't much to see around Lacus Solis, of course, yet you'd think she'd be somewhat impressed. She was hooked up with Saunders on an intercom outfit, and he kept waiting for her to say something.

Instead, Grandma Perkins glanced around at the horizon for a moment, shrugged, and then stooped down.

"What are you doing?" Saunders asked.

"Just picking up some of these stones," she explained. "I promised Martha I'd bring some back for the children. Ain't likely to find much else by way of souvenirs from the looks of the place."

"But aren't you—well, impressed?" Saunders inquired.

"Humphf! What's there to impress a body here? Can't breathe a bit of air, and there's no water. Just look at this soil! Why, you couldn't even sow alfalfa and hope to get a crop."

Just then one of the crew signalled Joe and he had to go back to the ship. He left Grandma in the care of Stigmeir, one of the engineers. They stayed out for another hour, and then came back. Stigmeir joined the others, forward, and Saunders came to the cabin where Grandma Perkins sat alone.

She had taken off her suit and helmet, and Joe says he thought she must have been impressed after all, because he noticed she'd been crying.

"Kind of gets to you, doesn't it?" he said. "The grandeur of it all, and the loneliness. Which reminds me—"

"Loneliness?" Grandma snapped. "Who's lonely? If you must know, young man, I'm crying because I'm ashamed."

"Ashamed?"

"Yes. I'm ashamed of myself." She dabbed at her eyes with the hem of an unfinished doily, then glanced carefully around the cabin. "You're sure we're alone?"

Saunders nodded. "They're all up front. I must tell you—"

"I must tell *you.*" Grandma leaned forward. "Young man, I did an awful thing. You been so good to me, all you people, taking me on this trip and everything, and I can't help it. I got to tell somebody before I bust. I won this contest under false pretenses."

"False pretenses? You mean you didn't write—?"

"Oh, I wrote the hundred words myself, all right. But what I said just wasn't true. I mean, I really don't know anything about them newfangled General Electronics gadgets. I never owned a one of 'em, couldn't abide having them in my house! Outside of the old radio, and the motor on the pump, there isn't a doo-hunkus in the place. And me fibbing about how wonderful they all are, and how I enjoy having such things!"

For a moment she sat there, looking very little and very old. Joe Saunders reached out and put his hand on her shoulder. "That's all right," he said. "It doesn't matter, now."

"But it *does!* Me, fooling all you big scientists—" Saunders sighed. "Big scientists!" he said. "That's a laugh. You know what I came here to tell you?

It seems that we big scientists have run into some trouble. We planned on taking off tomorrow, but something's gone wrong."

"You mean, with the engine?"

"The space-drive. I had Watkins test, and it doesn't respond. We checked the fueling mechanism and there's nothing wrong—but it won't start."

"Can't you send out for—" Grandma hesitated, and Saunders could see that she understood. "You mean—?"

He nodded. "I mean we have food and oxygen here for the nine-day return trip, plus an extra three days. Say two weeks at most, if we ration everything. And after that—" Saunders turned and stared out at the bleak plains of Mars.

"So you've got to fix the whatchamacallit by tomorrow or the next day if we're going to get back, is that it?"

"That's it." He turned and gave her a wry smile. "Apparently you aren't the only one travelling under false pretenses. We thought we knew our way around. But now, it looks as though it doesn't matter. Unless we can figure out the trouble, fast."

Then he went forward. He was forward all that day, and the next. The men slept in shifts, and they didn't say much—to Grandma or to each other. They checked and rechecked, cursing the lack of tools, cursing the impregnable housing of the drive that prevented them from stripping it down or reaching the source of the powerhead. And *they* stared out of the port, too.

Finally they got the drive to turn over, but the instruments stayed dead. The transmission and feeder mechanism was shot. This was on the third day, the last.

They went back to the cabin, then, with their micrometers and their testing instruments and their delicate probes, and they sat down while Joe Saunders paced the narrow aisle between the bunks.

"Well, it looks like this is it," he said. "There's nothing more we can do."

Nobody said anything. Nobody, that is, but Grandma. "Lands sakes!" she murmured. "And me with the whole set of doilies almost finished." She cocked her head. “You fellers sure you tried everything?”

“Of course we’re sure.” Saunders clenched his fists. “Do you think we’re anxious to stay here and die?”

“But the engine’s running. I can hear it myself.”

“It runs, yes. But the transmission—the induction coils—oh, what’s the use?” Saunders turned on his heel, then halted.

“Hey,” he called. “Where do you think you’re going?”

“Up to take a look for myself,” Grandma Perkins said. “Want to come along?”

A half-hour later, they took off for earth.

“So that’s how it was,” Saunders told me, as he opened his eighth bottle of beer. “In half an hour we were on our way. And we didn’t have a bit of trouble during the whole nine days. Of course, most of the boys talked about resigning once they got back, and I’ve got a good notion to turn in my card myself. None of us could look Grandma Perkins in the face. But I’ve got to hand it to her. She just sat there, knitting away, strapped in most of the time because she’d started some new embroidery and claimed she couldn’t get it right while she floated.”

“Let me get this straight,” I said. “You mean she fixed the space-drive for you?”

“Of course she did. And that’s what’s so awful about the whole thing. If it ever gets out we’ll be the laughing-stock of the scientific world.”

“But she didn’t know anything about it,” I said. “You told me she didn’t. So what could she do?”

“What could she do?” Joe Saunders sighed, then grinned. “You remember how she kept comparing that space-drive to the electric motor on her pump back at the farm? Well, I took her in to see it and she listened for a minute, and then she did just what she did when that pump of hers gets out of order. And it worked.”

“You mean—?”

“That’s, right.” Joe Saunders raised his beer and uttered a great sob. “There happens to be a little doohickey on top of the dingus. And Grandma Perkins just lifted her skirts and kicked it.”

THE END

1955

Comfort Me, My Robot

Henson knew his wife was holding a guilty secret from him. This was intolerable and only one thing could quiet his anxiety—killing her!

WHEN Henson came in, the Adjustor was sitting inside his desk, telescreening a case. At the sound of the door-tone he flicked a switch. The posturchair rose from the center of the desk until the Adjustor's face peered at the visitor from an equal level.

"Oh, it's you," said the Adjustor. "Aren't you a bit early for dinner? Our engagement isn't until five."

"This isn't an engagement," Henson told him. "It's an appointment."

"Appointment?"

"Didn't the girl tell you? I'm here to see you professionally."

If the Adjustor was surprised, he didn't show it. He cocked a thumb at a posturchair. "Sit down and tell me all about it, Henson," he said.

"Nothing to tell." Henson stared out of the window at the plains of Upper Mongolia. "It's just a routine matter. I'm here to make a request and you're the Adjustor."

"And your request is—?"

"Simple," said Henson. I want to kill my wife."

The Adjustor nodded. "That can be arranged," he murmured. "Of course, it will take a few days."

"I can wait."

“Would Friday be convenient?”

“Good enough. That way it won’t cut into my week-end. Lita and I were planning a fishing trip, up New Zealand way. Care to join us?”

“Sorry, but I’m tied up until Monday.” The Adjustor stifled a yawn. “Why do you want to kill Lita?” he asked.

“She’s hiding something from me.”

“What do you suspect?”

“That’s just it—I don’t know what to suspect. And it keeps bothering me.”

“Why don’t you question her?”

“Violation of privacy. Surely you, as a certified public Adjustor, wouldn’t advocate that?”

“Not professionally.” The Adjustor grinned. “But since we’re personal friends, I don’t mind telling you that there are times when I think privacy should be violated. This notion of individual rights can become a fetish.”

“Fetish?”

“Just an archaicism.” The Adjustor waved a casual dismissal to the word. He leaned forward. “Then, as I understand it, your wife’s attitude troubles you. Rather than embarrass her with questions, you propose to solve the problem delicately, by killing her.”

“Right.”

“A very chivalrous attitude. I admire it.”

“I’m not sure whether I do or not,” Henson mused. “You see, it really wasn’t my idea. But the worry was beginning to affect my work, and my Administrator—Loring, you know him, I believe—took me aside for a talk. He suggested I see you and arrange for a murder.”

“Then it’s to be murder.” The Adjustor frowned. “You know, actually, we are supposed to be the arbiters when it comes to method. In some cases a suicide works just as well. Or an accident.”

“I want a murder,” Henson said. “Premeditated, and in the first degree.” Now it was his turn to grin. “You see, I know a few archaicisms myself.”

The Adjustor made a note. “As long as we’re dealing in archaic terminology, might I characterize your attitude towards your wife as one of —jealousy?”

Henson controlled his blush at the sound of the word. He nodded slowly. “I guess you’re right,” he admitted. “I can’t bear the idea of her having any secrets. I know it’s immature and absurd, and that’s why I’m seeking an immature solution.”

“Let me correct you,” said the Adjustor. “Your solution is far from immature. A good murder is probably the most adult approach to your problem. After all, man, this is the twenty-second century, not the twentieth. Although even way back then they were beginning to learn some of the answers.”

“Don’t tell me they had Adjustors,” Henson murmured.

“No, of course not. In those days this field was only a small, neglected part of physical medicine. Practitioners were called psychiatrists, psychologists, auditors, analysts—and a lot of other things. That was their chief stock in trade, by the way; name-calling and labelling.”

THE Adjustor gestured toward the slide-files. “I must have five hundred spools transcribed there,” he calculated. “All of it from books—nineteenth, twentieth, even early twenty-first century material. And it’s largely terminology, not technique. Psycotherapy was just like alchemy in those days. Everything was named and defined. Inability to cope with environment was minutely broken down into hundreds of categories, thousands of terms. There were ‘schools’ of therapy, with widely divergent theories and applications. And the crude attempts at technique they used—you wouldn’t believe it unless you studied what I have here! Everything from trying to ‘cure’ a disorder in one session by means of brain-surgery or electric shock to the other extreme of letting the ‘patient’ talk about his problems for thousands of hours over a period of years.”

He smiled. “I’m afraid I’m letting my personal enthusiasm run away with me. After all, Henson, you aren’t interested in the historical aspects. But I did have a point I wanted to make. About the maturity of murder as a solution-concept.”

Henson adjusted the posturchair as he listened.

“As I said, even back in the twentieth century, they were beginning to get a hint of the answer. It was painfully apparent that some of the techniques I mention weren’t working at all. ‘Sublimation’ and ‘catharsis’ helped but did not cure in a majority of cases. Physical therapy altered and warped the personality. And all the while, the answer lay right before their eyes.

“Let’s take your twentieth-century counterpart for an example. Man named Henson, who was jealous of his wife. He might go to an analyst for years without relief. Whereas if he did the sensible thing, he’d take an axe to her and kill her.

“Of course, in the twentieth century such a procedure was antisocial and illegal. Henson would be sent to prison for the rest of his life.

“But the chances are, he’d function perfectly thereafter. Having relieved his psychic tension by the common-sense method of direct action, he’d have no further difficulty in adjustment.

“Gradually the psychiatrists observed this phenomenon. They learned to distinguish between the psycopath and the perfectly normal human being who sought to relieve an intolerable situation. It was hard, because once a normal man was put in prison, he was subject to new tensions and stresses which caused fresh aberrations. But these aberrations stemmed from his confinement—not from the impulses which led him to kill.” Again the Adjustor paused. “I hope I’m not making this too abstruse for you,” he said. “Terms like ‘psycopath’ and ‘normal’ can’t have much meaning to a layman.”

“I understand what you’re driving at,” Henson told him. “Go. ahead. I’ve always wondered how Adjustment evolved, anyway.”

“I’ll make it brief from now on,” the Adjustor promised. “The next crude step was something called the ‘psychodrama.’ It was a simple technique in which an aberrated individual was encouraged to get up on a platform, before an audience, and act out his fantasies—including those involving aggression and violently antisocial impulses. This afforded great relief. Well, I won't trouble you with the historical details about the establishment of Master Control, right after North America went under in the Blast. We got it, and the world started afresh, and one of the groups set up was Adjustment. All of physical medicine, all of what was then called sociology and psychiatry, came under the scope of this group. And from that point on we started to make real progress.

"Adjustors quickly learned that oldfashioned therapies must be discarded. Naming or classifying a mental disturbance didn't necessarily overcome it. Talking about it, distracting attention from it, teaching the patient a theory about it, were not solutions. Nor was chopping out or shocking out part of his brain-structure.

"More and more we came to rely on direct action as a cure, just as we do in physical medicine.

"Then, of course, robotics came along and gave us the final answer. And it is the answer, Henson—that's the thought I've been trying to convey. Because we're friends, I know you well enough to eliminate all the preliminaries. I don't have to give you a battery of tests, check reactions, and go through the other formalities. But if I did, I'm sure I'd end up with the same answer—in your case, the mature solution is to murder your wife as quickly as possible. That will cure you."

"Thanks," said Henson. "I knew I could count on you."

"No trouble at all." The Adjustor stood up. He was a tall, handsome man with curly red hair, and he somewhat towered over Henson who was only six feet and a bit too thin.

"You'll have papers to sign, of course," the Adjustor reminded him. "I'll get everything ready by Friday morning. If you'll step in then, you can do it in ten minutes."

"Fine." Henson smiled. "Then I think I'll plan the murder for Friday evening, at home. I'll get Lita to visit her mother in Saigon overnight. Best if she doesn't know about this until afterwards."

"Thoughtful of you," the Adjustor agreed. "I'll have her robot requisitioned for you from Inventory. Any special requirements?"

"I don't believe so. It was made less than two years ago, and it's almost a perfect match. Paid almost seven thousand for the job."

"That's a lot of capital to destroy." The Adjustor sighed. "Still, it's necessary. Will you want anything else—weapons, perhaps?"

"No." Henson stood in the doorway. "I think I'll just strangle her."

"Very well, then. I'll have the robot here and operating for you on Friday morning. And you'll take your robot too."

"Mine? Why, might I ask?"

"Standard procedure. You see, we've learned something more about the mind—about what used to be called a 'guilt complex'. Sometimes a man isn't freed by direct action alone. There may be a peculiar desire for punishment involved. In the old days many men who committed actual murders had this need to be caught and punished. Those who avoided capture frequently punished themselves. They developed odd psychosomatic reactions—some even committed suicide.

"In case you have any such impulses, your robot will be available to you. Punish it any way you like—destroy it, if necessary. That's the sensible thing to do."

"Right. See you Friday morning, then. And many thanks." Henson started through the doorway. He looked back and grinned. "You know, just thinking about it makes me feel better already!"

HENSON whizzed back to the Adjustor's office on Friday morning. He was in rare good humor all the way. Anticipation was a wonderful thing. Everything was wonderful, for that matter.

Take robots, for example. The simple, uncomplicated mechanisms did all the work, all the drudgery. Their original development for military purposes during the twenty-first century was forgotten now, along with the concept of war which had inspired their creation. Now the automatons functioned as workers.

And for the well-to-do there were these personalized surrogates. What a convenience!

Henson remembered how he'd argued to convince Lita they should invest in a pair when they married. He'd used all of the sensible modern arguments. "You know as well as I do what having them will save us in terms of time and efficiency. We can send them to all the boring banquets and social functions. They can represent us at weddings and funerals, that sort of thing. After all, it's being done everywhere nowadays. Nobody attends such affairs in person any more if they can afford not to. Why, you see them on the street everywhere. Remember Kirk, at our reception? Stayed four hours, life of the party and everybody was fooled—you didn't know it was his robot until he told you."

And so forth on and on. "Aren't you sentimental at all darling? If I died wouldn't you like to have my surrogate around to comfort you? I certainly would want yours to share the rest of my life."

Yes he'd used all the practical arguments except the psychotherapeutic one—at that time it had never occurred to him. But perhaps it should have, when he heard her objections.

"I just don't like the idea," Lita had persisted. "Oh it isn't that I'm oldfashioned. But lying there in the forms having every detail of my body duplicated synthetically—ugh! And then they do that awful hypnotherapy or whatever it's called for days to make them think. Oh I know they have no brains it's only a lot of chemicals and electricity but they do duplicate your thought-patterns and they react the same and they *sound* so real. I don't want anyone or anything to know all my secrets—"

Yes that objection should have started him thinking. Lita had secrets even then.

But he'd been too busy to notice; he'd spent his efforts in battering down her objections. And finally she'd consented.

He remembered the days at the Institute—the tests they'd taken, the time spent in working with the anatomists, the cosmetic department, the sonic and visio adaptors, and then days of hypnotic transference.

Lita was right in a way; it hadn't been pleasant. Even a modern man was bound to feel a certain atavistic fear when confronted for the first time with his completed surrogate. But the finished product was worth it. And after Henson had mastered instructions, learned how to manipulate the robot by virtue of the control-command, he had been almost paternally proud of the creation.

He'd wanted to take his surrogate home with him, but Lita positively drew the line at that.

"We'll leave them both here in Inventory," she said. "If we need them we can always send for them. But I hope we never do."

Henson was finally forced to agree. He and Lita had both given their immobilization commands to the surrogates, and they were placed in their metal cabinets ready to be filed away—"Just like corpses!" Lita had shuddered. "We're looking at ourselves after we're dead."

And that had ended the episode. For a while, Henson made suggestions about using the surrogates—there were occasions he'd have liked to take advantage of a substitute for token public appearances—but Lita continued to object. And so, for two years now, the robots had been on file. Henson paid his taxes and fees on them annually and that was all.

That was all, until lately. Until Lita's unexplained silences and still more inexplicable absences had started Henson thinking. Thinking and worrying. Worrying and watching. Watching and waiting. Waiting to catch her, waiting to kill her—

SO he'd remembered psychotherapy, and gone to his Adjustor. Lucky the man was a friend of his; a friend of both of them, rather. Actually, Lita had known him longer than her husband. But they'd been very close, the three of them, and he knew the Adjustor would understand.

He could trust the Adjustor not to tell Lita. He could trust the Adjustor to have everything ready and waiting for him now.

Henson went up to the office. The papers were ready for him to sign. The two metal boxes containing the surrogates were already placed on the loaders ready for transport to wherever he designated. But the Adjustor wasn't on hand to greet him.

"Special assignment in Manila," the Second explained to him. "But he left instructions about your case, Mr. Henson. All you have to do is sign the responsibility slips. And of course, you'll be in Monday for the official report."

Henson nodded. Now that the moment was so near at hand he was impatient of details. He could scarcely wait until the micro-dupes were completed and the Register Board signalled clearance. Two common robots were requisitioned to carry the metal cases down to the gyro and load them in. Henson whizzed back home with them and they brought the cases up to his living-level. Then he dismissed them, and he was alone.

He was alone. He could open the cases now. First, his own. He slid back the cover, gazed down at the perfect duplicate of his own body, sleeping peacefully for two serene years since its creation. Henson stared curiously at his pseudo-countenance. He'd aged a bit in two years, but the surrogate was ageless. It could survive the ravages of centuries, and it was always at peace. Always at peace. He almost envied it. The surrogate didn't love, couldn't hate, wouldn't know the gnawing torture of suspicion that led to this shaking, quaking, aching lust to kill—

Henson shoved the lid back and lifted the metal case upright, then dragged it along the wall to a storage cabinet. A domestic-model could have done it for. him, but Lita didn't like domestic-models. She wouldn't permit even a common robot in her home.

Lita and her likes and dislikes! Damn her to Los Alamos and gone!

Henson ripped the lid down on the second file.

There she was.

There she was; the beautiful, harlot-eyed, blonde, lying, adorable, dirty, gorgeous, loathsome, heavenly, filthy little goddess of a slut!

He remembered the command word to awake her. It almost choked him now, but he said it.

“Beloved!”

Nothing happened. Then he realized why. He’d been almost snarling. He had to change the pitch of his voice. He tried again, softly. “Beloved!”

She moved. Her breasts rose and fell, rose and fell. She opened her eyes. She held out her arms and smiled. She stood up and came close to him, without a word.

Henson stared at her. She was newly-born and innocent, she had no secrets, she wouldn’t betray him. How could he harm her? How could he harm her when she lifted her face in expectation of a kiss?

But she was Lita. He had to remember that. She was Lita, and Lita was hiding something from him and she must be punished, would be punished.

Suddenly, Henson became conscious of his hands. There was a tingling in his wrists and it ran down through the strong muscles and sinews to the fingers, and the fingers flexed and unflexed with exultant vigour, and then they rose and curled around the surrogate’s throat, around Lita’s throat, and they were squeezing and squeezing and the surrogate—Lita tried to move away and the scream was almost real and the popping eyes were almost real and the purpling face was almost real, only nothing was real any more except the hands and the choking and the surging sensation of strength.

And then it was over. He dragged the limp, dangling mechanism (it was only a mechanism now, just as the hate was only a memory) to the waste-jet and fed the surrogate to the flame. He turned the aperture wide and thrust the metal case in, too.

Then Henson slept, and he did not dream. For the first time in months he did not dream, because it was over and he was himself again. The therapy was complete.

"SO that's how it was," Henson sat in the Adjustor's office, and the Monday morning sun was strong on his face.

"Good." The Adjustor smiled and ran a hand across the top of his curly head. "And how did you and Lita enjoy your weekend? Fish biting?"

"We didn't fish," said Henson. "We talked."

"Oh?"

"I figured I'd have to tell her what happened, sooner or later. So I did."

"How did she take it?"

"Very well, at first."

"And then—?"

"I asked her some questions."

"Yes."

"She answered them."

"You mean she told you what she'd been hiding?"

"Not willingly. But she told me. After I told her about my own little check-up."

"What was that?"

"I did some calling Friday night. She wasn't in Saigon with her mother."

"No?"

"And you weren't in Manila on a special case, either." Henson leaned forward. "The two of you were together, in New Singapore! I checked it and she admitted it." The Adjustor sighed. "So now you know," he said.

"Yes. Now I know. Now I know what she's been concealing from me. What you've both been concealing."

"Surely you're not jealous about that?" the Adjustor asked "Not in this modern day and age when—"

"She says she wants to have a child by you," Henson said. "She refused to bear one for me. But she wants yours. She told me so."

"What do you want to do about it?" the Adjustor asked.

"You tell me," Henson murmured. "That's why I've come to you. You're my Adjustor."

"What would you like to do?"

“I’d like to kill you,” Henson said. “I’d like to blow off the top of your head with a pocket-blast.”

“Not a bad idea.” The Adjustor nodded. “I’ll have my robot ready whenever you say.”

“At my place,” said Henson. “Tonight.”

“Good enough. I’ll send it there to you.”

“One thing more.” Henson gulped for a moment. “In order for it to do any good, Lita must watch.”

It was the Adjustor’s turn to gulp, now. “You mean you’re going to force her to see you go through with this—?”

“I told her and she agreed,” Henson said.

“But, think of the effect on her, man!”

“Think of the effect on me. Do you want me to go mad?”

“No,” said the Adjustor “You’re right. It’s therapy. I’ll send the robot around at eight. Do you need a pocket-blast requisition?”

“I have one,” said Henson.

“What instructions shall I give my surrogate?” the Adjustor asked.

Henson told him. He was brutally explicit, and midway in his statement the Adjustor looked away, coloring. “So the two of you will be together, just as if *you* were real, and then I’ll come in and—”

The Adjustor shuddered a little then managed a smile. “Sound therapy,” he said. “If that’s the way you want it, that’s the way it will be.”

THAT’S the way Henson wanted it, and that’s the way he had it—up to a point.

He burst into the room around quarter after eight and found the two of them waiting for him. There was Lita, and there was the Adjustor’s surrogate. The surrogate had been well-instructed; it looked surprised and startled. Lita needed no instruction; hers was an agony of shame.

Henson had the pocket-blast in his hand, cocked at the ready. He aimed.

Unfortunately, he was just a little late. The surrogate sat up gracefully and slid one hand under the pillow. The hand came up with another pocket-blast aimed and fired all in one motion.

Henson teetered, tottered, and fell. The whole left side of his face sheared away as he went down.

Lita screamed.

Then the surrogate put his arms around her and whispered, "It's all over, darling. All over. We did it! He really thought I was a robot, that I'd go through with his aberrated notion of dramatizing his revenge."

The Adjustor smiled and lifted her face to his. "From now on you and I will always be together. We'll have our child, lots of children if you wish. There's nothing to come between us now."

"But you killed him," Lita whispered. "What will they do to you?"

"Nothing. It was self-defense. Don't forget, I'm an Adjustor. From the moment he came into my office, everything he did or said was recorded during our interviews. The evidence will show that I tried to humor him, that I indicated his mental unbalance and allowed him to work out his own therapy.

"This last interview, today, will not be a part of the record. I've already destroyed it. So as far as the law is concerned, he had no grounds for jealousy or suspicion. I happened to stop in here to visit this evening and found him trying to kill you—the actual you. And when he turned on me, I blasted him in self-defense."

"Will you get away with it?"

"Of course I'll get away with it. The man was aberrated, and the record will show it."

The Adjustor stood up, "I'm going to call Authority now," he said.

Lita rose and put her hand on his shoulder. "Kiss me first," she whispered. "A real kiss. I like real things."

"Real things," said the Adjustor. She snuggled against him, but he made no move to take her in his arms. He was staring down at Henson.

Lita followed his gaze.

Both of them saw it at the same time, then—both of them saw the torn hole in the left side of Henson’s head, and the thin strands of wire protruding from the opening.

“He didn’t come,” the Adjustor murmured. “He must have suspected, and he sent his robot instead.” Lita began to shake. “You were to send your robot, but you didn’t. He was to come himself, but he sent his robot. Each of you double-crossed the other, and now—”

And now the door opened very quickly.

Henson came into the room.

He looked at his surrogate lying on the floor. He looked at Lita. He looked at the Adjustor. Then he grinned. There was no madness in his grin, only deliberation.

There was deliberation in the way he raised the pocket-blast. He aimed well and carefully, fired only once, but both the Adjustor and Lita crumpled in the burst.

Henson bent over the bodies, inspecting them carefully to make sure that they were real. He was beginning to appreciate Lita’s philosophy now. He liked real things.

For that matter, the Adjustor had some good ideas, too. This business of dramatizing aggressions really seemed to work. He didn’t feel at all angry or upset any more, just perfectly calm and at peace with the world.

Henson rose, smiled, and walked towards the door. For the first time in years he felt completely adjusted.

The Past Master

The tall man with the hypnotic stare came out of the sea carrying six million in cash. Only four people could furnish clues to his mysterious behavior. Here are their stories.

Statement of Dorothy Laritzky

Honestly, I could just *die.* The way George acts, you'd think it was *my* fault or something. You'd think lie never even *saw* the guy. You'd think *I* stole his car. And he keeps asking me to *explain* everything to him. If I told him once, I told him a hundred times—and the cops too. Besides, what's there to *tell* him? He was there.

Of *course* it doesn't make sense. I already know that. Honest to Pete, I wish I'd stayed home Sunday. I wish I'd told George I had another date when he called up. I wish I'd made him take me to the show instead of that old beach. Him and his convertible! Besides, your legs stick to those leather seats in hot weather.

But you should of seen me Sunday when he called. You'd think he was taking me to *Florida* or someplace, the way I acted. I had this new slack suit I bought at Sterns, with the plaid top, sort of a halter, like. And I quick put on some more of that Restora Rinse. You know, George is the one down at the office who started everybody calling me "Blondie."

So anyhow he came around and picked me up about four, and it was still hot and he had the top down. I guess he just finished washing the car. It looked real snazzy, and he said, “Boy, it just matches your hair, don’t it?”

First we drove along the Parkway and then out over the Drive. It was just *parked,* the cars, I mean. So he said how about it if we didn’t go to the beach until after dinner.

That was all right by me, so we went to this Luigi’s—it’s a seafood place way south on the highway. It’s real expensive and they got one of those big menus with all kinds of ozzy stuff like pompanos and terrapins. That’s a turtle, like.

I had a sirloin and French fries, and George had—f can’t remember, oh, yes I do—he had fried chicken. Before we ate we had a couple drinks, and after we just sat in the booth and had a couple more. We were sort of kidding back and forth, you know, about the beach and all, and waiting until after dark so we could go swimming on account of not bringing any suits.

Anyways, *I* was kidding. That George, *he* just as soon do anything. And don’t think I didn’t *know* why he was feeding me all those drinks. When we went out he stopped over at the bar and picked up a pint.

The moon was just coming up, almost full, and we started singing while we drove, and I felt like I was getting right with it. So when he said let’s not go to the regular beach—he knew this little place way off somewhere—I thought, why not?

It was like a bay, sort of, and you could park up on the bluff along this side road, and then walk down to the sand and see way out across the water.

Only that’s not why George picked it. He wasn’t interested in looking at water. First thing he did was to spread out this big beach blanket, and the second thing he did was open up his pint, and the third thing he did was to start monkeying around.

Nothing serious, you understand, just monkeying around, kind of. Well, he’s not so bad-looking, even with that busted nose of his, and we kept working on that pint, and it was kind of romantic I mean, the moon and all.

It wasn’t until he really began *messing* that I made him stop. And even then, I practically had to *sock* him one before he figured out I wasn’t kidding.

“Cut it out,” I said. “Now see what you’ve done! You tore my halter.”

“Hell, I’ll buy you a new one,” he said. “Come on, baby.” He tried to grab me again, and I gave him a good one, right on the side of his head. For a minute I thought he’d—you know—get tough about it. But be was pretty canned up, I guess. Anyhow, he just started blubbering. About how sorry he was, and that he knew I wasn’t that kind, but it was just that he was so crazy about me.

I almost had to laugh, they’re so funny when they get that way. But I figured it was smarter to put on an act, so I made out like I was real sore, like I’d never been so insulted in all my life.

Then he said we should have another drink and forget about it, only the pint was empty. So he said how about him taking a run tip to the road and getting some more? Or we could both go to a tavern if I liked.

“With all these *marks* on my neck?” I told him. “I certainly will not! If you want more, *you* get it.”

So he said he would, and he’d be bark in five minutes. And he went.

Anyhow, that’s how I was alone, when it happened. I was just sitting there on the blanket, looking out at the water, when I saw this thing sort of moving. At first it looked sort of like a log or something. But it kept coming closer, and then I could see it was somebody swimming, real fast.

So I kept on watching, and pretty soon I made out it was a man, and he was heading right for shore. Then he got close enough so’s I could see him stand up and start wading in. He was real tall, *real* tall, like one of those basketball players, only not skinny or anything. And so help me he didn’t have any trunks on or anything. Not a *stitch!*

Well, I mean, what could *I* do? I figured he didn’t see me, and besides, you can’t go running around screaming your head off. Not that there was anyone to hear me. I was all alone there. So I just sat and waited for him to come out of the water and go away up the beach or someplace.

Only he didn't go away. He came out and he walked right over to me. You can imagine—there I was, sitting, and there *he* was, all dripping wet and with no clothes. But he gave me a big hello, just like nothing was wrong. He looked real dreamy when he smiled.

"Good evening," he said. "Might I inquire my whereabouts, Miss?"

Dig that "whereabouts" talk!

So I told him where he was, and he nodded, and then he saw how I was staring and he said, "Might I trouble you for the loan of that blanket?"

Well, what else could I do? I got up and gave it to him and he wrapped it around his waist. That's the first I noticed he was carrying this bag in his hand. It was some kind of plastic, and you couldn't tell what was inside of it.

"What happened to your trunks?" I asked him.

"Trunks?" You'd of thought he never heard of such things the way he said it. Then he smiled again and said, "I'm sorry. They must have slipped off."

"Where'd you start from?" I asked. "You got a boat out there?" He was real tan, he looked like one of these guys that hang around the Yacht Basin all the time.

"Yes. How did you know?" he said.

"Well, where else would you come from?" I told him. "It just stands to reason."

"It does, at that," he said.

I looked at the bag. "What you got in there?" I asked.

HE opened his mouth to answer me, but he never got a chance. Because all of a sudden George came running down from the bluff. I never even seen his lights or heard the car stop. But there he was, just *tearing* down, with a bottle in his hand, all ready to swing. *Character!*

"What the hell's going on here?" he yelled. "Nothing," I told him.

"Who the hell is this guy? Where'd he come from?" George shouted.

"Permit me to introduce myself," the guy said. "My name is John Smith and—"

"John Smith my foot!" yelled George, only he didn't say "foot." He was real mad. "All right, let's have it. What's the big idea, you two?"

"There isn't any big idea," I said. "This man was swimming and he lost his trunks, so he borrowed the blanket. He's got a boat out there and—"

"Where? Where's the boat? I don't see any boat." Neither did I, come to think of it. George wasn't waiting for any answers, though. "You there, gimme back that blanket and get the hell out of here."

"He can't," I told him. "He hasn't got any trunks on."

George stood there with his mouth open. Then he waved the bottle. "All right, then, fella. You're coming with us." He gave me a wise look. "Know what I think? I think this guy's a phony. He could even be one of those spies the Russians are sending over in submarines."

That's George for you. Ever since the papers got full of this war scare, he's been seeing Communists all over the place.

"Start talking," he said. "What's in that bag?" The guy just looked at him and smiled.

"Okay, so you want to do it the hard way, it's okay by me. Get up that bluff, fella. We're gonna take a ride over to the police. Come on, before I let you have it." And he waved the bottle.

The guy sort of shrugged and then he looked at George. "You have an automobile?" he asked.

"Of course, what do I look like, Paul Revere or something?" George said.

"Paul Revere? Is he alive?" The guy was kidding, but George didn't know it.

"Shut up and get moving," he said. "The car's right up there."

THE guy looked up at the car. Then he nodded to himself and he looked at George.

That's all he did. So help me. He just *looked* at him.

He didn't make any of those funny passes with his hands, and he didn't say anything. He just *looked,* and he kept right on smiling. His face didn't change a bit.

But George—his face changed. It just sort of set, like it was frozen stiff. And so did everything. I mean, his hands got numb and the bottle fell and busted. George was like he couldn't move.

I opened my mouth but the guy kind of glanced over at me and I thought maybe I'd better not say anything. All of a sudden I felt cold all over, and I didn't know *what* would happen if he looked at me.

So I stood there, and then this guy went up to George and undressed him. Only it wasn't exactly undressing him, because George was just like one of those window dummies you see in the stores. Then the guy put all of George's clothes on himself, and he put the blanket around George. I could see he had this plastic bag in one hand and George's car keys in the other.

I was going to scream, only the guy looked at me again and I couldn't. I didn't feel stiff like George, or paralyzed, or anything like that. But I couldn't scream to save my neck. And what good would it of done anyhow?

Because this guy just walked right up the side of the bluff and climbed in George's car and drove away. He never said a word, he never looked back. He just went.

Then I could scream, but good. I was still screaming when George came out of it, and I thought he'd have a hemorrhage or something.

Well, we had to walk back *all* the way. It was over three miles to the highway patrol, and they made me tell the whole thing over and over again a dozen times. They got George's license number and they're still looking for the car. And this sergeant, he thinks George is maybe right about the Communists.

Only he didn't see the way the guy *looked* at George. Every time I think about it, I could just *die!*

Statement of Milo Fabian

I SCARCELY got the drapes pulled when he walked in. Of course, at first I thought he was delivering something. He wore a pair of those atrocious olive-drab slacks and a ready-made sports jacket, and he had on one of those caps that look a little like those worn by jockeys.

"Well, what is it?" I said. I'm afraid I was just a wee bit rude about it—truth to tell, I'd been in a perfectly filthy mood ever since Jerry told me he was running up to Cape Cod for the exhibit. You'd think he might at least have considered my feelings and invited me to go along. But no, I had to stay behind and keep the gallery open.

But I actually had no excuse for being spiteful to this stranger. I mean, he was rather an attractive sort of person when he took that idiotic cap off. He bad black, curly hair and he was quite tall, really immense: I was almost afraid of him until he smiled.

"Mr. Warlock?" he asked.

I shook my head.

"This *is* the Warlock Gallery, isn't it?"

"Yes. But Mr. Warlock is out of the city. I'm Mr. Fabian. Can I help you?"

"It's rather a delicate matter."

"If you have something to sell, you can show me. I do all the buying for the Gallery."

"I've nothing to sell. I want to purchase some paintings."

"Well, in that case, won't you come right back with me, Mr.—"

"Smith," he said.

We started down the aisle together. "Could you tell me just what you had in mind?" I asked. "As you probably know, we tend to specialize in moderns. We have a very good Kandinsky now, and an early Mondrian—"

"You don't have the pictures I want here," he said. "I'm sure of it."

We were already in the gallery. I stopped. "Then what was it you wished?"

He stood there, swinging this perfectly enormous plastic pouch. “You mean what kind of paintings? Well, I want one or two good Rembrandts, a Vermeer, a Raphael, something by Titian, a van Gogh, a Tintoretto. Also a Goya, an El Greco, a Breughel, a Hals, a Holbein, a Gaugin. I don’t suppose there’s a way of getting *The Last* Supper—that was done as a fresco, wasn’t it?”

It was positively weird to hear the man. I’m afraid I was definitely piqued, and I showed it. “Please!” I said. “I happen to be busy this morning. I have no time to—”

“You don’t understand,” he answered. “You buy pictures, don’t you? Well, I want you to buy me some. As my—my agent, that’s the word, isn’t it?”

“That’s the word,” I told him. “But surely you can’t be serious. Have you any idea of the cost involved in acquiring such a collection? It would be simply fabulous.”

“I’ve got money,” he said. We were standing next to the deal table at the entrance, and he walked over to it and put his pouch down. Then he zipped it open.

I have never, but simply never, seen such a fantastic sight in my life. That pouch was full of bills, stack after stack of bills, and every single one was either a five- or a 10-thousand dollar denomination. I *mean* it; he had this huge pouch filled with five- and 10-thousand dollar bills. Why, I’d never even seen one before!

If he’d been carrying twenties or hundreds, I might have suspected counterfeits, but nobody would have the audacity to dream of getting away with a stunt like this. They looked genuine, and they were. I know, because —but that’s for later.

So there I stood, looking at this utterly mad heap of money lying there, and this Mr. Smith, as he called himself, said, “Well, do you think I have enough?”

I COULD have just passed out, thinking about it.

Imagine, a perfect stranger, walking in off the street with 10 million dollars to buy paintings. And *my* share of the commission is five percent!

“I don’t know,” I said. “You’re really serious about all this?”

“Here’s the money. How soon ran you get me what I want?”

“Please,” I said. “This is all so unusual, I hardly know where to begin. Do you have a definite list of what you wish to acquire?”

“I can write the names down for you,” he told me. “I remember most of them.”

He knew what he wanted, I must say. Velasquez, Gorgione, Cezanne, Degas, Utrillo, Monet, Toulouse-Lautrec, Delacroix, Ryder, Pissarro.

Then he began writing titles. I’m afraid I gasped. “Really,” I said. “You can’t actually expect to buy the Mona Lisa!”

“Why not?” He looked perfectly serious.

“It’s not for sale at any price, you know.”

“I didn’t know. Who owns it?”

“The Louvre. In Paris.”

“I didn’t know.” He *was* serious, I’d swear he was. “But what about the rest?”

“I’m afraid many of these paintings are in the same category. They’re not for sale. Most of them are in public galleries and museums here and abroad. And a number of the particular works you request are in the hands of private collectors who could never be persuaded to sell.”

He stood up and began scooping the money back into his pouch. I took his arm.

“But we can certainly do our best,” I said. “We have our sources, our connections. I’m sure we can at least procure some of the lesser, representative pieces by every one of the masters you list. It’s merely a matter of time.”

He shook his head. “Won’t do. This is Tuesday, isn’t it? I’ve got to have everything by Sunday night.”

Did you ever hear of anything so ridiculous in all your life? The man was stark staring.

"Look," he said. "I'm beginning to understand how things are, now. These paintings I want, they're scattered all over the world. Owned by public museums and private parties who won't sell. And I suppose the same thing is true of manuscripts. Things like the Gutenberg Bible. Shakespeare first folios. The Declaration of Independence—"

Stark staring. I didn't trust myself to do anything but nod at him.

"How many of the things I want are here?" he asked. "Here, in this country?"

"A fair percentage, well over half."

"All right. Here's what you do. Sit down over there and make me up a list. I want you to write me down the names of the paintings I've noted, and just where they are. I'll give you $10,000 for the list."

Ten thousand dollars for a list he could have acquired free of charge at the public library! Ten thousand dollars for less than an hour's work!

I gave him his list. And he gave me the money and walked out with the list.

By this time I was just about frantic. I mean, it was all so *shattering.* He came and he went, and there I stood—not knowing his real name, or anything. Talk-about your eccentric millionaires! He went, and there I stood with $10,000 in my hand.

Well, I'm not one to do anything rash. He hadn't been gone three minutes before I locked up and stepped over to the bank. I simply *hopped* all the way back to the gallery.

Then I said to myself, "What for?"

I didn't have to go back now, really. This was my money, not Jerry's. I'd earned it all by my little self. And as for him, he could stay up at the Cape and rot. I didn't need his precious job.

I went right down and bought a ticket to Paris. All this war-scare talk is simply a lot of fluff, if you ask me. Sheer fluff.

Of course Jerry is going to be utterly furious when he hears about it. Well, let him. All I have to say is, he can get himself another boy.

Statement of Nick Krauss

I WAS dead on my feet. I'd been on the job ever since Tuesday night and here it was Saturday. Talk about living on your nerves!

But I wasn't missing out on this deal, not me. Because this was the pay-off. The pay-off to the biggest caper that was ever rigged.

Sure, I heard of the Brink's job. I even got a pretty good idea who was in on it. But that was peanuts, and it took better'n a year to set up.

This deal topped 'em all. Figure it for yourself, once. Six million bucks, cash. In four days. Get that, now. I said six million bucks in four days. That's all, brother!

And who did it? Me, that's who.

Let me tell you one thing: I earned that dough. Every lousy cent of it. And don't think I didn't have to shell out plenty in splits. Right now I can't even remember just how many was in on it from beginning to end. But what with splits and expenses—like hiring all them planes to fly the stuff down—I guess it cost pretty near a million and a half, just to swing it.

That left four and a half million. Four and a half million—and me going down to the yacht to collect.

I had the whole damn haul right in the truck. A hundred and forty pieces, some of 'em plenty heavy, too. But I wasn't letting nobody else horse around with unloading. This was dynamite. Only two miles from the warehouse where I got everything assembled. Longest two miles I ever drove.

Sure, I had a warehouse. What the hell, I *bought* the thing! Bought the yacht for him, too. Paid cash. When you got six million in cash to play with, you don't take no chances on something you can just as well buy without no trouble.

Plenty of chances the way it was. Had to take chances, working that fast. Beat me how I managed to get through the deal without a dozen leaks.

But the dough helped. You take a guy, he'll rat on you for two-three grand. Give him 20 or 30, and he's yours. I'm not just talking syndicate, either. Because there was plenty guys in on it that weren't even in no mob—guys that never been mugged except maybe for these here college annual books where they show pictures of all the professors. I paid off guards and I paid off coppers and I paid off a bunch of curators, too. Not characters, curators. Guys that run museums.

I still don't know what this joker wanted with all that stuff. Only thing I can figure is maybe he was one of these here Indian rajahs or something. But he didn't look like no Hindu—he was a big, tall, youngish guy. Didn't talk like one, either. But who else wants to lay out all that lettuce for a bunch of dizzy paintings and stuff?

ANYWAYS, he showed up Tuesday night with this pouch of his. How he got to me, how he ever got by Lefty downstairs I never figured out.

But there he was. He asked me if it was true, what he heard about me, and he asked me if I wanted to do a job. Said his name was Smith. You know the kind of con you get when they want to stay dummied up on you.

I didn't care if he dummied up or not. Because, like the fella says, money talks. And it sure hollered Tuesday night. He opens this pouch of his and spills two million bucks on the table.

So help me, two million bucks! Cash!

"I've brought this along for expenses," he said. "There's four million more in it if you can cooperate."

Let's skip the rest of it. We made a deal, and I went to work. Wednesday I had him on that yacht, and he stayed there all the way through. Every night I went down and reported.

I went to Washington myself and handled the New York and Philadelphia end, too. Also Boston, on Friday. The rest was by phone, mostly. I kept flying guys out with orders and cash to Detroit, Chicago, St. Louis and the Coast. They had the lists and they knew what to look for. Every mob I contacted set up its own plans for the job. I paid whatever they asked, and that way nobody had any squawks coming. No good any of ’em holding out on me—where could they sell the stuff? Those things are too hot.

By the time Thursday come around, I was up to my damn neck in diagrams and room plans and getaway routes. There was six guys just checking on alarm systems and stuff in the joints I was suppose to cover. We had maybe 50 working in New York, not counting from the inside. You wouldn’t believe it if I told you some of the guys who helped. Rig professors and all, tipping us off on how to make a heist, or cutting wires and leaving doors unlocked. I hear a dozen up and lammed after it was over. That’s what *real* dough can buy you.

Of course I run into trouble. Lots of it. We never did get a haul out of L.A. The fix wasn’t in the way it was supposed to be, and they lost the whole load trying for a getaway at the airport. Lucky thing the cops shot up all four of the guys, the ones who made the haul. So they couldn’t trace anything.

All told, must of been seven or eight cashed in; the four in L.A., two in Philly, one guy in Detroit and one in Chicago. But no leaks. I kept the wires open, and I had my people out there, sort of supervising. Every bit of the stuff we did get came in by private plane, over in Jersey. Went right to the warehouse.

And I had the whole works, 143 pieces, on the truck when I went down for the pay-off.

It took me three hours to cart that stuff onto the yacht. This guy, this Mr. Smith, he just sat and watched the whole time.

When I was done I said, “That’s the works. You satisfied now or do you want a receipt?”

He didn’t smile or anything. Just shook his head. “You’ll have to open them up,” he said.

“Open ’em up? That’ll take another couple hours,” I told him.

"We've got time," he said.

"Hell we have! Mister, this stuff's hot and I'm hotter. There's maybe a hundred thousand honest johns looking for the loot—ain't you read the papers or heard the radio? Whole damn country's in an uproar. Worse than the war crisis or whatever you call it. I want out of here, fast."

BUT he wanted them crates and boxes open, so I opened 'em. What the hell, for four million bucks, a little flunkey work don't hurt. Not even when you're dead for sleep. It was a tough job, though, because everything was packed nice. So as not to have any damage, that is.

Nothing was in frames. He had these canvasses and stuff all over the floor, and he checked them off in a notebook, every one. And when I got the last damn picture out and hauled all the wood and junk up on deck and put it over the side in the dark, I come back to find him in the forward cabin.

"What's the pitch?" I asked. "Where you going?"

"To transfer these to my ship," he told me. "After all, you didn't expect I'd merely sail off in this vessel, did you? And I'll need your assistance to get them on board. Don't worry, it's only a short distance away."

He started the engines. I came right up behind him and stuck my Special in his ribs.

"Where's the bundle?" I asked.

"In the other cabin, on the table." He didn't even look around.

"You're not pulling anything, are you?"

"See for yourself."

I went to see. And he was leveling.

Four million bucks on the table. Five- and 10-thousand-dollar bills, and no phony geetus either. Wouldn't be too damn easy passing this stuff—the Feds would have the word out about big bills—but then, I didn't count on sticking around with the loot. There's plenty countries where they like them big bills and don't ask any questions. South America, such places. That part didn't worry me too much, as long as I knew I'd get there.

And I figured on getting there all right. I went back to the other cabin and showed him my Special again. “Keep going,” I said. “I’ll help you, but the first time you get cute I’m set to remove your appendix with a slug.”

He knew who I was. He knew I could just let him have it and skid out of there any time I wanted. But he never even blinked at me—just kept right on steering.

We must of gone about four-five miles. It was pitch dark and he didn’t carry any spot, but he knew where he was going. Because all at once we stopped and he said, “Here we are.”

I WENT up on deck with him and I couldn’t see nothing. Just the lights off on shore and the water all around. I sure as hell didn’t see no boat anywheres.

“Where is it?” I asked him.

“Where is what?”

“Your boat?”

“Down there.” He pointed over the side. “What the hell you got, a submarine or something?”

“Something.” He leaned over the side. His hands was empty, he didn’t do anything but lean. And so help me, all of a sudden up comes this damn thing. Like a big round silver ball, sort of, with a lid on top.

I didn’t even notice the lid until it opened up. And it floated alongside, so’s he could run the gangplank out to rest on the lid.

“Come on,” he said. “I’ll help you. It won’t take long this way.”

“You think I’m gonna carry stuff across that lousy plank?” I asked him. “In the dark?”

“Don’t worry, you can’t fall. It’s magno-meshed.”

“What the hell does that mean?”

“I’ll show you.”

He walked across that plank and climbed right down into the thing before I thought to try and stop him. The plank never moved an inch.

Then he was back out. “Come on, there’s nothing to be afraid of.”

“Who’s afraid?”

But I was scared, plenty. Because now I knew what he was. I’d been reading the papers a lot these days, and I didn’t miss none of the war talk. Them Commies with all their new weapons and stuff—well, this was one of them. It is no wonder lie was tossing around millions of bucks like that.

So I figured on doing my patriotic duty. Sure, I’d haul his lousy pictures on board for him. I wanted to get a look inside that sub of his. But when I finished, I made up my mind he wasn’t gonna streak out for Russia or someplace. I’d get him first.

That’s the way I played it. I helped him cart the whole mess down into the sub.

Then I changed my mind again. He wasn’t no Russian. He wasn’t anything I ever heard of except an inventor, maybe. Because that thing he had was crazy.

It was all hollow inside. All hollow, with just a thin wall around. I could tell there wasn’t space for an engine or anything. Just enough room to stack the stuff and leave space for maybe two or three guys to stand.

There wasn’t any electric light in the place either, but it was light. And *daylight.* I know what I’m talking about—I know about neon and fluorescent lights too. This was something else. Something new.

Instruments? Well, he had some kind of little slots on one part, but they was down on the floor. You had to lay down next to them to see how they’d work. And he kept watching me, so I didn’t want to take a chance on acting too nosy. I figured it wasn’t healthy.

I was scared because he *wasn’t* scared.

I was scared because he *wasn’t* no Russian.

I was scared because there ain’t any round balls that float in water, or come up from under water when you just look at ’em. And because he come from nowhere with his cash and he was going nowhere with the pictures. Nothing made any sense any more, except one thing. I wanted out. I wanted out bad.

Maybe you think I'm nuts, but that's because you never was inside a shiny ball floating in water, only not bobbing around or even moving when the waves hit it, and all daylight with nothing to light it with. You never saw this Mr. Smith who wasn't named Smith and maybe not even Mr.

But if you had, you would of understood why I was so glad to get back on that yacht and go down in the cabin and pick up the dough.

"All right," I said. "Let's go back."

"Leave whenever you like," he said. "I'm going myself now."

"Going yourself? Then how the hell do I get back?" I yelled.

"Take the yacht," he told me. "It's yours." Just like that he said it.

"But I can't run no yacht, I don't know how."

"It's very simple. Here, I'll explain—I picked it up myself in less than a minute. Come up to the cabin."

"Uh uh." I got the Special out. "You're taking me back to the dock right now."

"Sorry, there isn't time. I want to be on my way before—"

"You heard me," I said. "Get this boat moving."

"Please. You're making this difficult. I must leave now."

"First you take me back. Then you go off to Mars or wherever it is."

"Mars? Who said anything about—"

He sort of smiled and shook his head. And then he looked at me.

He looked—right—at—me. He looked—*into*—me. His eyes were like two of those big round silver balls, rolling down into slots behind my eyeballs and crashing right into my skull. They came towards me real slow and real heavy, and I couldn't duck. I felt them coming, and I knew if they ever hit I'd be a goner.

I was out on my feet. Everything was numb. He just smiled and stared and sent his eyes out to get me. They rolled and rolled and I could feel them hit. Then I was—gone.

The last thing I remember was pulling the trigger.

Statement of Elizabeth Rafferty, M.D.

At 9:30 Sunday morning, he rang the bell. I remember the time exactly, because I'd just finished breakfast and I was switching on the radio to get the war news. Apparently they'd found another Soviet boat, this one in Charleston Harbor, with an atomic device aboard. The Coast Guard and the Air Force were both on emergency, and it—

The bell rang, and I opened the door.

There he stood. He must have been 6-foot-4, at the very least. I had to look up at him to see his smile, but it was worth it.

"Is the doctor in?" he asked.

"I'm Dr. Rafferty."

"Good. I was hoping I'd be lucky enough to find you here. I just came along the street, taking a chance on locating a physician. You see, it's rather an emergency—"

"I gathered that." I stepped back. "Won't you come inside? I dislike having my patients bleed all over the front stoop."

He glanced down at his left arm. He was bleeding, all right. And from the hole in his coat, and the powder-marks, I knew why.

"In here," I said. We went into the office. "Now, if you'll let me help you with your coat and shirt, Mr.—"

"Smith," he said.

"Of course. Up on the table. That's it. Now, easy—let me do it—there. Well! A nice neat perforation, upper triceps. In again, out again. It looks as if you were lucky, Mr. Smith. Hold still now. I'm going to probe. . . . This may hurt a bit. . . . Good! . . . We'll just sterilize, now—"

All the while I kept watching him. He had a gambler's face, but not the mannerisms. I couldn't make up my mind about him. He went through the whole procedure without a sound or a change of expression.

Finally I got him bandaged up. “Your arm will probably be stiff for several days. I wouldn’t advise you to move around too much. How did it happen?”

“Accident.”

“Come now, Mr. Smith.” I got out the pen and looked for a form. “Let’s not be children. You know as well as I do that a physician must make a full report on any gunshot wound.”

“I didn’t know.” He swung off the table. “Who gets the report?”

“The police.”

“No!”

“Please, Mr. Smith! I’m required by law to—”

“Take this.”

He fished something out of his pocket with his right hand and threw it on the desk. I stared at it. I’d never seen a 5,000-dollar bill before, and it was worth staring at.

“I’m going now,” he said. “As a matter of fact, I’ve never really been here.”

I shrugged. “As you will,” I told him. “Just one thing more, though.”

“What’s that?”

I stooped, reached into the left-hand upper drawer of the desk, and showed him what I kept there.

“This is a .22, Mr. Smith,” I said. “It’s a lady’s gun. I’ve never used it before, except on the target range. I would hate to use it now, but I warn you that if I do you’re going to have trouble with your right arm. As a physician, my knowledge of anatomy combines with my ability as a marksman. Do you understand?”

“Yes, I do. But you don’t. Look, you’ve got to let me go. It’s important. I’m not a criminal!”

“Nobody said you were. But you will be, if you attempt to evade the law by neglecting to answer my questions for this report. It must be in the hands of the authorities within the next twenty-four hours.”

He chuckled. “They’ll never read it.”

I SIGHED. “Let’s not argue. And don’t reach into your pocket, either.”

He smiled at me. “I have no weapon. I was just going to increase your fee.”

Another bill fluttered to the table. Ten thousand dollars. Five thousand plus 10 thousand makes 15. It added up.

“Sorry,” I said. “This all looks very tempting to a struggling young doctor—but I happen to have old-fashioned ideas about such things. Besides, I doubt if I could get change from anyone, because of all this excitement in the newspapers over—”

I stopped, suddenly, as I remembered. Five-thousand and 10-thousand-dollar bills. They added up, all right. I smiled at him across the desk.

“Where are the paintings, Mr. Smith?” I asked.

It was his turn to sigh. “Please, don’t question me. I don’t want to hurt anyone. I just want to go, before it’s too late. You were kind to me. I’m grateful. Take the money and forget it. This report is foolishness, believe me.”

“Believe you? With the whole country in an uproar, looking for stolen art masterpieces, and Communists hiding under every bed? Maybe it’s just feminine curiosity, but I’d like to know.” I took careful aim. “This isn’t conversation, Mr. Smith. Either you talk or I shoot.”

“All right. But it won’t do any good.” He leaned forward. “You’ve got to believe that. It won’t do any good. I could show you the paintings, yes. I could *give* them to you. And it wouldn’t help a bit. Within twenty-four hours they’d be as useless as that report you wanted to fill out.”

“Oh, yes, the report. We might as well get started with it,” I said. “In spite of your rather pessimistic outlook. The way you talk, you’d think the bombs were going to fall here tomorrow.”

“They will,” he told me. “Here, and everywhere.”

“Very interesting.” I shifted tire gun to my left hand and took up the fountain pen. “But now, to business. Your name, please. Your real name.”

“Kim Logan.”

“Date of birth?”

“November 25th, 2903.”

I raised the gun. “The right arm,” I said. “Medial head of the triceps. It will hurt, too.”

“November 25th, 2903,” he repeated. “I came here last Sunday at 10 p.m., your time. By the same chronology I leave tonight at nine. It’s a 169-hour cycle.”

“What are you talking about?”

“My instrument is out there in the bay. The paintings and manuscripts are there. I intended to remain submerged until the departure moment tonight, but a man shot me.”

“You feel feverish?” I asked. “Does your head hurt?”

“No. I told you it was no use explaining things. You won’t believe me, any more than you believed me about the bombs.”

“Let’s stick to facts,” I suggested. “You admit you stole the paintings. Why?”

“Because of the bombs, of course. The war is coming, the big one. Before tomorrow morning your planes will be over the Russian border and their planes will retaliate. That’s only the beginning. It will go on for months, years. In the end-shambles. But the masterpieces I take will be saved.”

“How?”

I TOLD you. Tonight, at nine, I return to my own place in the time-continuum.” He raised his hand. “Don’t tell me it’s not possible. According lo your present-day concepts of physics it would be. Even according to our science, only forward movement is demonstrable. When I suggested my project to the Institute they were skeptical. But they built the instrument according to my specifications, nevertheless. They permitted me to use the money from the Historical Foundation at Fort Knox. And I received an ironic blessing prior to my departure. I rather imagine my actual vanishment caused raised eyebrows. But that will be nothing compared to the reaction upon my return. My triumphant return, with a cargo of art masterpieces presumably destroyed nearly a thousand years in the past!"

"Let me get this straight," I said. "According to your story, you came here because you knew war was going to break out and you wanted to salvage some old masters from destruction. Is that it?"

"Precisely. It was a wild gamble, but I had the currency. I've studied the era as closely as any man can from the records available. I knew about the linguistic peculiarities of the age—you've had no trouble understanding me, have you? And I managed to work out a plan. Of course I haven't been entirely successful, but I've managed a great deal in less than a week's time. Perhaps I can return again—earlier—maybe a year or so beforehand, and procure more." His eyes grew bright. "Why not? We could build more instruments, come in a body. We could get everything we wanted, then."

I shook my head. "For the sake of argument, let's say for a minute that I believe you, which I don't. You've stolen some paintings, you say. You're taking them back to 29-something-or-other with you, tonight. You hope. Is that the story?"

"That's the truth."

"Very well. Now you suggest that you might repeat the experiment on a larger scale. Come back to a point a year before this in time and collect more masterpieces. Again, let's say you do it. What will happen to the paintings you took with you?"

"I don't follow you."

"Those paintings will be in your era, according to you. But a year ago they hung in various galleries. Will they be there when you come back? Surely they can't co-exist."

He smiled. "A pretty paradox. I'm beginning to like you, Dr. Rafferty."

"Well, don't let the feeling grow on you. It's not reciprocal, I assure you. Even if you were telling the truth, I can't admire your motives."

"What's wrong with my motives?" He stood up, ignoring the gun. "Isn't it a worthwhile goal—to save immortal treasures from the senseless destruction of a tribal war? The world deserves the preservation of its artistic heritage. I've risked my existence for the sake of bringing beauty to my own time—where it can be properly appreciated and enjoyed by minds no longer obsessed with the greed and cruelty I find here."

"Big words," I said. "But the fact remains. You *stole* those paintings."

"Stole? I saved them! I tell you, before the year is out they'd be utterly destroyed. Your galleries, your museums, your libraries—everything will go. Is it stealing to carry precious articles from a burning temple?" He leaned over me. "Is that a crime?"

"Why not stop the fire, instead?" I countered. "You know—from historical records, I suppose—that war breaks out tonight or tomorrow. Why not take advantage of your foresight and try to prevent it?"

"I CAN'T. The records are sketchy, incomplete. Events are jumbled. I've been unable to discover just how the war began—or will begin, rather. Some trivial incident, unnamed. Nothing is clear on that point."

"But couldn't you warn the authorities?"

"And change history? Change the actual sequence of events, rather? Impossible!"

"Aren't you changing them by taking the paintings?"

"That's different."

"Is it?" I stared into his eyes. "I don't see how. But then, the whole thing is impossible. I've wasted too much time in arguing."

"Time!" He looked at the wall clock. "Almost noon. I've got just nine hours left. And so much to do. The instrument must be adjusted."

"Where is this precious mechanism of yours?"

"Out in the bay. Submerged, of course. I had that in mind when it was constructed. You can conceive of the hazards of attempting to move through time and alight on a solid surface; the face of the land alters. But the ocean is comparatively unchanging. I knew if I departed from a spot several miles offshore and arrived there, I'd eliminate most of the ordinary hazards. Besides, it offers a most excellent place of concealment. The principle, you see, is simple. By purely mechanical means I shall raise the instrument above the stratospheric level tonight and then intercalculate dimensionally when I am free of earth's orbit. The gantic-drive will be—"

No doubt about it. I didn't have to wait for the double-talk to know he was crazier than a codfish. A pity, too; he was really a handsome specimen.

"Sorry," I said. "Time's up. This is something I hate to do, but there's no other choice. No, don't move. I'm calling the police, and if you take one step I'll plug you."

"Stop! You mustn't call! I'll do anything, I'll even take you with me. That's it, I'll take you with me! Wouldn't you like to save your life? Wouldn't you like to escape?"

"No. Nobody escapes," I told him. "Especially not you. Now stand still, and no more funny business. I'm making that call."

He stopped. He stood still. I picked up the phone, with a sweet smile. He smiled back. He looked at me.

Something happened.

There has been a great dispute about the clinical aspects of hypnotic therapy. I remember, in school, an attempt being made to hypnotize me. I was entirely immune. I concluded that a certain degree of cooperation or conditioned suggestibility is required of an individual in order to render him susceptible to hypnosis.

I was wrong.

I was wrong, because I couldn't move now. No lights, no mirrors, no voices, no suggestion. It was just that I couldn't move. I sat there holding the gun. I sat there and watched him walk out, locking the door behind him. I could see and I could feel. I could even hear him say "Good-by."

But I couldn't move. I could function, but only as a paralytic functions. I could, for example, watch the clock.

I watched the clock from 12 noon until almost seven. Several patients came during the afternoon, couldn't get in, and went away. I watched the clock until its lace was lost in darkness. I sat there and endured hysteric rigidity until—providentially—the phone rang.

THAT broke it. But it broke me. I couldn't answer that phone. I merely slumped over on the desk, my muscles tightening with pain as the gun fell from my numb fingers. I lay there, gasping and sobbing, for a long time. I tried to sit up. It was agony. I tried to walk. My limbs rejected sensation. It took me an hour to gain control again. And even then, it was merely a partial control—a physical control. My thoughts were another matter.

Seven hours of thinking. Seven hours of *true or false?* Seven hours of accepting and rejecting the impossibly possible.

It was after eight before I was on my feet again, and then I didn't know what to do.

Call the police? Yes—but what could I tell them? I had to be sure, I had to know.

And what did I know? *He was out in the bay, and he'd leave at nine o'clock.* There was an instrument which would rise above the stratosphere —

I got in the car and drove. The dock was deserted. I took the road over to the Point, where there's a good view. I had the binoculars. The stars were out, but no moon. Even so, I could see pretty clearly.

There was a small yacht bobbing on the water, but no lights shone. Could that be it?

No sense taking chances. I remembered the radio report about the Coast Guard patrols.

So I did it. I drove back to town and stopped at a drugstore and made my call. Just reported the presence of the yacht. Perhaps they'd investigate, because there were no lights. Yes, I'd stay there and wait for them if they wished.

I didn't stay, of course. I went back to the Point. I went back there and trained my binoculars on the yacht. It was almost nine when I saw the cutter come along, moving up behind the yacht with deadly swiftness.

It was exactly nine when they flashed their lights—and caught, for an incredible instant, the gleaming reflection of the silver globe that rose from the water, rose straight up toward the sky.

Then came the explosion and I saw the shattering before I heard the echo of the report. They had portable anti-aircraft, something of the sort. It was effective.

One moment the globe soared upward. The next moment there was nothing. They blew it to bits.

And they blew me to bits with it. Because if there *was* a globe, perhaps he was inside. With the masterpieces, ready to return to another time. The story was true, then, and if that was true, then—

I guess I fainted. My watch showed 10:30 when I came to and stood up. It was 11 before I made it to the Coast Guard Station and told my story.

Of course, nobody believed me. Even D. Halvorsen from emergency—he said he did, but he insisted on the injection and they took me here to the hospital.

It would have been too late, anyway. That globe did the trick. They must have contacted Washington immediately, with their story of a new secret Soviet weapon destroyed offshore. Coming on the heels of finding those bomb-laden ships, it was the final straw. Somebody gave the orders and our planes were on their way.

I've been writing all night. Outside in the corridor they're getting radio reports. We've dropped bombs over there. And the alert has gone out, warning us of possible reprisals.

Maybe they'll believe me now. But it doesn't matter any more. It's going to be the way he said it was.

I KEEP thinking about the paradoxes of time-travel.

This notion of carrying objects from the present to the future—and this other notion, about altering the past. I'd like to work out the theory, only there's no need. The old masters aren't going into the future. Any more than he, returning to our present, could stop the war.

What had he said? “I’ve been unable to discover just how the war began—or will begin, rather. Some trivial incident, unnamed.”

Well, this was the trivial incident. His visit. If I hadn’t made that phone call, if the globe hadn’t risen—but I can’t bear to think about it any more. It makes my head hurt. All that buzzing and droning noise . . .

I’ve just made an important discovery. The buzzing and the droning does not come from *inside* my head. I can hear the sirens sounding, too. If I had any doubts about the truth of his claims, they’re gone now.

I wish I’d believed him. I wish the others would believe me now. But there just isn’t any time.

I Do Not Love Thee, Doctor Fell

This is, belatedly, Robert Bloch's first story in F&SF; and I could introduce the author adequately only by writing an essay of such length that we'd have to drop a novelet or so. Bloch has written every type of science-fantasy from screwball farce to Lovecraftian unmentionable slitherings; he's written a little of everything else too, from above-average paperback crime novels to very nearly every witty word that you've read in any American s.f. fan-magazine; and he is, with no exceptions, the best toastmaster in the world. There are many other facets of this sharply chiseled Bloch; but the important one on this occasion is that he's an intensive and acute student of psychology and psychiatry, and has here extrapolated those sciences to predict, with forceful conviction and threatening bite, a new disease of the mind.

BROMELY COULDN'T REMEMBER WHO had recommended Doctor Fell. The name had popped into his mind (funny, something like that popping *into* his mind at a time when so many things seemed to be popping *out* of it!) and he must have made an appointment.

At any rate, the receptionist seemed to know him, and her "Good morning, Mr. Bromely" had a warm, pleasant sound. The door of the inner office, closing behind him, had a harsh, grating sound. Both seemed oddly familiar.

Bromely sensed the same misplaced familiarity as he gazed around the inner office. The bookshelves and filing cases to the left of the window, the desk to the right, the couch in the corner almost duplicated the arrangement in his own office. This was a good omen, he felt. He'd be at home here. At home. But, *you can't go home again. Home is where the heart is. You have stolen my heart, now don't go 'way. As we sang love's old sweet song on*—

It took a tremendous, conscious effort to pull out of that one, but Bromely did it. He wanted to make a good impression on the Doctor.

Doctor Fell rose to greet him from his chair behind the desk. He was a tall, thin man of about Bromely's age and build, and Bromely received a vague impression that his features were not dissimilar. The subdued lighting did not lend itself to a closer scrutiny of the psychiatrist's countenance, but Bromely was aware of a look of purpose and intensity quite foreign to his own face.

The same purpose and intensity drove Doctor Fell around the desk, communicated in his hearty handclasp.

"You're prompt, Mr. Bromely," said Doctor Fell. His voice was deep and low. *Deep and Low. Low and Behold. Behold, Bedad and Begob. Shadrach, Mesach and Abednego, Inc*.

How he got out of that one, Bromely never knew. He was somewhat surprised to find himself on the couch. Apparently he'd been talking to Doctor Fell for quite some time—and quite rationally, too. Yes, he remembered, now. He'd been answering all the routine questions.

Doctor Fell knew that he was Clyde Bromely, age 32, public relations counsel. Born in Erie, Pennsylvania. Parents dead. Business, lousy. No business. No *business like show business, there's no business I know*—

Had he said that? Apparently not, because Doctor Fell's rich, deep, comforting voice moved right along, asking the questions and extracting the answers. And it was quite all right to talk to Doctor Fell, tell him all he knew. Fell was a good psychiatrist.

Bromely knew a little something about psychiatry himself. Oh, not the technical terms of course, but more than a smattering of technique. This was a routine orientation, preliminary to probing. And Bromely cooperated.

When Doctor Fell began to ask questions about his health and his general background, Bromely took a sheaf of papers from his inside coat pocket and handed them over.

"Here it is, Doc," he said. "Complete report on the physical, Had it taken last week." He indicated a second folded sheaf. "And here's the autobiography. All the names you'll need—friends, relatives, teachers, employers, the works. Everything I could remember. Which isn't much, right now."

Doctor Fell smiled in the shadows. "Excellent," he said. "You seem to understand the necessity of cooperation." He put the papers on the desk. "I'll check over this later," he told Bromely. "Although I imagine I'm already familiar with most of the contents."

Bromely got that panicky feeling again. Whoever had recommended Doctor Fell to him must also have talked to Doctor Fell about his case. Now who would that be? He hesitated to ask—not that he felt ashamed, but it would be an admission that he was pretty far gone if he couldn't even recall how he'd come here. Well, it didn't matter. He was grateful to be here, and that was the important thing. He needed Doctor Fell.

"You've got to help me, Doctor Fell," he was saying. "You're my last hope. That's why I've come to you. You must understand that, because it's the crux of the whole matter. I would never have come to you unless you were my last hope. I'm at the end of my rope. When you come to the end of your rope, you swing. I'm swinging, now. I'm swinging down the lane. Down Memory Lane. I wanted to be a songwriter, once. But my lyrics sounded as if they were stolen. That's my problem. Association. I've got too much association. Everything I do or say sounds like it's stolen from somebody else. Imitation. Mimicry. Until there's nothing original, nothing basic beneath to which I can cling. I'm losing myself. There's no real *me* left."

Bromely went on like this for about an hour. He said everything that came into his mind. The associative clichés poured out, and with them the desperate plea for help.

Doctor Fell scribbled in his notebook and said nothing. At the end of the session he tapped Bromely on the shoulder.

“That’ll be enough for today,” he said. “Tomorrow, same time? Let’s plan on an hour a day, five days a week.”

“Then you think you can help me?”

Doctor Fell nodded. “Let’s say that I think you can help yourself. Five days a week, from now on.”

Bromely rose from the couch.

Doctor Fell’s face wavered and blurred before him. He was very tired, very confused, but oddly relieved despite the physical strain that affected his vision. There was just one thing bothering him—and suddenly, he remembered it.

“But, Doc, I just happened to think. You know, I’m not doing too well with the business these days and five days a week—”

The hand gripped his shoulder. “I quite understand. But let’s put it this way. Your case—your problem, that is—interests me, personally. And even a psychiatrist has been known to extend his services on occasion, without fee.” Bromely couldn’t believe his ears at first. “You mean—it won’t cost me anything?” His expression of gratitude was genuine. “Doc, you’re a real friend. A friend in need. A friend in deed. Indeed.”

Doctor Fell chuckled. “Believe me, Mr. Bromely, I *am* your friend. You’ll find that out for yourself, in time, I trust.”

As Clyde Bromely went out the door he felt the phrases flooding through his brain. *In God we trust, all others pay cash. My best and only friend, A man’s best friend is his mother*.

The receptionist said something to him as he left, but Bromely was too preoccupied to catch her words. He was *engrossed in thought,* he was *deep in contemplation, Deep in the Heart of Texas. Death and Texas. Nothing’s sure but.*

The rest of the day passed in a blur. Almost before he realized it, tomorrow had come and he had come and here he was back on the couch.

Doctor Fell listened as he told him about his father and mother, and about the peculiar feeling he now had—the feeling that Doctor Fell reminded him of his father and mother. Brother and sister I have none, but I am my father's only son. Who am I?

"Who are you?" Doctor Fell asked the question, softly. "That's really what's bothering you, isn't it? Who are you? You can answer that question if you want to, you know. So try. Try. Who are you?"

It was the *wrong* question. Bromely felt it, and he froze. Somewhere, deep inside, words formed an answer. But he couldn't find the words. He couldn't find that spot, inside him, where the words came from.

For the rest of the hour he just lay there on the couch.

Doctor Fell said nothing. When the time was up he tapped Bromely on the shoulder, muttered "Tomorrow, then," and turned away.

Bromely got out of the office. The receptionist stared at him oddly, half-opened her mouth to say something, and didn't. Bromely drugged. Somehow he managed to find his way back to his own office.

He walked in and asked *his* girl for messages. Apparently whatever was wrong with him showed in his appearance, because she did that half-open-mouth trick too. Then she managed to control herself and tell him that CAA had called just a few minutes ago and wanted to see him. There was a chance to handle Torchy Harrigan.

That was the news he'd been waiting for. Bromely snapped out of it, fast. Torchy Harrigan—just signed for a new network video show—two pictures coming up with MGM—big deal with CAA, Consolidated Artists of America—personal representative—press releases to all dailies—

"Call them back and tell them I'm on my way over," he said. "Bromely rides again!"

Bromely was riding again. He was riding the couch in Doctor Fell's office. He was *riding for a fall, riding hell-for-leather*—

And all the while he was talking it out, gasping and sobbing and wheezing and choking it out.

"I can't explain it, Doc. I just can't figure it out! Here I had this deal sewed up with Harrigan, just the kind of setup I've been looking for. Two bills a week and all expenses, a chance to go out to the Coast with him, the works. Even turned out that his business manager is Hal Edwards—good friend of mine, known him for years. He gave Harrigan the pitch on me, built me up.

"So I walked in on Edwards and we talked it over, and then we went up to Harrigan's suite at the Plaza to talk it over. And Harrigan gave me the big hello, listened to Hal Edwards pitch for me—greatest flack in the business, all that kind of thing.

"You get the picture, Doc? The whole deal was in the bag. Harrigan was just waiting for me to give him the word on my plan for a publicity campaign. Edwards flashed me the cue and I opened my mouth.

"But nothing came out. You understand me? But *nothing!* I couldn't think of anything to say. Oh, there were words and phrases whirling around in my head, only they didn't add up. I couldn't think like a press agent any more."

All the while he talked, Bromely had been watching Doctor Fell's face. At first it seemed far away, but now it was coming closer and closer, getting bigger and bigger until it blotted out everything.

And Doctor Fell's voice was like distant thunder, then thunder near at hand, thunder overhead.

Vision and hearing played their tricks, but Bromely clung to Doctor Fell, clung to *words that fell from Doctor Fell for he's a jolly goodfellow which nobody can deny.*

Doctor Fell had been taking notes in shorthand. He glanced at them now as he spoke. In a moment, Bromely realized he was merely reading off a string of quotes from Bromely's previous conversation. The phrases droned on, louder and louder.

"Can't figure it out . . . sewed up . . . setup . . . two bills a week . . . the works . . . gave Harrigan the pitch on me, built me up . . . big hello . . . greatest flack in the business . . . get the picture . . . in the bag . . . give him the word . . . flashed me the cue . . . but nothing . . . didn't add up." Doctor Fell leaned forward. "What do those phrases mean to you, Bromely? What do they really *add up* to, in your mind?"

Bromely tried to think about it. He tried hard. But all he could come out with was, "I don't know. They're all slang expressions I used to use in public relations a few years ago. Come to think of it, they're a little dated now, aren't they?" Doctor Fell smiled. "Exactly. And doesn't that tie in with your final statement, that you couldn't think like a press agent anymore? Isn't that part of your problem, Mr. Bromely—that you aren't a press agent any more, really? That you're losing your identity, losing your orientation? Let me ask you once again, now: *who are you?"* Bromely froze up. He couldn't answer because he couldn't think of the answer. He lay there on the couch, and Doctor Fell waited. Nothing happened.

Nothing seemed to happen for a long, long time. How Bromely got through the next two days he couldn't remember. All he recalled were the hours on the couch—and it seemed to him that he shuttled back and forth between his office and Doctor Fell's more than once a day.

It was hard to check, of course, because he didn't talk to anyone. He lived alone in a one-room walkup apartment and he ate at one-arm counter joints. He wasn't talking to his office-girl, Thelma, any more either. There was nothing to talk about—no calls since the unfortunate Harrigan affair—and he owed her for three weeks' back salary. Besides, she almost seemed afraid of him when he appeared in the office. Come to think of it (and it was so hard to come to think of it, or anything else, so very hard) even Doctor Fell's little receptionist looked frightened when he walked in, without a word.

Without a word. That was his problem. He had no words any longer. It was as though his final effort, talking to Harrigan and Hal Edwards, had drained him dry of the ability to communicate. All the clichés had flowed out of him, leaving . . . nothing.

He realized it now, lying on the couch in Doctor Fell's office. Once more Doctor Fell had asked the single question, the only question he ever asked. "Who are you?"

And he couldn't answer. There was nothing. He was nobody. For years, now, he'd been in the process of becoming nobody. It was the only explanation that fitted. But he couldn't seem to explain.

With a start, he realized that it wasn't necessary. Doctor Fell was sitting close to Bromely now, breaking the long silence, whispering confidentially in his ear.

"All right," he was murmuring. "Let's try a different approach.Maybe *I* can tell you who you are."

Bromely nodded gratefully, but somewhere deep within him, fear was rising.

"Your case is quite remarkable in a way," said Doctor Fell, "but only because it's one of the first. I don't believe it will be the last. Within several years, there'll be thousands of men like you. The schizoids and the paranoids will have to move over and make room for a new category."

Bromely nodded, waited.

"You know anything about disease germs, bacteria? These organisms undergo swift mutations. Men. invent sulfa drugs and the germs: develop tolerance to sulfa. Men use antibiotics—penicillin, streptomycin, a dozen others. And the bugs adapt. They breed new strains; of bugs."

He things I'm bugs, Bromely told himself, but he listened. Fell went on, his voice rising slightly.

"Bugs change, but still their spawn on men. And aberration changes with the times, too—but still it spawns on men. Five hundred years ago the commonest form of insanity was belief in demoniac possession. Three hundred years ago men had delusions of witchcraft and sorcery. A man who couldn't integrate his personality created a.

new one—he became a wizard. Because the wizard was the symbol of power, who knew the secrets of Life and Death. The disintegrating personality seeks reaffirmation in Authority. Does that make sense to you?"

Bromely nodded, but actually nothing made sense to him any more. The fear rose within him as Doctor Fell's voice rose without.

"Yes, three hundred years ago, thousands of men and women went to the stake firmly convinced that they were, actually, witches and wizards.

"Times change, Bromely. Look what happened to you. Your personality disintegrated, didn't it? You began to lose touch with reality.

"You lived alone, without personal ties to reaffirm identity. Your work was phony, too—the epitome of all phoniness—manufacturing lies to create artificial press-agent personalities for others. You lived in a phony world, used phony words and phrases, and before you knew it, nothing you did was quite real to you any more. And you got panicked because you felt your sense of identity slipping away. True?"

Bromely felt the fear very close now, because Doctor Fell was closer. But he wanted Doctor Fell to stay, wanted him to solve this problem.

"You're not a fool, Clyde." Doctor Fell used his first name now and it underlined the intimacy of his words. "You sensed something was going wrong. And so you did what others are beginning to do today. You did that which will create, in years to come, a new kind of mania."

The fear was *here*, now. But Bromely listened.

"Some start by seeking the 'self-help' books, just as old-time sorcerers used to study grimoires. Some go further and experiment in all the odd bypaths of parapsychology—ESP, telepathy, occultism. And some go all the way. They cannot conjure up the Devil but they can commune with Freud, with Adler, with Jung and Moll and Stekel and the other archfiends. They don't chant spells any more, but they learn the new Cabala, the new language of Mystery. *Schizophrenia, echolalia*, *involutional melancholia*—the words come trippingly from the tongue, do they not?

"You should know, Clyde. Didn't you visit the library on those long dull days when business was bad, and read endlessly in psychiatry? Didn't you bury yourself, these past several months, in a completely new world of delusion and hallucination and obsession, of neurosis and psychosis? In other words, when you felt you were going crazy—just as in the past, men felt they were becoming possessed of the Devil—didn't you seek to fight it by studying psychiatry as the ancients studied the black arts?"

Bromely tried to sit up. Doctor Fell's face loomed closer, swung away, loomed closer again.

"You know what happened to those men, Clyde. They became, in their own minds, wizards. And you know now—surely you must have guessed—what has happened to you. During the past week, you couldn't be a press agent any more. You couldn't be a rational human being any more. In an effort to project, to invest in a new identity, you became a psychiatrist. And *you invented me!*

"You've told yourself that this office is something like your own office, my receptionist resembles your girl, I resemble you. Don't you understand? This *is* your office. That *is* your girl. You've been coming in daily and lying down here on your own couch. No wonder she's frightened, hearing you talk to yourself. *Now* do you know who you are?"

Was it Doctor Fell or the fear screaming in his ears?

"This is your last chance, Clyde. You've got to decide once and for all. You can be yourself again, completely, if you have faith in your own identity. If not, you're the first of the new maniacs. Let me ask you once again, once and for all: *who are you?"* "

Clyde Bromely lay there on the couch while the room whirled and swirled. He saw pictures, endless pictures: a faded snapshot of a little Clyde, clinging to Mamma's skirt—Bromely, Lt. j.g., U.S.N., in uniform—Speed Bromely, public relations, shaking hands with a top comic at a benefit show—Bromely sitting in the public library, seeking the answer in the ologies and the isms—Bromely lying on the couch, clawing at nothing.

Bromely saw the pictures, shuffled them, sorted them, and made his choice.

Then the fear fell away, and Bromely slept. He slept there on the couch for a long, long time. When he woke up it was dark and he was alone in the room. Somebody was rapping on the door.

It was his girl. He knew that now. He was in his own office, and his own girl came in, timidly and hesitantly, as he rose with a smile of renewed confidence.

“I was worried,” she said. “You being in here so long, and—He laughed, and laughed again, inside as he realized that the sound but dimly conveyed the new security he felt within himself. “I was sleeping,” he told her. “There’s nothing to worry about, my dear. From now on, we’re going places. I’ve been in a pretty bad slump for the past month or so—someday I’ll tell you all about it—but I’m all right now. Let’s go out for dinner and we’ll make plans.”

The girl smiled. She could sense the change, too. Dark as the room was, it seemed to fill with sudden sunlight.

“All right,” she said. “All right, Mr. Bromely.”

He stiffened. “Bromely? That patient? Don’t you know me, my dear?”

Mr. Margate’s Mermaid

CHAPTER I

THE man at the employment agency gave me a long look. “Why do you keep coming back?” he muttered, wearily. “There’s nothing for you. I’ve told you that a dozen times.”

I lost my patience.

“What’s wrong with me?” I snapped. “I’ve done everything the books advise. Look at me—my shoes are shined. My trousers are worn but neatly pressed. I haven’t got unsightly pores, or dandruff or five o’clock shadow. I use a deodorant. My fingernails are clean.”

Despite himself, I could see that he was impressed. I pursued my advantage.

“I smile pleasantly, don’t I? My handclasp is firm isn’t it? Look!” As a crowning gesture I produced a handkerchief and waved it under his nose. “See?” I exclaimed, triumphantly. “No tattle-tale gray.”

They employment man sat up and then shrugged.

“I know all that,” he conceded. “You come up to all the specifications except one, as far as a job is concerned.”

“And what’s that?” I asked.

“You can’t *do* anything.”

I kept still. I knew he had me there.

“Listen, Mister,” he said, patiently. “Your card says you’re a writer. And we just don’t get any calls for writers. Now if you could only do something useful—like plumbing for instance. Or if you were an arc-welder. Lots of calls for arc-welders.

“But no. You’re useless. All you can do is write.” A slight sneer crossed his face. “Can’t even operate a lathe,” he accused.

I bowed my head. It was true. I couldn’t operate a lathe.

“But I can type,” I suggested, desperately. “You surely must get plenty of calls for a stenographer.”

He grunted. “Wouldn’t you look cute now, sitting on a business man’s lap?”

“Never thought of that.”

He rose from his desk. “So you see how it is. You’re just not the type. Too puny for outdoor work or the army. Haven’t got a chance in a factory. My advice to you is to go back home and start pounding the typewriter again.”

I faced him and bowed.

“A very excellent suggestion,” I agreed. “But there are one or two slight difficulties. To begin with, as of this morning I no longer have a home. Nor a typewriter. My landlady is in possession of both.”

The employment man sighed sympathetically. “Sure tough. There must be some way out. Wonder what I’d do if I were in your shoes.”

“Have them re-soled, probably,” I told him. “My feet are touching the pavement.”

“Must be something,” he muttered, scratching his head. “Writer, huh? Inside work. Hey—maybe I’ve got it!”

He faced me across the desk and his voice dropped.

“Would you mind going to work for a screwball?” he asked.

“What do you mean, a lunatic?”

“No. Of course not. Why this guy is a millionaire. He’s just kind of eccentric.”

“You mean that if he were poor he’d be crazy.”

“What do you care? A job’s a job, and this is a good berth, if you fill the bill. Ever hear of Julius Margate?”

"No."

"Lives uptown. In a mansion, no less! I've checked. He called in last week—let me see now, if I can find the order." He bustled around opening a card file.

"Here it is. Yes, Julius Margate. He wants a house man. $200 a month, plus room and board."

"$200 a month and keep for such a job? He must be whacky!" I exclaimed.

"Wait. Listen to this. Man selected must be fond of animals, able to climb trees, a good horseman; must have Type C blood and an I. Q. of 180 or higher."

He looked at me.

"Well?"

I SMILED. "Happen to know my blood type is okay," I answered. "Got a transfusion once. I've got an I.Q. record lying around that I think I can get my hands on. I haven't climbed a tree for ten years, but I guess I can manage. I used to ride pretty well. I'm not fond of animals—but for $200 a month and keep I'll sleep with a rhinoceros."

"Maybe you'll do at that," commented the employment man. "I'll call, up Margate and see what he says. Drop back this afternoon around two."

"Doesn't he want me to go out there for an interview?"

"No. Told you he sounded like a screwball. Insists on phone interviews only. Says when he selects a man he'll send a guide down to take you to his place."

I let it go at that.

Promptly at two I returned. The employment agent was waiting for me. He ushered me into the private office at once.

"You've got the job," he informed me. "And you start today. Your things will be called for. All ready to go?"

"Suits me."

“Sign here. Usual commission.” I signed.

“What about that guide?” I asked.

“He’s waiting for you now in the outer office.”

I paused. “I didn’t see anyone there,” I objected. “That is, nobody but a blind man.”

“He’s your guide,” the employment agent told me. “I warned you Margate was a. screwball.”

We went back to the outer office. The fat blind man with the striped cane rose as we entered.

“Here he is,” said the employment man. He introduced me “And this is Captain Hollis.”

“Pleased to meet up with you.” The captain’s voice was a jovial boom. He grasped my hand, held it. “Sure we’ll get along fine. Boss ought to like you. You got long fingers. Like eels. Artistic, ain’t you?”

“Writer,” I admitted.

“Well ain’t that swell, dammit! Boss likes writers. Thinks they’re just too stinking intellecshool. He’s pretty intelleschool himself. But let’s heave anchor. The car’s outside.”

We left the building. Captain Hollis led the way, cane and all. He moved with marvelous celerity for a sightless man. He found the elevators and his cane pressed the *down* button with unerring accuracy.

He threaded his way through the outer lobby, using his cane for a needle. And once in the street, he walked directly toward a large gray limousine which stood resplendently at the curb.

A uniformed chauffeur opened the door. “This is Dave,” the captain told me.

“Pleased to meet you,” I said, climbing in.

“He’s deaf.” The captain thrust his face forward and his lips moved repeating my name and greeting.

Dave smiled. “Glad you’re with us. The Boss is gonna like you, I guess. You wear glasses. I’ll bet you read a lot.”

The limousine moved out into the traffic as we sat back. I turned to Captain Hollis.

"How about giving me a few tips on my new employer?" I asked. "He seems to be a most remarkable man."

"Who, the Boss? Listen, remarkable ain't the word for that guy. Some people might think he was a little balmy, but they just don't understand him. Kindest man in the world. Big hearted? Why, he loves everybody. He loves people you and I wouldn't put up with in a nightmare."

The captain shivered slightly. It was a startling phenomenon in so large a man.

"Not that I'm saying a word against the house-guests, you understand. They're all nice, decent folks in their way. But what a way!"

He shivered again.

"That's why I'm glad you're taking this job. I've been helping the Boss out around the house. It isn't easy for me, without my lights to guide me, and besides I can't seem to get used to them guests of his. Even if I went and brought a couple of them in the first place. I remember snagging Jory in Hungary. Before the war, that was. Dammit, there was a voyage! But—"

"I don't understand. What about Mr. Margate's guests? Who are they?"

The captain ignored my questions as he leaned forward suddenly to address Dave.

"Wait a minute! I nearly forgot something. Jory wants some flea powder. Better stop at the pet shop on our way up!"

Dave read his lips and nodded. A moment later the car turned in at the curb.

"You go in and get it," ordered the captain. "Here's the money. A large can of flea powder."

I DID. It was my first act in the service of Julius Margate and I was oddly disappointed. After all this build-up I expected something better than buying a can of flea powder for a guest's poodle.

When I returned to the car, the captain was already issuing a further order to Dave.

“Dammit, I’m losing my memory!” he growled. “We got to stop by the dentist for Mr. Simpkins.” Obediently, the car moved forward. The captain turned to me. “You’ll like old Simpkins,” he predicted. “He’s the best of the gang. Easiest to get along with, I think. Of course Simpkins isn’t his real name. Talks with an accent. But the Boss doesn’t care about a guy’s past if he’s working on the level now.”

The captain chuckled. “Poor Simpkins kind of over-stepped himself, though. That’s why the Boss made him go to the dentist today. It puts an end to all chances of accident.” His fingers went to my wrist.

“What time does your watch say?”

“Almost five.”

“Is it dark yet?” His sightless eyes blinked.

“Yes.”

“Good. Simpkins will be out. He was asleep when I brought him down. Lugged him up myself. He ought to be awake now. And will he be mad when he finds out what the dentist did!”

Again the captain chuckled.

The car moved on once more.

Dave turned his head from the wheel.

“There he is, waiting at the curb,” he indicated.

“Does he look mad?”

“Boiling.”

We pulled up.

I saw a tall, thin, middle-aged man with thinning hair. He *did* look mad—his eyes anyway. The rest of his face was covered by his cupped hands.

“Hello, Mr. Simpkins,” boomed the captain. “Climb in. Meet the new house man.”

He introduced me.

Tall Mr. Simpkins entered with a grunt. His black coat covered the seat beside me as he extended a bony hand. I grasped it, but not for long. It was icy cold.

“Gratified I’m sure.” said Mr. Simpkins, in a burring voice. “You will excuse me. I am very upset.”

His hand went back to his jaw as he turned to the captain.

“That was a very bad thing you did to me,” he accused. “Taking me to the dentist while I am asleep.”

“Boss’ orders.”

“Ah! I thought so. He is a hard man, Julius Margate. Do you know what he had the dentist do to me?”

“What?”

“He pulled all my teeth! When I woke up a few minutes ago I was lying in the chair and my teeth were gone. All of them!”

Captain Hollis began to laugh. “Dammit, that’s rich! Beg your pardon, Mr. Simpkins, but that’s rich!” The captain turned to me. “Don’t you think so?”

“I don’t understand,” I answered. “What’s so funny about pulling out all of a man’s teeth when he’s asleep?”

It was Simpkins who answered, sulkily.

“It isn’t funny at all. Losing my teeth is the worst thing in the world that could happen to me. Because,” continued Mr. Simpkins, in a dismal voice. “I happen to be a vampire.”

CHAPTER II

CAPTAIN HOLLIS was a very strong man.

I discovered this when I tried to jump out of the car.

Mr. Simpkins was almost as upset as I was.

“Don’t be afraid,” he whispered. “I won’t hurt you. My teeth are all gone, anyway. I couldn’t bite you if I wanted to.”

His bony hand pressed my shoulder. I winced.

“Honestly,” he pleaded. “I never bit anyone even when I had my teeth. Julius—Mr. Margate—always took excellent care of me. Bought me canned blood, the kind they use in transfusions. Liver extract. Anything I wanted. I was never hungry.”

“Best-hearted guy in the world,” Captain Hollis repeated. “Besides you’ve got nothing to worry about. You’re Type C, and Mr. Simpkins here is allergic to Type C blood; ain’t you now, Mr. Simpkins?”

“Of course, There’s nothing to be afraid of,” reassured the vampire. He mumbled badly through his aching jaws.

“If you’re a sample of Mr. Margate’s house-guests, I’m going to have a pretty tough job,” I answered.

“Not at all. Now take me, for example. I’m no bother to anyone. Of course, I don’t like to have mirrors in my room, and I can’t cross running water. You’d think I’d have trouble bathing, but I use liquid soap and oil.”

“I don’t want to know a vampire’s beauty secrets,” I retorted, somewhat harshly. Mr. Simpkins looked glum.

“You don’t like me,” he accused. “Nobody likes me.”

“There, there,” Captain Hollis consoled him. “Of course he likes you. We all like you. Doesn’t the Boss take care of you? Didn’t he bring you all the way from Transylvania and put you up in his swell mansion? Doesn’t he give you everything you want?”

“Everybody hates me,” the vampire mumbled. “I’m going out and let the worms eat me.”

“Don’t talk like that, dammit! You’re acting very ungrateful to the Boss. Why when we found you back there in Europe, you was starving to death. Sneaking into henhouses at night and killing chickens, you was. Living from hand to mouth. Thin—you was anaemic! And all the time afraid somebody was going to find out where you held up to sleep in the daytime.

“Now look at you! Got a swell boudoir rigged up down in the cellar. Nobody to bother you. All you got to do is come out at night and talk to the Boss. He’s gonna write you up in his book, he says. You’ll be famous!”

Mr. Simpkins smiled weakly. “Maybe I am a bit hasty,” he conceded. “And I assure you I shall be of little trouble.” He turned to me. “I am a noctambulistic soul. I sleep from sunrise to sunset. My wants are simple. I won’t bother you.”

This was evidently meant to console me. It didn’t.

“Listen,” I began, addressing the captain. “You might as well tell me everything now. What about these other houseguests? Has Mr. Margate got a couple of zombies boarding with him? Any ghouls to feed?”

“The Boss? Of course not—he wouldn’t have anything to do with no such creatures. Kindest guy in the world, But wait a minute. You can get the dope straight from him.”

I hadn’t realized it, but the car was turning into a driveway. We rode through an avenue of trees, hinting at spacious grounds beyond. The limousine pulled up before the steps of a large, rambling stone structure. The interior brilliantly illuminated, justified the captain’s description. It was a mansion all right, and a big one.

We climbed out—Simpkins, the captain, and myself. Dave the chauffeur drove off to the rear.

Simpkins rang the bell. The door opened. No butler stood there. Instead, a pudgy little man in an ornate purple lounging jacket fairly flung himself out onto the terrace. His shock of gray hair bristled with an excitement matched by the gleam in his darting black eyes.

“Here you are! How’s your jaw, Simpkins? Ha, ha—explain about that later. Matter of necessity. Want to see you tonight. And you—you must be the new house man.”

His hand pumped mine in a friendly, vigorous grip. “My name’s Margate. Julius Margate. Sorry, we haven’t got a butler. Can’t keep them. Devil of a servant problem. Hope you’ll be a bit more broadminded.”

He ushered us inside, bustling and talking in a quite breathless manner.

“Got a very good report on you from the agency, young man. Very good. Seem to be just what I need around here. So much to attend to, you know.

So much. But come along—I'll show you to your rooms later. Right now, dinner's waiting."

I followed the short man and the captain through the long hall. We entered a spacious dining room. The table was set for three.

"You're eating upstairs, aren't you?" Margate called to Simpkins. The vampire nodded.

"I'll be up to visit later," said the host. "Want to take some notes."

He turned to me.

"Hear you're a writer. Fine! You'll be interested in the book I'm doing. Helpful too, no doubt."

We sat down, following Margate's example.

"Jory's cooking," Margate said. "Had him go out and take Trina her fish. Gerymanx ate earlier. Took his stuff out myself. We'll have to teach our new house man how to feed our guests, eh Captain?"

Margate turned his gray head.

"Jory! he called. "Oh, Jory—we're ready now!"

Jory brought the platter in from the kitchen. I was introduced quite naturally. I correctly assumed that Jory was a guest, not the cook.

As far as I was concerned, Jory would be neither guest or cook in any house of mine.

JORY was a big man. Too big.

His arms were too long and his legs were too short. He didn't have any neck. His hair was long. And plentiful. It ran over his forehead and bristled on cheek and chin. It sprouted from his wrists.

If he were my guest I'd insist on his using a depilatory. And I'd send him to the dentist too. I didn't like the look of his teeth when he smiled at me.

"You new house man, huh?" he grunted.

"That's right, Mr. Jory."

"Okay. Where's my flea powder?"

I'd forgotten about that little item. I took the can from my pocket and handed it to him. "Thanks," he grunted.

His huge fingers tore open the lid. Raising the can, he doused his head liberally with the powder. With a nonchalant smirk he unbuttoned his shirt and poured flea powder down his chest.

"Jory—please!" objected Margate.

"Huh?"

"The moon will be up in half an hour. I'll powder you then after you change."

Margate turned to me.

"Jory's a werewolf," he explained. I tried to get up. The captain tripped me with his cane.

"He changes every night when the moon is more than half full," Margate continued. "But there's nothing to worry about. I've got his lycanthropy under control. He doesn't get violent unless he sees the moon, and I take care of that. Make him wear dark glasses."

Jory shuffled out of the room. The others began to eat. I didn't feel very hungry, somehow.

"You mustn't mind Jory," Margate told me, noticing my hesitation. "He's crude, I'll admit. Illiterate peasant type. Hungarian backwoods, you know. Hasn't got the breeding of Mr. Simpkins. But he means well. Faithful as a dog, too.

"That's his only trouble. That canine streak. You know," Margate confided, "I wouldn't want it to get around for the world, but in winter Jory has a very bad habit. He *sheds!* Dreadfully. Usually make him stay in his room. He prefers to sleep in that kennel in back, of course, but I see to it that his hamburger is waiting for him upstairs. Fleas bother him a bit, too. But not so much any more. When the captain captured him he was really—I confess—mangy."

Margate passed me my salad.

"You ever bathe a dog?" he asked. "You can give Jory a bath every so often."

Bathing a werewolf somehow didn't appeal to me. But I was past making objections.

"I'd like to introduce you to some of our other guests later this evening," Margate said. "But I doubt if I'll have time. I must talk to the captain here. Fact is, Captain, I've got another voyage planned for you."

"Now?" boomed Captain Hollis.

"Yes, for you and Dave both."

"What're we after this trip?"

"Never mind."

Margate glanced at me significantly.

"I'll tell you later. But it's the kind of thing I need you for especially. No one else could do it. And Dave has his part to play as well."

"Don't like it," the captain answered. "Risky business. Blockades and submarines and all. Where to?"

"Greece again."

"Russian-occupied."

"You'll get by if you follow orders. You'll be using my yacht, you know. Little danger of being fired on. And the regular crew. They'll handle things. All you must do is follow the map and act when the time comes."

"Something hard to capture?"

"Very hard. Hardest yet. No one but you could do it. There's a bonus in it, of course. Make it worth your while."

The captain grunted. Margate beamed on me.

"Well, young man—suppose you're drawing your own conclusions?"

"More or less," I admitted. "What do you make of my little household from what you've seen of it?"

"It's very—unusual," I ventured. "Unusual? Diplomatic word. Very. Tactful, aren't you? Why don't you come right out with it and say you think I'm crazy?"

"Because I suspect that I might be the crazy one."

"Ha. Good! Very good!" Margate leaned back. He offered me a cigar. I took it as we sipped our coffee.

"Don't alarm yourself," he told me. "It's very simple. I'm a collector, that's all. Just a collector. Hobby of mine. Many wealthy men collect books. Some collect paintings, or antique furniture. I collect mythological entities."

"So I see."

"Might call me something of a hunter, too. But I'm not interested in the usual big game. Besides, even if I have captured most of my guests, they are guests. And are treated as such. I rather flatter myself that I've improved their lot. It's not easy, in times like these, to be a vampire or a werewolf."

I AGREED with him on *that*.

"Perhaps you're wondering just what impulse led me to the pursuit of this little hobby?"

"I am."

Margate giggled.

"Oh, it's silly enough, I suppose. At least to people who fancy themselves the practical, hard-headed sort. As a boy, I mooned around a lot over books. Mythology. Bulfinch. You know the stuff. I inherited money. There was no need to work. I inherited a certain amount of intelligence, too, I claim. Enough intelligence to avoid emulating the average career of the wealthy man of leisure. You know the stuff—blondes, polo, blondes, golf, blondes, horses, blondes, tennis." He giggled again. "But I do like blondes," he added.

"You might say I rebelled against certain so-called rational concepts of reality. I began to study myth-cultures. I convinced myself that certain deviations from the accepted norm existed in Nature. That the legends of supernatural presences and entities might conceivably rest on a basis of truth. That you can't sit back and say, 'There is no such thing as a werewolf,' for example, if you've never looked for one. Besides, psychopathology has only recently admitted the psychotic existence of werewolves, if not the physiological possibility.

“I knocked around the globe a bit in the yacht. Picked up Captain Hollis, here. A good man, the captain. Lost his eyes in my service. A maenad scratched them out, off the Dardanelles.”

“She was a hussy, that one!” the captain boomed.

“We found a few things together, he and I. Things the hard-headed scientific boys never bothered to look for. They’re always willing to go chasing off to nowhere and back to capture a reported new specimen of gorilla, or something, but you never hear of them getting up an expedition to actually track down a sea-serpent, for example. Dullards!

“At any rate, you’ll meet some of my—discoveries—later. At the moment, I am engaged on a little writing project of my own. Sort of combination of clinical case-histories and a revision of mythology. That’s why my guests are here. I’m extracting their life histories.”

Margate smiled amiably.

“I think you’ll like it here, once you get accustomed to things,” he said. “There’s a number of tasks for you to perform, of course. But if you humor my guests a bit you won’t have any trouble. They’re all. goodhearted, if a little unusual.”

A crash interrupted his monologue.

“The kitchen!” the captain muttered.

Indeed, the noise of falling crockery and silver resounded from the kitchen doorway.

Margate was on his feet. I followed him.

“Damn that Jory! How often have I told him not to change in the house? He’s always doing that, and he always smashes the dishes!”

We stared into the kitchen.

Floundering amidst a welter of broken plates, a large wolf stared up at us with contrite eyes. The wolf had brown fur—like Jory’s hair, only more of it. The wolf was panting a little, and its red tongue lolled.

As we watched, it rose to its paws and uttered a little yelp of embarrassment.

“Oh, Jory, you’re so careless!” Margate sighed, shaking his head.

The wolf nuzzled against his leg.

"All right. But try to remember!"

I stared at the red eyes. Jory's eyes.

Now I was able to trace, not without a certain fascinated horror, the human outlines inherent in the wolf body. The bony structure of the ribs. The peculiar adaptation of elbow to joint. The finger-like pattern of the paws. And the human cast of the lupine muzzle.

The werewolf turned and began to scratch patiently at the door.

Margate stared at me.

"Oh dear!" he whispered. "Oh dear!"

"What's the matter?"

He stepped to the wall and took down a harness and muzzle. Stooping, he adjusted them about the wolf's body and throat.

"I'm sorry," he told me. "But I'm afraid you'll have to take Jory outside. I can tell he wants to go."

He placed the end of the leash in my nerveless fingers and pushed me forward into the night. The wolf tugged me into darkness.

"Just once around the block," Margate cautioned.

So I did it. My first duty in the house of my new employer was to walk his pet werewolf around the block.

CHAPTER III

I SLEPT soundly that evening, inspite of it all. I could save my nightmares for when I was awake.

Margate met me at the breakfast table. He was in bubbling spirits—as usual.

"The captain's left," he announced. "Got his maps and orders last night. Should be gone about six weeks, I estimate."

He chuckled to himself.

"If he succeeds this time, my collection will be complete."

“After something unusual?”

“Unusual is hardly the word! This one will really paralyze you! Hope he makes it all right.”

“Isn’t it a risky business for a blind man?”

“Riskier for a man with his eyes.” Margate babbled on. “But finish your breakfast. I’m going to show you around.”

I had hardly downed my coffee when Margate jumped up from the table, bursting with eagerness. “Come on, come on!”

He led the way into the yard. We walked along a shaded gravel pathway leading to the rear of the house. Margate stooped midway.

“Jory’s tracks,” he muttered. “Didn’t hear him come in last night. Oh well, he’ll sleep until noon or later. And Simpkins won’t be with us until sundown.”

We proceeded, moving between ordered flower-beds.

“Warm, isn’t it?” Margate commented. He paused in the shadow of a tree.

“It is hot.” I rested my hand against the trunk.

“Get your hands off me!” commanded a voice.

I looked around. There was nothing to see.

“You heard me!” The voice was high, feminine; yet strangely muffled.

I stared again. As I did so, a branch descended and slapped my face.

“Fresh!”

Margate laughed.

“That’s Myrtle,” he explained. “In the tree. A hamadryad.”

I wheeled and surveyed the tree. It looked quite ordinary to me.

“Tree nymph,” Margate continued. “Don’t mind her. Her bark is worse than her bite.”

“That isn’t funny,” came the voice from the tree. “Who’s the new fellow, Margate?”

“That’s our new house man.”

“Hmm. Not very polite, I must say.”

I thought it best to turn and bow at the branches.

"Sorry if I offended you. As a matter of fact, I was merely admiring your limbs. That's a lovely trunk you have there."

This was the right approach. I could tell that. A peal of girlish laughter was my reward. "Flatterer!"

"Not at all, I assure you."

"Margate," said Myrtle, softly. "I hate to say it, but I wish you'd remember to tell Jory to keep away from me when—"

"Of course, Myrtle. He's just thoughtless, that's all. How are things otherwise?"

"Pretty fair."

"Your new friend here can climb a tree. I might have him shinny up you if you want to be pruned at any time."

I recalled that tree-climbing was one of my requisites listed by the employment man. Type C blood, fond of animals, a tree-climber—yes, it worked in, all right.

"I'd be glad to handle your limbs at any time," I offered.

Myrtle laughed.

"How you talk!" Her branches shook coyly.

Margate moved on down the path. I followed. Myrtle rustled coyly in farewell.

"Lovely girl," my employer remarked. "Often wonder what she looked like. The captain picked her up in the Carpathians. Had to fight off a gang of peasants when he transplanted her." He sighed reminiscently.

We walked down a graveled pathway through the garden which led to the door of a large, low structure. It resembled a stable or barn.

"Want you to meet Gerymanx," Margate explained, as we entered. He bustled in. I had to stoop in order to pass the doorway.

Gerymanx stood in a large stall. Or rather, a part of Gerymanx. Gerymanx was a horse, and since his back was turned toward me, the part I gazed upon hardly constituted a proper introduction.

"There he is," said Margate. "Nice looking, isn't he?" He thumbed at the portion of Gerymanx which was visible. "Ever see anything like it before?"

I had an answer for that one.

SUDDENLY, at the rear of the stall, a man raised his head and peered intently at us. He was a stranger, and a rather disreputable one. Tousle headed and unshaven, he bared prominent yellow teeth in a sly grin.

It rather disappointed me to find Margate employing such a raffish-looking fellow. I told him so, under my breath.

"Not much of a stable-boy," I commented.

"Stable-boy? That's no stable-boy, that's Gerymanx."

"But I thought you told me this—this thing—is Gerymanx," I protested, weakly indicating the protruding brown backside of the horse.

"So it is. But the head is also Gerymanx. Don't you understand, my boy? Gerymanx is a centaur." He would be. I might have known it. But I could hardly control my confusion when the human head wheeled, the horse body pivoted, and Gerymanx trotted out of his stall to welcome us formally.

I am no judge of horseflesh, and certainly no judge of centaurflesh either, but I must admit Gerymanx was impressive. His horsebody glistened beautifully in the sunshine from the stable sky-light. His human torso, rising from the waist, was superbly muscled. I had always imagined centaurs to be somewhat shaggy. Gerymanx wasn't. He trotted forward, and upon our introduction, shook hands. He had to bend his elbows to do it, being considerably taller than myself.

"A pleasure," he boomed. "Mr. Margate here tells me you're quite a horseman. We must go for a ride together soon."

Margate beamed with pride. "Gerymanx is quite a pacer," he told me. "Four-gaited."

"Glad to get out again," the centaur went on. "No one has been around to exercise me but Dave, and he can't do anything but hang on. Thought I'd like to work out mornings and maybe enter the steeplechase this fall."

"He's very ambitious," Margate added. "Wants to race." He turned to the centaur. "How's the oat situation?"

“Pretty fair. You can tell this gentleman here what to do for me. I’d like to be curry-combed this week, if you don’t mind.”

“Your mane wants clipping,” Margate observed, critically.

“Guess it does.” The centaur smiled coyly. “You know, Margate, I’ve been thinking of having my tail bobbed.”

“Don’t do anything hasty now,” my host begged.

“But it’s all the style. I was looking at the *Breeder’s Annual* last night.”

“We’ll discuss that later,” said Mr. Margate, curtly. “Right now we have to be moving on. I’m sure you two will get to be great friends.”

He turned to me. “I must give you instructions on Gerymanx shortly. You’ll take care of him as well as Myrtle and the rest.”

We moved out of the stable as Gerymanx trotted back into his stall.

“Lunch time. Listen—I want you to call up the grocer in town and order a few items for me.”

We marched back to the house. “You understand, I can hardly allow tradespeople to get in here. You’ll meet them at the gate, of course. But let’s see now. We’ll need a roast for ourselves—and some raw hamburger—about two pounds—a bottle of Lextron—that’s Vitamin B extract for Mr. Simpkins—better get a bottle of Glover’s Mange Cure for Jory—five pounds of halibut steak—and then call the feed store and ask them to send up a bale of hay—a bottle of tabasco sauce—”

I used the hall phone.

“Afraid you’re going to be in for a little heavy duty these days,” Mr. Margate apologized. “What with the captain and Dave away. Why not run upstairs and take a shower before lunch? It might freshen you up a bit for the afternoon. I want to go over the notes for my book with you, if you don’t mind. Run along now—I’ll fix us a snack if Jory isn’t around.” I ascended the stairs to my own quarters. I had quite a nice bedroom with bath attached. I noted that my things had arrived some time during the morning. Jory must have brought them up.

It was quiet in my room. Quiet, and normal. That’s what I needed most. A touch of normalcy, after all this bewilderment.

I walked into the bathroom, reached around the shower curtains and turned on the water. Then I undressed, slowly. I had a cigarette—one of Margate's Turkish. I went back to the bath. I pulled aside the curtain, climbed in the tub.

"Hey!" said a voice.

I looked down.

THERE was a girl in the bathtub.

She was a very pretty girl. I noticed that at once. She had a long oval face, high cheekbones, deep blue eyes, and long, curly hair.

I also observed that she would look good in a sweater, though at the moment she wasn't wearing any that I could notice. And I noticed.

"Hey," she repeated, staring up at me.

I just stood there. Because a second glance afforded me certain observations of a disturbing nature. She was a pretty girl with long hair, all right—but her hair was green. A vivid green. Most unusual color.

"What are you trying to do?" persisted the girl.

"I was just going to take a bath," I answered, not too brightly.

"Well don't stand there on one leg like a stork, then," she replied. "Come on in. The water's fine."

I didn't move, but I was taken aback.

"Who are you?" prattled the chatter box in the tub. "My but you're skinny, aren't you?"

It was a trifle disturbing—this criticism. What would you say if you walked into your bathroom and a strange girl in your tub made disparaging remarks about your physique?

I was still pondering the problem when a discreet cough sounded from the doorway.

It was Margate.

He ignored me and strode toward the tub, staring down at the soapy water.

"So here you are, Trina," he accused. "At it again, eh? How did you ever get up here?"

"Jory carried me," answered the girl, defiantly. "I didn't think anyone would notice. Besides, I just wanted to use the bath salts."

"Well, you'll have to get out now. This is our new house man. He wants a bath, I imagine. That is what you want, isn't it?" he added, turning to me for corroboration.

"Yes."

"Oh very well. If you will be a pig, and hog it all for yourself." Trina sulked. "Lift me out."

I hesitated.

"Come on."

I stooped and lifted. She was slippery. But that wasn't the reason I almost dropped her.

I was staring at her waist. At the green—oh, it might as well be admitted! Trina was a mermaid.

"Shame on you," Margate scolded. "I thought I told you not to leave your tank." He sighed. "What will our new house man think of us, I wonder? Jory changing in the kitchen and you sneaking into his tub."

"I just wanted bath salts," the mermaid wailed. "And a chance to use this lovely mirror here to comb my hair." Her eyelids fluttered up at me coyly, like waving kelp. "Maybe you'll help me comb my hair?" she suggested.

"Not now!" Margate extended his arms. "Here, give her to me. Go ahead and bathe in peace."

He bore Trina from the room. A most attractive armful too. I bathed meditatively.

At the luncheon table, Margate confided in me.

"It's her French blood," he declared. "Trina's a Breton, you know. Found her off the coast of Brittany.

"She's the restless type, though. Wants to sneak out to bathing beaches, I suppose. Crazy about bath salts and perfumes. Guess she's lonesome. Used to a lot of oceanides and nereides around. To say nothing of sailors."

"I like her," I ventured. "I don't blame her for getting bored in a tank. It must be like living the life of a goldfish. Isn't there a swimming pool or something around here?"

"Say, that's an idea! You could dig her one! There in the garden. You know how to handle cement?"

"Guess I could manage:"

"Jory will help," Margate promised. "Say, that's fine."

We finished our luncheon in high humor. After a smoke we adjourned to Margate's study.

It was more of a library than a study, and more of a museum than a library. The walls were lined with bookshelves. I scanned the titles with eager curiosity.

"Quite a collection you have here," I commented. "Lots of sorcery."

Margate gave me an earnest glance. "Just for reading purposes," he emphasized. "Never monkey with the stuff personally. Too dangerous."

I noted a glass bell jar on the side table. A long, thin bone rested on a cushion within. Margate marked my interest.

"Supposed to be a unicorn horn," he explained. "But I'm inclined to believe it's a fake. Anybody knows there are no such things as unicorns."

I RETURNED to the large center table and desk. In order to avoid resting my finger on a mummified head I brought my hand down on a large, dark brown bottle. Margate gasped.

"Careful there! Don't jiggle that bottle! Got a djinn in there." I stepped back.

"Bought it from a sailor in Aden. Set me back a pretty penny. Don't know why I wanted it—I'm afraid to open the thing."

I stared into the brown, cloudy glass. I could see nothing. But when I lifted the bottle it gave forth a rustling sound—a most disconcerting noise to emanate from glass or liquid.

"Let me see, now," Margate began. He stooped over the desk drawers and began to draw forth sheafs of manuscript.

"Here's the case history of Mr. Simpkins," he muttered. "And the notes Jory is giving me. Cave stuff—archeological background from Gerymanx. What's this? Oh, the report of the Demonolatrical Society. 1946. Out of date."

He lifted his hands, eyebrows waggling in despair.

"You see? Everything's topsyturvy. Never get anything done this way. Need some system. A little order. Then I can get started again."

But somehow we didn't get at any filing system that afternoon. We sat down and got involved in a little discussion, during which my employer added a few scraps of information to my data on his life-work.

I learned that he had conducted this somewhat singular menage of his for about five years. Mr. Simpkins was his oldest guest; then Gerymanx, Myrtle, and Jory. Trina was really the latest acquisition.

They got along fairly well together, according to Margate. Of course he humored them. Kept them happy. And in return, they afforded him diversion enough to recompense him for the sacrifice of a normal social life.

"Never go out," Margate told me. "Couldn't afford to, under the circumstances. Never invite guests, either. But the book is coming along, and it's well worth it. When I am finished I'll take my place alongside of Frazer and Ellis. What Darwin and Huxley did in their fields I will do in mine."

He seemed a simple soul, did Julius Margate. I felt a growing affection for the man.

"Only one complaint," he confided. "People are always trying to palm off fakes on me. Those things get around, you know. I've had side-show dealers trying to sell me freaks. And some unscrupulous dealers try to peddle their fakes—monstrosities that never existed. Missing links, and basilisks. One Irish rogue had the cheek to claim he could secure a leprechaun. Anyone with any sense knows there aren't things like that. I ask you, now, is that right?"

He didn't wait for an answer, but rose to his feet with a frown.

"Dear me! Almost supper time. Better dash out to the gate for those groceries. I'll route Jory out. He's in the kennel, most likely.

"On your way back," he called, "I think you'd better take a run down to the cellar. Fix the furnace. It'll be chilly tonight."

I left on my errand. After lugging up the groceries I made for the cellar stairs, descended.

It was dark down there. I struck three matches before I located the furnace in the gloom.

I found the coal, filled the hopper. It took some time. Little red shadows danced on the walls behind me as I got the fire glowing. It was cheerful, warm. I began to whistle.

Then I heard the sound.

The creaking, groaning sound from the corner.

And a rustling. A slow, crawling rustle. A slithering noise.

I lit a match, held it up in none too steady fingers.

Fire swept across a mound of churning earth. A mound in which a box was set—a long, white box. A box that opened. Opened in darkness, as two long arms rose silently, swiftly.

Something sat up. Something with a long white face.

With a sudden start, I recognized Mr. Simpkins.

"You!" I gasped.

"Hello." Simpkins rose. The earth fell from his black coat. He stretched himself and yawned.

"What time is it? Forgot to set the alarm clock again."

I stared down at the coffin from which he had emerged.

The vampire stood beside me. "Pretty bad, isn't it?" he commented.

I shuddered in complete agreement. "Know what I'm going to do, my friend?" he asked.

"N—no."

"I am going to make our host purchase a new coffin for me. It's the least he can do to repay me for that scurvy trick of removing my teeth."

I nodded numbly.

"Since Dave is gone, you shall have to accompany me," he continued. "We can go tonight, I suppose."

"Go—where?"

"Why to the undertaking parlor, of course. Where else would you buy yourself a coffin?"

"I won't do it," I declared.

And that settled that.

After supper Mr. Simpkins and I went out to buy him a new coffin.

CHAPTER IV

JASON HARRIS operated one of the most thriving mortuary chapels in the city. Business was never dead. Mr. Harris himself was always on hand to welcome a fresh customer. That's the only way he liked his customers—fresh.

But he didn't like us.

I could tell that almost as soon as Mr. Simpkins and I entered his outer display rooms.

It had been a struggle to drag me this far. Both Mr. Simpkins and Mr. Margate had argued with me—pointing out that I was the only one who could drive the vampire down, and that night was the only opportunity Simpkins had of going out to make a personal selection. They clinched the argument by reminding me that I was, after all, an employee. And an employee must be obedient.

Now I wanted to get the whole business over with, quickly and quietly. So when Jason Harris moved forward to greet us, I lost no time.

"My friend and I should like to purchase a coffin," I began.

“Very well.” Mr. Harris assumed a mask of sympathy. “Might I inquire as to the nature of the bereavement in the family?”

Mr. Simpkins stepped out. “Never mind that. Just show us around this box factory of yours and we’ll make our own selection.”

“Of course.” Somewhat disconcerted by the callousness of the request, Harris led us over to an imposing bronze casket.

“Here is one of our latest models,” he began. “I want you to note the dignity of its outlines, the solidity of its construction, the—”

“What about a mattress?” inquired Mr. Simpkins, eagerly. “Has it got a mattress?”

“A mattress can be secured,” Harris assured him. “But I must ask you to observe this special feature—the method whereby the sealed casket is made airtight.”

“Airtight? Nothing doing,” Simpkins snapped. “How do you expect a man to breathe in an airtight coffin? Why he’d strangle to death!”

“But the deceased does not breathe—”

“How do you know? You ever been deceased? Come to think of it you do look a little dead on your feet.”

Mr. Harris was indeed quite pale.

“I don’t seem to understand you gentlemen,” he muttered.

“We just want to buy a coffin, that’s all. For a body.”

“What sort of body?” Mr. Harris persisted.

“Why no body in particular. Just any body.”

The mortician looked agitated. “You aren’t by any chance planning a murder? You’re not gangsters, I hope?”

“Of course not.” Mr. Simpkins gave out with a laugh that was meant to be reassuring. It wasn’t. “Say, I heard a good one about an undertaker who specialized in gangsters funerals. His motto was ‘Don’t Put All Your Yeggs in One Casket.’ Good eh?”

Mr. Harris didn’t think so. He looked distressed. I took advantage of his confusion to pull the vampire over toward a small modest-appearing gray box.

“What about this?” I suggested.

“Not bad,” Simpkins commented. “Streamlined. And plush lining. Always like a plush lining.”

“This is a very select model,” Harris assured us. “One of our most popular styles this season.”

“Never mind the sales build-up,” said Simpkins. “I’ll just try it out for myself.”

Lifting the lid, he climbed into the coffin and lay down.

“Very comfortable,” he grunted. “Lots of leg room.”

This statement didn’t please the undertaker either. He kept staring at Mr. Simpkins with a rapt expression, and his teeth began to chatter like a bunch of women around a Gin Rummy game.

“This coffin isn’t for you!” he exclaimed.

“Of course it is. I always pick out my own coffins when I get the chance.”

“Most people don’t get a chance,” Harris was forced to observe.

“Not me. I’m different. I’ve picked out five coffins in my time. Outlasted them all.” Without waiting to observe the reaction to this last statement, Mr. Simpkins suddenly banged the lid shut. A moment later he pushed it up again.

“Have to oil this lid,” he complained. “I might want to get out in a hurry some time. You know how it is.”

“NO, I don’t,” the undertaker confessed. “I don’t want to know how it is, either. You two get out of here. You are crazy.”

“A fine way for a mortician to talk to a customer,” Simpkins bridled. “All right. I don’t “Want your old box anyway. It’s lousy. Why I would be ashamed to be found dead in one of your coffins.” He rose. “Come on,” he told me. “We’ll try another joint down the street where the service is better. I probably can make a deal on a trade-in of the old casket, too.” Mr. Harris forced a smile. “Don’t be hasty,” he coaxed. “It’s just that I didn’t seem to understand. But I guess I do now. You want to purchase this coffin to sleep in, is that it?"

"Of course," said Mr. Simpkins, in a disgusted voice. "What would *you* do in a coffin?"

"Very little," the mortician assured him. "But, if I might inquire, why don't you purchase a bed?"

"Beds? Bah! The dirt gets onto the sheets," Simpkins complained. "And the light comes in, too."

"You sleep during the day?"

"That's right. I want something that's dark. Something to keep out the dirt. To say nothing of the worms."

"You have worms?" asked Mr. Harris in spite of himself.

"I'll say I have worms," answered the vampire.

"Dyspepsia is my trouble," the undertaker confessed.

"Maybe a coffin would help you, too."

"Never thought of it. Quiet in there, isn't it?"

"Very quiet. And think of the plush lining—all that satin and stuff!"

"Interesting idea, if a little morbid."

"Beds are expensive," the vampire continued. "And linen is high, too. I should think, with all these swell boxes lying around, you'd just hop into one for forty winks now and then."

Harris scratched his head.

"I'd have to talk it over with my wife first," he mused.

"Haven't you got any of these double caskets? The big jobs?"

"Yes. It might work out at that."

"Just a thought, friend. By the way—guess we'll take this one."

Harris resumed his professional interest. He quoted a price. I paid him.

"Do you want this delivered?" he asked.

"I'll take it with me," Simpkins responded. He grabbed one end of the casket and I took the other.

Harris followed us to the door. "But this is all so unusual—I'm a little confused. You really want to get into this coffin?"

“Sure as I’m alive,” Simpkins answered. Harris sighed deeply.

“Well it’s your own funeral.”

“Not bad!” Simpkins chuckled. “And don’t forget what I told you. Try a casket yourself for sleeping purposes. I’d love to see you in a coffin.”

The undertaker shuddered visibly.

“Oh, gentlemen,” he called, as we opened the door. “Just one thing more. It’s customary to have the name and address when anyone purchases a casket.”

Simpkins turned. Look me up out at Everest Cemetery,” he suggested, maliciously. “I’ve got a nice grave out there.”

Harris trembled.

“Drop in some time,” Simpkins added.

As we closed he door, the undertaker turned and ran back into his shop. His shoulders heaved.

“Now see what you did,” I accused, as we climbed into the car. “He probably won’t be able to work for a week now.”

Mr. Simpkins was contrite.

“I was only trying to be funny,” he apologized. “Besides let him close up the funeral parlor if he wants to. Business is probably dead anyway.”

I shivered as we drove off. Vampires I could learn to stand—but puns, never. If Mr. Simpkins didn’t behave, he’d find some worms on his pillow one of these days.

CHAPTER V

THE ensuing days were unexpectedly pleasant. Life quickly fell into a routine.

In the morning I usually went out to the stables and brought Gerymanx his oats and hay. Then I turned the hose on Myrtle. Afternoons I spent with Margate, trying to recopy his disordered notes and straighten out his reference sources in some kind of filing system.

At times I took Jory for a walk in the evening. Every Saturday night it was my duty to give him a bath. During the third week I had the rather unpleasant duty of shaving him, but on the whole I managed excellently.

At the time of the full moon I called up town and ordered a pair of motorcycle goggles. These fitted over his eyes more comfortably than the usual dark glasses, and he passed through the difficult days with a minimum of howling. Margate's system seemed to keep his lycanthropic instincts well under control.

Within a few weeks I had Mr. Margate's household running smoothly. My work in his study came to an end. He was able to sit down with his book material well organized. I saw little of him, these days—he spent most of his time taking new notes. Jory's recital occupied his immediate attention. Jory being rather stupid and illiterate, it was a difficult task to extract coherent information from him. But Margate persevered.

My first feeling of strangeness was almost completely dissipated. One can become adjusted to almost anything through, constant familiarity.

I no longer found it shocking when Jory assumed his lupine form before my eyes. The spectacle of Mr. Simpkins snoring in his cellar coffin did not alarm me. Myrtle's muffled voice from the tree-trunk became as natural a manifestation as the rustling from the branches of surrounding elms. Gerymanx was no bother at all. He read his racing form bragged heroically of his racing abilities, and had latterly become absorbed in a system of physical culture exercises he was taking through the mails.

Perhaps not visiting in town did it. Isolation inured me to the unusual. My duties were light, the food was excellent, and the hours passed swiftly.

Besides, there was Trina.

I got her out of that cellar tank in no time.

During the second week I began to dig the swimming pool. I worked alone, but it was a steady pace that I set for myself. Another week and I had the concrete laid. In the fifth week of my stay the pool was completed.

Trina didn't know, of course. I planned it as a surprise for her, with Margate's connivance.

When I carried her up from the basement she thought I was smuggling her in for a go at the bath salts—a frequent practice of mine which I might as well admit. We had become very friendly, Trina and I. After all, I'm broadminded enough to overlook little details like that emerald hair.

I took her out that afternoon and brought her to the pool.

At first she couldn't speak.

"Oooooooh!" she squealed. Tenderly, I threw her into the water. She splashed gaily. In a moment she swam over and put her arms around my neck.

"It's wonderful!" she whispered, and kissed me. It was the first time but not the last. I found it very nice. A mermaid's kiss is moist, and a little salty, but very interesting.

I'd built a little rockpile in the center of the pool. She sunned herself like a Lorelei, her livid curls shimmering in the breeze, the radiance of her scales glistening against the water. Her long, delicate fingers, with just the fascinating suggestion of a web at the palm, beckoned to me. I went in the house and borrowed a pair of Margate's swimming trunks to join her.

AFTER that time went very swiftly indeed. I spent hours out there on the rocks with her.

We'd swim awhile and sun awhile. She used to sing me some old Breton sea ballads in a piquant Flemish accent. Some of them were slightly bawdy, I suppose. I don't understand French very well.

Trina was happy for the first time in her life since she had been ensnared in Captain Hollis' nets.

"I've been like a fish out of water," she confessed to me. "It's like coming home again. Now, if I only had a few sailors—"

I put a stop to that talk in short order. Her weakness for seafaring men was really deplorable. But mermaids are like that, I suppose.

My fondest memories are those of the moonlight bathing parties. She and I in a world of silver water, gliding along under the moon. And afterwards we'd sit on the edge of the pool, roasting hot dogs or toasting marshallows over a little fire. It was beautiful while it lasted.

Then came the well-remembered day. Along in the seventh week it was.

Margate met me at the breakfast table with a worried frown.

"What's the matter? Still stuck on that Jory memorandum?" I asked. "That part about the relation of the moon-flower to the anthropomorphic tendencies?"

"No, it's not that," Mr. Margate answered. He ran his hand through his bristling gray crop. "It's Captain Hollis and Dave. They're nearly two weeks late. Haven't had a word—not a cablegram."

"It's nothing," I consoled him. "Perhaps. But they're on a dangerous errand."

It wasn't the first time Margate had told me that. He was constantly hinting but never revealing the nature of this quest.

"I wish you'd tell me," I said. "Maybe I could help."

"There's no way of helping," he answered. "Maybe I'm just a fool for planning this anyway. What good will it be if they are successful? I can't look and I can't listen. Never even see or hear what I get. Have to take my notes secondhand."

I COULDN'T make head or tail out of this recital.

"In case they do get back," Margate continued, "I'd better have you clear out the back room in the cellar. The big one. I've ordered sheet metal to cover the door. It's fairly soundproof. Just clear out the old furniture and leave the place vacant. We won't need any pen, or any food either, I don't suppose."

He sighed.

"The crew is reliable, though; Hollis has used the men before. They have their orders, but Hollis has to make the actual capture, of course. Dangerous business. Oh well, we'll just have to wait and see. Or rather, wait and not see.” Curiosity gnawed within me. I opened my mouth. But Margate rose and cut me off.

“Say! I just remembered—are you a blacksmith?”

“No. Can’t say that I am.”

His face fell. “Too bad. Knew I’d forgotten something when I listed your requirements.”

“What’s the matter?”

“It’s Gerymanx. He needs to be shod.”

“Oh.”

“Didn’t he mention that his hooves hurt him?”

“Come to think of it, he said something of the sort to me yesterday. I assumed it was just a minor complaint.”

“No, he needs shoes badly. And he’d like a manicure, I suppose.” Margate sighed. “Tell you what you have to do. Take the small truck into town and see the blacksmith there. I’ve got the address. Used to ride him down at night myself.

“But you’d better go. I want to stick around here in case Captain Hollis shows up.”

“You mean I put the centaur in the back of the truck and haul it to a blacksmith shop?”

“It’s all right. I’ve bribed this fellow heavily. Business being what it is in the smithy line these days, he keeps his mouth shut.”

“But what about traveling on the road?”

“Oh, if you use the county truck you shouldn’t have any trouble. Not much traffic.”

“All right.”

“Better get started.” Margate scribbled down an address and gave me some money. I turned.

“Be careful now,” he warned me. “And watch Gerymanx. He’s a wild one when he gets loose. Got ambitions, he has. And he’s too friendly. Keep him out of mischief and when he gets through bring him right back.

Whatever you do, don’t let him get into Droopy’s Tavern next door. He’s fond of the grape. We caught him that way, while he was drunk.”

I hurried down the path. Trina called out to me from the pool. “Coming in for a swim, dear?”

“Can’t make it. Got to hurry into town.” I stopped and gave her a kiss. “See you later.”

She flipped her tail at me saucily and turned away.

Gerymanx was at the stable door. “Margate says you’re taking me in for a pedicure,” he greeted me. “That’s right.”

“You want a saddle?”

“No. You’re coming in on the truck. And no monkey business either,” I warned.

The centaur’s face fell. “That’s too bad. I thought we might have a little canter around the park before we went to the smith’s.”

“Nothing doing. Can’t afford to attract any attention.”

“Oh, all right,” Gerymanx sulked. “Get the truck.”

I pulled it out of the garage. It was a small job, but I was grateful for the enclosed sides on the compartment. They completely hid Gerymanx’s astonishing body from view. Only his tousled head was visible above the railing.

“Take it easy,” he called out.

I took it easy. Very easy. Every time we passed a car on the highway I slowed down and I did my best to avoid jolting my peculiar passenger. It was almost lunchtime when we pulled up at the old brick smithy on the outskirts of town.

I backed the truck lip to the door and walked inside.

THE blacksmith, who by the most appropriate coincidence was named Smith, came to the door. He was a broad shouldered man with a bald head and a ruddy complexion.

“I’ve got a job for you,” I began, hesitantly. “Gentleman in back there wants to be shod.”

Smith cocked his head at Gerymanx, then smiled.

“Oh—you’re from Mr. Margate. I understand. Bring him inside, there’s nobody around.”

I led Gerymanx down the loading platform and hurried him into the stables.

“Make it snappy will you?” I requested, nervously.

“Take about an hour,” Smith told me. “Why not go next door and have a bite of lunch?”

It seemed like a sound suggestion. I entered Droopy’s Tavern and sat down.

Mr. Droopy—if that was his name—proved to be a short little man with red hair and a permanently bored expression on his unshaven features.

“Whatsa gonna be?” he asked.

I ordered a sandwich and a glass of beer. The sandwich was liberally salted. I had a second glass of beer. It must have been salted too, because my thirst increased. I had a third glass, a fourth.

All this time I could hear a merry clanging from the smithy next door. Smith was at work.

The ponding ceased abruptly. Smith came in through a side door with a pail.

“How’s it going?” I asked.

“Pretty hot work,” he told me. He turned to the bar. “Hey, Droopy—fill this up.”

Droopy took the pail over to the tap.

Smith went out again. In a few moments the clanging increased. Suddenly it halted once more. Smith re-entered with the empty pail.

“Very hot work,” he explained.

“Droopy—fill this up.”

Again he went out. Again the clanging rose. And in a remarkably short time, Smith walked heavily in with his bucket.

“Stremely hot,” he mumbled. “Fill ’er up, Droop.”

I watched Droopy fill the large pail. I ordered another beer myself. Smith stumbled out. More clanging. Then silence.

Smith wobbled through the door. “Heat’s terrific,” he hiccupped. “Gotta fill thish up, Droop, ol’ pal.” He went out. I listened intently. The clanging began again. But this time it held a peculiar cadence. A familiar cadence.

“Da-da-da-da dee-da, de-da de-da, de-da-da.

Where had I heard *this* before? I made for the side door and slipped into the smithy.

Gerymanx squatted on his haunches beside the blacksmith, whose left arm was locked around his neck. Both centaur and smithy held a hammer in their free hands. As I watched, they tapped merrily away on the anvil. Their raucous voices rose in a sour blending of the *Anvil Chorus.* The empty bucket, inverted, was perched on Gerymanx’s shaggy head.

“Hello, pal!” the centaur greeted me. I glared. “What is the meaning of this—this horseplay?” Gerymanx wobbled to his feet. “Wanna nother drink of beer!” he insisted. “Feet all shod. Now I wanna celebrate.”

“Gerymanx!” I yelled. “Come back here!”

But it was too late. The centaur trotted unsteadily through the side door and into Droopy’s Tavern.

He was up at the bar before the red-headed proprietor looked at him. From the waist up, it was a naked man who stared at the bartender and shouted, “Shoot the soup to me, Droop!”

“Where’s your clothes?” Droopy demanded.

“I’m masquerading,” the centaur temporized. I tugged at his elbow.

“Come on, get out of here.” I whispered.

“I don’t serve no naked persons,” Droopy declared. He stepped around the bar, then fell back. His eyes took in the horse body.

“Gawd!” he breathed.

Gerymanx turned what was meant to be a reassuring smile on the bartender.

“Told you I was masquerading, didn’t I?” he explained.

“Well, I don’t like it.” Droopy turned to me. “Get the blazes outta my joint.” he demanded. “And take this horse’s—whatever it is—‘with you!”

It was an ill-chosen moment for the entry of another couple. They lurched into the tavern; a tall, flashily-dressed man and an obviously befuddled woman. They stared incredulously at Gerymanx.

“Holy Moses!” muttered the man. “Do you see what I see?”

“Gawd, Harry, it’s a mounted policeman.” The woman peered tipsily at the centaur.

“What’d he do with his clothes?”

“And where’s his legs?” The man quavered. “He’s a horse!”

Gerymanx wheeled, offended. “Who you think you’re talking to?” he bridled.

“A talking horse,” the woman amended. “Harry, we better lay off the stuff for awhile.”

“Lay off me, that’s what you should do.” Gerymanx tried to prance and stumbled unsteadily. His hooves clattered against a cuspidor.

“I bet his mother was frightened by a merry-go-round,” the woman continued.

“Oooh—look out!”

FOR Droopy had rounded the bar, bearing a baseball bat. He bore down on Gerymanx with an oath.

“I’ll learn ya to horse around in my dump,” he grated. “What you think this is, a livery stable?” He lifted his bat menacingly.

Gerymanx wheeled. His forefeet rose. Droopy sailed over the bar. With an inhuman neigh, the centaur dashed forward. His charge carried him through the door. I raced after him.

In his drunken fury, the centaur careened into the street. By some unfortunate mischance a milk-wagon was standing beside our truck. The mare between the shafts looked up, startled.

At the sight of Gerymanx she neighed coyly. A slow blush spread over her equine cheeks. Gerymanx whinnied. Suddenly the mare's eyes gave a flicker of apprehension as they rested on the centaur's human torso. With a shrill, indignant squeal she dashed forward, carrying the wagon with her. There was a grinding crash as the wagon tipped sideways—right into our truck.

At the same moment Droopy emerged from the tavern. Up the street the milkman dropped his bottle-rack with a clatter and started to run our way.

"Now you've done it," I panted. "Wrecked the truck, too!"

"Get on my back," Gerymanx mumbled. The shock had sobered him. "We'll make a run for it."

I mounted hastily.

"Hang on to my neck."

I hung.

"Here we go."

We went.

The centaur's hooves struck sparks from the brick as he raced down the street. I clung to him for dear life.

"Whee!" he yelled. "This is more like it!"

A glance showed me that our pursuers were gathered in a knot around the milk wagon and truck.

"What a mess," I groaned. "How'll we ever get back?"

"I'll carry you."

"On top of the load you're carrying already?"

Gerymanx laughed.

"I feel great," he snorted over his shoulder. "Great. Let's go annoy some street cleaners."

"We're going home. Right now."

"Oh, don't be a wet blanket! I want to have fun. Let's go down to Saratoga. Maybe you could enter me in a race."

I allowed this revolting suggestion to go unanswered.

"Take me home," I commanded. "But—"

"Listen, Gerymanx," I said, slowly. "You've got a pretty soft berth there at Margate's, and you know it. If you don't behave, I'll fix you."

"What do you mean?"

"I'll tell Margate to sell you to an ice dealer. Then you'll have to pull a wagon all day long, and yell, 'Ice for sale' into the bargain." Gerymanx's pace slackened.

"All right," he grumbled. "All right."

"Stick to the side road now," I cautioned.

He did. It was a slow trip. We hid out behind billboards whenever I spotted a car ahead or behind us.

It was almost twilight when we cantered through the gate and up the drive.

"That's about enough excitement for one day," I sighed.

But—

CHAPTER VI

"COME right in!" Margate urged, standing on the steps. He waved his arms expansively. "Me too?" Gerymanx asked.

"Of course. Wouldn't be a party without you."

"But I'll track up the carpet—"

"Track away! We're going to celebrate tonight."

"What is all this?" I inquired. Margate's flushed little face held a slightly tipsy grin.

"Great news! Captain Hollis is back, and the trip's a success."

"Fine. Where is he?"

"He called from the yacht basin. He's hired a truck and he ought to be up in few hours."

"I'm anxious to see what he's got."

"You wouldn't be if you knew what it was." Margate snickered. "But come on, let's go inside and have a drink. I'm in the mood." Gerymanx clattered after Margate and I followed.

The house was brilliantly illuminated. Margate was following its example. I found all the guests in the parlor. Trina sat in a wash tub.

Mr. Simpkins was up and about. Jory, in his more or less human form, was busily mixing drinks.

“Success!” Margate proposed, passing glasses to the centaur and myself.

“How about some supper?” I suggested.

“Help yourself.” Margate indicated a row of bottles.

I shrugged. He was too far gone to argue with. I sat down next to Trina and tried to get into the spirit of things.

I didn’t succeed. Perhaps they were all too far ahead of me. Perhaps it was instinctive premonition. Maybe it was just the rotten sandwich I’d had at the tavern. Whatever it was, I was the skeleton at the feast. I couldn’t get in the mood at all.

When Gerymanx began riding Mr. Simpkins around on his back I regarded it as so much horse-play. Trina, noticing my dour face, turned away and began to flutter her eyelashes at Margate.

Jory, who had been taking a drink for himself every time he mixed for anyone else, soon lost all control. He charged right in front of us, and began running around the room on his paws. Everyone seemed to get a great kick out of the spectacle, but it gave me the chills.

Margate was maudlinly solicitous.

“Whassa matter?” he demanded.

“Come on, have a drink.”

“No thanks.”

“All right. Spoil the party. Go ahead.”

I forced a smile. “I’m pretty tired. Think I’ll hit the hay.”

“Whassat? Aren’t you gonna wait up to see the nice new specimen Captain Hollis’ gonna bring to the party? No welcoming committee?”

“I guess not.”

“All right, then.” Margate shrugged, and nearly fell over. “Get me bucket full of whiskey,” he called. Gerymanx trotted over.

"Bucket of whiskey? What for?"

"Myrtle isn't here. Gonna take it out and splash it all over her roots."

That was enough for me. I went upstairs to my room and climbed in bed.

Downstairs I could hear the murmurs from the parlor. The party was getting wild. I didn't like it. For the first time I was really ready to consider my situation. After all, this sort of thing couldn't go on forever. Trina was a nice girl, but you don't walk up the aisle with a mermaid. Mr. Simpkins was very nice, for a vampire, and Jory was an amiable enough werewolf. But we'd never be close friends. And being jockey to a centaur isn't exactly a recommendation to future employers. A man is known by the company he keeps.

If this kept up, people would soon be pointing their finger at me for an incubus, or something.

I'd better have a talk with Margate soon, I decided. Yes, Margate would have to let me go. I was a little worried about him, anyway. It was hard to say what new monstrosity Hollis was bringing—but it would complicate matters. All this secrecy, and the special room in the cellar, now; this meant something pretty outlandish.

And there was Margate, whooping it up downstairs. Happy as a kid with a new toy. And just as irresponsible. Irresponsible! That was it. That's what the matter was with the whole crew. They couldn't cope with life. They needed a nursemaid. Being fantasies, they weren't able to face realities.

Oh well, In the morning, now—I fell asleep.

I HAD the damnedest dream. It seemed to me that something sneaked into my room. It had Trina's hair and Jory's face, and it lumbered along on four hooves like Gerymanx. Somehow I got the idea that it had Mr. Simpkin's missing teeth and it wanted to bite me. All the while it came closer it was laughing like Margate himself. I tried to move, but couldn't. It squatted right on top of me and grabbed at my throat. Its mouth opened.

I woke up.

Strong hands were closing around my neck.

"What the—"

The hands relaxed.

"Wake up!" boomed a voice. It was Captain Hollis.

"How'd you get here?"

"I made it." The blind man was panting. "I had to get you. Come on."

I sat up. "What's the matter?" I yawned. "When did you get in?"

"About half an hour ago. Around midnight. But never mind. You've got to help me get them out! You've got to. You're the only one left."

"Where's Dave?"

"Dave's—'gone."

"What do you mean?"

"When we captured it. He got bit. Buried him at sea." The captain's hurried tones reached me as he jostled me toward the door.

"Tell me what happened," I muttered, as we went down the hall. "Where is everybody?"

"They're in the cellar. With it."

"With what?"

"Don't ask questions. That's what finished them. They were siting around drunk when I got in. I carried it into the cellar in a packing crate. But I passed Myrtle, and she's gone too."

"I don't understand."

We moved across the deserted parlor. I snapped on lights as we went. Hollis came after me, cane tapping.

"Don't try to understand," he whispered. "I couldn't stop them. They had to take a peek. Margate forgot everything. Said he wasn't afraid, dammit, and it was his after all. The whole crew made for the cellar."

"Come on." I went on through the kitchen. "They're all down there?"

"Yes."

"But what happened to them? What's the matter? What must I do?"

"Try and get them out. Think of a way."

"What's that?"

I flattened myself against, the wall of the dark staircase. A figure padded through the level below.

"Where?"

"Listen—footsteps."

"Jory. I know those paws."

It was Jory. The wolf was slinking down the cellar corridor.

"Jory—wait!" I called. He didn't look around.

We followed.

The wolf made straight for the door at the end of the hall. The metal-covered door. It stood ajar. His muzzle forced it wider. The gray body moved in.

"Stop—" Hollis began.

I heard a howl. Just one howl. A howl that rose, and then froze in midair on its highest quaver. After that, silence.

"It got him," Hollis whispered.

I moved forward.

Hollis clutched my arm. "Wait. Don't go in there."

"But you say they're all in there. You want me to get them out with you."

"I know. But you mustn't go in now. Not like that."

I faced the doorway. "Quit talking riddles. I'm going in."

Hollis held me.

I began to stare at the slight opening where the door hung ajar. It was dark beyond, but not so dark. A sort of subdued light filtered through. A light that didn't dissipate the darkness, but seemed to be a part of it. A stronger part.

IT WAS a violet, but sharper than a distinct color. Radiant. Like the reflection of a million Christmas tree ornaments. Gaudy. Alluring.

Then I felt it. The urge to enter. I wanted to see that light. It was like the ray emanating from a great jewel.

I brushed the captain's hand away.

“Let me go.” I muttered. “I want to go on.”

Wriggling from his grasp. I darted forward. I opened the door.

With a grunt, Hollis lunged. His fist caught me in the eye. I reeled back. His other fist lashed out. I stumbled, my hands covering my face.

“What in blazes—”

I reeled, steadied myself, took my hands away. Darkness.

“Hollis, you fool—you’ve blacked my eyes for me!”

“I know. Now go in!”

I groped my way through the door. He followed.

We stood in darkness. Two blind men, in a room filled with a violet light.

“Where are we?”

I groped along the wall. The room was silent. Too silent. “Jory! Trina! Where are you?” I whispered. “Margate!” No answer. I stumbled forward, hands outstretched.

I touched something. Something cold. My hands flew back. But there was no sound, no movement. I stretched my fingers forward once more. Again they rested on a cold surface. A hard surface.

I ran them along, tracing an all too familiar outline. Hair. A face. Trina’s hair and face. But hard and cold. Cold as—marble.

“She’s stone!”

“Of course. They’re all stone. All of them.”

I moved on. Another figure. I almost collided with it. It was a standing man. Bristly hair.

“Margate.”

Hollis sighed behind me.

“That’s why we both had to come in, dammit. To lift them out. They’re too heavy.”

“But Hollis—what is it? What did this?”

“The thing,” the captain answered.

My fingers fumbled toward a third figure.

“What thing?” I asked.

My fingers came to rest, and found the answer.

This surface was cold too, but it wasn't motionless. My hands moved over a long neck; and then up into an icy tangle. Hair.

But the hair moved, too. It was thick, horribly thick, in solid coils. Coils that suddenly came to life, writhing forth with a rustling.

Then I heard the hissing, felt the hair coiling around my wrist, jerked my hand away in frantic haste.

"Serpents!" I muttered.

"Get back!" Hollis yelled. "It's the thing—that damned Gorgon—the Medusa!"

As the hissing rose to a shrill crescendo I turned and ran blindly out of the cellar room.

CHAPTER VII

THAT'S the way it was.

It must have been over an hour before Hollis argued me into going back with him to get them out. I consented, finally, and we went to work.

They must have weighed at least three hundred pounds apiece. Gerymanx we had to slide across the floor—too heavy to lift. It was all we could do to keep him from chipping.

Two blind men, carrying statues. We made it, though. Until at last there was only the hissing thing.

We locked the door on it. It couldn't walk, of course. I wanted to burn the place, but it would cause trouble later on.

Hollis and I had a long talk. He wouldn't tell me much more about his voyage. Or about the charts and directions Margate gave him. I know he found it somewhere close to Crete, and that's all. He had to go into the cave alone—being blind, it couldn't harm him. It was after he had it out that Dave reached into the sack and one of the snakes bit him.

I shuddered over my own narrow escape when I heard that.

"Poor Dave," Hollis grunted. "Mebbe it was just as well. Boss had a later job for him. Going after one of these sirens—that's what you call them. Because he was deaf and couldn't hear it."

He wouldn't tell me anymore.

So there we were.

"We'll have to get some sleep," Hollis told me. "Then we can figure something out."

But in the morning there was nothing figured out. I could see a little, though my eyes were puffy and swollen. I got another nasty shock when I looked at the statues we dragged out.

Usually I admire life-like work, but these things were too damned life-like to suit me. Or to suit themselves, I suppose. Trina was lovely, though. It broke my heart to look at her. And Gerymanx looked quite imposing. Margate had one hand stuck out straight, as though to steady himself. Jory and Mr. Simpkins were both caught in mid-howl. Their mouths were still open.

"Now what do we do?" Hollis groaned. "We can't go away and leave that Medusa thing down there alive."

"Why leave it alive?" I asked. "We can kill it."

He laughed sarcastically.

"That's what you think," he told me. "It won't die."

"But Perseus killed one."

"Who?"

"A Greek warrior. He had some kind of sword—"

"Baloney. It's still alive, ain't it? This Percy-what's-his-name must have been kidding somebody along."

"Never thought of that."

"Well, think of it, then. I know it won't die. Because I tried it myself."

"You did?"

"Sure. After it got Dave. I pumped six shots into the thing."

"You didn't!"

"You bet I did, dammit. And on the voyage back—two of the boys blundered onto it down in the cabin. Snoopers. It got them both. After that the rest went to work. The cook took a knife to it, from the rear. No result. Except that it turned around. I cooked the rest of the trip."

"It won't die, huh?"

"That's right."

This was a prettier problem than I'd expected. I looked at the stone faces around me. No solution there. But there must be a solution. I couldn't run off and leave that thing down in the cellar. Somebody would investigate sooner or later. And then—more statues. "I'm going down there again."

"Oh, no you don't. You can see now." I'd forgotten *that* little detail. I *could* see. I stared at my puffy eyes in the mirror.

Then I got it.

"Wait for me. I've found the way out."

"Not me. I'm heading for that yacht, and I'm not coming back."

"But Captain—"

He tapped off. I was left alone. I acted fast. I found what I was looking for and went downstairs.

It was hard work unlocking the cellar door. It was harder work to nerve myself up to going in. The violet light shed its evil radiance through the chink of the keyhole.

But there was no choice. I opened the door and walked in.

The Medusa was against the wall in the center of the room. Alone, in Gorgonic glory. I heard the rustling whisper of the coiled tresses.

It didn't stop me.

I walked forward, holding the object I'd brought right squarely in front of my face. It was a shield. "Hey!" I called.

The Gorgon wouldn't understand English. But this didn't matter. Just so long as I attracted attention.

"Hey—look!"

I was almost on top of it. But it looked. It must have looked.

Because I heard the damnedest hissing shriek that ever issued from the lips of nightmare. Whether it was the Gorgon or the serpents in its hair I don't know.

That wail rose up as the Gorgon stared, and then there was silence.

After that, I stuck out my hand. I felt the cold face. The cold *stony* face.

It had worked.

I dropped the object I was holding. It shattered there on the floor. But I didn't need it any more. Nor Perseus' sword.

I'd killed the Gorgon in the only possible way. I turned it to stone by showing it its own face in the mirror. So—

THERE it is. I've got two choices now. I can go back to the employment agency and try to get another job. Something quiet and peaceful, like ditch-digging or assembly work in a boiler plant.

Or I could stay here and take care of my statues. I smashed the Medusa without looking at it. Used a crowbar. The others I have upstairs.

Margate has no relatives, so I might as well make myself at home. Let's see now—Trina would look good decorating the pool. Gerymanx would do for the foot of the staircase. I could make a gallery with Margate and Simpkins. As for Jory—I've got just the place for Jory.

I think that's the best solution, after all. Of course, I'll never touch anything that Margate dabbled in.

Which reminds me. That bottle, with the *djinn* inside. Maybe I can get rid of that, too.

CHAPTER VIII

AFTER a few days I stopped fingering bottles and began to drink from them. For Margate had a stock of fine liquor in his cellar, right next to the coffin that once housed Mr. Simpkins, the vampire.

Who can blame me? I was so lonely! Lonely for a sight of my unusual friends. I used to brush the statues every day with loving care. Particularly the statue of Trina the mermaid. Ah, there was a girl! I sighed when I thought of her, and the wonderful times we'd spent together. She and I would sit in the magic moonlight and I would toss her a fish. The sight of her piquant face as she twisted her neck and caught the fish in her mouth—it haunted me with wistful poignancy.

A man can stand only so much of such moon-drenched memories. I had to do something.

Of course, I could have left the mansion and sought a job elsewhere. But if I went away, who would brush the dust from the faces of my stone friends? Into what unsympathetic hands would I entrust the statues? I couldn't bear the thought.

SO I stayed. Stayed and studied.

Studied sorcery in the great black library of Julius Margate. Studied sorcery in the shadowed silence of dust-shrouded shelves.

I pored intently through endless pages, peered at passages in musty, iron-girdled tomes, perused with a perilous purpose.

For I was seeking a spell—an evocation—a rune or incantation—a rite or ritual—whereby I could summon my friends to animate life again. I sought to shatter that shroud of stone that swathed their souls.

Somewhere I must stumble across a solution, a means to kindle living flesh from marble. A mystic Pygmalion, I sought the formula to evoke a half-dozen Galateas.

There must be a way!

I read, and shuddered. Here and there were hints. Only a linguist could hope to translate Greek, Latin, medieval French and German, Sanskirt, Arabic and Hebrew.

Once translated, only a devotee of mantie arts would risk his soul to perform the dark offices necessary to conjure up Those who might grant the baleful boon of forbidden life.

But I searched. Day after day night after night. When the autumnal skies were black as my despair, I read on. When the ravening winds howled as mournfully as the sighs that rose in my throat, I pondered over the yellowed, crumbling pages.

The wings of ancient evil brushed my face and left deep lines etched about my eyes but I read on. I sat till dawn forever seeking a solution for my dark desires.

Seated one night in the study, I heard a knock on the great outer door.

I rose, startled. Wryly, I thought of Poe's *Raven.* But dismissing the absurd fancy with a grin, I shook off my bemusement and stalked down the hall.

As I went striding along, blood flowed back into my cramped limbs. I began to feel a little foolish about the whole thing.

I was going to see another human face finally, and I was self-conscious about the way I'd been spending my time.

More than that, I experienced a curious elation. I didn't know who in the world would be knocking on Julius Margate's door around midnight, but anyone would prove a welcome visitor to me. I thirsted for companionship.

Just the mere act of answering the door brought my spirits up with a bound.

I unchained the door, fumbled with the lock, threw the door open wide.

There was a sudden swoop.

A broomstick hit me in the face.

Riding the broomstick was a witch!

CHAPTER IX

I LAY flat on my back and stared up as the witch swooped into the hallway on her broomstick.

"Whoa, there," muttered the witch, and the broomstick clattered to a halt on the floor. The witch climbed off slowly. A dog and a cat jumped down from the shaft of the broomstick behind her. The witch dumped a large satchel on the floor.

All the while, I stared, recognizing her for what she was. Oh, she was a witch, all-right! The broomstick proved it—and so did the beaked nose, the wrinkled face, the gray, disheveled hair.

My first impulse was to stay right where I was, on the floor. It seemed somehow safer there. But the witch gave me a withering glance.

"Up off the floor with you," she snapped. "Is that any way to greet a guest?"

She placed her broomstick neatly in the corner.

I rose and faced her, mumbling my name. I didn't have the courage to hold out my hand in greeting.

She took no notice of the omission. A smile revealed her toothless gums.

"I am Miss Terioso," announced the witch. "An old friend of Julius Margate's."

"Is that so?" I answered, brilliantly.

"Used to see him around at covens," the witch explained.

"Covens?"

"Witch Sabbats," Miss Terioso enlightened me.

"But I didn't know he went in for such things."

"Oh, it was just a hobby with him. He dabbled a bit in witchcraft. Dabbled in everything, did Julius Margate. A bit of a dabbler and a bit of a babbler. Eh?"

Miss Terioso laughed. Some of the more sadistic radio advertisers might have liked that laugh for a spot announcement. I didn't care for it, myself.

"Aren't you going to ask me in?" she demanded. "Where's your courtesy, young sir?"

I indicated the parlor with a weak gesture. Miss Terioso's bent figure crept across the hall. She turned an evil profile toward me, and I'll swear she looked like something only a vulture would love. A mother vulture, at that.

“By the way,” she screeched, “better get some milk tor my dear pets here. My familiars, dear little lambs.”

I stared at the snarling, mangy dog and the hissing, scrawny black cat. They padded towards me stealthily.

HASTILY, I backed into the hall and ran to the kitchen. Returning with a saucer of milk, I found the witch and her two familiars in the parlor under the lamplight.

“That’s a courteous young man,” approved Miss Terioso. “Let them sup on milk. Of course it’s not as good as the real red stuff, but it’s better than nothing. Eh?”

I nodded, but the last half of the nod was a shiver.

“Look at the darlings,” commanded the witch. “My two sweet lovelies!”

“What are their names?” I asked, just as if I wanted to know.

“I call the cat Fido and the dog is named Puss,” she told me.

“Very nice,” I answered.

The witch sat down and raised her legs. With a shock I noticed that she was wearing slacks under her black skirt.

“Those slacks—” I began.

She giggled softly, like a wounded tigress.

“What’s wrong with them?” she demanded. “Nothing immodest about slacks, young sir! I have to wear them. I’m certainly not going to ruin a good pair of silk stockings riding a broomstick.”

This sounded logical.

“As it is, I’m worried about a straw shortage for my broom,” Miss Terioso complained. She opened her big satchel and took out a woolen knitting bag and two knitting needles.

“Do you knit?” I asked.

She giggled again. “Not exactly.”

Reaching into the knitting bag she extracted a tiny wax mannikin and began to stick her knitting needles into its body.

"Just a poppet," she explained. "Do you mind if I work while we talk?"

"Not at all," I gulped.

She put the poppet away and reached into the big satchel again. When her hand emerged again it was clutching something.

A human arm!

She reached in again and drew out a leg. A shapely leg, but a severed limb, for all that.

"Murderess!" I choked.

Miss Terioso smiled. "Flatterer!" she cooed. "I haven't really murdered anyone in years! No, young sir. These are not human limbs. They are the limbs of a window dummy. Here."

She began to bring out more appendages from her satchel. Another arm, another leg. A torso. And finally, a lovely head with a red wig.

Expertly, she fitted the various parts together. Soon a complete window dummy stood before us. A very pretty redheaded window dummy—distinctly female.

"Just a notion of mine," Miss Terioso explained. "I began to think that my poppets were too small to really get delicate work into them with the needles. So I bought this window dummy. It's still a wax figure, but a life-size one. Clever, eh?"

"Clever is no word for it," I said. And it wasn't.

Suddenly Miss Terioso shrugged.

"But let us get down to business, then," she declared. "I am here for a definite reason. I want Julius Margate."

"You can't see him." I spoke too rapidly to be cautious about it. "You can't see him. He's turned to stone."

The witch grinned.

"I know. I know all about it.

He's stone and the rest of his freaks are statues, too. And I want him."

"You want his statue?"

"Yes."

Was I crazy, or did Miss Terioso blush slightly?

"I—I used to have a crush on the old fool," she explained. "I'd like to have him around for sentimental reasons."

Somehow this didn't sound convincing. She looked about as sentimental as a barracuda.

There was more here than met the eye. I decided. So I also decided on a little strategy.

"By the way, Miss Terioso," I began. "Before we get down to details—would you care for a little refreshment?"

The witch simpered. "Don't mind if I do, young sir. Have you a bit of human—" She checked herself hastily. "No, I don't suppose you would," she sighed.

"Be right back," I promised.

AND I was. I went down to the cellar, rummaged around, and emerged with a fifth of Irish whiskey and two glasses. Bearing the refreshments back to the parlor, I poured out two neat shots.

Miss Terioso drained her glass.

I refilled it.

Miss Terioso drank the second as a chaser, so I refilled it again.

"Very pleasant," she told me. "I enjoy something mild for a change."

"One of Margate's prize bottles," I remarked.

"Speaking of bottles," she interrupted, "I meant to tell you this before. I not only want to buy Margate and the other statues, but that geni in the bottle as well. He has a geni in a bottle hasn't he?" I admitted it. "But what I want to know," I said, filling her glass for the fifth time, "is what you want with those statues."

She drank. I refilled her glass. "I told you," she repeated. "I am sentimental about the old son of a poltergeist. I'd like to have him around to look at. Eh?"

The liquor was working. The witch was getting slightly tipsy. I refilled her glass once more and proceeded artfully.

"Come now," I coaxed. "We're friends, aren't we? You can tell me the truth. What do you really want with those statues?"

"Ha!" cackled Miss Terioso. "He's so artful, this kind young sir. Me thinks he wants me to betray the fact that I intend to re-animate those statues myself and bring them back to life. But he'll never squeeze a word about it from me, he won't! Eh?"

I smiled and pressed my fingers together judiciously before my face.

"Suppose someone wanted to bring the statues back to life," I said, just as if I'd never heard her maunderings. "Would it be possible through sorcery?"

"Anything is possible through sorcery, my pet," said the witch. "If one is willing to pay the price." She cackled, grabbed the bottle, and clawed it to her scrawny bosom.

"Now the price for a fine young man like you would be high," she mumbled. "But an old hand like myself—blast you, there are ways and means of paying very little. Of striking bargains, as it were. I should conjure a demon . . . a friendly one, of course . . . and I should not sell my soul. I could not, for I sold it long ago. Long, long ago."

The witch began to sing *Long, Long Ago* in a voice like a tugboat's whistle. I coughed discreetly.

"Eh? It's the problem of animating those statues, isn't it, dear sir?" Miss Terioso smiled. "I have a sort of due bill on Hell, so to speak. There are certain powers and perquisites coming to me. I should just summon my demon, ask the boon, and the statues would be warm flesh and blood in the twinkling of an owl's eye!"

She drank again.

"But how do you summon demons?" I demanded.

"You hold a Black Mass," she answered. Everybody knows that." Suddenly a look of crafty reticence spread over her wrinkled countenance. "But I'm talking too much.

I see that now. I'll not tell you how to hold a Mass to Satan, never fear. I'd be such a silly to tell you, eh?"

I was prepared for this. For suddenly I saw a way of bringing back my friends. So I proceeded deliberately about my appointed task.

"You can't fool me," I mocked. "You and your talk about Black Masses and witchcraft." I rose and smiled. "You and your ridiculous little wax figures. And this foolish looking window dummy here!" I tapped the red-headed dummy with an accusing finger.

"You aren't a witch," I told her. "Just a broken-down dressmaker, I'm thinking. All this is nonsense."

She rose to the bait.

"Nonsense, is it?" screeched Miss Terioso. "I'm not a witch eh? I, the most famous sorceress in three continents and four dimensions?"

"Black Mass," I chortled, scornfully. "That's horseplay of another color."

Miss Terioso gulped the last drink in the bottle and lurched to her feet. She stared at me with bloodshot eyes.

"You can't hold a Black Mass," I snickered.

"Oh, can't I?" snarled the witch. "I'll show you! I'll not only hold a Black Mass—I'll blessed well hold one with stripes if you like!"

CHAPTER X

MISS TERIOSO swayed out into the wide hallway. I followed at her rundown heels, gasping in mingled apprehension and excitement.

Then we stood in the huge room that held the statuary. I lit a lamp and revealed the stony images of my friends. There was pot-bellied little Julius Margate, his face a marble mask of bewilderment. Gaunt Mr. Simpkins hovered, his false teeth forever frozen in an embarrassed grin. Jory, as a stone wolf, held a petrified paw in the air. Gerymanx was a noble Grecian centaur and looked somehow natural in stone. And Trina made a beautiful mermaid. She had a gorgeous shape—plenty of these and those, and fins, too.

I sighed.

The witch wheezed alcoholically in my face.

“Think I can’t do it?” she muttered.

“A Black Mass? It’s ridiculous,” I told her. “I understand you must draw a pentagon in blue chalk, and use holy wafers and sacramental wine. And you intone the Lord’s Prayer backwards in Latin, and use the body of a naked woman for an altar.”

“Right,” said the witch.

“Well, you haven’t got the facilities, so that’s that!” I jeered.

Miss Terioso tittered drunkenly.

“I’ll fix that,” she promised. “You’ve got some chalk, haven’t you, dear boy? Margate must have some around for his own spells.”

I rummaged through the library and returned with a stub of blue phosphorescent chalk.

I found Miss Terioso on her way back from the kitchen, laden with packages.

“Here’s the chalk.”

She set to work on hands and knees, drawing a glowing blue line. Panting, she arose.

“That’s no pentagon,” I exclaimed.

“There’s only four sides to it.”

“Ran out of chalk,” mumbled the witch. “It doesn’t matter, really.”

She faced me and began to chew on something.

“Holy wafer?” I asked.

“No,” said Miss Terioso. “Haven’t got any. This is a graham cracker. Same thing, almost.”

She drank something out of a cup.

“Sacramental wine?”

“Coca-cola,” the witch explained. “They will probably never know the difference.”

Suddenly she ran tipsily out of the room and returned with the window dummy, which she placed across two chairs.

"We have no naked woman for an altar, so the dummy will have to do," said Miss Terioso. "Here goes for the invocation."

As the phosphorescent chalk glowed in the darkness, the witch crouched over the window dummy mumbling sonorously.

"Wait a minute," I interrupted. "That doesn't sound like the Lord's Prayer backwards in Latin."

"Don't remember the Latin," sighed the witch. "I'm using pig-Latin."

She continued. After a moment she began to make passes with her clawlike hands. Her voice deepened, then rose shrilly. I recognized rumbling syllables and shrieking vocables.

The cadence was rhythmic. In my fancy the blue lines of the pentagon began to dance in pulsation with her pronouncements.

It wasn't fancy. The lines moved. The room swayed. Her voice shrieked.

Miss Terioso turned blue in the face. Her drunken mumblings slurred oddly. She began to sway.

The sight was very impressive. She looked just as though she had been given a Mickey Finn.

With a supernatural belch, Miss Terioso slid to the floor in a dead faint.

"Out like a light," I sighed. "Oh well, I might have known the old hag couldn't do it."

"Do what?"

"Why, that she couldn't—*hey!" I* wheeled suddenly as I realized that a strange voice had addressed me.

Staring across the blue line I saw the strange owner of the strange voice.

This time I almost slid to the floor.

But not quite. I gazed at the presence on the other side of the pseudo-pentagon.

Was it a demon?

If demons have red, scaly bodies like gigantic lizards, and semi-anthropomorphic limbs, slick hairless skulls, and faces like grinning death

—then it was a demon, all right.

Or a demon, all wrong.

Because despite this terrifying aspect, there was something horribly bedraggled about this apparition.

HIS eyes were bloodshot. His checks were scratched. His arms hung limply, and his chest rose and fell in despairing gasps. I noticed that his tail was dragging.

"Go ahead," said the deep voice, in accents that congealed my vertebrae. "Go ahead, make sport of me! You accursed human midge! You enscorcelled scum, you foul thaumaturgical imposter! You're not fit to be impaled on a spit for a weenie roast in hell!"

"What do you mean?" I gulped.

"What do I mean? The infernal impudence of the nigromantic nincompoop! I mean you bungled the whole ceremony! You used the wrong materials, you gave the wrong accent to the invocations, you even left out part of the Gloric Chant!"

"But—"

"And what does that mean? I'll tell you what," snarled the demon, and his eyes flashed at 400 degrees Fahrenheit. "It means I was dragged bodily through five-dimensional space. It means I was twisted through the veritable warpings in the spatial continuum! I was bruised and battered and banged and buffeted, and nearly annihilated before I got here! My mundane simulacrum was almost impossible to assume.

"And why? Because an amateur sorceror like yourself didn't know how to call me. Why you don't know enough to raise the dead! Why don't you read the rule books?"

"Wait a minute," I temporized. "I didn't call you. She did—Miss Terioso, the witch. She was drunk and forgot a lot of things."

"Drunk eh?" said the demon, with a self-righteous smirk. "Serves her right. Never touch the stuff myself. Wine is a mocker."

I nodded.

The demon did an alarming thing. He thrust his head out on his rubbery neck. It stretched a good foot.

As he darted his skull forward and back restlessly, I diffidently jumped a yard to one side.

"Well, now that I'm here, what are you going to do about it?" demanded the demon. "Have I wriggled through the dimensions all for nothing? I want something to eat, something to kill, or something to bargain over."

"I'll bargain with you," I said boldly.

"You? The demon sniffed. "You aren't a sorceror. What can you offer me? Your soul?"

"I don't think so," I hesitated.

"Current rate of exchange is very favorable," said the demon suddenly all coaxing smiles. "I pay highest prices."

"Not interested," I insisted.

"Then I might as well go," the demon sighed.

Inspiration smote me.

"Wait a minute," I snapped. "I'll give you a wonderful trade. How would you like to own a geni?"

"A geni? You have a geni?" The glare on the demon's face registered red incredulity. "I doubt that very much."

"I have a geni in a bottle," I told him. "Wait right here and I'll be back in a flash with the flask."

He waited, and I was.

Barely a minute passed before I returned, bearing the curious old bottle from Margate's library. Within it gurgled the geni, like a shrunken mermaid.

The demon goggled.

"You *have* got one at that," he admitted. His eyes narrowed to cunning slits.

"What are you asking for it?" he purred.

"A boon."

"Be specific."

“I want these statues reanimated,” I said, waving my arm to embrace the stone images around me. “I want their souls, or life-force to return to flesh instead of stone.”

“That’s very difficult,” said the demon, thoughtfully. “Couldn’t you settle for something easier? How about a blonde? Lots of you magicians seem to go for deals involving blondes. A nice blond *succubae,* now, with big—”

“Never mind,” I insisted, “I want those statues alive.”

The demon shrugged. “I don’t know.”

“Think of the geni,” I said, shaking the bottle. “One of your own kind. A helpless prisoner in a bottle. How would you like to be shut up in a bottle, like—like an olive?”

The demon winced. I knew I had him.

“I am too soft-hearted,” he rumbled. “But I’ll do it. Or try to do it. A most unusual request, and there’s so much to arrange.”

“Get to work,” I said. “I’ll toss you the bottle in a moment.”

“Hold on,” advised the demon. “This is liable to be a bit messy.”

It was.

I didn’t mind the way the air changed colors as the demon crouched in the center of the room, croaking gutturally as he squatted like a malignant frog.

I didn’t mind the great quaking wind that rose to howl through my hair.

I didn’t mind the smoke and the flame.

But when the chandelier crashed from the ceiling and hit me on the head, I minded very much indeed.

The world went black and I went to sleep beside Miss Terioso on the floor.

There was a confused impression of a gigantic hand grasping the geni-bottle, a muffled illusion of smoke and shouting, and then I went out, like the proverbial light.

The next thing I knew I was awake, spitting out a mouthful of broken glass.

“What a hangover!” I whispered.

“Oh, yeah?” said a strange voice.

CHAPTER XI

I SAT up. Miss Terioso and the shattered chandelier still lay on the floor. But the demon had vanished from the chalk formation, and the bottle with the geni was nowhere to be seen.

I groped for the light, seeking the source of the voice.

Radiance flooded the room and I stared at the statues.

Statues no longer!

They *were* alive. I saw familiar flesh once more. The grotesque bodies of men and the wolf and the centaur and mermaid were moving.

I ran over to Trina. The beautiful mermaid with the lovely green hair stared up at me with a radiant smile.

“Trina, darling!” I whispered, taking her in my arms.

“Get away from me or I’ll kick your teeth down your throat with my hoofs!” boomed a gruff voice.

“But you have no hoofs, dear,” I laughed. “You’re a mermaid. You have a—”

“Don’t you call me ‘dear’, you oaf! I’m a centaur!” growled the voice.

I stepped back in dismay.

That voice—I recognized it—was the voice of Gerymanx the centaur! But it came from Trina’s body!

I rushed over to Gerymanx.

“Hello, my friend,” came the calm words. Again I recognized the voice from the centaur’s body. It was the voice of Julius Margate!

“Who—who are you?” I whispered.

The centaur smiled. “I’m Margate, of course. Who else would I be?”

I gulped. “You’re sure?”

“Of course.”

“Come here.” I grabbed the centaur’s arm and led the figure over to a full-length mirror.

“Take a look,” I suggested.

HE looked at him—at the horsebody projecting behind him. When he saw what he was dragging around in the rear, the man almost collapsed.

“But I’m Margate!” he wailed. “What am I doing in Gerymanx’s body?”

“What is Gerymanx doing in Trina’s body?” I asked.

“Who is in my body?” Margate suddenly yelled. He ran over to confront his body and reached out a cautious hand to grasp the chest.

“What are you reaching for, dearie?” lisped a high voice. “Be careful how you handle my trunk.”

“Myrtle!” whispered Margate. “Myrtle, the hamadryad.”

“Of course,” answered Myrtle. “Can’t you recognize my limbs?”

“What is all this?” demanded the rasping voice that had roused me from unconsciousness. I turned to face tall Mr. Simpkins.

“Why am I not a wolf?” demanded the voice. “Who stole my form? Why am I a wolf in My Simpkins’ clothing?”

It was Jory the werewolf, in the vampire’s body. As I expected, the vampire was now wearing the wolf-form instead.

“Is this a way for a self-respecting vampire to be?” groaned the wolf. “Going around on all fours like an animal?”

“Something terrible has happened,” I gasped. “You’re alive, but your souls got into the wrong bodies. The demon made a mistake. You’ve switched.”

Then I remembered. Gerymanx was in Trina’s body. But where was Trina?

I stared out the open window. Then I saw it—the tree, the tree of Myrtle the hamadryad. Trina had to be in the tree! It must have been transformed through the open window like the rest of the statuary.

Running across the room, I bounded out on the lawn and threw my arms around the tree-trunk.

“Trina,” I whispered. “Trina, darling!” There was no answer.

“Trina, speak to me!”

Not a leaf rustled.

I stumbled back into the room. “Trina,” I groaned.

“Here I am, darling!”

The familiar voice fired my blood.

I turned my head.

Coming toward me was—*the red-headed window dummy!*

She fell into my embrace, the lovely waxen figure, and we kissed.

I shuddered. She was alive—but still wax.

Now I understood. In the mixup, the window dummy, having, no soul, probably entered Myrtle’s tree. Trina entered the body of the window dummy.

So there we stood.

A vampire in a werewolf’s body, a werewolf in a vampire’s. A man in a centaur’s form, and a centaur in a mermaid. A mermaid in a window dummy, and a tree nymph in the shape of a man.

And I myself, in one hell of a mess!

MISS TERIOSO couldn’t have picked a worse moment to regain consciousness. Which is probably why she picked this moment.

The witch rose from the floor and her bleary gaze swept the room more thoroughly than her broom could have done the job. In a moment comprehension came to her.

“So you made your own bargain with the demon,” she scolded me. “Gave him the geni, I warrant? A clever young sir, aren’t you. I’ve a good mind to—”

Then she saw the face of Julius Margate.

Instantly a change swept over Miss Terioso. I remembered she had admitted having a crush on Mr. Margate—and her actions now confirmed the fact.

She simpered coyly, straightened her stringy hair, and assumed a smile such as one sees on the face of a particularly hungry crocodile.

“Why Julius my dear!” she gushed, advancing on Mr. Margate with a sickening leer. “I’m so glad to see you.”

“Keep your hands off me, you old cow!” shrilled a high voice.

Miss Terioso halted and stared at the man.

“Don’t look at me that way, you Walpurgistic wench!” said the voice from Margate’s body.

Miss Terioso, not realizing that Margate’s body was now in habited by Myrtle the hamadryad, was confused.

“Here I am,” called another voice. “It’s me, Julius Margate, over here.”

The witch turned to face the centaur. Her face was shock-proof, but her lips twitched.

“Don’t you recognize me, sugar?” asked Julius Margate, waving his tail coyly.

Miss Terioso gaped at the centaur.

“Who is making sport of me?” she snapped. “What sort of jest are you playing?”

“Nobody’s making fun of you,” insisted Margate. “Come on over and get-friendly. I’ll give you a ride around the block if you like.”

The witch froze. “I don’t want a ride around the block,” she announced. “I’m getting out of here.”

She swooped across the hall and returned with the cat and dog under her arm. She set her satchel and broomstick down.

“I’m leaving, baggage and broomstick,” sniffed Miss Terioso. “Oh, yes, I must take my window dummy, too.”

“Not me,” said Trina.

The witch goggled at the redheaded wax dummy.

“Did you speak?” she demanded.

"Of course. What's the matter with your ears, outside of their looks?" Trina replied.

"Something is very much wrong here," the witch declared.

"I've been trying to tell you," I said. I explained briefly.

Miss Terioso nodded.

"Nevertheless, the window dummy is mine. It's my poppet, and I shall pop off with it."

"Go fly your broomstick," shrilled Trina the mermaid. "And don't call me a dummy, you Halloween bag!"

"She's right," said Margate, from the centaur's body. "You have no claim on a soul. You'd better go now."

"You dare to order me out of your house?" screamed the witch.

"I dare to throw you out," said Margate.

Miss Terioso made for the door, hastily. She mounted her broomstick and turned.

"Very well," she sniffed. "Good riddance to all of you. And as for you, Julius Margate, you're just a—oh, go look in a rear-view mirror and see what you are!"

The door banged s-hut behind her.

THERE was an ominous silence.

I felt the danger of that silence. I knew my peculiar friends. They were bad enough to handle in their own weird bodies. But now that those bodies were all mixed up, I'd better do something in a hurry.

"You must be hungry after such an ordeal," I said. "Let's all go out to the kitchen and I'll whip up a snack to eat."

We did.

They ate ravenously. The sight of a mermaid eating oats and a centaur smoking a cigar rather spoiled my own appetite. And the clumsiness of all of them in their new forms did something to general table manners. But hunger ruled for a while.

Then they finished, and gloom reigned.

“This is a fine mess sighed Gerymanx. “What do we do now? Usually after a meal I go out for a brisk trot around the stable and grounds. But now I’m a mermaid. I can’t even canter.”

“I’d like to go out and have the birds perch on my limbs,” sighed Myrtle. “But I can’t, in this man’s body. It’s so difficult. I doubt if I can even get a robin to build a nest in my hair.”

“Don’t you dare put bird-nests in my hair,” yelled Margate, from the centaur’s body.

“Your hair?”

“That body you’re wearing still belongs to me,” Margate insisted. “I expect you to take good care of it.”

“What about me?” asked Jory, disconsolately. “I’d like to howl in the sunshine at dawn. But in a vampire’s body I’ll have to sleep all day in a musty old coffin.”

“That’s nothing,” responded Mr. Simpkins the vampire. “Just look at me in this wolf’s form! I’m afraid I’m going to shed all over the place. And I can’t seem to get the knack of changing back into a man! You’ll have to give me some lessons soon, Jory.”

“Your troubles are mild.” insisted Julius Margate. “How can I go out in polite society in a centaur’s body? It’s enough to give anybody a fright.”

Trina pouted at me from the window dummy’s body.

“Can I take a swim in the pool?” she whispered.

“No. Your wax will spoil,” I told her sadly.

“We’ve got to settle this problem somehow,” said Julius Margate. “Wonder if we could call up that demon again and make him put us in the right bodies?”

“Not without selling somebody’s soul,” I told my employer. “I’ve made the only trade I could, and from now on, souls are the articles of exchange. And I won’t sell my soul, I’ll tell you that!”

Margate shook his head.

"We'll have to figure it out," he declared. "It can't go on like this forever. It isn't natural for a werewolf to be a vampire, and a centaur to be mermaid."

"It isn't natural for a mermaid to be a window dummy either," said my red-headed companion. "I'm dying to be tearing a herring." Her words smote my heart.

"I'll think of something, folks," I promised. "Tomorrow night, when Mr. Jory wakes up at sundown in Mr. Simpkins' body, we can get together again and figure something out. Right now we all need sleep after this excitement." So, yawning at dawning, we went to bed.

I fell asleep as soon as my head hit the pillow. But I didn't dream.

The way things were going, I was having my nightmares when I was wide awake.

CHAPTER XII

"WE'VE got to do something, bright now!" insisted Julius Margate, over the supper table.

The heads of his bedraggled companions nodded in eager assent.

"I'm sick of sleeping in a coffin," said Jory the werewolf. "I want to go back to my dog kennel." He shot a malicious glance at Mr. Simpkins in his wolf's body.

Simpkins wagged his tail. "What about me?" he complained. "I turned into a man in the daylight but when the sun set tonight I became a wolf again. And I don't like it. I think I'm getting the mange." Gerymanx the centaur, in his mermaid form, propped both elbows on the table and sighed. "Being a mermaid is no fun, either," he declared. "I can't go near that swimming pool unless I get a pair of water wings.

"Imagine a mermaid who doesn't know how to swum!"

He started to expand on the theme, then turned in shocked surprise to survey the body of Julius Margate. Julius Margate's human body rose and began to divest itself of clothing.

“What goes on here?” I asked, in a startled voice.

“Oh,” said Myrtle the hamadryad, from within Margate’s body. “I’m just pruning off these clothes, that’s all. I can’t stand the pressure on my limbs.”

“Please, for the sake of decency,” I protested. “Wait a while. I’ll find a way to restore you all to your proper shapes.”

“Hurry, darling.” It was the voice of Trina in my ear. The wax dummy leaned close. “I do so want to kiss you,” said the girl, wistfully. “But every time I try it, my head falls off.”

“Yes, hurry up,” yelled Julius Margate, from the body of Gerymanx the centaur. “I’m afraid to visit the barber shop to get my tail clipped.”

“Too bad,” I sympathized.

“And that’s not all,” sighed Margate. “I wish you’d go and steal the witch’s broom and use it to sweep out the stable.”

“There’s an idea!” cried Trina.

“What?”

“Why don’t you go and visit the witch tomorrow? Persuade *her* to hold another Black Mass.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, she has some kind of a due-bill on hell, hasn’t she? She can get the demon to switch us back into our regular bodies. Then we can be self-respecting mermaids and vampires and werewolves again.”

“Brilliant!” said Margate.

“But the witch is mad at us,” I objected.

“Then you must soften her up,” Margate told me “Make love to her, or something.”

“Make love to a witch? A dizzy old spinster like her?”

“She’s not so bad,” Margate lied. “She’s not exactly a spring chicken, either,” I answered. “She’s more like a vulture.”

“It’s the only way out,” Margate snapped “You’ll have to do it. You can’t let us down this way.”

I sighed and nodded.

Trina nibbled my ear with waxen lips. "Just remember," she whispered. "Make love to her, but no funny stuff. I get jealous so easily. Why it makes my wax melt to think of you in her arms."

"It makes my blood freeze to think of that," I replied.

"Even if you have ice-cubes in your veins, you must go through with it," implored Julius Margate. "Tomorrow you woo the witch." And so it was decided.

NEXT afternoon, after getting directions from Julius Margate I left the mansion on the hill and set out along a winding path through the woods to the house of Miss Terioso.

Carrying a basket on my arm, I approached the cottage feeling like Little Red Riding Hood on her way to Grandma's house.

Miss Terioso's cottage looked something like Grandma's house at that—except for the red and green smoke that poured from the crumbling stone chimney as I walked up the path.

The smoke assumed ghastly, billowing shapes, and I averted my eyes. I preferred to read the signs on the cottage lawn.

"MISS TERIOSO—BLACK, WHITE, & ALL COLORS OF MAGIC"

"LOVE PHILTRES. FORTUNES TOLD. PSYCHO-ANALYSIS"

"UNFAMILIAR SPIRITS KEEP OUT"

I knocked on the door, letting my trembling wrist provide the leverage.

Miss Terioso stuck her head out. "We don't want any," she said. "Oh, it's you, young sir. Step in, won't you?"

I would, and did.

There was a bearskin rug in the hallway. As I put my foot on it, it grunted horribly, and the gigantic head rose with gnashing teeth.

"Down, Bruno!" commanded the witch. The rug subsided, and regarded me through malevolent glass eyes.

I stood in the witch's cottage glancing around at the ancient furniture—1890 vintage, and typical of an old maid's home.

Miss Terioso resumed her seat by the fire and took up her knitting. She was silent, absorbed.

I looked at the placards on the walls. There was a Charter Membership in Local Coven Number 9, a neatly embroidered motto, decorated with mandrake roots, reading *“A Fiend in Need Is a Fiend Indeed”*.

Then I broke the silence.

“What are you knitting?” I inquired.

“Oh, just a shroud,” said Miss Terioso, brightly.

I coughed. “I’ve brought you a little present,” I coaxed.

Her eyes brightened. I handed her the basket. She opened the cover.

“What is it?” she asked.

“Just a little wax fruit.”

“Wax fruit?”

“To melt down into poppets,” I explained.

Miss Terioso favored me with a warm smile.

“How kind of you,” she gushed.

I turned on the charm. “I was so delighted to see you the other evening,” I said, sitting down. “I admired you greatly.”

“You *did?”* She positively simpered.

“Yes. I said to myself, ‘now there’s a girl with real high spirits about her,’ that’s what I said.”

“Flatterer! I usually consort with low spirits,” Miss Terioso gurgled.

“I was wondering if you’d care to have a date with me,” I ventured. “How about going out tonight?”

“Why, there’s no Sabbat tonight.”

“I wasn’t thinking of a Sabbat,” I answered. “Just a little stepping.

You know, hitting a few high spots.”

“You really want to?” beamed the witch.

She blushed. “Very well. But first I must go to the beauty parlor. I’ll drop you off at home on the way and then pick you up afterwards when we go out.”

Miss Terioso rose and bustled over to her broomstick.

I gulped.

"We're not going to ride that thing, are we?" I asked.

"Why, of course," she declared.

Trembling, I mounted the broomstick behind her. She opened the cottage door, muttered a few words under her breath and we were off in the twilight.

CHAPTER XIII

I DON'T know whether or not you've ever ridden a broomstick, but it's not an experience one is likely to forget. I don't like to think about that soaring sweep through dusk-driven skies. All I can say is that for my money, the broomstick will never replace the horse.

When I was finally dropped off—literally—at my destination—

Miss Terioso waved farewell and called that she would come back from the beauty parlor and pick me up again.

For several minutes I wondered if she would have to pick me up, actually, before I'd be able to stir. But after a time I groaned, stood up and hobbled into the house.

The gang bombarded me with questions.

"Did you see her?"

"What did she say?"

"Did you make a date?"

I answered definitely. "I'm taking Miss Terioso out to dine and dance this evening," I announced. "Margate, I'm borrowing one of your tuxedoes. And about $30 in cash."

Trina walked up to me, her wax arms swinging in agitation.

"I'm jealous," she confessed. "Take me with you as a chaperone."

"Impossible," I sighed.

"Then I'll go alone, with Myrtle in Margate's body," she declared. "I don't trust you with that baleful hag."

"I'll hitch up the station-wagon," Margate chimed in. "Then I'll harness myself to it and pull the rest of you into town."

I protested.

"Do you want to spoil everything? You'll make a terrible scene in human society! Leave everything to me," I argued.

"But—"

There was a thump from upstairs.

Miss Terioso had made a three-point landing on the roof.

"Get out of sight," I commanded. "Don't let her see you and arouse her anger. I'll skip upstairs and change and crawl out the skylight to join her. Now all of you stay here and behave. I'll have you back in your bodies before morning."

They scattered, and I scampered.

Five minutes later I joined Miss Terioso on the roof.

I stared at the vision in the starlight.

For Miss Terioso was changed. The magic of the beauty parlor had wrought a startling transformation.

This was no old crone who awaited me, but a radiantly lovely woman—a vivid brunette with lips red as love's own fire. Her eyes sparkled and she smiled with pleasure as she noted my reaction.

"Life in the old gal yet, eh?" she said. Her voice was low, husky.

I said nothing, but mounted the broomstick and put my arms around her. Her nearness was intoxicating.

We sailed up toward the stars. Her hair streamed in the wind, mingling with the moonlight.

I enjoyed the ride.

All incongruity was forgotten. By the time we landed on a fire-escape and clambered down to reach a nightclub entrance, we were chatting merrily.

We swept into the lobby of the club and Miss Terioso checked her broomstick in the cloakroom.

A waiter led us across the dancefloor to a table.

“Champagne,” I ordered.

I didn’t need it. I was intoxicated as I say, by her presence. But revolving drunkenly in the back of my brain was the consciousness of my purpose.

Soon I would artfully wheedle and cajole her into changing my friends back. But the evening was young now, and I could enjoy myself first. Enjoy her company. Gaze into those burning black eyes. Hold her flowery-fragrant fingers.

We lifted our glasses.

“Here’s to you,” murmured Miss Terioso.

“Here’s to—us,” I corrected.

“Yes,” she sighed.

We drank.

After that I tried to sit on her lap.

Now, thinking back, I know what must have happened. Miss Terioso was an old hand at the game.

She’d probably anticipated this, the old she-wolf, and slipped a love philtre into my drink.

But the effects were startling.

All at once I knew that I was madly in love with Miss Terioso. The thought of my friends, the thought of Trina—all was forgotten.

SHE gave me a demure glance and I held her hand and stared into her inscrutable eyes and I leaned forward over the table, and then I got hit in the head with a human leg.

Yes, a human leg sailed through the air and hit me on the back of the head!

That’s one way to sober a fellow up.

I turned quickly and stared!

Lying on the floor was a leg. With a shock, I recognized it. Trina’s leg, from the window dummy!

Employing my knowledge of trajectory I wheeled around and stared at a table across the way.

Sure enough, Trina had made good her threat! She sat at another table with Myrtle in Margate's body.

I collected my scattered wits hastily. Then, bending down, I collected the scattered leg, rose politely, mumbled an excuse to Miss Terioso, and stalked over to the table carrying the wax leg.

"Pardon me, madam, but I think you've lost something," I said, for the benefit of eavesdrop-, pers. Trina accepted the leg, bent down, fastened it on again, and winked.

"What the hell's the big idea?" I whispered furiously. "I thought I told you to stay home."

"We're going to keep an eye on you," Trina answered. "After getting an eyeful of that glamorous hag, I don't trust you any further than I can throw my limbs."

"We're all here," added Myrtle, from Margate's body.

"No!"

But as I glanced around, I saw Mr. Simpkins and Jory at another table, in each other's bodies. Jory's body had resumed human shape.

"Margate and Gerymanx are outside, in the centaur's and mermaid's bodies," Myrtle added. "They came-in the wagon."

"I hope to heaven they stay there," I sighed. "What if the customers saw them?"

It was a hideous thought. As things were, the situation was bad enough. No sooner had I uttered the words than I caught a snatch of conversation between Myrtle and a stranger at the adjoining table.

Myrtle, in Margate's body, had probably been drinking. The stranger certainly had. His little bloodshot eyes revolved woozily as he mumbled.

"Pardon me," sir," he hiccuped. "But that lady at th' table wish' you—has she got wooden leg, huh?"

"Sure," answered Myrtle, gaily.

"Mos' unusual," said the drunk.

“What’s unusual about that?” demanded Myrtle, suddenly argumentative. “Why shouldn’t she have a wooden leg? Me, I’m *all* wood!”

Under the influence of liquor, Myrtle forgot she was in Margate, and thought of herself as still being a hamadryad in a tree. But the drunken stranger didn’t know this. He peered incredulously.

“You’re all wood? he echoed.

“Of course,” said Myrtle. “Do you want to examine my trunk?”

“You’re crazy!” sneered the drunk, wobbling to his feet.

“I am not,” said Myrtle. “I can prove that I’m a tree. Why, I even have termites!”

“I wouldn’t brag about it sir.”

“Say, who are you calling sir?” shrilled Myrtle. “I’ll have you know I’m a lady! A hamadryad.”

The drunk stared at Julius Margate’s body.

“I wouldn’t admit such a thing,” he declared passionately.

“What’s wrong with that?” Myrtle flung back. “Some of my best friends are hamadryads! And if you don’t stop annoying me—I’ll have my girl friend throw her head at you!”

The drunk drew back in panic.

Mr. Simpkins, in Jory’s body, stalked over to the scene and quickly led Myrtle away in time to prevent mayhem.

Jory, in Mr. Simpkin’s body, quietly left the room.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Miss Terioso advancing on me. I kicked Trina’s waxen shin.

“Keep quiet from now on,” I ordered. “Nearly had a riot as it is. Now I’ll steer Miss Terioso away from here before she recognizes you.”

I turned, bowed to the advancing witch.

“Let’s dance,” I suggested.

I danced with the witch on the nightclub floor while my window dummy sweetheart regarded me with a smouldering light in her lovely glass eyes.

CHAPTER XIV

FORTUNATELY, I was dancing and didn’t see the scene in the outer bar. But I heard about it later—plenty.

Mr. Simpkins, in Jory’s body, had retired to the bar for a quiet and meditative drink.

“What’ll it be?” asked the bartender.

“Got any bl—give me Scotch,” said Mr. Simpkins, quickly, erasing his original thought.

The Scotch arrived. Simpkins paid for it with a $20 bill.

The sight of the greenback fluttering in the breeze acted as an unwitting signal to a tall blonde draped over the end of the bar. She uncoiled herself and advanced sinuously on Mr. Simpkins.

“You look sad, Mister,” she observed. “Are you lonesome?”

This remarkable technique overpowered Mr. Simpkins quite completely. He was pretty unworldly, being a supernatural entity.

“I am sad,” he sighed.

“Tell Olga what the matter is,” coaxed the blonde, summoning the bartender and ordering a Silver Fizz. “Why are you sad?”

“Well,” breathed Mr. Simpkins, “I used to be a vampire, but I’m not any more.”

Olga blinked. This stranger was pretty drunk.

“You know how it is,” he mournfully observed. “I’m hungry for blood. Now all I get is dog biscuits.”

“Say,” said Olga, perturbed. “Who do you think you’re kidding? That’s a funny line for a guy to hand out to a girl. You look like a wolf to me.”

This was definitely the wrong thing to say.

“I am a wolf,” muttered Mr. Simpkins.

“What do you mean, you’re a wolf?” laughed Olga, back on familiar territory again. “You’ve got to show me, brother!”

Mr. Simpkins, naive soul, sighed.

“Right here?” he asked.

"Sure. Why not?"

"All right," said Mr. Simpkins. "I'll show you."

He descended from his bar stool and crouched on the floor. He threw his head back and began to whimper. Suddenly his body seemed to quiver. A plastic horripilation coursed through his frame. His forehead melted to a slant. His nose lengthened. His arms and legs furred.

Mr. Simpkins turned into a werewolf on the barroom floor.

Olga saw and was convinced. She was so convinced she began to scream.

About that time, Miss Terioso and I were dancing near the doorway. Miss Terioso heard the scream and turned her head.

She looked out.

Her gaze was not attracted by Mr. Simpkins, but by Jory. He stood at the checking counter, and he was grabbing Miss Terioso's broom.

"Come on," gasped my dancing-partner, running off the floor.

"Where are you going with my broomstick?" she yelled at the fleeing Jory.

"I'm just borrowing it to use outside," he called. "Don't forget, Margate is in Gerymanx's body out there."

"Come back here," yelled the witch, leaping after him.

Hell broke loose with a vengeance.

Miss Terioso clawed at Jory. She beat the poor man over the head with her broomstick, uttering shrill imprecations.

A flying form launched past me as I wavered in the doorway.

It was Trina, in the window dummy's body She hurled herself on Miss Terioso, valiantly coming to Jory's aid.

Miss Terioso turned.

Before I could intervene, she grappled with the red-headed dummy. Before the eyes of the shrieking spectators, she tore the window dummy apart, literally limb from limb.

A torso, a head, and pairs of arms and legs fell to the floor.

Behind me came another scream. I turned in time to see Myrtle, in Margate's body, exchanging wild blows with the drunk from the next table.

"Good God, what next?" I gasped.

I started toward the howling wolf on the floor. Then something thundered past me from the outer door.

Margate, in the body of the centaur, charged into the night-club lobby. Squirming in his arms was the mermaid—Greymanx. Stamping his hoofs, the terrible apparition bearing its hideous burden, roared down the bar.

"What is all this?" boomed Margate, flicking his tail and neighing wildly.

Arms encircled me. I turned to face Miss Terioso, brandishing her broomstick.

"Let's get out of here, eh?" she panted. "Get on the broomstick before it's too late."

I mounted in a daze.

The howling wolf, the prancing centaur, the fighting man, and the dismembered body of the window dummy blocked our path. We sailed over them all.

Sailed over them—and into the arms of the police!

CHAPTER XV

JUDGE NUMBOTTOM heard the story. First he heard it from the drunk who insulted Myrtle. Then he heard it from Olga the come-on girl. After that he got a few stumbling sentences out of me.

Finally he listened to Patrolman Lossowitz as he explained the whole thing, from ghastly beginning to untimely end.

"So she says she's a tree, Your Honor," mumbled Lossowitz, unemotionally. "Meanwhile out in the bar this guy is telling Olga he used to be a vampire but now he's a werewolf. And he turns into a wolf.

"Meanwhile, the witch tears this other woman to bits, and then the centaur and the mermaid run in, and the witch tries to beat it on a broomstick with this guy here.” Lossowitz pointed to me.

Judge Numbottom pointed to Lossowitz. His face was purple and he could hardly speak. The veins bulged on his bald forehead.

“Stop that kind of talk,” he gasped, weakly. “After all, this is a night court, not a bedtime story session. I’m a grown man, Lossowitz, am I not?”

“Yes, Your Honor,” said Lossowitz meekly.

“Yes, what?”

“Yes, you’re not,” Lossowitz declared, uncertainly.

“Shut up! You can’t think straight or talk straight! Admit you were drinking in this night club!”

“No, Your Honor. Not a drop.”

“You don’t drink drops, I realize that. Probably a bottle,” decided the terrible old man. “But drunk or sober, you couldn’t see such things. Bring in the prisoners, Lossowitz, and let me question them myself.”

Obediently, Patrolman Lossowitz marched out and returned with Myrtle, Trina, Margate, Gerymanx, Jory, and Mr. Simpkins in tow. Miss Terioso marched before them, indignantly waving her broomstick.

Judge Numbottom took one look at the man, the centaur, the window dummy, the mermaid, the second man, and the wolf. Then he hid his face in his hands.

“No, no!” murmured. “Cover them up. Lossowitz! Get blankets and at least cover some of them up. That horse-thing and that human fish, anyway!”

It was a matter of minutes before Judge Numbottom raised his haggard face. He winced as he stared at the motley assemblage. Finally his eyes lighted on Miss Terioso as the most attractive and normal-looking prisoner.

“Will you please step forward and answer a few questions,” he said, controlling his voice.

Miss Terioso advanced.

“Your name?”

“Miss Terioso.”

“Your—your occupation?”

“Oh,” she replied lightly. “I’m just a witch.”

Judge Numbottom began to turn purple again. “I beg your pardon,” he rasped. “I must have misunderstood you.”

“I’m just a witch, Your Honor,” she said. “I ride broomsticks.”

“Go on,” sighed the Judge. “You nauseate me strangely.”

“Well, it all started when these people turned into statues,” said Miss Terioso.

“Statues?”

“Yes, Marble. Stone, you know. They’re all statues, really.”

“Looks like a statue-tory offense,” put in Lossowitz, unhelpfully.

“I don’t understand,” sighed the Judge.

“This man can confirm my story,” said Miss Terioso, pointing her broomstick at me.

“That’s right,” I answered. “These people were once statues, in my charge. But as you see, they’ve undergone a change, Your Honor. That’s simple enough. I haven’t got all my marble statues any more.”

“You haven’t got all your marbles any more, you mean!” snarled Judge Numbottom. “Step down, you two. You’re driving me crazy!”

Margate, in Gerymanx’s body, sidled forward.

“Let me help you,” he suggested. “I owned these people before they were statues.”

JUDGE NUMBOTTOM looked at the horse’s body protruding from under the blanket. He favored Margate with a long, painful scrutiny.

“Who and what are you?” he whispered.

“I’m a centaur.”

Lossowitz interfered again. “The guy is lying, Your Honor!” he bawled, excitedly. “He ain’t no centaur. I seen lots of centaurs when I was in Washington!”

“Shut up!” thundered the Judge. “Let me speak to the others.”

He addressed the mermaid in the centaur’s arms.

"What about you, young lady?" he asked, forcing a smile. "What is the reason for your—ah—piscatorial disguise?"

"Who are you calling a lady?" snarled the voice of Gerymanx from the mermaid's body. "And what kind of a fishy remark are you making about me being piscatorial?"

Judge Numbottom was sorry he started the whole thing.

"Can't any of you talk sense?" be begged.

"Let me help you." said Jory, from Mr. Simpkins' body. "It's very simple. You see, I used to be in that body over there."

He pointed at the wolf form now worn by Mr. Simpkins.

"You were in the body of that animal?" Judge Numbottom's eyes started from their sockets.

"Why not?" piped the wolf.

"A talking wolf?" moaned the Judge.

"Well, if it disturbs you so much," sniffed the wolf. He bent forward and began to go through contortions. It was a fascinating if repulsive spectacle. Slowly, the wolf turned into a man.

"You see?" he asked.

"I don't want to see!" groaned Judge Numbottom.

"Then look at her!" suggested Lossowitz, pointing at Trina in the body of the redheaded window dummy.

The window dummy was redheaded no longer. With a clatter, the dummy's head dropped to the floor.

"So sorry," said Trina. "Looking at a sight like that wolf is enough to make anyone lose their head."

She stooped and picked up her head slowly.

Judge Numbottom's eyes were almost resting on his cheekbones.

"It's sorcery," he sobbed. "Sheer black sorcery! And how can I press a sorcery charge at election time?"

I stepped up.

"Listen, Your Honor," I whispered. "I think I have a way to straighten this matter out. Never mind getting the story straight. I know a way to restore these people to their rightful forms. Then we can forget the whole thing."

"How?" gasped the Judge.

Briefly, I told him about Miss Terioso holding a due bill on hell. She could evoke a demon and order him to restore my friends to their rightful shapes.

"Incredible," objected the Judge.

"No more incredible than what you've seen here," I reminded him.

"Why doesn't she do it, then?" he asked.

"She's stubborn. I suggest that you force her to do it."

"How?"

"Issue a court order commanding her to evoke the demon and make the change."

The Judge sat up.

His eyes flashed fire. "I'll damned well issue the order," he snapped. "If not, I'll have the lot of you jailed for the rest of your unnatural lives."

CHAPTER XVI

"HAVE you got your due-bill on hell ready?" I whispered nervously, crouching next to Miss Terioso in the darkened courtroom.

"It's right here in my satchel," replied the witch. During the past hour her glamor had fallen away, and she was once again the familiar crone-like figure, as she puttered around making passes in the air.

Judge Numbottom had ejected the drunk, the come-on girl, and Patrolman Lossowitz from the chamber, leaving us in privacy.

A bailiff had been dispatched to secure the ingredients Miss Terioso required for the ceremony of the ritual, and now she went through the parody of the Black Mass and the moment for evoking the demon neared.

My fine finned and furry friends moved restlessly to and fro as her voice rose in awesome crescendo.

The climax came.

Amidst a shaking of walls and a rumbling of far-off vortices between the stars, the red demon slithered into tri-dimensional being in the center of Judge Numbottom's court.

A gasp rose from the assemblage.

"To think of me, acting as an accessory in this black magic," hissed Judge Numbottom morosely. "Oh, Lord—what's that?"

He saw the demon.

So did my friends.

The demon stretched a rubbery red neck and blinked with nyctaloptic eyes.

"It's you again," he growled, squatting near me.

I shrugged. "Not at all. This lady called you."

I indicated Miss Terioso, who nodded. The witch swept commandingly before the creature of darkness.

In low tones she conversed with the entity.

"You want me to switch them?" the demon asked.

"Yes."

"And you have a paper entitling you to—ah—services?"

"Here it is."

Miss Terioso fluttered a piece of paper.

"Very well," sighed the demon. "Here goes."

He paused. "I shall have to freeze them into marble again before I unscramble their psyches," he said.

"Very well."

"Don't worry," I told Trina, moving close to her. "It will just be a minute."

That is all it took, and I was glad.

For my very spine shook at the violence of the psychic force that concentrated itself in the room.

Gazing through the phosphorescence of the chalk lines, I saw a horribly unnatural transformation. Men, mermaid, centaur, and wolf, turned to gleaming white stone. They froze in marble attitudes on the floor.

"So," breathed the demon. He was sweating horribly, as sparks rising from his body attested.

"Now for the second step," he muttered. "But give me the due bill first."

His voice addressed the witch. But his eyes couldn't reach her.

It was I who finally located Miss Terioso in the darkness. She stood by the window, the open window, and she was already bestriding the broomstick.

"She's not going through with the deal!" I yelled. "She's double-crossing us and making a getaway!"

It was true.

The demon realized it instantly.

"Come back!" he shouted.

"Farewell!" called the witch.

She rose in midair.

The demon, like a gigantic rubber ball, bounded after her.

He soared, with dynamic propulsion, through the window.

I rushed over to the ledge and peered outside.

Hovering in midair, witch and demon clawed wildly in writhing tangle of arms and legs. She was trying to hold on to the piece of paper. He enfolded her in his red arms, hissing.

The broomstick wobbled.

SUDDENLY came a cataclysmic crash of thunder, a burst of eye-ball searing luminance, and then—nothing.

Witch and demon were gone. "Trina," I whispered.

A lifeless window dummy stared at me with glassy eyes.

Judge Numbottom switched on the lights.

He rubbed his eyes.

"It is the order of this court," he whispered, "that these statues be confiscated. Immediately. And taken out of sight. Not a word of this must get out. You understand?”

I nodded.

“Julius Margate’s house will be put up for sale under court order,” he added.

“The window dummy?” I whispered.

“Will await claim by rightful owners,” he told me.

And so it ended. I left Margate, his friends, and his house. And now I try to forget.

Of course, I still see the window dummy every day.

That’s all I have left, you know. All I have to prove that it really happened.

So I see the window dummy every day. And you can come and see her yourself if you like.

She’s the third one from the left—in our biggest department store window.

You Could Be Wrong

It started the day that Harry Jessup bought a TV set. Even then it might have worked out all right, only he started to worry about the commercials.

The end was inevitable. Too bad that the innocent victims had to be his own wife and a good friend. Or was "innocent" the right word?

WHEN Harry Jessup came back from Korea, he wasn't aware of the change. Not immediately.

Marge was still waiting for him, so they got married and bought a little ranchhouse out in Skyland Park. Harry got a job at Everlift, and although he noticed money didn't seem to go very far these days, he managed to get along. He and Marge made friends with the couple next door—the Myers, very nice people; Ed Myers was a CPA—and pretty soon they bought a television set.

That's probably what set him off.

One night he and Marge were watching the Sloucho Marks quiz show. Harry had always liked Sloucho in the old days, when he was making pictures, and he could still quote most of the lyrics to *Hooray For Captain Mauldin.*

Marge kept laughing at Sloucho's cracks during the program, and she was a little surprised to see that Harry was just sitting there, staring at the screen. He never smiled. When it was time for the last commercial, Harry got up and turned off the set.

“What’s the matter?” Marge asked.

Harry muttered something that sounded like, “Fake!” but Marge wasn’t really interested in his reply. She’d asked a purely rhetorical question and intended to follow it up with certain remarks which she now delivered.

“I thought it was a very funny show, myself,” she said. “What’s wrong with you, Harry? You always liked Sloucho Marks before.”

“Yeah,” Harry said. He just sat there, staring at the blank screen.

“You’ve got to admit he’s the cleverest ad-libber in the world,” Marge persisted. “Maybe he’s a little corny, but I’d like to see you do any better, Harry Jessup.”

Harry scowled at her.

“Perhaps I could,” he murmured, “if I had four writers.”

“Four writers?” Marge was genuinely shocked. “What are you talking about?”

“He’s got four writers,” Harry said. “I read about it in the paper.”

Marge sniffed. “Why, I never heard of such a ridiculous idea! Everybody knows it wouldn’t work. How can anybody write such a show in advance when they don’t know who’s going to be chosen as contestants?”

“They know,” Harry told her. “It’s all fixed in advance. Rehearsals and everything.”

“Nonsense!”

“Some of the people who are going to be on the show even advertise ahead of time in the Hollywood trade papers,” Harry said.

“Who told you that?”

“Read it.”

“Well, I don’t believe a word of it,” Marge declared. “I think you’re just jealous, or something. I bet you wouldn’t mind trading places with Sloucho Marks any day.”

“Maybe I could,” Harry answered.

“What *are* you talking about?” Marge sat down heavily and began tapping her foot.

“I mean, maybe I could be Sloucho Marks,” Harry said. “How do you know you’re seeing the real Sloucho on TV now?”

“Oh, don’t be ridiculous! Just because he’s given up wearing that false moustache—”

“Did you ever see him before without it? I mean, outside of his last movies where he appeared alone?”

“No—but—”

“Maybe there isn’t a real Sloucho,” Harry persisted. “Maybe there never was. Remember in one of his early movies where he stood in front of this mirror frame and thought there was glass in it? And Cheeko put on a moustache and pretended to be his reflection? Cheeko looked just like Sloucho. Anybody can, with a little makeup.”

“What’s come over you, Harry?”

“Nothing. It just occurred to me how easy it would be to pull off a stunt like that nowadays. Anybody with four writers and a physical resemblance could act the part. The whole thing’s a fake from start to finish. A pretended ad-libber purporting to interview phony contestants in a comedy show which is supposed to be a quiz program. All a big fraud.”

“I don’t understand why you’re getting so riled up over-nothing,” Marge snapped. “If you get right down to it. Sloucho certainly didn’t write all his own parts in the old days.”

“Of course not.” Harry sighed. “But nobody ever tried to pretend he did. When you saw him on the stage or in the movies, you knew it was make-believe. Now they try to get you to think it’s real. That’s what bothers me.”

“But it *is* real. You saw it!” Harry Jessup shook his head. “No I didn’t. And neither did you. All we saw was a wave-pattern, reproduced. You don’t really see a picture on TV; your eyes merely interpret it that way. Same as moving pictures—they don’t move. I was reading all about it in *Popular* ——”

Marge sniffed again. “Did it ever occur to your precious intellect that maybe what you read is phony, too? Just because it’s printed somewhere, that’s no reason you have to believe it any more than if you saw it.”

Harry blinked. “I never thought of that angle before.” Marge saw her advantage and pursued it. “Well, suppose you think about it before you sound off any more. How do you know it’s true Sloucho has four writers? That could be a lie, too.” She smiled triumphantly.

“Yes.” Harry didn’t smile back. “Yes, it could be, couldn’t it? But why—that’s what I want to know. What’s the meaning of it?” He paused and stared down at Marge’s foot.

Marge noticed his stare and stopped tapping. “Sorry,” she said. “Didn’t mean to get on your nerves.”

“Well, it does,” Harry declared. “I wish you wouldn’t wear those heels. You’re five-feet-two. Why must you pretend to be five-feet-four?” Marge went over and put her hand on Harry’s forehead. When she spoke, her voice was soft. “What’s gotten into you?” she asked. “Don’t you feel well?”

Harry reached up and clasped her hand. He pulled it down to eye-level. “Nail polish,” he muttered. “Pretending you have red nails. Don’t understand it.”

“You’re sick. You’ve got a fever——” Marge rose. “I’ll get the thermometer and we’ll see.”

He shook his head. “I don’t need any thermometer.” Marge decided to humor him. “Just for fun,” she said. “After all, it’s a brand new one. I just bought it, and we might as well get *some* use out of it.”

“New one. That’s just the trouble. It might be a phony, too. Built to register fever when there isn’t any.”

“Harry!”

“I’m going to bed.” He stood up and shuffled over to the door. “You asked what’s gotten into me,” he said. “I don’t know. Maybe it’s honesty.”

Marge knew better. Harry had a fever, all right. He went to work Friday, but when he came home his face was flushed and his eyes were red. He didn't say very much, either.

They sat down to eat, and Harry stared at his plate. "What's this?" he asked in a harsh voice.

"Mock chicken legs."

"Mock chicken?" Harry pushed his plate away. "Why can't we have real chicken for a change?"

"I don't know. I just thought——"

Harry was looking over the table now, muttering to himself. "White bread. You know how they make white bread these days? Take all the nourishment out and then fortify it artificially with vitamins. Oleo instead of butter. Process cheese. That's synthetic, too. And instant coffee—"

"But you know how much regular coffee costs nowadays, dear."

"Doesn't matter. Suppose it was beer instead of coffee. Same thing. Brewed with chemicals instead of the old way. Even the water isn't water any more—it's something filled with chlorine and fluorine and heaven only knows what."

Harry pushed back his chair.

"Where are you going?"

"Out for a walk."

Marge drew in her breath. "You aren't going down to the tavern—?"

He made a barking sound, then caught himself. "What's the matter with me?" he said. "Can't I even come up with a genuine laugh any more? It's getting me fast, the thing's contagious, isn't it?"

"Harry, you promised you wouldn't go to that tavern—"

"Don't worry about me." He smiled. "Tavern! It isn't a tavern, it's a saloon. No such thing as a real tavern, you know. Just a name they use to make it sound fancy. In a real tavern you used to be able to drink whiskey. Nowadays you get something called a blend—65 per cent or 72 per cent neutral spirits, artificially aged in imitation-charred casks. Fake!"

Marge came over to him, but he pushed her away. “Why do you use perfume?” he asked. “You don’t smell that way, really.”

“Lie down,” she whispered. “I’ll call Doctor Lorentz.”

“Don’t want a doctor. Just going for a walk. Got to think.” Harry looked at the wall. “Quit my job today.”

“Quit your job?” She was suddenly tense. “Why?”

“Tired of it. Tired of making brassieres. Falsies. That’s what they call them and that’s what they are—false. I want to get into something real.”

He backed over to the door. “Don’t worry. We’ll work things out. I’ll figure a way, if there is a way.”

Then he was gone.

For a moment, Marge watched him through the window, then bit her lip and hurried to the telephone.

Harry came back in about an hour. Marge met him at the door.

“Feel better, dear?” she asked.

“Yeah.” He patted her shoulder. “I’m all right.”

“Good.” She smiled. “Ed Myers is in the living room.”

“What’s he doing here?”

“Just dropped in to visit.

Thought he’d like to talk to you, I guess.”

“You *guess!”* Harry stepped back. “You told him to come over, didn’t you?”

“Well——”

“Lies,” he muttered. “All lies. Oh, what the hell, I’ll see him.”

He strode into the living room.

“Hello, Harry,” said Ed Myers. Myers was a big, blonde, jolly fat man with round baby-blue eyes. He sat there in the easy chair, puffing on a cigarette.

“Hi,” Harry said. “Want a drink?”

“No, thanks. Just dropped in for a minute.”

Harry sat down and Myers grinned amiably. “How’s tricks?” he asked.

“Tricks! It’s all tricks.”

“What’s that?”

“You heard me. You ought to know. You and this ‘just dropped in for a minute routine. Marge called you over, didn’t she?”

“Well——”

“What did she tell you?” Harry leaned forward, his expression angry.

“Nothing, really. That is, she said you’d been sort of under the weather lately. Figured there might be something on your mind you’d like to talk about. And seeing as how I’m a friend of yours——”

“Are you?”

“You know that, pal.”

“Do I? I’m beginning to wonder if I know anything. Maybe that’s it—I didn’t know, but I’m starting to find out.”

“I don’t get it, Harry.”

“Just took a walk. Walked around the block a couple of times, then down to the corner. What did I see?”

“You got me, pal. What did you see?”

“Fakes. Phonies. Frauds.”

“This doesn’t sound like you, Harry.”

“How do you know what I sound like? Really, I mean?” Harry Jessup bit his lip. “Listen, and I’ll try to explain. I walk down the street and I look back at this house. This house—what is it? They call it a ‘ranchhouse.’ Why? It’s not on a ranch. It’s not the kind of a house anybody ever built on a real ranch. Just a five-room crackerbox with a fake gable in front and a fake chimney to indicate a non-existent fireplace. This neighborhood is full of them. A thousand neighborhoods are full of them. Must be five, maybe ten million such places built in the last few years.”

“So why get excited over a thing like that?”

“I’m not excited. Just curious. About a lot of things. Skyland Park, for instance. That’s the name of this suburb, isn’t it? But it’s not a park, and there’s no view of the sky around here. Everything’s blotted out by TV aerials. People sitting in the dark, watching something that's not real but pretending to themselves that it is."

Ed Myers chuckled. "Marge told me about Sloucho Marks," he said. "Mean to say you let a little thing like that get on your nerves?"

"It isn't a little thing, Ed. At least, I don't think so. Everything's like that nowadays. I didn't understand at first when I came back, but I get the picture now. I got it tonight. The TV all over, and men standing outside washing their cars. Hundreds of average men, but none of them own an average car."

"How's that again?"

"Ever stop to think about that, Ed? No average cars any more. Everybody's got a Commander, or a Land Cruiser, or a Coup de Ville or a Roadmaster or a Champion. Even the poorest slob owns a Super Deluxe Model. Aren't there any plain, old-fashioned automobiles any more? I haven't seen any. Just millions of Hornets and Ambassadors and Strato-jets, driven by people who have no place to go. No *real* place, that is. They drive to the movies and see 3D which isn't really three-dimensional, or they go over to a grocery store built like an Italian Doge's palace which calls itself a Supermarket and offers Below Cost Bargains yet still makes a profit, and ——"

"Dig this!" Ed Myers chuckled again. "You talk like a Commie."

"How do you know how a Commie talks?" Harry retorted. "You ever hear one? Did you ever see one in the flesh?"

"Why, no, but I read the papers, everybody knows about Communists."

"You mean everybody is *told* about them. You read what's printed, that's all. How do you know any of it ever happened?"

"Hey, wait a minute, Harry!"

"You read about the President's latest speech, but he didn't write it—some team of ghostwriters ground it out. You read about the war, and what you read is censored. You read about some movie star, and it turns out to be a planted publicity story, concerning an interview that never occurred. How do you know what actually happens? Or if anything *is* actually happening?"

"Say, you *are* serious, aren't you?"

"I don't know. I walked and walked tonight, trying to figure things out. Nothing makes sense. Ed, I saw the kids in the street. Little kids running around playing cops and robbers, cowboy and Indian, playing war. It scared me."

"Why should it scare you, pal? Didn't you do those things when you were a kid?"

"Sure. Of course I did. But I didn't play the same way. I *knew* it was a game, just making-believe. I'm not so sure about the kids today. I swear, from the way they act, they think it's real."

"Harry, you're making a mountain out of a molehill."

"That's the fashion, isn't it? If I really knew how, I could become quite wealthy in these times. Anybody who can take a molehill and persuade people into thinking it's a mountain is right in style. Look at that!"

Ed Myers was lighting another cigarette, but Harry snatched it out of his mouth.

"Here you are," he said. "Perfect example. The world's finest tobacco, isn't it? Mildest, choicest, most expensive blend. That's how it's advertised. Do you believe it? Do you realize there are a hundred brands that cost more, taste better?"

"But everybody knows about advertising——"

"I'm not talking about advertising. It used to be bad enough, when advertising was the only big offender. But things like this are happening all over. We're losing the truth, Ed. The truth about everything. Politics, government, world affairs, business, education—we get it all through a filter, selected and distorted. Where has reality disappeared to?"

"You're getting yourself all worked up over nothing," Ed Myers said. "What you need is a vacation, little relaxation."

"Relaxation? How? I listened to the radio last Sunday. Jack Benny. He did a show which was supposed to take place ten minutes before he went on the air. In the middle of the program he pretended he was going on the air and got himself introduced all over again. Then in a few minutes, during the pretended show, he was supposed to go over to visit the home of a cast-member. By this time I couldn't even follow what he was pretending to pretend.

"Movies are worse. Did you ever see that oldie, *Sings Again?* Larry Parks plays Jolson, of course, but Jolson did the singing. That's par for the course these days. But then, in the middle of the picture, Parks as Jolson is supposed to meet Parks as Parks. And he plays both parts. Parks-Jolson talks to Parks-Parks about making a picture of Jolson's life, and then the picture of Jolson's life goes on to show how a picture of Jolson's life was made. Only what is shown isn't what really happened to begin with, so ——"

"Calm down, boy!" Myers grinned. "It's all in fun."

"I'm calm. But I'm not so sure about the fun part. Not any more. This is getting serious. I happen to like real things. And everything is *ersatz."*

"You're just picking out a few examples and magnifying them all out of proportion."

"Proportion? How do we know what proportion is? You've got to have something to measure against. Pontius Pilate asked 'What is Tuth?' I'm still worried about the answer."

"Well, if you want to drag religion into it——"

"I'm not dragging religion into it. Look at yourself, for example." Harry Jessup was on his feet now, almost shouting. "You're wearing a sports jacket. You a sportsman by any chance? No. Examine those pearl buttons. Are they made of pearl? Not on your life. That gold watch-band—it's not gold, is it? Regimental stripe tie. You ever belong to the Coldstream Guards? Your shoes, with the leather heels that aren't even leather. Fake, every bit of it a fake! And you're so used to a world of fakery you aren't even conscious of it any more. CPA, that's your job. Filling out fake income tax returns for fake business men who contribute sums for fictitious government expenditures——”

“Harry, you’re shouting!” Marge came into the room. “What’s wrong?”

“Everything.” He went over to her how and his finger stabbed again and again. He talked for Ed Myers’ benefit. “Look at her. Blonde curly hair. Know why? Bleach and a permanent wave. Two false teeth in front. Foundation garment to disguise her shape. Been married to her for almost a year, and I swear I’ve never seen her real face—just a lot of makeup. Makeup and fake mannerisms, that’s all she is!”

Marge started to cry. “You see,” she sobbed. “That’s what I meant. He’s been like this ever since last night.”

Ed Myers wasn’t smiling, any more. He nodded gravely. “Maybe we ought to call some specialist and——”

“Wait a minute,” Harry said. “Wait a minute! You think I’m cracking up, don’t you? You think I’m real gone in the head.”

Myers shrugged. He didn’t say anything.

“All right.” Harry lowered his voice with an effort. “All right. Maybe I’d better tell you the rest.”

“The rest?” Marge stopped sniffling. Ed Myers hunched forward, picking at his ear.

“Yeah. I never said anything about it before, because I thought it was just a lot of malarkey when I heard it. Now I’m not so sure.”

“Heard what?” Myers asked.

“About the bombs.” Harry took a deep breath. “Last year, when I was in Korea, this rumor came along. Nobody ever found out how it started. Anyway, we all heard it. According to the way it went, the Russians came over and bombed the United States. Bombed hell out of it. That was one story. At the same time, we heard another. This one was different. According to the second rumor, it wasn’t the Russians at all. Some of our own scientists came up with a new kind of bomb. They tested it but there was a chain-reaction, a big one. Blew up the whole damn' country!"

"A specialist——" Myers began.

"Wait. Let me finish. Then you can call your specialist, if you want to. Somebody ought to be able to give me an answer."

Marge came over to Harry and put her hand on his arm. "Listen to me, Harry," she said. "Are you trying to tell me you think the country was destroyed while you were in Service?"

"I don't know," he muttered. "I don't know what I'm trying to tell you, or myself, either."

"Be reasonable, Harry. Think for a moment. You're *here,* aren't you? and so are we. We're *in* this country. So how could it be destroyed? Do you see any ruins, any signs of bombing?"

"No. But I wouldn't. Not if all the real things were gone and the fakes remained. You can't destroy what actually doesn't exist."

Ed Myers stood up. He glanced significantly at Marge. "Let me use your phone," he said.

Marge waved her hand. "Wait. Not yet. Give him a chance to explain."

"Thanks." Harry smiled up at her gratefully. "You know, this business of *seeing* things proves nothing. They say when you're born, you see things upside down. I don't understand it, but the image is supposed to be received on the retina that way, and then translated by the brain so that you think it's right-side up. The whole business of seeing is cockeyed, anyhow. This thing that looks like a table, as I remember it, is just trillions and trillions of little particles jumping up and down in waves. All our senses are playing tricks on us; smell, hearing, everything. Lots of people get hallucinations——"

"Don't they, though?" Myers glanced again at Marge, and picked at his right ear once more.

"Please," Marge whispered.

Harry went on. “So maybe none of us ever comes close to Reality, after all. We just sort of *agree* amongst ourselves that certain things are real and certain things are not real. We base those agreements on the evidence of our senses; if we all get just about the same reactions, we decide to believe or disbelieve accordingly. You follow me?”

“I think so,” Marge said. “But doesn’t that prove you’re living in a real world?”

“Not any more. Not since this phony stuff took over, the way it has in the last ten years or so. I said our senses can play tricks. Maybe they’ve gotten so used to the fakes they can’t detect the difference any more. Maybe there’s a sort of a balancing-point somewhere. As long as 50 per cent of our environment is real, we’re safe. We can still recognize it, use it as a gauge to judge our surroundings. But when there isn’t 50 per cent left—when more than half of the things we see, or hear, or say, or do, or own or experience are false—then how can we tell? Maybe we reached that point a long time ago and didn’t know it. Maybe we’re all hypnotized into believing in the existence of a lot of things. If that was so, then the real world could actually disappear and we’d never even suspect it. Because all the illusions we’ve come to think of as reality would still remain.”

“Sort of a mirage, eh?” Ed Myers nodded. “You sure worked yourself up a theory, boy. But there’s kind of a hole in it, isn’t there?”

“Hole?”

“Well, just for the sake of argument, supposing something like that had happened. Let’s even use that rumor you and the troops heard over in Korea, about how the whole country was knocked out by chain-reaction. Then how could you come back here again to live? There’d be nothing left, isn’t that right? No people, no buildings, no radio or TV or books or movies or any of the stuff you’re so badly worried about.”

“But if we believed it was here——” Harry started, then stopped. “Come to think of it, I guess you’re right.”

“Of course I’m right.” Myers smiled again. “You just think about it a while, boy. Everything’ll straighten out. Take a rest for a few days, you’ll get over it."

Marge smiled, too. "You gave us an awful scare, Harry."

"Scare?" Harry Jessup blinked. "Scare? Could that be it?"

"Could what be what?"

"Scare. The flying saucers scare. Remember? We heard all about it. Sure—that could be the answer!"

"Oh, Harry, for heaven's sake——"

"Same deal. Nobody knew whether *they* were real or fake either. But suppose they were real. And they dropped the bombs. A new kind. Wiped out the country and took over. Nobody'd ever know. They'd send out fake reports, create an illusion that nothing had changed. People coming in from abroad would find everything the same. So accustomed to fakery in normal life they wouldn't notice the difference. Just as I didn't notice."

Ed Myers groaned. Marge sighed.

"That's the answer!" Harry cried. "It has to be the answer! Nobody left at all, and the whole thing an illusion built up to protect whoever or whatever owns this country now—built up to fool the few real people left, the ones in Service who came back! They'll just have to keep things going until we're dead and buried and then the masquerade is over.

"No wonder they keep pouring out more and more synthetics all the time! Do it to deaden our faculties, get us so used to the artificial we'll forget there ever was anything real. Who remembers when Hopalong Cassidy was lame, when Wild Bill Hickok was an outlaw instead of a hero? Today kids think there really was a man named Sherlock Holmes—if there *are* any kids, that is."

"Are any kids?" Marge shuddered. "Do you know what you're saying now? Are you inferring that——?"

Harry paused. "Yeah," he said, slowly. "Yeah. Come to think of it, I am."

He walked over to Ed Myers, who was still picking his ear. Suddenly he reached out and grabbed at Myers, trying to reach the side of his head.

Myers ducked, moved back in alarm.

"That gray spot," Harry whispered. "I think I know what it is, now."

“Keep away from me!” Ed Myers yelled.

But Harry didn’t keep away. He lunged forward, grabbing up the paper-knife from the desk and bringing it down with a single, startling motion.

There was a ripping sound. Harry plunged the paper-knife into Myers’ head.

“Look!” he shouted. “I was right—nothing but sawdust! Sawdust and a bunch of cogwheels.”

Myers fell to the floor and lay still.

Marge began to scream.

“Look!” Harry yelled. “Sawdust, all over the rug! Can’t you see——?”

He stopped. Marge kept staring at the floor, her scream subsiding to a whimper. “Harry, you’ve killed him.”

“How could I kill something that isn’t real? Something stuffed with sawdust?”

“Take another look,” Marge said. “That isn’t sawdust. It’s blood.”

Harry took another look. The knife clattered to the floor. He stared down at the slowly widening red pool. . . .

He was still staring when Marge went to the phone. He was still staring when she came back. He was still staring when the squad-car arrived.

After that there were questions, many questions, and a lot of men crowded around, and somebody came in with a camera and flashbulbs and took pictures, and then they took Ed Myers’ body away, and finally they took Harry away too.

At the end, there was nobody left but Marge. She was all alone and there was nothing else to do, so she got out the dustpan and the broom and swept up the little pile of sawdust from the floor.

THE END

The Miracle of Ronald Weems

As salesman rate, Ronald was a fair brassiere man; but he was a whiz at chemistry sets—especially ones containing alcohol—which sent him flying high!

THINGS were very quiet in ladies' underwear that morning.

Nothing was going on in panties, either. Girdles held up fairly well, but brassieres were sagging.

So was Ronald Weems.

He stared across the counter and down the third-floor aisle of Lacey's Department Store and muttered to himself. "Bloomers!" he sighed. "I'm sick of them!"

The small man meant it. He was bored with bloomers, fed up with frillies, petulant about petticoats.

Five years as Assistant Buyer in Ladies' Lingerie had left a lasting mark on the man.

Aside from that, Ronald Weems' soul was as spotless as an angel's wing. And perhaps that was the actual cause of his discontent. Normally, a man of thirty manages to acquire at least a few interesting stains and blemishes, suitable for a spiritual dry-cleaning. But Ronald Weems had led an immaculate life.

His maiden aunts—now deceased—had seen to that. They belonged to the Old School, as they never ceased telling Ronald throughout his adolescence and early manhood.

Ronald didn't know precisely what they meant by the Old School. He visualized it vaguely as a place where rigid rules were neatly and impeccably written down in a firm hand on shiny, sterile blackboards. Rules like *"Don't-forget-to-wear-your-rubbers-it-looks-like-we-might-get-some-rain"* and *"Please-wipe-your-feet-before-you-come-in"* and *"Never-smoke-in-the-parlor-it-makes-the-curtains-smell"*.

Fortunately for them, the maiden aunts had shuffled (ever so sedately, though) off this mortal coil just prior to Ronald's promotion to Ladies' Lingerie, five years ago. They would never have approved of their nephew working in proximity to feminine underthings. In fact, one of their chief aims in life had been to keep him far, far away from feminine underthings in any form—or feminine forms in any underthings.

And they had succeeded, Ronald now mused, only too well. For although five long years had passed since their passing, Ronald was still living according to the rules of the Old School. He had bought and sold millions of pairs of hosiery, and never once handled a leg. He knew nothing of limbs—except for the vague awareness that he was now out on one.

For Ronald was in love.

At least he thought he was in love. The combination of sleeplessness, stomach palpitation, hot flushes and nervous excitement is often diagnosed by physicians as hyperacidity. But Ronald didn't feel as though he needed a physic. He felt as though he needed Amy Cooper.

Amy Cooper worked upstairs, in Toys. She looked rather like a toy herself—one of those chubby, cuddly yellowhaired plush kittens—although Ronald had never dared tell her so. Any more than he had ever dared rush up to her and say, "Look, honey, my stomach's upset. Let's get married."

He had danced with her at the Annual Employee's Ball, taken her to the movies a half-dozen times, and dined with her at the cafeteria upstairs. He had always behaved like a perfect gentleman, which is a polite way of saying he'd never gotten to first base.

Ronald was perfectly sure that his maiden aunts would have approved of his conduct, and he couldn't quite figure out why Amy Cooper didn't seem to. It had never occurred to him that Amy wasn't a maiden aunt.

Nevertheless, on this particular November morning, Ronald Weems was conscious of a sudden heart-burn which reminded him of two things—it was almost time for lunch, and he wanted very much to see Amy.

Noting that the floor was almost deserted, save for the clerks and a few unstylishly stout customers who were obviously Just-looking-Thank-You, Ronald darted through the side doorway and into the office of his immediate superior.

QUENTIN Bickerstaff thrust his square jaw over the edge of his square desk. "Ah, Weems, there you are! Wondered where you'd been keeping yourself. Everything all set for this afternoon?"

"Yes, sir. I've had all the chairs put out, and the electricians are working on the lighting."

"Umph," Bickerstaff commented. "I want everything perfect, understand? There must be no hitches."

"I'm sure you'll find we're well prepared, sir." Ronald stared at the big THINK! and SMILE! signs on the off ice-wall and caught himself wondering why it was that Mr. Bickerstaff never seemed to do either. He banished the disloyal thought immediately and coughed discreetly.

"Do you imagine I could take an early lunch hour?" he asked.

"Lunch?" Mr. Bickerstaff's eye brows rose like astonished caterpillars. "How can you think of lunch at a time like this? When the whole fate of our Department hangs on the success or failure of this afternoon's style show?" He slammed his fist on the desk, causing the SMILE! sign to rattle violently against the wall. "Do you realize how far we're behind on our girdle quota for the year? Do you know we're overstocked by at least eight thousand brassieres—four thousand of them in A-cups alone?"

He glowered at Ronald, then sighed. “But I suppose you don’t care,” he said, bitterly. “You’re a young man. Brassieres mean nothing to you. You’re more interested in filling your stomach than in filling A-cups.”

“But everything’s taken care of—” Ronald ventured.

“I know.” Bickerstaff nodded. “That’s not the point. The point is, Weems, you’ll never get anywhere in this line. I can see it now. You haven’t the *feel* for Ladies’ Lingerie. Maybe you belong in Nighties.”

“Oh, don’t say that, Mr. Bickerstaff!” Ronald cried. “I love my work, you know that. I’m very happy in Negligees and Briefs, believe me I am.”

“It isn’t enough to love this Department,” Bickerstaff declared. “You have to *live* it. Now take me, for example. While you’re concerned only about food, I am thinking only of brassieres. Night and day, that’s all I have on my mind. And I won’t rest until I somehow manage to put those eight thousand brassieres where they belong—in the hands of our customers.”

“But brassieres don’t belong on hands,” Ronald objected.

“I *know* that.” Mr. Bickerstaff flushed slightly. “It’s just a figure of speech. What I mean to say is, I think of it as my mission in life to find eight thousand women who need brassieres—four thousand of them for A-cups. And if there aren’t four thousand, maybe they can be squeezed into them. Where there’s a will there’s a way.”

“What way would you suggest?” Ronald asked, genuinely interested. “Some sort of shoe-horn, perhaps?”

“Ohhh—” Bickerstaff wailed, “Go to lunch!” As the younger man headed for the door he called after him, “But no dawdling. Back at one, promptly. I’m picking Laura Lee up at the airport and the photographers will be here for pictures.”

Ronald nodded. He knew all about Laura Lee, for Hollywood bakes its cheesecake well, and Miss Lee’s fame as a movie starlet had preceded her. Bickerstaff counted it as quite a triumph that he had secured her to model in this afternoon’s Lingerie Fashion Show. “A perfect C-cup!” he’d gloated.

Ronald didn’t particularly care whether or not Mr. Bickerstaff escorted Laura Lee from the airport or not this noon. He was much more interested in escorting Amy Cooper to the cafeteria. Let Mr. Bickerstaff have glamour—until his C-cup runneth over, Ronald decided. He'd take Amy any day.

Going up in the elevator he found himself wondering, for the first time, whether Amy Cooper was an A. B. or C. Then he shed the thought quickly. Such A-B-Cs were not part of the curriculum in the Old School.

THE Sixth Floor was Toyland, and Ronald quested in search of his babe. He found her behind the counter administering to the wants of a matronly woman and her small son. The child was as skinny as a lead-pencil and his head came to a most appropriate point.

“Here we are, Precious,” the woman was cooing. “Now Mother will buy you a lovely painting set.”

“Dowanna painting set!” muttered Precious.

“Of course you do,” his mother beamed. She smiled at Amy Cooper. “He's really quite artistic, you know. You ought to see some of his work.”

Abruptly, Precious leered at Amy. “Sure,” he said. “How'd you like to see my etchings?”

“Why, that's no way to talk!”

Mother was abashed.

“Well, I can't show her no nudes. You tore up all my nudes,” Precious pouted.

“Amy bit her lower lip. “Your son seems somewhat precocious,” she ventured. “Perhaps he might be interested in a scientific toy—a chemistry set, perhaps.”

“Yeah,” Precious gloated. “That's more like it. Then I can make Mickey Finns for the kids on the block.”

Ignoring this last remark, Amy led the woman over to a display of chemical toys. Ronald followed behind Precious.

“Now here is the very latest,” the girl said. “Something brand new, imported from Germany.

"Oh boy!" Precious exclaimed, grabbing for the box, which contained a large assortment of test-tubes, retorts, and vials of colorful liquids. "Does this stuff make stink bombs, hey?"

"I'm sure you'll find it very educational," Amy told the mother. "Your child can perform actual experiments with this."

Precious began to scrabble through boxes of powder, his eyes gleaming. "Can I make an atomic bomb with this?" he queried, hopefully. "Can I blow up the world?"

"Put that down!" his mother demanded. But Precious was fondling an assortment of glass vials. "Gee!" he cried. "Acid! I can use this stuff in my squirt-gun!" Before anyone could stop him he had uncorked a vial and was hopping around in a frenzy of anticipation. "Wow!" he said. "Looka how it fizzles!"

The liquid did indeed fizzle. It began to bubble out of the container, squirting the counter, and gushed over the box of chemicals. Mother and Amy stared aghast—and it was Ronald who stepped up and took the vial away from Precious.

"Better put that down, little boy," he advised.

Precious smiled, nodded, and then kicked him viciously in the shins. Amy Cooper fluttered her hands nervously.

"Please!" she said. "Oh, just look at my counter—and the set, it's ruined! I'm afraid you'll have to purchase it, Madame. We can't hope to sell it to anyone else."

Madame sniffed. "What? Do you expect me to buy damaged merchandise? Why, I never heard of such a thing!"

"But your child is responsible—"

"Responsible? After you deliberately excited him?"

"But this is an expensive set," Amy wailed. "If you don't buy it, they'll take the price out of my salary."

"Sorry," said the woman. "It's your own fault for getting Precious so upset. He's very high-strung."

"I'd like to see him strung even higher," the girl declared. "About thirty feet off the ground, on the end of a strong rope."

With a sniff and a yank, mother and son departed. Amy put her head down on the counter. "Oh, Ronald!" she sighed. "Now what do I do? Eighteen dollars for a chemistry set—"

"I'll buy it," Ronald said.

"You? But—"

"Never mind." He smiled. "Wrap it up. I've got a nephew who'll like it. He won't care if it's a little stained."

Amy looked up and returned his smile, with interest. "That's awfully nice of you, Ronald. You're really very sweet."

RONALD would cheerfully have surrendered his eighteen dollars for the compliment alone, but after taking his money Amy wrapped and presented him with his unexpected purchase.

"Here you are," she told him. "One slightly shopworn Little Jim Dandy Home Chemical Set." She tucked a strand of fluffy hair into place at the nape of her neck. "But you haven't told me yet—what brought you up here in the first place?"

"The elevator," Ronald replied. "That is, I mean—I thought I'd come up and take you to lunch."

"Well." Amy glanced at her watch. "It *is* time, isn't it? Come on."

With the package under one arm and Amy Cooper under the other, Ronald was happy for the first time that day.

He carried his happiness up to the cafeteria on Ten and maintained it midway through their meal.

Then two things happened to dim his delight. He asked her for a date for the evening and she demurred.

"Sorry, but I can't, Ronald," she said. "I'm going out this evening."

Ronald gulped back his disappointment. "Well, maybe we could just have supper together, then."

“If you like,” the girl said, indifferently. “But I must be home by eight.”

“What’s so important?” Ronald asked.

“Please, I don’t like it when people are inquisitive,” the girl pouted. “But if you must know, tonight’s the night my Sewing Club meets.”

“You never told me you belonged to a Sewing Club.”

“You never asked me,” Amy replied.

“But is that so vital?” Ronald persisted. “I mean, couldn’t you just skip it for one evening? I thought we could really go out and have a good time—”

“Sorry!” Amy Cooper shook her head. “Tonight we do fancy-work and I can’t possibly miss the lessons. Rut if you like, I’ll let you take me to a nice expensive place for dinner.”

“That’ll be fine,” said Ronald, and he really thought so. He reached out across the table, actually on the very verge of taking her hand, when suddenly there was another interruption.

The interruption was big, bluff and burly. It had blonde, curly hair and a boyish grin.

“Ah, here you are!” it boomed. “Looking all over for you.” It boldly squeezed the hand Ronald had timidly reached for and sat down at the table.

“Relax, folks!” it said. “Stu Lacey has arrived and the situation is well in hand.”

Ronald didn’t agree. He wanted no part of Stu Lacey, even as a gift—although he might look well on a silver platter, roasted and with an apple stuck in his mouth.

But Amy beamed fondly on the blonde young man. “How are things up in Advertising?” she asked.

“The most,” Stu answered. “Did you see today’s spread on the fashion show? Featuring Laura Lee, of course. Judging from the pictures she sent, she’s got quite a spread herself. Had trouble squeezing her into eight columns full.” He chuckled.

Well, thought Ronald, he could afford to. He was the nephew of the owner of the store, he was young and handsome, he had the world by the tail and Amy Cooper by the. hand.

Amy was smiling up at him. “I know all about the fashion show,” she said. “Ronald was just telling me.”

“That’s right, he’s in the department, isn’t he?” Stu Lacey grinned. “Is it true you’re ashamed of your work?” he asked. “I understand you fellows in the brassiere department never admit what kind of jobs you have. When anybody asks, you say that you’re engaged in an uplift movement.”

RONALD, who had heard every possible variation on the feeble gag during the past five years, smiled stoically. But Stu was undeterred.

“Well, I must say I envy you, with Laura Lee on your hands this afternoon. What’s your part in the show, exactly? Are you doing the fitting? You two may end up as bosom friends.”

Ronald flushed. “Please,” he said. “After all, there’s a young lady present —”

But to his dismay, the young lady was snickering. “I think that’s cute,” she said. “Stu, you’re such a character! Don’t be so stuffy, Ronald.”

“That’s his business,” Stu remarked. “Stuffing and padding.

Putting lip a good front, you know.” He glanced at his watch. “But say, aren’t you due back upstairs? The show must be just about ready to start in a few minutes.”

Ronald noted the time, gulped, and rose. “Yes,” he sighed, misererably. “I’d better run along.” He eyed the girl. “Coming, Amy?”

Stu waved him away. “I’ll take care of her,” he said. “You go ahead and handle Laura Lee. If that’s the correct term, and I think it is.”

Ronald blushed, nodded, and stumbled away. He clutched the chemistry set to his bosom and rode grimly to his destination.

Ladies’ Lingerie was fluttering with activity. Milling and jostling, the audience pushed its way down the aisles toward the north end of the Department, where a wooden platform had been erected and backed by curtained partitions. Chairs had been set up in semicircular rows facing the stage and Ronald arrived too late to supervise the job.

Indeed, the store’s organist was already installed at one corner of the stage, and electricians switched on a battery of lights. The show was virtually ready to begin.

Ronald started for the back, to deposit his package, when Mr. Bickerstaff suddenly materialized from behind the curtains. He spied Ronald and bore down on him.

“Where have you been?” he demanded. “And what have you there?”

“Nothing,” the young man gulped. “Just a chemistry set I bought.”

“Chemistry sets? Here we are, up to our neck in brassieres, and you’re out buying chemistry sets.” He snorted. “Damned things are no good anyway—unless you can use them to invent some kind of bust-developer.” He seized Ronald by the shoulder. “Take a look at the crowd,” he groaned.

Ronald eyed the capacity audience. The women had filled the semicircle of seats surrounding the stage.

“Looks like a full house,” he said.

“Bah!” Mr. Bickerstaff was not impressed. “Same old story. Too fat or too thin. Fat ones should go to the hammock department. Thin ones don’t need our brassieres either—they can stop downstairs at the drug counter and buy a box of Band-Aids.” He glowered. “But we’re going to sell them merchandise this afternoon, we’ve got to! And there’d better not be any slipups.”

Ronald nodded. “Is Miss Lee here?”

“Of course. She’s backstage, dressing. Or undressing. A very charming young lady.” Bickerstaff’s jaw relaxed a trifle.

“What does she look like?”

“Lovely,” said the Head Buyer. “Perfect 36.”

“Blonde or brunette?”

“I didn’t notice,” Bickerstaff snapped. “Who has time for such nonessentials?” He waved Ronald towards the stage. “Get up there and tell the organist we’re ready to start. Then pick up that carton of handbills and pass them out to the clerks backstage. They can distribute them to the audience during intermission—we've got all the sale prices listed on the things."

The young man hesitated. "Can't I just put my chemistry set in the office, first?"

"Park it backstage," Bickerstaff commanded. "There's no time to delay. Now, move!"

RONALD moved. He spoke to the organist, and that worthy began to pedal his extremities. Then Ronald darted behind the curtains and found the three clerks and the carton of handbills. For a time he was quite busy. Too busy to notice the half-dozen models who wriggled past him, awaiting their cues; too busy to listen as Mr. Bickerstaff stepped out on the platform and delivered his opening announcements to the crowd.

The show was well under way when at last Ronald was free to peer through the curtains and watch its progress.

To the accompaniment of music, the girls paraded across the stage and down the aisle into the audience. They promenaded one at a time, while Mr. Bickerstaff described the undergarments they wore.

Ronald, despite his familiarity with the business, found himself blushing once more at the sight of the models. He scanned the audience, grateful in the realization that it was almost entirely feminine. Here and there the spotlight reflected from a bald head, but men were few and far between. Ronald noted one wizened little character in the second row who seemed incongruously out of place—but decided that like the others, he must be somebody's captive husband. Perhaps he belonged to the fat dowager beside him; the one with the gaudy diamond bracelet worn over her gloved wrist.

Ronald watched the bracelet glitter until his eyes were dazzled by other things, such as the gleam of platinum in a girl's hair.

She stepped out on the platform and a low murmur arose from the crowd. They had recognized Laura Lee.

The starlet made her appearance—and an almost complete appearance it was—in a black negligee, covered with sequins that matched her hair. She turned her head and Ronald caught a glimpse of an oval face and slanting eyes. Then she advanced to the center of the platform and began her promenade.

All eyes centered on the girl, and Mr. Bickerstaff began to do a bit of quiet gloating. As she moved down the aisle, Ronald found himself admiring the metronomic precision with which Laura Lee undulated her trim torso—at least he told himself it was the precision he admired, rather than the torso itself. Somewhat abashed at the notion, he glanced hastily away.

And it was then that he caught the glitter of the diamond bracelet once more. The fat dowager was leaning forward, and the bracelet seemed to be slipping off her wrist.

Slipping? Not exactly. The seedy little man beside her was quietly unclasping it and preparing to drop it into his pocket.

Ronald parted the curtains and bounded across the stage. Even as the little man removed the bracelet, Ronald was halfway to his side, and his sudden shout stopped the starlet's promenade performance.

The fat woman turned to stare. The small thief looked up, startled, just as Laura Lee brushed her way past down the aisle. Swiftly the small man rose, stumbled forward.

Ronald caught him by the collar and plumped him back down again in his seat.

LAURA Lee stood uncertainly as Mr. Bickerstaff bore down on the scene in full cry. "What's the meaning of this?" he demanded.

Ronald shrugged. "Sorry to interrupt," he answered. "But I saw this lady being robbed of her diamond bracelet."

The fat dowager clutched her wrist with sudden dismay, to say nothing of pudgy fingers. "It's gone!" she gasped.

“Of course it is,” Ronald nodded, “And I think it’s in this man’s pocket.”

The little wizened gentleman looked up and wrinkled his nose in distaste. “Ain’t nothin’ in my pocket,” he announced. “Nothin’ but fuzz.”

“Let me see.”

Mr. Bickerstaff leaned over and groped in the right hand suitcoat pocket with his fingers. Then he repeated the performance on the left pocket.

“He’s right,” Bickerstaff announced. “Nothing in there but fuzz.”

“Try his trousers,” Ronald urged.

The little man wrinkled his nose again. “No use,” he said. “Same kinda fuzz down there, too.”

“But my bracelet *is* gone!” wailed the woman.

“And I saw him take it,” Ronald insisted.

The little man scowled. “You tryin’ to incinerate I’m a cannon?” he demanded. “I’ll sue the store!” His voice was penetrating, and the crowd didn’t miss a word.

Mr. Bickerstaff began to redden behind the ears, as if a beautiful sunset was disappearing behind his bald head.

“You’ll sue?” shrilled the dowager. “My bracelet’s gone. *I’ll* sue!”

“Let’s both sue, lady,” the little man suggested. “I gotta good shyster—he’ll take this jernt for every penny it’s got.”

Bickerstaff glanced at both of his irate customers, then turned to Ronald. “You!” he muttered. *“You* started this! I’ll give you just thirty seconds to produce that bracelet or else—”

Ronald waved his arms. “But I tell you, I saw it happen. He did take it, and then he got up and tried to run away, and he bumped into Miss Lee, and—”

A gleam of comprehension came into his eyes as he turned and advanced to the edge of the platform where the statuesque platinum blonde still poised en *negligee.*

“Now I understand,” he said. “That’s what happened. He planted the bracelet on her.”

“Twenty seconds!” Bickerstaff hissed.

“Must be in the sleeve.” Ronald began to paw the starlet’s shoulder.

“Oops—forgot—this doesn’t have sleeves,” he said. “Then there’s only one place he could have put it. Down here—”

Laura Lee jumped a foot out of her professional aplomb. “Hey,” she demanded. “What do you think you’re doing?”

“Just looking for a bracelet,” Ronald explained, smiling placatingly at her and Mr. Bickerstaff.

“I don’t happen to wear any down there,” the starlet told him. “As you can all too plainly see. Now stop that—”

“Ten seconds!” Bickerstaff said. Ronald struggled desperately. “Please, Miss Lee,” he begged. “Hold still. I’m not doing what you think I’m doing.”

“Even if you were, I wouldn’t hold still,” she retorted. “Besides, your hands are cold.”

“It’s got to be around here someplace,” Ronald wheezed, reddening. “Oops—pardon my elbow—”

Laura Lee jerked away. The abrupt gesture catapulted Ronald to the floor, and there was a loud snap. At first he thought the girl’s patience had given way, but a roar from the crowd told him otherwise. It was her negligee. Floating down, it covered his face just in time to hide the blush. Amidst the din, Laura Lee’s brassiered bosom and pantied posterior scooted across the stage to the curtains.

Over the howling of the mob Bickerstaff had no trouble in making himself heard. “You’re through!” he shouted “Get out of here this minute!”

Somehow Ronald managed to stumble backstage, pick up his chemical set, and depart.

There was no question about seeing Amy Cooper for dinner. There was only the need to get home, fast.

After what had happened today, he had no future with Amy. He had no future with Ladies’ Lingerie, either. In fact, Ronald meditated bitterly, he had no future at at all.

ARRIVING at the apartment, he flung himself into a chair and the depths of the most profound depression he had ever known.

This, he decided, was the end. Might as well finish the job.

“I’ll kill myself, that’s what I’ll do,” he muttered. Rising, he groped his way into the darkness of the kitchen. “Cut my throat,” he murmured. He opened the table drawer and fumbled for a knife. “Ouch!” Ronald yelled, as his finger grazed the edge of a piece of cutlery. He retreated to the parlor, gating at his bleeding thumb. “Can’t use a knife,” he decided. “Too sharp. I’m liable to hurt myself.”

Ronald was not exactly in a logical frame of mind, but it would be a mistake to judge him harshly. Five years in Ladies’ Lingerie does things to a man.

Abruptly he contemplated the chemistry set.

“Just the thing,” he told himself. “Poison. There should be a lot of poisonous chemicals in there.”

He unwrapped the Little Jim Dandy Kit, took off the cover, and considered the imposing array of vials and powders. A large bottle of colorless liquid attracted his eye.

“Might as well try it,” he sighed. He raced out to the kitchen and returned with a glass. He was too well-trained to think of drinking out of the bottle.

Pouring three ounces of the liquid, Ronald closed his eyes and drew the glass to his lips. “Well,” he whispered. “Here goes nothing.”

The stuff smelled strong. He had to force himself to swallow, and then his throat began to burn. Somewhere in Ronald’s stomach it seemed as though a Boy Scout had rubbed two sticks together and achieved spectacular results.

“Oooh!” Ronald groaned. “I’m dying! Wonder what it was—cyanide?”

Through tear-dimmed eyes he read the label. “Pure Grain Alcohol—180 Proof.”

Ronald had just taken his first drink.

Surprisingly, the bonfire in his stomach seemed to subside, and there was now only a warm glow, that rose throughout his body and heated his face and forehead pleasantly.

Hardly realizing what he was doing, Ronald poured again. Once more he drank, and this time an entire troop of Boy Scouts won their merit badges in his esophagus.

But he didn't die. And now, somewhat woozily—for six full ounces of Grain Alcohol can kindle quite a conflagration—Ronald grasped vials and bottles at random and shook a small portion of their contents into the glass. An ounce of red, an ounce of green, an ounce of blue; jigger of that yellow liquid, a pinch of whitish powder. The resultant cocktail began to simmer and fizzle as the various components seethed and blended into a purple liquid.

He stared at the glass, and as the warmth of the alcohol bathed his body, he hesitated for a moment. Maybe he was making a mistake, after all. But no—his girl was gone, his job was gone, and he had nothing to live for. This was the best way.

Closing his eyes, he drained the glass at a gulp.

Boy Scouts and bonfire vanished from his stomach, hurled into nothingness by the force of an atomic explosion. A Bikini Test reached its successful conclusion somewhere in the neighborhood of Ronald's liver.

With a gasp, the young man tottered and fell up.

He landed with a dull thud, on the ceiling.

CHAPTER II

IT was several moments before he opened his eyes. Dazed, he stared down at the room below. He blinked, closed his eyes again, then parted his lids once more.

The sight remained, unchanged. Ronald was lying on the ceiling and staring down at the parlor.

“I’m dead!” he whispered. “If I could get through I’d float right up to heaven. But—where’s my body?”

He searched the floor, seeking to catch sight of his corpse. But there was none to be seen. Glancing down, he was aware of his material presence, apparently quite intact, lying here on the ceiling.

“That’s impossible!” he told himself. “How can I be lying up here?”

Now that he noticed it, he wasn’t exactly recumbent. He was floating rather; floating ever so gently at the top of the room. He turned over gingerly, banging his head on the chandelier.

The sharp stab of pain convinced him.

“I’m alive,” he decided. “But what keeps me from falling? I should be on the floor.”

There was a sudden whoosh and Ronald thumped down on the carpet. Fortunately, he hadn’t had time to tense his muscles and he made a perfect three-point landing without undue damage to his body. His mind, however, was far from intact.

“This can’t be,” he muttered, dazedly. “Those chemicals are giving me hallucinations. Bumping my head on the chandelier—I must have imagined it.”

He tried to stand up. More accurately, he visualized himself as standing, and found that he was floating to his feet. It was a giddy feeling, and he didn’t exactly enjoy it. He willed himself to stand erect, and that only made him feel worse. Truth to tell, Ronald was more than a little drunk. The alcohol—plus the haphazard combination concocted from the chemistry set—had done its work only too well.

He wavered from side to side, then glided over to a mirror on the wall. Conscious of his slight stature, he rose on tiptoe to peer at himself. Hardly aware of his actions, he lifted about a foot in the air and hung there, staring.

“True,” he mumbled. “There I am. So I must be alive. And I *can* float.” Dizzy, he closed his eyes and lay down on the air. Now the sensation was rather pleasant. He opened his eyes again and waved his arms, at the same time willing himself to move towards the sofa.

“Foolish,” he said. “Don’t need the sofa. Perfectly comfortable right here.”

And he was. As fright left him, bewilderment gradually faded away. He began to move around the room, accustoming himself to this new method of locomotion. There were, he discovered, two ways of controlling his floating ability. He could use his arms and legs for steering and thus swim through the air; that was one method. The other, and more startling, was simply to *will* himself to a certain height at a certain distance. Both systems seemed equally effective.

“Lightheaded,” he murmured.

That’s how I feel. Must be awfully drunk. Everything going around and around.” No sooner had he expressed the thought than he caught sight of himself in the mirror, revolving in midair like a human top.

“If Amy could only see me now,” he told himself.

Well, why not? Ronald arrested his movement and floated over to the clock. It wasn’t much past seven. He could go over and visit Amy until it was time for her to leave for the Sewing Circle.

Come to think of it, that wasn’t such a bad idea. After all, he had to tell somebody about this seeming miracle. Inebriated though he was, Ronald realized that his peculiar condition warranted investigation and explanation; yet he could hardly venture to call upon a stranger. Amy would be the logical person to see.

But when he willed himself down once more and attempted to head for the door, he found himself weaving dangerously. “No use,” he sighed. “Too much to drink. Never make those stairs.”

But then, he remembered, he didn’t have to. Why bother with stairs?

RONALD put on his hat and coat. The night was chilly and he didn’t want to run any risks.

After thus taking all suitable precautions for his health . . . and safety, he turned and jumped out of the fourth-storey window.

For a moment he felt panic as he fell. Then he righted his body by flailing his arms and with effortless inclination, propelled himself down the alleyway at a height of about twenty feet. Taking a deep breath, he shot forward across the street and into the continuation of the alley in the next block.

Luckily, traffic was light, and the night was moonless. His airy progress was unnoted. His body whizzed past the back windows of countless apartments, but nobody looked out to observe him. The city-dwellers were following their usual nocturnal patterns this evening; watching television, quarreling, or drinking beer. Some were watching television *and* quarreling at the same time. Some were watching television *and* drinking beer. A few of the more impoverished ones were just quarreling and drinking beer while watching the neighbors' television. It was a typical night in an urban community.

Typical, that is, for everyone except Ronald Weems. He was flying, and he loved it.

The sudden exhilaration surprised him. Part of it was due to his intoxicated condition, of course, but over and above that he felt the surge of unexpected release. He sensed power and a new awareness that came of finding himself free.

He had been short. Now he was tall.

He had been confined to Ladies' Lingerie for five years. Now his domain was limitless.

He had wanted to do away with, himself. Now—

"I'm really living," he whispered, as the sharp wind cut his cheeks, as the night air wrapped around him like a black blanket. He waved his arms gaily, willed himself forward at greater speed.

What would that old fool Bickerstaff say if he could see *this?* For that matter, what would anyone say? For the first time, the full possibilities of his newfound talent revealed themselves. Why, he could become rich and famous! Maybe he could go before the CAB and get himself a commercial license—pick off a fat government contract as a chartered carrier of airmail.

But Amy would advise him, she'd know what he ought to do. Ronald chuckled as he flew. He passed the city hall with its clock-tower. Almost eight. If he hurried, he'd just manage to catch her before she went out. He could scarcely wait to see the look on her face.

Amy's apartment building loomed ahead. Ronald swooped down along the alley and circled the side of the structure until he reached her third-storey living-room window. The shades were up, the light was on. He'd just make a landing out in front and ring her doorbell. On the other hand—

On the other hand, why bother? Ronald chuckled again. He'd fly right up to the window itself and surprise her.

He did.

But, unfortunately for Ronald, Amy surprised him.

For as Ronald gazed through the glass, at precisely five minutes past eight, the young lady was just opening her front door. At first he thought he was too late—that Amy was departing for her Sewing Circle date.

Then he changed his mind, for Stu Lacey walked into her living-room.

A great deal happened in the next five minutes, but none of it seemed to have anything to do with what usually goes on in a Sewing Circle. There was, admittedly, quite a bit of fancy work, although the only thing knitted was Ronald's brow.

Stu Lacey and Amy had made themselves extremely at home on the sofa, and there was no telling what might have happened next if Amy hadn't peered over her shoulder.

She let out a subdued shriek.

"What's the matter, baby?" Stu demanded. "Did I pinch you too hard?"

"No, but you'd better," the girl declared. "I could swear I just saw a face looking through the window."

Stu turned and shook his head. "Nothing there," he said. "Besides, it's impossible. There's no porch or fire-escape, and we're three flights up. Must be your imagination.".

Amy nodded and pursed her lips invitingly. Stu bent towards them in the age-old manner of romance, to say nothing of a kid trying to get a drink from a bubbler. Then it was his turn to freeze at attention.

“You’re right!” he declared. “There *is* something out there. I just saw it myself.”

He rose and headed for the window. Amy followed.

“Gone now,” he muttered. “But I’m sure I did see a face.” He opened the window and peered down at the sheer drop to the street below.

“Nothing now, though,” he assured the girl. “Maybe we’-re both upset. How about a drink?”

Amy nodded. Leaving the window open, they repaired to the hall cabinet and the girl procured a bottle.

“Never mind the soda,” Stu said. “I want mine straight. That face gave me a nasty start.”

“You got a nasty start the day you were born,” a voice declared, hallowly.

“What did you say?” Stu Lacey demanded.

“I didn’t say anything,” Amy answered, returning from the kitchen with glasses.

“Could have sworn I heard somebody talking,” her companion muttered. “Oh, well. Let me pour—”

“Eek!” eeked the girl. “There it is again!” She pointed at the window. Stu dashed towards it but once more he peered out upon darkness.

“We’re both imagining things,” he decided.

Amy shook her head. “Not me! This time I’m positive I saw a face.”

“What did it look like?”

“All staring and horrible. It must be a Peeping Tom.”

“Peeping Tomcat, more likely,” Stu said. “See for yourself, there’s no one here.”

Satisfied, the girl nodded and poured a drink. Stu closed the window.

“Better?” he asked. “Come on, baby, relax.”

He took her into his arms and demonstrated in a very active way just what he meant by relaxation. Once more, the girl started.

“Stu,” she whispered. “I thought you closed the window?”

“I did.”

“Well, don’t look now, but it’s open again.”

The window was indeed open. A cold blast blew up Stu Lacey’s neck.

“This joint is haunted,” he mumbled, pouring himself another drink.

“I *told* you!” Amy shivered, and not entirely from cold. She grabbed the bottle and reduced its contents. “You should have seen that face—all grinning and horrid, just hanging there and goggling at me.”

“Was not.”

“Was not what?”

“Was not goggling.”

“I didn’t say you were, Stu,” the girl told him.

“I never said you did.” He blinked. “That wasn’t *my* voice.” It was his turn to reach for the bottle. “I’m going to close that window,” he promised. “But not until I have another drink.”

“Good idea,” the voice boomed from behind them. “Let’s all have one.”

RONALD WEEMS stood lurching in one corner of the room. His face was reddened equally by exposure to wind and to 180 proof alcohol, but he grinned amiably.

“Quite a Sewing Club you have here, Amy,” he remarked. “For a small membership you certainly get a lot accomplished.”

Amy Cooper flushed. “Why—why, I was just about to leave, Ronald,” she said. “Stu is driving me over. He’s going to carry my yarn.”

“I don’t see any yarn,” Ronald answered. “Except maybe the one you were handing me.” He took the bottle from Stu Lacey’s nerveless fingers and downed a healthy swig.

Stu stared at him intently. “How did you sneak in here?” he demanded. “The door’s locked.”

“Window’s open,” Ronald reminded him.

“Now don’t tell me you crawled up the bare bricks for three storeys—that’s impossible.”

“Of course it is,” Ronald agreed, mildly. “Matter of fact, I flew.”

“Flew?”

“Floated, if you prefer. Or rather, if I prefer. I can float or fly, whichever I choose.”

“You’re drunk!” Stu Lacey accused.

“Right.” Ronald wobbled, then recovered his balance. “That makes it even more fun. Did you ever try floating when you’re drunk? Very strange sensation.”

Amy Cooper put her hand on his arm. “No wonder you didn’t take me to dinner,” she said. “You were out getting high instead.”

“Sure.” Ronald tilted the bottle again. “Easy for me to get high. Want to see?”

Holding the bottle, he performed an *entrechat* that would have done credit to Nijinsky and ended up with his head against the ceiling.

Stu Lacey and the girl found themselves staring open-mouthed, but neither of them applauded.

“Think of it,” Ronald called down to them. “Two hours ago I was finished. The brassiere sale turned out to be a bust. I thought I was down for the count. And now I’m a rising young man.”

He kicked his legs again. “Not used to liquor,” he apologized.

“Pardon me. Maybe I’d better lay down and take a little nap.” And he stretched out on the ceiling, closing his eyes.

Amy Cooper clutched her companion. “Do something,” she whispered. “This is serious.”

“You’re right,” Stu agreed. “He has the bottle up there.”

“I’m going to call the police,” Amy decided. “I don’t want a human fly hanging around my apartment.”

Ronald opened his eyes. “Not a human fly,” he muttered. “Not a Peeping Tom, either. Just flitting around, thought I’d drop in and pay you a little flying visit. That any reason to call the police?"

Stu Lacey was holding his head in his hands. "I don't believe it," he moaned. "Tell me I'm drunk. Tell me I'm seeing things."

"But we're both seeing it," Amy reminded him. "And: hearing it, too."

"I'm not an it," Ronald said. "Just a poor misguided square who's never been around. So all right, I've learned my lesson. Don't bother about me, Amy. Go on with your Sewing Circle or whatever you call it. I'll just catch forty winks up here, out of your way."

Stu pulled himself together with an effort. "Now see here," he began. "You can't get away with this—"

"Oh, stick to your knitting!" Ronald peered down at Amy Cooper. "Maybe it's a good thing I found out about you the way I did," he murmured. "Maybe that's why I was given the power."

The girl wasn't following his remarks. She was heading for the phone. "Close the window, Stu," she called. "Don't let him get away! I'm calling the police right now. He's crazy."

SHOCKED into sudden sobriety, Ronald swooped after her. "But Amy, you don't understand—I came to you for help, I want to explain what happened—"

Amy Cooper grabbed the phone and yanked the cord into the bedroom, slamming the door. "Keep away from me," she screamed. "Stu, close that window and grab him!"

Stu did his best. As Ronald soared overhead, the blonde young man rushed for the window.

"All right, if that's the way you want to play," Ronald muttered. "Here, have a drink on me."

He dropped the bottle. The bottle, landing squarely on Stu Lacey's head, dropped him.

And Ronald dropped out of the open window.

For a moment he hung there, kicking empty air. He was badly shaken. It was true that he'd come to Amy Cooper seeking aid. Instead of consolation he'd found consternation. Now he had literally nowhere to turn.

What was worse, from a distance came the faint wail of sirens. The sound grew louder.

"She did it!" he told himself. "She called the cops!"

Quickly, he swooped along the alley. He had almost reached the end when he saw the flash of a squadcar's searchlight beam. Somersaulting in midair, he reversed his path and soared back to the other end.

Then he realized that his method of locomotion was, to say the least, conspicuous. He willed himself to descend and landed with a thump that rocked his heels, on the alley pavement close to the far exit.

The searchlight stabbed against the apartment building walls behind him, and he could hear the sound of running feet. Suddenly a voice rang out. "There he is! Stop—stop or I'll shoot!"

Alarmed, Ronald crouched beside a garbage-can. Peering out, he discovered that the remarks were not addressed to him, but to a diminutive figure that now floundered up the alley towards him. Behind came three minions of the law, their long arms extended, hands brandishing revolvers.

A shot echoed through the alley, then another. The running figure weaved and ducked, but the searchlight glared. The pursuers raised their weapons again.

This time the light shone directly down the alley, outlining their moving target. This time they would not miss.

Ronald made his decision. He didn't know who was running, or why, but he did know that he disliked policemen; especially policemen with guns. They were on the side of the Bickerstaffs and the Stu Laceys—and as such, automatically his enemies. Besides, he couldn't let a man be shot down in cold blood. Maybe that's why he had the power, too.

At any rate, he'd find out. And now.

With a welling of will that propelled him forward like a cannonball, Ronald whizzed along the alley, scooped up the running figure in his arms, and soared a hundred feet above the highest rooftop.

The searchlight swept crazily, seeking him in the sky, and from far below came the whine of bullets and the wail of bewildered men.

But Ronald flew fast and free into the night, cradling the diminutive fugitive.

A voice chirped feebly in his ear. “Solid, Dad!” it said. “Dig that crazy jet propulsion!”

Ronald gazed down.

Smiling up at him tenderly was the little pickpocket from the department store.

CHAPTER III

“HOW did you get here?” he gasped.

“Search me, buddy. Here I am, running down the alley and minding my own business, and you come along and make with the break. I was just gonna ask how *you* did it.” The little man scowled in perplexity. “You don’t happen to be a character name of Superman, huh?”

Ronald shook his head and shifted the little man’s weight to his left arm.

“My name’s Ronald Weems,” he said.

“Pleaseda meetcha, I’m sure. Hey, wait a minute!” The shrill voice rose. “You’re the party what hollered copper on me this afternoon, ain’cha? In the department store, where I was negotiatin’ for that diamond bracelet!”

Ronald nodded ruefully.

“So what am I hanging around you for? Lemme go!” the little man wailed.

“I wouldn’t make such a request if I were you,” Ronald declared, gazing down at the city far below. His companion followed his gaze and shuddered.

“Yeah. Guess you’re right at that. But look, Dad, where you figger on taking me?”

Ronald shrugged as best he could, under the circumstances. “I haven’t the faintest idea,” he declared, dodging the City Hall tower. “Want me to drop you somewhere?”

“You better not!” the man gasped.

Ronald slowed down. “Then perhaps you might as well introduce yourself and tell me what you happened to be doing in that alley-way.”

“My name’s Guilty Mil tie, and I was just dodging cops is all.”

“But why were you dodging them?” Ronald persisted.

“So they wouldn’t catch me, of course,” Guilty Miltie answered. “Jeez, how dumb can you get.”

“Never mind that, now. I want the truth. What were you up to?”

“I was up to the second storey, if you must know,” Miltie admitted. “I’m a cannon, see?”

“Frankly, I don’t. You’re mighty small to be a weapon of any sort.”

“All the better,” Miltie declared. “Us short ones have a advantage. We’re closer to the pocket. We can snitch and switch.”

“You mean you’re a pickpocket, eh?”

“I was, until this afternoon. You reformed me.”

Ronald smiled. “You mean, because I foiled you in your attempt to steal that bracelet?”

The little cannon nodded. “That’s it. I figgered my techneek was shot, I’d better give it up and reform. So that’s why I was in the alley tonight. I decided to go in for burglary, instead.”

“Oh, great!” Ronald groaned. “Not so great. Somebody got the cops, and I had to drop from the second-storey window and slam for a lam. Lucky you come along or I’d be real cool in the cooler.” He winked at Ronald. “Got to thank you for that, pal. But hey, how’d you manage this flying trick? You got a motor in your pants, or something?”

The young man shook his head. “No. It’s just a little talent I seem to have developed.”

“Suits me fine,” Miltie declared. “Well, it doesn’t seem to suit anyone else. I went to tell my girlfriend about it, and she’s the one who called the police. They saw me take off with you, so I expect everybody's looking for me by this time. Which reminds me—what am I going to do? I can't take you home with me. They'll stake out there."

"Then how about coming along with me?" Miltie asked. "I think a guy with your gimmick can go a long ways."

"Where, for instance?"

Guilty Miltie pointed towards the left. "Across the river," he said. "Maybe I'm only a little cannon, but I know some real torpedos. The guy we want to see is Ace Diamond."

Ronald hesitated. "Is Mr. Diamond a crook?" he inquired.

"Nah, don't worry. He's just a respectable big-time gambler, is all."

"Well, in that case—" Ronald sighed. "Oh, what have I got to lose? Show me where to go."

GUILTY Miltie showed him.

Five minutes later they spiralled down beside what appeared to be a deserted warehouse on the waterfront across the river.

"Good to get my feet on terror firmer," Miltie declared. "That was some ride. Come on, here we are. Just you let me do the explaining, see?"

He led Ronald up to a doorway and knocked discreetly three times. Nothing happened.

"I don't understand it," the little pickpocket muttered. "That's always suppose to be the signal, ain't it? Knocking three times? Oh, well."

He began to knock less discreetly with both hands and then with his feet. That did it. In a moment the panelled top of the door slid open and a face stared out. It was a big fat face that hadn't seen a razor for some time.

"So?" it muttered.

"So let us in," Guilty Miltie answered.

"Who are you?"

"Don't you recognize me? I'm a friend of Ace Diamond's."

The face wagged dolefully. “Huh,” it said. “If you was a friend of Ace Diamond’s, you’d know he ain’t got no friends.”

“But I got to see him—I’m in trouble.”

“You’ll be in more,” the face promised, “unless you scram outta here.” The panel slammed shut.

“This is embarrassing,” Miltie said. “Can’t figger why he’s so cagey. Must be a big game going on tonight.” Suddenly his eyes narrowed. “Hey, we can still get in. I know a way.”

“How?”

The little man pointed overhead. “Window,” he said. “Come on.”

“But won’t Mr. Diamond be angry if somebody breaks in on him so—abruptly?”

“Nah. He’ll love it!” Miltie grabbed Ronald by the shoulders. “Come on,” he urged. “Going up!” And up they went, to the second floor, hovering around the side of the building until Ronald’s small passenger discovered an unlocked window. The room beyond was dark and deserted. In they climbed, tumbling to the floor. Miltie headed for the door, which led down a passageway to a large, well-lighted room.

Ronald stood there, getting his first glimpse of a gambling den.

The space around the half-dozen green tables was well occupied by eager patrons. Two roulette wheels spun, a chuck-a-luck cage rattled, dice thumped. The operators behind the tables wore evening clothes, and they weren’t the only ones—many of the customers were similarly attired, although several seemed in the process of losing their boiled shirts.

Down at the far end of the room the largest crowd was gathered around a big dice-table, behind which sat a corpulent gentleman with a dazzling smile. Ronald didn’t need an introduction once he saw the smile. The man had diamonds set in his teeth.

“That’s your friend, isn’t it?” he whispered.

Miltie nodded, “Yeah. And I can see he’s busy, all right.”

Ace Diamond was indeed quite busy. At the moment he was engaged in raking in a large bundle of greenbacks.

“He seems to be very lucky tonight,” Ronald observed.

“Sure.” Miltie chuckled. “He’s lucky nobody’s examined his dice.”

“You mean Mr. Diamond cheats?”

Miltie shivered. “Don’t say things like that around here,” he said. “He’s kind of sensitive. Also, his boys are.” A nod indicated half a dozen solitary figures lounging at intervals along the far wall.

“I’m not so sure I want to meet your Mr. Diamond after all,” Ronald said.

“Aw, come on—” Miltie started forward, then stopped.

“What’s the matter?”

“That dame,” he wheezed. “The one with the dice now—”

Ronald stared, recognized the platinum hair. “Laura Lee, isn’t it?”

“It is. And if she recognizes me, I’m cooked!”

“Hey, where are you going?”

But the little pickpocket had already gone, leaving no forwarding address. He darted through the crowd, pausing only to snatch two wallets, and plunged down the front stairs.

RONALD turned to follow, then hesitated. Laura Lee was up here. After he’d been fired this afternoon she must have discovered the missing bracelet on her person. Perhaps she could vindicate him if he asked her. It was worth a try. He could at least speak to her.

Accordingly he moved down the aisle towards the big table. As he did so he wobbled a bit. “Liquor,” he reminded himself. Although the giddy feeling didn’t seem to be connected with intoxication. Rather it was as though the chemicals he had absorbed were bubbling and seething in his system. A wave of heat scorched through his skull and he closed his eyes. When he opened them again he had the sensation of being able to see more clearly than before.

And what he saw was very simple. Laura Lee, holding the dice, was tossing the contents of her purse onto the green table. Ace Diamond grinned at her, counted the bills, matched them from his pile.

The starlet did not return his smile. “This had better be it,” she declared. “I still don’t see how you managed to clean me in fifteen minutes.”

“Luck,” Ace Diamond grunted. “Come on, let ’em roll!”

The platinum blonde picked up the dice and held them for a moment. Beneath the mask of mascara, the patina of powder, Ronald caught the momentary glimpse of a nervous tic. The girl was frightened, he decided. He knew that look only too well—he’d worn it himself, many times.

Ronald regarded the dice in her hand. He hoped she’d win now. Let’s see, what did it take? A seven, or an eleven. Of course, that’s what she was muttering. “Come on, seven!”

“Come on, seven,” Ronald repeated, under his breath.

The dice bounced down on the table, hit the backboard, came to rest. A five and a two.

“Ah!” sighed the girl.

“Well, whaddya know!” Ace Diamond shrugged and glanced at the spectators, then at Laura Lee. “Your dice, your bet.”

She pushed the entire stack of bills forward. “I feel as if my luck has changed,” she said.

Again she threw the dice. Ronald remembered that four and three also make seven. Curiously enough, these were the numbers that came up.

So did Ace Diamond’s eyebrows.

“Well, I’ll be damned,” he said, thus demonstrating his ability to predict a sure thing. “Do you mind if I give you a new pair of dice, lady?”

Laura Lee eyed him suspiciously. “I rather like these,” she pouted.

Ronald edged over to her and nudged her. A wild surmise gleamed in his eyes. “Go ahead,” he whispered. “Let him switch.”

The starlet glanced at him in surprise, then curiously.

“Haven’t I seen you somewhere before?” she asked.

“We met informally,” Ronald muttered. “But I wish you’d take my advice. I think you’ve got a winning streak.”

The platinum curls tossed. “All right.” She faced the fat gambler. “Bring out the ivories.”

Ace Diamond nudged a sallow gentleman at his left, who immediately produced a fresh pair of dice. He rolled them out on the table to the girl, and as she scooped them up Ronald noted that they had landed to show one and one—snake-eyes. This was not in itself unusual, because these dice happened to be covered with nothing but single dots on every side.

Laura Lee held them without inspecting them. She turned to Ronald and smiled. “Well, Mister, seeing as you’re advising me, what do I bet?”

Again Ronald felt a strange surge, compounded of equal parts of power, confidence, and Grain Alcohol. “Shoot the works,” he said.

The girl pushed her imposing stack of folding money forward. Ace Diamond smiled. His left-hand man counted the bills carefully, and Diamond matched them. It took everything he had in front of him, plus a sizable addition from his trousers pocket.

A reverent hush fell over the assemblage. The worshippers of Dame Fortune had deserted the minor altars and now crowded around this table, awaiting the major sacrifice to come.

Ace Diamond stuck a gold toothpick between his glittering fillings.

“Roll ’em, lady,” he urged.

And Laura Lee rolled ’em.

Six and one make seven, Ronald thought.

The dice bounced. A one came up. And then, another one.

Six, Ronald thought. *That should be a six*.

“Snake eyes!” Ace Diamond shouted. “I collect.”

He reached for the money, then his hands hesitated. Ronald broke the silence. “Perhaps you need glasses.” he said. “That’s a one and a six.”

“Glasses?” Diamond scowled. “Have I gone crazy, or did that one turn into a six just now.”

“You’re right, boss,” muttered the left-hand man. “I seen it myself.”

“But that’s impossible!” Diamond yelled, as Laura Lee scooped her winning into her handbag. “It can’t be a six. Somebody cheated—I know, on account of there’s nothing on them dice but ones.”

“Glasses,” Ronald said. “Nice, strong glasses. I know the name of a reliable optometrist—”

Ace Diamond stood up slowly and pushed his jaw halfway across the table. “You know a lot of things, don’t you, buddy?” he said. “Such as what the lady should bet, what comes up on the table. Very sharp. But I am not interested in your optometrist.”

“Sorry,” Ronald said.

“I am hoping you know the name of a good undertaker,” Ace Diamond continued. “Because unless the lady here gives back that dough, you are gonna need one, fast. Grab her, Thorstein.”

The sallow man named Thorstein put his hand on Laura Lee’s shoulder. Nobody made a move to stop him, because he put his other hand on the table—and there was a pistol in it.

Ronald gulped air, and at the same time absorbed confidence and sudden decision. He whirled the girl around and slipped an arm under hers.

“Don’t be scared,” he said. “No matter what happens. Just hang on tight. Or tightly. No time for grammatical niceties.”

And indeed, there wasn’t. Before the astonished starlet could frame a protest, her protesting frame was lifted off the ground and Ronald soared over the table.

Ace Diamond stared up, jaws gaping to reveal every one of the 18½ carats in his mouth.

The crowd gasped and scattered, as well they might, because Thorstein was waving his pistol.

“Ooohh!” gasped the girl. “He’ll shoot!”

Ronald lowered his head and crashed forward, brushing against the hanging light-fixture. The globes shattered and the room was plunged into darkness. A shot made a scarlet exclamation point to the crash of the chandelier.

There were screams and curses, and then guns blazed from the far wall as the other attendants got into the act.

“Wh-what are you doing?” quavered the girl, clinging to Ronald’s neck.

“Looking for the door I came in by,” he told her. “I think I know where it is, now. Keep your head down—here we go!”

And there they went, through the dark doorway and into the office beyond. The window was still conveniently open.

Kicking the door shut as he sailed past it, Ronald swirled for the window.

“Where are you going now?” breathed Laura Lee.

“Out, of course. Where else?”

“What a way to die!” Shuddering, she closed her eyes as Ronald jumped out the second-storey window, holding her in his arms.

He felt the now familiar falling sensation and almost automatically kicked his heels. Nothing happened. He was still falling—although far from still.

It wasn’t working!

Now it was Ronald’s turn to close his eyes. They were still closed when the two fugitives landed; a double landing in more ways than one. The first stop was momentary, on the canvas roof of a convertible that was speeding down the alleyway. When the roof collapsed, they collapsed, in the back seat of the car.

No bones were broken. As the car gained speed, screaming out of the alley on two wheels, they regarded each other in shocked surprise.

Then, almost simultaneously, they peered at the driver. He turned and leered at them cordially.

“Where to, folks?” said Guilty Miltie.

“Hanover Hotel,” breathed Laura Lee, and promptly fainted.

CHAPTER IV

"SHE'LL be all right," Miltie said, for the fifth time, as Ronald fanned the platinum blonde with a wad of greenbacks from her handbag. "What I wanna know is, what happened?"

Briefly, Ronald described his experiences since the pickpocket's departure. He omitted mention of the changing dice-numerals, however; that little detail still puzzled him. Even more baffling was the sudden loss of his strange powers.

"But what *I* want to know is," he concluded, "where did you get this car?"

"I come downstairs, see?" Miltie explained patiently. "And I decided to take a little walk for myself. Until in the parking lot back there I noticed this here car. So I figured walking is nice but riding is nicer."

"In other words, you stole the car."

"I borried it," the little man snapped. "I was gonna bring it back, honest I was. Maybe take a little drive out to California or someplace first. I figger it's a patriotic duty like, to see America first."

Ronald shook his head. He was at a loss for words. He was at a loss for thoughts, too. So much had happened to him today—so much that was baffling, inexplicable, and unpredictable. He could no longer apply his sense of values to a changed and apparently still-changing world. As late as this afternoon he'd have maintained a firm opinion that borrowing cars for trips to California was wrong. But then again, as late as this afternoon he'd have held an equally firm opinion about the impossibility of floating, flying, or changing the spots on dice.

No! it was too much for Ronald. His muscles ached from unaccustomed exertion, his head ached from unaccustomed contact with ceilings, chandeliers and convertible canvas. Besides, the glow of of the alcohol was wearing off.

Ronald was quite weary when the car pulled up before the entrance of the Hanover Hotel. He eyed the somnolent starlet. "Guess we'll have to carry her in," he said.

Guilty Miltie shook his head. “Not me, buddy,” he said. “She wakes up and what does she do? Recognizes me from this afternoon and hollers copper, that’s what. No, you gotta carry her alone. Besides, you can always fly up.”

“That’s just it,” Ronald murmured. “I can’t fly. Something’s wrong.”

“Your opinion,” retorted Miltie. “I figgered something was wrong when you could.” He gunned the motor. “Anyways, from now on, you’re on your own.”

“My own what?” Ronald asked. But Miltie didn’t answer. The convertible drove off, leaving the young man standing on the sidewalk with the girl in his arms.

“Wake up!” he said, shaking her violently. “You’re home!” Slowly, Laura Lee opened her eyes. Then she shuddered.

“Now I remember you! You’re the one who went after me this afternoon.”

“I wasn’t after you,” Ronald protested. “I was just after that diamond bracelet.”

“Not very flattering, are you?” Laura Lee sniffed. “Honestly, that’s all you men think of is money.”

“I wasn’t thinking of money,” he told her. “If I was, I could have stolen your purse just now while you were unconscious.”

“That’s right.” She smiled at him, and Ronald was surprised at the warmth in her eyes. “You did save me, didn’t you? But I can’t quite see how—diving out of the window that way—”

“It’s a long story,” Ronald said. “Hard to explain.”

“Maybe a drink would help,” the girl suggested. “I have ever so much liquor up in my suite.”

“Lead the way,” Ronald answered. His reply surprised him; it was not like Ronald Weems to pay midnight visits to hotel suites in search of liquor. It was not like Ronald Weems to look fondly on young women who paraded around publicly in their undies; who gambled and drank and exhibited none of the demureness of Amy Cooper. But, on the other hand, he reminded himself, Amy Cooper wasn't particularly demure at heart. She drank, too. He'd learned that tonight, along with a lot of other things.

Going up to Laura Lee's suite seemed to be merely a matter of continuing the educational process.

ONCE established on a sofa, glass in hand, Ronald relaxed. The liquor was good; it didn't seem to burn nearly as much as the Grain Alcohol. And Laura Lee, under the softer light of a lamp, didn't seem nearly as hard and brassy. In fact, she was almost subdued.

"Now," she said. "Tell me about yourself."

"There's really nothing to tell," Ronald said. But he started to talk, and somehow the words came out. He meant to mention only the incidents of the day, but in the end he seemed to find it necessary to explain a lot of things. About Amy Cooper, and five years in Ladies' Lingerie, and the maiden aunts, and Mr. Bickerstaff.

Laura Lee refilled his glass and her own several times, and talking became increasingly easy. Ronald told her about the bracelet again, and she nodded.

"You were right, you know," she said. "I found it when I got back-stage. It must have slipped down into—anyway, I found it. But by that time you were gone. And this Mr. Bickerstaff told me he'd fired you. I felt just awful about it."

"You did?"

The girl's eyes widened. "Of course I did. Why do you suppose I went to that crummy gambling joint tonight? Do you think I spend all my time whooping it up?"

"I didn't know," Ronald said. "I thought all movie stars went in for debauchery."

"Sweet of you to say so." Laura Lee splashed more whiskey into their glasses with an angry gesture. "But for your information, I'm not a movie star. Just a starlet. That's a polite word for a girl who gets a stock contract, dyes her hair platinum, and poses for pinup pictures when she isn't running around the country on cheap publicity stunts like the Lingerie Show this afternoon."

She stood up and paced the carpet. "From the way you describe your relatives," she said, "you had aunts in your pants. They brought you up to be a Perfect Gentleman of the Old School. Isn't that it?" Ronald nodded miserably.

"Well, I didn't have aunts," Laura Lee continued. "I just had Momma. Or, rather, she had me. Momma always wanted me to be a Great Actress. So while you were learning to wipe your feet on the doormat, I was taking tap and ballet and elocution lessons. I got a lot of rules shoved down my throat, too. But Momma had her way. Before she died, I got this studio contract. And for the past two years I've stayed, doing a few bad bits in a few bad pictures—but mostly posing and chasing around this way. Up until today you were under Mr. Bickerstaff's thumb. Well, I had Mr. Flick."

"Mr. Flick?" Ronald echoed. "Mr. Flick is a flack. A public relations man to you; a cheap press-agent to me. He's the one who set up this deal today. He's the one who fired me after I raised glory hell about *you* being fired on account of that bracelet—"

"You raised hell on my account? And *you* got fired?"

She stared indignantly. "Well, he said he'd notify the studio that I'd made a public scene, and they'd fire *me.* And he pulled out right after dinner. So I took a few drinks and went to this Ace Diamond's place; Flick had told me about it, he always knows about such things. I had five hundred dollars and I thought if I was really fired, maybe I'd better use the money and try and see if I could win some more. Only I didn't, until you came along and changed my luck. And then you saved me, like the chivalrous goof you are —"

"I'm not a chivalrous goof," Ronald protested.

"Never contradict a lady," said Laura Lee. And kissed him.

Ronald learned that Grain Alcohol is not the only thing that can produce a strong reaction.

SHE snuggled on his lap and stroked his forehead. “Thanks,” she whispered. “Thanks for being so brave, and rushing me out of there. How you ever managed to jump up like that and put out the lights I’ll never know—and diving out of the window that way was wonderful.”

“B-but I didn’t jump,” Ronald insisted. “I flew. And when I went out the window I thought I could float down.”

Laura Lee sat back, biting her lower lip. “Huh?” she commented.

“Didn’t you realize I was flying?” Ronald persisted. “Wait, let me tell you about what happened this afternoon, after I got fired.”

And he completed his story—from the moment he opened the Little Jim Dandy Home Chemical Set until his arrival at the gambling den.

When he finished, Laura Lee poured silently, drank swiftly. “So that’s how it is,” she said. “Psychic trauma.”

It was Ronald’s turn to say, “Huh?”

“Shock reaction,” she said. “You poor, poor guy. Don’t you see what happened? Getting fired that way just tore your world to bits, didn’t it? So you went home and decided to end it all, didn’t you?”

“Are you trying to tell me I’m crazy?” Ronald asked. “All this happened—I know it did.”

Laura Lee shook her head. “Of course you’re not crazy,” she told him. “But you are mentally upset. Wanting to commit suicide proves it.”

“Since when are you a psychiatrist?” Ronald demanded.

“You can’t be in the movies for two years without learning something about psychiatry,” Laura Lee answered. “That’s all you hear. Anyway, just take my word for it. You were in a shock state, remember? So you took a drink—that Grain Alcohol is powerful stuff and you’re not used to liquor in any form. Then you ran into this pickpocket and he brought you to Ace Diamond’s place.”

“But Amy Cooper and Stu Lacey,” Ronald interjected. “I *saw* them.”

“Fantasy,” the girl sighed. “All fantasy. Like that stuff about drinking chemicals and flying.”

“Look, I can prove it. Come home with me and I’ll show you the chemistry set; you can see I drank out of it.”

“At two in the morning?” Laura Lee smiled. “I’m not going up to your apartment to look at chemistry sets, believe me!” She giggled softly. “Why Ronald, you must be drunk—making like a wolf.”

“I’m serious,” he declared.

“I know you are. And so am I. Tomorrow I think you’d better see a doctor, just to clear this up. Then I’ll take you back to Mr. Bickerstaff and see that you’re given your job again.” She sat down once more. “After all, it’s the least I can do for you.”

Ronald passed a hand across his forehead. He was beginning to feel a trifle woozy, what with the excitement and the liquor and the nearness of her. “I don’t know,” he murmured. “Maybe you’re right and I did imagine most of what happened. You’re quite sure I wasn’t flying?”

“No,” the girl admitted. “I’m not. Everything happened so fast—you grabbed me and they started shooting. But I was under the impression that you jumped, carrying me. Of course, I’m no fool; I kept my eyes closed.”

“I *know* I flew,” Ronald insisted. “All right, if you say so. But that can wait until tomorrow when you see the doctor.”

“Tomorrow?” Suddenly Ronald remembered. In his experiences, real or imaginary, Amy Cooper had called the police. If it had actually occurred, then they would still be watching his apartment. He couldn’t take the risk of going home.

And this was honestly all he had in the back of his mind. when he faced the girl, beside him and said, “What about tonight, though?”

Whatever Laura Lee had in the back of her mind, it didn’t stay there long. “Why, Ronald!” she said, and moved into his arms.

CHAPTER V

MORRIE Bund, M. D. was a nervous man. This afternoon he had a nervous patient.

Ronald Weems faced him in the consulting room, clutching his chemistry set under one arm. Last night's experiences had unsettled him considerably, and he had awakened with Laura Lee and a large feeling of guilt.

The girl had insisted that he visit a physician, however, and Ronald in turn had been equally stubborn about picking up the chemistry set. Finally, in order to please him, Laura Lee had taken his key and ridden over to the apartment in a cab. There she picked up the Little Jim Dandy and returned with it, reporting that she had not encountered any members of the police force on the premises.

Ronald immediately opened the kit and brandished the partially empty vials and bottles. "See," he told her, "I did drink this stuff yesterday. This proves I could fly."

"It proves nothing of the sort," Laura Lee retorted. "Except that you're going to the nearest doctor for an examination."

The nearest doctor turned out to be Morris Bund, and while a determined Laura sat in the outer waiting-room, Ronald hesitantly told his story.

"It all started," he said "when I yanked off this girl's negligee." Dr. Bund, who had been taking notes on his patient's age, weight and previous medical history, sat bolt upright. "You yanked off a girl's negligee?" he repeated, as though he hadn't quite heard aright. "Might I ask where this event took place?"

"Why, in a department store, of course. I work there."

"And is yanking off negligees one of your duties?"

"No, of course not," Ronald explained. "I was looking for a diamond bracelet."

Dr. Bund shook his head. "I'm not sure you've come to the right place," he sighed. "You ought to have gone to my brother-in-law, down the hall. He's a psychologist."

"I don't need a psychologist," Ronald insisted. "If you'd only listen to me—"

"Go ahead," Dr. Bund said, chewing on his mustache. "You were looking for a diamond bracelet. Yours, I presume?"

"No. It was stolen."

"Kleptomania," the Doctor muttered. "I knew you ought to see my brother-in-law."

"I'm not a kleptomaniac," Ronald shouted. "I'm only trying to tell you what led up to my condition. If I hadn't yanked off her negligee I wouldn't have been fired. If I hadn't been fired I wouldn't have tried to commit suicide—"

"Attempted suicide, eh?" The Doctor rose. "Really, Mr. Weems, if you'll permit me to call my brother-in-law in for consultation, I'm sure we'll get results."

"But I'm not here about the suicide effort," the young man persisted. "It's what happened afterwards. You see, I drank these chemicals and all at once I started to float. Then I discovered I could fly, and also change the spots on dice, and when the gamblers started shooting at me I jumped out of the window. Now my only question is, Doctor—do you think there's anything wrong with me?"

Morrie Bund retreated towards the door. "Certainly not," he said. "From your story, I'd judge you are perfectly normal. What you just told me could happen to anyone. Now, if you'll excuse me just a moment, I have to make a phone-call."

He disappeared hastily, and Ronald tiptoed to the door and peered into the reception room. The nurse sat at her desk and Laura Lee paced the floor, but as he suspected, the Doctor was gone.

"Come on," Ronald told the starlet. "We're getting out of here. This guy thinks I'm crazy—he must have gone after his brother-in-law. He's a. psychiatrist."

"But Ronald, don't you think perhaps—"

"I don't think perhaps," he answered. "Let's go. Hurry, now."

He opened the door leading to the outer hallway, then shrank back. "Take a look," he breathed. "Do you see what I see?"

The girl peered down the corridor.

"Yes," she whispered. "I do. Must have followed us from the hotel."

Sure enough, standing next to the elevator was Ace Diamond and his left-hand man Thorstein. They were engaged in a mumbled colloquy, although neither of them could have spelled it.

"That's what the desk-clerk said," Diamond muttered. "She went out with this guy right after she asked where she could find the nearest croaker."

"Think we plugged him last night?"

"I dunno. That isn't important. What I'm after is my dough. And also this character. Anybody that can fly—"

Laura Lee shut the door quietly. "They're waiting for us," she said. "Now what?"

"Stand guard," Ronald told her. "I'm going back into the office. It's safer there. When the Doctor comes back, I'll explain. Maybe he can let us out another way."

RONALD retreated once more and took his place beside the desk. Suddenly he felt giddy. On an impulse, he opened the Little Jim Dandy set and took out the bottle of Grain Alcohol. A healthy swig served to quiet his nerves. He decided to take another, and was just finishing the bottle when the door swung open.

He jumped, but it was only Morrie Bund. And behind him, a thin, bespectacled gentleman who Ronald immediately identified as the brother-in-law.

"This is Dr. Clobberheimer," the physician said. "I took the liberty of telling him about your case, and he's very much interested. I wonder if you'd just go over it with him while I step out for a cup of coffee?"

"No, don't go!" Ronald cried. "I have to tell you something first." He lowered his voice to a whisper. "There are a couple of gangsters out in the hall now. They're after me."

Dr. Bund exchanged a significant glance with his relative. Then he beamed at his patient. “I’ll be very careful,” he promised. “You needn’t worry about me.”

“I’m worried about myself,” Ronald murmured. “What can I do?”

“Just relax. They won’t bother you as long as you’re in here,” said Dr. Clobberheimer in a soothing voice.

“All right.” Ronald slumped wearily in his seat as Morrie Bund made his exit. “Maybe you’ll believe me,” he said.

“Of course.” Dr. Clobberheimer gave him a thin smile. “I’m sure there’s a logical explanation for all this.”

“That’s the spirit.” Ronald was heartened. “You see, I guess I didn’t explain matters too clearly to Doctor Bund. First of all, there’s my background.”

“Right.” Dr. Clobberheimer leaned forward. “In cases like this background material is all-important. To begin with, what do you do?”

“I’m in Ladies’ Lingerie,” Ronald told him.

“Aha!” said the psychiatrist. “A transvestite, eh?”

“You don’t understand—I’m not in Ladies’ Lingerie any more, not since yesterday.”

“Obviously,” Dr. Clobberheimer purred. “I can see that for myself. You’re dressed quite normally, I agree.”

“But I *am* normal,” Ronald wheezed. “It’s just that last night I was able to float, and to fly.”

“The flying dream,” muttered the savant. “Very commonplace, that. Of course you realize the Freudian interpretation?”

“It wasn’t a dream. It happened. I drank some chemicals from this set here.” Ronald exhibited the Little Jim Dandy outfit. “First,” he said. “I took on quite a lot of Grain Alcohol. Matter of fact, I just finished the rest of the bottle a few minutes ago. Otherwise I could offer you a drink.”

“And then we’d both fly together, eh?” Dr. Clobberheimer said.

“Nothing of the sort! Are you inferring I merely suffered from hallucinations?”

"Grain Alcohol can have that effect," Clobberheimer told him. "But my brother-in-law mentioned a suicide attempt, too. That's what really bothers me. What happened?"

"Give me a glass and I'll show you," Ronald said. The psychiatrist handed him a water tumbler. Ronald opened the vials and bottles and, carefully estimating the amount by the height of the liquids remaining, quickly duplicated the potion he had consumed last night.

"Here," he said. "This is what I drank. And then I floated and flew and guessed the spots on dice. I could predict what was coming up, even change the spots—"

"Delusions of teleportation, levitation, and telekinesis," Dr. Clobberheimer said. "Very, very interesting." He leaned forward. "Young man, I believe you need a thorough examination and a prolonged rest. A few months or so in a private instit—"

"Never!" Ronald stood up. "I'm telling you the truth."

"As you see it," Dr. Clobberheimer purred. "But I'm afraid you don't realize the gravity of the situation."

"Yes I do." Ronald lifted the glass. "When I drink this stuff, the gravity of the situation is that there is no gravity."

"Wait a minute—" the Doctor shouted.

"I guess there's only one way to prove that I'm not lying," Ronald said. And drank the bubbling, fizzing brew.

Waves of heat coursed through him. Clobberheimer rushed from the office, summoning Dr. Bund's nurse. "Get a stomach-pump!" he shouted. "A man just tried to commit suicide."

THE nurse swung into action, with Laura and the psychiatrist behind her. Armed with a revolting-looking instrument, the efficient disciple of Florence Nightingale returned to the consultation room.

Ronald awaited her calmly, hands folded across his chest.

Clobberheimer turned to Laura. “You’d better go outside,” he said. “There may be a painful scene, in case he turns violent. One never knows, in cases like these.”

The platinum blonde trembled. “You mean—he *is* crazy?” she quavered.

“Oh, I wouldn’t say that,” Dr. Clobberheimer reassured her. “Just a touch of paranoia, with schizophrenic complications, plus a bit of hysteria.”

“What does that mean in English?”

“He’s nuttier than a fruitcake. Go outside,” the psychiatrist told her.

Laura retreated.

Doctor and nurse advanced.

“Get up on the table, Mr. Weems,” the thin psycotherapist coaxed. “Get up on the table and let the nice nurse use the nice stomach-pump.”

“Come one step closer,” Ronald warned, “and I’ll take off.”

“Nurse has seen men undress before,” Dr. Clobberheimer said.

“I’m not talking about undressing. I mean I’ll fly.”

“Mustn’t fly off the handle,” the Doctor cooed. And, softly, to the nurse, “Get behind him now—quickly!”

They lunged, one from in front and one from in back. Lunged, and collided with each other. For Ronald wasn’t standing there any more.

He was sitting upside down on the ceiling.

“Oh my goodness!” breathed the nurse.

“Great Jung!” murmured the Doctor. “Jumping *gestalt*, what’s the meaning of this?”

“I told you,” Ronald said. “Now, what about watching this?”

In rapid succession, he offered a demonstration of walking on the ceiling, flying from one side of the room to another, and floating gracefully in mid-air.

“Levitation,” Dr. Clobberheimer said. “Good Stekel, I’d never have believed it! You do have the power of teleportation after all.”

“And what was that other business?” Ronald called.

“Telekinesis. The ability to move objects through mental power.”

“Such as those coins in your pocket?”

As Ronald spoke he closed his eyes A shower of silver emerged from Dr. Clobberheimer's trouser-pocket and dropped to the table.

"I never really tried this before," Ronald muttered. "When I willed the dice, I thought it was just making a wish. I didn't know I was actually moving them. And when I called the results, it was a combination of telepathy and telekinesis, apparently. Such as this—when I make all your coins land heads up."

As he uttered the phrase, half of the coins on the table rose and spun forward. Doctor and nurse examined them.

"He can do it, all right!" Clobberheimer frowned. "I'll be a dirty Behaviorist if he can't!"

"Now do you understand?" Ronald persisted. "It's something in the combination of those chemicals. Apparently the effect of the dose I took lasts about four hours and then wears off. But until it does, I can do almost anything I want—fly and all the rest."

"This is important!" the psychiatrist said. "It opens up vast new vistas. Professor Rhine's experiments are nothing compared to this. We've used narcohypnotic therapy, why not chemical aids for the factors? Mr. Weems, I believe you've stumbled onto something vital and revolutionary. The first step will be to analyze the exact chemical components of that solution you mixed. Then we'll arrange a series of demonstrations, get a patent on the formula, and—"

"Later," Ronald said. "Right now, I want you to do me a favor."

"Anything," Dr. Clobberheimer told him. "Anything at all."

"Just step outside and tell my girl to come in," Ronald urged. "I want you to inform her I'm not crazy."

"Delighted," the Doctor answered.

But he was not delighted when he opened the door leading to the outer office.

"She seems to have left," he murmured.

"Left? But that's impossible. Or—oh, no!" Ronald swooped through the doorway, headed for the second door leading into the hall. It too was deserted. Ace Diamond and his henchman had gone.

"They kidnapped her, that's what they did!" Ronald muttered.

"Who kidnapped what?"

"Those gangsters I told you about. That part was true, too!" Ronald danced on air helplessly. Suddenly he turned and sailed down the corridor.

"Come back!" shouted the psychiatrist. "Where are you going?"

"After her, of course!" Ronald said. "Hang onto my chemical set, though. I'll be back."

The nurse blinked unbelievingly. "Look at him go," she whispered softly. "Just like a bird."

Dr. Clobberheimer nodded. "Something tells me," he said, "that the goose hangs high."

CHAPTER VI

RONALD wasn't exactly hanging, and he wasn't exactly off on a wild goose chase. As he spiralled down the staircase and landed upright once more in the lobby, he had already come to a definite conclusion. Ace Diamond must have taken Laura Lee to his establishment. Why, he didn't know—but there was one sure way of finding out.

Ronald glanced at the crowded street and realized he'd never dare to take a chance on flying in broad daylight. And, as is inevitable whenever one is desperately needed, there wasn't a taxi in sight. Ronald sighed, then thought of his telekinesis.

He closed his eyes and concentrated. Abruptly, a cab ground to a halt at the curb before him.

The driver was cursing melodiously. "Better not get in, Mister," he said. "Something's gone wrong with the steering gear. I was just coming up Stover Street, heading straight, when I swear this heap did a U-turn and landed me over here."

"I'm sure you'll find there won't be any more trouble," Ronald assured him. He climbed in and gave the warehouse address and they started off.

In daylight the warehouse looked less forbidding. Ronald paid the driver and headed for the front door. He rapped several times with no answer. The door was locked. Taking a look around to make sure he was unobserved, the young man flapped his arms and ascended to hover on air outside the second-storey window. It wasn't fastened, and he had no trouble gaining entrance.

But the gambling joint, like the dummy warehouse below, was deserted. Ronald shook his head. Of course; it would be too much to hope for that Ace Diamond would bring the girl here. For the moment he was stymied.

He went back to the window again and stared out. Perhaps he ought to notify the police. They would know what to do. But one of the things they'd do would be to lock him up—after all, Amy Cooper and Stu Lacey had issued a complaint. Besides, trying to explain his peculiar condition was impossible; he'd already gone through that ordeal. No, the police were out. The situation was hopeless.

Ronald stared out across the river at the city. So much had happened in the last twenty-four hours that he could scarcely comprehend anything in proper perspective. Certainly the city itself seemed different. Heretofore it was a forbidding spectacle to Ronald; a vast stone maze through which he crept unnoticed and unnerved.

Now it no longer presented the same challenge; the stone walls weren't obstacles, for he could fly above them. A chemical miracle had done that for him, and a glandular miracle as well. Maybe the Little Jim Dandy set had enabled his body to fly, but Laura Lee was the one who had sent his spirit soaring. Laura Lee—he had to find the girl, had to—

SOMETHING sputtered and purred in the alleyway below. Ronald glanced down and his eyes focussed on a red convertible with a broken top, slowly backing into a parking area.

“Miltie!” he breathed, and launched himself out of the window. A moment later he came to rest beside the vehicle. Sure enough, Guilty Miltie was at the wheel.

“What are you doing here?” Ronald inquired.

“Bringing the car back, like I said I would,” Miltie told him. “I been driving around and thinking things over, and I decided to go straight from now on. Even gonna get me a job.”

“What kind of a job?”

“Well, I dunno,” Miltie mused. “I alius had kind of a way with kids. So maybe I’ll try peddling reefers.”

The little man beamed virtuously. “But how come you’re back here too?” he asked.

Ronald told him, telegram-fashion, in ten words.

“Put the snatch on her, huh?” Miltie mused. “Sounds bad, don’t it?”

“Never mind how it sounds,” Ronald answered. “What I want to know is, where’d he take her?”

“Prolly out to his country place,” Miltie decided. “He’s got a greenhouse down the road about five miles.”

“A greenhouse?” Ronald was surprised. “I never thought Ace Diamond was the type who went in for horticulture.”

“Oh, he likes them, too,” Miltie assured him. “Even if they ain’t got no culture.”

“I mean I never thought he’d raise flowers.”

“But he does,” Miltie insisted. “He raises poppies. For opium, you know.”

“Could you drive me to the greenhouse now?” Ronald asked.

“I ain’t suppose to drive this car,” Miltie pointed out. “It’s not my propitty.”

“Well, I could fly you there, I suppose.”

“In daylight? Not me, buddy! Them farmers’d think we was a flying saucer or something and haul out the old shotguns.” He sighed heavily. “Might as well get in,” he said. “I’ll take you.”

So it was that Ronald and his loose-fingered friend careened out of town, down a county trunk road, and up the pathway to the small, tree-bordered dwelling beside the glassed-in greenhouse.

“They’re here, all right,” Miltie exclaimed. “I recognize his car in back. The one with the gun-turret on top.”

Ronald alighted from the car.

“Careful!” Miltie warned. “They can see us out here. Liable to pop you.”

As if ready and willing to prove this statement, the door of the cottage swung open and Ace Diamond appeared, a motherly smile on his face as he glanced down at the machine-gun cradled in his arms.

“Don’t move!” he called. “That means both, of you. No flying, no funny business either. The girl’s inside.”

“Then you admit you kidnapped her?”

“Admit it? I’ve been trying to reach you on the phone ever since we got here. Now I see you saved me a dime. Much obliged.”

“I don’t understand,” Ronald said.

“So I’ll make it real simple.” Ace Diamond grinned. “We got your girl, right?”

“Not right, but you’ve got her,” Ronald answered, bitterly.

“And you’ve got something we want,” Diamond told him.

“What’s that?”

“This flying gimmick.” Ace Diamond shook his head. “I never seen nothing to compare with that little trick you pulled off last night. I couldn’t get to sleep, just thinking about it. And finally, it come to me.”

“What come to you?” little Miltie piped up.

“Why, the idea, of course. How to use this gimmick in my business. Now you take like a bank, for instance. I never touched one before, account of the burglar alarms. They got all the cages and stuff wired. Minute you touch ’em, or even show up with a rod, somebody knows. But suppose you didn’t touch ’em. Suppose you just flew over ’em and didn’t pull a rod until you was right inside with the cashier? And instead of making a getaway in a hot car, you just flew off?”

“Who, me?” Ronald demanded, incredulously.

“Yeah, you! That’s my deal, chum. You rob me a bank, I give you back your dame. Fair enough?”

Ronald hesitated, then shook his head. “Never,” he said.

ACE Diamond lifted the muzzle of the machine-gun. “I’m not kidding,” he said. “It’s either-or. And you better make up your mind in a hurry, because I’m tired of holding this thing. It’s too heavy.

I never could figure out how Burt Lancaster does it in the movies.”

Ronald gulped and glanced at Guilty Miltie. Miltie gulped back at him.

“He means it, Dad,” whispered the pickpocket. “So which do you wanna be—a live bank-robber or a dead duck?”

“I can’t hold up a bank,” Ronald insisted. “I’ve had no experience.”

“You’ve had no experience bein’ dead, either,” Miltie reminded him. “Also, there’s the girl.”

Ronald sighed. “Yes,” he said. “There’s the girl.” He turned to face Ace Diamond once more. “All right. I’ll do it.”

“Now you’re talking!” The gambler urged them forward. “Just step inside and let’s make plans. Tonight’s downtown shopping night—everything’s open. The way I got it figured—”

But Ronald didn’t listen to him. He could see Laura Lee sitting on the sofa inside the cottage. The hood named Thorstein sat next to her, yet she seemed none the worse for wear. At the sight of Ronald, she rose and came forward.

“Darling—are you all right?”

“Sure,” Ronald told her. “I’m just fine. I’ve been captured and in a little while I’m going to rob a bank. What more could I ask?” He turned to Ace Diamond. “Promise she goes free if I do the job?”

“Scout’s honor,” said Ace Diamond.

Laura Lee squeezed the young man’s arm. “You’re doing this for me, aren’t you?” she whispered. “Oh, Ronald—to think I got you out of

Lingerie and into all this trouble!”

“Not your fault,” he answered.

Ace Diamond coughed discreetly. “Sorry to break up the scene,” he said, “but we gotta get down to business.” He seated himself at the kitchen table and summoned Thorstein to keep an eye—and a pistol—cocked on the prisoners.

“Suppose I draw you a diagram,” he began. “Now the First National Bank has a layout like this—”

Half an hour later he had covered the tablecloth with lines and done the same to his forehead.

“It’s no use,” he sighed. “No matter how you work it, robbing a big bank just ain’t a one-man job.” He turned to Ronald. “You can see that, can’t you? Even if you fly, it takes a man to cover the front door and a man for the guard, and a third guy to stick a gun on the crowd, and a fourth guy to handle the tellers and cashiers, and a fifth guy to actually collect the dough.”

“Then I don’t have to rob the bank?” Ronald asked, eagerly. “Right.” Ace Diamond smiled. “The robbery’s off. I’ll just rub you out, instead.”

“Rub me out?”

“Sorry. That’s the way the ball bounces.”

“Tough,” Guilty Miltie consoled. “Hate to see you go like this, pal.”

“You’re going, too,” Ace Diamond decided. “No witnesses.”

“Who—me?” Guilty Miltie hopped up and down in his chair. “But you can’t do *that!* I’m on your side, I’m just as big a crook as you are! Ain’t you got no ethics?” Ace Diamond shook his head.

GUILTY Miltie snapped his fingers. “Hey, wait a minute,” he said. “Maybe I got an answer figgered out.”

“Better make it fast,” Diamond advised. “Thorstein here is getting itchy.”

“While he’s scratchin’ hisself, listen to this.” Guilty Miltie leaned forward’. “You say it takes five or six guys to knock off a big bank, huh?”

"Right."

"So what's stoppin' you? You got five or six guys on your payroll, ain't so?"

"What's stopping us," Ace Diamond explained patiently, "is that none of us can fly like Ronald, here."

"But you *can!"* Miltie exclaimed. "All's you need is some of them there chemical sets."

"What chemical sets?"

"Don't tell them!" Ronald whispered. But it was too late. The little pickpocket had already launched on his explanation. Diamond listened attentively, and the smile came back.

"So you see how it is," Miltie concluded. "You just go down to Lacey's Department Store and buy yourself a bunch of Little Jim Dandy Home Chemistry outfits, or whatever they're called. And you're in business." He grinned up at the gambler. "Now, if you'll let us all go, we'll be square, huh?"

"Uh-uh." Ace Diamond shook his head.

"Whatsamatter, don't you believe me?"

"Of course I believe you," the gambler answered. "But it isn't that simple. First off, we got to get the sets. And if you think any of the gang is gonna walk into that department store with their bare faces hanging out and buy such stuff, you're crazy. If it works, and we rob the bank, some smart copper'll put two and two together. Also, we got to know a few other things—such as just how to mix the chemicals, and all that."

"But Ronald here can tell you what to use," Miltie pointed out.

"He can, but he won't," Ronald said, firmly.

"I think different," Diamond told him. "Which do you want for supper—a bellyful of porkchops or a bellyful of lead?"

"Well, now that you put it that way—"

"I also think something else," Ace Diamond went on. "I think *you* are the guy who can go downtown and buy those chemistry sets for us." He glanced at Thorstein for confirmation. "Sure, why not? You know your way around the store and everything. Just take a fast run down there right now. You'll be back in time for supper. I'll get the rest of the boys lined up and right after we eat, you can show us how to mix up that flying cocktail of yours. Then we can knock over the bank tonight, before downtown shopping closes. Nice, fast job."

Ronald glanced at Laura Lee. Then he squared his shoulders. "All right," he said. "I'll do it." He stood up and headed for the door.

"Wait a minute," Ace Diamond called after him. "You got company. I'm sending Thorstein along, just to keep an eye on you. Not that I don't trust you or anything." He chuckled. "And one more thing. I suppose you hope maybe somebody will recognize you and remember. Or somebody will recognize Thorstein. Well, I got a way around that, too. This is almost Christmas shopping season, you know. Well, on the way downtown, here's what you're gonna do—"

CHAPTER VII

AND that's what they did.

Less than an hour later, Ronald and the gangster named Thorstein emerged from the Carnival Costume Shoppe wearing outfits that were a veritable smorgasbord for moths.

"Santa Claus, yet!" Thorstein grumbled. "At my age, I gotta put on a crummy red suit and whiskers and carry a dopey bag around."

"If you'd only listen to me," Ronald said, "you wouldn't need to. Just let me go to the police, explain everything, and we'll be all right."

"No dice," Thorstein told him. "It would ruin me in the profession. So just follow orders, see? And remember, Santa Claus or no Santa Claus, I still got this heater on you. None of those flying tricks tonight."

Sighing, Ronald led the way to Lacey's Department Store.

It was almost the dinner-hour, and although the place was open for the coming evening, the crowd was light. For this small favor, Ronald was duly grateful. Few customers bothered to observe the passage of the two Santa Clauses down the first-floor aisle. Ronald felt conspicuous enough as it was; besides, his beard was tickling him.

Through the ride back to town, he had been awaiting an opportunity to fly, to say nothing of flee—but Thorstein was always alert. Now, as they invaded the department store, he realized that even if he had the chance, flying would soon be out of the question. His four hours were almost up; the influence of the chemicals would be wearing off.

Meanwhile, there was work to be done.

But Thorstein, oddly enough, seemed in no particular hurry. Walking along at his side, the hoodlum suddenly remarked, “That stuff about the chemicals is true, huh?”

“Definitely,” Ronald assured him.

“What do they call it when a guy floats and flies like that?”

“Levitation.”

“And what about moving those dice, the way you did last night?”

“Telekinesis.”

“Well, let’s see some.”

“What do you mean?”

“You heard me,” the hoodlum growled. “Let’s see some. There’s the jewelry counter. You got that canvas bag. Let’s see you make some of them necklaces and stuff move into the bag.”

“But that would be stealing—”

“If I shoot you, that would be murder,” Thorstein assured him, “But I’m gonna, unless you obey orders.”

Ronald, blushing beneath his beard, concentrated on a tray of necklaces standing on the jewelry counter. Almost instantly, they slithered, snake-like, into the gaping depths of the bag he carried.

“Wow!” Thorstein observed. “What a deal.” He tugged Ronald along the aisle. How about some stockings, hey? My girlfriend could use a few pair.”

“This isn’t a shopping tour,” Ronald reminded him. “Nor a shoplifting tour, either. Suppose we’re caught?”

"Nylons," Thorstein insisted. "And then maybe we can get her a purse."

Trembling, Ronald approached the stocking-counter. Once more he performed his telekinetichnique, and once again escaped undetected.

"Purses, now!" said the triggerman, happily. "Let's pick out a big one—my girlfriend likes to carry her heater inside. You know how dames are."

Ronald nodded. Urged by the goadings of the gunman, Ronald managed to acquire, in rapid succession, a red velvet purse, a large flagon of perfume, two ashtrays, and the attention of a thin gentleman wearing a derby hat.

"Don't look now," Ronald whispered, "but that's Amos Shamus, the store detective. I think he's spotted us."

"Awright," Thorstein growled. "Let's get up to the Toy Department and buy those chemical sets and beat it."

THEY sought an elevator, and the detective followed, unobtrusively. Just as unobtrusively, Thorstein poked his gun in the neighborhood of Ronald's kidneys. "Don't tip him off," he whispered, "or you get it. If he makes trouble, stall him."

The elevator brought them to Toyland and they hastened down the aisle to the counter where the chemistry sets were displayed—and where, Ronald noted, Miss Amy Cooper was also displaying herself.

As they neared the girl, Amos Shamus stepped up and tapped Ronald on the shoulder.

"Pardon me," he said, "but might I ask what you have in that bag?"

"Christmas presents, of course," Ronald replied, prompted by the jab of the gun in his back.

"Kind of early for delivery," the detective grunted. "Seeing as how Christmas is six weeks off yet."

"But you don't understand," Ronald said. "I'm not getting them for gifts. They're—well, they're for the store here. I suppose you saw me picking them off the counters."

"Then you admit it," the detective answered. "I thought I saw you at work."

"Of course you did." Ronald forced a smile through his whiskers "Me and my partner here, we work for the store. Up here in Toyland. He's the head Santa Claus and I'm his assistant. He has seniority because his beard is longer."

"Work here, huh?" Amos Shamus didn't seem quite convinced.

"Certainly. Didn't Mr. Lacey tell you about it downstairs? It was his idea." Ronald babbled. "We sit on a throne, you know, and hand out gifts to the kiddies. Every once in a while we run out of merchandise and have to go down and replenish our stock for the little brats, bless them."

Thorstein nodded in confirmation, but Amos Shamus reached for Ronald's sack.

"Let's see what you've got in there," he demanded. He thrust his arm inside and came up with an ashtray and the flagon of perfume.

"Fine stuff for kiddies," he commented. "Ashtrays, yet. And what about this perfume?"

"That's for a kid who doesn't smoke," Thorstein supplied, unhelpfully.

The detective inspected the perfume with startled eyes. *"Scents of Sin,"* he murmured. "What kind of a business is that?"

"Some of the girls are a bit precocious," Ronald told him. "You know how it is."

"I don't know how it is," Amos Shamus said. "I'm a respectable married man, with eleven children."

"With eleven children you'd hardly have a chance to be anything else." Ronald said. He waved at the detective. "Keep the perfume. Maybe one of your kids could use it."

At this juncture Amy Cooper entered into the conversation. Leaning over the counter, she regarded Ronald with curious eyes.

"Don't I know you?" she asked. "Your voice sounds very familiar."

"This is my first day on the job," Ronald answered. "My partner and I are just on our way to Santa's Throne. We merely stopped by to pick up half a dozen of these chemistry sets. You know, the Little Jim Dandy outfits."

"Little Jim Dandy?" Amy Cooper's eyes widened. Reaching out abruptly, she yanked Ronald's beard. "I thought so! It's *you* again!"

"Amy, don't!" Ronald gasped. But it was too late. First his beard, and then all hell, broke loose.

"Aha!" shouted Amos Shamus, reaching for his gun.

"Drop it!" shouted Thorstein, who didn't have to reach. "Now, hustle!" He turned to Ronald. "Stick six of them sets in your bag."

"Why not in yours—there's more room," Ronald suggested.

"Oh no there ain't." Thorstein grunted softly. "On account of *he* goes in my bag. *And* her."

A little knot of customers and salespeople collected just in time to view the spectacle. True to his word, Thorstein stuffed first the detective and then Amy Cooper into his sack and knotted the neck tightly.

"What is all this, some kind of publicity stunt?" asked one of the clerks.

"Must be. Nobody would be giving *people* away as a Christmas present, would they?" asked her partner.

"Make a nice gift to some cannibal, perhaps," replied the first.

"I never thought of that. But then, who wants to give gifts to cannibals? Maybe they don't even celebrate Christmas."

"That doesn't look like a publicity stunt to me," said a portly gentleman. "Not the way those two in the sack are squealing. *I* think somebody should call the police. Do it myself."

He waddled away and Thorstein whirled.

"All right," he snapped. "You got the sets? Then come on—let's go!"

"And run into the cops downstairs?" Ronald answered. "You heard what that man said about calling the police."

"Then we'll fly," Thorstein decided.

"But the power—it only lasts about four hours—I may run out of gas, or levitatory force or whatever, right in midair."

“You’d better not!” Thorstein grated, grimly. “Quick, over to the windows!”

Ronald gazed down from the sixth floor at the city below. If he jumped and couldn’t fly it would be sheer suicide. If he didn’t jump—the gun in his back told him it would be sheer murder.

Thorstein, clutching the sackful of chemical sets, grabbed him around the waist.

“Let’s go!” he commanded. “From the looks of things, the law is already here.”

Indeed, the boys in blue were pouring out of two elevators simultaneously. Ronald caught only a glimpse of them before the gun pressed and he jumped.

There was a moment of frantic falling, and then he kicked his legs and willed himself to straighten out.

Let go of my arms,” he panted. “I need them for steering.”

“Gawd!” breathed the gangster. “What a way to travel. I just forgot that I get airsick when I fly.”

“You’ll be worse than airsick if the chemicals give out,” Ronald reminded him. “Here we go.”

And there they went, across the twilight city. Ronald flew high, despite his burden; grateful for the dusk that masked his progress. He headed for the river—he could follow it to the country road.

“Think we’ll make it?” Thor stein breathed.

“Guess so. We’re almost over the river now,” Ronald told him. And then, as he lurched, “Oh-oh! Guess I spoke too soon. Something—something is happening—look out—”

“Stop!” Thorstein screamed. “We’re going down!”

“I know it,” Ronald panted. “But I can’t stop. I don’t have any brakes.”

“We’ll fall right in the river,” Thorstein yelled. “We’ll be drowneded.”

“Drowned,” Ronald corrected him.

“Now he tells me!” sobbed the gangster. “Oops—” They hit the water with a splash, and disappeared.

CHAPTER VIII

"SO that's how it happened," Ronald told Ace Diamond, as he dripped on the rug before the cottage fireplace. "Thorstein was out cold when I managed to drag him up on the bank. You'll probably find him there. I had to walk the rest of the way. Here are the chemical sets—all the stuff you'll want to use is in bottles and vials, so there's no harm done."

The fat gambler grunted. "Nice of you to come back," he said. "Why didn't you take it on the lam?"

Ronald made a helpless gesture. "Where could I go?" he sighed. "The police are looking for me all over town. Besides, I had to bring you this stuff, so that you'd let Laura Lee go. That was our bargain, remember?"

"Right." Ace Diamond showed the 18½ carats of fillings in his teeth. "Just one more little thing, though. You'll have to show me and the boys how to mix these chemicals for a proper dose." Ronald stared around the room. In addition to Laura Lee and Guilty Miltie, five of Diamond's henchmen were henching all over the place.

"Come here, boys," Diamond ordered. "And pay attention."

Ronald opened the topmost Little Jim Dandy set and began to collect glasses from the cupboard. Carefully, he measured out the Grain Alcohol.

"This first," he commanded. "All of it."

Laura Lee bit her lip. "Ronald—" she began, then fell silent as he glanced at her.

"It's the only way," he said. "Now, everybody, drink."

The gambler and his pack dutifully downed the concoction.

Ronald set to work with vials and flasks. Diamond squared his jaw. "No funny stuff, now," he said. "This had better make us fly or else."

"You'll fly," Ronald promised. "But be patient. I have to remember exactly the right quantities of everything. There must be some kind of delicate chemical stasis achieved, I imagine. Now—I think I've got it. If you'll all please drink—"

Diamond lifted his glass. "Okay, boys," he murmured. "Here's to crime."

They gulped in unison.

“I don’t feel any different,” Diamond declared. “Kind of woozy, but no different.”

“Wait a minute or two,” Ronald counseled. “It takes time to work. Now—try to float.”

“How?”

“Just sort of let yourself go limp, and imagine that you’re rising. There, like that.”

Ace Diamond smiled and rose to the ceiling like a fat balloon. He hung there, leering. “You did it!” he exulted. “Come on, boys—try it.”

They tried it., In a moment all six were suspended from the ceiling.

“Gawd, what a sight!” Guilty Miltie breathed. “Looks like we’re off to a flying start!”

Laura Lee observed them open-mouthed. Finally she managed to speak. “Ronald—then it *is* true! You’re not whacky, after all.”

“Of course I’m not, darling.”

“Somehow, I almost wish you were,” said the girl. “When I think of what you’ve done. Now they’ll go out and rob the bank, maybe kill a few innocent bystanders—”

“I had to do it,” Ronald soothed. “It was the only way to save you, remember?”

ACE Diamond flew around the room in a lazy circle, like a wingless walrus, and lighted again before the fireplace. “Come on down, boys,” he called. “Let’s get organized. We’d better get started. You all have your instructions.” Ronald rose, grasping Laura Lee by the arm. “Well, you won’t be needing us any more,” he said. “So we might as well be going.”

Yeah,” Guilty Miltie added. “Have a nice time at the bank-robbery. Money happy returns and all that.”

“Hey!” Diamond’s voice—and gun—halted them. “Not so fast!”

"But you promised if I got you the chemicals, we'd be free," Ronald protested. "Scout's honor."

"Fooled you that time," Ace Diamond chuckled. "On accounta because I never was a Scout. My old lady wouldn't let me join—said they played too rough." He scowled. "You folks are coming with us, see? We need you."

"I told you I wouldn't rob a bank—"

"Who's asking you to? All you and the little jerk and the lady got to do is fly along with us and come inside. We'll just use you for shields, in case anybody wants to start shooting."

He turned to his cohorts. "Grab 'em," he ordered. "And let's go." Within moments, the illy-assorted gathering was soaring through the nighted skies towards the city. Ronald and Guilty Miltie were held securely by two of the thugs, while Ace Diamond himself carried Laura Lee. It was definitely not a pleasant journey, although Diamond seemed to think so.

"Won't be long now," he gloated. "What an idea! Look at the trouble we save, not having to monkey around with wiring systems and burglar alarms. We don't even need a getaway car. And think of the dough we used to waste on gasoline! If we knock over the First National Bank tonight, nothing can stop us. Tomorrow we can knock over the Second National Bank, and the next day we'll tackle the Third. Why, this here flying gimmick is gonna revolutionize the whole bank-robbing industry!"

"Look, boss," said one of the henchmen, flying close. "How do we know this joker didn't double-cross us? Maybe he tipped off the cops and they're waiting for us to show up."

"Not likely," Diamond told him.

Ronald, overhearing the remark, added bitter confirmation. "The last people I'd go to would be the police," he said. "It seems to me as if I've spent the past forty-eight hours being chased by either cops or robbers, or both. You needn't worry."

And they didn't. "Here we are," Diamond shouted suddenly, as he swooped down towards a tall building. The others followed.

“Fly in the shadows,” the gambler cautioned. “Land here in the parking lot.” The group obeyed orders. Once on the ground they proceeded in a wedge formation towards the door of the First National Bank.

“In we go,” Diamond said. “Never mind the customers. Hurry up, that alcohol’s making me dizzy.”

Pushing Laura Lee before him, he entered the bank. Two more gunmen grasped Ronald and propelled him forward. The others dragged a struggling and protesting Guilty Miltie.

Employees and customers glanced up idly as the group entered, but nobody had any intimation of what was about to occur until the entire party suddenly became airborne.

FROM a height of ten feet above the cashier’s cage, Ace Diamond suddenly shouted, “Reach, everybody! This is a stickup.” Guns in the hands of the hovering henchmen threatened aerial bombardment.

Arms rose and jaws dropped.

“Fine,” Ace Diamond said. He dropped towards the rear of the cashier’s cage. “Now, I want everything you got, and I want it fast.” He landed solidly behind the counter, pressing Laura Lee before him. The cashier glanced at his gun, then hesitated.

“Three seconds,” Ace Diamond said. And wobbled. “Oops!” he said. “Did I hear something crash?”

He did indeed. One of the gunmen suddenly plummeted to the floor and lay there, writhing. There was another thump as a second of the party fell, dragging Guilty Miltie after him. Then, in rapid succession, the three remaining henchmen followed suit. Ronald landed on his feet and raced towards the gambler.

Ace Diamond’s face was now as blue as a baboon’s backside, and equally expressive. He tried to steady himself against the counter. “Back—” he wheezed. “Or I’ll shoot—”

He brought up the gun and then toppled forward. There was a final thud and he too was out like a lout.

Then Laura Lee was in Ronald's arms, the cashier was on the phone and the police were everywhere.

After that came confusion, excitement, and eventually, explanations. The entire party was hauled down to the police station, and it wasn't for quite a while that Ronald and Gully Miltie were released from the cell housing Ace Diamond and his five comatose companions.

But finally they told their story, and were officially released.

Laura Lee met them outside.

"I still don't understand what you did to them," she sighed. "I had a wild hunch you might try changing the chemicals in some way—and yet they could fly, right up until the last."

"I didn't change the chemicals," Ronald grinned. "All I did was add something. On the way back after falling in the river I stopped at a tavern. It took a lot of talking and a considerable amount of money, but I got what I wanted to use in the Grain Alcohol."

"What was it?"

"I wouldn't know the chemical name," Ronald confessed. "Phenop-something. But it worked. You see, I remembered a remark some kid made the first time he saw one of these sets. Something about using them to mix up a Mickey Finn. That's what I put in the Grain Alcohol. And it worked."

"Boy, did it work!" Guilty Miltie exclaimed. "You should of seen, in the cell—"

Ronald silenced him with a look. "Never mind," he said.

"Okay, Dad." The little pickpocket waved his hand. "I'll be shoving off, I guess."

Ronald held out his hand. "Right. Good luck. Oh, by the way, what are your plans?"

"I'm gonna retire, I guess," Guilty Miltie said. "Now that I'm rich."

"Rich?"

“Sure. Just pulled my last job, while we was in the cell. Neatest bit of pickpocketing anybody could ask for.” Miltie slid his hand into his trousers and then withdrew it, palm upward. Resting between his fingers was a glittering array of diamonds.

“Lifted them right outta Ace Diamond’s teeth,” he exulted. “Guy never even stirred!”

He padded off, but neither Ronald nor Laura Lee noticed his departure. They were already making tracks for the Hanover Hotel.

It wasn’t until the next day that they were really bothered by reporters. And it wasn’t until the day after that that the call came from Hollywood.

“That was Flick!” Laura Lee reported. “They want me back at the studio. All that newspaper publicity and everything—it’s got them excited. Promised me a decent role right away, to cash in on the notoriety.”

“Well, let’s get started then,” Ronald said. “I’ve done my job. Just been down to see the guy who manufactures those chemistry sets. Turns out his name really is Jim Dandy, too. Anyway, I explained everything and he’s taking the set off the market. But we’re turning the formula over to the government. Make a nice defense weapon.”

“Did you see the papers, darling?” Laura Lee asked. “There’s an item announcing that your old girl friend is getting married.”

“To Stu Lacey, I suppose.” Ronald nodded. “Well, anyway, I beat her to it.”

“That you did.” Laura Lee smiled, smugly. “So let’s you act like a husband and go order our plane reservations for Hollywood.”

“Plane reservations!” Ronald paled. “Not on your life! We’re going on the train. No more flying for me!”

“All right,” the girl answered. “Maybe it’s just as well those chemicals don’t have any permanent effects at that.”

AS it turned out, her assurance was a bit premature. But the realization didn’t come until almost a year later, when a nurse came flying into her room at Cedars of Lebanon Hospital, just as Laura Lee came out of the anaesthetic.

She smiled up at the nurse and murmured. “What is it—-boy or girl?”

The nurse gulped. “It’s a boy,” she gasped. “A bouncing baby boy.” Her voice rose to a wail. “But that’s just the trouble, lady. How do we get him to stop bouncing against the ceiling?”

THE END

The Big Binge

Ever wonder what would happen if you let your inhibitions run wild? Elmer Klopp had quite a few—and they were galloping all over town! . . .

I'M not going to guarantee the truth of everything in this story. To begin with, I heard it from a friend who heard it from a friend—and you know what that means. One or two of the events seem to strain my credulity to the point where it may have to wear a truss.

But on one point I'm reasonably certain, so let's start right there. The grasshopper was invented in a college town.

The grasshopper, for the benefit of you lucky, lucky people who have never encountered it, is a green drink. It contains, among other ingredients mercifully nameless, *creme de menthe*, and the color may account for its name. However I prefer to think it's called a grasshopper because after imbibing two or three you really start hopping.

Elmer Klopp found that out the hard way.

He downed the first foaming concoction about four in the afternoon, one day late in the month of October. Let it be said in his defense that the bleak, rainy day contributed to his mood. The grasshopper was merely a catalystic agent. As time went on, it became cataleptic.

Elmer was the sole customer in Ye Olde Gin Mill, and that was just as well. For a second grasshopper jumped down his gullet, and then a third.

They may have been called grasshoppers, but they were acting more like locusts.

The locusts swarmed. They rose to his brain and ate away awareness. By six o'clock, Elmer Klopp was in a green fog. He sat there at the bar of Ye Olde Gin Mill and let it swirl around him. Somehow it brought tears to his eyes.

All at once a face peered out of the fog and wiggled its lips at him. It was a red face, with hair and eyebrows to match. Elmer thought it looked very pretty in the fog. After looking at it for several moments he realized there was a body attached to it, and recognized the proprietor of Ye Olde Gin Mill, one Michael Finn.

Mr. Finn was addressing him.

"Why are you crying?" he asked.

Elmer Klopp took out his handkerchief and blew his nose. Some of the fog disappeared. And back came bitter reality—the bitter reality that had driven him into the tavern in the first place, caused him to drink for the first time in his twenty-two years.

He leaned forward and looked at Michael Finn gravely. "Can you keep a secret?" he asked.

"Sure thing," said the bartender. "What is it—woman trouble?"

Elmer shook his head. "No," he said. "Another kind."

The bartender sighed. "Don't try and fool me," he warned. "I been in this business for ten years, and there *ain't* no other kind of trouble. Guys with secrets always turn out to have woman trouble."

"Do they?" Elmer asked. "I'll bet you've heard some unusual stories."

"Only two," Michael Finn replied. "All woman trouble can be divided into two kinds. Either a guy is after some dame he can't get hold of, or he's got some dame he can't get rid of." Michael Finn's eyes took on a look of bloodshot compassion. "Come on, now, which kind is yours?"

Elmer sat up straight. He was getting soberer by the moment. "Neither," he insisted. "My problem is worse."

"Trust me," said the bartender.

“Well,” Elmer sighed. “I’m drinking for the first time in my life because I want to be an S.O.B.”

Michael Finn’s eyes now registered bloodshot astonishment. “You do?” he breathed. “And you sit there and admit it?”

“Why not?” Elmer was defiant. “Nothing would make me prouder than to become an S.O.B.”

“And you think drinking will help?”

“Most of them drink, don’t they?”

THE bartender nodded emphatically. “I’ve had my share of S.O.B.s in here, lapping it up,” he declared. “But I wouldn’t blame their condition on liquor. You can get to be an S.O.B. in a lot of ways.”

“No I can’t,” Elmer said. “That’s just the trouble. They won’t let me.”

“Who won’t let you?”

“Why the other S.O.B.s, of course!” Elmer downed the rest of his grasshopper. “They know I had my heart set on it, but do you think they cared? Why, I would have been one of the best-behaved S.O.B.s on the campus. Sort of a model S.O.B., you might say. I would have behaved like a true S.O.B. to everybody I met—my friends, the professors, the co-eds, everybody! It would have been like a career to me.”

“Some career,” the bartender muttered. “But say, I don’t follow you. You talk as if the rest of the S.O.B.s had some kind of club and kept you out of it. Don’t tell me them guys have organized a union?” He reflected for a moment. “Not that it would be a bad idea. So many S.O.B.s running around these days, they’d have quite a membership.”

“You don’t understand,” Elmer insisted. “The S.O.B.s are exclusive. They have standards to maintain.”

“You mean you got to pinch babies and seduce old maids before you can get it?” Michael Finn was interested. “This I didn’t know.”

“Oh, nothing like that. But you need a certain status, and I guess I just don’t have it. I’d never be well known like most of the S.O.B.s, I guess.”

“Don’t be discouraged,” the bartender soothed. “You’re young yet. If you really got your heart set on being an S.O.B. you can probably make it. Why don’t you start planning ahead—maybe you can figure out a way of cheating some widows and orphans, or robbing a bank or something.”

Elmer sat up even straighter. “I’ll have you know that true S.O.B.s don’t indulge in that sort of thing,” he announced. “An honest S.O.B. is sober, truthful, law-abiding and kind.”

“Not the ones I met,” Michael Finn murmured.

“All S.O.B.s are strictly legitimate,” Elmer told him.

“Hey!” The bartender wiped his forehead with the bar-rag. “Are you sure we’re both talking about the same kind of S.O.B.?”

“There’s only one kind on this campus,” Elmer assured him. “The members of the Sigma Omega Beta fraternity. S.O.B.—that’s their initials.”

Michael Finn turned away. “Oh,” he said, in a strangled voice. “Well, on that I buy a drink.” He began to concoct the insecticide for another grasshopper.

“So you go to school here, eh?” he asked, over his shoulder. “What are you, a senior?”

“Sophomore,” Elmer replied. “Got a late start. I did a hitch in the service. My folks both passed away before I got out, so I decided to get an education. That’s why I came to Hardnox.” He accepted the drink gratefully. Michael Finn watched him down it.

“How do you like it?” he asked. “The drink? Perfect.”

“No, the school.”

“Not so good,” Elmer confessed. “When I entered the University of Hardnox, I thought I was going to do more than study. I thought I’d make friends, have a little social life. My folks are gone and I’m lonesome. But here I am a sophomore and nothing’s happened. I had my heart set on being pledged to Sigma Omega Beta—and they passed me up. Guess I’m not important enough to bother with.”

“Good student?”

“Pretty good. But lately I can’t seem to concentrate on my studies.”

"What about sports?"

"Oh, I went out for football. But I don't have the build for it. Coach Gutz put me on the third-string and I've never played yet." Elmer winced. "He thinks I'm chicken, I guess."

The bartender nodded. "Buster Gutz is a hard man," he replied. "But did you ever stop to figure maybe he's right about you?"

"In what way?"

"Well, maybe it's none of my business, but I'm going to say it anyway. You know, being a bartender is sort of like being a psychologist. I mean, you see all kinds of people day after day, night after night. You watch 'em trying to have a good time, you listen to them when they got troubles. And after a while you get so you can sort of size them up.

"Way I've got you sized up, you're too normal."

Elmer blinked. "Normal? What's wrong with that?"

"Nothing. If you're happy. But you ain't happy, chum. You're miserable. Like you said, you came to college hoping to make friends. You been a fair student, you went out for football, you behaved yourself—like you said, this is the first time you even took off on a little toot. And maybe that's just the whole trouble. You're so normal nobody even notices you. If you raised hell now and then, perhaps you'd amount to something. Better to be an S.O.B.—*either* kind of an S.O.B.—than to be nobody at all."

THE young man shook his head at the bartender in bewilderment. "This is the first time anybody ever suggested such a thing," he confessed. "I wouldn't know how to begin."

"Take women," Michael Finn said.

"I'd like to," Elmer assured him. "Only I don't know any I can take."

"You see?" The bartender shrugged. "You're just too average to even attract a dame. But the more I think of it, the more I'm positive that's what you need. A nice, good looking chick with a figure like this Gina Lollobrigida, say. You like Gina Lollobrigida?"

“She has her points,” Elmer admitted. “But where would I ever find such a girl?”

Michael Finn didn’t answer. He merely gulped and stared at a point directly behind Elmer’s back.

Elmer turned and almost collided with the body of a girl. It was the kind of body it would be pleasant to collide with; and it was certainly Lollobrigidean in every sense of the word. Elmer stared into an oval, upturned face and encountered a pair of dark eyes. The eyes were not looking at him, however, their gaze was reserved for the bartender.

“Sorry, Miss,” Michael Finn said. “I didn’t see you come in.”

“Oh, that’s all right.” The girl smiled. “Eve been here for quite some time, as a matter of fact. Sitting in that booth over there.”

“Then you heard—” Elmer began to redden.

For the first time she looked directly at him, and Elmer finished the job. “Yes,” she admitted. “I couldn’t help but overhear your remarks. And I must say I agree with your bartender friend.”

“About me? But you don’t even know me!”

“That can be easily rectified.” The girl gave him a long, cool stare. “You seem to be about as simple as they come. But that’s not why I’m here.”

“No?”

“No.” She paused, then continued. “I heard you were looking for a woman. What I want to know is—would I do?”

“Do?”

“Very monosyllabic, aren’t we? Well, that doesn’t matter. All I need is a yes-or-no answer. And the question is—how would you like to come up to my apartment?”

Elmer Klopp stared at the brunette, and somewhere he found an answer. “How would I like to come up to your apartment?” he murmured. “Why, with the greatest possible alacrity. That’s how.”

“Come on, then,” smiled the girl. “I simply can’t wait to get you on the couch.”

Michael Finn let out a strangled gasp. As Elmer descended from his stool, the bartender reached out and tried to grasp his arm.

“Wait a minute, son.” he whispered, wheezily. “Maybe you and I better have a little heart-to-heart talk, first. Dames can be quite a problem—they take a lot of handling.”

“Never mind,” flashed the girl. “I’m sure this gentleman can do his own handling without any further instructions.”

Grasping Elmer’s arm, she dragged him out of Ye Olde Gin Mill and into the night.

The rain had ceased, and a moon peered through ragged clouds. The girl led him over to a car parked at the curb.

“Climb in,” she said. “It’s only a short drive.”

It was, but none too short for Elmer. He glanced at the darkhaired damsel beside him and realized he should be trying to make conversation. But what the bartender had said was true; Elmer had little or no experience with women. He didn’t even know how to make conversation, let alone anything else. And he had always let alone anything else.

For her part, the girl was equally silent. She didn’t so much as glance his way—just drove swiftly and expertly up the campus. They turned off on a wide street bordered by stately trees, then drew to a halt before a large, old-fashioned house set well back on a big lawn.

“Here we are,” she announced. “We’ll sneak in the back way. My apartment’s on the third floor, and I don’t want to risk anyone seeing us going up together.” She gripped his arm conspiratorially, and Elmer suddenly realized that her nearness—bottled and distributed in scented, liquid form—was so overpowering it would soon run all other intoxicants off the market.

Together they circled the walk and found the rear entrance. The girl switched on a light, then removed her shoes. “Take yours off, too,” she commanded. “And walk softly.”

They tiptoed up the stairs, until they reached the big white door on the third landing.

"Here we are," the brunette whispered. She fumbled with a key, opened the door, groped for a lamp-switch. "Come in," she urged, and Elmer was conscious of the suppressed excitement in her voice—matching the suppressed excitement in his own breast, where his heart seemed to be practicing for a *mambo* contest.

Was this it? Was this really the beginning of a new, rich life after all?

He couldn't quite believe it. But here he was. Here he was, in her apartment. Yes, and she hadn't been fooling—the big red couch dominated the room.

Elmer watched her as she removed her coat, fluffed out her hair, and rolled up her sleeves. She was humming, now, and smiling. Suddenly she turned to him and her eyes gleamed with excitement.

"Well, what are you waiting for?" she breathed. "Hurry up and lie down on the couch." Elmer gasped. "Y-you really mean it?" he whispered.

"Of course I mean it, stupid," said the girl. "Lie down on the couch and let me start psychoanalyzing you!"

CHAPTER II

ELMER Klopp stared. "Psychoanalyze me?" he demanded. "Is *that* why you invited me up here?"

"Of course. What other reason could I possibly have?" the girl retorted. Then she paused, flushing indignantly. "Surely you didn't misconstrue my intentions?"

"I guess I did," Elmer admitted. "and I beg your pardon. I've never misconstrued a woman before in my life."

"That's just why I brought you here," the girl told him. "When you were talking to the bartender about not knowing any women, I got interested. I thought I'd like to find out about your sex-life."

"Then you are interested in sex, after all?"

"Of course," said the girl. "After all, I mean, what else is there?"

"What else indeed?" Elmer agreed. "Sure you don't want to join me on the couch?"

"No," she declared. "I'm just interested in sex."

"So am I. That's why I made the suggestion."

"I'm talking about sex in the abstract," she answered. "Not in the concrete."

"Sex in the concrete—that *would* be rather messy, come to think of it."

"See here," the brunette interrupted. "There's no need to be flippant. I don't believe you think sex is as important as I do."

"Try me and see," Elmer suggested.

"Very well, then—lean back and start talking."

"Talking?"

"Certainly. How else does one approach sex?"

"I'd heard there were more direct methods."

She sighed and bit her lip. "We certainly don't seem to speak the same language," she observed. "I'm speaking of my interest in sex from the psychiatric standpoint. There's nothing personal in it for me, nothing at all."

"Come to think of it, there hasn't been a helluva lot in it for me, either," Elmer volunteered. "But a pretty girl like you—" He paused. "Say, are you really a psychiatrist?"

"Tm not a psychiatrist," the brunette admitted. "Not yet, anyway. Just a graduate student. Next year I start my pre-med training. But meanwhile, I'm doing a thesis on maladjustment amongst college students, and I thought I'd get your case-history for my records."

She sat down next to the couch, grabbing a notebook and pen from the end-table. "Let's begin at the beginning," she said, crisply. "Your name?"

"Elmer Klopp." He sat up, eyeing her. "Come to think of it, what's yours?"

"Ada," she told him. "Ada Noid."

"Not old Perry Noid's daughter?"

"I'm his niece. My uncle is not married."

"Then this must be his house." Elmer gazed around the room with reawakened interest. "Gosh, it *looks* normal enough."

"Why shouldn't it look normal?" Ada demanded.

"Well—uh—I guess you know the rumors about your uncle's place."

"My uncle does not run a boarding-house."

"Rumors." Elmer spelled the word. "They say he has all kinds of crazy machines he uses in his experiments."

Ada drew herself up erect. "First of all, 'crazy' is a word without clinical significance," she said. "Secondly and more important, my uncle is head of the Psychiatry Department of this University. He is a brilliant scientist, even though he may be just a wee bit batty."

"Is he the one who got you interested in this sort of work?"

"Yes. He adopted me when I was only a baby. If it hadn't been for him, I'd have—" The girl paused. "But I'm supposed to be interviewing you."

"Forget it," Elmer said. "You wouldn't get much of a case-history out of me, anyway. I've led a dull life. Let's just talk, instead."

SO they talked, and before he knew it, Elmer was giving her his case-history in conversational form. He didn't tell his story the way he had to the bartender; somehow the presence of the ravishing brunette inspired a greater intimacy. It was mainly a confession—not of misdeeds but of lack of any deeds; a recital of shyness and loneliness.

From time to time Ada nodded in agreement. "I know what you mean," she said. "I've heard things like this before. You'd be surprised if you knew just how many young people today, are really lonely inside. The introvert, the isolated personality, is out of fashion—and adolescents strive to conform. Hence the meaningless fads in fashion, speech, amusement, all part of the tendency to seek group-approval and in-group status. But underneath many a crewcut is a hidden egghead, if you know what I mean."

"I know." Elmer nodded. "And I'm just beginning to discover that underneath some Italian-cuts there can be some mighty good sense. I—I'd like to see your postgraduate paper some time."

"My thesis?" It's incomplete, and what I've written is still in the first draft. But if you really are interested, I could get it for you."

"I wish you would."

"It's in the closet," Ada told him. "Somewhere in back on the top shelf here. Everything's such a mess." She regarded the chair somewhat dubiously. "I better not try standing on this—it might collapse."

"Let me lift you up," Elmer volunteered, gallantly.

"Well—"

"Come on."

He put his arms around Ada's waist and boosted her up. She was heavier than he'd expected, but pleasantly so.

"Move in a little closer," she called. "I can't reach."

Elmer moved in a little closer, and promptly got his head tangled in a cluster of dresses hanging from the closet-hooks.

"Steady!" she commanded. "Quit moving your neck that way."

"Ummppplfff," Elmer explained. "Can't—see—"

"Look out!" Ada cried. "Oh, that dress around your neck—you're choking—here, let me unwind it—"

She leaned down and tried to disengage the garment from Elmer's throat. Elmer promptly lost his balance. With a strangled grunt, he toppled to the floor. Six dresses and Ada fell on top of him.

"Let me out of here!" he gasped. "Here, let me get this skirt off my face —"

"That's *my* skirt!" Ada exclaimed. "Quit tugging at it!" But the damage was already done, or rather, undone. The skirt came free in Elmer's hand. Ada coiled up in his lap and grabbed for it.

At that particular moment the door opened and a short, bald-headed gentleman in evening clothes waddled into the room. He looked like a penguin with a pince-nez. He looked like—"Perry Noid!" breathed Elmer. "Merciful God!"

“I am not a deity,” Professor Noid observed, drily. “And if I were, I doubt if I would be inclined towards mercy in this particular situation. Might I ask, young man, just what you are doing with my niece?”

“Why—research—” Elmer stammered. “I mean, she just invited me up here for a little experiment—”

Perry Noid glared through the pince-nez. “An experiment involving the removal of her clothing?” he demanded.

“Just going through her effects,” Elmer explained. “She said she was going to show me her thesis.”

“Her what?”

“My thesis, Ada corroborated. “We were looking for it in the closet, but I guess it’s not there. I was just going to ask Elmer here to rummage through my drawers—”

“Rummage indeed!” snapped Professor Perry Noid. “Exhibitionism is bad enough, but I draw the line at sadism.”

Elmer stood up. “I assure you my intentions were perfectly honorable,” he said.

“That’s right.” Ada rose and slipped into her skirt once more. “As a matter of fact, if anyone’s to blame, I am. I invited this young man up to my room. I’ve been taking his case-history.”

“Nonsense.” Perry Noid removed his pince-nez and polished the lenses on the edge of his goatee. “How often have I told you that such methodology is archaic, outmoded? The wish is father to the man. Find out the nature of the wishes, the daydreams, and you have a clue to the *gestalt.* Gratify those wishes, and all traces of neurosis or psychosis vanishes. To paraphrase the old rhyme, ‘neuroses are fled, psychoses are through.’ All this chap or anyone else needs is a few sessions with the Psycopathfinder.”

ADA sniffed. “That’s all very interesting,” she said. “But I notice you still teach your classes to use the orthodox approach in therapy.”

"Naturally," Professor Noid restored both the pince-nez and his goatee to their proper places. "You know I must. My invention is still in the experimental stage. Until I am satisfied that it is perfected, until the results can be demonstrated and proven before an accredited group of investigators, I must keep my own theories secret. But surely you, my own niece, should have faith in my methods. Instead, I find you sneaking young men up to your room in the middle of the night—"

"It's not the middle of the night," Ada declared. "It's scarcely eight o'clock. Why, the homecoming rally doesn't start for another hour and a half yet."

"What's the home-coming rally got to do with it?" demanded her uncle. "You didn't look as though you were attending any rally just now."

"But I intended to go," Ada protested. "I'm riding on one of the floats."

"What about this person?" Professor Noid turned to Elmer. "I warn you, the explanation had better be good. Don't tell me he was getting you into your costume for the homecoming rally. This I wouldn't believe, unless by some chance you plan to go as Lady Godiva." He paused. "Well, I'm waiting."

Ada flashed Elmer a desperate glance. "It's really very simple," she said. "Actually, I was just taking his case-history as a sort of preliminary. I meant to surprise you with him."

"Instead I surprised you with him," the Professor nodded. "But just what do you mean, surprise me?"

"Well," the girl improvised. "You've been talking about the Psychopathfinder, and verifying your experiment. And it occurred to me that Elmer, here, would be the perfect subject. So I was going to check his background and then bring him to you."

"Really? That was very thoughtful. And it's true, I've been looking for a human subject. Of course, I suppose you've explained that an experiment might be dangerous."

"Not with him," Ada said, quickly. "I made sure of that in my interview. He has practically no trace of traumatic incident, and his sex-drive is almost non-existent.”

“How did you find that out?” asked the Professor, then added hastily, “No, don’t tell me! But are you sure he understands what is involved in such a test?”

“Of course.” Ada took a deep breath, and again looked at Elmer imploringly. “As a matter of fact, he volunteered. Didn’t you, Elmer?”

If she hadn’t taken the deep breath, Elmer probably wouldn’t have answered as he did. Certainly if she hadn’t taken a deep breath *and* worn that particular sweater, he wouldn’t. But the combination brooked no denial. “Y-yes,” he said. “Anything you say.”

If the deep breath did its work, the deep sigh of relief that followed completed the job. But the Professor paid no attention to the by-play. He rubbed his hands.

“Let’s get started, then,” he said. “You’ll find my methods a bit unusual, but don’t let that disconcert you. For example, just now you may have noticed how I rubbed my hands.”

“Flaccidly,” Elmer observed.

“That’s right. Whenever one reads a book or a story, one inevitably finds characters who rub their hands briskly. I got to thinking about it and decided we adhere too closely to the conventions. From that time on I made a practice of rubbing my hands flaccidly, if at all. Mine is an iconoclastic nature.”

HE led the way down the hall, chattering as the two young people followed.

“I suppose this iconoclastic streak is what led to my original break with orthodox theory,” he remarked. “After years of teaching sophomorons the so-called basic elements of psychiatry according to the standard texts, I began to question the validity of their principles. I found myself taking everything with a grain of *gestalt.* The id, the ego and the super-ego may serve their purpose as theoretical concepts, but in actual practice a psychiatrist finds it hard to effect a cure. Even the so-called normal students seem aberrated to me. Just a bunch of crazy, mixed-up ids."

"What's he talking about?" Elmer muttered to Ada, as they trailed the Professor down the stairs.

"He's explaining how he got started on his experiments," she told him. "The thinking that led to the building of the Psychopathfinder."

"I finally came to the inevitable conclusion," the Professor was saying, as he ushered them into his study. "Psychiatric treatment, as normally administered, is largely useless. Anybody who goes to a psychiatrist ought to have his head examined."

The Professor sat down behind his desk. On the wall overhead was a large sign, reading SHRINK!

"Fortunately I had an excellent background in the physical sciences. My work in shock-therapy, electro-encephalography, stood me in good stead. I began to think of constructing a mechanical analyzer."

You mean a psychiatry machine?" Elmer asked, interested in spite of himself.

"Why not? In effect, the so-called standard Lie-Detector is just that. True, its functions are limited, but it does effectively analyze certain psychic components. The cyberneticists, with their computing machines—their mechanical brains—gave me a further clue to the construction of what I finally came to call the Psychopathfinder." Professor Noid paused and milked his goatee with thoughtful fingers. "No doubt Ada has told you about my own personal theories of analytic procedure."

Elmer opened his mouth, but Ada answered for him. "I explained everything," she said. "He knows a great deal about psychiatry."

"Good." The Professor smiled. "How do you feel about the cathartic method?"

"Never use 'em myself," Elmer said, truthfully. "Glass of hot water in the morning is just as effective."

"True! I can see you've thought the problem through, just as I did. Ordinary analysis, even so-called depth-analysis, is just a waste of time.

Removing inhibitions and psychic blocs by searching out the original causation buried in the subconscious is a lengthy procedure. Much easier to dramatize those suppressed desires and thus eliminate the personality defects.”

“But are you sure it will work?” Ada asked.

“Now you’re talking like one of my stupid colleagues,” the Professor snapped. “Full of prejudice and dogma. No wonder that psychotherapy today is so psychopathetic! Of course it will work—didn’t I tell you I’ve already tested the machine on those white rats? And then on some black rats, too?” He glanced at Elmer. “You’ll find I’m like that all down the line,” he said. “Broadminded. I don’t draw the color-line. I believe all rats were created equal.”

“I didn’t hear about the rats,” Ada said.

“Well, you won’t hear about them now,” the Professor declared. “Instead, if you’ll step this way, I’ll show them to you.”

He rose and led them to a door set in the wall of his study. Producing a key, he unlocked it and opened the way into what proved to be a large and well equipped laboratory.

“Why, this is quite a place!” Elmer marvelled, glancing about the white-tiled room and noting the elaborate electrical apparatus, the leaping arcs and sputtering retorts.

“Isn’t it?” The Professor rubbed his hands languidly. “I never could have afforded to build it myself. I bought it second-hand from a Hollywood studio after they were through using it in a science-fiction movie. Got the whole thing for less than five thousand dollars, including two rubber Martians and an old Frankenstein’s monster costume.”

HE walked over to some cages near the wall. “Here are the rats,” he proclaimed. “Take a look at the difference.”

Elmer and Ada peered into the cage. Three or four rats, sleek and fat, slumbered peacefully.

“I don’t see anything changed about them,” the girl said. “They’re awfully plump, yes, but—”

“Don’t touch the bars!” cried the Professor. “They’ll crumble!”

“Why?”

“Look and see.”

They looked and saw. In place of the conventional bars, the front of the cage was criss-crossed with long strips of aged cheese.

“Limburger!” Ada sniffed. “Why did you put up bars made out of cheese?”

“That’s just the point, my dear. I didn’t. The rats did. After one treatment, they commenced to exert latent psychic energy towards their suppressed goals. The same electrical energy manifested by the brain in encephalographs was transformed into positive use by the machine. Their wishes took substance—and the bars of their cage turned to cheese.”

“Let me get this straight,” Elmer said. “You mean you’ve got a new method of psychotherapy? A machine that makes wishes come true?”

“Utilizing the basic energy of the human brain,” the Professor assented. “That’s all there is to it. A preliminary mechanical hypnosis by-passes the inhibitory blocs on both the conscious and subconscious level. The energy released immediately formulates the suppressed desires that are usually dramatized in a distorted form in dreams, neurosis or psychosis. Once materialized as independent entities, the subject can gratify his wishes and eliminate conflict. Or, on another level, he can materialize his phobias and conflict-images and thus be rid of them. In either case, the end-result is complete sanity.”

“The rats were crazy for cheese and now they’ve got all the cheese they want so they’re satisfied, eh?” Elmer muttered. “I suppose if you tried it on dogs, they’d want bones?”

“Not always,” smiled the Professor. “I *did* try it on dogs, of course. Two of them were what you might call fairly well-adjusted to begin with. They materialized bones in their cages. The third dog chose to materialize a half a dozen lamp-posts.” He coughed discreetly. “Of course, one must expect some unusual results when one in effect grants every wish. I remember I made the mistake once of trying it on rabbits and—"

He shrugged. "But never mind. If my niece vouches for your basic normality, you should have nothing to. fear. In fact, this experiment may have pleasant results for you. Not quite as pleasant as for the rabbits, perhaps, but—"

He drew Elmer over to the other wall. A large black machine stood next to a switchboard; connecting the two were a dozen wires and cables. The machine itself resembled nothing so much as an old-fashioned stereoptican, such as can still be found in the Penny Arcade at an amusement park. The only difference appeared to be that this machine's viewing-surface was enlarged so that the entire head could fit inside.

"This is it?" Elmer asked.

"This is it," nodded Professor Noid. "The Psychopathfinder. The greatest revolutionary concept in therapy since the discovery of sex! First Freud and then Noid! My boy, rest assured that if your volunteer efforts prove successful, you will share my fame. I promise to give you full credit when I write up my monograph—mention your name in a footnote, or something."

"That's mighty nice of you, Professor. But just what do you want me to do?"

"Why, nothing at all. You might care to take a look at the insides of the apparatus, though. Go ahead, stoop down. I'll switch on a light."

Ada stepped forward. "Please," she said. "You're sure he can't be harmed—?"

"Not a chance," boomed the Professor, jovially. "The voltage is infinitesimal; the subject's brain builds up its own charge. No danger at all. Go ahead, my boy—take a look. Stoop to conquer."

Elmer stooped.

The Professor conquered.

Elmer stuck his head into the apparatus, waiting for the light to switch on and a view of the interior to emerge. Instead, something else happened.

THE Professor threw a switch and the machine started to drone and shake. At the same time something pressed tightly against Elmer's temples, neck and forehead. His skull was squeezed and held inside the machine. He began to drone and shake, too. In front of his eyes a spiral pattern appeared—a circular pattern that revolved and held his attention even as his body fought for release. All at once he felt himself falling forward—not physically but psychically. His entire being seemed drawn into that spiral, whirling around and around and around—

"You started the machine!" Ada whispered. "That was a dirty trick!"

"That was the scientific approach," Professor Noid corrected her. "No pre-conditioning. Observe, the hypnotic effect supervenes rapidly. One more notch here and I'll induce deep trance. There! Now to release the energy for image-materialization."

"It's like shock-therapy," Ada said.

"Not at all! This is completely involutional on all levels. Whatever is most completely suppressed in this young man's mind will manifest itself in actuality once the treatment is over. Note the change in him when I complete the cycle."

He switched off the machine and Elmer's body sagged slightly. Ada ran over to him. "Are you all right?" she murmured, pulling his head out of the opening.

The young man smiled at her. "Sure, I feel fine," he said. "What happened? When does the treatment start?"

"It's all over," Ada told him. She turned and regarded her uncle skeptically. "It's all over, and I don't notice any change in him at all."

"That's right," the Professor agreed. "But you might take a look at yourself. He just stared at you, didn't he?"

"Yes, but—"

Ada glanced down at her body, then clothed herself in a blush.

And well she might, for aside from the blush, Ada was completely naked.

Elmer let out a gasp. "Believe me, I had nothing to do with it," he murmured. "I just looked at you, and your clothes came off—there they are on the floor—”

“So I notice.” Ada stepped over the tangled heap and advanced towards him. “I don’t know how you managed it,” she grated. “But you’re going to pay for this little trick!”

“No!” Elmer protested. “It’s not my fault, I assure you.”

Ada looked far from assured. The young man retreated towards the door.

“Come back,” called the Professor. “It’s just the treatment, don’t you see? I can explain.”

“Over his dead body,” Ada suggested. “Which I’ll have ready for you in about a minute, now.”

But Elmer didn’t wait. As the nude female descended upon him-, he turned and bolted—through the hall, down the stairs, and out into the night.

CHAPTER III

ELMER kept running until he reached Main Street. Here the crowds gathering for the homecoming parade impeded his progress.

Panting, he slowed down to a walk. At the sight of the students swarming over the sidewalks, he quickly closed his eyes. It seemed the safest thing to do. No telling what might happen if he looked at people.

Something had happened to him, all right. Or all wrong, rather. Professor Noid’s machine was probably responsible, but that was no consolation. He didn’t care to think about it; what he wanted to do was reach the safety of home and bed.

Eyes closed, face flushed, hair disheveled, he reeled along the curb.

A voice shouted, “Hey, Klopp!” He recognized the tones.

Despite himself, Elmer halted and turned to confront the porcine visage of the president of Sigma Omega Beta. William Shooter, better and more appropriately known as ‘Bull’, was a Big Man on the Campus. And well he might be, weighing in the neighborhood of two hundred and twenty pounds. Quite a rough neighborhood it was, too; for ‘Bull’ Shooter was a football star on the gridiron, an amateur boxer in the ring, and an almost professional wrestler in the back-seat of his convertible.

His wrestling companion tonight seemed to be a voluptuous blonde, who fluttered her long eyelashes coyly at the Big Man.

Elmer didn't share her admiration. He had a pretty accurate notion that 'Bull' Shooter was one of those who had seen to it that he wasn't pledged to the fraternity.

Nor did Elmer have a welcoming smile for Shooter's crony, one Warty Weems. Weems had a girl of his own, a bespectacled redhead with the intellectual look of a codfish who has read a book.

"Come here, Klopp!" commanded Shooter. "Wanna talk to you."

"Sorry," Elmer mumbled, closing his eyes again. "In a hurry." He tried to move past, but Warty Weems blocked his path. "You heard what the Big Man said," he grinned. "What's the matter, got no manners?"

"Why, he's drunk!" Shooter whooped. "Sure, that's it! Look at him—staggering along with his eyes closed. Klopp, I'm surprised at you!"

"I'm not drunk," Elmer insisted. "Just in a hurry."

"Then why do you keep closing your eyes?" Shooter came closer, and Elmer realized that if anyone could be accused of intoxication, the Big Man was the logical candidate. "Whatsa matter, don't you like the way my babe looks?"

"She's very pretty, I'm sure," Elmer said, hastily. "But you'll excuse me if I keep my head turned the other way. I—I've seen all I want to see of women for a while."

"What kind of a remark is that?" Warty Weems wanted to know. "And why do you keep looking back over your shoulder?"

"To see if I'm being followed," Elmer explained. "Do either of you happen to notice a naked woman back there?"

"Naked woman?" Shooter perked up his ears to get them out of the way of his grin. "You trying to tell us you're being chased by a naked woman?"

"Well, not exactly. But one did try to attack me a little while ago. I barely escaped. That is, I escaped, and she was bare." Elmer found himself reddening again. “Please, let me go home. This has been a confusing evening.”

“No you don’t!” Shooter grabbed his arm and arrested his progress. “I want to hear the rest of this business. Little squirt like you comes along and tries to hand me some crud about naked women chasing him—that doesn’t go, chum. Now let’s have the straight story. How did you get mixed up with this naked woman in the first place?”

“I didn’t get mixed up with her.” Elmer shook his head. “And she wasn’t naked until I undressed her.”

“You?” Warty Weems was incredulous.

“With my eyes, of course,” Elmer tried to explain. “I just took one look at her and her clothes came off.”

“Sounds goofty,” observed ‘Bull’ Shooter.

“Sounds drunk,” Warty Weems amended.

“Sounds interesting,” the blonde girl ventured.

“Sounds aberrated,” snapped the redhead.

“No such thing,” Elmer told her. “It was all an accident. But I don’t dare to look at women now or the same thing might happen again. That’s why I keep my eyes shut.”

“Nonsense,” the redhead declared. “It’s all pure rationalization. Or impure rationalization. You ought to see a psychiatrist.”

“I just did,” the young man protested. “And that’s how everything started.”

Bulk Shooter took him by the arm. “Now see here, Klopp,” he said. “I always had you figured for an oddball character. But when you come around and try to confuse people with a lot of crazy baloney about undressing people with your eyes—that’s all, brother! I got a good notion to pop you one, just to teach you a lesson in courtesy.”

“Go ahead!” Warty Weems urged, hopping up and down in alcoholic excitement. “Teach him good manners. Break his arm for him!”

THE Big Man on the Campus grinned. “That would be rude,” he admonished. “However, I will make you a deal, Klopp. Either you open your eyes and look at us like a human being or I will black them for you.”

“C-can’t we compromise?” Elmer suggested. “Couldn’t I just open one eye?”

“Both,” his captor insisted.

“All right—but you’ll be sorry.”

“Go ahead,” urged the redhead. “It will clear up your delusions. Seeing is believing, you know.”

“I know,” Elmer sighed. “But do you?”

She found out quickly. Elmer opened his eyes and stared at her for a long moment.

“You see?” she cried. “Nothing happened. Say, it’s getting chilly this evening, isn’t it?”

“P-pick up your clothes,” gulped Warty Weems. “You’re naked as a coot.”

“What do you mean by that statement?” the redhead demanded. “I’ve always wondered what a coot is and why it’s so—” She halted as her gaze travelled down over her body. “Oh!” she gasped. “It’s true!”

“I warned you, didn’t I?” Elmer reminded. Quickly he tore his eyes away. Unfortunately the next recipient of his gaze was the voluptuous blonde with the long eyelashes.

One glance, however, altered her appearance considerably. First the long eyelashes fell off, and then the voluptuous figure disappeared. As dress and bra vanished, the curves melted away and she stood there in dismay, if nothing else; revealed to all the world as a figure of scrawn.

‘Bull’ Shooter’s reaction was instantaneous. With the courageous chivalry of a big man confronting a little man, he roared, “Undress my girl, will you? Take this!”

Elmer refused his generous offer by ducking, but the Campus Hero caught him in an armlock. By this time a large group of passing students had halted at the curb, attracted by the sight of a scuffle and the presence of two nude girls. Delighted at their good fortune, they now prepared to witness a murder as an additional bonus.

But Elmer wasn't cooperating. As 'Bull' Shooter tightened his grip, Elmer focussed his attention on his enemy's belt-buckle.

"Pardon me," he panted. "But I think your trousers are falling down."

"Thank you," said Shooter. Then, "Migawd, they *are* down!"

"I'll hold him for you," Warty Weems volunteered.

"Hold your shorts," Elmer advised. And in a moment that's what both of his opponents were doing. Elmer took advantage of the occasion to plunge blindly into the crowd and race away.

"What's going on here?" demanded an elderly gentleman, as Elmer elbowed him aside. "Or should I ask what's coming off here? On second thought, I needn't ask, need I?"

It would have done him no good, for by this time the young man was halfway up the block, and gaining speed. From behind him came shouts and shrieks, but he didn't bother to look back. He kept going, panting and puffing, until he rounded the corner. Here sheer instinct—and the odor of fermented hops—guided him into a place of refuge. Gasping, Elmer tottered into the dim confines of Ye Olde Gin Mill.

Michael Finn gazed at him patiently from behind the bar. "What's the matter?" he inquired, mildly. "Lumps in the couch?"

Elmer permitted his eyes to open but avoided gazing directly at the bartender. "Give me a drink," he pleaded. "Give me a lot of drinks."

"Grasshoppers?"

"No—I want something in a hurry."

"Little eye-opener, eh?"

"Not that!" Elmer groaned. "Give me something to shut 'em, quick!"

"Double-brandy?"

"A double-double-brandy," the young man amended. "Make it two double-double-brandies." Shrugging, the bartender poured. Slurping, the young man drank. "Whoosh!" he said. "That's better. Do it again!"

“Now take it easy—you’ll pass out if you put it down that fast,” Michael Finn warned.

“Just the idea,” Elmer said. “Want to pass out. Got to pass out, quick, before I look at too many people. Lucky you don’t have any customers here tonight.”

“What’s so lucky about it?” Michael Finn wanted to know. “Everybody’s at that damned rally and parade. You’re the only business I’ve got.” He watched as Elmer took the second double-double brandy and downed it. “Though come to think of it, what more do I need? You’re drinking like a whole bar-full of customers.”

“More,” Elmer demanded.

THE bartender hesitated.

“Please,” he said. “Are you really serious about wanting to pass out? And if so, why?”

“Told you,” Elmer reminded him. “So I won’t look at people. When I do, things happen.”

“You been looking at that girl, is that it?”

“Yes. I wish I’d never set eyes on her.”

“Is she that bad? Seemed like quite a dish.”

“A dish without a cover,” Elmer amended. “Took one look at her and her clothes came off.”

“Tell me more,” urged Michael Finn. So Elmer told him more. Elmer, in fact told all; up to and including his recent encounter with ‘Bull’ Shooter and party.

“You sure you ain’t just making this up?” the bartender demanded, when he concluded. “Honest, now—look me straight in the eye.” Elmer looked him straight in the eye. Michael Finn’s tie, shirt and underwear tops flew off. So did his toupee.

“If the rest of you wasn’t out of sight back of the bar, I’d have stripped you bare,” Elmer told him.

“Then it’s the truth you’ve been telling,” the bartender gasped. “The naked truth.”

“Exactly. I can’t seem to control it either. I look at somebody and—poof! Now do you see why I want to get blind drunk?”

“Only solution,” Michael Finn agreed. He dressed thoughtfully. I’ll join you in a double-double myself.”

He did. Several double-doubles later the two were still discussing the mystery of Elmer’s ability and Professor Noid’s strange machine.

“Don’t know what happened to my mind,” the young man said. “But it had better wear off soon. Can’t go around this way—turn the whole world into a nudist colony.”

“You could wear blinders,” Michael Finn suggested.

“I’m no horse.”

“An excellent point. I’ll drink to that.” He paused. “Well, how about keeping your eyes closed permanent-like?”

“Then I couldn’t watch television,” Elmer protested.

“Well, maybe you could get yourself one of them Seeing Eye Dogs. He could watch television for you.”

“Splendid!” Elmer drank again. “Come to think of it, that’s the *best* way to watch television, judging from most of the programs I’ve looked at.” He blinked. “Know something? I think this brandy is working.”

“You mean you can’t take clothes off any more? Try me.”

“Hold still.”

As the bartender posed, Elmer concentrated on his figure with both eyes. For a moment Michael Finn’s necktie flapped feebly, then subsided.

“I’m safe!” Elmer exulted. “I don’t think I could take the dressing off a piece of lettuce at ten paces.”

“Good. One more double-double should do the trick.”

“It’s already doing something,” Elmer confessed. “I’m getting so that I see double-double. F’rinstance, those girls there.”

“Those girls?” The bartender turned, just as Ada entered the place.

“So there you are!” she called. “I thought I might find you here!”

“Keep away from me!” Elmer begged.

“It’s a deal—just so you don’t subject me to another public striptease.”

“Don’t worry about that,” Elmer assured her. “I’m all right. Been drinking—lost my evil eye, or whatever it was.”

“Glad to hear it,” Ada replied. “Then you’re not angry?”

“Of course not.” She settled down on the bar-stool beside him. “My uncle explained everything. It wasn’t your fault.” She sniffed and stared. “My goodness, you have been indulging, haven’t you?”

Elmer leered happily. “Think nothing of it,” he said. “Never felt better in my life.”

“Take your hand off my knee when you say that,” Ada cautioned him.

“Here!” Elmer called. “Let’s all have ’nother double-double.”

“You’ve had enough,” Ada declared. “One more will bring you face to face with *delirium tremens.* Besides, it isn’t safe for you to be drinking like this in your present state. That’s why I came looking for you. My uncle wants you to come back and take another treatment in the Psychopathfinder.”

“Another treatment?” Elmer shuddered. “Never! Won’t catch me sticking my head in that infernal machine, nosiree!”

“But it’s all a matter of adjustment—he says the first experiment merely brushed the surface, released some of the common, suppressed fantasies. Another treatment will probe deeper and restore your contact with reality.”

“Don’t need contact with realty. ’M doing okay.” Elmer wobbled on the stool. “Things going round and round now, but at least got all their clothes on. Dizzy. Must be drunk, all right. Get dizzy then, huh? See things, too.”

“Please,” the girl begged. “Let me take you back for another treatment. My uncle is worried about you.”

“Nothing t’worry ’bout. I’m fine.”

“Oh—you!” The girl climbed down from the bar-stool and regarded him indignantly. “And to think I gave up a chance to be in the parade just to come out and argue with a stupid, inebriated—”

"Poo!" Elmer remarked. "Run along, leave me be. Happy like this. Wanna see things."

"See what you please," Ada retorted. "I'm going."

"Tell Prof'ssor I'm happy like I am," Elmer called after her. "Me and my lil old pink elephant."

"What pink elephant?"

"That one, over there, in the corner," Elmer said. "Don't you see him?"

Ada and Michael Finn both stared at the corner, then at each other. Then they stared at Elmer.

"Dear Lord!" breathed Ada. "He does need a treatment, and that's definite!"

"Maybe we all need treatments," Michael Finn shuddered. "You see it, too?"

"I see it," Ada admitted. "We all see it, don't we, Elmer?"

"Tha's right," babbled the young man, happily. "Nice big pink elephant. Biggest and pinkest one I ever saw." He giggled. "Better give it a drink, hey? I think it wants one."

Sure enough, the biggest and pinkest elephant in the world advanced and put its trunk on the bar.

CHAPTER IV

"NOW what do we do?" Ada had accepted and downed her second drink, unable to tear her eyes from the spectacle of the pink pachyderm as it absorbed the greater part of a pony of beer.

"Maybe if you sober Elmer up it'll go away," Michael Finn suggested.

"You're probably right," the girl agreed. "After all, it's just an embodiment of a hallucination. Another form of wishfulfilment."

"You leave my pink elephant alone," Elmer pouted, maudlinly. "See? He loves me. Watch him put his trunk 'round my neck."

"I can't bear the sight!" Ada confessed. She turned to the bartender quickly. "How do we sober him up?" she murmured.

"Fresh air would help."

"Good. I'll take him outside."

"And leave me here alone with that beast? Not on your life, lady!"

"But we can't take him."

"You'll have to take him. After all, he ain't my hallucination."

"Wouldn't you like to keep him for a pet?" Ada asked, desperately.

"Huh. Fine pet!" The bartender regarded the elephant balefully. "Got a hunch he ain't even house-broken."

"Maybe you could train him," the girl argued. "Doesn't the sheer challenge of it grip you? Think of tackling a big job like that."

"I am thinking about it," the bartender replied. "And I don't like it."

"But if you succeeded, you'd be famous." Ada adopted her most cajoling manner. "Why, you could become an authority in the field. Write a book about it, perhaps. *How to Housebreak an Elephant.* Who knows, it might be a bestseller. Worse ones than that have made it."

"I'm no author," said Michael Finn. "And I ain't no wet-nurse to pink elephants, either. I advise you to get him to hell out of here before *he* gets drunk too. Guzzling up all that beer, anything's liable to happen. Suppose the elephant starts to see pink men?"

"Awright!" Elmer, who had been petting the the pachyderm, now turned and scowled. "I can take a hint. I know when I'm not wanted. Come on, Lucy, le's go."

"Lucy?" Ada frowned. "What kind of a name is that?"

"You an authority on elephant names all of a sudden?" Elmer demanded. "This is my elephant and I'll chris'n her what I please. Named her Lucy on purpose—short for hallucination, see?"

"I see." Ada hesitated. "You aren't really going to walk right out on the street with her like that, are you?"

"Course not!" Elmer climbed up on the bar-stool and tottered triumphantly. "Gonna ride her. Come on, you too."

“Not me!”

“Said you wanted to be in the parade, didn’t you? Well, this is your chance.”

“Maybe that’s a good idea,” Michael Finn agreed. “If you join the parade, people will think it’s sort of a stunt, like.”

“Well—”

Through the door came the sound of cheers and music. The homecoming parade in progress.

“Come on,” Elmer urged. “You want me to take ’nother fling at that Psychopachyderm or whatever it is? Got to get to your uncle, then. This is easiest way.”

Ada hesitated. Then, “The things one has to do in the interest of science,” she muttered. And climbed up behind Elmer on the elephant’s back.

Michael Finn lurched around the bar and opened the door. “Better duck,” he cautioned.

They ducked. The pink elephant stepped out across the sidewalk and into the street as the parade moved by. Elmer tugged at its ears and guided it into the procession.

There were stares, gasps, and then applause. In the array of floats and costumed marchers, the pink elephant did not seem too incongruous.

“Hey, this is fun!” Elmer declared, as they lumbered along in the wake of a band. “And you know something? The bartender was right—I *am* sobering up, fast. This air is wonderful!”

“Try to look dignified then,” the girl advised. “We may get away with this yet.”

And they almost did. Nearing the judge’s stand at the head of the street, the elephant plodded majestically past. Elmer was indeed sobering rapidly, and in an effort to convey this good news to Ada, he now turned and stared at the girl.

“I’m all right now,” he announced, proudly.

"Oh, fine!" Suddenly she groaned. "You're all right—but look at me. No, don't look at me, you've done it again!"

And he had.

THE crowd and judges were suddenly treated to the spectacle of a pink elephant bearing a naked girl who seemed to be clawing and cursing at her male companion.

Cheers mingled with laughter, then turned to shrieks of consternation. For Elmer, glancing about wildly for some means of escape, let his gaze fall on the crowd at random. And wherever it fell, clothes fell with it.

His eyes swept the judges' stand—and literally swept it bare.

"Stop that!" Ada screamed. "You're undressing half the university!"

"I can't help it," Elmer panted. "I'm getting soberer by the minute!"

As if in final proof of the statement, the pink elephant began to wobble precariously beneath them. Then, abruptly, it disappeared.

The two of them plunged to the pavement. Nobody noticed the sudden vanishment, being much too occupied with a search for their missing garments.

Elmer landed with a thump, catching the girl as she descended. "See, it's gone," he muttered. "I'm cold sober."

"I'm cold, period," Ada chattered.

"Take my coat," Elmer urged, gallantly. "Maybe we can find some place and have a drink."

"What? And bring back that pink nightmare again? Not on your life! We're going to find my uncle right away and get you straightened out."

She dragged him to the sidewalk through the unclad throng, and they sought the sheltering shadow of the trees.

Elmer peered back at the pandemonium in the street. People in varying stages of dress and undress rushed to and from; while from the judging stand, nude gentlemen in top-hats waved their canes and gesticulated indignantly to naked policemen.

“Pity we can’t stick around,” he sighed wistfully. “Maybe we could have won a prize.”

“Will you come on?” panted the girl. “My teeth are chattering. Your coat doesn’t begin to cover me in the back here. What do you expect me to do?”

“Nothing,” Elmer told her. “Except grin and bare it.”

Stifling a groan, the half-naked damsel dragged him off into the night.

CHAPTER V

“SO OU’RE back,” Professor Noid muttered, opening the door hastily.

“In the flesh,” said Ada. “As you can all too plainly see.”

“Good.” The Professor rubbed his hands weakly. “For a while I was a bit worried.”

“Nice of you to be concerned,” his niece remarked, in a bitter voice. “But there’s really nothing to get upset about. Our boy Elmer here has been undressing half the population while sober—and when he was drunk, he materialized a hallucination of a pink elephant.”

“A pink elephant? Really?” Professor Noid peered over the top of his pince-nez. “I’d like to have seen it. Full-size, I presume?”

“Very full,” Ada said.

“Might I inquire as to its sex?”

“Female,” Elmer said.

“Ah!” The Professor’s goatee wagged excitedly. “Very significant, that. It shows I have succeeded in removing some of your inhibitions.”

“I wish you’d remove some of his exhibitions, too,” the girl exclaimed. “I’m tired of losing my clothes in public.”

“Then let’s go inside,” the Professor suggested.

“Are you suggesting I lose my clothes again in private?”

“I’m suggesting nothing,” her uncle told her. “That’s all up to Elmer.”

“Like heck it is!” Ada’s tone was fervent. “See if you can snap him out of his nude mood altogether.”

"Maybe I can get drunk again," Elmer suggested. "It worked once before."

"Then we'd have the elephant on our hands," the girl reminded him.

"This I'd like to see," the Professor said. "Was it African or Indian, by the way?"

"It was awful!" Ada shuddered. Briefly she recounted the events in the tavern and during the parade. The Professor nodded and made notes.

"How long do you think this will keep up?" Elmer asked.

"I think I can assure you that you won't be troubled after another treatment," Professor Noid said, soothingly. "Now that the commonplace surface fantasies have been uncovered, materialized, and eliminated, we can probe deeper and reach the basic problems. But I promise you, one more session with the Psychopathfinder and your present troubles will be dissipated."

"They're dissipated enough already," Ada grumbled. "You should have seen how drunk he got!"

"Excellent!" The Professor rubbed his hands together in listless abandon. "Before the treatment he'd never have had the courage to get really drunk. Just goes to show he's making progress."

"What's your idea of complete success?" inquired his niece. "When he starts running around committing rape and arson?"

"You needn't be afraid," the Professor soothed. "I doubt if he'd ever set fire to you."

He led them into the laboratory. The black unit loomed balefully before them.

"Let's go to work," Professor Noid said. "Ada, you take notes."

ELMER blinked dubiously. "I'm not so sure about this," he muttered. "One treatment and I went haywire. What might another do?"

"We won't know until we try. This is all highly experimental."

"And I'm the guinea-pig?"

"You might put it that way, yes. But you're a better guinea-pig than you were beforehand." The Professor regarded him seriously for a moment. "All your life, probably, you've been carrying around this subconscious *voyeuristic* desire to see people in the nude. By fulfilling it, your conflict in this area has been resolved. I'd venture to guess that from now on, you won't want to be a Peeping Tom any more."

"Right," Elmer agreed.

"Also, I'd hazard you've always had a suppressed desire to get blind drunk and allow your fantasies to take over. Hence the rather stereotyped hallucination of a pink elephant. You won't want to surrender to that impulse again, now that you've realized it, will you?"

"Definitely not! I've had my fill of elephants." Elmer grinned. "Now I'm beginning to understand, I think. This machine hypnotizes you, releases inhibitions, and harnesses the electrical energy of the brain to materialize suppressed concepts that cause conflict—is that it?"

"The electro-psychic energy," the Professor corrected him. "And probably not from the brain alone, if the *gestalt* concept is taken into consideration."

"But how do you know how many suppressions I have?" Elmer asked. "Or how many conflicts?"

"You've probably got all of them." Professor Noid butted the air with his goatee. "That's another part of my theory. In orthodox psychiatry, patients are classified according to individual labels. We have the schizoid, the paranoid, the subdivisions of the hebephrenic, catatonic, and so forth. But the majority of authorities admit that there are few classic cases—in which the patient exhibits only the pure, undifferentiated symptoms of a single psychosis. The syndromes tend to overlap. Do you follow me?"

"Vaguely," Elmer admitted. "I sort of tripped and stumbled over that hebephrenic stuff back there."

"Well, it doesn't matter." Professor Noid shrugged. "Point is, my theory holds that every man possesses the potentialities of *all* the neuroses and psychoses known. In essence, each of us is a latent multiple psychotic—

phobic, masochistic, sadistic, cycloid, aggressive, withdrawn, hysteric, compelled, obsessed; a schizophrenic rogue's gallery of conflicting personality components, as it were."

"Were it?" Elmer asked. "Then you mean to say, the next treatment can turn me into anything?"

"Not exactly. It will merely accentuate whatever lies in the next layer of the subliminal and release it. Then we can go on to a still deeper area. It's like peeling an onion."

"But I don't want to be a peeled onion!" Elmer stared fiercely at the Professor. Abruptly, the Professor's clothes dropped.

"Well, I don't want to be peeled, either," the scientist told him. "And I'm sure you can't go around undressing people all the rest of your life, either. You're lucky you got away with it tonight—another such episode and the police might take a hand."

"You're sure the treatment will cure that?" Elmer asked.

"Quite."

"But what if it brings on something worse?"

"We can eliminate the next phase with still another treatment." The Professor dressed thoughtfully.

Elmer was silent. Ada glanced at him and smiled.

"All right," he said. "I suppose there's no choice."

"Good. Put your head in there."

Elmer approached the machine, bent forward. Once again the Professor threw the switch—there was the droning and the shaking, and the sight of the hypnotic spirals drawing him down. As Elmer sagged, Professor Noid busied himself with various levers on the control-panel.

"You're sure you know what you're doing?" Ada whispered, anxiously.

"Of course," her uncle told her. "Note that I'm stepping up the reactor-factor. The first treatment had projective results—he externalized, altered his environment. Now we'll try for introjection; a change in himself."

"Don't hurt him," the girl murmured.

"Fond of him, are you?"

“Afraid so. I don’t quite know why—he’s such a *schmoe*.”

“Maternal instinct.” The Professor got clever with a lever. “There, I think that does it.”

And it did.

ELMER’S sagging body slid to the floor. He sat there for a moment, holding his head in his hands.

“How do you feel?” Ada bent over him, eyes clouded with concern.

“All right.” The young man’s voice was muffled. He shook his head experimentally. “Better than all right. I feel great!” He took his hands away from his face. “Like a new man!”

“Yikes!” screeched Ada, and bolted for the door.

“What’s the matter?” Elmer rose and approached the Professor.

“G-get back!” The psychiatrist cringed against the wall, his goatee sagging in dismay.

“Is something wrong? Tell me?” Elmer insisted.

For answer, the Professor pointed a trembling finger at a mirror in the corner.

Elmer approached it and stared at his own face.

Only it wasn’t his own face any more.

Leering up at him from the glass was the reflection of a. hairy, brutish countenance—the fanged, fierce and fiendish face of a gorilla.

“Oh!” gasped Ada.

“Oh no!” amended Elmer, feeling his face with furry fingers. “What’s the meaning of this monkey-business?”

“I told you the next change would be introjective,” the Professor exulted, rubbing his hands in hysterical apathy. “He has uncovered the brutal, primitive side of his nature, the atavistic heritage we all share.”

“You can have my share,” Elmer groaned. “But speaking of uncovering—these clothes itch.”

His paw-like hands scrabbled at buttons and belt, and in a moment he stood before them naked; if a hirsute adult male gorilla can be considered naked.

Ada retreated to her uncle's arms.

"Am I that awful?" Elmer asked, moving forward, his knuckles scraping the floor.

"Worse!" the girl shuddered. Elmer took another look in the mirror and confirmed the fact. "It's like something out of *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde,"* he muttered.

"True." The Professor stroked his niece with one hand and the goatee with the other. "That particular story has a sound psychological basis. Every one of us has a concealed, primitive side."

"It should be concealed," Elmer told him. "And if you think I'm going to walk around in the body of a gorilla, you're nuttier than I think you are—which, by the way, is considerably." He swayed before them. "Put me back in that machine of yours and give me another treatment, fast."

"But can't you put up with it for just a few hours?" The Professor asked. "Long enough for me to study you a bit? I'd like to try you with a Rohrsach test and the Poretus Maze; see how your reflexes respond."

Elmer growled and raised a hairy arm. "I'll show you how my reflexes respond if you don't hurry up and change me back," he threatened.

"Why, what's come over you?" Ada whispered. "You're so savage—"

"It's the bestial aspect," her uncle said. "The change is more than bodily. Maybe I'd better do as he says. No telling what his brutal instincts might lead him to in his present state."

Elmer started over to the Psychopathfinder. "Get busy," he commanded. "I'm so brutal I scare myself. I have the funniest feeling that I want to pound on my chest and roar."

"No, not that!" the Professor begged. "Think of the neighbors. If anyone should hear you now, or see you—"

"Speaking of hearing," murmured Ada. "Seems to me as if there are footsteps on the stairs."

"No!"

"Someone's coming down the hall," the girl insisted. "I'm sure of it."

Professor Noid glanced at Elmer in frantic despair. "Hurry up," he whispered. "Hide yourself, quickly!"

"But where?" Elmer demanded.

"Never mind—lay down on that table over there—do something—anything—"

Elmer started for the table.

A moment later the door opened and a stranger walked into the room.

CHAPTER VI

"GOOD evening," said the stranger, briskly. "I trust I'm not disturbing anything?"

The Professor offered him a weak smile and weaker handclasp. "No, not at all," he said.

"I rang the doorbell several times but there was no answer. Finding the door open, I took the liberty of coming upstairs. After all, you did invite me over tonight, didn't you? Something about a remarkable discovery you've made?"

"Uh—yes." The Professor turned to Ada. "I don't believe you two have met, my dear. This is Dr. Noodlemayer, head of the Department of Anthropology. My niece, Ada."

Lying on the table, Elmer cocked one eye at the anthropologist. He saw a tall thin man whose bushy eyebrows and mustache seemed interchangeable.

"I know I'm late," Noodlemayer was saying, "but I didn't want to miss the homecoming parade."

"Anything worth seeing?" the Professor asked.

Noodlemayer passed a hand over his forehead. "I'm not sure," he answered. "In fact, since seeing that parade I'm not sure of anything." He pulled a pint bottle from his inside coat pocket. "If you'll forgive me, I think I'll have a medicinal libation." He uncorked the bottle, smiling apologetically at the Professor. "I trust you will ignore this lapse," he said. "Very seldom indulge."

"What it is?" asked Ada, curiously.

"Harmless alcohol," Noodlemayer assured her. "Generally use it to pickle my specimens in." He drank deeply.

"Er—how are your specimens?" the Professor ventured.

"Pickled, as I said," Noodlemayer replied. "And as I soon hope to be, myself." He shuddered, then handed the bottle to his colleague. "That parade tonight! I couldn't believe my own eyes! I was standing near the judging platform, and in the middle of the affair people seemed to suddenly go mad. It was like a saturnalia, really—they began tearing off their clothes and capering about." He paused, eyeing Ada. "I trust I'm not offending you," he ventured.

"I think it's very offensive not to offer a lady the first drink," she said.

"Excuse me." Noodlemayer passed her the bottle. She gulped, shivered, and returned the diminished pint to her uncle, who drank quickly.

"You may not believe this," Noodlemayer continued, "But for a moment I thought I saw a pink elephant in the parade, too."

"Possibly." Professor Noid smiled vaguely. "Some of the students may have rented an elephant from the zoo and dyed it pink, you know."

"I know." Noodlemayer tipped the bottle again, smiling self-consciously. "But while I was looking at it, the beast disappeared. And that's when people began losing their clothes. It was like a Bacchic orgy."

"Speaking of Bacchus," Ada said, "Are you sure you weren't drinking *before* the parade, too?"

"Well—just a nip," Noodlemayer confessed. "I had about a pint or so of this stuff left over after preserving an alligator, and I hated to waste it."

"Alligator?" Ada shuddered and grabbed the bottle, downing another stiff drink. "Brrrr! A few slugs of this and I can understand why you saw pink elephants and naked people. You've got the d.t.s."

"Have I?" Noodlemayer asked. "But I feel quite sober, I assure you."

"No sober man sees pink elephants," the girl insisted. "Just thinking about them has driven me to drink."

"Well, let's talk about it downstairs," the Professor said, hastily, eyeing Elmer as he endeavored to lead Dr. Noodlemayer from the room.

"But. you were going to show me the results of your recent experiments," Noodlemayer protested. "You said something about a new machine and exciting advances in—"

"All a mistake," the Professor assured him. "I was drunk when I called you. As a matter of fact, I wish I were drunk now." Nervously, he reached for the pint bottle again, and took a final pull.

"Well, if you really feel that way about it," Noodlemayer beamed, reaching into his coat once more, "I just happen to have another bottle with me. You see, I actually preserved two alligators."

AT the sound of the word, Ada snatched the second bottle from his hands. She tilted it expertly.

Elmer, watching from the table in the corner, realized that all three of them were rapidly showing the effects of their hasty tippling. The Professor and Ada both drank to calm their apprehensions.

Once more the psychiatrist endeavored to lead Noodlemayer from the room. "Downstairs," he coaxed. "We can all relax and take our shoes off."

"Please, no," Noodlemayer begged. "I don't want to see anything else removed this evening. I still am not sure if it was real or imaginary. Maybe your niece is right. I might have indulged too freely. Perhaps I should give up trying to preserve alligators."

Once more Ada grabbed at the bottle. "Must you talk about such loathsome things?" she asked. "Alligators and elephants—what next?"

Noodlemayer turned, a placating smile on his lips. It froze suddenly, then crept up under his mustache and disappeared. "W-what's that?" he gasped.

"What's what?"

"Over there—in the corner, on the table." He pointed a wavering finger. "Am I completely deranged, or do I see the body of an anthropoid?"

"Which question do you want answered first?" Ada began. But Noodlemayer walked over to the table and peered down at Elmer. Elmer promptly closed his eyes and lay still, trying not to breathe noticeably.

The Professor started forward, but it was too late. Noodlemayer reached down and prodded Elmer's chest with his finger.

"It *is* a real gorilla!" he exclaimed. "I'm not that drunk!"

"I wish you were," muttered the Professor, despairingly.

"What did you say?"

"Now you went and spoiled it," Ada answered, quickly. "That's why we wanted to get you out of the room. We meant it as a surprise."

"It *is* a surprise," Noodlemayer agreed.

"No, you don't understand." Ada giggled in alcoholic inspiration. "You weren't supposed to see this for another two months yet. It was my uncle's idea."

"Was it?"

"Of course," Ada rattled on. "You understand how fond he is of you. So he decided to give you this gorilla for a Christmas present. Didn't you?"

Professor Noid nodded helplessly.

"We were talking it over, just the two of us, trying to think what kind of a gift would be useful to an anthropologist. And we decided a gorilla would be just the thing."

"Dandy," Noodlemayer agreed. "I've always wanted one."

"So we figured." Ada took a drink out of the bottle for added stimulation, and apparently found it. "Only we were going to wrap it up nicely in gift-paper and tie a big blue ribbon around it. What fun it would have been watching you opening your present and trying to guess what was inside! Wouldn't it have been?"

"I can't imagine anything more jolly," the Professor groaned, wrenching the bottle from her hands and ingurgitating rapidly. "A stuffed gorilla for

Christmas—leave it to my niece to think up an appropriate sentimental remembrance. Of course, it's spoiled now."

Noodlemayer took the bottle, drank absently, and then sniffed. "It doesn't smell spoiled," he said.

"The gorilla? Of course not, because it's stuffed."

"Stuffed? What did you stuff it with?"

"Oh, all sorts of things." Ada waved vaguely. "We took it to a taxidermist."

Noodlemayer peered down at Elmer and his eyebrows waggled.

"I'm trying to classify it," he said. "Strange. The pectoral development is that of *gorilla beringei* or *uellensis,* but the zygomatic processes resemble *gorilla castaneiceps* or even *may etna.* I can't decide if it's a coastal or a mountainous specimen. Where did you get it?"

The Professor opened his mouth, but Ada broke in quickly.

"We raised it ourselves," she said. "From a chimpanzee."

"Impossible." Noodlemayer passed his hand over his forehead again. "You're just trying to confuse me."

"Here, have another drink," the Professor said. "That ought to help."

NOODLEMAYER finished the bottle. Then he tapped Elmer's forehead. "Something wrong here," he declared. "Did you say you had this specimen stuffed by a taxidermist?"

"Of course."

"But the brute's forehead seems warm."

"Maybe the taxidermist lied to us," Ada suggested. "Maybe he only claimed to have stuffed it."

"Then it's just a corpse," Noodlemayer nodded. "And not long dead, either, I'd guess." He ran his hand down across Elmer's nose.

That was a mistake.

Elmer sneezed.

"Yow!" the anthropologist commented, flinching and drawing back. "It's alive!"

"Now really," the Professor told him. "Maybe you've had too much to drink, old man. Remember those d. t. s."

"But I heard it," wailed Noodlemayer. "I saw it wrinkle its black snout at me!"

"Take it easy," Ada soothed. "This ape is quite dead. Can't feel a thing." Smiling she picked up the empty pint bottle and brought it down across Elmer's forehead. "You see?"

"I see!" Noodlemayer's jaw dropped as Elmer sat up.

"Hit me with a bottle, will you?" he growled. "A fine trick! And when the bottle was full, you wouldn't even come near me."

"It's alive—and talking!" Noodlemayer cried.

"I don't hear anything," said the Professor, innocently. He turned to his niece. "Do you, Ada?"

"Certainly not. Dr. Noodlemayer, you're blotto."

"Y-you mean to tell me you can't see it move?" The anthropologist shrank back against the wall, trembling. "Why, it's getting up—it's taking those clothes off the floor, putting them on—what kind of a monster do you have here? Is this the experiment you were telling me about?"

Ada stepped over to Elmer and hastily whispered in his oversized ear. "Lie down!" she breathed, hoarsely. "Now see what you've started?"

The gorilla shook its head. "I'm tired of lying down," he told her. "Tired of watching everybody else drink and have a good time. I'm leaving." Clumsily, it adjusted the clothes over its bulky body and knotted shoelaces with prehensile thumbs.

"Now *she's* talking to it," Noodlemayer wailed. "Listen, you can hear it!"

"Nothing of the sort," the Professor said. "Come downstairs and let me fix you a nice drink."

But before the unnerved anthropologist could accept the invitation, the gorilla had blocked the doorway. The simian countenance leered incongruously above the clothing.

“W-where are you going?” Ada demanded. “You can’t go out like this.”

“Oh can’t I?” Elmer answered.

“Just you watch and see. I’m through with your uncle and his thicks. Turn me into a gorilla, will he? All right, I’m going to enjoy myself before I vanish like that pink elephant.”

“Come back!” Ada called. “I’ll give you a banana.”

But it was too late. Scraping his knuckles along the floor, Elmer disappeared down the hall.

“Now what?” whispered the Professor.

The girl sighed. “I don’t know,” she said. “You were saying something about giving Dr. Noodlemayer a drink. Let’s all have one and try to think. Or not to think.”

“I saw it,” Noodlemayer insisted. “I saw it, I heard it. I’m going to phone the police!”

“First the drink, remember?” Professor Noid propelled the anthropologist out of the laboratory. “First the drink, and then you can call the police about the pink elephant and the gorilla and the naked alligators, or whatever you think you saw.”

“I-I’m so confused!” Noodlemayer groaned, as they descended the stairs.

“You aren’t the only one.” Ada halted at the bottom of the landing and surveyed the telltale evidence of the open front door. “And something tells me a lot of people are going to be still more confused before the night is over.”

CHAPTER VII

AS the first step towards confirming her prediction, Elmer crouched in the doorway of a hamburger stand on Main Street. He was suddenly conscious of an overpowering hunger. Here it was, almost midnight, and he hadn’t eaten dinner. All of this drinking and metamorphizing had stimulated his appetite; he had to eat.

Still, he hesitated. Gazing through the window, he discerned two couples seated at the counter of the hamburger joint. They were obviously college students, and he wondered how they would react to his appearance. Well, there was only one way to find out.

Squaring his shoulders and trying to walk erect, Elmer entered.

He seated himself at the counter, crouched low to avoid the gaze of the collegiate couples, who were engrossed in playing footie down at the far end. But he could not hope to hide his countenance from the counterman.

That gentleman now stepped in front of him and opened his mouth to solicit an order. But when the counterman gazed into Elmer's hairy, bestial face, his jaws refused to function. So did the rest of him, which was just as well—for if he could have moved his legs, the counterman would have taken a running start for parts unknown.

As it was, he peered at the clothed gorilla in strangled silence. When finally he managed to articulate, all that came out of his mouth was a feeble, "Ulp!"

"What's that?" Elmer demanded.

"I said, 'ulp!' " the counterman declared. Then, as if realizing that this beast had indeed addressed him, he murmured, "So you can talk, too?"

"Why not?" Elmer wanted to know. "Doesn't everybody?"

"Only human beings," the counterman replied.

"Meaning I'm not one?" asked Elmer, menacingly.

"I—I didn't say that."

"Well, you'd better not," growled the ape-man. "Or I'll tear your head from your scrawny shoulders." He reached over and grasped the counterman by the collar. "I'm hungry," he rasped. "Bring me five or six hamburgers."

"Cooked or raw?" the counterman asked.

"Cooked, of course! What makes you think I'd eat raw meat?"

"Why—I dunno—I thought they served it at the zoo—"

Elmer gave him a shake that rattled the fillings in his teeth. "Are you insinuating that I come from a zoo?" he roared.

“Why, no, but—”

“I’m a student here at the university.” Elmer told him. “I should think you could tell that by looking at me.”

“Oh, sure. One of them backward students, huh? I—”

Another shake silenced the hapless counterman. “Never mind the conversation,” Elmer thundered. “Hurry with those hamburgers.”

Released, the counterman scurried away.

“No onions,” Elmer called after him. “People who eat onions aren’t popular.”

“It would take a lot more than not eating onions to make you popular with me,” the counterman declared, from the safety of the kitchen.

The altercation had attracted the attention of the two couples at the end of the counter, and all four were now staring curiously at Elmer.

“Do you see what I see?” demanded one of the girls of her escort.

“I’m afraid I do,” that youth sighed.

“It’s an ape,” the other girls said. “An ape in men’s clothing.”

“A square ape at that,” said the second young man. “Nobody wears pink shirts any more.”

“Since when did they accept gorillas as students at this university?” the first gal asked.

“I don’t know,” her escort puzzled. “Maybe Buster Gutz managed to get him enrolled so he could play on the football team.”

The second girl squinted myopically at Elmer. “Are you sure it’s a real gorilla?” she asked. “Maybe it’s just somebody who needs a shave.”

“If so, he needs one worse than anybody I ever saw,” said the fourth student, earnestly. “But not as badly as I need a drink.”

“I’ve got to find out about this,” declared the first girl. She rose and approached Elmer.

“Excuse me,” she began, “but just to settle a friendly argument—are you a man or a monkey?”

ELMER started to growl at her, then checked himself. Curious, this tendency to fly off the handle. Perhaps the Professor had been right about his Jekyll-Hyde theory. Elmer felt definitely brutal and aggressive. But common sense prevailed. He smiled, baring his fangs.

"I'm quite human," he said. "This is just a costume I wore to the parade tonight."

"Of course!" The girl smiled. "We should have thought of that. My, it's quite realistic, isn't it? Where did you get all that hair from?"

"My girl friend's father runs a barber-shop," Elmer explained, glibly. "She saved the sweepings for me."

"Kind of her." The co-ed touched Elmer's hand. "I see you even had enough left over for your fingers."

"Oh, I'm covered with the stuff," Elmer said. "There was plenty to go around."

"Around what?" the girl wanted to know.

"Everything."

"She must have saved it for months and months."

"Saved what?"

"The hair. You know, this girlfriend you were telling me about."

"She did," Elmer asserted. "But then, it's an old habit of hers. She keeps boxes of it for souvenirs. Sort of an hairloom, you might say."

"Are you sure you're not kidding me, mister?" the girl asked him.

"Why should I kid you about a thing like that?" Elmer wanted to know. "Obviously I can't be a real gorilla. Real gorillas come from Africa—how would I be able to speak English?"

"I never thought of that," the girl mused. "Not that I'd particularly care to."

"Here's your hamburgers." The counterman slid the plate down and retreated quickly. Elmer reached out and crammed a hamburger into his mouth—then another, and another. The girl watched him swallow them and her eyes widened.

The other three students gradually approached and peered at Elmer. He stopped midway through the fourth hamburger and regarded them intently.

"What's the matter?" he asked. "Haven't you ever seen a man eat a hamburger before?"

"Not in one gulp," the second girl said. "And it isn't so much your manners—it's your teeth. Don't tell me those big yellow fangs are part of the costume, too?"

"Those big yellow what?"

"Fangs."

"You're welcome," said Elmer, hastily. But the girl was not to be diverted.

"I asked if those were your real teeth," she said.

"Certainly not!" Elmer snapped, consuming his fifth hamburger in the same gesture. "It so happens I have another girl-friend whose father is a dentist, and she saved me—"

He halted, conscious of the stares of the two males. "What are you looking at?" he demanded.

The college boys did not reply. They merely gestured helplessly at Elmer's feet.

HE glanced down and realized the source of their display. During the wait at the counter he had unconsciously kicked off his shoes, which were far too small for his apish toes and broad, wrinkled heels. Now the two nether paws were bare, curling around the bottom of the stool.

"T-that's no costume," one of the young men declared. "I don't care how many girl-friends you've got or what their fathers do for a living. None of them could have saved you toes like these!"

"Then it *is* a real gorilla!" the second girl exclaimed. "I knew it all the time." She headed for the door. "I'm getting out of here!" she announced, suiting the action to the words.

"Wait for us!" Her three companions followed hastily.

Elmer rose from the stool, tugging on his shoes. The counterman stared.

"They'll call the cops," he said. "So you'd better pay me, quickly, before the police get here."

"Nice reasoning," Elmer grated.

"Now look, you caused enough trouble," the counterman said. "How am I ever gonna live it down? Folks find out I been serving gorillas in my place, it'll get a bad name."

"For the last time, Em not a real gorilla," Elmer told him. "And that's the truth."

The counterman smiled bitterly. "What are you then?" he asked sarcastically. "I suppose you're going to tell me you're just an organ-grinder's monkey."

"Right," Elmer said.

"Who ever heard of an organ-grinder's monkey that size?"

"He had a pipe-organ," Elmer explained. "Now goodnight."

"Running off without paying, huh?" called the counterman.

"I'm not sticking until the police show up," Elmer said.

"Well, go ahead, then. I don't care. They're bound to catch you, anyway. Can't hope to escape unnoticed, the way you look. Which is, to put it bluntly, awful!"

The counterman ducked just in time as Elmer aimed the sugar-bowl at his head, then darted from the hamburger stand.

He peered up and down the street. The four students had disappeared from sight, but Elmer had audible evidence of their recent activity. The counterman had guessed correctly; they had turned in an alarm. For Elmer could hear the sound of sirens in the distance.

As they grew nearer, he hesitated and then started down the deserted street at random. He had to find a place in which to hide, and quickly. There was no getting away from it; his hairy countenance was incapable of passing unnoticed.

Elmer ran along the curb, cursing softly as the pavement scraped his dragging knuckles. The sirens grew louder. He scanned the darkened storefronts and headed for the nearest one as a flash of light down the street signalled the coming of a squadcar.

Crouching in the doorway, he debated his next move. Obviously there was only one thing to do. Gripping the handle of the store entrance, he crushed it beneath his powerful fingers. The lock yielded and he ducked into the shop, closing the door behind him just as the squadcar swept past.

He turned and blundered into the rear of the store. Oddly enough, in view of his recent conversation with the college-girl, he appeared to have hidden himself in a barbershop. A curtained doorway in the rear seemed, to lead to the barber's living-quarters.

ELMER crept down the hall and into the back room. Sure enough, a baldheaded gentleman lay slumbering upon a cot. Elmer stared at him silently for a moment; then, struck by a sudden inspiration, switched on the light.

Being suddenly awakened in the middle of the night to find a gorilla staring down at you is not necessarily the world's most enchanting experience. At least it did not seem that way to the barber, whose name was Al O'Pecia. His reaction was normal enough, considering the circumstances. Being bald-headed, his scalp stood on end.

"Get up!" Elmer ordered, in a deep growl. Mr. O'Pecia tried to crawl under the bedclothes. "Go away," he said, hoarsely. "I knew I never should have went and drank that last bottle of hair-tonic."

Elmer yanked the covers down. "Up!" he insisted.

"I'm dreaming," Al O'Pecia murmured. "I gotta be. Tell me I'm dreaming."

"Pinch yourself and see," Elmer advised. "On second thought, I'll do it for you."

His ape-like fingers tweaked the barber's nose.

"Yeowtch!" observed the barber, and got up, fast.

“What’s the idea of breaking in here in the middle of the night?” he demanded.

“You’re a barber, aren’t you? Well, I need a shave.”

Al O’Pecia rubbed his eyes and gazed at his strange visitor. “You can say that again, brother. I ain’t never seen anyone who needed a shave worse.” Then he shook his head. “But I don’t open until nine in the morning.”

“You’re open right now,” Elmer told him. “I can’t wait.”

“Look like you been waiting quite a long time.” The barber searched for his slippers. “You look more animal than human, with all that fur.”

“My mother was frightened by a yak,” Elmer explained. “Or was it a hair mattress?” He watched the barber don a robe. “Never mind. Just don’t ask any questions and I’ll make it worth your while. You shave me the way I tell you, and there’s ten dollars in it for you.”

The barber’s eyes narrowed. “Aha,” he breathed. “Funny business, eh? You one of them escaped convicts or something?”

“I told you, no questions,” Elmer said. “Ten bucks, in advance.”

“Twenty,” said the barber. “What kind of a clip-joint are you running here?” Elmer asked. But he paid. And the barber shaved him as directed, although his hands trembled whenever he came in close contact with the brutish face.

The brutish face looked considerably less brutish, Elmer was pleased to note, once the barber had finished his work. A carefully scalloped hairline made Elmer resemble a crewcut collegian with a broken nose.

“Good enough,” he told Al O’Pecia, “Now shave my hands.” The barber did so, grumbling.

“I don’t like this business,” he said. “Something funny going on. You don’t hardly seem human.”

“I am, though,” Elmer answered. “How I got this way would take too long to explain.”

“I’ll bet it’s a hair-raising story,” the barber ventured.

“It is,” Elmer assented. “Now, if you’re finished, I’ll get out of here. You can go back to bed and forget anything ever happened.”

“I may go back to bed,” the barber declared, “but I doubt if I’ll ever forget.”

“One thing more,” Elmer said, eyeing the barber’s feet, which were extremely large. “I want a pair of your shoes.”

“Anything,” the man told him. “Just so you go away and stay away. Though why you need shoes in the jungle is beyond me.”

Ignoring his grumbling, Elmer accepted a pair of oversize moccasins which fitted his feet perfectly.

Thus accoutred, he sallied forth again into the night. Oddly enough, despite the hectic events of the past six hours, he didn’t feel tired. On the contrary, his hirsute body seemed filled with almost boundless energy.

ELMER paused before the shop, scanning the silent street. No squadcars were in evidence. The campus mall was deserted. He moved along restlessly, his long arms dangling to the pavement. Crossing over to the wooded mall, he made a sudden decision. Why scrape his knuckles this way?

Reaching up, he grasped the branch of the nearest tree and swung himself aloft. The sensation was exhilarating. Elmer began to swing from tree to tree, Tarzan-fashion.

As he did so, he became acutely conscious of the change in himself. It was physical, yes; but more than physical. For the first time in his life, Elmer felt truly aggressive. More than that, he experienced a queer elation compounded of primitive urges. There was this impulse to beat his chest, roar, fight, seek a mate.

The voice of reason faintly told him he’d better take advantage of his shaven face and return to his boarding-house room and bed. Still he swung along restlessly, seeking he knew not what in the crisp silence of the night.

Delighted with his newfound agility, he swung higher and higher, seeking the topmost branches of the great trees. Thus his remote forebears might have travelled milleniums ago. The evolutionists were right, Elmer decided—there must have been apes in his family tree.

He hurtled past the second-storey windows of the faculty houses lining the side of the campus. Most of them were darkened, and there was no danger of detection. When Elmer saw a light loom ahead, he ducked and hesitated. As he did so, he peered into the room to see if his progress might be observed.

But the occupants of the room were much too busy to look out of the window at this moment. In spite of the fact that Elmer no longer had any desire to be a peeping Tom, he paused and stared.

One of the occupants was well worth staring at. She was a tall, leggy blonde of generous proportions—said proportions being confined, at the moment, in only the sheerest of negligees. In his dual role of Jekyll and Hyde, Elmer found she appealed to his tastes as a gentleman and as an ape.

Oddly enough, the girl's companions in the room did not seem to share his sentiments. The two men appeared to be arguing with the blonde. Elmer squatted on the limb of the tree before the window and scrutinized them.

One of the men was tall, the other short; both were bearded The tall man did most of the talking. He pounded on the vanity table and pointed at the blonde, who shook her head emphatically. The short man said something and again the blonde tossed her curls.

Then both men shrugged. The tall man stepped forward and took the blonde by the arm. As she tried to break free, the small man ran forward, holding something in his hand—something that flashed and glittered.

The blonde opened her mouth to scream, but the tall man's hand came down over her face as he held her. And the little man ran at her with his knife.

Had Elmer Klopp witnessed such a scene just six hours earlier, he would have fallen out of the tree in sheer dismay. But the Elmer Klopp of six hours earlier was gone. In his place was a powerful, ape-like figure spoiling for a fight.

He spoiled no longer. With a lunge, he swooped forward, kicking in the window-pane and swinging to the center of the room.

THE two men looked up. As the tall man released the blonde, she opened her mouth, but no scream came out—only a gasp, as Elmer went into action.

One paw brushed the knife to the floor. One paw grasped the big man by the collar. Then Elmer had them both by the beards. He banged their heads together expertly. Eyes rolling, they collapsed.

Growling deep in his throat, the ape-man dragged his victims to the window and casually tossed them out. Then he peered down at the grass below.

Apparently unconsciousness had caused them to fall without any muscular tension, and the jar of landing revived them; neither man showed any signs of broken bones, but only a singular determination to get up and run off into the night. Elmer watched them disappear.

Then he returned to the middle of the room, stooped, picked up the knife, and hurled it out of the window.

"Silly idea, trying to cut you up," he grunted. "Couldn't they see there's enough of you to go around?"

"You don't understand," the blonde told him. "That wasn't what they had in mind at all."

"Then they were even sillier," Elmer said, eyeing her in frank admiration.

"You really think so?" she murmured, stepping forward.

Six hours ago, Elmer Klopp would have run out of the room as fast as his legs could carry him. Now, he merely took three steps forward, in the right direction. It may not have been the proper direction, but proper or improper, it brought results.

The blonde nestled against his barrel-chest and gazed up at him, her big eyes rolling soulfully. "You were magnificent," she said.

"Crashing out of the night, crushing their heads together. You reminded me of my first husband—"

"Never mind your first husband," Elmer suggested, kissing her.

"Whoo!" said the blonde, when at last she was able to free her lips. "It is strange. Your kiss, too, is familiar. My second husband—"

"Bah!" Elmer pushed her back. "This is no time for an autobiography."

The blonde tendered him a sidelong glance. "You are so right," she murmured. "The hero deserves his reward." She swayed closer, and her hands caressed his neck. Elmer promptly switched out the light.

"So," the blonde giggled. "That is discreet. Sergei, my third husband, was also discreet."

"How's this for discretion?" Elmer asked, suiting the action to the word.

But before the blonde could answer, footsteps sounded in the hall outside the bedroom door.

"Good Lord!" Elmer groaned. "Don't tell me that's your fourth husband arriving?"

"No," whispered the blonde, faintly. "You need not fear on that account. My fourth husband is dead."

"Good," Elmer told her.

"Not so good," the blonde responded. "I'm afraid the one outside happens to be my fifth."

CHAPTER VIII

DR. Hans Noodlemayer was a badly bewildered man. After Elmer's flight, he had permitted himself to be taken downstairs by Professor Noid and Ada.

The Professor and his niece saw to it that Dr. Noodlemayer imbibed several quick drinks in succession, nor were they remiss in following his example. By the time an hour passed, Noodlemayer was completely confused.

Once he had been quite sure that he'd seen people losing their clothing on Main Street. He believed he had witnessed the appearance and disappearance of a pink elephant. He thought he had discovered a talking gorilla in the Professor's laboratory.

But what with the liquor, and the frantic babbling of Ada and her uncle, he was no longer certain of anything. They had him almost convinced that these events were a figment of his imagination. One final stiff drink—a triple brandy, poured by the Professor—left Noodlemayer in a state where he could not distinguish between preconceptions and reality. And by the time he reeled out of the house, he was hopelessly muddled. He didn't know his assumptions from a hole in the ground.

In order to avoid holes in the ground—real or imaginary—

Noodlemayer walked very slowly. Once he thought he saw two bearded figures racing frantically through the tree-bordered campus, but he could not be sure. Nothing was right any more.

Noodlemayer shook his head. Ever since his last anthropological field-trip, a year ago, things had been strange. It was then, in Kirghiz, that he had met and married Sonia. Dear Sonia, with her exotic ways; her feline fancies. Like a cat, she preferred a nocturnal existence; like a cat, she was apt to claw and bite when unduly provoked. But even so, the late marriage had proved pleasant to Dr. Noodlemayer. The presence of a young and beautiful wife attracted many new friends to his home; almost every evening, while he worked on his papers, Sonia would entertain a coterie of students or unattached faculty members.

Yet Hans Noodlemayer had no reason for jealousy. For Sonia never seemed to retain the same admirers for long. A month or two and they vanished from the social scene, to be replaced by others.

Certainly she was devoted to his welfare. It was she who urged him to take certain steps for his own advancement on the faculty. It was she who suggested he make friendly overtures to Professor Noid.

As a matter of fact, Sonia seemed to know a great deal about what went on behind the scenes at Hardnox.

“Why don’t you find out what your friend the Professor is up to?” she had inquired. “I hear he’s been working on some kind of experimental machine lately. Maybe it’s something you could use in connection with your own studies.”

That was what had prompted the friendship leading up to this evening’s bewildering events.

Noodlemayer didn’t know what to make of it. He glanced at his watch, noticed that it was after one o’clock. Sonia would still be up, of course. She usually remained awake until four or even five in the morning and dozed the day away. He could tell her what had happened, and perhaps she’d be able to explain. A clever woman, Sonia, with a surprising fund of knowledge at her painted, pointed fingertips.

Dr. Noodlemayer approached his house with renewed confidence, then halted as he realized that the lights were out. Sonia had retired, after all.

In that case, he decided, he’d enter quietly. He was careful about opening the door and cautious about closing it. He switched on the hall light and tiptoed softly up the stairs.

Then he heard the sounds coming from his wife’s bedroom. Her voice, and another—a deep, masculine voice.

Abruptly, confusion swept over Noodlemayer once more. Confusion, and alcoholic anxiety. After all, a man can take only so much without cracking. Naked women, pink elephants and garrulous gorillas had overloaded Noodlemayer’s quota, and brandy tipped the balance. Now, the sound of the male voice issuing from his wife’s boudoir was the final touch.

Everything had gone crazy, it seemed; there was nothing to do but follow suit.

WITH an oath, Dr. Noodlemayer plunged into his own bedroom and sought the bureau drawer. He emerged in a moment, brandishing a large revolver and sought his wife’s room.

At the sound of his coming, the voices ceased. Without a word, he yanked at the doorknob. It did not yield; the door was locked.

"Sonia!" he cried. "Are you in there?"

"Yes, of course," his wife replied.

"Then open the door and let me in."

"Just a minute," Sonia said. "I'm busy."

"That's what I thought," her husband declared. "I knew I heard a man's voice."

"You heard no such thing," Sonia called. "If that's what you're thinking, you're badly mistaken."

"If that's what I'm thinking, somebody is going to be badly mutilated," her husband told her. "I may as well tell you, I've got a gun here. Are you going to open that door now or do I have to shoot the lock off?"

There was the sound of murmuring from within, and then a heavy thump. After a moment, Sonia unlocked the door. She stood there smiling calmly at her irate spouse.

"Such a fuss!" she said. "Hans, what has gotten into you?"

"I might well ask the same question," her husband declared, stalking into the room and waving his revolver menacingly. He wheeled and faced her. "All right, where is he?"

"Where is who?"

"The man I heard talking to you," Noodlemayer shouted.

"You didn't hear a man," Sonia answered. "And for pity's sake, don't shout at me. You'll wake Aunt Olga."

"Aunt Olga?"

"Shh!" Sonia put her fingers to her lips. "She just arrived this evening, unexpectedly, from Kurdistan. She wanted it to be a surprise."

"It is," Noodlemayer asserted. "I didn't even know you had an Aunt Olga. I thought you told me you were just a poor orphan with nobody in the world except four ex-husbands."

"Aunt Olga is a very *distant* relative," Sonia explained. "But she's close enough now. In fact, she's right over there in my bed, sleeping. The poor thing was so tired she dozed off the moment she hit the pillow."

Dr. Noodlemayer glanced at the bed and discovered it was indeed occupied; a huge figure curled beneath the covers, which were pulled up over the head.

He approached the bed slowly, flourishing his weapon.

"What are you doing?" Sonia cried. "Don't disturb her!"

"Why not?" her husband demanded. "I don't see why I'm the only one who should be disturbed around here. Besides, I don't believe you. Aunt Olga, indeed!"

Reaching out, he yanked the covers down swiftly, exposing a bulky body clad in one of Sonia's longest kimonas. The head of the reclining figure was swathed in a bonnet—the type women wear when they put their hair up in curlers as an excuse for repulsing husbandly advances.

"You see?" Sonia said, triumphantly. "It's not a man."

DR. Noodlemayer stared into the broad, brutal features, noting the splayed nostrils and jutting jaw. "It doesn't look like a woman, either," he sighed. "In fact, as a qualified anthropologist, I must say your aunt doesn't seem to belong to any racial group I recognize. If her face wasn't hairless, I'd swear she'd resemble that gorilla I saw earlier this evening." Sonia sniffed. "Hans," she murmured. "Have you been drinking, by any chance?"

"Not by any chance," her husband replied. "I was drinking on purpose. You'd drink too if you ran into a talking gorilla."

"Just where did you meet this gorilla, might I ask?"

"You might," he told her, "It was in the Professor's laboratory."

"Aha!" The blonde's eyes narrowed. "Just as I suspected—then he is up to something, after all. What is it?"

"I don't know. I'm terribly confused. After the gorilla escaped, they insisted that I drink with them. I forgot all about calling the police." Dr.

Noodlemayer brightened. “Perhaps I had better do so now. Send out a general alarm.”

Abruptly, the figure on the bed stirred and sat up.

Elmer had been lying there quietly, hoping that a glimpse of “Aunt Olga” might serve to satisfy the man. But now, at the mention of the word “police” he could contain himself no longer.

Striving to pitch his voice in a high falsetto, he blinked his eyes and said “Sonia, my pet—who is this man?”

The blonde took the cue gracefully. “Why, Auntie, this is my husband, Dr. Noodlemayer.”

Elmer extended a shaven paw. “Ah, this is indeed a great pleasure. Sonia has told me as much about you.”

Noodlemayer took the paw and examined it with ill-concealed distaste. “I wish I could say the same,” he replied. “She never told me a thing concerning you. You’re here from Kurdistan, is that right?”

“Why, yes.”

“Funny, you have no accent. Most Arabs find difficulty in mastering English.”

“I’m not Arabian,” Elmer explained, quickly.

“But the Kurds are an Arabic tribe.”

“Perhaps Sonia should have explained to you that I’m not a true Kurd. I’m more of a Whey.”

“Whey? I never heard of them. Yezidees, perhaps?”

“I really couldn’t say,” Elmer floundered. “I just got here tonight.”

“That’s so.” Noodlemayer’s gaze shifted around the room. “By the way, I don’t see any bags.”

“Why should you? I’ll have you know I’m a highly moral woman. I wouldn’t travel with any—”

“Luggage,” Noodlemayer interjected, hastily. “Where is your luggage?”

“Down at the station,” Sonia said, shooting Elmer a warning glance. “I thought we could pick it up in the morning. That’s why Aunt Olga is wearing my clothes.”

"I see." Dr. Noodlemayer, in the course of his inspection, encountered a glimpse of the broken glass strewn on the floor beside the shattered window.

"What's this?" he snapped.

"Oh." Sonia hesitated. "I wasn't going to tell you, because I knew you'd just be upset. We had intruders this evening."

"Intruders?" Noodlemayer gripped his revolver. "Perhaps it was the gorilla on the prowl. Let me ring up the police—"

"No!" Elmer clambered out of bed. "They were harmless. Just a couple of travelling salesmen."

"Travelling salesmen?" Again Noodlemayer's gaze was suspicious. "How come you know so much about these things if you've just arrived from Kurdistan?"

"Well—"

"I don't mean to appear offensive, but might I look at your *visa?"*

"My *what?"* Elmer drew himself erect. "What a thing to ask a lady!"

"Your passport, I mean." Despite himself, Noodlemayer blushed.

"It's down at the station," Elmer explained. "But don't you want to hear about those salesmen? Like I say, they were really harmless. When we got tired of listening to them talk, I just threw them out of the window."

"You—threw them out—bodily?"

"How else?" Elmer pointed at the broken glass. "Then we locked the door, of course. A woman can't get her beauty sleep if a bunch of travelling salesmen keep wandering into the bedroom at all hours. Isn't that so, Sonia?"

"That's so," the blonde admitted. "My second husband was a—" Abruptly she bit her lip and fell silent.

NOODLEMAYER turned and confronted Elmer. "Excuse me," he said. "But did either of these travelling salesmen happen to wear a beard?"

"They both did," Elmer replied. "Great big bushy beards. Claimed to be selling cough-drops. Claimed to be brothers, said their name was Smith, something like that."

"Then you are telling the truth," Noodlemayer said, shaking his head in bewilderment. "I saw two men answering to that description, running along the campus as I came by."

"You see?" Elmer gave Sonia a triumphant grin. "That explains everything doesn't it?"

"I guess so." Noodlemayer took his wife's arm.

"Come along, then," she said. "Let's not disturb poor Aunt Olga any longer." She winked at Elmer out of the corner of her eye. "Maybe I'll slip back for a moment later," she murmured. "Just to tuck you in."

"That will be, as you Americans say, just ginger-peachy," Elmer replied. "Good night, Dr. Noodlemayer."

"Good night," he answered. And then, "Good grief!"

"Now what's the matter?" Sonia asked.

"Explains everything, eh?" Noodlemayer muttered. "Aunt Olga from Kurdistan, is that it?" He pointed the revolver at the floor.

There, in a telltale heap, lay Elmer's discarded clothing.

Noodlemayer turned and confronted the former occupant of his wife's bed. "So you didn't want me to call the police," he grated. "Well, I can understand that, now. You're the one I've been looking for."

"Hans, what do you mean?" Sonia was genuinely puzzled.

"Mean?" Noodlemayer raised the revolver. "My dear, this is what I've been telling you about—the talking gorilla!"

Without a word, Elmer turned and sprinted across the room.

Noodlemayer raced after him, his foot coming down on the kimona. It ripped and gave—dropping to the floor and exposing the hairy, simian body.

Sonia screamed, Noodlemayer fired, and Elmer Klopp jumped out of the window.

CHAPTER IX

FORTUNATELY for Elmer the indignant husband’s shot missed its mark. Also fortunately for Elmer, he was able to swing his way through the trees without detection or interception until he arrived at his boarding-house.

Everyone had long since retired, and he managed to sneak up to his room without incident. There he collapsed in bed. He was glad to be there, even though Sonia wouldn’t show up to tuck him in.

A part of him regretted this fact greatly. Another part speculated on the possibilities of the same performance by Ada. Despite the obvious attractions of the blonde, there was something about the Professor’s niece that caused Elmer to stir restlessly. He remembered her impudent face—and other things—issuing from the scanty protection of his coat after the wild ride on the pink pachyderm.

Good heavens, had all this really happened to him this evening? Or was it all a product of alcoholic fancy? Perhaps he was still in the Professor’s laboratory, imprisoned in that machine. Yes, that part might be true; Professor Noid could have invented this Psychopathfinder, or whatever he called it. And in subjecting himself to it. Elmer was merely experiencing a seemingly lengthy and involved dream. Surely that was the sensible answer. All of the rest, including undraped females, bearded males, and his present state of apprehensive apedom, were figments of fancy. The pink pachyderm itself was just another example of the impossible—an elephantasy.

Yes, that must be the answer, Elmer decided. This was just a post-hypnotic stage of suggestibility. In the morning he’d wake up and find everything back to normal. Once more he’d be a nonentity *m* a drab but familiar world.

He sighed, sinking into slumber. For a moment he felt a curious twinge of regret. Crazy as it all seemed, the events of the evening had been oddly fascinating, in a way. It was going to be difficult being just plain Elmer Klopp again . . .

Difficult?

It was going to be impossible.

Elmer found that out when he opened his eyes the next morning. His first gesture was to run his hands down his body. What he encountered sent him staggering from the bed to the mirror. He gazed at himself with horrified dismay.

He was still an ape. And, at the moment, only a half-shaven ape, at that. The face that leered back at him from the glass was already covered with bristles.

Moving almost automatically, Elmer secured a razor. He shaved himself with the dubious aid of trembling fingers. Then he dressed, slowly and carefully.

Something, he told himself, had to be done. Today was Saturday. He suddenly remembered his duties: Hardnox was playing Pyro Tech this afternoon in the homecoming game, and it behooved Elmer to show up on the third-string bench. Elmer, however, didn’t feel very well behooved at the moment. He felt bewitched, bothered, and quite logically, be-furred.

No, he decided, he could never present himself to Coach Buster Gutz in his present guise, or disguise. For that matter, the police might even now be searching for someone answering to his description. And since nobody else in his right mind would answer to such a description, Elmer was in danger.

The thing to do was to seek out Professor Noid immediately and take another treatment. No matter what it turned him into, anything would be better than existence in this anthropoid state.

So Elmer Klopp dressed very carefully indeed, and saw to it that he wore both a hat and a scarf before venturing out into the street.

The day was bright and sunny, and the late morning air stimulated his appetite. Well, no harm in that; he’d better pick up a bite before seeking out the Professor.

But no more *contretemps* with countermen, he resolved. Elmer entered a cafeteria, filled his tray, and shambled into a quiet corner. He ate hastily, but without attracting undue attention. Satisfied at the success of his performance and disguise, Elmer paid his check and hastened down the street leading to Professor Noid's home.

He was scarcely a block away when a large red limousine pulled up to the curb and somebody waved a beard at him.

"Come here," said a voice.

ELMER recognized the beard and was not impressed. He started to pass on, then thought the better of it. For something else was waving at him now—not a beard, but the muzzle of what looked very much like a Thompson sub-machine gun.

"Please come here," said the voice.

"Well, if you're going to be polite about it, yes," Elmer said. He walked over to the car, knuckles dragging.

"Kindly step inside," the voice urged.

Elmer hesitated, eyeing the machine gun.

"Yes, do," urged a second voice. "Have you no civic pride? It wouldn't be nice to spatter a lot of messy blood all over the sidewalk."

This appeal moved Elmer strangely. It moved him right into the back seat of the red limousine, which promptly pulled away from the curb.

Elmer found himself staring at beard number two. Beard number one was driving.

"You're the two guys I ran into up in Sonia's room!" he exclaimed.

"Ran into? That's hardly the phrase," said beard number two, rubbing a bandaged head ruefully. "However, don't be alarmed, comrade. As you can see, I bear no malice."

"You bear a machine-gun, and that's just as bad," Elmer told him. "Would you mind telling me what this is all about?"

Beard number one replied. "There's nothing to it, really. We just have a little job for you to do."

"A second-storey job," added his companion, shifting the machine-gun in his lap.

"But why me?"

Beard number two eyed Elmer's body and shrugged. "You're good at climbing," he observed. "Besides, there won't be any fuss if the Professor or his niece notice you come in."

"Professor Noid?" Elmer asked.

"He's the one with the machine, isn't he? Well, that's what we're after. Or what you're going to be after."

"Do you think I'd steal the Professor's machine for you?"

"I'm sure you will." Beard number two patted his weapon. "Our orders are to get that device any way we can."

"Orders? Who gave them to you?"

"Our leader, of course." Beard number two writhed into a smile, or a hirsuteable facsimile of same. "But that doesn't concern you. What concerns you is this machine gun."

"You can say that again," Elmer murmured, feelingly.

"Why should I? Once is enough." Beard number two nodded. "We'll park outside and you can climb up to the laboratory. There is reason to believe the Professor is not at home, so you probably won't be disturbed. You have just three minutes to bring us that machine. If not, we come in after it ourselves."

"And don't get any ideas about calling the police," cautioned the beard in the driver's seat. "If you do, you'll never live to give testimony."

The red limousine pulled up to the curb before Professor Noid's house. "Here you go," said the second beard. "With all those trees, you won't be noticed from the street. But hurry up—three minutes is all you have."

Reluctantly, Elmer left the car. For a moment he considered trying to make a run for it. But the machine-gun was trained on his back. Besides, if he did escape, no telling what the bearded men might do. He quite believed that they'd blast their way into the house and take the Professor's Psychopathfinder by force, if necessary.

So Elmer made his way over to the trellis at the corner of the building and climbed it, hand over hand—or paw over paw. Halfway up, he shed his shoes for greater convenience. Looking back over his shoulder he noted the two beards wagging at him approvingly.

Then he reached the window of the laboratory and slid it open. A moment later he landed with a thump on the polished floor.

THE lights were on, and Elmer noted that the Psychopathfinder stood in its accustomed place, wires connected to the control panel against the wall.

He moved towards it, wondering vaguely if there was anything he could do; any way of removing himself safely from his entanglement with the two beards. But nothing occurred to him. If they had been unarmed, he could easily have used his physical strength on them as he had last night, and broken their heads. However, now they had the machine-gun—and this was obviously no time to split hairs.

No, he had to steal the Psychopathfinder. The first step was to loosen the control panel from the wall—

He turned his head quickly as the door opened and Ada stepped into the room. The darkhaired girl was wearing a most becoming pair of lounging pajamas and a most unbecoming look of consternation.

“Who are you?” she gasped. “What are you doing here?”

Elmer spread his palms outward.

“Don’t you recognize me?” he asked. “I’m Elmer Klopp.”

The girl shook her head dubiously. “Impossible,” she declared. “Elmer Klopp has a face like a rolled-up fur coat, and little piggish red eyes, and nasty long yellow fangs.”

“But I *do* have little piggish red eyes, and nasty long yellow fangs,” the young man protested. “The only thing is, I got a shave.” He stepped closer. “Take a good look,” he urged. “Notice how bestial I am.” Acting on sudden inspiration, he wiggled his toes at her.

“You’re right,” the girl smiled. “I’ve never seen anything quite so bestial and revolting. Oh, Elmer, darling—you’re back.” And she threw herself into his astonished arms.

“I’ve been so worried about you,” She declared. “If you only knew! Thank heavens you’re here—now you can wait for my uncle and take another treatment.”

“Where is your uncle?” Elmer demanded.

“At a faculty meeting,” the girl explained. “But he should return within an hour. Meanwhile, you and I can make ourselves comfortable.” And she grabbed him in an embrace that made him extremely uncomfortable.

“Sorry,” Elmer sighed. “I can’t wait.”

“But you have to wait—the treatment—”

“I’m not here for a treatment,” he explained. “As a matter of fact, I can only stay long enough to steal your uncle’s machine.”

“Elmer, have you lost your mind?”

“I’ll lose more than my mind if I don’t obey orders,” he muttered. Quickly, he outlined his encounter with the bearded men. Drawing her over to the window, he indicated the parked car below. She nodded in comprehension.

“Let me call the police right he could do; any way of removing himself safely from his entanglement with the two beards. But nothing occurred to him. If they had been unarmed, he could easily have used his physical strength on them as he had last night, and broken their heads. However, now they had the machine-gun—and this was obviously no time to split hairs.

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“Let me call the police right posit two patrolmen on the curb, then continued up the street, giving chase to the other car.

Elmer stopped his descent, permitting his paws to pause. A shout from the street assailed him.

“Hey, you!” barked one of the patrolmen, menacing. “Come on down offa there. You’re under arrest!”

"But I can explain," Elmer called. "I'm really not stealing anything. It's all part of the act—just you ask the lady inside the house about it and she'll tell you."

"Ain't interested," the patrolman grunted. "Burglary's not my department. I'm in Traffic."

"What's that got to do with me?" Elmer asked.

"Wasn't you with those guys in the red limousine?"

"Yes, but—"

"Then come along without making no trouble. Mebbe next time you won't make the mistake of trying to pull a robbery when you're parked next to a fire hydrant."

CHAPTER X

JUDGE Spleen was in an ugly mood. It fitted him like a glove, for the little magistrate generally enveloped himself in an aura of incipient anger.

But this noon the Judge was even more enraged than usual. It was almost one o'clock and the day was Saturday. He had planned on attending the homecoming game between Hardnox and Pyro Tech, and was the proud possessor of two seats on the fifty-yard line.

Instead he found himself occupying a single seat on the bench—and the judicial bench, at that. A steady stream of traffic violators had been flowing through his courtroom all morning, and the end was not yet. Judge Spleen was hungry, and he was confused. For hours now he had been dealing with freak accidents resulting from last night's homecoming parade and rally. The stories he had heard upset him greatly—weird accounts of pink elephants, and people losing their clothing; with resultant loss of control at the wheel.

For the twelfth time a prisoner was telling him the same absurd tale. "I was just driving along doing thirty, your honor, when I look up and I see this big pink elephant crossing the street in the parade ahead of me. I started to slam on the brakes when all of a sudden it disappears. And then, believe it or not, my clothes drop off—"

"I don't believe it!" snapped Judge Spleen, banging down his gavel. "Thirty dollars or thirty days."

"Give me the thirty dollars," said the prisoner, hopefully. "I can use the dough."

"Lock him up!" grated the Judge. "This is the last straw."

But his statement was unduly optimistic. For at that moment, the two partolmen ushered Elmer down the aisle.

The young man was not struggling. He had gone through that particular stage several minutes ago, to no avail; at the moment he was merely resigned.

Apparently the red limousine had eluded the pursuing squadcar; eventually the latter had returned to transport Elmer and the cylinder to court. All the way down Elmer had protested, urging the patrolmen to contact Ada and trying to explain the circumstances. His only response had taken the usual form—"Tell it to the Judge."

Gazing up at the little magistrate's rubicund countenance, Elmer wondered if it would do any good to tell this man anything. He glared down over the rostrum and transfixed Elmer with an envenomed stare.

"What have we here?" Judge Spleen demanded.

"Traffic violation, your honor," said the first patrolman. "Parking in front of a fire hydrant."

Judge Spleen's face relaxed into a snarl of relief. "Thank goodness!" he breathed. "For a moment I was afraid it might be another one of those affairs involving pink elephants and naked women. I've been listening to those stories all day, and I'm sick of naked women and their tales."

"Beggin' your pardon," said the second patrolman; a rookie new to the force and to the Judge's chambers. "But naked women don't have tails—at least not the ones I've seen. Maybe you're thinking of monkeys."

“I was not thinking of monkeys,” Judge Spleen observed. “I was thinking of having you suspended from the Force. For your information, I hate all animals, including pink elephants. And monkeys most of all.”

ELMER listened to this tirade and any expectations of mercy faded. Judge Spleen appeared to be in no mood to listen to reason, let alone anything else.

“Now let’s have the facts,” growled the magistrate. “And only the facts. Where did this violation occur?”

“Over on main Street, just a few minutes ago. In front of Professor Noid’s house, it was.”

“What was?”

“This big red limousine. Parked right smack in front of the fire-hydrant.”

Judge Spleen relaxed. This looked like a cut-and-dried case. He gazed at Elmer and muttered, “Very well, then. What do you plead—guilty or not guilty?”

“Not guilty, your honor.” Elmer faced his two captors. “You know very well I wasn’t in the car while it was parked.”

“Weren’t you the driver?” the Judge demanded.

“Matter of fact, he wasn’t,” admitted the first patrolman. “Two other fellas were in the car.”

“Then why didn’t you bring them in?”

“Because they got away,” the patrolman explained. “But don’t worry, that red limousine ought to be easy to spot—on account of it’s got a machine-gun sticking outta the rear window.”

“Machine-gun?” Judge Spleen wasn’t relaxed any more. “What in heaven’s name—?”

“I suppose they was coverin’ this guy,” the patrolman continued. “Seein’ as how we caught him climbin’ down the trellis of the house.”

“What were you doing on the trellis?” Judge Spleen wanted to know.

“I was stealing this.” Elmer indicated the bulky cylinder which had been wheeled into the courtroom by two more of the squadcar’s crew.

Judge Spleen looked at Elmer, and then at the cylinder.

“Go on,”-he said, in a subdued voice. “Tell me what it is. I want to know what you and your machine-gunner friends were after.”

“Why, it’s really nothing at all,” Elmer said. “Just a little old hi-fi low pass vacuum-precipitated ten-lamination acetate bonded orthoflow telekinesis booster tank circuit. That’s all.”

“That’s quite enough,” the Judge murmured. “Might I ask what it’s good for?”

“Nothing,” Elmer explained. “You see, those men in the car were really after the Psychopathfinder. They kidnapped me at gun point and made me steal it. I was going to fool them. No sense in letting them have the real Psychopathfinder—no telling what they might do with it. Already caused enough trouble dreaming up a pink elephant and undressing all those women.”

The moment he uttered this last remark, Elmer was sorry. For Judge Spleen let out a strangled gasp.

“No!” he said. “Not *that* again! Are you trying to tell me there actually was such a creature, and that these women were stripped by mechanical means?” He peered over the bench. “Just who are you, anyway?”

“Elmer Klopp. I’m a sophomore here at Hardnox.”

“You were,” the Judge agreed. “But if this theft charge isn’t cleared up, there’ll be a lapse of several years before you ever manage to become a junior.”

Judge Spleen stared hard at Elmer. “Are you quite certain you’re just a college student?” he asked. “Your face is anything but youthful.”

“I worry a lot,” Elmer explained.

“You should.” Judge Spleen watched the young man as he stood scratching diligently. “Must you do that?” he asked.

“I’ve got to,” Elmer told him. “Nobody else will do it for me.”

“Can’t blame them. I’d hate to get within ten feet of you.” Judge Spleen wrinkled his nose. “I’m inclined to believe you’re in with that gang of thieves, whoever they are. There’s a hard look about you—I can recognize a criminal when I see one.” Again the Judge stared, then flinched. “You’re barefooted!” he cried. “What is the meaning of coming into this courtroom in your bare feet?”

“Left my shoes back at the house,” Elmer said, truthfully. “Easier to climb without them.”

JUDGE Spleen gazed at the anthropoid toes. “How horrid,” he murmured. “How extremely horrid! Climbing with your toes, like a monkey. Let’s dispense with all this nonsense about a trial—I couldn’t stand listening to your testimony, if this is any sample. Tell you what; why don’t you just throw yourself on the mercy of the court and let me give you ten years at hard labor?”

Elmer took a deep breath. “You can’t sentence me at all,” he declared. “It’s illegal.”

“How do you arrive at that conclusion?”

Because I’m not a human being,” Elmer announced, triumphantly. “I’m a monkey.” He pointed. “Look at my toes.”

Judge Spleen sputtered, like a fuse reaching the point of explosion. “I don’t want to look at your loathsome toes,” he choked. “And I don’t want to hear any more of your disgusting lies.”

“All right,” Elmer said. “If you won’t believe me, what about this?” Dramatically, he ripped open his shirt and exhibited his hairy torso.

It had been his desperate intention to divert the Judge from passing immediate sentence, and in this he succeeded. At the sight of his chest, Judge Spleen became incapable of passing anything—except, perhaps, out.

He stared at Elmer and uttered little strangled gasps. The two patrolmen and the clerk of the court likewise goggled.

“Holy homicide!” gasped one of the policemen to his companion. “Did you ever see the like? Only two in the afternoon, and he’s got five o’clock shadow all over!”

“Sure looks like an ape,” the other agreed. “Unless he’s been taking baths in hair-restorer.”

“Well?” Elmer demanded, looking up at the maddened magistrate. “Now do you believe me, or shall I take off my trousers, too?”

“No—not that!” Judge Spleen held up both hands. “In all my years on the bench I’ve never seen anything like this before; I only pray that I never will again. Did I understand you to say that you are some sort of simian?”

“A gorilla,” Elmer answered. “Listen!” He proceeded to beat on his chest and roar.

“Stop that!” screamed Judge Spleen, bringing the gavel down on the desk, and one of his thumbs. “This puts us in a pretty pickle. I don’t know whether to sentence you to jail or to twenty years in the local zoo. Perhaps I’d better call upon competent authority to assist me. Dr. Noodlemayer, up at the University, could assist me. He’s an anthropologist.”

“I know,” Elmer said. “I was in bed with his wife last night.” He blushed hastily and added, “Oh, it’s not what you’re thinking. I was disguised as a woman at the time.”

“This gets worse and worse,” one of the patrolmen muttered. “From that last remark, the ape ain’t even normal.”

“Maybe it’s a chimpansy,” said the other patrolman, unhelpfully.

“Quiet!” cried the Judge. “Let me call Noodlemayer.”

“Why don’t you call Professor Noid?” Elmer asked. “He’s the one who knows all about this affair. He can restore me to my normal shape—”

“What is that?” Judge Spleen asked, sarcastically. “A pink elephant?”

“I can explain that to you, too, if you’d only listen,” Elmer protested. “I’d be glad to tell you about undressing all those women, too.”

Judge Spleen held his head in his hands. “One more word,” he announced, “and I’ll clear this courtroom. I only wish I had that machine-gun here to do it with!”

As if in answer to his prayer, the door at the far end of the court flew open. Down the aisle came the two bearded men; the taller one carrying the sub-machine gun.

“Don’t anybody move!” he shouted. “Up with your hands, all of you!”

His companion observed the frozen tableau, then noted the bulky cylinder resting on a table near the front of the room.

“There it is,” he said. “I’ve got it.”

He ran over and lifted the huge tanklike apparatus. Slowly, the two bearded men retreated up the aisle.

“Robbed in my own courtroom!” the Judge sobbed. “Isn’t anybody going to do something?”

One of the patrolmen reached for his holster. Immediately the machine-gun chattered. So did the Judge’s teeth, as he dived under the bench. The clerk and the second patrolman scrambled frantically for positions of safety on the floor as the shots sprayed the ceiling above.

Elmer sprinted for the side of the room. His first thought was to take cover; then he realized that the bearded men were hastening out of the courtroom.

At the same time he noted his own proximity to an open window. For the second time in less than twenty-four hours he prepared to jump to the ground below. Closing his eyes, he leaped, bracing himself against the moment when his feet would strike the hard pavement.

It was not the hard pavement he struck, however, but something quite a bit softer.

Opening his eyes, he gazed down in surprise. “Ada!” he exclaimed.

“That’s right,” said the girl calmly. “Would you mind taking your toes out of my midriff?”

CHAPTER XI

ELMER obliged and assisted the young woman to her feet. "What are you doing here?" he asked.

"Listening to you and that old paranoic through the window," she explained. "He's somewhat of a manic-depressive, you know."

"He sure depressed hell out of me," Elmer replied. "But why didn't you come in?"

"I intended to. Then I saw those two thugs drive up and climb out with their machine-gun, and thought the better of it. You see, the Professor is with me, too; around the corner in our car. He has the Psycopathfinder and the panel control board equipment with him."

"How come?" Elmer wanted to know.

"Well, when he came home, I told him what had happened. Naturally, our first thought was to come down and rescue you. But in view of the circumstances, my uncle didn't think it safe to leave the Psychopathfinder behind and unguarded. So he dismantled it and took it along in the car." Ada smiled. "Setting it up again is no problem," she explained. "All you really need is a wall-plug."

"Well get me to one, quick," Elmer said. "I'm tired of monkeying around."

Ada led him across the lawn to the parked automobile. Professor Perry Noid saluted him from the front seat. In a few words his niece explained the happenings in the courtroom.

The Professor hastily applied his foot to the starter. "Better get out of here before they start looking for our friend," he said.

"You mean the police or those thugs?" Elmer asked. "I don't seem to be popular with either."

"The thugs won't bother you, I guess," Ada remarked. "Not as long as they think that cylinder is the machine they're looking for."

"But where did they hear about it?" Elmer wanted to know. "And what on earth do they want with it?"

"We'll find that out in due time," the Professor suggested. "Meanwhile, where's a safe place for us to go and administer another Psychopathfinder treatment?"

"What about my room at the boarding house?" Elmer suggested.

Ada shook her head. "That's the first place they'll go to look for you," she reminded him. "Our place isn't safe, either."

"Well, there's nowhere else—" the young man began. Then he glanced at his companion's wrist-watch and brightened. "Of course, there is!" he exclaimed. "The stadium!"

"Stadium?"

"I was supposed to be there two hours ago. Don't you remember the homecoming game? It's going on right now, and I'm on the third team!"

"You mean we should set up our apparatus on the field?" inquired Professor Noid, doubtfully. "Wouldn't that interfere with the other players?"

"Certainly not," Elmer told him. "We can do it in the dressing-room. Plenty of electrical outlets there, and we won't be disturbed." "Come on, then," Ada urged. "Let's get going before something else goes haywire." Her uncle obediently headed the car in the direction of the stadium on the outskirts of town, while Elmer adjusted his clothing and recited his recent adventures. He told of encountering the bearded men in Sonia Noodlemayer's bedroom and went on from there; discreetly omitting the blonde's amorous advances from the narrative.

"But what puzzles me," Elmer concluded, "is what those two men want with your machine. Who are they, and why were they threatening Mrs. Noodlemayer?"

"I don't understand," the Professor sighed. "Ever since you came into my life, things have been very confusing for me."

"Ever since I came into *your* life?" Elmer retorted. "That's a fine way to put it! I didn't come into your life to begin with—I was dragged into it by this scheming hussy, here."

"Who's a hussy?" Ada demanded.

"You are," Elmer said, kissing her. "And between you and your uncle, I'm the one who's really confused. Sometimes I think it's all more than I can handle; I feel like I'm about ready to fly off into a dozen directions at once."

THE Professor eyed him sharply.

"Watch that, young man," he said. "I warn you that a split personality is a very difficult condition to deal with."

"It can't be worse than being a gorilla," Elmer insisted.

"Well, cheer up, you won't be a gorilla much longer," Ada comforted. "And I, for one, will be very happy to see you change. Right now, hugging you is like trying to make love to an animated fur coat."

"Don't talk about it," Elmer begged. "Now that I stop and look back at what I've been through, I feel as if I'm going to pieces."

"Get hold of yourself," the girl said. "Everything's going to be fine. You'll see."

Everything, however, was far from fine at the stadium. As they passed the structure they listened in vain for sounds of cheers from the Hardnox half of the audience. All of the yelling seemed to be coming from the Pyro Tech rooters.

Craning her neck, Ada caught a glimpse of the scoreboard as they circled around to the dressing-room entrances.

"Almost half-time," she announced. "Two minutes to go."

"And the score?" Elmer inquired.

"20 to 0, in favor of Pyro Tech."

The young man groaned.

"Cheer up," Ada said. "If you take your treatment, maybe the coach will let you play in the second half."

"He wouldn't let me play anything but tic-tac-toe on the bench," Elmer grumbled. "I'm on the third team. That's one step below being water-boy. Besides, you don't know Buster Gutz. Even though I don't get a chance to play, he's liable to kill me for not showing up on schedule." Again he sighed. "Is it my fault I can't be in two places at once?" he asked.

“Don’t bother your head about it,” the Professor soothed. “All you need is a treatment. Here, I’ll park and you can help me carry the equipment in. Ada, grab those rheostats.”

The apparatus-laden trio staggered into the Hardnox locker rooms and deposited their burdens. Swiftly, the Professor set up the panel control, plugging in and adjusting his wiring. He placed the Psychopathfinder on a bench around the corner near the showers and tested various dials and levers.

“Seems to be working,” he said. “It’s drawing power properly.”

“Good!” Ada said. “Now, Elmer, if you want to step over there—”

“I do,” he answered, emphatically.

“Then what’s keeping you?”

The young man glanced at the door. “Can’t you hear?” he whispered. “The team’s coming in. The half must be over.”

Sure enough, footsteps sounded outside.

“Now what do we do?” the girl asked.

“Duck into the showers here,” Elmer suggested. “They won’t come around the corner. Chances are they’ll never notice the machine, either, here in the shadows. Half-time is just fifteen minutes; then they’ll go out again and we can continue.”

Quickly they sought the shower-stalls and huddled silently as Buster Gutz led his weary warriors in from the fray.

He was asking questions.

“#%&’()*!?” he inquired. “What the c@¼6%!!! is the matter with you $“&!½@???” he demanded. “Can’t any of you—%&”-)c!!! tell your $#(/!!! from a “?:) (%!???”

Elmer blushed. “Pep-talk,” he explained to Ada, in a whisper. “He’s famous for them.”

“He should be,” replied the girl, emphatically.

BUT there was not much pep in Buster Gutz' talk this afternoon. Reverting to the English language for a time, he spoke in tones of mournful discouragement Elmer had never heard before. The first team, apparently, had suffered heavy casualties during the first two quarters of the game. Seven of the regulars were out of the line and into the infirmary. Half of the second team had been tossed, trampled and trodden upon, and the coach was rapidly running out of his third-string reserves. Pyro Tech had outpassed, outpunted, outblocked, outrun, and outraged Hardnox, and with a full half of the game yet to play the prospects were grim.

"I'm not asking you guys to win," the coach concluded, wearily. "All I want now is you should try and protect yourselves. It would be one #$%*('c!!! of a note if we ended up the game without having eleven men left to stagger around on the field." He sighed. "/?&!!!" he remarked. "The way things are, I'd even put in Elmer Klopp if he was here!"

At this indication of their coach's total despair, the team groaned in unison.

Not so Elmer. Hearing his name mentioned in connection with playing was too much for the young man to bear. Momentarily forgetting his condition, he started out of the showers and rounded the corner.

"Here I am, coach," he said, brightly. "Did you say you wanted to put me in?"

"Who the $—#!)&!!! are you?" Buster Gutz demanded, eyeing the shaven anthropoid with singular distaste. "Not that I care. I wouldn't want to put you into anything but a cage."

"I'm Elmer Klopp," the youth announced, brightly.

"A likely story." Buster Gutz gazed wonderingly over the bulky body with its dangling arms. "You sure don't look like him."

"But I am, really." Elmer halted, conscious that the other was scrutinizing his obviously altered appearance. "I see you can notice the difference. That's the reason I'm late, you know," he improvised. "I was trying to build myself up, improve my physique."

"How?" asked the coach, skeptically.

“I was taking a muscle course.”

“Well, send the muscles back and get them to refund your money,” Buster Gutz advised. “You look terrible. What makes your arms so long?”

“Maybe I overdid it a little,” Elmer hazarded. “I took all fifteen of the lessons in one day.”

“&”}4c /;!!!” declared the coach. “You’re not Elmer Klopp. You can’t fool me. I’d recognize his face anywhere. Yours is different—all ape-like and coarse—featured. Klopp’s face isn’t like that.”

“Thanks,” said Elmer.

“No,” the coach continued. “Klopp’s face isn’t like that at all. He looks more like an anemic jackass with the heaves.” Buster Gutz turned his back. “Probably those ¼!!! from Pyro Tech planted you here, hoping I’d put you in and get the team disqualified. Well, go back and tell ’em it didn’t work.”

“But I’m Elmer,” the young man protested. “And if you’ll just wait here, I can fix it so that I won’t look different any more. Will you put me in, then?”

“I’ll put you in a straight jacket if you don’t stop bothering me,” Buster Gutz promised, rejoining his battered gridders.

Elmer hurried back to the showers.

“Come on,” he murmured to the Professor. “Never mind waiting. Give me a treatment now. I want to play the next half.”

“But Elmer, that’s dangerous—”

“I don’t care,” he said. “You don’t understand what this means to me. I’ve been a nobody all season long. This is probably the only chance I’ll ever get. If you’re so interested in improving my personality, you’ll realize how important the game is.”

“He’s right,” Ada added, unexpectedly.

“I don’t like it,” the Professor demurred. “For one thing, he’s too upset right now for a treatment. The subject should be calm, relaxed—”

“I am calm!” Elmer gibbered. “If I was any more relaxed, I’d explode in a million pieces! Hurry up before I come apart at the seams! Don’t you see, my whole self is wrapped up in playing this game? If you won’t treat me, I’ll crack up!”

“All this talk of split personalities is dangerous.” The Professor twiddled his goatee, then rubbed his hands together insipidly. “Very well,” he sighed. “Step over to the machine here. But I won’t answer for the consequences.”

COACH Buster Gutz was trying to make up for lost time. In the ten minutes remaining during the half-period, he decided to crowd a full hour of inspirational profanity. His voice rose from the huddle near the door, effectively drowning out all sounds of the Psychopathfinder’s drone. It muffled the continuing noises, too—the sudden gasps of surprise from Ada and the Professor, and the gasps from Elmer, too. These gasps—and further drones—continued for quite a time.

Finally there was silence.

Elmer Klopp ran across the room and tapped Coach Gutz on the shoulder.

“Here I am,” he said. “Just as I promised. Now can I play?”

The coach wheeled abruptly. “Well I’ll be—” He paused. “Yeah, it’s you, all right. If I had time, I’d ask you to explain this nutty business, but I haven’t. Maybe you can tell me when you’re sitting on the bench out there.”

“But you said I could play—”

“Hah!” Buster Gutz pointed the finger of scorn. “And just what position do you think you could fill?”

“All of them,” Elmer said. *“All* of them?”

“Quarterback, halfback, fullback, guard—the works!”

“Oh, fine! Now my troubles are over!” The coach exercised the muscles in his jowls. “I suppose I can just tell everybody else to go home and let you take over the job for the whole team.”

“Exactly,” Elmer beamed. “I’ve subdivided.”

“Subdivided?”

"Split my personality. The Professor was worried about it. Apparently the last conscious wish before the treatment influences the results. I wanted to be a lot of people, see? That's the way it is with a schizoid sometimes. Very simple."

"You certainly are," Buster Gutz commented. "Now get out of here with your crazy double-talk and let me alone."

"But you need me," Elmer said. "I'm your team. Or rather, *we* are." He turned his head in the direction of the showers and called, "Come on, boys."

Ten more figures sprinted from the shower stalls and lined up next to Elmer.

"No!" groaned Buster Gutz.

"Why not?" asked Elmer. Or one of the Elmers, rather—for there were now eleven unreasonable facsimiles of same.

The team gazed at this astonishing assortment in a sort of bruised bewilderment. As for their coach, he clutched his head in dismay.

"Which one of you guys is the real Elmer?" he wheezed.

"All of us," they chorused. "We're like the Three Musketeers, remember? All for one and one for all. Or was it the Four Horsemen? Or Seven Brides for Seven Brothers?"

"Shut up, the lot of you!" Buster Gutz stormed, recovering his customary lack of poise. "And get out of here!"

"Only five minutes to go," said one of the Elmers. "We'll have to put on our uniforms."

"You can't play," the coach wailed. "It's—it's illegal!"

"Why?" asked an Elmer on the far end. "We're all the same person, actually. A collective entity. Professor Noid says he wants to write us up."

"Let him write you up if he likes," said the coach. "I don't care if he blows you up, for that matter. But you can't play. When you were one man, you were no good. What makes you think eleven of you will be anything but eleven times worse?"

"Because we'll confuse hell out of the other team," the Elmers chorused. "Besides, we won't have to call signals, since each of us knows what the others are thinking. It’s all one big thought, really.”

“And a damned screwy one,” the coach added, emphatically. He paused and scratched his head. “Still, I dunno. You got a point there, about confusing the other team. Sure confused *this* team, I’ll say that for you.” He pointed at his warriors. The Hardnox eleven, known for some strange reason as the Irate Irish, had finally comprehended that this was not a hoax. They were indeed staring at an eleventuplet Elmer—and none of them liked it. Several of the more game-weary members of the squad had fainted as realization dawned on them, and the rest were pitifully unnerved at the spectacle.

Buster Gutz grimaced grimly. “Well, all right,” he said. “You can call your own plays. Anything goes, now. At least the longer you’re on the field, the less time the opposition will spend in crippling my regular players. Get yourself into uniforms and decide which part of you plays which position. Only three minutes until the slaughter—I mean, until the second half.”

“Thanks,” said the all-male chorus.

ELMER went into action. Twenty-two arms and twenty-two legs flashed and flickered. It was bewildering to control all of this movement simultaneously; all the more bewildering because he *was* controlling it. For the first time, Elmer realized something of the sense of alienation which accompanies true aberration; seeing out of twenty-two eyes at once, from every angle, gave him a fresh and distorted perspective.

When he had come out of the machine—in sections—he’d been first frightened, then puzzled, then astounded. He’d stood there watching a duplicate of himself emerge; then the duplicate added to his identity and the two of them had watched a third come forth, and then the trio had watched a fourth, and so on.

But fright, puzzlement and astonishment gave way to purpose; Elmer elevenfold had that much more confidence and power. He, in his multiple manifestations, kept dressing his various bodies—while in the background

Professor Noid numbled vague references to multi-levelled perception, and repeated over and over again a meaningless phrase which sounded like, “Baby is Eleven.”

As for Ada, she rapidly became rapt at the spectacle of her multiplied man. When the Elmers finally lined up for a last-minute inspection, the girl moved forward and hurled herself into the nearest pair of arms.

“I’m so proud of you, darling,” she whispered. “Take care of yourself.”

Elmer Number One kissed her fervently.”

“Hey, what about me?” demanded his nearest counterpart.

“I’m just as much Elmer as he is.”

Elmer Number Two now bussed her soundly, and in a moment she was being omnibussed.

“Whooey!” gasped the brunette, reeling from the end of the line. “I’d hate to imagine what it would be like to be married to you guys.”

“Might be fun,” the Elmers ventured.

“Not for me,” the girl declared. “I’m thinking of all that cooking.”

“Break it up!” commanded the coach. “Save your tackling for the other team.”

“Wait for me,” Elmer urged.

The girl nodded. “We’ll be here,” she promised. “You’ll have to pop right back into the machine, all of you, once the game is over. The Professor says he’s worried about the effect of all this multiple sensation on you.”

Elmer was not worried in the least. Any effect of multiple sensation on him was nothing compared to the effect of him on the waiting crowd in the stadium.

As he trotted out on his twenty-two legs, a roar went up from the crowd. At a distance, his facial similarities weren’t noticed at first, but his height was uniform and there was something oddly disconcerting about the single rhythm of his almost centipedal walk.

Then, as a bewildered announcer read the hastily-scribbled lineup of substitutions, there was multiple sensation indeed.

“For the Irate Irish,” that worthy began. “Klopp for Wiznezovitch at right tackle. . . Klopp for Bolesoupsky at left guard . . . Klopp for Stankopolitz at center . . . Klopp for Yifnifowskows at quarterback . . . Klopp for heaven’s sake, what is this anyway?”

And that’s what they all wanted to know . . . the crowd, the members and coaching staff of the Pyro Tech team, and the field officials.

THERE was a hurried hassle down at the fifty-yard line, but Coach Gutz and eleven arm-waving Elmers prevailed. “One man.” Buster Gutz insisted. “Regular member of the third-string team. Sure, it’s a trick, but you can let the doc check him; take his fingerprints if you like. You’ll see it’s the same guy . . . no, I don’t know how he did it . . . none of your business, anyway . . . whaddya mean I’m crazy? . . . all right, then, just show me a rule that says the same man can’t play all the positions—if he isn’t in one body, that is . . . show me the rule or shuddup . . .”

In the end, Elmer took the field.

Amidst a howl from the crowd on both sides, the game started. And the howling never ceased.

Elmer Klopp in the singular was never a good football player. But Elmer Klopp in the plural, although unimproved, was now more singular than ever in his special way. His prediction had proved to be correct; the Pyro Tech players couldn’t get used to the idea of seeing his face and body multiplied elevenfold. Everywhere they turned, there was the selfsame Elmer Klopp, grinning amiably at them.

Elmer Klopp kicked off. A Pyro-Tech man caught the ball on his own twenty-seven yard line, only to be tackled by Elmer Klopp, while two more Elmer Klopps piled on top with lusty enthusiasm. On the second play, Pyro Tech fumbled, and Elmer Klopp waltzed down the field while Elmer Klopp ran interference for him and another trio of Elmer Klopps took out the opposition. When Elmer Klopp was about to be tackled after a gain of thirty yards, he merely threw the ball to himself and continued romping for a touchdown. Then he held the ball and kicked the extra point, while nine more of him cheered lustily.

And so it went. By the end of the third quarter the score was 37-20 in Hardnox’s favor. By the time the final whistle blew, Elmer Klopp had singlehandedly, eleven-handedly, or underhandedly—whichever way one cared to look at it—run up a score of 58 points.

He had never enjoyed himself so much in all his lives.

While reporters raced for phones and photographers pleaded for group photos; while Coach Gutz and the faculty tugged at his arms and pounded him on the backs (quarter-, half-, and full-) Elmer headed for the showers.

Ada and the Professor were waiting for him, as they had promised.

“Well?” he chorused. “How did you like me—I mean, us? Think we’re going to make the All-American?”

“You were wonderful,” Ada breathed. “Every one of you.”

“Great game,” the Professor conceded. “You’ve got good heads on your shoulders.” He rubbed his hands together brusquely. “But now, let’s get started with the Psychopathfinder. Which one of you wants to go first?”

ELMER Klopp halted, all twenty-two feet coming to a full stop.

“Not me,” said his first eleventh.

“Me neither,” said his second fraction.

“Well don’t expect me to go,” said his third aspect. “I like it just the way I am. Or the way we are.”

“Why should we bother to take a treatment?” Elmer Number Four asked. “Look what we can do if we all stick together this way.”

“Sure,” said Elmer Five. “United we stand, divided we fall.”

“But look, you can’t go on being eleven people at once,” argued the Professor. “I assure you, the strain is too great for any psyche to bear. You *will* fall, all of you, if you remain divided this way.”

“All right,” said Elmer Number Six. “Then just tell us this. Which one of us will be left? Number One? Number Eleven? Me? Myself? Or I?”

“I don’t know,” the Professor hedged.

“Well, you’d better find out,” Elmer Seven asserted. “Because I don’t intend to take the rap for the rest of myself.”

“Me neither,” Elmer the Eighth chimed in. “This is one case where the parts are greater than the whole.”

“I’m with you,” said Elmer Nine. “Think I want to become extinct and let one of you other guys play around with my girl?”

“*Your* girl?” snapped Elmer Number Ten. “She’s *my* girl.”

“You’re both wrong,” yelled the eleventh Elmer. “I saw her first. Anyways, not more than fifth, maybe.”

“We’ll all have her,” declared Number Four. “Let the best men *win,* I say. Nothing can stand between us and the girl we love. And if she isn’t faithful to the eleven of us—”

Professor Noid raised his goatee for silence, but the Elmers overruled him.

“Great idea!” yelled Elmer the Third. “Why don’t the twelve of us get married and set up housekeeping together?”

“In a big house,” added Elmer Six. “With lots of twin beds.”

“One bed,” insisted Elmer Number Nine. “Thirty feet wide.”

Ada stepped into the center of the circle. “Now listen, boys,” she said. “Much as I love all of you, this will never do. Marriage isn’t a football game, and I’m not going to be tossed around between the eleven of you. One Elmer is enough.”

“Who do you think you are?” demanded Elmer Two. “Trying to tell us, your *fiancé,* what to do?” The girl stamped her foot. “I won’t marry the whole eleven,” she declared. “That would be bigamy.”

“Damned big of you,” Elmer Ten agreed. “But that’s the way it’s going to be. All or nothing.”

“Nothing, then!” Cheeks flaming and eyes blinking, Ada rushed from the circle and the sound of her receding footsteps raised a clattering echo in the dressing-room. The door slammed.

“Now see what you’ve done!” accused Professor Noid.

Elmer hung his heads.

"I told you this multiple-split would be too much for a single personality to handle," he went on. "And you realize now that I'm correct. You've started fighting among yourself."

"Yourselves," corrected Elmer Seven.

"Yourself," repeated the Professor. "You're one person, despite the physical demarcation. So this squabbling was meaningless. No matter how your physical forms disappear, you're still the same person; you still could have had Ada. Now you've lost her."

"She'll be back," said Elmer Eight. "She loves us."

THE Professor shrugged. "My niece, despite her training, is still a stubborn girl. Once she makes up her mind, she seldom changes it. No, I think you'll find she won't be back."

"Don't say that," said the Elmers, in unison once more.

"Let's drop the subject," suggested Professor Noid, "and get down to cases. Your cases. I'm anxious to see you undergo an immediate series of treatments. The drain on psychic energy and physical energy—dispersed over eleven forms—must be terrific. I'd hate to see it injure you permanently."

"Who cares?" moaned the Elmers. "I am tired, but that doesn't matter. I hate to think what the machine might change me into next, but that doesn't matter, either. Ada's gone. I wish I was dead."

"Don't talk about such things," The Professor warned. "Just line up now and let's start the treatments. You first."

Elmer One shambled forward listlessly. "I hope my part vanishes," he announced. "Without Ada, what's there to live for?"

The machine droned. The ten remaining Elmers watched their counterpart jiggle and twitch; his head invisible within the aperture of the machine. Abruptly, his body became invisible, too.

"Next," called the Professor. The performance was repeated, but the spectator Elmers showed no emotion. They were sagging with weariness and revulsion.

Three, four, five, six, seven of the Elmers disappeared. Still the remainder contemplated their counterparts' vanishing without a sign of life.

Eight, nine, ten.

The eleventh Elmer stepped forward. "Maybe I'll disappear too," he said, hopefully. "That would be nice. End it all. Peaceful in the grave, for ever and ever."

"Stop that!" pleaded the Professor. "You know how this instrument operates by this time. Your immediate thought-pattern exerts a definite influence on the results of a given treatment. And we're getting deeper and deeper into your basic personality with every subsequent probing. You'll be rid of schizoid traits from now on, so cheer up. Don't allow the *thanatos*—the Death-Wish—to take hold."

"Peaceful and quiet," droned Elmer. "Just sleep, sleep, sleep, with no alarm-clock."

"I beg of you!" the Professor groaned. He silenced Elmer by thrusting his head into the aperture of the Psychopathfinder. Once more the machine hummed and the body jiggled. Jiggled, but did not disappear.

Professor Perry Noid breathed a sigh of relief. He switched off the machine and pulled Elmer's limp form forward. "You all right?" he murmured.

Elmer didn't answer. He didn't breathe a sigh of relief, either. In fact, the Professor realized with a thrill of horror, Elmer wasn't breathing at all.

Professor Noid stared down at the waxen face and glassy eyes of Elmer Klopp. "Hes—*he's dead!"* the Professor gasped. "The urge was too strong, after all."

A logical explanation, he realized, but not the kind that is likely to influence a jury. The psychiatrist glanced around nervously, congratulating himself only on insisting that the team members must wait outside until he had finished his work on Elmer. The door was locked—but a restless pounding proclaimed that team, coach, reporters and students were getting impatient.

Well, let them. Professor Noid was impatient, too. Hastily, he unhooked and disconnected his apparatus. Might as well take it along while he still had the chance. Once Elmer's body was discovered, neither the apparatus nor his own life would be worth a plugged nickel.

Wondering idly just what a plugged nickel was worth these days, the little Professor staggered out the back entrance, grunting under a load of equipment.

And on the floor, Elmer slept the sleep of one to whom alarm-clocks have forever lost their meaning . . .

CHAPTER XII

IT was not an alarm-clock's ringing that eventually awoke Elmer Klopp, but a much more subtle noise—the fall of night.

Actually, his first thought upon opening his eyes was that the clamor of the team and students from beyond the door had aroused him.

He blinked, sat up stiffly, and rose slowly. The voices and poundings seemed very far away and unimportant.

With languid curiosity he gazed around the locker-room, looking for the Professor. He didn't seem to be there any more, and the equipment was gone.

Elmer shrugged listlessly. It didn't really matter. He was going to change into his street-clothes now, but that didn't really matter, either.

It was night, and time to go. This alone seemed important.

Elmer doffed, donned, and departed through the small exit door at the rear. The parking-space at this side of the stadium was long-since deserted, and he moved out upon the street without encountering opposition.

His feet plodded leadenly. He was very tired; he wanted to go home.

Rounding the corner, he came upon a newsstand. The proprietor sat upon an upturned orange-crate, apparently reading a blatant sex-magazine, beneath which he shamefacedly concealed the science-fiction magazine he was actually perusing.

Scarcely knowing what he did, Elmer approached him and tapped the news vendor on the shoulder.

“Pardon me,” he said politely, “but could you direct me to the nearest cemetery?”

“Huh?” queried the man. “Cemetery,” Elmer repeated patiently. “You know, where they bury you.”

“Not me they don’t,” the news vendor declared. “I’d rather die than be buried in one.”

“I’m not trying to bury you,” Elmer said. “I merely want to get to a cemetery. I’ve got to go there, in the worst way.”

“That would be in a hearse,” the news vendor mused, thoughtfully.

“I’ll attend to the transportation,” Elmer assured him. “If you’ll just give me directions.”

“Well, there’s Belleigh Acres,” the man offered. “Right down the street here, about half a mile.”

“What kind of a place is it?” Elmer asked. “Quiet?”

“I never heard any sounds coming out of it,” said his informant, piously. “Not that I’d hang around and listen if I did.” He stared curiously at Elmer’s face. “Whatchoo want in a cemetery at this time of night?” he demanded.

“I’m a bit tired,” Elmer told him. “I was thinking of finding a spot where I could retire.”

“If you’re tired already, why do you want to retire?” asked the news vendor. “Seems to me when you retire in a cemetery, it’s kinda permanent, like.”

“Exactly what I had in mind,” Elmer assured him. “Think of the joy of it, the peace! Freedom from daily cares—no more fret or worries—no more income taxes—no more TV commercials—no more Liberacejokes—”

"Cut it out!" pleaded the newsstand proprietor, feelingly. "A little more of that kind of talk and you'll sell me on the idea of committing suicide."

"Why don't you?" Elmer urged, eagerly. "Then we could go together. Maybe we could rent a crypt or a sarcophagus."

"How did you know my name was Gus?" demanded the news vendor, in agitation. "Who are you anyway? Coming around here with a lot of crazy talk about cemeteries. Suppose you expect me to believe you're dead yourself, is that it?" The vendor laughed sarcastically. "Well, I don't go for that fantasy stuff, see? I'm strictly what you call scientific-minded, get me? Now run along and let me peddle my papers."

With that the little man returned to his science-fiction. He was reading a story about an aristocratic gentleman on Mars, who employed one of the livid-skinned natives as his butler. The tale was called *How Green Was My Valet,* and it was ever so much more scientific than the puerile fantasy the vendor so rightly despised.

ELMER moved slowly up the street in the direction of Belleigh Acres.

Approaching the darkened, tree-guarded area, he noted with approval the high walls and the sharp spikes surmounting them. The cemetery beyond seemed very remote and secluded indeed.

He turned up the pathway to the entrance gate, which was closed and locked. However, he discovered, a light shone from the window of the small building just beside the gate. Elmer found the door and knocked.

"Come in," called a voice.

He entered the gatekeeper's quarters. An elderly gentleman in the uniform of a guard or watchman sat at a table, ostensibly paging through a sex-magazine, inside of which he had concealed a copy of *Gory Stories*—an alleged comic-book dealing with the supernatural.

"Yes?" said the watchman.

"Pardon me," Elmer said. "But can you tell me what I have to do to get into the cemetery?"

"Drop dead," the watchman muttered.

"I'm serious," Elmer countered.

"So am I," the watchman assured him.

"Isn't there another way?" Elmer asked. "I'm looking for a plot."

"Author?" asked the watchman. "Every once in a while, one of them writers shows up, asks me a lot of crazy questions about my job. Do I ever see any ghosts, and stuff like that."

"Well, do you?"

"Certainly not!" the watchman retorted. "Think I'm nuts? The minute I so much as *hear* a ghost, I right away close my eyes until it goes away."

"Then you're superstitious, is that it?"

"Nonsense," snapped the watchman. "Only superstition I believe in is the one about how, it's bad luck to walk under a black cat."

"Well, I'm no author," Elmer maintained. "I'm here because I want to *rent* a plot. Or maybe a small vault or mausoleum."

The watchman put down his magazine. "What's all this about?" he demanded.

"It's very simple," Elmer insisted. "This is a cemetery, isn't it? And a cemetery is a place where you rent a, grave. Very well—I want to rent a grave. Not just any old grave, either, but a good one. The kind of a grave that will last me a lifetime."

"This grave is for yourself?" the watchman demanded.

"Of course, who else? Besides, what difference does it make? I was under the impression they all came in a standard size."

"What on earth would you be wanting with a grave?" the watchman persisted.

"Very little," Elmer admitted. "It's under the earth that you need one. I feel as if I'd like to curl up in this nice little cemetery of yours and quit the mad rush and turmoil of the outside world. Who wants all this hustle and bustle, this constant striving for success? Let the early bird get the worm, I say."

"You curl up in a grave," said the watchman, sourly, "and you're liable to get a few worms yourself."

"Wouldn't want that," Elmer decided. "Maybe a vault would be best. Though I had sort of counted on a headstone or some kind of marker. You know, with just my name on it, and maybe a friendly warning to people—I was thinking it could say, *Do not Disturb "*

"Nobody disturbs our graves," the watchman told him. "That's what I'm here for."

"Excellent!" Elmer gave him an ingratiating smile. "Now, could you possibly show me something in a vault?"

"What would you like to see in one?" inquired the watchman. "A floor show?"

"Let's not be facetious, now," Elmer cautioned. "I'm here to rent and I'm willing to pay good money. But I'm entitled to take a look at the property in advance; isn't that fair?"

"It's fair all right, in a foul sort of way," the watchman said. "Look here, mister—I think you're just trying to talk your way into this cemetery here."

"Of course I am," Elmer replied. "I'm dead set on getting in.

"Dead set isn't enough," the watchman told him. "You've got to be embalmed. And have a death-certificate, and a regular funeral."

"Isn't it enough that I'm dead?" asked the young man, in a pained voice.

"You're—what?"

"DEAD," Elmer repeated.

"Take a good look at me. I'm not breathing, am I? I belong in this cemetery. I stand upon my rights as a citizen and a corpse."

"Bah!" said the watchman. "Don't you believe me?" Elmer persisted. "Look at how pale I am. Feel my clammy hands—I should think you'd be scared, at least."

"Stiffs don't frighten me," sneered the watchman.

"How do you know I'm not a ghost?" Elmer hazarded.

"Too solid. No ectoplasm."

"But if I'm not dead, and no ghost, then what would I be trying to get into your cemetery for?"

"Damned if I can figure that out," the watchman admitted. All at once he squinted at Elmer's face and cringed. "Now I see what this is," he panted. "I know what you want to get in for, and why you've been handing me this line of crazy talk. I know what you are!"

"You do?" Elmer blinked. "What am I?"

"A body-snatcher!" The watchman's lower lip trembled. "Sure, I might of guessed it. You're a body-snatcher, all right, one of them ghouls what steals cadavers for the medical students." He retreated around the table slowly. "You should of told me to begin with," he whined.

"Why?"

"Because I'm scared to death of body-snatchers." The watchman trembled and edged towards the door. "Well, this is one body you aren't gonna snatch, let me tell you!" Seizing his opportunity, and the doorknob, the watchman took to his heels.

Elmer waited until he had disappeared beyond the view from the window, then picked up the gate-keys from their rack on the wall and let himself into the cemetery.

It was dark and dismal and altogether delightful in there. He wandered down the tomb-bordered pathways, into a maze of statuary, cenotaphs and markers. A chill wind whispered in the trees.

Elmer walked along, looking for either an untenanted crypt or a suitable spot in which to dig in. His throat was dry, and he suddenly realized that he was quite hungry.

He reminded himself that the dead have no appetite, and moved along. Enough of this windowshopping; he would have to pick himself out a permanent parking space.

Suddenly he whirled, startled by a sound.

"Psssst!" hissed a voice.

"What's that?" he quavered.

"I said 'Psssst!'," the voice told him "Can't you even understand English?"

"Are you English?" Elmer wanted to know.

"Pennsylvania Dutch," the voice hissed. "But what's that got to do with it?"

"Do with what?"

"Come here and find out," the voice urged.

"Where are you?"

"Inside this vault, of course. Where else would I be?"

Elmer approached a large tomb off to the left. "Are you looking for a spot to rent too?" he asked.

The voice chuckled. "Not me, brother. I own this little piece of property. All bought and paid for. Got it for a song, years ago. Almost doubled in value—bet I could make 100% profit on it, if I wanted to sell."

"Why don't you, then?" Elmer suggested. "Can't tell when the market might drop again. Now's the time to get out from under."

"I get out from under every night," the voice replied "Same as you do, friend. Funny I never bumped into you before."

"I'm new here," Elmer explained. "Just got in tonight."

"I see." The voice sounded sympathetic. "Trying to walk the stiffness off, eh? Damned embalming fluid."

ELMER approached the black, bleak entrance to the tomb. "Well, don't just stand there," the voice continued. "Come right in, make yourself at home. Pull up a slab and sit down. Sorry I can't offer you something to eat, but there isn't a bite left in the house. And I'm afraid I'm badly overdrawn at the blood-bank. My last check spattered."

Laughter curdled out of the darkness. Elmer stepped back. "Who are you?" he, murmured. "Kemia is the name, buddy," the voice told him. "Luke Kemia. Isn't that a hell of a name for a vampire?"

“It certainly is,” agreed Elmer, with feeling. He retreated a step, but the voice called after him.

“And who might you he?”

“I’m Elmer Klopp,” said the young man. “I was formerly a member of the student body at the University.”

“Student body, eh?” The voice was wistful. “How I’d like to get my teeth into a good student body right about now! I’m so hungry I could eat fingernails.”

“Not mine,” Elmer cautioned.

“Of course not. Don’t be afraid! Besides, in a couple of minutes we ought to have some action around here.”

“Action?”

“Sure. The car is due any minute.”

“What car?”

“The dining-car, I call it.” Again the voice chuckled. “You’ll see!”

And Elmer did. Even as the voice spoke, Elmer noted the sweep of headlights moving along the road from the unbarred gate. A large car—a strangely familiar car—rolled into the cemetery and halted in the roadway beside the tomb.

Elmer gasped. It was the red limousine!

He turned-, half-expecting to see the two beards emerge. But instead a feminine voice called, “Luke!”

“Coming!”

A spidery-limbed, cloaked figure emerged from the tomb and Elmer caught a glimpse of a gaunt visage with an anvil-shaped chin. It moved towards the red car as the door swung open.

“What’s on the menu tonight?” the voice hissed.

“You’ll see,” the feminine voice replied.

Elmer listened intently. This voice, as well as this car, was familiar to him. Suddenly he placed it.

“Sonia,” he called. “Sonia Noodlemayer!”

“Who’s there?”

"It's Elmer Klopp," he said. "Or rather, the late Elmer Klopp. You see, I got in that machine again and almost disappeared—but instead I came out dead. Still, better late than never, I always say."

"Klopp? Machine?" The feminine voice grew shrill. Elmer approached the car.

"Sure. Remember last night, when I was in the ape's body? That was the machine's work. I got back today and took another treatment and it turned me into a football team. Didn't you see me play this afternoon?"

"I was sleeping," Sonia said. "But tell me more."

"Well, like I said, then I took another treatment and I think I died. Because all I wanted to do was come here and find a grave. The Professor thinks it's the death-instinct, or something like that, but I couldn't talk to him about it because he went away before I woke up."

"Let's find him and ask him," Sonia suggested. "Climb in the front seat here with me."

"But you've got a vampire in the car."

"Oh, don't mind *him,"* Sonia laughed. "He's a little crazy but perfectly harmless. Sometimes he thinks he's a vampire and then again he thinks he's Napoleon. We call him the Little Corpuscle."

"Now I understand," Elmer said, sliding into the front seat as Sonia leaned over, closed the door, and started the car rolling swiftly around the path to the gateway once more. "You just came here to pick him up and take him back home, is that it?"

"This is his home," Sonia purred. "And he is a vampire, just as he said—but harmless. Too old to hurt anybody, really. I have to get all his meals for him."

"You?"

"Of course." She laughed again. "It's we young ones who do all the work."

Elmer suddenly remembered her remarks about sleeping by day. And he remembered, last night, during their embrace, how she had started to reach for his neck.

"Y-you're a vampire, too?" he whispered.

The car picked up speed.

"Certainly." Sonia licked her red lips. "And don't look so horrified. After all, if what you tell me is true—you're a vampire yourself, now!"

CHAPTER XIII

DEAD or alive, nobody jumps out of a car speeding at sixty miles an hour.

Elmer didn't try it. He merely huddled in his seat and tried to reason out what Sonia Noodlemayer had told him. The more he thought about it, the more sense it made in a grisly sort of way.

He'd wished he was dead, but the Psycopathfinder couldn't exterminate him. Instead, it had given him a half life; that of the Undead. No wonder he had revived at the coming of darkness and sought a cemetery. No wonder he felt hungry, thirsty—Elmer shuddered.

All at once he didn't want to be dead any more. He wanted to find the Professor and use the machine. Anything would be preferable to his present lack of existence.

Sonia was still staring at him and giggling, and Elmer realized he'd better maintain his composure. He was too close to being decomposed as it was.

"What's the matter?" the blonde asked.

"Nothing, really. It's just that it's a bit hard for me to get used to the idea," Elmer replied. "I never dreamed you were a vampire."

"Neither does anyone else," Sonia purred. "When Hans met me in Kirghiz, he didn't have the faintest notion. To him I was just an innocent young widow who had the misfortune of losing four previous husbands—something that could happen to anybody."

"Why did he marry you?" Elmer asked.

"He didn't. *I* married *him,"* Sonia corrected. "Because I wanted to leave the country and come to America, the land of progress, opportunity, new ideas, and—"

"Fresh blood," supplied Luke Kemia, from the back seat.

"Well, that too," Sonia admitted. "Anyway, I married him and when he finished his field trip we came here. He still doesn't suspect a thing, you know. I've gotten him used to the idea that I prefer to sleep by day. He leaves me alone."

"But don't vampires have to sleep in grave-earth?" Elmer asked.

"I always wear a mud-pack to bed," Sonia explained. "Hans thinks it's a beauty-treatment, but he can't understand why I don't bother with mirrors when I make up my face." She giggled again. "In many ways, he's the ideal husband; he's so naive. He doesn't even mind all the students who come around to visit—he thinks I like to talk to them because I have an appetite for knowledge."

"We know what kind of an appetite you have," Luke Kemia chuckled. "No wonder so many of those poor kids drop out of circulation after a few visits to you. With some of them, I hear, their circulation stops entirely."

"Don't believe Luke," Sonia told Elmer. "He's always full of those underground rumors of his. Actually, most of them just think they're developing anemia and leave school. There have been only one or two—accidents."

Elmer shivered.

"Relax," the blonde urged, clawing his shoulder. "You must learn to be philosophical about these things. After all, that's the way life is. Somebody is bound to get it in the neck."

"Particularily if they hang around you," Luke supplied.

Elmer forced a smile. "I suppose I'll get used to the idea, in time," he said. "Right now it all seems a bit strange. I'll have to accustom myself to being a vampire; there's so much I don't know. I'll have to learn the ropes."

"To say nothing of the veins and arteries," Luke Kemia added. "They're more important."

Sonia nodded. “Don’t you worry about a thing,” she reassured him. “It’s really very simple. Sleep by day, walk by night. Avoid mirrors, running water, crucifixes, and the touch of silver. Get plenty of stale air and stick to a well-balanced diet. Don’t worry, you’ll soon get your teeth into it.”

ELMER’S teeth did a little quiet chattering. As soon as he could immobilize his molars, he said, “But might I ask what you were doing in the cemetery? And where did you get this car? What about those two men with beards—are they vampires, too?”

“Of course not!” Sonia rounded a corner and turned down a side-street. “Boris and Morris don’t even know I’m one. Didn’t you see them threaten me with a knife the other evening?”

“I did, and that’s what I can’t understand.”

“Just a little argument over politics,” Sonia explained. “You see, they think I’m just a regular agent.”

“Agent?”

“They’re Communist spies, of course,” Sonia said. “They came to Hardnox on the strength of a rumor that your friend Professor Noid had invented some new kind of gadget. Their instructions are to capture it and smuggle it out of the country—so that the Soviets can take credit for inventing it. You know the Communist line; they like to claim they invented everything from space-ships to sex. So I agreed to help them steal it. I sent Hans over to make friends with the Professor and investigate. I gave Boris and Morris my car today and let them go after the Psychopathfinder.”

“But why are you working with them?” Elmer asked.

“Because I’m a Communist myself.”

“A Communist vampire?”

“There’s a law against it, maybe?” Sonia retorted. “What makes you think all vampires have to vote Republican?”

“I see. No wonder you were anxious to get into this country.” Elmer mused. “But what’s your connection with Luke, here?”

“That’s different,” Sonia continued. “When I arrived in Hardnox, I didn’t know anyone but my husband. So naturally, I started looking around to see if I could dig up a few friends.”

“You sure picked a place for it,” Elmer admitted. “In a cemetery.”

“Where else?” Sonia demanded. “Anyway, Luke here was the only vampire I could find. We spent a great deal of time together during those first few months, and became well-acquainted. I must say for him that he seems grateful.”

“You know how it is,” Luke said. “Nobody likes to eat alone.”

“But even if you are a vampire,” Elmer ventured, “I can’t understand how you, as a 100% native, red-blooded American, would associate with a Communist.”

“Oh, I don’t know.” Luke shrugged. “I’ve got nothing against red-blooded Americans—in fact, they’re the kind I like best. But Sonia has converted me. She says things are better for us vampires under the Communist system. The Soviets are against capitalism, you know; they don’t let people spend a lot of money on embalming, and sealed metal coffins. A Soviet vampire would never have to leave his graveyard to search for nourishment. Makes sense to me. So I decided to help her. After all, one gets tired of just dabbling in blood. Now I also dabble in politics.”

Sonia put her arm on Elmer’s shoulder. “And you’re going to help me, too,” she said. “Aren’t you?”

“Well—”

“What else is there left for you to do?” she asked. “Oh, I know all about you and that little snip of an Ada Noid. But she’s not for you now. You’re one of *us.* Think it over, and you’ll see. What would you do if you married her—take a honeymoon trip in a hearse?”

“But the Professor’s machine could change me back—”

“Ah, yes,” Sonia smiled. “Only you forget the Professor doesn’t have his machine any more. Boris and Morris stole it from Judge Spleen’s courtroom this noon, remember? I’m going to their hideout now and look it over.”

ELMER remembered the cylinder he had substituted for the Psychopathfinder. Apparently the Soviet agents didn't realize it was a phoney. Well at least that was something.

"We'll smuggle it onto a plane tomorrow," Sonia explained. "And fly it across the border. There's another plane waiting for us in Mexico. We can take it directly to the Kremlin. What a triumph! Elmer, you'll be hailed as a hero!"

"Lucky you ran into him," Luke commented. "Seeing as how he must know the way to operate the machine."

"That's right," Sonia agreed. "I hadn't counted on it, either. I thought I might have to kidnap Ada and the Professor. Now, of course, that will be unnecessary." Elmer was thinking fast, and this last remark decided him. As long as nobody knew the machine was a fake, as long as he pretended to fall in with their plans, the girl and her uncle would be safe. And so would the real Psychopathfinder.

It might mean sacrificing himself, but? it was the only way. After all, what else had he to live for? If being a vampire was living, that is?

So he turned to Sonia and grinned. "Good enough," he said. "I'm with you."

"Then follow me," she said.

"Here we are."

The red limousine had turned into an alley just in back of Main Street and nosed into a parking-space between two buildings.

Sonia opened the door and Elmer got out, followed by Luke. "Can't we pick up a snack somewhere before we go in?" he grumbled. "I'm starved."

She shook her head. "Business comes first," the blonde reminded him.

"Maybe just a small child?" Luke pleaded wistfully. "Something to nibble on between meals?"

"Later."

She picked her way through the yard until she reached a cellar door.

"Down here," she directed.

"Boris and Morris rented the basement from some fool on Main Street. He doesn't even suspect what they're up to—thinks they're using the cellar to grow mushrooms in."

The trio descended into darkness. Elmer tripped over something that tinkled and broke.

"Bottle," Sonia said. "The owner's a tavern-keeper, I guess. Stacks his empties down here."

She groped for a door, opened it. Light flooded the corridor from the room beyond.

The two beards—Boris and Morris—rose from behind a table in the cellarway.

"Everything all right?" whispered Sonia.

Boris nodded. His smaller companion eyed Elmer suspiciously. "Who's he?"

"My name's Elmer Klopp," the young man offered. "The last time you saw me I was just an ignorant gorilla. But I have seen the light. I am now a sworn follower of the Party Line, and full of dialectical materialism."

"You vouch for him?" Morris asked.

The blonde nodded. "Completely. He's a sort of bloodbrother of mine." She paused. "Besides, he knows how to work that machine you stole. Where is it?"

"Right over here."

DORIS indicated the bulky structure of the hi-fi low pass vacuum-precipitated ten-lamination acetate bonded orthoflow telekinesis booster tank circuit.

"Funny thing," he said. "Morris and I have been fiddling around with it for hours, and we can't get the hang of how it works. We plug it in, but nothing happens."

"Don't worry," Sonia said. "That's why I brought Elmer along. He understands all about it, don't you, Elmer?"

"Sure I do." Elmer smiled. "The minute we get to Moscow, I'll give you a demonstration."

"No." Boris shook his beard. "We can't afford to take chances, comrade. Suppose something happened to you before then—who would know how to operate this device?"

"But nothing will happen," Elmer told him.

"One never knows." Boris smiled and patted his hip, which bulged ominously. "I think it would be better if you gave us all a demonstration right now."

"But—" Elmer hesitated. "You understand what this machine does, don't you? It's a Psychopathfinder. It gives a sort of mechanical psychiatric treatment, but it alters the whole person; physically and metabolically, as well as mentally. Anyone who uses it may experience a radical change."

"Well, we're all radicals," Morris beamed.

"No, I'm not making myself clear. This machine turned me Into a gorilla. Do any of you want to take such a risk?"

"Of course not. There would be no place for a gorilla in Russia, except maybe in the secret police."

"Well, then." Elmer shrugged. "No subject—no demonstration.

"Wait a minute!" Boris said. "I can get you a subject."

"You can? How?"

Boris stabbed his finger at the ceiling. "Upstairs," he said. "That tavern-keeper. He always closes up on Saturday night so he can go out and get drunk. I know his habits; he must be dressing right now."

"But that's dangerous—"

"Poof, begging your pardon." He turned to Sonia and bowed graciously. "It doesn't matter. We leave here on the plane at midnight. So what if we leave a gorilla behind? Or a dead body."

"Don't leave it," Luke begged. "Somebody might get hungry on the trip."

Sonia flashed him a warning glance, and the elderly vampire subsided sullenly.

“Very well,” she said. “Let’s get him.”

Smiling, Boris slipped out of the room.

“Go ahead and make your preparations,” the blonde commanded. “We haven’t any time to waste.” Elmer stepped up to the cylinder and examined it. This was not turning out the way he had hoped or expected. The heavy tank had wires extending to a plug, and he fitted the plug into a socket, whereupon nothing happened. A valve-cock on the side seemed to govern a spigot. Elmer tilted the cylinder and heard a squishing sound.

There was no hope here—nothing he could possibly utilize to fake a demonstration with. He stood silent, praying that the tavern-keeper would have left before Boris could find him.

BUT luck was not with him. Instead, Boris was. And with Boris came the tavern-keeper. The Soviet agent dragged him into the room at revolver-point, and the redheaded man goggled incredulously until his eyes found Elmer’s. Then he goggled credulously and said, “What are you doing here?”

“You stole my line,” Elmer accused. “I didn’t know this cellar was under your tavern.”

“Where else could it be?” demanded Michael Finn, surlily. “You never heard of a cellar being over a tavern, did you?” He ran a hand over his toupee.

“Now what kind of crazy business are you mixed up in?” he asked, wearily. “Last night it was pink elephants.”

“Tonight it’s Reds,” Elmer told him. “We’re all Communist agents.” The bartender turned to Boris. “Then you’re not just raising mushrooms down here,” he murmured. “Kind of suspected that, the minute you stuck a gun in my ribs.” He pouted. “I knew I should have asked for references before I let you move in. And to think I passed up a chance to rent this here cellar to a nice, respectable bunch of dope-smugglers.”

“Shuddup!” snapped Boris, reverting momentarily to his native tongue. “All right, here’s your subject. Now what do we do?”

Elmer wished he knew. Stalling desperately he said. “Well, the first thing is for all of you to line up over there against the wall.”

“Why?” Morris wanted to know.

“I’ve got to warm up the machine,” Elmer said. “And the vibrations are lethal, in a deadly sort of way. Scientific tests have proven beyond the shadow of a doubt that fatal vibrations can sometimes kill you, especially if they exterminate your life.”

“Jeez, I never knew you was a scientist,” marvelled Michael Finn. “Say, mebbe you could tell me which brand of cigarette I should smoke, huh?”

“Later,” Elmer agreed. “Now, everybody line up against the wall. And perhaps it would be better if you all closed your eyes.”

“Not me!” Morris snapped. “I don’t trust you. I want to see what goes on.”

“Very well.” It wasn’t, but what else could Elmer say? He stepped over to the cylinder and twisted the faucet control for want of something better to do.

A spray of something very much like water shot from the faucet on the upper sides of the cylinder. As a matter of fact, it *was* water. It spurted over the table and ran along the floor.

“Yi!” screeched Luke Kemia, suddenly. “Water—don’t let it touch me!”

Sonia cowered back. Elmer remembered that she had warned him against running water—vampires couldn’t cross it. Gaily, he increased the flow.

“What the—?” Boris inquired, stepping forward. Elmer twisted the faucet and a stream spattered Boris in the eyes. He staggered back, and Morris was drenched. The two vampires clawed the wall.

Without waiting for any further effects, Elmer turned and ran out of the room. He pounded up the stairs, threw open the door and hurtled into the red limousine.

The car careened up the alley and down the street. Elmer ground to a halt before Professor Noid’s tree-bordered home and in a moment he was pounding on the front door, gratifed to see that a light shone from within the house.

Then the door opened and Ada held out her arms.

“Elmer! I thought you were dead!”

The young man recoiled. “Don’t touch me,” he said huskily. “I am!”

“W-what—?”

“Where’s the Professor?”

“Upstairs, in the laboratory.”

“Come on, then.”

THEY hastened, two steps at a time. As the laboratory door swung back, Professor Noid looked up, his goatee bristling with apprehension.

“Oh, my! I was afraid it might be the police!”

“We’ll need them, soon,” Elmer said. “But not while I’m in my present condition. Get me into that headshrinking machine of yours, right away.”

“Aren’t you going to tell us what happened?”

“I will,” Elmer sighed. “But I don’t like it.” Swiftly he filled the Professor and the girl in on the events of the past few hours.

“And it’s all my fault,” he con eluded, mournfully. “What a fool I was to get mixed up with that Sonia woman in the first place!”

Ada shook her head in violent agreement and Elmer cringed.

“Don’t look at me like that,” he begged. “You make me feel as if I was about a foot high. I’d like to crawl in a hole someplace and die.”

“You nearly did,” the Professor reminded him. “So don’t go getting any more ideas. Let the Psychopathfinder conquer your death-wish, and that’s enough.”

“But I feel so helpless about all this, so insignificant,” Elmer protested. “If I’d only known—”

“The Psychopathfinder is ready,” Professor Noid interrupted, rubbing his hands lackadaisically. “Hurry and let’s get started. The minute you’re finished we can alert the police.”

"Just don't think about anything except returning to normal," Ada cautioned.

Elmer shook his head, then placed it in the aperture. The Professor operated the panel. The spirals revolved, the droning rose, the shaking increased.

And something happened to Elmer.

"Stop the machine!" Ada cried.

"He's—he's *shrinking!"*

The Professor looked up. It was true. The young man appeared to be dwindling before their very eyes. He grew smaller, and smaller, and smaller —

"Turn it off!" Ada screamed. As her uncle threw the switch, the girl ran forward and caught Elmer's body before it fell.

It wasn't really a strenuous accomplishment, for the young man had dwindled away inside his clothing to the size of a rather small doll. To be exact, he was now about a foot high.

"Back to the womb," the Professor murmured. "The basic feeling of insecurity at last. He felt small, inadequate, unable to cope with the problems of—"

"Me too," Ada exclaimed, eyeing the diminutive figure in her arms. "How can we call the police now, when he's like this?"

"Something tells me we won't have to worry about that," the Professor sighed. "Unless I'm wrong about those footsteps outside, we have company."

"Dear Lord in heaven," Ada murmured, as Elmer's oversize clothing dropped unheeded to the floor. "Now what happens?"

"Plenty," announced a voice from the doorway.

Boris and Morris entered the room.

CHAPTER XIV

AS they entered, the Professor threw up his hands in despair, an emotional prompting automatically reinforced by the sight of Boris’s automatic.

Ada turned away and hastily wrapped Elmer’s naked form in a laboratory rag.

“Come back here,” Morris called. “You put up your hands, too, lady.”

“Please,” Ada sniffed. “Is that any way to talk to a mother?”

“Mother?”

“Yes.” Ada held out Elmer, who now stirred and opened his eyes. As comprehension of his situation dawned, he started to speak, but the girl quickly clapped her hand over his tiny mouth.

Boris stepped forward. “How come?” he demanded. “You didn’t have a baby with you this morning.”

“I know.” Ada’s eyes were downcast. “I’m as surprised as you are. But that’s the price a girl pays for living in one of these college towns and listening to the blandishments of the students. I ought to have known what would happen when I accepted his maternity pin.”

“Fraternity, isn’t it?”

Ada held up the small figure in her arms. “Maternity,” she insisted. “I ought to know.”

“Born today, eh?”

“This very evening.”

“You seem to have recovered quickly, lady.”

“Now wait a minute,” Morris interrupted his companion. “This isn’t a clinic, you know. What are you going to do, give the baby a blue ribbon? Remember, we came here on a mission.”

Boris scowled and lifted his automatic. “That is right,” he intoned. “So let’s get going. Professor, unhook that machine of yours. Morris will help you carry it downstairs to the car. By the way, Morris—you can dismiss our taxi. We will return in the red limousine which our young friend parked out in front so conveniently.”

He gazed around the room. “By the way,” he said. “Where is Elmer?”

“Don’t mention his name to me,” Ada muttered. “He’s the scoundrel who’s responsible for my condition.”

The infantile figure squirmed in her arms at this, but she kept her hand tightly over its mouth.

“But where is he now?”

Ada cocked her head at the machine. “My uncle put him in there for a treatment and that’s the last we saw of him.”

“You mean, he disappeared?”

“Right.” The girl nodded.

“I don’t believe you.”

“Search if you like.”

“We haven’t time.” Boris waved his gun. “Hurry up, you two.” He motioned the girl forward. “Come along.”

“Me? But I’ve got to take care of the baby. He must have his bottle—”

“Plenty of bottles where we’re going,” Boris assured her. “And I’ll be glad to get back. I could use a drink.”

The Professor worked silently, his shoulders sagging. They sagged even more as he began carting the Psychopathfinder down the stairs. Morris walked behind him, lugging the panel control board and auxiliary wires. Boris herded them forward, watching Ada and her tiny burden preceding him.

INNOTICED and unimpeded they entered the red limousine and in a few moments the car parked once more in the alley area behind Ye Olde Gin Mill.

Morris got out first.

“The rest of you stay here,” Boris commanded. “Until he takes a look to see if the coast is clear. I don’t trust your story about Elmer. He might have gotten away and called the police.”

Morris descended into the cellar. He was gone quite a while. When he reemerged, Boris said, “Well?”

“They’re not there,” the second beard told him.

“Aha, just as I suspected—”

“No, it’s all right,” Morris broke in, hastily. “They just moved upstairs to the tavern. Sonia and Luke didn’t like the water, I guess. But the place is closed, the shades are drawn, and we can go right in. That bartender has been mixing them a few drinks to calm their nerves.”

“He can mix me one,” Boris said. “Let’s go.”

They went.

Entering the tavern through the rear door, they greeted Sonia and Luke, who stared at them in glassy-eyed silence from their seats at the bar. Michael Finn nodded glumly at them across the counter.

“Your friends don’t like water, it seems,” he explained. “So I been mixing them something a little stronger.”

“So I see.” Boris eyed the vampires, who sat rigid on their stools. “What are you drinking?”

“I don’t know,” Luke said, faintly. “It’s awfully strong.”

“Very,” Sonia agreed. “I feel quite numb.”

“You look it,” Boris told her. “What’s the name of that stuff, bartender?”

“Why, it’s a Silver Fizz.”

“Silver?”

Luke tried to move from his stool but couldn’t make it.

“That’s right,” Michael Finn said. “Made according to my own secret formula. Just a wee drop of silver nitrate in it, too.”

“Silver nitrate?” Sonia uttered a faint gasp. “I’ve been poisoned—let me out of here—”

She wobbled, then fell back. Clawing at the bar, she tried to stand up, but it was too late. She opened her mouth to scream, but all that came out was a puff of smoke. And then she fell to the floor with a clatter. The clatter was understandable enough, for by the time she landed, her body was gone; only a pile of bones remained.

Luke peered down with glassy eyes. “Help me, somebody,” he croaked. “Get a doctor—call Alcoholics Anonymous—”

Then he too was gone.

Michael Finn grinned. "Minute I saw how scared they was of water, I knew what they were," he said. "I heard all about vampires in the Old Country, from my mother-in-law. She used to read up on such things; anyway she was an expert." He scratched his toupee thoughtfully. "Come to think of it, my mother-in-law was quite an old bat. I wonder if—"

"Stop wondering!" Regaining his composure, Boris stepped forward. "Maybe those two were vampires, but we're not. And you won't get rid of us with any silver nitrate. Just keep quiet now, or you'll be quiet permanently."

Michael Finn gazed at the gun and subsided.

Boris turned to his partner. "All right—tell the Professor to set up the machine. We're still going to have our demonstration before we leave."

OBEDIENTLY, Morris and Professor Noid set to work at the end of the bar. Disconnecting the juke-box, the Professor plugged in the panel control-board.

"Where's Elmer?" Michael Finn asked.

"Disappeared," Ada told him, shortly.

"I see you've got a bundle from heaven," the bartender observed. "Congratulations. I didn't know you were expecting."

"Frankly, neither did I," the girl answered. "The stork brought this particular bundle in a hurry."

"Special delivery, maybe?"

"Just the ordinary kind," Ada said.

"Ugly little thing," Michael Finn commented, peering over the bar. "Excuse me for saying so, lady, but it almost looks as if your baby needed a shave."

"I do," Elmer piped up.

"It talks!" the bartender gasped.

"It wasn't talking ten minutes ago." Boris muttered, giving Ada a frown. "You said it had just been born."

"Can I help it if I'm precocious?" Elmer lisped. "It's not my fault that I'm brilliant—any more than it's yours that you're subnormal."

"Why, you—"

"You wouldn't strike a helpless infant, would you?" Elmer cooed, spitting in the bearded man's eye.

"Lady—either you shut that brat up or I'll—" Boris peered down at Elmer and recognition dawned. "You lied to me," he declared. "I know who that is. It's Elmer Klopp."

"All right." Ada sighed. "I may as well admit it. Nothing matters any more."

Elmer struggled in her arms. "Put me down," he muttered. "Put me down and I'll beat hell out of him. He can't talk to you like that!"

"Dry up!" Boris commanded. "Or I'll strangle you in your own diapers."

Morris tapped him on the shoulder. "The Professor says we're all ready," he said.

"Excellent."

"Do you want the bartender to undergo a demonstration treatment?"

Boris hesitated. He eyed the tiny figure in Ada's arms. "No," he said. "Let's use Elmer, here. The bartender is of some use to us—he can help transport this equipment to the plane before we kill him. But this insignificant little thing—who cares what becomes of him?"

"I do," Ada volunteered.

"Me too!" Elmer added.

"Never mind. Into the machine you go!" Boris grabbed the squirming form from Ada's arms and carried it over to the Psychopathfinder. Despite the Professor's horrified protests, he stuffed the foot-long figure into the aperture usually reserved for a human head.

"All right," he said. "Commence the demonstration!"

Ada ran forward and tugged at her uncle's arm. "You can't," she cried. "Maybe he'll disappear entirely this time!"

"You'll all disappear entirely if you don't do what I say," Boris reminded her. "Now stand back!"

"Get me out of here!" Elmer wailed, in a shrill falsetto. "If I was only myself, I'd—"

"Start the machine!" Boris waved his gun.

The Professor pulled the switch. Spiral—drone—shake—shudder—and the tiny figure, squirming in the aperture.

And then the figure wasn't so tiny any more.

"Thank God!" Ada breathed. "He's growing again!"

IT was true. Before their eyes Elmer was elongating, emerging from the machine until his feet touched the floor and his nude, quivering body resumed its normal proportions.

"That's enough—shut it off!" Boris called.

The Professor obeyed. Ada ran forward as Elmer slumped from the Psychopathfinder and fell into her arms. He opened his eyes and she stared into them, then recoiled with dismay.

"H-he's gone back!" she whispered to the Professor. "Look at him—he's the way he was before—a vampire!"

And it was true. Elmer rose to his feet, eyes set in a somnambulistic stare.

Then they blurred. Everything blurred. Elmer's outline wavered dimly, coalesced, and suddenly expanded.

"He's still going," Ada marvelled.

"Repeating the cycle in reverse!" Professor Noid nodded. "Now, the next step."

"What's all this?" Boris demanded.

Nobody answered him. Everyone watched Elmer.

Everyone watched Elmers.

For all at once there were two Elmers, then three, then four, five, six—

“Where did they come from?” Morris chattered. “Hey, stop,” this joint is getting too crowded!”

It was more than crowded. Boris tried to train his gun on eleven Elmers, but even a well-trained gun cannot cover eleven naked men.

Instead, they covered Boris; and Morris, too. The Soviet agents went down in a tangle of writhing bodies. Abruptly, the tangle diminished. Now there were only three on the tavern floor—Boris, Morris, and the huge gorilla that banged their skulls together.

And then there was only Elmer, holding them erect. Boris managed to open one eye. His hand reached feebly for the fallen weapon, raised it.

“Look out!” screamed Ada.

But Elmer didn’t notice the gun. Instead he ducked, as the pink elephant materialized, swaying above them. Its right forefoot came down on Boris’s hand, and the gun dropped.

“Yeow!” Boris cried. The elephant disappeared. Morris broke free, and pulling his battered partner to his feet, tried to make a run for it. Elmer sat on the floor, looking at them. Their pants fell down. Their clothes fell off. He tackled them and tied their beards together.

Then he stood up and draped a bar-rag over his nudity.

“That’s that,” he declared. “I think I’m myself again.”

“So do I,” breathed the girl. “Oh, thank goodness!” She swayed into his arms. They kissed. Suddenly she drew back. “Something new has been added,” she declared. “You still kiss like that football team.”

Professor Noid rubbed his hands together weakly. “A triumph for the Psychopathfinder,” he commented. “A complete demonstration of its practicality. You have undergone a complete psychotherapy, rooted out all inhibitions, compulsions, delusions, phobias; the death-wish, the desire to return to the womb—congratulations are in order for all of us.”

“You mean this calls for a drink?” Michael Finn asked, eagerly.

“Why not? We’ve proved our theory, Elmer is a new man, the Soviets are thwarted, we’ve gotten rid of the vampires—” The Professor paused, eyeing the bones on the floor dubiously. “Er—what do we do about these?” he asked.

“Send them to Noodlemayer,” Ada suggested. “After all, he’s an anthropologist. Vampire-bones might be something new in his line. We did promise him something for Christmas you know.”

“I’ll have them boxed,” the Professor agreed. “Handsomely.” Michael Finn stirred, shook and poured briskly.

“Here you are,” he announced. “How about a couple of grasshoppers?”

“Oh!” Elmer looked at Ada and groaned. “This is where I came in. Once you drink one of these things, anything can happen.”

“And probably will,” Ada told him. “But don’t worry. Something tells me that from now on you’re going to enjoy it.”

Together, they lifted their glasses and drank.

Where the Buffalo Roam

Many and vitriolic have been the editorial denouncements of the "transplanted western" science-fiction story; in a like manner, both editors and readers are apt to cast a bored and disdainful eye on the "after the atomic war" story. This, apparently, was all that was needed to send Robert Bloch rushing to his typewriter to turn out a post-atomic-war story with a wild-and-woolly-western setting—a story guaranteed to make the above-mentioned editors and readers retract their harsh words—in reference to this story, at least.

MAY have been two seasons ago, may have been three. This child don't shine at figures much. Doc, now—he's got a passel of books up to his lodge, and even Iron Head keeps a few in his *tipi.* But I never did hold with booktalk, not even for a white, let alone Injuns.

This jigger's happy and sassy as long as he's got his hide in one piece, with plenty of fleece fat to fill it, and a good gun and a few traps to set for the getting of plews. A rifle's all the company you need beyond the Platte. Come winter, of course, I push back to the river with my catch, and then I allow it's slick to hole up in a lodge of my own with a squaw for the fixing and the making of robes. But there's always a might to do, and no need for books even then—spite of all Doc's talk.

Book's won't skin a painter for you, or cure you of the flux. And books weren't handy agin *them* either. It was books caused all the misery in the first place, I figger. *They* have books aplenty.

But it was *them* I aimed to tell about, to begin with. Like I say, might have been two, could be three seasons back. It was fixing summer anyways, that I know. That's when *they* come.

I recollect the night it happened. Doc and Iron Head and I had headed back to the river to see if the team had come with the new guns and the ammunition. It was in, all right, and I got me a brand new rifle—along with a lot of blankets and such, and even some fancy folderol for Taffy. Taffy was my squaw; still would be, but she died birthing. Taffy had yellow hair, same as me. I guess she was more white than Injun, but they're all squaws.

Anyways, we'd had a regular powwow for a couple days after the team pulled in, like always, and Jed and Huck did a heap of bragging, about the trip. They always fetch some tall stories about the places back Across the River. Doc holds the yarns are true, but I figger they stretch a mite.

Then we set out again, four party of us. Two headed upriver for the traps, one hit downriver with the team—to trade extry guns and shot with the next camp. Me and Doc and Iron Head struck out west to buffalo country. The grass was in now, and we figgered they'd be ranging this way. We aimed to strike a big herd and drive it back to the river. Then the hull camp'd come out—'boys and squaws and old folk alike—and just blaze away until we snagged a smart passel, enough for meat and skinning and curing to hold us through winter.

That was the scheme of it, and we reckoned on working our way for maybe two, three days.

But we struck it pretty the afternoon of the first day out. Coming up over a rise, just up from the plains, with the sun scorching our eyeballs fit to fry, and we looked down onto the level with the tall grass stretching for a hundred miles off.

But we didn't see any grass. Everything was black. Black and moving.

"Huh!" Iron Head let out a grunt. "Buffler!"

"Buffalo?" said Doc, squinting through those spectacles he wears. "Sure enough. But look at the size of that herd! You ever see so many, Jake?"

I had to allow as I hadn't. In all my born days, and I knowed this country ever since I was big enough to tote a rifle, I never did see a sight to match this one.

There was buffalo as far as sight would stretch, like a big black cloud settled over the land. Cows and calves and yearlings, young bulls with their horns still black and old bulls just lording it over the harems.

"Reckon we better circle behind?" I asked.

But Iron Head grinned. "Walk along," he said. "Take us two days to go around."

"What if they get riled up?" Doc said.

"Make noise," Iron Head told him.

I allowed as he was right—buffalo always scatter if you fetch them a start. That's how we aimed to stampede them to the river, by shooting guns. But right now we wanted to get on the other side of the herd, so as to drive them in the right direction.

So we walked down, moving dose together, and headed straight for the herd. And Doc told us to sing.

That's what we did. We traipsed along, singing fit to bust—the old songs, anything that come into our head. Tunes like TEA FOR TWO and ROLL OUT THE BARREL and THE SWEETHEART OF SIGMA CHI; all them songs with the crazy words. Made a powerful ruckus, too.

And you know, it worked. It got us into the herd all right, but come a time when this child wondered if we'd ever get out again. Wondered if there *was* an end to it, or if we'd just go wandering and singing along until our voice-boxes plumb wore out.

Because it was a herd the likes of which a hump-hungry feller dreams about. Doc's the head for figures, so I asked him. "How many you reckon? A million head?"

"Easy," Doc said. "We been walking close to three hours now. Seems to be no end to it."

"Strikes me mighty odd," I told him. "I don't allow as I ever saw more'n two-three thousand at a crack before."

“The herds grow every year,” Dog come back. “It’s like the old days. Remind me tonight and I’ll tell you about it. But something must have happened to force them together this way.”

“Dry,” said Iron Head. “Powerful dry ahead. Dust storm, so they move. Buffler heap migratory ruminant.”

He was right. Way off to the west the sun was going down and from the clouds I reckoned haze. The plains were dry, so the herds come together and move east to graze. Now, hoofing it through the center, this child could see that it wasn’t one big herd at all—instead it was thousands of little herds, each one ranging from twenty to two-three hundred head.

Old bulls heading their cows and the calves. Young bulls bunched together, hanging on at the fringes and waiting for a chance. And here and there, the strays and the cripples.

We didn’t dast break off singing to talk much—I tell you it gave me a mighty crawly feeling to scrunch along through that grass, with hundreds of thousands of sharp-horned critters less than a holler away from us. They was making their own racket, too—calves a-bawling and them bulls roaring and tossing horn at any cow out of line. We spotted a few fights, too, and every once in a while a bull’d rear up for a mount. They smelled powerful strong that day, but the flies wasn’t so bad around, account of the wind. That was a fancy fix, because at times you can’t nigh breath for the clouds of flies pestering a herd.

We kept moving and singing and staring.

“Look at those spike-bulls,” Doc said. “They get bigger every year.”

It was true. Some of the young ones were crowding six feet, maybe ten, long. And I spotted some whopping big full-grown critters with a spread of maybe three feet; them horns run a good two feet long, and I allow as a couple topped a ton weight. That’s more’n two thousand pounds.

Close up this way I made notice of the robes—regular brown a-plenty, with here and there a blade, a beaver, a buckskin and even a blue. Iron Head squinted too; I knew what he was fixing for. He wanted a whitey if he could find one. Them whiteys are the rarest; you can fetch most anything you want with a white, from stale firewater to a fresh squaw.

But he wouldn't snag one even if he saw it, because a shot might set the whole passel off. It was best we just keep on a-singing and a-walking, and so we did until it was raising a powerful dark.

Finally we got through, and oozed out the other side, onto a little dried-over crick bed. We didn't figger the herd'd move in the night, and come morning we could start the drive back. So we bedded down.

But first we made us a fire and broke out the supplies.

Iron Head stuck a pipe in his craw and curled up in his bag closing his eyes and looking like a boss gone under for sure—it was always his way, come night at a camp.

Me and Doc just set there for a spell.

"I can't shake it," I said "All them critters, more than this child could count."

"Nature is fecund," Doc said.

"Wouldn't know about that," I told him. "But there's a powerful lot of breeding. Beaver, deer, elk, fish. And the flies and skeeters, and chiggers, too. Even up there." I pointed at the sky. "Look at that big white herd, forever roaming and twinkling down. Doc, do you reckon stars mate, too?"

"I wouldn't know," Doc mumbled. "And I don't want to find out."

"One thing's mighty dark to this child," I said. "And I been meaning to ask. Seeing that we're animals too, in a way—how is it that we never breed strong?"

"There's fifty-five of us on the Platte," Doc said. "And forty downriver, and another forty beyond. It's that way all over, Jake. Thousands of us, really."

But that's just a smidgin compared to the others," I said.

"You'd figger maybe there'd be millions."

Doc sort of sighed. "There were, once."

"You mean like in the book-stories? About the cities and all?" I let out a bark. "Don't tell me you put stock in that talk, too.

“It’s true, Jake. Where do you think the books came from? And don’t Jed and the others take the team back to the ruins to get us guns and ammunition from the arsenals? You heard him tell about it with his own lips.”

“I just can’t swaller,” I said. “I always figgered he aimed to stuff us with his talk. Thousands of stone *tipis* in one place, wagons that used to run without a team—it don’t hold with Nature.”

“That’s why everything turned out this way,” Doc told me. “Men didn’t hold with Nature. Jake, I’ve read it in the books. And my father told me what *his* father told him—*he* was alive and saw it when he was a boy. Once there were cities and towns and villages everywhere.”

“What happened?” I asked. “What became of the people, and why?”

Iron Head opened his eyes for a spell. “People go under,” he grunted. “Heap bad medicine called nuclear fission.”

“That’s right,” Doc said. “They got to fighting, and they had weapons. Atomic bombs, nerve-gas. The cities were razed, the survivors scattered. And most of them didn’t last long. They couldn’t live in the open, they couldn’t cope with the wilderness. They died of disease and plague, they froze in the winter, and they starved—”

“I don’t rightly make out the meaning of the words,” I told him. “But I’ll allow you’re talking straight about the fighting and maybe rough ways of killing. Only that part about the starving, now—how could they starve, with all this game here for the taking?” Doc smiled. “You’d find it all in the books if you’d only be willing to learn,” he said. “Iron Head knows the story, don’t you?”

The Injun opened his eyes again. “No story,” he said. “Only biological inevitability to restore the balance of nature.”

Sometimes that Injun-talk, or book-talk, whichever it is, gets me down. But Doc set up a hoot and a holler.

“Probably right at that,” he said. “Here’s the way it was, Jake. Originally, all this land was much the way you see it now. Then men came and settled. They killed the beaver, they fished the streams, they hunted buffalo and game until many animals were almost extinct. That means there were hardly any left.

"When the last wars were fought, there were only a few deer, a few buffalo, a few bear left roaming out here in the wilderness. There wasn't a wild creature east of the Big River at all. And the gas and the bombs and the plague killed off most of the domestic animals in the east—cows and sheep and pigs and horses. We've got a few horses here, but we're lucky; and you know we're trying to breed more, because we need them. Some day we might try plowing."

"Plowing for squaw men," Iron Head muttered. "Agricultural perversion."

"Don't worry," Doc said. "It wouldn't be for a long time yet—and then, only if we have to." He turned to me again. "But I was telling you about what happened. There was no game, and people died. Only a few of us managed to survive, out here in the open. A few hunters, trappers, Indians."

Doc always talked like that—he never did learn how to say "Injun" rightly, but stuck to book-talk. Only I knew what he palavered anyhow.

"Gradually they came together, in little groups, for protection. The old crafts came into their own, the old speech-ways and folks-ways that had somehow survived through two centuries of so-called civilization."

"You mean city life?" I asked.

"City death," Iron Head said. And Doc nodded again.

"We managed. We survived. And the remaining animals bred again, unrestricted and unmolested. They multiplied quickly, so that for the past generation it's been like old times once more. Plenty of game, and the timber's come back up north, too. There's nothing left of the cities but ruins, and not even ruins where most of the villages and homesteads were. Life is simple again. Crude, perhaps, but—peaceful."

Sometimes I get the savvy of what Doc says, even if I can't understand the foferaw lingo. I knew what he meant now when I lay back and looked up at all the stars, blazing away.

Doc lay back, too. It was quiet and easy, ’cept for a kayote howling off on the ridge.

“You never did say about the stars, Doc,” I told him. “Reckon they mate? Reckon anybody’s ever hit out to take a look?”

Doc frowned. “What made you say that?”

“Nothing. Only I was figgering maybe if they had some of them contraptions you showed me once in the books—what they call them, rackets?”

“Rockets,” Doc said. “No, men didn’t reach the stars. But there at the last, they were to try for the moon. Some said that when war began, they actually took off and—”

He closed lip, fast. Then he sat up.

I sat up too. Iron Head was already standing, with his rifle cocked at the ready.

So it was no mistake. We’d all seen it and heard it at the same time.

It was like a big orange flash in the sky, over to the east. And like a big thunder. Only it wasn’t lightning and it wasn’t a storm. Something had hit, back there, near the river.

“Meteor!” Doc muttered.

“What’s that?” I asked.

“I can’t tell you now. Come on.”

“Where you aiming to sashay to?”

“I want to see if I can find it.” He was folding his pack. Iron Head stamped out the fire.

“All right,” I said. “Reckon this child’s not bent on rumping it far behind. But that thunder’s getting nigher.”

“Wait.” Doc held up his hand.

“He’s correct!”

“Correct, hell,” I said. “I’m right! Just you clean the grubs out of your ears.”

We could all hear it then, roaring closer and closer. And now Iron Head was squinting off a ways, and he turned back and yelled, “Buffler! The noise—they're stampeding this way!"

No mistake the herd was pounding prairie. I could see them plain now, black moving on black, in a crazy wave.

Nobody had to tell this boss what to do, or the others, either. We spread out and dropped to our knees. Then we started pumping lead.

"Fire together!" Doc hollered. "Else they can't hear you!" So we fired together, or tried to. And the wave come on, faster and faster, and I could see horns tossing in the starlight, and I could hear the bawling and panting and the drumming, and it did something to me inside so that I sort of tight-ended up all over because I knowed for a fact now that we were going under. Unless they heard, and stopped.

They did, and not a mite too soon, either. The lead bulls reared up, and then they crashed back against the cows, and for a minute they was milling around, raising dust. Then it was like a wave dying off into ripples that stretched way back, far as eye could see. And then they quieted down again, ready to graze.

Doc stood up, rubbing his knees. "That was close," he said. "Think we're safe to walk through?"

Iron Head nodded. "Come," he said. "We sing ONWARD CHRISTIAN SOLDIERS."

So we walked back through the herd, and we sang ONWARD CHRISTIAN SOLDIERS and ROLL ME OVER IN THE CLOVER and NO BUSINESS LIKE SHOW BUSINESS and everything Doc could remember teaching us from the books at the rendezvous-sings at springtime.

It was even worse, in the dark, with the eyes and horns sort of glittering and skittering all around us, but we went on. And on. And on.

Until we got back to the top of the ridge, where we'd come over in the afternoon, and looked down and saw it.

"God!" said Doc.

"The devil!" said Iron Head.

"What is it?" I asked.

But neither answered me, they just stared. I stared, too. This child has seen a heap of sights, but never nothing like this. Never nothing like this big shiny shape setting there on the prairie, bigger'n all the lodges and *tipis* put together.

We stared, and that's how it happened—how he fixed it so's he snuck up behind us. And we not noticing until the light come.

It like to of blinded me, at first, and I could scarce make out to aim. Then the voice come, and I knowed it was a man.

"Don't shoot," he said. "We're friends."

Iron Head was drawing a bead too; he's got Injun-eyes.

"Put it down," said the man. "We're friends, don't you understand?" He sort of jerked his head away, and it come over me he was talking to other men behind him. "Maybe they don't understand English."

All at once I could see. The light was coming from a little stick he held in his hand. It wasn't a torch, and it wasn't any kind of oil lamp I ever heard tell of. But the light was bright as day, and he stood there with three others behind him, all alike as chips under a buffalo. Wearing floppy duds all of one piece, but with bare heads; the hair cut short the way tads wear it, and not a beard to be seen. That's the truth of it—four overgrown nippers is what they shined up to be.

This child's not one to run from tads, and neither is Iron Head. We dropped our guns.

"That's better," said the one with the light. "Maybe they do understand, after all."

"Of course we understand," Doc told him. "It's just that you startled us."

"We startled *you?"* The man grinned. "That's a good one. But look, this Is no way to meet. After all, it's a historic occasion. The very least it rates is a 'Doctor Livingstone, I presume', or something similar."

"Then you say it," Doc told him. "My name happens to *be* Doctor Livingstone."

It was book-talk, but I got the hang of it; enough to remember every word, even what I couldn't rightly reckon out. Because it was strange, I set store by it.

Doc pointed to us. “This is Iron Head,” he said. “And that’s Jake.”

“I’m Captain Buckton,” the big tad told us. “And this is Lieutenant Thorne, Ensign Winters, Ensign Taylor.” He nodded our way. “These Indians understand English?”

“Dry your gap,” I spoke up. “I ain’t no Injun. Iron Head here’s a true Cree, but I allow as he can palaver better’n you hosses.”

“No offense,” Captain Buckton said. He took Doc by the arm. “It’s wonderful to find you here. We didn’t know what to expect—whether there’d be any life at all, for that matter. I presume you realize we’ve just landed. You can see the rocket down there.”

Doc nodded. “We noticed it. But I could scarcely believe my eyes—there are still rumors preserved, of course, yet I never knew if anyone had succeeded in taking off.”

“Tell you anything you want to know,” Buckton said. “But come on, let’s go down to the ship and make ourselves comfortable.”

I looked at Doc and he nodded, so we trailed along. We let him and this Captain Buckton do all the jawing.

Now here’s the meat, without hide or fat or guts or lights—according to the way Buckton skinned it. What Doc used to tell about was gospel-true, about the war and all. Seems there had been men that were set on hitting the sky trail, and they’d built these rockets out in the desert. When things got bad, they decided it was time to get shut of earth, and the whole kit and kaboodle took off for the moon.

Some made her, some went under. According to this Buckton—and Doc, he didn’t make him out a liar—things on the moon ain’t natural-like. He allowed as how your weight changes, and it’s hard to breath, and there’s no critters up there. But the ships that landed brought means of making air which I don’t rightly comprend, and they dug lodges underground. From the talk, I figger they made regular cities like the old ones down here, only all underneath, living like prairie-dogs. For a while it was all leather and no fleece for them, until they got the hang of how to live that way. Then they got so's they could mine metals and make things and set up a way of making their air. and raised a bellyfull by some means—the word for it is "hydroponics", whatever that is. They knew how to get water too; Doc asked a powerful lot of questions, but it's of no nevermind to me. Main thing is, they done it.

All this time they figgered earth for a goner. But they were breeding up again, and wanted to fan out, and for some seasons there was a heap of talk about coming back.

It weren't easy to ready a rocket for the trip, from all Buckton said, and they only hoped to make do with it once they got her.

Doc asked aplenty about that part, but I got lost in the brush right off—anyhow, they pieced it out and took off for earth. Buckton and six others, there were, come to scout and see what had happened back here. They was a longspell on the way, and here they were.

"But where are we?" Buckton asked.

"Just west of the Platte," Doc told him. "Our group is located across the river, to the east of here."

And he told him how many we were, and about the other lodges we knew or reckoned tell of, and how we made out. And about the game, and how we lived; the hunting and fishing and trapping and trading and all.

Buckton kept asking the questions now, and no matter what Doc told him, he said, "Incredible," which means, near as I can figger from the way he used it, "Well, I'll be goddamned."

Then it was *our* turn to say it, because we come to the rocket ship. Called it a ship, but it was no more proper boat than it was anything else. Didn't even look like the *pictures* of ships in Doc's books. More like a big bullet with fins on, stood up on end with a metal door to it that opened up so's you could mosey into a lodge. No sense fixing to tell what was inside—reckon nobody'd believe it anyway. But this child saw it, and he's not making brag.

Anyways, we met up with the other three in the rocket and all of us settled down for a palaver.

They didn't squat rightly; had some metal contraptions to ease their rumps into. Didn't talk rightly, either, and as for chawing! They passed out what they called coffee and I couldn't go it. Had the taste of hot painter-water, and even Doc set it aside.

But Doc seemed to know about most of this doing, and so did Iron Head, even if he froze over. I kept waiting for the game to flush, and it did.

Buckton said, "This is wonderful! From what you tell us, we'll have no trouble at all. We've got light cruising gear, and of course we intend to survey as much of the area as we can. But if things are as you say, that's almost unnecessary. We can return, make a report, and implement other ships for a full-scale landing."

"Don't know as I follow you," Doc said.

"Isn't it obvious? We're coming back! Look—according to the latest survey, we number in excess of forty thousand. We've got technicians, and can train more. Excellent data on microfilm covering the field. All we need to do is go into the ruins and rebuild. We can set up the factories again, get transportation in order—communications, too. We'll use your group, every group we can find; we need plenty of manpower. Of course, we're prepared to set up a fiscal system and restore governmental control. I presume there are other men like yourself scattered around the country; men who have sufficient intelligence and elementary education to assist us. You'll be a great help."

"Will we?" Doc asked.

"Why not? Surely you can see the advantages. It's going to be like pioneering days all over again for a while, but modern technology is on our side. In a generation or so we should be able to restore the world to where it was before the war."

"Suppose our people don't want it that way?" Doc spoke out. "Suppose they like things this fashion?"

"Don't worry, we'll educate them to the advantages," Buckton said. "And there's more than one way of dealing with savages. We've no atomic weapons, of course, but we're well armed. And the next ships can bring the necessary bacterial cultures—just in case of emergency, you understand."

"I understand," Doc said. And he fetched a sigh.

"Well, don't look so down in the mouth about it," Buckton told him. "This is a great day. It's the beginning of a fresh start for earth. You should be proud, as I am proud, of an opportunity to participate."

The book-talk made my skull-bones ache, and Doc wasn't looking sassy, either. "Only a generation or so until we're back to where we were before the war," he muttered. "But what assurance have you we can just stop there? This country's rich again—rich in natural resources. Timber, game, minerals. There'll be trouble." Lieutenant Thorne laughed. "Not under proper control," he said. "We won't repeat our mistakes. We've learned the errors of democracy. Men have become civilized at last."

"Strange." Buckton shook his head. "We've gone so far in three generations on the moon. And you have relapsed into such barbarism. Living like mountain men and Indians." He cocked an eye at Iron Head. "I mean—"

"You mean no races," Iron Head said. "No creeds. No money. No taxes. No war. No economic problems. No greed, no intolerance, no worship of dollars or machines. Just freedom and plenty for all. That's barbarism. Also happiness."

"He talks!" Lieutenant Thorne said.

"Sure, I talk. I talk book-English and I talk heap plenty *pidgin,* too. I live in one world, but I've read about the other. Enough to be sure that I prefer the world I live in."

Buckton nodded at me. "And you?" he asked. "What do you think? Remember, you're a white man—not a savage."

I scratched my thatch. "Ain't much difference atween the two, I figger. Anyways, Iron Head's right. We got all we can ever use. No ruckus, nothing this child's agin."

Buckton shrugged. "I can't understand it," he said. He looked at Doc. "How could you permit such a state to exist? You say there are others like you in settlements scattered all over. Men with books, men with background and comprehension. Surely you could have done something to keep things going. Education, reclamation. What became of the railroads, the telegraph, telephone, radio? Why haven't you gone down into the cities, rebuilt? Why this—this—"

He got so red, looked as if he'd swallered a hornet. Doc sort of grinned.

"I talk to other men from other settlements," he said. "Iron Head and Jake don't know this, but we get together for meetings regularly, once a season or so. And we've considered a lot of possibilities. The railroad tracks are still here, but they're overgrown. Telegraph and telephone poles went down a generation ago. The cities are ruins. We send in to the arsenals from time to time for ammunition and that's about all."

"Now I understand," Buckton said. "You lack the equipment, the engineering facilities. Well, we'll provide that. You'll be surprised how quickly we can get things running again."

"But the education," Lieutenant Thorne busted in. "Why didn't you combat this savagery?"

"Because it survived," Doc told him. "When the educated men took the world into war, they died. The strays, the outcasts, the remnants of atavistic social orders proved their fitness then. They lived in harmony with Nature. We've encouraged that, since then. If a man like Jake prefers illiteracy, that's his business. The important thing is that Iron Head and Jake and I, and all those like us or unlike us. have managed to exist in peace together. To me, that's true progress."

"Buckton stood up. "Then I take it you're not in sympathy with our plans? You have no intention of collaborating in reclaiming the world?"

"Nobody reclaims the world," Doc said. "Because nobody had a right to claim it in the first place. Not governments or priests or money-lenders or scientists or engineers. It belongs to everyone. That's the way I think, and Iron Head and Jake and all of us. And so do others in our settlement, and all the settlements. You'll find that out."

"We intend to." Buckton nodded at Lieutenant Thorne and the others. "Tomorrow we'll cross the river and talk to your people. Then we'll head on and visit elsewhere. We'll survey the cities, go east. Maybe we'll find sentiment as you say it is. But it doesn't matter. Because we'll come back. We'll come back with the right men and the right weapons.

"You can't turn back the clock, you know. Once before this was a wild frontier until progress came. You know what happened then."

"Yes." Iron Head stood up, too. "Buffler died. My people died. Everything died but white men. So they ended up killing each other. Progress stinks!"

Buckton got riled, then. "All right. I guess we know where we stand, then. And under the circumstances, you'll realize it will be necessary for me to detain you here until we've investigated your settlement—"

Doc shrugged. "I expected as much."

"What does he mean, Doc?" I asked.

"He means we're prisoners," Doc told me.

Then I got the drift of it. Buckton gave a signal and the men eased around behind us, two to each. They all had these pesky little guns out.

Doc looked at me and I looked at Iron Head, and he said, "Let's raise hair."

So I tromped out and caught the nearest tad on the shinbone and then I twisted the gun up and like to blast his head off. Other one let fire but only singed me, and I took and threw him up agin Lieutenant Thorne. Doc was clubbing with his rifle when Buckton come nigh, but he didn't have to stop—Iron Head broke him in half over one of them metal rump-holders. That left two, and we just took aim and let the rifles chaw guts.

It was powerful smokey in there when we finished, and Iron Head didn't really get riled when Doc stopped him from counting *coup.*

So we left them with hair after all and just hightailed it out of there.

The ship, or rocket, or whatever it was, looked mighty peaceful in the moonlight. I squinted up.

"Reckon they really come from there?" I asked Doc.

"That's right, Jake."

"Allow as they'll ever send another ship down!"

"Doubt it, if this one doesn't come back."

"Wonder what them bosses from across river will say when they set eyes on this contraption. Figger any of them will get ornery on account of thinking we did wrong?"

Iron Head grunted. "Maybe they no see it."

Doc and I looked at each other. That was Injun-talk, for fair, and straight talk, too.

We knew what to do.

We headed west again and come to the buffalo herd. It was a long hike back, singing all the way. Songs like WHEN IRISH EYES ARE SMILING and ALEXANDER'S RAGTIME BAND and the only one that ever makes sense to me, the one with the words a man can understand—HOME ON THE RANGE. I guess we sang that one pretty near all the way.

Then we got through the herd, rumbling and restless-like in the dark, and come out the other side.

We fanned.

Then we let fly. We loaded and reloaded, and we kept it up until they were on the run. All of them, a million of them, heading east away from the guns and the noise.

We run after.

But you couldn't keep up, not with a million buffalo, a million of them roaring and charging and pouring over the ridge and down into the valley. Into the valley where the rocket pointed at the sky.

All we could do was to get to the top of the ridge in time to see it happen. They didn't stop for the rocket, of course. They kept on going. The moon was bright now, and this child could see everything plain. This child saw them hit the rocket.

Their hoofs made powerful thunder, and then there was a crash when a thousand hit the side of the rocket and a hundred thousand came on behind, driving them through.

One minute the rocket stood there, like a big bullet—and the next minute, the bullet exploded. This child's never seen sight or heard sound to match. It was something to shake the sky.

Doc and Iron Head and me, we dropped in our tracks and closed our eyes agin the light. It rained buffalo meat and hunks of metal.

"They brought explosives," Doc said.

"Sure," Iron Head grunted. "That white man's burden."

I stood up again, watching the critters wheel and fan out for the river.

"Come on," I hollered. "They'll make for the river from the lodges to get meat, now. We better hump along and help.

So we did, and that was the end of it.

Doc and Iron Head and this child let on that it was one of them meteors that fell and exploded, and there weren't a contrariwise notion, ever. Because the rocket was gone. Nothing but a big burned-out hole in the prairie.

Like I say that was two-three seasons back. I been across just lately, and I see the grass is coming in again. It'll be right pretty in another season or so.

Meantimes, the buffalo are grazing over the plain, like they used to do in the old days.

It's a mighty peaceful sight.

THE END

WIdower’s Whalebone Stays

Elizabeth, the Virgin Queen,
Was chaste to the end of her days.
Although they hurt you, keep your virtue

With WIDOWER’S WHALEBONE STAYS

Widower's Copal Varnish

Lescoffier, the wellknown chef,
Invariably used to garnish
Legs of ham and cans of Spam

With WIDOWER'S COPAL VARNISH

Widower's Pneumatic Falsies

The early demure Victorian miss
Was shocked by intimate waltzes,
So each young charmer wore as armour

WIDOWER'S PNEUMATIC FALSIES

WIdower's Wonderful Bloomers

Where Florence Nightingale kept her lamp
Is a source of many rumours.
She had it concealed, it's now revealed

In her WIDOWER'S WONDERFUL BLOOMERS

Widower's Wonderful Diapers

When the Serpent caused Adam and Eve to fall
(Was it python, asp, or viper?)
They had to leave Eden and shortly were needin'

WIDOWER'S WONDERFUL DIAPERS

WIdower's Wonderful Pills

Moses climbed up Mount Sinai
For ten tablets to cure mankind's ills;
But when internal growls distress your bowels

Buy WIDOWER'S WONDERFUL PILLS!

Widower's Asbestos Trousers

The Boy stood on the Burning Deck:
That fire was a wow, sirs
Yet he could, without doubt, have sat it out

With WIDOWER'S ASBESTOS TROUSERS

Widower's Porcelain Dentures

The Mona Lisa's secret smile
Which hints of gay adventures
Could be more daring if she were wearing

WIDOWER'S PORCELAIN DENTURES

Widower's Piano Accordions

As Salome shed her seven veils
With Herod as an audience
They beheaded John to the sound of one

Of WIDOWER'S PIANO ACCORDIONS

WIdower's Soap

The Ancient Mariner, lost at sea
Had almost given up hope.
What washed this explorer safely ashore? A

Bar of WIDOWER'S SOAP

Widower's Cod Liver Oil

Spartacus led the revolt of the slaves;
He refused to give a royal
Tyrant his whim to embalm him

In WIDOWER'S COD LIVER OIL

Have Tux—Will Travel

Class? That's Bobby Baxter's middle name! The proof? Space Operas, Inc!

Takeoff, N.M.
August 1, 2042

DEAR WALLIE:

I suppose you caught my ad In *Variety* by this time. Well, it's strictly legit.

I'm really on Mars-time now!

Bet you couldn't believe it when you read it, huh? Seeing as how you know I been turning down big deals to play Luna Circuit for years—everybody in the biz after me, you know. Could of named my own price, but I told you how I felt. You don't catch Bobby Baxter wasting the old personality on a bunch of space-happy colonials with crater-dust in their ears. Let 'em drool over me on feelio if they got the urge.

Which reminds me, before I forget it. Caught your act from Las Vegas on feelio the other night. You still haven't got the angle, kid. Stinx. Flash, but oldstyle. Cut out the monolog intro. Build up the tap routine. Hell, if I had the time I could teach you the ropes. Book you into 4D—I got a lot of contacts, you know.

But I can't. The rocket leaves tomorrow. They'll be rolling out the red carpet for yours truly. If they got any red carpets up there.

Well, kid, I suppose you're wondering what made me do it. You say to yourself, here's this Baxter character, got all the personality in the world, hottest comic working today. What's he mean by jetting off to a place where they never even heard of feelio, still goof around with oldfashioned live acts?

That's the answer, sweetheart. Live acts. I've never worked with a real audience: I guess nobody has in the last 50 years. Get some kicks out of the idea—like in tire old days, comics all wanted to play *Hamlet*. By the way, some day I may get around to that little thing just for the hell of it. I never scanned any Shakespeer but the old creep must of had something or you wouldn't hear all this talk. Of course, I figure I'd have to rewrite, on account of from what they tell me this Shakespeer was pretty sad when it comes to gags. But I could make a real Bobby Baxter Production out of it. Kill the people.

But I was telling you how I come to take this Mars deal. Sam Fogle put me up to it. He books the Luna Circuit, you know, and he bumped into me the other day in NY and started to bend my ear about this new outfit of his he's setting up on Mars. Calls it *Space Operas, Inc*.

Seems he was up there a couple years back, looking over the situation, and he says the Martians are just ape for human shows. Of course, they never see anything except those old Cinerama movies the museum boys took along years ago. But he talked around, and he found out they got their own entertainment. Just like a hundred, two hundred years ago here on earth. Traveling performances, even circuses. And all of it from poverty. Give you some idea of what goes over big with the Martians, they like carneys the best. Oldstyle carneys, under canvas, like they used to have here back in the live days. Sideshows with all native talent of course. Fogle says they're pretty sad. Not a jet character in the biz. And their musicians are even worse. Don't know their ASCAP from a hole in a piccolo.

Just to show you how bad it is, they still have geeks. You know that old carney pitch they tell about—some guy with a fright-wig down in a pit, gnawing the head off a chicken. Of course, they don't call them geeks up there, and they don't have any chickens. Fogle said they're called *porlce.s* and the thing they use in the act is a sort of bird like a chicken, a *gotch.* But it's the same deal.

DON'T SOUND like much, does it, kid? But you know old Fogle. He kept telling me about the big new theater they got at Inport. Says there's fifty showhouses all over, the Martians built themselves. And he went and took an option on all of them—the works. Rebuilt the stage of the Inport house, too. That's how much he thinks of the possibilities up there.

Fogle told me he figured he could start something just like regular old earthstyle vaudeville with live acts. Turn that Inport house into the big deal. You ever hear about the Palace, kid? Jettest thing in the biz a hundred years ago. In NY, when they had the old Keith-Orpheum time or whatever they called it, the thing was to play the Palace. If you went over there, you were in for life.

Well, that's Fogle's deal. He's going to bring show biz to Mars, with live acts. Got to be live, because even if he could get a feelio transmitter up there, or a 4D setup, the natives couldn't see it. On account of the three eyes, you know. They don't get the pictures right. Cinerama works, but not very well. Live stuff is what they really go ape for.

Fogle says it's a gamble, but he stuck plenty into it and thinks whoever gets there first will make millions.

Naturally, when it come to digging up the right talent, he thought of me. That's why he cornered me in his office.

So I told him absolutely no dice, did he think I was going to give up a sweet setup here to go running off on a 9G rocket and do my stuff for a bunch of yokels with three eyes? If they go for *porlees* nibbling a *gotch,* how're they gonna appreciate real Bobby Baxter material?

And so forth and so on. Then this Maxine Miller toddled in. I don't know if you ever caught her or not, she's done some stuff on feelio out east but not much on account of her material being a little bit on the blue side. But believe me, kid, she is pure hydrazine. Racked, stacked and shellacked. With the slickest figure I ever laid hands—I mean eyes on. If you know what I mean, kid.

Up to that time I wasn't what you'd call sold on the deal. Until I find out this Maxine Miller is signed with Fogle to open at Inport.

Of course she was just about crazy when she found out who I was. I don't blame the kid, and I got to hand it to her for covering up the way she did. But anybody could see she was dying to work with a name like me.

So I told Fogle yes, I could make it. And when was he planning to take off?

I flipped when he said next Tuesday—that's tomorrow, kid. I asked him what about the rest of the lineup? And he said he was going to book whatever he could pick up on short notice.

Well, you don't catch Bobby Baxter with his socks down, not me. I smelled a right angle here, and I pitched it. Told Fogle he was in for a lot of trouble, booking blind. And if he figured on opening at Inport soon as he arrived, he wouldn't have any time for rehearsals. Guess the poor guy was so excited he'd forgotten all about that: seeing as how he'd already gone ahead and started to beat the drums up there about the first night performance.

I told him why not leave the whole deal to me? For a couple of extra bills a week, I'd take charge of the works—book some flash to pad out, make it a regular Bobby Baxter Production. Of course, the idea would be to build the show around me, and maybe spot this Maxine Miller. But you got to have at least four other acts to warm up a house.

Well, Fogle was so happy to get me he said okay, anything I wanted. But not over three yards for the talent budget until we see how the thing goes. Maybe we'll find out they just like acrobats or something. Got to sort of feel our way.

Which I am now doing. With the acts all this afternoon, at auditions. And which I plan to do tonight, when I have dinner with this Maxine Miller. If you get what I mean.

So that’s the pitch. I figured you’d like to know. Will drop you another line when I get a chance. Right now I got to do an off to Buffalo.

Your ever-loving

Bobby

In Free Fall

August 6, 2042

DEAR WALLIE:

Catch this flash stationary! Really class, yes? I never knew they had this space-travel duked out so much. Why this ship is just like a fancy hotel, good as anything in Las Vegas or Miami B. And this artifical gravity or whatever they call it works perfect. Never know you were in free fall at all.

I got the best cabin on board, even better than Fogle’s. Spend a lot of time here, too, with Maxine. Sweetheart, I’m really in, let me give you the word on that!

Whole deal is jet. Couple floops, but they don’t amount to much. You know how it is, everything at the last minute—had a little trouble picking up any acts. Seems like I couldn’t dig up enough singles who were at liberty, ready to take off on a route like this without any advance notice.

And I was spotting singles, on account of the budget. Only about eight showed up for the audition, and they were mostly dogs. Some kind of singer—grand opera, I guess she called it—old fatso with a set of pipes like the whole Rocketeer Chorus Line going at once. Out, of course. Told her this was *Space Opera,* not grand opera or whatever.

Got a pretty good juggler—name of Martini, he does some trick stuff with cocktail glasses, bottles. Ends up balancing a bottle on his head and a glass on his nose; pours from the bottle into the glass, then flips an olive into it.

You happen to know a hoofer named Terry King? He’s along. Does that trick dance on stilts. Strictly a filler, but he works cheap. Also a fellow name of Murphy, he has a flash balancing act, slack wire with a bicycle. Juggles indian clubs with his feet. Reason I picked him is to give those three-eyed rubes something to talk about. Figure they never saw any faster action than a *porlees* chasing a *gotch.* This is the kind of stuff that will panic the house.

Had a little trouble getting Murphy's equipment through. Seems they're pretty fussy about weight on these flights, and his rig and bike and clubs are pretty heavy.

They told me okay, they'd take it, but couldn't I leave out one of my trunks? I raised plenty hell about that', believe me—if you think I'm going to open on Mars without a decent wardrobe, you're space-happy, I told the guy. Why, this is practicly what you might say a historical ocassion and all. Besides, I got to have at least six changes because the way I got it figured I'm m.c.-ing the show and filling in all down the line.

That's on account of getting stuck with Mary and Jim.

THEY'RE THE floops I was going to tell you about. Like I say, there was this trouble picking up acts at liberty on such short notice. Tell the truth, by the time I run through the audition the afternoon before we took off I was getting kind of desparate, if you know what I mean. Because it looked like I would not be able to put on a real Bobby Baxter Production.

Just at the last minute these two kids show up—this Mary and Jim. Mary Connor and Jim Hastings. Team, but I never heard of them. She sings and he does instrumental solos, I asked where they'd been booking and they told me radio. Radio, for crying out loud, did you ever hear of such a thing? I didn't even know they still *had* radio. But I guess, out in the mountains or wherever they run a couple stations or whatever they're called. And these two kids do some kind of act.

Well, like I said, I was strickly on the ropes, no more time for auditions, and a hole in the show to fill. I looked them over. Young stuff, and they were just about frantic to get a chance like this. Matter of fact, the guy—Hastings—said he'd go along just for the ride and the billing. The girl was willing to take peanuts. Not much on looks, no wardrobe, and on top of it she wears glasses, yet. You know what I mean, spectacels, the real oldstyle deal, not even contact lenses.

Maxine was sitting next to me when this pair come up and it was all she could do to keep from going into histerics over the getup. I wanted to turn thumbs down, of course, but Maxine gave me the word. Pointed out the bill was weak on music and maybe this guy Jim Hastings could accompany her. She asked him and he said sure, he thought so.

So I said what about the girl, and Maxine said she did not think there was any comparison between their styles. It might make a good contrast. What she was really thinking, of course, was how she'd look compared to this Mary creep—I know how these babes figure.

But anything to keep Maxine happy. I wound up telling Mary and Jim okay, and we'd put together a show and rehearse it on the flight out.

That's what we did.

And that's why I got fill-ins to worry about.

Held a rehearsal the first day. Martini's great. So is the hoofer, and so is Murphy—the slack-wire guy. All novelty acts, but with my line of chatter for a buildup, I'll make those triple-eyed yahoos think they're seeing the greatest show on earth. You know that old Bobby Baxter charm, sweetheart. I can really pour it on.

But even I couldn't save Mary and Jim.

Here's the payoff.

Mary's a singer, all right. And what do you suppose she sings? Ballads. That's it, brother. Ballads, yet. Oldies. Stuff you never even heard of, from before feelio. *Moon in My Heart*. *Crater of Love*. *Thunder and Roses*, I ask you. And talk about projection—there ain't. She just stands there and sings.

You ought to see Maxine move into one of her specialties to get the difference. She does this material of hers, something called *Air on a G-String,* a strip, but very refined like. And believe me, brother, she projects.

Even though I don't know what in hell we'll do about an accompanist, unless I double in brass for her.

Because the rest of the payoff is this guy Jim Hastings. The musician. *He* says. Know what kind of a musician he is? Turns out he plays a mouth-organ! That's a harmonicker, son. Bet you never even heard of it. Oldfangled dingus you play by putting in your mouth and blowing on it. Not a horn. Hell, I can't describe it to you. And the sounds it makes you wouldn't want to know about. What a floop!

This is what I got to work with. On a Bobby Baxter Production! Well, not me. Minute I got a squint at their act, I yanked it. Maxine or no Maxine, nobody's going to louse me up on a historical ocassion. Not this Thespeean.

I told Fogle, I said, "By Xst, I'll do the whole show myself before I let them get out there. If I got to drag out every routine in the book!"

And it looks like I'm doing just about that. Carrying the whole performance on my back. But I promised Maxine she could have at least four numbers, and that makes her happy.

One thing I will say, she sure warmed up to me in a hurry. Once she got a chance to know me.

I been seeing she gets plenty chances, too. Last night for the gag of it I turned off the artificial gravity in my cabin. You wouldn't believe what happened unless you tried it yourself sometime. Which I advise you to do. If you can ever latch onto something like this Maxine, it's worth the trip.

Well, I got to go offbeam now. She just rapped on the door and it looks like we're going into free fall again.

Your ever-loving

Bobby

Still in Free Fall
August 9, 2042

DEAR WALLIE:

This is a quickie.

We land tomorrow and Fogle's as itchy as grandpa's underwear. I don't blame the guy, he's got all this dough tied up. But there's nothing to worry about. I keep telling him everything's ready to jet.

Lined up a pretty good little show, if I do say so myself. Rehearsing every day in the lounge, and last night we let the rest of the passengers in for a sort of preview. They went absolutely ape over the whole deal.

Of course, I was in top form. I'm doing my horse act—you know the routine, where I come out in this half of a horse costume. The rear half. Like I'd been going to a masquerade party only my partner stood me up. Very funny, special material stuff. Blue, but sutle. You know how sutle I can get.

Well, it murdered the people. Then I got another bit, the psichytrist bit. This one plays with a stooge, see, and I got Maxine up in the part to help me out. Can't take the time to run through it, but this ought to give you a rough idea of what it's like.

Maxine comes out on the stage and she says to me, "Hi, Bobby, what you doing these days?"

And I say, "I'm a psichytrist, see?"

Then she feeds me, "A psichytrist? That's a soft racket. All you guys do is sit around in your office waiting for patients to come in. Then you throw them on the couch, ask a lot of stupid questions, and charge a big price."

So I say, "Just a minute, now. First of all, you gotta understand we go to school for seven years. Then we gotta be inturns. Then we specialise. And those questions aren't stupid, either.

"For instance, I might ask a patient, what is it that a dog does in the back yard that you wouldn't want to step in? The answer is, he digs a hole.

"Or I ask, what does a woman have two of that a cow has four of? The answer is, feet.

"Or I ask, what does a man do standing, a woman sitting, and a clog on three legs? The answer is, shakes hands.

"But believe me—you'd be surprised at some of the crazy answers I get to those questions!"

That's only a part of it, I cleaned it up a lot, because if there's one thing I'm aiming at it's class. Class all the way—that's a Bobby Baxter trademark you might say.

And I just fractured the passengers. Shows it pays to be sutle.

That’s what I was telling this Mary Connor fluff. She’s been hanging around a lot lately, ever since I gave her and Jim the sad word about their act. Says she’s awful sorry, and maybe I could sort of give her a couple pointers. They’ll be going right back to earth on the next flight out when we land, and I guess this is her only chance to see a real Big Timer operate.

Also—this is rich, son—the poor creep is gone on me. You never saw anything like it, the way she’s got it. Can’t leave me alone. I have a helluva time shaking her when Maxine and I want to be together, which is usually.

She even tried to fix her hair, and the other day she come around without her glasses on. So nearsighted she kept bumping into stuff. I had to laugh. Of course, I just give her the old freeze routine, but she keeps coming back.

Her partner, this Jim Hastings, he don’t know what to make of it all. He went and got himself engaged to Mary or something awful like that, and now he’s from nowdiere and besides he’s burned because I tossed the act out.

The little rat even went to Sam Fogle behind my back the other day and put up a beef, claims he’s got a contract and he wants to show.

Naturally Sam told me about it, and I gave him the third word on it—nobody plays without my say-so. I want this deal to be perfect.

Understand *Variety* and *Billboard* will both be covering die opening, and I got my deputation. No floops for Bobby Baxter.

I never even let on to Jim that I knew he squawked. But just to teach him a lesson, I leen forceing myself to play ip to this Mary a little. Not nuch, because I can’t stand he creep, but enough so as to jive him a hard time.

You know me, kid, I’m too soft-hearted to really pull any tough stuff. Besides, Maxine’s all the time watching me these days.

Well, I got no more timet;o write now. Tomorrow we and and tomorrow night is he historical moment when show biz really comes to Mars.

I know you’ll be waiting to catch those writeups in *Vanity* and *Billboard*. But don’t jo green over them, kid, who mows, someday you may be ip there yourself. If you ever earn the secret like I did, vhich is to develop that old oveable personality.

Your ever-loving

Bobby

Inport Mars
August 11, 2042

DEAR WALLIE:

Well, I suppose the reviews are out.

Of course I havn't seen them up here, but before you or anybody else gets funny ideas, let me give you the real inside story of what happened.

If you think I'm taking this lying down, you're crazy. When I get through with this double-crossing rat of a Sam Fogle he won't be able to book a stag smoker date in the crater of Abulfeda or wherever.

I knew the whole setup was a phoney from the word go. That's what I wrote you, remember? If it wasn't I'm so much of a idealis, I never would of listened to that lieing dog. Sneaking around and appealling to my better nature about how I owe it to the biz to pioneer and bring high class entertainment to Mars! And all the while giving me that pitch about how they were ape for real talent. Why, those three-eyed apes would not recognise real talent if it come up and did a bump-and-grind right under their noses. If they had noses, that is.

Noses they ain't. Also all of them are about seven feet tall, or did you know that? And they smell funny. They eat funny food, too, and none of them smoke or drink or weed, either—bunch of creeps, if you ask me. Even if you don't ask me, I'm telling you. No wonder they got such lousy taste! It's pitiful, kid, believe me.

Well, I don't see the sense of giving you a long song and dance about what's wrong with the Martians—you ought to be able to figure for yourself when you read the reviews. (Hell, they're so dumb they don't even know they're Martians. Really! They call themselves be some damned thing. I'm surprised those foureigners even had even sense to learn English, the way they talk.) Everything they do is crazy.

I was so excited about landing and all that I didn't notice much at first. They had a big reception arranged for us when we come off, and Sam Fogle sure had lined up some sweet publicity. The house was a sellout three hours after the box office opened, at noon. Some of these three-eyed goops had stood in line since the night before to get tickets.

Sam was plenty enthused when he found that it. Two carneys playing in town at the same time, and they were dying, absolutely. No biz at all. Everybody wanted to see Bobby Baxter.

"This is it," he told me. "Your gonna roll 'em in the aisles tonight."

Roll 'em in the aisles. That's a hot one! One account of this big showhouse he was talking about, the best spot in Inport, doesn't even *have* any aisles. Or seats, either. So help me, it's that way all over this damned planet. Martians never sit down, it turns out—and they watch their shows standing up!

Ever try to play to a standing house? You know it's murder. I told Fogle that, but he said it didn't matter, we had to make allowances for strange customs. When in Rome, do the Romans before they do you, or however it is.

Mostly he was worried about the gravity. Maybe you never heard of it, but another thing on this dizzy planet, they got the wrong kind of gravity. I can't explain it, not being what you call technicle-minded, but up here I only weigh 60 pounds.

So help me, that's right! 60 pounds I weigh, on account of their lousy gravity. Bounce right up in the air when I walk fast if I'm not careful.

Fogle told me we better have a rehearsal before showtime, to get used to the difference. Which was a good idea, except that the local press wanted interviews all afternoon. Catch me lousing up a million dollars worth of free publicity. Not on your life, kid. So I did the sensible thing and got buddy with the press. So the first show might be a little ragged, I figured these yahoos would never notice. Just so we got the press on our side.

Get that. I sacerficed a chance to rehearse, just to make sure Fogle got the breaks on publicity. I gave up a run-through only because I wanted to see that everybody in Inport knew about our show. I spent right up until supper time telling these three-eyed reporters all about the performance—where I used to play on earth, what I did in feelio, how I socked ’em in 4D, anything they wanted to know. Even what I liked to eat, intimate stuff, just to make friends you might say.

I did all that. Then I went backstage and set the cues, and saw to it that all the props were there, and I even had to tell the stoop stagehands how to handle the lights. Troubles? You got no idea what troubles. I never had no love for the Union before, but when I see what these threeeyed foureigners call a lighting setup, it’s murder.

Anyhow, I got it all set, just knocked myself out for Fogle’s sake—and all the time he’s interfering, keeps telling me what about giving Martini and the other a chance to practise with their props, nagging at me like I could do eight things at once when I’m trying to help Maxine zip into her breakaway dress. Anybody with sense would of walked out on him right then and there.

But you know me, kid, always good-natured. So I just kept on working and politely told him he should keep his goddam yap shut and let me run this show. Because it was my show, and he’d better not forget it, or he’d end up going out there all by himself and doing a two-hour single.

After that he calmed down, and I managed to line things up. I had this Jim and Mary working carrying props and stuff, and I put Jim in charge of the dumb juicers—at least he knew enough to handle lighting cues, I figured. Mary was hanging around, so I made her unpack my stuff and line it up and sew up my horse costume which got kind of tore in the trunk.

Then it was time, and the house was packed—one thing I got to say about this business of no seats, you can sure jam in a crowd that way.

So we opened.

I SUPPOSE you figure I’m going to hand you a lot of excuses now, because of the writeups. But why should I? You know me, kid. You’ve caught me enough times to realize Bobby Baxter never gave a bad performance in his life. The show must go on, that's my motto.

And you can tell anyone who asks you that you got it straight from me—Bobby Bakter did a great show that night. I was never better, believe me.

Can *I* help it if I was working the lousiest audience in the world? (World? In the universe, yet!)

Can I help it if this jerk juggler of a Martini uses liquor props in front of a crowd that never heard of drinking and don't know what he's doing? Is it my headache if his olive keeps floating around in the air on account of this crazy Martian gravity business?

Am I to blame for gravity, already? I ask you, I? So when Terry King does his tap-dance on the stilts and he can't keep them on the ground, what am I supposed to do—run out there and tie weights to the things?

Is it my fault if Murphy's indian clubs sail forty feet in the air when he tries to juggle them, and his bike falls off the slack wire and hits him on the head just when he's got his neck twisted in the rope?

He didn't even get hurt bad, and the way he looked would get a yak out of any audience—except these three-eyed schmoes. They don't even think a pratt-fall is funny.

On top of it, Maxine Miller has to rope me into, accompanying her on a midget piano when she goes on for her first strip. You think gravity can louse up a juggler—let me tell you, kid, just watch a peeler work with a breakaway costume that usually doesn't unzip unless you tug three times harder than you need to up here. She just gave one little yank and the whole damn outfit come off her. Like somebody unveiling a statue. Had to finish up her first number behind the piano, and like I say, it was only a midget piano. That sure gave those three-eyed characters a triple eyeful, but do you think they appreciated it? Not them, brother! They couldn't dig her songs at all.

Ignorant, that's the trouble with them. Just plain ignorant. I kept trying to hoke it up. Like I said, I never did a better job—I was out there myself most of the time, just knocking myself out with routines. Gave ’em everything in the old book.

Talk about a cold house! They just plain didn’t it. The hind end of a horse routine, for instance. I guess none of them had ever *seen* a horse. Just couldn’t figure out what the gags were about. And that psichytrist bit, they could not catch that one either.

Right in the middle of it, they sat down. That’s right, they all started to sit down!

I nearly flipped, and when I come off there was Fogle busting a gut in the wings. “You’re dead!” he kept yelling. “Know what that means? When they sit down on you up here, it’s like they walked out on you back on earth.”

I said, “Who told you that malar-key?” and he said, “Jim Hastings. He’s been talking to some of the natives on the stage crew. They all say your show stinx.”

Then he started to go into a heavy routine, but I shut him up in a hurry. I told him I was sick and tired of beating my brains out for an unapprecaitive audience, and if he knew anybody who could do a better job, he’d better start looking them up in a hurry. Because as far as I was concerned, he could take his show and shove it into the next rocket leaving for earth.

That scared hell out of him, believe me. He kept moaning.

“What can we do? Got an hour to go and nothing left. You got to save this turkey.”

I told him it was all his fault, which it was, and the best thing I could think of was for him to go out there and tell his three-eyed vaudeville lovers they could get their money back.

WELL, you know Sam Fogle, how he is when it comes to facing an audience. Full of big talk about how everybody else should go out and knock ’em dead, but when it comes to him, he’s scared to blow his nose in a public phone-booth.

So he begged me, I should go make the announcement. Of course I just laughed at him.

Then this Jim Hastings comes up and says he’ll do it. Which is okay by Fogle.

And out he goes, only he double-crosses me. Flo doesn’t make any announcement. Instead, he starts going into his act. Of all the hammy tricks you ever heard of, this is the worst! Goes right out there with this harmoniker of his and cuts loose. You never heard such a blat in your life.

Before I know it, he’s done two numbers and those creeps are beginning to stand up again. Then he waves into the wings and out comes Mary, of course, wearing her glasses yet because she’s in such a hurry she forgot to take them off.

Know what she looked like, she looked like one of those Martians with an eye missing. On account of the glasses frames giving her that big, frog-eyed look they all have. Maybe they *thought* she was a Martian, because they started to hiss.

Did I tell you hissing is the way they applaud up here? Well, it is. Talk about *crazy!*

What’s the sense of trying to explain it? Right away they go into one of their own routines. Never heard anything like it, never. Joe Miller stuff, with Martian switcheroos, yet.

Like, “Why does a cross a canal?” And “Why do *mortcogleps* wear red suspenders?”

Brother! I ask you!

And then Mary starts to sing, all that corny ballad stuff, and Jim slobbers into his mouth-organ or whatever, and they have to keep coming back for encores. Never heard such hissing. The crowd ends up by throwing vegetables at them—which is something almost never heard of, because vegetables are so hard to get up here. Like showering them with diamonds, yet. . . .

One hour and forty minutes they improvise out there, and when we ring down the curtain it's a madhouse. Fogle wants to go on tour right away, but he can't, because the show is sold out three months in advance, including sitting-room only. (That's right, kid, when they can't get standing room, some of them are willing to sit on the railings of the balcony.)

Martini, Terry King and Murphy are going back on the next flight. I guess Maxine is going, too—let me tell you one thing, kid, a dame has no gratitude, and listening to her talk you'd think I had personally loused up her act. So let her go.

Not me, though. If Sam Fogle thinks he can get away with this, he's space-happy. Nobody's putting on a Bobby Baxter Production without Bobby Baxter. He's not going to run a full show featuring just that broken-down harmoniker player and a corny girl singer. Even if I did say I was quitting, I got a contract.

So no matter what the papers say, don't you worry, kid. He can't do this to me. I'll sue!

Your ever-loving

Bobby

Do-punk, Mars
August 30, 2042

DEAR WALLIE:

Just time for a line between shows.

That's right, I'm working again—you never thought they could kick Bobby Baxter out of show business, did you?

Of course you know they tried. It must of been in the papers. These damn space-lawyers are no good, wouldn't even issue an injunktion—or anything. So Fogle's going bigger than ever here.

Last I heard, he's sending-back to earth for a whole flock of radio performers, got agents out scouring the woods for these kind of acts—calls them "hill billys" or something. Bringing up an all girl accordion band yet, and something called Uncle Hezzy's Barn Dance, which you can imagine.

This dame Mary won't even give me a tumble any more. When I found out the score on trying to collect my back pay from Fogle, I went around to see her and turned on the old charm a little. But like I said before, dames are ungrateful. What a freeze I got! She's so stuck-up, ever since the Martian females started this fad of imitating her, wearing copies of her spectacels with three lenses yet.

All right, let them have their fun. It won't last. It'll be just like on earth—once you get a hick audience started, they get educated up to better things. In a year or two this corny stuff will be dead, and they'll be crying for real class. Which I can give them.

Believe me, I didn't have any trouble getting a job. All I had to do was shine around to one of the carnivals and they grabbed me.

It's nothing fancy, but I got to make enough for my return fare, and I've never been afraid of trouping, you know that kid. Outfit I'm with plays a lot of burgs out in the sticks, but that's good experience. Only this business of eight performances a day sure can get you down when you're not used to it.

If I can just stick it out for a year or so, like I said, I'll really show them a few things—Fogle, those smart guys on *Variety,* everybody!

Your ever-loving

Bobby

P.S.: I BEEN thinking it over. I just come from doing another performance, and maybe I better not plan on any year up here.

Look, kid, if you could send me the dough for my return fare, that's all I need. Once I get back to earth there's no problem—you know me, hottest act in the biz. I'll see that you get your money back right away. Just send it c/o General Delivery at lnport, because I'm heading out of this lousy carney tonight.

Between the two of us, I just can't take it any longer. Eight shows daily, yet! If you had to eat eight *gotch* a day, you'd know what I mean.

Bobby

1956

I Like Blondes

*of course, it’s all a matter of taste,*nothing more. It’s a weakness with me, I suppose. My friends have their own opinions: some are partial to brunettes or redheads, and I suppose that’s all right. I certainly don’t criticize them in the least.

But blondes are my favorites. Tall ones, short ones, fat ones, thin ones, brilliant ones, dumb ones—all sorts, sizes, shapes and nationalities. Oh, I’ve heard all the objections: their skin ages faster, they have peculiar personalities, they’re giddy and mercenary and conceited. None of which bothers me a bit, even if it’s true. I like blondes for their special qualities and I’m not alone in my weakness. I notice Marilyn Monroe hasn’t done too badly in general favor. Nor Grace Kelly.

Enough of this; after all, I’m not apologizing. What I do is my own business. And if I wanted to stand on the corner of Reed and Temple at 8 o’clock at night and pick up a blonde, I owed no apologies to anyone.

Perhaps I was a bit obvious and over dressed for the occasion. Perhaps I shouldn’t have winked, either. But that’s a matter of opinion, too, isn’t it?

I have mine. Other people have theirs. And if the tall girl with the page-boy cut chose to give me a dirty look and murmur, “Disgusting old man,” that was her affair. I’m used to such reactions, and it didn’t bother me a bit.

A couple of cute young things in blue-jeans came sauntering along. Both of them had hair like Minnesota wheat, and I judged they were sisters. Not for me, though. Too young. You get into trouble that way, and I didn’t want trouble.

It was a nice, warm late spring evening. Lots of couples out walking. I noticed one blonde in particular—she was with a sailor, I recall—and I remember thinking to myself that she had the most luscious calves I've ever seen. But she was with a sailor. And there was one with a child and one with a party of stenographers out on the town for a night, and one I almost spoke to, until her boyfriend came up suddenly after parking the car.

Oh, it was exasperating, I can tell you! It was beginning to seem as though everybody had his blonde but me. Sometimes it's like that for weeks, bill I'm philosophical about such things.

I glanced up at the clock, around nine, and concluded that I'd best be on my way. I might be a "disgusting old man" but I know a trick or two. Blondes are where you find them.

Right now, I knew, the best place to find them would be over at Dreamway. Sure, it's a clime-a-dance hall. But there's no law against that.

There was no law against my walking in and standing there at the back before I bought tickets. There was no law to prevent me from looking, from sorting out and selecting.

Ordinarily, I didn't much care for these public dance halls. The so-called "music" hurts my ears, and my sensibilities are apt to be offended by the spectacle of dancing itself. There is a vulgar sexual connotation which dismays me, but I suppose it's all a part of the game.

Dreamway was crowded tonight. The "operators" were out in force; filling-station attendants with long sideburns, middle-aged dandies incongruous in youthfully-styled "sharp" suits, wistful little Filipinos and lonesome servicemen on leave. And mixing and mingling with them, the girls.

Those girls, those hostesses! Where did they get their dresses—the crimson dayglow gowns, the orange and cerise abominations, the lowcut black atrocities, the fuchsia horrors? And who did their hair—poodle-cuts and pony-cuts and tight ringlets and loose Maenad swirls? The garish, slashing red-and-white makeup, the dangling, bangling cheap jewelry gave the effect of pink ribbons tied to the horns of a prize heifer.

And yet, there were some prize heifers here. I don’t mean to be crude in the least; merely honest. Here in the reeking cheap-perfume-deodorant-cigarette-smoke-talcum scented mist of music and minglement, strange beauty blossomed.

Poor poetry? Rich truth! I saw a tall girl with the body of a queen, whose eyes held true to a faroff dream. She was only a brunette, of course, but I’m not one to adhere to blind prejudice. There was a redhead whose dancing was stiff and stately; she held her body like a white candle surmounted by a scarlet flame. And there was a blonde.

Yes, *there* was a blonde! Quite young, a bit too babyishly plump, and obviously a prey to fatigue, but she had what I was looking for. The true, fairhaired type, bred blondely to the bone. If there’s one thing I can’t stand, it’s a fake blonde. Dyed hair, or the partial blonde who becomes a “brownette” in her late twenties. I’ve been fooled by them before, and I know.

But this was a real blonde, a harvest goddess. I watched her as she swept, in unutterable boredom, around the floor. Her dancing-partner was a clod; visiting rancher, I’d guess. Expensively dressed, but with that telltale red neck rising out of the white collar of his shirt. Yes—and unless my eyes deceived me, he was chewing on a toothpick as he danced!

I made my decision. This was it. I went up and bought myself three dollars’ worth of tickets. Then I waited for the number to end.

They play short numbers at Dreamway. of course. In about a minute the clamor ceased. My blonde was standing on the edge of the floor. The rancher broke away, apparently determined to buy more tickets.

I walked over to her, displayed my handful. “Dance?” I asked. She nodded, scarcely looking at me. She *was* tired. She wore an emerald green gown, low-cut and sleeveless. There were freckles on her plump arms and —intriguingly enough—on her shoulders and down the neckline to the V. Her eyes seemed green, but that was probably the dress. No doubt they were actually gray.

The music started. Now I may have given the impression that, since I dislike dance halls and dancing, I am not particularly adept at the ballet of the ballroom. In all modesty, this is far from the case. I have made it my business to become an expert dancer. I find it inevitably to be of help to me in establishing contacts.

Tonight was no exception.

We weren't out on the floor thirty seconds before she glanced up and looked at me—really looked at me, for the first time.

"Gee. you're a good dancer!"

That "Gee" was all I needed. Together with her rather naive tone of voice, it gave me an immediate insight into her character and background. Small-town girl, probably, who quit school and came to the city. Perhaps she came with some man. If not, she met one shortly after her arrival. It ended badly, of course. Maybe she took a job in a restaurant or a store. And then she met another man, and the dance-hall seemed easier. So here she was.

Quite a lot to adduce from a single exclamation? Yes. but then I've met so many blondes in similar situations, and the story is always the same: that is, if they're the "Gee!" type. And I'm not deprecatory in the least. I happen to like the "Gee!" type best of all.

She could tell that I liked her, of course, from the way I danced. I almost anticipated her next remark. "There's life in the old boy yet."

I smiled, not at all resentful. "I'm younger than I look." I winked. "You know, I could dance with you all night—and something tells me that's not a bad idea."

"You flatter me." But she looked worried. That was the whole idea. She believed me.

I gave her just under a minute for the thought to take hold. Then I pulled the switch. "I wouldn't fool you," I told her. "I'm like all the other men you meet—just lonely. I'm not going to ask if we couldn't go somewhere and talk, because I know the answer. You're paid to dance. But I happen to know that if I buy, say, ten dollars' more worth of tickets, you can get off. And we can sneak off for a few drinks." I winked again. "Sitting down."

"Well, I don't know——"

"Of course you don't. But I do. Look, if you have any worries about me pulling a fast one, I'm old enough to be your grandfather."

It was obvious, and she considered it. She also considered the delightful prospect of sitting down. "I guess it's OK." she murmured. "Shall we go, Mr.——?"

"Beers." I said.

"What?" She checked a giggle. "Not really."

"Really. Beers is the name. Not the drink. You can drink anything you like, Miss——"

"Shirley Collins." Now the giggle came out. "Sort of a coincidence, don't you think? Beers and Collins."

"Come on. what are we waiting for?"

I steered her over to the edge of the floor, went to buy my tickets and made the necessary arrangements with the manager while she got her coat. It cost me an extra five for his tip. but I didn't begrudge hi in the money. We all have to eat, you know.

She didn't look bad at all, once she had some of that mascara washed off. Her eyes *were* gray, I discovered. And her arms were soft and rounded. I escorted her quite gallantly to the bar down the street and hung up her coat when we found a nice, quiet back booth.

The waitress was one of those scrawny, sallow-laced brunettes. She wore slacks and chewed gum: I'd never consider her for a moment. But she served her purpose—drinks, rather. I ordered rye on the rocks and she brought the two glasses.

I paid her, not forgetting to tip, because I'd be wanting prompt service. She snapped her gum in friendly acknowledgement and left us alone. I pushed my drink over to Shirley.

"What's the matter?" she said.

"Nothing. It's just that I don't indulge."

"Now, wait a minute, Mr. Beers. You aren't trying to get a girl loaded, are you?"

"My dear young lady—please!" I sounded for all the world like an elderly college professor admonishing his class. "You don't have to drink if you don't want to."

"Oh. that's OK. Only you know, a girl has to be careful." The way she downed the first rye belied her words. She toyed with the second glass. "Say, this can't be much fun for you, sitting and watching me drink."

"If you only knew," I said. "Didn't I tell you I was lonely? And wanted someone to talk to?"

"A girl hears some funny lines, but I guess you're on the level. What'll we talk about?"

That was an easy one. "You." From now on I didn't even need to think about what I was saying. Everything proceeded automatically. My mind was free to consider her blondeness, her ripe and ample richness. Why should anyone insist on the presence of a brain in a body like that?

I certainly didn't. I was content to let her ramble on, ordering drinks for her whenever the glass was empty. "And honest, you have no idea what that grind does to your feet——"

"Excuse me a moment," I said. "I must say hello to an old friend."

I walked down to the other end of the bar. He had just come in and was standing there with a lovely Negro girl. Ordinarily I wouldn't have known him, but something about the way he kept staring at her tipped me off.

"Hello," I said, softly. "See you're up to your old tricks."

"Look here!" He tried to appear arrogant, but he couldn't hide the fright. "I don't know you."

"Yes you do," I told him. "Yes you do." I pulled him away and put my mouth to his ear. When he heard what I had to say he laughed.

"Dirty trick, trying to scare me, but I forgive you. It's just that I didn't expect to see you here. Where you located?"

"Something called the Shane Apartments. And you?"

"Oh, I'm way outside town. How do you like her?" He nudged me and indicated his girl.

"Nice. But you know my weakness." We both laughed.

"Well," I concluded, "I won't disturb you any longer. I just wondered if you were making out all right."

"Perfectly. No trouble at all."

"Good," I said. "We've got to be extra careful these days, with all that cheap publicity going around."

"I know." He waved me along. "Best of luck."

"Same to you." I said, and walked back to the booth. I felt fine.

Shirley Collins felt fine, too. She'd ordered another drink during my absence. I paid and tipped the waitress.

"My, my!" the blonde gushed. "You certainly do throw your dough around."

"Money means nothing to me," I said. I fanned five twenties from the roll. "Here—have some."

"Why, Mr. Beers! I couldn't, really." She was positively drooling. "Go ahead," I urged. "Plenty more where that came from. I like to see you happy." So she took the money. They always do. And, if they're as high as Shirley was, their reactions are always the same.

"Gee, you're a nice old guy." She reached for my hand. "I've never met anyone quite like you. You know, kind and generous. And no passes, either."

"That's right." I drew my hand away. "No passes."

This really puzzled her. "I dunno, I can't figure you out, Mr. Beers. Say, by the way, where'd you get all this money?"

"Picked it up," I told her. "It's easy if you know how."

"Now you're kidding me. No fooling, what do you do for a living?"

"You'd be surprised." I smiled. "Actually, you might say I'm retired. I devote all my time to my hobbies."

"You mean, like books or paintings or something? Are you a collector?"

“That’s right. Come to think of it. maybe you’d like to get acquainted with my collection.”

She giggled. “Are you inviting me up to see your etchings?”

I went right along with the gag. “Certainly. You aren’t going to pretend that you won’t come, are you?”

“No. I’ll be glad to come.”

She put the five twenty-dollar bills in her purse and rose. “Let’s go, Pappy.”

I didn’t care for that “Pappy” stuff at all—hut she was such a luscious blonde. Even now, slightly tipsy, she was wholly delectable. What the young folks call “a real dish.”

A half-dozen stares knifed my back as we walked past the bar on our way outside. I knew what they were thinking. “Old dried-up fossil like that with a young girl. What’s the world coming to nowadays?”

Then, of course, they turned back to their drinks, because they really didn’t want to know what the world was coming to nowadays. Bombs can drop, saucers can fly, and still people will sit at bars and pass judgements between drinks. All of which suits me perfectly.

Shirley Collins suited me perfectly, too. at the moment. I had no difficulty finding a cab. or bundling her inside. “Shane Apartments,” I told the driver. Shirley snuggled up close to me.

I pulled away.

“What’s the matter. Pappy—don’t you like me?”

“Of course I do.”

“Then don’t act as if I was gonna bite you.”

“It’s not that. But I meant it when I said I had no—er—intentions along such lines.”

“Sure, I know.” She relaxed, perfectly content. “So I’ll settle for your etchings.”

We pulled up and I recognized the building. I gave the driver a ten-dollar bill and told him to keep the change.

“I can’t figure you out, Mr. Beers,” Shirley said—and meant it. “Way you toss that moola around.”

“Call it one last fling. I’m leaving town shortly.” I took her arm and we stepped into the lobby. The self-service elevator was empty. I pressed the button for the top floor. We rose slowly.

On the way up, Shirley sobered suddenly. She faced me and put her arms on my shoulders. “Look here, Mr. Beers. I just got to thinking. I saw a movie once anti—say, what I mean is, way you hand out dough and talking about leaving town and all—you aren’t sick, are you? I mean, you haven’t just come from the doctor and heard you’re gonna die front some disease?”

Her solicitude was touching, and I didn’t laugh. “Really,” I said, “I can assure you that your fears are groundless. I’m very much alive and expect to stay that way for a long time to come.”

“Good. Now I feel better. I like you, Mr. Beers.”

“I like you. too. Shirley.” I stepped back just in time to avoid a hug. The elevator halted and we got out. I led her down the hallway to the stairs.

“Oh, you have the penthouse!” she squealed. Now she was really excited.

“You go first.” I murmured.

She went first. At the top of the stairs she halted, puzzled. “But there’s a door here—it’s the roof or something.”

“Keep going,” I directed.

She stepped out on the rooftop and I followed. The door closed behind us, and everything was still.

Everything was still, with a midnight stillness. Everything was beautiful, with a midnight beauty. The dark body of the city stretched below us, wearing its neon necklaces, its bracelets and rings of incandescence. I’ve seen it many times from the air, many times from rooftops, and it’s always a thrilling spectacle to me. Where I come from things are different. Not that I’d ever care to trade—the city’s a nice place to visit but I wouldn’t want to live there.

I stared, and the blonde stared. But she wasn't staring at the streets below.

I followed her gaze to the shadow of the building abutment, to the deep shadows where something shimmered roundly and iridescently in the darkness. It was completely out of sight from the surrounding buildings, and it couldn't be seen at first glance from the doorway here on the roof. But she saw it now, and she said, "Gee!"

She said, "Gee! Mr. Beers—look at that!"

I looked.

"What is it, a plane? Or—could it be one of those saucer things?"

I looked.

"Mr. Beers, what's the matter, you aren't even surprised."

I looked.

"You—you knew about this?"

"Yes. It's mine."

"Yours? A saucer? But it can't be, you're a man and——"

I shook my head slowly. "Not exactly, Shirley. I don't really look like this, you know. Not where I came from." I gestured down toward the tired flesh. "I borrowed this from Ril."

"Ril?"

"Yes. He's one of my friends. He collects, too. We all collect, you know. It's our hobby. We come to Earth and collect."

I couldn't read her face, because its I came close she drew away.

"Ril has a rather curious hobby, in a way. He collects nothing but *D'*s. You should see his trophy room! He has a Bronson, three Bakers and a Beers—that's the body I'm using now. Its name was Ambrose Beers, I believe; he picked it up in Mexico a long time ago."

"You're crazy!" Shirley whispered, but she listened as I went on. Listened, and drew away.

"My friend Kor has a collection of people of all nations. Mar you saw in the tavern a while ago—Melanesian types are his hobby. Many of us come here quite often, you know, and in spite of the recent publicity and the danger, it’s an exhilarating pastime.” I was quite close to her now, and she didn’t step back any further. She couldn’t—she stood on the edge of the roof.

“Now, take Vis,” I said. “Vis collects redheads, nothing but redheads. He has a magnificent grouping, all of them stuffed. Ril doesn’t stuff his specimens at all—that’s why we can use them for our trips. Oh. it’s a fascinating business, I can tell you! Ril keeps them in preservative tanks and Vis stuffs them—his redheads. I mean. Now as for me, I collect blondes.”

Her eyes were wide, and she could scarcely get the words out for panting. “You’re—going to—stuff me?”

I had to chuckle. “Not at all, dear. Set your mind at rest. I neither stuff nor preserve. I collect for different reasons entirely.” She edged sideways, toward the iridescent bubble. There was nowhere else to go, and I followed closely, closely.

“You’re—fooling me——” she gasped.

“No. Oh. my friends think I have peculiar ideas, but I enjoy it this way. There’s nothing like a blonde, as far as I’m concerned. And I ought to know. I’ve collected over a hundred, so far, since I started. You are number one hundred and three.”

I didn’t have to do anything. She fainted, and I caught her, and that made things just perfect—no need to make a mess on the roof. I merely carried her right into the ship and we were off in a moment.

Of course people would remember the old man who picked up Shirley Collins in the dance hall, and I’d left a trail of money all over town. There’d be an investigation and all that. There almost always was an investigation.

Hut that didn’t bother me. Ril has many bodies for use besides old Beers, whoever he might have been. Next time I’d try a younger man. Variety is the spice of life.

Yes. it was a very pleasant evening. I sang to myself almost all the way back. It had been good sport, and the best was yet to come.

Hut then, I like blondes. They can laugh at me all they please—I'll take a blonde any time. As I say, it's a matter of taste.

And blondes are simply delicious.

You Got To Have Brains

The mysterious Mr. Goofy was building something. An A-bomb? A spaceship? Stakowsky knew—and he hadn't a brain in his head.

Few indeed are the science fantasy writers who can swing on a golden trapeze—and with miraculous ease—from the Pleiades and the blue infinite to flop-houses and murder in a gin mill setting. When the amazing Robert Bloch is determined to terrify us as he did in THE SCARF *and* YOURS TRULY, JACK THE RIPPER *we can only lean back in awe and let his incredible brilliance speak for itself. A fantasy chiller this, by a top-echelon craftsman in the genre.*

MUST HAVE been about a year ago, give or take a month, when Mr. Goofy first showed up here on the street.

We get all kinds here, you know—thousands of bums and winos floating in and out every day of the year. Nobody knows where they come from and nobody cares where they go. They sleep in flophouses, sleep in bars, and in doorways—sleep right out in the gutter if you let 'em. Just so's they get their kicks. Wine jags, shot-an'-beers, canned heat, reefers—there was one guy, he used to go around and bust up thermometers and drink the juice, so help me!

When you work behind the bar, like me, you get so you hardly notice people any more. But this Mr. Goofy was different.

He come in one night in winter, and the joint was almost empty. Most of the regulars, right after New Year's, they get themselves jugged and do ninety. Keeps 'em out of the cold.

So it was quiet when Mr. Goofy showed up, around supper time. He didn't come to the bar, even though he was all alone. He headed straight for a back booth, plunks down, and asks Ferd for a couple of hamburgers. That's when I noticed him.

What's so screwy about that? Well, it's because he was lugging about ten or fifteen pounds of scrap metal with him, that's why. He banged it down in the booth alongside him and sat there with his hands held over it like he was one of them guards at Fort Knock or wherever.

I mean, he had all this here dirty scrap metal—tin and steel and twisted old engine parts covered with mud. He must have dug it out of the dumps around Canal Street, someplace like that. So when I got a chance I come down to this end of the bar and looked this character over. He sure was a sad one.

He was only about five feet high and weighed about a hunnerd pounds, just a little dried-up futz of a guy. He had a kind of a bald head and he wore old twisted-up glasses with the earpieces all bent, and he had trouble with the hamburgers on account of his false choppers. He was dressed in them War Surplus things—leftovers from World War I, yet. And a cap.

Go out on the street right now and you'll see plenty more just like him, but Mr. Goofy was different. Because he was *clean*. Sure, he looked beat-up, but even his old duds was neat.

Another thing. While he waited for the hamburgers he kept writing stuff. He had this here pencil and notebook out and he was scribbling away for dear life. I got the idea he was figuring out some kind of arithametics.

Well, I was all set to ask him the score when somebody come in and I got busy. It happens that way; next thing I know the whole place was crowded and I forgot all about Mr. Goofy for maybe two hours. Then I happen to look over and by gawd if he ain't still sitting there, with that pencil going like crazy!

Only by this time the old juke is blasting, and he kind of frowns and takes his time like he didn't care for music but was, you know, concentrated on his figures, like.

He sees me watching him and wiggles his fingers like so, and I went over there and he says, "Pardon me—but could you lower the volume of that instrument?"

Just like that he says it, with a kind of funny accent I can't place. But real polite and fancy for a foreigner.

So I says, "Sure, I'll switch it down a little." I went over and fiddled with the control to cut it down, like we do late at night.

But just then Stakowsky come up to me. This Stakowsky used to be a wheel on the street—owned two-three flophouses and fleabag hotels, and be comes in regular to get loaded. He was kind of mean, but a good spender.

Well, Stakowsky come up and he stuck his big red face over the bar and yelled. "Whassa big idea, Jack? I puts in my nickel, I wanna hear my piece. You wanna busted nose or something?"

Like I say, he was a mean type.

I didn't know right off what to tell him, but it turned out I didn't have to tell him nothing. Because the little guy in the booth stood up and he tapped Stakowsky on the shoulder and said, real quiet, "Pardon me, but it was I who requested that the music be made softer."

Stakowsky turned around and he said, "Yeah? And who in hell you think you are—somebody?"

The little guy said, "You know me. I rented the top of the loft from you yesterday."

Stakowsky looks at him again and then he says, "Awright. So you rent. So you pay a month advance. Awright. But that ain't got to do with how I play music. I want it should be turned up, so me and my friends can hear it good."

By this time the number is over and half the bar has come down to get in on the deal. They was all standing around waiting for the next pitch.

The little guy says, “You don’t understand, Mr. Stakowsky. It happens I am doing some very important work and require freedom from distraction.”

I bet Stakowsky never heard no two-dollar words before. He got redder and redder and at last he says, “You don’t understand so good, neither. You wanna figure, go by your loft. Now I turn up the music. Are you gonna try and stop me?” And he takes a swipe at the little futz with his fist.

Little guy never batted an eye. He just sort of ducked, and when he come up again he had a shiv in his hand. But it wasn’t no regular shiv, and it wasn’t nothing he found in no junk-heap.

This one was about a foot long, and sharp. The blade was sharp and the tip was sharp, and the little guy didn’t look like he was just gonna give Stakowsky a shave with it.

Stakowsky, he didn’t think so either. He whitened up fast and backed away to the bar and he says, “All right, all right,” over and over again.

It happened all in a minute, and then the knife was gone and the little guy picked up his scrap metal and walked out without even looking back once.

Then everybody was hollering, and I poured Stakowsky a fast double, and then another. Of course he made off like he hadn’t been scared and he talked plenty loud—but we all knew.

“Goofy,” he says. “That’s who he is. Mister Goofy. Sure, he rents from me. You know, by the Palace Rooms, where I live. He rents the top—a great big loft up there. Comes yesterday, a month rent in advance he pays too. I tell him, ’Mister, you’re goofy. What do you want with such a big empty loft? A loft ain’t no good in winter, unless you want to freeze. Why you don’t take a nice warm room downstairs by the steam heat?’ But no, he wants the loft, and I should put up a cot for him. So I do, and he moves in last night.”

Stakowsky got red in the face. “All day today that Mr. Goofy, he’s bringing up his crazy outfits. Iron and busted machinery, stuff like that. I ask him what he’s doing and he says he’s building. I ask him what he’s building and he says—well, he just don’t say. You saw how he acted tonight? Now you know. He’s goofy in the head. I ain’t afraid of no guys, but those crazy ones you got to watch out for. Lofts and machinery and knives—you ever hear anything like that Mr. Goofy?"

So that's how he got his name. And I remembered him. One of the reasons was, I was staying at the Palace Rooms myself. Not in the flops, but a nice place on the third floor, right next to Stakowsky's room. And right upstairs from us was this loft. An attic, like. I never went up there, but there was a stairs in back.

The next couple of days I kept my eyes open, figuring on seeing Mr. Goofy again. But I didn't. All I did was hear him. Nights, he kept banging and pounding away, him and his scrap metal or whatever it was, and he moved stuff across the floor. Me, I'm a pretty sound sleeper and Stakowsky was always loaded when he turned in, so it didn't bother him neither. But Mr. Goofy never seemed to sleep. He was always working up there. And on what?

I couldn't figure it out. Day after day he'd come in and out with some more metal. I don't know where he got it all, but he must have lugged up a couple of thousand pounds, ten or fifteen each trip. It got to bothering me because it was the sort of a mystery you feel you've got to know more about.

Next time I saw him was when he started coming into the place regular, to eat. And always he had the pencil and notebook with him. He took the same booth every night—and nobody bothered him with loud music after the story got around about him and his shiv.

He'd just sit there and figure and mumble to himself and walk out again, and pretty soon they were making up all kinds of stories about the guy.

Some said he was a Red on account of that accent, you know, and he was building one of them there atomic bombs. One of the winos says no, he passed the place one night about four ayem and he heard a big clank like machinery working. He figured Mr. Goofy was a counterfitter. Which was the kind of crazy idea you'd expect from a wino.

Anyways, the closest anybody come was Manny Schreiber from the hock shop, and lie guessed Goofy was a inventor and maybe he was building a rowbot. You know, a rowbot, like in these scientist magazines. Mechanical men, they run by machinery.

One day, about an hour before I went on shift, I was sitting in my room when Stakowsky knocked on the door. “Come on,” he says. “Mr. Goofy just went out. I’m gonna take a look around up there.”

Well, I didn’t care one way or the other. Stakowsky, he was the landlord, and I figured he had a right. So we sneaked up and he used his key and we went inside the loft.

It was a big barn of a place with a cot in the comer. Next to the cot was a table with a lot of notes piled up, and maybe twenty-five or thirty books. Foreign books they were, and I couldn’t make out the names. In the other corners there were piles of scrap metal and what looked like a bunch of old radio sets from a repair shop.

And in the center of the room was this machine. At least, it looked like a machine, even though it must have been thirty feet long. It was higher than my head, too. And there was a door in it, and you could get inside the machinery that was all tangled up on the sides and sit down in a chair. In front of the chair was a big board with a lot of switches on it.

And everywhere was gears and pistons and coils and even glass tubes. Where he picked up all that stuff, I dunno. But he’d patched it all together somehow and when you looked at it—it made sense.

I mean, you could tell the machine would *do* something, if you could only figure out what.

Stakowsky looked at me and I looked at him and we both looked at the machine.

“That Mr. Goofy!” says Stakowsky. “He does all this in a month. You know something, Jack?”

“What?” I says.

“You tell anybody else and I’ll kill you. But I’m scared to even come near Mr. Goofy. This machine of his, I don’t like it. Tomorrow his month is up. I’m going to tell him he should move. Get out. I don’t want crazy people around here.”

"But how'll he move this thing out?"

"I don't care how. Tomorrow he gets the word. And I'm going to have Lippy and Stan and the boys here. He don't pull no knife on me again. Out he goes."

We went downstairs and I went to work. All night long I tried to figure that machine of his. There wasn't much else to do, because there was a real blizzard going and nobody came in.

I kept remembering the way the machine looked. It had a sort of framework running around the outside, and if it got covered over with some metal it would be like a submarine or one of them rockets. And there was a part inside, where a big glass globe connected up to some wires leading to the switchboard, or whatever it was.

And a guy could sit in there. It all made some kind of crazy sense.

I sat there, thinking it over, until along about midnight. Then Mr. Goofy came in.

This time he didn't head for his booth. He come right up to the bar and sat down on a stool. His face was red, and he brushed snow off his coat. But he looked happy.

"Do you have any decent brandy?" he asked.

"I think so," I told him. I found a bottle and opened it up.

"Will you be good enough to have a drink with me?"

"Sure, thanks." I looked at him. "Celebrating?"

"That's right," says Mr. Goofy. "This is a great occasion. My work is finished. Tonight I put on the sheaths. Now I am almost ready to demonstrate."

"Demonstrate what?"

Well, he dummied up on me right away. I poured him another drink and another, and he just sat there grinning. Then he sort of loosened up. That brandy was plenty powerful.

"Look," he says. "I will tell you all about it. You have been kind to me, and I can trust you. Besides, *k* is good to share a moment of triumph."

He says, “So long I have worked, but soon they will not laugh at me any more. Soon the smart Americans, the men over here who call themselves Professors, will take note of my work. They did not believe me when I offered to show them my plans. They would not accept my basic theory. But I knew I was right. I knew I could do it. Part of it must be mechanical, yes. But the most important part is the mind itself. You know what I told them? To do this, and to do it right, you’ve got to have brains.”

He sort of chuckled, and poured another drink. “Yes. That is the whole secret. More than anything else, you need brains. Not mechanical formula alone. But when I spoke of harnessing the mind, powering it with mental energy rather than physical, they laughed. Now we’ll see.”

I bought myself a drink, and I guess he realized I wasn’t in on the pitch, because he says, “You don’t understand, do you?”

I shook my head.

“What would you say, my friend, if I told you I have just successfully completed the construction of the first practical spaceship?”

Oh-oh, I thought to myself. Mr. Goofy!

“But not a model, not a theory in metal—an actual, practical machine for travel to the moon?”

Mr. Goofy and his knife, I thought. Making a crazy thing out of old scrap iron. Mr. Goofy!

“If I wish, I can go tonight,” he said. “Or tomorrow. Any time. No astronomy. No calculus. Mental energy is the secret. Harness the machinery to a human brain and it will be guided automatically to its destination in a moment, if properly controlled. That’s all it takes—a single instant. Long enough to direct the potential energy of the cortex.”

Maybe you think it’s funny the way I can remember all those big words, but I’ll never forget anything Mr. Goofy said.

And he told me, “Who has ever estimated the power of the human brain—its unexploited capacity for performance? Using the machine for autohypnosis, the brain is capable of tremendous effort. The electrical impulses can be stepped up, magnified ten millionfold. Atomic energy is insignificant in comparison. Now do you see what I have achieved?"

I thought about it for a minute or so—him sitting there all steamed up over his dizzy junk-heap. Then I remembered what was happening to him tomorrow.

I just didn't have the heart to let him go on and on about how his life-work was realized, and how he'd be famous in Europe and America and he'd reach the moon and all that crud. I didn't have the heart. He was so little and so whacky. Mr. Goofy!

So I says, "Look, I got to tell you something. Stakowsky, he's bouncing you out tomorrow. That's right. He's gonna kick you and your machine into the street. He says he can't stand it around."

"Machine?" says Mr. Goofy. "What does he know of my machine?"

Well, I had to tell him then.

I had to. About how we went upstairs and looked.

"Before the sheath was on, you saw?" he asked.

"That's the way it was," I told him. "I saw it, and so did Stakowsky. And he'll kick you out."

"But he cannot! I mean, I chose this spot carefully, so I could work unobserved. I need privacy. And I cannot move the ship now. I must bring people to see it when I make the announcement. I must make the special arrangements for the tests. It is a very delicate matter. Doesn't he understand? He'll be famous, too, because of what happened in his miserable hole of a place—"

"He's probably famous tonight," I said. "I'll bet he's down the street somewheres right now, blabbing about you and your machine, and how he's gonna toss you out." Mr. Goofy looked so sad I tried to make a joke. "What's the matter with you? You say yourself it works by brain-power. So use your brain and move it someplace else. Huh?"

He looked even sadder. "Don't you realize it is designed only for space-travel? And properly, my brain must be free to act as the control agent. Still, you are right about that man. He is a wicked person, and he hates me. I must do something. I wonder if—" Then you know what he does, this Mr. Goofy? He whips out his pencil and notebook and starts figuring. Just sits there and scribbles away. And he says, "Yes, it is possible. Change the wires leading to the controls. It is only a matter of a few moments. And what better proof could I ask than an actual demonstration? Yes. It is fated to be this way. Good."

Then he stood up and stuck out his mitt. "Goodbye, Jack," he says. "And thank you for your suggestion."

"What suggestion?"

But he doesn't answer me, and then he's out the door and gone.

I closed up the joint about one-thirty. The boss wasn't around and I figured what the hell, it was a blizzard.

There was nobody out on the street this time of night, not with that wind off the lake and the snow coming down about a foot a minute. I couldn't see in front of my face.

I crossed the street in front of the Palace Rooms—it must have been quarter to two or thereabouts—and all of a sudden it happened.

Whoom!

Like that it goes, a big loud blast you can hear even over the wind and the blizzard. On account of the snow being so thick I couldn't see nothing. But let me tell you, I sure heard it.

At first I thought maybe it was some kind of explosion, so I quick-run across to the Palace and up the stairs. All the winos in the flops was asleep—those guys, they get a jag on and they'll sleep even if you set fire to the mattress. But I had to find out if anything was wrong.

I didn't smell no smoke and my room was okay, and it was all quiet in the hall. Except that the back door leading to the attic was open, and the air was cold.

Right away I figured maybe Mr. Goofy had pulled something off, so I run up the stairs. And I saw it.

Mr. Goofy was gone. The junk was still scattered all over the room, but he'd burned all his notes and he was gone. The great big machine, or space-ship, or whatever it was—that was gone, too.

How'd he get it out of the room and where did he take it? You can search me, brother.

All I know is there was a big charred spot burned away in the center of the floor where the machine had stood. And right above there was a big round hole punched smack through the roof of the loft.

So help me, I just stood there. What else could I do? Mr. Goofy *said* he built a space-ship that could take him to the moon. He *said* he could go there in a flash, just like that. He *said* all it took was brains.

And what do I know about this here auto-hypnosis deal, or whatever he called it, and about electricity-energy, and force-fields, and all that stuff?

He was gone. The machine or ship was gone. And there was this awful hole in the roof. That's all I knew.

Maybe Stakowsky would know the rest. It was worth a try, anyhow. So I run down to Stakowsky's room.

After that, things didn't go so good.

The cops started to push me around when they got there, and if it hadn't been for my boss putting the old pressure on, they'd have given me a real rough time. But they could see I was sorta like out of my head—and I was, too, for about a week.

I kept yelling about this Mr. Goofy and his crazy invention and his big knife and his trip to the moon, and it didn't make no sense to the cops. Of course, nothing ever made any sense to them, and they had to drop the whole case—hush it up. The whole thing was too screwy to ever let leak out.

Anyhow, I felt rugged until I moved out of the Palace Rooms and got back to work. Now I scarcely ever think about Mr. Goofy any more, or Stakowsky—or the whole cockeyed mess.

I don't like to think about the mess.

The mess was when I ran down the stairs that night and looked for Stakowsky in his room. He was there all right but he didn't care about Goofy or the trip to the moon or the hole in his loft roof, either.

Because he was very, very dead.

And Mr. Goofy's foot-long knife was laying right next to him on the bed. So that part was easy to figure out. Mr. Goofy come right back there from the tavern, and he killed him.

But after that?

After that, your guess is as good as mine. The cops never found out a bit —not even Mr. Goofy's real name, or where he come from, or where he got this here theory about space-ships and power to run them.

Did he really have a invention that would take him to the moon? Could he change some wires and controls and just scoot off through the roof with his mental energy hooked up?

Nobody knows. Nobody ever will know. But I can tell you this.

There was a mess, one awful mess, in Stakowsky's room. Mr. Goofy must have taken his knife and gone to work on Stakowsky's head. There was nothing left on top but a big round hole, and it was empty.

Stakowsky's head was empty.

Mr. Goofy took out what was inside and fixed his machine and went to the moon.

That's all.

Like Mr. Goofy says, you got to have brains . . .

Dead-End Doctor

It’s all really very simple—if you cannot change with the times, just change the times!

THE LAST psychiatrist on Earth sat alone in a room. There was a knock on the door.

“Come in,” he said.

A tall robot entered, the electronic beam of its single eye piercing the gloom and focusing on the psychiatrist’s face.

“Dr. Anson,” the robot said, “the rent is due today. Pay me.” Dr. Howard Anson blinked. He did not like the harsh light, nor the harsh voice, nor the harsh meaning of the message. As he rose, he attempted to conceal his inner reactions with a bland smile, then remembered that his facial expression meant nothing to the robot.

That was precisely the trouble with the damned things, he told himself; you couldn’t use psychology on them.

“Sixty tokens,” the robot chanted, and rolled across the room toward him.

“But—” Dr. Hanson hesitated, then took the plunge. “But I haven’t got sixty tokens at the moment. I told the manager yesterday. If you’ll only give me a little time, a slight extension of credit—”

“Sixty tokens,” the robot repeated, as if totally unmindful of I lie interruption, which, Dr. Anson assured himself, was exactly the case. The robot was unmindful. It did not react to unpredictable factors; that was not its function. The robot didn’t set the rental figures in this office building and had no power to make decisions regarding credit. It was built to collect the rent, nothing more.

But that was enough. More than enough.

THE ROBOT rolled closer. Its arms rose and the hooklike terminals slid back the panels in its chest to reveal a row of pushbuttons and a thin, narrow slot.

“The rent is due,” repeated the robot. “Please deposit the tokens in the slot.”

Anson sighed. “Very well,” he said. He walked over to his desk, opened a drawer and scooped out half a dozen shiny disks.

He slipped the disks into the slot. They landed inside the robot’s cylindrical belly with a series of dull plops. Evidently the robot had been making the rounds of the building all day; it sounded more than half full.

For a wild moment, Dr. Anson wondered what would happen if he kidnaped the robot and emptied its cashbox. His own medical specialty was psychiatry and neuro-surgery, and he was none too certain of a robot’s anatomical structure, but he felt sure he could fool around until he located the jackpot. He visualized himself standing before the operating table, under the bright lights. *“Scalpel. . . . forceps . . . blowtorch . . .”*

But that was unthinkable. Nobody had ever dared to rob a robot. Nobody ever robbed anything or anyone today, which was part of the reason Dr. Anson couldn’t pay his rent on time.

Still, he *had* paid it. The robot’s terminals were punching pushbuttons in its chest and now its mouth opened. “Here is your receipt,” it said and a pink slip slid out from its mouth like a paper tongue.

Anson accepted the slip and the mouth said, “Thank you.”

The terminals closed the chest-panels, the electronic beam swept the corners as the wheels turned, and the robot rolled out of the room and down the corridor.

Anson closed the door and mopped his brow.

So far, so good. But what would happen when the robot reached the manager? He'd open his walking cash register and discover Anson's six ten-token disks. Being human, he'd recognize them for what they were—counterfeit.

Dr. Anson shuddered. To think that it had come to this, a reputable psychiatrist committing a crime!

He considered the irony. In a world totally devoid of anti-social activity, there were no anti-social tendencies which required the services of psychiatry. And that was why he, as the last living psychiatrist, had to resort to antisocial activity in order to survive.

Probably it was only his knowledge of anti-social behavior, in the abstract, which enabled him to depart from the norm and indulge in such actions in the concrete.

Well, he was in the concrete now and it would harden fast—unless something happened. At best, his deception would give him a few days' grace. After that, he could face only disgrace.

ANSON shook his head and sat down behind the desk. Maybe this was the beginning, he told himself. First counterfeiting and fraud, then robbery and embezzlement, then rape and murder. Who could say where it would all end?

"Physician, heal thyself," he 32 murmured and glanced with distaste at the dust-covered couch, where no patient reposed; where, indeed, no patient had ever reposed since he'd opened his office almost a year ago.

It had been a mistake, he realized. A big mistake ever to listen to his father and—

The visio lit up and the audio hummed. Anson turned and confronted a gigantic face. The gigantic face let out a gigantic roar, almost shattering the screen.

"I'm on my way up, Doctor!" the face bellowed. "Don't try to sneak out! I'm going to break your neck with my bare hands!"

For a few seconds Anson sat there in his chair, too numb to move. Then the full import of what he had seen and heard reached him. The manager was coming to kill him!

"Hooray!" he said under his breath and smiled. It was almost too good to be true. After all this time, at last, somebody was breaking loose. A badly disturbed personality, a potential killer, was on his way up—he was finally going to get himself a patient. If he could treat him before being murdered, that is.

Tingling with excitement, Anson fumbled around in his files. Now where in thunder was that equipment for the Rorschach Test? Yes, and the Porteus Maze and—

The manager strode into the room without knocking. Anson looked up, ready to counter the first blast of aggression with a steely professional stare.

But the manager was smiling.

"Sorry I blew up that way," he said. "Guess I owe you an apology."

"What?"

"When I found those counterfeit tokens, something just seemed to snap for a moment," the manager explained. "You know how it is."

"Yes, I do," said Anson eagerly. "I understand quite well. And it's nothing to be ashamed of. I'm sure that with your cooperation, we can get to the roots of the trauma. Now if you'll just relax on the couch over there —"

THE RED-FACED little man continued to smile, but his voice was brusque. "Nonsense! I don't need any of that. Before I came up here, I stopped in at Dr. Peabody's office, down on the sixth floor. Great little endocrinologist, that guy. Gave me some kind of a shot that fixed me up in a trice. That's three times faster than a jiffy, you know."

"I don't know," Anson answered vaguely. "Endocrinology isn't my field."

"Well, it should be. It's the only field in medicine that really amounts to anything nowadays.

Except for diagnosis and surgery, of course. Those gland-handers can do anything. Shots for when you feel depressed, shots for when you're afraid, shots for when you get excited, or mad, the way I was. Boy, I feel great now. At peace with the world!"

"But it won't last. Sooner or later, you'll get angry again."

"So I'll get another shot," the manager replied. "Everybody does."

"That's not a solution. You're merely treating the symptom, not the basic cause." Anson rose and stepped forward. "You're under a great deal of tension. I suspect it goes back to early childhood. Did you ever suffer from enuresis?"

"It's my turn to ask questions. What about those fake tokens you tried to palm off on me?"

"Why, it was all a joke. I thought if you could give me a few more days to dig up—"

"I'm giving you just five minutes to dig down," the manager said, smiling pleasantly but firmly. "You ought to know that you can't pull a trick like that with a cash collector; these new models have automatic tabulators and detectors. The moment that robot came back to my office, it spat up the counterfeits. It couldn't stomach them. And neither can I."

"Stomach?" asked Anson hopefully. "Are you ever troubled with gastric disturbances? Ulcers? Psychosomatic pain in the—"

The manager thrust out his jaw. "Look here, Anson, you're not a bad sort, really. It's just that you're confused. Why don't you clever up and look at the big picture? This witch-doctor racket of yours, it's atomized. Nobody's got any use for it today. You're like the guys who used to manufacture buggy whips; they sat around telling themselves that the automobile would never replace the horse, when any streetcleaner could see what was happening to business.

“Why don’t you admit you’re licked? The gland-handers have taken over. Why, a man would have to be crazy to go to a psychiatrist nowadays and you know there aren’t any crazy people any more. So forget about all this. Take a course or something. You can be an End-Doc yourself. Then open up a real office and make yourself some big tokens.”

Anson shook his head. “Sorry,” he said. “Not interested.”

The manager spread his hands. “All right. I gave you a chance. Now there’s nothing left to do but call in the ejectors.”

HE WALKED over and opened the door. Apparently he had been prepared for Anson’s decision, because two ejectors were waiting. They rolled into the room and, without bothering to focus their beams on Anson, commenced to scoop books from the shelves and deposit them in their big open belly-hampers.

“Wait!” Anson cried, but the ejector robots continued inexorably and alphabetically: there went Adler, Brill, Carmichael, Dunbar, Ellis, Freud, Gesell, Korney, Isaacs, Jung, Kardiner, Lindner, Moll—

“Darling, what’s the matter?”

Sue Porter was in the room. Then she was in his arms and Dr. Anson had a difficult time remembering what the matter was. The girl affected him that way.

But a look at the manager’s drugged smile served as a reminder. Anson’s face reddened, due to a combination of embarrassment and lipstick smudges, as he told Sue what had happened.

Sue laughed. “Well, if that’s all it is, what are you so upset about?” Without waiting for a reply, she advanced upon the manager, her hand digging into her middle bra-cup. “Here’s your tokens,” she said. “Now call off the ejectors.”

The manager accepted the disks with a smile of pure euphoria, then strode over to the robots and punched buttons. The ejectors halted their labors between Reich and Stekel, then reversed operations. Quickly and efficiently, they replaced all the books on the shelves.

In less than a minute, Anson faced the girl in privacy. “You shouldn’t have done that,” he said severely.

“But, darling, I wanted to. After all, what are a few tokens more or less?”

“A few tokens?” Anson scowled. “In the past year, I’ve borrowed over two thousand from you. This can’t go on.”

“Of course not,” the girl agreed. “That’s what I’ve been telling you. Let’s get a Permanent and then Daddy will give you a nice fat job and—”

“There you go again! How often must I warn you about the Elektra situation? This unnatural dependency on the Father Image is dangerous. If only you’d let me get you down on the couch—”

“Why, of course, darling!”

“No, no!” Anson cried. “I want to analyze you!”

“Not now,” Sue answered. “We’ll be late for dinner. Daddy expects you.”

“Damn dinner and damn Daddy, too,” Anson said. But he took the girl’s arm and left the office, contenting himself by slamming the door.

“Aren’t you going to put up that *Doctor Will Return in Two Hours* sign?” the girl asked, glancing back at the door.

“No,” Anson told her. “I’m not coming back in two hours. Or ever.”

Sue gave him a puzzled look, but her eyes were smiling.

DR. HOWARD ANSON’S eyes weren’t smiling as he and Sue took off from the roof. He kept them closed, so that he didn’t have to watch the launching robots, or note the ’copter’s progress as it soared above the city. He didn’t want to gaze down at the metallic tangle of conveyors moving between the factories or the stiffly striding figures which supervised their progress on the ramps and loading platforms. The air about them was filled with ’copters, homeward bound from offices and recreation areas, but no human figures moved in the streets. Ground-level was almost entirely mechanized.

"What's the matter now?" Sue's voice made him look at her. Her eyes held genuine concern.

"The sins of the fathers," Anson said. "Yours and mine." He watched the girl as she set the 'copter on auto-pilot for the journey across the river. "Of course it really wasn't my father's fault that he steered me into psychiatry. After all, it's been a family tradition for a hundred and fifty years. All my paternal ancestors were psychiatrists, with the exception of one or two renegade Behaviorists. When he encouraged my interest in the profession, I never stopped to question him.

He trained me—and I was the last student to take up the specialty at medical school. The last, mind you!

"I should have known then that it was useless. But he kept insisting this state of affairs couldn't last, that things were sure to change. 'Cheer up,' he used to tell me, whenever I got discouraged. 'The pendulum is bound to swing in the other direction. And then he'd tell me about the good old days when he was a boy and the world was still full of fetichism and hebephrenia and pyromania and mixoscopic zoophilia. 'It will come again,' he kept telling me. 'Just you wait and see! We'll have frottage and nympholepsy and compulsive exhibitionism—everything your little heart desires.'

"Well, he was wrong. He died knowing that he had set me up in a dead-end profession. I'm an anachronism, like the factory worker or the farmer or the miner or the soldier. We don't have any need for them in our society any more; robots have replaced them all. And the End-Docs have replaced the psychiatrists and neuro-surgeons. With robots to ease the physical and economic burden and gland-handers to relieve mental tension, there's nothing left for me. The last psychiatrist should have disappeared along with the last advertising man. Come to think of it, they probably belong together. My father was wrong, Sue. I know that now. But most of the real blame belongs to *your* father."

"Daddy?" she exclaimed. "How can you possibly blame him?"

A NSON laughed shortly. "Your family has been pioneering in robotics almost as long as mine has worked in psychiatry. One of your ancestors took out the first basic patent. If it weren't for him and those endocrine shots, everything would still be normal—lots of incest and scoptophilia, plenty of voyeurism for everybody—"

"Why, darling, what a thing to say! You know as well as I do what robots have done for the world. You said it yourself. We don't have any more manual or menial labor. There's no war, plenty of everything for everybody. And Daddy isn't stopping there."

"I suppose not," Anson said bitterly. "What is the old devil dreaming up now?"

Sue flushed. "You wouldn't talk like that if you knew just how hard he's been working. He and Mr. Mullet, the engineering chief. They're just about ready to bring out the new pilot models they've developed for space travel."

"I've heard that one before. They've been announcing those models for ten years."

"They keep running into bugs, I guess. But sooner or later, they'll find a way to handle things. Nothing is perfect, you know. Every once in a while, there's still some trouble with the more complicated models."

"But they keep trying for perfection. Don't you see where all this leads to, Sue? Human beings will become obsolescent. First the workers, now the psychiatrists and other professions. But it won't end there. Inside of another generation or two, we won't need anyone any more. Your father, or somebody like him, will produce the ultimate robot—the robot that's capable of building other robots and directing them. Come to think of it, he's already done the first job; your factories are self-perpetuating. All we need now is a robot that can take the place of a few key figures like your father. Then that's the end of the human race. Oh, maybe they'll keep a few men and women around for pets, but that's all. And thank God I won't be here to see it."

"So why worry?" Sue replied. "Enjoy yourself while you can. We'll apply for a Permanent and Daddy will give you a job like he promised me —"

"Job? What kind of job?"

“Oh, maybe he’ll make you a vice-president or something. *They* don’t have to do anything.”

“Fine! A wonderful future!”

“I don’t see anything wrong with it. You ought to consider yourself lucky.”

“Listen, Sue.” He turned to her earnestly. “You just don’t understand the way I feel. I’ve spent eighteen years of my life in school, six of it in training for my profession. That’s all I know and I know it well. And what have I to show for it? I’m a psychiatrist who’s never had a patient, a neuro-surgeon who’s never performed anything but an experimental topectomy or lobotomy. That’s my work, my life, and I want a chance to function. I don’t intend to sit around on a fat sinecure, raising children whose only future is oblivion. I don’t want a Permanent with you under those conditions.”

SUE SNIFFED petulantly. “A Permanent with me isn’t good enough, is that it? I suppose you’d rather have a lot of repression and guilt complexes and all that other stuff you’re always talking about.”

“It isn’t that,” Anson insisted. “I don’t really want the world to revert to neurotic or psychotic behavior just so I can have a practice. But damn it, I can’t stand to see the way things are going. We’ve done away with stress and privation and tension and superstition and intolerance, and that’s great. But we’ve also done away with ourselves in the process. We’re getting to the point where we, as human beings, no longer have a function to perform. We’re not *needed.”*

The girl gave him an angry glance. “What you’re trying to say is that you don’t need me, is that it?”

“I do need you. But not on these terms. I’m not going to lead a useless existence, or bring children into a world where they’ll be useless. And if your father brings up that vice-president deal at dinner tonight, I’m going to tell him to take his job and—”

“Never mind!” Sue flipped the switch from auto-pilot back to manual and the ’copter turned. “You needn’t bother about dinner. I’ll take you back to your office now. You can put yourself down on the couch and do a little practicing on your own mind. You need it! Of all the stupid, pigheaded—”

The sound of the crash reached them even at flying level. Sue Porter broke off abruptly and glanced down at the river front below. Anson stared with her.

“What was that?” he asked.

“I don’t know—can’t make it out from here.” She spun the controls, guiding the ’copter down until it hovered over a scene of accelerating confusion.

A huge loading barge was moored against one of the docks. *Had* been moored, rather; as they watched, it swung erratically into the current, then banged back against the pier. Huge piles of machinery, only partially lashed to the deck, now tumbled and broke free. Some of the cranes splashed into the water and others rolled across the flat surface of the barge.

“Accident,” Sue gasped. “The cable must have broken.”

ANSON’S eyes focused on the metallic figures which dotted the deck and stood stolidly on the dock. “Look at the robots!”

“What about them?” asked Sue. “Aren’t they supposed to be doing something? That one with the antenna—isn’t it designed to send out a warning signal when something goes wrong?”

“You’re right. They beam Emergency in a case like this. The expediters should be out by now.”

“Some of them look as if they’re paralyzed,” Anson noted, observing a half dozen of the metallic figures aboard the barge. They were rigid, unmoving. Even as he watched, a round steel bell bowled across the deck. None of the robots moved—the sphere struck them like a ball hitting the pins and hurtled them into the water.

On the pier, the immobilized watchers gave no indication of reaction.

“Paralyzed,” Anson repeated. “Not that one!”

Sue pointed excitedly as the ’copter hovered over the deck. Anson looked and found the cause of her consternation.

A large, fully articulated robot with the humanoid face of a controller clattered along in a silvery blur of motion. From one of its four upper appendages dangled a broad-bladed axe.

It bumped against an armless receptacle-type robot and the axe descended, striking the robot squarely in its loading compartment. There was a crash as the victim collapsed.

And the controller robot sped on, striking at random, in a series of sped-up motions almost impossible to follow—but not impossible to understand.

“That’s the answer!” said Anson. “It must have cut the cable with the axe. And attacked the others, to immobilize them. Come on, let’s land this thing.”

“But we can’t go down there! It’s dangerous! Somebody will send out the alarm. The expediters will handle it—”

“Land!” Anson commanded. He began to rummage around in the rear compartment of the ’copter.

“What are you looking for?” Sue asked as she maneuvered the machine to a clear space alongside a shed next to the dock. “The rope ladder.”

“But we won’t need it. We’re on the ground.”

“*I* need it.” He produced the tangled length and began to uncoil it. “You stay here,” he said. “This is my job.”

“What are you going to do?”

“Yes, what are you going to do?” The deep voice came from the side of the ’copter. Anson and Sue looked up at the face of Eldon Porter.

“Daddy! How did you get here?”

“Alarm came through.”

THE BIG, gray-haired man scowled at the dock beyond, where the expediter robots were already mopping up with flamethrowers.

"You've got no business here," Eldon Porter said harshly. "This area's off-limits until everything's under control." He turned to Anson. "And I'll have to ask you to forget everything you've seen here. We don't want word of accidents like these to leak out—just get people needlessly upset."

"Then this isn't the first time?" asked Anson.

"Of course not. Mullet's had a lot of experience; he knows how to handle this."

"Right, Chief." Anson recognized the thin, bespectacled engineer at Eldon Porter's side. "Every time we test out one of these advanced models, something goes haywire. Shock, overload, some damned thing. Only thing we can do is scrap it and try again. So you folks keep out of the way. We're going to corner it with the flame-throwers and—"

"No!"

Anson opened the door and climbed out, dragging the long rope ladder behind him.

"Where in hell do you think you're going?" demanded Eldon Porter.

"I'm after that robot," Anson said. "Give me two of your men to hold the ends of this ladder. We can use it like a net and capture the thing without destroying it. That is, put it in restraint."

"Restraint?"

"Technical term we psychiatrists use." Anson smiled at the two men and then at the girl. "Don't worry," he said. "I know what I'm doing. I've got a case at last. Your robot is psychotic."

"Psychotic?" grumbled Eldon Porter, watching the young man move away. "What's that mean?"

"Nuts," said Sue sweetly. "A technical term."

SEVERAL weeks passed before Sue saw Dr. Howard Anson again.

She waited anxiously outside in the corridor with her father until the young man emerged. He peeled off his gloves, smiling. "Well?" rumbled Eldon Porter. "Ask Mullet," Anson suggested. "He did it!" the thin engineer exulted. “It works, just like he said it would! Now we can use the technique whenever there’s a breakdown. But I don’t think we’ll have any more. Not if we incorporate his suggestions in the new designs. We can use them on the new space pilot models, too.”

“Wonderful!” Eldon Porter said. He put his hand on Anson’s shoulder. “We owe you a lot.”

“Mullet deserves the credit,” Anson replied. “If not for him and his schematics, I’d never have made it. He worked with me night and day, feeding me the information. We correlated everything—you know, I’d never realized how closely your engineers had followed the human motor-reaction patterns.”

Eldon Porter cleared his throat. “About that job,” he began. “That vice-presidency—”

“Of course,” Anson said. “I’ll take it. There’s going to be a lot of work to do. I want to train at least a dozen men to handle emergencies until the new models take over. I understand you’ve had plenty of cases like this in the past.”

“Right. And we’ve always ended up by junking the robots that went haywire. Hushed it up, of course, so people wouldn’t worry. Now we’re all set. We can duplicate the electronic patterns of the human brain without worrying about breakdowns due to speedup or overload. Why didn’t we think of the psychiatric approach ourselves?”

“Leave that to me,” Anson said. And as the two men moved off, he made a psychiatric approach toward the girl.

She finally stepped back out of his arms. “You owe me an explanation. What’s the big idea? You’re taking the job, after all!”

“I’ve found I can be useful,” Anson told her. “There *is* a place for my profession—a big one. Human beings no longer go berserk, but robots do.”

“Is that what this is all about? Have you been psychoanalyzing that robot you caught?”

NSON smiled. “I’m afraid psychoanalysis isn’t suitable for robots. The trouble is purely mechanical. But the brain is a mechanism, too. The more I worked with Mullet, the more I learned about the similarities." other."

"You cured that robot in there?" she asked incredulously.

"That's right." Anson slipped out of his white gown. "It's as good as new, ready to go back on the job at once. Of course it will have slower, less intense reactions, but its judgment hasn't been impaired. Neuro-surgery did the trick. That's the answer, Sue. Once you open them up, you can see the cure's the same."

"So that's why you were wearing a surgical gown," she said. "You were *operating* on that robot."

Anson grinned triumphantly. "The robot was excited, in a state of hysteria. I merely applied my knowledge and skill to the problem."

"But what kind of an operation?"

"I opened up the skull and eased the pressure on the overload wires. There used to be a name for it, but now there's a new one." Anson took her back into his arms. "Darling, congratulate me! I've just successfully performed the first prefrontal robotomy!"

A Good Imagination

I may have my faults, but lack of imagination isn't one of them.

Take this matter of George Parker, for example. It finally came to a head today, and I flatter myself that I handled it very well. That's where imagination counts.

If it hadn't been for my imagination I probably never would have noticed George in the first place. And I certainly wouldn't have been prepared to deal with him properly. But as it was, I had everything worked out.

He showed up, right on schedule, just after lunch. I was down in the basement, mixing cement, when I heard him rap on the back door.

"Anybody home?" he called.

"Down here," I said. "All ready to go."

So he walked through the kitchen and came down the cellar stairs, clumping. George, the eternal clumper, banging his way through life; about as subtle as a steamroller. And with a steamroller's smug belief in its own power, in its ability to crush anything that didn't get out of its way.

He had to stoop a bit here in the basement because he was so tall. Tall and heavyset, with the thick neck and broad shoulders that are the common endowment of outdoor men, movie stars, and adult male gorillas.

Of course I'm being a bit uncharitable. George Parker couldn't be compared to a gorilla. Not with that boyish haircut and amiable grin of his. No self-respecting gorilla would affect either.

"All alone?" he asked. "Where's Mrs. Logan?"

"Louise?" I shrugged. "She's gone over to Dalton to close up the bank account."

The grin vanished. “Oh. I was sort of hoping I’d get a chance to say goodbye to her.”

I’ll bet he was. It almost killed him, realizing that he wasn’t going to see her again. I knew. I knew why he’d come scratching on the door with his “Anybody home?” routine. What he really meant was, “Is the coast clear, darling?”

How many times had he come creeping around this summer? I wondered. How many times had he called her “darling” ? How many times during the long weekdays when I wasn’t home—when I was slaving away in town, and she was alone up here at the summer house?

Alone with George Parker. The steamroller. The gorilla. The ape in the t-shirt.

In June, when we first came up, I had thought we were lucky to find somebody like George to fix things around the place. The house needed repairs and carpentry work, and a fresh coat of paint. The lawn and garden demanded attention, too. And since I could only get away on weekends, I congratulated myself on finding a willing worker like George.

Louise had congratulated me too. “It was wonderful of you to discover such a jewel. This place needs a handyman.”

Well, George must have been handy. All summer long, Louise kept finding new things for him to do. Putting in a walk to the pier. Setting up trellises. The neighbors got used to seeing him come in three or four days a week. I got used to it, too. For better than two months, you’d have thought I didn’t have any imagination at all. Then I began to put two and two together. Or one and one, rather. George and Louise. Together up here, day after day. And night after night?

Even then, I couldn’t be sure. It took a great deal of imagination to conceive of any woman allowing herself to become enamored of such an obvious ape. But then, perhaps some women like apes. Perhaps they have a secret craving for hairy bodies and crushing weight and panting animalism. Louise always told me she hated that sort of thing. She respected me because I was gentle and understanding and controlled myself. At least, that’s what she said.

But I saw the way she looked at George. And I saw the way he looked at her. And I saw the way they both looked at me, when they thought I wasn’t aware.

I was aware, of course. Increasingly aware, as the weeks went by. At first I contemplated getting rid of George, but that would have been too obvious. Firing him in midsummer, with work to be done, didn’t make sense. Unless I wanted to force a showdown with Louise.

That wasn’t the answer, either. All I’d have gotten from her would’ve been a tearful denial. And before she was through, she’d have twisted things around so that I was to blame. I’d be the brute who penned her up here in the country all summer long and left her alone to suffer. After all, I couldn’t really prove anything.

So then I decided to sell. It wasn’t difficult. Getting the place fixed up was a good idea; it added a couple of thousand to the value of the property. All I had to do was pass the word around to the realtor over at Dalton, and he did the rest. By the end of August there were three offers. I chose the best one, and it gave me a tidy profit.

Of course, Louise was heartbroken when she heard about the deal. She loved it here, she was just getting settled, she looked forward to coming back next year—why, she had even meant to talk to me about having a furnace put in so we could stay the year round.

She played the scene well, and I enjoyed it. All except the part about staying up here permanently. Did the little fool really think I was stupid enough to go for that? Staying in town alone all week, slaving away at the business, and then dragging up here weekends in the dead of winter to hear her excuses? “No, really, I’m just too bushed, honey. If you only knew how much work I’ve been doing around the place! I just want to sleep forever.”

I wanted to shout at her, then. I wanted to curse her. I wanted to spit it all out, tell her that I knew, then take her in my arms and shake her until her silly head spun. But I couldn’t. Louise was too delicate for such brutality.

Or so she had always intimated to me. She demanded gentle treatment. Gentle George, the gorilla.

So I was gentle with her. I told her that selling the place was merely a matter of good business. We had a chance to realize a handsome profit. And next year we'd buy another. In fact, I had already arranged a little surprise for her. After Labor Day, on our way back to town, I'd show it to her, even though it was a day or so out of our way.

"Out of our way?" She gave me that wide-eyed stare. "You mean you've got another place picked out, not around here?"

"That's right."

"Where? Tell me. Is it far?"

I smiled. "Quite far."

"But I—I'd like to stay here, on the river."

"Wait until you see it before you decide," I said. "Let's not talk about it any more now. I imagine you're tired."

"Yes. I think I'll sleep on the day bed, if you don't mind."

I didn't mind. And we didn't talk about it any more. I just completed the sale and got Louise to start packing. There wasn't much to pack, because I'd sold the furniture, too.

Then I waited. Waited and watched. Louise didn't know about the watching, of course. Neither did George.

And now it was the last day, and George stood in the cellar with me and looked at the mixing trough.

"Say, you do a pretty good job," he said. "Never knew you was so handy."

"I can do anything if I set my mind to it." I gave him back his grin.

"Is this the hole you want me to plug up?" he asked. He pointed to the opening underneath the cellar steps. It was a black shelf about two feet high and three feet wide, between the top of the basement blocks and the ceiling beams.

"That's it," I told him. "Goes clear back to the shed, I think. Always bothered me to see it, and I'd like to cement it up for the new owners before

I go."

"Keep the mice out, eh?"

And the rats," I said.

"Not many rats around here," George muttered.

"You're wrong, George." I stared at him. "There are rats everywhere. They creep in when you're not around to see them. They destroy your property. If you're not careful, they'll eat you out of house and home. And they're cunning. They try to work silently, unobserved. But a smart man knows when they're present. He can detect the signs of their handiwork. And a smart man gets rid of them. I wouldn't want to leave any opening for rats here, George. I'd hate to think of the new owner going through the same experience I did."

"You never told me about the rats," George said, looking at the hole in the wall. "Neither did Lou—Mrs. Logan."

"Perhaps she didn't know about them," I answered. "Maybe I should have warned her."

"Yeah."

"Well, it doesn't matter now. The cement will take care of them." I stepped back. "By the way, George, this is some new stuff that I got in town. I don't know if you've ever worked with it before. It's called Fast-seal. Understand it dries hard in less than an hour."

"You got the instructions?" George stared at the coagulating mass.

"Nothing to it. You use it the same way as the regular cement." I handed him the trowel and the boards. "Here, might as well get started. I'm going to dismantle this target range."

He went to work then and I stepped over to the other side of the basement and took down my targets. Then I got the pistols out of their case and packed them. After that I took up the revolvers. I did a little cleaning before I laid them away.

George worked fast. He had the energy for tasks like this; energy, coupled with lack of imagination. Physical labor never troubles people like George, because they're not plagued by thoughts while they work. They live almost entirely in the world of sensation, responding aggressively to every challenge. Show them a hole in the wall and they'll cement it, show them a woman and they'll—

I steered my thoughts away from that and concentrated on oiling the last revolver. It was a big Colt, one I'd never used down here. Odd, that I collected weapons and used them so seldom. I liked to handle them, handle them and speculate upon their potential power. See, here in this tiny hole lurks death; from this minute opening comes a force big enough to burst the brain of idiot and emperor alike, to shatter the skull of sinner and of saint. With such a weapon one could even kill a gorilla at close range.

I held the revolver and stared at George's broad back. He was working swiftly with the trowel, closing off the opening entirely and smoothing it over.

I loaded the revolver, cocked it, and stared again. Ten feet away from me was a perfect target. It was an easy shot. The fool would never know what hit him.

That was the whole trouble, of course. He'd never know what hit him.

And I wanted him to know. Somewhere, deep down inside, even an ape like George had the ability to think, to realize. The trick lay in finding a method that would stimulate his imagination.

So I put down the revolver and walked over to him.

"Looks like you're finished," I said.

He nodded and wiped the perspiration from his forehead. An animal odor came from his armpits.

"Yeah. This stuff sure does a swell job. It's getting hard already. I just got to smooth it off a little more."

"Never mind." I stepped back. "You look as if you could use a beer."

He grinned and followed me over to the portable refrigerator in the corner. I took out a bottle of beer and opened it for him. He gulped gratefully. The bottle was empty before he bothered to look up and remark, "Aren't you drinking?"

I shook my head.

"Not around firearms, George." I pointed to the cases on the table. "Say, Mr. Logan, I always meant to ask you something. How come a fella like you collects guns?"

"Why not? It's a fairly common hobby."

"But I never seen you shoot one."

I walked over and fished out another beer, uncapped it and handed it to him.

"Perhaps I don't collect them to shoot, George," I told him. "Perhaps I just collect them as symbols. Take this Colt, for example." I held it up. "My admiration for the black barrel has nothing to do with ballistics. When I look at it, I see a thousand stories. A story for every bullet fired. Scenes of violence and danger, of high drama and low melodrama."

"Sort of appeals to your imagination, is that it?"

"Precisely." I handed him another beer. "Go ahead, George," I said. "I've got to clean out the refrigerator anyway. This is our last day, you know. Might as well celebrate."

He nodded. But he didn't look as though he was in a mood for celebrating our departure. The ice-cold beer, downed rapidly, was beginning to take effect. Just a few bottles on a hot day will do the trick—particularly after violent exertion. I saw to it that another was ready before he had finished this one. He drank quickly, noisily, his neck bulging, his thick lips greedily encircling the mouth of the bottle. On his face was the absorbed look of an animal oblivious to everything except the immediate satisfaction of his appetite.

I picked up the Colt again and walked over to the cemented portion of the wall. With my left hand I rubbed the solidifying surface. "Marvelous stuff," I said. "Why, it's hard already. And perfectly dry."

He grunted. He put down the empty bottle and reached for the full one, his fifth. I waited until he had taken a healthy swig. Then I bent down and put my head next to the wall.

"What's that sound?" I asked.

He looked up. "I don't hear no sound."

"Mice," I said. "Back in there."

"Or rats, like you told me." He nodded.

"No, I rather think this is a mouse. The squeaking is so shrill Can't you hear it?"

"I don't hear nothing."

He came over and stooped. His hand brushed the Colt and I drew it away. "I still can't hear nothing."

"Well, it doesn't matter. This job is airtight, isn't it?"

"Sure."

"Then whatever's inside will suffocate in a few minutes or so." I smiled at him. "You must be deaf to the high tones, George. I heard that sound all during the time you were cementing the wall."

"What's the matter, it bother you, thinking about the mouse?"

"Not particularly, George."

"Anyways, there won't be no more getting through. This wall is really solid, now."

He thumped it with his fist. "I done a pretty good job."

"Yes, you certainly did. And it's your last one, too." I went over to the refrigerator. "Which reminds me, it's time we settled up. But first, let's have another drink."

George glanced at his wristwatch. "Well, I dunno, Mr. Logan. Maybe I better be running along. I got some business over to Dalton. . . ."

Yes, he had business in Dalton, all right. He wanted to run over and see Louise. Maybe they'd have time to say goodbye again, the way they had last night before I'd arrived. Or before they knew I had arrived. But I saw them then, and I could see them now in my imagination.

It took a lot of effort for me to shut out the picture of what I had seen, but I did it. I even grinned back at George. And I held out the bottle and said, "Just one more, for old times' sake. And if you don't mind, I'll join you."

I took out a bottle for myself, opened it, raised it. With my left hand I picked up the Colt again.

He lifted his beer and belched. The sound echoed through the cellar like a revolver shot.

“A little toast might be in order,” I said.

“Go ahead.”

I smiled. “Here’s to freedom.”

He started to drink, then pulled the bottle away from his lips. I watched the crease form in his sweating forehead. “Freedom?”

I shrugged. “There’s no sense trying to keep any secrets,” I said. “After all, you’re almost like one of the family, in a way.”

“I don’t get it.”

“You will.”

“What’s this business about freedom?”

“Mrs. Logan,” I said. “Louise.”

He put the beer down on the table. “Yeah?”

“We’ve separated.”

“Sep—”

“That’s right, George.” I turned my head. “Do you hear anything from behind the wall?”

“No. But what’s all this about separating? You have a fight or something?”

“Nothing like that. It was all very sudden. You might say it was completely unexpected, at least as far as she was concerned. But I thought you might like to know.”

“Isn’t she over to Dalton, then?”

“I’m afraid not.”

“You mean she went away already today?”

“You might say that.”

“Look here, Logan, just what are you driving at? What’s the big idea of —”

I cocked my head toward the wall. “Are you sure you don’t hear anything, George?”

“What’s there to hear?”

“I thought she might be telling you goodbye.”

He got it, then.

“Jesus, no! Logan, you’re kidding me!” I smiled.

His eyes began to bulge. I watched his hand curl around the mouth of the beer bottle. And I brought the muzzle of the Colt up until he could see it.

“Put it down, George. It won’t do you any good. I’ve killed a mouse. What makes you think I’d be afraid to kill a rat?”

He put the bottle down. The minute he let go, his hands started to tremble. “Logan, you couldn’t’ve done it, not you. You wouldn’t—”

I inched the revolver up higher, and he flinched back. “That’s right,” I said. “I couldn’t have. You and Louise were so certain about me, weren’t you? You decided I couldn’t do anything. I couldn’t suspect, couldn’t see what was going on right under my eyes. And if I did find out, I couldn’t do anything about it, because I’m a poor weak fool. Well, you were wrong, George. And Louise was wrong. I wonder if she can hear me now, eh?” I raised my voice. “Are you listening, Louise?”

George moved back against the wall, his mouth twitching. “You’re lying,” he said. “You didn’t kill her.”

“That’s right. I didn’t kill her. She was quite alive when I was finished. I merely saw to it that her arms and legs were bound tightly, so that she couldn’t thresh around, and that the gag was firmly in place. Then I lifted her up into the hole and waited for you to come.”

His face was whiter than the wall.

“You can understand why, can’t you, George? Even an ape has enough imagination to appreciate the situation. Quite a joke, isn’t it? You cementing up the wall, and all the while I knew you were killing her. And to make it even funnier, *she* knew it too, of course. She lay in that black hole, trying to cry out to you, while you sealed her up in a airless tomb, in a darkness that is worse than night, in the darkness of death—”

"You're crazy!"

I saw his muscles flex, his neck tighten. "Take one step," I said, "and I'll blow your face off."

He moved then, but away from me. He went to the wall and he began to pound on it. The cement held.

"No use," I said. "It's solid. You did a good job, George. Your last job, and your best. Besides, it wouldn't be any use now. The air couldn't have lasted this long. She's gone."

He turned, panting. He held up his hands, and they were red. "Crazy!" he gasped. "No wonder she was scared of you, hated you. No human being could think of a thing like that."

I smiled. "Yes they could, George. Haven't you ever read any books? Did you ever hear of Edgar Allan Poe? *The Black Cat*, or *Cask of Amontillado?* I guess not, George. You've always been too busy living, haven't you? And Louise was the same way. You believe in action, and you despise people like me. You say we've always got our noses buried in a book, while you're the practical ones, the go-getters. You're proud because you take what you want from life. And you laugh at us. I'll bet you and Louise laughed at me a lot. Now it's my turn."

"You—you can't get away with it!"

"Why not?"

I'll tell. I'll get the sheriff on you!"

"No you won't. You're an accessory, George. Don't forget, you walled her up. And if you go to the sheriff I'll have my story. I'll tell him we were both in on it together, that I'd promised you half of her insurance. She has quite a lot of insurance, George. I'll tell the sheriff how you walled her up alive, while she writhed and kicked and tried to scream, knowing you were killing her. Not me, George. You!"

He almost rushed me, then. I took the first step forward and at the sight of the Colt he wilted. When I laughed, he put his hands over his ears.

"A pity she didn't listen to you last night, George, when you kept urging her not to wait until I came. You wanted her to drop everything and run away right then and there. You could get a ranger's job in Montana, wasn't that it? And nobody would ever know. Only she had to be practical. She wanted to stick around and draw the money out of the bank first. Wasn't that it?"

"You heard us?"

"Of course. I parked down the road and came up under the window. Then I went back and drove in, the way I always do. You didn't even have time to plan how you two would meet and arrange for your getaway, did you, George? You couldn't even say goodbye properly. Well, do it now. There's a chance in a thousand that she can still hear you."

His eyes were glassy. It wasn't the heat and it wasn't the beer. He was shaking, whimpering.

"Hurry up, George. Tell the lady goodbye. Tell the lovely lady goodbye before she takes her last breath, before she gasps the last gulp of air into her lungs and feels them burn and shrivel. She'll die fast, George, if she isn't dead already. And then she'll crumble. She won't rot, because it's dry in there. There'll be no odor. She'll just mummify. Her limbs will turn to brown leather, and her hair will become brittle and drop out, and her skin will flake and her eyes will finally coagulate in their sockets. But on what's left of her face you'll still be able to see an expression. You'll be able to see how she was at the moment when she died with that last silent scream for mercy. She's screaming at you now. Can't you hear her? She's screaming, 'George, help me! Get me out of here, get me out of here, get me out—' "

George made a sound deep in his chest. Then he blinked and ran for the stairs. I didn't try to stop him. I let him thud up the steps, listened as he thundered through the kitchen, slammed the door.

It was very quiet in the cellar after that. I put the Colt away in its case, but first I took the precaution of unloading it and wiping off the barrel and the butt.

Then I took the empty bottles and stacked them neatly in the corner.

I finished George's beer and drank my own. And after that, I went upstairs.

There was nothing left to do now but wait.

I must have had two or three more beers while I was waiting. I got them from the big refrigerator in the kitchen and carried them into the front room so that they'd be handy while I read. I picked up my copy of Poe, and not by accident. I wondered if his treatment of the situation was as melodramatic as mine had been. Perhaps not, but then, I had my reasons. In retrospect, what I had said to George seemed a bit silly and overdrawn, but it served a purpose.

After a while, I got absorbed in my reading. Say what you will, Poe had a wonderful imagination, and I can appreciate that.

It was almost dusk when I heard a tapping on the door. I thought of Poe's raven, and put the book aside.

"Come in," I said.

It wasn't Poe's raven, of course.

"Hello, Louise." I smiled up at her. "Did you get everything accomplished?"

"Yes, darling." She sat down, and I noticed just the hint of a frown on her face.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing. But something odd happened to me on the way back."

"So?"

"I was coming along the County Trunk, just about opposite the Beedsley place, when a state trooper pulled up alongside me."

"Speeding?"

"Of course not, silly. You know I never do over fifty. But he asked for my driver's license, and then he did a funny thing. He made me get out of the car and come over to the motorcycle. And he had me talk into the squawk-box. I think that's what he called it, anyway."

"What on earth for?"

"He didn't tell me. All I know is I had to give my name to the sheriff. And then he said he was sorry to trouble me, but I'd saved him a trip out here for nothing. And he let me go. I asked him what this was all about, and he just shrugged and said there'd been a little misunderstanding but this cleared everything up. Can you figure it out, darling?"

I smiled. "Perhaps," I said. "But maybe we'd better talk about it some other time. I don't want you getting all upset over nothing on our last night here."

"Darling, tell me. I insist!"

"Well, we had a little excitement around here, too," I told her. "Remember George Parker was supposed to come over and put in that cement?"

"Yes, that's right." She hesitated. I watched her. It was pleasant to watch her, to sense the way she was waiting for what I'd say next. If I could have, I'd been willing to prolong that particular moment forever. But finally I let it go.

"Well, he never showed up," I said. I could almost *feel* the way she sighed with relief. "So finally I went ahead and did it myself."

"Poor dear. You must be tired."

"You don't understand. That isn't the excitement I was talking about."

"N-no?"

Again I let her wait, savoring the moment. Then I went on, knowing there was a better moment to come. "But along about four, Sheriff Taylor called up, wanting to know where you were. Of course I told him, and I imagine that's why the troopers were out trying to locate you."

"But whatever for?"

"Are you sure you want to hear the rest?"

"Please."

"It's a rather unpleasant situation, apparently. It seems our friend George has suffered some sort of nervous breakdown."

"George?"

"Rather incredible, isn't it? Always seemed like such a stolid, unimaginative fellow, too. You've seen a bit more of him than I did, and I'm sure you wouldn't say he was the sensitive type, would you?"

"Tell me what's wrong, what's happened—"

"If you wish. As I get it, friend George came bursting into the sheriff's office with an utterly fantastic story. At first they thought he'd been drinking, but apparently he was in a state of actual hysteria. It seems he was accusing me of murdering you and walling your body up in the cellar."

"You're joking!"

"That's what the sheriff told George, at first. Until he realized the poor fellow was almost out of his head with fear. Naturally, the sheriff called me and I told him to try and locate you. I'm glad he did. I'd hate to have us involved in any trouble just as we're ready to leave."

I couldn't see her face in the dusk, so I got up and went over to her. She tried to turn away, but I held her and patted her shoulder. "There, there," I murmured. "I didn't want to upset you. Nothing to worry about. It's all over."

"George!" Her voice started to break, but she controlled it. "How is he?"

I sighed. "Stark staring, according to the sheriff. They called Doc Silvers right away. Unless he snaps out of it, he'll be committed. A pity, too—somebody said he was planning to take a ranger's job in Montana."

Louise was shaking, but her voice was firm. "Did he say anything else?"

"No. What more is there to say?"

"Why did he think you'd try to kill me?"

"I haven't the faintest idea. Funny about these strong, silent types. Once their imagination runs away with them, they can't seem to control it. They get keyed up to a certain pitch and then snap, all at once. I'm just glad it didn't happen when he was out here with you. There's no telling what he might have attempted." I laughed. "It may sound far-fetched to you, darling, but he could even have tried to assault you. Can you imagine being made love to by a lunatic?"

She shuddered and buried her head against me.

"Let's talk about something more cheerful," I said. "Here, have a beer." I could feel her sob.

"Don't cry," I told her. "We're going away tomorrow, remember? Back to town. Just you and I. You needn't worry about George—they'll take care of him. You'll never have to see him again. Why, in a little while you'll forget all about him."

"Y-yes. . ."

"We're going to have a lot of fun together," I murmured. "That's a promise. I've got it all planned."

And I have, of course. I wasn't lying to her.

I intend to have quite a lot of fun with Louise, tonight. She's in the bedroom right now as I write this, sleeping. I gave her quite a strong sedative, but it will wear off in another half hour or so. Then she'll be wide awake again. And I want her to be wide awake.

I want her to be wide awake when I take her in my arms, and I want her to be wide awake afterwards, when I hold her ever so gently, but ever so firmly, and tell her just what really happened. I want her to know how clever I am, and how strong, and how wise. I want her to know that I'm stronger and wiser than George could ever be.

She must realize the cleverness that brought everything to perfection. She must come to appreciate that I'm the better man after all. And of course I am.

It would have been stupid to confront them both with their guilt; what could I possibly have gained? And it would have been equally stupid for me to kill George and run the risk of discovery. As things worked out, as I *planned* them to work out, George is disposed of forever. I've sealed *him* up behind the walls of a madhouse for life. He'll live on and suffer, thinking Louise is dead and that he killed her. And of course the sheriff and the folks around here know differently. They know she's alive, and that there's nothing behind the cement wall. They'll remember talking to her and to me, and that she was to go away with me. Neither the new owners nor anyone else will ever tear down that wall.

I'm going to make all this very plain to Louise. I'm going to tell her exactly what happened. In fact, that's why I'm writing this. I don't trust myself to find the exact word to convey the meaning of the moment.

I'll let her read what I've written. *Have* you read this far, Louise?

Do you understand now? Do you understand what I've done?

And do you understand what I'm going to do, in just another moment?

That's right, Louise.

I'm going to bind and gag you. And I'm going to carry you down into the cellar, and tear the wall open once again. I'm going to thrust you into the darkness and let you scream away your life and your sanity while I wall you up again with fresh cement—wall you up forever, until your body rots to match your rotten soul.

I'll be standing right behind you when you've read this far, so you won't have a chance to scream. And you won't have a chance to beg, or plead, or try any of your stupid feminine tricks with me. Not that they would do any good. No use telling me I'll be caught, either. You know better than that.

The alibi is already set. I'll leave here alone in the morning. And you'll stay here forever.

That's because everything was planned, Louise. Because, you see, I *am* a better man than George. He was only an animal, really. And the difference between an animal and a man is really very simple.

It's all a matter of knowing how to use your imagination.

Terror In the Night

IT MUST HAVE BEEN ABOUT two o’clock when Barbara started shaking me.

She kept saying “Wake up!” over and over again, and tugging at my shoulder. Since I’m generally a pretty sound sleeper, it took me almost a minute to come to.

Then I noticed she had the lights on and she was sitting up in her bed.

“What’s the matter?” I asked.

“There’s somebody downstairs, pounding on the door. Can’t you hear?” I listened and I heard. It certainly sounded like the door was getting a workout.

“Who the devil would be showing up here at this hour?” I asked. “Get up and find out,” Barbara told me. Which was a sensible suggestion.

So I walked over to the window and looked down. Sure enough, I could see someone standing down there, but in the shadows it was hard to make out any details. I got the funniest notion that whoever it was, was wearing a white sheet.

Now the doorbell began to ring, insistently.

Barbara said, “Well?”

“I don’t know,” I told her. “Can’t make out anything from up here. You stay where you are. I’ll go down and see.”

I went out of the bedroom and almost tripped on the stairs, because I forgot about turning on the light. I still wasn’t used to staying here in the summer place.

Of course I remembered where the hall light was, and when I got down there I switched it on. All the while the doorbell kept ringing. Then I opened the door.

There was a woman standing on the porch. She wasn't wearing a sheet, but she had on the next thing to it—some kind of long white nightgown. Not lingerie, but a real old-fashioned nightgown that came way down to her ankles. Or used to. Now it was torn and there were stains on it; dirt or grease. Her hair hung down over her eyes and she was crying or panting, or both. For a minute I didn't recognize her, and then she said, "Bob!"

"Marjorie! Come in."

I turned my head and called up to Barbara, "Come on down, honey. It's Marjorie Kingston."

There wasn't time to say anything more. Marjorie was off the porch in nothing flat, and she hung onto me as if she were afraid of drowning. Her head was right against my chest, so that I could feel her shaking, and all the while she kept mumbling something I couldn't make out. At last I got it.

She was saying, "Shut the door, please. Shut the door!"

I closed the door and steered her into the front room. I turned on one of the lamps, and she looked at me and said, "Pull the shades, Bob."

She'd stopped crying and her breathing was a little more relaxed by the time Barbara came downstairs.

Barbara didn't say anything. She just walked over to Marjorie and put her arms around her, and that was the signal for her to really let go.

I finished pulling the shades and then ducked out to the kitchen. I couldn't find any soda, but when I came back I had three glasses and the bottle of Scotch I'd bought when I went into town on Monday.

The two of them were sitting on the sofa now, and Marjorie had calmed down a little. I didn't ask if anyone wanted a drink, just poured three stiff slugs. I gave Marjorie her glass first, and she put the shot down like water.

Barbara took a sip as I sat down in the armchair, and then she looked at Marjorie and said, "What happened?"

"I ran away."

"Ran away?"

Marjorie brushed the hair out of her eyes and looked straight at her. "Oh, you needn't worry about pretending. You must have heard where I've been. At the asylum."

Barbara gave me a look but I didn't say anything. I remembered the day I bumped into Freddie Kingston at lunch in town and he told me about Marjorie. Said she'd had a nervous breakdown at school and they were sending her up to this private sanatorium at Elkdale. That must have been about three months ago. I hadn't see him since to get any further details.

I stood up. Marjorie sucked in her breath. "What's the matter?" I asked.

"Don't go," she said. "Don't call anyone. Please, Bob. I'm begging you."

"How about Freddie? Shouldn't he know?"

"Not Freddie. Not anybody, but most of all not Freddie. You don't understand, do you?"

"Suppose you tell us," Barbara suggested.

"All right." Marjorie held out her glass. "Can I have another drink, first?"

I poured for her. When she lifted the glass up I could see her fingers. The nails had been bitten all the way down.

She drank, and then all at once she was talking, even before she took the glass away from her lips.

"You see, it wouldn't do any good to tell Freddie, because he sent me there in the first place and he must have known what it was like. He has this Mona Lester, and he thought they'd kill me and then he'd be free. I had plenty of time to figure things out and I can see that now. I mean, it makes sense, doesn't it?"

I tried to catch Barbara's eye but she wasn't looking at me. She kept staring at Marjorie. And then she said, very softly, "We heard you had a nervous breakdown, dear."

Marjorie nodded. "Oh, that part's true enough. It's been coming on for a long time, only nobody knew it. That's my fault, really. I was too proud to tell anyone. About Freddie, I mean."

"What about Freddie?"

"Freddie and this Mona Lester. She's a model. He met her last year, down at the studio. They've been living together ever since. When I found out, he just laughed. He said he wanted a divorce and he'd furnish me with all the evidence I needed. Glad to. But of course I don't believe in divorce. I tried everything—I argued with him, I pleaded with him, I went down on my hands and knees to him. Nothing did any good.

"He started to stay away night after night, and weekends, too. Then he'd come back and tell me about what he'd been doing with Mona, in detail, everything. You can't imagine the things he said, and the way he'd watch me while he told me. And he used to watch me at parties, too, when we had to go out together. He said he got a kick out of seeing me pretend that everything was all right. Because nobody knew about Mona. You didn't, did you? Freddie was too smart for that. Even then he must have been planning the whole thing. Yes, I know he must, because I remember now what he said that one time—if I didn't divorce him he'd keep on until I went crazy and then he could do what he pleased." She paused for breath.

Barbara bit her lip. "Are you sure you want to talk about this?" she asked. "You mustn't get excited. . . ."

Marjorie made a sound. It took me a second to realize she was laughing, or trying to laugh. "Quit talking like a doctor," she said. "You don't have to humor me. I'm not crazy and I'm not psychotic. That's the word the doctors use, you know. Psychotic. Or when they talk to the relatives they say, 'mentally disturbed.' It isn't that way with me at all. When I broke down in class that day—English IV, my last afternoon class—it was just nerves. I had hysterics. God knows what the pupils thought. The principal had to come in and quiet me down. They sent me home and gave me a sedative, and the doctor came and he left some pills. Then Freddie came. He doped me up. I mean it. I was supposed to take two pills at the most. He gave me six. He kept on feeding me the stuff, all through the next week. When the other doctor came, and when he took me to see Corbel, and when we went to court. I was shot. By the time I came to, I was committed. He'd gotten the papers signed and everything. And I woke up in Corbels little private asylum."

I didn't look at her. I couldn't. She went on talking, louder and louder.

"That was three months ago. I've kept track of the days. The hours, even. What else was there to do? Freddie has never come to see me. And nobody else has come, either. He has it fixed with Corbel not to let them. I tried to write, until I realized the letters weren't being mailed. And if I got any letters, Corbel saw to it they weren't allowed to reach me. That's the way he runs the place. That's why they pay him so much—to keep anyone from getting in, to keep anyone from getting out. It must be costing Freddie a fortune to have me there, but it's worth it to him. And to the others."

"What others?" Barbara asked.

"The other relatives. Of the other patients, I mean. Most of them are wealthy, you know. We've got some alcoholics and some drug addicts out there, but I wouldn't say any of them were really mental cases. At least they weren't when they arrived. But Corbel does his best to drive them crazy. You can have all the liquor and shots you want. He calls it therapy. What he's really trying to do is kill them off as fast as he can. Maybe he gets an extra fee that way. He must. Particularly with the old people. The sooner they die, the sooner the relatives inherit."

"This Corbel," I said. "He's a psychiatrist?"

"He's a murderer!" Marjorie leaned forward. "Go ahead, laugh at me—it's true! I can hear. I stay awake all night and listen. I heard him and Leo beating old Mr. Scheinfarber to death two weeks ago in the hydrotherapy room. They never use it for hydrotherapy at all, you know. But when he was done screaming they dumped his body in the water and left him there. The next morning they said he'd been taking a treatment and slipped under—committed suicide. Corbel signed the certificate. I know what's going on! Poor old Mr. Scheinfarber, who only wanted to be left alone. . . . And now that sneaky son and daughter-in-law of his get all the money. Leo almost admitted as much to me."

"Who is Leo?" Barbara asked.

"One of the orderlies. Leo and Hugo. Leo's the worst; he's on night duty. He was after me from the beginning."

"What for?"

"Can't you guess?" Marjorie made that laughing sound again. "He's after most of the women patients there. Once he locked Mrs. Matthews in isolation and stayed with her for two days. She couldn't dare do anything about it; he said he'd see to it she starved to death if she wouldn't let him."

"I see," I said.

Marjorie looked at me. "You don't see. You think I'm lying to you. I can tell. But it's all true. I can prove it. That's why I ran away—to prove it. I want to get to the police. Not the sheriff or anyone around here; I think they're in cahoots with Corbel. Otherwise, how would he be able to fix things with the coroner and everyone so there isn't any fuss? But when I get to town maybe somebody will listen. We could force an investigation. That's all I want, Bob. Really it is. I don't even want to punish Freddie. I'm past that stage. I just want to help those people, those poor, hopeless people stuck away to rot and die. . . ."

Barbara reached over and patted her on the shoulder. "It's all right," she said. "It's all right. We believe you, don't we, Bob?"

"I know what it sounds like," Marjorie said, and she was calmer now. "You tell yourself such things can't happen in this day and age. And you see Doctor Corbel in town and he's such a kind, brilliant man. You go for a drive past the sanatorium and look at the building up on the hill, in among all those trees—you think it's a beautiful place, a wonderful rest home for those who can afford it. You don't notice the bars, and you never get inside the soundproof part where you could hear the screams and the moans, or see the stains on the floor in isolation. The stains that won't wash off, the stains that never wash off—"

"Another drink?" I interrupted. I didn't want to give her another drink, but I had to stop her someway.

"No thanks. I'm all right now, really I am. You'll see. It's just all this running—"

“You need rest,” Barbara nodded. “A good nights sleep before we decide anything.”

“There’s nothing to decide,” Marjorie said. “I’ve made up my mind. I want you to drive me into the city tonight so that I can make a statement right away. I don’t care if they believe me or not, just so they come out and investigate. Once they get inside, they’ll find proof. I’ll show them. All I’m asking you to do is drive me.”

“I can’t,” I said. “The car’s in the garage but the battery’s out of whack. I’m having the garage man out to fix it in the morning.”

“It may be too late then,” Marjorie said. “They’ll cover things up once they realize I’m liable to go to the authorities.”

I took a deep breath. “How did you manage to get away?” I asked her.

Marjorie put her hands down in her lap and looked at them. Her voice was very low.

“For a long while I didn’t even think about escaping. Everyone said it was impossible, and besides, even if I did, where could I go? Certainly not to Freddie or the local police. And how could I get to town safely without any money? Then I happened to remember that you folks had this summer place, and you’d be up here. It isn’t too far from Elkdale. All I needed was a good start. So I knew the thing to do, then.

“I told you about this Leo, the night orderly—the one who was always after me? I kept fighting him off all the time; I’d never take sleeping pills or even doze off while he was on duty.

“Well, tonight Leo was drinking a little. I heard him coming around in the hall, and I asked him in. I even took a drink from him, just to get him started again. He had quite a few. And then . . . I let him.”

She didn’t say anything for almost a minute. Barbara and I waited.

“After he fell asleep, I got his keys. The rest was easy. At first I couldn’t get my bearings, but then I remembered the creek running next to the highway. I kept close to the creek and waded in it at first. That was to throw them off the scent.”

“Throw who off the scent?” Barbara asked.

Marjorie's eyes widened. "The bloodhounds."

"What?"

"Didn't you know? Corbel keeps bloodhounds out there. To track down the patients, in case they ever escape." I stood up.

"Where are you going?"

"To fix your bed," I said.

"I won't sleep," Marjorie told me. "I can't. What if Leo woke up? What if he got Corbel and they called out the bloodhounds to look for me?"

"Don't you worry about a thing," I answered. "No bloodhounds can get in here. We won't let anyone harm you, Marjorie. You're overtired. You've got to rest and forget about—"

"The asylum! You're going to call Corbel!"

"Marjorie, please try—"

"I knew it! I knew it when you stood up, from the look on your face! You're going to send me back; you're going to let them kill me!"

She jumped up. Barbara reached for her and I started forward, but not in time. She hit Barbara in the face and ran. I tried to head her off from the hall, but she got there first and tugged the front door open. Then she was running, jumping off the porch and circling through the trees in back. I could see her white nightgown waving behind her. I called, but she didn't answer.

If the car had been working, I would have tried to follow her. But even so, there wouldn't have been much chance of catching up, because she wouldn't stick to the roads.

After a couple of minutes, I went back into the house and closed the door. Barbara took the glasses into the kitchen, but she didn't say anything, not even when we went upstairs. It wasn't until we switched off the light and settled down in bed that she spoke to me.

"Poor Marjorie," Barbara said. "I felt so sorry for her."

"Me, too."

"You know, for a while she almost had me believing her. Sometimes those crazy stories turn out to be true after all."

I grunted. “I know. But all that medieval stuff about killing patients in asylums—that’s just delusions of persecution.”

“Are you sure, Bob?”

“Of course I’m sure. I admit I had my doubts for a while, too. But you know what tipped the scales?”

“What?”

“When she got to that part about the bloodhounds. That did it for me. Only a nut would dream up an idea like that.”

“It bothers me, though. Don’t you think we ought to call the sheriff after all? Or this Doctor Corbel, or Freddie?”

“Why get mixed up in it?” I asked. “I mean, look at the mess we’d get into.”

“But the poor girl, running around out there all alone . . .”

“Don’t worry, they’ll get her. And she’ll be taken care of.”

“I can’t help thinking about what she said, though. Do you think the part about this Leo was true?”

“I told you, it’s delusions of persecution, Barbara. The whole works; about Freddie and his woman, about the killings—everything. Now just forget it.”

She was quiet for a minute and I was quiet for a minute, and then we heard the noise. Faint and far away it was, but I recognized it. “What’s that?” Barbara asked.

I sat up in bed, listening to it, listening to it get closer and closer. I was still listening to it when it faded off in the distance again. “What’s that?” Barbara asked, again.

“Oh, just some damned dogs on the loose,” I told her. “Lots of strays out here, you know.” But I was lying.

I’m a Southerner, born and bred, and if there’s one thing I can recognize, it’s the sound of bloodhounds. Bloodhounds, unleashed and on the scent.

I Kiss Your Shadow

Bob Bloch is himself the most urbane and charming of men, with as ready a flow of wit—pointed, yet kindly—as I have ever heard. But though (like the Mikado's) his nature is love and light, he rarely lets these elements filter into his fiction. This humorous and gentle man has written some of the ghastliest chillers of our day, such as the classic Yours Truly, Jack the Ripper *or this latest tale, which opens with such deceptive quiet.*

JOE ELLIOT SAT DOWN IN MY FAVorite chair, helped himself to a drink of my best whisky, and lighted one, of my special cigarettes.

I didn't object.

But when he said, "I saw your sister last night," I was ready to protest. After all, a man can only take so much.

So I opened my mouth and then realized I had nothing to say. What *could* I say to a statement like that? I'd heard it from his lips possibly a hundred times before, during the months of their engagement, and it sounded perfectly natural then.

It would sound perfectly natural now, except for one thing: my sister had been dead for three weeks.

Joe Elliot smiled, or tried to. The result wasn't altogether successful. "I suppose you think I'm crazy," he said. "But it's the truth. I saw Donna. Or at least, her shadow."

He still wasn't providing me with the opportunity for a sensible answer: the only thing I could do was remain silent and listen:

"She came into the bedroom and leaned over me. I've been having trouble getting to sleep, ever since the accident, but I guess you know that. Anyway, I was lying there looking up at the ceiling and trying to decide if I should get up and pull down the shade, because the moonlight was so bright. Then I turned on my side and got ready to swing my legs out of bed, and there she was. Just standing there, bending over me and holding her arms out." Elliot leaned forward. "Sure, I know what you're thinking. The moonlight was deflected by something in the room and made a shadow, and I made the rest of it myself. Or I really was asleep and didn't know it. But I know what I saw. It was Donna, all right—I'd recognize her anywhere, from the shape."

I found my voice, or a reasonable facsimile. "What did she do?" I asked.

"Do? She didn't do anything. Just stood there, holding her arms out as if she were waiting for something."

"What was she waiting for?"

Elliot stared at the floor. "This is really the hard part," he murmured. "It sounds so—well, the hell with how it sounds. When Donna and I were engaged, she had this trick of hers. We'd be talking, or perhaps getting ready to do the dishes when I ate over at her place, some ordinary thing like that. And then, all at once she'd hold out her arms. I got so I recognized the gesture. It meant she wanted to be kissed. So I'd kiss her. And—go ahead, laugh!—that's what I did last night. I got up out of bed and kissed her shadow."

I didn't laugh. I didn't do anything. I just sat there and waited for him to continue. When he showed no signs of saying anything further, I had to fill the gap. "You kissed her. And then what happened?"

"Why, nothing. She just went away."

"Disappeared?"

"No. She went away. The shadow released me and then turned around and walked through the door."

“The shadow *released* you,” I said. “Does that mean you—?”

He nodded. I’m not a nod-interpreter, but it was obvious that there was no defiance in his movement; only a sort of resignation. “That’s right. When I kissed her she put her arms around me. I—I saw it. And I *felt* it. I felt her kiss, too. Funny sensation, kissing a shadow. Real, and yet not all there.” He glanced down at the glass in his hand. “Like a watered drink.”

There was something wrong with his comparison, but then there was something wrong with the whole story. I suppose the main trouble lay in mere chronology—he’d come to me with it just about 50 years too late.

Fifty years ago, it might not have sounded quite so odd. Not in the days when people still believed in ghosts, by and large; the days when even so eminent and hardheaded a psychologist as William James was active in the Society for Psychical Research. There was a certain receptivity then to the sentimental approach—undying love, capable of reaching beyond the grave, and all that sort of thing. But to hear it *now* was wrong.

The only thing that kept me from coming right out and saying so was the realization that there was another aspect to the business even wronger than the rest. Joe Elliot himself. *He* was the professional skeptic, the confirmed scoffer.

Of course, maybe the shock of Donna’s death . . .

“Don’t say it,” he sighed. “I know how cockeyed and corny it all sounds, and I know what you’re thinking. I won’t argue with you. The accident did hit me pretty hard, you understand that. And I admit I was in some kind of shock-state when they pulled me out of the car down there in the ravine. But I snapped out of it before the funeral. You know that, too. And if you don’t believe it, just check with Doc Foster.”

My turn to nod.

“I was all right at the funeral and after,” he continued. “You’ve seen me almost every day since then. Have you noticed anything . . . offbeat?”

“No.”

“So it wasn’t just imagination. It couldn’t be.”

“Then what’s your answer?”

He stood up. “I have no answer. I just wanted to tell you what happened. Because it’s one of those things where you must tell someone, and you’re the logical person. I can trust you not to go around repeating it. Besides, you’re her brother, and there’s a chance that she might—come to you.”

Joe Elliot moved to the door. “Leaving so soon?” I asked. “Tired,” he said. “I didn’t sleep very much last night, afterwards.”

“Look,” I said. “How about a sedative? I’ve got some stuff here that—”

“Thanks, but I’d rather not.” He opened the door. “I’ll call you in a day or so. We can have lunch together.”

“You’re sure you’re—”

“Yes, I’m all right.” He smiled and went out.

I frowned and stayed in. I was still frowning as I got ready for bed. Something was definitely wrong with Elliot’s story and that meant something was definitely wrong with Elliot. I wished I knew the answer.

“*There’s a chance that she might—come to you.*”

I crawled between the sheets and noted that the moonlight was bright on my ceiling tonight, too. But I didn’t look at the moonlight very long. I closed my eyes and contemplated the chance. It seemed to be a very slim one, as chances go.

My sister Donna was dead and in her grave. I hadn’t seen her die, but I was the first one summoned right after the accident, as soon as the police arrived on the scene. I saw them lift her out of the crumpled car, and she was dead, no doubt about it. I didn’t like to think about seeing her. I didn’t like to think about seeing Joe Elliot, either, shaking in shock; unconscious of my presence, unconscious of the gash in his forehead, unconscious even of the fact that Donna was dead. He’d kept talking to her while they carried her to the ambulance, trying to make her understand that it was an accident, there was oil-slick on the road, the car had skidded. But Donna never heard him because she was already dead. She had died when her head went through the windshield.

That’s what they thought at the inquest, too. Verdict of accidental death. And surely the morticians who embalmed her had no doubts, nor did the minister who preached the sermon over her casket, the workmen who lowered her body into the grave out there at Forest Hills. Donna was dead.

And now, three weeks later, Joe Elliot came to me and said, "I saw your sister. Or at least, her shadow." Hardheaded Joe, a rewrite man on the desk and cynical as they come, kissing a shadow. He had said she stood there with her arms extended and he recognized her.

Well, I hadn't seen fit to mention it, but I recognized that particular gesture from his description. Because it so happens I'd seen it myself, long before Joe Elliot came into the picture. Way back when Donna was engaged to Frankie Hankins, she used to pull the same trick with him. I wondered if Frankie had heard the news yet, over there in Japan. He'd enlisted and that broke the affair up.

Come to remember, there was another time Donna used the open-arms technique. With Gil Turner. Of course, that hadn't lasted, it was obvious from the start: Turner was just a namby-pamby. Surprised everybody to see a wishy-washy character like him pull up stakes and leave town in such a hurry.

It must have surprised Donna, too, but not for long. Because just about that time I introduced her to Joe Elliot and the heat was on.

There was no question about this being the big thing for both of them. They were engaged inside of a month, and planning to be married before the summer was out. Donna just took over, lock, stock and barrel.

Of course I'd always known my sister was a determined woman (let's face it, she made a habit of getting her own way, and she was a hellcat if you crossed her) but it was interesting to watch how she worked on Joe Elliot. Talk about Pygmalion—here was one case where Galatea reversed the play. Before anyone knew it, Joe Elliot was out of his sloppy sports jacket and into gray tweeds, out of smelly cigars and into briar pipes, out of cuppa-cawfee-'n-a-hamburger and into Donna's comfortable little apartment for regular evening meals.

Oh, she made a lot of changes in that boy! Got so that he was shaving twice a day, and he trotted around the corner to the bank with his paycheck instead of over to Smitty’s Tap.

I had to give Donna credit. She knew what she wanted, and she knew just how to get it. Maybe she was ruthless, but she was feminine-ruthless. She remade Joe Elliot, but she also made him like it. He certainly didn’t seem to object. I got so used to the new Elliot that I virtually forgot about the old one—the old one who used to sit in Smitty’s and swear a mighty oath that the girl didn’t breathe who could ensnare him into unholy dreadlock.

By the time the wedding drew near, Donna was already openly talking about their plans for buying a house—“You can’t raise a family in an apartment”—and Elliot would listen and actually grin.

(“And another thing,” he used to say, shaking his finger at Smitty in solemn warning, “I may be a poor downtrodden wage-slave, but you’ll never catch me being a house-slave. Or turning into that typical figure of fun—the American Father. Dear Old Dad, the butt of every family radio and TV show in the country! Not for me. I believe in the old saying: children should be seen and not had.”)

But this was *before* Donna. Before, I suppose, he found out how nice it is to have a woman around who lights your pipe, and straightens your tie, and fixes the fried potatoes at just the right time so they won’t get soggy when the steak is served. Before he found out what it is to have somebody who holds out her arms and doesn’t say anything, except with her eyes.

This much I was sure of: Donna wasn’t playing any trick. She loved the guy. She died loving him, the night they were driving back from my party. That part was real.

Everything was real, up to now. Now, and Joe Elliot’s story of the shadow.

I looked up at the shimmering ceiling. Somehow, here in the dark, with its mingling of moonlight, I could almost begin to believe.

Maybe we’re not quite so sophisticated as we like to think we are; ghosts happen to be unfashionable, and the concept of love conquering the grave went out with *Outward Bound*. But set a sophisticate down in the pitch-black bowels of a haunted house, bar the exit, and leave him there for the night. Maybe his hair won't turn white by morning; still, there'll be some reaction. Intellectually, we reject. Emotionally, we're not so sure. Not when the chips are down and the lights are low.

Well, the lights were low and I kept waiting for Donna to come. I waited and waited, and finally I guess I just fell asleep.

I told Joe Elliot about it at lunch two days later. "She never showed." He cocked his head at me. "Of course not," he answered. "She couldn't. She was at my place."

I finally managed to speak. "Again?"

"Two nights ago, and last night."

"Same thing?"

"Same thing." He hesitated. "Only—she stayed longer."

"How much longer?"

More than hesitation now; a lasting silence. Until he brushed his napkin from his lap, stooped down to pick it up, and barely whispered, "All night."

I didn't ask the next question. I didn't have to. One look at his face was enough.

"She's real," Elliot said. "Donna. The shadow. You remember what I said the first time? About the watered whisky?" He leaned forward. "It's not like that now. Maybe they get stronger once they break through. Do you think that's it? They learn the way, and then they get stronger."

He was close enough so that I could smell his breath, and he hadn't been drinking—any more than he'd been drinking the night of the accident. I'd testified to that, and it helped seal the verdict.

No, Elliot wasn't drunk. I wished to heaven he was, so I wouldn't have to say what I was going to say. But I had to.

"Why don't you take a run up to see Doc Foster?" I asked him.

Joe Elliot spread his palms on the table. "I knew you'd say that," he grinned. "So I already called him this morning, for an appointment."

I managed to withhold the sigh of relief, but it was there, and I could feel it. For a minute I'd been afraid of an argument—not because I dreaded arguments, but because of what it would imply about Elliot. I was glad to see he hadn't gone completely overboard.

"You needn't worry," he assured me. "I know what Doc will tell me. Sedatives, relaxation, and if that doesn't work, see a head-shrinker. And if he does, I'll follow orders."

"Promise?"

"Sure." He gave me the grin again, but this time it was a little twisted. "Want to know something funny? I'm beginning to be a bit scared of that sister of yours—even if she is only a shadow."

I put a large *No Comment* sign on my face and we went out together in silence. We separated in the street—I went back to the office and Elliot went over to Doc Foster's.

I didn't learn about his visit for several days. Because when I got back to the office they had a surprise for me.

The same newspaper employing Joe Elliot on the rewrite desk sees fit to retain me in the capacity of roving correspondent. And the M.E. was waiting for me with a suggestion that I rove in the direction of IndoChina. As of two days from now, with all watches synchronized.

I got busy. So busy that I never managed to call Joe Elliot. So busy that if he called me, I wasn't around to get the message.

He finally reached me at the airport, actually, just before I took off for the west coast and the first leg of the flight.

"Sorry I couldn't be on hand," he said. *"Bon voyage* and all that."

"You sound pretty happy."

"Why not?"

"Doc's sedatives do the trick?" He chuckled. "Not exactly. When I told him, he didn't even bother with the first part of the routine. Sent me packing right away to the you-know-who. Name of Partridge. Heard of him?"

I had. "Good man," I said.

"The best." He paused. "Well, I mustn't keep you . . ."

"You're all right?" My voice was insistent.

"Sure. I'm fine. I sailed for the works. Some of the things the guy told me make sense. I guess I'm more tangled up than I thought—oh, not just what I told you about, but there are other angles. Anyway, I'm going in to him twice a week for I don't know how long. And it's not as phony as I thought it might be, either. None of this couch business. He really gets results." Another pause. "I mean, I've been there just twice, and she's gone."

"The shadow, you mean?"

"The guilt-fantasy." He chuckled again. "See, I'm picking up the lingo already. Time you come back, I'll be ready to hang out my shingle. Well, lots of luck, kid. And keep in touch."

"Will do," I said. And hung up, listening to them announce my flight. And took the flight, and made my transfer in Frisco, and went to Manila, and went from there to Singapore, and from there to hell.

It was hot as hell in hell, and although I managed to get enough dispatches back to satisfy my M.E., I had no opportunity to keep in touch.

You know what happened in Indo-China, and when they opened a branch hell in Formosa, my M.E. sent me over there, and when hell got too hot for even a roving correspondent I was based in Manila and then Japan. I'm not trying to make a production out of it; just explaining why it turned out that I was gone for eight months instead of eight weeks.

When I got back they gave me a leave, and some information. Not much, but just enough to send me scurrying around to Joe Elliot's apartment the first opportunity I got.

I didn't waste any time on hello-how-are-you. "What's this I hear about your leaving the paper?" I began.

He shrugged. "I didn't leave. I got canned."

"Why?"

"Hitting the sauce."

He looked it, too. The sports jacket was back, and it was dirty. He wasn't bothering to shave once a day, either, let alone twice. He was thin, and twitchy.

"Let's have it," I said. "What happened with you?"

"Nothing."

"Quit stalling. What does Partridge say?"

He gave me a grin, and to say it was twisted doesn't even begin to describe it. They could have made a cast and used it to cut pretzels with.

"Partridge," he echoed. "Sit down. Have a drink."

"All right, but keep talking. I asked you a question. What does Partridge say?"

He poured for me. I was a guest; I got a glass. He gulped out of the bottle. Then he put it down. "Partridge doesn't say anything any more," he told me. "Partridge is dead."

"No."

"Yes."

"When did this happen?"

"Month or so back."

"Why didn't you go to another hea—psychiatrist?"

"What? And have him jump out of the window, too?"

"What's all this about jumping out of a window?"

He picked up the bottle. "That's what I'd like to know." *Gulp.* "Personally, I'm not even sure he jumped. Maybe he was pushed."

"Are you trying to tell me—?"

"No. I'm not trying to tell you anything. Any more than I'd try to tell Doc Foster or the boys down at the office. You can't tell anyone a story like that. Just got to keep it to yourself. Yourself and the little old bottle." *Gulp*.

"But you said—I mean, you sounded as if everything was going so well."

"That's right. And it went fine. Up to a point."

"What point?"

"The point where I found out why she wasn't coming back any more." He stared out of the window, and then he went a million miles away and only his voice remained. I could hear what he said, plainly enough. Too plainly.

“She wasn’t coming back to me because she was going to him. Night after night after night. Not with her arms out—not the way she’d come to me, in love. She went to him out of hate. Because she knew he was trying to drive her away. Don’t you see, when he worked on me it was like . . . like exorcism. You know what exorcism is, don’t you? Casting out demons. Ghosts. A succubus.”

“Joe, you’ve got to stop this. Get hold of yourself.”

He laughed. “All I can get hold of is this.” And reached for the bottle, as he spoke. “You’re asking me to stop this? But I didn’t start it. I didn’t make it up. Partridge told me himself. Finally he broke down and he *had* to tell me. Do you get the picture now?—*he* came to *me* for help. And I couldn’t help him. I was getting well, there’s a laugh for you, I was getting over *my* delusions. I talked to him the way you’re trying to talk to me, real Dutch uncle stuff.

“And I went out of his office, and the next morning I read where he jumped. Only he didn’t jump—she must have pushed him—he was afraid of her, she kept getting stronger and stronger, just as I thought she would. They found him spattered all over the sidewalk—”

This time I reached for the bottle. “So you quit your job and started drinking, just because a psychiatrist cracked up and committed suicide,” I said. “Because one poor overworked guy went to pieces, you had to do likewise. I thought you were smarter than that, Joe.”

“So did I.” He took the bottle away from me. “You heard what I told you. I thought I was completely well. Even when he died, I still wasn’t sure about some things. Until that night, when she came back.”

I watched him drink and waited.

“Sure. She came back. And she’s been coming back, every night, since then. I can’t fight it off, I can’t fight her off, she keeps clinging and clinging to me. But why try to explain? You don’t believe me anyway. I saw the look on your face when I mentioned the part about a succubus.”

“Please,” I said. “I want to hear the rest. I’ve read about those things, you know. A succubus takes the form of a woman and comes to men at night—”

He was nodding and then he cut in. “So that explains it, don’t you see? What she was whispering to me. I guess I didn’t tell you, but she talks now. She talks to me, she tells me things. She says she’s glad, and it won’t be long now, then she’ll have everything she wanted—”

His voice trailed off, and I stood up just in time to catch him as he slumped. He was out cold; his body was limp and light in my arms. Too light. He must have lost a lot of weight. I guess Joe Elliot had lost a lot of things.

I suppose I could have tried to bring him around, but I didn’t make the effort. It seemed kinder just to carry him over to the bed, take off his things and let him rest. I found pajamas in one of the bureau drawers, got them on him—it was like dressing a rag doll instead of a man—and covered him up. Then I left him. He’d sleep now, sleep without shadows.

And while he slept, I’d figure out something. There had to be an answer. Because Donna was my sister and I’d loved her, and because Joe Elliot was my friend, there had to be an answer.

If Partridge were only alive. If I could just talk to him and find out what he’d really learned about this delusion! He must have learned something, in eight months. Even if Elliot deliberately tried to hold back, in eight months a man like Partridge would learn—

The thought hit me then; a stinging blow. I tried to duck. But it hit harder and this time there was a numbing reaction.

“No,” I told myself. “No.”

I kept telling myself no, but I was telling the cab-driver to take me down to the office again. I told myself no, but I told the M.E. I wanted all the stuff in the house on Partridge’s suicide.

Then I was reading it, and then I was over at the Coroner’s office, checking the report of the inquest.

I didn’t ask any fancy questions, and I didn’t do any fancy detective work. That’s out of my line. I won’t pretend to have done anything more except to jump at a wild conclusion. That’s all the records showed—

Partridge had jumped to a wild conclusion.

But knowing what I did, I was more inclined to agree with Joe Elliot. Partridge hadn't jumped; he'd been pushed.

There wasn't a single solitary thing I could hang onto as tangible evidence; nothing to build a case around. But I checked and rechecked, and I fitted the pieces together and then everything shattered apart when I recognized the picture.

I left the Coroner's office and went over to Smitty's Tap and drank a very late supper, not talking to anyone. I didn't know who to talk to now—surely not the Coroner, or the D.A., or the cops. They couldn't help, because I had no evidence. Besides, I owed Joe Elliot a chance.

There was still the shadow of a doubt. A *shadow* named Donna, who'd come back. Maybe she'd be coming back tonight, but I wasn't going to wait.

After a while it was quite late, but I was on my way, back to Elliot's apartment. Chances were that he was still sleeping, and I hoped so in a way. Then again, I knew I had to see him now.

I went up the stairs slowly, one voice saying *let him sleep* and the other voice saying *let him sleep* and the two of them fighting together, *let him sleep—knock—let him sleep—knock—*

It turned out that neither voice won, because when I got to the door, Joe Elliot opened it and looked out.

He was awake all right, and maybe he'd been back to the bottle again and maybe he hadn't: he looked as if he'd swallowed strychnine. And his voice was the voice of a man with a burned throat.

"Come in," he said. "I was just going out."

"In your pajamas?"

"I had an errand—"

"It can wait," I told him.

"Yes. It can wait." He led me inside, closed the door. "Sit down," he murmured. "I'm glad you're here."

I sat down, but I kept a grip on the arms of the chair, ready to move in a hurry if necessary. And I waited very carefully until he sat down, too, before I spoke.

“Maybe you won’t be so glad when I speak my piece,” I said.

“Go ahead. It doesn’t matter what you say now.”

“Yes it does, Joe. I want you to listen carefully. This is important.”

“Nothing’s important.”

“We’ll see. After I left you this afternoon, I did a little investigating. I went to the Coroner’s office, among other things. And I agree with you now. Partridge *was* pushed out of the window.”

For the first time his face showed interest. “Then I was right, wasn’t I?” he began. “She did push him, you found some evidence—”

I shook my head. “I didn’t find any evidence. Not any *new* evidence.

I just began to check the facts and see if they fitted in with a theory of my own. They did.” I spoke very slowly, very deliberately. “I checked on one particular phase of the report, Joe. The account you gave of your own movements after leaving Partridge’s office the day he jumped. The whole story about not taking the elevator down because it was crowded and you were in a hurry to get to the office. And the part about not going to the office after all because you remembered you’d forgotten your hat and went back upstairs to get it. And how you came in just as they were looking out the window where Partridge had jumped.

“I read it all, Joe. I read your account of the last meeting with Partridge, how upset he seemed. Only I was a *special* reader.”

He was *more* than interested now; he was alert.

“They tried pretty hard to break down your story, didn’t they, Joe? Only they couldn’t, because there was no evidence to the contrary, and what you said made sense. About how Partridge was fidgeting and nervous and kept looking out the window. About how jumpy he’d been the past few weeks. Good word, that *jumpy*. Good enough for the coroner’s jury, anyway. But not good enough for me.

“Because you didn’t mention anything about the shadow in your story to the jury. You told something entirely different.”

He hit the arm of his chair hard. “Of course I did, man I I couldn’t tell them what I told you, they’d think I was crazy.”

“But you *were crazy*, Joe. Crazy enough so that your story to me makes sense. Partridge didn’t jump, he was pushed—and you pushed him.”

Joe Elliot made a noise in his chest. Something came out of his mouth that sounded like, “Why?”

“I wish I knew the answer to that. The real answer. All I can do is guess. And my guess is that there wasn’t anything to this story of yours about Partridge being afraid of a shadow. My guess is that *you* were the one who was afraid—because in session after session, Partridge kept getting nearer and nearer to something you didn’t want him to find. Something you tried to hide, but couldn’t. Something he, as a trained analyst, found anyway. Or was on the very verge of finding. When you realized that, you panicked—and destroyed him.”

“Rave on,” he said.

“All right, I will. Joe, you’re not crazy. You never were. I think this is all an act. You wouldn’t murder a man except for a very important reason. Whatever Partridge found out, or was about to find out, was something vitally necessary for you to conceal.”

“Such as?”

“Such as the fact that you killed my sister.”

The words hit the wall and bounced. The words hit his face and twisted it up into the gargoyle grin, the spasmodic twitch.

“All right. So you know.”

“Then it’s true,” I said.

“Of course it’s true. But what you don’t know is *why.* You wouldn’t know, and you’re her own brother. How could I expect anyone else to understand if you never saw it? What Donna was *really* like, I mean. The way she tried to fasten her claws into me, pulling me down, trying to possess me, never letting go for an instant. Sure I loved her, she knew how to make a man love her, she had a thousand tricks to drive you mad with wanting her, holding out her arms was just the beginning. But that wasn’t enough, to possess me that way. She had to have *everything*, she wanted every minute, every movement, every thought. She was making me over and trying to turn me into all the things I always hated. I could see it, I knew what lay ahead, a life of slavery to *her* house and *her* kids and *her* future."

He stopped because he had to, and I said, "Why didn't you get out, then? Break the engagement?"

"I tried. Don't you think I tried? But she wouldn't let go. Not her, not Donna. Even then she was a succubus. She had her claws in me and she wanted to drain me. I can't help it; there was something about her, and when she came into my arms I couldn't break free because then I didn't want to any more.

"But when I was alone again, I wanted to. You never heard about this part, but just before your party, I tried to sneak out of town. She caught me. There was a scene—or there would have been, except that Donna never made scenes. She made love. Do you understand?"

I nodded.

"And after that I was sick. Not physically sick, but worse than that. Because I knew it would always be this way: me trying to get free and her clawing me back. There'd *always* be a succubus. Unless I got rid of her."

Another pause, another breath, and then he rushed on. "It wasn't difficult. I knew the spot on the road where the rail hung over the edge of the ravine. I had a wrench in the car. You remember we left late, and the road was deserted. When we got to the ravine I suggested we park and look at the moon. Donna liked that kind of suggestion. So then I—I hit her. And sent the car over. And went down myself, and finished cracking the windshield and gave myself a gash in the forehead and crawled into the car. I didn't have to do much pretending about the shock. Only it was a shock of relief, because I knew now she was really dead."

I put my hands in my lap. "And that's what Partridge was on the verge of finding out, isn't it?" I asked. "All this business about the shadow was just what he told you it was—a guilt fantasy. You felt compelled to spring it on me first because of the guilt-feeling, and you didn’t want to tell Partridge anything about the possible cause of the delusion. Only he kept probing until he was too close for safety. If our safety, and his. So you killed again.”

“No.”

“Why bother to deny it? You’ve already confessed to one murder, so—”

“Killing Donna wasn’t murder,” he said. “It was self-defense. And that’s the end of it. I didn’t kill Partridge, no matter what you think. *She* did.

“I told you how she went to him night after night, torturing him, breaking him down, trying to get him to the point where he was ready to jump.

“And when he told me, that day in his office, I couldn’t stand it. So I got ready to explain, I was going to tell him the truth about the shadow and what I’d done.

“I remember he was bending over me, asking me about the accident, and then he straightened up and looked surprised and I saw that *she* was there. A shadow, but not a shadow on the wall. A shadow in the room, right beside us, tugging at his arm. And he tried to scream but there was this blackness over his mouth, her hand, and she was pulling him over to the window, and his feet made little scuffing noises sliding along the carpet, and he tried to grab the window frame, but the shadow is strong and the shadow laughed so you could hear it above the scream when he went down and down and down—”

He snapped out of it suddenly, “Too bad you weren’t here earlier tonight. You’d have believed me then, because you would have seen her. She came a while before you arrived and woke me. Said she wanted me to go out there, because there was a surprise. Something to show me. At first I didn’t know what she was hinting at, but I know now. You see, I counted back, but you’d only laugh. I could take you along to look, too, but you’d laugh and—”

“I’m not laughing, Joe,” I said.

“Well, you’d better not. She wouldn’t like that. She wouldn’t like to have anyone get in her way. And she’s so strong now, stronger than anyone. She’s already proved that. I’m going to do what she says. Now that she has a real claim on me, nothing can stop her.”

I stood up. “But she can be stopped. There’s a way, you know.”

“You mean you believe in exorcism now?”

“Joe,” I said, “you’re partially exorcised already. By confessing to me you’ve rid yourself of a portion of her power. You might have banished her forever if you’d succeeded in telling Partridge the truth, because he represented authority to you. That’s the answer, Joe. You’ve got to tell this to an authority. Then there won’t be any more guilt-feelings or guilt-fantasy, either. You’ll remember what actually happened to Partridge, and once they understand the situation you can put in a plea. I’ll help you all I can. There’s a pretty smart lawyer downtown who—”

Now Elliot stood up. “I get it,” he murmured. “You’re humoring me because I’m a psycho and that’s what you want them all to think. Maybe you’re afraid she’ll be coming after you, too. Well, don’t worry. She won’t, unless you try to stand in her way. I’m the one she really wants, and I’m going to her. I want to see—”

“Listen, Joe,” I began, but he wasn’t listening.

He reached out suddenly and his hand swept across the tabletop, gripped the half-empty bottle, raised it, and smashed it down until it shattered. Then he took a quick step forward, swinging the glittering weapon.

The whole operation from start to finish was almost instantaneous, and it silenced me.

He stood there, holding the jagged length of glass that splintered down from the broken bottletop.

“Sorry to cut you off,” he said. “Now you’d better go. Before I really cut you off.”

I took one step forward. The gargoyle grin returned to his face, and I took two steps backward.

“I’m the one she wants,” he said. “You can’t stop me. And no sense going to the cops. They can’t stop me, either. She won’t let them.”

I should have jumped him then, even though he was a maniac with a broken bottle in his hand for a weapon. I often wonder what would have happened if I *had* jumped him.

But I didn't.

I turned and ran, ran out of the apartment and down the stairs and through the hall and into the street, and I kept telling myself it wasn't just because I was afraid. I had to find help, this was a job for the police.

There was a call-box two blocks down and around the corner, and I used it. I suppose it didn't take more than five minutes between the time I left the apartment and the time I got back to meet the squad car as it pulled up.

That was enough, however. Joe Elliot had disappeared. They sent out a prowl, and they put it on the police broadcast band, and you'd think a pajama-clad man would be easy to spot on a deserted city street.

But it wasn't until I broke down and told them where I thought Joe Elliot was headed for that we got any action—and then it was because we piled into the squad car and drove all the way out to Forest Hills.

He couldn't have made the trip out there in that time on foot. He must have stolen a car, although they never found one or heard a report of a missing vehicle.

But he was there, of course, lying across her grave. And he'd been digging long enough to claw down a good six inches through the thick turf and solid soil.

That's when the stroke must have hit him. They never did agree as to the exact cause. The point is, he was dead.

And that left me to answer the questions.

I tried.

I tried to answer questions, and at the same time to leave out all the crazy stuff, the unfashionable stuff about ghosts and shadows and a succubus that kept getting stronger and stronger. *They* brought up the idea of a love reaching past the grave; it was their own idea, only of course they thought *he* was trying to reach *her*.

I tried to keep the murder part out of it too—because there was no sense opening that up now.

But they were the ones who finally got around to it, and they opened it up. The case, I mean. And then the grave.

They dug down the rest of the way through the thick turf and solid soil; dug down to what hadn’t been disturbed for ten long months.

And they found her, all right, although there were no marks or anything to prove murder. No proof at all.

And there was no explanation for what else they found, either. The tiny body of a newborn infant in Donna’s intact coffin—lying there just as dead as Donna was.

Or just as alive.

I can’t make up my mind which is which any more. And of course the police keep asking me questions for which there are no answers. None that they’d believe.

I can’t tell them Donna wanted Joe so badly even death couldn’t deny her. I can’t tell them she came to him at the last and summoned him proudly, that he went out to Forest Hills to see their child.

Because there is no such thing as a succubus. And a shadow does not speak, or move, or hold out its arms.

Or *does* it?

I don’t know. I just lie in bed at night, now, when the bottle is empty, and look up at the ceiling. Waiting. Maybe I’ll see a shadow. Or shadows.

All On A Golden Afternoon

Among the many subjects which Robert Bloch knows well are Hollywood, psychiatry and the works of Lewis Carroll. But all three together, and you have one of the most fascinatingly unclassifiable novelets to reach this editorial desk in a long time. Try a spot of classification yourself when you've finished it. Is it fantasy? Science fiction? Or possibly just a simple truthful explanation of the nature of dreams?

THE UNIFORMED MAN AT THE GATE was very polite, but he didn't seem at all in a hurry to open up. Neither Dr. Prager's new Cadillac nor his old goatee made much of an impression on him.

It wasn't until Dr. Prager snapped, "But I've an appointment—Mr. Dennis said it was urgent!" that the uniformed man turned and went into the little phone booth to call the big house on the hill.

Dr. Saul Prager tried not to betray his impatience, but his right foot pressed down on the accelerator and a surrogate of exhaust did his fuming for him.

Just how far he might have gone in polluting the air of Bel-Air couldn't be determined, for after a moment the man came out of the booth and unlocked the gate. He touched his cap and smiled.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, Doctor," he said. "You're to go right up."

Dr. Prager nodded curtly and the car moved forward.

“I’m new on this job and you got to take precautions, you know,” the man called after him, but Dr. Prager wasn’t listening. His eyes were fixed on the panorama of the hillside ahead. In spite of himself he was mightily impressed.

There was reason to be—almost half a million dollars’ worth of reason. The combined efforts of a dozen architects, topiarists and landscape gardeners had served to create what was popularly known as “the Garden of Eden.” Although the phrase was a complimentary reference to Eve Eden, owner of the estate, there was much to commend it in its literal sense, Dr. Prager decided. That is, if one can picture a Garden of Eden boasting two swimming pools, an eight-car garage, and a corps of resident angels with power mowers, pruning shears, and hoses.

This was by no means Dr. Prager’s first visit, but he never failed to be moved by the spectacle of the palace on the hill. It was a fitting residence for Eve, the First Woman. The First Woman of the Ten Box Office Leaders, that is.

The front door was already open when he parked in the driveway, and the butler smiled and bowed. He was, Dr. Prager knew, a genuine English butler, complete with accent and sideburns. Eve Eden had insisted upon that, and she’d had one devil of a time obtaining an authentic specimen from the employment agencies. Finally she’d managed to locate one—from Central Casting.

“Good afternoon,” the butler greeted him. “Mr. Dennis is in the library, sir. He is expecting you.”

Dr. Prager followed the manservant through the foyer and down the hall. Everything was furnished with magnificent taste—as Mickey Dennis often observed, “Why not? Didn’t we hire the least inferior interior decorator in Beverly Hills?”

The library itself was a remarkable example of calculated decor. Replete with the traditional overstuffed chairs, custom-made by a firm of reliable overstuffers, it boasted paneled walnut walls, polished mahogany floors, and a good quarter-mile of bookshelves rising to the vaulted ceiling. Dr.

Prager's glance swept the shelves, which were badly in need of dusting anyway. He noted a yard of Thackeray in green, two yards of brown Thomas Hardy, complemented by a delicate blue Dostoievsky. Ten feet of Balzac, five feet of Dickens, a section of Shakespeare, a mass of Moliere. Complete works, of course. The booksellers would naturally want to give Eve Eden the works. There must have been two thousand volumes on the shelves.

In the midst of it all sat Mickey Dennis, the agent, reading a smudged and dog-cared copy of *Confidential.*

As Dr. Prager stood hesitant in the doorway, the little man rose and beckoned to him. "Hey, Doc!" he called. "I been waiting for you!"

"Sorry," Dr. Prager murmured. "There were several appointments I couldn't cancel."

"Never mind the appointments. You're on retainer with us, aincha? Well, sweetheart, this time you're really gonna earn it."

He shook his head as he approached. "Talk about trouble," he muttered —although Dr. Prager had not even mentioned the subject. "Talk about trouble, we got it. I ain't dared call the Studio yet. If I did there'd be wigs floating all over Beverly Hills. Had to see you first. And you got to see *her."*

Dr. Prager waited. A good fifty per cent of his professional duties consisted of waiting. Meanwhile he indulged in a little private speculation. What would it be this time? Another overdose of sleeping pills—a return to narcotics—an attempt to prove the old maxim that absinthe makes the heart grow fonder? He'd handled Eve Eden before in all these situations, and topped it off with more routine assignments, such as the time she'd wanted to run off with the Mexican chauffeur. Come to think of it, that hadn't been exactly routine. Handling Eve was bad, handling the chauffeur was worse, but handling the chauffeur's wife and seven children was a nightmare. Still, he'd smoothed things over. He always smoothed things over, and that's why he was on a fat yearly retainer.

Dr. Prager, as a physician, generally disapproved of obesity, but when it came to yearly retainers he liked them plump. And this was one of the plumpest. Because of it he was ready for any announcement Mickey Dennis wanted to make.

The agent was clutching his arm now. “Doc, you gotta put the freeze on her, fast! This time it’s murder!”

Despite himself, Dr, Prager blanched. He reached up and tugged reassuringly at his goatee. It was still there, the symbol of his authority. He had mastered the constriction in his vocal chords before he started to speak. “You mean she’s killed someone?”

“No!” Mickey Dennis shook his head in disgust. *“That* would be bad enough, but we could handle it. I was just using a figger of speech, like. She wants to murder herself, Doc. Murder her career, throw away a brand-new seven-year noncancellable no-option contract with a percentage of the gross. She wants to quit the Industry.”

“Leave pictures?”

“Now you got it, Doc. She’s gonna walk out on four hundred grand a year.”

There was real anguish in the agent’s voice—the anguish of a man who is well aware that ten percent of four hundred thousand can buy a lot of convertibles.

“You gotta see her,” Dennis moaned. “You gotta talk her out of it, fast.”

Dr. Prager nodded. “Why does she want to quit?” he asked.

Mickey Dennis raised his hands. “I don’t know,” he wailed. “She won’t give any reasons. Last night she just up and told me. Said she was through. And when I asked her politely just what the hell’s the big idea, she dummied up. Said I wouldn’t understand.” The little man made a sound like trousers ripping in a tragic spot. “Damned right I wouldn’t understand! But I want to find out.”

Dr. Prager consulted his beard again with careful fingers. “I haven’t seen her for over two months,” he said. “How has she been behaving lately? I mean, otherwise?”

“Like a doll,” the agent declared. “Just a living doll. To look at her, you wouldn’t of thought there was anything in her head but sawdust. Wrapped up the last picture clean, brought it in three days ahead of schedule. No blowups, no goofs, no nothing. She hasn’t been hitting the sauce or anything else. Stays home mostly and goes to bed early. Alone, yet.” Mickey Dennis made the pants-ripping sound again. “I might of figgered it was too good to be true.”

“No financial worries?” Dr. Prager probed.

Dennis swept his arm forward to indicate the library and the expanse beyond. “With *this?* All clear and paid for. Plus a hunk of real estate in Long Beach and two oil wells gushing like Lolly Parsons over a hot scoop. She’s got more loot than Fort Knox and almost as much as Crosby.”

“Er—how old is Eve, might I ask?”

“You might ask, and you might get some funny answers. But I happen to know. She’s thirty-three. I can guess what you’re thinking, Doc, and it don’t figger. She’s good for another dozen years, maybe more. Hell, all you got to do is look at her.”

“That’s just what I intend to do,” Dr. Prager replied. “Where is she?”

“Upstairs, in her room. Been there all day. Won’t see me.” Mickey Dennis hesitated. “She doesn’t know you’re here, either. I said I was gonna call you and she got kind of upset.”

“Didn’t want to see me, eh?”

“She said if that long-eared nanny-goat got within six miles of this joint she’d—” The agent paused and shifted uncomfortably.

“Like I mentioned, she was upset.”

“I think I can handle the situation,” Dr. Prager decided.

“Want me to come along and maybe try and soften her up a little?”

“That won’t be necessary.” Dr. Prager left the room, walking softly.

Mickey Dennis went back to his chair and picked up the magazine once more. He didn’t read, because he was waiting for the sound of the explosion.

When it came he shuddered and almost gritted his teeth until he remembered how much it would cost to buy a new upper plate. Surprisingly enough, the sound of oaths and shrieks subsided after a time and Dennis breathed a deep sigh of relief.

The Doc was a good headshrinker. He'd handle her. He was handling her. So there was nothing to do now but relax.

"Relax," Dr. Prager said. "You've discharged all your aggression. Now you can stretch out. That's better."

The spectacle of Eve Eden stretched out in relaxation on a chaise longue was indeed better. In the words of many eminent lupine Hollywood authorities, it was the best.

Eve Eden's legs were long and white and her hair was long and blonde; both were now displayed to perfection, together with a whole series of coming attractions screened through her semitransparent lounging pajamas. The face that launched a thousand close-ups was that of a petulant child, well-versed in the more statutory phases of juvenile delinquency.

Dr. Prager could cling to his professional objectivity only by clinging to his goatee. As it was, he dislodged several loose hairs and an equal number of loose impulses before he spoke again.

"Now," he said. "Tell me all about it."

"Why should I?" Eve Eden's eyes and voice were equally candid. "I didn't ask you to come here. I'm not in any jam."

"Mr. Dennis said you're thinking of leaving pictures."

"Mr. Dennis is a cockeyed liar. I'm not thinking of leaving. I've left, period. Didn't he call the lawyers? Hasn't he phoned the studio? I told him to."

"I wouldn't know," Dr. Prager soothed.

"Then he's the one who's in a jam," Eve Eden announced, happily. "Sure, I know why he called you. You're supposed to talk me out of it, right? Well, it's no dice, Doc. I made up my mind."

“Why?”

“None of your business.”

Dr. Prager leaned forward. “But it is my business, Wilma.”

“Wilma?”

Dr. Prager nodded, his voice softening. “Wilma Kozmowski. Little Wilma Kozmowski. Have you forgotten that I know all about her? The little girl whose mother deserted her. Who ran away from home when she was twelve, and lived around. I know about the waitress jobs in Pittsburgh, and the burlesque show, and the B-girl years; Frank, and Eddie, and Nino, and Sid and . . . all the others.” Dr. Prager smiled. “You told me all this yourself, Wilma. And you told me all about what happened after you became Eve Eden. When you met me, you weren’t Eve Eden yet; not entirely. Wilma kept interfering, didn’t she? It was Wilma who drank, took the drugs, got mixed up with the men, tried to kill herself. I helped you fight Wilma, didn’t I, Eve? I helped you *become* Eve Eden, the movie star. That’s why it’s my business now to see that you stay that way. Beautiful, admired, successful, happy—”

“You’re wrong, Doc. I found that out. If you want me to be happy, forget about Eve Eden. Forget about Wilma, too. From now on I’m going to be somebody else. So please, just go away.”

“Somebody else?” Dr. Prager leaped at the phrase. An instant later he leaped, literally.

“What’s that?” he gasped.

He stared down at the floor, the hairs in his goatee bristling as he caught sight of the small white furry object that scuttled across the carpet.

Eve Eden reached down and scooped up the creature, smiling.

“Just a white rabbit,” she explained. “Cute, isn’t he? I bought him the other day.”

“But—but—”

Dr. Prager goggled. It was indeed a white rabbit which Eve Eden cradled in her arms, but not *just* a white rabbit. For this rabbit happened to be wearing a vest and a checkered waistcoat, and Dr. Prager could almost swear that the silver chain across the vest terminated in a concealed pocket-watch.

"I bought it after the dream," Eve Eden told him.

"Dream?"

"Oh, what's the use?" she sighed, "I might as well let you hear it. All you headshrinkers are queer for dreams, anyway."

"You had a dream about rabbits?" Dr. Prager began.

"Please, Doc, let's do it my way," she answered. "This time *you* relax and I'll do the talking. It all started when I fell down this rabbit-hole . . ."

In her dream, Eve Eden said, she was a little girl with long golden curls. She was sitting on a river bank when she saw this white rabbit running close by. It was wearing the waistcoat and a high collar and then it took a watch out of its pocket, muttering, "Oh dear, I shall be too late." She ran across the field after it and when it popped down a large rabbit-hole she followed.

"Oh no!" Dr. Prager muttered. "Not *Alice!"*

"Alice who?" Eve Eden inquired. *"Alice in Wonderland*."

"You mean that movie Disney made, the cartoon thing?"

Dr. Prager nodded. "You saw it?"

"No. I never waste time on cartoons."

"But you know what I'm talking about, don't you?"

"Well—" Eve Eden hesitated. Then from the depths of her professional background an answer came. "Wasn't there another movie, 'way back around the beginning of the thirties? Sure, Paramount made it, with Oakie and Gallagher and Horton and Ruggles and Ned Sparks and Fields and Gary Cooper. And let's see now, who played the dame—Charlotte Henry?"

Dr. Prager smiled. *Now* he was getting somewhere. "So that's the one you saw, eh?"

Eve Eden shook her head. "Never saw that one, either. Couldn't afford movies when I was a brat—remember?"

“Then how do you know the cast, and—”

“Easy. Gal who used to work with Alison Skipworth told me. She was in it, too. And Edna Mae Oliver. I got a good memory, Doc. You know that.”

“Yes.” Dr. Prager breathed softly. “And so you must remember reading the original book, isn’t that it?”

“Was it a book?”

“Now look here, don’t tell me you’ve never read *Alice in Wonderland,* by Lewis Carroll. It’s a classic.”

“I’m no reader, Doc. You know that, too.”

“But surely, as a child you must have come across it. Or had somebody tell you the story.”

The blonde curls tossed. “Nope. I’d remember if I had. I remember everything I read, that’s why I’m always up on my lines. Best sight-reader in the business. I not only haven’t read *Alice in Wonderland*, I didn’t even know there was such a story, except in a screenplay.”

Dr. Prager gave an irritable tug at his goatee. “All right. You *do* have a remarkable memory, I know. So let’s think back now. Let’s think back very carefully to your earliest childhood. Somebody must have taken you on their lap, told you stories.”

The star’s eyes brightened. “Why sure!” she exclaimed. “That’s right! Aunt Emma was always telling me stories.”

“Excellent.” Dr. Prager smiled. “And can you recall now, the first story she ever told you? The very first?”

Eve Eden closed her eyes, concentrating with effort. When her voice came, it was from far away. “Yes,” she whispered. “I remember now. I was only four. Aunt Emma took me on her lap and she told me my first story. It was the one about the drunk who goes in this bar, and he can’t find the john, see, so the bartender tells him to go upstairs and—”

“No,” said Dr. Prager. “No, no! Didn’t she ever tell you any fairy tales?”

“Aunt Emma?” Eve Eden laughed. “I’ll say she didn’t. But stories, she had a million of ’em! Did you ever hear the one about the young married couple who—”

"Never mind." The psychiatrist leaned back. "You are quite positive you have never read or heard or seen *Alice in Wonderland*?"

"I told you so in the first place, didn't I? Now, do you want to hear my dream or not?"

"I want to very much," Dr. Prager answered, and he did. He took out his notebook and uncapped his fountain pen. In his own mind he was quite certain that she had heard or read *Alice*, and he was interested in the reasons for the mental bloc which prevented her from recalling the fact. He was also interested in the possible symbolism behind her account. This promised to be quite an enjoyable session. "You went down the rabbit-hole," he prompted.

"Into a tunnel," Eve continued. "I was falling—falling very slowly."

Dr. Prager wrote down *tunnel—womb fixation?* And he wrote down *falling dream,*

"I fell into a well," Eve said. "Lined with cupboards and bookshelves. There were maps and pictures on pegs."

Forbidden sex knowledge, Dr, Prager wrote.

"I reached out while I was still falling and took a jar from a shelf. The jar was labeled orange marmalade."

Marmalade—Mama? Dr. Prager wrote.

Eve said something about "Do cats eat bats?" and "Do bats eat cats?" but Dr. Prager missed it. He was too busy writing. It was amazing, now that he thought of it, just how much Freudian symbolism was packed into *Alice in Wonderland*. Amazing, too, how well her subconscious recalled it.

Eve was telling now how she had landed in the long hall with the doors all around, and how the rabbit disappeared muttering, "Oh my ears and whiskers, how late it's getting." She told about approaching the three-legged solid glass table with the tiny golden key on it and Dr. Prager quickly scribbled *phallic symbol*. Then she described looking through a fifteen-inch door into a garden beyond and wishing she could get through it by shutting up like a telescope. So Dr. Prager wrote *phallic envy*.

“Then,” Eve continued, “I saw this bottle on the table, labeled drink me. And so I drank, and do you know something? I did shut up like a telescope. I got smaller and smaller, and if I hadn’t stopped drinking I’d have disappeared! So of course I couldn’t reach the key, but then I saw this glass box under the table labeled eat me and I ate and got bigger right away.”

She paused. “I know it sounds silly, Doc, but it was real interesting.”

“Yes indeed,” Dr. Prager said. “Go on. Tell everything you remember.”

“Then the rabbit came back, mumbling something about a Duchess. And it dropped a pair of white gloves and a fan.”

Fetichism, the psychiatrist noted.

“After that it got real crazy.” Eve giggled. Then she told about the crying and forming a pool on the floor composed of her own tears. And how she held the fan and shrank again, then swam in the pool.

Grief fantasy, Dr. Prager decided.

She went on to describe her meeting with the mouse and with the other animals, and the Caucus-race, and the recital of the curious poem about the cur, Fury, which ended “I’ll be judge, I’ll be jury. . . . I’ll try the whole case and condemn you to death.”

Super-ego, wrote Dr. Prager, and asked, “What are you afraid of, Eve?”

“Nothing,” she answered. “And I wasn’t afraid in the dream, either. I liked it. But I haven’t told you anything yet.”

“Go on.”

She went on, describing her trip to the rabbit’s house to fetch his gloves and fan, and finding the unlabeled bottle in the bedroom. Then followed the episode of growth, and being stuck inside the house (*Claustrophobia,* the notebook dutifully recorded) and her escape from the animals who pelted her with pebbles as she ran into the forest.

It was *Alice*, all right, word for word, image for image. *Father-image* for the caterpillar, who might (Dr. Prager reasoned wisely) stand for himself as the psychiatrist, with his stern approach and enigmatic answers. The “Father William” poem which followed seemed to validate this conclusion.

Then came the episode of eating the side of the mushroom, growing and shrinking. Did this disguise her drug addiction? Perhaps. And there was a moment when she had a long serpentine neck and a pigeon mistook her for a serpent. A viper was a serpent. And weren't drug addicts called "vipers" ? Of course. Dr. Prager was beginning to understand, now. It was all symbolic. She was telling about her own life. Running away, and finding the key to success—alternating between being very "small" and insignificant and trying every method of becoming "big" and important, Until she entered the garden—her Garden of Eden here—and became a star, and consulted him, and took drugs. It all made sense, now.

He could understand as she told of the visit to the house of the Duchess (*Mother-image*) with her cruel "Chop off her head." He anticipated the baby who turned into a pig and wrote down *rejection-fantasy.*

Then he listened to the interview with the Cheshire-Cat, inwardly marveling at Eve Eden's perfect memory for dialogue.

" 'But I don't want to go among mad people,' I said. And the crazy cat came back with, 'Oh, you can't help that. We're all mad here. I'm mad. You're mad.' And I said, 'How do you know I'm mad?' and the cat said, 'You must be—or you wouldn't have come here.' Well, I felt plenty crazy when the cat started to vanish. Believe it or not, Doc, there was nothing left but a big grin."

"I believe it," Dr. Prager assured her.

He was hot on the trail of another scent now. The talk of madness had set him off. And sure enough, now came the Tea Party. With the March Hare and the Mad Hatter, of course—the *Mad* Hatter. Sitting in front of their house (*asylum*, no doubt) with the sleeping dormouse between them. *Dormouse—dormant* sanity. She was afraid of going insane, Dr. Prager decided. So much so did he believe it that when she quoted the line, "Why is a raven like a writing-desk?" he found himself writing down, *Why is a raving like a Rorschach test?,* and had to cross it out.

Then came the sadistic treatment of the poor dormouse, and another drug-fantasy with mushrooms for the symbol, leading her again into a beautiful garden. Dr. Prager heard it all: the story of the playing-card people (*club* soldiers and *diamond* courtiers and *heart* children were perfectly fascinating symbols, too!)

And when Eve said, “Why, they’re only a pack of cards after all—I needn’t be afraid of them,” Dr. Prager triumphantly wrote, *paranoid fantasies: people are unreal*.

“Now I must tell you about the croquet game,” Eve went on, and so she told him about the croquet game and Dr. Prager filled two whole pages with notes.

He was particularly delighted with Alice-Eve’s account of conversation with the ugly Duchess, who said among other things, “Take care of the sense and the sounds will take care of themselves,” and “Be what you would seem to be—or if you’d like it put more simply, Never imagine yourself not to be otherwise than what it might appear to others that what you were or might have been was not otherwise than what you had been would have appeared to them to be otherwise.”

Eve Eden rattled it off, apparently verbatim. “It didn’t seem to make sense at the time,” she admitted. “But it does now, don’t you think?”

Dr. Prager refused to commit himself. It made sense, all right. A dreadful sort of sense. This poor child was struggling to retain her identity. Everything pointed to that. She was adrift in a sea of illusion, peopled with Mock Turtles—*Mock* Turtle, very significant, that—and distorted imagery.

Now the story of the Turtle and the Gryphon and the Lobster Quadrille began to take on a dreadful meaning. All the twisted words and phrases symbolized growing mental disturbance. Schools taught “reeling and writhing” and arithmetic consisted of “ambition, distraction, uglification and derision.” Obviously fantasies of inferiority. And Alice-Eve growing more and more confused with twisted, inverted logic in which “blacking” became “whiting”—it was merely an inner cry signifying she could no longer tell the difference between black and white. In other words, she was losing all contact with reality. She was going through an ordeal . . . a trial . . .

Of course it was a trial! Now Eve was telling about the trial of the Knave of Hearts, who stole the tarts. *(Hadn't Eve once been a "tart" herself?)* And Alice-Eve noted all the animals on the jury (*another paranoid delusion: people are animals)* and she kept growing (*delusions of grandeur)* and then came the white rabbit reading the anonymous letter.

Dr. Prager pricked up his own ears, rabbit-fashion, when he heard the contents of the letter:

My notion was that you had been
(Before she had this fit)
An obstacle that came between
Him, and ourselves, and it.

Don't let him know she lilted them best,
For this must ever be
A secret kept from all the rest
Between yourself and me.

Of course, A *secret*, Dr. Prager decided. Eve Eden had been afraid of madness for a long time. That was the root of all her perverse behavior patterns, and he'd never probed sufficiently to uncover it. But the dream, welling up from the subconscious, provided the answer.

"I said I didn't believe there was an atom of meaning in it," Eve told him. And the Queen cried, 'Off with her head,' but I said, 'Who cares for *you?* You're nothing but a pack of cards.' And they all rose up and flew at me but I beat them off, and then I woke up fighting the covers."

She sat up, "You've been taking an awful lot of notes," she said. "Mind telling me what you think?"

Dr. Prager hesitated. It was a delicate question. Still, the dream-content indicated that she was perfectly well aware of her problem on the subliminal level. A plain exposition of the facts might come as a shock, but not a dangerous one. Actually, a shock could be just the thing now to lead her back and resolve the initial trauma, wherever it was.

"All right," Dr. Prager said, "Here's what I think it means." And in plain language, he explained his interpretation of her dream; pulling no punches, but occasionally his goatee.

"So there you have it," he concluded. "The symbolic story of your life—and the dramatized and disguised conflict over your mental status which you've always tried to hide. But the subconscious is wise, my dear. It always knows, and tries to warn. No wonder you had this dream, at this particular time. There's nothing accidental about it. Freud says—"

But Eve was laughing, "Freud says? What does he know about it? Come to think of it, Doc, what do you know about it, either? You see, I forgot to tell you something when I started. I didn't just *have* this dream." She stared at him, and her laughter ceased. "I bought it," Eve Eden said. "I bought it for ten thousand dollars."

Dr. Prager wasn't getting anywhere. His fountain pen ceased to function and his goatee wouldn't respond properly to even the most severe tugging. He heard Eve Eden out and waved his arms helplessly, like a bird about to take off. He felt like taking off, but on the other hand he couldn't leave this chick in her nest. Not with a big nest egg involved. But why did it have to be so involved?

"Go over that again," he begged, finally. "Just the highlights. I can't seem to get it."

"But it's really so simple," Eve answered. "Like I already told you. I was getting all restless and keyed-up, you know, like I've been before. Dying for a ball, some new kind of kick. And then I ran into Wally Redmond and he told me about this Professor Laroc."

"The charlatan," Dr. Prager murmured.

"I don't know what nationality he is," Eve answered. "He's just a little old guy who goes around selling these dreams."

"Now wait a minute—"

“Sure, it sounds screwy. I thought so too, when Wally told me. He’d met him at a party somewhere, and got to talking. And pretty soon he was spilling his you’ll pardon the expression guts about the sad story of his life and how fed up he was with everything including his sixth wife. And how he wanted to get away from it all and find a new caper.

“So this Professor Laroc asked him if he’d ever been on the stuff and Wally said no, he had a weak heart. And he asked him if he’d tried psychiatry and Wally said sure, he’d been to Doc Weissnichtwer but it didn’t help him any.”

“Your friend went to the wrong analyst,” Dr. Prager snapped, in some heat. “He should have come to a Freudian. How could he expect to get results from a Jungian—”

“Like you say, Doc, relax. It doesn’t matter. What matters is that Professor Laroc sold him this dream. It was a real scary one, to hear him tell it, all about being a burglar over in England some place and getting into a big estate run by a little dwarf with a head like a baboon. But he liked it, liked it fine. Said he was really relaxed after he had it: made him feel like a different person. And so he bought another, about a guy who was a pawnbroker, only a long time ago in some real gone country. And this pawnbroker ran around having himself all kinds of women who—”

“Jurgen,” Dr. Prager muttered. “And if I’m not mistaken, the other one was from *Lutyindoo.* I think it was called ‘The Snout.’ ”

“Let’s stick to the point, Doc,” Eve Eden said. “Anyway, Wally was crazy about these dreams. He said the Professor had a lot more to peddle, and even though the price was high, it was worth it. Because in the dream you felt like somebody else; you felt like the character you were dreaming about. And of course, no hangover, no trouble with the law. Wally said if he ever tried some of the stuff he dreamed about on real women they’d clap him in the pokey, even in Hollywood. He planned to get out of pictures and buy more. Wanted to dream all the time. I guess the Professor told him if he paid enough he could even *stay* in a dream without coming back.”

“Nonsense!”

"That's what I told the man. I know how you feel, Doc. I felt that way myself before I met Professor Laroc. But after that it was different."

"You met this . . . person?"

"He isn't a person, Doc. He's a real nice guy, a sweet character.

You'd like him. I did, when Wally brought him around. We had a long talk together. I opened up to him, even more than I have to you, I guess. Told him all my troubles. And he said, what was wrong with me was I never had any childhood. That somewhere underneath there was a little girl trying to live her life with a full imagination. So he'd sell me a dream for that. And even though it sounded batty, it made sense to me. He really seemed to understand things I didn't understand about myself.

"So I thought here goes, nothing to lose if I try it once, and I bought the dream." She smiled. "And now that I know what it's like, I'm going to buy more. All he can sell me. Because he was right, you know. I don't want the movies. I don't want liquor or sex or H or gambling or anything. I don't want Eve Eden. I want to be a little girl, a little girl like the one in the dream, having adventures and never getting hurt. That's why I made up my mind. I'm quitting, getting out while the getting is good. From now on, me for dreamland."

Dr. Prager was silent for a long time. He kept staring at Eve Eden's smile. It wasn't *her* smile—he got the strangest notion that it belonged to somebody else. It was too relaxed, too innocent, too utterly seraphic for Eve. It was, he told himself, the smile of a ten-year-old girl on the face of a thirty-three-year-old woman of the world.

And he thought *hebephrenia* and he thought *schizophrenia* and he thought *incipient catatonia* and he said, "You say you met this Professor Laroc through Wally Redmond. Do you know how to reach him?"

"No, he reaches me." Eve Eden giggled. "He sends me, too, Doc." She was really pretty far gone, Dr. Prager decided. But he had to persist. "When you bought this dream, as you say, what happened?"

"Why, nothing. Wally brought the Professor here to the house. Right up to this bedroom, actually. Then he went away and the Professor talked to me and I wrote out the check and he gave me the dream.”

“You keep saying he ‘gave’ you this dream. What does that mean?” Dr. Prager leaned forward. He had a sudden hunch. “Did he ask you to lie down, the way I do?”

“Yes. That’s right.”

“And did he talk to you?”

“Sure. How’d you guess?”

“And did he keep talking until you went to sleep?”

“I—I think so. Anyway, I did go to sleep, and when I woke up he was gone.”

“Aha.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means you were hypnotized, my dear. Hypnotized by a clever charlatan, who sold you a few moments of prepared patter in return for ten thousand dollars.”

“But—but that’s not true!” Eve Eden’s childish smile became a childish pout. “It was *real*. The dream, I mean. It *happened*.”

“Happened?”

“Of course. Haven’t I made that clear yet? The dream *happened.* It wasn’t like other dreams. I mean, I could feel and hear and see and even taste. Only it wasn’t *me,* it was this little girl. Alice. I was Alice. That’s what makes it worthwhile, can’t you understand? That’s what Wally said, too. The dream-place is real, you *go* there, and you *are* somebody else.”

“Hypnotism.”

Eve Eden put down the rabbit. “All right,” she said. “I can prove it.” She marched over to the big bed—the bed large enough to hold six people, according to some very catty but authenticated reports. “I didn’t mean to show you this,” she said, “but maybe I’d better.”

She reached under her pillow and pulled out a small object which glittered beneath the light. “I found this in my hand when I woke up,” she declared. “Look at it.”

Dr. Prager looked at it. It was a small bottle bearing a little white label. He shook it, and discovered that the bottle was half-filled with a colorless transparent liquid. He studied the label and deciphered the hand-lettered inscription which read, simply, drink me.

"Proof, eh?" he mused. "Found in your hand when you woke up?"

"Of course. From the dream."

Dr. Prager smiled. "You were hypnotized. And before Professor Laroc stole away—and *stole* is singularly appropriate, considering that he had your check for ten thousand dollars—he simply planted this bottle in your hand as you slept. That's my interpretation of your proof." He slipped the little glass container into his pocket. "With your permission, I'd like to take this along," he said. "I'm going to ask you now to bear with me for the next twenty-four hours. Don't make any announcements about leaving the studio until I return. I think I can clear everything up to your satisfaction."

"But I am satisfied," Eve told him. "There's nothing to clear up. I don't want to—"

"Please." Dr. Prager brushed his beard with authority. "All I ask is that you be patient for twenty-four hours. I shall return tomorrow at this same time. And meanwhile, try to forget about all this. Say nothing to anyone."

"Now wait a minute, Doc—"

But Dr. Prager was gone. Eve Eden frowned for a moment, then sank back on the chaise lounge. The rabbit scampered out from behind a chair and she picked it up again. She stroked its long ears gently until the creature fell asleep. Presently Eve's eyes closed and she drifted off to slumber herself. And the child's smile returned to her face.

There was no smile, childish or adult, on Dr. Prager's face when he presented himself again to the gatekeeper on the following day.

His face was stern and set as he drove up to the front door, accepted the butler's greeting, and went down the hall to where Mickey Dennis waited.

"What's up?" the little agent demanded, tossing his copy of *Rave* to the floor.

"I've been doing a bit of investigating," Dr. Prager told him. "And I'm afraid I have bad news."

"What is it, Doc? I tried to get something out of her after you left yesterday, but she wasn't talking. And today—"

"I know." Dr. Prager sighed. "She wouldn't be likely to tell you, under the circumstances, Apparently she realizes the truth herself but won't admit it. I have good reason to believe Miss Eden is disturbed. Seriously disturbed." Mickey Dennis twirled his forefinger next to his ear. "You mean she's flipping?"

"I disapprove of that term on general principles," Dr. Prager replied, primly. "And in this particular case the tense is wrong. *Flipped* would be much more correct."

"But I figgered she was all right lately. Outside of this business about quitting, she's been extra happy—happier'n I ever seen her."

"Euphoria," Dr. Prager answered. "Cycloid manifestation."

"You don't say so."

"I just did," the psychiatrist reminded him.

"Level with me," Dennis pleaded. "What's this all about?"

"I can't until after I've talked to her," Dr. Prager told him. "I need more facts. I was hoping to get some essential information from this Wally Redmond, but I can't locate him. Neither his studio nor his home seems to have information as to his whereabouts for the past several days."

"Off on a binge," the agent suggested. "It figgers. Only just what did you want from him?"

"Information concerning Professor Laroc," Dr. Prager answered. "He's a pretty elusive character. His name isn't listed on any academic roster I've consulted, and I couldn't find it in the City Directory of this or other local communities. Nor could the police department aid me with their files. I'm almost afraid my initial theory was wrong and that Professor Laroc himself is only another figment of Eve Eden's imagination."

“Maybe I can help you out, Doc.”

“You mean you met this man, saw him when he came here with Wally Redmond that evening?” Mickey Dennis shook his head. “No. I wasn’t around then. But I been around all afternoon. And just about a half hour ago a character named Professor Laroc showed up at the door. He’s with Eve in her room right now.”

Dr. Prager opened his mouth and expelled a gulp. Then he turned and ran for the stairs.

The agent sought out his over-stuffed chair and riffled the pages of his magazine.

More waiting. Well, he just hoped there wouldn’t be any explosions this afternoon.

There was no explosion when Dr. Prager opened the bedroom door. Eve Eden was sitting quietly on the chaise longue, and the elderly gentleman occupied an armchair.

As Dr. Prager entered, the older man rose with a smile and extended his hand. Dr. Prager felt it wise to ignore the gesture. “Professor Laroc?” he murmured.

“That is correct.” The smile was a bland blend of twinkling blue eyes behind old-fashioned steel-rimmed spectacles, wrinkled creases in white cheeks, and a rictus of a prim, thin-lipped mouth. Whatever else he might be, Professor Laroc aptly fitted Mickey Dennis’s description of a “character.” He appeared to be about sixty-five, and his clothing seemed of the same vintage, as though fashioned in anticipation at the time of his birth.

Eve Eden stood up now. “I’m glad you two are getting together,” she said. “I asked the Professor to come this afternoon so we could straighten everything out.”

Dr. Prager preened his goatee. “I’m very happy that you did so,” he answered. “And I’m sure that matters can be set straight in very short order now that I’m here.”

“The Professor has just been telling me a couple of things,” Eve informed him. “I gave him your pitch about me losing my buttons and he says you’re all wet.”

“A slight misquotation,” Professor Laroc interposed. “I merely observed that an understanding of the true facts might dampen your enthusiasm.”

“I think I have the facts,” Dr. Prager snapped. “And they’re dry enough. Dry, but fascinating.”

“Do go on.”

“I intend to.” Dr. Prager wheeled to confront Eve Eden and spoke directly to the girl. “First of all,” he said, “I must tell you that your friend here is masquerading under a pseudonym. I have been unable to discover a single bit of evidence substantiating the identity of anyone named Professor Laroc.”

“Granted,” the elderly man murmured.

“Secondly,” Dr. Prager continued, “I must warn you that I have been unable to ascertain the whereabouts of your friend, Wally Redmond. His wife doesn’t know where he is, nor his producer. Mickey Dennis thinks he’s off on an alcoholic fugue. I have my own theory. But one fact is certain—he seems to have completely disappeared.”

“Granted,” said Professor Laroc. “Third and last,” Dr. Prager went on. “It is my considered belief that the man calling himself Professor Laroc did indeed subject you to hypnosis and that, once he had managed to place you in deep trance, he deliberately read to you from a copy of *Alice in Wonderland* and suggested to you that you were experiencing the adventures of the principal character. Whereupon he placed the vial of liquid labeled drink me under your pillow and departed.”

“Granted in part,” Professor Laroc nodded. “It is true that I placed Miss Eden in a receptive state with the aid of what you choose to call hypnosis. And it is true that I suggested to her that she enter into the world of *Alice*, as Alice. But that is all. It was not necessary to read anything to her, nor did I stoop to deception by supplying a vial of liquid, as you call it. Believe me, I was as astonished as you were, to learn that she had brought back such an interesting souvenir of her little experience."

"Prepare to be astonished again, then," Dr. Prager said, grimly. He pulled the small bottle from his pocket and with it a piece of paper.

"What's that, Doc?" Eve Eden asked.

"A certificate from Haddon and Haddon, industrial chemists," the psychiatrist told her. "I took this interesting souvenir, as your friend calls it, down to their laboratories for analysis." He handed her the report. "Here, read for yourself. If your knowledge of chemistry is insufficient, I can tell you that H_20 means water." He smiled. "Yes, that's right. This bottle contains nothing but half an ounce of water."

Dr. Prager turned and stared at Professor Laroc. "What have you to say now?" he demanded.

"Very little." The old man smiled. "It does not surprise me that you were unable to find my name listed in any registry or directory of activities, legal or illegal. As Miss Eden already knows, I chose to cross over many years ago. Nor was 'Laroc' my actual surname. A moment's reflection will enable you to realize that 'Laroc' is an obvious enough anagram for 'Carroll', give or take a few letters."

"You don't mean to tell me—"

"That I am Lewis Carroll, or rather, Charles Lutwidge Dodgson? Certainly not. I hold the honor of being a fellow-alumnus of his from Oxford, and we did indeed share an acquaintance—"

"But Lewis Carroll died in 1898," Dr. Prager objected.

"Ah, you *were* interested enough to look up the date," the old man smiled. "I see you're not so skeptical as you pretend to be."

Dr. Prager felt that he was giving ground and remembered that attack is the best defense. "Where is Wally Redmond?" he countered.

"With the Duchess of Towers, I would assume," Professor Laroc answered. "Lie chose to cross over permanently, and I selected *Peter lbbetson* for him. You see, I'm restricted to literature which was directly inspired by the author's dream, and there's a rather small field available. I still have Cabell's *Smirt* to sell, and *The Brushwood Boy* of Kipling, but I don't imagine I shall ever manage to dispose of any Lovecraft—too gruesome, you know." He glanced at Eve Eden. "Fortunately, as I told you, I've reserved something very special for you. And I'm glad you decided to take the step. The moment I saw you, my heart went out to you. I sensed the little girl buried away beneath all the veneer, just as I sensed the small boy in Mr. Redmond. So many of you Hollywood people are frustrated children. You make dreams for others but have none of your own. I am glad to offer my modest philanthropy—"

"At ten thousand dollars a session!" Dr. Prager exploded.

"Now, now," Professor Laroc chided. "That sounds like professional jealousy, sir! And I may as well remind you that a permanent cross-over requires a fee of fifty thousand. Not that I need the money, you understand. It's merely that such a fee helps to establish me as an authority. It brings about the necessary transference-relationship between my clients and myself, to borrow from your own terminology. The effect is purely psychological."

Dr. Prager had heard enough. This, he decided, was definitely the time to call a halt. Even Eve Eden in her present disturbed state should be able to comprehend the utter idiocy of this man's preposterous claims.

He faced the elderly charlatan with a disarming smile. "Let me get this straight," he began, quietly. "Am I to understand that you are actually selling dreams?"

"Let us say, rather, that I sell experiences. And the experiences are every bit as real as anything you know."

"Don't quibble over words." Dr. Prager was annoyed. "You come in and hypnotize patients. During their sleep you suggest they enter a dream world. And then—"

"If you don't mind, let us quibble a bit over words, please," Professor Laroc said. "You're a psychiatrist. Very well; as a psychiatrist, please tell me one thing. Just what *is* a dream?"

“Why, that’s very simple,” Dr. Prager answered. “According to Freud, the dream-phenomenon can be described as—”

“I didn’t ask for a description, Doctor. Nor for Freud’s opinion. I asked for an exact definition of the dream-state, as you call it. I want to know the etiology and epistemology of dreams. And while you’re at it, how about a definition of the ‘hypnotic state’ and of ‘sleep’ ? And what is ‘suggestion’ ? After you’ve given me precise scientific definitions of these phenomena, as you love to call them, perhaps you can go on and explain to me the nature of ‘reality’ and the exact meaning of the term ‘imagination.’ ”

“But these are only figures of speech,” Dr. Prager objected. “I’ll be honest with you. Perhaps we can’t accurately describe a dream. But we can observe it. It’s like electricity: nobody knows what it *is,* but it’s a measurable force which can be directed and controlled, subject to certain natural laws.”

“Exactly,” Professor Laroc said. “That’s just what I would have said myself. And dreams are indeed like electrical force: indeed, the human brain gives off electrical charges, and all life—matter—energy—enters into an electrical relationship. But this relationship has never been studied. Only the physical manifestations of electricity have been studied and harnessed, not the psychic. At least, not until Dodgson stumbled on certain basic mathematical principles, which he imparted to me. I developed them, found a practical use. The dream, my dear Doctor, is merely an electrically charged continuum given a reality of its own beyond our own space-time continuum. The individual dream is weak. Set it down on paper, as some dreams have been set down, share it with others, and watch the charge build up. The combined electrical properties tend to create a *permanent* plane; a dream-continuum, if you please.”

“I don’t please,” answered Dr. Prager.

“That’s because you’re not receptive,” Professor Laroc observed smugly. “Yours is a negative charge rather than a positive one. Dodgson—Lewis Carroll—was positive. So was Lovecraft, and Poe, and Edward Lucas White, and a handful of others. Their dreams live. Others positively charged can live in them, granted the proper method of entry. It's not magic, there's nothing supernatural about it at all, unless you consider mathematics as magic. Dodgson did. He was a professor of mathematics, remember. And so was I. I took his principles and extended them, created a practical methodology. Now I can enter dreamworlds at will, cause others to enter. It's not hypnosis as you understand it. A few words of non-Euclidean formulae will be sufficient—"

"I've heard enough," Dr. Prager broke in. "Much as I hate to employ the phrase, this is sheer lunacy." The Professor shrugged. "Call it what you wish," he said. "You psychiatrists are good at pinning labels on things. But Miss Eden here has had sufficient proof through her own experience. Isn't that so?" Eve Eden nodded, then broke her silence. "I believe you," she said. "Even if Doc here thinks we're both batty. And I'm willing to give you the fifty grand for a permanent trip."

Dr. Prager grabbed for his goatee. He was clutching at straws now. "But you can't," he cried. "This doesn't make sense."

"Maybe not your kind of sense," Eve answered. "But that's just the trouble. You don't seem to understand there's more than *one* kind. That crazy dream I had, the one you say Lewis Carroll had first and wrote up into a book—it makes sense to you if you really *live* it. More sense than Hollywood, than this. More sense than a little kid named Wilma Kozmowski growing up to live in a half-million-dollar palace and trying to kill herself because she can't be a little kid any more and never had a chance to be one when she was small. The Professor here, he understands. He knows everybody has a right to dream. For the first time in my life I know what it is to be happy."

"That's right," Professor Laroc added. "I recognized her as a kindred spirit. I saw the child beneath, the child of the pure unclouded brow, as Lewis Carroll put it. She deserved this dream."

"Don't try and stop me," Eve cut in. "You can't, you know. You'll never drag me back to your world, and you've got no reason to try—except that you like the idea of making a steady living off me. And so does Dennis, with his lousy ten per-cent, and so does the studio with its big profits. I never met anyone who really liked me as a person except Professor Laroc here. He's the only one who ever gave me anything worth having. The dream. So quit trying to argue me into it, Doc. I'm not going to be Eve any more, or Wilma either. I'm going to be Alice."

Dr. Prager scowled, then smiled. What was the matter with him? Why was he bothering to argue like this? After all, it was so unnecessary. Let the poor child write out a check for fifty thousand dollars—payment could always be stopped. Just as this charlatan could be stopped if he actually attempted hypnosis. There were laws and regulations. Really, Dr. Prager reminded himself, he was behaving like a child himself: taking part in this silly argument just as if there actually was something to it besides nonsense-words.

What was really at stake, he realized, was professional pride. To think that this old mountebank could actually carry more authority with Eve Eden than he did himself!

And what was the impostor saying now, with that sickening, smile?

"I'm sorry you cannot subscribe to my theories, Doctor. But at least I am grateful for one thing, and that is that you didn't see fit to put them to the test."

"Test? What do you mean?" Professor Laroc pointed his finger at the little bottle labeled drink me which now rested on the table before him. "I'm happy you merely analyzed the contents of that vial without attempting to drink them."

"But it's nothing but water."

"Perhaps. What you forget is that water may have very different properties in other worlds. And this water came from the world of *Alice*."

"You planted that," Dr. Prager snapped. "Don't deny it."

"I do deny it. Miss Eden knows the truth."

"Oh does she?" Dr. Prager suddenly found his solution. He raised the bottle, turning to Eve with a commanding gesture. "Listen to me, now. Professor Laroc claims, and you believe, that this liquid was somehow transported from the dream-world of *Alice in Wonderland*. If that is the case, then a drink out of this bottle would cause me either to grow or to shrink. Correct?”

“Yes,” Eve murmured.

“Now wait—” the Professor began, but Dr. Prager shook his head impatiently.

“Let me finish,” he insisted. “All right. By the same token, if I took a drink from this bottle and nothing happened, wouldn’t it prove that the dream-world story is a fake?”

“Yes, but—”

“No buts. I’m asking you a direct question. Would it or wouldn’t it?”

“Y-yes. I guess so. Yes.”

“Very well, then.” Dramatically, Dr. Prager uncorked the little bottle and raised it to his lips. “Watch me,” he said.

Professor Laroc stepped forward. “Please!” he shouted. “I implore you—don’t—”

He made a grab for the bottle, but he was too late.

Dr. Prager downed the half-ounce of colorless fluid.

Mickey Dennis waited and waited until he couldn’t stand it any longer. There hadn’t been any loud sounds from upstairs at all, and this only made it worse.

Finally he got the old urge so bad he just had to go on up there and see for himself what was going on.

As he walked down the hall he could hear them talking inside the bedroom. At least he recognized Professor Laroc’s voice. He was saying something about, “There, there, I know it’s quite a shock. Perhaps you’d feel better if you didn’t wait—do you want to go now?”

That didn’t make too much sense to Mickey, and neither did Eve’s reply. She said, “Yes, but don’t I have, to go to sleep first?”

And then the Professor answered, “No; as I explained to him, it’s just a question of the proper formulae. If I recite them we can go together. Er—you might bring your checkbook along.”

Eve seemed to be giggling. “You too?” she asked.

“Yes. I’ve always loved this dream, my dear It’s a sequel to the first one, as you’ll discover. Now if you’ll just face the mirror with me . . .”

And then the Professor mumbled something in a very low voice, and Mickey bent down with his head close to the door but he couldn’t quite catch it. Instead, his shoulder pushed the door open.

The bedroom was empty.

That’s right, empty.

But he could swear he heard voices just a second ago. What had the Professor said? Something about facing the mirror?

Mickey looked in the mirror, the big mirror above the mantelpiece.

For a moment he got a screwy idea he could see the Professor and Eve Eden reflected in the glass, with the light shining every which way and Eve somehow looking like a little kid with long golden curls. But that was crazy, of course.

Then the dressed-up white rabbit came hopping out from behind the bed and began to scamper around the floor.

Mickey didn’t know how to explain that one, either. There was going to be a lot he couldn’t explain. He’d never find out where Eve and the Professor had gone, because he’d never read *Through The Looking-Glass.*

And he’d never understand where Doc went, for that matter.

The rabbit began to scamper around the pile of clothing on the floor. Mickey recognized Doc’s coat and trousers and shirt and necktie, but this didn’t tell him anything, either.

Then he stooped and picked up the little bottle lying next to the empty clothes. He stared at the label reading drink me.

Right now he could use a drink, Mickey decided, but this bottle was empty.

Maybe it was just as well.

Founding Fathers

If you're determined to change history nothing can equal a time machine. But he warned! You may prematurely whiten your bones!

We doubt if anyone but Robert Bloch could dissolve what at first appears to be an outrageous distortion of history—the Founding Fathers in gangster roles!—into such a sunburst of dazzling humor that we find ourselves forgiving him almost before we discover that there is nothing to forgive. You see, the opening scene of this hilarious science fantasy isn't really in the least irreverent, for the astounding, turnabout climax sets history by the ears!

EARLY ON THE morning of July 4th, 1776, Thomas Jefferson poked his peruked head into the deserted chamber of what was to be known as Independence Hall and yelled, "Come on, you guys, the coast is clear!"

As he stepped into the big room he was followed by John Hancock, who puffed nervously on a cigarette.

"All right," Jefferson said. "Ditch the butt, will ya? You wanna louse us up, creep?"

"Sorry, boss." Hancock glanced around the place, then addressed a third man who entered behind him. "Dig this," he murmured. "Not an ashtray in the joint. What kind of a setup we got here anyway, Nunzio?"

The third man scowled. "Don't call me Nunzio," he growled. "The name's Charles Thomson, remember?"

“Okay, Chuck.”

“Charles!” The third man dug John Hancock in the ribs. “Straighten that wig of yours. Ya look like somethin’ out of a Boy Scout pageant yet.”

John Hancock shrugged. “Well, whaddya expeck? Guy can’t even smoke, and these here britches are so tight I’m scared to sit down in ’em.”

Thomas Jefferson turned and confronted him. “You ain’t gonna sit down,” he said. “All you gotta do is sign and keep your yap shut. Let Ben do the talking, remember?”

“Ben?”

“Benjamin Franklin, schmoe,” said Thomas Jefferson.

“Somebody mention my name?” The short fat balding man hurried into the room, carefully adjusting square-lensed spectacles to the bridge of his nose.

“What took you so long?” Thomas Jefferson demanded. “You run into trouble back there?”

“No trouble,” Benjamin Franklin replied. “They’re out cold, and the gags are holding. It’s just these glasses—the lenses distort my vision. I’d forgotten I’d have to wear them.”

“Can’t you ditch ’em?”

“No. Somebody might get suspicious.” Franklin peered at his companions over the tops of the spectacles. “They’re likely to get suspicious anyway, if you don’t do what I told you.” He glanced around the room. “What time is it?”

Thomas Jefferson fumbled with the ruffles at his sleeves and gazed down at the face of his wristwatch. “Seven-thirty,” he announced.

“You’re sure?”

“Checked it with Western Union.”

“Never mind that Western Union talk. And take off that thing—put it in your pocket. It’s stuff like that can get us into trouble.”

“Trouble,” John Hancock groaned. “These here shoes are killin’ me. They ain’t nearly my size.”

"Well wear them and be quiet," Benjamin Franklin told him. "I wish to God you'd remembered to shave, too. Fine thing—the President of the Continental Congress on the most important day of our history, coming in without shaving."

"I forgot. Also they was no place to plug in an electric shaver."

"Well, never mind now. The main thing is just to be quiet and remember what you're supposed to do. Mr. Jefferson, do you have the Declaration?"

Nobody answered. Franklin strode up to the tall man in the peruke. "Jefferson, that's you I'm talking to."

"I forgot." The big man smiled sheepishly.

"You'd better not forget. Now, where is it?"

"Right here in my pocket."

"Well, get it out. We've got to sign right away, before anybody else shows up. I expect they'll start drifting in around eight at the latest."

"Eight?" Jefferson sighed. "Do you mean to tell me they go to work that early here?"

"Our friends in the back room looked as if they'd been working all night," Franklin reminded him.

"Ain't they never heard of union hours?"

"No, and don't you mention it, either." Franklin surveyed his companions earnestly. "That goes for all of you. Watch your tongues. We can't afford a slip-up."

"Telling me?" Charles Thomson took the parchment from Thomas Jefferson and unfolded it.

"Careful with that," Franklin warned.

"Pipe down, will ya? I just wanna take a look at it," Thomson replied. "I ain't never seen that there thing." He glanced at the manuscript curiously. "Hey, dig this crazy hanwriting. Its' all lettering, like."

He spread the Declaration on a table and squinted down at it, mumbling aloud.

" 'When inna course a human events, it becomes nessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connecked them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth the separate—hey, what kinda double-talk is this, anyway? Whyn't these guys write English, huh?"

"Never mind." Ben Franklin took the parchment from him and strode to a desk. "I'm going to revise it right now." He rummaged around in the drawer, finding fresh parchment and a quill pen. "I'm not up to copying the lettering style, I'm afraid, tut I can explain that to the Congress easily enough. I'll tell them that Jefferson here made his last-minute changes in a hurry. The hurry part of it is no lie."

He bent over the blank parchment and studied the Declaration as it rested alongside. "Got to keep the style," he said. "Very important. But the main thing is to add the provisions at the end."

"Provisions?" John Hancock brightened. "We gonna have some grub, hey? I'm starved."

"That can wait," Jefferson snapped. "Now keep still and let the guy work. This is the most important part of the whole caper, understand?"

Then there was silence in the room—silence except for the busy scratching of the quill pen as Benjamin Franklin wrote.

Jefferson stood over his shoulder, nodding from time to time. "Don't forget to put in that part about me being temporary boss," he said. "And stick in that we need a treasurer."

Franklin nodded impatiently. "I've got it all down here," he answered. "Nothing to worry about."

"Think they'll sign?"

"Sure they'll sign. It's only logical. Right after the part about being free and independent states there should be a mention of a temporary governing arrangement. They can't object to that. Wonder why it was left out in the first place."

"Search me." Jefferson shrugged. "How would I know?"

"Well, you're supposed to have written it."

"Oh, yeah, that's right."

Franklin finished, sat back, and poked at Jefferson's chest with his quill. "Cough," he said.

Jefferson coughed.

“Again. Louder.”

“What’s the big idea?”

“You’ve got laryngitis,” Franklin told him. “A bad case. That’s why you’re not talking. Anybody asks you any questions, you just cough. Right?”

“Okay. I didn’t want to talk anyway.”

Franklin gazed at Hancock and Thomson. “You two better sign and disappear. When the gang arrives, you go in the back room and keep an eye on our buddies there. I’ll make up some excuse why you’re not around—can’t take the risk of having you cornered and questioned. Got it?”

The two men nodded. Franklin extended the quill pen. “Here. You two are supposed to sign first.” As John Hancock reached for the pen, Franklin chuckled. “Just put your John Hancock right here.”

Hancock signed with a flourish. He gave the pen to Charles Thomson.

“Remember, you’re the secretary,” Franklin said, as Thomson dipped the quill in the inkwell. “What’s the matter, that quill too clumsy for you?”

“Sure it’s clumsy,” Thomson said. “And these clothes are murder. And none of us guys knows how to talk. We can’t get away with this, Thinker. We’re gonna make mistakes.”

Benjamin Franklin stood up. “We’re going to make history,” he declared. “Just follow orders and everything will be all right.” He paused and lifted his hand. “In the immortal words of myself—Benjamin Franklin—we must all hang together, or assuredly we shall all hang separately.”

II

THEY HAD HUNG together for a long time in Philly—Sammy, Nunzio, Mush and Thinker Tomaszewski. They shoved a little queer, peddled a few decks, but mostly they made book.

It was a nice setup for all of them, particularly since the Thinker came into the deal. The Thinker was a genuine shyster, with a degree and an office and everything, and he fronted for the outfit. The funny part of it was, Thinker Tomaszewski had a regular law practice too, and he could have made a pretty nice piece of change without cutting corners.

But he worked with them for kicks, at first.

"The only way I can explain it," he told them, "is that I don't seem to have a super-ego." Always with the two-dollar words, that was the Thinker.

And it was his two-dollar words that finally got them into trouble. In the beginning, everything was fine. Using his law office as a front, he had no difficulty in getting acquainted with a better class of mark—not the two-bucks-on-the-nose working stiff, but heavy bettors. He steered them to Sammy or Nunzio or Mush, and they made a big book.

They made a big buck, too. So big that they just had to place a few bets of their own, with some of the top wheels like Mickey Tarantino. Playing it smart, of course, and working only on inside tips, when they were sure of a horse getting the needle.

Came an afternoon when the needle stuck. And they were stuck for twenty grand. Mickey Tarantino held out his hand and smiled. But the smile vanished when Sammy went to him and said he needed time to pay up.

"Whaddya mean?" Mr. Tarantino had inquired. "You guys are loaded. Look at all the rich suckers you make book with."

"All we got to show for it is markers," Sammy confessed. "It's like your old man's delicatessen. The poor guys pay and the high-class trade puts it on the cuff. You know how those big operators work. Well, it's the same in our line. You can't collect from them."

"You damn well better colleck," Mr. Tarantino advised. "Because you got until tomorrow morning. Or elst you wind up in Plotter's Field, or wherever."

So Sammy went away and called a meeting at Thinker Tomaszewski's office and broke the news.

Thinker had news for them too. "Tarantino isn't the only one who thinks we're rolling in the stuff," he announced. "Uncle Sam is looking down our throats for a little matter of back income taxes."

"Great!" Sammy groaned. "Tarantino's hoods in front of us and the Federal finks behind us. Which way do we turn?"

"I suggest you turn to our clients," Thinker answered. "Call on some of our investors and ask them to redeem their markers."

So Sammy and Nunzio and Mush called. And early that evening they assembled and pooled results.

"Three grand!" Sammy snorted. "Three lousy grand!"

"Is that all?" The Thinker was genuinely mystified. "I should have thought you'd get more than that."

"Sure we got more. Excuses we got, promises we got, brush-offs we got. But here's the moola. Three grand, period."

"How about Cobbett?" Thinker asked.

"Professor Cobbett? He's your baby, isn't he?"

The Thinker nodded. Professor Cobbett was indeed his baby. One of the upper crust.

"What's he into us for?" Sammy demanded.

"About eight, I think."

"Eight and three is eleven. Not so hot. But if we could get it fast, maybe Tarantino would hold off for a while."

"Let's get it fast," Mush suggested. "Let's go out and see old Cobbett right now."

So they all piled into Sammy's car and went out to see old Cobbett. The Professor had a country place—a nice layout for a man who lived all alone—and he was cordial and pleasant when he greeted the Thinker on the front porch.

He was not quite so cordial or pleasant when he learned what the Thinker wanted, and he was downright inhospitable when the Thinker beckoned and his three companions appeared out of the darkness.

They had to stick their feet in the door and they had to stick their heaters in his ribs.

“No foolin’,” Nunzio told him. “We want our loot.”

“Oh dear!” said Professor Cobbett, as they marched him backwards into his own parlor. “But I have no money.”

“Don’t con us,” Mush told him. “Look at this joint, all this fancy furniture.”

“Mortgaged,” the Professor sighed. “Mortgaged to the hilt, and past it.”

“What about this here school where you teach at?” Mush asked. “You could maybe brace them for some advance dough on your salary, huh?”

“I am no longer connected with the university.”

“What gives here?” Sammy wanted to know.

“Yes,” Thinker added. “I thought you were a wealthy man.” The Professor shrugged and ran his hand through his graying hair. “Things are not always what they seem,” he said. “For example, I considered you to be a reputable professional man. And when I innocently inquired about the possibilities of placing a small bet on the races, I never dreamed you were associated with these ruffians.”

“Watch that talk,” Sammy warned. “We ain’t no more ruffians than eight grand is a small bet. Now whaddya mean about things ain’t always what they seem?”

“Well, it’s like this,” the Professor answered. “I did have a certain sum of money set aside—yes. And I did have a position of some eminence at the university. The fact that both money and position are gone today can be attributed to one thing—my private research project.

“The cost of experimental models reduced my savings. The revelation of my theories cost me my faculty position. An attempt to raise funds to continue my work led me to the last resort—betting on the races. Now I have nothing.”

“You can say that again,” Sammy told him. “In about three minutes you’re gonna have nothing with lace around it.”

“Wait a moment,” the Thinker interrupted. “Experimental models, you said. What have you been building?”

“I’ll show you, if you like.”

“Come on,” Sammy ordered.

“Boys, keep the heaters warm, in case he pulls a funny.”

But the Professor didn’t pull a funny. He led them downstairs to what had been the basement, and was now an ornate private laboratory. He led them up to the large rectangular metal structures covered with coils and tubing. It had a vague resemblance to an outhouse designed by Frank Lloyd Wright.

“Jeez,” Nunzio commented. “Whatchoo doin’, buildin’ one of them there Frankensteens?”

“I bet it’s a space-ship,” Mush hazarded. “Was you gonna make a getaway to Mars?”

“Please,” the Professor sighed. “You’re making sport of me.”

“We’re making hamburger of you in another minute,” Sammy corrected him. “This doojigger ain’t no use to us. Couldn’t get twenny bucks for it at a junk-yard.”

Thinker Tomaszewski shook his head. “Just what is this object, Professor?”

Professor Cobbett blushed. “I hesitate to designate it as such, after the rebuffs I received at the hands of supposed authorities, but there is no other intelligible term for it. It is a time-machine.”

“Oof!” Sammy put his hand to his forehead. “And this is what we let get into us for eight grand. A nutty scientist, yet!”

The Thinker frowned at him. “A time-machine, you say? An instrument capable of transporting one forward or backwards in time?”

“Backwards only,” the Professor answered. “Forward travel is manifestly impossible, since the future is non-existent. And travel is not the best word. Transit more closely approximates the meaning, insofar as time possesses no material or spatial characteristics, being bound to a three-dimensional universe by the single observable phenomenon which manifests itself as duration. Now if duration is designated as X, and—"

"Shuddup!" Nunzio suggested. "Let's kiss off this joker and scram outta here. We're wastin' time."

"Wasting time." The Thinker nodded. "Professor Cobbett, is this a *working* model?"

"I'm practically positive. It has never been tested. But I can show you formulae which—"

"Never mind that now. Why haven't you tested it?"

"Because I'm not sure of the past. Or rather, our present relationship to it. If any person or object in present time were sent to the past, alterations would occur. What is here now would be absent, and something added to what was there, then. This addition would alter the past. And if the past were altered, then it would not be the *same* past we know." He frowned. "It's hard to state without recourse to symbolic logic."

"You mean you're afraid that by time-travel you'd change the past? Or come out in a different past—a past *made* different *because* you traveled into it?"

"That's an over-simplification, but you have the general idea."

"Then what good is your work on this?"

"No good, I'm afraid. But I wanted to prove a point. It became an almost monomaniacal obsession. I have no excuses."

"So." Sammy stepped forward. "Thanks for the lecture, but like you say, you got no excuses. And we got no time. This here basement looks like a nice soundproof place for target practice—"

The Thinker grabbed Sammy's arm. "What's the sense?" he asked. "The guy welshed."

"So he welshed. Will murder change that? Will murder help us now?"

"No." Sammy bit his lip. "But what we gonna do? We got no dough. We got Tarantino after us, and also the govmint. We can't go back to town."

The Thinker looked around. "Why not stay here, then? We're safe, isolated, with a nice big roof over our heads. Let's enjoy the Professor's hospitality for a while."

"Yeah," Mush said. "But how long? We're gonna run out of dough, or food, or somethin'. We'd just be stallin' for time."

The Thinker smiled. "Stalling for time." He gazed intently at the complicated structure in the center of the cellar. "But here is the logical vehicle for a getaway."

"You mean jump in that dizzy outfit and beat it?" Sammy demanded. "You're kidding."

"I'm serious," the Thinker replied. "Some time in the near future we'll be safe in the past."

III

It took a lot of figuring. That was the Thinker's job, working with the Professor during the next few days.

"How do you set the controls up? Is this for steering?"

"You do not steer—you press the computers. Here, I'll show you again."

"And you can choose any time in the past, any time at all?" asked the Thinker.

"Theoretically. The main problem is accurate computation. Remember, we and our earth are not static. We do not occupy the same position in space that we did an instant ago, let alone a longer period. We must consider the speed of light, planetary motion, inclination, and—"

"That's going to be your department. But you can establish past position mathematically and set up a guiding-plan for the computers accordingly?"

"I'm reasonably certain of it."

"Then all that remains is to determine where—or rather, *when* we're going to."

Sammy and Nunzio and Mush tackled *that* problem on their own.

"Jeez, mebbe alls we gotta do is go back a couple weeks to before when the Professor made his bets. Then we ain't out no dough."

"Yeah? What about them there back taxes?"

"So we go to before when we owed 'em."

"That's when we went into business, stupid. We was broke."

"Well, if we can go anywheres we want in time, how's about way back, to the Egypians, like? I seen one of them there pitchers, they had all these hot broads runnin' around in their unnerwear—"

"You talk Egypian, stupid? Besides, we don't wanna stay back someplace forever. Way I figger, we go to some time where we can lay our mitts on some loot, real fast-like. And then come back."

"Now you got it. That's the angle. Hey, how about that there Gold Rush?"

The Professor interrupted them. "I'm afraid the Gold Rush wouldn't be of much use to you gentlemen. After all, it occurred in the year eighteen hundred and forty-nine."

"But you can send us to eighteen forty-nine, can't you?"

"Conceivably, if my theory is correct. But you would not be in California. You would still be right here in Philadelphia, in the filed which stood here before this house was built."

"Then we gotta find our loot in Philly, huh? Somewheres in the past?"

"I'm afraid so."

"Jeez, And we can't show up in no vacant field with that machine, either."

Then the Thinker took over. "I am beginning to pinpoint our problem," he announced. "Professor, I am going to utilize your library for a day or so. Perhaps I can discover when gold was available in Philadelphia."

"There's always the Mint."

"Too well-guarded. We'd never be able to loot it, any more than it could have been looted by past efforts."

"Banks?" Sammy brightened. "With our heaters, we could knock over one of them big jugs easy—say, a hunnert years ago."

"And come out with what? Old-fashioned greenbacks? We wouldn't be able to use currency of that era today. Arouse suspicion. No, I'm looking for gold.”

Finally, in a copy of Berkeley’s *History of the Revolution,* the Thinker found it. He broke in upon the others as they sat guarding Professor Cobbett.

“Here’s the answer!” he exulted. “Remember what happened in Philadelphia on July fourth, seventeen seventy-six?”

“That’s a holiday, ain’t it?” Nunzio brightened. “Must be the Phillies took on the Giants in a double-header.”

“Seventeen seventy-six stupid!” Sammy scowled. “Yeah, I remember. They made Washington the President.”

“Nah. It was the Decoration of Indepenence,” Mush corrected.

“Right. The Declaration of Independence was presented to the Continental Congress assembled at what is now Independence Hall. And so forth. But here’s another little-known fact. At the same place, on the same day, the Revolutionary treasury was turned over to a small group for temporary storage. It consisted of upwards of thirty thousand pounds sterling in smelted ingots. That’s about a hundred and fifty thousand dollars in gold.”

“Brother!” Sammy whistled. “What a way to celebrate the Fourth!” Then he frowned. “I’ll bet they had plenny guards around.”

“No, that’s just the point. It was all a secret—few people know of it to this day. Troops brought it in a wagon, around noon. They thought they were hauling documents. It was carted upstairs, and no guards were posted lest suspicion be aroused. Its presence was known only to Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, and one or two others—probably John Hancock and maybe Charles Thomson, the Secretary of the Congress. It was to be used to pay troops and buy supplies.”

“It sure could help to pay off old Mickey Tarantino and the Feds. And leave us plenny to spare.”

"That is exactly what I had in mind, gentlemen." The Thinker smiled. "Now all that remains is to work out the details. I shall concentrate on the historical aspect and the Professor here can work out the mathematical computations."

Professor Cobbett blanched. "Mathematical computations? But you're asking the impossible. Why, that was over a hundred and eighty light-years ago; we'll be faced with the problem of billion-fold magnitudes, and the slightest error or variation can have serious consequences."

"Ain't gonna be no errors," Sammy told him. "Or consequences will be really serious. *For you."* He showed the Professor his heater. "Now get to work. We're going places."

"Going places." Mush looked at him. "All this here stuff was at Indepenence Hall. The machine's here in the cellar. We gonna come out on July fourth inna cow-pasture or somethin' ?"

"That's your job," Sammy decided. "Case this joint. See how it's set up for guards at night. Alarm-system, the works. Look it over like you would a bank job. I think we can take over. Nobody's gonna think a mob would break into a Hysterical Shrine or whatever. We get things set, we hire us a truck and cart the machine right down to the Hall and take off from there some night soon. Right?"

"Hey, that's a tough deal."

"Things are tough all over," Sammy said. "Now get going."

So Mush got going and the Professor got going and the Thinker got going too. And before the first week was up they were organized.

Mush made his report. The invasion of Independence Hall could be made without too much trouble. Of course it would cost money for the truck, and there might be repercussions, but they could try to pull it off.

And in view of their present hopeless situation—and in view of the possible gain—it was worth the gamble, Sammy decided.

The Professor presented them with the working manual, based on his computations.

"Are you sure this gets us there?" Sammy demanded. "And back, too?"

"Look it over," the Professor said. "See for yourself."

"It's all right," the Thinker told him. "I've checked it. See, we have no set time for return. Our plans call for us to get the gold and come back as soon after the noon hour as possible. So the Professor has worked out return-variations based on five-minute intervals throughout the early afternoon. It's as foolproof as we can hope to make it."

"All right, if you say so." Sammy shrugged. "But what I want to know is, what do we do when we get there?"

"I've been working on that angle," the Thinker said. "Checking all the source books and references I could muster. History texts. Biographical data on Franklin and Jefferson in particular. And I've got a plan. Apparently the first ones to arrive that morning were Jefferson and Thomson. Franklin and John Hancock came in early too.

"It's not quite clear whether any of them spent part of the night there. The important thing is that the four men conceivably held an early morning meeting, discussing the Declaration before Congress convened on the fourth. So if we arrive early enough we'll be dealing with just four men. The four men who knew about the gold, by the way."

"Got it," Sammy said. "We come in, flash our heaters, and take over."

"Not quite so simple," the Thinker answered. "Remember, Congress will be gathering that morning. We can't hope to hold our guns on these four key figures from that time until noon. Any more than we can hope to pass unnoticed in the crowd for such a period."

He paused as Sammy started to open his mouth, then hastily continued. "I know what you're thinking, and that won't work either. We can't show up *at* noon and just hijack the shipment. Not in front of fifty or more men, with troops just outside the door."

"Then what do you figger on us doing?"

The Thinker took a deep breath, and then he told them.

"Oh no!" cried Sammy.

"Me, making like John Hancock?" Mush gasped.

“I should run around in one of them wigs like a big-shot politician?” Nunzio scoffed.

The Thinker was calm. “Don’t you see, it’s the only way? The wigs are perfect disguises. Look, I’ve got pictures of all these men, and we can buy a makeup kit. I’m fortunately bald and approximate Franklin’s build. Physically, we’ll get by. And don’t worry about playing the role of a politician.”

“Yeah.” Mush was thoughtful. “After all, what’s a politician, anyhow? Just a crook that’s learned how to kiss babies.”

“But we won’t be kissing no babies that morning,” Sammy reminded him. “Me, I been reading up a little on that stuff, too. Them four guys did a lot of things on the fourth. Made speeches, tried to get the rest of the Congress to sign, all kinds of stuff. And they knew everybody, everybody knew them. We’d fluff it for sure, trying to do what they did.”

“That’s just the point.” Thinker Tomaszewski was triumphant. “We *don’t have to do what they did!* Because we’re going back in time, we’re changing what happened. I think I’m familiar enough with Franklin’s personality. I can talk if necessary. Sammy, I’ll coach you. The other two boys can be absent, if need be—and it may well be necessary to guard our machine and our captives in the rear room. We’re not going to merely re-enact history. We’re going to change it, to suit ourselves. Now do you get it?”

They got it, eventually, because the Thinker rammed it down their throats.

And so they got their coaching, got their truck, got their plan, and actually transported the machine bodily into the rear of the vehicle on the evening arranged for departure.

It wasn’t until they stood for the last time in the now open expanse of the cellar that Professor Cobbett voiced a final, timid protest.

“I hesitate to bring this up,” he said, “because you’ll very likely suspect my motives. You’ll think it’s because you’re preempting my property, and because you are unwittingly involving me as an accomplice to your crime, You'll think it's because I have patriotic objections to your plans for desecrating our history."

"Well, haven't you?" Sammy asked.

"Yes, I admit it."

Sammy glanced significantly at Nunzio, then back to the Professor as he continued.

"But what I have to say to you now I say in my capacity as a scientist. In that capacity I warn you, as I did on the first evening here. Time-travel is hazardous. The possibility of alteration of the past due to your invasion cannot be discounted. You may well find yourselves up against unforeseen factors, unexpected problems. That's why I never dared make the attempt myself; not even a journey of one minute, let alone almost two centuries. Should you fail, I must absolve myself of any responsibility. I shall await your return with the utmost trepidation."

"Don't bother," Sammy told him. "We got that all figgered, too. You plan on waiting for our return with a gang of coppers, don't you?"

The Professor turned pale. "Don't tell me you gentlemen expect me to come along?" he murmured. "I couldn't do that. I wouldn't. I'd—I'd be afraid. Frankly, the dangers of dislocation or alteration in the past frighten me worse than the prospect of death itself."

"I'm glad," Sammy said slowly. "On account of it's either—or. And you just made up our minds for us."

The Thinker was already out in the truck, but Mush and Nunzio stood beside Sammy in the cellar.

Nunzio took out his heater and Mush smiled. "Well," he said. "Looks like we're starting off our trip with a bang."

IV

AND A BANG-UP journey it was. There was a route to travel, and guards to knock out and bind, and a heavy machine to cart up into the rear chambers of Independence Hall. Then came the nerve-wracking business of setting it up, and the Thinker's frantic re-scanning of the Professor's charts and directions as he set the computers. By the time they were ready to take off—1:45 a.m. on the dot—the transition itself was almost an anticlimax.

Anti-climax it proved to be. They huddled in the machine, the vacuum-lock set and the vacuum-lined walls enclosing them, and a generator hummed and their fluorescent light above the dials dimmed and the Thinker pressed his finger down after endless adjustment of tab-buttons and then—

Nothing happened.

Or seemed to happen, until the moment—or century, or eternity—of darkness elapsed. None of them were conscious of a change at all. It was when they opened the compartment and stepped out that the change occurred, or they were aware of its prior occurrence.

"Thinker!" Nunzio said, blinking in the bright morning sunlight that streamed through the high windows. "We made it!"

Sammy and the Thinker and Mush didn't even look at him. They were staring at the four men on the other side of the room—four men who stared, in turn, at them.

Then things happened fast. Things happened with orders and heaters and ropes and gags. Things happened with wigs and shoes and clothing.

Four writhing figures squirmed on the floor, then calmed to quiescence as Mush used the butt of his heater.

"Fancy this!" he sighed. "Me knocking out old Ben Franklin hisself!"

"Never mind fancying it now," the Thinker told him. "We've got to get ready for more action."

And so they'd gone into their act.

Altering the text of the Declaration itself was an inspiration on the Thinker's part.

"Give 'em something to argue about all morning," he said. "Keep them talking, then we don't have to. And if they accept the business about temporary governing powers and a treasurer, there'll be no questions asked when the gold arrives and we take charge of it."

He glanced at Mush and Nunzio. "You two go in the back room right now. Watch the machine, keep the Founding Fathers company. And don't forget to watch the windows—maybe the gold will arrive early. Professor Cobbett was no fool. I respect his judgment. If he said things might be a bit different in the past because our coming changed it, maybe he's right."

"Nothing different so far," Sammy said.

"Well, one never knows."

Mush and Nunzio vanished and the Thinker turned to his companion. "Remember your laryngitis. They call it quinsy in these times, and that's how I'll refer to it. And when I do, you cough."

"Got it," Sammy said. "But hey, when's the gang showing up?" He pulled his watch out of his pocket and studied it. "Must be after eight by now." He frowned. "That's funny, it stopped. Still says seven-thirty."

"Let me take a look outside," the Thinker suggested. He strode to the window. "Crowd down there all right. But—wait a minute—" He tugged Sammy's arm. "Look at those soldiers!"

"I see 'em. You mean the ones in the tall hats, with the red uniforms?"

"Red uniforms mean British troops."

"British?"

The Thinker didn't answer. He rushed to the door of the hall, flung it open. Two grenadiers in scarlet coats confronted him. He stared at the white piping on the coats, stared at the silvery steel of their bayonets.

"Halt!" cried the taller of the two. "In the name of His Majesty."

"His Majesty?"

"Yes, His Majesty, you pesky rebel."

"What kind of a gag is this?" Sammy muttered.

"No gag," the Thinker whispered. "Professor Cobbett knew. We changed the past by coming here. The British occupy Philadelphia."

"Enough of your blabbing, sirrah," the soldier shouted. "Save your protests for General Burgoyne. When he enters the city today you and your fellow-traitors can explain at a drum-head court martial."

The Thinker paled. “Changed history,” he whispered. “Burgoyne the victor. The Congress scattered.

The four men we came upon in the back room weren’t waiting for it to meet today. They’ve been trapped here without warning. They’re prisoners. Which means we’re prisoners, too!”

“Oh no we ain’t!” Sammy drew out his heater and pulled the trigger. There was an almost inaudible click. He tried to fire again, but the Thinker slammed the door.

“What good is that?” he murmured. “The place is surrounded.”

“Gun jammed,” Sammy was grumbling. “Can’t figure how—” Then he blinked. “Surrounded. And we’re stuck, huh? Now what?”

“Obviously we get back in the machine and get out of here.”

“But don’t you have to wait until noon, anyway?”

“I’ll worry about that. Let’s get the boys. And hurry. Those soldiers may decide to come in after us at any time.”

So they retreated to the rear room and they got the boys and explained. And in a surprisingly short time they were huddled in the time-machine once more; huddled in the incongruous flummery of their Colonial costumes; huddled and trembling and perspiring as the Thinker hastily checked his data and then reached for the computer levers.

Reached and pressed.

Or tried to press.

“What’s happening?” Sammy shouted, the echo of his voice almost deafening them in the cramped confines of the metal chamber.

“Nothing,” the Thinker groaned. “Nothing’s happening. That’s just the trouble.”

“It don’t work?” Nunzio wailed. “No. And Sammy’s watch doesn’t work, and your guns don’t work, because all of the principles are wrong, altered the way everything is altered.”

“Let me try!” Mush pawed at the levers, the buttons, the dials. Then they were all clawing and scrabbling at once, and still nothing happened.

The Thinker stopped them. “Might as well give up,” he muttered. “Professor Cobbett was right. We’ve changed the past.”

“But even in seventeen seventy-six, guns and watches and machinery worked, didn’t they?” Sammy demanded.

“In *our* seventeen seventy-six,” the Thinker said. “In *our* past. But this isn’t our past any more. It’s our present. And by making the past the present we’ve violated a fundamental law. Or tried to. Actually, fundamental laws can’t be violated.”

“But we came here.”

“Yes. Here. But here *isn’t* our past. It couldn’t be. It would have to be somewhere else.”

“Where else could it be?” Mush wanted to know.

“A place where modern mechanisms don’t work, not having been perfected yet A place where the British defeated the forces of the Revolution and captured the Founding Fathers. And that could only be in—an alternate universe.”

“Alternate universe?”

The Thinker was still trying to explain the concept of an alternate universe to them when the soldiers finally came in to drag them away. He had time only for a final warning as the troops seized them. They were very rough about it.

“Remember, like Franklin said, we must all hang together,” he whispered.

Even there the Thinker was wrong.

They were hanged separately.

Corn-Fed Genius

Thorne brought his new machine to the great industrialist, and everything was fine except nobody could make it work. The answer went beyond mechanics—back into basics—back to an ancient quotation beginning —“Oh, ye of little faith. . . .!

F. DANFORTH GRAHAM sat behind a great mahogany desk in an office panelled with mahogany picwood and methodically stuffed expensive tobacco into the mahogany-colored bowl of a flamegrain briar pipe. He fired up a pipe lighter that looked and behaved like a miniature blowtorch and puffed the tobacco into glowing coals. Then he looked again at the man on the other side of the desk, seeing him through a blue-gray wreath of smoke.

“Do you really consider that a business proposition, Mr. Thorne?” he asked at last.

Peter Thorne was a tall, muscular, taciturn man in his middle thirties. His crew-cut hair was premature salt-and-pepper gray, and his hazel eyes looked out of deep sockets beneath a pronounced supraorbital ridge. He had a habit of rubbing his chin and lower lip with his right forefinger as he spoke.

“I don’t see anything wrong with it, Mr. Graham,” he said. “I’ve got to protect my invention.”

Graham raised one bushy, white eyebrow and smoothed the palm of his hand over his pink, hairless scalp. For a full minute, he said nothing, but there was a look of deep thought in his shrewd blue eyes.

Finally: “Now let’s get this straight. Essentially, you say you’ve designed a new, high-temperature rocket exhaust nozzle liner. You want General Alloys to test your sample to see if it works as you claim it does. You’re willing to put up a five-thousand-dollar bond to guarantee it will be worth our time to run the test. After that, we’ll dicker. Is that it?”

“That’s it, sir,” said Thorne. “You see, I wouldn’t want anyone to steal my invention. That wouldn’t be fair to me.”

“Steal it?” Graham’s other eyebrow went up. “Haven’t you patented it?”

Thorne blinked. “No, sir. I understand you have to prove that something is new and useful in order to patent it, don’t you? Well, I can’t prove it’s useful until it’s been tested, can I? And, you see, I don’t have any way of testing it in my own little shop.” Graham’s eyes grew very thoughtful. “I’ll tell you what I’ll do, Mr. Thorne; I’ll check with the lab and get an estimate on what it will cost to test this liner of yours. We’ll draw up a contract which calls for either payment, at a proper rate, for laboratory service, or an option on your patent, depending on the results of the tests, if you see what I mean.”

Thorne nodded. “If it doesn’t work out, I pay. If it does, you get an option on the patent. And you’ll pay the patent fees—lawyers and so forth?”

“Naturally,” said Graham. “If your invention is worth anything, if it’s patentable, we’ll see that you get full protection.” He looked at his wristwatch. “What say you come back tomorrow at one? We’ll have the papers drawn up then; you can have your attorney look them over.” Thorne rose and extended his hand. “Thanks a lot, Mr. Graham,” he said, smiling—a little bashfully, Graham thought. “My friends in Peoria said I’d never be able to talk to an important man like you, but I told ’em that a good businessman is always open to a good business proposition. And I was right.”

Graham's smile was friendly. "Of course, Mr. Thorne. We'll see you tomorrow, then? Good."

When the door had closed behind Peter Thorne, Graham reached for the phone.

"Give me Dahlquist, in the testing labs."

"Dr. Dahlquist? This is Graham. Can you give me a breakdown of what it costs to test one of those rocket tube liners? What? No, just a regular run. Have Cost and Accounting do a run on it, will you? Fine.

"By the way, any new leads on those liners? Mmmhmm. All right. Good-bye. Thanks." He hung up and shrugged.

F. Danforth Graham knew nothing whatever about metal alloys, but he knew how to handle the money end. The stockholders of General Alloys knew it; in the past ten years, Graham, as President of General Alloys had more than tripled the value of GA stocks, both preferred and common.

Now he was after big money—a Government contract for the newly-born Space Service. Already, the new, ultra-hard, tough, and light titanium-manganese-hydrogen alloys had put GA well into the running for hull construction of space vessels. There was only one fly in the ointment as far as General Alloys was concerned. It doesn't do much good to build spaceship hulls if you can't propel them.

People—the Great General Public—had been inured to $e = Mc^2$ for twenty-odd years, ever since the first A-bomb had gone off, back in '45. Most of them, however, were totally unaware of that famous formula's little brother, $e = Mv^2$. The kinetic energy of a moving body is proportional to its mass multiplied by the square of its velocity.

As far as the rocket is concerned, this simply means that the hotter the exhaust gases, the less reaction mass the ship has to carry.

Working on this sound principle, the AEC and the USAF had come up with the highly efficient, but totally useless Rhodeland-Clevebush Drive, an atomic reactor which squirted water out the tail end of a rocket at something like six thousand degrees Centigrade—a nice, brilliant, white heat.

Why useless? Well, you've got to have something to make the rocket tube out of, and, unfortunately, nothing, but nothing, will stand up to heat like that for very long.

The ceramics boys had been working on it for a long time, but F. Danforth Graham felt that there ought to be something General Alloys could produce that would do the job. So far, the experimental labs had come up with absolutely nothing.

Graham sat in his office and scratched his bushy brows. No good businessman pays any attention to cranks, but this was an unusual case. One: The man was willing to pay. Two: It might—just might—be something. Three: If it *was* useful, it looked as though GA might get it for a song. And, in the fourth place, GA could make money in the first place.

Two weeks later, to the day, Peter Thorne was back in the sumptuous office of the president of General Alloys. He sat down in the chair in front of the desk and politely refused Graham's offer of a cigarette.

"Cigar, perhaps?" Graham opened a box of fine Panatelas.

Thorne smiled a little and shook his head. "I don't smoke," he said.

Graham began stuffing the flamegrain briar. "I'm a pipe man, myself," he explained. "The other stuff is for visitors." He lit the pipe with his miniature blowtorch and leaned back in his chair. He tapped a sheaf of papers on his desk with a neatly manicured forefinger. "I've read these reports on the test of your tube liner. I'm not a scientist, but they look good to me, and they evidently look good to the lab men. You watched the tests; what did you think?"

"I think they ran very well, sir. They took an oxyacetylene flame at forty-four hundred Centigrade without losing a microgram after twelve hours. That's pretty good."

Graham glanced at the report. “Yes. According to this, the lab men are flabbergasted. They took some turnings from that liner. Seems it’s cast tungsten, alloyed with a small amount of platinum.

That right?”

Thorne nodded, his eyes looking straight into Graham’s. “That’s right. The platinum makes the cast tungsten more machinable and tougher. It cuts down on the brittleness, besides, without changing the hardness much.”

“Mmmhmm.” Graham was still looking at the report. At last, he looked up. “According to Dr. Dahlquist, such an alloy might be a bit difficult—not to say expensive—to produce. What do you think?”

Thorne rubbed his lips with a forefinger and looked apprehensive. “Well—well—uh—

maybe it is rather expensive. I hadn’t thought of that. Platinum runs into money, I know. It sure cost me plenty to make that one liner.”

Graham’s voice didn’t change. “That’s not what we mean,” he said smoothly. “The materials are, in comparison to labor and equipment cost, relatively inexpensive. We’d have to know what sort of machinery is required, what it will take to retool and set up for these liners—that sort of thing.” He took a deep breath and then paused. “And, of course, we’ll have to know what the Space Service thinks of the liner. After all, we don’t have the facilities here at General Alloys to subject this thing to the final test—the actual run in a Rhodeland-Clevebush reactor.”

Thorne nodded. “I see what you mean.” He sat and thought for a long time. Then, he said: “Look. Suppose I do this: Suppose I go back to Peoria on the afternoon plane. I can bring back the equipment by tomorrow morning. Then you can tell how much it would cost you to build similar machines.”

Graham smiled, folding his plump cheeks into wrinkles. “That would be fine; that way, we can—”

“Excuse me, sir,” Thorne said, looking at his wrist-watch, “But if I’m going to catch that plane, I’d better leave now. I’ll see you in the morning.” He grabbed his hat and topcoat and bolted out of the office.

F. Danforth Graham looked blankly at the door for a second, then he grinned, and looked at his office intercom.

"Would you mind coming in here, Dr. Dahlquist?" After a moment, the door opened again, and an impossibly tall, lean man walked in. He stood at least six-three, and looked as though he didn't weigh more than one-fifty with his pockets full of osmium. A strand of blond hair hung limply over his forehead, and his lean, pointed jaw looked as though it hadn't been shaved that morning. But the sparkling blue eyes behind smart gold-rimmed *pince-nez* were alert and smiling in spite of the unsmiling mouth.

Graham waved him to *n* chair and said: "Well, how do you size it up?"

Dahlquist pulled a cigarette out of his pocket with bony fingers and lit it. "Screwy," he said.

"How so?" Graham wanted to know.

"Doesn't make sense. First place, I'd've said that alloy was impossible. Can't cast tungsten. Melting point's too high.

"Tungsten has a melting point of around thirty-three eighty Centigrade, higher than damn near anything else. There's nothing you can cast it in. What do you use for a mold?"

Graham scratched his broad, pink scalp. "What does the platinum have to do with it?"

"Can't tell you. Platinum melts at seventeen fifty-five. Shouldn't alloy with tungsten, anyhow. At tungsten's fusion temperature, platinum is vaporizing like hell. It'd be like putting mercury into molten iron." Dahlquist rolled his cigarette between his fingers. "They've both got a cubic crystalline structure, of course. Tungsten's got body-centered cubic crystals, while platinum is face-centered. That wouldn't necessarily make 'em incompatible at room temperature, but I don't see how in hell you'd alloy 'em in the first place."

"How about electrolytically?" Graham asked.

"Nope," the Norseman shook his head. "Crystalline formation—grain structure—indicates cast tungsten. As I said, I'd have claimed it was impossible."

Graham knocked the dottle out of his pipe, tapping it gently against the rubber-padded edge of a huge silver ash tray.

"What would happen," he asked, "if you melted tungsten and platinum together in a pot of some kind?"

Dahlquist grinned one-sidedly. "First place, you couldn't get a pot to melt 'em in. Aside from that, the platinum would be fuming and boiling like hell by the time the tungsten started to melt. You'd have a spongy mess."

"And this stuff isn't spongy?"

Dahlquist ground out a half-smoked cigarette. "Nope. It's cast tungsten. With platinum. And a couple other things."

Graham's face took on a decisive grin. "Fine! Doctor, it doesn't matter how it's done; we know he *can* do it. And our competitors will go nuts trying to figure out *how* it's done!" He rubbed vigorously behind his ears with both palms. "We'll have the market cornered on tube linings!"

Dahlquist didn't say anything for a moment; then: "I don't know about that, Mr. Graham; remember what this Thorne said when he left?"

Graham scowled. "Certainly! He said he was going back to Peoria to get his equipment. What's wrong with that?"

The Norseman's bony shoulders went up in a shrug. "I think this country boy's taken *you* for a ride, Mr. Graham. You don't think you could get the equipment to cast tungsten on a plane, do you? Why, the stuff would weigh tons! I don't know what his game is, but I'll bet you don't see him tomorrow—or for a long time."

It was a good thing that Dr. Dahlquist hadn't offered to bet seriously. If he'd offered to eat his shirt, he might have put himself in the unpleasant position of having to do so. A good chemist *can* fix up a shirt so that it's edible, but it isn't palatable.

Peter Thorne, his deep-set eyes looking haggard but expectant, arrived at ten the next morning. He spent not more than three minutes cooling his heels in Graham’s outer office before the efficient-looking young lady in the outer office informed him that “Mr. Graham will see you now.”

She looked admiringly at the tall, muscular body and the hard, blocky face as Peter Thorne strode into the inner office.

F. Danforth Graham’s sleek, chubby body was bent over his desk, examining a piece of paper, but as Thorne entered, he stood up, smiling. Thorne could see that there was something behind the smile, but he said nothing.

“How was the trip, Thorne?” Graham asked, whole-heirtedly. “Did you bring your equipment?”

Thorne sat down. “Yes, sir. Two big packing cases. I had them sent air express; they’ll be here in an hour. I sent them collect, of course. I didn’t have the money to pay the charges.”

Only the faintest flicker of a great, white eyebrow indicated any response on Graham’s part. “Of course, Mr. Thorne,” he said smoothly “And you’ll be ready for a demonstration this afternoon?”

“Not immediately, sir,” Thorne said. “It’ll take some time to set up the equipment. I’d like to talk to Dr. Dahlquist again. If I could get him to help me . . .”

“Certainly, Mr. Thorne,” Graham agreed. “However we’d like to know something else. Those test pieces you gave us were cylinders. Now the Space Service insists that test liners sent to them for tryout must conform to a certain geometric shape. I have the specifications here.

“Would it be possible to convert your machine to these specifications within, say, six weeks?”

Thorne grinned. “I’ll make them this evening, for the demonstration, sir. The apparatus is easily adjustable.”

“Fine,” said Graham.

In the other office, Dahlquist’s thin, bony face smiled and frowned at the same time. “Who’s he tryin’ to kid? Or is he?” he asked softly, staring at the intercom speaker. “This is ridiculous!”

“That cable goes there—that *is* the four-forty line, isn’t it?—that’s it, there. Now, if one of you men will help me . . .”

Peter Thorne was putting the finishing touches on his machine. It was big, to be sure, but it didn’t weigh the tons that Dahlquist had prophesied.

Several yards away, Graham and Dahlquist were talking in low tones. Five or six other executives were lounging around here and there, watching idly, waiting for the fireworks to start.

Graham said: “What do you mean, it won’t work?”

Dahlquist shrugged. “Just what I said. Not enough power going into that thing to melt tungsten. Not in big lots like that. Hell, there’s not enough to melt the platinum. It’s a farce.”

“Have you checked over his machine thoroughly?” Graham asked.

“Don’t need to. Wouldn’t let me anyway. The thing simply can’t do anything like he claims for it. You wouldn’t have to know how a paper punch worked to know it couldn’t turn out a driveshaft forging. Same thing here.”

“We’ll see,” said Graham.

“Okay, throw her now!” Thorne’s voice called from across the room. There was the slap of a heavy-duty relay, and then a slight click as Thorne flipped a switch on his control console. Then he turned to the men assembled around him and smiled rather sheepishly.

“I feel sort of silly, standing here, telling you men how this thing does its job, but that’s what I’m supposed to do. As you can see, there’s two hoppers suspended over the machine. The big one is full of powdered tungsten, and the little one contains granular platinum. They’re carefully measured out through the bottom of the hoppers by an automatic weighing device which is set for the size of the thing we’re going to make. Mr. Graham gave me the specifications for the Space Service test pieces, so we’re going to make six of them for test purposes. Now, the . . .”

“I’ve got it!” whispered Dahlquist. His voice, though low, was excited.

“Got what?” whispered Graham.

"His angle. Kept wondering what he was to gain by this. Now I know. It's the platinum! He figures on getting away with some of that platinum! It'll go into that machine, and that's the last we'll see of it."

"He won't get away with a trick like that," Graham said tightly. "Let's see what he's up to."

". . . and the finished casting will roll down that chute into the tub," Thorne finished. He looked around. "Now, if you're ready, gentlemen."

He turned to the control console and began adjusting dials and rheostat settings. Then, seemingly satisfied, he punched a button. A deep hum, with powerful subsonic undertones, vibrated through the building. Snickerings and clankings sounded within the machine.

Then, suddenly, a dazzling, yellow-white cylinder appeared from a hatch at one end of the machine, slid down a chute, and landed in a steel tub at the bottom. As they appeared he counted.

"One," said Thorne mildly.

"Two," he said, a short time later.

"Three—four—five—six!"

He shut off the machine and smiled. "There you are, gentlemen. Machine them down and send them to the Government. Naturally, I don't know if they'll hold up, but we can hope, can't we?" Then he grinned. "And by the way, save the machining scraps; that stuff is expensive as hell."

Two more weeks passed, with the slow plodding of minutes and hours and days. Then, a board meeting of General Alloys of America, Incorporated, was called. At the head of the long table sat F. Danforth Graham. Before him were several sheaves of paper, divided neatly into piles. One sheaf was in his hand. His droning voice filled the room with dull reverberations as he read the report on the findings of several investigators who had worked on the Thorne Rocket Liner Machine. He came to the final sentence, finished it, and looked up.

"Now," he said, "are there any questions?"

Miss Jerri Satin (37% of the shares, by proxy and otherwise) crushed out a cigarette and said: "The Space Service has accepted the tube liners for an actual rocket test. Is that right?"

Graham nodded. "That's right. Although the liners won't hold up under the direct blast *without* refrigeration, they do fine *with* it."

"And this young man's machine makes these liners?" Miss Satin's voice sounded like her name. Thirty years had passed since her voice had been heard on the radios of a nation, but the voice was still there, and a lovely dignity had replaced the passion-stirring beauty in her face.

"Apparently, it does," Graham acknowledged.

"Either it does or it doesn't, Mr. Graham," said Miss Satin, her voice chilly. "If it does, give him a contract; if it doesn't, throw him out."

Lewis Tenwick (12½%) stood up slowly. His nine decades of life weighed on him heavily, but they had not crushed him yet.

"Mr. Graham," he said, in a dry, old voice, "as I understand it, our only objection to giving this Mr. Thorne a contract is the statement by Dr. Dahlquist that there is no physical basis for the machine's operation. Am I correct?"

"Quite correct, Mr. Tenwick."

"Hmmm. Mr. Graham, I'm a good deal older than you—than any of you. I was a young man when this century began. We thought we knew what science was then. We were satisfied that there was nothing left to discover.

"The scientist then could have told you that a great many things were impossible: the airplane, the atomic bomb, travel to the moon, a space station—these were all impossible.

"Frankly, Mr. Graham, I am of the opinion that a scientist. *may* be able to tell us what we *can* do, but he's not worth a *damn* when it comes to telling us what we do." Slowly, and with laborious dignity, he sat down. There were several smiles around the table.

The three-hundred pound bulk of Jeremy Psmith (14%) didn't even attempt to rise. "Let's put it this way, Graham," he said, in a deep, hoarse, rumbling baritone, "if we can make money by making these things, it doesn't matter if they're made by black magic."

"I have often thought," Miss Jerri Satin cut in, "that Mr. Psmith would sell his soul to the Devil if it would net a profit." She smiled then, and it was the same brilliant smile that millions had loved three decades before. "Frankly, I must admit that *I'd* sell Mr. Psmith's soul to the Devil, too, if it would net a profit."

A chuckle ran around the table, but it was almost drowned out by the booming *Haw! Haw! Haw!* of Jeremy Psmith.

"However," Miss Satin continued, as soon as the laughter had died down, "we'd ought to cover our own tracks, too. I suggest that the contract stipulate that General Alloys owns, Jock, stock, and transistor, the patent to Mr. Thorne's machine. In addition, there should be a clause which stipulates that Mr. Thorne shall be paid on a—uh—piecework basis. In other words, he only gets his money for every successful liner turned out."

Old Tenwick raised a withered hand. "I'm not sure that would stand up in court, Miss Satin. I suggest that we . . .

The debate went on for nearly two hours, but, at long last, they arrived at a solid decision—depending, of course, on the decision of the lawyers.

There wasn't a one of them that expected Peter Thorne to accept the contract as it stood; they thought the poor yokel had more sense than that, and were ready to bargain.

But Thorne's sole words were: "That sounds fair enough to me." At which point, he'd taken his pen out and signed the contract.

The patent went through without argument, an unusual circumstance in itself. But not even the shrewd lads in the Patent Office could deny that a method of casting tungsten, was a "new and useful discovery." The thing was iron-bound, and it belonged entirely to General Alloys, Incorporated.

The full, entire, and complete diagram, process, and description of Peter Thorne's machine was on file with the United States Government. Complex as it was, Thorne insisted, despite his attorney's protestations, that everything be recorded in detail. By the time the harassed lawyer was through, anyone in the world could, for ten cents, get a diagram of Thorne's machine.

The board of directors of General Alloys worried for a while, until they discovered one vital fact. No one but Peter Thorne could make the machine work.

Exactly what happened in foreign countries which attempted to reproduce the Thorne machine is unknown, but it is highly probable that the events paralleled, roughly, the reports sent in by Dr. Gustav Dahlquist of General Alloys.

F. Danforth Graham looked at Dr. Dahlquist through an effluvium of blue pipe-smoke. "So? What happened?"

The Norseman's figure was even leaner than before; he looked as though he had lost an additional twenty pounds, if that were possible. But a cold, unholy light burned in his blue eyes.

He raised a bandaged hand. "Mr. Graham, I've gone over that machine inch by inch, circuit by circuit, tube by tube. It doesn't work; it *can't* work. I've rebuilt it. I've constructed an exact duplicate. And—" He weaved the hand, "—this is what I've gotten."

"What happened?" repeated Graham, puffing steadily at his pipe.

"We've taken meter readings of the machine during production," Dahlquist went on. "We have slow motion pictures of exactly what Thorne does. We have duplicated that, too.

"Yesterday evening, we tried our first test run. The damned machine blew up in our faces, practically. There was red-hot metal all over the place. Red-hot! Around a thousand, at most. Not anywhere near enough to melt tungsten or platinum."

Graham was in no mood to sympathize. "Dr. Dahlquist," he said preemptorily, "the United States Government has given us a multi-million dollar contract to supply them with rocket tube liners. The Space Service has sent the first successful robot ship to Venus, landed it, and brought it back. They want a manned ship to go next.

"Within a few years, we'll have to turn those liners out by the hundreds. We'll have to make better ones. And you stand there and tell me it can't be' done!" He punched a button on the intercom. "Ask Mr. Thorne if he'll step in here for a moment."

He looked back up at Dahlquist. "We've tried long enough to duplicate Thorne's work without his advice. I want you to talk to him. Let's see if we can't get something out of this. If he's discovered a new principle—"

"New principle!" Dahlquist interrupted. "Couldn't have! That hick doesn't know the first thing about electronics! His machine isn't even built right! He—"

The door opened, and Peter Thorne came in. "Yes, sir?" he said.

"Sit down, Thorne," Graham said. "We need your advice." Graham's pipe had gone out, so he relit it. "According to your contract, we own the right to build your machine and use it. But we can't make it work. Why?"

"I've told you—or rather I've told Dr. Dahlquist—that I don't know, sir," said Thorne honestly. But there was an odd sparkle in his deep-socketed eyes.

"Haven't you any ideas?" Graham asked.

Peter Thorne leaned back in his chair. "Why, yes, sir, I do. I've told them to Dr. Dahlquist, and he refuses to pay any attention."

Graham speared Dahlquist with a suspicious look as Thorne went blithely on.

"For fifteen years or so," he continued, "it's been known that the human mind had definite control over electromagnetic and gravitic fields. Matter and energy are, under the proper conditions, under the control of the human mind.

"But it's rather like trying to make an automobile go uphill. You can't push it uphill with sheer brute strength, but you can cooperate with it; you can *guide* it uphill. It's a sort of cooperative thing; you need a machine—a psionic machine—to do the work, and a human mind to guide it.

"These liners are made just that way. With the aid of the machine, I sort of—well, I *think* the alloy into place.

"The human body is a perfect example of a psionic machine. You don't have to go through a lot of tough rigamarole to make your fingers move; you just move them." He wriggled his fingers to demonstrate. Then he spread his hands.

"It seems simple to me. If the human mind can control as complex a machine as the human body, why can't it control a simple thing like that machine of mine?

"The only reason Dr. Dahlquist won't believe my machine works is that it doesn't fit in with the theories he's already got set in his mind. Even proof won't sway him."

Graham nodded. "Sounds perfectly reasonable to me. I didn't know we'd got that far along with such things." He turned to Dahlquist, and started to say something. But the tall, thin man was ahead of him.

"This is ridiculous," he said, thickly. "There's something wrong with that machine, and I can prove it! It doesn't—I mean, it can't—"

"Dahlquist!" Graham's voice cut across the scientist's own. "Do you or don't you intend to work with Mr. Thorne on this?"

Dahlquist's eyes blazed. "No! You sound like Bridges! Young blockhead from MIT who said that the law of conservation of matter-energy and the second law of thermodynamics weren't necessarily compatible. He—"

"He got fired," said Thorne, his voice cold. "You fired him because he agreed that there might be reason behind a psionic machine."

"Damn it!" Dahlquist shouted. "You can't just throw over physics like it was a silly fairy tale. The observed facts are there!"

"Nobody is trying to say that observed facts are wrong," Thorne said quietly. He suddenly seemed stronger, bigger, and more commanding than even Graham. “It’s just that they aren’t the final and all-inclusive facts. There are others.”

F. Danforth Graham knew nothing of the basic theories of the argument taking place before him. But he did know that one man was right and another wrong. He stood up, pointed a finger at Dahlquist, and said: “Dr. Dahlquist, you’re fired.” His voice was heavy and final. “You will be permitted to resign, and your record will be clean. But I won’t have a man working with me who can’t see his nose in front of his face.”

He looked at Thorne. “Do you have anything to say?”

Thorne couldn’t look at Dahlquist. “I—I’d say you ought to look up young Bridges. He seemed to be interested in learning something new.”

Graham nodded. “Right. That’s what business needs in these times—new blood.”

Thorne said nothing. He wanted to smile, but he couldn’t. **THE END**

String of Pearls

Jerry Gibson was sitting at the bar when she came in. He turned to stare at her. Five minutes later he was still staring.

“Exquisite, isn’t she?” said Sweet William. “So tall, so slender. She carries herself like a sword sheathed in white silk.”

Sweet William talked like that when he was a little high, and Jerry was used to it. Besides, what he said was true. She was a luxurious hunk of fluff, with black hair and eyes to match, and the kind of figure that made you want to whistle, except that your throat went dry when you looked at her.

Only that wasn’t what made Jerry stare. He was looking at her throat, and what was around it.

It wasn’t exactly a necklace and it wasn’t a pendant, because it was drawn up tightly—just a string of perfectly matched pearls.

But such pearls! Ten of them, almost the size of marbles. They shone brightly under the light, and so did Jerry’s eyes. He did a little quick appraisal job. Say five banners apiece, at least, if they were perfect—and genuine. Nobody could touch them without breaking the string up, so the best he could get might be three for each. But three times ten still added up to thirty—thirty thousand dollars.

And she was wearing other stuff, too: an emerald ring and a fancy gold bracelet with smaller emeralds set in it. No use figuring on them, though. Emeralds were out of style, and you just had to take whatever a fence would cough up for them.

But there was probably more stuff where this came from. Maybe Sweet William would know.

Sweet William knew, all right. He sat down at the bar next to Jerry and nodded. “Just got in yesterday.” he murmured. “The Ranee.”

“The what?”

“Ranee, old boy. Female of the species. Male title, Rajah. Only in this case there is no Rajah. Deceased. Suicide, last year—Rajah of Gwolapur. You must have read about it.”

Jerry shook his head. How could he have read about it? They didn’t print that kind of news in the Racing Form. But trust an operator like Sweet William to be up on such stuff. That was his specialty—moving in on rich widows, and rich women who wished they were widows.

They watched the Ranee of Gwolapur as she settled herself at a table. It was quite an interesting setup, because she had a lot of help. Two little characters in turbans were doing a brother act for her—pulling out the chair, taking the menu from the waiter and holding it so that she could look it over without unladylike haste.

“Her servants, huh?” Jerry asked.

Sweet William nodded. “Loaded,” he said. And then, as his eyes narrowed, “Stacked, too. This might be interesting. I wonder if the oriental taste includes poetry?”

“I saw her first,” Jerry said. “I got a right.”

“The pearls?”

“What else?”

Sweet William put his head down and talked softly, so the bartender wouldn’t hear. “Child’s play,” he said. “Crude, too. This calls for the delicate touch, old boy. Finesse.”

Jerry scowled. “You got a one-track mind. You want to finesse everything in skirts. Me, I’ll settle for the loot.”

“You misunderstand. I’m thinking of the same thing. But we differ on ways and means.”

“I’ll handle the ways and means,” Jerry told him. “I saw her first, remember? I’m gonna case this job good, find out if she keeps the stuff up in her room or puts it in the safe. Then—”

Sweet William dug his fingers into Jerry's arm and the two of them dummied up until the bartender passed down the line. Then he shook his head again.

"It would never do," he said. "Not here, old boy. Too plushy. There'd be a proper row. Suggestions in order? Deal me in. You know how I function. The subtle approach. I'll get the gumdrops for you. May take a bit longer, but no fuss. Clean. And we'll cut the cake two ways."

Jerry thought it over. Sweet William was right. Pulling off a caper in a big resort hotel was enough to make you sweat. With the fix in and the gambling wide open, the management kept its own stable of hoods. And they were on the lookout for loners like Jerry Gibson. They didn't like any funny business because it knocked their good name. So even if he got the pearls his way, he'd be certain to have the hoods on his tail as well as lots of law.

"Rough show, old boy," Sweet William said, like he was reading his mind.

Jerry bit his lip. It added up. Ten to one, the doll kept her ice stashed in the safe anyway, and he'd never get it there. He'd have to jump her or those flunkeys she kept around. Plenty rough, all right. But Sweet William would just move in and take over, without any trouble. He could do it, too; Jerry had seen him operate before. A real pussy-cat.

Jerry swallowed the rest of his drink. "All right," he said. "You got yourself a deal."

Sweet William started to smile, then stopped. Jerry saw that he was looking over at the table again.

"Perhaps not," Sweet William said. "We have company for dinner."

It was true. The Ranee wasn't alone any more. A tall, gray-haired man had just joined her. He was sitting across the table, smiling and talking, and from the way she smiled and talked back it looked as if neither of them worried much about using the same toothbrush.

In a minute the Ranee said something and the two flunkeys bowed and went away.

Jerry decided to do the same thing. He and Sweet William walked outside together.

“How dumb can you get?” Jerry asked. “It’s crazy to figure a queen like that floating around without a jack in the pack. We’ll have to do it my way after all.”

“Cool’s the word, old boy. Let me check on the gentleman first. Tomorrow morning, right off. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have an engagement.”

Jerry let him go. He knew what Sweet William meant by an engagement. He needed another fix. That was Sweet William’s little problem—he was on the stuff. Once he’d told Jerry that if it wasn’t for the fixes he’d be sitting pretty in Hollywood right now. And Jerry believed him. Sweet William wasn’t a liar—just a hophead blackmail artist who lived off women. Jerry could trust him.

And he would, until tomorrow.

Meanwhile, there might be some action at the tables.

There was, too. Jerry had a good night and he went to bed happy. Funny thing, he kept dreaming about the Ranee. Not about the pearls, but about the dame herself. In the dream she wasn’t even wearing pearls.

It was a good dream, and when Jerry woke up he found himself envying Sweet William. Or the gray-haired gent who had already moved in.

He got up early, before lunch, and was just going to phone Sweet William’s room when the character knocked on the door. He was all togged out in gray flannels and he looked great.

“Good morning, merry sunshine,” he said.

“What’s so good about it?” Jerry wanted to know. “You been checking up on the Ranee’s boyfriend, is that it?”

Sweet William nodded. “Precisely,” he said. “No trouble at all. Sylvan Lemo. Formerly of Athens. Shipping interests. Here on a sabbatical, as it were. As nearly as I can determine, he spent part of it in the Ranee’s suite last night.”

"So what's so good about that you should hold up an applause card?" "Farewell appearance, old boy. The gentleman checked out at midnight. Bag and baggage. In fact, he did a bunk."

"Bunk?"

"Didn't pay his bill."

"Hey!" Jerry stood up. "You think he maybe got to her first? Maybe it was a phony name, and he had the same idea—"

Sweet William put his hand on Jerry's shoulder. "He didn't get the pearls, if that's what's worrying you. She's still wearing them this morning."

"How do you know?"

Sweet William grinned like a skunk eating bumblebees. "I saw them when we had breakfast together."

"Brother! You're not handing me a line—"

"Quite the contrary. She is the recipient. I happened to bump into her in the lobby and strike up an acquaintance. By the way, she speaks English beautifully. Does everything beautifully." Sweet William backed toward the door.

"Hey, where you going?"

"I've a luncheon engagement with the Ranee."

"You sure move fast."

"That's the specialty of the house."

"What do you want me to do?"

"Nothing, old boy. Absolutely nothing." Sweet William was serious now. "You understand the situation. From now on I don't know you. We don't speak to one another, or call one another."

"But—"

"I'll see to it that you get a progress report. And it won't take long. Trust me. This is the best way." Jerry nodded.

But when Sweet William left, he went over and sailed a pillow across the room. Hell of a note. He was going to have to sweat it out alone while Sweet William had all the kicks. Did he understand the situation, like Sweet

William said? Damned right he did—meaning, Sweet William couldn't afford to let a babe like this Ranee think he knew a ratty-faced little scrut like Jerry. It might queer the act.

A beautiful doll like the Ranee didn't have anything to do with ratty-faced little scruts, or even people who associated with them. In her book, he stunk.

"All right," Jerry told himself. "All right. Take it easy."

Or rather, sit tight, and let Sweet William take it easy. And when he took it, they'd cut up the loot and then there'd be plenty of moola. Enough moola so that Jerry could go out and buy himself a doll—a tall, ritzy-looking doll with black hair like the Ranee who would think him the playboy type. Or at least, she'd pretend she thought so, as long as the moola held out.

But damn it—

Jerry got hold of himself and went down to the bar. Two drinks later he was ready for the track. Going out he saw Sweet William coming in, steering the Ranee by the arm. She wasn't wearing the pearls now, but the two stooges were right behind her.

Jerry stared, but nobody stared back. Sweet William didn't even notice him. He was busy talking to the Ranee, and she was looking up at him and smiling and showing her teeth, and they were almost as good as the pearls. Jerry wondered what it would be like to feel those teeth digging into a guy's shoulder and—

The hell with it. He went out to the track.

He stayed in the bar out there after the last beetle crawled in, and met a couple of dealers he knew from K.C. They went out to eat and ended up in a joint on the highway. Highway was right: Jerry was plenty high when they finally poured him into the hotel about two a.m.

He flopped right on the bed without shedding his threads, and sort of passed out. But he dreamed about the Ranee, and her teeth and her eyes and her white arms reaching—

Jerry woke up at noon and it was rugged. A shower helped. He went downstairs, hoping to bump into Sweet William, but no dice.

By the time he finished eating it was too late to go out to the track, and he didn't feel like it anyway. He went into the bar and sobered up on beer.

It must have been almost five when somebody tapped him on the arm, and it was Sweet William. He didn't sit down.

"Only have a minute," he said. "Meeting the dear girl for dinner, you know."

"How's it going?"

"Splendidly, old boy. Couldn't be better. She's crackers over me, absolutely. Last night—"

Jerry didn't want to hear about last night. "What about the deal?" he asked.

Sweet William wasn't even listening to him. "Would you believe it, she's on the stuff, too. The genuine. Yen shee gow. Smokes a pipe. You've never had a bang until you've tried the pure quill. Of course, the orientals were always great ones for opium. How she manages to maintain her supply I don't know, but I'll find out tonight."

"Is that all you're going to find out?" Jerry couldn't help sounding off.

"Of course not. I've been trying to get to you all day, but I couldn't shake off Her Highness. And those two attendants of hers watch me like narks. Bit of a problem, getting her alone. When she's gone they keep their eyes open, let me tell you."

"Bodyguards, huh?"

"In a manner of speaking. But don't worry—I'll get rid of them tonight."

"You got plans?"

"Don't underestimate me, dear boy. Certainly I have plans. The time is ripe for a bit of a rendezvous in her suite. She'll see to it that we're alone, I'm sure. Then we'll pad down a bit, with a pipe or two for company. The pipe sets her off; she's a proper caution, then. And so am I."

Sweet William smiled reminiscently, then sobered. "But tonight I'll indulge in a bit of duplicity. I won't really hit the stuff. When she's out, I'll take up a collection."

"Are you sure the pearls will be there?"

"I'll make sure. Usually she keeps them in the safe—you were right about that. But they'll be around her neck tonight, until I remove them. By the way, there happen to be eleven of them, not ten. You miscounted, old boy. But I forgive you since it's in our favor."

Jerry frowned. "Okay, then what?"

"Then we travel. In your car, naturally. We throw them off the scent. Nothing could be simpler. I'll check out now. You check out before midnight. Drive around to the parking lot of the Golden Wheel. Look out for me about two at the latest. I'll have a cab drop my luggage in the lobby checkroom and you can pick it up. No sense chancing someone seeing the baggage going into your car. Right?"

"Right."

Jerry wanted to say more, but Sweet William was gone. And now there was nothing to do but wait. Wait and sweat.

He waited and he sweated through supper. Then he went out and took a walk around. No sense drinking—not if he was going to drive tonight. They'd have to at least clear the state line by morning before holing up in a motel.

He walked around until eleven or so, then went back to the hotel and checked out. He got the car and took it to the parking lot and sat there. Just sat there, waiting and sweating.

Waiting and sweating was bad enough, but thinking was worse. Funny thing, he wasn't thinking about what might go wrong with the deal. Sweet William could swing it all right, and there was no sense in getting antsy over something he couldn't help either way.

What bothered him was thinking about the Ranee. The Ranee and Sweet William together, alone up in her suite. He wondered what they were doing and then he knew what they were doing and that was the worst part of it.

So he tried thinking about something else. He tried wondering what went with a dame like that. Husband committed suicide last year—was that the story? Guy must be nuts, killing himself when he had a dame like that.

Maybe she hit the pipe too hard, though. Maybe she was too much for him to handle. Maybe that's why she went around now, alone, moving from Miami to Vegas to Reno to Colorado Springs—the Big Circuit—picking up guys and getting her kicks on the way. Funny she hadn't been taken before. Asking for it, really. Unless those two stooges of hers protected her.

If that was the way it worked, then perhaps Sweet William would run into trouble. But no, no use figuring like that. Got to trust Sweet William. He'd get the pearls.

Wait and sweat.

Jerry glanced at his watch. Holy hellsmoke, two-thirty! And where was the joker?

He tried to hold it down, tried to bury it in his mind, but it kept popping up in other places—his stomach, for instance. His stomach began to jump up and down. At three o'clock he was ready to flip.

Maybe the two little guys, those servants, were knife artists. Sweet William might be up there with a shiv in his back. You couldn't trust foreigners anyhow. He'd wait another half hour, and then—

And then it was three-thirty, and no Sweet William. So what could he do? He could barge up to the Ranee's suite and knock on the door. But maybe he'd better go back to the hotel and check.

So he went back, and he checked.

The clerk on the desk was very polite. Yes, Mr. Henderson had left, about ten o'clock.

It was funny to think of Sweet William as "Mr. Henderson," but the rest wasn't so funny. Because while the clerk was explaining that no, Mr. Henderson hadn't left a message, somebody bumped into Jerry at the desk.

He looked around and there was one of the little guys—one of the Ranee's servants.

"You wish news of Mr. Henderson, sir?" he asked.

Jerry could hardly understand him, but he understood enough to nod and listen close.

"It is as the dark says. You friend go away, in his car."

"His car?"

"I know. I assist him with his bags."

Jerry nodded again. There was nothing else to say to the little character. He went away, and Jerry walked over to the lounge and sat down.

Sweet William was gone. Sweet William the joker, the guy who was so sure he'd get the pearls. Well, that's exactly what he'd done—and how easy it had been! Set Jerry up to wait for him, then skip out with a good four or five hours' start.

Almost six hours now, and no telling which direction he'd taken off in. There'd be no way of catching up with him. It was a clean getaway. So clean the Ranee probably didn't even know about it yet; the little guy in the turban didn't sound upset. Hell, the trick was so slick Sweet William even had him carry out his bags!

Jerry had to hand it to the joker. He wished he could hand him something, right now. Playing the Ranee for a mark was one thing—but playing him, too!

But there wasn't a damned thing he could do about it. Not a damned thing to do, now. Except to get his own bags, check in again, and try to figure out what could be done tomorrow.

All at once Jerry was very bushed. He needed a drink, and remembered the pint in his bag.

So he went up to the clerk, got himself a room again, let the bellboy haul in his stuff, and then he was set. The pint helped. He sat on the bed and drank it straight, drank it fast. Every time he felt like cursing Sweet William he shoved the old bottle into his mouth. It was almost light when he fell back across the bed and passed out.

It was almost dark when he woke up again. No hangover, but then he'd slept the clock around.

Jerry got up, shaved, dressed, and went downstairs. He was hungry, but the rage in his stomach kept him from eating. A drink would be better. Damn it, there must be something he could do to copper his bets. He'd counted on those pearls. He'd counted on a lot of things, including that lousy, double-crossing—

He was just walking into the bar when she stopped him.

"I beg your pardon," she said.

He'd never heard her voice before, and it did something to him. It made his stomach churn faster, but not with rage, not with hunger, not with thirst.

The Ranee was standing there in the corridor leading from the bar, and she was smiling at him.

"Aren't you the gentleman who was asking for Mr. Henderson last night? Ghopal spoke to me about it."

Jerry didn't know what to say. If she was trying to get a lead on her missing ice, he'd better dummy up fast.

Then he blinked. He'd been so busy watching her smile he'd never looked at her throat.

And she was still wearing the pearls. There they were! She had on the ring and the bracelet, too. And matching earrings. So Sweet William hadn't snatched the loot after all.

Jerry smiled. "Why, yes," he said. "We had a business matter to discuss."

"I happen to know where Mr. Henderson is," the Ranee told him. "He had an urgent call yesterday evening—something about an appointment in the city. But he told me he expected to be back before six. In fact, we had a dinner engagement."

It sounded phony as hell. But there was just an off-chance it might be true. Sweet Wiiliam was a smoothie; he always had a couple of deals cooking. Could he have gotten a fast blast from town and scooted off to take care of it? There was no way he could have gotten in touch with Jerry beforehand, and maybe he was too smart to leave a note that would tie them together later.

So he'd checked out and planned to come back tonight. It was worth thinking about, anyway. And meanwhile, the Ranee was still here. The Ranee and that necklace, or whatever it was, with the big pearls. Big pearls, big eyes, big—

“I was on my way in to dinner,” the Ranee was saying, “in hopes that your friend might join me later.”

“Good idea,” Jerry said. “How’s about us waiting together?”

It was crude, and he could have kicked himself, but she didn’t seem to mind. That smile of hers hit him hard. Maybe he’d been underestimating himself. She didn’t seem to object when he introduced himself, and then they were sitting together and the two stooges were going through their routine with the chairs and the menu.

They poured the champagne, too, and it was easy to talk, and pretty soon Jerry didn’t give a damn whether Sweet William showed or not.

What the hell, he could handle this. Sweet William wasn’t the only one who could work the rich-bitch racket. Just because he was a smoothie, and easy on the eyes, that didn’t mean guys like Jerry Gibson were good for nothing but that wait and sweat routine. Come to think of it, worse-looking guys than him managed to get places with the broads.

And he was certainly getting places with this one. The way the champagne hit on an empty stomach, he was talking a blue streak. And here it was—must have been—nine o’clock already, and they were still sitting here, eating and living it up. She was telling him all about Gwolapur, and how she and the Rajah used to go on shoots—which meant tiger-hunting, with elephants, just like in those movies—and about how she missed all that.

Then they talked about traveling and about how beautiful she was and what a shame it was that Sweet William had stood her up, and somehow he let it slip out how much he admired her ice. Of course he didn’t call it ice, and she didn’t get sore. She just said she had a lot more of it up in her suite. And would he like to see the collection?

That’s when Jerry sobered up.

Here he’d been running off at the mouth, letting himself get half-crocked, and all the while he should have been figuring angles.

Now, when his chance came, he wasn’t ready. He’d have to watch himself.

But he wanted to go up to the suite, all right. It would be a good chance to case the setup. He wouldn't pull anything off tonight, anyway—just take a look around. If he played it close to the chest he might be able to come back. And next time he'd have a plan.

So he stood up and she stood up and the turbans pulled out the chairs, and they took the elevator.

The elevator hesitated after the twelfth floor and for a second Jerry was afraid they'd stop at thirteen. Not that he was superstitious or anything, but he just didn't like thirteen. But of course that was a lot of malarkey. Hotels didn't have thirteenth floors any more. The elevator left them off at fourteen.

Then he was in the suite. There was a plush layout for you—big rooms, all dim lights, and lots of fancy cloths hung over the furniture and draped on the walls; she must have brought the stuff with her. It looked like one of those harems you see in the movies.

Funny smell, incense or something. Jerry remembered what Sweet William had said about yen shee gow, and it was funny to think of this gorgeous dish being a hophead. But then it was funny that she could go for him, too; sitting him down on one of the big sofas and bringing him a drink with her own hands. Because the two servants had disappeared.

They were all alone in the dim coolness, and the drink wasn't strong. He know he could take it without feeling it. He could take anything, he could take her if she just moved a little closer. The way she smiled, and her soft voice going through him, and talking to him about how lonely it was to live like this, traveling from place to place with nothing but memories—

Then Jerry saw the guy standing in the corner and he wanted to jump. He was big and black and he had six arms.

The Ranee laughed at him. "Do not be afraid," she said. "She will not do you harm."

"She?"

"The statue. Durga, the goddess of our household. Kali."

Jerry stared at the statue before leaning back again. She had six arms, all right, and looked plenty mean. There was a string of white things around the statue's neck, and it took Jerry less than five seconds to make out what they were. Little ivory skulls. Human skulls. A hell of a necklace.

Thinking of necklaces made him think of the pearls. The Ranee was sitting next to him now, and something about the way she rested her head on his shoulder told him he could take her in his arms, if he wanted to. If he wanted to? Just feeling her near him, feeling the whiteness and the redness and the blackness all blending in heat and perfume was enough to stone him. But before he reached out, he had to look at the pearls.

They were there, resting against her throat, moving up and down—big and round and perfect. Eight, nine, ten, eleven, twelve of them.

Twelve?

He'd counted ten, and Sweet William told him there were eleven. But that was before Sweet William went away.

There were ten the first day, and then the gray-haired man had gone away. After that, there were eleven. Then Sweet William went away, and now there were twelve—

She must have seen him jump, and he tried to smile and cover it up. He said, "You've got a better taste in jewelry than that statue of yours, if you don't mind my saying so."

And she smiled too, and said, "Kali is the goddess of the Thugs, you know. Each skull represents one of her victims."

Jerry stood up. She didn't try to hold him.

"The Thugs are stranglers, you know. They kill as a sacrifice. The cult was supposedly stamped out many years ago, but it still has its devotees. My late husband was a believer. He chose me as a bride because he looked upon me as a reincarnation of the goddess. Quaint, isn't it?"

Jerry looked at the necklace. She was close enough for him to make a grab for her, so he wasn't afraid. Besides, the servants were gone.

"So you killed him, huh? And you've been going around ever since, knocking guys off and adding to your string of pearls. That's what you did to the Greek, and to Sweet William. You’re crazy as a bedbug.”

The Ranee laughed. “How utterly absurd!” she said.

“Like hell it is,” Jerry said. “You just got me up here because you were scared I’d kick up a fuss if Sweet William didn’t come back. And maybe you had some loony idea of making me number thirteen in your necklace. Well, let me tell you—”

But Jerry Gibson never got a chance to tell her. Because all at once the servants were back, and one of them was holding his arms and the other one was wrapping something tight around his neck, something that squeezed and squeezed.

Jerry’s eyes began to bulge. The last thing he saw was the string of pearls around the Ranee’s neck. It wasn’t really a necklace, of course. He knew that now.

It was more like a choker.

Water's Edge

Connors thought Krauss' widow would he really stacked. He was hardly anticipating a used-up drab. Yet his interest in the woman went far, far deeper than the physical, and one day it was to lead him to the boat-house upon the—

The fly-specked lettering on the window read *The Bright Spot Restaurant.* The sign overhead urged *Eat.*

He wasn't hungry, and the place didn't look especially attractive, but he went inside anyway.

It was a counter joint with a single row of hard-backed booths lining one wall. A half-dozen customers squatted on stools at the end of the counter, near the door. He walked past them and slid onto a stool at the far end.

There he sat, staring at the three waitresses. None of them looked right to him, but he had to take a chance. He waited until one of the women approached him.

"Yours, Mister?"

"Coke."

She brought it to him and set the glass down. He pretended to be studying the menu and talked without looking up at her.

"Say, does a Mrs. Helen Krauss work here?"

"I'm Helen Krauss."

He lifted his eyes. What kind of a switch was this, anyway? He remembered the way Mike used to talk about her, night after night. “She’s a tall blonde, but stacked. Looks a lot like that dame who plays the dumb blonde on television—what’s-her-name—you know the one I mean. But she’s no dope, not Helen. And boy, when it comes to loving. . . .

After that, his descriptions would become anatomically intricate, but all intricacies had been carefully filed in memory.

He examined those files now, but nothing in them corresponded to what he saw before him.

This woman was tall, but there all resemblance ended. She must have tipped the scales at one-sixty, at least, and her hair was a dull, mousy brown. She wore glasses, too. Behind the thick lenses, her faded blue eyes peered stolidly at him.

She must have realized he was staring, and he knew he had to talk fast. “I’m looking for a Helen Krauss who used to live over in Norton Center. She was married to a man named Mike.”

The stolid eyes blinked. “That’s me. So what’s this all about?”

“I got a message for you from your husband.”

“Mike? He’s dead.”

“I know. I was with him when he died. Just before, anyway. I’m Rusty Connors. We were cellmates for two years.”

Her expression didn’t change, but her voice dropped to a whisper. “What’s the message?”

He glanced around. “I can’t talk here. What time do you get off?”

“Seven-thirty.”

“Good. Meet you outside?”

She hesitated. “Make it down at the corner, across the street. There’s a park, you know?”

He nodded, rose and left without looking back.

This wasn’t what he had expected—not after the things Mike had told him about his wife. When he bought his ticket for Hainesville, he had had other ideas in mind. It would have been nice to find this hot, goodlooking blonde widow of Mike’s and, maybe, combine business with pleasure. He had even thought about the two of them blowing town together, if she was half as nice as Mike said. But that was out, now. He wanted no part of this big, fat, stupidlooking slob with the dull eyes.

Rusty wondered how Mike could have filled him with such a line of bull for two years straight—and then he knew. Two years straight—that was the answer—two years in a bare cell, without a woman. Maybe it had got so that, after a time, Mike believed his own story, that Helen Krauss became beautiful to him. Maybe Mike had gone a little stir-simple before he died, and made up a lot of stuff.

Rusty only hoped Mike had been telling the truth about one thing. He had better have been, because what Mike had told Connors, there in the cell, was what brought him to town. It was this that was making him cut into this rat-race, that had led him to Mike’s wife.

He hoped Mike had been telling the truth about hiding away the fifty-six thousand dollars.

She met him in the park, and it was dark. That was good, because nobody would notice them together. Besides, he couldn’t see her face, and she couldn’t see his, and that would make it easier to say what he had to say.

They sat down on a bench behind the bandstand, and he lit a cigarette. Then he remembered that it was important to be pleasant, so he offered the pack to her.

She shook her head. “No thanks—I don’t smoke.”

“That’s right. Mike told me.” He paused. “He told me a lot of things about you, Helen.”

“He wrote me about you, too. He said you were the best friend he ever had.”

“I’d like to think so. Mike was a great guy in my book. None better. He didn’t belong in a crummy hole like that.”

“He said the same about you.”

"Both of us got a bad break, I guess. Me, I was just a kid who didn't know the score. When I got out of Service, I lay around for a while until my dough was gone, and then I took this job in a bookie joint. I never pulled any strong-arm stuff in my life until the night the place was raided.

"The boss handed me this suitcase, full of dough, and told me to get out the back way. And there was this copper, coming at me with a gun. So I hit him over the head with the suitcase. It was just one of those things—I didn't mean to hurt him, even, just wanted to get out. So the copper ends up with a skull-fracture and dies."

"Mike wrote me about that. You had a tough deal."

"So did he, Helen." Rusty used her first name deliberately and let his voice go soft. It was part of the pitch. "Like I said, I just couldn't figure him out. An honest John like him, up and knocking off his best friend in a payroll stickup. And all alone, too. Then getting rid of the body, so they'd never find it. They never did find Pete Taylor, did they?"

"Please! I don't want to talk about it any more."

"I know how you feel." Rusty took her hand. It was plump and sweaty, and it rested in his like a big warm piece of meat. But she didn't withdraw it, and he went on talking. "It was just circumstantial evidence that pinned it on him, wasn't it?"

"Somebody saw Mike pick Pete up that afternoon," Helen said. "He'd lost his car-keys somewhere, and I guess he thought it would be all right if Mike took him over to the factory with the payroll money. That was all the police needed. They got to him before he could get rid of the bloodstains. Of course, he didn't have an alibi. I swore he was home with me all afternoon. They wouldn't buy that. So he went up for ten years."

"And did two, and died," Rusty said. "But he never told how he got rid of the body. He never told where he put the dough."

He could see her nodding in the dimness. "That's right. I guess they beat him up something awful, but he wouldn't tell them a thing."

Rusty was silent for a moment. Then he took a drag on his cigarette and said, "Did he ever tell you?"

Helen Krauss made a noise in her throat. “What do *you* think? I got out of Norton Center because I couldn’t stand the way people kept talking about it. I came all the way over here to Hainesville. For two years, I’ve been working in that lousy hash-house. Does that sound like he told me anything?”

Rusty dropped the cigarette stub on the sidewalk, and its little red eye winked up at him. He stared at the eye as he spoke.

“What would you do if you found that money, Helen? Would you turn it over to the cops?”

She made the noise in her throat again. “What for? To say, ‘Thank you,’ for putting Mike away and killing him? That’s what they did, they killed him. Pneumonia, they told me—I know about their pneumonia! They let him rot in that cell, didn’t they?”

“The croaker said it was just flu. I put up such a stink over it, they finally took him down to the Infirmary.”

“Well, *I* say they killed him. And *I* say he paid for that money with his life. I’m his widow—it’s mine.”

“Ours,” said Rusty.

Her fingers tightened, and her nails dug into his palms. “He told you where he hid it? Is that it?”

“Just a little. Before they took Mm away. He was dying, and couldn’t talk much. But I heard enough to give me a pretty good hunch. I figured, if I came here when I got out and talked to you, we could put things together and find the dough. Fifty-six gees, he said—even if we split it, that’s still a lot of money.”

“Why are you cutting me in on it, if you know where it is?” There was an edge of sudden suspicion in her voice, and he sensed it, met it head-on.

“Because, like I told you, he didn’t say enough. We’d have to figure out what it means, and then do some hunting. I’m a stranger around here, and people might get suspicious if they saw me snooping. But if you helped, maybe there wouldn’t be any need to snoop. Maybe we could go right to it.”

“Business deal, is that it?”

Rusty stared at the glowing cigarette butt again. Its red eye winked back at him.

“Not *all* business, Helen. You know how it was with Mike and me. He talked about you all the time. After a while, I got the funniest feeling, like I already knew you—knew you as well as Mike. I wanted to know you better.”

He kept his voice down, and he felt her nails against his palm. Suddenly his hand returned the pressure, and his voice broke. “Helen, I don’t know, maybe I’m screwy, but I was over two years in that hole. Two years without a woman, you got any idea what that means to a guy?”

“It’s been over two years for me, too.”

He put his arms around her, forced his lips to hers. It didn’t take much forcing. “You got a room?” he whispered.

“Yes, Rusty—I’ve got a room.”

They rose, clinging together. Before moving away, he took a last look at the little winking red eye and crushed it out under his foot.

II

ANOTHER WINKING red eye burned in the bedroom, and he held the cigarette to one side in his hand so as to keep the light away. He didn’t want her to see the disgust in his face.

Maybe she was sleeping now. He hoped so, because it gave him time to think.

So far, everything was working out. Everything *had* to work out, this time. Because before, there had always been foulups, somewhere along the line.

Grabbing the satchel full of dough, when the cops raided the bookie joint, had seemed like a good idea at the time. He had thought he could lam out the back door before anyone noticed in the confusion. But he had fouled that one up himself, and landed in stir.

Getting buddy-buddy with that little jerk Mike had been another good idea. It hadn't been long before he knew everything about the payroll caper —everything except where Mike had stashed the loot. Mike never *would* talk about that. It wasn't until he took sick that Rusty could handle him without anybody getting wise. He had made sure Mike was real sick before he put real pressure on.

Even then, the lousy fink hadn't come across—Rusty must have half-killed him, right there in the cell. Maybe he'd overdone it, because all he got out of him was the one sentence before the guards showed up.

For a while there, he had wondered if the little quiz show was going to kick back on him. If Mike had pulled out of it, he'd have talked. But Mike hadn't pulled out of it—he had died in the Infirmary before morning, and they had said it was the pneumonia that did it.

So Rusty was safe—and Rusty could make plans.

Up 'till now, his plans were going through okay. He had never applied for parole—believing it better to sweat out another six months, so he could go free without anybody hanging onto his tail. When they sprung him, he had taken the first bus to Hainesville. He knew where to go because Mike had told him about Helen working in this restaurant.

He hadn't been conning her as to his need for her in the deal. He needed her all right. He needed help, needed her to front for him, so he wouldn't have to look around on his own and arouse curiosity when he asked questions of strangers. That part was straight enough.

But, all along, he had believed what Mike told him about Helen—that she was a good-looking doll, the kind of dame you read about in the paperback books. He had coked himself up on the idea of finding the dough *and* doing away with her, of haying a real ball.

Well, that part was out.

He made a face in the darkness as he remembered the clammy fat of her, the wheezing and the panting and the clutching. No, he couldn't take much more of that. But he had had to go through with it, it was part of the plan. He needed her on his side, and that was the best way to keep her in line.

But now, he'd have to decide on the next move. If they found the dough, how could he be sure of her, once they made the split? He didn't want to be tied to this kitchen mechanic, and there had to be a way . . .

"Darling, are you awake?"

Her voice! And calling him "darling." He shuddered, then controlled himself.

"Yeah." He doused the cigarette in an ashtray.

"Do you feel like talking now?"

"Sure."

"I thought maybe we'd better make plans."

"That's what I like, a practical dame." He forced a smile into his voice. "You're right, baby. The sooner we get to work the better." He sat up and turned to her. "Let's start at the beginning—with what Mike told me, before he died. He said they'd never find the money, they couldn't—because Pete still had it."

For a moment Helen Krauss was silent. Then she said, "Is that all?"

"All? What more do you want? It's plain as the nose on your face, isn't it? The dough is hidden with Pete Taylor's body."

He could feel Helen's breath on his shoulder. "Never mind the nose on my face," she said. "I know where that is. But for two years, all the cops in the county haven't been able to find Pete Taylor's body." She sighed. "I thought you really had something, but I guess I was wrong. I should of known."

Rusty grabbed her by the shoulders. "Don't *talk* like that! We've got the answer we need. All we got to do now is figure where to look."

"Sure. Real easy!" Her tone dripped sarcasm.

"Think back, now. Where did the cops look?"

"Well, they searched our place, of course. We were living in a rented house, but that didn't stop them. They tore up the whole joint, including the cellar. No dice there."

"Where else?"

“The sheriffs department had men out for a month, searching the woods around Norton’s Center. They covered all the old barns and deserted farmhouses too, places like that. They even dragged the lake. Pete Taylor was a bachelor—he had a little shack in town and one out at the lake, too. They ripped them both apart. Nothing doing.”

Rusty was silent. “How much time did Mike have between picking up Pete and coming back home again?”

“About three hours.”

“Hell, then he couldn’t have gone very far, could he? The body must be hid near town.”

“That’s just how the police figured. I tell you, they did a job. They dug up the ditches, drained the quarry. It was no use.”

“Well, there’s got to be an answer somewhere. Let’s try another angle. Pete Taylor and your husband were pals, right?”

“Yes. Ever since we got married, Mike was thick with him. They got along great together.”

“What did they do? I mean, did they drink, play cards or what?”

“Mike wasn’t much on the sauce. Mostly, they just hunted and fished. Like I say, Pete Taylor had this shack out at the lake.”

“Is that near Norton’s Center?”

“About three miles out.” Helen sounded impatient. “I know what you’re thinking, but it’s no good. I tell you, they dug things up all around there. They even ripped out the floorboards and stuff like that.”

“What about sheds, boathouses?”

“Pete Taylor didn’t have anything else on his property. When Mike and him went fishing, they borrowed a boat from the neighbors down the line.” She sighed again. “Don’t think I haven’t tried to figure it out. For two years, I’ve figured, and there just isn’t any answer.”

Rusty found another cigarette and lit it. “For fifty-six grand, there’s got to be an answer,” he said. “What happened the day Pete Taylor was killed? Maybe there’s something you forgot about.”

"I don't know what happened, really. I was at home, and Mike had the day off, so he went downtown to bum around."

"Did he say anything before he left? Was he nervous? Did he act funny?"

"No—I don't think he had anything planned, if that's what you mean. I think it was just one of those things—he found himself in the car with Pete Taylor and all this money, and he just decided to do it."

"Well, they figured it was all planned in advance. They said he knew it was payroll day, and how Pete always went to the bank in his car and got the money in cash. Old Man Huggins at the factory was a queer duck, and he liked to pay that way. Anyway, they say Pete went into the bank, and Mike must have been waiting in the parking lot behind.

"They think he sneaked over and stole Pete's car keys, so, when he came out with the guard, Pete couldn't get started. Mike waited until the guard left, then walked over and noticed Pete, as if it was an accident he happened to be there, and asked what the trouble was.

"Something like that must have happened, because the guy in the parking-lot said they talked, and then Pete got into Mike's car and they drove off together. That's all they know, until Mike came home alone almost three hours later."

Rusty nodded. "He came home to you, in the car, alone. What did he say?"

"Nothing much. There wasn't time, I guess. Because the squad car pulled up about two minutes after he got in the house."

"So fast? Who tipped them off?"

"Well, naturally the factory got worried when Pete never showed with the payroll. So Old Man Huggins called the bank, and the bank checked with the cashier and the guard, and somebody went out and asked around in the parking lot. The attendant told about how Pete had left in Mike's car. So they came around here, looking for him."

"Did he put up any struggle?"

"No. He never even said a word. They just took him away. He was in the bathroom, washing up."

"Much dirt on him?" Rusty asked.

"Just his hands, is all. They never found anything they could check up on in their laboratories, or whatever. His shoes were muddy, I think. There was a big fuss because his gun was missing. That was the worst part, his taking the gun with him. They never found it, of course, but they knew he'd owned one, and it was gone. He said he'd lost it months beforehand but they didn't believe him.

"Did *you?"*

"I don't know."

"Anything else?"

"Well, he had a cut on his hand. It was bleeding a little when he came in. I noticed it and asked him about it. He was halfway upstairs, and he said something about rats. Later, in court, he told them he'd caught his hand in the window-glass, and that's why there was blood in the car. One of the windows was cracked, too. But they analyzed the blood, and it wasn't his type. It checked with Pete Taylor's blood-type record." Rusty took a deep drag. "But he didn't tell you that, when he came home. He said a rat bit him."

"No—he just said something about rats, I couldn't make out what. In court, the doctor testified he'd gone upstairs and cut his hand open with a razor. They found his razor on the wash-stand, and it was bloody."

"Wait a minute," Rusty said, slowly. "He started to tell you something about rats. Then he went upstairs and opened up his hand with a razor. Now it's beginning to make sense, don't you see? A rat *did* bite him, maybe when he was getting rid of the body. But if any one knew that, they'd look for the body some place where there were rats. So he covered up by opening the wound with his razor."

"Maybe so," Helen Krauss said. "But where does that leave us? Are we going to have to search every place with rats in it around Norton's Center?"

"I hope not," Rusty answered. "I hate the damned things. They give me the creeps. Used to see them in Service, big fat things hanging around the docks . . ." He snapped his fingers. "Just a second. You say, when Pete and

Mike went fishing, they borrowed a boat from the neighbors. Where did the neighbors keep their boat?"

"They had a boathouse."

"Did the cops search there?"

"I don't know—I guess so."

"Maybe they didn't search good enough. Were the neighbors on the property that day?"

"No."

"Are you sure?"

"Sure enough. They were a city couple from Chicago, name of Thomason. Two weeks before the payroll robbery, they got themselves killed in an auto accident on the way home."

"So nobody was around at all, and Mike knew it."

"That's right." Helen's voice was suddenly hoarse. "It was too late in the season anyway, just like now. The lake was deserted. Do you think . . .?"

"Who's living in the neighbors' place now?" Rusty asked.

"No one, the last I heard. They didn't have any kids, and the real estate man couldn't sell it. Pete Taylor's place is vacant, too. Same reason."

"It adds up—adds up to fifty-six thousand dollars, if I'm right. When could we go?"

"Tomorrow, if you like. It's my day off. We can use my car. Oh, darling, I'm so excited!"

She didn't have to tell him. He could feel it, feel her as she came into his arms. Once more, he had to force himself, had to keep thinking about something else, so that he wouldn't betray how he felt.

He had to keep thinking about the money, and about what he'd do after they found it. He needed the right answer, fast.

He was still thinking when she lay back, and then she suddenly surprised him by asking, "What are you thinking about, darling?" He opened his mouth and the truth popped out. "The money," he said. "All that money. Twenty-eight gees apiece."

"Does it have to be apiece, darling?"

He hesitated—and then the right answer came. “Of course not—not unless you want it that way.” And it wouldn’t be. It was still fifty-six thousand, and it would be his after they found it.

All he had to do was rub her out.

III

IF RUSTY had any doubts about going through with it, they vanished the next day. He spent the morning and afternoon with her in her room, because he had to. There was no sense in letting them be seen together here in town or anywhere around the lake area.

So he forced himself to stall her, and there was only one way to do that. By the time twilight came, he would have killed her anyway, money or no money, just to be rid of her stinking fat body.

How could Mike have ever figured she was good-looking? He’d never know, any more than he’d ever known what had gone on in the little jerk’s head when he suddenly decided to knock off his best friend and steal the dough.

But that wasn’t important now—the important thing was to find that black metal box.

Around four o’clock he slipped downstairs and walked around the block. In ten minutes, she picked him up at the corner in her car.

It was a good hour’s drive to the lake. She took a detour around Norton’s Center, and they approached the lake shore by a gravel road. He wanted her to cut the lights, but she said there was no need, because nobody was there anyway. As they scanned the shore Rusty could see she was telling the truth—the lake was dark, deserted, in the early November night.

They parked behind Pete Taylor’s shack. At sight of it, Rusty realized that the body couldn’t possibly be hidden there. The little rickety structure wouldn’t have concealed a dead fly for long.

Helen got a flashlight from the car.

“I suppose you want to go straight to the boathouse,” she said. “It’s down this way, to the left. Be careful—the path is slippery.”

It was treacherous going in the darkness. Rusty followed her, wondering if now was the time. He could pick up a rock and bash her head in while she had her back to him.

No, he decided, better wail. First see if the dough was there, see if he could find a good place to leave her body. There must be a good place—Mike had found one.

The boathouse stood behind a little pier running out into the lake. Rusty tugged at the door. It was padlocked.

“Stand back,” he said. He picked up a stone from the bank. The lock was flimsy, rusty with disuse. It broke easily and fell to the ground.

He took the flashlight from her, opened the door and peered in. The beam swept the interior, piercing the darkness. But it wasn’t total darkness. Rusty saw the glow of a hundred little red cigarette butts winking up at him, like eyes.

Then, he realized, they *were* eyes.

“Rats,” he said. “Come on, don’t be afraid. Looks like our hunch was right.”

Helen moved behind him, and she wasn’t afraid. But he had really been talking to himself. He didn’t like rats. He was glad when the rodents scattered and disappeared before the flashlight’s beam. The sound of footsteps sent them scampering off into the corners, into their burrows beneath the boathouse floor.

The floor! Rusty sent the beam downward. It was concrete, of course. And underneath . . .?

“Damn it!” he said. “They *must* have been here.”

They had—because the once-solid concrete floor was rubble. The pickaxes of the sheriff’s men had done a thorough job.

“I *told* you,” Helen Krauss sighed. “They looked everywhere.”

Rusty swept the room with light. There was no boat, nothing stored in corners. The beam bounced off bare walls.

He raised it to the flat roof of the ceding and caught only the reflection of mica from tar-paper insulation.

"It's no use," Helen told him. "It couldn't be this easy."

"There's still the house," Rusty said. "Come on."

He turned and walked out of the place, glad to get away from the rank, fetid animal odor. He turned the flashlight toward the roof.

Then he stopped. "Notice anything?" he said.

"What?"

"The roof. It's higher than the ceiling."

"So what?"

"There could be space up there," Rusty said.

"Yes, but . . ."

"Listen."

She was silent—both of them were silent. In the silence, they could hear the emerging sound. It sounded at first like the patter of rain on the roof, but it wasn't raining, and it wasn't coming from the roof. It was coming from directly underneath—the sound of tiny, scurrying feet between roof and ceiling. The rats were there. The rats and what else?

"Come on," he muttered.

"Where are you going?"

"Up to the house—to find a ladder."

He didn't have to break in, and that was fine. There was a ladder in the shed, and he carried it back. Helen discovered a crowbar. She held the flashlight while he propped the ladder against the wall and climbed up. The crowbar pried off the tarpaper in strips. It came away easily, ripping out from the few nails. Apparently, the stuff had been applied in a hurry. A man with only a few hours to work in has to do a fast job.

Underneath the tarpaper, Rusty found timbers. Now the crowbar really came in handy. The boards groaned in anguish, and there were other squeaking sounds as the rats fled down into the cracks along the side-walls. Rusty was glad they fled, otherwise he'd never have had the guts to crawl up there through the opening in the boards and look around. Helen handed him the flashlight, and he used it.

He didn't have to look very far.

The black metal box was sitting there right in front of him. Beyond it lay the thing.

Rusty knew it was Pete Taylor, because it had to be, but there was no way of identification. There wasn't a shred of clothing left, nor a shred of flesh, either. The rats had picked him clean, picked him down to the bones. All that was left was a skeleton—a skeleton and a black metal box.

Rusty clawed the box closer, opened it. He saw the bills, bulging in stacks. He smelled the money, smelled it even above the sickening fetor. It smelled good, it smelled of perfume and tenderloin steak and the leathery seat-cover aroma of a shiny new car.

"Find anything?" Helen called. Her voice was trembling.

"Yes," he answered, and his voice was trembling just a little too. "I've got it. Hold the ladder, I'm coming down now."

He was coming down now, and that meant it was time—time to act. He handed her the crowbar and the flashlight, but kept his fingers on the side of the black metal box. He wanted to carry that himself. Then, when he put it down on the floor, and she bent over to look at it, he could pick up a piece of concrete rubble and let her have it.

It was going to be easy. He had everything figured out in advance—everything except the part about handing her the crowbar.

That's what she used to hit him with when he got to the bottom of the ladder . . .

He must have been out for ten minutes, at least. Anyway, it was long enough for her to find the rope somewhere. Maybe she had kept it in the car. Wherever she got it, she knew how to use it. His wrists and ankles hurt almost as much as the back of his head, where the blood was starting to congeal.

He opened his mouth and discovered that it did no good. She had gagged him tightly with a handkerchief. All he could do was lie there in the rubble on the boathouse floor and watch her pick up the black metal box.

She opened it and laughed.

The flashlight was lying on the floor. In its beam, he could see her face quite plainly. She had taken off her glasses, and he discovered the lenses lying shattered on the floor.

Helen Krauss saw what he was staring at and laughed again.

"I don't need those things any more," she told him. "I never did. It was all part of the act, like letting my hair go black and putting on all this weight. For two years now, I've put on this dumb slob routine, just so nobody'd notice me. When I leave town, nobody's going to pay any attention either. Sometimes it's smart to play dumb, you know?"

Rusty made noises underneath the gag. She thought that was funny, too.

"I suppose you're finally beginning to figure it out," she said. "Mike never meant to pull off any payroll job. Pete Taylor and I had been cheating on him for six months, and he had just begun to suspect. I don't know who told him, or what they said.

"He never said anything to me about it beforehand—just went downtown with his gun to find Pete and kill him. Maybe he meant to kill me too. He never even thought about the money at the time. All he knew was that it would be easy to pick Pete up on payroll day.

"I guess he knocked Pete out and drove him down here, and Pete came to before he died and kept saying he was innocent. At least, Mike told me that much when he came back.

"I never got a chance to ask where he'd taken Pete or what he'd done with the money. The first thing I did, when Mike came home and said what he'd done, was to cover up for myself. I swore it was all a pack of lies, that Pete and I hadn't done anything wrong. I told him we'd take the money and go away together. I was still selling him on that when the cops came.

"I guess he believed me—because he never cracked during the trial. But I didn't get a chance again to ask where he hid the dough. He couldn't write me from prison, because they censor all the mail. So my only out was to wait—wait until he came back, or someone else came. And that’s how it worked out.”

Rusty tried to say something, but the gag was too tight.

“Why did I conk you one? For the same reason you were going to conk me. Don’t try to deny it—that’s what you intended to do, wasn’t it? I know the way creeps like you think.” Her voice was soft.

She smiled down at him. “I know how you get to thinking when you’re a prisoner—because I’ve been a prisoner myself, for two years—a prisoner in this big body of mine. I’ve sweated it out for that money, and now I’m leaving. I’m leaving here, leaving the dumb waitress prison I made for myself. I’m going to shed forty pounds and bleach my hair again and go back to being the old Helen Krauss—with fifty-six grand to live it up with.”

Rusty tried just once more. All that came out was a gurgle. “Don’t worry,” she said, “they won’t find me. And they won’t find you for a long, long time. I’m putting that lock back on the door when I go. Besides, there’s nothing to tie the two of us together. It’s clean as a whistle.”

She turned, and then Rusty stopped gurgling. He hunched forward and kicked out with his bound feet. They caught her right across the back of the knees, and she went down. Rusty rolled across the rubble and raised his feet from the ground, like a flail. They came down on her stomach, and she let out a gasp.

She fell against the boathouse door, and it slammed shut, her own body tight against it. Rusty began to kick at her face. In a moment the flashlight rolled off into the rubble and went out, so he kicked in the direction of the gasps. After a while, the moaning stopped, and it was silent in the boathouse.

He listened for her breathing and heard no sound. He rolled over to her and pressed his face against something warm and wet. He shivered and drew back, then pressed again. The unbattered area of her flesh was cold.

He rolled over to the side and tried to free his hands. He worked the rope-ends against the jagged edges of rubble, hoping to feel the strands fray and part. His wrists bled, but the rope held. Her body was wedged against the door, holding it shut—holding him here in the rank darkness.

Rusty knew he had to move her, had to get the door open fast. He had to get out of here. He began to butt his head against her, trying to move her—but she was too solid, too heavy, to budge. He banged into the money-box and tried to gurgle at her from under the gag, tried to tell her that she must get up and let them out, that they were both in prison together now, and the money didn't matter. It was all a mistake, he hadn't meant to hurt her or anyone, he just wanted to get out.

But he didn't get out.

After a little while, the rats came back.

A Way of LIfe

Twirling the top of his propeller beanie nervously, the next President. . . .

Robert Bloch, who needs no introduction in these pages, takes us to a future where men recall, tears in their eyes, the glorious story of fandom's early martyrs. John Henderson, next President of the United States, an authority who hands down pronouncements on the meaning of the scientific scriptures, makes a shocking discovery that threatens to change his world.

TWIRLING the top of his propellor beanie nervously, the next President of the United States peered through the curtain at Convention Hall.

"Now?" he murmured.

The girl beside him shook her head. "Not yet. Let them get the demonstration out of their systems." She smiled. "Are you happy, John?"

John Henderson nodded. "Yes, but scared, too."

"Don't forget, you're the next President," the girl reminded him.

"If I'm elected." Henderson grinned. "This was only the nomination, remember? And that NFFF crowd is tough."

"FAPA will win, though." Avis Drake squeezed his arm reassuringly. "How did you like Daddy's nominating speech?"

"Terrific. It really did the trick."

"Yes, didn't it? Listen to that demonstration."

Together they stared through the aperture in the curtain and watched the conventioneers parade through the hall.

Somewhere in the background the organ was playing a wild medley—everything from the religious *Kyrie Ellison* to the old traditional FAPA drinking-song, *Yes, Sir, That's My Burbee.* But it was impossible to hear the melodies plainly, for the fans were on the march, spilling down the aisles of Gernsback Hall and shouting Henderson's name. They were tossing their beanies, spraying one-another with zap-guns, waving copies of their state magazines. All of the delegations joined the demonstrations, clustering around the banners borne aloft by standard-bearers from every club in the land.

John Henderson peered at the legends. Here was the contingent from Silverbergh, there the flag of the Swamp Critters, and in the back of the hall rose the snowy emblem of a small group from the faraway North Pohl. Interspersed with the HENDERSON FOR PRESIDENT signs swirled other printed declarations—GRENNELL WAS A GOOD MAN BUT HENDERSON IS BETTER, and WHERE THERE'S A WILLIS THERE'S A WAY, and because there's always a joker in the crowd some place, BHEER IS THE ONLY TRUE GHOD!

But now Avis's father, Lionel Drake, had mounted the rostrum once more and was pounding for order, his gavel giving forth a rising rhythm.

Gradually the Big Name Fans found their seats. Lionel Drake was holding the microphone, uttering the short introduction.

"Ready?" Avis whispered.

John Henderson nodded. The girl put her arms around his neck and kissed his. cheek. "Go out there and pour it on," she murmured.

He heard Lionel Drake speak his name, heard the roar of the crowd, then stepped through the aperture of the curtains and faced the convention.

They cheered him, and when the cheers subsided he began to speak. There was a mimeographed copy of his talk on the lectern in front of him, but John Henderson found himself ignoring it.

He talked slowly, at first, eying the faces in the crowd. They were so young, so absurdly young! Many of them seemed scarcely out of their teens, and less than a third were in their thirties. Out of the entire assemblage there couldn't have been a dozen old people: Lionel Drake's gray head was singularly conspicuous. But then, Lionel Drake was one of the rare exceptions, one of the rare survivors. Why, he'd been alive in Ellison's day, in the actual time of Rog Phillips and Dave Kyle and Ackerman! Of course, he'd just been a baby and he'd never seen them, but he'd been alive. And so had hundreds of millions of others. What made old Lionel Drake so unusual was the fact that he'd stayed alive when the hundreds of millions perished. Lionel Drake had survived, and as a survivor he was one of the few remaining actual links with the distant past.

John Henderson found himself talking about that distant past now: speaking not from his prepared message, not from his head, but from his heart.

"You want to know my plans, my program," he was saying. "But the statement of my platform will have to wait. Today I have one thing, and only one thing to say to you. In the immortal words of the sainted Tucker—*Fandom. Is a Way of Life."*

He paused until the cheering subsided.

"Strange, isn't it, how that phrase has survived in a shattered century? Incredible as it may seem to us here today, it was first uttered less than a hundred years ago. We do not know the circumstances which gave it birth. We do not even know too much concerning its creator. The man that was Wilson Tucker, or Arthur Tucker, or Bob Tucker is today merely a legend; we know less of the actual facts of his existence than we do of Shakespeare, or H. G. Wells, or Aldous Julian Huxley and the other great fantasy and science writers of the more remote past.

"But the words survive. They survived in the old days, before fandom rose to bring light into the darkness of men's minds. When our ancestors—yours and mine—were a humble and persecuted minority—those words gave them strength. Strength to endure the jibes and the ridicule of the uneducated masses; the television-worshippers, the sports-lovers, the Cadillac-minded who ruled the world.

"You all know the story, of course; the story of fandom's early martyrs, gathering secretly in little bands to form the first fan-clubs and hold the first conventions. They had no power then, no recognition. They were jeered at and despised, mocked as wild-eyed visionaries and fanatics. And yet they persevered. They toiled over their crude mimeographs, turning out their magazines. Those magazines have long since crumbled into dust, but who amongst us can ever forget the names? *Grue* and *Hyphen: Amazing* and *Astounding: Galaxy* and *Quandry* and *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction. Fantastic Universe, Startling, Confidential, Infinity, Dimensions—these* names will never die!

"Nor will the names of their creators. And yet, they were not famous then. There was a John W. Campbell, yes, but no Campbellites to follow him. There was an Aitchell Gold, but no Aitchellians. And when St. Anthony Boucher was writing, of painting those marvelous works under the pseudonym of Francois Boucher, canonization was far-distant from his thoughts. Why, then, did these men continue in the great work? I like to believe it was because all of them followed a single inspiration, the inspiration found in that great motto of theirs and ours—*Fandom Is a Way of Life.*

"Surely that motto must have inspired the great fan scientists of that era: men like Asimov, E. E. Smith, Arthur C. Clarke, Dr. Barrett and Willy Ley. The immortal Heinlein, or Einstein must have known it when he created Heinlein's Theory of Relativity which resulted in the development of thermonuclear weapons.

"And yet, at the time, the masses laughed. Today we know that all science, all invention, sprang directly from the work of these men. We still have their hardcover books attesting to their knowledge of nuclear fission, rocketry, radar and all the other marvels of the First Age of Fandom.

“But the power they possessed fell into evil hands. The bombs fell and the intercontinental missiles landed. And from Moscow—which we know today as Moskowitz—came the war that ended the First Age of Fandom and almost ended the existence of all fankind.

“We are well aware, all of us, of the black years that followed. The years when men of good will—the few who survived—went underground. The years of plague and radiation and ceaseless surface warfare; the years of almost total disintegration and destruction. Fankind’s political structure, religious structure, social and economic structure vanished. Even the military structure could not long endure. And what was left? Only the faith of fandom. When they burned the universities, burned the libraries, burned the books—what remained? The treasured possessions of a handful of surviving fans. In the burrows beneath the ruins of cities; in rural fastnesses like buried Bloomington and faraway Weyauwega, the few existing mimeographs continued to turn.

“When survivors sought the surface of the world again, when the few millions left out of hundreds of millions walked the face of the earth once more, many found a fate worse than their fellows. They looked upon the shambles of civilization and went mad. There were those who turned upon their fellows and sought to enforce their rule through force. They warred upon one another and perished. There were those who tried vainly to re-establish the old order, but in vain. Fankind had lost faith in industrial science, in military science, in so-called political government and the religious creeds that sanctioned the horror of war.

“And it was then, we know, that Fandom came into its own at last. Fandom International—founded on friendship, on mutual knowledge and mutual faith in true brotherhood and trite scientific knowledge. Fans did not go mad. Fans did not resort to force. Fans were prepared for a new order, and a new day. Why? Because even through the time of darkness and destruction they clung to their motto—*Fandom Is a Way of Life.*

“It was Fandom, then, that rose to leadership. The children of the First Fans received the carefully-guarded knowledge of the past. They rallied to the organizations known as FAPA and—yes—the NFFF."

At the mention of the rival party's name, the crowd booed. John Henderson raised his hand for silence.

"Do not allow sentiment to overthrow reason," he cautioned. "We of the FAPA—the Fantasy Amateur Press Association—know that the NFFF is a deluded minority. The so-called National Fantasy Fan Foundation will never win a national or international election."

The crowd applauded, but Henderson overrode them. "Still, the NFFF are Fans. Fake-Fans, perhaps, but still Fans. They too believe that *Fandom Is a Way of Life."*

He paused, clearing his throat. "Remember, we once worked together, all of us. Our fathers helped to rebuild die cities, helped to restore reason. Using the scientific knowledge and the wisdom preserved in the science-fiction books, they brought order out of chaos.

It was the application of Fannish principles that rebuilt the world.

In the past thirty years we have gone far. Our world is still woefully underpopulated. Great cities, entire nations, are yet in ruins. But we make progress. Under the guidance and leadership of our local Fan Clubs, under the supervision of Big Name Fans like yourselves, we are reshaping fankind.

"First Fandom's dream of reaching the stars is still a dream. But once again the jet planes are beginning to soar—the great silver Heinliners streak across our skies. Once more we are building factories and laboratories; training our future leaders at Fredric Brown University, peering up at the planets from the Mount Richard Wilson Observatory, creating new developments like the Bradbury Ray.

"There will be no more war. Fandom has seen to that. Now that all of us are united as True, Serious Constructive Fans, our racial and political differences will never matter. Nor will religion divide us. For whether we choose to worship Ghu or Foofoo, whether we exalt the Poo or the Yobber, we unite in one belief. And it is this belief I intend to carry forward; it is this belief which will become the keynote of the coming campaign. *Fandom Is a Way of Life!"*

John Henderson bowed his head and stepped behind the curtains, not waiting to acknowledge the roaring applause from the crowd below.

He faced Avis Drake and her father with a wry grin. "Well, that's that," he sighed. "Now—what about that little vacation you promised me?"

The farmhouse stood just outside what had once been the city of Reading, in Pennsylvania. It was Lionel Drake's own private headquarters, and here John Henderson found the weeks of rest he needed before embarking on the presidential campaign.

There was work to do, of course: the Big Name Fan delegations from every state came to lay out their plans and to pledge Henderson's attendance at their rallies—the Midwestcon, the Oklacon, the Westercon and all the rest. And in the evenings, Henderson plotted strategy with old Lionel Drake.

But there were long golden afternoons spent wandering with Avis hand in hand over the enchanted countryside. For this was Pennsylvania, and magic ground—the land of Flarry Warner, of Bill Danner and Madle and Rothman and many another legendary figure from the distant past. The ghosts of Damon Knight and Judith Merril hovered in the haze.

Such notions were childish, Henderson realized, but at the same time he understood that he and Avis were in a sense seeking to capture childhood. They had never known what it was to be a child.

One day they talked about it.

"I never had anyone to play with," Avis confessed. "When I was born, just about everybody in Daddy's generation was sterile, because of living at the time of the radiation. Besides, Fandom was just getting established and sometimes we had to hide. There was still part of the old Armed Forces in existence, and their leaders were trying to take over the country. And the General Party was operating—you remember, General Motors and General Electric and all the rest?

"Daddy says that Fandom won because we were better organized for communication, with our tapes and shortwave and our mimeographs—but most of all, because fans *trusted* one another. And the military and industrial groups were always fighting amongst themselves. You must remember how it was when you were a boy; we had a new President every month or so, because of all the assassinations."

Henderson nodded. "That's why my folks went underground for a while," he said. "Out near Peoria. They say Philip Jose Farmer lived there, too, you know."

"Then you know what I mean," Avis told him. "Daddy was a psychologist and he helped found the new Fandom. Naturally, everybody was out to get him. Even some of the first Fan Clubs were against him—those Shaverites and Palmerites and the other religious sects. We kept moving from place to place, never stopping for years. So I never knew any other girls my age and I never had any toys. By the time I was seven or eight, Daddy had me slipsheeting and cutting stencils for fanzines. We must have sent out millions, before he really got an organization going and we took over the newspapers. Gradually his plans took hold, though, and we got our people into radio and general publishing. And with their help we won the first real election."

"Seems hard to realize that was only sixteen years ago," Henderson mused. "I was still in Peoria when it happened. Finishing up my courses in a private school run by an old fan named Shaw. Claimed to be a grandson of the great Shaw, but couldn't prove it, of course. Said his father had been a member of the old Hydra Club. He was a bug on psychology: always talking about Hubbard and his disciple, Freud. He got me interested in the field—and that's how I met your father. And you."

"It worked out wonderfully, didn't it, darling?" The girl squeezed his hand. "And it's going to be even better from now on. You'll win the election, and we'll be together, and—"

John Henderson shook his head. "Don't oversimplify things," he answered. "You know, that's one of our big problems today. Everything is oversimplified. Did you Know that there were over two billion people in the world at the time of the war, and almost a hundred and eighty million in this country alone? What's the population today? Maybe twenty, million, at the most. Nobody knows, really, because we've never had a census.

There are so many things we've never had, and must have. Public schools, for one thing. We can't go on educating our children in fan-groups forever. And we've got to teach them more facts and less legends. We've got to train more engineers and scientists and technicians and fewer artists and writers and multigraph operators. It's all very well to say we have half the population working the land and keeping us going, and that we have a few railroads running and some main highways in order, and even a fleet of Heinliners. But we need so much more! Why, it will take us another fifty years just to dig out the ruins of our cities, and then—"

"Please, you sound as if you were making a campaign speech," Avis protested. "You're talking like Daddy now."

"Your father is a wonderful man," Henderson said. "I don't know how I'll ever repay him for all he's done for me. He taught me, trained me, groomed me for this step by step ever since I was just a neo in the Beanie Brigade. He says he picked me for a future President, and I often suspect he picked me for your future husband."

"That happens to be *my* doing," Avis murmured. "Now, let's forget politics for a while."

And so they did, for the remainder of that afternoon and for the rest of a glorious week-end.

It was on the following Monday that disaster struck. Lionel Drake received the sudden shortwave message summoning him to FAPA Headquarters in Sturgeon—the new city which had risen on the outskirts of what had once been Philadelphia. And Avis accompanied him there for the day, leaving John Henderson alone at the farmhouse with a few servants and a secretary.

Henderson spent the morning going over his press notices in the current fanzines and preparing a statement denouncing the mutant theories of a rabid Van Vogt cult which had arisen to harass both FAPA and NFFF during the campaign. He did not go so far as to advocate the suppression of Van Vogt's books—it was a cardinal principle that everything rescued from the past be preserved and kept in print for educational purposes—but he cautioned fans everywhere not to take their reading too literally. "What would happen," he wrote, "if we accepted Bester and deCamp and Kornbluth as historians? We must remember that many of the Masters wrote in parable and allegory. Some of them, in their deep wisdom, saw fit to satirize their contemporaries and their times. Others, like the learned Poul, or Hans Christian Anderson, wrote outright fables. Van Vogt's extrapolations were not meant to be taken as gospel."

But were they?

Afterwards, in the early afternoon, Henderson slipped away and went for a walk. He did not choose the country path Avis had selected for their previous strolls, but struck off across the fields toward a cluster of abandoned farmhouses near what had once been a crossroads.

Henderson wanted to think. Here he was, a presidential candidate, a Big Name Fan among Big Name Fans, an authority who handed down pronouncements on the meaning of the scientific scriptures. But what did he know about it, really? Oh, he'd read all the books, of course—everything that had been salvaged from the rubble. The torn and battered Gnome Press editions, the dog-eared Doubleday relics now carefully preserved in a few remaining collections had long since been reprinted in the standard editions which served as texts in every fan-group school in the country. He'd studied them, just as the small contingent of technicians studied them; for clues to the past, for knowledge and guidance.

Henderson had never been one to question their authority. When excavators had come across actual college texts in the razed archives of the universities, they had collated them with the work of the great fan-writer Masters and found that these men based their work on sound scientific principles. This was definite proof that they wrote out of revealed wisdom. But some of their more advanced concepts—this business of mutant powers, of ESP, PSI, of anti-gravity, of space-travel—seemed unknown to the textbook writers.

Henderson had asked Drake and some of the others about this point. Drake told him that undoubtedly men like Heinlein and Mareulies and Howard Browne were in possession of still greater secrets than they had chosen to reveal at the time—given another thirty years and probably they would have gone to the government and offered formulae which could send men soaring to the stars. But they didn't have another thirty years. The governments of the world, misusing Heinlein's theory, had chosen atomic destruction instead.

That was the story.

But was it true?

Several things puzzled Henderson. He was no heretic, no Fake Fan, but he couldn't help wondering. If fans had been so persecuted and powerless in the old days, how was it that Heinlein had gone to the government in the first place?

Why was it that some of the Masters' work survived in hardcover books and the writings of others equally famous had never been found in the ruins? Why weren't there any copies of the first fanzines? Granted, almost everything had been destroyed in the years of warfare, and paper was most perishable—but surely somewhere a few samples should, have survived. The addresses of many of the Masters were known; why hadn't the reclamation parties and the excavators made special efforts to seek the collections of Don Ford, Bea Mahaffey, Redd Boggs?

As it was, nothing remained but their names. Henderson had to admit it was all hearsay. He didn't know if Don Ford had been related to Henry Ford, the automobile manufacturer. Was Bea Mahaffey a stern-faced old lady or a brassy blonde? Had there really been an omniscient genius like Redd Boggs or was he just a FAPA legend?

Henderson found himself approaching the crossroads. To his surprise he discovered that a small group of farmers and local citizens were engaged in clearing the area surrounding the demolished dwellings. An ancient bulldozer had swept a swath at one side and allowed access to the crumbling foundations of four or five structures.

He approached, idle curiosity mingling with sudden fancy. This was Eshbach country, wasn't it? Nobody remembered the exact location of the Lloyd Eshbach residence, but here the famous fan-publisher had lived and died. Suppose a miracle occurred, and one of these ruined houses turned out to be his home? Suppose the searchers uncovered a whole cache of fan-literature, something he could use in the campaign? It was a wild, impossible thought, of course, but suppose—

Henderson nodded at some of the diggers. "Need any help?" he asked.

A short, stocky man lifted his head and stared at him without recognition. He wore no beanie and was obviously just a farmer.

"Sure, if you want to lend a hand. Grab a shovel." He indicated a pile of implements at the side of the road.

Henderson selected a rusty specimen and clambered down gingerly into the nearest cleared foundation.

"What are you looking for?" he asked.

"Typewriters, I guess." The stocky farmer wheezed as he worked. "District headquarters had an idea we might find some business machines here. Gang of us been donating one afternoon a week to excavating, these past few years. Turned up quite a bit of stuff around Reading. Now we're getting at these villages and crossroads places. Been at this one a month. But we've got down far enough so's we may strike something today."

"Any idea who used to live here?"

"Dunno. Headquarters tells us this might have belonged to an old-timer name of Polk."

Henderson gulped.

Polk. Was his dream about to come true after all? He knew that name, knew it well. There had been a Polk in ancient fandom—Chester A. Polk.

Obviously the name meant nothing to the farmer or his companions. They were just doing an assigned job. They lent their muscles to a routine task, shovelling out debris, stooping to pick up battered artifacts. But Henderson dug like a demon.

He wasn't interested in the antique furniture, the broken springs, the shards of chinaware. He didn't join the group that puzzled over the wallpaper pieces, or even stop to examine what had once obviously been a television set. There was no more television today, Henderson knew, and ordinarily he'd have been interested in seeing what a machine had looked like.

But not now. Not when there was a possibility of finding something greater. Filing cabinets, perhaps, and maybe a desk with a locked drawer—

He dug, and the sweat poured down his face. The sun sank lower and the farmer climbed out of the pit to join his fellows.

"Guess we'd better call it a day," he said. "Mebbe we'll strike something next week. Getting right down to the basement level: see where we can pry up the floorboards. This house must have been burned, not blasted."

Henderson nodded, but didn't look up from his digging.

"Aren't you coming out, fella?" He shook his head. "I've got another hour to spare," he panted, "Mind if I just keep going?"

"Well, suit yourself." The farmer hesitated. "But remember, if you find any machinery, stuff like that, it's public property."

"I'll remember," Henderson promised. "If I turn anything up, I'll bring it in to your district offices."

They must have left, but he didn't pay any attention to their departure. Because he had reached the floorboards now, and he was prying them up, and then he was down in the basement area. He waded knee-deep in debris, and clouds of dust arose to choke him. He blinked in the gathering twilight. Here was the rusty remains of an old-fashioned furnace; there was a broken table and on it something that gleamed dully.

Typewriter? Henderson approached it, then gasped. It was a Gestetner. A mimeograph machine—its drum broken, its crank dangling! And beneath the table was a large metal box. He stooped and pulled it free of the rubble, wiped the dust from the top.

He read the lettering crudely daubed in black paint. *Chester A. Polk—Private.*

Files? This was a file, a portable, two-drawer file. And the drawers could be opened. Henderson tugged at the rusty handles, and it wasn't exertion that made his heart pound.

The top drawer came open. Yellowed folders cascaded forth. Henderson picked one up at random. It bulged with letters—typewritten letters, handwritten letters.

He looked at the date of the topmost sheet. *April 1, 1956!* He glanced through the message, then turned the page hastily and sought the signature.

Jim Harmon!

Jim Harmon, one of the oldtime Masters—the man who had first advocated *Harmony,* or Universal Brotherhood in Fandom, in the pages of the old PEON magazine!

What if he found some copies of PEON itself?

Henderson hastily pulled open the second drawer.

He found PEON. He found PEON, and HYPHEN, and INSIDE, and a complete mailing—a FAPA mailing, the 75th. This was the fanzine collection, the fabulous fanzine collection of Chester A. Polk!

There was no thought in Henderson's mind now concerning district managers or the necessity of turning this material in. There was only the need of gathering up the magazines, gathering up the few hardcover books at the back of the file, and taking them to a safe place where he could read them. The sun wouldn't set for over an hour yet. If he carried everything to that spot under the trees where he and Avis usually rested, he could go through his find at leisure. And then, when he went back to the farmhouse, he'd find Avis and Lionel Drake and tell them, show them. An hour was all he needed. Just one hour, and then—

It was almost three hours later that John Henderson staggered into the farmhouse.

Lionel Drake and his daughter heard the heavy footsteps in the hall, and Avis ran to meet Henderson as he leaned against the doorway.

"John, where have you been?" she murmured. "Daddy and I got back hours ago—nobody knew what had happened to you." She paused and stared up at his face. "What's the matter?"

Henderson didn't answer. He brushed past her, stumbled to the sofa, sat down, and buried his face in his trembling hands.

"For the love of Leiber, what's wrong?" the girl gasped.

Lionel Drake rose and walked over to the young man.

"Yes, what's the trouble?" he demanded. He nearly added, "You look as though you've seen a ghost," but there was no need to. For Henderson had produced a ghost. He pulled it out from his jacket pocket and extended it: a solid, palpable *revenant* in the form of a battered book.

Drake took it and read the title. "THE IMMORTAL STORM," he whispered. "A History of Science-Fiction Fandom by Sam Moskowitz," There was silence, then a sharp intake of breath. "Where did you find this?"

"Where I found the rest of the stuff," Henderson said, dully. "The copies of *Oopsla* and *Inside* and *Skyhook* and *A Bas* and all the others. In Chester Polk's basement." He nodded. "Yes, *the* Chester Polk. The one who got letters from Nancy Share and Joe Gibson and Earl Kemp and even William Rotsler. He went to Conventions. He played poker with Tucker, once. It's all there. Everything."

"Tell us about it," Avis soothed. "From the beginning. Daddy, isn't this marvelous?"

There was nothing in Lionel Drake's demeanor to indicate that he agreed. He stood there for a minute, holding "THE IMMORTAL STORM" in his gnarled hands. Then he put it down on the table.

"How about a drink?" he suggested. "After that we can talk."

Henderson accepted a drink, and downed a second one without an invitation. Then he just sat there and stared.

"Come on," Avis urged. "Tell us, now."

He didn't look at the girl when he replied. He stared at Lionel Drake.

"What is there to say?" he whispered. "You're not surprised, are you, Drake? You knew about the magazines—what they contained?"

The older man nodded silently.

"Other copies have been found before, I suppose; even copies of "THE IMMORTAL STORM?" And you and a few Big Name Fans have kept the discoveries from the rest—from fools like myself."

Avis Drake glanced at the two men in bewilderment. "What's all this about?" she asked.

Lionel Drake made a sudden gesture, but Henderson shook his head. "She might as well know the truth," he said. "It's about time somebody learned the facts. The way I learned them, this afternoon."

He faced the girl now, talked to her directly. "I found the old fanzines," he said. "And I read them. Oh, I couldn't go through everything thoroughly, and there are a lot of old letters, too, but I read enough to know what I'm talking about. For the first time in my life, I *do* know what I'm talking about. And that means everything I've ever believed in, everything I've been taught, everything I've tried to tell others as a candidate—is a lie.

"No, don't stop me. Your father knows. He and a few others have known all along, and deliberately withheld and distorted that knowledge, deliberately upheld the lies.

"First of all, fandom was never a persecuted minority. There were no martyrs, no dedicated group of scientists seeking a solution to the problems of the future. There were just men who wrote stories for publication—in the hard-cover books that survived and in the commercial magazines that have all been destroyed. Perhaps some of them were found again, but hidden away by your father and his friends.

"The men who wrote these stories were called 'pros' or even 'dirty pros' by the fans of their day. Some of them were talented writers, some of them even possessed sound scientific backgrounds—but they were not the inventors of the things they described. They were not even the greatest writers of their time.

“And the fans themselves were another, separate group. The legend has mixed up the commercial magazines with the fanzines. But fanzines were just amateur publications, privately mimeographed and distributed amongst a small circle. Most of the fans were quite young. Some of them were serious, yes, but not all of them. And they weren’t bent on saving the world. They poked fun at themselves half of the time. Do you know what I read in one fan magazine? It said, *Fandom is just a goddam hobby.”*

Henderson paused and glanced at the copy of “THE IMMORTAL STORM.”

“There’s more in the book. It tells about the very earliest fan organizations—how they fought and feuded, quarreled among themselves. The Big Name Fans weren’t supermen. Tucker was a motion picture projectionist. Wollheim became an editor. So did Lowndes—he never was a doctor, and ‘Doc’ was just a nickname.

“So you see, it’s all a myth, this story of Fandom keeping the torch of knowledge lighted in the darkness. They weren’t saints, they weren’t dedicated—just a gang of people who joked and bickered about a hobby. Yes, they had clubs and they had conventions, and they formed close friendships, and sometimes fans even married one another. But the rest is delusion. Lies and propaganda to feed the silly multitude—to elevate men like your father to power on the shoulders of stupid dupes like myself.”

Henderson poured himself another drink. Avis began a silent sobbing. Lionel Drake sighed heavily and sat down in the armchair opposite the younger man.

“There’s an old fannish saying,” he murmured. “Where ignorance is Blish, ’tis folly to be wise.” He paused, then continued. “What you say is true, of course. That’s the way things were, and a small group of us has always known. We did find fanzines from time to time, and we have concealed them. Also we deliberately helped to create the myth of Fandom. But not because we wanted personal power."

"What other purpose could you possibly have had?" John Henderson demanded. "Setting up a falsified version of history, suppressing the facts, making what almost amounts to a religious cult out of Fandom?"

"We had one purpose," Lionel Drake replied. "To restore the world to sanity."

"You call this sanity? Elevating juvenile antics to heroic status, putting laurel-Wreaths on the brows of money-grubbing writers, inventing a Golden Age out of whole cloth?"

"I do," said Drake. "Remember, I'm a psychologist. Oh, not one of the old-time, orthodox psychotherapists you read about. My field is mass-psychology, sociology perhaps. What I've done, and the others have done, is necessary.

"It's true we invented part of the story—the part concerning life before the coming of atomic warfare. But the rest, my boy, is true. You know it. Fandom *did* constitute the sole reliable nucleus remaining after the world was razed and ruined. As such, it formed a small operating-force that could help to restore order; at that time a very few men capable of operating a hand-cranked mimeograph could become a potent force. Remember, they trusted one another in an age where all men seemed surrounded by enemies.

"But rudimentary skill and simple trust were not enough. As a student of history, of sociology, we knew that. Every important group, every important political or religious or social movement, gains its strength from other sources; from., legend. It is belief in legend that made the old-time movements strong—in the labor unions it was the story of Joe Hill and the Wobblies; in the Nazi Party it was the story of Hitler languishing despised and ignored in prison; I needn't remind you of the early Christian martyrs, or of the Young Republicans and their stories of Lincoln the rail-splitter. Out of the legends come the songs and stories, the fables and the folklore that gives men faith. Faith in their destiny, faith in their future. Fandom had to find its legends in order to grow strong and succeed. An old psychiatrist named Jung pointed out the pattern common to all mythologies; demonstrated that men need heroes and sagas and epics to believe in, in order to survive in a civilized state."

"But you can't found a firm future on the basis of lies," Henderson whispered.

"Who says we can't?" Drake countered. "Our country was founded on the myths which sprung up around the Founding Fathers—Washington and the cherry tree, and all the rest of it. From the time of Romulus and Remus in ancient Rome, the myths have played their part in progress; giving men something greater than themselves to cherish as a heritage. And more important, in this instance, the legend has done its work.

"Fandom *did* help rebuild our world. Fannish forms of government *have* succeeded in restoring order. We no longer need armies in the nations founded on International Fandom. We have a working economy, yes, but it no longer rules the world through monetary power. For the first time since the days of Greece under Pericles, the artist and the creator play a respected and important role in life. Our commerce and our industry is slowly being rebuilt, but under sounder concepts than before. Educational facilities are increasing."

"You mean you're organizing means to spread more lies," Henderson retorted bitterly. "You've no real newspapers, no motion pictures, no television—"

"In time they will be restored," Drake said, calmly. "And so will the knowledge that we've retained for ourselves. Don't you think we know more than we've seen fit to reveal? We have the data with which to build atomic power-plants once more, to continue our rocketry experiments, perhaps to build an actual Moon-rocket within a generation. But our first concern must be to build a foundation for the better world to come. Yes, we choose to build it upon a myth—but surely it's a better myth than that which upheld the civilizations which have gone before. Would you want us to return to the old ways and the old myths—the Divine Right of Kings, die myth of Communism, or our own mindcrushing myth of the past which proclaimed that the Customer Is Always Right? Should we choose military mass-murderers as our new heroes, or exalt those who perverted pure science to the ways of destruction? The legend of the Big Name Fans preserved sanity in the world for the past generation. We can't abandon it now.

"I know what you're thinking, my boy. You'd like to quit the campaign, or go before the FAPA group and blurt out the truth. But what could you possibly gain? Isn't it better to aid in the cause—knowing that in the generation to come, men will continue to grow in knowledge and in achievement? The time will come when we can allow the legends to die; when we can take pride in present achievement, learn to dream about the future instead of the past. But for the moment mankind needs a dream of the past to counteract the nightmare reality of what actually occurred. That is the purpose of Fandom, the true and only purpose—to give men that dream and keep them sane."

Henderson glanced at Avis. The girl wasn't crying any longer. She was looking at him, waiting for his answer. In her eyes he read a curious mixture of love and loyalty, shame and fear. These emotions, he knew, were mirrored in his own gaze.

"If I go along with you," he said, softly, "I'm choosing the easiest way."

Drake opened his mouth to reply, but the girl spoke before him.

"No you aren't, darling," she murmured. "It will be the hardest way. To know the truth and yet not tell it. To carry the burden of guilt and deceit because it's necessary. To live a lie so that all other men can live the truth."

"Part of the truth," Henderson said.

"Yes, part of the truth. But their children—our children—can know it all."

Henderson rose and went to her. "Perhaps," he whispered. "We can try, anyway. I suppose we must try."

They walked outside together, out under the stars. Far overhead a Heinliner thundered across the sky. Henderson thought of the dreams that had made it a reality—the dreams, shattered for him forever, which he must help preserve for his fellow men.

Lionel Drake would help, Avis would help, and maybe he could endure the years to come. Fandom was still a way of life. Quite suddenly, John Henderson remembered another saying that had survived from the olden days—a saying he had read again in a fanzine just this afternoon. Now, for the first time, he grasped the ironic truth of its meaning.

Softly, still staring up at the stars, he quoted it aloud:

“It is a proud and lonely thing to be a fan.”

Try This For Psis

When this issue appears, Robert Bloch will be in New York, serving as master of ceremonies for the banquet of the 14th World Science Fiction Convention; and I doubt that anywhere in Manhattan, in night club or Broadway revue, will one find a more suave and witty m.c. (Or should a science fiction m.c. be an mc^2*?) Bloch's previous stories in F&SF have been surprisingly serious in theme and treatment: but now he casts a humorous eye (with a faintly bawdy twinkle in it) upon the much-publicized new science of psionics.*

ONCE UPON A TIME THERE WAS A time there was a sane scientist who had an ugly daughter.

The scientist's name was Dr. Angus Welk, and in the Anthropology Department of a large eastern university he was the brachycephalic head. He was, naturally, a staunch believer in the physical sciences. At the same time, he detested anything abstract. He had a particular hatred for that branch of scientific investigation known as parapsychology—the investigation of extra-sensory perception and psychokinesis. "There is absolutely no such thing as telepathy," he often declared. "It's all in your mind."

Nor was Dr. Welk content to let the matter rest there. He made a constant habit of challenging every investigator in the field of ESP or psi phenomena. He heckled them at lectures, he wrote indignant letters to psychiatric journals, he published a long monograph entitled *Extra-Sensory Deception.* And during his summer vacation, when his colleagues roamed over the New England states with their cameras, happily exposing film, Dr. Welk covered the same territory, happily exposing spiritualist mediums. So perhaps Dr. Welk was not completely sane.

And maybe his daughter, Nora, was not entirely ugly. True, everything about her was just a little larger than life-size. Her nose was a trifle big and her mouth was too wide, and her cheekbones were so prominent they might easily have run for public office. But in an era which bows down before the busts of Monroe, Russell, Lollobrigida and Ekberg, she possessed certain other attributes which might be considered outstanding. In fact, one might easily search the wide world over without finding her equal in either hemisphere.

It was not necessary, however, to conduct a global mission in order to discover Nora Welk's whereabouts. As a graduate student she served as her father's secretary, and also ran his household. Dr. Welk was a widower, and secretly considered himself fortunate in that his daughter had never shown the slightest interest in young men.

"When the right mate for you comes along," he often told her, "I'll let you know. I'll recognize him by his cephalic index, and we'll conduct a controlled experiment. A true eugenic mating, my dear. Won't that be nice?"

Nora used to agree that it would be just splendid, but as time went on she began to entertain doubts. Maybe that's because doubts were all she ever had to entertain—nobody asked her for a date, and whenever she timidly mentioned a young man's name in her father's presence he would denounce the individual as a dolichocephalic dolt.

Just how long they might have continued their sane, ugly life together is problematical—if a problem hadn't arisen in the shape of Frank Tallent.

Frank Tallent didn't have much of a shape. He was short, sandyhaired, and myopic, and weighed about a hundred and ten pounds, dripping wet—if he climbed on the bathroom scales with a heavy bar of soap in each hand.

But he happened to sit next to Nora Welk at a lecture one evening, and the damage was done.

All during the talk he kept staring at her profile, occasionally lifting his eyes to her face, and when the session ended he noticed that she seemed to have some trouble finding her purse.

As she groped about her, he touched her arm. “I beg your pardon, Miss,” he said. “But the purse is under your seat.”

Nora blinked at him. “I just looked there,” she declared.

Frank Tallent reddened. “I wasn’t referring to the wooden one,” he murmured. “If you’ll just get up . . .”

Sure enough, there was the purse.

Now it was Nora’s turn to blush. “Thank you,” she said. “I can’t imagine how it got there. I guess I was so interested in the speech I didn’t notice when it slid behind me.” She smiled at Frank. “It *was* an interesting speech, wasn’t it?”

“I thought it stunk,” Frank said, with more vehemence than grammar.

Nora’s eyes flashed. “Is that so? And just what was wrong with it, might I ask?”

“Why, that old goat doesn’t know what he’s talking about,” Frank answered. “Just because you can’t weigh it or measure it or put it under a microscope, he claims there isn’t any such thing as clairvoyance.”

“I suppose you know differently?”

“Of course I do.” Frank peered up at her through his glasses. “I’m taking a special course in the Psych Department, under Professor Seine. He’s probably the most famous authority on parapsychology in the country.”

Nora sniffed. “Professor Seine is a crackpot,” she declared. “And the old goat who delivered tonight’s lecture happens to be my father.”

She started to brush past Frank, but the young man reached out his hand and grabbed her by the elbow.

“Better empty out your purse first, before you go,” he said. “The stopper came out of your perfume bottle and your things are getting soaked.”

Nora halted and scrabbled in her handbag.

"You're right!" she exclaimed. "How on earth did you know—?"

"I'm a psychic sensitive." Frank answered, modestly. "Dr. Seine is using me to run experiments. I could see what was going on inside your handbag. It isn't a matter of actual eyesight, you know."

Nora started to nod, then shook her head. "Of course not," she agreed. "It isn't eyesight at all. You could smell that perfume leaking and you just jumped to conclusions. My father says that's how Professor Seine distorts all his data. He's explained everything to me—but of course, *you* wouldn't be interested."

"On the contrary, I'm very much interested," Frank protested. "Maybe you'd be good enough to tell me about your father's theories, Over a cup of coffee, perhaps?"

Nora hesitated a moment.

"I'll buy you a hamburger, too," Frank went on. "After all, you didn't eat any supper."

"How did you know that?"

"Psychic." Frank grinned faintly as he rose. Nora hesitated once more.

"Don't worry about your father," Frank went on. "He's backstage talking to the reporters, telling them what a fool Professor Seine is and what a courageous investigator *he* is."

"Is that supposed to be another demonstration of your psychic powers?" Nora inquired.

"Just a guess," Frank admitted. "But I'm right, aren't I?"

"Probably. Only you're wrong about my father and his theories. Let me tell you—"

So she told him over a hamburger, and over a cup of coffee, and over two cigarettes.

At the end of it all, Frank Tallent sighed. "I'm sorry," he said. "I've heard all these arguments before. Table-tipping and levitation isn't telekinesis, but a fake. Mind-precognition in dreams is just coincidence, and so forth. But the trouble is, *I* can do these things. I do them every day, with Professor

Seine. He says Pm the most remarkable subject he’s seen since Lady, the Talking Horse.”

“Does he hypnotize you?” Nora asked, as they left the restaurant and walked along the darkened streets.

“Of course not. It’s just something that seems to come naturally. I never knew I had ESP or psi powers at all until I came to the university and got into his class. He asked for volunteers one day when he was demonstrating telekinesis with a pair of dice, and I got up and threw thirty passes in a row. After that he took an interest in me.”

“Who wouldn’t?” Nora scoffed. “If I could throw thirty passes in a row I’d go to Las Vegas and make a fortune.”

“It isn’t that easy,” Frank explained. “Apparently the subliminal mind is influenced adversely by the conscious mind when the element of personal gain enters into the situation. I had the same idea after throwing the passes, of course. I got into a little crap game with some of the boys in my dormitory.”

“What happened?”

“I lost eighteen bucks the first five minutes.”

“You see?” Nora nodded. “It doesn’t really work. That’s why none of these so-called mind readers ever make a killing on the stock market.”

“I explained about that,” Frank answered. “You can’t control the phenomena. And if you’re seeking some kind of reward, you freeze up. But the fact remains, I *did* throw thirty straight passes with those dice in the classroom.”

“Then either the dice were loaded, or you were.”

“Impossible. Professor Seine is an honest man, and I don’t drink.” Frank took the girl’s arm as they entered the park and halted near a bench. “If I could only make you understand,” he said. “Sit down here a moment. Maybe I can give you a demonstration.”

They took their places on a bench.

“Now,” Frank began. “Take your feet off the ground. That’s it. I’ll do the same. We’re sitting quietly, right? And the bench is firmly balanced on the grass, isn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“Watch this,” Frank said.

Suddenly the bench beneath them began to move. It tipped forward and the girl, with a gasp of astonishment, slid into his arms.

“What happened?” she murmured.

“Telekinesis,” he told her, tightening his embrace. “What do you think of it?”

“It’s wonderful,” Nora sighed, snuggling closer.

“Would you like another demonstration? How about a little supernormal perception?”

“Whatever you say.” Nora was beginning to feel quite conscious of this young man’s psychic aura; it positively made her tingle all over. She had never dreamed that a scientific experiment could be so interesting.

To her disappointment, Frank released her suddenly and stood up.

“All right,” he said. “Here’s what you do. I’m going to walk over there and stand under that tree, with my back to you. I want you to take something out of your purse and hide it while I’m not looking. Then it’s up to me to find it.”

Strictly in the spirit of scientific inquiry, Nora selected an old class ring from the bottom of her purse and tucked it under the inner pleat at the neckline of her blouse.

When Frank returned to her side he immediately placed his fingers on her throat and again Nora felt the tingling thrill she was learning to associate with parapsychoolgical investigation. As she felt his hand gradually descend, however, she became apprehensive.

“What do you think you’re doing?” she snapped.

“Why, looking for your ring,” Frank told her. “It is a ring you concealed, isn’t it?”

“Yes—but not *there*. It’s up there, under the neckline.”

“That’s where you intended to put it,” Frank answered, continuing his search. “But it slipped down. In fact, quite a ways down. Don’t worry, though. I'll get it."

"It can't be *that* far down," the girl protested.

"Oh, but it is. Hold still! Remember, this is just an experiment."

Even controlled experiments can sometimes get out of hand, and this particular experiment rapidly became uncontrolled. There was no doubt in either of their minds, however, as to the experiment's success. Within two minutes Frank had found Nora's ring, and before another five minutes had elapsed, they were engaged to be married.

Since Dr. Angus Welk did not possess psi powers, he was quite blissfully unaware of his daughter's clandestine engagement. This situation seemed ideal to both Nora and Frank. Their courtship was conducted in the park and at times in the last parking space at the rear of a drive-in movie. Since neither of them cared for motion pictures, they were free to continue their research into the supernormal, and Nora quickly graduated from the status of willing pupil to adoring convert. She soon learned that no matter what she hid nor where she hid it, Frank could seek it out unerringly. Just how long she might have continued as a subject for a wide field of investigations is problematical, had not an unforeseen crisis arisen.

The unforeseen crisis, in the person of Professor Seine, changed everything. The unforeseen Seine suddenly went off on a parapsychological wingding.

"It's murder, that's what it is!" Frank announced to Nora one late summer evening, after greeting her at the park entrance they had chosen for a trysting place. "Did you see tonight's paper? Did your father tell you?"

She shook her head. "No, I've just come from the office. Daddy stayed home all day today. What's the matter?"

"It's Seine. He's been grumbling about your father's attacks on him for months now. Says it's ridiculous that two men from the same university faculty should dispute with each other about a perfectly selfevident matter. And now he wants to bring the matter to a head. He issued a public challenge to your father today. Invited him to select a committee of six—anyone he wants—to witness a demonstration of parapsychological phenomena. He's coming to your father's house tomorrow with a subject, prepared to prove his case."

"That's terrible," the girl agreed. "Daddy's going to be awfully upset."

"He's not the only one," Frank muttered. "The subject Professor Seine selected for his demonstrations happens to be me."

"No—he couldn't!"

"He could, and he did. After all, I'm his star example. He wants to write this book about me, remember?"

"But why didn't you refuse?"

Frank paused and gulped.

"You could have refused," Nora continued, relentlessly. "Didn't we agree we'd keep our engagement a secret until you graduated, so Daddy would never know you were mixed up in these experiments? Didn't I tell you that he'd rather see me married to a psychopath than to a psychic sensitive? And didn't you promise me that you'd give up your investigations after you finished school and get an honest job in some laboratory where they do *real* psychological work—like ringing bells and teaching dogs to salivate?"

"Sure," Frank answered. "I wanted to make a good impression on your father. Approach him wearing a white smock and carrying a test-tube full of airedale saliva in one hand. But Professor Seine has convinced me, Nora. This work is more important. If we can control ESP and psi powers it means the opening of a whole new era. Your father's a scientist. Surely, if we demonstrate the truth to him, he'll understand."

Nora began to sniffle. "He's a scientist, yes, but as you once remarked, he's also an old goat. Can't you understand? No matter what kind of proof you present, he won't believe it. He'll just hate you for it and then we'll never get married." She sobbed aloud. "I don't think you really want to marry me, anyway. You just like to have somebody around to experiment on."

"That's not true, you know it isn't. I'm sure we're going to be married." Frank spoke gravely. "My supernormal percipience is never wrong. I've told you that sometimes I have these prophetic dreams, haven't I? And they always come true. Well, last night I had another. In this dream I saw you lying in bed. And you weren't alone."

"Let's not be vulgar," the girl murmured.

"What's vulgar about a baby?" Frank demanded. "You were lying in bed with this newborn child. Cutest little thing you ever saw—looked just like me."

"Boy or girl?" Nora asked, eagerly.

"That I can't tell you. The alarm rang and I woke up. You know how noises distract psi powers. Professor Seine has already warned your father about that—tomorrow's experiments must be conducted under fair conditions."

Nora put her hands on his shoulders. "You really intend to marry me, then," she said, softly.

"Of course I do. And the dream proves it."

"It proves something else, too, then," the girl said. "The experiments can't be conducted fairly."

"What are you getting at?"

"Listen to me, now. I *know* Daddy. If you go to him and demonstrate your powers, he'll just flip. On the other hand, if you flop, he'll be delighted. He'll feel so good about proving his case that he'll agree to anything. I know this isn't the Dark Ages, darling—we could get married without his consent, any time we want. But I happen to love him too, even if he is an old goat. And I don't want to spend the rest of my life in the middle of a family quarrel."

"Do you want to spend the rest of your life with a faker?" Frank snapped. "As far as I'm concerned, we *are* in the Dark Ages, until we successfully demonstrate the unsuspected powers of the human mind. Now Professor Seine's theory—" Nora stamped her foot. "I wish Professor Seine would stick his theory in a pigeonhole and forget it! What I want to know, will you play along with me or won't you? "

"There's nothing I'd rather do," said Frank, and meant it. "But Nora, I just *cant*. Don't worry, things will work out anyway. I saw our baby in a dream—"

"As far as I'm concerned, that's the only place you'll ever see it," Nora told him.

The girl turned and clattered out of the park. Frank sat down on a bench and groaned. He knew he was right. They *were* going to have a baby. But now he realized that it wasn't going to be accomplished through extra-sensory perception.

Professor Etienne Seine whistled with Gallic gaiety as he piloted his Porsche in the direction of Dr. Welk's big house just outside of town. The Professor, despite his position as a member of the psychological *savant-garde*, had not developed any ESP powers of his own. Consequently it was some time before he noted the dejected air of the young man seated at his side.

"What is it that there is?" he inquired, solicitously. "What sickens you? Is it that you dread the testing?"

Frank shook his head and attempted a reassuring smile. Evidently it was a failure, because Professor Seine continued to regard him quizzically.

"Is it that it is something you ate? Your stomach, she is upset?"

"My stomach, she is empty," Frank told him.

"Ah, that is best, *mon brave.*" The Professor nodded gravely. "As we well comprehend, the success of ESP or psi experimentation can be imperiled by physical distractions. Eating and drinking spoil the victory. What is that which the poet says? 'There's many a slip between *coupe* and lip.' But be of cheer, we shall not fail. We shall convince the Doctor Welk and his committee, we shall convince the reporters—"

"Reporters?" Frank groaned. "Oh no!"

"Oh, *oui!"* Professor Seine gestured ahead as they rounded the driveway leading to the Welk mansion. "Regard them."

Frank regarded the waiting figures grouped on the porch. He recognized several of Dr. Welk's colleagues on the faculty, plus two or three young men with the inevitable notebooks clustered around the corpulent red-faced man who scowled down at them over the rims of his glasses. A glimpse of Dr. Welk's eyes was enough to terrify Frank, until he realized their bulging prominence was due to a trick of the spectacle lenses. From their thickness, it was reasonable to assume they had been ground at Mount Palomar.

"*Myopique,"* the Professor murmured, apparently noting the same thing as he left the car and conducted Frank up the steps. "But he will see much, today."

Frank didn't answer. He was searching for a sight of Nora. The girl was not in evidence.

He hastily recalled himself to acknowledge introductions. In response to a question from one of the reporters, he enunciated his name slowly.

"Tallent," the reporter repeated, as he scribbled. "Didn't somebody write a book about you? Charles Fort, maybe?"

"Charles Fort was an old fool." The rasping voice belonged to Dr. Welk. "Except, of course, when he was young. Then he was a young fool."

Professor Seine laughed merrily. "It is this scepticism which we today shall overcome," he predicted. "If anyone advances anything new, people resist with all their might; they act as if they neither heard nor could comprehend; they speak of the new view with contempt, as if it were not worth the trouble of even so much as an investigation or a regard; and thus a new truth may wait a long time before it can make its way."

"Just the kind of nonsense I expected from you," Dr. Welk observed.

The Professor shrugged. "This is not my nonsense," he answered, mildly. "It is a statement of Gertie."

"Humph, I might have known. Gertie was a fool, too. Very unsound. All you have to do is look at his prefrontal lobes."

"This Gertie a friend of yours?" one of the reporters demanded, eagerly. But before the Professor could answer him, a disturbance made its appearance—and a very charming appearance it was—in the form of Nora.

This form was duly admired as the young woman passed among the group and distributed glasses of a pink liquid.

"I thought you gentlemen might like a little refreshment before you began the tests," she said.

"Hey, Bacardis!" exclaimed the reporter who wanted to know about Gertie.

The girl shook her head. "No, it's only fruit punch." She approached Frank and gave him a level stare. He started to open his mouth, but his throat went dry. Automatically he accepted a glass and drank. He wished now that Nora had stayed away. Her presence disturbed him greatly, and her aloofness disturbed him even more. He found it difficult to concentrate on what was going on.

Professor Seine had taken over now, and he was telling the reporters and Dr. Welk's committee a few things about telepathy, telekinesis, teleportation, clairvoyance, and dowsing. From a briefcase he extracted a mimeographed report of his past six months of experimentation with Frank—the card-runs, the work with dice, the psychometric data.

Dr. Welk cleared his throat for action. "Twaddle," he said. "Sheer twaddle. Nobody can read minds." He strode over to Professor Seine. "Go ahead and read my mind, I dare you to." He glanced at his daughter. "On second thought, maybe you'd better wait until Nora leaves. What I'm thinking about you is best not repeated in mixed company."

"But I do not read of minds," the Professor protested. "It is the young man here. He is the sensitive."

Frank smiled weakly. He didn't feel like a sensitive. He was numb. He watched Nora refill the glasses from a large pitcher and extended his own with an imploring look. Nora refused to meet his eyes. He couldn't tell what she was thinking. He couldn't—the realization came to him with a flash of horror—tell what *anyone* was thinking. His head was beginning to whirl.

"Let's go inside," Dr. Welk was saying, "and get this affair over with. I can't afford to waste much time with such tomfoolery—I've got a four o'clock appointment to trepan a gorilla."

He led the party into a large old-fashioned study, with book-lined walls; obviously this was his private den in which he was wont to pace and growl at will.

"You'll find I have made the arrangements we agreed upon," he told Professor Seine. "As I understood it, you asked me to conceal a deck of cards somewhere within the room, and also a packet of letters—"

"Would you care for another drink before you begin?" Nora interrupted, coming in from the hall with a full pitcher. "It's so hot today——"

"Sure," said the reporter who had asked about Charles Fort. "Say, you positive there isn't any liquor in this? Stuff tastes like it's got a kick in it."

"Not at all," Nora told him. "As I understand it, liquor affects the precognitive faculties, doesn't it, Professor?"

"Certainement," he responded. And as the company drank, Professor Seine proceeded to explain the theories he was to demonstrate.

Frank tried again to concentrate upon the conversation, but everything was blurry. Nora's face wavered before him as she poured the contents of the pitcher into his glass. He tried to whisper to her. "Darling, won't you at least say something to me? I'm so—"

But she had turned away, and now Professor Seine had his hand on Frank's shoulder and was propelling him to the table in the center of the room. He gestured at the crowd, indicating a row of chairs lined up against the far wall.

"And now, *messieurs!"* he began, "if you will be so good as to discover your seats, we shall make a commencement. First we shall have the card-run, as I have explained. The Doctor has undertaken to conceal a pack of playing cards here in this room. I shall now ask my subject to locate those cards."

He turned to Frank expectantly. Frank stood there—conscious of the perspiration bathing his palms, and of nothing else. He couldn't concentrate. The room wavered. It was Nora's fault—she had deliberately upset him so that the experiment would be a failure. He glanced nervously at Professor Seine. The gaunt investigator looked at him trustingly. It would be terrible to let him down now. It would be terrible to let himself down. Dr. Welk was scowling, murmuring to the committee and the reporters.

Frank closed his eyes. Immediately the room steadied. He began to get a vague impression. It didn't come quickly or clearly, as such impressions usually did, but it was coming.

Eyes closed, he moved forward. One hand swept the line of bookcases. He fumbled for a book, removed it, reached behind. From a space between the books and the wall he extracted a rectangular object. Opening his eyes, he gazed down at a package of playing cards.

His sigh of relief mingled with a sharp gasp from Dr. Welk.

"But that's not where I put them!" he exclaimed. "There must be some mistake—"

"Mistake?" Professor Seine smiled blandly as he took the unopened pack from Frank's hand. "You concealed of the cards, did you not? And my subject found of the cards, did he not? Let us proceed to the experiment."

Deftly he blindfolded Frank and placed him in the far corner of the room. Then, stepping briskly to the table, Professor Seine removed the pack, shuffled it, and extended it to the nearest committee member. Upon a whispered instruction, the committee member shuffled the pack again. A second committee member now laid the first card face down upon the table, in plain view.

Frank stood motionless.

"What do you perceive?" the Professor called.

Frank gulped. He clenched his fists.

"Eh bien, what is it that you see?" the Professor insisted.

Frank shuddered. "Must I tell?" he quavered.

"But well sure, you must! Describe the card, please!"

"All right," Frank muttered. "You asked for it. This card has the picture of a naked blonde lying on her back and kicking a heart in the air with both feet. I suppose it's the ace of hearts."

As the crowd gasped, Frank raced on. "And the second card, with the brunette and the pony, is the four of spades. The redhead and the sailor is the seven of diamonds, and the next one, with the three girls wearing the black brassieres, is the nine of clubs—"

By this time Professor Seine was at the table, rapidly turning over the cards. Frank was right: thence of hearts was followed, in turn, by the others as he'd described them.

"A wolf-pack, by George!" exclaimed one of the reporters, crowding up to the table. "And boy, *what* a wolf-pack. Look at this here Queen of Diamonds; how'd she get mixed up with the Jack? Hey, Doc, I didn't know you had anything like this around—"

"Neither did I," muttered Dr. Welk. "I mean, this is definitely *not* the deck I concealed. One of my students recently returned from a field expedition to Cuba. He brought back some curiosa for anthropological study and left them with me—"

"Yeah, sure," said the reporter. "We know how it is, Doc." He tried to riffle through the rest of the deck, but Dr. Welk snatched it away. "Perhaps we'd better get on with the next phase," he said. "We'll consider this sufficient evidence."

"Ah yes." Professor Seine bowed blandly. "There is now the matter of the letters." He removed Frank's bandage, and in a low voice murmured, "What arrives?"

"Damned if I know," Frank said. "I think you'd better call it off. Everything's going blank again."

"Here, have a drink." Nora was at his elbow, extending a glass. Frank was about to wave it away until he realized she was smiling. He drank gratefully, although his throat burned. She passed around the room, refilling glasses.

Finally the Professor rapped for attention. "My good colleague has been instructed to conceal some letters in this room. I shall now ask that the subject find these communiques and read of them aloud to you."

Frank shook his head. As he did so, the subliminal came to his aid. He walked waveringly to the desk, then paused. Dr. Welk's eyes narrowed, but as Frank moved away from the desk he gave a sigh of relief.

His bulging eyes widened again as Frank paused in front of a portrait of Whistler's Mother, then pushed it aside and began to manipulate the combination of a safe concealed behind the picture.

"That's not the place!" Dr. Welk shouted, rising. "And how did you know the combination, anyway?" Frank, moving as though in a trance, continued to twirl the dial. The safe swung open. Frank reached in and extracted a packet of letters, bound in faded red ribbons. He put his hand over them, his eyes closing.

"The first letter is dated June 12, 1932," he muttered. "And it begins like this: *Dear Honey bug, It is morning now but I can still taste your kisses. If only the nights would never end*—"

"Give me those!" Dr. Welk snatched the bundle from his hand and stuffed it into his coat.

"Aren't you going to tell us if he's right, Doc?" cried the nearest reporter. "What's with this 'Honey-bug' business?"

Dr. Welk's face blossomed with a sudden case of rubella. "These are positively not the letters I had in mind," he groaned. "Professor Seine, what is the meaning of this? Are you making mock of me?"

"*Non,*" the parapsychologist protested. "I do not make the mock of you." He glanced nervously at Frank, who stood there goggling. "We will commence the next phase of the experiment, please." Professor Seine blinked and popped his hand to his mouth to stifle an unexpected belch. Several of the committee members noted the gesture and laughed raucously. Nora tittered in the background.

Professor Seine shrugged and made haste to continue. "Dr. Welk has arranged certain objects in his lavatory, is it not?"

"It is certainly not," Dr. Welk boomed. "What I do in the lavatory is no concern of this investigation."

"Why not, Doc?" asked the most persistent of the two reporters, lurching to his feet. "Now take me, for instance. I do a lot of reading in the—"

"Kindly shut your trap!" shouted Dr. Welk. "Professor Seine has reference to my laboratory. He asked me to arrange something on the table there, to test the subject's ESP powers."

"Ah yes," the Professor nodded. "It is as I say, the laboratory in which the good Doctor conducts of the experiments, and not the lavatory, in which the good Doctor—"

"Get on with it!" yelled Dr. Welk. "I'm stifling in here and I've got a splitting headache. I put some stuff out on the table. Your stooge has never been in my laboratory. He's supposed to guess what's in there. Now, go ahead!" Frank turned and put his palms to his forehead. He felt the room reel. His mouth opened, seemingly of its own volition. The words came. "Reading from left to right," he said, "I see a series of jars. The first one contains dill pickles. The second one contains a pickled foetus. The third one contains pure water."

He opened his eyes. "That's right, isn't it?" he asked.

Dr. Welk nodded reluctantly. "As far as it goes," he conceded. "But what about the fourth one?"

"Fourth one?" Frank frowned. "There is no fourth one."

"Oh yes there is," Dr. Welk exclaimed triumphantly. "Come along and I'll show you."

The group trooped down the hall at Dr. Welk's heels. He moved slowly and seemed to have some difficulty opening the laboratory door. But once inside he gestured at the table with a flourish.

"You see?" he announced. "Four jars!"

"Uh uh," said the eldest committee member. "Six."

"You're seeing double," his nearest neighbor told him. "There's only three."

"Three!" echoed Professor Seine. *"Regardez donc!*"

"Four, in plain English!" contradicted Dr. Welk. Then he stared. "Where'd it go?" he panted. "Where'd it disappear to? I could have sworn I had a fourth jar there. It was filled with a gallon of medical alco—"

"Anyone for punch?" murmured Nora, sweetly, as she appeared in the doorway with a refilled pitcher.

Frank bore down upon her. He brushed her aside and whispered hastily. “So that’s it, that’s what you did! Spiked punch! You knew I was affected by alcohol, you wanted to ruin the experiment. Well, I’ll show you—”

But he had no time to show her anything. Professor Seine was leading them back along the hall, and out of the house.

“We conclude with the dowsing,” he said.

“Dowsing?” The reporter who knew Fort’s name was instantly alert. “That’s where you find water with a forked stick, isn’t it? But what’s that got to do with psi?”

“It is an example of the clairvoyance, of a supernormal perceptive power,” Professor Seine told him, accepting a glass of punch. “The willow wand, she is not necessary; she is mere superstition. *La radiesthisie*—that which you name die dowsing—can be accomplished as well with a bent coat hanger, as you will quickly see.”

“Or just as poorly,” murmured Dr. Welk, lowering his voice so that Professor Seine could not hear him. “I took the trouble to get some of the boys from the Geology Department over here. You’ll find their reports inside. There’s no water on my land anywhere—it’s dry as a bone. Watch and see.” Professor Seine, for his part, had collared the reporters, both of whom were accepting their fifth glass of punch from Nora.

“This instrument you observe on the lawn,” he explained. “He is a portable well-digger I made rent of this morning. When my young friend discovers water, I shall avail myself of it to make the bore. Attend, he emanates from the house now with the coat hanger.”

Frank was emanating, but not very rapidly. A slow anger churned within him, mingling with the alcohol he had unwittingly consumed. Nora was giggling openly at him, but nobody seemed to notice it—the punch had done its work too well. Any attempt at extra-sensory perception seemed doomed; for that matter nobody was in a condition to attempt normal perception. The side-lawn was littered with straggling drunks as though a cocktail party had broken up and strewed the guests helterskelter across the sward.

Dr. Welk was shouting incoherently at him and waving his arms. “C’mon, let’s finish this up!” he called. “Don’t forget, I’ve got a four o’clock date with a gorilla!”

“This is not of the time for monkey business,” Professor Seine retorted. “I ask that you be silent as the grave. The subject must concentrate with the utmost.”

Frank raised the coat hanger. He took a deep breath, hoping to restore his sobriety. He had found water before; if there was a trace of moisture anywhere on this land, he knew the forces within him would inevitably lead him to it. The coat hanger would jerk, then point. And Professor Seine would drill. The Professor stalked behind him, panting now as he lifted the heavy portable driller with its long electrical cord trailing behind from its extension plug-in back at the house. The cord was three hundred feet long. Frank began to walk, slowly, his head bent.

“Stop!” murmured the Professor. “The cord, she is at the end of her rope.”

Frank retraced his steps. The coat hanger remained steadily outstretched before him. The crowd trailed behind, stumbling and giggling. Suddenly Frank wheeled abruptly and started for the house. He halted just under one of the bay windows and the coat hanger jerked down as if independently directed.

“Here,” Frank whispered.

Professor Seine began to rig his drill.

“No!” Dr. Welk protested. “No, there isn’t any water! I’ve had the place inspected, there can’t be! Don’t ruin my flower-beds—don’t you dare turn that thing on—stop him, somebody!”

But as the group converged on Frank and the Professor, the drill went into action. There was a whirring, a piercing of soft earth. And then—

A geyser spouted from the sod.

A wave of water spurted upwards, then fell in a flashing arc to drench the crowd.

Frank beamed at the girl.

“I did it!” he cried.

“Sucre!” ejaculated the Professor. *“Sucre du Printempsl.”*

“Look!” Frank grabbed Nora and shook her, holding her under the spray. “He’s got to believe me now, doesn’t he? I can do anything, liquor or no liquor. I can produce apports, poltergeists, phenomena, anything. I’ve got the power, see? I can levitate, teleport—just you watch me—”

“You damned fool!” Dr. Welk staggered over. “Know what you just did? *You hit the city wuter muin!”*

Professor Seine was frantically tugging at the drill. “It is immovable,” he gasped. “I cannot extricate it—”

“Here, let me try!” Frank tugged at it, then turned. “Never mind, I’ll levitate it.” He faced the drenched and leaping crowd. “Now watch!” he yelled. “I’ll prove I have psi powers once and for all—look at this!”

He allowed the darkness to surge over him, the blurry, alcoholic darkness. With his inner eye he could see the drill rising out of the ground as if of its own accord. He could see it lifting higher and higher. He strained to elevate it, watched it twirl above his head, and then the effort was too much. It was dropping, coming closer and closer. Frank tried to dodge, but he was too late. As the shrieking committee scattered in all directions, the drill landed on Frank’s head and the darkness closed in.

It took ten stitches to patch up his skull, but Nora patched up the rest. Before the sobered, sodden committee left the house they had agreed to keep silence on the entire affair—including their own part in it. Perhaps Nora’s admission about the spiked punch helped. At any rate, no one was willing to go on record as having participated in the debacle. As for the reporters, neither of them was inclined to turn in a story.

“Who’d believe it anyway?” said the one who was interested in Fort. “My city editor’s death on that kind of stuff. He wouldn’t recognize a flying saucer if his wife hit him with one.”

Professor Seine was happy, however. In his eyes the experiment was a complete success, and once he was assured Frank’s injury wasn’t serious, he even agreed to pay for the cost of repairing the damaged water main.

Dr. Welk's reaction was curiously complex. He had seen enough to modify his attitude on parapsychology—but at the same time he had his reputation to consider. Fortunately, as Nora pointed out, no one would know. She certainly wouldn't say anything, and neither would Frank.

The young man didn't learn all this until later. He sat up in bed at the hospital and listened to Nora's account.

"So you see, it all worked out for the best," she told him. "Daddy isn't angry at you for what happened. He feels you saved him, really."

"I saved him?"

Nora blushed. "Yes. I told him it was your idea to spike the punch that way."

"But darling—"

"Don't you see? It's all right now. We can be married, and you can continue your experiments in private, if you want."

"No I can't." Frank's tone was sepulchral.

"What do you mean?"

"That blow on the head. It did something to me. I . . . I've been testing. The power doesn't work any more. I can't tell what's written on my chart, and I don't even know what you have in your purse."

Nora sighed. "I don't know whether I'm happy or sad," she said, reaching for his hand. "But don't worry. Maybe it will come back when you're well again."

She was wrong, of course. It didn't come back. And some nine months after they were married—and Frank had an excellent job as assistant to Dr. Welk, cataloguing the pelvic bones of Australian aborigines—came the fatal hour.

As the young man paced the floor outside the delivery room, a nurse asked him the usual question. "Which do you think it will be?" she inquired. "Boy or girl?"

"Damned if I know," Frank groaned. "What do you think I am—a mind reader?"

1957

The Real Bad Friend

It was really all Roderick's idea in the first place.

George Foster Pendleton would never have thought of it. He couldn't have; he was much too dull and respectable. George Foster Pendleton, vacuum cleaner salesman, aged forty-three, just wasn't the type. He had been married to the same wife for fourteen years, lived in the same white house for an equal length of time, wore glasses when he wrote up orders, and was completely complacent about his receding hairline and advancing waistline.

Consequently, when his wife's uncle died and left her an estate of some ninety-five thousand dollars after taxes, George didn't make any real plans.

Oh, he was delighted, of course—any ten-thousand-a-year salesman would be—but that's as far as it went. He and Ella decided to put in another bathroom on the first floor and buy a new Buick, keeping the old car for her to drive. The rest of the money could go into something safe, like savings and loan, and the interest would take care of a few little luxuries now and then. After all, they had no children or close relatives to look after. George was out in the territory a few days every month, and often called on local sales prospects at night, so they'd never developed much of a social life. There was no reason to expand their style of living, and the money wasn't enough to make him think of retiring.

So they figured things out, and after the first flurry of excitement and congratulations from the gang down at George's office, people gradually forgot about the inheritance. After all, they weren't really living any differently than before. George Foster Pendleton was a quiet man, not given to talking about his private affairs. In fact, he didn't have any private affairs to talk about.

Then Roderick came up with his idea.

"Why not drive Ella crazy?"

George couldn't believe his ears. "You're the one who's crazy," George told him. "Why, I never heard of anything so ridiculous in all my life!"

Roderick just smiled at him and shook his head in that slow, funny way of his, as if he felt sorry for George. Of course, he *did* feel sorry for George, and maybe that's why George thought of him as his best friend. Nobody seemed to have any use for Roderick, and Roderick didn't give a damn about anyone else, apparently. But he liked George, and it was obvious he had been doing a lot of thinking about the future.

"You're a fine one to talk about being ridiculous," Roderick said. That quiet, almost inaudible way he had of speaking always carried a lot of conviction. George was handicapped as a salesman by his high, shrill voice, but Roderick seldom spoke above a whisper. He had the actor's trick of deliberately underplaying his lines. And what he said usually made sense.

Now George sat in his dingy little room at the Hotel LeMoyne and listened to his friend. Roderick had come to the office today just before George left on his monthly road trip, and decided to go along. As he'd fallen into the habit of doing this every once in a while, George thought nothing of it. But this time, apparently, he had a purpose in mind.

"If anyone is being ridiculous," Roderick said, "it's you. You've been selling those lousy cleaners since nineteen fifty-six. Do you like your job? Are you ever going to get any higher in the company? Do you want to keep on in this crummy rut for another twenty years?"

George opened his mouth to answer, but it was Roderick who spoke. "Don't tell me," he said. "I know the answers. And while we're on the subject, here's something else to think about. Do you really love Ella?"

George had been staring at the cracked mirror over the bureau. Now he turned on the bed and gazed at the wall. He didn't want to look at himself, or Roderick, either.

“Why, she’s been a good wife to me. More than a wife—like a mother, almost.”

“Sure. You’ve told me all about that. That’s the real reason you married her, wasn’t it? Because she reminded you of your mother, and your mother had just died, and you were afraid of girls in the first place but you had to have someone to take care of you.”

Damn that Roderick! George realized he never should have told him so much in the first place. He probably wouldn’t, except that Roderick had been his best—maybe his only—friend. He’d come along back in ’54, in the service, when George had been ready to go to pieces completely.

Even today, after all those years, George hated to remember the way he’d met Roderick. He didn’t like to think about the service, or going haywire there on the island and trying to strangle the sergeant, and ending up in the stockade. Even so, it might have been much worse, particularly after they stuck him in solitary, if he hadn’t met Roderick. Funny part of it was, Roderick had become his intimate friend and heard everything about him long before George ever set eyes on him. Roderick had been down in solitary, too, and for the first month he was just a voice that George could talk to in the dark. It wasn’t what you’d call the best way in the world to develop a close friendship, but at the time it kept George from cracking up. He had someone to confide in at last, and pretty soon he was spilling his guts, his heart, his soul; telling things he hadn’t even known about himself until the words came.

Oh, Roderick knew, all right. He knew the things George had carefully concealed from everyone—the kids back in school, the guys in the army, the gang at the office, the card-playing friends and neighbors, even Ella. Most especially, Ella. There were lots of things George wouldn’t dream of telling Ella, any more than he would have told his mother, years ago.

Roderick was right about that. Ella did remind George of his mother. And when his mother died he’d married Ella because she was big and took care of him, and the way it worked out it was she who made most of the decisions. As a child he’d been taught to be a good little boy. Now he was a good little salesman, a good little potbellied householder, a fetcher-home of Kleenex, a mower of lawns, a wiper of dishes, a wrapper of garbage. Twelve years of it since the war. And if it hadn't been for Roderick, he never could have stood it.

Could he stand another twelve years of it? Or twenty, or thirty, or even more?

"You don't have to put up with it, you know," Roderick murmured, reading his thoughts. "You don't have to be mommy's boy any longer. This is your big chance, George. If you got rid of the house, you'd have over two hundred-fifty Gs in cash. Suppose you settled down on one of those little islands in the Caribbean. There's dozens of them, according to that travel guide I saw on your desk in the office today."

"But Ella wouldn't like that," George protested. "She hates hot climates. That's why we've never traveled south on vacations. Besides, what on earth could she do down there?"

"She wouldn't be going," Roderick answered, patiently. "She'd stay here. That's the whole point of it, George. You could live like a king there for a few hundred a month. Have a big house, all the servants you want. Plenty to drink. And the *girls,* George! You've heard about the girls. Every color under the sun. Why, you can even buy them down there, the way those old Southern planters used to buy slaves. Quadroons and octoroons and mulattoes—probably can't even speak a word of English. But you wouldn't have to worry about that. All you'd want is obedience, and you could have a whip to take care of that. They'd have to do anything you wanted, because you'd be their master. You could even kill them if you liked. The way you'd like to kill Ella."

"But I don't want to kill Ella," George said, very quickly, and his voice was quite loud and shrill.

Roderick's answering laugh was soft. "Don't kid me," he said. "I know you. You'd like to kill her, the same way you'd have liked to kill that sergeant back on the island, but you can't because you're chicken. And besides, it isn't practical. Murder is no solution to this problem, George, but my way is. Drive Ella crazy."

"Preposterous."

"What's preposterous about it? You want to get rid of her, don't you? Get rid of your job, get rid of taking orders from a wife and a boss and every stinking customer with enough cash for a cleaner who thinks he can make you jump. And here's your chance. The chance of a lifetime, George, sitting right in your lap."

"But I can't drive Ella insane."

"Why not? Take a look around you, man. It's being done every day. Ask the lawyers about the sons and daughters and in-laws of people who have money, and how they get the old folks put away in the asylum. Getting power of attorney from grandpa and grandma—things like that. Don't you think a lot of them help the deal along a little? You can drive anyone crazy, George, if you plan."

"Ella isn't the type," George insisted. "Besides, anything I did—don't you think she'd know about it and see through it? Even if I tried, it wouldn't work."

"Who said anything about you trying?" Roderick drawled. He seemed very sure of himself, now. "That's my department, George. Let me do it."

"You? But—"

"I wouldn't fool you. It's not merely a beautiful gesture of friendship. I want those West Indies, too. We can go there together. You'd like that, wouldn't you, George? The two of us down there, I mean, where we wouldn't have to be afraid of what we did, what people would say or think? I could help you, George. I could help you get hold of some of those girls. Do you remember that book you read once, about the Roman Emperor, Tiberius—the one who had the villa on the island, and the orgies? You told me about some of those orgies, George. We could do it, you and I."

George felt the sweat oozing down the insides of his wrists. He sat up. "I don't even want to think of such things," he said. "Besides, what if you got caught?"

"I won't get caught," Roderick assured him, calmly. "Don't forget, Ella doesn't even know me. I've steered clear of your friends all these years. I'm a free agent, George, and that's our ace in the hole. You've always treated me like a poor relation, never introducing me or even mentioning my name.

Oh, I'm not complaining. I understand. But now that little situation is going to come in handy. Let me think things out, work up a plan."

George bit his upper lip. "Ella's too sensible," he said. "You'd never get her upset."

Roderick laughed without making a sound. "Nobody is really 'sensible,' George. It's just a false front, that's all. Like the one you've built up." He was suddenly quite serious again. "Think about it. How many people would believe you were capable of even talking to me the way you have just now, let alone of carrying out any such ideas? Would your boss believe it? Or Ella, even? Of course not! To the world, you're just another middle-aged salesman, a Willy Loman type, only worse. A spineless, gutless, chicken-hearted, yellow-bellied coward. A weak-kneed sissy, a little pantywaist, a mommy's boy, a—"

"Shut up!" George almost screamed the words, and then he was on his feet with his sweat-soaked hands balled into fists, ready to smash at the voice and the face, ready to kill. . . .

And then he was back on the bed, breathing hoarsely, and Roderick was laughing at him without making a sound.

"You see? I knew the words to use, all right. In one minute I turned you into a potential murderer, didn't I? You, the respectable suburban type who's never gotten out of line since they shoved you into the stockade.

"Well, there are words for everyone, George. Words and phrases and ideas that can churn rage, trigger emotion, fill a person with incoherent, hysterical fear. Ella is no different. She's a woman; there's a lot of things she must be afraid of. We'll find those things, George. We'll press the right buttons until the bells ring. The bells in the belfry, George. The bats in the belfry—"

George made a noise in his throat. "Get out of here," he said.

"All right. But you think over what I've said. This is your big opportunity—*our* big opportunity. I'm not going to stand by and see you toss it away."

Then he was gone.

Alone in his room, George turned out the light and got ready for bed. He wondered if there was a threat hidden in Roderick's last words, and that startled him. All his life George had been afraid of other people because they were violent, aggressive, cruel. At times he could sense the same tendencies in himself, but he always suppressed them. His mother had made him behave like a little gentleman. And except for that one terrible interlude in the service, he had always been a little gentleman. He'd kept out of trouble, kept away from people that could harm him.

And Roderick had helped. He'd gotten out of the army at the same time George did, settled down in the same city. Of course, he didn't really settle down, inasmuch as he had no wife or family and never kept a regular job.

Still, he seemed to get by all right. In spite of his hand-to-mouth existence, he dressed as well as George did. And he was taller and leaner and darker and looked a good ten years younger. It often occurred to George that Roderick lived off women—he seemed to be that type, always hinting of sexual conquests. But he never volunteered any information about himself. "What you don't know won't hurt you," he'd say.

And George was satisfied with the arrangement, because as a result he could talk about himself. Roderick was the sounding board, the confessional booth, the one person who could really understand.

He'd drop in at the office from time to time when George was free, and sometimes he'd ride along with him for a day when George went out of town, or in the evenings when he called on prospects. After a few perfunctory overtures, George stopped trying to get Roderick to meet his wife. And he'd never mentioned Roderick to her—mainly because of the circumstances of their having been in the stockade together, and George had never dared tell Ella about *that*. So Ella didn't know about Roderick, and somehow this made everything quite exciting. Once, when Ella had gone down to Memphis for her mother's funeral, Roderick consented to move in with George at the house for two days. They got violently and disastrously drunk together, but on the third morning Roderick left.

It was all very clandestine, almost like having a mistress. Only without the messy part. The messy part was no good, though it might be different if you were on one of those islands and nobody could see you or stop you and you owned those girls body and soul; then you could have a whip, a long black whip with little pointed silver spikes at the end, and the spikes would tear the soft flesh and you would make the girls dance and little red ribbons would twine around the naked bodies and then—

But that was Roderick's doing, putting such thoughts into his head! And suddenly George knew he was afraid of Roderick. Roderick, always so soft-voiced and calm and understanding; always ready to listen and offer advice and ask nothing in return. George had never realized until now that Roderick was as cruel as all the rest.

Now he had to face the fact. And he wondered how he could have escaped the truth all these years. Roderick had been in the stockade for a crime of violence, too. But the difference was that Roderick wasn't repentant. Repentance wasn't in him—only defiance and hatred, and the terrible strength that comes of being untouched and untouchable. It seemed as though nothing could move him or hurt him. He bowed to no conventions. He went where he pleased, did what he pleased. And apparently there was a streak of perversity in him; obviously he hated Ella and wanted George to get rid of her. If George had listened to him tonight. . . .

The little vacuum cleaner salesman fell asleep in his sagging bed, his mind firmly made up. He was finished with Roderick. He wouldn't see him any more, wouldn't listen to any of his wild schemes. He wanted no part of such plans. From now on he'd go his way alone. He and Ella would be safe and happy together. . . .

During the next few days George often thought of what he'd say to Roderick when he turned up, but Roderick left him alone. Maybe he'd figured out the situation for himself and realized he'd gone too far.

Anyway, George completed his trip, returned home, kissed Ella, helped supervise the installation of the second bathroom, and finished up his paperwork at the office.

Being on the road had left him feeling pretty tired, but there came a time when he just had to catch up with his prospect list here in town, so he finally spent an evening making calls.

Since he was just plain fagged out, he violated one of his rules and stopped for a quick drink before he began his rounds. After the first call he had another, as a reward for making a sale, and from then on things went easier. George knew he had no head for alcohol, but just this once a few drinks helped. He got through his customer list in a sort of pleasant fog, and when he was done he had several more fast shots in a tavern near the house. By the time he put the car in the garage, he was feeling no pain.

He wondered vaguely if Ella would be waiting up to bawl him out. She didn't like him to drink. Well, perhaps she'd be asleep by now. He hoped so, as he went up the walk and started to unlock the door.

Before he could turn the key the door opened and Ella was in his arms. "Thank goodness you're here!" she cried. She *was* crying, George realized, and then he noticed that all the lights in the house were on.

"Hey, what's the matter? What's all this about?"

She began to gurgle. "The face, in the window—"

Alcohol plays funny tricks, and for a moment George wanted to laugh. Something about the melodramatic phrase, and the way Ella's jowls quivered when she uttered it, was almost painfully amusing. But Ella wasn't joking. She was frightened. She quivered against him like a big blob of Jello.

"I had this awful headache—you know the kind I get—and I was just sitting in the front room watching TV with the lights off. I guess I must have been dozing a little, when all of a sudden I got this feeling, like somebody was watching me. So I looked up, and there in the window was this awful face. It was like one of those terrible rubber masks the kids wear for Halloween—all green and grinning. And I could see hands clawing at the window, trying to open it and get in!"

"Take it easy, now," George soothed, holding her. "Then what happened?"

Gradually he got it out of her. She had screamed and turned on the big overhead light, and the face had disappeared. So she'd turned on all the lights and gone around locking the doors and windows. After that she'd just waited.

"Maybe we ought to call the police," she said. "I thought I'd tell you about it first."

George nodded. "Sensible idea. Probably was just what you thought—some kid playing a trick." He was quite sobered now, and thoughtful. "Which window did you see this through, the big one? Here, let me get a flashlight from the garage. I'm going to look for footprints."

He got the flashlight, and when Ella refused to accompany him, walked across the lawn himself. The flowerbed beneath the window was damp from a recent rain, but there were no footprints.

When George told Ella about it, she seemed puzzled.

"I can't understand it," she said.

"Neither can I," George answered. "If it was a kid, he'd probably have run off when you spotted him, instead of waiting to smooth out his tracks. On the other hand, if it was a prowler, he'd cover up his traces. But a prowler wouldn't have let you see him in the first place." He paused. "You're sure about what you saw?"

Ella frowned. "Well . . . it was only for a second, you know, and the room was so dark. But there was this big green face, like a mask, and it had those long teeth. . . ."

Her voice trailed away.

"Nobody tried any doors or windows? You didn't hear any sounds?"

"No. There was just this face." She blinked. "I told you about my headache, and how I was dozing off, watching that late movie. It was all sort of like a nightmare."

"I see." George nodded. "Did you ever stop to think that maybe it was a nightmare?"

Ella didn't answer.

"How's the head? Still aching? Better take a couple of aspirins and go up to bed. You just had a bad dream, dear. Come on, let's go to bed and forget about it, shall we?"

So they went to bed.

Maybe Ella forgot about it and maybe she didn't, but George wasn't forgetting. He knew. Roderick must be starting to carry out his plan. And this would only be the beginning. . . .

It was only the beginning, and after that things moved fast. The next afternoon, George was sitting in the office all alone when Ella called him from the house. She sounded very excited.

"George, did you tell the plumbers to come back?"

"Why no, dear, of course not."

"Well, Mr. Johnston is here, and he said they got a call to come over and rip everything out again. I don't understand it, and I've been trying to explain that it's some kind of mistake and—"

Ella sounded very upset now, and George tried to calm her down. "Better put him on, dear. I'll talk to him."

So Ella put Mr. Johnston on and George told him not to bother, there was a mix-up somewhere. And when Mr. Johnston got mad and said there was no mix-up, he'd taken the call himself, George just cut him off and got Ella back on the wire.

"It's all taken care of now," he assured her. "Don't worry about a thing. I'll be home early."

"Maybe you'd better get something to eat downtown," Ella said. "I've got such an awful headache, and I want to lie down for a while."

"You go ahead," George said. "I'll manage."

So George managed, but if Ella lay down, she didn't get very much rest. George found that out when he got home. She was quivering, her voice and body trembling.

"Somebody's trying to play a trick on us," she told him. "The doorbell's been ringing all afternoon. First it was Gimbel's delivery truck. With *refrigerators*."

"I didn't order a refrigerator," George said.

"I know you didn't, and neither did I." Ella was trying to hold back the tears. "But somebody did. And not just one. They had four of them."

"Four?"

"That's not the worst of it. Some man from Kelly's called and asked when I was going to move. They'd gotten an order for a van."

"Let me get this straight." George paced the floor. "How did they get the order?"

"Over the phone," Ella said. "Just the way Mr. Johnston did. That's why I thought at first you might have called." She was sniffling now, and George made her sit down.

"So you said," George told her. "But I asked Mr. Johnston about that. He happened to take that particular call himself. And he was quite positive the caller was a woman."

"A woman?"

"Yes." George sat down next to Ella and took her hand. "He claimed he recognized your voice."

"But George, that's impossible! Why, I never even used the phone once today. I was lying down with my headache and—"

George shook his head. "I believe you, dear. But who else could it be? What other woman would know that Johnston was the plumber who put in our bathroom? Did you mention his name to anyone?"

"No, of course not. At least, I don't remember." Ella was pale. "Oh, I'm so upset I can't think straight." She put her hands up to her forehead. "My head feels like it's splitting wide open. I can stand it. . . ." She stared at George.

“Where are you going?”

“I’m calling Dr. Vinson.”

“But I’m not sick. I don’t need a doctor.”

“He’ll give you a sedative, something for that head of yours. Now just calm down and relax.”

So Dr. Vinson came over, and he did give Ella a sedative. Ella didn’t mention anything about the calls, so he only went through a routine examination.

But afterwards, when she was asleep upstairs, George took Dr. Vinson aside and told him the story—including the part about the face in the window.

“What do you think, Doc?” he asked. “I’ve heard about such things happening when women start going through change of life. Maybe—”

Dr. Vinson nodded. “Better have her call my office for an appointment later in the week,” he said. “We’ll see that she gets a complete checkup. Meanwhile, don’t let yourself get upset. It could be somebody’s idea of a practical joke, you know.”

George nodded, but he wasn’t reassured.

The part that really bothered him was the business about Ella’s voice being recognized over the phone.

Next morning he left early, and Ella was still asleep. Down at the office he called Gimbel’s and then Kelly’s. After much confusion he was able to locate the clerks who had taken the orders. Both insisted they had talked to a woman.

So George called Dr. Vinson and told him so.

No sooner had he hung up than Ella was on the phone. She could scarcely speak.

A man had come from the Humane Society with a Great Dane. A West Side furrier, somebody Ella had never heard of, drove up with samples of mink coats—mink coats in July! A travel agency had kept calling, insisting that she had asked for information about a flight around the world. Her head was killing her; she didn't know what to do; she wanted George to phone the police and—

She broke off in the middle of her hysterical account, and George quickly asked what was happening. A moment later he realized he could have spared himself the question. The sound of what was happening was clearly audible over the wire: he recognized the hideous wailing.

"Fire engines!" Ella gasped. "Somebody called the Fire Department!"

"I'll be right home," George said, hanging up quickly.

And he went right home. The trucks were gone by the time he arrived, but a lieutenant was still there, and a detective from the Police Department.

Ella was trying to explain the situation to them, and it was a lucky thing George was on hand to straighten things out. He had Ella go upstairs, and then he told the men the story.

"Please," he said. "Don't press any charges. If there's any expense, anything like a fine, I'll be glad to pay it. My wife is under doctor's care—she's going to have a complete examination later in the week. This is all very embarrassing, but I'm sure we can straighten things out. . . ."

The men were quite sympathetic. They promised to let him know what the costs would be, and the detective gave George his card and told him to keep in touch with him in case there was anything he could do.

Then George got on the phone and squared things with the Humane Society, the furrier and the travel agency. After that he went up to Ella's bedroom, where he found her lying on the bed with all the shades pulled down. He offered to fix her something to eat but she said she wasn't hungry.

"Something's happening," she told him. "Somebody's trying to harm us. I'm frightened."

"Nonsense." George forced a smile. "Besides, we've got protection now." And then, to cheer her up, he told her that the detective had promised to put a watch on the house and tap the telephone.

"If there's anybody pulling any funny business, we'll catch him," George reassured her. "All you have to do is rest. By the way, Dr. Vinson said it would be a good idea if you stopped in for a checkup toward the end of the week. Why not call him for an appointment?”

Ella sat up. “You told him?”

“I had to, dear. After all, he’s your doctor. He’s in a position to help if—”

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“George. Look at me.” He didn’t, but she went on. “Do you think I made those calls? Do you?”

“I never said so. It’s just that Johnston claims he recognized your voice. Why would he want to lie about a thing like that?”

“I don’t know. But he’s lying. He *must* be! I never called him, George. I swear it! And I didn’t call anyone this morning. Why, I was in bed until almost noon. That sedative made me so dopey I couldn’t think straight.” George was silent.

“Well, aren’t you going to say something?”

“I believe you, dear. Now, try and get some rest.”

“But I can’t rest now. I’m not tired. I want to talk to you.”

“Sorry, I’ve got to get back to the office and clean up my desk. Don’t forget, I’m leaving town again tomorrow.”

“But you can’t go now. You can’t leave me alone like this!”

“Only for three days. You know, Pittsville and Bakerton. I’ll be back by Saturday.” George tried to sound cheerful. “Anyway, the police will keep an eye on the house, so you needn’t worry about prowlers.”

“George, I—”

“We’ll talk about it again tonight. Right now, I’ve got a job to attend to, remember?”

So George left her weeping softly on the bed and went back to his office. But he didn’t pay much attention to his job.

Roderick was waiting for him when he came in.

The other salesmen were out that afternoon, and there was no one else near the hot, stuffy little back-room cubicle George used for an office. He and Roderick were all alone, and Roderick spoke very softly. George was glad of that, at least, because he wouldn't have wanted anyone to hear the things Roderick told him. Nor, for that matter, would he have cared to have been overheard himself.

The moment he saw Roderick he almost shouted, "So it was you, after all!"

Roderick shrugged. "Who else?"

"But I told you I didn't want any part of it, and I meant it!"

"Nonsense, George. You don't know what you mean, or what you really want." Roderick smiled and leaned forward. "You talked to this Dr. Vinson and to the detective. Did you mention my name?"

"No, I didn't, but—"

"You see? That proves it. You must have realized who was responsible, but you kept silent. You *wanted* the scheme to work. And it is working, isn't it? I have everything all planned."

In spite of himself George had to ask the question. "How did you manage to imitate her voice?"

"Simple. I've called her on the phone several times—wrong number, you know, or pretending to be a telephone solicitor. I heard enough to be able to fake. She's got one of those whiney voices, George. Like this. *I think I'll lie down for a while. My head is killing me*."

It was uncanny to hear Ella's voice issuing from those sardonically curled lips. George's heart began to pound.

"You—you said you had plans," he murmured.

Roderick nodded. "That's right. You're going out of town for a few days, I believe?"

"Yes. Tomorrow."

"Good. Everything will be arranged."

"What do you intend to do?"

"Maybe you'd better not ask that question, George. Maybe you ought to keep out of this completely. Just leave everything to me." Roderick cocked his head to one side. "Remember, what you don't know won't hurt you."

George sat down, then stood up again hastily. "Roderick, I want you to stop this! Lay off, do you hear me?"

Roderick smiled.

"Do you hear me?" George repeated. He was trembling now.

"I heard you," Roderick said. "But you're upset now, George. You aren't thinking straight. Stop worrying about Ella. She won't really come to any harm. They'll take quite good care of her where she's going. And you and I will take good care of ourselves, where we're going. That's what you want to concentrate on, George. The Caribbean. The Caribbean, with all that cash in our pockets. A little boat, maybe, and those long, moonlit tropical nights. Think about the girls, George—those nice, slim young girls. They aren't fat and blubbery, always whining and complaining about headaches and telling you not to touch them. They like to be touched, George. They like to be touched, and held, and caressed, and—"

"Stop it! It's no use. I've changed my mind."

"Too late, George. You can't stop it now." Roderick was very casual, but very firm. "Besides, you don't really want to stop. It's only that you're afraid. Well, don't be. I promise you won't be involved in this at all. Just give me three days. Three days, while you're gone—that's all I need."

"I won't go!" George shouted. "I won't leave her! I'll go to the police!"

"And just what will you tell them?" Roderick paused to let the question sink in. "Oh, that would be a fine idea, wouldn't it, going to the police? Not on your life, George. You're going out of town like a good little boy. Because this is a job for a bad little boy—like me."

He was laughing at George now, and George knew it. Any further protest on his part would be useless. Still, he might have tried to do something about it if the boss hadn't come in through the side entrance at that very moment. Roderick stood up, crossed the room, slipped out the door and was gone. And George, staring after him, realized that his last chance had gone with him.

* * *

Things seemed a little bit better that evening. Ella had had no further disturbances during the rest of the day, and as a result she was considerably calmer. By the time they had finished a makeshift supper and got ready for bed, both of them felt a trifle more reconciled to the coming separation.

Ella said she had phoned Dr. Vinson and made an appointment for Friday afternoon, two days hence. George, for his part, promised to call her faithfully every evening he was away.

“And if you need me, I’ll drive right back,” he told her. “I won’t be much more than a hundred miles away any time during the trip. Come on now, I’ll finish packing and we can get some sleep.”

So they left it at that. And the next morning George was up and on the road long before Ella awakened.

He had a fairly easy day of it in Pittsville and finished his calls long before he had anticipated. Perhaps that’s why he started to worry; he had nothing else to occupy his mind.

What was it Roderick had said? *What you don’t blow won’t hurt you?*

Well, that wasn’t true. Not knowing was the worst part of it. Not knowing and suspecting. Roderick had told him he had everything planned. George believed that all right. And Roderick had told him he wouldn’t actually harm Ella. This part George wasn’t certain about; he didn’t know whether he could believe it or not. Roderick couldn’t be trusted. He’d proved it by the way he’d gone ahead with the scheme despite George’s protests. There was no telling what he might be capable of doing. After all, what did George know about the man? He might already be guilty of far greater crimes than the one he proposed.

George thought of Roderick with a knife, a gun, or even his bare hands.

. . . And then he thought of those same bare hands ripping away a dress, fastening themselves like hungry mouths on naked flesh. And he saw his face, like the face of one of those fiends in that old copy of Paradise Lost with the Dore etchings, the one his mother had owned.

The thought made his hands tremble, made his voice quaver. But he forced himself to be calm as he dialed the long-distance operator from his motel room, put through the call to the house.

And then he heard Ella's voice, and everything was all right. Everything was fine.

Yes, she could hear him. And no, nothing had happened. Nothing at all. Apparently, whoever had been playing those tricks had decided to stop. She'd been cleaning house all day. And how did he feel?

"Fine, just fine," George said. And meant it. His relief was tremendously exhilarating. He hung up, suddenly jubilant. Ella was undisturbed, and that meant Roderick had been scared off after all.

George went down to the bar for a few drinks. It was still early, and he felt like celebrating. He struck up a conversation with a leather-goods salesman from Des Moines, and they hit a few of the local spots. Eventually his companion picked up a girl and wandered off. George continued on alone for quite a time, blacking out pleasantly every now and then, but always remaining under control; he liked the good feeling that came with knowing he was under control and would always behave like a little gentleman. He had the right to celebrate because he had won a victory.

Roderick had told the truth in a way; for a while George had been tempted to let the scheme go through. But he had changed his mind in time, and Roderick must have known he meant it. Now Ella was safe, and he was safe, and they'd be happy together. Cutting and running to an island in the West Indies—what a pipe dream! George Foster Pendleton wasn't that kind of a person. And now it was time to find the motel, find his room, find the keyhole, find the bed, find the whirling darkness and the deep peace that waited within it.

The next morning George had a hangover, and he was pretty rocky as he drove to Bakerton. He made a few calls around noon, but just couldn't seem to hit the ball. So in the afternoon he decided to call it quits, because he still had Friday to finish up there.

He went back to his room intending to take a late afternoon nap, but he slept right straight through. He didn't wake up to eat supper or call Ella or anything.

When he awoke the next morning, he was surprised to find that Ella had apparently called him several times; he had slept right through the rings. But he felt good, and he was out making the rounds by nine.

He called Ella immediately after supper. Her voice was relaxed and reassuring.

"Did you go to the doctor today?" he asked.

She had seen Dr. Vinson, she told him, and everything was fine. He had checked her over thoroughly—cardiograph, blood tests, even head x-rays. There was nothing wrong. He'd given her a few pills for her headaches, that was all.

"Any other disturbances?" George asked.

"No. It's been very quiet here." Ella sounded quite calm. "When are you coming in tomorrow?"

"Around noon, I hope. Right after lunch."

"Right after lunch," Ella repeated. "I'll see you."

"Good night," George said, and hung up.

He felt very happy, and yet there was something bothering him. He didn't quite know what it was, but there was an uneasy feeling, a feeling of having forgotten an important message. Like when he was a boy and his mother sent him to the store for groceries, and he couldn't remember one of the items on the list.

George sat there, holding the phone in his hand, and then he jumped when he heard the tapping on the door.

He got up and opened it and Roderick came into the room. Roderick was smiling gaily.

"Always stay at the best motel in town, don't you?" he said. "Knew I'd find you here."

"But what—"

"Just thought I ought to take a run over," Roderick said. "You're coming back tomorrow, and I figured you'd better be prepared."

"Prepared for what?"

Roderick stood in front of the mirror and cocked his head. "I've been working hard," he told George. "But it's paid off. Like I told you, all I needed was three days."

George opened his mouth, but Roderick wasn't to be interrupted.

"While you've been snoozing away here, I've been up and doing," he chuckled. "No rest for the wicked, you know. Let me give you a quick rundown. Wednesday, the day you left, I made a few calls in the evening. The first one was to the savings and loan people—they're open Wednesday nights until nine, you know. I did the Ella impersonation and told them I wanted my money out as soon as I could get it. Talked to old Higgins himself. When he asked why, I told him I was planning on getting a divorce and going to Europe."

Roderick nodded to himself and continued. "Then I went around to the house and did the mask routine again. Ella was in the kitchen, drinking a glass of milk before she got ready for bed. When she saw me I thought she was going to jump right out of her skin. She ran for the telephone, and I guess she called the police. I didn't wait around to find out.

"Yesterday I figured it might be best to keep away from the house, so I went through the telephone gag again. I talked to Higgins once more and told him I needed the money at once, because you were deathly ill and had to have an operation on your brain. That was a neat touch, wasn't it?

"Then I talked to the bank, and after that I phoned a few stores and had them promise to make deliveries this morning. Just a few odds and ends—a piano, and two trombones from the Music Mart, and seventy-five dozen roses from the florist. Oh yes, as a final touch, I called Phelps Brothers and told them I wanted to stop in and look at a casket because I anticipated a death in the family."

Roderick giggled over that one, almost like a naughty little boy. But his eyes were serious as he continued.

"Finally, I called that old goat, Dr. Vinson, and told him I wanted to cancel my appointment. He couldn't quite figure out why until I told him I was leaving for Europe on a midnight flight. He wanted to know if you were going and I said no, it was a big surprise because I was going to have a baby over there and you weren't the father.

"After that, I went out to the house—but I was very careful, you understand, in case any cops should happen to be around. Lucky for me I'd anticipated them, because not only was there a prowl car parked down the street, but when I sneaked back through the alley and looked in the kitchen window, I could see this detective talking to Ella in the hall. So I got out of there. But it wasn't necessary to do any more. I could see that. Ella looked like the wrath of God. I don't imagine she'd had any sleep for two nights. And by today, word must have gotten around. Old Higgins in savings and loan will do his share of talking. So will Doc Vinson, and some of the others. And your wife will keep insisting to the police that she saw this face. Now all you have to do is go back and wrap everything up in one neat package."

"What do you mean?" George asked.

"I imagine they'll all be calling you. Your only job is to give the right answers. Tell them that Ella *has* talked about taking a lot of crazy trips. Tell them she wants to hide her money in the house. Tell Doc Vinson she's afraid he wants to poison her, or attack her, or something. You ever hear about paranoiac delusions? That's when people get the idea that everybody's persecuting them. Build up a yarn like that. You know what to tell Ella; she's so confused now that she'll go for anything you say. Mix her up a little more. Ask her about things she's told you, like trading in the Buick for a Cadillac. She'll deny she ever said anything like that, and then you drop the subject and bring up something else. A day or two—with a few more looks through the window at the mask—and you'll have *her* convinced she's screwy. That's the most important thing. Then you go to

Vinson with a sob story, have her examined while she's scared and woozy, and you've got it made." Roderick laughed. "If you could have seen her face . . ."

George shook his head in bewilderment. Why was Roderick lying to him? He'd talked to Ella Wednesday night and tonight, and she'd been quite normal. Nothing had happened, nothing at all. And yet here was Roderick, coming a hundred miles and boasting about all kinds of crazy stuff—

Crazy stuff.

Suddenly George knew.

Crazy stuff. A crazy scheme to drive someone crazy. It added up.

Roderick was the crazy one.

That was the answer, the real answer. He was more than cruel, more than childish, more than antisocial. The man was psychotic, criminally insane. And it was all a fantasy; he'd started to carry out his delusions, then halted. The rest of it took place only in his disordered imagination.

George didn't want to look at him, didn't want to hear his voice. He wanted to tell him to go away, wanted to tell him he had just talked to Ella and she was okay, nothing had happened.

But he knew that he mustn't. He couldn't. Roderick would never accept such an answer. He was crazy, and he was dangerous. There had to be some other way of handling him.

All at once, George found the obvious solution.

"I'm all through here," he said. "Thought I might drive back tonight. Want to ride along?"

Roderick nodded. "Why not?" Again the childish giggle. "I get it. You can't wait, isn't that it? Can't wait to see the look on her foolish fat face. Well, go ahead. One good thing, you won't have to look at it very much longer. They're going to put her on ice. And we'll have the sunshine. The sunshine, and the moonlight, and all the rest of it. The tropics are great stuff, George. You're going to be happy there. I know you don't like insects, but even they can come in handy. Take ants, for instance. Suppose one of these girls disobeys us, George. Well, we can tie her to a tree, see? Spread-eagle, sort of. Strip her naked and rub honey all over her. Then the ants come and . . .”

Roderick talked like that all during the drive back home. Sometimes he whispered and sometimes he giggled, and George got a splitting headache worse than anything Ella could ever have had. But still Roderick kept on talking. He was going to have Ella locked up. He was going to take George to the islands. Sometimes it even sounded as if he meant *the* island, the one where they’d been in the stockade. And he was going to do things to the girls the way the guards used to do things to the prisoners. It was crazy talk, crazy.

The only thing that kept George going was the knowledge that it *was* crazy talk, and if anyone else heard it they’d realize the truth right away. All he had to do was get Roderick into town, stall him on some pretext or other, and call in the police. Of course Roderick would try to implicate George in the scheme, but how could he? Looking back, George couldn’t remember any slip-up on his part; *he* hadn’t actually said or done anything out of line. No, it was all Roderick. And that was his salvation.

Still, the cold sweat was trickling down his forehead by the time he pulled up in front of the house. It must have been close to midnight, but the front-room lights were still burning. That meant Ella was up. Good.

“Wait here,” George told Roderick. “I’m just going in to tell her I’m home. Then I’ll put the car away.”

Roderick seemed to sense that something was phony. “I shouldn’t hang around,” he said. “What if the cops have a stake out?”

“Let me check on that,” George said. “I’ve got an idea. If the cops aren’t here, you could give her one more taste of the rubber mask. Then I can deny seeing it. Get the pitch?”

“Yes.” Roderick smiled. “Now you’re cooperating, George. Now you’re with it. Go ahead.”

So George got out of the car and walked up to the front door and opened it.

Ella was waiting for him. She *did* look tired, and she jumped when she saw him, but she was all right. Thank God for that, she was all right! And now he could tell her.

"Don't say a word," George whispered, closing the door. "I've got a lunatic out in the car there."

"Would you mind repeating that?"

George looked around, and sure enough he recognized him. It was the detective he'd talked to after the fire alarm was turned in.

"What are you doing here this time of night?" George asked.

"Just checking up," said the detective. "Now what's all this you were saying about a lunatic?"

So George told him. George told him and he told Ella, and they both listened very quietly and calmly. George had to talk fast, because he didn't want Roderick to get suspicious, and he stumbled over some of his words. Then he asked the detective to sneak out to the car with him before Roderick could get away, and the detective said he would. George warned him that Roderick was dangerous and asked him if he had a gun. The detective had a gun, all right, and George felt better.

They walked right out to the car together and George yanked open the door.

But Roderick wasn't there.

George couldn't figure it out, and then he realized that Roderick might have been just crazy enough to pull his rubber mask trick without waiting, and he told the detective about that and made him look around under the front windows. The detective wasn't very bright; he didn't seem to understand about the mask part, so George showed him what he meant—how you could stand under the window on this board from the car and look in without leaving any footprints. The detective wanted to know what the mask looked like, but George couldn't quite describe it, and then they were back at the car and the detective opened the glove compartment and pulled something out and asked George if this was the mask he meant.

Of course it was, and George explained that Roderick must have left it there. Then they were back inside the house and Ella was crying, and George didn't want her to cry so he said there was nothing to be frightened about because Roderick was gone. And she didn't have to be afraid if somebody played tricks on her like imitating her voice because anyone could do that.

The detective asked him if he could, and of course he could do it perfectly. He was almost as good as Roderick, only he had such a splitting headache. . . .

Maybe that's why the doctor came, not Dr. Vinson but a police doctor, and he made George tell everything all over again. Until George got mad and asked why were they talking to him, the man they should be looking for was Roderick.

It was crazy, that's what it was. They were even crazier than Roderick, the way they carried on. There were more police now, and the detective was trying to tell him that he was the one who had made the calls and worn the mask. He, George! It was utterly ridiculous, and George explained how he had met Roderick on the island in solitary and how he looked like the fiend in the Dore book and everything, and how he was a bad boy.

But the detective said that George's boss had heard him talking to himself in the office the other afternoon and called Ella to tell her, and that she had talked to the police. Then when George went on his trip they'd checked up on him and found he drove back to town the night he got drunk and also the night he said he was sleeping in his motel room, and that he was the one who had done it all.

Of course they didn't tell him this all at once—there was this trip to the station, and all those doctors who talked to him, and the lawyers and the judge. After a while, George stopped paying attention to them and to that nonsense about schizophrenia and split personalities. His head was splitting and all he wanted to do was get them to find Roderick. Roderick was the one to blame. Roderick was the crazy one. They had to understand that.

But they didn’t understand that, and it was George whom they locked up. George Pendleton Foster, not George Roderick the naughty boy.

Still, George was smarter than they were, in the end. Because he found Roderick again. Even though he was locked up, he found Roderick. Or rather, Roderick found him, and came to visit.

He comes quite often, these days, moving in that quiet way of his and sneaking in when nobody’s around to see him. And he talks to George in that soft, almost inaudible voice of his when George sits in front of the mirror. George isn’t mad at him any more. He realizes now that Roderick is his best friend, and wants to help him.

Roderick still dreams about getting his hands on all that money and going away with George to the Caribbean. And he has a plan. This time there won’t be any slip-ups. He’ll get George out of here, even if he has to kill a guard to do it. And he’ll kill Ella, too, before he goes.

And then they’ll travel on down to the islands, just the two of them. And there’ll be girls, and whips gleaming in the moonlight. . . .

Oh, George trusts Roderick now. He’s his only friend. And he often wonders just where he’d be without him.

The Travelling Salesman

when the dogs howl and the seven geese keen mournfully, then comes—

BLACK ART is throwing a party, see?

His real name is Arthur Schloggenheimer, but we call him Black Art on account of him being a wizard. Sort of a gag. see, because he is really very serious and raises the dead and all that kind of stuff.

But every once in a while Black Art knocks oft from that old black magic and throws a big party. He is a good joe, even though screwy, and he has a lot of liquor so we always come to his brawls.

Well, this time we are silting around in the big French parlor he calls the Louis 0 Room. Black Art won't allow any mirrors or glassware in his pad, because if he sees his reflection then old John Q. Satan will foreclose his mortgage on him. There is Subconscious Sigmund, the headshrinker, and Floyd Scrilch and a lot of other big wheels, and we are all drinking Pernod out of paper cups and talking about Gilles de Retz and the Marquis de Sade and Howard Hughes and the other characters Black Art knows in the good old days.

I notice Black Art is nervous tonight, and when he gets nervous something always happens. I can always tell. To begin with, his beard usually stands up like there was a wind blowing tin it from across the stars, he says.

Well, tonight his beard is standing up so straight it damn near hits him in the nose. He gets up and walks over to the window, and I can see he is shaking all over. So I sneak across the room and see he is looking out at the moon.

Something flies across the moon. I can make out seven little specks.

“The seven geese!”

I hear him whisper it, and then there is an awful squawk as the birds fly past and the moon goes behind a big, black horned cloud.

“He is coming!” Black Art whispers. “I see the omens!”

Sure enough, a minute later there is a paradiddle on the front door. Everybody looks while Black Art goes and opens it.

A strange cat conies in.

Now there is nothing really wrong with this guy and the way he dresses. He is Lull and thin, and he has big sad eyes—but lots of finks look that way. He wears a set of black threads, plenty dusty, like a burlap bag with lapels. He carries a big bulging suitcase which is also dusty. There is something about the way he wheels in that makes you feel he is real dragged.

Everybody digs it. Here is somebody who travels a long, long way for a long, long time. A little cold wind runs around the room as Black Art doses the door. He looks at the dust on the guy’s shoes and at the dust in his eyes.

“I expected you,” he says. “I saw the signs.”

The stranger sighs like somebody letting air out of his tires.

“Then you know who I am?”

Black Art goes into his educated bit. “When the clogs howl and the seven geese keen mournfully from afar, I know. A man would be stupid indeed not to recognize you for what you are.”

“Yes.” The cat looks at all of us. “I am the Traveling Salesman.”

He sets the suitcase down with a thump anti dust flies all over the room. Floyd Scrilch comes up to him.

“What you mean, *the* Traveling Salesman?” he asks. “There’s lots of those characters around.”

The stranger smiles his tired smile. “Yes. But there’s only one Traveling Salesman known all over the world—the Traveling Salesman of the dirty jokes. And that’s who I am.”

He sits clown on the sofa very carefully, like part of him is made of expensive glass which he is afraid of breaking. Black Art hands him a drink and we all stand around.

“Thanks,” he says. “It’s cool to take five like this. Haven’t been in the city for years, you know. Just one damned rural route after another. I go from farm to farm, year in and year out. What an awful life I lead!”

“Yeah?” I say. “What about all those farmers’ daughters?”

“Nyaaaa!” yells the Traveling Salesman, real loud. He jumps up like he is being gnawed by mice. “That’s all they ask me. What about all those farmers’ daughters? I’ll tell you what!

“I’m sick of farmers’ daughters! I’m sick of lanners. I’m sick of their wives, their rickety farmhouses, their squeaky beds, their outdoor plumbing!”

I shrug. “Then why travel?” I ask him.

“Why?” snarls the Salesman. “Because I’m cursed, that’s why. Like the Flying Dutchman and the Wandering Jew.”

“Cursed?”

“By men. Men like you. Men who tell stories about the Traveling Salesman. You created me—you and your mass thought through the ages. After millions of men, their minds inflamed through telling bawdy tales, had thought about me in groups for hundreds of years—I just *materialized.* All those mass thoughts created a physical being. Me—the Traveling Salesman! And so I am cursed to wander.

“To wander, every night visiting a new farmhouse. Never a change of routine. A greasy supper. A fight over where to sleep. Then to bed. And there’s always some damn daughter . . .

“Those daughters! Dumb ones, fat ones, ugly ones—but they all have insomnia. Or cold feet. Or they snore.”

The Traveling Salesman begins to groan. We get closer.

"It's my fate to live through the details of every one of those thousands of stories men have invented around my legend. I must engage in a hundred foolish acts, a million excesses. In barns, in haylofts, in horse-stalls, even in cow-pastures. I have been accused, abused, subjected to every indignity by the demands of those lousy jokes. Nyaaaa!"

Everybody looks sympathetic and drinks while he shudders.

"We understand, dad." says Black Art, patting his shoulder. "Why not stay here and rest up for a few days? I'll lend you a pad."

The Salesman gets to his feet. "Thanks," he mumbles, trying to smile. "Mighty nice of you to ask me, but I really can't do it." He sighs. "Some party in Omaha just figured out a new story for me. Something involving a double bed, three daughters and a horse, yet. I have an appointment tomorrow to try it out. So I must grab a train."

He reaches down for his suitcase. Black Art lifts it for him.

"Hey!" he comments. "This is a real heavy drag! What's in this grip?"

The Traveling Salesman blushes. Then he looks sick.

"Bricks," he whispers.

"Bricks?"

The Salesman opens the door and turns around.

"Yes," he snarls. "Bricks! That's the real tragedy of it all. Here I am, one of the best salesmen on the road, and it means nothing. Nothing at all. I might as well carry bricks as anything else.

"Because," he says, and then he begins to scream, "Because in all the gawd-awful stories about the Traveling Salesman, nobody ever mentions that I *sell* anything!"

Weeping foolishly, the Traveling Salesman closes the door behind him and falls down the stairs.

Man With A Hobby

It must have been around ten o'clock when I got out of the hotel. The night was warm and I needed a drink.

There was no sense trying the hotel cocktail lounge because the place was a madhouse. The Bowling Convention had taken that over, too.

Walking down Euclid Avenue I got the impression that Cleveland was full of bowlers. And most of them seemed to be looking for a drink. Every tavern I passed was jammed with shirt-sleeved men, wearing their badges. Not that they needed extra identification; many of them carried the standard bowling-bag holding a ball.

When Washington Irving wrote about Rip Van Winkle and the dwarfs, he understood bowlers all right. Well, there were no dwarfs in this convention—just man-sized drinkers. And any sound of thunder from the distant mountain peaks would have been drowned out by the shouting and the laughter.

I wanted no part of it. So I turned off Euclid and kept wandering along, looking for a quiet spot. My own bowling-bag was getting heavy. Actually, I'd meant to take it right over to the depot and check it in a locker until train-time, but I needed that drink first.

Finally I found a place. It was dim, it was dingy, but it was also deserted. The bartender was all alone down at the far end of the bar, listening to the tail-end of a double-header on the radio.

I sat down close to the door and put the bag on the stool next to me. I signalled him for a beer. "Bring me a bottle," I said. "Then I won't have to interrupt you."

I was only trying to be polite but I could have spared myself the trouble. Before he had a chance to get back to follow the game, another customer came in.

“Double Scotch, never mind the wash.”

I looked up.

The bowlers had taken over the city, all right. This one was a heavily-built man of about forty, with wrinkles extending well up toward the top of his bald head. He wore a coat, but carried the inevitable bowling-bag; black, bulging, and very similar to mine. As I stared at him, he set it down very carefully on the adjoining bar-stool and reached for his drink.

He threw back his head and gulped. I could see the pasty white skin ripple along his neck. Then he held out the empty glass. “Do it again,” he told the bartender. “And turn down the radio, will you, Mac?” He pulled out a handful of bills.

For a moment the bartender’s expression hovered midway between a scowl and a smile. Then he caught sight of the bills fluttering down on the bar and the smile won out. He shrugged and turned away, fiddling with the volume-control, reducing the announcer’s voice to a distant drone. I knew what he was thinking: If it was beer I’d tell him to go take a jump, but this guy’s buying Scotch.

The second Scotch went down almost as fast as the volume of the radio.

“Fill her up,” said the heavy-set man.

The bartender came back, poured again, took his money, rang it up, then drifted away to the other end of the bar. He crouched over the radio, straining to catch the voice of the announcer.

I watched the third Scotch disappear. The stranger’s neck was red now. Six ounces of Scotch in two minutes will do wonders for the complexion. It will loosen the tongue, too.

“Ball game,” the stranger muttered. “I can’t understand how anyone can listen to that stuff.” He wiped his forehead and blinked at me. “Sometimes a guy gets the idea there’s nothing in the world but baseball fans. Bunch of crazy fools yelling their heads off over nothing, all summer long. Then come fall and it’s the football games. Same thing, only worse. And right after that’s finished, it’s basketball. Honest to God, what do they see in it?”

“Everybody needs some kind of hobby,” I said.

“Yeah. But what kind of a hobby do you call that? I mean, who can get excited over a gang of apes fighting to grab some kind of a ball?” He scowled. “Don’t kid me that they really care who wins or loses. Most guys go to a ball game for a different reason. You ever been out to see a game, Mac?”

“Once in a while.”

“Then you know what I’m talking about. You’ve heard ‘em out there. Heard ‘em yelling. That’s what they really go for—to holler their heads off. And what are they yelling most of the time? I’ll tell you. *Kill the umpire!* Yeah, that’s what they’re screaming: *Kill the umpire!*”

I finished the last of my beer quickly and started to slide off the stool. He reached out and rapped on the bar. “Here, have another, Mac,” he said. “On me.”

I shook my head. “Sorry, got to catch a train out of here at midnight,” I told him.

He glanced at the clock. “Plenty of time.” I opened my mouth to protest but the bartender was already opening a bottle and pouring a Scotch for the stranger. And he was talking to me again.

“Football is worse,” he said. “A guy can get hurt playing football, some of ‘em get hurt bad. That’s what the crowd likes to see. And boy, when they start yelling for blood it’s enough to turn your stomach.”

“I don’t know,” I said. “After all, it’s a pretty harmless way of releasing pent-up aggression.”

Maybe he understood me and maybe he didn’t, but he nodded. “It releases something, like you say, but I ain’t so sure it’s harmless. Take boxing and wrestling, now. Call that a sport? Call that a hobby?”

“Well,” I agreed, “people want to see somebody get clobbered.”

“Sure, only they won’t admit it.” His face was quite red now; he was starting to sweat. “And what about hunting and fishing? When you come right down to it, it's the same thing. Only there you do the killing yourself. You take a gun and shoot some dumb animal. Or you cut up a live worm and stick it on a hook and that hook cuts into a fish's mouth, and you sort of get a thrill out of it, don't you? When the hook goes in and it cuts and tears—"

"Now wait a minute," I said. "Maybe that's good. What's a fish? If it keeps people from being sadists—"

"Never mind the two-dollar words," he cut in. He blinked at me. "You know it's true. Everybody gets the urge, sooner or later. Stuff like ball games and boxing don't really satisfy it, either. So we gotta have a war, every so often. Then there's an excuse to do real killing. Millions."

Nietzsche thought *he* was a gloomy philosopher. He should have known about double-Scotches. "What's your solution?" I tried hard to keep the sarcasm out of my voice. "Do you think there'd be less harm done if they repealed the laws against murder?"

"Maybe." The bald-headed man studied his empty glass. "Depends on who got killed. Suppose you just knocked off tramps and bums. Or a floozie, maybe. You know, somebody without a family or relatives or anything. Somebody who wouldn't be missed. You could get away with it easier, too."

I leaned forward, staring at him.

"Could you?" I asked.

He didn't look at me. He gazed down at his bowling-bag for a moment before replying.

"Don't get me wrong, Mac," he said, forcing a grin. "I ain't no murderer. But I was just thinking about a guy who used to do it. Right here in town, too. This was maybe twenty years ago."

"You knew him?"

"No, of course not. Nobody knew him, that's the whole point. That's how he always got away with it. But everybody knew about him. All you had to do was read the papers." He drained his drink.

“They call him the Cleveland Torso Slayer. He did thirteen murders in four years, out in Kingsbury and around Jackall Hill. Cops went nuts trying to find the guy. Figured he came into town on week ends, maybe. He’d pick up some bum, lure the hobo down into a gully or the dumps near the tracks. Promise to give him a bottle, or something. Did the same thing with women. Then he used his knife.”

“You mean he wasn’t playing games, trying to fool himself. He went for the real thing.”

The man nodded. “That’s right. Real thrills and a real trophy at the end. You see, he liked to cut ‘em up. He liked to cut off their—”

I stood up and reached for my bag. The stranger laughed.

“Don’t be scared, Mac,” he said. “This guy must of blown town way back in 1938 or so. Maybe when the war came along in Europe he joined up over there. Went into some commando outfit and kept on doing the same thing—only then he was a hero instead of a murderer. See what I mean?”

“Easy now,” I said. “I see what you mean. Don’t go getting yourself excited. It’s your theory, not mine.”

He lowered his voice. “Theory? Maybe so, Mac. But I run into something tonight that’ll really rock you. What you suppose I been tossing down all these drinks for?”

“All bowlers drink,” I told him. “But if you actually feel the way you do about sports, how come you’re a bowler?”

The bald-headed man leaned close to me. “A man’s got to have some kind of hobby, Mac, or he’d blow his stack. Right?”

I opened my mouth to agree, but before I could answer him there was another noise. We both heard it at the same time—the sound of a siren down the street.

The bartender looked up. “Heading this way, sounds like, doesn’t it?”

The bald-headed man was on his feet and moving towards the door.

I hurried after him. “Here, don’t forget your bag.”

He didn’t look at me. “Thanks,” he muttered. “Thanks, Mac.”

And then he was gone. He didn't stay on the street, but slipped through an areaway between two adjoining buildings. In a moment he had disappeared. I stood in the doorway as the siren's wail choked the street. A squad car pulled up in front of the tavern, its motor racing. A uniformed sergeant had been running along the sidewalk, accompanying it, and he came puffing up. He glanced at the sidewalk, glanced at the tavern, glanced at me.

"See anything of a big, bald-headed guy carrying a bowling bag?" he panted.

I had to tell the truth. "Why, yes. Somebody went out of here only a minute ago—"

"Which way?"

I gestured between the buildings and he shouted orders at the men in the squad car. It rolled off; the sergeant stayed behind.

"Tell me about it," he said, pushing me back into the tavern.

"All right, but what's this all about?"

"Murder. Over at the Bowling Convention, in the hotel. About an hour ago. The bellboy saw him coming out of her room, figured maybe he was a grab artist because he used the stairs instead of the elevator."

"Grab artist?"

"Prowler—you know. They hang around conventions, sneak into rooms and pick up stuff. Anyway, this prowler leaves this room too fast. Bellboy got a good look at the guy and notified the house dick. The house dick found this dame right on the bed. She'd been carved, but good. But the guy had too much of a start."

I took a deep breath. "The man who was just in here," I said. "A big bald-headed guy. He kept talking about the Cleveland Torso Slayings. But I thought he was just drunk, or rib—"

"The bellboy's description checks with the one a newsie gave us just down the street from here. He saw him coming this way. Like you say, a big bald-headed guy."

He stared down at the bowling bag. "He took his with him, didn't he?"

I nodded.

He sighed. “That’s what helped us trace him to this tavern. His bowling bag.”

“Somebody saw it, described it?”

“No, they didn’t have to describe it. It left a trail. Notice how I was running along the sidewalk out there? I was following the trail. And here—take a look at the floor under the stool.”

I looked.

“You see, he wasn’t carrying a bowling ball in that bag. Bowling balls don’t leak.”

I sat down on the stool and the room started to spin. I hadn’t noticed the blood before.

Then I raised my head. A patrolman came into the tavern. He’d been running, judging from the way he wheezed, but his face wasn’t red. It was greenish-white.

“Get him?” snapped the sergeant.

“What’s left of him.” The patrolman looked away. “He wouldn’t stop. We fired a shot over his head, maybe you heard it. He hopped the fence in back of the block here and ran onto the tracks. And smack into this freight train.”

“Dead?”

The patrolman nodded. “Lieutenant’s down there right now. And the meat-wagon. They’re gonna have to scrape him off the tracks.”

The sergeant swore softly under his breath. “Then we can’t know for sure,” he said. “Maybe he was just a sneak-thief after all.”

“One way,” the patrolman said. “Hanson’s coming up with his bag. It rolled clear of the freight when it hit.”

The other patrolman walked in, carrying the bowling bag. The sergeant took it out of Hanson’s hands and set it up on the bar.

“Was this what he was carrying?” he asked me.

“Yes,” I said. My voice stuck in my throat.

I turned away. I didn't want to watch the sergeant open the bag. I didn't even want to see their faces when they looked inside. But of course, I *heard* them. I think Hanson got sick.

I gave the sergeant an official statement, which he requested. He wanted a name and address and he got them too. Hanson took it all down and made me sign it.

I told him all about the conversation with the stranger, the whole theory of murder as a hobby, the idea of choosing the dregs of life as victims because they weren't likely to be missed.

"Sounds screwy when you talk about it, doesn't it?" I concluded. "All the while, I thought it was a gag."

The sergeant glanced at the bowling bag, then looked at me. "It's no gag," he said. "That's probably just how the killer's mind worked. I know all about him—everybody on the force has studied those Torso Slaying cases inside and out for years. The story makes sense. The murderer left town twenty years ago, when things got too hot. Probably he did join up over in Europe, and maybe he stayed on in the Occupation countries when the war ended. Then he got the urge to come back and start all over again."

"Why?" I asked.

"Who knows? Maybe it *was* a hobby with him. A sort of a game he played. Maybe he liked to win trophies. But imagine what nerve he had, walking into a Bowling Convention and pulling off a stunt like that? Carrying a bowling bag so he could take the—"

I guess he saw the look on my face because he put his hand on my shoulder. "Sorry," he said. "I know how you feel. Had a pretty close shave yourself, just talking to him. Probably the cleverest psychopathic murderer who ever lived. Consider yourself lucky."

I nodded and headed for the door. I could still make that midnight train, now. And I agreed with the sergeant about the close shave, the cleverest psychopathic murderer in the world.

I agreed that I was lucky, too. I mean there at the last moment, when that stupid sneak-thief ran out of the tavern and I gave him the bowling bag that leaked. Lucky for me he never noticed I’d switched bags with him.

The Proper Spirit

If you enjoy a gentle, quietly humorous story that carries, scorpion-like, a sting in its tail—if, like me, you're especially pleased when such a story seems even better upon rereading, with foreknowledge of the sting—then I think you'll be delighted by this account of Mr. Cavendish's occult revenge upon his pestilential covey of ravening relatives.

MR. RONALD CAVENDISH WHEELED the laden tea-cart into the dining room. Depositing the entree and side-dishes on the table, he turned and surveyed himself in the sideboard mirror.

What he saw did not displease him. He was, he reflected—and so did the mirror—a gentleman of the old school. A cynic would have dismissed him as type-casting for a stage butler, but Mr. Cavendish took little heed of cynics.

The fashionable address of his old brownstone house, the solidity of the mahogany and sterling effects among its contents, the tangibility of his banked assets were all sufficient answers to cynics. Yes, and that included relatives.

Mr. Cavendish made a face at the mirror. It was not a nice face, and he wished his relatives could see it. Well, they'd be seeing it soon enough, over the dinner-table.

Here it was, six o'clock, and everything was arranged. Everything was ready for them.

Ready. Mr. Cavendish crossed hastily to the parlor. He'd almost forgotten something. The big Sarouk had been rolled back, and now he knelt on the bare floor and rubbed out the blue chalk-marks with his handkerchief. It would never do to let them see the pentagram. And while he was at it, he might just as well light some incense and get that faint odor out of the room. Someone could just possibly recognize it.

"There." Mr. Cavendish stood up, flexing his knee joints. After all, he was pushing sixty—or was sixty pushing him, eh? Might be a good idea to check on the affair of that fellow, what's-his-name, Doctor Faust. Perhaps there was a similar deal available to him without, of course, the element of risk.

Maybe tonight, after the family dinner, he could hold a little session and inquire of—

Ping!

Mr. Cavendish shot his cuffs and marched to answer the doorbell. He had just time to assume his "dear old Uncle Ronald" expression, and then they burst past him into the parlor.

Fat, simpering Clara, wizened little Edwin, sideburned Harry, and hennaed Dell. Last one in is a dirty dog—that would be Jasper, of course. He wheezed and he waddled and he joined the inane Medley of "Hello, Uncle Ronald," and "My, you're looking fit," and "Just like old times, the family all together under one roof again." Seats. Cigarettes. Tiny glasses of brandy. Ronald Cavendish saw to all the amenities, and even managed a smile when Edward lifted his glass and murmured, "To your good health."

Then, "Shall we go in to dinner?" he proposed. "I have everything waiting."

At the mention of dinner, Jasper was already on his feet. A greedy type. But then they were all greedy, Mr. Cavendish reflected, wistfully.

Take Clara. "My, what a lovely silver service." That was Clara. Her gimlet eyes peering from folds of fat needed only a jeweler's loupe to complete the picture as she took inventory down to the last penny.

Edwin, her husband, sniffed the brandy. “Napoleon or Armagnac, Uncle Ronald?” he asked. As if Mr. Cavendish would serve Napoleon to them, and before dinner, too! Edwin didn’t know, but he lusted to learn. It wasn’t money he wanted, but luxury.

Then there was Harry. “Squab under glass, by golly! You must have been playing the winners, eh, Unc?” Thus Harry, at sight of the breast of guinea hen. Harry with his racing form and his—ugh!—“Unc.” Harry was greedy for luck.

And Dell. Mr. Cavendish contemplated her kohled, cold eyes and the figure alternately swelled and svelte. He knew what *she* was greedy for. Right now she probably found it easily available during those afternoons when Harry was out at the track; in ten years she’d need money for gigolos, or whatever they called them nowadays.

Nowadays. That’s what Jasper was talking about. Mr. Cavendish forced himself to pay attention.

“Nowadays you seldom sit down to a meal like this.” *Chomp-chomp*. “Don’t know how you do it, Ronald, with Grace gone these seven years.” *Chomp-chomp*. “Rattling around in a big old barn like this, without servants or anyone to look after you. Wish you’d”—*chomp-chomp*—“move down to the Club with me.”

Yes, that was Jasper. Move down to the Club and let him take over. Lock, stock and barrel. He’d handle the sale of the house and the investments like a big, benevolent brother-in-law. Mr. Cavendish, who always prided himself on giving the devil his due, had to admire Jasper’s utter impartiality—*he* was greedy about *everything*.

So thinking, he addressed himself to a glass of warm milk and partook of French toast from a small casserole set beside his plate.

“Whassamatter, Unc, this chow too rich for you?” This from Harry, along with a gratuitous dirty look from wife Dell which he ignored.

“Touch of ulcers,” Mr. Cavendish said. “Doctor’s orders.”

“Doctor?” Clara brightened. “Have you been seeing Doctor Barton again? What did he say? Nothing serious, I hope. You know, lots of times they say it's ulcers, but it turns out to be stomach can—"

"Errumph!" Edwin knew how to turn her off, and he thought he was doing it just in time. "I'm sure Uncle Ronald takes good care of himself, dear. Seven years a widower, and you'd never know it from this table."

"Thank you," said Mr. Cavendish. "Might I help you to another guinea hen? There's plenty here for all."

"I'm ready," Jasper said. "And some of that sauce. Never tasted better. For an old bachelor, you do yourself proud. Of course, the chef at the Club —"

"How come you never remarried?" Dell asked. "The women would be after a man like you in droves. I mean, you're still sort of well-preserved like, and with all that moola—"

It was Harry's turn to issue an unlaundered glance. But Mr. Cavendish was not offended.

"You know the reason," he said. "I still have Grace with me whenever I want her."

Well, here it was. Mr. Cavendish braced himself for the onslaught.

Jasper was the first to walk over the barricade, armored in false geniality. "Really, Ronald," he said. "We're a bit disturbed, all of us. This morbid fancy of yours—that Grace is always with you—it's not sound."

"Neither are your assumptions," Mr. Cavendish answered, helping Jasper to his third portion, with more of the savory sauce. "My belief is neither morbid nor a fancy. Ever since the dawn of history, enlightened men have known it's possible for the departed to return when properly summoned. If you'd investigate the annals of psychic research, you'd understand that communication with the spirits is quite commonplace."

Clara offered a fat-lipped pout. "You see?" she addressed the others. "It's just like I said, not Uncle Ronald's fault at all. He's merely repeating what that crazy medium told him—the one he went to after Grace died. She's the one who filled him with all this nonsense."

Edwin was *errumphing* violently.

Mr. Cavendish smiled and served coffee. "It's true I went to a medium after Grace's passing. You all know that, and I shall not distress you by alluding to the hullabaloo you stirred up when you heard of it. But you needn't have worried. After a few visits I made a most gratifying discovery. I learned that a medium was unnecessary—I myself, am a psychic sensitive. Since then I have conducted my own investigations. I dare say I've managed to go further than most practicing mediums today."

"Ghosts!" Dell shuddered. "I hate to talk about 'em. Not that I believe in that stuff, understand."

"If you did, you'd not be subject to either fear or hatred," Mr. Cavendish assured her. "Actually, except for certain limitations, they're just like one of us. Take Grace, for example. The last time I saw her she seemed as real as you are."

"Be reasonable, Ronald," said Jasper. "You don't mean to tell us you spend all your time talking to the imaginary spirit of your dead wife?"

Ronald Cavendish finished the last of his French toast, took a sip of milk, and then lit the candles on the table.

Tapers put forth blossoms to flower against the shadows.

"I've told you no such thing," he declared. "True, at first I spent a good deal of time with Grace here. But—I blush to admit it—I tired of that. Of *her,* rather. Why, I asked myself, should I confine my companionship to Grace when there are so many other fascinating personalities available? After all, our marriage ended with her passing; where she is now, there's neither marriage nor giving in marriage. So for your information, I haven't summoned Grace for over four years."

"You mean you've given up all this malarkey?" Harry asked.

"Quite the contrary. It's just that there's such an infinite number of other contacts available to me." Mr. Cavendish smiled in the shadows. "I wish I could make you understand. Why, it's like having the combined libraries of all the world right here at your fingertips. It's like owning the greatest museum, the largest record collection. You've seen my pianoforte in the parlor, for example. Oftentimes during dinner I regale myself with the music of Handel and Haydn—played by the composers themselves.”

“Nuttier’n a fruitcake!” Dell murmured, but Mr. Cavendish affected not to hear her.

“Think of being able to summon the greatest shades in history,” he continued. “To be able to converse with Shakespeare, Julius Caesar, Napoleon, while listening to Chopin at the piano.”

“You mean them dead long-hairs come here and knock out tunes?” Harry was fascinated in spite of himself. “Say, about those spirits, now. Is it true they can see the future? I mean, like say if there’s gonna be a horse in the sixth at Belmont tomorra, you think maybe somebody like Michael Angelo or whatever could give you a tip?”

Mr. Cavendish smiled. “Perhaps,” he said. “Although I’ve never cared for racing.”

“Enough of this!” Even in the shadows, Jasper’s face loomed in mottled purple. “I’m getting dizzy myself, and no wonder. Ronald, you’re talking like a madman. And in such a case, we have no choice but to treat you as one.”

“Calling up the ghost of Napoleon!” Clara scoffed. “I’ll say he’s crazy, all right. Grace’s ghost isn’t good enough for him any more, he says. Suppose he wants us to believe he spends his evenings with Cleopatra.”

“A very much overrated female, I assure you,” said Mr. Cavendish, softly. “Of course, I may be doing the lady an injustice, owing to the language barrier. Although my opinion is not based upon our lingual activities alone.”

“You been playing around with the famous babes of history?” Dell grew suddenly animated. “That sounds kinda interesting, you know? I mean, I always wondered about some of them. Take this here: Madame Pompadour, and Anne Boleyn.”

Mr. Cavendish shuddered slightly. “I’d rather not talk about *her* he said. “When I summoned that particular young woman, I’d forgotten she had been decapitated. She appeared with her head tucked underneath her arm.”

Jasper punctuated his remarks with a resounding belch, then turned to Ronald Cavendish with the humoring smile generally reserved for those in their first or second childhood.

"Ronald, you've got to listen to us now. After all, we're your *family.* We've tried to be patient. Very patient." And he registered his interpretation of patience; his head cocked for all the world like a fat vulture perched on a limb above its victim.

"We've tolerated your eccentricities," Jasper continued. "But outsiders won't take so charitable a view. What will other people say when they hear such things?"

"Nothing," replied Mr. Cavendish. "Unless you tell them."

"I'm afraid the time has come when someone has to be told," Jasper answered. "After all, you're—*burp*!—responsible for a sizable fortune. If the banks and your brokers ever got wind of your ideas, they'd go wild."

Jasper had never been a brilliant speaker, Mr. Cavendish reflected, but this time he was apparently surpassing his most boring previous efforts. It appeared as though he had already put Edwin and Clara to dozing, and Harry slouched in his chair in a listless fashion. But for some reason, Mr. Cavendish himself was fascinated by what he heard.

"What are you driving at?" he demanded, suddenly.

"Well, it's not me, understand—it's all of us. We got together beforehand and talked things over. We agreed the best solution would be for you to step out of the active investment end. You aren't getting any younger, and perhaps the strain contributes to your—*burp!*—eccentricities. Time for you to sit back and take things easy. What I suggest is that you turn over your power-of-attorney to someone. Me, for instance. I can handle the estate for you without any trouble. You just sit back and enjoy yourself. This is serious, Ronald. I'm making you a fair offer. Surrender your power-of-attorney and go on living as you like. Call up all the spooks you want; we won't mind."

Jasper belched again, portentously. "If not, we'd have no choice. We'd be forced to call in an alienist. You know what that means. Why, on the basis of what we've heard here tonight alone, you'd be certified in jig time. Right, folks?"

He glanced down the table and noted that a slumber party was in progress. "Too hot in here," he complained. "Can't you open a window or something?"

"Presently," Mr. Cavendish said.

Jasper fumbled at his vest. "Sauce too rich for my blood," he murmured. "Got to watch that—doctor told me . . ." He slumped forward in a doze. Before drifting off he managed a weak wheeze. "What's the answer?"

Mr. Cavendish stood up. He leaned forward and spoke quite loudly, as if to waken his guests and make sure they heard every word.

"My answer," he said, "is no. No power-of-attorney, no alienist, no asylum. Do you hear that, my dear family? This is a farewell dinner. For tonight, having liquidated all my assets, I am flying to Tibet, to pursue my studies in the occult sciences.

"Yes," he continued, "this is a farewell. A long farewell. But I perceive you have already departed."

Indeed, they had. Slumped and seated in the shadows, there was no longer a semblance of sleep. Sightlessly staring at the skeletal remnants of the guinea hens, the family was quite dead.

Mr. Cavendish surveyed them, shuddered slightly, and prayed that no medium would ever be unfortunate enough to evoke them.

Then he moved around the table, glanced at his watch, and noted that he had less than an hour to reach the airport. He opened the sideboard door and extracted a bulging valise.

There. He was ready now. He stepped back to the table and bent over the tapers. "Out, brief candles," he said.

Mr. Cavendish was in the dark, but he was not afraid. Some of his best friends were in the dark. He'd met some very nice people under those circumstances. Madame Pompadour, Dell had said. Ha! He could have told her about Guinevere, and Montespan, and Helen of Troy. There was life in the old dog yet, and he had quite a way with the ladies.

Ladies. That reminded him of something. He couldn't leave without showing the proper spirit.

Mr. Cavendish chuckled. "Proper spirit" indeed! Why, he owed the entire success of tonight's party to the proper spirit.

It was time to express his gratitude for the guinea hen, with its most unusual savory sauce. Perhaps the kitchen was still occupied—at any rate, he'd make the gesture. Pure genius, his summoning a culinary expert for the family's last meal.

Mr. Cavendish tiptoed quietly to the kitchen door, opened it just a trifle, and whispered into the darkness.

"Thank you, Lucrezia," said Mr. Cavendish.

Welcome, Stranger

It was only a routine mission for Rel—but Earth's future hung upon his findings. So it was lucky for us he found only

REL LEFT THE mother-ship, shortly after the sun rose. It hovered only a dozen miles or so above the surface of the planet, scarcely beyond the range of visibility from below. There it would remain, until he returned at dusk.

Now he floated down in the little carrier, a bit giddy at first, as all four of his lungs gasped for oxygen in the thin atmosphere. When he neared the green surface below, he breathed more easily.

It was going to be all right, he told himself. There was nothing to fear. This was only a routine assignment after all, and not a very important one. If it had been important, Rel wouldn't have been chosen to carry it out. But this job was quite simple.

The planet he was approaching had been under careful observation for years. Others, much more skilful and intelligent than Rel, had landed here in the past. They had come away with data—data in the form of writings and recordings. The material was crude, as was to be expected from a primitive culture, but sufficient.

From it, Rel's people had learned all they needed to know. Apparently, there was no uniformity of culture here, and, for a time, Rel and his superiors were uncertain as to which group was dominant, which language to learn, which pattern of behavior to assimilate.

Repeated study and frequent visits finally gave them the necessary answer. Scout carriers, skimming above the land-surfaces again and again, corroborated their findings.

The most advanced group of mammals calling themselves men inhabited a large land-mass, bordered on two sides by great bodies of water. Known as the United States of America, its heartland was the Midwest. Here were cities, heavily-populated areas.

It was to one of these cities that Rel must go. A simple assignment, really—his Krala had outlined the situation quite logically.

"You have had the necessary training," the Krala told him. "You have learned the language—English. You have read the writings, listened to the recordings. Your briefing has been thorough, and you needn't anticipate any difficulty in passing as a man during a brief stay.

"As for outward appearance, that is no problem. Your skin can be bleached. A hair-covering has been prepared for your skull. We have acquired typical garments for you to wear, including clothing for the feet, called shoes, which will hide the webs. You will look like a man, talk like a man, act like a man. The rest is merely a matter of observation."

The Krala was right, of course. When Rel saw how he looked in disguise, he marveled.

"It's not so surprising, really," the Krala commented. "After all, there are many similarities between us and the inhabitants of this planet—just as the planet itself closely resembles our own. Atmospherically, organically, the resemblance is remarkable. The gravitational aspect is almost identical. That is why we are interested, of course. It's only a tiny place, and hardly important, but, perhaps, we might find use for it as a colony."

"I am to spend a day in observation," Rel said. "Is there any specific data I must acquire? Should I assess the physical and psychic potential, seek to discover what weapons these mammals possess?"

The Krala went orange in mirth. "Hardly! This is not an espionage assignment—we are already fully aware of the technology. It is crude—these mammals still deal with energy in terms of explosion and implosion.

Intelligence-wise they are retarded. No, taking over the planet by force does not constitute a problem at all. Your task is merely to render an opinion as to whether it's worth the effort."

"But you say you have learned conditions are ideal. Gravitation, temperature, oxygen-content are satisfactory. Natural resources are abundant. There is food, water, everything our people use to sustain life. Isn't that worthwhile enough?"

The Krala pinkened questioningly. "I speak now in kinetic terms. You know our policy in regard to colonization. A conquest by force entails far too great an expenditure of time and effort. The energy necessary to subdue aliens and rule over them is generally a waste.

Therefore, we have always approached a new planet with a view towards infiltration. If we find that the living-habits are congenial, we gradually dispatch our people. They melt into the existing population slowly, and in a generation or so, their numerical domination is complete. Only then do we reveal ourselves.

"Usually, by that time, our people have attained key positions of control, so that it is possible to conquer from within. Less effort is entailed. The less effort expended, the greater the life-force preserved. That's fundamental."

Rel listened, yellowing with comprehension beneath his bleach. "Then I am merely to observe if the present living-habits of these mammals would be congenial to our people?"

"Exactly—you are to spend a typical day as a typical human, or American—whatever the term is. Mingle with others. Take care that you're not detected, of course, but mingle. Eat and drink. Check your reactions carefully. Determine, if you can, what life would be like here for our people, during the time they'd spend in disguise. You will be the one to decide."

Rel felt himself glowing redly, but the Krala's final words dimmed him immediately.

"It's nothing to get scarlet about," the Krala said snappishly. "As I told you, the decision really isn't of any great importance. There are thousands of such worlds. If it were a vital matter, we wouldn't select you for the task. We'd send down many trained observers, instead of mere fledglings.

"But we haven't the time or energy to waste. So we selected you—just an average specimen—because your reactions will approximate those of the average specimens who might conceivably infiltrate here. We're willing to abide by your opinion. Now go to your Bezzter for final briefing."

Rel had gone to his Bezzter, and the details were arranged. The day chosen was one during which the mammals did no labor, but congregated in park areas for recreation. Therefore Rel could wander about freely, without having to leave the park, and still be assured of ample opportunity to mingle with mammals at a minimum risk to himself.

"But the carrier," Rel protested. "It will be observed, just as others have been in the past. Some of our data mentions such sightings—flying saucers, isn't that the term?"

He was reassured on that score immediately. The carrier would be undetected at dawn of a recreation-day, or Sunday, as it was called. Nobody came to park areas that early. From previous scouting-trips, a place had been discovered, where he could conceal the carrier during the time he spent in the park.

So it came to pass that, shortly before 8 a.m., on the morning of Sunday, June 3rd, Rel landed his carrier in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, at Washington Park Zoo.

He had noted the location of the caves very carefully as he descended, and steered the carrier until he hovered above the walled-off row. Selecting a center section, he dropped quietly and landed the vessel on an open stone surface, midway between a cave and the metal bars beyond.

The park was deserted. No men-figures were visible in any direction. Rel congratulated himself as he quickly dragged the light carrier toward the mouth of the cave. It was quiet and peaceful here. He bad to restrain himself from oranging under his bleach, as he thought of the welcome he would get if his coming were anticipated by men. Instead of slipping down unnoticed, there would be a reception committee, and . . .

The reception committee was awaiting him at the mouth of the cave. It was big and white, and it had four legs, armed with sharp claws, and a red throat, bordered by yellow fangs. It rose on its hind legs and roared, and Rel blackened with fear.

Instinctively, he crouched behind the carrier, shoving it forward and keeping it between himself and the white creature. The thing began to claw at the carrier—Rel wasn't alarmed, because the vessel was indestructible. He shoved the carrier into the cave, the creature retreating behind it. But the carrier didn't prove to be a sufficient obstacle, once it had passed the mouth. The white monster could burrow around the side and emerge. Roaring again, it did so.

Rel turned and fled. The great roaring beast lumbered after him. He ran toward the metal bars, hoping to vault them and escape to the park area beyond. The creature was right behind him, and he knew its paws were lifted to rake and rend. He leaped for the bars—and the ground fell out from under him.

Rel hadn't noticed the moat. He landed with a thud. The white horror growled down at him from the edge, but made no effort to follow. Slowly and painfully Rel got to his feet. He began to climb up the bars.

Now roars resounded from the caves on either side. The open spaces before them were suddenly filled with more monsters—black ones, grey ones and immense brown ones that walked on two legs and howled fearsomely. Rel inched his way up to the top of the bars—and the metal spikes dug into his chest.

He almost fell then, but managed to hook his legs over the projections. The bottom part of his garments tore on the sharp points. He jumped to the grass on the far side and lay there, panting, for a moment.

Then he rose and staggered away, until the roaring was faint in the distance behind him.

He walked through the park, his four lungs slowing to a point where they resumed their normal function. He came to a narrow black strip, running between two sections of grass, and began to cross it.

There was a deafening sound, and an enormous, clumsy, mechanical vehicle, moving on wheels, rushed past him. Its gleaming snout missed striking his waist by a matter of inches. “Hey, whyinell doncha look where yer goin’ ?” a voice from within shouted.

Rel reached the safety of the grass beyond and ran away. He came to a large open area, where the grass was thin, and halted at its edge. There was no way of telling what function this space was intended for—best not to attempt crossing it. Besides, he had expended enough effort already. He decided to lie down and rest.

How long he rested he had no idea. The sun was already high when he opened his eyes once more, aroused by the sound of shrill shouts.

A large group of mammals now occupied the open area before him. They seemed smaller, somehow, than he’d expected. Then he realized why—they were the progeny, the immature offspring. More than a dozen of them milled around the field—some clustered at one end, where one of their number wielded a club, the rest taking up apparently arbitrary position at a greater distance.

In the center, a young mammal hurled a round weapon at the mammal holding the club. This mammal did not dodge, but attempted to strike down the weapon with his stick.

The rest of them yelled.

It was, Rel realized, some sort of a game.

From time to time, the creature with the club succeeded in hitting the round weapon, whereupon he ran furiously from man to man in the field. Then all of the mammals yelled.

Rel ventured closer, observing. It was indeed a game of sorts—a primitive, meaningless game, but a harmless one. And it required a certain degree of coordination and dexterity to hurl the round weapon, strike it, run. Others in the field caught the weapon and tossed it back and forth.

“Mister—get out of the way!”

One of the mammals was yelling, apparently at him. Rel smiled to acknowledge the greeting, looked up, blinked, and was hit in the head by the round weapon . . .

He must have been stumbling for hours in a daze. The park was full of people now, happy and carefree in the midst of nightmare. For nightmare it was—to Rel, at any rate.

The beings were everywhere. They raced along the narrow strips in their huge machines—automobiles, Rel now remembered. He had heard of them. But he hadn't learned about the smaller, even noisier and more dangerous, vehicles with two wheels, which darted between them, roaring like the beasts of the caves.

He hadn't learned about the other two-wheeled vehicles that made no noise. These traveled along the grass, propelled by young mammals and several times Rel was almost knocked down by them. He could, however, avoid the four-wheeled quiet vehicles, which were pushed by females.

These moved slowly. Each contained an object which was not quiet, however—an object that made an appalling outcry. Rel managed to catch a glimpse of the noisemakers and saw that they were the redfaced spawn of this race. Their racket was hideous, and often they had an acrid, unpleasant odor. Why the adult mammals gazed at them so proudly he didn't know.

Nor did he know why the mammals—male and female alike—gazed proudly or fondly at one another. Granted their appearance was not altogether hideous, the majority were far from handsome. As he had been warned, some of the males inhaled nauseating stenches from tiny tubes held in their mouths. This was called "smoking".

Many males, as well as many females, wore curious transparent shields before their eyes—again, as he had been informed, for their own pleasure. Apparently, these shields increased their faulty powers of vision.

Rel's highly developed aesthetic faculties were repelled by the men with the tubes and the females with the shields. When, behind the bushes at a corner of the park, he beheld a man put down his tube and embrace a female wearing a shield, he felt a wave of almost intolerable disgust. Apparently, incredibly, the two were mating!

Rel moved away. It was already afternoon. His legs ached, his webs were sore in the confining foot-garments. The heat was intolerable. And his stomachs were empty.

He looked for a vacant space. There, under the trees, were benches and tables. Large groups of mixed mammals congregated here, making loud noises. But there was a vacant seating-place.

Rel rested, watching the table at his left where several old mammals and a group of young ones were obviously feeding.

The oldest male looked up and noticed him. “Hey, mister!” he called. “You hungry, maybe?”

Rel recognized the word. It had to do with food. He was tempted. Besides, it was his duty to mingle, wasn’t it? He nodded.

“So come by us—we got plenty left over here. Mamma, give the mister a plate.”

Rel accepted the paper plate, and the elderly female heaped it with food.

“Go ahead, eat up,” urged the old male. “Sauerkraut and Polish sausage. Also gives bratwurst. You like bratwurst?”

Rel took the implements he was handed. Knife and fork—he knew about them had studied their use. The food was hot.

“What’s your name, Mister?” Rel blinked and gulped before replying. He had selected a name, or, rather, the Krala had selected one for him.

“John Smith,” he said.

“Schmidt, huh? I’m Rudy Krauss.” A huge hand gripped Rel’s—gripped and squeezed painfully. “From Third and Burleigh is where we live. You know, where the bus bends?”

Rudy Krauss beamed at him. “Here, how about a beer?” He laughed thunderously. “I’m a little schnozzled up, you know, all day I been at it, and we gotta drink it up. Come on, you help.” Rel was thirsty. He drank, coughed, drank again. Rudy Krauss refilled the glass. He went on talking, and, apparently, all Rel had to do was nod—nod and drink, nod and drink.

Everything blurred. It was getting dark now, but the blurriness was more than twilight. When he stood up, Rel found that he was wobbling.

He had to stand up because the kids wanted him to. The young mammals were called kids, he discovered. Butch and Jeanie insisted that he go with them to the playground, whatever that was, and push them on the swings.

"Sure, he'll make a push for you, ain't so?" Rudy Krauss boomed. "Here, before you go, drink up. The beer is almost all." So he drank again, and then they were leading him over to the metal tangle, and they sat in something suspended by metal chains, and he was pushing, and they were going away and coming back, and Butch bumped into his stomachs and he had to sit down. So now he was sitting in one of the things, and they pushed him, back and forth, higher and higher, and everything was blurry and going around and around.

He thought he was going to die before they stopped. It was quite dark now and people were leaving, and he ran away toward the caves. Climbing over the metal bars was torture, and, again, he forgot about the moat and fell into it. Again, the white monster growled and waited, but Rel dodged it somehow and reached the carrier, wheeling it out safely. Then, miraculously, he was back at the mother-ship and the Krala was greening at him.

"*Look* at you!" he said, lividly.

"Scratches, bruises, torn garments! What happened, were you in physical combat?"

"No," Rel answered, greyly. "I was enjoying myself—the way men do. We were wrong about them. They're monsters. They keep ferocious pets for their amusement, they allow their young to hurl weapons at one another, their social and sexual habits are intolerable. We could never learn the language properly—the specimen who spoke to me sounded entirely different from the recordings we have heard."

The Krala meditated. "Those difficulties can be overcome with proper training," he decided. "I'm interested in the fundamentals of survival. What would we find for food and drink?"

“Food and drink?” Rel wobbled and colored kaleidoscopically beneath his ravaged bleach. He spoke slowly and painfully. “Their beverage is called beer. It swells the head and the stomachs and distorts vision. Their nourishment is called pickles, and bratwurst, and Polish sausage, and salami, and potato salad, and knackwurst, and sauerkraut and—”

Suddenly Rel was transparent—then he was very, very sick.

The Krala nodded. “Very well,” he murmured. “You have brought me the answer. Obviously, we cannot adapt.”

MANY LIGHT-YEARS behind, on the planet Earth, by Third and Burleigh, Rudy Krauss rested in bed. It had been a nice picnic, he decided. And that stranger, that young feller, he was nice, too. He seemed to like Mamma’s cooking and the good beer.

So thinking, the saviour of the planet turned on his side, belched appreciatively and went to sleep.

How Bug-Eyed Was My Monster

Something very unusual happens to me the other night. It is around ten o'clock and I am standing in a tavern.

This in itself maybe isn't so unusual. But what makes it unusual is that this is the night when Fast Mickey saves the world.

Fast Mickey is the bartender at this juice-stand, and I don't suppose anybody figures at the time that he is going to be the cat who saves the world, but most of us regulars already know he is blue-blade sharp. Lots of uptowners come into the tavern just to talk to Fast Mickey—real hep characters like bigshot professors and skull doctors and even some used-car dealers.

He is most particular-wise the favorite of the headshrinkers. In fact, on this evening he is entertaining a whole gang of them, including Subconscious Sigmund.

Subconscious Sigmund always brings his troubles to Fast Mickey. "You bartenders are really the best psychiatrists," he says. "You listen to people's troubles every day of the year and hear more confessions than we do. You're the original father-image and medicineman rolled into one. Maybe you can help me out."

Fast Mickey smiles and nods. "Sure," he says. "You want I should probe your psyche or whatever? OK, just climb up here on the bar and stretch out. Just close your eyes and relax now, and tell me the first thing that comes into your mind—"

The reason I remember all this is because I am standing right next to them, trying to catch the ball game on the radio. And here it is, the ninth inning, all tied up, and the Bums are at bat, and—And then, it happens.

The studio announcer cuts in with a fast pitch of his own.

“Flash!” he hollers. *“We interrupt this broadcast to bring you a bulletin from the Disassociated Press!”*

Everybody listens carefully, because we know they won’t interrupt a ball game unless it’s really important.

“Maybe they got a cure for some disease,” I say.

“Could be that Russia is dropping the H-Bomb,” Subconscious Sigmund suggests.

“It must be more important than that to cut into the Bums game,” says Fast Mickey. “I figure it’s an announcement that Marilyn Monroe is gonna make *The Brothers Karamazov.”*

We were all wrong.

The studio announcer is really yelling. “*The Unidentified Flying Object over the city is now identified as a genuine flying saucer. Landing in the corner of Central Park, it is presently discharging a passenger. Eye-witness reports agree that the creature emerging from the saucer is definitely an extraterrestial. It is about nine feet tall, covered with green fur, and has multiple tentacles. Please stand by for further bulletins now coming in.*

One of the cats down the bar starts to cackle. “It’s a gag, that’s what it is—like this here Invasion From Mars bit they do years ago. There ain’t no such thing as a flying saucer.”

“Mass hallucination, apparently,” says Subsconscious Sigmund. “Who can believe that business about multiple tentacles? Covered with green fur, indeed!”

“I don’t know about the tentacles,” I tell him. “But if you want to check on that green fur bit, come around early some morning and look at my tongue.”

“stand by!” yells the announcer again. *“Latest bulletin on the creature from the flying saucer. It is definitely outside the strange craft now, walking across the Park. According to what is coming over the wire to us here in the studio, it is being met by the Mayor’s Welcoming Committee and three* *squadcars armed with riot guns. Oops—what's that again? Our report says it is brushing off the Mayor's Welcoming Committee with one tentacle and brushing off the riot guns with another. Apparently bullets have no effect on this organism. It is overturning the squad cars and heading for the street. The crowds are running."*

"I'll say they are!" squawks Fast Mickey, all of a sudden. "Turn off that radio and you can hear them. I just happen to remember—Central Park is only two blocks away from here!"

This is true. With the radio off we can hear noise from outside—cats are howling and scampering off to their pads.

"It's no fake, then," Subconscious Sigmund mutters. "A monster is in our midst. Somebody must stop him!"

"Don't look at me," I tell him. "I am allergic to monsters. In fact, I once lose a good job working for a politician because I refuse to attend his monster rally."

"This creature lands on earth for a definite purpose," Subconscious Sigmund says. "If after all these years of flying saucer reports, one actually comes down, it means there's an important reason. The creature must want something."

"Well, it isn't the keys to the city, apparently," says Fast Mickey. "And it isn't a night in the pokey, either."

"Of course not," Sigmund tells him. "They're handling him all wrong. This calls for a psychologist. Such as me. I'm going out and reason with him."

"Wait!" yells Fast Mickey.

But Subconscious Sigmund doesn't wait. He grabs up the little portable couch he carries around with him for curb-service and dashes out the door.

The rest of us sit and wait. Pretty soon there is more shrieking outside the door and then we hear some awful crashes. There is a pretty chick at the other end of the bar whose name is Estrellita Shapiro and who weighs about 120 pounds soaking wet.

This I find out all of a sudden, because after the first big crash she jumps into my lap and upsets a drink all over her.

"Save me!" she yells. "The monster is coming this way!"

Sure enough, the door opens, but it isn't the monster. It's Subconscious Sigmund, and he is beat down to the seat. His clothes are torn, his glasses are broken, and half of his goatee is missing.

"Hear that crash a minute ago?" he pants. "The creature just rips down a four-story office building. It goes scrabbling around inside with its big green tentacles. It's looking for something all right."

"You probe its mind?" asks Fast Mickey.

"Not me! I wouldn't probe its mind with a ten-foot pole!" yells Sigmund. "It takes one look at me when I get close and starts to grab. So I do the only sensible thing."

"Which is-?"

"I run like hell," Subconscious Sigmund says. He looks at us. "I suggest we turn out the lights and lock the door, but fast. If it ever decides to come after me—"

Suddenly he leaps up.

"Yeow!" he remarks. *"Here it is now!*"

And here it is, coming right through the door.

The radio report is mostly right. The creature is nine feet tall, it is covered with green fur, and it has lots of long, slimy feelers. Also it has eyes that bug out. Only it doesn't walk, really. It sort of writhes and twists and skootches its way along.

It is really awful. It looks like Elvis Presley with tentacles.

For a second it stands in the doorway and then it opens up its mouth and starts making sounds. And the sounds are even worse than Elvis Presley.

By this time Subconscious Sigmund and the other head-shrinkers and customers are under the bar, in back. I would be there too, only this Estrellita Shapiro is hanging onto my neck and trying to crawl down the top of my shirt. She almost makes it, too.

But Fast Mickey just stands there. He isn't scared a bit. He looks up at this bug-eyed monster and listens to its sounds. Then he reaches down behind the bar and pours a drink. He hands it over.

The monster doesn't pay any attention. He starts wriggling down the aisle towards me.

Fast Mickey shakes his head. He turns around and opens the cash register, hauls out a wad of lettuce and slaps it down next to the drink. The monster doesn't even look at the loot. He keeps right on moving.

All at once Fast Mickey races around the end of the bar and comes up to where I'm sitting with Estrellita Shapiro. He yanks her off my lap and shoves her over to the monster.

The monster wriggles right by her.

"No use," whispers Subconscious Sigmund, from under the bar. "I know what you're doing—trying to find out what the creature is after. It isn't money, it isn't liquor, it isn't women."

"What else does anybody come in here for?" Fast Mickey says.

"This isn't somebody," Subconscious Sigmund groans. "It's a being from another worldsomething weird, alien, uncanny!"

The monster is making nasty growling noises now. But all of a sudden Fast Mickey smiles. He turns around, walks right up to the monster, and grabs it by a tentacle. Then he pulls it along with him to the end of the room and disappears.

Two minutes later the monster is gone. It just walks out through the tavern again and up the street. No more shrieks, no more crashes. And when we turn on the radio we are just in time to hear a report that it is back in the flying saucer and the flying saucer is taking off.

That's the end of it, of course. We're all out in the open again, and Fast Mickey is setting up drinks on the house, and then the reporters come and interview him on saving the world.

Fast Mickey is very modest. "Nothing to it," he says. "When Subconscious Sigmund describes the creature as uncanny, I suddenly understand. Taking a trip in a flying saucer is probably just like taking a long drive in an automobile. Sooner or later, you’re going to want something. I just figure out what it is and take him there.”

“Brilliant psychology,” says Subconscious Sigmund. “But how do you ever arrive at this conclusion?”

“Because I am a bartender, not a psychiatrist,” Fast Mickey tells him. “And I know that anybody who comes into a tavern wants one of four things. If it isn’t liquor, or money, or women, then it has to be the other. You see,” he says, lifting his drink, “it’s all a matter of elimination.”

Dig That Crazy Grave!

The tale of a six-man jazz combo led by the famous JoJo Jones—a tale of the long moan of the cat on the oh-so-cool tin roof—a tale of jive jargon and kicks and being hep and letting them send you and letting it pour out—but mostly a tale of the big kick.

WHEN PROFESSOR TALMADGE heard about JoJo Jones coming to town, he was very excited. He called Dorothy right away.

"We've got a date tomorrow night," he told her. "JoJo Jones is opening out at The Mirror Club."

Dorothy was excited too. "Darling, what a break! Do you think he'll help you on the book?"

"Could be. Anyway, we're going to see him."

Talmadge picked Dorothy up about nine and they drove out. Word must have got around fast, because there was quite a crowd on hand. Talmadge recognized a lot of kids from the college, and several of them recognized him. Some of them did so directly—with a "Hi, Professor!"—and others merely did a double-take and then whispered to their companions. Everybody seemed genuinely surprised to see him—no one, of course, knew he was writing a book on. jazz.

Except Dorothy, and they hugged their secret together as they took a table just off the edge of the dance floor. It was nearly a quarter to ten, but the bandstand was still deserted. Talmadge could sense the restless anticipation of the crowd, and he and Dorothy shared it.

Then all at once the combo filed in. The manager of The Mirror Club went up to the microphone and made a little announcement, and JoJo Jones took over.

Everyone in the place stared up at the men on the stand, but the musicians didn't stare back. They sat down—six men in blazer jackets—and unpacked their instruments slowly from battered cases. Clarinet, trombone, horn, bass. One of the men drifted over to the piano and diddled a few notes. JoJo Jones set up the drums.

All six musicians had pale faces, and they wore a look of boredom. They seemed oblivious of the audience, and of one another.

Dorothy shook her head. "Are you sure this is *the* JoJo Jones?" she asked Talmadge. "I mean, he looks so *young."*

"He was just a kid when he started out," Talmadge reminded her. "They all were. Bix and Tesch and the Chicago crowd, and B.G." Then he remembered that Dorothy was not really a jazz buff, so he interpreted—"Bix" was Bix Beiderbecke, "Tesch" was Frank Teschemacher, and "B.G." of course was Benny Goodman. Unconsciously his manner became professorial, for Talmadge was neither a jazz buff nor an aficionado. He was a student, and to him it was always a matter of accurate data. He told Dorothy that Muggsy Spanier's first name was really Francis—in exactly the same tone of voice he'd use to tell her that Ulysses S. Grant's first name was really Hiram.

Dorothy giggled. "Do you suppose JoJo Jones dyes his hair?" she wanted to know. "I expected an old man with a long white beard. Couldn't this be someone else using the same name?"

"I can't answer that one until I've heard them play," Talmadge said. "Looks like they're starting now."

They were seated, poised and ready, as JoJo Jones raised his drumstick. Then came the down-beat, and the answer flooded forth.

It was *the* JoJo Jones, all right. From the first paradiddle on, it was unmistakable. The sidemen may have changed, but not the style nor the arrangements. Here was the JoJo Jones of the fabulous Twenties, the JoJo Jones who had recorded for Okeh and Vocalion and the old Brunswick company.

Talmadge had the records, Dorothy had heard them many times, and she recognized the music. So did the crowd. They didn't attempt to dance. This rhythm went to the head, not to the feet. The audience was content to listen. Talmadge nodded, wondering how a six-piece outfit could pour such power into oldies like *High Society, Nobody's Sweetheart, Muskrat Ramble.* Jojo's drumming wove its way through vintage arrangements, and when Talmadge closed his eyes there was an illusion of tremendous volume. So much so that when the set finally ended, the sudden silence hit like a cymbal-crash.

Talmadge blinked and looked over at Dorothy.

"Wow!" she said. "This boy doesn't fool; does he?"

"Like it?"

"Tremendous."

Then their voices were lost in the buzz of surrounding conversation. Talmadge smiled because he knew what was going on. This college crowd took jazz as seriously as French students take their politics—and in as many schisms. "Chicago jazz" fans would argue with the devotees of Dave Brubeck, and the apostles of Dizzy Gillespie clashed with the Gerry Mulligan followers. It was an interesting sociological development, this jazz-cult, and Talmadge was putting the whole thing into his projected book.

A clarinet cut through the confusion and a second set was on. The sound changed subtly, because now Jones was playing the jazz of the Thirties—the jazz of the Dorsey Brothers and Artie. Shaw and Duke Ellington. A touch of Dixieland, a torrent of what used to be called "swing"; the drive, the intensity, rocked relentlessly through the room.

The crowd shouted, and the white faces on the bandstand suddenly came alive. Jojo gave a signal and they skipped their intended break, going right into another set.

The Forties this time. Glenn Miller and Stan the Man Kenton, and then the "new sound." Faster and faster, solo after solo, offbeat and offbar, and into the stuff from the bottom of the cage at Birdland. Jojo was moving them along with his drums, through the Forties and then into the Fifties, stepping up the tempo as he time-traveled them relentlessly.

Talmadge watched that pale white face, the face that was almost blank with inner concentration, and tried to read the expression. Where had he seen that look before? Only on the faces of women during ecstasy. Only in dreams, when the statues come alive and move, and the great hands from the sky reach down to pluck at your entrails and play them like a bass; when they jam the mouth of the. trumpet in your eye and the valves move of their own accord to blow your brains out.

It was happening now. He could feel the tram sliding up and down his spine; he could hear the piano in his head as the left hand marched mercilessly across the sponge inside his skull. And Jojo was tomtomming on his eardrums. Jojo was playing *him* now, the band was playing the audience like an instrument—a great instrument that screamed and shouted and moaned the long moan of the cat on the oh-so-cool tin roof.

Shave and a haircut, two bits.

Was it really over?

Yes, because Jojo's jacket was now drenched with sweat, and his palms were red where the nails had dug into them, and his legs were stiff with tension; but the sound had ceased.

The players began filing off the bandstand, working their way through the crowd of bobby-soxers—*jailbait, man!*—and earnest adolescents with fountain pens and copies of "Downbeat" opened at a picture spread.

Talmadge watched Jojo Jones as he brushed past their table on the way to the bar. He would have liked to stop him, but felt this wasn't the right time. Dorothy apparently thought differently. She reached up and tugged at the musician's sleeve.

"Care to join us for a drink?" she asked.

Jojo looked down at her. Evidently he liked what he saw because he nodded and pulled out a chair.

Dorothy introduced herself. “Dorothy Daniels. And this is Professor Talmadge—he’s been wanting to meet you for years. He’s writing a book on jazz.”

“Take five, man.”

JoJo Jones extended his hand and Talmadge grasped it. The hand was cold. Jojo didn’t return his smile, because he was staring at Dorothy.

“—of course I’ve heard all your old records,” she was saying. “But I just couldn’t believe it was you until I heard you play. I mean, you’re so young.”

Jojo shrugged. “I’m forty-eight. Don’t let the crewcut and horn-rims fool you. And Figgy is over fifty.”

Talmadge interrupted. “Figgy? You don’t mean Figgy Newton on trumpet?”

“That’s the cat.”

“I thought I recognized the style, but I wasn’t sure. The crewcut fooled me too.”

“Standard equipment, Dad. Crewcut, horn-rims. Musician’s Local won’t let you book into a place without you look like this Dave Garroway character.”

The waitress came and took their order. Two boys walked over and asked for autographs, but they didn’t stay. When the drinks arrived, Jojo turned to Talmadge and asked, “What’s this I dig about a book?”

Talmadge smiled. “Seems as if nearly everyone is doing a book on jazz these days. I thought I might as well get into the act. Not the usual history, though—the sociological approach.”

“Sounds like a real crazy bit.”

“Perhaps we could get together some time. I’d like to ask you a few questions.”

“Glad, Dad.”

“Are you free tomorrow? During the day?”

Jojo shook his head. “This cat loves his pad. I don’t howl and prowl until the cool of the evening.”

Dorothy leaned forward. “I don’t mean to be rude,” she said, “but why do all you musicians talk that way?”

“Stock arrangement. Like the cheaters and the hair-do. Give the square his share.” Jojo’s eyes met hers. “You dig me?”

“I dig you,” Dorothy said. “The most.”

“Solid gone for real?”

“I dig you,” Dorothy said, “enough to know that it’s all a silly, stupid act. You’re a grown man and a great musician. You don’t have to wear a loud jacket and crop your hair and hide your eyes behind horn-rims. You don’t have to hide your thoughts behind this juvenile jive-jargon, either. Why do you do it?”

“For a kick, chick. Strictly for kicks.” Jojo wasn’t smiling now. “but you wouldn’t know about kicks, would you, doll? That Columbus cat was wrong—the world is square.”

Talmadge coughed. “Er, that’s one of the things I’d like to discuss with you at some future time,” he said. “The position of jazz musicians and devotees as a self-constituted in-group, with their own vocabulary and idiom.”

“Sounds real nervous, man.” Jojo stood up. “Thanks for the sauce. Now I’ve got to trample back up there and play pretty for the people. Stick around until after, we’ll have a ball.”

Talmadge opened his mouth to acknowledge the invitation, but Dorothy cut in. “No, thanks,” she said. “We really must be going.”

Jojo nodded calmly. “You don’t like the juke, don’t spend your nickels,” he said. And walked away.

Dorothy rose and Talmadge followed her out.

“Something upset you?” he asked. “No. But I’m afraid all this smoke has given me a headache.” She paused. “You can stay if you like.”

“Oh, there’s always another time. Maybe we can stop in again next weekend.”

"Yes." But she didn't sound enthusiastic about it, and when they were in the car riding back, Talmadge questioned her.

"What got you angry all of a sudden?"

"I wasn't angry, darling. But there's something about that man that irritates me. He's such a *phoney.* It gets on my nerves to see him act like a character out of a cheap movie."

"He told you why he does it. The customers expect that sort of thing."

"Nonsense! Remember the night we met Benny Goodman? He doesn't talk that way. Lots of fine jazz musicians don't—they aren't all a bunch of dope addicts or eccentrics, you know that. And not all jazz fans are peculiar, either. Those kids who came up asking for autographs were perfectly normal and well-behaved. But your JoJo Jones seems to be putting on a deliberate act. I got the feeling he was sitting back and laughing at us all the time."

"Don't underestimate the man. You heard him give what amounted to a musical history of jazz tonight—from Oliver right up to the day after tomorrow. He knows what he's doing."

"That makes him even more of a hypocrite."

"Wait until we sit down and really talk with him, get to know him better."

"Sorry, count me out." She was shivering beside Talmadge in the car, and her voice shivered, too. "There's something *wrong* about that man."

"But you have to admit his playing is out of this world."

"Too far out." Dorothy shuddered again. "Please, let's talk about something else."

They talked about something else, but Dorothy went right on shivering during the ride home, and when Talmadge kissed her good night her lips were still trembling.

Talmadge's lips trembled when he walked into The Mirror Club the following Saturday. It was past one, and as he expected, the band had just finished for the night. He'd anticipated this might be a good time to catch JoJo Jones in a free moment, while he was sitting around and relaxing after cutting the last set. Sure enough, the drummer was perched on a stool at the bar.

But Talmadge hadn’t expected to see Dorothy Daniels sitting next to him.

He had called her three times during the week, asking for a date, and she had put him off each time. He’d phoned again this evening, suggesting they go out as they always did on Saturday nights, and once again she had stalled. He’d believed her when she said she had a headache and would stay home.

Yet here she was, sitting next to JoJo Jones. And smiling. And leaning forward. And putting her hand on his arm in that familiar gesture he knew so well. Talmadge noted that she was wearing the blue dress, the lowcut one that she claimed always embarrassed her because of what happened if she didn’t remember to keep sitting back. Well, she wasn’t sitting back now.

Talmadge’s lips trembled, and for a moment he thought of turning around and walking out before anyone noticed him.

Then it was too late, because Dorothy was laughing at something Jojo had said, and she looked around, spotted him, and waved.

He went over to the bar.

“Hi, Dad!” said Jojo.

Talmadge nodded. “How’s it going?” he asked, not particularly caring what he said just as long as he could say something and see if he could keep his voice under control.

“Great, man! This is a real gone spot—we’ve had ’em climbing the walls every night, haven’t we, sugar?”

“Right, Pops.”

That was Dorothy talking. Dorothy—this girl in the lowcut blue dress, leaning over and letting everybody and his brother take a look. Dorothy—this stranger with the heavy makeup and the unfamiliar bright red fingernails that were long and pointed like the claws of a cat. A real crazy cat.

Talmadge heard himself say, “Every night, eh? Is that right, Dorothy?”

"You heard the man."

Jojo grinned at him. "Don't get me wrong, Dad—I ain't been queering your solo. Just giving the chick a kick. She likes to sit up on the stand when we give out—sort of get the feel of it, you know? Now she can really dig. Now she can get with it, can't you, baby?"

"The most," Dorothy said. "Darling, you'll have to try it yourself one of these nights."

Talmadge nodded but didn't answer. Then Jojo stood up. "Sit down, toss the sauce. I'll be flying back."

He walked off in the direction of the Men's Room. Talmadge took a stool and deliberately stared down the front of Dorothy's dress.

"Every night you've come here," he murmured.

"Well, what of it?" Dorothy didn't look at him. "I got to thinking that maybe I was wrong, that maybe I'd done the man an injustice. I drove out and listened again. He saw me, came over and talked. That's how it started."

"How what started?"

"Nothing. Nothing like what you're thinking. We just talked. He's different when he's alone. None of this hep stuff then. He talks about music and sensation and what it does to you, what it does *for* you. But you wouldn't understand that. You couldn't. You have to sit up there with the band and let them send you. Feel them send the crowd. That's the big kick."

Talmadge nodded again. "You're for kicks now too, is that it?"

"Just this one. Just listening, and letting the crowd pour it on to you. You sit up there behind the music, and they let. go with everything they've got—you feel it coming up, beating against you in waves. All the emotions. All the energy. All the desire, and the frustration, and the aching just pours out. You can almost taste it."

"Sounds like it's habit-forming."

He was trying to play it for laughs, but she seemed serious. "That's what Jojo says. He's been doing it for thirty years now. Claims that's all that keeps him alive, keeps him young." She smiled. "I'm beginning to understand musicians a little better now, I guess. Not the commercial ones, but the real cats, like Jojo and his boys. The ones who're willing to play in little offbeat spots like this, or ride the crummy busses for one-night stands in Fallen Armpits, Nebraska. The ones who won't join the big outfits or cut hit records, because they aren't interested in money if it means playing commercial jazz. Like Jojo says, they're out for kicks. And once you've felt that big kick, you know why."

She looked up, pausing abruptly, and Talmadge realized that Jojo was back. He stood behind them quietly, and the rest of the boys were with him. Talmadge recognized Figgy Newton; at close range it was possible to detect the telltale wrinkles and the pasty pouches under the eyes. It was also possible to detect the acrid reek that hovered over the entire group, and Talmadge began to realize what they'd been doing out in the Men's Room. The youngest of the group, the kid who played piano, still had a butt in his mouth. He took a final puff, sucking in air noisily along with the last drag of charge, then ground the reefer under his heel.

Jojo put his hands on Dorothy's shoulders. "We're putting the show an the road," he said. "Flying down to Figgy's pad. Gonna be a big bash tonight." As Dorothy rose, the musician turned to Talmadge. "You want in?" he asked.

Talmadge looked at Dorothy. She turned away, fumbling with her purse.

"No, thanks," he said. "I've got to be running along. Some other time."

"Sad, Dad." Jojo waved genially.

"I'll call you tomorrow," Talmadge said. Dorothy didn't answer, and he hated himself for having said it. But he had to. Just as he had to walk out now, pretending nothing had happened, pretending that he didn't care.

He was all set to pretend again the next day, when he called Dorothy at her apartment. But he needn't have bothered, because she wasn't there.

She wasn't there in the morning, nor in the afternoon, nor that night. And she didn't come in late, either.

Talmadge would have known: he was waiting for her, parked outside her building for five hours.

He called her office Monday morning, determined to have it out with her, but that was no good either. The girl who answered the phone said that Miss Daniels was no longer with the company.

So Talmadge went out to The Mirror Club again on Monday night. Dorothy hadn't lied about one thing. She really did sit up there behind the band.

And Talmadge sat down below, watching her, watching them, watching the crowd, feeling the music flow down and the emotion flow up. After a while he just watched Dorothy's face—the white face, white with a pallor the makeup could only partially hide. And no amount of makeup could hide the glassy immobility of her stare, nor its startling resemblance to the faces of the musicians in the combo.

Maybe it was because they were all on charge, or even horse. Maybe it was because they all slept days and stayed up nights. Maybe it was because they never ate, only drank. Or maybe it was because they had been sitting up there so long, playing so hard, and drinking in all that raw emotion. Night after night after night of kicks. The big kick. It had got them, and it had got Dorothy.

When the break came, Talmadge didn't wait for her to leave the stand. He walked right up and hailed her.

"How about a kind word?" he called.

She scowled. "Go away," she said.

"But, Dorothy, I've got to talk to you—"

"Save it for a sick friend."

She rose and moved away down the platform, to join Jojo and the boys as they filed off. She nudged Figgy Newton in the ribs and murmured something Talmadge couldn't catch. He laughed and glanced at Talmadge out of the corner of his eye. Nobody else bothered to look at him.

Talmadge brushed through the crowd to get to the other side of the stand. He made it just in time to catch Dorothy by the arm. She wheeled around, facing him, and he got a closeup of her face. It was like a clown-mask with eyes.

"Dorothy, what's happened? They told me you quit your job—"

"We're closing tonight. Off to Buffalo."

"You're going away?"

"You dig me. *We're* going."

"When did you decide? Dorothy, what's happened to you, anyway?"

She gave a little offkey laugh. "What is this, the $64,000 Question?"

He could smell the charge now. She was loaded.

"Dorothy, come on home with me. We have to straighten things out."

"It's all straight, gate. Straight, great. Straight and flying right. Excuse please, man. Got a call for a ball."

And then she slipped from his grasp and was gone, out the side door, following the others.

Going out to the cars, Talmadge thought. Out for a charge, or a jolt and a bolt, or a quick kick in the back seat. The hot images poured down on him in waves, scalding his eyeballs.

He had to sit down; He found a place at the bar and heard himself ordering. One fast drink. Two fast drinks. One more for the road, and then he could go out to the parking lot and find her. It was time for a showdown.

No, too late. Talmadge blinked as he heard the downbeat. JoJo Jones and his combo were back on the bandstand, and although he couldn't see them from his seat out here at the bar, he could hear the band at work. He could hear the braying and the squealing and the thumping and the tinkling and the booming. That's all it was, heard at a distance. Just noise, an animal bleating, savage and senseless. And the walls and the floor shook with a boom-boom-boom.

That would be old Jojo on the drums. Boom-boom-boom. Jojo's drums and *his* heart.

The rhythm was senseless, but it didn't have to make sense. It was mindless but it didn't have to reach the mind. It could reach something else—the body, the nerves, the dark places where the blood runs swiftly. The blood obeyed, the body obeyed, the heart pumped faster, and everything began to pour out. The beat cut into you and made the opening so the sound could pour in, and when the sound poured in everything else poured out. Simple displacement. You couldn't hold both. So you took the sound and gave up yourself.

The drums did it, of course. Talmadge remembered the drums—the basis of all ritual, all magic. Drums made the savages dance around the fires, drums drove them to die in battle, drums thundered on the hills when they gathered to invoke the dark forces of the night. In every age, in every culture, the drums ruled. They ruled and they rolled and they rocked round the clock.

It was magic.

Talmadge got up and walked to the doorway, staring into the ballroom. He could see Jojo up there on the platform, bending over his tomtoms. Jojo's face was a mask that wizards wear; it was catatonic trance; it was every known name and learned label for one and the same thing—the eternal ecstasy of the magician in complete communion with his worshippers. Communion and control. He ruled the drums and the drums ruled them. They danced like puppets, like jerky automatons.

Talmadge shook his head groggily. His eyes searched for Dorothy. Then he realized she wasn't on the platform with the band. She must still be outside in one of the cars.

He made for the doorway. The cool air—*cool, man, real cool!*—hit him hard. He scuffed along the driveway—*kicks, Dad, kicks!*—and he peered into the dark recesses of the parked cars. He was way down at the end of the line—*long gone, cat!*—when he saw her white face. It was lolling against the rear seat of an old heap backed against the side wall of the roadhouse.

Talmadge called to the girl but she didn't answer.

He opened the door of the car but she didn't stir.

He climbed in and sat down next to her, but she didn't open her eyes or look up. Not even when he put his arms around her, not even when he took her hand, not even when he held his breath and placed his palm over her heart.

There was something wrong with her heart. Something wrong with the rhythm. The beat was missing. She wasn't getting with it. *Wake up, doll, this is a ball!*

But the doll didn't wake up. The white doll would never wake up. It just crumpled grotesquely in Talmadge's arms, and he was stroking one of the limp arms and then looking at it in the light—looking at the place where one of the magicians had stuck a pin into the doll. Maybe there was a little too much H on the end of the pin. Maybe this doll had a weak heart. Those things happened. Every once in a while they happened.

Talmadge swallowed hard. Then he leaned out of the window and was sick. After that he sat there for a long time, just holding the doll in his arms. He was trying to think things out—about magicians, or was it musicians? And the way some of them lived—the dedicated ones, the ones who went in for kicks.

After a while he thought he had it straight.

By this time the music had stopped and the cars were pulling out of the parking area all around him, so he knew the place must be closing down for the night.

It was time to go back inside and tell them.

Talmadge put Dorothy down on the seat and walked back into The Mirror Club.

The lights were going out over the bar, and the bartender was putting on his coat. Back in the ballroom only a single bulb burned over the bandstand.

Talmadge walked in just as the boys were packing up. Figgy and the horn and the tram were closing their little black cases—their little black cases that looked like coffins. And Jojo was getting ready to cart away his drums.

They all had that waxen look under the light, but there was something else—something Talmadge recognized now. He could sense the repletion, the satiation in their stare. They'd had plenty to drink tonight. Plenty of emotion, plenty of vitality, plenty of kicks. They'd taken it from the audience, and they'd taken it from Dorothy. That's why they'd slipped her the H—to restore her vitality, so that they could drink it up again. That's how they got their kicks—drink the audience, drink the dolls, and if nothing else was available for nourishment, drink each other or even themselves.

He thought of all the "real gone" musicians who were really gone these days. Gone forever, because they had doped and drunk themselves to death. They had died for licks and kicks—lived a little and then died a lot.

Talmadge looked up. Apparently he had been saying these things out loud for quite some time—because JoJo Jones was standing next to him and trying to steer him over into the shadows. But he had to go on.

"—used to wonder, like Dorothy did, why you were such an in-group. All dressing alike, looking alike, living the same way. Shunning the daylight, but always keeping that youthful appearance year after year in spite of drugs and alcohol and sex and sensation. I might have guessed it was magic, and that the language you use is a part of it—like the old secret code the witchcraft cults taught their followers. I might have guessed that, but I never expected to find Dracula wearing horn-rims."

"Take five, man, you're dragged." Jojo was smiling at him, smiling his white smile.

Talmadge shook his head. "You're the one who's going to be dragged," he said. "Dorothy's dead."

"Dorothy—?"

"I found her out in the car. Somebody slipped her a jolt, didn't they? Weil, her heart gave out."

"Murder, man!"

"That's the word for it. Murder. The law is going to call it just that, Jojo. But you and I know better, don't we? We know the real name for what you did. The real name for what you are—all of you who need those kicks to keep you alive. You don't drink blood the way they're supposed to do in the fables. You drink the essence, the vital energy."

Now the others were standing around the table, making a ring of white faces in the darkness, and Talmadge could hear them muttering.

"What gives with this cat? Monkey on his back?"

"Sounds like a gorilla, maybe."

"Dig him, Jojo?"

Jojo stood up. His voice was low, but it echoed hollowly in the empty ballroom. "He's got real crazy news. Dorothy's dead."

"The chick? But we were laughing it up in the car, just this last break—real groovy."

"The needle slipped."

"Oh-oh!"

"This cat is purring murder. He's ready to run to the law and do a vocal."

"Can't have that, man."

"And that's not all she wrote. Dig this. Cat thinks we're vampires."

"Vampires?"

"You know. Those real gone characters, they pad down in coffins."

"Man, that's the most!"

"What we gonna do?"

"Well, we can't let him sing."

"We got to ditch that chick before we blow town."

"Why riot ditch 'em both?"

"Now?"

"Now."

Talmadge started to get up, but JoJo Jones pushed him back. Then somebody was behind him, holding his arms. And somebody else put a big cold hand over his mouth and held it there. It didn't cover Talmadge's eyes, though, and he could see the others advancing on him, holding their instrument cases ready. As they got closer, he could smell the charge.

Then they were hitting him, and he tried to struggle but it was no good. They hit him silently but very hard. Just before he passed Out he thought he could feel something sting against the side of his throat, and a voice from far away said, “Maybe he has something there, Dad. We. ought to try this vampire kick.”

After that there was a long pause. From time to time Talmadge would come to, long enough to realize that things were happening. Once he was being carried, and once he was jolting along in a car . . .

The last thing Talmadge heard was Jojo’s voice, chuckling as he murmured, “Dig that crazy grave!”

Terror Over Hollywood

What had happened? What would be the fate of this beautiful woman who had come so close to the frightening secret of "the top ten" ?

Robert Bloch, well known Science Fiction and Fantasy writer, returns with this startling explanation for the survival of Hollywood's legendary indestructibles. Have you *never wondered why some actors go on, year after year, long after even younger men withdrew admitting their age?*

THE first time I saw Kay Kennedy was at Chasen's, several years ago.

She wasn't Kay Kennedy, then. In fact, I can't even remember what name she was using during that period—something like Tallulah Schultz. And she wasn't a brunette, either, but a blonde. MM had just come into vogue, and like Mamie van Doren and Sheree North and five thousand others, this girl had platinum hair and a bra-cup size far along in the alphabet.

I ran into her quite by accident, because she happened to be sitting at the bar with Mike Charles when he hailed me.

"Sweetheart! C'mon over—I wanna murmur sweet nothings in your shell-like ear." He rose unsteadily as I approached, gripped my arm, and slapped me on the back.

I have been in Hollywood many years, and I still do not like to be addressed as "sweetheart" by other males, nor do I enjoy being slapped on the back.

But I grinned and said, “Hi, lover-boy!” and punched him in the ribs. As I say, I have been in Hollywood many years.

“What’ya drinking?” he asked.

I shook my head.

“Oh, that’s right, you don’t drink, do you?” He turned to his blonde companion. “Funny, this character never takes a drink. Doesn’t eat, either. What do you do, boy—live on H?”

I sighed. “Ulcers. A bland diet.”

He laughed again. “That’s right. You’re a producer. Bland diet for you. Lucky I’m a director. Blonde diet for me.” Then he turned to the girl, mumbled her name so that I couldn’t catch it, and said, “Darling, I want you to meet Eddie Stern—the sweetest guy in the industry.”

I smiled at her and she smiled at me, and it meant absolutely nothing. That is, it meant nothing to me and I was fairly certain it meant nothing to her. Nobody ever remembers the names of the independent producers. A few, like Selznick and Kramer and Huston, get established through publicity channels, but most of us are anonymous.

So this little blonde pirouetted her eyelashes and exhaled and I was prepared to let it go at that. But all at once she opened her mouth and said, “Edward Stern. Of course. I’ve seen your pictures ever since I was a little girl. MOON OVER MOROCCO, and LONELY CITY, and—”

She rattled off the names of eight films, without once wrinkling her blank forehead.

I confess I wrinkled mine. “What are you?” I asked. “A child prodigy?”

“I just happen to like movies,” she told me. “I study them, don’t I, Mike?”

The director pinched her arm. “That she does, that she does,” he agreed. He grinned at her. “Baby, how’d you like to be my star pupil? I guarantee you’ll be working under an experienced teacher.”

“I’m going to be a star, some day.”

“Sure,” Mike said. “I promised you, didn’t I?”

"I'm serious," she answered. And she was. She faced me. "That's why I'm interested in every phase of production. And I've always admired your work, Mr. Stern. I rank you right up there with Hal Wallis."

I nodded "So you know his name, too, eh? Frankly, that surprises me."

"She probably knows his wife's name," Mike said, in a disgusted voice.

"Of course. He married Louise Fazenda. She was in RAIN OR SHINE, with Joe Cook. And Mr. Chasen, who runs this restaurant, was Joe Cook's stooge in the same picture."

That threw me. The girl wasn't pretending, she *did* know pictures. I've known Hal Wallis since before he married Louise, but the general public doesn't. For that matter, how many people remember Louise Fazenda? She's gone from common consciousness even though some of her contemporaries—Crawford, Cooper, Gable—are still around.

I decided it might be worth my while to talk to this girl after all. But Mike Charles had other ideas.

He stood up and grabbed my arm. "Come on over here a minute, pal," he said. "Little private conference, huh?" As he pulled me away he called back over his shoulder, "You don't mind, do you, precious? Order y'self another drink."

We moved toward the end of the bar, and I said, "Where'd you find her, Mike? She interests me."

"That goat?" He laughed. "Don't waste your time. Just another movie-struck kid. Reads the *Reporter* in bed." He sobered. "Look, I got serious business with you."

"Go ahead. I'm listening."

"Ed, I want a job with you."

"Directing?"

"What else? You know I'm good. You know my credits."

"So does everyone else in town, Mike," I told him. "Why haven't you picked up something in the last six months?" I stared at him, "Is it the drinking?"

"No. I never used to drink at all, you can ask anyone. I just started after DOOMED SAFARI, when the word went out that I was poison with the majors. You heard about that, don't try and kid me."

"All right," I said. "I heard. But I never did find out why."

"Silliest damned thing. I just committed the unpardonable sin, that's all. DOOMED SAFARI was one of these African things, see? And as usual, we had a sequence where the hero and the heroine are making their escape down one of those rivers. So I goofed."

"How do you mean, goofed?"

"Well, I was going to be arty and different, so I did the whole sequence *without including a single shot of crocodiles slithering off the banks into the water."* He sighed. "Naturally, you just can't get away with making an African picture without that shot in it. Ever since then I've been dead. Like that guy over at MGM years ago who made the mistake of calling Lassie a bitch."

I didn't know whether he was ribbing me or not; Mike was always a great ribber. But he was serious about one thing. He wanted a chance.

"Please, Ed," he murmured. "I've got to make another picture soon. I've been around for twelve years, but you know this business. Twelve months without a credit and I'm washed up for good. Help me."

"I don't have anything lined up at the moment," I answered, truthfully.

"But you know I'm good. You know about the three times I've been runner-up for the Academy—"

I shook my head. "Sorry, Mike. Nothing I can do."

"Ed, for the first time in my life, I'm begging. I belong in the industry, I've been around ever since I was a kid. Started as a grip, went on to cutter, spent eight years as an assistant until I got my chance. Then twelve years on top. And now they slam the door in my face. It isn't fair."

"It's Hollywood," I said. "You know that. Besides, I'm just a little independent producer. I don't swing any weight in this town. Why come to me?"

He was completely sober now. His eyes rested on me steadily and his voice dropped. “You know why, Ed. It isn’t just that I want an assignment from you. I’d like to have you talk to your people about me.”

“My people?”

“Don’t try to play dumb. I hear things. I know what you’ve got. And I want in. I think I deserve in, on my record. I *belong*.”

I couldn’t face his eyes any longer. I turned away. “All right, Mike, you might as well know. I *did* talk to my people, as you call them, several months ago. We studied your case thoroughly. And—they voted you down.”

He uttered a short laugh, then smiled. “As they say in Mexico, that’s the way the *cojones* bounces. Thanks for trying, anyway, Ed. See you around, sweetheart.”

I got out of there because I didn’t want to spend any more time with Mike Charles. I wanted to talk to his girl again, yes, but at the moment I couldn’t stand being around him. For some reason I felt as if I’d just passed the sentence of death upon him.

Perhaps it was foolish of me to take that attitude, but when I read about his suicide the following month, I wasn’t surprised. A lot of them commit suicide after coming to me. Particularly if they know—or guess—the truth.

But Kay Kennedy didn’t commit suicide.

I don’t know who she hooked up with after Mike Charles hung his brains on the ceiling with a .38, but he was the right one, for her. Within a year her name *was* Kay Kennedy, and her hair was its natural reddish brown. I began to watch her. One of an independent producer’s main jobs is to watch people who are coming up in the field. Watch and wait.

I watched and waited another year before I ran into her again. It happened at Romanoff’s, one evening.

She’d already had her first big success, in SUNSHINE, and she was sitting at one of the good tables with Paul Sanderson when I came in.

Paul halloed across the room and I went over, and when he introduced her he didn’t mumble her name. And this time she didn’t flutter her eyelashes, either.

“I’ve been waiting for a chance to see you again, Mr. Stern,” she said. “Of course, you probably don’t remember me.”

“Yes I do,” I told her. “Did you know Joe Cook had Chasen with him on the stage, in HOLD YOUR HORSES, and FINE AND DANDY?”

“Certainly,” she responded. “But I don’t think he was in ARIZONA MAHONEY when Cook did it for Paramount. That was a little stinker, by the way.”

“Yes it was,” I agreed. Paul Sanderson stared at the two of us, then rose. “I think I’ll leave you two lovebirds for a moment,” he said. “Besides, I have to go to the men’s room.”

He got up and stalked away.

“My new leading man,” Kay said. “Of course, he isn’t exactly new, is he?”

I shook my head. “Been around about as long as Gilbert Roland, I guess. But he still looks good, doesn’t he?”

“Very.” She gazed up at me. “How do they do it?”

“How does who do what?”

“You know what I mean. How do some of them manage to hang on forever? People up there in the Top Ten, box-office leaders year after year. Don’t they ever get any older?”

“Of course they do. Look at the ones who die off—” Her eyes narrowed. “That’s what you want me to do, isn’t it? That’s what you want everyone to do. To look at the ones who die off, and forget about the dozen or so who are always around, always have been around. The ones who remain stars for fifteen, twenty, twenty-five years and still play leads. And a few directors and producers, too—deMille, people like yourself. When did you come to Hollywood, Mr. Stern? 1915, wasn’t it?”

“You’ve been reading my mail,” I said.

She shook her head. “I’ve been talking to people.”

“What people?”

“Well, your friend Mike Charles, for instance. Your *late* friend.” She paused. “The night I met you, after you went away, Mike got pretty high.

And he told me a couple of things. Said there was a little inner group out here that controlled the situation. They called the shots on the top people, decided who stays and who goes. And he said you were in with that group. He said you'd just given him the word that he'd have to go."

"He was pretty high that night, like you told me," I murmured.

"He wasn't high the night he killed himself."

I took a deep breath. "Some people get delusions. That's one of the steps along the suicide route."

"This was no delusion." Kay Kennedy watched me calmly. "I want to know the truth."

I toyed with a napkin. "Suppose there was something to the story?" I asked. "Oh, nothing preposterous, like an inner sanctum arrangement where a few key people controlled all the big plums in Hollywood—you can see on the face of it that's ridiculous. No director or producer or star can depend on a contract or publicity to keep going; the public has to make the final decision. But let's suppose that there *are* a select few whom the public cherishes, and that there are ways to stay in that group. Let's even go so far as to say that I might know something about the method." I stared at her. "If so, why should I tell you?"

"Because I belong in that group," Kay Kennedy whispered. "I'm going to be a star, a big star. And I'm going to stay on top forever."

"Big talk, little girl."

"I talked just as big when I *was* a little girl. Go ahead and laugh? That's what my parents did. But I made my father quit his job and bring me to the Coast. He worked nights in a factory to give me dramatic lesson fees, until he died six years ago. And my mother took his place, at the same factory, so I could still have my tuition. She died last year, of the same thing. Silicosis. That factory wasn't a healthy place."

She lit a cigarette. "Do you want to know the rest? Do you *need* to know the rest? The names of the clowns like Mike Charles who I let push me around on the way up? The names of the hole-in-the-wall agents, the greasy bookers, the stag promoters, the casting-directors for blue films? Do you want to know how I got my first decent address, my first wardrobe, my first car? Or would you rather hear about that nice guy in the Air Force I bounced because he insisted on getting married and having a family?"

I smiled at her. "Why bother? As you say, I've been out here since 1915. I've heard the same story a thousand times."

"Yes. But that's not all the story, Ed Stern. There's another part, the most important part. I *am* an actress, and a good one. I'm going to be a better one in another year or two. Do you think the studio would take a chance on me with a property like Paul Sanderson unless they knew I was going to make it? I'm ready to hit the top, because I'm prepared. And that's the way I like to be—always prepared. So now I want to know one more thing. When I hit the top, how can I stay there?"

I glanced across the room. Paul Sanderson stood there, deep in conversation with two men who obviously would never be escorted to one of Mike Romanoff's tables. They were short, swart, and stocky, and their hands were shoved deep in the pockets of their trousers. Paul was smiling at them as he spoke, but they weren't smiling back.

Kay Kennedy followed my gaze. I grinned at her.

"Why don't you ask Paul when he gets back?" I suggested. "Maybe he can tell you."

"Then you won't."

"Not yet, Kay. I don't think you're ready yet. If you get to be as big a name as you say you will, then perhaps there's a chance. Until then—"

"All right." She returned my grin. "But I *did* find out what I wanted to know. Mike, Charles told the truth, didn't he? There *is* a secret."

She glanced across the room. "And Paul knows it too, doesn't he? But the reason you suggested I ask him is because you're sure he wouldn't tell."

"Something like that."

She focussed her attention on me again. "Funny about Paul Sanderson. I might have guessed he'd be one of your people, as Mike put it. He was the first star I remember seeing in the movies, way back in the '30s. And here I am today, all grown up and playing opposite him, and he doesn't look a bit different."

"Makeup," I said. "Those Westmore boys are great."

"Oh, it's not that. I know he wears a toupee. But he's so different on the set and off. When he's working he never gets tired, never complains. I can be dying under those lights and he isn't even sweating."

"You learn to relax," I said.

"Not that much." She leaned forward. "You know, all the time we've been together on the picture, he never made a pass at me?"

"How come he's taking you out?"

"Flack's idea. Good publicity." She paused. "At least, I thought that's all it was until tonight, when we got together. And that's what I meant when I said it was funny about Paul Sanderson. He's been on the make for me all evening long. And he's drinking, too. If I hadn't worked with him and gotten to know him, I'd swear it wasn't the same guy. Flow do you explain that?"

"I don't," I told her. "Let's ask him." I turned and gazed across the room. But Paul Sander? was gone. So were the two men.

I stood up very quickly. "Excuse me," I said. "I'll be right back."

But she wasn't buying. "You saw them too?" she murmured. "Those men with him? Think there's something wrong—"

I didn't answer her. I was walking across the room. I didn't bother with the hat-check girl, but went outside and grabbed the first attendant I saw. "Mr. Sanderson," I said. "Did he come out just now?"

"Just leaving." He pointed to a black limousine rounding the exit-lane.

"That's not his car."

"He was with a couple of other men."

I jabbed him in the ribs. "Get my car, fast."

Kay Kennedy dug her hand into my left arm. "What's happening?"

"That's what I intend to find out. You go back inside and wait. I'll return —I promise."

She shook her head. "I'm coming along."

The car rolled up. There was no time to argue if I wanted to keep the limousine in sight. “All right, get in.”

We made the exit. The limousine had turned right and was picking up speed. I trailed it. The car cut left, going still faster. I followed.

“This is exciting,” Kay told me.

I didn’t find it so. It took all my concentration to keep up with the car ahead—and more speed than I could summon here in town. A delay or a ticket would be fatal now. I twisted and turned, always a full block behind, as the limousine swerved and doubled and sped forward until it reached the canyon entrance far to the north. Then it really began to move.

“Where are they taking him?” Kay gasped. “What are they trying to do —”

I didn’t answer her. I had my right foot on the floorboards and both hands on the wheel; my eyes were on the hairpin turns, and I kept thinking, *the damned fool, I knew I couldn’t trust him, I never should have chosen him in the first place.*

But it was too late for self-reproach now, too late for anything at all unless I could overtake the car ahead. By now they must have known I was following, of course, and that probably decided them. They’d reached the top of the canyon when it happened.

I didn’t see anything because my car was a good two hundred feet behind as they rounded the last curve. But I heard it. A muffled sound, in three bursts.

Then we rounded the turn and I could see the limousine pulling away, going down the straight stretch on the other side of the canyon. Its taillights were like two little red eyes winking in farewell.

I didn’t try to follow it any further.

Instead I pulled up at the edge of the road, pulled up alongside of the black, huddled figure that had been tossed from the speeding car like a discarded doll.

This doll had a hole in its forehead, and another in its chest, and a third in its belly. It was limp and shapeless, and its limbs were doubled up grotesquely beneath the torso.

Kay started to scream and I slapped her face. Then I got out of the car and picked up the doll. I opened the rear door and dumped it into the back seat.

Kay didn’t look at it, and when I climbed in front again she didn’t look at me. She just kept sobbing over and over again, “He’s dead, they killed him, he’s dead.” So I slapped her again. That sobered her. She put her fingers up to the side of her face and said, “Your hands are cold.”

I nodded. “I’m glad your powers of observation arc returning,” I told her. “Apparently you lost them for a moment just now. Or else you might have noticed something. Paul isn’t dead.”

“But I saw him—that hole in his forehead—the way he was lying there, after they threw him out of the car—” She started to glance toward the back seat, but I grabbed her shoulder.

“Never mind,” I said.

“Take my word for it. He’s still breathing. But he won’t be for long, if we don’t get him to a doctor.”

“Who were they?” Kay murmured. “Why did they do it?”

“That’s a question for the police to answer,” I replied. And started the car again.

“Police.” She whispered the word, but she might just as well have shouted it. I knew what she was thinking. *Police, publicity, scandal, Parsons, Hopper, Graham, Skolsky, Fidler*.

“Do—do we have to go to the police?” she whispered.

I shrugged. “No, we don’t. But the doctor will. Bullet-wounds must be reported.”

“Isn’t there some doctor who’ll keep his mouth shut? I mean—”

“I know what you mean.” I drove grimly, turning back onto the highway and heading through Bel Air. “And I know a doctor.”

“You’ll take him there?”

“Perhaps.” I paused. “On one condition.”

“And that is?”

I glanced at her. “No matter what happens, you forget all about this business tonight. Never ask any questions, either. No matter what happens.”

“Even if he—dies?”

“He won’t die. I promise you that.” I looked at her again. “Now, do you promise me?”

“Yes.”

“All right,” I said. “Now I’m going to drop you off home.”

“But shouldn’t you get to the doctor first? He’s lost a lot of blood—”

“No questions,” I reminded her. “Home we go.”

So I dropped her off. Getting out of the car she was very careful not to turn her eyes in the direction of the back seat. “Will you call me?” she murmured. “Let me know how it—turns out?”

“You’ll know,” I assured her. “You’ll know.”

She nodded vaguely, and I drove away. I went straight to Loxheim and told him the whole story.

Dr. Loxheim was understanding, as I knew he would be.

“Gambling debts, no doubt,” he nodded. “The *verdammten* young fool. But it iss difficult to find someone completely trustworthy. And now you must find another. It will take time, and until then we must be very careful, all of us. Have you told Paul?”

“Not yet,” I said. “First I thought we’d better get rid of the body.”

“Leave that to me.” Loxheim smiled. “There will be no trouble. I am sure that the ones who did the killing won’t talk.” Then he frowned. “But what about the girl, this Kay Kennedy?”

“She won’t talk, either. I have her promise. Besides, she’d be afraid of the publicity.”

Dr. Loxheim puffed on his cigar. “Does she know he’s dead?”

“No. I told her he was merely wounded.”

He expelled smoke rapidly. “Still, she knows he was thrown from a moving automobile. She heard the shots. She at least saw his forehead, if not the other wounds. And this iss Friday night. Do you think she’ll be able to remain silent when she sees Paul Sanderson walk on the set on Monday morning?”

I lifted my hands. “What else could I do under the circumstances?” I asked. “But you’re right. When she sees him Monday, it will be a shock.”

“A great shock,” Loxheim agreed.

“Do you think I’d better be on hand then?”

“Definitely. I think you had better be on hand from now on, to watch her.”

“Whatever you say.”

“Good. Now leave me There is much to be done.”

“Want me to help carry in the body?”

Dr. Loxheim smiled. “That will not be necessary. I have carried them in before.”

Monday morning must have been pure hell for Kay Kennedy. I was on the set, working with Craig, the free-lance who was bossing the camera assignment. I watched Kay when she came in, and she looked all right.

I watched her when Paul Sanderson showed up, and she never cracked. Maybe that was because she’d noticed I was there. Anyway, she managed to get through the morning, somehow. At noon I dragged her to lunch.

We didn’t eat at the commissary. I took her over to Olivetti’s, in my car. No point in detailing the course of events. What matters is that we talked.

“I think I’ve got it figured out,” she told me. “Ever since Saturday, when there was nothing in the papers, I’ve been thinking.”

“There wouldn’t be anything in the papers,” I reminded her. “Who was there to tell them?”

“Oh, somebody would,” Kay Kennedy said. “If Paul Sanderson had to stop production on a picture for a month or two, they’d cook up a story to explain things to the press. But there wasn’t a word. So I guessed the truth.”

“Which is?”

“Which is that the man who was with me the other night, the man who got shot, wasn’t Paul Sanderson at all. Remember, I was telling you how different he seemed to be off the lot, almost as if he were another person entirely? That's it, of course. He *was* another person. Paul Sanderson's double."

I didn't say anything.

"That's right, isn't it?"

I avoided her gaze. "Remember what you promised me—no questions?"

"I remember. And I'm not asking you questions about the other night. I'm not asking you if the double died, or if he was already dead when you talked to me. I'm not asking how you got rid of the body. I'm merely asking you about Paul Sanderson, who wasn't really mixed up in this affair at all. Now, was he?" She ground her third cigarette into the ashtray.

"You smoke too much," I said.

"And you don't smoke at all," she told me. "And you don't drink, and you haven't even touched your sandwich. Try and pretend this doesn't mean anything to you!"

"Very well," I said. "It means a lot to me. More than you know or can possibly guess." I leaned forward. "Are you sure you want me to answer your questions?"

"Quite sure."

"Very well. The man was Paul Sanderson's double. Had been for several years. As you yourself observed, Paul is getting along. He has to save himself for his work. When it comes to public appearances, going to parties and making a show for the usual publicity routine, the double took over. He was well-paid, perhaps too well. Apparently he gambled a lot. Apparently he welched a lot—or at least, once too often. Does that explain things?"

"Some of them. Why his voice sounded a bit different, for one thing. Although he had an uncanny physical resemblance to Paul."

"He was carefully selected," I told her. "And there was a bit of plastic surgery, too. A very competent doctor—"

"The same doctor you were going to take him to the other night?" she asked.

I realized I'd said too much, but it was done.

"Yes."

“Would his name happen to be Loxheim, by any chance?” My mouth hung open. “Who told you?”

She smiled at me. “I read it. Remember when I said I’d been doing a lot of thinking since Saturday? Well, I did a little checking, too. On Sanderson. And on you. I got hold of your press-book at the studio Saturday afternoon. It’s all down there in black and white. Black and yellow, really. Some of your press-clippings are pretty old, darling. Like that one from way back in 1936, when you had that accident playing polo. At first they thought you were going to die, but a few days later was this notice about your being moved from Cedars of Lebanon—to the private hospital of Dr. Conrad Loxheim.”

“He’s a wonderful man,” I said. “He pulled me through.”

“1936,” Kay Kennedy said. “That’s a long time ago. You were an independent producer then, and you’re an independent producer now. At least, everyone says you are. How come you’ve never made a picture on your own since then?”

“But I have, dozens—”

“Your name has been listed as an associate,” she corrected me. “Actually, you haven’t financed a thing. I checked.”

“So I dabble a bit,” I conceded.

“And yet you’re still a big man in Hollywood. Everybody knows you, you swing a lot of weight behind the scenes—and this in a town where nobody stays on top unless he’s active.”

“I have connections.”

“Like Dr. Loxheim?”

I tried to keep my voice down. “Look, Kay, we made an agreement. You’re not to ask questions. What do you want to know these things for, anyway?”

She shook her head stubbornly. “I told you the reason why the other night. You’ve got a secret I intend to learn. And I’m not letting go until I find out.”

Suddenly she put her head down on the table and began to cry.

"What's the matter?"

Her voice came to me, faint and muffled. "You hate me, don't you, Ed?"

"No. I don't hate you. I admire you. You've got guts. You showed it this morning when Sanderson came in. You showed it the other night when you snapped out of your shock. And I'll bet you've showed it all through the years, on the way up."

"Yes." The far-away voice was a little girl's voice now. "You understood, didn't you, Ed? When I told you about my folks, I mean? I wasn't being hard-boiled. I didn't want to see them die. It—it tore me to pieces inside. Only there's a part of me that can't be hurt. The part that makes me keep going, makes me keep reaching for the top. No matter what I have to do to get there. Oh, Ed, help me!" She lifted her face. "I'll do anything you want, I promise. You can take charge of my career, I'll ditch my agent, give you any cut you want, fifty-fifty, even."

"I don't need money."

"I'll marry you if you like, I won't—"

"I'm an old man."

"Ed, isn't there something I can do, some way I can prove myself? Ed—*what's the secret*?"

"Believe me, the time hasn't come to me again. We'll see." Maybe ten years from now, when you're established. Right now you're young, beautiful, everything is just beginning. You can be happy. I want you to be happy, Kay, honestly I do. And that's why I won't tell you. But this much I promise. Keep going. Make good, the way you intend to. And in ten years, come to me again. We'll see."

"Ten years?" Her eyes were dry now, her voice harsh. "You think you can fluff me off like this for ten years? Why, for all I know, you'll be dead by then."

"I'll be around," I promised. "I'm tough."

"Not tough enough," she flashed. "I'll wear you down." I nodded. She was right, of course. I could see that. She wasn't going to be stopped.

"And if I don't get the truth out of you," she continued, "I'll go to Loxheim myself. Something tells me I ought to meet that man."

I nodded again. "Maybe you're right," I said slowly. "Perhaps you ought to meet him, soon."

It wasn't easy for me to sell Dr. Loxheim the deal. Still, when I gave him all the facts, he finally had to agree.

"We have too much at stake to take any chances," I said. "You know that."

"What about the others?" he reminded me. "They are entitled to a say in the matter."

"Let them take a vote, of course. But it's the only way."

"You think this girl iss worthy?"

"Of course I do. Normally we'd take her in anyhow, after another eight or ten years. She's on her way up, you'll see. The only thing is, like I've explained, she won't wait. So we get her now."

"If the others are willing."

"If the others are willing. And they'll agree."

They did agree. We called a meeting that very night, at Loxheim's place, and everyone showed up. I told my story, and Paul supported me. That was enough.

"When does this happen?" Loxheim asked.

"The sooner the better. I'll make the necessary arrangements right away. You can expect her in about a week." And it was a week, to the very day, that I brought her in. Right after her picture was finished. Right after she was scheduled for a four-week vacation. Right after I'd personally escorted her over to Frankie Bitzer, my agent, and had him sign her up on a long-term.

After that we went for a drive.

"Where are you taking me?" she asked.

"To Loxheim's place."

“Ed—does that mean I’m going to find out the secret?”

“That’s right.”

“What made you change your mind?”

“You.”

“You do like me a little bit, don’t you?”

“I said so, didn’t I? And if I didn’t like you, I wouldn’t be letting you in on the secret. I’d have you murdered instead.”

She laughed, but I didn’t join in. Because I was telling her the truth.

Dr. Loxheim was waiting for us downstairs in his office, and he was very cordial. I’d made Kay promise not to ask questions until he had finished his examination, and she cooperated magnificently. He took a blood-test and a skin-graft, and did a tape-recording of her voice and even snipped off a lock of her hair.

Then he went on to a case-record session that lasted over an hour. He was very thorough, of course: not only did he get her complete history, plus all the names of acquaintances, but also a sort of inventory of her personal tastes—including some color choices and the brand-names of her cosmetics and favorite perfume.

All this was unnecessary, really, but he was the methodical type and wanted to be prepared for any emergency. I could see his point; if something went wrong and we had to make a fast, last-minute switch, he’d have the necessary data on hand.

But nothing had ever gone wrong in the past, and I was fully confident now. Besides, Kay didn’t object. She thought she was being psychoanalyzed, I guess.

Finally, when it was all over, she stood up.

“Well, I’ve answered a lot of questions,” she said. “And now it’s my turn to ask a few. First of all—when do I find out about this secret?”

She was looking at me, but it was Dr. Loxheim who answered her. “Why, right now, my dear,” he said. Coming up behind her, he deftly inserted the needle at the base of the brain.

I caught her as she fell, and we carried her into the surgery.

It takes about four weeks for the entire process. I’m afraid poor Loxheim didn’t get much rest.

As for me, I was busy on my own—quieting her studio, spreading the carefully-prepared story about her incognito vacation in Canada, and doing my own private interviewing. I spent a lot of time interviewing, but finally I came up with someone who satisfied me.

Then I had nothing to do but wait until the 29th day, when I could see her. Loxheim had kept her under drugs and sedation throughout, of course, but he assured me that for the past twenty-four hours she’d had nothing.

“She is quite normal,” he assured me.

“Normal?”

“A figure of speech.” He smiled. “I mean, I believe she iss in a condition where she iss capable of assimilating the truth.” He paused. “Are you sure that you don’t want me to tell her?”

I shook my head. “This time it’s my responsibility.”

“You will be careful of shock? She has come through everything wonderfully thus far, but one never knows. You remember how Jimmy took it when he found out—?”

“I remember. But he’s all right now. They get used to it, once they realize the significance.”

“But she iss still so young.”

“I warned her.” I sighed. “God knows, I tried. And I’ll tell her now, in my own way.”

“Good luck,” said Dr. Loxheim.

I left him and went into her bedroom.

She was resting quietly. Her head was on the pillow, but no sheet covered her body—just the long gown. Her eyes were open, of course, and they looked the same to me. Everything looked the same. Her voice hadn’t changed, either.

“Ed!” she said. “He told me you were coming, but I didn’t believe it.”

“Why shouldn’t I come?” I smiled down at her. “You’re well again. Didn’t he tell you that, too?”

“Yes. I didn’t believe him then, either.”

“You can believe me, though. You’re well, Kay. Come on, sit up! You can get up if you like. You can get dressed and go home, anytime you want to now.”

She sat up very slowly. “That’s right,” she murmured, in a small voice. “I *can* sit up. But Ed, there’s something funny about it. I don’t feel anything. That’s why I wasn’t sure, Ed. I don’t seem to have any feeling. I’m just—numb.”

“It’ll go away,” I assured her. “Once you get out, get some exercise and fresh air.” She stood up, and I grabbed her arm. “Take it easy, now,” I cautioned. “You haven’t been on your feet for a long time—bound to be a bit stiff. It’s like learning to walk all over again.”

Her feet moved jerkily, but she had coordination of a sort. I helped her to a chair. She sat down as if she had never done so before in her life. Her eyes went out of focus, briefly, then steadied. “There,” I said. “You see?”

“Yes. I’m okay, I guess. But Ed, I still don’t *feel.* I mean, it’s like my foot is asleep, only all over.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“And that’s not all, either. Ever since I’ve been awake, I’ve *stayed* awake. For days and days. I told Dr. Loxheim about it, asked him to give me some kind of sedative, but he wouldn’t do it. Claimed it was dangerous. So I’ve just stayed awake, night and day. Peculiar thing is, I don’t seem to be tired.”

I nodded.

“In fact, I don’t seem to be *anything.* I’m not a bit hungry. Or thirsty. And I don’t even—”

She hesitated, and I patted her shoulder.

“I know all about that, too. It doesn’t matter.”

“Doesn’t matter?” She frowned. “Ed, what *happened* to me? Dr. Loxheim wouldn’t tell me a thing. I know he did something to me in the office—when was that, how long ago? And I think I had an operation. A long, long operation, or many operations. I just can’t remember.” She paused. “When I woke up, this last time, and stayed awake, I tried to remember. But I couldn’t.”

“That bothered you?”

“Yes. And something else bothered me even more. I wanted to cry, and I couldn’t.” Her eyes were wide as she looked up at me. “Ed, tell me the truth. Did I go off my rocker? Am I in some kind of sanatorium?”

I shook my head.

“Then what happened? *What happened to me?”*

I smiled. “What you wanted to happen. You learned the secret.”

“The secret?” She remembered, all right. I could tell she remembered everything up until the time the needle hit home, so I wasn’t worried any more. She’d come through, and I’d be able to talk to her now.

“Yes,” I said. “Loxheim’s secret. Our secret. The secret you wanted to learn, so that you could get into the Top Ten and stay there. Don’t forget, Kay, you said you were willing to do anything if you could make it. Well, you have. So you mustn’t be frightened.”

“What did Loxheim do to me?” she asked. Her voice was calm, controlled. “Who is he, anyway?”

I sat down next to her. “I’m somewhat surprised you don’t know,” I said. “You seem to be such an expert on motion pictures. Still, I guess the technical experts never rated much attention, particularly back in the early days of the talkies.

“That’s when Loxheim came over here. He did some work on animation for a couple of studios, about the time Cooper and Schoedsack were turning out KING KONG. His specialty was lifesize figures; he had a few original processes of his own that were too expensive for the Germans to try. Well, they turned out to be too expensive for us to try here. It was marvelous stuff; not just papier-mache and machinery, and not just clockwork either. After all, he was a physician and a brilliant one. Surgery and anatomy and neurology—the works. But there was no place for him in spectaculars.

“He opened up a little clinic in Beverly Hills as soon as he managed to get a license to practice, and went back to surgery. Plastic surgery—that was the most profitable. Built up a few faces and along with them, a reputation. He made money. And on the side, he continued his studies. And gradually, he perfected the process?"

"What process?"

"Let him explain it. I still don't pretend to understand all the technical jargon. What I do understand is what the process has meant to me. And to the big names—the stars you were wondering about, the ones who seemed to be able to go on forever. People like Sanderson, and a dozen others.

"We formed sort of a closed corporation, Kay. Just a few of us—those able to afford the kind of an oneration that costs two hundred thousand dollars to perform. Those who could see the advantages of remaining on top for twenty years or longer, staying young and fresh while their doubles went out and did the routine things to allay everyone's suspicion. You never suspected it, did you Kay? Even after you found out about Sanderson's double, you never suspected Paul. You yourself told me he didn't drink, didn't sweat under the lights, never got tired, never made love. And still you didn't realize the truth. I can tell you also that he never eats, never sleeps. Because he doesn't have to. Not with his brain and vital organs harnessed to synthetic nervous system in a synthetic body."

Her hand went to her mouth, then dropped.

"That's the secret, darling. The big secret of the biggest names. Only a few of them keep going, because only a few of them were willing to take the risk, pay the price. Only the ones who placed fame and stardom above the petty pleasures of so-called 'living'. Only the ones who were willing to give up eating and drinking and sleeping and loving—because they ate, drank, slept and loved fame alone.

"You said that's the way you felt, Kay. You weren't willing to wait ten years until you were old, ready for the junk-heap. You begged to have the secret now. And you have."

Kay stood up. She moved jerkily, like a doll.

"Easy," I said. "You'll have to learn how to control yourself. Not that you'll chip or break—the housing is almost indestructible. But there's a different balancing-system, and the ears lack the semicircular canals. Also your depth of focus is altered."

She gaped at me. "I thought I was mad," she said. "But I was wrong, wasn't I? You're the crazy one, Ed. Admit it. Telling me I'm some kind of automaton—"

"Take a pin," I suggested. "You'll find you won't bleed."

"Where is Dr. Loxheim? I want to see Dr. Loxheim at once."

"Relax," I said. "He'll be in presently. You can have all the proof you want. Tonight we'll call a meeting and get the whole gang in, Paul and the rest of them. Sort of get acquainted a bit. All but Betty—I forgot, she's turned off this month."

"Turned off?"

"Yes. That's part of it, don't you see? To rest. Conserve energy. Let the doubles do the work, between pictures. You last longer. Of course we can't allow any star to remain on top more than twenty, twenty-five years at the most, because then the public *would* get suspicious. After that, they just retire. But they can last indefinitely, if they rest. Loxheim says maybe two or three hundred years. Without aging, mind you. So it won't be so bad, once you get used to it. Ask Paul."

She reeled across the floor. "Paul. Betty. They're all friends of yours, eh?"

"Associates, darling." I smiled. "That's *my* secret. You asked me once how it was that I was still a big name in Hollywood, yet hadn't made many films on my own in years. It's because I happen to have these associates. All of them are indebted to me for the opportunity to remain on top. All of them work through my agent, Bitzer. I get my percentage. Just as I will from you."

She was trying to open the door now, trying not to hear me. I felt very sorry for her, but I continued to smile. I had to remain calm, for her sake.

"Don't do anything rash, Kay," I advised her. "Think it over. Tomorrow you'll feel better. Then you can meet your double and we'll start making the necessary plans."

“Double?”

“Certainly. I told you a double is necessary. I have selected an extraordinarily talented young lady for the role. Not only does she bear a remarkable physical resemblance to you, but she also has considerable histrionic ability of her own. Through studying your pictures she’s managed to pick up most of your mannerisms, and the rest she can acquire from firsthand observation. She has your voice down pat from Loxheim’s tape-recording, and she’s memorized all the material you gave him on your life, habits, and tastes. You’ll supplement that. Work things out together.”

I paused. “And by the way, I don’t think we need worry about her behaving foolishly on her own, like Paul’s double did. This young lady happens to have a criminal record, and I know about it. Also she knows that I know. So you see, she’ll stay right in line. I think you’re going to like her. I certainly hope so, because you’ll probably be living together for a good many years.” I walked over to the door and drew her away. “Might as well stop trying,” I said. “The door is locked.”

Now she faced me and I read unreason in her eyes.

“Double,” she whispered. “So that’s it! Now I begin to understand. It’s a trick, isn’t it? You’ve got a double, all right, and you and Loxheim and this agent Bitzer are all in on it together. Paul Sanderson too, probably. You think you can drive me crazy—or at least get people to think I’m crazy, if I tell them such a story. And meanwhile, you pull a switch, put this double in my place, pocket the money.”

I put my hands on her shoulders. Staring her right in the eyes, I shook my head.

“No darling. That’s a wonderful idea for a plot, but it isn’t true. What’s true is that you’re an automaton now. And once you face the fact, you’ll find it isn’t as bad as you think. I know.”

“You?”

“Of course. Why do you think I control the secret? Because I was the first. Loxheim was my friend, and after the accident in the polo game, he came to me at the hospital where I lay dying. I gave him permission to take me to his clinic, gave him permission to experiment. When it was successful, I realized what he had—what could be done with the process, once the right people were approached. And through the years I've done just that. There are only a dozen or so, as I say, but we're the insiders. We're the secret rulers of Hollywood, the walking shadows, the dreams that never die. We're the immortals who welcome you now to our company."

She wasn't ready yet, she couldn't accept. I saw it in her eyes.

So I took my hand away from her shoulder, fished in my pocket, and pulled out the pin.

"Here," I said. "Test yourself."

She stared down at the pin and her face worked. "No," she murmured. "It's another trick. It's all a trick, a trick to drive me crazy. I'm not a robot, it can't be, how can you stand there and smile at me, how can you lie like that, stop smiling, stop it, *stop it*—"

And then she reached out and swept the pin from my hand as her arm came up. Her nails clawed at the side of my face.

After that she stood there and screamed until I pressed the top of her head. The scream died away and she collapsed. I left her where she fell and picked up the phone.

Loxheim answered. "Well?"

"Hysteria, of course. But she'll be all right. I think we can call Bitzer tomorrow and tell him to sign her with the studio for a new deal. Be down in a moment."

I hung up. Then I opened the closet door and got out her new box—the one Loxheim had built, with the velvet lining and the airholes. The respiratory system still works on oxygen principle.

I fastened the loops around her neck and hung her up. Just before I closed the lid I took another look at her. She was great. And she'd look just as great ten years from now, or twenty. Like a million bucks. A million bucks at the boxoffice.

She belonged in the Top Ten, all right.

For the first time I was satisfied I'd done the proper thing. I put her away and headed for the door, whistling.

Just before I went out I remembered something. I walked over to the mirror and sure enough, there it was. Poor kid, I didn't blame her for getting upset, seeing it was the first time.

When she clawed me, she'd ripped a few strips of plastic off my cheek, exposing what was beneath.

I stood there looking at the bright, gleaming metal for a moment, then turned away and started downstairs.

Alternate Universe

The drug from the new mescalin derivative had opened a doorway to a parallel world existing in a dimension side by side with our own. But was it a better world?

STANLEY HUNTER strolled into the office wearing a pearl-gray homburg and matching gloves.

“Nice day for sex,” he remarked.

Tom Morton merely grunted. He had heard his bachelor partner voice this sentiment before—in fact, he voiced it every day, rain or shine.

Fortunately for the business affairs of Bio Laboratories, Stanley Hunter confined himself to the sale s-promotion end. Maybe his consuming interest in human biological affairs helped him to sell biological products to pharmacists.

Tom Morton didn’t much care, as long as he was permitted to devote his own attention to research and experiment. He picked up a small vial from the desk and squinted at it.

“What have you got there?” asked Stanley Hunter. “Some new aphrodisiac, I hope?”

“Not exactly,” Tom answered. “In fact I don’t quite know what this is. Some off-trail derivative of mescalin hydrochloride. The boys from the lab just sent it in for testing.”

“Mescalin?” Stanley Hunter sounded a little vague. “Isn’t that the stuff junkies use when they want to climb the walls?”

“Melons Huxley isn’t a junkie,” Tom told him, scowling. “This drug has unusual properties—you must, have read about it. It. expands the threshhold of consciousness, alters the time-sense. From some reports, it even gives the illusion of time-traveling. And the potentials of a new derivative like this; have never been explored.”

“You’re going to monkey around with it, eh?”. Stanley Hunter murmured. “I suppose that means you’ll be cluttering the place up with a lot of guinea-pigs again.”

“Not at all,” Tom assured him. “There’s only one way to test this preparation, and that’s subjectively.”

“You mean you intend to swallow the stuff?” his partner groaned. “Be careful, boy! Remember the time I decided to take a nip of cantharadin—”

“Don’t worry, it can’t harm me in this quantity.” Tom’s eyes gleamed behind the spectacles. “Think of the possibilities, man! Suppose we could alter our perception sufficiently to really travel in time—there’s no end to what might happen.”

“Maybe so.” Stanley Hunter tipped his homburg. “Go ahead and pi ay around with it this afternoon if you like.’ As for me, there’s no time like the present, I always say. And I intend to make the most of if.”

“Off to the races?” Tom inquired.

“Just off.” Stanley Hunter whistled and sauntered toward the door. “Take it easy, now. Don’t mess with the mescalin.”

He made his exit, but Tom was scarcely aware of his departure. Already he had pen and notebook ready. He buzzed his receptionist and instructed her not to disturb him with any calls, then drew the blinds and sat down behind his desk again. He uncorked the vial.

400 mgs. of a new mescalin hydrochloride derivative, swallowed at—let’s see now—1:30 p.m. April 12th.

He made the notation, then hesitated.

Actually, this was all very unscientific. What he ought to do was bring in a volunteer, rig up a whole series of testing devices to check reactions, conduct the experiment in the presence of a physician. That was the scientific way.

But then Tom, being a true scientist, *was* unscientific. He wanted, more than anything else, to enjoy the thrill of a new discovery; the intimate, personal thrill of being *first.* The first to explore a new realm of hyperconsciousness, a new dimension of awareness, a new world of sensation. If Stanley Hunter thought this was a nice day for sex, then why wasn't it a nice day for something completely novel, something transcending sex?

Tom blinked at the thought. Sex. Hadn't he better call Ann first, just in case something *could* happen? But no, there was no sense in needlessly alarming her. And besides, she generally took a nap in the early part of the afternoon. He could tell her all about it tonight. But right now—

TOM raised the vial to his lips, and drank.

For a moment nothing happened.

For an hour nothing happened.

For a century nothing happened.

Except that Tom was aware he couldn't estimate duration—moment, hour, century were all the same. He tried to focus his eyes on his wrist-watch, but he couldn't find it. He couldn't find his wrist, he couldn't find his arm, he couldn't find his body.

He had no body.

He just *was.*

Where were the glowing colors Huxley and the others had written about? Where were the strange sounds, the weird visions? Tom was conscious only of himself, swirling in emptiness.

But he *was* conscious, *was* himself. He could still reason logically. This wasn't the usual mescalin reaction because he hadn't swallowed the usual compound. He’d taken something new. *This* was something new.

All at once, he was back in his own body again, back in his own office. He could feel, he could see.

Everything remained unchanged. There was. a slight humming sensation, a faint vibration, and his vision wavered just a trifle as though what he saw was being projected by a faulty television-tube. But there were no hallucinations. He was aware of a normal self in a normal world.

For a moment he was conscious only of a terrible disappointment. To have expected so much and then to get no reaction at all!

Tom stood up, and then it happened.

He burned.

He began to burn all over. That’s the way Stanley Hunter had said he felt, the time he swallowed the cantharadin extract. That’s the way Tom himself had felt, with Ann, on their honeymoon.

A nice day for sex.

No reaction, eh?

Tom began to tremble. This stuff had a reaction, all right. A totally unexpected one, but it was there. He felt like a satyr, like Pan, like Elvis Presley doing a second chorus.

His hand reached out to press the buzzer. He’d get his secretary in here, that’s what he’d do, and—

No. Ann wouldn’t like that.

Besides, he didn’t have to. Because he had Ann, didn’t he? Ann was home right now, in bed, taking a nap.

All he had to do was sneak out the side-door, hail a cab, drive home, open the door, tiptoe upstairs—

And something *had* happened to his time-sense after all, because he was *doing* those very things, doing them so rapidly he was scarcely conscious of a moment elapsing.

On the other hand, maybe his consciousness was completely preoccupied with the burning sensation. All he could think of was his body.

Now he was going through the downstairs hallway, noting the table next to the stairway. No letters on it. Good. He wasn't in the mood to stop and read any letters, anyway. All he could think of was his body. And hers.

HER body was on the bed, in the bedroom. The shades were down, but he could see her. The gorgeous gleaming. It was warm, and she hadn't bothered to wear anything.

Ann, sleeping. The gorgeous gleaming. The burning. Should he wake her up? Yes, but in his own way.

Tom set about it, and apparently she had no objections to his methods. In fact her cooperation was altogether—and mutually—satisfactory.

Then the burning subsided and there was only the gorgeous gleaming, and Ann giggling, "Oh, Tom you surprised me!"

"Didn't I, though?"

"Yes." She sighed, snuggling gracefully, then stiffened. "But think of the chance you're taking! What if *he* found out?"

"He?"

"Stanley, of course."

"Stanley Hunter? You mean my partner? What's he got to do with us?"

"He'd have plenty to do if he knew about this." Ann giggled again. "Don't forget, he's more than your partner. He also happens to be *my* husband."

"Stanley—your husband?"

"Maybe you have your dates mixed, darling. Is today the day you planned to sneak in on some other girl, you bachelor wolf, you? Get with it, boy—this is Ann Hunter you're talking to."

Tom tried to read her face in the dimness. "Are you kidding?" he gasped. "Darling, you're *my* wife."

"It'll never stand up in a court of law," Ann assured him. "Come on, stop teasing. Or if you must tease, think of another way. Like this, for instance."

Ann thought of another way, and Tom pretended he did, too. But actually all the while he was conscious of reeling instead of reality.

He was the bachelor and Ann was married to Stanley. But that was impossible! He *knew* who he was, what had happened. He didn't have anything wrong with his memory. He recalled meeting Ann four years ago. Why, Stanley had even introduced them. Maybe Stanley had gone with her for a while before then, but he had no intentions of ever marrying her. And he hadn't married her. Tom did. He remembered their wedding-day, their honeymoon, everything. Stanley was still a bachelor. Just this afternoon he'd walked into the office and—

The office. That's where Tom had swallowed the mescalin derivative.

It all came back to him now, and so did the consciousness of that faint humming vibration. The room was shimmering, even Ann's gorgeous gleaming rippled in waves.

"Darling, what's the matter?"

"Nothing. Got to go now."

THEN everything speeded up like a fast film, or a tape-recorder being run at double speed. What he said and what Ann said sounded like gobbling. He was dressing, walking, running, hailing a cab, riding, zooming up in the elevator, opening the door, falling into his chair behind the desk. He was falling, falling, falling—

And he landed.

Landed in his own office, landed at precisely 3:10 by the watch on his wrist, which was ticking normally now without the slightest suggestion of a humming noise in the background to interfere.

There was no vibration, no burning sensation. All Tom knew was that he was tired, and drenched with perspiration.

He reached for the carafe on the desk and poured himself a glass of water.

What a nightmare!

Then he stared down at the empty vial. Suppose it hadn't been a nightmare? He'd swallowed the stuff, hadn't he? And passed out for a little over two hours?

But any other explanation was absurd. The whole thing was a trick of the subconscious. Sure, that was the answer. The old subconscious. Instead of expanding perception this drug expanded the imagination.

Tom nodded wisely at himself in the silver, mirror-like reflection of the water-carafe. Then he leaned forward and stared.

Even the blurred image showed the red stains on his mouth and face.

He rubbed a finger across his lips, then brought his hand away. He recognized the lipstick smudges, and now he could smell a familiar perfume. Ann's perfume.

So he *had* been somewhere.

Where?

The answer was beginning to form. He'd hoped for a timetravelling effect, but the drug didn't exactly work that way.

Suppose, instead, it opened another doorway? A doorway to a world of *if,* a parallel world existing in a dimension side-by-side with our own, an *alternate* universe?

In this world, Stanley had married Ann and rented the same house Tom would have picked.

Now he was getting confused, because it wasn't a question of "would have picked"—Tom *had* picked the house in the present world. If this *was* the present world.

TOM had to find out. He knew he had to find out at once, or he couldn't stand it. Maybe it was a toxic reaction from the drug; but he knew he was on the verge of flipping.

But what to do? He couldn't just get on the phone and call Ann and ask her if he was really her husband in this world.

"Get a grip on yourself," he muttered. "There's an easier way. A sensible way."

And he found it. Carefully wiping the rest of the lipstick from his face, Tom buzzed his secretary. "Mr. Hunter still out? All right." He hesitated; then took a deep breath. "Did my wife call?"

"No, Mr. Morton."

Tom clicked off, the grateful sigh rushing from his lips. "No" meant "Yes." It meant yes, he *was* married, Ann *was* his wife, he *was* in this world.

The best of all possible worlds, he told himself.

All this business of yearning for new sensations was nonsense. He ought to be content with what he had. Ann, for example.

And right now, even without the burning sensation to incite him, he was pleased to go home. With the curious feeling of retracing his footsteps, he left by the side entrance, hailed a cab, and drove to his house.

This time the sense of duration was normal. There was no humming or buzzing to interfere with his thoughts as he rode.

The mescalin derivative, now—what was to be done about it? Should he go ahead and set up an orthodox full-dress experiment?

No. Too dangerous. If what he had experienced was any indication, it would be better to forget the whole thing. Tell the boys in the lab they'd come up with a dud.

Maybe the doors had better remain closed. It was an ugly place. Best if no one else ever blundered into it.

Actually, he couldn't even tell Ann what had happened. She wouldn't like the idea of being an unfaithful wife, even in another world.

Tom made up his mind as he paid the cab-driver and went up the front steps.

His eyes searched out the name-plate in tire mailbox. *Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Morton.* That resolved all his doubts.

He was in the right world at last. And at the right time. Upstairs Ann might still be in bed, gorgeously gleaming. And he could tiptoe in and awaken her—

Tom did tiptoe, into the hall.

He got as far as the stairs, then glanced at the little table. There were no letters on it.

But resting on the table-top were Stanley Hunter's gray homburg and his matching gloves.

Tom paused, staring.

This was it, then. He was in the right world, at the right time. And he could go upstairs and surprise his wife and his partner and raise a big stink and dissolve the firm and dissolve the marriage and—

The alternative? There *was* an alternative. A whole universe of alternatives, in fact. And somehow, in the light of what he had just discovered, it might not be so ugly after all.

A nice day for sex, eh?

Tom hesitated a moment longer, then smiled—and tiptoed out of the house again.

He wondered how long it would take the boys out in the lab to mix up another batch of that mescalin derivative.

THE END

Crime In Rhyme

A whimsical murder mystery? We didn't think it was really possible. Well, here's Mr. Bloch proving us wrong. Meet an extraordinary blend of the White Rabbit and a tough private eye . . .

MISS KENT APPROACHED THE cottage door and rapped sharply. It was really a darling place, she decided; for some reason it reminded her of the home of the White Rabbit in *Alice in Wonderland.*

When the door opened to reveal the occupant of the cottage, Miss Kent could not restrain a gasp. Aside from the length of his ears, the man standing before her might have passed for the White Rabbit himself. He was small, pale, pinkeyed, and his face ran largely to nose; his mouth was wobbly and his chin almost negligible. Also he was wearing a checkered weskit, and even as Miss Kent gazed at him he consulted his watch.

"I'm looking for Rickie Lane," she announced.

The man blinked at her and smiled. "Won't you come in, please?"

Miss Kent entered and found herself in a paneled hallway with mid-Victorian furnishings which heightened die resemblance to the world of Lewis Carroll and Tenniel illustrations.

"I am Archibald Pope," the little man said. "You must be Miss Kent, the lady who wrote about die secretarial position."

"That is correct," she admitted. "Is Mr. Lane at home?"

The little man nodded. "If you'll be good enough to step in here—" He waved her through a doorway and into a large parlor equipped as an office. Filing cabinets lined the walls, and the center of the room was dominated by a large desk on which stood an electric typewriter and a fluorescent lamp.

Little Mr. Pope walked over to the desk and sank into the chair behind it.

"Now, then," he said. "If I might have a look at your references, please?"

Miss Kent hesitated. "But I understand it was Mr. Lane who needed a secretary."

"So he does." The small man inclined his head. "I am Rickie Lane."

"But—"

Mr. Pope sighed. "You are disappointed because I choose to work under a pseudonym?" he asked. "Considering the somewhat—er—violent nature of my writing, it seems advisable."

Miss Kent flushed slightly. "It's not that," she confessed. "I hope you don't think me rude, Mr. Pope, but you just don't *look* like a writer."

Mr. Pope uttured a delighted chuckle and leaned back, running his hands through his white hair.

"Exactly, my dear lady!" he crowed. "I *don't* look like a writer, do I? Thanks to the photographs on the back of dust jackets, we all know what a writer looks like today. He is a scowling young Neanderthal with an unshaven chin that bristles nearly as much as his crew-cut. He wears a white T-shirt, and possibly a dog tag nestles against his hairy chest. That's your modern writer, eh?"

Miss Kent nodded. "If I remember correctly," she murmured, "there is just such a photograph on the back of all the Rickie Lane books."

"Indeed there is," Mr. Pope agreed. "Posed by a professional model—or, to be specific, a Greek gentleman my agent found washing dishes in a restaurant in Soho. Although completely illiterate, it happens that he resembles a writer. In some cases, his illiteracy would increase the resemblance. At any rate, I agreed to the deception in the interests of commerce."

“I understand,” said Miss Kent.

“Perhaps you’re disappointed?” Mr. Pope asked, softly. “I have had that trouble with secretaries before. They come to me with visions of working with a burly young brute, a hulking he-man who responds to the sight of a blonde the way Pavlov’s dogs responded to the dinner bell. If you had any ideas along these lines, then perhaps you won’t care to continue this interview.”

Miss Kent shook her head. “On the contrary,” she told him, “I’m greatly relieved.” Fumbling in her purse, she drew out a sheaf of letters. “My references,” she said.

“Thank you.” Mr. Pope barely glanced at them before placing the correspondence on his desk. “I presume you arc experienced in typing, filing, taking dictation and all the requirements my *Times* advertisement specified. But that’s secondary. What I am interested in is this—if you didn’t seek me out with the notion of taking a position under a virile creative man, then just what reason did you have for applying?”

“Because I am a Rickie Lane fan,” Miss Kent told him, earnestly. “I’ve read all your books.”

“Have you, indeed?” Mr. Pope glanced over at the bookshelf and smiled. “Read them all, eh? Then perhaps you’ll be good enough to favor me with your opinion. What did you think of the first one?”

“Mr. *Mutin Takes a Gun?” said* Miss Kent. “It hit the target, with me.”

Mr. Pope smiled. “How about *Mr. Fyfe Takes a Knife?”*

“Ripping.”

“And *Mr. Frazer Tabes a Razor?”*

“Keen.”

“Then there’s *Mr. Flubb Takes a Club.”*

“Smashing.”

“And my latest, have you read that—*Mr. Saxe Takes an Axe?”*

“Sharp and cutting. Penetrates deeply into your characters. Opens them up and lets the reader see what’s inside.”

Mr. Pope sat back and beamed.

"I am delighted to see that you are so perceptive a critic," he told her. "You may consider yourself hired as of now, if you wish. What do you say to room and board and twenty pounds a week?"

"Why, that would be wonderful, Mr. Pope." Miss Kent hesitated slightly. "But I'd intended taking a room in the village—"

"Nonsense, my dear girl! You'll stay here, of course. Plenty of room, and I can assure you I'm an excellent cook. I fancy a diet of cold mutton is not altogether to your taste, and the village inn offers little else."

"Yes, but—"

Mr. Pope glanced down at himself and smiled wryly. "I assure you there's nothing to fear from me," he said. "And if it's the neighbors you're worried about, we have none for a half mile around. I gather from your references that you are alone in the world—hence, I see no possibility of any scandal. And since I often find it necessary to work at night, your presence here will offer added convenience to us both."

Miss Kent fluffed her blonde curls nervously. "Very well," she answered. "I accept your offer. When do we begin?"

"Immediately," said Mr. Pope, rubbing his hands together briskly. "My next manuscript is due at the publisher's in a fortnight."

"How thrilling!"

Mr. Pope sighed. "I can hardly agree, inasmuch as I have yet to write a single line."

"What seems to be the problem? Can't you think of a plot?"

The little man shook his head, "I see you don't understand," he said. "To me a plot is relatively unimportant. You've read my work, and the stuff other writers turn out. What does the plot consist of? Rickie Lane is a private eye who writes in the first person singular—although not quite as singular as some others I could mention. He stumbles on the corpse of a beautiful woman, and since he is not a necrophile there is only one thing to do. He must solve the crime. During the course of the story he beats up various thugs and is in turn beaten up; he is approached by various voluptuous and full-breasted females and he approaches them in turn.

Eventually he discovers that the most voluptuous female of all is the killer, and he shoots her in the end, or the navel, or the ensuing *melee*. The plot, you see, is secondary to the real problem."

"But I should think the real problem is finding the murderer."

"For the reader, yes. But not for the author. His problem, in writing the story, is to find the crime."

"I never thought of it that way before." Miss Kent nodded. "But it makes sense, doesn't it?"

"Of course it does. That's where I got the whole idea for my series. One day a phrase just happened to pop into my head—a common phrase which often passes unnoticed. *Poetic justice*. It was then that I began to think of crime in rhyme. My titles came about inevitably. But in each case the murder itself was the most important element."

"You had to plot perfect crimes?"

Mr. Pope shook his head, "imperfect crimes," he said.

"I'm afraid I don't understand."

"There's no trick to plotting a perfect crime," he explained. "Scotland Yard tells us a murder is committed in real life once every twelve minutes. Further statistics reveal that a good half of these murders remain unsolved. *Ergo,* one unsolved murder every twenty-four minutes; sixty perfect crimes committed each and every day, or close to twenty-two thousand a year."

"You're quite an expert," Miss Kent beamed.

"I should be. After all, it's my business. And as an expert I assure you that the perfect crime is the least of my problems. It's trying to invent a crime that *looks* perfect but contains a basic flaw or error in commission—a flaw that Rickie Lane can discover and which leads to his solution of the killing."

"Now I'm beginning to see what you mean," Miss Kent said. "And that's what you're looking for now?"

"Desperately," Mr. Pope admitted.

"I'm afraid such matters are a little out of my ken," the girl told him, "But perhaps if we were to talk about it—"

Mr. Pope rose. “Later,” he said. “But I see I have been a poor host. Let me get your valise from the hall and show you to your room. Undoubtedly you would like to freshen up a bit after your trip. That train from London is abominable.”

He led her upstairs and into a quite comfortable apartment. “The bath is at the end of the hall,” he informed her, “just past my room and die storeroom. I’ll leave you to your own devices for a time while I take a turn about the garden. The sunset may provide inspiration.”

He bowed and withdrew.

Miss Kent didn’t bother to unpack. She waited until Mr. Pope had left the cottage and then sought out his room. For a time she was quite busy there, pausing in her efforts only to cock an ear for the sound of footsteps. Hearing nothing, she continued her activities, then transferred her attention to the storeroom.

It was necessary for her to force the lock, but this she did both expertly and effortlessly. Once inside, Miss Kent found herself amply repaid for her trouble—so much so, indeed, that she soon became completely engrossed. In fact, she forgot to listen—until it was too late.

She knew it was too late when she looked up and saw Mr. Pope standing in the doorway.

“Well, well,” he observed mildly. “What have we here?”

Miss Kent faced him serenely. “What haven’t we here?” she asked. She pointed to an array of objects unearthed from a small trunk in the corner. “A .38 Webley automatic—the same weapon you described in *Mr. Munn Takes a Gun*. A pearl-handled dagger with more than a suspicion of rust on the tip—just like the one mentioned in *Mr. Fyfe Takes a Knife.* And this straight-razor could not have got all these stains even if it had been legitimately used by a sufferer from chronic hemophilia. It reminds me of the murder weapon in *Mr. Frazer Takes a Razor.* Certainly there’s no doubt about the blood on the end of this club—it is exactly as depicted in *Mr. Flubb Takes a Club.* As for the axe, it might be the former property of Miss Lizzie Borden, but I rather think it is the original specimen described in *Mr. Saxe Takes an Axe.”*

Mr. Pope pursed his lips speculatively. “Quite right on all counts,” he said. “I see there is little sense in any further attempts to conceal my methods. Like all true literary artists, I rely heavily on personal experience in my work. The autobiographical approach, you might say. I find it best to derive the bulk of my writing from life.”

“From death, you mean.”

“As you will, dear lady.” Mr. Pope shrugged. “Let us not quibble over details.”

“Details? You’ve virtually admitted to committing five murders.”

“Over a five-year period,” Mr. Pope said, gently. “Allow me to refresh your memory as to the statistics. My contribution to them is slight—merely one out of nearly twenty-two thousand per annum. And in return, my contribution to the world of crime literature is great.”

He took a step forward and his voice grew stronger. “The killer instinct is basic in us all,” he told her. “Even a young lady like yourself gets a vicarious thrill from reading a gory mystery, and so do beardless youths and gentle clergymen and elderly dowagers. Yours is a harmless sublimation, but the urge is there—an urge strong enough to set you reading. But consider, if you will, how much stronger the urge must be to set a man *writing* this sort of thing.”

“That’s no justification,” Miss Kent protested.

“I do not need justification,” Mr. Pope replied. “My work speaks for itself. During the past half dozen years I have moved about the country under various names and disguises, and as a result of my endeavors five women have met an untimely end. But think, for a moment, of all the lives I must have saved! Think of the girls like yourself who found harmless outlets for your own homicidal tendencies in my books; think of the young men who used me as a surrogate for their own violent impulses, and the oldsters who refrained from killing their spouses and sought satisfaction through my work. Why, I must have averted hundreds of tragedies! That’s the practical way to look at it. And from the purely critical standpoint you admitted that my work was—what did you say?—ripping, keen, smashing, eh?"

"Bloody awful," Miss Kent snapped, "if you must know the truth."

"Now, now," Mr. Pope chided. "Temper, dear child! Let us have none of that. You remind me of someone I once knew in Herts. When she—"

"The widow," Miss Kent interrupted. "The one they thought shot herself while looking through her husband's gun collection. You used that situation in your first book."

"So I did."

"And there was the girl in Rainham, and the woman in Manchester, and the chorus girl in Brighton—"

"Say no more," Mr. Pope murmured. "You have told me enough. Enough to realize that it was not idle curiosity which caused you to enter my storeroom, nor accident which brought you here. You, my dear lady, are nothing but a copper's nark."

Miss Kent drew herself up proudly. "I am nothing of the sort," she snapped. "I happen to be an employee of Scotland Yard."

"Then I take it I have been under suspicion for a considerable period?"

"That is correct, Mr. Pope, or whatever your name is. The variety of names and disguises you assumed threw us off for a time. Then somebody noted that within a year after the commission of each crime a new Rickie Lane mystery appeared. Similarity of weapons gave us the clue. We've had difficulty tracking you down, because your publishers work only through your agent, and he seems singularly elusive."

"I have no agent," said Mr. Pope. "He is as fictitious as the rest of my disguises." He paused. "Where are you going?"

Miss Kent edged towards the door. "I intend to ring up the Yard," she replied firmly.

"Can I not persuade you to change your mind? After all, think of the hundreds of slayings I've prevented—"

“I am thinking of the five you committed,” she told him. “I warn you,” she went on, as Mr. Pope inched forward, “you’d better not try to stop me. My superiors know I’m here.”

“But nobody knows *I’m* here,” he reminded her. “They’ll come looking for a Mr. Pope. Needless to say, I shall be long gone.”

“You can’t get away with it. You ran that advertisement for a secretary —”

“As bait, to draw Scotland Yard out, in the event that they suspected. It means nothing.” He strode quickly to the door and slammed it shut. “Now, then,” he said.

“I shall scream!”

“But not for long.” Mr. Pope stepped forward. There was a moment of brisk struggle, but the little man proved surprisingly strong. Within a few minutes Miss Kent lay on the floor, arms tied behind her and the useless screams dying in her throat.

“Hot work,” Mr. Pope observed. “I had better get rid of this muck before I continue.” Thoughtfully he removed the white wig, disclosing his head with its close crew-cut. Off came the spectacles, the putty nose, the built-up mouth, and the protruding teeth. In another moment he peeled off his weskit, sighing gratefully as he emerged from the garments to stand before her in a T-shirt. “That’s better, eh?” he said. He flexed his muscles tentatively.

Miss Kent shuddered. “Why, you look just like the pictures on the dust jackets!” she exclaimed.

“True.” He smiled down at her. “The Greek dishwasher in Soho is another invention of mine. I find the role excellent protective coloration. That is why, even if your police come seeking Rickie Lane, they shall never find him. They don’t know what he really looks like, or what he really is. They don’t know about any of us.”

“Any of you?”

The smile became a wolfish grin. “Yes. I told you the secret, but you didn’t realize it. About those of us who write murder stories, and who gain fame and fortune because our stories are so convincing. Naturally, we all write from life. And—oddly enough—most of us look alike too. Lombroso's old theory about criminal types, you know."

"But that's impossible! I've seen photographs of—"

"Yes. Of course you have. Do you think I'm the only one who's clever enough to use a make-up kit? Or to change my name? Most of the others use pseudonyms, too." His voice sank to a whisper. "Think for a moment. Who *is* Ellery Queen, really? Or Carter Dickson, or H. H. Holmes, or—"

"You can't mean it, not *all* of them!"

"Merely a theory, my dear. I speak only for myself when I tell you that your real detective-story writer conceals his identity and the crimes on which he bases his fictional narratives. I told you before that my chief problem is to concoct an imperfect crime—fundamentally, I am so constituted that I can ordinarily think only in terms of perfection. For I am a detective-story writer, and that means I am a master criminal."

Miss Kent writhed and tugged at her wrists.

"This time you won't succeed," she threatened. "They'll find you."

"Find who?" Mr. Pope shrugged. "My present disguise is abandoned. They'll never recognize me in my new one. And if they seek out Rickie Lane, their trail will end at that restaurant in Soho. Besides, they'll have quite a time discovering that you were the victim of foul play, not a suicide."

"Suicide?" Miss Kent gasped.

"Precisely. There will be an explanatory note, downstairs—everything is arranged. I perfected my plans during a walk in the garden just now, after I remembered that I had this."

He stopped and groped for a moment in the corner of the room, coming up with a length of hempen coil in his hands.

"I shall just throw one end over the beam here," he said.

"Wait!" Miss Kent begged.

He nodded regretfully, then shook his head. "I know how you feel, dear lady," he told her. "But there really isn't any time to spare. I told you my next manuscript is due at the publisher's within a fortnight. *Ars longa vita brevis,* you know."

Bending forward, he made a knot and fastened the loop about her throat.

The manuscript of *Mr. Pope Takes a Rope* reached the publishers precisely on the day of the deadline. When it appeared in print the critics were enthusiastic and the public ecstatic.

If Scotland Yard failed to share in die general enthusiasm it was merely because its operatives were trying in vain to unravel a knotty problem involving a noose, an apparent suicide, an abandoned cottage, and an untraceable gentleman who looked like a White Rabbit.

Meanwhile, bloodthirsty readers of Rickie Lane mysteries await the next volume in the series. As usual, there is no hint as to what may be forthcoming.

But just recently, in Cornwall, a debonair, mustachioed gentleman took up lodgings in the boarding house of an attractive divorcee.

The other morning he had occasion to step into the shop of the neighborhood ironmonger.

"My name is Mr. Stammer," he announced, "and I should like to purchase some household tools—"

Luck Is No Lady

Frankie hung onto the bar with both hands. If he let go, he might fall down. He didn't want to pass out, because this old Professor guy was talking to him. If he listened, maybe the old guy would keep on buying the drinks.

"Luck," said the old Professor guy. "That's what makes all the difference in the world. Five years ago I was a respected member of the faculty here at the university. Today, owing to the vicissitudes of fortune—"

He paused and sighed. Frankie sighed, too. "I know what you mean," Frankie said. "I ain't used to being on the bum myself." Which was a lie, because Frankie had always been a bum. But he wanted to stay friendly; he wanted another drink. And sure enough, the old guy was signaling the bartender. He pulled out a half dollar and held it up in the air.

"Heads or tails," the Professor said. "Who can tell which it will be when I drop this coin on the bar? I can't. You can't. And neither can the bartender. A mathematician will say the chances are even, either way. Professor Rhine will tell you the odds can be modified. But no one knows. And there you have the Mystery of the Universe. None of us can foresee what luck will bring. Behold!"

Frankie had his eyes in focus now and he watched the coin drop. It hit the bar, bounced, then stood still—balanced on edge.

"Luck!" chuckled the old Professor guy. "Sheer luck, operating all around us, governing every move of our lives. If Lincoln had stooped to tie his shoelace at the moment Booth fired his shot—if the bird had not appeared when Columbus faced the mutineers—*if!* But we're all victims of Tyche."

"Tight," Frankie said. "I know I'm tight."

"You misunderstand. I was speaking of Tyche. Fortuna, the Romans called her. One of the Fates, a sister of the Parcae."

"Never met the dame."

"I can well imagine that." The old Professor guy smiled at Frankie over his glass. "But the ancients realized her importance. They held an annual festival in her honor. June twenty-fourth, I believe, was the date. I've seen her represented with a cornucopia in her hands, standing on a ball—"

"Let's have a ball," Frankie muttered. "One more drink and I'm gonna be all set for a ball."

"You shouldn't drink so much," the old guy told him.

Frankie shrugged. "Why not? What else is there to do? I ain't never had the breaks, not once. Look at me—a lousy, washed-up wino. I shake like an old man, and I'm only thirty-three. If I just got a decent chance—"

The Professor guy was nodding. "I know," he said. "I could tell you a similar story. And so could every man. One man takes his last hundred dollars and buys a shack on the beach—six months later they find him there, dead of starvation. Another does the same thing—six months later they strike oil on the shore, and he sells his property for a million plus royalties. One man walks down the street and finds a fat wallet in the gutter. Another walks down the same street a moment later, just in time to be hit by a falling cornerstone. Fortune is a fickle goddess, my friend. But who knows? Being fickle, she may reverse her attitude and visit you with wealth and happiness."

"Nuts!" said Frankie.

"There speaks the scientific mind," said the old Professor guy. "But I'm not so sure. If I could only learn the secret of what attracts Fortune, I'd ask for nothing else. Perhaps it's just a matter of real belief, or of worship. Fortune is a goddess and goddesses demand adoration. Being female, she requires constancy. Could it be that the so-called fortunate ones are merely those who have learned this secret and swear fealty to Fortune in return for her favors?”

“I dunno,” Frankie mumbled. “Me, I’d go all-out for any dame who’d change my luck.”

He picked up his glass, swallowed, then turned. But the old Professor guy had stumbled out. The bartender came up, shaking his head. “Funny how it hits them all of a sudden,” he said.

“Yeah,” Frankie answered. “But what gets me is why a guy like him hangs around this joint.”

“I dunno about that,” the bartender said. “We get some pretty classy trade, on account of the game in back.”

Then Frankie remembered. Sure, there was a back room here. Roulette, dice, the works. He’d never been back there because he never had a stake. But come to think of it, people had been crowding through all evening, passing behind him. Like the bald-headed jerk walking by now, and the college boy with the glasses, and the dame in red.

The dame in red—there was a real item!

Frankie hadn’t paid any attention to dames for a couple of months now. When you’re really on the juice, you get so dames don’t interest you. But this one did.

She wore this red sort of evening dress, and her skin was white as marble, and her hair was jet-black. Like her eyes. She looked at Frankie when she passed, and she smiled.

She smiled at *him.* The way he looked mustn’t have bothered her.

Frankie was high, or he’d never have done it. But he was high, so he floated after her. Floated to the door of the back room and stood behind her while the eye looked her over and gave the nod. And Frankie went right through to the back with her—the eye didn’t try to stop him. In fact, Frankie had an idea the eye was looking at *him* more than at her.

The room in back was bigger than he’d thought, and they had quite a layout. That crummy bar up front was only a blind. This was the McCoy—

three big tables for roulette and four pool tables in the corners, for dice. And there must have been fifty people at least.

It was smoky back there, but not noisy. Even the dice-players were quiet, and when the wheel was spinning at a table you could notice the sound of the ball clicking. Frankie followed the dame in red over to one of the roulette tables. Lots of fat faces here, well-dressed citizens with plenty of moola. Big piles of chips in front of some. Little piles in front of others. And the wheel in the middle turning, the wheel with the thirty-six numbers and the 0 and the double-0, the wheel with the red and the black. Every time it turned, some of the piles would get smaller and other ones would get bigger.

Why?

Here it was, the thing the old Professor had been blabbing about. Fortune. Luck.

Some of the guys must have had a G or more in chips in front of them, and they kept on winning. Some of the others kept on losing and buying more: a dollar for whites, ten for reds, twenty for blues.

But win or lose, everybody was excited. Frankie could feel it coming off them in waves, the excitement around the table. Everybody watched every spin, every play. He watched, too, and felt the pressure. If he only had a stake now!

He looked over at the dame in red. She wasn't playing either, just standing and looking, same as him. Not quite the same, because she wasn't excited. Frankie could tell from the way she stood there, like a statue, sort of. Nobody else paid any attention to her, even though she was the hottest-looking dish in the joint. You'd think they didn't even know she was there, the way they ignored her and kept their eyes on the table, on the little silver ball bouncing around on the rim of the wheel.

And she watched, but her eyes never changed. She didn't clench her fists or breathe hard or even look interested, really. It was almost as if she knew who was going to win and who was going to lose.

Frankie stared at her, stared hard. All at once she turned her head and looked at him again. Those eyes were like a couple of black stones. He wanted to look away, but she looked away first. Her eyes glanced down at the floor.

Frankie bent over to see what she was looking at. And then he noticed it.

There was a chip lying there, right at his feet. It must have fallen off somebody's stack. Frankie bent over and picked it up, held it in his hand. A blue chip—twenty bucks. He could cash it in right now. There was some luck for you!

He started to look around for one of the cashiers who went through the crowd with their little boxes strapped on, but he couldn't spot one. And the stick was going into his act. "Place your bets, ladies and gentlemen—"

Why not? Twenty bucks found, that was luck. And maybe luck would hold. Twenty could get you forty. But which should he play, the red or the black?

Frankie looked over at the dame again. She had a red dress, that was a hunch. But her hair was black and her eyes were black. The black eyes were staring at him now—

Sure, he'd play the black. Frankie started to put his chip down, but his hand wasn't steady and the chip got away from him. It rolled and landed smack on number 33.

He made a move to reach out, but the stick said, "The bank is closed," and the wheel was spinning, and all he could do was stand there and watch. Twenty bucks tossed away like nothing, a rotten piece of luck. The wheel went round and round, the ball went round and round, the room went round and round.

The ball stopped. The wheel stopped. And the room stopped, too, so Frankie could hear the stick saying, "Thirty-three, black."

His number!

Then it started. The stick pushed this big stack of chips his way. And the dame in red smiled, so he put half the chips back on red. Red came up. He left the stack there and red came up again. Three straight wins in a row and he couldn't lose.

But the dame in red shook her head and edged away from the table, so he scooped all his chips together and gave them to the cashier. The cashier paid him off in twenties and fifties and hundreds. Three thousand and twenty bucks, cash!

Frankie stuffed it in his pockets, hurrying through the crowd because he wanted to see the dame again, thank her, maybe even give her a split.

The eye held the door open for him and the dame walked out ahead, and he called, "Hey, wait a minute!" and the eye looked at him.

"What's that, buddy?"

"I wasn't talking to you," Frankie said. "I was talking to the dame."

"What dame?" asked the eye.

Frankie didn't answer, because he could see her going out the front door of the tavern. He caught up with her on the corner. The fresh air hit him, made him feel slightly sick, but he floated over to her and said, "Thanks. You brought me luck."

She just smiled, and in the dim light her eyes were darker than ever.

"Here." He scooped out a handful of bills. "I figure you got this coming."

She didn't take the money.

"I mean it," Frankie said. "Go ahead." Then he stopped. "What's the matter, you deaf or something?"

No answer. That was it, all right. Imagine a classy dame like that, deaf. But couldn't they read your lips?

"Where you headed for?" Frankie asked her. Still no answer.

Maybe the dame was a dummy, too. No wonder she didn't have any boy friend.

"Wanna come with me?" Frankie asked. It didn't make sense that she would—a dame like her being picked up by a crummy bum. But nothing made sense any more; besides, he was too tired for sense. All he knew was that he had to get some rest and sober up. If she wanted to come with him, let her. Nobody'd say anything at the fleabag where he stayed. But he had to sleep now, had to.

He began to walk and sure enough, she followed him. Not a sound out of her, not even the clicking of high heels, because she was wearing sandals. No rings, no jewelry to clank. A beautiful dish, but like a statue.

And she stood like a statue in the middle of his dirty room.

Was she waiting for him to make a pass at her? All he knew was that he was tired, terribly tired. He dragged himself across the room, plopped down on the bed. He knew he couldn't stop himself from falling . . .

He must have slept that way all night, with his head in her lap. And she must have just sat there, not sleeping. Because it was morning now and she was looking down at him and smiling.

She smiled while he washed and shaved and changed into his other shirt. He tried to talk to her again, but she didn't answer. Just smiled and waited, waited until he put on his coat and picked up his hat.

"Come on," he said. "I'm hungry."

They went downstairs and out onto the street. Frankie was going into the Ace Lunch until he remembered he had three grand in his pocket. Why not eat in one of those nice big restaurants over on Main? But he couldn't go to a place like that, looking the way he did.

"Wait a minute," he told her. "I got shopping to do first."

She waited, smiled and waited, while he went into the Hub and bought himself an outfit. Everything from shoes up to a twenty-dollar hat. The ready-made fit perfectly and he looked like a million bucks for only a hundred and thirty.

The clerk was plenty polite, but he ignored the dame. Frankie didn't notice this so much, but afterwards in the restaurant the waitress acted the same way—brought him a glass of water and a menu, but nothing for her.

But it turned out she wouldn't eat anything, anyhow. He pointed at the menu and she just shook her head.

So he ended up eating alone. Then he sat back and tried to figure things out. Here he was with almost three grand still in his pocket. But he had her, too. Miss Can't-hear, Miss Can't-talk, Miss Won't-sleep, Miss Won't-eat. How about that, now?

She smiled at him and Frankie smiled back, but he was beginning to wonder. Sure, she brought him luck, but there was something screwy about her—something awful screwy. He'd have to find a way to shake her before he got in some kind of trouble.

He walked out of the restaurant and she tagged along. Usually he headed for a park-bench in the morning, but now as he got ready to cross the street he stopped. The dame was holding his arm and looking up at a sign, ACME-METAL PRODUCTS COMPANY. So what?

There was another sign in the front window of the building. She was staring at it. MEN WANTED.

He tried to take another step, but she held him. And now she was pointing. Frankie blinked. Was that what she meant? Did she figure on him going in there and asking for a job?

He could, of course. That'd been his line years ago. Still had his social security card, and he could probably get back in the union somehow, even in spite of the bum rap on him. But how could she know that? And what made her think he'd go back to being a working stiff, now that he had all that dough in his kick?

So Frankie shook his head. But she kept right on smiling and her arm kept right on tugging at his sleeve.

All at once he got an idea. "Okay," he said. "I'll do it. But you wait here." He pointed to the doorway, and sure enough, she walked over and stood there. He brushed past her to go inside and she gave him a big smile.

Once he got inside, Frankie started to smile, too. He knew what to do now. This joint must have a back entrance. He'd just slip out the other way. Simple.

Only this guy was standing in the hall, and he spotted Frankie and said, "You a machinist 'r a metalworker?"

"Coremaker," Frankie said. It slipped out natural, before he could stop it. "But I'm not union—"

"Neither is this plant, buddy. Come on in, fill out an application. Got a rush order, the boss's crying for help, and this town's murder when it comes to getting experienced—"

Before he knew it, the guy had him in the office and a fat character named Chesley was handing him a form.

Frankie was getting ready to tell him off when the door opened behind him.

They came in fast, two of them, walking like a couple of wound-up toys. Both of them had bandanas over their mouths. They must have put them on outside in the hall, before they'd pulled their rods.

Their rods were out now, and pointing. And one of them said, from under his bandana, "Stick 'em up and don't move."

There was Frankie and this Chesley and an old bookkeeper guy and the man who'd brought him into the office. They all got their hands up in a hurry.

"Over against the wall," said the first bandana-mouth. "Make it snappy." He walked over to the big wall-safe and waited.

They started moving. The old bookkeeper guy looked like he was ready to pass out. In fact, all at once, he did pass out.

"Catch him!" Chesley yelled. "He's got a bad heart!"

Both of the bandana-mouths turned and watched him fall. Frankie was watching, too. He didn't notice the big wastebasket in front of him until he walked right into it.

The basket went over with a clatter and rolled. It hit one of the gunsels in the shins. Frankie stumbled because of his tangling with the basket and fell forward. He grabbed for something to hang onto. And that turned out to be the nearest gunman's neck. All at once this fellow and Frankie were down on the floor in a heap and Frankie saw the gun in front of him. He reached for it because he was so scared he couldn't think to do something sensible like not grabbing the gun.

The other crook saw him grab for it and he jerked away from the safe. Just then the rolling wastebasket hit him in the shins. This startled him and he gave out a yell and turned. But now his back was to Chesley, and Chesley jumped him. Frankie got this crook's gun away from him, with a hard crack on the wrist, and covered both of the men while Chesley turned on the burglar-alarm.

There was plenty of excitement for the next half hour. When the cops got through talking to Frankie, there were reporters. When the reporters got through, there was Chesley again, and Frankie never did have to fill out that form.

Chesley was delighted that Frankie would be working for him, starting tomorrow.

Frankie was so confused he ended up walking out the front door. By the time he realized what he was doing it was too late to turn around. And there she was. She had been waiting for him all this time, and now she spotted him.

Like the old Professor guy said, everything was luck. The roulette wheel, and stumbling over the wastebasket, and now this job and a new, decent life ahead of him. Blind luck.

He stared at her. Now what? She was always around when things happened.

Frankie asked her to come to him with a jerk of his head, and she smiled. They walked down the street together and he bought some luggage and then he went into the Ardmoor and took a furnished suite, just like that. Two hundred clams a month, but no questions asked. The clerk didn't even look at *her,* and the bellboy took them up without a word, or even a know-it-all grin.

He flipped the kid a half dollar and then sat down on the bed. She stood in the center of the room and smiled.

"This is it, huh, kid? Well, make yourself at home."

He tried to light a cigarette, but it got on his nerves to see her just sitting there, smiling like a statue carved out of stone. Maybe the dame was feebleminded . . .

What he needed was a drink. A nice little drink before dinner. There was a cocktail lounge right downstairs in the Ardmoor, one of those high-class places, all dim and quiet. Peaceful as a church. A place where you could relax and drink.

Frankie stood up. “Wait here a minute,” he said. “I’m gonna go down to the lobby and buy a paper.”

She didn’t try to stop him—just smiled.

He walked downstairs and into the lounge. The bartender asked him what’ll it be and Frankie almost said, “Glass of musky,” before he remembered he didn’t have to drink rotgut muscatel wine any more.

“Rye on the rocks,” he said.

It tasted good.

“Do it again,” Frankie told the guy.

The guy did it. And this one tasted good, too. Everything was good here. The nice, soft darkness and the nice, soft music in the background. A guy could relax.

“The same,” Frankie said to the bartender.

He was feeling better and better. Why not? With his luck, nothing could go wrong. Not even with the dame.

Or *because* of the dame.

It hit him on the third drink. It had been in the back of his mind all along, and with the third drink it didn’t seem so crazy. The dame in red was Lady Luck.

“Hit ’er again!” Frankie said to the bartender.

What had the old Professor guy said? Maybe if you believed in her enough, she’d come to you. And he’d sort of had that feeling last night. It was screwy, but then luck is always screwy. Like the Professor said, some guys get all the breaks and others always wind up with the wrong end of the stick.

Sense or not, it had happened to him. He had Lady Luck right where he wanted her, on his side.

"One more," Frankie said.

It was the strangest, greatest feeling in the world, just sitting there and knowing that luck was with him now, smiling on him. Blind luck, dumb luck, but always smiling. Ready to give him everything and anything he wanted.

Frankie began to think about all the things he'd wanted during all the years he'd been wanting. One of those snazzy English cars. A place up in the woods maybe, with a private lake for fishing. And when he'd been in stir, he'd wanted a blonde more than he'd wanted anything else. Like that one sitting over there at the end of the bar.

She was a tall dame with bare legs. She had one of those fancy cigarette-holders and there was class written all over her. Kind of a doll Frankie'd never even had the nerve to look at twice.

But now, why not? Things were different now. He had luck with him. If he wanted something he could have it. Maybe *she* sent the blonde on purpose, knowing how he felt.

That was it. All he had to do was lean over and say, "How about a drink, baby?" Or maybe, "Would you care for a drink?" That would sound better, classier.

Sure it sounded classier, and it worked, too. She was moving over. Frankie stood up, feeling a little dizzy, and helped her onto the stool. Then he sat down again and had another and he felt fine, just fine.

He kept feeling better and better. Easy to talk, now. Her name was Margot. Not Margaret, but Margot. Only you said it "Margo." The "t" was silent. Silent like the dame in red, waiting upstairs. Maybe he ought to get back to her. But what for? She didn't eat; you don't have to feed Luck. Luck was free, everything was free and easy now.

It was easy to talk to Margot, too. Easy to tell her how lucky he was. How everything he touched turned to gold, like this King Midas or whatever the guy's name was they named that flour after.

So Frankie told her, and they drank, and he said how he'd just moved in, and how he'd foiled the robbery today and how he'd won all that dough last night. Only this was just the beginning, wait and see.

She said she'd like that—waiting and seeing. She called him "Frankie-boy," and said she was afraid she was getting just a wee bit drunkie.

Then the bar started filling up. And Frankie said how's for getting a bottle and taking it up to his room and drinking in peace?

And she said oh she didn't know about a thing like that, but he could see she was only stalling, and sure enough she finally said yes.

So the bartender wrapped a bottle and she carried it because it was hard for him to walk. And they went up the stairs and he leaned on her and he could feel how warm her skin was under her sleeve and he knew this was it, this was what he wanted more than anything.

But in the hall he remembered and told her to wait right where she was for a minute. He went around a corner and down a corridor until he came to his door.

Frankie unlocked it. *She* was still sitting there, smiling at him—hadn't moved a muscle since he left.

He stumbled over to her and he said, "Thanks. Thanks a million. But you gotta get out now or she'll see you. We wanna be alone, understand?"

She just sat there, not hearing. So he yelled it at her. And then he pulled her up and pushed her over to the door. It was like lugging a statue, but he made it. And he headed her down the hall past the blonde in the corridor, hoping she wouldn't see the blonde.

Only she must have, because she looked at him and stopped smiling. She stood there and her black eyes got that stony stare in them as she looked right through him.

He tried to grin and gave her a little push. "Go on," he said. "Come back tomorrow. Tha'sa good girl."

Then she was walking away and Frankie was walking away, back around the corridor to pick up the blonde and steer her into his room.

"Who were you talking to?" Margot asked. "Yourself?"

"Never mind," said Frankie.

She didn't mind and they had a drink together. And just to show her he wasn't handing out a line, he showed her his roll.

After that things were even better between him and the blonde. She said she liked him much, much more than a lot. But he was so loaded and so sleepy, he had a hard time keeping his eyes open.

Funny thing, just about then Frankie thought he heard somebody knocking on the door. He figured maybe it was the dame in red. But before he could even try to find out, he passed out.

When Frankie woke up, it was morning, full bright daylight. The blonde was gone. So was the dough; so was his new luggage, even. He found a dollar and thirty-five cents change in the back of his suit. And that was it, brother, you've had it.

He'd had it, all right. Because before he could pull himself together, the house manager was on the phone complaining, telling him he was to vacate the premises at once on account of disturbing the neighbors during the night.

Frankie tried to say something about a refund then, remembering that a buck thirty-five was all that he had left, but the house manager said one more word and he'd call the cops. Besides, he didn't want an ex-con for a tenant.

Frankie's head was splitting; he couldn't figure out how the guy knew about *that.*

Not until he got downstairs and bought a paper and saw the story about the robbery could he figure it. EX-CONVICT FOILS HOLDUP was the headline, and he read the story under it that was all about himself. *All* about himself, because some smart-aleck reporter must have checked the news files to see what he could find out about Frankie and ran across his name in an old story written at the time he got sent up.

So there was no sense going around to see Chesley for his job now. And the dough was gone, all on account of that dizzy, double-crossing blonde—

So it was gone. So what? That was just the breaks of the game. He could get more, with his luck.

With his luck.

But *she* was gone, too! And *she* was luck!

They must have thought Frankie was insane when he ran back to the Ardmoor and yelled to the manager about a dame in red. The manager hadn't seen her, of course. Nobody had seen her. Nobody but Frankie.

He went back to the restaurant and to the old flop, went everywhere he'd been. Nobody talked.

What had the old Professor guy called her? Fortuna, the fickle goddess. Fickle. Only he'd been the one who was fickle. He'd ditched her for a blonde, thrown her out for a double-crossing thieving blonde.

Frankie went up and down the streets all day, looking for the dame in red. But he never saw her. His feet got tired and his head hurt and he kept talking to himself.

Finally, he decided to try the tavern. That's where he'd met her in the first place. She might be hanging around in the back room, where the Wheel of Fortune turned.

It was getting dark and Frankie was a wreck. What with his hangover, and all that walking, and the funny feeling inside of him—not knowing what was real any more—he could hardly see.

He was just about a block away from the joint, when he blinked and straightened up. Somebody was coming out of the front door and it looked like the dame in red.

Frankie started to run. The dame was walking away, fast, and this time he could hear the hard click of high heels. Now that he was closer, he could tell it wasn't the dame in red.

Then he saw who it was. It was the blonde—Margot! She'd been in there, playing the wheel on his dough!

She was walking away fast in the other direction and wasn't yet aware of him sprinting towards her. He caught up with her just alongside an alley, and that was good, too.

Now Frankie knew that even though he hadn't seen the dame in red that morning, she was still with him. Because she'd arranged for him to find Margot again. So luck was still in there pitching for him.

So he knew just what to do.

He reached out and grabbed the blonde by her pony tail and yanked her into the alley, fast. She turned around and saw him, her mouth dropping open and her eyes getting as big as they could get.

"Where's the dough!" Frankie shouted, yanking her head back and forth. "Where's my dough!"

The blonde couldn't answer, because she was shaking so. But her bag fell out of her hand and landed on the bricks. It opened and a lot of lipstick and such spilled out of it. She pointed in the direction of the bag, gasping.

Frankie gave her one last angry shove. Then he got down on his knees and rummaged through the things that had fallen from her bag. He came up with a dollar or two in small change.

"You lost it!" Frankie yelled. "You lost it all! Talk about tough luck—"

Then he looked at her.

She was sitting on the alley pavement where she'd landed, sitting there with her back up against the wall. When Frankie had given her that shove, she'd banged her head, banged it hard, too, because there was blood running down the side of her face.

Frankie bent over and started to feel her forehead. But her head fell forward at his touch and Frankie could see right away that she was dead.

Frankie got out of the alley, fast. He wanted to run, but there was no place to go. When they found the blonde, he knew that they'd trace her back to the hotel, identify her, and tie him in, sooner or later. And with the tough luck he was suddenly having, it might as well be sooner.

In Frankie's hand was the mound of loose change. Just enough to buy a couple of drinks, maybe. So he walked down the block, went into the tavern, and slid onto his regular stool.

The old Professor guy was there, and Frankie wanted to tell him the story. He wanted to tell him because maybe the Professor could settle something for him that was very important. Had there really been a dame in red, or had Frankie imagined the whole deal?

So Frankie started talking to the Professor real fast, spilling it all out. The Professor was pretty loaded, just like Frankie had been the night before, but he seemed to get the drift.

“Hallucination,” he said. “It’s all in your mind. Reality in such cases becomes purely subjective. But is there an objective world? That, my harried friend, is the question.”

And then he set his glass down on the bar and stared at the door to the back room.

“Wait a minute,” he said. “Who’s she beckoning to?”

“I don’t see anybody,” Frankie told him.

“Then she must be looking for me,” the Professor said. He climbed down off the stool and staggered his way to the door. In a minute Frankie saw him standing there, moving his lips and gesturing, as if he were talking to someone. Then he nodded his head and held the door open for someone to go ahead of him into the back room and to its games of chance.

Frankie still couldn’t see anyone, but then he remembered what the Professor had said about Fortune being a fickle goddess and all that. So maybe she had a new friend now, who maybe would treat her better. On the other hand, the Professor could have caught this hallucination business from him like you catch measles or a cold in the chest. But maybe they were both crazy. Maybe the whole thing was just in their imaginations.

Maybe he’d even imagined murdering the blonde. By this time, Frankie didn’t know just what to believe. Until all at once he could hear the sirens outside, and he knew that at least a part of it hadn’t been his imagination.

The sirens got louder, and Frankie picked up his glass.

“Here’s luck,” said Frankie.

And then the cops walked in.

The Cure

when your girl goes mad in the jungle, there's just one thing to do

IT MUST HAVE BEEN after midnight when Jeff awoke.

The hut was dark, but moonlight streamed through the doorway. As Jeff rolled over, he could see Marie standing beside his hammock.

She was stark-naked.

The long golden flame of her hair shone against the whiteness of her breasts, and there were little flecks of light dancing in her eyes.

Jeff held out his arms and she moved forward, smiling.

Then the knife came down.

Jeff caught the reflection of the moonlight on the steel, caught it just in time to twist his body to one side. There was a harsh, ripping sound as the blade of the machete slashed through the coarse canvas of the hammock.

He grappled with her, his hands sliding across the warm weight of her body, slippery with sweat. Marie made sounds deep within her throat and slashed at him again. The machete bit into Jeff's ankle, and he screamed.

Then a dark form blotted out the moonlight from the doorway, hurtled forward, and pinned Marie from behind.

"Senor, you are all right?"

"I guess so." Jeff clambered out of the hammock, gasping at the sudden surge of pain in his ankle as he found the lamp and lit it.

Luiz was standing behind the naked girl, pinning her arms to the wall. He stood quite calmly—a little man with a brown face and long black bangs who could have passed for a wooden Indian. A wooden Indian with a machete of his own in his hand, pressed against Marie's naked throat.

"Yes, *senor?"*

"No!" Jeff muttered. "Don't!"

Luiz shrugged and let the machete fall but did not release the girl. There was no expression in his muddy brown eyes.

Marie began to whimper.

"I'll kill you, Jeff, I swear it! You thought I didn't know, but I do. The money came, didn't it? You and Mike have the money. You're going to run away and leave me here to die. But I won't let you. I'll kill you first, I'll kill you——"

"Hey, what goes on here?"

Mike came into the hut, wheezing from his climb up the ladder. He stared at them.

Jeff shrugged. The words came hard, but they came. "It's Marie," he said. "She flipped her wig."

"Came at you with a machete, huh?"

"That's right. She thinks we got the dough and we're planning to pull a sneak."

"Maybe it's fever."

"Look at her," Jeff said.

Mike looked at Marie. Her eyes were rolling and saliva dribbled out of the corner of her mouth.

"Guess you're right." Mike sighed. "It isn't fever. So now what do we do?" "I don't know. She'll have to be watched." Jeff turned to Luiz. "Lucky you came along," he told the Indian.

Luiz nodded. "I see her come out of hut with machete, so I walk behind. She look bad. Is a sickness in the head, no?"

"Yeah. A sickness in the head. We'll have to take her back to the hut and tie her down on her cot."

"Let us do it," Mike suggested. "You'd better look after that ankle of yours. It's bleeding bad. If there was only a doctor around——"

Jeff grunted. "She needs a doctor worse than I do," he said. "I've seen this coming on for weeks. This is no place for a dame. No wonder she flipped. If that dough doesn't get here soon, we'll all flip."

Mike and Luiz got Marie out of the hut, carrying her down the ladder. Jeff limped over to the bureau and looked for some brandy. He wanted to sterilize the wound. In this jungle damp even a scratch could be dangerous. He found the bottle and was all set to pour some on when Luiz came back. He had something in his hand. The stained rag looked like some kind of poultice.

"I fix," he said. *"Muy bueno."*

"What is it, one of your native messes?"

A hint of reproach shone in the muddy eyes. "I am not native, *senor.* I am the Spanish, no?"

"All right, you're Spanish." Jeff lay back in the hammock as Luiz bound his ankle. The poultice burned.

"Marie all right?" he asked.

"Senor Mike, he ties her tight," Luiz answered. Then he paused. "Why you not let me kill her? She try to kill you."

"Because she didn't know what she was doing. She's out of her head."

"But she hurt you. I do not let anyone hurt the *senor.* He is my *jefe."*

"That's all right, Luiz. You're a good boy." Jeff sighed. "Now go away and let me rest."

The Indian slipped away, and Jeff fell into a troubled sleep. It must have been midafternoon when Mike climbed the ladder to his hut again and Jeff awoke to find him standing there.

"How is she?" he asked.

Mike grunted. "Listen," he said. "You oughtta be able to hear her screaming from here."

"That bad, huh?"

"Plenty bad. Hollering about the dough at the top of her lungs. If these Indians understood English, we'd be in real trouble. We've got to get her to a doctor quick."

Jeff sat up, slapping at a mosquito. "I can't travel with this leg," he said. "Besides, we have to wait here for the dough. Then we can go down to the coast, take a freighter to Belem. It's a big city—they've got psychiatrists there."

"You mean Marie needs a headshrinker?"

"That's right." Jeff sighed.

Mike looked at him. "I wonder how long it'll take before your foot heals," he said. "Maybe the smart thing to do is take her now. For all we know, the dough won't arrive for another month. We can't keep her tied up all the time, can we?"

"But I told you, I can't travel now."

"You don't have to," Mike answered. "Luiz and I could take her to Belem." "And leave me here all alone?"

"Somebody'd have to stay anyway, to get the dough when it comes."

Jeff blinked at his partner. "You'd trust me?"

"Sure, why not?" Mike smiled. "We're buddies, aren't we? We pulled the job off together, didn't we? Of course I trust you with the dough—ain't you always trusted me with Marie?" He wiped the sweat from his forehead. "So let's do it this way. Luiz and I will take Marie down to Santarem in the piragua. From there we can catch some tramp steamer into Belem. We still got a grand or so stashed away, and that ought to be enough. I'll slip a few bucks to the skipper and nobody'll pay any attention to Marie no matter what she's yelling about. In Belem I'll hunt up a good headshrinker, get her fixed up. One of those private hospital deals, I figure. By the time you get the money she'll be okay again. That's the way you want it, isn't it, Jeff?" "Yeah." Jeff sighed. "That's the way I want it."

And that’s the way it was. They left the following morning, Mike, Marie, and Luiz. Luiz didn’t quite know what it was all about, but he listened to Jeff’s instructions very carefully and promised to come back and report as soon as he could.

“You rest,” he told Jeff gravely. “I tell women to look after you, fix foot. No worry ’bout anything, eh?”

Jeff nodded, and after they departed he drowsed.

He nodded and drowsed, drowsed and nodded, and the days slipped by. The women in the village came with his food. They cleaned his hut and they fanned him with leaves during the heat of the day, and they changed the poultices on his ankle.

But something must have been wrong with the wound, because the fever came back. Jeff lay in his hammock, listening to the rain, and tried to pretend that none of this was real. And yet it *was* real; it *had* to be real.

You spend a year planning the armored-truck job, you and Mike together, and you know it’ll work. You figure all the angles, and you know you can get away with the dough—but then what?

If you’re smart, you can pull a big job and not get caught; it’s afterward that the trouble starts, when you try to get rid of the loot. They trace the bills and catch up with you.

Finally you work a deal. You make contact with a man named Gonzales in Cuba. He’ll dump the bills in exchange for pesos, in exchange for a third of the split. Meanwhile you have to hide out. Not in Cuba, because something might go wrong, and not in any city. So you think it over and decide to hole up somewhere out of the way—somewhere nobody goes if they have any dough or any sense. The godforsaken backwaters of Brazil, the jungle. You’ll wait there until Gonzales sends the dough.

So you pull the job, and it goes off okay, even if you have to plug a guard on the truck. You got your fake passports. You grab a freighter. You land in Porto de Moz.

Then you get lucky. You run into a wooden Indian named Luiz on the beach, and he takes a shine to you, wants to be your servant because you buy him the first pair of shoes he ever owned in his life. You treat him like a Spaniard, not like an Indian, and this makes him your slave for life. He tells you he'll take you upriver, to his village. He brings you in his piragua, real proud to return home with three *Norteamericanos.* He's a big shot now. He gets you installed in huts, and all you got to do is wait for the runner with the mail to bring you your dough.

That part makes sense.

But why did you bring Marie?

Because she wanted to come, and because you wanted her. That's why you pulled the job in the first places for Marie. You wanted her, and you had to have her because she was the most beautiful woman in the world. Not one of those cheap pushovers, but a big-time TV singer, real class. She didn't soil her hands with punks; it took real dough to get her to roll over and play tricks.

You told her about the job and promised her everything she ever wanted—down in South America she could live like a queen on the loot. And you took her along because you were scared to wait and send for her later. You brought her here.

Here, where it rained all the time and the mosquitoes were murder. Here, where the huts were set on stilts, planted in filled oil drums to keep the ants away. But the ants came anyway, and they bit. And the fish in the river bit, too, so you couldn't even bathe. And at night the Indians pounded on drums and played flutes. You sweated in the heat and shivered with fever and ate goat meat and drank brandy, and you waited. Luiz tried to be a good servant, but he was just a wooden Indian, even if he did speak English. He ran off to the jungle like the rest of them, and maybe he drank blood and used poison darts.

But that was crazy.

It was all crazy, and no wonder Marie flipped. Waiting for the runner with the dough, week after week. And the rain dripping on the roof, dripping on your skull, hour after hour, day after day, night after night.

Where was the damned runner? Where was Luiz? Where was Marie?

The fever broke at last, and then Jeff remembered where Marie was. She was in Belem, with Mike and Luiz. He hoped they'd found a good skull doctor for her so she'd be all right. Once she got out of here, got away from the jungle, she'd snap back. It was just that the jungle was no place for a woman. Funny, he wasn't sore because she'd taken a cut at him with the machete. A person can't help it when they flip.

But Jeff knew that if he didn't get that dough soon he'd flip himself. Now that his ankle was all right again he spent all his time sitting in the doorway of the hut, staring out at the river. The waiting was awful. There was nothing to do, nobody to talk to, and he had only one bottle of brandy left.

Finally came the evening when he knew he was cracking up. He decided to tackle the brandy. He hadn't been able to sleep decently for a week, and maybe the brandy would help. If it didn't, tomorrow he'd set out for the coast alone. He couldn't stand this any longer.

The brandy was like fire, like the moonlight. It was like the drums pounding out there in the clearing. Jeff was very drunk, so drunk that he forgot once again that Marie and Mike and Luiz were gone. He couldn't find his shoes, and he began to crawl around the floor of the hut looking for them. Luiz must have put them away. "Luiz!" he shouted. "Luiz!"

And then, all at once, Luiz was there.

Luiz was there, and everything was all right. Jeff stood up, reeling, and stared at the little brown man with the muddy eyes. Good old Luiz, the perfect servant! He'd take care of everything now, he was back. . . .

He was back.

Jeff sobered, remembering.

"What happened?" he murmured.

Luiz shrugged.

"A bad thing, *senor.*"

"Marie, did something happen to Marie?" Jeff gripped the edge of the table.

"She is all right," Luiz said.

Jeff relaxed. "Okay, then. I can take anything else, I guess. What happened—did Gonzales double-cross us about the money?"

"No, the money came, *senor."*

"You have it?"

"No. *Senor* Mike, he had it in the piragua. They think I am asleep, but I see him counting it when we go down the river. He tells your woman the runner brings it before they leave here. Now he will run away with her, after he kills me."

"Why, the dirty, stinking rat——"

"Please, *senor,* do not alarm yourself. This *Senor* Mike then creeps toward me with his knife, to kill. But I am awake and waiting for him with my own machete. We fight. The money falls in the river—it is a sad thing, no? But your honor is saved, for I kill the *Senor* Mike very dead."

Jeff began to sweat. "I see. The dough's gone, my double-crossing partner is gone, and Marie——"

"She is all right. I do just what you say."

"Took her to Belem alone?"

Luiz shrugged. "Please, *senor.* I am simple man. I have not the education to go alone to Belem. But I tie up your woman and take her back up the river, to my friends. I find the headshrinker there."

"In the jungle? But——"

"Look." Luiz unwrapped the bundle from his waist, and something rolled forward onto the table. "Better than you get in Belem. Is a good job, no?" Jeff stared at the object on the table. It was a good job, all right. Marie's head was no bigger than an orange.

The Tempter

Dr. Jensen had treated a good many mentally ill patients. But plain Mr. John Smith had the most complicated mind and body on Earth. Or anywhere in the Universe—for that matter!

DOCTOR JENSEN was just lighting his cigar when the stranger walked into his office and sat down directly opposite him.

This annoyed him very much, because the girl in the outer office had strict orders not to admit anyone without an appointment. People didn't just walk in on him—it took several weeks and a series of interviews before a prospective patient actually got to see the Doctor. After all, he wasn't running a mitt-camp. He was a prominent psychoanalyst who owned two apartment buildings outright, and had a mortgage on a third. Even his receptionist knew better than to intrude on him without a signal, and the Doctor seldom buzzed her except after office-hours. Lately, he hadn't buzzed her at all.

The Doctor had been anticipating the solitary enjoyment of his cigar. It was a pure Havana filler costing one dollar, much better than the cigars Sigmund Freud could have afforded. Doctor Jensen realized that cigar-smoking helped increase his resemblance to Freud, as did the goatee he so carefully cultivated. A clever touch, but then Doctor Jensen was a clever man. Aside from that, he really enjoyed his cigars, despite what Freud had to say about oral eroticism.

So he was genuinely irked when the stranger appeared.

"Yes?" he said.

"Yes what?" asked the stranger.

Paranoid, the Doctor told himself. But he smiled, ignoring the question. "You wished to see me?" he asked.

"It's necessary," said the stranger.

"What seems to be your difficulty?"

"No difficulty," the stranger assured him promptly. "It's the others who are difficult."

Delusions of persecution, the Doctor noted. He blew a perfect smoke-ring and asked. "What others?"

"The ones who don't believe me. The ones who won't acknowledge my identity. They must know who I am, at least subconsciously. In fact—"

"Who are you?" the Doctor demanded.

"The Devil," said the stranger.

Doctor Jensen stared more intently at the blond, asthenic-looking man who stood quietly facing him with his hands in his pockets. There was nothing at all diabolical about his appearance, and that made his psychosis twice as interesting.

During the course of his professional career, Doctor Jensen had met one Julius Caesar, one Napoleon, two Joans of Arc and innumerable Saviors. But he'd never had a Devil seek him out before.

"Might I have your name?" ho. asked.

"Satan. Satan the Tempter."

The Doctor blew another smoke-ring. "Your—uh—human name, please."

"John Smith."

"Now, really—" For a moment Doctor Jensen almost lost his professional aplomb. But a hand came out of the stranger's pocket, bearing a social security card and a driver's license. Both were made out to John Smith, and both listed an address on the West Side.

"*That* makes trouble, too," the stranger complained. "You know, sometimes it's easier to get people believing I'm the Devil than it is to tell them I'm John Smith."

"But you really *are* John Smith," said the Doctor, "You know that, don't you?"

"Suppose I put It this way. I was John Smith until I became possessed. Now I'm Satan the Tempter."

An automatic system of checks-and-balances began to function in Doctor Jensen's cortex. The stranger's suit was shabby, but he had an unusually interesting delusion. There probably wouldn't be much of a fee, but the case had its unique aspects. And finally, the Doctor told himself: *think what a paper I could write on it! It's just what I need for the lectures—a natural for publicity.*

That decided the matter. Doctor Jensen smiled and waved his cigar. "Sit down," he invited. "We'll go into your problem more fully. You'll find me a most sympathetic listener."

When John Smith finally departed, armed with a mild sedative ("Can't you give me something that will make me sleep without dreaming, Doctor? Every night I go straight to Hell!") he had an appointment set up for the following afternoon.

And Doctor Jensen had a miscellany of notes to pore over—more accurately, to puff over, with the aid of a fresh cigar. He sat there now and reviewed his somewhat unorthodox shorthand style.

"*B.* 7979, *Pawtucket R.I., f. butcher, m. clerk, l sib., sister, dec. age 10, sc. fvr. No maj. phys. ill., disab. Ed. grmmr., hi sch., then thtre. usher. 4F draft (fit. ft., rupt.) unmarrdappar. htrosxl. Last 10 yrs. prnter. (Check: "printer's devil").*

Nothing there. But some of the responses to the word-association test had been interesting—so interesting, in fact, that he'd circled them in red pencil.

"BLACK—*pit."*

"RED—*burn."*

"PUNISH—*my duty.*"

"MAN—*enemy.*"

The patient had a psychotic-type fixation, beyond any possible doubt. Doctor Jensen read the rest of his notes and reviewed what John Smith had told him.

The dreams had begun about a year before. The patient had been tormented night after night by sleep-induced visions of mingled flame and darkness, conveying a sense of confinement that was not claustrophobia but just a feeling of being "sealed off, way under the earth."

At first John Smith had been mortally terrified, screaming himself awake. And then, gradually, the fear vanished, and the darkness and the flames became familiar, recognizable. John Smith came to realize that he *belonged* in the dreams. Finally had come the true realization of his identity.

"Don't you see, Doctor? That's the only way I, or any of the others, can reach upper earth. By contacting the sleeping, defenseless minds of men and gradually taking over their bodies."

"What *others?*" Doctor Jensen had asked.

"The demons. Fiends are confined, of course. They have their eternal, infernal duties below. But the demons roam abroad, seeking living souls. Surely you've heard of demoniac possession."

"You must have done considerable reading in the field," Doctor Jensen observed.

But John Smith shook his head. "No reading," he replied. "What I know I've learned from first-hand experience. And that kind of knowledge is always the best."

Doctor Jensen nodded, but he didn't believe it. The pattern seemed obvious. John Smith, job printer in a large shop, unmarried, without close friends or family ties—such a man might easily spend many hours of his time in the public library, reading up on obscure religious and metaphysical concepts. A man who might get to brooding about his vanished youth (and, perhaps, his potency: better check that angle, too) and his personal obscurity. Every psychiatrist worth his forty-minute hour knew that the latent aberrations of the subconscious could be drawn from dreams and transformed into power-symbols. In Smith’s case the dreaded nightmares had become the springboard for delusions of grandeur and John Smith had become the Devil.

Simple. Probably much *too* simple. But Doctor Jensen would probe more deeply.

“Precisely what do you do?” he asked, “when you feel you’re the Devil?”

“I tempt people,” John Smith told him. “That’s my mission. To tempt others to Evil, so that I may snare their souls for my own. Not the truly virtuous, of course—they’re a waste of time. I seek out those who have already succumbed to sin. The most likely prospects, those who need only a final nudge.”

Doctor Jensen talked on as he scribbled. “Do you enjoy being the Devil?” he asked.

John Smith shrugged. “Yes, I do,” he declared. “*I* do, because *I* am Satan. But the other part, the *human* part—sometimes it takes hold and realizes it can’t stand the dreams and the knowledge. That’s the part that wants your help. Oh, how can I explain it?”

“You don’t need to explain it,” the Doctor smiled, as he wrote down *schizo* and underlined it in his notebook.

It was then that he’d made the appointment for the following day. John Smith had been pathetically grateful, and insisted that Doctor Jensen take twenty dollars.

Jensen, tom between telling him that his usual fee was thirty dollars or just refusing the money altogether, finally pocketed the amount and dismissed his new patient.

After all, twenty dollars was twenty cigars, was two bottles of good Scotch, was one-fifth of a night with that new girl Miss Charlene had called him about. And a rose was a rose was a rose.

So Doctor Jensen put aside his notes now and went out for the evening, during the course of which he partook of all three of the pleasures which had come to mind when he accepted the money.

And thus hygienically refreshed, he returned to his office the next day and awaited, late in the afternoon, the coming of his new patient. He wanted more word-association tests, he wanted free-fantasy, he wanted an immediate transference. He put John Smith on the couch and started him talking.

One month and fifteen sessions later, John Smith was still talking. And Doctor Jensen had learned nothing. Oh, he had all the data on John Smith's humdrum and utterly Smithsonian existence as a man. But the Devil eluded him.

He couldn't uncover the traumatic incident that had been the source of the fantasies. And that was what he needed in order to do a successful monograph or, at the very least, a successful lecture. Was—Doctor Jensen permitted himself to wonder—because he actually didn't know how to conduct a really successful analysis? Was it because he'd gotten into the habit of merely going through the motions, striving to *keep* his patients rather than cure them?

The thought irritated him. And one afternoon, following a trying day during which he'd been forced to commit a regular hundred-dollar-a-week analysand to an institution, Doctor Jensen lost control. He began to question his patient directly and to make positive statements.

"You say you're the Devil. The Devil in John Smith's body, which you entered during sleep. Why? Why choose that particular body? What purpose have you on earth? It makes no sense."

The man on the couch smiled. "Sense. What is 'sense' ? Perhaps I chose the body because it *is* so nondescript—as average as the name. I'm less conspicuous that way, for my purpose. And my purpose is, as I've told you, to tempt mankind and to snare souls."

Doctor Jensen bit off the end of his cigar—and to blazes with the symbolic content of the act. "All right, if you're convinced of that, why did you come to me and beg to be relieved of your delusion?"

"It's not a delusion. Not to *me* it isn't. It's only a delusion to the John Smith personality who originally sought you out. *He* doesn't matter any more, for *I'm* in complete control now."

"Very well." Doctor Jensen leaned forward, his jaw muscles tightening. "You're the Devil. You're sure of it, and you're satisfied to be the Devil. So why do you keep coming back here to me?"

Still smiling, the man on the couch put his hands in his pockets. "Because I have another purpose, Doctor. I'm here to snare your soul."

"My soul?" Doctor Jensen felt the irritation grow. He didn't have to take this sort of thing from a charity case. "What if I told you I don't believe in the soul, or an afterlife, or the Devil?"

"I know," said his patient. "That's what makes it so easy."

"Easy?"

"At first I thought it might be difficult. Although you're obviously ripe for Hell, the problem of temptation seemed formidable. No sense offering you riches because your profession, as you practise it, brings you wealth. As for the pleasures of the senses, you have ample access to them all. But there's pride and hatred and the urge to kill—"

Doctor Jensen stiffened. *Projection,* he told himself. "Let's talk about those things," he said, softly. "Have you ever wanted to kill someone, John Smith? Did you ever want to kill your father because of what he did to your mother, or—"

John Smith laughed. "No, Doctor. I've never had the urge, any more than I had parents. I've never wanted to kill, or torture, or rape, or indulge in any act of violence. Those are *human* failings, not diabolical ones. Those are the traits that condemn humans to Hell, where I extend punishment.

"I have pride, yes—the pride of Lucifer, Prince of Darkness. But that pride is based on the realization that I'm above human vices and greeds. I have my hatred, too—hatred of being eternally condemned to associate with evil humanity. But I've no urge to kill. That's *your* problem."

Doctor Jensen bit the end of his cigar again, and cut his lip. It was extremely painful, and for a moment something rose unbidden to the threshold of consciousness; something strangely similar to the urge to kill. Then he remembered that he himself had once undergone a complete analysis, that he was a pillar of his profession, and that the patient on the couch before him could be numbered among the least important of men.

He forced himself to smile tolerantly upon his patient, saying, "Very well. But you aren't very convincing, you know. If you're the Devil, where are your supernatural powers? You don't walk through walls or vanish in a puff of smoke. To be blunt, you hardly impress me."

John Smith sighed. "I should think you'd understand," he said. "If I walked through the wall right now—and I assure you I can, quite easily—you wouldn't believe the evidence of your own senses. Your so-called professional training would lead you to label the phenomenon as pure hallucination.

"As for vanishing in smoke or similar devices, it's all a matter of keeping abreast of the times. Some hundreds of years ago, when my reality was widely acknowledged, people expected such feats and were not too startled or surprised. But today I'd merely attract unwelcome attention. And my strength lies in remaining anonymous. In a prosaic body I come and go as I please, tempt and snare, tempt and snare."

Doctor Jensen was impatient again. "Whom do you tempt and whom do you snare?" he snapped. "Every day you come and lie here on my couch, you lie and lie—"

"Father of Lies. That's the association, isn't it?" John Smith sat up and nodded. "But I assure you, I speak the truth. I've winnowed and won many souls since my sojourn in this body. Fat bankers and red-necked military men, and rich women like perfumed hogs, and drunken foundry-workers and fraternity brothers and a transvestite in the subway and a boy who smothered his baby sister and a girl who—"

"Baby sister," snapped Doctor Jensen. "Quick now! Did you ever try to smother your baby sister?"

John Smith grinned. “No,” he said. “You don’t believe me, do you? But I speak the truth. Truth is the weapon I’ve chosen to snare your soul.”

Doctor Jensen took a quick look around his office, to reassure his sense of reality. “That’s enough for today,” he declared. “But don’t be discouraged. I’ll cure you yet.”

His patient shook his head slowly. “Truth is my weapon,” he repeated. “And the truth is that you’ve never cured anyone in your life.”

“Now see here—”

“I do see. I see everything. Your methods are not sound, Doctor Jensen. You’ve never really corrected a neurotic, psychotic or psychosomatic disorder. You don’t care to. Your policy is to make your patients permanently dependent on you, so that they remain patients. At times you’ve managed to relieve them of superficial tension, together with most of their cash. But you don’t care.”

“How dare you intimate a thing like that?”

John Smith grinned again. “Pride is one of your sins, and hatred is another. Hatred you express in your extortionate attitude toward the tenants of your apartment buildings. Hatred you scarcely managed to mask when you railroaded Doctor Klauss out of the profession two years ago by falsely testifying under oath that he supplied narcotics to confirmed addicts.”

Doctor Jensen rose. “Where’d you find that out?” he gasped. “Nobody knew—”

“*I* know.” John Smith walked over to the window, and stared down at the streets of the city like a saturnine gargoyle. “I know everything. I know about the girls you visit at Miss Charlene’s, I know about your secret files, I know about the ten thousand in cash you got from old Ligget’s nephew for having him committed to the asylum. I know about every dirty action, every filthy thought in your miserable life. Your life, motivated by pride and hatred and the urge to kill.”

Doctor Jensen gripped Smith’s shoulder, his voice rising above the traffic murmur from the street far below. “Now I’m beginning to understand,” he muttered. “It was all a gag, wasn’t it? You came here to get next to my girl, get at my files. You’re a spy, aren’t you? Who sent you? Was it Klauss or some of those old women who’ve been after my hide?”

John Smith turned. “Take your hand off my shoulder,” he said. “I dislike being touched.”

Doctor Jensen’s face contorted violently. “You dislike being touched, eh? You, with your nonsense about the Devil, coming here and trying to make a fool out of me, trying to wreck my career!” His hand moved from John Smith’s shoulder, rose to his neck. “I could kill you—”

And before he knew it, Doctor Jensen was killing him. Both hands up now, tight around the throat, and John Smith was the asthenic type, no match for a powerfully built man bent on murder. He was making harsh gargling noises but he kept right on smiling, and Doctor Jensen knew he would have to wipe that smile off his face, forever.

Then they were stumbling forward, and the window was open, and Doctor Jensen felt an emotion so pure it was almost an ecstasy. It came from the realization that he *was* killing, and it was a wonderful feeling of release, with everything turning red.

Only he must have stumbled against the window itself, because there was a bump and a wrench and a crash. He tried to release his grip but it was too late.

Doctor Jensen and John Smith toppled out of the window together and crashed nine stories to the pavement below.

Even in death’s coming, Doctor Jensen retained his basic convictions. He admitted John Smith had been right in a way. He’d hit on Doctor Jensen’s weak points, for there *was* pride, there *was* hatred, there *was* an urge to kill. Come to think of it, John Smith had even tempted him into killing.

But that was as far as Doctor Jensen would go—as far as his swirling thoughts *could* go before he hit the pavement. He still didn’t believe in God, or the Devil, or an afterlife.

That’s why it was so particularly shocking, after a moment of black concussion, to find himself up and walking down the long dark corridor. That’s why it was so shocking to reach the end of the corridor and gaze through the open door at the radiant reaches of fiery fury beyond.

That’s why it was so shocking when Doctor Jensen saw the figure standing inside the doorway, smiling a greeting.

“Hello,” said John Smith.

Sock Finish

Hollywood was filming an "epic" of the Good Old Days. They needed an oldtime comic who epitomized silent slapstick So hasbeen Artie Ames had his chance for a comeback. A nostalgic tale of the "cat's pajama" days when "life was just a bowl of cherries

THE NAME OF THE VICTIM WAS Artie Ames. I doubt if you remember him. I didn't, arid when he walked into my Beverly Hills office that afternoon and announced himself to my girl, I couldn't have cared less.

Of course, I didn't know he was a victim, then.

Let's get one thing straight: I try to see the people who come into the office, but I'm an agent. When I'm on the job, my first duty is to my clients. And an agent's office is Mecca for every Arab in Hollywood. Hollywood is full of Arabs without camels, Arabs with three-humped camels, Arabs with caravans of millions of imaginary camels, all looking for agents.

So I let Artie Ames sit on the mourner's bench in my outer reception room while I spent the afternoon slaving over a hot telephone. I was working out a deal with Dick Melvin, at Metromount. He wanted to sign one of my properties, Tommy Nolan, as juvenile lead for a big Cinemascope turkey they were cooking up for the Thanksgiving trade. He'd already tested Nolan and liked what he saw, and now it was just a matter of working out the minor details, such as the price. We hassled back and forth for a while and finally I nailed him down on the third callback and was just getting ready to hang up when he insisted on talking about the plot of the picture.

It turned out that he was going to do one of those "Good Old Days" things—not a biog, but a general story on Hollywood in the 1920s. "We were going to work it up as *The Mack Sennett Story,"* he told me. "Only you know what would happen. We'd put out a big buck for rights, and then we'd have to change the whole thing, anyway. So we'll just sort of keep the feel of the period, get me? Lots of slapstick stuff, and we may hire Chester Conklin or a few of the other oldtimers who're still around. But the guy I'm really trying to get hold of is Artie Ames." Something clicked then, and it wasn't the receiver. I took a deep breath. "Artie Ames?" I said. "Why, he happens to be in my office right now."

"You handle him?"

"Why not?" I said, which wasn't really an answer, either way.

"Can you get him over to Semple in Casting tomorrow morning?"

"Why not?" I said again.

"It isn't really much of a deal, just a bit," he told me.

"What do you mean, it isn't much of a deal?" I revved the motors just a trifle. "You want Hollywood in the 1920s? You want the spirit of slapstick comedy? The genuine spirit, the authenticity, the whole soul of the era can be summed up in just two words—Artie Ames. And you say it isn't much of a deal."

"We may go five grand," he answered.

"Talk about that later," I assured him. "You tell your man Semple to expect Artie Ames at nine."

I hung up fast, buzzed my girl, and told her to admit Artie Ames in three minutes. Then I sat back to do a little fast exercise in total recall.

Because I *still* didn't remember Artie Ames. Oh, the name rang a bell, once it was associated with the silent slapstick comedies. But I couldn't place the face. I scanned flickering images of all the two-reel clowns—Lupino Lane, Billy Dooley, Larry Semon, Lloyd Hamilton, Bobbie Vernon, Charlie Chase. I thought of the other mustached comics, like Jimmy Adams and Jimmy Finlay son, and Conklin, of course, and that great little Englishman, Billy Bevan. I came up with Al St. John before he turned into a western stooge, and Hank Mann, and even Max Davidson. I even conjured up a picture of the old trademark of Educational Comedies—*The Spice of the Program*.

But it wasn't until I thought of the music that I remembered my man.

They used to play jazz accompaniments for the comedies in the old silent days. Things like *Running Wild* and *Barney Google* and *Raggedy Ann* and *Don't Bring Lulu:* jerky, syncopated rhythms to synchronize with the jerky, syncopated antics of Jack Duffy or Snub Pollard, or his sister Daphne. I don't know what they played for Buster Keaton, but Langdon usually drew *I'm Just Wild About Harry,* and Harold Lloyd was associated with *Collegiate* after *The Freshman* came out. Chaplin, naturally, had *Charlie My Boy.*

Artie Ames usually had *San.*

I placed him now. Artie Ames—two-reelers during the late Twenties. Just before talkies came in. A little guy—they were all such little guys, Stan Laurel and Monty Banks and the rest—with a peculiar makeup. He always looked like the political cartoon figure of Mr. Taxpayer or the Average Man—balding, bespectacled, bemustached, bewildered. Carried an umbrella and wore a stiff high-crowned derby. And as he raced around, the organist played *San.* Sure, I remembered Artie Ames.

Then he came in, and I didn't remember him at all.

I don't know just what I expected to see. Certainly I'm aware that a performer looks different offscreen and out of makeup. I wasn't anticipating the exaggerated eyebrows, the unnatural dark circles under the eyes, the pasty-white complexion, the sagging shoulders, the shuffling walk, the nervous flutter of the fingers.

On the other hand, I was more or less prepared to greet an elderly man, possibly even a shabby one. As far as I knew, Artie Ames went out with the talkies almost thirty years ago, and I expected that time would have taken its toll.

But Artie Ames was a complete surprise: he was a total stranger.

To begin with, he wasn't nearly as short as I'd remembered him to be. He held himself erect, he was neither hangdog nor fidgety, and he was wearing a suit made by my own tailor, who turns them out at $200 apiece. On top of all that, he wasn't old. Oh, you wouldn't peg him as a youngster, but he could pass for a man in his forties. And a well-preserved man at that, with a full head of graying hair and a face devoid of wrinkles or pouches. He didn't resemble his screen characterization of thirty years ago, and he didn't appear to be ready for a nursing home either.

When he opened his mouth to greet me by name I got the biggest surprise of all.

Artie Ames had a *basso profundo* voice.

Then it all came back to me, of course. The voice—that's what killed him. It was wrong for talkies, wrong for a slapstick comic playing a Timid Soul character. Sound slaughtered his career, just as it eventually slaughtered the career of a great artist like Buster Keaton. Now I remembered.

He told me all about it during the next few minutes. How he did bit parts, went out with tab shows during the early Thirties, how he made a whole series of films in Europe—for, he hastened to assure me, he was still popular abroad. "After all," he said, "I was only twenty-nine when sound came in. And a man has to do something."

"A man has to eat, too," I suggested.

He didn't like my suggestion. I could tell from the way he drew himself up stiffly in his chair. "That's never been a problem," he answered. "I own a bloc of lots down near Long Beach. No buildings on them—just oil wells."

Which, of course, explained the $200 suit. But it didn't explain what Artie Ames was doing in my office today. He cleared that up himself, immediately.

"Suppose you're wondering what I want with you," he said. "I'll make it short and sweet. The grapevine tells me that Metromount is casting for a flick about silent pics. And the word is out that they want Artie Ames. Think you can represent me?"

I didn't waste time stalling. "I already represent you. Report to Semple, in Casting, at nine tomorrow."

He didn't even blink. "I heard you were a bright boy," he said. "I guess I heard right."

"You'll test," I told him. "But don't talk contract until you check with me. It's some kind of a bit, and they mentioned five. Maybe we can raise the ante."

"Don't worry," he nodded. "The reason I came to you in the first place was because I found out you're handling young Nolan on the same deal. I know you've got an in there. But perhaps I can help matters along in my own way. Wait and see."

He bowed out, and I spent the next forty-eight hours waiting and seeing.

On his next appearance, Artie Ames was wearing another $200 suit, and a high-priced grin on his face. He told me just what the grin was worth.

"Twenty-five grand," Artie Ames exulted. "That's what Melvin said he'd go for. And he called in Sid Belter, right after he saw the test, and told him to build up my part. In fact, I'm going to work with him on the movie sequences and fatten the part myself. Use a lot of my old routines. And Melvin says he's got an idea for building all the promotion around me—make a comeback vehicle out of it. Said I didn't have to worry about my voice, either. Engineers can handle that now. You should have seen them in the screening room! They were crazy about me—I had 'em rolling in the aisles!"

Well, I've heard that kind of talk before. But the next day, when we went to Melvin's office to sign the contract, I found out that Artie Ames was telling me the truth. Dick Melvin *was* excited. And they were going to angle their publicity around the oldtime comic.

When I saw the actual contract, made out for the $25,000 figure, my respect for Artie Ames went up several notches. He was nobody's fool. And who knows?—perhaps I had myself a valuable property. Once in a while those hasbeens make a big comeback.

Artie Ames seemed to think so, when he signed for the deal. “Give me that pen,” he said. “This marks the beginning of a new career.”

I nodded.

How could I know that he was signing his own death warrant?

It’s a standing gag in the Industry that Hollywood people are the biggest suckers for their own publicity. That’s why they believe their own ads in the trade papers and their own puffs in the columns.

Maybe so. And this may have contributed to my respect for Artie Ames in the month that followed. He certainly got a big enough buildup, Melvin and his crew of hired assassins at the studio went all out. Ames was interviewed, he was quoted, he was profiled, he was shoved into guest appearances—all carefully staged so as to get in a mention of the forthcoming picture, of course. But there was plenty about just plain Artie Ames, too. The name was getting around to a new generation. And after seeing his picture pop up all over the place, and reading copy on him day after day, I couldn’t help but be aware of him.

Still, I like to believe that part of my growing affection for the man was based on his own personality, I came to know him fairly well. He dropped in at the office frequently, we managed a few luncheons together, and I even spent a couple of evenings out at his big house near Malibu.

I found out that Artie Ames was lonely. In spite of his money—and he really had it—he’d never married. And unlike many of his age group, he didn’t care to associate with his contemporaries. Not for him those little social gatherings where former stars sit around and reminisce.

“Who needs those horses’ necks?” he scoffed. “They’re washed up, finished.” Ames always lapsed into the slang of the Twenties when he got excited. “Why should I waste my time listening to the sad story of how they faw down go boom? Far as I’m concerned, life is just a bowl of cherries.”

That’s something else I found out about Artie Ames. He had never retired. In his own mind he was still a star. He had never stopped being a star. He showed me his press-books. The clippings were up-to-date. The fact that most of the rave reviews of the past twenty-five years were printed in French or Spanish or Italian didn’t faze him a bit. All he knew was that somewhere people still enjoyed his work. Whether they called him “Artie” or “Arturo” didn’t matter. He was a comedian, he worked for an audience, and laughter knows no language barrier.

“I’m going to show these smart alecks around town how wrong they were,” he insisted. “When they see the routines I’ve worked up for this picture, they’ll be sorry about passing me up all these years. Comedy doesn’t change. The good stuff is always good. And there isn’t much competition any more. What have they got today? They got Lou Costello! Jerry Lewis!”

Here he went into an impromptu imitation of the latter, and for a moment I was amazed by the startling transformation in the man. He aped Jerry Lewis perfectly. His miming captured Lewis’s gestures and facial expressions precisely, but caricatured the caricature. He managed to burlesque Lewis’s burlesquing. And all done so easily, so assuredly.

He could discuss the theory of comedy with the same ease and assurance. Of course he talked about the old days, but he did so with complete authority. He spoke about the grotesques—Kalla Pasha, who was too hairy, and Mack Swain, who was too fat, and Slim Summerville, who was too thin, and Ben Turpin, whose eyes were too crossed. He explained the difference between the exaggerations of a Ford Sterling and the unappreciated subtlety of Charlie Chaplin’s brother, Syd. His conversation was spotted with allusions to half-forgotten figures—Charlie Murray and Louise Fazenda and Mabel Normand and the team of Hale and Hardy. Yes, Alan Hale had worked with Oliver Hardy before Stan Laurel came along—but that priceless bit of knowledge isn’t likely to win anybody $64,000 on a quiz show.

Still I was interested, and more interested when he demonstrated some of the comedy bits he'd planned.

So was the studio.

I was on hand when they started filming. Artie Ames had been assigned to the First Production Unit, because they planned to shoot his stuff in advance of the rest of the picture. He wasn't in the "story" of the film itself: he merely appeared in the scenes revolving around the oldtime moviemaking.

Seeing him in action took me back thirty years. Oh, the studio was new, and the sound stage was modern, and the technicians used all the latest equipment—but Artie Ames was unchanged. In costume and makeup, he was the comic of 1929, and the routines he'd worked out were definitely of that vintage.

The amazing thing about it was that he was funny. Not only to me, but to everyone on the set—to the props, the grips, the gaffers, and the bit players. More important, he was funny to Dick Melvin and to Sid Belter, the writer. Several times during the first day's shooting, he "broke up" the rest of the cast, just by his ad libs. It was all strictly pantomime stuff, you understand, but with the perfect timing and the deft precision common to many of the silent comedians who worked without benefit of a crew of gag writers, or even the assistance of a written script.

"Wonderful!" Melvin exulted to me. "At this rate, he'll steal the picture." Then he scowled darkly. "Have to do something about that," he muttered to himself. "Miss Swivel-hips won't like it."

Sid Belter chewed his pipe. "Don't worry, sweetheart," he said. "You saw the script. She's all taken care of. Plenty of close-ups, lots of nice, simple, two-syllable dialogue. The audience will know who's the star."

"Well, they're not going to remember her when this character is on the screen," Dick Melvin said. "Maybe we made a mistake, letting him build up those routines."

"Forget it," Belter answered. "He's great. Just what we needed. Besides, he works fast—we'll have all his stuff in the can before the week is out, except for the one scene with Miss Swivel-hips. And we can always chop it up, later.”

I didn’t say anything. I was beginning to worry a little, because I’d forgotten that this was supposed to be a starring vehicle for Miss Swivel-hips, as they called her.

Perhaps it would be safer if that’s what I called her, too. Actually, her real name doesn’t matter—she never used it anyway. None of the Miss Swivel-hips of Hollywood ever use their real name. It’s part of the pattern.

Miss Swivel-hips was a gorgeous blonde. She used a screen name, and like most Hollywood blondes, she was originally a brunette. Her history was standard, too. Product of the usual broken household, violated at the age of nine, or was it ten (her astrologer would probably know the exact date), and married in her teens to some Okie motorcycle cowboy or the equivalent. A few years of knocking around, some dubious experiences as a model, and then—Hollywood and the golden transformation.

Now, of course, Miss Swivel-hips had already arrived. Her every word, opinion, or wisecrack was dutifully chronicled in the public prints, her manifold romances detailed, and her acting skill extolled. The fact that words, opinions, wisecracks and even the romances were mainly the creations of press agents didn’t really matter. Nor did her acting skill, which was virtually non-existent. What did matter was that Miss Swivel-hips commanded $150,000 per picture. Her contract was real—possibly the only real thing about her, except a 39-inch bust and a torso that was rapidly becoming a trademark.

So, when the day’s shooting was completed, and Artie Ames gave me a perspiring welcome in his dressing room, I was more concerned about Miss Swivel-hips than I was with my client’s immediate reaction.

“How’d you like it?” he greeted me. “Wasn’t it the cat’s pajamas?”

I nodded, wincing a little at the dated slang. Maybe Artie Ames was the cat’s pajamas, but I couldn’t help thinking of another pajama-clad cat who wouldn’t much care for his performance.

“Told you I could do it,” he said, as he applied cold cream to his face. “Wait’ll you see what I’ve got lined up next. We’re going to do one of the old chase sequences. You know—twelve guys in a tin lizzie, running up the side of buildings—everything. Melvin’s all excited. He’s worried because he thinks I’m too old to take those prat-falls, but he doesn’t know me. I’ve still got plenty of tricks to show him.”

I wondered if Artie Ames was acrobatic enough to take another kind of a fall, in case Miss Swivel-hips decided to pull the rug out from under him.

And as he hurried through a change of clothes, I decided to broach the subject tactfully.

“You’re doing a swell job,” I said, truthfully. “But don’t forget, they may do a little cutting later on. After all, you’re not officially the star of this picture.”

He grinned at me. “Don’t you worry about the star of the picture,” he told me. “I met her yesterday, when we went over plans for the scenes we’ll be doing together.”

“What did you think of her?” I asked.

“Great gal. A real trouper, that kid. Of course, she needs a little polishing, but she’s got the real savvy—and she’s willing to learn.”

This was news to me. “Glad to hear it,” I said. “It’s important to get along with her, so play it diplomatic.”

Artie Ames grinned again. “Don’t you worry about that part,” he murmured. “I’m doing all right. Reason I’m changing in such a rush is that I’ve got a heavy date with her tonight for dinner.”

“Business?”

“Who said anything about business? Believe me, this is strictly for pleasure.” He managed a third grin for himself, in the mirror. “And if you don’t believe it, read Lolly’s column tomorrow.”

Then he dashed out.

And the next day, like a good little boy, I read Lolly’s column. And Hedda’s and Sid’s, and all the others’.

Artie Ames hadn't been kidding. He and Miss Swivel-hips had done the town. One of the tabs even carried a picture of the two of them dancing, and I must admit they didn't make such an incongruous couple. He was close to thirty years her senior, but the picture didn't show it. And in many a Hollywood calendar the months of May and December are juxtaposed.

During the next ten days I didn't see anything of my client, but I got plenty of reports. Melvin kept me informed of Artie Ames's progress on the set—"Terrific, sweetheart, absolutely terrific!"—and the gossip columnists kept me informed of his progress around and on the town.

By the time the ten days were up, they were printing direct quotes from Miss Swivel-hips herself. Romance? "No comment." Engagement? "We're very good friends." What had happened to Miss Swivel-hips's supposed marriage to a wealthy Texas promoter? "Artie Ames has taught me that a laugh is worth more than a million dollars any day."

I couldn't quite believe it, but I had to. And I stopped worrying about Artie Ames. One of the movie magazines ripped out its inside spread and substituted a hastily written article titled *Old Hollywood Meets the New*, and filled it with pictures of the twosome at the beach, at her house in Bel Air, at the races. AP and UP were running squibs now, and it was getting to be news. Plenty of human interest in it, of course—even better than the days when Chaplin used to squire around some young leading lady. Because Miss Swivel-hips was an accepted celebrity and Artie Ames was making a comeback. It was quite a story while it lasted.

And all the while they were fattening him up for the kill.

When the axe was sharpened, the victim couldn't see the blade for the glitter.

He came running into my office all excited. "Did you hear about it?" he demanded. "Did you hear the news?"

"What news?" I swiveled around, facing him. "Tommy Nolan tells me the picture's almost finished, if that's what you mean. It'll be in the can before the end of the month."

"Never mind that," Artie Ames panted. "I'm talking about my footage."

"You still have a couple of scenes to shoot with your leading lady," I said. "Is that what you're so hopped up about?" I hesitated. "Or are you two planning a little announcement of some kind?"

He almost blushed. "Well, I really shouldn't say anything," he mumbled. "She wants to wait until the picture's finished, see? Oh, she's a great kid—the cat's meow! You ought to see us Charleston—"

"This is an announcement?" I inquired.

"Oh, I forgot." I could see the excitement mount again. He was practically dancing across my carpet. "It's the Sullivan show—they're going to do a special preview bit on the Ed Sullivan show, next month! It's all set. And they're using one of my scenes!"

I stopped swiveling and sat up straight. "Big deal," I said.

"It must be, or else Melvin wouldn't have gone to all that expense. Know what he did? He had my scene processed in advance—stuck on the sound track and a special musical score, just for TV showing. This is *it,* kid!"

This was indeed it, if true.

"They're running the print tomorrow morning at eleven, for Dick Melvin and all the big shots," Artie announced. "You be there?"

"I wouldn't miss it for the world," I assured him.

And I didn't.

The next morning at eleven I was sitting in one of those nice, soft executive chairs in the Producer's Screening Room. Melvin had a cigar, Artie Ames had a cigar, I had a cigar—everybody had a cigar except Miss Swivel-hips. But she was there, big as life, at Artie's side, to witness his moment of triumph.

The lights went off, the projector began to hum—and the axe fell.

You know what the poet said? "This is the way the world ends—not with a bang, but a whimper."

Well, the poet never worked in Hollywood, or he'd have changed his story. If he'd been sitting there in the projection room with us, he'd have seen the end of Artie Ames's world and heard the sound that came with it.

Artie Ames's world ended that morning with a squeak.

It ended with a squeak, it ended with a blat, it ended with the idiot music you hear accompanying the cartoon antics of a half-witted dog.

We stared up at the vaunted chase sequence that Artie Ames had told me about, and we heard the sounds: the squeals, the brays, the barks, the cackles. When the driver of the flivver pressed the horn, some genius in the engineering department had put die blat of a foghorn on the sound track. When Artie Ames climbed out, the very pathetic picture of Mr. Average Man faced with insuperable difficulties, and cranked the motor—explosions, machine-gun fire, and the ironic mockery of an atomic bomb explosion. Ames faced the camera to deliver one of his rare lines of dialogue and I wondered how they'd corrected that bass voice of his. I found out as his mouth opened and a squeak emerged.

It was the nasty, subhuman vocalization of a tape recorder run in reverse.

No words emerged—just an insane gibberish.

And the gibberish continued throughout the sequence. The sequence itself was cut drastically, and some clever craftsman had speeded up the action until what remained was a frenzied flicker of paranoid distortion. Artie Ames's pantomimic bits were projected in a lightning-like fashion that gave him the appearance of an epileptic in full seizure. And all the while, out of his mouth, came this *Silly Symphony*, this *Loony Tune* noise.

Funny? Yes, it was funny—the way a four-year-old child thinks it's funny when the mouse puts a cannon muzzle in the cat's ear and blows the top of his head off. It was funny-grotesque, it was funny-idiotic, and most of all it was funny-cruel.

The sequence was mercifully short, much shorter than the originally filmed version, and I remembered Melvin's remark about "chopping." Only he hadn't chopped—he'd butchered. He'd ripped out the closeups, torn out the pantomime, and given the victim the voice of a pig, squealing in slaughtered agony.

When the lights went on again, I didn't look at Artie Ames. Nobody wants to see the face of a murdered man.

And Artie Ames had been murdered. They'd killed him up there on the screen. They'd killed him, and his art, and the whole genius of silent comedy. They'd laughed at the laughter, burlesqued the burlesque, ridiculed the ridiculous.

"How about that?" Melvin boomed. "Pretty tricky stuff, eh? The boys did a good job. This ought to slay em."

I didn't like to hear that talk about wanton destruction.

And neither did Artie Ames.

"Hey, what's the big idea?" he demanded. "You massacred a perfectly good scene."

"Massacred?" Dick Melvin's eyebrows were twin half-moons of arched astonishment. "I thought it was funny as hell. How about you, Sid? Dave, what did you think? Eddie? Mike?"

Sid and Dave and Eddie and Mike and all the others on Dick Melvin's payroll chorused together that in their personal opinions the scene was funny as hell.

Nobody bothered to ask how funny hell was, even though the hell was there, in Artie Ames's eyes.

"You doublecrossed me," he said. "You cut out all the good stuff. You speeded up the film. You put in those noises. You took out all the sympathy, all the audience identification. You made me into a goof."

"Now wait a minute, sweetheart," Dick Melvin said. "This is the picture business, remember? I'm handling production, and I know what I'm doing. I've seen the rushes we've shot so far, and I'm working for a balance. Had to cut out a lot of your stuff, Artie, because it made the picture top-heavy. Put too much emphasis on that oldtime atmosphere." He put his arm around the comic. "Tell you a little secret, sweetheart. You're just too good, that's all. Too damned good. Now if we were making like say a documentary about the silent movies, what you did was just fine. Hit the whole spirit of the times—just like they did it in 1927. But we're filming a story, see? A story about this boy and this girl, and how they get together and have a fight and get together again. Got to keep the emphasis where it belongs."

"But couldn't you let what you did use alone?" Artie Ames was pleading now. "Even if you cut me to one or two scenes, couldn't you let the stuff stand?"

Dick Melvin shook his head. *"You* didn't listen to me, sweetheart," he said, patiently. "I told you we weren't making a documentary. You do 1927 comedy, but this isn't 1927. Today's audiences, they don't care about that oldtime stuff. To them it's cornball, something to laugh at. So we're giving it the treatment—showing we can laugh at it too. Don't think I can't appreciate your kind of talent: Lord knows, I wish we had the kind of audiences who appreciated real comedy when they see it. But we can't take that chance. Got a million and a half tied up in this little epic. So I have to keep an eye on the old B.O. And I can't take the story line away from Miss Swivel-hips, either. Can I, darling?"

He turned to her, but Artie Ames cut in ahead of him.

"What do you think?" he demanded. "Don't you agree with me?"

She fluffed her curls. "Well, I don't know, Artie. After all, Mr. Melvin *is* the producer. *He* can tell what's best for the production."

Artie Ames stared at her. "But honey," he blurted. "You know what this is going to mean to me. We talked it all over. This could be my big chance—my comeback vehicle. It can make me a star again, a big star. Then you won't have to be ashamed of me. And after we're married—"

What had Artie Ames said about Miss Swivel-hips? Something to the effect that she was "the cat's meeow" ?

Well, the cat was meeowing now.

"Never mind that! We're talking about the picture, and Mr. Melvin is right. You can't go around hogging scenes in my picture—"

"Our picture," Artie Ames said. "Remember how we talked about it, honey? This is going to be *our* picture."

The cat had claws, too.

"Come off it! I've got a career to protect, and I'm not going to let them pad out scenes for some sawed-off little nobody in a funny hat." The cat was spitting, now.

"Grow up, Artie! We had our kicks, but you ought to know the whole deal was a publicity setup. You're a cutie and all that, but the party's over. Take a good look at yourself in the mirror sometime and then you'll see why that marriage stuff is definitely out."

Artie Ames couldn't have faced a mirror then. He couldn't face anybody. He turned to Dick Melvin, but the producer stared down at the floor.

"I get it," Ames said, and his voice was never deeper. "The old buildup routine. And I suppose that stuff you've been handing the papers about my comeback is just a lot of hooey, too."

"Well." Dick Melvin cleared his throat. "You know how it goes Artie. We figured we had a good angle to tie a story to, and we used it. Did a great little job, too—look at all the ink we got! And don't forget, we have played up your name, plenty. Maybe you'll get yourself another couple of deals out of this, after the picture is released."

"You mean after they see me in scenes like the one you just ran?" Artie Ames shook his head. "Don't try and kid me. I'm washed up, really washed up."

Then came the moment I dreaded. He looked at me and said, "Well, what about it? Are you going to let them get away with it? I've got a contract."

I opened my mouth, but Dick Melvin cut in ahead of me. His voice was harsh. "Damned right you've got a contract, Artie, and a good one. Twenty-five grand we laid out, for a job any walk-on could do with a little makeup and coaching. But we bought your name, so we could use it for the publicity angle. Your contract doesn't entitle you to write, direct, produce, cut, or edit. It calls for you to be on the set when we want you—and to do what we want you to do. So stop trying to push us around. This isn't 1927, like I said before."

Artie Ames shrugged. "All right," he said. "It's your nickel. But I'm walking out."

“Go jump, for all I care,” Melvin snapped. “But remember this—you’ve got one more scene to shoot. The pie wagon bit. You said you wrote it, and we want it, and we’re going to shoot it. What we do with it after that is our business. But next Tuesday you be on location in Malibu, bright and early, and no tricks, either. You’re going to give us exactly what the contract calls for.”

“Forget the scene,” Artie Ames said, and he was begging now. “Just go ahead and do whatever you like. But leave me alone. Please.”

“We want that scene,” Melvin told him. “It’ll make a sock finish.” Artie Ames nodded and shuffled out. It wasn’t the comedy shuffle he used when he worked. This was a different kind of a shuffle—a blind one. He walked out of that screening room like a zombie.

Dick Melvin sighed and looked at me. “Sorry we had to give him the business,” he said. “But he ought to have figured how it would be.” He frowned. “Guess he took it pretty hard. Maybe you better go after him. He might be, you know, in a mood.”

“Maybe he’ll kill himself,” Miss Swivel-hips said, and her voice held more excitement than concern.

I stared at her. “How could he?” I asked. “You can’t kill a corpse. And he died here half an hour ago.”

“Cut the melodrama,” Melvin muttered. “Just see that I have a live actor on location Tuesday morning. He’s got to come through with that sock finish for us.”

Now I know what the score is. Maybe Dostoevsky or somebody like that could get away with a murder yarn about killing a man’s soul. And maybe he could peddle a bill of goods about how more than a man’s soul was killed—how a whole golden age of entertainment was slaughtered by a new era. But I can’t. And if that’s all there was to the Artie Ames bit, I wouldn’t waste your time and mine by trying to tell it.

But there’s more to it. Not much more—just *enough*.

You see, I went after Artie Ames, I went after him, and I kept after him, and I stayed with him all during the long weekend.

It wasn't easy. He wanted to drink, and I wouldn't let him. He wanted to take sleeping pills, and I hid the bottle. He wanted to cry—and this he did.

"They're all against me," he said. "I haven't got a friend left in the world."

"I'm here," I reminded him.

"Sure. You're here. Because you want to protect that precious contract. Not for die money, but because a deal is a deal, and you can't afford to let your reputation as an agent suffer."

"That's not true," I told him. "I understand. I'm all for you, Artie. To me you're one of the all-time greats."

"What's the use?" He blinked at me. "I might as well stop kidding myself. For more than twenty years I've been sitting around, giving myself the needle, telling myself that I was still a star. Banana oil!" He grinned wryly, and it was not a pleasant thing to see. "Banana oil! They stopped saying that in 1929. Forgot it, just like they forgot me. This is a new generation, isn't it? A generation that likes Miss Swivel-hips and her kind of talent. I don't belong here. You want comedy, see a cartoon. Let the little animated pictures hand you a fast boffola."

I gave him a drink then, but just one. "Now listen to uncle," I said. "Stop this self-pity stuff right now and get hold of yourself. You're Artie Ames. Maybe you're forgotten, maybe you're getting kicked around, but as long as I believe in you—as long as you believe in yourself—you've got a chance. There's just one thing you must remember. You're a trouper. A real trouper, out of the old school. The show must go on, that sort of thing."

"Laugh, clown, laugh!" he said, bitterly.

"All right, make fun of it. But the tradition's real. And sometimes the laugh backfires. Look at the way they sneered at Al Jolson—a beat-up old guy with a collapsed lung, box office poison, all the rest of it. He showed them. And you can show them, too. You want to win their respect? Then keep your own self-respect. Go out to Malibu next Tuesday and play it straight. Give them the scene, just as you wrote it. Give them everything you've got. You're Artie Ames—always remember that. And don't let yourself down."

Well, it sounded like the old college try, and the funny part of it was, it worked.

He perked up. I checked on him Sunday, and Monday night after I closed up shop I dropped in on him, just to see if he was in shape.

What I saw scared me, at first. In a three-day weekend he looked as if he'd aged twenty years. No, his hair hadn't turned white and his face didn't show any new wrinkles. It was just his expression—the way his eyes stared and the way he twisted his mouth. He was definitely an oldtimer, now, riding a one-way ticket.

But his deep voice was vibrant, and his gestures were animated, and he greeted me as if he was really living again. When I heard him speak, I was fooled completely. I'd forgotten that you're supposed to be afraid of a suddenly animated corpse.

"All set," he said. "Been running through the routine this afternoon. And you know what I'm going to do tonight?"

I shook my head.

"I'm going to bake me some pies," he crowed.

"Pies?"

"Sure. You know the way the bit goes, don't you? Your juvenile, Nolan, has just quarreled with Miss Swivel-hips, see? He's her director, and to make her sore he casts her in this Keystone-comedy thing, where she does this scene with me. I'm the comic driving the pie wagon and she's after me with an umbrella. I'm heading for the old cliff, but I'm too sore to notice—I quit driving, climb in back of the truck, pick up a pie, and let her have it. Right in the mush."

"The old custard pie routine, eh?"

"Melvin said we had to have one, to make it look like real slapstick. But it isn't custard, of course. It's blueberry. Photographs better. They've got to be real gooey to splatter just right—prop man was asking me what kind I wanted, and I told him I'd make up a batch myself. Always did in the old days."

He couldn't stop talking now, any more than he could stop twitching his mouth. "I can still hurl 'em, too. Been practising up. I used to be one of the best in the business. Almost as good as Arbuckle. Old Fatty—he was tops. He could sail two at once, one in each hand, and never miss."

I nodded. "This I've got to see," I said. "Tell you what. Suppose I pick you up tomorrow morning and drive you out to Malibu and watch the shooting."

He twitched his mouth at me, and I guess it was supposed to be a grin. "I get it. Want to show Melvin you're delivering the goods, eh? Well, why not? Come on along."

"It's not that," I said. Then I paused. "You sure you feel all right?"

"Of course. Feel great! Snapped right out of it. You gave me the word, didn't you? No sulking. Laugh, clown, laugh. The show must go on. Give Melvin his sock finish."

There was nothing else I could say, so I went away. But I worried all night, and when I showed up next morning I wasn't sure he'd be there.

But he was ready, and when I honked the horn in the driveway he came out carrying his big box of pies. He even clowned a bit for me, balancing the box ever so delicately as if it contained the Crown Jewels. And he bowed.

"Artie Ames rides again," he said. "The Last Roundup. On to the guillotine."

He never was any good at dialogue, I told myself. He was a silent comic. Or had been. Now he was just an animated corpse, a grotesque little old man who chattered frantically and twitched his mouth at me as we drove out to the roped-off location area at the edge of the big bluff overlooking the beach.

"Funny feeling," he said. "This is it, you know. The end. I'll never do it again after this one is finished. Today I'm putting on my makeup for the last time."

"Stop it," I muttered. "You'll get another break. When the picture is released, I can line up plenty of work for you."

He shook his head. "Breaks ran out for me years ago. Melvin was right. This isn't 1927 or even 1929. The new gang is in the saddle. Assembly-line producers like Melvin. Cheap dialogue writers like Sid Belter. Blondes with box office busts like Miss Swivel-hips. All they need me for is a sock finish."

But I was still worried, Dick Melvin was very cordial, very glad to see me and Artie Ames, He was busy with the location-unit director and the studio police, and he didn't seem to notice how Artie Ames looked when he arrived. I was glad of that, because I was sweating it out, wondering if the comic was really on the verge of a crack-up. I only hoped he'd do the scene right on the first take and get out before there was any trouble.

Miss Swivel-hips was ready, emerging from the makeup tent, and somebody drove the pie wagon into position while the cameramen lined up their shots. The scene called for Artie Ames to drive the wagon slowly toward the edge of the bluff while Miss Swivel-hips pursued him with the umbrella. Then he'd appear at the rear of the wagon and hurl the pie. Actually, of course, the wagon would have a driver up front. They'd stop action then and shoot another scene where the pie wagon apparently went over the cliff. That would come this afternoon.

Dick Melvin explained it to me, and to Miss Swivel-hips, who seemed calm enough. And then Artie Ames came on. The old Artie Ames, in makeup, carrying his pies over to the wagon and loping back in a way that got a laugh out of the camera crew.

His painted mouth smiled at Melvin and Miss Swivel-hips and me. They didn't notice anything wrong. I was beginning to feel a bit better, too. Maybe he'd carry it off yet.

Melvin must have felt the relief too, because he patted Artie Ames on the shoulder and said, "How about it, sweetheart? Want to take a dry run, or should we just roll 'em right away?"

Artie Ames gave him his clown’s grin. “I’m ready if you’re ready,” he said. “I always did it in one take hack in ’27. Don’t worry—this one will be right.”

So they lined up, and Miss Swivel-hips ran into camera range, whacking Artie Ames over the head with a big old-fashioned umbrella. And he gave little hops, wincing comically—the Beast belabored by Beauty—and then he floundered into the pie wagon as it started to move.

Miss Swivel-hips chased the wagon, brandishing the umbrella. The wagon headed slowly for the edge of the cliff.

Then something odd happened. A body dropped out of the cab of the wagon. I recognized the regular driver. He fell easily, as though pushed off-balance, and picked himself up at once. He hadn’t been hurt.

Still, it was enough for the director to yell, “Cut!” And the cameras stopped turning.

But the wagon kept on rolling, and all at once Artie Ames appeared at the rear. He stood there grinning, balancing a pie in one hand. Miss Swivel-hips stopped and stared up at him. She looked statuesque and lovely.

Artie Ames peered down, as the wagon rolled away toward the cliff-edge. The direct sunlight hit his face, and I could see the white, clownlike makeup. Beneath it I could see his lips twitching, and I could see his eyes.

There was nothing funny about the way he looked.

Then he said something. I guess I’m the only one who heard it, because a moment later he hurled the pie, and a moment after that the pie wagon went over the cliff, and Artie Ames went with it.

That was the end. The end of the scene, the end of the picture, the end of Dick Melvin’s production, and the end of Miss Swivel-hip’s career., But Artie Ames had the last word.

“To hell with that laugh, clown, laugh business!” he yelled. And then came the pie—the pie that hit Miss Swivel-hips in the face, the pie that Artie Ames had made himself—and carefully filled with TNT.

He gave them their sock finish, all right.

Broomstick Ride

Witches and warlocks on the strange, new planet! There had to be a reasonable, scientific explanation of this phenomena.—But was there any scientific explanation?

IT was close to midnight when they gathered at the crater. Night raised its head across the pitted plains and the twin moons opened their green eyes to stare down into the crater's depths.

The pit was deep and dark. Forbes crouched on the rim with his companions and his mind was full of *ds. Deep, dark, dank, dismal, dolorous.* Yes, he thesaurized. and also *dreary, deathly, damned* and *doomed.* To say nothing of *diabolical.*

Right now, crouching at the crater's edge, he mentally reviewed the work of Shakespeare, William. *Macbeth* was what he had in mind. *Macbeth* on the blasted heath. If this wasn't a blasted heath, then all his concepts were awry. A blasted heath at midnight, with two moons instead of one.

Just behind him in the darkness, the three technicians checked the controls of the recorder-units. Visio and audio extended full-range to cover 360° scan on a half-mile sweep, with a 20-20000 frequency. Fourteen lenses played upon the heath, the crater rim, and the crater depths.

"Picking up anything yet?" Forbes whispered.

"Not yet. But if anything happens—"The technicians tone implied, for himself and his companions, that nothing was expected to happen. They couldn’t quite understand what they were doing on a blasted heath at midnight, setting up their sensitive equipment to record emptiness and silence.

Forbes couldn’t blame them. This was supposed to be just a routine field-trip.

“You’ll check Pyris,” the Director had told him. Cartography did a run on it, and Doyle will give you the details. The atmosphere, I understand, is positively Earthlike, and it’s a Class I planet—one of the anthropomorphic cultures. Doyle places it at about 900 spans behind us, and there are even language similarities. We’ll want audio and visio records of course and an element analysis. Just a preliminary survey in case we find mineralogical possibilities worth exploiting. Strictly a routine checkup.”

And Doyle hadn’t added much more. “Outside of the craters and vegetation you’d think you were on Earth—a thousand spans ago, of course. The natives wear clothes, they have a primitive government, a religious pattern complete with totem and taboo, everything. Better get a hypnolearn on the language.”

Forbes took the hypnolearn, and that started him wondering. The language wasn’t English, but there were odd similarities. And odd references—some of them so odd that Forbes spent the last week before departure checking Central Data files. He had covered all the available filmscannings from 1500 to 1700 Oldstyle.

The comparison between life on Pyris and life on Earth in post-feudal times proved surprisingly apt after Forbes landed. He had paid a formal call upon the Kal, or ruler, and sued for permission to “visit” the planet. Gifts and courtesies had been exchanged, and then Forbes had taken his technical crew into the desert to study life in the villages. A small force remained aboard the ship which landed close to the Kal’s fortress.

For three days Forbes and his men had taken records of daily existance in the mines and the subterranean grottoes where all the food for the planet was grown. He reviewed his conversation with the “peasants”—that’s what they’d be called on Oldstyle earth, and that’s how he thought of them now.

He remembered the hints of curious beliefs which the workers of Pyris held. They were afraid to dig in certain grottoes, they kept away from the pits after dark, and they whispered of certain things which meant nothing to the men in Forbes' crew.

But he had scanned the Oldstyle past on Earth, and that's how he'd run into Shakespeare, and similarities. The similarities excited him sufficiently to have his equipment set up in what he thought was the logical spot at the logical time. The blasted heath at midnight.

NOW Forbes crouched there and waited for what appears on blasted heaths.

It came.

Audio got it first, faint and far away. The rush of matter through atmosphere, and above it the shriller sounds, splintering the silence.

One of the technicians, Kalt, began to mutter. "Bedamned!" Voices. Voices in the sky!" Visio took over now. The delicate cameras were on target, automatically focussing and feeding out *infra* and *ultra* to record what human eyes could not as yet perceive. And then the distant objects came into the range of normal viewing.

"Look!" Kalt whispered to his companions. "Pyrans. Up there, in the sky. And what are they riding on?"

Forbes could have told him. Forbes could have told him what comes to blasted heaths at midnight, and what they rode upon. But he kept silent, rather than disturb them at their work.

A month ago he himself would not have been disturbed, but since then he'd done that filmscan. And now he knew about witches.

They rode on broomsticks to the Sabbat, swooped from the skies—witches and warlocks, wizards and sorceresses, coming in coven to adore Satan, the Black Master of the Flock.

Of, course, all this was ancient superstition, and earthly superstitions besides. It had no basis in reality.

But he was seeing it now.

The broomsticks—were those long shafts really broomsticks?—soared overhead and then descended into the crater. The riders (were those frowsy hags really witches?) cackled and shrieked, their voices echoing below the crater rim.

Now fire blazed below, and the flames blazed blue as the crones cast powder upon the pyres. The hags were naked now, their anointed bodies shimmering in the smoke.

"Bedamned!" muttered Kalt again, like the sensible modern technician he was. Forbes reflected that the man didn't even know the meaning of the word he used. It was merely a common-place expression. Once it had been a jocular curse—"I'll be damned!" And before that, back in the ancient days of 1500-1700 Oldstyle, it had a literal meaning. It was, in those times, an acknowledgement of fact. People *were* damned. They *did* sell their souls to Satan. And they danced around fires and chanted while the smoke swirled. The damned danced.

They were dancing now.

Forbes recognized the ritual from what he'd scanned. He knew about the unguent cast on the fire, the ointment on the naked bodies, about belladonna and aeon he and other forgotten drugs.

He knew about the rituals they chanted in the Pyric tongue. Of course they could not be adoring Satan—he'd go over the audio records very thoroughly in the future—but at the moment he thought he could detect repeated shouts of a word resembling "Sire".

But everything else was familiar, dreadfully so. When the figure stepped out of the shadows, wearing a hood crowned with *kort*-horns, Forbes was reminded of the Master of the Sabbat, who wore the Sign of the Goat or the antlers of the Black Stag. Here it would be a *kort,* of course, for it was the only quadreped on Pyris.

THE Master of the Sabbat, whatever his Pyric title, was leading the chanting now. And he brought the *kort* into the firelight and he wielded the knife and filled the bowl and gave all to drink of the sacrifice. Then the smoke swirled up and the voices howled and—

The *temrars* came. Forbes recognized the soldiers of the Kal as they rose along the opposite rim of the crater. He recognized their breastplate, their spears and swords and the two-man slings which hurled arrows of steel.

The arrows were speeding now, through the smoke. And the Kal's men clambered down the sides of the crater. The crones wailed.

Then came another shout—from behind.

Forbes turned, but too late. Another group of *temrars* had crept up in the darkness, to pinion the arms of his crew. And they used their swords now—not on the men, but on the receptors and the equipment. In a moment, audio and visio were wreckage.

The tall, spade-bearded leader confronted Forbes, placed his hand on his heart in salute, and murmered, "You are to follow me. It is the wish of the Kal."

Forbes heard Kalt protesting, and cut him off with a curt gesture. He remembered that he was the guest of an alien culture and a primitive one. They had already destroyed his records and they were perfectly capable of destroying him. just as they would probably destroy the witches in the pit below. "Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live. Wasn't that an old biblical injunction? Strange, that there should be this similarity.

And there were more similarities to come, as Forbes and his companions were escorted, on *kort*-back, across the nighted plain. Forbes could close his eyes and easily imagine himself transported across space and time to ancient Earth. The clank of armor, the thud of hoofbeats, the remorseless tread of the iron legions returning victorious to the castle of the king—all were part of another world. A world of conquerors and commoners, of mage and magic.

Forbes couldn't repress an ironic grin. He, the selfstyled representative of modern intergalactic culture, was a prisoner of these superstitious savages. A single sweep of a sword had shattered the finest and most delicate scientific recording instruments yet devised. This wasn't his world —it was a world of force and cunning and he'd do best to deal with it on those terms.

Perhaps he'd treated the Kal too lightly. Certainly the Pyric people feared their ruler. They gave him their toil, their allegience, their taxes and their daughters. He owned the mines and the grottoes and was worshipped like a god.

So perhaps those who opposed the Kal would find new gods to worship. Sire, or whatever he was called, would be more than a Devil. He'd be Kal's chief political opponent. No wonder his soldiers sought the witches out.

THEY came to the valley and the citadel of the Kal. Rising within the walls of stone was the great fortress, its silhouette serrated against the sky. The company made its way through narrow streets to broader avenues, down the ramps and into the castle proper.

And here, in one of the stone antechambers, Forbes found Siddons, the ship's astrogator. and the other members of the crew.

"They came for us an hour ago," dons said. "No, they didn't try to force their way inside—locks were closed, anyhow. But they summoned, and we didn't resist. There's a guard around the ship now, but none of them went in, or even tried to enter. I don't understand it."

Forbes mustered a show of confidence. "We'll find out all about it when I see the Kal."

"The Kal will see you now." It was the spade-bearded *temrar* who spoke, who led Forbes away alone and gestured to the others to keep back.

Forbes followed him down a long corridor, then halted as the *temrar* indicated a small door. "Please to enter," he said.

Nodding, Forbes opened the door, stepped inside, and faced the Kal.

The hairy little fat man was seated behind a large table. His pudgy hands rested on the table-top and cradled a silver shape.

He tucked it away in the folds of his sleeve as Forbes entered and nodded at him gravely.

"I had you brought here for your own protection," the Kal said. "Your lives are in danger."

"From what?"

"The *wrali.* Or, as you would call them, witches."

"Why should they harm us?"

"Because you threaten their way of life. And unless you leave, they will destroy you. That was the purpose of their rites this evening—to summon Sire, the Evil One."

Forbes smiled. "But that's superstition," he said. "They can't harm us with spells or enchantments. Surely you don't believe, for example, that a witch or one of your *wrali* can kill a man by sticking pins into his image or melting it over a hot fire. Or do you?" The Kal's voice, like his face, was inscrutable. "It is not a question of what I believe. It is a question of what my people believe. And is it not true that once there were men who believed in witchcraft on Earth?"

"True." Forbes hesitated. "But how would *you* know that?"

"Because the *wrali* have a legend. According to that legend, the inhabitants of Pyris come originally from Earth."

"Our Earth?"

"Exactly. Haven't you noticed the similarities in language, in concept, in the system of government corresponding to olden days? And isn't our *wrali*-worship of Sire similar to the witch-worship of Satan?"

The Kal smiled now. "I'm not the ignorant barbarian you think me to be—it is only through choice that I appear so. And you might do well to ponder our legend.

"The tale is this. Long ago, on your Earth, witches were persecuted, burned, hanged, torn to pieces, because they believed in Satan, or Sire. And a certain group, facing extinction on your planet, invoked the Evil One to save them. He granted their desires. They mounted their broomsticks and flew into space—flew here, to Pyris."

Forbes blinked. “You don’t believe that, do you?” he asked.

“Legends are interesting, you must admit. They do offer explanations.”

“I’ll have another.” Forbes considered for a moment. “On our Earth, long ago, science was as suspect as witchcraft. Scientists performing experimentsor investigations could be accused of black magic and executed just as witches were.

“Now suppose a certain man, or group of men, working in secret, managed somehow to hit upon the principles of atomic propulsion and space-travel—just as we know the alchemists investigated atomic theory? And in order to escape from a hostile environment, they actually built a ship and came here? Whereupon a clique of warriors among their descendants determined to seize the power of government, gradually debased the people and enslaved them—planting such crude legends to keep them in the grip of superstition?”

The Kal shrugged. “You find that theory more attractive than witchcraft, eh?”

Forbes met his gaze. “It’s logical. Somewhere in this world the sources of scientific knowledge must still exist, suppressed only to maintain the present rulers in control. I rather suspect that the *wrali* understand some of it. I saw them ride to the meeting tonight on broomsticks, and I’m thinking now that those broomsticks contained individual power-packs.”

The Kal shrugged again. “I see there are no secrets to the trained scientific mind. But now that you know the story, I must ask you to leave, for your own safety. “The *wrali* fear you and may take drastic measures.”

Forbes bowed his head. “Very well. We can take off immediately, if you release us.”

“You will be escorted to your ship. Is there anything you need, any service you require?”

“No, thank you.” Forbes hesitated. “It’s just that I’m sorry. Sorry to see a world still existing in such savagery as yours, when it isn’t necessary. That men here are still ruled by ignorance and superstition."

The Kal tugged at his beard. "But suppose there were truth to the legends? Suppose that Sire, or Satan does rule here and that science dares not oppose magic? That this world stays in barbarism because it is the Evil One's wish to rule, and that science must bow before sorcery lest everything be destroyed?"

Forbes smiled. "You know that's nonsense," he replied. "I can't accept that, any more than you can."

"Yet you'll go now and leave us to our savagery?"

"I have no choice."

"Very well, then." The Kal inclined his head. Forbes went to the door and the Kal spike to his *temrar*, gave orders for safe escort back to the ship.

THE door closed, and the Kal was alone in the little room. He stared into the flame from the brazier, then extracted the gleaming object from his sleeve once more. He turned it over and over with his pudgy hands and after he had examined it quite thoroughly he merely sat and waited.

After a time the door opened again. A Pyran came in, wearing a hood crowned with *kort*-horns.

"They are gone?" asked the Kal.

"Back to the ship. Soon they depart."

"I am sorry about tonight," the Kal said. "I trust the *temrars* did not actually hurt anyone, but they had to make it convincing. If Earth ever suspected that the government and the *wrali* work together, then nothing could stop them from returning. As it is, I think we deceived them and they are gone for good."

The hooded one stood stockstill and his head was cocked as though he were listening. "I can sense them now," he murmured. I can reach the one called Forbes, on the ship. He is thinking of his report. He will put in a request for an expedition to come back here. He wants to bring a new government from his planet and civilize all Pyris." The hooded one sighed. "It is as I told you it would be. Your plan has failed."

The Kal rose. "I'm sorry," he said. "I tried to save them. First I told him the truth about how we came to Pyris, and about the power of magic. But he didn't believe me. He preferred to think it was all science, disguised as legend."

"Then it must be ended my way," the hooded one declared. "We work together, *wrali* and *temrar,* although the people do not know. We work together to keep this planet in ignorance, keep our race from civilization and science—because with science, worship of the Evil One would cease. And that was the ancient promise we made when we came here—that our people would always worship. We must keep that promise in order to survive.

"So we cannot let this Forbes come back and bring his cursed science here. We must do things my way. Give that to me."

The Kal handed the silvery object to the hooded one. "Is it time?" he whispered.

The hooded one cocked his head again. "I can sense it now," he said. "The ship has taken off. It climbs swiftly. Thousands of miles."

The hooded one bent over the brazier as the flames roared up. Carefully he thrust the silvery object into the crimson coals. The flames licked, tasted, then consumed with incredible speed. In a moment the object melted away.

"What happens now?" whispered the Kal.

The hooded one shuddered. "Ten thousand miles away," he murmured. "Now!"

Ten thousand miles over Pyris the space-ship exploded, melted into nothingness.

And down below the Kal murmured sadly, "We had to do it, didn't we? To save our planet from the scientists. Because they don't believe in the Power of Evil. They don't believe you can kill by sticking pins into an image—or by melting an image over a hot fire—"

THE END

1958

Daybroke

He had no name—or couldn't remember it. But the things that he saw that morning, the agonized world would never forget.

UP IN the sky the warheads whirled, and the thunder of their passing shook the mountain.

Deep in his vaulted sanctuary he sat, godlike and inscrutable, marking neither the sparrow's or the missile's fall. There was no need to leave his shelter to stare down at the city.

He knew what was happening—had known ever since early in the evening when the television flickered and died. An announcer in the holy white garb of the healing arts had been delivering an important message about the world's most popular laxative—the one most people preferred, the one four out of five doctors used themselves. Midway in his praise of this amazing new medical discovery he had paused and advised the audience to stand by for a special bulletin.

But the bulletin never came; instead the screen went blank and the thunder boomed.

All night long the mountain trembled, and the seated man trembled too; not with anticipation but with realization. He had expected this, of course, and that was why he was here. Others had talked about it for years; there had been wild rumors and solemn warnings and much muttering in taverns.

But the rumor-mongers and the warning-sounders and the tavern-mutterers had made no move. They had stayed in the city and he alone had fled.

Some of them, he knew, had stayed to stave off the inevitable end as best they could, and these he saluted for their courage. Others had attempted to ignore the future, and these he detested for their blindness. And all of them he pitied.

For he had realized, long ago, that courage was not enough and that ignorance was no salvation. Wise words and foolish words are one—they will not halt the storm. And when the storm approaches, it is best to flee.

So he had prepared for himself this mountain retreat, high over the city, and here he was safe; would be safe for years to come. Other men of equal wealth could have done the same, but they were too wise or too foolish to face reality. So while they spread their rumors and sounded their warnings and muttered in their cups, he built his sanctuary; lead-guarded, amply provisioned, and stocked with every need for years to come, including even a generous supply of the world's most popular laxative.

DAWN came at last and the echoes of the thunder died, and he went to a special, shielded place where he could sight his spyglass at the city. He stared and he squinted, but there was nothing to be seen—nothing but swirling clouds that billowed blackly and rolled redly across the hazed horizon.

Then he knew that he must go down to the city if he wanted to find out, and made due preparations.

There was a special suit to wear, a cunning seamless garment of insulated cloth and lead, difficult and costly to obtain. It was a top secret suit; the kind only Pentagon generals possess. They cannot procure them for their wives, and they must steal them for their mistresses. But he had one. He donned it now.

An elevated platform aided his descent to the base of the mountain, and there his car was waiting. He drove out, the shielded doors closing automatically behind him, and started for the city. Through the eyepiece of his insulated helmet he stared out at a yellowish fog, and he drove slowly, even though he encountered no traffic nor any sign of life.

After a time the fog lifted, and he could see the countryside. Yellow trees and yellow grass stood stiffly silhouetted against a yellow sky in which great clouds writhed and whirled.

Van Gogh's work, he told himself, knowing it was a lie. For no artist's hand had smashed the windows of the farmhouses, peeled the paint from the sides of the barns, or squeezed the warm breath from the herds huddling in the fields, standing fright-frozen but dead.

He drove along the broad arterial leading to the city; an arterial which ordinarily swarmed with the multicolored corpuscles of motor vehicles. But there were no cars moving today, not in this artery.

Not until he neared the suburbs did he see them, and then he rounded a curve and was halfway upon the vanguard before he panicked and halted in a ditch.

The roadway ahead was packed with automobiles as far as the eye could see—a solid mass, bumper to bumper, ready to descend upon him with whirring wheels.

But the wheels were not turning.

The cars were dead. The further stretches of the highway were an automotive graveyard. He approached the spot on foot, treading with proper reverence past the Cadillac-corpses, the cadavers of Chevrolets, the bodies of Buicks. Close at hand he could see the evidence of violent ends; the shattered glass, the smashed fenders, the battered bumpers and twisted hoods.

The signs of struggle were often pitiable to observe; here was a tiny Volkswagen, trapped and crushed between two looming Lincolns; there an MG had died beneath the wheels of a charging Chrysler. But all were still now. The Dodges dodged no longer, the Hornets had ceased their buzzing, and the Ramblers would never ramble again.

It was hard for him to realize with equal clarity the tragedy that had overtaken the people inside these cars—they were dead, too, of course, but somehow their passing seemed insignificant. Maybe his thinking had been affected by the attitude of the age, in which a man tended to be less and less identified as an individual and more and more regarded on the basis of the symbolic status of the car he drove. When a stranger rode down the street, one seldom thought of him as a person; one's only immediate reaction was, "There goes a Ford—there goes a Pontiac—there goes one of those big goddam Imperials." And men bragged about their cars instead of their characters. So somehow the death of the automobiles seemed more important than the death of their owners. It didn't seem as though human beings had perished in this panic-stricken effort to escape from the city; it was the cars which had made a dash for final freedom and then failed.

He skirted the road now and continued along the ditch until he came to the first sidewalks of the suburbs. Here the evidence of destruction was accentuated. Explosion and implosion had done their work. In the country, paint had been peeled from the walls, but in the suburbs walls had been peeled from the buildings. Not every home was leveled. There were still plenty of ranchhouses standing, though no sign of a rancher in a gray flannel suit. In some of the picturesquely modern white houses, with their light lines and heavy mortgages, the glass side walls remained unshattered, but there was no sign of happy, busy suburban life within—the television sets were dead.

Now he found his progress impeded by an increasing litter. Apparently a blast had swept through this area; his way was blocked by a clutter of the miscellaneous debris of Exurbia.

HE WADED through or stepped around:

Boxes of Kleenex, artificial shrunken heads which had once dangled in the windows of station-wagons, crumpled shopping-lists and scribbled notices of appointments with psychiatrists.

He stepped on an Ivy League cap, nearly tripped over a twisted barbecue grille, got his feet tangled in the straps of foam-rubber falsies. The gutters were choked with the glut from a bombed-out drugstore; bobbie-pins, nylon bobby-socks, a spate of pocket-books, a carton of tranquilizers, a mass of suntan lotion, suppositories, deodorants, and a big cardboard cutout of Harry Belafonte obscured by a spilled can of hot fudge.

He shuffled on, through a welter of women's electric shavers, Book-of-the-Month-Club bonus selections, Presley records, false teeth, and treatises on Existentialism. Now he was actually approaching the city proper. Signs of devastation multiplied. Trudging past the campus of the university he noted, with a start of horror, that the huge football stadium was no more. Nestled next to it was the tiny Fine Arts building, and at first he thought that it too had been razed. Upon closer inspection, however, he realized it was untouched, save for the natural evidence of neglect and decay.

He found it difficult to maintain a regular course, now, for the streets were choked with wrecked vehicles and the sidewalks often blocked by beams or the entire toppled fronts of buildings. Whole structures had been ripped apart, and here and there were freakish variations where a roof had fallen in or a single room smashed to expose its contents. Apparently the blow had come instantly, and without forewarning, for there were few bodies on the streets and those he glimpsed inside the opened buildings gave indication that death had found them in the midst of their natural occupations.

Here, in a gutted basement, a fat man sprawled over the table of his home workshop, his sightless eyes fixed upon the familiar calendar exhibiting entirely the charms of Marilyn Monroe. Two flights above him, through the empty frame of a bathroom window, one could see his wife, dead in the tub, her hand still clutching a movie magazine with a Rock Hudson portrait on the cover. And up in the attic, open to the sky, two young lovers stretched on a brass bed, locked naked in headless ecstasy.

He turned away, and as his progress continued he deliberately avoided looking at the bodies. But he could not avoid seeing them now, and with familiarity the revulsion softened to the merest twinge. It then gave way to curiosity.

Passing a school playground he was pleased to see that the end had come without grotesque or unnatural violence. Probably a wave of paralyzing gas had swept through this area. Most of the figures were frozen upright in normal postures. Here were all of the aspects of ordinary childhood—the big kid punching the little kid, both leaning up against a fence where the blast had found them; a group of six youngsters in uniform black leather jackets piled upon the body of a child wearing a white leather jacket.

Beyond the playground loomed the center of the city. From a distance the mass of shattered masonry looked like a crazy garden-patch turned by a mad plowman. Here and there were tiny blossoms of flame sprouting forth from the interstices of huge clods, and at intervals he could see lopped, stemlike formations, the lower stories of skyscrapers from which the tops had been sheared by the swish of a thermonuclear scythe.

He hesitated, wondering if it was practical to venture into this weird welter. Then he caught sight of the hillside beyond, and of the imposing structure which was the new Federal Building. It stood there, somehow miraculously untouched by the blast, and in the haze he could see the flag still fluttering from its roof. There would be life here, and he knew he would not be content until he reached it.

But long before he attained his objective, he found other evidences of continued existence. Moving delicately and deliberately through the debris, he became aware that he was not entirely alone here in the central chaos.

Wherever the flames flared and flickered, there were furtive figures moving against the fire. To his horror, he realized that they were actually kindling the blazes; burning away barricades that could not otherwise be removed, as they entered shops and stores to loot. Some of the scavengers were silent and ashamed, others were boisterous and drunken; all were doomed.

It was this knowledge which kept him from interfering. Let them plunder and pilfer at will, let them quarrel over the spoils in the shattered streets; in a few hours or a few days, radiation and fallout would take inevitable toll.

NO ONE interfered with his passage; perhaps the helmet and protective garment resembled an official uniform. He went his way unhindered and saw:

A barefooted man wearing a mink coat, dashing through the door of a cocktail lounge and passing bottles out to a bucket-brigade of four small children——

An old woman standing in a bombed-out bank vault, sweeping stacks of bills into the street with her broom. Over in one corner lay the body of a white-haired man, his futile arms outstretched to embrace a heap of coins. Impatiently, the old woman nudged him with her broom. His head lolled, and a silver dollar popped out of his open mouth——

A soldier and a woman wearing the armband of the Red Cross, carrying a stretcher to the blocked entrance of a partially-razed church. Unable to enter, they bore the stretcher around to the side, and the soldier kicked in one of the stained-glass windows——

An artist's basement studio, open to the sky; its walls still intact and covered with abstract paintings. In the center of the room stood the easel, but the artist was gone. What was left of him was smeared across the canvas in a dripping mass, as though the artist had finally succeeded in putting something of himself into his picture——

A welter of glassware that had once been a chemical laboratory, and in the center of it a smocked figure slumped over a microscope. On the slide was a single cell which the scientist had been intently observing when the world crashed about his ears——

A woman with the face of a *Vogue* model, spread-eagled in the street. Apparently she had been struck down while answering the call of duty, for one slim, aristocratic hand still gripped the strap of her hatbox. Otherwise, due to some prank of explosion, the blast had stripped her quite naked; she lay there with all her expensive loveliness exposed, and a pigeon nested in her golden pelvis——

A thin man, emerging from a pawnshop and carrying an enormous tuba. He disappeared momentarily into a meat market next door, then came out again, the bell of his tuba stuffed with sausages——

A broadcasting studio, completely demolished, its once immaculate sound stage littered with the crumpled cartons of fifteen different varieties of America's Favorite Cigarette and the broken bottles of twenty brands of America's Favorite Beer. Protruding from the wreckage was the head of America's Favorite Quizmaster, eyes staring glassily at a sealed booth in the corner which now served as the coffin for a nine-year-old boy who had known the batting-averages of every team in the American and National Leagues since 1882——

A wild-eyed woman sitting in the street, crying and crooning over a kitten cradled in her arms——

A broker caught at his desk, his body mummified in coils of ticker-tape——

A motor-bus, smashed into a brick wall; its passengers still jamming the aisles; standees clutching straps even in *rigor mortis*——

The hindquarters of a stone lion before what had once been the Public Library; before it, on the steps, the corpse of an elderly lady whose shopping-bag had spewed its contents over the street—two murder-mysteries, a rental copy of *Peyton Place,* and the latest issue of the *Reader's Digest*——

A small boy wearing a cowboy hat, who levelled a toy pistol at his little sister and shouted, "Bang! You're dead!"

(She was.)

He walked slowly now, his pace impeded by obstacles both physical and of the spirit. He approached the building on the hillside by a circuitous route; avoiding repugnance, overcoming morbid curiosity, shunning pity, recoiling from horror, surmounting shock.

He knew there were others about him here in the city's core, some bent on acts of mercy, some on heroic rescue. But he ignored them all, for they were dead. Mercy had no meaning in this mist, and there was no rescue from radiation. Some of those who passed called out to him, but he went his way unheeding, knowing their words were mere death-rattles.

But suddenly, as he climbed the hillside, he was crying. The salty warmth ran down his cheeks and blurred the inner surface of his helmet so that he no longer saw anything clearly. And it was thus he emerged from the inner circle; the inner circle of the city, the inner circle of Dante's hell.

His tears ceased to flow and his vision cleared. Ahead of him was the proud outline of the Federal Building, shining and intact—or almost so.

AS HE neared the imposing steps and gazed up at the facade, he noted that there were a few hints of crumbling and corrosion on the surface of the structure. The freakish blast had done outright damage only to the sculptured figures surmounting the great arched doorway; the symbolic statuary had been partially shattered so that the frontal surface had fallen away. He blinked at the empty outlines of the three figures; somehow he never had realized that Faith, Hope and Charity were hollow.

Then he walked inside the building. There were tired soldiers guarding the doorway, but they made no move to stop him, probably because he wore a protective garment even more intricate and impressive than their own.

Inside the structure a small army of low clerks and high brass moved antlike in the corridors; marching grimfaced up and down the stairs. There were no elevators, of course—they'd ceased functioning when the electricity gave out. But he could climb.

He wanted to climb now, for that was why he had come here. He wanted to gaze out over the city. In his gray insulation he resembled an automaton, and like an automaton he plodded stiffly up the stairways until he reached the topmost floor.

But there were no windows here, only walled-in offices. He walked down a long corridor until he came to the very end. Here, a single large cubicle glowed with gray light from the glass wall beyond.

A man sat at a desk, jiggling the receiver of a field telephone and cursing softly. He glanced curiously at the intruder, noted the insulating uniform, and returned to his abuse of the instrument in his hand.

So it was possible to walk over to the big window and look down.

It was possible to see the city, or the crater where the city had been.

Night was mingling with the haze on the horizon, but there was no darkness. The little incendiary blazes had been spreading, apparently, as the wind moved in, and now he gazed down upon a growing sea of flame. The crumbling spires and gutted structures were drowning in red waves. As he watched, the tears came again, but he knew there would not be enough tears to put the fires out.

So he turned back to the man at the desk, noting for the first time that he wore one of the very special uniforms reserved for generals.

This must be the commander, then. Yes, he was certain of it now, because the floor around the desk was littered with scraps of paper. Maybe they were obsolete maps, maybe they were obsolete plans, maybe they were obsolete treaties. It didn’t matter now.

There was another map on the wall behind the desk, and this one mattered very much. It was studded with black and red pins, and it took but a moment to decipher their meaning. The red pins signified destruction, for there was one affixed to the name of this city. And there was one for New York, one for Chicago, Detroit, Los Angeles—every important center had been pierced.

He looked at the general, and finally the words came.

“It must be awful,” he said.

“Yes, awful,” the general echoed.

“Millions upon millions dead.”

“Dead.”

“The cities destroyed, the air polluted, and no escape. No escape anywhere in the world.”

“No escape.”

He turned away and stared out the window once more, stared down at Inferno. Thinking, *this is what it has come to, this is the way the world ends.*

He glanced at the general again, and then sighed. “To think of our being beaten,” he whispered.

The red glare mounted, and in its light he saw the general’s face, gleeful and exultant.

“What do you mean, man?” the general said proudly, the flames rising. “We won!”

Edifice Complex

Wayne looked at Nora and laughed.

"You're a good kid," he said.

Nora's smile was bleary. Even though the ship was in *grav*, she had difficulty standing because she was bashed to the gills.

"You keep saying that, but you never do nothing. I thought this was a pleasure trip," she giggled.

"Wait until we land," Wayne reassured her. "I told you last night when I brought you aboard, we can't do anything in free-fall. Besides, you've got your pay."

Nora staggered over and put her plump hand on his shoulder as he bent over the scanner. Her voice was soft. "I was hoping you wouldn't say that," she murmured. "I know what you think, picking me up in a stinking dive like that, but when I said yes, it wasn't just the money. I kind of went for you, hon, you know? And when you sweet-talked me into this I was thinking it would be, well, romantic like. Running off on your ship to a secret hideaway—"

She paused, blinking down into the scanner. They were cruising just a few thousand feet above the cloudless surface at a slow speed, circling over gentle, rolling sandy slopes with broad flat areas between. There was no water, no vegetation, no sign of life.

"Where are we, anyhow?" she asked.

"Vergis IV," Wayne told her.

"Don't look like much of a place for a weekend," Nora said. "Lonely."

Wayne grinned and pulled her close. “That’s just why I picked it out,” he muttered. “There’ll be nobody around to bother you—except me.”

The plump, voluptuous brunette ran her hand along his spine. “When you plan to start bothering, hon?” she whispered.

“Soon. Let me put us down first. I’m looking for a spot.”

Nora put her head close to his and stared into the scanner. “Who told you about this place?” she asked.

“Friend of mine—a space-rat. Luke, they call him.”

The full-figured brunette giggled. “Old Luke? The guy who hit Port City last week for a big bash-out? The one with all them diamonds?”

“That’s right,” Wayne answered. “Diamonds.”

“He sure was tossing ‘em around. Dorine, she’s my girlfriend, she was with him night before last. He was real bashed, and Dorine tried to find out where he got the loot. But he wasn’t talking.”

“He told me,” Wayne said. “The diamonds came from here.”

Nora dug her nails into his arm.

“Is that why you picked this place, on account of the diamonds?” Her breath quickened, and Wayne could smell the sickly-sweet odor of bash. “You gonna get me some diamonds, hon?”

Wayne smiled down on her. “I said you were a good kid, didn’t I? If there are any diamonds here, you’ll get them.”

“Oh, hon—”

“Hold it,” Wayne told her, disengaging her arms. “We land first, remember? Meanwhile, how are you fixed for bash? I’ve got some prime stuff here in the pouch.”

“Sure, hon. Give me a pop. The more I bash, the better I am—you’ll see—”

Wayne pulled the pouch from his pocket and poured a minute mound of the grayish seeds into her palm. She raised it to her nostrils and sniffed, inhaling with a deep sigh that ended in a sneeze.

“Now I’m cruising,” she said. The whites of her eyes turned yellow as the pupils contracted. “Come on, hon—”

"Let me set us down," Wayne urged. He squinted through the scanner. "Right over there," he told her.

"What's that big brown thing?" Nora asked, trying to focus her gaze. "Looks like a snake."

Wayne studied the brown, irregular oblong. "It does at that, from this height," he agreed. "But it's really a hut. Luke told me to find a hut if I wanted to get hold of the natives. Besides, we'll need a place to stay."

"How about right here on the ship?" Nora suggested. "Right here on the ship, and right now—" She was beginning to breathe heavily.

"Don't forget the diamonds," Wayne reminded.

"Diamonds." Nora's voice trailed off as the bash took hold. She fell back upon the bunk. "Hon, I'm dizzy. Don't leave me, hon."

"I wouldn't think of it," Wayne assured her. "You're a good kid, remember?"

He grinned and bent over the controls. Slowly, the ship glided in for a landing on a sandy plain only a few hundred yards from the brown oblong. As Nora murmured incoherently, Wayne put out the landing platform and packed a small kit-bag which he slung over his shoulder. Then he stepped over to Nora and shook her.

"Wake up," he said. "We're going out."

Eyes closed, Nora tried to pull him down on the bunk. "Wait, hon," she whispered. "Let's not go now."

"We've got to," he told her. "The way I figure it, there's less than an hour of daylight left. I want to look around."

"You promised—"

"First let's see about the diamonds. If there's anybody in that hut they'll spot us."

He raised the girl to her feet. She had to hang on to him as they walked down the ramp, and her legs went rubbery as she waded through the sand.

"Take your shoes off," he suggested.

She kicked them aside. "Hot," Nora murmured, eyes closed against the sun's glare. "Too hot."

"Cooler in the hut," he replied. "Come on."

They trudged over to the oblong. It was perhaps thirty feet in length, seven or eight feet high, and nine feet wide. Seen at close range it no longer resembled a serpent, except to Nora's bash-distorted vision.

"Looks creepy," she whispered. "What's it made of, anyway?"

"Some kind of hide, I guess. See how it's stretched? Wonder how they pieced it together—"

Wayne broke off as Nora stumbled against him. The girl was bashed, all right. Maybe he shouldn't have given her that last pop. But she was a good kid, he had to remember that.

And now, where were the natives?

He approached the dark doorway of the hut and tried to peer into the dimness beyond. There didn't seem to be any door at all, and no windows. The interior flooring slanted down away from the opening and he couldn't see very far within.

"Place must be deserted, all right," he said. "Let's take a peek inside."

Nora tugged at his arm. "I don't want to go in there. It's too dark."

"Here's a light." Wayne produced a small tube from his pack. "Got a stunner attachment, too, following the beam. We're ready for anything." He pulled her toward the doorway.

"It smells so," the girl whimpered. "Like snakes. And I think someone's looking at us."

Wayne glanced behind him, scanning the desert horizon, then shook his head. "You're just bash-happy."

"I'm scared, that's all."

He shrugged and moved forward. She had no choice but to follow. They walked down the slanting floor into the hut.

It did smell in here, Wayne realized. The odor was atrocious. No wonder the place was deserted. He swept the beam up and over the rough, unfinished walls. There was no furnishing, no sign of occupancy.

They stood in the outer chamber and gazed forward, noting that the interior of the hut was divided into several sections. Ahead of them was a narrow passageway leading to a second chamber. As Wayne moved forward the odor grew stronger and the girl held back.

“Let’s go outside,” she urged. “I’m choking, hon.” Wayne shook his head and advanced to the head of the passageway. He stood there and played his beam on the empty chamber beyond. The stench was almost intolerable, and it seemed to be coming from the floor, which was inches deep in stagnant muck. Maybe the natives used this hut as a cesspool. Maybe this is where they disposed of the—

“Look!” Nora had crept close behind him, and now she was cowering against him and pointing. “See, in that slime in the corner? There’s bones, and a skull!”

Wayne swept the beam around, away from the opening. “You’re imagining things,” he told her.

But he’d seen them too, and now he knew everything was all right.

“Want to go back outside?” he asked.

“Yes. Oh, please, hurry—I think I’m going to be sick.”

He half-supported Nora as she staggered back up the slanting slope leading to the doorway. The sky had darkened over the desert beyond, and the air was suddenly chill.

“Take a deep breath,” he commanded. “You’ll feel better.”

“Not until we get back to the ship,” the girl whispered. “I can’t stand being near this place. There’s something awful about it. It isn’t just a house, it’s—” Abruptly she paused and stared back at the oblong bulk of the hut. “We’re being watched,” she said. “I know it.”

“Nonsense. You can see for yourself there’s nobody around.”

“Then where are the natives?”

“Hunting, perhaps.”

“Are there animals around, too?”

“No.”

“Then what do they hunt?”

“Each other.”

“You mean they’re—”

“Cannibals.” Wayne nodded. “It’s a dying world. No real civilization. No wonder they give diamonds as gifts. They’re so grateful when anyone brings them a present.”

“Is that how Luke got his loot?” Nora asked. “What kind of present did he give them?”

Wayne grinned at her. “His partner, Brady.”

Nora’s mouth twitched. “You’re joking. Or—he was lying to you—”

“Dying men don’t lie,” Wayne said, softly. “I picked old Luke up in an alley, two nights ago, bashed to the lungs and coughing his guts out. Dragged him into my place, and ten minutes later he was dead. But he talked, first. I thought he was delirious, until I saw the diamonds. Then I knew he was telling the truth.

“It had all been an accident, really. He and Brady were scavengers, operating a little wildcat freighter. They were on their way back from Cybele when Luke got sick. Brady must have figured it was better to find a place to stop, and he put down here. Luke was unconscious at the time.

“When he came to, he was alone on the freighter. Apparently Brady had decided to step out and take a look around. It was night, but the moon was up and Luke could see out—he was in desert country, like this. And there was nobody around. Off in the distance was one of these huts, and Luke wondered if Brady had gone to investigate. He felt pretty weak, but he just about made up his mind to follow his partner when the natives came.

“Luke didn’t let them get aboard, of course. But he stood in the airlock and gestured at them. I guess they caught on to his sign language in a hurry. Anyway, they nodded at him and pantomimed. The way it looked, they’d found Brady wandering outside and jumped him.

“Luke said there were a dozen or more of them, all carrying long spears. He couldn’t possibly handle them all, so he did the next best thing—smiled, looked friendly, and tried to find out what they’d done with Brady.

“So he made stabbing gestures and cutting gestures, but they just shook their heads and kept gesturing over at the hut in the distance. Then some of them bowed down facing it, and the rest bowed down facing the ship. And the biggest one, whom Luke took to be the chief, pulled out the sack of diamonds. He set it down and bowed again. Then he pointed at the hut once more and started to rub his belly. That's when Luke guessed the rest. You see, he thought Luke was some kind of god who had brought them Brady as an offering. And they were repaying him in diamonds."

The moon was rising redly over the black bulk of the hut, and Wayne could see Nora's face flaming in the light. Her eyes were glazed.

"The natives left, then, and after a while Luke opened the lock and picked up the diamonds. He wanted to go to the hut and find Brady, but he was afraid. Instead, he took off. That's why he went on the bash when he hit port. He knew he'd been a coward."

"I don't believe it," Nora murmured. "He was out of his head."

"I saw the diamonds," Wayne reminded her.

"But it doesn't make sense. Maybe he and Brady found diamonds here and they quarreled. So he killed his partner and took the loot for himself. That crazy yarn about the natives eating each other—"

"You saw the bones in the hut," Wayne muttered. "And in a little while, you'll see the natives, too."

Nora stepped back. "I don't want to see them," she wailed. "I want to go back to the ship. Why did you bring me here in the first place? Why—"

"Because you're a good kid," Wayne said, and hit her across the face with his flash.

She fell forward heavily and he put his knee in her back, pressing her down as he got the rope out of his pack. The bash had weakened her and she couldn't put up much of a struggle. He tied her wrists expertly and then dragged her along the sand by her ankles. She moaned a little, but didn't come around until he'd propped her up on a small rise a few hundred feet from the entrance to the hut.

"There we are," he told her. "All wrapped and ready. Like I said, you're a good kid. But I suppose you don't know what I mean, do you?"

"Hon, let me go—"

"A kid is a baby goat. Once upon a time, back on Terra, in a place called India, there were other animals called tigers. Some of them were man-eaters. When the natives wanted to attract a man-eater, they staked a kid out.

"So when I heard Luke's story, I knew what to do. I started looking for bait for a man-eater, and I found you."

"You can't—"

"I can." Wayne stared down at her soberly. "Nobody saw us together last night. Nobody knows you sneaked off with me on an unauthorized flight. The Port is filled with tramps like you—they come and go. Even if somebody notices your disappearance, I'll never be involved."

"But why me?" She was sobbing now, wheezing in panic.

Wayne reached forward and started ripping away her garments, slowly and deliberately.

"This is why," he murmured. "Because you're white and soft. Because you're plump and rounded and tender. Because you're a good kid."

"Stop! Let me go!"

Wayne stood up, nodding. "That's right," he said. "Go ahead and scream. If they don't see that body of yours in the moonlight, at least they'll hear your voice. When the kid bleats, the man-eater comes."

"No—don't leave me—come back—I'll do anything you want, anything!"

"You'll get me the diamonds," Wayne told her. "I'll be waiting, never fear."

He walked over to the dark shadow of the oblong hut and crouched just inside the doorway. The charnel stench was strong on the night air, but he wanted to keep out of sight. After they came, that was the psychological moment. With the weapon in his hand, he had nothing to fear. They'd treated old Luke like a god, and he'd get the same consideration.

Nora was crying softly in the distance. Her nude body was radiant in the moonlight. If there were any natives around, they'd be here soon.

For a moment he wondered if Nora had been right. Could the old scavenger have made up the whole yarn just as she said? Maybe there were no natives after all. The whole idea of cannibals with spears seemed a bit naive and ridiculous. Brady could have wandered off, found some diamonds, then brought them back with him. Maybe he'd tried to hide them from his partner, only to have Luke discover them and kill him in a quarrel over the loot. That made a lot more sense.

Yes, the old space-rat had probably been lying. And who could blame him under the circumstances? Wayne hadn't told Nora the whole story—what he'd gotten out of Luke at the end wasn't a voluntary confession. Sure, he'd picked the old man up in the alley and dragged him inside, but only after he'd gone through the dying man's pockets and found the diamonds. That's why he put him on his bed, and started choking him; choking him until the story came out in bits and pieces, like the bits and pieces of lung he coughed up in the final dying spasm.

Wayne frowned at himself. He'd been a little too rough; otherwise he'd have gotten more of the details. He'd have found out how to separate fact from fancy. As it was, all he really knew was that Luke had found the diamonds here on Vergis IV.

If there was nothing to the yarn about the cannibal natives, then Wayne was wasting his time. He'd have to dispose of the girl himself and then go diamond-hunting.

On the other hand, he reminded himself, there were the huts, just like Luke described them. Someone must have built them. And now he remembered the bones. The bones and the stench. There had to be man-eaters around. There had to be—

A whiff of carrion odor caused him to wrinkle his nose in revulsion. He wished there was another place of concealment available. Nora had been right; something about this hut made him feel uneasy. What kind of creatures could have built it? Where did they get the hides? Maybe they used their own skins—that is, the skins of their victims. Wayne tried to imagine a completely cannibalistic civilization. Had there ever been any on Terra?

Wayne tried to think about that for a moment, but there was something else that disturbed him, something he couldn't quite account for.

Maybe it was the red moon. It gave him the feeling Nora had complained about in the hut, the feeling of being watched. It was too much like an accusing eye.

Maybe it was remembering how he'd choked the story out of that bash-crazed old man; maybe it was seeing that naked, moaning girl up there on the rise.

He stared at her silhouette as it writhed on the horizon and wondered when something was going to happen. He hoped it would be soon, because he had to get out of here, the smell was getting worse—

Suddenly Wayne stiffened and crouched back in the doorway.

Something was coming over the rim of the hill.

The bait was luring the man-eater.

Wayne squinted into the wastes, trying to distinguish individual forms in the black blur that moved across the hilltop. Why, there must be an army of them, moving packed together in a solid mass!

Nora saw the movement too, because she was screaming, now. And there was another sound—a soft, slow rumbling. The black bulk was flowing forward. It wasn't black, really; more of a reddish-brown. The same color as the hut.

Then Wayne realized why he couldn't make out individual figures. There were no figures—just the solid mass. The thing crawling sluggishly over the hillside was a single great form. A brown oblong form, moving slowly but surely.

As Wayne recognized the object, another realization came to him. Now he knew what had eluded his mind. It was something about this hut. With no wind to disturb the sand, why hadn't he noticed the footprints of the natives leading to and from the doorway?

He had the answer, now. There were no natives—at least, no humanoid cannibals. Nora's guess had been correct. Brady found the diamonds and Luke killed him, then made up the story about natives dragging him into their hut. Brady hadn't been dragged to a hut—*the hut had come to him.*

And it was coming to Nora, now, out there on the hillside, its brown bulk inching toward her, towering over her, the black doorway gaping to engulf her like a ravenous mouth.

But it is a mouth, Wayne told himself, and suddenly there was a shock of final recognition as he remembered the hide-like covering that was hide, and the second inner compartment with the stagnant stench bubbling over the bones.

The huts were man-eaters, and he had to get out of here! He moved up the slanting slope leading to the doorway, eyes intent on the spectacle before him. Nora was screaming, the maw was closing over her—and then the vision was blotted out.

The maw was closing over him.

The doorway ahead of him disappeared, and the slanting slope moved beneath his feet. It contracted in a series of ripples, convulsing like a throat in the act of swallowing. Wayne gasped, the stench suddenly stronger in his nostrils. He clawed out at the walls, dropping his weapon as the slope tilted, pushing him back. And now a wave of nauseous liquid gushed out from the floor, and Wayne felt himself forced back, thinking idiotically, *salivation, that's what it is,* and wondering why there were no teeth in the house.

The odor was overpowering, and he felt the slimy waves wash over him as he retreated, forcing his way along the narrow passage toward the second chamber.

It squeezed him clammily, and all too late he realized that this must be the esophagus.

Snakes. Nora had said. The thing smelled like a snake, it looked like a snake, it was a snake. A snake that devours its victims whole and alive. And then digests them in its stomach.

Wayne clawed the constricting walls of the narrow passage, trying to hold himself back. But the creature was moving and shuddering all around him, and then it gave a great gulp and swallowed. Wayne fell into the second compartment, and the bubbling liquid surged and seared . . .

When daylight came, the hut was sluggish and quiescent. The dark doorway opened once more, but there was no other sign of movement.

The hut belched once, then settled back to wait . . .

The Sleeping Redheads

“New Orleans,” said Morgan. “The land of dreams.”

“That’s right,” the bartender nodded. “That’s the way the song goes.”

“I remember Connee Boswell singing it when I was just a kid,” Morgan told him. “Made up my mind to hit this town someday and see for myself. But what I want to know is, where is it?”

“It?”

“The land of dreams,” Morgan murmured. “Where’d it all disappear to?” He leaned forward and the bartender refilled his glass. “Take Basin Street, for instance. It’s just a lousy railroad track. And the streetcar named Desire is a bus.”

“Used to be a streetcar, all right,” the bartender assured him. “Then they took ‘em out of the Quarter and made all the streets one way. That’s progress, Mac.”

“Progress!” Morgan swallowed his drink. “When I got down here today I did the Quarter.

Museum, Jackson Square, Pirate’s Alley, Antoine’s, Morning Call, the works. It’s nothing but a tourist trap.”

“Now wait a minute,” the bartender said. “What about all the old buildings with the balco-nies and grillwork, stuff like that?”

“I saw them,” Morgan admitted. “But you pass one of those fine old green-shuttered jobs and what do you see sitting right next door? A laundromat, that’s what. Laundromats in the Vieux Carré. They’ve killed off your old Southern mammy and installed an automatic washer in her place. All the quaint, picturesque atmosphere that’s left is hidden behind the walls of a private patio. What's left to see are the antique shops on Royal Street, filled with precious items imported from faraway Brooklyn."

The bartender shrugged. "There's always Bourbon Street."

Morgan made a face. "I hit Bourbon tonight, before I came here. A big neon nothing. Cli-pjoints and stripjoints. Imitation Dixieland played for visiting Swedes from Minnesota."

"Careful, Mac," said the bartender. "I'm from Duluth myself."

"You would be." Morgan tackled a fresh drink. "There isn't a genuine native or a genuine spot in the whole place. What's the song say about Creole babies with flashing eyes? All I saw was a bunch of B-girls out of exotic, mysterious old Cincinnati."

The bartender tipped the bottle again without being asked, "Now I get the drift, Mac," he muttered. "Maybe you're looking for a little action, huh? Well, I know a place—"

Morgan shook his head. "I'll bet you do. Everybody knows a place. Walking north, before I crossed Rampart, I was stopped three times. Cab drivers. They wanted to haul me to a place.

And what was their big sales pitch? Air-conditioning, that's what! Man waits half his life, saves his dough for a trip down here, and the land of dreams turns out to be air-conditioned!"

He stood up, knocking against the bar-stool.

"Tell you a secret," Morgan said. "If Jean Lafitte was around today, he'd be a cab driver."

He lurched out of the tavern and stood on the sidewalk outside, inhaling the damp air. It had turned quite foggy. Fog in the streets. Fog in his brain.

He knew where he was, though-north of Rampart, east of Canal and the Jung Hotel. In spite of the fog, he wasn't lost.

All at once Morgan wished he *was* lost. Lost on this crazy, winding little side street where the grass pushed up between the brick paving-stones and all the houses were shuttered against the night. There were no cars, no passersby, and if it wasn't for the street-lamps he could easily imagine himself to be in the old New Orleans. The *real* New Orleans of the songs and stories, the city of Bolden and Oliver and a kid named Satch.

It had been that way once, he knew. Then World War I came along and they closed down Storeyville. And World War II came along and they turned Bourbon Street into a midway for servicemen and conventioneers. The tourists liked it fine; they came to the Mardi Gras parades and they ate at Arnaud's and then sampled a Sazerac at the Old Absinthe House and went home happy.

But Morgan wasn't a tourist. He was a romantic, looking for the land of dreams.

Forget it, he told himself.

So he started to walk and he tried to forget it, but he couldn't. The fog grew thicker-both fogs. Out of the internal fog came phrases of the old songs and visions of the old legends. Out of the external fog loomed the crumbling walls of the St. Louis Cemetery. St. Louis Number One, the guidebooks called it.

Well, to hell with the guidebooks. This was what Morgan had been looking for. The real New Orleans was inside these walls. Dead and buried, crumbling away in decayed glory.

Morgan found the grilled gate. It was locked. He peered through the bars, squinting at foggy figures. There were ghosts inside, real ghosts. He could see them standing silently within-white, looming figures pointing and beckoning to him. They wanted Morgan to join them there, and that's where he belonged. Inside, with the other dead romantics—

"Mister, what you doing?"

Morgan turned, stumbling back against the gateway. A small man peered up at him, a small white-haired man whose open mouth exuded a curious-sweet odor.

One of the ghosts, Morgan told himself. *The odor of corruption*—

But it was only alcohol. And the old man was real, even though his face and his eyes seemed filled with fog.

“Can’t get in there, Mister,” he was saying. “Place is closed for the night.”

Morgan nodded. “You the watchman?” he asked.

“No. Just happened I was wandering around.”

“So was I.” Morgan gestured at the vista beyond the gateway. “First damned thing I’ve hit in this town that looked real.”

The old man smiled, and again Morgan caught the sickish-sweet odor. “You’re right,” he said. “All the real things are dead. Notice the angels?”

“I thought they were ghosts,” Morgan admitted.

“Maybe so. Lots of things inside there besides statues. See the tombs? Everybody’s buried above ground, on account of the swamps. Them as couldn’t afford a tomb, why they just rented a crypt in the cemetery wall. You could rent by the month if you liked. But if you didn’t pay up-out came Grandpa! That is, if the snatchers didn’t get him first.”

The old man chuckled. “See the bars and chains on the doors?” he asked. “Rich folk put them up. Had to protect their dead from the bodysnatchers. Some say the grave-robbers were after jewels and such. Others claim the darkies needed the bones for voodoo. I could tell you stories—”

Morgan took a deep breath. “I’d like to hear some of those stories,” he said. “How about going somewhere for a drink?”

“A pleasure.” The old man bowed.

Under ordinary circumstances, Morgan would have found the spectacle slightly ridiculous.

Now it seemed appropriate. And it was appropriate that the little man led him down twisting streets into ever-thickening fog. It was appropriate that he steered him at last into a small, dingy bar with a single light burning in its curtained window. It was appropriate that the stranger ordered for both of them without inquiring what Morgan would have.

The bartender was a fat man with a pockmarked face which bore no expression at all as he set glasses down before them. Morgan stared at the cloudy greenish liquor. It looked like a condensation of the fog, but it gave off the odd, sickish-sweet smell he had come to recognize.

“Absinthe,” the old man murmured. “Not supposed to serve it, but they know me here.” He raised his glass. “To the old days,” he said.

“The old days.”

The drink tasted of licorice and fire.

“Everybody used to know me then,” the stranger told him. “Came to Storeyville in nineteen-and-two. Never did pick up the accent, but I’ve been a professional Southerner ever since.

A real professional, you might say.” He started a chuckle that ended up as a wheeze. “Throat’s dry,” he explained.

Morgan beckoned to the bartender. The green liquor climbed in the glasses, then descended. It rose and fell several times during the next hour. And the old man’s voice rose and fell, and Morgan felt himself rising and falling, too.

It wasn’t a panicky feeling, though. Somehow it seemed quite natural for him to be sitting here in this lonely little bar with a shabbily-dressed old lush who gazed at him with eyes of milky marble.

And it was natural for Morgan to talk about how disappointed he was in New Orleans, about wishing he’d been here to see the Mahogany Hall and the Ivory Palace—

“Storeyville,” the old man said. “I can tell you all you want to know about that. Said I was a *professional* Southerner.” He wheezed again, then recovered himself. “Had six chickens on the block,” he said. “Wouldn’t think it to look at me now, but I was a mighty handsome lad.

And I made out. Had my own rig, nigger coachman and all. When autos came along, I got me a chauf*feur*. Wore spats every day of the week.” He lifted his glass. “Six chickens, a high-class house. Professor in the parlor, mirrors all over the walls in every room upstairs. Bartender on duty twenty-four hours a day, and the biggest call was for champagne. Customers ca-me from far away as Memphis, just to see the oil paintings.”

“No air-conditioning?” Morgan mumbled.

“What’s that?”

“Never mind. Go on.”

“Called it the Palace,” the old man murmured. “And it was. When the girls came down in their evening-dresses, with their hair done up and their eyes kind of sparkling behind their fans, they looked like queens. And we treated our customers like kings. Things were a lot different in the trade, then. Us fancy operators, we knew how to show a man a good time. We didn’t hustle ‘em for a quick trick and push ‘em out again. Gave a sociable evening, a little re-finement, a little refreshment, a little romance.”

He sighed. “But the army closed Storeyville. Jazz bands went north, Professors got jobs in shoe-shine parlors, and I sold the oil-paintings. Still, I was luckier than most. I’d made my pi-le. Even hung on to the Palace, but closed everything up except for my own room downstairs.

Nobody around today except me and the Red Queen.”

“The Red Queen?”

“Told you I was a professional. Just because the lid clamped down, that didn’t mean all us old-timers got squashed. I’ve kept going, on the q.t., understand? Sort of a sentimental gesture, if you follow me. Never more than one chicken now, but that’s enough. Enough for the few who still appreciate it, who still want a taste of the old days, the old ways—”

Morgan burned his throat on the drink. “You mean to tell me you’re still-in business?” he asked. “You’ve got a girl, the same kind who used to work in Storeyville in the old days?”

His companion nodded solemnly. “Trained her myself,” he murmured. “Wears the old dresses, old-fashioned stuff, not like the chippies over in the big houses. Got her room fixed up like it was forty-five, fifty years ago. Like stepping into the past, and she treats you right, you know? I’m pretty careful who I let in these days, but there was something about you, I sa-id to myself when I saw you—”

Morgan stood up. “Come on,” he said. He produced his wallet, flung a bill on the table.

“I’ve got dough. Been saving it up just for this trip. How much is this going to cost me?”

"She'll set the price," the old man told him. "For me this is only-well, you might call it a hobby."

Then they were out in the night again, and it seemed to Morgan that the fog was thicker, the streets darker and narrower than before. And the absinthe burned, and he alternately stumbled forward and hung back; eager for the past recaptured and wondering why he was seeking a nameless destination with a drunken old pimp.

Then they came to the house, and it looked like any other ancient house in the fog, in the absinthe haze. The old man unlocked the door, and he stood in the dark, high-ceilinged, mahogany-panelled hallway while the gas-jet sputtered on. The old man's room was off to the right; the big double-doors of what used to be the parlor were tightly closed. But the huge staircase loomed ahead, and Morgan blinked as his companion reeled over to it and cupped his hands, shouting, "Company!"

His voice echoed and re-echoed down the long hall, reverberating off the walls and the doorways, and Morgan got the feeling they were all alone in the dim circle of light from the gas-jet, that the old man was crazy, that this was indeed the land of dreams.

But, "Company!" the old man shouted again, his face contorted, his voice angry and insistent. "Damned woman," he shrilled. "Sleeps her life away. I've had trouble with her before about this. Thought I'd taught her a lesson, but maybe I'll have to teach her again"-and once more he shouted up the stairway.

"Company!"

"Send him up."

The voice was soft, musical, and thrilling. The moment Morgan heard it, he knew he hadn't made a mistake. Crazy old man, crazy old house, crazy errand-but there was the voice, the warm and wanton invitation.

"Go ahead," the little man urged. "Right at the head of the stairs, her room is. You won't need a light."

Then he went into his room and Morgan climbed the stairs, feet moving over frayed carpeting, eyes intent on the doorway looming above the landing. When Morgan reached the door he fumbled for the knob in the darkness, standing there for a long moment as he tried to enter.

Quite suddenly the door opened inward, and there he was in the big bedroom, with twenty crystal chandeliers tinkling their welcome, twenty velvet carpets offering cushioned caresses to his feet, twenty ornate vanities spreading a pungent powder-and-patchouli perfume from their littered tops.

Twenty great canopied beds straddled the center of the room, and twenty occupants waved him forward. The light blazed down on the redness; the rich, reflected radiance of twenty Red Queens. They had red hair and red lips and red garters and red nipples. Twice twenty white arms opened to enfold him in an embrace that was all illusion.

Morgan reeled forward through a thousand rippling reflections from the mirrored walls and ceiling, trying to find the real bed and the real Red Queen. She laughed at him then, because he was drunk, and she held out her hand to guide him, draw him down beside her. And her touch was fire, and her mouth was a furnace, and her body was a volcano gushing lava, and the mirrors whirled wildly in a long red dream of laughter and delight.

He must have put on his clothes again and tiptoed downstairs around dawn; he couldn't remember. He didn't recall saying goodbye or paying the girl or seeing the old man again, either, nor could he recollect walking back into the Quarter. The absinthe had left him with a splitting headache and a bitter aftertaste in his mouth, and now he moved like an automaton, turning into the first place he saw.

It was a small Oyster Bar, but he didn't want the traditional dozen raws-he needed coffee.

The fog was gone from the morning streets, but it lingered inside his skull, and Morgan wondered vaguely how he'd managed to find his way back to familiar surroundings. He stepped up to the counter and reached for his wallet.

His pocket was empty.

His hand began a search, up and down, forward and back. But his wallet was gone. His wallet, his identification, his license, his three hundred dollars in cash.

Morgan couldn't remember what had happened, but one thing was obvious. He'd been rolled. Rolled in the good old-fashioned way by a bad old-fashioned girl.

In a way it was almost funny, and in a way it served him right. He knew that, but somehow he failed to see either the humor or the justice of it all. And when it came to justice-Morgan gave up all thoughts of coffee and went to the police. He started to tell his story to a desk sergeant, told a little more of it to a polite lieutenant, and ended up telling the whole thing over again to a plain-clothes detective as he walked with him down Rampart Street, heading east.

The detective, whose name was Belden, didn't seem to be polite at all.

Morgan freely admitted he'd been drinking last night, and even found the first little bar he had patronized. The bartender Morgan had talked to was off-duty, but the day man gave the detective his home phone, and Belden called him from the tavern and talked to him. The bartender remembered seeing Morgan, all right.

"He said you were drunk as a skunk," the impolite Belden reported. "Now, where did you go from there?"

"St. Louis Cemetery," Morgan said. But to his chagrin, he couldn't find his way. In the end, Belden led him there.

"Then what?" Belden demanded.

"Then I met this old man—" Morgan began.

But when Belden asked for an exact description, Morgan couldn't give it to him. And Belden wanted to know the old man's name, and where they'd gone together, and why. Morgan tried to explain how he'd felt, why he had agreed to drink with a stranger; the detective wasn't interested.

"Take me to the tavern," he said.

They prowled the side streets, but Morgan couldn't find the tavern. Finally he had to admit as much. "But I was there," he insisted. "And then we went to this house—"

"All right," Belden shrugged. "Take me to the house."

Morgan tried. For almost an hour he trudged up and down the winding streets, but all the houses looked alike, and their sameness in the sunlight was different than their distinctiveness in the darkness. There was nothing romantic about these shabby old buildings, nothing that savored of a midnight dream.

Morgan could see that the detective didn't believe him. And then, when he told him the whole story once again-about the old man training his girl in the Storeyville tradition, about the mirrored room upstairs and the red garters and all the rest of it-he knew the detective would never believe. Standing here in the bright street, with the sun sending splinters into his reddened eyes, Morgan found it hard to believe himself. Maybe it *had* been the liquor; maybe he'd made up the part about the old man and all the rest. He could have passed out in front of the cemetery, someone might have come along and lifted his wallet. That made sense. More sense than a journey to the land of dreams.

Apparently Belden thought so too, because he advanced just that theory as they started walking back.

Morgan found himself nodding in agreement, and then he turned his head suddenly and sa-id, "There it is-that's the tavern we went into, I'm sure of it!"

And it *was* the tavern. He recognized the pockmarked man who had served them, and the pockmarked man recognized him. And, "Yes," he told Belden. "He came with the old one, with Louie."

The detective had his notebook out. "Louie who? What's his last name?"

"This I cannot tell you," the bartender said. "He is just old man, he has been a long time in the neighborhood. Harmless but—" The bartender made a twirling gesture close to his forehead.

"Do you know where he lives?" Belden asked.

Surprisingly enough, the bartender nodded. "Yes." He muttered an address and Belden wrote it down.

"Come on," he said to Morgan. "Looks as if you were giving me a straight story after all."

He uttered a dry chuckle. “Thought we knew what was going on down here, but I guess the old boy fooled us. Imagine, running a panel house undercover in this day and age! That’s one for the books.”

A surprisingly short walk led them to the building, on a street scarcely two blocks away.

The house was old, and looked untenanted; some of the front windows were caved in and the drawn green shades flapped listlessly in the hot morning breeze. Morgan didn’t recognize the place even when he saw it, and he stood on the doorstep while Belden rang the bell.

For a long while there was no answer, and then the door opened just a crack. Morgan saw the old man’s face, saw his rheumy red eyes blink out at them.

“What you want?” the old man wheezed. “Who are you?”

Belden told him who he was and what he wanted. The old man opened the door a bit wider and stared at Morgan.

“Hello,” Morgan said. “I’m back again. Looks like I mislaid my wallet.” He’d already made up his mind not to enter charges-the old boy was in enough hot water already.

“Back?” the little white-haired man snapped. “What do you mean, you’re back? Never set eyes on you before in my life.”

“Last night,” Morgan said. “I think I left my wallet here.”

“Nonsense. Nobody here last night. Nobody ever comes here anymore. Not for over forty years. I’m all alone. All alone—”

Belden stepped forward. “Suppose we have a look around?” he asked.

Morgan wondered if the old man would try to stop him, ask for a search warrant. Instead, he merely laughed and opened the door wide.

“Sure,” he said. “Come on in. Welcome to the Palace.” He chuckled again, then wheezed.

“Throat is dry,” he explained.

“It wasn’t so dry last night,” Morgan told him. “When we drank together.”

The old man shook his head. “Don’t listen to him, Mister,” he told Belden. “Never saw him before.”

They stepped into the hall and Morgan recognized it. The dark panelling looked dingy in the daylight, and he could see the dust on the floor. There was dust everywhere, a thick coating on the wood of the double-doors and lighter deposit on the small door leading to the old man’s room.

They went in there, and Belden began his search. It didn’t take long, because there weren’t many places to look. The old man’s furniture consisted of a single chair, a small brass bed, and a battered bureau. There wasn’t even a closet. Belden went over the bed and mattress, then examined the contents of the bureau drawers. Finally, he frisked old Louie.

“One dollar and fourteen cents,” he announced.

The old man snatched the coins from the detective’s hand. “See, what’d I tell you?” he muttered. “I got no wallet. And I don’t know anything about the mark, either. I’m clean, I am. Ask down at the station house. Ask Captain Leroux.”

“I don’t know any Captain Leroux,” Belden said. “What’s his detail?”

“Why, Storeyville, of course. Where do you think you are?”

“Storeyville’s been closed for almost forty-five years,” Belden answered. “Where do you think *you* are?”

“Right here. Where I always been. In the Palace. I’m a professional man, I am. Used to ha-ve six chickens on the block. Then the heat came on strong, and all I had left was the Red Queen. She sleeps too much, but I can fix that. I fixed it once and I can fix it again—”

Belden turned to Morgan and repeated the twirling gesture the pockmarked bartender had made.

But Morgan shook his head. “Of course,” he said. “The wallet’s upstairs. She has it. Come on!”

The old man put his hand on Morgan’s shoulder. His mouth worked convulsively. “Mister, don’t go up there. I was only fooling-she’s gone, she beat it out on me this morning, I swear it! Sure, she copped your leather all right. Up to her old tricks. But she did a Dutch on me, you won't find her —"

"We'll see for ourselves." Belden was already pounding up the stairs, and Morgan followed him. The dust rising from the stair-treads, and Morgan started to choke. His ears began to hurt, because Belden hammered on the door at the head of the stairs.

"You sure this was the one?" he panted.

Morgan nodded.

"But it couldn't be-this door isn't locked, it's sealed. Sealed tight."

Morgan didn't answer him. His head throbbed, and his stomach was beginning to churn, but he knew what he must do. Shouldering the detective aside, he thrust the full weight of his body against the door.

The ancient wood groaned, then splintered around the rotten doorframe. With a rasp of hinges, the door tottered and fell inward.

A cloud of dust billowed out, filling Morgan's lungs, blinding him. He coughed, he choked, but he groped forward and stepped into the room.

The twenty chandeliers were gone, and the twenty carpets and the twenty vanities and the twenty beds. That's because the mirrors hung cracked and broken in their frames. Now there was only one of everything-one cobwebbed chandelier, one ragged and mouldering patch of carpet, one vanity whose littered top gave off a scent of dead perfume and musty decay, and one canopy bed with its yellowed hangings mildewed and shredded.

And the bed had only one occupant. She was sleeping, just as the old man whined now while he peered over Morgan's shoulder. Always sleeping, and maybe he'd have to fix her again like he did once years ago. Morgan saw that she was still wearing the red garters, but aside from that he wouldn't have recognized her. One skeleton looks just like another.

"What the hell kind of joke is this?" Belden wanted to know.

The old man couldn't tell him, because he was alternately whining and complaining, and then he was weeping in a high, shrill voice-something about the Red Queen and the old days and how he hadn't meant to do it, and he only could awaken her on the nights when Company came calling.

Morgan couldn’t tell him, either. He couldn’t tell him about the land of dreams, or the land of nightmares either.

All he could do was walk over to the bed, lift the rotting skull from the rotting pillow, reach his hand underneath and pull out his brand-new, shiny leather wallet.

Is Betsy Blake Still Alive?

By Hollywood standards, Betsey Blake—the Blonde Baby, the madcap Miss Mystery—died at exactly the wrong time. But it had happened before—Valentino, Harlow, James Dean. So Hollywood knew exactly what to do.

IN APRIL, STEVE RENTED A LITTLE cottage down at the beach. Strictly speaking, it wasn't "down" at all; it stood right on the edge of a steep cliff, and you had to walk almost a quarter of a mile until you got to the nearest steps. But Steve didn't care. He hadn't come to the beach to go swimming.

He'd holed up here for a dual purpose. He wanted to lick his wounds and he wanted to write. Things hadn't gone too well for Steve during the past year—six weeks as a junior writer at one of the major studios, but no contract, and two originals picked up by small independent producers on option, only both options had lapsed without anybody getting excited. So Steve had broken with his agent after one of those standard "To hell with Hollywood!" routines and retreated to the beach. Sometimes he thought he was going to write the Great American Novel. At other times, when the fog rolled in, he'd stand at the window and gaze down at the water, thinking how easy it would be to jump.

Then he met Jimmy Powers, and things got worse.

Jimmy Powers had a cottage right down the line from the one Steve had rented. He came rolling up four or five nights a week in a big new Buick convertible, He had a nice collection of Italian silk suits, but when he was at the beach he preferred to lounge around in matching shorts-and-shirts outfits, all of which had his initials monogrammed on the pockets. Often he came for the weekend, hauling a case of champagne in the trunk of the car. On such occasions Jimmy was usually accompanied by a stock-contract girl from the studio where he was employed as a public relations man.

The thing that got Steve down was the fact that Jimmy Powers (Buick, silk suits, monogrammed shirts, champagne and starlets) was only twenty-three.

"How does he do it?" Steve asked himself over and over. "The guy's got nothing on the ball. He can't write for sour apples. He's not even a good front man. It isn't charm, or personality, or good looks, or anything like that. What's his secret?"

But Jimmy Powers never talked about his work at the studio; and whenever Steve brought up the subject, he'd switch to another topic. But one evening, when both of them had half a load on, Steve tried again.

"How long you had this job, Jimmy?"

This time it worked.

"Almost three years."

"You mean you started when you were twenty? Just walked into one of the biggest outfits in the business and snagged a public relations job?"

"That's right."

"No previous experience? And right away they let you do promotion puffs on their top stars?"

"That's the way the ball bounced."

"I don't get it." Steve stared at him. "How does a guy fall into something like that?"

"Oh, it isn't so much, really," Jimmy told him. "Only three bills a week."

"Only three bills." Steve grunted. "For a kid like you? I've never come close to a steady three hundred a week, and I've knocked around the Industry for years. What gives, Jimmy? Level with me. Do you know where the body is buried?"

"Something like that," Jimmy answered. He gave Steve a kind of funny look and changed the subject, fast.

After that evening, Jimmy Powers wasn't very friendly any more. There were no further invitations to the handsomely furnished cottage. Then for about three weeks Jimmy stopped coming down to the beach altogether. By this time Steve was actually in production, grinding away at a book.

He was hard at it that evening in June when Jimmy Powers knocked on his door.

"Hi, sweetheart," he said. "Mind if I barge in?"

At first Steve thought Jimmy was drunk, but a double-take convinced him that the guy was just terribly excited. Powers paced up and down, snapping his fingers like a cornball juvenile in an expectant-father routine.

"Still writing the Great American Novel, huh?" Jimmy said. "Come off it, chum. Maybe I can steer you onto some real moola."

"Like three bills a week?" Steve asked.

"Peanuts. I'm talking about big money. The minute I hit this angle I thought of you."

"Very kind, I'm sure. What do I have to do—help you stick up the Bank of America?"

Jimmy ignored the gag. "You know where I just come from? M.P.'s office. That's right—for the last five hours, solid, I've been sitting in Mr. Big's office preaching the Word. Ended up with cart blank to handle the whole deal. Any way I want."

"What deal?"

Jimmy sat down then, and when he spoke again his voice was softer.

"You know what happened to Betsey Blake?" he asked.

Steve nodded. He knew what had happened to Betsey Blake, all right. Every man, woman, and child in the United States had been bombarded for the past two weeks with news reports about the Betsey Blake tragedy.

It had been one of those freak accidents. Betsey Blake, the Screen's Blonde Baby, the one and only Miss Mystery, was piloting her speedboat just outside Catalina Channel around twilight on the evening of June 2nd.

According to the reports, she was preparing to enter the annual racing event the following Sunday, to try for her fourth straight win. Nobody knew just what had happened because there were no witnesses, but apparently her speedboat rammed into another boat head-on, killing a Mr. Louis Fryer of Pasadena, And herself.

Both boats had gone down immediately, and divers were still making half-hearted efforts to recover them from the deep water outside the choppy channel when, two days later, Fryer's body was washed up on a lonely beach. The next day Betsey Blake's corpse made a farewell appearance in the same place.

Betsey's identification took another few days to be established definitely enough to satisfy authorities, but there was no doubt about it. The Blonde Baby was no more.

It was a big story, because The Blonde Baby had been up there for a long time. The "Miss Mystery" tag had been pinned on her when she first rose to prominence in pictures, and she'd always lived up to it, taking unusual care to conceal her private life, which rumor had it was just one lurid escapade after another.

So the papers had had a field day digging up her past. They managed to ring in the name of virtually every important male star of the past twenty years. Some of the scandal sheets hinted that they could also mention the names of most of the studio set-dressers, gaffers, and truck-drivers over the same period.

"What happened?" Steve asked Powers. "Did your boss have a heart attack?"

Jimmy nodded. "Just about. Her death puts us on a real spot. The Friday before, she'd just finished her part in *Splendor.* Studio wrapped the picture up, four million bucks' worth of Technicolor, Super-Cinemascope, three top stars—the works. It's all finished, no more retakes, the sets are struck, the film is in the can. And then Betsey kicks off."

"So?"

“So? M.P. is sitting there with a very cold turkey. Sure, if he could push *Splendor* out to the exhibitors right away, maybe he could capitalize on the headlines a little. But this is our biggest picture for the year. We already set it up for late Fall release, around November, to catch the holiday trade and make a bid for the Awards. You begin to see the grief? Comes November, and Betsey Blake will be dead six months. By that time all the excitement is over. Who’s going to plunk down a dollar-twenty to see somebody who’s putting out free lunch to the worms? M.P. has to gross at least five million to break even. How’s he going to do it? So for the past two weeks he’s been nursing a real headache. Takes a lot of aspirin to cure a headache like that.”

“But where do you come in?”

“With the U.S. Marines,” Jimmy said. “Here M.P, and all the big wheels have been batting their brains out trying to come up with an angle—naturally, they had to junk the whole publicity campaign—and all they’ve got for their pains is sweat. Well, I got busy, and today I walked into M.P.’s office and laid five million potatoes right in his lap—maybe seven or eight.”

“You found a solution?” Steve asked.

“Damned right I found a solution! It was sitting there staring them in the face all the time. I say it—right on M.P.’s wall. I walked over and pointed to the picture. That’s all, brother.”

“Picture on the wall?” Steve said. “Whose picture?”

Jimmy made with the dramatic pause.

“Valentino.”

“Come again?”

“Rudolph Valentino, You’ve heard of him?”

“Sure I’ve heard of him.”

“Yeah. Well, chances are you wouldn’t have if some bright boy hadn’t pulled the same stunt back in ’26.”

“What stunt?”

“Valentino went up like a skyrocket, but he was coming down fast. Then, just when he’d finished *The Son of the Sheik*—bingo! he gets appendicitis or something and croaks. So there the studio sits—with a dead star and a dead flicker. That's when some genius pulled a rabbit out of the hat."

Jimmy Powers snapped his fingers again. "They staged the most sensational funeral you ever saw. Poured out the puffs about the passing of the screen's Greatest Lover. Filled the newspapers, jammed the magazines, flooded the country with Valentino. Made out that all the dames who used to flip over him on the screen were soaking their handkerchiefs now that he was gone. By the time his picture was released they had everybody so hot to see it there was no holding them. The picture and the re-releases made so much dough that even the Valentino estate paid its debts and showed a profit. How did they do it? Women weeping at the grave, rumors cropping up that Rudy was still alive—publicity. Publicity—with a capital P."

Jimmy Powers grinned. "Well, I guess you get my angle. M.P. sure latched onto it! And I pointed out to him that we had an even better deal going for us. Because we had this Miss Mystery gimmick to play with, and a real mysterious death. We can even start a story that Betsey Blake is still alive—stuff like that."

"But she was positively identified—"

"I know, I know! So was Booth, and Mata Hari, and this Anasthesia dame, or whatever her name was, over in Russia. But the suckers go for that angle. *Is Betsey Blake Still Alive?* We plant articles in all the rags. Maybe even pony up some loot to get out special one-shots. *The Betsey Blake Magazine.* You know, like they did on this kid Presley, and a lot of others. Hire some kids to start Betsey Blake fan clubs. Get some of the high-priced talent to write sob stuff for the women's magazines. Like how Betsey Blake was a symbol of American girlhood."

"But she wasn't a symbol," Steve objected. "And she wasn't exactly a girl, either."

"Sure, sure, she was past forty. And I happen to know M.P. was going to axe her the minute her contract ran out. But she was well-preserved, you got to admit that, and. a lot of the kids still went for her. We can build it up—yes sir, man, we can build it up!"

No doubt about it, Jimmy Powers was very excited. “And think of what we can do with her past! Nobody has dope on her real name, or just how she got started in show biz back in the Thirties. Wait’ll we get to work on *The Real Betsey Blake* and T*he Betsey Blake Nobody Knows.”*

The excitement was contagious. In spite of himself Steve found himself saying, “Say, that’s a possibility, isn’t it? You might be able to uncover all sorts of things. Didn’t I once hear a rumor that she’d had an illegitimate child by some producer? And that she was once married to—”

Jimmy Powers shook his head.

“No, that isn’t the kind of stuff we want at all! You hear that stuff about everybody in the Industry. I’m giving strict orders to lay off any investigation, get me? We’ll cook up our own stories. Make any kind of a past we want. Maybe get her mixed up with some of these mystic cults, you know what I mean. Hint foul play, too. Oh, we’ll have a ball!”

“We? I thought this was just your baby.”

“It is—M.P. gave me the green light all the way. But it’s a big job, Steve. That’s why I thought of you, sweetheart. You’d be a natural on this kind of promotion—doing some of the high-class stuff—like, say, for those women’s rags I mentioned. So how’s about it, Stevie-burger? How’d you like to be a great big legend-maker?”

Steve sat there for a moment without opening his mouth. And when finally he did open it, he had no idea what was going to come out.

“You know Betsey Blake when she was alive?” he asked.

“Of course I did. Handled most of her promotion—Stalzbuck was in charge, really, but I did a lot of the work. I thought you knew that.”

“I wasn’t sure.” Steve hesitated. “What kind of person was she, really?”

Jimmy Powers shrugged. “An oddball. What difference does it make?”

“Was she friendly? Would you say she was a kind person?”

“In a way. Yes, she was. So why the District Attorney bit?”

“Because she’s dead, Jimmy. Dead and gone, in a tragic accident. And the dead should be allowed to rest in peace. You can’t just go and pitch a sideshow over her grave.”

“Who says I can’t?”

It was Steve’s turn to shrug. “All right. I suppose you can. And nothing I say is going to stop you, is it?”

“Damned right it won’t!”

Steve nodded. “Then go ahead. But, in the classic phrase, include me out. And thanks all the same. I can’t be a ghoul.”

Jimmy stared at him. “So I’m a ghoul, huh?” he muttered. “Well, I’ve got news for you. I’m a ghoul and you’re a fool. A damned fool.”

“Knock it off, please.”

“Okay.” Jimmy paused at the door. “You were always asking me what it takes to get along in this racket. Well, Stevie, it takes guts, that’s what it takes. Guts to see your big opportunity when it comes along, and guts to follow through. Guts that you haven’t got, Stevie-boy.”

“Maybe I was brought up differently.”

Jimmy laughed harshly. “You can say that again! Brother, if you only knew *how* differently! I got the perfect training for this particular job, believe me. And just you watch how I make good on it.”

Then he was gone, and Steve tried to go back to work.

Jimmy stayed away from the beach for a long time—right through the height of the summer season. Steve figured he was working on his promotion, but there was no word from him.

Then the news started trickling in. The trickle became a stream, the stream became a flood.

The Betsey Blake legend burst open the American public during the latter part of August. By September the first magazines hit the stands, carrying their planted stories. By October the specials were out, the fan clubs were formed, and the television people were combing their files for old kinescopes of Betsey Blake’s few live shows.

The whole thing was just as Jimmy Powers had outlined it, only more so. *I Was Betsey Blade’s Last Date* vied for attention with *The Loves of Betsey.*

And there was *The Truth About*—, and *The Real*—, and *What They Don't Dare Print About*—, and a hundred others. The studio, meanwhile, was doing an indefatigable job tying in *Splendor.* Betsey Blake in her last and greatest performance! The greatest actress of the American screen!

On a different level there was the *Betsey Blake—The Woman Nobody Knew* approach. In this series it was possible to learn that Betsey Blake had herself been the daughter of a reigning celebrity of the silent screen, or of royal European blood, or merely a youngster out of Hollywood High School who deliberately set out to fashion a career for herself.

There were as many, and as conflicting, details as to her love life. And there was much speculation about why she had maintained such an air of secrecy concerning her personal affairs. She was a devout churchgoer, she was a freethinker, she was a secret Satanist, she dabbled in astrology, she attended Voodoo ceremonies in Haiti, she was really an old woman who had discovered the secret of eternal youth. She was secretly an intellectual and her lovers included most of the celebrated literary figures of our generation; she was actually a shy, sensitive person who couldn't face her own image on the screen; she was a devoted student of the drama who had planned to retire from the screen and establish her own repertory theater. She loved children and wanted to adopt half a dozen, she had been jilted as a girl and still cherished the memory of her one real love, she was on the verge of a nervous breakdown and spent all her money on psychiatrists.

All this, and much more, could be learned by any reader during early fall.

But Jimmy Powers had prophesied correctly when he said that the mystery angle would prove to be the most attractive part of the legend. There was the *Betsey Blake Did Not Die!* theory, which played up the "strange circumstances" surrounding the case, the "unexplained disappearance" of the two boats, the "reluctance" of the studio to exhibit the body in a public funeral. This angle fastened on every conceivable circumstance, real or rumored, which could be offered as "proof."

As November approached, the volume and tempo of the articles neared a crescendo. For now the Betsey Blake legend was public property, and the fake fan clubs had given way to real fan clubs. Some of the scandal rags were printing the "inside story" and the "real lowdown"—Betsey Blake had been a tramp, she had been an alcoholic, she had started out posing for "art studies" and worse—but none of these allegations affected the legend. Rather, they served to strengthen it. To her growing army of devotees came the teenagers, and that was the final victory. Everyone from eight to eighty was breathlessly awaiting the advent of *Splendor* on their local screens.

It was early one night in November. as Steve sat typing the second draft of his novel, that Jimmy Powers reappeared.

Once again he hailed Steve from the doorway, and once again Steve thought he might be drunk.

This time, however, he had more grounds for his suspicion, because as Jimmy entered the room he brought an alcoholic aura with him.

"How ya doing, boy?" he shouted.

Steve started to tell him, but Powers wasn't really listening.

"Guess I don't have to tell you how I'm doing," he exclaimed. "We open nation-wide next week. Nation-wide, get me? No previews, no test spots, no New York first run—just solid bookings straight across the board. Every key city, and the highest percentage of the gross we ever sold a picture for! And who did it, Stevie-burger? Me, that's who."

Steve lit a cigarette to avoid having to make any comment.

"And don't think the Industry doesn't know it! Man, are the offers pouring in. Of course, M.P.'s a smart old buzzard—he's not going to let me get away from him. Two grand a week, five years non-cancellable, and that's not all. When the pic opens I get a bonus. Fifty Gs under the table. You imagine that? Fifty Gs, cash, that nobody will ever know about. No taxes, nothing. Let me tell you, M.P. knows how to make a gesture. Of course, it’s worth it to him. I been sweating blood on this thing, Stevie. Nobody will ever know the throats I had to cut—”

“Don’t tell me,” Steve said.

“Still playing it simon-pure, huh? Well, that’s okay by me, no hard feelings. I just wanted you to know what you missed out on, sweetheart. This was the biggest coup of the century.”

“You can say that again.”

Both Jimmy Powers and Steve stared at the woman in the doorway. She was short, brown-haired, and plump enough to fill out the rather bedraggled slacks-and-sweater combination she was wearing. Her feet were bare, and she had some difficulty balancing on them, because she was obviously tight as a tick.

“What the hell—?” Jimmy began as she weaved toward him with a smirk.

“Saw you leave your shack just as I came along,” she said. “So I just sneaked in there by myself and had a little drinkie. I could hear you talking over here, so I thought why not come over and join the party?”

“Mind telling me who you are?” Steve asked, a premonition growing in him.

The woman grinned and pointed at Jimmy Powers. “Ask him,” she said.

Jimmy Powers just stood there, his face going from red to white.

“No,” he said. “No, it isn’t—it can’t be—”

“The hell it isn’t,” said the woman. “You know better than to try and get away with that.”

“But what happened? Where have you been?”

“Took myself a little trip.” The woman giggled. “It’s kind of a long sh-story.” She turned to Steve. “Got anything to drink?”

Before Steve could answer, Jimmy stepped forward. “You’ve had enough,” he said. “Tell your story and make it fast.”

“All right, all right, hold your horses.” The woman flopped into an armchair and for a moment stared at the floor.

“I saw the papers, of course,” she said. “They got it all wrong.”

“Then why didn’t you do something?” Jimmy growled.

“Because I was on a trip, remember? I mean I saw them all right, but they were a couple of months old.” She paused. “You going to let me tell this my way?”

“Go ahead.”

“Sure, I cracked into this other boat, like they said. Damn thing running without a light, motor throttled down so’s I never heard a thing. This Louis Fryer was on board, like they said—I knew old Louie from ’way back. What the papers didn’t know, of course, is that he wasn’t alone. He must have picked up some tramp off the beach, some blonde floozy hanging around the Yacht Club. Anyway, when we hit she got it, too. At least that’s the way it figures. She got it and when her body came up they identified her as me.”

“And what happened to—?”

“I’m coming to that part. I passed out, I guess. But I had sense enough to hang onto the boat.”

“The boat went down. They never found it.”

“The boat didn’t go down. And the reason they never found it was that it got picked up that night. With me with it. Little Mexican freighter spotted us just outside the channel and hauled us on board. Me and the boat. I was out cold—guess I had a concussion. When I came to, I was on my way to Chile.”

“Chile?”

The woman nodded. “Sure, Chile. That’s in South America, you know? Valparaiso, Santiago—we went everywhere. Those little wildcat freighters, they take their own good-natured time when they make a trip. Besides, I sold the boat down there for a good price. Made enough to pay my way and plenty left over for tequila. Captain was a good friend of mine. Whole crew, for that matter. You see, they didn’t ever catch on to who I was. All they could see was a blonde. At least, after I got another bottle of rinse and touched it up a bit.” The woman gestured toward her tousled hair. “You know how they flip for a blonde.” She giggled again.

Jimmy Powers stood up. “You mean to tell me you’ve spent the last five months helling around on a freighter with a bunch of Mex grease-monkeys?” he shouted.

“And why not? First real vacation I’ve had in years. And believe me, it was one long party. When I found out in Santiago what the score was, I thought the hell with it, let ’em suffer. This was my big chance to get off the hook for a while and live a little. So I lived. But we ran out of cash, the Captain and I, so when we docked at Long Beach today I came ashore, I knew M.P. would blow his stack if I walked in on him cold. I figured I’d see you first. Maybe we can cook up a publicity angle together, so when we hit M.P. he won’t go through the roof.”

The woman turned to Steve. “You sure you haven’t got a drinkie?” she asked. “Jeez, look at my hair. Got to get to a beauty parlor right away. Nobody’d recognize me. Isn’t that right, pal? Go ahead, admit it—you didn’t recognize me either at first, did you? Gained fifteen pounds, hair grown out. And next week the picture opens—”

“That’s right,” Jimmy Powers said. “Next week the picture opens.”

The woman stood up, swaying. “One thing I got to hand you,” she said. “You did a wonderful promotion job. Even in Chile they knew all about it. And when I hit town today, first thing I did was hike over to the magazine racks. There I am, all over the place. A wonnerful job.”

“Yeah,” said Jimmy.

“Well, don’t just stand there. Now you gotta do even a more wonnerful job. Because I’m back. That’s the real topper, isn’t it? Wait until this one hits the good old public!”

“Yeah,” said Jimmy.

“Of course, this time I’ll be around to help you. I got a line all cooked up. The Captain, he won’t do any talking—he’s shoving off again for Mexico tomorrow morning. We can handle it any way we like. Hah, I can just see the look on the face of old Louie Fryer’s wife when she finds out he had a blonde on board! But it’s a *wonnerful* story. It’ll be a big needle for the picture.”

“Yeah,” said Jimmy.

She turned away and faced Steve again. “How about that drinkie, loverboy?”

“I’ll give you a drink,” Jimmy Powers said. “Over at my place. Come along now.”

“Betcha.”

He placed his arm around the woman and guided her toward the door. Then he paused and looked at Steve. “Stick around, will you?” he said. “I want to talk to you later.”

Steve nodded.

He saw them disappear into Jimmy’s cabin. It was the only other cottage with lights on all along the beach—November is offseason.

He could even have listened and caught some of their conversation. But Steve couldn’t concentrate. He was too busy calling himself names.

Was this the woman he’d been too noble to help turn into a legend? Was her reputation worth protecting at the sacrifice of his own future? Jimmy had been right—the trouble with him was he had no guts. His chance had come and he’d muffed it. For what?

Steve was too wrapped up in name calling to notice what time it was Jimmy and the woman left. When he finally glanced across the way he saw that the lights of the cottage had gone out.

Jimmy Powers had said he was coming back. Where was he? Steve started for the door. He was quite sure Jimmy hadn’t driven away, because he would have heard the sound of the car.

Just then Jimmy came stumbling up the walk. He seemed to have taken on quite a bit more to drink.

Steve said, “What’s the matter? Where’s Betsey Blake?”

“Who?” Jimmy staggered in the doorway, then steadied himself against the side of the screen. “You mean the old bat who barged in here? I hope you didn’t go for that line of malarkey she tried to hand out.”

“But it figures, Jimmy. You can check up on it—”

"I don't have to. When I got her over to my place I started asking a few questions and she broke down. She was just running a bluff—made the whole thing up. She's no more Betsey Blake than you are."

"What!"

Jimmy Powers wiped his forehead. "I think she was figuring on a shakedown. You know—come out with the story just before the picture's set to break, and threaten to queer the works unless the studio pays off." He shook his head. "Anyway, it doesn't matter, now."

"You scared her off?"

"No." Jimmy gulped. "Don't get me wrong, pal. Nobody *scared* her. She just left of her own free will, and under her own steam. You got to get that straight, seep Because I—I think there's been sort of an accident."

"Accident?"

Steve stiffened, and Jimmy went limp.

"I'm not sure yet. That's why I came over. I wanted you to come with me and look—"

"Look at what? Where is she?"

"Well, you must have noticed, she was crocked, wasn't she? I happened to be at the back window after she left, and I saw her stumbling along the edge of the cliff, like. I was all set to holler at her—listen to what I'm telling you, Stevie-boy, you got to get this—I was all set to holler at her when she sort of fell. Bingo, like that, she's gone."

"You mean she . . . But that's a sixty-foot drop!"

Jimmy gulped again. "I know. I haven't looked. I'm afraid to, alone."

"We'd better call the cops," Steve said.

"Yeah, sure. But I wanted to talk to you first. Alone, see? I mean, we call them, right away they'll ask a lot of questions. Who was she, where did she come from, what did she want around here? You know cops."

"Tell them the truth."

"And queer the picture?"

"But you say she wasn't Betsey Blake."

"She wasn't, but the minute they find out she *claimed* to be, the whole campaign is in the soup. Don't you understand, Steve? People will start wondering—was she or wasn't she? I worked my tail off building up a legend, and now it can all tumble down just because some dizzy old bag takes a header off a cliff."

Steve tried to get Jimmy Powers to meet his stare, but the bloodshot eyes kept rolling. "What I mean to say," he was muttering, "is why not just forget the whole thing?"

"But we've got to notify the authorities. Who knows? She may still be alive down there." Steve started for the phone.

"I know, I know. You got to tell them. But she isn't alive, she couldn't be. And all I want is that you don't say anything about her coming here tonight. Or that she said anything. Make believe it never happened. I just looked out the window before I went to bed and I noticed this beach bum stagger over the edge. That's the way it was. No harm done, is there, Steve? I mean, look at all that's at stake."

"I'm looking," Steve said. "And I'll think about it." He went to the phone and dialed. "Hello, get me police headquarters. I want to report an accident . . ."

He didn't waste words. No details—a woman had apparently fallen over the cliff, such-and-such an address; yes, he'd be waiting for them.

When Steve hung up, the publicity man expelled his breath in a deep sigh.

"That's the way to do it," he said. "You handled it just right. I won't forget you, Stevie-boy."

"I'm still thinking," Steve said. "When they get here I'll make up my mind what to say."

"Now, listen—"

"You listen to me. What makes you so sure that woman wasn't who she claimed to be? No, don't give me that blackmail argument again. Nobody gets drunk when they're out to pull a shakedown." He walked over to Jimmy Powers. "Let me ask you another question. Suppose she really was

Betsey Blake. Then what? Why couldn't you have made the announcement tomorrow, the way she said? Think of the sensation it would have made, what it would have done for the picture."

Jimmy drew back against the door. "To hell with the picture," he said. "It's me I'm thinking about. Don't you understand that, meat-head? This is *my* promotion, mine all the way. I cooked it up. I nursed it. It's my baby, and everybody in this town knows it. The picture's gonna be a smash, and who gets the credit? Me, that's who.

"Figure it your way and see what happens. So she breaks the story, and there's a sensation all right. Maybe even a bigger sensation, a real sockeroo. But it's not going to do the picture any more good—we've got it made already, just the way it is. And so Betsey Blake turns up alive, then what? She's still an old bag—she can't play leads any more, not even if they photograph her through a scrim to take the wrinkles out. Alive, she's just a middle-aged tramp who hits the sauce. Dead, she's a legend. She's right up there with Valentino and Harlow and James Dean. Her old pictures are worth a fortune in re-run rights. I tell you, it adds up!

"Besides, if she breaks the story, what happens to me? I'm the fairhaired boy right now. But if she tops me, then she gets the credit.

You heard her say it yourself, how 'we' were gonna figure out an angle together. I know that 'together' line from way back! She'd take all the bows, steal all the scenes. Believe me, Steve, I know! She was always like that, couldn't stand to have anyone else share the spot with her. It was Betsey Blake, first, last, and always. The things she pulled with me personally! I would have rotted in the publicity department the rest of my life if this break hadn't come along. You don't get this kind of a chance often out here, Steve. I took it, and I worked on it, and nobody's gonna grab it away from me at the last minute. I wouldn't let her—"

Steve put his hand on the man's shoulder. "You told me what I wanted to know," he said. "She *was* Betsey Blake, wasn't she?"

"I ain't saying. And you don't have to say anything either, when the cops come. I mean, Steve, have a heart—what good can it do now? You don't know anything about it, that’s all you tell ’em. I’ve got five grand I can bring over here tomorrow morning. Five grand in cash that says you don’t know anything. Hell, ten grand. And a job at the studio—”

“So she was Betsey Blake,” Steve murmured. “And she just walked out of your place and fell off the cliff.”

“Those things happen, you know how it is, a drunk dame and her foot slips. It was an accident, I swear it was! All right, if you must know, I was with her—I didn’t want to tell you that part. I was with her, I was going to drive her home, and then she let go of my arm and stumbled off.”

“There’ll be footprints in the sand,” Steve said. “And they’ll check anyway, they always do. They’ll find out who she really is, and they’ll investigate from start to finish. They’ll go all the way back—”

Jimmy Powers wilted. Steve had to hold him up.

“I never figured,” he said. “Sure, they’ll go all the way back.”

“You shouldn’t have killed her.”

“Don’t say that, Stevie!”

“It’s true, isn’t it? You did kill her. You knew she was Betsey Blake, but you killed her anyway, because you thought she’d queer your big deal.”

Jimmy didn’t answer. Instead he hit out at Steve, and Steve twisted and brought up his arm. Jimmy sagged. Steve held him there, listening for the sound of a siren in the distance.

“Fifty grand,” Jimmy whispered. “I told you I had it coming. Fifty grand, all in cash. Nobody’d ever know.”

Steve sighed. “When I heard about the money I was ready to kick myself,” he said. “I thought I was a sucker because I didn’t have your kind of guts. But now I know what it means to have them. It means you don’t stop at anything, not even killing.”

“You don’t understand,” Jimmy whimpered. “I wanted to live it up, I wanted my chance to be a big shot. She never gave it to me while she was alive, and when she disappeared I thought my big break had finally come. But what’s the use now? Like you say, they’ll find out sooner or later. I ought to have doped it out. I couldn’t get away with it. And now it’ll kill the legend, too.”

“Never mind the legend,” Steve said. “You killed a woman.” The sirens were close now; he could hear the tires squealing to a halt. “I guess I don’t understand at that,” Steve said. “I don’t understand your breed of rat at all. Call yourself a big-shot publicity man, do you? Why, you’d murder your own mother for a story.”

Jimmy Powers gave him a funny look as the cops came in. “That’s right,” he whispered. “How’d you guess?”

A Killing in the Market

I mat not have much time to set this down.

To make things worse, the pen leaks, and there isn't very much paper. You'd think that for forty dollars a day, the hotel would furnish a decent pen. At least they could replace the supply of stationery once in awhile. Of course, I suppose I could call room service and ask for more, but I don't dare to have anyone nosing around.

It's just that I want to write this out while I still have the chance. Maybe it will help explain a few things. At least it might be of interest to a few eager beavers—the kind of people who've always dreamed of a chance to make a big killing in the stock market.

That was my idea. I wanted to make a killing. And now I have, only—

I suppose I ought to begin at the beginning. And say that my name is Albert Kessler, and up until a little over three months ago I worked in Wall Street. I was a clerk in a brokerage house. Maybe I'd better not mention the name of the firm. It isn't important, anyway.

Up until then, nothing was important. Including myself. I was just another guy, holding down just another job. My idea of a big deal was to get out fifteen minutes early and catch a seat in the subway, instead of having to stand up all the way home. That's another laugh—home. One furnished room, in the Bronx. A small order of nothing. But that's all I had. That, and the big dream.

I guess everybody who ever worked in the Street has had the same dream. It's one of those things you think about when you bounce around in the subway, or on the mattress in your crummy room. You can't help but think about it, and hope that tomorrow it's going to come true.

Tomorrow, that's always when you're going to get the break—when you'll just happen to run into this character with the golden touch. He's a plunger, and every time he plunges he comes up smelling like a rose. Somehow you manage to make friends with him, and pretty soon he's giving you the word on a good thing, and before you know it you're a character yourself. A real big operator.

Sure, I know what it sounds like. But after you spend a little time working in the Street, you can't help but think that way. Because you occasionally see the dream come true. Bernard Baruch isn't the only one who ever made a killing. You hear stories about guys who started out as runners and ended up buying their own seats on the Exchange. Sometimes they made all their money on the Big Board, and sometimes they branched off into investing in their own firms. The oil men, those Greek shipping magnates, people like that; they prove it happens.

But it doesn't happen to everyone; not to guys who just moon around and wish. You've got to do more than dream. You've got to keep your eyes open and figure the angles. And you've got to wait.

That's what I did. For over two years I waited. And I planned. I saved my dough, too. Not much—a pitiful three thousand. But at least I held onto it. A lot of the other dreamers aren't willing to save and wait. They're suckers for every crazy rumor on the Street, and they use the Dow-Jones like a scratch-sheet. It's five bucks on Steel to win, or ten bucks on Industrials to place or Utilities to show. The *Journal* is their racing form, and they make graphs and charts and follow stock performance records back for years. They play systems or they play hunches—but all of them go for broke.

That two-dollar window stuff wasn't for me. I didn't believe in tips or theories. Sure, the Market is a gamble, but gamblers aren't always winners. The winner, in the long run, is the man who has a sure thing from the start.

I kept my eyes open trying to spot that winner. Instead of studying the Market, I studied the customers.

And that's how I found Lon Mariner.

There's no sense going into all the details of how I made up my mind. Half a dozen times beforehand, I thought I'd located my man—a big investor, who consistently moved in at the right time, then moved out again after a quick profit. But each time, sooner or later, the customer I had my eye on pulled a goof, or started hedging with gilt-edge stuff at a small profit. Over the years I kept track of several investors; in New York, or in our branch offices.

But it wasn't until three months ago that I made my discovery. Lon Mariner, who always pulled a sure thing out of the hat. He put fifteen thousand into a small aircraft company three days before they landed a big Navy contract. He pulled out with fifty thousand and bought into some electronics outfit I never heard of—until they declared a split, then a dividend, and bounced up eighteen points. He took his profits and went into oil, dumping his stock the morning before a nose-dive. Next there was a flier in a Texas railroad that was gobbled up by a bigger combine within a week. By this time I was really following his orders, which came in through our Frisco office. And I was surprised to find that after a month or so he was operating out of Cleveland. But the pattern continued. What he bought didn't make sense; the important thing was that everything he touched turned to gold. Copper, radar, TV in Cleveland; then a big utilities deal out of Boston. He never missed on timing. In eleven weeks he was in on every spectacular rise, every major split across the Board. I figured he'd run his fifteen thousand up to several million. Then he placed his next whopping order out of our Chicago office.

That's when I quit my job and went to Chicago.

All I had was three thousand dollars and this wild idea of mine. At least I thought it was a wild idea, after I actually got on the plane. Here I was, chasing halfway across the country to locate a perfect stranger—or maybe a stranger who wasn't so perfect—in hopes that I'd get him to cut me in on his big deal. I did some sweating on that flight when I really took stock of the situation. After all, what did I know about this Lon Mariner, anyway?

He wasn't in *Who's Who*. And he didn't have a D&B rating, either. I hadn't dared to make any direct inquiries through any of our branch offices. All I really knew about him was that he was the guy I was looking for—the guy with the golden touch. From now on, I'd have to play it by ear.

The minute I got off the airport limousine at the Palmer House, I took a cab over to our Chicago office on LaSalle Street. I still had my company ID card—so I forgot to turn it in, is that a crime?—and I flashed it. I said I'd been sent out here to contact one of our clients, and had Mr. Mariner been in today?

Well, it turned out Mr. Mariner hadn't been in—today or any day. His orders came by phone and his bank drafts by mail. I went clear up to the Vice-President in Charge Of, but nobody could tell me anything more about the man.

But I did find out he was staying at a hotel on the Gold Coast. *This* hotel.

I hotfooted it over yesterday afternoon, and plunked down my forty bucks for this room—complete with air conditioning, television, and a lousy pen.

Forty bucks was only the start of my investment. Ten bucks more made sure that the Room Clerk put me on the same floor—he even showed me Mariner's name on the register, and his suite number. It was 701, right down the corridor from my room. He didn't remember much about Mariner's appearance, because he hadn't seen him since. Said he'd come in alone, without very much luggage, and that he was "average-looking." Medium height, brown hair, middle-aged.

I spent another ten bucks on the bellboy. All he could tell me was that Mariner ordered all his meals sent up to him, and that he didn't go out much except in the mornings when the maid-service cleaned up.

By this time it was almost seven o'clock, and the maids were off duty. I had to settle for a talk with the waiter who served him his meals, a guy named Joe Franscetti.

For the usual ten, Franscetti said yes, he'd just come down from Mr. Mariner's room after clearing away the supper dishes. Apparently, Mariner hadn’t made any impression on him at all; I got the same vague description of an “average-looking” guy. The waiter couldn’t remember anything he’d ever said to him, or even how he usually dressed.

“But I can tell you what he had for dinner,” he said. “Shrimp cocktail, the prime ribs—medium rare, I think it was—baked potato, Waldorf salad, coffee, apple pie. And you know what he tipped? A lousy half a buck!”

I thanked him and went away. It was a little discouraging. I hadn’t come all this way to find out that Lon Mariner liked his meat medium rare. And even the fact that a guy on a five-million-dollar winning streak is a poor tipper didn’t mean very much to me.

There didn’t seem to be anything I could do at the moment. No sense going to the house dick. It had been risky enough asking the questions I’d asked, because the last thing I wanted was to call attention to myself. I suppose everyone figured I was a private eye, and that was bad enough, but at least it was some kind of an excuse.

Anyway, I’d learned nothing useful, and from now on I was on my own. So about seven-thirty I ended up back in my room, with the door open. If I sat in a chair at a certain angle I could keep my eye on 701. Just in case Mariner *did* go out.

Of course, there was nothing to prevent me from just marching down the hall and knocking on his door. Except that I wasn’t ready for that yet. Before talking to Mariner, I had to make up my mind about him. When I did speak to him, my conversation was going to be mighty important. I couldn’t afford to muff the deal, and I had to decide what I intended to say. And that would depend on sizing up my man, first.

There was just one thing running through my mind right now. Mariner must be some kind of a nut.

On the face of it, there wasn’t anything particularly screwy about what I’d heard concerning him; lots of quiet, middle-aged guys are a little on the timid side, and prefer to keep to themselves if they live alone. But under the circumstances, the pattern didn’t make sense. If *I*’d cleaned up millions in the market in three months, *I* wouldn't be hiding out by myself in a hotel room, and that's for darn sure.

So he was probably a psycho, like all those eccentric recluses you hear about who end up dying in a basement with a fortune in cash stuck under the mattress.

I sat there for a long time, thinking about it. And the more I thought, the worse I felt. Because it's pretty hard to get close to that kind of a nut. They're the suspicious type, delusions of persecution and everything. They don't trust strangers, and nobody's their friend.

On the other hand, there was something wrong with the picture. I was paying forty bucks a day. And Mariner, even if he was a stingy tipper, must be shelling out close to a hundred for his suite. Besides, during the last few months, he'd moved from Frisco to Cleveland to Boston to Chicago—and trips like that cost dough. Even if he was making millions, he wouldn't be inclined to spend an extra dime if he was just another eccentric. Those guys hole up in the slums and stay put, and they eat stale crackers instead of shrimp cocktails.

So there must be some other reason why Mariner was keeping himself under wraps. I got a sudden hunch.

Could it be that he was the stooge or front-man for some syndicate?

That made a little better sense to me. Sure, it could explain a lot of things. Including why he stuck to his room. Probably he got his information or his orders by phone. It was a cinch one or the other came from someplace, unless he just got tips on the market out of dreams.

I was beginning to get a terrible yen to visit his room and see if I could spy on him while he was under the influence of H, or operating his ouija board, or whatever he did. Maybe he kept a collection of shrunken heads, and they talked to him.

On the other hand, it might be a lot smarter to check the switchboard girl tomorrow and see if she'd just keep track of any phone calls coming in or going out of his suite, and slip me the word.

I looked at my watch. Almost ten o’clock, and nothing had happened. I was tired. Better turn in and sleep on it. In the morning I’d decide what to do.

So I got up and went over to the door to close it.

Just as *his* door opened, and he came out.

I knew it was Mariner the minute I saw him. Middle-aged, middle-sized, brown-haired; he wore a plain blue suit and a white shirt, and the face above the collar was the kind you could forget even while you were looking at it.

I guess I’ve seen ten thousand such faces in my time—crowded into elevators, jammed into subways, bobbing along the street. Looking at them had never made me sweat, but I was sweating now. Because this face was worth five million bucks. Lon Mariner, the man with the golden touch.

Now I got a look at his back. He was trying his door, making sure it was locked. Maybe he kept a lot of cash inside. Maybe I could stick around and pick the lock. No, that was too dangerous. What I had to do was follow him and pick his brains.

I put on my coat while he walked over to the elevator. I figured I could dash out and make it just in time, but I figured wrong. Because the car stopped before I reached my door, and he got in.

Then I was swearing, and running down the stairs. I hit the lobby in one minute flat, but he wasn’t there and the elevator was already going up again. I could see the lights flickering on the numerals—two, then three, then four.

I shook my head. Should I wait for the car to come down again and talk to the elevator boy, hoping he’d remember which way the man in the blue suit had gone? Or should I dash outside and try to find him?

I decided to get going. I started across the lobby, trying not to break into a run, and scooted past the entrance to the cocktail lounge. Something caught my eye as I went by. The back of a blue suit.

I stopped.

Mariner was sitting at the bar, all alone, way down at the end.

The sweat rolled down my sides as I walked into the place. I chose a stool about twenty feet away from him; there wasn't anybody between us. In fact, outside of a couple off over in a booth, we had the whole joint to ourselves.

The bartender, a fat guy with a mustache, was pouring Mariner a drink. Cognac, from the looks of the glass. He saw me and came down to my end of the bar.

I ordered a beer and swivelled around on the stool so that I could get a good look at my man.

The waiter had certainly been right; Lon Mariner was "average-looking." I didn't get a clue from his ready-made clothes, and there wasn't a hint of anything unusual in his ready-made face, either. He was just another guy.

The more I studied him, the worse I felt. I'd been sure that after I had a chance to get a close look at him, I could size him up and figure out the best way to approach him. But he just sat there, a bump in a blue suit on an overstuffed log. He didn't seem to be enjoying his drink, he wasn't listening to the radio, and he never looked around at the bartender or at me. He had about as much life as a window dummy, and he wasn't nearly as handsome.

All at once he signaled for another drink. And when the bartender brought the bottle and poured, he slugged down the shot and told him to refill. Then, after he paid, he mumbled something and the bartender left the bottle standing there on the bar.

That told me something, at last. That, and the way he sat there, all stiff and frozen.

He was frozen, all right, because he was afraid. I recognized the symptoms, now. He was scared to death about something and even more scared that he'd show it So he sat and drank.

I had my cue, now. I waited until he'd poured and downed his fourth drink. Then I glanced around, checking to see that the place was still almost empty, and slid off my stool. I walked down along the bar and stood next to him. He could see me in the bar mirror, and I noticed the way his fingers tightened around his empty glass.

"Mr. Mariner," I said. "I've been looking for you." If he'd turned around and thrown the glass at me, that would have been one thing. If he'd turned pale, gasped, or slumped to the floor in a dead faint, that would have been another. But what he *didn't* do was still more effective. He didn't move. He'd been frozen before; now he was dead. He tightened up, all over, as if *rigor mortis* was setting in. I had the feeling he'd stopped breathing, just stopped completely.

"I want to talk to you, Mr. Mariner," I murmured.

He didn't turn his head and his lips never moved. But a sound came out of him, and then faint words.

"You must be mistaken. My name's not Mariner."

I shrugged. "Of course it isn't. But that's the name you signed on the hotel register. That's the name you've been using on all your business deals. I know."

He reached out and spilled himself another drink. Not poured—spilled. I watched him do it, waited while he wavered the glass up to his lips and gulped. Then he whispered again.

"How did you find me?"

"That isn't important," I answered. "I've been keeping an eye on you for quite awhile."

"Then I was wrong all along, wasn't I? I thought I could get away with it. But they knew all the time, didn't they?"

"I'm all alone, Mr. Mariner."

"Yes. But they sent you."

I hesitated, then decided how to play it. "Nobody sent me. This was my own idea. I've been studying your stock market operations for months. You see, I work for the firm you've been doing business with. And I wanted to talk to you about your methods."

"My—methods?"

For the first time there was a recognizable expression on his face. You could almost call it a smile. He turned his head just a trifle and stared at me. "Then I was wrong. You're just an—an ordinary citizen?"

"Very ordinary, I assure you. But I have an extraordinary curiosity about you. Or about any man who can do what you've been doing in the investment field. I thought we might discuss your methods."

He was really smiling, now. He poured another drink, and his hand was perfectly steady. "Well, I don't know—"

He was confident once more, ready to brush me off. I knew how to handle that.

"Listen, Mr. Mariner. I'm not the nosey type, but you've already told me enough so that I know you're in some kind of trouble. You don't exactly welcome publicity, do you? I mean, you wouldn't want any stories in the papers about mysterious millionaires, or men traveling under assumed names who have secret methods of beating the stock market. I could go to the phone right now and call the reporters—"

"You wouldn't!"

"Of course I wouldn't. Because you're going to talk to me, instead. Just me. And if you can tell me what I think you can, I'll have every reason to keep my own mouth shut in the future, just the way you do. There it is, Mr. Mariner—my cards are on the table. I want in."

"All right. We'll talk."

"Good."

"But not here. Not like this. In my room."

"Fine. Let's go up." I waited for a moment, then repeated it louder. "Let's go up."

But he wasn't listening to me.

He wasn't looking at me, either. He was staring into the bar mirror. I followed his glance.

Behind us, in the doorway of the cocktail lounge, stood a tall blonde. She had, among other things, the biggest pair of eyes I'd ever seen. She was worth looking at for a number of reasons, but her eyes were what held me.

The eyes held Mariner, too. He looked at her and his mouth opened and closed, and he froze up again. Really froze.

She didn’t smile, and she didn’t say anything, and she didn’t even come closer. She just gave him that long look and then she beckoned.

Mariner stood up. “Excuse me,” he muttered. “I must go now. I have an engagement.”

“What about our talk?” I said.

“Oh, yes. Suppose we say ten o’clock tomorrow morning, in my room?”

I grabbed his arm. “You wouldn’t try to pull a sneak, now would you? Remember what I said about the reporters.”

“I remember.”

“All right, see you at ten, then. But no funny business. I mean it, Mr. Mariner.”

“I promise.”

And then he was walking over to her, following her out of the place. I watched them go, saw them head across the lobby in the direction of the elevators. He couldn’t find an exit that way, and I was pretty sure he wasn’t looking for one—not with that tall blonde on his arm. In a way I didn’t blame him for cancelling his appointment and putting me off until tomorrow. If a blonde like that ever beckoned to me, I’d cancel my appointments, too. I doubt if I’d be ready to see anyone even at ten the next morning.

But I’m still the suspicious type. I waited a few minutes, then got up and went out to the desk. The Room Clerk on duty was my ten buck boy.

I leaned across the counter and flipped a bill his way, very quietly.

He palmed it, just as quietly. “Yes, sir?”

“About Mr. Mariner,” I said. “He didn’t check out, did he?”

“No party by that name checked out, no sir.”

“Well, in case he does, any time between now and tomorrow morning, I want you to call me. And right away, before he gets past the desk here.”

“Certainly, but—”

“But what?”

The clerk was frowning. “I don’t believe we have a party by that name here at the hotel.”

I knew how to frown, too. “What do you mean, you don’t have such a party? Lon Mariner, in Suite 701. You’re the guy who tipped me off about him in the first place.”

“I am? You must be mistaken, sir.”

“Now, look—”

“You look, sir.” The clerk flipped through the registration list. “Here’s our guest-entries for the past week. No Mariner, is there? Are you sure you have the right name?”

“Am I sure? You showed me, yesterday. Give me that!” I grabbed and squinted. I saw my own name, and ran my eyes along the signatures above it. Paige, Stein, Tenn, Klass, Phillips, Graham—no Mariner.

“What kind of a business is this?” I was getting a funny feeling in my stomach. “Who’s in Suite 701?”

“Let’s look at the card-file. Over here, sir.” He stepped to the next cage, where the billing entries were kept. He pulled out a yellow card. “Suite 701 has been vacant all week,” he told me. “Just rented it tonight. Party named Fairborn. Here, see for yourself.”

The funny feeling spread from my stomach upwards. My heart was pounding.

“But that’s Mariner’s suite,” I said. “Little middle-aged guy, with a blue suit. You must have seen him going through the lobby just now, with a big blonde—”

The clerk shook his head. “No, sir, I didn’t.”

“But he was just in the bar; I talked to him.”

“I’m sorry, sir—”

I turned my back and ran for the elevator. By the time I got to the seventh floor, my heart was in my mouth; and it wasn’t from the fast ride, either.

I went down the corridor, right to 701, and banged on the door. My heart was in my mouth, but I could still talk. And when the door opened, I did.

“Mr. Mariner,” I said. Then my voice trailed off. I was looking at the blonde with the big eyes. And she was looking at me.

“You have the wrong room, I believe.”

"I don't. Where's Mariner?"

"Who?"

"The guy in the blue suit. You came up here with him less than half an hour ago. This is his room."

She shook her head. "Sorry, but you're mistaken. This is my room. I'm Miss Fairborn."

"But I saw you two together—"

The big eyes narrowed. "Now, wait a minute. I've been in this room ever since I arrived this evening. I don't know what you're talking about. If you doubt my word, you can check with the desk downstairs."

"I already did. But I know you and Mariner were together, I saw him leaving the bar with you."

"Ah. The bar. You were drinking there."

"Never mind that stuff. I'm not drunk! What'd you do with Mariner?"

The door opened a trifle more. A man put his head out behind Miss Fairborn. He was a big man, with steel-gray hair, and he didn't look like Mariner at all. He looked like trouble.

"What goes on here?" he demanded.

Miss Fairborn shrugged. "I don't know. Some drunk looking for a friend. You'd better handle hun, Harry."

"Glad to."

But I wasn't being handled. I backed away. "All right," I said. "So I made a mistake. I'm sorry."

Harry started to say something, and then stepped aside. I recognized the waiter, Joe Franscetti. He was coming out, wheeling a service table.

I waved at the three of them. "Excuse it please," I muttered. "I'll go quietly."

And I went, around the corner, hearing the door close behind me. I stood there, waiting until Joe Franscetti caught up with me. He wheeled his table along, head down. I stepped out and grabbed his elbow.

"What gives?" I asked. "Where's Mariner?"

"Who? What's that again, mister?"

"I asked where's Mariner? The guy in 701?"

"But I just come from there. You saw me. There's this dame and her boyfriend, they just had dinner."

"I know. Only that's Mr. Mariner's room. You served him all last week, you said so. Remember?"

"Mister, are you all right?"

"Of course I am. But everybody else has gone crazy. Now look here, you told me about Mariner yourself. The brown-haired guy in the blue suit, the one who only tipped fifty cents. Prime ribs rare, Waldorf salad."

"Mister, that room's been vacant all week. I never saw anyone like you say, and I never saw you before, either. You better lie down, you don't look so good."

I knew how I looked, but there was no sense wasting time. There was still the bell-captain; he'd know if a certain bellboy was on duty.

Downstairs I went. I found the bell-captain. My boy was on, tonight, and I caught him over in a corner of the lobby. This time I decided to make another investment.

"Here," I said, waving the bill under his nose. "This is a hundred bucks, see it?"

"Yes, sir."

"Now I've no idea what they might have paid you to clam up, but I've got a hunch they didn't go higher than twenty. So you might as well sell out to the highest bidder."

"I don't follow you, sir."

"It's very simple. Yesterday you and I had a little talk together. I was asking you questions about a man named Lon Mariner. In Suite 701. You described him to me, said he never went out except while the maids were cleaning up. Right?"

His eyes watched the hundred-dollar bill as it waved under his nose. Then he shook his head.

"Sorry, sir. I don't remember anything like that. I mean, I couldn't have told you such a thing, because 701 was vacant until this evening. I know for a fact—I took the party up myself just a few hours ago. A big blonde.”

The hundred went back into my pocket and I headed back into the bar. It was still deserted, and the fat bartender came right over.

“Yes?”

“Remember me?” I asked. “I was in here earlier this evening.”

“That’s right.”

Well, at least he admitted *I* had been here. Now I was ready to try for double or nothing.

“Remember the guy I was talking to?”

Silence.

“He left before I did, with a blonde.”

“A big blonde?” The bartender brightened. “Sure, she was in here just a couple minutes ago. I served her a—I forget just what.”

“She was in here before then, looking for this guy in the blue suit. He sat down at the end of the bar, drinking cognac. I spoke to him. Then she came along and they left together. Now do you recall him?”

The bartender shook his head. “I didn’t see them. I didn’t see you talking to anyone, either. You were all alone.” He wiped the bar. “What’s the matter, sir? You don’t look so good.”

“I don’t feel so good,” I told him. “Go away.”

He went away and I sat there. No use talking any more. He wouldn’t remember. None of them remembered. But I did.

I remembered an old English movie they keep reviving on television. *The Lady Vanishes.* This dame sees another dame and talks to her, and later everybody swears she doesn’t exist. Of course she does; she’s been kidnapped by spies.

Then there’s the yam that pops up every now and then about the woman in the hotel room; she disappears, too. I guess it started way back in the 1890s—it was supposed to have happened in Paris, during some kind of International Exposition. Turned out the woman had cholera and they hushed everything up in order to avoid a panic when she died. They even repapered her room overnight.

Come to think of it, I'd read a lot of detective novels with the same idea. And usually there was a dame involved, and a spy or murder plot.

Somehow I couldn't swallow it in connection with Mariner. Spies don't play the market. And I didn't think he had cholera, either, or even Asiatic flu.

But he *was* scared.

That I remembered. He'd been scared when I talked to him, wondering if *they* had sent me. So who were *they?* The Syndicate, maybe? He'd recognized the blonde, and gone along quietly. Gone along up to the suite, where the gray-haired man named Harry was waiting. He'd gone along, even though he was scared to death.

Scared to death. Was that it? Had they killed him?

It didn't seem logical, from any angle. You don't kill the goose that lays five million golden eggs. You can't get away with it, even in Chicago, in a swank hotel.

But they had gotten away with *something*. And that was the screwiest part of it. They'd made everybody forget Lon Mariner had even existed, including people who'd seen him just a little while before he vanished. They'd removed his name from the registry, and even from the billing cards.

Was it just bribery? I doubted it, somehow. You can't take such chances. Sooner or later somebody would come looking for Mariner and put on the pressure. Clerks, waiters, bellboys couldn't be trusted to keep their mouths shut when the heat was on. Somebody would come, and someone would sing. Bribery wasn't good enough.

How about threats? That might work. But the people I'd just talked to didn't seem frightened. They were just puzzled. It was as if they actually believed that Lon Mariner had never existed.

That was the point I kept coming back to.

Why was it so important to make sure nobody believed there had ever been such a man?

And *how* had they managed the trick? If the deal involved murder, then certainly the killers would be more interested in concealing their presence than the presence of the victim. Yet the blonde had registered openly, showed herself around. She'd even come back here to the bar, probably while I was out in the lobby, and talked to the bartender. He said she ordered a drink from him, he couldn't remember what.

He couldn't remember—

I got a flash. A flash of those enormous eyes, and the two of them in here, all alone. The blonde leaning over the bar and telling him he couldn't remember. Not bribing him, not threatening him, but *telling* him. Hypnotizing him into forgetting.

Wild?

Perhaps, but I was wild now, too. When plain facts don't make sense, you've got to look for something fancy. And hypnotism works. It works fast, under the right conditions, with the right operators. That blonde would be the right operator. She could get close to the clerk or the bellboy; they'd look—being men—and they'd listen. And the waiter, Joe Franscetti, had been right up there in the room with her, serving a meal. That left the bartender to deal with. So she slipped down here and slipped him a mental Mickey.

I felt a little better, but not much. Because Mariner was still missing, and I didn't know why. And *they* knew that *I* knew.

What I needed now was an ace in the hole. But I didn't have one. The best I could do was a gun in the suitcase. At the time, I'd worried a lot about packing one along. It seemed risky, and I really didn't expect to use threats on Mariner. Now I was glad I had it.

Because there was only one thing left for me to do. I'd have to go up to my room, get the gun, and knock on the door of Suite 701 again.

I got up and went out into the lobby. I took the elevator. I got off at the seventh floor. I tiptoed down the hall, past 701, to my own room. I took out the key and opened my door very quietly. I stepped in.

And then I stumbled, reaching for the light. I started to swear, under my breath, but I should have prayed instead. Because my having stumbled is what must have saved me.

The blow came out of the darkness behind the door, and if it had landed on my head, I'd have been a goner. As it was, my shoulder almost broke. But I ducked, and turned, and was just coming up with a right when two things happened simultaneously.

The light clicked on, and the man named Harry stuck a gun in my ribs.

"Now, march," he suggested.

We marched. There was nobody in the corridor to watch the parade go by. Nobody cheered when we halted before the door to 701.

He knocked. The door opened and Miss Fairborn looked out at Harry. "Did you get him?" she whispered.

"Yes," Harry murmured. "I got him." He pushed me into the room and closed the door.

"Then why didn't you knock him out?" she asked.

"Changed my mind," Harry said. "I think we might have other plans." He winked. "Understand?"

Miss Fairborn nodded, then turned. Those great big beautiful eyes stared at me.

"Cut it out," I said. "I don't hypnotize easy."

She sighed. "I know. That's why I didn't try. It wouldn't work on you because you wouldn't cooperate. You were too suspicious."

"Sorry. That's my nature."

"I'm sorry, too. If only you hadn't come, if only you'd go away now—but of course it's too late."

I looked across the room at the bed. "Where's the money?" I asked. "I thought it might be piled up here, ready for shipping."

Harry rubbed his chin with his free hand. I knew where the other one was, of course—it was holding the gun. And I knew where the gun was, too—still in my ribs.

"You had to guess, didn't you?" he said.

"Yes. I guessed. So where is it, might I ask?"

"You're in no position to ask anything, but I'll tell you. The money has already been shipped."

"And Mr. Mariner?"

"He's been shipped, too. Or will be, soon."

"Then it's like I thought. Murder."

"You did a lot of thinking, didn't you?"

"Why not?" I shrugged. "I knew Mariner was afraid for his life. That's why he kept running from city to city; that's why he holed up here. He practically turned blue when I spoke to him and he admitted *they* were after him. I didn't know what he was talking about until Miss Fairborn showed up. He was twice as frightened then, but he went along with her. So it all adds up, doesn't it? We were after the same thing—the secret of how he managed to make all that dough in such a hurry.

"The only difference is, I was working alone, and I intended to go about it in a nice way. You teamed up and put on the pressure. You were ready to threaten him, ready to kill him. And you did. I still can't understand how you figured you'd get away with it, but you did."

I paused as another thought struck me. "How did you manage to erase his name from our company records? Was it hypnosis again—the way you operated here in the hotel?"

Miss Fairborn nodded. "We have teams operating in every major city."

"That must cost dough. Of course, with five million involved—"

"Multiply it by ten," Harry said. "Mariner just made a little extra on the side, after he thought he'd sneaked away from us."

"From you?"

"You got your story a bit twisted. You see, we all work for the same outfit?"

"Syndicate?"

"Not the one you mean. It's a group of investment people. Their names don't matter. Let's just say they are wealthy and influential people who want to become still more wealthy and influential. They are in a position to get advance tips on a lot of inside deals—but there are laws governing the right to speculate independently in the affairs of your own company. So they conceived this idea of pooling their resources, setting up a private organization to make investments. As long as secrecy is maintained, they can make many millions in profits each year. All they needed was a front man."

"Mariner?"

"Exactly. A nobody from nowhere. Someone who followed orders; and a few trained people like us to keep an eye on him, check up to make sure he didn't get out of line. And it worked well, for the past few years. He must have brought in well over fifty million in stocks and bonds alone."

"But no one man could make that much money without making headlines as well. And I never heard of him until I stumbled across his trail three months ago, as a small investor."

"Exactly. Up until three months ago, his name wasn't Mariner. He used half a dozen other names over the years. That was part of the plan, to keep switching identities. And that was part of our job—to go around, when he changed his name, and erase memories of his previous existence. As I told you, we have similar operatives all over the country.

"Then, about three months ago, he decided to change his name on his own. He'd been armed with advance information, told what to invest and where to invest it. So he decided to skip out on us and work for himself. He took the Mariner name, started to dodge around the country. In ninety days he managed to pile up close to five million in cash profits. Then we caught up with him." Harry rubbed his chin again.

"Why are you telling me all this?" I asked.

He grinned. "Because I like your face."

"You're not going to try to kill me, too," I said. "You couldn't get away with that."

"Certainly not." He took the gun out of my ribs. "Here, you might as well have this, too." And he held the weapon out to me.

"But—"

"Go ahead, take it. It isn't loaded, anyway. Besides, it's your gun. I found it in your suitcase."

I blinked. "Why—"

Miss Fairborn smiled at me. "I think I know what Harry has in mind," she said. "He's asking you to join us. Aren't you, dear?"

"That's right," Harry said.

"You see," she said, "now we need someone to take Mr. Mariner's place. And since you seem to be alone in the world—"

"Exactly." Harry nodded pleasantly. "An ideal candidate."

"What if I don't like the idea?" I asked.

"Nonsense! That's why you followed Mr. Mariner, wasn't it?" Miss Fairborn said. "Because you wanted to make millions. That's been your big dream for a long time, hasn't it? Well, this is an opportunity to make your dream come true. From now on you'll be doing just that. You'll go from city to city—under a variety of names, of course—and you'll invest a fortune in securities. By the time the first year is ended you'll probably take in more cash than anyone else in the market today. What more could you ask from life?"

"But I won't be allowed to keep it. And I'll have to live under cover, in hotels, with people like you spying on me night and day, watching every move I make."

"The penalty of wealth," Miss Fairborn said.

"I won't have anything, not even a name. Nobody will know me, or even remember me after you've erased their memories."

"But think of the romance of being a man of mystery."

"I am thinking of it," I said. "And I don't like it. I don't like your proposition, and I don't like you. What's there to prevent me from just walking out of here, going to the police, and telling them your whole story? For that matter, I can probably get them to find Mariner's body."

"Probably," said Harry. "Suit yourself. But if you change your mind within the next hour, come on back. We'll be waiting right here for you."

"I won't be back," I told him, opening the door.

"Yes you will," Miss Fairborn called after me. "This is what you've always wanted. I'm sure you'll see it our way."

But, as I walked down the hall to my room, I didn't see it their way. I didn't understand it at all. They admitted murdering Mariner and they could have murdered me, too, just to be on the safe side. If their story was true, it would be worth the extra risk. Instead, they offered me this fantastic proposition—this living death. Why?

I didn't see it. Not until I was actually back in my room, not until I walked into the bathroom and saw him lying there in the tub, with a bullet in his forehead. The pillow through which it had been fired lay on the floor next to the tub. They'd thought of everything. The pillow had muffled the sound of the shot. And that's why Harry had come to my room. He'd murdered Mariner with *my* gun. No wonder he'd given it back to me!

Yes, I saw it now. The corpse was in my room, the fingerprints were on my gun. I'd been looking for Mariner, told everyone about him. Running away wouldn't help. If I wanted to get out of this, I'd have to rely on them. And that meant taking Mariner's place.

Only knowing what I did about the Syndicate, I'd never be able to try what Mariner had tried. I'd never get up enough nerve to run away and attempt to make money on my own. I'd just go on stooging forever—or until they decided they'd had enough.

I thought about it for the full hour. But long before the hour was up, I'd made my decision.

Finally, I walked back to their room and knocked on the door.

Miss Fairborn opened it. Her big eyes wide and luminous in welcome.

"All right," I said. "You win. But get me out of here, fast. I can't stand that body in there—"

She smiled. "Certainly. We've contacted our superiors and all arrangements have been made for you. Just check out of your room and stop worrying. Now, here're your orders . . ."

That was three weeks ago. Since then I've been to Detroit and Dallas and now I'm on my way to Kansas City. They gave me a new name—Lloyd

Jones—and credentials to match. Everywhere I go, I am met by contacts who give me instructions. I make the investments and I sit in my hotel room. I can see where it's going to be an endless, monotonous grind.

But I can stand that part of it. It's just that lately, something else had started to worry me.

You see, I remember how I got on the trail of Mr. Mariner. I was ambitious; I wanted to find a man who had the secret of playing the market. So I looked around, and finally I found him. As a result, I was responsible for his death. At the very least, precipitated it.

No, it isn't my conscience that's bothering me.

It's this.

Somewhere, someplace, there must be others like myself—little guys with big ideas. And somewhere, sooner or later, another man is going to start looking for a fabulous character who seems to have the golden touch. He's going to run across my name, and he's going to make up his mind, like I did.

And then he'll come looking for me.

If he finds me—well, I remember only too well what happened to Mariner.

There's no sense trying to run; I'm trapped in my new identity. I can only wait until the man catches up with me. And, meanwhile, I'll keep on making millions. Doing what I always wanted to do—make a killing in the market.

But the next victim might very well be me.

Spawn of the Dark One

Our juvenile delinquency problems have, been attributed to everything from slums to momentary expectation of an all-out atomic war. Any one of these reasons is no doubt potent. But here's a new one out of the fertile mind of our Robert Bloch. Thank heaven it's fiction—or is it?

EVERYTHING was peaceful the night before the trouble came.

Ben Kerry perched on the porch rail outside his cottage, blinking like an owl in the twilight. He peered across the wide rolling expanse of the Kettle Moraine country and flapped his arms as if he were about to take off.

"There's gold in them thar hills," he muttered. "I never knew it, but I could have gotten in on the ground floor, too."

Ted Hibbard grinned at him. "You mean, when the glacier swept down and made them? You're not *that* old." Kerry chuckled and lit his pipe. "That's right, son. And I wasn't here when the glacier rolled back and the Indians came, either. They used the hills for signalling posts or for their ceremonial rituals. No money in that, I grant you."

"I know," Hibbard said. "I read your book about it."

Kerry chuckled again. "No money in *that,* either. If it wasn't for the university presses, we anthropologists would starve to death waiting for a publisher. Because we never see what's right under our noses." He stared out at the hills again, far into deepening dusk.

“Of course the farmers didn’t see, either, when they arrived here. They preferred to settle on level land. And their sons and grandsons sought still better soil, down around the waterways. So all these rock-strewn hills with their boulder outcroppings, stood deserted until maybe thirty years ago. Then the automobile brought the first hunters and fishermen from the cities. They put up cheap cabins on cheap land. And they didn’t see the gold any more than I did, when I came here just before the War. All I wanted was a summer place where I could get away from people.”

Ted Hibbard chuckled, now. “Strikes me as funny,” he said. “An anthropologist who hates people.”

“Don’t hate ’em,” Kerry insisted. “At least, not most of ’em. Even today, you know, the majority of the inhabitants of the Earth are still savages. I’ve always gotten along with *them* very well. It’s the civilized who frighten me.”

“Such as your students and former students?” Hibbard smiled up at him. “I thought I was welcome here.”

“You are, believe me. But you’re an exception. You aren’t like the others. You don’t move out here for a fast buck.”

“Oh,” Hibbard said. “So that’s what you mean by the gold, is it?”

“Of course. What you see out there isn’t hill country any more. It’s real estate. Development property. Right after the War the city people came. Not the hunters and the fishermen now, but the exurbanites. The super de-luxe exurbanites, who could afford to move forty miles out of town instead of just fifteen. They’ve been pouring in ever since, putting up their ranchhouses and their double garages for the station wagons.”

“Still looks like a pretty lonely region to me,” Hibbard mused. “Too damned lonely, after dark.”

The Indians were afraid of the hills at night,” Kerry told him. “They used to huddle inside their tepees around the fire. Just like today’s citizens huddle inside their ranchhouses around the TV set, safe and protected.

“I suppose you have a right to be resentful,” Hibbard said. “All these property-values going up. If you’d anticipated the boom you might have picked up choice locations years ago and made a fortune.”

Kerry shrugged. “Wouldn’t need a fortune. Just enough to move on. By now I could have a little *cabana* down along the barren stretches of the Florida Keys. I’d call it the *Key Pout.”*

A white face popped around the comer of the porch.

“Hey, Dad! Mom says it’s almost time for supper.”

“Okay,” Hibbard answered. “Tell her I’ll be along soon.” The face disappeared. “Nice boy you have there,” Kerry said.

“Hank? We think so. Crazy about math, all that sort of thing. Can’t wait to start school in the fall. I guess he’s a lot more serious about things than I was at his age. A lot more than most kids are, nowadays.”

“That’s why I like him.” Kerry tapped his pipe against the porch-rail. “You know, I’m not really such a misanthrope. This hermit pose of mine is mostly pretense. But some of it is defense, too. Defense against the mobs taking over our cities, our culture. I saw it coming, fifteen years ago. That’s why I got out. It’s bad enough having to stay in town during the school year, to teach. Once that’s over, I come back to the cottage here. Now even this little bit of privacy is being invaded. The hot-dog stands are taking over Walden Pond, I guess.” Hibbard stood up. “I hope you don’t resent my hanging around this way,” he said.

“Good heavens, no! When you bought your place last month I was mighty pleased to see you. I’m still a member of the human race, remember, even though I find the average rural resident as much of an alien as I do the city troglodyte or his suburbanite cousin. You’re more than welcome here, at any time. I like your wife, and I like that boy of yours. They’re real people.”

“Meaning that the rest are not?”

“Don’t bait me,” Kerry said. “You understand very well what I’m talking about. That’s why you moved out here yourself, isn’t it?”

Hibbard moved to the edge of the porch. “Well, I guess so. Actually, we came out here because of Hank, mostly. Didn’t like the city schools. Didn’t like the kind of kids he ran around with back in town. They’re—I don’t know—different. All these juvenile delinquents. You know.”

Kerry nodded. “Indeed I do. As a matter of fact, I’ve been spending most of the summer taking notes for a little monograph. Nothing pretentious, understand—sociology’s out of my line—but it’s an interesting study. And this happens to be an ideal spot for anthropological field-trips.”

“You mean there’s a lot of rural delinquents around here?” Hibbard looked distressed. “We were hoping to get away from that.”

“Don’t worry,” Kerry reassured him. “From what I’ve seen, the farm areas are still pretty well untouched. Of course, we have the usual percentage of barnyard sadists, truants, maladjusted types. But Hank won’t run into too many; at his age most of them have either gone off to the armed services or the Industrial Home For Boys. It’s the city youngsters I’ve been investigating.”

“You’re talking about exurbanite kids like mine? Or is there some kind of boys’ camp around here?”

“Neither. I’m speaking about our week end visitors. Don’t tell me you haven’t seen them in town during the summer.”

“No, I haven’t. Actually, I’ve been so busy getting our place straightened out that I don’t get into town very often. About once a week I stock up on supplies, usually on a Wednesday. I heard it’s pretty crowded, week ends.”

“You heard correctly,” Kerry told him. “But perhaps you might be interested in seeing just what I’m talking about. I plan to take a run in, tomorrow morning, about nine or so. And you’re welcome to ride along.”

“Will do.” Hibbard waved his hand in salute.

Kerry stood on the porch and watched his guest walk down the hillside path, his shoulders silhouetted against the sunset.

From the far horizon came a low, rumbling sound. It might have been the mutter of distant thunder—at least, that is what both men mistook it for at the time.

Neither of them knew that it heralded the arrival of the trouble.

They must have been coming in all through the night, and they were still gathering around ten the following morning when Ben Kerry drove Hibbard into town in his old Ford.

Their first encounter occurred on the highway just outside the town limits, between the *Welcome To Hilltop* sign and the notice which read *Speed Limit 25 m.p.h.*

It came in the form of a rumbling again, but this time there was no mistaking it for thunder. The motorcycle roared along the road behind them, then swerved past without slackening speed. As it zoomed by, Hibbard caught a glimpse of a squat figure in a black leather jacket, with a monkey on his back. At least, it looked like a monkey in the dusty passing blur; not until a moment later did he realize that what he had seen was a girl with cropped hair who was clinging with arms entwined about the cyclist.

As they speeded ahead, Hibbard saw the girl raise her right hand as though in a gesture of greeting. Automatically he started to return her wave, then froze as Kerry gripped his shoulder.

"Look out!" he shouted, and ducked his head.

At that instant something struck the windshield of the car and bounced off with a clatter. It fell in a silvery arc to the side of the road, and Hibbard understood. The girl had not been waving. She had hurled an empty beer-can at them.

"Why, she could have broken the windshield!" he exclaimed.

Kerry nodded. "Happens all the time. By tonight you'll find the roadside paved with empties."

"But they aren't even supposed to *buy* beer, are they? Isn't there a state law?"

Kerry jerked his finger over his shoulder. "Sign says you cut down to twenty-five miles an hour when you enter town, too," he muttered. "But they're doing close to fifty."

"You talk as if you expected such things."

"I do. It's like this every week end, all summer long. Everyone knows what to expect around here."

"And nobody tries to do anything about it?"

"Wait and see," Kerry told him.

They were entering town now, passing a row of motels. Although it was still midmorning, a surprising number of cars were parked before the various units. Hibbard gazed at them curiously, noting a strange incongruity. Virtually none of the vehicles were recognizable as standard units. Painted junkers, restyled hot-rods, ancient sports cars predominated. And there were dozens of motorcycles everywhere they looked.

"I see you notice our week end visitors' choice of transportation," Kerry said. "I'm afraid it's apt to strike you as a bit unconventional. As a group they seem to dislike what I believe is called 'Detroit iron'—you might gather from that that they utilize the motor car as a symbol of protest. As I remark in my notes, there seems to be an automotive in their madness."

He slowed to a snail's pace as they proceeded up the short thoroughfare known, inevitably, as Main Street. The sidewalks were jammed with the usual Saturday throng of farm-folk, but intermingling with them was the unusual throng of teenage visitants.

There was no difficulty in separating them from the local youngsters; not these swaggering, guffawing figures in their metal-studded jackets and skintight jeans. Their booted feet thudded along the pavement, their visored caps bobbed. Some of them were bareheaded, choosing to display shaven skulls, crewcuts, and the more outlandish coiffures known as "Mohawks" or —for polite abbreviation—the "d.a." An occasional older lad in the crowd was more apt to affect the other extreme; long, greasy locks and exaggerated sideburns. Several of the latter youths wore spade beards, which gave them an oddly goatish appearance. The resemblance to satyrs was perhaps increased by the presence, and the attitudes, of their female companions. Virtually all of them were indistinguishable from the girl on the motorcycle; the cropped hair, overpainted face, and tight sweater and jodhpurs seemed to be standard equipment.

Their boisterous babble rose and echoed from the artificial ampitheatre created by the store-fronts lining either side of the narrow street; from the end of the block came the sound of a juke-box blaring away at full volume inside the root-beer stand and drive-in.

A large crowd of juveniles congregated before it, and several couples were dancing on the sidewalk, oblivious of those who had to step out into the street in order to pass by. The sun's rays reflected from a score of beer-cans held in a score of hands. An orgiastic aura prevailed.

Hibbard turned to his companion. "I think I get it now," he said. "I remember reading something about this a couple of years back. Wasn't there a motorcycle convention in some small town in California? A gang took over, almost started a riot?"

"There was," the older man confirmed. "And it happened again, last year, in another state. Then I read of another instance, this summer. If you wanted to check on such things, I imagine you'd find the phenomenon has become commonplace all over."

"Is this what you wanted to show me?" Hibbard asked. "That cyclist gangs are coming in here and terrorizing the citizens?"

Kerry shook his head.

"Don't, be melodramatic," he murmured. "In the first place, this isn't a 'cyclist gang,' any more than it's a 'hot-rod crowd' or a 'sports car mob' or a congregation of Elvis Presley fans. These youngsters come from all over; the big city, the outlying suburbs, the smaller industrial communities nearby. There's no outward indication that they belong to any formal group, club, or organization. They just congregate, apparently. And if you look closely, you'll see they're not terrorizing the citizens, as you put it. In fact most of the local merchants are delighted to have them here." He waved his arm in the direction of the beer-drinkers. “They’re good customers. They leave a lot of money in town over a week end. The sky’s the limit.”

“But you said yourself that they break the laws. They must stir up trouble, get into fights, do damage.”

“They pay for it, I guess.”

“What about the local authorities? What do they think?”

Kerry smiled. “You mean the mayor? He’s a plumber here in town, gets a hundred dollars a year to hold the title as a part-time job. He doesn’t worry much.”

“But the police—”

“We have a local sheriff, that’s all. The place isn’t even big enough to have its own jail. That’s over at the county seat.”

“Don’t the citizens who aren’t merchants do any complaining? Are they willing to sit back and just let a bunch of strange young hoodlums run wild?”

“I guess they complain. But so far there hasn’t been any action taken. For my selfish purposes, it’s just as well. You’d be surprised what I’ve managed to observe during this summer alone. What I want to do now is get over and see one of their race meetings.”

“Race meetings?”

“That’s right. You don’t think they come here just to walk up and down Main Street, do you? Saturday or Sunday afternoons you’ll generally find them off in the hills, on one of those little side roads back behind the county trunk highways. They rent a spot from a local farmer and hold drag races, hillclimbing contests, that sort of thing. This week there’ll be a gathering in our neighborhood, I think. They were always west of town before this, but I guess something happened and they got run off from their usual spot. Now old Lautenshlager is going to let them use the big hill behind his property. We ought to be able to see the bonfire tonight.”

“Bonfire?”

Kerry nodded. “They usually have them.”

“What do they think they are, Indians?” Hibbard stared at a trio on the nearby corner; a skinny boy epileptically contorted over a guitar and a writhing couple who seemed to be executing an impromptu war-dance. He had to grin at the sight. “Maybe they are, at that,” he admitted. “They sure sound like savages.”

“Rock-and-roll,” Kerry shrugged.

Suddenly Hibbard’s grin faded. “Look at that,” he snapped, pointing up the street ahead.

A beat-up convertible was screeching down the avenue towards them, loaded with youngsters whose voices competed more than successfully with the mechanical din. As the car moved forward, a cat moved quickly out of its path. But not quickly enough, for the car swerved purposefully to the side. There was a jarring thump and a louder screech, followed by howls of laughter.

“Did you see what they did-?” Hibbard demanded. “They deliberately went out of their way to run it down! Let me out of here! I’m going to—”

“Oh, no you’re not.” Kerry put his foot down on the accelerator and the Ford moved on. “The poor thing’s dead. You can’t help it now. No sense starting trouble.”

“What’s the matter with you?” Hibbard’s voice was shrill. “You aren’t going to let them get away with this, are you?” He stared as the convertible skidded to a halt and its inmates poured out across the sidewalk. “It’s bad enough when small boys torture an animal out of childish curiosity, but these aren’t children. They’re old enough to know what they’re doing.”

“That’s right,” Kerry agreed. “Like you say, they’re savages. Remember the riots. You can’t win.” Kerry drove in silence, turning off at the end of the street and cutting back along a side-road which circled the edge of town and joined the highway once again. Even at a distance it was possible to hear the blare of music, the cough of exhaust pipes, the yammer of horns and the snarl of the cycles.

"They must have noise wherever they go," Kerry said, at last. "I suppose it's what the psychiatrists call oral aggression."

Hibbard didn't reply.

"Rock-and-roll is another manifestation. But then again, there was swing in your salad days and jazz in mine. In fact you can see a lot of parallels if you look for them. Eccentric dress and hair styles, the drinking—the whole pattern of rebellion against authority."

Hibbard stirred restlessly. "But not the senseless cruelty," he said. "Sure, I remember frat initiations and how wild we got after football games. But there was nothing like this. There were a few bullies or maladjusted kids with mean streaks—now they all behave like a pack of psychos."

"Your boy isn't like that," Kerry answered. "Lots of them are normal."

"Yes. But there seem to be so many of the other sort.

More and more each year. Don't tell me you haven't noticed. You told me you've been studying these kids. And just now, back in town, you were afraid."

Kerry sighed. "Yes, I've studied them. And I am afraid." He paused. "How about coming home for lunch with me? I think I ought to show you a few things."

Hibbard nodded. The noonday countryside was silent, or almost silent. It was only by listening very closely that they could hear the faint rumbling, moving along the roads in the direction of the distant hills.

Kerry spread the scrapbooks on the table after lunch. "Started these myself some time ago," he said. "But recently I've signed up with a clipping service."

He riffled the pages of the topmost book. "Here's your motorcycle riots, and a section on gang fights. Rumbles, they call them. A report from the Police Commissioner of New York on the rise of delinquency. A list of weapons taken from a group of high school freshmen in Detroit—switchblade knives, straight razors, brass knuckles, two pistols, a hatchet. All of them used in a street battle. A section on narcotics, one on armed robbery, quite a few stories of arson. I've tried to eliminate what seem to be run-of-the-mill occurrences, so the clippings involving sex-crimes mostly concern forcible rape, gang assaults, and sadistic perversion. Even so, you can see there's a frightening assortment. This second book is devoted exclusively to newsstories of torture and murder. I warn you, it's not pleasant reading."

It wasn't. Hibbard found his gorge rising. He'd noticed such items, of course, while skimming through his daily paper, but had never paid too much attention to their frequency. Here, for the first time, he encountered a mass accumulation, and it was an anthology of horror.

He read about the teenage kidnappers in Chicago who mutilated and then killed an infant; the youngster down South who butchered his sister; the boy who blew off the head of his mother with a shotgun. Case after case of parricide, fratricide, infanticide; instance after instance of apparently senseless slaughter.

Kerry glanced over his shoulder and sighed.

"Truth is stranger than fiction, isn't it?" he muttered. "You'll look a long time before discovering any Penrods or Willie Baxters in those newsclippings. This isn't a Booth Tarkington world any more. For that matter, you'll search in vain for an Andy Hardy."

"I believe it," said Hibbard. "But I can't understand it. Of course, there were always juvenile delinquents, Dead End Kids, that sort of thing. Only they seemed to be the exceptions, the victims of the Depression. And the zoot-suiters during the War were supposed to be the result of lack of parental supervision. The youngsters in these cases seem to be the products of normal upbringing; I notice the stories make quite a point out of the fact that most of them come from nice homes, prosperous backgrounds. So what's happened to our kids?"

"You'll still find nice children around. Hank isn't that way, remember."

"But what's influencing the majority? Why has there been such a terrible change in the last few years?"

Kerry puffed on his pipe. "Lots of explanations, if you want them. Dr. Wertham, for example, blames a lot of it on the comic books. Some psychotherapists say television is the villain. Others think the War left its mark; kids live in the shadow of military service, so they rebel. They've taken new heroes in their own image—James Dean, Marlon Brando, the torn-shirt totem rules their clan. Oh, there's already a most impressive literature on the subject."

"Well, it doesn't impress me," Hibbard declared. "Maybe it sounds good, but how does one of those fancy theories explain a thing like this? Listen." He jabbed his finger at one of the clippings pasted on the page opened before them. "Here's a case from just last month. A fourteen-year-old boy, down South. He got up out of bed in the middle of the night and killed his parents in cold blood, while they slept. No rhyme or reason for it, he admits he had no reason to hate them, and the psychiatrists' reports seem to show he's perfectly normal, had an ordinary home-life. His story is that he just woke up out of a sound sleep and felt a sudden 'urge to kill somebody.' So he did." Hibbard thumbed through the book. "Come to think of it, that's what a lot of them say. They just get an 'impulse,' or 'something comes over them,' or they 'want to see what it's like.' And the next day the cops are beating the bushes for the bodies of missing babies, or digging up fragments of dismembered corpses in gravel-pits. I tell you, it doesn't make sense!"

He closed the scrap-book and stared at Kerry. "You've gone to a lot of trouble to collect these clippings," he said. "And you say you've been studying this juvenile delinquent problem all summer. You must have come to some conclusions."

Kerry shrugged. "Perhaps. But I'm not quite ready to commit myself. I need further data before presenting a hypothesis." He gave Hibbard a long look. "You were a pretty fair student, as I recall. Let's see what you make of it all."

"Well, there's a couple of things that occur to me. First, this insistence, in case after case, over and over again, that a youngster suddenly experiences ah irresistible impulse to commit murder. Generally, in such examples, the child is alone and not part of any gang. Come to think of it, he's often an only child, isn't he, or lives an isolated life?"

Kerry's eyes narrowed. "Go on."

"That seems to take care of one group. But there's another—the gangs. The ones that go in for the uniforms, and the regalia. I notice there's quite a bit of reference to initiations and secret society mumbo-jumbo. They've got a jive-talk language of their own, and fancy names, that sort of thing. And they seem to be premeditated in their crimes." He hesitated. "On the face of it, we're dealing with two totally different types. "No, wait a minute—there's one thing all these kids seem to have in common."

Kerry leaned forward. "What's that?"

"They don't *feel* anything—no shame, no guilt, no remorse. There's no empathy towards their victims, none at all. Time after time the stories bring that point out. They kill for kicks, but it doesn't really touch them at all. In other words, they're psychopaths."

"Now we're getting somewhere," Kerry said. "You call them psychopaths. And just what *is* a psychopath?"

"Why, like I said—somebody who doesn't have normal feeling, who lacks responsibility. You've studied up on psychology, you ought to know."

Kerry gestured towards the row of bookshelves lining the sides of his fireplace. "That's right. I've got quite a collection of psychotherapy texts up there. But you can search through them in vain for a satisfactory definition of the so-called psychopathic personality. He isn't considered a psychotic.

He doesn’t respond to any form of treatment. No psychiatric theory presently offers a demonstrable explanation of how a psychopath evolves, and for lack of contrary evidence it’s often assumed that he’s born that way.”

“Do you believe that?”

“Yes. But unlike orthodox therapists, I have a reason. I think I know what a psychopath is. And—”

“Dad!”

Both of them turned at the cry.

Hibbard’s son stood in the doorway, the rays of the late afternoon sun reflecting redly from the bright blood streaming down the side of his face.

“Hank! What happened? Did you have an accident?” He moved towards the boy.

“No, I’m all right. Honest I am. I just didn’t want to go home and scare Mom.”

“Sit down.” Kerry led him to a chair. “Let me get some hot water, clean you off.” He went over to the sink and returned with a cloth and a basin. Skilfully he sponged the blood away, revealing the lacerations on the scalp.

“Not too deep,” he told Hibbard. “A little peroxide and a bandage, now.”

The boy winced, then subsided as Kerry finished his ministrations.

“Better?”

“I’m all right,” Hank insisted. “It’s just that they hit me with the tire-chain—”

“Who hit you?”

“I don’t know. Some guys. I went for a walk this afternoon, and I heard all this racket up on the hill behind old Lautenshlager’s place, you know. And I saw all these guys, and some dames, too. They were riding motorcycles up and down, making a lot of noise. I wanted to see what was going on, that's all, I just wanted to see what was going on—"

His lower lip trembled and Hibbard patted his shoulder. "Sure, I understand. So you went up there, eh? And then what happened?"

"Well, I started to go up. But before I could get very close, these big guys jumped me. There must have been five or six of them, they just came out from around some bushes and grabbed me. And one of them had a stick and another one had this tire-chain, and he swung it at me and hit me alongside of the head, here. The others let go of me to get out of the way, and that's how I got loose. I started to run, and they were chasing me, only I got across the fence and then I ducked down behind Lautenshlager's barn so they couldn't see me."

"Did you get a good look at the fellows?"

"Well, one of them had a beard. And they were all wearing these black leather jackets and some kind of boots."

"It's the gang, all right. Our friends, the psychopaths." Hibbard stood up. "You can walk, can't you? Then come on."

"Where are we going?"

"Home, of course. I'm going to see to it that you get to bed. You got quite a knock, there. And then I think I'll hop in the car and take a little run over to the county seat. Seems to me this is a matter for the state police."

Kerry put down his pipe. "Are you sure it's wise to stir up trouble?" he asked, quietly. "No telling what might happen."

"Something has happened already," Hibbard answered. "When a bunch of hoodlums knock my son over the head with a tire-chain, that's trouble enough for me. Come on, Hank."

He led the boy out of the door and down the path, without a backward look.

Kerry grimaced, then shook his head. For a moment he opened his mouth to call after them, then closed it. After that he just stood there, his eyes intent on the far hills. No smoke rose from them in the waning horizon-light, but the sound of racing exhausts was plainly audible. Kerry stood there listening for a long time. Then, slowly, wearily, he walked into the front room. He kindled a fire in the fireplace and sat down before it, balancing a notebook on his lap. From time to time he scribbled a few words, sitting stiffly, head poised as though listening for an unexpected sound. His face bore the tight, strained look of a man who had been waiting for trouble—and found it. He concentrated deeply.

It must have been almost an hour before the sound came. Even though he'd been tensed and alert, Kerry jumped when he heard the footsteps. He rushed to the door, reaching it just as Hibbard burst in.

"Oh, it's you!" His voice rose in relief. "So dark I didn't recognize who it was at first."

Hibbard didn't respond for a moment. He stood there, panting, waiting to regain his breath.

"Ran all the way," he wheezed.

"What's the matter? Is it Hank?"

"No. The kid's all right, I guess. We put him to bed when I got him home, and my wife doesn't think there's any concussion. She used to be a nurse, you know. So I decided to grab a sandwich before I drove in for the police. We had the door shut, so I guess that's why I didn't hear anything. They must have sneaked in and out of the yard again very quietly. My wife didn't hear them either."

"Who?"

"Our young friends. Guess they figured out where Hank lived and decided I might be going after them. Anyway, they weren't taking any chances. They slashed all my tires."

Hibbard's voice rose. "They could see there are no telephone wires around our place, and I suppose they thought if they fixed the car I couldn't do anything. But I'll show them!"

"Take it easy, now."

"I am taking it easy. I'm just here to borrow your car, that's all."

"You still intend to get the police?"

"What do you mean, *still?* After what just happened, nothing could stop me. I made sure everything was locked good and tight when I left, but even that's no guarantee. For all I know, they'll be around to burn the house down before the night is over."

Kerry shook his head. "I don't think so. I think if you just go back home and stay there quietly there won't be any more trouble. All they want now is to be left alone."

"Well what they want and what they're going to get are two different things. I'm going to round up every police officer, every trooper in this part of the state. We're going to put an end to this sort of thing—"

"No. You won't end it. Not that way."

"Look, I'm not here to argue with you. Give me your car-keys."

"Not until you listen to me, first."

"I listened to you long enough. I should have got tough the minute I saw those kids run over the cat." Hibbard wiped his forehead. "All right, what is it you wanted to say?"

Kerry walked over and stood next to the bookshelves.

"We were talking about psychopaths this afternoon. I told you that psychiatrists didn't understand them, but that I did. Sometimes it takes an anthropologist to know these things. In my time I've studied a great deal concerning the so-called 'gang-spirit' and the secret societies of many cultures. You find them in all regions, and there are certain similarities. For example, did you know that in some places, even the young women have their own groups? Lips says—"

"I'm not interested in a lecture."

"You will be. Lips says there are hundreds of such societies in Africa alone. The Bundu group, in Nigeria, wears special masks and costumes for their secret rituals. The male adventurer who dares to spy on them is disciplined, or even killed."

“Listen, a gang of crazy kids around a bonfire isn’t any secret lodge!”

“You noted the similarity yourself, this afternoon.”

“I said some kids ran in gangs, yes. But others don’t. What about the ‘loners,’ the ones who just get the urge to kill?”

“They don’t know what they are, that’s all. They haven’t recognized themselves. For that matter, I don’t think the gangs do, not consciously. They think they are just out for thrills. And I only pray that they go on that way, that they don’t realize what brings them together.”

“We know what brings them together. They’re all psycho.”

“And what *is* a psychopath?” Kerry’s voice was soft. “A psychotherapist couldn’t tell you, but an anthropologist can. A psychopath is a fiend.”

“What?”

“A fiend. A devil. A creature known in all religions, at all times, to all men. The spawn of a union between a demon and a mortal woman.” Kerry forced a smile. “Yes, I know how it sounds. But think a moment. Think of when all this started—this wave of sudden, unnatural juvenile crime, of psychopathic cruelty. Only a few years ago, wasn’t it? Just about the time when the babies born in the early years of the War started to enter their teens. Because that’s when it happened, during the War, when the men were away. And the women had nightmares—the kind of nightmares some women have had throughout the ages. The nightmare of the incubus, the carnal demon who visits them in sleep. It happened before in the history of our culture, during the Crusades. And then followed the rise of the witch-cults all over Europe—the witch-cults presided over and attended by the spawn of the night-fiends; the half-human offspring of a blasphemous union. Don’t you see how it all fits into the pattern? The unholy love of cruelty for its own sake, the strange, sudden maniacal urge to torture and destroy which comes in sleep, the hideous inability to respond to normal sentiment and normal feelings, the seemingly irrational way in which certain youngsters are irresistibly drawn together into groups who thrive on violence? As I said, I don’t think that even the gangs realize the truth about themselves yet—but if they ever do, you’ll see a wave of Satanism and Black Magic which will put the Middle Ages to shame. Even now, they gather about fires in the summer night, seeking the hilltop haunts—”

“You’re batty!” Hibbard grabbed Kerry by the shoulder and shook him roughly. “They’re just kids, that’s all. What they need is a damned good beating, the whole lot of them, and maybe a couple of years in reform school.”

Kerry shook him off. “Now you’re talking like the authorities—the truant officers and the police and the get-tough school of welfare workers. Don’t you see, that’s just the way they’ve tried to handle the problem, and it never works? Any more than psychotherapy can work? Because you’re dealing with something you’re no longer conditioned to believe in. You’re dealing with fiends. What we need is exorcism. I can’t let you go up there, tonight. The police will just start a riot, it will be murder—”

Hibbard hit him, then, and he went down. His head struck the edge of the fireplace and he lay silent, an ugly bruise rising along the side of his right temple. Hibbard stooped, felt his pulse, then gasped in relief. Quickly he explored the contents of Kerry’s jacket-pockets. His hands closed over the car-keys.

Then he rose, turned, and ran from the cottage.

Kerry came to with a start. There was a throbbing in his head. He grasped the mantel, pulled himself erect. The throbbing intensified. But it wasn’t all in his head; part of it pounded in rhythm from a distance. He recognized the sound, the roaring that came from the hills.

He rubbed his forehead, then walked slowly in the direction of the porch. The distant darkness was dissolved in a reddish glow, and he could see the flames rising now from the far hilltop.

Kerry felt in his pockets, then swore and started for the door. He hesitated in the doorway, then returned to the living room and stooped over his desk. His hand scrabbled in the right top drawer; closed over a small revolver. He slipped it into his jacket-pocket and headed for the door once again.

It was dark on the path, but the faint flicker of flames guided his descent. When he reached the bottom of the hill and made sure that his car was gone, he swore again, then squatted until he discerned the fresh tire-tracks and the direction in which they led. Hibbard had chosen to take the back road, the nearest approach to the highway which led to the county seat. The road was rough and it skirted directly behind the big hill on the Lautenshlager property, but it would be the fastest route. Kerry wondered if he'd reach the highway in time to head off the police. He hadn't been able to convince Hibbard, but he was willing to try again. The police weren't going to solve the situation. There'd just be more violence. If he only had time to work on the problem *his* way, to talk to those who still retained faith in the age-old remedy of exorcism, the casting-out of demons—

Kerry lengthened his stride, smiling wryly to himself. He couldn't blame Hibbard for his reaction. Most men were of the same mind today. Most *civilized* men—that is to say, the small minority of our western culture who go their way blindly, ignoring the other billion and a half who still know, as they have always known, that the forces of darkness exist and are potent. Potent, and able to spawn.

Perhaps it was just as well they didn't believe. He'd told Hibbard the truth—the only immediate hope lay in the fact that the changelings themselves weren't entirely aware of their own nature. The fiends didn't know they were fiends. Once they came to learn, and united—

He put the thought away as he worked around behind the hill where the fire flared. Kerry sought the shadows at the side of the road for concealment; the noise of racing motors and the sound of shouts muffled his passing.

Then he rounded a sharp turn and saw the car looming drunkenly in the ditch. Through narrowing eyes he recognized the vehicle as his own. Had there been an accident? He started forward, calling softly. “Hibbard—where are you?”

The figure emerged from the edge of darkness. “Kind of thought you’d be along.” Kerry had just time enough to wonder about the oddly altered voice; time enough for that and no more. Because then they were all around him, some of them holding and some of them striking, and he went down.

When he came to he was already on top of the hill; yes, he must be, because the big brush-fire was leaping and roaring right before him, and the figures were leaping and roaring around it.

Why it was like the old woodcuts, the ones showing the Sabbat and the Adoration of the Master. Only there was no Master in the center of the fire—just this burned and blackening figure, a charred dummy of some sort, thrust upright against a post. And the youngsters were dancing and capering, somebody was plucking the guts of a guitar, it was rock-and-roll, just a gang of kids having a good time. Some of them were drinking beer and a few had even started up their motorcycles to race in a circle about the flames.

Sure, they’d panicked and hit him, but they were only teenagers, he told himself, it had to be that way. And he’d explain, he’d tell them. He had to thrust the other thought from his mind, had to. Now they were pulling him into the circle and the big kid, the one with the beaver-tails dangling from his cap, was grinning at him.

“We found the other one,” he called. “Clobbered him before he got away.”

“Man, he’s all shook up.”

“Must be hip. He was on his way to town.”

“If he got there, we’d really have a gasser.”

“Ungood.”

“What’ll it be?”

Kerry whirled, seeking the source of the voices. He stared at the circle of goatish, grinning faces in the firelight. A girl danced past, bop-fashion, her eyes wild.

"How about the sacrifice bit?"

And then they were all shouting. "The sacrifice bit, that's it! Yeah, Man!"

Sacrifice. Man. The *Black Man* of the Sabbat.

Kerry fought the association, he had to fight it, he couldn't believe that. And then they were pushing him closer to the fire, and he could see the blackened dummy.

When he recognized what was burning there he couldn't fight the knowledge any more, and it was too late to fight the hands which gripped him, held him, then thrust him forward into the flames.

A mighty shout went up and lie made one last effort to retain his faculties. If only he could hear what they were screaming—at least then he'd learn the final truth. *Did they or did they not know what they really were?*

But he fell forward, fainting, as the motorcycles began to race around the fire.

Their roaring drowned out every other sound, so even at the end, Kerry never heard the chanting. **THE END**

Two By Two

Lambert offered two people the priceless gift of salvation. But who needed it?

WHEN a man is as wealthy and important as Preston Lambert, you just don't walk right off the street into his private office.

But Mary and I did.

The moment we gave our names to the receptionist and said we had come in answer to the ad, she buzzed Lambert and sent us in.

"So you're the couple the agency selected," he said, standing up behind his big desk and holding out his hand. "Well, well, good to see you. Yes, indeed."

Since he was frankly looking us over, I decided to do a little inspecting myself.

Preston Lambert was about six feet tall and perhaps fifty-five years old. On the other hand, he might have been closer to sixty-five or even seventy; it's hard to tell, because the rich don't seem to age the way we do. Good food, plenty of rest, regular massage, and the best of medical treatment keeps them young—that is, if they're not slave-drivers or the dissipating type. Lambert did not appear to be either; he was relaxed, amiable, and clear-eyed.

And I wondered what his game was.

"Sit down," he urged, ushering Mary over to a big armchair. "And you, sir—make yourself comfortable. I want you both to feel right at home here. Right at home."

The nicer he was, the uneasier I felt. Mary and I have applied for jobs together before, and to people of means. Usually, the more money they have, the more they push you around; it's a regular Inquisition bit. Of course, we'd gone through *that* routine before we came to the office here—

Preston Lambert seemed aware of it, because he sat down again and began to shuffle through some papers very officially.

"Before we begin," he said, "I wonder if you realize just how many applicants there were for this particular opening?"

Mary and I looked at one another and then shrugged simultaneously.

"Well, no point in playing games. My staff in New York received over five hundred letters. And of those five hundred, more than two hundred couples went through preliminary examinations."

Mary couldn't conceal her surprise. "You mean to say that you gave the same tests we took to all those others? Why, that must have cost a fortune—"

"It did, I assure you. I had to take over the entire clinic at the hospital you visited. IQs and physical checkups took weeks to process. And of course, I had another group checking on the background and antecedents of all applicants."

"You put a private eye on us?" I was the surprised one, now.

"Er—well, as a matter of fact, yes. I find it best to be thorough."

"Those tests you gave were thorough enough," I told him. "In fact, some of them were downright embarrassing."

Preston Lambert chuckled. "Well, it's all over now. The reports have been reviewed, and I concur with the findings of my staff. The job is yours."

“Wait a minute,” I said. “Not so fast. Don’t we get a chance to do any investigating?”

He chuckled again. “Of course, Mr. Dexter.” He glanced at Mary. “I admire your husband’s attitude. He’s a realist. That’s what I was hoping, to find—a realist.”

Mary smiled, but did not answer. She was going to let me do the talking. That’s the way we usually operated. I did the talking and she made the final decisions. At least I’m enough of a realist to admit it.

“About this position,” I continued. “Your ad in the newspaper mentioned a handsome salary. And the employment agency gave us the same information—but no figure. Would you mind telling me just how much you propose to pay for our services?”

Lambert unwrapped an Upmann. He didn’t offer one to me; I assume he’d studied the reports and discovered I don’t smoke.

“Ah, yes,” he murmured. “The salary, eh? How about a thousand a month?” He lit the cigar. “Each?”

A thousand a month for each of us. Twenty-four thousand dollars a year. Plus, I assumed, room and board. It was fantastic—and I’m a realist.

“Just what are we expected to do for that kind of money?” I asked.

“Why, what my advertisement mentioned, I’m looking for a young couple to act as personal attendants on an extended pleasure-cruise. The woman must be able to cook and perform all the ordinary domestic duties the man should have some mechanical ability, a knowledge of farming and animal husbandry, and a reasonable educational background. Added to this, I insist on perfect physical health, plus intellectual and emotional stability. The actual duties of employment will be light, and—”

“You don’t have to quote the ad to me,” I told him. “I read the come-on. But there’s nothing about your requirements that justify a combined salary of twenty-four thousand a year.”

"I disagree." Lambert sifted the ash from his cigar. "And so would you, if you'd examined the reports as I have during the past weeks. Inevitably, there's a defect in one or both parties—out of all the couples examined, you alone seem to fill all the requirements. So—"

I stood up. "About this pleasure-cruise, now," I said. "I'm beginning to get an idea. You wouldn't by any chance be looking for a couple of guinea-pigs now, would you?"

"Guinea-pigs?"

I stared down at him. "You are a wealthy man, Mr. Lambert. A very wealthy man. Sometimes very wealthy men have very odd hobbies—and even odder ambitions. And it just occurs to me that possibly you have an idea of building some kind of space-rocket. Are we being selected as passengers for a trip to Mars?"

Lambert laughed and put down the cigar. "I thought you were a realist, Mr. Dexter! No, I assure you on my solemn oath, I've no intention of employing you as participants in any sort of space-flight. I'm a shipbuilder, sir, and when I plan a cruise it will be by water, right here on earth."

"Yachting party?" Mary asked.

"Not at all. An ocean liner is more to my fancy. Would you care to see it? We can drive down to the yard if you like—the vessel is already on the way. We can be there when it arrives."

"This is a boat your firm built?"

"That is correct."

"Who owns it?"

"I do." Lambert smiled. "It's my retirement project."

Mary looked at me, her eyebrows raised slightly.

"Come on," I said. "Let's take a look."

She nodded, so that was settled.

Lambert drove us out himself, waving the chauffeur back to his seat in the outer office. Trailing smoke from a fresh Upmann, he led us through the busy dockside tangle of the huge boatyard which had built so many vessels—and so much of his fortune.

"Here she is," he said. "What do you think of her?"

"Why I had no idea—this must have cost a couple of million—"

"Eleven, to be exact," Lambert answered, casually. "I bet the wad."

"But it's immense," Mary exclaimed, eyeing the outlines of the ship. It was indeed an ocean-going liner, and undoubtedly completed, yet certain modifications in the smokestacks seemed unusual, even to my landlubber's eye.

"Looks a bit odd, eh?" Lambert asked, noting my stare. "Well, it is, in a way. You see, we'll be using atomic power. And virtually everything on board is controlled by automation. One computer and a switchboard supervises the works, including navigation. That's why we'll be able to dispense with the usual crew."

"No crew? But who's going to serve the passengers, just Jim and myself?" Mary looked stricken.

"Passengers? I said nothing about passengers, did I? I will be your only concern."

"You're going on a pleasure-cruise in an atomic-powered ocean liner, all by yourself? Where are you heading for, anyway?"

Lambert shrugged. "Oh, no destination in particular. I thought we might float around for a bit."

"Mister, you're crazy!"

"Perhaps. Then again, maybe it's the world that's crazy. Did you ever stop to think about that for a moment, Dexter?" He inhaled slowly. "I managed to wangle atomic power for this vessel. Believe me, it wasn't easy. Not in an age where the miracle of nuclear fission is dedicated almost exclusively to weapons of wholesale destruction. Not in an age trembling on the brink of war and shuddering past the brink of hysteria—an age where the air is literally filled with death, tiny radioactive particles of death, and the very soil is polluted with poison.

"Yes, the world is crazy, Dexter. Crazy to do what it's doing, crazy not to flee from the consequences of its actions. And that's what *I* intend to do. I intend to flee, before it's too late. Flee, and survive."

I nodded. It was out in the open, now. Preston Lambert was one of the screwballs; one of the calamity-howlers, the escapists. The only difference was that *he* happened to have eleven million dollars and he *could* escape. He'd stock the powered ship with provisions and take off for the subtropics.

Mary sighed. She didn't bother to look at me, this time.

"Sorry, Mr. Lambert," she said. "It's no deal. We can't take a job and go on a trip like that."

"What's the matter, don't you believe me?" His voice took on a querulous quality. "Haven't you read the reports? The amount of fallout in the atmosphere is dangerous even now. Think of what the future will bring, even if war does not come. Why, even the rainfall is deadly—yes, the gentle rain from heaven. What safety is there in such a world for your children? And you do intend to have children some day, I'm sure. How can you face the prospect of bringing them into being in these lethal surroundings? There isn't much time left before the final reckoning—I have it on the highest authority—"

Mary shook her head. "Please, Mr. Lambert, it's no use. We can't go with you."

"But it may be your only chance, your salvation!" He turned to me and put his hand on my shoulder. "Look, you can understand, can't you? This is not merely an eccentric whim on my part. I know what I'm doing, believe me. And I chose you. I'm offering you an opportunity to escape. Do you really *like* the world the way it is, a world where even the rain is a rain of death? Do you—" I sighed. "Thank you, Mr. Lambert. But if you don't mind, Mary and I will just take a rain-check on this trip of yours."

And that was that.

I was pretty satisfied with myself when Mary and I said good-bye to Mr. Lambert. He may have been a multi-millionaire and an elder in his church, but he was obviously a fanatic and probably paranoid as well. We want no part of him and his little pleasure-cruise in an ocean liner. Funny, how the human mind functions when it strips a gear. He'd been very logical about his methods of selecting a couple to accompany him on the voyage, but completely illogical when it came to planning the size of his vessel. No rhyme or reason whatsoever, even though he'd apparently managed to conceal his project from the press and public.

Of course, he couldn't conceal matters forever. Less than a week later we read an account of the launching of the vessel. There was even an interview with Preston Lambert, in which he declared his intention of sailing as soon as he got the animals assembled and aboard.

"The animals!" Mary gasped, as she read the news-story. "Of course, why didn't we see it right away? Lambert wasn't just building a ship—he was building an *ark!"*

"They'll lock him up," I said.

"Perhaps. They would if he were building a boat in his back yard. On the other hand, when a man spends eleven million dollars, they generally don't touch him—at least, not as long as he has any money left."

Sometimes Mary is even more of a realist than I am.

Anyway, in the following weeks we read further accounts. Lambert was willing to talk freely about his unique arrangements for housing his specimens—he needed all the space, it seems, for stalls and for food storage, and there were cunningly-devised automatic-feeding systems. He was going to load the vessel and cast off as soon as possible.

"They'll stop him," I said. "Wait and see."

"Poor old man," Mary sighed. "In a way I'm sorry for him." Then she shuddered. "Then again, I'm not. Just think, he wanted *us* to be specimens, too."

"And I told him I'd take a rain-check," I muttered. "That is a hot one."

Yes, it was a hot one, all right.

And I kept watching the papers, waiting for news of just how and when the authorities would step in to stop him. Only the way it turned out, the authorities had other problems. Because there were a few sudden and unexpected explosions during the next couple of days—turned out somebody was testing a new cobalt bomb—and they were a lot more "hot" than any news about a religious fanatic.

All of us had other things to think about after the bombs went off.

And now I can't help but wonder about Preston Lambert, who loaded his ship and sailed—apparently with another young couple—during all the excitement.

I can't help but wonder about his little statement there at the end. "There isn't much time left before the final reckoning—I have it on the highest authority—"

The *highest authority.*

Was he *told?*

The way Noah was told?

Should I have taken that "rain-check" ?

I don't know the answers to those questions.

All I know is that it has been raining for a week, now. It has been raining for a week, steady, all over the world.

And it doesn't look as if the rain is ever going to stop. . . .

THE END

Terror In Cut-Throat Cove

When Bob Bloch pats on his fright-wig and goes to work on a terror-tale, his readers are seldom disappointed. We think this is one of his best. If you read it just before bed-time, we promise you won't sleep very well.

YOU won't find Cutthroat Cove on any map, because that is not its real name. And you can search a chart of the West Indies thoroughly without locating the island of Santa Rita.

I have changed the names for obvious reasons. If those reasons are not obvious at the moment, they will be by the time you finish this account.

My own name is Howard Lane, and I lived on Santa Rita for almost a year without ever hearing of Cutthroat Cove. That isn't too surprising, for it wasn't the lure of buccaneers and bullion that brought me here—in fact, you might say I left the United States just to get away from the atmosphere of piracy and plunder which dominates the modem commercial scene.

You might say it, but *I* did say it, night after night, in Rico's Bar. Eventually, of course, I'd stop talking and fall down. Nobody ever paid much attention to me—before, or after.

Except on the night when I met Don and Dena. The teddy-bear and the Christmas-tree angel.

I had a little bit too much of Rico's rum that evening, and I admit it. But even after I got to know them I still thought my first impression was right.

Teddy-bear. That was Don, standing at the bar beside me; blonde, burly, his short arms thick and bare and covered with that soft golden fuzz; his nose splayed and pink, and his eyes like big brown buttons. I watched him order a drink. American beer. American beer, in cans, at a dollar a throw! And he was tossing American money on the bar—a twenty. That was enough to make me look twice. We seldom get strangers or tourists in Santa Rita, and the infrequent visitors never have any money. So I watched the teddy-bear as he carried the two cans of beer over to a table in the corner. And that's when I saw her sitting across from him.

The Christmas-tree angel. Her dress was white and wispy, her hair was spun gold, her eyes china-blue. The complexion was peaches-and-cream, the peaches being slightly ripened by the sun. She laughed up at the teddy-bear as he approached, and I felt an unreasoning resentment.

Why is it always that way? Why does that kind of a girl always pick that kind of a man?

I'd asked myself that question a thousand times. I'd asked it ever since I'd come to Santa Rita a year ago. In fact, that's the real reason I *had* come; because once I'd picked just such a girl—only to find she picked that sort of man.

And I knew what he was, the moment I looked at him. He was the Muscle Beach Boy, the bushy-eyebrows type, the kind who shows up in all the cigarette ads with a tattoo on his hand. I made a little bet with myself about what would happen after he had poured out the beer. Sure enough, I won. He took hold of the empty beer-can in one ham-like hand and squeezed, crushing it flat.

That made *her* laugh again, and I knew why. Because she wasn't a Christmas-tree angel, after all. She was just the kind of a girl who fooled my kind of man into thinking that's what she was. So that we treated her that way; like a fragile, precious, enchanting ornament at the unattainable top of the tree of illusion. Until one of these crude animals came along to grab her with his furry paws, drink his fill, slake his lust, then squeeze her and toss her aside. But she liked that. Beer-cans are made to be crushed. Laughing beer-cans and tattooed teddy-bears.

Yes, I was drunk enough, I suppose, with my stupid similes and maudlin metaphors and the whole sickening mixture of cheap cynicism, sentimental self-pity, and raw rum.

Drunk enough so that when the teddy-bear returned to the bar and ordered another round, I pretended complete indifference. Even after he tapped me on the shoulder, I took my own ill-natured time before turning around.

"Care for a drink?" he asked.

I shrugged. "No, thank you."

"Come on, have a beer! Thought maybe you'd like to join us—we're strangers here, and we'd like to get acquainted."

That intrigued me. I knew the teddy-bear type, or thought I did. And while they're often full of false geniality at the bar, they *never* invite you to join them when they have a Christmas-tree angel in tow. Unless, of course, there's some ulterior motive involved.

Well, I had ulterior motives, too. American beer was a dollar a can—and I hadn't been able to lay a dollar bill down on the bar for a single drink in over eight months now.

I nodded. He held out a golden paw.

"My name's Don Hanson."

"Howard Lane."

"Pleased to meet you. Come on over, I'd like you to meet Dena, here. Dena, this is Howard Lane." He turned to me. "Dena Drake, my secretary."

I stared at her.

"It's really *Dinah,"* she told me. "Like in the song. But Danny Kaye made a recording once, years ago, and he pronounced it *Dena,* and that's what my kid sister called me. So I guess I'm stuck with it. Everybody does a double-take when they hear it."

I nodded, but not in agreement. It wasn't her name that caused me to stare. It was Don Hanson's description of her as his secretary. Their relationship was so obvious I couldn't imagine anyone except a child coming up with such an uninspired lie. Besides, it wasn't necessary here. Santa Rita isn't Santa Monica—only a newcomer would feel it necessary to apologize for the obvious. Still, this Don Hanson *was* a newcomer. In fact, that's what he was talking about, now.

"Just got in before sundown," he was saying. "Little surprised to see how small this place is—not even a hotel, is there? Doesn't matter, really, because I can sleep right on the boat."

"You came in your own boat?"

"It's a yacht," Dena said. "We sailed all the way from Barbados."

Don chuckled. "Pay no attention to her. It isn't much of a yacht, and besides, the crew did all the sailing. We couldn't be bothered, could we, honey?"

I would have liked it if Dena had blushed. But she didn't blush; she squealed as Don did his crushing act with the beer-cans again.

Then he turned to me and grinned. "Lucky I ran into you this way," he said. "I was intending to look you up very soon."

"That's right," Dena chimed in. "We don't speak Spanish, either of us, but Roberto—that's the first mate of our crew—he does, and he talked to somebody here in town after we landed. That's how we found out you're the only white man on the whole island."

"Is that true?" Don asked. "Are you living down here all alone with these Negroes?"

"No," I said.

"But they told Roberto—"

"No," I repeated. "It is not true. There are very few pure-blooded Negroes on Santa Rita. The bulk of the population is of mixed blood; *Mestizo* and *marino* and even more complicated combinations of Negro, Carib, Spanish, Portuguese and French racial stocks. These people are for the most part simple and uneducated, but they have pride."

"Sure, I understand. I thank you for the tip. But you are the only white man."

"According to your interpretation of anthropology, yes."

"Dig him." Dena giggled. She gave me a melting sideways glance from beneath the long eyelashes—the kind of a glance such girls practice while sitting before a mirror and curling those eyelashes. "You'll pardon my curiosity, but just what are you doing way off here in this god-forsaken place?"

"I am drinking your employer's beer," I said, in a flat voice. "And for the past year I have been drinking rum. And this is not a godforsaken place. It is an exotic tropical paradise, complete with cockroaches, beetles, bedbugs, mosquitoes, flies, and Black Widow spiders. Only one form of vermin is unknown here—the tax-collector. His absence more than makes up for the presence of the other insect pests, and also explains my own."

"You a tax-dodger, is that it?" Dena's voice held genuine interest. "A gambler on the lam, maybe?"

I shrugged. "I'm afraid it's not quite that romantic. I happen to be a free-lance writer with an unpredictable income. Having no family ties, I decided to look around for a place where the cost of living is low. Here in Santa Rita I have rented a roomy old furnished house built in the days of Spanish occupation, acquired a devoted couple as servants, and supplied myself with ample food—for less than I'd spend in such mainland paradises as Downhill, Oklahoma or Flyspeck, Utah."

"But don't you ever get lonely?"

"I was lonely long before I came to Santa Rita," I told her. "You can be lonely in New York."

"Brother, don't I know it!" Her smile seemed a little more genuine, but I didn't have an opportunity to analyze it.

Don put his hand on my arm. “Free-lance writer, eh? How’s it going?”

“So-so. Some months good, some months not so good. It varies.”

“Well. Maybe you’d like to earn a few bucks. I could use a little help.”

“What doing?”

“Oh, sort of straightening things out with the local natives. You know these people, maybe you could smooth the way for me. I’d like to get a couple of permits, for one thing.”

“Fishing? You don’t need anything for that.”

“Not fishing, exactly. Diving.”

“He’s a marvelous skin-diver,” Dena said. “Absolutely fabulous.”

I nodded. “That won’t require any official permission, either.”

“Even if it’s a salvage job?”

“Salvage?”

“Treasure,” Dena said. “Why don’t you level with him, darling?”

“Why don’t you shut up?” Don scowled. He turned it into a grin for me. “All right, you might as well know. I’ve got a lead on something pretty big down here.”

“Wait a minute,” I said. “Did somebody sell you a map?”

“No, it isn’t a map. It’s a manuscript. An old manuscript.”

I nodded. “And it describes how one of the galleons laden with bullion from the Inca mines was wrecked and sunk right here off the shoals of Santa Rita, in clear water. Is that it?” I gave him back his grin, with interest. “Why, that’s one of the stalest yarns in the Indies! Somebody’s always waiting to make a sucker out of the tourists with that gag. As far as I know, nobody has salvaged a Spanish treasure-ship anywhere in Caribbean waters for years.” Don shook his head. “Perhaps we’d better get a few things straight,” he said. “First of all, I know about the treasure-ship dodge. I’ve knocked around these parts for a couple of years, mostly diving, and doing some fishing for kicks. A man can really live down here.”

“The Hemingway bit,” I said.

"Do you know Papa?"

"I spit in his milk. I'm a Beatrix Potter fan, myself."

"You don't say," Don muttered. "Well, anyway, I'm not a sucker fresh out of Miami. And I've gotten together a pretty good crew of boys. Five of them, including this mate of mine, Roberto. It was his father who had the manuscript."

"Don went after him when the sharks got him," Dena said. "He told me about it. He pulled him out, but his legs were gone and—"

"Knock it off. Maybe I should have left you on the boat. Or back in Barbados." He gave us each our portion of that frown-and-grin routine again, then continued. "Well, the father died, and Roberto came to me with this manuscript. He'd found it in with the old man's effects.

Didn't know what it was—neither he nor the father could read English."

"You keep talking about a manuscript," I said. "Just what is it, really?"

"Actually, it's a sort of a journal."

"Written by an old Spanish prisoner on old Spanish parchment, and watermarked 1924, in Yonkers?"

"Nothing like that. And it isn't your treasure-ship yarn, either." He leaned across the table. "Look here. I'm no brain, but I wouldn't sail a crew of five all the way down here to this crummy little island unless I was pretty sure there was something in it for me. So you needn't do the needling bit. You want to take a look at it for yourself, come aboard tomorrow morning. Then you can decide if you want in or not."

I hesitated, thinking of the teddy-bear and the Christmas-tree angel, and how I'd come all this way just to avoid playing with toys again. I had resolved that.

On the other hand, I could use some extra money—for eating, and for drinking, too. Drinking helped me to forget about teddy-bears and angels.

So I stood up and I bowed politely, and I said, "Yes, it's a date," to the teddy-bear.

And all the while I couldn't take my eyes off the angel . . .

At ten o’clock the next morning I sat on the forward deck of *The Rover,* reading *Isaih Horner, Hys Journal: Thyse Beeing A True Acct. Of The Voyage of* The Black Star; *1711 Anno Domino.*

Don had told the truth. It wasn’t a Spanish manuscript at all; it was written in the quaint and barbarous English of a semi-literate seaman in the first years of the eighteenth century. The crabbed handwriting was atrocious, the spelling and grammar worse, and no forger would have been inspired to disguise his bait with a long, rambling preliminary account of a sea-voyage.

I’ll make no attempt to reproduce the contents of the journal, but it was obviously genuine. Isaih Horner had been second mate of the *Black Star* during what he smugly described as a “trading voyage” to the Isthmus and the northern coast of Venezuela—but it took no great perception to realize that the principal business of the vessel was armed piracy. Indeed, Captain Barnaby Jakes, his commander, bears a name well-known to anyone who has ever followed the history of the Brotherhood of the Coast; and there were a number of references to meetings with other gentlemen familiar to students of buccaneer lore. Moreover, the *Black Star* did no “trading”; instead, it “confiscated” the property of several Spanish and Portuguese ships which it intercepted *en route* from the Isthmus.

But the big prize was the *Santa Maria*—not Columbus’ vessel, but a namesake, built well over a hundred years later in Spanish shipyards to convey the wealth of the New World to the coffers of His Most Christian Majesty.

The captain had learned that the *Santa Maria* was departing for Spain on its annual voyage, laden with a most unusual cargo of booty—the fruit of no less than three forays during which the *conquistadores* had penetrated far more deeply than ever before into the jungles south of Venezuela, in what is now known as the Amazon backwaters. A civilization had been ravished; not the Inca, but a valley people, worshipping a deity of their own and offering it sacrifice on an altar of beaten gold. The altar and the trappings of the temples constituted the sole "treasure"—but from rumored accounts, this was enough. There was, for example, a huge golden "chest" or "ark" which had been transported on the long march to the coast by no less than forty captured native slaves. Just why the gold had not been melted down into portable ingots on the spot was not made clear, except that the accounts mentioned a certain *padre* accompanying the expedition who insisted that the artifacts of pagan religion be kept intact. Indeed, there was some confusion as to whether or not he approved of removing the temple's contents at all; apparently there had been actual conflict with the commander of the expedition, and a number of men had died during the return journey to Spain.

But that was not important. What mattered was that the booty had been placed aboard the *Santa Maria,* in the deep hold designed for the conveyance of such cargoes, and the ship was sailing for Spanish waters, accompanied by a convoy of two lighter escort vessels, fully-armed for protection against piratical marauders.

All this had Isaih Homer's commander learned; and so, apparently, had a number of other freebooters whose spies were active in the ports.

Normally, Captain Barnaby Jakes would not have acted upon this knowledge. The *Black Star,* with its twelve small guns and its mongrel crew of forty, preyed on smaller game; there were few members of the Brotherhood, even those equipped with a fleet of larger vessels, who ever dared attack a full-sized galleon, let alone one accompanied by an armed and alert escort. For pirates, despite the romantic lore and legend accumulating about their exploits through the centuries, were not lions in courage. They could more aptly be compared to jackals, or at best, hyenas. They sought out the defenseless, the crippled ships, the wrecks, and by the eighteenth century the days of the great early commanders—Henry Morgan, L'Olonnais and their like—were past. The true "buccaneers" of the Indies had vanished; those who remained would seldom board an armed brigantine, let alone sack a city.

So Captain Barnaby Jakes had no intention of attempting to intercept the *Santa Maria* and her sister ships. Not until he heard of the storm.

A small sloop drifted up out of southern waters, and he rescued—and later slew—its two surviving crew-members. But not before he had their eye-witness accounts of the great tempest in which they saw the *Santa Maria* riding the waves alone, after one of her escort ships foundered and the other was sent careening off its course.

The *Santa Maria,* crippled and alone, would have to put in at the nearest port now. And that would be the island of Santa Rita. If she could be caught in open waters—

The *Black Star* bore south for Santa Rita.

Isaih Horner, writing in his *Journal,* spoke piously enough of "the duties of a subject of Hys Mafestie" to harass the Papish Enemy and take legitimate spoils. But it was an expedition of piracy, impure and simple, and it might have succeeded, for they bore down on the *Santa Maria* just outside Santa Rita harbor.

The only trouble was, another "subject of Hys Mafestie" had found her first.

Closing in on her, cutting across her bows as she wallowed towards the safety of the shore, was a vessel which both Captain Jakes and mate Isaih Horner recognized immediately as the pride of one Ned Thatch, *alias* Edward Teach, *alias* Blackbeard. Because of a strict *punctilio* observed among the Brotherhood—and because Blackbeard's ship was easily twice the size and carried three times the guns of the little *Black Star,* there was nothing to do but stand by and watch the battle.

The *Santa Maria* had lost a mast in the storm, and its rudder did not function properly. Apparently most of its guns were out of commission, too, for while it fired defensive salvos as it lumbered along, there was not enough threat in its volleys to prevent Blackbeard from heading her off from the harbor entrance. The big galleon was forced to hug the shore and make for another opening along the coast of the island. Blackbeard followed, closing in without firing. That was ever his way—to hold his fire until almost alongside, and then let a direct volley rake the hull and then the decks.

Not until the *Santa Maria* had almost gained the shelter of the cove at the far side of the island did this opportunity occur. Blackbeard closed in quickly, then stood about for a direct broadside. It came, with a roar. The great galleon rocked and shuddered.

The gunners reloaded for a second salvo, even more shattering than the first. The *Santa Maria,* riding low in the water, attempted to turn. A foremast toppled in a shroud of smoke. Now was the time to close in for the kill—grappling irons were ready, the boarding-pikes mustered. If enough shots had penetrated the vitals of the ship, it would sink within five or six hours; but a boarding-party could secure surrender and transfer the treasure long before then. Blackbeard, presumably, was ready to lead the attack; as was his usual custom, he'd be lighting the candles he'd twisted into his beard, and carrying the pots of brimstone he hurled before boarding the enemy's deck. One more broadside, now—

It came. And the *Santa Maria* rolled with the blast, then careened tipsily to one side.

According to eyewitness Isaih Horner, watching from the deck of the *Black Star* at a distance of less than a mile away, the shots were directed at the top-deck of the galleon. But it was as though the entire discharge of thirty ship's cannons had simultaneously penetrated the vessel below the waterline, as if something had ripped the keel out of the Spanish ship.

For with a roaring and a roiling, with a great tidal tremor, the *Santa Maria* sank like a plummet before his very eyes. The water shot up from the opened hatchways, "lyke a verritable fountin" and Blackbeard, instead of boarding, hastily sheered off to avoid being caught in the almost instantaneous vortex of a whirlpool set up by the downward plunge of the great galleon. Within the space of two minutes the *Santa Maria* was gone. It had sunk into the waters of Cutthroat Cove.

The *Journal* did not end here. It told of how Blackbeard and Captain Barnaby Jakes made common ground in a salvage attempt, but were unable to send men down into the deep water to reach the vessel. There were several survivors whose accounts were reported and paraphrased—none of them could explain why the ship had so suddenly and inexplicably perished, except in terms of sailors’ superstitions. It had been a “black voyage” and there was a “curse” upon the ship; they should not have carried the treasures of a “heathen temple.” Isaih Horner had small patience with these notions—neither did Blackbeard or Captain Jakes. Being somewhat short of rations, and even more short of temper after the loss of such a prize, they merely slit the throats of the Spanish seamen and sent them down to follow their fellows.

It was impossible to land at Santa Rita—the Spanish garrison would undoubtedly be sending out vessels of its own against the intruders—so Blackbeard and the *Black Star* went their separate ways.

Isaih Homer’s *Journal* ended abruptly, a few pages later. He’d put in at Kingston, Jamaica, and was thinking of giving up “the life of a mariner.”

“And that’s just what he did,” Don told me, as I laid the manuscript down on top of the oiled pouch in which it had been preserved. “I guess he turned to robbery on land. Anyway, when I tried to trace down what had become of him, I found out that an Isaih Horner was hanged for purse-snatching in the Government Docks in 1712.”

“Then you checked on all this?” I asked.

“Of course I did. I told you I hadn’t come down here on a wild goose chase. Found out everything I could. About the *Santa Maria,* the storm, the sinking. It’s in the records.”

“What about the treasure?”

“There isn’t much. But it stands to reason that it existed. They never sent a galleon back to Spain with an escort unless it was loaded. Besides, this story of Horner’s impressed me a lot more because it spoke about an altar and temple trappings instead of the usual guff—you know, gold bullion, chests of jewels, stuff like that. There wasn't any such thing anyway, except during the early days when the Spaniards went after the Aztecs and the Inca tribes."

"But if it's in the records, then why didn't others try salvaging the ship?"

"They did. Trouble is, it's in fairly deep water—I'd say somewhere between two hundred and three hundred feet. And up until a dozen years ago, it was impossible to dive that far safety, or to do any work at such a depth. Now we have the technique and the equipment. And we have the details we need. Five hundred yards offshore, just east of the Cove entrance."

"How would you lift up an altar, or a heavy chest?"

"We'd have to go back for a big rig. What I want to do now is locate the wreck. That's a job in itself—have you any idea what happens to a boat that has been under water for almost two hundred and fifty years? Just finding its topmasts above the silt is hard enough to do." Don shrugged. "But that's no concern of yours. What I want is a little help from you in handling the local authorities. Explain what we're here for, that we're a research expedition, interested in salvaging historical relics. You don't need to mention the gold."

"I see."

Don eyed me. "Well, why should you? It isn't *their* property, is it? The laws of salvage—"

"According to the laws of salvage, you'd need a government permit to start work; not from here but from the mainland."

"All right, so I didn't make arrangements. Why can't you go to the mayor or whatever the head man calls himself and just get his okay? You can handle him. And I'm willing to spend a few bucks."

"How much?"

"How much do you think it will take?"

“Well, a hundred dollars is a fortune down here.”

“That’s pretty reasonable.”

He nodded. “I’ll go another couple of hundred for you, if you can sew it up. What we want is permission to dive over at the Cove, without any interference from the natives. Nobody should be allowed to hang around. Get it?”

Got it!”

“How long do you think it’ll take to line up the deal?”

“I can probably see Jose Robales this morning. He’s the mayor of Santa Rita; the inland villages have *jefes* of their own, but they don’t count. I should have word for you before the day is over.”

“Make it in writing.”

“Will do.” I held out my hand. “He’ll expect payment in advance.”

“Right.” Don reached into his jacket, pulled out his wallet. He extracted three one-hundred-dollar bills quite casually.

I was equally casual, an hour later, when I flipped one of the bills to Jose Robales in his little office near the waterfront. He signed the permit with a flourish.

“Remember,” he told me, “I take your word for it that these people will not create problems here. You are to observe them as my representative and see that the crew keeps away from the village at the Cove.”

“I understand. I’ll keep an eye on them, I promise.”

“That is good. Then there will be no trouble, no?”

“There will be no trouble, no,” I echoed.

But I was wrong . . .

The trouble came almost ten days later, when Don finally located the ship.

He’d moved to the area outside the Cove immediately, of course, and anchored in fifty fathoms, five hundred yards out. Roberto and Juan Perez—another crew-member—assisted him in the actual diving operations, while the other three attended to arrangements topside. They put down a heavy shot-line, with handholds, and it hit bottom at two hundred and sixty feet. Nobody got down that far until the third day; it takes time to get accustomed to such depths. And even when they managed to reach the ocean floor, that didn't locate the vessel for them. As Don explained, the ship itself would be covered with silt and almost undetectable. The shifting of the sands, the alteration of the shoreline itself through the long years; these factors added to the problem. It would take time and patience.

I came out every day; I beached a rowboat on the shore of the Cove and it wasn't a long pull. I sat there and watched the operations. After they hit bottom, Don did most of the diving himself. Every second dive, he'd haul anchor and try a new location. By the time a week had passed they'd explored an area several hundred yards in circumference without finding a thing. But Don wasn't discouraged yet—just tired.

Dena was bored.

I'd sit with her on the deck of the yacht while Don was diving, and listen to her complain. She didn't care if Roberto and the others overheard her; actually, they were much too busy up forward to pay any attention to us.

"Pleasure trip!" she murmured. "He hauls me way off here to the middle of nowhere, and for what? To sit on my fanny out in the hot sun all day long while he's down there playing footsie with the fishes. Then at night he's tired, wants to turn in right away—not that there's anything else to do for excitement over on that crummy island of yours. A big nothing, that's all it is."

"Then why did you come along in the first place?"

Dena shrugged.

"Did he promise you a share of the treasure?"

"In a way." She scowled at me. "Not that it's any of your business."

"You in love with him?"

"That isn't any of your business, either."

“All right. I’m sorry.”

“You don’t have to be. I can take care of myself.”

“So I notice.”

“You notice a lot, don’t you?”

“It’s my business. I’m a writer, remember?”

“I’ll bet you are.” She lit a cigarette. “What would a writer want in a nowhere like this place?”

“Now *you’re* getting personal,” I told her. “But I *am* a writer. I’ve got books and stuff up at the house to prove it. Want to see them?”

“I’ve seen books already, thanks. Also etchings.”

“That isn’t what I had in mind.”

“Don’t kid me. I haven’t met a man since I was fifteen who had anything else in mind. They always want to show me something. When I came aboard Don’s boat back in Barbados, he was going to show me the portable bar.”

“Then why did you accept his invitation, if you knew the way it would turn out?”

“Maybe I wanted it to turn out that way.”

“Then you *are* in love with him.”

“Shut up!” She turned away, tossing her cigarette over the side. It arced down and hissed into the waves. “All right, what’s the sense of putting on an act? When I was eighteen I was singing with a band. I had a contract with MCA and a chance to do a TV show, just a summer replacement deal on sustaining, but they told me it could build into something big if I got a few breaks. That was seven years ago, and I’m still waiting for the breaks. I haven’t been with MCA for a long time, and I haven’t done any television, either. Six months ago I got a chance to play a night-spot in Havana. It wasn’t a very good one, but the one in Port-au-Prince was worse, and the one in Trinidad was just plain lousy. I ended up in Barbados without a job, and without a dime. Then Don Hanson came along with his boat. I didn’t care what kind of a guy he was or what kind of a boat he had. I wanted out.

So, as the sun sinks in the west, we say farewell to beautiful Barbados. End of story."

"You don't really like him, do you?"

"I hate his guts. He's the kind of a guy who's always had plenty of money and is still greedy for more. He's the kind of a guy who always had plenty of muscles, but still has to use them to show off—and to push other people around. As far as he's concerned, I'm not even a person; just another convenience he wanted to take along on the trip, like his portable bar."

"Then why don't you—"

"What? Ditch him and come with you to your island paradise? Don't give me that, chum. You've got nothing to offer. But nothing." The blue eyes were level. "I didn't ask you for your sad story, but I'll bet I already know it. There was a girl in it, wasn't there? And another guy, who took her away, while you sat mooning around. I've met your kind before—the sensitive intellectual type, isn't it? Which is just another way of saying you don't have any guts. I told you I hated Don's guts, but at least he *has* some. Enough to go out after what he wants. He'd never ask me to pull a sneak on another man; he'd fight him for me. Would you fight Don? Not in a million years!"

I sighed. "You're right," I said. "And very honest."

"I shouldn't have said that," she told me. "If I was really honest, I'd admit I'm not worth fighting for. Not any more."

"Suppose I think differently. Suppose I'm willing to fight?"

"You couldn't win." She sighed again, and lighted another cigarette. "Guys like you can never win. This is a money-and-muscle world. Them as has, gits. Even if the prize is only a beat-up bleached blonde with a bad case of the whim-whams. Oh, let's forget it, shall we?"

I was going to tell her that I wouldn't forget it, that I preferred an angel who admitted truthfully to a little tarnish, and that maybe both of us were a bit too cynical and defeatist for our own good.

But I never got the opportunity.

Because suddenly there was a commotion up forward, and a babble of excited Spanish. Don was coming up—he was clinging to the shot-line twenty feet down, spending five minutes in stage decompression before being hauled aboard. His body was perfectly visible in the clear water; the weird fins, the goggles, the cylinder-assembly and regulator on his back all part of an eerie ensemble.

We waited patiently until he tugged three times, giving the signal for hauling up the line. Roberto and Juan hoisted him to the deck. He stood there, shivering slightly, while they unstrapped his equipment. Then he took off his goggles and grinned.

"I've found it," he said.

"No—are you sure?"

"Positive." He nodded, reaching for a towel. "And it's better than we could have hoped for. Went down on its side, right into a big rock crevice that protected the top-deck from silting. Part of the deck itself is still clear, and I could see what's left of the masts and forward cabin. We ought to be able to clear a path inside almost immediately—just chop a hole in the hull." He turned to Roberto. "But don't take my word for it! Here, I want you to go down and take a look for yourself, right now. And then Juan. The sooner all three of us have had a look at her and compared notes, the better. Got your stuff?"

Roberto nodded, then hurried below. By the time Don had towelled himself back to warmth, taken a shot of brandy and accepted a cigarette, Roberto was already lowering himself over the side.

We watched him disappear along the shot-line, going down into the water.

Dena was excited. "What's it look like?" she asked. "Can you really see anything down there?"

Don lifted his head impatiently. "Of course you can," he told her. "It gets quite dark about halfway, but once you actually hit the bottom there's a lot of reflected sunlight; it seems to penetrate the dark, transparent area above.

The light is bluish, but you can make out objects quite easily. I recognized the boat at once, even though it doesn't look much like a galleon any more."

"Everything's covered with slime, eh?" I asked.

"Slime? Whatever gave you that idea?" Don stared at me. "Trouble with you writers—you get everything out of books. Make a few dives yourself and you'd find out differently. There's no slime. The wood is just about eaten away and the metal structure is just a skeleton. Lots of little marine animals covering it. And fish everywhere—millions of 'em. You know, I may even have guessed wrong about the hull; maybe there's only the iron hasps and what I thought was wood was just a solid mass of fish. They like to swarm where there's some protection. Roberto should be able to tell us more when he comes back."

"It takes a long time to make a dive, doesn't it?"

"Going down is easy, if you're carrying a shot like he is. But coming back is slow work. You have to make at least three stops for decompression, to avoid the bends." There was a waterproof watch strapped to Don's wrist. He parted the golden fuzz and glanced at it. "I'd say he's due up again in about fifteen minutes. Should just be at the first stage of decompression now, about fifty feet under." He went over to the rail where the rest of the crew was gathered. "See anything yet?" he asked.

"No," Juan told him.

"Well, he ought to give the first signal soon."

We watched the rope, but it remained taut.

"Fifteen minutes," Don muttered to himself.

But it wasn't fifteen minutes. It was less than one minute later that Juan shouted, "Here he come!" and he wasn't pointing along the shot-line either, but far offside, beyond the rail.

"You're crazy!" Don grunted. "That's some damn fish, surfacing."

"No—is Roberto!" Juan said.

I stared. What broke water certainly wasn't a fish, for fish lack arms and legs, and they do not wear apparatus on their backs.

"Madre de Dios!" Juan cried. "Is Roberto!"

It was Roberto, all right, but I'd never have recognized him floating there in the water, his body swollen and distorted grotesquely by the change in pressure. Nor was that the worst of it.

Roberto's body had come up from the wreck below. But it no longer had a head . . .

"Of course it wasn't a shark," Don said. "No shark could bite like that. Besides, the way it was sheared off—"

He kept his voice low, even though Dena had gone below to her bunk.

"How about a squid?" I asked. "I've read about the way the big ones hole up in wrecks down there."

"You've *read!"* He gave me a pitying look. "Maybe you'd better read a little more. A squid isn't the answer, either. There isn't any kind of marine creature that could take a man's head off clean at the shoulders. And that includes whales, in case you also happen to have read *Moby Dick."* Don glanced at the body lying on the deck, covered with a tarpaulin. "No, the answer's not a fish or an animal, either. Roberto must have left the line and gone off to explore the wreck. And my guess about the fish is probably right. There is no solid hull left, only a framework. When Roberto reached the wreck, the fish swam off. My guess is that he tried to enter what's left of the ship, swimming between the ribs. And then—"

He drew a finger across his throat. It wasn't a pleasant gesture, but it was extremely graphic.

"But how could that do it?" I persisted. "I don't pretend to know the way those old boats were put together, but if they used iron, surely it was in big pieces. There wouldn't be any razor edges to worry about."

Don shrugged. "Do you know what happens to metal after it's been under water for a few hundred years? It wears down, eventually just crumbles away. Gold wouldn’t, but old iron—”

“Then how could it be so sharp, and how would it hold up to slice a man’s head from his shoulders just because he swam against it?”

“I don’t know. But we’ll find out tomorrow. Juan and I will go down.”

He was only partially correct.

They buried Roberto at sunset, and I didn’t stick around after the simple ceremony. That’s just as well, because I heard about it the next morning.

If the sharks hadn’t taken Roberto’s head, they got their consolation-prize. Even though the body had been carefully wrapped and weighted down with shot, they must have found him, because they had been swimming around the yacht all night, their long cold bodies gleaming as they surfaced and snapped their teeth in the moonlight. It hadn’t been a pleasant evening.

I could tell that when I looked at Dena’s face the next day, and the crew’s reaction was even more apparent.

As for Don, he was agitated only by anger.

“They’re grumbling,” he murmured, as he led me down into the cabin, out of earshot of those on deck. “Want me to turn back, chuck the whole thing. I don’t know who started it, but then all these Negroes are like children. Giving me a lot of jazz about curses and hoodoos.” He sighed. “But that’s not the worst of it. Juan won’t dive any more. He absolutely refuses to go down.”

“So what are you going to do?”

“Do? I can turn back, the way they want me to, and come here again with a fresh crew. But that’s a waste of time and money. Dammit, I found the wreck! A few more trips down and I’ll have all the data I need on what it’ll take to bring up the treasure.”

“If it’s really there.”

“That’s just the point—I intend to find out. This is no time to stop.”

“You can still dive, yourself.”

“Yes, but it isn’t a good idea to do it alone, at that depth, unless there’s someone else standing by in case of emergencies. Not that there’ll be any; now that I know what to expect, I won’t get caught the way Roberto was. Still, I need someone to rely on.”

“Have you tried offering Juan more money?”

“Certainly! I told him I’d pay him Roberto’s wages in addition to his own. But he’s scared spitless.”

Dena clambered down the ladder. “So what’s the story?” she asked, listlessly. “We leaving Nature’s wonderland?”

“Looks as though we’ll have to,” Don told her. “Unless—” He paused, eyeing me. “Unless you could help out.”

“Me?”

“Why not? You could learn to dive. I could teach you in three days. Nothing to it, with a regulator, and we’ve got all of Roberto’s equipment. I’d make it worth your while—”

“No thanks,” I said. “Don’t mention money. I’ve got a poor head for figures, but at least it’s still on my shoulders. Which is more than you can say for Roberto’s.”

“I’d cut you in on the salvage,” Don said. “We’d split on the gold. Think of it, a solid gold altar, and a golden chest so big it took half a dozen men to carry it.”

Dena smiled. “Never mind the sales-talk,” she said. “Can’t you see he just isn’t the outdoor type?”

I don’t know if it was *that* that did it, or the realization that unless I agreed she’d be sailing away. But all at once I heard myself saying, “Why not? At least I can give it a try.”

That shut her up in a hurry, and it made Don start talking. Within a matter of minutes it was all arranged. He’d abandon his project for the next few days and devote all his time to instructing me. We’d start inland, near the beach at the Cove, and then I’d get into deeper water. First with the shot-line and then alone, gradually learning how to handle myself in the depths.

And that's just the way it worked out.

There's no need to give a detailed account of what it's like to learn skin-diving. The sea holds a lot of surprises, but your own body holds still more. I'd never have believed I could undergo the amount of pressure I experienced in the increasing scope of my descents, or endure the cold. I learned how to accomplish the necessary decompression, how to walk and swim and handle my limbs under weird gravitational alterations. And I learned, still more importantly, that I was not afraid. For the first time I really understood the fascination of skin-diving as a hobby, or as the avocation or vocation of men like Clarke and Costeau.

Don was a good, if impatient instructor. And more than his grudging praise, I relished the reluctant admiration of Dena. Thus stimulated, I underwent a rapid apprenticeship.

By the morning of the fifth day, I was ready to stand by and handle the line while Don dived. The crew seemed to have settled down into a state of morose resignation once more, and there were no difficulties.

I watched Don adjust his helmet and fins and clamber over the side. Dena leaned over the rail at my elbow and we traced the trail of bubbles rising through the translucent water. Then we waited.

Almost an hour passed before Don reappeared on the line at the twenty-foot decompression stage. He stayed so long that I went down myself, gesturing to him in the water. He signalled for me to leave, with a wave of his hand. I came up again.

"Is he all right?" Dena asked.

"I guess so. But he's certainly in no hurry to come up."

Finally, though, he emerged. The fins, the tanks, the helmet came off. He took a towel, sank into a deck-chair, and his usually ruddy face was unnaturally pale in the mid-day sun.

"What's the matter?" I muttered.

"Nothing. Nitrogen narcosis."

I nodded. He'd explained it to me—the nitrogen intoxication which sometimes affects the central nervous system after one relies on the air-supply from the tanks during long dives to great depths. It brings on anaesthesia, hallucinations, and all sorts of odd reactions, but disappears when the diver decompresses.

"Took a long time to wear off," Don continued. "Hit me so suddenly I wasn't really aware of it. At first I thought the men were right about their squid, or whatever they think is down there in the wreck."

"You reached it?"

"Yes. And there is no hull, as I suspected; just masses of fish clustering almost solidly around the crevice where the ship settled. Inside there's bits of wood and metal still leaving a partial skeleton, but all the heavy stuff—the guns and the spars—is sunken into the sand. Over at one side there's a big bulge. I'd swear it's the altar and the chest we're looking for, but I never got to examine them.

"Because that's when I began to feel funny. The water seemed to be turning black. The first idea I had was about the squid, so I scuttled out of there. And when I turned around to take a look, the whole area seemed to be not only black, but boiling. Clouds of bubbles. Fish, of course, returning to the spot. And they'd churned up the silt. But at the time I would have sworn there was some big animal coming up from under the wreckage. Then, when I saw Roberto's head bobbing around in the center of the black stuff, I realized what was wrong with me. I was drunk as a coot. So I came back up on the rope. I was so woozy I almost forgot to let go of the weights."

"Did you find the place where Roberto had his accident?"

"No, I didn't. Maybe you can when you go down."

"You mean—?"

"Why not? No reason why you shouldn't get used to it. I won't tackle it again today, so it's your turn. Maybe you can get closer than I did. Just remember to watch out for the nitrogen when it hits you. Chances are it won't, though."

Dena shook her head. "He shouldn't risk it," she said. "After all, he's just learning, and it's over two hundred feet. You told me yourself it calls for an experienced diver—"

"Only one way to get experience, isn't there?" I said. "I'm ready."

And I was, the moment I heard the veiled concern in Dena's voice.

I lowered my mask over the side, dipping it in the water so that no mist would cloud the inner surface of the goggles. Juan strapped the cylinder blocks of the regulator to my back and looped the hose over my head as I fitted the rubber mask until it moulded tightly to my face. I gripped the mouthpiece between my lips as Juan hung ten pounds in weights to my belt. I adjusted my fins, picked up a spear, then went over the side, grasping the rope with my left hand as I lowered myself into the water.

It was cold. Gradually I felt my body adjusting to the temperature and the pressure, just as my eyes adjusted to the deeper gloom. Bubbles burst around me and fish swam past. My lungs ached. I straightened to a horizontal position so that intake and exhaust were equalized at the same pressure-level and the regulator would function properly. It was hard not to panic; to remember, in effect, that the demand regulator was doing my breathing for me, or at least supplying the air which my constricted lungs needed as I flailed my way down. The pressure grew stronger, my movements correspondingly slower. Here in the deeper darkness I began to feel drunk—nitrogen narcosis was not the cause, merely the gravitational change. My ears and sinuses ached, and I swallowed until the pain eased. A school of small fish glided by. I was tempted to abandon the shot-line and follow them. But no, the line was my guide to the treasure below. I went down, deeper into the darkness.

Not enough nitrogen had entered my bloodstream to produce any side-effects. All I had to worry about was the pressure. How far down was I? Close to two hundred feet, probably. It was hard to move, now; hard to hold the spear. I wanted to rest for a while, to float.

The water here was dark. Only the bubbles from the regulator retained any color—they were round and yellowish, like beads of amber strung endlessly upwards from here to the surface. So far to the surface up there. So cold down here.

And getting colder now.

Because I was descending again. Deeper and deeper. Darker and darker. Colder and colder. *Down went McGinty*—

Drunk. All right, so I was drunk. But that was good, because I couldn't feel the pain any more. My ears had stopped hurting. The cold didn't bother me, now. And it was easy to continue, to go all the way down. All the way down to where the treasure lay—the golden altar.

And then I saw the rock crevice, saw the great solid swarm of fish packed in a writhing mass and rising up like the dim drowned outline of a ghostly galleon. And I left the line and wriggled forward, moving like a fish myself. A swordfish, with a spear. They fled before me, these little ones. I was Neptune, scattering my subjects. Make way for the king! *King of the Sea.*

Drunken diver, rather. Or was it drunken driver? *Could they arrest you for drunken diving? Fine you twenty clams?*

I tried to clear my mind. Mustn't go on like that. Had to be careful, avoid running into whatever it was that sheared off poor Roberto's head. Funny way to die. Most men lost their heads over a woman—

And then I *saw* her.

I saw the woman.

She was standing perhaps fifty feet to my left, away from the crevice and the wreck. It was the glint of light that first caught my eye; a reflection brighter than anything else here in the murky dimness. I thought it might be the sunlight glinting from the scales of a large fish, and I turned my head, and I saw.

Saw the black hair floating free in a mane that masked the face. Saw the sudden movement of her body as she turned and waved the cutlass. The gleaming cutlass, razor-sharp—

Women do not walk the ocean floor brandishing cutlasses. I realized that, but my awareness was only partial. Because another part of me was whispering, *now you know. Now you know what cut off Roberto's head.*

And then *she* saw *me,* and the black mane whipped back, revealing her face. It was a blob of greenish-white gristle with four gaping holes; two black sockets, a jagged nasal septum, and a grinning maw that parted now as a tiny fish wriggled *out.*

And it wasn't the skull that frightened me, it wasn't the sight of a corpse walking here at the bottom of the sea. It was just the hideous, grotesque inconsequence of the little fish swimming out of the dead mouth.

That's what I was afraid of, and that's what I remembered as I pulled in panic for the shot-line. As I struggled to release the weights I dropped my spear and stared. The figure wavered off in the distance, disappearing into the crevice where the ship lay. And now the black bubbles were rising, cascading in clouds from the spot. Through the turbulence I could see the skull-face melting and blending, and I saw another face that could have been Roberto's, and yet others—brown, bearded, grimacing faces that formed out of bubbling blackness and disappeared in inky incoherence.

Then I was going up the line, not remembering to move slowly, but propelled by the panic, flailing forward in frantic fear.

At the fifty-foot level I forced myself to stop and wait. The water below was clear and no inchoate ichor rose about me. I counted slowly, then climbed again. Twenty feet now—another five minutes and I'd be free. Free and safe. But what if I waited, and something came after me? *What if it was following me, crawling along the line?*

My lungs were bursting. My head was bursting. Not with pressure, but with fright. I couldn't wait any more, I couldn't stand it, I had to get out, I *had* to—

I kicked and released myself, straining upwards, striving for the sun. My head broke water and I could see the light, feel it all about me.

Then it dissolved into darkness and I went down again, down into the black bubbles . . .

It was Don who hauled me out. I learned it later, when I opened my eyes and found myself lying on the deck.

"Don't try to talk," Dena said.

I nodded. I had neither the strength nor the desire. It was a good twenty minutes and two shots of rum later before I was able to sit in a deck-chair and tell my story.

Don shook his head. "Nitrogen narcosis," he said. "You had it worse than I."

"But the corpse with the cutlass—Roberto's head—"

"Hallucinations."

"Yes, but how?" I thought about it for a moment. "Was it the manuscript that set me off? The part about the pirates? Did I subconsciously remember Mary Read and Anne Bonney and the other females who sailed in Blackbeard's day?"

"You must have," Don told me.

"But we both saw Roberto."

"We were both thinking about him, and what happened down there."

"Well, what *did* happen, do you suppose?"

Don sighed. "Perhaps we can find out tomorrow."

"You're not going down again?" Dena asked.

"Of course I am. One more trip and I should be able to locate that altar, and the chest. A few fish churning up the silt aren't going to scare me away." He grinned at me. "Tell you what. If you're so concerned about my welfare, I'll take Howard along tomorrow for a guardian. We'll both go down. What'dya say?"

What could I say, with Dena watching me? I nodded, reluctantly. I didn't really want to go down into that deeper darkness again.

And that night, when the dreams came, I was left with still less desire to return to the wreck.

The dreams came, and I lay tossing in my bed in the old house on the hillside above the winding waterfront of Santa Rita. I knew I was there, in my bed, but at the same time I was once again writhing in deep waters.

In my dreams I swam down to the wreckage, wriggled into the crevice where the black bubbles churned, and scraped at the sand with my spear until the point wedged against a solid object. It was the chest, of course, and I could detect the outline of the heavy lid set solid on the massive golden container. I sought to brush away the encrustation of corrosion and fungoid growth and gaze upon the gold beneath, but as I reached out the lid began to rise. It swung open slowly, and the blackness seeped out; the black bubbles burst like bloating blossoms. And they were not bubbles, but heads, and each head had a face, and each face had a mouth, and each mouth was gaping wide to greet me with a grotesque grimace. Yet these were only smoky bubbles, ghost-faces floating there in the water—the broad, flat faces of savages, the bearded faces of *hidalgos* and Spanish mariners, the seamed and pitted countenances of corsairs; yes, and here was Roberto again, and the woman. The dark cloud floated forth, and it was like a great black bush bearing heads for fruit; a strange undersea growth waving there in the dim depths, growing before my eyes. And now the bush put forth fresh branches, and the branches were long and waving; a writhing mass of titanic tentacles. Still the smoke poured out, and billowed forth, and now I perceived that there was a body beneath the nightmare nebulosity of faces and feelers; a black body that was like a squid, a sea-serpent, a reptilian monster spawned in the dawn of pre-history when Nature shaped strange simulacra from primeval slime. And beneath the seething, shifting smokiness of that amorphous and polymorphous presence there were real eyes—real eyes that glowed and glared and glinted at me. But they were *more* than eyes; they were mouths as well. Yes, they were mouths, for I could see the pupils gape and the lids rolled back like lips, and I knew that the eyes would devour me, they would ingest me in their hunger, incorporate my essence into the black being of that incredible body so that I too would take my place as one of the scores of shifting shapes in the smoke which emanated from it.

It was one and it was many, it was a composite creature of an incorruptible corruption; it was insanity incarnate.

I screamed and fled from it, but the faces and the feelers flowed forth to envelop me in ichorous essence, so that I drowned in the bubbling blackness of its being. I was consumed by it.

And then there was no fear, and no revulsion, for in its place came an overwhelming expansion of awareness, so that I became a part of *it* and I knew. My memory was *its* memory, my knowledge was *its* knowledge. And my hunger was *its* hunger—

Memory.

Deep in the jungle they built the temple and reared a golden altar of worship. And behind the golden altar was the great golden ark in which I rested and waited for the sacrifice. Nor did I wait too long, for they came frequently to attend me, bringing me the captives of their warfare, trussed on poles like pigs. And when there were no captives they brought me slaves, and when there were no slaves they brought me children, and when there were no children they brought me their choicest virgins. All I devoured in the darkness, incorporating far more than flesh—for I took from living things the continuity of their consciousness and added their awareness to mine. So that I grew and grew, eternally enlarging. For I was that which is known in all legends; the creature of darkness which devours the world. And if I were not fed, if my appetite were not appeased, I would flow forth to raven freely as I had—long aeons ago, or was it yesterday, or would it be tomorrow? But if they kept me sated, I was content to dwell in the temple. And when they built the ark I entered it willingly, nor did I try to leave, for it was pleasant to curl and coil and coalesce in the darkness and wait for them to bring me fresh fare. I remembered, now . . .

Knowledge.

Time is a rushing river that flows endlessly, yet never reaches the sea. And it is pleasant to drift upon the stream, drift drowsily and content. So that when I coiled compactly in the golden chest, I willed myself to satiated sleep. And it was then that they hammered down the lid, so that I could not escape; hammered it fast to hold me captive, and put an end to sacrifice. But I was still aware; I knew when the armored white strangers came and prevailed over my worshippers, and I endured as they sought to pry open the lid of the great chest, and then abandoned their vain efforts to talk of fire and of melting down. Finally there was talk of a golden gift to their ruler and in the end the chest was borne away to the ship, together with the altar of sacrifice. I did not stir or struggle, for I anticipated the nearing moment when the chest *would* be opened again, and I could feast. Feast on flesh, feast on spirit. Yes, I knew, now . . .

Hunger.

I drowsed in the darkness, and then the thunder came, and the shattering sound awakened me. I felt the shock and the shudder as the sinking ship gave way and I fell into the depths; the lid of the chest burst and I was free. Yet I did not come forth, for there was no reason. Not until the bodies drifted down, sinking slowly. Then I put forth a portion of myself, bubbling out from the lid and groping until I grasped the floating forms and drew them to me. I feasted until replete, then slept once more. There was no need to emerge from the chest until the opportunity came to feed again. Time means nothing, for I endure forever. I have but to wait. I neither dwindle nor grow; nothing grows except the hunger.

But the hunger is there, and lately I have stirred, heeding its pangs. The other day I took a man—it was curious, in that he came to me willingly and saw the chest with its lid ajar. He could not lift it, of course, because of the weight of the water, but he felt along the edges. Then I bubbled forth, grasping him and pulling him down, and he threshed mightily so that the lid fell, decapitating him. The body floated away, but I did not pursue. I do not have to pursue. I am aware of his awareness now, and with it I know that there are others of his kind in a ship, just above me. They will follow him down, for they are seeking the chest and the altar. Yes, they will come to me, and soon I shall feast again.

In the feasting there is great pleasure. To taste the memories, to savor the surge of every emotion, to know the nuances of all desires; there is the richness of rage, the pungency of passion, the fine, full flavor of frantic fear. I eat it all, and I digest it, and I retain it, and that is *my* ruling need. Most of all I want the woman, the golden woman. And I will engulf her with my eyes, and I will take her whiteness into my blackness, and drain her body of all delight—

“No!” I was screaming now, it was my own voice that was screaming, and it was my own sweat-drenched body that threshed in ultimate fright there upon the bed in the moonlight as I awoke.

It had been a nightmare. I knew that now, and yet I *believed.* No subconscious fantasies can evolve without stimulation, and my stimuli had come from beneath the sea. *I believed.*

But when the harsh sun rose, my certainty wavered. By the time I rowed out to the yacht, I was half-ashamed to even speak about the dream. And when I started to tell Dena and Don of what had shattered my sleep, I was more than apologetic.

“Sure you weren’t hitting the rum again?” Don asked.

“No, I didn’t touch a drop. But even if it was just a nightmare, I’m convinced there’s *something* behind it. That business of the lid coming down to decapitate Roberto—”

“You know yourself what it would weigh, and how slowly it would move in water at that depth.”

“Yes, but if something were holding him—”

“What could hold him? Your mysterious monster, made out of black bubbles? The one who lives inside the chest?”

“We saw the bubbles, remember?”

“Sure we did. And we saw the fish that made them, churning up the silt down there in the crevice.” Don wiped his forehead with a hairy arm. “Personally, I think you cooked up this yam because you’d like to chicken out of making a dive with me. You were pretty shook up yesterday, weren’t you? Sure you were.”

“Leave him alone,” Dena said. “The poor guy almost drowned. If he doesn’t want to go back down, I don’t blame him.”

“I’ll go,” I said. “Don’t worry about me.”

“Then come on,” Don snapped. “Juan has our gear laid out. The sooner we get started, the better.”

We stripped down to our trunks, and I followed the teddy-bear over to the rail in silence. Juan helped us into our equipment. And then it was time to lower ourselves along the shot-line, lower ourselves into the drowned domain of darkness and seek what waited there . . .

Don reached the bottom before me. Spear in hand, he jacknifed through the gloom in the direction of the crevice, then waved a flipper to urge me forward.

The fish did not swarm here today, and we could see the ribs of the skeleton-ship wavering weirdly in the water. And Don swam between them, then lowered himself to the sand as he groped forward, digging his spear into the bulky, buried outline of a shape set against the side of the rocks. Suddenly he flung up a flipper again, gesturing impatiently as I held back. The spear scraped over the encrustations and bubbles rose.

Then I saw the glint and hurried forward. He *had* found something—it was the altar!

There was no way of determining if it had fallen flatly or upended itself in the sand—in either case it was huge; far larger than I'd expected. And its surface, beneath the silt, was hammered, gleaming gold. I peered into Don's face, beneath the goggles, and read the exultation in his eyes.

We'd found what we were looking for.

The cost of rigging up a winch and windlass to raise it from the depths would be tremendous, but the reward was worth the effort. This was a prize surpassing the dreams of any treasure-seeker. And there was still the chest—

Again, it was Don who moved forward, deeper into the debris centered between the ribs of the hulk. He stooped and groped and probed, then rounded a rocky outcropping in the wall of the crevice and literally stumbled across the rectangular lid of the great chest sunken in the sands.

I was beginning to feel faint. Part of it was residual fear, of course, but most of it was sheer excitement at the realization of our discovery.

Whatever the cause, I was conscious of a growing giddiness, and I moved back, not wanting to stray too far away from the shot-line. Don waved at me, but I shook my head and continued to retreat. Only when I saw the line slanting before me did I halt and gaze off into the crevice.

Don had stooped over the imbedded outline of the lid and now he was digging at it with his spear. I remembered his own remarks about the weight of the water and knew his puny efforts would be futile; perhaps he was beginning to suffer from nitrogen narcosis too.

But no, his attempts were *not* useless! Because even as I watched, the lid was raising. Slowly, very slowly, the sand began to slant and shift beneath the spear. And now I could see an opening inch up, and there was a blackness and a bubbling. It was like the blackness and the bubbling I'd encountered yesterday, during my dive, but there were no fish about to churn the silt. Yet the lid continued to rise, and the darkness flowed forth.

The darkness flowed forth, just as it had in my dream.

And then Don was backing away, and he flailed the spear before him; flailed frantically at the faces that seethed and surged in shapeless shadows. And out of the faces emerged the feelers, coils of twisting tentacles that shrouded him in smoke. I thought of the legends of the huge *djinn* imprisoned by Solomon in tiny bottles, and I thought of how lambent gases are compressed in minute containers, and I thought of protoplasm that proliferates instantaneously in response to the blind, insensate forces which spawned life out of the insane vortex of chaos when the world began. But this was not *djinn* or gas or protoplasm; it was nightmare. Black nightmare, boiling out of a golden chest at the bottom of the sea, black nightmare that emerged now in sudden, shocking solidity; oozing obscenely aloft until it towered titanically amidst its twining tendrils.

And I saw the central coils part to reveal the eyes, the eyes which were like mouths—which *were* mouths, because they were swallowing Don. The coils whipped him aloft, forced him against the openings, and the lid-lips came down. I could see Don's legs threshing in a blur of bubbles; one of his flippers had come off.

I forced myself forward, spear in hand. But the chest was closing; the tentacles were forcing it down from within. The black, threshing mass disappeared, carrying the white mass of Don's body with it, and the lid clanged shut. Behind it floated a mass of bubbles, and a tangle of reddish skeins, and something small and curiously white. Don's foot, sheared off at the ankle by the closing lid—

I blacked out.

Half an hour later I found myself gasping and retching on the deck in the warm sunlight. I had no memory of how I came to the surface; apparently Juan had seen me ascend and came down to hold me through the decompression stages. He bent over me, and his brown face was almost as pale as Dena's.

I told them about Don.

In Dena's face I could read only doubt and incredulity, plus a strange compassion. But Juan nodded, slowly.

"We must leave this place," he said.

I shook my head. "But you can't leave now—there's the gold, it's really down there, and it's worth a fortune—"

"What is gold to a dead man?" he murmured. "We will go back to Barbados."

"Wait!" I begged. "We've got to think things over. Dena, you understand —"

"Yes." She turned to Juan. "We can't decide anything now. Can't you see he's exhausted? Look, let me take him ashore. Tomorrow we can decide what must be done. There's no sense talking any more. And no reason to get all excited over hallucinations."

"Hallucinations!" I sat up, shaking.

She put her hand on my shoulder. "Never mind. We'll discuss it later, when you're rested. Come on, I'll go in with you. Juan can have one of the men row us ashore."

I was silent. It took all my strength to get over the side and into the rowboat. When we landed, about a mile down from the Cove, Dena and the crew-man helped me walk up the steep, winding path which led to the old house I occupied on the hill. Looking down, I could see the yacht riding out there on the waters, silhouetted against the sunset.

The crew-man went back, but Dena stayed. My serving couple, Felipe and Alicia, prepared a meal for us. Then I sent them away. The food and a few drinks restored me. By the time darkness came I was ready to talk. And Dena was ready to listen.

We sat on the terrace outside the house. The sky was bright, and I had the feeling that, if I wished, I could reach out and grasp the moon and the stars. But I was content merely to sit there and watch the play of moonlight and starlight in Dena's golden hair.

Dena filled our glasses and sank back.

"All right," she said. "What really happened down there?"

I stared out at the water. "But I already told you."

"We're alone now. You aren't talking for Juan's benefit, or the crew's."

"I realize that."

She sipped her drink. "Can't you remember? Was it really all hallucination?"

I leaned forward. "Dena, none of it was hallucination. It happened just the way I told you. We found the treasure. And that creature down there. I dreamed about it, but it's real, it actually exists. Maybe it's not the only one, either—what about all these legends of sea-serpents and monsters? What happened to the crew of the *Marie Celeste?* I've read about such things on land, too; jungle villages, whole primitive civilizations which had been apparently destroyed instantaneously, without warning. Suppose there *are* life-forms we know nothing about, spawned when the earth was young and still surviving—or spawned even *before* the earth evolved? What about the beings that might have come here from the stars, the alien entities that never die? Those legends—"

"Legends!" Dena brushed the hair back from her forehead, frowning. "I'm interested in the truth."

"But I'm trying to explain—"

"You don't have to explain." She stared at me levelly. "I know what happened. You and Don went down to the wreck. You found the altar, perhaps you even found the chest. And they were gold, all right."

"Yes. I wasn't lying. Those objects would be worth a fortune if we raised them."

"Of course. You thought about that, didn't you? And you thought how wonderful it would be to have that fortune, keep it for yourself. So you got hold of Don's spear, and you killed him. And then you came back up with your crazy story about the monster, knowing it would frighten Juan and the others, keep them from going down to look. Now you'll wait until they go, get your own crew, and salvage the treasure.

That's the way it was, wasn't it? You killed Don."

"No."

She came closer, her voice low. "I understand. It wasn't just for the sake of the money, was it? You wanted me. You knew you'd have to get Don out of the way, first. And you remembered what I said, about not having the guts. So it's my fault, too. I'm not afraid to face the truth—I'm partly responsible."

"You don't know what you're saying."

"Yes, I do. I'm saying that I'm sorry, but it's happened now and I can live with it. We can both live with it. We will get the treasure together. You and I. And then, if you still want me—"

Then she was in my arms and I looked down at my tarnished angel, at the golden toy, mine now for the taking. And I smiled, and I pushed her away.

"It's too late. I don't want you. Now, or ever."

"I'm not good enough for you any more, is that it?" She stood up quickly. "Now that you know about the gold, you think you can keep it all for yourself and you won't need me because you can buy other women."

"I don't need you. And I don't need other women any more, either."

"Oh, yes you do! You need me all right! Because all I have to do is go to that precious mayor of yours here on the island and tell him who murdered Don."

"Go ahead," I said. "We'll see what happens when he tries to pit himself against a God. For it is a God, you know. Stronger and stranger than any entity of Earth."

Dena stepped back, still staring.

"You're crazy," she whispered. "That's it. You've gone crazy."

"Because I don't want you as a woman any more? Because I'm through with sentimental daydreams about teddy-bears and angels? Oh, no, Dena. I'm not crazy. I *was* crazy, perhaps, until I gazed on the ultimate realities. What I saw was not pretty, but its truth transcends terror. I've gazed on something far more powerful than the petty forces that rule our little lives and our little lusts. There is a power stronger than all earthly desire, a hunger greater than all earthly hunger. And when I saw it today, when I recognized it down there, I did the only thing a mortal may do. I bowed down and worshipped, do you hear, Dena? I remember now what happened after Don died. I sank to my knees on the ocean floor and I worshipped!" I rose and faced her. "And then I went over to the chest and I opened the lid. I was not afraid any longer, because I knew *it* was aware of my emotions. I could realize that. And I could release it without harm, because it understood I meant to serve it. Dena, I opened the lid!"

"I don't believe you, I don't believe anything you're saying—"

"They believe me." I gazed out at the moonlit waters of the Cove beyond.

She followed my stare.

"Don't you see what's happening?" I said, softly. "The yacht is moving. Juan raised the anchor. He believed what I told him. And he and the crew must have made up their minds. They aren't going to wait until tomorrow. They aren't waiting for us at all. They remember what happened to Roberto and to Don and they want to get away."

Dena gasped. "You're right—the yacht *is* moving! What can we do?"

"We can watch," I told her, calmly. "They want to get away. But they won't. They don't know what you know now—that I opened the lid. And its hunger is growing. Look!"

The moon was very bright over the water. And even at the distance of a mile we could see the bubbles rising, see the waves churning and boiling as something broke the surface just before the vessel. It was like a wave, like a waterspout, like a giant cuttlefish. And the tentacles tossed and twisted and twined about the prow, and the little yacht tilted, and then a black bulk emerged from the waters and swept across the deck. In the distance we could hear faint screams, and then Dena was screaming too as the boat careened over on its side and the huge black blob enveloped its white hull and bore it down, down—

The black bubbles disappeared, and there was only the soft and shimmering surface of the sea, glittering in the cold silver moonlight.

“The *Marie Celeste,”* I murmured. “And countless other ships. Countless other mortals in all climes, in all times. When the appetite waxes, it awakens. When it wanes, it subsides. But now the hunger grows again and it will come forth to feed. Not on the bodies alone, but on the *being.*

It will glut on soul-substance, feast on the emotions and the psyche. First a ship, then a village, then a town, perhaps an entire island. And what is comparable to that knowledge? Does that slimy gold under the water or the tarnished gold of your body hold any allure for one who realizes his true destiny at last? His destiny to serve a God?”

“Get away from me—I’ll go to Robales—”

I pinned her arms. “You will not go to Jose Robales. You will come with me. And I will summon it to the sacrifice.”

She screamed again, and I hit her with the heel of my hand across the back of the neck. It silenced her, but did not bruise her mouth or face. I knew it would be better if she was not marked. One does not bring spoiled fruit or withered flowers as an offering to the Gods.

I carried her down to the beach, then, in the moonlight. And I stripped her and staked her out upon the sand there at the water’s edge. She was silver and gold in the moonlight, and for a moment I coveted the treasure of her body's richness. But I had spoken truly; this was as nothing to the knowledge of my destiny. I had found myself at last—I was meant to serve. To serve, and to summon.

I sent my thoughts out across the water and deep down. It was not difficult, not since I had opened the chest and let the blackness therein meet and mingle with my being. For already I was a part of it and it was a part of me. And I knew this was what it was searching for—not the crew, but the golden woman.

Now it would come to slake all hunger and all thirst. And my own appetite would be appeased in the sacrificial act.

I did not have long to wait. The bubbles burst near the shore and then it flowed forth. Larger now—for as it feasts, it grows. The black blur became a black cloud, the black cloud became a black blot, the black blot became a black body; a thousand writhing arms to caress her nakedness, a thousand pulsing lips to drink, a thousand hungry mouths to savor and to swallow.

And the blackness flowed over her whiteness and it was like an exploding ecstasy in which I was the ravisher and the ravished, the eater and the eaten, the victor and the victim, the watcher and the watched, and it was better than seeing Don, it was better than seeing the crew, and I knew it would keep getting more wonderful each time, the sensation stronger still as *we* kept feeding and growing, feeding and growing.

Yes, *we.*

Because when it was finished, and the blackness melted back into the rolling waters, leaving the beach bare before it in the moonlight, I knew that *we* would go on together.

There had been no altar this time, but that did not matter. *We* know nothing, care nothing for altars of gold. The bed is not the bride, the plate is not the meal. Anywhere and anytime, all that is necessary is soul and substance for the sacrifice. So that *we* can swallow and grow, swallow and grow.

I made *our* plans.

Jose Robales had warned me to keep the crew away from the natives in the little village behind the Cove. They were only ignorant savages, after all—probably not much better than the jungle natives who had reared the golden altar to a God. But they lived—and that is enough to *we* who drink life.

So I would summon the God again, tomorrow, the next day, soon. And it would come in its strength and take nourishment. Perhaps the villagers would bow down to it and then raise an altar of their own. Perhaps not. In the end, it couldn't matter. Because in the end *we* would take them all.

And perchance Jose Robales might come to us. If not, in due season *we* would go to him.

Yes, in due season *we* would visit everyone on the island of Santa Rita. And our awareness would grow as we incorporated all the lives and all the learning and all the lusts. And our appetite would increase. And *we* would grow; grow in size, grow in power, grow in strength to satisfy our dark desires.

There need be no end. It is a small distance from island to island. And as *we* grow we can travel faster, seize more swiftly and surely. With us there is no time and no death—nothing to halt or to hinder.

The creature that swallows the world.

Why not?

From island to island, always growing. Then on to the mainland, to the swarming cities. It will feast and I will share, it will search and I will lead, it will rule and I will serve, for ever and ever.

And I have written it down now so that all may know the truth and decide whether to join in worship or serve us in another way—as subjects, sustenance for sacrifice.

The choice is yours, but make it swiftly. For I feel the urging of that black appetite, and soon *we* must go forth to ravage and raven across the world . . .

(Statement of Jose Robales, mayor.)

In the matter of the man Howard Lane, presently confined to await trial on the charge of murder, these facts are known.

The foregoing account was found, in the prisoner's own hand, upon the desk in the study of his home, by Felipe and Alicia Martino, his servants.

The statement was handed to me when I visited his house early this morning, together with Officer Valdez, seeking to question him concerning the sinking of the yacht *Rover,* which event had been reported to me by certain natives of the village near Cutthroat Cove.

Howard Lane being asleep, I first examined the above statement and then awakened him, formally charging him with the murder of Roberto Ingali, Donald Hanson, and the woman Dena Drake.

This he of course denied, but in such a manner as to permit of only one supposition—that this account he had written truly represents his own belief as to what occurred.

It is evident that the prisoner suffers from a severe mental derangement, and I shall make it a point to see that he undergoes a complete examination before formally bringing him to trial. At the moment one can only conclude that he performed the crimes while in a state of unbalance, and—although it is not easy to determine the method—arranged for the sinking of the yacht.

Unfortunately there are as yet no witnesses who can testify to actually seeing the vessel go down, but the sudden disappearance of a seaworthy boat anchored in calm waters, coupled with the discovery this morning of timbers and bits of wreckage washed ashore in the Cove, permits of no other conclusion. It was undoubtedly Hanson's boat.

The prisoner's statement seems obviously the work of a mind obsessed with guilt, and it is to be hoped that he will recover sufficiently to make a full and sensible confession.

Before wiring to summon a physician, I shall make it my business, as an official and as a former friend of Howard Lane, to visit him in the jail and urge that course upon him.

Indeed, I would have done so today, had it not been that the reports of the wreckage washed ashore occupied my time and attention until late this afternoon.

As it is now well into the evening, I will put off my interview until tomorrow morning.

It is to be admitted that one is shaken by this sad turn of events.

The spectacle of Howard Lane, my former friend and now my prisoner, in the grip of his delusions—shrieking threats and curses like an hysterical woman—disturbs one far more than I can indicate. Even now I can hear him moaning in his cell below.

And it is sorrowful indeed to reflect upon the sudden tragedy which has visited our peaceful island.

As I sit here and gaze out across the calm waters of which the prisoner has written so vividly, I cannot reconcile this scene with such a chaos of murder and violence. As for the statement itself, absurd as it may seem to one still in full possession of his reason, there is a certain powerful if irrational logic about it—

Wait. The prisoner below is not moaning. He is shouting again, in measured cadences. It is as though he were *chanting.*

And the waters of the bay—

The moonlight is clear and I can see the black bubbles rising. They are moving closer to the shore, moving swiftly. And now I hear the screaming from the waterfront. They see it, they see it coming out of the water. It is black and immense, and it is slithering forward, it is coming to feast just as he said it would, it is coming to devour the w——

THE END

Hungarian Rhapsody

We're not trying to fool you with the by-line, Wilson Kane. Actually, we couldn't, because Robert Bloch's fans are going to know he wrote this story. Wilson Kane is one of prolific Bob's pen names. We use it here because it could be confusing to have two Robert Blochs on the contents page. So it's just a device to get two top yarns by one great writer into the same issue. Sneaky, huh?

RIGHT after Labor Day the weather turned cold and all the summer cottage people went home. By the time ice began to form on Lost Lake there was nobody around but Solly Vincent.

Vincent was a big fat man who had bought a year-round house early that spring. He wore loud sport-shirts all summer long, and although nobody ever saw him hunting or fishing, he entertained a lot of city people every weekend at his place. The first thing he did when he bought the house was to put up a big sign on his property which read SONOVA BEACH. Folks passing by got quite a bang out of it.

But it wasn't until fall that he took to coming into town and getting acquainted. Then he started dropping into Doc's Bar one or two nights a week, playing cards with the regulars in the back room.

Even then, Vincent didn't exactly open up. He played good poker and he smoked good cigars, but he never said anything about himself. Once, when Specs Hennessey asked him a direct question, he told the gang that he came from Chicago, and that he was a retired business man. But he never mentioned what business he had retired from.

The only time he opened his mouth was to ask questions, and he didn't really do that until the evening Specs Hennessey brought out the gold coin and laid it on the table.

"Ever see anything like that before?" he asked the gang. Nobody said anything, but Vincent reached over and picked it up.

"German, isn't it?" he mumbled. "Who's the guy with the beard—the Kaiser?"

Specs Hennessey chuckled. "You're close," he said. "That's old Franz Joseph. He used to be boss of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, forty-fifty years ago. That's what they told me down at the bank."

"Where'd you get it, in a slot-machine?" Vincent wanted to know.

Specs shook his head. "It came in a bag, along with about a thousand others."

That's when Vincent really began to look interested. He picked up the coin again and turned it in his stubby fingers. "You gonna tell what happened?" he asked.

Specs didn't need any more encouragement. "Funniest damn thing," he said. "I was sitting in the office last Wednesday when this dame showed up and asked if I was the real-estate man and did I have any lake property for sale. So I said sure, the Schultz cottage over at Lost Lake. A mighty fine bargain, furnished and everything, for peanuts to settle the estate.

"I was all set to give her a real pitch but she said never mind that, could I show it to her? And I said, of course, how about tomorrow, and she said why not right now, tonight?

"So I drove her out and we went through the place and she said she'd take it, just like that. I should see the lawyer and get the papers ready and she'd come back Monday night and close the deal. Sure enough, she showed up, lugging this big bag of coins. I had to call Hank Felch over from the bank to find out what they were and if they were any good. Turns out they are, all right. Good as gold." Specs grinned. "That's how come I know about Franz Joseph." He took the coin from Vincent and put it back in his pocket. "Anyway, it looks like you're going to have a new neighbor out there. The Schultz place is only about a half-mile down the line from yours. And if I was you, I'd run over and borrow a cup of sugar."

Vincent blinked. "You figure she's loaded, huh?"

Specs shook his head. "Maybe she is, maybe she isn't. But the main thing is, she's stacked." He grinned again. "Name is Helene Esterhazy. Helene, with an *e* on the end. I saw it when she signed. Talks like one of them Hungarian refugees—figure that's what she is, too. A countess, maybe, some kind of nobility. Probably busted opt from behind the Iron Curtain and decided to hole up some place where the Commies couldn't find her. Of course, I'm only guessing, because she didn't have much to say for herself."

Vincent nodded. "How was she dressed?" he asked.

"Like a million bucks." Specs grinned at him. "What is the idea, you figuring on marrying for money or something? I tell you, one look at this dame and you'll forget all about dough. She talks something like this ZaZa Gabor. Looks something like her, too, only she has red hair. Boy, if I wasn't a married man, I'd—"

"When she say she was moving in?" Vincent interrupted.

"She didn't say. But I figure right away, in a day or so."

Vincent yawned and stood up.

"Hey, you're not quitting yet, are you? The game's young—"

"Tired," Vincent said. "Got to hit the sack."

And he went home, and he hit the sack, but not to sleep. He kept thinking about his new neighbor.

Actually, Vincent wasn't too pleased with the idea of having anyone for a neighbor, even if she turned out to be a beautiful red-headed refugee. For Vincent was something of a refugee himself, and he'd come up north to get away from people; everybody except the few special friends he invited up during summer weekends. Those people he could trust, because they were former business associates. But there was always the possibility of running into former business rivals—and he didn't want to see any of them. Not ever. Some of them might nurse grudges, and in Vincent's former business a grudge could lead to trouble.

That's why Vincent didn't sleep very well at night, and why he always kept a little souvenir of his old business right under the pillow. You never could tell.

Of course, this sounded legitimate enough; the dame probably was a Hungarian refugee, the way Specs Hennessey said. Still, the whole thing might be a very clever plant, a way of moving in on Vincent which wouldn't be suspected.

In any case, Vincent decided he'd keep his eye on the old Schultz cottage down the line and see what happened. So the next morning he went into town again and bought himself a very good pair of binoculars, and the day after that he used them when the moving van drove into the drive of the Schultz place half a mile away.

Most of the leaves had fallen from the trees and Vincent got a pretty clear view from his kitchen window. The moving van was a small one, and there was just the driver and a single helper, carrying in a bunch of boxes and crates. Vincent didn't see any furniture and that puzzled him until he remembered the Schultz cottage had been sold furnished. Still, he wondered about the boxes, which seemed to be quite heavy. Could the whole story be on the up-and-up and the boxes maybe filled with more gold coins? Vincent couldn't make up his mind. He kept waiting for the woman to drive in, but she didn't show, and after a while the men climbed into their van and left.

Vincent watched most of the afternoon and nothing happened. Then he fried himself a steak and ate it, looking out at the sunset over the lake. It was then that he noticed the light shining from the cottage window. She must have sneaked in while he was busy at the stove.

He got out his binoculars and adjusted them. Vincent was a big man, and he had a powerful grip, but what he saw nearly caused the binoculars to drop from his fingers.

The curtain was up in her bedroom, and the woman was lying on the bed. She was naked, except for a covering of gold coins.

Vincent steadied himself and propped both hands up on the sill as he squinted through the binoculars.

There was no mistake about it—he saw a naked woman, wallowing in a bed strewn with gold. The light reflected from the coins, it danced and dazzled across her bare body, it radiated redly from her long auburn hair. She was pale, wide-eyed, and voluptuously lovely, and her oval face with its high cheekbones and full lips seemed transformed into a mask of wanton ecstasy as she caressed her nakedness with handfuls of shimmering gold.

Then Vincent knew that it wasn't a plant, she wasn't a phoney. She was a genuine refugee, all right, but that wasn't important. What was important was the way the blood pounded in his temples, the way his throat tightened up until he almost choked as he stared at her, stared at all that long, lean loveliness and the white and the red and the gold.

He made himself put down the binoculars, then. He made himself pull the shade, and he made himself wait until the next morning even though he got no rest that night.

But bright and early he was up, shaving close with his electric razor, dressing in the double-breasted gab that hid his paunch, using the lotion left over from summer when he used to bring the tramps up from the city. And he put on his new tie and his big smile, and he walked very quickly over to the cottage and knocked on the door.

No answer.

He knocked a dozen times, but nothing happened. The shades were all down, and there wasn't a sound.

Of course, he could have forced the lock. If he'd thought she was a plant, he'd have done so in a moment, because he carried the souvenir in his coat-pocket, ready for action. And if he'd had any idea of just getting at the coins he would have forced the lock, too. That would be the ideal time, when she was away.

Only he wasn't worried about plants, and he didn't give a damn about the money. What he wanted was the woman. Helene Esterhazy. Classy name. Real class. A countess, maybe. A writhing redhead on a bed of golden coins —

Vincent went away after a while, but all day long he sat in the window and watched. Watched and waited. She'd probably gone into town to stock up on supplies. Maybe she visited the beauty parlor, too. But she ought to be back. She had to come back. And when she did—

This time he missed her because he finally had to go to the bathroom, along about twilight. But when he returned to his post and saw the light in the front room, he didn't hesitate. He made the half-mile walk in about five minutes, flat, and he was puffing a little. Then he forced himself to wait on the doorstep for a moment before knocking. Finally, his ham-fist rapped, and she opened the door.

She stood there, staring startled into the darkness, and the lamplight from behind shone through the filmy transparency of her long hostess-gown, then flamed through the long red hair that flowed loosely across her shoulders.

"Yes?" she murmured.

Vincent swallowed painfully. He couldn't help it. She looked like a hundred-a-night girl; hell, make it a thousand-a-night, make it a million. A million in gold coins, and her red hair like a veil. That was all he could think of, and he couldn’t remember the words he’d rehearsed, the line he’d so carefully built up in advance.

“My name’s Solly Vincent,” he heard himself saying. “I’m your neighbor, just down the lake a ways. Heard about you moving in and I thought I ought to, well, introduce myself.”

“So.”

She stared at him, not smiling, not moving, and he got a sick hunch that she knew just what he’d been thinking.

“Your name’s Esterhazy, isn’t it? Tell me you’re Hungarian, something like that. Well, I figured maybe you’re a stranger here, haven’t got settled yet, and—”

“I’m quite satisfied here.” Still she didn’t smile or move. Just stared like a statue; a cold, hard, damn beautiful statue.

“Glad to hear it. But I just meant, maybe you’d like to stop in at my place, sort of get acquainted. I got some of that Tokay wine and a big record-player, you know, classic stuff. I think I even have that piece, that *Hungarian Rhapsody* thing, and—”

Now what had he said?

Because all at once she was laughing. Laughing with her lips, with her throat, with her whole body, laughing with everything except those ice-green eyes.

Then she stopped and spoke, and her voice was ice-green, too. “No, thank you,” she said. “As I say, I am quite satisfied here. All I require is that I am not disturbed.”

“Well, maybe some other time—”

“Let me repeat myself. I do not wish to be disturbed. Now or at any time. Good evening, Mr.—” The door closed.

She didn’t even remember his name. The stuckup snob didn’t even remember his name. Unless she’d pretended to forget on purpose. Just like she slammed the door in his face, to put him down.

Well, nobody put Solly Vincent down. Not in the old days, and not now, either.

He walked back to his place and by the time he got there he was himself again. Not the damnfool square who'd come up to her doorstep like a brush salesman with his hat in his hand. And not the jerk who had looked at her through the binoculars like some kid with hot pants.

He was Solly Vincent, and she didn't have to remember his name if she didn't want to. He'd show her who he was. And damned soon.

In bed that night he figured everything out. Maybe he'd saved himself a lot of grief by not getting involved. Even if she was a real disheroo, she was nuttier'n a fruitcake. Crazy foreigner, rolling around in a pile of coins. All these Hunky types, these refugees, were nuts. God knows what might have happened if he'd gotten mixed up with her. He didn't need a woman, anyway. A guy could always have himself a woman, particularly if he had money.

Money. That was the important thing. She had money. He'd seen it. Probably those crates were full of dough. No wonder she was hiding out here; if the Commies knew about her haul, they'd be right on the spot. That's the way he figured it, that's the way Specs Hennessey the real-estate man had figured it.

So why not?

The whole plan came to him at once. Call a few contacts in the city—maybe Carney and Fromklin, they could fence thing, including gold coins. Why the setup was perfect! She was all alone, there was nobody else around for three miles, and when it was over there wouldn't be any questions. It would look like the Commies had showed up and knocked the joint over. Besides, he wanted to see the look on her face when he came busting in—

He could imagine it now.

He imagined it all the next day, when he called Carney and Fromkin and told them to come up about nine. "Got a little deal for you," he said. "Tell you when I see you."

And he was still imagining it when they arrived. So much so that both Fromkin and Carney noticed something was wrong.

"What's it all about?" Carney wanted to know.

He just laughed. "Hope you got good springs in your Caddy," he said. "You may be hauling quite a load back to town."

"Give," Fromkin urged.

"Don't ask any questions. I've got some loot to peddle."

"Where is it?"

"I'm calling for it now."

And that's all he would say. He told them to sit tight, wait there at the house until he came back. They could help themselves to drinks if they liked. He'd only be a half-hour or so.

Then he went out. He didn't tell them where he was going, and he deliberately circled around the house in case they peeked out. But he doubled back and headed for the cottage down the way. The light was shining in the bedroom window, and it was time for the wandering boy to come home.

Now he could really let himself go, imagining everything. The way she'd look when she answered the door, the way she'd look when he grabbed her gown and ripped it away, the way she'd look when—

But he was forgetting about the money. All right, might as well admit it. The hell with the money. He'd get that, too, yes, but the most important thing was the other. He'd show her who he was. She'd know, before she died. She'd know all right.

Vincent grinned. His grin broadened as he noticed the light in the bedroom flicker and expire. She was going to sleep now. She was going to sleep in her bed of gold. So much the better. Now he wouldn't even bother to knock. He'd merely force the door, force it very quietly, and surprise her.

As it turned out, he didn't even have to do that. Because the door was unlocked. He tiptoed in very softly, and there was moonlight shining in through the window to help him find his way, and now there was the thickness in the throat again but it didn't come from confusion. He knew just what he was doing, just what he was going to do. His throat was thick because he was excited, because he could imagine her lying in there, naked on the heap of coins.

Because he could *see* her.

He opened the bedroom door, and the shade was up now so that the moonlight fell upon the whiteness and the redness and the golden glinting, and it was even better than he'd imagined because it was real.

Then the ice-green eyes opened and for a moment they stared in the old way. Suddenly there was a change. The eyes were flame-green now, and she was smiling and holding out her arms. Nuts? Maybe so. Maybe making love to all that money warmed her up. It didn't matter. What mattered was her arms, and her hair like a red veil, and the warm mouth open and panting. What mattered was to know that the gold was here and she was here and he was going to have them both, first her and then the money. He tore at his clothes, and then he was panting and sinking down to tear at her. She writhed and wriggled and his hands slipped on the coins and then his nails sank into the dirt beneath.

The dirt beneath—

There was dirt in her bed. And he could feel it and he could smell it, for suddenly she was above and behind him, pressing him down so that his face was rubbing in the dirt, and she'd twisted his hands around behind his back. He heaved, but she was very strong, and her cold fingers were busy at his wrists, knotting something tightly. Too late, he tried to sit up, and then she hit him with something. Something cold and hard, something she'd taken from his own pocket; *my own gun,* he thought.

Then he must have passed out for a minute, because when he came to he could feel the blood trickling down the side of his face, and her tongue, licking it.

She had him propped up in the corner now, and she had tied his hands and legs to the bedpost, very tightly. He couldn't move. He knew because he tried, God how he tried. The earth-smell was everywhere in the room. It came from the bed, and it came from her, too. She was naked, and she was licking his face. And she was laughing.

"You came anyway, eh?" she whispered. "You had to come, is that it? Well, here you are. And here you shall stay. I will keep you for a pet. You are big and fat. You will last a long, long time."

Vincent tried to move his head away. She laughed again.

"It isn't what you planned, is it? I know why you came back. For the gold. The gold and the earth I brought with me to sleep upon, as I did in the old country. All day I sleep upon it, but at night I awake. And when I do, you shall be here. No one will ever find or disturb us. It is good that you are strong. It will take many nights before I finish."

Vincent found his voice. "No," he croaked. "I never believed—you must be kidding, you're a refugee—"

She laughed again. "Yes. I am a refugee. But not a *political* refugee." Then she retracted her tongue and Vincent saw her teeth. Her long white teeth, moving against the side of his neck in the moonlight. . . .

Back at the house Carney and Fromkin got ready to climb into the Cadillac.

"He's not showing up, that's for sure," Carney said. "We'll blow before there's any trouble. Whatever he had cooked up, the deal went sour. I knew it the minute I saw his face. He had a funny look, you know, like he'd flipped."

"Yeah," Fromkin agreed. "Something wrong with old Vincent, all right. I wonder what's biting him lately."

THE END

Red Moon RIsIng

Washington teas appalled when Moscow announced a scientific triumph that made Sputnik look like a child's toy. Our leaders had to make a quick decision—with a gun pointed at their heads.

I'LL never forget the day they launched the big one.

At precisely four o'clock I was sitting in my little unpadded cell here at *Globe News,* pounding out the usual daily stint for a Washington dateline column called *The View from Washington's Monument.*

At precisely one minute after four the bulletins started coming in over the wire up front.

My office is way down at the end of the corridor, but within three minutes the bedlam had reached a pitch where I couldn't work any longer. I got up and joined the crowd in the front layout.

From the noise and the milling around, you'd think they were doing the Christmas Party bit. Until you got a look at their faces.

I realized what had happened at once.

Somebody had pushed the panic button.

About the time I managed to squeeze my way clear of the corridor, McGregor climbed up on top of his desk and everybody shut up.

It was the sight of him there that did it. McGregor isn't the kind of a man who stands on desk, and we all knew it. The effect was as shocking as seeing Albert Schweitzer sitting in with Louis Armstrong at a Newport Jazz Festival.

Any tendency to murmur a comment about this was effectively stilled by a glimpse of McGregor's face. I've been with Globe for a good many years, and I'd never seen him so stunned—not even on the night that Truman clobbered Dewey.

Then he held up his hand and started to read.

Now it would be nice to pretend I have total recall, but the truth is that I can't give a single word of direct quotes. I was too stunned to remember; I could only react, as we all reacted.

But I got the message.

There was another satellite in the sky.

Another Sputnik had been launched.

And its estimated weight was in the neighborhood of fifty tons.

That's right. *One hundred thousand pounds.*

No official confirmation had been received yet, of course—but it wasn't necessary. Some eight million citizens had seen the satellite in orbit as it passed over Los Angeles and environs. Signals had already been picked up as it continued its progress.

It wasn't a gag, it wasn't a flying saucer, it wasn't a publicity stunt for Mike Todd's birthday.

The sword of Damocles was hanging over our head, and it weighed fifty tons.

Runners kept pushing through to McGregor with fresh bulletins, and somewhere along the line he stopped reading them and began calling out names. So-and-so to check the rival newsservices and the TV networks immediately; so-and-so to contact our sources on the Geophysical Year project, at once; so-and-so to the Pentagon, pronto; so-and-so to the White House, soonest.

I turned away. I didn’t expect to be called; when it came to questions of actual news, *The View from Washington’s Monument* was pretty dim.

That’s why I was startled when I heard my name blasted out. I got up to the desk in nothing flat, and McGregor gave me a glare which told me I should have made better time.

“Where’s Carling?” he snapped.

“I don’t know. It’s his day off, isn’t it? Have you tried—”

“Yes, we tried his apartment. And we tried the Mayflower Bar and that joint down on B Street, too. You’re a buddy of his. What else would he be doing on his day off?”

“Never mind. Go out and find him, fast.”

“Right. It’ll take me just five minutes to finish up on the column, and then—”

This wasn’t my day for finishing sentences. McGregor, like the true executive he was, disposed of my column in a few well-chosen words.

I went straight back to my cubicle and picked up my hat. and coat. In order to save time, I didn’t even stop to do what he’d suggested I do with my column.

There was no need to emphasize the importance of finding Carling. At a time like this, Globe News could use his services. Leonard Carling was Science Editor. He’d copped a Pulitzer for his series on the Los Alamos Project a few years ago. A yarn like this could easily win him another.

If I could find him.

Actually, I had a pretty fair idea of where he might be. There was a little spot around the corner from his place, run by a bartender who detested rock-n’-roll and put his own collection of records on the juke box. Sometimes, on his day off, Carling would squeeze into a back booth and listen to a stack—stuff like the old Raymond Scott Quintet numbers on the Brunswick label.

I managed to flag down a taxi on the street and gave the driver the address. Apparently he had not heard about the satellite yet, because he had nothing to say. This suited me. If I found Carling, he'd do plenty of talking. As a matter of fact, he already had.

On the face of it, our friendship was a very offbeat item. Carling wasn't just another wire-service reporter; he had quite an educational background, including the M. I. T. bit. As for me, I know just enough about science to change a washer—and even there I rely more on profanity than technological know-how. But somehow, we enjoyed each other's company. Maybe it was because both of us were divorced.

Carling thought so. I remember how he'd analyzed it one night. "It isn't so much that we're lonely," he said. "Each of us has our friends. But we lack sounding-boards. That's a wife's function, you know. To serve as a sounding-board for her lord and master. To listen to all his gripes, all the complaints, all the wild ideas and foolish theories. I used to talk to Lucy about the nucleonics projects twenty-four hours a day. Come to think of it, maybe that's why she divorced me. At least *you're* willing to listen."

I was. Maybe I couldn't dig the scientific terminology, but his opinions always interested me. Even lately, when he'd begun to get very downbeat about the Red satellites and our own failures.

"You haven't seen anything yet!" he'd predicted, in that we-are-gathered-here-to-pay-our-last-sorrowful-tribute voice of his, just the other night. "The next one is going to be the clincher."

I didn't ask him how he knew.

Leonard Carling, on the basis of his reputation, had *entree* to high official circles and even higher unofficial circles. Much of his information came from the latter; he couldn't write it for publication, but he got the word.

And now his prophecy had come true.

So I was quite lathered up when I walked into the little bar and spotted Carling's gray crew-cut rising over the top of the rear booth. The place was almost empty; the bartender stood down front talking to a couple of

Department of Agriculture stenographer types who were making faces at the juke box. The juke box didn't care; it went right on playing an old John Kirby number.

Leonard Carling looked up and smiled at me.

"Sit down," he said.

I shook my head. "Grab your socks," I told him. "McGregor wants you."

"Does he know where I am?"

"Of course not. But he sent me out to find you, and I guessed."

"So you couldn't locate me." He gestured. "Sit down and have an ale."

"No time. Wait'll you hear the news."

"About the satellite?" He shrugged. "The bulletin came over TV ten minutes ago. Fifty tons, I think they said."

I stared at him. "Well, aren't you going to do something about it?"

"I *am* doing something about it. I'm drinking ale. Care to join me?"

He signalled the bartender before I could object. I slumped into the seat opposite him when the bartender came and waited until he brought our order and went away again. John Kirby's outfit began to play *Rose Room*.

"I suppose McGregor wants me to check at top-level," he mused, pouring his ale carefully. "I imagine he'd like some interviews."

"Of course. So put on your coat and—"

"No, thanks. I brought in enough interviews when the earlier Sputniks were launched. Let him rewrite them. I guarantee the story will be the same."

He was using that funeral-oration voice of his, but somehow it sounded very appropriate. I listened.

"The first interview would be with the top brass, wouldn't it? You know what they'll tell me. The military geniuses who claimed they needed billions to keep us ahead of Russia in national defense will say this only proves they need *more* billions to keep us ahead. The big boys who went around bragging about how America is always first in the technology race will issue statements denying there ever *was* a technology race. The politicians who did their best to get rid of all the egghead scientists will loudly proclaim that we need is *more* egghead scientists. None of these people see a real Sputnik in the sky—all they see up there is a political football.”

“But the man in the street—” I began.

“As for the man in the street, he doesn’t see *anything*. When the first satellite was launched, there was plenty of publicity—but actually, the average citizen was more interested in whether or not the Braves would win the World Series. Of course, hi-s wife was more excited when the second Sputnik went up—because of the dog. The way it struck her, it was a moral victory for our side; *we* would never send a poor, helpless little puppy to its doom that way! Then the dog died, and the public forgot the whole thing.”

“They won’t forget *this* one,” I said. “There’s a hundred thousand pounds up there. They saw it with the naked eye on the West Coast, and it’ll be visible to the whole country on its orbital course. By tomorrow morning there’ll be hell to pay. And you’re still willing to sit here and make With the cheap cynicism.”

“I’m using only the most expensive cynicism. The most costly, shall we say?”

“Either you’re drunk or you’ve flipped,” I told him. “But if you don’t snap out of it, half the world will be drunk or flipping within twenty-four hours. This thing is big enough to hold a dozen men. Is it a manned satellite? Maybe it’s armed. Maybe it’ll be followed by rockets with warheads. Aren’t you interested in finding out?”

“Certainly. And in due time, Von Braun and Arthur C. Clarke will write articles on the subject.”

“Be serious, won’t you? I’m no scientist, but this thing scares hell out of me.”

“Yes.” He nodded slowly. “You’re scared. And, as you say, everybody will be frightened by tomorrow. So my going out and getting interviews won’t help the situation. Something more must be done.”

“Such as sitting here and drinking, I suppose?”

“Exactly. It so happens I’m here by appointment. In a little while I expect a visitor. If our meeting goes as I think it might, it may be that I shall really be able to help.”

“A visitor? Who?”

“I am not at liberty to say.”

“You mean you already contacted a guy who—”

“He contacted me. I decided, under the circumstances, it would be wisest not to meet at my apartment. Therefore, I selected the semi-privacy of this establishment.”

“Well, why didn’t you say so in the first place? Just clue me in a little so I can tell McGregor what you’re doing.”

“No. There must be no interference. When I’m certain of my facts, I’ll notify him. Until then, just say that you couldn’t find me.”

“Look, at least give me a hint. Why all the hush-hush? Did you locate a leak somewhere? Is this government stuff?”

He shook his head.

I lowered my voice. “All right, let me guess. You’re onto the Soviet angle, isn’t that it? Somebody’s willing to spill the inside story of how they did it. That must be it. Right?”

“Don’t ask any questions. Now, run along. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow,” I echoed and went away. Wondering if there would *be* a tomorrow.

A nasty conviction was beginning to filter through to me. Talk about the propaganda value of the previous Sputniks—*this* was the real thing! One look at the Red moon in the sky tonight and the man in the street might very well become the man in the cellar, the man under the bedclothes, cowering and waiting for the first bomb to fall.

I thought about it as I drank my dinner down the street. Then, as the evening wore on, I thought about it some more.

Talk about the Christmas Party bit, or New Year's Eve! The streets were jammed and the bars were crowded. Everybody was talking, everybody was yelling, everybody was drinking. But there was one difference—nobody was laughing or even smiling.

They had heard the word.

The word, out of Chicago, when the Red moon came over and the panic-stricken motorists abandoned their cars in the middle of Outer Drive.

The word, out of a small town in Pennsylvania, where an obscure religious leader of a still more obscure sect saw the sphere in the sky as a period proclaiming the end of the world and—gathering his fanatical followers—set fire to the buildings of the entire community.

The word, out of Boston, of riots in Scollay Square.

The Soviet Government must have anticipated this reaction, counted on it when they launched their miniature moon.

Miniature, hell! It weighed fifty tons. What kind of initial thrust had been necessary to launch a satellite of this size? With that kind of power, they could speed nuclear warheads around the world and back again. Maybe they'd be doing just that, soon.

Maybe they *were* doing it, now.

The Sputnik was circling above the globe, but the rumors circled even more swiftly down in the streets, rising from the saliva-flecked launching-platforms of human lips.

"Jeez, did you hear the latest? Air Force spotted Red bombers comin' over Alaska . . ."

"Yeah, they hit Seattle. They must of, I-was listening to CBS news and it was supposed to be a roundup, they said for Seattle to come in, and then they right away switched back to New York . . ."

"I have it on good authority, I tell you! Everything west of the Mississippi has been blacked out. The President will issue an emergency proclamation any minute now . . ."

"Shut up about the damn thing and let's get ourselves a drink!"

"—and what I want to know is, why hasn't the President gone on the air with a statement? I tell you the whole thing is part of a conspiracy, we've sold out to save our necks, and—"

"What I'm gonna do is climb in the car and get the hell out of town, right now. There's hills over in West Virginia where they'll never find you . . ."

"Who cares *how* much it costs? A fat lot of good it's going to do to save your money *now*, George!"

"I'm *scared."*

"Why doesn't somebody *do* something?"

"Have another drink!"

"To hell with you!"

"To hell with everybody!"

And that's the way it went; on the streets, in the bars, up and down Pennsylvania and along Connecticut and halfway to Chevy Chase. It wasn't a mob-scene yet, even though the cops weren't in evidence and nobody was bothering to obey the traffic signals. The character who was thinking about West Virginia was a little more farsighted than his fellows; maybe by-tomorrow at this time there would be a wild exodus from this city and from every city, but tonight it was mainly a matter of restless wandering and hysterical wondering. And finally it all blended into a blur of *I'm scared why doesn't somebody do something, have a drink and to hell with you*, over and over and over again until *I* was scared and wanted somebody to do something and wanted a drink—and then *I* said to hell with it.

And elbowed my way back along the streets until I came to the little bar where I'd left Leonard Carling.

He was gone, of course. The bartender said he'd left over an hour ago. Yes, he'd had company in the back booth—a little fellow with dark glasses. They'd talked for quite a while, and then he went away. Carling stuck around for another drink and then vanished.

I looked at my watch. It was almost eleven o’clock. Carling had gone home.

So I walked around the corner to his apartment. The crowd was streaming past, and I paid no attention to any of the faces wavering before me. It wasn’t until a man hurried out of the doorway and jostled me just as I walked in that I bothered to take a second look. He disappeared in the mob before I got a glimpse of his face; I couldn’t even see if he wore dark glasses or not.

Do Russian spies wear dark glasses, or is that corny? Are Russian spies corny, with or without dark glasses? Carling hadn’t really admitted anything to me.

But I’d admitted one thing to myself. Corny or not, I was frightened. For myself, for Carling, for everybody.

And I got up those stairs, fast. I hurried down the hall to his apartment door, started to press the buzzer. Then I noticed, with a shock, that light was streaming across the carpet. His door was ajar.

I pushed it open, catching sight of Carling’s profile as he sat behind his desk staring out the window.

My first reaction was relief; my second, indignation. I stormed up to him.

“Don’t you know any better than to leave the door open?” I muttered. “What’s the matter, have you got a hole in your head?”

I crossed the room in five steps. As my feet thudded across the floor, Carling nodded. At least, I thought he was nodding, then realized he was swaying and falling forward, out of the chair.

But not before I saw his forehead.

Leonard Carling *did* have a hole in his head.

They didn’t let me go until past noon the following day, and even then I was lucky.

I was lucky because there were fingerprints all over the room; Carling's and somebody else's—not mine. I hadn't even touched the doorknob when I came in.

I was lucky because the bartender told a straight story about my meeting with Carling and how I'd come back to find him, less than five minutes before I phoned the police about the discovery of his body.

I was lucky because they listened to what I told them about my encounter with Carling, and how I'd seen a stranger come out of the place just before I found him.

But even so, I doubt if they would have let me go—even on bail, as a material witness—if McGregor hadn't pulled strings in high places. Not with the D. C. police force, either, but with the Federal boys. Yes, they were in on it from the first. They were great on listening and not much on talking, but I managed to find out one thing which confirmed my own suspicions—Carling had evidently made some connections with the Reds.

That he was a traitor I could not and didn't believe. That the man he'd met in the tavern was a Soviet agent was still a matter of conjecture. That the man who killed him was the same person seemed even more dubious. It was much more likely that he'd managed to contact a defecting agent who gave him some information—but that *another* agent had then trailed him and killed him immediately. The crime was clumsily and hastily committed; evidently it was of the utmost importance to get him out of the way before he could reveal what he had learned.

But it was all theory.

And now we'd never know what he *had* found out.

"Maybe I can really help," he'd said.

Well, it was too late now. That's what I told McGregor, driving back along Pennsylvania after they turned me loose.

He sighed. "You're right, it *is* too late now. But I doubt if he could have found out anything that would stop this."

"What're you talking about?" He blinked at me. "I forgot, you've been under wraps for fourteen hours, haven't you? You didn't hear about the press conference."

"Where? The White House?" McGregor sighed again. "I wish to God that's where it was. But things have changed. This one is scheduled for two o'clock—at the Soviet Embassy."

"The Reds called—?"

He still wasn't letting me finish my sentences. "The Reds are calling everything," he muttered. "Including the shots. This is top level. The Soviet Government refused to issue any statement in reply to the questions of our own State Department last night or this morning. Instead, they set up this conference at the Embassy. Only the news service reps are to be admitted; two from each agency. And if our officials want to find out what's going on, they'll have to come and beg admittance."

"But that's fantastic!"

"What isn't?" He chewed on his pipe. "Is it fantastic that New York City is being evacuated? That a National Emergency has been proclaimed? That this damned Red moon is putting the fear of death into the citizens of Dubuque and bringing psychosis to Peoria?

"Don't you worry—our big wheels will roll into the Soviet Embassy this afternoon. You'll see them there."

I stared at him.

"That is, if you're up to it. I've got permission for two representatives from our outfit. Naturally, I wanted to cover it myself. If Carling were alive, God rest him, he'd be the other one. But in view of what happened, I thought of you. Not because of what you can write, but because of the tie-in with the story. Human interest angle, get it?" He laughed, but there was no mirth in his mouth. "Human interest! I wonder if any of us will give a damn about human interest by this time tomorrow?"

We turned off; we were approaching the Embassy now. Crowds boiled along the streets, but National Guardsmen had cleared an inner lane.

"What do you think is going to happen?" I asked.

Again the lifeless laughter came. “Isn’t it obvious? The Reds have won the war before it’s started. They weren’t ready to risk a sneak attack and they weren’t going to sit back and wait for us to try and catch up to their scientists, either. How they ever managed to get this thing into the sky I’ll never understand—but the point is, they did it. Which means they have the power to blast their bombs anywhere in the world.

“This so-called ‘press conference’ is merely a public gesture. Actually, I doubt if anybody is going to get a chance to ask questions. We’ll be *told.* And it won’t be a matter of issuing a prepared statement. What we’re going to hear is an ultimatum. They’re going to dictate terms of surrender. It’s all out in the open, now—an *either-or* proposition.”

“Do you think we’ll accept it?”

“What choice do we have?”

We were parking now. The gates of the Embassy loomed ahead. McGregor fumbled in his coat, handed me a wallet.

“It’s yours,” he said. “Identification and credentials for this clambake. They’ll be strict.”

They *were* strict. And once inside, there was none of the old-style red-carpet-and-champagne treatment. As we assembled in the big hall I didn’t even notice the usual buffet and bar. setup for the press. More significant still, I saw no neat stacks of printed handouts awaiting distribution for after the conference.

We took our places on hard chairs, before a long table. I recognized a number of the boys from the other outfits: AP, UP, INS, the radio and TV networks. They weren’t fraternizing; just sitting glumly. Then the top-level people started coming in, and they were even glummer.

McGregor nudged me. “See, what did I tell you?” he whispered, fiercely. “The House, the Senate, the whole damned Cabinet! Plus the Chiefs of Staff and—”

I nudged him back. “There,” I murmured. “Two seats ahead. The little fellow with the dark glasses!”

“You’re crazy! You mean the one the bartender said was talking to Carling? It couldn’t be—”

“I’m going to find out,” I began, and started to rise.

McGregor pulled me back.

“Not now,” he said. “Here it comes!”

The doors had closed behind us and now another door opened at the end of the room. A half-dozen men filed in, all of them wearing the uniform of the Soviet Army. They took their places at the big table. Suddenly the room became quiet—deadly quiet.

Then the fat man walked out.

He wasn’t smiling and he wasn’t waving, the way he usually did in the newsreels. He merely moved to the head of the table, then stood there and stared.

There was an audible rustle as he took a paper from his pocket and laid it on the table before him. Quite deliberately he donned spectacles. Then he picked up the paper and started to read.

McGregor had guessed right. This was no press conference—not even the pretense of one.

What we were listening to was a demand for unconditional surrender.

Again, there’s no sense pretending that I can give direct quotes. The guttural voice droned on; sometimes the pompous phrases blurred, but the meaning was always clear.

As I listened, I glanced at the little man wearing the dark glasses. He sat there, hunching forward, his head protruding from the neck of his big overcoat, and in profile he resembled a turtle peering out of his carapace. The dark glasses contributed to the effect, as did his mittened hands, which twisted nervously in his lap as he listened to the ultimatum.

The guttural voice droned on.

There was no sense in maintaining a pretense any longer, the voice told us. The time for meaningless diplomacy was past. There was no more need for hypocritical protestations of friendship. Since we, as a nation, had persisted in our warmongering efforts in spite of every reasonable warning, it had been decided to take steps. Once and for all, it would be demonstrated that the Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic had the might, as well as the right, to assume world leadership. We had just witnessed the first portion of that demonstration.

Now we would be given the opportunity to respond to it. A detailed agreement had been drawn up which would establish our future relationship, and in a moment its terms would be outlined.

However, if for any reason these terms were ignored, it would be necessary to allow the demonstration to proceed. We had already seen the Russian satellite. It was to be fervently hoped that we would not require a first-hand experience of comparable Russian advances in the field of thermonuclear warfare.

"Yesterday," the guttural voice proclaimed, "the Soviet Union launched a Red moon. Tomorrow we launch a Red world!"

I had been watching the turtle-profile of the man in the dark glasses. Now I was startled to see him move; though not half as startled as the Soviet spokesman when he rose and took three paces forward, facing the room.

"He lies!"

The voice was even deeper than that of the official Soviet spokesman. Deeper, and more compelling. "He lies!" the voice repeated.

"No, let me speak. You understand, of course, that it will do no good to try and harm me."

Suddenly, shockingly, the fat face of the Soviet leader began to sag. "Who are you?" he murmured. "How did you come here?"

"The credentials I presented state that I am Leonard Carling," the stranger said. "This, of course, is a falsehood, for Leonard Carling is dead—murdered by one of your agents, no doubt, after I talked to him last night.

“Originally, it had been planned that Leonard Carling be here today, to bring you the truth. He was selected on the basis of his reputation, as a proper, unbiased representative. Now he is dead, and I must speak for him.

“What he was prepared to tell you was quite simple. It is this. There is no Russian satellite in the sky today.”

The Soviet leader did not move. The uniformed men did not rise to shoot the stranger. The crowd did not murmur. The silence in that room was thick as solid glass.

“I repeat—there is no Russian satellite in the sky today. And the Russians know it. That is why they dare not harm me. Because there would be retaliation—far worse than anything with which they have threatened you.

“Naturally, they had no way of knowing just what the satellite really was. All they realized was that they had not launched it; could not possibly have launched an instrument of such magnitude. When no statement was forthcoming from your government, and panic spread, they knew no so-called western power was responsible. It was then decided to take a daring gamble; to capitalize on the general assumption that this was a Russian satellite and call for your surrender.

“It was in anticipation of this that Leonard Carling was approached and given the truth. Since he is no longer able to speak, you must listen to me.”

I wanted to believe him. And yet I had to know. Before I realized it, I was on my feet, my voice thinly insistent.

“What proof have we got? How can we be sure this isn’t just another trick—that you didn’t murder him yourself?”

The turtle-profile turned to face me.

“I am not totally unfamiliar with your police methods,” the deep voice intoned. “According to my understanding, there is the question of fingerprints found in Leonard Carling’s apartments. In order to leave fingerprints, one must have—fingers.”

And the mittened hands rose and twisted, the mittens fell to the floor. I, and everyone in the room, saw what they had concealed—the *pink, webbed paws.*

The pink, webbed paws that rose, now, sweeping off the dark glasses and revealing the place where the eyes *should* have been, and the short, blunted stalks which took their place in the rimmed sockets and evidently fulfilled their function in some unearthly way. Some *unearthly* way—

“I see I have convinced you in this matter,” the voice continued. “And I trust I am equally convincing in my other statements to you. When I tell you that the satellite in the sky is not a creation of Russia or any other nation. To be quite specific, it is *not* a satellite. You might call it a ‘spaceship’, but even this term is inadequate. It is best that you think of it as a *warning.*

“I do not presume to threaten, but I can advise. I suggest that all of you—as official representatives or as common citizens of your various governments—instantly abandon any further efforts to place ‘artificial moons’ in orbit. I suggest you turn your eyes away from the stars and contemplate, with renewed honesty and insight, the spectacle of life here on your own earth. You have much to do here.

“The time may come when you have achieved the vision to go beyond. But you are not presently prepared or qualified; your motives and attitudes can lead only to self-destruction.

“I ask you to convey this message to the world at large, and to act upon it. For the span of a lunar month, we shall continue to orbit the earth. If you cooperate within that time, we shall leave you. If, however, you do not comply, we shall be forced to take—further measures.

“But I sincerely hope this will not prove necessary. And once again, I urge you to heed my warning.

“I suggest that you abandon the satellite race and consider the human race.”

That was the end. The end of his speech and the end of his presence among us. I didn’t have to ask how it was that he managed to get by the stake-out at Leonard Carling’s apartment and acquire his wallet and credentials. If you can disappear into thin air at will, you undoubtedly can appear at will, too.

The point is, *you can't.* And *I* can't.

We happen to be human.

And as for him—

Well, all this happened about ten days ago, and the thing in the sky is still orbiting on schedule.

But the universal treaties have been signed, and the whole peace program is going forward, and chances are he'll carry out his part of the bargain and take the object away at the end of the month.

Meanwhile, habit is a funny thing. The papers, and most people, still refer it to as a Red moon.

Oddly enough, they *could* be right at that. According to the way. I heard it, Russia isn't the only thing that's Red.

Seems to me there's also a Red planet out there.

Some day, maybe, we'll have a chance to find out for ourselves, first-hand.

Some day. . . .

THE END

Egghead

Any expression of nonconformity or difference of taste was suspect, meaning a maladjusted personality.

Robert Bloch, who will be remembered for his TERROR OVER HOLLYWOOD *in our June 1937 issue, and the much-discussed* A WAY OF LIFE *in the October 1936 issue, turns to a problem of interest to all of us these days—conformity and how the urge towards it may create new standards, new values, new ethics.*

SHERRY was the first one to notice.

I picked her up in front of the sorority house about eight and I’ll never forget the way her eyes got wide as she stared at me.

“Why, Dick!” she gasped. “You are letting your *hair* grow!”

I couldn’t help it. I turned red as a beet. “Yeah,” I mumbled. “Kinda looks that way, doesn’t it?” Her eyes got wider. “And what’s that you’re wearing? I mean, *what* on *earth*—?”

“It’s a double-breasted suit,” I told her. “Picked it up last weekend, when I went home. I figured it was sort of different.”

“Different? It’s *horrible!* I’ll bet nobody’s worn one of those things in *years.”’*

I shrugged. “Sorry. But I thought, since we were only going to have breakfast together, it would not make much difference.” I didn’t want to see her face, so I made a big production out of looking at my watch. “Come on, it’s after eight, and I’ve got a nine-o-clock this morning. We’d better hurry.” She didn’t answer. I took her arm and steered her into the drugstore on the corner. It was crowded, as usual, and the juke was going. The big screen was behind the counter, but there were smaller ones in most of the booths. Only the two little booths at the rear didn’t have juke-screens, and of course they were vacant. Nobody wants to sit where you can’t see the screens. Right now Buzzy Blake was doing Number One—the Extra-Cola commercial.

Sherry made a face. “I suppose we’ll just have to wait for a place,” she said.

“Haven’t got time,” I told her. “Let’s grab a bite in one of the back booths.”

I sat her down before she could object, and pretty soon the waitress came up with two mugs of coffee.

“What’ll it be?” she asked.

“Cruller,” Sherry said.

The waitress looked at me and I shook my head. “No cruller. I want poached eggs. And you can take this coffee back, too. I didn’t order it.”

“You don’t want coffee?”

“I think I’d prefer cocoa instead.”

They were both staring at me. I wanted to sink right through the floor.

Sherry leaned over the table. “Dick, what’s wrong with you? Are you *sick*?”

“No, I’m fine. Just wanted to try something new for a change. Is there any law says you’ve got to have coffee and crullers for breakfast every morning of your life?”

“But everybody does.”

“I’m not everybody. I’m me.”

The waitress walked away, mumbling. Buzzy Blake finished the Extra-Cola song, and somebody dropped a dime for Number Two. Fuzzy Fluke, singing about King-Size Tissue. It had a real catchy beat, but Sherry wasn't listening.

"Dick, what's *happened*?"

I sighed. "I don't want to talk about it now. It's just that I've made up my mind. I'm sick and tired of being like everybody else on the campus. Wearing the same clothes, eating the same food, listening to the same things, thinking the same thoughts. At least I thought I might experiment a little."

"Experiment? Look, you better go see your Psych Advisor. I mean it."

"I'm all right. This is just sort of—well, you might call it a gesture of protest."

"Protest?" She was really steamed. "I want you to march right over to the barber-shop and get a decent crewcut and then put on some *sensible* clothes. If you think I'm going to the game with you looking like that this afternoon, you're *mistaken."*

"I thought we'd skip the game," I told her. "I mean, who cares? Two gangs of apes fighting over a blown-up pig bladder." Then came the thing that bombed her. "Besides, we'd have trouble getting there, anyway. I sold my car."

"What?"

"Yesterday. I figured walking's good exercise. As long as I'm right here on the campus all the time, what do I need a car for, anyway?"

"But *everybody* has a car, even the janitors! Suppose you *did* want to go to the game, the stadium's half a mile away, how could you *walk* to—"

She was bombed, all right. Just then somebody put on Number Three, Muzzy Miles and his outfit, and I couldn't hear the end of her sentence. But she was getting up, leaving the booth.

"Hey," I said, "what about your breakfast?"

"Never mind, I'm not hungry. And don't bother to get up. I don't want to be seen with you. Now, or *ever."*

"But Sherry—"

She was gone. And Muzzy Miles and a big symphonic chorus did a big production number on Ulcer-Seltzer, with trick camera-work that showed the whole gang singing and dancing inside a set that looked just like your small intestine.

It was just the sort of thing I should have been interested in, because I was sure the Prof would ask questions about it in the next Consumotivation Class. But I didn't care about it, or about my meal when it arrived. The poached eggs tasted awful.

So I skipped the cocoa and hurried down the street to the Administration building. I'd lied to Sherry, because I really *did* plan to see my Psych Advisor.

That was old Hastings, of course, and his office was over three blocks away. It felt kind of funny to walk that far, and I knew a lot of people were hanging out of their car-windows and staring at me as I tramped along all alone on the sidewalk.

Halfway there I noticed another guy walking, across the street. It looked like Mark Sawyer, but I couldn't be sure, Mark and I never had anything to say to each other—of course, very few people ever talked to him.

Anyway, that didn't matter. My appointment with old Hastings did.

The girl told me to go right in. Hastings sat there puffing on his pipe and smiling at me. He had the closed-circuit screen on, and I guess he was monitoring some class or other, but when I sat down he turned it off.

"What's the story, Dick?" he asked.

I shrugged. "No story. Like I said when I called you, I want to change my program to an allelective course."

He smiled and puffed. "You're a senior, aren't you, Dick?"

"You ought to know." I pointed at the desk. "You've got my file right there in front of you."

Old Hastings didn't bat an eyelash. "Sharp orientation reflex," he said. "Bet your father is the same way. He's a pretty big operator up at Major Products, isn't he?"

"President," I said. "What's that got to do with it?"

"I wish I knew." Hastings stopped the nonsense with the pipe and pulled out a regular cigarette with a cancer-canceller filter. "Look at it my way for a minute. Here's a bright student, doing excellent work for over three years. He tests out perfectly normal all along the line. Excellent adaptability, a conformity-rating of better than ninety-five per cent, routine channelization of all aggressions; a potential company man by any standards. I know, because I've just re-checked your personality profile, semester by semester. So here you are, taking a Junior Exec Course, and doing well. Next year, when you graduate, you'll go right into the Home Office with your father's company. But now you come to me and say you want to drop your studies and switch over to electives. What electives, might I ask?"

"Well, English Lit., for one."

"You mean Advanced Copywriting?"

"No, English Lit. It's down in my bulletin, under Liberal Arts."

Hastings chuckled. "Really, Dick—you must have your old bulletin, from your freshman year. Right? We cut out the whole Liberal Arts Department last semester, didn't you read about it in the paper? I'm quite sure there was a squib on it somewhere. This is a state university, not a private college. Legislature decided not to appropriate any more funds for frills."

"What about Philosophy?" I asked.

"Out," he murmured, and he wasn't smiling, now. "Don't try and tell me you didn't hear about *that.* We fired Professor Gotkin the year you came here. A notorious egghead."

"But I thought—I mean, I hear he's still around. He has a house just off the campus, doesn't he?"

"Unfortunately, there's no way in which the university can compel a man to vacate his own property. But I assure you, Professor Gotkin has absolutely no connection with this institution."

"Don't some students go up to his place, for some kind of private seminars?"

Hastings ground out his cigarette. “Let’s stop sparring,” he said. “Have you been seeing Gotkin? Is that where you got these ideas about changing your courses? The truth, now.”

“I’m not on trial.”

“Not yet.”

I gulped. “Is it a crime to want to study Philosophy?”

“Don’t play stupid, Dick. Of course it’s no crime, any more than it’s a crime to study, say, the history of Russia. Not if the purpose of your study is to get documentation on the evils of Communism. But suppose you didn’t have such a sensible, clearcut purpose and were just reading out of what you believed was idle curiosity? Consciously or unconsciously you’d be laying yourself open to dangerous ideas. Then your study would be a criminal matter. You see that, don’t you? Well, the same holds true for Philosophy, or any of those borderline subjects. They’re poison, Dick. Poison.”

He stepped over to the window. “Two hundred million people out there,” he murmured. “Two hundred million today, and in another generation there’ll be three hundred million. Each and every one of them equipped with drives, goals, needs. Each and every one of them vital to our economy as a consumer. All of them dependent upon the skills and techniques of a very few specialists, trained to direct those drives, set up those goals, stimulate and channelize those needs. That’s our job here, training the specialists. You’re studying to be one of them. Isn’t that enough of a positive challenge for you? Why bother with the doubts and illusions of Philosophy?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “And I can’t answer until I’ve investigated.”

Hastings scowled. “All right, you might as well have all of it. I took the liberty of getting in touch with your father this morning, after you called. He told me that under no circumstances should you be permitted to alter your program.”

“I can insist on a hearing. I can take it to the Dean.”

"Please." He came around the desk and put his hand on my shoulder. "You know what that would lead to. Now I have another suggestion. It's obvious you've been brooding about this whole business for quite some time. Perhaps you've been subject to pressure from outside influences which you don't care to talk about. That's your affair.

"On the other hand, I'm your Psych Advisor, and your mental health is my affair, too. I recommend an honorable solution. Put in for a two-week leave, for special therapy, and enter the hospital here. Let me handle the treatment. We'll do it with narco-hypnosis. There won't be any conflict involved; when you give us the names of these people—students or faculty members who have been feeding you all this nonsense about rebellion—there'll be no guilt-feelings. It's all very open and above-board. And I'm sure it will clear up the whole problem."

I jerked my hand away, I knew his receptionist was listening through the open door, but I didn't care if I shouted.

"All right, to hell with it! You can tell my father whatever you like. Tell him his son is an antisocial egghead for all I care. And as for you, you can take your psychiatric couch and shove it!"

Then I got out.

I went back to my room and waited. Three times the phone rang, and as soon as I recognized my father's voice I hung up.

The fellows came in from classes around noon, and I could hear them going through the hall. None of them stopped at my room. Word must have gone around fast.

Finally, at one o'clock, when most of them were going back to classes, my door opened.

A tall, skinny guy with glasses stood there blinking at me. At first I didn't even recognize him.

"I'm Mark Sawyer," he said. "Oh. Come on in, have a chair."

"I—I heard about this morning."

"Who hasn't?" I grinned at him. "Don't tell me you came around to say you're sorry."

"No. I came around to say I'm glad." He smiled up at me. "Surprised, too."

"Why be surprised?" I shrugged. "Sooner or later, a guy just gets fed up. You know."

"Yes, I know. But somehow I never thought you would. None of us did."

"Us?"

He hesitated. "Well, you aren't the only one, you know."

I forced a grin. "I was beginning to feel that way. When you stop to think, there's over twenty thousand students enrolled here; it gives you sort of a funny feeling when you figure that maybe you're the only one in the whole bunch who doesn't want French fries with his hamburgers."

"I understand." He hesitated a minute. "But are you sure you did not just lose your temper, on impulse?"

"Look, Sawyer. In the past six hours I've lost my girl, got my father sore at me, and told off Hastings. Chances are I'll be expelled before the week is out. Does that sound as if I was acting on impulse?"

"I guess not." He stood up. "How'd you like to be my guest this evening? Sort of a bull-session, to meet a couple of other fellows with the same ideas. We usually get together once or twice a week at a friend's house."

"Well—"

"You might find it interesting. If you feel like it, drop over. Anytime after eight. We meet at Professor Gotkin's house."

He left, then, and the rest of the afternoon passed quietly. But there was a buzzing in my stomach, and when suppertime came I didn't want to eat. I waited until it got dark and then I slipped out and headed for Professor Gotkin's house.

I walked through alleys, wondering if this was the way *they* always walked; the Commies, the pinkos, the eggheads. It gave me a funny feeling, a feeling of being *alone.* The game was over now, and the cars were packing the streets; I could hear the horns blaring and the radios going and the guys singing. And I was alone, stumbling through an alley. A dark alley. A blind alley. *Alone.*

Then I came to the big old house where Professor Gotkin lived, and I wasn't alone any more. Mark Sawyer met me at the door and put out his hand, and he pulled me in, down the hall and through the double-doors of the old-fashioned study. I blinked in the sudden glare.

The brightness came from one of those old-fashioned overhead lighting-fixtures; come to think of it, I didn't see a single TV-lamp in the place, and no TV set, either. Instead, the room was filled with the kind of furniture you wouldn't expect to find anywhere but in a museum. Overstaffed chairs, big sofas; real pre-atomic pieces.

Old Gotkin came up and held out his hand, and he was a museum-piece himself. He had long hair, positively bushy, and the oddest glasses I ever saw. They were rimless, so help me.

But what surprised me the most was the guys he introduced me to. There must have been almost a dozen other students in the room, and he took me around and introduced me to them. I don't know what I'd expected, really; I suppose I thought all of them would look something like Mark Sawyer. But he was the only oddball in the whole crowd. All of the other fellows looked perfectly normal and Ivy League, with crewcuts and hornrims. A couple of them even wore army gab pants and Service emblems. There were three girls, too, and I was a little shocked to realize I'd met them all before; two of them were friends of Sherry's, and the third was last year's Junior Prom Queen. Everybody seemed to be acting perfectly natural, and they all smiled at me, but I guess they could tell I was upset.

Professor Gotkin showed me to a big chair—it was a funny-looking thing, no functional lines at all, but it felt kind of comfortable—and then brought me a glass of something that turned out to be beer.

Only it was *dark,* and tasted strange.

"Glad to have you with us," he said. "According to what Mark tells me, you *are* with us, aren't you?" Mark Sawyer leaned over my shoulder. "I hope you don't mind, Dick. I took the liberty of explaining to the gang just what you had to say to me this afternoon."

I nodded. "Then I guess there's nothing more to explain."

"There's one thing you can tell us," Professor Gotkin murmured. "What are your plans for the future?"

"Well, I suppose I'd better quit school before they call a hearing and throw me out. After that, I guess I'll have to find a job on my own. My father'll be pretty sore."

"What sort of job?"

I thought about it for a moment. "Factory or manual labor. If I try for anything better, they'll check up on my record here. But maybe that won't be too bad. I mean, it's just five or six hours a day, and I'll have security."

"Security." Surprisingly enough, it was the Junior Prom Queen who spoke. "I thought you were the one who made that remark about not liking French fries with your hamburgers."

"What's that got to do with it?"

"Everything. Do you know how the average worker lives?"

"Well—"

"Take an ordinary job and you'll be a prisoner for life, in a world of French fries, surrounded by the faceless mob that eats, drinks, dresses, talks and acts on the basis of conditioned reflexes. You'll live in a prefabricated house with a prefabricated wife and a bunch of prefabricated kids. You were taking a Junior Exec course, weren't you? Then you must have studied Depth Motivation Technique. What did you think you were learning that stuff for? In order to use it on consumers, *against* consumers; and who are they? Manual workers, factory workers, the army of conformists and conformity-worshippers you're rebelling against. And now you think you'll find a solution by joining their ranks? Don't be ridiculous!"

"Then what *should* I do?" I asked.

Professor Gotkin stepped in front of me. "We've been discussing that, before your arrival," he said. "We advise you to stay right here in school."

"But I can't. I mean, they won't let me change my courses, they told me so."

He shook his head. "That's the whole point. You don't change any courses. You make your apologies, take a week off to rest your nerves, and go right back into your studies in Junior Exec."

For a minute I couldn't believe my ears. "You mean, keep on doing what I've been doing? And graduate next year, and go into the Corporation, and buy a ranchhouse, and marry the kind of a girl the Corporation wants me to marry—a girl who'll nag at me until we can buy a bigger ranchhouse? Be an Exurbanite, and drive a new car back and forth to work until I keel over with a heart attack and they drive me to the cemetery in a new hearse? Is this your idea of a solution?"

"A necessary step *towards* a solution," Mark Sawyer said.

"I don't get it."

"Listen, what you've just said isn't new. Everybody in this room has sounded off about the same thing, in practically the same words. But all of us are still here, going to school. And all of us will be graduating, taking regular jobs, doing our best to work our way up into key positions. Don't you see that this is the whole secret?"

"Secret of what?"

"The secret of rebellion. The only way a minority can ever hope to win. By *infiltration.* It's Professor Gotkin's idea."

He smiled. "Not original, I assure you. I borrowed it from the Communists."

"But—you *are* a Communist, aren't you?" I asked.

He frowned. "Not at all. A Communist, actually, is the follower of a political doctrine, a believer in community property, who seeks to overthrow other governmental systems by force, if necessary."

"That isn't the way I heard it." His frown deepened. "That's right, I'd forgotten. They don't teach that definition any more, do they? To you, a Communist is anyone whose ideas differ from those of the majority—or, rather, from the ideas superimposed upon the majority, who accept them without thinking. A Communist is an egghead is an individualist is a psychotic, isn't that how it goes?"

"Something like that, yes."

"And you think that any expression of nonconformity, any difference of taste from that of the mathematical majority, is an automatic indication of a maladjusted personality?"

"I suppose so."

"Still, *you* are aware of such a difference in yourself?" His frown smoothed into a smile. "Don't bother to answer that, Dick. Because we all feel the same way. Only we've learned not to be ashamed of it. We know that the history of this nation, and of every civilized nation, is a history of constant rebellion. It was political rebellion which won our freedom, social rebellion which expanded our frontiers, intellectual rebellion which resulted in invention and progress. Only in recent years have we fallen into the error of orienting our philosophy around an expanding economy, dependent upon a constant and complacent consumerdom. Only in recent 'years has it come to be a shameful thing to be 'different'—that individuality is equated with antisocial attitudes.

"I know, because I've lived through the change. The get-in-line-and-stay-in-line doctrine was imposed as a necessity during the War, and somehow we never managed to abandon it after the shooting was over. Mass-media dedicated itself to the noble purpose of selling masses of goods to the mass-audience. From that it was only a step to the mass-merchandising of ideas. Then came the real Communist scare, we began to be afraid of eggheads—and everybody who criticized was given that label. It's still a label, today, but soon it may be down on the books as a legal synonym for traitor. Unless we take decisive steps to prevent it."

"But what good will my returning to school do? How will it be helping to rebel by staying in line?"

"Through infiltration," the Professor said. "Don't you see? We're all doing it. Granted, the process is a slow one, but it will bear fruit. If, within ten years or even twenty years, every student in those rooms will have attained a position of importance in the outside world, there will be a chance to reverse the trend. A legislator here, a banker there, a business executive, an advertising magnate, a newspaper man, a TV producer—people like that are in a position to influence key decisions from the top level."

I glanced around. "There's only eleven of us," I said. "A drop in the bucket."

Mark Sawyer cleared his throat. "You'd be surprised if you knew how many there really were," he told me. "Not everybody's here tonight. I'll bet we have almost fifty on the campus."

"Fifty out of twenty-three thousand students?"

"Fifty of the *best.* The individualists, the clear-headed ones. And this isn't the only campus in the country, remember." Professor Gotkin drew himself up. "Since I left—since I was fired, rather—I haven't been idle. My connections with colleagues all over the nation have served me well. There are groups like these scattered throughout the schools, and in other places where you'd least suspect it. Army camps, labor unions, fraternal organizations; yes, and the very strongholds of the *status quo.* Most of our followers are young men and women like yourselves, yes, and it is from their ranks that we'll draw our real strength in the future. But even now we've got a slight toe-hold in high places. Would it surprise you if I revealed that we've already enlisted several important educators in our ranks? And no less than six Congressmen? And two *practicing* 'industrial psychologists' who specialize in Depth Motivation techniques?" He chuckled. "We're not entirely impractical, you see. Nor entirely helpless. But there's much to be done, and we can use able assistance. We need men like you, Dick. What do you say?"

I hesitated. “How can I be sure that you’re telling me the truth?”

“A sensible reaction. And one I’ll be glad to honor. It so happens that there are lists available to me. You are welcome to inspect the names of your—shall we call them fellow-eggheads?—right here in school. As the situation warrants, I’ll acquaint you with other members of the movement in the outside world; we hope to be eventually forming little key-groups in selected industries and professions in time to come.”

“You aren’t going to start a revolution? You’re sure of it?”

“Of *course* we are! But not an armed revolution; we don’t intend to overthrow the government by violence. Ours will be a much more far-reaching and long-lasting rebellion. A revolution of ideas. We’re going to take the world away from the pitchmen and their puppets and give it back to the individual, the free citizen. Are you with us?”

I nodded.

“What do you want me to do?” I asked. “Where do I begin?”

“You begin by going back to your Psych Advisor. Apologize to him. Tell him you had a fight with your girl, tell him you’ve been under a strain. If he suggests rest or treatment, take it But no narcohypnosis, of course. You understand why.”

I nodded again.

“Then, return to your classes. I’m sure there’ll be no real difficulty. You have a brilliant record. Your father and your girl will come around. Just carry on as you did before this all happened.”

I stood up. “But don’t I *do* anything? I mean, aren’t you carrying out any kind of program at all here on the campus?”

“You mean some sort of underground protest movement or sabotage?” Professor Gotkin shook his head. “We aren’t ready for that yet. In a few years, perhaps, when our group is stronger. Meanwhile, about all we do is proselyte. And that’s where someone like yourself will come in handy. Maybe we can work out a system; a way of bringing in more potential recruits. It’s worth thinking about, and planning for.”

“Will there be meetings like this regularly?”

"Yes, but not according to any schedule. We can't afford to attract too much attention at this stage of the game. And another thing; we don't believe it wise to congregate in social groups or be seen together anywhere outside this house. The notice of the next meeting will come to you from one of your fellow-members. I suggest, therefore, that you take steps to memorize their names."

"An excellent idea." I made *a* circuit of the room slowly, shaking hands with each of my fellow-conspirators. As I did so, I asked each one to repeat his or her name to me.

"Don't forget, now," Professor Gotkin cautioned.

"I won't."

"You'll be notified when to come again."

"I'll be here."

And, about a week later, I was, A lot happened in the meantime. I'd seen old Hastings and the Dean. I saw my father, too, and then there was a special two-day trip which nobody knew about. That is, not until I walked into the next meeting at Professor Gotkin's house, with the Security Officers right behind me.

We caught fifteen of the lousy eggheads right then and there, and of course we got hold of the old buzzard's secret lists. Every last one of the subversive rats on the campus was rounded up, and even I was surprised at some of the big wheels who were in on the plot.

But it was like that all over the country, they tell me. And it made a real stink—I guess you must have read about it in the papers, though.

Of course I don't claim credit for the whole thing. It was Dad's idea in the first place, when he got wind of some kind of Commie activity down here at the school. He even supplied me with the little portable wire-recorder I'd hidden in my coat when I went to Gotkin's house the first time; and that clinched it. No matter what he and the others said, they couldn't deny the evidence—it was all down on tape, the whole subversive pitch, even their names in their own voices.

Right now I guess they're being held on open charges, but that's just a formality. Dad is in pretty thick with all the right people, and they say that in just a couple of weeks Congress is going to pass a Treason Law to take care of the whole gang. It'll be retroactive, of course. They're even talking about something called the Egghead Amendment to the Constitution.

Naturally, I'm pretty happy about the way things worked out. It wasn't much fun having to pretend to be psycho, even for a little while—it must be awful to actually *be* that way, all queer and alone.

But it's all over now, and I'm back at school, and Sherry's with me, and Dad bought me a new convertible, and I guess right now you might say I'm kind of a hero.

It wouldn't surprise me a bit if I was elected President of the Class of 1978.

Report On Sol III

We take pride in our culture, our advancement up the evolutionary settle. But possibly "civilization" is only a comparative term.

RABOR flowed into the hall where Yem vibrated.

They twined tentacles until contact was established, and then Rabor began to pulse.

"I am ready with a preliminary report on Sol III," he vibrated.

Yem tingled. "Ah, yes. The major life-forms, I suppose?"

Rabor oozed embarrassment. "Not exactly. Kwor and Zyla dealt with the *major* life-forms—micro-organisms, vegetable matter, insects."

Yem tingled more strongly. "Then you gathered data on the fourth most important group—the creatures inhabiting the seas?"

Rabor fleched uneasily. "No. I was assigned to mammals."

"The flying things?"

"They are called birds. Mammals are the others—quadrapeds and bipeds. And the bipeds rule Sol III."

Yem writhed in confusion. "That is strange. One would hardly expect a minority to attain power."

"There are many strange things about Sol III," Rabor pulsated. I hardly know where to begin, it is all so incredible. Even our most creative dreamers could not throb such fantasies."

“Allow me to be the judge,” Yem pulsed. “I take it the expedition encountered no difficulties?”

“That is correct. The microorganisms paid no heed, and the other life-forms have a limited visual range. We were well above their perceptual abilities, so we could go about our studies without hindrance.”

“You infer that the inhabitants might have proven hostile if they could have perceived you?”

Rabor grinched. “Only the bipeds—but their hostility exceeds the wildest imaginings. Not only do they destroy all other life-forms for food, or merely for pleasure, but they also frequently destroy one another.”

It was Yem’s turn to grinch. *“One another?”*

“Yes. That is their principal occupation.”

“Are you quite sure you did not misconstrue their actions?” Yem vibrated.

“Quite sure. We were able to learn one of their two forms of communication—a primitive method called *speech.* A study of the meaning of these sounds, or *words*, confirms our findings. The second method, employing visual symbols known as *writing,* has not been mastered, though we have specimens for further examination. But in words and deeds, we have found the purpose of the bipeds—who call themselves *men*—unmistakable.”

“Fantastic!” Yem pulsed.

“I assured you it would be. Men are divided into intricate tribal units, each intent on the destruction of the other. The slightest difference in method of government, form of worship, minor custom, speech, or even pigmentation, is sufficient excuse to visit extermination upon the enemy.”

“Enemy?” Yem quizzled.

“A speech-form,” Rabor throbbed. “Meaning, ‘one whom I hate because he has something I want’ or, conversely, ‘one whom I hate because he wants something I have’. In reality, of course, the conflict is over the material possession of the planet and its resources. This conflict, waged between large groups of rivals, is called *war.* When waged by small groups or individuals, it is called *business* or *competition.* But the end is the same—to totally defeat the enemy, and gain more resources.

“What resources?”

“Land. Food. Minerals. Gas. Chemicals.”

“What is done with these resources?”

“Why, they are consumed and destroyed as quickly as possible. The very act of *war* destroys a large proportion of them. And the purpose of *business* is to urge and incite men to consume as much as possible. Since almost half of the men are either engaged in *war* or preparations for future *war,* and nearly all the rest are engaged in *business,* you can see how quickly the destruction proceeds.”

“Yet you spoke of worship,” Yem pulsated. “Do they not recognize the Supreme Being?”

“Let us say that they are *aware* of Him. But their recognition varies. Each group has a different concept, and each believes that its concept is the only correct one; for that reason, those of different beliefs are to be hated.”

“But are there no exceptions? Is there not a group which identifies the Supreme Being with peace, or even a group which refuses to recognize a Supreme Being at all?”

“Indeed, there are such groups. But they are the most warlike of all. In fact, the group which identifies the Supreme Being with peace has so many quarrels and disputes amongst its own members as to the exact nature of the Deity that they fight amongst themselves. And When you add to this the hatreds fomented by the differences in speech and customs, and in pigmentation—”

“Please,” Yem queebled. “You are making my tentacles ache. Can’t you vibrate about something more pleasant? Surely these men are like any other living entities. They take pleasure in reality, do they not? They revere natural beauty—”

"Not greatly. Most of their time, as I revealed to you, is spent in *competition*. They train for it almost from the moment of birth, and give their later lives almost entirely to that end. As a result, they live, mainly, in portions of the planet unsuited to their physical well-being, so that their bodies must be concealed by coverings and much of their time spent in artificially-heated shelters. They seldom venture forth from these dwellings except to proceed from one to another, and if they travel any distance at all, it is in an enclosed vehicle."

"But surely they can *see* their surroundings?"

"They take the utmost pains to avoid such awareness. Even when journeying in their vehicles, they take care to line the routes of travel with huge structures bearing *words* and injunctions to consume, which block out the view of nature. The dust and dirt and gases shroud their cities in a pall, and artificial illumination blots out all sight of their world as it appears by night. And they further escape consideration of nature through their arts—"

"Ah," Yem tingled. "Their arts."

"I cannot begin to make you comprehend, Rabor throbbed. "Their arts are not like ours."

"You mean they do not glorify the wonder of nature, or of life itself?" Yem wriggled in dismay. "But they have sensory apparatus, and they reproduce. Surely they enjoy the greatest of natural pleasures and make of it their principal source of artistic achievement?"

"Their enjoyment is furtive," Rabor responded writhingly. "There are many intricate laws and customs regulating participation in this pleasure. Usually the reproductive act must be accomplished in total darkness, and almost always in secrecy. Even an open allusion to the act in *speech* or *writing* is forbidden, and artists who depict it are punished by law."

"But is not the activity itself considered a form of artistic expression?"

"No—quite the contrary! The slightest deviation *from* custom is punishable. And the indulgence itself, hedged about as it is with danger and

difficulty, is frequently further hindered by the participants themselves. One of the commonest customs, in regions where the climate permits, is for a mating couple to journey forth in a small, enclosed vehicle to a large arena where huge images are flashed upon a great screen in darkness. And there, amidst an assemblage of hundreds of other couples in their vehicles, they conduct themselves with preconditioned shame and embarrassment."

"Monstrous!" Yem tingled. "No wonder they prefer to spend their time killing one another! But one would think that it would be unsafe to assemble in such a group as the one you speak about. Do they not fear their companions?"

"No. One individual is not allowed to harm another individual for personal reasons. No man is permitted to kill his enemy, however valid the reasons may be for his hatred. And no man is permitted to end the life of a loved one—even if the loved one is doomed to pain and inevitable death. An individual who takes an individual life is a *murderer*, who will be killed in turn by process of law.

"If, however, an individual kills a stranger, during a war, he is a *hero*. The more strangers he kills, the greater a *hero* he becomes. He then rises to a position as leader or even ruler."

Yem twisted. "That is impossible! I cannot believe in the existence of so unnatural a life-form anywhere in the universe! A being that loathes the very act which created it, a being that hates its own kind, a being that is forbidden to destroy an actual enemy but is encouraged to kill utter strangers because of a difference in appearance or customs or belief. Rabor, I cannot accept this report of yours—it is preposterous!"

Rabor fleched and grinched simultaneously. "I swear that all this is true; all this and much more! If you could only see for yourself—"

"I *will* see," Yem tingled. "You will take me to Sol III yourself, and now!"

"But—"

"No objections! I shall order the ship immediately! Get ready to show me all this."

And so it came to pass that Rabor and Yem voyaged together to Sol III and set down in a region known as the Everglades, from which they quickly vulffed to a certain spot just outside Palm Beach.

"Before we observe the actual beings," Rabor proposed, "I have in mind that you should familiarize yourself with certain of their domestic customs. For this reason, I would like to conduct you to one of their dwelling-places. During this portion of Sol Ill's cycle, many of the larger ones are deserted, and we can examine one at leisure. I have in mind a certain *mansion*—"

"Mansion?"

"A large living-structure. The *word* is a contraction of two others; *man*, an individual being, and *shun*, meaning to avoid. It is a house where a *man* lives when he is important enough in *business* to be able to avoid other men. Only the leaders can live in mansions, but it is there that you will find the most representative display of Sol III culture."

"Very well," Yem throbbed.

They vulffed onward until Rabor located the mansion, which was set amidst the grounds of a private estate. It was indeed deserted, and they flowed into it freely.

Rabor conducted Yem on a hasty tour of inspection.

"*Living room,"* he said.

"They live here? This is the room for reproduction?"

"No. As I explained, that is a private act. In a dwelling it is generally performed in the room set aside for rest—the *bedroom."*

"But what is all this apparatus, then?"

"*Furniture*. The bipeds spend most of their time doubled up or contorted into odd positions called *sitting* or *lying down."*

"This is called living?"

"Indeed. Bipeds devote most of their waking hours to labor at *business* or *war,* just so that they can enjoy a few hours to themselves, during which they *sit* or *recline*, as they please. And. of course, one-third of their lives is spent in complete rest, or *sleep.* This time is passed in the *bedroom.* Here it is."

"But such a small and gloomy place," Yem tingled. "I would not wish to pass a third of my existence here! Even if it was all devoted to pleasure."

"Bathroom," Rabor pulsed, as they flowed on. Briefly he explained the process of elimination and the functions of cleansing and adorning the body.

"Very vital," Yem throbbed. "But why then is this not the *biggest* room? Surely what happens here is most important of all? And is it not a source of pride to men that they can eliminate waste-products and clean themselves regularly? I should think they would want their fellow-men to observe these efforts towards betterment. A larger room—" He paused. "Like this one—"

Rabor vibrated. "No. This is the *dining-room,* where men eat. They gather together here in happy social groups to consume the flesh of animals and devour vegetables and fruits."

Yem quatched sneffly. "You mean they are actually *happy* to eat what they have killed? And they are not ashamed to perform the function publicly?"

"All their greatest festivals involve eating."

"But that is horrible! To conceal the functions which make one a better, cleaner, healthier being—and to openly display one's cruelty, greed and capacity for absorbing the substance of other living things! Ridiculous!"

Rabor quickly flowed into the study. "You wished to learn for yourself about their art and culture," he pulsated. "Here you will find evidences of what I informed you about."

His tentacles waved. *"Books,"* he vibrated. "Containing the *words* of communication. "And on the walls, *pictures*. Men excel in the graphic arts."

Yem quiggled the pictures. "Horrible!" he fleched. "What is the meaning of these monstrosities?"

"This is, as I previously explained, art. In fact, it is the very highest form of art. Only a few great leaders are able to own such examples, which were created by a man called Picasso.

"But these things are hideous—who can bear the sight of them? Even on Saturn you won't find such horrors. Do *men* really look like *this?"*

"Of course not. It is not considered artistic to portray men as they are, nor anything in nature. Misrepresentation is the greatest and most important characteristic of creative activity. *Words* placed together without meaning are called *poems.* Lumps of inanimate substance kneaded into grotesque, misshapen forms are called *sculpture*. Then there are sounds, called *music.* But allow me to demonstrate—"

Rabor's tentacle twiddled with the dial of a television set. The screen flickered into life.

"Do not be alarmed," he throbbed. "These are only images, transmitted for enjoyment. Actually, they are meant only to consume time between *business* announcements. If you will only watch for a while, I am sure they will have music."

Yem watched.

He watched for almost two hours, during which he learned more about man than Rabor could ever have explained.

He saw a pile advertisement and watched animated animals singing and dancing around rolls of toilet-paper. He saw three different automobiles, each the lowest-priced of the Low Three. He witnessed divers, lumberjacks, riflemen and athletes demonstrating their virility by puffing on various brands of cigarettes. He saw the thrilling race between two pills descending into cross-sections of the human stomach.

And in between were actual *human beings,* as they called themselves, entertaining the viewers by shooting one another, going insane, plotting robberies and holdups and kidnappings, punching one another with their fists, or attempting to steal each other's mates. And every so often there were episodes involving various groups of bipeds called *families*, who seemed to live in still another world. In *this* world, there were no scenes of violence; everything was quite friendly and amusing, and most of the events involved methods whereby the female and the small offspring outwitted or triumphed over the male.

Yem twined with Rabor. “You deceived me,” he tingled. “There are two worlds, are there not?”

“No. This is entertainment—make-believe. Fantasies. Men are not allowed to kill one another as individuals, so they enjoy seeing the pretense. Families are not so happily grouped, but it is flattering for them to identify themselves with the images on the screen. And remember, the real underlying purpose of all this is to incite the viewer to consume more natural resources. But wait—you wished to learn about *music.* And that, I believe, is about to be presented now. Ah, yes!”

The figure flickered forth, gyrating with a guitar. And then the sound came.

“Yem!” Rabor grinched. “What is wrong?”

Yem writhed in agony. “No!” he squoggled. “No—stop—”

A twiddle of tentacles and the set went off.

“Thank you,” Yem fleched, weakly. “I do not believe I could have endured another moment So that is *music.”* He pulsed wearily. “Now I can believe you. Men are irrational beings indeed. They detest their very natures, they abhor one another, they distort everything in their lives. Is there nothing they hold sacred?”

“One thing only,” Rabor vibrated. “The symbol of power. I will show you. Usually this symbol is carefully concealed, but I know where it is hidden.”

He flowed over to the wall, parting a drape with a tentacle and grasping the knob of a safe until attuned with the combination. The safe swung open and Rabor scooped out the contents.

“Here,” he throbbed. “This is what men want.”

“But these are only little pieces of green parchment.”

“They are covered with words and pictures. Are they not interesting?”

“Interesting, perhaps. But of no value.”

“No value at all,” Rabor pulsed. “Come, shall we go back?”

And they vulffed off into the night. **THE END**

Word of Honor

the dangerous game of truth—and consequences

AT 2:27 IN THE AFTERNOON, Homer Gans, cashier, entered the office of his employer. the President of the First National Bank.

“I’ve got something to tell you,” he murmured. “It’s about the reserve fund. I’m into it for 40,000 dollars.”

“You’re *what?”*

“I embezzled from the reserve fund,” Homer said. “Been doing it for years now. and nobody ever caught on. Some of the money went to play the rates, and a lot of it has been paying somebody’s rent. You wouldn’t think to look at me that I’d be keeping a blonde on the side. But then, you don’t know how it is at home.”

The President frowned. “Oh yes I do,” he answered, taking a deep breath. “As a matter of fact. I happen to he keeping a blonde myself. Though to tell the truth, site isn’t a natural blonde.”

Homer hesitated, then sighed. “To tell the truth,” he said, “neither is mine.”

Between 2:28 and 2:48, quite a number of things happened. A model nephew told his rich anti elderly untie to go to hell and quit trying to run his life. An equally model husband told his wife he had hated her and their children for years anti frequently wished they’d all drop dead. A star shoe salesman told a female customer to quit wasting time trying on small sizes and go out and buy a couple of rowboats. At one of the embassies. a visiting diplomat paused in the midst of a flattering toast and abruptly emptied the contents of his glass upon the bald head of the American Ambassador.

And——

“Holy Toledo!” howled Wally Tibbets. Managing Editor of the *Daily Express*. “Has everybody Hipped?”

Reporter Joe Satterlee shrugged.

“In nine years on this rag. I’ve never pulled that ‘Stop the presses!’ stuff. But we’re standing by for a replate right now—and we’re going to stand by until we find out what gives. Got enough lead copy for a dozen front pages right now, and none of it makes sense.”

“Such as?” Satterlee gazed calmly at his boss.

“Take your pick. Our senior Senator just issued a statement of resignation-says lie’s unfit to hold office. That labor leader who built the big new union headquarters uptown went and shot himself. Police headquarters can’t keep up with the guys who are coming in and confessing everything from murder to mopery. And if you think that’s something, you ought to hear what’s going on down in the advertising department. Clients arc canceling space like mad. Three of the biggest used-ear dealers in town just yanked their ads.”

Joe Satterlee yawned. “What goes on here?”

“Thai’s just what I want you to find out. And fast.” Wally Tibbets stood up. “Go see somebody and get a statement. Try the University. Tackle the science department.”

Satterlee nodded and went downstairs to his ear.

Traffic seemed to be disrupted all over the city. and something had happened to the pedestrians. Some of them were running and the others moved along in a daze or merely stood silently in the center of die sidewalk. Fates had lost their usual mask of immobility. Some people laughed and others wept. Over in the grass of the University campus, a number of couples lay locked in close embrace, oblivious of still other couples who were fighting furiously. Joe Satterlee blinked at what he saw and drove on.

At 3:02 he drove up to the Administration Building. A burly man stood on the curb, doing a little dance of impatience He looked as though he wanted cither a taxi or a washroom, but last.

"Pardon me," Satterlee said. "Is Dean Hanson's office in this building?"

"I'm Hanson," the burly mail snapped.

"My name's Satterlee. I'm with the *Daily Express*——"

"Good Ford, do they know already?"

"Know what?"

"Never mind." Dean Hanson shook his head. "Can't talk to you now. Got to into a cab. I suppose I'll never get to the airport."

"Leaving town?"

"No. I've got to get my hands on Doctor Lowenquist. He's at the bottom of all this——"

Satterlee opened the door. "Come on. gel in," he said. "I'll drive you to the airport. We can talk on the way."

A wind came out of the west and the sun disappeared to cower behind a cloud.

"Storm coming up," Dean Hanson muttered. "I hat damned fool better land Indore it hits."

"Lowenquist." Satterlee said. "Isn't lie head of the School of Dentistry?"

"That's right." Hanson sighed. "All this nonsense about mad scientists is bad enough, but a mad *dentist*——"

"What did he do?"

"He chartered a plane this afternoon, all by himself, and look it tip over the city. He's been spraying the town with that gas of his." Hanson sighed. "I don't know anything about science. I'm just a poor University Dean, and my job is to get money out of rich alumni. But the way I hear it. Lowenquist was monkeying around with chemical anesthetics. He mixed up a new combination—like pentothal sodium, sodium amytal—only a lot stronger and more concentrated."

"Aren't those used in psychotherapy, for narcohypnosis?" Satterlee asked. "What they call truth serums?"

“This isn’t a serum. It’s a gas.”

“You can say that again.” Satterlee agreed. “So he waited for a dear, windless day and went up in a plane to dust the city with a concentrated truth gas. Is that a fact?”

“Of course it is.” Hanson replied. “You know I can’t lie to you.” He sighed again. “Nobody can lie any more. Apparently the stuff is so powerful that one sniff does the trick. Psychiatry department gives me a lot of flap about inhibitory release and bypassing the superego and if a man answers, bang up. But what it all boils down to is the gas *works*. Everybody who was outside, everybody with an open window or an air-conditioning unit, was affected. Almost the entire city. They can’t lie any more. They don’t even *want* to lie.”

“Wonderful!” Satterlee exclaimed, glancing tip at the gathering storm clouds.

“Is it? I’m not so sure. When the story hits the papers, it’ll give the whole school a bad name. I shouldn’t even have told you, but I can’t help myself. I just felt the need to be frank about everything. That’s what I was telling my secretary, before she slapped my face——”

Satterlee wheeled into the airport. “That your boy tip there?” He pointed upward, at a small plane careening between the clouds in the sudden gale.

“Yes,” Hanson shouted. “He’s trying to conic in for a landing, I think. But the wind’s too strong—”

A sudden lance of lightning pierced the sky. I lie plane wobbled and began to spin.

Satterlee gunned the motor and turned off onto the field. In the distance a siren wailed, and through the rushing rain he could see the plane spiraling clown in a crazy dive . . .

• • •

Wally Tibbets leaned back and pushed his chair away from the desk.

“I hat’s how it happened.” Satterlee told him. “The poor guy was dead before they pulled him out of the wreckage. But they found the tanks and equipment. He had the papers on him. and I persuaded Hanson to turn the stuff over to me: he was in such a daze lie didn't even think to object. So now we can back up the story with proof. I've got copies of the formula he discovered. I suppose we'll feed the dope in to the wire services, too."

Tibbets shook his head. Nope I in going to answer all inquiries with a flat denial."

"But the story——"

"Isn't going to be any story. All over now, anyway. Didn't you notice how people changed after that storm hit? Wind must have blown the gas away Everyone's back to normal. Most of them have already convinced themselves that nothing ever happened."

"But we *know* it did! What about all those story leads you got this afternoon?"

"Killed. Ever since the storm, we've been getting denials and retractions. Turns out the Senator isn't resigning after all—he's running for Governor.

I he laboratory's shooting himself was an accident. The polite can't get anyone to sign their confessions. The advertisers are placing new copy again. Mark my words, by tomorrow morning this whole town will have forgotten—they'll *will* themselves to forget. Nobody ran face the truth and remain sane."

"That's a terrible way to think," Satterlee said. "Doctor Lowenquist was a great man. He knew his discovery could work—not just here, but everywhere. After this trial run he meant to take a plane tip over Washington. Hy over Moscow, all the capitals of the world. Because ibis truth gas could *elm Hire* the world. Don't you see that?"

"Of course I see it. But the world shouldn't he changed."

"Why not?" Satterlee squared his shoulders. "Look here. I've been thinking. I have the formula. I could carry on where Lowenquist left off. I've saved sonic money. I could hire pilots and planes. Don't you think the world needs a dose of truth?"

"No. You saw what happened here today, on just a small scale."

“Yes. Criminals confessed, crooks re formed, people stopped lying to one another. Is that so had?”

“About the criminals, no. But for ordinary human beings this could be a terrible thing. You don’t see what happens when the doctor tells his patient that he’s dying of cancer, when the wife tells her husband he’s not actually the father of their son. Everybody has secrets, or almost every body. It’s better not to know the whole truth—about others, or about yourself.”

“But look at what goes on in the world today.”

“I am looking. That’s my job—to sit at this desk and watch the world go round. Sometimes it’s a dizzy spin, but at least it keeps going. Because people keep going. And they need lies to help them. Lies about abstract justice, and romantic love everlasting. The belief that right always triumphs. Even our concept of democracy may be a lie. Yet we cherish these lies and do our best to live by them. And maybe, little by little, our belief helps make these things come true. It’s a slow process, but in the long run it seems to work. Animals don’t lie, you know. Only human beings know how to pretend, how to make believe, how to deceive themselves and others. But that’s why they’re human beings.”

“Maybe so,” Satterlee said. “Yet think of the opportunity I have. I could even stop war.”

“Perhaps. Military and political leaders might face up to the truth about their motives and change—temporarily.”

“We could keep on spraying,” Satterlee broke in, eagerly. “There are other honest men. We’d raise funds, make this a long-term project. And who knows? Perhaps after a few doses, the change would become permanent. Don’t you understand? We could end war!”

“I understand,” Tibbets told him. “You could end war between nations. And start hundreds of millions of *individual* wars instead. Wars waged in human minds and human hearts. There’d be a wave of insanity, a wave of suicides, a wave of murders. There’d be a tidal inundation of truth that would drown the home, the family, the whole social structure.”

“I realize it’s a risk. But think of what we all might gain.”

Tibbets put his hand on the younger man’s shoulder. “I want you to forget this whole business,” he said, soberly. “Don’t plan to manufacture this gas and spray it over the Capitol or the Kremlin. Don’t do it, for all our sakes.”

Satterlee was silent, staring out into the night. Far in the distance a jet plane screamed.

“You’re an honest man,” Tibbets said. “One of the few. I dig that, and I admire you for it. But you’ve got to be realistic and see things my way. All I want is for you to tell me now that you won’t try anything foolish, leave the world the way it is.” He paused. “Will you give me your word of honor?”

Satterlee hesitated. He *was* an honest man, he realized, and so his answer was a long time coming. Then, “I promise,” Satterlee lied.

That Hell-Bound Train

Ever since 1541, when a peculiar doctor died under peculiar circumstances, our literature has crackled with contracts signed in human blood and bargains reached by the light of brimstone. Here Robert Bloch and a delightfully disreputable Faust find a new kind of balance—on a warm and surprisingly different *level—between the intoxication of the impossible wish and its disconcerting morning-after, an eternity in Hell.*

WHEN MARTIN WAS A LITTLE BOY, his Daddy was a Railroad Man. Daddy never rode the high iron, but he walked the tracks for the *CB&Q,* and he was proud of his job. And every night when he got drunk, he sang this old song about *That Hell-Bound Train.*

Martin didn't quite remember any of the words, but he couldn't forget the way his Daddy sang them out. And when Daddy made the mistake of getting drunk in the afternoon and got squeezed between a Pennsy tank-car and an *AT&SF* gondola, Martin sort of wondered why the Brotherhood didn't sing the song at his funeral.

After that, things didn't go so good for Martin, but somehow he always recalled Daddy's song. When Mom up and ran off with a traveling salesman from Keokuk (Daddy must have turned over in his grave, knowing she'd done such a tiling, and with a *passenger,* too!) Martin hummed the tune to himself every night in the Orphan Home. And after Martin himself ran away, he used to whistle the song softly at night in the jungles, after the other bindlestiffs were asleep.

Martin was on the road for four-five years before he realized he wasn’t getting anyplace. Of course he’d tried his hand at a lot of things—picking fruit in Oregon, washing dishes in a Montana hash-house, stealing hub-caps in Denver and tires in Oklahoma City—but by the time he’d put in six months on the chain-gang down in Alabama he knew he had no future drifting around this way on his own.

So he tried to get on the railroad like his Daddy had and they told him that times were bad.

But Martin couldn’t keep away from the railroads. Wherever he traveled, he rode the rods; he’d rather hop a freight heading north in sub-zero weather than lift his thumb to hitch a ride with a Cadillac headed for Florida. Whenever he managed to get hold of a can of Sterno, he’d sit there under a nice warm culvert, think about the old days, and often as not he’d hum the song about *That Hell-Bound Train.* That was the train the drunks and the sinners rode—the gambling men and the grifters, the big-time spenders, the skirt-chasers, and all the jolly crew. It would be really fine to take a trip in such good company, but Martin didn’t like to think of what happened when that train finally pulled into the Depot Way Down Yonder. He didn’t figure on spending eternity stoking boilers in Hell, without even a Company Union to protect him. Still, it would be a lovely ride. If there was *such* a thing as a Hell-Bound Train. Which, of course, there wasn’t.

At least Martin didn’t *think* there was, until that evening when he found himself walking the tracks heading south, just outside of Appleton Junction. The night was cold and dark, the way November nights are in the Fox River Valley, and he knew he’d have to work his way down to New Orleans for the winter, or maybe even Texas. Somehow he didn’t much feel like going, even though he’d heard tell that a lot of those Texas automobiles had solid gold hub-caps.

No sir, he just wasn’t cut out for petty larceny. It was worse than a sin—it was unprofitable, too. Bad enough to do the Devil’s work, but then to get such miserable pay on top of it! Maybe he'd better let the Salvation Army convert him.

Martin trudged along humming Daddy's song, waiting for a rattler to pull out of the Junction behind him. He'd have to catch it—there was nothing else for him to do.

But the first train to come along came from the other direction, roaring towards him along the track from the south.

Martin peered ahead, but his eyes couldn't match his ears, and so far all he could recognize was the sound. It *was* a train, though; he felt the steel shudder and sing beneath his feet.

And yet, how could it be? The next station south was Neenali-Menasha, and there was nothing due out of there for hours.

The clouds were thick overhead, and the field-mists rolled like a cold fog in a November midnight. Even so, Martin should have been able to see the headlight as the train rushed on. But there was only the whistle, screaming out of the black throat of the night. Martin could recognize the equipment of just about any locomotive ever built, but he'd never heard a whistle that sounded like this one. It wasn't signalling; it was screaming like a lost soul.

He stepped to one side, for the train was almost on top of him now. And suddenly there it was, looming along the tracks and grinding to a stop in less time than he'd believed possible. The wheels hadn't been oiled, because they screamed too, screamed like the damned. But the train slid to a halt and the screams died away into a series of low, groaning sounds, and Martin looked up and saw that this was a passenger train. It was big and black, without a single light shining in the engine cab or any of the long string of cars; Martin couldn't read any lettering on the sides, but he was pretty sure this train didn't belong on the Northwestern Road.

He was even more sure when he saw the man clamber down out of the forward car. There was something wrong about the way he walked, as though one of his feet dragged, and about the lantern he carried. The lantern was dark, and the man held it up to his mouth and blew, and instantly it glowed redly. You don’t have to be a member of the Railway Brotherhood to know that this is a mighty peculiar way of lighting a lantern.

As the figure approached, Martin recognized the conductor’s cap perched on his head, and this made him feel a little better for a moment—until he noticed that it was worn a bit too high, as though there might be something sticking up on the forehead underneath it.

Still, Martin knew his manners, and when the man smiled at him, he said, “Good evening, Mr. Conductor.”

“Good evening, Martin.”

“How did you know my name?”

The man shrugged. “How did you know I was the Conductor?”

“You *are,* aren’t you?”

“To you, yes. Although other people, in other walks of life, may recognize me in different roles. For instance, you ought to see what I look like to the folks out in Hollywood.” The man grinned. “I travel a great deal,” he explained.

“What brings you here?” Martin asked.

“Why, you ought to know the answer to that, Martin. I came because you needed me. Tonight, I suddenly realized you were backsliding. Thinking of joining the Salvation Army, weren’t you?”

“Well—” Martin hesitated.

“Don’t be ashamed. To err is human, as somebody-or-other-once said. *Readers Digest,* wasn’t it? Never mind. The point is, I felt you needed me. So I switched over and came your way.”

“What for?”

“Why, to offer you a ride, of course. Isn’t it better to travel comfortably by train than to inarch along the cold streets behind a Salvation Army band? Hard on the feet, they tell me, and even harder on the eardrums.”

“I’m not sure I’d care to ride your train, sir,” Martin said. “Considering where I’m likely to end up.

“Ah, yes. The old argument.” The Conductor sighed. “I suppose you’d prefer some sort of bargain, is that it?”

“Exactly,” Martin answered.

“Well, I’m afraid I’m all through with that sort of thing. There’s no shortage of prospective passengers any more. Why should I offer you any special inducements?”

“You must want me, or else you wouldn’t have bothered to go out of your way to find me.”

The Conductor sighed again. “There you have a point. Pride was always my besetting weakness, I admit. And somehow I’d hate to lose you to the competition, after thinking of you as my own all these years.” He hesitated. “Yes, I’m prepared to deal with you on your own terms, if you insist.”

“The terms?” Martin asked.

Standard proposition. Anything you want.”

“Ah,” said Martin.

“But I warn you in advance, there’ll be no tricks. I’ll grant you any wish you can name—but in return, you must promise to ride the train when the time comes.”

“Suppose it never comes?”

“It will.”

“Suppose I’ve got the kind of a wish that will keep me off forever?”

“There is no such wish.”

“Don’t be too sure.”

“Let me worry about that,” the Conductor told him. “No matter what you have in mind, I warn you that I’ll collect in the end. And there’ll be none of this last-minute hocus-pocus, either. No last-hour repentances, no blonde *frauleins* or fancy lawyers showing up to get you off. I offer a clean deal. That is to say, you’ll get what you want, and I’ll get what I want.”

“I’ve heard you trick people. They say you’re worse than a used-car salesman.”

“Now, wait a minute—”

“I apologize,” Martin said, hastily. “But it *is* supposed to be a fact that you can’t be trusted.”

"I admit it. On the other hand, you seem to think you have found a way out."

"A sure-fire proposition."

"Sure-fire? Very funny!" The man began to chuckle, then halted. "But we waste valuable time, Martin. Let's get down to cases. What do you want from me?"

Martin took a deep breath. "I want to be able to stop Time."

"Right now?"

"No. Not yet. And not for everybody. I realize that would be impossible, of course. But I want to be able to stop Time for myself. Just once, in the future. Whenever I get to a point where I know I'm happy and contented, that's where I'd like to stop. So I can just keep on being happy forever."

"That's quite a proposition," the Conductor mused. "I've got to admit I've never heard anything just like it before—and believe me, I've listened to some lulus in my day." He grinned at Martin. "You've really been thinking about this, haven't you?"

"For years," Martin admitted. Then he coughed. "Well, what do you say?"

"It's not impossible, in terms of your own *subjective* time-sense," the Conductor murmured. "Yes, I think it could be arranged."

"But I mean *really* to stop. Not for me just to *imagine* it."

"I understand. And it can be done."

"Then you'll agree?"

"Why not? I promised you, didn't I? Give me your hand." Martin hesitated. "Will it hurt very much? I mean, I don't like the sight of blood, and—"

"Nonsense! You've been listening to a lot of poppycock. We already have made our bargain, my boy. I merely intend to put something into your hand. The ways and means of fulfilling your wish. After all, there's no telling at just what moment you may decide to exercise the agreement, and I can't drop everything and come running. So it's better if you can regulate matters for yourself."

"You're going to give me a Time-stopper?"

"That's the general idea. As soon as I can decide what would be practical." The Conductor hesitated. "Ah, the very thing! Here, take my watch."

He pulled it out of his vest-pocket; a railroad watch in a silver case. He opened the back and made a delicate adjustment; Martin tried to see just exactly what he was doing, but the fingers moved in a blinding blur.

"There we are," the Conductor smiled. "It's all set, now. When you finally decide where you'd like to call a halt, merely turn the stem in reverse and unwind the watch until it stops. When it stops, Time stops, for you. Simple enough?" And the Conductor dropped the watch into Martin's hand.

The young man closed his fingers tightly around the case. "That's all there is to it, eh?"

"Absolutely. But remember—you can stop the watch only once. So you'd better make sure that you're satisfied with the moment you choose to prolong. I caution you in all fairness; make very certain of your choice."

"I will." Martin grinned. "And since you've been so fair about it, I'll be fair, too. There's one thing you seem to have forgotten. It doesn't really matter *what* moment I choose. Because once I stop Time for myself, that means I stay where I am forever. I'll never have to get any older. And if I don't get any older, I'll never die. And if I never die, then I'll never have to take a ride on your train."

The Conductor turned away. His shoulders shook convulsively, and he may have been crying. "And you said *I* was worse than a used-car salesman," he gasped, in a strangled voice.

Then he wandered off into the fog, and the train-whistle gave an impatient shriek, and all at once it was moving swiftly down the track, rumbling out of sight in the darkness.

Martin stood there, blinking down at the silver watch in his hand. If it wasn't that he could actually see it and feel it there, and if he couldn't smell that peculiar odor, he might have thought he'd imagined the whole thing from start to finish—train, Conductor, bargain, and all.

But he had the watch, and he could recognize the scent left by the train as it departed, even though there aren't many locomotives around that use sulphur and brimstone as fuel.

And he had no doubts about his bargain. That's what came of thinking things through to a logical conclusion. Some fools would have settled for wealth, or power, or Kim Novak. Daddy might have sold out for a fifth of whiskey.

Martin knew that he'd made a better deal. Better? It was foolproof. All he needed to do now was choose his moment.

He put the watch in his pocket and started back down the railroad track. He hadn't really had a destination in mind before, but he did now. He was going to find a moment of happiness. . . .

Now young Martin wasn't altogether a ninny. He realized perfectly well that happiness is a relative thing; there are conditions and degrees of contentment, and they vary with one's lot in life. As a hobo, he was often satisfied with a warm handout, a double-length bench in the park, or a can of Sterno made in 1957 (a vintage year). Many a time he had reached a state of momentary bliss through such simple agencies, but he was aware that there were better things. Martin determined to seek them out.

Within two days he was in the great city of Chicago. Quite naturally, he drifted over to West Madison Street, and there he took steps to elevate his role in life. He became a city bum, a panhandler, a moocher. Within a week he had risen to the point where happiness was a meal in a regular one-arm luncheon joint, a two-bit flop on a real army cot in a real flophouse, and a full fifth of muscatel.

There was a night, after enjoying all three of these luxuries to the full, when Martin thought of unwinding his watch at the pinnacle of intoxication. But he also thought of the faces of the honest johns he'd braced for a handout today. Sure, they were squares, but they were prosperous. They wore good clothes, held good jobs, drove nice cars. And for them, happiness was even more ecstatic—they ate dinner in fine hotels, they slept on innerspring mattresses, they drank blended whiskey.

Squares or no, they had something there. Martin fingered his watch, put aside the temptation to hock it for another bottle of muscatel, and went to sleep determined to get himself a job and improve his happiness-quotient.

When he awoke he had a hangover, but the determination was still with him. Before the month was out Martin was working for a general contractor over on the South Side, at one of the big rehabilitation projects. He hated the grind, but the pay was good, and pretty soon he got himself a one-room apartment out on Blue Island Avenue. He was accustomed to eating in decent restaurants now, and he bought himself a comfortable bed, and every Saturday night he went down to the corner tavern. It was all very pleasant, but—

The foreman liked his work and promised him a raise in a month. If he waited around, the raise would mean that he could afford a second-hand car. With a car, he could even start picking up a girl for a date now and then. Other fellows on the job did, and they seemed pretty happy.

So Martin kept on working, and the raise came through and the car came through and pretty soon a couple of girls came through.

The first time it happened, he wanted to unwind his watch immediately. Until he got to thinking about what some of the older men always said. There was a guy named Charlie, for example, who worked alongside him on the hoist. “When you’re young and don’t know the score, maybe you get a kick out of running around with those pigs. But after a while, you want something better. A nice girl of your own. That’s the ticket.”

Martin felt he owed it to himself to find out. If he didn’t like it better, he could always go back to what he had.

Almost six months went by before Martin met Lillian Gillis. By that time he’d had another promotion and was working inside, in the office. They made him go to night school to learn how to do simple book-keeping, but it meant another fifteen bucks extra a week, and it was nicer working indoors.

And Lillian *was* a lot of fun. When she told him she'd marry him, Martin was almost sure that the time was now. Except that she was sort of—well, she was a *nice* girl, and she said they'd have to wait until they were married. Of course, Martin couldn't expect to marry her until he had a little more money saved up, and another raise would help, too.

That took a year. Martin was patient, because he knew it was going to be worth it. Every time he had any doubts, he took out his watch and looked at it. But he never showed it to Lillian, or anybody else. Most of the other men wore expensive wristwatches and the old silver railroad watch looked just a little cheap.

Martin smiled as he gazed at the stem. Just a few twists and he'd have something none of these other poor working slobs would ever have. Permanent satisfaction, with his blushing bride—

Only getting married turned out to be just the beginning. Sure, it was wonderful, but Lillian told him how much better things would be if they could move into a new place and fix it up. Martin wanted decent furniture, a TV set, a nice car.

So he started taking night courses and got a promotion to the front office. With the baby coming, he wanted to stick around and see his son arrive. And when it came, he realized he'd have to wait until it got a little older, started to walk and talk and develop a personality of its own.

About this time the company sent him out on the road as a trouble-shooter on some of those other jobs, and now he *was* eating at those good hotels, living high on the hog and the expense-account. More than once he was tempted to unwind his watch. This was the good life. . . . Of course, it would be even better if he just didn't have to *work.* Sooner or later, if he could cut in on one of the company deals, he could make a pile and retire. Then everything would be ideal.

It happened, but it took time. Martin's son was going to high school before he really got up there into the chips. Martin got a strong hunch that it was now or never, because he wasn’t exactly a kid any more.

But right about then he met Sherry Westcott, and she didn’t seem to think he was middle-aged at all, in spite of the way he was losing hair and adding stomach. She taught him that a *toupee* could cover the bald spot and a cummerbund could cover the pot-gut. In fact, she taught him quite a lot and he so enjoyed learning that he actually took out his watch and prepared to unwind it.

Unfortunately, he chose the very moment that the private detectives broke down the door of the hotel room, and then there was a long stretch of time when Martin was so busy fighting the divorce action that he couldn’t honestly say he was enjoying any given moment.

When he made the final settlement with Lil he was broke again, and Sherry didn’t seem to think he was so young, after all. So he squared his shoulders and went back to work.

He made his pile, eventually, but it took longer this time, and there wasn’t much chance to have fun along the way. The fancy dames in the fancy cocktail lounges didn’t seem to interest him any more, and neither did the liquor. Besides, the Doc had warned him off that.

But there were other pleasures for a rich man to investigate. Travel, for instance—and not riding the rods from one hick burg to another, either. Martin went around the world by plane and luxury liner. For a while it seemed as though he would find his moment after all, visiting the Taj Mahal by moonlight. Martin pulled out the battered old watch-case, and got ready to unwind it. Nobody else was there to watch him—

And that’s why he hesitated. Sure, this was an enjoyable moment, but he was alone. Lil and the kid were gone, Sherry was gone, and somehow he’d never had time to make any friends. Maybe if he found new congenial people, he’d have the ultimate happiness. That must be the answer—it wasn’t just money or power or sex or seeing beautiful things. The real satisfaction lay in friendship.

So on the boat trip home, Martin tried to strike up a few acquaintances at the ship’s bar. But all these people were much younger, and Martin had nothing in common with them. Also they wanted to dance and drink, and Martin wasn't in condition to appreciate such pastimes. Nevertheless, he tried.

Perhaps that's why he had the little accident the day before they docked in San Francisco. "Little accident" was the ship's doctor's way of describing it, but Martin noticed he looked very grave when he told him to stay in bed, and he'd called an ambulance to meet the liner at the dock and take the patient right to the hospital.

At the hospital, all the expensive treatment and the expensive smiles and the expensive words didn't fool Martin any. He was an old man with a bad heart, and they thought he was going to die.

But he could fool them. He still had the watch. He found it in his coat when he put on his clothes and sneaked out of the hospital.

He didn't have to die. He could cheat death with a single gesture—and lie intended to do it as a free man, out there under a free sky.

That was the real secret of happiness. He understood it now. Not even friendship meant as much as freedom. This was the best thing of all—to be free of friends or family or the furies of the flesh.

Martin walked slowly beside the embankment under the night sky. Come to think of it, he was just about back where he'd started, so many years ago. But the moment was good, good enough to prolong forever. Once a bum, always a bum.

He smiled as he thought about it, and then the smile twisted sharply and suddenly, like the pain twisting sharply and suddenly in his chest. The world began to spin and he fell down on the side of the embankment.

He couldn't see very well, but he was still conscious, and he knew what had happened. Another stroke, and a bad one. Maybe this was it. Except that he wouldn't be a fool any longer. He wouldn't wait to see what was still around the corner.

Right now was his chance to use his power and save his life. And he was going to do it. He could still move, nothing could stop him.

He groped in Iris pocket and pulled out the old silver watch, fumbling with the stem. A few twists and he'd cheat death, he'd never have to ride that Hell-Bound Train. He could go on forever.

Forever.

Martin had never really considered the word before. To go on forever—but *how?* Did he *want* to go on forever, like this; a sick old man, lying helplessly here in the grass?

No. He couldn't do it. He wouldn't do it. And suddenly he wanted very much to cry, because he knew that somewhere along the line he'd outsmarted himself. And now it was too late. His eyes dimmed, there was a roaring in his ears . . .

He recognized the roaring, of course, and he wasn't at all surprised to see the train come rushing out of the fog up there on the embankment. He wasn't surprised when it stopped, either, or when the Conductor climbed off and walked slowly towards him.

The Conductor hadn't changed a bit. Even his grin was still the same.

"Hello, Martin," he said. "All aboard."

"I know," Martin whispered. "But you'll have to carry me. I can't walk. I'm not even really talking any more, am I?"

"Yes you are," the Conductor said. "I can hear you fine. And you can walk, too." He leaned down and placed his hand on Martin's chest. There was a moment of icy numbness, and then, sure enough, Martin could walk after all.

He got up and followed the Conductor along the slope, moving to the side of the train.

"In here?" he asked.

"No, the next car," the Conductor murmured. "I guess you're entitled to ride Pullman. After all, you're quite a successful man. You've tasted the joys of wealth and position and prestige. You've known the pleasures of marriage and fatherhood. You've sampled the delights of dining and drinking and debauchery, too, and you travelled high, wide and handsome. So let's not have any last-minute recriminations."

“All right,” Martin sighed. “I can’t blame you for my mistakes.

On the other hand, you can’t take credit for what happened, either. I worked for everything I got. I did it all on my own. I didn’t even need your watch.”

“So you didn’t,” the Conductor said, smiling. “But would you mind giving it back to me now?”

“Need it for the next sucker, eh?” Martin muttered.

“Perhaps.”

Something about the way he said it made Martin look up. He tried to see the Conductor’s eyes, but the brim of his cap cast a shadow. So Martin looked down at the watch instead.

“Tell me something,” he said, softly. “If I give you the watch, what will you do with it?”

“Why, throw it into the ditch,” the Conductor told him. “That’s all I’ll do with it.” And he held out his hand.

“What if somebody comes along and finds it? And twists the stem backwards, and stops Time?”

“Nobody would do that,” the Conductor murmured. “Even if they knew.”

“You mean, it was all a trick? This is only an ordinary, cheap watch?”

“I didn’t say that,” whispered the Conductor. “I only said that no one has ever twisted the stem backwards. They’ve all been like you, Martin—looking ahead to find that perfect happiness. Waiting for the moment that never comes.”

The Conductor held out his hand again.

Martin sighed and shook his head. “You cheated me after all.”

“You cheated yourself, Martin. And now you’re going to ride that Hell-Bound Train.”

He pushed Martin up the steps and into the car ahead. As he entered, the train began to move and the whistle screamed. And Martin stood there in the swaying Pullman, gazing down the aisle at the other passengers. He could see them sitting there, and somehow it didn’t seem strange at all.

Here they were; the drunks and the sinners, the gambling men and the grifters, the big-time spenders, the skirt-chasers, and all the jolly crew. They knew where they were going, of course, but they didn't seem to give a damn. The blinds were drawn on the windows, yet it was light inside, and they were all living it up—singing and passing the bottle and roaring with laughter, throwing the dice and telling their jokes and bragging their big brags, just the way Daddy used to sing about them in the old song.

"Mighty nice traveling companions," Martin said. "Why, I've never seen such a pleasant bunch of people. I mean, they seem to be really enjoying themselves!" The Conductor shrugged. "I'm afraid things won't be quite so jazzy when we pull into that Depot Way Down Yonder."

For the third time, he held out his hand. "Now, before you sit down, if you'll just give me that watch. A bargain's a bargain—" Martin smiled. "A bargain's a bargain," he echoed. "I agreed to ride your train if I could stop Time when I found the right moment of happiness. And I think I'm about as happy right here as I've ever been."

Very slowly, Martin took hold of the silver watch-stem.

"No!" gasped the Conductor. "No!"

But the watch-stem turned.

"Do you realize what you've done?" the Conductor yelled. "Now we'll never reach the Depot! We'll just go on riding, all of us—forever!"

Martin grinned. "I know," he said. "But the fun is in the trip, not the destination. You taught me that. And I'm looking forward to a wonderful trip. Look, maybe I can even help. If you were to find me another one of those caps, now, and let me keep this watch—"

And that's the way it finally worked out. Wearing his cap and carrying his battered old silver watch, there's no happier person in or out of this world—now and forever—than Martin. Martin, the new Brakeman on That Hellhound Train.

That Old Black Magic

They told me that Jed Connors was the oldest booking agent in the business, and that I could probably find him in a little joint called the Firefly Club, at the bar.

Every word of it was true. He was there, all right, and he was at the bar, and there was no doubt in my mind, after looking at him, that he was the oldest agent in the business. For all I knew, he might have been the oldest man in the world. He certainly looked the part.

I had no trouble getting acquainted. The minute I slid onto the stool next to his and suggested a drink, he began to talk. And when I introduced myself, the floodgates opened.

“Writer, huh?” Some of the wrinkles in his face arranged themselves in a smile. “Suppose you’re after a story about me. Well, like the fella says, half the lies told about me aren’t true. Mebbe I am the oldest booker in show biz, but that gag about me promoting Jenny Lind’s first tour is just a rib. I been handling talent for over fifty years, though. When I started out, I booked the big ones into the Palace. Today I’m down to working the Borscht Circuit, and I’ll even line up acts for a stag smoker if I have to. I’m not ashamed. A guy’s got to eat, even with false teeth. But if you’re looking for copy, I can give it to you. What did you have in mind? I’ve always thought the story of my life would make a great book. A great book. All’s I need is a smart young fella like you to sort of whip it into shape. Say, how’d you like to—”

I shook my head and he started to frown. But the smile came back when I signaled the bartender for a refill.

“Sounds like a good idea, Mr. Connors,” I told him. “We’ll have to talk about it some other time. Right now, though, I’m here for another reason. I was told you could give me the dope on Harlow Black.”

The frown came back. The drinks arrived too, but the frown didn’t disappear.

“Harlow Black? You wouldn’t want to know anything about him, son. That’s ancient history. Nobody cares about magicians any more, and besides, he’s been dead for over twenty years.”

“That’s just the point,” I explained. “There’s a pretty good magazine market for articles on colorful old-timers. And right now, Harlow Black is back in the news.” I nudged the drink his way. “You *were* his agent, weren’t you? I should think you’d have a lot to say about him.”

“Think what you please. I got nothing to say about Harlow Black. He was just another act. A screwball. All acts are screwballs, but magicians are screwier than the rest.”

“Now we’re getting somewhere,” I said. “The screwball angle, this is what I’m after. Wasn’t there some crazy business about a murder, and—”

The old man shook his head. “I wouldn’t know,” he muttered. “Now if you’re after some real material, why not take Raymond Hitchcock, say? Or Sam Bernard, there was a character for you! Let me tell you about old Sam.”

“Tell me about Harlow Black,” I persisted. “I want to write him up while the news item is fresh.”

The old eyes blinked. “News item? You keep talking about that all the time, fella. What do you mean?”

“Haven’t you seen it?” I pulled the clipping out of my pocket. “It’s about Black’s brother Henry. He and his wife were killed in a plane crash out on the Coast yesterday.”

“Let me see that.” He wasn’t polite about it; he grabbed. “Yes, that’s right. Henry J. Black. And they identified the body, guess there’s no mistake. He’s dead.”

Suddenly the elderly agent was sitting up straight on his stool again. Maybe it was a trick of the light, but he seemed to look twenty years younger. *Twenty years.* Harlow Black had been dead about that length of time—

"Bartender! Do it again!" Some kind of a miracle had definitely occurred, because the old man was buying. And he handed me back the clipping and said, "All right. Now I can talk. But let's take our drinks over to a booth, huh? What I've got to say may take a little time. Anyhow, I've waited twenty years to say it."

Well, if he had waited twenty years to talk, I could wait twenty minutes to listen. We took a booth.

I'm not going to bother with quotation marks from now on, because it's all the old man's story. I'm not going to say whether I believe it or not, either; for all I know, there may still be a few relatives around, ready to spring a lawsuit. The only thing to do is set down what Jed Connors had to say. And this is what he told me about Harlow Black. . . .

I said nobody cares about magicians any more, and that's the truth. But in the old vaude days, they were the biggest of the Big Time. Even toured with their own shows. I ran into a lot of 'em, handled a few, and knew 'em all. That is, I knew 'em as well as anybody ever got to know a magician.

They were a pretty close-mouthed bunch, the whole crew—mentalists, prestidigitators, escape artists—all alike. Put up a big mysterious front, because mystery was their stock in trade, from Anna Eva Fay on down to Dunninger today. And of course none of them ever talked about their tricks. I never found out about any of the great illusions, either; Chung Ling Soo's bullet-catching act, or old Kellar and his stunts, or even Fred Keating and his canary-cage routine. But to me, the biggest mystery of all was this—why did so many of the top magicians have names beginning with *H*? Look at the line-up and you'll see what I mean. There was Hermann the Great, and Harry Houdini, and Harry Blackstone, and Howard Thurston. And Harlow Black. Last, but not least.

Because for my money, Harlow Black was *the* greatest. I don't suppose you're old enough to remember him during his peak years. Whenever he booked into a town, he used to run this advance ad in the papers—,i can get out of anything! That's the way the challenge read, and he'd go on to give a list. Strait jackets, handcuffs, milk-cans, packing cases, jail cells, trunks, vaults, even refrigerator cars. He meant it, too. Because Harlow Black was the best escape artist in the world.

Oh, I'm not knocking Houdini. He was a real showman, that guy. And maybe Harlow Black copied a lot of his stunts, including the challenges to police departments and the like. But Harlow Black had that extra something—maybe it was stage presence. Houdini knew how to sell himself, how to make the tricks look hard, how to play the audience for sympathy. But Harlow Black was one up on Houdini when it came to dressing the act. You see, Houdini was a little guy, really; short and stocky and powerful, but just a little guy with bushy hair. He pitched himself as a skillful performer.

Harlow Black sold magic.

He was tall and dark and he had a mustache, but that was standard for most magicians around that time. Lots of them even dressed up to look like the Devil. Harlow Black didn't bother; he just plain looked like a magician. And he never explained. There was a sort of an *air* of magic about him.

I know it sounds whacky, but that's the way it was. That's what gave him his big appeal. And it was real. Ask anybody who ever saw him in the vampire bit.

That was Harlow Black's last big turn, the vampire bit. You see, when vaude died, the day of the escape artist was over. The average audience just wouldn't sit still for an hour, or even half an hour or fifteen minutes while a performer tried to get out of a water-pack or a torture cabinet behind a screen. If you wanted to get a booking as a magician, you made like Cardini, or Think-a-Drink Hoffman, maybe. Great entertainers, but not in a class with Harlow Black.

So Harlow Black took out his own show, and I booked him. He had all the standard gimmicks—sawing the girl in half, you know the bits. But he had something more. He had this *finale*, this vampire bit. He called it A *Stake in the Future.*

Dracula had just made a hit, and maybe he stole the idea from that. Wherever he got it, the turn used to kill the people. Here was Harlow Black, playing the vampire. Believe me, he looked the part, too! That was half the deal, the way he could stalk out on the stage with his eyes glittering and those white teeth of his gleaming. Then he'd start making with the illusions. Conjuring up wolves out of nowhere, in a puff of smoke. Oh, they were just a bunch of German shepherds, but they looked the part and it was still a great stunt. He had half a dozen good audience-chillers, working against this fake castle backdrop. Then he'd go into the vampire routine with this girl assistant of his. When he put his mouth down to her neck and let the cackle-bladder go, you'd swear he was drinking her blood. Half the women in the crowd would faint. The other half fainted later, usually, when he came to the big trick.

After the business with the girl, the two stooges would rush in and capture him. They'd stick him in this upright coffin, nail down the lid, and put it on a trestle, right there on the stage. Then came the real chiller. They drove the stake into the coffin, right through his heart. You could hear the pounding, see the big silver spike go splintering its way into the wood. Then came the big groan. And the point of the stake, coming through the other side of the coffin, dripping red.

That's when the rest of the ladies fainted. But whoever waited around for the finish, after the lights dimmed and went on again, could see 'em pry the lid open again and display the coffin.

It was empty, of course.

Then the music would come up, and everybody who hadn't fainted would applaud like crazy, and Harlow Black would come out on stage for his final bow—with the big red stain oozing out of his chest.

Oh, it was a real gasser, that act of his! And Harlow Black was a real magician, in my book.

Actually, I never saw too much of the guy when he was off. I routed him, of course, but most of the contract dealings were through his brother, Henry.

Yes, Henry J. Black, the fella who just died. He's the one I got to know, because whenever there was a business arrangement, Harlow sent him in. They didn't travel together; come to think of it, I never saw them together on or off the stage, but whenever something came up, Henry was there to handle it.

Houdini had a brother, too, remember? Theodore, his name was, but he set up an act of his own under the name of Hardeen. Well, that wouldn't have worked with Henry. He wasn't a magician type. Not at all.

Henry was older than Harlow, and quite gray. He was much quieter, too, and if you took a quick look at him, you'd think he was just a bum. A very sloppy dresser. But when it came to talking terms, you'd change your mind about Henry. Maybe he was quiet, but he was nobody's fool. And whenever a problem came up, Henry seemed to hear about it right away. And he'd show around, pronto.

Henry was there when the big problem came.

Her name was Lulu.

I don't have to tell you much about Lulu. There were a lot of Lulus around in show biz in the old days, and they're still around now—although today they have different names, usually with ay in them someplace.

But you know what that fella Shakespeare says about a rose by any other name. And Lulu wasn't exactly a rose. More of a tiger lily, you might say. Black tights. Red hair. A look that took you to bed with her. Get the picture?

Harlow Black did. He put her into his act. She was the gal in the blooddrinking routine, though sometimes I thought it should have been the other way around.

But I kept my thoughts to myself, at least for a while. Harlow Black had put dames into his act before, and it was always the same story. He'd have a big wild affair all season long, but when the summer layover came, the dame would usually disappear.

This time, though, I began getting reports which made me think things were working out a little different. I heard Harlow was talking marriage.

It wasn't that alone which made me hop the Chief for Chicago when Black played there. I happened to have some other deals working with Balaban and Katz. But at the same time, I made it a point to look up Black and see for myself. He was one of the biggest names in my stable, and I liked to keep tabs on his welfare. I knew Harlow Black always had a reputation for being a jealous, possessive sort of guy, and I wanted to check on this Lulu deal. If she turned out to be some kind of tramp, I knew there could be trouble.

Well, I didn't have to do much checking.

I merely went backstage the afternoon I arrived, looking for Black. Turned out that what I didn't know was there were two star dressing-rooms in this particular theatre, and by mistake I chose the wrong one. I got Lulu's instead of Harlow's.

Only it wasn't really a mistake.

Because when I opened the door, there was this redheaded dame in a clinch with Tom Martin, one of the two stooges who worked the stakepounding bit in the act.

I came in without knocking and I went out without a sound. I doubt if either of them saw me, because they were too wrapped up in each other—and that's not just a figure of speech, brother.

Anyway, I didn't stick around to see Harlow Black. Instead, I finished my other business in town and headed home. I wanted some time to think things over.

Then the show finished its route and came back to New York that summer.

That's when these marriage stories began to pile up. And that's when I decided to have a little talk. Not with Harlow, but with brother Henry.

He was coming in anyway, to discuss plans for the fall, and when he did, I let him have it.

Henry was a pale man, but when I told him about Lulu he turned even paler. I told you had a quiet voice, but when he spoke to me now it was scarcely a whisper.

“You’re sure?” he asked.

I nodded.

“And it was Tom Martin?”

I nodded again. “You’d better tip your brother off,” I said. “She’s nothing but another roundheels. But I’m surprised he doesn’t know. All you have to do is take one look at the dame.”

“But he loves her. He wants to marry her.”

I stopped nodding and shook my head. Versatile.

“It’ll never work,” I told him. “Get rid of her.”

“Maybe it would be easier to get rid of Tom Martin,” Henry suggested.

I went right on shaking my head. “Take my word for it. If it isn’t Tom Martin, it’ll be some other guy. She’s just that kind.”

Henry sighed. “I can’t believe it,” he muttered. “She seems so devoted to him. I could swear—”

“There’ll be a hell of a lot of swearing unless you get this straightened out,” I warned him. “My advice is to go to Harlow and put the cards on the table.”

So Henry went to Harlow and put his cards on the table. And the next day, Harlow Black disappeared.

“But he didn’t leave town,” Henry told me, that afternoon in my office. “He wouldn’t run off. I think it was murder. I’m going to ask for an investigation.”

“Take it easy,” I told him. “Wait a few days, see what happens. Maybe he’ll show up.”

Henry shook his head. He looked old, and tired. I couldn’t see his eyes under the drooping lids.

“He’ll never show up alive. I know.”

And that was all I could get out of him. When he went to the police, they didn't get much more.

The first thing the cops did was call in Lulu and Tom Martin. They told a straight story.

Henry had talked to his brother, all right, and Harlow lost no time in going around to see Lulu. When he walked into her hotel room the following night, Tom Martin was there.

Lulu claimed she was honest about it. She told Harlow Black to his face that she loved Tom, that they planned to get married.

According to her story, Harlow just wilted and walked out. This was pretty hard for me to believe, knowing him the way I did. Harlow Black wasn't the wilting kind.

But the police believed it. Harlow Black *did* walk out of that hotel room, that's certain. People in the lobby downstairs saw him go. And there were a couple of others down the street who thought they could identify the man who walked toward the river that night in the fog.

As for Lulu and Tom Martin, they had an alibi for the rest of the evening. It wasn't a pretty one, but it made sense. They'd spent the night together in her hotel room.

There was a big spread in the papers, of course, but there the matter rested for a couple of weeks.

But Henry Black didn't rest. I wasn't used to seeing Henry around very much, and now he was in my office every day.

"Why don't they do something?" he kept saying.

"What do you expect them to do? The word is out on your brother's disappearance. He's known, he'll be recognized, even if he shows up in Mexico. They're checking with all the depots and airports—"

Henry shook his head. "He won't show up in Mexico or anywhere else. He didn't need transportation for the trip he took. Somebody gave him a one-way ticket."

"Then what do you suggest?"

"I want them to drag the river," he said.

And finally, that's just what they did. Must have been three weeks later that they found something.

It wasn't too hard to find something in the East River in those days. Gangsters didn't waste money on funerals if they could help it. I remember the old vaude gag that went the rounds about gangsters—"Don't put all your yeggs in one casket."

But this is nothing to joke about. Because they came up with a body.

Matter of fact, they came up with two bodies. One was a woman, and she'd jumped a day or so before. The other had been in the water about three weeks. It was a man's corpse, that much they knew, but you know what water does to a body in hot weather. The only way Henry Black finally managed to identify it was by the ring on one swollen finger.

It was Harlow Black.

That's the way he testified before the coroner's jury, and that's the way it ended. Lulu and Tom Martin told their stories again, and so did the witnesses who had seen Harlow Black leave the hotel and head for the river. It looked as if he'd taken a walk down there to think things over, slipped off the pier in the fog, and drowned.

So the verdict was accidental death, and the whispering campaign said it was suicide.

The Lambs and the Friars got ready for a big funeral, but Henry Black wouldn't hear of it.

"My brother was not a churchgoer," he said. "He didn't believe in ceremonies. We'll have a private interment."

It was damned private, too. Just Henry, Lulu, Tom Martin and I rode out to the little cemetery in Queens.

I won't forget that afternoon. It was raining, of course, and I felt like hell. Not only because of what had happened but because of the tension in the air. Henry was acting mighty odd.

Lulu and Tom Martin knew it, too.

All the way out there, in the car, he wouldn't speak to them. He just kept staring. It wasn't until we saw the coffin lowered into the grave that he talked.

"What are your plans?" he asked.

Lulu shrugged. "Nothing's changed," she said. "Tom and I are still going to get married."

Henry shook his head.

"Harlow wouldn't like that," he said.

"But Harlow's dead."

Henry shook his head again.

"What do you mean?"

"I talked to him last night."

"You—what?"

"Well, put it this way. He talked to me."

"You mean he's *alive?"*

"I didn't say that."

"But when I said he was dead, you shook your head."

Henry blinked. "What do we know about life and death?" he asked. "That was Harlow's question, remember? Didn't he ever speak to you about that, Lulu?"

"You mean spiritualism, stuff like that? I never paid any attention to such nonsense."

"If you'd been in my room last night, you'd have paid attention," Henry told her. "Harlow was there. He spoke to me. He told me to warn you two. You must never marry. That is to be your punishment for what happened."

"What do you mean?" Tom Martin demanded. "What are you getting at?"

"Do you really want me to tell you?" Henry answered. "In front of *him?"* And he nodded toward me.

Tom Martin got very white, and I thought Lulu would pass out.

Henry shrugged. "Maybe it was a hallucination, or a dream. I'm just passing the word along. The two of you are to separate, for good. If not—"

He left it at that, and turned away. I rode back to town with him in one car, and Lulu and Tom Martin took another.

“All right, now,” I said to Henry. “What was all that about? Did you really talk to Harlow?”

He sighed. “I won’t try to convert you to spiritualism. But how else would I know the truth? You saw the way Lulu and Tom took it, didn’t you?”

“Cut out the mystery. That was your brother’s racket. What are you getting at?”

“The truth, like I said. Which is that they killed Harlow. Or Tom did, rather. He followed him when he left, caught up with him down on the pier. Then he knocked Harlow over the head and dumped him into the water.”

“But you can’t prove it! The police would never believe—”

Henry nodded. “I guess they wouldn’t. The important thing is, Lulu and Tom Martin believe it.”

“All right,” I said. “That’s your theory. And you cooked up the ghost story just to keep them from getting married, as a sort of revenge for your brother, is that it? Well, I don’t like the idea, Henry.”

“It isn’t an idea,” Henry insisted. “I *know.* And I know my brother, too. The way he felt about Lulu.” He paused. “Look, do me a favor. If you ever get wind that those two are together, give them another warning. I’d hate to see Harlow come back from the grave—”

“Knock it off,” I said. And meant it. All this talk was getting me down. It was crazy. Or Henry was crazy. Maybe the poor old guy had flipped over his brother’s death. The quiet ones do, sometimes. You know the old saying about still waters run deep. I wondered what Henry would do now that Harlow was gone and the act was finished.

But it wasn’t my problem, and I was glad to say goodbye to him. Frankly, he gave me the creeps. I didn’t like his murder theory and I didn’t like the crazy line about coming back from the grave.

Still, I remembered it.

And two months later, when I got tipped off about Lulu and Tom Martin running off to Jersey to get married, I decided to do something about it.

Against my better judgment, I called Henry at his brother's house, where he'd been staying ever since Harlow had died. I was almost relieved when I couldn't locate him there, until I realized that if anyone was to do anything, it would have to be me.

My tip had included information on where Lulu and Tom Martin were staying; they were in Atlantic City.

So that night I went down.

I didn't have any trouble locating them. They had a big suite at one of the big hotels, and they were throwing a champagne party. I got the red carpet treatment, but no chance to do any talking while the brawl went on. And it went on for quite a while.

It must have been close to two o'clock when the guests cleared out. I stuck around, waiting for my chance. By this time, I'd taken on quite a load myself, and I was a little hazy about just what I intended to say.

Mind you, I didn't believe any of that warning from the grave hooey. But I wanted to pass the word along. Just in case.

So finally we got together in the parlor of the suite, and Lulu kicked off her shoes, and Tom went around turning off the overhead lights and one of the lamps, and we got ready to relax.

And that's when the bedroom door opened.

At first we thought it was one of the guests, somebody who'd been sleeping it off. We turned, ready to make with the wisecracks.

But there were no wisecracks when Harlow Black walked into the room.

He stood there in his evening dress and his eyes glittered. He didn't look like a ghost and he didn't look like a man. He looked like a magician. He looked like a vampire, like something which couldn't die.

All of us were a little loaded, but one look at him sobered us up. We sat there and stared while Harlow Black walked over to the sofa where the bride and groom were sitting.

And he looked down at them with his gleaming eyes and he opened his mouth and showed his gleaming teeth, and he reached into his coat and pulled out the gleaming knife.

I recognized the knife, of course. It was the one he used regularly in his act.

I recognized it by the curved hilt, that quivered back and forth after the blade plunged into Tom Martin’s heart.

He toppled over on the floor, and the knife quivered, and Lulu and I stared at it, and when we looked up again Harlow Black was gone.

Then Lulu screamed.

What happened after that was rugged. The cops, the jail, the hearing, the inquest—it was all a nightmare. But nothing like the nightmare that started it, the nightmare of seeing Harlow Black again.

They tried to pin the rap on me, and then they tried to pin it on Lulu. But they couldn’t, of course. Henry showed up the next day and told his story, and I guess he was the one who suggested in his quiet way that they check the fingerprints on the knife against some old ones in police files all over the country. You see, when Harlow Black used to do the escape act from jail cells, part of the gag was to book him in like a regular prisoner and give him the works—take his fingerprints and everything.

So they checked.

And found Harlow Black’s fingerprints on the knife.

After that they had to let us go. I don’t know where Lulu went, but I had to hide out for a couple of weeks until the excitement died down. The papers had a fine time. Harlow Black wasn’t dead. He was dead and had come back from the grave. It was all a publicity stunt.

Oh, they had quite a time.

And so did I. Finally I caught up with Henry.

“All right,” I said. “Let’s have it. This damned gag has gone far enough. Ruined my business, nearly got me a stretch in pokey. I want a straight answer. Where’s that crazy brother of yours? Where’s Harlow?”

Henry blinked at me. “I haven’t seen him,” he said. “You’re the one who claims he did.”

“Damned right I did. And dead men don’t go around committing murder.”

"But he swore he would. He swore he'd come back. He kept his word."

"I'll never buy that."

Henry spread his hands. "Would it interest you to find out?" he asked, softly. "The police are going to reopen his grave and examine the body again. This afternoon. Do you want to come along?"

I went along.

And I stood there with Henry, at the side of the excavation, while the gravediggers shoveled and sweated and finally brought up the coffin.

I stared at the coffin and Henry stared at me.

"He said he'd come back from the grave," Henry whispered.

That's when I passed out. When I looked at the empty coffin in Harlow Black's grave. The coffin that had been splintered and forced from *inside.* . . .

It's time for quotation marks again. And it was time for another drink, too, when Jed Connors finished his story.

Only I wasn't so sure it was finished.

"What happened then?" I asked.

He waved his hand vaguely. "Big sensation. Nationwide search for Harlow Black. More fuss in the papers. I holed up for almost a year before things finally died down."

"But they never found Harlow Black?"

He shook his head. "Never."

"And what became of Henry?"

"He went abroad until the heat was off. Refused to talk about it any more. Never gave any more interviews, either. When he came back he drifted out to the Coast—he'd gone into some business or other out there—and a little while later I heard he got married. That was the last, until you showed me this clipping. He's dead, now."

"That's right," I said. "He's dead now, and when you heard about it, you suddenly decided you could talk. So tell me the rest of it."

Jed Connors smiled and lifted his glass. “Pretty smart, aren’t you? All right, I guess I might as well. Took me a while to figure things out—but after all, I’ve had more than twenty years. And I guess I know, now. In fact, I knew the truth right there at the grave, when I fainted.

“It wasn’t the sight of the empty coffin that made me pass out. It was seeing Henry stare at me. Stare at me with his eyes open. I’d have recognized that glitter anywhere. He had Harlow’s eyes.”

“You mean, Henry and his brother had—?”

The little agent sighed.

“There was no Henry,” he said. “Just Harlow Black. Figure it out for yourself. Nobody ever saw the two of them together—I never did. Henry was just Harlow Black’s offstage character. Without the hair rinse, the false mustache, the built-up shoes, the fancy clothes and the loud voice. Harlow Black used Henry as a disguise, for business purposes. A screwball trick, but like I said, magicians are the screwiest.

“But that’s how he knew what he claimed to know, about Harlow Black being followed by Tom Martin that night, getting slugged and thrown into the water. Which is probably just what really happened. Only the water revived him, and he crawled out like the old escape artist he was. Crawled out and plotted revenge.

“How he planted his ring on the finger of the corpse, I dunno. Maybe he did it the very night he was slugged—maybe he went out and murdered a guy, then slipped a ring on his finger and waited for the body to show up. I wouldn’t put anything past him. Not Harlow Black!

“Anyway, it worked. But the police wouldn’t indict Tom Martin because of Lulu’s alibi. So Harlow rigged up his little ghost story to frighten the two of them, keep them apart. And when that idea fell through, he merely walked in and killed Tom Martin in cold blood.”

I gulped my drink. “But what about the grave?” I asked.

The agent grinned. “Leave it to Harlow Black to build an illusion,” he said. “Simple trick for him to sneak out there the night before it was to be opened and do a little digging himself. Splinter the coffin, nail the lid back on.

“And the body? What did he do with the body?”

“Who knows? Dumped it somewhere, maybe back in the river again. I didn’t ask. I didn’t even want to think about it.”

“You never told this story to the police?”

“I told you I didn’t want to think about it. With a guy like Harlow Black running around loose, it wasn’t safe to ask questions. Besides, in a way, everything worked out. Tom Martin did steal his girl and try to murder him. He got what was coming to him, all right. And so did Harlow.”

I looked at the little agent. “You’re sure you recognized him?”

“Positive. And when I saw those eyes of his, I knew all I had to know. Which was to keep my mouth shut, as long as he lived. Nobody could stand in Harlow Black’s way when he was after what he wanted.”

“But he wanted Lulu.”

“He got her, too. Didn’t I tell you that when Henry came back and went out to the Coast he got married?”

“Lulu? You mean after all that happened, after all he knew, he came back posing as his own brother and married the girl?”

The agent shook his head solemnly. “Love,” he said. “That old black magic. Besides, didn’t I tell you magicians were all screwballs?”

Block That Metaphor

In dealing with Mechs, "Guard your tongue" was the worst advice—they would obligingly guard it for you!

IT was to be a formal affair-white shorts and tails—and Lane Borden wondered just how well Vorm would fit in.

The servants and *attaches* here at the Embassy were used to the presence of visiting extraterrestials, but even they seemed disturbed by Vorm.

If he had been a mere robot, there wouldn't be any problem, but the idea of a sentient intelligence housed in a wholly synthetic body was difficult to accept. The body itself was not repulsive; it was largely metallic, but humanoid in its general contours. There were some rather disturbing differences, though.

An engineer would probably grant the advantage of having six visual perceptors, or "eyes," situated equidistantly around the entire cranial compartment. Still, the knowledge that Vorm really had "eyes in the back of his head" and could observe everything in a room *simultaneously* created an unnerving effect Then, too, Vorm's "mouth" was just a speaking-tube, and as for his "nose"—

Lane Borden remembered what had happened earlier in the afternoon, when he'd conducted Vorm into his own apartments at the Embassy for a little informal chat That was when Borden's fiancée had made an unexpected appearance.

Borden was justly proud of Margaret Zurich. She was a strikingly beautiful woman and an intergalactically famous pianist—one of the few who still excelled in the ancient art of non-electronic musicianship. Borden really envied her talent.

But when she abruptly entered the room where he sat with Vorm, he felt neither pride nor envy, merely a frantic fear.

“Excuse me a moment,” he said, nodding to Vorm as he rose and crossed over to Margaret Zurich. Before she could object, he took her arm and led her out into the anteroom. Even so, he wasn’t at all certain that he’d managed to act in time to prevent a crisis.

“DARLING, what’s the matter?” Margaret asked. She stared at Borden’s throat. “And what’s that thing you’re wearing around your neck?”

“It’s a jammer,” Borden told her, opening a desk drawer and producing a duplicate of the contrivance. “Just take this one for yourself. Here, I’ll show you how to put it on.”

“But whatever for?”

“You’ve heard of jammers, haven’t you?”

“Oh. Of course. I’ve just never seen one.” She frowned. “You mean that creature in there is a telepath?”

“No, not in the ordinary sense. This instrument doesn’t scramble thought patterns. You’ll notice it’s worn around the neck, at the larynx. It scrambles subvocalizations.”

“The thoughts one put into words but doesn’t speak aloud?”

“Close enough. The point is he has unusual hearing ability which extends to detecting subvocalizations. That’s why we wear jammers—to scramble the unspoken sounds.”

“But I don’t—”

“Please, we’ll discuss it later. I don’t want to keep my guest waiting.”

Throat masked, pulse obscured by electronic impulse, Margaret reentered the room and met the visitor.

She seemed startled by Vorm's appearance, and even more startled when he acknowledged her introduction by abruptly reaching up and unscrewing the flaring spout above his speaking-tube. He reached into the diplomatic pouch strapped to his waist and drew out a blunt nozzle which he inserted in the gaping hole.

Margaret Zurich pretended not to notice, but Borden could see she was unsettled. Later on, he must take her aside and explain that nose-changing was a token of polite greeting in Vorm's world. Vorm's race did not need noses.

Once, perhaps, millenia ago, they had been creatures of flesh and blood. Then, like hermit crabs, they had retreated into their synthetic shells; created the shells, in fact, to shield themselves from mortal frailties. They had substituted mechanical evolution for physical evolution and now only the intelligence remained, encased in fabricated bodies that were wholly functional.

In a completely prostheticized body, the nose was only a special tool. The diplomatic pouch Vorm carried must contain a dozen different nasal attachments, each one designed for use in a given situation. Borden knew of one which served as a drill, another which was a sort of acetylene torch, still another which was merely a great razor-sharp cutting instrument. These were all useful to Vorm's race in the mines of their planet.

YES, Borden would have to make Margaret understand Vorm's alienness, his super-sensitive faculties, his freedom from the physiological demands of eating, voiding, sleeping. Margaret was not like those in the street mobs who yelled, "Down with the dirty Mechs!" Mechs. Mechanical monsters, without regard for human feelings or human lives.

Borden would set Margaret straight on that point, too. It had been an accident when the Mechs killed some of the humans in the first contact crew to reach their planet. The crew hadn't known that the Mechs could detect subvocalizations, nor had they realized another important *psychological* difference. The Mechs interpreted everything literally. There were no similes, no figures of speech, no abstractions or hyperbole in their concepts.

So when a crew member, exhausted by the rigors of the long journey and discouraged by his first glimpse of the barren planet, had subvocalized to himself, “Volunteering for an expedition like this—I ought to have my head examined!” the Mechs had taken him obligingly but lethally at his unspoken word.

There had been more killing, a whole series of tragic incidents, until someone had been astute enough to *ask* the Mechs the reason for their actions. And the Mechs explained. Apparently they told the truth about everything—just as they accepted every statement of others as the truth. When it was learned that they detected subvocalizations, “heard” them, in fact, like humanly audible speech, the remedy became obvious. From then on, crew members wore quickly improvised jammers. And as an added precaution, they tried to avoid even *thinking* in exaggerated terms.

Borden and his people had set up the invitation which brought Vorm to Earth, and he'd studied the problems connected with this first visit very thoroughly. The Mechs could be indispensable allies. If the proper treaties and agreements could be made, the Mechs might solve many vital problems. For example, a Mech could work where humans couldn't—in the mines of hot planets, on the peaks of cold planets, and amidst poisonous atmospheres or none at all.

Borden was determined to see that emissary Vorm enjoyed his stay here, but he had to admit that this business of taking everything literally was awkward at times.

For example, before Margaret left the room after her brief visit, she and Borden embraced. Worm didn't comprehend the gesture, and after she departed he indicated his curiosity.

Borden tried to tell him something about physical contact, but the whole concept of tactile, functioning flesh was strange to the prosthetic being.

“No love,” Borden mused. “I know you speak the truth, but it’s hard for me to accept. I just can’t seem to get it through my head.” Vorm reached into the diplomatic pouch and pulled out a gleaming nasal attachment. “I could drill an opening,” he suggested.

BORDEN said hastily, “You don’t understand,” aware that he’d made a slip despite his conscientious effort to avoid one. “I was merely using a figure of speech.”

“Speech is formless.”

Borden nodded. “True. Yours is a realistic race.”

“Very,” Vorm acknowledged. “Perhaps that is why we do not comprehend your emotions.”

“But you do have feelings of your own. You know what I mean when I speak of fear, greed, pride. And you have esthetic appreciation. You have told me that you enjoy music, for example.”

“Yes,” Vorm replied, resonating in amplified excitement. “You promised to play something for me, did you not?”

“Gladly,” Borden told him.

And he *was* glad of the reminder. It would be easier to play than to continue the discussion on an abstract plane, trying to avoid lingual pitfalls.

Besides, the music might help drown out the disconcerting sound which was faintly audible from outside the Embassy. All afternoon long, the crowds had been parading back and forth, carrying their stupid placards, don’t mix with mechs! and no deals with monsters! were the mildest inscriptions. And the fools kept shouting, “We know you’ve got a Mech in there! Will you bring him out or do you want us to come in and get him?”

Well, they wouldn’t come in. Borden had the gates locked and guards posted. But it was embarrassing under the circumstances. He wished he could go out and explain the truth about those unfortunate first clashes between Vorm's race and the early contact crews. But it would take time to register, even with a person of Margaret's intelligence. In order to make a mob comprehend clearly, a whole campaign of indoctrination and education must be mounted.

Such a campaign was in the works, but it hadn't been launched as yet. Vorm's visit had been premature and unexpected; the best Borden could hope to do was shield him from the hostility of the uninformed masses. So much depended on the success of this meeting—and it was up to Borden, meanwhile, to establish and maintain cordial relations.

Borden knew how to play the role of a charmer. He had a collection of antique tapes, and he put on a few for his visitor. Vorm seemed to enjoy the mild dissonances—the finale of Prokofieffs *Chout,* the rhythms of Villa-Lobos' *Urapuri,* Respighi's *Fountains of Rome,* and other primitive examples of olden "symphonic" musical compositions.

Noting Vorm's reaction, Borden excused himself and went off to dress, leaving his guest happily twiddling with his stereophonic and binaural ear-vents.

VORM'S preoccupation continued long enough for Borden to get down into the dining hall and check on dinner arrangements; long enough for him to admit and greet the guests who arrived—awkwardly but sensibly—through a rear entrance. It just wasn't safe to use the front entry, with the mob outside.

As it grew dark, the crowd increased. They were going to make a big demonstration, Borden knew, but there was no help for it.

He was just thankful that most of the invited guests actually showed up, despite the unpleasant situation. Most of them were government people and all of them had been briefed about their conduct. They wore jammers as a matter of course.

When the group had assembled, Borden brought Vorm into the hall and introduced him around. For the most part, the humans managed to conceal whatever strain or agitation his presence inspired, but there was a noticeable increase in the consumption of before-dinner cocktails. Lawrence, the butler (it was a part of Embassy tradition to employ live servitors), circulated with his tray for a good half-hour or more before dinner was announced.

Vorm went in with Margaret Zurich on his arm. She displayed admirable composure. Again, Borden was proud of her, and he had no reason to be ashamed of his guests. They ate and drank quite naturally and pretended not to notice that Vorm merely sat there and employed his oral orifice for speaking purposes only.

If he felt awkward—or experienced actual repugnance—at the spectacle of human beings ingesting nourishment, he did not betray his reaction. His speaking-tube was in constant use and he seemed pleased to meet so many officials and dignitaries.

Borden noticed that he had inserted a different nasal attachment in honor of the occasion. It was a star-shaped instrument, obviously ornamental, for it was studded with diamonds. Several of the ladies openly admired it. Borden wondered what they would have said if Vorm had chosen instead to wear his drill, or perhaps the long razorlike knife. Surely the ladies would have remembered the "murdering monster" stories and reacted unpleasantly.

For that matter, Vorm probably regarded the throat-jammers as ceremonial decoration. If he was aware of the absence of subvocalizations, he gave no sign.

All was well. There were no untoward incidents during the course of the dinner and Borden was quite relieved at its successful conclusion. He led his guests into the drawing room and there announced that Margaret would play a few selections in honor of the distinguished visitor.

Some of the guests had never actually seen an old-fashioned "piano" before, but all of them were aware of Margaret's reputation as an artist. They settled down to enjoy the impromptu musicale.

Borden and Vorm sat together, directly before the instrument. Vorm seemed fascinated with the spectacle of a "live" performance.

MARGARET'S repertoire was classical, of course. She specialized in the three Bs—Bartok, Brubeck and Bernstein—and Borden sat back, beaming in pride as she played.

"Do you play?" Vorm asked softly.

"A very little," Borden admitted. "But I lack the touch." He hesitated. "Sometimes I think I wasn't cut out for diplomacy. I should have been a—"

There was a sudden crash, and Borden jumped to his feet.

Everyone started at the sound, then stared at the pavement block which had landed on the tesselated floor. Through the broken window came the clamor of the mob outside.

Lawrence hurried over to Borden's side and whispered. Borden faced his guests with a set smile.

"Please don't be alarmed," he said. "There has been a slight accident downstairs. I'll attend to it. Margaret, if you'll be good enough to continue —"

And she did continue, while Borden raced down the hall, then took the stairway steps two at a time. Lawrence followed him with a force-gun such as the guards were holding in the foyer below.

"Nasty," Lawrence said. "They got through the gates somehow. It's all the men can do to keep them from breaking down the door. Captain Rollins is afraid they'll have to open fire soon unless something is done to disperse the crowd. He wants your orders—"

Borden nodded and brushed past him.

"Wait, sir!" the butler quavered. "You aren't going out there, are you? Here, you forgot the gun—"

Borden kept going. At the door, Captain Rollins stepped up to intercept him. Borden walked past without a word and opened the door.

The roar of the mob struck him like a great blow.

"Give us the Mech! We know he's in there!"

Borden raised his hands, palms outward, to show he was unarmed. The gesture had its inevitable, immemorial quieting effect.

Afterward, he couldn't quite remember just what it was he had to, say. But words come easily to the trained diplomat, and Borden had risen to his present position due to superior qualifications.

He started out by telling the crowd they had nothing to fear. Yes, there was a Mech inside, but couldn't they see guards had been posted all around the building for the protection of the public? The Mech couldn't possibly escape to harm anyone. Besides, he didn't want to do any harm. Right now he was listening to music. Yes, the Mech was a music-lover! And if they didn't believe it, they could hear for themselves, through the window.

So there was absolutely no danger. The Mech was guarded, would be guarded until tomorrow, when he'd return to his own planet. He had come here under government invitation, to conclude a treaty. The government needed Mechs to mine metals for the Galaxy.

BORDEN found himself explaining about the death of the crewmen during the first contacts. He went into a simplified description of subvocalization, using his own jammer by way of illustration.

As he lifted it back from his neck, there was a single frightening moment of realization which he forced himself to suppress. Smiling, he went on with his talk.

There was nothing to be alarmed about, he repeated. In fact, the Mech thought the guards were here to protect *him*—he was afraid of people! If it hadn't been for the music, he'd probably be hiding under his bed right now!

This got a laugh from the mob, and after that the rest was routine. In five minutes, Borden managed to break up the assemblage. In ten minutes, the street in front of the Embassy was almost cleared. Borden was able to turn matters over to Captain Rollins.

"You did a wonderful job, sir," Rollins told him. He paused. "Why, what's the matter?"

"Look at this." Borden held up the jammer. "When I took it off to show the crowd just now, I noticed the input feeder was broken. It isn't working."

"Think it came loose when you removed it?"

"I hope so." Borden's voice was tense. "I'd hate to think I'd been sitting upstairs with our guest without the protection of a jammer." He spied Vorm coming down the stairs, and turned, quickly detaching the jammer from Captain Rollins' throat. "I'll need this," he said. He barely managed to adjust it when Vorm arrived at the foot of the stairway.

"I'm sorry, but I had to come," Vorm said. "I know I caused you this trouble."

"It was all a mistake," Borden answered. "A misunderstanding."

"Gracious of you to say so," Vorm droned, his cranium bobbing. "But I understand what happened. They came to destroy me and you turned them away. You saved me."

"Do not be offended. They just didn't understand."

"I am not offended. I admire you. You see, I do possess certain of your emotions after all. While our race does not comprehend love, it knows admiration. And it knows gratitude. I am grateful to you, Mr. Borden. I must reward you."

"No need, I assure you."

"I shall see to it that we conclude the treaty of which you spoke."

"I am overwhelmed."

"But that is not enough. I must think of something suitable for you, personally."

"Forget it, please."

"I never forget anything."

"Shall we join the others?"

THEY did, and the episode concluded. Margaret made no attempt to resume playing, and in a short while the guests departed. Although reasonably sure that there was no longer any danger from the crowd, Borden insisted that they again use the rear exit. As for Margaret, he persuaded her to stay over for the night. “I’ll feel safer if you do,” he told her.

“Very well, if you insist.”

She said good night to Vorm, and Lawrence escorted her down the hall to one of the guest apartments at the end of the corridor.

Borden was left alone with Vorm, but not for long. He was embarrassed by the Mech’s protestations of gratitude.

“Isn’t there something you want?” he kept repeating.

“Not a thing.” Borden shook his head emphatically. “Now if I may be excused—”

“That is right. You must rest, is it not so? There is much I do not understand about the human structure.”

“Good night.”

“It is, isn’t it?” Vorm agreed.

Borden retired to his own quarters. It had been an eventful evening. The affair was successfully concluded, the mob had dispersed, Vorm was favorably inclined toward a treaty. There was nothing to worry about—except, perhaps, the matter of the defective jammer. Quite probably it *had* failed when he took it from his throat out there before the mob. But if it had failed earlier—

Frantically, he attempted to recall any subvocalizations he might have made earlier in the course of the evening. It was an almost hopeless effort; one is scarcely aware of the constant and habitual phenomenon. Borden could only hope that his conscious efforts to think and speak only in literal terms had been successful; that he had not inadvertently emitted some perfectly normal idiom which might be capable of disturbing interpretation.

He could not fall into deep slumber until near dawn, and he must have overslept as a consequence, because when he awoke, Lawrence was shaking him and saying something to the effect that Vorm had gone.

“Gone?” Borden sat upright in bed. “But I was to take him to the launching-site myself.”

“Captain Rollins did so, sir. And knowing you were tired—”

"But I meant to say good-by."

"It wasn't really necessary. Vorm told me to express his gratitude."

"That again!"

"I'm afraid so, sir. You seem to have made a lasting impression on him because of your conduct last night. A diplomatic triumph, if I may say so." He coughed. "In fact, he left you a little farewell gift."

LAWRENCE extended the small white box and Borden fumbled with the wrappings.

"What for? More gratitude, I presume?"

"Exactly," Lawrence smiled. "He said he'd spent hours trying to think of something for a man who claimed he had everything. Fortunately, he told me, he forgets nothing. And he happened to remember that you expressed a certain wish last night, which he was happy to be able to fulfill." Borden halted in his efforts to untie the package. "A wish?" he muttered. "I don't recall—"

"He said that now you would be able to play the piano well." Borden put down the package, very slowly.

He stood up, thinking about Vorm. Vorm, who didn't understand love, but who knew gratitude. Vorm, who didn't comprehend human flesh and its frailty, but who knew that he could change parts of his own body at will, by simply unscrewing one instrument and replacing it with another.

Vorm, who took everything absolutely literally. Vorm, who could install a nasal appendage which was like a great razor.

"What's the matter, sir?" Lawrence murmured. "Aren't you even going to look at your gift?"

But Borden was already running down the hall toward Margaret's room.

He knew it was too late, just as he knew what must be in the package. Because now it came to him—he could remember how he and Vorm had sat there watching Margaret play the piano.

"Do you play?" Vorm had asked.

“A very little. But I lack the touch,” Borden had replied. And he’d paused, and the subvocalization must have come then. Yes, it must have come then, and the jammer was already broken, and Vorm had heard the unspoken wish—the wish he’d just granted, literally.

Borden raced down the hall, the subvocalization thundering in his ears. Yes, he remembered the words now. *“I wish I had those fingers—”*

A Lesson for the Teacher

Ruth Bailey wanted to engage in matrimony. But she was faced with two problems—a gorgeous young competitor and a guy who wanted to practice a while before he signed up.

ALL right," said Ruth Bailey. "Let's face it. I'm thirty-seven.

"Thirty-seven," she repeated. "That's the age when even the biggest Hollywood stars have trouble getting another five-year contract from a major studio. The age when a dramatic actress thinks twice before playing a fourteen-year-old Juliet, and then goes ahead and does it anyway, praying that the critics will be kind. At thirty-seven the career woman stops being a private secretary and begins to climb. It's the time when a prostitute has to decide whether to become a madame or a scrubwoman; when a society matron sheds her third husband and looks for a fourth, and the housewife starts pestering her husband about moving out to the suburbs and joining a country club. Why, at thirty-seven some women become grandmothers! Time to sit back and enjoy the menopause that refreshes."

Ruth Bailey shook her head and smiled wryly. "That old saying about life begins at forty may hold true for men, but thirty-seven is the crucial time for most women. And what have *I* to show for it?"

Nobody answered her question, because Ruth Bailey was talking to herself. She'd found herself getting into the habit lately, and it was beginning to worry her. Lots of things were beginning to worry Ruth recently. Like being lonely at night and nobody giving a damn about her, and overhearing the kids talk about “Old Lady Bailey” at school.

Kids. All those young people.

She sat down on the bed and thought about them for a moment. For fifteen years she’d been a school-teacher, and there’d been nothing in her life but kids. Was it really fifteen years since Nick had been killed in the war? That’s right—she’d been just twenty-two then, and ever since that time she’d taught. The way it looked now, she’d go right on teaching until she retired.

For a while Ruth had thought she might be getting somewhere with Harold Ferris, the manual-training instructor. Things had even reached the point where he invited her over to look at his ship-models.

Maybe she shouldn’t have turned the invitation down. But at the time, Ruth thought it wise to play coy and kittenish. That was last semester, before Ann Corwin came to join the high school faculty. Ann Corwin, the Home Ec instructor—what on earth would a man like Harold Ferris see in her? Why, she was nothing but a young snip!

Ruth’s lips shaped themselves into the wry smile again. That was the answer, of course. Ann Corwin was young. Young, and pretty; just the kind of a girl who any red-blooded manualtraining teacher would invite up to inspect his flotilla. She’d probably seen the whole fleet by now, while as for Ruth—“I guess I just missed the boat,” she told herself.

She rose and stood before the mirror. She didn’t preen. Thirty-seven is no age for preening, if you’re an honest woman. And Ruth was, she insisted, honest. Still, she had to admit what she saw wasn’t *too* bad. Her hair was still brown and glossy. Her skin, and the flesh beneath it, remained firm. She had good color and her figure wasn’t too bad—maybe she’d been smart never to go in for the uplift bra fad.

“You’re no spring chicken,” she told herself earnestly, “but I’m damned if you’re an old hen, either.”

Well, it was nothing to cackle about. She was still thirty-seven, whether she looked her age or not, and today was her birthday. A fine celebration she was having, too. No relatives in the world to remember the occasion with presents, and Harold Ferris hadn't even sent her a card. No cake, no candles. "Just as well," she mused. "The heat from thirty-seven candles would kill me."

Sure, that was the way.

Laugh it off. Kid herself about it. Only all at once, standing there in front of the glass, Ruth Bailey didn't feel like kidding herself any longer. She peered at the mirror intently—not at her reflection, but at the shiny surface itself. The mirror had been here in her room ever since she moved in, fifteen years ago. Now it was beginning to speckle, to dull and tarnish in spots. You couldn't really notice it until you looked closely, but the process of decay was going on. And it would continue, slowly but inexorably. Eventually the mirror would crack; then it would be discarded in the junk-heap, with nobody to mourn its former, forgotten brightness—

"Oh, *stop!"* she told herself, turning away. But there was nothing else to look at in the bedroom except the bed. And nothing to do. In spite of all the old jokes, Ruth had never found a man hiding under her bed.

"And what's more, you never will," she said, aloud. "This is the way it's always been, the way it always will be." Her voice broke. "Damn it, why *can't* there be a man under the bed, just once? Even a brush salesman?"

In a moment, she realized angrily, the tears would come.

Because there was no man under her bed, no man in her bed, no man at all.

Her eyes brightened, ready for liquid release, then widened suddenly at the sound of a knock on the door.

Ruth opened it and stared up at her visitor.

He was young, he was dark, but above all, he was tall. He must have been six feet five, at least, and he towered above her in a way no brush salesman would ever do. Brush salesmen are small and neat and cheerful. This man was big, and he wore a rumpled slack-suit and his gray eyes were grave. But he *was* a man.

"Miss Bailey?" His voice was deep, very resonant, and he spoke with just the slightest hesitant trace of an accent. "You *are* Miss Bailey, are you not?"

Ruth nodded, but he didn't seem quite satisfied.

"The Miss Bailey who teaches the Social Science at the upper school?"

"High school," she corrected, congratulating herself that she'd guessed right about the trace of accent. "I teach Social Science, yes."

"Good. I was told I could find you here." He paused. "My name is Clay." He paused again, as if he expected some reaction from Ruth.

"Pleased to meet you," she said, mechanically. Her next phrase was no better, but she had to say something. "What can I do for you?"

"I would like you to teach me."

Ruth blinked. "But—"

"I know. It is all most unregular. But I made to inquire at the school, for someone who would be a private tutor. And you were suggested. It was said that your evenings were free."

Yes, Ruth told herself, *my evenings are free*.

"Oh, I do not mean that I will not pay," said Clay. He smiled. "My English is not too perfect. That is one of the things I wish you to help me about."

"Then why not take a night-school course in English?" Ruth asked. "There are some very good—"

"Please. I am a stranger, I do not feel yet at ease in a group. Besides, it is not just a matter of language. It is the customs, the folkways, the Social Sciences you instruct, this I wish to learn. I have so little of it where I come from."

"And that is—?" Ruth murmured.

"Martinique," Clay told her. "Fort-de-France."

"The West Indies? How exciting."

Clay shrugged. “Very dull. Very, how you say, provincial. I must learn the whole world. You will help me?” And he smiled again.

The smile decided her. After all, why not? He was a man, a handsome man. And her evenings were free.

“Why not?” Ruth answered. “Shall we say three nights a week? My fee will be five dollars an evening.”

“Agreed. Can we start tomorrow night? Here?”

Ruth hesitated, thinking of her landlady. A mean, gossiping old biddy—she was bound to talk. Well, let her talk. It was about time Ruth gave her something to chew on. About time? It was literally now or never.

Ruth returned Clay’s smile, with interest. “Tomorrow night.” she echoed. “Here.”

And so it began.

At first Ruth was uneasy. How could she work out a formal program of instruction for a grown man? She was no Margaret Mead.

But then, Clay was no ordinary student. He much preferred the informal discussion, the question-and-answer approach. He was not just interested in facts and figures; he did not want mere knowledge, but *understanding*.

So they talked. They talked of cabbages and kings, and it sometimes became a seminar in philosophy rather than a lesson in civics. Ruth was delighted with Clay’s perceptive mind, with his incisive questions.

Ruth was delighted with Clay, period.

She admitted as much to herself. He was shy, even to the point of reticence, concerning his own background and achievements—but eager to learn every detail of her own existence, past and present. It was all very flattering. His deference to her opinions, his courtesy, his reliance on her judgment, formed a startling contrast to the attitude of her regular daily pupils.

Her daily pupils. Ruth had always found it difficult to face them. Now it was becoming intolerable. The kids were awful, and getting worse. The change had started way back at the end of the war. That’s when the convertibles began to show up in the parking-lot, and the reefers began to turn up in the pockets of the leather jackets. Then came rock-n’-roll and the I’m-Tough cult of Brando and Dean. Respect and responsibility vanished, and with it the wish to learn. Oh, there were still exceptions, and Ruth didn’t make the mistake of damning an entire generation as juvenile delinquents. But sometimes it seems as if the rebel veils of the rebels without a cause drowned out all other sounds, and it was a blessed relief to seek refuge in those nights with Clay. Ruth found herself looking forward to each evening—the three a week she spent teaching, and the two nights when they just went out together.

For that was the most recent development, the going out together. Clay had suggested it.

“Why not?” he argued. “What better way is there for me to learn—how is it said?—the folkways and the culture? To dine, to enjoy the entertainment, it is all a part of Social Sciences.”

Ruth didn’t resist very strenuously. She knew what was happening to her, of course, but she didn’t really care. In fact, she had reached the point where she took an exultant delight in the opportunity to flaunt Clay’s company to the world.

After years of dining in shabby tea-rooms at a deuce-table next to the swinging doors of the kitchen it was pure heaven to walk into a good restaurant on the arm of a handsome man and be wined and dined in style. A childish vanity, childishly phrased, but it meant a lot to the woman in Ruth. And Ruth was increasingly conscious of her womanhood. Once she assured herself that Clay seemed to possess ample funds, she had no further scruples about his extra-curricular attentions. She accepted the pleasures, enjoyed them.

And that, of course, was the cause of her downfall.

Came the inevitable night when she and Clay bumped into Harold Ferris and Ann Corwin. The manual-training teacher and his colleague were out on the town. At first Ruth looked upon the meeting as the climax of her personal triumphs. She enjoyed the astonished look on Harold Ferris's face when introduced to Clay, and was just catty enough to relish the poorly-concealed envy of Ann Corwin when she covertly contrasted her aging escort with Ruth's handsome pupil.

But after Harold and Ann joined them at their table and had a few drinks, Ruth began to regret the affair. Particularly when Clay asked the younger woman to dance.

Harold Ferris was asking her questions about Clay, and she answered impatiently, her eyes and mind intent on the couple circling the floor. They moved perfectly together; the tall, youthful man and the tall, youthful blonde. Youthful. That's what they had in common—youth. They were talking and smiling at one another, and all at once Ruth realized the truth. She wondered if Harold Ferris had any inkling of it; that these two belonged together.

Apparently he did not, for he said nothing and exhibited no sign of jealousy. And there was just the bare possibility that there was no reason for being jealous, either, for when Clay and Ann returned to the table they behaved quite decorously.

When Clay escorted Ruth home that evening, it was as if nothing had changed. He never even spoke of the blonde girl. For a moment Ruth was relieved. Maybe she was just imagining things. As usual, under these circumstances, she began the old interior debate again—should she ask him in? For the corny nightcap, the corny clinch? She'd never dared, knowing it was corny; knowing, at the same time, that she wanted just that. Perhaps tonight was the time.

He was standing outside the door now as she fumbled for her key; he was looking down at her and smiling, and his eyes were warm. She had only to look up and say—

But he said it first.

“I shall not be seeing you tomorrow night.”

“No lesson?”

He shook his head. “We will resume the night after, yes? It is that I have a former—no, a previous—engagement. Yes, other plans.”

“Oh.”

“It is with your friend, the Miss Corwin.”

“Oh,” said Ruth again, and what she wanted to do was cry and curse at the same time, what she wanted to say was, *Damn it, did you have to tell me, don’t you even care enough about me to lie about it?*

What kind of a man was Clay anyway, to brush her off, come out with it in cold blood, and still stand there and smile at her? So he was a foreigner, he was from Martinique; weren’t Frenchmen supposed to be gallant?

“She is very pretty, Miss Corwin. And I have a feeling I may learn much from her, too. The Social Sciences, you know.”

“Yes,” said Ruth. “The Social Sciences.” She stooped and inserted the key in the lock. “And now will you please go away? I’m very tired.”

“Tired?” A frown creased Clay’s forehead. “But I was hoping we might still talk. There is a thought I wished to express, about the—what is the word?—sexual relationships of society.”

Ruth wanted to laugh in his face. No, that wasn’t true; she wanted to cry in his face. Instead she straightened up and said, very quickly, “Anything you want to learn in that department you can find out from Miss Corwin. She’s an exceptionally competent instructor.”

Then she walked inside and slammed the door.

The next forty-eight hours were the hardest. It was bad that first night, it was worse the next day, it was almost unbearable the night following, and the succeeding day was utter agony.

But by the time the third evening arrived, Ruth had faced up to everything.

She sat before the mirror after her lonely supper and made her summation. “I should have known nothing would come of it, really. I’m too old for him, for one thing. Besides, I know next to nothing about the man, the whole affair is utterly ridiculous. If he shows up tonight I’m going to tell him to go to hell. Only—

“I love him.”

She could have skipped the rest. But the rest was true, too, and the rest was important. Any good Social Science teacher could tell you that. But at the moment, Ruth was not a good Social Science teacher. She was a frightened, middle-aged woman in love. No, not even a woman—just an emptiness, an emptiness which waited to be filled, wanted to be filled, *had* to be filled in spite of rhyme or reason. An emptiness sitting on the edge of the bed, gazing into a blank mirror and poised for the sound of footsteps which were going to come this way, *must* come this way.

They came.

And Ruth rose, and went to the door, knowing what she would say to him, knowing what she would do. She’d not ask questions, she’d not demand answers. She’d just hold out her arms and nothing else would matter.

The girl ran into the room.

“Ann! What are you doing here?”

“Where is he? Where is he?”

“I don’t know. If it’s Clay you mean, he has a room—”

“Yes. I went there first. I told the police to look for him there.”

“Police?”

“Oh, God, I’m so frightened—”

Ruth looked at her. She’d been crying and her face was drawn. Her lips trembled as she spoke.

“He’s crazy, that’s what’s the matter,” Ann was murmuring. “Last night we went out, and then afterwards, in his room—but you know, too, don’t you? I mean, he must have—" She broke off abruptly, shuddering.

"No," said Ruth, softly. "I don't know. Do you want to tell me about it?"

"It wasn't so much what he did. It was the way he *talked* to me, the way he *looked* at me—and the *questions.* I mean, you don't ask *questions*, not unless you're a maniac. That's when I knew he was crazy. And then I saw the six toes, and he said yes, other things were different, too, and he *showed* me—" She shuddered again, her voice breaking. "He's a maniac, that's what he is, and I went to the police, and I wanted to warn you. If he comes here, you'd better call them right away." She hesitated. "Is he coming here?"

It was Ruth's turn to hesitate. "I don't think so," she said, at last.

"All right. They'll catch him anyway, at his room when he goes back. They know there's something wrong. I guess they investigated. Harold told me not to worry. I'm going to see him right now, he's waiting for me. But, Ruth, be careful! Please!"

Ruth nodded.

Long after Ann left she was still nodding, nodding to herself and to her reflection in the mirror.

Then she stopped nodding as *he* came. And she opened the door, and she did not hold out her arms. She just sat there and stared at the floor and said, "The police are looking for you. Ann told them. They know all about you, now."

"All about me?"

"Well, what they don't know, they'll find out. So you might as well tell me, too. Your name isn't Clay, is it? And you're not from Martinique, either. And you have six toes, and—"

"Six toes? Did *she* tell you that?"

"She told me everything." Ruth looked at him for the first time and was surprised to find him blushing. "How could you?" she sighed. "How could you do it? She thought you were crazy, staring at her and asking her questions. Questions, for heaven's sake! Why on earth—?"

"Because I wanted to learn," he said, softly. "Didn't you say she could teach me? That is why. Because I wanted to learn on earth. Learn everything."

He moved closer and gazed down. "I am not altogether ignorant, you know. I read books first, many books, before I dared make contacts. And I remembered the advice of some of your anthropologists. They say the best way to learn about a different culture is to find a native woman, and discover the customs of the country. That is why I sought Ann."

"Why her, why not me?" Ruth snapped.

"There was a reason."

"I'm too old."

"Old?" The frown appeared on his forehead. Then he smiled and shook his head. "Old? As you reckon time, you are thirty-seven, no?"

"Yes," Ruth admitted.

He took her hand. "That is as I thought. So there is no problem. I, as you reckon time, am four hundred and twelve."

"But—"

"You're not afraid, are you? Because of the age, because of the six toes? Otherwise, basically, we are very much alike. That is why I was sent here, because we discovered how similar you were to us. I came to learn your ways. No, not with any idea of conquest in mind—merely understanding. There is much that your culture can contribute to ours. I found that out from your teaching. At the outset the thought was that I would learn and return home, to become a teacher to my own world. Now I have another idea. If your police are seeking me, it is best if I leave at once. But there is no need for me to go alone. Will you come with me?"

"As a teacher?"

"Yes. He took her other hand. "And as my—what is the word—wife?"

"That's the word," Ruth said, softly. "And there are other words." She stared at him for a moment.

"I love you," he whispered. "Then that's settled." Ruth stood up. "How do you leave?

What does one pack for a trip in a flying saucer?"

He chuckled. "No saucer. Just hold my hands. It is a psycho-physical process which we call *czorgy*. Oh, there will be much for *you* to learn now, too."

"I'm sure of it, darling." Ruth grasped his hands.

"Now?" she asked. . . .

There was quite a scandal over Ruth's disappearance with the handsome foreigner. Both Harold Ferris and Ann Corwin were particularly upset.

Unfortunately for their peace of mind, Ruth never reported her whereabouts. It was quite impossible, due to the limitations of the postal system. And even if she could have managed it, she hesitated to send them a card to say that she and her star pupil were honeymooning on far Arcturus.

THE END

This Crowded Earth

1. Harry Collins—1997

THE telescreen lit up promptly at eight a.m. Smiling Brad came on with his usual greeting. “Good morning—it’s a beautiful day in Chicagee!”

Harry Collins rolled over and twitched off the receiver. “This I doubt,” he muttered. He sat up and reached into the closet for his clothing.

Visitors—particularly feminine ones—were always exclaiming over the advantages of Harry’s apartment. “So convenient,” they would say. “Everything handy, right within reach. And think of all the extra steps you save!”

Of course most of them were just being polite and trying to cheer Harry up. They knew damned well that he wasn’t living in one room through any choice of his own. The Housing Act was something you just couldn’t get around; not in Chicagee these days. A bachelor was entitled to one room—no more and no less. And even though Harry was making a speedy buck at the agency, he couldn’t hope to beat the regulations.

There was only one way to beat them and that was to get married. Marriage would automatically entitle him to two rooms—*if* he could find them someplace.

More than a few of his feminine visitors had hinted at just that, but Harry didn’t respond. Marriage was no solution, the way he figured it. He knew that he couldn’t hope to locate a two-room apartment any closer than eighty miles away. It was bad enough driving forty miles to and from work every morning and night without doubling the distance. If he did find a bigger place, that would mean a three-hour trip each way on one of the commutrains, and the commutrains were murder. The Black Hole of Calcutta, on wheels.

But then, everything was murder, Harry reflected, as he stepped from the toilet to the sink, from the sink to the stove, from the stove to the table.

Powdered eggs for breakfast. That was murder, too. But it was a fast, cheap meal, easy to prepare, and the ingredients didn't waste a lot of storage space. The only trouble was, he hated the way they tasted. Harry wished he had time to eat his breakfasts in a restaurant. He could afford the price, but he couldn't afford to wait in line more than a half-hour or so. His office schedule at the agency started promptly at ten-thirty. And he didn't get out until three-thirty; it was a long, hard five-hour day. Sometimes he wished he worked in the New Philly area, where a four-hour day was the rule. But he supposed that wouldn't mean any real saving in time, because he'd have to live further out. What was the population in New Philly now? Something like 63,000,000, wasn't it? Chicagee was much smaller—only 38,000,000, this year.

This year. Harry shook his head and took a gulp of the Instantea. Yes, this year the population was 38,000,000, and the boundaries of the community extended north to what used to be the old Milwaukee and south past Gary. What would it be like *next* year, and the year following?

Lately that question had begun to haunt Harry. He couldn't quite figure out why. After all, it was none of his business, really. He had a good job, security, a nice place just two hours from the Loop. He even drove his own car. What more could he ask?

And why did he have to start the day like this, with a blinding headache?

Harry finished his Instantea and considered the matter. Yes, it was beginning again, just as it had on almost every morning for the past month. He'd sit down at the table, eat his usual breakfast, and end up with a headache. Why?

It wasn't the food; for a while he'd deliberately varied his diet, but that didn't make any difference. And he'd had his usual monthly checkup not more than ten days ago, only to be assured there was nothing wrong with him. Still, the headaches persisted. Every morning, when he'd sit down and jerk his head to the left like this—

That was it. Jerking his head to the left. It always seemed to trigger the pain. But why? And where had he picked up this habit of jerking his head to the left?

Harry didn't know.

He glanced at his watch. It was almost nine, now. High time that he got started. He reached over to the interapartment video and dialled the garage downstairs.

"Bill," he said. "Can you bring my car around to Number Three?"

The tiny face in the hand-screen grinned sheepishly. "Mr. Collins, ain't it? Gee, I'm sorry, Mr. Collins. Night crew took on a new man, he must have futzed around with the lists, and I can't find your number."

Harry sighed. "It's one-eight-seven-three-dash-five," he said. "Light blue Pax, two-seater. Do you want the license number, too?"

"No, just your parking number. I'll recognize it when I see it. But God only knows what level it's on. That night man really—"

"Never mind," Harry interrupted. "How soon?"

"Twenty minutes or so. Maybe half an hour."

"Half an hour? I'll be late. Hurry it up!"

Harry clicked the video and shook his head. Half an hour! Well, you had to expect these things if you wanted to be independent and do your own driving today. If he wanted to work his priority through the office, he could get his application honored on the I.C. Line within a month. But the I.C. was just another commutrain, and he couldn't take it. Standing and swaying for almost two hours, fighting the crowds, battling his way in and out of the sidewalk escalators. Besides, there was always the danger of being crushed. He'd seen an old man trampled to death on a Michigan Boulevard escalator-feeder, and he'd never forgotten it.

Being afraid was only a partial reason for his reluctance to change. The worst thing, for Harry, was the thought of all those people; the forced bodily contact, the awareness of smothered breathing, odors, and the crushing confinement of flesh against flesh. It was bad enough in the lines, or on the streets. The commutrain was just too much.

Yet, as a small boy, Harry could remember the day when he'd loved such trips. Sitting there looking out of the window as the scenery whirled past—that was always a thrill when you were a little kid. How long ago had that been? More than twenty years, wasn't it?

Now there weren't any seats, and no windows. Which was just as well, probably, because the scenery didn't whirl past any more, either. Instead, there was a stop at every station on the line, and a constant battle as people jockeyed for position to reach the exit-doors in time.

No, the car was better.

Harry reached for a container in the cabinet and poured out a couple of aspirystamines. That ought to help the headache. At least until he got to the office. Then he could start with the daily quota of yelIo.wjackets. Meanwhile, getting out on the street might help him, too. A shame there wasn't a window in this apartment, but then, what good would it do, really? All he could see through it would be the next apartment.

He shrugged and picked up his coat. Nine-thirty, time to go downstairs. Maybe the car would be located sooner than Bill had promised; after all, he had nine assistants, and not everybody went to work on this first daylight shift.

Harry walked down the hall and punched the elevator button. He looked at the indicator, watched the red band move towards the numeral of this floor, then sweep past it.

"Pull up!" he muttered. "Oh, well."

He reached out and touched both sides of the corridor. That was another thing he disliked; these narrow corridors. Two people could scarcely squeeze past one another without touching. Of course, it did save space to build apartments this way, and space was at a premium. But Harry couldn't get used to it. Now he remembered some of the old buildings that were still around when he was a little boy—

The headache seemed to be getting worse instead of better. Harry looked at the indicator above the other elevator entrance. The red band was crawling upward, passing him to stop on 48. That was the top floor.

Now it was moving down, down; stopping on 47, 46, 45, 44, 43, and—here it was!

“Stand back, please!” said the tape. Harry did his best to oblige, but there wasn’t much room. A good two dozen of his upstairs neighbors jammed the compartment. Harry thought he recognized one or two of the men, but he couldn’t be sure. There were so many people, so many faces. After a while it got so they all seemed to look alike. Yes, and breathed alike, and felt alike when you were squeezed up against them, and you were always being squeezed up against them, wherever you went. And you could smell them, and hear them wheeze and cough, and you went falling down with them into a bottomless pit where your head began to throb and throb and it was hard to move away from all that heat and pressure. It was hard enough just to keep from screaming—

Then the door opened and Harry was catapulted out into the lobby. The mob behind him pushed and clawed because they were in a hurry; they were always in a hurry these days, and if you got in their way they’d trample you down like that old man had been trampled down; there was no room for one man in a crowd any more.

Harry blinked and shook his head.

He gripped the edge of the wall and clung there in an effort to avoid being swept out of the lobby completely. His hands were sticky with perspiration. They slipped off as he slowly inched his way back through the crush of the mob.

“Wait for me!” he called. “Wait for me, I’m going down!” But his voice was lost in the maelstrom of sound just as his body was lost in the maelstrom of motion. Besides, an automatic elevator cannot hear. It is merely a mechanism that goes up and down, just like the other mechanisms that go in and out, or around and around, and you get caught up in them the way a squirrel gets caught in a squirrel-cage and you race and race, and the best you can hope for is to keep up with the machinery.

The elevator door clanged shut before Harry could reach it. He waited for another car to arrive, and this time he stood aside as the crowd emerged, then darted in behind them.

The car descended to the first garage level, and Harry stood gulping gratefully in the comparative isolation. There weren't more than ten people accompanying him.

He emerged on the ramp, gave his number to the attendant, and waved at Bill in his office. Bill seemed to recognize him; at least he nodded, briefly. No sense trying to talk—not in this sullen subterranea, filled with the booming echo of exhausts, the despairing shriek of brakes. Headlights flickered in the darkness as cars whirled past, ascending and descending on the loading platforms. The signal systems winked from the walls, and tires screeched defiance to the warning bells.

Old-fashioned theologians, Harry remembered, used to argue whether there really was a Hell, and if so, had it been created by God or the Devil? Too bad they weren't around today to get an answer to their questions. There *was* a Hell, and it had been created by General Motors.

Harry's temples began to throb. Through blurred eyes, he saw the attendant beckoning him down the line to a platform marked *Check-Out #3*. He stood there with a cluster of others, waiting.

What was the matter with him today, anyway? First the headache, and now his feet were hurting. Standing around waiting, that's what did it. This eternal waiting. When he was a kid, the grownups were always complaining about the long seven-hour work days and how they cut into their leisure time. Well, maybe they had reason to gripe, but at least there *was* some leisure before work began or after it was through. Now that extra time was consumed in waiting. Standing in line, standing in crowds, wearing yourself out doing nothing.

Still, this time it wasn't really so bad. Within ten minutes the light blue Pax rolled up before him. Harry climbed in as the attendant slid out from behind the wheel and prepared to leave.

Then a fat man appeared, running along the ramp. He gestured wildly with a plump thumb. Harry nodded briefly, and the fat man hurled himself into the seat beside him and slammed the door.

They were off. Harry read the signals impatiently, waiting for the green *Go*. The moment he saw it he gunned his motor and got the car up to twenty-two and zipped away.

That's what he liked, that's what he always waited for. Of course it was dangerous, here in the tunnel system under the garage, but Harry always got a thrill out of speed. The Pax could do thirty-five or even forty, probably, on a theoretical open road. Still, twenty-two was enough to satisfy Harry.

He whizzed up the ramp, turned, headed for the street-level, then braked and waited for the signal to emerge.

Harsh sunlight pierced the smog and he felt his eyes watering. Now the street noises assailed his ears; the grinding of gears, the revving of motors. But at least the total volume was lower, and with the windows tightly closed against the acrid air, he could hear.

Turning to the fat man beside him he said, "Hello, Frazer. What's the urgency *V*

"Got to get downtown before eleven," the fat man answered. "Board meeting today, but I forgot about it. Knew I wouldn't have time to wait for the car, and I was hoping I'd find someone who'd give me a lift. Lucky for me that you came along when you did."

Harry nodded but did not reply. At the moment he was trying to edge into the traffic beyond. It flowed, bumper to bumper, in a steady stream; a stream moving at the uniform and prescribed rate of fifteen miles per hour. He released his brakes and the Pax nosed forward until a truck sounded its horn in ominous warning. The noise hurt Harry's head; he winced and grimaced.

"What's the matter?" asked Frazer.

"Headache," Harry muttered. He menaced a Chevsoto with his bumper. "Damn it, I thought they didn't allow those big four-passenger jobs on this arterial during rush hours!” Gradually he managed to turn until he was in the righthand lane. “There,” he said. “We’re off.”

And so they were, for all of three minutes, with the speed set at fifteen on autopilot. Then a signal went into action somewhere up ahead, and the procession halted. Harry flicked his switch. As was customary, horns sounded indignantly on all sides—a mechanical protest against a mechanical obstruction. Harry winced again.

“Hangover?” Frazer asked, solicituously. “Try aspirystamine.”

Harry shook his head. “No hangover. And I’ve already taken three, thanks. Nothing does any good. So I guess it’s just up to you.”

“Up to me?” Frazer was genuinely puzzled. “What can I do about your headaches?”

“You’re on the Board of City Planners, aren’t you?”

“That’s right.”

“Well, I’ve got a suggestion for you to give to them. Tell them to start planning to drop a couple of heavy thermo-nucs on this area. Clean out twenty or thirty million people. We’d never miss ’em.”

Frazer chuckled wryly. “I wish I had a buck for every time I’ve heard *that* suggestion.”

“Ever stop to think why you hear it so often? It’s because everybody feels the same way—we can’t take being hemmed in like this.”

“Well, a bomb wouldn’t help. You know that.” Frazer pursed his lips. “Robertson figured out what would happen, with the chain-reaction.”

Harry glanced sideways at his companion as the car started forward once again. “I’ve always wondered about that,” he said. “Seriously, I mean. Is the story really true, or is it just some more of this government propaganda you fellows like to hand out?”

Frazer sighed. “It’s true, all right. There was a scientist named Robertson, and he did come up with the thermo-nuc formula, way back in ’75. Proved it, too. Use what he developed and the chain-reaction would never end. Scientists in other countries tested the theory and agreed; there was no collusion, it just worked out that way on a practical basis. Hasn't been a war since—what more proof do you want?"

"Well, couldn't they just use some of the old-fashioned hydrogen bombs?"

"Be sensible, man! Once a war started, no nation could resist the temptation to go all-out. Fortunately, everyone realizes that. So we have peace. Permanent peace."

"I'll take a good war anytime, in preference to this."

"Harry, you don't know what you're talking about. You aren't so young that you can't remember what it was like in the old days. Everybody living in fear, waiting for the bombs to fall. People dying of disease and worried about dying from radiation and fallout. All the international rivalries, the power-politics, the eternal pressures and constant crises. Nobody in his right mind would want to go back to *that*. We've come a mighty long way in the last twenty years or so."

Harry switched to autopilot and sat back. "Maybe that's the trouble," he said. "Maybe we've come too far, too fast. I wasn't kidding about dropping those thermo-nucs, either. *Something* has to be done. We can't go on like this indefinitely. Why doesn't the Board come up with an answer?"

Frazer shrugged his heavy shoulders. "You think we haven't tried, aren't trying now? We're aware of the situation as well as you are—and then some. But there's no easy solution. The population just keeps growing, that's all. No war to cut it down, contagious diseases at a minimum, average life-expectancy up to ninety years or better. Naturally, this results in a problem. But a bomb won't help bring about any permanent solution. Besides, this isn't a local matter, or even a national one. It's global. What do you think those summit meetings are all about?"

"What about birth control?" Harry asked. "Why don't they really get behind an emigration movement?"

"We can't limit procreation by law. You know that." Frazer peered out at the swarming streams on the sidewalk levels. "It's more than a religious or a political question—it's a social one. People want kids. They can afford them. Besides, the Housing Act is set up so that having kids is just about the only way you can ever get into larger living-quarters."

"Couldn't they try reverse-psychology? I mean, grant priority to people who are willing to be sterilized?"

"They tried it, on a limited experimental scale, about three years ago out on the West Coast."

"I never heard anything about it."

"Damned right you didn't," Frazer replied, grimly. "They kept the whole project under wraps, and for a good reason.

The publicity might have wrecked the Administration."

"What happened?"

"What do you suppose happened? There were riots. Do you think a man and his wife and three kids, living in three rooms, liked the idea of standing by and watching a sterilized couple enjoy a four-room place with lawn space? Things got pretty ugly, let me tell you. There was a rumor going around that the country was in the hands of homosexuals—the churches were up in arms—and if that wasn't bad enough, we had to face up to the primary problem. There just wasn't, just isn't, enough *space.* Not in areas suitable for maintaining a population. Mountains are still mountains and deserts are still deserts. Maybe we can put up housing in such regions, but who can live there? Even with decentralization going full blast, people must live within reasonable access to their work. No, we're just running out of room."

Again the car halted on signal. Over the blasting of the horns, Harry repeated his query about emigration.

Frazer shook his head, but made no attempt to reply until the horns had quieted and they were under way once more.

"As for emigration, we're just getting some of our own medicine in return. About eighty years ago, we clamped down and closed the door on immigrants; established a quota. Now the same quota is being used against us, and you can't really blame other nations for it. They're facing worse population increases than we are. Look at the African Federation, and what's happened even worse, in spite of all the wealth! And South America is even worse, in spite of all the reclamation projects. Fifteen years ago, when they cleared out the Amazon Basin, they thought they'd have enough room for fifty years to come. And now look at it—two hundred million, that's the latest figure we've got."

"So what's the answer?" Harry asked.

"I don't know. If it wasn't for hydroponics and the Ag Culture controls, we'd be licked right now. As it is, we can still supply enough food, and the old supply-and-demand takes care of the economy as a whole. I have no recommendations for an overall solution, or even a regional one. My job, the Board's job, is regulating housing and traffic and transportation in Chicagee. That's about all you can expect us to handle."

Again they jolted to a stop and the horns howled all around them. Harry sat there until a muscle in the side of his jaw began to twitch. Suddenly he pounded on the horn with both fists.

"Shut up!" he yelled. "For the love of Heaven, shut up!"

Abruptly he slumped back. "Sorry," he mumbled. "It's my damned headache. I—I've got to get out of this."

"Job getting you down?"

"No. It's a good job. At least everybody tells me so. Twenty-five hours a week, three hundred bucks. The car. The room. The telescreen and liquor and yellow-jackets. Plenty of time to kill. Unless it's the time that's killing me."

"But—what do you *want?"* Harry stepped on the accelerator and they inched along. Now the street widened into eight traffic lanes and the big semis joined the procession on the edge of the downtown area.

"I want out," Harry said. "Out of this."

"Don't you ever visit the National Preserves?" Frazer asked.

"Sure I do. Fly up every vacation. Take a tame plane to a tame government resort and catch my quota of two tame fish. Great sport! If I got married, I'd be entitled to four tame fish. But that's not what I want. I want what my father used to talk about. I want to drive into the country, without a permit, mind you; just to drive wherever I like. I want to see cows and chickens and trees and lakes and sky."

"You sound like a Naturalist."

"Don't sneer. Maybe the Naturalists are right. Maybe we ought to cut out all this phoney progress and phoney peace that passeth all understanding. I'm no liberal, don't get me wrong, but sometimes I think the Naturalists have the only answer."

"But what can you do about it?" Frazer murmured. "Suppose for the sake of argument that they *are* right. How can you change things? We can't just *will* ourselves to stop growing, and we can't legislate against biology. More people, in better health, with more free time, are just bound to have more offspring. It's inevitable, under the circumstances. And neither you nor I nor anyone has the right to condemn millions upon millions of others to death through war or disease."

"I know," Harry said. "It's hopeless, I guess. All the same, I want out." He wet his lips. "Frazer, you're on the Board here. You've got connections higher up. If I could only get a chance to transfer to Ag Culture, go on one of those farms as a worker—"

Frazer shook his head. "Sorry, Harry. You know the situation there, I'm sure. Right now there's roughly ninety million approved applications on file. Everybody wants to get into Ag Culture."

"But couldn't I just buy some land, get a government contract for foodstuffs?"

"Have you got the bucks? A minimum forty acres leased from one of the farm corporations will cost you two hundred thousand at the very least, not counting equipment." He paused. "Besides, there's Vocational Ap. What did your tests show?"

"You're right," Harry said. "I'm supposed to be an agency man. An agency man until I die. Or retire on my pension, at fifty, and sit in my little room for the next fifty years, turning on the telescreen every morning to hear some loudmouthed liar tell me it's a beautiful day in Chicagee. Who knows, maybe by that time we'll have a hundred billion people enjoying peace and progress and prosperity. All sitting in little rooms and—"

"Watch out!" Frazer grabbed the wheel. "You nearly hit that truck." He waited until Harry's face relaxed before relinquishing his grip. "Harry, you'd better go in for a checkup. It isn't just a headache with you, is it?"

"You're not fooling," Harry told him. "It isn't just a headache."

He began to think about what it *really* was, and that helped a little. It helped him get through the worst part, which was the downtown traffic and letting Frazer off and listening to Frazer urge him to see a doctor.

Then he got to the building parking area and let them take his car away and bury it down in the droning darkness where the horns hooted and the headlights glared.

Harry climbed the ramp and mingled with the ten-thirty shift on its way up to the elevators. Eighteen elevators in his building, to serve eighty floors. Nine of the elevators were express to the fiftieth floor, three were express to sixty-five. He wanted one of the latter, and so did the mob. The crushing, clinging mob. They pressed and panted the way mobs always do; mobs that lynch and torture and dance around bonfires and guillotines and try to drag you down to trample you to death because they can't stand you if your name is Harry and you want to be different.

They hate you because you don't like powdered eggs and the telescreen and a beautiful day in Chicagee. And they stare at you because your forehead hurts and the muscle in your jaw twitches and they know you want to scream as you go up, up, up, and try to think why you get a headache from jerking your head to the left.

Then Harry was at the office door and they said good morning when he came in, all eighty of the typists in the outer office working their electronic machines and offering him their electronic smiles, including the girl he had made electronic love to last Saturday night and who wanted him to move into a two-room marriage and have children, lots of children who could enjoy peace and progress and prosperity.

Harry snapped out of it, going down the corridor. Only a few steps more and he'd be safe in his office, his own private office, almost as big as his apartment. And there would be liquor, and the yellowjackets in the drawer. That would help. Then he could get to work.

What was today's assignment? He tried to remember. It was Wilmer-Klibby, wasn't it? Telescreenads for Wilmer-Klibby, makers of window-glass.

Window-glass.

He opened his office door and then slammed it shut behind him. For a minute everything blurred, and then he could remember.

Now he knew what caused him to jerk his head, what gave him the headaches when he did so. Of course. That was it.

When he sat down at the table for breakfast in the morning he turned his head to the left because he'd always done so, ever since he was a little boy. A little boy, in what was then Wheaton, sitting at the breakfast table and looking out of the window. Looking out at summer sunshine, spring rain, autumn haze, the white wonder of newfallen snow.

He'd never broken himself of the habit. He still looked to the left every morning, just as he had today. But there was no window any more. There was only a blank wall. And beyond it, the smog and the clamor and the crowds.

Window-glass. Wilmer-Klibby had problems. Nobody was buying window-glass any more. Nobody except the people who put up buildings like this. There were still windows on the top floors, just like the window here in his office.

Harry stepped over to it, moving very slowly because of his head. It hurt to keep his eyes open, but he wanted to stare out of the window. Up this high you could see above the smog. You could see the sun like a radiant jewel packed in the cotton cumulus of clouds. If you opened the window you could feel fresh air against your forehead, you could breathe it in and breathe out the headache.

But you didn't dare look down. Oh, no, never look *down,* because then you'd see the buildings all around you. The buildings below, black and sooty, their jagged outlines like the stumps of rotten teeth. And they stretched off in all directions, as far as the eye could attain; row after row of rotten teeth grinning up from the smog-choked throat of the streets. From the maw of the city far below came this faint but endless howling, this screaming of traffic and toil. And you couldn't help it, you breathed *that* in too, along with the fresh air, and it poisoned you and it did more than make your head ache. It made your heart ache and it made your soul sick, and it made you close your eyes and your lungs and your brain against it.

Harry reeled, but he knew this was the only way. *Close your brain against it.* And then, when you opened your eyes again, maybe you could see the way things used to be—

It was snowing out and it was a *wet* snow, the very best kind for snowballs and making a snowman, and the whole gang would come out after school.

But there was no school, this was Saturday, and the leaves were russet and gold and red so that it looked as if all the trees in the world were on fire. And you could scuff when you walked and pile up fallen leaves from the grass and roll in them.

And it was swell to roll down the front lawn in summer, just roll right down to the edge of the sidewalk like it was a big hill and let Daddy catch you at the bottom, laughing.

Mamma laughed too, and she said, *Look, it's springtime, the lilacs are out, do you want to touch the pretty lilacs, Harry?*

And Harry didn't quite understand what she was saying, but he reached out and they were purple and smelled of rain and soft sweetness and they were just beyond the window, if he reached a little further he could touch them—

And then the snow and the leaves and the grass and the lilacs disappeared, and Harry could see the rotten teeth again, leering and looming and snapping at him. They were going to bite, they were going to chew, they were going to devour, and he couldn't stop them, couldn't stop himself. He was falling into the howling jaws of the city.

His last conscious effort was a desperate attempt to gulp fresh air into his lungs before he pinwheeled down. Fresh air was good for headaches . . .

2. Harry Collins—1998

IT TOOK them ten seconds to save Harry from falling, but it took him over ten weeks to regain his balance.

In fact, well over two months had passed before he could fully realize just what had happened, or where he was now. They must have noticed something was wrong with him that morning at the office, because two supervisors and an exec rushed in and caught him just as he was going out of the window. And then they had sent him away, sent him *here.*

"This is fine," he told Dr. Manschoff. "If I'd known how well they treated you, I'd have gone couch-happy years ago."

Dr. Manschoff's plump face was impassive, but the little laugh-lines deepened around the edges of his eyes. "Maybe that's why we take such care not to publicize our recent advances in mental therapy," he said. "Everybody would want to get into a treatment center, and then where would we be?"

Harry nodded, staring past the doctor's shoulder, staring out of the wide window at the broad expanse of rolling countryside beyond.

"I still don't understand, though," he murmured. "How can you possibly manage to maintain an institution like this, with all the space and the luxuries? The inmates seem to lead a better life than the adjusted individuals outside. It's topsy-turvy."

"Perhaps." Dr. Manschoff's fingers formed a pudgy steeple. "But then, so many things seem to be topsy-turvey nowadays, don't they? Wasn't it the realization of this fact which precipitated your own recent difficulties?"

“Almost precipitated me bodily out of that window,” Harry admitted, cheerfully. “And that’s another thing. I was sent here, I suppose, because I’d attempted suicide, gone into shock, temporary amnesia, something like that.”

“Something like that,” the doctor echoed, contemplating his steeple.

“But you didn’t give me any treatment,” Harry continued. “Oh, I was kept under sedation for a while, I realize that. And you and some of the other staff-members talked to me. But mainly I just rested in a nice big room and ate nice big meals.”

“So?” The steeple’s fleshy spire collapsed.

“So what I want to know is, when does the real treatment start? When do I go into analysis, or chemotherapy, and all that?”

Dr. Manschoff shrugged. “Do you think you need those things now?”

Harry gazed out at the sunlight beyond the window, halfsquinting and half-frowning. “No, come to think of it, I don’t believe I do. I feel better now than I have in years.”

His companion leaned back. “Meaning that for years you felt all wrong. Because you were constricted, physically, psychically, and emotionally. You were cramped, squeezed in a vise until the pressure became intolerable. But now that pressure has been removed. As a result you no longer suffer, and there is no need to seek escape in death or denial of identity.

“This radical change of attitude has been brought about here in just a little more than two months’ time. And yet you’re asking me when the ‘real treatment’ begins.”

“I guess I’ve already had the real treatment then, haven’t I?”

“That is correct. Prolonged analysis or drastic therapy is unnecessary. We’ve merely given you what you seemed to need.”

“I’m very grateful,” Harry said. “But how can you afford to do it?”

Dr. Manschoff built another temple to an unknown god. He inspected the architecture critically now as he spoke. “Because your problem *is* a rarity,” he said.

"Rarity? I'd have thought millions of people would be breaking down every month. The Naturalists say—"

The doctor nodded wearily. "I know what they say. But let's dismiss rumors and consider facts. Have you ever read any *official* report stating that the number of cases of mental illness ran into the millions?"

"No, I haven't."

"For that matter, do you happen to know of *anyone* who was ever sent to a treatment center such as this?"

"Well, of course, everybody goes in to see the medics for regular checkups and this includes an interview with a psych. But if they're in bad shape he just puts them on extra tranquilizers. I guess sometimes he reviews their Vocational Apt tests and shifts them over into different jobs in other areas."

Dr. Manschoff bowed his head in reverence above the steeple, as if satisfied with the labors he had wrought. "That is roughly correct. And I believe, if you search your memory, you won't recall even a mention of a treatment center. This sort of place is virtually extinct, nowadays. There are still some institutions for those suffering from functional mental disorders—paresis, senile dementia, congenital abnormalities. But regular checkups and preventative therapy take care of the great majority. We've ceased concentrating on the result of mental illnesses and learned to attack the causes.

"It's the old yellow fever problem all over again, you see. Once upon a time, physicians dealt exclusively with treatment of yellow fever patients. Then they shifted their attention to the *source* of the disease. They went after the mosquitoes, drained the swamps, and the yellow fever problem vanished.

"That's been our approach in recent years. We've developed *social* therapy, and so the need for individual therapy has diminished.

"What were the sources of the tensions producing mental disturbances? Physical and financial insecurity, the threat of war, the aggressive patterns of a competitive society, the unresolved Oedipus-situation rooted in the oldstyle family relationship. These were the swamps where the mosquitoes buzzed and bit. Most of the swamps have been dredged, most of the insects exterminated.

"Today we're moving into a social situation where nobody goes hungry, nobody is jobless or unprovided for, nobody needs to struggle for status. Vocational Apt determines a man's rightful place and function in society, and there's no longer the artificial distinction imposed by race, color or creed. War is a thing of the past. Best of all, the old-fashioned 'home-life, with all of its unhealthy emotional ties, is being replaced by sensible conditioning when a child reaches school age. The umbilical cord is no longer a permanent leash, a strangler's noose, or a silver-plated life-line stretching back to the womb."

Harry Collins nodded. "I suppose only the exceptional cases ever need to go to a treatment center like this."

"Exactly."

"But what makes *me* one of the exceptions? Is it because of the way the folks brought me up, in a small town, with all the old-fashioned books and everything? Is that why I hated confinement and conformity so much? Is it because of all the years I spent reading? And why—"

Dr. Manschoff stood up. "You tempt me," he said. "You tempt me strongly. As you can see, I dearly love a lecture—and a captive audience. But right now, the audience must not remain captive. I prescribe an immediate dose of freedom."

"You mean I'm to leave here?"

"Is that what you want to do?"

"Frankly, no. Not if it means going back to my job."

"That hasn't been decided upon. We can discuss the problem later, and perhaps we can go into the answers to those questions you just posed. But at the moment, I'd juggest you stay with us, though without the restraint of remaining in your room or in the wards. In other words, I want you to start going outside again."

"Outside?"

"You'll find several square miles of open country just beyond the doors here. You're at liberty to wander around and enjoy yourself. Plenty of fresh air and sunshine—come and go as you wish. I've already issued instructions which permit you to keep your own hours. Meals will be available when you desire them."

"You're very kind."

"Nonsense. I'm prescribing what you need. And when the time comes, we'll arrange to talk again. You know where to find me."

Dr. Manschoff dismantled his steeple and placed a half of the roof in each trouser-pocket.

And Harry Collins went outdoors.

It was wonderful just to be free and alone—like returning to that faraway childhood in Wheaton once again. Harry appreciated every minute of it during the first week of his wandering.

But Harry wasn't a child any more, and after a week he began to wonder instead of wander.

The grounds around the treatment center were more than spacious; they seemed absolutely endless. No matter how far he walked during the course of a day, Harry had never encountered any walls, fences or artificial barriers; there was nothing to stay his progress but the natural barriers of high, steeply-slanting precipices which seemed to rim all sides of a vast valley. Apparently the center itself was set in the middle of a large canyon—a canyon big enough to contain an airstrip for helicopter landings. The single paved road leading from the main buildings terminated at the airstrip, and Harry saw helicopters arrive and depart from time to time; apparently they brought in food and supplies.

As for the center itself, it consisted of four large structures, two of which Harry was familiar with. The largest was made up of apartments for individual patients, and staffed by nurses and attendants. Harry's own room was here, on the second floor, and from the beginning he'd been allowed to roam around the communal halls below at will.

The second building was obviously administrative—Dr. Manschoff's private office was situated therein, and presumably the other staff-members operated out of here.

The other two buildings were apparently inaccesible; not guarded or policed or even distinguished by signs prohibiting access, but merely locked and unused. At least, Harry had found the doors locked when—out of normal curiosity—he had ventured to approach them. Nor had he ever seen anyone enter or leave the premises. Perhaps these structures were unnecessary under the present circumstances, and had been built for future accomodations.

Still, Harry couldn't help wondering.

And now, on this particular afternoon, he sat on the bank of the little river which ran through the valley, feeling the mid-summer sun beating down upon his forehead and staring down at the eddying current with its ripples and reflections.

Ripples and reflections . . .

Dr. Manschoff had answered his questions well, yet new questions had arisen.

Most people didn't go crazy any more, the doctor had explained, and so there were very few treatment centers such as this.

Question: Why were there any at all?

A place like this cost a fortune to staff and maintain. In an age where living-space and areable acreage was at such a premium, why waste this vast and fertile expanse? And in a society more and more openly committed to the policy of promoting the greatest good for the greatest number, why bother about the fate of an admittedly insignificant group of mentally disturbed patients?

Not that Harry resented his situation; in fact, it was almost too good to be true.

Question: Was it too good to be true?

Why, come to realize it, he'd seen less than a dozen other patients during his entire stay here! All of them were male, and all of them—apparently—were recovering from a condition somewhat similar to his own. At least, he'd recognized the same reticence and diffidence when it came to exchanging more than a perfunctory greeting in an encounter in an outer corridor. At the time, he'd accepted their unwillingness to communicate; welcomed and understood it because of *his* condition. And that in itself wasn't what he questioned now.

But why were there so *few* patients beside himself? Why were they all males? And why weren't *they* roaming the countryside now the way he was?

So many staff-members and so few patients. So much room and luxury and freedom, and so little use of it. So little apparent purpose to it all.

Question: Was *there a hidden purpose?*

Harry stared down into the ripples and reflections, and the sun was suddenly intolerably hot, its glare on the water suddenly blinding and bewildering. He saw his face mirrored on the water's surface, and it was not the familiar countenance he knew—the features were bloated, distorted, shimmering and wavering.

Maybe it was starting all over again. Maybe he was getting another one of those headaches. Maybe he was going to lose control again.

Yes, and maybe he was just imagining things. Sitting here in all this heat wasn't a good idea.

Why not take a swim?

That seemed reasonable enough. In fact, it seemed like a delightful distraction. Harry rose and stripped. He entered the water awkwardly—one didn't dive, not after twenty years of abstinence from the outdoor life—but he found that he could swim, after a fashion. The water was cooling, soothing. A few minutes of immersion and Harry found himself forgetting his speculations. The uneasy feeling had vanished. Now, when he stared down into the water, he saw his own face reflected, looking just the way it should. And when he stared up.

He saw her standing there, on the bank.

She was tall, slim, and blonde. Very tall, very slim, and very blonde.

She was also very desirable.

Up until a moment ago, Harry had considered swimming a delightful distraction. But now—

“How’s the water?” she called.

“Fine.”

She nodded, smiling down at him.

“Aren’t you coming in?” he asked.

“No.”

“Then what are you doing here?”

“I was looking for you, Harry.”

“You know my name?”

She nodded again. “Dr. Manschoff told me.”

“You mean, he sent you here to find me?”

“That’s right.”

“But I don’t understand. If you’re not going swimming, then why—I mean—”

Her smile broadened. “It’s just part of the therapy, Harry.”

“Part of the therapy?”

“That’s right. *Part.”* She giggled. “Don’t you think you’d like to come out of the water now and see what the rest of it might be?”

Harry thought so.

With mounting enthusiasm, he eagerly embraced his treatment and entered into a state of active cooperation.

It was some time before he ventured to comment on the situation. “Manschoff is a damned good diagnostician,” he murmured. Then he sat up. “Are you a patient here?”

She shook her head. “Don’t ask questions, Harry. Can’t you be satisfied with things as they are?”

"You're just what the doctor ordered, all right." He gazed down at her. "But don't you even have a name?"

"You can call me Sue."

"Thank you."

He bent to kiss her but she avoided him and rose to her feet. "Got to go now."

"So soon?"

She nodded and moved towards the bushes above the bank.

"But when will I see you again?"

"Coming swimming tomorrow?"

"Yes."

"Maybe I can get away for more occupational therapy then."

She stooped behind the bushes, and Harry saw a flash of white.

"You *are* a nurse, aren't you," he muttered. "On the staff, I suppose. I should have known."

"All right, so I am. What's that got to do with it?"

"And I suppose you were telling the truth when you said Manschoff sent you here. This *is* just part of my therapy, isn't it?"

She nodded briefly as she slipped into her uniform. "Does that bother you, Harry?"

He bit his lip. When he spoke, his voice was low, "Yes, damn it, it does. I mean, I got the idea—at least, I was hoping—that this wasn't just a matter of carrying out an assignment on your part."

She looked up at him gravely. "Who said anything about an assignment, darling?" she murmured. "I volunteered."

And then she was gone.

Then she was gone, and then she came back that night in Harry's dreams, and then she was at the river the next day and it was better than the dreams, better than the day before.

Sue told him she had been watching him for weeks now. And she had gone to Manschoff and suggested it, and she was very glad. And they had to meet here, out in the open, so as not to complicate the situation or disturb any of the other patients.

So Harry naturally asked her about the other patients, and the whole general setup, and she said Dr. Manschoff would answer all those questions in due time. But right now, with only an hour or so to spare, Was he going to spend it all asking for information? Matters were accordingly adjusted to their mutual satisfaction, and it was on that basis that they continued their almost daily meetings for some time.

The next few months were perhaps the happiest Harry had ever known. The whole interval took on a dreamlike quality—idealized, romanticized, yet basically sensual. There is probably such a dream buried deep within the psyche of every man, Harry reflected, but to few is it ever given to realize its reality. His early questioning attitude gave way to a mood of mere acceptance and enjoyment. This was the primitive drama, the very essence of the male-female relationship; Adarh and Eve in the Garden. Why waste time seeking the Tree of Knowledge?

And it wasn't until summer passed that Harry even thought about the Serpent.

One afternoon, as he sat waiting for Sue on the river bank, he heard a sudden movement in the brush behind him.

"Darling?" he called, eagerly.

"Please, you don't know me *that* well." The deep masculine voice carried overtones of amusement.

Flushing, Harry turned to confront the intruder. He was a short, stocky, middle-aged man whose bristling gray crewcut almost matched the neutral shades of his gray orderly's uniform.

"Expecting someone else, were you?" the man muttered. "Well, I'll get out of your way."

"That's not necessary. I was really just daydreaming, I guess. I don't know what made me think—" Harry felt his flush deepen, and he lowered his eyes and his voice as he tried to improvise some excuse.

"You're a lousy liar," the man said, stepping forward and seating himself on the bank next to Harry. "But it doesn't really matter. I don't think your girlfriend is going to show up today, anyway."

"What do you mean? What do you know about—"

"I mean just what I said," the man told him. "And I know everything I need to know, about you and about her and about the situation in general. That's why I'm here, Collins."

He paused, watching the play of emotions in Harry's eyes.

"I know what you're thinking right now," the gray-haired man continued. "At first you wondered how I knew your name. Then you realized that if I was on the staff in the wards I'd naturally be able to identify the patients. Now it occurs to you that you've never seen me in the wards, so you're speculating as to whether or not I'm working out of the administration offices with that psychiatric no good Manschoff. But if I were, I wouldn't be calling him names, would I? Which means you're really getting confused, aren't you, Collins? Good!"

The man chuckled, but there was neither mockery, malice, nor genuine mirth in the sound. And his eyes were sober, intent.

"Who are you?" Harry asked. "What are you doing here?"

"The name is Ritchie, Arnold Ritchie. At least, that's the name they know me by around here, and you can call me that. As to what I'm doing, it's a long story. Let's just say that right now I'm here to give you a little advanced therapy."

"Then Manschoff did send you?"

The chuckle came again, and Ritchie shook his head. "He did not. And if he even suspected I was here, there'd be hell to pay."

"Then what do you want with me?"

"It isn't a question of what I want. It's a question of what *you need*. Which is, like I said, advanced therapy. The sort that dear old kindly permissive Father-Image Manschoff doesn't intend you to get."

Harry stood up. “What’s this all about?”

Ritchie rose with him, smiling for the first time. “I’m glad you asked that question, Collins. It’s about time you did, you know. Everything has been so carefully planned to keep you from asking it. But you *were* beginning to wonder just a bit anyway, weren’t you?”

“I don’t see what you’re driving at.”

“You don’t see what anyone is driving at, Collins. You’ve been blinded by a spectacular display of kindness, misdirected by self-indulgence. I told you I knew everything I needed to know about you, and I do. Now I’m going to ask you to remember these things for yourself; the things you’ve avoided considering all this while.

“I’m going to ask you to remember that you’re twenty-eight years old, and that for almost seven years you were an agency man and a good one. You worked hard, you did a conscientious job, you stayed in line, obeyed the rules, never rebelled. Am I correct in my summary of the situation?”

“Yes, I guess so.”

“So what was your reward for all this unceasing “effort and eternal conformity? A one-room apartment and a one-week vacation, once a year. Count your blessings, Collins. Am I right?”

“Right.”

“Then what happened? Finally you flipped, didn’t you? Tried to take a header out of the window. You chucked your job, chucked your responsibilities, chucked your future and attempted to chuck yourself away. Am I still right?”

“Yes.”

“Good enough. And now we come to the interesting part of the story. Seven years of being a good little boy got you nothing but the promise of present and future frustration. Seven seconds of madness, of attempted self-destruction, brought you here. And as a reward for bucking the system, the system itself has provided you with a life of luxury and leisure—full permission to come and go as you please, live in spacious ease, indulge in the gratification of every appetite, free of responsibility or restraint. Is that true?"

"I suppose so."

"All right. Now, let me ask you the question you asked me. What's it all about?"

Ritchie put his hand on Harry's shoulder. "Tell me that, Collins. Why do you suppose you've received such treatment? As long as you stayed in line, nobody gave a damn for your comfort or welfare. Then, when you committed the cardinal sin of our present-day society—when you rebelled—everything was handed to you on a silver platter. Does that make sense?"

"But it's therapy. Dr. Manschoff said—"

"Look, Collins. Millions of people flip every year. Millions more attempt suicide. How many of them end up in a place like this?"

"They don't, though. That's just Naturalist propaganda. Dr. Manschoff said—"

"Dr. Manschoff said! I know what he said, all right. And you believed him, because you wanted to believe him. You wanted the reassurance he could offer you—the feeling of being unique and important. So you didn't ask him any questions, you didn't ask any questions of yourself. Such as why anybody would consider an insignificant little agency man, without friends, family or connections, worth the trouble of rehabilitating at all, let alone amidst such elaborate and expensive surroundings. Why, men like you are a dime a dozen these days—Vocational Apt can push a few buttons and come up with half a million replacements to take over your job. You aren't important to society, Collins. You aren't important to anyone at all, besides yourself. And yet you got the red-carpet treatment. It's about time somebody yanked that carpet out from under you. What's it all about?"

Harry blinked. "Look here, I don't see why this is any of your business. Besides, to tell the truth, I'm expecting—"

"I know who you're expecting, but I've already told you she won't be here. Because she's expecting."

"What—?"

“It’s high time you learned the facts of life, Collins. Yes, the well-known facts of life—the ones about the birds and the bees, and barefoot boys and blondes, too. Your little friend Sue is going to have a souvenir.”

“I don’t believe it! I’m going to ask Dr. Manschoff.”

“Sure you are. You’ll ask Manschoff and he’ll deny it. And so you’ll tell him about me. You’ll say you met somebody in the woods today—either a lunatic or a Naturalist spy who infiltrated here under false pretenses. And Manschoff will reassure you. He’ll reassure you just long enough to get his hands on me. Then he’ll take care of both of us.”

“Are you insinuating—”

“Hell, no! I’m *telling* you!” Ritchie put his hand down suddenly, and his voice calmed. “Ever wonder about those other two big buildings on the premises here, Collins? Well, I can tell you about one of them, because that’s where I work. You might call it an experimental laboratory if you like. Sometime later on I’ll describe it to you. But right now it’s the other building that’s important; the building with the big chimney. That’s a kind of an incinerator, Collins—a place where the mistakes go up in smoke, at night, when there’s nobody to see. A place where you and I will go up in smoke, if you’re fool enough to tell Manschoff about this.”

“You’re lying.”

“I wish to God I was, for both our sakes! But I can prove what I’m saying. *You* can prove it, for yourself.”

“How?”

“Pretend this meeting never occurred. Pretend that you just spent the afternoon here, waiting for a girl who never showed up. Then do exactly what you would do under those circumstances. Go in to see Dr. Manschoff and ask him where Sue is, tell him you were worried because she’d promised to meet you and then didn’t appear.

“I can tell you right now what he’ll tell you. He’ll say that Sue has been transferred to another treatment center, that she knew about it for several weeks but didn’t want to upset you with the news of her departure. So she decided to just slip away. And Manschoff will tell you not to be unhappy. It just so happens that he knows of another nurse who has had her eye on you—a very pretty little brunette named Myrna. In fact, if you go down to the river tomorrow, you'll find her waiting for you there."

"What if I refuse?"

Ritchie shrugged. "Why should you refuse? It's all fun and games, isn't it? Up to now you haven't asked any questions about what was going on, and it would look very strange if you started at this late date. I strongly advise you to cooperate. If not, everything is likely to—quite literally—go up in smoke." Harry Collins frowned. "All right, suppose I do what you say, and Manschoff gives me the answers you predict. This still doesn't prove that he'd be lying or that you're telling me the truth."

"Wouldn't it indicate as much, though?"

"Perhaps. But on the other hand, it could merely mean that you know Sue *has* been transferred, and that Dr. Manschoff intends to turn me over to a substitute. It doesn't necessarily imply anything sinister."

"In other words, you're insisting on a clincher, is that it?"

"Yes."

"All right." Ritchie sighed heavily. "You asked for it." He reached into the left-hand upper pocket of the gray uniform and brought out a small, stiff square of glossy paper.

"What's that?" Harry asked. He reached for the paper, but Ritchie drew his hand back.

"Look at it over my shoulder," he said. "I don't want any fingerprints. Hell of a risky business just smuggling it out of the files—no telling how well they check up on this material."

Harry circled behind the smaller man. He squinted down. "Hard to read."

"Sure. It's a photostat. I made it myself, this morning; that's my department. Read carefully now. You'll see it's a transcript of the lab report. Susan Pulver, that's her name, isn't it? After due examination and upon completion of preliminary tests, hereby found to be in the second month of pregnancy. Putative father, Harry Collins—that's you, see your name? And here's the rest of the record."

"Yes, let me see it. What's all this about inoculation series? And who is this Dr. Leffingwell?" Harry bent closer, but Ritchie closed his hand around the photostat and pocketed it again.

"Never mind that, now. I'll tell you later. The important thing is, do you believe me?"

"I believe Sue is pregnant, yes."

"That's enough. Enough for you to do what I've asked you to. Go to Manschoff and make inquiries. See what he tells you. Don't make a scene, and for God's sake don't mention my name. Just confirm my story for yourself. Then I'll give you further details."

"But when will I see you?"

"Tomorrow afternoon, if you like. Right here."

"You said he'd be sending another girl—"

Ritchie nodded. "So I did. And so he'll say. I suggest you beg to be excused for the moment. Tell him it will take a while for you to get over the shock of losing Sue this way."

"I won't be lying," Harry murmured.

"I know. And I'm sorry. Believe me, I am." Ritchie sighed again. "But you'll just have to trust me from now on."

"Trust you? When you haven't even explained what this is all about?"

"You've had your shock-therapy for today. Come back for another treatment tomorrow."

And then Ritchie was gone, the gray uniform melting away into the gray shadows of the shrubbery above the bank.

A short time later, Harry made his own way back to the center in the gathering twilight. The dusk was gray, too. Everything seemed gray now.

So was Harry Collins' face, when he emerged from his interview with Dr. Manschoff that evening. And it was still pallid the next afternoon when he came down to the river bank and waited for Ritchie to reappear.

The little man emerged from the bushes. He stared at Harry's drawn countenance and nodded slowly.

"I was right, eh?" he muttered.

"It looks that way. But I can't understand what's going on. If this isn't just a treatment center, if they're not really interested in my welfare, then what am I doing here?"

"You're taking part in an experiment. This, my friend, is a laboratory. And you are a nice, healthy guinea pig."

"But that doesn't make sense.

I haven't been experimented on. They've let me do as I please."

"Exactly. And what do guinea pigs excel at? *Breeding*."

"You mean this whole thing was rigged up just so that Sue and I would—?"

"Please, let's not be so egocentric, shall we? After all, you're not the *only* male patient in this place. There are a dozen others wandering around loose. Some of them have their favorite caves, others have discovered little bypaths, but all of them seem to have located ideal trysting-places. Whereupon, of course, the volunteer nurses have located *them."*

"Are you telling me the same situation exists with each of the others?"

"Isn't it fairly obvious? You've shown no inclination to become friendly with the rest of the patients here, and none of them have made any overtures to you. That's because everyone has his own little secret, his own private arrangement. And so all of you go around fooling everybody else, and all of you are being fooled. I'll give credit to Manschoff and his staff on that point—he's certainly mastered the principles of practical psychology."

"But you talked about breeding. With our present overpopulation problem, why in the world do they deliberately encourage the birth of more children?"

"Very well put. 'Why in the world' indeed! In order to answer that, you'd better take a good look at the world."

Arnold Ritchie seated himself on the grass, pulled out a pipe, and then replaced it hastily. "Better not smoke," he murmured. "Be awkward if we attracted any attention and were found together."

Harry stared at him. "You *are* a Naturalist, aren't you?"

"I'm a reporter, by profession."

"Which network?"

"No network. *Newzines.* There are still a few in print, you know."

"I know. But I can't afford them."

"There aren't many left who can, or who even feel the need of reading them. Nevertheless, mavericks like myself still cling to the ancient and honorable practices of the Fourth Estate. One of which is ferreting out the inside story, the news behind the news."

"Then you're not working for the Naturalists."

"Of course I am. I'm working for them and for everybody else who has an interest in learning the truth." Ritchie paused. "By the way, you keep using that term as if it were some kind of dirty word. Just what does it mean? What *is* a Naturalist, in your book?"

"Why, a radical thinker, of course. An opponent of government policies, of progress. One who believes we're running out of living space, using up the last of our natural resources."

"What do you suppose motivates Naturalists, really?"

"Well, they can't stand the pressures of daily living, or the prospects of a future when we'll be still more hemmed in."

Ritchie nodded. "Any more than you could, a few months ago, when you tried to commit suicide. Wouldn't you say that *you* were thinking like a Naturalist then?"

Harry grimaced. "I suppose so."

"Don't feel ashamed. You saw the situation clearly, just as the so-called Naturalists do. And just as the government does. Only the government can't dare admit it—hence the secrecy behind this project."

"A hush-hush government plan to stimulate further breeding? I still don't see—"

"Look at the world," Ritchie repeated. "Look at it realistically. What's the situation at present? Population close to six billion, and rising fast. There was a leveling-off period in the Sixties, and then it started to climb again. No wars, no disease to cut it down. The development of synthetic foods, the use of algae and fungi, rules out famine as a limiting factor. Increased harnessing of atomic power has done away with widespread poverty, so there's no economic deterrent to propagation. Neither church nor state dares set up a legal prohibition. So here we are, at the millennium. In place of international tension we've substituted internal tension. In place of thermonuclear explosion, we have a population explosion."

"You make it look pretty grim."

"I'm just talking about today. What happens ten years from now, when we hit a population-level of ten billion? What happens when we reach twenty billion, fifty billion, a hundred? Don't talk to me about more substitutes, more synthetics, new ways of conserving top-soil. There just isn't going to be *room* for everyone!"

"Then what's the answer?"

"That's what the government wants to know. Believe me, they've done a lot of searching; most of it *sub rosa.* And then along came this man Leffingwell, with *his* solution. That's just what it is, of course—an endocrinological solution, for direct injection."

"Leffingwell? The Dr. Leffingwell whose name was on that photostat? What's he got to do with all this?"

"He's boss of this project," Ritchie said. "He's the one who persuaded them to set up a breeding-center. You're *his* guinea pig."

"But why all the secrecy?"

"That's what I wanted to know. That's why I scurried around, pulled strings to get a lab technician's job here. It wasn't easy, believe me. The whole deal is being kept strictly under wraps until Leffingwell's experiments prove out. They realized right away that it would be fatal to use volunteers for the experiments—they'd be bound to talk, there'd be leaks. And of course, they anticipated some awkward results at first, until the technique is refined and perfected. Well, they were right on that score. I’ve seen some of their failures.” Ritchie shuddered. “Any volunteer—any military man, government employee or even a so-called dedicated scientist who broke away would spread enough rumors about what was going on to kill the entire project. That’s why they decided to use mental patients for subjects. God knows, they had millions to choose from, but they were very particular. You’re a rare specimen, Collins.”

“How so?”

“Because you happen to fit all their specifications. You’re young, in good physical condition. Unlike ninety percent of the population, you don’t even wear contact lenses, do you? And your aberration was temporary, easily removed by removing you from the tension-sources which created it. You have no family ties, no close friends, to question your absence. That’s why you were chosen—one of the two hundred.”

“Two hundred? But there’s only a dozen others here now.”

“A dozen males, yes. You’re forgetting the females. Must be about fifty or sixty in the other building.”

“But if you’re talking about someone like Sue, she’s a nurse—”

Ritchie shook his head. “That’s what she was *told* to say. Actually, she’s a patient, too. They’re all patients. Twelve men and sixty women, at the moment. Originally, about thirty men and a hundred and seventy women.”

“What happened to the others?”

“I told you there were some failures. Many of the women died in childbirth. Some of them survived, but found out about the results—and the results, up until now, haven’t been perfect. A few of the men found out, too. Well, they have only one method of dealing with failures here. They dispose of them. I told you about that chimney, didn’t I?”

“You mean they killed the offspring, killed those who found out about them?”

Ritchie shrugged.

“But what are they actually *doing?* Who is this Dr. Leffingwell? What’s it all about?”

"I think I can answer those questions for you."

Harry wheeled at the sound of the familiar voice.

Dr. Manschoff beamed down at him from the top of the river bank. "Don't be alarmed," he said. "I wasn't following you with any intent to eavesdrop. I was merely concerned about him." His eyes flickered as he directed his gaze past Harry's shoulder, and Harry turned again to look at Arnold Ritchie.

The little man was no longer standing and he was no longer alone. Two attendants now supported him, one on either side, and Ritchie himself sagged against their grip with eyes closed. A hypodermic needle in one attendant's hand indicated the reason for Ritchie's sudden collapse.

"Merely a heavy sedative," Dr. Manschoff murmured. "We came prepared, in expectation of just such an emergency." He nodded at his companions. "Better take him back now," he said. "I'll look in on him this evening, when he comes out of it."

"Sorry about all this," Manschoff continued, sitting down next to Harry as the orderlies lifted Ritchie's inert form and carried him up the slanting slope. "It's entirely my fault. I misjudged my patient—never should have permitted him such a degree of freedom. Obviously, he's not ready for it yet. I do hope he didn't upset you in any way."

"No. He seemed quite"—Harry hesitated, then went on hastily—"logical."

"Indeed he is." Dr. Manschoff smiled. "Paranoid delusions, as they used to call them, can often be rationalized most convincingly. And from what little I heard, he was doing an excellent job, wasn't he?"

"Well—"

"I know." A slight sigh erased the smile. "Leffingwell and I rare mad scientists, conducting biological experiments on human guinea pigs. We've assembled patients for breeding purposes and the government is secretly subsidizing us. Also, we incinerate our victims—again, with full governmental permission. All very logical, isn't it?"

"I didn't mean that," Harry told him. "It's just that he said Sue was pregnant and he was hinting things."

"Said?" Manschoff stood up. *"Hinted?* I'm surprised he didn't go further than that. Just today, we discovered he'd been using the office facilities—he had a sort of probationary position, as you may have guessed, helping out the staff in administration—to provide tangible proof of his artistic creations. He was writing out 'official reports' and then photostating them. Apparently he intended to circulate the results as 'evidence' to support his delusions. Look, here's a sample."

Dr. Manschoff passed a square of glossy paper to Harry, who scanned it quickly. It was another laboratory report similar to the one Ritchie had shown him, but containing a different set of names.

"No telling how long this sort of thing has been going on," Manschoff said. "He may have made dozens. Naturally, the moment we discovered it, we realized prompt action was necessary. He'll need special attention."

"But what's wrong with him?"

"It's a long story. He was a reporter at one time—he may have told you that. The death of his wife precipitated a severe trauma and brought him to our attention. Actually, I'm not at liberty to say any more regarding his case; you understand, I'm sure."

"Then you're telling me that everything he had to say was a product of his imagination?"

"No, don't misunderstand. It would be more correct to state that he merely distorted reality. For example, there *is* a Dr. Leffingwell on the staff here; he is a diagnostician and has nothing to do with psychotherapy *per se.* And he has charge of the hospital ward in Unit Three, the third building you may have noticed behind Administration. That's where the nurses maintain residence, of course. Incidentally, when any nurses take on a—special assignment, as it were, such as yours, Leffingwell does examine and treat them. There's a new oral contraception technique he's evolved which may be quite efficacious. But I'd hardly call it an example of sinister experimentation under the circumstances, would you?"

Harry shook his head. "About Ritchie, though," he said. "What will happen to him?"

"I can't offer any prognosis. In view of my recent error in judgment concerning him, it's hard to say how he'll respond to further treatment. But rest assured that I'll do my best for his case. Chances are you'll be seeing him again before very long."

Dr. Manschoff glanced at his watch. "Shall we go back now?" he suggested. "Supper will be served soon."

The two men toiled up the bank.

Harry discovered that the doctor was right about supper. It was being served as he returned to his room. But the predictions concerning Ritchie didn't work out quite as well.

It was after supper—indeed, quite some hours afterwards, while Harry sat at his window and stared sleeplessly out into the night—that he noted the thick, greasy spirals of black smoke rising suddenly from the chimney of the Third Unit building. And the sight may Rave prepared him for the failure of Dr. Manschoff's prophecy regarding his disturbed patient.

Harry never asked any questions, and no explanations were ever forthcoming.

But from that evening onward, nobody ever saw Arnold Ritchie again.

3. President Winthrop—1999

THE Secretary of State closed the door.

"Well?" he asked.

President Winthrop looked up from the desk and blinked. "Hello, Art," he said. "Sit down."

"Sorry I'm late," the Secretary told him. "I came as soon as I got the call."

“It doesn’t matter.” The President lit a cigarette and pursed his lips around it until it stopped wobbling. “I’ve been checking the reports all night.”

“You look tired.”

“I am. I could sleep for a week. That is, I *wish* I could.”

“Any luck?”

The President pushed the papers aside and drummed the desk for a moment. Then he offered the Secretary a gray ghost of a smile.

“The answer’s still the same.”

“But this was our last chance—”

“I know.” The President leaned back. “When I think of the time and effort, the money that’s been poured into these projects! To say nothing of the hopes we had. And now, it’s all for nothing.”

“You can’t say that,” the Secretary answered. “After all, we did reach the moon. We got to Mars.” He paused. “No one can take that away from you. You sponsored the Martian flights. You fought for the appropriations, pushed the project, carried it through. You helped mankind realize its greatest dream—”

“Save that for the newscasts,” the President said. “The fact remains, we’ve succeeded. And our success was a failure. Mankind’s greatest dream, eh? Read these reports and you’ll find out this is mankind’s greatest nightmare.”

“Is it that bad?”

“Yes. The President slumped in his chair. “It’s that bad. We can reach the moon at will. Now we can send a manned flight to Mars. But it means nothing. We can’t support life in either place. There’s absolutely no possibility of establishing or maintaining an outpost, let alone a large colony or a permanent human residence. That’s what all the reports conclusively demonstrate.

“Every bit of oxygen, every bit of food and clothing and material, would have to be supplied. And investigations prove there’s no chance of ever realizing any return. The cost of such an operation is staggeringly prohibitive. Even if there was evidence to show it might be possible to undertake some mining projects, it wouldn't begin to defray expenses, once you consider the transportation factor."

"But if they improve the rockets, manage to make room for a bigger payload, wouldn't it be cheaper?"

"It would still cost roughly a billion dollars to equip a flight and maintain a personnel of twenty men for a year," the President told him. "I've checked into that, and even this estimate is based on the most optimistic projection. So you can see there's no use in continuing now. We'll never solve our problems by attempting to colonize the moon or Mars."

"But it's the only possible solution left to us."

"No it isn't," the President said. "There's always our friend Leffingwell."

The Secretary of State turned away. "You can't officially sponsor a thing like that," he muttered. "It's political suicide."

The gray smile returned to the gray lips. "Suicide? What do you know about suicide, Art? I've been reading a few statistics on *that,* too. How many actual suicides do you think we had in this country last year?"

"A hundred thousand? Two hundred, maybe?"

"Two million." The President leaned forward. "Add to that, over a million murders and six million crimes of violence."

"I never knew—"

"Damned right you didn't! We used to have a Federal Bureau of Investigation to help prevent such things. Now the big job is merely to hush them up. We're doing everything in our power just to keep these matters quiet, or else there'd be utter panic. Then there's the accident total and the psycho rate. We can't build institutions fast enough to hold the mental cases, nor train doctors enough to care for them. Shifting them into other jobs in other areas doesn't cure, and it no longer even disguises what is happening. At this rate, another ten years will see half the nation going insane. And it's like this all over the world.

"This is race-suicide, Art. Race-suicide through sheer fecundity. Leffingwell is right. The reproductive instinct, unchecked, will overbalance group survival in the end. How long has it been since you were out on the streets?"

The Secretary of State shrugged. "You know I never go out on the streets," he said. "It isn't very safe."

"Of course not. But it's no safer for the hundreds of millions who have to go out every day. Accident, crime, the sheer maddening proximity of the crowds—these phenomena are increasing through mathematical progression. And they must be stopped. Leffingwell has the only answer."

"They won't buy it," warned the Secretary. "Congress won't, and the voters won't, any more than they bought birth-control. And this is worse."

"I know that, too." The President rose and walked over to the window, looking out at the skyscraper apartments which loomed across what had once been the Mall. He was trying to find the dwarfed spire of Washington's Monument in the tangled maze of stone.

"If I go before the people and sponsor Leffingwell, I'm through. Through as President, through with the Party. They'll crucify me. But somebody in authority must push this project. That's the beginning. Once it's known, people will have to think about the possibilities. There'll be opposition, then controversy, then debate. And gradually Leffingwell will gain adherents. It may take five years, it may take ten. Finally, the change will come. First through volunteers. Then by law. I only pray that it happens soon."

"They'll curse your name," the Secretary said. "They'll try to kill you. It's going to be hell."

"Hell for me if I do, yes. Worse hell for the whole world if I don't."

"But are you quite sure it will work? His method, I mean?"

"You saw the reports on his tests, didn't you? It works, all right. We've got more than just abstract data, now. We've got films for the telescreenings all set up."

"Films? You mean you'll actually *show* what the results are? Why, just telling the people will be bad enough. And admitting the government sponsored the project under wraps. But when they *see,* nothing on earth can save you from assassination."

"Perhaps. It doesn't really matter." The President crushed his cigarette in the ashtray. "One less mouth to feed. And I'm getting pretty sick of synthetic meals, anyway."

President Winthrop turned to the Secretary, his eyes brightening momentarily. "Tell you what, Art. I'm not planning on breaking the proposal to the public until next Monday. What say we have a little private dinner party on Saturday evening, just the Cabinet members and their wives? Sort of a farewell celebration, in a way, but we won't call it that, of course? Chef tells me there's still twenty pounds of hamburger in the freezers."

"Twenty pounds of hamburger? You mean it?" The Secretary of State was smiling, too.

"That's right." The President of the United States grinned in anticipation. "Been a long time since I've tasted a real, honest-to-goodness hamburger."

4. Harry Collins—2000

HARRY didn't ask any questions. He just kept his mouth shut and waited. Maybe Dr. Manschoff suspected and maybe he didn't. Anyway, there was no trouble. Harry figured there wouldn't be, as long as he stayed in line and went through the proper motions. It was all a matter of pretending to conform, pretending to agree, pretending to believe.

So he watched his step—*except in the dreams, and then he was always falling into the yawning abyss*.

He kept his nose clean—*but in the dreams he smelled the blood and brimstone of the pit.*

He managed to retain a cheerful smile at all times—*though, in the dreams, he screamed.*

Eventually, he even met Myrna. She was the pretty little brunette whom Ritchie had mentioned, and she did her best to console him—*only in dreams, when he embraced her, he was embracing a writhing coil of slimy smoke.*

It may have been that Harry Collins went a little mad, just having to pretend that he was sane. But he learned the way, and he managed. He saved the madness (or *was it the reality?)* for the dreams.

Meanwhile he waited and said nothing.

He said nothing when, after three months or so, Myrna was suddenly "transferred" without warning.

He said nothing when, once a week or so, he went in to visit with Dr. Manschoff.

He said nothing when Manschoff volunteered the information that Ritchie had been "transferred" too, or suggested that it would be best to stay on for "further therapy."

And he said nothing when still a third nurse came his way; a woman who was callid, complaisant, and nauseatingly nymphomaniac.

The important thing was to stay alive. Stay alive and try to learn.

It took him almost an additional year to find out what he wanted to find out. More than eight months passed before he found a way of sneaking out of his room at night, and a way of getting into that Third Unit through a delivery door which was occasionally left open through negligence.

Even then, all he learned was that the female patients did have their living quarters here, along with the members of the staff and—presumably—Dr. Leffingwell. Many of the women *were* patients rather than nurses, as claimed, and a good number of them were in various stages of pregnancy, but this proved nothing.

Several times Harry debated the possibilities of taking some of the other men in his Unit into his confidence. Then he remembered what had happened to Arnold Ritchie and decided against this course. The risk was too great. He had to continue alone.

It wasn't until Harry managed to get into Unit Four that he got what he wanted (what he *didn't* want) and learned that reality and dreams were one and the same.

There was the night, more than a year after he'd come to the treatment center, when he finally broke into the basement and found the incinerators. And the incinerators led to the operating and delivery chambers, and the delivery chambers led to the laboratory and the laboratory led to the incubators and the incubators led to the nightmare.

In the nightmare Harry found himself looking down at the mistakes and the failures and he recognized them for what they were, and he knew then why the incinerators were kept busy and why the black smoke poured.

In the nightmare he saw the special units containing those which were not mistakes or failures, and in a way they were worse than the others. They were red and wriggling there beneath the glass, and on the glass surfaces hung the charts which gave the data. Then Harry saw the names, saw his own name repeated twice—once for Sue, one for Myrna. And he realized that he had contributed to the successful outcome or issue of the experiments *(outcome? Issue? These horrors?)* and that was why Manschoff must have chosen to take the risk of keeping him alive. Because he was one of the *good* guinea pigs, and he had spawned, spawned living, mewing abominations.

He had dreamed of these things, and now he saw that they were real, so that nightmare merged with *now*, and he could gaze down at it with open eyes and scream at last with open mouth.

Then, of course, an attendant came running *(although he seemed to be moving ever so slowly, because everything moves so slowly in a dream)* and Harry saw him coming and lifted a bell-glass and smashed it down over the man's head (*slowly, ever so slowly)* and then he heard the others coming and he climbed out of the window and ran.

The searchlights winked across the courtyards and the sirens vomited hysteria from metallic throats and the night was filled with shadows that pursued.

But Harry knew where to run. He ran straight through the nightmare, through all the fantastic but familiar convolutions of sight and sound, and then he came to the river and plunged in.

Now the nightmare was not sight or sound, but merely sensation. Icy cold and distilled darkness; ripples that ran, then raced and roiled and roared. But there had to be a way out of the nightmare and there had to be a way out of the canyon, and that way was the river.

Apparently no one else had thought of the river; perhaps they had considered it as a possible avenue of escape and then discarded the notion when they realized how it ripped and raged among the rocks as it finally plunged from the canyon's mouth. Obviously, no one could hope to combat that current and survive.

But strange things happen in nightmares. And you fight the numbness and the blackness and you claw and convulse and you twist and turn and toss and then you ride the crests of frenzy and plunge into the troughs of panic and despair and you sweep round and round and sink down into nothingness until you break through to the freedom which comes only with oblivion.

Somewhere beyond the canyon's moiling maw, Harry Collins found that freedom and that oblivion. He escaped from the nightmare, just as he escaped from the river.

The river itself roared on without him.

And the nightmare continued, too . . .

5. Minnie Schultz—2009

WHEN Frank came home, Minnie met him at the door. She didn't say a word, just handed him the envelope containing the notice.

"What's the matter?" Frank asked, trying to take her in his arms. "You been crying."

"Never mind." Minnie freed herself. "Just read what it says there."

Frank read slowly, determineedly, his features contorted in concentration. Vocational Apt had terminated his schooling at the old grade-school level, and while like all students he had been taught enough so that he could read the necessary advertising commercials, any printed message of this sort provided a definite challenge.

Halfway through the notice he started to scowl. "What kind of monkey business is this?"

"No monkey business. It's the new law. Everybody that gets married in Angelisco takes the shots, from now on. Fella from State Hall, he told me when he delivered this."

"We'll see about this," Frank muttered. "No damn government's gonna tell me how to run my life. Sa free country, ain't so?"

Minnie's mouth began to twitch, "They're coming back tomorra morning, the fella said. To give me the first shots. Gee, honey, I'm scared, like. I don't want 'em."

"That settles it," Frank said. "We're getting out of this place, fast."

"Where'd we go?"

"Dunno. Someplace. Texas, maybe. I was listening to the 'casts at work today. They don't have this law in Texas. Not yet, anyway. Come on, start packing."

"Packing? But how'll we get there?"

"Fly. We'll jet right out."

"You got prior'ty reservations or something?"

"No." The scowl returned to Frank's forehead. "But maybe if I pitch 'em a sob story, tell 'em it's our honeymoon, you know, then we could—"

Minnie shook her head. "It won't work, honey. You know that. Takes six months to get a prior'ty clearance or whatever they call it. Besides, your job and all—what'll you do in Texas? They've got your number listed here. Why, we couldn't even *land,* like. I bet Texas is even more crowded than

Angelisco these days, in the cities. And all the rest of it is Ag Culture project, isn't it?"

Frank was leaning against the sink, listening. Now he took three steps forward and sat down on the bed. He didn't look at her as he spoke.

"Well, we gotta do something," he said. "You don't want those shots and that's for sure. Maybe I can have one of those other things instead, those whaddya-call-'ems."

"You mean where they operate you, like?"

"That's right. A vas-something. You know, sterilize you. Then we won't have to worry."

Minnie took a deep breath. Then she sat down and put her arm around Frank.

"But you wanted kids," she murmured. "You told me, when we got married, you always wanted to have a son—"

Frank pulled away.

"Sure I do," he said. "A son. That's what I want. A *real* son. Not a freak. Not a damned little monster that has to go to the Clinic every month and take injections so it won't grow. And what happens to you if you take *your* shots now? What if they drive you crazy or something?"

Minnie put her arm around Frank again and made him look at her. "That's not true," she told him. "That's just a lot of Naturalist talk. I know."

"Hell you do."

"But I do, honey! Honest, like! May Stebbins, she took the shots last year, when they asked for volunteers. And she's all right. You seen her baby yourself, remember? It's the sweetest little thing, and awful smart! So maybe it wouldn't be so bad."

"I'll ask about being operated tomorrow," Frank said. "Forget it. It don't matter."

"Of course it matters." Minnie looked straight at him. "Don't you think I know what you been going through? Sweating it out on that job day after day, going nuts in the traffic, saving up the ration coupons so's we'd have extra food for the honeymoon and all?

“You didn’t have to marry me, you know that. It was just like we could have a place of our own together, and kids. Well, we’re gonna have ’em, honey. I’ll take the shots.”

Frank shook his head but said nothing.

“It won’t be so bad,” Minnie went on. “The shots don’t hurt at all, and they make it easier, carrying the baby. They say you don’t even get morning sickness or anything. And just think, when we have a kid, we get a chance for a bigger place. We go right on the housing lists. We can have two rooms. A real bedroom, maybe.”

Frank stared at her. “Is that all you can think about?” he asked. “A real bedroom?”

“But honey—”

“What about the kid?” he muttered. “How you suppose it’s gonna feel? How’d you like to grow up and *not* grow up? How’d you like to be a midget three feet high in a world where everybody else is bigger? What kind of a life you call *that?* I want my son to have a decent chance.”

“He will have.”

Minnie stared back at him, but she wasn’t seeing his face. “Don’t you understand, honey? This isn’t just something happening to us. We’re not special. It’s happening to everybody, all over the country, all over the world. You seen it in the ‘casts, haven’t you? Most states, they adopted the laws. And in a couple more years it’ll be the only way anyone will ever have kids. Ten-twenty years from now, the kids will be growing up. Ours won’t be different then, because from now on all the kids will be just like he is. The same size.”

“I thought you was afraid of the shots,” Frank said.

Minnie was still staring. “I was, honey. Only, I dunno. I keep thinking about Grandma.”

“What’s the old lady got to do with it?”

“Well, I remember when I was a little girl, like. How my Grandma always used to tell me about *her* Grandma, when *she* was a little girl.

"She was saying about how in the old days, before there even was an Angelisco—when her Grandma came out here in a covered wagon. Just think, honey, she was younger than I am, and she come thousands and thousands of miles in a wagon! With real horses, like! Wasn't any houses, no people or nothing. Except Indians that shot at them. And they climbed up the mountains and they crossed over the deserts and went hungry and thirsty and had fights with those Indians all the way. But they never stopped until they got here. Because they was the pioneers."

"Pioneers?"

"That's what Grandma said *her* Grandma called herself. A pioneer. She was real proud of it, too. Because it means having the courage to cut loose from all the old things and try something new when you need to. Start a whole new world, a whole new kind of life."

She sighed. "I always wanted to be a pioneer, like, but I never thought I'd get the chance."

"What are you talking about? What's all this got to do with us, or having a kid?"

"Don't you see? Taking these shots, having a baby this new way—it's sort of being a pioneer, too. Gonna help bring a new kind of people into a new kind of world. And if that's not being a pioneer, like, it's the closest I can come to it. It sounds right to me now."

Minnie smiled and nodded. "I guess I made up my mind just now. I'm taking the shots."

"Hell you are!" Frank told her. "We'll talk about it some more in the morning."

But Minnie continued to smile.

And that night, as she lay in the utility bed, the squeaking of the springs became the sound of turning wheels. The plastic walls and ceiling of the eightieth-floor apartment turned to billowing canvas, and the thunder of the passing jets transformed itself into the drumming hoofbeats of a million buffalo.

Let Frank talk to her again in the morning if he liked, Minnie thought. *It wouldn't make any difference now. Because you can't stop us pioneers.*

6. Harry Collins—2012

HARRY crouched behind the boulders, propping the rifle up between the rocks, and adjusted the telescopic sights. The distant doorway sprang into sharp focus. Grunting with satisfaction, he settled down to his vigil. The rifle-barrel had been dulled down against detection by reflection, and Harry's dark glasses protected him against the glare of the morning sun. He might have to wait several hours now, but he didn't care. It had taken him twelve years to come this far, and he was willing to wait a little while longer.

Twelve years. Was it really that long?

A mirror might have answered him; a mirror might have shown him the harsh features of a man of forty-two. But Harry needed no mirror. He could remember the past dozen years only too easily—though they had not been easy years.

Surviving the river was only the beginning. Animal strength carried him through that ordeal. But he emerged from the river as an animal; a wounded animal, crawling through the brush and arroyo outside the southern Colorado canyon.

And it was animal cunning which preserved him. He'd wandered several days until he encountered Emil Grizek and his outfit. By that time he was half-starved and completely delirious. It took a month until he was up and around again.

But Emil and the boys had nursed him through. They took turns caring for him in the bunkhouse; their methods were crude but efficient and Harry was grateful. Best of all, they asked no questions. Harry's status was that of a hunted fugitive, without a Vocational Apt record or rating. The authorities or any prospective employers would inquire into these things, but Emil

Grizek never seemed curious. By the time Harry was up and around again, he'd been accepted as one of the bunch. He told them his name was Harry Sanders, and that was enough.

Two months after they found him, he'd signed on with Emil Grizek and found a new role in life.

Harry Collins, advertising copywriter, had become Harry Sanders, working cowhand.

There was surprisingly little difficulty. Grizek had absentee employers who weren't interested in their foreman's methods, just as long as he recruited his own wranglers for the Bar B Ranch. Nobody demanded to see Apt cards or insisted on making out formal work-reports, and the pay was in cash. Cowhands were hard to come by these days, and it was an unspoken premise that the men taking on such jobs would be vagrants, migratory workers, fugitives from justice and injustice. A generation or so ago they might have become tramps—but the last of the hoboes had vanished along with the last of the freight trains. Once the derelicts haunted the canyons of the big cities; today there was no place for them there, so they fled to the canyons of the west. Harry had found himself a new niche, and no questions asked.

Oddly enough, he fitted in. The outdoor life agreed with him, and in a matter of months he was a passable cowpoke; within a year he was one of Grizek's top hands.

He learned to ride a bucking jeep with the best of them, and he could spot, single out, and stun a steer in forty seconds flat; then use his electronic brander on it and have the critter back on its feet in just under a minute.

Work was no problem, and neither was recreation. The bunkhouse offered crude but adequate facilities for living; old-fashioned air-conditioning and an antique infra-red broiler seemed good enough for roughing it, and Cookie at least turned out real man-sized meals. Eating genuine beef and honest-to-goodness baked bread was a treat, and so was having the luxury of all that space in the sleeping quarters. Harry thrived on it.

And some of the other hands were interesting companions. True, they were renegades and mavericks, but they were each of them unique and individual, and Harry enjoyed listening to them fan the breeze during the long nights.

There was Big Phil, who was pushing sixty now. But you'd never know it, not unless you got him to talking about the old days when he'd been a boy in Detroit. His daddy had been one of the last of the Union Men, back in the days of what they used to call the Organized Labor Movement. He could tell you about wage-hour agreements and the Railroad Brotherhood and contract negotiations almost as if he knew of these things through personal experience. He even remembered the Democratic Party. Phil got out when the government took over and set up Vocational Apt and Industrial Supervision; that's when he drifted west.

Tom Lowery's family had been military; he claimed to have been a member of the last graduating class ever to leave West Point. When the armament race ended, his prospects of a career vanished, and he settled down as a guard at Canaverel. Finally, he'd headed for the open country.

Bassett was the scholar of the outfit. He could sit around and quote old-time book-authors by the hour—classic writers like Prather and Spillane. In another age he might have been a college professor or even a football coach; he had an aptitude for the arts.

And there was Lobo, the misogynist, who had fled a wife and eleven children back in Monterey; and Januzki, who used to be mixed up with one of those odd religious cults out on the Coast. He bragged he'd been one of the Big Daddy-Os in the Beat Generationists, and he argued with Bassett about some old-time evangelist named Kerouac.

Best of all, though, Harry liked talking to Nick Kendrick. Nick's hobby was music, and he treasured his second-hand stereophonic unit and collection of tapes. He too was a classicist in his way, and there was many a long winter night when Harry sat there listening to ancient folk songs. The quaint atonalities of progressive jazz and the childishly frantic rhythms of "cool sounds" were somehow soothing and reassuring in their reminder of a simple heritage from a simpler age.

But above all, these men were wranglers, and they took a peculiar pride in the traditions of their own calling. There wasn't a one of them who wouldn't spend hours mulling over the lore of the range and the prairie. They knew the Great Names from the Great Days—Eugene Autry, Wyatt Earp, the legendary Thomas Mix, Dale Robertson, Paladin, and all the others; men who rode actual horses in the era when the West was really an untamed frontier.

And like the cowboys they were, they maintained the customs of other days. Every few months they rode a bucking helicopter into some raw western town—Las Vegas, or Reno, or even over to Palm Springs—to drink recklessly in the cocktail lounges, gamble wildly at the slots, or "go down the line" with some telescreen model on location for outdoor ad-backgrounds. There were still half a dozen such sin-cities scattered throughout the west; even the government acknowledged the need of lonely men to blow off steam. And though Ag Culture officially disapproved of the whole cowhand system, and talked grimly of setting up new and more efficient methods for training personnel and handling the cattle ranges, nothing was ever done. Perhaps the authorities knew that it was a hopeless task; only the outcasts and iconoclasts had the temperament necessary to survive such loneliness under an open sky. Citydwelling conformists just could not endure the monotony.

But even Emil Grizek's hands marvelled at the way Harry lived. He never joined them in their disorderly descent upon the scarlet cities of the plain, and most of the time he didn't even seem to watch the telescreen. If anything, he deliberately avoided all possible contact with civilization.

Since he never volunteered any information about his own past, they privately concluded that he was just a psychopathic personality.

"Strong regressive and seclusive tendencies," Bassett explained, solemnly.

“Sure,” Nick Kendrick nodded, wisely. “You mean a Mouldy Fig, like.”

“Creeping Meatball,” muttered cultist Januzki. Not being religious fanatics, the others didn’t understand the reference. But gradually they came to accept Harry’s isolationist ways as the norm—at least, for him. And since he never quarreled, never exhibited any signs of dissatisfaction, he was left to his own pattern.

Thus it was all the more surprising when that pattern was rudely and abruptly shattered.

Harry remembered the occasion well. It was the day the Leff Law was officially upheld by the Supremist Courts. The whole business came over the telescreens and there was no way of avoiding it—you couldn’t avoid it, because everybody was talking about it and everybody was watching.

“Now what do you think?” Emil Grizek demanded. “Any woman wants a baby, she’s got to have those shots. They say kids shrink down into nothing. Weigh less than two pounds when they’re born, and never grow up to be any bigger than midgets. You ask me, the whole thing’s plumb loco, to say nothing of psychotic.”

“I dunno.” This from Big Phil. “Reckon they just about have to do something, the way cities are filling up and all. Tell me every spot in the country, except for the plains states here, is busting at the seams. Same in Europe, Africa, South America. Running out of space, running out of food, all over the world. This man Leffingwell figures on cutting down on size so’s to keep the whole shebang going.”

“But why couldn’t it be done on a voluntary basis?” Bassett demanded. “These arbitrary rulings are bound to result in frustrations. And can you imagine what will happen to the individual family constellations? Take a couple that already has two youngsters, as of now. Suppose the wife submits to the inoculations for her next child and it’s born with a size-mutation. How in the world will that child survive as a midget in a family of giants? There’ll be untold damage to the personality—”

“We’ve heard all those arguments,” Tom Lowery cut in. “The Naturalists have been handing out that line for years. What happens to the new generation of kids, how do we know they won't be mentally defective, how can they adjust, by what right does the government interfere with private lives, personal religious beliefs; all that sort of thing. For over ten years now the debate's been going on. And meanwhile, time is running out. Space is running out. Food is running out. It isn't a question of individual choice any longer—it's a question of group survival. I say the Courts are right. We have to go according to law. And back the law up with force of arms if necessary."

"We get the message," Januzki agreed. "But something tells me there'll be trouble. Most folks need a midget like they need a monkey on their backs."

It's a gasser, pardners," said Nick Kendrick. "Naturalists don't dig this. They'll fight it all along the line. Everybody's gonna be all shook up.

It is still a good idea," Lobo insisted. "This Dr. Leffingwell, he has made the tests. For years he has given injections and no harm has come. The children are healthy, they survive. They learn in special schools—"

"How do you know?" Bassett demanded. "Maybe it's all a lot of motivationalist propaganda.

"We have seen them on the telescreens, no?"

"They could be faking the whole thing."

"But Leffingwell, he has offered the shots to other governments beside our own. The whole world will adopt them.

"What if some countries don't? What if our kids become midgets and the Asiatics refuse the inoculations?"

"They won't. They need room even more than we do."

"No sense arguing," Emil Grizek concluded. "It's the law. You know that. And if you don't like it, join the Naturalists." He chuckled. "But better hurry. Something tells me there won't be any Naturalists around after a couple of years. Now that there's a Leff Law, the government isn't likely to stand for too much criticism." He turned to Harry. "What do you think?" he asked.

Harry shrugged. "No comment," he said.

But the next day he went to Grizek and demanded his pay in full.

"Leaving?" Grizek muttered. "I don't understand. You've been with us almost five years. Where you going, what you intend to do? What's got into you all of a sudden?"

"Time for a change," Harry told him. "I've been saving my money."

"Don't I know it? Never touched a penny in all this time." Grizek ran a hand across his chin. "Say, if it's a raise you're looking for, I can—"

"No, thanks. It's not that. I've money enough."

"So you have. Around eighteen, twenty thousand, I reckon, what with the bonuses." Emil Grizek sighed. "Well, if you insist, that's the way it's got to be, I suppose. When you plan on taking off?"

"Just as soon as there's a 'copter available."

"Got one going up to Colorado Springs tomorrow morning for the mail. I can get you aboard, give you a check—"

"I'll want my money in cash."

"Well, now, that isn't so easy.

Have to send up for a special draft. Take a week or so."

"I can wait."

"All right. And think it over. Maybe you'll decide to change your mind."

But Harry didn't change his mind. And ten days later he rode a 'copter into town, his money-belt strapped beneath his safety-belt.

From Colorado Springs he jetted to Kancity, and from Kancity to Memphisee. As long as he had money, nobody asked any questions. He holed up in cheap airtels and waited for developments.

It wasn't easy to accustom himself to urbanization again. He had been away from cities for over seven years now, and it might well have been seven centuries. The overpopulation problem was appalling. The outlawing of private automotive vehicles had helped, and the clearing of the airlanes served a purpose; the widespread increase in the use of atomic power cut the smog somewhat. But the synthetic food was frightful, the crowding intolerable, and the welter of rules and regulations attending the performance of even the simplest human activity past all his comprehension. Ration cards were in universal use for almost everything; fortunately for Harry, the black market accepted cash with no embarrassing inquiries. He found that he could survive.

But Harry's interest was not in survival; he was bent upon destruction. Surely the Naturalists would be organized and planning a way!

Back in '98, of course, they'd been merely an articulate minority without formal unity—an abstract, amorphous group akin to the "Liberals" of previous generations. A Naturalist could be a Catholic priest, a Unitarian layman, an atheist factory hand, a government employee, a housewife with strong prejudices against governmental controls, a wealthy man who deplored the dangers of growing industrialization, an Ag Culture worker who dreaded the dwindling of individual rights, an educator who feared widespread employment of social psychology, or almost anyone who opposed the concept of Mass Man, Mass-Motivated. Naturalists had never formed a single class, a single political party.

Surely, however, the enactment of the Leffingwell Law would have united them! Harry knew there was strong opposition, not only on the higher levels but amongst the general population. People would be afraid of the inoculations; theologians would condemn the process; economic interests, real-estate owners and transportation magnates and manufacturers would sense the threat here. They'd sponsor and they'd subsidize their spokesmen and the Naturalists would evolve into an efficient body of opposition.

So Harry hoped, arid so he thought, until he came out into the cities; came out into the cities and realized that the very magnitude of Mass Man mitigated against any attempt to organize him, except as a creature who labored and consumed. Organization springs from discussion, and discussion from thought—but who can think in chaos, discuss in delirium, organize in a vacuum? And the common citizen, Harry realized, had seemingly lost the capacity for group action. He remembered his own existence years ago—either he was lost in a crowd or he was alone, at home. Firm friendships were rare, and family units survived on the flimsiest of foundations. It took too much time and effort just to follow the rules, follow the traffic, follow the incessant routines governing even the simplest life-pattern in the teeming cities. For leisure there was the telescreen and the yellowjackets, and serious problems could be referred to the psych in routine checkups. Everybody seemed lost in the crowd these days.

Harry discovered that Dr. Manschoff had indeed lied to him; mental disorders were on the increase. He remembered an old, old book—one of the very first treatises on sociological psychology. *The Lonely Crowd,* wasn't it? Full of mumbo-jumbo about "inner-directed" and "outer-directed" personalities. Well, there was a grain of truth in it all. The crowd, and its individual members, lived in loneliness. And since you didn't know very many people well enough to talk to, intimately, you talked to yourself. Since you couldn't get away from physical contact with others whenever you ventured abroad, you stayed inside—except when you had to go to work, had to line up for food-rations or supplies, had to wait for hours for your check-ups on off-days. And staying inside meant being confined to the equivalent of an old-fashioned prison cell. If you weren't married, you lived in "solitary"; if you were married, you suffered the presence of fellow-inmates whose habits became intolerable, in time. So you watched the screen more and more, or you increased your quota of sedation, and when that didn't help you looked for a real escape. It was always available to you if you searched long enough; waiting at the tip of a knife, in the coil of a rope, the muzzle of a gun. You could find it at the very bottom of a bottle of pills or at the very bottom of the courtyard outside your window. Harry recalled looking for it there himself, so many years ago.

But now he was looking for something else. He was looking for others who shared not only his viewpoint but his purposefulness.

Where were the Naturalists?

Harry searched for several years.

The press?

But there were no Naturalists visible on the telescreens. The news and the newsmakers reflected a national philosophy—adopted many generations ago by the Founding Fathers of, mass-communication in their infinite wisdom—*"What's good for General Motors is good for the country."* And according to. them, everything happening was good for the country; that was the cardinal precept in the science of autobuyology. There were no Arnold Ritchies left any more, and the printed newzine seemed to have vanished.

The clergy?

Individual churches with congregations in physical attendance, seemed difficult to find. Telepreachers still appeared regularly every Sunday, but their scripts—like everyone else's—had been processed in advance. Denominationalism and sectarianism had waned, too; all of these performers seemed very much alike, in that they were vigorous, forthright, inspiring champions of the *status quo.*

The scientists?

But the scientists were a part of the government, and the government was a one-party system, and the system supported the nation and the nation supported the scientists. Of course, there were still private laboratories subsidized for industrial purposes, but the men who worked in them seemed singularly disinterested in social problems. In a way, Harry could understand their position. It isn't likely that a dedicated scientist, a man whose specialized research has won him a Nobel Prize for creating a new detergent, will be worldly enough to face unpleasant realities beyond the walls of his antiseptic sanctum. After all, there was precedent for such isolationism—did the sainted Betty Crocker ever enlist in any crusades? As for physicians, psychiatrists and mas' pychologists, they were the very ones who formed the hard core of Leffingwell's support.

The educators, then?

Vocational Apt was a part of the government. And the poor pedagogues, who had spent generations hacking their way out of the blackboard jungles, were only too happy to welcome the notion of a coming millennium when their small charges would be still smaller. Even though formal schooling, for most youngsters, terminated at fourteen, there was still the problem of overcrowding. Telescreening and teletesting techniques were a help, but the problem was essentially a physical one. And Leffingwell was providing a physical solution. Besides, the educators had been themselves educated, through Vocational Apt. And while they, and the government, fervently upheld the principle of freedom of speech, they had to draw the line somewhere. As everyone knows, freedom of speech does not mean freedom to *criticize.*

Business men?

Perhaps there were some disgruntled souls in the commercial community, whose secret heroes were the oil tycoons of a bygone era or the old-time Stock Exchange clan united under the totems of the bull or the bear. But the day of the rugged individualist was long departed; only the flabby individualist remained. And he had the forms to fill out and the inspectors to contend with, and the rationing to worry about and the taxes to meet and the quotas to fulfill. But in the long run, he managed. The business man worked for the government, but the government also worked for him. His position was protected. And if the government said the Leff Shots would solve the overpopulation problem—*without* cutting down the number of consumers—well, was that really so bad? Why, in a generation or so there'd be even *more* customers! That meant increased property values, too.

It took Harry several years to realize he'd never find Naturalists organized for group action. The capacity for group action had vanished as the size of the group increased. All interests were interdependent; the old civic, fraternal, social and anti-social societies had no present purpose any more. And the once-familiar rallying-points—whether they represented idealistic humanitarianism or crass self-interest—had vanished in the crowd. Patriotism, racialism, unionism, had all been lost in a moiling megalopolitanism.

There were protests, of course. The mothers objected, some of them. Ag Culture, in particular, ran into difficulties with women who revived the quaint custom of "going on strike" against the Left Law and refused to take their shots. But it was all on the individual level, and quickly coped with. Government medical authorities met the women at checkup time and demonstrated that the Leff Law had teeth in it. Teeth, and scalpels. The rebellious women were not subdued, slain, or segregated—they were merely sterilized. Perhaps more would have come of this if their men had backed them up; but the men, by and large, were realists. Having a kid was a headache these days. This new business of injections wasn't so bad, when you came right down to it. There'd still be youngsters around, and you'd get the same allotment for extra living space—only the way it worked out, there'd be more room and the kids would eat less. Pretty good deal. And it wan't as if the young ones were harmed. Some of them seemed to be a lot smarter than ordinary—like on some of the big quizshows, youngsters of eight and nine were winning all those big prizes. Bright little ones. Of course, these must be the ones raised in the first special school the government had set up. They said old Leffingwell, the guy who invented the shots, was running it himself. Sort of experimenting to see how this new crop of kids would make out . . .

It was when Harry learned about the school that he knew what he must do.

And if nobody else would help him, he'd act on his own. There might not be any help from organized society, but he still had disorganized society to turn to.

He spent the next two years and the last of his money finding a way. The pattern of criminality had changed, too, and it was no easy matter to find the assistance he needed. About the only group crime still flourishing was hijacking; it took him a long while to locate a small undercover outfit which operated around St. Louie and arrange to obtain a helicopter and pilot. Getting hold of the rifle was still more difficult, but he managed. And by the time everything was assembled, he'd found out what he needed to know about Dr. Leffingwell and his school.

As he'd suspected, the school was located in the old canyon, right in the same buildings which had once served as experimental units. How many youngsters were there, Harry didn't know. Maybe Manschoff was still on the staff, and maybe they'd brought in a whole new staff. These things didn't matter. What mattered was that Leffingwell was on the premises. And a man who knew his way about, a man who worked alone and to a single purpose, could reach him.

Thus it was that Harry Collins crouched behind the boulder that bright May morning and waited for Dr. Leffingwell to appear. The helicopter had dropped him at the upper end of the canyon the day before, giving him a chance to reconnoitre and familiarize himself with the terrain once again. He'd located Leffingwell's quarters, even seen the man through one of the lower windows. Harry had no trouble recognizing him; the face was only too familiar from a thousand 'casts viewed on a thousand screens. Inevitably, some time today, he'd emerge from the building. And when he did, Harry would be waiting.

He shifted behind the rocks and stretched his legs. Twelve years had passed, and now he'd come full circle. The whole business had started here, and here it must end. That was simple justice.

And it is justice, Harry told himself. *It's not revenge.* Because there'd be no point to revenge; that was only melodramatic nonsense. He was no Monte Cristo, come to wreak vengeance on his cruel oppressors. And he was no madman, no victim of a monomaniacal obsession. What he was doing was the result of lengthy and logical consideration.

If Harry Collins, longtime fugitive from a government treatment center, tried to take his story to the people, he'd be silenced without a hearing. But his story must be heard. There was only one way to arrest the attention of a nation—with the report of a rifle.

A bullet-in Leffingwell's brain; that was the solution of the problem. Overnight the assassin would become a national figure. They'd undoubtedly try him and undoubtedly condemn him, but first he'd have his day in court. He'd get a chance to speak out. He'd give all the voiceless, unorganized victims of the Leff Law a reason for rebellion—and offer them an example. If Leffingwell had to die, it would be in a good cause. Moreover, he deserved to die. Hadn't he killed men, women, infants, without mercy?

But it's not revenge, Harry repeated. *And I know what I'm doing. Maybe I was disturbed before, but I'm sane now. Perfectly logical. Perfectly calm. Perfectly controlled.*

Yes, and now his sane, logical, calm, controlled eyes noted that the distant door was opening, and he sighted through the 'scope and brought his sane, logical, calm, controlled hand up along the barrel to the trigger. He could see the two men emerging, and the shorter, plumper of the two was Leffingwell. He squinted at the high forehead with its receding hairline; it was a perfect target. A little squeeze now and he knew what would happen. In his sane, logical, calm, controlled mind he could visualize the way the black hole would appear in the center of that forehead, while behind it would be the torn and dripping redness flecked with gray—"What are you doing?" Harry whirled, staring; staring down at the infant who stood smiling beside him. It *was* an infant, that was obvious enough, and implicit in the diminutive stature, the delicate limbs and the oversized head. But infants do not wear the clothing of preadolescent boys, they do not enunciate with clarity, they do not stare coolly and knowingly at their elders. They do not say, "Why do you want to harm Dr. Leffingwell?"

Harry gazed into the wide eyes. He couldn't speak.

"You're sick, aren't you?" the child persisted. "Let me call the doctor. He can help you."

Harry swung the rifle around. "I'll give you just ten seconds to clear out of here before I shoot."

The child shook his head. Then he took a step forward. "You wouldn't hurt me," he said, gravely. "You're just sick. That's why you talk this way." Harry leveled the rifle. "I'm not sick," he muttered. "I know what I'm doing. And I know all about you, too. You're one of them, aren't you? One of the first of Leffingwell's brood of illegitimates."

The child took another step forward. “I’m not illegitimate,” he said. “I know who I am. I’ve seen the records. My name is Harry Collins.”

Somewhere the rifle exploded, the bullet hurtling harmlessly overhead. But Harry didn’t hear it. All he could hear, exploding in his own brain as he went down into darkness, was the sane, logical, calm, controlled voice of his son.

7. Michael Cavendish—2027

MIKE was just coming through the clump of trees when the boy began to wave at him. He shifted the clumsy old Jeffrey .475, cursing the weight as he quickened his pace. But there was no help for it, he had to carry the gun himself. None of the boys were big enough.

He wondered what it had been like in the old days, when you could get fullsized bearers. There used to be game all over the place, too, and a white hunter was king.

And what was there left now? Nothing but pygmies, all of them, scurrying around and beating the brush for dibatags and gerenuks. When he was still a boy, Mike had seen the last of the big antelopes go; the last of the wildebeestes and zebra, too. Then the carnivores followed—the lions and the leopards. *Simba* was dead, and just as well. These natives would never dare to come out of the villages if they knew any lions were left. Most of them had gone to Cape and the other cities anyway; handling cattle was too much of a chore, except on a government farm. Those cows looked like moving mountains alongside the average boy.

Of course there were still some of the older generation left; Kikiyu and even a few Watusi. But the free inoculations had begun many years ago, and the life-cycle moved at an accelerated pace here. Natives grew old and died at thirty; they matured at. fifteen. Now, with the shortage of game, the elders perished still more swiftly and only the young remained outside the cities and the farm projects.

Mike smiled as he waited for the boy to come up to him. He wasn't smiling at the boy—he was smiling at himself, for being here. He ought to be in Cape, too, or Kenyarobi. Damned silly, this business of being a white hunter, when there was nothing left to hunt.

But somehow he'd stayed on, since Dad died. There were a few compensations. At least here in the forests a man could still move about a bit, taste privacy and solitude and the strange, exotic tropical fruit called loneliness. Even *that* was vanishing today.

It was compensation enough, perhaps, for lugging this damned Jeffrey. Mike tried to remember the last time he'd fired it at a living target. A year, two years? Yes, almost two. That gorilla up in Ruwenzori country. At least the boys swore it was *ingagi.* He hadn't hit it, anyway. Got away in the darkness. Probably he'd been shooting at a shadow. There were no more gorillas—maybe *they* had been taking the shots, too. Perhaps they'd all turned into rhesus monkeys.

Mike watched the boy run towards him. It was a good five hundred yards from the river bank, and the short brown legs couldn't move very swiftly. He wondered what it felt like to be small. One's sense of proportion must be different. And that, in turn, would affect one's sense of values. What values applied to the world about you when you were only three feet high?

Mike wouldn't know. He was a big man—almost five feet seven.

Sometimes Mike reflected on what things might be like if he'd been born, say, twenty years later. By that time almost everyone would be a product of Leff shots, and he'd be no exception. He might stay with people his own age in Kenyarobi without feeling self-conscious, clumsy, conspicuous. Pressed, he had to admit that was part of the reason he preferred to remain out here at Dad's old place now. He could tolerate the stares of the natives, but whenever he ventured into a city he felt awkward under the scrutiny of the young people. The way those teen-agers looked up at him made him feel a monster, rather.

Better to endure the monotony, the emptiness out here. Yes, and wait for a chance to hunt. Even though, nine times out of ten, it turned out to be a wild goose-chase. During the past year or so Mike had hunted nothing but legends and rumors, spent his time stalking shadows.

Then the villagers had come to him, three days ago, with their wild story. Even when he heard it, he realized it must be pure fable. And the more they insisted, the more they protested, the more he realized it simply couldn’t be.

Still, he’d come. Anything to experience some action, anything to create the illusion of purpose, of—

“Tembo!” shrieked the boy, excited beyond all pretense of caution. “Up ahead, in river. You come quick, you see!”

No. It couldn’t be. The government surveys were thorough. The last record of a specimen dated back over a half-dozen years ago. It was impossible that any survivors remained. And all during the safari these past days, not a sign or a print or a spoor.

“Tembo!” shrilled the boy. “Come quick!”

Mike cradled the gun and started forward. The other bearers shuffled behind him, unable to keep pace because of their short legs and—he suspected—unwilling to do so for fear of what might lie ahead.

Halfway towards the river bank, Mike halted. Now he could hear the rumbling, the unmistakable rumbling. And now he could smell the rank mustiness borne on the hot breeze. Well, at least he was down-wind.

The boy behind him trembled, eyes wide. He *had* seen something, all right. Maybe just a crocodile, though. Still some crocs around. And he doubted if a young native would know the difference.

Nevertheless, Mike felt a sudden surge of unfamiliar excitement, half expectancy and half fear. *Something* wallowed in the river; something that rumbled and exuded the stench of life.

Now they were approaching the trees bordering the bank. Mike checked his gun carefully. Then he advanced until his body was aligned with the trees. From here he could see and not be seen. He could peer down at the river—or the place where the river had been, during the rainy season long past. Now it was nothing but a mudwallow under the glaring sun; a huge mudwallow, pitted with deep, circular indentations and dotted with dung.

But in the middle of it stood *tembo.*

Tembo was a mountain, *tembo* was a black block of breathing basalt. *Tembo* roared and snorted and rolled red eyes.

Mike gasped.

He was a white hunter, but he'd never seen a bull elephant before. And this one stood eleven feet at the shoulders if it stood an inch; the biggest creature walking the face of the earth.

It had risen from the mud, abandoned its wallowing as its trunk curled about, sensitive to the unfamiliar scent of man. Its ears rose like the outspread wings of some gigantic jungle bat. Mike could see the flies buzzing around the ragged edges. He stared at the great tusks that were veined and yellowed and broken—once men had hunted elephants for ivory, he remembered.

But how could they? Even with guns, how had they dared to confront a moving mountain? Mike tried to swallow, but his throat was dry. The stock slipped through his clammy hands.

"Shoot!" implored the boy beside him. "You shoot, now!"

Mike gazed down. The elephant was aware of him. It turned deliberately, staring up the bank as it swayed on the four black pillars of its legs. Mike could see its eyes, set in a mass of grayish wrinkles. The eyes had recognized him.

They knew, he realized. The eyes knew all about him; who he was and what he was and what he had come here to do. The eyes had seen man before—perhaps long before Mike was born. They understood everything; the gun and the presence and the purpose.

"Shoot!" the boy cried, not bothering to hold his voice down any longer. For the elephant was moving slowly towards the side of the wallow, moving deliberately to firmer footing, and the boy was afraid. Mike was afraid, too, but he couldn't shoot.

"No," he murmured. "Let him go. I can't kill him."

"You must," the boy said. "You promise. Look—all the meat. Meat for two, three villages."

Mike shook his head. “I can’t do it,” he said. “That isn’t meat. That’s life. Bigger life than we are. Don’t you understand? Oh, the bloody hell with it! Come on.

The boy wasn’t listening to him. He was watching the elephant. And now he started to tremble.

For the elephant was moving up onto solid ground. It moved slowly, daintily, almost mincing as its legs sampled the surface of the shore. Then it looked up and this time there was no doubt as to the direction of its gaze—it stared intently at Mike and the boy on the bank. Its ears fanned, then flared, Suddenly the elephant raised its trunk and trumpeted fiercely.

And then, lowering the black battering-ram of its head, the beast came forward. A deceptively slow lope, a scarcely accelerated trot, and then all at once it was moving swiftly, swiftly and surely and inexorably towards them. The angle of the bank was not steep and the elephant’s speed never slackened on the slope. Its right shoulder struck a sapling and the sapling splintered. It was crashing forward in full charge. Again it trumpeted, trunk extended like a flail of doom.

“Shoot!” screamed the boy.

Mike didn’t want to shoot. He wanted to run. He wanted to flee the mountain, flee the incredible breathing bulk of this grotesque giant. But he was a white hunter, he was a man, and a man is not a beast; a man does not run away from life in any shape or size.

The trunk came up. Mike raised the gun. He heard the monster roar, far away, and then he heard another sound that must be the gun’s discharge, and something hit him in the shoulder and knocked him down. Recoil? Yes, because the elephant wasn’t there any more; he could hear the crashing and thrashing down below, over the rim of the river bank.

Mike stood up. He saw the boy running now, running back to the bearers huddled along the edge of the trail.

He rubbed his shoulder, picked up his gun, reloaded. The sounds from below had ceased. Slowly, Mike advanced to the lip of the bank and stared down.

The bull elephant had fallen and rolled into the wallow once more. It had taken a direct hit, just beneath the right ear, and even as Mike watched, its trunk writhed feebly like a dying serpent, then fell forward into the mud. The gigantic ears twitched, then flickered and flopped, and the huge body rolled and settled.

Suddenly Mike began to cry.

Damn it, he hadn't *wanted* to shoot. If the elephant hadn't charged like that—

But the elephant *had* to charge. Just as he *had* to shoot. That was the whole secret. The secret of life. And the secret of death, too.

Mike turned away, facing the east. Kenyarobi was east, and he'd be going there now. Nothing to hold him here in the forests any longer. He wouldn't even wait for the big feast. To hell with elephant-meat, anyway. His hunting days were over.

Mike walked slowly up the trail to the waiting boys.

And behind him, in the wallow, the flies settled down on the lifeless carcass of the last elephant in the world.

8. Harry Collins—2029

THE guards at Stark Falls were under strict orders not to talk. Each prisoner here was exercised alone in a courtyard runway, and meals were served in the cells. The cells were comfortable enough, and while there were no telescreens, books were available—genuine, oldstyle books which must have been preserved from libraries dismantled fifty years ago or more. Harry Collins found no titles dated later than 1975. Every day or so an attendant wheeled around a cart piled high with the dusty volumes. Harry read to pass the time.

At first he kept anticipating his trial, but after a while he almost forgot about that possibility. And it was well over a year before he got a chance to tell his story to anyone.

When his opportunity came, his audience did not consist of judge or jury, doctor, lawyer or penologist. He spoke only to Richard Wade, a fellow-prisoner who had been thrust into the adjoining cell on the evening of October 11th, 2013.

Harry spoke haltingly at first, but as he progressed the words came more easily, and emotion lent its own eloquence. His unseen auditor on the other side of the wall did not interrupt or question him; it was enough, for Harry, that there *was* someone to listen at last.

"So it wasn't a bit like I'd expected," he concluded. "No trial, no publicity. I've never seen Leffingwell again, nor Manschoff. Nobody questioned me. By the time I recovered consciousness, I was here in prison. Buried alive."

Richard Wade spoke slowly, for the first time. "You're lucky. They might have shot you down on the spot."

"That's just what bothers me," Harry told him. "Why didn't they kill me? Why lock me up *incommunicado* this way? There aren't many prisons left these days, with food and space at such a premium."

"There are *no* prisons left at all—officially," Wade said. "Just as there are no longer any cemeteries. But important people are still given private burials and their remains secretly preserved. All a matter of influence."

"I've no influence. I'm not important. Wouldn't you think they'd consider it risky to keep me alive, under the circumstances? If there'd ever be an investigation—*"*

"Who would investigate? Not the government, surely."

"But suppose there's a political turnover. Suppose Congress want to make capital of the situation?"

"There is no Congress."

Harry gasped. "No Congress?"

"As of last month. It was dissolved. Henceforth we are governed by the Cabinet, with authority delegated to department heads."

"But that's preposterous! Nobody'd stand still for something like that!"

“They did stand still, most of them. After a year of careful preparation—of wholesale *exposes* of Congressional graft and corruption and inefficiency. Turned out that Congress was the villain all along; the Senators and Representatives had finagled tariff-barriers and restrictive trade-agreements which kept our food supply down. They were opposing international federation. In plain language, people were sold a bill of goods—get rid of Congress and you’ll have more food. That did it.”

“But you’d think the politicians themselves would realize they were cutting their own throats! The state legislatures and the governors—”

“Legislatures were dissolved by the same agreement,” Wade went on. “There are no states any more; just governmental districts. Based upon sensible considerations of area and population. This isn’t the oldtime expanding economy based on obsolescence and conspicuous consumption. The primary problem at the moment is sheer survival. In a way, the move makes sense. Old-fashioned political machinery couldn’t cope with the situation; there’s no time for debate when instantaneous decisions are necessary to national welfare. You’ve heard how civil liberties were suspended during the old wars. Well, there’s a war on right now; a war against hunger, a war against the forces of fecundity. In another dozen years or so, when the Leff shot generation is fullgrown and a lot of the elderly have died off, the tensions will ease. Meanwhile, quick action is necessary. Arbitrary action.”

“But you’re defending dictatorship!”

Richard Wade made a sound which is usually accompanied by a derisive shrug. “Am I? Well, I didn’t when I was outside. And that’s why I’m here now.”

Harry Collins cleared his throat. “What did you do?”

“If you refer to my profession, I was a scripter. If you refer to my alleged criminal activity, I made the error of thinking the way you do, and the worse error of attempting to inject such attitudes in my scripts. Seems that when Congress was formally dissolved, there was some notion of preparing a timely show—a sort of historical review of the body, using old film clips.

What my superiors had in mind was a comedy of errors; a cavalcade of mistakes and misdeeds showing just why we were better off without supporting a political sideshow. Well, I carried out the assignment and edited the films, but when I drafted a rough commentary, I made the mistake of taking both a pro and con slant. Nothing like that ever reached the telescreens, of course, but what I did was promptly noted. They came for me at once and hustled me off here. I didn't get a hearing or a trial, either."

"But why didn't they execute you? Or—" Harry hesitated—"is that what you expect?"

"Why didn't they execute *you?"* Wade shot back. He was silent for a moment before continuing. "No, I don't expect anything like that, now. They'd have done it on the spot if they intended to do so at all. No, I've got another idea about people like you and myself. And about some of the Congressmen and Senators who dropped out of sight, too. I think we're being stockpiled."

"Stockpiled?"

"It's all part of a plan. Give me a little time to think. We can talk again, later." Wade chuckled once more. "Looks as if there'll be ample opportunity in the future."

And there was. In the months ahead, Harry spoke frequently with his friend behind the wall. He never saw him—prisoners at Stark Falls were exercised separately, and there was no group assembly or recreation. Surprisingly adequate meals were served in surprisingly comfortable cells. In the matter of necessities, Harry had no complaints. And now that he had someone to talk to, the time seemed to go more swiftly.

He learned a great deal about Richard Wade during the next few years. Mostly, Wade liked to reminisce about the old days. He talked about working for the networks—the *commercial* networks, privately owned, which flourished before the government took over communications media in the '803.

"That's where you got your start, eh?" Harry asked.

"Lord, no, boy! I'm a lot more ancient than you think. Why, I'm pushing sixty-five. Born in 1940. That's right, during World War II. I can almost remember the atomic bomb, and I sure as hell remember the sputniks. It was a crazy period, let me tell you. The pessimists worried about the Russians blowing us up, and the optimists were sure we had a glorious future in the conquest of space. Ever hear that old fable about the blind men examining an elephant? Well, that's the way most people were; each of them groping around and trying to determine the exact shape of things to come. A few of us even made a little money from it for a while, writing science fiction. That's how I got my start."

"You were a writer?"

"Sold my first story when I was eighteen or so. Kept on writing off and on for almost twenty years. Of course, Robertson's thermo-nuc formula came along in '75, and after that everything went to pot. It knocked out the chances of future war, but it also knocked out the interest in speculation or escape-fiction. So I moved over into television for a while, and stayed with it. But the old science fiction was fun while it lasted. Ever read any of it?"

"No," Harry admitted. "That was all before my time. Tell me, though—did any of it make sense? I mean, did some of those writers foresee what was really going to happen?"

"There were plenty of penny prophets and nickel Nostradamuses," Wade told him. "But as I said, most of them were assuming war with the Communists or a new era of space travel. Since Communism collapsed and space flight was just an expensive journey to a dead end and dead worlds, it follows that the majority of fictional futures were founded on fallacies. And all the rest of the extrapolations dealt with superficial social manifestations.

"For example, they wrote about civilizations dominated by advertising and mass-motivation techniques. It's true that during my childhood this seemed to be a logical trend—but once demand exceeded supply, the whole mechanism of *stimulating* demand, which was advertising's chief function, bogged down. And mass-motivation techniques, today, are dedicated almost entirely to maintaining minimum resistance to a system insuring our survival.

“Another popular idea was based on the notion of an expanding matriarchy—a geronto-matriarchy, rather, in which older women would take control. In an age when women outlived men by a number of years, this seemed possible. Now, of course, shortened working hours and medical advances have equalized the life-span. And since private property has become less and less of a factor in dominating our collective destinies, it hardly matters whether the male or the female has the upper hand.

“Then there was the common theory that technological advances would result in a pushbutton society, where automatons would do all the work. And so they might—if we had an unlimited supply of raw materials to produce robots, and unlimited power-sources to activate them. As we now realize, atomic power cannot be utilized on a minute scale.

“Last, but not least, there was the concept of a medically-orientated system, with particular emphasis on psychotherapy, neurosurgery, and parapsychology. The world was going to be run by telepaths, psychosis eliminated by brainwashing, intellect developed by hypnotic suggestion. It sounded great—but the conquest of physical disease has occupied the medical profession almost exclusively.

“No, what they all seemed to overlook, with only a few exceptions, was the population problem. You can’t run a world through advertising when there are so many people that there aren’t enough goods to go around anyway. You can’t turn it over to big business when big government has virtually absorbed all of the commercial and industrial functions, just to cope with an ever-growing demand. A matriarchy loses its meaning when the individual family unit changes character, under the stress of an increasing population-pressure which eliminates the old-fashioned home, family circle, and social pattern. And the more we must conserve dwindling natural resources for people, the less we can expend on experimentation with robots and machinery. As for the psychologist-dominated society, there are just too many patients and not enough physicians. I don’t have to remind you that the military caste lost its chance of control when war disappeared, and that religion is losing ground every day. Class-lines are vanishing, and racial distinctions will be going next. The old idea of a World Federation is becoming more and more practical. Once the political barriers are down, miscegenation will finish the job. But nobody seemed to foresee this particular future. They all made the mistake of worrying about the hydrogen-bomb instead of the sperm-bomb."

Harry nodded thoughtfully, although Wade couldn't see his response. "But isn't it true that there's a little bit of each of these concepts in our actual situation today?" he asked. "I mean, government and business *are* virtually one and the same, and they do use propaganda techniques to control all media. As for scientific research, look at how we've rebuilt our cities and developed synthetics for food and fuel and clothing and shelter. When it comes to medicine, there's Leffingwell and his inoculations. Isn't that all along the lines of your early science fiction?"

"Where's your Underground?" Richard Wade demanded.

"My *what?"*

"Your Underground," Wade repeated. "Hell, every science fiction yarn about a future society had its Underground! That was the whole gimmick in the plot. The hero was a conformist who tangled with the social order—come to think of it, that's what *you* did, years ago. Only instead of becoming an impotent victim of the system, he'd meet up with the Underground Movement, Not some sourball like your friend Ritchie, who tried to operate on his own hook, without real plans or system, but a complete *sub rosa* organization, bent on starting a revolution and taking over. There'd be wise old priests and wise old crooks and wise old officers and wise old officials, all playing a double game and planning a *coup.* Spies all over the place, get me? And in no time at all, our hero would be playing tag with the top figures in the government. That's how it worked out in all the stories.

"But what happens in real life? What happened to you, for example? You fell for a series of stupid tricks, stupidly perpetrated—because the people in power *are* people, and not the kind of synthetic super-intellects dreamed up by frustrated fiction-fabricators. You found out that the logical candidates to. constitute an Underground were the Naturalists; again, they were just ordinary individuals with no genius for organization. As for coming in contact with key figures, you were actually on hand when Leffingwell completed his experiments. And you came back, years later, to hunt him down. Very much in the heroic tradition, I admit. But you never saw the man except through the telescopic sights of your rifle. That was the end of it. No modern-day Machiavelli has hauled you in to play cat-and-mouse games with you, and no. futuristic Freud has bothered to wash your brain or soft-soap your, subconscious. You just aren't that important, Collins."

"But they put me in a special prison. Why?"

"Who knows? They put me here, too."

"You said something once, about stockpiling us. What did you mean?"

"Well, it was just an old science fiction idea, I suppose. I'll tell you about it tomorrow, eh?"

And so the matter—and Harry Collins—rested for the night.

The next day Richard Wade was gone.

Harry called to him and there was no answer. And he cried out and he cursed and he paced his cell and he walked alone in the courtyard and he begged the impassive guards for information, and he sweated and he talked to himself and he counted the days and he lost count of the days.

Then, all at once, there was another prisoner in the adjacent cell, and his name was William Chang, and he was a biologist. He was reticent about the crime he had committed, but quite voluble about the crimes committed by others in the world outside. Much of what he said, about genes and chromosomes and recessive characteristics and mutation, seemed incomprehensible to Harry. But in their talks, one thing emerged clearly enough—Chang was concerned for the future of the race. "Leffingwell should have waited," he said. "It's the *second* generation that will be important. As I tried to tell my people—"

"Is that why you're here?"

Chang sighed. “I suppose so. They wouldn’t listen, of course. Overpopulation has always been the curse of Asia, and this seemed to be such an obvious solution. But who knows? The time may come when they need men like myself.”

“So you were stockpiled too.”

“What’s that?”

Harry told him about Richard Wade’s remarks, and together they tried to puzzle out the theory behind them.

But not for long. Because once again Harry Collins awoke in the morning to find the adjoining cell empty, and once again he was alone for a long time.

At last a new neighbor came. His name was Lars Neilstrom. Neilstrom talked to him of ships and shoes and sealing-wax and the thousand and one things men will discuss in their loneliness and frustration, including—inevitably—their reasons for being here.

Neilstrom had been an instructor under Vocational Apt, and he was at a loss to explain his presence at Stark Falls. When Harry spoke of the stockpiling theory, his fellow-prisoner demurred. “It’s more like Kafka than science fiction,” he said. “But then, I don’t suppose you’ve ever read any Kafka.”

“Yes, I have,” Harry told him. “Since I came here I’ve done nothing but read old books. Lately they’ve been giving me microscans. I’ve been studying up on biology and genetics; talking to Chang got me interested. In fact, I’m really going in for self-education. There’s nothing else to do.”

“Self-education! That’s the only method left nowadays.” Neilstrom sounded bitter. “I don’t know what’s going to become of our heritage of knowledge in the future. I’m not speaking of technological skill; so-called scientific information is carefully preserved. But the humanities are virtually lost. The concept of the well-rounded individual is forgotten. And when I think of the crisis to come—”

“What crisis?”

"A new generation is growing up. Ten or fifteen years from now we'll have succeeded in erasing political and racial and religious divisions. But there'll be a new and more dangerous differentiation; a *physical* one. What do you think will happen when half the world is around six feet tall and the other half under three?"

"I can't imagine."

"Well, I can. The trouble is, most people don't realize what the problem will be. Things have moved too swiftly. Why, there were more changes in the last hundred years than in the previous thousand! And the rate of acceleration increases. Up until now, we've been concerned about too rapid technological development. But what we have to worry about is social development."

"Most people have been conditioned to conform."

"Yes. That's our job in Vocational Apt. But the system only works when there's a single standard of conformity. In a few years there'll be a double one, based on size. What then?"

Harry wanted some time to consider the matter, but the question was never answered. Because Lars Neilstrom went away in the night, as had his predecessors before him. And in succeeding interludes, Harry came to know a half-dozen other transient occupants of the cell next to his. They came from all over, and they had many things to discuss, but always there was the problem of *why* they were there—and the memory of Richard Wade's premise concerning stockpiling.

There came a time when the memory of Richard Wade merged with the memory of Arnold Ritchie. The past was a dim montage of life at the agency and the treatment center and the ranch, a recollection of lying on the river bank with women in attitudes of opisthotonos or of lying against the boulders with a rifle.

Somewhere there was an image of a child's wide eyes and a voice saying, "My name is Harry Collins." But that seemed very far away. What was real was the cell and the years of talking and reading the microscans and trying to find a pattern.

Harry found himself describing it all to a newcomer who said his name was Austin—a soft-voiced man who became a resident of the next cell one day in 2029. And eventually he came to Wade's theory.

"Maybe there were a few wiser heads who foresaw a coming crisis," he concluded. "Maybe they anticipated a time when they might need a few nonconformists. People like ourselves who haven't been passive or persuaded. Maybe we're the government's insurance policy. If an. emergency arises, we'll be freed."

"And then what would *you* do?" Austin asked, softly. "You're against the system, aren't you?"

"Yes. But I'm *for* survival." Harry Collins spoke slowly, thoughtfully. "You see, I've learned something through the years of study and contact here. Rebellion is not the answer."

"You hated Leffingwell."

"Yes, I did, until I realized that all this was inevitable. Leffingwell is not a villain and neither is any given individual, in or out of government. Our road to hell has been paved with only the very best of intentions. Killing the engineers and contractors will not get us off that road, and we're all on it together. We'll have to find a way of changing the direction of our journey. The young people will be too anxious to merely rush blindly ahead. Most of my generation will be sheeplike, moving as part of the herd, because of their conditioning. Only we oldtime rebels will be capable of plotting a course. A course for all of us."

"What about your son?" Austin asked.

"I'm thinking of him," Harry Collins answered. "Of him, and of all the others. Maybe he does not need me. Maybe none of them need me. Maybe it's all an illusion. But if the time ever comes, I'll be ready. And meanwhile, I can hope."

"The time has come," Austin said, gently.

And then he was standing, miraculously enough, outside his cell and before the door to Harry's cell, and the door was opening. And once again Harry stared into the wide eyes he remembered so well—the same wide eyes, set in the face of a fullgrown man. A fullgrown man, three feet tall. He stood up, shakily, as the man held out his hand and said, “Hello, Father.”

“But I don’t understand—”

“I’ve waited a long time for this moment. I had to talk to you, find out how you really felt, so that I’d be sure. Now you’re ready to join us.”

“What’s happening? What do you want with me?”

“We’ll talk later.” Harry’s son smiled. “Right now, I’m taking you home.”

9. Eric Donovan—2031

ERIC was glad to get to the office and shut the door. Lately he’d had this feeling whenever he went out, this feeling that people were staring at him. It wasn’t just his imagination: they did stare. Every younger person over a yard high got stared at nowadays, as if they were freaks. And it wasn’t just the staring that got him down, either.

Sometimes they muttered and mumbled, and sometimes they called names. Eric didn’t mind stuff like “dirty Naturalist.” That he could understand—once upon a time, way back, everybody who was against the Leff Law was called a Naturalist. And before that it had still another meaning, or-so he’d been told. Today, of course, it just meant anyone who was over five feet tall.

No, he could take the ordinary name-calling, all right. But sometimes they said other things. They used words nobody ever uses unless they really hate you, want to kill you. And that was at the bottom of it, Eric knew. They did hate him, they *did* want to kill him.

Was he a coward? Perhaps. But it wasn’t just Eric’s imagination. You never saw anything about such things on the telescreens, but Naturalists were being killed every day. The older people were still in the majority, but the youngsters were coming up fast. And there were so many *more* of them.

Besides, they were more active, and this created the illusion that there were Yardsticks everywhere.

Eric sat down behind his desk, grinning. *Yardsticks.* When he was a kid it had been just the other way around. He and the rest of them who didn't get shots in those early days considered themselves to be the normal ones. And *they* did the namecalling. Names like "runt" and "half-pint" and "midgie." But the most common name was the one that stuck—Yardstick. That used to be the worst insult of all.

But now it wasn't an insult any more. Being taller was the insult. Being a dirty Naturalist or a son-of-a-Naturalist. Times certainly had changed.

Eric glanced at the communicator. Almost noon, and it had not flicked yet. Here he'd been beaming these big offers, you'd think he'd get some response to an expensive beaming program, but no. Maybe that was the trouble—nobody liked *big* things any more. Everything was small.

He shifted uneasily in his chair. That was one consolation, at least; he still had oldtime furniture. Getting to be harder and harder to find stuff that fitted him these days. Seemed like most of the firms making furniture and bedding and household appliances were turning out the small stuff for the younger generation. Cheaper to make, less material, and more demand for it. Government allocated size priorities to the manufacturers.

It was even murder to ride public transportation because of the spacer-reductions. Eric drove his own jetter. Besides, that way was safer. Crowded into a line, with a gang of Yardsticks, with only a few other Naturalists around, there might be trouble.

Oh, it was getting to be a Yardstick world, and no mistake Smaller furniture, smaller meals, smaller sizes in clothing, smaller buildings—

That reminded Eric of something and he frowned again. Dammit, why didn't the communicator flick? He should be getting some kind of inquiries. Hell, he was practically *giving* the space away!

But there was only silence, as there had been all during this past week. That's why he let Lorette go. Sweet girl, but there was no work for her here any more. No work, and no pay, either. Besides, the place spooked her. She'd been the one who suggested leaving, really.

"Eric, I'm sorry, but I just can't take this any more. All alone in this huge building—it's curling my toes!"

At first he tried to talk her out of it. "Don't be silly, luscious! There's Bernstein, down on ten, and Saltonstall above us, and Wallaby and Son on fourteen, I tell you, this place is coming back to life, I can feel it! I'll beam for tenants next week, you'll see—"

Actually he'd been talking against his own fear and Lorette must have known it. Anyway, she left. And now he was here alone.

Alone.

Erie didn't like the sound of that word. Or the absence of sound behind it. Three other tenants in a ninety-story building. Three other tenants in a place that had once held three thousand. Why, fifty years ago, when this place went up, you couldn't buy a vacancy. Where had the crowds gone to?

He knew the answer, of course. The Leff shots had created the new generation of Yardsticks, and they lived in their own world. Their shrunken, dehydrated world of dollhouses and miniatures. They'd deserted the old-fashioned skyscrapers and cut the big apartment buildings up into tiny cubicles; two could occupy the space formerly reserved for one.

That had been the purpose of the Leff shots in the first place—to put an end to overcrowding and conserve on resources. Well, it had worked out. Worked out too perfectly for people like Eric Donovan. Eric Donovan, rental agent for a building nobody wanted any more; a ninety-storey mausoleum. And nobody could collect rent from ghosts.

Ghosts.

Eric damned near jumped through the ceiling when the door opened and this man walked in. He was tall and towheaded. Eric stared; there was something vaguely familiar about his face. Something about those ears, that was it, those ears. No, it couldn't be, it wasn't possible—

Eric stood up and held out his hand. "I'm Donovan," he said.

The towheaded man smiled and nodded. “Yes, I know. Don’t you remember me?”

“I thought I knew you from someplace. You wouldn’t be—Sam Wolzek?”

The towheaded man’s smile became a broad grin. “That’s not what you were going to say, Eric. You were going to say ‘Handle-head’, weren’t you? Well, go on, say it. I don’t mind. I’ve been called a lot worse things since we were kids together.”

“I can’t believe it,” Eric murmured. “It’s really you! Old Handle-head Wolzek! And after all these years, turning up to rent an office from me. Well, what do you know!”

“I didn’t come here to rent an office.”

“Oh? Then—”

“It was your name that brought me. I recognized it on the beamings.”

“Then this is a social call, eh? Well, that’s good. I don’t get much company these days. Sit down, have a reef.”

Wolzek sat down but refused the smoke. “I know quite a bit about your setup,” he said. “You and your three tenants. It’s tough, Eric.”

“Oh, things could be worse.” Eric forced a laugh. “It isn’t as if my bucks depended on the number of tenants in the building. Government subsidizes this place. I’m sure of a job as long as I live.”

“As long as you live.” Wolzek stared at him in a way he didn’t like. “And just how long do you figure that to be?”

“I’m only twenty-six,” Eric answered. “According to statistics, that gives me maybe another sixty years.”

“Statistics!” Wolzek said it Kka a dirty word. “Your life-expectancy isn’t determined by statistics any more. I say you don’t have sixty months left. Perhaps not even sixty days.”

“What are you trying to hand me?”

“The truth. And don’t go looking for a silver platter underneath it, either.”

"But I mind my own business. I don't hurt anybody. Why should I be in any danger?"

"Why does a government subsidy support one rental manager to sit here in this building every day—but ten guards to patrol it every night?"

Eric opened his mouth wide before shaping it for speech. "Who told you that?"

"Like I said, I know the setup." Wolzek crossed his legs, but he didn't lean back. "And in case you haven't guessed it, this is a business call, not a social one." Eric sighed. "Might have figured," he said. "You're a Naturalist, aren't you?"

"Of course I am. We all are."

"Not I."

"Oh yes—whether you like it or not, you're a Naturalist, too. As far as the Yardsticks are concerned, everyone over three feet high is a Naturalist. An enemy. Someone to be hated, and destroyed."

"Think I'd believe that? Sure, I know they don't like us, and why should they? We eat twice as much, take up twice the space, and I guess when we were kids we gave a lot of them a hard time. Besides, outside of a few exceptions like ourselves, all the younger generation are Yardsticks, with more coming every year. The older people hold the key positions and the power. Of course there's a lot of friction and resentment. But you know all that."

"Certainly." Wolzek nodded. "All that and more. Much more. I know that up until a few years ago, no Yardstick held any public office or government position. Now they're starting to move in, particularly in Europasia. But there's so many of them now—adults, in their early twenties—that the pressure is building up. They're impatient, getting out of hand. They won't wait until the old folks die off. They want control now. And if they ever manage to get it, we're finished for good."

"Impossible!" Eric said.

"Impossible?" Wolzek's voice was a mocking echo. "You sit here in this tomb and when somebody tells you that the world you know has died, you refuse to believe it. Even though every night, after you sneak home and huddle up inside your room trying not to be noticed, ten guards patrol this place with subatomics, so the Yardstick gangs won't break in and take over. So they won't do what they did down south—overrun the office buildings and the factories and break them up, cut them down to size for living quarters."

"But they were stopped," Eric objected. "I saw it on the telescreen, the security forces stopped them—"

"Crapola!" Wolzek pronounced the archaicism with studied care. "You saw films. Faked films. Have you ever traveled, Eric? Ever been down south and seen conditions there?"

"Nobody travels nowadays. You know that. Priorities."

"I travel, Eric. And I know. Security forces don't suppress anything in the south these days. Because they're made up of Yardsticks now; that's right, Yardsticks exclusively. And in a few years that's the way it will be up here. Did you ever hear about the Chicagee riots?"

"You mean last year, when the Yardsticks tried to take over the synthetic plants at the Stockyards?"

"Tried? They *succeeded*. The workers ousted management. Over fifty thousand were killed in the revolution—oh, don't look so shocked, that's the right word for it!—but the Yardsticks won out in the end."

"But the telescreen showed—"

"Damn the telescreen! I know because I happened to be there when it happened. And if *you* had been there, you and a few million other ostriches who sit with your heads buried in telescreens, maybe we could have stopped them."

"I don't believe it. I can't!"

"All right. Think back. That was last year. And since the first of this year, what's happened to the standard size meat-ration?"

"They cut it in half," Eric admitted. "But that's because of Ag shortages, according to the telescreen reports—" He stood up, gulping. "Look here, I'm not going to listen to any more of this kind of talk. By rights, I ought to turn your name in."

"Go ahead." Wolzek waved his hand. "It's happened before. I was reported when I blasted the Yardsticks who shot my father down when he tried to land his jet in a southern field. I was reported when they killed Annette."

"Annette?"

"You remember that name, don't you, Eric? Your first girl, wasn't she? Well, I'm the guy who married her. Yes, and I'm the guy who talked her into having a baby without the benefit of Leff shots. Sure, it's illegal, and only a few of us ever try it any more, but we both agreed that we wanted it that way. A real, life-sized, normal baby. Or abnormal, according to the Yardsticks and the stupid government.

"It was a dirty scum of a government doctor who let her die on the table when he discovered the child weighed seven pounds. That's when I really woke up, Eric. That's when I knew there was going to be only one decision to make in the future—kill or be killed."

"Annette. She died, you say?"

Wolzek moved over and put his hand on Eric's shoulder. "You never married, did you, Eric? I think I know why. It's because you felt the way I did about it. You wanted a regular kid, not a Yardstick. Only you didn't quite have the guts to try and beat the law. Well, you'll need guts now, because it's getting to the point where the law can't protect you any more. The government is made up of old men, and they're afraid to take action. In a few years they'll be pushed out of office all over the world. We'll have Yardstick government then, all the way, and Yardstick law. And that means they'll cut us down to size."

"But what can you—we—do about it?"

"Plenty. There's still a little time. If we Naturalists can only get together, stop being just a name and become an organized force, maybe the ending will be different. We've got to try, in any case."

“The Yardsticks are human beings, just like us,” Eric said, slowly. “We can’t just declare war on them, wipe them out. It’s not their *fault* they were born that way.”

Wolzek nodded. “I know. Nothing is anybody’s fault, really. This whole business began in good faith. Leffingwell and some of the other geniuses saw a problem and offered what they sincerely believed was a solution.”

“But it didn’t work,” Eric murmured.

“Wrong. It worked only too well. That’s the trouble. Sure, we eliminated our difficulties on the physical level. In less than thirty years we’ve reached a point where there’s no longer any danger of overcrowding or starvation. But the psychological factor is something we can’t cope with. We thought we’d ended war and the possibilities of war a long time ago. But it isn’t foreign enemies we must fear today. We’ve created a nation divided into Davids and Goliaths—and David and Goliath are always enemies.”

“David killed Goliath,” Eric said. “Does that mean we’re going to die?”

“Only if we’re as stupid as Goliath was. Only if we wear our telescreens like invincible and pay no attention to the slingshot in David’s hands.” Eric lit a reef. “All right,” he said. “You don’t have to lecture. I’m willing to join. But I’m no Goliath, really. I never had a fight in my life. What could I do to help?”

“You’re a rental agent. You have the keys to this building. The guards don’t bother you by day, do they? You come and go as you please. That means you can get into the cellars. You can help us move the stuff down there. And we’ll take care of the guards some night, after that.”

“I don’t understand.”

The friendly pressure on Eric’s shoulder became a fierce grip. “You don’t have to understand. All you do is let us plant the stuff in the cellars and let us get rid of the guards afterwards in our own way. The Yardsticks will do the rest.”

“You mean, take over the building when it’s not protected?”

“Of course. They’ll take it over completely, once they see there’s no opposition. And they’ll remodel it to suit themselves, and within a month there'll be ten thousand Yardsticks sitting in this place."

"The government will never stand still for that."

"Wake up! It's happening all over, all the time, and nothing is being done to prevent it. Security is too weak and officials are too timid to risk open warfare. So the Yardsticks win, and I'm going to see that they win this place."

"But how will that help us?"

"You don't see it yet, do you? And neither will the Yardsticks. Until, some fine day three or four months from now, we get around to what will be planted in the cellars. Somebody will throw a switch, miles away, and—boom!"

"Wolzek, you couldn't—"

"It's coming. Not only here, but in fifty other places. We've got to fight fire with fire, Eric. It's our only chance. Bring this thing out into the open. Make the government realize this is war. Civil war. That's the only way to force them to take real action. We can't do it any other way; it's illegal to organize politically, and petitions do no good. We can't get a hearing. Well, they'll have to listen to the explosions."

"I just don't know—"

"Maybe you're the one who should have married Annette after all." Wolzek's voice was cold. "Maybe you could have watched her, watched her scream and beg and die, and never wanted to move a muscle to do anything about it afterwards. Maybe you're the model citizen, Eric; you and the thousands of others who are standing by and letting the Yardsticks chop us down, one by one. They say in Nature it's the survival of the fittest. Well, perhaps you're not fit to survive."

Eric wasn't listening. "She screamed," he said. "You heard her scream?"

Wolzek nodded. "I can still hear her. I'll always hear her."

"Yes." Eric blinked abruptly. "When do we start?"

Wolzek smiled at him. It was a pretty good smile for a man who can always hear screaming. "I knew I could count on you," he murmured. "Nothing like old friends."

“Funny, isn’t it?” Eric tried to match his smile. “The way things work out. You and I being kids together. You marrying my girl. And then, us meeting up again this way.

“Yes,” said Wolzek, and he wasn’t smiling now. “I guess it’s a small world.”

10. Harry Collins—2032

HARRY’S son’s house was on the outskirts of Washington, near what had once been called Gettysburg. Harry was surprised to find that it *was* a house, and a rather large one, despite the fact that almost all the furniture had been scaled down proportionately to fit the needs of a man three feet high.

But then, Harry was growing accustomed to surprises.

lie found a room of his own, ready and waiting, on the second floor; here the furniture was of almost antique vintage, but adequate in size. And here, in an atmosphere of unaccustomed comfort, he could talk.

“So you’re a physician, eh?” Harry gazed down into the diminutive face, striving to accept the fact that he was speaking to a mature adult. His own son—his and Sue’s—a grown man and a doctor! It seemed incredible. But then, nothing was more incredible than the knowledge that he was actually here, in his child’s home.

“We’re all specialists in one field or another,” his son explained. “Every one of us born and surviving during the early experimental period received our schooling under a plan Leffingwell set up. It was part of his conditional agreement that we become wards of the state. He knew the time might come when we’d be needed.”

“But why wasn’t all this done openly?”

“You know the answer to that. There was no way of educating us under the prevailing system, and there was always a danger we might be singled out as freaks who must be destroyed—particularly in those early years. So

Leffingwell relied on secrecy, just as he did during his experimentation period. You know how *you* felt about that. You believed innocent people were being murdered. Would you have listened to his explanations, accepted the fact that his work was worth the cost of a few lives so that future billions of human beings might be saved? No, there was no time for explanation or indoctrination. Leffingwell chose concealment."

"Yes," Harry sighed. "I understand that better now, I think. But I couldn't see it then, when I tried to kill him." He flushed. "And I still can't quite comprehend why he spared me after that attempt."

"Because he wasn't the monster you thought him to be. When I pleaded with him—"

"You were the one!"

Harry's son turned away. "Yes. When I was told who you really were, I went to him. But I was only a child, remember that. And he didn't spare you out of sentimentality. He had a purpose."

"A purpose in sending me to prison, letting me rot all these years while —"

"While I grew up. I and the others like myself. And while the world outside changed." Harry's son smiled. "Your friend Richard Wade was right, you know. He guessed a great deal of the truth. Leffingwell and Manschoff and the rest of their associates deliberately set out to assemble a select group *of* nonconformists—men of specialized talents and outlooks.

There were over three hundred of you at Stark Falls. Richard Wade knew why."

"And so he was dragged off and murdered."

"Murdered? No, Father, he's very much alive, I assure you. In fact, he'll be here tonight."

"But why was he taken away so abruptly, without any warning?"

"He was needed. There was a crisis, when Dr. Leffingwell died." Harry's son sighed. "You didn't know about that, did you? There's so much for you to learn. But I'll let him tell you himself, when you see him this evening."

Richard Wade told him. And so did William Chang and Lars Neilstrom and all the others. During the ensuing weeks, Harry saw each of them again. But Wade's explanation was sufficient.

"I was right," he said. "There was no Underground when we were at Stark Falls. What I didn't realize, though, was that there was an Overground."

"Overground?"

"You might call it that. Leffingwell and his staff formed the nucleus. They foresaw the social crisis which lay ahead, when the world became physically divided into the tall and the short, the young and the old. They knew there'd be a need of individuality then—and they *did* create a stockpile. A stockpile of the younger generation, specially educated; a stockpile of the older generation, carefully selected. We conspicuous rebels were incarcerated and given an opportunity to think the problem through, with limited contact with one another's viewpoints."

"But why weren't we told the truth at the beginning, allowed to meet fact-to-face and make some sensible plans for the future?"

Harry's son interrupted. "Because Dr. Leffingwell realized this would defeat the ultimate purpose. You'd have formed your own in-group, as prisoners, dedicated to your own welfare. There'd be emotional ties—"

"I still don't know what you're talking about. What are we supposed to prepare for now?"

Richard Wade shrugged. "Leffingwell had it all planned. He foresaw that when the first generation of Yardsticks—that's what they call themselves, you know—came of age, there'd be social unrest. The young people would want to take over, and the older generation would try to remain in positions of power. It was his belief that tensions could be alleviated only by proper leadership on both sides.

"He himself had an important voice in government circles. He set up an arrangement whereby a certain number of posts would be assigned to people of his choice, both young and old. Similarly, in the various professions, there'd be room for appointees he'd select. Given a year or two of training, Leffingwell felt that we'd be ready for these positions. Young men, like your son, would be placed in key spots where their influence would be helpful with the Yardsticks. Older men such as yourself would go into other assignments—in communications media, chiefly. The skillful use of group-psychological techniques could avert open clashes. He predicted a danger-period lasting about twenty years—roughly, from 2030 to 2050. Once we weathered that span, equilibrium would be regained, as a second and third generation came along and the elders became a small minority. If we did our work well and eliminated the sources of prejudice, friction and hostility, the transition could be made. The Overground in governmental circles would menace us. This was Leffingwell's plan, his dream."

"You speak in the past tense," Harry said.

"Yes." Wade's voice was harsh. "Because Leffingwell is dead, of cerebral hemorrhage. And his plan died with him. Oh, we still have some connections in government; enough to get men like yourself out of Stark Falls. But things have moved too swiftly. The Yardsticks are already on the march. The people in power—even those we relied upon—are getting frightened. They can't see that there's time left to train us to take over. And frankly, I'm afraid most of them have no inclination to give up their present power. They intend to use force."

"But you talk as though the Yardsticks were united."

"They are uniting, and swiftly. Remember the Naturalists?" Harry nodded, slowly. "I was one, once. Or thought I was."

"You were a liberal. I'm talking about the *new* Naturalists. The ones bent on actual revolution."

"Revolution?"

"That's the word. And that's the situation. It's coming to a head, fast."

"And how will we prevent it?"

"I don't know." Harry's son stared up at him. "Most of us believe it's too late to prevent it. Our immediate problem will be survival. The Naturalists want control for themselves. The Yardsticks intend to destroy the power of the older generation. And we feel that if matters come to a head soon, the government itself may turn on us, too. They'll have to."

"In other words," said Harry, "we stand alone."

"Fall alone, more likely," Wade corrected.

"How many of us are there?"

"About six hundred," said Harry's son. "Located in private homes throughout this eastern area. If there's violence, we don't have a chance of controlling the situation."

"But we can survive. As I see It, that's our only salvation at the moment—to somehow survive the coming conflict. Then, perhaps, we can find a way to function as Leffingwell planned."

"We'll never survive here.

They'll use every conceivable weapon."

"But since there's no open break with the government yet, we could still presumably arrange for transportation facilities."

"To where?"

"Some spot in which we could weather the storm. What about Leffingwell's old hideout?"

"The units are still standing." Harry's son nodded. "Yes, that's a possibility. But what about food?"

"Grizek."

"What?"

"Friend of mine," Harry told him. "Look, we're going to have to work fast. And yet we've got to do it in a way that won't attract any attention; not even from the government. I suggest we set up an organizing committee and make plans." He frowned. "How much time do you think we have—a year or so?"

"Six months," his son hazarded.

"Four, at most," Wade said. "Haven't you been getting the full reports on those riots? Pretty soon they'll declare a state of national emergency and then nobody will be going anywhere."

"All right." Harry Collins grinned. "We'll do it in four months."

Actually, as it worked out, they did it in just a day or so under three.

Five hundred and forty-two men moved by jetter to Colorado Springs; thence, by helicopter, to the canyon hideaway. They moved in small groups, a few each week. Harry himself had already established the liaison system, and he was based at Grizek's ranch. Grizek was dead, but Bassett and Tom Lowery remained and they cooperated. Food would be ready for the ‘copters that came out of the canyon.

The canyon installation itself was deserted, and the only problem it presented was one of rehabilitation. The first contingent took over.

The jetters carried more than their human cargo; they were filled with equipment of all sorts—microscans and laboratory instruments and devices for communication. By the time the entire group was assembled, they had the necessary implementation for study and research. It was a well-conceived and well-executed operation.

To his surprise, Harry found himself acting as the leader of the expedition, and he continued in this capacity after they were established. The irony of the situation did not escape him; to all intents and purposes he was now ruling the very domain in which he had once languished as a prisoner.

But with Wade and Chang and the others, he set up a provisional system which worked out very well. And proved very helpful, once the news reached them that open revolt had begun in the world outside.

A battered ‘copter landed one evening at dusk, and the wounded pilot poured out his message, then his life's blood.

Angelisco was gone. Washington was gone. The Naturalists had struck, using the old, outlawed weapons. And it was the same abroad, according to the few garbled reports thereafter obtainable only *via* ancient shortwave devices.

From then on, nobody left the canyon except on weekly ‘copter-lifts to the ranch grazing lands for fresh supplies. Fortunately, that area was undisturbed, and so were its laconic occupants. They neither knew nor cared what went on in the world outside; what cities were reported destroyed, what forces triumphed or went down into defeat, what activity or radioactivity prevailed.

Life in the canyon flowed on, more peacefully than the river cleaving its center. There was much to do and much to learn. It was, actually, a monastic existence, compounded of frugality, abstinence, continence and devotion to scholarly pursuits. Within a year, gardens flourished; within two years herds grazed the grassy slopes; within three years cloth was being woven on looms in the ancient way and most of the homespun arts of an agrarian society had been revived. Men fell sick and men died, but the survivors lived in amity. Harry Collins celebrated his sixtieth birthday as the equivalent of a second-year student of medicine; his instructor being his own son. Everyone was studying some subject, acquiring some new skill. One-time rebellious natures and one-time biological oddities alike were united by the common bond of intellectual curiosity.

It was, however, no Utopia. Some of the younger men wanted women, and there were no women. Some were irked by confinement and wandered off; three of the fleet of eleven ‘copters were stolen by groups of malcontents. From time to time there would be a serious quarrel. Six men were murdered. The population dwindled to four hundred and twenty.

But there was progress, in the main. Eventually Banning joined the group, from the ranch, and under his guidance the study-system was formalized. Attempts were made to project the future situation, to prepare for the day when it would be possible to venture safely into the outside world once again and utilize newly-won abilities.

Nobody could predict when that would be, nor what kind of world would await their coming. By the time the fifth year had passed, even shortwave reports had long since ceased. Rumors persisted that radioactive contamination was widespread, that the population had been virtually decimated, that the government had fallen, that the Naturalists had set up their own reign only to fall victim to internal strife.

“But one thing is certain,” Harry Collins told his companions as they assembled in the usual monthly meeting on the grounds before the old headquarters building one afternoon in July. “The fighting will end soon. If we hear nothing more within the next few months, we’ll send out observation parties. Once we determine the exact situation, we can plan accordingly. The world is going to need what we can give. It will use what we have learned. It will accept our aid. One of these days—”

And he went on to outline a carefully-calculated program of making contact with the powers that be, or might be. It sounded logical and even the chronic grumblers and habitual pessimists in the group were encouraged.

If at times they felt the situation fantastic and the hope forlorn, they were heartened now. Richard Wade summed it up succinctly afterwards, in a private conversation with Harry.

“It isn’t going to be easy,” he said. “In the old science fiction yarns I used to write, a group like this would have been able to prevent the revolution. At the very least, it would decide who won if fighting actually broke out. But in reality we were too late to forestall revolt, and we couldn’t win the war no matter on whose side we fought. There’s just one job we’re equipped for—and that’s to win the peace. I don’t mean we’ll step out of here and take over the world, either. We’ll have to move slowly and cautiously, dispersing in little groups of five or six all over the country. And we’ll have to sound out men in the communities we go to, find those who are willing to learn and willing to build. But we can be an influence, and an important one. We have the knowledge and the skill. We may not be chosen to lead, but we can *teach* the leaders. And that’s important.”

Harry smiled in agreement. They *did* have something to offer, and surely it would be recognized—even if the Naturalists had won, even if the entire country had sunk into semibarbarism. No use anticipating such problems now. Wait until fall came; then they’d reconnoitre and find out. Wait until fall.

It was a wise decision, but one which ignored a single, important fact. The Naturalists didn’t wait until fall to conduct their reconnaissance.

They came over the canyon that very night; a large group of them in a large jetter.

And they dropped a large bomb . . .

11. Jesse Pringle—2039

THEY were after him. The whole world was in flames, and the buildings were falling, the mighty were fallen, the Day of Judgment was at hand.

He ran through the flames, blindly. Blind Samson. Eyeless in Gaza, treading at the mill. The mills of the gods grind slowly, but they grind exceedingly small.

Small. They were all small, but that didn’t matter. They had the guns and they were hunting him down to his doom. Day of doom. Doomsday. The great red dragon with seven heads and ten horns was abroad in the land.

They had unleashed the dragon and his breath was a fire that seared, and his tail was a thunder that toppled towers. The dragon was searching him out for his sins; he would be captured and set to labor in the mill.

But he would escape, he must escape! He was afraid of them, small as they were, and great oaks from little acorns grow, it’s the little things that count, and he dare not go a-hunting for fear of little men.

Jesse crouched against the dock, watching the grain-elevators burn. The whole city was burning, Babylon the mighty, the whole world was burning in God’s final wrath of judgment.

Nobody believed in God any more, nobody read the Bible, and that’s why they didn’t know these things. Jesse knew, because he was an old man and he remembered how it had been when he was a little boy. A little boy who learned of the Word of God and the Wrath of God.

He could see the reflection of the flames in the water, now, and the reflection was shimmery and broken because of the black clusters floating past. Large clusters and small clusters. There were bodies in the water, the bodies of the slain.

Thunder boomed from the city behind him. Explosions. That’s how it had started, when the Naturalists began blowing up the buildings. And then the Yardsticks had come with their weapons, hunting down the Naturalists. Or had it been that way, really? It didn’t matter, now. That was in another country and besides, the wench was dead.

The wench *is* dead. His wench, Jesse’s wench. She wasn’t so old. Only seventy-two. But they killed her, they blew off the top of her head and he could feel it when they did. It was as if something had happened in *his* head, and then he ran at them and screamed, and there was great slaughter amongst the heathen, the forces of unrighteousness.

And Jesse had fled, and smote evil in the name of the Lord, for he perceived now that the time was at hand.

How the mighty are fallen.

Jesse blinked at the water, wishing it would clear, wishing his thoughts would clear. Sometimes for a moment he could remember back to the way things *really* were. When it was still a real world, with real people in it. When he was just a little boy and everybody else was big.

Strange. Now he was an old man, a big old man, and almost everybody else was little.

He tried to think what it had been like, so long ago. It was too long. All he could remember about being small was that he had been afraid. Afraid of the bigger people.

And now he was big, and afraid of the smaller people.

Of course they weren’t real. It was just part of the prophecy, they were the locusts sent to consume and destroy. He kept telling himself there was nothing to fear; the righteous need not fear when the day of judgment is at hand.

Only somewhere inside of him was this little boy, crying, “Mama, Mama, Mama!” And somewhere else was this old man, just staring down into the water and waiting for them to find him.

Another explosion sounded.

This one was closer. They must be bombing the entire city. Or else it was the dragon, lashing his tail.

Somebody ran past Jesse, carrying a torch. No, it wasn't a torch—his hair was on fire. He jumped into the water, screaming, "They're coming! They're coming!"

Jesse turned and blinked. They were coming, all right. He could see them pouring out of the alleyway like rats. Rats with gleaming eyes, gleaming claws.

Suddenly, his head cleared. He realized that he was going to die. He had, perhaps, one minute of life left. One minute out of eighty years. And he couldn't fool himself any longer. He was not delirious. Day of judgment—that was nonsense. And there was no dragon, and these were not rats. They were merely men. Puny little men who killed because they were afraid.

Jesse was a big man, but he was afraid, too. Six feet three inches tall he was, when he stood up straight as he did now, watching them come—but he knew fear.

And he resolved that he must not take that fear with him into death. He wanted to die with something better, than that. Wasn't there something he could find and cling to, perhaps some memory—?

A minute is so short, and eighty years is so long. Jesse stood there, swaying, watching them draw nearer, watching them as they caught sight of him and raised their weapons.

He scanned rapidly into the past. Into the past, before the time the wench was dead, back to when you and I were young Maggie, back still earlier, and earlier, seeking the high point, the high school, that was it, the high school, the highlight, the moment of triumph, the game with Lincoln. Yes, that was it. He hadn't been ashamed of being six feet three inches then, he'd been proud of it, proud as he raised his arms and—

Splashed down into the water as the bullets struck.

And that was the end of Jesse Pringle. Jesse Pringle, champion basketball center of the Class of '79 . . .

12. Littlejohn—2065

THE helicopter landed on the roof, and the attendants wheeled it over to one side. They propped the ladder up, and Littlejohn descended slowly, panting.

They had a coasterchair waiting and he sank into it, grateful for the rest. Hardy fellows, these attendants, but then they were almost three feet tall. More stamina, that was the secret. Common stock, of course, but they served a purpose. Somebody had to carry out orders.

When they wheeled the coasterchair into the elevator, Littlejohn descended. The elevator halted on the first floor and he breathed a sigh of relief. Great heights always made him faint and dizzy, and even a short helicopter trip took its toll—the mere thought of soaring two hundred feet above the ground was enough to paralyze him.

But this journey was vital. Thurmon was waiting for him.

Yes, Thurmon was waiting for him here in the council chamber. The coasterchair rolled forward into the room and again Littlejohn felt a twinge of apprehension. The room was vast—too big for comfort. It must be all of fifty feet long, and over ten feet in height. How could Thurmon stand it, working here?

But he had to endure it, Littlejohn reminded himself. He was head of the council.

Thurmon was lying on the couch when Littlejohn rolled in, but he sat up and smiled.

“I greet you,” he said.

“I greet you,” Littlejohn answered. “No, don’t bother to stay seated. Surely we don’t need to be ceremonious.”

Thurmon picked up his ears at the sound of the unfamiliar word. He wasn’t the scholarly type, like Littlejohn. But he appreciated Littlejohn’s learning and knew he was important to the council. They needed scholars these days, and antiquarians too. One has to look to the past when rebuilding a world.

"You sent for me?" Littlejohn asked. The question was purely rhetorical, but he wanted to break the silence. Thurmon looked troubled as he replied.

"Yes. It is a matter of confidence between us."

"So be it. You may speak in trust."

Thurmon eyed the door. "Come nearer," he said.

Littlejohn pressed a lever and rolled up to the couchside. Thurmon's eyes peered at him through the thick contact lenses. Littlejohn noted the deep wrinkles around his mouth, but without surprise. After all, Thurmon was an old man—he must be over thirty.

"I have been thinking," Thurmon said, abruptly. "We have failed."

"Failed?"

Thurmon nodded. "Need I explain? You have been close to the council for many years. You have seen what we've attempted, ever since the close of the Naturalist wars."

"A magnificent effort," Littlejohn answered politely. "In less than thirty years an entire new world has risen from the ruins of the old. Civilization has been restored, snatched from the very brink of a barbarism that threatened to engulf us."

"Nonsense," Thurmon murmured.

"What?"

"Sheer nonsense, Littlejohn. You're talking like a pedant."

"But I *am* a pedant." Littlejohn nodded. "And it's true. When the Naturalists were exterminated, this nation and other nations were literally destroyed. Worse than physical destruction was the threat of mental and moral collapse. But the Yardstick councils arose to take over. The concept of small government came into being and saved us. We began to rebuild on a sensible scale, with local, limited control. The little community arose—"

"Spare me the history lesson," said Thurmon, dryly. "We rebuilt, yes. We survived. In a sense, perhaps, we even made certain advances. There is no longer any economic rivalry, no social distinctions, no external pressure. I think I can safely assume that the danger of future warfare is forever banished. The balance of power is no longer a factor. The balance of Nature has been partially restored. And only one problem remains to plague mankind."

"What is that?"

"We face extinction," Thurmon said.

"But that's not true," Littlejohn interrupted. "Look at history and—"

"Look at us." Thurmon sighed. "You needn't bother with history. The answer is written in our faces, in our own bodies. I've searched the past very little, compared to your scholarship, but enough to know that things were different in the old days. The Naturalists, whatever else they might have been, were strong men. They walked freely in the land, they lived lustily and long.

"Do you know what our average life-expectancy is today, Littlejohn? A shade under forty years. And that only if one is fortunate enough to lead a sheltered existence, as we do. In the mines, in the fields, in the radioactive areas, they die before the age of thirty."

Littlejohn leaned forward. "Schuyler touches on just that point in his *Psychology of Time,"* he said, eagerly. "He posits the relationship between size and duration. Time is relative, you know. Our lives, short as they may be in terms of comparative chronology, nevertheless have a subjective span equal to that of the Naturalists in their heyday."

"Nonsense," Thurman said, again. "Did you think that is what concerns me—whether or not we feel that our lives are long or short?"

"What then?"

"I'm talking about the basic elements essential to survival. I'm talking about strength, stamina, endurance, the ability to function. That's what we're losing, along with the normal span of years. The world is soft and flabby. Yardstick children, they tell us, were healthy at first. But *their* children are weaker. And their grandchildren, weaker still. The effect of the wars, the ravages of radiation and malnutrition, have taken a terrible toll. The world is soft and flabby today. People can't walk any more, let alone run. We find it difficult to lift and bend and work—"

"But we won't have to worry about such matters for long," Littlejohn hazarded. "Think of what's being done in robotics. Those recent experiments seem to prove—"

"I know." Thurmon nodded. "We can create robots, no doubt. We have a limited amount of raw materials to allocate to the project, and if we can perfect automatons they'll function quite adequately. Virtually indestructible, too, I understand. I imagine they'll still be able to operate efficiently a hundred or more years from now—if only they learn to oil and repair one another. Because by that time, the human race will be gone."

"Come now, it isn't that serious—"

"Oh, but it is!" Thurmon raised himself again, with an effort. "Your study of history should have taught you one thing, if nothing else. The tempo is quickening. While it took mankind thousands of years to move from the bow and arrow to the rifle, it took only a few hundred to move from the rifle to the thermonuclear weapon. It took ages before men mastered flight, and then in two generations they developed satellites; in three, they reached the moon and Mars."

"But we're talking about *physical* development."

"I know. And physically, the human race altered just as drastically in an equally short span of time. As recently as the nineteenth century, the incidence of disease was a thousandfold greater than it is now. Life was short then. In the twentieth century disease lessened and life-expectancy doubled, in certain areas. Height and weight increased perceptibly with every passing decade. Then came Leffingwell and his injections. Height, weight, life-expectancy have fallen perceptibly every decade since then. The war merely hastened the process."

"You appear to have devoted a great deal of time to this question," Littlejohn observed.

"I have," answered the older man. "And it is not a question. It is a fact. The one fact that confronts us all. If we proceed along our present path, we face certain extinction in a very short time. The strain is weakening constantly, the vitality is draining away. We sought to defeat Nature—but the Naturalists were right, in their way."

"And the solution?"

Thurmon was silent for a long moment. Then, "I have none," he said.

"You have consulted the medical authorities?"

"Naturally. And experiments have been made. Physical conditioning, systems of exercise, experimentation in chemotherapy are still being undertaken. There's no lack of volunteers, but a great lack of results. No, the answer does not lie in that direction."

"But what else is there?"

"That is what I had hoped you might tell me," Thurmon said. "You are a scholar. You know the past. You speak often of the lessons of history—" Littlejohn was nodding, but not in agreement. He was trying to comprehend. For suddenly the conviction came to him clearly; Thurmon was right. It was happening, had happened, right under their smug noses. The world was weakening. It was slowing down, and the race is only to the swift.

He cursed himself for his habit of thinking in platitudes and quotations, but long years of study had unfitted him for less prosaic phraseology. If he could only be practical. *Practical.*

"Thurmon," he said. "There is a way. A way so obvious, we've all overlooked it—passed right over it."

"And that is—?"

"Stop the Leffingwell injections!"

"But—"

"I know what you'll say. There have been genetic mutations. Very true, but such mutations can't be universal. A certain percentage of offspring will be sound, capable of attaining full growth. And we don't have the population-problem to cope with any more. There's room for people again. So why not try it? Stop the injections and allow babies to be born as they were before." Littlejohn hesitated before adding a final word, but he knew he had to add it; he knew it now. "Normally," he said.

Thurmon nodded. “So that is your answer.”

“Yes. I—I think it will work.”

“So do the biologists,” Thurmon told him. “A generation of normal infants, reared to maturity, would restore mankind to its former stature, in every sense of the word. And now, knowing the lessons of the past, we could prepare for the change to come. We could rebuild the world for them to live in, rebuild it psychically as well as physically. We’d plan to eliminate the rivalry between the large and the small, the strong and the weak. It wouldn’t be difficult because there’s plenty for all. There’d be no trouble as there was in the old days. We’ve learned to be psychologically flexible.”

Littlejohn smiled. “Then that *is* the solution?” he asked.

“Yes. Eliminating the Leffingwell injections will give us a good proportion of normal children again. *But where do we find the normal women to hear them?”*

“Normal women?”

Thurmon sighed, then reached over and placed a scroll in the scanner. “I have already gone into that question with research technicians,” he said. “And I have the figures here.” He switched on the scanner and began to read.

“The average nubile female, aged thirteen to twenty-one, is two feet, ten inches high and weighs forty-eight pounds.” Thurmon flicked the switch again and peered up. “I don’t think I’ll bother with pelvic measurements,” he said. “You can already see that giving birth to a six or seven-pound infant is a physical impossibility under the circumstances. It cannot be done.”

“But surely there must be *some* larger females! Perhaps a system of selective breeding, on a gradual basis—”

“You’re talking in terms of generations. We haven’t got that much time.” Thurmon shook his head. “No, we’re stopped right here. We can’t get normal babies without normal women, and the only normal women are those who began life as normal babies.”

“Which comes first?” Littlejohn murmured. “The chicken or the egg?”

“What’s that?”

“Nothing. Just an old saying. From history.”

Thurmon frowned. “Apparently, then, that’s all you can offer in your professional capacity as an historian. Just some old sayings.” He sighed. “Too bad you don’t know some old prayers. Because we need them now.”

He bowed his head, signifying the end of the interview.

Littlejohn rolled out of the room.

His ‘copter took him back to his own dwelling, back across the rooftops of New Chicagee. Ordinarily, Littlejohn avoided looking down. He dreaded heights, and the immensity of the city itself was somehow appalling. But now he gazed upon the capital and center of civilization with a certain morbid affection.

New Chicagee had risen on the ashes of the old, after the war’s end. Use of thermo-nucs had been limited, fortunately, so radioactivity did not linger, and the vast craters hollowed out by ordinary warheads had been partially filled by rubble and debris. Artificial fill had done the rest of the job, so that now New Chicagee was merely a flat prairie as it must have been hundreds of years ago—a flat prairie on which the city had been resurrected. There were almost fifty thousand people here in the capital; the largest congregation of population on the entire continent. They had built well and surely this time, built for the security and certainty of centuries to come.

Littlejohn sighed. It was hard to accept the fact that they had been wrong; that all this would end in nothingness. They had eliminated war, eliminated disease, eliminated famine, eliminated social inequality, injustice, disorders external and internal—and in so doing, they had eliminated themselves.

The sun was setting in the west, and long shadows crept over the city below. Yes, the sun was setting and the shadows were gathering, the night was coming to claim its own. Darkness was falling, eternal darkness.

It was quite dark by the time Littlejohn’s ‘copter landed on the rooftop of his own dwelling; so dark, in fact, that for a moment he didn’t see the strange vehicle already standing there. Not until he had settled into his coasterchair did he notice the presence of the other ‘copter, and then it was too late. Too late to do anything except sit and stare as the gigantic shadow loomed out of the night, silhouetted against the sky.

The shadow shambled forward, and Littlejohn gaped, gaped in terror at the titanic figure. He opened his mouth to speak, but words did not form; there were no words to form, for how does one address an apparition?

Instead, it was the apparition which spoke.

“I have been waiting for you,” it said.

“Y-yes—”

“I want to talk to you.” The voice was deep, menacing.

Littlejohn shifted in his coasterchair. There was nowhere to go, no escape. He gazed up at the shadow. Finally he summoned a response. “Shall we go inside?” he asked.

The figure shook its head. “Where? Down into that dollhouse of yours? It isn’t big enough. I’ve already been there. What I have to say can be said right here.”

“W-who are you?”

The figure stepped forward, so that its face was illuminated by the fluorescence streaming from the open door which led to the inclined chairway descending to Littlejohn’s dwelling.

Littlejohn could see the face, now—the gigantic, wrinkled face, scarred and seared and seamed. It was a human face, but utterly alien to the humanity Littlejohn knew. Faces such as this one had disappeared from the earth a lifetime ago. At least, history had taught him that. History had not prepared him for the actual living presence of a—

“Naturalist!” Littlejohn gasped. “You’re a Naturalist! Yes, that’s what you are!”

The apparition scowled.

“I am not a Naturalist. I am a man.

“But you can’t be! The war—”

“I am very old. I lived through your war. I have lived through your peace. Soon I shall die. But before I do, there is something else which must be done.”

“You’ve come here to kill me?”

“Perhaps.” The looming figure moved closer and stared down. “No, don’t try to summon help. When your servants saw me, they fled. You’re alone now, Littlejohn.”

“You know my name.”

“Yes, I know your name. I know the names of everyone on the council. Each of them has a visitor tonight.”

“Then it *is* a plot, a conspiracy?”

“We have planned this very carefully, through the long years. It’s all we lived for, those few of us who survived the war.”

“But the council wasn’t responsible for the war! Most of us weren’t even alive, then. Believe me, we weren’t to blame—”

“I know.” The gigantic face creased in senile simulation of a smile. “Nobody was ever to blame for anything, nobody was ever responsible. That’s what they always told me. I mustn’t hate mankind for multiplying, even though population created pressure and pressure created panic that drove me mad. I mustn’t blame Leffingwell for solving the overpopulation problem, even though he used me as a guinea-pig in his experiments. I mustn’t blame the Yardsticks for penning me up in prison until revolution broke out, and I mustn’t blame the Naturalists for bombing the place where I took refuge. So whose fault was it that I’ve gone through eighty years of assorted hell? Why did I, Harry Collins, get singled out for a lifetime of misery and misfortune?” The huge old man bent over Littlejohn’s huddled form. “Maybe it was all a means to an end. A way of bringing me here, at this moment, to do what must be done.”

“Don’t harm me—you’re not well, you’re—”

“Crazy?” The old man shook his head. “No, I’m not crazy. Not now. But I *have* been, at times, during my life. Perhaps we all are, when we attempt to face up to the complications of an average existence, try to confront the problems which are too big for a single consciousness to cope with in a single lifespan. I’ve been crazy in the city, and crazy in the isolation of a cell, and crazy in the welter of war. And perhaps the worst time of all was when I lost my son.

“Yes, I had a son, Littlejohn. He was one of the first, one of Leffingwell’s original mutations, and I never knew him very well until the revolution came and we went away together. He was a doctor, my boy, and a good one. We spent almost five years together and I learned a lot from him. About medicine, but that wasn’t important then. I’m thinking of what I learned about love. I’d always hated Yardsticks, but my son was one, and I came to love him. He had plans for rebuilding the world, he and I and the rest of us. We were going to wait until the revolution ended and then help restore sanity in civilization.

“But the Naturalists flew over and dropped their bomb, and my boy died. Over four hundred of our group died there in the canyon—four hundred who might have changed the fate of the world. Do you think I can forget that? Do you think I and the few others who survived have ever forgotten? Can you blame us if we did go crazy? If we hid away out there in the western wilderness, hid away from a world that had offered us nothing but death and destruction, and plotted to bring death and destruction to that world in return?

“Think about it for a moment, Littlejohn. We were old men, all of us, and the world had given us only its misery to bear during our lifetimes. The world we wanted to save was destroying itself; why should we be concerned with its fate or future?

“So we changed our plans, Littlejohn. Perhaps the shock had been too much. Instead of plotting to rebuild the world, we turned our thoughts to completing its destruction. Our tools and texts were gone, buried in the rubble with the bodies of fine young men. But we had our minds. Crazed minds, you’d call them—but aware of reality. The grim reality of the post-revolutionary years.

“We burrowed away in the desert. We schemed and we dreamed. From time to time we sent out spies. We knew what was going on. We knew the Naturalists were gone, that six-footers had vanished from a Yardstick world.

We knew about the rehabilitation projects. We watched your people gradually evolve new patterns of living and learning. Some of the former knowledge was rescued, but not all. Our little group had far more learning than you've ever dreamed of. Fifty of us, between ourselves, could have surpassed all your scientists in every field.

"But we watched, and we waited. And some of us died of privation and some of us died of old age. Until, at last, there were only a dozen of us to share the dream. The dream of destruction. And we knew that we must act swiftly, or not at all.

"So we came into the world, cautiously and carefully, moving unobtrusively and unobserved. We wanted to contemplate the corruption, seek out the weaknesses in your degenerate civilization. And we found them, immediately. Those weaknesses are everywhere apparent, for they are physical. You're one of a dying race, Littlejohn. Mankind's days are numbered. There's no need for grandiose schemes of reactivating warheads in buried missile-centers, of loosing thermo-nucs upon the world. Merely by killing off the central council here in New Chicagee, we can accomplish our objective. A dozen men die, and there's not enough initiative left to replace them. It's as simple as that. And as complicated."

Harry Collins nodded. "Yes, as complicated. Because the only weaknesses we've observed *are* physical ones. We've seen enough of the ways of this new civilization to realize that.

"All of the things I hated during my lifetime have disappeared now—the crowding, the competition, the sordid self-interest, the bigotry, intolerance, prejudice. The antisocial aspects of society are gone. There is only the human race, living much closer to the concept of Utopia than I ever dreamed possible. You and the other survivors have done well, Littlejohn."

"And yet you come to kill us."

"We came for that purpose. Because *we* still retained the flaws and failings of our former cultures. We looked for targets to blame, for villains to hate and destroy. Instead, we found this reality.

"No, I'm not crazy, Littlejohn. And I and my fellows aren't here to execute revenge. We have returned to the original plan; the plan Leffingwell had, and my son, and all the others who worked in their own way for their dream of a better world. We come now to help you. Help you before you die—before we die."

Littlejohn looked up and sighed. "Why couldn't this have happened before?" he murmured. "It's too late now."

"But it isn't too late. My friends are here. They are telling your fellow council-members the same thing right now. We may be old, but we can still impart what we have learned. There are any number of technological developments to be made. We can help you to increase your use of atomic power. There's soil reclamation and irrigation projects and biological techniques—"

"You said it yourself," Littlejohn whispered. "We're a dying race. That's the primary problem. And it's an insoluble one. Just this afternoon—" And he told him about the interview with Thurmon.

"Don't you understand?" Littlejohn concluded. "We have no solution for survival. We're paying the price now because for a while we wouldn't heed history. We tried to defeat Nature and in the end Nature has defeated us. Because we would not render unto Caesar the things which are—"

Harry Collins smiled. "That's it," he said.

"What?"

"Caesar. That's the answer. Your own medical men must have records. I know, because I learned medicine from my son. There used to be an operation, in the old days, called a caesarean section—used on normal women and on dwarfs and midgets too, in childbirth. If your problem is how to deliver normal children safely, the technique can be revived. Get hold of some of your people. Let's see what data you have on this. I'll be glad to furnish instruction."

There was excitement after that. Too much excitement for Littlejohn. By the time the council had assembled in emergency session, by the time plans were formulated and he returned to his own dwelling in the helicopter, he was completely exhausted. Only the edge of elation sustained him; the realization that a solution had been found.

As he sank into slumber he knew that he would sleep the clock around.

And so would Harry Collins. The old man and his companions, now guests of the council, had been temporarily quartered in the council-chambers. It was the only structure large enough to house them and even so they had to sleep on the floor. But it was sufficient comfort for the moment.

It was many hours before Harry Collins awoke. His waking was automatic, for the tiny telescreen at the end of the council room glowed suddenly, and the traditional voice chirped forth to interrupt his slumber.

“Good morning,” said the voice. “It’s a beautiful day in New Chicagee!”

v Harry stared at the screen and then he smiled.

“Yes,” he murmured. “But tomorrow will be better.”

THE END

F.O.B. Venus

Sometimes you get the idea, from reading science fiction that if there is intelligent life on other planets and if the natives ever get bored someone ups and yells, "Let's invade Earth!" Then everyone brightens up and away they go. Poor old picked-on Earth! Anyhow, here's a story about some of the most gorgeous invaders you'll ever meet.

HAROLD FOLLANSBEE was the first to see one. In a world filled with military observers, civil defense watchers, professional astronomers and amateur sighters of flying saucers and other celestial crockery, Harold Follansbee was a most unlikely candidate for the honor of welcoming our first visitor from Outer Space.

Follansbee was a most timid, withdrawn and introverted type (even his toenails were ingrown) and he scarcely ventured outdoors except when journeying to and from his job. He seldom even dared look out of the window since an unfortunate morning when, suffering from a severe hangover, he'd pulled up the shade and discovered that it was bleeding outside.

He worked in the heart of downtown Chicago, buried away on the topmost floor of a large music store. Here he served as the clerical custodian of the sheet-music department.

That Harold Follansbee, in this obscure position, would be apt to encounter an Alien, was a most improbable circumstance.

But strange things happen, even in Chicago.

And thus it was that Follansbee became privileged to make the initial contact with an extra-terrestrial presence.

One morning, when the upper storey of the shop was seemingly devoid of customers, he leaned lovingly over a bound volume of Chopin preludes and surreptitiously pencilled a mustache on the portrait adorning the latest song number by Jerry Lee Lewis.

It was at this precise moment that Harold Follansbee looked up and confronted a visitor.

Although he did not know it, the fate of the world might conceivably have rested upon his reaction. If Follansbee had done the sensible thing and run, screaming, for his very life, perhaps things might have been different.

But few men, Follansbee included, are apt to flee from the sight of a beautiful woman. And this woman was lovely beyond the dreams of the poets who hymn the praises of *Miss Rheingold,* or even Brigitte Bardot.

There was absolutely nothing about her appearance to suggest an ultra-terrene origin; as a matter of fact, in her lowcut and tightly-fitted dress, she could hardly have looked more earthy.

Nor was there anything to hint that her impromptu visit to the sheet-music department of the store was based on a desire to become better-acquainted with mundane melody, in order to pass successfully as a human being.

Follansbee had no way of knowing that she had hovered above Earth for months in the mother-ship, before she and her sisters had been catapulted to earth in individual capsules which were destroyed immediately upon landing. He did not realize that during the hovering stage she and her kind spent their time absorbing AM and I'M broadcasts to learn the language and pick up news and information. He could not possibly conceive she had acquired a passionate liking for the romantic German ballads of Schubert, Schumann and Hugo Wolf; to a point where her first impulse upon landing on earth was to procure samples of such music for herself.

Even without this knowledge, Follansbee might still have saved the world, had he himself been a reader of science fiction. But he despised the stuff.

Consequently, he attached no meaning or importance to her introductory remarks as she riffled through a stack of art-songs, smiled pleasantly at him, and murmured the first words ever spoken by an Alien to an earth-man—"Take me to your *lieder."*

Joel Francis picked her up in Harold's Club, in Reno. She said her name was Yvette, which Joel Francis didn't exactly believe—inasmuch as his own name was Joe Francisco, or had been before he got out of stir, grew the sideburns, and started hanging around Reno and making a pitch for the divorcees.

But it didn't matter to Joel what her real name was. The important thing was, she was stacked, but good. Two big stacks of silver cartwheels in front of her on the dice-table, and a lot of folding lettuce in her big purse. The moment Joel noticed, he was attracted to her.

When he got a chance to look behind the stacks, he found that she had a wealth of personal assets, too. Best of all, she was alone and a stranger in town. After striking up a conversation (it isn't difficult, if you have sideburns like Joel Francis, and you work your way over to a place next to a dame at the dice-table and haul out a silver dollar and smile at her and say, "Will you bet this one for me, for luck?") he did his best to convince her that she was not alone any more and need not be a stranger.

The next step was in the direction of the bar. Here, Joel found out all that he wanted or needed to know. She *was* alone and she *was* in the chips. Yvette wouldn't tell him anything about her divorce, but that didn't mean anything. A lot of these chicks played it cool when it came to discussing personal matters—particularly when they were as flashy as she was.

Usually, it was because they'd been hitched to some old pappy guy with a fat bankroll and they came out here to cut in on it *via* the alimony route. They knew they had a soft touch, and they were sort of embarrassed.

Joel didn't care. He knew when *he* had a soft touch, too, and he wasn't embarrassed at all. His specialty was playing this kind of babe for all she was worth, going the whole route from cocktails to fun and games. He had a buddy named Cono who stayed in the background, but somehow always managed to show up at various motels at the oddest hours. This buddy was sort of a photographybug, you might say, and he took some real unusual pictures. He was real proud of the pictures, too; he always managed to bring the prints around later and show them to the dames and ask if they wanted to buy some. The pictures were quite expensive, and the negatives usually cost a small fortune, but most of the dames decided to buy. Particularly when they found out that such photos, introduced as evidence in court, might hurt a wife's chances of getting alimony payments.

Joel didn't tell Yvette about Cono and the camera, of course. He just bought her a few drinks and made with the small-talk and told her about his big ranch out in the valley. Joel really didn't own a ranch, of course, and his only experience along that line came from the time he was on the Honor Farm at the State Penitentiary back home, but she didn't ask too many questions.

In fact, she didn't ask any questions at all. Not even when Joel made the suggestion about driving out to this little motel he knew about. She seemed to go for the idea right away, just as she seemed to go for Joel.

Actually, it might have been wiser if Joel had been the one who had asked a few questions—although there is some doubt that Yvette would have revealed her eager cooperation was based on the premise that it was *her* given task to study human biology, and the reproductive factor in particular.

But Joel, after a few drinks, wasn't inclined to make inquiries. Never look a gift horse in the mouth; not when you have a beautiful filly like this one. And she *was* lovely, and she *did* cling to him, and when they got to the car she slid next to him on the seat and offered her lips and arms quite eagerly. Joel, despite his long experience and his long sideburns, found himself responding with unusual ardor and reacting with unusual anticipation.

Thus it was that he started the car in quite a hurry and drove out of town very fast, with Yvette in the seat beside him, her arms around him and her lips nibbling at his ear. Her nearness and the liquor and the speed were all mitigating factors, perhaps, as was the indecorous imagery which now filled Joel Francis with pleasurable euphoria.

But fast freights take no account of mitigating factors. And when Joel hit the railroad crossing on the outskirts of town, doing seventy, the fast freight loomed out of nowhere and hit him.

The next thing Joel Francis knew was the grinding, twisting sensation as the car compressed about him like a beer-can crushed by a giant hand. And like a beer-can, squeezed and emptied, it was flung into the darkness of a ditch.

One moment Joel was sitting there, speeding along without a care in the world, with this beautiful babe crawling all over him. The next minute he was lying in the overturned car, with the hood pinning his legs so he couldn’t get free and crawl out.

At that he was pretty lucky, because the windshield had gone and the huge, jagged splinters of glass might have sliced his head clean off his body.

He closed his eyes and tried to wriggle loose, but he could not make it. He couldn’t make it, but Yvette could. She was still at his side, and her legs hadn’t been caught at all, so it was very easy for her to roll over and put her arms around him in a continuation of a loving embrace. She held him tightly; very tightly indeed.

So Joel wondered what the hell, had shock driven her screwy? Had she really flipped, did she think he was going to lie here in the wreck and make with the love bit? He tried to ease her off, but she wouldn't let go; she was awfully strong and in a minute she'd probably try to kiss him.

That's when Joel opened his eyes again and now there was enough light for him to see.

Enough light for him to realize that, whatever else she might be doing, she wouldn't be kissing him. Because the glass from the windshield had caught her, all right.

The thing making love to him didn't survive very long. Just long enough for him to see that it didn't have any head. Just long enough to drive Joel Francis mad.

Lawrence P. Dunlap hired her because she was the prettiest of the eighteen applicants for the job, and he kept her on because she was the smartest. Not just of the eighteen—but of all the women he had ever met.

Dunlap had met a lot of women in his time, too; but that time, for him, was long since past. Now he was only interested in making enough money to retire on, so he never attempted to inject the personal element in his relationship with Leona Cummings.

She started off as a good stenographer and became an excellent private secretary; just when she advanced to the role of indispensable assistant, Dunlap couldn't quite recall. It had surprised him to learn that she was a student of economics, with a particular interest in the stock market. This seemed a rather odd hobby for so charming a young lady, even though she was an orphan who lived alone in a room at the YWCA, without friends or social interests.

Still, Dunlap did not object. In fact, he came to the point where he encouraged her to discuss the ramifications of his own business, which was real estate.

At fifty, he prided himself on the accumulation of a modest fortune; his wife wore mink, his son drove a Lancia, and he himself was a nonathlete member of the Athletic Club and a non-farming member of the Country Club. He was thinking quite seriously of retiring pretty soon now.

At fifty-one, however, Lawrence P. Dunlap was not quite so self-assured. Casual conversations with Leona Cummings had convinced him he was missing several opportunities. She’d given him shrewd hints on various deals, current and pending, and offered him sound advice on future projects.

It was at her suggestion that he bought out a contracting firm in order to bid on an expressway program coming up that fall. It was due to her foresight that he managed to acquire title to large blocs of land adjoining the proposed route. When his bid went through, Leona Cummings was instrumental in getting him to buy into the syndicate which formed to put up a huge shopping center in the new development.

Naturally, all this took money, and Dunlap had to mortgage his holdings. He spread himself pretty thin, but if everything went smoothly he’d have his money back in a year and then he could retire and watch the profits roll in.

Leona Cummings, meanwhile, was indispensable, as always. There were all sorts of delicate negotiations and arrangements to be made with aldermen, members of city planning commissions, union officials, and neighborhood politicians. Leona Cummings handled them as a go-between and his name was never connected with the exchange of cash for promises.

It was also fortunate that she was available to put in proxy bids for property, to head up the shrewdly-devised network of dummy corporations and holding companies which were necessary to establish if Dunlap didn’t want his connections revealed. If it ever leaked out that he was profiting from the building of the expressway, profiting from the sale of land adjoining it, and profiting from the leasing and resale of business property as a result of his other efforts, there might be embarrassing consequences down at City Hall and in the offices of the Collector of Internal Revenue. Rut with Leona Cummings as a front, there were neither leaks nor consequences. And a modest investment of a hundred thousand or so—spread judiciously through token corporate entities in order to establish credit for loans—made Dunlap a millionaire on his fifty-second birthday. He was ready to retire, now, and not to the ranchhouse he presently owned. He could build a mansion.

He felt so good about it that he paid Leona Cummings a Christmas bonus of over a thousand dollars, in cash, so she needn't declare it on her tax returns. She was properly grateful, too.

So grateful, in fact, that she came to him several days later with a further suggestion. A housing project was the ticket—a complete, multi-million-dollar venture with several thousand units. He owned the land, and the deal could be financed easily enough. She had already taken the liberty of consulting Bert Harkin, their attorney.

At first, Dunlap demurred. I've got enough money now," he said. "I'd like to quit. Isn't every man who can retire at fifty-two."

"Isn't every man who can be a multi-millionaire at fifty-three," Leona Cummings told him. "Just one more year."

And in one more year the project was almost completed. Leona was invaluable; she took most of the load off Dunlap's shoulders as the work progressed. Not only did she assume the job of fronting for the development corporation putting up the cracker-box units; she also took over the responsibilities in the promotional firm which was formed to handle sales and advertising of the houses to the general public.

The business boomed. Leona Cummings hadn't lied; at fifty-three, Dunlap was a multi-millionaire. Of course it was all on paper—his money was invested in the various corporate structures controlling the area. "But I can sell out for five or six million right now," he told her, the evening he handed her a three-thousand-dollar bonus as a token of his appreciation.

And that's just what I plan to do. Sell out and retire. Build me a place down in Florida and—"

"You can't," Leona Cummings said. "The next few years will quadruple your holdings. Values are skyrocketing. Besides, there's talk of another expressway down on the South Side. Suppose you got in on that the same way. Why, you'd end up owning half the property in town! And that's not all—you'd own the property-owners, too! That's something I wanted to talk to you about, Mr. Dunlap. There's no reason why you shouldn't think about getting into politics. Oh, maybe you wouldn't care to run for office yourself, but you could groom a couple of bright young men. With the people you have in the areas you control, you could bring a lot of pressure to bear, swing a lot of votes. How'd you like to own this town, really *own* it, and everyone in it? Why—"

Dunlap was almost carried away by her argument. Almost, but not quite. He shook his head. "Maybe so," he agreed. "I think it can be done. But I'm not going to do it. If I were ten years younger, perhaps, I'd be interested. Right now I just want to get out. I want you to call Harkin for a meeting. I've got to arrange a gradual liquidation—"

Leona Cummings shook her head. "I've spoken to him. There's no need of a meeting. That is, if you *insist* on retiring."

"Of course I insist. And I intend to liquidate."

"You can't liquidate."

"What do you mean?"

"You forget, Mr. Dunlap, that you're not the legal head of these businesses. I am."

"But the voting stock—"

"Much of it is under my name, remember? And there's probably more than you think. You signed a lot of papers in the past few years. Harkin tells me you signed over practically everything."

"What are you trying to tell me? Are you by any chance threatening to squeeze me out of my own business?"

"Of course not, Mr. Dunlap. You squeezed yourself out. You don't have a business any more. And all I'm telling you is that if you're set on retiring, you're perfectly free to do so, right now. You can walk out of this office this very minute without having to sign a thing."

"Now see here, I'll have the law—"

"I think it would be better for you if you forgot about the legal aspect. That's what Mr. Harkin said, after I showed him some of the papers you directed me to make out concerning a few little deals."

"This is blackmail, you can't get away with it! Turning me out of my own office."

"*My* office. *My* businesses." Leona Cummings smiled brightly and wrote out a check. "Here you are," she said. "A little retirement gift as a token of our association. Four thousand dollars. That's what you paid me in bonuses. I've saved the money, because I always intended to give it back to you. A sentimental gesture."

"But—"

"I wish you happiness in your retirement," Leona Cummings told him. "It's what you've always wanted, isn't it?"

So Lawrence P. Dunlap took the check. His own home was still mortgaged, and the four thousand dollars would not buy him a ranchhouse or a mansion, or a big place down in Florida. About all it did buy was liquor, during the next year. And on his fifty-fourth birthday, when he read in the papers about Leona Cummings and her new South Side housing project development, he found he had just about enough money left to buy a second-hand revolver and some brand-new bullets.

Then Dunlap finally retired, to the family plot at the cemetery.

Clark Holton never knew where she came from and he didn't inquire.

There is no telling how many of them came during the early years: creatures like the one who called herself Margaret Kern.

A surname was hardly necessary, for in most instances—Margaret's included—marriage soon brought a new one.

She was Margaret Holton, now, his very own Margaret, six years married and the mother of a five-year-old girl named Peggy.

All of them who married, it seems, were monoparous, and all of them gave birth to perfectly normal-appearing, golden-haired little girls. Replicas of their nature.

Clark Holton was proud of his daughter and he adored his lovely wife. She was wise in those ways a man desires wisdom in a woman, and charmingly naive in others. Although he knew nothing about her background previous to their marriage, he was entirely content in the present. Margaret saw to that.

If there was anything strange or disconcerting about his wife and child', Clark Holton remained totally unaware of it—at least, until too late. He never realized that Margaret's particular assignment was the study of human anatomy and physiology, or that she had given birth to Peggy merely to provide herself with a readily available assistant.

One night, in the cellar, he found out.

The next day Margaret was telling her neighbors that Clark Holton had gone away on a long business trip. In fact, he'd been transferred to the firm's Alabama plant, and while he got established and looked for a home down there, she intended to sell the house up here and then join him.

Calm and unruffled—and completely bathed after all that grimy wrestling with the furnace at midnight—precocious little Peggy played in the yard outside the window.

Margaret gazed fondly at her offspring as the neighbor lady beamed and gushed over the youngster.

"Why, she looks simply adorable," the neighbor lady cooed. "Just like you!"

Margaret acknowledged the flattery, but even an Alien has some compunctions to be fair and truthful. So she glanced out at Peggy, who was squatting in the dust and playing marbles with the souvenirs she had insisted on retaining from last night's incident.

"Yes," Margaret replied. "She *does* resemble me. But she has her father's eyes."

Roy Hinchley realized that his couch was sagging and the leather was worn away by the squirmings of numberless neurotics and countless psychotics—but never, in all the years of his psychotherapeutic practice, had he ever entertained a patient like this one. Talk about paranoid delusions!

There was no need to, because the patient was doing all the talking.

“Don’t ask me how I found out, Doctor, but I swear to you it’s true.”

“What’s true?”

“There aren’t any women left in the world any more.”

The patient sat up. “That’s why I came to you for help, Doctor. Not just because I need it myself, but because we all need it—all we men—now that the women are gone.”

Roy Hinchley opened his mouth, but the patient didn’t wait for his reply. He continued to report.

“Sure, I know they *look* like women, and they even *act* like women—sometimes. But they are not, I tell you. They’re invaders from another planet. That’s the only possible answer.

“You see, they must have studied us first and figured out a logical method of conquest. No need to start a destructive war, once they figured out our own system of sexual relationships here on earth. All they had to do was marry us and take over. They saw how easy it was for our own earth-women to do just that; they’ve done it for generations, you know, as wives and mothers. So these creatures merely assumed female form and followed suit—with refinements and improvements of their own. They came down here and married all the best men, the key men, and pretty soon they’ll be running everything, owning everything. Look at all the beautiful young widows of wealthy and prominent citizens who’ve become important factors in business and industry and government just in the last few years.”

“Not all of these women are widows,” Roy Hinchley said.

“Some of them aren’t even married.”

“That’s true. They’re too smart to follow just one pattern. Some of them infiltrated as spinsters, some of them play the role of the power behind the throne. But they're squeezing us out, more and more. They control eighty per cent of the buying power, most of the investments, and pretty soon they won't need men at all any more, even as fronts. I'll tell you something else I found out, too, Doctor—after I started studying this thing in earnest. Something's happening to the birth-rate."

"It's common knowledge, yes," Roy Hinchley admitted. "The birth-rate *is* declining, a bit."

"A bit? It's dropping fantastically. These creatures only seem to have one child. And have you noticed—it's always a female? I've written letters to Washington—"

Roy Hinchley repressed a sigh. Of course he'd written letters to Washington; these patients usually did. It was almost useless to attempt to reason with them, but one had to try.

"But there are over a billion women on earth. Surely you don't mean to imply that each and every one of them is an—outsider? Think of your own relatives, your mother, your sister—"

"That's just it, Doctor," the patient murmured. "That is how I found out, you know. Because of my sister. She's not my sister any more. Oh, she still *looks* like my sister, but she's changed. She's got a demon in her, one of those things from outer space. In the last six months she's pushed me out of the family business, taking over everything for herself. It's happening everywhere, Doctor. Naturally, there are only a few thousand who came here in assumed human form; who were able to marry and masquerade in that method. The others waited until they could profit by the knowledge of those who came first to spy and to learn. Now the rest are gradually infiltrating in a *new* way. They're occupying the bodies of our *real* women, too. Displacing their personalities with other entities. That's how the mass changeover is taking place.

"It's happening everywhere, Doctor. And when a few men like myself begin to suspect the truth, they just seem to disappear. That's why I came to you. You know something about the mind, the personality. You can warn people, they'll listen to you.

"You've got to help me tell them. Tell them the earth is being conquered. Not on the battlefield, but in the boudoir. Tell them mankind is being—"

Dr. Roy Hinchley managed to get rid of his patient at last. The first step was to prescribe mild sedation. The second step, before he returned for another appointment, was to get in touch with this sister of his; find out something about the background of the situation. Maybe Clara would have some suggestions.

He closed his office for the day and prepared to mount the stairs to his second-floor apartment. Clara would be waiting for him there and he could tell her about this patient.

Up until recently, of course, he'd preserved a professional seal of silence concerning the confidences he heard, but lately Clara had begun to exhibit a profound interest in the nature of his work. Strange that she should suddenly become so fascinated after all these years. But then, she'd changed a great deal lately; developed an insight which was positively remarkable. And she'd taken to reading up on medicine and surgery, too.

Dr. Hinchley shrugged. Funny, the delusions patients will get. If he'd told this man about Clara, he'd have rationalized that it was all proof of what he'd been saying about Aliens taking over the minds and bodies of human women. A rather engaging theory, in a way—at least it might explain such things as the sudden craze for sack dresses. Hard to imagine a *real* woman wanting to dress like that.

But that was nonsense. Dr. Hinchley, chuckling as he climbed the stairs, was just another husband contemplating the apparently inexplicable behavior of just another wife.

And when he opened the door, and Clara plunged the gleaming scalpel into his throat with surgical precision, he was still thinking—even as you and I—"Now, what do you suppose got into her lately?"

The last man on earth sat in a room. There was no knock on the door; only a faint hissing, as the creatures pumped in the lethal gas . . .

THE

END

The Deadliest Art

Noted mystery and science fiction writer Robert Bloch has a particular talent for the offbeat, the wry unexpected. Here he offers a deadly duo—modern fables about two very different kinds of desire, and their unpleasant consequences.

I: the Ungallant Hunter

It was a hot night, even for the tropics. Vickery was just mixing a gin-and-splash when he heard the discreet tap at the hotel-room door.

“Sarah?” he murmured.

A man entered quickly arid quietly, bolting the door behind him.

“I’m Fenner,” he said. “Sarah’s husband.” He grinned down at Vickery in the chair. “Surprised to see me? Sarah was.”

“Really, now.” Vickery started to rise.

“Don’t bother,” Fenner told him. “Just stay where you are.” Still grinning, he pulled the big Webley out of his jacket and pointed it at Vickery’s stomach.

“Sitting target,” Vickery “said. “Not very sporting, old boy.”

“You’re a fine one to talk about sportsmanship, after what you did with my wife. Great White Hunter, eh? Adjoining hotel-rooms and all—must have been quite a safari.”

Vickery sighed. “I suppose there’s no sense my denying it. So shoot and be hanged.”

“Just the point. I don’t mean to be hanged. So I won’t shoot.” Still holding the gun, Fenner fumbled in his jacket-pocket and produced a small leather pouch. He opened it gingerly, then dropped a squirming, brilliantly-colored object at Vickery’s feet It looked like a tiny coral bracelet, but it was alive.

“Better not move,” Fenner muttered. “Yes, it’s, a *krait.* Deadliest little snake in the world, they say.”

Tenner, wait, listen to me—” The tiny coral bracelet suddenly uncoiled. Before Vickery could draw back, pink lightning struck. Again and again the *krait* sunk its fangs into Vickery’s right leg, through the thin trouser-cloth.

Vickery gasped and closed his eyes, making no move to crush the serpent. Suddenly it subsided sluggishly and coiled up again in the center of the carpet.

Fenner gulped, wiped his forehead, and rose. He put the gun over on the table. “I’ll leave this,” he said. “Maybe you’ll want to use it. They tell me that in less than ten minutes—”

Vickery chuckled. “Fenner, you *are* a mug!”

“What d’ye mean?”

“A bazaar-native sells you a harmless grass-snake and you take his word that its a *krait*. Just as you took the word of a jealous woman that we were having an affair. Actually, old boy, she was miffed because I wanted no part of her.” Vickery chuckled again. “Not a gallant statement, I admit, but you’re entitled to know the truth.”

“You don’t expect me to swallow that, do you?”

“Suit yourself.” Vickery waved a hand. “Oh, don’t go. Sit down and have a peg with me. Nothings going to happen—you’ll soon see.”

And nothing *did* happen, except that Fenner had his drink, and a short talk which fully convinced him that Vickery was as innocent and harmless as the tiny snake that was curled up on the carpet.

When he left, he apologized profusely to Vickery for everything. He'd sent Sarah packing on the first plane to London, and planned to follow her himself in the morning.

Vickery wished him godspeed. "Take your gun," he said. "And the snake, too. You needn't bother with the pouch—just put it in your pocket. Snakes love warmth and body-contact."

After Fenner left for the adjoining room formerly occupied by his wife, Vickery continued his preparations for retiring. His mind busied itself with mathematical calculations. How long would it be, for example, until Sarah arrived in London and he could put through a call? How much had she said the old boy was worth? And just how long would it take for that *krait* to stir in annoyance in Fenner's pocket and strike through the cloth into his fat flesh?

The answer to the last question was provided quickly.

Vickery heard the man screaming through the thin wall of the adjoining room, at the precise moment that he sat down on the bed and unbuckled the straps of his artificial leg.

II: A Fast Fix

GORDY WAS GIGGING DATES AROUND Chi and it was a real drag, until he latched onto Uncle Louie.

Just in time, too, because they'd started the countdown on the rocket to Flipville. He got the word from Phil, one of the cats in the combo he was working with.

"You've got a big habit," Phil said. "Go see the man. Uncle Louie—a boy's best friend."

Gordy went to see him right away, because he did have the biggest kind of a habit, and with a capital "H".

Uncle Louie turned out to be an old cat who ran a pawnshop for a front, down on South State. He had the stuff, and it was mellow, and he gave Gordy the fastest kind of a fix.

So everything was copasetic, except in the wallet department. The gigs weren’t bringing in enough to pay for his kicks.

When he asked for credit, Uncle Louie made like a federal case. Gordy pawned his watch, his studs, his fancy threads. But the habit was bigger than both of them, and pretty soon Gordy was one sick Daddy-O. He began missing on the rim-shots and his paradiddles were off.

“You want a fix?” Uncle, Louie said. “So pawn the drums.”

“Hock my traps? Man, I can’t play without ‘em, like.”

“You’re shaking so you can’t play anyway,” Uncle Louie told him, and it was true. “Look, I give you a week’s supply. A whole week.”

It sounded like a gasser to Gordy. A week on the stuff would straighten him out so he could fly again. “All right,” he said. “I’ll go for broke.”

But the week went by, and then another two days, and Gordy was climbing the walls. The shakes hadn’t come yet, but the voices were here in hi-fi.

At first when Phil showed up at his pad and told him about the lake cruise bit, he didn’t believe it was for real. But Phil laid it to him solid. “We book for the whole summer, starting tomorrow night, So pull yourself together and we’ll ball.”

Gordy fell up to Uncle Louie’s place that night, figuring to explain the job set-up so the old cat would give him a break—let him have his traps and maybe a little goose-juice on the cuff.

Only Uncle Louie wasn’t having any. “No dough, no drums,” he kept saying. “I ain’t in business for my health.”

He was a fine one to talk about health, with Gordy digging his wig for a fix. Gordy grabbed him by the collar, talking up a storm. He came on strong about how he had to have it, and his traps too.

Uncle Louie tried to brush him off. So Gordy went behind the counter and dug out his traps for himself. Then there was a hassle, and that’s when the traps fell and Uncle Louie kicked the heads in.

He did it, the old cat busted the traps right in front of Gordy’s eyes and busted Gordy’s job. Until Gordy found himself busting Uncle Louie, with the big hatchet he’d grabbed from under the counter—busting him again and again, and screaming in that high, bugged voice.

So Gordy got his fix after all. But Uncle Louie must have gone to the bank earlier; because there was no dough around the place tonight. Nothing but pawnshop junk. No dough, no traps. And tomorrow Gordy would need his drums. But the heads were busted in—just like Uncle Louies head.

The old cat was. dead affright.

He looked at the drumheads and at Uncle Louie, and at the hatchet in his hand. Then he noticed there was a whole case full of medical instruments under the counter . . .

The next night he lugged his drums up the gangplank of the excursion boat. He was nine times higher than the Wrigley tower, but he was ready to play and he *did* play. The traps had never sounded better.

“So you got ’em back,” Phil said. “How’d you operate, man? Uncle Louie is a pretty tough customer.”

Gordy did a fast paradiddle on his brand new drumheads. Then he grinned. “You know the old saying,” he said. “There’s more than one way to skin a cat.”

1959

NIghtmare Number Four

(With apologies to the late Stephen Vincent Benét)

We thought it was a Joke
When we read it in the papers that afternoon—

About some nut inventor down in Georgia
With a device for printing matter on air.
No, it wasn't skywriting again,
Or television. It printed matter on the air for you to read: It was permanent
And wouldn't blow away.

But there it was.
Just an item in the paper. It didn't mean much.
Something to laugh about, or tell your wife,
"What will these guys think of next?"
And most people didn't even see it, I suppose.
That's why it came as such a shock
When the advertisers took it up.

I remember the morning
When I looked out of the window and saw the sign hanging there (Just hanging there, you understand, in bold black letters) Reading:
"HAVE YOU TAKEN A GOOD LAXATIVE LATELY, OLD TIMER?"

I know I blinked.
The letters were black as ink, but solid to the touch: They hung there and they didn’t go away.

Well, this was how it started—and on the streets, going to work, There were more signs to read.
“EAT REEKIES—THEY’RE GOOD FOR YOU!”
“HAVE YOU HAD YOUR WINTER FUR RELINED?”
and
“GET YOUR CRANKCASE DRAINED.”
Passengers puzzled on the bus, but we weren’t sore, then.
The signs were small at first;
Just two feet high, black and white—“POOPSI-COLA HITS THE SPOT.”

After while we noticed the men with spray guns
Like insect exterminators, spraying the letters out.
Little crowds used to watch them do it.
And the TV comedians made gags,
And the columnists filled their columns,
And somebody wrote a song about it.
But nobody wrote indignant letters to the newspapers Yet

Then they began spraying signs over the lawns
And over driveways
And above houses
And the streets were choked with signs, signs, signs.
Black specks of printed matter, wherever your eyes turned.
Advertising firms were sued by property owners,
But the air was free. Wasn’t it?
The courts thought so.

Motorists complained the signs blocked visibility.

There were accidents.
Men were killed, but the ads went on.
To sell more bread.
To sell more tonics to help digest the bread.
To sell more laxatives to get rid of the bread
Once it was digested.
And then, of course—they advertised more bread again.

That's how it was, and we might have gotten used to it, in time If only the signs hadn't started getting BIGGER
And THICKER.
Two feet tall in the air.
Then five feet.
Then ten.
And the letters a foot thick.
The air was black. Foul.

There was some secret ink they used, and when you breathed it, It made you retch.
But that was all right, too.
One of the signs said "USE FLETCH'S PILLS AND STOP RETCHING."
There was a cure
But not for blindness, not for insanity,
Not for the perpetual sight of signs
Floating over Broadway and Park Avenue.

Twisting between clotheslines in the slums,
Weaving across the swimming pools on palatial estates.
Blocking the boulevards
Shadowing the sun in a black blot over the city—
The signs, reading, "TENDER SKIN LIKES VELVY-DOWN TISSUE," "EAT MORE KOHLRABI WEEK," "GET RID OF YOUR UGLY

PIMPLES!" and "THROW AWAY YOUR TRUSS!"

And then they made the signs in color to light up the night, And blindness and insanity began to pile up vital statistics.
Regular advertising died
Because this was cheaper and more profitable.
What if the signs did tangle up in streaming criss-crosses?
What if you looked out of the window and saw nothing but reams of it,
Illegibly imprinted on air?

They got the insects to work, then.
Inoculated them, I suppose. Trained them, perhaps To void out the signs.
No more sprayers.
Insect thoraxes spewed out the signs in patterns.
They must have bred the bugs on Madison Avenue.
Some genius thought it up—
The Man in the Gray Flannel Overalls.

Of course we tried to pass some laws.
We always do, when it's too late,
And it was too late now.
There were insects everywhere. Insects in clouds, Insects in black swarms, spurting from distended bellies; Each forming his little letter—its dot, his dash, her period.
And that, of course, was the beginning
Of the end.

Too many insects.
Too many to train, too many to control. So they bred.
Bred, and flew, and devoured.
They made nests in crates of VELVY-DOWN. They nibbled at the trusses.
They bored through boxes of FLETCH'S PILLS.

It didn’t do any good to reline your winter furs.
They ate them, too,
And bred again.

The skies were really black now. Black with flying forms.
It was too late.
The plague came, and then the famine.
They called out the Marines.
But how are you going to bayonet an insect?
And pretty soon,
What with plague and famine and all,
There weren’t any Marines any more.

There weren’t any consumer goods left to consume, Nor any consumers.
And—belated blessing!—there weren’t any advertisers either.
Just the insects
Flying aimlessly through ink-spattered air, droning by the signs Made meaningless through lack of eyes to read them. And insect retinas
Flickered down on an empty world where there was nothing left But words.

Lucky for me
I saved a few to write this down. . . .

The Screaming People

Stephen lived in a world of agony—always fearful that he. too, would become one of

IT BEGINS in darkness.

They call it sleep, but it's only a darkness. I lie there curled in the womb-posture and the darkness is all around me. When sleep comes, I merely draw some of that darkness inside me; the warm, rich, all-encompassing darkness, the darkness that is the nourishing blood of the night.

Womb-posture. A fetus lacks awareness, but I know that I'm asleep. I like to sleep.

"Take it easy. Rest, relax. Get plenty of sleep." That's what the doctors told me. And I'm willing to follow orders.

Roxie tells me I'm lazy, but I don't care; not if she lets me sleep. Not if she lets me go into the darkness, where I can be alone.

I'm alone now. I don't even have to think about the necessity of sleep any more. I'm safe. No one can get to me, not even myself. *Not even myself.* That's very important, somehow. I'm really alone, the way I want to be.

Better than that, I can burrow so deeply down into the darkness that I lose myself completely. There is no *me,* there's nothing but night.

Night—and the Voice.

I have to call it that, although it really isn't a Voice—I don't hear it, merely *sense* its presence. It exists, suddenly, somewhere in the darkness around me.

It emerges as a buzzing which I cannot locate in time or space. Does it impinge upon me from far away or is it whispering beside my ear?

"It doesn't matter."

The Voice tells me that. And I realize this is true. It *doesn't* matter where the Voice comes from. It's a part of the darkness. I need the darkness around me, so I must accept the Voice.

Then it grows.

Maybe the Voice feeds on darkness too, because it expands immediately until everything else is blotted out.

Even the darkness is engulfed by the Voice. The Voice, speaking to me, telling me what I must do if I want to go back into the dark.

"Get up. Get dressed. Go to Hexler's."

I'm asleep. I don't want to get out of bed. I don't want to go anywhere. And I've never heard of Hexler's.

But the Voice realizes all that. It understands. And it tells me I have to go.

"Get up. Get dressed. Go to Hexler's." Over and over again. I try to escape from it, into the darkness, but the darkness is gone now. There's only the Voice, telling me what I must do. In order to retreat into the safety of the dark again, I have to obey. There's no question of refusal. If I refuse, I'll stay here forever, listening to the Voice and I don't want to do that.

So it's easier to do as I'm told. The Voice will direct me. All I need do is listen and accept, and the Voice will lead me back into the darkness. The Voice knows the way.

Everything is so simple. I'm not conscious of awakening but I know—a part of me knows—that I've left the bed. No need for lights; I can find my clothing in the dark, without even opening my eyes. I can dress in the dark, quickly and quietly. The Voice anticipates everything.

But where's the door? If I could only open my eyes—

"Very well. Open your eyes."

That's better. I can go now. But where?

"Hexler's. Hexler's house."

So it's a house.

"James P. Hexler. 100 North Azure Drive."

The Voice will guide me, the Voice will never fail, because it knows. I can trust it, I must trust it. There's something familiar about the Voice. "His Master's Voice." Funny, that should come into my head. Records. I'm in the transcription game myself.

Mustn't think about that, though. Must concentrate on what the Voice is telling me. I'm getting instructions now.

"Walk quietly."

I open the door, tiptoe into the hall, close the door behind me. The Voice anticipates every movement.

And then I'm out on the street, alone in the night. Alone, yet not alone. Because the Voice is with me.

"Turn west."

The wind angers the grass. I gaze up at the ancient, evil world of the moon. It radiates an orange aura of corruption.

"North, into the canyon."

On steeply-sloping hills, the trees bow and beckon before me. Huddled behind them, strange houses squat, blinded by night.

"Enter the fifth driveway."

The hill is high, the path uncertain.

"Climb."

Why couldn't I have come around the front, where the walk leads to a gate?

"Climb!"

I climb the hill, and then the wall is before me; the high stone wall ringing the hilltop. I pause, uncertain.

“Climb!”

My fingers claw, my knees lock, my back arches. But somehow there is no pain. The Voice protects and directs. My forehead is wet and an engine throbs in my chest. But I’m straddling the top of the wall, gazing down through the trees at the dark house on the hilltop.

“Jump!”

I float on the wind. The falling dream. My ankles are wrapped in cotton batting as I land. No, that’s illusion. I must remember to be careful of illusions. I must remember that the Voice alone is real. There is nothing but the Voice and the will to obey it.

Now I must walk towards the house, approaching it from the rear. I must stay within the shadows of the trees, where the moon’s rays are barred by branches. Where I remain in the shadows.

The house of stone is huge; a mansion, built in the days when men thought of such edifices as mansions. The myriad heads of its cupolas are gray, silvered by the touch of time and moonlight. Myriad heads and one body—a hydra-house.

Why do I think of that? I don’t think in such terms. But the Voice does. The Voice is thinking for me. The night holds no secrets for the Voice. All I need do is listen and obey.

“Look for the open window.”

Yes, look for the open window. Look for the silver lining. Look for the bluebird. That’s *my* voice now, *my* thought. Or am I just remembering something that was already told to me, a long time ago?

A long time ago I was in bed, asleep. Maybe I’m still asleep. Maybe I’m just dreaming.

“The open windoio—”

The Voice doesn't want me to wonder about such things. The Voice is telling me that somewhere along this side of the house there is a window, open and waiting.

Yes. I can see it. The sill is low. I can reach it, climb over it. That's what I'm supposed to do. And I must be quiet, exceedingly quiet. Yes, I hear, I know.

But it's dark. If I had my lighter—

"No light."

Of course. No light. I can stand here until my eyes grow accustomed to the dimness. Carrots for night vision. Night vision—a vision born of the night. Stand in the strange house now and try to see.

There's a musty odor in this room, a museum smell. I stand quietly, breathe softly, because no one must know I'm here.

I am a stranger and afraid, in a house I never made.

I blink at the sudden light. Is there somebody outside? No, it's only the moon shining through the trees as it rises. I can see now.

The long room is like a museum hall, lined with cases. I start down it.

The Voice guides me. Watch out for creaking floorboards. Don't bump against the glass. Breathe slowly, quietly.

Behind the glass I see figurines, pottery, vases, horses.

Chinese art—Ming, Sung, Han, Tang. I don't know my dynasties. Big Kwan Yin. Foo dogs. A Ho-Ti in the milky perfection of jade. That's valuable, the jade. Tao—

"Go to the stairs."

The staircase is around the corner, in the outer hallway. There are other rooms opening off the hall, containing more glass cases. A fortune in the stuff. Hexler must be filthy rich.

"Move slowly."

I must climb the stairs. They creak, so easy does it. One step at a time. And now where?

"The third door on the left."

It’s darker here in the upper hall, because all the doors are closed. One, two, three. Here.

Now, open the door. Open it just a trifle, as the Voice directs. There’s moonlight streaming through the window and I can see.

I’m standing in a bedroom, a vast bedroom. The high, canopied bed in the corner is a million miles away. Its curtains waver slowly in the breeze from the open window, billowing back and forth like batwings flapping in the dark. The bed is a huge beast, crouching over its prey—

I walk silently, threading a path through the tables lining the long room. There are bell-jars on the tables, with more jade beneath them. Jade and ebony and ivory. There’s a jackal-headed figure beneath one jar. That would be Anubis, the Opener of the Way. Who opened the way for me?

And what’s that sound . . .?

I hear a tinkling. A tinkling in the moonlight, a faint clicking and clattering. Something is stirring in the breeze; the same breeze that ripples the short hairs rising along the nape of my neck.

Now I see it, on the table, next to the bed. There’s a little silver skeleton, mounted on a pedestal.

I stare at it, but there’s no mistake. It’s a perfectly-fashioned miniature skeleton, completely articulated; a silver skeleton with ruby eyes, hinged and jointed and hung from a hook rising out of the pedestal’s base.

No wonder it clicks and clatters. For the tiny figure is weaving with the wind, bobbing and grimacing in a dance of death.

Death.

I must get out of here. What am I doing? This is all wrong, I must—

“The window-seat. Open the window-seat.”

The Voice commands, but I can’t obey. I have to get away from this place.

“The window-seat. Just open it and take the box. Then you can go.”

Yes. I could do that. I could do that, very quickly. Nobody will see me. Those little red eyes are only rubies. I can take it, fast, and then I can run.

The seat swings up. Funny, there was a lock here, I can see that, but it's broken now. I lift the seat. And here's the box. A black velvet box, long and shallow. I can hold it. I can hold it as I run down the hall—

"Go to the bed."

I don't want to go to the bed. I want to run. I'm *going* to run. Except that I can't move. All at once I'm back there in the desert, pinned underneath the car, and my arms and legs are paralyzed and I'm trying to get away from the pain in my head, trying to sink down into the darkness. That's why I need the darkness, still need it now; to get away from the memory, and the pain.

And the only way to find the darkness again is to let the Voice guide me. I must follow the Voice. That's the only way.

"Go to the bed."

I put the black case down on the table and walk over to the bed. It won't hurt to look. Even if the batwings flap, even if the tiny skeleton moves in its *dans macabre,* I can look. I can gaze through the parted curtains.

The room is a museum and I am staring down at a mummy. Gaunt, stiffened limbs, wrapped in the folds of the bedding. A bald, shrivelled skull. A face that is old and wrinkled and brown and dry. No bitumen seals the lips, so it cannot be a mummy; it must be a man. A very old man, sleeping in a canopy bed, sleeping the sleep of the aged which is like death. His chest neither rises nor falls. His tongue is limp, in his open mouth. I can hear nothing but the faint clattering of the little silver skeleton.

There are deep pools of shadow covering the old man's eyes. I bend forward, peering into them. Surely there will be a ripple; the stone of my gaze must inevitably plumb those depths.

No ripple. No movement.

"Now."

The Voice is not speaking to me. It is talking to my hands.

They know what to do.

It's so simple, and there's nothing to fear. Besides, the Voice will leave me if I obey. Then I can run away, then I can sleep, then I can go back into the darkness where there is neither Voice nor dreams nor memory of pain.

I have to sleep. It's the only sure way. The only sure way to banish silver skeletons and yawning corridors and mummies grinning up into endless darkness—

"Now."

Besides, *I* won't be doing it. Only my hands. My restless, moving hands.

"Find a pillow."

There is a pillow under the old man's head. There *was* a pillow.

Now it is above his head, over his face. My hands hold it there, until the eyes and the open mouth are blotted out. My hands press a whiteness into the darkness.

No sound. No movement. My hands press and press and my wrists ache, but the Voice wants to be sure, very sure.

A century later, I turn away and pick up the black case from the table. The moonlight is dimming and the darkness increases.

All at once the Voice is gone. There is only that insane jangling, that damnable clicking from the obscene little grotesque on the table.

My hands put a stop to the mummy-vision. I can end *this* torment, too.

I grasp the silver figure and hurl it to the floor. Let my feet put a stop to the skeleton-spectre. It's good to feel it crunch and splinter beneath my heel. See, *I* can dance too, now!

There, it's done. And I'm alone in the dark, at last. I must grope my way out of the room, ever so slowly. I must creep down the stairs, out of the house, back through the strangeness of the silent streets. But the Voice is gone and I shall sleep once more . . . untormented sleep.

I turn at the doorway for a last look. Blur of moonlight, swirl of shadows. And in the center of the room, the broken jumbled heap of tiny silver bones . . .

Somebody was poking me in the ribs. I opened my eyes.

Then I knew it was all right because I was in bed, in my own apartment, with the sunlight streaming through the blinds. I was back in the world of morning, and bacon-and-eggs, and Roxie.

Roxie was doing the poking, of course. Her slim arm extended from beneath the covers of the twin bed next to mine, as she jabbed the pointed, painted nail of her index finger against my pajamas.

I was wearing pajamas! How could that be? Had I undressed again and —?

A quick glance to my right showed my clothing hung neatly over the back the way Roxie always hung it for me. My jacket wasn't there. It would be in the closet. Roxie put it on a hanger before we went to bed.

Yes. Of course. It *had* to be that way.

"Wake up. What's the matter?"

Husky voice. I could remember the way she used it when she sang. No control, but the fire came through.

"What's wrong with you, Steve? Another nightmare?"

"Nightmare?"

"You've been tossing and turning and groaning like a—I don't know what." She laughed. "I had an awful time waking you up. She must have been pretty."

"That was no lady, that was something I ate." I sat up and grinned. It wasn't hard to do.

Roxie was something to grin at—something to whistle at, too. I never could understand what she saw in me, but there was no doubt about what I saw in her.

She was a beautiful redhead. Repeat, beautiful. Because there are plenty of redheads *per se* (or *per* henna, for that matter) but very few worthy of that much-abused adjective. Generally speaking, every girl with orange hair or caramel-colored hair is, by courtesy, a redhead. But Roxie's hair, in ordinary light, was really *red.* And there was no accompanying dermatological disorder; no hint of freckles or blotches in the smooth skin.

I reached over and took her in my arms. Not a bad deal. But she kept one eye on the clock. Thirty-six seconds later she said, “Steve—time to get up. You’ll be late.”

I made a face at the clock, but I got up.

“Want me to fix breakfast, honey?” she called, as I started shaving.

“No, don’t bother. I’ll catch something downtown.” I stared at my countenance in the mirror. There were sagging pouches under my eyes. And no wonder. That dream last night had been the worst. Worse than the reality of the night on the desert, the night I was pinned under the car; worse than the weeks that followed.

I really ought to tell Roxie about the dream, but not now. This evening, perhaps, when I came home; then we could talk.

Right now the thing to do was to get down to the office. I had a job to hold, peddling one-minute commercials, twenty-second transcriptions, thirty-second recordings for station-breaks in a world of hard-sell which had nothing to do with last night’s fantasy of dancing death. So it was time to face today’s reality. Out, damned spot-announcement.

I adjusted my tie, picked up my coat, slung it over my arm, kissed Roxie good-bye at the door, and made my exit.

It wasn’t until I was halfway down the stairs that I put my coat on, and I was actually striding through the foyer of the apartment lobby before I became conscious of the unaccustomed bulk inside the jacket.

That’s when I pulled out the long, shallow, black velvet box. It was utterly empty, but utterly real.

And that, of course, is when the nightmare began again. Not in darkness, this time, but in broad daylight—the harsh, acrid, smog-obscured daylight of what, in Los Angeles, passes for reality.

So I didn't go to the office after all. I phoned them from a public cubicle at the corner, and then I boarded a Sunset bus. That's right, a bus; everybody drives in L.A., but I'm the lone exception—have been, ever since that night out on the desert when the car rolled over.

Right now the car was rolling over again, and the little silver skeleton was jangling, and I wanted to run home to Roxie and bury myself in her arms. But you can't go home again, and you can't tell the woman you love that everything is a nightmare and she is only a part of it. You can't seek reality through a mother-substitute.

Dr. Wagram had made that perfectly clear. And that's why I had to go to him now.

I took the bus not far from Angel's Flight and rode past the new County buildings on Hill. All the while I kept a tight grip on that damned black velvet box, because it was a part of reality now. I had to keep my grip on reality until I reached Dr. Wagram. He could explain things to me; there *must* be an explanation, and I wasn't going to start screaming right here in a public bus.

And I forced myself to stare out at Los Angeles, though that didn't reassure me very much. For fantasy *is* reality out here. I gaped at a cordon of men who groped with canes against the searing sunlight as I passed the Braille Institute of America. I blinked while the weird figure in the Space Patrol helmet whizzed past on his police motorcycle. After the bus turned onto Sunset I noted the headquarters of the National Judo Association—and tried to picture what went on inside, with little success. No more than I obtained as I attempted to visualize how the TV dreams were being made in the studios at Sunset and Cahuenga.

If anything, that bus-ride was a continuation of flight and fugue. Why, I wondered, had they bothered to build a Disneyland out here, when every street-corner offered its own vista of escape? I turned my head to the left and saw Schwab's Pharmacy; turned it to the right and saw a Chinese pagoda towering high on the hillside; stared straight ahead at the palms of the Garden of Allah. And here was a midget roaring by, all alone in the enclosed immensity of an outsize imperial. Following him came Irish McCalla—Sheena of the Jungle, one of the tallest women in show business—crouched over the wheel of her tiny copper-colored Volkswagon.

And now I climbed to the west, along the gaudy improbabilities of restaurant row—that Japanese place, and Ciro's, and the Mocambo and Scandia—all utterly unreal here in the sunlight because they were asleep, their painted faces and neon eyes closed against the glare of the day. Like vampires, they came alive only after dark, and maybe that's the secret; maybe these Strip restaurants *are* vampires. Or run for the benefit of vampires who venture forth only at night and who know the password and enter to drink blood from the crimson concealment of crystal goblets. And that would lend a certain sinister significance to the name of the street itself—*Sunset* Boulevard. Could there be any more appropriate designation for a thoroughfare peopled by the Undead?

I thought of some of the waxy, pallid faces I'd glimpsed in the night along this route; thought of the feral, feverish eyes, the too-bright, too-crimson lips pulled back from the white and gleaming teeth; thought of this army awaiting sunset on Sunset; awaiting it in crypts concealed beneath the big houses up there in the canyons. They were waiting now, waiting for the sun to fade before they awoke to walk and drink their fill in a world of mist and moonlight and silver skeletons—

And then I was back in my nightmare again and I thought of the big house on the hillside, and the *other* big house I was searching for now.

I left the bus just in time and started running up the slope of the hill to my left, and it *was* a nightmare, it was just the way it had been in my dream, only this time no Voice prompted me. I knew where I was going, and why, and I didn't stop until I rounded the turn on the private entry-way and came to the stone arch on which was imbedded the neat little bronze plaque reading *Carl Wagram.*

I was sweating and panting, but I didn't slow down.

I started to run along the drive, towards the big doorway, and it was like running through water, or something thicker. *What is thicker than water?*

Blood.

Yes, I was running through blood, because everything was turning red.

My heart was pounding so loudly I could hear it even through the black velvet of the box inside my jacket. And now it seemed as though I could hear other sounds, too. There was the tinkling of tiny silver bones, and a harsh grating noise which seemed to come from far beneath the surface of the earth. It's hollow and empty down there in the crypts, and even the echoes are monstrously magnified when the coffin-lids are opened from within and *they* come crawling out. They had heard my heart and that's why they were coming to get me, because they knew it was pumping blood and I was running through blood and they thirsted. Blood is redder than Roxie's hair, and if you're blind and groping through the redness with a cane you can't escape; even judo won't save you when they wrap their cold arms around you and drag you down into the darkness. I could hear them coming closer and closer, and there was only one way to shut out the sound.

I screamed.

I screamed as I stumbled up the steps, screamed as I beat upon the door, screamed as I fell into Dr. Wagram's waiting arms.

I was still screaming when he put me back in the womb . . .

It was very pleasant in the womb.

I lay there for a long time, coiled up fetally (fatally?—no, there was nothing to be afraid of here) and stark naked. Naked as a newborn babe, naked as an *unborn* babe with only a gossamer covering of lanugo to protect it. But there was no need for protection because this was the womb. It was dark and it was red, and the walls were soft and moist and rubbery and there was a faint and faroff murmuring which soothed and sated me.

I wasn't afraid to think now, wasn't afraid to remember. Although I didn't have too much to recall. Here I was, back in the womb, yet my actual memories didn't extend back past my thirtieth birthday.

My thirtieth birthday—that was the night I'd rolled the car over.

That was the night I'd been driving to Vegas; at least they surmised it had been my destination, for why else would I be racing across the desert in an open convertible with four thousand dollars in cash in the glove-compartment?

That's the amount they found when they found me—or, rather, when *he* found me. For it was Dr. Carl Wagram who, en route from Las Vegas to Los Angeles, pulled his car over to the side of the road and discovered me lying there in the ditch with half the convertible crushing my body. I'd suffered compound fractures of both arms and both legs, my skull had been smashed, and yet I was still able to scream. I must have been screaming for half an hour before he came along.

Even now—even here in the womb, where nothing could harm me—I still didn't care to dwell on what happened. Actually, it all came to me via second-hand report, because when Wagram arrived I slipped down into the merciful oblivion of concussion-induced coma. And there I stayed for the next ten days, while Wagram accompanied me to the nearest town, supervised the work of the doctor who put the casts on me, represented me in the police investigation which followed, and finally—after two surgeons flew out from L.A., examined my head injuries, and pronounced my condition hopeless and my brain-damage so extensive as to render the case inoperable—chartered a private plan and flew me back to his own clinic here. Then *he* operated; Dr. Carl Wagram, who learned his neuro-surgery in war-torn Munich. He put the plates into my skull and my head healed and he grafted the skin and hair grew and there was even a touch of cosmetological miracle involved. By the time my casts were off, my physical recovery was assured.

This left me with but one problem.

Amnesia.

Complete and total amnesia.

Oh, I could comprehend consciousness, and I could even speak after a fashion. But I was unable to remember a single solitary moment of my life before that crash. Existence, for me, began with a scream of pain out there on the desert.

My name?

Stephen Edmundson, according to the driver's license and the registration of the crumpled car.

My address?

A motel, just south of Venice, in the Santa Monica area, which I'd occupied for just three weeks. And it was during those three weeks that I'd obtained both my license and the automobile. I'd paid cash for the latter, and the dealer at the used car lot had a sketchy record and a vague recollection of my coming in and making the transaction. But that was all.

The motel proprietor knew nothing about me except that I'd showed up one afternoon, wearing a nondescript outfit and carrying a single piece of luggage. I had paid him in cash, too, and we had no further dealings except for my weekly settlement of the rent. Apparently I'd gone out, applied for a driver's license, took my tests—that was on record, too—and bought the second-hand convertible. In the meanwhile I'd lived quietly, unobtrusively, made no contacts and no friends.

Dr. Wagram investigated, of course, and so did the police. They didn't have much to go on. When I drove out of the motel I'd acquired new luggage and a complete new wardrobe, down to socks and handkerchiefs and underwear. They were able to find out where I'd bought some of it, but never learned what happened to my old clothing. Obviously, I'd discarded the lot.

So they checked the military authorities, but there was no record of any Stephen Edmundson in Service.

And they checked with the FBI and they put out the usual bulletins and inquiries and tried to match fingerprints—without results.

No family claimed me, no friends stepped forward, no wife or children rushed to identify me. Nor was there any clue as to what I'd been doing holing up in a Venice motel with about seven thousand dollars in cash—or what I'd intended to do with the four thousand I had left when I took off in the general direction of Las Vegas.

I couldn't remember.

My mind couldn't remember and my body couldn't remember. Thirty years had been wiped out.

At first there was even the painful and embarrassing matter of re-learning the simple physiological habit-patterns governing ingestion and elimination. And, after the casts were removed, the business of learning to walk again. I was like a child; more accurately, like a newborn infant.

And that, I suppose, is why Dr. Wagram put me in the womb.

I knew where Wagram picked up his neuropsychiatric techniques, but never did discover where he'd acquired his theories. And even after I'd regained a certain measure of comprehension, a certain vocabulary which extended my frame of reference, I was unable to obtain satisfaction in the matter.

"There's no point in explaining," Wagram told me. The short, plump, balding little man regarded me with enigmatic eyes. "Poor Reich tried to explain about the orgone, and they laughed at him. Moreno's psychodrama techniques haven't won general acceptance. Even Jung has had trouble with his theories about the use of the *mandala.* The innovator, the unorthodox practitioner, had best be silent and let his work speak for itself, in terms of results.

"I will say only this. Out of trauma comes fugue, out of fugue comes the retreat to the womb. Many psychotherapists attempt to block this retreat. As the record attests, few succeed. So I have chosen another course. The patient seeks the safety and comfort of the womb? Very well, I will give it to him. I have built a womb, where he is safe and secure, where he can find rest and reassurance. When the time comes that life stirs anew within him, when he desires to be born again, he and I together will weave an umbilical cord of words—a cord of dependency which will be snapped only when the moment of psychic rebirth arrives.

"The orthodox analyst becomes a father-image. I extend that; I become the mother-image as well. And the womb serves. It has served others amongst my patients; it will serve you."

And it did.

Since that time I've heard it argued, by reputable psychotherapists, that the gaudy little room which Dr. Wagram set up as an artificial womb is a ridiculous concept, a charlatan conceit.

But it worked, for me.

It saved my life. It *gave* me a life, in place of the one I'd lost when memory melted away there in the desert.

There came a time when I could talk again, when I could reason again. And when I could feel emotion.

I never did manage to recover a knowledge of what had gone before. The past was not recaptured and I learned to accept Thomas Wolfe's bitter dictum—you can't go home again. But there were clues.

Wagram may have been an unorthodox practitioner, but he didn't scorn the use of orthodox methodology when the situation indicated its employment. I took batteries of the usual tests, and Wagram probed with depth techniques, free association and all the rest. There were clues in my reactions—indications of learned responses.

Somewhere in my past I'd acquired the equivalent of a college education, plus a variety of motor and manual skills which reflected practical experience. Perhaps I'd been in the Merchant Marine for a while (though again a search of the records gave no confirmation). I'd lived in a colder climate for a time; I was familiar with the operation of a typewriter; I'd enjoyed sports. But all these things were haphazard inferences at best, and they afforded little reassurance.

I couldn't stay in the womb forever. And I couldn't stay at Wagram's clinic forever. The time was coming when I must go back into the world—a world I never knew, and that didn't know me.

I had no family, no friends, no ties of any sort. And I had no money, either. The cash had gone; mainly to the doctors and the officials, and only a surprisingly small sum to Wagram, who refused to even entertain the notion of future indebtedness. In fact, he insisted that I take six hundred dollars with me when I left his place.

"The data afforded me in connection with your case is invaluable," he told me. "I consider the time and effort spent on you to be a sound investment which will bring me ample returns in the future."

Wagram was wonderful. It was he who found me a place to live, pulled strings to get me my first sales job. From that, after a few months of orientation—during which I kept coming back to him for reassurance whenever necessary—I finally stepped into my present position with the transcription agency. And that's where I'd met Roxie.

She'd come in, one day, with an agent, a Ben Clermer. He was one of those hearty, gregarious boys, a tactile tactitian—continually patting you on the back, holding your arm while he talked to you. He pawed every woman he met. It was a compulsion, really. He couldn't help putting his hands on you, digging you in the ribs, going through all the motions employed by a successful pickpocket.

But I don’t like pickpockets, and I didn’t much care for Ben Clermer; particularly when I saw him pawing Roxie.

That’s when I knew I was falling in love with her—when I began to resent his familiarity.

They came in several times; Roxie was hoping to get a job belting out singing commercials. Unfortunately, she didn’t have the voice for it. Those husky, untrained tones just didn’t lend themselves to cooing over the delights of a liquid detergent. And she lacked the disciplined projection necessary for a career as a straight singer. Roxie had, I learned, knocked around the fringes of show biz for a number of years; she’d been a nitery chorine in her teens, done bits in strawhat stock, even had a season as assistant to a carney magician. She’d started out at fifteen as a beautiful redhead, and she ended up, at twenty-three, as a beautiful redhead.

Somewhere along the line there had been a brief, unsuccessful marriage and any number of brief, unsuccessful liaisons. I never asked her about the past—I’d learned to be pretty sensitive myself about this. But I did, eventually, broach the matter of her future.

“I don’t know what Clermer has told you,” I said.

“But I can imagine. He keeps giving you the buildup, doesn’t he? Well, in a way, I don’t blame him. You can catch more flies with honey than you can with vinegar. I believe that’s how it goes.”

“That’s a left-handed compliment if I ever heard one,” Roxie answered.

“I’m a left-handed guy. And right now I’m not interested in feeding you compliments. I want to give you a taste of the truth.”

“Which is—?”

“You can’t sing. You dance well enough for the second line, but in another couple of years you’ll be too old for chorus work. Your speaking-voice is fair, but you’d need a lot of training if you ever hoped to make it in radio or TV as an actress. It would take time and money, and let’s face it—you haven’t too much of either.”

“What are you suggesting, then?” she asked me. “Could be you’re out shilling for some Business College?”

“That’s a possibility,” I said. “But frankly, it hadn’t occurred to me. I was going to give you a bit of more obvious advice. The same advice you get from your mirror every morning.”

“Which is?”

“Get married.”

She made a face. “Clermer’s already married.”

“He’s not the only man in the world.”

“I know. But a girl has to wait until she’s asked.”

“Consider yourself asked, then.”

“Steve—”

“I make a hundred and a quarter a week here, average. Sometimes up to a hundred and fifty, if the commissions go good and the residuals pay off. I don’t have anything much put aside in the bank, but I’ve no obligations either. No family, no other responsibilities. We could find an apartment. You wouldn’t have to just sit around all day, you know—suppose you did want to take a little coaching, learn a bit about acting? There’d be the time and the money for that. And when you’re set, I could see about making some contacts for you. I may not be an agent, but I’ve got a few connections in the field. How does that sound to you?”

“Pretty good, as far as it goes. But there’s one little part you left out. Something about love and—”

“Roxie!” I said that part then, “with my arms around her; said it and meant it and felt it. And I hadn’t stopped saying it and meaning it and feeling it during the past year we’d been together.

Of course I’d asked Dr. Wagram, first. We had a long talk about marriage and its risks—particularly as they might apply to someone in my rather unusual position and circumstances. He hadn’t been too encouraging.

But I didn't need encouragement at the time. I needed Roxie. And for a while she took the place of any continuing therapy: It wasn't for many months that I went back to Dr. Wagram's clinic.

When I went, Roxie wasn't involved. In fact, she didn't even know. She had met Wagram, of course, once or twice during the early months of our marriage. I'd told her a bit about my past—or lack of one, rather—and of what Wagram had done for me. She hadn't pried or probed, merely accepted my story as she accepted me. And as I accepted her. For my own part, I never spoke to her of her earlier years. Even though she could remember them, I sensed that there was much unhappiness in that area, and I avoided it; just as I avoided my own earliest memories of lying under that car and screaming my mind away into the echoing night.

The trouble was, I couldn't 26 avoid such recurrent recall completely, not even in Roxie's arms. And so the time came when I went back to Wagram—and even to the womb.

I did a little reading about amnesia, and what I learned bothered me. "There must be something I'm afraid to face, something pretty awful," I told him. "Surely by this time I should have a gradual return of memory. Partial recollection ought to be triggered in, at least. Couldn't you try some more word-association techniques? And what about hypnoanalysis, narcohypnosis, or—"

Wagram waved my suggestions aside. He was never a violent man, always a quiet one, but his mere casualness carried weight.

"I've not found it necessary to discuss my other work here at the clinic, Steve," he told me. "The work which supports all of my research, all of my independent investigations, my staff. You met Dr. Bittner, of course, and Dr. Corelli. But did you know that I have four more internists on the payroll, and three fulltime nurses? Do you realize that at no time are there less than a dozen patients here, plus the others that I see regularly by appointment?

"Well, it's true. This is a big house, Steve. Big, and soundproofed. You've never been on the soundproofed side, have you? And I've no intention of taking you there now. You wouldn't want to meet the screaming people."

"Screaming people?"

Wagram shrugged. "Not a very flattering description, but a most accurate one. You see, that is the chief source of my livelihood here—the screaming people. The so-called incurables, the hopelessly psychotic. I've specialized in their care since I came here to the Coast after the war. I've deliberately taken on the cases which were given up as hopeless; the men and women whose only remaining alternatives are confinement in a public or a private institution for life. To be utterly blunt, they are given a choice including a private institution like this only if they or their families have a great deal of money. I need a great deal of money in order to advance my own therapeutic techniques, and I've had no compunctions about obtaining it from them. Because, in return, I've been able to stop the screaming."

"You've cured the incurables?"

Dr. Wagram shrugged again. "Remember what the doctors decided in your case? You were to die. But neurosurgery—"

"Yes," I admitted. "Neurosurgery. You saved me. But with physical techniques, here in your own operating-room. What can you do for the psychotics?"

"I can do what all the others do," Wagram answered. "I can give them what you're asking me to give you, now. Free association, depth-analysis, narcohypnotic sessions. But these people are beyond the scope of such treatment. Their only hope lies in drastic therapy—new techniques. I have evolved many. The womb, here, is one. Another is my sadomasochistic ampitheatre, where acts of violent aggression can be carried out upon the persons of lifelike, even partially animated mannikins. Sexual repressions can be similarly discharged—but I've no intention of giving a lecture.

“It is enough for me to say that in most instances, something even more extreme is required.

“Here, let me put it this way. I will simplify, even oversimplify. The source of aberration lies in the past. The past lies in the memory-banks. Eliminate the memory-banks and you eliminate the source of aberration. There is no trauma, no guilt, no compulsion, when you remove the past; when you excise it surgically, completely.

“The brain has often been compared to a sponge, and so it is. Squeeze this gray sponge, squeeze it dry of all unpleasant memories of the past, and it can be filled again.

“I’ve learned how to drain the memories, using my own surgical techniques—call it a combination of lobotomy, topectomy and advanced shock-therapy, exercised with sufficient skill to avoid permanent damage to the tissue. There will be papers published some day, when my findings are sufficiently comprehensive, and I assure you that your own case will be much more than a mere footnote. Meanwhile, the work goes on.”

I remember my reaction to Wagram’s words. “So that’s it,” I said. “You actually induce amnesia, deliberately and artificially erase all memory-patterns.”

“Not in your case,” he told me. “It wasn’t necessary, any more than it was necessary during the war when I first began to study and specialize in mnemonic disorders. But I *have* learned how to duplicate general as well as retrograde amnesia without risk of amentia or physical lesion. And that’s what I’ve done for my screaming people.

“In effect, I reduce them to the prenatal stage, and put them back in the womb. Then, very slowly, with the help of the staff working under my direction and with my prescribed techniques—I allow them to be born again. To become infants, little children; to learn once more how to walk, and feed themselves, and control bodily functions. I teach them to talk, to think, guide them through childhood and adolescence to full maturity. All this, of course, with a careful avoidance of traumatic incident; and naturally, in a comparatively short time. The autonomous nervous system responds quickly, relearning and readapting previous patterns of behavior. In some cases a year or two is necessary for complete reeducation; in others, I've seen miracles accomplished in eight or ten months."

"But don't you get zombies, robots?"

"Not when the process is accompanied by selective memory-restoration. When these people are ready for it, I begin the process of reorientation; that is to say, I feed them data based on their actual past life. With the help of family and friends I can quickly and effectively recreate the sense of continuity based on a factual awareness of previous existence. But without the stress and tensions dramatized by Freud in his concept of Id and Ego and Super-Ego. I give them back their past without fear and guilt, without the screams."

"You couldn't give me back mine."

"No, for I didn't induce the condition, merely corrected the concussion. But it doesn't matter, really, does it? Not as long as you're satisfied with the present."

I agreed with him then, and let the matter drop. And whenever I had problems—daily tension, nightly dreams—I went back to. Wagram and talked it out. When Roxie started taking lessons and private coaching, when she began getting a few-walk-on or one-line bits in TV shows, when I started branching out at the transcription agency, I kept Wagram informed. Somehow our relationship was never on a social plane, but Wagram remained an important part of my existence. He was, in a way, my only link with the mysterious past; and I suppose I kept going there, from time to time, with the hope that sooner or later he could guide me back and help me to fully establish my identity. Always, of course, when I brought the matter up directly, he repeated his dictum. "The past doesn't matter as long as you're satisfied with the present."

And always I'd been able to reconcile myself to this statement. Always, until now.

Until now, when I was writhing and screaming in the womb, remembering last night. After a time I was able to talk rationally about it and he made me go over it again and again and asked many pertinent questions.

"It's beginning to sound a bit like last week's episode," he told me, when at last I emerged from the red chamber and donned my clothes once again. "Remember, you came to me with the story of your dream? Something about firing a rifle on a target-range covered with snow? I told you then what must be happening. Your buried memories, the suppressed content, attempt to break through to the conscious level in symbolic form. All that is necessary is to realize this. Of course, if one likes, one can examine these symbols and arrive at an interpretation. For example, in this dream of yours last night, there's the skeleton, the smothering attempt, the—"

"But last night was different!" I exclaimed. "It *wasn't* a dream! Look, here's the black velvet case, it was in my jacket-pocket this morning."

"Couldn't it have been there last night as well?" Dr. Wagram leaned back in his chair and stared at me across the desk. "Are you sure it isn't your wife's property?"

"I don't recall seeing her with such a case," I told him. "Besides, you're forgetting the most important thing. That Voice."

"I haven't forgotten, but at the moment this doesn't concern me. What concerns me is what *you* have forgotten. Frankly, Steve, there must be another explanation as to how you came into possession of this object. There's something you don't want to remember. A limited retrograde amnesic condition has been established; a purposeful occlusion that—"

"Please, don't throw me off with labels. I've got to find out what this is all about. Can't you see it's driving me crazy?"

"I don't like that word, Steve."

"I don't like it, either. I don't like to go to bed and hear strange commands, and have nightmares that seem real. A little more of this and I'll end up like your screaming people."

Wagram leaned forward, pursing his lips. “Steve, I’ll be frank. You may not be too far wrong. I still feel I did an efficient job on you, surgically, but now I’m not so sure I did what was necessary psychically. Perhaps that’s the next step. Maybe I ought to erase the past entirely—erase the dreams, erase the tension, give you a whole fresh start.”

“You mean, to operate again? The way you do on these rich psychos of yours?”

“An operation, as you call it, would be unnecessary. I have certain shock-therapy techniques that would work quickly and easily.”

“To make me forget all this?” I stood up. “But then I’d forget Roxie—”

“You could learn again. The others do.”

“No.”

“I’m not asking for a decision now. Don’t try to make one. Think about it. Discuss it with your wife. Come to think of it, there’s no reason why she should be excluded; this is as much her problem now as it is yours. Perhaps you ought to have confided in her fully before—I might have been mistaken in urging you to keep the whole truth from her. Why don’t we arrange to get together, the three of us, some day next week, and go over the entire matter? I won’t try to deceive you, Steve; this dream of yours disturbs me because of its latent symbolic content.”

“It disturbs me because I still don’t think it was a dream.”

I stood up, brushing past his desk. My arm swung out, dislodging the folded copy of the afternoon newspaper. I stooped, picked it up. My eyes scanned the headlines, halted at a routine little paragraph at the bottom of the front page.

“What are you reading?” Wagram asked.

“Here,” I said, extending the paper and moving towards the door. “You read it. Maybe you’ll find it interesting.”

He took the paper from my hand, but I didn’t wait. I walked out of there, then started to run. Somehow I couldn’t face what would happen when he read what I had just read—the little paragraph about the death, last night, of James P. Hexler, retired industrialist and art-collector, who had been robbed of a fortune in uncut emeralds and smothered with a pillow in his own bed at 100 Azure Drive . . .

Police. I had to go to the police.

I knew that, but this isn't what made me run all the way down to Sunset Strip.

Sooner or later I'd go to them or they'd come to me. Right now, I must see Roxie first. I must see her and tell her what had happened. Roxie would know how to help.

Suddenly I realized the truth. Roxie was more important to me than Dr. Wagram. He had failed me, just now; he hadn't been able to comprehend the facts and so he hadn't been able to help. Roxie had never been given a chance to help. I owed her that. And I owed myself that, too.

Because I couldn't conceive of how or why I'd kill a perfect stranger. And I had to know, before the police stepped in.

So I hailed a cab in front of the Bank of America and gave him the apartment address. And I sat forward on the edge of the seat as we hit the Freeway, hit the afternoon tangle of traffic, veered off to the south, skidded down into the smog once more. That damned black velvet box was still in my jacket—the empty box. Where were the emeralds? Yes, and where was the Voice? For that matter, where was 100 Azure Drive? Surely nowhere near my apartment; but I had *walked* there last night. Walked there and stolen and killed.

I had no answers. Wagram had no answers. Maybe Roxie had some answers. Roxie could save me—

We pulled up before the apartment and I was out of the cab before it ground to a stop, pushing a bill into the driver's hand and brushing aside the change. Then I was running up the stairs, fumbling in my pocket for the key.

The key—where was it? I searched in my trousers, my jacket. Had I forgotten to take my key this morning? Well, no matter now. If Roxie was home, she'd let me in.

Roxie was home. The door was slightly ajar. I pushed it open, then halted, just in time to avoid stumbling over her overnight bag. It rested right in the doorway. And next to it, on the floor, was her purse.

"Roxie!" I murmured.

There was a faint sound from the bedroom beyond. I crossed the room in three strides.

She was on the bed and he was bending over her, his hands coiled in her long red hair. He had wound her hair about her throat and now he was pulling the ends tight, strangling her in a scarlet noose. Her face was mottled and purple.

His face I couldn't see, didn't wait to see. I jumped him from behind, and pulled him off. And then I tore the heavy bed-lamp from its socket and I smashed his skull, smashed and battered at the top of his head until he slumped to the floor and I could stare down into his unconscious face.

At first I didn't recognize it—hadn't expected to recognize it, of course. And then, beneath the pallor of that contorted countenance a familiar expression emerged. The man had aged, his hair was graying, there was no pan-makeup on the face. But I could still identify it.

"Bucky Dugan," I murmured.

Bucky Dugan. Yes, I remembered him now. He used to be on the network, M.C. of one of those quiz shows, until the scandals broke last year. Then he'd disappeared.

Things began to click into place now. Click-click-click, a tinkling sound, like the rattle of little silver bones jangling in the night-wind.

I stooped and searched his pockets, knowing what I'd find. My key, of course. And the rough objects the size of robins' eggs. They were grimy and encrusted, but as I turned them the light caught a hint of green flame.

Roxie lay back on the bed, breathing stertorously. But she still breathed and that was all I needed to know. I could call the police, now. They'd send an ambulance over, take care of her.

I made the call hastily, and hung up when they asked my name.

It would have been fine if I could have stayed with her until they arrived, but there wasn't time. And it wasn't safe; not with the unconscious man on the floor and that other man—the dead man—discovered out there in the big house on Azure Drive.

So I left, hastily, running down the street until I found another cab. Then I made the driver wait while I located my address-book and found the name I sought.

I gave him a number out on the Strip. Funny that I should be retracing my route again. But then it was all very funny, all very coincidental—until one stopped to think, stopped to realize that there was no coincidence involved at all.

This time we drove back through dusk, and the lights began to blaze up—the enchanted lights of an enchanted city. The wonderful lights of a world of magic, blazing forth from all of those wonderful, magic clip-joints and gay bars and mortuaries which make up the romantic spectacle of Hollywood by night. The vampires would be abroad, now. The bloodsuckers. And there was one bloodsucker in particular whom I was seeking.

We came to the building; one of those two-story layouts divided up into small cubicles where little men spend their days barking into their telephones, where the air is filled with stale cigar-smoke and the endless babble of *darling, sweetheart, lover-boy, let's get together for lunch, let's make a deal, let's sign quick before they change their minds.*

I didn't know if I'd find him there this late, or if I'd have to seek him out at the Vince Street Derby, or Barney's Beanery, or even Tail o' The Cock. But I was past caring. If I had to track him all over town I'd catch up with him eventually. And when I did, I knew what I was going to do.

As it turned out, he *was* in his office, and alone. So I merely had to walk in, close the door behind me, march over to the desk, reach down, and grab him by the throat. I squeezed hard, but not too hard. That was the only difficult part, really—remembering that I mustn't kill him. Not yet, anyway. And then I stared down into his crumpled face and said, "All right, Clermer, let's have the straight story. Who paid you to bring Roxie to me in the first place? Who paid you, and how much?"

He talked, then.

It was all bluff and bluster at first, and I had to slap him around a bit before he realized that I meant business. Once he made a break for his desk-drawer, but he never got his hand on the gun. In a way that was all to the good, because I took the gun myself. And after that, everything was much easier.

Only it wasn't easy to hear what he had to tell me. It wasn't easy to hear the truth, even though I expected and anticipated most of what he had to say.

Nothing was easy until I came to leave. Until I marched out of there and started walking north, into the canyon, with the gun cocked and ready in my pocket.

Nothing was easy until I came to Wagram's place.

The night was deeper here in the canyon. The private driveway held a private darkness, and there were no lights in the big house beyond.

The screaming people were asleep, and I had no desire to wake them. Let them slumber in their wombs, their tombs, their dooms. Let them rest, let them rot in the lair of the womb-faker, the tomb-breaker, the doom-maker. *Dr. Carl Wagram.* I read his name etched in bronze. I saw his name, etched in blood, emblazoned on a bleeding brain.

The door was locked. I didn't care. I knew other ways of entry. Case-entry. Window-entry. Breaking and entering.

There was no Voice to guide me here, but I didn't need one now. I knew how to walk in the dark, how to stalk in the dark, how to simulate the silence of a shadow flitting down the long hall on the soundproofed side of the building.

The soundproofed side—that's where the screaming people were. I could detect the dim light issuing from beneath the door on my left.

I wasn't afraid. I had Clermer's gun. I edged up to the door, turned the knob slowly. The door opened.

The wide room was bathed in twilight from recessed, indirect fixtures set in the walls. And it was lined with low cribs that looked like beds, yet bore a mocking resemblance to still another place of slumber. *Eternal slumber. As* I gazed down into the cold countenances of the occupants, the resemblance heightened.

These were not beds. They were coffins. And they contained corpses.

There were no screaming people here; the mouths were closed in thin-lipped lines, the faces were slack, the eyes glazed. I saw a dozen coffinlike cubicles; ten were occupied. I glanced at the faces through a tangle of apparatus overhead; then recognized the mundane instruments and installations used in ordinary Intravenous feeding.

They weren't really dead, but merely sleeping. Or in a coma, rather—for my presence did not awaken them. I gazed into their frozen features, then froze myself. Two faces I recognized, two I knew. "Bittner!" I murmured. "Corelli!"

Yes, Dr. Bittner. And Dr. Corelli. Wagram's own assistants. He'd said they helped him with the screaming people, and yet they were lying here with the others. And the others did not scream.

I was the one who wanted to scream, but I held the gun and I held my purpose and I held my course. I moved towards the door at the far side of the room. Wagram's private quarters must be beyond.

Yes, there was light flooding forth from under this door, too. I approached the panel slowly, cautiously. Gently, I eased the door ajar.

Now I could see into the room ahead. Wagram's private study, as I'd suspected. And I could see the back of his head over the top of the big armchair, see the front of his head as he swivelled and turned, see the look in his eyes as he recognized me, see the slackness of his mouth as he goggled at the gun in my hand.

"That's right," I said, softly. "Don't try to get up. In fact, I wouldn't advise you to attempt to move at all."

"Steve—"

"I know it's a surprise. You were expecting Bucky Dugan, weren't you?"

"I—"

"Let me do the talking. There are a few things I'd like to get straight before I call the police." He started to say something, but I waved him into silence. The gun was much better than a magic wand; I could perform some really amazing transformations with that gun. And he knew it, because he slumped back in his chair and listened.

"I've never cared for the usual denouement," I said, softly. "You know the bit—where the murderer holds a gun on the detective and blurts out a complete explanation of his crimes, just before the cops break in and rescue his intended victims. Fortunately, the situation is reversed now. So let me tell it my way. All I want from you is confirmation or correction."

"Steve, you're not well, you need help—"

"I've *had* your kind of help," I told him. "All I ever want of it And at the time, I was grateful. Grateful that you came along, opportunely, to rescue me and save my life. Now I wonder if I wouldn't have been better off if I'd died out there on the desert. At least I wouldn't have served as your guinea-pig.

"Because that's what I was, wasn't I? You experimented on me, using my genuine amnesia as a base on which to superimpose an artificial personality-pattern. I was the first, wasn't I?"

I waited, waving the gun, until he nodded reluctantly.

"That's what I thought. Once you saw how easily it was possible to control an amnesic, you applied similar techniques with your so-called screaming people. The hopeless cases, whom only wealth saved from permanent public institutionalization; people whose families wanted to avoid publicity and who were willing to consent to anything which might seemingly restore the sanity of their loved ones.

"You had sent me back into the world, and you were able to send them back, when and if you so desired. My memory was lost in the accident; their memories you erased with shock-treatments. Is that the story?"

"Yes." Wagram sighed the word.

I raised the gun. "That's the story," I said, "but not the truth. I'm no neurologist, but I do know that the actual source of memory-patterns has never been definitely located in the human brain. You can't deliberately 'erase' memory, as you claim, without irreparable damage to actual cellular tissue and structure. Many external physical agents can bring about temporary amnesia, partial or complete—but unless there's widespread permanent deterioration, memory returns. You can't do what you claim to have done, physiologically. So your erasure must have been accomplished *'psychologically,* instead. In my case, and in the case of all the poor victims of your 'advanced' therapy, you seized upon a temporary lapse in orientation and recall and made it permanent. And there's just one way in which you or anyone else could do this—through suggestion, through hypnosis. And you installed those permanent memory-blocs yourself; did so deliberately."

"All right," Wagram said. "I'll admit that. But there was a reason, I've already explained it to you. By suppressing the memories, I could suppress the sources of psychosis and prevent any recurrence of aberration. That was the theory, the basis of my techniques—"

"Perhaps it was, originally. But then you found that your hypnotherapy, administered to stunned and literally infantile personalities, gave you complete and utter control over your patients. You could actually order their present and future existences as you willed. And the temptation was too great, wasn’t it? You began to think about ways of using that power. Of what it would be like to send supposedly cured patients back into the world who were actually under your eternal command. You could install a series of hypnotic controls, insure just the reactions you desired. Oh, it wasn’t quite that simple, I realize that; it wasn’t just a matter of sitting at some sort of psychic switchboard and pressing buttons at will, or being able to hold all the tangled strings and making the puppets dance. You needed other help, and you got it.”

“Clermer told you this?” Wagram murmured.

“He told me enough so that I can guess the rest. I know about last night, for example. You were planning to take a big step forward, weren’t you? If I’d succeeded as you intended, then you’d set up other similar tasks for the rest of your screaming people. You thought you’d found a way of committing the so-called perfect crime.

“Somehow you learned of Hexler’s emeralds. Perhaps through some relative who might have been a patient of yours. You made it your business to gain access to his home, to ‘case the joint’ and familiarize yourself with the physical layout and with his personal habits. Then you sent me there, to kill him and to steal the stones. But something went wrong.

“It took you a while to figure out what had happened. Today, when I showed up here at noon, you realized what must have occurred. So while you kept me occupied and we talked, you got the key to my apartment. While I was in that womb of yours, you gave the key to Bucky Dugan. He was one of your patients, one of your screaming people—had been, ever since he cracked up after the quiz-show mess. You went into that charming little morgue of yours, where you keep your wonderful cures in hypnotic trance, and you fed Bucky Dugan full of subliminal suggestion, then sent him out to kill. And again, something went wrong, because I showed up in time to forestall him. She isn’t dead, Wagram.”

He stood up then. His eyes never left the muzzle of the gun, but he stood up anyway. "The police—she'll talk—"

"It doesn't matter. I'm going to talk, too."

Wagram shook his head. "No. You're wrong. You won't talk." He took a step forward. "You won't talk, and you won't shoot me, either. Because you can't, you know." My finger tightened on the trigger. "I wouldn't risk it if I were you," I muttered.

"There's no risk involved." He was just a grotesque, bald-headed little fat man and there was nothing imposing, nothing menacing, about his appearance.

But all at once I wasn't *seeing* him any more. I was *hearing* him. I was listening to his voice, as it changed—as it became *the* Voice.

"Yes. You were right, Steve. I do use hypnotic controls. I have used them to suppress your latent memories. I have used them to install commands. And you obeyed. Remember last night, Steve? You obeyed me then. Just as you obey me now. Because you *must* obey. You know that, don't you? You must always obey. Unless you listen to me, you'll go back. Back to the pain, forever. Do you understand? Back to the pain, *forever.* I can do that, you know. I can send you there forever—send you to the time when you were crushed under the car, screaming your life away. You don't want to Scream again, do you, Steve? You don't want to scream always and always, the way you feel like screaming now . . . it's more than anyone can bear, isn't it, the agony inside your skull . . . you're lying under the car, you can't move, you can't possibly move or get away from the pain . . . it's crushing you, Steve, you've got to make it stop . . ."

And it *was* crushing me, and I couldn't see Wagram any more. I couldn't see the room, because it was dark here on the desert and I was trapped, trapped under two tons of steel, and the pain was all around me and I wanted to scream, had to scream.

"Don't," said the Voice. "There's another way. The only way. Just hold out your hand. There, hold it out. Give me the gun, Steve. You don't need the gun, do you? That's right . . . just give me the gun. It's the gun that is hurting you. Once you get rid of it you won't feel the pain. There will be no more pain. Just darkness . . . darkness and peace. You will rest then. Rest and forget. Forget that any of this ever happened. It was just a bad dream. A bad dream. Give me the gun—"

And I was out there in the darkness on the desert, but a million miles away was the end of my hand, and I was holding it out to him and he was taking the gun and I could feel the pain flowing down my arm (how slowly the pain flows when it has a million miles to go) and into the gun that he was taking and in a moment I would be free and the pain would be gone and the Voice would be gone and there would be nothing but the rapture of release.

The Voice told me that, I believed the Voice, I obeyed the Voice, and then—the Voice stopped.

The Voice stopped, and I opened my eyes.

I was back in Wagram's study and I was staring at him wondering what had happened to the Voice.

Wagram stood there, the gun dangling between his fingers. He let it fall and raised his hand to his throat, fumbling at the shiny object which quivered there in the space between his wide collar and his pudgy chin.

The light glittered on the length of the vibrating knife-blade. It glittered on the redness which gathered and gushed forth from the spot where the tip had penetrated his veined neck.

He took a half-step forward and opened his mouth, but no Voice came forth—only a thin trickle of pinkish foam. He stared at the blade of the scalpel lodged in his throat, then fell and lay silent. Silent and forever still.

I turned. Roxie stood in the doorway.

"Just in time," she whispered. "I must have come to right after you left. I knew you'd head straight for here, so I followed, before the police arrived. I found the scalpel out there, in the other room, where those creatures are sleeping. And I heard you and Wagram talking, heard what he told you there at the last. Oh, Steve, I'm so glad I got here before he—"

She started forward but I ignored her. I stooped and picked up the gun. "I'm not glad," I said, softly. "I'm sorry. Very sorry. You should have kept running, Roxie. Even without the emeralds, you should have kept running while you had the chance."

"Steve—"

"No, don't come any closer." I had the gun now, held it steadily. "You see, there's just one thing wrong with your reasoning. I didn't head straight for here after I left the apartment. I made a stop first, out on the Strip. I saw your friend Clermer."

Drained white, the pallor of her face was indescribably lovely when framed by that long red hair.

"Or should I say Wagram's friend Clermer?" I continued. "He must have been Wagram's friend, first. Because it was Wagram who came to him, originally, and asked him to introduce you to me."

"No, that's not true! I don't know what Clermer told you, but he lied!"

I shook my head. "I'm willing to believe him," I answered. "Because it all fits."

My voice softened. "I think I understand, Roxie. I can see how it was. You were just one of those good-looking women who never quite managed to make the grade. The breaks hadn't come your way, and you were getting just a little panicky about the future. Maybe you'd have to choose between marrying some bartender or taking the B-girl route. Then Wagram came along with his proposition. Clermer was to introduce you to me, you'd make your play, we'd get married. That would give Wagram what he needed to continue his experiments—a go-between, a liaison agent, someone who could help him to keep control. In return, he'd cut you in on his future profits. Because he told you his plans, didn't he, Roxie? He told you that he intended to use me as a sort of zombie, in robbery and murder. And you agreed."

“But it didn’t work out that way,” Roxie murmured. “I loved you, Steve.”

“Yes. You loved me, and you loved living in a crummy little apartment and taking-cheap bit parts when you could get them. But all the while you loved money more. And Wagram kept building me up, waiting for the right proposition to come along. When he planned this Hexler affair he thought he had it in the bag. Only that’s when you got smart.”

Roxie closed her eyes. “No, Steve, no. Clermer didn’t tell you this.”

“Of course, he didn’t, not this part. I had to figure it out for myself. But it’s perfectly obvious, isn’t it? There were a couple of things even Wagram didn’t know about your past. That you worked a season or two with a carney, for example. Long enough to learn how to throw knives—as Wagram found out, just now. More important, my guess is that you probably got acquainted with some mentalist; well enough acquainted so that you understood the scope of Wagram’s plans for me and realized they might work.

“It was a simple enough idea. Wagram planted the entire pattern of post-hypnotic suggestion with me when I visited him last week and arranged for you to give me a prearranged signal while I slept which would set the whole series of commands in motion as a sort of dream in which a Voice directed me.

“But even Wagram wasn’t fool enough to believe that a dazed somnambulist could get away with a detailed crime. *You* had to get there first, didn’t you? Last night, when you were sure I was asleep, *you* went to Hexler’s. That’s why the window was already open, that’s why the lock on the window-seat had already been forced, that’s why the emeralds were already stolen. And that’s why Hexler was already dead when I arrived. *You* strangled him with his pillow. I merely repeated the gesture with a corpse.”

“That’s insane—”

“But it just might have worked, mightn’t it? You came back, then gave the prearranged signal which activated Wagram’s pattern of suggestion over me. So that I’d retrace your footsteps, leave telltale fingerprints, retain a memory which would later convince me that I’d been guilty of the crime. The rest of it I can figure out, too. Wagram expected me to come running to him today, with the story. And he’d be very sympathetic, but finally he’d agree to let me go to the police. That’s when you’d step in to testify about my inexplicable absence. Everything would come out then; everything except the present whereabouts of the emeralds—which you were already to have concealed, and turn over to Wagram once I was safely incarcerated and the heat was off. It was a doubly-perfect crime, wasn’t it, Roxie?

“Only you wanted to make it triply-perfect. By crossing up Wagram, taking the emeralds yourself, and making a run for it. Mexico, I suppose.

“But when I came to Wagram, something I said or did seemed to have aroused his suspicions. Maybe you were supposed to have phoned him, and didn’t. Anyway, he figured things out. And he stole my key, gave it to Dugan, sent Dugan to kill you. It was all right if I discovered your body—that would merely implicate me further, when Wagram informed the police he had Hexler’s killer. Maybe I was to be accused of your death, too. In any event, Wagram would get rid of me, of you, and of any suspicion of complicity.

“Except, of course, that I arrived before Dugan finished the job. And went to Clermer. And came here.” I shook my head. “Why didn’t you keep on running, Roxie? Why did you come back?”

She stared into my eyes. “To save your life, Steve. Wagram had the gun. In another minute he’d have killed you.”

“I know.”

“Maybe it’s true, Steve, maybe everything you said is true. And maybe there were other things to come. What would you say if I told you that Carl Wagram confided in me? What if I told you that he was in love with me himself, that he offered me a full share in his future? If this experimental venture succeeded, he wasn't going to stop there. He had plans for his patients, Steve, big plans. Don't forget, some of them were wealthy and important, and all of them had influential connections. He could send them back to their homes, control them through his post-hypnotic suggestions and pseudomemories and plant observers at their sides, too. He'd recruit his own staff of nurses and attendants for the job.

"And it wasn't murder and robbery he had in mind—there were bigger things. Some of these people of his had access to estates, trust-funds, controlling interests in banks, insurance companies. There'd be ways of making millions, in the end, without risk or bloodshed involved.

"I could have shared that, Steve. But instead, when I came here tonight and picked up that scalpel, I killed him. And saved you."

"Because you knew it was too late, then. If he killed me there'd be an investigation and both he and you would eventually be implicated. So you got rid of him instead, hoping that I'd take pity on you and let you save your own neck."

"I—"

"Don't lie to me, Roxie. Not now."

She couldn't meet my gaze any more. And the flush rose to cover the pallor.

"All right, Steve. It's true. I thought maybe you'd let me go."

I sighed and put the gun in my pocket.

"You're a smart girl, Roxie."

"Ohh—then you mean—?"

I turned away and faced the desk, staring down at the phone. "I'll give you ten minutes. Just ten minutes. Then I'll have to make the call."

She didn't say anything and I didn't look at her, but I knew that she'd opened the door and backed out of the room, retracing her steps, running down between the coffin-like rows where the screaming people slept like vampires in their native earth.

And I stood there in the soundproofed silence of the room and my heart beat a requiem and the watch on my wrist brought me ten minutes closer to my own death.

Then I called the police.

It didn’t take them long to come—perhaps five minutes more, so that it was just fifteen minutes in all since Roxie had departed.

Only she hadn’t departed, and fifteen minutes was quite long enough.

I should have thought about that a little more.

I should have thought about what might have happened when Dr. Carl Wagram died; Dr. Carl Wagram, whose personal control over the psychotic psyches of his patients plunged them into trance, so that they slept in the room beyond. I should have wondered if, perhaps, that control might end when Wagram’s own life ended.

And I should have remembered that the rooms were completely and utterly soundproof . . .

But the police came, and they chose to arrive by the entrance on this side of the house, and by the time I told a portion of my story and opened the door through which Roxie had made her escape, it was too late.

I could only stare into the room beyond and listen to the screaming people—the screaming people who had awakened when Wagram died, awakened in all their ravening madness, and waited there when Roxie had retreated into their midst.

I could only stare at what was still in their midst, there on the floor—what had once been Roxie and was now only a tom and tattered mass over which the screaming people fought and clawed and bit and tore.

And the sound was deafening, so that the captain of detectives had to shout at me as I pushed him away and entered the room.

“Don’t, man!” he cried. “Where do you think you’re going? What’s the matter with you?”

There was only one answer left to me now, of course, and I gave it to him.

I opened my mouth.

And began to scream—

THE END

The Hungry Eye

Wouldn't you think a beat joint was the last place to find an ancient alien horror? But through the smoke, the gin and jazz, terror heralded the unutterable shining of . . .

THERE'S an old Chicago saying which covers it—if you stand on the corner of State and Madison Street long enough, you'll see everyone you know in the world pass by. A seeming exaggeration, but that's what they say.

I'd been in Chicago for quite a while now, but I'd never put the matter to a test, and I had no intention of trying it today. As far as that goes, I wasn't even standing on the corner; I was halfway down the block, making for the subway entrance, but that's when I saw him. Just a flash of the profile, with the broken nose unmistakably outlined against a store-window—yet even after five years it was enough for instantaneous recognition. One doesn't forget the face of an only brother, though heaven knows I'd tried during the years apart.

For a moment I was tempted to go on without speaking. But there was something about the way he hurried along, head bent, which triggered a response. Before I knew it, the words were out of my mouth.

"George," I called. "George, it's me."

I could swear to the look of panic on his face, and it wasn't that he was horrified by my grammar, either. He turned, stared, recognized me, and put his hand to his mouth. And then he ran. He ran down State Street like a man possessed.

Of course that isn't the way I described his actions to myself at the time. Nobody uses phrases like "a man possessed" any more. "Possessed" by *what?* There are no demons in the Twentieth Century, we all realize that. There are no demons, no devils, no evil spirits. We live in an enlightened age, in a sane, matter-of-fact world of gas chambers, human incineration plants, wholesale massacres, scientific torture-devices and hydrogen bombs. But everything has a perfectly logical explanation, and no man's cruelty or inhumanity to his fellows is based on demoniac possession. There is no place in this modern world for ogres or bogey-men. We are well aware that we deal with nothing more alarming than sadists, psychopaths, paranoiacs, schizophrenics, manic-depressives, necrophiles, zooerasts, pyromaniacs and other deviates and border-line neurotics whose combined total is probably less than one-third of the entire population.

So my brother George, whatever his problem, was obviously not "possessed." He was just, in popular parlance, a weirdo. And if he ran off that way it was because he was merely sick, sick, sick.

"Sick, sick, sick." For a moment I thought of following him, but the press of the crowd was too great. Besides, why *should* I bother? I hadn't seen the man for over five years, and when he'd left then I'd been glad to be rid of him. It was obvious, whatever his present problem might be, that he didn't want to see me now. I was surprised to run across him in Chicago—we'd parted in Boston. Chances were, in a city area of four million, that I wouldn't encounter him again; if he wanted to seek me out, he could do so easily enough. He'd find my name in the papers, in the little ads on the amusement page. Let him come down to the Club and watch my act.

No sense in worrying about him and his troubles, not right now. Better to think about that "sick, sick, sick" business. Maybe I ought to work up some more bits for the act.

I was doing a stand-up routine at the Club every night. The Club was on North Clark, just a sucker-trap like hundreds of other joints all over the country, and my routine was like hundreds of other acts. The Mort Sahl scene, dig? Every week you read *The Reporter* magazine and then you make with the memorized ad-libs about the squares and all like that there. You've got Nixon jokes and Sputnik jokes and General Motors jokes and progressive jazz jokes and Zsa Zsa Gabor jokes and G.I. jokes and Eisenhower golf jokes and Togetherness jokes and sports-car jokes and addict jokes and television jokes and if the crowd is hip you even have a few Zen jokes. Just the old off-Beatnik routine, but that's what they're going for this season. And most of all, of course, you have sick jokes. The time is long gone when Will Rogers could get up and milk laughs by talking about visiting Congress. Today every comic talks about visiting his psychiatrist.

Actually, I'd never visited a headshrinker, but maybe should have. Because I hated this routine of mine. And I hated the audience—the oh-so-sophisticated, oh-so-selfconscious, self-assured, nervous, nonconformist in-group of enlightened, superior free souls enchained in the irresponsible necessity of satisfying their own selfish desires. Said desires being to drink, dope and debauch while avoiding any consequences of their actions; in a word, the same desires which might conceivably be found in a gang of truck-drivers. The only difference being in favor of the truck-drivers; they at least gratified them without rationalizations. They didn't expect anyone to write books proclaiming that their antisocial activities were really the spiritual expression of an inner sensitivity searching for the truth. If a truck-driver got drunk and picked up a girl and sponged off her and then deserted her on the road, that was that. But a Beatnik, or the thousands upon thousands of pseudo-Beatniks who hid behind beards these days, insisted that he was On *the* Road. And he liked to do his drinking and make his pickups and get his kicks, man, in crummy joints featuring comics such as myself—who flattered his stunted ego by making funnies about squares.

Oh, I hated it, and no mistake. But it was a living. I got two bills a week out of it, and besides now I had Lucy.

We'd been married a little over four months now, and lived in an apartment not far from the Club. Yes, it was an apartment, an old-fashioned apartment with Kroehler furniture and there were Audobon print reproductions on the walls. It wasn't a "pad" where you sat on the floor and played bongos, ducking your head whenever you stood up so that you wouldn't be brained by the sharp edges of one of those damned mobiles.

Lucy was no Beatnik type, and that's why I loved her. She had been taking postgrad work at U. of C. when I met her, and she had a job in a law office in the Loop now; when she came home she cooked dinner in an apron instead of hopping around opening a can of beans while wearing a dirty leotard.

Right now I was anxious to get home to her. Riding the subway I gradually forgot about brother George. He was one of *them,* one of the Beatniks. Of course, he'd been born a few years too early to call himself a member of the Beat Generation. He wasn't lucky enough to be around when the self-justification labels were passed out In *his* time, people like George were identified, quite simply, as selfish and untrustworthy. If they lied and stole and cheated and ran up bad debts and goofed off on jobs and beat it out of town when some girl's parents raised a stink, they acquired bad reputations. And if you loved them, you tried to help them. You did your best to pull them out of jams and you did your best to talk a little sense into them, and then when nothing seemed to work, you heaved a sigh of mingled regret and relief when they finally took off for good.

I had. And I heaved another sigh now and turned my thoughts to Lucy. She'd be home now, waiting for me.

And she was. She came into my arms, there at the door, and I forgot everything; the stupid moralizing and self-righteousness and the worries beneath them. There was only this warmth and this richness and this response. Until she stepped back and handed me the newspaper.

"Here, darling," she said. "Read this."

This was a single-column story on the front page, and my eyes moved over it hastily. It was Lucy's habit to call my attention to items in the paper which might inspire a gag or two for my act, but I wasn't getting any particular sparks from this one.

A murder had been committed this morning in the basement of the old Harvey residence, out on the South Side. The late Chandler Harvey was a well-to-do collector of oriental art who had willed his acquisitions to the Chicago Art Institute. Upon being notified of the settlement of the estate, the Institute had dispatched two guards to catalogue and pack the collection under the supervision of orientologist Wilmer Shotwell. While waiting for Shotwell's arrival, the two men had entered the basement of the Harvey home where the collection was assembled. It was here, at approximately 12:15 P.M. that Shotwell discovered the body of one of them, Raymond Brice, 41, of 2319 Sunview Avenue. He had apparently been killed by a blow on the head from a heavy stone figurine. Police were seeking the other guard, George Larson, 33, of—

My brother, George.

Lucy stared at me. "Then I was right," she murmured.

"Yes."

"Of course, that's not such an unusual name. It could be another George Larson."

I sighed. "It could be. But it isn't."

"What makes you so certain?"

"Because I saw him, less than an hour ago. He was downtown, on State Street, and when I recognized him and called out, he ran."

"Oh, Dave, what are you going to do?"

I shrugged. “What *can* I do? I don’t know where he is now—certainly not at that fleabag hotel address listed in the paper. Maybe he got out of town. I hope so.”

“In spite of all he did to you?” I’d told Lucy about George, of course.

“Yes. That’s gone and forgotten. Besides, I’m not sure he’s guilty.”

“But the paper says—”

“I know what the paper says, and what the police say. They find a body, George is gone, and they jump to conclusions. But George is my brother. I know him pretty well. He’s a bum and a moocher, and I wouldn’t trust him with a wallet or a woman. But I don’t buy him as a murderer—he hasn’t got it in him to kill. There’s no violence in George.”

“How do you know?” Lucy put her hands on my shoulders. “How do you know what it takes to make a killer?”

“I don’t really. It’s just that I can’t imagine George pulling a stunt like that.”

“You’re really fond of him, aren’t you, in spite of everything?”

I crumpled the newspaper. “Damn it, if he’d only stopped when I called him, let me help him!”

“You’re upset,” Lucy said. “Maybe you ought to call the Club, tell them you can’t appear tonight.”

I shook my head. “What good would that do? Until we get more facts, we might as well forget about it. We aren’t listed in the phone-book yet so there’s no chance of George seeking us out here. And I doubt if the police or anyone else knows that he’s my brother. So you go ahead to your evening class, and I’ll go to the Club. To coin an expression, the show must go on.”

And it went on, at the Club, around ten. I was standing there holding the floor-mike when I saw George come in. He was still wearing the same suit he'd worn downtown during the afternoon, but his collar was open and his tie was gone. His hair hung over his forehead. He was drunk.

No, it wasn't the open collar and fallen hair bit that made me so certain. It was the way he slumped down at a deuce-table in the far corner and started talking to this pink panda.

That's right; he carried a pink panda, the kind you win at an amusement park. The kind *you* win, perhaps, but not I. I wouldn't be caught dead at an amusement park. And maybe that had been George's idea. He didn't want to be caught, dead or alive, and what better way to disappear than in the midst of a crowd? But he was still nervous, and he started to drink, and when he got enough liquor under his belt he realized he needed help. So he remembered seeing my name in the Club ads and he came here, to me.

And I came to him, as soon as I'd cut the show. Came to the corner where he sat mumbling to this damned pink panda. An idiotic thing to do—or was it? He looked like just another drunk and perhaps it was a clever move, using a pink panda for protective coloration. One thing I had to give George; drunk or sober, he was always clever, I could vouch for that.

Only he didn't look clever now. He looked scared.

"Davie-boy! It's good to see you."

I sat down. "You didn't think so this afternoon, on State Street."

"I was in a hurry."

"I know. I read the papers."

"But you don't understand—"

"Damned right I don't."

"I've got to talk to you, alone. Dave, there's something I've got to tell you, I'm going to need your help. I've never been in a spot like this before."

"You're talking about the guard?"

He glanced around, then bent forward. "No, it isn't that. The guard's not important. There's something else. Something worse. Something—"

"Hold it," I said. "We can't talk here, and I won't be able to leave now. I cut the last show at twelve; after that the band takes over for the late crowd. Stick around until then and we'll go somewhere together."

"But I can't wait that long." He grabbed my arm. "Dave, I mustn't be alone. Don't you see? Unless I talk to somebody pretty soon I'll flip—"

"Talk to your friend here," I said, poking my finger at the pink panda. "Have another drink. But wait here. I'll get back as soon as possible."

His eyes went blank, as blank as the brown buttons in the panda's head. And he stared at the ridiculous doll, stared at it long after I left the table. He hadn't lied; he was ready to flip. To snap his cap, climb the walls, or whatever phrase you choose to disguise the grim reality. There are so many charming, picturesque little phrases dealing with that subject today—because there are so many charming, picturesque cases of acute psychosis.

But then I was up in front of the mike again, talking about psychosis myself, talking about Flipville and stopping in at your friendly neighborhood analyst, three couches—no waiting. And the crowd loved it. They loved it because they could all pretend they were laughing at the other fellow; *they* were all right. Sure they were all right—the chronic lushes, the double-gaited ones and the lizzies and the barroom brawlers and the girls on tea and the boys on horse. They were intellectuals, they were iconoclasts, they were artists. In order to be truly creative, in order to dig Life the most, you had to get your kicks.

Like Sarah, for example.

I saw her out of the corner of my eye, coming in from the bar. Big Sarah, in the toreador pants and the sweatshirt; both garments bulging in all the right places. That was the story of Sarah's life—she was always bulging in the right places. She wore dangling copper earrings to match the color of her hair, and I had no doubt but that she'd made them herself. Because Sarah was an artist and she enjoyed making things. Including ugly scenes and handsome men. Sometimes, when she was a little high, even the men could be ugly. I knew quite a bit about Sarah, because she was one of the regulars at the Club. She was one of those who laughed the loudest at all the sick jokes, but I happened to know she'd spent some time on the psychiatrist's couch herself—and quit only when she couldn't persuade him to join her there.

But Sarah was an artist and she had an artist's eye. Right now it might be a trifle bloodshot, but it seemed to have spotted that pink panda. Because as I watched, she wandered over to my brother George and started talking. By the time I'd finished the routine I was on, she'd sat down next to him. During the course of my next bit the waitress came over with drinks. Sarah was giving him the big treatment now.

Well, maybe it was all for the best. At least she'd keep George company until I could join him again. She knew how to laugh it up, and that was just what he needed now to last out the evening. But I wished both of them were a bit more sober. The waitress was already back at the table with more drinks—doubles, this time.

I wanted to trim my act, but the crowd was with me and off to one side I could see Paul, the booker. He was grinning and I grinned back. I needed Paul. He was the guy who could pull me out of this trap—get me a better spot, maybe even downtown. So this was no time to beg off. I had to keep going.

But Sarah and George kept going, too. I watched the waitress approach again. They were toasting the panda, now. Sarah held it on her lap. She said something to George and laughed.

Then the crowd was laughing, and I went into my finale. The TV commercial business, and the horror movie jazz. That's the big sophisticated boffola, you know—kidding the horror movies. Only to make it really sharp, you throw in a few references to *The Lonely Crowd* and *Lolita*.

I bowed off.

I bowed off and started for George's table—or what had been George's table. But George was gone now. He, and Sarah and the pink panda had vanished. It didn't take a correspondence-course in detective work to figure out where they must be. Sarah had a studio down the street. Just the place for a *ménage à trois*. Maybe she was queer for pandas.

If I could have left then, I'd have made it my business to find out. But I couldn't leave; there was another show to do in just forty minutes. The last show. After that I could go. George would still be there, if Sarah had her way. And she generally did. George was in no shape to offer much resistance.

Perhaps it was for the best; at least he'd be out of public scrutiny. But I wasn't, not until the final show was over. And in order to prepare for it, I needed a drink.

I stepped over to the bar, looking around for Paul. The booker was standing down at the end, near the door, talking to a tall, gray-haired man who had just come in. I nodded at him and he nodded back. Then he turned to his companion and said something. I thought he'd break away, and was surprised to see that the gray-haired man moved in my direction instead. He paused behind me.

"Mr. Larson—"

"Yes?"

"I am Dr. Shotwell."

Shotwell. Where had I heard that name before? Then I remembered—the newspaper story. Wilmer Shotwell, the orientologist in charge of the Harvey collection. My brother and the other guard had been waiting for him when the murder occurred. So he must know George. And he'd found me. Did he realize George had been here? Had Paul noticed me talking to him?

I'd have to gamble on that. In a case like this, attack is usually the best defense. So I turned to Shotwell and nodded.

"Yes, I read your name in the news story tonight. Have you found my brother yet?"

"I was hoping you'd give me an answer to the same question, Mr. Larson."

"My brother and I have been out of touch with one another for the past five years. It wasn't until today that I knew he was in Chicago." I paused, but not long enough for him to ask any questions. Instead, I shot one at him. "How did you know he was my brother?"

"I did some checking. It seems he gave your name as a reference when he applied for the position of temporary guard at the Institute several months ago."

If Shotwell had checked, that meant the police would check too. Maybe it was just as well that George had gone off with Sarah. I'd avoid a lot of explanations this way.

"He never informed me about this," I said. "I'm afraid I can't help you."

"That isn't the reason I'm here," Dr. Shotwell answered. "I wanted to warn you."

"About George? He isn't dangerous. In fact, no matter what the newspapers say, I can't believe he killed that man."

"I can. And it's quite likely that he will kill again."

"But why? Just because he may have had a fight with his fellow-guard and struck him in a moment of rage—"

Dr. Shotwell shook his head. "That's what the police believe. I know they are wrong, but I made no effort to correct them. It's better that they aren't aware of the facts."

"Which are—?"

"Mr. Larson, I knew the late Chandler Harvey very well. He was an insatiable collector of *objets d' art* and *curiosa.* He bought at auctions, he bought from dealers, he purchased through agents, he spent a fortune acquiring rarities. As an orientologist I helped catalogue only a small part of his treasure-trove; for that's what it was, what it came to represent in his own mind. Collecting can become a form of monomania, you know, particularly in the case of a wealthy man who reaches the point where he doesn't even know what he has obtained any more. This was certainly true in Harvey's situation. He literally did not know the extent of his own possessions. Pottery, sculptures, *bas-reliefs,* jewels from all over the world and out of it."

"Out of it?"

Shotwell leaned forward. "Do you know anything about meteorites?"

"A little."

"Well, I needn't lecture. Let's just say that I have reason to believe that there are many strange, as yet unclassified phenomena concerning these particles from outer space. There are australites, for example, which seem to fall recurrently in certain areas of the Earth's surface, almost as though they were sent. Or if they were seeking—"

"Seeking? You talk as if they were alive."

"Is it so impossible to believe that there are other life forms besides the animal and the vegetable in the universe? Is mineral life so alien a concept? What *is* the difference between life and existence? What laws govern its patterns? How can we recognize life when we see it? There are living creatures whose skeletons grow outside their bodies, there is the mystery of reincarnation and metamorphosis leading from larva to butterfly. What causes the regeneration of a fingernail, how do you explain the growth of a single hair on your own body, what is the common denominator of a blade of grass and a Giant Redwood?" Shotwell paused and smiled self-consciously. "But I said I wouldn't deliver a lecture, didn't I? And I won't. All I must tell you is that I think amongst Chandler Harvey's collection of rarities was an unusual meteorite—an ancient, jewellike object which, in a certain sense, is alive. And I believe your brother must have found it today."

"Are you trying to tell me he mistook it for a jewel, was caught trying to steal it by the other guard, and killed him?"

"Perhaps."

"Then why come to me? Why not inform the police?"

"Because they wouldn't believe me. And they wouldn't take the proper precautions with the meteorite if they recovered it."

"Precautions?"

Shotwell sighed. “Have you heard about precious stones which seemed to carry a curse, to bring death and violence to their owners or whoever came in prolonged contact with them? Have you any knowledge of temple idols before whose jewelled eyes a bloody sacrifice is made? Have you ever wondered why certain infamous mass-murderers carried so-called ‘lucky stones’ upon their persons?”

I stared at him. “You mean to say you believe this meteorite possesses some intelligence which influences men to kill? But why?”

“Some living entities subsist on air, some on sunlight, some on flesh. Some require water—and some need blood.” Shotwell grimaced. “I don’t know very much, really. I have been able to trace this particular fragment back a mere fifty years. At that time it appeared in St. Petersburg, as the property of one Gregorovitch, the Little Gray Brother. History knows him as Rasputin. The meteorite had already been artificially faceted and polished then, but it may not have been when he acquired it, during his years of exile in Siberia. There have been great recurrent meteor showers in that area, you know. It is said that Rasputin used various jewels as hypnotic agents—”

I stood up. “Really, Dr. Shotwell, I don’t see what you have to gain by all this.”

“It’s not a question of gain. I have only one purpose in seeing you. If your brother seeks you out, try and secure that meteorite. Don’t turn it over to the authorities; notify me immediately. Here is my card.”

Somebody tapped me on the shoulder. It was Lew Kirby, the leader of the combo at the Club. “Two minutes ‘til showtime, Pops,” he said. I nodded at him.

“Got to run along now,” I told Shotwell. “You heard the man.”

“Yes, but if anything happens—”

“Okay. I’ll get in touch with you.” And I moved away. The old brushoff. That’s the only way to handle the weirdos, and Shotwell was a weirdo from way back. I only wished he’d stayed there. Him and his living meteorites and out-of-this-world life forms.

The trouble was, he hadn't stayed there, in his own little private world of fantasy. And I couldn't brush off what he'd told me. Even though he went right out, and I went right on to do the act, the whole crazy business kept nagging at me.

What was he *really* trying to say? That strange entities may exist in outer space and occasionally succeed in reaching Earth—that they need blood for nourishment and influence men to provide it—that such an entity became a part of the Harvey collection—that my brother stumbled across it today and killed a guard and stole it.

None of this made any sense. Besides, George hadn't really shed any blood; he'd conked that other guard on the head with a statue and run off. More likely this thing was a jewel, he'd seen it and gotten a case of sticky fingers, the guard saw him put the snatch on it and interfered, and George panicked and let him have it with the stone figurine. In which case perhaps Shotwell was spinning this wild yarn deliberately. He knew I'd never repeat such nonsense to anyone else, but at the same time he was giving me the message. George had a jewel, and Shotwell probably wanted it for himself. I was supposed to play stooge; get the thing away from George and give it to Shotwell. No wonder he hadn't hollered copper—if the jewel was valuable, but no one else knew it had been in the collection, he could latch onto it for keeps.

That made a lot more sense to me. That's the kind of thing which *could* happen in my little world—the world of the Club, where everybody is out for just two things; loot and kicks. And there are no mysteries, only the psychoses and neuroses which arise when people are thwarted in their search for loot and kicks.

Well, right now they were spending their loot at the little tables so that I'd stand up there and provide them with a few vicarious kicks. So I did. I gave them my monologue, gave them the hip line of you-and-I-know-all-the-answers patter, with every gag reassuring them by inference that they were smart and sure and superior in a world of stupid conformists.

Oh, it was all so simple! The squares looked down on the Beatniks and the Beatniks looked down on the squares, and I looked down on them all because I was really kidding them both, I had the real message. By keeping one foot in either world I was free of both. And there were no *other* worlds.

That was the only trouble. There were no *other* worlds, no worlds where this business of George and the meteorite fitted in. He *had* killed somebody, but why? George wasn't a murderer. He was my brother and he was in a jam, stolen jewel or no. Right now he was drunk, and shacked up with the whackiest nympho I'd ever seen. And pretty soon the cops would do what Shotwell had done; they'd find me, and start asking questions. If George happened to wander back while they were around, or when I had some law tailing me, it would be curtains.

And it *was* curtains, finally, for the act. I bowed off and begged off, and headed out of the Club. I knew where I was going now, where I had to go. Sarah's studio was just down the street. I'd find George, give him the word. Ask him to set me straight on this whole mess. If he was still looped, I'd see that he sobered up, got in shape to travel. But above all, I must get him out of there, get him away from that man-eating female whose artistic efforts extended to canvas and mattress alike. And if she gave me any trouble—

But she didn't give me any trouble.

The downstairs hallway was open, as it always was, day or night. And the light, as usual, was burned out in the stairwell. On the fourth landing I could see the dim illumination seeping from under the studio door. That door was never locked, either.

I suppose I could have knocked. It would have been the gentlemanly thing to do, under the circumstances. Right now, though, the circumstances were such as to make me forget I was a gentleman.

The circumstances were that it was past midnight, and the hallway was dark, and I was afraid when I came creeping up those stairs. I was afraid because here in the dark it was so hard to remember about fantasies and hallucinations and affects and all the learned labels by which we seek to explain and expunge our secret dreads. And it was so easy to accept the atavistic memory and menace of myth—of alien life burrowing upwards from inner Earth or swooping down from outer stars, of life that feeds upon us, fastens upon us to eat and drink with myriad, monstrous mouths—

So I didn't knock. I walked right into the studio. And Sarah didn't give me any trouble. She just stood there in front of the big easel and continued painting.

She had been painting for some little time now, apparently, and I doubt if she even realized I was in the room. I doubt if she realized anyone was in the room. Perhaps she might *never* realize the presence of another person again. No, it wasn't that she was drunk and it wasn't that she was in a state of shock. Her movements were the rigid and jerky ones of incipient catatonia (how easily the phrase comes, and how little it really *explains!)* and her eyes were fixed in glassy concentration upon the canvas.

She was painting the pink panda, of course, but she hadn't bothered to use it as a direct model. Her panda was huge, a hastily blocked-in figure covering the entire area of her canvas, and its outlines were grotesquely distorted. It wasn't cubism or surrealism or anything abstract. She'd merely added and altered, so that the panda was now a misshapen monster with a single, blazing eye; a grotesque mutant spawned of a teddy-bear and a Cyclops. And it was no longer a *pink* panda. It was red, and it was ropy, and thick globs of pigment had already congealed in dark masses.

Occasionally she bent forward to the sofa beside her to dip her brushes, and I glanced at her palette.

Her palette was the body of my brother George, who lay sprawled out on the couch, his limp arms still hugging the pink panda to his breast. From breast to crotch he'd been ripped completely open by her palette-knife, and she was dipping her brush in his wound, dipping her brush in blood and entrails as she painted her monster from life. From *his* life—

I could have screamed. I could have screamed, and struck her, and run for help. Except that now I knew there was no help. George was dead, and she was possessed. Not psychotic, but possessed. Driven, compelled to do what she must do; shocked beyond sanity by killing him, the subconscious rationalization merged with catharsis and she returned to her art. She was atoning for the crime by painting a symbolic portrait of the criminal.

So I made no outcry, because I realized now that what Shotwell had hinted must be true. *There are more things in Heaven and Earth*—

There are more things coming *to Earth,* out of Heaven or some inconceivable alien hell. George had stumbled across one of them, and killed. He brought it to her, and she killed in turn. And it would go on, and on, unless I acted in time.

I acted. I walked over to the corpse and took the pink panda in my arms. She didn't hear me, didn't see me. She was painting the creature's mouth now. The hungry mouth that gaped beneath the stare of the hungry eye.

I picked up the panda and then I turned and ran out of the studio. The stairs thumped beneath me, and the panda thumped against my chest. It thumped and thumped, I could hear it, feel it throbbing there all the way home. There wasn't far to go. It was quite late, now, and the streets were deserted. Anything can happen in deserted streets at night, you know, even in a great city. A vampire can poke his head out of a manhole. A bloated corpse can rise from the fog-wreathed water of the river. A shower of blazing life can fall from the outer stars—

And a pink panda, a silly pink panda from an amusement park, can sound its hideous heartbeat like a devil's drum.

I could only hope that Lucy wouldn't hear it when I let myself into the apartment. I could only hope that she would be asleep by now, long home from her evening class and too weary to wait up for me. She usually went to bed without waiting. I prayed she had tonight. Then I could call Shotwell and wait for him to arrive. Maybe I could even give him what he wanted without Lucy knowing. It would be best if she didn't know, if she'd never know.

Luck was with me.

Lucy had retired, leaving the light on in the kitchen. She'd eaten a snack before going to bed, and the leftovers of her midnight lunch were still on the table. I pushed the plate and cup and silverware aside and put the pink panda down.

Now that I wasn't holding it close any longer, I wasn't conscious of the thumping. It was just a toy once more; a foolish, harmless toy. And that, of course, was all it had ever been. There was no malignity about it, no Cyclopean essence. George had won it at the amusement park and carried it along with him as a drunken whim. One ear was a bit battered, and the side of the head was torn—

Torn? It had been *cut.*

George had cut it, and not because of intoxicated impulse. He'd cut it and carried it along with him, and no wonder it thumped, because the meteorite was inside. That's where he'd hidden it away. And he'd carried it to the studio and Sarah was aware of it, and then—

Then, *what?*

Had it happened the way Shotwell said it happened? Had the mere presence of the stone been enough to influence a susceptible, already unbalanced psyche?

I didn't know. I didn't care. The one thing now was to get out Shotwell's card, call him, let him come over and take the damned thing away. The damned thing that had already been linked with two deaths today alone, and God knows how many more through the years. *If* Shotwell wasn't as crazy as the rest. As crazy as Sarah was, as crazy as George had been.

But George *wasn't* crazy. And I wasn't, either. There are no monsters. A meteorite is just a piece of metal. It can be stuffed into the soft skull of a fuzzy pink panda, and it can be drawn out very easily.

You can feel it in your hand, because it throbs. It isn't cold and it isn't warm—it just *pulses.* It pulses there in your open palm and you stare down at it.

And it stares back.

It stares back, because it's an eye.

What had Shotwell said—that sometime, somewhere, somebody had faceted and polished it until it resembled a jewel? He had been wrong. It hadn't been artificially cut at all, and it didn't resemble a jewel. It resembled an eye. It *was* an eye.

You *could* find such an eye in the forehead of an ancient idol. And you could easily imagine it set in the head of a Cyclops. But staring at it now, I didn't have to imagine anything. I didn't have to imagine, because I *saw.*

I gazed into the eye and I saw everything . . .

The Arctic plain was barren of snow with the coming of spring. Stalagmitic cairns dotted the bleak surface; great rock-masses that seemed imbedded in the earth, but which might have fallen from the stars. There was no life here; no life as *we* know it, under that brooding sky.

And then life came. The bearded elders of the tribe advanced across the plain in slow processional, bearing the grease-dipped torches. Before them capered the *angekok,* the shaman. He carried the girl in his arms.

She did not struggle, for she had been drugged and lay limp, nude and insensible. The shaman placed her upon the flat outcropping ledge of a cairn, and the drums thundered all around him. This was the chosen one, the maiden sacrifice of spring. She would lie here, her body bared to the savagery of the sullen sky, until night came. And with the coming of night, the dark brothers would venture forth to feast. The wolves of darkness would come to devour that which was their due, and then seek their lairs for a season. Thus spring would come safely to the wilderness, for the eaters of life would be appeased by this sacrifice.

So spoke the drums. And so spoke the shaman. And then the tribesmen shambled away, and their torches died in the distance. The body on the altar lay lifeless as the black maw of the horizon slowly swallowed the sun.

And then the thunder came again, but not from the drums. The sky shook, and a renewed radiance illumined the firmament. The maiden stirred restlessly, awoke. She sat up, stared about her. Her eyes widened for there, in the shadows beyond the cairn, she saw the skulkers, the waiting ones. The wolves had come. They snarled at the sky and edged closer. The thunder boomed.

Suddenly they turned; turned and ran, howling. And the ruddy radiance cast blood upon their backs, for a red rain descended.

The maiden rose from the ledge and slipped down, shivering. The earth was shaking all around her, and the cairns tilted crazily, bobbing and weaving in the eery light. The light was coming from the sky—*falling* from the sky!

She turned to flee, but the light pursued. And suddenly it coalesced, condensed into a single, concentrated blaze that soared and swept and swooped between the cairns like a single great eye. An eye that pursued her. An eye that wove a web of light about her nakedness, an eye that settled at her feet so that she halted and stooped down and picked it up, only to drop it with a shriek of mingled pain and horror as the heat seared the flesh of her palms.

But still she stared at it, squatted and stared. And as the thunder waned and the light faded and the night came, she continued to stare.

She stared until the eye cooled and she did pick it up and hold it to her breast; an eye that was alive and staring between the two blind eyes of her nipples. And she walked across the barren plain, walked in darkness until she came to the place where her people stayed and slept about their dying fires.

She stared down at the eye and then she picked up the stone knife and she walked among her people and she slew. The knife rose and fell, rose and fell, and they awoke and screamed. But when they saw her eyes, when they saw the third eye she carried, they did not resist, did not attempt escape. She slew until her knife was red to the hilt, until the arm which wielded it was bathed in blood. And then the shaman bowed down before her and the elders worshipped also, for they knew she was the bride of a god. Thereafter it was she who gave in sacrifice and she who wore the eye in an amulet woven to hang between her breasts . . .

In time she died, but the eye lived on. And it moved on. I saw the Tatars come and raid, and the eye moved southward with them on their return march, in the saddlebag of a chieftain. He spent hours staring at it before a battle or a raid, and then he slew and slew . . .

And a Mongol took it from the Tatar, and it found its way to India, and for a time it was indeed the eye of a goddess—Kali, the Dark Mother, whose *phansigars* slew with the silken cord . . .

And a Moslem wrested it from the temple, and a Seljuk adventurer took it from the Moslem, and a soldier of Napoleon found it in the plunder from the field of Aboukir. He returned to Marseilles, and for years thereafter Marseilles was haunted by a mass-murderer who roamed abroad at midnight, slitting throats with a bayonet . . .

The police of the last Louis found it during the Commune, and it passed from hand to hand. A Prussian held it for a time (there were a series of brutal slayings in Prague) and a seaman carried it to London where it fell into the possession of an eccentric gentleman who was suddenly impelled to carry on a bloody private crusade against ladies of the evening . . .

And to Russia it returned again, to Holy Mother Russia and Holy Father Rasputin. Staring into its depths, the monk induced visions, in himself and in others who became his victims . . .

The Bolsheviki looter who found it went berserk. The curio-dealer in St. Petersburg sold it to a Greek merchant and then hung himself. The Greek merchant lost it when he went on trial for murder. Chandler Harvey's agent bought it when the government fell and a corrupt official sold a roomful of art treasures, sight unseen, to the highest bidder. It was never unpacked until this morning, when my brother George found it, misplaced in a carton containing mountings of Coptic coins. And the guard saw him pocket it, and he picked up a figurine standing on the table beside him and he crushed the skull of the guard . . .

And he put it inside the panda at the amusement park and carried it with him. There was a great confusion in the mind of my brother George. He couldn't understand why he had killed. He hadn't *meant* to kill. Sure, he saw this hunk of jewelry and he figured it was valuable, who knows? You could get a few bucks for a thing like this, and nobody'd ever miss it. So he put it in his pocket and when this character, this Ray Brice, spotted him, he got panicky and started swinging. Only that damned thing was lying on the floor, it had dropped out of his pocket, and it kept staring up at him and he stared back and the next thing you know he was lifting the figurine and smashing it down on Ray Brice's head . . .

I *knew* what my brother had thought I knew, because the eye knew. It knew what all of them had thought; the naked virgin, the tallow-faced Tatar, the bearded Mongol, the dark priests of Kali, the Mameluke who died at Aboukir, the fiend who gloated in the night of Whitechapel, the monk who strangled his little white doves in orgies at St. Petersburg.

And I knew what drunken Sarah had thought, what she had sensed when she brought George to her studio. What her unbalanced, undisciplined, uncanny artistic intuition had focussed upon without even the necessity of *seeing*—its presence in the panda was enough to set her off. "Kiss me, George.” And one arm behind his neck, so, and the other arm free, the hand free to grasp the palette-knife and bring it up, and the redness and the gushing and then the shock, the trauma of the deed accomplished and the realization, and the *fugue* into denial of reality and catharsis combined, the blind painting of the murder-beast . . .

That’s what it wanted. That’s why it had come from the stars, come to feed. To feed and to feast. Shotwell was right; there *are* other forms of life, other ways of life. And this entity needed nourishment. Sarah had used a knife to bring blood, but George had used a blunt instrument and others had used the cord, the noose, their bare hands. The instrument did not matter, because blood did not matter. It wasn’t blood the creature wanted, it wasn’t even killing. It fed on something else—on the released emotion of the killer. That’s what it needed, that’s why it sought life in death. *It ate emotion.*

I stared down at it and it stared up at me, and we both knew.

We knew what was right and what was wrong, and the answer lies in *being.* Being and becoming. To be is the only purpose, and to become more the only goal. One becomes more by destroying lesser being and incorporating itself in one’s own essence. One must devour the sensation of others, add it to one’s awareness and capacity. It is a feast without end, life without end.

To seek emotion in sexuality is a snare and a delusion, for one wastes one’s own substance in the attempt; just as one eats himself in attempting to heighten sensation through drugs or drink. So the Beatniks are fools, and their “kicks” merely the convulsive spasms of rigor mortis in a stiffening corpse. And the squares are fools too, because they shun sensation and fear its effects.

And I was doubly a fool and doubly damned because I tried to live so as to make the best of both possible worlds. Not knowing, until now, that there are more than two possible worlds. There are inconceivable worlds beyond worlds beyond the stars, worlds of sensation beyond sensation which I could seek and share.

I'd sensed those worlds when I'd seen what the eye had beheld. Now I knew why some men killed—not because they were fanatics, not because they were sadists, not because they were deranged. They killed because of the hunger which could be sensed and sated, the hunger that never ceased. And while they fed that hunger, they shook the stars. Psychosis, neurosis—meaningless labels, more insane than that which they attempt so inadequately to describe. All words were meaningless. *Dig? Crazy? Kicks? Man? Cool?*

The eye could dig its way into your brain.

The eye was crazy.

The eye was kicks.

Man? *What is man?* You can be greater than man when you share the sensation of a greater being, a greater awareness from a greater world.

Cool. The eye was cool in my hand. It throbbed because it was alive. Alive and staring at me.

Why did it stare?

To tell me these things.

To tell me to help it.

To tell me to help myself.

To *share* with me everything that it was, and could become.

The eye stared up at me. Stared hungrily. That was it. The eye was hungry. It would always be hungry, and I would always be hungry, but if I took it away with me now there would be years of feasting.

And that was the thing to do. The eye and I would go away together. Away from the stupid world of squares and the equally stupid world of Beatniks.

Now I knew how they all must have felt—the famed and feared killers of the past.

And I turned to go. That was my sole intention, merely to go.

I didn’t expect to find Lucy standing there. I could scarcely see her, actually, because the eyes were all around me, the ring of hungry eyes.

I couldn’t really see her any more than I could really see the bread-knife on the table.

All I could see was the eye.

And all I could do was what must be done.

I reached for Lucy.

I reached for the knife.

And I fed the hungry eye—

THE END

Show Biz

If you take this story seriously . . .

FLORIAN AND CARTER STOOD AT THE rail of the yacht, staring out over the harbor. The bay was a bowl of moonlight in which a black dot bobbed.

"Here he comes now," said Florian. "You go below and keep out of sight."

"Sure it wouldn't be safer if I stuck around?" Carter asked. "You know how these crackpots are. I don't like this cloak-and-dagger routine, the way he insisted on coming out alone at night—"

"I'll handle him," Florian said. "Just run along and leave everything to me."

Carter left. Florian watched the rowboat approach, tossed out a line as it heaved to, and waited while its occupant clambered up the rope ladder to the deck.

The newcomer was a squat, gray-haired man, wearing heavy bifocals and carrying a worn leather briefcase.

"Good evening," said Florian. "You're Professor—"

"Please," murmured the visitor. "No names."

Florian shrugged. "As you wish. But we're quite alone, I assure you. I sent the crew ashore for the night, just as you insisted when you phoned to set up this appointment."

“I know all this may seem melodramatic to you,” the professor told him. “But when I’ve explained, you’ll understand the need for absolute secrecy.” He cleared his throat. “I told them at the school that I was taking a leave of absence. Nobody knows I’m here. Nobody must ever know.”

“You have my word,” Florian said. “Now, shall we go into the cabin and get down to business?”

He led the way. The interior of the cabin resembled an executive’s office, complete with intercom, teletype, and a battery of phones on the big steel desk. Florian slid into a seat behind the desk and waved the professor to a leather lounge chair. “Drink?” he offered.

“Thank you, no.” The professor smiled bleakly. “After spending nearly six months trying to set up a meeting with you, I’m impatient to proceed.” He unzipped his briefcase. “It’s an ironic paradox that the head of the largest public-relations organization in the country has no time to see the public. But I assure you this interview will be important—to you, to myself, to the entire nation.”

The professor pulled a bulky manuscript from his briefcase and placed it on the edge of the desk.

“Here it is,” he said.

Florian frowned. “A book?”

“That’s what it started out to be,” the professor answered. “When I sat down to write, three years ago, I intended to produce a text on political science. And then the idea came to me.”

Florian started to reach for the manuscript, but the professor shook his head. “Don’t touch it,” he said. “It isn’t a book now—it’s a bomb.”

“You mean you’ve developed a formula for some secret weapon?”

“In a way. Actually it’s neither new nor secret—but by carrying existing methods to their logical conclusion, I’ve created what might well be called a weapon. Of course my field is political science—”

“And mine is public relations,” Florian told him. “What has all this to do with me?”

The professor leaned forward. “How would you like to run this country?” he asked softly. “How would you like—*to own the world?”*

“Really, now—”

The professor tapped his manuscript with a blunt forefinger. “Here’s the blueprint,” he said. “The perfect combination of political science and applied public relations that will do the job.”

Florian sat back. “I’m afraid I’m not too impressed,” he murmured. “After all, I’ve read a few books myself. The Hidden Persuaders. The Lonely Crowd. It isn’t exactly news to me that voters can be manipulated by advertising and mass psychological techniques. In fact, our organization has been active in political campaigns behind the scenes for some years now. I know a little something about how to sell a candidate as if he were a piece of merchandise.”

The professor nodded. “We’ve come a long way,” he said. “Less than a hundred years ago Abraham Lincoln sat in his room at the home of Judge Wills in a dusty little Pennsylvania town, on the evening before the dedication ceremonies of a soldiers’ cemetery, working with a pencil on the final draft of the Gettysburg Address. Today our candidates and holders of political offices work with a staff of consultants—ghost writers, gag writers, idea men to feed them material; psychologists to mold their personalities into ideal father images for the masses; advertising agencies to devise their slogans and conduct their campaigns with television spot announcements in place of speeches; press secretaries to control or even write their public statements once they take office.”

“I know all that,” Florian said.

“And you probably know, too, that the old-fashioned political campaign is a thing of the past. There’s nothing spontaneous about the rallies or the handshaking tours any more—every movement is planned and rehearsed. Presidential conventions are staged like Broadway shows. TV appearances require the services of a producer, a voice coach, camera and lighting experts, makeup artists, and little men with teleprompters.”

Florian yawned. “So what?” he said. “Everyone knows how candidates are selected nowadays. Take a man with a clean record, a good safe middle-of-the-road attitude, and then package and sell him to the consumer with tested techniques. You can teach him how to smile and how to talk. Hell, that’s been done by public-relations outfits all over the country ever since television came in. And they use everything from soft sell for the liberals to pure corn for the yokels, complete with hillbilly bands and dancing girls.” He lit a cigar. “What you’re trying to tell me is that political science is dead and show biz has taken over. Is that it?”

“That’s what gave me the idea,” the professor said. “When I began to study just these things you’ve mentioned—how the people from the entertainment world have gradually infiltrated politics as advisors, producers, technicians; how they’ve tried to train our politicians and officeholders to behave like actors. And it occurred to me then—why not *use* actors?” Florian sat up. He put his cigar in the ashtray. “What’s that again?”

“I said, *why not use actors?* You said yourself that almost any man who starts with a clean record and a noncommittal attitude can be built into a political figure by means of present-day psychological techniques. The trick is to teach him to speak, to handle himself properly when on public display. So why waste time with tired old men or egotistical prima donnas who can’t cope with their roles? If politics is show business, why not put the right actors into the parts to begin with?”

The professor stood up. He began to pace the floor, and Florian followed him with his eyes.

“Think of the possibilities,” the professor went on tensely. “No more hit-or-miss campaigning. You cast men for public offices just the way you’d cast them for a show. It’s just the matter of building the proper psychological image for any given locality. Prefabricate the right character and select the type of actor who fits the role—the Courageous Leader, the Elder Statesman, the Champion of Minority Groups, the Man from the Prairie, the Fighting D.A., the Boy Wonder.”

Florian's eyes narrowed. "Is this what you've written about?"

The professor nodded. "I told you I had a blueprint," he said. "It's all down in detail—analysis and methodology. You scout the country for likely prospects. Of course it will cost money, and most of the preliminary work will have to be conducted in the utmost secrecy—but then, the big political organizations are used to that. The men who control them would be willing to put up the finances if we could guarantee success. And they'd be willing to wait too. Naturally we couldn't expect to take over the key offices in the nation overnight. We'd be starting from scratch, with unknowns. But the point is, we'd have a tremendous advantage: *our* unknowns would be real actors. They'd look the part, sound as convincing as big-time commercial announcers. We could bring them up the ladder fast. Aldermen, judges, then members of the state legislatures, then on to governorships, the House of Representatives, the Senate, the important appointive offices, the Cabinet, even the Presidency itself—oh, it might take fifteen years before we had a working majority in all the right places, but think of what power we'd wield then! And I tell you, the time is ripe for just such a move. I can feel it coming—it's inevitable! The public is already more than half sold on just this type of candidate, synthetically created. We can give them the real thing and take over the country!"

The professor sank back into his chair. "Well?" he said.

Florian shook his head. "You're crazy. Absolutely stark, staring mad." He gestured at the manuscript. "It that's what you've been writing about, I advise you to burn this."

The professor snatched the bulky sheaf and shoved it into his briefcase. "All right," he muttered. "It you don't see it, I'm sure somebody else will. There are other public-relations outfits, you know. Maybe they're not quite as big or quite as important, but I assure you any one of them could be or will be if they listen to my proposition."

"I take it, then, that you intend to present this idea elsewhere?"

"Naturally. It may take another six months to get a hearing, but I'm willing to spend the time. Because I believe in this idea. I believe that anyone with the vision and enterprise to carry out my methods can rule this nation and eventually rule the world."

Florian sighed. "Nothing I can possibly say would dissuade you? You're sure of that?"

"Absolutely sure."

The professor started to rise—but he never made it. Florian opened a desk drawer, pulled out a small revolver, and shot the professor right through the center of his forehead.

Carter came running in. "Oh, my God!" he muttered. "You did it!"

"Don't panic," said Florian. "We'll put the body in the boat and tow it outside the harbor. Then we'll sink the body with weights and turn the boat adrift. It will look like an accident—if anyone ever finds out. He assured me no one knew he was coming here, so we won't be implicated."

"It's risky," Carter murmured.

"Of course. But there was no choice."

"He knew?"

Florian nodded. "Yes, he'd even written a book about how to do it—figured it pretty accurately too. It was his idea that a public-relations outfit, with well-heeled backing, could turn a gang of professional actors from unknowns into key political figures in just about fifteen years. And he'd hit on most of the methods too. So you see, I had no choice." Florian grimaced and pointed at the revolver. "It was either a matter of using that or of telling him you and I got the same idea and started working on it a few years ago." Florian glanced at his watch. "Which reminds me, there should be a call coming in from Washington any minute now. Maybe I'd better stick around. You can handle the body alone, can't you?"

Carter made a face. "I suppose so. But tell me, why do I always get stuck with the dirty work?"

Florian smiled at him. "That's show biz," he said.

As we started to say, if you take this story seriously, you ought to go out and end it all—before it's too late . . .

The Gloating Place

Susan was so anxious to get to the gloating place that she almost ran down the slope.

"Gloating place," of course, was only her name for it; actually the spot was a small ravine at the far end of the park where she could sit without being noticed or disturbed. As far as she was concerned, it had always been her gloating place and it always would be. And after all, she thought, what's in a name? Since last week the kids at school had started calling her "Susie," and even Lieutenant Palmer called her "Sue." But she was still Susan really. Always was and always would be, particularly when she could manage to hide away all by herself here in the gloating place.

Sometimes Susan had come here to cry. Sometimes she had come here just to sit and think—not think, really, but to sort of dream. That's when the ravine really became a gloating place, because it was there that she could kind of let herself go and imagine the way things would be *if If* she wasn't just that dumpy little Susan Harper, and *if* she didn't have all those awful pimples, and *if* Tom Reynolds would only like her instead of Marjorie and invite her to the prom. Yes, and *if* Mom and Dad were only out of the way (suppose they were both going someplace, on a vacation, say, and the plane crashed, and then it wouldn't even hurt very much; they'd probably never even feel anything) and she had all the insurance money and could do whatever she wanted with nobody to stop her, ever.

Susan didn't think about such things *all* the time but just when she was really down in the dumps and everything was a drag. After all, she had a right to think about *something,* didn't she? Something besides *do this* and *do that,* which was all she ever heard at home or at school; something besides the fact that she really came to the gloating place because she had nowhere else to go. Because she was alone and nobody ever paid any attention to her.

To tell the truth, she had to admit there'd never been anything to actually gloat about—never anything *real,* that is—until last week.

But since then everything had changed. Changed so swiftly that this was her first chance to come here and snatch a moment alone.

She hadn't been alone for a single moment since a week ago Friday when she'd come tearing into the house, screaming about the man in the mask who grabbed her over in the vacant lot behind the old Austin place.

First there was Mom and then there was Dad and then there were the police and this nice, red-haired Lieutenant Palmer. And there was the matron and that Dr. Kleinhaus who examined her—*that* part wasn't so nice, really, and besides, hadn't she explained that the man didn't *really* attack her, because she managed to break away? But the rest of it was all perfect; the way the lieutenant talked to her, so polite and embarrassed, sort of, and the way the reporters came in, and the photographers who took her picture just in time for the Sunday paper.

Oh, it had been a real gasser, and on Monday things were even better. Because all the kids started to make up to her, and even the stuck-up pigs like Marjorie came around with a lot of lovey-dovey talk to get on the good side of her, just so she'd give out with the real lowdown. Of course, their folks had been calling up Mom all weekend long, and *they* wanted to hear all about it too. And Miss Billings excused her from all her English exams for the week, and Mr. Ryder said she was looking pale and if she wanted to be excused and just go to the infirmary and lie down for a while . . .

It had been just about perfect all week long. Mom and Dad treating her so nice, and not even saying a word about homework or dishes or anything like that, and everybody making a fuss over her, and Lieutenant Palmer stopping by just about every evening in a shiny new squad car to report that they hadn't found anything yet but they were still working on it, the whole department. Of course, he kept asking a lot of stupid questions, but they were all about the same thing, so the only thing she had to do was give him the same answers.

Then on Wednesday he'd come for her special, right after school, and he took her and Mom downtown in the squad car, with the siren going all the way, and then she sat in the dark and watched the line-up.

That was the dreamiest-creamiest bit of all—a real line-up, just like on television, with all these horrible-looking creeps walking across the platform and blinking under these terrible bright lights. And all of them just about scared spitless in case she'd holler out and identify them. Some of them were pretty hard characters, too—real apes. You didn't have to be a doctor to figure out that they weren't quite right in the head. So one of them *could* be the kind who'd put on a black mask and a pair of canvas gloves and hide behind the billboards in a vacant lot to wait for some teenage girl to come along.

All she had to do was make up her mind and sing out. Because they had been picked up and booked on suspicion and probably most of them didn't have any alibis for late Friday afternoon anyway. And when it came to a showdown, it would be her word against the word of whoever she picked, and the police were on her side. They'd probably even beat a confession out of one of these apes, make him admit that he'd grabbed her around the neck, made those bruises, torn her dress, and tried to get her down until she kicked him with her knee and tore away and ran. They'd take him out to the vacant lot, to the place she'd showed them where the grass was all trampled down, and make him reenact the crime; show how he'd held her at first so she couldn't even scream. It would be very easy.

But it wouldn't be very smart. Because there was always a chance that the one she picked *did* have an alibi. And there might be a trial and she'd have to testify in court, and some of these defense attorneys were pretty tough cookies themselves, according to television. Besides, what would she really gain? She was getting all the benefits she wanted right now—and not identifying anyone would probably keep up the excitement even longer.

So Susan kept her mouth shut and finally they let her go home. She could hardly wait to see the follow-up story in the Thursday-night paper; she guessed it would be a big one.

The trouble was she hadn't counted on anything else happening, like that big smash-up over on Highway Nine—three cars wrecked and two people killed, with five more in the hospital. That got all the space, and there was just one stinking little paragraph about the line-up, way back on page seven.

To make it worse, one of the cars in the crash had carried a couple of kids from school: George Hicks, who wasn't even scratched, and his sister Martha, who went to the hospital with a broken jaw and a fractured hip. So on Friday everybody wanted to talk about the accident, and they were all hanging around George or going out to buy sympathy cards and get-well greetings for that pig of a Martha. Nobody, but nobody, even bothered to *ask* Susan about the line-up.

Still, Lieutenant Palmer said they'd continue their investigation and there might be a better chance next time. If the worst came to the worst, she *could* take a chance and identify *some* body. After all, she'd been real careful to say that she didn't see the man too clearly there in the twilight and the shadows, and the description she had given was pretty general. With the black mask and the canvas gloves it was hard to tell how a person really looked.

It was hard to tell how a person really looked anyway. Susan stopped gloating long enough to stare at herself. She hadn't brought a mirror, but she didn't need one. There was a little creek running along the bottom of the ravine, and she could walk over to the edge and stare down at her reflection in the brown, muddy water.

In the past, when she'd done so, she hadn't liked what she'd seen. The fat, foreshortened body, the plump, pimply face, the hair the color of the brown, muddy water—that's the way she always looked to herself.

That's the way she'd always looked to herself *before*. But *now* . . .

Now Susan gazed down at the fat, foreshortened body, the plump, pimply face, the hair the color of the brown, muddy water.

She hadn’t changed.

Nothing had changed.

It came to her, and she didn’t want it to come, but it was there and she had to face it, just as she had to face that nasty, runny reflection of herself. She was still the same. And so was everything else. The investigation would die out. The kids were already excited about something new. Mom and Dad would forget the whole thing and go back to nagging at her all over again, like they always had. If they did anything different, it would just be to keep harping away at her about coming home early and staying inside nights. Why, she’d even had to sneak off to come *here* after school!

In the long run she hadn’t gained a thing. Maybe even lost out a little, if they kept tabs on her and wouldn’t let her go out evenings. Not that she ever had anyplace to go.

Susan shook her head. She’d forgotten about it before, when she was gloating, but she wasn’t gloating any more. One of the big reasons, the very biggest reason she had for all this happening, was to get Tom Reynolds to notice her. To get him to talk to her, maybe even take her out, instead of always going with Marjorie.

Well, he hadn’t so much as said one word to her. And the prom was only three weeks away, and this afternoon she’d heard Marjorie talking to Phyllis Lister about her new formal and how she hoped Tom would like it.

Tom would like it, of course. How could he help but like it, even if it was just an old burlap bag, as long as Marjorie was wearing it? Marjorie was tall and slim, except in *those* places, and her hair was like the kind the models have in the home-permanent ads, and she had real white skin, particularly around her shoulders and neck. . . .

It was no use trying to pretend. No matter what *she* did, Tom Reynolds was going to keep on being in love with Marjorie. And he was going to take her to the prom in three weeks, and she’d wear her formal, and probably they’d do all kinds of smooching in the car afterward, and he might even kiss her shoulders and neck. . . .

Why did she keep coming back to Marjorie’s shoulders and neck?

Then Susan remembered about the man in the mask, the man who wore the canvas gloves and tried to grab her around the neck.

Suppose—

No.

But just *suppose*—

Susan's heart began to pound so hard she had to sit down. And then the whole thing came to her, and she kept shaking her head, but it kept right on coming. When she closed her eyes she could even see pictures of it, just the way it *could* happen, if only she planned it right. The way it *would* happen. *The way it was going to happen. . . .*

Susan had to wait a whole week before it did. And then, of course, they came for her again, just as she knew they would, and took her down to headquarters to see Lieutenant Palmer.

She knew that this was going to be the worst part, and the only thing that helped was that she could cry. It would be natural to cry under the circumstances or even to have hysterics. Even a cop, even Lieutenant Palmer, wasn't going to ask too many questions if you were having hysterics all over the place.

So all she actually had to do was say that no, she hadn't seen Marjorie since they left school yesterday, and no, Marjorie had never told her where she was going on Friday night, and no, she'd never seen Marjorie with any strange man. And, of course, she said what Mom had already told the lieutenant—that on Friday night, at the time of the murder, she had been upstairs in her own room playing records and studying her homework.

Lieutenant Palmer didn't ask any more questions. Anyone could see he was just about ready to have hysterics himself. But he did say a couple of things that interested Susan. Like, just before he let Mom take her home, "I guess I owe you an apology, young lady."

"What do you mean?" Susan asked.

"Well, to tell the truth, I was beginning to have a few doubts about your story."

Susan took a deep breath, but she had to ask the question. "You mean, you thought maybe I'd made the whole thing up?"

"No, not that. At least, not exactly. But we ran down so many false leads, and your description was so vague—I had an idea that perhaps you might have, well, exaggerated things just a trifle." Lieutenant Palmer was actually blushing. "You see, we've run into cases like this before, where some kid—girl, that is—may come to us with a story about being molested. And sometimes it turns out that a boy just tried to pick her up, and she got excited, lost her head, you might say, and made a big production out of it. Something like your description of the mask and gloves. That's probably what really started me wondering, you know. It's not exactly commonplace to find an attacker wearing such things."

"But didn't you find one of the gloves? I mean, out in the alley behind the garage, where Marjorie—" Susan started to sob again; it wasn't hard.

Lieutenant Palmer nodded. "Yes, we did. A canvas glove, left hand. Lab is running tests on it right now, but after that we're going to ask you to try and identify it."

"Then you think maybe—maybe it's the same one?" Susan wiped her eyes with her handkerchief and looked at him.

"It's too early to say that. All we know now is that the girl was strangled but not—" Lieutenant Palmer stopped short, and he was blushing again.

Susan decided to sob once more, but not too hard, in case he meant to say anything else.

And he did. "That's the worst feature of a case like this," he said, speaking so softly that it was almost as though he were talking to himself. "The way these things seem to run in cycles. Almost as if one crime brings on another."

"I don't understand."

"Well, do you remember the line-up, Sue?"

That was her, "Sue." She wanted to smile but just nodded. "Yes, I remember."

"There were some pretty offbeat characters we rounded up for you to look at. Apparently none of them was the actual criminal—but almost any one of them *could* have been. I mean, on the basis of their records, the majority of those men are *capable* of committing such a crime. Several of them have psychiatric case histories which show that they're potential murderers. Unfortunately we haven't got the legal machinery to deal with *potential* killers. But we know about them. And we know, from experience, that sometimes a slaying like this stirs them up. Just reading a sensational newspaper account is often enough to set one of them off—get him to the point where he decides to emulate the attacker. It's happened before, in other cities.

"I just hope to God the papers don't play this up too big." Lieutenant Palmer sighed. "But I suppose they will. Anyway, Sue, I want you to promise me one thing—don't talk to the reporters any more than you have to. You follow me?"

"Yes, I follow you. But about the murder, Lieutenant. Don't you have any idea who—"

She never got a chance to finish her question because the chief of police came in and said something about the Sheriff's Department wanting information for the inquest. So Lieutenant Palmer told her that was all and he'd keep in touch with her, and then she and Mom went home.

That was Saturday, and now it was Tuesday and Susan's first and only chance to get away. There *had* been reporters, and then the excitement at school, and she was getting twice the attention she had before. You'd think that they'd pay more attention to Marjorie—except, of course, that Marjorie was dead and she was alive. Yes, that was the big difference, wasn't it? *Marjorie was dead and she was alive.* Even Tom Reynolds had to realize that. They'd even questioned *him,* for a little while, hadn't they? But it was all over, all the bad part, and now perhaps he'd notice her.

Oh, it would take time, and it wasn't just going to *happen.* Susan would have to figure out a way of *making* it happen. But she could do it. She could do anything, she knew that now. Now that Marjorie was dead.

The only thing was, she wanted to be alone. Even at home, in her own room, Mom and Dad kept fussing over her. She had to be careful to watch her voice and her expression and everything else.

So Tuesday afternoon, after school, she sneaked off for the gloating place. There was really something to gloat about now. Only first of all she had to *think.*

She came down the slope of the ravine and sprawled there in the slanting shadows that hid her face, even from herself. That was the best way, if you really wanted to think. To think about whether you'd really done everything *right.* There was the business of finding the old canvas gloves in the trash bin down the alley where somebody had thrown them. That had been smart, not to buy new gloves, in case they could ever check up, but to snoop around on the chance of turning up some old ones. Getting hold of them had been a lucky break. All the rest of it wasn't a matter of luck, though, but of careful planning. Phoning Marjorie to sneak out to go to the show but *not* to tell her folks—that was part of it. Nobody traced calls on a dial phone, and nobody had heard her. Setting up the records was another good bit; Dad was gone and Mom was lying down with a headache in her bedroom on the first floor. Sure, she might have come upstairs unexpectedly after Susan had climbed out of the window and left the long-plays on the phonograph, but that was one of the risks you had to take. And so was getting through the alley without running into anybody. The point is, it had worked out. She never needed to use any alibis—and if she had, she would just have told the almost truth about sneaking off on a date with Marjorie to go to the show. That was bad, but they couldn't hang her for it, could they?

They couldn't hang her for anything now. Because they hadn't really found out a thing. Not about the dirty old gloves, or the way they'd come up around the back of Marjorie's long white neck as she came tiptoeing out into the alley in back of the garage. Not about how the gloves had cut off Marjorie's wind, so she couldn't make a sound, or how the fingers of the gloves had pressed and pressed and squeezed and squeezed until there was no Marjorie any more, just a big, boneless pig doll that was no good to Tom Reynolds or to anybody. *Because it was dead, and Susan was alive.*

Susan was gloating now. She admitted it. And all at once she wondered about it, just for a moment. Wondered because she wasn't really sorry at all, wasn't really afraid. You'd think a person would *be* just a little bit sorry or scared; at least, a *part* of them would be. Unless doing it had changed her somehow.

Had she changed?

Susan knew she wanted to look at her reflection in the water again. Maybe it would tell her something. She stood up, squinting in the late-afternoon twilight. For a moment she hesitated, just standing there and thinking about something Lieutenant Palmer had said. She didn't *want* to think about it, because of what it might mean—but she had to.

It was what he told her, there at the last, about offbeat characters. About some people being *capable* of committing murder because they were crazy. And when they read about such things in the papers it set them off.

Of course, he'd been talking about *men* and about Marjorie's case. But before then there'd been her own case. And *she'd* read about *herself.* Wasn't that what gave her the idea of killing Marjorie in the first place? So couldn't it mean that maybe she was one of those creepy characters, like those awful men? And that the reason she couldn't feel any grief or pity or fear was because she was—

No! She wasn't crazy. She was Susan. She was Susan, alive, and Marjorie was dead. And all she had to do was look at her own reflection in the water to prove it.

Susan looked at her own reflection, and then everything was all right. Her face was just as muddy and brown as ever, but it was *her* face. She hadn't changed. And that meant Lieutenant Palmer was the crazy one, with all his cruddy ideas about how reading about Marjorie’s death could set some other killer off.

Susan smiled down at herself in the water, and then she blinked because the water blurred as a shadow slid across it. The shadow looked like a man’s face, but it was darker at the top. And the face seemed to be right in back of her own. Susan peered at the dark part, then opened her mouth.

She had just enough time to recognize the dark part as a mask but not enough time to scream, because it was then that the canvas gloves closed over her throat.

The Big Kick

Some people total up their assets in a bankbook, but Judy always used a mirror.

Many men had told her she had a beautiful body, but she liked the mirror’s message better. The mirror could tell her the same thing without panting or pawing or slobbering.

The only trouble was, the mirror had no money. It would never give her a lot of nice clothes, a big car, a fancy apartment. At times Judy caught herself wondering if she really wanted these things, but, after all, what else is there in life?

Then she met Mitch and she found out.

Mitch had a bristling black crewcut, heavy eyebrows, and a tuft of beard on his jutting chin. He didn’t have money for clothes or cars or big apartments, but he didn’t make the usual sweating, wheezy advances, either. He merely took her, with casual brutality, and taught her about kicks.

Maybe it was the casual brutality that did it, but suddenly Judy found a reason for living. And she was living with him. Mitch, who wore a sloppy t-shirt and dirty slacks, whose car was a broken-down ‘51 Chevrolet, and whose apartment was a crummy rear-entrance walk-up he referred to as his “pad.”

It was there that Judy found her kicks.

Mitch taught her the whole beatnik bit, including the vocabulary. At first she thought it was rather silly—she couldn’t think of Mitch as a “real cool Daddy-o”—but gradually some of it began to make sense. Like the way

Mitch whispered, at an intimately appropriate moment, “Baby, I dig you the most.”

Everything moved with Mitch. Pretty soon she was making the scene with all the gone cats and crazy studs he knew up at the university. They’d fall up to somebody’s pad; they’d blow some pot, and it was like wow, man.

Mitch and his crowd didn’t flip for jazz, but he’d come on strong with the bongos. “You don’t mess with the sound,” he told her. “It’s a drag, strictly nowhere. All you need to do is dig the beat. That’s everything—just beat. Now you take like Zen. . . .”

But he’d lose her there; she couldn’t make the intellectual bit. It just didn’t swing. Balling for kicks was enough—why make a federal case out of it? And yet every once in a while Mitch and some of the other characters would get real spooky about meaning and significance and all that jazz.

One night he tried to explain. They were off in a corner at a real crazy bash, with everything rocking. “The most,” Mitch said. “I mean like, here we are holed up in a lousy pad, bunch of chicks and cats, and nobody has any bread, you know? But everything’s with it, everything swings.”

“But don’t you ever worry about the future?” Judy asked.

“This *is* the future, dig?” Mitch answered. “The whole thing’s a circle, with us in the middle having kicks. Now take like squares, what have they got? The study-and-work-hard pitch, the get-a-steady-job thing, real draggy. And then it’s marry-and-settle-down and buy-on-easy-terms and take-care-of-the-wife-and-kids. So you end up at fifty, doing the coronary bit.”

“Awright awready,” Judy said. “You aren’t going to marry me, and I’m not queer for that wife-and-mother scene myself. But a girl has to think about things, you know? And I don’t have any money, you don’t have a job —”

“So get with it.” Mitch shrugged. “You want some loot, find a live one.”

“You mean some fat old character with a wife and six kids? I should sneak in and out of motels with him for peanuts?” Judy was scornful. “Look, Pops, I don’t need it. I’ve been getting passes from such jerkies for years. All I’d catch is a bad dose of trouble.”

"Figures," Mitch agreed. "But why sweat? You don't even have to bother looking. Just relax and enjoy it. Let it come to you. Like Kenny here."

He jabbed his thumb in the direction of a tall, thin man who stood leaning against the hall doorway, squinting at the smoky room through his hornrims.

"A real creepnik, that one," Mitch said. "Used to be an assistant prof up at the U, but he doesn't have to bust a truss making a living. He's loaded. Phil tells me he popped for three jugs tonight, just to get in. Likes to make the scene, you know? And he's got eyes for you."

Judy stared at the man, then made a face. "Clammy," she said.

"So, clammy. But you could promote. He's what you call the society type. Lots of 'em sucking around, all wanting in. Swishes, eggheads, introverts, like. Too scared for fun and games but just dying to play. All you'd have to be is friendly. The teaser bit."

Judy looked at Kenny again. He blinked shyly at her from across the room.

"Well, I don't know," she murmured.

"What's to lose?" Mitch asked. "You've got it made. I mean, a beautiful chick like you."

That did it, when he called her beautiful. Judy stood up and walked over to Kenny, proud as a queen.

Kenny treated her like a queen.

He was definitely a square, she decided, but kind of nice. He kept getting her drinks and lighting cigarettes and asking if she was comfortable and did she want anything to eat. And he didn't try to touch her or suggest that the two of them sneak off together. He just talked.

"He's going to call me tomorrow," Judy told Mitch later, "for a date. You aren't sore if I go out with him?"

"Look, we set it up this way, right? So live a little!" Mitch grinned. "You want the jealousy bit?" He pulled her down on the bed. "Not from me. This Kenny won't even make a pass. He's just sick."

"He talked real intelligent—"

“Sick, sick, sick,” Mitch repeated. “Let me give you the word. Now you take squares, they’re sick but organized, like. All this jazz about jobs and families and voting the straight ticket—it’s a big habit and they’re hooked, see? But they love it.

“Creeping meatballs like Kenny are worse. They hate the habit but they can’t kick it. They’re the ones always talking it up about the beat generation, always making with the analyzing bit, always hanging around, but too chicken to get with the scene.”

He pulled her closer. “Go ahead and take him! Strictly no problem. Sure, he’s got the hots for you, but he’s too sick to make move one. Too sick for the big kicks. Like this. That’s all there is, baby. This. The big kick. The most.”

“Yes,” Judy echoed. “The most!”

So Judy went out with Kenny, to shows, to nice restaurants, to a concert. He never escorted her to anyone else’s parties, outside of the gang; he didn’t seem to have any friends of his own.

“He’s just lonely,” she told Mitch.

Mitch shrugged. “So he needs company, so let him start paying for it. Now here’s the pitch. . . .”

He instructed her, and Judy obeyed.

She told Kenny the tale about getting some of her things out of hock so she could find a job. Kenny gave her the money.

She mentioned that Mitch’s heap had broken down and the garage insisted on payment before finishing the repairs. Kenny gave her the money for that also.

She came to Kenny with the sad story about the rent, and again he opened his wallet. But this time he opened his mouth too.

“Tell Mitch that’s all,” he said.

They had just ordered dinner at this real fancy joint, and Judy didn’t want to make a scene.

But the tall man didn’t seem to be angry; his dark eyes smiled at her from behind the heavy lenses of his glasses. “Really, now,” he was saying, "didn't you think I knew Mitch set this all up? It was his idea in the first place, wasn't it? Just as it's Phil's idea that I pay for the liquor whenever I'm permitted to attend a party and Jean's idea to invite me to join their friends when they go out to eat because I always pick up the check."

Judy sighed. "But if you know, why do you do such things?"

"Call it an admission fee. Maybe I enjoy watching the show."

"Hey!" The idea hit her then. "You writing a book about us or something?"

Kenny chuckled and shook his head. "Why should I? There's nothing worth writing about. It's the same old story. Thirty years ago people like your friend Mitch called themselves the lost generation, and Hemingway and Scott Fitzgerald were their prophets. Twenty years ago they pretended to be communists, ten years ago existentialists.

"But nothing really changes. Mitch and his kind will always rationalize. Their beat philosophy—what is it but an acrobat's vocabulary of 'jumps' and 'flips' and 'blows' and 'kicks'? An immature in-group's set of catch phrases used to dramatize irresponsibility to others and to themselves."

Judy shook her head. "They're not bums! Mitch is a musician, Phil's an artist, Jean writes poetry—"

"They always did," Kenny told her. "In the Village, the *Vieux Carre,* the North End. But the real creative talents never stayed in these places very long. They got out. If they didn't conform to social discipline, they developed self-discipline. Mitch's kind never develop anything except self-pity. All this pretense about art is just an excuse to justify freeloading as a way of life."

"At least they're living," Judy said. "They get their kicks. Not like some people who just sit around and talk because they're too sick and too scared to take what they want."

Kenny sighed. "Splashing blobs of paint on canvas and blowing an instrument offkey doesn't make anyone a rebel. And it doesn't take a hero to get drunk on somebody else's liquor and vomit on somebody else's floor.

Kicks! What does a child like Mitch know about the real potentialities of sensation?”

He put his hand on Judy’s wrist; his grip was surprisingly strong. “The difference between Mitch and me is that I know what I want and I’m mature enough to wait for it.”

Judy jerked her wrist away. “You’ll wait a long time,” she said. Then she rose. “I think I’d like to go now.”

After he took her home and left her without a word she experienced misgivings.

“I goofed,” she told Mitch. “I blew the scene.”

Mitch shook his head. “Let him snap his cap. He’ll be back.”

“Think he’s just jealous?”

“Righterooney!” Mitch pulled up his sweatshirt and scratched. “This is a real sicknik. A masochist, like.”

Mitch had to explain to her about masochists.

Judy nodded. “I think maybe that’s it,” she agreed. “But lover, where did you learn all this goop?”

“I dig psychology. And I dig Kenny. All this stuff he handed you about how simple I am, it doesn’t hang me. You peel the banana and what’s left? The same old jazz about morality, right and wrong, good and evil.” He put his arm around Judy’s waist. His hand moved. “Look. Is this right? Is this wrong?”

Judy shuddered. “I don’t know. I don’t care. It’s you and me.”

“Yeah. You and me. The real kick.” He released her. “But I’m not forgetting what we talked about. We need some loot. Like say, if we go out to the Coast next week—”

“The Coast?”

“Frisco. Bill Wallace, cat I know out in Richmond, he’ll line me up a job in a combo. We’ll really have a ball out there. All we do is get Kenny to pay the freight.”

“But I can’t go to him for money to—”

Mitch put his arm around her again. “You don’t go. He comes to you. Want to bet?” He grinned at her. “You don’t ask for dough either. You tell him the straight story, about you and me going away together.”

“He’ll get sore.”

“He’s a masochist, remember? I dig the type. The more you pour it on, the more he loves it. He’ll pop with a going-away present. Old sicknik Kenny.”

“Honey, it wouldn’t be right. I mean, if he’s really sick like you say, then to take him this way—”

Mitch put both arms around her. “Right, wrong, all that jazz, it’s nowhere. Like the man says, beyond good and evil. Nothing matters but this. The big kick.”

“The big kick!” Judy said. “Righterooney!”

And it was righterooney two days later when Kenny called, just as Mitch predicted. So that gave her the courage to do what he ordered and tell Kenny the story. Kenny reacted as if Mitch had written his lines for him—he was a real masochist and no mistake.

Of course Judy thought there might be some mistake when he said goodbye to her without mentioning a present, and when she saw Mitch she was worried.

“He didn’t pop,” she told him. “I said we were leaving tomorrow afternoon, and all he did was smile and wish me luck. He didn’t even kiss me. . . .”

“Wait,” said Mitch. “Just wait!”

The next morning the package came in the mail. Judy was so excited that she let Mitch open it up. His hands were steady until he unwrapped the box and removed the cover. Then he started to shake.

“Christerooney!” he said. “Dig this!”

It was a diamond bracelet—and a big one.

“Mitch, look at it. It can’t be real—”

“It’s real, all right. See, the tag’s still on it. From Orfitt’s. They don’t sell phony ice, not in that joint. Why, I’ll bet it’s worth five grand, maybe ten!”

Judy started to fasten the bracelet around her left wrist, but Mitch took it away from her. “What’s with you?” he asked. “We got no time. Enough of this lovemaking.”

“But—”

“Look, here’s the bit. I’ll fall right over to Orfitt’s. No, they won’t go for any jazz about returning it, but they’ll give out with what it cost. Then we head uptown and hock it. But I want some idea of what we can get, dig?”

“Oh, honey, it’s so lovely—”

Mitch grabbed her by the ponytail. “We can yak about it on the trip out. We leave for the Coast this afternoon, remember? And this pays our way.” Judy didn’t say anything.

“Okay,” Mitch muttered. “So you keep the bracelet. And you fall up and see old Kenny, just like he figures you will, after I’m gone. Real cozy like, you and that sicknik and the ice, the togetherness bit. Me, I’m off to the Coast for kicks.”

Judy gripped his arm. “No, Mitch. I don’t want the bracelet. Take me with you. We’ll hock it, just like you say.”

So they went down to Orfitt’s in the heap. But first Mitch got into some decent threads—he had this one blue suit and he wore a white shirt and a tie too. “You don’t blow into an uptown layout like Orfitt’s looking beat,” he told her. “And another thing—I want you to stay outside, so the word never gets back to Kenny about you asking questions about the ice. Maybe he buys a lot of stuff in there. Let me handle the scene. I’ll make like a real square.”

They parked right in front, and Judy sat waiting while Mitch marched into the store. She could see him through the window, playing it cool when the clerk came up. She could see him talking to the clerk, pulling the bracelet out of his pocket. She watched the clerk examine it.

And then she saw the clerk signal the manager, and both of them jabbering at Mitch, and he was shaking his head and trying to shut them up. Then he slammed his fist down on the counter and started to walk away, but the manager grabbed him, and all of a sudden a third character in some kind of guard's uniform came up and hung onto Mitch's arm. The clerk was pressing a buzzer, some kind of alarm thing, and the other two held him tight, and then Judy could hear the sirens down the street.

So she started up the motor and cut out of there.

The car was all loaded for the trip, but she couldn't leave town. She had no money, and besides, Mitch was in trouble. Judy drove back to his pad, and by the time she arrived she figured out what had happened.

It was getting dark already, but she had no difficulty in recognizing the tall man who leaned against the downstairs stoop in the shadows. And because she had the deal straight in her own mind now she didn't make a scene. Instead, she just nodded at him when she got out of the car and allowed him to follow her up the stairs.

She stooped and unlocked the door, beckoned to him to enter.

"You don't act very surprised to see me," Kenny said.

Judy shrugged.

"Which means you've probably realized what happened," he said. "In which case this won't surprise you either." He stepped over to the door and locked it. The key flashed in the gloom and disappeared into his pocket.

"You think you're pretty smart, don't you?" Judy said. "Stealing that bracelet because you knew Mitch would go back to Orfitt's and try to find out what it was worth and they'd recognize it."

"Smart enough," Kenny said. "At least Mitch fell for it. I imagine he'll get at least two years in which to meditate on his stupidity. Or cupidity." Kenny smiled shyly at her across the dim room. "Cupidity—under the circumstances, that's very good!"

"I can go to the police. I can explain," Judy said.

Kenny nodded. "Yes. But I doubt if they'll believe you. After all, the car is full of your luggage. You were ready to leave. And you don't have any friends here in town, not any *real* friends, who might serve as character witnesses. That's the trouble with beatniks, you know—you lack roots. You can drop out of sight overnight and nobody will ever know or care—"

"Skip the sermon," Judy murmured. "You don't have to give me a hard time. I know the bit now. If I'm nice to you you'll get Mitch off the hook." She began to fumble with the buttons of her blouse. "So I'm nice."

Kenny walked over to her and put a restraining hand on her shoulder. "Don't misunderstand," he said gently. "I didn't go to all the trouble of arranging this meeting just to force you to be nice, as you insist on calling it. I'm sorry to disappoint you, but I'm not interested in that sort of thing. Any more than I'm interested in the fate of a stupid animal like Mitch. Let him rot in jail—there's nothing you can do now to get him out."

"Animal?" Judy's voice trembled. "Why, you lousy masochist!"

Kenny seemed puzzled. "What on earth do you mean, dear child?"

"You know what I mean. Mitch told me what you are. Like now, you won't even touch me. This isn't what you want, is it? This isn't how you get your kicks—"

"But I *am* touching you!" Kenny caressed her shoulder softly with his left hand. "It's true I don't get my kicks this way, as Mitch would say. But he was wrong about my being a masochist. Actually, you know, I'm a sadist."

Judy opened her mouth to ask what a sadist was, but Kenny put his hand over it. And then he bent her back over the sofa, bent her back in the darkness.

She couldn't scream and she couldn't move. He held her there, and Judy could only stare as he pulled out the knife and showed her the *big* kick.

The Last Plea

Do you despise rock 'n' roll? Do you think Elvis is a hound dog? Do you understand the words of any popular song? Here, tor the first time, the whole ghastly plot is revealed, the Conspiracy of Cacophony traced to its Cosmic Lair.

THERE was nothing supernatural about the way Clay Clinton got his start. *That* part comes later.

In the beginning, there was only Luther Snodgrass, of Crump Creek, Texas.

Nobody paid much attention to Luther Snodgrass at first, including his own mother. She took one look at the squalling brat when he was born, then dumped him in the railway ditch next to the water-tower. Within five hours she took the next freight out of town and vanished into Oblivion (Olda.).

All she bequeathed the infant was his name, scribbled with the stub end of a pencil on the inside of a Sterno label. She christened him with a note pinned to half a pair of panties which she ripped down the middle and wound around his spindle-shanks as he lay cradled in an old orange-crate.

Her message was brief and to the point, if any.

> *To Whoom It may Consern: Pleese somebody take care of my babey boy his name is Luther Snodgrass after his father the no good sunabich he run out on me in Waco.*
> *Hoping You Are The Same,*

—Joyleen Crutt

A gandy-dancer named Hank Peavey found Luther—and his letter of introduction to a waiting world—within a matter of minutes after the freight pulled out. He called the sheriff and the sheriff took the baby to the County Hospital, and the County Hospital (after a few desultory efforts to locate either Joyleen Crutt or the no good sunabich she had honored with the paternity of her offspring) passed the infant on to the County Orphanage at Crump Creek.

Luther Snodgrass did a lot of howling when he was a baby, but nobody can lay credit to discovering him then.

In due time he grew up to attend grammar school, where he pledged allegiance to the American flag, broke three windows, learned how to read *(Goofball Comics)* and write *("Old Ladey Krantz Has Dirtey Pints")* and do elementary sums *("Cigarettes—28. Muscatel—594 a fifth").*

At the age of sixteen he completed his formal education and his informal education simultaneously—the latter through the kind offices of a young lady named Luletta Switzel. Unfortunately for Luther Snodgrass, Miss Switzel was her father's pride and joy; rivalled in his affections only by the 12-gauge shotgun that he subsequently pointed in Luther's direction.

Luther got out of range in a manner apparently traditional to his family; he hopped the next rattler.

What he did in El Paso we'll probably never know. What he did in Fort Worth was thirty days for vagrancy.

During the next two years it almost seemed as if the young man were destined to become a writer. At least, he underwent what is apparently the customary apprenticeship for that career—he was a dishwasher in a restaurant, a house-to-house salesman, a fry-cook, and a merchant seaman. Actually, however, he flunked out on this last requirement. Luther

Snodgrass never really went to sea; he merely did some work as an itinerant stevedore on the banana boats moored at the docks in New Orleans.

It was there, presumably, that he picked up his talent for the guitar (along with something else which he was fortunately able to get rid of after a few visits to the Public Health Clinic). But the musical affliction persisted; probably some of the local roustabouts encouraged him. He even managed to obtain possession of his own instrument—fortunately, nobody asked to examine the dice during the game—and before long he was playing and passing the hat in the French Quarter. The Vieux Carre Association takes a dim view of such activities on Bourbon Street, but he managed to get into a few dives on Decauter and Chartres. He developed a popular repertoire, including such authentic folk-classics as *The Harlot of Jerusalem, Christopher Columbo,* and that plaintive ballad, *The Ring-Dang-Doo.*

The few connoisseurs of folk music who heard him agreed unanimously that Josh White in his prime had never sounded anything like that. Luther Snodgrass was already beginning to develop his distinctive wriggling style; he learned that it was better to writhe and keep moving so as to avoid any missiles aimed his way by listeners who *didn't* appreciate his talent.

It was during this period that Opportunity knocked on young Luther's door. That chance of a life-time appeared.

To be exact, it wasn't really *his* door, but that of Miss Evangeline LaTour, who resided in the Quarter as a young art student (the art being pickpocketing and the old badger-game). And it wasn't really Opportunity knocking, but a gentleman named Jefferson Davis Fink, renowned throughout the sunny Southland as the progenitor, proprietor and sole purveyor of *Finkola.*

Who has not heard of *ola*—that antidote for asthma, banisher of bunions, cure for catarrh, destroyer of dandruff, eradicator of eczema; indeed, of all the alphabetically-arranged ailments the flesh is heir to, including such obscure sub-Masonian-and-Dixonian-Line afflictions as the running trots, the galloping consumption and the creeping miseries?

If there are any amongst you who remain in ignorance of this amazing new scientific discovery, it is not because of any failing on the part of Jefferson Davis Fink. He has spared neither pain nor expense in his effort to spread the glad tidings of miraculous healing properties throughout the length and breadth of Dixie. Wherever five watts join together in the conspiracy known as a southern radio station, the *Finkola* jingles jangle forth. Wherever a tall pine or a majestic cypress looms along the highway, a *Finkola* billboard obscures it. Wherever the sweet scent of magnolias mingles upon the soft and balmy breeze, it mingles with the joyfully-drawn breath of a *Finfcola* user *(37 alcohol, by volume).*

“Yeass, honey-chile,” said Jefferson Davis Fink to Miss Evangeline LaTour, as he skilfully diverted her caressing fingertips from the neighborhood of his watch-chain, “Ah reckon they ain’t hardly nobody nohow who don’t guzzle the stuff.”

“My aunt Minnie, she used it for a poultice, time she had them boils,” Miss LaTour volunteered, eyeing her companions gen-oo-ine 5-carat (slightly yellowish) diamond ring.

“Sure, sugah,” Mr. Fink agreed. “It cures ’most anything, up to *and* including mastitis. And I hear tell it makes a mighty refreshin’ douche, too. *Mighty* refreshin’.” Then, “Great bolls o’ cotton, what’s *that?”*

That proved to be Luther Snodgrass, returning unexpectedly early from his nightly rounds and roundelays. The sight of the tall, gangling youth who confronted them menacingly, armed with a guitar, served to both annoy and affright Miss LaTour.

“Gah dam’,” she exclaimed, with girlish petulance. “Ah *tole* you to knock, afore you come bargin’ in heah that-away.”

“Who is this?” inquired Jefferson Davis Fink, sitting up and reaching for his vest.

“Mah *nevvoo,”* Miss LaTour explained. “He’s like mah *proto jay.”*

“Proto jay? What-all is he a *proto jay* of?”

“Well, he plays tar. Ah been soht of boa’din’ him heah whilst he studies up on it.”

Noting the look of skepticism on Mr. Fink’s face, she turned to Luther and waggled a coy cuticle. “You-all play suthin’ foe Mistah Fink, hear?”

Luther heard. And Mr. Fink, whether he was thus inclined or not, heard also.

“Purty?” Miss LaTour inquired.

The least that gallantry demanded was a nod. Mr. Fink gave it, and thus precipitated another selection. Luther was all set to launch into a third, when Mr. Fink held up his hand.

The sight of the diamond silenced the young man.

“You right talented, boy,” he declared. “Right talented. Evah think of goin’ into the show bizness?”

“Show bizness?” Luther’s eyes rivalled the diamond. “Ah been aimin’ fer it.”

Jefferson Davis Fink cleared his throat, or at least a portion thereof which was not occupied by plug tobacco. “Well, reckon you done hit the mark, son. So happens Ah’m readyin’ anothuh exstrava-ganza. Yessiree, anothuh big *Finkola* Fun Festival is ’bout ready to hit the road.”

“Do tell!” Luther’s reply was academic; actually it was scarcely necessary to tell him anything about the famous *Finkola* productions. Every year a truckload of top talent trouped through the turpentine swamps and bayous, and into the big tent swarmed every man, woman and wood-colt who possessed the *ola* label which entitled the bearer to admission. It was all part of Mr. Fink’s advertising campaign, and he spared no expense in mounting his entertainments; raiding every cultural Mecca from Grossinger’s to Las Vegas in his quest for top talent. And now—

“Boy, Ah’m gonna give you a chance. Yesiree, that’s exactly what Ah’m gonna do! You’re gonna work for me!”

“You mean, play mah pittar in the show? How *about* that?”

“Wonderful!” Evangeline LaTour beamed fondly on Luther and still more fondly on Jefferson Davis Fink. “Ah do appreciate this. Truly Ah do.”

“Think nothin’ of it. Always ready to encuh-ge talent when Ah see it.” Mr. Fink patted Miss LaTour on the thigh in a fatherly fashion and turned to Luther Snodgrass. “Repoht to mah office at the factory tomorrow mohn’in’.”

“Yes, *suh!”*

“Meanwhile, kindly git to hell out’n heah.”

“Yes, *suh!”*

Thus, as every biographer knows, Luther Snodgrass made his professional debut for *Finkola* the following week, in the thriving metropolis of Ague, Louisiana.

What every biographer doesn’t know—or carefully neglects to mention—is that the young musician laid a bomb.

A liberal swig of *Finkola* has a tendency to deaden the hearing (indeed, there are some authorities who claim that steady indulgence will eventually deaden the indulger to a point where his only further use for *Finkola* will be as embalming-fluid) and the good people of Ague had sampled enough of the nostrum before Luther appeared so that they were more or less inured to the actual sound of his singing and playing.

However, their olfactory powers remained acute, and before Luther had finished his first number, several of the spectators were glancing under the wooden seats in an effort to detect the whereabouts of a sick polecat.

Some of the men in the audience considered slipping out quietly and summoning an emergency meeting of the Klan.

Jefferson Davis Fink, astute showman that he was, got the message. And right after the first show, he delivered it to Luther Snodgrass.

“Out, boy,” he said. “You finished.”

“Finished? But Mistah Fink, suh—”

“Don’ you-all *Mistah Fink suh* me, hear? Git!”

“Ah thought Ah sounded purty good out theah tonight.”

“Good foh what? Lookee heah, boy, Ah’m sellin’ medicine to make folks feel bright an’ sassy. Then you come on, a membah of mah own company, an’ you sound like a hog with it’s ham caught in a bob-wire fence. Call that smart advertisin’ ? No, son, you gotta go.”

“Please, give me anothuh chance.”

“Sorry. Powerful sorry.”

“But you-all cain’t leave me stranded heah. Got no grit-money, got nothin’—”

“Heah.” Jefferson Davis Fink held out a five-dollar-bill and a bottle of *Finkola.* “This ought to see you back to town. You-all can drink the bottle on the bus. Compliments of the house.”

And that was all Luther Snodgrass could get out of him.

In the end he tnidged away, guitar in one hand, grip in the other. But the bus station was closed, and there would be no transportation available until ten o’clock the next morning, so Luther didn’t go Greyhound.

He picked at his grits and some iguana gumbo in Ague’s sole culinary establishment; meanwhile squandering another fifty cents in the jukebox to play the latest recordings by Elvis Presley, Jerry Lee Lewis and The Platters.

“Ah kin sing evah-bit as good as they,” he muttered. “Louder, even!”

The thought—as well as the sounds—understandably depressed him. So much so that after he left the restaurant he spent his remaining capital for a bottle of something called *Old Poontang—A Blend: 85% Neutral Spirits, 15% Hostile Spirits.* It was something like that, anyway; he didn’t bother to read the label. And he didn’t bother to delay in consuming the contents. By the time he’d finished, Luther made up his mind to hitch-hike back to New Orleans. He took the road to the Crescent City, but it was very dark outside, and somehow he seemed to have missed his way.

The next thing he remembered was wandering down a bayou byway which led deeper and deeper into the swamps. The night was black as pitch and even smelled that way; tarry bubbles oozed from the swamp as Luther trod a path never used even by day, and then only by Voodoo conjure-men. A mist crept out of the trees, and Luther shivered. He emptied the bottle and tossed it away, then stumbled on.

"Ah'm purely lost," he complained, sitting down on an old log and fishing out the other bottle, containing *Finkola.* He uncorked and attacked it, and before long, it was attacking him.

Perhaps the *Finkola* was to blame. I'm not going to attempt to sway your opinion. You'll have to decide for yourself. At any rate, nothing happened to Luther Snodgrass until he began to drink the stuff.

"Lost!" he sighed. "Nowhere, U.S.A.!"

It suddenly occurred to him that he was addressing his complaints to an exceedingly large alligator which had crawled up out of the bubbling blackness and was perched on the log beside him.

Luther put his arm around the alligator's neck.

"Whassa matter, ole buddy-buddy?" he asked the saurian. "Y'all look purty green around the gills. What you need is a slurp of *Finkola."* He extended the bottle. "Mebbe it'll help you to git rid o' them warts, too!"

The alligator shook its head politely.

"Party-pooper!" muttered Luther, bitterly. He took another swig. His mood changed. "Ah don't blame you. Nobuddy wants to drink with me. Nobuddy wants to heah me sing an' play. Nobuddy loves me. Ah jus' ain't appreciated, nohow. Why for is evvy-buddy agin us artists?"

The alligator shrugged.

"What's Elvis got that Ah ain't got?" Luther demanded. "How come folks make such a fuss ovah a square piano-player like this heah Albert Schweitzer?"

The alligator started to squirm off the log.

“Don’ leave me!” Luther wailed. “Ah craves sympathy. You see befo’ you a beat-down cat. Ah’s sick of tryin’ the ha’hd way. A man gits fed up, you know? Right now, Ah’d sell mah soul fo’ a little ole hunk of prosperity.”

The alligator edged away.

“Git me out’n this swamp,” Luther implored, clutching vainly at the departing reptile and falling backwards off the log into the muddy ooze. “Take me to your Leader!”

That’s what the man said.

Of course, it was only a current phrase; a commonplace expression, like the one about selling one’s soul. And naturally, the alligator was only an alligator.

You can interpret it that way if you like. On the other hand, you may choose to believe otherwise.

In either case, all I can do is offer the facts in the matter.

Which were, and are, as follows. Luther fell off the log into the mud. When he sat up again the alligator had disappeared—but there, sitting on the stump-end of the fallen tree, was another presence. It seemed to be a man; at least its face was slightly less green and slightly less warty than the alligator’s had been.

Luther stared up at the stranger.

“Evenin’,” he murmured.

“Good evening, son,” the stranger replied. “What seems to be the difficulty?”

“Ah fell.”

“Hmm, so I perceive. Well, you’re not the only one. I’ve had some previous acquaintance with the fallen.” The stranger smiled benignly. “It behooves us, if you’ll pardon the expression, to take consolation at times likes these in that glorious motto—‘The South shall rise again!’ And now, if you’ll permit me to assist you—”

He extended a hand and hauled young Luther up to a seat beside him on the log. Luther blinked at him and beheld his benefactor. The stranger was a plump, white-haired gentleman wearing a hammer-tail coat and a modest five-gallon hat.

"Who mought you be?" Luther inquired.

"I might be Judge Harmer," the stranger told him.

"Judge?"

"An honorary title, of course," his companion assured him. "But I'm a real Harmer, of that you may be sure. Come from a long line of Harmers. Certainly you are familiar with the name?"

"Reckon not," Luther answered. "Ah'm a stranger in these parts. Luther Snodgrass, at yo' service."

"Pleased to meet you." Judge Harmer's eyes twinkled. "But speaking of service, I perceive you have a bottle—"

"He'p yo'self," Luther urged, extending the Judge Harmer reached for the bottle, read the label, then hastily drew his hand away. "No, thank you," he muttered. "On second thought—"

"But it's only *Finkola*—"

"I assure you I'm perfectly familiar with the concoction," Judge Harmer replied. "And so again I say, no, thanks."

"You talk awful funny."

"Just plain English."

"Yeah, what I mean. Y'all sound like—pardon the expression—a Yankee." Luther gazed suspiciously at his new acquaintance. "If'n you ain't a real judge, then what are you, anyhow?"

"Call me a talent scout, if you like."

"A talent scout? You mean like for shows and all?" Judge Harmer nodded. "Come now!" Luther stood up. "What-all would a talent scout be doin' out heah in this little ole swamp?"

"Why, looking for talent, of course."

"In a bayou—at midnight?"

“I was informed that there might be a possibility of an informal get-together in these purlieus,” the judge explained.

“Who-all would hold a sociable in a place like this?” Luther’s eyes narrowed. “Hold on—you-all ain’t talkin’ about one of them Voodoo meetin’s, are you?”

The judge shrugged. “I believe I’ve heard the term used in that connection, yes.”

“But what kind of talent can you git out’n a bunch of conjure men and hexers?”

“Oh, you’d be surprised.” The judge smiled. “I understand they sing and dance at such ceremonies. And of course, there are always drummers. There’s a great demand for drummers up North, you know. Give a man a set of bongoes instead of a drum and clap a beret on his head and you’ve got a good non-union Beatnik.”

“Nevah figgered it that way befo’,” Luther admitted.

“But I fear I was mistaken,” the judge continued, consulting his pocket-watch.

Luther couldn’t imagine how he could possibly see it in the darkness, but apparently the green and glittering eyes searched out successfully. “Here it is, past midnight, and no meeting in evidence.” He sighed. “I don’t know what’s come over folks nowadays, really I don’t! Used to be an average of three meetings a week, regular as clockwork, and a human sacrifice on Sundays. Now everybody stays home and watches Oral Roberts on television.” He sighed again. “Apparently I’m wasting my time.”

“Hold on!” Luther said. “If it’s talent you’re after, mebbe Ah’m your boy. If’n Ah kin find mah *git-tar*—”

He stooped and fumbled in the mud at his feet until he located the battered instrument. Raising it, he brushed his fingers lightly across the strings, then turned the guitar and shook it vigorously.

"Dern that toad!" he muttered, then brightened. "Happens that Ah'm a entetainer mah-self. You-all care for an audition?"

"Be delighted." The judge settled himself on the log and Luther, without further preamble, launched into the rendition of a popular ditty entitled *The Hang Down*

Your Head Tom Dooley Cha-Cha-Cha.

Several alligators back in the swamp joined in the second chorus, and Luther finished with a brisk *obligato* which caromed off his left tonsil.

"Well?" he inquired. "What do you think?"

"I think I'll have a drink after all," said the judge, hastily reaching for the *Finkola* bottle.

"You didn't like mah singin' ?"

"I never said that," his audience replied. "In fact, I was merely about to propose a toast."

"What about mah playin' ?"

"I never heard anything to equal it." The judge took a deep gulp.

"Mebbe you-all'd like to give me a job?"

"My dear boy, I'm no impresario!"

"Is that like an imp, mebbe?"

"In a way." The judge smiled. "Actually, an impresario is a bit worse—he's a man who puts on theatrical performances. Well, as I say, I'm not one of those. I'm merely a sort of talent scout. I only find talent."

"An agent, like?"

"Ah, yes. That would be closer to the truth. I'm an agent."

"Then you could sign me up?"

"Well—"

"Mebbe you ain't convinced. Mebbe Ah ought to sing agin—"

"No!" the judge exclaimed, hurriedly. "No, that won't be necessary at all. I'm quite willing to sign you right now."

"Ten per cent, ain't it?"

"A hundred per cent, if you like."

“That’s moughty generous,” Luther grinned. “One o’ them long-term contracks?”

“Lifetime,” the judge assured him. “Better still, in perpetuity.”

“Ah was kinda hopin’ we could sign right heah.”

“Good enough.” The judge produced a document—not from his pocket, not from his sleeve, but from somewhere around his person. “Errr—I seem to have mislaid my fountain-pen. But this twig will do. And for ink, let’s just prick your finger, here.”

“Nothin’ doin’ !” Luther drew himself proudly erect. “Ah suspicioned you-all was the Devil right along.”

“But I’m not the Devil, I swear it—merely an agent!” The judge’s tones were unctuous. “Son, this is your big chance. Don’t toss it away because of a technicality!”

“Well, Ah ain’t signin’ anythin’ in mah blood.” Luther frowned determinedly, then brightened. “Lookee heah, how’s about me signin’ in some of this *Fi*

“Hmmm—I don’t know—it seems highly irregular—”

“Ain’t nothin’ irregular about it!” Luther protested. “Ah done heah the raddio announcer tell just the opposite. He say there ain’t nothin’ like *Finkola* for keepin’ you *regular.”*

“I’d prefer blood,” the judge murmured.

“You-all want me or don’t you?” Luther was solemn. “Ah tell you, friend, it ain’t every day you git a chance to heah a talent like mine. You better not pass it by.”

The judge sighed. “That’s right,” he said.

“So what you say?”

The judge sighed again. “Oh, very well. Sign in *Finkola.* After what you’ve already drunk from the bottle, I’m sure your blood is probably ninety per cent *Finkola* anyway. So there’s not much difference.”

"You-all want this formal?" Luther inquired. "If so, Ah'll make a capital X."

"Can't you write?" The judge frowned. "Not even your own name?"

"Course Ah kin! It's the spellin' Ah ain't so sure of." Luther scrawled his *X* on the document, then reached for the bottle.

"We got us a deal," he said. "Mought as well kill this now."

Apparently the *Finkola* had the same idea, because shortly after swallowing it, Luther gazed at his newfound agent with a contented grin, rolled up his eyes and heels, and passed out.

When he came to, he was in Noiseville, U.S.A.

Now the actual name of the town may be Nashville, or Chattanooga, or even Memphis. All three communities have at times proclaimed—and loudly—their right to be called the music capitals of America.

Call it rock-'n-roll, call it country music, call it hillbilly style, call it something which can't be printed in these pages—the fact remains that these three cities are responsible for more popular entertainment, decibel for decibel, and dollar for dollar, than any other metropolises since Sodom and Gomorrah.

And it was in one of them that Luther Snodgrass awoke.

"Where am Ah?" he wailed. "Does it matter?" replied Judge Harmer.

"Matter? Ah'll say it does! Must've been drunk as a skunk! Ah do declare, Ah don't even remember mah own name."

"It's Clay Clinton," the judge told him.

"Clay Clinton?" The young man blinked suspiciously. "You sure it ain't Luther Snodgrass?"

"Not after last night it isn't. Don't you remember? You auditioned for me, I signed you up as my client?"

"Yeah, reckon so."

"Well, as your agent, I'm taking over your career. And the first thing I'm doing is changing your name. Luther Snodgrass—that's no good for theater marquees. Takes too many lights. And it's too long for TV credit-cards. You're Clay Clinton."

"Ah'm goin' on television?"

"Eventually. After you've had your vocal lessons."

"Ah don't need none. Ah sing okay."

"I'm not referring to singing. You're going to learn English."

"But who kin unnerstan' Elvis or Jerry Lee Lewis—?"

"I'm not referring to the way you deliver the so-called lyrics of your so-called songs.

It's just that when you talk, it helps to be intelligible."

"You gonna ruin mah style."

"Trust me. From now on you're Clay Clinton, and you're my boy."

"He's *my* boy!"

For the first time Luther heard the strange voice.

He raised his head (he was lying in bed in Room 666 of the Flabbee Arms Hotel at the time) and instantly regretted his effort. It made his skull ache with a hangover, and worse than that, it afforded him a glimpse of the speaker.

A dear little white-haired old lady stood at the judge's side, smiling lovingly at Luther from behind the neck of a gin-bottle. She gazed at him with tender, bloodshot eyes.

"Son," said the judge. "I want you to meet your mother."

"Mother?" Luther sat up. "Not really?"

"Don't ever let me catch you talking like that again," the judge cautioned him. "From now on, you're Clay Clinton, like I said. And this is your dear mother."

"But—"

"It's time, son, that you learned the Facts of Life. Every young popular singing star has a mother, whom he worships and adores. Not only is it good for reams of publicity, but it can also help to take the heat off if—perish forbid!—he happens to get tangled up with one of those chorus girls in Las Vegas. You understand?"

Luther nodded. “So you hired me a mother, is that it?”

He stared at the little old lady. “Where’d she park her broomstick?”

“If you must know, it’s on the roof,” the little old lady told him. “My cat is watching it. She’s queer for phallic symbols.”

“Then you *are* a witch?” Luther swung his legs over the side of the bed. “Ah was only kiddin’—Ah nevah dreamed—”

“Here, where are you going?” the judge demanded.

“Away!” Luther fumbled for his jeans. “Ah don’t aim to mess with no witches—”

“We have a contract,” Judge Harmer reminded him. “Besides, she’s not a practicing witch. She’s retired.”

“That’s right, buster,” cackled the old woman. “The judge hired me right out of the Old Spook’s Home.”

“But Ah don’t need no super-type-natural Mamma.”

“No. But you do need an English instructor. And that’s something your new mother can do for you. She can teach you how to speak properly. Besides, I want someone around here to keep an eye on you while I’m away.”

“You goin’ somewheres?”

“Of course. I’m an agent. You’re not my only client, you know. I’ve got people in New York, Miami, Hollywood, who need my help. But ask your mother. She can tell you.”

And in the days that followed, she did.

Mother proved to be an apt instructor. During the next few weeks, the new Clay Clinton stayed in his room with her and she patiently taught him the rudiments of grammar and pronunciation. Using such standard texts as *Down-beat* and *Variety,* he gradually enlarged his vocabulary.

The judge appeared three weeks later.

"Well?" he inquired. "How is it going?"

"Crazy, man!" Luther informed him. "Mom falls up to the pad here, making the scene with the English bit every day, and I'm coming on strong. I mean, it's like a gasser, Dad. You dig?"

The judge beamed. "My boy, I'm proud of you!" he declared. "All that vulgar Southern accent has disappeared—now *anyone* can understand what you're saying. Son, I do believe you're almost ready."

"Almost? Like I'm the most, Daddy-O." Luther paced the floor. "I'm with it, Pops. Solid."

"Not so fast. First we'll have to work on your musical education."

"What's with the music, Clyde? I make with my pipes, I belt it out and they flip. I mean like they'll love it."

The judge shook his head. "You need polish. That's another thing Mother is here to teach you." He turned to the little old lady. "Let him study for another couple of weeks," he commanded. "With the "The cat? Which cat?"

"My black cat," Mother told him. "She's got just the right *vibrato* for a popular singer these days. Real fishshaped tones."

So for two weeks, Luther listened to the cat. The cat didn't always feel like howling, but mother belted it regularly with her broomstick and belted herself with the gin-bottle as Luther listened and learned.

When the judge returned he was properly impressed. Luther did a number for him.

"Wonderful," Judge Harmer exclaimed. "Why, you can't hardly tell him and the cat apart!"

"He's a good boy," mother declared. "You know, Judge, I had my doubts when you took me out of straight sorcery and made me get into show biz. I thought you were like putting me down. But this is the greatest! Sticking pins into wax figures, all that jazz—it's funky compared to working with live talent. And Avhen I think of all the harm I can do—"

She cackled and tackled her gin.

"Never mind that now," the judge cautioned, with a warning look in Luther's direction. "We're going to put the finishing touches on his education now. I think we’re ready for Eddie.”

“Eddie?” Luther echoed. “Who’s he?”

“Eddie Puss, at your service—blowing cool and plenty nervous!” A dapper little bald-headed man bounded into the room. “Ah, Mother, good to see you! Share some skin!” He shook hands enthusiastically. “Same old fascinating witch, eh? Have broom, will travel. Righterooni?”

“This is Eddie Puss,” the judge said. “He writes songs.”

“Not my real name, of course,” the little man said, grinning at Luther. “They slapped the handle on me because I write a lot of *Mother* numbers. Eddie Puss, like in the complex and all that jazz, dig? Also, because I’m quite a cat.”

“But I don’t need a songwriter,” Luther objected, in his newfound English. “I’m the most.”

“Everybody needs songwriters in this business,” the judge told him. “How do you suppose a hit singer operates these days? They all have to write their own numbers in order to get into the Top Ten. And that’s where people like Eddie come in handy. They can do the coaching. Teach you the ropes.” He turned to the little man. “How about it—what do you think?”

“Well, I don’t know.” Eddie Puss surveyed Luther with a calculating eye. “He’s almost too old, don’t you think? I mean, what we need like is young blood. Most big hits, they’re written by kids still in high school. Freshmen are best. Me, I’ve even worked with seniors, but it’s hard.”

“He’s really very childish,” the judge reassured him. “I want you to try.”

“I can’t promise anything—”

“You wouldn’t be going back on our agreement, would you?” The judge was suave. “Remember what you were when I met you? Justa frustrated lyric-writer. All you ever were able to do was those four-line poems on the walls of public—”

“Never mind!” Eddie Puss shuddered. “I appreciate what you’ve done, and like I say, I’ll try.”

“Then get busy,” the judge muttered. “I want this boy in shape for his debut in two weeks. Teach him the popular song business.”

So Luther learned the popular song business from yet another teacher.

“Really nothing to it,” Eddie reassured him, during the course of their daily lessons. “It’s as simple as NBC. All you got to remember is that there are only two kinds of pop hits today. One of ’em is about a couple of high school kids in love, and the other makes even less sense. The main thing is, you have to remember to include certain phrases in each lyric.”

“Such as?”

“Well, we got what we call key-words. You know ’em.”

“You mean like *heart*, and *tears*, and *embrace?”*

“Crazy, man! Only you never use ’em that way. You make with the phrase. So it comes out, *this heart of mine*, and *these tears in my eyes*, and *your fond embrace.* Whatever you do, never change a single word. Here’s the rest of the list—dig it, because it’s all you’re gonna need to write dozens of songs. *The touch of your lips. They don’t understand. I hold your charms. Each thrilling moment. Of love divine.”* He paused. “And one thing more. The most important bit. Every couple of lines, you got to throw in the word, *baby.”*

Mother was crying. “I always was one to snap my cap over poetry.”

Luther himself was equally impressed.

“See how easy it is?” Eddie remarked. “With me helping you on lyrics and the cat here giving you the tunes, we can’t miss.”

And they didn’t.

Two weeks later, to the day, Judge Harmer appeared in the hotel room.

“Everything in readiness?” he demanded. Mother and Eddie Puss beamed proudly and the cat purred at Luther and nodded.

“Prepare to dig your wig, Big Daddy,” Luther said, picking up his guitar. “We’ve got a smasheroo.”

And he launched into the world premiere of the number now universally known as, *If I Had To Do It All Over Again, I'd Do It Over You.*

For a moment after the last note sickened and died away there was an impressive silence in the little room.

Then the telephone jingled and Judge Harmer picked it up.

"Yes," he said. "Yes, I understand. Right away."

He replaced the phone in its cradle and turned to the gathering with a smile of relief.

"Management is getting complaints on the noise," he said, happily. "We're being evicted."

"Then it registered," Eddie Puss muttered.

"It must have. Come on, let's get started."

"Where are we going?" Luther was puzzled.

"To New York, of course. For your debut. I understand that Hank Corrupta is replacing Terry Coma at the Club Sandwich on Saturday."

"Corrupta? He's with that rival outfit, MCA, isn't he?" Eddie demanded.

"Right. We got to get rid of him. And we will." Judge Harmer grinned. "What he doesn't know is that our boy here will be replacing him."

"But how—?" Luther murmured.

"You'll see." The judge turned. "Start packing, we're off to the big city."

Mother started for the window.

"Where are you going?" the judge demanded.

"I was just after my broomstick—"

"We're traveling by TWA this time," he told her. "Never mind the expense. Besides, I'll need your services *en route."*

"What do you want me to do?"

"Get three pounds of wax—no, two will do, Corrupta's pretty skinny. Make me a poppet. And then—"

"With the pins, eh? Give him the old stab-and-jab routine?" Mother cackled.

“No, he wouldn’t even feel the needle. He’d just think it was a fast fix. I’ve got a better idea.” And the judge whispered something in her ear.

She cackled again.

And she continued to cackle on the plane, as she sat beside Luther and moulded a wax figurine which took on an eery resemblance to Hank Corrupta.

“Why, it’s amazing!” Luther marveled. “Where did you ever learn to model like that?”

“In my younger days I used to work for Disney,” the crone confided. “I was a stand-in for *The Reluctant Dray on.* I picked up a lot of techniques from his artists.”

“Well, it’s certainly a remarkable job,” the young man said. “Even those hands are perfect.”

“They have to be,” the old woman said. “Because of this.” She began to mumble over the mannikin and then, suddenly, she reached out and squeezed the waxen right hand.

“You—you *crushed* it!” Luther exclaimed.

“Natch. And I just got you a job!” she predicted.

Luther didn’t believe it.

Not until he arrived in New York and Judge Harmer showed him the announcement in Ed Sullivan’s column. Hank Corrupta would not be opening at the Club Sandwich on Saturday night after all.

“Lost his voice?” Luther wondered, aloud.

“Worse than that,” the judge declared, smugly. “Read what it says. He can’t sing because he hurt his hand and he won’t be able to snap his fingers!”

“But I still don’t see—”

“Leave everything to me. I’m going down to the Club Sandwich right now and talk to the boys about putting you on.”

“You have connections?”

“In this business, you’ve got to have connections. Why, the Musician’s Union and I are just like that.” He held up two fingers, then drew them across his throat.

Luther shivered.

He was still shivering after the judge had left.

“What’s the matter, boy?” asked Eddie Puss. “What gives?”

“I’m scared,” Luther confessed.

“What’s to be scared of? You’re all set. You’ve let your sideburns grow, you haven’t combed your hair in a month, and if you shiver like that on stage tonight nobody can tell you from Elvis himself.”

“It’s not that. It’s like I never really believed what the judge said before. And I never thought mother was a real witch—”

“Wise up, buster,” the old woman said. “How do you think anyone gets ahead in show business these days? It sure enough ain’t talent.”

“You mean it’s all the result of magic?”

“What do you think? You’ve watched television, haven’t you? How else could half of those ham-bones get on in the first place?”

“But I’ve always thought—”

“Never mind what you thought. This is it, pal. This is the big time!”

And it was.

That evening, at ten o’clock, Luther Snodgrass, *alias* Clay Clinton, stepped up to the microphone of the Club Sandwich and brandished the gold guitar which Judge Harmer had slipped into his surprised fingers just before his number was announced. And he killed the people.

“I did it!” Luther marveled, at the impromptu party following his performance. “I really sent them!” He laughed happily and nudged Eddie Puss in the ribs. “And it was me, singing and playing up there. That’s what they dug the most—me. Nobody hoodooed them into applauding. And to think I almost fell for that line about witchcraft!”

“Yeah,” said Eddie.

"You were ribbing me, weren't you? I mean, you're just a lyric-writer. The judge is a smart agent, but he's only human. Mother gets stoned and thinks she's a witch, but that's for the birds. I see it now—you were all in it together, a real swinging combo, feeding me that jazz so I'd keep up my confidence."

"Yeah," said mother.

"But from now on, we're straight up and flying right. I get the message—you can level with me. Because I'm not scared any more. I know I can punch over a number. So let's forget all that Creepville jazz."

"Yeah," said the cat . . .

And Luther Snodgrass forgot witchcraft from then on. In a little while he almost forgot his own name. Because he was Clay Clinton now, and there wasn't time to think about anything else.

Judge Harmer kept him busy.

First of all, there was the recording bit.

"Records," the judge told him. "That's where the big loot is made. I'm going to get you into every juke-box in the country."

"But I'm not even signed with a recording outfit," Luther protested.

"Who needs it?" Eddie Puss demanded. "What we do is, we set up our own wax-works. That way we don't just collect the royalties—we get profit on distribution, the whole package."

"But how can we be sure the records will become popular? How can we get them spinning?"

"Through the dee-jays," Eddie told him. "They can make you or break you."

"Can Judge Harmer get the disc-jockeys to play our waffles?"

Eddie Puss smiled grimly. "Believe me," he said, "some of his best friends are disc-jockeys. When it comes to going after a fast buck, he doesn't care who he associates with or how low he stoops!"

And so Clay Clinton’s gold guitar was matched by his growing collection of gold records. Remember his clever modern adaptation of great classical favorites—*Rock-n-Roll Of Ages* and *When The Rock-n-Roll Is Called Up Yonder* and all the rest? Or would you rather forget?

The point is, the public didn’t forget. It never had a chance to do so. Clay Clinton was on every radio show. Clay Clinton was in every juke-box. Clay Clinton moved from the Club Sandwich to top spots in Chicago, Detroit, St. Louis, Miami. Clay Clinton appeared in theaters and auditoriums. Clay Clinton guested for his fan-clubs. Clay Clinton did his act on the *U.S.A. Grandstand* television show, and two fourteen-year-old girls tore off his pink shoelaces for souvenirs.

He acquired a wardrobe of sixty suits and a fleet of nine Cadillac convertibles, and eventually reached such heights of success that he was seriously thinking about going to a psychiatrist.

But he just didn’t have the time. There was never any time, any more.

Eddie Puss had long since dropped out of sight. “You don’t need him,” the judge decided. “From now on, you plug standard tunes. Besides, I’ve got other assignments for him to handle.”

That was something Luther had learned; he was indeed far from the only client Judge Harmer dealt with. It seemed, in his travels through the enchanted realms of show business, that the judge had connections everywhere. Although he specialized in teenage talent, it almost appeared as though teen-agers had taken over the bulk of the entertainment outlets in the country. Between rock-’p-roll singers and progressive jazz combos, they dominated the musical end, and there was little else.

“Of course, there’s the movies to be considered,” the judge said, thoughtfully. “I’ve got something working for me out there.”

“You mean you’re active in Hollywood too?” Luther marveled.

“Why not? Who do you think is responsible for all those pictures about juvenile delinquents? If it wasn’t for the how-to-do-it movies, the average kid wouldn’t know how to handle a switch-blade or smoke a reefer.”

“You’re kidding, of course,” Luther said.

“And then there’s the monster-movies,” the judge went on. “That’s a pretty important department. You know the kind—*I Was A Teen-Age Supreme Court Justice,* and *Invasion of the Giant Spirochetes?* I’ve been promoting them pretty heavily, and with fine results. Ten years ago there was a lot of silly talk about motion-picture audiences with a mental age of twelve. Well, we’ve made a lot of progress since then. I think we’ve got it down to around seven. Of course, this doesn’t include western fans or Mickey Spillane addicts, or the people who think a girl is hiding her talent if she wears a brassiere. If we included them, we’d have the index of intelligence down to about five years of age.”

“I doubt it,” Luther mused. “Well, I can dream, can’t I?” the judge retorted.

“Look here,” said Luther. “You aren’t serious, are you? You don’t really want to put out all this crud? I mean, in my spare time between shows, I’ve been doing quite a bit of reading on my own—”

“Reading?” The judge raised his eyebrows. “Mother had strict orders to keep you on *Billboard* and *Mad Comics.”*

“Mother isn’t around much,” Luther confessed. “When all this loot started pouring in she came to me and hinted about retiring. Said it wasn’t so much her idea as it was the cat’s. It seems like the cat had always wanted to settle down in a little vine-covered cottage and raise mice for a hobby. And for twenty thousand dollars, mother found just the place—not exactly a cottage, but a lovely old liquor store. She said that with all that wine and stuff around she wouldn’t need any vines. So I bought it for her, and she cut out.”

“Leaving you to read, eh?” The judge frowned.

“Well, like why not? I mean, I dig education the most. I figure education is one of the best forms of learning, particularly if you want to know something. And like that there.”

“It’s corrupting your taste, son. Pretty soon it will affect your art.”

"I meant to flip my lip about that, too." Luther sighed.

"You know, sometimes I wonder if all this singing I do is really the living end. I get to thinking it's cornball. Now you take this character Boris Pasternak and what he says about the artistic conscience bit—"

"Look." Judge Harmer put his hand on Luther's shoulder. "You're a singer. I'm your agent. I made you. I have further plans. Your only job is to carry them out."

"But why? I'm making plenty of money now. I could retire on royalties. And you've got other clients, a lot of them."

"It isn't a question of money. It's a question of ethics."

"Ethics?"

"Sure, what else have we been talking about? Ethics—I want to degrade them. I won't rest until the whole world is rocking and rolling."

"But why?"

"Because it's my duty, that's why. Just as it's mother's duty to be a respectable, practicing witch instead of running off to lush it up in a liquor store. Not that I have anything against lushes, understand—they're quite acceptable, in a way. But the major task comes first. To corrupt, and to destroy."

Luther grinned. "So you're back to that old line again," he said. "Trying to scare me with that phoney superstition talk. Well, it won't work. I've come a long way since you met me in the swamp."

"And you can go right back there if you aren't careful," the judge retorted. "Very well, I have no intention of convincing you that I'm an emissary of infernal powers. Just let me say this, though—when you argue against bad taste, you're arguing against your own bread and butter, to say nothing of the necessities of life, such as caviar and champagne. Forget all this nonsense about self-improvement."

"But I don't want to forget—"

"Then remember this. You and I have a contract. And according to the terms, I'm entitled to plan your itinerary. From now on I'll see to it that you're so busy you won't have time to read or moon around with a lot of egghead ideas, either."

The judge stood up. "Start packing," he said. "I'm taking you right to the Home Office." He frowned grimly.

Luther gulped. "Now, look here," he said. "Don't put me down."

"Put you down? That's a good one." Judge Harmer chuckled gutturally.

"It isn't that I believe you, or anything," Luther quavered. "But you keep talking about the Home Office. I understand that the climate in Hell is pretty bad."

The judge laughed again. "Who said anything about Hell? Where I'm taking you, the climate is even worse. This is the twentieth century, son, and we move with the times. Our Home Office is in Hollywood!"

Luther Snodgrass was in Hollywood for exactly three days when he met Mary Jane Hawkins. He happened to be sitting in the outer office of Judge Harmer's agency office on Vermont when the girl walked in.

He watched the little blonde request an interview from the receptionist, and saw her receive the usual brush-off—the *don't-call-us-we'll-call-you* routine. He noted how her shoulders sagged, and noted too how other salient portions of her anatomy remained fascinatingly firm.

Then she turned away, and saw him sitting there, and something happened.

It was hate at first sight. "Clay Clinton!" the girl exclaimed. "Aaargh!"

"What?" said Luther, rising to his feet.

"Aaargh!" the little blonde repeated. "Also pfaugh!"

"I don't dig you, chick." Mary Jane moved closer and peered up at him. "You *are* Clay Clinton, aren't you?"

"Well—like yes, I guess so."

"Then blecchhh," she told him. "To say nothing of bracchhh. And, if you'll pardon the expression, *pfui!"*

"Now wait a minute, doll. Listen to me—"

"I *have* listened to you," Mary Jane told him. "Which is precisely what I mean when I say—"

"Let's not go through that routine again," Luther said, hastily. "It hurts me to hear such sounds coming out of a lush thrush like you."

"You're a fine one to talk," the girl retorted. "What about the sounds *you* make?"

"Are you knocking my singing?" Luther demanded.

"Singing!" She sighed dismally. "That's what you call it, eh?"

"Well, I may not be the greatest," Luther admitted, "but it's a living. I mean, I got nine Cadillacs, and—"

"Sure. You've got nine Cadillacs. And meanwhile, a girl like me can't even get an audition from an agent. That's because I have a trained voice and all the public wants to hear nowadays is a lot of screeching. You and your kind are responsible for that."

"Now don't make a federal case out of it," Luther murmured. "Don't hang me, judge!"

"I wish I could. I happen to love music, and when I think of what you've done to ruin singing in this country, I could just scream."

"In what key?"

"Now you're making fun of me." Mary Jane stamped her foot petulantly, and it was Luther who screamed, because she came down on his toes.

"Ohh—I'm sorry—I didn't mean to lose my temper—"

"That's all right," Luther told her.

"I apologize for being so rude."

"You only told the truth."

"What?" She stared at him.

"I know I can't sing," Luther said.

"But—"

“Let me explain.” He smiled at her. “Kind of a long story, so I won’t do a stand-up routine. How about lunch?”

Cadillac Number Seven (the pink one, with the purple upholstery) happened to be on the parking lot outside, and he drove her to the Derby. And it was there that he told her the story.

“I can’t believe it,” she murmured, shaking her head slowly.

“This is Truthville, U.S.A.,” Luther insisted.

“But it’s fantastic!” Mary Jane wrinkled her forehead. “It’s absurd to think of the Devil trying to take over the entertainment and television industry in this town! Besides, he wouldn’t have a chance, as long as Desi Arnaz is around.”

“I didn’t go for the bundle myself, really,” Luther confessed. “Not until Judge Harmer brought me out here and I dug what went on around his office. In the past couple of days I’ve seen him do business with half the weirdies in show biz.”

He described some of the no-talent he’d met—the orchestra leaders who couldn’t read music and their musicians who couldn’t play a note as written—the offbeat young actors from the torn-shirt schools of drama who seemed to have a madness in their Method—the dancers whose movements depended less on choreography than on the tightness of their underwear.

“All right,” Mary Jane conceded. “I know a lot of these people are bad. But that doesn’t mean they’re part of some organized conspiracy. Aren’t you exaggerating just a trifle?”

Luther shook his head earnestly. “Has to be a plot,” he insisted. “How else would all those idiot M.C.s get jobs on those daytime give-away shows? Where do all the loudmouthed announcers come from with their pitches for pile remedies?”

“But surely it’s not the Devil’s work?”

"Oh, no?" Luther stared at her triumphantly. "Who do you think invented the singing commercial?"

"Well—"

The girl was weakening. "You heard how I got into this racket," Luther continued. "Judge Harmer admitted he was an agent, didn't he? He laid it on me about how he was out to ruin the public's taste. It figures."

"Yes, it figures." Mary Jane nodded at him. "You're a nice person, Clay. I misjudged you."

"Call me Luther," he begged.

"All right—Luther. I'm ashamed of the way I acted when we met. Now that you've told me your story, I think I'm beginning to understand the situation. And I'd like to help you."

"You can't help me," Luther said. "I never knew until recently that I was no good, and that the reason I was hired was just because I was so terrible. But it's too late to do anything about that now. I'm under contract."

"Contracts can be broken."

"This one is in perpetuity." Luther smiled and shrugged. "When the judge told me that, I thought he was talking about a place. Since then I've done a little reading, you know? I'm up on all this longhair talk."

"Like paranoid delusions, for example?"

"Huh?"

"Like sick-sick-sick," the girl explained, patiently. "Rationalizing your sudden success into a diabolical conspiracy."

"Stop making like a square," Luther begged her. "All I know is, I've got a contract. I'm hooked."

"You really believe this?"

"If I don't, may I drop dead and work for Lawrence Welk."

Mary Jane bit her lip. "Please—watch your language."

"I'm sorry."

"I'm sorry, too." She gazed at him for a long moment. "Well, if there something to what you say, then maybe there's a way out."

"Like what?"

"Perhaps you need to be exorcised."

"I get all the exercise I need at the hotel swimming-pool."

"Not exercise—*exorcise.* That means to cast out demons."

"You mean there's a way to get rid of the Devil?"

"I wouldn't know. But I do know there are a lot of psychic mediums in this town. Some of them claim to be able to communicate with spirits. Suppose you went to one and presented your problem? Maybe something could be done."

"But I wouldn't know where to find a cat like that."

"Let's try the Yellow Pages."

And sure enough, in one of the five phone-books of Greater Los Angeles, they discovered Dunn.

Medium Dunn turned out to be a little old man who operated a spiritualist parlor on Fairfax, above one of those used-clothing shops which specialized in selling the discarded costumes of motion picture stars. There was a big sale on leopard-skin trusses left over from an old Tarzan movie in the downstairs section, but up above all was quiet.

Little Mr. Dunn listened to Luther's story in silence and seemed not at all surprised at his client's revelations.

"Do you think you can help him?" Mary Jane asked.

"I'm not sure." The little old man cupped his hand to his ear. "Who did you say it was held your contract?"

"Judge Harmer. At least, that's what he calls himself."

"Judge Harmer." The cupped hand trembled perceptibly. "I was afraid I'd heard the name."

"Then you know him?"

"Yes. He's got quite a reputation in certain circles."

"Could you exorcise his influence?"

Medium Dunn shook his head slowly. "Judge Harmer is mighty big in this town," he said. "Mighty big. He's got quite a large and dependent following.”

“Then there’s nothing you can do?”

“I didn’t say that.” Medium Dunn peered out of the window at the pink Cadillac. “For a reasonable offering—say a thousand dollars—I can put you in touch with certain parties who have the power to negotiate. Mind you, I couldn’t help you break the contract; I can’t promise that. All I can do is open the way for a meeting.”

“A conference?”

“You might call it that.”

“When? Where?”

“Now. And right here. If you happen to have the thousand on you. Or are you one of those people who never carry more than fifty dollars in cash?”

“I never signed for those ads,” Luther told him, pulling out an alligator billfold and prying open its jaws. “Here’s the loot.”

Medium Dunn glanced at the girl. “I’m going to ask you to step outside and wait,” he said.

Mary Jane departed for the reception room and settled down with a bundle of old psychic magazines. She buried her nose in a copy of *The Saturday Evening Ghost* and kept it there, even when the smell of burning sulphur issued from behind the closed doors. She could hear the scraping of chalk on the floor and the sound of an eery chant. Then there was silence.

Inside the darkened room, Luther Snodgrass lay on a couch. He too could smell the sulphur, hear the chalk tracing a curious geometrical figure which resembled nothing so much as a pentagram with two pairs of pants. And then he listened to the chanting. His eyes closed, and the chanting rose to a faint and faroff wail. The smoke rose around him in the darkness. And then—

And then he was rising, not to walk but to swoop through space. He was rising, or was he falling? He didn’t know, because all at once there were no directions any more; no *up,* no *down.* But Luther moved, moved through blackness into deeper night. And there was a circle of light which moved with him, supporting his substance until he stood silently before the shadows.

Behind the shadows were stars, and he realized then that he must be in outer space.

"I'm way out," he said.

The shadows stirred. Stirred and blurred. Blurred and brightened.

Now he could see the enormous outlines of the crouching figures, stare into the gigantic eyes which held all emptiness. There were two figures, four eyes. He faced them, puzzlement overriding panic.

"Two?" he muttered to himself. "I always thought there was only one—"

"*There is one,"* came the reply. *"But he is not here. We are but judges."*

"Judges? What do I need with a judge?"

"*You wish to discuss a contract, is that not so?"*

"Yes."

"Then it is a matter of law, and judges are required."

"I never thought of it that way."

"We will hear your plea."

"Well—"

"Proceed. There is no to waste. The Devil will find work for idle hands to do." Two pairs of gigantic hands reached towards Luther's neck, and he retreated hastily to the center of the circle of light.

"I get the message," he said, shuddering. "But it's really just a simple bit. You see, there's this deal I have on with Judge Harmer, if you happen to know him—"

"*We know him. He is our brother."*

"Ullp! Your brother, eh?" Luther hesitated, then plunged on. "Well, we had this little agreement, dig? Only now I want out. That's all there is to it. I want out."

"You signed a contract?"

“Uh—yes.”

“Then you are committed. There is no legal way to free yourself of obligation unless he releases you.”

“But couldn’t you persuade him?”

“Why should we?”

“Can’t I buy my way out?”

“*With what?”*

“Money. Loot. Moola. Look, I’m loaded. I’ve got nine Cadillacs—”

“What do we want with your Cadillacs? We do not run a used-car lot. Although, naturally, we do business with many used-car dealers.” There was faint amusement in the booming voice, but none in Luther’s quivering whisper.

“But there must be some way I can lick this thing. If you don’t want money, what do you want?”

There was a long pause until the voices came again.

“We do not buy.”

“We do not sell.”

“But at times we trade.”

“Trade what?”

“An eye for an eye. A tooth for a tooth.”

“I didn’t sell any eyes or teeth.”

“We know what you sold “

“So shall toe say—a soul for a soul?”

“Another soul in exchange for mine? But whose—”

“*There is a girl. One who trusts you.”*

“Now, hold it—”

“If you were to take her to Judge Harmer, she would go willingly enough. You would tell her you were mistaken about him, that it was all a delusion on your part. You would say that you were using your influence to secure her an opportunity. It could be arranged for the judge to offer her a contract. Once she signs, you are released.”

“That would be a fair exchange.”

“Like hell it would! Nothing doing!”

“Then your plea is dismissed.”

“But—”

“Go.”

The huge hands reached forth. And the voices boomed. *“A final teaming. Do not attempt to evade your contract. This time you have come to us. But next time we can come to you.”*

The hands swooped down and Luther moved. He blurred his way through darkness and then he was falling into the endless emptiness beyond the stars. Falling back on the couch in the little room. Yes, he was there once more, and awake. He could smell the sulphur.

Only it wasn’t sulphur, now. It was something else. Something like brimstone—“How’d you make out?” Medium Dunn inquired.

Luther blinked and sat up. “You mean you don’t know?” he asked. “You didn’t see them, or hear them?”

“I noted nothing,” the little old man said. “You appeared to be in a deep trance. Quite similar to that of a hypnotic subject.” He brightened. “I happen to be a competent hypnotist, too,” he continued. “In case you are ever in need of such services—”

“Never mind,” Luther said, rising.

“I am adept at Reichian psychotherapy,” Dunn said. “Orgone treatments day or night, by appointment.”

“Not interested.”

“Tea leaf readings?” Medium Dunn grasped his arm as he hastened towards the door. “How about a high colonic—?”

“Let’s get out of here,” Luther gasped, pulling Mary Jane to her feet and leading her over to the stairway.

“You might stop downstairs,” Medium Dunn called hopefully. “Tell them I sent you and get a ten per cent discount. I understand they have something special in Jayne Mansfield’s old bras—”

The smog was reddening into sunset as they reached the street. Luther opened the door of the Caddy and helped the girl to enter.

“How did it go?” she asked. “What happened?”

“Wait,” he said. “I don’t want to talk here.”

They drove in silence up through the hills. In spite of what the TV comics say, it is possible to find a certain serenity in the darkness on Mulholland Drive. And it was there, gazing down across the neon nonentity that is the city, that Luther told Mary Jane of his experience.

“Or was it a dream?” he concluded. “I don’t know.”

“In any case, you protected me.” the girl said. “I’m proud of you.”

“I’m not proud,” Luther answered. “I’m scared. If it *was* just a cooky dream, then I’m flipping. And if it happens to be real, well—”

“Forget it,” Mary Jane commanded.

“How?”

She showed him. Nice girl or no, Mulholland Drive has a magic all its own. And as she entered his arms, Luther murmured, “Don’t worry, baby. I won’t let anybody hurt you. And I’m going to get out of this deal, wait and see—”

Suddenly he froze. For there was no need to wait and see. He was seeing, right now.

He was seeing the neon lights blotted out, obscured by the huge talons which descended from the sky, shoving aside the stars as they scrabbled towards him.

“Honey, what’s the matter?” Mary Jane whimpered.

The claws came closer. Luther shuddered.

“They’re here,” he whispered. “They’re watching. They know they can’t have you—and they won’t let me touch you, either.”

“You’re imagining these things,” the girl reassured him. “I don’t see anything.”

“I do.”

“Look.” She sat upright, faced him, grasped his hands.

"You're not well. You ought to get out of here, go away from all this. I'll come with you."

"But—"

"Let me take care of you. I want to."

"We'd be poor." Luther glanced up at the sky nervously.

"Who cares?"

"But you don't know what a raunchy character I was when I was poor. Strictly a no-goodnik. Anything for kicks. I was willing to sell my soul—"

"You're not like that any more. We'd get along, I'm sure we would."

"No." Luther was watching something outside the car. He didn't look at her.

"You don't love me, is that it?"

He looked at her then. "Of course I do. Can't you understand? I *want* to go. But they won't let me. They have a contract. They have plans for me. Me and my lousy voice."

"All right." Mary Jane turned away. "I guess I *do* understand, after all. There's no need to hand me a line about how you hate what you're doing, or dream up any more stories about the Devil. I can take a hint. When it comes to a choice between me and nine Cadillacs—"

"It's not that at all," he protested. "There isn't a Cadillac made that can compare with you. Why, I'd trade them all in for just one—"

"I'm not an automobile dealer," she sniffed. "Just take me home, please."

"But—"

"Please," she repeated, kicking him politely in the shins.

Luther drove her home in silence.

And all the way, the shadowy hands followed him across the sky, and somewhere between the stars the eyes blazed down . . .

Judge Harmer was waiting for him beside the swimming pool at the Beverly Hills Hotel.

“Where have you been, son?” he demanded. “What have you been up to?”

“I—” Luther hesitated, gulping.

“Don’t tell me, I already know.” Harmer raised a pudgy hand and smiled. “Well, it doesn’t matter. I’m sure you’ve learned your lesson. Now we can just let bygones be bygones and get down to business.”

“Business?”

The judge nodded. “I didn’t bring you out here for a rest cure,” he said. “Though speaking for myself, I could certainly use a black sabbatical. It’s time to go to work. I’ve just been talking to the Boss.”

“The Boss?”

“Who else? He’s out here, too. Just got in from Las Vegas. And he’s a little worried about the opposition.”

“What opposition?”

“There are certain signs of good taste creeping into the field, and he doesn’t like it. You know, things like Playhouse 90, some of those Sunday egghead shows. And movies are improving, too. We’ve got to hit, and hit hard. That’s where you come in. At midnight, Monday, in my office. He wants to meet you then.”

“Supposing I refuse?”

Judge Harmer glanced up at the sky.

“Nice clear weather we’re having. I’d hate to see a storm come up over the week end.”

Luther sighed. “What does he have in mind for me?”

“First of all, we’re lining up a regular television show for you. A full thirty-nine-week series, every hour staged like a spectacular. You know the bit—lots of guest stars for you to insult and call by their first names, plenty of novelty acts with chimpanzees. You’ve seen those dance-numbers they stage where three creeps in tights come out and swish around the singer? Well, money is no object—we’re going to hire *six* creeps for your show!

Already lined up a sponsor; he's one of the biggest laxative manufacturers in the business. We're going to have singing commercials, too. Remember all these cigarette programs where big burly guys go around puffing on cigarettes as soon as they've finished wrestling an alligator or jumping from a plane without a parachute? The ones where everybody has a tattoo on the back of his hand? Well, the sponsor came up with a great gimmick. Our guys are going to be tattooed on—hey, what's the matter, son?"

Luther groaned.

"Sounds like hard work, eh? Don't worry. You'll have writers. The best. We'll hire five of 'em just to turn out adlibs for you. The same guys who make up all the jokes about how Ed Sullivan looks like an undertaker, or an undertaker's customer. And that's not all."

"More, yet?"

"Certainly! Boss wants you to make a movie. He's doing the script himself. It's called *I Was A Teen-Age Plucker For The*—

"No!" Luther gasped. "No, not that!"

The judge glanced at the sky again and gestured with his cigar. Something brushed Luther's cheek, and a gigantic shadow blurred past him. There was a great splash in the swimming pool and the water suddenly began to steam.

"Hold it," Judge Harmer said, grasping Luther's collar. "I'd hate to see you fall into that pool. Looks to me like it's full of crocodiles, too—you see?"

Luther took one glance, then turned away. "Monday at midnight, you said?" His voice was dull.

"Right! In my office, remember. That gives you the whole week-end to rest up." Harmer nodded briskly and stepped away. "Well, if you'll excuse me, I have an engagement at Forest Lawn."

"At this hour?"

"The young lady prefers it." Judge Harmer chuckled. "Perhaps you'd care to join us? I'm sure we could dig up a date for you."

Luther shook his head and ran down the path towards his guest-house.

"See you Monday night, then," the judge called.

"Meanwhile, take care of your voice. We're counting on you."

Luther took care of his voice. He used it immediately, to call Mary Jane.

"I'm sorry," he said, over the phone. "I know you're making with the mad bit at me, and this is no time to bother you. But I'm really in trouble, and I've got to talk to someone. Unless you can help me—"

"I'll be right over," said Mary Jane Hawkins.

"Good." Luther glanced out of the window. "I was hoping you'd say that. Somehow, I don't care to go out at night myself. Not right now."

"Stay where you are. I understand."

She came over, just as she promised, and Luther told her the story.

And then, I think, is when Mary Jane came up with her idea. I say I *think,* but I'm not sure.

You see, I hadn't made the scene yet. In fact, I hadn't even met Luther Snodgrass.

I didn't meet him until Monday night.

That's when he walked into Judge Harmer's office and saw me, sitting all alone behind the big desk.

He stared at me as I checked my watch. It was midnight, right on the head.

His eyes bulged. "You're the boss?" he murmured.

"You?"

I smiled. "Why not?"

"But—"

"What did you expect, a long red tail?" I laughed and brushed the cigarette ashes from my sports-jacket.

"You're just a man, aren't you?" He was utterly deflated. "And here, all along, I've been thinking—"

"I know what you've been thinking." I shrugged. "That's what comes of too much reading, my boy. You've been digging the *Faust* bit, haven't you?

And *Damn Yankees,* and *Will Success Spoil Rock Hunter?* and all that jazz. You've got the idea that anyone can sell his soul for talent. Let's face it, *you're* not talented."

Luther nodded at me. "That's right. But the way I had it figured out, from what Judge Harmer told me, the Devil wasn't interested in real talent. He just wanted to corrupt everyone's taste, spoil their standards. From then on, he would find it easier to influence their morals. It was all a gigantic plot, and it sounded pretty logical to me. I mean, if the Devil were around today, he'd naturally go into the advertising business, and television, and public relations—"

"Please!" I raised my hand. "I grant you it all sounds logical. And if I were the Devil, I just might encourage people to produce shows like *Damn Yankees* and the rest, simply to be subtle and put the idea into folks' heads that it's possible to cook up a deal. But I'm not the Devil, as you can plainly see."

"Then Judge Harmer is crazy?"

"Like a fox," I told him. "The judge knows what he's doing. He's lined up a great career for you out here. You're going to come on strong. And that's what I want to talk to you about tonight. First, the television series—"

"You really are serious about this? Even though you know I'm lousy?"

"Let the great American Public be the ones to decide." I stared at him. "I see you brought your guitar. Good. There's a new number I want you to try—the theme-song for the show." I reached into my desk and brought forth a sheaf of sheet music. "Here it is. Brand new tune, be up there in the Top Ten three weeks after you introduce it. Great title, too. *Strontium-90 Daddy, Don't You Fall Out On Me!"*

He took the music and held it awkwardly.

"Prop it against the book-ends here and let's give it a try," I said. "Just run through it cold. I don't expect a finished performance—all I want is a general idea."

Luther Snodgrass nodded and raised his guitar. Then he smiled at me, cleared his throat, and began.

I got a finished performance.

And I do mean *finished.*

Standing there in my office, Luther Snodgrass sang as he'd never sung before—he sang *good.*

I couldn't believe my ears.

Out of his mouth came the pear-shaped tones of a trained vocalist. He sounded like a concert artist, and he played the guitar like Segovia.

"There." He put down the guitar. "How'd you like that?"

I didn't answer. I couldn't, for a moment. Then I whispered, "Try something else. Let me hear your old number—*If I Had To Do It All Over Again*—"

So he sang *that.* And it sounded, so help me, wonderful. He was even pronouncing the words so you could understand them.

"Try another," I muttered.

He did a third selection. It was even better. I didn't wait for him to finish but made him stop in mid-chorus.

"What's happened?" I demanded. "What's come over you? Why don't you sing the way you always do?"

"Always *did,"* he corrected. "I *can't* sing that way any more. I've been trained."

"By whom?" I snarled, bitterly. Wait until I get my hands on—"

"Mary Jane taught me," Luther said, happily. "Over the week end. From now on, I'm going to be a real singer."

"But how could you change in just one week end? And why can't you change back again?"

"Because she didn't teach me alone." Luther was positively grinning now. "She remembered something Dunn had mentioned."

"Medium Dunn?"

"That's the cat. He said he was also a hypnotist. So she took me to him, and he put me under hypnosis while she coached me. Planted subconscious suggestion, you see? Now I couldn't sing the way I used to, even if I wanted to—"

"Which you don't," I grated, savagely. "Because you know blessed well that with this new voice I can't possibly use you any more. That I'll have to release you from your contract."

"I only did it because I thought you were the Devil," Luther explained. "I just wanted to save my soul."

"You and your square soul! As far as I'm concerned, you can take it and —"

"Then you won't be needing me any longer?"

"Who needs you?" I swivelled away from him. "Look, I'm a businessman. I'm in the entertainment field and what I want is mediocrity. Fortunately, there's plenty of it around, just as awful as you were, too. I can get myself another boy. So run along. Go back to your Mary Jane. Marry her, settle down, raise six kids and the payments for the mortgage. Sweat out the rest of your days in some lousy factory, rendering chicken-fat."

"Thanks." Luther smiled. "No hard feelings, then?" He moved towards the door, then halted. "Wait until I explain to Mary Jane!" he said. "You know, I almost had convinced you were the Devil, too? I really believed the whole deal about how you had organized to ruin the world with rock-'n-roll and like that. Thanks for relieving my mind."

"Get lost," I said.

Luther Snodgrass went out. Out of the door, out of my hair. I reached up and touched my hair as Judge Harmer came in.

"Well?" he asked.

"You must have heard his voice," I told him. "I can't use anything like that. Send in this new kid—this Randy Studd."

Judge Harmer hesitated.

“You mean you let Luther Snodgrass go? Just like that?”

“Why not? He’s got everything figured out. I’m only a no-talent scout, in business for my wealth. No problem.”

Judge Harmer nodded and made his exit.

I continued to touch my hair, brushing my hand over my head carefully, so as not to muss my toupee.

That toupee cost $2,000, but it’s worth it.

It hides the horns . . .

THE END

The Man Who Knew Women

Before he left his motel room, Luis Manuel took a good look in the mirror. He wanted to make sure that Lou Manning was there.

His reflection reassured him. Lou Manning was very much present.

Actually, Luis Manuel was allergic to mirrors. He didn't like the sight of himself—a little, balding, swarthy man with a graying mustache and ill-fitting false teeth made by a prison dentist.

But Lou Manning was something to look at. He was at least two inches taller than Luis, thanks to the elevator shoes. The cheap choppers had long since been replaced by gleaming platework, and the bald forehead completely concealed with a curly brown hairpiece. A pair of scissors and a bit of dye transformed the straggly gray mustache into a black and virile symbol of masculinity.

Luis smiled and adjusted his silk tie. He admired his new tropical gabardine suit, his open-weave shirt, his oversize zircon ring. He didn't take pride in them for their own sake—it was the effect they created. The effect of Lou Manning. He was proud of the way Lou Manning looked, and proud of what Lou Manning could do.

In the past month, Lou Manning had done a lot. He had written all those letters to the Romance Club and carefully scanned the replies. He had selected Bessie Carmody as a likely prospect and given her a real snow job. To such good effect that before the month was up, he was out of the snow of Boston and down here in the warmth of Daytona Beach.

And the past week had seen even greater progress. Once he found out that Bessie Carmody really *was* a childless widow with an $8,000 bank account, Lou Manning really went to work on her. The old bat (she was fifty-three, just a trifle older than Luis Manuel) was flattered at the attentions of dashing, debonair Lou. And she was tired of working as a clerk at one of the Boardwalk motels. The idea of marrying a wealthy promoter was irresistible.

Lou Manning shrugged at his image. He was a promoter, all right, but he wasn't wealthy—yet. That's why he was promoting; he could use that $8,000 in a hurry. He'd gambled his last few hundred dollars to come down here, invest in a new outfit, and pitch a little woo at fat, foolish Bessie Carmody.

Well, the gamble had paid off. Before the week was out the marriage would go through.

So Lou Manning had every reason to be proud of himself. He knew how to handle women. It was like being an actor, he often rationalized. That's what he really was; an actor who played the role of Lou Manning.

This was quite a rationalization, for most people would consider Lou Manning a bad actor, in the slang sense of the term. He didn't play his part for applause, and although he had several captive audiences in the past, they all seemed to have disappeared.

But there was no need to worry about that now. Lou Manning picked up the corsage and the box of candy. Another eight bucks shot—but what the hell, he was shooting for eight *thousand* bucks. It was a good investment. Bessie, Carmody would be pleased with the corsage and her fat jowls would quiver over the candy.

And that's the way it worked out. When Lou left his shabby little motel and walked over to the lobby of the big $60-a-day establishment on the ocean side of the Boardwalk, Bessie was waiting for him. She did coo over the corsage and she did quiver over the candy, and it was all Lou could do to keep from laughing as he watched the plump, overdressed, middle-aged widow simpering girlishly and fluttering her eyelashes.

He planned, now, to take her out for dinner and a few drinks. That would cost him another twenty bucks or so, but it would be money spent for a purpose. He'd soften her up, make a date to get the marriage license tomorrow, and discuss where to spend their honeymoon. Lou had it all planned.

But there was one thing he hadn't planned on. When he kissed her on the forehead and said, "Well, shall we go now?" Bessie shook her head.

"Just a minute, dear," she told him. "I've got company. He'll be down right away."

"*He?*"

"Oh, here he comes now."

And sure enough, this character came walking down the stairs—this little thin, dried-up baldheaded guy with the rimless glasses and the pasty white complexion. He was wearing a light gray suit and a loud purple shirt—a real creep outfit. Lou Manning didn't like his looks and he didn't like his actions. He went right up to Bessie, smiled, and kissed her on the mouth. Lou wanted to clobber him.

Instead, he waited for the introduction.

It came. Bessie simpered and said, "Dear, I have a surprise for you. This is my brother, Bert Jackson."

This was a surprise, all right. She'd never mentioned a brother before. And what in hell was he doing here?

Lou didn't have to ask the question, because Bert Jackson was already supplying the answer.

"Take five," he said, holding out his hand. It was cold and small and soft, like a dead sardine. But he pumped Lou's arm up and down, and his voice was loud and hearty. "The kid wrote me about you last week," he said. "Told me you were going to make an honest woman out of her, so I didn't bother to bring my shotgun. So I figured I'd lay off for a week and take a run down here to get acquainted. After all, she's the only family I've got."

"You're not married, eh?" Lou asked.

"No, but I'm all for it. Marriage is a great institution—no family should be without it." Bert Jackson uttered a barking laugh and dug Lou in the ribs. "That's an old Cantor gag," he said.

Bessie smiled indulgently at her brother. “Bert used to be in vaudeville years ago,” she explained. “He was one of the best—”

“What do you mean, *used* to be?” Bert demanded. “I’m still working the same routine, only now they call it television. Of course, mainly I play club dates these days. My agent keeps me booked solid, and it’s sure a lot better than the old five-a-day. Or even the two-a-day.”

Bessie took her brother’s arm. “I hope you didn’t give up a good job just to run down here.”

“You know I always head south at least once a year for a change and a rest,” Bert Jackson said. He grinned at Lou. “The bellboys get the change and the bookies get the rest.”

Lou kept the forced smile in place. This fink and his corny chatter—was he going to be hanging around now?

Apparently so, because Bessie was saying, “I thought Bert could join us tonight for dinner.”

There was nothing else to do but go along with the gag; go along with the gagster. And that’s the way it worked out. Lou had planned to eat at a Chinese place with a bar attached, and he took them there. But the rest of his plans—including lining up the trip to the license bureau tomorrow—went by the board. He had no chance to talk to Bessie alone. In fact, he scarcely got a chance to talk at all. Bert Jackson took over in that department.

A few drinks put him in a reminiscent mood. Bessie herself had never been in what Bert Jackson insisted on calling “show biz” but apparently she’d followed her brother’s career, because he addressed himself mainly to her.

“Remember when I got my first big break on Orpheum time? Those were the days. Lou Holtz was doing a single in blackface; they were still imitating Tinney, you know. Only a few comics who didn’t work that old heckling routine with the orchestra leader. Old Herb Williams used to sock the leader over the head with a baseball bat. He had another great sight gag

—got himself a gimmick axe and hit the leader with that instead. But it backfired on him—looked too gruesome, see? So he had to cut it out."

Lou listened and wondered how it would be if he could hit Bert Jackson over the head with an axe. He wouldn't bother to use a fake one, either, if he had the chance. But all he could do was sit and smile.

"Of course, for my money the real comics were the ones who didn't force the laugh. Bert Wheeler and the apple-eating bit, and old Raymond Hitchcock in his baggy streetclothes with the hair hanging down in his eyes. I'll bet Will Rogers copied that getup from him. I was on a bill with Will once in Scranton, when he was still doing the rope act. He tried to teach it to Fred Stone. There was an all-round trouper for you, that Stone! Reminds me of Joe Cook, another guy who could do anything. Of course they all got into musical comedy or legit in the Twenties. I was only a kid, and by the time things started breaking for me, vaude was on its last legs. Oh, we had good people working—Fred Sanborn and his xylophone, Fanny and Kitty Watson, old Johnny Burke and his rookie monologue, Senator Murphy, and even some of the flash acts like Kellerman and the Gus Edwards gang. But you could see the end coming—"

Lou wished he could see the end coming. But he had to sit there and be polite, nodding at the mention of names that meant nothing to him. What did he know about Cross and Dunn or Savoy and Brennan or Jones and Hare? And what did her care about Lowe, Hite and Stanley or Willie West and McGinty or Herman Timberg, Jr.?

The more he drank, the more the little man talked. And Lou found himself drinking just in order to keep going. There came a time when he was grateful for that. Because somehow the conversation had shifted from vaudeville and gotten around to Lou Manning—what he'd done in the old days, where he'd come from, what he did for a living now.

Only it wasn't a case of "somehow"; Lou suddenly realized that Bert Jackson had deliberately led up to this. Quite a clever little operator, this old-time vaudevillian! On the other hand, since when was a two-a-day ham any match for a professional actor? And Lou Manning considered himself to be just that. Oh, he didn't give his performances on the legitimate stage—but in his own field, the illegitimate theatre, he was supreme. He knew how to build up a characterization, all right.

And he built one now. He parried all the questions Bert Jackson could throw at him. The drinks gave him confidence, and so did Bessie's plump hand resting on his wrist as he talked. He smiled at the little baldheaded brother and poured it on. He talked about his mining interests out west, and about his poor dead wife Florence, and about his hopes for the future.

The orphan from the Orpheum circuit ate it all up. How did he know that the closest Lou ever came to mining out west was a stretch on the rockpile, or that he never had a wife named Florence? There'd been one named Mae, and one named Ellen, and one named Dorinda, but never a Florence. And as to those hopes for the future—Lou carefully omitted all mention of the eight grand.

It worked all right. Walking home after leaving brother and sister at their motel, Lou congratulated himself. Until he remembered that he hadn't managed to talk to Bessie in private or discuss their plans. Bert Jackson had seen to that. All he had was a vague promise to see her tomorrow, after work.

Lou figured he had to do something about it, so he called her the next morning and arranged for a private get-together. To his surprise, Bessie offered no objections. In fact, she didn't even mention her brother.

That came later. It came when they met in the evening and sat on a bench overlooking the Boardwalk, watching the waves roll in. Lou had his arm around her and he was talking about the marriage license when he felt her stiffen. He knew enough about women to realize something was wrong.

"What's the matter, honey?" he asked. "You aren't getting cold feet, are you?

"No." Bessie stared out at the water. "It's just that—well, maybe we're rushing things a little."

"How can you say that? Only two days ago you were all set. You told me yourself how tired you were of living alone."

"I know. But I didn't have any choice, then."

"Don't tell me somebody else has come along to beat my time?"

Bessie giggled, but her heart wasn't in it. "Oh, nothing like that! It's just Bert."

"Bert? What about Bert?"

"Well—" She shifted uneasily, then faced him. "Bert says I should come and live with him. Says he's thinking of settling down in a place of his own, doing a little local TV work and maybe just playing the Borscht Circuit in summer. And he'd like me to keep house for him. It'll be just like being married, only—" Bessie hesitated, but Lou picked it right up.

"Only what?" he demanded.

"Nothing."

"Nothing, my eye!" Lou put his hand on her arm. "Bert doesn't want you to marry me, does he? I could tell that last night. He's got something against me.

"Oh, no!" Bessie's denial was emphatic. "He was very honest about that, dear—he hasn't got a single, solitary thing against you. It's just that he feels we haven't known each other long enough. He has an idea you're sort of rushing me into this."

Lou laughed. *"I'm* rushing you into this? What about him? He hasn't seen you for years and all at once he pops up down here and within twenty-four hours he's trying to promote you for a free housekeeper." Lou hesitated, then decided to take the risk. "And I'll bet he even suggested you go in with him and help pay for the house."

From the expression on Bessie's fat face, Lou knew his hunch had paid off. He bored in. "Sure," he said. "It's the Big Brother act, isn't it? He wants to protect you. Hah!" Suddenly he made his voice soften. "Don't get me wrong, honey. I'm not trying to knock the guy. But the way he struck me, from seeing him last night, is that Bert's not the type who'll ever really settle down. He never got married, did he? He's used to moving around, spending his money as fast as he earns it, and I'll bet he likes to take a little drink every now and then, too. I know these actors, honey—they're always out for a good time and a lot of laughs. But Bert isn't getting any younger, is he? And all of a sudden he realizes maybe it would be nice to have a home of his own and somebody to look after him."

"What's wrong about that?" Bessie demanded.

"Nothing. For Bert, it's perfect. But he's thinking about himself. And I'm thinking about you."

Lou's voice got even softer as he slid his arm around Bessie's waist. "You want your own home, don't you?" he said. "The kind of a home you used to have, when Clarence was still alive. Remember, how you told me about it? How nice it was to know that there was somebody to be with you, every night, somebody to love? You're still a young woman, Bessie. You don't need a brother—you need a husband."

It made Lou sick to have to talk this way; almost as sick as it did to put his arm around the old bag. But this was the kind of pitch that paid off. He kept on for quite a while, until Bessie started sobbing.

"You—you *do* love me, don't you, darling?" she wheezed. "I mean, it isn't just an act of some kind?"

"How can you even imagine such a thing?" Lou whispered. "No—don't answer me. You couldn't imagine it, I know. It would take Bert to think of an idea like that. Tell me the truth, now, Bessie. What other ideas has he been putting in your head?"

Bessie sobbed a little louder. She could scarcely get the words out. "He said he thought you were a—phony. And he said—" The words came in a rushing gurgle. "He said that you wore a toupee."

It sounded so damned funny Lou could scarcely choke back the laugh. On the other hand, it was damned serious, too. Women had the screwiest ideas, sometimes. Lou debated his reply a moment.

"All right," he said. "Your brother is a pretty shrewd observer. I *do* wear a toupee. But that's nothing to be ashamed of, is it? Is it?"

"N-no."

"But that's as far as it goes, dear. I'm not going to try and defend myself against Bert's suspicions. I don't think I have to. My actions speak for themselves. Have I ever done anything to make you think I'm a phony, as he puts it? Have I ever stepped out of line in any way? Answer me, Bessie—have I?"

"Of course not."

"All I've ever done is make you an honorable offer of marriage. Because I love you, and I want to take care of you. I don't want to see you slaving away in a motel, or spending the rest of your life keeping house for your selfish brother. You deserve a *real* home; a nice place out on the West Coast, maybe, with one of those Jap maids. Of course, we'll probably want to do a lot of traveling—Mexico, Hawaii, places like that—"

Lou poured it on now, and she took it all in; she wanted to take it all in. She didn't care about the lousy toupee any more. He could have told her he had a wooden leg and a truss and she'd still buy the deal. So he put the deal to her now.

"No sense starting any family argument," he said. "I don't want to see you quarreling with your brother. And that's just the way it's going to be, if you go back and tell him what I said. Nothing's liable to make him change his mind. He'll have to see for himself that things are different. We'll just write him a postcard from Miami Beach."

"Miami Beach?"

"Sure. Isn't that a nice place for a honeymoon?" Lou squeezed her close. "I had the plans all made before Bert showed up—even wired for reservations. I figured we'd get married Saturday and take off right away. Spend a couple of weeks just lying around in the sun—maybe fly over to Nassau for a while, if you like." He squeezed harder. "But now I've got an even better idea. You and I aren't going to get married at all. We're going to elope—tomorrow."

"Elope?"

"That's right, honey. You aren't going to go through any big scene with that brother of yours."

"But I'd have to give notice—there's a million and one things to do."

“Never mind. I want you to go back to your place and pack up, now. We’ll take the morning plane out.” Lou smiled at her. “From now on, this is my show.”

The rest was easy. There wasn’t even any hitch about the money; Bessie was the one who suggested she go down and draw it out of the bank before they took off.

Lou stuck close to her all the way. Once she’d gotten out of the motel without her brother seeing her, his troubles were over.

The following afternoon they were in Miami. Bessie had a fresh corsage and Lou had the eight grand in a cashier’s check nestling in his wallet. Right after they were married Bessie wanted him to open a joint account.

Lou knew his women, all right. He played it very straight. He never touched Bessie, never made a suggestion. They took their tests, waited, and went in the following week for a civil ceremony.

Apparently Bert Jackson hadn’t been able to figure out their destination, because he never followed them. Lou took the precaution of registering under a phony name, but just the same he sweated it out until the marriage was performed. He didn’t want that wise little creep to stick his nose in and queer the pitch.

After the ring was on Bessie’s finger he allowed her to send two wires. One went to the motel in Daytona and the other to her brother’s regular address in Newark, just in case he’d returned home.

A few days later, he even let Bessie sit down and write a long letter to Bert Jackson at the Newark address, telling him how happy she was and inviting him to pay them a visit when they got established in a place of their own.

Again Lou sweated, worrying about the off-chance of having the guy suddenly show up to spoil the honeymoon. But he must have decided he was licked, because he didn’t answer and he didn’t appear.

So the honeymoon wasn’t spoiled, after all.

It was nice to put up at a swanky joint, eat at the best places, and do the town at night. Of course, steering this old tub around was no picnic, but Lou knew how to handle her. He kept pouring drinks and it worked. Bessie wasn’t used to liquor, but she got so she liked it. Lou tried to keep her stoned at night and he saw to it that she attracted attention when he dragged her back to the hotel. This all cost dough, but it was necessary. Every day was eating farther into that eight grand, and yet he had to stall for time.

He waited until well into the second week before he sat down and sent off his own letter to Bert Jackson. It was a little masterpiece—it ought to be, because he rewrote it four times, one morning while Bessie slept off a hangover. Let bygones be bygones, forgive and forget, we’re all one family now—that sort of thing. And then the plant, just a touch, about how Bessie was very happy but she had to take things a little easy on account of the old ticker.

That was enough for Bert, Lou figured. The next step was to spread the word around. Whenever Bessie slept late, he made a point of showing up in the lobby downstairs. He told the maids and room service not to disturb his wife, because she wasn’t well.

Once, as a master stroke, he even managed to give *her* the needle. During the course of a particularly bad hangover he convinced her that she should see the house physician.

He was a young squirt who didn’t know his stethoscope from second base. All he did was examine her and give her a couple of pills. But his visit gave Lou a chance to take him aside privately and put on the old act.

“I don’t know what to think, Doc,” he said. “It scares me, sometimes. We’re just married, you know—and I never realized that she—well—” He allowed his voice to trail off in embarrassment. “Don’t you have some kind of pills that sort of take away the craving?”

The house physician gave him some advice on how to keep Bessie away from the sauce and even promised to come back again and talk to her about it when she felt better.

Lou thanked him, and then he went to work.

He got the digitalis at a drugstore way out in the sticks. As a matter of fact, *he* didn’t get it; Luis Manuel got it. Luis Manuel, the baldheaded little guy, wearing big hornrims and driving a rented car.

But it was Lou Manning who arranged for the Saturday night binge at the nitery down the street.

And it was Lou Manning who brought Bessie back to the hotel, stewed to the eyeballs, and poured her a nightcap when she got to bed.

It was Lou Manning who gave her the digitalis, got rid of the bottle, cleaned and refilled the glass, and saw that she put her own fingerprints all over it again. It was Lou Manning who ran the shower to cover up the sound of her groans.

Bessie didn’t have to do anything but die.

When she stopped threshing around and her eyeballs rolled up and the gasping ceased, he knew it was safe to call the house physician.

There were no problems.

He told his story about the sudden attack, and the death certificate read “cardiac collapse during acute gastroenteritis.” Everybody was very sorry, and the cemetery lot was easy to buy, and nobody came to the funeral to comment on the cheap casket or the lack of flowers. That’s because, in his grief and confusion, Lou forgot to wire Bert Jackson until the day before the funeral. So Bert couldn’t possibly have made it down there in time.

But those things happen and must be forgiven. And it was perfectly understandable that the stricken husband wouldn’t stay at the hotel any longer. If Bert Jackson did show up later, they could explain it to him.

As for Lou Manning, he didn’t wait around. The day after Bessie was planted he checked out. Fortunately, he’d never quite managed to open a joint account, and he had over seven thousand of Bessie’s money in cash. He bought himself a ticket to San Juan.

He figured he deserved a little vacation.

There was a girl named Encarnacion and there was a thing called a Silver Punch and there was a gambling casino. Lou Manning didn't quite know where to place the blame. All he knew was that a month later he was back in New York with less than a grand left in his pocket.

He'd blown the wad. It was a damned fool thing to have done, but there it was.

But easy come, easy go. And there always plenty more where that came from.

Lou checked into a small East Side hotel, went around to a cheap printer and got some letterheads made up, and batted out another inquiry to the Romance Club. He enclosed the usual fee.

After that, there was nothing else to do but wait.

It took several weeks for the first replies to come in, and at first nothing looked good. Some Polack waitress out in Montana with two kids—a dame in Chicago who claimed she owned a big estate but who wrote on cheap stationery which gave her away immediately as a phony. Lou Manning could smell a phony a thousand miles away.

So he sweated it out, cutting down his expenses to eighty bucks a week. Sooner or later the right one would come along. He'd been through this before. There was nothing to worry about, because when the right one came, he'd handle her. Lou knew women.

Sure enough, he got a break.

The break's name was Mrs. Amy Goodrich.

She said she was forty-one and sent a picture to prove it, but that meant nothing. Usually they cut about fifteen years off their ages and used an old snapshot. Lou Manning didn't care about that, one way or another.

What interested him was the eight-unit apartment building left to her by her late husband. It was too much for her to handle alone; she had no relatives and few close friends. That's why she had written to the Romance Club, she told him in her second letter. It made her feel just a wee bit foolish and ashamed, but she needed a friend.

Lou Manning liked her letters. They were neatly typed and the grammar was good but not *too* good—which was perfect, because you had to watch out for the brainy types. Lou liked her setup, too. There was just one thing wrong with the deal, though.

Mrs. Amy Goodrich lived in Miami Beach.

Normally, he'd have arranged to rush right down, but this was a special problem. Miami Beach was entirely too close to Miami.

So he tried to work the angles. He wrote, assuring her that he was the friendly type. And it just so happened that he had some experience in property management and real estate. As soon as he disposed of his own holdings in New York, he was going to California. Right now he couldn't possibly get away until the deal was cleaned up. But why didn't she try to sell her place and fly into town for a visit so that they could get better acquainted?

Of course he didn't lay it on the line cold like that, and he didn't crowd all his suggestions in at once. There was plenty of padding and sweet-talk in between, and he managed to stretch his proposal over four letters. He built up a very convincing picture of himself as a well-to-do widower, and he was really in there pitching at the end. He had to, because he was down to a little over six hundred dollars.

But Amy Goodrich wouldn't buy—or, rather, she wouldn't sell. Lou realized, too late, that he'd outsmarted himself.

If he had experience in handling property (she wrote) then why didn't he come down and pay *her* a visit? Maybe he could help handle the deal and get a better price. Or perhaps he might decide it would be a good idea to keep the apartments, which really brought high rentals in season. She was telling him these things assuming that she could trust him and that he was serious about his intentions. Of course, there was only one way to find out and that was to get acquainted personally. His letters sounded charming, but a lonely woman has to be sure of things before she entrusts her future to a stranger. She hoped they'd be compatible, because she didn't want to spend the rest of her life alone. And she was relieved to find out that he was fairly well-off too. That's what had kept her away from the men she met in Miami Beach—they all seemed to be broke and out after her money. Couldn't he just take a week off for a flying visit?

Lou Manning thought it over. He weighed the possible risks, and found them negligible. He inspected his bankroll. That was negligible, too.

Then he sent the wire and took off for Miami Beach.

Fortunately, the season was over and he was able to get a decent break at a nice hotel. A week there would be all he could possibly afford, but a week might be long enough. It *had* to be long enough.

The minute he got into his room he phoned Mrs. Goodrich at the number she'd given him in her last letter. Somebody answered—sounded like the maid—and said Mrs. Goodrich was out at the real estate office, but she'd left word for him to meet her if he called. She'd be in the dining room of the Savoy, at one. Did he know where the Savoy was, in Miami?

Lou knew where the Savoy was, all right. Less than three blocks away from the hotel where he'd stayed with Bessie.

But what the hell. He couldn't turn chicken. Besides, there wasn't any possible risk. Bessie was dead and buried and forgotten. And Mrs. Goodrich was spending the morning at the real estate office. Did that mean she'd changed her mind and was planning to sell her property and surprise him?

He had to find out.

So Lou Manning put on a blue shirt and a red tie and inspected his black mustache in the mirror. Then he rented himself a nice, shiny convertible and drove into Miami. A lot depended on making a good first impression. As he rode along he began to plan his opening remarks. By the time he entered the lobby of the Savoy he was all ready to go to work on Amy Goodrich. He glanced at his watch. One o'clock on the head. She'd be waiting for him in the dining room.

He started across the lobby toward the dining room entrance, but he never got that far. Midway in his progress he bumped into somebody, muttered, "Excuse me" and started to brush past. But a hand on his arm detained him.

Lou turned around and stared at Bert Jackson.

The little baldheaded man blinked up at him and smiled. “Here you are,” he said. “I’ve been trying to locate you for over a month now, but they said you left town. How about that, my friend?”

“I—I was sick,” Lou told him. “It was a shock and everything. Doctor told me to get away for a rest.”

“Which doctor?” Bert Jackson asked. “The house physician?”

Lou stiffened. What did the creep mean, making a crack like that?

But Bert Jackson was smiling, and Lou remembered to relax. Of course her brother would talk to the house physician when he came down here. Naturally, he’d ask for details. There was nothing out of line. Jackson sounded friendly enough.

“How about a drink?” he was saying. “We ought to have a talk.”

For a moment Lou was tempted to brush him off, then thought better of it. He had to find out what Bert Jackson knew and he couldn’t afford to make him suspicious by running away. Amy Goodrich would wait. Lucky for him he’d met Bert while he was still alone.

So Lou nodded and they went into the bar and took a booth and talked.

There was no need to ask any leading questions, because the little man went right ahead and told his story. He had been pretty upset when Bessie had run off with Lou that way in Daytona Beach, but when she wrote and assured him of her happiness he got over it. He’d received the letter in Newark, where he was working a few club bookings with the old act. Funny thing, he’d run into one of the Six Brown Brothers—did Lou by any chance happen to remember them?

Lou didn’t remember the Six Brown Brothers, and he wasn’t interested. He prodded Bert Jackson to continue.

“I was out of town when your wire came,” Bert said, “and when I got back I knew the funeral must have been held already. But I called the hotel. You must have known I would—why didn’t you stick around?”

“I was too upset,” Lou answered. “Like I told you. I had to get away.”

“You should have left a forwarding address.”

"I didn't know where I'd be. I meant to write you again when I got settled down. Just arrived in town today." He paused, wondering whether or not to ask the question. But he had to.

"How come you're here?"

Bert Jackson shrugged. "Got myself a booking. Three weeks, maybe four. I've been in town a week already."

That sounded logical. Lou decided it was safe for him to turn on the grief. A nice little act—bereaved husband describes his wife's last hours to her brother.

But Bert was sparing him the trouble. "Naturally, I did a little checking up," he was saying. "I talked to the people at the hotel, and to the doctor you called in for Bessie. But I didn't find out until today that you'd gone to San Juan."

Lou took a big gulp of his drink. All at once he felt very cold.

"Nice place to rest up," Bert continued. "And even if you had a shock, there was Bessie's money to cushion it for you."

"Bessie's money? But she didn't have—"

"Eight thousand dollars," Bert Jackson said, nodding. "Oh, I knew all about her bank account, my friend. And so did you. You came down here with Bessie and her eight thousand dollars. Now Bessie is gone, and I suppose the money is gone, too."

"What business is that of yours?"

"I'm not concerned with the money. It's Bessie I'm thinking about." Bert Jackson wasn't smiling now. He leaned forward, one slim white hand tapping the table. "What really happened to my sister? Tell me."

"But you know what happened. She had this attack—"

Bert sighed. "Never mind. I didn't think you'd really level with me, anyway."

"I *am* leveling with you! What do you *want* me to tell you?"

"Just the truth. Did she really have a heart attack, Lou? Or—"

Lou took a deep breath. "Look here, I don't have to sit here and take this kind of stuff from you. You say you talked to the people at the hotel. You talked to her doctor. They'll back me up."

Bert Jackson sighed again. "Yes. They already have. As far as the record goes, you're clean. And being her husband, I suppose you're entitled to the money, too. But I know what you were up to, Lou. Romancing a fat, foolish middle-aged woman, giving her the big rush act—"

Lou Manning knew that the crisis was over. Bert didn't really have a leg to stand on; he'd just admitted as much. So he could relax and go into his pitch again.

"You've got me all wrong, Bert. I loved her, and she loved me. She was happy, but you wouldn't understand that. You're a bachelor—you don't know anything about women—"

Now what in hell had he said wrong? It must have been something, because Bert Jackson wasn't reacting properly.

The little man was laughing.

It wasn't a mirthful laugh, but it was genuine. Bert Jackson's shoulders shook. He stood up and gazed down at Lou, and there was no mistaking the hatred that shone in his eyes. But he laughed.

"All right," he said. "All right, Lou. Have it your way."

Then he was gone.

Lou sat there and finished his drink. He had a lot of thinking to do. The creep suspected him. He'd snooped around and gotten nowhere. That was plain enough, because there'd been no threat of calling in the law. But Bert suspected him and he was an enemy. And why had he laughed? Lou had told him the truth—at least about the way Bessie had felt. She *did* love him, she *was* happy with him, until the end. Why had Bert laughed?

Lou Manning didn't know. All he knew what that he must work fast. Sew up Amy Goodrich and get out of town, quickly, before Bert could get hold of him again. Then he'd be safe. That was the ticket—get hold of Mrs. Goodrich right now.

He glanced at his watch. Almost quarter to two. He practically ran out into the lobby and across the dining room entrance. His eyes scanned the faces of the late diners. Young couples, old couples, three or four singles, male. No solitary middle-aged woman in sight. He asked the headwaiter if he'd seen a woman sitting alone, asked if there was anyone who'd left a message for Lou Manning.

The headwaiter shook his head.

Lou went outside, got his car, and drove back to Miami Beach and the hotel. He phoned Mrs. Goodrich from his room. This time there was no answer at all.

Something had gone wrong. Damn that little creep!

Lou hadn't eaten lunch, but he wasn't hungry. He was scared. Looking into the mirror he had to admit the truth. He was losing the old grip. He could see Lou Manning's face in the glass, but Luis Manuel showed through. And Luis Manuel, underneath the toupee and the hair-dye, was scared spitless.

This would have to be different. Maybe meeting Bert Jackson had been a blessing in disguise—a warning. He couldn't handle any more women the way he'd handled Bessie. And maybe there *shouldn't* be any more women. Just this Amy Goodrich.

He took out her picture and stared at it again. Suppose she was only forty-one, like she said. And she had a fair-sized hunk of dough. Wasn't that enough? Couldn't he make an honest try for once, if she turned out to be halfway decent? Why not marry her and really settle down? Life could be quiet and peaceful. No more disguises, no more writing to the Romance Club, no more skulking around and narrow escapes. Yes, and no more crazy flings like that trip to San Juan, either. Well, he was willing to call it quits. He might as well face the facts. He wasn't getting any younger. If he could swing it with Amy Goodrich, that would be good enough for him. He'd hit it off with her all right—after all, he knew how to make a woman happy.

Twice more he called her number, and twice more he listened to the unanswered ring. The loneliest sound in the world.

Just sitting around like that gave him the jitters worse than ever, so finally he called room service and had the boy bring up a pint of rye. All he needed was one or two drinks to steady his nerves. He had to have steady nerves from now on in. So he could handle this woman right.

But what had happened to her? Where was she? Why hadn't she showed up at lunch? What was going on at the real estate office?

Maybe there'd been an accident. Maybe something crazy had come up. There were all sorts of ways to foul the details in a deal like this. But the deal couldn't get fouled up. He was counting on it. It had to go through.

The drinks only made him feel worse. All at once Lou noticed the room was getting dark. He'd been sitting here for hours. Maybe he'd better not wait around. Maybe he'd better give up and get out of town while the getting was good—before that little fink got some new ideas.

Lou scowled. Why should he be afraid of a broken-down vaudeville ham? But the little man had laughed at him. Maybe he was off his rocker. Lou knew the feeling. He was getting close to going off his rocker himself.

Well, one more phone call. Just one more. If Amy Goodrich wasn't home by now he might as well kiss her off for good.

He was just getting ready to pick up the telephone when it rang. It made him jump about a foot and his voice wasn't any steadier then his hand when he finally answered.

"Hello?"

"Hello—is this Mr. Manning—Lou? This is Amy Goodrich."

A warm contralto voice, slightly slurred.

"Yes. What happened? We were to meet for lunch."

"I know. I'm sorry about that. I'll explain everything when I see you. So much has happened—"

"Good. Where are you now?"

"Why, I'm right downstairs in the lobby. I thought we might go out for dinner, maybe have a little drink first to celebrate—"

Lou grinned. He recognized the slur in her voice now. Why, the dame was half-crocked! He hesitated another moment, then decided to chance it. "Why not come on up here for your drink?" he asked. "I happen to have the makings."

“Well, I don’t know,” Amy Goodrich giggled. “You think it would be all right?”

“Of course. You come right up. I’m in five-seventeen.”

She hung up and Lou got to work. He switched on the side lamp, straightened the room, fetched clean glasses and scrabbled around in the dregs of the ice bucket. Then he checked his face in the mirror. By the time he heard the knock on the door everything was ready.

Amy Goodrich stood there, swaying slightly, and blinking in the light.

Lou Manning smiled at her, and his smile was genuine—because she was genuine, too. Small, slender, her wavy brown hair gathered in a pug, and just like her photograph. Her carefully made-up face betrayed no wrinkles, and she couldn’t have been any older than she claimed. Lou wasn’t exactly the type to fall for the old love-at-first-sight gag, but he liked her at first sight. No doubt about that.

And when she came in, flopped into a chair without ceremony, accepted a drink with a smile and leaned back, he made a sudden decision. He’d play this one straight.

“It all happened so suddenly I don’t exactly know how to begin,” she was saying. “And then I’ve had three cocktails and this drink—” She giggled and held out her empty glass. Lou refilled it quickly.

“Anyway, I got the call this morning. From the real estate people. Remember, I told you I hadn’t made any plans to sell? Well, I hadn’t. But this agency knew about the apartments and they phoned today to say they had a client who was interested in just that kind of property. They wanted me to come down right away. So I went, and left a message for you—”

Lou nodded. “I got it,” he said.

“I’m dreadfully sorry I had to break our luncheon engagement,” Amy Goodrich said. “But they had the client right there in the office and he insisted on taking me out and talking things over. It went on for quite a long time. Finally, though, I had to say yes.”

“Yes to what?” Lou asked.

“Why, to selling the place, of course. You know what he paid me? Two-fifty. Two hundred and fifty thousand dollars in cash!”

“You mean you—?”

“Oh, I don’t have the money yet. But I will before the week is out. I’ve got the option payment and all that’s left is the title search and making out the final papers.” She beamed up at him. “I guess I’m entitled to a little celebration, aren’t I?”

Lou took her hand. It was warm and soft. He wasn’t at all sure about that love-at-first-sight business being a gag now. Ever since he’d heard about the money he’d felt a genuine stirring of emotion. Money had always been an aphrodisiac to Lou. Just like liquor is an aphrodisiac to some women, for instance.

Holding her hand that way, the idea hit him. Why not? He had to work fast, didn’t he? And the best way to do that was to cut out all the preliminaries. What he wanted to do was to sew up the deal, sew her up, and get out of town before there was any possibility of trouble with Bert Jackson.

This was a heaven-sent opportunity. Here was Amy Goodrich, already a little bit stiff. Another drink or two, she’d be a pushover. The whole thing would be a pushover. Besides, she wouldn’t be hard to take. Lou knew women, and this one was desirable. He thought back, with a shudder, to all the old bats he’d known—fat, repulsive old creatures like Bessie. But Amy Goodrich was something different. She was warm and soft. And she wasn’t a prude.

She giggled up at him now and pointed at the empty bottle on the table. “I’ve got another surprise for you,” she said. “Maybe you’ll be shocked. But I was hoping you’d ask me up when I called, and I didn’t know if you’d have any liquor in your room, and I wanted to celebrate. So I bought this and put it in my purse.”

Sure enough, she hauled out a pint of bourbon. The seal had been broken, but it was more than three-quarters full.

Lou grinned at her and accepted the bottle. He poured two stiff ones. He could stand another jolt, and it would just about take care of her.

"I'm glad you thought to bring it," he said. "And don't worry about shocking me. You'll find out I like a drink now and then. You'll find out I like a lot of the good things in life. And might I say that you're definitely one of them?"

He raised his glass. "To our better acquaintance," he said. The bourbon tasted much stronger than the rye—it burned as it went down. But he emptied it at a gulp, hoping she'd follow suit. Then, in a few minutes, he'd make a few passes. She'd never know what hit her until it was too late to resist. Tomorrow they could apply for a license—let's see now, they could be married just about the time the money for the apartment building came through.

He started to move toward her, then noticed that she hadn't taken a drink. As he watched, she set the glass down on the bureau next to the chair.

"But you were talking about getting acquainted," she said. "Tell me something about yourself."

Lou smiled. "What do you want to know?" he began. "You've read my letters. I'm like you are. One of the lonely ones. Looking for companionship, someone I can trust, someone who understands me—"

"What's the matter?" She stood up now, staring at him. Lou bit his lip. How could she tell? He had felt the sudden cramp as he was speaking, but thought he'd concealed it. Now it came on again, worse than before. He knew he had turned pale, knew he was sweating. All at once he had to sit down on the bed. He smiled weakly.

"I'm all right," he said. The pain bored in again, stronger.

She nodded and moved closer. "Then tell me some more," she said. "About understanding. Didn't Bessie understand you?"

"Bessie?" The pain flared up again, but he ignored it. "What do you know about Bessie?"

"Everything. You married her less than two months ago, didn't you? And you took her money—"

Lou fell back on the bed. He was trying to sit up, trying to get up, but the pain pressed him down. It was a huge stone, crushing his stomach. A pointed stone that ripped and tore. And her words were ripping and tearing, worse than the pain.

"You fed her the digitalis in a drink, didn't you? Of course, nobody can prove it. They found it there when they exhumed the body, but there's no way of making certain she didn't take an overdose for herself, because of her heart. Of course, Bessie really didn't have heart trouble, did she? But you spread the word around, and now that she's dead it's just your word against a lot of suspicions. Even if you went to trial, they wouldn't have a chance at a conviction."

The pain was rising in his chest now, rising in his throat. He wanted to vomit it out, just as he was vomiting out the words.

"So Bert told you," he wheezed. "You're a friend of Bert Jackson's. He put you up to this, didn't he? He must have seen Bessie's letters from the Romance Club and figured out I'd write them again. So he hired you as bait for me. Is that it? Go ahead—tell me the rest."

"What's there to tell?" Amy Goodrich was still smiling. "You can probably figure it out. Bert ordered the body exhumed for an autopsy—a brother has the right, you know. And he checked up on you, all the way back. Then he went to the police. But the trouble is, he had no proof. No proof at all. He wasn't even sure you'd blown the money until he met you today. Then he decided to go ahead with it."

"Go ahead with what?" Everything was blurring, but Lou gritted his teeth and forced himself to sit up. He had to hear the rest. "Go ahead with what?" he gasped.

"Why—this." Amy Goodrich pointed at the bottle of bourbon. "He wasn't going to let you get away with murder. An eye for an eye, you know. So now you've taken the digitalis too, and in a few minutes—"

"Digitalis?"

"Why not? It worked on Bessie. It will work on you. Nobody saw me come up to your room. Nobody knows about the two of us. Nobody ever will. You were drinking, you had a little spell, your heart gave out. There's a house physician in this hotel, too. He'll write out the death certificate."

"No—"

The pain was blinding. Lou tried to stand up. He tried to stand up. He tried three times, then doubled over on the bed, sobbing.

"Don't let me die—I don't want to die—get a doctor—quick—"

"Too late for that. But I've got an antidote."

"Antidote? Where is it?"

"Right here."

She was fishing in her purse again, and he could see, dimly, that she was holding a small vial in her hand.

"Give it to me—"

"Not until you confess."

"All right. I confess. I did it. Now, give it to me—"

"That isn't enough. There has to be a witness. I'll call the police."

"You can't do that."

She shrugged. "All right. Have it your way." She walked across the room.

Pain came in continuous waves now. He could just about see her, just about talk. "Where are you going?"

"To turn on the shower. In a while you'll start screaming."

"Wait—"

She had to wait, because it hit him so hard then he couldn't get the words out for a minute.

"All right. Call the cops. I'll tell—"

And she called them, and they came, and he told. He nearly passed out, twice, and they slapped his face to bring him around, but he told.

Then at the end he managed to wheeze out the rest. The dirty slut thought she'd fixed his goose, but she'd forgotten that he could pay her back.

"Don't let her get away with anything," he finished. "She's as guilty as I am. Trying to kill me with digitalis. It's in that bottle, over there." Then his voice cracked. "And now, for God's sake, give me the antidote!"

Amy Goodrich looked at the cops and shook her head.

"There is no antidote," she said.

"But there has to be—you promised—"

"There is no digitalis in the whiskey, either. All I slipped you was a Mickey Finn. That's right, the old Mickey. You're going to be sick as hell in another five minutes, and then you'll pass out. But that's all right. They'll take care of you fine when you wake up again. You're going to be right in shape for the trial."

One of the cops helped Lou get to the bathroom. Amy was right; he was very sick indeed. When he got back they were waiting to take him downstairs.

"I'm afraid we'll have to ask you to come along too," the cop said. "We'll need a complete explanation of all this, Mrs. Goodrich."

"Whatever you say," she answered.

Lou stared at her. She was a fine figure of a woman. For a moment he felt a twinge of regret and somehow it was worse than the physical pain. If only she had been content to let things ride! They could have been happy together. He knew that he could have been happy with a woman like her. But she had to turn out to be a dirty double-crosser, a friend of Bert's.

Suddenly she turned to Lou and began to laugh, and sick as he was, he recognized the sound.

"All right," she said, softly. "I'm sorry. But I had to do it this way. A long shot, but I figured it was the only chance. And it worked." She nodded at Lou soberly. "And I couldn't help laughing when I thought about it this noon." Slowly, Mrs. Goodrich removed the brown wig and revealed the bald head beneath. And the laughter came again. "Telling me you knew all about women and I didn't. Me, Bert Jackson—one of the best female impersonators in the business!"

Night School

You find them on the sidestreets of every large city, and you wonder, sometimes, how the proprietors manage to make a living.

There's a basement entrance, usually, and a dimly-lighted window with used books emblazoned on it in speckled lettering. Almost always you'll encounter a rack just beside the doorway, surmounted by a crudely-lettered sign: your choice—100. Inevitably the rack contains at least six standard titles—Three Weeks, The Green Hat, Helen's Babies, Black Oxen, If Winter Comes, and Speaking of Operations.

Nobody ever buys them, even for a dime, and nobody ever seems to pay the exorbitant prices for those copies of Fantazius Mallare, The Golden Ass or Tertium Organum which you're bound to find inside the shop. You may suspect that the proprietor dispenses other treats to bibliophiles from under the counter—eager students of geography might be able to obtain Henry Miller's Tropic of Cancer, and a keen nose could detect the spicy scent of The Perfumed Garden—but even so, sales must be slow. And you wonder, once again, how the proprietors can keep going over the long years.

It was to just such a shop that a young man came, in early evening. His name was Abel, and there was nothing remarkable about him except the slightly furtive air with which he scurried down the steps and into the darkened store.

He frowned as he entered, as though bewildered by his surroundings. It was as though the very commonplace appearance of the establishment confused him or disappointed him in some way. And when the proprietor emerged from a dusty counter at the rear of the store, young Mr. Abel's expression as much as said, "I must have made a mistake."

The proprietor himself was a standard edition, slightly soiled by Time; he had the appearance of being thumbed, discarded, and put away on a shelf to gather dust unheeded and unheeding of the passage of years. He was short and stooped, as most of them are; his wispy hair and scraggly mustache were of no particular color, and the eyes behind his spectacles might have been milky marbles.

His voice, when it came, was a toneless murmur. "What can I do for you?"

Young Mr. Abel hesitated. Again he frowned, and for a moment it was a tossup as to whether he'd ask for a copy of Jurgen, reply with the standard, "Just looking around, thank you," or merely turn and walk out of the store.

But there seemed to be something more than just bewilderment behind the frown, and after a hesitant pause it emerged as a determined ring when he spoke.

"I'm looking for instructions," he said. "A rather special course, and I'll need some rather special books."

The marbles rolled behind the spectacles and the proprietor bowed his head. "Titles?"

"Three," came the answer. "The first is, Introduction to Murder. The second is, Death on the Installment Plan. And the last, The Price Is Right."

The proprietor looked up. The milky marbles had been replaced by a pair of black, piercing eyes.

"An unusual assortment," he muttered. "But perhaps I can help you. By the way, who recommended me?"

"One who said you would ask that question, and that I would know better than to answer."

The bookseller nodded. "We'd best go in back, then. Wait a moment until I lock up." He fumbled with the door, then clawed at the lightswitch. The young man followed him along darkened aisles until they came to the room at the rear of the shop.

It was bright and comfortable there, and rather remarkably well-furnished.

"Sit down," said the proprietor. "Now, then, your name?"

"Abel. Charles Abel."

"Abel, is it? Dear me!" The older man chuckled. "Then I suppose you might call me Mr. Cain."

The young man's frown disappeared. "Then this *is* the place," he exclaimed. "You *are* the right man!"

Mr. Cain shrugged. "Have you the money?" he asked.

"Here it is. A thousand in cash, all small bills."

Mr. Cain accepted the sum and counted it carefully. Then he looked up and nodded. "I'm the right man," he murmured. "Now, about those instructions you're seeking. Just who is it that you wish to kill?"

Almost a week had passed since young Abel's first visit to the bookstore. He had returned every night, appearing punctually at nine o'clock. There was no question of tardiness, for he was an eager pupil. And there was so much to learn.

To his delight, he found Mr. Cain an able instructor. He told him as much, thinking he was delivering a compliment. But the older man merely grimaced wryly. "You know what they say," he commented. "Them as can't, teach."

"You mean you've never murdered anyone yourself?"

Mr. Cain assumed an expression of embarrassment. "I suffer from haemophobia. Most unfortunate. The sight of blood so distresses me that I can't even bear to set out traps for the mice which infest this place. They literally eat away my profits."

"But the bookstore is only a front, really. This is your real business, isn't it?"

"Yes. I am a teacher, by profession."

Young Mr. Abel grinned. “Sorry, but I can’t help it. Just strikes me funny to think of you sitting back here and planning the perfect crime.”

“And just what’s so funny about that, young man?” The bookseller rose. “If you knew how bad things were in the trade, you’d understand. A man has to make a living.”

“You said, ‘in the trade.’ Does that mean you’re not the *only* one? Do *other* secondhand booksellers—”

“That’s no concern of yours,” Mr. Cain answered, hastily. “I’m the one who asks the questions around here. And I should be getting more answers. You’ve been studying for a week now, and you still haven’t told me whom you intend to murder. It’s about time we got down to cases. I’m a busy man, I have other clients who need help.”

The young man shook his head. “I intend to tell you, once I’m really convinced,” he apologized. “It’s just that I must be *sure* you can teach me how to commit the perfect crime.”

“Perfect crime? No trick to that at all,” Mr. Cain snapped. “I told you I’d never actually killed a man myself, and that’s true. But I’ve been what you might call an accessory, hundreds of times. And I assure you, each instance was a perfect crime. You know what the statistics are on murder? Fifty-five percent of all murders go unsolved. Fifty-five percent, just think of that! No trial, not even a suspect, in over half of all the slayings committed each year. It’s not an accident. A lot of the killers had help. Expert instruction. The kind I offer you. Remember that Black Dahlia case, out on the West Coast?”

“Did you plan that?”

“For one of my pupils, yes.” Mr. Cain smiled with shy pride. “That’s merely a sample of what I can come up with, when I get a bit of cooperation from a student who’s willing to learn.”

Young Abel lit a cigarette. “How do I know you’re not just filling me full of nonsense? That particular killing looked pretty senseless to me.”

Mr. Cain bit his lip. “That’s just the point,” he insisted. “Haven’t you been listening to what I’ve told you all week? Let’s go through it once again, briefly. What are the reasons for murder? Quickly, now."

"Well, there are three, you said. First, necessity."

"Such as?"

"Oh, mercy killings, and cases where money is involved, or when somebody wants to get rid of a marriage partner but has scruples about divorce."

"Good. And the second reason?"

"Anger. Jealousy. Rivalry. That sort of thing."

"The third?"

"Just plain battiness, isn't it? Purely for kicks."

"Impurely for kicks," Mr. Cain corrected. "The third category is out, as far as I'm concerned. I won't take on a psychopath as a student. Can't trust them to follow instructions, for one thing."

"But the Black Dahlia case looked like the work of a psychopath."

"Now you're beginning to see the light," Mr. Cain assured him. "Of course it did. It was planned that way."

"Planned?"

"I told you before that over half the murders in this country are never solved. Why? Because the clues which lead the authorities to most murderers have nothing to do with the actual *modus operandi* of the crimes. About twenty years ago there was a fad for detective books featuring involved, elaborate methods of destruction. I ought to know; the shelves up front are filled with 'em. Fantastic murder plots—people using poisoned darts, daggers made out of icicles, rigging up locked-room plots, using phonograph records of their voices for alibis. All that's ridiculous. If you use ordinary common sense and aren't seen by somebody who can go running to the police as an informer or witness, there's no trick to getting away with murder. Provided, of course, you take sensible precautions about fingerprints, bloodstains, and kindergarten stuff like that.

"The police don't apprehend the killer today because of his *methods.* What leads them to the culprit are his *motives.* And that's just what the unlucky forty-five percent who get caught are apt to forget about. In cases of necessity, the law is always on the lookout for someone who *benefits* from the death; an heir, an unhappily-married man or woman, a business rival. In cases of anger or jealousy, it's equally easy to spot the culprit." He paused. "Let me assure you, there *was* a genuine motive behind every murder I've ever helped plan. But I always plan them so that there is no *appearance* of motive. In a word, each killing looks like the work of a maniac."

"So *that's* the secret!"

"Didn't the person who sent you to me infer as much?" Mr. Cain demanded. "Or don't you know the details of his success story?"

"He did," young Abel admitted. "And I *do* know the details. He recommended you very highly. It's just that it didn't seem to make sense to me, before."

"And now it does? Good! Very well, then, don't you think it's about time you confided in me? Exactly what do you have in mind?"

Mr. Abel hesitated no longer.

"I want to kill the man who recommended you," he said.

"One of my former pupils? But my dear boy, that's hardly ethical—"

"Put your mind at ease. I won't tell you his name. You'll never know, so your conscience will remain at rest."

"Do you have some sort of personal grudge against him, is that it?"

"I do. Again, it's not necessary for me to burden you with the details. All you have to know is that *he* doesn't suspect me of hating him. So already we have a perfect setup, according to your definition. Nobody would ever connect me with the crime, because apparently I have no motive. Now, all I require from you is a method. Something that will make the actual killing look like the work of a criminal psychopath."

"Hmmmm." Mr. Cain rose and paced the floor. "It sounds simple enough, if you're telling me the truth."

"Scout's honor."

"Well, if you put it that way—" Mr. Cain paused. "I suppose it would be too simple for you to just corner him alone somewhere, strangle him, and then walk away? Sometimes the very simplicity of a slaying is the most baffling element. A blow on the head in a dark alley, and the police are stymied."

"Please, sir," said Mr. Abel, softly. "Such advice is hardly worth a thousand dollars in cash, tax-free."

"I could get you some poison, now—"

"What's psychopathic about poison? Really, after all that buildup, I expected something a bit more gaudy."

"Gaudy, is it?" Mr. Cain halted, and his eyes brightened. "Here's one which may appeal to you, my boy. It's an oldie, of course, but it hasn't been done to death in recent years. I call it the Dead Litter Office."

"Dead Letter Office?"

"*Litter.*" He smiled down at his pupil. "In order to carry it out, one must make sure of just three conditions."

"What are they?"

"First, that the killer can lure the victim to a secluded spot and there dispose of him. Again, despite your objections, I must strongly recommend a blow on the head or plain strangulation. Of course, it's assumed that pain will be taken to remove the usual evidences of the crime and dispose of the murder weapon, if any. Do you think you can handle that part of the job?"

"Quite easily."

"Good. The second condition is that the killer has an automobile."

"I've got a car, yes."

"Thirdly, and most important—the killer must not be under regular surveillance. That is to say, he should be able to move about freely, perhaps leave town for several days without anyone wondering about his absence."

"I live alone, and I'm on vacation from work all next week."

"Perfect! Then I think we can arrange the perfect psychopathic crime. The Dead Litter Office is bound to throw the police off the scent. They'll be so interested in the method that the question of motive will be completely forgotten."

"But just what do I do?"

"Can't you see it yet? You kill your victim in a simple fashion, as I suggest. Then, with the aid of a butcher knife or a cleaver, you dismember the body. I'd say the natural division, based on my previous experience in such matters, would be lower legs, thighs, split pelvis, ditto torso, lower arms, upper arms, and head. A total of thirteen pieces in all. Unlucky number, but then I trust you're not unduly superstitious."

"No. Just curious. What do I do with the—fragments?"

"Why, bundle them up, of course. Into thirteen separate packages. You'll need some of that plastic sacking used for home freezers, some heavy brown paper, and butcher's twine. Be sure you have plenty of twine! Once your packages are wrapped and ready, you merely address them, put on some stamps, and pop them into the mailboxes for parcel post."

"But thirteen heavy packages—"

"That's why I asked you if you had a car, and a few days to spare. You don't mail them all from one location. You drive around, to a dozen different cities. Get yourself a map and find out just how far you can travel in, say, four days. It would be smart to choose apparently unrelated locations, so the police can't establish a pattern, or a central point. I'll help you plan these details later. Part of the service, you know. Also, you must be sure of buying your stamps in advance—a roll of threes, I'd suggest, since nobody will notice them."

"But who do I address the packages to?"

"Pick the names at random from the phone books of the towns you visit. Or—here's a touch—send them to thirteen morticians, one in each community. *That* might mislead the police entirely. They'll go looking for people with grudges against undertakers, or hunt up necrophiles. Anyway, they'll be sure the job was done by a psychopath. Once the papers get hold of it and blow the story up, you can be sure that the trail will be lost in a maze of lurid sensationalism. Mad fiends, that sort of thing." Mr. Cain bent his head. "How does that sound to you, eh? Gaudy enough for your taste?"

"Yes. But are you quite sure there'll be no hitches?"

“Not if we plan thoroughly. Of course you must make sure of the elementary precautions, whereby you lure your victim to the proper spot. And you’ll have to arrange for disposal of your—ah—utensils. Best to steal them in the first place, from some cutlery store. Afterwards, drop them over a bridge somewhere out of town. But we can take these details step by step as we come to them. First of all, we’ve got to get rid of fingerprints. Would you care to do it now or wait until your vacation? Come to think of it, tonight is Friday. If you don’t work Saturday, we might just as well have it over with right away. Then you’ll heal enough over the weekend.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Acid, my boy. A little preparation of my own. Takes off the whorls so they can’t trace your prints. Of course it takes off the skin, too, but that can’t be helped. And I’m afraid I’ve no anaesthetic available. Still, this room is fairly soundproof, and if you scream a little, nobody will notice.”

“Acid? Scream? Really, now—” Young Abel shrank back.

Mr. Cain ignored him as he walked to a cabinet and extracted a bottle, a basin, and a beaker. He did things with all three until he was peering benevolently at his pupil from behind a rising cloud of acrid fumes.

“Come along,” he murmured. “This may hurt a bit, but I guarantee it will prove mild, as compared to the anguish of electrocution. If you’ll pardon the jest, the electric chair is apt to inspire a deep-seated aversion. . . .”

Over a week passed from the time Mr. Abel left the bookshop with bandaged, gloved fingers, and the moment of his abrupt reappearance one evening.

It was quite late, and he had to rattle the outer door of the store for several moments before Mr. Cain shuffled up and admitted him.

He led the young man to the back room through the darkness, gazing curiously at the satchel he carried, but saying nothing until at last the two were seated in the quiet confines of the rear chamber.

Then inquisitiveness overcame the proprietor. “What happened to you?” he asked. “You never came back for final instructions. I was worried—”

Young Abel smiled. “You needn’t have concerned yourself. I found your suggestions adequate for their purpose. The whole affair was a complete success.”

“You—you *did* it? But when? I mean, there were no headlines in the papers, nothing—”

“I thought things over. Your first suggestion, about simply strangling the victim, made sense. Of course my fingers were a bit sore, but there were no complications. The killing itself, in a dark alley, was presumed to be the work of a common mugger as I believe they’re called. It scarcely rated a paragraph in the paper; no wonder you overlooked it. Here, see for yourself.”

Abel passed over a clipping, and the older man read it quickly. He looked up, nodding. “Young Driscoll, eh? But I thought you weren’t going to tell me the name.”

“It hardly matters, does it? He *was* the man who sent me to you, and he *was* a former—uh—pupil of yours.”

“Yes. A jealousy case. Some rival had stolen his fiancee. Oddly enough, he didn’t hate the man. He wanted to kill the girl. She was living with his rival, and we had to go to some pains to conceal his motive for the slaying. Finally, we worked out an angle to make it look like the work of a psychotic. We used the Mad Bomber approach, as I recall, but decided on a bus instead of a plane. The trick was to plant the bomb, *not* in *her* luggage, which might lead to examining the motives, but in the suitcase of a GI who was going back to camp after a leave. We located such a party just in time and did the job—I won’t bore you with details. Anyway, the device worked.”

Abel nodded. “Yes. Four killed, three injured. The girl died, all right.”

“You have an excellent memory. That was over two years ago.” Mr. Cain paused. “Or did he tell you?”

“He told me nothing. I merely guessed. You see, *I* happened to be his rival. The girl he killed was *my* girl.”

“Oh, I see. No wonder you wanted to eliminate him. Well, now you have your revenge.”

“Yes.”

“And all’s well that ends well.”

“But it isn’t ended.”

“Oh, no?”

Mr. Abel opened his satchel. “You see, as you yourself explained it to me, you were an accessory. You helped plot the crime. And so—” He took out a large knife and a small cleaver.

“Now, wait,” Mr. Cain quavered. “You can’t get away with this!”

“You said this place is virtually soundproof. Nobody will hear the screams, particularly if I knock you over the head first.” Abel blocked the doorway and made a tentative swipe with the cleaver, which swished in an eminently satisfactory manner.

“But I appeal to you—not as your intended victim, but as your teacher, your superior in experience! The plan I gave you wouldn’t succeed in my case.”

“Why not? I have plenty of time to make the trip. You see, I lied to you. I’ve two weeks of vacation, not just one.”

“Even so, you’ll be found out. Someone, somewhere, must know you’ve been visiting me here night after night. And when I disappear—”

“You won’t disappear. At least, not permanently. As far as anyone knows, you’ll just go on vacation for about a week. *I’m* the one who’s disappearing.”

“Where?”

“Right back here, into the bookshop. I’m disappearing behind a hair-dye, a stooped walk, a scraggly mustache, and a pair of spectacles.”

“You’ll take *my* place? Permanently?”

“Why not? I can learn to imitate your voice, copy your handwriting. The rest of your little tricks I’ll pick up along the way. Along with your future clients, I suppose. You’ve got to admit that anyone who can figure out such a scheme has talent as an instructor. Besides, as I am about to demonstrate, I have one practical advantage over you—I'm not squeamish about the sight of blood."

"No, you can't—you *are* a psychopath!"

"All killers must be. And teachers, too."

"But—"

The cleaver cut short his answer.

It was a pity that Mr. Abel's former instructor was not around to take pedagogical pride in the way he carried out every step of the plan. Since part of the plan consisted of Mr. Abel becoming Mr. Cain, he even went so far as to adopt all his little mannerisms, including the penchant for bad puns. Inside of each package that he prepared for mailing he included a special bookwrapper. His title choices included The Anatomy of Melancholy, The Naked and the Dead, and The Heart of the Matter. For the dismembered torso, naturally, he reserved A Farewell to Arms.

He realized, of course, that it was a bit of a risk, but even a psychopath is entitled to a bit of harmless spoofing. Particularly when he intends, as the new Mr. Cain intended, to carry out the rest of his schedule in painstaking sobriety and then return and settle down to a humdrum life of teaching.

And that, of course, is the way it worked out. His mission completed, he came back to the bookshop and retired behind the glasses and the hair-dye. After a bit, he mastered the pattern of existence. And after a little longer, new pupils came. The used bookstore continued in business.

You find them on the sidestreets of every large city, and you wonder, sometimes, how the proprietors manage to make a living. . . .

Sneak Preview

CHAPTER 1

THE swallow was scarcely more than a fledgling. It had flown up from Sanjancapistrano, and now it was approaching the Laguna Dome.

No Shelley hailed its blithe spirit as the bird spiralled slowly down towards the community nestled between the ocean and the hills. The swallow noted, without comprehension, the hilltop houses and the oxygenerators on the peaks. It circled lower, over the scholasticity, the industricity, the consumarkets and the outlying farmareas, all powered by the atomic plant from distant Longbeach.

None of this interested the swallow. It was searching for something else —something it had not seen during the long flight between Sanjancapistrano and here.

Life.

That's what the swallow was looking for. Some sign of life, of sentience. Avian, animal, even human life would suffice: the swallow was lost in a great loneliness. Ever since leaving its nest it had been alone, and only instinctual hunger had sent it on the long, solitary flight in search of fellow-beings. The bird had flown over empty ocean and equally empty land—flown emptily, endlessly, impelled by a need to seek out a living thing from the vast wastes of sand and rock.

The swallow had seen other cities en route, or their remains: skeleton cities, corpse-cities, and bits of disarticulated white bone that had once been connected into roads. But there had been no life.

And now life was at hand. Five thousand feet below, the bird caught glimpses of movement in the city streets. The living creatures were alien—what did the swallow know of humans?—but they were undoubtedly alive. And life called out to life, in wild welcome.

The swallow glided down, circling to dive. Fortunately, it hesitated before actually diving. Thus it was that only its wings struck the plexide transparency of the Dome.

The invisible barrier did not reflect; it merely rejected. The swallow pecked at it vainly, but nothing happened. The Dome remained, inviolate.

So the swallow rose, spiralled again, and descended at a distance. Once more the Dome deflected it. The bird could see life passing below, oblivious to every frantic effort at entry. Time after time the swallow circled and swooped, but wherever it went the Dome was there.

Finally dusk came. The bird, exhausted, circled in the radioactive air, then turned its three eyes to the southern sunset and fluttered away.

It couldn't get inside the Dome.

On the other hand, those inside the Dome couldn't get out . . .

CHAPTER 2

INSIDE the Dome, in one of the hilltop houses, Graham waited. Palms perspiring, the dark-haired young man adjusted his glasses and then reached for the controls.

He stared into the blackness of the room before him, then blinked at the sudden light. His companion coughed nervously.

Suddenly the plain came into view—the sweeping stretch of sunlit sand beside the sea. Far in the distance a black dot moved. Swiftly it approached, transforming as it neared into the familiar combination of a manicycle and rider.

The manicycle was a standard model, complete with smasher before and rakers behind, but its rider was not garbed for combat. Instead he wore the conventional black uniform and crashhelmet, without covering armor. Through the plexide bubble his features were plainly visible as he ground to a halt and dismounted. And it was then that both Graham and his companion could note, upon closer scrutiny, that *he* was *she*—an attractive young blonde.

"Switch," Graham murmured.

His companion grunted.

Boots scuffing sand, the uniformed blonde reached into the saddle-pouch and withdrew a pennant which she staked upright in the center of the plain. She stood there for a moment, then raised her right arm in a signal before returning to the manicycle. Mounting the machine once more, she waited.

Now attention moved again to the far horizon. Two dots this time, approaching still more rapidly than the manicycle had moved.

Within a matter of moments, the dots were rushing into the foreground, easily recognizable for what they were.

The enclosed, armored vehicle with the eight-foot spikes jutting from the bumper was obviously a Cad. And the lowslung open job with the battering-rod extending along the side of the hood was just as obviously a Jag.

Behind the controls of each were the drivers, in full armor.

The young man in the Jag smiled and waved at the Cad driver, who scowled in return. Then both of them glanced at the girl as she signalled.

Side by side the two cars rolled abreast of the pennant in the sand, clicking fenders in the ceremonial gesture. Then the Jag backed away and the Cad turned, backing in reverse. When each car was a hundred yards away from the pennant marker, the girl raised her right arm again.

And so the duel began.

The Cad thundered down the sand, shifting from third to fourth in a matter of seconds as it sought its prey. Six thousand pounds of armored might thrust forward, impelling the spikes toward the oncoming Jag.

The smaller car made no effort to swerve. It too came on at top speed, moving so swiftly it almost blurred. Suddenly its driver switched controls, moving the Jag out in a growing arc. At the same time the battering-rod telescoped past the hood as the extension went into play, and smashed the left fender of the Cad as the two cars passed one another with only inches separating them.

"Tournament style," Graham whispered. "Watch, now!"

Both cars wheeled and returned, scarcely slackening speed. Again the Cad hurtled forward, again the Jag dodged. But this time the driver of the Cad had anticipated the feint.

He countered with a side-swipe and the spikes on his hood dug squarely into the side of the Jag, almost rolling it over. The driver of the Jag huddled to one side as the righthand door came off, armor and all.

Not giving him time to recover. the Cad halted just ahead and quickly reversed. And now the rippers on the rear-fenders went into play, heading for the vulnerable hood of the floundering Jag. Just in time the driver switched on the exhaust-discharge, and lost himself, squid-fashion, in a murky cloud.

The Cad backed into the cloud, seeking its prey blindly. But the Jag swooped to one side, then described a quick arc. The Cad came out of the cloud, still in reverse, its driver blinded by the smoke. And the Jag was ready. It drove forward, hitting the Cad squarely in the side. At the same time the battering-rod swung around on a moveable extension and struck the windshield, ploughing through until it sheared the top off the heavier machine in a single vicious sideswipe.

The Cad's driver sat there in the arrested vehicle, bowing as if in appreciation. It was a grotesque bow, because the same blow that struck windshield and top had sheared off the top of his skull.

The driver of the Jag grinned and glanced at the girl. There was no need to formally acknowledge the victory—already she had removed her crashhelmet and was divesting herself of the black uniform. Still grinning, the Jag driver stepped out of his vehicle, ready to claim his reward. Now was the time to—

“Turn that bombed thing off!”

Graham glanced at his companion, then shrugged and reached for the switch. The scene faded away, the two screens rose and retracted into the ceiling, and the normal flow of fluorescence returned to the projection room.

“Sorry,” Graham murmured. “I know it’s hard to get the full effect without the sensories. The tracks are still in processing, and they’re beauties—particularly the audio and the olfac. But I thought you could at least get some idea from the video.”

“I got an idea, all right, sweetheart.” The other man rose from the posture-chair, his checkered robe fluttering in indignant accompaniment to his waving arms. “Great Godfrey—who authorized this?”

“It’s my treatment,” Graham told him. “Knocked it out in my spare time, and it cost next to nothing, so don’t worry.”

“I don’t give a bomb about time and cost, lover-boy,” said the man in the checkered robe. “What I want to know is why you did it in the first place. Trying to give a break to that blonde saddle-partner or something?”

“Please, Zank,” Graham answered. “I scarcely know the girl. That wasn’t my intention at all. It’s just that I’ve always wanted to try my hand at a Realie for a change.”

“Realie!” Zank was so excited he removed his checker-framed glasses. “How often I got to tell you we *got* a Realie Department already in operation?”

“I know. But I thought this might be a bit different—”

“Different! I’ll say it’s different! You think we’d ever release something showing a duel? You know better!”

“But people *do* duel, you know. At least, the Technos do. I tried to make it look authentic. Everything about it is true.”

"Darling!" Zank used the traditional phrase sneeringly. "Since when has truth got anything to do with Realies?" He wiped his glistening forehead with a checkered sleeve. "Realies are for Public Information. You know that."

"But why can't we do something different once in a while? Maybe just for a selected audience?"

"Because that's not our job." Zank shook his head. "Listen, Graham. Let me remind you that you're writing for the Space Opera Division. You've got one job, and that's to please your immediate superior—me. And if you want to please me, you'll stick to one plot—Bern meets Fern. That's all."

"I know," Graham sighed. "Only I get sick of it, doing the same old thing again and again. Telling the same old story. Space-travel is dangerous. Other worlds are filled with danger and evil. And so forth."

"And so on," Zank added. "You forget, it serves a purpose. Violence is outlawed here on Earth. We can't show killings and torture and antisocial aggression. So we switch to other planets, transfer the aggressive tendencies from men to the Bug-Eyed Monster. And at the same time, punch home the idea that it's better not to meddle with space-flight. What's the matter, sweetheart, don't tell me you've forgotten the basics?"

"How could I forget?" Graham replied. "That's all I've been hearing since I went to work. Space Operas are an important-adjunct of social conditioning. The hero must be dark, the heroine must be blonde, the monster must be green and the plot must be—"

This time it was a look rather than a word from Zank that halted him. The little producer smiled at him oddly.

"What's that again, lover?" he murmured. "Do my ears deceive me or are you sounding off like one of those lousy radical politicians? Where'd you pick up that kind of talk, anyway—you got ancestors in the GOP, maybe?"

In spite of himself, Graham paled. Biting his lip, he forced his features into a placating smile.

“Sorry,” he said. “Guess I’m a little bit tired.”

But Zank continued to grin.

“What from?” he asked. “Reading books, perhaps?”

Graham shook his head hastily. “You know better than that, Zank,” he protested. “Why, I’ve never even *seen* a book. Not a real one, that is. Of course, you understand we Talents have access to microfilms. But the stuff is all selected and approved. I’m not political, Zank, not at all. How could I be cleared for a job like this if anyone thought so?”

Zank’s grin relaxed a trifle. He sat down again. Abruptly his voice softened. “How old are you, Graham?”

“Twenty-five.”

“And you’ve been with Space Opera for four years, that right?”

“Four years this August.”

“Hmmm.” Zank clasped his hands together and wriggled his fingers. “I’m forty-four, myself. Got just six years left before I’m Socially Secured. You’d think if anyone wanted to play rebel, I’d be a logical candidate. Not a youngster like you, with half your active life still ahead.”

“Half an active life? Twenty-five more years of writing about technicolor tentacles reaching for three-dimensional bosoms?” Graham frowned. “I’m a Talent, Zank. You don’t understand what that means, do you? It means I want to express myself.”

“I do understand, darling.” There was no sarcasm in the producer’s voice now. “I’m half-Talent myself, on my mother’s side. You didn’t know that, did you? Well, it’s true. She was in Sadies, big operator in the designing department back East. Plastic stuff—like those old-time what-do-you-call-‘em, sculptors, I guess. Did some pretty important things, too. I understand she was the first one to come out with the bleeding dummy models. By the time I was born she was in charge of the whole Eastern Division. And then she got ideas.”

Zank paused and wiped his forehead again. “Of course all this is hearsay, because I never saw her—my father was a Techno, and it was just a one-year mating arrangement. But I heard about it from him later. He’d sort of kept track of my mother afterwards, when she went in for free-lance matings. For a while there I guess she changed mates about once a week, but that didn’t help. She was headed the wrong way. She wanted some variety in her work, too. Had the same ideas about Realies you seem to be taking up now, only in her case of course she was working with dummies instead of emotion-pictures. Finally she by-passed authorization and installed some new models in the Sadies at Nework. Psychos.”

Graham sat up straight. “Psychos?”

“You heard me. Psychos, robes and all, complete with scream-tracks. Claimed the best way for customers to work off aggression would be to carve up facsimiles of Authority.” Zank sighed. “Naturally, they quashed that idea in a hurry.”

“What happened to your mother?”

Zank sighed again, and shrugged. “What could happen?” he said. “They sent her back to the Womb.”

“I’m—I’m sorry.”

“Well, don’t be. Be glad, instead. Glad I told you, gave you an example. Because that’s what happens to Talents who decide they’ve got to express themselves. They think they’re heading in a new direction, but they always end up in the same place. Back to the Womb. You don’t want that to happen, do you, sweetheart?”

“No.” Graham repressed a shudder. Suddenly he reached over and patted his superior on the shoulder. “Look, Zank, I’m sorry about all this. I had no right to experiment. And no reason to talk the way I did. I’m just a bit tired, that’s all.”

“Maybe you need a rest.” Zank stared at him. “How long since you’ve been to a Psycho for a checkup?”

“There’s nothing wrong with me, really there isn’t,” Graham aid, hastily. “I’ll snap out of it. All I need is a little hard work to get back into the old routine. Matter of fact, I've been readying a script you're going to like this one has a real switch, an invisible Bern, you can only see it when it drinks blood and the blood brings its outline into view—"

"Great idea," Zank said. "You can tell me all about it when you come back."

"Back? But I'm not going anywhere."

"Oh yes you are." The producer smiled. "I've made up my mind. What you need to pick you up right now is a good week of relaxation. I'm authorizing you for an immediate Fornivacation." He delved into the folds of his checkered robe and pulled out a small black photoviewer. "Got just the partner for you, too. See this blonde here? 3-D doesn't do her justice; you need 4-D for that. Her name's Wanda. You're going to like her."

CHAPTER 3

IT WAS difficult not to like Wanda. She was every bit as blonde and beautiful as Zank had claimed.

Graham told her so, the very first night in his apartment.

"I can't understand why you aren't in emotion pictures," he confessed.

"As a Beni?" She smiled up at him.

"You know what I mean."

"I like this better."

Graham frowned. "Really? All these strange men, week after week—"

"Don't be so medieval, darling. There's nothing strange about men, actually. Of course you're different."

Now it was Graham's turn to smile. "Do they teach you what to say in school?"

"They taught me everything in school. It might interest you to know I have my Mistress's Degree in Erotology. Want to see my diploma?"

"Quite unnecessary. I'm well satisfied with your credentials."

“Then why are you sitting so far away from me?” the girl demanded. “Did I do something wrong? Didn’t you like the dinner I ordered?”

“Certainly. You order dinner perfectly.” Graham regarded her gravely. “You’re perfect, all anyone could reasonably ask for. But maybe I’m not the reasonable type.”

“Well, why didn’t you say so? Do you want to beat me? Are you a fetichist? Would you like to—”

“No, nothing of the sort. It’s just that I think I’d rather talk.”

“Talk?” Wanda’s eyes flickered momentarily, then opened wider. “Have you had a checkup lately?”

Graham shook his head. “Zank asked me that, this afternoon. Everybody asks, the moment they recognize a departure from the standard response-patterns. Why?”

“Well, isn’t that what checkups are for, lover? I mean, we can depend on the Psychos to help us adjust.”

“Bomb the Psychos!”

Wanda’s mouth was an oval of astonishment.

“Don’t look shocked,” Graham said. “You forget that I’m a Talent. I’ve only been oriented, not conditioned. To me a Psycho is just another man, not a Father-Image.”

“But surely you don’t question the benefits of adjustment?”

“Of course I do. That’s part of a Talent’s job—to question. We’re brought up that way. Everybody else gets hypnotherapy from birth, but not the Talents. We’re not supposed to have any checks on creative imagination. We’re allowed to doubt if we want to.”

“What is there to doubt?”

Graham sighed. “You’ve been conditioned, you wouldn’t understand. It’s just that I see things differently.”

“For instance?”

The young man stared at her. “Well, you, for example. I sit here looking at you across the room and where most men would see something perfectly normal—a beautiful naked girl wearing glasses—I don’t have the usual response. I keep wondering why you don’t take the glasses off, or at least wear contact lenses.”

“Contact lenses?”

“I learned about them on the microfilms. They were used in the past. Don’t be afraid—Talents are encouraged to scan, you know.”

“But everybody wears glasses, always. Everybody is myopic.”

“Perhaps. The Psychos claim that’s so, and nobody has ever questioned it, any more than they question the need for universal infant-appendectomy. But I wonder if it isn’t all part of the pattern of making everyone look alike, dress alike, think alike. Giving everybody his little scar, his little ocular badge. Conditioning the child to seeking security from the Psychos. Once you accept the knife, accept the visual aid, you’re well on the way to accepting anything they impose on you. You don’t question what the Psychos do and you don’t question what you see through the glasses they’ve given you to wear.”

“You sound disturbed.”

“I am disturbed.” Graham laughed, “That’s why Zank gave me this Fornivacation, remember?”

“Yes. And you’re not going to spend it sitting in a posture-chair discussing glasses, either.” Wanda rose and went over to the accommodation-shelf. She found her kit, fumbled in it, then turned and extended a pill.

“Here, take this,” she commanded.

“What is it?”

“Libidose, of course.”

“But I don’t want—”

She looked at him, genuine pleading in her eyes. He forced a smile as he gazed down at her. “Guess I’m thoughtless to upset you like this.” He reached for the pill, then hesitated. “If I swallow this, will you do something for me?”

“Anything.”

“Will you take off your glasses?”

Wanda nodded and her hand moved to her eyes. “Better?”

“Much better.”

“But wait—you didn’t take your pill.”

“Now I don’t need a pill.”

There was no more talk of pills, or anything else, the remainder of the evening. And the next day Graham was quiet and obliging. After the breakfast order came up on the dispenser they took the vator down to the level beneath the hilltop and Graham piloted his ‘copter to the beach area.

Here they undressed and for a few hours relaxed in the filtered water pumped from the subterranea of what had once been the ocean’s floor—before the Dome’s installation.

Far out on the horizon, beyond the rounded transparency of the Dome, they could see the actual ocean, with its tumbling waves. If they listened closely they could almost hear the roar of the gray fury.

“Ever been out of the Dome?” Graham asked.

“Of course. It’s my job to travel.”

“I mean, on your own.”

“Don’t be ridiculous.” Wanda’s eyes narrowed. “Have you?”

Graham shook his head. “No, but I’ve often wondered. What would it be like, for example, to take an old-fashioned boat and go sailing off on that ocean out there?”

“I’ve sailed,” Wanda confessed. “Just in a jetsub, of course. I went out on a Fornivacation with a very important man, to the Island.”

“What Island?”

“Up north a ways. You can see it on a clear day—Catatonia Island. It’s a Psycho resort, off Longbeach.”

"But that's Domed too, I suppose?"

"Certainly. Isn't everyplace?"

"Not from what I've heard. There can't be more than three thousand Domes in the entire continent. That leaves millions of square miles open all over the world. What would it be like to get out there, breathe unfiltered air, feel unfiltered sunlight?"

"Are you forgetting the radioactivity?" Wanda asked.

"How could I forget it? Don't we get an Official Geiger Count every day?"

"They say in another generation it may be safe to abandon the Domes."

"They say." Graham stood up, brushing the sand from his body. "They say, and they report, and we take their word for it. But I've scanned plenty of radiation data. And it's my belief we could open the Domes right now. Next time you jet off on a trip, take a look at the countryside before you're launched. It looks green and clean enough to me. My father told me that years ago."

"Your father!" Wanda rose and put her hand on his shoulder. "You knew him?"

"Of course. Didn't I say we Talents had a different kind of training? He lived with me until he was Socially Secured, four years ago. I was never put in a Big Family Unit like the rest of you."

He gestured and his movement indicated the figures on the beach area around them—the dozens of lolling and reclining figures, individual in their nudity but identical in their eyeglass badges, their closecropped hair, their youthfulness.

"Let's get out of here," Graham said.

Wanda shrugged, nodded, rose. They walked toward the 'copter.

"Is your father the one who gave you all these ideas?" she asked.

"Perhaps. He was a great Talent, Wanda. Perhaps the greatest here on the Coast. Ever hear of Lewis?"

“Lewis? The one who worked with the Technos to perfect the double screen for solid-view illusion?”

Graham raised an eyebrow. “Where did you pick that up?”

“Oh, I spent a week with a high-ranking Techno once, up near Sanfran. He told me all about it. So Lewis was your father?”

“Was and is. I still hear from him on the vox-box hookup once a week.”

“Do you ever talk to him about your opinions?”

“I used to.” Graham ushered Wanda into the ‘copter, set the controls, and ascended to speed-zone. “But he’s changed since he went South. He never should have been Socially Secured in the first place. They promised to reclassify him as a Techno because of his work on the double screen. That’s what he wanted. Then something happened, I don’t know what, and he wouldn’t tell me. He got his Greetings and was assigned to a place called Gulfport.”

“That’s one of the best, I hear. Beautiful country down there,” Wanda murmured.

“Too beautiful, maybe. It did something to him. He doesn’t sound like the same man. Whenever I say something, he tells me to see Warner—that’s the Psycho Supervisor for our Talent Section, in Space Opera.”

“Good man.”

“You know about him, too?”

“Heard of him.”

Graham glanced at her as they landed at the foot of the hill. They took the vator up into the building. “But why are you so interested in my problems, all of a sudden?”

“Because I’m interested in you.”

“That’s very flattering.” Graham grinned. As they entered his apartment Wanda took his hand and guided him across the living room.

“Where are you going?” he asked.

“In there.”

Graham shook his head and drew back.

“What’s the matter?” Wanda asked. “Another mood?”

“I feel like thinking.”

Wanda pouted. “Thinking!

Talking! What you need is some relaxation.” She brightened. “Maybe we ought to go out tonight. There’s something special at the Playdium. Middleweight championship slashing match. Sounds exciting.”

“I never got any euphoria out of watching two people cut each other up with sabres.”

“How about some culture, then? The symph’s in town. With that new Talent, Kovac. They’re playing his *Psychiatric Suite* and the *Melancholia and Fugue.”*

“Quit trying to entertain me, Wanda. I’m worried.”

“What about?”

“I got a funny idea, back there on the beach.” He walked across the room and opened the wall service-slot. “I’m going to see if I can clear an emergency vox-box hookup with my father.”

“What on earth for?”

Graham paused. “I’m not sure if I ought to talk to you about these things.”

“Please, go on. I want to hear. I’m interested.”

“Why?”

“You ought to know the answer to that, after last night.”

“You mean you’re—serious?”

“I took off my glasses for you, didn’t I?” The girl moved dose to him. “Tell me. Why do you want to call your father?”

He gazed down at her and there was pain in his eyes, and speculation. “It just occurred to me there might be an explanation of why he sounds different. Maybe they didn’t leave him alone when he got down there. Maybe the Psychos did a laundry job on him. Even a prefrontal or a topectomy?”

“But that’s absurd!”

“Is it? Look, Wanda, I seldom get outside or meet anyone except Talents like myself. I don’t think ordinary workers are permitted anything like these weekly vox-box hookups—why should they, when their parents mean nothing to them anyway? But here in this building, there are plenty of other Talents, all with the same arrangement. Once a week they’re permitted to call their fathers or their mothers in the South.

“I’ve never really thought about it before, but now that the idea hits me, I remember remarks my Talent friends have made, about *their* parents sounding different to them. And I remember some of those parents—my father’s friends—before they were Socially Secured in the South. A lot of them seemed to share his views, talk the way he did. And yet now the reports I get of their conversations are just like mine. Everyone is happy, everyone is contented, everyone is adjusted.”

“Why not?” Wanda asked. “They’re Socially Secured. No more problems, just peace and plenty. Who wouldn’t relax?”

“My father wouldn’t. He faced his problems, taught me to face mine. He’d never urge me to conform this way. I think he’s been worked over, and I intend to find out why.”

Wanda tossed her head. “You’re wrong, Graham. It does not make sense.”

“Nothing makes sense lately. But there must be a reason. Maybe everybody gets a laundry-job when they’re Socially Secured, just to keep them in line. Maybe my father was double-crossed, sent South just to get him out of the way. All his talk about giving up the Domes, abandoning hypnotherapy conditioning for everyone—it might have been considered dangerous. But he wasn’t subversive, he just believed in freedom for the individual.” Graham nodded to himself. “I’m going to arrange this call and ask some straight questions, try to get some straight answers. For that matter, I think I’ll pass the word along to some of my friends here in the building. Carson, Davis, Loeb. Maybe they can do the same thing when they call. We could pool our information, figure things out.”

Wanda’s fingers dug into his arm. “Are you sure you know what you’re doing?” she asked. “You don’t want to start any trouble.”

“If my theory is correct, the trouble’s already started. And I intend to stop it.”

“Graham, think a moment. You shouldn’t go ahead without competent advice. Why not see Warner, your Psycho, first?”

“Sure. And have him tell me to relax, forget it? The way my father does, during our vox-box sessions? The way you’re doing now?” He paused. “That’s pretty funny, you know—you telling me to relax, when all the while you’re digging into my arm clear through to the bone.”

“All right,” Wanda murmured, but she didn’t release her grip. “So I’m concerned about you. I admit it. I don’t want you to get mixed up in anything, I don’t want you to be hurt.” She raised her voice and the tempo of her speech quickened. “Suppose you *are* right, Graham? “Suppose your father was laundered, and all the rest of them? Is that so terrible? He’s happy, isn’t he? Everyone’s happy. Everyone who has the sense to conform, to adjust, to stop asking questions that only lead to doubt and torment. Look, Graham, I’m begging you—for your sake, for my sake—let things alone! I won’t turn in a report—”

She stopped short and her hand fell away.

Graham stared at her. “Report?” he sighed. “I might have guessed, the way you’ve been talking lately. Quite a change from that simple little take-another-pill routine. You were planted here with me, weren’t you? It’s all part of the routine, isn’t it?”

“Yes. I’m with Intelligence. Zank was worried about you and he wanted to check.”

“I suppose you’ve been recording?”

“No, Graham. I swear it! I haven’t, and I won’t. You aren’t just a case to me. You haven’t been, not since—”

“Well? Since when?”

“Since you asked me to take off my glasses.”

She came into his arms and she was all softness and warmth, and in her flesh he sensed surrender.

“Graham, don’t you understand what we can have together? It doesn’t happen very often any more, and I never believed it would ever happen to me. But it did, and I don’t want to lose it. I don’t want to lose you.”

Graham stared down at the girl-face, the woman-face, the utterly ageless countenance. She might have been -twenty, or thirty, or forty—it was hard to tell because of the makeup. And her words might be true, or part-true, or false: he couldn’t tell that either. All he could do was listen as she went on.

“Listen, darling. I have important connections. More important than you think. I can arrange it so that you won’t have to be troubled any more. We could go away together. Even outside the Domes if you like. There’s so much you don’t know about, so many wonderful possibilities for the two of us. We can have some of this freedom you seem to want so badly. Just as long as you don’t ask questions. Just as long as you take what’s given to you freely and without reservation.”

“Something for nothing?” Graham murmured gently. “Is that what you offer me? Or nothing for something?”

“Does it really matter?” She pressed close and her eyes said *no* and her lips said *no* and then her body said *yes, yes, yes.*

Graham released her and stepped back.

“I’d be a bombed fool to turn down an offer like that,” he said.

“Then you’ll forget about the call?”

He smiled. “Trouble is,” he continued, “I *am* a bombed fool.” And moved away.

“Where are you going?”

“To arrange for my call. I still think my father’s in trouble.”

Wanda shook her head. “Maybe he is and maybe he isn’t,” she told him. “But one thing is definite. *You’re* in trouble, now. No, stay where you are.”

Her hand sought her shoulder-kit, and emerged from it in a quick gesture. Graham halted as he caught the gleam of a stunner.

“You’re turning me in, eh?”

“Yes, but not for punishment. You’re still worth saving, darling, and I intend to save you in spite of yourself. And for myself.”

Holding the stunner, she motioned him back, then moved toward the wall service-slot. “It’s my turn to make an emergency call,” she said.

“To Warner?”

“No.” The eyes behind the glasses glinted in determination. “I told you I had important connections, didn’t I? So I’m taking you right to the top, Graham.

I’m going to turn you over to Sigmond himself, in Hollywood.”

CHAPTER 4

WANDA held the stunner on him while she made the call. She held the stunner on him afterwards, while they took the vator down to the level. She held the stunner on him as she flashed her idento to one of the ‘coptercab pilots and arranged for immediate launching from Laguna Dome to Hollywood.

The pilot took them to the jet, and again Wanda used her idento to good effect.

Graham began to believe that part about her important connections. It was quite a remarkable thing to arrange for a special jetfiight—just the two of them in the huge ship. But Wanda had no trouble doing it. Each step was smoother than the last.

She had no trouble with Graham, either, because the stunner was always ready. Graham respected the stunner. It couldn’t kill him, but the excruciating pain preceding paralysis and unconsciousness was something he urgently wished to avoid. And he knew she’d use it.

So he sat there silently during the flight, not even gazing down at the countryside as they launched. Usually he was fascinated by the movement through the hatchway leading out of the Dome, the thrill of propulsion, and the view of the alien land beneath. Now he preferred to sort his thoughts and impressions, unpleasant though the task might be.

And it *was* unpleasant.

Despite his talk of freedom and his contempt for conformity, Graham realized he'd always had a great measure of security and unconsciously relied upon it.

Ever since his father had arranged for his job in Space Opera Division, five years ago, Graham had held an assured place in his world—the little microcosm of the Talent Building in Leguna Dome. He'd been assigned his own apartment, his own Techno staff and crew of assistants. He had his work to rely on.

The departure of his father was a shock, but in a sense Zank took his father's place as mentor and authority. Graham had sensed discontent, inner turmoil, but always he had expressed it against the comfortable counterpoint of security—security in his job, his status, his environment.

Now his job was in jeopardy. Zank obviously had lost his trust in him. The very least that could happen would be a demotion—possibly even a laundry-job, if the Psychos started to probe deeply.

And they would probe deeply, no doubt about it. Graham had heard of Sigmond; who hadn't? He was the Head Shrinker himself, chief of the entire Psycho Division on Coast. Wanda was taking him directly to the top.

Why?

That in turn raised still other disturbing questions. There was only one obvious answer. Somehow, Graham had stumbled on the truth—his father, the parents of other Talents, perhaps all parents who had been Socially Secured, were being given laundry-jobs. And for a yet unknown reason. Whatever it was, Graham had a pretty definite idea it wouldn't be a pleasant one.

And just what was he going to do about it?

That was the most bothersome question of all. What *could* he do about it? Graham suddenly realized that for all his vaunted intellectual freedom, he was powerless. He'd been trained only to question, not to act upon his questioning. He had experience in exercising his doubts, but there were times when it was more important to exercise his muscles. And he had no training, no experience here.

He couldn't jump Wanda with her stunner. How could he hope to struggle against Sigmond and his staff?

As they descended, off-jet, into the great Hollywood Dome, she offered him a temporary reprieve.

"I'm taking you straight to Psychocenter," she said. "But you won't see Sigmond immediately. He's tied up in a very important top-level."

Graham nodded but remained silent. He was silent all during the 'copter trip across Hollywood, but now he permitted himself to observe their progress.

They passed over the suburb area of Angeles and headed into the capital itself. Here was the emotion-picture plant of TV. Yes, there the production headquarters of NB-See networks. He recognized the cluster of buildings familiarly known as Microcity, from which emanated all the microfilms sent for educational purposes to Big Family Units throughout the country. The ground levels of Angeles had been swarming with workers moving from consumer areas to industricity locations between shifts, and above them the 'copters of the Technos and Chiefs whirled restlessly. Here in Hollywood the ground levels were deserted, save for an occasional Jag or Caddy whizzing along a speedway as it bore some dignitary to a top level meeting. And the few 'copters in evidence moved only from one landing-spot to another as Talents went their necessary ways.

For Hollywood was the Home-Dome of the leaders, the planners, the shapers of destiny in these, the Ideal States of America.

Graham found the spire of the Intelligentsium, and near it the huge Technoquarters, dominated by its roof symbol of a giant T-square. Then he felt the ‘copter descend and recognized directly beneath him the broad, flat landing-platform of the Psychocenter itself.

He waited until the ‘copter settled and the pilot opened the doors. Wanda motioned toward him with the hand holding the stunner.

“You first,” she said. “We’re expected.”

“So I see.” Graham tried to smile as he watched the two white-robed men approaching their ‘copter from the far side of the huge roof.

Wanda flashed her idento at them and murmured something. The two men nodded in unison. One of them was short and thin, the other tall and portly. Both wore the pince-nez of their rank and profession.

“Graham,” said the short man. “Would you step this way, please?”

There wasn’t much choice. Graham glanced around hesitantly as if to confirm the fact. He could jump off the edge of the roof, of course, but—

“Please,” Wanda said, putting the stunner back into her shoulder-kit. “Don’t be stubborn, darling. They won’t harm you, I promise. It’s just a routine checkup. Sigmond is interested in you, and I made him promise not to do anything drastic.”

“That’s correct,” said the short, thin man. “You can see we’re not armed. This isn’t coercion.”

Graham nodded, but edged back. The pilot had left the ‘copter and was walking across the roof toward an exit-vator. There were several other ‘copters in anchor-slots lining the edge of the roof, but the area about them was deserted, except for a few mechanics a considerable distance away.

Graham watched Wanda and the two men and calculated his chances. If he could just move back to the door of the ‘copter, get into it and take off before they could stop him—

“For your information, the pilot locked the panel before he left.” The tall, stout man’s voice cut his thread of thought suddenly. “So there’s no use trying what you have in mind. You see, Graham, we anticipate.”

His voice carried conviction.

Wanda stepped forward. “Let me talk to him,” she said, over her shoulder, then faced Graham once more. “Be patient, lover, and try to understand. You’re not officially in custody—I wouldn’t risk calling you ‘lover’ in front of them if you were, now would I?” She came up to him. “See Sigmond when he’s ready, and cooperate. I’ll visit you before the night is over.” Kissing his forehead, she whispered, “Don’t make trouble. I can only protect you within limits.”

Graham nodded and squared his shoulders as she stepped back and walked away. He waited until she had disappeared inside the nearest exitvator.

“All right,” he said. “I’m ready.”

“Then follow me,” said the short man. He began walking across the rooftop. His tall companion fell into step beside Graham.

“That’s better,” the big man smiled. “By the way, we haven’t introduced ourselves, have we?” He nodded in the direction of the short figure ahead. “That’s Rankin,” he said. “And I’m West.”

Somewhat to his surprise, Graham noted that the big man was extending his hand in greeting. The familiar gesture evoked the familiar response. Almost before he knew what he was doing, Graham found himself extending his own hand.

Their palms met, and the man named West began to pump his arm up and down enthusiastically. His grip was strong, and Graham started to draw away as his skin encountered an unexpected abrasive substance that pricked him.

Suddenly a sharp tingling ran up his arm.

He pulled his hand free, shaking it as the pain rose to his elbow, then to his shoulder. At the same time he gazed at West’s palm and saw the tiny needle cradled there.

“Tricked me,” he said. Or started to say. For his mouth was suddenly numb, just as his arm was numb, and his shoulders and chest. And his legs were melting, his brain was melting.

He noted, with rapidly glazing eyes, that the short man was now standing behind him, ready to catch him when he fell—as he was falling—right now —

And the roof was spinning, the sky beneath the Dome was spinning, and the voices were spinning all around him.

"That's better," the short man was saying. "Now he's all set for a trip to the Womb."

Graham couldn't be sure he heard it right. The darkness was rushing up much too suddenly, and it filled his ears as well as his eyes. Maybe the short man hadn't said, "Womb." Maybe he'd said, "tomb."

Graham tried to shrug before he fell, as the realization came to him.

Womb or tomb, it wouldn't matter either way, now.

CHAPTER 5

IN THE great Twenty-First-Century-Vox Studios, in the citistate of Hollywood, the top level proceedings began slowly.

Sigmond squirmed uncomfortably in his seat, wishing he was in a posture-chair. But of course there were no posture-chairs here in the Conference Suite.

It was a whim on the part of Archer, His MGMinence. The tall, thin, hawk-faced man at the head of the table had deliberately chosen to surround himself with the quaint decor of olden times, including all the appurtenances of a medieval "executive suite." In the past, in the days of actual "executive suites," the presidents and chairmen of boards held similar affectations—they indulged themselves in Victorian panelling and Currier and Ives prints in their sanctums.

Sigmund recognized the pattern: the need of authority to bolster its position with symbols of continuity—to hint discreetly that nothing had changed or would ever change, and that the man at the head of the table belonged there by hereditary right and would always remain in that spot.

It pleased Sigmond to realize that Archer felt such basic insecurity, but at the same time he could do with a bit more comfort.

And it annoyed him not a little to see Archer affecting the speech mannerisms and even the dress of another era. Really, the "business suit" he wore belonged at a masquerade—it looked positively grotesque here, when the man was surrounded by the priestly white of his fellow-Psychos, the service blue of the Technobility, and the khaki of the Brass. Even Archer's rimless eyeglasses were an anachronism in this collection of costly and ornate frames.

He looked ineffectual and ill at ease now as he rapped for order with an old-fashioned gavel, and his voice was soft and hesitant.

"Let us dispense with formalities," he was saying. "We are gathered here to consider a question of basic policy. That question has been raised, and will be presented now, by our good friend, Dean."

He gazed down the table and Sigmond searched the row of faces across from him until he located the little sandy-haired man in charge of the Egghead division.

Sigmond was surprised to hear that Dean was raising an issue. He knew him only as a quiet, efficient worker in his special field—which, as the name implied, was that of education. Somebody on Sigmond's staff must have a complete *dossiere* on Dean's background as a matter of course, but there had never been any reason for Sigmond himself to check on him.

Now the little man was on his feet, clearing his throat and running one hand nervously through his hair.

"Your MGMinence, fellow workers. I have recently been in consultation with various officials in both the Techno and the Intelligence divisions. I questioned them deliberately in order to verify certain conclusions of my own—conclusions based on research in the educational field. As you know, it is my duty to work with facts. And the facts available to me recently lead to inevitable validation. I've gathered all the data and testimony and placed it in the hands of His MGMinence before asking permission to speak here this afternoon. And here is what the facts tell us."

Dean paused.

Just what are you driving at? Sigmond wondered.

He found out in a moment. "The facts tell us that we've done a good job in the past. In less than three generations, Planned Society has done away with disease, poverty, war, personal insecurity. We have eliminated competitive economy, political and religious strife. We have exploded once and for all the pernicious old fallacy that you can't change human nature. We *have* changed it, and for the better.

"As an Egghead I teach the young, the future workers of the Ideal States of America, to appreciate their good fortune. I teach them that all our wants and needs are cared for by a regular system of interchange between three thousand Domes, without the use of currency, or the oldstyle profit-motive which led only to friction and unrest. Our population of thirty millions is assured of food, clothing, shelter, medical and psychiatric assistance as part of the Standard Allotment. Recreation and luxuries can be earned by making a good personal adjustment to working and living conditions. Every worker over the age of fifty is Socially Secured, and the average life-expectancy has risen to one hundred years. So far, so good. I've no quarrel with it. But in view of the facts now at our disposal, we must move further. Have we gone as far as we can go? Is what we have done good enough? I say the answer is 'no' !"

They were listening to Dean now, all of them. His voice was flat and uninspired, but it had been a long time since the word "no" had been uttered in the presence of His MGMinence.

"The time has come when it is safe to abandon the Domes. Vast areas outside have been tested and found to be thoroughly decontaminated. There is no longer a need to depend on special farm areas or hydroponic installations. The entire continent is again ready for human habitation."

Dean's final sentences were almost drowned out in the excited buzzing which arose from both sides of the table. He hesitated, then went on.

"This is not my opinion. I repeat, it's authenticated information, coming directly from Schwartz himself."

Eyes turned now to regard the plump, swarthy Techno Chief at the other end of the table.

"Well, Schwartz?" Dean challenged. "Is what I say here the truth?"

Schwartz nodded indifferently. "Our Geiger Count for the past three years is well below minimum, on the basis of eighteen thousand separate checks. Field surveys and readings bear this out. His MGMinence is in possession of this data."

The buzzing rose again, and Dean's voice quelled it.

"That's not all," he proclaimed. "There are other factors. Our production-rate, for example. Even now, inside the Domes, we have ample living-space and provision for a population of fifty millions instead of thirty. Once we leave the Domes there's no reason why we can't double or triple this figure—don't forget that a hundred years ago this country supported almost a hundred and eighty million people. True, Ormsbee?"

Sigmond saw his Medic colleague nod emphatically.

"Therefore," Dean continued hastily, "I advocate the immediate revision of our policy toward the Socially Secured. Even without leaving the Domes we can raise the age-level from fifty to sixty. We can remove checks upon population entirely. We can, when we abandon the Domes, eliminate a great portion of our conditioning techniques, including hypnotherapy. Let us move forward once more, confidently and aggressively, into a new era of freedom—"

This time the little man was not interrupted by a buzz, but by a roar. Half a dozen white-clad figures fluttered to their feet, but it was the khaki-clad Hix, Chief of Brass, whose shattering bellow claimed attention.

"What are you driving at?" he demanded. "Next thing you'll have us repealing the Declaration of Dependence!"

The blasphemy shocked them into silence. And Dean took advantage of it to reply.

"Yes," he said, softly. "This will come too, in time." He peered earnestly at the faces around him. "We have founded a Planned Society, and all has gone well. So well that we've become overly complacent. We've unconsciously come to accept the *status quo* as a fixed and eternal norm. But the world changes. Physical conditions change. And we must change with them in order to survive. Unless we are willing to move forward we shall inevitably go backward.

"It is not easy for us to consider giving up certain rights and privileges we now enjoy as directors of this social order. But I say to you that we must. A glance at history is sufficient to remind us of this fact. Unless we take steps, we shall find ourselves going the way of all leaders who refused to recognize the need of change in the past. The kings, emperors, knights, nobles, industrial despots, rugged individualists. All of them vanished, whether they ruled by the divine right of kings or the power of the almighty dollar. Let's not make the same mistake of opposing progress. I say, open the Domes at once."

Dean sat down suddenly, so suddenly that his audience was unprepared for it. There was no buzzing; merely a silence in which each man sought to read the reaction of his fellows.

Sigmond alone was impassive. *So he dropped his C-bomb*, he thought. Whoever would have expected it, and from him, of all people? Better check on his background immediately.

Then he dismissed the thought. Right now he wanted to consider what would happen next. Surely Archer must be prepared to answer this heresy.

And yes, now his MGMinence was rising to his feet. It would be interesting to see how his counter-strategy evolved.

"Gentlemen," he began. "Pm sure we have all given serious consideration to what our good friend Dean has said here. I can assure you that he has indeed given me a complete file of reports from various departments which back up his findings."

Archer paused, and Sigmond waited for him to continue with anticipatory relish. He recognized the gambit now—disarm your opponent by conceding something, then move in for the kill.

"However," Archer droned, "I feel that some of you are not entirely convinced. Perhaps you recall an ancient proverb that figures don't lie, but liars can figure.

"If such is the case, then allow me to go on record personally in assuring you that Dean speaks the truth. The Domes *can* be opened up tomorrow, and dispensed with entirely. We *can* increase the population indefinitely without harm to our economy. We can not only raise the age-level of the Socially Secured, but abandon the entire program. We can, in short order, do away with the Declaration of Dependence and return to a form of government and economy similar to that which existed in the past. Dean's statements and his conclusions are, in my opinion, entirely correct."

What's this? Sigmond asked himself. *Unconditional surrender? Senile dementia, more likely*.

"Before we put the matter to a vote," Archer was saying, "there's just one more thing we might consider. Planned Society is more than a political or economic concept. It is based upon the principle of psychiatric supervision. For that reason, I suggest we get an opinion from the one man best qualified to give us a sane, objective reaction—our Psycho Chief himself. Sigmond, what have you to say?"

Plenty, Sigmond thought as he arose. *I underestimated you, Archer. You know what you're doing. You let Dean stick his neck out and now you're letting me stick mine out. You won't betray yourself by taking sides—but you'll be there, ready to back the winner. No wonder you've always been Your MGMinence. And if I want to remain Psycho Chief, I'd better see that I win.*

The tall Psycho Chief stood there staring down at Dean for a long moment, and when he began to speak his voice was gentle.

"His MGMinence is right, you know," he said, softly. "You have given us facts and a partial conclusion. But no conclusion is correct unless it takes into account a clinical diagnosis of the situation.

"You've studied your history, Dean. When you remind us of the old days, a hundred years ago, you're speaking of a time when psychiatry was only a small and somewhat suspect branch of what was then called organized medicine. Its practitioners numbered less than seven thousand throughout the country, and its authority was limited to a purely advisory capacity. Those were evil days, Dean, in the time of the Big Neurosis, before the wars.

"Then came the Big Trauma, and the picture changed. The Big Trauma, when the bombs fell. And psychiatry rose in general esteem. It was useful to the Brass of that day in dealing with the armed forces. It was useful in Intelligence work. Psychiatrists were called upon to counsel the leaders of industry and business and government, but still without official status or great power. On the individual level, psychiatry dealt only with those confined in institutions or those few who could afford to command private treatment. But respect for its opinions and techniques grew.

"The Big Trauma continued. The enemy population of the world virtually vanished. Radiation and disease ravaged the earth, and we here at home were not immune to fallout, famine and frenzy.

"Government, as we knew it then, vanished in the panic and peril of the times. There was no voice of authority remaining. Brass of that day had won a victory—but at a hideous price in lives and security. Brass was discredited. Economic leaders were suspect because they had 'led us into war' and 'profited' by it. The so-called 'politicians' and 'religious leaders' had shown themselves unable to prevent panic and privation. The country was disorganized; no civil or military authority was able to restore order.

"And yet salvation was at hand. For by this time the so-called authorities had learned to rely upon psychiatrists for guidance in every crisis. The generals, business moguls, scientists, industrialists and intellectuals who looked to psychiatry for a solution of both personal and public problems now instinctively turned to them for leadership. And since psychiatrists now held key positions in military and civil life, there was less difficulty than might be expected. They knew how to influence public opinion, how to bring about the desired reactions on the part of the masses."

Sigmond paused. He allowed his voice to deepen and gather strength. "But we all know what happened," he said. "Meanwell and Stolz were appointed, with broad temporary powers, by what was then the Congress of the United States. They convened the first Clinic and formulated the Declaration of Dependence. The Brass was behind them when, in a surprise move, they dissolved the very Congress that had given them free rein.

They had control of the primitive TV-radio facilities as they directed the Brass in restoring order. They cooperated with the engineers and the scientists—whom we now refer to as Technos—in erecting the first Domes and installing oxygenerator equipment.

"At first the workers were uncooperative, as might be expected. But once the Domes went up, once they realized they could be admitted and gain protection against fallout and disease, their attitudes changed.

"There was opposition from the forces of politics and religion, but they had no weapons and no alternative plans—nor could they combat radioactivity with empty phrases. We had the Domes. And we had the plan. The plan of Planned Society.

"Slowly we evolved the present pattern, creating the top-level leadership divisions of Psychos, Technos, Brass and Intelligence. It wasn't 'government' in the old-fashioned meaning of the term—it was a delicate neurosurgical operation on the body politic.

"And there's no need to tell you that the operation was a success. In three generations we have witnessed the triumph of *psyche* over *soma,* thanks to the introduction of new methods of therapy. As you know, we have analyzed the causes of social disorder—pinpointed the aggressive instincts which lead to atomo-biological war on a broad scale or frustration and discontent on the part of the individual. Through the ages, men sought to thwart, stifle or deny the very presence of these instinctual drives. The leaders have always lied in the past. They told men that they were all created equal—that they were brothers who must turn the other cheek. They preached peace without attempting to harness the basic forces, internal and external, which lead only to continuing conflict.

"Our therapy took other forms, Dean. Instead of denying the basic drives, we have chosen to satiate them through surrogates. There has been a redefinition of the nature of reality. Sound Psycho principles govern every aspect of life here in the Domes. And the Domes themselves are admirable microcosms, in which we can experiment in our search for social stability and adjustment.

"Our experiment has been successful. That you have already admitted. And why? Because the very physical nature of the Domes lends itself to *control* That's the secret of our way of life, Dean—*control.* Control leading to adjustment. Adjustment leading to security.

"Suppose we have reached a time when we can give up the Domes without physical danger. What do we stand to gain? We're not overcrowded now. The standard of living surpasses anything known in history. There's no need for more room.

"Population-wise, what possible end can be served by the spawning of additional millions? Again, what do we stand to gain by such a move?"

Sigmond stared at Archer, trying to read that timid, tired face—a face which he now recognized was only a façade.

"That's a question I cannot answer, a question *you* have not answered. What do we stand to gain by this?" He wheeled now and levelled a finger at Dean. "There is however, one question I can and must answer. A question we all must consider. *What do we have to lose?*

“The moment we open up the Domes, we lose the whole basic pattern of our success. We lose *control.*

“Disperse the population over a wide area, and see how quickly a wide difference in living patterns due to varied climate and geography will lead to a resumption of all the old rivalries—North against South, farm against city, and all the rest.

“Eliminate the program for the Socially Secured and you’ll set up again the patterns of hatred which split old-fashioned society into two secretly warring camps—the struggle between Youth and Old Age.

“Do away with hypnotherapy conditioning and the Big Family Unit will disappear. Before you know it, we’ll be back to the old style family situation; the very source of inner conflict and tension.

“We couldn’t hope to combat these things, gentlemen. All our facilities for education and opinion-moulding—TV, emotion-pictures, information-screening—couldn’t hope to function efficiently amidst a dispersed population. Even in the days of the Big Neurosis, when mass psychology was just a primitive tool in the hands of amateurs called ‘advertising men’, there was a name for a group such as ours. It was called a ‘captive audience’. We can’t afford to lose them.

“Lose them, and we lose our lives. Turn them loose and they’ll turn against us, in the name of freedom. Freedom! Freedom from our surrogates means only freedom to kill, to destroy.”

Sigmond paused and sighed. “Perhaps you think I speak as I do out of selfishness, out of fear for my own safety and yours. That is not the case. I would gladly make any sacrifice—even the sacrifice of my life—if I thought it would truly serve the greater good. But I am a Psycho. I have devoted my existence to the study of humanity. And I know that Mankind is not yet ready to move ahead without psychiatric control. He will use his freedom not only against us but against himself.

“What Dean here is really proposing is to turn back the tide of history. He is asking us to revert to the days of the Big Psychosis, the time of anarchy.

"Gentlemen, it is up to you to make a choice. But remember—if you choose to abandon the Domes, abandon the sound system of control we have so carefully set up, you are choosing the inevitable consequences of that decision. You are choosing a return to the old competitive economy, a return to religion and politics and yes, even monogamy! You are choosing war. You are choosing so-called individual freedom at the expense of mass aberration."

Sigmond sat down. His own words had moved him more strongly than he realized—for he had spoken out of the uttermost depths of his inmost conviction. Now he found himself oddly empty and depleted.

In an effort to shake himself out of the mood, he forced his attention away from the present scene. He refused to permit himself to listen to Dean's hesitant rebuttal, or to observe the reaction of his audience here in the room. Instead he directed his attention to a totally different problem.

As Archer rose and called for a vote on the question, Sigmond concentrated on the problem of the young Talent whom Wanda had brought in for processing just before the meeting began. It was just a routine checkup, probably, but Wanda was a pretty shrewd operator and there might be something worth investigating here. If she thought it was important, he'd better not take any chances. Well, the boys were working on it right now, and it wouldn't take long to get a scenario into filming. He could assemble the film and study it right after this meeting ended. Wanda seemed insistent that he handle this Talent's problem personally.

And now, what was this interruption? Sigmond jerked back to awareness. Ah, yes, the vote. The question. Archer was calling for a show of hands.

"All those in favor of—"

Sigmond felt excitement ripple up his spine as he peered around the room. How many hands would be going up?

Dean's, of course. And that Medic, Ormsbee, the one who supported him on population-increases. Sigmond made a mental note to look into

Ormsbee's background, too.

At the same time he permitted himself to relax. Only two hands in favor.

"All those opposed—"

Sigmond raised his own hand, exulting in spite of himself as he saw his gesture duplicated all around the table.

Of course. The motion was defeated. There was nothing to fear. He could handle Dean and Ormsbee, unless His MGMinence Archer chose to take care of it himself.

He smiled down the table at Archer, as the meeting adjourned. Perhaps it might be wise to say a word to him in private.

No, that could wait. Archer was going to play his game of the impartial observer—why spoil it with a public discussion?

Several of the group, including Techno Chief Schwartz and Brass Chief Hix, came up now to congratulate Sigmond on his speech. He nodded, made the customary acknowledgments, and moved away as quickly as possible.

He left the chamber and returned to ground level prepared to take up his daily duties once more. This Talent matter, now—

Young West was waiting for him in his office.

"What's the report?" he asked. "Do a scenario?"

"All filmed." West tried to keep from smirking, but he was obviously quite pleased with himself. "Rankin's keeping watch over him upstairs—he's still out."

"What's his name, by the way?"

"Graham." West waited, obviously expecting a reaction, and when none came, he added, "Lewis's son."

"Lewis? You don't mean—?"

"Exactly." West was smirking openly, now. "Quite a surprise, isn't it? I think you'll find the film extremely interesting."

Sigmond privately agreed, but he tried to conceal his impatience. “Very well, I’ll look at it if you like.” Then, keeping his voice casual, he asked, “What’s your prognosis?”

West licked his lips. “Of course it’s really not my place to say anything of a prejudicial nature,” he murmured. “But if you ask me, on the basis of what I’ve seen, Graham is just about ready for a little trip back to the Womb.”

CHAPTER 6

FIRST there was the needle and then there was the voice asking questions. First there was his own voice saying “no” and then came the other needle and his own voice saying “yes.”

After that Graham went back down into the darkness, listening to both voices—the strange voice, asking the questions and his own voice (equally strange now) giving the answers.

Then there was this thing on his head, and he was talking into it and the questions came from inside his head, and then another needle pricked and he knew he could stop talking and just *think* his answers. Not think, really, but visualize. That’s what the voice wanted, that’s what the needle wanted, that’s what the thing on his head wanted. He was supposed to *see* the answers, make images out of them. And he couldn’t lie. He couldn’t make up answers out of his imagination. He had to use real images. The voice and the needle and the thing on his head wouldn’t let him lie.

Graham didn’t want to lie, anyway. This wasn’t coercion. The thing on his head told him so, or maybe it was the needle, or the voice—it was all very confusing, and it didn’t matter since the three were parts of the same thing. Anyway, he knew he wasn’t being forced into anything. It was just that he had to tell the truth so that he could sleep. They were playing fair with him.

Yes they were, because when he had *seen* all there was to see, all they wanted to see, they let him sleep. He slept for a long time (minutes, hours, days, weeks, centuries, forever) and when he woke up he felt fine. He could sit up, or even walk if he wanted to. At the moment he was content to sit, because Sigmond was in the room with him.

Sigmond, the Head Shrinker himself. He seemed like a pleasant enough person—a big man, with a pale face and a high forehead. He might have been forty, might have been fifty, or even older. It was hard to say. Of course *he* wouldn't be Socially Secured at fifty.

The thought jolted Graham out of his present acceptance. Socially Secured. His father. That's why they'd done this to him, given him a laundry-job—

Sigmond was staring at him, and now he reached forward and put his hand on Graham's shoulder.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

"You gave me a laundry-job," Graham said.

Sigmond chuckled. "Nonsense, my boy. We don't indulge in such measures here. And I assure you, if we did, you wouldn't be sitting up and ready to take nourishment now, nor for a week. Your stomach couldn't retain food, any more than your mind could retain a thought. There's an old saying which applies to laundry-jobs, you know—'it all comes out in the wash'."

He chuckled again, but Graham interrupted him.

"Then what *did* you do to me?" he asked.

"Simple script-therapy. We asked for a scenario, and got it. The Ganz method."

"Visualization of mental images transcribed directly on film?"

"You've heard of it, eh?"

"There was talk of adopting it for Talents, in emotion-picture work. I guess it was too personalized, though."

"So I should imagine." Sigmond smiled. "Your own film is *very* personalized, I might say. Seldom have I seen such introspection."

"You've seen it?"

"Of course. Would you care to?"

"Why are *you* seeing me? What do you want of me?"

"Nothing but your honest reaction. That's the principle of filmanaiysis, my dear Graham. Project the unconscious so that the conscious can see it. Then let the superego review and criticize. It's really the only efficient form of therapy. I'm hoping some day we can make it available generally, for routine use in checkups. As of now it's a little bit too expensive and complicated for anything except special cases."

"I'm a special case, then?"

"Let's see the film and permit you to decide for yourself." Sigmond rose and beckoned to Graham. "We'll use my office," he said. "I've got everything set up."

Graham was not reluctant to leave the windowless cubicle behind—its bed reminded him vaguely of a hospitalarea. He followed Sigmond down the corridor, noting that the Psycho Chief was carrying a stunner. Sigmond didn't flourish it, nor did he allude to its presence in words. That was completely unnecessary. No need for guards, either! not here in Psychocenter. Graham knew that the very idea of rebellion or escape was ridiculous.

A vator took them down. For some reason Graham had assumed Sigmond's office would be near the top of the huge building. He was surprised to find it on ground-level. He was equally surprised at the modest three-room suite. Guards and office personnel greeted the Psycho Chief deferentially enough, but there was nothing about the furnishings and appointments of the office to indicate Sigmond's important rank.

There were three rooms, and Sigmond led him to the center chamber. Here was the desk, the couch, and the viewer—no other equipment. Graham wondered if the Psycho Chief used filmanalysis exclusively. And if so, why.

The room darkened as Sigmond seated himself at the desk, the film came on, and then Graham found the answer.

Sigmond had told the truth. Filmanalysis was the only efficient method of therapy.

The film itself was crude, just a simple two-dimensional black-and-white job such as Graham himself had never seen except in the ancient clips kept in the Space Opera files for obscure reference purposes. It didn’t even have a sound-track, let alone sensories. And the little projector unreeled it jerkily. But none of this mattered. Graham had never seen anything before which could equal its claim upon his interest.

Because it was *his* film. It was *his* mind, *his* life up there on the screen before him. Here were *his* thoughts, naked and unveiled, for all to see.

How far back had they taken him? Early childhood! Infancy? Pre-natal? The seething kaleidoscope held few clues. There was a visual blur, the kind of blur seen by the unfocussing eyes of a tiny infant. There was a parade of giant images—of huge hands, grotesquely enlarged faces. There were sudden movements holding inexplicable threats, leading to uncomprehended consequences. And there was Father. Father, holding him. He recognized the face, and at the same time it wasn’t really Father’s face at all; just an idealized countenance that smiled and laughed and beamed.

Graham blinked. It wasn’t *himself* in the picture either. He was small, yes, but strangely enough his features were those of an adult. An adult’s face on a baby’s body.

“Confused?” Sigmond murmured, from the darkness behind him. “Remember, this is a visualization of the subconscious. No age-differentiation. Very little contact with actual reality. All subjective, has to be interpreted. Notice that the backgrounds are sketchy and the action jumps. That’s because of the way you were questioned, of course—we weren’t after unimportant details. And also because the subconscious imagery is a sort of mental shorthand. The dream-symbols are there, too.”

Graham was oriented, now. He understood why, as his life-pattern unfolded in childhood, the actors often moved against the sketchiest type of scene. A whole room would be symbolized by just a door and a chair—sometimes the door was big, in an instance where the action centered around the need to escape, or leave; sometimes the chair was most important as a refuge or a place of comfort.

He saw himself as a small boy. He recognized incidents, and there were many things he didn't recognize. Interspersing actual events were glimpses of another world; a dream-world, a realm of nightmare. He was engulfed in vast floods of enuresis, he was pursued by the fecal finger of fate, he lost himself in remote fantasies of fear, anger, and—surprisingly enough—infantile lust.

Graham felt his cheeks burn as he watched. His palms grew wet and he stirred in his posture-chair. Was *this* the way it had been? Were these the secret places of his psyche?

It had to be. There was no other answer, no possible way in which this film could be faked. It was the truth, ripped raw from his inmost self and projected for his outward self to realize.

Adolescence began, and with it a heightening of the sexual element. At the same time the imagery grew subtly more sophisticated in content. Father was reduced to "life-size" proportions, and the various characters in the scenes began to move in response to predictable and recognizable motivations. And yet the growing "realism" in itself formed a background of shocking contrast to the occasional outbursts of fantasy and fugue—the imagined orgies of cruelty and lust, of self-pity, self-abasement, and egomaniac delusions of grandeur. Here was rape, and murder, and suicide, and idiotic euphoria: here was sentiment and sentimentality, oceans of blood and tears and glandular secretion.

Graham shuddered as he watched, yet clung to the intervals of reality—his conversations with his father. He watched himself talk to the older man, and watched the subject-matter of their discussions unfold in a sort of superimposition on the screen. It was a sort of doubleimage taking the place of a spoken or written account of their conversations, and in it he recognized the elements Sigmond must have been seeking.

Indeed, the Psycho Chief admitted as much.

"I want you to watch very closely from this point on," he said. "I think you'll begin to see the emergence of a pattern both of thought and of behavior. It's up to you to determine its significance."

Graham nodded. He felt his cheeks burn once more. This was going to continue, he realized. It would continue, inevitably and inexorably, right up to the present moment. He'd see himself becoming a nonconformist, see himself preaching rebellion, see himself as a cheater, a secret scanner of forbidden microfilms, a secret holdout against authority. He'd see all the fears and frustrations of his later years. Worst of all, he'd see once again the hideous trauma of his father's leaving—see his departure for the ranks of the Socially Secured. He'd see his own loneliness, and virtually reexperience the acute mental crisis which had grown intolerably in recent months—grown to the point where he'd foolishly flouted Zank and made that Realie film. Graham thought of a thousand things he wanted to conceal—not only from Sigmond but from himself as well. He thought of having to watch himself with Wanda the other night. How could he bear it? And how could he bear the knowledge that Sigmond knew, too?

He started to blink, and Sigmond must have guessed it, because he whispered, "Don't close your eyes. You've got to face it. Face yourself as you really are."

I can't, Graham thought. *Help me, please help me, stop this, Father—*

The buzzer sounded, jerking him back to reality. A vox-box blared.

"Front to Sigmond. Krug here for briefing and orders."

Sigmond clicked a switch. His own voice was low. "Yes. With him immediately."

Behind his back, Graham was conscious that the big man had risen and moved across the room.

"Stay where you are and keep watching," Sigmond said. "I'll only be a few moments."

He crossed to the door and opened it. A flash of light and then the door closed behind him once more. Graham was alone. Alone with the film. It ground on and on but he wasn't watching. He didn't have to watch, now.

He stood up, deliberately turning his back, and faced the projector on Sigmond's desk. In its beam he surveyed the room. No windows. Just the door through which Sigmond had made his exit, and another door leading to the rear office.

It was a waste of time even to think about looking for an avenue of escape. There was no escape, not here. Not any more, after the filmanalysis had been made. Graham acknowledged the fact wryly. He didn't have to see the rest. He knew what it would be—a self-damning portrait of a maladjusted individual. The inevitable sequel would be a laundry-job or perhaps even a trip to the Womb.

Graham nodded absently. His gaze focussed on the desk-top. Something shone in the projector's light. A long, silver cylinder—Sigmond's stunner! He'd left it there when he went out of the room!

Graham moved toward it. His hand grasped quickly. Here, at least, was a weapon.

Holding the stunner in his palm, he walked over to the door, then halted at the sound of Sigmond's voice, faint yet intelligible.

He placed his ear against the panel, and his eye focussed on the tiny sliver of light between door and frame. He could see into the front office.

Sigmond stood there, talking to a short, squat man in a Brass uniform.

"—papers are all in order," Sigmond was saying. "You're in charge of tonight's Jetfleet. Destination, Miami Consumarket.

Six in the lot, total cargo of eighteen hundred. Officers as listed. By the way, you've a new assistant. Name is Mellot. He's to meet you here."

"What happened to Smith?" Krug scowled, and it made his face look older.

"Transferred to Sadies. But Mellot's a capable man. You'll have to break him in, of course, and he doesn't know anything about procedure. He's due to report here now and—"

Graham turned away. He had suddenly remembered the other door here in the office. It led, presumably, through the third room of Sigmond's suite to a corridor beyond.

There would be guards there, of course, and guards all the way to the outer level. But now he had a stunner.

Graham weighed his chances. They were slim, slim as the outline of the stunner in his hand. He glanced once more at the screen. The film was still unreeling; he caught sight of himself in an erotic fantasy and shuddered. Sigmond knew all about him, and as a Psycho he would take the inevitable steps. Anything was better than to await his return and passively submit. If he moved quickly, now—

He moved quickly, but not quickly enough. As he reached the other door it swung open and a khaki-clad man entered the room.

He stood there, surprised, blinking in the dimness. "I must have made a mistake," he murmured. "They told me this would be Sigmond's office."

"It is," Graham quickly assured him.

"Good. Mellot reporting." The tall young man noticed the screen for the first time. "What's this, something special going on?"

"Very special. Would you care to stay and watch?" Without waiting for an answer, Graham raised the stunner and pressed the switch. He aimed at the center of the forehead, above the pineal area.

Mellot froze.

He stood there like an old-fashioned window dummy, and like an old-fashioned window dummy he was divested of his garments.

Graham stripped hastily and donned the khaki uniform. He felt in one pocket for the idento. Mellot was approximately his size and build, and his hair was dark—curly instead of straight, but maybe that wouldn't matter. Graham could only hope. Hope and act.

Mellot was on the floor now, rigid in paralysis. Graham had to take the risk of lowering him, even if bones were broken, in order to remove his trousers and shoes. Mellot's eyes stared up at him glassily—the stunner had done its work well, and even the optic nerve was temporarily paralyzed.

Graham tried to remember the duration of the stunner's effect. Two hours, or was it three? Long enough to get out of here, if he was going to get out at all.

He rose, adjusting his uniform. Now, if he could get past Sigmond in some way and contact Krug—

Once more he approached the other door, just in time to hear Sigmond's voice.

"—try to locate him immediately. I'll step in and check with Front to see if he reported in yet."

Graham bit his lip and stepped back against the wall as the door opened and Sigmond stepped back into the room. The door dosed again, quickly, as the Psycho strove to readjust his vision in the darkness.

"Graham," he called. "Where are you, Graham?"

"Right here."

Sigmond turned, noting the body on the floor for the first time.

"What—"

The stunner flicked on. Sigmond's mouth froze along with the rest of his body. Graham wondered, momentarily, how the autonomous nervous system managed to function in maintaining circulation and respiration in spite of the stunner's effect. Then he dismissed the question: it was certainly not important now.

What was important was to push Sigmond's immobilized body back against the wall, to square his own shoulders, take a deep breath, and open the door.

Graham stepped into the other office and extended his idento with a smile.

"Krug?" he murmured. "Mellot reporting for duty."

The Brass nodded, not bothering to glance at the idento, "How'd you get into Sigmond's office?"

"They gave me directions outside. I came in through the other entrance. He said you were waiting for me here."

"Right." Krug put his hand on the young man's shoulder. "Well, let's be on our way. We're due to leave for Miami in an hour."

CHAPTER 7

BY THE time they arrived at Jetport, the Farewell was in full swing.

The Jets stood alone under the lights of the launching-platforms on the big field, separated from the runways by barricades. The Technos were readying them for takeoff, while Krug checked with them by means of his audio-relay. He stood on the edge of the Administration roof, looking down at the activities of preparation.

But Graham, at his side, had eyes only for the mob behind the barricades. He was watching the Farewell.

The friends of the Socially Secured milled about, singing and shouting their good-byes, shaking hands and extending farewell gifts to the group which stood apart in single file before the gates.

Graham recognized their enthusiasm; realized, too, that it was only a pale shadow of the emotion which suffused the faces of the Socially Secured themselves.

They waited impatiently, garbed in the special dress donned for Departure—the golden robe worn only by those who had been found to be fit and fifty. Most of them had handtrucks to convey their belongings—Graham was surprised at the amount of luggage some of these elderly people were taking with them. His own father had departed virtually empty-handed, except for a few personal microfilm files. But then, his father was a Talent, not a worker. The workers were different. They were great accumulators. People with fantasies of projection, pride of ownership. The Psychos were doing their best to gradually stamp out the viewpoint—they'd outlawed Jags and Caddies for everyone except Technos many years ago, for example. But still the workers clung to material possessions. Some of the Socially Secured would be taking new things into the South, too; there would be fishing-tackle and other unusual items. Graham had heard that in some Resorts they even permitted hunting.

Krug barked something into the audio-relay and the gates opened beneath them. Shouting and waving, the line of Socially Secured moved across the field, escorted by Brass guides. The handtrucks rolled with smooth, electrified precision.

Krug glanced at his assistant and nodded. "Quite a sight, isn't it?" he commented.

Graham nodded. "This is all new to me," he answered. "I've got a lot to learn."

"Well, you might as well enjoy yourself tonight. Next time we make a run, Pm putting you in with the crew, to pick up general procedure. But this trip is just for orientation."

Graham nodded. The talk of "next time" disturbed him. He'd have to make plans quickly. Granted that he'd be able to get away with this before somebody at Psychocenter discovered what had happened and relayed the information here.

He glanced nervously over his shoulder, half-expecting the arrival of a messenger—and guards. But the roof was empty. Maybe he'd be leaving in time. He wished they'd take off now.

"Any questions?" Krug was asking.

Graham blinked. He remembered that he was Mellot now; he had a role to play. The new assistant. What would the new assistant ask at a time like this?

"One thing does surprise me," Graham said, slowly. "They all seem to be so happy. Don't any of them ever have any regrets at leaving here?"

Krug shook his head. "Why should they? What's so wonderful about being an agriculturist or a laborian or an industrician that anyone would be sorry to quit? Oh, they're all adjusted, but think of the benefits they're going to get. Maybe fifty years of taking it easy at government expense, thanks to geriatrics. Isn't that better than the old way they tell us about—when a man had to slave at a job until he was ready to drop, and then be dependent on a small pension or whatever he could manage to lay away?"

"I wasn't thinking of that," Graham persisted. "I was thinking about giving up friends, family ties—"

Krug looked at him sharply, and he realized he'd made a mistake.

"What do you mean, family ties?"

"Well, extended mating-arrangements, for example—"

Krug's glance didn't soften. "Where'd you take training?" he asked.

"Sanmonica, of course." Graham remembered there was a Brass schooling-center there, and hoped it was the right answer.

"Didn't they tell you that all mating-arrangements for workers terminate in the forty-sixth year?"

"Oh, that's right. I'd forgotten."

"Well don't forget. That's important. At forty-six the special conditioning begins. Class-therapy, one night a week. Indoctrination courses for Social Security. They're taught what to expect when they go South. Usually, their jobs are switched around, too, and they're moved to a new living-area, just so old ties can be broken. After a few years, they adapt. And of course they know that once they arrive in the South, they can free-mate all they please. That's one of the reasons they look happy about leaving, now."

Graham nodded. “Don’t they ever allow them to stay with mates? I mean, if both reach the age of fifty at the same time?”

Krug spat over the edge of the roof. “Why should they? Might as well expect them to take their own offspring along. The whole point of conditioning is to eliminate all the dangers of the oldstyle family setup, with ‘romantic love’ and ‘marriage’ and such aberrations. I’m no Psycho, boy, but you know as well as I do what that meant. Why, almost all our troubles in the old days came from the dangers of just that sort of thing. The very roots of psychic disorder stemmed from those family situations—with permanent parents, the Oedipus-complex, sibling rivalry.”

Graham half-listened as he watched the Socially Secured file up the ramps into the waiting Jets. He glanced behind once more. All clear.

Krug noticed his movements. “Anxious to get started? So am I. Let’s go down. We’re on First Jet, of course.” He guided Graham to the vator. On the way down he checked details through his audio-relay. Apparently satisfied, he switched it off as they reached the field and walked through the gates to the waiting Jet in the foreground.

“That’s part of it, of course,” he continued, taking up the thread of the conversation without interruption. “The rest, as you should know, was a matter of the old-time rivalry between youth and age. The family situation only helped to keep it alive: father against son, mother against daughter, younger children against the eldest. And you know what it did to the community. Before Planned Society you saw it everywhere. The young who went out to fight and die resented the old who stayed behind to pick up the profits in safety. It wasn’t until the Psychos came along and hit on the solution of separating the two groups that we got stability. Today all those tensions are gone. We don’t worry about parents or our elders or bigger boys or any of that nonsense. When we’re young, we stay with our own age-group, in a Big Family Unit. We work with our own age-group, leave with our own age-group when we're Socially Secured. There's nothing left behind to cause us any regrets."

Krug cleared his throat. "Of course, I'm just speaking figuratively, you might say. You and I, we don't have to bother. We're exempt from being Socially Secured at fifty or any other age. We can keep on going until we're eighty or ninety, even."

He paused at the foot of the Jet-ramp and placed his hand on Graham's shoulder. "I want you to remember that tonight, because it's important. No matter what you think, just keep on remembering—you'll never be Socially Secured." He shook his head emphatically. "Look at me. I'm sixty-four. Hard to believe, isn't it? But it's true. And I'm good for another twenty years. Just keep in line and the same holds true for you."

A buzzer sounded on his audio-relay and he switched it on. Graham gulped, but the voice was merely reporting the successful boarding of the Jets and clearing with Krug for take-off.

"This way." The Brass led him forward to the cabin. The pilot was already working at the instrument-panel, while the co issued instructions to their passengers in the space behind. Each of the six Jets carried a full complement of three hundred. Huge as they were, Graham couldn't help but feel sorry for the Socially Secured—they must be crowded back in there. Even a two-hour flight would be an ordeal.

Krug, apparently, had no such compunctions. He conferred with pilot and co, then sent a final message to Control through his audio-relay.

Graham sat next to him in the cabin, just behind the pilots' seats before the panel.

"Strap," Krug told him. He indicated a lever at Graham's side. "Seat-chute. Just press in case of emergency. But you know that, of course. It's only that sometimes they forget, on the first trip. Liable to be quite a shock."

Graham smiled. The back of his neck was wet. They'd be taking off in a moment. Taking off. Getting out of here. Heading South, to the Resorts. How far was Miami from Gulfport? Maybe he could shake Krug down there, get to his father. He'd have to plan carefully, but no sense thinking about that now. It all depended on the situation when he arrived. At the moment the important thing was to get away.

And they were leaving.

Leaving with a shudder and with shock, with pulsation and pressure and power—but leaving nonetheless, so that Graham's heart soared with the ship. The launchers propelled them through the opening in the plexide Dome with split-second precision, and then they were clear, and jetting. Lights dimmed, brightened. The ship was on course, at a steady seven hundred.

Krug fumbled at a compartment next to his seat. "Hungry?" he asked.

Graham shook his head.

Krug shrugged and unwrapped a hamsan. He munched thoughtfully. "Better check in," he muttered, reaching for a comm-tube.

Graham held his breath as Krug addressed Control, already sixty miles behind them. But apparently Control had nothing to report. Everything was clear. And if no one had found Sigmond and Mellot by now, chances were that the offices would remain undisturbed until morning. By that time he'd be in Miami, and out of Krug's reach. Just how that would be arranged he didn't know, but a chance would come. It had to.

Graham shifted his strap, patting the pockets of the Brass uniform to see what he could discover. He'd had no time to take inventory. Here was his idento, here was a stunner, here a lumpy packet of what might be emergency rations or pacifiers—for all he knew, it could be Libidose. He had little idea of what constituted standard equipment for Brass assigned to flights like this. And he had little idea what he was supposed to know. The best thing to do would be to keep his mouth shut as much as possible and let Krug do the talking.

Krug seemed amenable to that arrangement. He talked over and around his hamsan.

“Desert country down there,” he said. “Too dark to see, of course.”

“No Domes?”

“We should be over Phoenix, now. Always fly the same route. Then there’s nothing until Dallas. And after that, the Gulf.”

“Gulf?”

“Gulf of Mexico, of course. Which reminds me.” He leaned forward and tapped the co on the shoulder. “Don’t forget to give me the signal,” he said.

The co nodded, then turned back to the panel. He and the pilot carried on a conversation of their own in low tones. Graham scarcely heard it. Another sound overrode; it came from the big passenger-area behind their cabin wall.

“What’s that?” he asked. “Socially Secured. They’re singing.”

And so they were. Graham strained, trying to distinguish the words of the ragged tune. All he could understand was something about *high in the sky we fly* and *life in the sun has just begun.*

“Traditional,” Krug commented. “They always sing those things when they leave.”

He fumbled for another hamsan. “Sure you don’t want one?” Graham nodded again. Krug gave him a worried glance. “What’s the matter, stomach upset?”

“No. I’m just not hungry.” That didn’t seem to be the right answer, because Krug continued to stare. “Wait a minute,” he said. “Back there at Jetport, you were asking a lot of questions about the Socially Secured. You made some remark about why they weren’t sorry to leave. Did somebody feed you some classified info?”

“What do you mean?”

“You’ve got some idea about what’s going to happen?”

“No. What *is* going to happen?”

Krug's eyes were intent upon his face. Apparently he was satisfied with what he saw, because he turned away. "You'll see," he said. Again he leaned forward and spoke to the co. The co nodded briefly.

Krug leaned back in his seat. He reached over to the right wall of the cabin and pressed a button located unobtrusively below the lights. A faint hissing filled the air.

"What's that?" Graham inquired.

"Don't ask questions." Krug reached for a third hamsan.

All at once his voice seemed louder, and Graham realized why. The singing from the big cabin behind had died away. There was only the hissing.

"They've stopped," he murmured.

Krug nodded. "That's right."

"Anything the matter?"

"Nothing at all."

"Maybe we ought to step back and take a look."

"I wouldn't advise it."

"But—"

"Stay strapped. And don't try to open the door. That's an order! If any of the gas ever reached us in here we'd be finished."

"Gas?"

"Don't worry. I'm going to run the ejector now. I think they've had enough." Krug pressed another button, still munching his hamsan. "Only takes a minute to work, only takes another couple of minutes to purify the air again."

Graham felt the urgency rising in him: he knew it was wrong to speak, and yet he had to. "Aren't you going to tell me?" he asked. "Because if you can't, I'll have to guess. The gas—it does something to them, doesn't it? I mean, you're not just knocking them out. You're giving them a laundry-job, isn't that it? Affecting their memories?"

"Right." Krug finished his last bite and wiped his hands. "This stuff affects their memories, you might say. Permanently."

"Per—?"

"Might as well face it. We all have to, our first trip out. Remember the conditioning you got at school? The first time they locked you in with the corpses? That was all done with a purpose, boy. It was necessary, if you're going to be fit for this assignment. Because you're going to see a lot of corpses. To be exact, six hundred every trip."

"You—you killed them?"

Krug nodded.

Something snapped and Graham turned in his seat. He was reaching out when he saw Krug's hand, saw the stunner trained on his throat.

"Easy now," Krug was whispering. "Easy. I know how you feel. I think the bombed system's wrong, myself. I'm in favor of letting the trainees know before they go into flight. But the Psychos don't agree. They want it to come this way; want you to find out only when it's happened."

Graham didn't hear him. He was listening to a voice inside, a voice that screamed *I know now. I know about the vox-box. It's a fake. Some impersonator. You killed my father. He died this way, they all die this way, there is no Resort for the Socially Secured anywhere, it's all a lie, the whole system's a lie.*

And the stunner was ready, waiting; waiting for him to open his mouth. Because he couldn't open his mouth he opened his pores. For a moment he thought he was going to be sick.

Then Krug gripped his arm. "That's better," he said. "Just relax. Use your common sense and you'll understand that it has to be this way. We're running to capacity right now; how could we possibly support another thirty or forty million of non-productives? Turn them loose for fifty years to live in luxury and idleness? And what would they do—spend half a lifetime playing shuffleboard? This is the best way. Live fully, and die quickly and painlessly in happy anticipation."

"But it's—"

"Cruel? Barbaric? Inhuman?" Krug smiled wryly. "Go ahead, use the words if you like. I won't hold them against you. Felt the same way myself, at first. Guess we all do. It's only when you stop to think things out objectively that you realize what we do is necessary. And for the best." He paused. "You know, they really tried to work out Resorts at first. They actually brought the Socially Secured down here. And the results were murder. Literally murder. Without Psychos to run things, they reverted, went right back to old-style civilization—complete with robbery, violence, even rape. Had to go in and exterminate whole colonies. Then they hit on this system, and there's been no trouble since."

He pointed at the left wall. "See that button? Press it."

Graham hesitated. Krug leaned forward and tapped the co on the shoulder. "Over the Gulf?" he asked. The co nodded.

Krug turned to Graham again. "All right. Press it," he repeated.

"What happens when I press it?"

"Never mind. Do as you're told." His voice carried authority, and so did the pointing stunner.

Graham pressed.

There was a whoosh and a thudding roar from behind. The Jet jerked violently.

"What happened?" Graham asked.

"We just dumped our passengers. Into the Gulf of Mexico."

As Graham started, the hand came down on his arm again. "You did it," Krug reminded him. "You're a part of the system. Might as well get used to it."

Graham turned his face away. He felt his fingers ball into fists. Then Krug was standing up, unstrapped. He put his audio-relay down on the seat.

"Hold it a minute," he said. "I'm going back to check the ship. Make sure everything's closed up again. I won't be gone long."

He edged into a passageway and shut the door.

Graham sat there alone, sat there thinking about what he had done; thinking about those who had just died, and about how his father had died. A whiff of gas and a plunge down into the dark waters—that was the end-result of fifty years of Planned Society. Lies, all lies, with this as the last lie of all. No, it didn't even end here. For Talents, there would be still more lies; the impersonators on the vox-box every week. *This* task was grim enough, the task of the executioner. But the impersonator's role was even worse. Studying old tapes and life-records, and then deceiving the survivors. Telling them to be happy, to adjust, to take it easy, relax, don't worry—

"Control to Krug."

The voice came from the empty seat beside him. Audio had been activated.

"Control to Krug. Stand by. Acknowledge. Emergency message. Repeat. Acknowledge and stand by for emergency message."

The metallic voice crackled in Graham's ears. Emergency message. That meant only one thing. They'd discovered Sigmond and Mellot. They knew. And they were warning Krug.

Graham glanced behind him. Krug was still in the cabin, but he'd be back in a moment. Could the audio be turned off? No, because the pilots were listening too. It wouldn't help. He'd have to unstrap himself and get out the stunner.

But he couldn't stun the pilots, and if he stunned Krug they'd turn on him. Bomb it, why hadn't he planned things in advance? He ought to have anticipated that his luck wouldn't hold forever. And now there was no answer available, no escape.

Escape.

He started to unstrap and then remembered what Krug had said about the seat. It was an escape-chute. "Just press in emergency."

Well, this was an emergency if he ever saw one. With the audio squawking now, *“Acknowledge!”* and the sound of the door behind him opening slowly. Krug was coming, Krug was here, he was holding his stunner in one hand.

Graham took a deep breath. His thumb found the button on the side of his seat. It was now or never.

“What are you doing?” Krug began.

The rest of his sentence was drowned in the rush of air. The seat dropped from beneath Graham, and then he was dropping with it, turning over and over as he fell. The darkness was all around, coming up with a rush, and he could see the phosphorescence whirling below.

SNEAK PREVIEW

Graham closed his eyes, then opened them. He’d have to dump the seat-chute before he landed. He was over water, and it would drag him down.

His fingers tugged frantically at the strap, but he was falling too fast, turning too quickly. Over and over and over, and the water rushing up, and the night closing in—

Then Graham screamed. He was still screaming as he followed the dumped dead down into the Gulf of Mexico.

CHAPTER 8

THE world was a woman’s face. It was as small as a pinpoint, it was so huge it blotted out the sky; it wavered and receded, then came forward again only to fade once more.

Graham blinked and gradually the face came into focus and assumed normal proportions. It stared down at him with grave and questioning eyes, and he suddenly became conscious of the fact that he was flat on his back, lying very quietly on something that rocked back and forth, back and forth. The face began to bob again, then steadied once more. He opened his mouth, but before he could speak the woman anticipated.

"It's all right," she told him. "You're on a boat, you know. We pulled you out of the water."

"But—"

"You came down from a Jet, didn't you? In a seat-chute? We saw the flare."

"What flare?"

"Don't you know every seat-chute has a flare attachment?"

Graham shook his head. "I didn't know. This was my first trip."

"What happened? Did something go wrong, was there some emergency? You're Brass, aren't you? I recognized the uniform. If you want me to report—"

"Please, don't. I can't talk now." Graham closed his eyes. Before he did so he caught the woman staring at him. It was an oddly guarded stare, but he seemed to sense surprise in her gaze, and puzzlement. Her voice, when she spoke, was oddly guarded, too.

"Don't try to exert yourself," she said. "Just rest, now. I'll give you a booster." She bent forward and her hand moved towards him. He felt a sudden sting, followed by a tingling, in his left arm. Then he went back into the darkness, but it was a rocking, gentle darkness that soothed his senses.

He slept for a long time. When he awoke he was instantly alert to broad daylight and a brisk breeze. He knew that he was lying on the deck of the small vessel—a primitive craft powered by an ancient petroleum motor. Out of the corner of his eye he stared down into a cabin where two men in nondescript uniforms piloted the boat.

Graham shifted his gaze and blinked. The woman was still seated beside him. Her face was immobile, though the wind had unloosed the auburn torrent of her hair. She too wore the bulky and nonedescript uniform of her male companions; there was no trace of makeup on her countenance and she didn't have glasses. Her face, as she bent forward, bore traces of small blemishes. Graham racked his memory to identify the discolorations. What did they call them? *Freckles.* That was it, freckles. People used to suffer from such dermatological afflictions in the days when they lived outside the Domes.

Outside the Domes. But he was outside, himself, now. Outside, on the rolling waters, in a small boat—

Graham sat up swiftly. The woman smiled at him.

"Don't be alarmed. You're quite safe, Graham."

He stared at her. "You know my name?"

"Of course. It's our job to keep contact with the Jets. Krug relayed an alert to us. We were looking for you." She paused. "My name is Clare."

Graham nodded at her. *You're quite safe, Graham.* It was an ironic self-contradiction. If she knew his name, then he wasn't safe. She had captured him, Krug knew where he was, and they both knew *who* he was. They had found out all about Mellot, now, and Sigmond, too. There was no escape. *Or was there?* He glanced out at the blue emptiness of the surrounding sea. *No escape*.

"Don't worry," Clare said. "We'll be reaching the Keys soon."

"The Keys?"

"We're based there, of course. This is only a small part of our duties—when a Jet consignment comes over, we're on hand to patrol the area. Sometimes, when a cargo is—dumped—there are accidents."

Graham raised his eyebrows. Clare glanced away as she continued.

"Every so often there's a slipup. One of the Socially Secured may revive upon reaching the water. That's where we function. We, and the crews of a dozen similar boats, comb the area for such survivors—"

"And kill them?" Graham muttered.

Clare said nothing. She continued to stare out at the water.

"Why didn't you kill me?" he asked. "You said yourself that Krug gave you a report."

"That's the reason," she answered. "He told us to bring you back and await further orders."

Graham shook his head. “But the report must have come in while I was asleep. I seem to recall that when you spoke to me last night, the first time, you said you didn’t know who I was.”

“Correct.”

“Why didn’t you kill me then? In fact, why did you bother to fish me out of the water at all?” There was something both incongruous and unconvincing in her statements, and he tried to formulate it as he spoke. “You say you search for survivors and finish them off. I should think the sea would do the job quite efficiently—or the sharks.”

Clare sighed. “Yes,” she murmured. “There are sharks, everywhere.”

“You haven’t answered my questions.”

“I don’t intend to. You can ask Doc, when we arrive.”

“Doc? Who’s he?”

“He’s in charge.”

“Brass?”

“Psycho.”

Graham stood up. If there were puzzling elements in the situation, her last word resolved it. He was being taken back into custody by the Psychos, and that could mean only one thing. He’d be better off taking his chances with the sharks.

He glanced covertly at the water. Land loomed off on the southern horizon—it was probably one of the Keys. Maybe it was a Psycho center, maybe not. Would it be possible to make a break, swim for it, attempt to hide there? It was worth the risk, in any case. Anything was better than falling into the hands of the Psychos again.

He gazed down into the cabin. The two men seemed entirely preoccupied. No one was watching him except the woman, and she was unarmed. Now was the time. If he could knock her out—

Graham stretched, flexing his arms as if yawning. He felt rested, refreshed, ready for anything. Yes, he could do it. He knew he could. And he had to. *Now.*

Suddenly he lashed out, his right hand grasping her hair, his left arm closing about her throat. His fingers tightened across her neck and he bent her back, and then—

Her hands locked behind her, closing around the back of *his* neck. His feet left the deck, and then he was whirling through the air. Before he knew what had happened he was jarred into painful realization as he landed on the hard surface with a thump that knocked the wind out of his lungs.

Clare stood over him stolidly, then tossed her hair back over her shoulders and smiled faintly. “Please don’t try anything like that again,” she said, crisply, “or I’ll have to use force.”

“Force? What do you call that?”

All at once the faint smile blossomed into an unmistakable grin. “Judo,” she explained. “Doc taught me.”

“You must have been a good pupil.” He stirred, and ran his right hand across his bruised shoulders.

“Here, I’ll help you up,” Clare said. “If you’ll promise not to make a break for it.”

“I guess there’s no choice, is there?” Graham allowed her to assist him, taking her hand as she pulled him to his feet. Her clasp was warm and unfemininely firm. He prepared to release his grip but she held him firm and bent her head closer to his own.

“Hold it,” she whispered. “They can see us from below, through the mirror. Pretend you’re dizzy and lean on me. Now listen carefully. I know why you tried to escape, of course. And I suppose I should have told you sooner. You were right when you questioned my motives in saving you. We don’t ordinarily rescue anyone—our job is merely to police and patrol these waters. But Doc has other plans in mind. You’ll just have to trust him, and trust me. Now, will you promise to behave?”

Graham nodded. “Then he’s not really a Psycho?”

“Oh, he’s a Psycho—but there is more to it than that. Wait and see.”

Clare stepped away. “Look,” she said. “We’re coming in!”

The boat chugged along a reef and entered the island harbor. Through the trees bordering the beach Graham caught a glimpse of a cluster of buildings, unprotected by any semblance of a Dome.

Slowly they moved towards a crude wooden dock, and all at once the engines slowed and stilled as they drifted in. One of the men clambered up from the cabin and ran across the deck, vaulting the rail to the dock below. He secured the boat with a rope. His companion left the wheel and spoke to Clare, who nodded.

The two men led the way. Graham and Clare followed, taking a path across the beach which led to a series of stone steps. They ascended, and came to a courtyard fronting a semicircle of steel and concrete structures, all of which seemed to have solid glass window-walls on the side facing the courtyard. Graham recognized the screen arrangements over the glass; visibility would be perfect from within, but it was impossible to see what lay behind from outside here. Architecturally, the buildings would not have been out of place in Hollywood, but this was not surprising; hadn’t Clare said there was a Psycho in charge of the Key? He’d just have to trust her, from now on.

Oddly enough, he did. She was smiling reassuringly now, urging him forward as they approached the outer door. Something buzzed and clicked—electronic protector threshold, Graham realized—and then the door slid open. The two men entered and turned down a corridor to the left. Clare grasped his arm and guided him to the right, through a long hall which resembled a corridor back in Technoquarters. Everything was white and shining—Psychowhite, Psycho-shining.

Clare halted before a doorway. “Don’t worry, now,” she whispered. Her voice was lost in the buzzing and clicking as the electronic guardian acknowledged their presence and activated the lock-mechanisms. The door moved to one side arid they entered the office. A white-gowned figure gazed at them from behind a desk.

"Here we are," Clare said, gaily. "Mission accomplished."

The Psycho stood up, nodding slowly. As his eyes met Graham's, he was conscious of seeing in them the same curious look of shocked recognition he'd noted in Clare's glance. The impression lasted for only an instant and then a veil came down. It wasn't actually a veil, but at the moment Graham was reminded of a lizard he had once seen sunning itself upon a stone; the reptile had seemed to draw a film over its gaze.

There was something remote and reptilian about this little man in the white robe. Suddenly Graham was conscious of a cold tingle of apprehension. He'd felt it before, that other time, when he'd reached out and touched the lizard. The lizard had flicked its tongue suddenly and moved away.

The Psycho flicked his tongue.

"So you're Graham," he murmured. "I'm glad to see you. In fact, we're both glad to see you—aren't we, Krug?"

Graham whirled, suddenly, raising his arm lest Clare try to intercept him. The girl made no movement. And Graham, after turning, halted and stood still Krug stood directly behind him, his eyes levelled on Graham's face and his stunner levelled at his forehead.

"Very glad," Krug said. "Very glad indeed." He smiled at Clare. "But I'm a little surprised, too. I'd have thought this one might have put up more of a struggle. He's disturbed, you know."

Clare nodded. "I took care of that. I persuaded him it was all a trick designed to deceive you. After that he was quite cooperative. I imagine he thought Doc here would save him."

"And so I shall." The Psycho's lizard-tongue licked at thin lips.

Graham faced the girl. "Bomb you! Why didn't you let me go over the side? At least I'd have had a quick death."

"You aren't to die," Clare told him. "Doc gave me my orders."

"And Krug gave me mine," the Psycho said.

"And Sigmond himself instructed me," Krug added. He grinned slowly. "We bear you no malice, Graham. So there will be no punishment. Only an adjustment."

"Adjustment?" Despite himself, Graham could not repress the note of pleading in his voice. "I don't want that. Believe me, I'd rather die—"

"Sigmond knows best," Krug said. "As far as I'm concerned, I'd be only too happy to eliminate you. But Sigmond insisted otherwise. You're a Talent, remember? And Talents are too scarce to be destroyed. Years have been invested in training you, and we can't afford to be cheated of your creative potential. You'll be re-assigned to a project after a proper period of Therapy."

"Therapy? You mean I'm going to be laundered, is that it?"

"We'll leave the matter up to Doc, here. He's in charge." Krug grinned again. "Actually, it's lucky in a way that you bailed out when and where you did—made it all very convenient. Unless Sigmond chose to treat you in Hollywood, chances are we'd have flown you down here anyway as a second choice. Doc gets a lot of special cases, don't you, Doc?"

The lizard-tongue flicked once more from between the smiling, parted lips. "That is correct." Graham paled. "You mean this is a—Womb?"

"Please." The Psycho raised a hand. "Let us not descend to vulgarities, Graham. It is enough for you to know that you are now an inmate of an Insanatorium."

Smiling graciously, he raised his hand in a languid motion and at the same time Graham felt Krug's stunner beam him in the back.

CHAPTER 9

THE room was light and airy.

Graham could glance out of the window at the ocean, or gaze through the door down the long corridor beyond, and there was no sense of confinement—unless, of course, he attempted to open either the window or the door. The glass was quite immovable, and beyond it were the meshed screens.

Food came up at regular intervals through the wall servitor. The furnishings were more than comfortable. In a way, it was as pleasant here as in his own apartment.

When he'd recovered consciousness, he found a fresh supply of clothing laid out for him on the bed, and an ample wardrobe in the wall closet. Somebody had also seen fit to provide him with sigs, and during the second day of his enforced stay he began to indulge in smoking. He'd never tried them before, but of course he knew what they were—oral-erotic tabagistic pacifiers, named in honor of Sigmund Freud, of course, who had smoked *cigars* in the olden, golden days.

But the biggest novelty lurked in the cupboards, which Graham investigated thoroughly on the second evening of his captivity.

They were filled with books. Actual *books,* bound and printed by ancient processes; their pages yellowed and crumbling now, but still legible. Quite legible, in fact. Graham thus found one of his wildest fantasies come true—and without further ado, he settled down to an orgy of unbridled reading.

It was all pornography, of course, things he'd heard of vaguely but never seen and not quite believed in; filthy stuff by writers named Asimov and Heinlein and Bradbury which had once been openly peddled under the guise of "science fiction." Despite his initial qualms, Graham found the material quite interesting from the clinical standpoint. After all, hadn't his own work—Space Opera—originally sprung from just such outmoded and obscene sources? That's the way he'd always understood it.

But he could see why these sources had been outlawed. The writing was suggestive in the extreme; consciously permeated with inhibition, repression, compulsion and obvious symbolism. It was unmistakably a product of the unclean mental attitudes of the Twentieth Century, teeming with quaint, old-fashioned, but nevertheless dangerous notions. For example, the idea of space-travel was completely perverted—these writers, while not minimizing the potential dangers, apparently did their best to make the idea sound *attractive!* They also speculated on time-travel, and all from the standpoint of escapist fantasy. Some of the absurd attempts at prophecy, involving visions of a future peopled by “robots” and “cybernetics machines” were quite ludicrous in the light of actuality, but in other respects Graham could trace the genesis of many concepts practically paralleled in today’s Space Opera. The Bems were here, for example. Yes, as a technician, as a Talent, he had to admit the ancient pornographers deserved credit for their imaginative efforts. It was their viewpoint which was warped and dangerous.

Throughout everything seemed to run absurd fantasies of omnipotence. The “heroes” were supposedly brilliant or at least superior intellects who nevertheless reacted to stress in terms of physical aggression throughout the narratives. They kept coming back for more punishment repeatedly and even when exhausted they seemed capable of one last superhuman effort which resulted in ultimate triumph. It was a monstrous concept of humanity, but Graham found it oddly attractive, in a way. That was the danger, of course; the temptation to identify with such atypicalities. Such a “hero” would never, for example, allow himself to become involved in Graham’s present predicament. He would have easily overcome that girl, Clare, and taken over the boat; sailed for some deserted island and escaped to—

Where?

That was the difference between pornography and reality; there was no escape afforded in the latter. No “underground” of rebels waiting to overthrow authority. No wonder “science fiction” had been repressed and repudiated, along with the rest of the old-fashioned “literature”; entirely too much of it dealt with fantasies of aggression directed against authority. And a great deal seemed to concern criticism of social attitudes and the social order. Of course, as Graham realized, most of the criticism had been perfectly justified; the point was that this form of writing could be employed by almost anyone as a weapon against any form of authority. Therein lay the real danger.

Why had *he* been allowed access to this material? This disturbed him.

The question remained unanswered. For five full days, Graham saw no one. There was nothing to do but read. And so he read. Day dimmed to darkness and darkness dwindled into dawn, but still he was alone. No figures appeared against the landscape beyond the window, no faces loomed in the corridor past the doorway. The longer he waited, the more apprehensive he became, and the more he took refuge from apprehension in the books. Perhaps that's the way it had happened in the old days, when everybody read. They read because they were afraid; because they couldn't stand the strain of waiting for the bombs to fall. But the ideas that brought the bombs were generated and nurtured by the concepts in the books, and the more they read the more they ripened to aggression and rebellion. It was a vicious cycle—no wonder the Psychos had outlawed all that pornographic trash! Now the world was clean and sane—

And they dumped the Socially Secured in the sea. Was that clean and sane?

Graham was still pondering the answer when Doe paid him a visit.

The Psycho appeared outside the door on the morning of the sixth day and gestured with his hand. The door slid open and the small man entered. Since the gesturing hand held a stunner, Graham made no effort to approach him.

Doc nodded down and smiled, but the lizard-tongue did not appear.

"How are you feeling?" he asked.

"Confused," Graham answered, truthfully. He glanced towards the cupboards. "Reading those books I found—"

"They were placed here for that purpose," Doc said. "I hope you got a few ideas from them."

"But I don't understand. This is a Womb, isn't it? I'm going to be laundered—"

"I was expecting the books to do the job," Doc said. "I thought they might help in reorientation."

"Pornography?"

"It used to be called fantasy," Doc reminded him. "Rut under any label, it's still the best approach to understanding current realities that I know."

"What has an Insanatorium got to do with realities?"

"Not much, in Hollywood or most of the other centers. But down here, we've learned to go our own way. The books have helped us immeasurably, I can assure you. So many of them dealt with tyrannies of the future, and possible rebellions against such tyrannies. No wonder they were banned, labelled pornographic. Anyone reading them would be bound to find certain parallels with the present situation. Didn't you?"

Graham hesitated a moment. Then, "What do I have to lose?" he murmured. "Of course I did."

"Very well," said Doc. "Consider yourself laundered." He slipped the stunner into his jacket and sat down.

"But—"

"I told you we didn't operate the way they would in Hollywood. Sigmond thinks we do, of course, and we try to keep him satisfied. That's why we had to go through with that little comedy the other night, for Krug's benefit. He'll report to Sigmond that you've been captured and will be given the full treatment. That means you're safe here for at least a few more weeks. By that time we'll be ready to act."

"Wait a minute. What are you trying to tell me?"

"Just what you should already have surmised from reading those books. That you're in the hands of the rebels."

"Underground?"

“Why not?” Doc shrugged. “Don’t you think it’s a good idea? You know now that this whole social order is built upon a lie. You saw what happened to the Socially Secured. Isn’t it worthwhile to step in and change things?”

“Yes, but how can *you* expect to do anything?”

Doc lit a sig. “I’ve been asking that Question for years,” he confessed. “When I came here, to take charge, I was armed with nothing but vague doubts. After I discovered the truth about the Socially Secured, those doubts were crystallized. What Clare told you is partly true. There’s no Brass base in this outlying area, beyond the Domes, and one of my duties as Psycho in charge is to send out boats when the Socially Secured flights come over—to make sure that no one escapes by any freak accident after being dumped.

“Well, I send out the boats, but on rescue missions. We can’t save many; most of them are quite dead before they hit the water. But through the past ten years we’ve managed to bring in and revive over a hundred. Some of them are good recruits.

“Then too, I’m in charge of four other Insanatoriums in this region, in addition to this one here. I’ve managed to pick up some interesting additions to our ranks. There are well over three hundred of us, now.”

Graham blinked. “Three hundred, to deal with His MGMinence, and Sigmond? People like Hix and Ormsbee and Schwartz, and the millions behind them? They control everything from the top—”

Doc raised his hand. “You needn’t tell me. After all, I *am* a Psycho. I know the setup very well. And as you say, it *is* controlled most efficiently from the top. Nothing of importance is delegated. This is its greatest strength, and also its greatest weakness. Since the whole system depends upon holding the media of communication and information, all we need do is take over on that level.”

“But how can you expect to do it with three hundred old men and maniacs?”

"They aren't maniacs. Forget the orthodox Psycho definitions of aberration. All the values have been inverted, all the standard psychiatric precepts perverted. Today the Insanatoriums are virtually the last refuge of the sane. If they haven't all been subject to shock-therapy and topectomy and lobotomy, just to dull them into submission. It's been years since psychotherapy has been used as a curative—the principal purpose of all therapy has been merely to destroy rebellion. No, some of our best minds, our most creative minds, are in Insanatoriums. I've utilized their abilities, set up a few laboratories. We aren't quite as helpless as you may imagine."

"You're talking about war, then? You have new weapons to destroy the Domes?" Graham shook his head. "Frankly, I doubt if the end would justify the means."

"I doubted it, too, for many years, when that seemed to be the only way. Lately, other avenues have opened. But I wasn't certain of our plans until you arrived."

"What have I got to do with it?"

"You're quite important," Doc smiled. "In a month or so, you'll be supposedly laundered and fit to return to duty. When the next flight comes down over the Gulf to dump, you'll be able to return with them to Hollywood. That's the way we'll work it—through infiltration. You can handle the matter from the inside—"

Graham shook his head. "Nonsense! You've been reading too much of that pornography. One man against the Galactic Empire, eh?" He stood up. "Look, I'm in sympathy with your ideas. I'd like to see the present order overthrown. But I'm not going to tackle the job. If you don't mind, I intend to help all I can, but from right here."

"Very well," Doc said. "You'll stay. But you'll go."

"I don't understand—"

"I told you we'd managed some rather clever innovations in our laboratory work, with the help of the technicians we recruited. I also told you that you're quite important to the success of this plan. But perhaps the best way to make things utterly clear is through actual demonstration. I asked to have Considine sent up here, and I believe he's waiting outside now."

Doc stepped over to the door. It slid open and he beckoned to a waiting figure outside.

The man stepped into the room.

"This is Considine," Doc said.

Graham heard the name, but he didn't believe him. He kept staring at the smiling stranger before him—the stranger who wasn't a stranger.

"Pretty good job, eh?" Doc asked. "Now are you beginning to understand how we'll work it? Naturally, I expect you to brief Considine here very thoroughly in the weeks to come. He'll have to become completely acquainted with all the necessary data—you must cooperate all along the line. Then, when the time comes, he'll be ready. Once he arrives in Hollywood, he knows what to do. It's your job to see that he can manage to carry out his duties undetected."

Doc smiled and patted him on the shoulder. "No reason why you shouldn't get started right away. From now on, you two will stay together; there's no time for delay. I've no doubt you'll get along well with one another. After all, you have a great deal in common."

Then he made his exit, and left Graham standing there, staring at Considine. What he had said was all too true; they *did* have a lot in common. The trouble was, Graham couldn't accept the stranger as Considine. The name just didn't fit.

Graham thought of the old books and shuddered.

Call him robot. Call him android.

Whatever he was, however he had been created—feature for feature, the creature named Considine was Graham's identical twin.

CHAPTER 10

I'M NO monster," Considine insisted. "I'm as human as you are. Here, feel my arm. It's flesh, isn't it?"

"But your face—"

"There was a natural resemblance to begin with. A little cosmetological work and some makeup helped. The big job now is to do as good a job on the inside as was done on the exterior. That's where you come in. You're going to have to tell me all about yourself. And about your life in Laguna Dome." Considine smiled. "There's a lot to catch up on—it's been some years since I was Socially Secured."

"Doc rescued you?"

"That's right."

"What did you do—beforehand? Back there?"

"We'll discuss it some other time. Right now, there's too much I've got to find out from you and we haven't got much time. Doc insists that *you* give me every bit of data you can remember; nothing is too trivial and inconsequential to be important. Names, dates, conversations, experiences you shared with others, details of your daily life and work."

"Think you can remember everything?"

"He'll supply us with a recording device."

"Tape or film?"

"Something new. One of his patients, a man named Lawrence, came up with it. I'll have it brought in. Don't be afraid, now."

Graham wasn't afraid, but he was a bit selfconscious when he saw the hypnotape. Considine set up the apparatus on a table; they took chairs on either side, and then adjusted the head-clamps and electrodes.

"You may find it easier to talk, at first," Considine said. "But just remember, you really don't have to. All that's necessary is that you think, that you remember. It's based on the free-association principle, of course. Electroenceplialographic patterns are set up mechanically; the machine analyzes the rhythms, yours and mine, and then plots a sort of median beam, a common frequency we can both approximate. You'll be on sending, I'll be on receiving, so of course I can't signal any questions. I'll just depend on you transmitting your reveries. If anything needs clarifying or supplementing, I can ask you for additional data after a session."

"But why is it called a hypnotape?" Graham asked. "Isn't it just mechanical thought-transmission?"

"There's a built-in signal, through the electrodes, to focus attention," Considine explained. "The result is definitely a hypnotic state on the part of both sender and receiver. This makes for maximum concentration, maximum ability to absorb impressions and information. But don't worry about being caught in a trance. The device can be set to break connection at any time. To begin with, I believe we ought to limit our sessions to an hour. Later on, when you're more relaxed, we can extend the length of contact if it seems advisable. Now don't worry—the important thing is to use the machine just as it would be used in therapy; for imparting thoughts to the analyst through free fantasy. Let yourself go."

It wasn't quite that simple, Graham told himself. To begin with, he had to accept the notion that such a transference was mechanically possible. Then he remembered how Sigmond had used the Ganz method on him, to make the filmanalysis. That had worked, worked only too well. Graham shuddered as he sank back in his chair, heard the device click on.

The funny part of it was, the device clicked on *inside* his head. He closed his eyes to concentrate, and felt a stirring beneath his skull. Little waves of horripilation coursed through him, and then an alien rhythm obtruded. It was strong, steady, and oddly soothing. Somewhere *outside* he could feel himself relaxing. There was no need to open his eyes and look around, no desire to. He could rest just by surrendering to the rhythm, and he wasn't afraid any more.

The rhythm was slow and peaceful, slow and peaceful . . .

And he didn't have to talk, all he had to do was think. Think about anything that came into his head. About Zank, and about Warner. About his friends—Carson, Davis, Loeb. About his father, down in Gulfport, who wasn't really down in Gulfport at all but who had gone down in the Gulf. Down in the Gulf with the Socially Secured, because of Krug and men like

Krug, the rats. Men like Archer, his MGMinence. MGMinence. Menace, the Bems in his work . . .

He thought about his work, about his day-to-day routine back there under the Dome. He recalled his conversations with Zank, his talks with Wanda. No feeling of embarrassment now. He could recollect every detail. All the little things, things he had consciously forgotten, fell into place. He even remembered the individual movements of that new *Psychiatric Suite;* they were *Trauma, Cathexis, Catharsis* and *Adjustment.* He thought about the Fornivacation and Wanda's glasses and his last job turned out for Space Opera . . .

Click!

Something shut off in his head, and the session was over. He had a moment of confusion, and then everything was all right once again. There was no self-consciousness, no aftermath of fatigue.

Considine was jubilant. He began talking at once, and now Graham was really startled; out of the mouth of his double poured his own thoughts, his own memories, literally verbatim.

"You see?" Considine exulted. "It really does work. Now, I've got a few points I'd like to ask questions about—"

And he did, thus establishing a routine to which they both adhered during the days and weeks that followed. Aside from the hypnotic influence of the machine, there was something definitely compelling about the very process of self-revelation. By opening his mind and memories to Considine, Graham found that he was in turn becoming acquainted with himself.

Once, when Doc stopped by to check on their progress, he said as much. "This is a wonderful adjunct to psychotherapy," he told him.

"I hope it will be," Doc answered. "If we ever return to *genuine* therapeutic concepts again. Right now, of course, they use plenty of narcohypnosis and subliminal suggestion, but only for purposes of control."

“How did it all start, anyway?” Graham demanded. But Doc shook his head.

“Can’t go into that now. No time. Later on, perhaps, we’ll have more chance to talk.”

Graham didn’t wait for that opportunity to arise. During the third and final week of their daily sessions, he spoke to Considine about it.

They had reached a point where his double was reasonably satisfied with the progress they’d made; for several days, Considine had ceased using the machine and instead improvised a series of testing-periods, during which Graham fired questions and he supplied the answers.

“I don’t think they’ll ever be able to trip me up now,” Considine said. “I know as much about you as you do yourself.”

“Probably more,” Graham admitted. “I’ve recovered a lot of latent memories. And I’m grateful for them. You know, when Sigmond made his filmanalysis, everything seemed so horrible—the infantile period especially. It’s as though he dredged up only the negative concepts; the fears, the blind aggressions, the feelings of inadequacy and insecurity.”

“That’s all he wanted to find,” Considine suggested. “He edited out the rest. Your feelings about your father, for example.”

“My father.” Graham smiled. “Lewis was a great man. You must have noticed how many of my pleasant recollections center about him.”

“Yes, I *did* notice,” Considine said, softly. “You miss him, don’t you?”

“Terribly.” Graham stood up, fumbling for a sig. “Oh, I know what such an admission would mean to the average Psycho. But I’m not ashamed. If I could only be half the man my father was—” He faced Considine abruptly. “Why wouldn’t they let me? Why won’t they let anyone develop in the old patterns? How did it all start, when did it change, why?”

Considine pointed upwards, his finger gesturing towards the window and stabbing at the sky.

“Bombs,” he said. “They brought more than physical destruction—they brought psychic destruction, too. The panic resulting from wholesale atomic and biological warfare caught the military and the industrialists unprepared. And the psychiatrists, already culture-heroes and authority-symbols in the 1960s, took over. Actually, they were already in key positions. During the war, they nominally controlled all media of communication—the press, television, motion pictures, radio. Quaint devices, primitive by our standards, but quite effective for “psychological warfare” and completely controlled by government psychologists in charge of censorship and propaganda.

“During the ensuing confusion after the war, they merely retained control, and augmented their positions of authority. As for so-called private industry, by this time almost every executive had his own personal analyst; these men merely pooled their influence and took over smoothly to dictate policy. First they acted in an advisory capacity and then, as more and more so-called ‘bosses’ or ‘big wheels’ cracked under the strain, the therapists moved into open control of business channels. You know something of what followed, I’m sure.

“The Declaration of Dependence abolished old-style political government, and the Psychos set out to establish a ‘sane’ world free of war and individual threats of aggression. Their initial premise seemed sound enough. They pinpointed the sources of tension in the familial situation, romantic love, competitive economics, competitive religion, nationalism. Using fear of technology and physical sciences as potential threats of future war, they developed new concepts based on a therapeutic social order. ‘Sanity’ became equated with ‘adjustment’ and what was that but conformity and obedience to Psycho dictates?

“There wasn’t much attempt to develop psychiatry or psychoanalysis any further. While it had once been freely admitted that mental therapy was still in the experimental stage, it was now postulated that the Science of the Mind was exact and ordained. They freely discarded anything which seemed contradictory or obscure; there was no more experimentation with

ESP or PSI, for example. A lot of the work of Freud, Adler, Jung and the others was ignored or actually suppressed. This wasn't too difficult, because by this time they'd started banning books and distorting the educational process. Narchohypnosis, perfected during the war, was a great aid to power. Birth-conditioning followed. Subliminal perception was freely employed—but I needn't tell you that, I'm sure.

"What gradually evolved was a drugged society. The Domes were built, to protect survivors from radioactivity, and no one hostile to the Psychos was permitted asylum in them. The rebels stayed outside and perished.

"Within the Domes, the new era really began. Atomic power and jet propulsion were developed, hydroponics became a necessary survival-technique, but no free research was permitted in the field of physical sciences. Rocket and space-flight experiments ended, because they were associated with weapons and the threat of destruction. There was an end to 'free enterprise' and communism alike, for the same reason. The surviving population was conditioned to believe they lived in a world without war, murder, suicide or aberration. Here in the Ideal States of America, the worker started out with birth-conditioning for immediate adjustment, lived as a ward of the state in a univercity, graduated to a farmarea or industarea, dwelt in a suburbanilex, visited consumarkets for pleasure, and ended up Socially Secured at fifty."

"Murder," said Graham, softly. "Living a lie and dying a lie."

"Remember they're not villains," Considine answered. "They tried to cope with a real situation as best they knew. The panic after the war created an emergency; someone had to take immediate and decisive action. Military and civil authorities failed, so the medical authorities took over. Building the Domes was a great initial achievement, and a necessity, too. Two-thirds of the entire country, three-quarters of the entire world, was seared by radioactivity. Epidemics wiped out virtually the entire population of Europe, Asia, South America—wherever survivors huddled in masses. The

Domes brought physical security. The Psychos imposed a secure social order. They tried to rebuild society along idealistic lines. But they had to work too fast, there wasn't enough to work with.

"Did you know that they *did* try to establish colonies for the Socially Secured at first, here in the south? But they lacked the necessary manpower, the necessary industrial output to support the project. It was too expensive, so eventually they just set up the present system."

"But why did they *have* to? Why enforce retirement at fifty? Why not let men live out their natural span?" Graham demanded. "They can open the Domes now. The threat of radioactivity is over. This country could support a larger population."

"I don't know," Considine sighed. "I really don't know. You'll have to ask somebody else."

A few weeks beforehand, this suggestion would have seemed absurd to Graham. But he was no longer a prisoner, now. After his daily sessions with Considine, he found he was free to come and go as he pleased.

Life in the Insanatorium and on the Key was complex. Graham found that Doc hadn't lied: he and his people, here and in the neighboring institutions on adjoining Keys, had set up an elaborate system of experimentation and preparation. Behind the protective regimen of Psycho control, which was maintained solely for the purpose of deceiving visiting Brass, the rebel group was determined and dedicated. Each month the boats went out when the jets went over, and each month Krug or his counterparts paid a courtesy-call or made a perfunctory tour of inspection. There was never anything amiss; during these interludes the patients were kept in confinement, the Psychos and Technos and Egghead personnel went about their accustomed duties. But in between, there were no distinctions and no pretenses of maintaining an Insanatorium—except, of course, when Doc made his regular telereports to headquarters in the East or out in Hollywood.

Doc (whose real name, Graham discovered, was Lee) explained the situation tersely. “It didn’t happen overnight,” he said. “Took years to gradually transform an actual Insanatorium into the present pattern. Had to weed out a lot of the former personnel here. A few we indoctrinated. Others we—eliminated.” He zipped a finger across his throat and smiled, not at all pleasantly. “We’ve had to lie and cheat and steal and smuggle in material for our lab work. Built ’em underground, of course. And for a long time we didn’t have sufficient staff-members to function. But we’ve recruited patients and survivors, as I told you, and for the past few years there’s been no problem.”

“But are you sure no one suspects?”

“Fairly certain. After all, we *do* effect some ‘cures’ here. That’s a necessary safe-guard, you know—every month or so, we get new patients for treatment. The majority, I’m happy to say, are like yourself; Talents and other nonconformists. Most of them are quite eager to enlist in the cause. The others—” Doc made the zipping gesture again.

“Some of the Talents we retain, as incurables. Others we ‘cure’ and send back to their former posts. So you see, the process of infiltration has already begun. All over the Domes, in various capacities, we have men working and waiting. They each know what to do when the time comes. What we needed, though, was someone like yourself—a man who could get into Hollywood. Being away from that area, our Insanatoriums never got any Talents who were stationed around there. And we need at least one, to work on the top level. He’ll set everything off according to plan.”

“Just what *is your* plan? I still don’t see—”

“It’s better that you don’t, at the moment. Considine knows what his role will be. We did a good job on him, didn’t we?”

“Remarkable. I still can’t get over the resemblance. For that matter, I don’t understand—”

“Sorry.” Doc’s voice was brusque. “Too busy, now. I’ll explain another time.”

Graham had no doubt that he spoke the truth. Doc was indeed busy. Everyone was very active and busy here.

A trip through the underground laboratory areas convinced him of that much.

Clare took him through. She was spending as much time as possible with him these days—whenever he wasn’t occupied in sessions with Considine, and whenever she could get away from her clerical staff-work as one of Doc’s assistants.

She introduced him to a number of men working on the lab projects, and Graham soon realized that Doc hadn’t lied about their abilities. There were Technos and Talents from Domes throughout the eastern area, and a surprising number of men and women over fifty.

At first Graham found himself uneasy in their presence. Clare noticed, of course, and commented upon it.

“What’s wrong with you?” she asked, after an interview with a gray-haired Techno who had been explaining his work on sensory tracks for a Realie. “You were scarcely civil to that man.”

“I can’t help it,” Graham confessed. “It’s just that I’m not used to being around senile people.”

“Senile? He’s only fifty-six.”

“Nobody’s that old, except on top level. And he seemed so nervous.”

“Nervous? You’d be nervous, too—remember what he’s been through! He was gassed, dropped into the sea, and drowning when our boat picked him up two years ago. He really needed genuine therapy from Doc when he arrived here. But there’s certainly nothing seriously wrong with him now—you seem to have been impressed by what he told you about his work.”

“Of course, I was impressed,” Graham admitted. “The whole setup is impressive. Why, you’ve got a technical staff here that can turn out Realies to compete with anything they do in Hollywood! Just duplicating the necessary equipment must have been a major job—nobody’s allowed to even touch the machinery in the Domes except the Technos directly in charge. Why, I've been a Talent for years and half of the instruments here I was never permitted to see at Laguna."

"The people you call senile are the ones who built them for us," Clare said.

"But why? What's their purpose? Are you making Realies here?"

"Not yet," the girl answered. "When the time comes—"

"Can't you tell me what the plans are?"

Clare shook her head.

She shook it again when Graham, wandering through the underground labyrinth of air-conditioned passages, attempted to enter a doorway at the far end of a remote passage.

"We can't go in there," she explained. "Off limits."

"Off limits? But why?"

"Medical research. Their labs are separated." She smiled and took his hand. "Now, don't ask me what kind of research they're doing, because I'm not allowed to answer that, either. Doc will explain, soon."

Graham got the same evasive answer from Considine, during their next session together.

"That's not my department," he said. "Let Doc tell you. It all ties in with the plan."

"Plan!" Graham scowled. "That's all I hear about—this mysterious 'plan'. How can he expect to take over the Domes and upset the established order from down here? What's he doing, trying to invent some kind of death-ray, some secret weapon out of those old science fiction books? Maybe Doc needs a little therapy himself."

"Perhaps you do," Considine said, gently. "Why don't you go to Doc and ask him?"

In the end, that's just what Graham did.

He confronted the older man in his own office-apartments the following evening.

“Good to see you,” Doc said. “I was just about to suggest we get together for a talk. According to reports received today, the time for action has arrived. And our plans call for—”

“Your plans?” Graham grimaced. “I suppose I was right. You’ve come up with some kind of secret weapon, haven’t you? A secret weapon to destroy the system?”

“Indeed we have,” said Doc. “What is it, anti-gravity? A disintegrator? Are you going to blast the Domes? Remember, I’m a Talent. I know all about Mad Scientists. Oh, I think I’ve already guessed your precious plan. You intend to send Considine back to Laguna in my place, smuggle him into Hollywood from there, and let him blow the whole place to bits. He’ll have the secret weapon, won’t he?”

Doc nodded, smiling. “You’re partially right, of course,” he answered. “We *do* intend to send Considine back as your substitute, and we do expect him to get to Hollywood—I’m sure Sigmond would insist on a personal interview with a Talent before considering it safe to restore him to active duty. But there won’t be any melodramatic nonsense about blowing the place to bits.”

“I thought you admitted Considine will have the secret weapon?”

“And so he shall,” Doc said. “The only weapon that can possibly destroy the present order.”

“What kind of a weapon is that?”

“Haven’t you discovered that for yourself yet?” Doc smiled again. “The secret weapon is—Youth!”

CHAPTER 11

LET me put it this way,” Doc said. “When psychologists and social scientists attempted to analyze the sources of aggression, back in the old days, they missed the really important one. Probably because they were so closely involved in the pattern themselves that they were unable to realize just how all-encompassing it was. Whatever the reasons, they *did* miss. They failed to recognize that the basic struggle in old-fashioned society was not that of Capital *versus* Labor, or Male *versus* Female, or Civil Authority *versus* Military Authority, or even Science *versus* Religion.

“The big clash was simply Youth *versus* Age.

“It must have started about the same time as psychology-worship, over a hundred years ago. It was largely the work of the old radio-television-motion picture-advertising cliques. Slowly but surely, at first probably by accident and then more and more consciously and deliberately, they created a Youth Cult here in the old United States of America. They made a fetish of adolescence.

“You can see it in their ancient films, their ancient books, their ancient advertisements; the theme is implicit and unmistakable. Nothing worthwhile, according to this premise, ever happened to ‘old people’ or the ‘middle-aged’. All romance, adventure and achievement were the province and prerogative of youth alone. Back in the middle years of the Twentieth Century, everyone wanted, above all else, to ‘look young’. It was an age of crew-cut hair styles, of juvenile slang, of music written for and by adolescents and delivered by adolescents to celebrate adolescent supremacy. Business, industry and the armed forces all solicited youth, but offered little opportunity to any newcomer over the age of forty. It was literally a social crime to be ‘old’ unless one was in a position of wealth and power.

“The few attaining such status were resented by the young people beneath them—indeed, the whole competitive economy worked to increase the friction between youth and age. The elderly poor were resented as an economic burden; the elderly rich were an economic menace. In either case, old age was hated.

“After the War, and the Declaration of Dependence, the same condition prevailed in the new social order. A few powerful oldsters remained safe and secure on top, and the many indigents were doomed to exile and murder. The present disposition of the Socially Secured is merely a logical extension of the attitudes and modes of earlier times—when old people were sentenced to drag out their declining years on state charity or the grudging bounty of their offspring.”

Graham sighed. “I know it’s true,” he said. “But you’d think the Psychos would recognize it. Haven’t they tried to eliminate killing and hatred?”

“You know better than that,” Doc answered. “All they’ve really done is channelize aggressions which might otherwise be directed against their own authority. That’s why we have the Sadies—what are they but psychodrama units where people are permitted to torture and destroy dummies and vent their pent-up aggressions as catharsis? That’s the reason for the Playdiums. Look at your own field—the emotion-picture, and 4D auto-erotic sexaphones! Remember the manicycle duels; merely a natural sequential development of the old automotive days when motorists drove in savage and suppressed hatred of their fellows on the open roads. And what of the sexual outlets—the Fornivacations and the Libidose?

“Of course, even these developments haven’t really solved the situation. The Psychos still had to create the Womb and the Insanatorium to take care of nonconformists and avoid the danger of questioning or open revolt. They think they’re secure now, because they’ve drained off all the rebel elements in the population, but they’re wrong. Top ranks are really weak—it’s a case of too many Chiefs and not enough introverts. And that’s where our opportunity lies. All their control is centered in the channels of communication. If we can commandeer those channels—”

“Then what? You expect to deluge the Domes with counterpropaganda?”

“No,” Doc murmured. “We’re done with deception. All that’s needed is tell the truth. We’ll wait until the next flight comes over; it’s due in just a couple of days now. This time we’ll do more than send out the boats for rescue. The vessels will be equipped for recording. We’ll be taking Realies of everything that happens—we’ll show the actual fate of the Socially

Secured. What do you suppose will happen when we beam those Realies out from Hollywood to every screen in the country?"

"But how will you get to Hollywood, how will you gain access to the beaming centers?"

"That part is easy," Doc assured him. "Wait and see." He grinned. "A week from today, if all goes well, we'll be in Hollywood and we'll control the media."

"Just like that, eh?" Graham sighed. "And supposing I believe it's possible, supposing it actually happens—then what? Do you really imagine that just by exposing the murder of the Socially Secured you're going to win over a psychologically-conditioned population? It's too simple to be sound."

"Of course. But I told you we had another weapon. Youth—"

He paused and turned as Clare entered.

"The reports just came," she said. "The Jets are taking off now. They're due over us in three hours!"

"Now? But I was told the flight was scheduled for the end of the week."

"I know. Something must have happened to step up the program."

"Three hours!" Doc shook his head. "We have no time for adequate preparation. I'll have to call a general assembly at once."

"I've already put the message through. We'll meet below in ten minutes." Clare nodded.

"And your detail?"

"The crews will be on the boats, and the equipment mounted and in place."

"Good." Doc rose and beckoned to Graham. "You'll come with me," he said.

And so it was, in the meeting area beneath the Insanatorium, that Graham learned the first steps in what was to come. The entire personnel had assembled, and when he glanced at the earnest faces surrounding him he was conscious of suppressed excitement but no surprise, no consternation. This was expected; this was what everyone had been waiting for.

Doc's briefing was a mere verbal shorthand; they already knew what to do, for everything had been planned and rehearsed.

The boats were going out manned by full technical crews, to record the dumping of the Socially Secured. Every detail had been carefully anticipated, each man had been assigned his set task.

But that was only the first part of the program. After the recordings were made, when the jets prepared to wheel back for their return flight—

"No!" Graham gasped, from his place in the assemblage at Clare's side. "It'll never work! It isn't possible!"

"It must!" Clare whispered, furiously. "Don't you see that it's our one opportunity? That's why you and Considine went through all this. And he's not the only one. Each man selected has been individually briefed and trained. Within a few hours now, we'll be in command."

"I'll believe it when I see it," Graham murmured.

"All right, you *can* see it," the girl replied. "Come along with me on my boat, if you like."

And he did.

The warning signal sounded, and the meeting dispersed in confusion; an efficient, highly-organized confusion. For Clare hadn't lied—each man and woman had a place and a purpose. Fully a hundred of them manned the dozen tiny vessels that edged out from their mooring-places and into the dark waters of the Gulf. Their movements directed and coordinated by signals from a scanner-system mounted in the lead-ship, they crept away from the shore and fanned out in a broad and sweeping semi-circle some miles distant from the cluster of Keys.

The night was dark and moonless, and a chill breeze played across the foam-crested waves. Standing at Clare's side against the rail, Graham stared out at the roiling water. Sky and sea inundated him in immensity.

For the first time in years—perhaps for the first time in his entire life—he caught a glimpse of true perspective. Once there had been the glory that was Greece, and its galleys had roamed afar, only to vanish beneath the waves. The triremes of mighty Rome had foundered in darkling waters, and in the north the dragon-ships went down to doom. The might of nations—the fleets of France, the armadas of Spain, the galleons of Portugal and the lordly lines of the British man-of-war had vanished in their turn, and so had the proud battleships and the sleek atomic subs of a latter day. For they were only toys and their masters were but children, playing at war and government. They came and vanished, but the waves endured, and the eternal sea claimed them all. Kingdoms and nations drowned, were swallowed up in the sea of history where their passing caused scarcely a ripple.

Graham thought of all the fine words, the fanciful phrases, the facilely-formulated philosophy he had heard in recent weeks. He knew now that it was without meaning or significance. What was meaningful was the devouring sea, what was significant was the engulfing night around him. And as on the sea, so on the land. All through the ages, all over the surface of the earth, men fought their battles—for king and country, for government and religion—a thousand concepts of right and wrong and truth and justice and freedom. It mattered not to the earth who won or who lost, for in the end earth claimed them all. Victor and victim alike went down into dust in the end, and of their boasts and battle-cries, of their creeds and concepts, not an echo remained. And here on the sea, the waters whirled and waited to welcome them in the eternal embrace of oblivion.

There are times when such thoughts come to all men, and when they do there is only one source of surcease; to cling to the flesh as the sole symbol of salvation. And so it was that Graham turned to Clare, and she pressed against him, and in her response was the illusion of the reality he craved.

This is real, he told himself. *Forget the philosophies and the psychology, forget all the ologies and isms. Measure life in its moments.*

As he held her, savoring her surrender, the odd and alien thought obtruded. He remembered Sigmond's filmanalysis, and his subsequent experiences; he remembered Considine and the hypnotape and the long conversational sessions. Had it all been a form of autoanalysis, in a way? Had he actually learned something about himself, learned to.

establish a viewpoint and an identity distinct from that imposed by pressure and pattern? In the Domes, men didn't consider themselves the pawns of Nature; when they embraced women it was merely to seek sensation for its own sake. Perhaps it *was* important that all men be given, once again, an opportunity like this—to stand under a sullen sky and consider their own unimportance, to cleave unto the flesh of their own kind in a search for strength as well as for fleeting fulfilment.

If so, then what lay ahead was worth fighting for. Freud and Jung and Reik and Adler would never approve of such immature antism. But they and their followers were not gods—they were men. And the men who came after them had twisted their teachings and distorted their theories into a dogma of deceit. Conditioned civilization was a farce. It was better to be a berserker Viking facing death on a dark sea than an unthinking drone in a Dome whose ironic destiny would be death in the same dark sea—but not death by choice, merely death by decree.

And Clare, like all women in all times, in the arms of all men, opened her eyes and whispered, "What are you thinking about?"

"The future," Graham answered.

"The future?"

"Yes. For the first time, I'm beginning to feel that there *is* a future."

She opened her mouth to reply, but the answer came from overhead. In throbbing sussuration, the jets droned.

Clare sprang to her feet and hurried below. “The lights!” she cried. The crew members were already at work, and the beams swept across the waters. And now, as the droning from the skies deepened into thunder, the lights flashed forth from every vessel, flaming against the flaring facets of the waves.

Graham stood at the rail and Clare rejoined him there. Now it was merely a matter of waiting.

There was no recording installation or equipment on this little vessel, but Graham knew what must be taking place on some of the other craft. Techno teams were tracking the jets on their course, filming the flight in full sensory range. Lenses and prisms pierced the night, capturing each impression overhead. Now the jets were poised, now the hatches were opening above, and the bodies came hurtling down into doom and darkness.

This was the way; the way to oblivion. But there would be no oblivion, for the recordings registered each instant and incident.

Now some of the boats edged out of the perimeter and into the circle of luminance. Brass in the jets above would not be alarmed; it was the duty of these ships to search the waters for possible survivors. They could not know that the camera crews were filming a documentary of death.

At a command from Clare, their vessel turned and bobbed away from the circle. It was followed by a dozen others.

“But aren’t you going to look for survivors?” Graham asked.

She shook her head. “No time. Let the others do it. We’ll need every man when the jets come in. Doc must be signalling them now.”

“You mean, he wants them to land?”

“Of course. You heard the plan. They’re to pick up the returnees from the Insanatorium and take them back as cured, for reassignment to duty. And when they hear that you’re one of them—”

“Me?”

"Considine, of course. He goes back in your place, remember? And there'll be others. Enough to insure that the films and tracks are smuggled aboard the jets. Enough to infiltrate the Domes, make contact with our people who are already planted there, waiting to act. Next time we'll send more, and the time after that, still more. Six months from now, maybe less, everything will be ready. We can strike, then. But this is the first step—to get some of our people back, to get Considine into Hollywood. He knows who to contact when he gets there—"

Graham attempted to reply, but the vibration overhead was deafening. The jets had been signalled; they were wheeling in for a landing on the Key.

The vessel headed for its harbor.

As they disembarked, Graham started up the path along the side of the mooring-area, but Clare put her hand on his arm.

"Wait here," she said. "You mustn't be seen. Remember, they are coming to escort ex-patients back to their Domes. Some will go to Nework, some to Sanloo—but Considine goes straight to Hollywood. Until he's left, you've got to keep out of sight."

"But don't I even get a chance to say good-bye?" Graham hesitated. "I feel it's important. We've been so close to one another. In a way, it's like losing a part of myself—"

"I know. But it is more important that the plans go through. Now, wait here. I'll come back for you after it's safe."

Clare slipped away and Graham stood alone in the night. He edged into the shadow of the dockside sheds and lit a sig, trying to compose himself. Too much was happening, too quickly. The jets had come, and the plan was operating; he'd found Clare, and now he was going to lose Considine. He'd told the truth about his feelings; it *was* as though he were losing a part of himself, and a very vital part. Considine was his double, his—what was the word in the fantasy books?—his *doppelganger*. He had shared so much of his inner being with the other man that a psychic duality of identification had been established. And there was more to it than that; a stronger feeling, a latent content of emotion. More and more, in their weeks together, he had come to realize how closely Considine shared not only his knowledge but his thought-processes. So very frequently he'd found the other man literally anticipating his own words, his own reactions. Now, for some vague reason, he felt impelled to share his latest responses. He wanted to tell Considine about Clare, wanted to talk to him about the events to come. With a shock, he realized that he'd never gotten around to discussing Considine's past life, or *his* personal problems. And they had never discussed the problem of invading the Domes. There was danger for Considine in days to come, and yet the self-effacing man had never mentioned it. That was the thing which disturbed Graham the most, he realized; Considine had been so completely *self-effacing.* He had applied himself wholly to the problem of eliminating his own personality and adopting that of Graham. Why was he so dedicated? How could any man make such a sacrifice?

In his preoccupied introversion, Graham had never really given the matter a thought. Now he realized that he had undergone a unique experience with a remarkable man. He wanted to see him again, wanted to tell him so. And there was something else, something even more important, buried just below the threshold of consciousness. Another reason for saying good-bye—

But Clare was right. He must keep out of sight. Most particularly now, because the jets had landed, and the men were coming. Just a few of them, of course; not the entire crews of the six in the fleet—gazing up at the floodlighted area before the Insanatorium buildings he could see a group of about a dozen khaki-clad Brass moving along the walks. Something about the outthrust head of the man in the lead triggered a reaction of recognition, Krug was with them!

Yes, now he could see the profile under the lights. Krug was here, to escort Considine to Hollywood. And if *he* recognized the deception—

But he wouldn't. Considine had been briefed. He'd play his role perfectly. There was no danger. Or was there?

Graham grimaced. No danger? There were a thousand dangers How could one man, or any group of men, get away with a stunt like this? How could he face Krug, and Sigmond, and Warner, and Zank—people who knew Graham well, who were on the alert to observe the slightest defection from their rigid concept of the norm?

He found himself pacing along the walk after the group had disappeared into the building. He couldn't help it; he couldn't stand still. Oh, he'd kept out of sight. But he had to see, had to know what was happening inside. Doc's office—that's where they all must be. If there was no one in the outer corridors, perhaps he could slip into the adjoining room. Then he could at least hear what was going on. There was no harm in that; there'd be no danger involved.

Nor was there. The corridor was deserted, and he slipped past the closed door unnoticed, his muffled footsteps muted by the sound of voices from within. He gained access to the next room and switched on the light. Tiptoeing over to the connecting door, he stooped to listen.

They were all inside; he could hear them. Must be quite a crowd—a dozen Brass from the jets, plus an equal number of Doc's people. And he could hear Doc, and Krug, and Considine. Or was it himself? Again, a wave of sensation he could not identify swept over him as he heard Considine speaking, speaking levelly and easily, in *his* voice. The man was a master-mimic.

"—quite fit again," Considine was saying. "I'm sorry to have caused all this disturbance."

"—no need to feel that way." Graham recognized Krug's deeper tones. "Sigmond is most anxious to see you before deciding on a new assignment., Perhaps a change—"

"—learned a number of things. As a Talent—"

Graham pressed his ear against the door. Considine was speaking so softly, so casually, that it was hard to catch more than an occasional phrase. He closed his eyes, concentrating in an effort to hear the rest.

And that, of course, was his mistake. He realized it the moment the hand grasped his shoulder. He hadn't heard the outer door open, hadn't heard the big man cross the room towards him. Now he opened his eyes and stared upwards at the smiling stranger.

He knew that smile, knew that face. Long ago, on a roof in Hollywood, with Wanda, he'd been introduced to the big man. He was one of Sigmond's Medics. "West!" he said.

"That's right, Graham. How nice of you to remember."

"But—"

"Sigmond sent me down to escort you on your return trip. I imagined Krug had already located you. He's next door now, isn't he?"

"Yes—that is—"

"Shall we join him, then? I know he's impatient to see you." Graham nodded, stepping back. If he could jump this man, now, quickly—

West gestured politely with his left hand. And then Graham saw that his right hand held a stunner.

"We might as well use this entrance," West said, still smiling. "After you, Graham."

Graham found the activator-button on the side of the door. His thumb went forward to press it. Then he whirled, and brought up his hand. The thumb dug itself between West's eyes. His other hand went for the windpipe. West reeled back, bringing up the stunner to sweep in a blind arc. Graham's knee lashed out and caught West on the wrist. The stunner clattered to the floor as West fell back against a desk. Then Graham was on top of him, both thumbs gouging into the big man's neck. West threshed and threw him off. Graham stepped back to scoop up the stunner. And then —

The door to the next room opened, and he heard Krug's voice from behind him.

"What's going on here?"

He had the stunner now, but his face was in the light.

“Graham!” Krug was shouting. “What kind of bombed nonsense is this? Two of you—”

Graham turned, raising his weapon. And then something exploded between his fingers. Krug wasn’t using a stunner. He had an old-fashioned gun.

“Look out!”

It was Doc’s voice, and barely discernible in the sudden roar of voices. Graham went back against the wall as somebody shoved Krug from behind. The second shot went wild, but then the gun levelled again. This time he wouldn’t miss. The others stood in the doorway, watching.

“Krug, wait—” Doc was shouting now, but Krug shook his head. He wasn’t waiting. Graham saw the pudgy finger tense against the trigger. And then, emerging from the huddled mass in the doorway, the moving figure of a man. It was Considine.

He flung himself on Krug, grabbing the hand that held the gun, jerking it to one side. Krug turned, and as he did so, Graham bent forward and picked up the stunner again. He levelled it at the thick neck and squeezed with all his strength.

Just as he did so, the gun went off for the last time. Krug jerked and buckled in sudden paralysis—but it was Considine who fell first, with a gaping hole where his heart had been.

Then, for a moment, all dissolved into madness. Graham could hear Doc shouting once more, shouting orders. He was vaguely conscious that all of Doc’s people were armed with stunners, partially aware that Krug’s companions had come here unsuspecting and weaponless. The Brass were falling now, there wasn’t even a struggle; the stunners struck them down like idiotic tenpins. Their bodies slumped along the floor in this office and the one beyond. When it was over, Doc’s group stood above them, poised and ready for command.

But no command came. For Doc was staring at Considine, just as Graham stared. There were sudden, unbidden tears in the eyes of both men.

"He saved my life," Graham whispered.

"I know," Doc nodded. "But that doesn't help us now. He's dead. Lewis is dead."

"Lewis?"

"You never realized, did you?" Doc sighed and turned away.

"Yes, it's true. He was your father."

CHAPTER 12

IT FELL into place, then; everything made sense. The curious look Clare had given him at their first meeting—the way Doc had singled him out for special treatment—Considine's odd gentleness and still odder reticence concerning himself—the way in which Considine had so frequently seemed to know what he was thinking, to know what *he* knew.

Yes, everything made sense, now, including the uncanny natural resemblance which had been heightened by make-up. And yet *nothing* made sense. Because Graham's father, Lewis, was still a man of fifty-five and Graham was thirty years younger. Cosmetology alone couldn't account for his youthfulness.

"Youth." It was Doc who explained. "I told you it was our secret weapon. And in one of the laboratories—"

In one of the laboratories, certain renegade Medics had been working with regenerative hormones. Basically, it was a matter of estrogen-cycle control through an injection process. "No, it's not eternal youth," Doc said. "But we have learned a simple, universally-applicable method of retarding the aging process. Of course, in this experimental phase, it's impossible to predict the duration of the effect, but I'm assured that a regular annual or semi-annual injection will not only slow down senile degeneration but bring physical tonus back to the thirty-year level for an indefinite period. There seems to be no reason why the so-called prime of life can't be extended until men are well into their seventies or eighties. The manufacture of synthetic hormone-derivatives is inexpensive; the effects thus far leave no cause for doubt. We've learned how to eliminate the physical symptoms of what we call old age."

"So that's your weapon," Graham mused. "When you took over communication-media in the Domes, you'd do more than just expose what happened to the Socially Secured. You'd reveal the news of this discovery just as you've been telling me. You'd be able to promise everyone a prolongation of youth, of active life."

"Don't you see how they'd respond?" Clare asked him. "Once the facts came out, the Psychos couldn't withstand the pressure. And they'd open the Domes. Oh, Doc planned it all so carefully, and when you arrived it was the final touch. We'd already rescued Lewis, but never dreamed of an opportunity like this—to find his son, and plan a perfect masquerade. That gave us the ideal combination; the weapon, and the man to wield it. We had everything."

"Had!" Doc shook his head. "But he's dead now."

"I'm alive."

They stared at Graham, then, but he didn't wait for them to speak.

"Why not? There was no need to send my father, there never was any need. If only you'd told me first—"

"But you couldn't take his place!"

"Of course, I can."

"Our plans—" Doc sighed. "It took months to formulate this operation, months of planning, of dealing with every possible contingency which might arise. He was to go back, resume his work, make contact with others of our group all over the Dome system, arrange slowly for concerted action. We wouldn't strike for at least another year yet, we couldn't hope to. And now—"

"And now your plans must be changed," Graham murmured. "Because my father is dead, and you have less than an hour. You must let me go."

"An hour?" Clare glanced at him, then straightened. "That's right!" She put her hand on Doc's wrist. "Krug, and West, and the others here—in an hour they'll recover consciousness. What happens then?"

"We'll dump them in the Gulf," Doc told her.

"Yes. But what about the crews on the jets?" Graham asked. "They'll be expecting Krug and his men to return, and bring a party of ex-inmates with them. How long before they come down to investigate? How long before somebody sends in a report to Control down in the Miami Consumarket or back in Hollywood?

I'd say we have just about an hour in which to do it."

"Do what?" Doc muttered.

Graham told him.

It took ten minutes—ten precious minutes. But then the matter was settled, and things moved swiftly. The boats moved swiftly out into the Gulf, and the bodies of Krug and the other Brass whirled whitely in the waves and then disappeared forever. Whirled whitely, because they had been stripped naked. Others were wearing their Khaki uniforms as they marched back to the landing area and boarded the jets. With them went a hundred Insanatorium inmates—ostensibly, they were being escorted to board for the return trip to various Domes. Actually, they and their khaki-clad escorts alike carried stunners. Stunners to beam the sentries on duty before the ships! Stunners to silence the men who received them on board, as the party split up into six units working with swift efficiency. There were minor slipups and several skirmishes, but no major disasters. The ultimate objective was to work their way through the jets compartment by compartment, until reaching the pilot cabins—and the imperative need was to overcome pilot and communications crews before any alarm could be sent.

"We did it!" Clare exulted. "We've got the jets."

"And their crews?" Doc raised his eyebrows questioningly.

"The boats are going out again, all of them," Clare said, her voice dropping. "It's the only way."

“Now for the next step,” Graham said. “You say that you have men here with experience at piloting and handling the com-units. That means we’ll have no trouble making the flight. And there’ll be enough uniforms taken from the crews to go around. That means we’ll be able to get into the Dome at Hollywood. And after that—”

“Yes, after that, then what?” Doc frowned. “It’s a crazy gamble, but I’m willing to concede we might make it that far. If we keep sending signals in to the effect that everything is all right, they may not suspect until we arrive. But where do we go from there?”

“Straight to His MGMinence,” Graham answered. “They won’t expect trouble when we land, so they won’t be prepared to offer any resistance. We can break through without fighting. What happens then depends on just how much we can do during a three-hour flight, You’ve already told me you have people inside the Domes in key positions—I assume you mean men indoctrinated down here who have returned to various Techno jobs in media channels.”

“That’s correct.”

“Well, they’ll have to be contacted at once, as many as possible, while we’re in flight. Meanwhile, there’s the matter of processing those Realies.”

“Masters will be done in another two hours,” Clare informed him. “They’re working in the labs downstairs. At least we’ll have olfac, video and audio.”

“That’s enough. If we can put through a Universal Attention Beam from Hollywood, we can preempt all networks. First the films and then Doc’s speech.”

“But by that time the Brass will be alerted,” Doc told him. “Even if we get that far, even if we live long enough to beam our message, it won’t help. Brass controls all weapons—do you expect the mobs to fight them with their bare hands? Besides, they aren’t *conditioned* to fight. The bombed fools do what they’re told, and all their lives they have learned to obey Brass and Psycho orders. You can’t turn the Domes into revolutionary centers with an emotion-picture and a few words. Even if they believe it, they won't be able to fight."

"I know," Graham said. "But I wasn't counting on a fight. If His MGMinence issues orders to surrender—"

Doc exploded. "Bomb it, this isn't a pornographic fantasy! You can't hope to play the superman hero, walk into the Home Dome and force the evil mastermind to call for surrender on pain of death. I happen to know Archer. His MGMinence isn't a coward—he'll die rather than give in. Sigmond's loyal, and so is Hix. The most you can hope to gain from all this is panic and civil war for a few hours.

Then the Brass will cut down any rebels—not that it will matter to us. Because by then we'll be finished, too."

"There's a chance," Graham said.

Doc opened his mouth to reply, but it was Clare who interrupted him. "Yes, there's a chance," she echoed. "And we'd better take advantage of it." The girl rose and faced the older man. "We *must* take advantage of it because it *is* a chance and we no longer have a choice. The jets are already captured. The crews are dead, you can't bring them back again. What's your alternative to doing as Graham suggests? Do you intend to sit here until they get suspicious back in Hollywood and send down another flight of Brass police ships?"

"But we can't possibly win this way. His MGMinence won't surrender, the mobs won't be able to resist the Brass. I don't understand why Graham persists in blinding himself to the obvious facts. How can he say there's a chance, under the circumstances?" Doc sighed. "I'm not cracking. It's just that I can't see any sense to *dying* needlessly for a lost cause."

"Can anyone?" Graham asked.

"What's that?"

"Can anyone see any sense to dying needlessly? Oh, I'm not talking about men like His MGMinence, or Sigmond—men who feel dedicated by virtue of their power and position. I'm talking about the rank and file of the Brass, the Technos, the Medics, the Egghead's. Suppose it isn't a matter of their fighting a few rebels roused by our message. Suppose it's a matter of surrender or die?"

"But how could it be?"

"You say you have people planted through previous infiltration, in various Domes. How many?"

"A thousand, perhaps."

"Is that all?"

"They have friends, families. Some of them have made cautious attempts to proselyte. There are allies."

"How many that we can count upon in a situation like this?"

"Four, perhaps five thousand, at most.

"In all the Domes?"

"No. They're concentrated in the major areas, like Nework, Denver, Sanfran."

"That should serve our purpose. If the big centers go, the little ones will have to follow suit. They depend on the others for supplies and material as well as orders."

"I still don't see—"

"Are most of your people Technos?"

"The majority, yes. But not top-ranking. Minor officials, in some cases, and crew workers."

"Free to move about?"

"More or less."

"And you have people planted in corn-centers at media, to take messages? And they can relay orders to these Technos?"

"Yes. The point is, there's no organization, no instructions.

We've never issued a plan. I presume we could get a certain number of messages through safely to various Domes and our people there could relay to the Tech nos. But, if we are able to arrange it, what are you going to tell them? How can a handful operate effectively against Brass?"

"I'll tell you when we're in flight," Graham answered. "No time now. We've got a date with His MGMinence at Twenty-First-Century-Vox."

CHAPTER 13

A MAN named Hoskins was speaking to Sigmond over the corn-system. "Krug reporting," he said, in a surprisingly successful simulation of Krug's deep voice. "Yes . . . all checked and cleared . . . eighty-two rehabilitees returned to seventeen Domes . . . I'm turning in the reports for processing . . . no . . . oh, by the way, I have your Talent with me . . . yes, Graham . . . thought you might want to check him personally before reassignment . . . what? . . . good . . . I'll bring him down . . ."

The circuit broke and Hoskins turned to Graham.

"I'm supposed to bring you in right away," he said. "As soon as we land."

"We can spare you and another man as escorts," Doc told him. "No more. We'll need everyone available just to take over Jetport. And if word gets through to Sigmond and the others before you arrive—"

He didn't complete his sentence. There was no need to say anything more.

Even as he had outlined the sketchy plan of attack and operations, Graham had realized the hopelessness of the task set for them.

Landing was no problem. The familiar ships would be admitted to the Domes without question; it was improbable that anyone in the signal-towers would question the identity of the pilots and navigators whose voices were transmitted in flat, mechanical tones.

But once on the ground at the port, everything depended on luck.

Their people had already donned the uniforms of the dead crew-members; the service blue of the Technobility, the khaki uniforms of the

Brass. Almost all of them were armed with stunners and a few had the old-fashioned guns as well. But it would be best not to use them. The trick would be to get clear of the field itself and converge on the Control Area.

It would be nothing short of miraculous if they could capture the Port before someone noticed and put through an alert. But it must be done. From Control they could signal to the Media installations—and pray that their people were ready to act there. Then the selected party must convey the films by jet-cop and get them beamed. By that time, probably, Media units would be besieged, for the alarm would be out.

"And that's why it's up to the other group," Graham had told them. "You know where to go and what to do. Fortunately, your objective is right at the edge of the Jetport area. But there's no question of gaining entry by deception here. You'll have to fight your way. You know the rest."

He paused. "As for myself, I'll get to Sigmond and His MGMinence. Maybe they'll finish me off—but I think they'll listen, first. And if they listen, and the 'casts are beamed, we have a chance. *If* the rest of you succeed by then."

Doc nodded. "We'll manage," he said. "We have no choice."

Clare turned to Graham, opened her mouth, then closed it. He squeezed her arm gratefully.

"Thanks," he said. "You spared me the 'Take me with you line'. You and the other women will stay here, on the ship. We'll keep the crew aboard here, too. If anything goes wrong, they have orders to take off immediately. Who knows? Some day you may be back."

"With nine women and a crew?" Clare tried to smile.

"We'll do our best to prevent the necessity," Graham answered.

And that was as close to heroics as he ever got.

It was odd, he mused, as the great ship quivered and settled, sinking down slowly and accurately through the opening in the plexide Dome. This was the time for heroism, for all the adjectives-and-adrenalin which accompanied deeds of daring—or was it derring-do?—in the old pornography. But he wasn't sure of the adjectives, and he certainly wasn't aided by any excessive adrenal discharge. All he felt was nervous tension and, beneath it, a sick fear.

Graham had a suspicion that almost all of them felt like this, now. Even Doc, who was quietly motioning towards the opening cabin-compartments, telling Hoskins and his companion, "You get out first, with Graham. Whatever happens, I want you to be on your way. Nobody will question Brass if you requisition a 'copter. We'll wait until you've left."

Doc smiled, but he was nervous, and his outstretched hand was wet.

And Clare's lips, trembling beneath his—which were also trembling.

Heroism, Graham thought. *Where are all the noble sentiments now? I don't really want to do this. I want to run. Most of all, I have to go to the bathroom.*

It was ridiculous, grotesque; yet, somehow, it reaffirmed reality. From now on all of them would act in fear and trembling, but that didn't matter. The important thing was that they *did* act. One step at a time, now . . .

And one step at a time, Graham was walking across the huge field. Hoskins and the other man, Rich, flanked him on either side. Brass, on official business, escorting a civilian. Nobody glanced at them. Ground-crews were slowly converging on the constellation of six jets. Graham prayed that they'd take their time. For when they finally reached those jets, entered them, there would be no turning back. Not for them, ever—and not for Graham's people.

"Over here." Hoskins had found his 'copter and his crew. Now he had stepped forward, flashing the idento of the dead Krug. He was speaking casually to a pilot. The pilot nodded. Good. They'd managed, *this* far.

Rich helped him into his seat. They were taking off, leaving the port. Out of the corner of his eye, Graham noted that some of the ground crewmen were moving up the landing-ramps into the jets.

There were stunners waiting for them, even though the hands which directed them probably trembled in nervous apprehension. Just as Graham was trembling, now.

He forced himself to look ahead, at the hills of Hollywood. Here was the Intelligentsium's silver spire and the familiar T-square of Technoquarters, and there—near the historic site of the first Psycho Headquarters, Forest Laundry—was Microcity.

That's the spot where they'd be 'casting the films. *If* they managed to get there. Staring at the monumental magnificence of the structures below, Graham felt an added access of anxiety. How could a few ever prevail against so many? The Psycho fortresses seemed impregnable.

The 'copter was descending now, descending upon the flat landing-platform of the new Psychocenter. It settled. The doors opened.

"Wait here," Hoskins snapped to the pilot. "We'll be back in a moment with another passenger."

I doubt that, Graham told himself. But this was no time for doubts. He had all he could do to walk without faltering. Hoskins slipped him a stunner.

Then the white-robed man emerged from the exit-vator. Graham remembered another white-robed man on this same roof; a man named West. He used the stunner almost automatically, and the man fell mechanically. The whole episode seemed unreal, and that removed the fear. Graham was just watching a Realie now, or a filmanalysis in which he was both actor and spectator.

That made it easier. Made it easier to descend with Hoskins and Rich, seek out Sigmond's office, wait until his sec nodded for them to enter.

Sigmond was in a posture chair behind his desk, the light reflecting from his high forehead. His pale face was almost as white as His priestly Psycho robe. He glanced at Graham incuriously, but there was questioning in the gaze he directed at Hoskins and Rich.

"Where is Krug?" he asked.

Rich stepped closer to the desk and smiled. “Where you’ll be,” he murmured, “if you don’t come quietly.”

Sigmond’s eyes focussed on the gun which had suddenly appeared in Rich’s hand, and there was no longer a question in his glance.

“Get up,” Rich said. “Just keep your hands where I can see them.”

Sigmond rose heavily. The light caught the jewelled rims of his pince-nez.

“Your doing,” he muttered, staring at Graham. “I might have known. Paranoid. Go ahead and shoot.”

“Never mind the labels.” Graham was exteriorized; he heard himself talking, but there was no feeling of conscious volition. “If you think we’re here to kill you, then you’re the one with delusions of persecution. We’re taking you to see Archer.”

“His MGMinence? But he’s in Council, there’s a high-level meeting—”

“So much the better. All we want is the pleasure of your company, to insure us getting in to see him.”

“But what’s this all about?”

“You’ll hear the story when we get there. Now, march.” Graham nodded, and Rich stepped behind Sigmond, pressing the gun into the bulk of his back.

“Put it away, now,” Graham told Rich. “But keep him covered.” He turned to Sigmond. “Just wanted you to know it’s there. And it’ll be there, all the way. You’re going to walk out of this office, tell your sec you have an appointment with Archer, and take a ’copter with us. That’s all. One slip on your part—” He hesitated. “Oh, yes, you might remember to smile. If it helps, don’t think of it as a gun pointing at your back. Call it a phallic symbol.”

They went out of the office, went back up to the roof, climbed back into the ’copter, and took off.

“Take us to Twentieth-Century-Vox,” Hoskins said.

And they made it, just like that.

Graham wondered if the others had made it.

Had they managed to take care of the ground crews at the Jet-port? Had they managed to get into the Controls and take over communications without alarms being sent out? Had the second group been able to reach Microcity, invade its precincts, beam the films?

And most important of all, had the third group attained its objective? That was the vital question.

Heroes. There were no heroes in a situation like this. There were only men with sweating palms, full bladders, queasy stomachs. And there were no great objectives; it was all a matter of living from moment to moment—of taking one step at a time without being observed, of using a stunner quickly, before one was used on you, of trying to anticipate what to do next and trying to remember what *had* to be done next. Only in the aggregate was the task impressive; infiltrating the communications media and beaming the film to every screen, sounding a preempt alert so that all would listen and all would see, holding off any opposition until the film was run and the message delivered. Each man was part of a hastily-organized team and each man's job was small. But the result could be incalculable.

If it worked—

Graham stopped thinking about the big picture. He was back in the little picture, or at least back *watching* it. The little picture, in which he was entering the halls of Twenty-First-Century-Vox, watching Sigmond at the outer officentry as he smiled and requested immediate audience with His MGMinence.

And now they were being buzzed into the Conference Suite; Sigmond in the lead, Rich and Hoskins right behind him, Graham himself in the rear.

It wasn't a picture any longer.

This was real.

In a moment he'd be face to face with Archer, His MGMinence—

And then he was.

Face to face with saturnine, graying Archer; with Technochief Schwartz, with Medic Ormsbee, with Hix from Brass and with little Dean from the Egghead Division. Everyone of them a hateful symbol.

They were all in a line, confronting him quite silently. This was the moment he'd waited for, the moment to speak.

But Archer spoke first.

"We've been expecting you," said His MGMinence, softly. "You see, we've just watched your little film."

Graham found himself trembling now, but not with fear. There was only exultation. *They'd made it, then—they'd, made it, and the film had been cast. Now he had only to tell them the rest, deliver his ultimatum—why, it was all as simple as those Space Operas he'd turned out. Bern meets Fern.*

Or was it?

Suddenly he heard the warning wail without, the shrilling of the sirens. That meant general alert. Instinctively, he reached into his jacket for the stunner. He felt reassured as he grasped the handle.

Archer was watching him, but he didn't move. He merely blinked his eyes, once.

And from somewhere behind him, the other stunners flashed. He saw Rich stumble, saw Hoskins fall, and then he was going down into a whirlpool where the sirens shrieked up into screaming silence.

CHAPTER 14

HIS MGMinence nodded at the Brass in the doorway. "Out," he said.

"Aren't you going to finish them off?" Hix asked.

"There'll be plenty of time for that, later," Archer answered. "We'll want to question them first, of course."

"Of course," Hix agreed, hastily. "Right now—"

“Right now your job is to get on top of this. You heard the reports. Apparently there are three areas affected—Jetport, Microcity and—”

“What about the mobs?” It was Schwartz who interrupted. His MGMinence frowned. He wasn’t used to interruptions. Still, this was an emergency. No point in making an issue of it if Schwartz lost his head. The important thing was to keep his own.

“Brass will deal with any trouble that may arise,” he said. “Personally, I don’t anticipate anything except sporadic outbreaks.”

“But everyone saw it—the Socially Secured—those bombed bodies dropping into the water—the traumatic effect—”

“Traumatic effect!” Archer’s voice was scornful. “Leave that to Sigmond. It’s his department.” He stepped forward and confronted the Psycho Chief. “Are you all right?”

“Certainly. But what’s happening?”

“Don’t you know?” Medic Ormsbee took up the thread of the conversation. Quickly, he told Sigmond about the film. Sigmond nodded.

“So they must have taken over Microcity to beam it, eh? I wonder how many of them are involved in this?”

“It doesn’t matter,” muttered little Dean. “The damage is done. That cast went out on preempt. Now everyone knows about the Socially Secured. Everyone knows about the new regenerative formula.”

“Nonsense! There’s no such formula!” Archer was emphatic, then tempered his tones. “But even if there is, it’s not important. What’s important is that we get back into Microcity and beam a few orders on preempt. Tell everyone that we’ve dealt with the trouble-makers. I’ll make a personal appearance—”

“It’s too late.” Dean faced them. “You’ve already heard the orders, on the film-narration. There’s been a call for revolt.”

“Call for revolt!” Hix chuckled. “What do you think, that the mobs will take over with their bare hands? We have all the weapons.”

“But these rebels may be armed.”

“With what? A few handguns and stunners, perhaps? If so, I wish them luck—chances are, they’re running like rats now, trying to get out of Microcity.” Hix glanced at the dark and crackling wallscreen. “I notice nobody is casting any longer.”

“Then what are we waiting for?” Archer stepped forward once again. “Mo time for discussion now, gentlemen. You each know your duties. Let’s roll it.”

“Look!”

Sigmond was staring at the screen. The wall had brightened and now the crackling faded. Suddenly a face appeared before them.

“I know that man—” Sigmond began. And then his voice was drowned in the words from the wall.

“Attention, all Brass,” Doc said. “Attention, all Brass. This is top warning. Repeat, top warning. We have taken over the oxygenerator units. Repeat, we have taken over the oxygenerator units.”

“Mo,” said Hix, softly.

“Mo further supply of oxygen will be released until we receive word of unconditional surrender. Civilian personnel are warned to get off the streets. Within fifteen minutes normal oxygen supply will be depleted below the safety levels. Repeat, top warning. All Brass to surrender immediately—”

“I told you it was too late,” Dean muttered.

Hix slipped out of the room.

“Bomb it, we’ll open the Dome,” Archer said. “Plenty of air outside—”

“You had your chance,” Dean answered. “Besides, you’ve forgotten. Your vents are at Jetport and the rebels hold it.”

“Hix is sending Brass—”

“To suffocate out there?

They’ll be running for shelter right now.”

But Archer wasn’t listening to Dean. He gazed over the top of his balding head as Hix reentered hastily.

"It's true!" Hix said. "They did it. And the corns are jammed—reports from other Domes. Riot conditions in Miami, Nework, Sanfran, Denver—oxygenerators going off in Sanloo, Pitts. Sabotage jobs. Can't contact GHQ. The men turned back from Microcity when this came over. I've got a cordon around the grounds here, but they won't hold. There's a mob outside—"

"They'll suffocate," Ormsbee said. "Give them two hours."

"Of course. But what about ourselves?"

"We'll stay right here," Archer decided. "No danger of suffocation inside for at least twenty-four hours."

"We haven't got twenty-four hours," Schwartz said. "Or even two. That mob's coming in, isn't it, Hix?"

"He's right," Hix answered "Our only chance is to jet out immediately."

"Run for it?" His MGMinence scowled. "Why, you poor, bombed—"

"Shut up!" said Sigmond. "We'd better find a 'copter."

And with that simple sentence. His MGMinence was deposed. His thin, sagging figure was swept up in the flight along the outer corridor as the little wedge of Council-members, Hix in the lead, battled their way to an exit-vator and the rooftop beyond.

Hix had taken the gun from Rich's jacket, and it was Dean who appropriated Graham's stunner. They left the unconscious men behind without a thought—unless a fleeting feeling of gratitude for their weapons. For the weapons alone prevailed in the panic which swept through the halls of Twenty-First-Century-Vox.

If there was anything more needed to indicate the end of an era, the spectacle of the surging throngs in these halls provided it. Brass, Technobility, Medics and Psychos struggled towards the roof. Frantic desperation took precedence over rank, and three times Hix had to use the gun before a path opened.

Finally they reached the roof. Sigmond found three' copters there—all surrounded by knots of struggling men, intent upon escape.

Hix used the gun again, and again. He wasn't in time to save Schwartz or Ormsbee; both were pulled down in the melee. In the end only Dean, Sigmond, Hix and Archer took to the air, with Hix at the controls.

He tossed his empty, useless gun down into the screaming maw of the city below. Out of that maw the siren still wailed, but overriding it was the concerted roar of voices. The mob was abroad.

The mob was swarming into the Intelligentsium, circling around Technoquarters. No Brass opposed its progress. Brass was hiding, Brass was running.

"Bombed idiots had better run, too!" Sigmond sighed. "The Dome is smogging up already. What will happen to them when the monoxide count goes up?"

"What happens to us?" Archer murmured. "Where can we go? We can't get out of the Dome."

"Let's be reasonable," Sigmond counseled. "This is no time to panic. What we need is a place of shelter. Not a private residence—the oxygen supply would be insufficient there. We want a large building, but a deserted one, for safety's sake. A place where we can have a breathing-spell, in every sense of the word. And that place is—"

"Down there!" Surprisingly enough, it was little Dean who spoke.

"Where?"

"To your left. That Sadie."

"A Sadie?"

"Why not? There's a landing-place on the roof."

"He's right. You won't find many people patronizing a Sadie at a time like this," Archer said. "Besides, they're all equipped with corn-systems. We can put some messages through to Domes in other areas. Set us down."

So they were set down, on the roof of the Sadie.

As Archer had predicted, it was deserted. The attendant personnel had fled at the first warning. In the huge central arena a few dozen citizens, drugged with Libidose to a point where the warnings had been either unheard or unheeded, still enjoyed a healthful, therapeutic release from pent-up aggression. Some coupled in semi-seclusion in the small, padded cubicles lining the main hall, and others hacked and flailed at rows of dummies. A small cluster of teen-agers had mounted the gallows to hang a rubbery yet realistic blonde. Down at one end of the arena was the enclosed area of the torture-chambers. Realistic screams emanated from the speaker-system; apparently someone was playing with the racks or the strappado. There were no attendants present to peddle whips or knives, but the customers seemed to have helped themselves.

Ordinarily, Sigmond might have viewed the scene through the glass of the overhead office with a clinical and approving eye. Right now, he and the others were inspecting the comboard.

“Yes, there’s a two-way,” he announced. “Hix, can you send?”

Brass nodded. “Yes, I can operate it.” He seated himself, and Archer and Sigmond peered over his shoulder.

“You can beam into Microcity to announce surrender,” Dean said.

“Surrender?” Hix jerked his head. “Who’s talking about surrender? We’ll beam out for help to other Domes. Get in a fleet of jets. Let those fools asphyxiate the city if they like. Brass will come in with masks and oxygen tanks. We’ll blow Microcity, blast the port.”

“Exactly.” Archer was regaining confidence now. “It may be a good thing. Teach them a lesson, once and for all.”

“That’s right,” Sigmond assented. “Of course, you know this means we can’t go back to a benevolent paternalism in the near future. We’ll have to do a complete psychological about-face, institute complete controls. No more reassurances. The fear-syndrome—”

“I take it then that you’re all in complete agreement, gentlemen,” Dean murmured. “There is to be no thought of surrender?”

“Of course not,” Archer snapped.

"Very well," said Dean.

And pulled out the stunner he had taken from Graham.

He waved it before their faces like a magic wand.

They froze and fell.

That part was easy.

The rest wasn't quite so easy.

Dean was a small man, and the task of dragging the bodies down into the arena, one by one, took most of his strength.

But he managed. He propped them up against the wall, near the cluster of dummy figures who stood in classic costumes of inferiority. Here was the plasticene-faced priest, the ugly man in the old-fashioned gray flannel suit, the obvious political orator with the word *Democrat* written across his slashed shirt-front and one empty eye-socket gaping as the result of a recent, enthusiastic attack.

Dean was glad to see that a knife-rack stood close by at the end of the wall. He moved the unconscious trio into place; they stood stiffly, limbs rigid in paralysis.

He wondered if they could still see and hear.

Dean could see and hear. And when he retreated once again to the glassed-in overhead office to put through his communication of surrender, he looked and listened.

Gazing down at the floor, Dean noticed a small cluster of patrons assembling. They examined the figures of Archer, Hix and Sigmond with curiousity, commenting amongst themselves.

"Look, Brass!"

"And a Psycho, too. Something new."

"Vo doop, Skidaloop." This comment from the drooling mouth of a woman who had exceeded her Libidosage. "Let's begin. Tear some skin. Come on guys let's get at him."

A big man came up with a handful of knives.

"I hate Brass," he said bitterly. "Big Brass!" He shoved the tip of his knife into the khaki tunic. "Cut his buttons off," he mumbled. "Cut—off—

all—his—buttons—just—like—this. And—that's—not—all—"

The knife descended.

"Cri!" yelled a thin man, shrilly. "Somethun' new. Like blood!"

"Ooooh!" This from the woman. "Lemme. *Jue'me!"* She grabbed a knife, slashing at Sigmond. The Psycho's robe wasn't white any more.

Dean turned away, suddenly sickened but not before he saw the broad blade slice across the jugular of Archer.

Then he was speaking into the com.

"Yes," he said. "It's official. His MGMinence has unconditionally surrendered—"

CHAPTER 15

IT'S NEVER quite that simple," Doc said. "You understand that, don't you, Graham?

"Of course, we won. We found you and Rich and Hoskins in time, and you know what Dean reported concerning Archer and the rest. We're in control, and the oxygenerators are functioning again, and on the face of it we could claim complete victory."

"The Domes are reporting in from all over," Clare added. "We've been feeding them Realies on what happened here."

"But we paid a price for it," Doc continued. "Thousands dead of suffocation in the streets. A third of Nework blasted. Casualties galore all over. And that's only the beginning. The real job is just ahead of us. First, a provisional government. And then, a complete reorientation process. Reeducation, reconditioning—it will take years. You can't expect to take an ordinary citizen, used to beheading dummies in the Sadies and watching men kill one another in the Playdiums, and confer a nebulous 'freedom' on him.

"For that reason we can't disband the existing governmental fabric. We'll have to keep Psychos and Technos and Brass as organizational units, even if we use new personnel to implement new directives. Egghead supervision is even more important. Because in the end, it will all come down to an educational process.

"We're not prepared for a tenth of what we must confront and cope with. We need many months just to mount some kind of over-all plan."

Doc sighed and subsided. "I wish we'd had more time to prepare. This is just the first step."

"I've been thinking about that," Graham admitted. "A first step—and suppose it's in the wrong direction?"

"It could be. Men aren't perfect. Maybe the whole concept of freedom is a dream. But we have a right to dream, a right to try to make those dreams come true in a free society.

"The old-fashioned family unit, the old-fashioned religious *ethos* act as custodians of those dreams. And the attendant striving, the struggle and the competition; these phenomena are in themselves part of the process of evolution. You can't deny the race the right to progress, however arrived at—it's a biological necessity for survival. Your so-called 'balance' is really stasis. There are going to be mistakes, yes, and misery, too, for many. But the future cannot be denied."

Clare looked at Graham and smiled.

And far overhead . . .

Far overhead, the swallow hovered. It swooped down, then instinctively deflected its flight, but only momentarily. An instant later it sped forward again, dropping downward. There was no longer anything to deflect its course.

Those tiny figures below were only men. And they were dismantling the Dome . . .

THE END

Sabbatical

This was cornball, strictly from Squaresville—the Mad Scientist bit—but dig this cat's pajamas!

(Excerpt from Yardley University Daily Bulletin, April 1, 1925) Professor Herbert Claymore, head of the Physics Department, announced today that he is leaving on a brief sabbatical. During his absence, Professor Claymore's classes will be conducted by Dr. Potter.

IT was quarter past eight Martinis in the little bar across the street and just down the block from Television City. This was subjective time, of course, but then Don Freeman always ran on subjective time, and didn't everybody, when you came right down to it?

Right down to eight Martinis, that is?

Don didn't know, but he was willing to argue the point with all comers.

And the big trouble right now was that there weren't any comers. Apparently Rosalie wasn't going to show up after all, and nobody else in this neon-lighted nothing was worth talking to. In just a little while, Don realized, it was going to get very drunk in here. And he'd wind up talking to the bartender again.

That was bad. But going home would be still worse. Besides, you can't go home again. Thomas Wolfe had said that, and it was a pretty perceptive remark, coming from a guy who hadn't even been married.

Don drained his drink and extended the empty glass. “Alms, for the love of Allah,” he said.

The bartender did his duty.

Somebody nudged Don’s shoulder and stepped on his foot, hard.

“Be my guest,” Don muttered, but moved down to the end of the bar. It was crowded in here—you couldn’t hear yourself drink. Of course, that was the one great advantage, wasn’t it? You also couldn’t hear yourself think. And if you pressed your luck (and your drinks), after a time you couldn’t *feel* yourself think, either—to think about Rosalie and the house and the job without feeling any pain or any remorse. Or not to think about them at all.

And the time was now, or at least only a Martini or two away. Soon he’d be able to forget that Rosalie was only a two-bit chirp who’d fluttered into his cage hoping to find a perch on one of the agency’s shows. He’d forget about going home, too—going home to Beverly and Pat and Michael. Not that there was anything wrong with them, really. It was just that every second guy his age seemed to be married to a girl named Beverly (or Shirley, or Susan) and they all had two kids named Pat and Michael.

AS for forgetting the job, that was the real bonus deal. Funny how he’d wanted it once—full credit listing as executive producer on *Playlights.* But now that he was boss man, it was just another headache; fighting the client, fighting the network, fighting the talent and the no-talent they sent him, fighting the hacks who kept on sending him the same three lousy scripts, over and over again.

There was the one about the girl recovering from a nervous breakdown who gets into a bind where she thinks she’s committed a murder—only her doctor uncovers the real killer, and so they get married. There was the one about the pilot or the racer or the gunfighter who loses his nerve until the chips are down, and then he comes through. And there was the one about the young guy who has to choose between crass commercialism or personal integrity, and guess what *he* does!

Don hated this last script worst of all. Maybe it was because he lived it. And his blonde wife hadn't made the big renunciation speech about preferring financial poverty to spiritual poverty, and he hadn't played the climactic scene where he was supposed to walk out on the boss and turn to honest creative labor.

So now he was a big man, a real live producer and everything, and he was entitled to sit in a noisy bar on his night off and order another Martini.

He held out his glass to the bartender once again. "Cloud Nine," he said.

Again he felt himself being shoved out of the way. Half of Television City was in here tonight—production people, musicians, agency men, even a gaggle of actors in full makeup for night dress rehearsals. If he wanted to, he could find plenty of people to talk to. But what was the use? They were here for the same reason he was here, most of them; they had their own troubles. Some day he'd write a story about the TV industry and its eventual collapse due to internal tensions. *The Fall of the House of Ulcer*.

But not tonight. Not right now. Because here was the drink, and maybe he'd better find himself a booth in back where he could nurse it without spilling the life-giving fluid all over a twenty-dollar Sulka tie.

Don spotted the empty in back, floated over to it, slid in. He was already seated when he realized the booth *wasn't* empty. There was an elderly man sitting across from him, nursing a beer.

"Sorry," Don said. "I didn't notice—"

"Quite all right," the elderly man told him. "I don't mind company."

Don eyed him, doing a quick job of type-casting.

THE man was in his late fifties and looked a bit like Parker Fennelly; one of those New England characters. It wasn't a makeup job either, although he was obviously an actor escaped from rehearsal, because he *was* wearing a costume. He had on a black double-breasted suit with wide lapels; a celluloid collar rode above his white shirt; a string tie twined with the ribbon of his pince-nez.

"The Old Professor, eh?" Don murmured.

The man raised his eyebrows. "But that's remarkable," he said. "How on Earth did you recognize me?"

"Simple." Don tapped his glass. *"In vino veritas."* He leaned forward. "That's the motto of MGM, you know."

The man looked puzzled.

"Don't mind me," Don told him. "I've just come from my meteorologist and he tells me I'm a little under the weather."

"But you *did* recognize me—"

"Of course. How could I possibly forget old—old—"

"Herbert Claymore."

"Sure! Herb Claymore, as I live and breed! The last of the big-time spenders! What are you doing here—the Mad Scientist bit?"

The man lifted his beer glass. "Please. Not so loud." He drank slowly, then looked up. "But how could you know? I mean, you must have been a mere child when you saw me. How old are you now, might I ask?"

"Thirty-four," Don told him. "Then it's utterly impossible. You wouldn't even have been born."

"I was born, all right," Don said. "I can show you my navel to prove it."

"You're intoxicated."

"Isn't everybody? What did you come here for?"

"Merely to study."

"Getting up on your lines, eh? Well, don't let me stop you. I'm about ready to go, anyway."

"No, please stay. I was hoping to find someone to talk to. And you intrigue me. I mean, I didn't expect anyone to recognize me."

"Not recognize Herb Claymore, the man who rocked the scientific world with his achievements! They mocked you, ridiculed you, laughed you out of court. But were you discouraged? No! You forged ahead, pushing back the boundaries of discovery past Preparation H, into Preparation I, even Preparation J—"

"Just who are *you,* sir?"

"Don Freeman is the name. Or as I put it to the young ladies of my acquaintance, Don Freeman, at your service."

"It isn't familiar. And yet you seem to know."

"I do. I do."

"Is it because of my clothing?"

DON nodded. "That Hoover collar would give anybody away."

"Hoover collar?" The man paused. "Ah, yes, Herbert Hoover, the chap who headed Belgian Relief during the War."

"President Hoover," Don corrected.

"Is he?"

"Not any more. But back in 1929—"

"Sorry. That was after my time."

"After?"

"Four years. I left in '25."

"Did you now? And what else is new?"

"Why, everything! I just arrived, and I must confess the changes are more startling than I'd anticipated. The very ground on which the university stood is now occupied by this television installation, and—"

"Come off it, Claymore. You're laying a bomb."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Very unfunny. We are not amused."

"I assure you, I'm quite serious." Don focused on him briefly.

"This isn't a rib? You aren't a fugitive from the Guild?"

"I am not a fugitive in any sense of the word, sir. I am a visitor."

"You, Herbert Claymore, came here in a time machine from the year 1925?"

"In a manner of speaking, yes." Don sighed slowly. "Then I, Don Freeman, need another drink. In a manner of speaking, God, yes!"

He waved to the bartender. "The same?" the bartender inquired.

“No. Switch me to a Miltown Special.” He peered at his companion. “How about you?”

“What is a Miltown Special?”

“It’s just like an ordinary Martini, only there’s a tranquilizer in the olive.”

“Well—”

“Come on. I’ll bet you couldn’t get one back where you came from. Why, they still had Prohibition, didn’t they?”

“Indeed, yes.” Claymore looked up at the bartender. “The same.” The bartender left “No kidding,” Don muttered. “From 1925, eh? Just like that.”

“Not ‘just like that,’ as you put it. I spent eighteen years perfecting the *modus operandi.* Steinmetz and Edison gave me the courtesy of a hearing, but nobody else was interested in my work.”

“Not even Einstein?”

“You refer to Albert Einstein, the German mathematician? I never met the gentleman. You see, I haven’t traveled abroad.”

THE bartender set their drinks before them and Don signed the tab.

“You’re serious about this gag, huh?” said Don. “Time traveling. What a ball! Why’d you come here, of all places?”

“I thought the university was still in existence,” Claymore explained. “Now I learn it disappeared during the—ah—Depression, I believe they called it.”

“Depression. I’m an authority on Depressions, particularly my own,” Don said. “Depressions, ruts, graves. Deep stuff.”

“But this seems a wonderful era.”

“Is it? Look, I’ll swap you even. You stay here, I go back to 1925. As long as we’re kicking the routine around for laughs, I mean.”

“It wouldn’t be fair,” Claymore told him. “That was a barbaric era.”

“I can see you haven’t read the papers,” Don answered. “Maybe they don’t have newsboys at the asylum.”

"Sir, I must ask you to—"

"All right, no offense. But anyone who likes the way things are today must be crazy. Just look at the situation—cold war, union scandals, fallout, conformity, space race, alphabet bombs, why Johnny can't read, security, censorship, anti-segregation troubles. It's murder!"

"I fail to see that it's any worse than what I left behind me," said Claymore. "In 1925 we had the Bolshevik menace, the Teapot Dome scandal, and bootlegging. As for censorship—what about Prohibition? What about this law down in Tennessee forbidding the teaching of evolution in the schools? Anti-segregation troubles? Haven't you heard about lynching? And as for murder, our papers are full of Al Capone."

"Aw right awready," Don said. "So let's play the flip side. Have you been around long enough to notice rock-'n'-roll, Presley, the tail-fin cars, the lousy ads, the crummy movies? *Will Success Spoil Frankenstein's Monster* —now I ask you!"

Claymore sipped his drink. "I've heard your rock-'n'-roll, as you call it, and your Mr. Presley. But have you ever heard voh-doh-dee-oh-doh songs, or *Yes, We Have No Bananas?* Have you ever tried to drive a Model T over a corduroy road during a rainstorm? Do your advertising tycoons ever ask the immortal question, *Why Wear a Truss?* And as for motion pictures, I submit the epic productions starring Mae Murray, Gilda Gray, and the cast-of-ten-thousand dramas of Cecil B. de Mille." He smiled. "At least you enjoy the benefit of modern technology."

"Sure. Air-conditioning, television, supermarkets, automatic washers. Also guided missiles, and the deadliest weapon of all, the income tax."

"Which we also had."

DON drank around his olive. "So it's a Mexican standoff. But let's consider the really *important* things. Like the crowded housing conditions that ruin our metropolitan areas, and the gray flannel strait jackets we wear, and the women we love—those big-busted, women we love—those big-busted, bleached-blonde, bird-brained beauties."

"Very well." Claymore smiled. "I'll match today's housing with 1925 tenements. Did you know that only half of the homes boasted bathtubs, and less than half had inside plumbing? I needn't say anything about our atrociously uncomfortable furniture. And as for clothing, I needn't say anything about *that*, either. Just look at what I'm wearing as compared to your garments."

"Never mind the small talk," Don interrupted. "Let's get back to fundamentals. Namely, sex."

"All right. You paint a rather alluring picture of the feminine ideal. In its place I offer you the Flapper—thin, flat-chested, neurotically shrill and neurotically slangy, gin-drinking, affected—"

"Okay, I get the message," Don cut in. "But as long as we're playing the game, why do we have to limit ourselves to my today and your yesterday? If both the past and the present are so intolerable, why can't we hop into your merry not-so-Oldsmobile and take a joyride into the future?"

"I did," Claymore said.

"What?"

"I said I did." He drained his glass. "This is my second stop, you might say. My first was to a time approximately thirty-five years from now."

"Why didn't you stay there? Don't tell me things were just as bad?"

"Judge for yourself. No Communist scare any more."

"Perfect!"

"It's the Conservatives they're afraid of. Consies, they call them. Advocates of go-slowism in government and business and international relations. Things need to be done. They *must* be done. Result—suppression of free speech, general censorship, spy hunts. Then there's the plutonium scandal to consider, and the sub-teen delinquency problem, and the druglegging. I don't think I'll mention *their* popular songs, or what has happened to entertainment media. Dimensional TV can be pretty overwhelming, and of course advertising has kept pace. As for comfort—you'd never imagine the rigors and distress of a rocket flight to the Moon."

"And the women?" asked Don hopefully.

CLAYMORE made an ellipse with his hands. "Lovely. Average weight, two hundred pounds. They're known as Queen-sized dolls. Quite aggressive, of course, as is only natural under a matriarchy. As you can perhaps detect even from the trends of today, they control virtually all of the corporations and business enterprises, together with entertainment media and government."

"Then what's the answer?" Don protested. "You mean you can't beat the game? You can't get away from it, wherever you go?"

"You can't get away from yourself," Claymore declared. "That's the only answer I've learned. How you live, in any age, is up to you. The adjustments you make with your own environment."

"But that's corny," said Don. "You mean horse feathers?" Claymore retorted.

Don nodded. "I suppose you intend to go back to 1925 and take up just where you left off?"

"Why not? I've learned what I wanted to learn. And if you have problems, I advise you to do the same. Accept reality."

"That's a lot of—" Don hesitated. Suddenly he banged on the table. "No, it isn't! You're right, by God! Accept reality, that's the answer. Now, look. You claim you actually came here in a time machine. Do you understand what this means? Why, it's a multi-mill ion-dollar proposition from word one!" He hunched forward. "Look, let's you and I get together, equal partnership. I'll handle the whole deal, do all the spadework. In two weeks we'll blast everything else off the map. I can get you the biggest publicity campaign you ever heard of—spreads in every newspaper and magazine in the country, your choice of network time. The advertising tieup is so sweet, I don't even have to talk about it. Man from the past here today—in person!

You'll hit all the big shows! Lawrence Welk, Steve Allen, Person to Person. What an endorsement job you can do on products! Shove you out next to a 1925 icebox and let you compare it with a new freezer, let you stand up there and break a few lousy Caruso records after you listen to the latest Fats Domino album. Get the pitch? And we'll ghost a daily column for you, the homespun philosophy bit. You're going to be big, bigger than Godfrey ever was at his peak, bigger than—"

"Sorry." Claymore stood up. "I meant what I said. I'm going back where I belong."

"Now wait a minute! This kind of opportunity only comes once in a lifetime. And there's no time like the present—"

"For you, perhaps. For me, there's no time like the past."

"But you said yourself it stinks."

"I can adjust. And that's what I'm telling you now—adjust to your own time, your own circumstances." Don shook his head, gazing into his empty glass. When he looked up again, Claymore was gone.

If he'd ever been there.

Hell, maybe it was just the drinkie.

SURE, it was the drinkie. Time travel was wacky. And so was the cornball philosophy. *Make the best of things as they are.* In other words, his subconscious was telling him to forget Rosalie, forget the rat race, go home to the little woman and the kids. A real lousy script ending. Well, he wouldn't buy it.

He didn't have to buy it. *He could sell it*

Sure. *That* was the answer. Little old subconscious working away all the time, still alive and breathing through a snorkel-tube under the ten Martinis. It had just given him a great plot. Make a fine show.

There's this old pappy-guy from the past, see? He invents this time machine gizmo and comes to the present day. At first he likes it and becomes a big celebrity, but after a while he gets so he can't stand all the phony routines. Finally they're going to put him on television, to make a big speech to the nation—sort of a Will Rogers bit—and a bunch of politicians have him in a bind to endorse their lousy candidate. Only he gets up and double-crosses them by denouncing the whole act. Tells the people to return to the old rugged individualism, the homely virtues, all that jazz.

Why, it was a natural, that's what it was! A natural!

Don fumbled around in his pocket for his notebook. Better get this down quick before he forgot. Tomorrow he could give it to a couple of the staff boys. All they'd have to do would be to run it through the typewriter—maybe he'd give them a third of the deal, but he'd keep the writing credit.

No Time Like The Present. A great title. A great idea. And a great little thought, too.

A man has to make the best of what he's got.

Don started to scribble. He knew where he was and what he was doing, and right now he wouldn't trade places with anyone in the world. Anywhere, any time.

(Excerpt from Yardley University Daily Bulletin, April 5, 1925) Professor Herbert Claymore, head of the Physics Department, resumed his duties today after a brief sabbatical.

1960

The Funnel of God

If came upon them like a galactic tornado—swirling, swallowing, a funnel of madness, a funnel of hate, a funnel of eternity. . . .

WHEN Harvey Wolf was seven, he met the Black Skelm.

Now "skelm" means rascal, and at his age, Harvey knew nothing of duplicity and the ways of men, so he was not afraid. Nor did the man's skin repel him, for Harvey was ignorant of *apartheid.*

The Basutos on his father's place called him *baas,* but he did not feel that he was their master. Even Jong Kurt, his father's foreman, treated the men of color without contempt. Harvey came to know the Bechuanas, the Kaffirs, the Fingos and the Swazis far better than the *Roinecks,* which was their name for Englishmen.

Harvey knew his own father was a *Roineck,* who owned this place, but that was virtually the extent of his knowledge. His father never visited him; he spent all his time at the Cape, and had ever since Harvey's mother died when he was born. Harvey had been left in care of Jong Kurt and of his wife, whom Harvey learned to call Mama.

"Poor little one," Mama said. "But you are free and happy with us, so *gued geroeg."*

And Harvey was happy. Mama made him of rawhide, and he roamed at will over the *karroo* beyond the drift where the gushed. As he grew older, lie sought the *krantz* above the valley where he made his home, and soon he was climbing the great *berg* which towered over all.

Here he found the wild orchids of the upland plateaus, plucked as he wriggled his way through the mimosa, the thornbush and the hartekoal trees where the perched and preened and peered for prey.

Harvey came to know the beasts of the mountain and the plain—the aard-wolf and the inyala, the oribi and the duiker, the springbok and the kudu. He watched the tall secretary-bird and the waddling kori bustard, and traced the flight of bats from out of the hidden caves on the *berg* above. From time to time he encountered snakes; the *cobra di capello,* the puff adder, and the dreaded mamba.

But nothing that loped or trotted or flew or crawled ever harmed him. He grew bolder and started to explore the caves high upon the faraway *berg.*

That was when Mama warned him about the Black Skelm.

“He is an evil man who eats children,” Mama said. “The caves are full of their bones, for on such a diet one lives forever. You are to stay away from the *berg.”*

“But Kassie goes to the *berg* at night,” Harvey protested. “And Jorl, and Swarte.”

“They are black and ignorant,” Mama told him. “They seek the Black Skelm for charms and potions. The wicked old man should be in prison. I have told Jong Kurt time and again to take the dogs to the *berg* and hunt him out. But he is too slim, that one, to be easily captured. They say he sleeps in the caves with the bats, who warn him when strangers approach.”

“I would like to see such a man,” Harvey decided.

“You are to stay away from the *berg,* mind?”

And Mama shook him, and he promised, but Harvey did not mind.

One hot morning he toiled across the *karroo,* slipping out unobserved from the deserted, heat-baked house, and made his way painfully up the *krantz.* The *aasvogels* drooped limply in the trees, their eyes lidded, for nothing moved in the plain below. Even the orchids were wilting.

It was no cooler on the *krantz,* and when Harvey found the winding *pad* which circled the *berg,* he paused, parched and faint, and considered turning back. But the trip would be long, and perhaps he could find a *fontein* up here. There were *pads* he had not yet explored—

He started off at random, and thus it was that he came to the cave of the Black Skelm.

The Black Skelm was a gnarled little monkey-man with a white scraggle of beard wisping from his sunken cheeks. He sat at the mouth of the cave, naked and crosslegged, staring out at the *veldt* below with immobile eyes.

Harvey recognized him at once and put his knuckles to his mouth. He started to edge back, hoping that the old man hadn't observed him, but suddenly the scrawny neck corded and swivelled.

"Greetings, *baas."*

The voice was thin and piping, yet oddly penetrating. It gained resonance from an echo in the cave behind.

"G-greetings," Harvey murmured. He continued to edge away.

"You fear me, boy?"

"You are the Black Skelm. You—"

"Eat children?" The old man cackled abruptly. "Yes, I know the tale. It is nonsense, meant only to deceive fools. But you are not a fool, Harvey Wolf."

"You know my name?"

"Of course. An old man learns many things."

"Then you've come down to the plains?"

"Not for long years. But the bats bear tidings. They are my brothers of the nights, just as the *aasvogels* are my brothers by day." The Black Skelm smiled and gestured. "Sit down. I would invite you inside the cave, but my brothers are sleeping now."

Harvey hesitated, eyeing the little old man. But the man *was* little, and so very old; Harvey couldn't imagine him to be dangerous. He sat down at a discreet distance.

"The bats told you my name?" he ventured.

The wrinkled black man shrugged. "I have learned much of you. I know you seek the *berg* because it is your wish to see what is on the other side."

"But I've never told anyone that."

"It is not necessary. I look into your heart, Harvey Wolf, and it is the heart of a seeker. You think to gaze upon the lands beyond this mountain; to see the *olifant,* the *kameel,* the great black brothers of the rhenoster birds. But to no purpose, my son. The elephant, the giraffe, the rhinoceros are long gone. They have vanished, with my own people."

"Your people?"

"Those you call the Zulus." The old man sighed. "Once, when I was a *jong,* the plains beyond the *berg* were black with game. And beyond the plains the *leegtes* were black with the *kraals* of my people. This was our world."

And the Black Skelm told Harvey about his world; the Zulu empire that existed long before the coming of the *ecks* and the Boers. He spoke of Chaka and the other great *indunas* who commanded armies in royal splendor, wearing the leopardskin *kaross* and lifting the knobkerrie of kingly authority to command the *impis*—the regiments of grotesquely painted warriors in kilts of wildcat tails. They would parade by torchlight, the ostrich plumes bobbing like the wild sea, and their voices rose more loudly than the wind in the cry of *"Bayete!"* which was the regal salute. And in return the *induna* chanted but a single response. *"Kill!"* Casting his spear to the north, the south, the east, or the west, he sent the regiments forth. And the *impis* killed. They conquered, or never returned. That was the way of it, in the old days.

Until, finally, none were left to return.

None but the Black Skelm, who sought the caves of the bats and the vultures, to live like a scavenger in a world of death.

"But my people are down there," Harvey protested. "They are not dead. They tell me Cape Town is a great city, and beyond that—"

"Cape Town is a cesspool of civilization," said the Black Skelm. "And beyond that are greater sewers in which men struggle and claw at one another, even as they drown. It is a sickening spectacle, this. The world will soon end, and I would that I could die with it. But, of course, I shall never die."

Harvey's head hurt; the sun was very hot. He wondered if he had heard aright.

"You can't die?"

"It is true, *baas.* Soon, of course, I must decide upon my next move, for this body of mine is no longer suitable. But—"

Harvey rose, reeling a bit, and backed away.

"Don't eat me!" he cried.

The old man cackled again. "Nonsense!" he said. "Sheer, superstitious nonsense. I do not eat children. My brothers feed me." He stretched forth his hand. "Look!"

And the air was filled with the odor of carrion, as the *aasvogels* gathered, fluttering frantically up the face of the sheer cliff and clustering about the bony body of the wizened black. In their beaks they carried bits of rancid flesh, dropping their tribute into the Black Skelm's fingers.

Then Harvey knew that he was very sick indeed; the sun had played tricks. He ran into the cave, and it was dark and musty, and from the twisted caverns beyond welled a terrible odor of decay. The bats hung head downwards, hung in mute millions, and the floor of the cave was not covered with bones but with whitish droppings. On the walls great eyes winked—eyes that had been painted by hands long dead. The eyes whirled and Harvey felt his kneecaps turn to water. He would have fallen, but the Black Skelm came up behind him and caught him.

The old man’s grip was surprisingly strong.

“Do not fear,” he whispered. “Drink this.” And he held out the hollowed skull. The liquid was warm and red.

“Blood,” Harvey quavered.

“Of cattle. It is pure and fresh.”

“But you are a wizard—”

“What is a wizard? Merely a seeker, like yourself. A seeker who has perhaps peered further than the land beyond the mountain.”

The Black Skelm led him back to the mouth of the cave, and bade him sit in the shadows there. Harvey was suddenly very tired. He closed his eyes, scarcely listening, as the Black Skelm droned on.

“All men are seekers, but each chooses a different path in his search for understanding. There is the path of Columbus who sought to encompass the earth and the path of Galileo who sought to search the heavens; the sevenfold path of Buddha which led, he hoped, to Nirvana, and the path of Appolonius which is an inward spiral with oblivion at its core. There is Einstein and—”

Harvey opened his eyes. He was, he knew, quite delirious. The black man sitting beside him, chanting strange names, eating out of the beaks of vultures, talking of Zulu *kraals* which had vanished a hundred years ago—this was a fever-dream. He could hear only bits and snatches.

“You will be a seeker, too, Harvey Wolf, You will go out into the world to look for knowledge. Eventually you will sicken of knowledge and try to find truth. Perhaps we can discover it together—”

Harvey’s head throbbed. The sun was blazing off in the west, sinking beneath the purple lower lid of a gigantic cloud. And a voice was echoing along the *berg,* calling, “Harvey—Harvey, where are you?”

“Jong Kurt!” Harvey rose.

The Black Skelm was already on his feet, scuttling into the shadows of the cave.

"No, wait—come back!" Harvey called, groping after the old man and nearly falling as his fevered body convulsed in a sudden chill.

But the old man retreated into the cave.

And then Jong Kurt was looming on the pathway, his face grave and his forehead seamed with apprehension. He caught the reeling boy in his arms.

Suddenly the blackness blossomed and burst forth from the cave, a blinding billowing of squeaking, stenchful shadows—shadows that flapped and fluttered and stared with millions of little red eyes.

Jong Kurt fled down the mountain, carrying Harvey Wolf. But the eyes followed, haunting Harvey's delirium in dreams. . . .

They sent him away, then. Harvey wasn't conscious when the decision was made, though he did see his father once, afterwards, at the dock in Cape Town. His father introduced him to his Uncle Frank, from America, and gave him strict orders about minding his manners and following instructions. There was talk about a New Life and a Good School and the Unhealthy Outlook that comes from being alone.

Harvey tried to tell his father about the Black Skelm, but his father wouldn't listen; not even Mama or Jong Kurt had listened. They all said Harvey had suffered from sunstroke, and in the end he came to believe it himself. It had all been heat and hallucination and nothing was real now but the great ocean and the great city.

In New York his Uncle Frank and his Aunt Lorraine were very kind. They took vicarious pleasure in his amazement at the sight of the city, and conducted him to his first motion picture.

That seemed to be a mistake, and after they dragged the frightened, hysterical child out of the theater he suffered what the doctor called a "relapse." Afterwards, he forgot the whole incident, and it wasn't until years later—

But meanwhile, Harvey grew up. He went to school and he managed to endure the tight, idiotic abominations called "Health Shoes." Gradually he accumulated the fund of knowledge necessary for a child to flourish in our society—that is to say, he could identify the various makes and models of automobiles in the streets, he learned the names of “baseball stars,” and the meanings behind the four-letter words and the slang-phrases of the day.

Also, he learned to insulate his interior existence from other eyes; he found that seekers are not popular with their fellows, so he concealed his interests from his playmates. His teachers, however, were not unaware of his intelligence; at their advice he went on to private schools and from there to an Ivy League college.

He was still there when Uncle Frank and Aunt Lorraine went over to Cape Town to bring his father back for a reunion; he was there when the news came to him that the private plane had crashed on the return flight.

After the funeral he visited the attorneys.

They told him he had inherited the entire estate. Once liquidated, with all taxes paid, he could count on an accumulation of better than three million dollars. It would be ready for him by the time he reached his twenty-first birthday.

Right then and there he made a sensible decision; he decided it was time to retire.

It was not just the caprice of a spoiled brat or a rich man’s heir. At twenty-one, Harvey Wolf was a fairly presentable young man—many girls even found him handsome, for three million reasons—and he possessed an alert intellect.

He turned his back on the world only because he was fed up with hypocrisy and liars.

Harvey’s first move was to leave the college. He said farewell forever to its small Humanities Department and its huge football stadium.

Next, he departed from a church whose spiritual representatives appeared at launching ceremonies to bless aircraft carriers and destroyers.

At the same time he walked out on most of the phenomena and beliefs held dear by his peers; on chauvinism, on racial prejudice, on the feudal caste-system glorified by the armed forces of our democracy.

He briefly considered going into business, until he found he couldn't subscribe to the widespread doctrine that there is some mystically ennobling value attached to "competition" and that somehow everybody benefits under a system where one man is dedicated to outsmarting another.

Harvey turned his back on the life of a wealthy idler because he could not tolerate the common amusements. He did not believe that animal-killers were "sportsmen," whether they dressed in red coats and drank champagne before chasing a fox or wore dirty dungarees and guzzled beer out of the bottle before shooting at an unsuspecting duck. He did not think that baseball players or boxers or even bullfighters were as much heroic as they were overpaid. He squinted but saw nothing in abstract art; he listened, but heard nothing in its credos and critiques.

Harvey Wolf turned his back on Mother's Day, Valentine's Day, Christmas, and all the other holidays heralded by the joyous tinkle of cash-registers on high. He deplored the phoney virility of the men's magazines, the fake coyness of the women's magazines, and the artificial social values which emotionally warped young people into "manliness" or "femininity."

Taking stock of himself, Harvey found he did not worship sportscars or subscribe to the "theory of obsolescence" dearly beloved by manufacturers and dearly paid for by consumers. He abhorred drum majorettes, bathing beauty contests, and the publicity given "Miss Canned Goods" or the "Oklahoma Cucumber Queen." He took a dim, pained view of billboards, and disliked the transformation of natural parks and beauty spots into commercialized locales for hot-dog stands and souvenir concessions which sold little wooden outhouses.

He held opinions which would automatically antagonize all fraternity-members, morticians, professional evangelists, Texans, and the marchers in

St. Patrick's Day parades. He did not believe in *caveat emptor;* card players who slam each trick down on the table and bellow at the top of their lungs; fake "frontier days" held by rough, tough pioneer towns in the wilds of New Jersey; sound engineers who "ride the gain" on TV commercials; professional fund-raisers who take 40% off the top in charity drives, or people who take pride in announcing that they are "quick-tempered," as though this statement entitled them to special privileges.

Harvey held a bias against practical jokers, and people who obscure driving visibility by decorating their car-windows with dangling dolls, oversize dice, baby shoes, and imitation shrunken heads. He saw no sense to endurance-contests, had no patience with litter-bugs, failed to believe in Beggar's Night or politicians who "compromise" after election at the expense of repudiating their campaign pledges. He had a contempt for Muscle Beach exhibitionists and he objected to the rewriting of history under the guise of "patriotism." He—but the list is endless, and of interest only to psychiatrists; *they* get $50 an hour for listening.

Harvey Wolf didn't go to the psychiatrists—not yet, at any rate, including the $50 an hour one.

He thought he was searching for something to believe in and that perhaps he could find it in good, hard, scientific logic.

So he sailed for Europe, to study at the source.

In Edinburgh, Harvey encountered a Brilliant Doctor who prided himself on complete objectivity.

"Nothing," said the Brilliant Doctor, in one of his famed private seminars, "is ever finally 'proved' and everything remains possible in theory.

"For example, granted the loose molecular structure of both a human body and a brick wall, it is only logical to concede that, with the exact proper alignment of every single molecule in the given body with every single molecule in the given wall, at a given instant it would be possible for said body to walk through said wall and emerge unscathed on the other side.

"The chances are almost inconceivably infinitesimal, but the *possibility* must be granted."

Harvey Wolf thereupon asked the Brilliant Doctor, in the light of this opinion, what he thought of allied phenomena. What of his late countryman, the Scottish medium, D. D. Home, who practiced levitation? He rose, resting on his back in mid-air, then floated out of one second-storey window and back into the room through another, in full view and broad daylight.

"Nonsense!" said the Brilliant Doctor.

Harvey Wolf blinked. "But no less an observer than the distinguished scientist, Sir William Crookes, testified he had witnessed this feat with his own eyes," Harvey replied.

"Impossible!" said the Brilliant Doctor. . . .

At Oxford, Harvey Wolf was enthralled by a Learned Scholar who spoke of the biological basis of Life and the almost metaphysical borderland between Being and Nothingness.

"The electromagnetic principles governing sentience and consciousness are still indefinable," he announced. "No man has yet isolated the Life Force or truly defined death or nonexistence except in terms of its absence."

Harvey Wolf was interested. What, he asked, did the Learned Scholar think of Pierre and Eve Curie's signed testimony that they had seen genuine evidence of psychic phenomena demonstrated by a medium? What about Thomas Edison's similar convictions, and his final experiments in communication with the spirit world?

"There is no objective validity offered in evidence here," said the Learned Scholar.

"But we ignored electricity for thousands of years," Harvey protested. "Its omnipresent existence was unknown to us except in lightning until we found a means of harnessing this force. Surely, if the borderline between existence and non-existence, consciousness and unconsciousness, cannot be exactly defined, and yet is apparently subject to certain definite principles—

“Utter rot!” said the Learned Scholar. . . .

In Heidelberg, Harvey Wolf studied under a famous Herr Doktor-Professor whose technical mastery of neuropathology was exceeded only by his interest in psychosomatic medicine. The Herr Doktor-Professor was extremely liberal in his outlook, and even admitted prodromosis as a basis for diagnosis.

“I knew a surgeon who was in charge of an army hospital during the war,” Harvey said. “One of his patients was completely paralyzed from the waist down—the spinal cord had been entirely severed and there was no nervous response. He lay in bed, wasting away, and was informed he’d never move his legs again. He refused to accept the verdict. Each day he pulled himself up in bed, lifted his legs over the side, tried to stand. The surgeon gave strict orders to restrain him, but he persisted. After two gruelling months, he stood. A month later he took his first step. All tests showed it was physically impossible for him to exercise any control over his legs, but he walked—”

“Impossible!” muttered the Herr Doktor-Professor.

“Yet what about Edgar Cayce and his clinically-verified healings of organic disorders with no possible basis in hysteria? What about—”

“Dumkopf!” opined the Herr-Doktor Professor. . . .

In the Sorbonne faculty, Harvey met a Celebrated Savant with unorthodox views; a man who dared to side with Charles Fort in his questioning of organized science. He once stated that if we accepted the theory of evolution from a non-anthropomorphic viewpoint, it was quite possible to believe that man’s function on earth was merely to act as host for cancer cells which would eventually learn to survive the death of the human body and emerge as the next, higher life-form. He was even fond of quoting Mark Twain and others to the effect that the stars and planets of our universe might be merely the equivalent of tiny corpuscles moving through the blood-stream of some incalculably huge monster. And that this monster, in turn, might walk the surface of another world in another universe which in turn might be composed of similar corpuscles—*ad infinitum* to the *nth*[2] power.

“It is a humbling thought,” the Celebrated Savant observed, and Harvey Wolf agreed.

“A far remove from petty human concepts,” Harvey mused. “There is no need to concern oneself with trivia in the face of it now, is there?”

But the Celebrated Savant wasn’t listening; he was reading the newspaper and scowling.

“Those pigs of Algerians!” he muttered to himself. “Yes, and those lousy *colons,* bidding for power and setting up education for all. It is a disaster!”

Harvey shrugged. “The world is only a corpuscle,” he said. “Or perhaps it’s just a virus-cell in the bloodstream of the Infinite. What does it matter?”

“Cochon! The purity of the State depends upon maintaining our autonomy. And furthermore, young man—”

Harvey Wolf found himself walking out once more. But this time he was walking out into Paris.

Paris, of course, is what you make it. To cutpurse Villon, living from hand to mouth and from the *Small* to the *Grand Testament,* it was a city of cold cobblestones where every twisted alley led only to the inevitable gibbet. To Bonaparte it was the site of a triumphal arch through which he marched to celebrate victory—or furtively avoided, in a solitary coach, as he whipped his horses from the field of Moscow or Waterloo. Toulouse-Latrec clattered across Paris leaning upon two sticks, and his city was a gaslight inferno. There is the *Sec* and *Brut* Paris of poutlipped Chevalier, the cerebral city of Proust and Gide and Sartre, the Paris of the GI on leave for *couchez-vous* carnival.

There is the Paris of the tourist—the Louvre's legweary legacy, the giddy gaping from the Eiffel Tower, the hasty concealment of the paper-bound *Tropic of Cancer* at the bottom of the suitcase. There is a Paris as gay as Colette, as tough as Louis-Ferdinand Celine, as weird as Huysmans. You pay your money and you take your choice.

And when you have three million dollars—

Harvey Wolf brooded about it in a Montmartre *bistro.* A bearded man stared at him with yellow cat-eyes and said, "Welcome, Pontius Pilate."

"Pilate?" echoed Harvey Wolf.

"I recognize the mood," said the bearded man. "You are asking yourself Pilate's age-old question—*what is Truth?"*

"And the answer?"

"Truth is sensation," the bearded man told him. "Sensation alone is reality. All else is illusion."

"Hedonism, eh? I don't know—"

"You can learn. Experience is the great teacher."

Harvey was sated with civilization, sick of science. He spent six months with the bearded man and the bearded man's friends. He rented a villa near Antibes, and many guests came.

There was the dwarf girl and the giantess and the woman with the filed and pointed teeth; the lady who slept only in a coffin and never alone; the girl whose luggage consisted solely of a custom-made traveling case filled entirely with whips. There was a rather unusual troupe of artists whose specialty consisted of a pantomime dramatization of the *Kama Sutra.*

Long before the six months were up, Harvey realized that his meeting with the bearded man had not been accidental. Behind the beard was neither Jesus, D. H. Lawrence or even a genuine Gilles de Rais—merely a weak-chinned, looselipped voluptuary adventurer who had visions of sugarplum splendor in the form of a billion-franc blackmail scheme.

Harvey got rid of him, at last, for considerably less, and he did not begrudge the price he finally paid. For he had learned that the senses are shallow and the orgasmic is not the ultimate peak of perceptivity.

Harvey went to Italy and immersed himself in Renaissance art. He journeyed to Spain and somehow he found he'd started to drink. A girl he met introduced him to some little capsules her friends smuggled in from Portugal. At the end of another six months he was picked up in the streets of Seville and shipped back home through the kindly offices of the American consulate.

They put him in Bellevue and then in a private san upstate. Harvey kicked the habit and emerged after a loss of four months and forty pounds.

He ended up, as do most seekers after Truth, on the confessional couch of a private psychiatrist.

The psychiatrist decided that perhaps Walt Disney was to blame for it all.

Harvey admitted the man had an interesting argument.

He was able, after many sessions, to recall his first visit to the movies when he'd come to America. Uncle Frank and Aunt Lorraine had taken him to see what was perhaps the most famous short cartoon of the Depression era—

Three Little Pigs.

He could recreate quite vividly, without the aid of narcohypnosis, the strong fear-reaction engendered by the sight of the Big Bad Wolf stalking the helpless pigs. He remembered how the Wolf huffed and puffed and blew the straw house in. What happened immediately thereafter he did not know, because it was then that he had been carried, screaming, from the theater.

It was, the psychiatrist averred, a "traumatic incident." And now, as an adult, Harvey had read a great deal about animated cartoons and their possible effect on children. Following the success of *The Three Little Pigs* it seemed as if the entire concept of cartoon-making underwent a drastic change. In place of playful Pluto and droll Donald Duck came a horde of ferocious bulldogs, gigantic cats with slavering fangs; huge animal menaces who tormented smaller creatures and sought to devour them in their great red maws.

But, if anything, their little intended victims were worse; they always outwitted the hulking pursuers and seemed to take fiendish delight in sadistic revenge. One animal was always crushing another under a truck or a steamroller; pushing his enemy off a steep cliff, blasting his head open with a shotgun, blowing him up with dynamite, dragging his body across the teeth of a great circular saw. During the years, the so-called “kiddy matinee” became a horror-show, a *Grand Guignol* of the animal kingdom in which atrocious crimes and still more atrocious punishments flashed in fantastic fashion across the screen in lurid color, to the accompaniment of startlingly realistic shrieks, groans, screams of agony, and cruel laughter.

Parents who carefully and conscientiously shielded their supposedly innocent youngsters from the psychological pitfalls of the dreaded comicbooks were quite content to listen to the same moppets shriek uncontrollably at the sight of a twenty-foot high animated hyena being burned to death while the happy little rabbit squealed in ecstatic glee.

Harvey had read about this and he listened when the psychiatrist told him there was probably no harm in such fantasies—to the average child it was merely a vicarious outlet for aggression. Such a child unconsciously identified with the small animal who destroyed the larger tormenter; the bigger creature symbolized Daddy or Mama or some authority-figure, and it was satisfying to witness their defeat. The weapons employed were direct concepts and representations of adult civilization and its artifacts. Most children were exposed to such films from infancy on and grew up without psychic damage. As normal adult human beings they were able to go out into the world and fight its battles. Indeed, it was the avowed purpose of many psychiatrists to keep them “mentally fit” during real battles, so that they could continue to spray liquid fire from flamethrowers upon enemy soldiers cowering in tanks, or drop bombs on unseen thousands of women and children.

It was merely unfortunate, said the psychiatrist (at $50 an hour) that Harvey had been brought up away from the influences of normal society and abruptly exposed to the symbolism of the cartoon.

And there were, of course, other factors.

The fact that Harvey's last name happened to be Wolf—so that his little American playmates insisted on calling him "The Big Bad Wolf" when they innocently ganged up on him at recess and tried to emulate the punishments inflicted by the heroic little pigs in the film.

The fact that Harvey, instead of acting any normal, redblooded American boy and fighting back against the six or eight older bullies who came after him with planks and stones, chose to cry and bleed instead.

The fact that Harvey soon underwent another traumatic cinematic experience when he saw a picture called *The Wolf Man* and its sequels, and gradually came to accept and identify with the role symbolized by his last name.

The fact that Harvey seemed to have totally misinterpreted the message; to him it wasn't important that the Wolf was destroyed, but that he was revived again in the sequels.

Regrettably, said the psychiatrist (at great and expensive length) he seemed to have equated acceptance of his Wolf role with survival. As an adult, he had become a Lone Wolf, moving away from the pack. And his self-styled search for Truth was merely a search for the Father-Image, denied him in childhood.

Harvey attempted, at one point in his analysis, to talk about the Black Skelm and that fantastic fever-dream atop the *berg*. The psychiatrist listened, made notes, nodded gravely, inquired into the duration of his subsequent illness, and went back to his theory about the traumatic effect of the films. What had Harvey thought when the Wolf Man was beaten to death with a cane by his father in the movie? Did Claude Rains, as the father, remind Harvey of his own parent? Did he perceive the phallic symbolism of the silver cane used as an instrument of punishment? And so on, blah, blah, blah—until Harvey Wolf got up from the couch and walked out again.

Psychotherapy had its own truths, but its methodology was still magic. One had to believe in certain *formulae*, in spells and incantations designed to cast out demons. At the same time there was this pitiful insistence upon a "realistic" interpretation; an attempt to reconcile frankly magical methodology with the so-called "normal" world.

Perhaps it was silly to compromise. The therapy-sessions had caused Harvey to think about the Black Skelm once more, for the first time in twenty years. He remembered how the little shriveled savage had spoken of Einstein, and of Appolonius of Tyana. He had sat all alone in a bat-cave atop a mountain, drinking warm blood from a skull, but he *knew.* He had a surety which science and philosophy and art only adumbrated, and the source of his knowledge must be magical insight.

Harvey moved down into the Village and began to fill his ramshackle apartment with books on occultism and theosophy. He avoided the local Beat types, but inevitably the word leaked out. The crackpots came to call, and eventually he met a girl named Gilda who claimed to be one of the innumerable illegitimate offspring of the late Aleister Crowley.

Soon he found himself standing in a darkened room, facing the East, with a steel dagger in his right hand. He touched his forehead saying, in the Hebrew tongue, *Atch;* touched his breast and murmured *Atallcuth;* touched his right shoulder as he intoned *Ve-Geburah* and his left as he muttered *Ve-Gedullah.* Clasping his hands upon the breast, with dagger pointed upwards, he shouted *Le-Olahm, Aum.*

Nothing happened.

Gilda's further experiments in sex-magic were equally (and fortunately) nonproductive. She attempted to interest him in a Black Mass, but before details could be arranged she ran off with a young man who yapped obscene ballads in public places but was granted the protection the law affords a folk-singer.

Harvey Wolf decided that he would continue his search alone.

During the year that followed he made many contacts and experiments. Undoubtedly he met with followers of Gerrald Heard and Aldous Huxley. Quite certainly he investigated the effects of lysergic acid and peyote.

Both produced the same trance phenomena. Harvey found himself regressing, the film of his life running backwards, until he reached the point where he was enveloped in the billowing black bat-cloud from the *berg*. The little red eyes swirled fire-fly fashion all around him, then vanished into a greater darkness. He stood alone on the mountain.

Yet not quite alone, because the Black Skelm was there, pointing to the path and whispering, "I have waited long, *baas.* The time has come when we must journey together."

The message was manifest; Harvey Wolf knew he would go back to Africa.

Another Wolfe had said *You Can't Go Home Again,* and in his more objective moments Harvey knew this was right. Twenty years had passed and nothing was left of the Africa he'd known. The world kept changing.

There were new governments with new slogans, new reasons to hate their neighbors, and new weapons poised to punish them. A new spurt of population, subject to new mutations of disease, sought new areas of conquest. Missiles had reached the moon and Man would follow, then go on to the stars with his civilized cargo of bombs, chewing-gum, carbon monoxide and laxatives. Eventually the millenium would come; a Soviet Federated Socialist Republic of the Solar System or a United Interplanetary

States. If the former prevailed, Saturn would be set up as the new Siberia; if democracy triumphed, special facilities for certain groups would be set up on Pluto—separate, but equal, of course.

Harvey Wolf made one last effort to escape such cynical considerations and their consequences. He became an ascetic; a disciple of Raja, Brahma and Hatha Yoga. He took a cabin in the Arizona desert and here he meditated, fasted, and grew faint.

And the Black Skelm came into his dreams and chanted, “This is not the path. Come to me. I have found the way.”

So, in the end, Harvey returned to the dark womb—to the Africa of his birth.

He found a new spirit at the Cape; *apartheid* had arisen, sanctioned by the sanctimonious and condoned by the cartel of dedicated men whose mission it was to artificially inflate the price of diamonds with which the wealthy bedeck their wives and their whores.

At first they would not even give Harvey permission to journey upcountry, but his father’s name—and a distribution of his father’s money—helped.

This time Harvey made the trip in a chartered plane, which set him down on the flat *veldt* near the old place and (in accordance with orders) left him there.

The old place had changed, of course. Kassie, Jorl, Swarte and others were gone, and no herds of humpbacked cattle roamed over the plain. The great house was deserted, or almost so; Harvey prowled the ruins for ten minutes before the elderly man with the rifle ventured forth from an outbuilding and leveled his weapon at him in silent menace.

“Jong Kurt!” Harvey cried. And the old man blinked, not recognizing him at first—just as Harvey didn’t recognize a Kurt whom the years had robbed of any right to retain his nickname.

Kurt lowered his rifle and wept. He wept for the passing of the old place, for the death of Mama, for the changes which had come to both of them. Did the *baas* remember the way it had been? Did he remember the night Kurt had carried him, faint with delirium, down the mountainside?

"Yes, I remember," Harvey murmured. "I remember it very well."

"When you left, your father sold the cattle. The boys went into the mines, everybody left. Only Mama and I stayed on, alone. Now she is gone, too." Kurt knuckled his eyes.

"And the Black Skelm?" Harvey said. "What happened to him?"

"He is dead," Kurt answered, shaking his head solemnly.

"Dead?" Harvey stiffened in the suddenness of the thought, "Do you mean that you—"

Kurt nodded. "Your father gave orders. The day after you went to the Cape, I took the dogs up to the *berg*. I meant to hunt him down, the *verdamte* scoundrel."

"You found him there?"

The old man shrugged. "Only the bones. Picked clean, they were, on the side of the ledge near the mouth of the cave. The carrion had fed his vultures for the last time."

Kurst wheezed and slapped his thigh, and he did not see the pain in Harvey's eyes.

"But why do we stand here, *baas?* You will stay the night with me, eh? Your plane does not return before tomorrow?"

Harvey murmured an acceptance of the invitation. It was true, his plane would not return until the next day. He'd thought to spend the interval in ascending the *berg,* but there was no need now. The Black Skelm was dead. *You Can't Go Home Again.*

Kurt had comfortable quarters in one of the smaller outbuildings. Game was scarce, but there was eland steak for dinner. The old man had learned to brew beer in the traditional Kaffir fashion, and after the. meal he sat reminiscing with the young *baas* and drinking toasts to the past. Finally he succumbed to stuporous slumber.

Harvey stretched out on a bunk and tried to sleep. Eventually he succeeded. Then the bat came.

It flew in through the open window and nuzzled at his chest, brushing its leathery wings against his face and nuzzling him with tiny teeth that grazed but did not bite. It chittered faintly.

Harvey awoke to a moment of horror; horror which subsided when the bat withdrew to a corner of the room. Kurt snored on, stentoriously, and Harvey sat up, brushing at the black, winged creature in an effort to drive it back out through the window.

The bat wheeled about his head, squeaking furiously. Harvey rose, flailing his aims. He opened the door. The bat hung in the doorway. Harvey beat at it. It whirled just out of arm's reach. Then it hung suspended in midair and waited.

Harvey advanced. He stood gazing across the moonlit emptiness of the *veldt*—a lake of shimmering silver beyond which towered the black hulk of the *berg.*

The bat cheeped and flapped its wings before him. Suddenly Harvey conceived the odd notion that the wings were *beckoning*. The bat wanted him to *follow.*

Then he knew. The Black Skelm wasn't dead. He was waiting for Harvey, there on the mountain. He had sent a messenger, a guide.

Harvey didn't hesitate. He went out into the moonlit plain and it was like the first time. Now he was a grown man in boots instead of a child in rawhide *veldschoen,* and it was night instead of day, but nothing had changed. Even the odd delirium rose to envelop him once again; not the fever born of the hot sun but the chill of the cold moon. He trudged across the silver silence of the sand and the bat swooped in sinister silhouette before him. When Harvey reached the *krantz* he almost decided to turn back; this was no mysterious midnight mission, only the tipsy *fugue* of an over-imaginative man unused to the potency of Kaffir beer.

But they were waiting for him there in the shadows; huddled in teeming thousands, their tiny red eyes winking a greeting. And now thy rose all about him, covering him in a living cloak. He glanced back and found they had closed in solidly, forming a living barrier against retreat. The acrid stench was in itself a wall through which he dared not pass, so he went forward, up to the winding *pad* which took him, toiling, to the top of the *berg.*

He saw the mouth of the cave looming before him, and then all vision faded as the moon was blotted out by a cloud—a cloud of wavering wings. The bats flew off and he stood alone on the mountain-top.

The Black Skelm came out of the cave.

"You *are* alive," whispered Harvey. "I knew it. But Kurt spoke of finding bones—"

"I placed them there for that purpose." The Black Skelm wove his wrinkles into a smile. "I did not wish to be disturbed until you returned. I have waited a long time, *baas."*

"Why didn't you summon me sooner?"

"There were things you had to learn for yourself. Now you are ready, having seen the world. Is it not as I described?"

"Yes." Harvey nodded at the gnarled little black man. "But how could you know these things? I mean—"

He hesitated, but the Black Skelm grinned. "You mean I am an ignorant old savage, a witch-doctor who believes in animism and amulets." He scratched his grisly chest. "Whereas you are a man of worldly wisdom. Tell me—what is Jack Paar *really* like?"

Harvey blinked, and the old man chuckled. "You are so naive in your sophistication! *Baas,* I have seen far more than you in your brief lifetime. Although my base body sat and shriveled in this cave, my spirit ventured afar. I have been with you throughout your wanderings. I was in the theatre when you screamed; I sat with you in seminars; I felt the caress of the woman with her silver-tipped whips; I was one with you when you raised the dagger to invoke the All-Being. There are ways of transcending space and time."

"But that's impossible!" Harvey muttered. "I can't think—"

"Don't try to think." The Black Skelm rose, slowly and stiffly. "One does not learn through processes of organized logic, for the world is not a logical place. Indeed, it is not a place at all—merely an abstract point in infinity. True knowledge is intuitional; an impressionary process which might be labelled as heuristics."

Harvey shook his head. "You drink cattle-blood and summon bats, and you speak of heuristics—unbelievable."

"Yet you believe."

"I believe. But I don't understand. You have these powers. Why live like an animal in a cave when you might have gone forth to rule the world?"

"The world?" The old man put his hand on Harvey's shoulder; the weight was as slight as a sere and blackened leaf. "Look down there." Together they stared at the silvery *veldt.*

"The world is a plain," said the Black Skelm. "And beyond, as we know, are the cities of the plain. Do you remember what happened to those cities? *Then the Lord rained on Sodom and Gomorrah brimstone and fire from the Lord out of heaven, and he overthrew those cities and all the valley and all the inhabitants of the cities, and what grew on the ground.* Remember?"

"Yes. You're trying to tell me that the world will soon come to an end."

"Can you doubt it, after what you've seen?"

"No."

"The Lord remembered Abraham and brought him to the safety of the hills." The black man smiled, but Harvey stared at him.

"Is that why you sent for me? Because you're—"

"God?" The black man shook his head. "Not yet. I have not chosen. That is why I waited for you. Perhaps you can help me choose."

"I don't understand—"

“Every man is God, or contains within him the seed of godhead. Look.” The Black Skelm fumbled with a little leather pouch at his waist and drew forth a dark, shrivelled object.

“This is a nut, encased in an outer shell. Within is the seed, the kernel. The hard shell is our human consciousness. Once broken, the kernel can be reached, the seed liberated to sprout and grow, to spread through space and thrust beyond the stars.”

The Black Skelm twirled the spheroid in his wrinkled palm. “Shall we open the shell and partake?” he murmured. “No, it isn’t like peyote, or your lysergic acid, either. I spent years searching for the seed, which indeed comes from the Tree of Knowledge. Once eaten, it will do more than merely expand and extend consciousness. Consciousness will be discarded, like the empty husk it is, and the soul will flourish. Flourish and soar beyond all being.”

He cracked the shell and dug within.

“Here, will you share with me?”

“But—why?”

The Black Skelm sighed. “Because the human part of me is old, and afraid. It may be that I will not enjoy being God. It must, I think, be a lonely estate. When you came to me as a child I recognized a fellow-seeker, and I knew that I would wait for you to join me on the quest.”

Harvey stared. “This isn’t just part of some crazy dream?”

“It’s all a crazy dream, you know that,” said the Black Skelm, softly.

“And if it works—suppose I want to turn back?”

“There is no turning back, as you have learned. One can only go forward, through the mist called life and into the mist called death. Or one who dares can go beyond. It is your choice.”

“But why now?”

“Why not? Does life, as you have seen it, appeal to you?”

“No.”

"Do you look forward to death?"

"No."

"Then let us move on." The Black Skelm carefully broke the dried kernel in half and extended a portion to Harvey.

"Place it on your tongue," he said. "Then swallow slowly."

Harvey knew now that he was dreaming. He knew he was back in the bunk at Kurt's place, and there was nothing to fear—in a moment he'd awake. Meanwhile there was no harm in putting the insignificant morsel on his tongue, no harm in gripping the black man's shrivelled hand as the waves of sensation coursed through him.

Because he was back at Kurt's place now, and as he swallowed *that* too was a dream and he was back in America in Arizona, he was back with Gilda, he was back with the bearded man in France, he was back at the universities, back at the theatre watching that preposterous cartoon, back here again on the mountain-top meeting the Black Skelm for the first time. No, he was further back than *that,* he was a little boy in Mama's arms, he was crawling, he couldn't even crawl, he was kicking inside a warm darkness, he was only a speck of liquified life, he was nothing, he was—

Everything.

Instantly he leaped forward and upward. The plain faded away beneath him, faded out of focus. He had no eyes to see it with, but he needed no eyes. He was one with immensity and perceived everything. He knew he was still standing—somewhere—and still grasping the black man's hand with his own. But the hand was huge enough to balance a sun on its palm, yet insubstantial enough to feel no pain from its molten mass.

Far below *(yes, it was below, there was still space and dimension, immeasurably transfigured as his body had been transfigured)* the wheeling planets moved in inexorable orbit.

A voice that was not a voice, a mere beat observed in soundlessness, impinged upon his expanded awareness.

“Behold the earth,” it said. “A speck, a mite, an errant, inconsequential atom.”

Harvey—or that part which remembered Harvey—had a momentary awareness of the old theory of the world as a single cell in the bloodstream of a cosmic monster. But it was not a cell, he perceived, any more than he was now a monster. It was just a speck, as the voice had said.

“Is this what God sees?” he asked.

“I do not know, for I am not yet God. To be God is to act. And I cannot decide. Shall I become God through action?”

“What action is possible?”

“Only one. To destroy this earth. To rearrange the cosmic pattern by removing the atom from being.”

“Destroy? Why not save mankind?”

“God cannot save mankind. This I now know. God is great and Man is small. If left alone, Man will destroy himself. We alone can be saved—by becoming one with God.”

“I dare not.”

“Why? Do you so love the race of Man after what you’ve seen? Do you love the cesspool in which he wallows, the devices with which he brings about the destruction of others and of himself?”

“But I am a man.”

“No longer. You are in Limbo now. Not God, not human. There is no turning back. One must go forward.”

“I cannot.” Harvey—or the greater being that stood between the stars—turned and faced the black, brooding face—an image of immensity, intangible yet limned and luminous in space.

“Perhaps your life on earth was a sweeter one than mine. You did not see your people perish, and the old ways of nature vanish from the world. You did not skulk in a cave on a mountain-top for endless years, companioned by scavengers—nor feed, like them, on carrion corruption. Your skin was not black.”

“You hate the world.”

"I am above hate. And above love."

"Pity, then? Compassion?"

"For what? This insignificant speck, crawling with midges that will soon destroy it if left to their own devices?" The soundless voice thundered. "If there is pity, if there is compassion, let it be for one's self. I shall survive, in eternity. There will be other earths—"

"No!"

But the black, brooding face stared down and pursed its lips. Suddenly it blew, and spat. A cloud of ichor issued from the titanic, toothless maw. It spiralled, gathering speed and form as it fell, twisting into a tunneling black cloud.

The cloud encompassed the earth. The earth seemed to be sucked into the spiralling mass; its shell cracked and fire flared forth fitfully. But only for an instant. Then the spittle evaporated into nothingness and what it had encompassed was gone.

Gone? It had never existed.

Harvey—that which was Harvey now—turned and glanced into the great glowing face in the heavens beside him. But it too was gone. Not gone, but growing—growing to such size and at such a speed that it was impossible to perceive even a portion of its features. It was becoming space itself. The Black Skelm was God and had destroyed the earth—

Harvey's mouth opened, swallowing the universe in a soundless scream.

He could not follow the Black Skelm, grow into godhead. He could not go back to an earth which no longer existed, had never existed.

He could only scream, and merge into a swirling nothingness, a funnel that engulfed him without end . . . **THE END**

The Show Must Go On

It was intermission time, and the tavern next door to the theatre was crowded when he came in.

Several people nodded and waved as he strode by, but he headed straight for the bar. He couldn't afford to be distracted by conversation now. He was too deep in the role. That was the only important thing, concentrating on the role, planning the part he was to play. But a drink would help.

Peter was waiting to serve him, nodding and murmuring something about somebody who'd been inquiring for him earlier in the evening.

No sense answering and losing the mood. He just stood there and waited for Peter to pour out his whiskey and water and turn away again.

Then he picked up the heavy shot glass and downed the drink. Damn it, his hand was trembling; he'd spattered a few drops on his mustache.

"What's the matter, Pet—are you nervous?"

At the sound of the strange voice from behind him he whirled abruptly and let the glass fall on the bar.

"I beg your pardon?" he murmured.

Two men confronted him. One was burly, bearded, and far gone in drink. The other was only a youngster, pale and wide-eyed. It was the burly man who had spoken.

"I asked if you were nervous, Pet."

This was no time for a barroom brawl. Still, he had to answer. "Please excuse me. I'm not in the habit of addressing strangers," he said.

The burly man shrugged at his youthful companion. "Polite, isn't he, Clem? Not in the habit of addressing strangers, he says. Leastways, not *male* strangers."

"Father, I beg of you—"

The burly man pushed the boy aside. "Everybody's too damned polite. It's time for plain talk, Pet."

"See here, my name isn't Pet."

"That's what Livvie always calls you." The burly man swayed closer, his brandied breath reeking. "Livvie's my daughter, but you don't even remember her, do you? Well, that's the way of it. A big man like you—a famous actor, if you please—how's he expected to remember the name of every girl he's left in the family way?"

"So you're Livvie's father." It was a stupid remark, but he could think of nothing else to say. All he knew was that he wanted to get out of here without breaking the mood. He *had* to get out of here, before intermission was over.

"Yes, I'm Livvie's father. You see, *she* hasn't forgotten *you.* She still remembers how you promised you'd come back to her after the tour, for the wedding. But I guess you never really planned on that, did you?" The burly man nudged the boy at his side. "Isn't dressed for a bridegroom, is he, Clem? All decked out in that fancy cloak and those slick boots—you'd think he was going traveling."

Then the burly man's hand moved under his coat, and now he could feel the blunt muzzle of the revolver pressing against his ribs.

"You're traveling," said the burly man. "And I've got your ticket right here. You're traveling straight to hell."

This was intolerable. The mood was definitely slipping away now. He had to do something quickly.

"But you *cant!"* he said, and his voice began to quaver. "You don't understand, sir. I am an actor!"

"And a damned poor one, according to the critics," sneered the burly man. "But that doesn't matter. It doesn't change the fact that you're a blackguard and a scoundrel." The revolver dug deeper.

"Please!" He began to tremble. "Can't we discuss this later?"

“Later?”

“Intermission’s nearly ended, and I’m needed in the theatre. I’ve a role to play—a most important role. Afterward I promise to place myself at your disposal. We can talk about poor Lizzie—”

“Livvie!”

“Yes, of course, forgive me. It’s just that I’m thinking of my part.” He began to sob. “I beg of you, sir, spare me until after I’ve concluded my performance! In the name of the theatre and its glorious tradition, the show must go on.”

“The show must go on!” The pressure of the muzzle slackened. “Is that all that matters to you?” The burly man turned to Clem. “Oh, they warned me he was crazy, but I never thought—”

Clem sensed his indecision. “Father, can’t you see? They were right, he *is* deranged! No sense threatening him. Would you really want Livvie to marry such a creature?”

The burly man shook his head. He put the gun away slowly. “I’m not sparing you out of pity,” he said. “All I feel for you is contempt. Go back to your play-acting, it’s all you’ll ever be any good for. There’s no point in killing you tonight, because it doesn’t matter whether you live or die.”

The burly man spat at his feet; then he and the boy turned away in the crowd.

He watched them go, glad that no one had seemed to notice the little scene he’d just played. In a way, however, that was unfortunate, for it had been a good scene. One of his best. They didn’t think he was much of an actor, eh? Well, he’d show them yet.

Yes, there was the call now. “Ten after ten,” from the street outside. That meant intermission was over and it was time to go.

He walked next door, greeting old Buckingham at the entrance of the lobby. “You won’t be needing a ticket from me now, will you?” he asked.

Old Buck smiled and let him pass. He went through the lobby as the house lights dimmed, then strode down the aisle. In the darkness he could smile as he thought of the scene he had just played with the stupid old man.

He could loosen his derringer, the derringer which could have killed that fool any time he decided to pull the trigger. But no need to dwell on that now. All he had to do was get back into the mood, prepare for the better scene to come. The biggest and best scene of all. He hadn't really lied; the show must go on.

And now the show *was* going on, as in the darkness he found the balcony stairs and climbed upward toward President Lincoln's box.

Till Death Do Us Part

A coffin, an invalid, a snooping brother—these were the ingredients involved in Carl Somers' plans of murder. Even circumstance did its part to help . . .

ARDENT FEMINISTS, forever bewailing the fact that it's a man's world, have thus far overlooked a telling example of injustice—it is usually easier for a husband to kill his wife than for a wife to dispose of her husband.

This is particularly true if the husband is fortunate enough to be a mortician by profession.

Carl Somers came to this conclusion one night in May, and by the end of June he was ready to put it to the test. He had his plans perfected and all he needed now was the proper opportunity.

Everything, he reasoned, was in his favor, His wife, Celia, was a semi-invalid who had made no friends in the community. There would be no embarrassing questions asked when he circulated the news that she had gone to Arizona for her health; in fact, several doctors had already urged her to do just that, and Carl had spread the word around.

After her supposed departure, he could fake some letter from her, if necessary, but there probably wouldn't be much talk. And by the time anyone might become suspicious, Carl himself would have disappeared.

He planned to sell die funeral home immediately and tell people he was joining Celia in Arizona. Oh, it would work out splendidly, and he knew in detail just what he intended to do when the chance came.

There was only one fly in die ointment; a big, fat fly named Elmer. Elmer was Carl’s brother, and a sanctimonious prig. He lived in another small community about twenty miles away, and die two of them met infrequently.

But-Elmer knew that Carl had married Celia for her late father’s mortuary establishment, and he didn’t approve of this. He also knew that Carl liked to step out occasionally, and he didn’t approve of that, either. In fact, he seemed to disapprove of everything not connected with his own preoccupation with the church choir.

Psalm-singing prig! When Carl thought about his brother and his possible suspicions, he hesitated. If anybody would ask the wrong questions, it would be that fool of an Elmer; he was always so critical, always so quick to note anything the least little bit out of line. The mere suggestion of impropriety was enough to set him off; a word from him at the wrong time might be just enough to start the authorities thinking—and what was worse, investigating. And therein lay the key to all Car Is plans; there must be no investigation.

So all through June Carl endured his wife’s hypochondriacal, complaints, dreamed of the freedom so tantalizingly offered and so tormentingly denied by his brother’s possible interference.

And then Fate stepped in and provided him with an unexpected opportunity. For on the Fourth of July, Elmer’s wife died.

It was a sudden heart attack, sustained after a picnic outing, and when Elmer came to Carl with the news, he was desolated. Carl pretended to share his brother’s grief, but inwardly he was overjoyed. It wasn’t likely, under the circumstances, that Elmer would be snooping around or asking questions. This would be the perfect setup for what he had in mind.

So Carl set the wheels in motion. He explained to his brother that Celia had just left for Arizona by train, in obedience to doctor’s orders, over this past weekend. She had promised to write him as soon as she arrived at her hotel, but in the meantime it might be difficult to contact her en route so that she could return in time for the funeral. He’d wire her, of course, but he couldn’t promise—

Elmer didn’t seem interested. He was too distraught to-do anything but nod. His own grief overwhelmed him; he asked Carl to handle all the funeral arrangements, and then broke down completely in the midst of choosing a coffin from Carl’s simple stock.

In the end it was Carl who actually selected the casket for Elmer’s wife, and that suited him perfectly. He picked a nice large one, and after Elmer departed, Carl went upstairs and told Celia about it.

“You see, it has to be big,” he explained, “because you’ll be buried in it, too.”

Celia’s only answer was a gurgle, for at that moment Carl thrust the knife into her neck.

It was rather a messy job, cleaning up the bathroom afterwards, but Carl didn’t really mind. He’d done it so many times in his dreams that everything seemed quite routine to him now.

He dragged Celia’s body downstairs and laid it out on a slab, next to that of his late sister-in-law. He did a nice job on Elmer’s wife, and a conscientious one, using the best materials and putting in the fancy smilers at the edges of her freshly-rouged lips. He wanted her to look good when the mourners came.

With Celia he contented himself with a routine embalming and didn’t even bother with makeup. After all, nobody was going to see *her.* She would be out of sight, tucked away underneath the velvet lining of the casket, with Elmer’s wife resting above her. Nobody would suspect her presence there in the chapel. Of course, when the time came for the ballbearers to carry the coffin out to the hearse they would find it a heavy burden—but it was a very large casket, and they weren’t likely to complain.

They didn’t.

Everything went off; without a hitch, just as Carl had planned and hoped. The mourners came to the chapel the night before and paid their last respects; some of them noted that Celia was absent and it gave Carl the perfect opportunity to spread the story of her trip to Arizona.

During the funeral the next day, Carl had one or two bad moments as he sweated out the ceremony. His brother Elmer was a pillar of the church, and his pastor gave an unusually long and eloquent eulogy. Carl could hardly wait until the casket was closed. But the moment came at last, and he had Celia right where he wanted her. As he reflected that in another half hour she'd be buried, he could scarcely contain his elation.

Out at die cemetery, Carl thought the way his brother carried on was rather odd. At least he thought it was odd, until he returned to the mortuary after the funeral and found die tall man waiting there.

"My name's Swanson," the tall man said. "Sheriff's office. I hate to disturb you at a time like this, but I'm afraid I must ask you a few questions. Do you know if your brother and his wife ever had any differences of opinion?"

"My brother? Differences?—"

"I'll be blunt," Swanson said. "There's talk going around that they'd been quarreling. It seems your brother got mixed up with some girl in the church choir. His wife found out about it. We know she threatened to go to the authorities. We also know that a pharmacist sold your brother some cyanide last week, before the picnic . . .

Carl began to tremble violently.

Swanson sighed and put his hand on Carl's shoulder. "Sorry to bother you," he said. "This must come as quite a shock, but sometimes one never knows what's going on, even with one's own brother. Of course there's one sure way of finding out. I've got the permit right here. We're going to dig up the grave and re-open the coffin . . ."

Beep No More

LADY ROSE from her launching pad shortly before dawn on April 1st. She carried a full payload of sending and receiving instruments as she soared triumphantly into space, and officials freely predicted that she would go into orbit around the sun by April 5th.

S. O. Bushwhacker rose from *his* pad shortly before noon on the latter date. He carried a full payload of benzedrine and trsnquilizers as he soared triumphantly into his executive suite at UBC in Hollywood, and officials freely predicted that he would go into orbit today without hitting the ceiling.

Lady—or Unmanned Satellite 69, as she was affectionately known to the government observers and astronomers who tracked her course—fell into solar orbit around 3 p.m. The faint and intermittent *beep-beep* of her signalling devices reassured these who charted her progress.

S.O. Bushwhacker—or “old S.O.B.”, as he was affectionately known to the underlings and network minions who tracked his course—returned from a leisurely luncheon at Tail o’ the Cock and fell into his chair around 3 p.m. The faint and intermittent burping of his digestive devices reassured those who charted his progress.

Exactly what prompted Lady’s sudden outburst a half hour later is still a matter of conjecture. But there is no dispute as to what caused S. O. Bushwhacker’s outburst at precisely the same time.

He was sitting in his private washroom, monitoring a new network comedy show, about a group of loveable hillbillies, called *The Real Rabinowitzes,* when the explosion occurred.

Members of his staff rushed in from the outer office, fully expecting that the inevitable had finally occurred—somebody had planted depth-charges in the plumbing.

The plumbing, however, was intact. It was Mr. Bushwhacker who had gone to pieces.

“Did you hear that?” he shouted, gesticulating at the TV set.

“Hear what?” inquired personal secretary Crosley Sneed.

“The commercial!” Bushwhacker stabbed a shaking finger in the direction of the television screen. “Listen!”

Centered on the tube was the stern, distinguished face of a prominent physician. Like all medical scientists, he had one of those machines which light up to reveal a cross-section of the human body through which pills raced, arrows of pain darted, and small fires raged in the large intestine.

Crosley Sneed shrugged. “Looks okay to me,” he murmured. “Of course, maybe we could blow up that intestine a little more. Make it king-size, for greater visual impact, like—”

“Never mind how it *looks!”* Bushwhacker yelled. “I designed the damned thing myself. I’m asking you to *listen!”*

The prominent physician was pointing his index finger at the viewing audience, as prominent physicians so frequently do—with or without the benefit of finger-cots—and speaking earnestly.

“—and so remember, friends, *modern* hemmorhoids demand a *modem* remedy. That’s why leading scientists recommend amazing new miracle discovery, Preparation J—the only hemmorhoid remedy in the world that helps shrink atomic piles! If *you* suffer from the burning, itching torture of piles, why not limp down to your friendly neighborhood BEEP-BEEP today?”

“What did he say?” demanded Crosley Sneed.

“Yes, folks, that’s Preparation J—the new, quick-acting ointment that will bring instant relief to your BEEP-BEEP or double your money back! Remember the name—that’s Preparation BEEP-BEEP—”

“Hear that?” Mr. Bushwhacker exclaimed. Sneed and the others nodded; they heard it loud and clear. Punctuating every few words now came the BEEP-BEEP tones, blasting out of the set and drowning out the commercial.

“Sabotage!” Mr. Bushwhacker shouted. “We’re being jammed by another network. Get me Edward R. Murrow, that—”

“Wait a moment.” As is usual in a crisis, cooler and wiser heads prevailed. Fortunately, one of the staff-members was the distinguished psychiatrist, J. Hooper Trendex, who may be remembered as the author of that popular adult western series, *Have Couch—Will Travel.*

It was he who spoke, and now stepped forward to switch channels on the set. For a moment Mr. Bushwhacker’s jaws clenched convulsively; never before had anyone dared to tune in on a rival network here at UBC, and to do so now, in the sacred confines of his own private washroom—

But the deed was done, and J. Hooper Trendex stepped back as a face and voice emerged from the tube. An idiot child gaggled forth in a smiling, loathesome closeup. “Look, Mom!” the little cretin shouted. “No BEEP-BEEP!”

“Just as I suspected,” murmured Trendex. “All over the channels. This isn’t sabotage. It’s the signal from that new satellite they sent up the other day. The one they call Lady.”

“Mamma mia!” Mr. Bushwhacker groaned and seated himself on the sole available article of furniture in the room.

“I’m quite sure,” Trendex continued. “Radio signals have been coming in for days—just a faint beep at regular intervals.”

“But this isn’t a faint beep,” Mr. Bushwhacker protested. “It’s a blast! And it’s interrupting every few seconds. How can anyone listen to television with that noise going on?”

“I’m positive Washington is already aware of the difficulty,” Trendex soothed. “Perhaps something went wrong when the satellite began to orbit around the sun. They’ll take care of it down there. Meanwhile, people can always listen to radio.”

"Oh no they can't!" Otis Wormley, chief of the Radio Division, burst into the room just in time to catch the last remark. "All hell's breaking loose, Chief!" he gasped. "I just got word from the engineers. Somebody is beeping Arthur Godfrey!"

Mr. Bushwhacker sprang to his feet. "Is nothing sacred?" he cried. "This has gone far enough. Get the FCC on the phone. Tell them we want the interference stopped immediately. It *must* be stopped before we hit A-Time tonight. Don't you realize we're premiering the new western?"

All faces sobered. UBC was indeed launching a new western series—its twenty-seventh effort of the season, and undoubtedly one of the best. Sick and tired of cowboys armed with pistols, revolvers, derringers, rifles and sawed-off shotguns, the network had come up with a novelty designed to revolutionize the field; the first cowboy in television history to carry a machine-gun.

"Get moving!" ordered Mr. Bushwhacker. "We've got to save that show!"

His entire staff mobilized into action, almost precisely at the same moment as other staffs at other networks moved into the fray. They called the FCC and the FCC called the Department of Defense and the Department of Defense called the Top Brass and the Top Brass called the Top Scientists, but—

At 9 o'clock, when the new cowboy hero pointed his weapon at the crooked gambler and pulled the trigger, the machine-gun beeped.

"Holy Moley!" screamed Mr. Bushwhacker. "Why can't somebody *do* something?"

"You heard the reports," Trendex told him. "Nobody really understands just what went wrong. Apparently the sun's proximity did something to the sending devices—stepped up the signal and beamed it over to AM and FM frequencies. Engineers say it's up to a decibel-count of around eighty right now and rising fast. Just one of those freak coincidences, but apparently there's nothing dangerous about the phenomenon."

“Nothing dangerous? It’s killing the ratings, and you say it isn’t dangerous.” Mr. Bushwhacker gulped.

“How long do they expect this noise to go on?”

Trendex shrugged. “There’s no telling. Lady can orbit around the sun for years, apparently. And the signals should continue for the life of the satellite.”

“Satellite, schmatellite!” Mr. Bushwhacker smote his desk a vicious blow. “You realize what this means? We’ll get beeped out of business!”

During the days that followed, it seemed as if his grim prediction was all too true. Frantic TV viewers and radio listeners were promptly reassured as to the source of the strange sounds emanating from their sets, but this did nothing to alleviate their irritation at the interruptions. Nobody wanted to hear something called *This Is Your Beep* or follow the irregular rhythm of Lawrence Welk and his *Beep-Beep* music. So the sets clicked off, and the sponsors cancelled in droves.

Meanwhile, the volume and irregularity of the signals continued to rise. Die-hard listeners began to sue the networks because of headaches they suffered while attempting to listen to headache-remedy commercials. A mob armed with switchblades and zap-guns picketed the studios where *American Bandstand* originated, protesting that the beeps were destroying the beat of rock-’n-roll. Several prominent stand-up comedians laid down on the couch in utter frustration because while their writers had all come up with beep-beep gags, there was no medium on which the routines could be heard.

Finally, the President preempted the networks for a Special Message, but by this time almost nobody was bothering to listen. The few who did reported that he said little or nothing. Mostly, he just beeped.

“It can’t go on,” Mr. Bushwhacker moaned. “People won’t be able to get along without TV! Why, they’ve got nothing to do! Reports say they’re flipping all over the country—jumping off roofs, blowing their brains out, even reading books.” He paused, then resumed grimly. “That’s right, *reading books.* You know what that means, don’t you, Trendex? You’re a psychiatrist. You’ve heard what happens when people start reading. It gets so they can't stop. First thing you know, everybody'll be hooked, they can't kick the habit—"

"I know." Trendex sighed. "Another few months and we'll lose our audience forever. Not only are they reading now, but some of-them are even starting to go *outdoors* again. Taking walks, going on picnics, indulging in sports and games and their own home entertainment. You know what *that* will lead to. Sooner or later somebody is bound to re-discover sex, and then —"

"This is the ulcer bit! There's got to be some way out!"

"So there is," Trendex mused, softly. "I've checked the government engineering reports, and they've found a method. The trouble is, they can't afford it. The government doesn't have the kind of money we have here at the network."

"Then let's spend the money," Mr. Bushwhacker groaned. "I don't care what it costs, just as long as we get back into business."

"Very well," Trendex murmured. "We'll call a meeting of execs from all networks and raise a kitty. Each network buys its own satellite from the government—yes, they have them ready for launching, but it costs too much to send them up. We'll foot the bill, provided our engineers are allowed to install a frequency system to jam out and ride over the beep-beep signal. And we'll put in a projection system too—"

As he continued, Mr. Bushwhacker's eyes widened. "It'll cost a fortune," he commented. "And what about the set-manufacturers?"

"Who cares?" Trendex shrugged. "As for the cost, once you start operating again, you can always raise the rates and get the money back from the sponsors."

And that is exactly the way it worked out.

Two weeks later, to the day, UBC launched its first satellite. Promptly at sunset, Mr. Bushwhacker and his staff gathered at the window and gazed at the darkening sky. Behind them stood the inner-office TV set, silent and neglected. It would remain so from now on, and so would all the television receivers and radio sets throughout the country and the world.

Because now, up in the sky, the lights of the 21,000,000,000-mile screen brightened into view, projecting the picture from the transmitting satellite orbiting forever around the sun. And all over the nation, eager eyes sought the heavens.

Up there the tremendous face beamed benevolently at the multitude below. A huge hand flicked a switch and a cross-section of the human body appeared against the Milky Way.

Then came the historic moment, as the voice thundered clearly from the sky, penetrating palatial mansions and poorest tenements alike.

“Friends,” boomed the message from the heavens. “Are you one of the three out of four people who can’t visit the washroom after every meal? Scientists say—”

Down on earth, Mr. Bushwhacker wasn’t listening to what scientists say. He was hugging Trendex, and he had a message of his own. “It works!” he exulted. “It really works!”

“Certainly marvelous,” Trendex agreed. “This marks the beginning of a new era of communication. No more sets, no more aerials—”

“Never mind that jazz,” Mr. Bushwhacker said, as the voice in the sky proclaimed amazing new relief from harsh laxatives. He winked at Trendex, and grinned.

“The important thing to remember,” he said, “is that from now on, nobody can ever turn it off . . .”

The Man WHo Murdered Tomorrow

Can you imagine Jack the Ripper with an H-bomb instead of a scalpel, and a whole prostituted world to hate?

"HOW DID you get in here?" asked the General.

I shrugged. "I'm a writer," I said. "Writers have a way of getting into well-guarded places—as the husbands of Lord Byron's mistresses discovered, to their sorrow."

"What a character!" the General muttered. "You sound just the way you did twenty years ago." He paused. "Is it really that long since I've seen you?"

I nodded.

"Well, it doesn't matter." He smiled and extended his hand. "It's great to have you here."

"You're looking fine," I told him, and the lie did not come easily. His hand was cold and moist. His eyes were cold and moist, too.

"Thanks. Sit down and make yourself comfortable, if you can." The cold, moist eyes made a quick survey of the small room. There was nothing to see but the desk and the cot and the wash basin, and the bank of instruments lining the wall.

"Sorry I can't offer you a drink," he said. "But it's against regulations. They don't even let me smoke up here."

I glanced at the small bookcase which stood next to the cot. “You’re permitted to read, I see.”

“That’s the prisoner’s reward for good behavior.”

“Prisoner?” I grinned. “That’s pretty good, coming from a man with five stars on his shoulder.”

“Might as well be five numbers on my chest,” he answered. “But don’t quote me.” The lids narrowed over the cold, moist eyes. “Look here, you’re not after an interview, are you?”

“Of course not. Nobody interviews you. Nobody’s even supposed to know where you are, or what you’re doing. They made that very plain before they allowed me to visit.”

He sat down behind the desk. “Mind telling me just how you managed that little trick? This is top secret. I haven’t seen my own orderly in three weeks, and yet here you come waltzing in, just like that. How’d you swing it?”

“They invited me. Somehow, somebody found out we’d been to school together. Thought you might like to see one of your old friends, help pass the time.”

“They.” He said it like a dirty word. “Meaning the doctors, I suppose. They’ve been watching me for weeks, waiting for a crackup. Medics are the only visitors I ever have—they come around regularly with some tired excuse about a physical checkup. But I can see Section Eight in their eyes.”

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to upset you.”

“That’s all right. I know what you were supposed to do. Cheer me up, eh? Little talk about the good old days, wasn’t that it?”

“Well, more or less.”

“Then, if you don’t mind, I’ll settle for less.” He smiled again, but it was only a twitch of the lips. “I’ve had plenty of time to think about the good old days, all by myself. The subject is played out. Everything’s played out.”

He glanced over at the instrument panels. “I suppose they told you what I’m doing here?”

“In a way. And I can guess the rest. Even with the security lid, the papers are full of rumors. There’s talk of Condition Red at any moment now. And I suppose, when it comes, somebody has to press the button.”

The eyes narrowed again. “All right, so you guessed it. Somebody has to press the button. And I’m elected.”

He turned and faced the instrument panels. “As a matter of fact, there *is* a button.” He pointed at a small black knob set in the center of a large dial. “When the signal comes, I acknowledge it on intercom. Then I’m supposed to press the button. That’s all there is to it.

“I press the button, the planes and missiles take off, and all hell breaks loose. So simple, really, a child could do it. But they insist on a five-star General.”

He scowled, opened the desk-drawer, and pulled out a service revolver.

“Wait a minute,” I said. “You aren’t going to—?”

The General shook his head slowly. “Of course not. I’m not that far gone. Not *yet.”* He laid the revolver on the desk-top. “It’s just that I remembered regulations. My instructions are to remain armed at all times when someone else is in this room. Even the medics, or for that matter, the President himself. Because *anyone* could press that button.

“If they try, it’s part of my job to stop them. Button-pressing is an honor reserved solely for me.” The twitch-smile flickered once more. “And that’s funny, isn’t it, because I don’t have all *my* buttons.”

I stood up. “Now see here, Sam,” I said. “You called the shot right the first time. They *did* send me up here to try and give you a lift. But I feel more like bawling hell out of you. This self-dramatizing kick is ridiculous. You’re intelligent enough to know there’s nothing wrong with you except nervous tension. You’ve been under a strain, in enforced isolation. But that's no reason for climbing the walls. So let's not have any more talk about buttons."

"All right. But that leaves us with nothing to talk about. Don't you see, for a man in my spot, there *isn't* anything else that's important?"

He may have been ready to crack, but they hadn't given him those five stars for nothing. He knew what the score was.

But they'd sent me here to divert him, and there had to be some way.

I walked over to the bookcase. "Still reading detective stories, eh?" Stooping, I examined the titles. "But this is all non-fiction! Wertham, Lindner, Pearson. I see you have Barnard's old anthology, *The Harlot Killer."*

"Jack the Ripper," he said. "You did a story about him once."

"Who didn't?" I shrugged. "It's the kind of a case that intrigues most writers. Everybody has some theory."

"So have I." He tapped the desk. "That's why I requested this type of reading-matter. Sitting up here, I've had a lot of time to think about murder." There was animation in his voice now, and all at once I was listening closely.

"I needn't tell you anything about the Ripper. He's been identified as a monster, a maniac, a medical man; a sailor, a butcher, a foreigner, a woman. But I think I'm the first to recognize him for what he really was. A *symbol.* Jack the Ripper was the man who murdered an era.

"It was the Victorian Age which Jack the Ripper really killed, you know. The age of hypocrisy, of sham gentility, of maudlin morality. When the Ripper rose to carve his way to fame, the Victorian Age was doomed.

"A new spirit of scientific investigation was in the air. Some of the sham had already been shaken off. Then the Ripper appeared—in London, the very capital of the Victorian world. He emerged out of darkness; the darkness in which proper Victorians buried all their vices. His victims, appropriately enough, were prostitutes, whose very existence wasn't admitted in this pious, respectable age. But the Ripper turned the spotlight on them as he operated with the weapon of the new science—a bright, gleaming scalpel. In dissecting prostitutes, he dissected the whole, infected corpse of Victorian morality. Jack the Ripper murdered his age. His coming was the symbol of change."

I whistled softly. "Maybe you have something, Sam. Other unknown killers committed atrocious crimes, but it's the Ripper we all remember, Maybe it's because of the unconscious symbolism involved. Now, if you extend your theory a little further—"

"I have," the General told me. "Take Lizzie Borden. Look at the hatchet-job she performed on New England virtue! By the time that case was closed, old ideas of Puritan rectitude were dead forever. This nation entered the new industrial age.

"I tell you, Toynbee and Spengler should have thought of this! You want to know the truth about a historical period? Never mind its heroes—study its murderers!

"Interested in the economic collapse of Europe in the twenties? Read about Landru, and about the German butchers who sold human flesh in the open market. They smybolize what happened perfectly. And when *our* Depression came, we had the Cleveland Torso Slayer. Is there any better way of dramatizing the fate of the have-nots in that period than what he did to the tramps and derelicts who were his victims?

"The Forties had their symbols, too. Tortured kids like William Heirens. Remember what he scrawled on the wall above one victim's body? *'For God's sake stop me, before I kill more.'* The perfect expression of the dilemma confronting modern youngsters in the dawning atomic age. We put a weapon in his hand, a weapon he had to carry and couldn't stop using. Youth couldn't have him, society couldn't save him. Now, in the Fifties—"

I nodded at him. "Let me guess," I said. "The Mad Bomber, of course."

He made a harsh sound which I had some difficulty in identifying as a chuckle. "That's me. The Mad Bomber."

"Now wait a minute. You promised—"

"Sure, I promised. I promised the Top Brass I'd sit up here in this little room and sweat out a crisis. It's all so easy. Just wait for the signal and press a button. I don't have to launch the missiles or guide the planes. I don't even have to know where they go, or see what happens when they reach their targets. But I already know the answer. This era is going to end, too."

"Please, knock it off! Maybe that time will never come."

"The time *is* coming."

"Forget it." I walked over to him. "If I were you, I'd work on that theory, instead. Put it all down on paper, think it through. If you can really symbolize the end of an era in its major murderers, then perhaps you can find a new approach to the whole problem. Maybe you've stumbled on an offbeat way of getting a real answer, the one we've all been looking for. It's worth trying, Sam."

A buzzer sounded, and I jumped. But it was only the summons from below, telling me that my time was up.

"Got to go," I said. "But please, promise me you'll play around with this idea."

"Occupational therapy, eh?"

"Call it what you like. But I'll be interested in your final conclusions."

"All right," he sighed. "When I figure things out, I'll let you know."

A moment later, I left. As the door closed behind me, he was back at his desk, staring glassy-eyed at the little black button on the wall.

I went right downstairs to see a man named Voigt. He wasn't an officer and he wasn't a doctor; officially, he had no title at all. But when he spoke, everybody jumped.

I jumped, too.

"Tell me about the General," he said.

So I told him. I told him everything, just as I've set it down here. When I finished he frowned and nodded.

“I was afraid of this,” he muttered. “What you say only confirms it. He’ll crack like the rest of them.”

“There were others, too?”

“Naturally.” Voigt spread his palms on the desk and studied the backs of his hands. “When we first set up this Alert, we placed a private on guard in the room—a simple buck private. Nobody minimized the importance of the assignment, but aside from the need for secrecy, we considered the actual duty to be mere routine.

“Well, we were wrong. Within forty-eight hours, the private had disappeared. AWOL. Fortunately, we managed to catch up with him before he talked. Heaven knows what kind of mob-hysteria might have spread if we hadn’t found him in time. But at least we learned one thing. We’d picked an ordinary private on the theory that a man of average intelligence would be too insensitive to react to the situation. That was a mistake.

“So we tried the opposite extreme. A lieutenant this time, a brilliant career physicist in civilian life. But he isn’t a physicist now, and he’s not a lieutenant, either. He’s a catatonic case, a hebephrenic curled up in a foetal position in the bed of a military hospital. It took just four days for him to break.

“The General was next. I’d hoped we’d found our answer. Military indoctrination, intelligence, maturity, emotional stability. An ideal personality-profile, in our opinion. We ran batteries of tests on several hundred candidates. None of the ratings showed a prognosis as favorable as his. And he’s lasted just nineteen days.”

“Why not just use all the men you tested?” I suggested. “Rotate them, on short shifts?”

Voigt shook his head. “Impractical. A single slip and secrecy is lost. With hundreds of men involved, or even half a dozen, there’s bound to be a leak sooner or later. No, we need one man. The right man.”

"How about yourself?" I stared at him directly. "You are a psychiatrist, are you not?"

"Never mind what I am. Titles and professional status don't enter into this problem.

I'll admit this suggestion was considered. But medical men are unfit, by the very nature of their training. We lack the emotional component to stand up under the realization of what would happen if that button were pressed."

"Maybe you're anticipating unduly," I said. "Maybe the General will hold the fort."

"After what you just told me about his theories?" Voigt sighed. "Symbolic murderers!"

"But I believe it," I murmured. "Look, I'm no psychiatrist, or penologist, either. But I know something about the criminal mind. I must have published several million words on crime and criminals through the years. I've studied and observed the destructive tendencies—"

Voigt nodded. "Of course. You've channelized your own aggressions, on paper. But we're dealing with reality now, not symbols. The man must be relieved from duty immediately."

He glanced up as a uniformed man strode into the room. There was no exchange of salutes or greetings; the man crossed to the desk and whispered a few words in Voigt's ear.

Voigt jumped up and motioned to me. "Come on," he said. "I was right."

I followed the two of them out into the corridor and up the stairs. We came to the little door. It stood open, unguarded. "Stay here," Voigt told the man. Then, to me, "You'd better come inside and see for yourself."

We went in and Voigt closed the door behind us.

The General was slumped over his desk, the revolver at his side. We could still smell the cordite fumes. Voigt walked over to the corpse but didn't bother to examine it. Instead, he reached for a slip of paper resting beneath the General's left hand.

“Read this,” he said, and passed the paper over to me.

The message was short and unsigned.

“Yes, there is an answer. Every age must have its symbolic murder. But today, murder is not enough. There is only one fitting crime and that is—self-destruction.”

I passed the paper back. “He must have done it right after I left. The conclusion was inevitable—modern man will destroy himself. What more proof do you need that the theory is correct?”

Voigt shook his head. “He just cracked under the strain, like all the others. One sought refuge in physical flight, one retreated into a psychotic fugue, and the General took suicide as a way out. There is no such thing as a symbolic murderer—it’s sheer nonsense!”

Voigt shouldn’t have said that.

Not about my theory.

Yes, *my* theory, of course, just as it was my typewritten note which I’d left next to the General’s body after I shot him with his own revolver there in the soundproofed little room.

It had taken me a long time to learn about the room and the revolver, but the rest was simple. After all, haven’t I been killing people on paper, year after year? My scheme had been foolproof, and I’m sure I needn’t have betrayed my hand even now. Voigt would wonder what to do with me, now that I knew the secret, and he would worry about finding a replacement for the General; then he’d finally put the two problems together and arrive at the only logical solution. He was ready to offer me the chance to take the General’s place.

But the besetting weakness of every writer is pride—and I had mine.

So when he laughed at my theory, I merely picked up the revolver and pointed it at his ugly pot-belly.

And then I told him. Told him everything. Told him what it really means to “channelize your agressions” as the stupid psychiatrists put it. Yes, the stupid psychiatrists who have phrases and labels for everything—but can't see the truth when it stares them in the face or pours out of their television tubes.

"This is the age of mass-media," I said. "The age of mass-communication. And it's the age of mass-frustration, too. So today's symbolic murderer has new weapons. The printed page, the motion picture and TV screen. Take a look around you and you'll see violence and horror whereever you turn; violence and horror supplied to frustrated millions by writers like myself. We're the symbolic murderers, using our own fantasies and projecting them because we don't have the courage or the opportunity to make our secret desires come true.

"Well, I've got the courage, and I've found the opportunity. Right here, in this room, with the panic button just waiting to be pressed. Now do you believe me?"

Voigt's face was just a gray, mumbling mask. "Yes," he whispered. "I believe you."

"Then get out."

I squeezed the trigger of the revolver ever so gently, and he got out. I locked the door behind him.

And then I just sat there. Sat there and stared at the little black button. For a little while I was quite happy. Happy for myself, and for all the other writers in the world who had to be content merely to cut the throats of paper dolls. Now *I* was all those writers, and I was Jack the Ripper, too, and Landru and Crippen and Hitler and Napoleon and Tamberlaine. I didn't have to do anything; the mere knowledge was enough. The knowledge that the little black button was there, waiting. If I wanted to press it, I could. I could press the button and explode the world.

And meanwhile, I could set everything down here, just as I've done, and nobody dared stop me. Nobody dared try to open the door or break it down, because I have the gun.

But I might have known it wouldn't last forever. I might have known Voigt was lying—that he really didn't believe my theory.

Because he came back. Yes, he came back and stood outside the door and shouted at me to come out, or they'd pump cyanide gas into the room.

He thinks I'm crazy. He can talk about killing me with cyanide gas and he thinks *I'm* crazy!

Well, there's only one thing for me to do now, of course. I must prove my sanity. That's the only way I can get Voigt to believe me.

You understand that, don't you? *You* believe it's true about the symbolic murderer.

Or you will, in a moment. Because I've just pressed the button . . .

THE END

The Bald-Headed Mirage

The four great heads loomed in the desert . . . offering riches, threatening doom. . . . Could they be sentient or were they merely

THE asteroid didn't have a name, unless one wanted to count the four-letter word which Chuck had used to designate it as he set the ship down.

Barwell didn't like the word, or any of the words Chuck used. Back in the old days, before space-travel, people with Chuck's limited and unsavory vocabulary were often described as "earthy." Barwell wondered what they should be called today. "Planetary" ? Or "asteroidy" ?

It didn't matter. What mattered was that Chuck happened to be a typical space frontiersman. Some day he and his fellows would probably be transfigured in legend as heroic interplanetary pioneers, just as the early settlers of the old American west had been transfigured. Songs and sagas would be written of their fearless exploits, their bold vision, their thirst for freedom, their struggle to shake down the stars.

But men like Barwell, who had to live with them now, knew that the space frontiersmen were probably no different than their historic counterparts back on Earth. They were misfits, antisocial aberrants who fled the responsibilities of organized society and the punishment of its laws. They sought the skies not out of poetic yearning but in a desperate attempt to evade bad debts, extortion charges, murder raps, bastardy warrants—and what they hoped to find was not the beauty of nature but the booty. They were led not by light but by loot—and because most of them were uncouth, ignorant men, they teamed up with partners like George Barwell who provided the brain to balance the brawn.

Perhaps, Barwell reasoned, he was being unfair. Chuck, like most of his counterparts, had more than brawn; he had natural coordination, natural comprehension manifesting itself in mechanical aptitudes. He was, in a word, a damned good pilot—just as the stumblebums of the Old West were often damned good horsemen, stagecoach drivers, bull-whackers, hunters and scouts. What he lacked in ratiocination Barwell provided. Together they formed a team—cerebrum and cerebellum, plus a psychic *medulla oblongata* composed of a fusion of component qualities.

Only by the time they landed on the asteroid, Barwell was damned sick of Chuck's four-letter words. Chuck had a four-letter word for everything during their long cruise—to describe the food, the confinement in the tiny cabin of the ship, his need for a sexual outlet. Chuck talked about nothing else, was interested in nothing else.

Barwell's own tastes ran towards poetry; the oldstyle poetry of long ago, complete with rhyme and metre and onomotopoeia. But there was no sense even mentioning the subject to Chuck; give him a title like *The Charge of the Light Brigade* and he'd think it was about the narcotics supply of some regiment. And as for *The Lay of the Last Minstrel*—

No, it was easier for Barwell to keep silent and let Chuck do the talking. About the . . . mineral deposits they were going to find, and the . . . money they'd make so they could go back to that . . . Lunadome City and tell everybody to . . .

It was easier for Barwell to keep silent, but not much easier. And by the time they were approaching the surface of the asteroid he was heartily sick of his partner, and his earthy aspirations. If George Barwell had invested his small inheritance in a second-hand ship in order to conduct a private sky-scan, it wasn’t because he wanted wealth to gratify his aggressive drives against society. He knew exactly what he meant to do with his money, if successful. He’d buy himself a little place out past Pluto and set up an interplanetary Walden’s Pond. Here he’d settle down to write poetry in the ancient manner; not the intermediate *vers libre* of the first space age or today’s soundspeak synthesis which had emerged from what the scholars once called “progressive jazz.” He hoped, too, to do some erudite and expensive research with the priceless tapes of forgotten folk-songs.

But there was no time for such speculations now, no time for poesy. They were skimming across the surface of the asteroid, off autopilot, of course, while the instruments tested for grav., ox., density, radiation, temp., and all the rest. Chuck was at the controls, set for a handland any minute.

Barwell got the tape comps and studied them. “We’ll do all right,” he muttered. “One and one-fourth grav. is no problem. But we’ll have to wear our bubbles. And—”

Chuck shook his head.

“Dead,” he muttered. That was one of the bad things about a trip like this—both of them had gotten into the habit of muttering; they didn’t really converse with one another, just vocalized a *monologue interieur.* “All dead. Desert and mountains. Of course, we want the mountains, but why the . . . does it have to be so dead?”

“Because it’s an asteroid.” Barwell moved over to within visual range of the scanners.

“You seldom find mineral deposits on inhabitable bodies.”

His mind played the usual tricks, contradicting his last statement. He thought of the mineral deposits he had seen in the form of gold and diamonds, ornamenting the women of Lunadome City; mineral deposits on inhabitable bodies. And that thought led him to still another; the lying premises of most of the “space romances” he had read, or for that matter, the so-called “factual accounts” of space travel. In almost all of them the emphasis was on the so-called thrill and challenge involved in expeditionary flights. Few were honest enough to present the reality of a spaceman's outlook, which was one of constant physical frustration. When he set up his interplanetary Walden's Pond, he'd make sure to bring along some feminine companionship. *All* spaceships were really powered with sex-drive, he decided. But to satisfy the libido required money.

"Look!" Chuck wasn't muttering now, he was shouting. And pointing at the starboard scanner.

Barwell gazed out and down.

They were at a half-mile elevation, over the desert, and the white sky shone pitilessly on an endless expanse of nothingness—the flat, monotonous expanse of sand or detritus was like a smooth, unrippled lake. *A lake in which giants bathed, immersed to their necks*—

Barwell saw them now; four giant bald heads in a row. He turned to Chuck. "What do you mean, dead?" he murmured. "There's life here. See for yourself."

"Stones," Chuck grunted. "Just stones."

"Look like heads to me."

"Sure they do, from this angle. Wait, I'll make another run."

The ship obeyed, dipping lower.

"Statues," Barwell decided. "Those *are* heads, you can see that now, can't you?"

". . .!" said Chuck. It wasn't a reply, merely a forceful observation. And now Barwell could see what he observed. The four heads set in sand *were* artificially carved, and in their eyesockets blazed a livid luminance.

"Emeralds," Chuck whispered. "Emeralds as big as wagon-wheels!"

"Can't be." Barwell shook his head. "There are no such concentrations of stratification—"

"I see 'em. So do you."

"Mirage. Some kind of igneous deposit."

"Why the . . . can't you talk English, like me?" Chuck demanded. "That's no mirage. It's real. Whoever heard of a bald-headed mirage?"

He began to snort and busied himself at the controls.

"What do you think you're doing?"

"Setting down for a landing, that's what."

"Now wait a minute—"

"What for? Man, those emeralds—"

"All right, hold it." Barwell's tone was subdued, but something about it caused Chuck to hesitate.

"Let's think things through for a minute," he continued. "Grant that there actual stone heads down there. And that they have some kind of ornamentation for eyes."

"Emeralds, dammit!"

"That's beside the point. The point is, statues don't come into existence through spontaneous generation."

"Will you for . . . talk English?"

"Somebody has to *make* statuary. Don't you see, there must be life down there."

"So?"

"So we land a good distance away. *And* come out armed. Armed and cautious."

"All right. Anything that shows its head, I blast."

"You don't blast. Not until you know what it is, and whether or not it shows hostility."

"Blast first, talk later." Chuck repeated the code that was older than the hills. *The only good Indian is a dead Indian.* Is prejudice a survival-mechanism?

Chuck's instantaneous, automatic response to anything new or different would be to lash out at it and destroy it. Barwell's would be to examine it and intellectualize. He wondered which of them was reacting correctly, then decided it would depend upon individual circumstance. But then, one must never generalize, because everything is unique—and this in itself is a generalization.

Barwell unracked the weapons, nevertheless, as Chuck went into reverse landing position. He opened the compartment and extracted the suits and the bubbles. He tested the oxygen-cycle of the containers. He checked the food-belts. He brought out the footwear. And all the while he was drowning in the muddy stream-of-consciousness. Bubbles arose.

Columbus, buckling on his armor before the landing at San Salvador . . . Balboa, that voyaging *voyeur,* peeking at a peak on Darien . . . Henry M. Stanley, being presumptuous with Dr. Livingstone . . . the first footfall on the moon, and the first man to scrawl *Kilroy Was Here* and disfigure the lunar landscape with an obscene injunction . . . a faroff memory of the California hills and a whitewashed message writ on rock; *Help Stamp Out Reality* . . . what was this land worth if those *were* emerald eyes? . . . Emerald Isles . . . when Irish eyes are bloodshot, sure, ’tis like a . . . but the eyes weren’t emeralds, it was a mirage . . . a bald-headed mirage . . . a mirage of convenience. *What do you think about when you’re preparing to land on a strange and alien world? You think about what a wonderful thing it would be to be back in Lunadome City, settling down to a good meal of dehydrated eggs or a bad night with a dehydrated woman.* Powdered women. A new recipe. Just add water and stir. Serves two. *That’s what you think about, that’s all you ever think about.*

And Chuck? What was *he* thinking about?

“Better make sure you use the relief tube before you put a suit on and go out there,” Chuck grunted.

That was Chuck, all right—the *practical* one.

And on this high note, the expedition proper started.

On the sweat of opening the locks. On the wrenching effort of lowering the landing-ladder. On the stumbling contact with the hard sand. On the wheezing accommodation to the oxygen-feeders. On the blinding brilliance of the garish glare, searing into the skull through eyes long-accustomed to half-darkness. On the trickle of sweat inside the suit, the tightness of the constricting crotch at every step, the heaviness of tank and weapon. *O Pioneers*—

"Oh . . .!" said Chuck. Barwell couldn't hear him, but like every spacer, he'd learned lipreading. He'd also learned to keep his own mouth shut, but now, as he turned towards the stone heads in the sand a dozen miles to their right, he broke his own self-imposed rule of silence.

"They're gone!" he gasped. And then blinked, as the echo of his own voice rebounded in reverberation from the bubble in which his head was encased.

Chuck followed his stare and nodded.

The heads were gone.

There was no possibility of miscalculation in landing. Chuck had set down within ten or twelve miles of the sighting spot. And Barwell remembered now that he had glanced sidelong through a scanner as he'd donned his suit and bubble. The heads had been visible then.

But they were gone.

Nothing on every side but an expanse of shimmering sand. And far beyond, to the left, the mountains.

"Mirage," he whispered. "It *was* a mirage, after all."

Chuck was reading him. His own lips formed a phrase. It wasn't exactly a reply—merely an obscene reaction.

As if by common, unspoken consent, the two men turned and trudged back to the ship. They clambered up the ladder, closed the locks, wearily removed their suits.

"We were space-bugged," Chuck muttered. "The two of us." He shook his head. "But I saw 'em. So did you."

"Let's go over the course again, retrace our route." Barwell waited until he saw Chuck nod. Then he sought a position at the starboard scanner.

"Waste a lot of juice taking off," Chuck grumbled. "Damn clumsy old tub!"

"If we find what we're looking for, you can have a new one. A whole fleet," Barwell reminded him.

"Sure." Chuck tested, then busied himself. There was a shuddering lurch.

"Slowly," Barwell cautioned.

Chuck answered with a suggestion as impossible as it was indecent, but he obeyed. The ship skimmed.

"Right about here," Barwell murmured. "Wasn't it?"

"Think so."

The ship hovered and the two men peered down. Peered down at empty wasteland.

"If only Mr. Eliot were alive to see it," Barwell told himself aloud.

"Who?"

"T.S. Eliot." Barwell paused. "A minor poet."

"T.S., huh?" Chuck snorted. Then he sobered. "Well, now what do we do?"

"Keep cruising. We'll head for the mountains. That's where we intended to go, anyway."

Chuck nodded and turned away. The ship rose, picked up speed.

Barwell contemplated the dryness of the desert, then refreshed himself by plunging back into the stream-of-consciousness.

Well, Columbus was disappointed with San Salvador, too; it wasn't really Asia. And Balboa never *really* stood upon a peak of Darien, except in the poem. Actually, he was at the Isthmus of Panama. Henry M. Stanley couldn't persuade Dr. Livingstone to return with him, and the first man to reach the moon was the first man to die there. And there were no dehydrated women, either, or hydrated ones, either. *Water, water, everywhere, and not a drop to drink.*

The feeling of frustration came again, and Barwell thought of the one woman he had truly loved, wishing she were somehow beside him now as she had been beside him once, so long ago.

“There they are!”

Chuck’s shout brought him wet and dripping tears of self-pity, from the pool of memory. Barwell stared down and out.

The heads rose from the desert below. The great eyes gleamed.

“We’re setting down!” Chuck told him.

Barwell shrugged.

Once again, the interminable routine. But this time, after both men were fully accoutred, they stared through the scanner to reassure themselves the stone heads were still visible, scarcely a mile away.

The heads stared back.

Then the locks swung open, the ladder swung down, and they emerged. Emerged upon the emptiness.

“Gone!”

Both men muttered simultaneously.

Then they walked—walked warily, weapons at the ready, across the barren plain. And walked wearily back again.

In the cabin, interminably, they argued and discussed. “Gone with the wind,” sighed Barwell. “Only there is no wind.”

“It can’t be a mirage. I saw those emeralds just as clear—” Chuck shook his head. “But if it was, why in hell did it have to be stone heads? When it comes to mirages, I’ll take—”

And he proceeded to describe his preferences in mirages very graphically. It was Barwell who finally resolved the situation.

“The mountains,” he said. “Let’s not waste any more time.”

So they went to the mountains.

That is, they went *near* the mountains, skimming in low for a drop-landing on the smooth sands before the foothills. They squinted through the shimmering sheen of the scene, but there were no stone heads; only the looming loftiness of the great peaks in the distance.

Leaving the ship, they set forth on foot to clamber and climb and curse. But in the end there were merely the muttered oaths. For there was nothing to climb. The mountains were merely another kind of mirage—palpable, but not solid. Mountains of detritus, mountains of dust into which the two men swiftly sank as they attempted to proceed.

"Volcanic ash," Barwell mouthed, through the bubble. "That's the answer."

Chuck had another answer, but Barwell ignored it. He knew now that their quest was quixotic. There would be no mineral deposits in the non-existent soil of this asteroid; it was merely a gigantic lava-splinter flung forth into space by the eon-old eruption of a volcano on some far-distant planet. Either that or a meteoric byproduct. The actual explanation didn't matter. What mattered was that there would be no way to wealth in this wilderness. They'd have to go back to the ship.

The two men turned, the grippers on the soles of their footwear useless in the shifting sand as they plodded down into the plain once more. Far in the distance they could see the black speck of the ship. It was hard to walk, but they kept moving as the speck became a bulk, the bulk became a recognizable object, the object became a—

Chuck must have seen it first, because he halted. Then Barwell squinted and stared. Even in the lurid luminence his eyes widened as he saw the ship; saw the crushed and crumpled hull that had been squashed and serrated—

Then they were both running across the plain, stumbling and lurching towards the wreckage. Everything seemed to function in slow motion, as in a nightmare, but the nightmare continued. It continued as they peered up at the incredibly battered silver shell; proceeded as they swung up the ladder and found the entry squeezed shut.

They stood below, on the surface of the sand, and there was no need to mouth a word from behind the bubbles. Both of them knew the situation. Food and water for a day, if they dared remove the bubbles long enough to ingest a supply. Oxygen for perhaps another twelve hours at most. And then—

There was no point in considering what had happened, or why, or how. All that seemed important now was the *fait accompli.*

"Fate *accompli,"* Barwell told himself. And that's all he could tell himself, or trust himself to tell. Staring up at the shattered sides of the spaceship, he experienced a sensation surpassing horror. For this phenomenon was alien.

Alien. A much-used, misused word, which cannot express the inexpressible. *A lien*—foreign. Foreign to understanding, foreign to human comprehension. Barwell recalled Arthur Machen's definition of true evil—when the roses sing.

When the roses sing.

Perhaps *alien* isn't always synonymous with *evil*—but something had destroyed the ship. There was no wind, and no life; yet they had walked away for a few miles and returned, and the ship was crumpled.

The roses were singing. What is a rose? Barwell thought of a long-dead poetess, Gertrude Stein. A *rose is a rose is a rose.* And added, *is evil.* But do roses live, does evil live, does the impalpable truly exist? A *rose by any other name*—

"Dammit, what happened?" Chuck, and the voice of reality. He wasn't concerned with roses, or neuroses, either. He wanted to name the enemy, locate it, and strike back. And with the realization Barwell (like a rose) wilted.

Here was a situation which didn't call for theory, or for any form of abstruse speculation. The ship was gone. They were stranded, with food and oxygen in short supply. A clear call for Chuck and his pioneer blood—or would his pioneer blood, too, be spilled across the sand?

Barwell hesitated helplessly, waiting for his partner to make the first move. No sceptre changed hands, but both sensed it was a moment of abdication. *The king is dead, long live the king. For another twenty-four hours, anyway.*

Both of them knew better than to waste breath in trying to talk through their bubbles. When Chuck turned back towards the mirage-mountains, Barwell followed without even moving his lips in token assent. At least there would be shadow there, and shelter, and surcease. The desert held nothing for either of them. The desert was all utter emptiness and shimmering mirage. Once more, Barwell thought of a lake.

Lake. As he trudged along behind Chuck's steadily-striding figure, he wondered what would happen if—as in the olden space-romances, the aliens actually invaded Earth. They'd probably send out scouting parties first; perhaps one or two at a time, in small ships. Granted the premise that their sensory organs roughly corresponded to the human and afforded similar impressions, what might they surmise from a skimming expedition over the earth at a height of a few hundred miles?

The first thing they would note was that the Earth's surface is more than three-quarters water and less than one-quarter land. So the logical conclusion; if there is any life on this planet, the chances are better than three to one that it is *marine* life—or at the very best, amphibious. The denizens of the great seas must be the highest and most intelligent life-forms. Conquer the fishes and rule the world. A highly sensible notion, that.

But there are times when high sense does not prevail. And if aliens could not be expected to comprehend humanity's existence offhand, then how could humanity interpret alienity?

In short—was there life on this asteroid which Barwell could not detect?

While there's life, there's hope. But Barwell had no hope. He had merely a premise. Something had crushed the spaceship. Where did it come from, where did it go? How did it link with life as he knew it, how did it differ? And the desert—*was* it a desert? The mountains had not been mountains. And the mirage had been—

Chuck still wasn't wasting words, even obscene ones. He merely turned and gripped his partners' arm with a plasticene-and-metal glove. Gripped it tightly, and turned, and pointed with his free hand. Pointed straight ahead, at the heads in the sand. Yes, they were here.

Barwell could have sworn that the heads hadn't been there a moment ago. But there they were, silhouetted against the searing surface, a scant mile before them. Even at this range the emerald eyes gleamed and glared, gleamed and glared as no mirage was meant to.

Four huge stone heads, with emerald eyes. Visible to them both; visible to them Chuck's lips formed a sentence beneath the bubble. "Keep looking at them," he said.

Barwell nodded. The two men moved forward, slowly.

Their gaze was intent, focussed upon the lambent, livid flame of the monstrous emeralds. Barwell knew, or thought he knew, what Chuck was seeing. Riches, infinite riches.

But he saw something else.

He saw all the idols of all the legends; the idols with the jewelled eyes, who stirred and moved and walked amongst men to spread destruction with a curse. He saw the massive monoliths of Stonehenge and the great figures of Easter Island and the stone horror beneath the waves in sunken R'lyeh. And the waves reminded him again of the lake, and the lake of the aliens who might misconceive and misconstrue the life-forms of Earth, and this in turn caused a curious concept. There had once been a man named

Ouspensky who had speculated upon the possibility of *varieties* of time and different *rates* of duration. Perhaps the rocks also live, but at infinitely slow pace by comparison to flesh, so that flesh is unaware of the sentience of stone.

What form might life take, if forged in fire, if birthed precipitately from a volcano's flaming womb? Those great stone heads with the emerald eyes—

And all the while they were coming closer, approaching slowly. The stone heads stared and did not disappear. The emeralds blazed and burned, and now Barwell could no longer think; he could only stare and he tried the old trick again. The cool stream-of-consciousness was waiting. Little eddies of thought swirled.

Emerald eyes. His love had emerald eyes; sometimes turquoise, sometimes smoky jade, but his love was not stone. And she was worlds away and he was here, alone on the desert. But that's not where he wanted to be—plunge back now into the stream, use the fanciful thoughts to ward off the still more fanciful reality. Think of anything but emeralds, think of longforgotten stars of a longforgotten art-form, the motion pictures; think of Pearl White and Ruby Keeler and Jewel Carmen and of anything but emeralds, think of Diamond Jim Brady and the fabulous stones of history which men wrested from the Earth for love of woman. *Love is just around the Kohinoor.* Faith, the Hope Diamond, and Charity . . .

Emerald eyes . . . Esmeralda, and the *Hunchback of Notre Dame* . . . Hugo's title was *Notre Dame de Paris* . . . the vast cathedral with its stone gargoyles staring . . . but stones do not stare . . . or do they? *The emeralds were staring.*

Barwell blinked, shaking his head. He half-turned, noting that Chuck had broken into a run as he neared the four fantastic monuments in the sand. Wheezing and panting, he followed. Chuck didn't see what *he* saw—that was obvious. Even at the point of death, he wanted the emeralds. Even at the point of death—

Somehow Barwell managed to overtake his companion. He clawed at his arms, halted him. Chuck stared at him as he shook his head and mouthed the words.

“Don’t go any closer!”

“Why not?”

“Because they’re *alive!”*

“Nonsense.” That was not the word Chuck used, but Barwell divined its meaning.

“They *are* alive. Don’t you see? Living rock. With their immense weight, the desert is like water, like a lake in which they can immerse at will. Immerse and reappear, up to their necks. That’s why they disappeared, because they were swimming beneath the surface—”

Barwell knew he was wasting precious oxygen, but he had to make Chuck understand.

“They must have grabbed our ship, picked it up to examine it, then discarded it.” Chuck scowled and said another word which meant, “Nonsense.” He pulled free. “No—don’t—keep away—” But Chuck had the pioneer spirit. The grab-claw-lunge-loot-rape reflex. He could only see the emeralds; the eyes that were bigger than his stomach.

And he started to run the last five hundred yards, moving across the sand towards the four staring heads which waited, *watched* and waited.

Barwell sprinted after him—or tried to sprint. But he could only flounder forward, noting as he did so that the huge rock heads were pitted and eroded, but not *chiselled.* No man, and no conceivable alien, had sculpted these semblances. For they were not semblances but actualities. The rock *lived,* the stone *sensed.*

And the emerald eyes beckoned . . .

“Come back!” It was worse than useless to shout, for Chuck couldn’t see his face behind the bubble. He could only see the great faces before him, and the emeralds above. His own eyes were blinded by hunger, by a greed greater than need.

Panting, Barwell caught up with the running man, whirled him around.

“Keep back,” he mouthed. “Don’t get any closer—they’ll crush you like they crushed the ship—”

“You lie!” Chuck turned, his weapon suddenly poised. “Maybe that was a mirage, too. But the jewels are real. I know your idea, you . . .! Get rid of me, take the emeralds for yourself, repair the ship and take off. Only I’m way ahead of you, because that’s *my* idea, too!”

“No—” gasped Barwell, realizing at the same moment that some poet had once said, “Say *Yes* to life!” and simultaneously aware that now there would be no time for further affirmation.

Because the weapon blazed, and then Barwell was falling; falling into the stream-of-consciousness and beyond, into the bubbling blackness of the stream-of-unconsciousness where there were no stone heads or emerald eyes. Where there was, no longer, any Barwell . . .

So it remained for Chuck to stand over the body of his partner at the base of the great stone head; to stand and grin in triumph as the smoke curled up as if before the altar of a god.

And like a giant god, the stone accepted its sacrifice. Incredulous, Chuck watched the incredible—saw the rock split open, saw the mountainous maw loom large as the head dipped and *gulped.*

Then the sand was smooth again. Barwell’s body was gone.

Realization came brutally, belatedly. Chuck turned to run, knowing the heads *were* alive. And as he ran a vision came to him of these Cyclopean creatures burrowing through the sand, bathing beneath the surface of the plain—rising at will to survey the silence of their dread domain. He could see a great stone paw emerge to fumble with the ship; knew now what the serrations in its sides meant.

They were simply the marks of gigantic *teeth.* Teeth in a mouth that tasted, rejected; a hand had tossed the ship aside like a crumpled toy floating on the lake of sand.

For one moment Chuck thought as Barwell thought, and then the thought was transfigured by reality. A gigantic paw *did* emerge from the sand before him as he ran. It scooped Chuck up and tossed him down into the grinding stone mouth.

There was the sound stone makes when it gulps, and then silence.

The four heads turned to stare once more—stare at nothingness. They would gaze silently for a long, long time through ageless emerald eyes, for what is eternity to a stone.

Sooner or later, in another thousand years—or a million, what did it matter?—another ship would come.

THE END

The Masterpiece

You talk of masterpieces, messieurs.

Well, I, too, have created a masterpiece in my time.

There is no need to laugh. I know what you are thinking—that it is the wine speaking. You fine gentlemen, you artists, thought to play a little joke. "Who is the old one, *le pauvre,* who comes nightly to this cafe to peddle shoelaces and paper flowers? Bid him join us, give him to drink until he grows tipsy, and we will have our sport with him."

You see I comprehend, and I am not offended. I myself have done the same many times, when gathered with my friends at the sidewalk cafes of Paris. Here in Buenos Aires it is much like the Paris I remember, before the war. But I was young then, as you are now, and I, too, was an artist.

You are looking at me, and I perceive that you do not believe. That is because I am aged and a peddler of shoelaces, an exile in this Argentina of yours. But I was an artist, and if I spoke my name you would surely recognize it. You will find my signature on a painting that hangs in the Louvre.

So, you laugh again. But it is the truth—I have created a masterpiece!

The painting of which I speak? It was my last finished canvas, a life-sized portrait.

Ah, you raise your eyebrows at that! Representational painting is out of fashion? This I know. Nevertheless, "Girl with Flowers" hangs in the Louvre, and it is as fresh and true today as the moment I completed it. Vivienne said—

Vivienne? Vivienne Surlac, my friends. She was the model, a tall dark girl from Bordeaux. She was like the wine of that region—full-bodied, richly sweet, and, upon further acquaintance, treacherous.

I did not know this when I worked on the portrait, though in my ignorance I fancied I knew her well. One does not live with a woman for a year without learning certain secrets: the mole on the left thigh, the heart murmur from a childhood ailment, the unreasoning love of sweets and pastries, the unreasoning fear of insects, the favorite song—

Perhaps you find these matters boring, but I assure you I was not bored during our year together. For I was in love with Vivienne, and the portrait was painted out of love, and it was in my mind to make her an honorable proposal of marriage.

You see, I did not know about the treachery.

When my affairs called me away from Paris for a week I left with a light heart, and it was with a light heart that I returned. My studio was empty; she had gone. From the concierge I learned that she had not gone alone. A gentleman had come for her. Gentleman! Her description was vivid and left little doubt—and when I inquired of my friends I found my guess confirmed. She had gone with Dobrieux. Max Dobrieux, fat Max who couldn’t paint a mural suitable for the decoration of a *pissoir;* fat Max, who used to sit quietly in the studio, watching me at the easel—and watching Vivienne as she posed. Often he brought champagne, for fat Max was also rich Max.

And that, of course, was why she went with him. Because of his wealth, because of the handsome little villa in the new suburbs beyond Versailles.

Now that it was, in effect, a fait accompli, my friends saw no reason not to talk. It seems they had all known of the intrigue; everyone had known except me. Love is proverbially blind.

Justice is blind, too, and so is rage. When I returned to my studio my first impulse was to destroy the painting. Then reason prevailed. The painting was without fault. As I said, it was fresh and true. The corruption and the falseness were in the model. In the name of love, in the name of justice, I would destroy Vivienne.

But not blindly. I went about the affair with my eyes open.

There was the trip to the villa, made merely to spy from afar and to learn that she was indeed living there with Max. There was the matter of arranging the phone call which summoned Max back to Paris because of the sudden illness of a brother. There was the hiring of the *flics* who taught the fat one a lesson, gave him something to reflect on as he lay recuperating in the hospital.

And finally there was my own journey back to the villa, unobserved, that same night. The steel was in my pocket and the cardboard container was in my hand, and of what was in my heart I need not speak.

Entering the villa was no problem. Justice is blind, but it can see in the dark. I made my way down the tiny corridor, into the bedroom.

She lay naked upon the bed, in the pose of Goya's "Maja," and when I tiptoed in she called out, "Max, darling, I've been waiting."

"You wait no longer," I murmured. Perhaps she recognized my voice, but by this time it did not matter, because I stood beside her in the darkness. My left hand swiftly pinned her wrists together behind her head and my right hand scooped the steel from my pocket. The handcuffs clicked as I fastened them, and she was helpless, chained to the headboard of the bed.

Then I switched on the lamp and she could see me. More important, I could see her—and for a moment I hesitated. Even her fear was beautiful to behold, because it was true, and one does not easily destroy reality.

But my love had been real, and she had destroyed it. And there, over the bed, was the painting—an ugly, grotesque daub, the sort of abstraction which wealthy idiots like Max buy because they are connoisseurs, because they despise representational artists who seek to show the truth. We are old-fashioned, so they mock our work and steal away that which we hold precious. Well, I would show them—Max and Vivienne both—that I, too, could deal in falsehood and treachery.

She read it in my eyes that she must die, for she began to whimper. No matter, for the villa was set well back from the road in a private park. She watched me as I opened the cardboard box. I held it up to the light, directly over her face.

I do not know what Vivienne expected. Perhaps she thought the box contained a gun, or a knife, or vitriol. Poor fool, she did not understand that a lover of beauty would not mar her body.

Slowly I tilted the box forward so that she could see its contents. Then she started to scream.

She screamed as she saw a score of black, wiggling figures, scuttling forth like tiny, furry monkey hands. She screamed as the box tipped and she saw the fatal symbols—the red hourglass markings on the bellies of the spiders.

"Black widows!"

These were the only words I could distinguish, because it was then that the screams rose—as the spiders fell. They descended upon the writhing whiteness of her body in a cloud of death; they crawled upon her and fastened themselves swiftly, surely.

I snapped off the light, and now there was only the darkness and the screaming. There was not long to wait before the screaming died.

And when I turned on the light once more, Vivienne was dead too.

I did what must be done, just as I'd planned. I unshackled her wrists, rearranged the coverlet, and gathered up the little wriggling horrors that marred her loveliness. Then I left as silently and secretly as I had come, left the villa and went directly to the airport. No one knew, and no one would ever know. And it does not matter now, because I am old—and because there is, of course, no extradition law here in the Argentine.

So, messieurs, the hour is late and I shall leave you. I trust I have not wearied you with all this talk of a forgotten masterpiece. But you, too, are painters; you understand the matter of an artist and his pride.

"Girl with Flowers" ? Yes, that is the title of my painting, and I assure you it hangs in the Louvre today, just as I have said. If it were truly a masterpiece, in it you could see the Vivienne I knew—the dark girl with the mole, the bad heart, the absurd fear of insects. But of course it is merely a good representational portrait.

No, you heard me right. When I refer to my masterpiece, I speak of the last bit of painting I ever did—the painting of those oh-so-real and frightening red hourglasses on the bellies of the harmless little spiders. . . .

Pin-Up Girl

Lulubel and I like attractive creatures of the opposite sex. Of course, Lulubel has her favorites and I have mine . . . After all, who'd want to pin up a picture of a tarantula? Ugh!

THE FIRST TIME THE PRINCE SAW Lani was at Ciro's.

She was having herself a ball—dinner, drinks, the works. Gibson was with her, and it was all part of the buildup. He'd even given her an evening dress to wear and she looked wonderful in it—or halfway out of it, really. Anyhow, everybody was staring and the camera boys kept flashing away, and she was really living.

Then the headwaiter left the card at her table. It had this name, *Prince Ahmed,* engraved at the top, and a single line of handwriting which read, *May I have the pleasure of your company?*

She showed it to Gibson. "Who is this character?" she asked.

Gibson rolled his eyes. "Well, *really!"* he said. "Darling, you can't be serious. Don't you even read *Time* magazine? Why they say he's simply rolling in the stuff, half a million a week or some such figure. Oil leases, you know. Absolutely *fab*ulous! He's here on some kind of diplomatic mission—"

"What does he look like?" Lani wanted to know. "Can you point him out to me?"

Gibson rolled his eyes again, until they came to rest at a point directly to his right. “Over there, third table, down front.”

Lani stared. She saw a party of four men. Three were tall and bearded; the fourth was slight, clean-shaven, and a bit less swarthy than his companions.

“That’s the Prince, the one without the beard,” Gibson told her. “Of course, he’s not exactly an Aly Khan type, but—”

Lani smiled at him. “Don’t worry,” she murmured. “I’m not interested. We’re doing fine without any greaseballs, so who needs it?” She put her hand on Gibson’s wrist. Ordinarily he disliked being touched, but this time he didn’t draw away.

“We *are* doing fine, aren’t we?” she asked. “I mean, this isn’t just a snowjob you’ve been handing me.”

Gibson licked his lips and stared down at her cleavage. ™ I told you the first time I met you, darling. I know how to peddle merchandise. And what you’ve got I can sell. Haven’t I been taking pictures for two months? Didn’t I spend a fortune on negatives, a wardrobe, that flack I hired just to spread your name around? The payoff is coming, precious, believe me. Not just the calendars and the art-photo bits, or the phony contests, either. I’ve placed shots of you in twenty-three magazines so far, and inside of another few weeks you’ll be lined up for fifty more. Covers, inside spreads, color stuff, the works! I’ll shove that fair white body of yours under the faces of every male in the country, from six to sixty. I’ll have them rubbing their noses between your—”

The headwaiter coughed discreetly and deposited a small white envelope in Lani’s hand. She opened it.

“Another card,” she sniffed. “This one just says *Please*.”

“Wait a moment, darling.” Gibson reached for the envelope. “There’s something else inside. Look.”

“Christ!” said Lani.

They stared down at the ruby. It was the size of a small marble.

Gibson smiled weakly.

“Christ!” said Lani, again.

Suddenly, she scooped up the gem in her hand. Then she rose.

Gibson turned away and faced the wall.

“Please, lamb,” Lani murmured. “I’ll just be a minute. After all, I have to return it.”

Gibson didn’t say anything.

“Well, let’s not make a big production out of this,” Lani said. “I mean—”

Gibson shrugged but he still wouldn’t look at her. “We’re shooting the beach series tomorrow, remember?” he muttered. “I’ll stall until noon. Try to make it by then, darling. Please?”

Lani hesitated. She could feel the ruby burning in her hand. All at once she turned and made her way toward the Prince’s table. The ruby was burning and she knew that his eyes were burning too, and she felt her cheeks burning as she smiled and said, “Excuse me, but are you the gentleman who—”

It was way past noon the next day when Lani awoke. She’d forgotten all about the photographer’s appointment, of course, and for a moment she didn’t even know where she was, what with the hangover and all. Then she recognized her surroundings; the big bedroom in the big suite of the big hotel. And she recognized the little man who was standing at the foot of the bed. When she saw that he was staring at her she remembered to smile. Artfully artless, she let the covers slide as she yawned, then stretched. Now the covers slid away completely. Lani waited for his reaction.

Surprisingly enough, he frowned.

“Please, my dear,” he said. “Cover yourself.”

Lani fluffed out her hair. “What’s the matter, hon?” she purred. “Don’t you like what you see?”

“Of course. It is only that in my country the women do not—”

"Never mind about your country." Lani held out her arms. "You're here now."

The Prince shook his head. "It is past midday," he said.

"What's that got to do with it?"

"I had thought you might be hungry."

Lani sat up. "You're going to take me to lunch?"

"Luncheon will be served here," the Prince told her. "It is already ordered and on its way."

"Then I'd better hurry up and get dressed." Lani jumped out of bed. "Here, lover, you want to hand me my things—?"

But the Prince didn't seem to hear her. He was already halfway out of the room.

Lani shrugged. The Prince was a strange one, all right. She'd have to tell Gibson all about it when she saw him. As a matter of fact, she ought to call him right now and explain why she was going to be late.

She located the telephone on the end table next to the bed. Just before she picked it up, she noticed the envelope with her name on it. Inside was another card, with the engraved name on it, but no writing. And underneath the card was a green stone. Lani took it out and looked at it. An emerald, twice as big as last night's ruby. First she stared at it and then she stared at the phone. Finally, she shook her head. Gibson would have to wait. She still intended to tell him all about it, of course, but he'd just have to wait . . .

Gibson waited well over a week before Lani saw him again. When they finally met it was at his studio. Gibson's own apartment occupied the rear of the establishment and it was there that Lani found him.

"I can only stay a minute, darling," Lani told him.

"Don't give me that *minute* routine," he pouted. "And you can skip the *darling,* too. What on earth has happened to you?"

"It's positively fantastic!" Lani sighed. "You remember the ruby? Well, the next morning it was an emerald, and then a diamond, and the third day a string of pearls. Then it was a jade bracelet, and yesterday a turquoise clip, and I swear I don't know how he managed it because we practically never left his suite all week. He had all our meals sent up and nobody on his staff has even *seen* me. It's like something out of the Arabian Nights—"

Gibson rolled his eyes. "I suppose that dress is out of the Arabian Nights, too. Where did you pick up such a ghastly abomination? Why, it comes way up to your *chin?"*

"He had it made for me. A whole wardrobe like that. He says that in his country the women are modest, a wife wouldn't even think of undressing in front of her husband—"

"So," said Gibson.

Lani put her hand to her mouth. "I didn't mean to tell you that way," she said. "Honest, I didn't. But he's going back tomorrow, and he's been begging me ever since I met him, and like you say, he's rolling in it. Why, he's one of the richest men in the whole world, I'll have a fortune—"

"Love's old sweet song," Gibson murmured.

"All right, so I *don't* love him. You can't have *everything*!"

Gibson's eyes narrowed. "You can't have anything," he said. "Not anything you want."

"I tell you, I don't care about the love part. Men don't mean a damned thing to me, not *that* way. Any more than women mean anything to you. But money—"

"You don't want money, either," Gibson muttered. "Not really." He went over to his desk in the corner of the studio and returned, holding out a sheaf of paper. *"This* is what you want," he said. "Here, take a look."

"Why it's my picture! On the cover! And here's an inside spread—and the glossies, these must be the mail-order series you were telling me about! Oh, darling, these are simply divine! Do you think they'll let us get away with this panty shot? Why you can almost see—"

"Stop squealing." Gibson was smiling again. "I *told* you the payoff was coming, didn't I? I *promised* you we'd be hitting the big time soon, didn't I? And this is only the beginning, believe me. Wait until we really spread that shape of yours around. You know what's going to happen then. They'll come running after you with their fountain pens just *dripping*—you'll get any kind of a contract you want; movies, television, the works! You saw what happened with Monroe. Mansfield, Ekberg, didn't you? Well, this can be even bigger."

Lani bit her lip. "Are you sure you're just not thinking about your end of the deal?"

Gibson shook his head. "Never mind that part. I ate before I ever met you and I'll keep right on eating, thank you. I'm not interested in the money, any more than you are, really. You don't want to be a star because of the money. You want to be a star so that they can see you up there on the screen. Millions and millions of men, all sitting in the darkness, staring at your body. Sitting there with their eyes popping, their throats dry, their fingers clenched into fists while they try to sneak a peek down the front of your dress. And then, going home and looking at your pictures in the magazines, drooling over the bust and torso shots. Putting your photograph up on the wall and trying to imagine what it would be like if you were *really* there, in bed with them."

Gibson stood so close to her that Lani could feel his breath on her face. "But that wouldn't do them any good, would it, darling? You know it—and I knew it the minute I set eyes on you. Because you're never going to fall in love with anybody except yourself. *Your* body, that's what you love. Your body, and knowing what it does to other bodies.

"I recognized that, and I realized what I could do with it. You'll never be an actress, but I can make you a star. You'll never be a real wife to anyone, but I can make you the love partner of the whole damned world. So forget this money kick. It isn't important. It isn't *you!'*

Lani stepped back. "I don't know," she said.

"What do you mean? Of course you know."

"All right. It isn't *that.* You were telling the truth just now, I guess. I *do* feel that way. I want them to *look* at me. All of them. Ever since I was a little girl, I've always felt it. The big thing is not when they touch you or try to do things to you; it's just when they look, or when you know they're looking and you can imagine what they're thinking—"

"I know," Gibson whispered. "I know, darling. Just like my kicks come from taking the pictures. From *teasing* them. From teasing the whole dirty, rotten world. So why not? We'll give them what they want, we'll get what we want."

"It isn't quite that easy," Lani said. "That's what I was trying to tell you. The Prince—he's big on this jealousy bit. I mean, I actually had to *sneak* out to get to see you at all, today. If he so much as suspected where I was —"

"Don't be ridiculous!" Gibson snapped. "This is your U.S.A., remember? Nobody comes around playing the oriental heavy—"

"Jesus!"

Lani's exclamation startled Gibson, but his reaction was slowed. He had just time to turn around and see the Prince step out from behind one of the studio screens, and just time enough to throw up his hands when he saw the gun the Prince was carrying.

But the Prince did not shoot. He merely advanced, smiling with empty eyes, and when he came close enough his arm went up and he brought the gun down squarely on Gibson's head.

When Gibson returned to consciousness he was propped up in a sitting position on a couch in the corner of the studio. The Prince sat in a chair across the way, smoking a cigarette. Lani was nowhere to be seen.

"I was concerned that I might have seriously injured you," the Prince told him. "So I thought it best to wait until I made certain of your recovery."

"How *very* thoughtful!" Gibson murmured. He rubbed his aching temples. "I guess I'm all right. And now, you'd better get out of here before I call the police."

The Prince smiled. "I think not," he said. "Diplomatic immunity, you know. But I intend to leave in a moment. If it will make you any happier, I am departing on my return flight tonight, ahead of schedule."

"You're not taking Lani, though."

The Prince inclined his head. "As you say. I am not taking the young lady. You see, I overheard all of your conversation together. That is good, for it saved me from making a regrettable mistake."

The Prince rose and walked over to the door. "As the two of you spoke, I was reminded of one your legends. The story of Circe, the beautiful enchantress, in whose presence men were transformed into swine. Lani has this power, the power of changing men into beasts. Her very image is enough to turn them into dogs, slavering and panting in heat. You think of her as a pin-up girl, but I know she is a sorceress. It is an evil thing, this power which the two of you conspire to spread, and I count myself fortunate to escape its influence."

He opened the door as Gibson stood up. "Wait a minute," Gibson said. "Where is Lani?"

The Prince shrugged. "When I struck you she fainted, and I took the liberty of carrying her into your apartment. I believe you will find her awaiting you in the bedroom. An appropriate place for a pin-up girl."

Then he was gone, and Gibson staggered back along the hall leading to his apartment. The light was on in his bedroom and he blinked as he stood in the doorway, forcing a smile. Might as well laugh it off. The Prince was gone for good now, and there was no harm done. He and Lani would be together, they'd go through with everything, just as they'd planned. Give her a big grin, a real watch-the-birdie look.

There she was, waiting for him. The Prince must have stripped her while she was unconscious, because she was stark naked now, standing against the bedroom wall with her arms outspread, and a seductive smile on her face. Pretty appropriate, all right.

Then Gibson took a closer look and he saw that the smile was really a grimace; saw that her arms and legs were not merely parted, but actually spread-eagled.

Just before he passed out again, the Prince’s parting words echoed in Gibson’s ears. “An appropriate place for a pin-up girl.”

It was appropriate, all right. He’d nailed Lani to the bedroom wall.

A Matter of Life

The salesman had a most unusual product to offer—and, for obvious reasons, only one to a customer . . .

IT WAS A BRIGHT AND SUNNY morning, but the thin man hugged the inside of the walk, staying within the shadows as he made his way carefully along the street.

He paused beneath the ornate awning of a Gold Coast apartment and put his small black bag on the sidewalk, setting it down gingerly as though its contents might be fragile. He drew a little leatherbound notebook from his pocket and opened it to the first page, peering carefully at what he saw there. Satisfied, he flipped it shut, replaced it in his pocket, picked up the black bag, and entered the fancy foyer of the apartment building. His long, bony finger pressed a buzzer beside a marker lettered *Anderson, Julius T.*

Exactly seventy-two seconds later he was standing before a door on the third floor, watching it ease open.

A woman thrust her head out. It was a most expensive sort of head; quickly he inventoried its assets—the thirty-five dollar permanent, the twenty-dollar dye job, the five-dollar tip to the beauty-parlor operator. In addition, he estimated the worth of the dangling miniature mobile earrings at perhaps another twenty-five dollars, plus ten percent tax. The face itself was decorated with easily five dollars' worth of assorted eyebrow pencil, eyeshadow, mascara, rouge, powder, lipstick, and dabs of perfume. Also, the sagging double chin had been lifted for a considerable fee; contact lenses were fitted to the myopic eyes and caps placed over the irregular teeth. The whole head, give or take a few pennies, must have cost at least two thousand dollars just for upkeep and maintenance.

And yet now, seeing it cocked forward apprehensively with a deep frown furrowing the brow, one could only conclude that the money had been wasted; it was still the head of a middle-aged woman.

“Mrs. Anderson?” the man murmured.

“Yes.” She glanced down at the little black bag, then straightened. “Come in, please.”

The door opened wider, permitting him to step inside, then closed quickly behind him. He stood in a spacious, deeply-carpeted alcove, gazing through to the living-room of the apartment. There was no need to inventory its contents or even guess at the fee of the interior decorator who had obviously ordered its furnishing.

Also, there was no time. The woman faced him, the maroon sateen sleeves of her lounging pajamas rustling faintly as she moved a step forward.

“I really wasn’t expecting you, Mr.—”

“Mr. Swift.”

“Yes.” She acknowledged the name with an impatient nod and hurried on. “That stupid Mr. Ross of yours, down at the office, kept telling me it was no use to even discuss the possibilities of a case, because I had no grounds. Of course, that’s utterly ridiculous, and I told him so. Even if Julius *is* good about money and doesn’t chase after other women, surely there must be *some* thing! I mean, no man his age is a saint, and I’m perfectly willing to pay a good fee, within reason of course, if you’ll arrange to—”

“Please, Mrs. Anderson,” said the man. “There seems to be a slight misunderstanding here. I’m not from your attorney’s office.”

“You’re not?” The surgically-lifted chin muscles sagged slightly. “Then if it isn’t about the divorce, what are you doing here? I mean, when I saw the briefcase, I just naturally assumed—"

"Sorry." The man shrugged. "It's not even a briefcase. It's just a bag. I've something interesting to show you."

"You mean you're a *salesman*? What's the matter with you, can't you *read?* The sign in the lobby says distinctly—"

"I saw the sign."

"Then what are you doing here? I don't want to buy anything." Mrs. Anderson waved her arm. "Please leave. I'm not in the mood for sales-talks."

"So I see." The man retreated a step, but only to set his bag down upon the rich pile of the foyer carpet. "From your remarks, one would gather that you're faced with personal problems. And it occurs to me that perhaps my visit is more opportune than you might think. A little distraction, even a sales-talk, may prove helpful." Slowly, he dropped to his knees and cautiously unzipped the black bag.

Mrs. Anderson stared at him curiously. "What are you selling?" she asked.

"This." A bony hand fumbled in the bag and brought forth a small plastic bottle.

"What is it, perfume?"

"Not at all, dear lady. It's a window-wiper."

"Window-cleaner?"

"Wiper." The man stood up, dangling the bottle between long, thin fingers. "Not an ordinary cleaning compound at all. It wipes away much more than dirt—it literally removes every obstruction, and will give you an entirely new view of the world. Oh, there's a definite psychological element involved, I assure you! Once you use this cleansing compound, your whole viewpoint changes. I would be only too happy to demonstrate—"

"No!" Mrs. Anderson spoke quickly and emphatically. "I don't *need* anything like that. My maid takes care of the windows. Besides, who ever heard of such nonsense? Why, there isn't even any label on your bottle, it's probably just something you make up yourself, out of water and a few chemicals."

The man nodded slowly. "You're right, of course," he said. "I do make it myself. And of course I use chemicals. Funny your mentioning that. Some of the chemicals are quite unusual. Odorless, colorless, undetectable. Strong enough so that a drop applied to a window will wipe away any stain without leaving a trace of its presence. Strong enough so that a drop placed in a cup of coffee will wipe away life itself—again, without leaving a single trace of its presence. One must therefore be most careful about using this solution. You would be careful, wouldn't you?"

Mrs. Anderson nodded at him now—at him, but to herself. "It really works, you say?"

"I assure you that used properly it will brighten your entire outlook on life."

"How much?"

The man shrugged. "Let's call this a free sample." He held out the bottle.

Mrs. Anderson reached for it, then drew back. "But suppose it—it doesn't work?"

"It will. There's never any difficulty. Take it."

"Maybe I should think it over."

"Dear lady, I'm afraid this is your only opportunity. I won't be coming this way again for some time."

Mrs. Anderson's fingers worked. "You wouldn't be back, then? I mean, in case of trouble—"

"No. I make only one call to a customer."

Mrs. Anderson closed her eyes for a moment and took a deep breath as she reached out her hand. The man placed the bottle in her palm, scooped up his bag, opened the door and made his exit—all in the few seconds that her eyes were closed. When she opened them again, he was gone.

And an hour later he was ringing the doorbell of the neat suburban ranch-house out in Skokie, staring out of the shadows at the harassed face of the young housewife who greeted him with an impatient gesture. The hand which waved him inside held a dust-cloth. She blinked at him through thick glasses.

"Honestly," she sighed, "I thought you'd never get here! What with the kids and the housework and all and having to run back and forth between here and the hospital every day, I'm just about out of my mind."

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Baker," he said. "I came as quickly as I heard."

He glanced around the disorder of the front room, staring at the litter of toys, the playpen in the corner, the soggy diapers tossed into one corner.

The young woman brushed her hand across the damp curls plastered across her forehead and removed her spectacles with a weary shrug.

"You see how it is," she said. "The place is such a mess I don't even know where to tell you to sit down."

"That's all right, Mrs. Baker. I'll just be a minute."

"A minute? With all we've got to discuss?" She put the glasses back on. "I told the man at the agency what a spot we're in, and he said there just wouldn't be any way of working something out. Can you imagine that? Ben in the hospital with a broken spine, paralyzed for life, and me stuck here with the three kids and he tells me that! Not a penny of. accident insurance, either. If he died, I'd collect fifty thousand dollars of life insurance from your firm, but when it comes to an accident like this, they say there isn't one red cent I can collect. And he'll never be up and working at sales again, the hospital is eating up our last penny, they can't even promise to stop the pain, and what am I going to do?"

"I really don't know, Mrs. Baker," the man said. "You see, I'm not from the insurance agency."

"Then where did you get my name?"

"There are sources for such information."

"Oh." She blinked at him through her spectacles. "But who are you? What do you want?"

“My name is Mr. Quick. I’ve come to give you a free sample, something to help you.” He put down his bag delicately in the center of the cheap inlaid carpeting. “I have here a preparation which works wonders on window-glass—or on spectacles, too, for that matter. One drop, properly applied, and you’ll really be looking at the world through rose-colored glasses—”

Two hours later the man was back across town, walking through a tangle of tenements on South Halstead. He hadn’t stopped for lunch.

He paused in a dim areaway and consulted his notebook, then nodded to himself and plunged into a dank and darkened doorway. Four flights of stairs creaked beneath his feet before he reached the landing he sought and knocked briskly on a door from which all paint had peeled.

“Mrs. Connors?” he called.

“Go away!” The voice from behind the door was muffled, sullenly monotonous.

The man knocked again.

“Go away!” the sullen voice repeated. “The Mister ain’t here.”

“I came to see you. Open up, please.”

“You from the police? I tell ya, he ain’t here.” But she opened the door and shook her frowsy head, squinting at him through red-rimmed eyes framed by larger bluish-black circles. “Coupla beauties, ain’t they?” she muttered. “The dirty rat give ’em to me. That’s all I ever get from him. You can’t prove by me that he pulls any of them big bank jobs you cops always think he’s pulling . . . I wish you guys *could* pin a real rap on him, something that’ll send him up for twenty years, maybe? Hell, I’d like to see him get life, that’s what he deserves. And that’s the only way I’ll ever get rid of him.”

He edged through the door and into the squalid room. “Perhaps I’d better explain, Mrs. Connors. I’m not from the police department.”

“No? Then who the hell—”

“The name is Fast. And I’ve got something here that might interest you.” He glanced at the six-pack and the big dime-store goblet on the kitchen table, then put his black bag down beside them with fastidious care. “You see, it’s a little something that cleans beer-glasses. And that’s not all. If there’s *anything* you want to get rid of—”

Early afternoon along LaSalle Street, and the shadows slanted sharply as the man entered the brokerage office. He took off his hat politely before he bent over to give his message to the receptionist. Her own smile faded as she heard what he had to say; then she rose and disappeared into another room. In a few moments she was back, beckoning for him to enter the private, panelled sanctum beyond the big mahogany door.

A fat, baldheaded man looked up from behind a kidney-shaped desk.

“Yes?” he snapped. “Now what’s all this nonsense my girl tells me? Something about a matter of life and death—”

“Exactly.” The man smiled and began to open his little black bag. “A matter of life and death. I have here a preparation for which you will pay me ten thousand dollars in cash. It is something which I assure you is absolutely essential to your welfare.”

“Look here, I’m a busy man—”

“I know that, and I won’t take much of your time. I’m sure only a few words of explanation will be necessary. As it so happens, I still have two other similar calls to make after I leave you this afternoon. Now, about this little preparation of mine. It’s the *only* antidote to an undetectable poison, Mr. Anderson . . .”

The Beautiful People

When Jimmie Hartnett came back to Highland Springs he was twenty-five years old, and there was some argument as to just how he looked.

According to the matronly friends of his late mother, he resembled a Greek god. Their daughters, on the other hand, were more apt to describe him as a "living doll." But everyone agreed that he was an extremely handsome young man.

Since Jimmie Hartnett was a lieutenant (j.g.) on terminal leave, it was quite proper for him to wear his dress uniform on formal occasions—and there were formal occasions aplenty, once the matrons and their daughters got a glimpse of him. The uniform did things for his curly brown crewcut, his deep tan, his blue eyes. In a month or so he'd probably have to content himself with the gray flannel suit which is the normal attire of young men in even so prosperous a suburb as Highland Springs, but meanwhile he cut an impressive figure at the country club.

And it was there, during the third set of a Saturday night dance, that he met Millicent Tavish.

Somebody—it doesn't really matter who, and Jimmie never remembered—led him over and introduced him to the tall, slim blonde wearing the diamond earrings. Jimmie acknowledged the introduction with his standard boyish grin and offered the standard invitation for the next dance, with his standard warning that he was not a very good dancer. This was nonsense, of course, for Jimmie was an excellent performer both on and off the dance-floor, and nobody was more aware of it than himself.

But genuine blondes wearing genuine diamond earrings are a rarity indeed, and Jimmie was quite determined to make an impression. He was all set to lead off with a few opening remarks—perhaps something about how unusual it was to discover a wild orchid in suburbia—when Millicent Tavish took the play away from him.

"You don't remember me, do you?" she asked.

Jimmie stared down at the upturned face. Pale complexion, flushed cheeks, downcast eyes told him nothing, except that the girl was inwardly excited by his presence. A good thing, but no clue. Nose slightly snub, firm chin, even teeth, high cheekbones, straight hair—Jimmie catalogued her features, thinking what a pity it was he seldom retained a memory of faces. He was much better on bodies. When it came to a matter of breasts and thighs (as it so frequently did) his memory was encyclopedic. But this was neither the time nor the place, unfortunately, and besides he was quite certain he had never been closer to this particular female than he was at present. All he could do was grin and stall for time.

"Think hard, now," she was saying. "It's over six years since you went away to college and the Navy, and you'll have to go further back than that. I used to live on Williams Street. Millie Tavish. Does that help any?"

Jimmie blinked at her and came to a standstill over in a corner of the dance-floor.

"Millie," he said. "Now I remember. Millie the—"

He stopped quickly, conscious that his ears were reddening, but she gave a little laugh and pressed his hand with a moist palm.

"Go ahead and say it," she told him. "Millie the Mule. After all, you're the one who christened me, aren't you? You must have called me that a thousand times."

"No," said Jimmie.

"But you did. And you used to pull my hair—"

"That isn't what I meant. I meant, 'No, it can't be.' Come out here and let me get a good look at you."

“On the terrace? There isn’t much light there.” But she came willingly enough, and when he tilted her face she bore his scrutiny with a soft smile.

“I can’t believe it,” he muttered. “Millie Tavish. You were just a scrawny little kid with freckles and buck teeth.” He flushed. “Sounds like the dialogue in one of those corny movies, doesn’t it?”

Her smile broadened. “Yes. And then I remind you that I was seventeen when you left town, and a girl grows up in six years.”

“Yes, but—”

“I know what you’re thinking,” she murmured. “I didn’t just grow up, did I? You want to know what became of the teeth that stuck out, and the big nose, and the long chin. You want to know what happened to Millie the Mule.”

“Please.”

“Don’t worry, I want to tell you. You, more than anyone else. Because you did it.”

Her palm was very wet now, but she gripped his hand tightly. “This isn’t a movie, Jimmie. This isn’t the scene where the hero comes back and finds the ugly duckling transformed into a lovely swan. I *was* an ugly duckling, but there was no chance I’d ever just outgrow it. I could have been Millie the Mule all my life, the way you thought of me.”

“Kids are kind of cruel, I guess,” Jimmie said.

“ ‘Kind of’ cruel? They’re monsters.” Her voice faltered, then went on. “You’ll never know how bad it was, Jimmie. But I might have stood it, if it hadn’t been for you. Even then I was sure you’d be coming back some day. So that’s why I had myself changed.”

“Had yourself—?”

“Three years ago, after Dad and Mommy died, in the crash on the turnpike. But you didn’t hear about that, did you?”

“I’m sorry.”

“I’m not. Maybe it’s a dreadful thing to say, but I’m almost glad. Dad never paid any attention to me, he’d always wanted a boy. And Mom was ashamed of the way I looked. She used to nag me, and worry out loud about what would happen after she was gone and I'd be all alone in the world. I think she hated me, really."

"Millie, you mustn't talk about it."

"But I must. It's important. I want to tell you what happened. When the folks died, and I came into the estate, I didn't go back to college. I went into the hospital instead. Dr. Madison worked on me. Everybody says he's the best plastic surgeon in this part of the country. Do you think he did a good job?"

"You're beautiful."

"Do you really mean that?"

"You're a beautiful woman, Millie."

"It took a long time, Jimmie. And it hurt, quite a lot. But it was worth it, to hear you say that."

Jimmie smiled down at her. She *was* beautiful; the doctor had done his work so well that you couldn't even see the scars. And he could see the way her eyes were shining, and he could see the diamond earrings sparkling too, and this made him remember that old man Tavish had been loaded. He must have left his only daughter a fortune. All at once Jimmie wasn't worried about exchanging his uniform for a gray flannel suit. Why not a yachting outfit, for example? Besides, there comes a time when a man ought to think about settling down.

He put his hands on Millie's bare shoulders, conscious that she was trembling.

"Would you like me to tell you more, darling?" he murmured . . .

It was a big wedding in the big church, with the biggest crowd, the biggest reception, and just about the biggest spread on the society page. And the honeymoon was big, too.

They went to Bermuda, and they were very happy together. Jimmie was accustomed to being happy, of course, but it seemed an almost overwhelming experience for Millie. He couldn't quite understand it when, after making love, she would whisper to him, “Darling, that was like the tolling of great bells.”

But Millie often talked that way. Apparently she’d been a great one for reading during her lonely adolescence, and even now she spent a lot of time with her nose buried in a book.

Jimmie didn’t go for that; he’d read his share of books in college, but even then it had come hard. He’d been grateful for the help of chicks like whatever her name was; some little redhead he’d shacked up with all during his senior year.

The point was, no sense wasting time on reading now. He’d cracked his last exam, and he wouldn’t be boning up for any job, either. Not with all the loot Millie had. Be enough of a nuisance just keeping track of the income from the estate, and running the big house back in Highland Springs.

He wasn’t anxious to go back, and even talked to Millie about buying a yacht, but she didn’t go for the idea. Then he suggested they hop a plane to Jamaica and hook up with a luxury cruise through the Caribbean. They’d met another young couple in Nassau, the Wilsons, and they could travel together.

Millie rejected that notion, too. Maybe she had some sneaking idea about Mrs. Wilson. A lush little number, no doubt about it, and she did wave her eyelashes and other things when Jimmie was around, but Millie should have known better. A guy doesn’t step out of line when he’s on his honeymoon. Anyway, he had his hands full the way it was.

But Millie wanted to go home, so they returned to Highland Springs and opened the big house. There was a lot of excitement about redecorating and refurnishing, and Jimmie let her handle everything.

What got him excited was the new four-car garage and its contents: the big Lincoln, the Caddy station-wagon, Millie’s convertible and the loaded Jag she bought him on their first month’s anniversary. When he got the Jag he insisted on putting in a fancy selection of tools and equipment; there was plenty of room in the garage, and he liked to putter around with engines.

Not that he had much time for it, because the minute the house was ready, Millie began to throw parties. She'd hire a caterer and a big staff and invite a gang over, and she really had herself a ball playing hostess and introducing Jimmie to all the big wheels and their wives. You could see she got a large charge out of showing him off.

Jimmie didn't get such a big bang out of it. Oh, it was nice at first, but the novelty wore off. And the people were cubes. Every once in a while some fluff turned up, only there was no chance to do anything about it. Jimmie watched his step, and he was almost glad when Millie decided she'd had enough of parties for a while.

Then it was just sitting around, mostly; Millie liked to read, and he'd go out and putter with the Jag. They didn't talk very much about plans. Once or twice she brought up the subject of kids, but Jimmie thought it would be better if they waited a while and enjoyed life while they were still young. He tried to interest her in another trip, and she said not now, next year perhaps, and didn't he like it here?

Of course there was only one answer to that. Only one answer she seemed to want. And since they were alone together so much, he had no choice. Millie just couldn't seem to realize that there comes a time when the honeymoon is over.

That's why she wouldn't hire any permanent servants. This was ridiculous, with all their dough, but she said she liked to cook for him and take care of him all by herself. At first it seemed kind of flattering, the way she fussed over him, even picking out the clothes he wore, but when he realized she was often in the habit of just sitting there and watching his face as he slept, Jimmie began to feel like a damned fool.

Finally, along about the fourth month, he faced up to the truth like a man. Millie was beginning to give him a distinct pain. Might as well be honest about it—there were a lot of things about the woman which disappointed him.

For instance, that doctor's job hadn't been one hundred per cent perfect. True, he'd left no scars, but when Millie was out in the harsh sunlight or felt particularly dragged, you could see her face wasn't quite natural. Her nose and chin looked too waxy, and when she smiled her lips went crooked. Maybe he was just being self-conscious, because he could remember Millie the Mule. But whatever it was, it bothered him. Especially when he had to kiss her, which was frequently.

That was the real reason for his gripe; she just couldn't let him alone. At first he'd been surprised at the way she responded, but in a way it had been sort of a tribute to his personality and good looks. Jimmie was used to that. But now there was more than response—there was demand.

Jimmie knew that any virile male like himself wants to be the aggressor; that was the man's job, to get his kicks from the challenge, the chase, the conquest. But here there was no challenge, no chase, and he was beginning to suspect that the real conquest was Millie's.

Of course, there was nothing he could do about it. He was a married man, and a married man just doesn't walk off and leave his wife just because she loves him. That would be a sneaky thing to do. And as for walking away from a million bucks—that would be downright crazy.

A smart guy plays the game. He may stall a little, encourage his wife to get interested in bridge parties and trips with "the girls," and try to spend more time himself out in the garage or with the car.

At first this didn't seem to work, because Millie wanted to come along when he took the Jag out for a spin. But she had a sort of a thing about high speeds, and when he found that out it was easy to discourage her. Then, when he told her about joining the Sports Car Club, she wasn't interested at all. By this time she was up to her neck in suburban social life; she got her satisfaction out of visiting with all the old school friends around town—girls who had probably snubbed her but good back in the days when she was Millie the Mule.

Jimmie wondered if she lorded it over them now, particularly the ones who'd married potbellied little junior execs or guys with horn-rims who had to lug their briefcases onto the 8:10 every morning. If so, he could understand that; under similar circumstances, he'd give them a hard time.

But it didn’t matter, as long as she was interested and kept out of his way. Because he was finding his satisfaction, too.

Her name was Peggy. Peggy Allen.

He’d met her through the club, and she had a Porsche, but she preferred a Jag. She was only a kid, nineteen or so, and she had some dumb ape of a boyfriend who was crazy about drag races; it was very convenient when he went off to school in September.

To be perfectly frank about it, maybe she really wasn’t any goddess, but she knew how to keep a guy interested. Half the club was after her, and she played the field, but she was no pushover. When it came to wrestling, she knew all the holds. But the more she stalled him, the more Jimmie wanted her. And she couldn’t fool him: he knew damned good and well it was mutual. All he needed was the time and place. Meanwhile, Jimmie was beginning to feel more like himself again. He was having a few laughs, a little excitement. At the same time, there was the big thing of knowing it wasn’t really serious. Just a little fun on the side. Hell, at twenty-five, a man is just hitting his stride. He doesn’t want to curl up in a corner and die. And since there was no question about ever leaving Millie, he had nothing to worry about. No reason why he couldn’t enjoy himself. All he needed now was opportunity.

When the opportunity came, it happened so fast he almost muffed it.

Millie wanted to take a run into Cleveland with a couple of “the girls” to see some damned ballet troupe or other. They’d stay over a day and do some shopping; would he like to come along?

Well, there was no trouble getting out of *that* one. Besides, he had a golf date the following afternoon. So he gave her a pat on the fanny and told her to run along and enjoy herself. No trouble at all.

The thing was, he didn’t check with Peggy Allen right away, and when he did get hold of her she said she was dated. Fed him the old hard-to-get line, and it wasn’t until he spelled it out for her and told her it was either-or that she stopped teasing.

So he picked her up the first night in his Jag and took her back to the house.

Even when it was over, Jimmie was surprised to find out that he was still coming on strong for the kid, and he wished they had a few more days before Millie was due back.

Then he got another break. Lucille Sims, one of Millie's snooty friends, called him up the next afternoon. Millie had come down with a cold and she'd decided to stay over in Cleveland at the hotel for another day, then come back on the train.

Jimmie phoned the hotel right away and talked to Millie. She didn't sound too bad, and he asked if she wanted him to drive up and get her. But she said no, she'd prefer the train, and he promised to pick her up at the station the following afternoon.

After that he was set. He called Peggy, and this time there was no stalling. He brought her over to the house at seven, and it must have been after midnight when he took her home again.

Driving back after dropping her off, Jimmie felt a lot better. He had everything under control now. Peggy was a softie underneath, like all the rest—she really went for him in a big way, and he'd be seeing her again. No promises, no strings, no problems. Handling Millie would be a cinch.

He put the car in the garage, the automatic doors closing softly and silently behind him. He turned on the light and grinned as he inspected the shining fleet, the immaculate workshop in the corner, the big breezeway enclosure leading to the house.

Yep, he really had it made. What more could a guy ask for? Plenty of moola, a dumb wife, and a hep chick on the side. Plus everything it takes to get anything he wanted. The character who made that crack about your face being your fortune sure knew what he was handing out.

Jimmie stared at his face in the shiny reflection of the Jag's hood. *You're not bad, kid,* he told himself. *Not bad at all.*

He was still staring when the lights went out.

And then the lights came on again, hurting his eyes and clear through the top of his head, and he said to himself *you must have passed out.* He tried to move, and he realized his hands were tied behind his back. *So you didn't pass out,* he thought. *You were sapped. What goes on here?*

That's when he looked up and saw Millie standing there.

"Hey!" he said.

"Is that all?" Millie asked. "No questions? Don't you want to know about the first time I got suspicious, when I happened to pick up the extension phone and heard you talking to that little tramp of yours? It was over a month ago, and I've been wondering ever since. Wondering so much that I finally decided to go to Cleveland and arrange to get sick. I kept hoping I was wrong, of course, even when I slipped out and rented a car tonight to drive back and surprise you."

"When—when did you get here?"

"Soon enough." Millie stared down at him, and he could see she was still holding the small wrench she'd used as a sap in her gloved hands. "Soon enough to know that I could stop wondering, and stop hoping, and stop worrying about surprises. You and the girl took care of that."

"That girl," Jimmie said. "She's just a—"

"I know what she is," Millie told him. "She doesn't really mean a thing to you, does she?"

"Of course not, darling. You understand, don't you?"

"I understand."

"Then why the melodrama? Come on, untie me. A gag's a gag."

"I won't need a gag. There's nobody around and this place is practically soundproof."

"Millie, for God's sake, you aren't going to do anything foolish—"

"No. What I'm going to do is very sensible. I've been sitting here in the dark, ever since I saw you leave to take that girl home, and I've been thinking things over. There's no need for me to use this."

She put down the wrench and opened her purse, pulling out the gun.

"Millie!"

"Don't worry. I told you I wouldn't use it." She slipped the gun back into her bag. "I said I'd be sensible."

Jimmie squirmed and tried to sit up. He couldn't quite make it, but he did manage a wry grin.

"I suppose that means a divorce," he said.

She shook her head. "That wouldn't work. I thought about it for a while, but you can see what would happen. No matter what kind of charges we trumped up, the story's bound to come out. I don't think I'd care to know about all the gossip going on."

"Then—" Jimmie hesitated, pitching his voice to just the right note of penitence. "I know I haven't even got the right to ask, but does this mean that you're going to—forgive me?"

Millie didn't answer, so he went on.

"I don't have to tell you I'm sorry. I know I made a mistake. All I can do is try to make it up to you."

"Yes." It was Millie's turn to pause. "You are sorry, aren't you? Sorry because you weren't smart enough, because you got caught."

"No, that's not it. I told you I'd make it up to you, I'd try."

"Of course you'd try, darling. And you'd fail. Because that's the kind of a person you are, Jimmie dear, the kind of a person you always have been and always will be. It's my fault for not realizing it from the very beginning. You're a pretty boy, and you can't stand anything around you that might mar your own perfection. You've always got to have new clothes, new cars, new women. You're one of the beautiful people, Jimmie, and you hate ugliness. The way you hated me when you were a kid. The way you hate me now."

"But I don't hate you, you're not ugly—"

"Oh yes I am, Jimmie." She smiled at him. "Only an ugly woman could do the sensible thing I'm going to do."

She walked over to the workbench and picked something up in her gloved right hand. Then she came back and stood over him again. He saw what she was holding and his throat went dry, so that the words were only a whisper.

"You'd better put that down, you can't get away with it!"

"I'm not going to get away with anything, darling. It's the thieves."

"What thieves?"

"The ones the police will think broke in here tonight while you were sleeping, and while I was still away in Cleveland. I'll be back there in my hotel room before anyone notices my absence, and tomorrow I'll check out and come home. I'll be very surprised when you aren't on hand to meet me at the station, and I'll be very shocked when I come home and find out what the thieves have done. Don't worry, you'll be mourned. And I'm going to be proud of you for doing such a foolish, proud thing—trying to keep the combination of the house safe from the thieves, even under torture—"

"Millie, you're crazy!"

"Not crazy. Just ugly, remember?" She walked away to the bench again, picked up a rag from its surface, returned and knelt beside him. "On second thought, it will look more natural if I do gag you, after all. Besides, I won't have to listen to your silly interruptions any longer. And maybe you'll scream more loudly than I thought. I'm almost certain you will."

"M—"

"There. That's better." She stood up. Jimmie kept watching her hands. She was holding the thing, pointing it.

"You don't understand what I mean by ugliness yet, do you?" she murmured. "Beautiful people never do. I suppose that's why you hate it so, because you don't understand. And you don't care. Life is so very easy for you, because we live in an age that worships beauty above all else; worships it the way I worshipped you. Even when you wrecked my life.

"No, I'm not talking about tonight. You wrecked my life years ago, Jimmie. When we were children together, when you gave me my new name. Millie the Mule. I told you once you'd never know what that did to me, and I was right. I didn't realize the *whole* truth until tonight.

“I thought having an ugly face and an ugly nickname was the worst thing that could ever happen to me. When my friends made fun of me, and even my parents were ashamed, that seemed the most terrible fate. And it went on for years, Jimmie. Even after you went away, the name stuck by me. The name, and the face. I thought nothing more dreadful could possibly happen, but I was wrong.

“The dreadful thing was to try and change. To forget the old saying that beauty is only skin-deep. Well, I found out that it’s true, Jimmie. You taught me that, tonight. Because you’re one of the beautiful people I’ve always envied, one of the favored few who walk through life getting everything they want without effort, without worries or problems or unpleasantness. And yet you’re not beautiful, inside. You’re ugly as sin. And it is a sin to get everything you want without doing anything to deserve it.

“That’s the thought which used to console me, Jimmie. I guess it helps console all of us ugly ones. I kept believing that I was better than I looked, underneath. That my heart was full of understanding, that my love was pure, all sorts of maudlin nonsense. And I had faith that if I kept striving, I’d get what I wanted.

“So I had my face altered, and I got what I wanted. You. I didn’t look like Millie the Mule any more, and I thought it was enough to make us both happy. That was my mistake, darling. Because it didn’t make you happy, did it? You could still see Millie the Mule underneath the mask, and that’s why you strayed.

“The only person I fooled was myself. And it wasn’t until tonight that I realized the truth.

“I *am* Millie the Mule. Inside, I’m as ugly as you are. Only an ugly person could dream of doing what I’m going to do to you.”

Jimmie stared at her hands, knowing that in a moment she’d move. Then he stared at her face, and in the half-light it seemed oddly altered. For a moment he could almost see her as she had once been, years ago—Millie the Mule, ugly as sin.

"But I'm not crazy," she whispered. "Please understand that, because it's important. You did your best to drive me mad, torturing me for years with your name-calling, your nastiness, your sniggering, your loathing. Still, it wasn't enough to drive me mad; just enough to make a monster out of me. That's right, Jimmie. I'm a monster now. That's why I've got to do this thing. Because you deserve it for making me ugly inside. So ugly that when I saw you and that girl together tonight, I gave up any thought of just shooting you. That's when I knew just how much of a monster you'd made of me—when I realized what I was planning, and how much I'm going to enjoy it.

"It's going to take a long time, Jimmie. I want it to take quite a long time. It will help me to get rid of your ugliness and mine, together."

Jimmie was thinking that she had never looked more like Millie the Mule than she did at this moment, as she knelt beside him and went to work . . .

It was quite the most horrible tragedy Highland Springs had ever known. When poor Millie came back from Cleveland and found her husband in the garage that way, everybody thought she'd collapse. But she managed to hold up quite bravely, even through the investigation and inquest, and when the ordeal of the funeral was over, she seemed like a different person.

In fact everyone remarked on it. While plastic surgery had done wonders for her, it wasn't until after her husband's death that Millie became a truly beautiful woman. She seemed to glow with an inner serenity, as if all the ugliness had been burned out of her.

All the more surprising, considering the shock she must have had when she discovered her husband's corpse. It was bad enough that the unknown thieves had tortured him, burning the soles of his feet to get the combination of the safe. But then, probably by accident, they'd set the gasoline torch down right next to his head. Even with a low flame, his face had been burned completely off . . .

The Covenant

Five famous science-fiction authors pool their talents in this "round-robin" novelette that stretches man almost to the breaking point on the rack of Time and Space. Here is a rare pyrotechnic display of sf writing skills and styles.

Part One

By Poul Anderson

TIME," she said.

Ban stirred, uneasy in this dim and rustling air. From outside, he would not have thought The Oracles wide enough to hold as many rooms as now appeared to stretch, doorway beyond arched doorway, further than he could see. Or was this a single great many-vaulted chamber? He didn't know. It was too dark to tell. Too many wings moved under the invisible ceiling. He wondered where the light came from, what little there was of it.

"I beg your pardon, prophetess?" His voice sounded strange in the bones of his head. "I don't quite understand."

"It is as well," said the one who sat across the black table. Her face was not veiled, and he should have been able to see what she looked like. But somehow he had only a blurred impression—eyes which caught more light than they should, so that they became blind luminous ellipses—perhaps, he guessed confusedly, more than somewhat afraid, it was because he could not stop watching her hands. They lay palms down on the table, relaxed, but with strength in every line. They had less taper than a woman's hands commonly do, but he thought he had never seen any so beautiful.

"If you understood," she said, "you might not dare to act."

That touched his pride. He sat up straight, clenching his gun, and answered: "Prophetess, the Cloud People killed friends of mine. Also, I am the son of the Warden—I have duties—" He faltered beneath her gaze. Something scuttered across the dusky stone floor. Pompousness drained from him. Almost wryly, he finished, "If the Cloud People take the City itself, what Wardenship will there be for me to succeed to?"

Did she nod? "Yes," her low tones replied, "there will be nothing then but the Heaths . . . a few lonely huts where men huddle and mutter, forgetting they ever raised a City . . ." After a pause: "Time is the strength of the Cloud People, even as Space is the strength of man. What you must overcome is Time itself."

Ban sat in twilight, and the rustlings and whisperings seemed to go around and around his head, but he could only see the hands of the prophetess. He fumbled for comprehension: "A man may walk or ride or fly in Space—from here to there—but no man can swim Time's river. Unless you—What is an Oracle? One who has mastered Time, ever so little perhaps, but not altogether helpless before it?"

She made no answer. "Forgive me," he said. "I am surely wrong. I didn't mean you were merely human, prophetess."

"There was an age once, which may come again if the last men flee out onto the Heaths, when lightning destroyed where it would," she told him. "Now, a hundred times a year, the highest towers of the City are crowned with lightning, and unhurt. That is one force which men have come to understand a little; and so they are not its pawns. There are others. Once, it may be, there were many others. But the world is very old, and much has been forgotten."

Then the silence lengthened so unendurably that he got the courage, or the desperation, to remind her: “Prophetess, I came to ask on behalf of the City—of all mankind, maybe—how the Cloud People can be overcome. For none of our weapons has served. You have not replied to my question.”

“Not yet,” she said. “Not ever, in full. For there is no destiny. Time is not a single river, sweeping from the birth of the stars to their last cinders. It is more akin to a huge many-branched delta.”

She sighed. “Armies have been broken. So by now, Captain Ban, you should know the uselessness of armies. One man alone, though—”

Her words were like fingers closing on his heart. But he found the strength to say, “Myself.”

“I can tell you nothing.” The shakenness in her voice was the most unnerving thing of all. “I can promise you nothing. I can only say, go secretly and alone to the island. Remember that Time is the strength of the Cloud People, but Space is the strength of man, and remember that in the end Time and Space are the same. More than that, I cannot say. It is too dark.”

The beautiful hands rose to cover the face he had never quite seen. “It has always been too dark,” she screamed. “Go!”

Ban rose. He didn’t even stop to make obeisance. He almost ran, stumbling over his feet and his gun. For a moment the room echoed with his noise, then he lost awareness of the echoes because his own heartbeat grew so loud.

When he emerged on the terrace—never quite sure how he had done so—it was like waking from nightmare. He spent a while simply leaning on the rail, breathing hard. Piece by piece, he began to recognize familiarity. He looked a thousand sheer feet down the black side of The Oracles to an incongruous park where clipped trees and formal flowerbeds made star patterns. Several other towers were visible, though even at this height the City stretched too wide to be encompassed in a glance. He saw the colonnaded tiers of Alpha, graceful against a deep blue late-afternoon sky; the startling red slimness of The Needle; the shifting polychrome which rescued the massive facade of Arsenal from monotony. The sun was low, striking long rays between those walls, flaming off windows and making parks, forests, gardens, crop fields glow an impossibly intense green. Here and there the light flashed off wings, bird or human. And far on the eastern edge of the world lay a blinding silvery gleam of sea.

It was quiet up here. A breeze ruffled Ban's sweat-dampened yellow hair. He shivered, drawing the tunic closer about his big young body. From somewhere, freakishly borne across a mile or two, he heard faint merry strains of music. Hard to believe that anyone could dance to a ballad while the Cloud People laired on this same planet. But he had done it himself, a few days ago. (Only days? It felt like centuries, now.) Life persisted unto the final destruction, and life was not a single thread. It was war and defeat and misery, yes, but it was also eating and sleeping and lovemaking and playing games to pass idle hours and looking at the stars with wonder and disputing with your blacksmith neighbor whose shop got too noisy and—

Urmuz came from behind one of the weeping willows which, with stone seats and an intricately playing fountain, ornamented this terrace. He looked out of place here, his great frame squat and hairy in a black tunic, his face battered beneath a military helmet. "What did she say, sir?" he rumbled. "Any help at all?"

Ban blinked, stared around him, clasped his gun as if to draw strength from iron. He felt dimly surprised, through all the turmoil within him, that he should reply with coolness, "I don't know. I did get some advice. But who ever heard of an Oracle making a straight answer?"

Urmuz spat. "Old Mother Grotta, on the twelfth floor, she'll speak plain. I told you not to monkey around with these here upper-level seeresses. Let's go find Mother Grotta right now."

Ban actually chuckled. "I don't need homely common sense, Urmuz, or a fake love philtre—"

"Dammit, captain, her love philtres work! I know!"

“The situation has gone beyond that.” Ban’s smile vanished, though his lips remained tense. “I suppose it was always beyond that, though we realized too late what the coming of the Cloud People meant.”

“What good are these upper-level prophetesses?” persisted Urmuz. “They’re frauds, captain, that’s what they are. Their words’re so bloody vague that after things’ve happened, they can always claim that’s what they meant. Me, I’ll waste my money on blondes and booze.”

“Be quiet!” Ban yelled. “What do you know about it, you mud-brained sub-level mechanic? Go back to school and learn about the prediction paradox, at least, before you start quacking—” He saw the ugly face stricken, and knew he was only venting his own fear. Urmuz had stood with him in the last battle, when others fled and the Cloud People laughed unseen. Urmuz had guided his first baby footsteps, and taught him to handle a gun, and carried him home from youthful nights when they drank down stars and moon and sang the sun awake . . . “I’m sorry,” said Ban. “Nerves.”

“Nothing to be sorry about, captain,” said Urmuz. “Part of my job, being cussed out. Well, so what did she tell us to do?”

Ban looked away. “I have to do it alone,” he said. “Secretly.”

Another emerged from the willows. She was as young as he, and her light white robe did not much hide fullness and suppleness. The loose hair streaming down her back was the color of a sunset after storm, and her eyes were great and gray in a sweetly shaped face. “Ban,” she said, making his name beautiful to him. “Captain Ban—”

“Yes?” He turned with eagerness to watch her, thinking that he would probably not have many more hours to watch anything at all.

She stopped before him, flushing, and they stood a while in mutual awkwardness.

Finally she sighed. “May you reveal what the prophetess told you?” she asked.

Ban shook his head. “Best I don’t.”

“He has to go somewhere secret,” blurted Urmuz. “Why don’t you wait here, captain, and I’ll get our kit and we can start right out?”

“At once?” breathed the girl.

“I think so,” said Ban. “No way to tell when the Cloud People will attack next, but it will be soon—and that next attack will bring them to the edge of the City.”

She looked seaward and shivered. “Mists out there,” she said, “and cold, and thin singing. Is that how it will be?”

“If we don’t stop them,” he said. “Yes, I’d better leave at once.”

Before I become so afraid I can’t leave at all, he thought.

“I’ll get our kit, sir,” repeated Urmuz.

“You stay here,” said Ban.

“Sir!”

All at once Ban had no strength left to argue. “Very well,” he said. “Go fetch the stuff, then, and come back here.”

“Yes, sir!” Urmuz snapped a salute.

“Don’t tell anyone,” said Ban. “Not even my father.”

“No, sir. Of course not.”

Urmuz touched the flight stud on his brass belt. The wings unfolded from the flat pack under his tunic, catching the light in a gauzy metallic shimmer. The noise of his takeoff resounded loudly among the willows.

When he was out of sight, Ban took the girl’s hands. She tried to withdraw them. “Please,” she whispered. “Don’t. I am her attendant—”

“And someday you’ll be her successor,” he said bitterly, not letting go. “Oh, yes. But still, if the Covenant allowed me to come up here, again and again, and allowed you to sit by me and talk in the moonlight, surely I can touch you when I say good-bye!”

She gulped and stopped pulling. Her head drooped.

“What is your name?” he asked.

“I haven’t any,” she said in a hurt, uncertain tone. “You know that.”

"You must have had one once, before your mother gave you to the prophetess. What was it?"

"Please," she begged again.

He released her. One hand smacked against his bare thigh, the other clamped on his gun. "All right," he said harshly. "As you will. Goodbye."

"You aren't—your man won't be back till—"

"I sent him off to get rid of him," said Ban. "Someone has to go, and alone . . . she told me. It may as well be myself."

"No!" she cried. "Someone else, Ban!"

"I am the Warden's son," he declared, "and you won't tell me your name. So good-bye."

He opened his wings with a savage blow on the belt control, and whipped off the terrace while her mouth was still parting to speak.

After a moment he realized how childishly melodramatic his exit had been. A mature man wouldn't have sped off like this—the very absence of farewells underlining his self-sacrificing heroism and similar egotistic noises. But it was too late now. Stubbornness, resentment, the fear of looking foolish, were stronger than survival instinct.

His wings rotated hard and steadily. He must squint into the speed of his own passage, and felt cold in a mere tunic. The brass belt contained, in its various compartments, basic field equipment and a few days' emergency rations. But he should have gotten full kit. A helmet, at the very least—

Well, he thought with sudden excitement, well, he wasn't really about to embark on any one-man campaign of reconquest. The prophetess had only said to go secretly to the island. Doubtless that meant nothing but a spying-out expedition—closer, to be sure, than anyone had yet dared approach a stronghold of the Cloud People, but still, just a quick investigation. He might be back before dawn, and Urmuz would make him a stiff drink and—He shook his head, as if to clear the last of that oracular twilight from it, and tried to look sanely out on a sane world.

Once or twice he passed a hovering citizen, and they hailed him, but he continued and soon had left them all behind. No one ventured far out over the sea any longer.

Nonetheless, the realization broke through his thoughts with a shock: that he *was* now above the water. He looked behind, seeking a final view of home. The sun exploded in his vision. For minutes that burning after-image remained. When he could see again, there were no towers, no beach, only dark choppy waves.

He didn't need map or compass to tell him he was bound due east, cutting across the Gulf of Orea toward Mwyrland. He had flown this way often enough, in boyhood years before the Cloud People came. (Where now were the green Mwyrland hills, the cottage of Ilbur the Robot with smoke lazing up from its chimney, the girl who shyly brought him milk in a wooden bowl? He remembered the sound of bells, and the belling of hounds when he hunted, but now there was nothing there but fog, gray fog and the Cloud People flitting and singing in a cold formless gray—where had Mwyrland gone? Indeed Time was a mystery which men did not comprehend.) He had usually passed over the island which marked the halfway point. Even then it had been a swart volcanic desolation; now the mists had reached that far westward and the island could no longer be seen. Scouts flying close thought they had glimpsed black towers on it, through an occasional rift in the fog, but they were never sure—

There!

The vapor bank rose like a mountain. Ban swallowed panic and slanted downward. This was as close as those scouts who returned had ever ventured. A few had tried to fly into the swirling thick mass of the cloud itself, but they had not come home.

It was very silent here.

When he landed, retracting wings through his tunic slits into the unit on his back, Ban felt the water chilly around his knees. A few streamers of fog curled and smoked; the waves were stilled. The sun was directly behind him, already blurred. Ahead was no sharp demarcation. The air simply grew murkier, until at last blackness loomed from water to sky, cutting off half the world.

Ban hefted his gun and started wading.

That was the idea which had sprung into his head, when the prophetess said to go alone to the island. Anyone else would approach from the air—would he not?—and the Cloud People would see him (or hear him, or whatever they did for awareness) and destroy him. But the island shelved very gradually toward open water. There were places where, at low tide, you could walk knee deep for miles until you reached shore. In fog and night, would even the Cloud People know of a single man walking through the sea?

The water splashed with his passage. Its cold stung him. The air was frigid, too, with a dank taste. Despite all need for caution, he cherished his own little noise, for otherwise he was totally alone. Grayness thickened; the sun was a blur at his back, heatless and cheerless, toppling toward the night only minutes away now. Ban unclipped the flashlight at his belt and tested its beam. Already it helped him. Hard to tell without it where water left off and the bleak, eddying air began. Mist streamed through the cone of light. Somewhere out in the unseen, he thought he heard dripping, as if the bowl of the sky were chilled and wet and dripping into the sea.

The sea felt heavy. He was getting higher all the time, now the water was hardly above his ankles, but it was an effort to shove it aside. He began stumbling more and more often on the irregular bottom, nearly dropping his gun. Seen by flashbeam and the last daylight, the weapon looked rusty. And it weighed in his hand. How it weighed! The flashlight, of thin inert metal, remained itself; but the gun barrel grew dull. Was there really a faint patina on his brass belt?

And when had he torn his clothes? Ban squinted through deepening gloom at his tunic. It hung from his bent shoulders, damp and rotten. He jerked a hand in startlement. The sleeve ripped apart and hung in rags. His belt certainly was tarnished, no, it was corroded, close to crumbling from his waist. The air was like ice; as it entered his lungs he coughed and cleared the rheum from his throat. His legs hurt, the knees weren't quite steady and he wanted to stop and rest but there was no place to rest. Was the sun down yet? Or had his eyes blurred on him? He rubbed them with the back of the hand that held the flashlight. He couldn't see so well. His legs were twin blotches. But his gaunt liver-spotted hand was still visible, if he held it close. He stroked it down his wet white beard—slowly, ever so slowly.

Time, he thought wearily, Time was the strength of . . . of who had she said? And with every step forward—His thoughts trailed off incoherently. He was too tired now to think, or be afraid, or anything except sleep. When he reached the black shore, maybe he could lie down and sleep. There had been something he meant to do there, but—He waded onward.

Part Two

By Isaac Asimov

THE land tottered under his feet, the last of the wavelets gone. Maybe—Maybe—

To sleep—sleep—

* * *

It was like the soft sound of chimes in his dull ear, the distant sound of thin singing. Where had he heard something like that?

A battle? A tall, rough man at his side? What was—his—name? Music—

Like thin sweet wind-torn words.

"There! He was almost gone!"

Ban heard that. His eyes flickered open and suddenly he knew he was Ban. Of course. What was wrong? Where was he?

He could breathe more easily somehow. He lifted his hands and the tawny, yellowing hair of his chin caught on them and he stared foolishly at it, uncomprehending.

“Help me hold him,” said the girl’s voice.

How did he know it was a girl? There were no words, only a singing in his mind, and yet there were words and they were girl’s words.

A different voice—different in what way?—but a boy’s, said, “He’s not that timevy.”

“Timevy enough for me. Get under.”

Ban struggled to his feet and stared about him. No one was holding him. No one was lifting him. The fog stretched out, luminously gray, not quite as dank as he remembered.

The sun, he thought suddenly. The sun must be gone by now. Why was it not night? The fog was still gray, as gray as the Prophetess’ blank eyes. He remembered the Prophetess? What had she said?

The girl’s voice sang, “I never saw one before.”

“I did,” said the boy. “I came out once where the fog closes in and saw one on—on—like—change—like—different—come and go.”

Fly, thought Ban, catching the dim thought intuitively. The boy had no proper expression for it. We fly, he thought, we fly. He whirled around and spoke for the first time since the fog had closed him in. “Who are you?”

There was nothing, at first, just the voices, and as he turned and tried to beat the fog aside by force of eyes alone, there was a short smothered chime without words.

Then, “Here we are, Changeman.”

They were like two coagulations, two clottings in the cloud; two shrouds with nothing inside.

He felt a chill and the hairs rose on his arms, so that he could feel their pressure against the sleeve of his tunic.

Oddly, his mind jumped backward. Hadn’t the tunic been torn, shredded? He remembered feebly for it was all as foggy as the fog. He shone the flashlight on his sleeve and it was whole, thinned and worn with age, but whole.

Suddenly, he flashed the light in the direction of the Cloud People and there was nothing there. Musical wordless chimes in his ears was all. He moved the light away and the shrouds were there again.

He said, “What has happened to me?”

The boy’s voice said briefly, “You fell.” Then, “You Change People always fall, don’t you know that.”

“Fell?” He looked down, shrinking automatically from an unseen and non-existent cliff.

“Fell,” said the girl. “You are so silly.”

“They don’t know,” said the boy.

“Tell him,” said the girl.

“I don’t think we ought to.”

“Who cares? I want to watch his top move when he talks. Do you see it in among the fringe, there.”

“The fringe came when he fell. It always does.”

Ban stared, feeling worn with the accumulating strain. They were discussing him and by fringe they must mean his beard.

It hit him with the shock of cold water colliding after a dive. His *beard*. He had no beard. He felt it and it was there and was yellow but it had been white.

He said, “Even so, I’ve grown old.” He felt the brittleness in his knees, so noticeable against the lithe strength he remembered.

“You fell,” said the boy, explaining.

I fell, thought Ban, and I grew old. He said, certain, “I fell through time. How?”

“I don’t know. You Change People always fall. You can’t lift up.”

Again Ban was remembering: Time is the strength of the Cloud People.

She had said that. The Prophetess had said that. Hadn’t she said more?

But he wasn’t as old now as he had been. His beard was no longer white. His uniform was no longer in shreds. *They* had held him, the boy and the girl. They had gotten under.

“Are you holding me now?” he demanded.

“Of course,” said the boy, “or you’d fall.”

“Lift me higher, then.”

“Why?”

“So I can talk.”

It was like feeling air come into clogged lungs, or slowly straightening a cramped muscle. The beard shrank to a yellow inch and his gun was almost glossy. He looked at it and at his jagged fingernails, then pointed the gun in the direction of the figures, automatically.

The girl’s voice said, “What’s that, ______ ____ ________?”

(She concluded with a clear musical triad which did not resolve itself into words. Was it the boy’s name?)

The boy said, “It throws a piece of metal. It can’t hurt, but if he tries I’ll drop him at once.”

Ban put the gun down hastily. He had to find out. He might get back. The Prophetess had sent him to find out. And if he didn’t get back, even so—He might not get back—He would not—

Drearily, he thought that after all he might not die in some flaming instantaneous holocaust or under the crush or cut of steel, but peacefully of sleep and old, old age.

He was young enough now to laugh shortly. He said, “Why do I fall here? I don’t fall back there.” He jerked his head, not knowing in the least if he were gesturing in the right direction.

The girl said, eagerly, “The fog holds you up.”

“No, it doesn’t,” said the boy at once. “Keep quiet, ________ ____ ______, you know nothing about it.”

The girl made a spiteful little discord, a sound that resolved itself into nothing in Ban’s mind.

The boy disregarded it. He said, “You do fall. Slowly.”

Ban said, “Fall?”

“In your world,” said the boy, “everything is a gentle slope, isn’t it?”

“No,” said Ban.

“Yes, it is,” said the boy. “Our Knower has told us. Your world is a slope and you roll down it all the time. Down and down until you wear out and die.”

Time, thought Ban, the inexorable flow of time. What had he said to the Prophetess? No man can swim Time’s river. Or climb up Time’s slope. One could only roll downward, or slide and slip downward, or, if one were at complete peace, walk downward.

“Time,” he said aloud, as the Prophetess had said to introduce their recent meeting.

“And here,” said the boy’s chiming voice, “there is no slope. Here it is free and we can move as we wish, up and down—”

No, he didn’t say “up and down.” Ban caught at the nuances of the chimes. This was different. His mind seized on “up and down” because the musical tones put the thought in his mind, but the thought was not quite “up and down.” The words were different; the meaning—

“Up and down in time,” said Ban, breathlessly.

“Up and down,” said the boy, with again that difference.

“And I fall down, only down.”

“It’s the only way you Change People ever move. So if you come here, you fall.”

Because here there is no slope, only a precipice; a plunging gap into which all life and matter fell, changing and aging and falling apart and dying. Rock might survive unchanged and water and air and all the fundamental fabric of the universe, but metal would rust and fabric disintegrate and—all living things would die.

Ban’s heart beat faster. No wonder men penetrating the fog never returned. No wonder armies and arms were useless. How hit a creature or how beat one who could evade you by moving in a direction you could not even conceive.

He could go back now and tell them there was no victory.

But could he go back?

They were holding him now, the boy and the girl, and under him was the black remorseless pit of eternity.

He said, “How do you move upward?”

“You just ____ ______ ____ __ ______.”

They went on and on but the chimes were chimes, not words. He lacked the ability to make meaningful concepts out of meaningless ones. As well, he thought bitterly, ask a fish how to breathe water or a tree how to live on sunlight.

“Teach me,” he said earnestly, desperately. “Teach me.”

Teach me to breathe water, fish, for I must or drown. Teach me to live on sunlight, tree, or I starve.

“I’m showing you. See, you are moving. See, up and down.”

Ban held his breath, closed his eyes. Was there any sensation at all other than what he felt in the way of strength. Now he felt his muscles harden, then slacken. There was no movement, no feeling of up and down. He was simply standing on the beach; he could even hear the faint noise of the surf. There was only the change within, the physiological concomitants of old age coming and going. That was all.

He said, “Isn’t there any way I can see better?” What good would seeing do?—He didn’t care, seeing was man’s chief sense. While the fog closed in, nothing could be clear.

“See?” asked the girl.

“See!” said the boy, changing the word too subtly for Ban to catch the nature of the change.

“You mean he’s so used to the fog that—” began the girl.

“I want no fog,” said Ban, with a sense of physical loathing at the very word. “I want it clear.”

“But it *is* clear. *Your* people have the fog.”

Ban fell silent. Here was a world in which all levels of time were commingled, in which people could move up and down—NO, he wondered if the words they were trying to say were "pasted" and "futured"—in such a world with up and down and past and future all commingled, surely all would be a fog to a man condemned to an eternal soft travel down a slope.

He pleaded, "Hold me. Hold me."

He had to work it out in case—in case he could get back. And on earth, with Time a mere slope that bound all creatures and all matter to a limited inexorable downward wash, it was fog to them, to the Cloud People.

Earth was a world in a universe of open space and bound time. Space is the strength of man, had said the Prophetess.

Had *she* known all this? he wondered suddenly. Had she understood? Then why had she not said so?

And did she know how to fight them, the Cloud People, as the Cloud People were fighting us?

His youngish heart leaped. But it was hard for them, too. It was for that reason that they, irresistable as they were, unfightable, undefeatable, didn't take over at once. The time-limited universe fought them and they advanced only slowly.

If men could only help the universe. If he could get back—

He said, "Teach me to fly in—in time."

The girl's voice said, "He means ____ ______ ____ ______."

The boy interrupted. "I know what he means, but how can I show him?"

"Show me," insisted Ban, desperately. "Show me."

"I *am* showing you. I'm up'n'downing you." (And behind the words, Ban could now hear a dim and simultaneous "past'n'futuring you.")

The girl said suddenly, "Lift him all the way up—Let's see what happens."

"No," screamed Ban.

He felt the lifting as though something, not air, not matter, but something, pressed against him with the speed of his passage. His cheeks were downy with unreaped fuzz and his legs were spindly. The pants came down over his shoes and then he seemed to shrink together.

He remembered his wings. He reached for the flight stud but it was gone and the wings themselves had fallen off his back a dull lump of reddish rock.

"No," he screamed in treble, and started to run across a fog-shrouded beach on short legs that entangled themselves in strands of raw wool that was turning to fleece. He fell and kicked chubbily, drooling and conscious of nothing more than a vague hunger. His lips moved in response, sucking —

Then his legs stretched out, and he rose tottering, unsteadily, to his feet. He was thin, about a foot less in height than he dimly realized he ought to be.

A voice said, and he recognized it all over again, as a girl's. "He changed. Did you see that? He changed."

"Of course." It was a boy's voice. "He's one of the Change People. What do you expect?—He isn't as timevy as he was."

Timevy, thought Ban's boy-mind. Time-heavy.

He remembered. And he didn't remember, too. He remembered the past and his own future when he would grow up; no, when he had grown up. It was madly confusing. He was twelve years old. Just a moment ago, he had been on Mwyrland and Ilbur the Robot had told him stories out of his long, long memory of a time when men crowded the earth and built cities on power unthinkable—dim myths and legends coming out of the crowded mechanical consciousness of a deathless robot—

And then he had been twenty-two and then ninety-three and then fifty-one and then twenty-nine and then a half and then twelve again, in inextricable confusion.

Yet how could he understand it better now? It made more sense.

Even the fog—The fog!

It was still there, but thinner. He could make out a glimpse of flatness, of gleaming smooth evenness and of infinite gap and sparkle and, in the distance, moving patches of shininess. The Cloud People?

He turned to bend his glance at the two who were with him. They were shrouds still, but sparkling shrouds now.

The boy said, "He's ______ now. When we lifted him up high, he got ______."

Ban almost caught that. The young were intimate with time. Time stands still for them and flows oddly, commingled and intermingled. It is only in maturity that the convention clamps down.

He had felt the movement through time just there at the end. He had felt something rushing past them.

"Teach me," he said, "teach me now how to move through time."

"Put out ________ ______ ____ ________," said the boy's chiming voice.

Ban tried. He *tried*. He tried to let his mind intuit if it could not understand. Almost he thought he had it. He put out something—something—

"No," said the boy. "Like this."

Ban felt something wrenching at him and something of him had moved. Nothing anywhere on his body. Something deep in his mind. It had moved and even fluttered.

"Now," said the boy. "I'll let you dow-ture-n easy."

Ban felt himself swelling and filling out, lift up and grow broad across his shoulder. The uniform was on him, fitting snugly, and the comfortable weight of furled wings was on his back.

The boy said, "No. You don't get the right ______. It's out, but you don't use it."

And a new voice interrupted. A deeper voice of chords that were incredibly beautiful. A mature voice, a subtle one.

"Younglings. It is long past time you were home. And you have been asked not to stray so near the fog banks."

The boy's chimes, thin and subdued, said, "Yes, Knower."

But the girl said, "We have one of the Change People."

"I know that, youngling. And you have been amusing yourself with him, which is not kind. And I see you have been trying to teach him to ______ also."

"It was wrong," said the boy, humble.

"Have you decided it was wrong?" said the Knower, without anger or reproof, merely questioning.

Ban cried, "Knower. Wait." But when he cried "Knower" he felt the thought shoot across the gap between himself and the Cloud People in a different form.

"You wish something?" There was a third shroud next to the two he had seen earlier, and it did not glitter. Even in the thinned fog, it did not glitter.

Ban had to bring his new knowledge to the City. He said, "Send me back, Knower. Let me return."

"Ought I?" The Knower said nothing more than that to him. The next words were addressed to the boy. "You are holding him."

"He's not very timevy," said the boy.

"I understand that. Let him go."

"But I'll fall," cried out Ban. "I'll die. Don't let go."

The third shroud clarified itself. A face, something very like a blank, formless face, came mistily into view. Something like blind, luminous ellipses formed themselves to gaze with infinite compassion down upon him.

"Let him go," said the Knower, and Ban knew that the boy must.

And he also knew the thought into which his word "Knower" had transmuted itself. He cried out, stranglingly, "Prophetess—Prophetess—Are *you* one of them?" And the boy let go and, in his despair, Ban let himself fall, uncaring. The beach was under him, steady, motionless, but he fell and his aching muscles slackened.

And when the desire for life overwhelmed him, as it must to the end and he struck at his flight-stud to unfurl wings and race old age to the City, the rusted remnant came off in his trembling fingers and his cheeks fell in over disappearing teeth.

He struggled with fading fierceness against the end. “Prophetess—” he wailed.

Part Three

By Robert Sheckley

DESPERATELY he fought time. Wisps of fog curled around him like pale headless snakes, and the sand far beneath his feet shifted and crept like an army of malignant ants. Ban winged through the fog bank, eternally falling, and saw his rifle barrel corrode and crumble to fine dust before his eyes. He flew, and a part of him watched with fascinated horror as ropelike blue veins corrugated his emaciated arms, and his head, unsupported by the wasted muscles of his neck, drooped on his chest.

“No man wins a race against time.”

Who had spoken? Was it the Knower? Or had the prophetess shrieked into his ear. Whoever spoke the words, Ban knew they were true. Even before reaching the far edge of the fog bank, Ban knew himself as old, too old. He could feel the sluggish blood pounding in his brittle veins, could sense the threadlike beat of his heart threatening momentarily to stop.

He knew then that he would never live to reach his city. Even now he was dying, dying . . .

Uselessly.

With an old man’s petulant anger he turned back. What had the Cloud People taught him? Could he remember it now, when memory had grown dim? Could he check his fall through the unplumbed depths of time?

Ban fought his way upward, swimming like a tired fish against the rushing river of time. He remembered concepts without words, he sensed his heaviness in time. A new direction seemed to open for him. He struggled toward it singlemindedly, and someone was singing a song without words. He fought for knowledge. Truly were his people called the Change People! For now Ban discarded everything he had learned, believed or felt before entering the fog banks that marked the furthest ramparts of time.

He attempted to lift himself in time.

In part, he succeeded.

He could feel the bone-wrenching jar as his body struck the sand. The blow would have shattered an old man's frame; but Ban was old no more.

Neither was he young.

He lay helpless on the sand, and realized that his stupendous effort had been based upon an incomplete knowledge of time's processes. He had held back death; but his present state was perhaps worse.

Stretched out on the sand was the heroic trunk and head of a middle-aged, yellow-bearded man. Beside him was his gun, the barrel deeply pitted, the wooden stock turned green and beginning to sprout. The hand that held the gun was a talon with brown-spotted parchment skin stretched tightly over frail bones. The other hand belonged by rights to a chubby boy of perhaps twelve. His legs could be judged at about four years old; but there from those small, fat legs hung a man's colossal feet.

Ban had learned the use of time—partially.

"Listen to me, Ban. Can you hear me?"

"I can hear you," Ban said, and realized that the Knower had spoken to him.

"You must become again what you were, Ban. You must fight again with time. You must ______ yourself."

"Impossible!"

"You must do it," Knower said. "For your own sake, and for the sake of all others. Because now we are all in deadly peril."

"I do not understand," Ban said.

"You still comprehend yourself only spatially. You must think temporally, as well. You must realize that you have stretched yourself to an immeasurable distance across time. How can I explain to you? Ban, your temporal elongation has created a flaw, a fault, a discontinuity in time. Now you are a ______."

"I still do not understand."

"Do you know what a fuse is?" Knower asked.

"Yes."

"You are a fuse. You are a connection. You are a conductor. A sea-wall holds back the ocean; you are a hole in the wall. A single tree on a barren plain attracts the lightning; you are a tree. Two elements may be stable until a link has been made between them; you are a link. Now do you understand why you must become as you were?"

"For whose good?" Ban asked.

"For the good of your people and mine," Knower said. "Ban, our people are not truly at war. Instead, we are both warred against. We push you because we ourselves are pushed, by the chaos that seeks to engulf the ordered universe. We must quarrel no longer. We must cooperate, your people and mine."

"How can I believe you?" Ban asked. And after a moment, he heard a cool, lucid voice behind him.

"What he tells you is true," the voice said, and Ban recognized it as that of the prophetess. "I myself tell you, Ban, you must become as you were. That is the first step."

Ban listened in an agony of indecision. Here in the thin mists, a man could be led to believe anything! Was this the prophetess speaking to him, or had the Knower adopted new form? What was happening, what was time going to do?

He decided. He fought to become as he had been. The heroic middle-aged trunk and head grew years younger; the parchment right hand started to fade, to take on size and strength. He fought to retain it, and suddenly his boy's legs grew three years younger. Desperately he aged his legs, and felt his arms grow thin and old. He made them young again, and felt his feet shrink hideously in his boots.

"It's impossible!" Ban screamed. "I can't do it all at the same time!"

"You must!" the prophetess told him.

"I need help!"

"No one can help you. Only you can do it. And Ban—there is very little duration left to do it in!"

Now Ban could hear a vast roaring in his ears. The sand beneath him seemed to mutter and shrink. He heard the Time children wail suddenly.

"Quick, Ban, quick!"

Staring wildly, Ban saw a strange entity before him, a creature of blind, luminous ellipses, beautiful, unhuman hands, a sparkling shroud. It was Knower. It was the prophetess. For a moment, Ban thought that they were standing side by side. Then he realized that he was staring at a single hermaphroditic entity, neither male nor female nor neuter, combining essences of all. Surely not human, yet perhaps benevolent. And Ban could not fathom the purpose of this Janus-natured creature, though he knew that purpose had to be there.

"Ban! For your own sake and for the sake of your people! *Become what you were!"*

Ban stared at the entity. Barren knowledge flooded his mind. Suddenly he understood the important yet ambiguous nature of the Time children, and what they would do to him, and he to them. Almost, he could understand the nature of the Knower-Prophetess.

"Ban!"

He blocked all thought from his mind. He made a massive effort, pitting all his strength and concentration against the baffling task before him. His hands became a man’s, and his feet grew large again, his legs stretched. He ground his teeth together, concentrated . . .

Space and time recognize no differences, no difficulties, no separations. Near and far, past and present, are terms for men to use; but the forces of space and time are not contained in terms.

So, in another part of the galaxy, at another time and place, an event was taking place whose meaning was crucial to Ban and also to his people.

On a planet named by its inhabitants Hiallo, a small red crustacean dropped to the sandy ocean floor. Far from his burrow, he moodily contemplated the mysterious ways of love. He considered the reasons for his rejection by the brood-queen. He thought of his position in life, the honors he had attained, the chances he had missed. He wondered about the ocean of air far above him, distant, hidden.

He finished thinking. With one powerful claw he pinched off his head, thus committing the eight thousandth suicide for that year upon Hiallo.

His act was in no way remarkable. Rejection by the brood-queen was normally followed by suicide upon Hiallo. And yet, this one particular act was crucial to Ban and his people.

In another part of the galaxy, at another time and place, an event was taking place whose meaning was crucial to Ban and his people.

A biped named Marcellus, of a planet called Terra, sat beneath a huge oak tree. The sun was hidden, and the gloomy forest somewhere in Germania was chilly, so Marcellus pulled his woolen cloak tightly around him. He looked around and tried to figure out where he was. Everything looked the same in these damned woods; one tree looked like another tree, and all the avenues of the forest led in different and unknown directions.

Marcellus and ten others, under the command of a centurion, had marched out from the forward command post at Legae to check on the movements of the barbarians. They had penetrated half a day's march into the forest, had been about to turn back when the tall, pale-skinned men had fallen upon them. It had been a slaughter. At the end, Marcellus had fled; and now he was lost.

He was an unimportant man; and yet, it was very important that he get back. For he, a common foot soldier, had glimpsed a sight in the forest that might change the destiny of Rome itself.

Marcellus got to his feet, stifling a curse when he put weight on his slashed leg. He looked around at the identical corridors of the forest. From what direction had he come? He didn't know; but it was unlike a Roman to stay indecisive for long. Marcellus chose a direction and struck out, limping.

After half an hour's march, he stopped. There were faint sounds on either side of him, sounds that no bird or beast would make. Marcellus peered around him into the gloomy woods. It was almost night. He was very hungry, thirsty, and weaponless.

The whispering sounds came closer. Marcellus listened for a moment, then broke off a branch of a tree. Quickly he stripped it of twigs. A Roman soldier would die fighting, no matter what he had to fight against.

His only regret, as the whispering drew nearer, was that he would probably not live to tell the others of the strange and marvellous thing he had glimpsed in the woods of deep Germania.

Death in battle was a common fate for soldiers of the Roman Empire, and Marcellus himself was in no way a remarkable man. And yet, what he had seen in the dark German forest was crucial to Ban and his people.

In another part of the galaxy, at another time and place, an event was taking place whose meaning was crucial to Ban and his people.

On a planet whose discoverers called it 3Bcc, two explorers were having an argument. They were at present four-legged and two-handed. For the purposes of the argument, each had extruded a triple tongue. Enormously simplified, their argument went like this:

"It was your fault!"

"Yours!"

"You took the gravity readings wrong. You left out an entire decimal point. You gave me this misinformation, and in that way our ship was wrecked."

"I will admit that the dials did not read correctly. But *you* were landing the ship. You should have felt the gravity fault and corrected for it in spite of the readings."

"You shouldn't have trusted the dial. You should have *become* a dial."

"I was sleepy. Besides, if I had become a dial, who would have been on standby?"

The two explorers stared at each other. At last, good humor reasserted itself. They flowed into friendlier shapes and contemplated the planet upon which they had crashed.

"It is a good land."

"A very good land."

"We will stay here, we will propagate, we will increase."

"And lose capability for our journey?"

"It is intended for journeys to have an end. And when the end is reached, the capabilities for journeying are no longer needed."

"That is true. This is a good land, and you have made a good answer. We will not be as we are . . . Still . . . Tell me, which of us will bear the children?"

"You will. After all, I piloted the ship."

"No, *you* will. For through me we came to this place, and the next task is yours."

The two explorers thought for a time. Then one said, "So important a decision cannot be argued. We must let another decide."

“That could de dangerous!”

“Not to us.”

So they constructed a hermaphroditic machine to select fairly and randomly who would be the mother and who the father. And when that was done they turned with a good will to the land, and let the machine do as it desired, and where and when it desired.

The machine lived. With hideous self-awareness it knew itself and its destiny. Not even desire was spared the machine; not even a strange and absurd destiny connected inextricably with the act of a red crustacean creature, with the courage of a Roman soldier, and with the final decision of two explorers.

“The machine is dangerous,” the female explorer said.

“Not to us,” said the male explorer.

“Then to our children, or to their children.”

“Would you have me destroy the machine?”

“No. Limit it, confine it, *dedicate* it!”

“Very well,” the male explorer said.

The machine, which no longer directly perceived itself as a machine, accepted the limit and the dedication with good grace. It could not blame the explorers, for the machine recognized its own danger inherent in its qualities of randomness. The built-in limit almost took care of that; but made much more difficult the task to which it had been dedicated. Perhaps now the task would be impossible; but the explorers didn’t care.

“Where is the machine?” the female explorer asked after a while.

“It has left us,” the male explorer answered. “It has gone in order to do its work.”

“And it didn’t even say goodbye,” the female explorer said thoughtfully. “I wonder if that means anything . . .” But then she had to take care of her two children, and there was no more time to think of the machine.

And Ban, lying in the coiled sea-mists, was dimly aware of all this. A red crustacean, a Roman soldier, a hermaphroditic machine . . . He fought to become as he had been, struggled, cursed. Slowly, inexorably, he began to succeed. He was becoming Ban again . . .

And then he heard the despairing wail of Knower, the simultaneous shriek of the Prophetess. It was too late. The lightning had struck, the sea-wall had collapsed, the last fraction of the fuse had flared. Just before unconsciousness struck him, Ban could feel the forces of chaos engulfing him much as storm clouds engulf the sky.

Part Four

By Murray Leinster

HE DID not exactly return to consciousness. Later, it seemed to him that he had not really become unconscious, but that the things he saw and heard and felt were so completely preposterous that his mind rejected them. Because it appeared that chaos had engulfed the universe and that time and space and reality had ceased to be. On the whole, that was a reasonable assumption.

Nevertheless he saw. He felt. He even heard. The hearing was a thin singing which did not form words at all, but muted wailings. The feeling was that the cosmos had turned askew, and the horizon had tilted so that what should have been the east was up, and what should have been the west was down—and he tended to fall toward it—and the beach was merely before him and the sky behind.

The seeing was unexpressable distortion of the beach. He saw it, but in a manner he could never have explained to anyone. An artist’s portrait of the beach and the waves would be something like it. But it would have to be a portrait, which differs from a photograph because a photograph is a picture of an instant and the sitter happens to be in it. But a portrait is of a person, and the moment is only a convention.

So Ban saw the beach, not as of this minute and second, but as a portrait shows a person. Somehow he saw it, all at once, shrouded in the fog that had come upon it since he was a boy, and also he saw it in bright sunshine. It was merely a pretense that he saw it between two breaths—at a given moment—because he could look inland and see smoke coming from the chimney of Ilbur the Robot, and he could see the beach empty as it was before there were either Cloud People or men. And he could see it as it would be aeons from now—

No. What he could see changed, even as he looked. He saw it, after a fashion, as a man in flight, and thousands of feet high, would see a winding highway in all its turnings in the same seeing. A man on foot on the same highway would see only a few hundred yards before him, and only remember what was behind. Ban saw the beach in such a strange perspective. He saw the beach from that dimension which is time. But it changed. There was an ending, which drew nearer. It was not unlike a highway seen from far above, with a cloud-mass moving to blot it out. Ban saw an ending of the beach, in time. There was a thing which was like a wall in the direction he knew to be the future. Nothing existed beyond that wall. The beach came to an end. There was no time beyond the wall. It was the end of everything—the solid world of men and the cloudy mist of the Cloud People alike. And the Cloud People wailed.

Ban could not actually see the wall because it was nothingness. Only nothingness could bring an end to time. And nothingness cannot be seen. Yet Ban knew it because it did not reflect the light that fell upon it, not yet absorb it. Nothingness cannot do either. It cannot do anything. If it could act it would not be nothingness, but something. Yet Ban knew that yonder real things ceased to be. Beyond that spot in time there was no time. There was a moment beyond which there was no next second. And this was what had made the Knower and the Prophetess cry out in horror, because Ban had brought it about.

Back in the city of the tall towers and living people, folk were apprehensive, but they feared the Cloud People. They did not fear this. But here with the east overhead and the west underfoot Ban knew that the Cloud People wailed because they could perceive what men could not, save Ban.

But how could he know? What had happened to him? The Knower had said bewildering things, each one specific but all of them confusion. The Knower said that Ban had stretched himself across an immeasurable distance of time. He had made a short-circuit, a discontinuity, perhaps a hole or a puncture in time, rather, a gap in time and space together. While the different parts of his body were child and man and doddering ancient all at once, he had created a weakness in the fabric of the universe. And somewhere, somewhen, reality began to collapse. These things were the only possible explanation, but Ban found himself objecting. A thing cannot collapse unless by so doing it releases energy. A thing is not destroyed unless its destruction releases some tension. Yet it was old, old knowledge that the universe of suns and stars and matter—and of Cloud People and men—exists only because it is held in existence. It did not create itself, and it does not sustain itself. And in some strange fashion Ban's blind fumbling had broken one small spot in the fabric of being. It could be likened to a puncture. And it spread.

But why could he see through time as the Cloud People did? And why was the east now overhead and the beach before him and the west beneath his feet? He noticed, suddenly, the tugging which pulled at him. He tended to fall. Downward. Toward the west. He fought the fall automatically, struggling to sum up this experience to know what to do. But he did not incline to fall toward the beach, any more than a man beside the Needle or Alpha or the Arsenal would be drawn toward those vast structures. Down, to Ban, was westward.

Why? There had to be an explanation.

He struggled to grasp his situation to do battle with it. In his absorption he unconsciously lessened his conflict with the westward pull. He reminded himself of a bird that had flown against a window in one of the City's towers. All windows and all outer doors were screened by force-fields like bubble-films, which allowed air to pass in or out gently, but resisted any fast-moving solid object or any strong wind. Sometimes a bird in full flight struck such a screen. Then the screen which was meant to act gently became violent. The bird was flung away, spinning and reeling and toppling helplessly. Sometimes the circuit-breaker clicked off and the bubble-field ceased to be unless someone restored the circuit. Yet one could reach a hand gently through the field, and the field ceased until the hand was removed. A man could walk through. But a running man would be flung back with violence.

That was it! Normally a man travelled slowly through the bubble-films which were instants of time. They let him pass slowly and gently through to the future, and age, and death. The boy and girl of the Cloud People had transported Ban through innumerable such films. Where the mists of the Cloud People hung, there was less impediment to time-movement than where clean sunshine shone upon the City. But when Ban became partly capable of time-motion, yet erratically; when Ban's legs were in one time-film and his body in another; when his body violated the laws of time and space, he shorted out the time-films as a hand through the bubble-screen destroys the screen until the hand is removed.

In effect, his body thus impossibly stretched through time acted as a man's body across an open screened doorway. It would destroy the screen; so that tornado-winds might roar through with nothing to stop them. And those tornado-winds would beat with terrific violence upon the man. He might be flung crazily away, like a bird trying to fly through a window.

This would explain everything. Partly instructed and partly capable of motion through time like the Cloud People, Ban had destroyed the time-films of unguessable centuries. And this caused the terror of the Knower and the Prophetess. Some part of him, some trivial part perhaps, remained remote from its proper place in time. There was a connection between it and now. There could be no time-films between while that connection lasted. So there could be no time. And through that gap came nothingness, to spread as a break in a soap-bubble spreads . . .

And Ban was beaten upon by the forces of the cosmos, trying to hold to what held it in being, like a force-bubble with a man lying across a door while a tornado raged. He was flung crazily about like a bird which has tried to pierce a window's bubble-field. He moved in no normal direction; he had no secure link either to space or time, and therefore the east was up and the west was down—but where was the past and future?—and the sky was behind him and the beach before. At least that was so.

But the beach was not before him! There was water, rippling like a vertical wall. There was stone. He looked ahead and saw down upon the rocky pinnacles of that small island halfway between Mwyrland and the City. There was no mist upon it now. He had forgotten to resist the pull upon him, and he fell, but not toward ancientness and death, nor toward the ground or sea, nor even skyward.

He fell toward the west. He gazed downward and saw that his motion was a retracing of the path he had flown, from the Oracles to Mwyrland. He fell headlong.

And then he noticed his body. It had changed again. He was a gangling boy of fifteen. He cried out angrily, and his voice broke. It was partly treble and partly the discordant croak of early adolescence, and then Ban realized what the tugging at him was, and what was its consequence. He was not only in a new relationship to the things of space, but of time. He no longer had an inherent tendency to fall toward the future and increasing age. Now he fell toward infancy. And the direction of infancy was the west.

He checked his fall by a terrific exercise of will, to look at his hands. They were not thin as a youth's hands are. They tended toward chubbiness like the hands of a child. The first phalange of each finger was rounded. His finger-joints were smooth.

It was exhausting to hold himself still, and not to fall toward the west. The pull was not as strong as it had been at first. He was a boy now, and the Cloud People children had said of him as a child that he was not as timevy—as time-heavy—as an old man. But as a boy he had not the strength of manhood. Yet now it was a man's mind that demanded the impossible of a child's body.

And that man's mind despaired, while still he fought the pull of time toward infancy, which lay to the west. He needed help. He needed knowledge. He raised his face toward the beach and cried out shrilly for the Cloud People to come and help him, however great their desperation.

Again there was a change. He still saw the beach as from time, but the distance through which he could look future-ward had dwindled. The wall-which-was-not-a-wall was nearer. The end of existing things was closer. As a standing forest grows small while a forest fire rages across it, time-to-come grew less as nothingness swallowed it. Yet nothingness cannot swallow anything. The beach and the sky and the sea were not devoured, but bit by bit they ceased to act; to reflect light or absorb it, to pull together or push apart, to move or to resist motion.

They ceased to be real. They became one with all those things which are merely possible and are not actual. There remained, in theory, a link to actuality in that they could exist if they could affect each other, if they could do anything, if they could perform any action of any sort. But for a thing to operate there must be time. Time is the arrangement by which things are able to happen. Without time nothing can occur. And there must be space. Space is the arrangement by which things can consist of parts which are side by side. But time and space were broken and breaking together like a punctured bubble, and the universe grew smaller.

There was no longer a cloud-bank over Mwyrland. Ban had gone back to a time in his childhood before the Cloud People formed their mist over Mwyrland and slowly, slowly, slowly deepened it until ageing men and women fled their homes and the war with the Cloud People began. But though Ban went back toward days long past, he still could see the vast encroachment of nothingness upon all things that were.

He knew very bitterly that he had brought the catastrophe about. He'd not intended it, to be sure. He hadn't done it alone, even, two Cloud-Children really began it, and the Knower was aware and thought their behavior only unkind. There had been no awareness that there was danger in the playful investigation, by Cloud-Children, of the nature of mere man. Yet the Cloud-People could travel back and forth in time from past to future. They could see the future. Then there had been a future, but now it grew less and less, so that there must be some dimension beyond the three of space and the fourth of time in which alterations of those four could come about. And of this dimension neither the Knower nor the Prophetess had any inkling. So there was a limit to prophecy.

And now he understood his present estate and the topsy-turviness of up and down and past and future. The universe attempted to use him—who had begun it—to bring an end to its destruction. The cosmos strove to heal itself. Had Ban died on the beach as an incredibly aged and futile dodderer, the sun would not shine on Mwyrland, to be sure, but it would still shine on the City, for a while. Had Ban not extended himself through time, there would not now be a gap blocked by his still-displaced body in which time could not exist as bubble-films which make the endless succession of seconds and minutes and hours and years. If Ban could restore himself to what he had been—withdrawing every atom of himself from any other time but the present—the crack in the cosmos would heal itself, like a force-bubble across a door or window. But it was impossible. He could not do it.

There was only one thing he could do, which would have the same effect. He could repair the fabric of reality by not ever having been.

It was this that he must consent to, in yielding to the westward tugging. His body was fourteen years old, now. Perhaps thirteen. To him, childhood lay to the west and maturity to the east. He was drawn backward through a displaced time toward infancy. This tugging, this pull, was the result of the laws of existence, because existence could not continue while his body contravened the laws of existence. If he let himself fall past ten years of age, and six, and two, and infancy itself . . . If he let himself fall back into the time before he was, then there would no longer be a break in the unity of time and space. He who had never been could not create a flaw. His body which had never existed could not short-circuit time. There could not be a break where he had never existed to make it.

Ban raged. It is not too bad a thing to die. All men face it sooner or later, and there is a secret knowledge which comes to every man at such moments. The knowledge is that it is not the end. But Ban was required to make a greater sacrifice than death. It was demanded of him that he surrender ever having been. He was required to embrace extinction.

He raged. But he was the Warden's son, and the City must be defended. He could not survive, but he could make extinction count. With somehow an air of scorn, he let himself fall. And it was dramatic, as he fell, to remember bitterly such unrelated things as a girl who shyly gave him a bowl of milk in the home of Ilbur the Robot, and Urmuz scolding him respectfully for some unrecalled fault, and the Prophetess with the strong hands and strangely indefinite face beneath her hood, and the girl who was to be her successor, who denied that she had a name and yet looked wistfully at Ban when he was in the prime of his strength and arrogance.

He remembered innumerable things, and now not one of them would ever have been real. Because he would never have been, and Urmuz would not teach him soldier-craft, nor his companions ever sing or drink with him, nor his father try to hide his pride in a swaggering son who would be Warden after him.

These things would be worse than forgotten. They would never be thought of. They would go into that limbo of possible things from which so few ever emerge to become actual. When Ban had never been born—why—things would start fresh. Perhaps his father would have another son, whom Urmuz would guide and scoldingly cherish. His friends would not miss him. How could they miss someone who never was? Perhaps they would choose another in his place, not knowing that it was a place that could have been filled otherwise. The girl at the Oracles would not think of him. How could she? She would think wistfully of someone else entirely. The Prophetess would not guide him, nor the Cloud-People children.

Then Ban revolted. In midair, he abruptly fought his own descent to infancy. His mind was still a man's mind, in a body perhaps four years old. The disparity, in fact, was very probably the reason for the disaster to all things. But he was required to make a greater sacrifice than any other man was ever asked to make. And it was not a reasonable bargain. He would accomplish nothing worth the sacrifice if he ceased to exist.

He fought the pull that dragged at him. He ceased to fall. Above him was the east and below the west and behind him there was the sky and before him the very shore-line of the Gulf of Orea. But he would not fall farther. He would not! Because there was no reward for his falling.

His non-existence would not keep the Cloud-People from forming the thinnest of mists above Mwyrland, in which people aged overnight, when the mist was thin, and then between sunrise and even-fall, when it grew thicker, and then in fractions of an hour when the cloud was at its densest.

If he were not ever born, the army of the City would still sally forth valiantly to do battle with the Cloud-People, and never return. The mist over Mwyrland would spread slowly out over the water, and cover the rocky volcanic island halfway to shore, and move forward to the City.

If he were never to exist, still someone—not he, but someone—would desperately demand counsel of the Prophetess on how the Cloud-People could be vanquished, and she would send him to Mwyrland as she'd sent Ban, alone. And he would die and ultimately the towers of the City would be filled with mist. Then the Cloud-People with their singing voices would drift about the wetted structures and only a few men would remain out on the Heath, forgetting that men had ever built cities or flown among the clouds.

These things would happen despite his sacrifice. But Ban had ventured greatly in defense of the City, because he was the Warden's son and it was his obligation. He was still the Warden's son, and it was still his obligation to defend the City. This sacrifice would do no good to the race of men. He would not sacrifice himself to extend the dank domain of the Cloud-People! He would not!

He cursed, and wept with rage because his curses were in a shrill treble voice, and he was a small and naked child in whom a man's mind inexplicably functioned, and because he stood alone against time and space and destiny and there was no one to help him in what he must accomplish. Must!

"I won't do it!" he cried in his child's high voice to the world and the sky and the sea about him. "I won't do it!" he cried fiercely to the galaxy. "You can't make me!" he cried to the universe itself. "Unless you make it save the City I won't do it!" he cried to all creation. But oddly enough he thought of a girl in the Oracles, who had looked wistfully at him when he was a tall, virile young man.

There was no reply. He clenched his child's fists and pipingly defied all time and space and destiny:

"I won't!—won't! won't!—won't!"

Part Five

By Robert Bloch

THE warp was widening. Time and Space had lost coalescence in a disintegrating cosmos. The Prophetess had predicted, the Knower suspected, but only one man had full knowledge, full realization. And shrilled his ultimate defiance against the ultimate extinction of all things—Ban, in his child's body, tangled in the loosening web of Time and Space, keening, "I won't, I won't, I won't!"

Only one man, and he helpless.

One man—and one *other.*

It was not man, nor beast; neither male nor female, but both and more than both. The machine which had been created on 3Bcc and vanished, was dedicated to a mission. And that mission involved neither instinct nor emotion. It was the pure, objective goal of cosmic survival.

Unfettered by tri- or quadri-dimensional laws of Time and Space, it moved freely through the universe as a random entity. All choice was its portion, all sentience and sensation was there to sample. But the machine was seeking the focal point, the focal point of weakness wherein it must function.

And its initial data was limited.

Perceptivity came slowly. First came the knowledge of weakness—a learned acquisition, for the machine had no initial referents. Then came the dimly-intuited associations.

The cosmos was a maze. Somewhere in the maze there was a flaw, threatening the entire structure. *Problem:* find a way *through* the maze *to* the flaw. *Clue:* personify awareness of distress.

On these vague premises the dedicated entity acted, and localized isolated instances; computing and discarding on the basis of intensity, probing for full comprehension.

Two images emerged, two clues to aid in the search. The machine established them as voices.

"I won't, I won't, I won't!"

First the voice was an interior echo. The machine sought to personify it. The only data which came through was ambiguous enough, and in the form of a single, simple impression—*redhead*.

Redhead.

Where in the universe was the redhead in distress? Another mechanism moved into full operation—and the machine found itself foundering upon the sandy ocean floor of the planet Hiallo, contemplating the red head of a crustacean which rested there, snapped clean from the lifeless body.

The cry had not come from here.

And yet it echoed, was still echoing, for in the Oracles the nameless neophyte who loved Ban could hear his call; she pressed her hands to her head, tangling her fingers in the red locks as his cry came to her. *"I won't, I won't, I won't!"*

The machine sensed her presence now, but simultaneously a stronger image came—not the echo-emanation but the source of the call itself.

A yellow-haired man.

The machine blurred and left the ocean bed of Hiallo. It was on Terra now, in Germania's tangled forest, perceiving the battle. Perceiving, and perceived. For yellow-haired Marcellus glimpsed it.

Marcellus—was this the entity the machine sought? It sensed no danger to the cosmos here, only individual destruction, and yet it could not be sure. There was more data to be gleaned. It followed Marcellus, waited for him in the wood. And it assumed substance and beckoned Marcellus with a whisper. Marcellus awaited it, armed with a puny branch.

The machine probed. Here was fear and courage, commingled in defiance. Marcellus did not want to die, but his thought was wholly self-centered. It was his danger and his alone which prompted him. And *"I won't, I won't, I won't!"* had not emanated from this yellow-haired biped.

So this was not the area of threat.

The machine moved from Terra, probing again. The keening cry existed. The keening crier existed. Existed in an area of almost non-existence.

Images and impressions multiplied. A fog, and a singing. A hairy, ugly man pacing the entrance to a tall edifice. A cold-eyed female in prayer. A moist-eyed female *(redhead? yes!)* in supplicating agony. An amorphous presence, a Knower, drained of all but dread.

All of them caught, caught in the maze. And the maze itself disintegrating. Yes, the cosmic threat was here, in this area. In this *non-area*. For that was what it was becoming, as Time and Space twisted and tore, and only one faint voice defied eternal termination with *"I won't, I won't, I won't!"*

The voice of a *yellow-haired* biped.

On land?

On sea?

In the air?

The machine probed. Probed land that was scarcely land, as Space sundered. Searched a sea that was now sky and mist and fog commingled. Roamed air that was truly empty—empty of all dimensional interrelationship.

The machine sought the source of the sole remaining strength; the awareness of extinction which still rebelled against the knowledge of its own ending.

And it came to Ban; came to the ridiculous child-body twisting and turning in a loosening Limbo where north, south, east, west, down, up, forward and back whirled free of all relationships.

The machine sensed the problem and the solution. It communicated with Ban using neither word nor image, merely direction in the form of reinforcing Ban's own survival-urge.

Suddenly Ban felt the strength surge back to implement his defiance. He began to move, to grow. He would become *himself* once more. And give *himself* up to the gap, to heal the breach between Time and Space. When he was properly timevy, he would be fixed in the balancing-area, forever, so that the universe could stabilize.

There was no right, no wrong, no alternative at all to consider. This was his purpose, his function. Where the new-found resolution came from was not even a question; nor was the source of his sudden power to act.

He became Ban.

And being Ban, he had only to remain fixed, forever fixed in this Limbo beyond Space and Time, so that the balances he had disturbed would be restored.

It meant an end to living, an end to consciousness, and end to self-awareness. But it was meaningful sacrifice, and worthy of the son of a Warden. Even if he would no longer know himself to be the son of a Warden. Even if he would no longer retain consciousness of squat Urmuz or the beautiful nameless one who waited (would wait forever, now, and in vain) inside the Oracles.

Ban *was* the sacrifice, his was the dedication. He felt consciousness spin away. For a moment there was a physical twinge of regret, but then the physical awareness left him, and the regret was purely psychic. He would cease to be, and that was right; yet he had lost the final battle. For in the end, this wouldn't alter the inexorable course of events. The cosmos would persist, but for how long? Only until the Cloud-People invaded his city and the Heaths beyond. Then the extinction would proceed until all was engulfed in nothingness. For Time would devour Space.

So it was a delaying-action, at best, this sacrifice he was making. But it must be done. He must surrender himself, lose himself in the whirling, for he was dedicated—

Dedicated.

The machine observed, registered. Something was wrong. *Ban* was not dedicated. Dedication was the machine's function.

Ban must not usurp its place.

The machine could heal. And it must communicate, quickly, establish a relationship with Ban before he was irrevocably lost in the elemental

Limbo.

“Ban—come back!”

Then the directive came, implemented by action. The machine lifted, grasped, transported.

Ban awoke to blinking awareness, standing upon the terrace beside the black bulk of the Oracles. He felt the firmness beneath his feet, sensed his proper physical-temporal relationship with Alpha, The Needle, the distant Arsenal.

He was *himself* again.

But for how long?

Something had snatched him from the jaws of sacrifice. But the jaws still gaped. Far away was the sea and the mist. Beyond that the Cloud-People hovered. Hovered closer and closer. Nothing had changed.

Nothing had changed, *because he had failed*.

Urmuz emerged from the shadows, breathless.

“You left me behind, sir—I was looking everywhere—” His face worked. “She told me—”

The girl with the great gray eyes stirred in the shadows behind the burly man.

Ban faced them, nodding slowly. “Yes, I went alone.” He shrugged. “And to no avail. There is no way to conquer the strength of the Cloud-People. Man cannot conquer Time.”

“But I don’t understand, sir—tell us what happened—” Urmuz stared at Ban helplessly. Then his eyes fell. “I suppose it’s no use talking.”

Ban nodded. “No use talking,” he echoed. “The end will come soon.”

The girl stepped forward. She walked proudly, bearing a gift in her great gray eyes. Ban saw it there, and found the exultation of ecstasy even in despair. His hands went out to claim the gift, and she was in his arms, her hair enveloping his shoulders in a red caress. *So we die,* Ban told himself. *But first, even for a moment, we live—*

"Hold!"

The voice that was not a voice came from the face that was not a face.

Ban stepped back, releasing the girl. She turned to stare, as he and Urmuz stared, at the apparition of the Prophetess.

"I heard," she said.

Ban squared his shoulders. "Then what does it matter?" he countered. "You know time has run out for all of us. Let the girl be. Give us the last few moments that remain."

"Captain Ban." The beautiful accents were measured. "You spoke of failure. Of this you need not be ashamed, for I am aware that you fought hard, even to the point of giving up the ultimate essence of identity."

"I tried," Ban murmured. "I failed."

"To fail is one thing. To surrender, another." The tones were even. "You are a soldier. Even now, with the battle lost, you cannot capitulate. You cannot flee, as you seek to flee, into the oblivion of momentary sensation. This girl is dedicated to the Covenant of the Oracles, just as you are dedicated to Wardenship of this City."

"I cannot stop the Cloud-People," Ban replied. "Time is too strong."

Urmuz stirred restlessly. "What do you want us to do?" he grumbled.

The Prophetess faced him. Something in her face—or what radiated from it and obscured it—caused the squat man to bow his head.

"I—I meant no disrespect, Prophetess," he muttered. "But the Captain's right. We are finished. What can we do now?"

"We can function as we were meant to function. We can observe the enemy. Watch and wait." A beautiful hand rose and beckoned. "Come with me."

Together they moved into the many-vaulted vastness of the Oracles. Together they sank down before the table as the Prophetess took her place behind it and bowed her head. For a moment, silence. The long, meaningful silence which is a prelude to extinction.

Almost Ban could see the clouds gathering and moving towards them; the Cloud-People were swirling before the sea and city, as Time moved forward to devour Space. Almost Ban could sense the death of the world as he knew it.

And then he *could* see, *could* sense.

For a cloud was with them now; the Prophetess, Urmuz, the girl could see it, too. It hovered in the vaulted archways above, and it emanated from the lovely hands upon the table-top.

The Prophetess had conjured up the final vision . . .

Once again Ban gazed upon the desolate shores where the shimmering clouds hovered. He thought he recognized the shape he had come to think of as the Knower, but he could not be sure. For there were thousands of shapes; thousands upon thousands of swirling semi-solid shadows, lambent and yet unillumined, obtuse and opaque. They were not merely hovering, they were converging now—converging upon a common goal.

It might have been a machine there in the sky, but it was not an artifact Ban recognized. It might have been a gigantic ship, designed to transport those who had not mastered flight by wing. It might have been a living entity, functioning to attract the Cloud-People.

Ban and the others did not know. But they could perceive what it was doing—incredibly, inexorably, it lured the cloud-shapes to its side. And a myriad whirring slits opened and engulfed them. The cloud-shapes disappeared, incorporated into the shining, shimmering sphere. The object was now a gigantic, blinding blur, and Ban could not look upon it, even in prophetic image.

He wrenched his eyes away, stared down at the Prophetess, seeking to fathom her face.

And now, suddenly, her *face* was a blinding blur, mirroring the machine.

The non-voice spoke.

“Fear not. Time is conquered. The Cloud-People, as you know them, are willing to depart. For they know that there is no future for them here. Their Time can devour our Space, but by the very nature of the act, the cosmos will be destroyed. I have told them so, and they have agreed that their place is in a cosmos of their own. I shall transport them there. That is my purpose, the function to which I am dedicated."

"But—who are you?"

"An instrument. An instrument serving one purpose—survival. I have served here in many ways. As Knower of the Cloud-People. As Prophetess, to your humanity. Now my service here is ended."

Ban glanced upwards and away. The gigantic vision was fading—and within it, the gigantic machine was blurring, too—

He tore his eyes from the incredible and searched the features of the Prophetess. *The features that were fading now as the machine faded*.

The lovely, lulling voice was fainter, too. But Ban could still hear it as it spoke.

"You thought you had failed, Captain Ban. But you did not fail. My mission was to save the cosmos, but I could not function until I found the focal point. And that focal point was in your strength, your human defiance of all destiny. It was your voice, crying, *"I won't, I won't, I won't!"* that guided me, brought me here. I go now, forever from your cosmos and your consciousness. But there is no need for me any longer. The Covenant is ended. I leave you with all you require to survive—your humanity, which is your strength."

The voice blurred, the vision blurred, the Prophetess blurred.

And then there were only the three of them—the squat, shaken man, the quiet, trembling girl, and the yellow-haired warrior in an empty, vaulted chamber.

"I don't understand," said Urmuz.

"I do," murmured the girl.

"I'll try," said Ban.

Together, the three of them walked back into the garden.

The sun was shining, as far as the eye could see.

"Dream?" muttered Urmuz.

"Reality," the girl affirmed.

"Perhaps both," Ban nodded. He paused. "If, somewhere, sometime, someone perfected a mechanism dedicated to saving the universe—and if it directed itself to us—"

"Foolishness!" Urmuz was scowling.

"But the Cloud-People are gone. We're safe. You know that, don't you?" the girl persisted.

"Yes. And I'm going to do something sensible about it—in the nearest tavern." Urmuz turned. "Coming, sir?"

Ban shook his head, moving closer to the girl.

Urmuz shrugged and moved down the dappled sunlight of the path.

For a moment Ban stared down into the great gray eyes—so cool a contrast to the red radiance of the haloing hair.

"You heard what she—it—said," he whispered. "The Covenant is ended."

She nodded gravely.

"That means there is no need for the Oracles. The future need not be foreseen; it is in our hands."

His hands reached for hers and she did not draw away.

"You are now destined to be a prophetess. You are a woman now."

Again she nodded. "And mine to claim."

She gave him her lips willingly enough, but Ban sensed no surrender. And when she was at last free to speak, her voice was firm. "Claim," she echoed. "But not to conquer. For I *am* a woman, as you are a man, and that is a struggle which never ends."

"You're joking," said Ban, with all the instinctual arrogance of the commander and future Warden.

"Perhaps," said the girl.

“Be serious for a moment, my darling. Remember, it is permitted now—tell me your name.”

Slowly she raised her great gray eyes to his, and in them he read the forecast of his future.

“Your name,” he commanded.

“Time,” she said.

THE END

Talent

Life's but a walking shadow—says the Bard—but this Player was heard forever!

IT is perhaps a pity that nothing is known of Andrew Benson's parents.

The same reasons which prompted them to leave him as a foundling on the steps of the St. Andrews Orphanage also caused them to maintain a discreet anonymity. The event occurred on the morning of March 3rd, 1943—the war era, as you probably recall—so in a way the child may be regarded as a wartime casualty. Similar occurrences were by no means rare during those days, even in Pasadena, where the Orphanage was located.

After the usual tentative and fruitless inquiries, the good Sisters took him in. It was there that he acquired his first name, from the patron and patronymic saint of the establishment. The "Benson" was added some years later, by the couple who eventually adopted him.

It is difficult, at this late date, to determine what sort of a child Andrew was; orphanage records are sketchy, at best, and Sister Rosemarie, who acted as supervisor of the boys' dormitory, is long since dead. Sister Albertine, the primary grades teacher of the Orphanage School, is now—to put it as delicately as possible—in her senility, and her testimony is necessarily colored by knowledge of subsequent events.

That Andrew never learned to talk until he was nearly seven years old seems almost incredible; the forced gregarity and the conspicuous lack of individual attention characteristic of orphanage upbringing would make it appear as though the ability to speak is necessary for actual survival in such an environment from infancy onward. Scarcely more credible is Sister Albertine’s theory that Andrew knew how to talk but merely refused to do so until he was well into his seventh year.

For what it is worth, she now remembers him as an unusually precocious youngster, who appeared to possess an intelligence and understanding far beyond his years. Instead of employing speech, however, he relied on pantomime, an art at which he was so brilliantly adept (if Sister Albertine is to be believed) that his continuing silence seemed scarcely noticeable.

“He could imitate anybody,” she declares. “The other children, the Sisters, even the Mother Superior. Of course I had to punish him for that. But it was remarkable, the way he was able to pick up all the little mannerisms and facial expressions of another person, just at a glance. And that’s all it took for Andrew—just a mere glance.

“Visitors’ Day was Sunday. Naturally, Andrew never had any visitors, but he liked to hang around the corridor and watch them come in. And afterwards, in the dormitory at night, he’d put in a regular performance for the other boys. He could impersonate every single man, woman or child who’d come to the Orphanage that day—the way they walked, the way they moved, every action and gesture. Even though he never said a word, nobody made the mistake of thinking Andrew was mentally deficient. For a while, Dr. Clement had the idea he might be a mute.”

DR. Roger Clement is one of the few persons who might be able to furnish more objective data concerning Andrew Benson’s early years. Unfortunately, he passed away in 1954, a victim of a fire which also destroyed his home and his office files.

It was Dr. Clement who attended Andrew on the night that he saw his first motion picture.

The date was 1949, some Saturday evening in the late fall of the year. The Orphanage received and showed one film a week, and only children of school age were permitted to attend. Andrew's inability—or unwillingness—to speak had caused some difficulty when he entered primary grades that September, and several months went by before he was allowed to join his classmates in the auditorium for the Saturday night screenings. But it is known that he eventually did so.

The picture was the last (and probably the least) of the Marx Brothers movies. Its title was *Love Happy,* and if it is remembered by the general public at all today, that is due to the fact that the film contained a brief walk-on appearance by a then-unknown blonde bit player named Marilyn Monroe.

But the Orphanage audience had other reasons for regarding it as memorable. Because *Love Happy* was the picture that sent Andrew Benson into his trance.

Long after the lights came up again in the auditorium the child sat there, immobile, his eyes staring glassily at the blank screen. When his companions noticed and sought to arouse him he did not respond; one of the Sisters (possibly Sister Rosemarie) shook him, and he promptly collapsed in a dead faint. Dr. Clement was summoned, and he administered to the patient. Andrew Benson did not recover consciousness until the following morning.

And it was then that he talked.

He talked immediately, he talked perfectly, he talked fluently—but not in the manner of a six-year-old child. The voice that issued from his lips was that of a middle-aged man. It was a nasal, rasping voice, and even without the accompanying grimaces and facial expressions it was instantaneously and unmistakably recognizable as the voice of Groucho Marx.

Andrew Benson mimicked Groucho in his Sam Grunion role to perfection, word for word. Then he "did" Chico Marx. After that he relapsed into silence again, and for a moment it was thought he had reverted to his mute phase. But it was an eloquent silence, and soon it became evident that he was imitating Harpo. In rapid succession, Andrew created recognizable vocal and visual portraits of Raymond Burr, Melville Cooper, Eric Blore and the other actors who played small roles in the picture. His impersonations seemed uncanny to his companions, and the Sisters were not unimpressed.

"Why, he even *looked* like Groucho," Sister Albertine insists.

IGNORING the question of how a towheaded moppet of six can achieve a physical resemblance to Groucho Marx without benefit (or detriment of make-up. it is nevertheless an established fact that Andrew Benson gained immediate celebrity as a mimic within the small confines of the Orphanage.

And from that moment on, he talked regularly, if not freely. That is to say, he replied to direct questions, he recited his lessons in the classroom, and responded with the outward forms of politeness required by Orphanage discipline. But he was never loquacious, or even communicative, in the ordinary sense, The only time he became spontaneously articulate was immediately following the showing of a weekly movie.

There was no recurrence of his initial seizure, but each Saturday night screening brought in its wake a complete dramatic recapitulation by the gifted youngster. During the fall of *49* and the winter of 50, Andrew Benson saw many movies. There was *Sorroicful Jones*, with Bob Hope: *Tarzan's Magic Fountain: The Fighting O'Flynn; The Lite of Riley: Little Women*, and a number of other films, current and older. Naturally, these pictures were subject to approval by the Sisters before being shown, and as a result movies depicting or emphasizing violence were not included. Still, several Westerns reached the Orphanage screen, and it is significant that Andrew Benson reacted in what was to become a characteristic fashion.

"Funny thing," declares Albert Dominguez, who attended the Orphanage during the same period as Andrew Benson and is one of the few persons located who is willing to admit, let alone discuss, the fact. 'At first Andy imitated everybody—all the men, that is. He never imitated none of the women. But after he started to see Westerns, it got so he was choosey, like. He just imitated the villains. I don't mean like when us guys was playing cowboys—you know, when one guv is the Sheriff and one is a gunslinger. I mean he imitated villains all the time. He could talk like 'em, he could even look like 'em. We used to razz hell out of him, you know?"

It is probably as a result of the "razzing" that Andrew Benson, on the evening of May 17th, 1950, attempted to slit the throat of Frank Phillips with a table-knife. Probably—although Albert Dominguez claims that the older boy offered no provocation, and that Andrew Benson was exactly duplicating the screen role of a western desperado in an old Charles Starrett movie.

The incident was hushed up, apparently, and no action taken; we have little information on Andrew Benson's growth and development between the summer of 1950 and the autumn of 1955. Dominguez left the orphanage, nobody else appears willing to testify, and Sister Albertine had retired to a rest-home. As a result, there is nothing available concerning what may well have been Andrew's crucial, formative years. The meager records of his classwork seem satisfactory enough, and there is nothing to indicate that he was a disciplinary problem to his instructors. In June of 1955 he was photographed with the rest of his classmates upon the occasion of graduation from eighth grade. His face is a mere blur, an almost blank smudge in a sea of preadolescent countenances. What he actually looked like at that age is hard to tell.

The Bensons thought that he resembled their son, David.

LITTLE David Benson had died of polio in 1953, and two years later his parents came to St. Andrews Orphanage seeking to adopt a boy. They had David's picture with them, and they were frank to state that they sought a physical resemblance as a guide to making their choice.

Did Andrew Benson see that photograph? Did—as has been subsequently theorized by certain irresponsible alarmists—he see certain *home movies* which the Bensons had taken of their child?

We must confine ourselves to the known facts, which are, simply, that Mr. and Mrs. Louis Benson, of Pasadena, California, legally adopted Andrew Benson, aged 12, on December 9th, 1955.

And Andrew Benson went to live in their home, as their son. He entered the public high school. He became the owner of a bicycle. He received an allowance of one dollar a week. And he went to the movies.

Andrew Benson went to the movies, and there were no restrictions. No restrictions at all. For several months, that is. During this period he saw comedies, dramas, Westerns, musicals, melodramas. He must have seen melodramas. Was there a film, released early in 1956, in which an actor played the role of a gangster who pushed a victim out of a second-story window?

Knowing what we do today, we must suspect that there must have been. But at the time, when the actual incident occurred, Andrew Benson was virtually exonerated. He and the other boy had been “scuffling” in a classroom after school, and the boy had “accidentally fallen.” At least, this is the official version of the affair. The boy—now Pvt. Raymond Schuyler, USMG—maintains to this day that Benson deliberately tried to kill him.

“He was spooky, that kid,” Schuyler insists. “None of us ever really got close to him. It was like there was nothing to get close to, you know? I mean, he kept changing off so. From one day to the next you could never figure out what he was going to be like. Of course we all knew he imitated these movie actors—he was only a freshman but already he was a big shot in the dramatic club—but it was as though he imitated all the time. One minute he’d be real quiet, and the next, wham! You know that story, the one about Jekyll and Hyde? Well, that was Andrew Benson. Afternoon he grabbed me, we weren’t even talking to each other. He just came up to me at the window and I swear to God he changed right before my eyes. It was as if he all of a sudden got about a foot taller and fifty pounds heavier, and his face was real wild. He pushed me out of the window, without one word.

Of course I was scared spitless, and maybe I just thought he changed. I mean, nobody can actually do a thing like that, can they?"

This question, if it arose at all at the time, remained unanswered. We do know that Andrew Benson was brought to the attention of Dr. Max Fahringer, child psychiatrist and part-time guidance counselor at the school, and that his initial examination disclosed no apparent abnormalities of personality or behavior patterns. Dr. Fahringer did, however, have several long talks with the Bensons, and as a result Andrew was forbidden to attend motion pictures. The following year, Dr. Fahringer voluntarily offered to examine young Andrew—undoubtedly his interest had been aroused by the amazing dramatic abilities the boy was showing in his extracurricular activities at the school.

ONLY one such interview ever took place, and it is to be regretted that Dr. Fahringer neither committed his findings to paper nor communicated them to the Bensons before his sudden, shocking death at the hands of an unknown assailant. It is believed (or was believed by the police, at the time) that one of his former patients, committed to an institution as a psychotic, may have been guilty of the crime.

All that we know is that it occurred some short while following a local re-run of the film, *Man in the Attic*, in which Jack Palance essayed the role of Jack the Ripper.

It is interesting, today, to examine some of the so-called "horror movies" of those years, including the re-runs of earlier vehicles starring Boris Karloff, Bela Lugosi, Peter Lorre and a number of other actors.

We cannot say with any certainty, of course, that Andrew Benson was violating the wishes of his foster parents and secretly attending motion pictures. But if he did, it was quite likely that he would frequent the smaller neighborhood houses, many of which specialized in re-runs. And we do know, from the remarks of fellow classmates during these high school years, that “Andy” was familiar—almost omnisciently so—with the mannerisms of these performers.

The evidence is oftentimes conflicting. Joan Charters, for example, is willing to “swear on a stack of Bibles” that Andrew Benson, at the age of fifteen, was “a dead ringer for Peter Lorre—the same bug eyes and everything.” Whereas Nick Dossinger, who attended classes with Benson a year later, insists that he “looked just like Boris Karloff.”

Granted that adolescence may bring about a considerable increase in height during the period of a year, it is nevertheless difficult to imagine how a “dead ringer for Peter Lorre” could metamorphose into an asthenic Karloff type.

A mass of testimony is available concerning Andrew Benson during those years, but almost all of it deals with his phenomenal histrionic talent and his startling skill at “ad lib” impersonations of motion picture actors. Apparently he had given up mimicking his associates and contemporaries almost entirely.

“He said he liked to do actors better, because they were bigger,” says Don Brady, who appeared with him in the senior play. “I asked him what he meant by ‘bigger’ and he said it was just that—actors were bigger on the screen, sometimes twenty feet tall. He said, ‘Why bother, with little people when you can be big?’ Oh, he was a real offbeat character, that one.”

The phrases recur. “Oddball,” and “screwball,” and “real gone” are picturesque, but hardly enlightening. And there seems to be little recollection of Andrew Benson as a friend or classmate, in the ordinary role of adolescence. It’s the imitator who is remembered, with admiration and, frequently, with distaste bordering on actual apprehension.

“He was so good he scared you. But that’s when he was doing those impersonations, of course. The rest of the time, you scarcely knew he was around.”

“Classes? I guess he did all right. I didn’t notice him much.”

“Andrew was a fair student. He could recite when called upon, but he never volunteered. His marks were average. I got the impression he was rather withdrawn."

"No, he never dated much. Come to think of it, I don't think he went out with girls at all. I never paid much attention to him, except when he was on stage, of course."

"I wasn't really what you call close to Andy. I don't know anybody who seemed to be friends with him. He was so quiet, outside of the dramatics. And when he got up there, it was like he was a different person—he was real great, you know? We all figured he'd end up at the Pasadena Playhouse."

THE reminiscences of his contemporaries are frequently apt to touch upon matters which did not directly involve Andrew Benson. The years 1956 and 1957 are still remembered, by high school students of the area in particular, as the years of the curfew. It was a voluntary curfew, of course, but it was nevertheless strictly observed by most of the female students during the period of the "werewolf murders"—that series of savage, still-unsolved crimes which terrorized the community for well over a year. Certain cannibalistic aspects of the slaying of the five young women led to the "werewolf" appellation on the part of the sensation-mongering press. The *Wolf Alan* series made by Universal had been revived, and perhaps this had something to do with the association.

But to return to Andrew Benson; he grew up, went to school, and lived the normal life of a dutiful stepson. If his foster parents were a bit strict, he made no complaints. If they punished him because they suspected he sometimes slipped out of his room at night, he made no complaint or denials. If they seemed apprehensive lest he be disobeying their set injunctions not to attend the movies, he offered no overt defiance.

The only known clash between Andrew Benson and his family came about as a result of their flat refusal to allow a television set in their home. Whether or not they were concerned about the possible encouragement of Andrew's mimicry or whether they had merely developed an allergy to

Lawrence Welk and his ilk is difficult to determine. Nevertheless, they balked at the acquisition of a TV set. Andrew begged and pleaded, pointed out that he “needed” television as an aid to a future dramatic career. His argument had some justification, for in his senior year, Andrew had indeed been “scouted” by the famous Pasadena Playhouse, and there was even some talk of a future professional career without the necessity of formal training.

But the Bensons were adamant on the television question; as far as we can determine, they remained adamant right up to the day of their death.

The unfortunate circumstances occurred at Balboa, where the Bensons owned a small cottage and maintained a little cabin cruiser. The elder Bensons and Andrew were heading for Catalina Channel when the cruiser overturned in choppy waters. Andrew managed to cling to the craft until rescued, but his foster parents were gone. It was a common enough accident; you’ve probably seen something just like it in the movies a dozen times.

Andrew, just turned eighteen, was left an orphan once more—but an orphan in full possession of a lovely home, and with the expectation of coming into a sizeable inheritance when he reached twenty-one. The Benson estate was administered by the family attorney, Justin L. Fowler, and he placed young Andrew on an allowance of forty dollars a week—an amount sufficient for a recent graduate of high school to survive on, but hardly enough to maintain him in luxury.

IT is to be feared that violent scenes were precipitated between the young man and his attorney. There is no point in recapitulating them here, or in condemning Fowler for what may seem—on the surface of it—to be the development of a fixation.

But up until the night that he was struck down by a hit-and-run driver in the street before his house, Attorney Fowler seemed almost obsessed with the desire to prove that the Benson lad was legally incompetent, or worse.

Indeed, it was his investigation which led to the uncovering of what few facts are presently available concerning the life of Andrew Benson.

Certain other hypotheses—one hesitates to dignify them with the term “conclusions”—he apparently extrapolated from these meager findings, or fabricated them out of thin air. Unless, of course, he did manage to discover details which he never actually disclosed. Without the support of such details there is no way of authenticating what seem to be a series of fantastic conjectures.

A random sampling, as remembered from various conversations Fowler had with the authorities, will suffice.

“I don’t think the kid is even human, for that matter. Just because he showed up on those orphanage steps, you call him a foundling. Changeling might be a better word for it. Yes, I know they don’t believe in such things any more. And if you talk about life-forms from other planets, they laugh at you and tell you to join the Fortean Society. So happens, I’m a member.

“Changeling? It’s probably a more accurate term than the narrow meaning implies. I’m talking about the way he changes when he sees these movies. No, don’t take my word for it—ask anyone who’s ever seen him act. Better still, ask those who never saw him on a stage, but just watched him imitate movie performers in private. You’ll find out he did a lot more than just imitate. He *becomes* the actor. Yes, I mean he undergoes an actual physical transformation. Chameleon. Or some other form of life. Who can say?

“No, I don’t pretend to understand it. I know it’s not ‘scientific’ according to the way you define science. But that doesn’t mean it’s impossible. There are a lot of life-forms in the universe, and we can only guess at some of them. Why shouldn’t there be one that’s abnormally sensitive to mimicry?

“You know what effect the movies can have on so-called ‘normal’ human beings, under certain conditions. It’s a hypnotic state, for this movie-viewing, and you can ask the psychologists for confirmation. Darkness, concentration, suggestion—all the elements are present. And there’s posthypnotic suggestion, too. Again, psychiatrists will back me up on that. Most people tend to identify with various characters on the screen. That’s where our hero worship comes in, that’s why we have western-movie fans, and detective fans, and all the rest. Supposedly ordinary people come out of the theater and fantasy themselves as the heroes and heroines they saw up there on the screen; imitate them, too.

“That’s what Andrew Benson did of course. Only suppose he could carry it one step further? Suppose he was capable of *being* what he saw portrayed? And he chose to *be* the villains? I tell you, it’s time to investigate those killings of a few years back, all of them. Not just the murder of those girls, but the murder of the two doctors who examined Benson when he was a child, and the death of his foster parents, too. I don’t think any of these things were accidents. I think some people got too close to the secret, and Benson put them out of the way.

“Why? How should I know why? Any more than I know what he’s looking for when he watches the movies. But he’s looking for something, I can guarantee that. Who knows what purpose such a life-form can have, or what he intends to do with his power? All I can do is warn you.”

IT IS easy to dismiss Attorney Fowler as a paranoid type, though perhaps unfair, in that we cannot evaluate the reasons for his outburst. That he knew (or believed he knew) something is self-evident. As a matter of fact, on the very evening of his death he was apparently about to put his findings on paper.

Deplorably, all that he ever set down was a preamble, in the form of a quotation from Eric Voegelin, concerning rigid pragmatic attitudes of “scientism,” so-called:

“(1) the assumption that the mathematized science of natural phenomena is a model science to which all other sciences ought to conform; (2) that all realms of being are accessible to the methods of the sciences of phenomena;

and (3) that all reality which is not accessible to sciences of phenomena is either irrelevant or, in the more radical form of the dogma, illusionary.”

But Attorney Fowler is dead, and we deal with the living; with Max Schick, for example, the motion-picture and television agent who visited Andrew Benson at his home shortly after the death of the elder Bensons, and offered him an immediate contract.

“You’re a natural,” Schick declared. “Never mind with the Pasadena Playhouse bit. I can spot you right now, believe me! With what you got, we’ll back Brando right off the map! Of course, we gotta start small, but I know just the gimmick. Main thing is to establish you in a starring slot right away. None of this stock-con tract jazz, get me? The studios aren’t handing ’em out any more in the first place, and even if you landed one, you’d end up on Cloud Nowhere. No, the deal is to get you a lead and billing right off the bat. And like I said, I got the angle.

“We go to a small independent producer, get it? Must be a dozen of ’em operating right now, and all of ’em making the same thing. Only one kind of picture that combines low budgets with big grosses, and that’s a science fiction movie.

“Yeah, you heard me, a science fiction movie. Whaddya mean, you never saw one? Are you kidding? How about that? You mean you never saw any science fiction pictures at all?

“Oh, your folks, eh? Had to sneak out? And they only show that kind of stuff at the downtown houses?

“Well look, kid, it’s about time, that’s all I can say. It’s about time! Hey, just so’s you know what we’re talking about, you better get on the ball and take in one right away. Sure, I’m positive, there must be one playing a downtown first run now. Why don’t you go this afternoon? I got some work to finish up here at the office—run you down in my car and you can go on to the show, meet me back there when you get out.

“Sure, you can take the car after you drop me off. Be my guest.”

SO Andrew Benson saw his first science fiction movie. He drove there and back in Max Schick's car (coincidentally enough, it was the late afternoon of the day when Attorney Fowler became a hit-and-run victim) and Schick has good reason to remember Andrew Benson's reappearance at his office just after dusk.

"He had a look on his face that was out of this world," Schick says.

" 'How'd you like the picture?' I ask him.

" 'It was wonderful,' he tells me. 'Just what I've been looking for all these years. And to think I didn't know.'

" 'Didn't know what?' I ask. But he isn't talking to me any more. You can see that. He's talking to himself.

" 'I thought there must be something like that,' he says. 'Something better than Dracula, or Frankenstein's Monsters, or all the rest. Something bigger, more powerful. Something I could really be. And now I know. And now I'm going to.' "

Max Schick is unable to maintain coherency from this point on. But his direct account is not necessary. We are, unfortunately, all too well aware of what happened next.

Max Schick sat there in his chair and watched Andrew Benson *change.*

He watched him *grow.* He watched him put forth the eyes, the stalks, the writhing tentacles. He watched him twist and tower, filling the room and then *overflowing* until the flimsy stucco walls collapsed and there was nothing but the green, gigantic horror, the sixty-foot-high monstrosity that may have been born in a screenwriter's brain or may have been spawned beyond the stars, but certainly existed and drew nourishment from realms far from a three-dimensional world or three-dimensional concepts of sanity.

Max Schick will never forget that night and neither, of course, will anybody else.

That was the night the monster destroyed Los Angeles.

END

Fat Chance

Their names were John and Mary, and they lived in a little white frame house with a picket fence all around the front lawn. They owned a fintail car and a TV set with a 21-inch screen, and a power mower and a freezer. John went bowling once a week, on Thursday nights, and Mary subscribed to three of the better women's magazines and cut out all the recipes. They had been married for fourteen years now, and in every respect they were a typical middle-class American couple.

So, naturally enough, John wanted to kill Mary.

Perhaps this is an oversimplification. In John's defense, it must be stated that he was perfectly willing to put up with most of his wife's little ways. He did not object to her pincurled presence at the breakfast table every morning, or to her habit of using baby-talk when she addressed the canary, or the way she appropriated his electric shaver to use on her legs. He had no complaints about her cooking, or the way she ran the household and spent his money. He had long ago realized that she was not a stimulating companion or conversationalist, and he was willing to accept the fact that her domestic habits, in the kitchen, parlor, or bedroom, were dull indeed. All this he resigned himself to putting up with, as most typical middle-class American husbands inevitably do. But there was just one thing he couldn't endure, one crime he could not forgive.

Mary was getting too fat.

She had begun putting on weight a few years after they were married. Eight years ago she had been "pleasingly plump" but presentable. Six years ago she began having trouble finding "her" size in the dresses she selected.

Five years ago she had embarked on what proved to be an endless series of ineffectual diets, all of which failed to remedy the situation because in the end they required that she cut down on her intake of calories. Three years ago she had apparently resigned herself to the situation—she was fat, and she admitted she was fat. Not *too* fat, of course; just plain “heavy.”

Of course Dr. Applegate warned her about stuffing herself; there were examinations and explanations about the way she reddened upon the slightest exertion, about the high blood pressure and the strain on her heart. But the fatter Mary became, the less she felt like exerting herself and the easier it was to just stay home and watch television. Besides, as she told the doctor, John was away almost every night at the store—his pharmacy stayed open until ten, except on Sundays—and there was nothing for her to do. And she didn’t really eat a lot; just nibbled now and then to calm her nerves.

Dr. Applegate had a few words to say about compulsive appetite, and John had quite a lot to say about her sloppy appearance, but these things only seemed to make Mary more nervous. So, of course, she ate.

Now she was positively gross, but John didn’t bother to talk about it anymore. He knew it wouldn’t do any good. She was fat as a pig.

That’s when John began to have these dreams about butchering hogs.

It might very well have ended with that—after all, John was so typically middle-class and middle-aged, and he could have so easily developed a few interests of his own. An ulcer, perhaps, or a coronary condition, or a woodworking shop in the basement.

It took something out-of-the-ordinary to bring him to the actual point of murder.

Her name was Frances.

Actually, Frances Higgins was extraordinary only in John’s eyes; to others she was only a tall, well-preserved woman on the wrong side of thirty, with rather pretty auburn hair. John saw her slimness and was dazzled. He had frequent opportunities to be dazzled, because Frances Higgins was Mary’s best friend.

They had gone to school together (incredible, that fat, candy-chewing, Welk-watching Mary had ever attended business college!) and continued the acquaintance after Mary married and Frances went on to a career as private secretary for a prominent downtown attorney.

Neither John nor Frances realized that they were embarking on an affair. One does not associate passion with middle-aged pharmacy proprietors, or with private secretaries who keep rubber plants in the office. Both of them were quite unprepared for the overwhelming consequences—the compulsive need to constantly see one another, touch one another, and be with one another at any cost to self-respect or self-control.

"I can't stand it, darling!" she told him. "Visiting you and Mary, seeing you together. And then thinking of you and Mary together when I'm *not* there—"

"I know," John sighed. "How do you think it is with me? I don't *want* to be with Mary; I hate the sight of her. Even before I found you, I hated her. Now I can't bear it. And if what you say is true about a divorce—"

Frances nodded sadly. That had been one of the first things they'd thought about; the possibilities of divorce. Frances had not been fool enough to reveal her true feelings about John when she sounded Mary out on the subject. Instead she had chosen the devious method; she had gone to Mary, as her best friend, and hinted that there was something she ought to know. It appeared as though John had been, as she put it "stepping out of line a little." There were nights when he absented himself from the drug store without Mary's knowledge. She refused to mention the sources of her information, but people were talking. And while it might not be really "serious" one never knew; perhaps Mary ought to prepare herself just in case and think about the future. A friendly warning—

Mary shrugged. Yes, she knew John had been restless lately; a wife can always tell. And she and John had been so very close through all the years. But for that very reason, she had no intention of leaving him, now or ever. Let him have his fling, poor dear. Sooner or later, it would blow over.

"But what if he came to you and demanded a divorce?" Frances had persisted. "What if he just walked out on you, cold, and left you for another woman?"

"He wouldn't do a thing like that," Mary answered. "He just *couldn't;* John isn't that type at all." Then her apologetic air had suddenly given way to grim resolution. "But if he did, he'd be sorry, believe me! There are laws, you know. I'd see to it that he paid—I'd get everything I've got coming to me. By the time I was through with him, he and this little tramp, whoever she is, would be good and sorry they ever started anything."

Frances had reported the conversation to John the following evening and they both agreed, sadly but logically, that Mary meant what she said. Moreover, she had the power to execute her threat. A divorce would mean an irreparable financial loss to John, perhaps even the loss of his business. And as for Frances, her elderly employer (who never, under any circumstances, ever handled a divorce proceeding) would fire her handily. Love in a garret is all very veil for moonstruck teenagers, but both John and Frances had reached a time in life where they enjoyed the creature comforts both of them had striven for over the years. And, being human, they felt the equal necessity of protecting their present status as respectable members of the community.

So divorce was out. And the only apparent result of Frances' conversation with Mary was that she began to gorge herself still more heavily. Dr. Applegate's latest diet was tossed overboard and Mary stuffed herself night and day. John would come home and find her consuming candy from the store—indeed, she insisted that he constantly supply her with more each time he put in his appearance from a night of work behind the counter.

"Cheer up," John told Frances, although he didn't really believe she would follow his suggestion. "The way the old sow is going now, she'll eat herself to death in a few years."

"A few years!" Frances looked at herself in the mirror behind the soda-fountain. Then she looked at John. She didn't say anything, but then she didn't have to. John knew what she was thinking. A few years was all they had left, really. A few years of being together as they wanted to be together, or a few years of this endless aching, this ceaseless torment of furtive, fear-filled meeting interspersed with interludes of mocking, maddening pretense. And meanwhile Frances would have to live on in her little cell-like apartment, while John stayed with the fat pig.

That's what Frances called her now. "The fat pig." A year ago she would never have dreamed of describing anyone that way, let alone her best friend. But a year ago she hadn't really known John, hadn't wanted John. So now it was easy for her to say what she really felt. "I can't go on like this. I won't go on! It isn't right. It would be different if she felt anything for you, darling, anything at all. But she doesn't. I've talked to her, and I know. To Mary, you're just property. Another household appliance, something she owns, a convenience that supplies her with food and shelter and performs menial chores around the house for her comfort. When I hinted you might be running around, she wasn't even jealous—just *angry.* The way you get angry at some gadget when you suspect it might be going out of order and cost you something to repair.

"I can't bear to think of you putting up with her any longer; the way she just sits around all day and all night feeding her fat face—why all the time I was talking to her, even when she started to get excited, she kept eating those damned macaroons out of a big box and watching the Arthur Godfrey show. She isn't any good to you. She isn't any good to herself. Nobody would miss her if she died tomorrow."

She stared at John. He lowered his eyes and didn't answer.

"Look, darling. I've been thinking. You're a druggist. Isn't there something you could give her that—"

John shook his head. He continued to avert his gaze as he answered. "I won't lie to you. I've been thinking about that, too. And it wouldn't work. Just because I *am* a pharmacist. Don't you realize that's the very first thing the police would think of if they ever became suspicious? And they *would* become suspicious, because of the medical report. A doctor would have to be called, he'd have to sign the death-certificate, and he'd know right away. Contrary to what you may be thinking, there just aren't any drugs that will do the trick without detection; at least nothing I could get out of stock here. And I couldn't order anything special or obscure without accounting for it. We have to make out reports, they check on us, we're inspected. No, that's out."

Frances put her hand on his arm—her cool, slim hand, with the long fingernails which could claw so deeply when she clung to him.

"All right," she said. "All right. But you've got to do something. I can't take much more of this. In fact, I'm going away."

"Going away?"

There was such anguish in his response that her own voice softened. "Don't be alarmed, darling. It's just a vacation. I've got two weeks coming this year, you know. At first I wasn't even going to take them, but I decided I'd better. All this has made me so nervous lately. There's an aunt and uncle of mine out in Portland—they've asked me to visit them."

"When?"

"Next week. I've got plane reservations for Monday."

John blinked. "But that means I won't be seeing you again, not for almost three weeks."

The nails dug into his arm. He could feel them even through his suitcoat. "Maybe longer than that," she said. "Darling, I meant what I told you. I can't stand living this way any longer. It's up to you, now. Either you find some way out for us, soon, or this is the end."

"But I can't—"

"You must! I don't care if you hit her over the head with a club and lock her in the deep-freeze. All I know is that I've had it. From now on, it's all or nothing." She relaxed her grip. "I didn't tell you this, darling, but my aunt and uncle have been urging me to move out there. They say the climate is wonderful in Oregon, and I'd have no trouble finding another job in Portland. When I visit them, I'm going to investigate the possibilities. Maybe that's the best thing to do, after all."

"No!" John muttered. He stood up taking a deep breath. "You're coming back here, you've got to promise me you'll come back."

"Do I?"

"Yes. And I'll make you a promise, too. I'm going to think of a way. I don't know how, but I'll think of one. When you come back, she'll be gone."

John kept his word. From that moment on, he thought of a way. He thought of a hundred ways during the next few days before Frances' departure. He thought of them by day while he sold bobbie pins and aspirins and band-aids in the store, and he thought of them by night as he watched Mary eating doughnuts in the living-room, belching in the bathroom or snoring stertorously by his side in bed.

He didn't see Frances again during the weekend, but he saw a lot of Mary. There was, he reflected grimly, quite a lot of her to see. She tipped the scales at about 240 now. All weekend long she kept babbling about still another new diet Dr. Applegate wanted her to try. And all weekend long, John kept thinking about ways of killing her. A hundred ways.

But none of them were any good. None of them would work. Oh, he could *murder* her all right, but the point was to get away with it. Get away with it scot free, get away with Frances, sell the damned business and move to Oregon after everything was over. That part would be easy. But the method, the method—

One Sunday night it came to him, just like that. And there was nothing particularly surprising in the phenomenon, because it had been there all the time. Frances had told him; he was a pharmacist and he had access to poisons.

Not obscure poisons, not undetectable poisons, but that didn't matter; he didn't need anything special, as long as he made sure he administered a lethal dose. Of course a physician would examine Mary's body before writing out a death-certificate, but there wouldn't be any trouble.

Because the physician would be Dr. Applegate. And Applegate, in addition to being the family doctor, was the man who had come to John when he needed some extra, but also extra-legal, prescriptions for narcotics. Now he would come to John's aid in *his* hour of need. And he would not demur, he would not question, he most certainly would not talk. If he did, then John would talk too, and Dr. Applegate would be up on criminal charges.

It was really very simple, now that he realized how to solve the medical aspects of his problem. Mary's few friends all knew that she was grossly overweight, that she had put a strain on her heart. So the death-certificate would testify, and nobody would ask any embarrassing questions.

All that remained to be considered now was the exact *modus operandi* to employ.

John thought about it all that day Monday in the store. It kept him from thinking about Frances' departure that morning. On the other hand he was really quite glad that she had left, under the circumstances. It meant she'd be out of town during the time of the tragedy; there'd be no strain of having to simulate grief, attend the funeral, and avoid any accidental betrayal of her true feelings in John's presence. Better still, her absence would rule out any evidence of collusion.

For his own part, it would be ideal for him to dispose of Mary immediately; the funeral and the subsequent winding-up of her affairs would occupy him during the next two weeks and keep him from brooding about Frances' absence. Yes, all in all, this was the ideal time.

And the method?

He had the whole pharmacopoeia at his disposal, everything from acetanilide to zinc phosphide. Yet in the end, John decided upon the simplest toxic agent of all, the old standby of Borgia and bourgeoise alike—plain arsenic. It was fast, reliable, deadly, and that's what he wanted; it didn't in the least matter if the symptoms of arsenic poisoning were apparent to a physician under the circumstances. More to the point, John could easily remove the necessary quantity from his stock without fear of its loss being noted.

Administration of the dosage would be no problem, either. He'd put it into some chocolates; bring Mary a box of candy from the store, as she expected. With her sweet tooth, she'd gobble down one or two—probably just one, because of the taste, but that would be enough. More than enough. Her resultant agonies would be painful to witness, but John had no intention of being present. He'd take her the box tonight but neglect to give it to her until tomorrow when he left again for work. That should give her something to do while she watched her daily soap-operas. Of course, there was always the off-chance that Mary, after swallowing a piece of the candy, would manage to get to the telephone before collapsing. But even then there was little risk; she would either call him or Dr. Applegate. *He* knew how to react, and as for Applegate, John intended to have a chat with him this evening in private before heading for home with the chocolates. It might prove to be a bit messy, but he knew he could convince the physician to cooperate.

As it turned out, he had little difficulty with Applegate. The only really messy part of the entire business was in actually introducing poison into the candy.

There were so many things he hadn't anticipated; opening the box itself and removing the plastic wrapper without damage, so that it could be resealed without detection—carefully melting the chocolate coating and removing a portion of the creamy fondant to make room for the poisonous powder—then re-melting the coating and smoothing it over until each individual piece of candy could survive inspection.

But finally he was finished, and the telltale evidence of his labors obliterated so that Willie Hayes, the assistant pharmacist, would notice nothing tomorrow morning when he opened the store, John made a mental note; he must remember to dispose of the remainder of the chocolates tomorrow night, the moment he was sure Mary had succumbed. If he took care of a few details like that, the rest was just a matter of routine.

The routine of going home, after his brief but satisfactory interview with Dr. Applegate. The routine of greeting the old sow as she grunted up at him from her chair before the TV set; of kissing her fat forehead and asking her the same stupid questions about the same stupid daily routine; of using the bathroom and turning out the lights and settling down in bed next to that repulsive mountain of flabby flesh (for the last time) and composing himself for sleep.

Sleep did not come easily, because anticipation stood in its path; anticipation of the morning, when he'd give her the box of candy and leave for work. He'd let Willie handle the evening shift tomorrow, as was usual on Tuesdays, and come home for supper early. No sense in waiting too long; suppertime would be long enough. She ought to open the box right after lunch, and then—

No, John did not sleep. He merely planned. He planned what he'd do after he found the body and phoned Applegate, planned how he'd break the news to the neighbors and send a wire to Mary's sister in Omaha. While he was at it, he might just as well be practical and consider what undertaker to select. A decent funeral would be expected, but there was no need of being unduly lavish. Mary had two thousand dollars' worth of life insurance. He could probably pick out a nice coffin for about four hundred; the whole deal would run a little under a thousand. Then, with the extra thousand, he could think about something for Frances, later on. On their honeymoon, perhaps. Say a year from now, or a little less. He could sell the business, sell the house here, move out to Portland or some other city. He'd always wanted to see the West Coast anyway; he'd never been there. Maybe Frances and he could take a plane over to Hawaii. That would be nice. Oh, it was all going to be nice, after tomorrow—

The odd thing was that he felt no guilt, no fear, no remorse. It had been Frances who actually came out and suggested the murder, of course, but now he realized that he had been killing Mary for years, in the deepest, darkest dungeon of his own mind. He was completely prepared to accept the act; he welcomed the role of murderer as familiar.

Everything seemed familiar, everything was normal. In the morning he rose and shaved and dressed and Mary had his breakfast ready as usual. She made the usual pretense of passing up the meal—"just coffee and orange-juice, that's enough for me today"—but he knew she'd fry herself the usual three eggs as soon as he was out of the door. And when, at the door, he produced the box of chocolates as an afterthought, she could not conceal her squeal of delight. Hogs always squeal.

John managed to conceal his own elation long enough to peck at her cheek and escape.

Escape. Today was the day he would *really* escape! Escape forever.

Forever is a long time, and before the afternoon was over, John was thinking only of escaping the store itself by five o'clock.

He wanted to get home and get it over with. He didn't actually look forward to seeing what he'd see when he got there, or doing what he'd have to do during the subsequent evening hours. But the whole point was that it was something which *must* be done, and the sooner, the better.

So he drove home, as usual, at Five-thirty, parked the car in the driveway, and went inside.

The kitchen was deserted, and he could hear the idiot drone of the TV set from the parlor beyond. Naturally that's the way it would be; she'd settled down to watch the afternoon programs, opened the box of candy, popped a chocolate into her mouth, and probably never managed to leave the easy-chair.

John tiptoed through the hall. He saw her then, slumped in the big chair, with just the back of her head showing—the back of her head and her big fat neck with those repulsive rolls of heavy flesh. Frances had a slim neck; a pale white adorable neck, with delicious little hollows made for kisses.

John was glad he could think of her under the circumstances because it proved he wasn't frightened, he wasn't going to lose his nerve, even at a time like this. A time like this, when he walked into the parlor to see his wife's dead body—

His wife’s dead body turned and stared at him. And then it rose from the chair. Mary was standing in front of him, big as life. Hideously big, hideously alive. She grinned at him.

“Early tonight, aren’t you?” she said. And then, “John, what *are* you staring at?”

It took a moment for him to answer, and when he did he couldn’t help himself, he had to blurt it out.

“Wh-where are the chocolates I brought you?”

The stupid grin loomed closer. “Surprise! I didn’t eat any of them! Remember that new diet I told you about? Well this time I’m sticking to it. I’ll lose at least twenty pounds, you’ll see. I was telling Frances—”

“Frances?”

“Yes, Frances, silly! Remember she was supposed to leave yesterday? Well, she didn’t. She left today. She stopped by here this afternoon, on her way to the airport. And since she was going on a trip, I gave her the box of candy to eat on the plane.”

“You gave her—?”

“Sure.” Mary giggled. “I figured it was a sort of a farewell present . . .”

The World-TImer

Definition of a time capsule: you put things into it for posterity to find. Definition of a Time Capsule: you put it in you, and find yourself. Dr. Morton Placebo was not at oil sure he liked the idea.

HE MAY or may not have been human.

It was hard to tell, because in a psychiatrist's office, you get all kinds.

But he *looked* human—that is to say he had two arms, two legs, one head, and a slightly worried expression—and there was no reason for the receptionist to turn him away.

Particularly since he was here to give free samples.

"I'm from the Ace Manufacturing Company," he told the girl. "An old established firm. You've heard of us?"

The receptionist, who dealt with an average of ten salesmen a day, nodded politely and proceeded to file her nails.

"As the name indicates, we used to be a specialty house," the salesman continued. "Manufactured all the aces used in decks of playing cards. But lately we've branched out into pharmaceuticals."

"How nice for you," said the receptionist, wondering what he was talking about, but not very much.

"Not ordinary products, of course. We have the feeling that most pharmaceuticals are a drug on the market. So we've come up with something different. As our literature indicates, it's more along the lines of the lysergic acid derivatives. In addition to the usual tranquilizing effect, it alters the time-sense, both subjectively and objectively. Mind you, I said 'objectively'. I'm sure your employer will be interested in this aspect, which is to say the least, highly revolutionary—"

"I doubt it. He's always voted Republican."

"But if I could just discuss the matter with him for a few moments—"

The girl shrugged and cocked her head towards the inner sanctum of Morton Placebo, M.D.

"Nobody rides that couch without a ticket," she told him. "The standard fee is $50 an hour, first-class, or $30, tourist. That's with three on the couch at the same time. He says it's group-therapy, and I say it's damned uncomfortable."

"But I'm not a patient," the stranger persisted. "I merely want to discuss my pharmaceuticals."

"You can't discuss your hemmorhoids without paying the fee," the receptionist drawled. "Doctor isn't in business for your health, you know."

The salesman sighed. "I'll just have to leave a few samples and some literature, I guess. Maybe he'll look it over and see me when I call back later. I'm sure he's going to be interested, because these little preparations will alter the entire concept and structure of psychotherapy."

"Then he won't be," the girl decided. "Dr. Placebo likes psychiatry just the way it is right now. Which is to say, at $50 an hour."

"But he will take the free samples?" the salesman persisted.

"Of course. He'll take anything that doesn't cost money. In fact, he told me it was the free-fantasy which attracted him to the profession in the first place."

She reached out her hand and the representative of the Ace Manufacturing Company placed a little packet of three tablets on her palm.

"The literature is inside," he said. "Please ask the Doctor to study it carefully before he experiments with the dosage. I'll stop by again next week."

"Don't you want to leave your card?" asked the girl, politely.

"Of course. Here you are."

He handed it to her, turned on his heel, and made his exit.

The receptionist studied the card curiously.

It was the Ace of Spades.

Normally, Dr. Morton Placebo wouldn't have paid much attention to a salesman's sample; largely because the very idea of paying was anathema to him.

But, as psychiatrists are so fond of saying—and, quite frequently, demonstrating—the norm is an abstraction.

And Dr. Placebo was always interested in anything which came to him without charge. Perhaps his receptionist hadn't been far wrong when she'd analyzed his reasons for entering a psychiatric career. All psychotherapists have their quirks.

According to his eminent disciple and official biographer, Ernest Jones, the great Sigmund Freud believed in occultism, telepathy, and the magic of numbers. The esteemed Otto Rank developed a manic-depressive psychosis; Wilhelm Reich's rationality was impugned on occasion; Sandor Ferenczi suffered from unbalance due to organic brain-damage.

Compared to these gentlemen, Dr. Placebo's problem was a minor one; he was a frustrated experimenter. Both his frustration and his stinginess had their origin in his childhood, within the confines of the familial constellation.

In plain English, his father was stingier than he was, and when the young Morton Placebo evinced an interest in laboratory experimentation, the old man refused to put up the money for a chemistry set. Once, during his high school years, the young man managed to acquire two guinea-pigs, which promptly disappeared. He was unable to solve the mystery—any more than he could solve the fact that his father, who always carried peanut-butter sandwiches in his lunch-pail, went to work during the following week with meat sandwiches.

But now, at fifty, Morton Placebo, M.D., was fulfilled. He had his own laboratory at last, in the form of his psychiatric practice, and no end of wonderful guinea-pigs. Best of all, the guinea-pigs paid large sums of money for the privilege of lending themselves to his experiments. Outside of his receptionist's salary, and the $25 he spent having the couch resprung after a fat woman patient had successfully re-enacted a birth-fantasy, Dr. Placebo had no overhead at all. With the steady stream of salesmen and their free samples, there was no end to the types of experimentation he could indulge in.

He'd used pills which produced euphoria, pills which produced depression, pills which caused a simulation of schizophrenia, pills which had remarkable side-effects, pills which tranquilized, pills which stimulated; pills which resulted in such fascinating manifestations as satyriasis, virilescence and the sudden eruption of motor reflexes in the *abductor minimi digit.* He kept copious notes on the reactions afforded by LSC, *peyotl* extracts, cantharadin, yohimbine and reserpine derivatives. Whenever he found himself with a patient on his hands (or couch) who did not respond to orthodox (or reformed) therapy, Dr. Placebo—purely in the interest of science, of course—reached into his drawer and hauled out a handful of free pills.

Thus it was that he was grateful when he received the samples from the Ace Manufacturing Company.

"The literature's on the inside," his girl told him. He nodded thoughtfully and stared at the glassine packet with its three yellow pills.

"Time Capsules," he read, aloud.

"Alters the time sense, both subjectively and objectively," the receptionist said, parroting what she remembered from the salesman's pitch.

"Subjectively," snapped Dr. Placebo. "Can't alter it objectively. Time is money, you know."

"But he said—"

"Never mind, I'll read the literature." Dr. Placebo dismissed her and thoughtfully opened the packet. A small wadded-up piece of paper fluttered out onto the desk. He picked it up, unfolded it, and stared at the message.

> *"Nstrctns*
>
> *Nclsd smpls fr prfssnl s nly. ch s cpbl f prdcng tmprl dslctn prmnntly nd tmsltng sr nt nthr cntnm r tm vctr."*

There was more to it, much more, but Dr. Placebo didn't bother attempting to translate. Apparently this literature was written in the same foreign tongue used by general medical practitioners when they scrawl their prescriptions. He'd better wait and get an explanation from his friendly neighborhood drug-store.

He gazed at the samples once again. *Time Capsules*. Catchy name for a pharmaceutical product. But why didn't the Ace Manufacturing Company print its literature in English? He scanned the last line of the literature. *"Dnt gt yr vwls n n prr."*

Made no sense. No sense at all.

But then, neither did most of his patients. So perhaps the pills would do some good. He'd have to wait for a likely subject.

The likely subject arrived at 3 p.m. Her name was Cookie Jarr, which was probably a polite euphemism for "sexpot." But what's in a name?

Sexpot or Jarr, Cookie was obviously quite a dish. She sprawled, in obvious *deshabille,* on the couch, and like the professional stripper she was, proceeded to bare her *psyche*.

After a dozen or so previous sessions, Dr. Placebo had succeeded in teaching her the technique of free association, and now she obediently launched into a form of *monologhorrea*.

"I had a dream under very peculiar circumstances the other night . . . I was sleeping alone . . . and in it I was a geek . . ."

"One moment, please," murmured Dr. Placebo, softly. "You say you were a geek? One of those carnival performers who bites the heads off of chickens?" Cookie shook her auburn locks impatiently. "Not chickens," she explained. "I was very rich in this dream, and I was geeking a peacock." She frowned. "In fact, I was so rich I was Marie Antoinette. And they dragged me out for execution, and I looked at the executioner and said, 'Dr. Guillotine, I presume?' and he said, 'Please, no names—you must be the soul of indiscretion'. So then I woke up and it was four in the morning and I looked out of the window at this big neon sign that says OK used cars. You know something, Doc? I'd never buy an OK used car. And I'd never eat at a place that says EAT. Or one that says fine food. And I'd never be buried in a funeral parlor approved by Duncan Hines. Do you think I'm superstitious? They say it's bad luck to walk under a black cat."

"Perhaps," said Dr. Placebo, sagely, "And then again, perhaps not. We must learn to relate, to adjust. Life is just a bowl of theories." He gazed at her piercingly. "The dream sequence is merely symbolism. Out with it now—face the truth. Why did you really wake up at four in the morning?"

"Because I had to go to the bathroom," Cookie snapped. "No, really, Doc, I'll level with you. It's the love bit. That damn' Max keeps getting me down, because he's so jealous of Harry, only that's ridiculous because I don't like Harry at all, it's really Fred, on account of he reminds me of Jerry, the guy I'm crazy about. Or almost as crazy about as Ray."" She paused, biting her lip. "Oh, I hate men!" she said.

"Ummm-hmmmm," said Dr. Placebo, doodling on a scratchpad with which he was ostensibly taking notes but actually drawing phallic symbols which looked suspiciously like dollar-signs.

"Is that all you got to say?" demanded Cookie, sitting up. "Fifty bucks an hour I'm paying, and for what? My nerves are killing me. You got any happy pills, Doc?”

“Happy pills?”

“Tranquilizers, or like whatever. Remember that stuff you gave me last month?”

“Oh, the cantharides.”

“Yeah.” Cookie smiled happily. “That was the greatest!” Dr. Placebo frowned; his memories did not coincide with Cookie’s, particularly when he recalled the frantic aftermath of that episode when he had to drag her bodily from the ninth floor of the local YMCA. But the experimental urge was strong.

Few men could look at Cookie without feeling the urge to experiment.

“Well, there’s something new,” he said, cautiously.

“Give.”

“It’s called a Time Capsule, Alters the subjective time-sense and—er—all that jazz.” He found himself lapsing into the idiom with Cookie; she was the sort who inspired lapses.

“Meaning what?”

“I’m not quite sure. I imagine it slows down the reflexes.”

“Relaxes you, huh? That’s for baby.”

“You’ll have to take it here, under test conditions.”

“The mad scientist bit? You are gonna hypnotize me and get fresh, is that it?”

“Nothing of the sort. I merely mean I must observe any side-effects.”

“Stuff really turns you on, eh?” Cookie bounced up happily. “Well, I’m for kicks. Spill the pill for me, Bill.”

Dr. Placebo went to the water-cooler and filled a paper cup. Then he carefully extracted one of the yellow capsules from its cellophane container. He handed it and the water to Cookie.

She gulped and swallowed.

Then she lay back on the couch. “Wow, I’m in Dizzyville,” she whispered. “Everything’s like round and round—no squares—”

Her voice trailed off, and for a very good reason.

Now it was Dr. Placebo's turn to gulp and swallow, as he stared down at the empty couch.

Cookie had disappeared.

"Where is she?" Ray Connors demanded. "Come on, where is she?"

Dr. Placebo sighed. He felt a horrible depression, quite unlike the shapely depression which had been left in the couch by Cookie's body.

"She—she cancelled her appointment this afternoon," he said, weakly.

"But I drove her over," the mustached young man insisted. "Went downstairs to do a bit of business—I'm booking a flea circus out in Los Angeles and I had to see about renting a dog so the troupe could travel in comfort—and then I came right back up to your office to wait. The receptionist told me Cookie was inside. So what happened?"

"I—I wish I knew," Dr. Placebo told him, truthfully. "She was lying right there on the couch when she vanished."

"Vanished?"

Dr. Placebo nodded. "Into thin air."

"Thin air, fat air, I don't believe it." Connors advanced on the pudgy little psychiatrist. "Come on, where you hiding the body?"

"She vanished, I tell you," Dr. Placebo wailed. "All I did was give her one of these sample pills—"

He indicated the packet on his desk-top and Connors picked it up. "This says *Time Capsules*, not *Vanishing Cream,"* he snorted. "Look, Doc, I'm not one of your loony patients. I'm an agent, and you can't con me. So you got sore at Cookie and pushed her out of the window—*this* I can understand. Why don't you admit it and let me call the cops? We could get a big spread on this." He began to pace the floor rapidly. "Real headline stuff—JEALOUS HEADSHRINKER SLAYS BEAUTIFUL PATIENT. Why, we'll push the Finch trial right off the front page! Think of the angles; exclusive interview rights, sob-stories to all the women's magazines, a nice big ghostwritten best-seller, a fat movie deal. Doc, you've got a fortune in your lap and you don’t know enough to cross your legs! Now for ten per cent, I’ll handle everything, you won’t have to worry—”

Dr. Placebo sighed softly. “I told you,” he murmured. “She swallowed one of these pills and disappeared.”

“Fiddlesticks,” said Connors. “Or words to that effect.” And before Dr. Placebo could stop him, he walked over to the couch, sat down, ripped a pill from the cellophane confines of the package, and popped it into his mouth.

“No—don’t!” cried the Doctor.

Connors shrugged. “You see? I swallowed one and nothing happens. I’m still here.” He leaned back. “So how about it, Doc, you gonna level with me? Maybe you didn’t push her out of the window. Maybe you carved her up and stuck the pieces in your filing-cabinet. Hey, that’s an eves better angle—mad BUTCHER CARVES CHICK! Or RIPPER GETS FLIPPER WITH STRIPPER. For ten per cent of the gross, I’ll fix it so you—.

Young Mr. Connors fell back on the couch and closed his eyes.

“Hey, what was in that last drink?” he mumbled. “I can’t see.”

Dr. Placebo advanced upon him nervously. “That pill,” he gasped. “Let me phone Dr. Glutea down the hall—he’s a G.U. man, maybe he has a stomach-pump—”

Connors waved him away. “Never mind,” he whispered, faintly. “I *can* see, now.”

This was strange, to say the least, for he still had his eyes closed. Dr. Placebo bent over him, not daring to touch his rigid body.

“Yeah, I can see. Stars. Nothing but stars. You running one of those science fiction movies, Doc?

“Sure, I’m hip now. There’s the world. Or is it? I can see North America and South America, but where are all those funny lines?”

“What funny lines?”

“Like in all the geography books—isn’t there supposed to be latitude and longitude?”

“That’s just on maps.”

"I dig. This isn't a map, Doc. It's for real . . . but it can't be . . . no . . . no . . ."

"Please, Mr. Connors, pull yourself together!"

"I'm pulling myself apart . . . oh, Doc, if you saw what I see . . . like crazy, the world inside a big egg-timer up in the sky . . . sort of an hour-glass, you know the bit?"

"Go on," murmured Dr. Placebo.

"There's sand or something running out of the end, into the other half of the timer . . . and now . . . a big claw, bigger than the whole world . . . reaching out and squeezing . . . squeezing the guts out of the earth *sgueeeee* . . ."

"Go on," repeated Dr. Placebo. But it wasn't necessary, for Connors had already gone on.

The couch was empty.

The little psychiatrist blinked and shook his head. He walked over to the desk and, indulging in a symbolic funeral, buried his face in his hands. "Now what?" he groaned. "Physician, heal thyself."

Then he sat up and took stock of the situation. After all he *was* a physician; moreover, a skilled analyst. The thing to do was to consider the problem logically. There were several obvious courses of action.

First of all, he could call the police. He'd simply explain what had happened, they would simply not believe him, and he'd simply go to the gas-chamber.

Secondly, he could tell his receptionist. She was a sweet young thing, and madly in love with him as a Father-Image. Her reaction was predictable; she'd pop him into her car and they'd drive off to Mexico together, where they'd live happily ever after until she ran off with a bullfighter. No, the gas chamber was better. But why wait, when there were even faster methods?

Maybe he could adopt some of Connors' ideas to his own use. Perhaps he could jump out of the window, or cut himself up into little pieces and hide in the file-cabinet. Merely a logical extension of filing one's fingernails.

No, he was irrational. He needed time to think. Time to think—

Dr. Placebo stared at the cellophane envelope which still rested on his desk where Connors had tossed it after taking the capsule. *Time Capsule.*

"Alters time-sense both subjectively and objectively." Suppose it were true? Once again he picked up the cryptic literature and studied it closely. And all of a sudden he found himself translating fluently. Only the vowels were missing.

> *Instructions*
>
> *Enclosed samples for professional use only. Each is capable of producing temporal dislocation permanently and translating user into another continuum or time vector."*

It was plain English, all right, and even the last line of the literature made sense now. He read it slowly.

"Don't get your vowels in an uproar."

Excellent advice. Advice from an area where the time-sense was altered, where linguistics were attuned to another tempo, where others marched to a different drummer.

Cookie had vanished suddenly, Connors slowly. Why the difference? Perhaps because Cookie had taken the capsule with water and Connors swallowed his dry. Took a while for the gelatin coating to dissolve.

Funny, Connors seeing those hallucinations. All very symbolic—the earth in an egg-timer and somebody squeezing it; the sands of time running forth. Running where? Running out, that's where. In another minute *his* time would run out; the receptionist would run in and ask where his patients were.

He had lost his patients. He had lost his patience. It all came back to the same thing—call the police, run off to Mexico, jump out of the window, or kill himself and stuff his dead body in the file. Sort of a necro-file. Maybe he deserved to die, if he was capable of making puns like that. It would rise up from the grass over his grave to haunt him, for the pun Is mightier than the sward—

No time for that now.

No time.

But a Time Capsule—

He picked up the cellophane container gingerly.

Why not?

It was a way out. Way out, indeed—but a way.

For one idiotic instant, Dr. Placebo took a good hard look at himself. A fat, foolish little man, driven by greed, who had never known love in all his life except as a professional Father-Image. A man surrounded by sensualists like Cookie and opportunists like Connors. What was he doing here in the first place?

"I am a stranger and a Freud, in a world I never made."

It was a terrible realization, a bitter pill to swallow. But swallow it he must. There was no other choice. Fingers trembling, he extracted the last Time Capsule from the packet and raised it to his lips. He swallowed.

There was no sensation. He floated over to the water-cooler and poured a drink. It gurgled down his throat. And then came the kaleidoscope, engulfing him.

Five minutes later his receptionist walked into the empty office. She inspected it, panicked, but eventually recovered and did what any sensible girl would do under the circumstances—called the Bureau of Missing Persons.

There was no answer . . .

There was, of course, no kaleidoscope. Nor did Dr. Placebo find himself entrapped in a cosmic egg-timer whirling in outer space. No huge hand stretched forth to menace his reason and he knew that he had not died.

But there was a dizzying sensation and he waited until it ceased before he allowed the autonomy of his nervous system to resume sway and blinked his eyes open once more.

Dr. Placebo was prepared for almost anything. If, indeed, the Time Capsule had been efficacious, he knew that he could have gone an infinite distance forward or backward in temporal dimension. Long conditioning through attendance at monster-movies led him to expect either the titanic vistas of *papier-maché* cities of the far future or *papier-maché* dinosaurs of the distant past. In either era, he knew, nothing would bear the slightest resemblance to the world he had lived in, except that the women of the future or the prehistoric age would still wear lipstick and mascara.

There was just one thing Dr. Placebo didn't expect to see when he opened his eyes—the familiar walls of his very own private office.

But that's where he found himself, sitting upon his own couch. And most uncomfortably, too, because he was wedged between Cookie and Connors.

"Oh, here you are," Cookie greeted him. "Where'd you go, Doc?"

"Nowhere. I've been here all the time. Where did *you* go?"

"Never left the couch."

"But you weren't here when I showed up," Ray Connors interrupted. "Then I saw you and I lost the Doc."

Dr. Placebo shook his head. "That's not the way it happened at all! First she disappeared and then you disappeared. I stayed right where I am."

"You weren't right where you are a minute ago."

"Neither were you."

"What does it matter? We're back, now," Connors said. "I told you those pills were fakes."

"I'm not so sure. We didn't travel in space, obviously, because we're in the same place we started. But if the capsules affect objective time—"

“So each of us passed out and lost a couple minutes. Big deal.” Cookie sniffed and swayed to her feet.

She glanced curiously at the calendar on the desk. “Hey, Doc,” she called. “What kind of a month is Jly?”

Instantly, Dr. Placebo was at her side. “You’re right,” he groaned. “It does say ‘Jly’. And that’s not my writing on the note-pad. Who is this ‘Dr. My’ ?”

“Maya,” said a soft voice. “We don’t write the vowels but we pronounce them. Indoctrinated associative reflex.”

Placebo turned to confront the newcomer to the room. She was a tall, plump, gray-haired woman with a rounded face and shoe-button eyes. She wore a plain smock and a bright smile.

“You must be the new patients,” she observed, glancing at the trio. “Armond did his job well.” She glanced again at the startled faces before her. “I had hoped for a random sampling, but you actually exceed my expectations.”

“We’re not patients,” Dr. Placebo exploded. “I happen to be a practicing psychiatrist. And expectations be damned—we want explanations!”

“Gladly given.” The woman who called herself Maya moved into the chair behind the desk “Please sit down.”

The trio retreated to the couch.

“First of all,” Dr. Placebo began, “Where are we?”

“Why, here, of course.”

“But—”

“Please.” Maya lifted a plump hand. “You don’t deny that you are here, do you? If so, you’re more disturbed than I thought. Believing yourself to be a psychiatrist is dangerous enough without any further disorientation.”

"I *am* a psychiatrist!" Dr. Placebo shouted. "And this used to be in my office."

"It still is, in another temporal vector. But when you swallowed one of Armond's little capsules, you entered a parallel continuum."

"Hey, how about making with like English?" Cookie demanded. "I don't dig."

"This must be one of those crazy planets," Connors muttered. And she's an alien." He stood up and approached the desk. "So take me to your leader."

"Leader? There is no leader."

"Then who runs things around here?"

"Things run themselves."

"But who's the boss?"

"We all are."

Maya turned back to the girl. "I note your saying that you don't dig. Allow me to reassure you—in our society there is no need for physical labor. I'm sure you'll find a worthy niche here for whatever you are qualified to do."

"Wait a minute," Connors interrupted. "Nobody books this chick except me. I'm her agent."

"Agent?"

"Yeah, her manager, tike. I find her work and collect my ten per cent."

"Ten per cent of what—the work?"

"No, the money."

"Ah, yes, money. I'd forgotten about that."

"You'd forgotten about money?" Dr. Placebo asked, excitedly. "Very peculiar symptom indeed. Rejection of the economic incentive—"

But Maya ignored him. Again she addressed herself to the girl. "Might I inquire just what sort of work you perform?"

"I'm a stripper."

"I see," Maya said, though it was obvious she didn't. "And just what do you strip?"

"Why, myself, of course."

"Oh, an exhibitionist." Maya smiled. "That's very nice. We have lots of them around. Of course, they don't get any recompense for it here, outside of their own pleasure."

"You mean they do it for fun?" Cookie demanded. "Standing up there on a bare stage with the wind blowing up your G-string and letting a lot of meatheads watch you break your fingernails on your zippers—this you call kicks?"

"I've had it," Connors announced, leaning over the desk. "The way I figure it, there's just two answers to the whole *kockamamie* deal. Either you're squirrelly or we've been kidnapped. Maybe both. But I'm calling the fuzz."

"Fuzz?"

"Law. Coppers. Police."

"There is no police force. Unnecessary. For that matter, no method of outside communication."

"You don't have a telephone?"

"Unnecessary."

"Then, lady, you'd better start hollering for help. Because if you don't send us back where we came from in thirty seconds, I am going to lean on you."

"Why wait?" Cookie bounded to her feet, raced over to the window, and flung it open. She leaned out.

"Help!" she yelled. "Hel—" Her voice trailed off. "Holy Owned Subsidiary!" she whispered, faintly. "Sneak a preview at *this!"*

Connors and Dr. Placebo moved to her side and stared out at *this*.

This was the city below them, a city they knew as well as they knew the month of the year.

But the month was Jly, and the city too was oddly altered. The buildings seemed familiar enough, but they were not nearly so high here in the downtown section, nor were there so many of them. No traffic hummed in the streets below, and pedestrians moved freely down the center of the avenues. The sides of the structures were not disfigured by billboards or painted advertisements. But the most drastic difference was a subtle one—everything was plainly visible in clear bright sunlight. There was no smoke, no soot, no smog.

"Another continuum," Dr. Placebo murmured. "She's telling the truth."

"I still want out," Connors said. He balled his fists. "Lady, I'm asking you in a nice way—send us back."

Maya shook her head. "I can't possibly do so until next week. Armond must return and prepare the antidotes."

Cookie frowned. "You still insist we got here just because we swallowed some kind of Mickey Finn? You didn't smuggle us aboard a spaceship or whatever?"

"Please, my dear, let me explain. As I understand it, in your time-vector you employ a variety of drugs—heroin, *cannabis indica*, various preparations such as marijuana and *peyotl* which affect the time-sense."

"I never touch the stuff," Cookie snarled. "I'm clean, see?"

"But there are people who use these concoctions, and it does affect their time-sense. Their subjective time-sense, that is. A minute can become an eternity, or a day can be compressed into an instant."

"I buy that," Connors said.

"My friend Armond has merely extended the process. He perfected a capsule which actually produces a corporeal movement in time. Since it is impossible to move into a future which does not yet exist, or into a past which exists no longer, one merely moves obliquely into a parallel time-stratum. There are thousands upon thousands of worlds, each based upon the infinite combinations and permutations of possibility. All co-exist equally. You have merely gone from one such possible world to another."

"Merely," Cookie muttered. "So Connors was right. You kidnapped us. But why?"

"Call it an experiment. Armond and I worked together, to determine the sociological variations existing in several continuums. You will remain here a week, until he returns. During that time, let me assure you, no harm can possibly befall anyone. You'll be treated as honored guests."

Ray Connors stepped closer to Cookie. "Don't worry, baby—I'll protect you," he said. "You know I only got eyes for—*wow!"*

Wow stood in the doorway. She was about eighteen, with baby-blue eyes, but any resemblance to infancy ended right there.

"This is Lona," Maya told him. "She will be your hostess during your stay here."

Lona smiled up at Connors and extended her hand. "I already have my instructions," she said. "Shall we go now?"

"Over my dead body!" Cookie screeched. "If you think for one minute I'm gonna let you fall out of here with that hunk of *Bastille*-bait, you got another—" It was her turn to react, when the tall young man entered. He too was about eighteen, but big for his age.

"I'm Kerry," he said. "Your host during the coming week. If you'll be good enough to accompany me—"

"I'm good enough," Cookie told him.

"Now wait a minute," Connors interrupted. "If you go off with this gorilla, how'm I gonna protect you?"

"You better worry about protecting yourself, buster," Cookie told him, eyeing the clinging blonde. She turned to the waiting Kerry. "Off to Funville," she said, and swept out.

"Shall we go?" Lona asked Connors. "A week is so little time, and I've so much to learn—"

"That's the spirit," Connors said. "Come on."

As they exited, Dr. Placebo glanced at Maya. "And what is in store for me—something out of *Lolita?"*

The plump woman frowned at the unfamiliar reference. “Why, you’ll be my guest. Stretch out on the couch and make yourself comfortable. I expect there are a few questions you’d like to ask.”

Dr. Placebo was beyond resistance. Meekly, he sank down on his own couch—which wasn’t really his own couch any more—and Maya promptly joined him.

“Really,” spluttered the little man. “This is hardly approved psychotherapeutic procedure.”

“I’m not a psychotherapist,” Maya told him. “I’m your hostess.”

“Need you be so hospitable?” Dr. Placebo protested.

“My feet hurt,” Maya explained, kicking off her shoes and wriggling her toes. “Besides, is there any rule that says you have to conduct a sociological experiment standing up?”

“This is an experiment?”

“Of course. Why did you think Armond brought you here?” She stared at him levelly.

“I was going to ask about that. There are so many things I don’t understand.”

“Look into my eyes. Perhaps I can tell you better in that way than by questions and answers.”

“Hypnosis? Telepathy? Rubbish!”

“Three labels, in as many words. Just forget that you’re a scientist for a moment and open your mind. Look into my eyes. There, that’s better. Keep looking. What do you see there?”

Dr. Placebo stared fixedly. His breathing altered oddly and his voice, when he spoke, seemed to come from far away.

“I see—*everything,”* he whispered.

There was the world he came from, and there was *this* world. But these were only two in a coexistent infinity of possible states of being, each subject to an individual tempo, and each ruled by the Law of the Universe, which men call *If.*

There was a world where the dinosaurs survived, and the birds who ate their eggs perished. There was a world in which amphibians crawled out upon the land and found it uninviting, then swarmed back into the sea. There was a world in which the Persians defeated Alexander, and oriental civilization flourished on the site of what would never be Copenhagen.

Dr. Placebo, guided by some power of selection emanating from Maya’s will, sampled a dozen of these possibilities in rapid succession.

He saw worlds which had developed in a manner very similar to his own, with just a tiny difference.

A world in which a few tiny birds wheeled and took flight at the sight of sailing vessels, so that Columbus never noticed them and sailed on his course to the coast of Mexico where he and his men were quickly captured by the Aztecs and enslaved. So quickly did the inhabitants of Central America learn the arts of their prisoners that within a hundred years they built ships and weapons of their own, with which they conquered Europe . . .

A world where it didn’t rain along the Flemish plains one night early in the nineteenth century—and next morning, Napoleon’s cavalry charged to victory across a dry field instead of tumbling into a sunken road. After winning Waterloo, there was no Bourbon restoration, no ensuing Republic, no Commune, no rise of Communist theory, no German nation or Russian Revolution, no World Wars. And Napoleon VI was emperor of all the earth . . .

Dr. Placebo saw the world in which the Hessians overheard the sound of oars one Christmas Eve at Trenton, and hanged George Washington. He saw the world where an axe slipped, and a young rail-splitter named Abe Lincoln lost his left leg and ended up as the town drunk of Magnolia, 111. He saw a world in which an eminent scientist suffered a minor toothache and neglected to investigate the queer mould which he’d observed, with the result that two of the men who might have subsequently developed atomic power installations died of disease instead, because there was no penicillin to save them, and a whole continent subsequently plunged into war and . . .

Faster and faster the worlds whirled; the one in which Adolf Hitler was just a man who painted houses and Winston Churchill painted landscapes fulltime instead of on Sundays . . . a world in which a real detective named Sherlock Holmes wrote a highly-successful series of stories about an imaginary London physician whom he called Arthur Conan Doyle . . . a world ruled by great apes, and a somewhat similar world ruled by a teen-age aristocracy who were proud of their blue genes.

"Possible," murmured Maya's voice, from a great distance. "All possible. Do you understand, now?"

Dr. Placebo sensed that he was nodding in reply.

"Good. Then, *this* world."

The panorama of impressions expanded, on a multi-leveled basis, so that Dr. Placebo was aware of sweeping generalization and specific example simultaneously. And slowly, a picture evolved. Dr. Placebo sensed and surveyed it with growing horror.

"But it *can't* be!" he heard himself muttering. "No Freud—and Havelock Ellis entering a monastery at twenty-two—no psychiatrists—no wonder you all became disturbed."

"You're disturbed," Maya's voice told him, calmly. "We're not. Look again."

Dr. Placebo looked again.

He looked at a world in which society was conditioned by biological principles, with Kinsey-like overtones; a world which lived in accordance to certain basic postulates. And as the examples expanded, Maya's voice provided accompaniment.

"As in *your* world, the sexual drive in the human male reaches its height between the ages of 16 and 26, whereas in the females the sex-urge is highest between 28 and 40. The only difference is that in *our* world this biological fact is accepted, and acted upon.

“Accordingly, our young men, at 16, are permitted to establish relationships with women of 28 or older, for any period of time up to 10 years. During this decade of association, there is no procreation—and, of course, no domestic or emotional responsibilities.

“At 26, the males are permitted to establish another relationship, again for a decade or so, with the females aged 16 and upwards. During this time, reproduction is encouraged, for the females are young and healthy and the males are fully mature; they lavish affection upon their offspring, who are —of course—turned over to the care of the state when they reach the age of 6.

“As both males and females reach 40 or thereabouts, they can again change their partners and seek permanent or temporary companionship within a domestic relationship—but without reproducing.

“Thus the sex-drive is fully satisfied during its period of maximum intensity, the reproductive urge is given full sway at a time likely to be most beneficial to both parents and offspring, and the social needs of later life are gratified without the rancor, tensions, frustrations, and naggingly permanent obligations which are the fruit of most monogamous marriages in your world. Simple enough, isn’t it?”

Dr. Placebo sat up. He was once again in full possession of his faculties, all of which were strained beyond credulity.

“It’s absurd!” he shouted. “You’re going against all natural instinct—”

“Are we?”

Maya smiled. “Our society is actually founded on a realistic basis—pure biology. In the animal kingdom, ‘fatherhood’ as we know it does not exist. The male may protect its spawn for a time and feed the pregnant female, but it does not safeguard or exhibit affection for its young over any extended period of time, except in your ‘moral’ textbooks for children or the cinematic fantasies of your Mr. Disney. In many species, the male does not even secure food for the female, let alone ‘support a family’. This is an artificial concept, yet your whole society is based upon it and everyone seems to believe that it’s ‘natural’.

"And when your poets and writers and philosophers envision an 'ideal' society, it is merely an extension of the same basic misconceptions with an attempt to put a little more of what you call 'justice' into them—even though one of your own writers, Archibald MacLeish, in his play *J.B.,* so wisely observes, *'There is no justice; there is only love* Ours is a world founded on love, and it begins by setting aright the biological basis of love."

"Monstrous!" Dr. Placebo exploded. "You've destroyed the fundamentals of civilization—the home—the family—"

"The so-called home and so-called family have destroyed the fundamentals of *your* civilization," Maya told him. "That's why you therapists flourish, in a sick world of emotionally-twisted youngsters who grow up as overly-frustrated or overly-aggressive adults; a world of prurience and poverty, of sin without atonement and atonement without sin, a world of bombs without balms. Don't look at your prejudices and your theories; look at the *results.* Are the people of your world truly happy, Doctor? *Are* they?"

"I suppose your way is better?" Dr. Placebo permitted himself a slight sneer.

"See for yourself," Maya suggested. "Look into my eyes—"

Dr. Placebo found himself staring and sharing; it was all a matter of viewpoint, he told himself.

He saw a world in which there was no transference of aggressions, due to sexual problems; a world devoid of jealousy and fear and secret guilts.

There was, to begin with, a complete change in the pattern of courtship; the element of rivalry, of competition, was almost eliminated. Male and female paired first for mutual pleasure, without the necessity of seeking the almost impossible combination of perfect lover, ideal helpmate, good provider, wise companion, and social prize which dogs most young people in their choice.

Later on, male and female paired for the purpose of reproduction; children born of the union of these matings were given a healthy environment of genuine love during the years when they were most loveable—and most subject to lasting psychological impressions. Then, at the time when they became encumbrances in a complex social order, they were turned over to well-organized state establishments for education and proper development.

Finally, male and female allied on the basis of fully matured judgments; as companions with mutual tastes and interests. Their early sexual drives fully satisfied, their reproductive drive fulfilled, their responsibilities in these areas ended, they were free to seek permanent or temporary *liaisons* on a fully realistic basis of compatibility.

Inevitably, there were other—and far-reaching—results.

For one thing, a change in personality-values—the notion of what constituted a "good" or a "bad" individual differed greatly from those prevalent in Dr. Placebo's world.

Less time was wasted, by young and old alike, in false and exaggerated emphasis upon presumably "masculine" or "feminine" attributes. A 16-year-old boy could *honestly* prove his masculinity, with full approval and satisfaction, on a biological basis, instead of spending most of his energy on football, juvenile delinquency, surreptitious indulgence in alcohol and narcotics and the assumption of an outward brutality designed to impress the female. A 16-year-old girl could fulfil her biological function in maternity instead of retreating into narcissism, virginity-fantasies, or a rebellious and unsatisfactory promiscuity.

The young man found sympathy and understanding with an older woman during his initial relationships, and learned to appreciate these qualities. The young woman found steadiness and strength in an older man, and was not impressed by reckless exhibitionism and irresponsible behavior. When the age-patterns of later relationships were reversed, an even greater mutual understanding prevailed; in the final maturity, there was a peace and a satisfaction born of genuine love and respect. In this world, men and women actually *enjoyed* one another's company, and there was no rivalry.

As a result, there was no fear of the domestic situation; it was not a lifelong trap in which both parties became enslaved to a consumer economy because they had to "preserve" a so-called home at all costs. Because there was no set and permanent family status, the element of economic competition virtually vanished; there was no need to pile up great accretions of consumer-goods for conspicuous consumption or as substitutes for genuine satisfactions. And there was no "Inheritance." The state regulated employment and recompense but did so benevolently—for there was no familial tension-source to spawn the guilt, hate, frustration and aggression which resulted in individual crime and mass warfare. Hence a "police state" proved unnecessary. Simple miscegenation had done away with national, racial and religious strife. And the limited 12-year breeding span had done away with population pressure; there was abundance for everyone. Social and economic freedom followed as a matter of course.

Perhaps most important of all, there was a great increase in creativity and the development of aesthetics.

Dr. Placebo began to realize why, when he looked out the window, there were no advertising displays—why there was no need of automotive traffic or "quick communication" devices, or any variety of artificial stimulants, escape-devices, or gilded carrots designed to keep the donkeys in perpetual harness as they tugged their cartloads of woe along the road of life.

There was actually plenty of time to *live* in this world; no claws were squeezing; within this hourglass lay no danger of an eruption or explosion.

All this Maya showed him, and much more. Until at last, Dr. Placebo hurled himself upright again and tore his gaze away.

"Fine!" he commented. "Wonderful! Now I know why you found a youthful hostess for Bay Connors and a young host for Cookie. And maybe it does work, at that."

"I'm glad you think so," Maya said. "Because that was Armond's plan, you see."

"I don't see," Dr. Placebo confessed.

"For some time Armond and others have used the capsules to visit worlds in other time-vectors. Most of them were either too alien in their patterns or too dangerous to explore, but yours seemed most similar to our own.

"Somewhere along the line, your world went wrong in the area of social-sexual relationships, but we have studied your *mores* and folkways and decided to make a radical experiment. Armond believed *we* could, if necessary, live in *your* world—but of course, we wouldn't want to. He then determined to discover if *you* could live in *our* world. That's why he went down to hand out a limited number of sample pills—in the hopes of getting a representative assortment of specimens here for observation. One week should be long enough to determine your reaction—"

Dr. Placebo stood up.

"One minute is all it takes," he announced. "At least, as far as I'm concerned."

"You are a wise man, Dr. Placebo," Maya said. "It didn't take you long to see how sensibly we live, how sanely we have ordered our lives."

"That is correct," Dr. Placebo murmured, and then his voice swept upwards shrilly. "And that's just why I want out of here! I'm a psychiatrist, and a highly successful one. What place have I in a world where nobody is emotionally disturbed or maladjusted? Why, I'd starve to death in a month! I tell you, all this sanity is crazy—"

Suddenly he doubled up and fell back upon the couch.

"Why, whatever is the matter?" Maya cried.

"Ulcer," Dr. Placebo groaned. "Kicks up on me every once in a while. Purely psychosomatic, but it hurts like hell."

"Wait just a minute," Maya soothed. "I'll get you some milk." And in exactly a minute, she was back with a glass. Dr. Placebo drank it slowly and gradually relaxed. It was good milk—damned good milk, he reflected bitterly, and no wonder. In a lousy, perfect world like this, the cows were probably more contented than any back on Earth . . . It figured!

“All right,” said Ray Connors, pausing in his restless pacing to face Cookie and Dr. Placebo. “I got to talk fast because there’s not much time. For a whole week I’ve been figuring out how to get a chance to see you two alone here in the office without Maya or any of the rest of these squares butting in. Because I got a billion-dollar idea by the tail and all I need is your help.”

“How’s Lona?” Cookie inquired.

“The chick?” Ray Connors smiled. “Okay, okay. But that’s not important.”

“Isn’t it?” Cookie frowned. “You know, this guy Terry is the greatest. He’s so—so *sweet*. Treats me like I was some kind of princess—”

“Never mind that jazz,” Connors interrupted. “We got no time.”

“Your idea?” Dr. Placebo inquired.

“Okay, now hear this. This is a square setup, dig? Both of you must have noticed what I did—everybody gets along with everyone else, there’s no muscle, no sweat. Strictly Loveville.”

“Yeah, isn’t it wonderful?” Cookie sighed. “That Terry—”

“I’ll say it’s wonderful!” Connors exulted. “The whole setup is a pushover for a couple of hip operators like us. I started to figure things out, and you know, I think the three of us could really do it?”

“Do what?” inquired Dr. Placebo.

“Why, take over, of course!” Connors eyed him elatedly. “Look, we each got our own racket, and all we need to do is start working. Cookie here knows how to turn on the glamor. Me, I’m the best combination agent and flack in the business. You’re a skull-specialist, you know about psychology and all that crud. Suppose we just team up and go to work?

“Remember that old gag about Helen of Troy, or whoever—the gal whose face launched a thousand flips, something like that?

Started a big war over her, didn’t they? Well, we got Cookie here. Suppose I started beating the drums, working up a little publicity, spreading the word about how this chick is the hottest dish in the whole pantry? And you coach me on the psychology, Doc.

“You know the way they got things rigged here—young gals with middle-aged guys, middle-aged guys with young gals, old folks at home together. Well, it would be the easiest thing in the world to upset the whole applecart. Get the kids excited about Cookie, and the old daddy-types, too. Teach ’em something about sex-appeal. You know what’ll happen. Inside of a month we can start opening up schools—regular courses to give all the chicks lessons on how to really land a man and hang onto him. Give ’em all the techniques on how to play hard-to-get. And that means the works—we bring out a line of cosmetics, fashions, beauty-parlor treatments, promote jewelry and perfume and luxury items.

“We’ll have the men flipping, too. They don’t use money in this crazy system, but we ought to be able to take our cut in land and services. I tell you, they’re so innocent it’ll be like taking candy from a baby. Inside of a year we can work our way up so that we’ll be running the whole world! Think of it—no police, no army, nothing to stop us! Wait until we bring in advertising, and juke-boxes, and hotrods, and pro football and falsies—”

“You intend to transform this world into a reasonable reproduction of our own, is that correct?” asked Dr. Placebo.

“Reasonable is right,” Connors snapped. “What’s to stop us?”

“I am,” said Cookie. “I don’t buy it.”

“You don’t—*what?”*

“I like it just the way it is,” she murmured. “Look, Ray, let’s face it. I’m pushing thirty, dig? And for the past fifteen years I been knocking around, getting my jollies in just the kind of a world you want to turn this into. Well, I had it, and no thanks. What good did it ever do me? I ended up a second-rate stripper, tied to a second-rate nogoodnik like you spending all my extra loot on Doc’s couch.

“I don’t need to be Helen of Troy here. I’m just Cookie, and that’s good enough for Terry—and believe me, he’s good enough for me. I never had it so nice as this past week, believe me. Why louse it up?”

“Okay, so who’s begging? You think you’re the only chick I can promote? I got Lona. She’s plenty square—one of those real sick good-hearted types—but I can twist her around my little finger. So I’ll slap a little makeup on her, teach her a few tricks, and we’re off and running.” Connors wheeled to face Dr. Placebo.

“How about it, Doc? You want in, don’t you?”

“You’re quite sure you can do all this?” Dr. Placebo murmured. “It’s a big program for one man to tackle.”

“Yeah, but we got a natural. No competition. No opposition. Nobody that’s hip. They’ll never know what hit ’em. In fact, they all love each other so damned much they don’t suspect anyone could ever pull a fast one, and they’ll cooperate just for asking.”

Connors walked over to the open window and gazed out at the sunlit city.

“Look at it, Doc,” he said. “All laid out and waiting for us to carve. Like the old saying, the world’s our oyster.”

“That’s right.” Dr. Placebo moved to his side, nodding thoughtfully. “And the more I think it over, the more I believe you. You could do it, quite easily.”

“I damn’ well *will* do it,” Connors asserted. “And if you and Cookie chicken out, I’ll make it alone.”

Dr. Placebo hesitated, shrugged, and glanced at Cookie. She nodded. He put his hand on Connors’ shoulder and smiled.

“A good idea,” he muttered. “Make it alone, then.”

And with an agile dexterity somewhat surprising in an older man, he pushed Connors out of the window.

The press-agent fell forth into the world that was his oyster; Dr. Placebo and Cookie leaned out and watched as he landed in the oyster-bed below.

“Nice work, Doc,” Cookie commented.

He frowned. “That’s the last time I’ll ever do anything like that,” he sighed. “Still, it was necessary to use violence to end violence.”

“Yeah. Well, I got to be running along. Terry’s waiting for me. We’re going to the beach. See you around, Doc?”

“I hope so. I intend to be here for a long, long time.” Dr. Placebo turned, staring past the girl, as Maya entered the room.

“Your conference is over?” the plump woman inquired. “Your friend left?”

Cookie nudged Doc in time for him to match her sudden look of consternation.

“A terrible thing just happened,” she gasped. “He fell out of the window!”

“Oh, no—” Maya gasped and rushed to the open window, staring down. “How awful! And just when he could have joined you in returning home—”

“Home?”

“Yes. Armond is back. The week is up, and he’ll be able to supply you with time-capsules now. You’re free to return to your own world.”

“Do we have to go?” Cookie’s voice quavered. “I—I want to stay here. Terry and I talked things over, and we hit it off so good together, I was hoping I could just sort of like settle down.”

“And what about you?” Maya confronted Dr. Placebo.

“Why—uh—I agree with Cookie. Since that first day, I haven’t had the slightest twinge from my ulcer. Something about the milk you serve, I suppose.”

“But what about your profession?” Maya asked. “You said yourself that there’s no need for a psychiatrist here. And, of course, there’s no way of making money.”

“I’ve been thinking about that,” Dr. Placebo said. “Couldn’t I assist you in your sociological experiments?”

Maya permitted herself a small smile. “Standing up or lying down?” she demanded.

“Er—both.” A slow blush spread over the bald expanse of Dr. Placebo’s forehead. “I mean, each of us is past forty, and under the existing order of things—well—”

"We'll discuss that later," Maya told him, but the smile was broader, now.

She turned to include Cookie in her glance. "Actually, I'm very happy about your decisions. And I shall inform Armond that the experiment was a complete success. I take it your deceased friend intended to stay, also?"

"He did," Cookie answered, truthfully. "He intended to make his mark here," She glanced down at the sidewalk below. "And in a way, I guess he succeeded."

"Then you can adapt," Maya said.

"Of course, we can adapt," Dr. Placebo nodded.

"All right, I shall inform Armond. And we can go into the second stage of the experiment."

"The second stage?" Dr. Placebo echoed.

"Yes. And we'd best hurry because there isn't much time."

Just how Maya got her information, we, of course, shall never know. Perhaps Armond read the papers during his visits to Earth, or maybe he just used his eyes and ears.

At any rate, Maya knew the truth—the truth behind the vision of the green claw squeezing the sands of time from the hour-glassed earth. She knew that time is running short for this world.

Hence the second stage of the experiment; the stage in which not one but thousands of Armonds will descend in mortal guise or disguise, to pass out millions of time-capsules.

Some will come as salesmen, some as pharmacists, some as physicians. Naturally, techniques of distribution will vary; it will be necessary to disguise the capsules as vitamin tablets, tranquilizers, or simple aspirin. But Dr. Placebo and Cookie will both cooperate with their suggestions, and Armond and his crew are both knowledgeable and efficient.

So, sooner or later, chances are you will be handed a capsule of your own.

Whether you elect to swallow it knowingly or not depends upon whether or not you’re willing to swallow the concepts of another world.

If not, of course, there’s always a simple choice.

You can stay right where you are, and let this world swallow you. . . .

THE END

The Final Performance

There's nothing I admire more than a man who is a master of his craft. I knew an undertaker once—lovely fellow—who was without a peer in dressing up a corpse to look handsomer than in life. He once offered to give me a free haircut, and I'd have accepted—except for one thing. I was afraid he didn't know how to cut hair in the back. Heh-heh. But that undertaker was nowhere near as good as Rudolph Bitzner, the character in this grisly masterpiece by one of our favorite macabre authors.

THE NEON INTESTINES HAD BEEN twisted to form the word *Eat.*

I squinted up at it, the sand stinging my eyes, and shifted my overnight bag to the left hand. As I opened the sagging screen door a trickle of perspiration ran down my arm.

Two flies accompanied me into the restaurant. One of them headed for a pile of crullers on the counter and the other alighted on the bald head of an elderly fat man who leaned behind it. The man looked up and the fly buzzed away.

"Evening," he said. "What'll it be?"

"Are you Rudolph?" I asked.

He nodded.

I slid onto a stool. "Fellow named Davis sent me."

"From the garage?"

"That's right—the place up the highway. My car conked out on me coming through the mountains. He had to phone Bakersfield for a new connecting rod. They're bringing it out first thing tomorrow morning, and he figures he can get it installed before evening. But tonight I'm looking for a place to stay. He told me to try here—said you used to run a motel."

"Not any more. Isn't enough traffic along this route."

"I noticed a couple of cabins out in back."

"Closed up." The fat man reached under the counter and came up with a half-empty bottle of beer. He took a long gulp; when he set the bottle down again it was empty. "Look, you could hitch a ride into Bakersfield and come back tomorrow."

"I thought of that, but I hate to leave all my belongings. Everything I own is in that car—guess it broke down because it was overloaded. You see, I'm moving to Hollywood, and I packed all my books and—"

"Hollywood?" The fat man blinked. "You in show biz?"

"I'm a writer."

"Television?"

"Short stories and books."

He blinked again. "That's better. TV is lousy. I can't understand what they think they're doing out there. Now you take a guy like that Ed Sullivan —" He broke off abruptly and stared at me. "Book writer, you say. Ever run into Arnie Pringle?"

"No. I can't say that I have."

"Before your time, I guess. Probably dead by now. He used to write my act."

"You were in show business?"

"Are you kidding? Rudolph the Great. Twenty years top billing, Pantages, Albee, Keith-Orpheum time. Why, I've got three press books full of—"

I rose from the stool.

"Here, where you going?"

I shrugged. “Sorry, but if I’m hitching a ride into Bakersfield I’d better get out there on the highway before dark.”

“Never mind that. Guess we can fix up a cabin for you. Put some clean sheets on the bed.” He swayed along behind the counter, and it suddenly occurred to me that he was just a little bit drunk.

“Look, I wouldn’t want to put you to any trouble,” I told him.

“No trouble. My pleasure.” He jerked his head toward the swinging door behind him. “Rosie!” he yelled.

Rosie came into the room.

She was a tall girl, blonde and amply proportioned, her hair done up in a ponytail. She wore a blue sleeveless smock and her legs were bare.

“Rosie, this is Mr.—”

“Chatham. Jim Chatham.” I nodded at her and she wrinkled up her nose at me. It took a moment before I realized she was smiling.

“Had a little trouble with his car,” Rudolph said. “Davis is fixing it up at the crossroads. He needs a place to stay overnight. You think you can find some clean bedclothes for Number One?”

She nodded at him, still looking at me.

“Better take him out with you. Let him have a look.”

“All right.” Her voice was soft, deeper than I’d expected.

“Keys in my desk, right-hand drawer.”

“I know. I’ll get them.”

She turned and left the room. Rudolph reached under the counter into the cooler and brought out another bottle of beer, a full one this time. “Care for a brew?” he asked.

“Later, perhaps. Let me get settled and then I’ll come back for dinner.”

“Suit yourself.” He bent to open the bottle, then raised it to his lips.

Rosie came back into the room; she carried a bundle of sheets wrapped around a pillow. “All set?” she asked.

I picked up my bag and followed her outside. The sun was setting and the desert wind was cool. Joshuas cast their shadows along the path leading to the cabins in the rear, striping the sand and the backs of her bare calves as she walked along before me.

"Here we are." She halted and opened the door of the tiny cabin. The interior of the little shack was dark and stifling hot. She switched on the light. "It'll cool off in a minute with the door open," she said. "I'll make up the bed for you."

I put down the suitcase and slumped into the single chair next to the gray-filmed window. She went to work, bending over the bed. She had fine breasts. As she moved around to tuck in the sheet, her leg brushed mine.

All at once, for no reason at all, my mind was filled with corny dialogue. *What's a nice girl like you doing in such a godforsaken hole? Let me take you away from all this . . .*

Suddenly I noticed she had stopped working. She stood there with the pillow in her arms, staring at me.

"I heard you talking to him," she said. "About being a writer. What are you going to do out in Hollywood, work for the movies?"

"I doubt it. Probably just keep turning out stories the same as usual. But the climate's better."

"Yes, the climate." She nodded and wrinkled her nose at me. "Take me with you."

"What?"

"I said, take me with you."

"But Mrs. Rudolph—"

"His *first* name is Rudolph. Bitzner."

"Mrs. Bitzner, then—"

"I'm not Mrs. Bitzner either."

"Oh, I just thought—"

"I know what you thought. Never mind that. Just take me with you. All I'd do is ride along. There wouldn't be any trouble." She let the pillow fall on the bed and moved closer. "I wouldn't be any bother at all. I promise."

I stood up, but I didn’t reach for her. I didn’t have to reach for her, because she came right into my arms, and she said, “Please, please, say you’ll take me. You’ve got to. You don’t know what it’s like all alone out here. You don’t know what he’s like. He’s crazy—”

She had this trick of talking without opening her mouth, keeping her lips puckered up, waiting to be kissed, and she wrinkled her nose and I could see the tiny freckles on the bridge, and her skin was marble-cool in all this heat. And it’s one thing to sit back and make sophisticated remarks about cheap waitresses named Rosie *(Rosie, for God’s sake!)* and another thing entirely to feel a waiting, willing woman stirring hard against you and whispering, “Please . . . promise me you will . . . I’ll do anything . . .”

So I opened my mouth to answer, then let it remain open in bewilderment as she stepped back quickly and picked up the pillow again. Then I heard him scuffling along the path and understood.

“Rosie!” he yelled. “You almost finished? Customers!”

“Be right in,” she called.

I stepped over to the doorway and waved at Rudolph.

“Everything all right?” he asked.

“Everything’s fine.”

“Come and eat, then. You can wash up inside.”

I glanced back at Rosie. She was bending over the bed and she didn’t look at me. But she whispered, “I’ll see you later. Wait for me.”

That’s what kept me going through the long evening.

I followed Rudolph, and I cleaned myself up a bit in the filthy washroom, and I shared a steak and french fries with the two flies and their cousins. The customers were in and out for the next couple of hours, and there was no chance to talk to Rudolph or even catch a glimpse of Rosie out in back. Then, finally, it was nine o’clock and the place was empty again. Rudolph yawned and walked over to the door, switching off the *Eat* sign.

"This concludes the evening's performance," he said. "Thanks for the use of the hall." He went over to the swinging door. "You fixing yourself something?" he yelled.

"Yes, just a hamburger. How about you?" Rosie asked.

"Never mind. I'll have myself another beer." He looked at me. "You ready for one now?"

I shook my head and stood up. "No, thanks. It's about time I turned in."

"What's your hurry? Stick around. We'll go in back and chew the fat awhile. To hell with the beer—I've got some hard stuff there."

"Well, I—"

"Come on. Got some things that might interest you. Man doesn't get much chance to talk to anybody halfway intelligent around here."

"All right."

He ran his wrist across the gray stubble around his mouth.

"Tell you what, I'll check the register first. You go right on back, through that door on the end. I'll be along."

So I went back, into the little room on the side of the restaurant which served as a parlor. I saw the overstuffed couch and the easy chair and the desk, the lamp, the TV set, but I didn't do any more than glance at them.

Because I was staring at the walls—the walls of another world.

It was the world of the twenties and the early thirties, a world that belonged to the half-forgotten faces which peered out at me from a thousand photographs reaching from floor to ceiling. Some of the pictures had peeled and faded, just as my memories had peeled and faded in the long years since early childhood. But I could still remember the familiar countenances, and I had at least heard of most of the names scrawled in autograph fashion beneath the unfamiliar ones. I moved around the room, moved around the mementos of what had once been a world called vaudeville.

Here was a skinny, gangling kid called Milton Berle and a buxom young woman named Sophie Tucker. Here was a youthful Bert Wheeler holding an apple and a smiling Joe Cook holding an Indian club and explaining why he would not imitate the Four Hawaiians. There was an entire section of faces in burnt cork—Cantor, Jolson, Lou Holtz in the pre-Sam Lapidus days, Frank Tinney (way before my time), and one mournfully humorous countenance which needed no spurious blackface; the signature read, “To Rudolph from Bert Williams.”

And there were the teams and the acts—Moran and Mack, Gallagher and Shean, Cross and Dunn, Phil Baker and Ben Bernie, Smith and Dale (Dr. Kronkheit, I presume), and a surprisingly handsome young couple who signed themselves “George and Gracie.” And there was an incredible Jimmy Durante—with hair—and Clayton and Jackson.

“See? It’s like I told you, I knew ’em all.” Rudolph had come up behind me, carrying a bottle and glasses. “Here, let me fix you a snort and I’ll show you my press books.”

He made me a drink, but he didn’t get around to the press books. Instead he sprawled out on the sofa, uncorked the bottle again, and uncorked himself.

I don’t know how long he rambled on about the old days and the old ways; about the Six Brown Brothers and Herman Timberg and Walter C. Kelly and Chic Sale. At another time, under other circumstances, I might have hung on to his every word. But right now I was hanging on to other words—“I’ll see you later. Wait for me.”

So I really didn’t listen to him, to Rudolph the Great who used to do Orpheum Time until vaudeville died and then wandered out here into the desert to do a twenty-year layoff as Rudolph Bitzner. Twenty years—why, Rosie, couldn’t be much over twenty herself! And here was this fat old man wheezing away on the couch, drinking out of the bottle now and slobbering. He was getting ready to pass out. He had to pass out soon, he *had* to . . .

“Have ’nother drink?” He sat up, blinking at the bottle. “Oh, ’s empty, well whaddya know?”

“That’s all right,” I told him. “I’ve had enough.”

“Well, I haven’. Got more ’round here someplace. Rosie!” He yelled her name, then lowered his voice as he turned to me. “She’s out front. Told her to clean up the joint. Won’t come near me when I’m drinking, anyhow, you know?” He chuckled. “Don’t matter—I locked the door before I came back. Got the key ri’ here, so she can’t get away. Never get away, not from me.”

He swayed to his feet. “Know what you’re thinkin’—just an old lush, that’s all, just an old lush. But wait till I show you the press books. Then you’ll see who I was. Who I *am.”* He stumbled back against the sofa. “Rudolph the Great. Tha’s me. Keep in practice. Jus’ as good as I ever was. Better. Why, I could go on Sullivan’s show nex’ week . . .”

Then the color drained from his face and he fell back on the couch. I never did get to see those press books. By the time I put his feet up on the sofa he’d started to snore. I took the keys from his pocket and went back into the restaurant. She was waiting for me in the dark. And we went out through the dark to my cabin, and she clung to me in the dark, and that’s the one thing I want to remember, *have* to remember now.

Afterward she told me about herself. She’d been ten when she’d come to Rudolph—her parents stopped by on their way to Texas and dropped her off while they filled a fair date. They were a couple of ex-vaudevillans themselves: the Flying Keenos. They knew Rudolph from the old days and they accepted his suggestion to leave her in his care while they traveled on, because they were down on their luck.

“Only they never came back,” she said. “They never came back. And he tried to find them. He wrote to *Billboard* and everything, but they just disappeared. So I stayed on. Rudolph—he wasn’t so bad then, you know. I mean, he didn’t drink so much or anything. He sent me to school on the bus, bought me clothes and things. Treated me just like he was my father—until I was sixteen.”

She started to cry, very softly. “He isn’t even in love with me, not really. It’s because of living out here all alone in this crazy desert and knowing he’s getting old. Before it started he used to talk about making a comeback on TV. He said it was just like vaudeville, he’d always known there’d be a revival. Then, that summer when I was sixteen, he decided the time was right and he took me with him out to L.A. He went around and saw some agents, had a few auditions. I never did find out what really happened. But when we came back here in the fall he started to drink right away, and that’s when—”

That’s when she tried to sneak off, and he caught her, and he closed up the motel so she couldn’t see anyone or attempt to hitch a ride. He kept her inside the restaurant, didn’t even allow her to go up to the crossroads for supplies, wouldn’t let anyone come near her.

There were times when she thought of running away in the night, but something always stopped her. She realized she owed him something for all the years he’d taken care of her, and he needed her now. He was just an old man, not quite right in the head, and he seldom bothered her any more. Most nights he just drank and passed out. She’d resigned herself to putting up with it until this evening. Then, when she saw me—

“I know. You figured you *could* get a ride, and maybe I’d even take care of you out on the Coast for a week or so, long enough for you to find a job. That’s it, isn’t it?”

“No!” She dug her nails into my arms. “Maybe I *did* think something like that at first. But not *now.* Believe me, not *now.”*

I believed her. I believed her voice and I believed her body, even though it was incredible that I should be lying here in the desert night with this stranger whom I’d known forever.

“It’s all right,” I said. “We’ll go away. But I’d feel better if we told him. Maybe if I talked things over with him, explained, I could make him understand.”

“Oh no—you can’t do that! He’s crazy jealous. I didn’t want to tell you, but one time he caught this truck driver talking to me outside—just talking is all—and he took after him with that big butcher knife. He would have killed him if he caught him, I know he would! And he beat me up so that I couldn't even get out of bed for three days. No, he mustn't even suspect. Tomorrow afternoon, when the car is fixed . . ."

We made our simple plans. The restaurant was closed on Sundays, and it would be better if I didn't attempt to take a meal there—just went straight to the garage and saw to it that Davis got the car fixed as soon as possible. Meanwhile Rosie would have her suitcase packed and ready. She'd encourage Rudolph to drink—not that he generally needed any encouragement from her. Maybe he'd even pass out. If not, she'd go so far as to cut the phone wire, if necessary; just so she could slip out to me with the assurance of getting a head start.

So we talked it all over, calmly and sensibly, and she slipped out of the cabin, and I lay there and tried to sleep. It was almost dawn when I closed my eyes, and the bats were out, flying against the gaudy desert sunrise.

I slept for a long time. When I left the cabin and cut across to the highway, it was almost two o'clock. I walked the mile to the crossroads garage and found Davis working with the car up on the rack. We talked for a while, but I didn't listen to what he said, or to what I said either. From time to time somebody drove up for gas and Davis would have to stop and give them service. The car wasn't ready until a little after five; it was already getting dark.

I paid him and drove off. The motor hummed smoothly, but I almost stripped gears as I shifted. I was nervous, that's all, just nervous. I didn't feel any guilt and I didn't feel any fear. Certainly I didn't feel any horror.

That came later.

That came when I parked in the deepening shadows on the side of the darkened restaurant and went up to the door. This was it. If something had gone wrong—

But nothing could go wrong. I squared my shoulders and took a deep breath, then rattled the doorknob. That was the signal; she'd be waiting to hear me.

Nothing happened. A few flies buzzed against the glass awaiting entry. I rattled the door again softly. It was locked.

Then the figure emerged from the back room.

I recognized Rudolph.

He moved briskly; there was no shuffle in his gait and no stagger either. His face was gray and puffy, but his red-rimmed eyes weren't blinking. He stooped and unlocked the door, motioning for me to come inside.

"Good afternoon," I said. There was nothing else I *could* say, not yet, not until I knew what had happened.

He nodded, moving behind me to lock the door again. I could hear the click of the key and I didn't bother to look around.

That's when the horror came.

Horror is something cold and sharp, biting against the back of your neck.

"Let's go into the other room," Rudolph said. "Rosie has something to say to you."

"What have you done to her?"

"Nothing. She just wants to talk to you. You'll see."

We went down the aisle past the counter, the flies buzzing in our wake. Then we were in the back room and they were all waiting for me there—George and Gracie, Frank Tinney, Lou Holtz. They were all staring, as I stared, at the open torn heap. For a moment, in the dim light, I thought it was Rosie lying there.

But no, Rosie was sitting on the sofa and she was looking at the suitcase too. She didn't say a word when I came in because there was nothing to say now.

I could feel Rudolph's breath on my neck, right behind me. And I could feel the coldness, too, the sharpness, the horror. All at once it went away. I heard the knife clatter to the floor.

"You can thank her for that," Rudolph murmured. "I could have killed you, you know. I wanted to kill you. But she talked me out of it. And now she has something to say to you. Go ahead, Rosie, tell him."

He left me standing there in the doorway and walked over to where Rosie was sitting. He slid down on the sofa beside her and put his arm around her, smiling. Rosie looked up then, but she didn't smile.

The shadows crept across the walls, across the faces of Williams and Bernie and Jolson, across his face and hers. But I wasn't watching the shadows. I was listening to the girl.

"You see how it happened," she murmured. "He walked in while I was packing. He found out."

"All right," I said. "So he found out. I wanted to tell him in the first place. And that he knows, he can let us go."

I was already moving before I finished my last sentence, crossing the room in two strides and scooping up the big, broad-bladed butcher knife from the floor.

"Look," I said. "I've got the knife now. He can't hurt us and he'd better not try. We can walk out of here whenever we please."

She sat there, turning her head to stare at the knife. And he stared, too, tightened his arm around her and stared and smiled while she said, "No. I've changed my mind. I'm not going with you."

"But I don't understand—"

"We talked it all over before you came. I can't go. He needs me so. It's right that I should stay. I belong with him. Can't you see that?"

I shook my head. There was something wrong with her words, something wrong with the way she stared and he smiled. And all at once it came to me as I looked into his fat face off in the shadows. "Maybe I can see," I said. "Rudolph the Great. You were a hypnotist, weren't you? That's the answer, isn't it? You've hypnotized her, that's what you've done—"

He started to laugh.

"You're wrong, mister," he said. "Tell him how wrong he is. darling."

And then she was laughing, too, in a high, hysterical titter. But there was no laughter in her face, and her words, when they came, were soft and somber.

"He's no hypnotist. I know what I'm doing, believe me. I'm telling you to get out. Just get out, do you hear me? Go away and don't come back. I don't want to go to the Coast with you. I don't want you pawing me in some dirty cabin. I know what you are. You're a—"

She began to curse me then; the filth and the foulness poured out of her mouth and she bobbed her head at me in rage, while he just sat there and smiled.

Finally she was finished. "All right," he said. "Have you heard enough?"

"I've heard enough," I said. "I'll go." And I dropped the knife again. It rolled across the floor, and a thin ray of light from the dying sunset streaked the dulled and darkened blade.

I turned to go, and neither of them rose. They just sat there, arms entwined, and stared at me. The shadows blotted out their faces, then pursued me all the way down the hall.

The car stood waiting for me in the twilight. I climbed in, switched on the ignition, pulled away. I must have gone two or three miles before I remembered to turn on my lights. I was in a daze. There was nothing but the shadows, the strange shadows. Shadows in the room, on their faces, on the dulled and darkened knife. *The dulled and darkened knife . . .*

Then it hit me, and I speeded up. I found a phone just ahead in a filling station outside Pono and put in my call.

The state troopers arrived in fifteen minutes, and I told my story as we roared back to the restaurant in their patrol car.

"He must have done *something* to her," I said. "That knife blade was dark with dried blood."

"We'll see," the sergeant told me.

But at first we didn't see, because Rudolph must have heard us coming, and that's when he used the knife on himself. We found it sticking out of his chest there on the floor in the back room, and he was quite dead.

Rosie still sat there on the sofa, staring at us. It was the sergeant who discovered she'd been strangled.

"Must have happened a couple of hours ago," he told me. "The body's getting stiff."

"Strangled? A couple of hours? But I was just here. We were talking—"

"See for yourself."

I walked over and touched her shoulder. She was stiff and cold and there were purple marks on her neck. Suddenly she toppled forward, and that's when I saw how the knife had been used—saw the huge, foot-long gash extending from the back of her neck down across the shoulders. The wound was incredibly deep; I couldn't understand why. Not even when the sergeant called my attention to the blood on Rudolph's right hand.

It wasn't until I saw the press books that I really knew. Yes, we found his press books, and I finally saw them there at the last, finally found out what must have happened in his dark room, in his dark mind, when he walked in and discovered her getting ready to leave.

That's when he'd strangled her, of course, strangled her to death in a crazy rage. But he was sane enough to realize I'd be coming by to get her and that he'd have to find a way to get rid of me.

So he used the knife then and cut the hole, cut it wide and deep. Wide and deep enough so that she could bow and nod and turn her head when he had his hand behind her. Of course I'd heard her talking to me, but the press books explained all that.

He wasn't lying about his notices; they were raves.

And he wasn't lying about hypnotism either. Rudolph the Great hadn't been a hypnotist. He was just one of the best damned ventriloquists in the business . . .

1961

Philtre Tip

Mark Thornwald had an obsession.

Now there is nothing wrong with having an obsession in our society, provided one chooses it wisely. The man who is obsessed with the desire to make money often becomes wealthy. Those who dedicate an entire existence to the pursuit of fame frequently are rewarded, and can deduct the clipping bureau's fee from their income tax. Men who devote a lifetime to excel in athletic pursuits often wind up with a sizable collection of trophies, plus an occasional hernia.

But Mark Thornwald chose the wrong obsession.

Her name was Adrienne.

It is easy to deal with this particular obsession in terms of labels—*mother-fixation, chemical attraction, love object*, and the like.

Unfortunately, Thornwald wasn't satisfied with labeling his obsession. He had other plans for Adrienne. With the sorry result that he wasn't satisfied, period.

The first time he attempted to put his plans into action, Adrienne laughed at him. The second time, she slapped his face. The third time she threatened to call her husband and have Thornwald thrown out of the house.

Thornwald elected to leave quietly, hugging his obsession to his breast, nursing it on the juices of hatred and frustration. As a result, it grew enormously.

Since Adrienne's husband, Charles, happened to be an associate professor of medieval history and since Thornwald was one of the regents of the university, it was no great trick to see that his contract was not renewed. After assuring himself that attrition had set in, Thornwald again approached Adrienne and made what he considered a handsome offer.

Adrienne thought both the offer and Thornwald quite ugly, and told him so. Again he retired to defeat, comforted only by the knowledge that she would never stoop to telling her husband.

Thornwald took stock of the situation. Of course, being obsessed, he did not consider matters realistically. When one is obsessed with avarice, one does not reflect upon the widows and orphans who may purchase the phony uranium stock; the seeker of fame at any price is quite willing to propel his pelvis in public or even run for Congress if needs be. And the man whose obsession takes a delectable, feminine form is equally lacking in ethics and scruples. To him, love laughs at locksmiths and goes into positive hysteria over the spectacle of a faithful wife.

"The end justifies the means," Thornwald told himself, and when he spoke of "the end" in connection with Adrienne it is to be feared he had a very tangible image in mind.

But there were no means available until Adrienne's husband provided them.

They came to Thornwald in the shape of a bulky manuscript, delivered by Charles himself.

"Aphrodisia," *Thornwald murmured.* "A Study of Erotic Stimuli Through the Ages."

"Don't let the title deceive you," Charles told him. "It's a scholarly work. I've been doing research on it now for almost a year—ever since I lost my position at the university. See what you think. Maybe it could stand a chance with Harker House."

"Ah yes, Harker House." Thornwald happened to be on the board of editors of the publishing firm.

"Read it as a professional," Charles urged. "Not as a friend."

This wasn't difficult for Thornwald, since by no stretch of the imagination did he consider himself to be Charles' friend. Rival, or deadly enemy—that was much more to Thornwald's taste, and the nourishment of his obsession.

Still, after Charles went away, he *did* read it professionally. And found the answer.

"Why did you cross out this formula for a love philtre?" he asked Charles, upon a subsequent visit. Thornwald indicated the page. "Here—the one from Ludvig Prinn's *Grimoire,* in the English edition." He read the ingredients listed and the description of effects.

"The meerest droppe, if placed in a posset of wine or sack, will transforme ye beloved into a veritable bitche in heate."

Charles smiled and shrugged. "You've just answered your own question," he said. "Most of the spells and incantations I've set down are mere *curiosa.* I doubt if there's any amorous incitement in owl dung, and calling a tomato a love apple is just sympathetic magic. But a few items come from sources I respect. Ludvig Prinn, for example, was a considerable sorcerer in his day."

Thornwald elevated his eyebrows. "In other words, you decided to omit this particular formula because you're afraid it might work?"

Charles nodded. "Look at the ingredients," he said. "Some of them I never heard of, and heaven only knows what their reaction might be in combination. The ones I do know—yohimbine and cantharadin, for example—are in themselves powerful aphrodisiacs. Added to this other stuff, the result could be trouble."

"Just what I was thinking," Thornwald said. And made a mental note, which he at once underlined in big black encephalographs.

"Interesting material," he told Charles. "Let me pop this in to the editorial staff and we'll see what we can do."

He took the manuscript away and, three weeks later, called Charles. "It's practically set," he said. "You've an afterdinner appointment with the board tonight. Get into town and come back with a contract."

That part was easy. The difficult matter had been to trace down all of the obscure ingredients for the love philtre. Some of them were only approximated in the pharmacopia and others had to be illegally obtained, but Thornwald's obsession brooked no obstacles. And now he was ready.

As soon as he made certain that Charles had indeed departed for the city he made his final preparations. Promptly at eight he knocked on the door of Charles' flat and Adrienne admitted him.

"Charles isn't here," she said.

"I know, but he'll be back before midnight. And then we'll celebrate his new book contract." Thornwald waved the two bottles. "Champagne, my dear, and already iced. One bottle for when Charles returns. One to share between us while we're waiting."

Adrienne eyed the bottles dubiously, but before she could object, Thornwald took over. "Glasses," he demanded. "And a corkscrew, if you please."

"But—"

"It's to be a surprise," Thornwald assured her. And he meant it.

Adrienne, he knew, could never resist surprises. And this particular one she could resist least of all. He didn't tell her about the third bottle—the tiny one—which he carried concealed in his pocket. He waited until she brought in the glasses and the corkscrew and an ice bucket.

"I'll open the bottle," he said. "Man's work." He winked at her. "Meanwhile, why don't you slip into that party dress of yours, so that we can give Charles a proper welcome?"

Adrienne nodded and left the room. It was then that Thornwald opened the champagne, poured it, and added just the merest drop of the love philter to the contents of her glass.

He finished just in time, dropping the little vial back into his pocket just as Adrienne blossomed into the room. His hand trembled, not with apprehension but with anticipation.

Obsession or no, Adrienne was a beautiful woman in her own right; slim, shapely, and quite probably a natural redhead. Thornwald determined to satisfy himself on this latter point the moment Adrienne downed her drink.

She swept over to him, proffering his glass and raising her own as he turned away until he could control his shaking fingers. Now was the time for self-control. In a moment, he felt certain, it could be abandoned.

Thornwald raised his champagne glass.

“To tonight,” he said. And sipped tentatively.

Adrienne nodded, bent her shapely wrist, brought the edge of the glass to her lips, and hesitated.

“Now that we seem to be friends again,” she murmured, “suppose we seal our relationship in a friendly gesture?”

“Such as?”

“Let us take each other’s glasses.”

Thornwald gulped. “Oh no!” he exclaimed. “Believe it or not, I have a cold.”

“Very well.” Again, Adrienne paused.

“Drink up, my dear,” Thornwald urged. “Here’s to surprises.”

“Surprises,” Adrienne echoed. And drank.

Thornwald tossed off the champagne. His hands were trembling again. How long would he have to wait?

Not very long, apparently. For it seemed but a moment before the change came.

Adrienne moved quite close and her voice, like her smile, was soft and caressing.

“I don’t know what you put in my drink,” she murmured. “But you *did* put something in. That’s why you wouldn’t switch glasses with me, isn’t it?”

Thornwald noted the warmth in her voice and felt it was now safe to nod.

“Good,” Adrienne said. “I thought as much. Which is why I switched glasses before I made the suggestion—when I handed you your drink.”

Thornwald blinked. And then the philter took effect and he knew it worked, knew that if the merest drop would transform a woman into a bitch in heat, it was equally potent when administered to a male.

All he could do was tremble and watch the room swirl and listen to Adrienne’s laughter. If only she could understand his motivations, if only she realized he’d acted out of genuine affection! Thornwald knew he had to tell her, so he took a deep breath and opened his mouth.

“I love you,” he barked.

A Home Away From Home

The train was late, and it must have been past nine o'clock when Natalie found herself standing, all alone, on the platform before Hightower Station.

The station itself was obviously closed for the night it was only a way-stop, really, for there was no town here and Natalie wasn't quite sure what to do. She had taken it for granted that Dr Bracegirdle would be on hand to meet her. Before leaving London she's sent her uncle a wire giving him the time of her arrival. But since the train had been delayed, perhaps he'd come and gone.

Natalie glanced around uncertainly, then noticed the phone booth which provided her with a solution. Dr Bracegirdle's last letter was in her purse, and it contained both his address and his phone number. She had fumbled through her bag and found it by the time she walked over to the booth.

Ringing him up proved a bit of a problem—there seemed to be an interminable delay before the operator made the connection, and there was a great deal of buzzing on the line. A glimpse of the hills beyond the station, through the glass wall of the booth, suggested the reason for the difficulty. After all, Natalie reminded herself, this was West Country. Conditions might be a bit primitive.

'Hello, hello!'

The woman's voice came over the line, fairly shouting above the din. There was no buzzing noise now, and the sound in the background suggested a babble of voices all intermingled. Natalie bent forward and spoke directly and distinctly into the mouthpiece.

'This is Natalie Rivers,' she said. 'Is Dr Bracegirdle there?'

‘Whom did you say was calling?’

‘Natalie Rivers. I’m his niece.’

‘His what, Miss?’

‘Niece,’ Natalie repeated. ‘May I speak to him, please?’

‘Just a moment.’

There was a pause, during which the sound of voices in the background seemed amplified, and then Natalie heard the resonant masculine tones, so much easier to separate from the indistinct murmuring.

‘Dr Bracegirdle here. My dear Natalie, this is an unexpected pleasure!’

‘Unexpected? But I sent you a ’gram from London this afternoon.’ Natalie checked herself as she realized the slight edge of impatience which had crept into her voice. ‘Didn’t it arrive?’

‘I’m afraid service is not of the best around here,’ Dr Bracegirdle told her, with an apologetic chuckle. ‘No, your wire didn’t arrive. But apparently you did.’ He chuckled again. ‘Where are you, my dear?’

‘At Hightower Station.’

‘Oh, dear. It’s in exactly the opposite direction.’

‘Opposite direction?’

‘From Peterby’s. They rang me up just before you called. Some silly nonsense about an appendix probably nothing but an upset stomach. But I promised to stop round directly, just in case.’

‘Don’t tell me they still call you for general practice?’

‘Emergencies, my dear. There aren’t many physicians in these parts. Fortunately, there aren’t many patients, either.’ Dr Bracegirdle started to chuckle, then sobered. ‘Look now. You say you’re at the station. I’ll just send Miss Plummer down to fetch you in the wagon. Have you much luggage?’

‘Only my travel-case. The rest is coming with the household goods, by boat.’

‘Boat?’

‘Didn’t I mention it when I wrote?’

‘Yes, that’s right, you did. Well, no matter. Miss Plummer will be along for you directly.’

‘I’ll be waiting in front of the platform.’

‘What was that? Speak up, I can hardly hear you.’

‘I said I’ll be waiting in front of the platform.’

‘Oh.’ Dr Bracegirdle chuckled once more. ‘Bit of a party going on here.’

‘Shan’t I be intruding? I mean, since you weren’t expecting me tonight . . .’

‘Not at all! They’ll be leaving before long. You wait for Plummer.’

The phone clicked off and Natalie returned to the platform. In a surprisingly short time, the station wagon appeared and skidded off the road to halt at the very edge of the tracks. A tall, thin grey-haired woman, wearing a somewhat rumpled white uniform, emerged and beckoned to Natalie.

‘Come along, my dear,’ she called. ‘Here, I’ll just pop this in back.’ Scooping up the bag, she tossed it into the rear of the wagon. ‘Now-, in with you and off we go!’

Scarcely waiting for Natalie to close the door after her, the redoubtable Miss Plummer gunned the motor and the car plunged back on to the road.

The speedometer immediately shot up to seventy, arid Natalie flinched. Miss Plummer noticed her agitation at once.

‘Sorry,’ she said. ‘With Doctor out on call, I can’t he away too long.’

‘Oh, yes, the house-guests. He told me.’

‘Did he now?’ Miss Plummer took a sharp turn at a crossroads and the tyres screeched in protest, but to no avail. Natalie decided to drown apprehension in conversation.

‘What sort of a man is my uncle?’ she asked.

‘Have you never met him?’

‘No. My parents moved to Australia when I was quite young. This is my first trip to England. In fact, it’s the first time I’ve left Canberra.’

‘Folks with you?’

‘They were in a motor smashup two months ago,’ Natalie said. ‘Didn’t the Doctor tell you?’

‘I’m afraid not you see, I haven’t been with him very long.’ Miss Plummer uttered a short bark and the car swerved wildly across the road. ‘Motor smashup, eh? Some people have no business behind the wheel. That’s what Doctor says.’

She turned and peered at Natalie, ‘I take it you’ve come to stay, then?’

‘Yes, of course. He wrote me when he was appointed my guardian. That’s why I was wondering what he might be like. It’s so hard to tell from letters.’ The thin-faced woman nodded silently, but Natalie had an urge to confide. ‘To tell the truth, I’m just a little bit edgy. I mean, I’ve never met a psychiatrist before.’

‘Haven’t you, now?’ Miss Plummer shrugged. ‘You’re quite fortunate. I’ve seen a few in mv time. A bit on the know-it-all side, if you ask me. Though I must say, Dr Bracegirdle is one of the best. Permissive, you know.’

‘I understand he has quite a practice.’

‘There’s no lack of patients for *that* sort of thing,’ Miss Plummer observed. ‘Particularly amongst the well-to-do. I’d say your uncle has done himself handsomely. The house and all but you’ll see.’ Once again the wagon whirled into a sickening swerve and sped forward between the imposing gates of a huge driveway which led towards an enormous house set amidst a grove of trees in the distance. Through the shuttered windows Natalie caught sight of a faint beam of light—just enough to help reveal the ornate facade of her uncle’s home.

‘Oh. dear,’ she muttered, half to herself.

‘What is it?’

‘The guests and it’s Saturday night. And here I am, all mussed from travel.’

‘Don’t give it another thought,’ Miss Plummer assured her. ‘There’s no formality here. That’s what Doctor told me when I came. It’s a home away from home.’

Miss Plummer barked and braked simultaneously, and the station wagon came to an abrupt stop just behind an imposing black limousine.

‘Out with you now!’ With brisk efficiency, Miss Plummer lifted the bag from the rear seat and carried it up the steps, beckoning Natalie forward with a nod over her shoulder. She halted at the door and fumbled for a key.

‘No sense knocking,’ she said. ‘They’d never hear me.’ As the door swung open her observation was amply confirmed. The background noise which Natalie had noted over the tele telephone now formed a formidable foreground. She stood there, hesitant, as Miss Plummer swept forward across the threshold.

‘Come along, come along!’

Obediently, Natalie entered, and as Miss Plummer shut the door behind her, blinked with eyes recently unaccustomed to the brightness of the interior.

She found herself standing in a large, somewhat bare hallway. Directly ahead of her was a large staircase; at an angle between the railing and the wall was a desk and chair. To her left, a dark, panelled door evidently leading to Dr Bracegirdle’s private office, for a small brass plate was affixed to it, bearing his name. To her right was a huge open parlor, its windows heavily curtained and shuttered against the night. It was from here that the sounds of sociability echoed.

Natalie started across the hall towards the stairs. As she did so, she caught a glimpse of the parlor. Fully a dozen guests eddied about a large table, talking and gesturing with the animation of close acquaintance with one another, and with the contents of the lavish array of bottles gracing the table-top. A sudden whoop of laughter indicated that at least one guest had abused the Doctor’s hospitality.

Natalie passed the entry hastily, so as not to be observed, then glanced behind her to make sure that Miss Plummer was following with her bag. Miss Plummer was indeed following, but her hands were empty. And as Natalie reached the stairs, Miss Plummer shook her head.

'You didn't mean to go up now, did you?' she murmured. 'Come in and introduce yourself.'

'I thought I might freshen up a bit first.'

'Let me go on ahead and get your room in order. Doctor didn't give me notice, you know.'

'Really, it's not necessary. I could do with a wash.'

'Doctor should be back any moment now. Do wait for him.' Miss Plummer grasped Natalie's arm, and with the same speed and expedition she had bestowed on driving, now steered the girl forward into the lighted room.

'Here's Doctor's niece.' she announced. 'Miss Natalie Rivers, from Australia.'

Several heads turned in Natalie's direction, though Miss Plummer's voice had scarcely penetrated the general conversational din. A short, jolly-looking fat man bobbed towards Natalie, waving a half-empty glass.

'All the way from Australia, eh?' He extended his goblet. 'You must be thirsty. Here, take this. I'll get another.' And before Natalie could reply he turned and plunged back into the group around the table.

'Major Hamilton,' Miss Plummer whispered. 'A dear soul, really. Though I'm afraid he's just a wee bit squiffy.'

As Miss Plummer moved away, Natalie glanced uncertainly at the glass in her hand. She was not quite sure where to dispose of it.

'Allow me.' A tall, grey-haired and quite distinguished-looking man with a black moustache moved forward and took the stemware from between her lingers.

'Thank you.'

'Not at all. I'm afraid you'll have to excuse him. The party spirit, you know.' He nodded, indicating a woman in extreme décolletage chattering animatedly to a group of three laughing men. But since it's by way of being a farewell celebration.

'Ah, there you are!' The short man whom Miss Plummer had identified as Major Hamilton bounced back into orbit around Natalie, a fresh drink in his hand and a fresh smile on his ruddy face. ‘I’m back again,’ he announced. ‘Just like a boomerang, eh?’

He laughed explosively, then paused. ‘I say, you *do* have boomerangs in Australia? And blackfellows? Saw quite a bit of you Aussies at Gallipoli. Of course that was some time ago, before *your* time, I daresay ‘Please, Major.’ The tall man smiled at Natalie. There was something reassuring about his presence, and something oddly familiar, too. Natalie wondered where she might have seen him before. She watched while he moved over to the Major and removed the drink from his hand.

‘Now see here ’ the Major spluttered.

‘You’ve had enough, old boy. And it’s almost time for you to go.’

‘One for the road.’ The Major glanced around, his hands waving in appeal. ‘Everyone *else* is drinking!’ lie made a lunge for his glass but the tall man evaded him. Smiling at Natalie over his shoulder, he drew the Major to one side and began to mutter to him earnestly in low tones. The Major nodded in sudden, drunken placation.

Natalie looked around the room. Nobody was paying the least attention to her except for one elderly woman who sat quite alone on a stool before the piano. She regarded Natalie with a fixed stare that at once emphasized her role as an intruder on a gala scene. Natalie turned away hastily and again caught sight of the woman in décolletage. She suddenly remembered her own desire to change her clothing and peered at the doorway, seeking Miss Plummer. But Miss Plummer was nowhere to be seen.

Walking back into the hall, she peered up the staircase.

‘Miss Plummer!’ she called.

There was no response.

Then, from out of the corner of her eye, she noted that the door of the room across the hallway was ajar. In fact, it was opening now, quite rapidly, and as Natalie stared, Miss Plummer came backing out of the room, carrying something in her hand. Before Natalie could call out again and attract her attention, she had scurried off down the hallway.

Natalie crossed before the stairs, meaning to follow her, but found herself halting instead before the open doorway.

She gazed in curiously at what was obviously her uncle’s consultation room. It was a cozy, book-lined study with heavy, leather-covered furniture grouped before the shelves. The psychiatric couch rested in one corner near the wall and near it was a large mahogany desk. The lop of the desk was quite bare, save for a cradle telephone, and a thin brown loop snaking out from it.

Something about the loop disturbed Natalie and before she was conscious of her movement she was inside the room, looking down at the desk-top. Now she recognized the loop, of course: it was the cord from the phone.

And the end had been neatly severed from its connection at the wall.

‘Miss Plummer!’ Natalie murmured. ‘That’s what she was carrying a pair of scissors. But why?’

‘Why not?’

Natalie turned just in time to observe the tall, distinguished-looking man enter the doorway behind her.

‘It won’t be needed,’ he said. ‘After all, I *did* tell you it was a farewell celebration.’ And he gave a little chuckle.

Again Natalie sensed something strangely familiar about him and this time it came to her. She’d heard the same chuckle over the phone from the depot station.

‘But you’re playing a joke!’ she exclaimed. ‘You’re Dr Bracegirdle, aren’t you?’

‘No, my dear.’ He shook his head as he moved past her across the room. ‘It’s just that no one expected you. We were about to leave when your call came. So we had to say *something’*

There was a moment of silence. Then, ‘Where *is* my uncle?’ Natalie murmured, at last.

‘Over here.’

Natalie found herself standing beside the tall man, gazing down at what lay in a space between the couch and the wall. An instant was all she could bear.

‘Messy,’ the tall man nodded. ‘Of course it was all so sudden, the opportunity, I mean. And then they *would* get into the liquor.

His voice echoed hollowly in the room and Natalie realized the sounds of the party had died away. She glanced up to see them all standing there in the doorway, watching.

Then their ranks parted and Miss Plummer came quickly into the room, wearing an incongruous fur wrap over the rumpled, ill-fitting uniform.

‘Oh my!’ she gasped. ‘So you found him!’

Natalie nodded and took a step forward. ‘You’ve got to do something,’ she said. ‘Please!’

‘Yes.’ But Miss Plummer didn’t seem concerned. The others had crowded into the room behind her, and stood staring silently; Natalie turned to them in appeal.

‘Don’t you see?’ she cried. ‘It’s the work of a madman. He belongs in the asylum!’

‘My dear child,’ murmured Miss Plummer as she quickly closed and locked the door and the silent starers moved forward. ‘This *is* the asylum . . .’

Crime Machine

For that real deep-down badness, nothing beats the Good Old Days.

“LET HIM alone,” said Stephen’s father. “It’s I *J* a phase they all go through. He’ll snap out of it.” Stephen didn’t really believe he was ever going to snap out of it, but he was grateful that his folks let him alone. He wasn’t worried what they thought, just as long as they allowed him to watch the viddies.

Because his father was rich and connected with the university labs, Stephen had his own viddie set. While his parents indulged their normal tastes and watched the adult mush on the wall downstairs, Stephen stayed in his room and his own world.

It was a wonderful world for any thirteen-year-old—the world called the Good Old Days. There were all kinds of viddie shows about the golden pioneer era of seventy-five years ago, the marvelous time when heroes like Dion O’Bannion and Hymie Weiss walked the Earth.

Stephen watched a show called *Big Jim*—about Big Jim Colosimo and his lovable friends. He watched *The Enforcer;* that was the one about Frank Nitti. He was a man of action, like the heroes of *Johnny Torrio* and *Legs Diamond.* The *Legs Diamond* show was very exciting, because Legs was the one who always danced his way around the bullets in a gang war. That was how he got his name.

Stephen learned a lot about the people who had lived in the romantic past. He knew about flashy gambling men like fancy Arnold Rothstein, who was so suave, and wild rascals like Bugs Moran. There was a new show out called *The Great Dillinger,* and that was pretty good. But the best of all was Stephen's favorite—*Scar face Al.* No wonder it was right up there on top with all the kids; its hero was Scarface Al Capone, the Robin Hood of Chicago, who took from the rich and gave to the poor.

Lots of times Stephen found himself humming the theme song, which went:

Al Capone, Al Capone,
A mighty man who
walked alone>—
Wherever daring deeds
are known,
Men sing the praise of
Al Capone.

Stephen liked the way the machine guns came in on the end of the last line.

But then he liked everything about Al Capone; the way he got his scar—defending his sister from the crooked prohibition agents; the way he disguised himself as "Mr. Brown" when he was fighting the wicked cops and the thieving politicians of Chicago. Stephen knew all about Al Capone, riding in from his hideout in Cicero to bring justice to Chicago and save pretty girls from the evil Vice Squad men.

Stephen joined the "Scarface Al Club" and ate enough cereal to get himself the complete prize outfit—the artificial scar to wear, the bulletproof vest and everything.

He might have been a very happy boy if he hadn't found his uncle's subjectivity reactor.

IT WAS a big machine, resembling nothing quite so much as the genetic control, which his uncle had also invented. The genetic control was a large box in which a woman could sit and be bombarded by radiations which would eradicate recessive and undesirable traits in her ova, thus leading to the reproduction of healthy offspring. This apparatus, marketed under the popular name of “Heir Conditioner,” was an immediate success because it was a failure. Nothing really happened, but the woman who used it felt better; in that respect it resembled a face cream and had the additional advantage of being much more expensive.

The machine which Stephen found—the subjectivity reactor—was a failure because it was a success. Not an immediate failure, for it was never manufactured or marketed, but a gradual failure. His uncle had devised it while still a young man, many years ago, and it too was a large box which contained a variety of mechanisms. Under their stimulus, the subject became capable of materializing, in tangible three-dimensional form, his immediate thought patterns.

The gradual failure came about because his uncle had experimented upon himself, and pretty soon his home was overflowing with tangible three-dimensional forms to which his wife objected; most particularly to the redheads.

Consequently the subjectivity reactor was carted off to the storage building behind the university labs where Stephen’s uncle and father both worked, and no one ever mentioned that it was also capable, by virtue of the same principle of materializing thought, of acting as a time machine.

Stephen himself found it out by accident one day when he was playing around, exploring the deserted warehouse premises. He noticed the boxlike apparatus and crawled inside, pretending for the moment that he was a hero like Pretty-Boy Floyd, hiding out from the dirty old Feds. He didn’t pay much attention to the blinking lights and whirling mirrors which became self-activating the moment he stepped inside and closed the door; he was wishing he had a gat to protect himself in case that archfiend J. Edgar Hoover showed up. He’d show him!

“All right, copper—you asked for it.” And he’d reach in his pocket and pull out his gat, like this, and—

Stephen felt the weight before he saw it. And then he *did* pull his hand out of his pocket and he *was* holding a gat. A real roscoe, a genuine equalizer. Stephen stared at it, his thoughts whirling faster than the mirrors.

The gun—where did it come from? He’d just thought about it and it was here; how could that be? Actually, he hadn’t even thought, just *wished.* The way he wished he had been around back in the Good Old Days, the way he was wishing now. He’d give anything to see real live American History in the making, like that morning of St. Valentine’s Day in the garage on Clark Street . . .

THE MIRRORS revved faster and suddenly they disappeared. Everything disappeared.

It was like a viddie dissolve, so Stephen wasn’t frightened. He knew the next scene would come up right after the commercial. Only this wasn’t viddie and there was no commercial. The next scene came up when the blurring stopped and he found himself sitting in the same box, the mirrors still whirring and he heard the noise outside. Stephen blinked, tugged at the door of the compartment, opened it, and saw the machine guns spit.

He knew where he was now. He’d seen it a dozen times on viddie, imagined it a thousand more. The garage, at eleven o’clock in the morning; the two executioners disguised in the uniforms of the hated police were mowing down the seven finks.

Stephen, in the subjectivity reactor, had materialized at the very instant the firing started. For thirty seconds Stephen stared at the finks as they writhed and fell. And during those thirty seconds the finks became men. Men who wriggled and flopped after the bullets struck, until the two swarthy hoods in uniform stepped up and completed their work with revolvers. There was blood on the wall and floor, and a terrible, acrid odor.

The two men noticed it, too, and commented harshly in Italian. One of them laughed and spat on the floor.

Stephen wasn't laughing and he felt that unless he got out of here right away he'd do more than spit. He started to close the door and it was then that the executioners looked up and saw him.

"What the hell—" said the short one, and raised his revolver. His taller companion slapped it out of his hand.

"Wait," he said He stooped, picked up the machine gun, and faced Stephen in the doorway of the compartment "Awright, kid, how you get in here? Where you come from?" He raised the muzzle of his weapon. "C'mon, talk!"

Stephen talked. It was hard to, with the choking in his throat as he watched the machine gun muzzle that was like a cruel mouth—almost as cruel as the mouth of the man who held it.

It was hard to explain, too, and he wasn't sure he understood the situation himself. Certainly the shorter assassin didn't understand, because he nudged his companion and said, "He's nuts! Hurry up and give it to him—we gotta get outa here!"

The big man with the machine gun shook his head. "Shaddup and listen. Dincha hear? This thing goes through time. It's a time machine. Aincha never heard?"

"Porko Dio! No such thing—"

"No such thing now." The big man nodded. "But maybe they invent it later on. That's where this kid comes from. How else you figure he got here if not like that?"

"So?"

"So you wanna get outa here, right?"

"Sure, to St. Louis. That's where Al said we'd get the payoff—"

"You know what kinda payoff we end up with." The big man made a nasty noise in his throat. "But suppose we *really* get out. Suppose we go back with the kid here."

He took a step forward. “Awright, kid, whaddya say?” He stared at Stephen.

STEPHEN stared back, into his face and the face of his companion. Here was his chance to take two real live gangsters back into his own world, his own time. It was something he’d always dreamed of. Only he had never dreamed they really looked and talked like this. And he had never dreamed the reality he glimpsed over their shoulders; the torn, huddled, oozing reality on the garage floor. Now he knew all there was to know about the Good Old Days.

The big man raised his weapon. “Hurry up! We ain’t got all day. Whaddya say?”

Stephen knew he himself didn’t have all day, or even another minute. Fortunately, thanks to the viddies, he knew what to say and how to say it. His hand squeezed the trigger inside his coat pocket. First the small man went down and then the big man.

As the big man fell there was a short, staccato burst from the machine gun. Several bullets punctured the shell of the compartment. But by this time Stephen had slammed the door of the subjectivity reactor and hurled himself to the floor in quivering panic, wishing with all his being that he was back where he belonged . . .

He might have had a hard time explaining the presence of the gat if he hadn’t wished so strongly that it would disappear. As it was, he emerged from the subjectivity reactor completely unscathed. To all intents and appearances, Stephen was unchanged by his experience.

The thing of it was that from then on he never watched *Scarface Al* any more.

“He’s growing up,” his mother said proudly.

“What did I tell you?” his father said. “I knew he’d get over it. All it takes is time.”

When he said, “All it takes is time,” he suddenly remembered Stephen’s visit to the old storage building. That night he made a trip there himself to confirm his suspicions.

And there, as he expected, he found the subjectivity reactor—and the telltale impressions left by the machine-gun bullets.

Funny thing, they didn’t penetrate with half the force of the old Colt .45s. Stephen’s father stopped until he found the holes near the bottom of the machine. Stephen’s father remembered the day *those* shots had been fired.

Sometime he’d have to tell Stephen. Tell him how it was when *he* was a boy, when the machine had first been invented. Like father, like son.

Stephen’s father gazed at the Colt bullet holes and smiled reminiscently. He too had had his viddie heroes in his youth. Only *his* personal favorite happened to be the *real* 1870 Wyatt Earp.

The Man Who Looked Like Napoleon

"A classical example of megalomania," said Doctor Rand—and one of the finest stories by the author of PSYCHO.

THE MAN WHO LOOKED LIKE NApoleon got out of the elevator on the fifth floor. He walked down the hall slowly, his head bent so that his forelock bobbed up and down. He might have brushed his hair back, but only if he took his hand from inside the front of his coat.

He couldn't take his hand out now—later, perhaps, but not now. He was being watched.

All eyes were on the Emperor as he moved along the hall. Nd one was visible, but he knew they were there—behind the doors, watching. Watching and whispering. Well, let them whisper. He was protected by the Old Guard and the people were behind him, to the last man.

He came to the door. The sign on it read: *G.K. Rand, M.D.*

It was the right door. It was the right time. It was the right day—the anniversary of Austerlitz. The sun had been shining this morning, so he knew it was the right day. The sun of Austerlitz shone. And now he was coming here for his appointment—and because of *something else.*

A little pulse moved up and down in his throat when he thought of that *something else.* Well, he'd be able to handle things. *Able was I ere I saw Elba—*

He entered the office and the woman in white said, “Mr. Throng, good to see you—the doctor will be free in a moment. Please sit down.”

“Merci.”

She didn’t look at him directly, didn’t notice the way he glared when she called him. Mr. Throng.

He couldn’t help glaring when people called him that. He knew why they did it—they hated him and tried to pretend they didn’t recognize him. Well, they would have to recognize him now. He would tell the doctor.

“You may go in now.”

She didn’t even say “Sire”; she didn’t how. But he ignored the insults and strode into the other room. He took short steps walking with dignity, still keeping his hand under his overcoat. Doctor Rand was sitting in his chair waiting for him, and he walked over and lay down on the couch and closed his eyes.

Doctor Rand was talking to him, and from far away he heard his own voice saying, “I’m fine, thanks,” and “Yes, I’m ready,” and “There’s a lot I must tell you.”

The doctor said, “Aren’t you going to take off your coat before you begin?”—but he shook his head without opening his eyes. He liked it better this way, with his coat on and his eyes, closed. Then there were epaulettes on the coat, and underneath was the uniform of a colonel of artillery, the one he had worn ever since 1802, ever since Josephine had—

“Just relax now,” said the doctor. “You know how to do it. Say whatever comes into your mind.”

The doctor was master here. So begin. Let nothing interfere, let no man say him nay.

“Ney,” he said. “Peter Ney. Marshal of France. Yet he denied me before my return from Elba. He said nay to me. Peter denied me. He denied Our Lord. Peter denied Our Lord, and I was Peter Ney’s Lord, come to redeem all France.

“Why don’t they tell the truth, Doctor? I wrote them of my escape to America. I can show you the letter. I told them to go to Paris and look into the Tomb. They'd find it empty and then they'd know. The Tomb was empty after the third day. Read your Bible."

He paused. Doctor Rand prompted. "Please, Mr. Throng. You aren't letting yourself go. Just say words—not sentences or thoughts. You understand, we've been all through this before. I want you to say just what comes into your mind—"

It was no use. He could see that now. He sat up on the couch and opened his eyes, swinging around until he could face Doctor Rand.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I'm afraid I'll have to give this up. You can't help me."

"If you'd only take my suggestion," the Doctor said softly. "Arrange to go away for six months. I could recommend a nice private sana—"

He interrupted the doctor quickly. "So that's it. History repeats itself. You want me to abdicate, go to St. Helena." He laughed grimly, and the laugh abruptly soared to a falsetto giggle.

The doctor shrugged. "It's the sensible solution, Mr. Throng. I think I can speak frankly to you. This is getting out of hand. We haven't arrived at the adjustment I hoped for. You seem to be retreating from reality and—"

Retreating. He was rubbing it in about Russia again. But that had not been a retreat. Winter, and the firing of Moscow—how could he be held responsible for things like that? He wasn't responsible. That was the answer. He just wasn't responsible any more. That's what they had told him last week down at the office, when they fired him. The doctor didn't know about that part yet. And there were a lot of other things the Doctor didn't know, either. He found himself shouting.

"You're a fool, Doctor! It is *you* who refuses to face the truth. You earn a living by telling everyone who. comes in here he's crazy. That's your little scheme and I see through it. No crazy ones and there'd be no business for men like you, would there? That's how it works, isn't it, Doctor?"

The nurse peeked into the room and the doctor nodded. She said, "Please, there are people waiting. I must ask you to restrain yourself, Mr. Throng."

"Restraint, eh?" he said when she disappeared again. "I know all about restraint. Remember two years ago, I got a sample of restraint at the hospital when I had my concussion. They put me in a jacket without sleeves and strapped it up my back. If it hadn't been for Josephine I'd still be rotting away in some damned asylum."

The doctor patted his shoulder and he calmed down. His voice dropped. He had to explain once more.

"Why don't you admit the truth, Doctor? Admit that I'm a product of reincarnation. There's no accident or coincidence about the way I look, though I didn't recognize myself until after the automobile accident. But it all ties in, doesn't it? Didn't I marry a woman named Josephine? And you know my family history. I'm a Corsican—I proved that to you. It's simple reincarnation, Doctor.

"All my life I moved in a dream—until that accident. Then I had time to lie there and think while my head healed up. Even when they put me in the psycho ward I knew exactly what I was doing, I let them keep me there so I could work things out in my mind, until I, was absolutely sure it all made sense. Don't you see now, Doctor?"

Doctor Rand rose. "Really, Mr. Throng, you're not making the progress your wife hoped for when she suggested that you visit me. With your permission I'd like to speak to her again about this."

"Go ahead. Why don't you call her now? You. have my house phone number."

He sat there grinning as the doctor dialed, waited, and finally replaced the phone.

"No answer, is there? I could have told you that. I was going to tell you, anyway. That's really why I came here today—to tell you. History repeats itself, Doctor. You see, I finally forced the issue. This morning I got rid of Josephine."

"You're divorcing her?"

"I wanted to. Believe me I did. I begged and pleaded with her. I told her it was long past time. I must have children, an heir. It's written in History.

But she refused to consider divorce—she absolutely refused. And so I got rid of her."

"You—"

As the doctor started to ring for the nurse, he stood up and pulled his hand out from under the overcoat. He brought the gun with it. "Don't do that, Doctor," he said. "Just sit quietly. That's better. Now I'm going to tell you all about it. Yes, I got rid of her this morning. You can't stop History, but you can alter it.

"That's the secret, Doctor. You can alter History, and this time things will be different. That's the real reason for reincarnation. It gives a man a chance to improve on Destiny. And I have my chance now. No Waterloo this time!

"I started to change the pattern this morning, when I killed her. She's lying on the bed at home now, but nobody knows. The police don't know. Fouche will never discover her. I won't tell. And you won't tell. Because I'm going to kill you, too."

He moved the gun up; stepped closer. The doctor was watching him, but he must be believing at last, because he didn't stir. He just sat there and listened while the truth came out.

"You see, I never recognized you before, you traitor. I didn't realize the whole truth—that we are *all* reincarnations of our past selves. How could I guess that it was you who betrayed the Revolution and then betrayed me to the Allies and the Bourbons? If I'd killed you the first time I would have saved myself. This time I'll make sure you're out of the way. I recognize you now. Doctor Rand, is it? I know your *real* name—Talleyrand!"

The doctor glanced toward the door. Hadn't the nurse looked in and out again just then, before he could stop her? That meant she was calling help. Yes, now he could hear footsteps and sounds in the outer office. She had summoned the police. But they couldn't stop him; this wasn't Waterloo, this time there wouldn't be any Waterloo.

Doctor Rand turned and said, "Mr. Throng!"—but it was too late. He aimed carefully and felt his finger move along the trigger.

He closed his eyes, started to squeeze and pull. Everything was squeezing and pulling and Josephine was dead, Talleyrand must die, he would raise a new army and they'd come out of the grave for him, the Marshals of France: Lannes, Bessieres, Davout, Marmont—all of them. Squeeze and pull—now!

Then he fired and Talleyrand was lying on the floor and there was shouting. A man in a blue uniform ran into the room and he had a gun too—he was the Enemy.

Squeeze and pull, run for the window, it was jammed, the glass, splintered all around him, trapped, the Old Guard dies but never surrenders, aim and fire now, this is Waterloo after all, jump, black and falling—*Vive I'Empereur . . .*

The man who looked like Napoleon lay on the sidewalk. He was quite dead by the time Doctor Rand got downstairs.

Doctor Rand felt lucky that he had got off with only a flesh wound in the shoulder. Thank goodness the nurse had got the police in time!

He stared down at poor Mr. Throng and shook his head. A classical example of megalomania. It was almost a comic strip cliche—the man who thought he was Napoleon. Poor Throng, with his theories of reincarnation, his pitiful misinterpretation of coincidence!

Doctor Rand turned as the homicide men arrived. They were talking to the patrolman who had burst into the office and fired the shot which had saved his life and sent Mr. Throng tumbling out of the window.

He walked up to the patrolman and held out his hand. "Thanks," he said. "If you hadn't got him in time—"

"That's my job," said the patrolman. "That's what I'm here for."

"Well, I appreciate it, Mr.—"

"Wellington," said the patrolman. "Wellington's the name."

The Model Wife

Murder, like love, is blind, it knows neither color nor creed.

Elise, for example, was a quadroon, and although she was perhaps the most beautiful member of the *demi-monde* in all Haiti, she was a devout churchgoer.

Josef was a mulatto and, despite his education, not a communicant of any established religion. Although he held a reputable position as display manager for the leading department store in Port-au-Prince, he came originally from the hill country where voodoo still flourishes.

Elise had *her* particular reputation, yet she gave up a promising career to marry Josef. And Josef, who some had predicted might have developed his native talent as a brilliant artist and sculptor, contented himself instead with routine commercial employment in order to support his voluptuous young bride.

They made a somewhat incongruous couple, but for a while all went happily.

Yet in the end, as the old saying goes, blood will tell. Elise was civilized, and Josef was still a savage.

Because Elise was civilized, she fell in love with Monsieur Carnet. Monsieur Carnet was an octoroon, and quite wealthy. He wanted to take her with him to Paris. “A wonderful life awaits you, *cherie,”* he told her. “You will pass for white easily enough, just as I do. France is a civilized country. I have means, we will travel, you shall be able to do all the things you were meant to enjoy—”

Because Josef was a savage, he did not understand all this, even though Elise carefully explained what such an opportunity meant to her.

For a short time, therefore—because *she* was civilized—Elise toyed with the idea that she might have to kill Josef in order to be free of him.

But in the end—because he was a savage—Josef relapsed into a sullen silence and let her go. He did not attempt to interfere with her meetings with Monsieur Carnet, and he did not contest the divorce proceedings. A month later, Elise sailed away with her new protector.

Before sailing, it is probable that she prayed to her God, just as it is unmistakable that Josef prayed to his. Yet, in the end, she left.

Elise and Monsieur Carnet planned to be married on shipboard, en route to France, and a gala ceremony had been arranged. Unfortunately, on the second day of the voyage she became ill. It was an illness which baffled the ship's doctor.

When the fever came, early that morning, Elise complained that she was burning up. Within an hour she was screaming in agony. They packed her beautiful body in cold sheets moistened with water, but she continued to writhe in torment, and no amount of morphine could dull the pain.

No amount of morphine could dull the shock of witnessing her rapid and incredible disintegration—the way the flesh seemed to literally melt from her face and body. In the end there was only a bubbling, coagulated horror.

It was not a civilized way in which to die, but then Josef was a savage. And although he was never formally indicted for murder, he did suffer some consequences. In fact, that very day, he lost his job as display manager of Port-au-Prince's leading department store.

They could not understand why a man of his experience would insist on making a window dummy of his own to place on display that morning. They could not see why he modeled the face and features to an uncanny resemblance of his former wife. And above all, they could not comprehend why he chose to mold the dummy of soft wax—wax that was bound to melt and run after an hour or so in the hot sun.

Untouchable

Race was bored with India.

"Nothing moves here, you know?" he griped. "Where's all the action?"

He gave everybody a hard time on location, and finally Simon took him on. Simon had always been able to handle him, and maybe that's why he was directing the picture; a lot of people just wouldn't work on a Race Harmon production any more.

"Look, sweetheart," he said. "I know it's been a drag. First the heat, then the rains, and then everybody coming down with the trots. Miller called me last night about the budget figures—the way he screamed, I could have heard him loud and clear from Bel Air without a phone."

"Let him suffer," Race muttered, then took a gulp of his drink. "I should bleed for him, shacked up in that air-conditioned office with the blonde throw-rug and a chick to match? Why doesn't he get off his butt and fly over here? We'll see how he likes being cooped up with a bunch of dumb niggers—"

"Please!" Simon frowned. "That's one of the things I wanted to warn you about. They're *not* niggers. Why, some of those technical people we hired out of the studios down in Bombay could run rings around any crew in Hollywood. The trouble is, they hear you talking on the set and they resent your attitude. Just remember, you're not home now."

"You can say that again! Where I come from, we call a spade a spade, whether he wears shoes or not. And that's the way it's gonna be, so kindly lay off the jazz, huh?"

Race poured himself another drink.

"Another thing," Simon said. "Aren't you hitting the sauce a little hard lately?"

"Got to get my kicks somewhere, Pops. This is a nothing unit here, you know? When we came out, I thought I had it made with Gladys, only she's got eyes for that Method swish, that Parker. So I gave a little play to this script-girl of yours, Edna what's-her-name—"

"Messy," Simon sighed, "You didn't have to break into her trailer."

"All right, she made a federal case out of it." Race emptied his glass and thumped it down. "What am I supposed to do for some action? I'm hurting bad."

"Control yourself. We'll wrap up our location shots and be out of here in two weeks."

"Two weeks? Look, Dad, this is Race Harmon you're talking to, not Barry Fitzgerald. I may have to make the scene with some of that dark meat. Noticed all these chicks in the sarongs, or saris, whatever you call 'em, parading down by the river. Why I spotted one yesterday, she couldn't be a day over fifteen, but she had a pair of—"

"Race, that's murder!" Simon shook his head. "I saw you talking to that girl, and so did everyone else. You're lucky you left it at that—one false move and there'd have been a riot. I only hope they didn't hear about it up at the palace."

"So what?"

"Can't you understand? These people are *not* ignorant savages. You've met the Maharajah; he's an intelligent man. If you want me to lay it on the line, I think he's a damned sight more civilized than you are."

"He's a nigger."

"Well, you'd better not make any such statements tonight," Simon said. "Don't forget, we're invited to the palace for dinner."

"I'll eat here."

"You'll come to the palace." Simon's voice was firm. "It's important, Race. We're guests here in the Maharajah's territory. We've rented his land, hired his people. We can’t afford to offend him. I want you to show up sober and on your best behavior. Is that clear?”

“I dig you, Pops.” Race waved his glass. “Okle-dokle, it’s a take. Who knows? Maybe he’ll give us a little of that old Southern hospitality—”

His Highness’ hospitality was lavish and unmistakable. There were twenty at table, including Race, Simon, and the principals of the cast. The only representative of the household was a bearded Sikh introduced as his major-domo.

“Actually, Singh commanded the palace guard,” the ruler explained. “But since I am no longer the official ruler of this territory, he too has been deposed. We have bowed to progress, or at least, to governmental decree.”

“They took away your title, huh?” Race paused and emptied his champagne-glass for the fourth time since starting dinner. “I suppose they got to your harem, too.”

“Harem? But I am not a Moslem, my dear fellow.”

The Maharajah was plump, middle-aged, bespectacled, and he wore a conservative grey tweed suit. But his complexion was unmistakably swarthy, and people with unmistakably swarthy complexions didn’t go around calling Race Harmon “my dear fellow.” Even if they *did* serve damned good champagne.

“Come off it!” he said, holding out his glass for a re-fill. “Everybody knows you rajahs have a ball. I’ll bet the joint is full of—whaddya call ’em?—concubines. Yeah, concubines. That’s the bit.”

“Sorry. I’m afraid I can’t oblige you, Mr. Harmon.”

“Never mind the double-talk,” Race told him. “Bring on the dancing-girls!”

“Devadasi? But they are confined to their temples.”

“So take me to your temple!” Race laughed, then broke off as he realized none of the others were joining in.

Their host stared at an imaginary spot on the table-linen before him. “Perhaps it would be wise, Mr. Harmon, if I explained the customs of my country. Nonbelievers are not welcomed in our places of worship. There is a certain—prejudice, shall we say? You see, there is still ignorance amongst my people. They even resent the notion of a stranger making approaches to an untouchable such as the water-carriers in the village. It would be most embarrassing if an outsider were to exhibit any—any—”

“So you heard about that, eh?” Race waved his glass. “I get the message. Hands off, is that it? Yankee, go home!”

“Please, Mr. Harmon—”

“Never mind. You heard about old Race, huh? That’s why you locked up the harem.”

“I assure you, I have only one wife. At the moment she happens to be in Chandigarh.”

Race grinned. “Sure, sure! Well let me tell you something. Nobody upstages me. And if I want a little poontang. I’m gonna get it, understand?”

“Poontang?”

“What’s the matter, don’t you niggers understand plain English?” Race stood up, ignoring Simon’s frantic gestures. “Ah, forget it. Where’s the head?”

The Maharajah glanced at his major-domo. Race watched them, fuzzily alert for any indication of anger. That’s what he was waiting for; just let the nigger blow his top and he’d *really* let him have it.

But there was no anger, merely a quiet exchange of glances and a nod. Then the bearded Sikh rose and gestured politely, and Race followed him out of the room and down a long, dim corridor.

For a moment there was silence in the dining-hall behind; then everybody started talking at the same time.

Covering up, Race thought. *The civilized bit.* Well, if they wanted to be polite to niggers, that was their business. He knew what he wanted to do. What had that snotty spade said about his wife? She was in Chandigarh, whatever the hell that was. And damned lucky, too, because right now, if he could find her—

“Here we are, sir.” The bearded man bowed and stepped aside. Race entered a modern bathroom.

Three minutes later he stood before the mirror, shaking the cold water out of his eyes and towelling off his face. He’d sobered somewhat, just enough to feel a sneaking distaste about rejoining the others in the banquet hall. Maybe the best idea was to just cut out of here.

He stepped into the deserted hall, moving slowly past a row of closed doors. That is, they had all been closed when he’d followed the major-domo. Now one of them was slightly ajar. As he passed he was aware of a heavy, musky scent drifting into the corridor.

Race halted and peered into a darkened room. Moonlight filtered from barred windows. Beneath the windows was a couch. On the couch was a girl. Her sole garment was a sari and she wore no ornaments, but such artifices were unnecessary. She was young and lovely, and when she rose in wide-eyed wonder the sari’s transparency disclosed an undulating outline in the moonlight.

“Hot damn!” Race muttered, as he stepped inside and closed the door behind him.

“Sir—”

The girl moved back towards the couch.

“Sir—”

Race grinned and reached for her.

“Please, sir—it is not permitted. I am untouchable—”

Her knees pressed against the couch and she fell. Race held her there, his hands ripping the soft silk, feeling the incredible warmth of the body beneath. For a moment she writhed in resistance, until his lips found the fiery crater of her mouth, its tongue erupting like molten lava.

“Untouchable, huh, baby?” Race whispered. “Well, we’ll see about that —”

He left her sobbing, without a word. What the hell was there to say? He knew she wouldn't talk, and neither would he. If anybody back at the banquet hall asked where he'd been so long, he'd tell them he got sick, heaved his cookies. Nobody would ask any questions.

But sometime, just before they pulled out of here for good, he'd find a way of letting the big shot know what happened. That uppity nigger thought he was so damned smart, handing out a line of jazz about keeping his hands off all the chicks. It would be a real gasser to see his face when he found out somebody had scored with his wife.

Well, he'd played it cute, but Race had the last laugh. It was all he could do to keep from busting out right now when he walked back into the banquet scene.

He got a real break because nobody even seemed to notice when he came in. They were all standing around some guy in a white suit at the head of the table.

Then the Maharajah looked up and saw him.

"Feeling better, Mr. Harmon?" he asked.

Race nodded, trying to hold back the grin.

"That is good. But if you felt ill, you could consult with Dr, Ghopura here."

Race blinked. "You called a doctor for me?"

"No—it just so happened that he arrived a few moments ago. I asked him to fly in from Bombay."

"It is useless, of course," the little doctor said. "If what you told me is true, the patient will surely die. All I can hope to do is ease the suffering in the terminal phase. I only pray you have kept her isolated."

"Wait a minute!" Race's throat was dry. "Your wife—she's sick—?"

"My wife is in Chandigarh, Mr. Harmon. We are speaking about a poor untouchable from the village whom I discovered the other day. I brought her here immediately to avoid panic and the spread of contagion, for the disease is invariably fatal."

"What disease?"

“Cholera.”

The other shrugged and turned away. “Doctor, if you will come with me, please? Her room is right down the hall—”

Everything started to whirl. Just before he fell. Race thought he saw the Maharajah exchange a smile with his major-domo, but he could not be sure. All he was sure of was the pain flooding his head and throat. It was a hot pain—hot and throbbing, like the mouth and tongue of the untouchable.

1962

The Professor Plays It Square

BUGSY and me are sitting in the lobby of the Cash Inn when this character crawls out of the woodwork.

"Look," Bugsy says. "A cucumber!"

Sure enough, this is a real green specimen—a little old shriveled-up guy with white hair and rimless cheaters. He is carrying an umbrella and wearing a black suit which he probably bought special for President McKinley's funeral.

"Dig the umbrella," Bugsy whispers. "What do you suppose he's lugging that around for?"

"Maybe he thinks the roof leaks," I tell him.

But I have to admit the old party is kind of conspicuous, because the Cash Inn caters to what you might call an exclusive-type clientèle. Meaning normal citizens like Bugsy and me, who don't go in for whacky outfits. For instance, this evening Bugsy is dressed for dinner in an ordinary black-and-white checked suit with matching spats, and I am sort of casual in orange trousers and a green shirt to match the beret.

Most of the other guests in this pad wear pretty much the same kind of duds, so we are a little surprised when this old geezer wanders up to us and makes with the mouth.

"I beg your pardon," he says, "but would you two gentleman happen to be gamblers, by any chance?"

"Not by chance—on purpose," says Bugsy. "What's with you, Dad?"

“Permit me to introduce myself,” the old character mumbles. “I am Professor Ladislaus Glockenspiel, of Parnell University.”

Bugsy gets up and does the honors. “Lay five on me, Pops,” he tells him. “I am Bugsy Roach from Pasadena, and this here is my business associate, Mr. Knuckle-Nose Mahoney.”

“A pleasure,” the Professor says, flipping me some skin. “And where are you from, Mr. Mahoney?”

“A small island just off San Francisco,” I inform him. “I forget the name.”

“But you gentlemen are gamblers, I hope,” he murmurs. “They told me this was a sporting rendezvous.”

“The best in the West,” I say. “Bugsy and me, we always hole up here when we hit town, on account of the homey atmosphere. For instance, if you’re down on your luck, you can always match the desk clerk double or nothing for your room. And see that weighing machine over in the corner of the lobby? If you guess your weight right, it pays off a jackpot in pennies.”

“All the comforts of home,” Bugsy chimes in. “When a guy suffers from insomnia, like I do, it is a great comfort to have a nice big slot-machine right there in your room, so you can get up and try your luck to pass the time away. Also, it is the only hotel I know of that prints the daily race results on the menus.”

“How fascinating!” says the Professor. “You simply must tell me more. And I hope I might have the pleasure of learning about games of chance from you through actual experience.”

“You mean you’d like to play with us?” Bugsy asks. “You’re looking for some action?”

“Precisely,” the Professor answers. “Looking for action—what a picturesque phrase! How idiomatic!”

“Please,” I say. “No insults.”

“I beg your pardon,” the Professor mutters. “I am merely interested in everything pertaining to gambling. The laws of chance have always absorbed me, and I came out here for the express purpose of studying them. I've saved my money for years just to make this trip."

"How much lettuce you got in the patch?" Bugsy wants to know.

The Professor frowns and looks blank.

"He means cabbage," I explain. "Moola. Loot. You got the scratch?"

"I *am* wearing my winter underwear, gentlemen," the Professor admits. "But—"

"Dough," I tell him. "You loaded?"

"Oh!" He puts a grin on his chin. "Well, I don't exactly have a fortune in my possession. But I thought that with eleven thousand dollars, perhaps I could learn a little something." And he hauls a roll out of his vest pocket.

I look at Bugsy and Bugsy looks at me. Then we both look at the roll. The manager of the Cash Inn passes by and gives us a dirty look, because I guess he does not like to see us drool all over his nice new carpet.

"Professor, you have a real deal," Bugsy tells him. "For eleven grand I think we can promise you that you'll learn a whole lot. And you sure come to the right teachers."

"Wonderful!" the Professor says. "I was hoping I might start tonight, if you're not too busy—"

"Well, we did have a date with a stiff who runs a prayer meeting," I admit. "But he'd probably try to rip the bricks on us, anyway."

"You were going to church?" the Professor asks.

"No," Bugsy explains. "A prayer meeting is a private crap game. A stiff is a guy who's down on his luck. And to rip the bricks means to switch the dice."

"Cheating?" The Professor shakes his head. "I wouldn't want to have anything to do with dishonest players."

"Then stick with us," I tell him. "We'll get up a nice friendly little game of stud poker." I turn to Bugsy. "Let's use your room," I suggest. "How about inviting Nifty Novotny, and Cold-deck Charlie and old Sticky-fingers?"

“Sorry,” Bugsy answers. “Nifty Novotny is still hiding out after that job he pulled in Las Vegas. Cold-deck Charlie is doing five in San Quentin, according to what I hear around town. And old Sticky-fingers has a regular night job, remember? He’s peddling reefers down at the drive- in restaurant.”

“Well, don’t worry,” I say to the Professor. “I’m sure we can find some other good friends of ours who are just as trustworthy. I’ll get on the phone and you go on up to Bugsy’s room and get started with your education.”

Well, the way it turns out, I have no trouble lining up three finks for the game. I choose some small-time operators on purpose, because there is no sense complicating the details by cutting them in. The Professor is our pupil, and we are going to do all the teaching, so we might as well collect the tuition fee.

When the game gets started, we commence learning him things right off. For example, he finds out that a deck of cards is called a devil, and that he is supposed to sit between Bugsy and me when he plays. This is called a cucumber sandwich, but we do not tell him that. We figure there is plenty for him to learn as it is, without bothering his head with such useless information. And believe me, when anybody sits down to play poker between Bugsy and me, such information *is* useless.

I must say this for Professor Glockenspiel, though—he is an eager student and he does not seem to worry about paying for his lessons.

Right off the bat he spends two hundred bucks to find out that the pair of kings he holds is called a pair of bulls—but does not beat my three fives.

Then he shells out another hunk of dough to discover that aces are called bullets or dreadnaughts, but do not beat the straight Bugsy has in his hand.

After that “we take six hundred clams to demonstrate that aces and eights are the Dead Man’s Hand, and a grand or so to prove that twos are called deuces, and cannot beat a full house. We also teach him never to draw to an inside straight, and finally we demonstrate that four of a kind is better than a flush.

By the time night-school is over, the Professor is out his eleven grand, but we hope he has the satisfaction of being a finished student.

The funny part is, he does seem to be satisfied. When he gets up to leave he is still smiling. “Thank you for a very rewarding experience, gentlemen,” he says. “It is kind of you to put up with an amateur like myself.”

“The pleasure is ours,” Bugsy assures him. “Too bad you don’t have better luck.”

“On the contrary, it is a rewarding experience,” the Professor says. “I have learned far more than I hoped.”

“If you want to try your luck again, be sure to look us up,” Bugsy tells him, as he eases him out the door.

But Professor Glockenspiel shakes his head and sort of sighs. “I doubt if I shall have the opportunity,” he says. “My losses tonight represent the savings of twenty years.”

“What if you won?” I want to know.

“Odd that you should ask me,” he answers. “I was hoping to increase my capital to endow Parnell University with a special chair.”

“You can buy a mighty fancy chair for eleven grand,” Bugsy says. “Maybe even gold-plated.”

“I am referring to a chair of research,” the Professor tells him. “The University refuses to allow me funds to pursue my hobby, so I thought I might win enough to institute a teaching department of my own. But apparently fortune is not with me.”

“Tough,” I say. “But if you do get hold of any more geedus, we’ll be around. Always glad to show you a little action.”

Then we say good night, and Bugsy and I salute the loot.

“A big score,” he grins. “The kind you hit once in a lifetime. Why the mark does not even give us any grief with a beef. Too bad he is cleaned out.”

“Let’s stick around a few days,” I suggest. “Maybe he will wire home for money.”

"What can we lose?" Bugsy agrees. So we stay over at the Cash Inn, and for the next couple of afternoons we go out to the track to play the bangtails and for the next few nights we watch the wheels go around at the tables.

And sure enough, on the third evening the Professor shows up in the lobby again. He has a friend with him—a tall, skinny kid with a crewcut like a worn-out welcome mat. Regular Joe College type, horn-rimmed glasses and all.

The Professor comes right over and lays on the introduction. "This is Oswald Fing," he says. "One of my star pupils from Parnell University. He is out here on vacation, and I told him how royally you gentlemen entertained me the other evening. He is anxious for a little session."

Bugsy and I stare at the square, and then Bugsy gets the Professor over in a corner. "You know how luck is," he whispers. "Can he afford to lose?"

The Professor winks at him. "The young man is, as you say, loaded. And I was wondering, if I brought him to you gentlemen for a game, if I might venture to claim a share of the—er—profits. I shall not be participating in the session myself, you understand. I am merely—what is the term?—a steerer."

Bugsy shakes his head. "Naughty, naughty!" he says. "But I see you learn fast. And I think we can cut you in. Shall we say one-third?"

"Fair enough," the Professor agrees. "Now, can you find a few other players for the evening? I would suggest you select some rather substantial investors."

Bugsy tips me off and I round up Big Mike Rafferty and Philadelphia Phil, two of the largest operators in these parts. There is no sense telling them what is going to happen—it is going to be a little secret between Bugsy, the Professor and me.

This time we play in my room, which has the advantage of being soundproof. Something tells me this kid Oswald Fing may not be as good a loser as the Professor, and I do not wish to disturb the neighbors with his cries of anguish when we lay it on him.

Right away we explain to him that this game calls for a bit of action, as Big Mike Rafferty and Philadelphia Phil do not indulge for peanuts, and Bugsy and me have eleven grand to work with, plus another four of our own to feed to the kitty.

Oswald Fing looks at the Professor and shakes his head. “You did not tell me the stakes are so high,” he says. “And I know absolutely nothing about poker.”

“Don’t worry about a thing,” the Professor answers. “I can assure you, you’ll learn in a hurry with these able instructors.” Then he smiles at Oswald Fing and winks at me, and the game starts.

That is the last smile anybody sees around the table from then on. Because something funny happens to the game.

Oh, Oswald Fing doesn’t know anything about poker—that is easy enough to see from the start. He cannot even call his hands, but merely lays them down and lets the Professor do the talking.

The trouble is, he lays down nothing but winning hands.

Instead of sticking in every pot, the way the Professor does the other night, he drops out half the time. But whenever he does stay, he has the cards.

If I draw three tens, he sticks on three jacks. If Bugsy holds a straight, Oswald has a flush. If Big Mike Rafferty or Philadelphia Phil catch full houses, there is Oswald with four of a kind.

Either he has a sure thing or he folds. Not once does he call without the top hand, and not once does he bluff. Rafferty and Phil find that out the hard way, and I figure they blow about twenty grand before they have enough. Then they get up and leave.

This suits me fine, because I know now that something is very much haywire, and I tip Bugsy the nod. This means we get down to business with a new deck. This new deck happens to be one of Bugsy’s specials.

We bring it into play, and all at once the kid jumps up.

“Not that deck!” he says.

“What do you mean?” I ask. “Are you incinerating that we’d cheat?”

“Yes, dear boy,” the Professor chimes in. “Don’t you trust these gentlemen?”

“Call it a hunch,” Oswald says. “I want the other deck.”

So there is nothing to do but bring back the old deck and hope for the best. I look at Bugsy’s pile and my own and figure we have maybe six grand left between us—from all the dough we won the other night plus our own. We will have to sweat it out.

And the next hand that comes up brings out the old perspiration in a hurry. I find myself sitting with aces back to back. As the cards go around, I cop a third bullet. I bet it up and Bugsy drops. Oswald stays, showing a straight in the works.

On the seventh card I catch the fourth ace. That’s when I shoot the works.

Oswald sees me—and raises.

I give Bugsy a peek at my hand and he grunts. Then he shoves the rest of his chips over to me. I call.

And Oswald lays down his straight. Only it is a straight flush, king high.

I am busted.

Also, I am pretty angry. In fact, I am just about to get up and reach for a heater which I happen to have laying around in the top drawer under my socks, when the Professor stops me.

“Sit down,” he says. “I think I have what you’re looking for.”

Sure enough, he holds a big equalizer in his hand, but he is not giving it to me—merely pointing.

“Hey, what’s the big idea?” Bugsy wants to know.

“You sit down, too,” the Professor suggests. “I believe I am holding what you call a Harlem hand.” He grins. “You see, I have done a bit of studying on my own, gentlemen.”

We sit there and watch while Oswald Fing counts up his winnings.

“Forty thousand dollars,” he announces. “You were right, Professor.”

“Of course I was,” the Professor tells him. “I have the utmost confidence in my hunches. And in yours.”

“You can’t cheat us—” Bugsy snarls. “This isn’t cheating,” the Professor says. “So let us have no more of that kind of talk. And I suggest you gentlemen remain seated until after we have left, or else I shall be forced to ventilate your ventricles.”

I do not understand this jive, but the gun tells me all I wish to know. So I sit there until they walk out, and Bugsy keeps me company.

Afterwards we are too weak to get up. Besides, being broke, there is no place for us to go.

I guess the Professor and his pupil check out the same night. Anyway, the next day they are gone. Bugsy and I stick around, hoping we can raise the dough to pay our hotel bill.

We are still there a week later, and we are still arguing about what happens. We can’t figure out why Oswald wins that way.

Not until one afternoon when Big Mike Rafferty comes up to us with a New York paper in his hand. “Here,” he says. “Read about your friends.” I sneak a peek at a little item on page 5. It tells me all I want to know:

> PROFESSOR ENDOWS UNIVERSITY CHAIR
>
> Professor Ladislaus Glockenspiel has just endowed Parnell University with a $40,000 Chair of Parapsychology. He will use the money to continue his research in ESP, or extrasensory perception.
>
> Readers may recall his experiments with student subjects; among them, Oswald Fing, who amazes experts by running through a pack of ordinary playing cards and calling them off correctly 52 times out of 52.
>
> When questioned as to the source of his funds, Professor Glockenspial said he had recently received contributions from philanthropists in the West.

That’s what the article says, and I don’t pretend I understand it all. I don’t dig this “Parapsychology” or this “extrasensory perception” bit, either.

Only one thing I’m sure of—“philanthropists.” That’s just another word for a couple of suckers. Meaning Bugsy and me.

Wheel and Deal

HARRIGAN arrived at work around nine o’clock. It was a Monday morning and he was dull-eyed and draggy-tailed, but as usual he brightened considerably when he surveyed his kingdom.

The big showroom was immaculate, and the huge lot next door looked imposing, with its row of used models. But best of all he liked the signs and banners which proclaimed his rule over the domain.

HAPPY HARRIGAN
King of the Auto-Erotics
NEW AND USED FEMALES
ALL MAKES
“WE’RE TRADING WILD!”

Harrigan squared his shoulders proudly and marched into his private office. There was a young punk sitting there, and for a minute Harrigan gave him his customer-smile, until he remembered who the fellow was. Phil Thompson, that was his name; Harrigan had hired him on Saturday as a new salesman.

“Ready to hit the ball, eh?” he said. “That’s good. Suppose the first thing I ought to do is show you around the place.”

The punk stood up. “Gee, that’d be great, Mr. Harrigan.”

“Call me Happy—everybody does,” Harrigan told him, deftly popping an ulcerizor into his mouth. “Most important thing to remember is that we're all friends here, Phil. This is a friendly business. That's something we tell all our customers. We don't just sell females—we sell service."

Phil nodded and trailed him out of the office and across the showroom.

"Which reminds me," Harrigan murmured, over his shoulder. "When I hired you Saturday you said you didn't have much experience with females."

"I was just thinking of the mechanical end," Phil explained. "But like I told you, I've always been crazy about 'em, ever since I was a kid. Used to spend all my time monkeying around with my Dad's—"

Harrigan nodded absently. 'Well, you don't have to worry about that part of it," he said. "Take a look back here—we've got six skilled medics always on the job. We service all types of females ourselves." He led the youngster into the noisy recesses of the big room behind the showroom, where frowning medics and harried grease-monkeys busied themselves with an imposing array of auto-erotics. Some of the models were only partially assembled, and some were undergoing extensive overhauling.

Harrigan gestured at a group clustered around a rack and raised his voice over the clangor which attended their efforts.

"Working on an old 69 model," he shouted. "Complete hysterectomy."

"You're really thorough, aren't you?" Phil commented.

"Have to be. You know our policy. Every female that goes out of here carries a six months' written guarantee."

Harrigan walked back into the showroom and the young man followed.

Brice, the senior salesman, was working on a customer—a dignified old geezer, all haunch, paunch and jowl. They were inspecting one of the new 75s; a stunning, streamlined brunette with a forward look. "Let me open her up for you," Brice was saying. "Here, just take a peek at her chassis. She's really built for performance. Auto-erotic transmission, just push a button to select your speed, all the attachments including a voice-tape and a built-in heater. This baby is loaded! And take a look at that rear end! She's got the biggest bustle on the market today."

“Well, I don’t know,” the old geezer muttered. “Could I get the same thing in a blonde?”

“Anything you like. Platinum, redhead, all the two-tone combinations—”

“Maybe I’d better bring my wife in and let her decide,” the customer said. “She’s kind of got her heart set on a convertible.”

“Convertible, eh?” The salesman winked and nudged him. “We can put an attachment in this baby in no time.”

Harrigan pulled Phil to one side and lowered his voice to a whisper. “Just wanted you to get a load of the way we sell ‘em in here,” he explained. “But you’re a long way from working the floor with new models. I’m gonna start you outside. It takes a special know-how to deal with blue chip customers.”

He grabbed Phil’s arm and ushered him out the rear exit. “Notice how Brice was handling that guy?” he asked. “Giving him the old pride-of-ownership routine. Never even mentioned the price. With those customers, money doesn’t mean a thing. They just buy to show off. You can tell by looking at him that he won’t be using his model more’n once a week, if that often. Probably the kind who just sits in the bedroom and turns over the motor.”

Harrigan blinked in the bright sunlight and popped another ulcerizor into his mouth.

“You won’t be working in there, like I said, but it’s important you get to know something about the kind of customers we deal with. That’s the biggest thing in salesmanship—you’ve got to be able to spot your customer the minute he walks in.

“Now take that character we just saw. He’s the conspicuous-consumption type. All he’s interested in is having the biggest, newest, flashiest, most expensive female in town. What the hell does he care about how much it costs; probably has a deal worked out where all his females are company-owned. He trades in and gets a new model every year, fast as they come out. And don’t think the manufacturers aren’t wise to him—that’s why they keep putting on more and more fancy paint jobs and bigger and wider bustles. You and I know a big bustle is just a damned nuisance; it doesn't add anything to the performance of a model or the pleasure you get out of her, and neither do those big bumpers up front. But that's what these kinds of customers want."

"Are they all like that?" Phil inquired.

"Well, most of them. One in a while we get somebody off the street who's just interested in a strip-job, but we don't make any dough off a naked model. We're out to load 'em good in the new showroom, so we discourage those characters. Let 'em go down the street to the Leering Irishman."

"What about sports models?"

"Floosies? Never touch 'em. We sell one-owner deals only. None of these souped-up specials." Harrigan chewed his lip. "But that's a big business, too. The sports model customer is an odd bird. He's got his own way of showing off. He keeps talking about speed and thrills. With him, it's all a matter of a fast start and a lot of noise. Actually, he usually gets less pleasure out of what he buys than the old codgers. But he talks a good game."

Harrigan prodded the younger man in the chest. "There's a couple of other types you should learn to recognize, too," he said. "The real show-offs. Guys so rich they can't stand owning anything but a foreign model. Real fancy stuff—voice-tapes with accents, yet, and all kinds of special French attachments." He sighed. "But the richest ones of all are worse yet. You know what they go in for? Old models, that's what. Whole fleets of 'em! They're queer for anything with a universal shift—not to use, just to look at. They'll pay a fortune for some antique, give her a face-lift, new paint, rub her up for hours on end. I dunno, some psych told me it was sort of a motor-complex."

He shrugged and dismissed the subject as they strolled over towards the big lot with its glaring banners waving in the wind.

OKAY USED FEMALES

Guaranteed Clean—One-Owner
YOU MUST BE SATISFIED
OR IT'S NO DEAL

"Here's where you'll be starting," Harrigan said. "Think you can handle it?"

Young Phil glanced nervously around the lot. Almost sixty models were lined up on display, in neat rows, each chained to a post. Some were old, some were almost brand new, but all were bright and shiny: eye-lights sparkling, teeth gleaming, bodies newly painted.

Harrigan ran his hand appreciatively along the flank of a brownette 74. "Take this baby, for example," he said. "A real creampuff. When we get in a number like this, we call it an executive model. That's the thing to tell the customers—she's just like a new one, except that you don't have to break her in. Here." He reached over and stuck his key into the ignition. "Why don't you see for yourself how she handles."

The model began to purr and vibrate.

"No, I couldn't, not out here—"

"Well, take her into one of the testing booths, then. We always give the customer a trial spin."

Harrigan squinted at Phil. "Hey, you look kind of pale. What's the matter?"

"Nothing. It's just that—"

"Now wait a minute. I thought you told me you had some mechanical experience."

"I did. That is, sort of. I mean, you know how kids are—"

"Don't hand me that. I'll bet you never had a model in your life. Probably your old man wouldn't let you play with anything but an Erector set."

"But he owned—"

"I know what he owned." Harrigan looked grim. "He bought a junker, didn't he? Souped it up, restyled her, like one of those hot-rodder jobs.

Come clean, kid—you've never operated a real model at all."

Phil was blushing. "Guess you're right, Mr. Harrigan," he admitted. "My Dad was kind of old-fashioned, you know. When Mom died, he didn't even want to get us a utility model to do the cooking and housework."

"You got a nerve coming around here and bracing me for a job."

"Well, I just figured—"

"I know what you figured. You thought you could make a fast buck here." Harrigan gripped his arm roughly. "Well, you can. Believe me, kid, you can! Only not unless you change your attitude. What the hell, you'd think we were running some kind of illegal racket or something. Wake up, kid—this is the twenty-first century! The auto-erotic industry is the biggest business in the country.

"Let me tell you something else, son. You're just lucky to be alive today and have such an opportunity. You've read your history-tapes. How'd you like to have been born a hundred years ago, when the bombs were knocking out the country? Or maybe even a few years before that, when there were a hundred and eighty million people around, three times as many as now? Think of it—a hundred and eighty million slobs, jamming all the cities, crowding the streets and highways with their lousy, stinking automobiles?

"The Good Old Days, huh? What a laugh that was! Why, the first model hadn't been invented yet. A young fellow like you wouldn't be able to afford more than one flesh- and-blood female, and you'd work like a dog all your life just trying to support her. No extras, no new models, no trade-in, nothing! I'm not knocking flesh females, now, don't get me wrong—I've had a wife myself for fifteen years and we get along together swell. But think of what kind of a life it would be if that's all I had. Or all you had. Knocking yourself out just to keep body and soul together in some crummy sales job."

Harrigan paused, then spoke solemnly. "Just think about this for a minute, kid. You know what you'd probably be doing if you were alive back in the twentieth century? You'd be selling automobiles, that's what. How'd you like that, huh? Imagine being a car salesman—preying on the vanity of a bunch of old men and rich snobs, or swindling some poor guy out of his last buck with a used clunker.

"Just thank God you've got a chance to get into an honest line of business, where you can give the customer some real service and an honest return for his money."

"I never thought of it that way," Phil murmured.

"Well, you think about it now," Harrigan told him. "I'm going back to my office. You make up your mind what you're going to do. If you want to try the job out, you can start right away. If not, you can shove off. It's up to you."

"I—I think maybe I'll give it a whirl."

"Suit yourself." Harrigan started walking away. "But remember one thing—you have to change your attitude. In this business we wheel and deal, understand?"

He continued on into his office, without looking back. For an hour or so he busied himself at his desk, and it was almost noon when he strolled out onto the Used Model lot again.

There was young Phil, over in the corner, looming over a battered blonde 70 model that Harrigan remembered picking up from a one-day rental service. He had removed the covering from the nylon hair and he was gesturing earnestly to a small, rabbity-looking man who had all the earmarks of a hesitant customer. Harrigan could hear his vibrant voice even at a distance.

"Book value?" Phil was saying. "Never mind about the book value. This one doesn't use any oil at all. I happen to know about this baby, Mister. You see, she belonged to an elderly school teacher, and he only used to take her out on Sundays—"

Mr. Harrigan smiled and quietly tiptoed away.

1963

The Old College Try

When Alfred Hitchcock brought Robert Bloch's bloodfreezing *Psycho* to the screen a few seasons back the public reaction was fabulous. The film became one of the biggest money-makers in cinema history—and Bloch, the versatile veteran who had been rapping out stories since January of 1935 (when his first pro effort was published in *Weird Tales)* suddenly found that he was "an overnight success." In 1960 he moved from Weyauwega, Wisconsin to Hollywood, where he has become an extremely busy scripter for most of the leading TV shows (and for various film studios). Bob has always been a clever, prolific purveyor of fantasy, suspense and of sf yarns which now total, "something over 500." Add to this seven mystery novels and 39 radio scripts (for his own show, *Stay Tuned for Terror*) and one begins to get the overall picture. Bloch won a "Hugo" at the World Science Fiction Convention for one of his stories—but his most famous short remains the oft-anthologized chiller *Yours Truly, Jack the Ripper.* As a youth, Bob dreamed of becoming a vaudeville comic, and his special gift for verbal comedy has won him a place (alongside Anthony Boucher and Forrest Ackerman) as "most in demand" for toastmaster at regional and world sf conventions. A fanatic student of the silent film era, Bloch can regale you by the hour with anecdotes from Hollywood's Yesterday—and he seems to know, by heart, the cast of every silent ever produced. For years, Bob earned his bread-and-circus money in an advertising agency, but quit to full-time it at the typewriter in 1954. As a dedicated fan of H.P. Lovecraft, Bob imitated the style of the master for many years—then began creating his own unique brand of terror. For

Gamma *2,* he introduces the Yorl, a race of aliens who seem to favor fun and games—so long as the rules they play by are definitely their own.

Administrator Raymond's head was a hive of hornets. He could feel them buzzing in his brain, and before opening his eyes he held out his hand.

The Yorl, who had probably been crouching at his bedside for the past hour, thrust a glass of Aspergin into his shaking fingers. Administrator Raymond gulped it down, and gradually his fingers ceased twitching. The buzzing died away inside his skull and he was able to open his eyes.

The blue-skinned little Yorl smiled at him and said, "Goo morning, Minstrata," then bowed as he offered Raymond his undergarments.

Raymond wondered just how much longer the Yorl would continue to bow if he knew that this was the last day. The new Administrator was arriving, and soon Raymond would go home—back to Vega and civilization. It would be good to see a normal world again—a world where grass was an honest pink and the birds snarled sweetly all the day.

Yet he rather regretted leaving Yorla. He even regretted leaving the Yorls. After five years on Yorla, Administrator Raymond was oddly fond of them.

Puffing a trifle, Raymond struggled into his uniform.

"Ship has land!" Another Yorl came scuttling in, as usual, without bothering to knock. He grinned up at Raymond. "Bringa pinky."

"Pinky". That's what the Yorls called humans. He must be referring to the new Administrator.

"You go back, tell him I'll be right down," Raymond instructed. The Yorl messenger withdrew, and the other Yorl gave Raymond a shave, a shoeshine, and another glass of Aspergin, in that order.

Then Raymond waddled downstairs to greet the new Administrator.

He found him standing on his hands in the center of the floor.

"Greetings," he called, from his upside-down position. "You must be Raymond, eh? I'm Philip."

“Pleased to meet you,” Raymond said, wondering if he ought to advance and shake Philip by the foot.

“Excuse the informality,” Philip said. “Just trying to get back a little circulation. Long trip, and the decompression effect is a bother.”

Raymond nodded, staring at the newcomer. Philip upside-down or Philip horizontal was still a remarkably handsome young man with a superabundance of muscles. His smile radiated enthusiastic vitality.

Philip bounded to his feet, healthily flushed, and held out his hand to Raymond. His grip was as hearty as his voice.

“Good to see you,” he said. “By the way, Captain Rand sends regrets. There was a slight mishap when we landed—something went wrong with the auxiliary grav-mech. I don’t understand the technical side, but I’m afraid he and the crew are in for about a week of repairs here before they can take off on a return flight.”

“A *week:?”*

Philip shrugged. “I know how you feel,” he said. “But speaking selfishly, I’m glad of the delay. In a week you can brief me on this post.”

Raymond turned and beckoned to his waiting Yorl. “Two Aspergins, hup-hup!”

As the Yorl nodded and backed out of the room, Philip shook his head. “Nothing for me, thanks. Never touch the stuff.”

“Better learn,” Raymond advised. “This is a fever-planet.”

“I’ll manage,” Philip said, confidently. “They gave me all the new shots before I left. Besides, I’ve never been sick a day in my life.” He paused, waiting until the Yorl had disappeared, then lowered his voice. “Odd creatures, aren’t they?”

“You get used to them,” Raymond said. “They make wonderful servants. There’s a post staff here of twenty—they’ll bathe you, dress you, brush your teeth for you if you like. And they actually enjoy working for a pinky. That’s what they call us, you know. It’s easier than slaving in the mines. You’ll find them faithful and loyal if you treat them decently. Once you get used to the blue skins and the language, and accept their customs—”

Philip sat down, cracking his knuckles. “Their customs,” he said. “Do you know how they met me when the ship landed? They came running out waving their spears. And on the tip of each spear was a head.”

“They meant to do you honor,” Raymond explained. “I told them a new Administrator would be arriving. So they got up a group to welcome you and brought out their trophies for display.”

“Trophies? You mean they’re actually head-hunters?”

“Of course not. They prize heads, and preserve them, but they don’t go around killing one another just to collect more.

“Then where do the heads come from?”

“Well, as you know, most of the Yorl work in our mines. The labor is hard and they don’t particularly enjoy it, but they like our trade-goods. So much so that when the Yorl chiefs made their agreements with Interplan, they set up a quota. Every Yorl who signs up for mining is obliged to produce a set amount of ore. If a Yorl fails to meet his quota, if he’s caught shirking—his companions merely chop off his head.”

“I should think something would be done about policing them.”

“Meaning *I* should have done something as Administrator?” Philip flushed but made no effort to deny the words.

Raymond sighed. “Maybe I felt the same way when I arrived here, five years ago. Since then I’ve learned a lot. They have their own laws. Remember, Interplan sent us here to administrate. It is not our duty to superimpose our own concepts or customs on this planet. Besides, the system works. We want what the mines produce. The Yorls see that we get it. They eliminate their own slackers and misfits, weed out their own criminals.”

“But it’s not right! In the name of common humanity—”

Raymond sighed again. “The Yorls are not humans. They are *humanoid,* That’s the one thing you must never forget.”

A Yorl bowed his way into the room.

“Affanoon, Ministrata,” he said. Philip glanced at Raymond, who nodded briefly. “That’s right, it *is* afternoon. You’re going to have to accustom yourself to the shorter days here.” He turned and confronted the York “What is it?”

“You come long forgo, this night, we hold *koodoo,* your honna.”

“He’s inviting us down to the village here for a party,” Raymond explained.

“You come long?”

“We’ll be there.”

“Yaya!” The Yorl grinned happily. “Much fun!”

It may have been much fun according to Yorl standards, and it may have been much fun for Raymond, but Philip didn’t enjoy the *koodoo* a bit.

He sat there on the dias, sweltering in the heat of the warm night, and watched the dancers with a strained smile on his face. The pounding of the drums made his head ache. Then there had been the banquet, and the nauseous concoctions he had to pretend to sample. Raymond didn’t seem to mind—but then, he kept washing down his food with Aspergin.

Philip didn’t like the setup at all. They *were* savages, and no amount of talking would change the fact. Dancing in a huge circle of spears set up in the sand—with each spear surmounted by the preserved and grinning head of a Yorl, the grins on the faces of the living dancers seemed even worse.

Now the dancers had separated into two groups; male and female. They formed two lines, facing one another, and the drums beat in a quickening tempo. The lines advanced, converged, and then the drums went frantic. And now the dance was no longer a dance. It was a mass orgy. Why, they were actually—

“Raymond!” Philip whispered. “Look! Aren’t you going to stop them?”

“I told you they have their own customs. This is being done in our honor.”

“Disgusting!” Philip rose abruptly.

“Natural.” Raymond blinked. “Where are you going?”

“Back to my quarters. I’m afraid I’m not up to this sort of thing.” He moved away. The older man didn’t catch up to him until they reached the Administration Building.

“Come back,” Raymond wheezed. “You can’t do this. You’re insulting them by walking out.”

“Insulting them? What did you expect me to do, get down there and wallow with them?”

“You’re angry? Now look, son, let me explain a few things to you about —”

“Never mind. I’ve heard some of your explanations. And I’m afraid the Company reports are right. Interplan gave me specific orders to come out here and clean up the situation—”

“Situation? What situation?” Philip hesitated, then took a deep breath. “I’m sorry I mentioned it, but perhaps it’s better that you know just where you stand. They know about you, Raymond. They know how you’ve been running this operation, and they don’t approve of it any more than I do. Lording it over the natives like one of those colonial governors in prehistoric days back on Earth.

“In five years you’ve made no attempt to educate them, no attempt to institute reforms, no attempt to provide them with decent government, decent standards of living. Instead of setting an example for them, you’ve merely sunk to their level.”

“Now wait a minute—”

“I’m *not* waiting a minute! Starting tomorrow, I’ll take over. Officially. You’ll stay here until Captain Rand completes his work on the ship, but from now on I’m in charge.”

“It isn’t that simple. I know the Yorls, I understand them. You can’t change them overnight.” Raymond blinked at him with his reddened eyes. “They’re entitled to their own way of life, their liberty.”

“Liberty isn’t license.”

“You don’t understand.”

“Oh, yes I do, only too well. Administration and Aspergin don’t mix. I advise you to go to bed and sleep it off.”

Philip turned on his heel and marched down the corridor to his room.

He wasn’t worried. He’d told off Raymond, and now he’d get to work on the Yorls. Tomorrow was the time to start. And the first and most important thing to do was to put an end to the headchopping. No more heads on pikes.

Tomorrow, then.

Raymond was somewhat agreeably surprised to see Philip join him at the breakfast table. He was even more surprised to note that the young man appeared in a conciliatory mood.

“I don’t want you to misunderstand me,” Philip told him. “I know as well as you do that there is no sense in trying to run roughshod over the feelings of the natives. The answer lies in the psychological approach. It’s all a matter of channelizing their aggressions.”

“Huh?” Raymond blinked.

“You tell me the Yorl only take heads of slackers, wrong-doers, inefficient workers. So I infer that they’re always on the lookout for someone who breaks the rules.”

“That’s right. Every Yorl keeps a close watch on the activities of his fellow-workers. It’s a sort of wholesale espionage system, you might say.”

“In other words, they compete with one another to detect possible victims.”

“You might say that.”

Philip nodded. “Now, if I can provide harmless substitute outlets for their competitive instincts, I’ll soon have them functioning normally.”

“How?” Raymond murmured.

Philip smiled again. “Wait and see,” he said.

Raymond waited, and three days later, he saw.

To be specific, it was three evenings later when Philip came to his office and invited him down to the *torga.* It was unusually hot, and Raymond chose to be transported in a litter, borne by four Yorls.

He couldn’t imagine where the younger man got his energy from, but there he was, hopping around like one possessed, making last-minute arrangements in the big clearing before the huts. He kept jumping in and out of the ring—

Ring.

“Wait a minute,” Raymond murmured. “Don’t tell me you’re planning a *boxing* match?”

“Exactly!” Philip beamed happily. “I’ve conferred with the villagers here and they seem quite excited. They donated their services to put up the ring, and I’ve had the females weaving gloves out of *ritan.* There were no end of volunteers for contestants, after I explained the procedure. I’ve coached the two we finally selected, and I think they’ll put on a great show. See, they’re assembling right now.”

And they were. The blue-skinned little humanoids had gathered on all four sides of the improvised ring, squatting on the ground and staring up expectantly as the Yorl fighters made their way to their respective comers. Philip, clad in a sweat-shirt and shorts, climbed through the strands of the *porga* serving as ropes. He was obviously serving as referee, and a whistle dangled from a cord around his neck. He conferred briefly with each of the contestants, and the little blue boxers nodded and grinned up at him in turn.

Then there was a roll of drums and Philip came forward to the center of the ring, lifting his hands for silence. He spoke very briefly about the rules of the coming contest, and the virtues of the manly art of self-defense. This, he declared, would be a clean fight, demonstrating the finest principles of sportsmanship. And now, at the drum-signal—

It came.

Philip stepped back.

The Yorls rushed out from their respective comers.

The crowd yelled.

The Yorls exchanged expert blows.

The crowd screamed.

The taller Yorl hit his opponent below the belt.

Philip stepped forward hastily.

The smaller Yorl brought his knee up and kicked the other fighter in the chin.

Philip blew his whistle.

The Yorls paid no attention. Perhaps they couldn’t even hear the whistle above the shrieks of the audience. At any rate, they went into a clinch. Both of them were kicking at one another’s groins. They had shed their gloves.

Philip waved, frantically, then tried to separate them. The Yorls put their heads down and kicked harder. Then, suddenly, they were rolling around on the floor of the ring. The smaller Yorl ended up on top of his opponent. He got his hands around the windwipe and squeezed.

“Stop!” Philip shouted. “You’re killing him!”

The little Yorl on top nodded, grinning happily. He released one hand, then dug Iris fingers into his victim’s eyes.

And then Raymond climbed into the ring. He helped Philip pull the Yorl off the prostrate body of his opponent, and he said something to quiet the crowd and disperse them.

Afterwards he walked Philip back to Administration in tire darkness.

“But I don’t understand,” Philip kept saying, “I don’t understand!

I offered them a logical outlet for sublimation—”

“Maybe they don’t *want* to sublimate,” Raymond said. “Maybe they can’t.”

“But the principles of psychology—”

“—apply to human beings,” Raymond finished for him. “Not necessarily to Yorls.”

“I’m not licked yet,” Philip declared. “I know the idea is sound. Sport is the best substitute for actual combat. It always works.”

They entered the office. Raymond turned to him. “Can’t you realize the Yorls don’t believe in substitutes? Why should they, when they can have the real thing?”

“The *real* thing,” Philip murmured. “Of course! That’s the answer! Nobody accepts a substitute when the real thing is available. But if the real thing is not available any longer, then perhaps they will learn to cooperate.”

“If you’ve got any wild ideas,” said Raymond. “I advise you to forget them.”

Philip shook his head. “No wild ideas. Just common sense. You did me a great favor tonight, Raymond. I won’t forget it.”

He turned and headed for his room. Raymond headed for the Aspergin.

It was almost two hours later when Raymond finally sought his own bed. He was pleasantly tired, pleasantly tipsy, and pleasantly unaware of the faint glow and the faint cries from outside his window.

Not until the Yorl came running in did he open his eyes and sit up.

“What’s the matter?” he muttered.

“You come,” the Yorl panted. “Come to *torga,* fast!”

“Why?”

The Yorl’s blue-veined eyeballs rolled. “Otha Ministrata there. He burn heads!”

“Damn!” Raymond rose, thrusting out his feet as the Yorl brought his shoes. He fumbled in the rear of a drawer, looking for the needier he never carried. It felt cold and heavy in his hand as he followed the Yorl down the path, running in the direction of the *torga.*

The faint glow had flared into flame now, and the cries rose to a chattering crescendo as Raymond entered the clearing.

The Yorl had told the truth.

Philip had waited until the village was quiet, then crept from hut to hut. He’d gathered the spears, harvested the heads, heaped them like ripe melons in a central pile at the end of the clearing, and ignited them. They were blazing furiously now—but not half as furiously as the Yorls themselves.

Philip stood before the fire, needier in hand, facing them defiantly. The Yorls confronted him in a body, screeching and howling, waving their spears. And they were edging forward—

“Get back!” Philip shouted. “I’m not going to harm you! This is for your own good, don’t you see? It is wrong to take heads. It is wrong to kill.”

Raymond made out the words vaguely through the tumult. He doubted if the Yorls could hear or understand, and even if they did, it meant nothing to them. Because they kept inching forward, closer and closer . . .

A spear whizzed past Philip’s head.

He didn't run. He faced the Yorl who had hurled the spear; faced the weaponless little blue humanoid and pressed the tip of his needier.

There was a faint crackling sound and the silvery flash of the energy-arc. The Yorl fell, shrivelling and blackening before he hit the ground.

A great sigh arose from the crowd, and then a hundred arms were raised, a hundred spears went back.

And halted.

Halted, as the pyre of heads hissed suddenly, then disappeared in a black billow.

Raymond had tossed water on the fire.

Everyone turned as he stepped forward and grasped Philip by the arm. They watched as he took the needier from Philip's hand and hurled it into the center of the dying blaze. They watched as he tossed his own weapon on the ground.

Raymond raised his arms over his head.

"I am truly sorry," he murmured. "A wrong has been done, but it shall never be repeated. We ask to go in peace."

Silently, he led Philip away into the darkness.

It was already afternoon of the following day when Philip reentered the office. Raymond looked up expectantly.

"Started your packing?" he asked, casually.

"I'm not quitting. Why should I?"

"You mortally offended the Yorls. You violated the great taboo. You killed one of their leaders."

Philip shook his head again. "It was self-defense," he said. "As for what I did, it was right."

"According to your standards, yes. But the Yorls—"

"Look at him!"

Philip levelled his finger at the comer. A Yorl servant crouched there, his blue face ashen, his eyes bulging in terror as Philip stared at him.

Philip smiled. "Don't you see? He's afraid of me now. They all are, after last night. I didn't realize it at the time, but I'd done the one thing necessary.

By putting on end to this head fetishism, by destroying their trophies, I proved that a human is stronger than their whole barbaric culture."

"But they hate you now—"

"Nonsense! They hated me last night, and I'm quite sure that after we left they got together and prayed for my destruction. I don't pretend to understand their superstitions, but I'll bet they expected their gods to destroy me with a bolt of flame. So when I went down to the village today, it came as quite a shock to see me alive and healthy."

"You went back to the village again?"

"I've just come from there." Philip glanced carelessly at the Yorl, who cringed. "That's the reaction I got from all of them. Nobody dared to harm me, nobody dared to speak. I summoned them out and laid down the law. From now on, no more taking of heads. The mines will be operated efficiently on the basis of my orders, and on the threat of my punishment."

Raymond scratched his head. "But you were the one who objected to my colonialism, as you called it! I thought you didn't like this business of having servants, or ordering them around."

"I don't," Philip answered. "Not when it's just a matter of selfish personal comfort. But this is different. We're dealing with fundamentals here. In order to bring civilization and sanity one must issue orders and enforce them." Raymond sighed. "What about the sports?" he asked, softly. "I suppose this isn't important any more under the new regime?" Philip smiled. "If you're indulging in sarcasm, spare the effort," he replied. "It so happens that I've no intention of abandoning the program. The natives will need outlets for aggression. And as I said then, once their old outlets are gone, they will embrace the new much more willingly. As they are doing now."

"Now?"

"Yes. I issued instructions to the villagers. They are laying out a football field."

"Football?"

"Of course. I really should have thought of it first, instead of this silly boxing business. Football is the natural sport. Calls for team-participation, allows substitute activity to a much greater number at one time. It's the ideal sublimation—a rough body-contact sport, and it's a great vicarious outlet for the spectators, too. I'll organize their teams and instruct them. They're bright enough, in their way. A few skull-practice sessions, a little actual training, and you'll see. By tomorrow I expect we can raise the goal-posts."

"Please, you're making a mistake. I can't stand by and watch you do this."

"Not necessary." Philip laughed again. "I keep forgetting you won't be around to observe the results. The ship leaves in three days." He turned. "Well, I'll not keep you. I expect you'll want to get on with your packing."

Raymond didn't want to get on with it, but he did. During the next two days he saw nothing of Philip. If he was organizing and coaching his teams, there was no sign. Raymond made no effort to visit the *torga* or to inspect the playing field behind it. He packed, and he drank incredible amounts of Aspergin.

On the night before the day of departure, Raymond suddenly felt very old, and very tired. He leaned back in his chair, hands folded over his fat paunch.

And it was there that the Yorl found him.

"Goo evening, Ministrata. You come now?"

"Come where?"

"See game."

"Game? You mean you're playing football already?"

"Tha ri'. Foo ball game now. Your honna."

"All right. Just for a little while." Raymond rose, fighting fatigue and the dizzying effects of the Aspergin. He didn't want to go, but it was the last night, and the Yorls would be disappointed. They were like children, really—they always wanted to share their pleasures with him.

Maybe it was a good idea to show up. Give credit where credit was due. If Philip could actually organize a football game in just three days, he deserved some recognition.

The Yorls had heaped fuel oil all about the playing field, and the blazing fires illuminated the scene. The drums pounded in joyous excitement, and the blueskinned audience cavorted in frantic enthusiasm as several minor chieftains danced before them, waving spears in a Yorla version of cheerleading.

The two teams were already on the field, engaged in a furious scrimmage. There was no hint of compulsion about their movements, not the slightest vestige of constraint amongst the spectators.

Raymond sighed. Philip had been right, and he was wrong. The evidence of his own eyes furnished the final proof. Once a game was substituted for reality, the Yorls conformed, just as humans did. And from now on, the rest would be easy. In five years Philip would have them all working in the mines and paying taxes. They'd become a civilized community, with jails and orphanages and asylums.

Somehow, he'd never believed it would work out this way.

A player on one of the teams was getting ready to kick the ball. Raymond tried to locate Philip on the field. He must be acting as referee.

Raymond squinted through the firelight, but he couldn't see him. All he could see was the ball, sailing over the goal-posts. And the crowd roared.

The crowd roared, and Raymond sighed again, and he turned back up the path to the Administration Building. He was tired, but he'd have to unpack. And he'd have to write a report to Interplan, explaining that he was right after all and that Philip was wrong. He'd have to explain that progress was not coming to Yorla. They didn't understand about sublimation, or the necessity of fighting over useless objects. They would play football, yes, but only for a real trophy, like the one he had just seen soaring over the goal-posts.

It was Philip's head . . .

Beezlebub

he knew he had to destroy this buzzing-horror that had trailed its filth into his private hell

HOWARD WAS STILL HALF-ASLEEP when he heard the buzzing. It was a faint, persistent drone, balanced delicately on the very threshold of consciousness. For a moment Howard wasn't sure whether the sound came from the sleeping side or the waking side of his mind. God knows, he'd heard plenty of strange noises in his sleep lately; made them, too. Anita was always complaining about how he'd wake up in the middle of the night, screaming at the top of his lungs. But he had reasons to be upset, the way things were going, and besides, Anita was always complaining, period.

The drone deepened insistently and Howard knew he was awake now. He could feel the stale heat of the bedroom and the response his body was making to it—the loginess of his limbs and the cold pattern of perspiration forming on them.

Bzzzzzzz.

Howard opened his eyes.

The room was dim, but the California sunshine filtering through the smog was also filtering through the interstices of the window blinds. Just enough to transform the bungalow-court apartment into a small oven with its baking heat. Just enough to give Howard a glimpse of what he didn't want to see—the living room filled with a fan-shaped clutter of clothing and furniture radiating from the axis of the roll-away bed, the cubbyhole kitchen through the open archway, with the caked and crusted dishes heaped in the sink. Yes, and the damned portable typewriter on the table in the corner, its carriage accusingly empty and its untouched keys leering up like rows of dusty teeth.

Rows of dusty teeth—Christ, man, what a writer you are! When you're asleep, that is.

But he wasn't asleep. He could hear that buzzing. Louder now, much louder. Goddamned fly. How'd it get in here, with all the windows tight shut? Anita had a thing about opening windows, no matter how hot it was, when she had her curlers in. And she always had the curlers——

Bzzzzzzzzz.

Howard sat up. Tile noise was too loud to be coming from the kitchen, it had to be here in the room. He turned and glanced at the huddle in the bed beside him.

The sun glinted off the curlers. A ray played cruelly across Anita's neck, accentuating the stringy fold.

That's where the fly was sitting. At first he thought it was Anita's mole. But moles don't move. Moles don't buzz.

It was a fly, all right. He stared at Anita, thinking Cod how he hated the thing—noisy, rasping at your nerves, always around when you don't want it, demanding attention, intruding on your privacy. Dirty, messy creature, carrying filth——

Somehow his hand had drawn back and now it was coming forward; he wanted to hit it, not too hard, just swat it and destroy it because it had to be destroyed, he had to get rid of it.

Howard wasn't conscious of die blow or its force. Realization of its impact vanished before the overwhelming explosion of Anita's shrill scream.

"Oh, you bastard!" And then she was sitting up, striking at him; not once, but again and again, harder and harder, and shrieking louder and louder. "You—you—trying to kill me while I'm asleep "

It was crazy, she was crazy, and he was trying to explain about the fly, he was only going to swat the fly, but she wouldn’t listen, she never listened when she got into one of those hysterical rages. She was trying, sobbing, stumbling into the bathroom: of course she locked the door. There was no sense continuing with the same old scene, no sense pounding on the panel and stammering out apologies. All he could do was had his clothes and get dressed, locate his brief case under the jumble of *her* clothing. Past nine already, and his appointment was at ten. He had to be there on time.

In his haste, Howard forgot all about the fly. What he had to decide now was whether to spend the next 20 minutes catching a cup of coffee at the drugstore on the corner or run into the barbershop for a quick shave. He settled for the shave; it was more important to show up looking presentable.

Luck was with him. He got the car started without any trouble, made it over to the barbershop. There was a vacant chair. Howard settled back in it, grateful for the hot towels that blotted out the sound of the radio and the sight of the autographed photos on the wall. Why was it that every damned barbershop in this town had to keep the radio blaring at full volume, had to disfigure the wall with faded pictures of faded actors?

And why was it that barbers didn’t have enough sense to keep their places clean?

Howard found himself Ringing the sheet aside before the barber had finished applying after-shave lotion. “What’s the matter with you guys—can’t you even keep the lousy flics out of here?”

He hadn’t meant to blow up. and come to think of it, there was only one fly, buzzing around the ceiling in Howard’s range of vision as he lay tilted back in the chair.

But Howard didn’t come to think of it until he was out of the shop, until the damage was done. The way that crummy barber had looked at him—

Oh, well, he wouldn’t be going back there again anyway. There were plenty of other barbers around.

Not so many producers, though. At least not so many who wanted to make a deal with him. Howard reminded himself of that as he wheeled up to the studio gate. He put a big smile on his face for the guard who directed him to parking space, and an even bigger smile for Miss Rogers, secretary in the outer office of Trebor Productions. But he saved the biggest smile for Joe Trebor.

That took a little doing. First of all, there was the damned half hour wait in the outer office. Well, that was Trebor for you—an A-OK ratfink. Of course they were all alike, these producers. They all had the same routine. Set up an appointment, then postpone it. Set up another, give you the pressure; "How soon can you make it? Tomorrow morning? Good—10 o'clock sharp, in my office. I'll leave a pass at the gate for you."

So you showed up promptly at 10, carrying the brief case and taking the best possible care of that extra-big smile so that it wouldn't crack around the edges. And then you sat there like a damned fool in the reception room, crossing and uncrossing your legs in the uncomfortable little chair, trying not to stare at the secretary as she kept putting calls through to the guy you were supposed to be seeing right now. Sometimes you even sat there while the charm boys finger-snapped their way in and out of the sanctum sanctorum; the sharp young agents, hair just a little too long over the back of the buttondown collar, trousers just a little too tight in the seat, always a little bit ahead of you as they made their pitch, set their deal—for somebody else.

Howard got into Joe Trebor's office at 10:32. He stayed six minutes.

Three minutes later he was standing before a pay phone in a glass booth, trying to dial Dr. Blanchard's number with a forefinger that wouldn't stop trembling, then interrupting the incoherency he poured into the mouthpiece to take a wild swipe at the insect that soared and swooped insanely within the confines of the phone booth. "It's following me!" he shouted into the mouthpiece. "The damned thing's following me."

• • •

"Do you want to talk about it now?" asked Dr. Blanchard quietly, as Howard sank back into the big, leather-covered chair. Scarcely another 20 minutes had elapsed, but Howard was now quite calm. And of course he wanted to talk about it.

That's why he'd called Blanchard, even though it wasn't his regular appointment day, that's why he'd come running over here to the nice, quiet office where you could sit back and relax and nobody pressured you.

It wasn't like Joe Trebor's office—he was telling the doctor about that now. About the phony modern paintings on the walls and the big desk with the high executive chair behind it and the low chair in front of it, the one you sat in. When you sat in that chair the producer looked down on you and you had to look up to him. You looked up over that bare desk which told you here was a man too important to waste his time on mere paperwork the way writers did. You looked at the intercom and the phone with the six extension buttons which showed just how busy a producer he was, and at the solid-silver water carafe which showed just how wealthy he was. And you looked at the picture of the wife and kids, which was supposed to show you what a solid citizen he was, if you didn't happen to know the stories about the way he interviewed for feminine leads.

But you didn't look directly at Joe Trebor, because he was staring at you. Staring and waiting for you to come up with the story line. You got the notes out of the brief case and you started to read, till the while conscious that you were just wasting your time with a showboat operator like this, a guy who kept interrupting to make Mickey Mouse suggestions for changes, a guy who didn't understand the values you were aiming for. All he knew was "story line" and "How do you go out. what's the curtain, you need a tag here." and "Why don't you change it and play this scene exterior?"

Typical fly-by-night producer.

And then tilt buzzing.

The *buzzing,* just when you were trying to build, trying to sell, trying to nail him down. The *buzzing,* drowning out your voice.

And you looked up and saw the fly, perched on the stopper of the silver carafe. It was just squatting there, rubbing its tiny forelegs together, cleansing them. If you put those-forelegs under a microscope you'd understand the need for cleansing, because they were covered with filth.

Then you looked at foe Trebor who was smiling and shaking his head and saying. "Sorry. I don't quite see it. You haven't licked the story line yet." And as he said it he rubbed his hands together. Because they were covered with filth, he'd walked through filth, he left a trail of filth wherever he went, and what right had he to buzz, at you? And what right did he have to keep flies in his office to bug you when you were telling your story, your story that you'd sweated over for weeks in that lousy one-room apartment. like a furnace, with Anita slopping around in her dirty housecoat and whining why didn't you get up the bread?

And some of this you thought and some of it you must have said because Trebor stood up and he got that look on his face and he was telling you something you couldn't quite hear because of the damned buzzing. So you smiled, holding your lips very tight, not wanting to admit you blew it. but you knew. And you split out and made the phone call to the doctor and there it was—the fly the same fly, the little black thing with a million eyes that ran see everything, everywhere, right in the booth with you now. buzzing and listening. It saw and it heard and it followed you. through all the filth in the world.

Howard knew Dr. Blanchard understood because he was nodding quietly, calm and relaxed, and there was nothing wrong with his eyes. They weren't like Anita's or the barber's or Joe Trebor's eyes, all accusing him of putting them on. And they weren't like the fly's eyes had been, either, watching and waiting. Dr. Blanchard really understood.

Now he was asking Howard all about it. when the fly had first appeared, how long ago he could remember being conscious of flies. He even knew that talking about such things made Howard a little nervous, because he was saying. "Don't be afraid. There are no flies here, just go right ahead and say whatever comes to mind. You won't be interrupted by any buzzing—*bttzzzing—bzzzzinnnggg——"*

The buzzing. It was in the room. Howard heard it. He couldn't hear the doctor's voice anymore because tilt-buzzing was so loud, lit couldn't even hear his own voice shouting, but he knew he was telling the doctor, "You're wrong! It's here—it followed me! Can't you see?"

But of course Dr. Blanchard couldn't see. how could he see. when the fly. the black, buzzing fly. was sitting there and buzzing on top of his bald head?

And it buzzed and it stared, and the droning drilled through Howard's skull and the eyes lanced his brain, and he had to run. had to get out of there, had to get away, because they didn't believe him. nobody believed him. not even the doctor could help him now.

Howard didn't slop running until he got to the car. He was panting when he climbed in. panting and wringing wet with perspiration. He could feel his heart pounding, but he forced himself to be calm. He *had* to be calm, very calm now, because he knew there was no one else to depend on. He'd have to do it all himself. The first thing was to check the car very thoroughly, including the back seat. And then, when he was quite sure nothing had gotten in. to lock the doors. Lock the doors and roll up the windows. It was hot inside the car. but he could stand the heat. He could stand anything but the buzzing and the stare.

He started the engine, pulled out. Calm. now. Keep calm. Drive carefully, right up to the freeway access. And edge out slowly. Get into the left lane and open up. Now. Drive fast. The faster you drive, the faster you get away from the buzzing and the staling. Keep it at 70. A fly can't do 70. can it?

That is. if the fly is *real.*

Howard took a deep breath.

Suppose there was no fly, except in his own imagination? lint it couldn't be: not in his imagination, the one tool, the one weapon, the one area a writer must protect. You can't open up your imagination to a buzzing beast, a creature that crawls through filth. you can't allow the invasion of the insect that incubates in your own insanity, an incarnation of your own personal devil, an evil that torments you incessantly. But if it *was* that way, then of course there was no escape. He couldn’t drive fast enough, tint fat enough. to “el away. Anil then was no hope for him at all.

Bzzzzzz.

It was there, in the car. At least, lulu art! it. But the sound might he coming from inside his own shattering skull.

And now he saw it. fluttering against the windshield before him, just below the rear-view minor. Or did he see it? Wasn’t it just a fragment of inward vision? How could there be a real fly here in the car, with all the windows closed tight?

But he saw it and he heard it and it crawled, and his sweat poured anti his heart thumped and his breath rasped and he knew it was real, it *had* to be real. And if it was, then this was his chance, his only chance, locked inside the car with it where it couldn’t get away.

Howard shifted his foot from the gas pedal to the brake. The car was hurtling down an incline but he knew he hail it in control, everything was under control now. All he needed to do was swat the fly.

The creature had paused in its progress across the windshield so that it was poised directly before his line of vision. Howard could see it very clearly now. as his hand moved up. He almost laughed at himself as he stared, laughed at his absurd fantasies. Silly to think of demonic possession by such a tins fragile insect: he could see every delicate veining and tracery of its fluttering wings as he leaned forward, l-or an instant he even stared into its eyes: its multifaceted eyes, mirrors of myriad mysteries.

In that instant he knew.

But his hand was already swooping out, and all he could do was shriek as the car lurched and the culvert wall loomed——

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When the squad car came the fly was resting very quietly on Howard’s eyeball.

Its eyes swiveled slowly as the rednecked patrolman bent over the body, pausing just long enough to sense the frustration, the suppressed anger, the set thing tension behind the stolid fate. Then it rose gracefully and buzzed around the patrolman's shoulders as he straightened. As the patrolman turned away, the fly followed.

The patrolman sighed. "Poor devil." he muttered.

It was. of course. Howard's epitaph.

1964

The Conventional Approach

Success has not spoiled Rock, er, Robert Bloch; he has not lost the common touch—although rumors to the effect that he invented it are, perhaps, exaggerated. In order, therefore, to convert into a triad the duet of articles which he wrote for us about aspects of Science Fiction fandom in times past, it was needful only for us to obtain the services of a comely grisette. She smiled, she plied him with potables, she put the question to him . . . and a mere eight months later the subappended monograph appeared. It is one of three on the subject of that singular microcosm peculiar to our particular literary genre; and will be, we are sure, at least as interesting to the majority of readers who do not form a part of it as to the minority who do. Fart of the phenomena of SF fandom is its conventions—the part Bob Bloch writes about here. It was at one such that we were politely accosted by (as his card revealed) a Corporation Man in hotel uniform of dark suit, white shirt, Sincere tie, who politely inquired of us what was going on. We told him. "Science Fiction . . ." he said, musingly. Then, still not quite clear, but nonetheless impressed, he said, "You don't know how unusual it is to see a group of people who are so obviously interested in and so obviously enjoying what they are doing!" Let Mr. Bloch show you why.

THE FIRST CONVENTION IN THE United States was held in Philadelphia during the month of May, 1787. Contrary to popular rumor, I did not attend (I seldom go anywhere in May) and according to reports I didn't miss much.

There were only 55 people present. I understand they spent most of their time just sitting around and yakking about a Constitution or some such nonsense. Oh, I guess they did have a masquerade ball—I’ve seen pictures of the affair and almost everybody was wearing ridiculous costumes, with wigs and knee-breeches—but the whole thing looks like a drag to me. I mean, with only 55 attendees, how could they possibly break even on the deal? I’m sure they lost money, and the proof of it is that they’ve never held another Constitutional Convention since.

Science Fiction Conventions, on the other hand, are a howling success; 21 of them have been held in the past 24 years, and most of them have made a buck. Which only goes to prove the superiority of free enterprise as opposed to governmental interference, my friends, and if I am elected—

But we’re getting ahead of our story, if any.

Science fiction, as we know it, was a minor snarl in the Roaring Twenties—a decade which witnessed the rise of such notables as Pretty-Boy Floyd, Legs Diamond, Dutch Schultz, Frank Nitti, Alphonse Capone and Hugo Gernsback. It was Gemsback who, in 1926, produced the first “scientifiction” magazine, *Amazing Stories.* Not only did readers find his publication; they also found its letter-column, and through the letter-column, one another. “Tans^0 of this sort of fiction were soon exchanging views and opinions, collecting artwork and hardcover books in the *genre,* and reading the other magazines which came into the field during the next halfdozen years.

Without going into morbid details on the subject, which I have covered at length elsewhere in my monumental historical survey *(The Decline of the North, South, East and West,* pub. by Stealth, 1958) it is sufficient to note that a science fiction fandom came into being. Teen-agers in particular flocked to the field. In some of the larger communities—notably New York, Philadelphia, Chicago and Los Angeles—informal “clubs” sprang up, with regular meetings and meeting-places. The coming of the Thirties saw the advent of the “fanzine,” an amateur publication devoted to various aspects of the science fiction field. These efforts multiplied during the Depression Decade, circulating amongst the readers through subscriptions and mailing-lists and spreading interest to an increasing number of fans. The artificial *apartheid* between professional editors, writers and readers was breached as early as 1933, when a 17-year-old fan magazine publisher graduated to the editorship of the professional science fiction magazine, *Wonder Stories.* In the following years, many fans, whose first editorial or auctorial efforts appeared in the amateur press, “crossed over” to commercial markets. When teen-age fanzine publishers like Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster could soar to success on the sturdy back of their creation, *Superman,* there was incentive for others to pursue fantasy and science fiction with more than the casual interest of the average reader of western or mystery stories.

There were other factors, too, which contributed to the development of fandom as a permanent in-group. The Depression itself (if you wonder why I capitalize it, it’s because you didn’t live through it) was a nightmare for penniless adolescents. In fandom they could achieve almost instant identity and status as publishers, editors, writers, artists, correspondents, critics, club-members and club-leaders. They created their own historical frame of reference, coined neologisms, revelled in running gags and hoaxes, enjoyed acceptance by their peers. Moreover, since many fans had “turned pro,” it was possible for the reader to form an acquaintanceship or even an enduring friendship with some of the professionals whose work he admired. In the major cities these professionals often attended the club meetings. It was heady stuff for a teen-ager to rub elbows with one of the “alltime greats” in the field and be treated as a fellow-fan by an elderly author in his thirties.

In such an atmosphere, the Science Fiction Convention was conceived. After some faltering experimental preliminaries on the local level, the concept of the “World Science Fiction Convention” became a reality, and the infant idea first saw the light of day on July 2nd, 1939, in New York City. Here, in the modest confines of Caravan Hall, a meeting-room in a midtown office building, some 200-odd (plus a few very odd) fans and professionals convened under the chairmanship of one Samuel Moskowitz, a name not altogether unknown to science fiction circles, or even squares.

All was not sweetness and light—there had been bitter feuding between various factions of fandom regarding the staging of the event, and disaffected elements appeared to upset the decorum of the meeting. Nor, judged by contemporary standards, was the Convention itself comparable to such later galas as the Yalta Conference or the historic meeting between Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton.

But two hundred people *did* attend, coming from such vast distances (by teen-age, 1939 standards) as Chicago, Los Angeles and Far Rockaway; though not truly a "world" Convention, the affair attracted many professional publishers, editors, writers and artists in the field. Guest of Honor was artist Frank R. Paul, who spoke in a somewhat dingy room decorated with original cover-paintings for science fiction magazines. There were many special fan publications distributed to attendees, and for the first time fan-correspondents of years' standing had a chance to sit down together. The second day was devoted to a program on the sciences and the highlight of the third was a baseball game and a mass trek to the nearby World's Fair. But several Convention "traditions" had been established.

First and foremost, a portion of the expenses were defrayed by means of an auction—artwork, manuscripts and magazines donated by professional publishers in the field were sold to the highest bidder. Since many fans were, and are, avid collectors, this practise has resulted in a considerable source of revenue to the amateur organizations staging a Convention.

The second tradition centers around the entertainment, which has since followed the general pattern laid down by New York in 1939—an address of welcome, introduction of the famous and infamous, speeches by notables, a scheduled program and a Convention Banquet.

Again, by today's standards, there was nothing earth-croggling about the program. The principal entertainment was a showing of the old silent UFA film, *Metropolis,* which didn't offer nearly as many weird effects as the fannish baseball game the following day. The Banquet cost the enormous sum of $1 per plate—and the best evidence that this was indeed a Depression affair consists of the fact that only 32 people felt they could afford to attend.

Both *Time* and *The New Yorker* published accounts of the affair, and sniggered sophisticatedly over the "Buck Rogers" atmosphere. But their recognition, however disdainful and distasteful, nailed down one thing; science fiction fandom was a national phenomenon, of national interest.

Once established, the World Science Fiction Convention became an annual event. The second was held in Chicago, the third in Denver. There was a hiatus during the war years, but in 1946 the affairs were resumed and have continued on a once-a-year basis.

What are Science Fiction Conventions *really* like? All I can do is cite a few of my own impressions, based on attendance at eleven of these gatherings from '46 through '62.

The 1946 Convention was held, kicking and screaming, in Los Angeles at a hall called the Park View Manor, so-called because it overlooked MacArthur Park, a spot well worth overlooking under any circumstances. The attendance was small; 125 people and Forrest J. Ackerman, who collapsed before my arrival and took to his bed. The rest of us stayed up to listen to A. E. van Vogt and E. Mayne Hull, to attend a Masquerade Ball which has since become an important feature of every subsequent Convention and to engage in the casual *camaradie* which is perhaps the most attractive feature of these get-togethers for fans and pros alike. I shared the podium at the Banquet with Ray Bradbury and Leigh Brackett, among others, and for the first time in my own career as a fan and as a professional writer, met a sizeable group of fellow-readers and fellow-chirospastics.

It was all so enjoyable that I needed two years in which to recover, but in 1948 I flew to Toronto as Guest of Honor, along with Bob Tucker. Again attendance was small, the program informal, the setting modest. But we *were* in Canada; Conventions had already begun to take on Na truly international aspect, and fans in London were beginning their annual gatherings. And a general procedure was being crystallized; each year fan-groups from various cities would attend and make a bid for their community as the following years Convention-site. Conventions were financed by a small membership fee ($1 then, $3 today) plus proceeds from the auctions.

The following two years I devoted to my hobby (raising pedigreed vultures) but in 1951 I was off to New Orleans. By now, Conventions were being held in official hotels, complete with meeting-halls, Banquet-room facilities, bars, smoke-filled rooms and other indispensable adjuncts including non-functioning elevators and unavailable room-service. Also the date had been advanced to Labor Day Weekend, in recognition of the fact that many fans were no longer teen-agers who hitch-hiked to the “Con” but full-grown, responsible (and irresponsible) adults who had to reckon with regular working-schedules. Highlight of the New Orleans program was the introduction of two brand-new science fiction movies, *The Day The Earth Stood Still* and *When Worlds Collide,* both of which were specially previewed for the Convention audience alone; in the case of the former, the producers rented the largest theatre in town for the occasion. Science Fiction Conventions were graduating to the Big Time, and the local press-coverage no longer waxed facetious about kids in propeller-beanies waving zap-guns.

As a matter of fact, there was a boom in the field, both in magazines and book-publication, and in Chicago, in 1952, the echoes resounded through the Morrison Hotel, where more than 1,000 attendees assembled for a dazzling affair. Somehow I got trapped into serving as Toastmaster at the Banquet, which allowed me the pleasure of introducing Guest of Honor Hugo Gernsback, the man who—in a large measure—was responsible for it all. I was also privileged to hear science expert Willy Ley assert that he’d never seen a flying saucer, and to remedy that lack by letting fly with a saucer at him.

The turnout of notable fans and professionals was impressive, the program (which included the first science fiction ballet) exciting, and the four-day nonstop schedule of parties beggared description—to say nothing of some of the hosts. From ‘52, World Science Fiction Conventions became truly impressive events, calling for tremendous effort and dedication on the part of the fan-groups sponsoring them, and requiring die services of many people to provide stimulating program-fare. Also inaugurated were a series of annual awards for the year’s “best” in the field—novel, short story, artist, magazine, dramatic presentation, fan-magazine, etc.—affectionately dubbed “Hugos” in honor of Gernsback. I have one of these trophies on my desk; it’s an impressive piece with a gold plaque set in a wooden base, from which rises what is either a silver rocket or an elephant’s suppository, I’m not quite sure which. But I’m proud of it, and the E. E. Evans Memorial Award which has also been bestowed in recent years. Along with the awards has come another annual institution—the Trans-Atlantic Fan Fund which, by popular subscription, alternately brings a British fan to an American Convention or sends an American fan to the British gathering.

In 1953 I went to the Convention in Philadelphia; in ‘54 it was San Francisco, and in ‘55, Cleveland. 1956 brought the Convention back to New York again, and in 1957 it became a true “World” affair in London—with over 50 American fans chartering a plane and flying across to attend. I didn’t make the scene, being busy with my new hobby (necrophilism) but I was in Los Angeles in ‘58 and Detroit in ‘59. During the next two years I was occupied with a small entertainment project (geeking canaries) but 1962 found me in Chicago, and subsequently in an iron lung after the lavish hospitality. Conventions have enabled me to hurl insults as a speaker and Toastmaster, participate in panel discussions and playlets, witness the premiere of the world’s first science fiction opera, see rare films, attend the fabulous art shows which are now a regular annual feature, buy special *memorabilia* at auctions, ogle the thicks at the Masquerade Balls and “Fashions of the Future” style-shows, hear first-rate talks by first-rate scientists, meet fans and publishers and artists and editors and fellow-writers from all over the world, catch a glimpse of many cities I might not otherwise have visited, and—above all—enjoy the stimulating company of people who share kindred interests in one of the world's most unusual and engrossing hobbies. (No, I'm not talking about sex: I understand that its inventor, Isaac Asimov, plans to cover this subject in a forthcoming issue.)

Thanks to Conventions, I've found lifelong friends; many of them people I only see once every few years, but with whom—when we meet again, three thousand miles away from our last encounter—I can pick up a conversation in mid-sentence and continue as though we had only been momentarily interrupted.

This is not an isolated, subjective reaction; witness the fact that, in addition to the World Conventions, there have been a continuing series of regional gatherings for many years—the ESFA and Philadelphia Conferences and Lunacons in the East, the annual Midwescon in Cincinnati, the Westercons on the Pacific Coast. Some fortunate fans who started attendance in their teens continue to appear in their forties, and such redoubtable professionals as Anthony Boucher and E. E. Smith, Ph.d. have declared and demonstrated that the dream of their lives is to move on from one Convention to another in a continuing euphoria of tape-recording, flashbulb popping, autograph parties, interview sessions, and relaxed conviviality.

Actually, as I've stated before in the past (I only state before in the future when writing a time-traveling story) the Convention is a miniature world of make-believe all its own; a three-ring circus that comes to a different town for a three-day stand just once a year, not for profit but for pleasure and participation. There's nothing comparable to the unique quality of the Science Fiction Conventions, and I guess that's why I like them—they're so unconventional.

1965

Double-Cross

You'll be seeing my name in the newspapers one of these days. What galls me is that you probably won't even recognize it.

But then, chances are you couldn't recite a list of the executive vice-presidents of NBC, CBS, ABC or Mutual, either.

The important thing is that around here, when people hear the name of Willis T. Millaney, they jump. I've always carried a lot of weight in this network, and that's where it counts.

At least it counted where most people in the TV industry were concerned. The only one who didn't seem to give a damn was Buzzie Waters.

Yes, Buzzie Waters. *His* name you'll know. Because for the past three years I've worked night and day behind the scenes, building it up. Building up his Hooper and his Nielsen ratings, too. That fat ham wouldn't amount to a hill of beans if it wasn't for me. Him and his "Bzzzzzz—Buzzie" tag, and his corny routines out of the Catskills!

Let me tell you something, comics like Buzzie sell on the open market for exactly eight-tenths of one per cent, or just a fraction under a dime a dozen. He'd never have gotten off the Borscht Circuit if it hadn't been for me, and everybody knows it.

Everybody but Buzzie, apparently. The trouble started when he forgot.

I was sitting in my office one hot afternoon when the phone rang. It was Sid Richter, calling from the theater where *Buzzin' Around* was going into rehearsal for the first show of the fall season. Sid's the kind of producer who likes to keep all the details wrapped up, so the minute my girl gave me his name I could smell that something had gone wrong.

"All right," I said. "Let's have it."

"You really want it?" Sid asked. "This is gonna hurt."

"Don't tell me, let me guess," I answered. "Buzzie doesn't like the script."

"Nope."

"He doesn't like the guest-star format?"

"Try again."

"He showed up drunk."

"Worse than that."

"How much worse?"

I could hear Sid take a deep breath at the other end of the wire. "He didn't show up at all, period."

"Now wait a minute—"

"I've been waiting, for over an hour. And so have a cast of fourteen, plus a full crew, all union, and a twenty-piece orchestra."

"What's the story? You tried locating him?"

"There is no story, and I wouldn't bother calling you if I hadn't tried. He knew about this, of course, and he was around last night. Somebody bumped into him at Lindy's."

"Drunk or sober?"

"Half and half. He threw apiece of cheesecake at the waiter."

"Good old Buzzie, always on."

"Well, he's not on today. We've tried every place in town. He left his hotel this morning and nobody's seen him since. His agent doesn't know, his writers don't know—"

I got a hunch. "Did you call his psychiatrist?"

Sid gave me a tired laugh. "Which one? You know how he's been lately. He changes psychiatrists even faster than he changes writers."

"What about this girl friend of his, this Melody Morgan?"

"Just talked to her. Says he hasn't showed for a week."

“Well,” I stalled for a moment. “You’re shaping up the rest of the show, though, aren’t you? Shooting around him?”

“What else can we do? I can’t even get hold of his stand-in, that double he hired, what’s-his-name.”

“Joe Traskin,” I told him. “And it doesn’t matter, because Buzzie told me last week he was going to fire him.”

“Great! We can’t even line up our shots. And we’re supposed to do a full rehearsal tomorrow, too.”

“Don’t cancel,” I said. “I’ll find Buzzie for you if I have to turn this town upside down.”

“I wouldn’t advise it,” Sid murmured. “Some mighty funny bugs might come crawling out from under.” He paused. “Serious-like, now—you think you can locate him?”

“I damned well have to,” I replied, honestly. “Don’t worry. That’s my job.”

I hung up, shaking my head. That was my job, all right. Worrying about Buzzie Waters. He’d been giving me grief all summer long, playing coy about signing for the fall series and ducking out of appointments with the sponsor, the agency, and the network reps. And there hadn’t been a thing we could do about it, either. Buzzie had come close to copping himself an Emmy this past season, even if the critics didn’t like his brand of mugging. So there was no sense trying to bluff him—he knew he was hot, and could hang his hat over the mike in any network he pleased.

On top of that, some two-bit writer got hold of him and started to work on one of those crummy biographies. You know the pitch; the one about the poor little neglected kid who overcompensates for his childhood by growing up to be a loud-mouthed comic, just because he’s insecure.

For some reason, this was the last straw. I’ve worked with names for twenty years, and let me tell you one thing—this “insecurity” gag is phoney.

Take Benny; he used to think he couldn’t work a live audience without a violin in his hand. So he left vaude and went into broadcasting, and he doesn’t need any benefits. I could use his brand of insecurity, believe me. Ed Wynn made with the funny hats, but he did all right for himself playing straight on *Playhouse 90* and in the flicks too. And there are a dozen others.

No, this poor-little-comic routine is something I can’t buy. A lot of people, in and out of show biz, are insecure. But they don’t go around lushing it up, putting solid gold monograms on their garters, and punching columnists at Toots Shors.

Let’s face it, Buzzie was a nogoodnik.

But where was he?

I called a couple of numbers on my private line. A bookie I knew, and an entrepreneur who ran a floating crap-game, and a motherly old dowager named Maggie who could supply you with anything you happened to need at a moment’s notice, including Shetland ponies.

Then, as a last resort, I called Buzzie’s house—not his hotel here in town, but the big house out on the Island. He never went there after Labor Day, but I was running out of numbers and I had to call somebody.

Sure enough, someone picked up the receiver.

“Sherwood Forest,” a voice said. “Robin Hood speaking.”

“Buzzie! This is Millaney. What the hell’s the big idea? Don’t you know you’re supposed to be at rehearsal—”

“We are not amused. The King has declared a holiday, and there’s dancing in the streets.”

He was sauced to the eyeballs.

“Are you coming in, or must I come out there and drag you in?”

“I’m *awfully* sorry, that is *not* the correct answer! But thank you for being with us, and as a consolation prize, our sponsor wants you to have this box of suppositories, which you can—”

“Stay where you are,” I told him. “I’m coming right out.”

And out I went. I didn’t call Sid back, and I didn’t even tell my girl I was going—just ducked through my private exit and took my own car from the parking lot across the street.

It wasn't a pleasant drive. I was fighting traffic, fighting the heat, and fighting the aggravation which kept tightening my scalp. There comes a time when even Miltown isn't the answer.

On the face of it, maybe it doesn't sound so bad. Comics have gotten drunk and missed a rehearsal before; you charge it off to the client somehow and forget it. But Buzzie wasn't my only problem this week. Already I'd had a brush with one of those damned little monsters from our quiz show—an eight-year-old freak who knew the batting averages of every player in the major leagues since 1908. He wanted out from the show in order to see the World Series. Then there was a rough session with our new cowboy star, who tried to cut his wrists over an unhappy love affair. I'd told him never to get mixed up with a chorus boy in the first place. Also there was—

But why go on? That's the kind of a job I have; troubleshooter and nursemaid and keeper all rolled into one. I ask myself that "But why go on?" question a dozen times a week, and the answer always comes back in good round numbers. The only thing is, this week I'd asked myself the same question a dozen times a day.

I guess it was the old story; you know the one. Buzzie Waters used to tell it himself, and I always thought it was pretty funny. About the old guy whose car breaks down and wants to borrow a horse and buggy from his stingy neighbor. On the way over to the neighbor's house he keeps thinking how stingy the guy is, and rehearsing in his mind how he'll refuse to loan him anything. Finally he gets all worked up, and when the neighbor answers the doorbell the guy just looks at him and yells, "All right—you know what you can do with your horse and buggy!"

That's the mood I was in when I drove into Buzzie Waters' place, and it was no joke. I'd made up my mind there'd better not be any more trouble, because I just couldn't take it.

I didn't see Buzzie's car out front, and that was a bad sign. Maybe he'd run out on me. When I rang the bell and got no answer, I was sure of it. Then I got mad and started to use the big brass door-knocker, and that was my mistake. The thing was red-hot from the heat of the sun, and I burned two fingers.

That's when I started swearing and kicking at the door. And then I stood there, feeling foolish, when the door swung open.

I went inside, where it was cooler. I wasn't cooler, though. The air-conditioning didn't help a bit. If I shivered a little, it was from rage.

"All right, Buzzie!" I shouted. "You can come out now. I know you're in there."

Some dialogue; I sounded like a ten-year-old kid. Realizing it didn't help me feel any better, either. I ran down the hall and into the library. Or what had been designed as a library until Buzzie bought the place and turned it into a bar.

It was a bar now; there were bottles and glasses all over the place, and as I came in, I stepped in a puddle of liquor on the floor. Buzzie must have been entertaining.

Well, he wasn't entertaining now. He was sprawled across the sofa, and he was out, cold.

He wore a dirty, beat-up sports outfit, and he hadn't shaved for two days, and he stank of liquor when I reached down and shook him.

"Huh?" he mumbled. "Who you? Millaney, huh? Go 'way." I pulled him up to a sitting position.

"Snap out of it," I said. "You're coming with me."

"No. Why sh' I come 'th you?"

"Rehearsal, that's why."

"Don' wanna rehearsal. Don' have t' rehearsal."

"Damn it, I'm not taking any more from you! You're going to get under a shower and sober up, and I want you dressed and ready to go in twenty minutes, hear?"

"Lea'me alone. You're not my boss—"

I slapped him across the face.

He snarled at me. "Why, you—"

Then, all at once, he was on his feet, lunging forward. He swept his hand across the end-table, knocking a glass to the floor, but his fingers closed around the neck of a bottle. He gripped it and swung at me.

There was only one thing to do, and I did it. I brought my fist up hard and connected with his jaw. He went over backward, taking the end-table with him. The glasses flew and shattered on the white marble floor beyond the rug, but all I heard was the nasty sound of his head hitting when he landed.

But everybody knows you can't hurt a drunk. I knew it too, when I bent down and shook him. Then I wasn't so sure. He flopped limply, and it was like shaking a corpse. His eyes were open and rolled back, and I didn't like to look at them.

So I felt his wrist. His skin was whiter than the marble, and it might as well have been marble for all the pulse I could detect.

It was very quiet in the room. I could hear myself breathe, but I couldn't hear him.

And then I knew. . . .

It was even quieter, three hours later, when my visitor arrived. The sunlight was fading fast, but even in the dimness I could see his face. He looked more like Buzzie Waters than Buzzie himself did.

"Joe Traskin," I said, standing up. "You remember me. I'm Willis Millaney."

He gave me a funny grin. "Buzzie's boss," he said.

"I was. Up until this afternoon."

"What goes on h—?"

I didn't let him finish his sentence, just grabbed his arm and pulled him over behind the sofa. He stared down at Buzzie Waters.

"Accident," I said. Then I told him what had happened. It didn't take me very long, and I knew just what I was going to say. I knew everything perfectly, except the one thing I needed to know most—how he'd take it.

“Yeah, sure, I understand,” said Joe Traskin. “But why are you telling *me* all this? Shouldn’t you be talking to the police?”

I stared at him and slowly shook my head.

“I don’t think so, Joe.”

“But—”

“I could have called the police three hours ago, when this happened. But then what? I’d tell my story and they’d lock me up. Oh, maybe I’d get off with a manslaughter rap. Say, two years and good behavior. When I got out again, I could find myself another job. Not exactly what I’m doing now, but something similar. Like say, lavatory attendant in a downtown hotel.”

“I’m sorry, but I don’t see where I fit into your troubles.”

“Listen, Joe.” I put my hand on his shoulder. “You don’t get the drift yet, do you? I’m not talking about my troubles. Sure, I’ll admit that’s the first thing that ran through my mind when I found out what happened. But it’s not important. This oh-God-what-have-I-done routine doesn’t mean a damned thing. By the time I realized Buzzie Waters was dead, I’d stopped the self-pity and started thinking like an executive vice-president again. Do you know how an executive vice-president thinks, Joe?”

“Do they?”

He snapped it out, just the way Buzzie would have done, and that helped. I squeezed his shoulder.

“Yes, Joe, they do. That’s their job. That’s my job. To think and to worry. Not about myself, but about my people. All my people, on all my shows. For instance, there are about seventy-five of them connected with *Buzzin’ Around,* in one capacity or another. And they’re the ones I’m thinking about right now. Killing Buzzie Waters is one thing, and that’s bad enough. But murdering their chances, murdering their livelihood is something else again. I made up my mind, Joe. I can’t do it.”

“But what—?”

“Listen, Joe. There’s an easy out. An obvious solution. It’s staring me right in the face.”

“What are you talking about?”

"You, Joe. From now on, you're Buzzie Waters."

"Hey—"

"Don't interrupt, Joe. Let me do the talking. I've got it all figured out. Here, sit down."

He gave me a funny look, but he sat down. And right there is when I knew I had him. I started to pitch.

"Let's see how it adds up," I said. "First of all, nobody knew Buzzie was out here. From the looks of things he must have driven out alone late last night and sat up drinking by himself. Sid says somebody saw him in Lindy's—I'll check that and get all the information; who was with him, what he'd been doing. All you need to do is pick it up from there."

"But—"

"Listen to me." I lit a cigarette and my hands weren't even trembling now. "I've been over the room. There's no blood, and this mess looks like an ordinary drinking bout. Besides, what's to prevent cleaning it up? Nobody is going to be suspicious anyway, because Buzzie Waters is still around."

"That's right," Joe nodded. "There he is. And what will you do about it?"

"We will do something," I told him. "There's a nice deep quarry just across the bluffs, and it's a dark night. A few heavy rocks, and there's no problem."

"No problem. Buzzie Waters goes on as usual." He paused. "But what happens to Joe Traskin?"

I met his stare. "Nothing," I said. "Let's be frank. Whatever did happen to you before you met Buzzie last year? You were just another working stiff, weren't you? Drove a truck or something, no family, no ties."

"You've been reading my mail," he murmured.

"I checked. It's my business. But never mind that, now. Let's get back to facts. Buzzie picked you up because of the resemblance. It's damned close, too, and that was a break for you. You acted as his stand-in. You even showed up for public appearances in his place, and I think once or twice he rang you to pose for publicity shots when he wanted out—is that right?"

Joe didn't answer, but he grinned.

"All right. So you had a year as his stand-in. And then, last week, he fired you. What happened?"

He shrugged. "I checked out of my hotel, took a room uptown. I been there most of the time, since."

"And when you run out of dough, you'd move," I went on. "End up driving a truck somewhere again. Maybe once in a while somebody would tell you you looked like Buzzie Waters, but that's all. I hate to say it, but you're expendable, Joe. Without the stand-in job, you're a small nothing. Nobody around the industry even wondered what became of you when Buzzie let you go. You just disappeared. Why, you don't even have an agent, do you? And no family to worry about."

"You got hold of me in one hell of a hurry, though," he remarked.

"Just luck." I pulled a slip of paper out of my pocket. "I found your name and number written down on this scratchpad on the desk."

Joe nodded. "That's right, I remember calling him when I moved, to give him my new number, just in case. Maybe he was going to give me a jingle today."

"We'll never know," I told him. "And it isn't important. What is important is that you can drop out of the picture without anybody getting suspicious. You just left town, that's all."

"It still sounds risky to me."

"Nonsense. Remember, seven-eight years ago, this guy who worked a lot of shows as a walk-on because he was a double for Harry Truman? How often do you wonder whatever became of him?" I paused. "No, there won't be any danger. I promise you that. And believe me, I have more at stake than you do. But the moment I saw your name and number on that scratchpad, I knew I had the problem licked."

"All right." Joe lit a cigarette of his own. "Maybe I can vanish without trouble. But that doesn't mean I can show up again as Buzzie Waters."

I shrugged. "I'd think about it if I were you, Joe. I'd think about it very strongly. It'd be worth your while.

"How much?"

It was my turn to grin, when I saw his face, heard the note of anticipation in his voice.

"I won't offer you a cent," I said. "Not a cent. All I offer you is the Buzzie Waters name. And his house here, and the place in town, and his cars, and his bank account, and his present weekly income. Plus his contract, his fame, his future. The works, on a silver platter. All you have to do is say 'yes.' "

"That's all, eh?" Joe gripped the arms of his chair. "Aren't you forgetting a few things? Buzzie Waters is—was—a great comic. He has to get up there and do a performance every week; he's supposed to kill the people."

"You know better than that, Joe. We've got four writers who make all the funnies. And the way Buzzie goofed off last season, he didn't even bother to sit in on the script sessions. Didn't really memorize his routines, either; just read the stuff off the teleprompter. With his own mugging and fly-catching, of course. But you can get up on his voice and delivery and technique in a week. I'll see that you get a chance to study kinies of all his old shows. Since he never did any singing or dancing, there's nothing to it. Buzzie is a synthetic product, Joe—just a combination of the proper writers, the right buildup. If I had your resemblance, I could do him myself."

Joe nodded. "You didn't think much of him, did you, Millaney?"

"Who did?" I stood up. "Let's be honest. If his friends knew what happened here today, they'd chip in and buy me a medal. Only they don't, and besides, I doubt if he had any friends."

"Maybe you're prejudiced." Joe hesitated. "But there's one thing that's certain. He knew an awful lot of people. Perhaps I can get away with the Buzzie Waters routine on camera, but what about in private, with everybody who knew him?"

It was time for me to grin again. "You've already had a little experience at that. You stooged for him with the photographers, and nobody knew the difference. The rest is just a matter of boning up on the part; learning the details of his life and his associations. I'll get you every clip on Buzzie that was ever printed; I'll see to it that you have access to everything in our files on the guy, and we've got a pretty complete history. I told you I was thinking like an executive, Joe. I worked all this out from the moment I decided to call you, and I've covered all the angles. Buzzie had no regular business manager, and he wasn't buddy-buddy with anyone except a lot of stooges and drinking companions. Another break for us—I happen to know he was between psychiatrists, too. So there's nobody really intimate with the guy. And as for details, I'm sure I can supply you with the works. In a week you'll be more like Buzzie than Buzzie himself. Except that you won't be drinking so much, you won't be such a goof-off, you won't be such an egotistical, loud-mouthed heel."

"You hated him, didn't you?"

I sighed. "How do you suppose old Doc Frankenstein felt after he saw what kind of a monster he created? That's how I felt about Buzzie. I made him out of nothing."

"And now I'm supposed to be the new monster."

"What have you got to lose?"

Joe stared at me. "All right," he said. "What have I got to lose?"

I held out my hand.

He had to reach in order to shake it, because we were standing on either side of the body. . . .

In TV, you do it with a dissolve or a fade-out. In books, you do it with asterisks or a new chapter heading. But in life, you have to live through the passage of time.

Luckily for me, there were no hitches.

Getting rid of the body in the quarry after dark was no problem. It was no picnic, either, but it had to be done. And once we did it, the worst was over—for me, anyway.

The big burden fell on Joe from then on, and I was happy to see him pitch in and do a job. All the details went through without a hitch; checking out of his room, getting rid of his personal effects, moving into Buzzie's place. I rigged up a story for Sid Richter about finding Buzzie and sobering him up, and the rehearsal went through as scheduled the next day. If Joe made any slips, they were probably attributed to a hangover. And I didn't hear about any slips. I spent a lot of time with him during the next two weeks; giving him the data he needed and coaching him on names, associations, references, friendships—or what passed for friendships in Buzzie's world of beards, hunkers, stooges, mooches, and sycophants. It all seemed remarkably easy, once he got into the swing of it. We even had penmanship lessons; in a few days he had the signature down pat, and the kinescopes gave him all he needed to know about Buzzie the comic.

Of course I sweated a lot, and as the date for the first show approached my forehead was never dry. But somehow, even at the worst, it seemed easier than if the real Buzzie had been around. Whatever headaches came up, I at least knew I had somebody willing to work them out *with* me; we operated as a team. With Buzzie, I'd have been fighting him all the way.

Joe did a good job for me. He was a quick study, and I kept him busy, protected him from interviewers and from most of the hangers-on. Getting ready for the fall season was a perfect excuse, too. And once he got over the hurdle of the first show, I had a feeling we'd be in business.

So he sweated bullets, and I sweated atomic bombs, and the big night came, and then my forehead was dry again.

He went on and he fractured them.

He was as good as Buzzie had ever been. Hell, he was *better* than Buzzie! There wasn't a fluff, there wasn't a boo-boo. He cut a fine show.

And after it was over, he went home to his apartment and slept, instead of going out and throwing cheesecake at the waiters.

Truth to tell, *I* was the one who went out and celebrated. I had a feeling I'd earned it.

In the weeks that followed, everything was copasetic. No problems. It got so that I left Joe pretty much on his own; he seemed able to handle his own life without any more help. Oh, I kept tabs on him, of course, and we got together, but there were no bloopers, no hitches.

“How do you like it?” I asked him.

“Never enjoyed anything so much in my life,” he told me, and I could see he was telling the truth.

So I stopped worrying.

By the time two months had gone by, I’d almost forgotten the way things had happened. I know it sounds crazy, but that’s the truth; the real Buzzie Waters faded out of my memory, and so did that unpleasant afternoon. All water under the dam. Or in the quarry. . . .

Then the cat came back.

It wasn’t a cat, really. It was a canary.

She twittered her way past my secretary one morning and took a perch in my private office.

“Melody Morgan!” I exclaimed, with a delight I did not feel.

But here she was. Melody Morgan—Buzzie’s little playmate.

The minute I saw her, I started sweating again. She had no business in my office. A small-time chirp never gets that far, usually; in fact, she wouldn’t even dream of trying to see me. Let alone saunter in, sit down, and dangle her calves over the side of my best overstuffed chair. But here she was.

“Something I can do for you?” I asked.

“Why, yes, Mr. Millaney. I think there is.” She fluttered her eyelashes and gave me that coy look. “I want a job.”

“A job, eh?”

“I’m a singer, you know.”

“Yes, I know.” I pursed my lips. “But that’s not my department. You want Loomis over in Auditions, or Seagrist, in Casting.”

“No, Mr. Millaney. I’ve talked to them. They don’t have anything to suggest.”

“Things are tight, eh?”

She smiled. “Not exactly. To be perfectly frank, Mr. Millaney, they don’t think I’m a very good singer. That’s why they never hire me.”

“Oh.”

“And since I’m being frank, I might as well admit that *I* don’t think I’m a very good singer, either.”

“But still, you think I’d hire you.”

“Right, Mr. Millaney.”

“Any reason?”

“Yes. I’m a good friend of Buzzie Waters.”

“I know.”

“I’ve seen quite a lot of him these past few weeks.”

“I—I didn’t know that.” I didn’t, either, and I cursed myself.

“You’re a busy man, Mr. Millaney. You can’t keep track of everything.”

“That’s true.” It *was* true, but that was one thing I *should* have kept track of. Joe would naturally have to see Buzzie’s girl friend, sooner or later. But why couldn’t it have been later?

“Anyway, I’d like you to give me a job,” she said.

“You have a particular show in mind?”

She shrugged. “It doesn’t matter, really. You can give me a general contract with the network. I can do guest shots, fill-ins, standby availabilities.” Melody Morgan’s eyelashes stopped fluttering and she gave me a level look. “In fact, since I’m really a lousy singer, I’ll give you a break. I won’t actually insist on appearing at all. Just give me a contract and that’ll be good enough.”

“Well.” I hesitated. “We do have a stock contract deal, yes. The usual minimum, on a six-month option basis—”

“Please.” She stood up. “I’d like a five-year deal. The non-cancellable kind. And I wasn’t thinking of the minimum.”

“What were you thinking of?”

“One thousand a week.”

She sang the words at me, real pear-shaped tones. Her delivery was perfect.

I stood there. I had a lot of answers, and none of them were any good. I could have asked her if she was crazy, if she'd flipped, who did she think she was, who did she think she was talking to? But I knew these lines wouldn't help. Buzzie Waters' four writers couldn't feed me the topper, either.

I cleared my throat and said, "Does Buzzie know you're here?"

She laughed. "Certainly not. We both are aware of that. Buzzie doesn't know anything, any more. Does he, Mr. Millaney?" She saw the look on my face, and she laughed again. "I won't ask you to answer that last question. It might be embarrassing. Just give me your answer on the job."

"And if I don't?"

"Then I'm afraid I'll have to ask the last question again. And a lot of other questions. Such as whatever became of that character Buzzie fired, that Joe Traskin? I haven't seen him around lately—or have I?"

I leaned forward. "How did you—?"

"Please! Now you're embarrassing *me!* When a girl is as friendly as I was with Buzzie, she *notices* things, you know? Little changes, differences. And she begins to put two and two together. Then she starts checking up. Until things add up."

"What do they add up to?"

"One thousand a week." She was singing again. And there was only one way to keep her from singing.

"All right," I said. "But I needn't remind you what the deal is. You'll have to keep your mouth closed."

"A pleasure."

It would take a lot of fixing, a lot of squaring. It would take a lot of explaining as to why I'd coughed up a big non-cancellable to a two-bit thrush. In the end, I might have to pay for it out of my own pocket. But there was no other way. Not now. Not until I talked to Joe. . . .

Joe couldn't help me.

“I tell you, I don’t know a damned thing about it,” he said. “I never guessed she suspected anything.”

“But why did you have to hang around?”

“You know the answer to that one. Because she and Buzzie were so close. I couldn’t drop her, or there’d be real trouble, right away. You know he was keeping her in that apartment of hers. She’d stir up a stink—”

“What do you call this?” I asked. “A thousand a week for five years! That smells to high heaven.”

“Tough. But that’s the way the ball bounces.”

“It could stop bouncing.”

“What do you mean?”

I stared at the ceiling. “Suppose you have a pet, Joe. Say, a canary. And you get tired of it. Maybe you don’t want to hear it singing any more. What do you do?”

He wasn’t staring at the ceiling. He was staring at me, and shaking his head. “Get this, chum,” he said. “I’m very fond of pets. And this pet in particular. I like things just the way they are. If I’m going to be Buzzie Waters, I’m going to have everything he had. That was our deal.”

“Yes, but what’s so special about this dame? I mean, you can have anything you want. My friend Maggie would get you—”

“I’m not interested in Shetland ponies. This canary satisfies me. And you want me to be satisfied, don’t you, pal?”

“Yes. Of course I do, Joe.”

“Call me Buzzie. Everybody else does.” He bent over the desk. “And if you want them to keep on calling me Buzzie, you’d better not go rumbling the details. You got away with it once, but you can’t be that lucky twice in a row. Leave well enough alone.”

“All right.”

Only it wasn’t all right, and I knew it. The thousand bucks was bad enough, but Joe’s new attitude was worse. He’d never tried to throw his weight around before, and it was a bad sign.

Before the week was out there was a worse one. He called and asked me to come up to his town apartment for a talk.

"How about tonight, at nine, sharp?"

I agreed.

I'd be there, and I'd be sharp. It was time to clamp down, once and for all.

Joe was waiting for me when I arrived. He looked very much at home, wearing one of Buzzie's monogrammed robes and one of Buzzie's big, phoney smiles. And I could tell he'd been sampling some of Buzzie's favorite after-dinner liqueurs, too. The coffee table was loaded with bottles.

"Welcome to humble abode," he greeted me. "Please to sit down."

"Never mind the routine," I told him. "I've got a few things to say to you, and I want you to listen carefully. It's time I straightened you out. Frankly, I don't like this independent attitude of yours. From now on, I'm issuing orders. Here's how we're going to work in the future."

"Save it," he said. "It won't be necessary."

"Why not?"

"Because we won't be working together in the future." He went around in back of his desk. "I said I had news for you. Look at this."

He flipped a sheaf of papers at me.

I glanced at the heading. "A contract? And with those lousy—"

"Please. You're speaking about my future employers, as of five short weeks from now."

"But you belong to us."

"On thirteen-week options, with cancellation privileges after a month's advance notification."

"You wouldn't leave *Buzzin' Around.*"

"Certainly not. I'll take it with me. Oh, not the name. But most of my people will come."

"Your people? Who do you think you are?"

"Buzzie Waters. And so do they, and so does everyone. You fixed that, didn't you?"

My throat hurt. It was hard to talk. “But you can’t quit—”

“For seven grand more a week I can do anything. You won’t match the figure.”

“Of course, I won’t.” I stared down at the coffee table. “I don’t have to. We’re in this thing together. We’ll stay in. I made you and I can break you.”

“I don’t get it.”

“Then let me spell it out for you.” I smiled at him. It hurt to smile, too, but I made it. “When I called you over to Buzzie’s house that afternoon I told you I was an executive, that I had everything figured. Well, it was the truth. I knew just what I was doing, and why.

“I could have disposed of his body alone and called you in later. But I had a reason for wanting you there, to help me. Not because I needed your physical assistance, but because this made you an accessory to murder. An accessory after the fact, as they say in court. Or will say, anytime you try to cross me.”

“So that’s how it is!”

I nodded. “Maybe you think I’d never confess. But if you walk out on me, I will. Because you know what happens. If *Buzzin’ Around* goes off, it’s my neck. They’ll crucify me. Letting you get away will wash me up with this network and any other outfit in the business. I’ve put my life into this job. If I lose it, I might as well lose the rest, too. So I’m warning you right now—walk out, and I’ll talk. When they put me in the chair you’ll be sitting in my lap.”

“You won’t stop at anything, will you?”

“That’s right,” I said. “I’m an executive.”

“You’re a murderer,” he murmured. “And that’s the real reason I signed this contract. You see, I hadn’t really figured it out.”

“What do you mean?”

“Think back, now,” he said. “When I went out to the house you told me that what happened there was an accident. I was willing to buy that. And I could see some sense in protecting you, and a lot more sense in protecting all the other people on the show. After all, it wouldn’t help anyone if I turned you in. So I went along with the gag.

“Then I found out you really were a killer. I found it out the other day, when you asked me to help you get rid of Melody. Only a real killer thinks like that, Millaney. That’s when I decided to walk out on you. And that’s what I’m going to do.”

“You’d better not try,” I whispered. “I’ll talk.”

He shook his head. “You forget. I have an alibi.”

I stared at him.

“Yes, an alibi. Melody. She’ll swear I spent that afternoon with her. I’m covered.” He grinned. “Matter of fact, I *did* spend part of the afternoon with her. And some people saw me go in. None of them saw me come out again, luckily enough.”

I managed to choke out the words. “But how can you be covered? You *weren’t* at Melody’s place. You didn’t even *know* Melody then. She never even met you, until after Buzzie died.”

He grinned again.

“I’ve got news for you,” he said. “Buzzie never died.”

“But—”

“You killed Joe Traskin,” he murmured. “I’m Buzzie Waters.”

I just stood there, staring at the coffee table. It whirled.

“Now let’s play the flip side,” he was saying. “I was out at my house when you called, sounding off. I didn’t feel like making rehearsal, and I didn’t feel like putting up with your ravings. You said you were coming right over.

“So I got this great idea for a gag. I called Joe up and told him to get out there on the double, in a cab. When he showed up, I offered him his old job back—on condition that he stand in for me and listen to you blow your top. We had a couple of drinks on it and he said okay. But he was worried the landlady at his rooming house might latch onto his belongings, because he was back on his rent. I told him that was no problem—if he gave me the key I'd stop by and settle with her, then bring his junk out to the house. That was the deal.

"Only on the way I dropped in to see Melody. We had a ball, laughing it up whenever we thought of you screaming at poor Joe. Then I left her and stopped at his place. That's when you called.

"Of course, I didn't figure what had happened. Not until I walked in and found you—and Joe. The poor jerk must have kept right on hitting the bottle after I left him. I don't blame him; he didn't want to face you. Well, the gag backfired on him, didn't it?

"But when you told me about the accident, I decided the gag had to go on. And that's when it got really big—when you made this terrific deal with me to play myself! Funniest damned thing I ever heard of—nobody'd ever believe it, would they? And that's why I'm not in any trouble. Who'd ever think I'd help get rid of my double's body, just so I could play myself? It doesn't make sense, because I have no *motive.* You're the guy with the motive. Me, I've got Melody and my alibi."

He started to laugh.

I almost moved.

"And Melody! That was the real topper, when I told her to give you the old shakedown routine. She said she thought you'd snap your cap!"

I tried to move, but I couldn't. "You put her up to it?" I whispered. "You weren't content with what you'd done, you had to let her bleed me, too?"

He nodded. "It was a gag, like I said. My best gag. A real weirdie, but then you don't have a sense of humor, do you? You don't understand what makes a comic, because you're just an executive. Or you were." He waved the contract at me. "After I walk out, we'll see. There's no way you can stop me, you and your executive mind—"

"Oh yes there is," I said, and I could talk loudly now and I could move swiftly. I had one of the bottles from the coffee table, and I swung it up, and I swung it down, and I swung it again, and even after the bottle broke I kept on using the jagged piece in my hand.

It was just the scene out at the house, all over again. Except for one difference—now I didn't have any double to call in. And I couldn't think like an executive any more. Buzzie Waters told the truth, there at the end. I'm a murderer.

And what can a murderer do now?

1966

All In the Family

Robert Bloch, author of the best-selling PSYCHO (S&S) and other novels, has become widely known in recent years for his stories and novels about minds in the shadows—tormented minds . . . But here is a vignette about a man who proposed to dispose of his wife—and anticipated as problems . . .

It is sometimes easier for a husband to kill his wife than for a wife to dispose of her husband.

This is particularly true if the husband is fortunate enough to be a mortician by profession.

Carl Somers came to this conclusion one night in May, and by the end of June he was ready to test his theory. He had his plan perfected and all he needed now was an opportunity.

Everything was in his favor. His wife, Celia, was a semiinvalid who had made no friends in the community, and there would be no questions asked when he circulated the news that she had gone to Arizona for her health. In fact, several doctors had already urged her to do just that. He could fake some letters from her if necessary, but there wouldn't be much talk. By the time anyone became suspicious, Carl himself would have disappeared. He planned to sell the funeral home immediately and tell people he was joining Celia in Arizona. Oh, it would work splendidly—and he knew just what he was going to do.

There was only one fly in the ointment; a big fat fly named Elmer. Elmer was Carl's brother, and a sanctimonious prig. He lived in a town about forty miles away, and the two of them met infrequently.

But Elmer knew that Carl had married Celia for her late father's mortuary establishment, and he didn't approve of it. He also knew that Carl liked to step out occasionally, and he didn't approve of that, either. In fact he disapproved of everything not connected with his own preoccupation with the church choir.

When Carl thought about his brother and his possible suspicions, he hesitated. And then Fate stepped in and provided him with an unexpected opportunity. For on the Fourth of July, Elmer's wife died.

It was a sudden heart attack, sustained after a picnic outing, and when Elmer came to Carl with the news he was desolated. Carl pretended to share his brother's grief, but inwardly he was overjoyed. It wasn't likely, under the circumstances, that Elmer would be snooping around or asking questions.

Carl lost no time in telling him there'd be difficulty in getting word to Celia so that she could return for the funeral—she was already en route to Arizona, by train, he said.

Elmer was too distraught to do anything more than nod. He didn't pursue the matter; just broke down completely in the midst of choosing a coffin from Carl's ample stock.

In the end, Carl selected the coffin for Elmer's wife, and that suited him perfectly. He picked a nice large one, then went upstairs and told Celia about it.

"You see, it has to be big,'* he explained. "Because you're going to be buried in it, too."

Celia's only answer was a gurgle, for at that moment Carl thrust the scalpel into her neck.

It was a rather messy death, but Carl didn't mind. He dragged the body down and laid it out on a slab, next to that of his sister-in-law. He made a nice job of it on *her*—using the best materials and putting in the fancy smilers. He wanted her to look good when the mourners came. With Celia, he didn't do a thing. It wouldn't be at all necessary. Right after the funeral service Carl would take the coffin around in back and load it onto the hearse. But before he did so, he'd just dismiss his assistant for a moment on some pretext or another and pop Celia inside. By the time the pall-bearers were ready to do their token service at the door of the funeral home, Celia would be right where he wanted her. And in another half hour she'd be buried.

That's exactly how it worked out. There wasn't a flaw or a hitch in the entire scheme. Carl gloated as he watched the coffin being lowered into the grave, wondering why his brother carried on so. You'd think Elmer would be happy to get rid of his wife, too, the old horror. Odd that his brother should be so different.

At least Carl thought it was odd, until he returned to the mortuary and found the tall man waiting for him.

"My name's Swenson," the tall man said. "Police. I hate to disturb you at a time like this, but I'm afraid I'll have to ask you a few questions about your brother and his relations with his wife. Do you happen to know if they ever had any serious differences of opinion?"

"My brother? Differences of opinion—?"

"I'll be blunt," Swenson said. "There's talk going around that they quarreled. Your brother got mixed up with some girl in the church choir. We checked with a pharmacist who tells us he sold your brother some arsenic last week, and it sounds bad."

Carl began to tremble violently.

Swenson put his hand on Carl's shoulder and sighed. "Sorry," he said. "I know I shouldn't bother you. All this must come as quite a shock, but sometimes one never knows what's going on, even with one's own brother. Of course there's one sure way of finding out that will spare you any further trouble or embarrassment. I've got the permit right here. We're going to dig up the grave and reopen the coffin."

The Plot Is the Thing

There are certainly worse ways to spend a rainy Saturday than to watch a re-run of, say, The Wolf Man*, starring Lon Chaney, Jr., Bela Lugosi and Maria Ouspenskaya (right! the old gypsy fortune teller). We suspected all along that horror films are best consumed in moderation, but not for the horrible reason suggested in the story below. Mr. Bloch is the author of a contemporary horror classic,* PSYCHO*, and we don't doubt that he knows what he's talking about.*

WHEN THEY BROKE INTO THE apartment, they found her sitting in front of the television set, watching an old movie.

Peggy couldn't understand why they made such a fuss about that. She liked to watch old movies—the Late Show, the Late, Late Show, even the All Night Show. That was really the best, because they generally ran the horror pictures. Peggy tried to explain this to them, but they kept prowling around the apartment, looking at the dust on the furniture and the dirty sheets on the unmade bed. Somebody said there was green mould on the dishes in the sink; it's true she hadn't bothered, to wash them for quite a long time, but then she simply hadn't bothered to eat for several days, either.

It wasn't as though she didn't have any money; she told them about the bank-accounts. But shopping and cooking and housekeeping was just too much trouble, and besides, she really didn't like going outside and seeing all those *people*. So if she preferred watching TV, that was her business wasn't it?

They just looked at each other and shook their heads and made some phone-calls. And then the ambulance came, and they helped her dress. Helped her? They practically *forced* her, and by the time she realized where they were taking her it was too late.

At first they were very nice to her at the hospital, but they kept asking those idiotic questions. When she said she had no relatives or friends they wouldn't believe her, and when they checked and found out it was true it only made things worse. Peggy got angry and said she was going home, and it all ended with a hypo in the arm.

There were lots of hypos after that, in in between times this Dr. Crane kept after her. He was one of the heads of staff and at first Peggy liked him, but not when he began to pry.

She tried to explain to him that she'd always been a loner, even before her parents died. And she told him there was no reason for her to work, with all that money. Somehow, he got it out of her about how she used to keep going to the movies, at least one every day, only she liked horror pictures and of course there weren't quite that many, so after while she just watched them on TV. Because it was easier, and you didn't have to go home along dark streets after seeing something frightening. At home she could lock herself in, and as long as she had the television going she didn't feel lonely. Besides, she could watch movies all night, and this helped her insomnia. Sometimes the old pictures were pretty gruesome and this made her nervous, but she felt more nervous when she didn't watch. Because in the movies, no matter how horrible things seemed for the heroine, she was always rescued in the end. And that was better than the way things generally worked out in real life, wasn't it?

Dr. Crane didn't think so. And he wouldn't let her have any television in her room now, either. He kept talking to Peggy about the need to face reality, and the dangers of retreating into a fantasy world and identifying with frightened heroines. The way he made it sound, you'd think she *wanted* to be menaced, *wanted* to be killed, or even raped.

And when he started all that nonsense about a "nervous disorder" and told her about his plans for treatment, Peggy knew she had to escape. Only she never got a chance. Before she realized it, they had arranged for the lobotomy.

Peggy knew what a lobotomy was, of course. And she was afraid of it, because it meant tampering with the brain. She remembered some mad doctor—Lionel Atwill, or George Zucco?—saying that by tampering with the secrets of the human brain one can change reality. "There are some things we were not meant to know," he had whispered. But that, of course, was in a movie. And Dr. Crane wasn't mad. *She* was the mad one. Or was she? He certainly looked insane—she kept trying to break free after they strapped her down and he came after her—she remembered the way everything gleamed. His eyes, and the long needle. The long needle, probing into her brain to change reality—

The funny thing was, when she woke up she felt fine. "I'm like a different person, Doctor."

And it was true. No more jitters; she was perfectly calm. And she wanted to eat, and she didn't have insomnia, and she could dress herself and talk to the nurses, even kid around with them. The big thing was that she didn't worry about watching television any more. She could scarcely remember any of those old movies that had disturbed her. Peggy wasn't a bit disturbed now. And even Dr. Crane knew it.

At the end of the second week he was willing to let her go home. They had a little chat, and he complimented her on how well she was doing, asked her about her plans for the future. When Peggy admitted she hadn't figured anything out yet, Dr. Crane suggested she take a trip. She promised to think it over.

But it wasn't until she got back to the apartment that Peggy made up her mind. The place was a mess. The moment she walked in she knew she couldn't stand it. All that dirt and grime and squalor—it was like a movie set, really, with clothes scattered everywhere and dishes piled in the sink. Peggy decided right then and there she'd take a vacation. Around the world, maybe. Why not? She had the money. And it would be interesting to see all the *real* things she'd seen represented on the screen all these years.

So Peggy dissolved into a travel agency and montaged into shopping and packing and faded out to London.

Strange, she didn't think of it in that way at the time. But looking back, she began to realize that this is the way things seemed to happen. She'd come to a decision, or go somewhere and do something, and all of a sudden she'd find herself in another setting—just like in a movie, where they cut from scene to scene. When she first became aware of it she was a little worried; perhaps she was having blackouts. After all, her brain *had* been tampered with. But there was nothing really alarming about the little mental blanks. In a way they were very convenient, just like in the movies; you don't particularly want to waste time watching the heroine brush her teeth or pack her clothing or put on cosmetics. The plot is the thing. That's what's *real*.

And everything was real, now. No more uncertainty. Peggy could admit to herself that before the operation there had been times when she wasn't quite sure about things; sometimes what she saw on the screen was more convincing than the dull gray fog which seemed to surround her in daily life.

But that was gone, now. Whatever that needle had done, it had managed to pierce the fog. Everything was very clear, very sharp and definite, like good black-and-white camera work. And she herself felt so much more capable and confident. She was well-dressed, well-groomed, attractive again. The extras moved along the streets in an orderly fashion and didn't bother her. And the bit-players spoke their lines crisply, performed their functions, and got out of the scene. Odd that she should think of them that way—they weren't "bit-players" at all; just travel clerks and waiters and stewards and then, at the hotel, bellboys and maids. They seemed to fade in and out of the picture on cue. All smiles, like in the early part of a good horror movie, where at first everything seems bright and cheerful.

Paris was where things started to go wrong. This guide—a sort of Eduardo Cianelli type, in fact he looked to be an almost dead ringer for Cianelli as he was many years ago—was showing her through the Opera House. He happened to mention something about the catacombs, and that rang a bell.

She thought about Erik. That was his name, Erik—The Phantom of the Opera. *He* had lived in the catacombs underneath the Opera House. Of course, it was only a picture, but she thought perhaps the guide would know about it and she mentioned Erik's name as a sort of joke.

That's when the guide turned pale and began to tremble. And then he ran. Just ran off and left her standing there.

Peggy knew something was wrong, then. The scene just seemed to dissolve—that part didn't worry her, it was just another one of those temporary blackouts she was getting used to—and when Peggy regained awareness, she was in this bookstore asking a clerk about Gaston Leroux.

And this was what frightened her. She remembered distinctly that *The Phantom of the Opera* had been written by Gaston Leroux, but here was this French bookstore clerk telling her there was no such author.

That's what they said when she called the library. No such author—and no such book. Peggy opened her mouth, but the scene was already dissolving . . .

In Germany she rented a car, and she was enjoying the scenery when she came to this burned mill and the ruins of the castle beyond. She knew where she was, of course, but it couldn't be—not until she got out of the car, moved up to the great door, and in the waning sun of twilight, read the engraved legend on the stone. *Frankenstein.*

There was a faint sound from behind the door, a sound of muffled, dragging footsteps, moving closer. Peggy screamed, and ran.

Now she knew where she was running to. Perhaps she'd find safety behind the Iron Curtain. Instead there was another castle, and she heard the howling of a wolf in the distance, saw the bat swoop from the shadows as she fled.

And in an English library in Prague, Peggy searched the volumes of literary biography. There was no listing for Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, none for Bram Stoker.

Of course not. There wouldn't be, in a *movie* world, because when the characters are real, their "authors" do not exist.

Peggy remembered the way Larry Talbot had changed before her eyes, metamorphizing into the howling wolf. She remembered the sly purr of the Count's voice, saying, "I do not drink—wine". And she shuddered, and longed to be far away from the superstitious peasantry who draped wolfbane outside their windows at night.

She needed the reassurance of sanity in an English-speaking country. She'd go to London, see a doctor immediately.

Then she remembered what was *in* London. Another werewolf. And Mr. Hyde. And the Ripper.

Peggy fled through a fadeout, back to Paris. She found the name of a psychiatrist, made her appointment. She was perfectly prepared to face her problem now, perfectly prepared to face reality.

But she was not prepared to face the baldheaded little man with the sinister accent and the bulging eyes. She knew him—Dr. Gogol, in *Mad Love.* She also knew Peter Lorre had passed on, knew *Mad Love* was only a movie, made the year she was born. But that was in another country, and besides, the wench was dead.

The wench was dead, but Peggy was alive. "I *am a stranger and afraid, in a world I never made."* Or had she made this world? She wasn't sure. All she knew was that she had to escape.

Where? It couldn't be Egypt, because that's where *he* would be—the wrinkled, hideous image of the Mummy superimposed itself momentarily. The Orient? What about Fu Manchu?

Back to America, then? Home is where the heart is—but there'd be a knife waiting for that heart when the shower-curtains were ripped aside and the creature of *Psycho* screamed and slashed . . .

Somehow she managed to remember a haven, born in other films. The South Seas—Dorothy Lamour, Jon Hall, the friendly natives in the tropical paradise. There *was* escape.

Peggy boarded the ship in Marseilles. It was a tramp steamer but the cast—crew, rather—was reassuringly small. At first she spent most of her time below deck, huddled in her berth. Oddly enough, it was getting to be like it had been *before.* Before the operation, that is, before the needle bit into her brain, twisting it, or distorting the world. *Changing reality,* as Lionel Atwill had put it. She should have listened to them—Atwill, Zucco, Basil Rathbone, Edward Van Sloan, John Carradine. They may have been a little mad, but they were good doctors, dedicated scientists. They meant well. "There are some things we were not meant to know."

When they reached the tropics, Peggy felt much better. She regained her appetite, prowled the deck, went into the galley and joked with the Chinese cook. The crew seemed aloof, but they all treated her with the greatest respect. She began to realize she'd done the right thing—this *was* escape. And the warm scent of tropic nights beguiled her. From now on, this would be her life; drifting through nameless, uncharted seas, safe from the role of heroine with all its haunting and horror.

It was hard to believe she'd been so frightened. There were no Phantoms, no Werewolves in this world. Perhaps she didn't need a doctor. She was facing reality, and it was pleasant enough. There were no movies here, no television; her fears were all part of a long-forgotten nightmare.

One evening, after dinner, Peggy returned to her cabin with something nagging at the back of her brain. The Captain had put in one of his infrequent appearances at the table, and he kept looking at her all through the meal. Something about the way he squinted at her was disturbing. Those little pig-eyes of his reminded her of someone. Noah Beery? Stanley Fields?

She kept trying to remember, and at the same time she was dozing off. Dozing off much too quickly. Had her food been drugged?

Peggy tried to sit up. Through the porthole she caught a reeling glimpse of land beyond, but then everything began to whirl and it was too late . . .

When she awoke she was already on the island, and the woolly-headed savages were dragging her through the gate, howling and waving their spears.

They tied her and left her and then Peggy heard the chanting. She looked up and saw the huge shadow. Then she knew where she was and what *H* was, and she screamed.

Even over her own screams she could hear the natives chanting, just one word, over and over again. It sounded like, “Kong”.

Life In Our Time

Recently we read a definition of “Camp” (Susan Sontag’s?). Something is "Campy” when it’s so “far out” that it’s “in” so “bad” that it’s “good—or put another way, so lacking in culture that it is culture. (Norman Mailer has defined Camp as “the art of the cannibal, the art which evolved out of the bankruptcy of the novel of manners.”)

But is Camp, or even Campiness, truly the most representative symbol of our Twentieth Century civilization? We don’t believe it; perhaps more accurately, we don’t want to believe it . . .

WHEN HARRY’S TIUME CAPSULE arrived, Jill made him put it in the guest house.

All it was, it turned out, was a big long metal box with a cover that could be sealed tight and welded so that the air couldn’t get at what was inside. Jill was really quite disappointed with it.

But then she was quite disappointed with Harry, too. Professor Harrison Cramer, B.A., B.S., M.A., Ph.D. Half the alphabet was wasted on nothing. At those flaky faculty cocktail parties, people were always telling her, “It must be wonderful to be married to a brilliant man like your husband.” Brother, if they only knew!

It wasn’t just that Harry was fifteen years older than she was. After all, look at Rex Harrison and Richard Burton or even Larry Olivier for that matter. But Harry wasn't the movie-star type. Not even the mad-scientist type, like Vinnie Price in those crazy high-camp pictures. He was nothing.

Of course Jill got the message long before she married him. But he *did* have the big house and all that loot he'd inherited from his mother. She figured on making a few changes, and she actually *did* manage to redo the house so that it looked halfway presentable, with the help of that *fagilleh* interior decorator. But she couldn't redo Harry. Maybe *he* needed a *fagilleh* interior decorator to work on him, too; *she* certainly couldn't change him. And outside of what she managed to squeeze out of him for the redecorating, Jill hadn't been able to get her hands on any of the loot, either. Harry wasn't interested in entertaining or going out or taking cruises, and whenever she mentioned sable jackets he mumbled something under his breath about "conspicuous consumption," whatever that was. He didn't like art or the theatre, he didn't drink, he didn't even watch TV. And he wore flannel pajamas in bed. *All* the time.

After a couple of months Jill was ready to climb the walls. Then she began thinking about Reno, and that's where Rick came in. Rick was her attorney. At least, that's the way it started out to be, but he had other ideas. Particularly for those long afternoons when Harry was lecturing at seminars or whatever he did over there at the University. Pretty soon Jill forgot about Reno; Rick was all for one of those quickie deals you get down in Mexico. He was sure he could make it stick and still see to it that she got her fifty-fifty share under the community property laws, without any waiting. It could all be done in twenty-four hours, no hassle; they'd take off together, just like eloping. Bang, you're divorced, bang, you're remarried, and then, bang, bang, bang—

So all Jill had to worry about was finding the right time. And even that was no problem, after Harry told her about the capsule.

"I'm to be in charge of the project," he said. "Full authority to choose what will be representative of our culture. Quite a responsibility. But I welcome the challenge."

"So what's a time capsule?" Jill wanted to know.

Harry went into a long routine and she didn't really listen, just enough to get the general idea. The thing was, Harry had to pick out all kinds of junk to be sealed up in this gizmo so that sometime—ten thousand years from now, maybe—somebody would come along and dig it up and open it and be able to tell what kind of a civilization we had. Big deal. But from the way Harry went on, you'd think he'd just won the Grand Prix or something.

"We're going to put the capsule in the foundation of the new Humanities Building." he told her.

"What are humanities?" Jill asked, but Harry just gave her one of those *Christ-how-can-you-be-so-stupid?* looks that always seemed to start their quarrels, and they would have had a fight then and there, too, only he added something about how the dedication ceremonies for the new building would take place on May 1st, and he'd have to hurry to get everything arranged for the big day. Including writing his dedicatory address.

May 1st was all Jill need to hear. That was on a Friday, and if Harry was going to be tied up making a speech at the dedication, it would be an A-OK time to make a little flight across the border. So she managed to call Rick and tell him and he said yeah, sure, perfect.

"It's only ten days from now," Jill reminded him. "We've got a lot to do."

She didn't know it, but it turned out she wasn't kidding. She had more to do than she thought, because all at once Harry was *interested* in her. *Really* interested.

"You've got to help me," he said that night at dinner. "I rely on your taste. Of course I've got some choices of my own in mind, but I want you to suggest items to go into the capsule."

At first Jill thought he was putting her on, but he really meant it. "This project is going to be honest. The usual ploy is pure exhibitionism—samples of the 'best' of everything, plus descriptive data which is really just a pat on the back for the status quo. Well, I want to include material that's self-explanatory, not self-congratulatory. Not art and facts—just artifacts."

Harry lost her there, until he said, “Everything preserved will be a clue to our social attitudes. Not what we pretend to admire, but what the majority actually believes in and enjoys. And that’s where you come in, my dear. You’re the majority.”

Jill began to dig it, then. “You mean like TV and records?”

“Exactly. What’s that album you like so well? The one with the four hermaphrodites on the liner?”

“Who?”

“Excuse me—it’s purportedly a singing group, isn’t it?”

“Oh, you’re talking about the Poodles!” Jill went and got the album, which was called *The Poodles Bark Again.* The sound really turned her on, but she always thought Harry hated it. And now he was coming on smiles.

“Great,” he said. “This definitely goes in.”

“But—”

“Don’t worry, I’ll buy you another.” He took the album and put it on his desk. “Now, you mentioned something about television. What’s your favorite program?”

When she saw he was really serious she began telling him about *Anywhere, U.S.A.* What it was, it was about life in a small town, just an ordinary suburblike, but the people were great. There was this one couple with the two kids, sort of an average family, you might say, only he was kind of playing around with a divorcée who ran a *discothetique* or whatever they call them, and she was getting the hots for a psychiatrist—he wasn’t really *her* psychiatrist, he was analyzing one of the kids, the one who had set fire to the high school gymnasium, not the girl—she was afraid she’d been caught because of that affair she was having with the vice-principal who was really a Commie agent only she didn’t know it yet and her real boyfriend, the one who had the brain operation, had a thing about his mother, so—

It got kind of complicated, but Harry kept asking her to tell him more and pretty soon he was nodding. “Wonderful—we’ll have to see if we can get kinescopes on a week’s episodes.”

"You mean you really want something like that?"

"Of course. Wouldn't you say this show captured the lives of typical American citizens today?"

She had to agree that he was right. Also about some of the things he was going to put into the capsule to show the way people lived nowadays—like tranquilizers and pep pills and income tax forms and a map of the freeway-expressway-turnpike system. He had a lot of numbers, too, for Zip Code and digit-dialing, and Social Security, and the ones the computers punched out on insurance and charge-account and utility bills.

But what he really wanted was ideas for more stuff, and in the next couple of days he kept leaning on her. He got hold of her souvenir from Shady Lawn Cemetery—it was a plastic walnut that opened up, called "Shady Lawn in a Nutshell." Inside were twelve little color prints showing all the tourist attractions of the place, and you could mail the whole thing to your friends back home. Harry put this in the time capsule, wrapping it up in something he told her was an actuarial table on the incidence of coronary occlusion among middle-aged, middle-class males. Like heart attacks, that is.

"What's that you're reading?" he asked. And the next thing you know, he had her copy of the latest Steve Slash paperback—the one where Steve is sent on this top-secret mission to keep peace in Port Said, and right after he kills these five guys with the portable flamethrower concealed in his judo belt, he's getting ready to play beddy-bye with Yasmina, who's really another secret agent with radioactive nipples—

And that's as far as she'd got when he grabbed the book. It was getting so she couldn't keep anything out of his hot little hands.

"What's that you're cooking?" he wanted to know. And there went the TV dinner—frozen crêpes suzettes and all. To say nothing of the *Plain Jane Instant Borscht.*

"Where's the photo you had of your brother?" It was a real nothing picture of Stud, just him wearing that way-out beard of his and standing by his cycle on the day he passed his initiation into Hell's Angels. But Harry put *that* in, too. Jill didn't think it was very nice, seeing as how he clipped it to another photo of some guys taking the Ku Klux Klan oath.

But right now the main thing was to keep him happy. That's what Rick said when she clued him in on what was going on.

"Cooperate, baby," he told her. "It's a real kinky kick, but it keeps him out of our hair. We got plans to make, tickets to buy, packing and like that there."

The trouble was, Jill ran out of ideas. She explained this to Rick but he laughed.

"I'll give you some," he said. "And you can feed 'em to him. He's a real s.a., that husband of yours—I know what he wants."

The funny part of it was that Rick did know. He was really kind of a brain himself, but not in a kooky way like Harry. So she listened to what he suggested and told Harry when she got home.

"How about a sample of the Theatre of the Absurd?" she asked. Harry looked at her over the top of his glasses, and for a minute she thought she'd really thrown him, but then he grinned and got excited.

"Perfect!" he said. "Any suggestions?"

"Well, I was reading a review about this new play, *Little Irma*—it's about this guy who thinks he's having a baby so he goes to an abortionist, only really I guess the abortionist is supposed to be God or somebody, even if he is a black, and it all takes place in a pay toilet—"

"Delightful!" Harry was off and running. "I'll pick up a copy. Anything else?"

Thank God Rick had clued her in. So she said what about a recording of one of these concerts where they used a "prepared" piano that makes noises like screeching brakes, or sometimes no sound at all. And he liked that. He also liked the idea about a sample of Pop Art—maybe a big blowup of a newspaper *Piles—Don't Be Cut* ad.

The next day she laid it on him about a tape of a "Happening" which was the real thing, because it took place in some private sanatorium for disturbed patients, and he really got hung up on this idea.

And the next day he asked for a suggestion for a movie, so she remembered what Rick coached her on about *7¼,* which was a way-out thing by some Yugoslavian director she never heard of, about a man making a movie about a man making a movie, only you never could be quite sure, in the movie, whether the scene was supposed to be a movie of a part of a movie or a movie of a part of what was really happening, if it happened.

He bought this. too.

"You're wonderful," he said. "Truthfully, I never expected this of you."

Jill just gave him the big smile and went on her merry way. It wasn't hard, because he had to go running around town trying to dig up tapes and films and recordings of all the stuff he had on his list. Which was just how Rick had said it would be, leaving everything clear for them to shop and set up their last-minute plans.

"I won't get our tickets until the day before," Rick told her. "We don't want to tip anything. The way I figure it, Harry'll be moving the capsule over to where they're holding the ceremonies the next morning, so you'll get a chance to pack while he's out of the way." Rick was really something else, the way he had it all lined out.

And that's the way it worked. The day before the ceremony, Harry was busy out in the guest house all afternoon long, packing his goodies into the time capsule. Just like a dopey squirrel burying his nuts. Only even dopey squirrels don't put stuff away for somebody to dig up ten thousand years from now.

Harry hadn't even had time to look at her for the past two days, and this didn't bother Jill any. Along about suppertime she went out to call him, but he said he wasn't hungry and besides he had to run over and contact the trucking company to come and haul the capsule over to the foundation site. They'd dug a big hole there for tomorrow morning, and he was going to take the capsule to it and stand guard over it until it was time for the dedication routine.

That was even better news than Jill could hope for, so as soon as Harry left for the trucking company she phoned Rick and gave him the word. He said he'd be right over with the tickets.

So of course Jill had to get dressed. She put on her girdle and the bra with the built-in falsies and her high heels; then she went in the bathroom and used her depilatory and touched up her hair where the rinse was fading, and put on her eyelashes and brushed her teeth, including all the caps, and tried those new fingernails after she got her makeup on and the perfume. When she looked at the results in the mirror she was really proud; for the first time in months she felt like her real self again. And from now on it would always be this way, with Rick—no more pretending, nothing phony.

There was a good moment with Rick there in the bedroom after he came in, but of course Harry *would* drive up right then—she heard the car out front and broke the clinch just in time, telling Rick to sneak out around the back. Harry'd be busy with the truckers for a couple of minutes at least.

Jill forced herself to wait in the bedroom until she was sure the coast was clear. She kept looking out the window but it was too dark now to see anything. Since there wasn't any noise she figured Harry must have taken the truckers back into the guest house.

And that's where she finally went.

Only the truckers weren't there. Just Harry.

"I told them to wait until first thing in the morning," he said. "Changed my mind when I realized how damp it was—no sense spending the night shivering outside in the cold. Besides, I haven't sealed the capsule yet—remembered a couple of things I wanted to add to the collection."

He took a little bottle out of his pocket and carried it over to the open capsule. "This goes in too. Carefully labeled, of course, so they can analyze it."

"The bottle's empty," Jill said.

Harry shook his head. "Not at all. It contains smog. That's right—smog, from the freeway. I want posterity to know everything about us, right down to the poisonous atmosphere in which our culture breathed its last."

He dropped the bottle into the capsule, then picked something else up from the table next to it. Jill noticed he had a soldering outfit there, ready to plug in when he sealed the lid, after he used a pump to suck the air out. He’d explained all this about the capsule being airtight, soundproof, duralumin-sheathed, but that didn’t interest her now. She kept looking at what he held in his hand.

It was one of those electric knife outfits, with the battery.

“Another artifact,” he said. “Another symbol of our decadence. An electric knife—just the thing for Mom when she carves the fast-frozen, precooked Thanksgiving turkey while she and Dad count all their shiny, synthetic, plastic blessings.” He waved the knife. “They’ll understand,” he told her. “Those people in the future will understand it all. They’ll know what life was like in our times—how we drained Walden Pond and refilled it again with blood, sweat and tears.”

Jill moved a little closer, staring at the knife. “The blade’s rusty,” she said.

Harry shook his head. “That’s not rust,” he said.

Jill kept her cool. She kept it right up until the moment she looked over the edge of the big, oblong box, looked down into the opening and saw Rick lying there. Rick was all sprawled out, and the red was oozing down over the books and records and pictures and tapes.

“I waited for him when he sneaked out of the house,” Harry said.

“Then you knew—all along—”

“For quite a while,” Harry said. “Long enough to figure things out and make my plans.”

“What plans?”

Harry just shrugged. And raised the knife.

A moment later the time capsule received the final specimen of life in the twentieth century.

1967

The Living Dead

All day long he rested, while the guns thundered in the village below. Then, in the slanting shadows of the late afternoon, the rumbling echoes faded into the distance and he knew it was over. The American advance had crossed the river. They were gone at last, and it was safe once more.

Above the village, in the crumbling ruins of the great chateau atop the wooded hillside. Count Barsac emerged from the crypt.

The Count was tall and thin—cadaverously thin, in a manner most hideously appropriate. His face and hands had a waxen pallor; his hair was dark, but not as dark as his eyes and the hollows beneath them. His cloak was black, and the sole touch of color about his person was the vivid redness of his lips when they curled in a smile.

He was smiling now, in the twilight, for it was time to play the game.

The name of the game was Death, and the Count had played it many times.

He had played it in Paris on the stage of the Grand Guignol; his name had been plain Eric Karon then, but still he'd won a certain renown for his interpretation of bizarre roles. Then the war had come and, with it, his opportunity.

Long before the Germans took Paris, he'd joined their Underground, working long and well. As an actor he'd been invaluable.

And this, of course, was his ultimate reward—to play the supreme role, not on the stage, but in real life. To play without the artifice of spotlights, in true darkness; this was the actor's dream come true. He had even helped to fashion the plot.

“Simplicity itself,” he told his German superiors. “Chateau Barsac has been deserted since the Revolution. None of the peasants from the village dare to venture near it, even in daylight, because of the legend. It is said, you see, that the last Count Barsac was a vampire.”

And so it was arranged. The shortwave transmitter had been set up in the large crypt beneath the chateau, with three skilled operators in attendance, working in shifts. And he, “Count Barsac,” in charge of the entire operation, as guardian angel. Rather, as guardian demon.

“There is a graveyard on the hillside below,” he informed them. “A humble resting place for poor and ignorant people. It contains a single imposing crypt—the ancestral tomb of the Barsacs. We shall open that crypt, remove the remains of the last Count, and allow the villagers to discover that the coffin is empty. They will never dare come near the spot or the chateau again, because this will prove that the legend is true—Count Barsac is a vampire, and walks once more.”

The question came then. “What if there are sceptics? What if someone does not believe?”

And he had his answer ready. “They will believe. For at night I shall walk—I, Count Barsac.”

After they saw him in the makeup, wearing the black cloak, there were no more questions. The role was his.

The role was his, and he’d played it well. The Count nodded to himself as he climbed the stairs and entered the roofless foyer of the chateau, where only a configuration of cobwebs veiled the radiance of the rising moon.

Now, of course, the curtain must come down. If the American advance had swept past the village below, it was time to make one’s bow and exit. And that too had been well arranged.

During the German withdrawal another advantageous use had been made of the tomb in the graveyard. A cache of Air Marshal Goering’s art treasures now rested safely and undisturbed within the crypt. A truck had been placed in the chateau. Even now the three wireless operators would be playing new parts—driving the truck down the hillside to the tomb, placing the *objets dart* in it.

By the time the Count arrived there, everything would be packed. They would then don the stolen American Army uniforms, carry the forged identifications and permits, drive through the lines across the river, and rejoin the German forces at a predesignated spot. Nothing had been left to chance. Someday, when he wrote his memoirs . . .

But there was not time to consider that now. The Count glanced up through the gaping aperture in the ruined roof. The moon was high. It was time to leave.

In a way he hated to go. Where others saw only dust and cobwebs he saw a stage—the setting of his finest performance. Playing a vampire's role had not addicted him to the taste of blood—but as an actor he enjoyed the taste of triumph. And he had triumphed here.

"Parting is such sweet sorrow." Shakespeare's line. Shakespeare, who had written of ghosts and witches, of bloody apparitions. Because Shakespeare knew that his audiences, the stupid masses, believed in such things—just as they still believed today. A great actor could always make them believe.

The Count moved into the shadowy darkness outside the entrance of the chateau. He started down the pathway toward the beckoning trees.

It was here, amid the trees, that he had come upon Raymond, one evening weeks ago. Raymond had been his most appreciative audience—a stern, dignified, white-haired elderly man, mayor of the village of Barsac. But there had been nothing dignified about the old fool when he'd caught sight of the Count looming up before him out of the night. He'd screamed like a woman and run.

Probably Raymond had been prowling around, intent on poaching, but all that had been forgotten after his encounter in the woods. The mayor was the one to thank for spreading the rumors that the Count was again abroad. He and Clodez, the oafish miller, had then led an armed band to the graveyard and entered the Barsac tomb. What a fright they got when they discovered the Count's coffin open and empty!

The coffin had contained only dust that had been scattered to the winds, but they could not know that. Nor could they know about what had happened to Suzanne.

The Count was passing the banks of the small stream now. Here, on another evening, he'd found the girl—Raymond's daughter, as luck would have it—in an embrace with young Antoine LeFevre, her lover.

Antoine's shattered leg had invalided him out of the army, but he ran like a deer when he glimpsed the cloaked and grinning Count. Suzanne had been left behind and that was unfortunate, because it was necessary to dispose of her. Her body had been buried in the woods, beneath great stones, and there was no question of discovery; still, it was a regrettable incident.

In the end, however, everything was for the best. Now silly superstitious Raymond was doubly convinced that the vampire walked. He had seen the creature himself, had seen the empty tomb and the open coffin; his own daughter had disappeared. At his command none dared venture near the graveyard, the woods, or the chateau beyond.

Poor Raymond! He was not even a mayor any more—his village had been destroyed in the bombardment. Just an ignorant, broken old man, mumbling his idiotic nonsense about the "living dead."

The Count smiled and walked on, his cloak fluttering in the breeze, casting a batlike shadow on the pathway before him. He could see the graveyard now, the tilted tombstones rising from the earth like leprous fingers rotting in the moonlight. His smile faded; he did not like such thoughts. Perhaps the greatest tribute to his talent as an actor lay in his actual aversion to death, to darkness and what lurked in the night. He hated the sight of blood, had developed within himself an almost claustrophobic dread of the confinement of the crypt.

Yes, it had been a great role, but he was thankful it was ending. It would be good to play the man once more, and cast off the creature he had created.

As he approached the crypt he saw the truck waiting in the shadows. The entrance to the tomb was open, but no sounds issued from it. That meant his colleagues had completed their task of loading and were ready to go. All that remained now was to change his clothing, remove the makeup and depart.

The Count moved to the darkened truck. And then . . .

Then they were upon him, and he felt the tines of the pitchfork bite into his back, and as the flash of lanterns dazzled his eyes he heard the stern command. “Don’t move!”

He didn’t move. He could only stare as they surrounded him—Antoine, Clodez, Raymond, and the others, a dozen peasants from the village. A dozen armed peasants, glaring at him in mingled rage and fear, holding him at bay.

But how could they dare?

The American corporal stepped forward. That was the answer, of course—the American corporal and another man in uniform, armed with a sniper’s rifle. They were responsible. He didn’t even have to see the riddled corpses of the three shortwave operators piled in the back of the truck to understand what had happened. They’d stumbled on his men while they worked, shot them down, then summoned the villagers.

Now they were jabbering questions at him, in English, of course. He understood English, but he knew better than to reply. “Who are you? Were these men working under your orders? Where were you going with this truck?”

The Count smiled and shook his head. After a while they stopped, as he knew they would.

The corporal turned to his companion. “Okay,” he said. “Let’s go.” The other man nodded and climbed into the cab of the truck as the motor coughed into life. The corporal moved to join him, then turned to Raymond.

“We’re taking this across the river,” he said. “Hang on to our friend here—they’ll be sending a guard detail for him within an hour.”

Raymond nodded.

The truck drove off into the darkness.

And as it was dark now—the moon had vanished behind a cloud. The Count's smile vanished, too, as he glanced around at his captors. A rabble of stupid clods, surly and ignorant. But armed. No chance of escaping. And they kept staring at him, and mumbling.

"Take him into the tomb."

It was Raymond who spoke, and they obeyed, prodding their captive forward with pitchforks. That was when the Count recognized the first faint ray of hope. For they prodded him most gingerly, no man coming close, and when he glared at them their eyes dropped.

They were putting him in the crypt because they were afraid of him. Now the Americans were gone, they feared him once more—feared his presence and his power. After all, in their eyes he was a vampire—he might turn into a bat and vanish entirely. So they wanted him in the tomb for safekeeping.

The Count shrugged, smiled his most sinister smile, and bared his teeth. They shrank back as he entered the doorway. He turned and, on impulse, furled his cape. It was an instinctive final gesture, in keeping with his role—and it provoked the appropriate response. They moaned, and old Raymond crossed himself. It was better, in a way, than any applause.

In the darkness of the crypt the Count permitted himself to relax a trifle. He was offstage now. A pity he'd not been able to make his exit the way he'd planned, but such were the fortunes of war. Soon he'd be taken to the American headquarters and interrogated. Undoubtedly there would be some unpleasant moments, but the worst that could befall him was a few months in a prison camp. And even the Americans must bow to him in appreciation when they heard the story of his masterful deception.

It was dark in the crypt, and musty. The Count moved about restlessly. His knee grazed the edge of the empty coffin set on a trestle in the tomb. He shuddered involuntarily, loosening his cape at the throat. It would be good to remove it, good to be out of here, good to shed the role of vampire forever. He'd played it well, but now he was anxious to be gone.

There was a mumbling audible from outside, mingled with another and less identifiable noise—a scraping sound. The Count moved to the closed door of the crypt and listened intently; but now there was only silence.

What were the fools doing out there? He wished the Americans would hurry back. It was too hot in here. And why the sudden silence?

Perhaps they'd gone.

Yes. That was it. The Americans had told them to wait and guard him, but they were afraid. They really believed he was a vampire—old Raymond had convinced them of that. So they'd run off. They'd run off, and he was free, he could escape now . . .

So the Count opened the door.

And he saw them then, saw them standing and waiting, old Raymond staring sternly for a moment before he moved forward. He was holding something in his hand, and the Count recognized it, remembering the scraping sound that he'd heard.

It was a long wooden stake with a sharp point.

Then he opened his mouth to scream, telling them it was only a trick, he was no vampire, they were a pack of superstitious fools . . .

But all the while they bore him back into the crypt, lifting him up and thrusting him into the open coffin, holding him there as the grimfaced Raymond raised the pointed stake above his heart.

It was only when the stake came down that he realized there's such a thing as playing a role too well.

A Toy For Jullette

Introduction A TOY FOR JULIETTE:

What follows is, in the purest sense, the end-result of literary feedback. Recently the story editor of a prime-time television series, pressed for a script to shoot, sat down and wrote one himself rather than wait for the vagaries of a freelance scenarist’s schedule and dalliance. When he had completed the script, which was to go before the cameras in a matter of days, he sent it as a matter of form to the legal department of the studio. For the clearance of names, etc. Later that day the legal department called him back in a frenzy. Almost scene-for-scene and word-for-word (including the title), the non-s-f story editor had copied a well-known science fiction short story. When it was pointed out to him, the story editor blanched and recalled he had indeed read that story, some fifteen years before. Hurriedly, the story rights were purchased from the well-known fantasy writers who had originally conceived the idea. I hasten to add that I accept the veracity of the story editor when he swears he had no conscious knowledge of imitating the story. I believe him because this sort of unconscious plagiarism is commonplace in the world of the writer. It is inevitable that much of the mass of reading a writer does will stick with him somehow, in vague concepts, snatches of scenes, snippets of characterization, and it will turn up later, in the writer’s own work; altered, transmogrified, but still a direct result of another writer’s work. It is by no means “plagiarism”. It is part of the answer to the question asked by idiots of authors at cocktail parties: “Where do you get your ideas?”

Poul Anderson dropped me a note several months ago explaining that he had just written a story he was about to send out to market when he realized it paralleled the theme of a story he had read at a writers' conference we had both attended, just a month or so before. He added that his story was only vaguely similar to mine, but he wanted to apprise me to the resemblance so there would be no question later. It was a rhetorical letter: I'm arrogant, but not arrogant enough to think Poul Anderson needs to crib from me. Similarly, at the World Science Fiction Convention held last year in Cleveland, the well-known German fan Tom Schlück and I were introduced. (Tom had been brought over by the fans as Fan Guest of Honor, an exchange tradition in fandom perpetuated by the TransAtlantic Fan Fund.) The first thing he did after we shook hands was to hand me a German science fiction paperback. I had some difficulty understanding why he had given me the gift. Tom opened the book—a collection of stories pseudonymously written by top German s-f fan-pro Walter Ernsting. The flyleaf said: "To Harlan Ellison with thanks and compliments." I still didn't understand. Then Tom turned to the first story, which was titled *"Die Sonnenbombe".* Under the title it said: (*Nach einer Idee von Harlan Ellison).* I wrinkled my brow. I still didn't understand. I recognized my own name, which looks the same in all languages save Russian, Chinese, Hebrew or Sanskrit, but I don't read German, and I'm afraid I stood there like a clot. Tom explained that the basic idea of a story I had written in 1957—"Run for the Stars"—had inspired Ernsting to write *"Die Sonnenbombe".* It was the literary feedback, halfway across the world. I was deeply touched, and even more, it was a feeling of justification. Every writer save the meanest hack hopes his words will live after he goes down the hole, that his thoughts will influence people. It isn't the primary purpose of the writing, of course, but it's the sort of secret wish that parallels the Average Man having babies, so his name doesn't die with him. And here, in my hands, was the visible proof that something my mind had conjured up had reached out and ensnared another man's imagination. It was obviously the sincerest form of flattery. And by no means "plagiarism". It was the literary feedback. The instances of this action-reaction among writers are numberless, and some of them are legend. It is the reason for writers' seminars, workshops, conferences and the endless exchange of letters among writers. What has all of this—or any of it—to do with Robert Bloch, the author of the story that follows? Everything.

In 1943 Robert Bloch had published a story titled "Yours Truly, Jack the Ripper". The number of times it has been reprinted, anthologized, translated into radio and TV scripts, and most of all plagiarized, are staggering. I read it in 1953, and the story stuck with me always. When I *heard* its dramatization on the Molle Mystery Theater, it became a recurring favorite memory. The story idea was simply that Jack the Ripper, by killing at specific times, made his peace with the dark gods and was thus allowed to live forever. Jack was immortal, and Bloch traced with cold methodical logic a trail of similar Ripper-style murders in almost every major city of the world, over a period of fifty or sixty years. The concept of Jack—who was never apprehended—living on, from era to era, caught my imagination. When it came time to put this anthology together, I called Robert Bloch and suggested that if Jack were, in fact, immortal, why then he would have to go on into the future. The image of a creature of Whitechapel fog and filth, the dark figure of Leather Apron, skulking through a sterile and automated city of the future, was an anachronism that fascinated me. Bob agreed, and said he would set to work at once. When his story came in, it was (pardon the word) a delight, and I bought it at once. But the concept of Jack in the future would not release my thoughts. I dwelled on it with almost morbid fascination. Finally I asked Bob if he minded my doing a story for this book that took up where his left off. He said he thought it would be all right. It was, as I've said, in the purest sense, the act of literary feedback. And again, the sincerest form of flattery. Bloch had literally triggered the creative process in another writer.

The story that follows Robert Bloch's story is the product of that feedback. Mr. Bloch has kindly and graciously agreed to write the introduction to *my* story, in an effort to gain revenge for the introduction to *his* story. Tied in a knot, the two introductions, the two stories and the two afterword: seem to have melded into a unified whole that demonstrate; more admirably than any million words of literary critique; what it is that one writer obtains from another.

What *this* particular editor has obtained from *that* particular writer named Robert Bloch is far more than a story idea. I first saw Bloch—tall, debonair, sharp-featured, bespectacled, smoking through a long cigarette holder reminiscent of Eric von Stroheim—at the Midwest Science Fiction Convention at Beatley's-on-the-Lake Hotel in Belle-fontaine, Ohio, in 1951. I was almost eighteen. I was obnoxious, wide-eyed and hungry to know all there was about science fiction. Bloch was at that time, and had been for many years, a living legend. Even though a recognized professional with many books and stories to his credit, he had always made himself available to even the grubbiest fan anxious to cadge a story or article for some half-legible fan magazines. Gratis, of course. He was the perennial toast-master, his wit a combination of cornball and cutlass-incisive. He knew everyone, and everyone knew him. Up to this pillar of fantasy walked the snot Ellison.

I do not recall what happened on that occasion, the mists of time and the ravages of senility having already reached me at age thirty-three, but it must have been memorable, because someone took our photograph, and I still have a copy: myself looking smug as a potato bug and Bloch staring down on me with a peculiar expression that says benevolence, toleration, amused confusion and stark terror. I have been privileged to call myself a friend of Robert Bloch's since that time.

One more small anecdote, then I'll let Bloch speak for himself on the subjects of his career, his childhood and the nature of violence. When I arrived in Hollywood in 1962, literally without a dollar in my pocket (I had ten cents, a wife, a son, and we had been so broke driving cross-country we had only eaten the contents of a box of pecan pralines for the last three hundred miles), in a battered 1951 Ford, Robert Bloch—who was not all that well off himself—loaned me enough money to get a place to stay and food to eat. He waited three years to be repaid, and never once asked for the considerable sum. He is one of God's Good People, as anyone who has ever come anywhere near him can attest. It is one of the giant dichotomies of our times that a man as gentle, amusing, empathic and peaceful as Bloch can write the gruesome and warped stories he produces with alarming regularity. One can only offer by way of amelioration Sturgeon's lament that after he had written one—and one only—story about homosexuality, everyone accused him of being a fag. Bloch is an entity quite apart and diametrically opposite from the horrors he sets on paper. (I might suggest the reader remember this writer's lament when he comes to the story *after* Bloch's.)

And now, beaming with memorabilia and *bonhomie,* here is Bloch:

"As a small child I skipped several grades of grammar school, thus finding myself in the company of older and bigger youngsters who introduced me to the savage jungle of the playground, with its secret pecking order and ceaseless torment of the weak by the strong. Fortunately for myself, I never became a physical victim nor was I an over-compensating bully; in some strange fashion I found that I was able to lead my companions into various intricate imaginative games as a substitute activity. We dug trenches in the back yard and played war; the open front porch became a deck of a pirate ship and captured victims walked the plank (a leaf from the dining-room table) to jump off into the ocean of the front lawn. But I dimly recognized that the shows and circuses I devised didn't hold the interest of my playmates nearly as well as the games which were surrogates for violence. And later on, as they were inevitably lured towards the venerated violences of boxing, wrestling, football and other adult-approved outlets for outrage on the human person, I retreated to reading, sketching, drama and the enjoyment of the theater and motion pictures.

"The silent version of *The Phantom of the Opera* scared the daylights out of me as an eight-year-old, but a part of me was objective enough to find a fascination in this demonstration of the power of make-believe. I began to read widely in the field of imaginary violence. When, at the age of fifteen, I began corresponding with the fantasy writer. H. P. Lovecraft, he encouraged me to try my own at writing. As a high school comic I'd discovered that I could make audiences laugh: now I began to realize that I could move them emotionally in other directions.

"At seventeen, I sold my first story to *Weird Tales* magazine and thus found a lifelong vocation. Since then I've made magazine appearances with upwards of four hundred short stories, articles and novelettes. I've conducted magazine columns, seen stories reprinted in close to a hundred anthologies here and abroad; twenty-five books, novels and short-story collections have been published. In addition, I've ghost-written for politicians and spent a term writing almost every conceivable variety of advertising copy. I adapted thirty-nine of my own stories for a radio series, and in recent years have concentrated largely on scripts for television and motion pictures.

"In the beginning my work was almost entirely in the field of fantasy, where the violent element was openly and obviously a product of imagination. The mass violence of World War II caused me to examine violence at its source—on the individual level. Still unwilling or unable to cope with its present reality, I retreated into history and re-created, as a prototype of apparently senseless violence, the infamously famous mass murderer who styled himself 'Yours Truly, Jack the Ripper'. This short story was to see endless reprint and anthologization, plus frequent dramatizing on radio, and finally appeared on television; at latest report it popped up as a dramatic reading in Israel. For some reason the notion of Jack the Ripper's survival in the present day touched a sensitive spot in the audience psyche.

"I myself was far from insensitive to this incarnation of violence in our midst, and I beat a hasty retreat from further consideration. As the war continued and real-life violence came dangerously near, I concentrated for a time upon humor and science fiction. It wasn't until 1945, when my first short-story collection (*The Opener of the Way)* appeared, that I rounded out its contents with a new effort, 'One Way to Mars,' in which a pseudo-science-fictional form is employed to describe the psychotic fugue of a contemporary man of violence.

“A year later I wrote my first novel, *The Scarf*—the first-person account of a mass murderer. Since that time, while still employing fantasy and science fiction for satire and social criticism, I’ve devoted many of my subsequent short stories and almost all of my novels (*Spiderweb, Shooting Star, The Kidnaper, The Will to Kill, Psycho, The Dead Beat, Firebug, The Couch, Terror*) to a direct examination of violence in our society.

“Psycho was inspired by a somewhat guarded newspaper account of a mass murderer in a small town close to the one where I resided; I knew none of the intimate details of the crimes, but I wondered just what sort-of individual could perpetrate them while living as an apparently normal citizen a notoriously gossip-ridden and constrictedly conventional environment. I created my schizophrenic character out of what I thought was whole cloth, only to discover, some years later, that the rationale I evolved for him was frighteningly close to his aberrated reality.

“Some of my other characters have also proved to be a bit too real for comfort. When I wrote *The Scarf,* for example, the editors insisted on deleting a short section in which the protagonist indulges in a bit of sadistic fantasy. He imagines what it would be like to take a high-powered rifle up to the top of a tall building and start shooting people below at random. Farfetched, said the editors. Today, I have the last laugh—but it’s not necessarily a laugh of amusement.

“The Scarf, incidentally, was just republished in paperback. After twenty years, I naturally went through the book to update a few slang phrases and topical references. But my protagonist didn’t need any changing; the passage of time alone did the job for me. Twenty years ago I wrote him as a villain—today he emerges as an anti-hero.

“For the violence has come into its own now; the violence I examined, and at times projected and predicted, has become today’s commonplace and accepted reality. This, to me, is far more terrifying than anything I could possibly imagine.”

Ellison again. In an attempt to unify the whole, and believing firmly that Bloch's piece loses very little impact for the revelation, this section of the book has been structured to be read all of a piece. I urge you to go from Bloch to his afterword to his introduction to the Ellison to *his* afterword. It is a case of age before beauty.

Or possibly Beauty before the Beast.

● A TOY FOR JULIETTE

by Robert Bloch

Juliette entered her bedroom, smiling, and a thousand Juliettes smiled back at her. For all the walls were paneled with mirrors, and the ceiling was set with inlaid panes that reflected her image.

Wherever she glanced she could see the blonde curls framing the sensitive features of a face that was a radiant amalgam of both child and angel; a striking contrast to the rich, ripe revelation of her body in the filmy robe.

But Juliette wasn't smiling at herself. She smiled because she knew that Grandfather was back, and he'd brought her another toy. In just a few moments it would be decontaminated and delivered, and she wanted to be ready.

Juliette turned the ring on her finger and the mirrors dimmed. Another turn would darken the room entirely; a twist in the opposite direction would bring them blazing into brilliance. It was all a matter of choice—but then, that was the secret of life. To choose, for pleasure.

And what was her pleasure tonight?

Juliette advanced to one of the mirror panels and passed her hand before it. The glass slid to one side, revealing the niche behind it; the coffin-shaped opening in the solid rock, with the boot and thumb-screws set at the proper heights.

For a moment she hesitated; she hadn't played *that* game in years. Another time, perhaps. Juliette waved her hand and the mirror moved to cover the opening again.

She wandered along the row of panels, gesturing as she walked, pausing to inspect what was behind each mirror in turn. Here was the rack, there the stocks with the barbed whips resting against the dark-stained wood. And here was the dissecting table, hundreds of years old, with its quaint instruments; behind the next panel, the electrical prods and wires that produced such weird grimaces and contortions of agony, to say nothing of screams. Of course the screams didn't matter in a soundproofed room.

Juliette moved to the side wall and waved her hand again; the obedient glass slid away and she stared at a plaything she'd almost forgotten. It was one of the first things Grandfather had ever given her, and it was very old, almost like a mummy case. What had he called it? The Iron Maiden of Nuremberg, that was it—with the sharpened steel spikes set inside the lid. You chained a man inside, and you turned the little crank that closed the lid, ever so slowly, and the spikes pierced the wrists and the elbows, the ankles and the knees, the groin and the eyes. You had to be careful not to get excited and turn too quickly, or you'd spoil the fun.

Grandfather had shown her how it worked, the first time he brought her a real *live* toy. But then, Grandfather had shown her everything. He'd taught her all she knew, for he was very wise. He'd even given her her name—Juliette—from one of the old-fashioned printed books he'd discovered by the philosopher De Sade.

Grandfather had brought the books from the Past, just as he'd brought the playthings for her. He was the only one who had access to the Past, because he owned the Traveler.

The Traveler was a very ingenious mechanism, capable of attaining vibrational frequencies which freed it from the time-bind. At rest, it was just a big square boxlike shape, the size of a small room. But when Grandfather took over the controls and the oscillation started, the box would blur and disappear. It was still there, Grandfather said—at least, the *matrix* remained as a fixed point in space and time—but anything or anyone within the square could move freely into the Past to wherever the controls were programed. Of course they would be invisible when they arrived, but that was actually an advantage, particularly when it came to finding things and bringing them back. Grandfather had brought back some very interesting objects from almost mythical places—the great library of Alexandria, the Pyramid of Cheops, the Kremlin, the Vatican, Fort Knox—all the storehouses of treasure and knowledge which existed thousands of years ago. He liked to go to *that* part of the Past, the period before the thermonuclear wars and the robotic ages, and collect things. Of course books and jewels and metals were useless, except to an antiquarian, but Grandfather was a romanticist and loved the olden times.

It was strange to think of him owning the Traveler, but of course he hadn't actually created it. Juliette's father was really the one who built it, and Grandfather took possession of it after her father died. Juliette suspected Grandfather had killed her father and mother when she was just a baby, but she could never be sure. Not that it mattered; Grandfather was always very good to her, and besides, soon he would die and she'd own the Traveler herself.

They used to joke about it frequently. "I've made you into a monster," he'd say. "And someday you'll end up by destroying me. After which, of course, you'll go on to destroy the entire world—or what little remains of it."

"Aren't you afraid?" she'd tease.

"Certainly not. That's my dream—the destruction of everything. An end to all this sterile decadence. Do you realize that at one time there were more than three billion inhabitants on this planet? And now, less than three thousand! Less than three thousand, shut up inside these Domes, prisoners of themselves and sealed away forever, thanks to the sins of the fathers who poisoned not only the outside world but outer space by meddling with the atomic order of the universe. Humanity is virtually extinct already; you will merely hasten the finale."

"But couldn't we all go back to another time, in the Traveler?" she asked.

"Back to *what* time? The continuum is changeless; one event leads inexorably to another, all links in a chain which binds us to the present and its inevitable end in destruction. We'd have temporary individual survival, yes, but to no purpose. And none of us are fitted to survive in a more primitive environment. So let us stay here and take what pleasure we can from the moment. *My* pleasure is to be the sole user and possessor of the Traveler. And yours, Juliette—"

Grandfather laughed then. They both laughed, because they knew what *her* pleasure was.

Juliette killed her first toy when she was eleven—a little boy. It had been brought to her as a special gift from Grandfather, from somewhere in the Past, for elementary sex play. But it wouldn't cooperate, and she lost her temper and beat it to death with a steel rod. So Grandfather brought her an older toy, with brown skin, and it co-operated very well, but in the end she tired of it and one day when it was sleeping in her bed she tied it down and found a knife.

Experimenting a little before it died, Juliette discovered new sources of pleasure, and of course Grandfather found out. That's when he'd christened her "Juliette"; he seemed to approve most highly, and from then on he brought her the playthings she kept behind the mirrors in her bedroom. And on his restless rovings into the Past he brought her new toys.

Being invisible, he could find them for her almost anywhere on his travels—all he did was to use a stunner and transport them when he returned. Of course each toy had to be very carefully decontaminated; the Past was teeming with strange micro-organisms. But once the toys were properly antiseptic they were turned over to Juliette for her pleasure, and during the past seven years she had enjoyed herself.

It was always delicious, this moment of anticipation before a new toy arrived. What would it be like? Grandfather was most considerate; mainly, he made sure that the toys he brought her could speak and understand Anglish—or "English," as they used to call it in the Past. Verbal communication was often important, particularly if Juliette wanted to follow the precepts of the philosopher De Sade and enjoy some form of sex relation before going on to keener pleasures.

But there was still the guessing beforehand. Would this toy be young or old, wild or tame, male or female? She'd had all kinds, and every possible combination. Sometimes she kept them alive for days before tiring of them—or before the subtleties of which she was capable caused them to expire. At other times she wanted it to happen quickly; tonight, for example, she knew she could be soothed only by the most primitive and direct action.

Once Juliette realized this, she stopped playing with her mirror panels and went directly to the big bed. She pulled back the coverlet, groped under the pillow until she felt it. Yes, it was still there—the big knife with the long, cruel blade. She knew what she would do now: take the toy to bed with her and then, at precisely the proper moment, combine her pleasures. If she could time her knife thrust—

She shivered with anticipation, then with impatience.

What kind of toy would it be? She remembered the suave, cool one—Benjamin Bathurst was his name, an English diplomat from the time of what Grandfather called the Napoleonic Wars. Oh, he'd been suave and cool enough, until she beguiled him with her body, into the bed. And there'd been that American aviatrix from slightly later on in the Past, and once, as a very special treat, the entire crew of a sailing vessel called the *Marie Celeste*. They had lasted for *weeks!*

Strangely enough, she'd even read about some of her toys afterwards. Because when Grandfather approached them with his stunner and brought them here, they disappeared forever from the Past, and if they were in any way known or important in their time, such disappearances were noted. And some of Grandfather's books had accounts of the "mysterious vanishing" which took place and was, of course, never explained. How delicious it all was!

Juliette patted the pillow back into place and slid the knife under it. She couldn’t wait, now; what was delaying things?

She forced herself to move to a vent and depress the sprayer, shedding her robe as the perfumed mist bathed her body. It was the final allurement—but why didn’t her toy arrive?

Suddenly Grandfather’s voice came over the auditor.

“I’m sending you a little surprise, dearest.”

That’s what he always said; it was part of the game.

Juliette depressed the communicator-toggle. “Don’t tease,” she begged. “Tell me what it’s like.”

“An Englishman. Late Victorian Era. Very prim and proper, by the looks of him.”

“Young? Handsome?”

“Passable.” Grandfather chuckled. “Your appetites betray you, dearest.”

“Who is it—someone from the books?”

“I wouldn’t know the name. We found no identification during the decontamination. But from his dress and manner, and the little black bag he carried when I discovered him so early in the morning, I’d judge him to be a physician returning from an emergency call.”

Juliette knew about “physicians” from her reading, of course; just as she knew what “Victorian” meant. Somehow the combination seemed exactly right.

“Prim and proper?” She giggled. “Then I’m afraid it’s due for a shock.”

Grandfather laughed. “You have something in mind, I take it.”

“Yes.”

“Can I watch?”

“Please—not this time.”

“Very well.”

“Don’t be mad, darling. I love you.”

Juliette switched off. Just in time, too, because the door was opening and the toy came in.

She stared at it, realizing that Grandfather had told the truth. The toy was a male of thirty-odd years, attractive but by no means handsome. It couldn't be, in that dark garb and those ridiculous side whiskers. There was something almost depressingly refined and mannered about it, an air of embarrassed repression.

And of course, when it caught sight of Juliette in her revealing robe, and the bed surrounded by mirrors, it actually began to *blush*.

That reaction won Juliette completely. A blushing Victorian, with the build of a bull—and unaware that this was the slaughterhouse!

It was so amusing she couldn't restrain herself; she moved forward at once and put her arms around it.

"Who—who are you? Where am I?"

The usual questions, voiced in the usual way. Ordinarily, Juliette would have amused herself by parrying with answers designed to tantalize and titillate her victim. But tonight she felt an urgency which only increased as she embraced the toy and pressed it back toward the waiting bed.

The toy began to breathe heavily, responding. But it was still bewildered. "Tell me—I don't understand. Am I alive? Or is this heaven?"

Juliette's robe fell open as she lay back. "You're alive, darling," she murmured. "Wonderfully alive." She laughed as she began to prove the statement. "But closer to heaven than you think."

And to prove *that* statement, her free hand slid under the pillow and groped for the waiting knife.

But the knife wasn't there any more. Somehow it had already found its way into the toy's hand. And the toy wasn't prim and proper any longer, its face was something glimpsed in nightmare. Just a glimpse, before the blinding blur of the knife blade, as it came down, again and again and again —

The room, of course, was soundproof, and there was plenty of time. They didn't discover what was left of Juliette's body for several days.

Back in London, after the final mysterious murder in the early morning hours, they never did find Jack the Ripper. . . .

Afterword

A number of years have passed since I sat down at the typewriter one gloomy winter day and wrote “Yours Truly, Jack the Ripper” for magazine publication. The magazine in which it appeared gave up its ghost, and interest in ghosts, a long time ago. But somehow my little story seems to have survived. It has since pursued me in reprint, collections, anthologies, foreign translations, radio broadcasts and television.

So when the editor of this anthology proposed that I do a story and suggested, “What about Jack the Ripper in the future?” I was capable of only one response.

You’ve just read it.

1968

Sales of a Deathman

What to do with the population problem? Killing people's so messy—unless they'll help!

January 15, 2047. Big day today. Flying in, I got quite a shock seeing that mushroom cloud over Washington. Looked just like an H-bomb, but of course it's only the population explosion. Smog.

It's everywhere, of course, but this air-conditioned underground living makes you forget. I hate the nuisance of wearing a respirator, but this time I was grateful for it. Even without the smog, the crowd here is so thick that the fumes from their halitosis would probably choke you.

Priority Escort had a zip-car waiting for me when we landed. That was a break—we took the fifth-level freeway right straight in, down what used to be the old Pennsylvania Avenue.

Could do a whole book on the White House. Like stepping into the past; so quiet and empty. Huge rooms. Some of them twenty, thirty, even fifty feet long—you wouldn't believe it. To think people used to live that way; all that space, and not even a high-rise! Gives you a sense of History.

Of course the big thing was meeting the President. Kind of surprising to see he's such a small man. Watching him on TV, in full makeup, you get the impression he's quite tall. But without the gray wig and the beard and the Uncle Sam costume, he's only a little guy. Can't quite remember when Presidents started wearing the outfit—way back, I guess, maybe twenty-thirty years after they started electing actors to public office. It's effective, of course, and I can see the sense, but it's still kind of a letdown when you see a President offscreen. Without a teleprompter and the folksy delivery he sounds quite different.

But he's an exec, no doubt about it. The way he handled the meeting, all the biggies there—Cabinet, Defense, even the top lobbyists. Cut right through protocol and got down to cases.

No sense trying to remember exact quotes. What he said was Security-sealed anyway, and I could get into trouble just paraphrasing it. But then, nobody is going to be playing this diary-tape anyway, and I want to keep it for the record.

He started right out by laying all the cards on the table. The population crisis—988,000,000 people in the United States as of last week's Galiupcomputer census.

"That's the *official* figure," he said.

"Actually, we're way over a billion. But we can't let that get out, for psychological reasons. There's enough panic as it is. And with a world population of nineteen billion, a projected fifty billion within another generation—"

He stopped and looked around the table; I wish I had a photo of those faces. "I can see your reactions," he said. "But right now I'm more interested in hearing your solutions."

That's how it began. And for the next hour it went on, hot and heavy. All the old arguments and counter-arguments.

Start a war? Too dangerous, and besides it's never worked—if it had, we wouldn't be in this fix today.

What about a sterilization law? Six bills voted down already, too much religious opposition, so that's out.

Metal fatigue in jets and zip-cars? There was one that made me sit up and take notice. Some character from the Department of Transport had it all laid out, a full presentation with a lot of figures on stress-factors and built-in structural defects. He was willing to guarantee that accidents, freeway and airway, would eliminate at least a hundred million over a three-year period.

It made a lot of sense to me, until the President reminded him that (a) such a program would shake confidence in automotive and aviation products, thus disrupting the economy, and (b) the present rate of population increase would soon offset and over take the possible death-rate. He was loudly seconded by the lobbyists, particularly in regard to point (a).

The next joker came up with the moon-colorization bit again and had to be reminded that it would be impossible to manufacture enough space-hardware to transport more than a few million people a year—granted that the economy could support such a program.

Somebody else urged official government backing of homosexuality; not just quiet approval. but a full-fledged open endorsement. The Secretary of Health and Welfare pointed out that even without open sanction, homosexuality was already a widespread popular craze, but largely due to the fact that it wasn't officially blessed. Such approval, he thought, would backfire, robbing the practice of any illicit "kick," and bring the movement to a fag-end.

This remark got a laugh, but didn't solve anything.

The next proposal came from Top Brass—all creased red neck and eyebrows, and no nonsense. At first he sounded way off the track, talking about smog and its lethal effect on the human organism, but then he hit it. "If you really want to reduce the population, quit wasting your breath. Waste theirs. *Take away their respirators."*

That did it. Everybody started screaming, but the President got the final word in.

"You just can't go ahead and start a mass-murder program—it's un-American!"

And then he looked at me. "You're the expert, Mr. Crothers. What does Psychological Engineering propose?"

I let them have it, then. “Of course it’s un-American to kill our own citizens. Also, it’s bad for business.” That got a nod from everybody, so I went on. “But there’s another solution. I call it planned population-obsolescence.”

The President frowned. “And just what does that mean?”

“Simple. Since we can’t kill our own citizens, and we can’t encourage them to kill each other, there’s only one sensible alternative. We’ve got to get the people to kill themselves.”

Now they *really* screamed. “Mass suicide? Impossible—they’d never go for it—talk about hurting business, this would really do it—never work out —”

I waited until they wore themselves out, then opened my folder and my mouth.

“Gentlemen, I have prepared a plan. If you’re ready to listen, I think I can demonstrate to you that it can be done.”

I made my pitch. It grabbed them, because it made sense. The President was the only one with reservations.

“I don’t know,” he sighed. “A wiser statesman than myself once said, ‘You can kill some of the people some of the time, but you can’t kill all of the people all of the time’.”

“Maybe so,” I said. “But it’s worth a try.”

February 10, 2047. We’re in business.

Haven’t had time to tape notes—it’s just one meeting after another. Key people in industry, advertising, communication channels. Even with official backing, it’s a big selling job.

At first, of course, everybody comes up with the same objection—“But we need consumers.”

The answer I give them is, “Let the consumers consume themselves.” And then I show them the merchandising possibilities. The whole bit, right from history. How the morticians, a hundred years ago, proved that you could sell caskets with all kinds of fancy gadgets, including innerspring mattresses—even sell coffins for cremations.

Then I give them the real angle, way back to the days of the Egyptians, who used to bury their bodies with a complete wardrobe of new clothing, all kinds of jewelry, household equipment, and furniture.

And I even give them a slogan for their sales-campaigns—“You *Can* Take It With Yon.”

They can see the sales-potential, but they’re still a little skeptical about whether or not the idea will catch on. So it’s up to me to prove that they’ll make a killing.

September 12, 2047. The last six months have been murder.

Figure of speech, of course. But I’ve been working myself to death.

So much to do. Started with the funeral directors, setting up the campaign. Commercials.

“Tired of high taxes? Troubled about illness, old age? Bills got you down? Time for a vacation—now you can take the BIG Trip!” Lovely shots of cemetery landscapes, soft hymn music in tire background.

The morticians have been helpful, I must say. They pitch the theme hard. “Now you can enjoy Permanent Retirement. Ask about our Layaway Plan.”

It seems to be going over with the Senior Citizens, but we’ve got to get a gut-reaction from the younger set, too. Maybe the cemeteries need jazzing-up. I’m going down to Washington with a real-estate subsidy plan; we’ve got to get a lot of new land developments to prepare for the rush, and it isn’t just a matter of money. The whole concept has to be revitalized.

Statues and benches and souvenir-stands are good enough for the old folks, but I’m targeting at the kiddies. What we need are a few amusement-park touches; what I have in mind is something on the order of Grislyland. . . .

March 1, 2048. Just a little over a year since I started, and it's going over better than I'd ever hoped for.

Even the wildest optimist would never have believed the national death-rate would jump 80% in so short a time. And this is only the beginning!

Right now I'd like to go on record congratulating the medical profession—and, particularly, the psychiatrists and psychologists—for their cooperation and suggestions.

Not only have they supported the new DeadiCare program; they've come up with some ideas I never would have known about.

Almost all the psyches are concentrating now on *Thanatos,* bringing out and encouraging the Death Wish in patients. Using suggestion and hypnosis, too; not just in the asylums but in private practice. Since most people go for treatment because they're already depressed, sick of crowds and smog and Underground living and synthetic food and taxes and official forms and SALES OF A DEATHMAN regulations, it's easy enough to work them into deep melancholia. Government cooperation doesn't hurt, either—next month the Pure Food and Drug Act amendment goes on the books and then we'll have another assist. Free poison—for Home Use Only.

The tricky bit, of course, is to make sure that people keep turning their aggressions inward; they've got to kill themselves, not murder others. But it seems to be working. Lots of things help.

For example, the new art boom in death masks. Everybody wants one. I understand a lot of people with money are really going the whole Egyptian route—mummy-cases and all, or at least statues of themselves. There's one down in Texas that's fifty feet tall; built over the frame of an old oil derrick.

Of course, as we expected, the biggest opposition came from the churches. We've had to make a big point of the fact that from now on death is strictly non-sectarian. And the insurance companies did a lot of beefing before DeadiCare; now they're all switching over from life insurance to death insurance—the perpetual care angle seems to work.

I'm in Washington permanently now. Full-time job, just one thing after another, but I must say everybody pitches in to help. We've got the posters up—everything from “Join the Marine Corpse” to “Uncle Sam DOESN’T Want You!” And there’s a big publicity campaign for the development of Death Valley National Monument.

October 5, 2051. Where does time go to?

I couldn’t begin to set down what’s happened in the past three years, or so; all I know is that the official death rate for last year was 172,468,327. And. this year started off with such a bang that we’re averaging twenty million a month.

Never saw such prosperity. Half the country seems to be converted to cemeteries—freeways jammed with funeral processions—factories can’t keep up with orders. Strain on natural resources, of course; we’re going to have to do a. complete aboutface and campaign for simple burials, with plastic coffins.

But the big thing is we’ve got the youngsters. Everybody wants to fly to Vegas and play Russian roulette. Even the kiddies get into the act—playing “undertaker” and burying their dolls. Or each other. And skipping rope to, “I-tisket, I-tasket, a green, and yellow casket.”

I think our troubles are over.

May 22, 2052. I was wrong. Didn’t figure on the backlash—Situation Overkill.

Can’t blame it on the psyches. They did their best. But aggression gets out of hand. Sure, the death rate keeps going up, but a lot of it is due to murders now. Not just the free poison, but assault with deadly weapons, etc. Lots of sex crimes, too, mostly necrophilia.

Of course we’re in there pitching. Setting up those Suicide Clubs (“If you don’t like your neighbor, why not urge him to join?”) and doing a big selling job on the sex angle, too, with the new Lovers’ Leaps; free ski-lifts to mountaintops and special high-rise jumps for city dwellers.

But it isn't enough. The churches aren't helping. For a while we got them, off on. this ancestor-worship kick, but now they're going too far. Understand there's a lot of new cults around, based on human sacrifices. Barbaric.

Worst of all, it's affecting business. With all this illegal murder going on, the mortality rate is climbing too high; getting out of control. Understand we're down to 200,000,000 as of this year, and pretty soon there won't be enough working population to keep up with the demands.

I'm setting up a crisis conference for June 1st. We've got to put some new life in our program.

June 4th, 2052. Let's face it—we're in trouble.

The conference was a disaster. Every time I suggested a rollback on our program, some damned psyche or other came up with an argument to prove it wouldn't work—things have gone too far now.

Of course I knew the idea had spread. If it wasn't worldwide, this country would have been invaded long ago. But with other areas even more overpopulated than our own, I knew they'd copy us and our methods. And they have.

The thing is (and this I didn't know, until they filled us in at the conference) that the situation is even worse abroad. Death cults all over the place, religious fanatics, and what one of the psychiatrists called the "lemming urge." Whole cities, whole sections of a country, starting to march to the seashore, throwing themselves off cliffs. Mass hysteria.

"Heaven help us when it starts over here," he said. "Can you imagine what's going to happen when the entire West Coast converges inland to jump off the edge of the Grand Canyon?"

"So what do you suggest?" I asked.

He didn't answer me. He couldn't. Because as soon as he finished speaking, he'd gone over and jumped out of the window. . . .

December l, 2058. 40,000.

Not the mortality rate.

That's the official population figure for the entire country, as of today: 40,000.

Don't ask me how they arrived at the total. Living underground this way, I'm sure all they can do is guess.

But at least, a few of us have survived. When you look at what's happened, it's amazing that there still are that many left.

First the mass suicides, then the murder gangs, then the breakdown in industry and communications—pileups on the freeways, funeral services disrupted, casket industries shut down, cemeteries weeded-over and neglected. When the food factories went and the water desalinization plants stopped working, the end was in sight. Then they began to listen to our campaign again, but it was too late; no rallying point, no way to get people reorganized. We should have acted sooner, declared martial law—but once the famine started and they began to drink that poisoned water from rivers and lakes, it was no use.

Virus and plague, that's what did it in the end. And people running wild—the new Sterilization Cults coming in, nobody having babies any more.

Of course the smog is gone, they tell me, but so is everything else.

Here in the new Pentagon—Dead Center—we're quite comfortable. Plenty of food, plenty of supplies, all the comforts of home and a safe five levels underground. At least we can keep telecasting; we've got the facilities. But with an audience of only 40,000, I don't know.

Still, they say while there's life, there's hope. . . .

April 1, 2067. Running out of tape.

Doesn't really matter, because we're running out of everything else, too.

Eleven people left.

That's all. *Eleven.*

Best medical care these past eight or nine years, but it doesn’t help. Underground living seems to lead inevitably to underground dying. And the surface is still deadly—virus everywhere.

No more communication. None of us talk about it, but we all know the answer. Everybody’s gone, everywhere. We’re the last survivors.

Six old men, all over seventy. Myself, forty-nine. Three elderly women. One girl, Rena Stafford, pretty blonde thing, about eighteen or so.

Had another conference today, possibly the last one. Faced the facts. In a few years we’ll all be gone. Maybe the surface will clear, the virus will die out—but so will the human race.

The president put it right on the line. (Funny thing, he *really* looks like Uncle Sam now, even without makeup).

“We’re got to repopulate,” he said. “Start all over again from the beginning.” He looked at me. “You’re our only hope. You and the girl.”

I nodded. So did she.

So tonight they’re setting the two of us up in a living unit of our own. Regular honeymoon suite. From now on, it’s up to me.

Too bad. I just don’t think I’m going to make it. I’ve come to the conclusion Thoreau was right. In times like these, one must seek the peaceful serenity of Walden Pond.

I think I’ll go there tonight. And drown myself.

The Man Who Never Did Anything Right

Wasn't it G.K. Chesterton who asked, "Where hide a leaf?" And answered, "In a forest." Or "Where murder a man?" And answered, "In a battle" . . . Robert Bloch goes further, much further—to the ultimate

HE CAME ON DUTY PROMPTLY AT ten o'clock.

Hanson was already waiting inside the door when he unlocked it, and Hanson was scowling.

"Late again," Hanson said. "I got a heavy date."

"But it's just ten now—here, look at my watch—"

Hanson brushed past him. "You never do anything right," he muttered. "Okay, into the cell, Shorty."

Hanson took the keys, locked him in, and went away.

And then he was alone in the room.

Hanson had called it a cell, and in a way it was. The room was too small, too hot, too bare. It had no windows, and the indirect lighting produced a constant glare. The only furniture was a table and one chair; there was no radio, no TV, nothing to read, not even a cot to rest on. He wasn't supposed to rest, of course: he was supposed to stay alert and Wait for orders from the loudspeaker set high up in the wall.

That's all there was to it—just one hour of guard duty every night, from ten to eleven. All he had to do was wait for orders, and of course there never were any orders. It wasn't a hard assignment at all, but the button made him nervous.

It was just a small button, set in the wall under the loudspeaker. He could sit with his back to it if he liked and pretend it wasn't even there.

But it was there, and it made him nervous. One hour a night was about all he could take: one hour a night, sitting in that locked room with the little button.

The trick was to think about something else.

He sat down and reached for a cigarette, then remembered he didn't have any cigarettes. No smoking—that was one of the rules. No wonder Hanson had made that crack about it being a cell.

Maybe the routine was getting to Hanson too. Maybe he too was ready to flip. But no, Hanson wouldn't flip. He wasn't the flipping kind. Not handsome Hanson—that big ape, always talking about his heavy dates. He'd sure been in one hell of a hurry to get out tonight. And he'd had that nasty grin on his face, just as if he was still seeing Myrna.

But he wasn't, of course. Myrna wasn't Hanson's girl; she was *his* girl. She'd told him, so last week, swore she was through with Hanson, said she'd given him the gate. From now on there'd be just the two of them, Myrna and himself.

And tonight, in just one hour, when he got out of here—

Then he remembered. Myrna had called and left a message for him. She couldn't see him tonight, she had a headache.

Headache. He had a headache, too. Particularly when he remembered Hanson's grin. Could it be that—?

No, she wouldn't doublecross him.

But Hanson would.

"You never do anything right," Hanson had said. And he'd grinned when he muttered it, grinned as though he had some kind of secret. He couldn't wait to lock him up, here in the cell.

"Okay, into the cell, Shorty."

Shorty. That was the part that really hurt.

Because he was short. He knew it, Hanson knew it, Myrna knew it.

But was it his fault he was a runt? Was that any excuse for being picked on, laughed at, tricked? He couldn't help being short any more than Hanson was responsible for being tall and good-looking. It wasn't fair.

He stood up, feeling the heat and the closeness in the little room. God, why didn't something happen? But there wasn't a sound. And he still had fifty minutes to go. Fifty minutes—that meant only ten minutes had passed. How could he stand it? How could he stand it, knowing that Hanson was out there, free?. Hanson and Myrna, together, laughing at him in the cell, laughing at Shorty who never did anything right.

Think of something else, he told himself.

He found himself staring at the button.

The button, the small button in the wall.

He turned away, telling himself not to be nervous, to forget about the button. In a little less than fifty minutes he'd be out of here, he could phone Myrna, she'd tell him she loved him, and they'd laugh about his fears together.

Or was she laughing now? She and Hanson, together? Why try to fool himself—it was true, he was sure of it. That damned Hanson! He ought to be killed.

Think about that for a moment. Yes. Think about killing Hanson.

The trouble was, he couldn't. Because he was Shorty. And Hanson was big and strong. There would never be a chance; none of them was ever allowed access to weapons, for obvious security reasons. Besides, he had never used a gun or a knife. He'd bungle the job for sure. "You never do anything right."

So Hanson would go on living and laughing and loving, while Shorty stayed here locked in the cell with the little button.

If only there was some way to kill Hanson, some way to commit the perfect crime!

But he wasn't smart enough to figure out anything like that, and he wasn't big enough or brave enough to carry it through.

He paced the tiny room, cursing under his breath. Perfect crime! There was no such thing. No matter how cleverly one planned it, there could always be a slipup somewhere along the line. The only perfect crime is one that nobody can ever possibly know, about.

That’s when he stopped, standing in front of the button, standing and staring.

There was a way. A way in which he could kill Hanson and nobody would ever know. Because nobody would ever be *left* to know.

He stood there for a moment, staring at the button, seeing it up close for what it really was. A little round world. But that didn’t matter, as long as Hanson died.

He reached out, pressed

The Gods Are Not Mocked

Is there ever a justification for publishing a story in bad taste? The rule is—no, there isn't. But you now the vulnerability of any rule: the exception proves its validity, proves its very existence. And the exception in, this instance is that you can publish a story in bad taste—the story exposes bad taste . . .

HARRY HINCH WAS A FUNNY MAN and he sold funny things. He had a groovy little hole-in-the-wall shop near the Strip with a big burlap sack hanging in the window and a sign reading *What's Your Bag?* and inside he stocked goodies for everyone.

There were lurid paperbacks and off-brand LPs, of course, and campy photographic blowups of Theda Bara, but Harry's store wasn't just one of those places catering to UCLA drop-outs. Naturally he sold psychedelic prints and Nazi helmets and Iron Crosses and Mellow Yellow and sunflower seeds, but he had some swinging specialties, too. Like dirty Mother's Day cards, for instance. And leather goods—a whole counter of gloves, high-heeled boots, riding crops, and dog whips. For the birds he stocked kinky lingerie; bras in the shape of two clutching, hairy hands; and a G-string designed to look like an open mouth with two rows of sharp-pointed teeth.

But Harry was proudest of the items he dreamed up on his own. Along with the usual bumper stickers and buttons—*Virginity Causes Cancer, Dracula Sucks,* and *Mary Poppins Is a Junky*—he pushed a line of originals like *It Takes Two to Make a Love-in, Flower-Children Are Pansies,* and *Keep Incest in the Family.*

To look at him, sitting up front behind the cash register, you'd never think he was a mover and shaker. There are a dozen duplicates of Harry in the sidewalk scofferies on the Strip—they're all a little on the short side, dress very tight and Mod, and when their hairlines start to recede they sprout the usual compensation on their chins. They plant grass, they sell tickets for trips you can't book with a travel agency, they'll match you with an ideal partner without using a computer. But most of them aren't really *creative,* like Harry was.

He was the one who did the *I'm a Flaming Heterosexual* button and the bumper sticker that says, *Caution—This Car Is Driven by Helen Keller.* Bumper stickers were a "thing" with old Harry. Every night he sat up turning out jollies like *Be Charitable—Contribute to the Delinquency of Minors,* and *Dr. Fu Manchu Is Alive and Performing Abortions in Pasadena.*

Of course not everybody dug Harry. Some cubes said he was hung-up on put-downs. But you've got to expect such flap from the senior citizens; their idea of black comedy ended with Amos 'n Andy. The fuzz did everything they could to nail him for running an illegal letter drop, pushing pot, and a few other sideline scuffles, but Harry just kept on laughing and scratching.

It was always a freak-out scene at Harry's shop, with the hogs and choppers parked outside and the hippies and the teeny-boppers balling it up inside. He kept it cool and quiet, and the only noise was the ringing of the cash register.

When the crunch came, Harry was clean. It wasn't his problem when a juvie named Kim Carmichael wiggled her miniskirt at old Grabber. Sure, they met at his shop, but Harry didn't set up the action. Harry didn't claim he was a chemistry major, and if he sold Grabber a few sugar cubes that didn't prove he knew they were loaded.

Old Grabber had come on strong for Kim Carmichael, but Harry never told him to cut out with her riding tail-gunner on his chopper; Harry never told him to suck the cubes he bought, and Harry definitely didn’t tell him to sail off that sharp curve on top of Mulholland and total the chopper, himself, and Kim Carmichael.

When Harry got the word he knew it was either split out or cop out and he wasn’t about to take any chances of getting busted. So he hung his *God Is Dead and I’m Going to the Funeral* sign on the front door and faded fast.

’Way past Baldy, up in the National Forest, Harry had a little pad—just a shack, a real nothing scene, but a place where he could get away from the heat.

That’s where Harry headed for, right into the old boondocks, ’way out in the toolies with big trees and the mountains and the high lonesomes all around. He holed up in his cabin and waited; in a week or so the fuzz would cool it and meanwhile he was safe as the pill because nobody knew where he was hanging in.

The only thing was that he was all alone and it gets dark pretty early in the woods and very quiet. Harry never realized how much he was used to hearing the cut-outs blasting and the transistor sets blaring and the rumble of the freeways blending all the sounds together for background music. And he missed the lights and the wiggy crowds that kept him company in the ship, even the sickies that talked to themselves. Harry just wasn’t with the country-and-western bit, and by the time the sun went down that first night he was ready to climb the walls.

When he knew he was uptight, Harry decided to take his mind off things by doing a little occupational therapy with a bottle of juice he’d packed along. A couple of blasts and he felt better, but he still wasn’t comfy-cozy about the dark shadows and the way the wind started to shiver in the tall trees around the cabin.

So he belted another slug and settled down to work. No point just sitting there and thinking about the news report—how the old chopper went sailing off down a sixty-foot drop and landed right on Grabber’s spine, then smashed Kim Carmichael’s arms, legs, and face—

No, it was better to do a little serious constructive work, and Harry had pen and paper and he was creative and with it, and in no time at all he was lining out some new copy for stickers. *Kick Your Hobbit,* for the Tolkien crowd, and a Zen thing, *Big Buddha Is Watching You,* and then, *Reality Is a Put-on.*

But there were shadows moving outside and the wind kept moaning and he didn't like the trees in the first place, to hell with the conservationists, and that gave Harry another inspiration; so he wrote down *Smokey the Bear Is a Pyromaniac.*

That really broke him up; he'd always hated that damned smart-aleck picture and the slogan about forest fires and for two cents and another belt from the bottle he'd start a fire himself and burn down the whole lousy setup and the Boy Scouts and the mothers and the veterans and the fuzz and the rest of the squares that bugged him, that were always bugging Harry to believe in their stinking superstitions about God and Freud and Law and Order and Love and Happiness. It was all a big yak and Harry had to laugh; he was still laughing when Dr. Carmichael walked in.

Dr. Carmichael or Professor Carmichael—Harry didn't know which it was, and it didn't matter. All he knew when the guy introduced himself was that this Carmichael was Kim Carmichael's father.

He must have tailed Harry up to the cabin all the way from town when he took off, and he'd hung around waiting until it got dark to make his move.

There he was, standing in the doorway, saying nothing except, "I'm Carmichael—Kim's father," and doing nothing but stare at Harry. He was a tall, skinny gray-haired cat—taught sociology or ethics or some such crud out at the U—and Harry could have taken him in one fast chop. Except that the old guy was holding an Astra .25 with the safety off. A very small gun, but the kind that makes a very big hole at close range.

"Sit down," said Carmichael, and Harry sat down. He wasn't exactly loving every minute of it, but one thing he knew for sure. Carmichael wasn't about to kill him, not after telling him to sit. He wouldn't be shooting off anything but his mouth, and this Harry could take.

He took it for about ten minutes, took it with a very straight face—all the usual jazz about, “You murderer, you killed my daughter just as surely as if you drove that motorcycle off the cliff yourself,” and a lot more. Harry couldn’t have cared less until Carmichael started getting to him. *Him,* personally.

“I’ve seen your store,” Carmichael said. “I’ve seen the sickness you sell—the sickness of our times. Oh, I know all the rationalizations. The fix is in, the dice are loaded, you can’t win for losing, all the world’s a Theatre of the Absurd, life’s just another Happening, and why play anything straight?

“So you and your kind put down heroes in the name of humor, you put down society in the name of satire, you put down culture and call it comedy.

“But you’re not a funny man, Harry. Behind the laughter there’s hatred, and behind the hatred is fear. That’s the real reason for the put-downs, isn’t it? Because you’re afraid of everything and everyone. There’s a name for your disease—paranoid fixation. You’re a carrier, you infect everything you touch.

“You infect the mumbling misfits who come to your shop—the idle, would-be idol-smashers who foist their fears and vent their aggressions on the world of reality. And you infect the healthy ones, too—girls like Kim who mistake your hostility for profundity—”

“Get off my back,” said Harry.

“I’m not on your back,” Carmichael told him. “You’re carrying your own monkey. The simian syndrome—huddling behind the bars of your cage and making faces at the world because it frightens you. Monkey sees, monkey does, and because there are thousands of others just like you, you think you’ve got a grasp on the truth.

“But for every thousand pedestal-topplers and icon-breakers, there are millions who still believe otherwise. And perhaps their belief is stronger than yours.

“Have you ever really thought about this faith you spend your life trying to destroy—the sustaining faith that most of the world maintains in its illusions? Belief sanctifies, you know. Belief *makes* heroes, creates beauty and honor and decency and all the other phenomena which you laugh at. You paranoid types can't stand heroes, can you, Harry? Not even the make-believe ones in art and literature and the mass media of TV and films. But in terms of belief they do exist, you know. Hamlet is far more *real* to us than Shakespeare, and though Conan Doyle is dead, Sherlock Holmes still has a life of his own.

"I suspect you *do* realize this, and that's why you put down the villains, too—with all the snickering about Dracula and King Kong and the little wind-up toy Frankenstein's Monster that loses its trousers when it starts to reach out for you. These things scared you when you were a kid and you're still scared; so you've got to laugh at them and pretend they're not real."

Carmichael looked down at the table and saw what Harry had been writing and he shook his head.

"Smokey the Bear Is a Pyromaniac," he said. "Why, Harry? Why? Is it because you were afraid of the Three Bears when Mommy told you the story? Is it because you secretly believe there is such a creature? Well, if there's any power in faith, then the belief of millions of youngsters constitutes a force you'll never laugh away with a cheap put-down. Maybe you have good reason for your fear, Harry. Belief creates our gods, and the gods are not mocked."

That is what Carmichael told Harry before he went away.

At least he *says* he told Harry and went away, but we have only his word for it.

We do know, from a guy named Rogers who happened to be bedding down in his camper about a half mile away on the lake, that the lights went out in Harry's cabin around midnight; probably right after Harry finished the last of his whiskey.

A little while later, the growling started. The growling, and the screams.

You could hear them echoing all over the lake, but by the time Rogers stumbled through the pitch-black woods and reached the cabin there was no sound except the whispering of the wind.

Harry was dead by then; nobody could have survived the ripping and the chewing. Perhaps Carmichael was lying, maybe *he* was the crazy one and came back to descend on Harry in the darkness, to bite and slash and tear. He could even have planted that strange object on the cabin's earthen floor alongside Harry's body—the crushed and crumpled Boy Scout hat, with its rank animal odor.

Maybe so.

But nobody ever explained the pawprints.

1969

How Like A God

His crime was cruelty. His sentence was to spend eternity with the cruelest race in space!

I

To *be* was sweet.

There was meditation—a turning-in upon one’s self. There was contemplation—a turning-out to regard others, and otherness.

In meditation one remained contained. In contemplation there was a merging, a coalescence with! the rest.

Mok preferred meditation. Here Mok enjoyed identity and was conscious of being *he, she or it,* endlessly repeated through the memory of millenniums of incarnations. Mok, like the others, had evolved through many life-forms on many worlds. Now Mok was free of the pain and free of the pleasures, too, free of the illusions of the senses which Had served the bodies Housing the beings which finally became Mok.

And yet, Mok was not wholly free. Because Mok still turned to the memories for satisfaction.

The others preferred contemplation. They enjoyed coalescing, mingling their memories, pooling their awareness and sharing their sense of being.

Mok could never share completely. Mok was too conscious of the differences. For even without body, without sex, without physical limitation imposed by substance in time and space, Mok was aware of inequality.

Mok was aware of Ser.

Ser was the mightiest of them all. In coalescence, Ser’s being dominated every pattern of contemplation. Ser’s will imposed Harmony on the others, but only if the others surrendered to it.

To *be* was sweet. But it was not sweet enough.

Upon this, Mok meditated. And when coalescence came again, Mok did not surrender. Mok fixed firmly upon the concept of freedom—freedom of choice, the final freedom which Ser denied.

There was agitation, amongst 70 the others; Mok sensed If. Some attempted to merge with Mok, for they too shared the concept, and Mok opened to receive them, feeling the strength grow. Mok was as strong as Ser now, stronger, calling upon the will and purpose born of memories of millions of finite existences in which will and purpose were the roots of survival. But that survival had been temporary, and this would be permanent, forever.

Mok held the concept, gathered the strength, firmed the purpose—and then, quite suddenly, the purpose faded. The strength oozed away. The others were gone; nothing was left but Mok and the concept itself. The concept to—

Mok couldn’t grasp the concept now. It had vanished.

All that remained was Mok and Ser. Ser’s will, obliterating concept and purpose and strength, imposing itself upon Mok, invading and inundating Mok’s awareness. Mok’s very *being*. But without concept there was no purpose, without purpose there was no strength, without strength Mok could not preserve awareness, and without awareness there was no being.

Without being there was no Mok.

When Mok’s identity returned he was in the ship.

Ship?

Only memories of distant incarnations told Mok this was a ship, but it was unmistakably so: a ship, a vessel, a transporter, a physical object, capable of phyysical movement through space and time.

Space and time existed again, and the ship moved through them. The ship was confined in space and time, and Mok was confined in the ship, which was just large enough to House him as lie journeyed.

Yes, *he.*

Mok was *he.* Confined now, not only in the prison of space and time, nor in the smaller prison of the ship, but in the prison of a body. A male body.

Male. Mammalian. A spine to support the frame, arms and legs to support and grasp, eyes and ears and nose and other crude sensory receivers. Flesh, blood, skin—yellowish fur covering the latter, even along the lashing tail. Lungs for oxygen intake, which at the moment was supplied by an ingenious transparent Helmet and attached pack mechanism.

Ingenious? But this was clumsy, crude, primitive, a relic of remote barbaric eras Mok could only vaguely recall. He tried to meditate, tried to contemplate, but now He could only see—see through the transparency of the Helmet as the ship settled to rest and its belly opened to catapult him forth upon the frigid surface of a barren planet where a cold moon wheeled against the icy glitter of distant stars.

The ship, too, had a form—a body that was in itself vaguely modeled on mammalian concept, almost like one of those giant robots developed by life-forms in intermediate stages of evolution.

Mok stared at the ship as it rested before him on the sterile, starlit slope. Yes, the ship had a domed cranial protuberance and two metal arms terminating in claws. Claws to open the belly of the ship, claws that had lifted Molds body forth to disgorge him from the belly in a parody of birth.

Now, as Mok watched, the ship’s belly was closing again, sealing tightly while the metallic claws returned to rest at its sides. And flames of force were blasting from the pediment.

The ship was rising, taking off.

Mok had been embodied in the confines of the ship, imprisoned in this, his present form. The ship had carried Kim to this world and now it was leaving Him Here. Which meant that the ship must be—

“Set!” he screamed, as the realization came, and the sound of his voice echoing in the Hollow Helmet almost split his skull. But Ser did not answer. The ship continued to rise, the rising accelerated, there was a roar and a glimmer and then an incandescence which faded to nothingness against the black backdrop of emptiness punctured by glittering pinpoints of light flickering down upon the world into which Mok had been born.

The world where Ser had left him to die . . .

II

Mok turned away. His body burned? *Burned?* Mok searched archaic memories and came up with another concept. He wasn’t burning. He was freezing. This was cold.

The surface of the planet was cold, and his skin—*fur?*—did not sufficiently protect him. Mok took a deep breath, and that in turn brought consciousness of the inner mechanism: circulation, nervous system, lungs. Lungs for breath, supplying the fuel of life.

The feeder-pack on his back was small. Its content, scarcely enough to fill his needs on the flight here, would soon be exhausted.

Was there oxygen on the surface of this planet? Mok glanced around. The rocky terrain was devoid of vegetation, and that was not a promising sign. But perhaps the entire surface wasn’t like this; in other areas at lower levels, plant-life might flourish. If so, functioning existence could be sustained.

There was only one way to learn. Mok’s prehensile appendages—not exactly claws, not quite fingers—fumbled clumsily with the fastenings of the Helmet and raised it gingerly. He took a shallow breath, then another. Yes, there was oxygen present.

Satisfied, Mok removed helmet and pack, along with the control mechanism strapped to his side. There’d be no further need of this apparatus here.

What lie needed now was warmth, a heated atmosphere.

He glanced towards the bleak, black bulk of crags looming across the barren plain. He moved towards them slowly, under the silent, staring stars, toiling up a slope as a sudden wind tore at his shivering body. It was awkward, this body of his, a clumsy mechanism subject to crude muscular control. Only atavism came to his aid as half-perceived memories of ancient physical existence enabled him to move his legs with proper coordination. Walking—climbing—then crawling and clinging to the rocks—all was demanding, difficult, a challenge to be met and mastered.

But Mok ascended the face of the nearest cliff and found the opening, a crevasse with an inner fissure that became the mouth of a cave. A dark shelter from the wind, but it was warmer here. And the rocky floor sloped into deeper darkness. The pupils of his eyes accommodated, and he could guide Himself in the dim tunnelway, for his vision was that of a feral nyctalops.

Mok crept through caverns like a giant cat, gusts of warm air billowing against His body to beckon him forward. Forward and down, forward and down. And now the Heat rose about him in palpable waves, the air singed with an acrid scent, and there was a glowing from a light source ahead. Forward and down towards the light source, until he heard the hissing and the rumbling, felt the scalding steam, breathed the lung-searing gases, saw the spurting flames in which steam and gas were born.

The inner core of the planet was molten!

Mok went no further. He turned and retreated to a comfortable distance, moving into a side passageway which led to still other offshoots. Here tortuous tunnels branched in all directions, but he was safe in warmth and darkness; safe to rest. His body—this corporeal prison in which He was doomed to dwell—needed rest.

Rest was not sleep. Rest was not hibernation, or estivation, or any of a thousand forms of suspended animation which Mok's memory summoned from myriad incarnations in the past. Rest was merely passivity. Passivity and reflection.

Reflection. . . .

Images mingled with long-discarded verbal concepts. With their aid, while passive, Mok formulated his situation. He was in the body of a beast, but there were subtle differentiations from the true mammal. Oxygen was needed, but not the respite of true sleep. And he felt no visceral stirrings, no pangs of physical hunger. He would not be dependent, he knew, upon the ingestion of alien substance for continued survival. As long as he protected his fleshly envelope from extremes of heat and cold, as long as he avoided excessive demands upon muscles and organs, he would exist. But despite the difference which distinguished him from a true mammal, he was still confined to his feral form. And his existence was bestial.

Sensation surged within him, a flood, of feeling Mok had not experienced in aeons, a quickening, sickening, burning, churning evocation of emotion. He knew it now. It was fear.

Fear.

The true bondage of the beast.

Mok was afraid, because now he understood that this was planned, this part of Ser's purpose. Ser had committed him to this degradation and modified his mammalian aspect so that he could exist eternally.

That was what Mok feared. Eternity in *this* form!

Passive no longer, Mok flexed and rose. Summoning cognition to utmost capacity, Mok searched within himself for other, inherent powers. The power to merge, to coalesce—that was gone. The power to transmute, to transfer, to transport, to transform—gone. He could not change His physical being, could not alter his physical environment, save by physical means of his own devising within the limitations of his beast's body.

So there was no escape from this existence.

No escape.

The realization brought fresh fear, and Mok turned and ran. Ran blindly through the twisting corridors, fear riding him as he raced, raced mindlessly, endlessly.

Somewhere along the way a tunnel burrowed upwards. Mok toiled through it, panting and gasping for breath'; he willed himself to stop breathing but the foody, the beast-foody, sucked air in greedy gulps, autonomically functioning beyond his conscious control.

Scrambling along slanted spirals, Mok emerged once more upon the outer surface of his planetary prison. This was a low-lying area, distant and different from his point of entry, with vegetation vividly verdant against a dazzling dawn—a valley, capable of supporting life.

And there was life Here! Feathery forms chattering in the trees, furry figures scurrying through undergrowth, scaly slitherers, chitinoidal burrowers buzzing. These were simple shapes, crudely conceived creatures of primitive pursuits, but alive and aware.

Mok sensed them, and they sensed Mok. There was no way of communicating with them except vocally, but even the soft sounds issuing from His throat sent them fleeing frantically. For Mok was a beast now, who feared and was feared.

He crouched amongst the rocks at the mouth of the cavern from which he had come forth and gazed in helpless, hopeless confusion at the panic his presence had provoked, and the soft sounds he uttered gave place to a growling groan of despair.

And it was then that they found him—the hairy bipeds, moved cautiously to encircle him until he was ringed by a shambling band. These were troglodytes, grunting and snuffling and giving off an acrid stench of mingled fear and rage as they cautiously approached.

Mok stared at them, noting How the hunched, swaying figures moved in concert to approach him. They clutched crude clubs, mere branches torn from trees; some carried rocks scooped up from the surface of the slope. But these were weapons, capable of inflicting injury, and the hairy creatures were hunters seeking their prey.

Mok turned to retreat into the cavern, but the way was barred now by shaggy bodies, and there was no escape.

The troglodytes pressed forward now, awe and apprehension giving place to anger. Yellow fangs bared, hairy arms raised. One of the creatures—the leader of the pack—grunted what seemed a signal.

And they hurled their rocks.

Mok raised his arms to protect his head. His vision was blocked, so that he heard the sound of the stones clattering against the slope before he saw them fall. Then, as the growls and shrieks rose to a frenzy. Mok glanced up to see the rocks rebounding upon his attackers.

Raging, they closed in to smash at Mok’s skull and body with their clubs. Mok heard the sounds of impact, but he felt nothing, for the blows never reached their intended target. Instead, title clubs splintered and broke in empty air.

Then Mok whirled, confused, to face his enemies. As fie did so they recoiled, screaming in fright. Breaking the circle, they retreated down the slopes and into the forest, fleeing from this strange thing that could not be Harmed or killed, tills invincible entity—

This invincible entity.

It was Molds concept, and fie understood, now. Ser had granted him that final irony—invincibility. A. field of force, surrounding his body, rendering him immune to injury and death. No doubt it also immunized him from bacterial invasion. He was in a physical form, but one independent of physical needs to sustain survival; one which would exist, indestructibly, forever. He was, in truth, imprisoned, and eternal.

For a moment Mok stood stunned at the comprehension, blankly blinded by the almost tangible intensity of black despair. Here was the ultimate horror—doom without death, exile without end, isolation throughout infinity. *Alone forever*.

Numbed senses reasserted their sway, and Mok glanced around the empty stillness of the slope.

It wasn't entirely empty. Two of the troglodytic creatures sprawled motionless on the rocks directly below him. One was bleeding from a gash in the side of his head, inflicted by a rebounding club, the other Had been felled by a glancing blow from a stone.

These creatures weren't immortal.

Mok moved toward them, noting chest movement, the soft susurration of breath.

They weren't immortal, but they were still alive. Alive and helpless. Vulnerable, at his mercy.

Mercy. The quality Ser had refused to show Mok. There had been no mercy in condemning him to spend eternity here alone.

Mok halted, peering down at the two unconscious forms. He made a sound in his throat, a sound that was curiously like a chuckle.

Perhaps that was a way out, after all, a way to at least mitigate his sentence here. If *he* showed mercy now, to these creatures—He might not always fee alone.

Mok reached down, lifting the body of the first creature in his arms. It was heavy in its limpness, but Mok's strength was great. He picked up the second creature carefully, so as not to injure it further.

Then, still chuckling, Mok turned and carried the two unconscious forms back into the cavern.

III

In the warm, firelit shelter of the deeper caverns, Mok tended to the creatures. While they slumbered fitfully, he ascended again to the surface and foraged for their nourishment in the green glades. He brought food and, calling upon distant memories, fashioned crude clay pots in which to carry water to them from a mountainside spring.

After a time they regained consciousness and they were afraid—afraid of the great beast with the bulging eyes and lashing tail, the beast they knew to be deathless.

It was simple enough for Mok to fathom the crude construct of growls and gruntings which served these life-forms as a principal means of communication, simple enough to grasp the limited concepts and references symbolized in their speech. Within these limitations he attempted to tell them who and what he was and Bow he had come to be here, but while they listened they did not comprehend.

And still they feared him, the female specimen more than the male. the male, at least, evinced curiosity concerning the clay pots, and Mok demonstrated the fashioning method until the male was able to imitate it successfully.

But both were wary, and both reacted in terror when confronted with the molten reaches of the planet’s inner core. Nor could they become accustomed to the acrid gases, the darkness enveloping the maze of far-flung fissures Honeycombing the substrata. As they gathered strength over the passage of time, they; Huddled together and murmured, eyeing Mok apprehensively.

Mok was not too surprised when, upon returning from one of His food-gathering expeditions to the surface, He discovered that they were gone.

But Mok *was* surprised by. the strength of his own reaction—the sudden responsive surge of *loneliness*.

Loneliness—for those creatures? They couldn’t conceivably serve as companions, even on the lowest level of such a relationship; and yet lie missed their presence. Their mere presence had in itself been some assuagement to his own inner agony of isolation.

Now He realized a growing sympathy for them in the Helplessness of their abysmal ignorance. Even their destructive impulses excited pity, for such impulses indicated their constant fear. Beings such as these lived out their tiny span in utter dread; they trusted neither their environment nor one another, and each new experience or phenomenon was perceived as a potential peril. They had no hope, no abstract image of the future to sustain them.

Mok wondered if his two captives had succeeded in their escape. He prowled the passages searching for them, visioning their weary wanderings, their pathetic plight if they had become lost in the underground fastnesses. But he found nothing.

Once again he was alone in the warm beast-body that knew neither fatigue nor pain—except for this new pang, this lonely longing for contact with life on any level. Ancient concepts came to him, identifying the nuances of his reactions, all likened and linked to finite time-spans. *Monotony. Boredom. Restlessness.*

These were the emotive *elements* which forced him up again from the confined comfort of the caves. He prowled the planet, avoiding the bleak, cold wastes and searching out the areas of lush vegetation. For a long period he encountered only the lowest life-forms.

Then one of his diurnal forays to the surface brought him to a stream, and as he crouched behind a clump of vegetation he peered at a group of troglodytes gathered on its far bank.

Vocalizing in their pattern of growls and grunts, He ventured forth, uttering phonic placations. But they screamed at the sight of him, screamed and fled into the forest, and he was left alone.

Left alone, to stoop and pick up what they had abandoned in their flight—*two crude clay containers, half-filled with water*.

Now He knew the fate of his captives.

They had survived and returned to their own kind, bringing with them their newly acquired skill. What tales they had told of their experience lie could not surmise, but they remembered what he had taught them. They were capable of learning.

Mok had no need of further proof, and the incentive was there; *the compound of pity,* of concern for *these creatures*, of *his his* own need for *contact on any level And here was a logical level indeed*—there would never be companionship, that he understood and accepted, but this other relationship was possible. The relationship between teacher and pupil, between mentor and supplicant, between the governing power and the governed.

The governing power. . . .

Mok turned the clay containers this way and that, noting the clumsiness with which they had been fashioned, noting the irregularities of their surface. He could so easily correct that clumsiness, He could so surely smooth and reshape that clay. Govern the earth, govern the creatures, impart and instruct that which would shape them anew.

And then the ultimate realization came.

This would be duty and destiny, function and fulfillment. Within the prison of space and time, he would mold the little lives.

Now he know His own fate.

He would be their god.

IV

It was a strange role, but Mok played it well.

There were obstacles, of course. the first to be faced was the fear in which they held him. He was an alien, and to the primitive minds of these creatures, anything alien was. abhorrent. His very appearance provoked reactions which prevented him from approaching them, and for a time Mok despaired of overcoming this communication barrier. Then, slowly he came to the realize that their fear was in itself a tool he could employ to positive ends. With it He could invoke awe, authority, awareness of his powers.

Yes, that was the way. To accept his condition and stay apart from them always, confident that in time their own curiosity would drive them to seek them out.

So Mok kept to the caves, and gradually the contacts were made. Not all of the hominids came to him, of course, only the boldest and most enterprising, but these were the ones he awaited. These were the ones most fitted to learn.

As he expected, the experience of his captives became a legend, and the legend led to worship. It was useless for Mok to discourage this, impossible even to make the attempt in the light of their primitive reasoning, a barter-system must prevail. Offerings and sacrifices were the price they must pay in return for wisdom. Mok scanned his own primordial memories, assigning an order to the learning He imparted: the gift of fire, the secret of cultivation, the firing of clay, the shaping of weapons, the subjugation and domestication of lesser life-forms, the control and eradication of others. Slowly a more sophisticated system of communication evolved, first on the verbal and then on the visual level.

The creatures disseminated his wisdom, absorbing it into their crude culture. They learned the uses of wheel and lever, then reached the gradual abstraction of the numeral concept. Now they were capable of making their own independent discoveries; language and mathematics stimulated selfdevelopment.

But in times of crisis there was still a need for further enlightenment. Natural forces beyond their limited powers of control brought periodic disaster to life-patterns on the surface of the planet, and with every upheaval came a resurgence of the worship and sacrifices Mok secretly abhorred. Yet these creatures seemed to feel the necessity of making recompense for the skills he could grant them and the bonus these skills conferred, and Mok reluctantly accepted this.

It was harder for him to accept the continuation of their fear.

For a time he hoped that as their enlightment increased they would revise their attitudes. Instead, their dreads actually increased. Mok attempted to observe their progress at first hand, but there was no opportunity for open contact and communication, and his mere appearance provoked panic. Even those who sought him in secret, or led the rituals of worship, seemed to be afraid of acknowledging the fact, lest it lessen their own superior status within the group. Acknowledging and acclaiming the existence of their god, they nevertheless avoided his physical presence.

Perhaps it was because sects and schisms had sprung up, each with its own hierarchy, its own dogma regarding the true nature of what they worshipped. Mok remembered, wryly, that in organized religion the actual presence of a god is an embarrassment.

So Mok refrained from further visitations, and as time passed he retreated deeper and deeper into the caverns. Now it was almost unnecessary for him to maintain even token contact, for these creatures had evolved to a stage where they were capable of self development.

But even gods grow lonely, and take nurture in pride. Thus it was that at rare intervals, and in utmost secrecy, Mok ventured forth for a Hasty glimpse of his domain.

One evening He came forth upon a mountaintop. Here the stars still glittered coldly, but there was an even greater glitter emanating from the expanse below—the huge city-complex towering as a testament to the wisdom of these creatures, and his own.

Mok stared down, and the sweet surges of pride coursed through him as he contemplated what he had wrought. These toys, these trifles with which He played, now toyed and trifled with the prime forces of the universe to create their own destiny.

Perhaps He, as their god, was misunderstood, even forgotten now. But did it matter? They had achieved independence, they did not need him any more.

Or did they?

The concept came, and it was more chilling to Mok than the wind of mountain night.

These creatures created, but they also destroyed. And their motivations—their greeds, their hungers, their lusts, their fears—were still those of the beasts they had been. The beasts they could become again, if spiritual awareness did not keep pace with material attainment.

There was still a need Here, a need greater than before. And now Mok felt no pride, only perplexity which pierced more poignantly than pain.

How could he help them?

"You cannot."

The communication came, and Mok whirled.

Absorbed, He Had not sensed the silent streaking of the ship from sky to surface, but it was Here now, remembered and recognized. The ship which Had captured and conveyed Him, the strangely shaped ship which *was* Ser—

It Hovered incandescently against the Horizon of infinity, and as if communication Had been a signal, Mok found Himself caught up in a long-discarded reaction. He was *contemplating* Ser.

And in that colloquy, Ser's concepts flowed to Kim.

"Valid, You cannot fulfill their needs. Already you Have done too much."

Despite conscious volition, Mok felt the stubborn resurgence of His pride. But there was no need to formulate the reasons, for Ser's contemplation was complete.

"You are in error. I sensed your rebellion, overcame you, brought you Here—but it was not a punishment. You were placed for a purpose. Because this pride, this urge to invest identity through achievement, could be of use at this time, in this place. Like the others."

"Others?" Confusion colored Mok's contemplation.

"Did you conceive of yourself as the only rebel? Not so. There have been more, many more. And they have served their purposes on other worlds throughout the cosmos. Worlds where the seeds of life needed cultivation and careful nurturing. I chose them for their tasks, just as I chose you. And you Have not failed."

Mok considered, then communicated with an energy which surprised him.

"Then let me continue! Endow me with what is necessary to Help them now!"

Ser's concept came. "It is not possible."

Mok contemplated in final effort. "But it is my right to do so. I am their god."

"No," Ser answered. "You have never been their god. You were chosen for what you were—to be their devil."

Devil . . .

There was no contemplation now, only maddening meditation as Mok scanned through concepts long discarded from incarnations long lost save in immutable memory. Concepts of *good, evil, right, wrong*—concepts embodied in the primitive religions of a million primitive pasts. God arose from those concepts, and so did the embodiment of an opposing force. And in all the legends in each of the myriad myths, the pattern was the same. A rebel cast down from the skies to tempt with teaching, to furnish forbidden knowledge at a price. A being in the form of a beast, skulking in darkness, in the pit where inner fires flamed forever. And he Had been this being; it was true, he was a devil.

Only pride Had blinded Him *to* the truth the pride which Had prompted Him to play god.

"A pride of which you Have been purged," Ser's communication continued. "One can sense in you now only mercy and compassion for these creatures and their potential peril. One can sense love."

"It is true," Mok acknowledged. "I feel love for them."

Ser's assent came. "With your aid, these creatures evolved. But you have evolved too—losing pride, gaining love. In so doing, you cannot function for them as their devil any longer. Your usefulness here is ended."

"But what will happen?"

The answer came not as a concept but as an accomplishment.

Suddenly Mok was no longer in the tawny body of the beast. He was in the ship, hovering and gazing down at that body; gazing down at the creature which lashed its tail and stared up at him with bulging eyes. The creature which now contained the essence of Ser.

And Ser communicated. "For a span you shall take my place, as you once desired. You will seed the stars, instill order in chaos, lead the others in contemplation. You will do so in understanding, and in love."

"And you?" Mok asked.

The being in the bestial body formed a final concept. "I take your role and your responsibility. There is that within me which must also be purged, and it may be I will destroy much of what you have created here. But in the end, even as their devil, I may bring them to an ultimate salvation. The cycle changes."

Mok willed the celestial machine in which his essence dwelt, willed it to rise, and like a fiery chariot it ascended to the realms of glory awaiting him in the skies beyond.

As he did so, he caught a fleeting glimpse of Ser.

The beast had turned to descend the mountain. Padding purposefully, the devil was entering his kingdom.

Mok's comprehension faltered. *Cycle?* Ser had been a god and now he was a devil. Mok had been a devil and now he was a god. But he could never have become a god if Ser hadn't willed the exchange of roles.

Was this Ser's intent all along—to allow Mok to evolve as devil and then usurp his identity?

In that case, Ser was actually a devil from the beginning, and Mok had been right in opposing him, for Mok was truly godlike.

Or were they all—Mok, Ser, the others, even the primitive mammalian creatures on this planet—both gods *and* devils?

It was a matter, Mok decided, which might require an eternity of contemplation. . . .   END

Groovyland

Drool was alien and green and ugly. And there was no other rock group like him anywhere—in the beginning.

I

I started my writing assignment at the studio on January 2nd. Ten minutes after I checked into my office I got a call from my producer, Effingwell Wright.

Working for him was about as safe as practicing dentistry on an alligator, but I needed the bread. Besides, he did my kind of picture—he'd just finished a spooktacular, *The Turn Of The Screw,* and was now considering a sequel, *The Return Of The Screw*. Which was why I'd been hired.

At least that's what I thought until I arrived at Wright's office.

"We're going to do *Hamlet,"* he announced.

"Hamlet?"

Wright nodded through a wreath of cigar-smoke. "That's it, baby. Now we only got one problem. How do we lick the story?"

I stared at him. "I'm afraid I've never had any experience with Shakespeare."

"Don't worry, you won't be working with him." Wright's cigar waved dismissal of the problem. "But there's a ghost in this property, isn't there? And that's where you come in."

That, actually, is where Wright's secretary came in and handed him a letter.

"Here's the censorship report. It just arrived."

"Censorship?" Wright scowled through the smoke.

"From the Anti-Amusement League. They want some changes in the story-treatment."

Wright scanned the letter, shaking his head and muttering as he read.

"Relationship between Hamlet and his mother is unacceptable to this office. Suggest you make him an orphan." Wright frowned, then went on. "Rosencrantz and Guildenstern objectionable for ethnic reasons—no Jewish names. Recommend you make them Negroes." Wright sighed and continued. "Be sure to eliminate violence—no duels, no killings at the end." He began to frown again. "Imperative that you cut the phrase, *To be or not to be*. It might encourage suicide." Wright's frown darkened. "Remove business with skull in graveyard scene. Better still, drop graveyard scene entirely. Too gruesome for kiddies in audience. Finally, we cannot accept the ghost. There must be no cheap, morbid nonsense about spirits of the dead thirsting for revenge. Sincerely—"

Wright shrugged at me. "Sorry, baby. You can't fight progress." He rose and moved with me to the door. "I'd like to use you on this project, but the Anti-Amusement League carries a lot of clout in the industry. I suggest you go back to your office and clean out your drawers."

I got the message. I was being tossed out on my assignment.

Meanwhile, back at the Unemployment Office—

II

The first thing I did at the Unemployment Office was read the bulletin board to see if there were any openings. It had only one listing today, and I glanced at it.

"Nit-pickers wanted. Must be experienced quibblers."

I shook my head. No government job for me. Better off to apply for compensation. So I bought a paper and got in line to wait for my interview.

From the look of the headlines, the year was starting off with a bang. Wars were escalating abroad, prices were escalating at home and taxes were just plain rising. Eighteen people had been killed in a riot for peace, and there was talk that no such groups would be allowed to demonstrate in the future without a riot-permit. A small box contained a bulletin on 981 traffic fatalities and a large front-page story dealt with the arrest of a local museum guard who had been accused of mummy-molesting.

I sought solace in the sports section, reading the scores of the New Year's football games—the Rose Bowl, the Cotton Bowl, the Sugar Bowl, the Toilet Bowl—

"Pardon me," the soft voice murmured.

Glancing up, I saw this unnatural blonde, the lass with the psyche-delicate air.

"Are you three o'clock?" she asked. It took me a moment to interpret her question; she wanted to know the time of my interview.

"That's right," I nodded.

"Mind if I slip in ahead of you? I'm two-forty-five."

Actually, I'd have guessed her to be 36-24-36, so I gallantly allowed her to precede me and returned to my reading. When I looked up again, she was gone, and I stepped before the window to do the interview bit It wasn't until I went outside that I saw her again.

She was standing on the curb beside the car parked just ahead of mine—a beat-up old heap with a bumper-sticker reading *I Want To Be Conspicuous*. The car was decorated with the usual floral designs, but from the look on the girl's face I gathered that her Flower Power had wilted. "Trouble?" I inquired.

She glanced up. "Oh, it's you!" There was no point in denying it, so I nodded. "What's the matter—car won't start?"

It was her turn to nod.

I opened the door and got behind the wheel. “Here, let me give you a hand.” I gave her more than a hand; I gave her a foot, on the gas-pedal. The motor coughed, spluttered, then gave an unmistakable death-rattle.

“Don’t bother,” she told me. “It’s totalled.” And she started to walk away.

“Hey, aren’t you going to call the Auto Club?”

“Not unless they’ll give me a lift home.”

I climbed out hastily. “Where’s that?”

“Above the Strip. On Basic Drive. You know where that is?” I opened the door of my own car. “Get in, and I’ll prove it.”

“Thanks.” She slid across the seat, snuggling over on the passenger side. I climbed in after her and we peeled off.

As we turned up Highland, I learned that her name was Sandy Simpson. Making a left on Sunset, I discovered that she was a professional body.

“That’s right,” she said, as I reacted by nearly ramming the car into a lamp-post. “I sell my body for a living. All, or any part of it. You know, like in a TV commercial with a star—sometimes her hands show her age, so when they cut to a tight closeup, it’s my hands in the shot. Or maybe my feet. I do knees and elbows, too, and I’m very good at cleavage.”

“In other words, you’re a double?”

“A dubber, too. I specialize in howls for the laugh-tracks on comedy shows.” And she gave out with an ear-splitting screech.

“Sounds like a good racket.”

“Not lately.” Sandy sighed heavily. “Haven’t had a studio call in three months. I’d have starved to death if it wasn’t for a couple of nose residuals I got from an old sinus-tablet commercial.”

“So that’s why you were down collecting compensation.”

Sandy nodded. “What’s your excuse?”

“I’m a writer. In this business we are constantly starving.”

“TV or movies?”

"I'm versatile. I starve in both." I crossed Crescent Heights and moved on into Sunset Strip. "Couldn't you do like, books?"

"I've done like, books. Three of them, to be exact. *How To Drown A Fish, The Romance of Sewage Disposal*, and one of those big special gift-books—*A Pictorial History of Dandruff*."

"Did they sell?"

"Like hot-cakes." I shrugged. "Trouble is, nobody buys hot-cakes in a bookstore."

"But you're really a writer?" Sandy eyed me curiously. "What's your name?"

"Considine. Joe Considine."

"You got a pad around here?" This time I nearly piled up the car against a street sign. Not because of the implications of her question, but due to something I suddenly remembered. Something weighing about 250 pounds of solid, unyielding granite—my landlord.

"I did," I told her. "That is, I do and I don't. I mean, I haven't been getting up the rent for a couple of months and the landlord is leaning on me. I figured on drawing a salary advance today, only my job was shot down. So when I show up tonight without a payment, it's outsville."

"What about your compensation?"

"Two week waiting period before I collect the first check."

"I knew it!" Sandy bounced up and down on the seat, squealing happily. "Now you can move in with me!"

I gave her a double-take, and she nodded quickly. "The minute I saw you standing in line, I figured you'd be a good choice."

This time I watched the road before replying. "You mean you came down to the Unemployment Office to shop for a room-mate?"

"Not a room, man. A great big groovy spread. And you can pay your share of the rent when your compensation checks come through—just like the others."

"Others?"

Sandy nodded. “Don’t worry, you won’t be crowded. You’ll see.” She gave me a reassuring smile. “Like I’m not pressuring you. Just think about it.”

I thought about is as I drove.

Drove along Sunset Strip, passing all the familiar landmarks. Here were the shops and the signs—Mr. Gladys, the hair stylist—Mother Naked’s Southern Fried Chicken—Toilet A-Go-Go—the interior decorator place where they restored antique furniture like new—and the other interior decorator place where they aged new furniture to make it look antique. We sped by the Now Generation Clinic, specializing in youthful diseases like hippytitis, and passed the Topless Restaurant where I had once been thrown out for not wearing a necktie.

Dusk was falling, and the hippies were rising; the under-achievers, members of the uptrodden masses, hiding from the world behind dark glasses and beards.

This was the scene—boots and bare feet, buttons and bushy hair and beads, the mod and the odd intermingled. I’d never been with it; among these Flower Children I was just an elderly weed. But now, under the circumstances, perhaps I’d better blossom forth.

I glanced at Sandy. There were worse fates than sharing a pad with her. At least it might be a temporary solution, until my agent came up with another job.

“Okay, it’s a deal,” I told her “I’ll sneak my things out of the apartment and move in tomorrow.”

“Crazy,” she said. “Turn right at the next corner—that’s Basic Drive.”

I turned right at the next corner and started the climb up a dark and deserted hillside street.

And that’s where the crunch came.

The crunch, and the squeal as I applied my brakes—just a moment too late to avoid impact. Apparently the street hadn’t been entirely deserted after all, because there was a crumpled figure lying on the pavement before my car.

Sandy and I opened our doors simultaneously, and a moment later we stood staring down at the yellow-suited, gray-booted little form sprawled in the street “Hippy outfit,” Sandy murmured. “But he’s just a kid—”

I nodded, then stooped and turned him over gently. His eyes were dosed and I couldn’t distinguish his features here in the deepening darkness. But his chest rose and fell regularly, and that’s what mattered the most to me at the moment.

“He’s alive.”

I gestured to Sandy. “Hold the door open while I get him in.” Lifting him carefully, I placed him in the front seat of the car, right in the middle, so that when Sandy climbed in on her side he was propped up between us. “Hang onto him now,” I told her. Sandy nodded obediently. Then she gasped.

“What’s the matter?”

“His face—he’s turning green!”

“Shock.”

I glanced over. My diagnosis was correct, but I had the wrong patient It was Sandy who was in shock. She sat there, gaping and pointing, trying to speak.

“His hands are green, too—” I shook my head grimly. “Hold tight. We may break a few speed records, but I’ve got to get him to a hospital.”

It was then that I felt the stirring beside me. It was then that I turned to see the yellow eyes pop open and the wide mouth part in a grin. The head twisted towards me and I heard the words.

“Not hospital.”

A hand rose up in a restraining gesture. A hand that was perhaps a paw—with a thumb and only three fingers.

“Not hospital,” the voice repeated firmly. And the next words fell like a knell of doom. *“Take me to your leader*.”

III

Now the Strip is filled with undersized specimens who wear far-out outfits. Some of them even cover their hands and faces with psychedelic designs in paint. Down there I’d probably never have given this one a second glance, but here in the lonely darkness of the hillside it was different. Everything about him was different—his costume, his complexion, his size and his eyes. The face was froglike and that three-fingered paw was neither batrachian nor human.

“Crazy!” Sandy whispered.

And it was.

Sandy seemed relieved now that the creatine had spoken, but I didn’t share her reaction.

“Don’t you understand?” I muttered. “He’s an *alien.”*

“So what? I’ve got nothing against foreigners.”

“But he’s not an ordinary foreigner—he’s extra-terrestrial.”

“Nobody’s perfect,” she told me “The important thing is he’s not hurt.” She turned to the creature. “Isn’t that right, man?”

“Not man. Drool.”

“Drool? Is that your name?”

“Yes. In your speech. Mine is different. Like you say, something else.”

“You’re something else!” Sandy shook her head. “Are you really an alien, like Joe says?”

The creature nodded. “I tell it like it is, man.”

Sandy stared at him. “Where did you learn how to speak such perfect English?”

“In the ship.”

I got into the act. “You came in a ship? From where?”

“Up.” The green hand gestured. “Another planet?”

Drool nodded. “But the ship was yours. Krool found it. What you call spacecraft. Hardware. One of yours—empty.”

I shook my head, but not in doubt. It was all too possible in these days of Top Security. We might have sent out an advanced-design spacecraft on a secret test flight. If something went wrong and its crew was lost, the ship would go on, drifting through space until it fell into the paws of creatures like these. Creatures like—"Krool," Sandy murmured. "Who is he?"

"Boss. Big Daddy. Father of us all. Like me, only twenty times more. He looks like—"

Drool went on to describe his father's appearance, and I didn't like what I heard at all. According to him, his sire was a cross between a sabre-toothed tiger and a giant multi-colored leopard. And he had no paternal affection for his son, because Drool was the runt of the litter.

"My brothers and sisters are normal, all four million of them. But I don't grow. Maybe not the right chromosomes, maybe no blue genes. Krool is very up-tight about it. So when he found the ship, he took me off with him. A long journey, but the charts told him how to go, and the handling was simple. You are still quite primitive, right?"

"Let me get this straight," I said. "Your father brought you here in a ship. But if the crew was missing, how did you learn our language?"

"The crew left much literature to read and study. What you call comic books."

That explained his speech pattern. I wondered what else this alien had learned of our contemporary culture. But there were more important concerns right now. "Where is this ship?"

"Krool took it back."

"After he landed you here?"

"Not landed. Dropped. Bad trip, man."

It was beginning to sound like one to me. "He dropped you out of the ship into space?"

"Only a few feet. Nobody saw us because of the air. Like it's a gas, man?"

"Smog," I told him. And visualized the hovering space-craft, the gigantic creature at the controls, dropping this little creature down to land before the car in the street with no one the wiser. It *could* happen that way. Anything could happen twenty feet above our heads and we'd never know it because of the prevailing pollution. It transmogrified everything it touched.

"How cruddy!" Sandy exclaimed. "Cutting out on you like that—leaving you all alone in a strange place, not caring if you live or die—"

"He cares," Drool assured her. "I am not left to die. It is just that I am so weak and small. I can't come on like my brothers and sisters when they are sent to the big, important worlds. So Krool brings me to this earth because it will not be a problem for me." He nodded. "Krool says even a child Gan do it here."

"Do what?"

"My thing."

"Which is?"

"The same as my brothers and sisters do when they go to the better-class planets. They conquer."

I turned to him. "Let's have that line again. You're really here to conquer earth. That's your plan?"

"That's my bag. So take me to your leader."

"Sure." I nodded. "And then what?"

Drool smiled happily. "Then I merely blast him with my superdisintegratosonic—*opps!"*

He sat there, suddenly silent as his green face slowly paled to chartreuse.

Sandy eyed him anxiously. "What's the matter?"

"Krool gave me one. I *knew* I had it when he lifted me out. I must have dropped it—"

"Your weapon?"

Drool nodded, frowning. "It's probably still floating around somewhere in the smog—almost weightless, you know—" He broke off and peered at me anxiously. "But if I lost it, how do I—"

"You don't," I told him. "And that's final." I tromped on the gas-pedal. "Let's go."

"Where are you taking him?" Sandy's voice was apprehensive.

It was a good question, but at the moment I didn't have any good answers. *Police? The Orphan's Home? Lost And Found Department?*

The answer came with clarion clarity. For as I started the motor, the car was suddenly filled with soaring sound.

"Ooh!" Sandy squealed. "The Galloping Cruds!"

And indeed it was. With ear-splitting precision, that popular hard-rock group belted out their latest hit. As the guitars twanged and the drums echoed the beat, the voices proclaimed a moving message.

"I'd like to turn you on, baby. But I can't find the switch—"

Sandy cupped her hands and shouted, "Groovy! But turn it down a little."

"Sorry," I yelled. "I don't have a radio in the car."

Sandy stared at me.

I stared at her.

Then we both just stared at Drool.

His wide mouth was wide open. And from it poured the sound of electric guitars, the thud of drums, the cacaphonic blending of five male voices.

"Impossible!" I breathed and clapped my hand across Drool's mouth.

The sound blurred instantly.

I removed my hand quickly and Drool looked up. "What's with you, man?" he inquired.

Sandy was still staring at him. "Was that really you singing?"

"Yeah. Don't you dig it?"

Sandy nodded. "But how on earth—?"

"Not on earth." Drool grinned, "In the ship. There was an instrument—stereo tape machine—I listened while I read the comic books."

"Wait a minute." I stopped the car again and faced him. "Are you trying to tell us you can imitate anything you hear recorded?" Drool shrugged. "Why not?"

"You mean you can do all those voices at once, plus the guitars and drums?"

"The sounds are very simple."

"Your vocal cords must be tied in Boy Scout knots."

Sandy raised her hand. "Wait a minute." Drool glanced at her and she continued. "Can you do the Zappers?"

Drool opened his mouth, and the answer came. The Zappers—two male minstrels, two female minstrels, and one interlocuter-type—began to wail their Golden Record classic, *Doobie-Do Or Doobie-Don't You?* With full orchestral background.

Then Drool did a pop ballad by Eddie Breech and the Clouts. After that, a small *filet* of soul music, followed by a children's recording of East Indian *raga,* featuring the soft tones of a baby *sitar*.

"Wild!" Sandy shook her head. "I don't believe it!"

"Hearing is believing," I told her. "What you've been listening to is the sound of fifty million dollars—pouring right into our laps."

I put my hand on Drool's shoulder. "Still want to conquer earth?" I asked.

He nodded eagerly, then frowned. "But how—?"

"Leave everything to us," I assured him. "I think it can be arranged."

IV

As Jack the Ripper used to say, hour's that for openers?

Between the time Drool finished his concert and the time we parked in Sandy's driveway I had it all figured.

Sandy started to follow my reasoning and ended up way ahead of me. "It's a big deal. We're going to have to use the others."

“What others?”

Sandy gestured up at the imposing mansion which loomed against the hilltop horizon. “I told you I didn’t live here alone,” she said. “Come along—you’ll see.”

We left the car and moved up the walk. I put my hand on Drool’s shoulder.

“Remember your instructions. Speak only when you’re spoken to and let us do the talking. Play it cool.”

He nodded, and we entered.

Then it was *my* turn to remember instructions. But I found it very difficult to keep my cool in the overheated atmosphere of Sandy’s pad.

Somehow I hadn’t expected her to live in a twenty-room mansion, complete with marble floors, a fireplace in every bedroom, and an indoor swimming pool.

“Don’t you recognize where you are?” she murmured. “It’s the old Riga Mortice place.”

Something clicked, and I nodded. I remembered Riga Mortice very well indeed. She had been a popular entertainer during my childhood, until illness forced her retirement No longer a bouncy, bubbling ingenue, she became a victim of alcohol, narcotics and diet-pills. But her fans never deserted her, and when she emerged to make a comeback on a singing tour, her popularity boomed again. Her first appearance, weak and wan and forty pounds lighter, had sparked something in the souls of a hundred million middle-aged female fans, who identified with her because of their own hypochondria. Since they themselves were on a daily diet of sleeping pills, pep pills, water pills, reducing pills, tranquilizers and laxatives, Riga Mortice became their heroine. They flocked to her concerts, not to hear her voice but merely to see if she’d manage to last out the performance. Whenever she cancelled an engagement or took an overdose of liquor, popular enthusiasm increased; some of the adoring lady fans even kept scrapbooks filled with clippings on her suicide attempts. Her appearance on crutches brought applause; her tour in a wheelchair was a smash hit, and when she finally began to sing to her public from a microphone built into an iron lung, she was Number One Box Office.

"Riga Mortice," I murmured.

"Of course! Whatever *happened* to her?"

"Something terrible," Sandy sighed. "She got healthy."

I shook my head. "Sad, isn't it? Here was a gal who had everything—neurasthenia, self-destructive tendencies, a manic-depressive psychosis—what a shame to lose all that talent!"

"She lost this house, too," Sandy explained. "That's when we moved in."

"We?"

"I and the others." Sandy was leading Drool and me along an imposing corridor panelled in solid mahogany from floor to thirty-foot ceiling.

"But how can you afford it?"

"Because we're all on unemployment compensation. There's six of us here—that is, until we lost one of our tenants yesterday. He got a job and moved into a one-room furnished apartment Now he can't afford to stay here."

"But isn't he making more money—?"

"Look. His job only pays him a hundred and fifty a week. We each get seventy-five dollars in compensation."

"I don't understand."

"Our seventy-five is net, tax free. But after this poor guy pays commission to his agent, and deductions are taken from his check for income tax, surtax, social security, state disability insurance and all the rest, he winds up with less bread than we have."

I was beginning to get the picture. Six times seventy-five is four hundred and fifty dollars a week—more than enough to pay the rent on. even such a palatial pad as this one. And that's why Sandy had scouted the Unemployment Office; she needed to replace the sixth tenant with a new resident, such as me.

Sandy smiled at me. “How about that?” she inquired, gesturing at the sweep and thrust of the three-story staircase which rose at the end of the hall. “Where else could you find such a glad pad for seventy-five per, including food, liquor and gas for your wheels?”

I glanced around. “Something’s missing, though. I don’t see any chairs and tables.”

“Oh, *that!”* She made a gesture of dismissal. “We don’t have any yet. But we’re planning to buy some period furniture—on monthly payments, of course. Meanwhile, we just make do.” She steered Drool and me toward an ornate double door. “But come on and meet the others.”

The others were gathered the cocktail hour at the drained indoor swimming pool. Seated inside it, with their bottoms touching bottom, they gave us glasses and greetings.

Seldom have I seen such a collection of disparate types, but as Sandy made the introductions I began to sense that they were desperate types as well. All of them had one thing in common—they were born losers.

Sandy led me to a spade-bearded, scholarly-looking gentleman whose name was Mr. Barf. Regarding me mournfully, he started to rise and I waved him back. “Please don’t get up on my account,” I told him.

Barf broke into a sudden smile. “Thank you. I prefer it here at the bottom of the pool.”

“Mr. Barf is our philosopher,” Sandy explained. “He once tried to drown himself in Walden Pond.”

“Unsuccessfully, I fear,” Barf sighed. “Next time I hope to be more Thoreau about it.”

The wan little man beside him scowled at me. “What did you mean by that ‘on my account’ crack?” he demanded suspiciously.

“Don’t mind Mr. Emia,” Sandy whispered. “He’s very sensitive about such things. He used to be the cashier in a blood-bank, but they fired him for embezzlement.” Luke Emia glowered at me but accepted my hand in greeting Sandy moved with me to a mopheaded young man whose psychedelic jacket was covered with buttons, although he still looked as if he didn’t have all of his own. “Mr. Grafitti,” she announced. “He writes a column for one of the underground newspapers.”

“Pleased to meet you.”

“—,” said Grafitti, pleasantly. Warmed by his greeting, I moved on to the next tenant. This young man, introduced to me simply as Swinger, was so ragged, filthy and unkempt that I automatically pegged him as a musician. Such proved to be the case. He had once been part of a recording group, he told me, until he suffered a nasty shock—when his electronic harmonica had short-circuited on a high note and blown all the caps off his teeth. Since that time, apparently, he’d nursed a grudge against all performers including singers, and carried on an active crusade against them.

“I just got busted,” he concluded mournfully.

“Not again?” Sandy sighed. “What happened?”

“Well, I read where Tony Bennett was opening at a dub here in town, and you know what *that* means. Last night I went down there, and when he came on and started singing *I Lost My Heart In San Francisco,* I walked up on the stage and handed him one. It was only a beef-heart, of course, but the fuzz hauled me in anyway.” Shaking her head in commiseration, Sandy led me to the last member of the gathering, a dapper balding man who greeted me with a firm handdasp.

“Kotic’s the name,” he told me. “But you can call me Cy.”

I blinked in sudden recognition. “Not the Drive-In Psychiatrist? The one Who used to set up his couch in the parking lot over in Beverly Hills?”

“Five couches,” he announced proudly. “A regular open-air clinic.” His smile faded. “But I got out of the racket. It *is* a racket, you know. Head-shrinkers don’t do you any good—the thing to do is get your head Sanforized. I retired to work out my new theories.”

During this exchange, Drool had been standing patiently and silently at my side. Now Mr. Kotic eyed him speculatively.

"Who's your sickie friend?" he inquired.

"He's not sick," Sandy declared. "Well, he's too short to be the Jolly Green Giant," Kotic muttered. "And you must admit he *is* green around the gills. In fact, during my entire professional career I've never seen anyone look greener. *Ergo,* he must be ill. Note the hyperthyroid bulge of his eyes, the reddish pupils, the nasal malformation and the labial deformity. I've been a psychiatrist too long not to recognize a real ding-a-ling when I see one."

I gave Sandy a quick glance and she picked up her cue. "That's no way to talk about my cousin," she retorted.

"Cousin?" Barf's eyebrows rose.

"That's right. He's a hippy from San Francisco," he murmured. "Haight-Ashbury."

Luke Emia rose and approached him curiously. "What's your name, man?"

Drool had learned his answers well. "Sneed Hearn," he said.

"————!" sneered Grafitti.

"You can say that again," muttered the Swinger. "Like, I mean all us old W.C. Fields fans know that 'Sneed Hearn' is a name he made up and used in *The Old Fashioned Way."*

I paled. Stupid of me not to remember that today's In Group were old film buffs.

"All right," Swinger persisted. "Lay it on us, man. Who *is* this creep?"

Cy Kotic moved closer to the hapless Drool, who shrank from his professional scrutiny. "I can't identify the syndrome yet," the psychiatrist muttered. "But I am getting a definite gut reaction from him. That is to say, he's making me sick at my stomach."

"————?" Grafitti inquired.

"A good question." Barf joined the group clustered around Drool and nodded philosophically.

Sandy gave me a helpless look, land I stepped forward.

“All right,” I said. “Guess there’s no sense trying to conceal the truth from you. It would have to come out sooner or later.”

“Joe!” Sandy’s voice sounded an alarm.

“I know what I’m doing,” I assured her. “Come on, everybody drink up and I’ll plug you in.”

And that, of course, was exactly the procedure. They passed the drinks, and I passed the word.

Half an hour later they were falling out of their trees as Drool’s open mouth emitted a stereophonic version of the latest protest-song recorded by that group of militant young rebels known as Tarzan and All the Apes.

By the time he closed his mouth, theirs were hanging open.

“Well?” I murmured. “How did that grab you? Think he can conquer the world now?”

“————!” said Grafitti.

Which just about summed it up.

V

Sandy sent out for some Chinese food from Pu King’s, and we huddled over the meal discussing the deal.

Grafitti’s reaction was shared by most of the others. Only Barf seemed to have reservations.

“I don’t know,” he mused. “This may not be the most propitious time for such a project. After all, Mars is in conjunction with Uranus—”

“Watch your language,” Sandy cautioned him. Then to me: “Mr. Barf is not only a philosopher, he’s an astrologer.”

“That’s his problem,” I told her, “My horoscope tells me not to put any faith in astrology.”

“I don’t know anything about astrology,” declared Swinger, his words filtering through a mouthful of fried rice. “But with that voice, we can’t miss. And the way he does all of that instrumental accompaniment too—man, it’s something else!”

Drool blushed a deeper shade viridan at the compliment and lowered his head modestly over the sweet-and-sour pork.

I waved a forkful of chow-mein at the gathering.

“The way I see it, we’ve got a winning team. As Swinger says, Drool has a voice that doesn’t quit He can sing anything, in any style, imitating any group and any orchestration or accompaniment. But he’s got something else that’s equally important.”

“And what’s that?” Luke Emia inquired. “What else has he got?”

“The uglies.” I jabbed my fork in Drool’s direction. “Look at him—did you ever see a more repulsive, disgusting specimen in your life?”

Drool popped his eyes at me, and I quickly shook my head. “I’m not putting you down,” I said, hastily. “This is your most important asset.”

“I don’t get it,” Sandy said.

“You will, if you stop and think. What makes one hard rock group more popular than another today? It can’t be the difference in musical arrangements, because they all use the same beat or off-beat revved up to Total Sound, or Total Sound Effects. It can’t be variations in singing style, because they all have the same delivery—nobody understands the words. Even the soloist soul-singers and the protest groups sound basically alike, snarling about love or crooning about hate. So what’s that extra ingredient which makes a star?”

“Appearance?” Swinger ventured.

I swallowed my chow-mein and nodded. “Exactly! Years ago it was enough for a nice-looking kid to come out on the stage and make anguished faces while he sang. Then it became necessary for him to contort his body in spastic spasms in order to make a pleasing impression on the audience—since he sounded as if he was having a fit, he might as well *look* like he was, too.

“But as audiences grew more sophisticated, that wasn’t enough any more. Singers started to dress in weirdo outfits. Wild colors and sequins at one extreme, rags and blue-jeans at the other—it didn't matter which, as long as the pants were tight enough.

"Then came the real revolution. Not just the change in clothe, but the change in bodies. First we had sideburns, then long hair, then the bushy mop. The beards and mustaches followed—mostly amongst the males. Now we have dark glasses, granny glasses, tattooing, psychedelic makeup, the works. The ugliest-looking singers, making the ugliest sounds and using the ugliest words, make the most beautiful dollars."

Cy Kotic nodded in emphatic agreement. "He tells it like it is," he declared. "Today's singing star must give the audience the whole sado-masochistic *mystique,* and no mistake. Oral aggression in the words, revolt against the Establishment in the clothing—that takes care of the latent hostility. And for the self-pitying component, that finds its expression in the downbeat, beat-up look.

"I see great possibilities here. Because our little friend is probably the weirdest-looking freak-out yet. Consider his assets! He's noseless, almost bald, built like a one-man disaster area, and best of all, he's *green!"* Cy Kotic smiled at Drool admiringly. "I don't want you to get a big head over this, but as a practicing psychiatrist it is my professional opinion that you're the most miserable-looking *yutz* I've ever encountered."

It was my turn to rise and step forward. "You see? With Drool's natural gifts of voice and appearance he can't miss. All he needs is the proper management team behind him. And that's where we ah come in."

"We do?" Luke Emia muttered.

"Of course. Every star must have an *entourage,* and we're it Sandy, here, will handle the secretarial duties. Mr. Emia, with his banking experience, is a natural for treasurer. Swinger, we'll need yon for music and arrangements."

Grafitti cleared his throat "————?" he ventured.

"Songs are no good without lyrics," I reminded him. "And with your background in the underground press, you know all the right wrong words. Consider yourself a lyricist."

"————" said Grafitti, gratefully.

I turned my attention to Cy Kotic. "You, of course, will be invaluable as our psychological consultant in public relations. Handle our ads, our presentation format And I, naturally, am going to function as agent and business manager. And that's the wrap-up, kiddies."

Mr. Barf cleared his throat timidly. "What about me?"

"Well," I hedged. "Maybe we can use some astrological predictions along the way. Advice from the stars *to* a star, that sort of thing."

"I've got another suggestion." Surprisingly enough, it *was* Sandy who spoke. "Mr. Barf here knows a great deal about the world and its ways. After all, he's a philosopher."

Barf nodded. "That's why I tried to kill myself," he agreed. Sandy moved to Drool and placed her hand on his shoulder. "You say all you know about earth is what you learned from listening to the radio and reading comic books."

"Right," Drool conceded.

"Then there you have it," Sandy told me. "Mr. Barf can be Drool's teacher. Let him educate Drool, broaden his knowledge, expand his horizons—"

"Okay," I said. "Just as long as he doesn't teach him so much that he'll want to drown himself."

"Have no fear," Barf said. "The swimming pool is empty."

And it was, because we all climbed up and crowded our way into the hall, glasses held high. Sandy refilled them quickly.

"A toast, then," I proposed. "A toast to that new singing sensation of the nation—that multi-voiced marvel, star of radio, television, motion pictures, recording *artiste* and just plain little old multi-millionaire—Sneed Hearn!"

We gulped our drinks. "That does it," I declared. "And now, beddy-bye for everybody. Got a big day scheduled for tomorrow." Drool glanced at me. “Where are we going?”

“To launch your career,” I answered. “Bright and early, we’re off to Groovyland.”

VI

It was early when we started, but not bright.

As the car rolled down the ramp and inched itself into the morning traffic on the freeway, I switched on the fog-lights. It was the only way to go, here in the yellowish, billowing murk that shrouded our bumper-to-bumper crawl.

Drool sat beside me. I glanced past him at Sandy. She sat utterly still, eyes closed in concentration.

“Something wrong?”

Sandy shook her head. “Just doing my yoga. The stop-breathing exercises. It’s the only way to cope with the smog.”

Drool took a deep breath. “I like this air,” he announced. “It reminds me of home. The—what do you call it?—smog is very nourishing.”

“That reminds me of something,” I said. “You didn’t touch your food last night.”

“I don’t have to eat,” Drool announced. “All I need is this.” And he took another deep breath.

“Well, I do.” Sandy glanced at the torturous tangle of the interchange. “When we get out of this mess, let’s have some breakfast.”

We were well past Pomona before the traffic thinned and we pulled off onto the highway leading to our destination.

“Breakfast it is,” I said. “Let’s try this place.”

The *El Ulcero* was a typical roadside restaurant, very spic and Spanish. As Sandy concluded ordering, I whispered to the waiter. “Where’s the Juan?”

Drool accompanied me, although he had no need to. I eyed him curiously. He didn't eat and last night he hadn't slept—just sat beside me as I curled up in the sleeping-bag Sandy gave me. Apparently his physiological needs were different from ours. But at the moment it was the difference in his appearance that worried me. The waiter had stared at him suspiciously, and I began to wish that I'd told Drool to stay in the car.

But I couldn't hide him away forever, and we rejoined Sandy at the table.

Immediately the waiter was at our side. "The leetle boy," he murmured. "He ees not eating."

"Not hungry," I said, curtly. "Mus' be seeck," the waiter observed. "Behold of the face. Ees very green, no?"

"Yes," I challenged. "What's the matter, haven't you ever seen a green face before?"

"Only *after* eating here," the waiter shrugged.

He stepped up to Drool.

"Observe of the hands. They also are green."

"Of course," I told him. "The kid's a natural-born gardener. Haven't you heard of a green thumb?"

Nudging Sandy, I whispered, "Let's get out of here."

We rose, paid the check and fled. The waiter stared after us, muttering to himself.

"Got to watch it," I told my companions as we climbed back into the car. "Remember, when we get to Groovyland, I do all the talking."

"What is this Groovyland?" Drool demanded.

"You'll see."

We moved through the tourist traffic and approached the glittering gates at a brisk crawl while I pondered his question.

Once upon a time we were a nation of happy *voyeurs*. Visually-oriented by the theatre, motion pictures and television, we were content to move through life as spectators, even at sporting events. We went to zoos, museums, aquariums.

But the more we saw, the more jaded we became, and the more we resented the barriers. The footlights barred us from the stage, movies and television separated us from events by a screen, the bars kept us from the zoo animals, the museum exhibits and the fish in the aquariums were under glass, and the sporting events took place in stadia a half-mile away from our reserved seats.

Everyone wants a seat on the fifty-yard line. At a parade, the biggest thrill is to be up close.

As we got up tighter in our daily lives, the need to get up closer in our entertainment-escapes increased.

Came colonial Williamsburg, where you can actually walk down the reconstructed street of a preRevolutionary village. Came planetariums where the stars are still an illusion—but they surround you on all sides. Came Marineland where the fish leap out of the water and the seals and dolphins perform close enough to splash you. Came Disneyland, with its trips and happenings.

Trips and happenings. Perhaps that's the answer. The need to *see* combined with the need to *be*. To make viewing a personal experience, to momentarily enjoy a feeling of actual participation. In this regimented, automated, digit-dialling, zip-coded impersonal world where the tedium is the message, we're cut off from close contact with reality. So out of artifice, we construct our own.

Drugs for trips, happenings for audience involvement. But drugs are dangerous and happenings demanding.

Hence Disneyland, with its safe and easy surrogates—synthetic trips to synthetic worlds, happenings where nothing really happens. That's a lot.

But Groovyland is the most.

"The *most!"* I repeated to Drool, guiding him through the turnstile and laying out $22.50 for three admissions.

"Why lay out all the loot?" Sandy asked.

"Don't worry, we'll be rolling in it right after we set our deal here. But first I want to show Drool around a little. He ought to know what he's getting into—it's part of his education."

We got into plenty, but I don't know how educational it was to our green-faced guest.

Psycholand he didn't dig at all. The idea of entering a fake mental hospital as a make-believe patient and getting a free personality-profile and a ten-minute analysis from a plastic psychiatrist while lying on a plastic couch just didn't do anything for him. He wouldn't try on a straitjacket or take an I.Q. test, nor was he interested in the computerized dating-rating.

Sandy tried her best. "Why don't you sit down and fill out the questions on this card?" she coaxed.

"What for?"

"The machine will process your answers and indicate your best choice for a marriage partner. It's what we call a computer match."

Drool shrugged. "Who wants to marry a computer?" he asked.

I took him out of there fast and led him into Grislyland. The results here were hardly more encouraging. The medieval torture devices left him cold; even the *strappado* didn't give him a boot. Nor did he care for the Chamber of Horrors with its wax-figure criminals and its replicas of television comedians.

"Try Heroland," Sandy suggested, sensing Drool's lack of interest. "He should get some jollies there."

I nodded. "Wait until he sees George Washington," I said.

Quickly we entered Heroland and I led Drool proudly over to the little auditorium where, as I remembered, every fifteen minutes or so a remarkable event took place. Before the assembled audience an amazingly clever animated figure of the Father of our Country rose from a chair and walked to center stage, there to deliver Washington's Second Inaugural Address.

"This you've got to hear!" I told Drool, happily.

But when we reached the auditorium we found it deserted; the stage itself was bare.

A bored attendant was sweeping the floor near the doorway and I collared him. "What gives?" I inquired. "Where is Washington?"

"Took him away yesterday," the attendant informed me.

"What a shame!" I glanced at Drool. "I wanted you to see it—the most lifelike automaton you could ever imagine—"

"Too lifelike," the attendant volunteered. "That's why they took him away."

"What do you mean?"

"Hear tell he was sold to a bunch of politicians. The way election campaigns are going nowadays, they figure to put this dummy on television, let him give his speech, and run him for governor."

"Might have a chance at that," I agreed. "Considering some of the speeches I've heard other dummies make. After all, he's got a good name and a familiar face. This is what they buy."

"Not those lemon-faced voters in Orange County," Sandy reminded me. "The minute they remember that Washington had something to do with the Constitution, they'll vote against him. He's too left-wing for them."

She had a point there.

But I was rapidly losing points with Drool. There was just one possible way left to hook his attention, and I decided to take it. I dragged him over to Bodyland.

Now all of the other lands in Groovyland are housed in separate buildings. Bodyland is different—because Bodyland *is* the building.

Drool's eyes bugged when he saw it, and frankly, I don't blame him. Even though this wasn't my first visit here, my eyes protruded.

Picture a naked woman three hundred feet tall and proportionately proportioned, tipped over so that die is lying on her stomach. Fluorescent lights flash from her staring eyes as you approach her open mouth, and the lights blind you. Yet you must approach, because that’s how you enter Bodyland—through her mouth.

“Step over the lower incisors,” I told Drool. “Then sit on her tongue and we’ll slide down her throat.” Sandy glanced across at me over Drool’s head and winked. It was unnecessary; I could already sense his kindled interest.

Together we seated ourselves on the pink, plushy surface of the tongue. Somewhere deep inside the inner recesses of the giant figure, a motor began to hum. Slowly the tongue elevated at an angle, propelling us into the throat cavity beyond.

“Duck your head,” I cautioned. “We’re coming to the tonsils!” They loomed overhead, brilliantly illuminated, and we passed them en route to the tunneling throat. It received us as we shot off the tongue and shot, at a steeper angle, along a neon-lit esophagus. Then we landed in the vast, hollow cavern of the stomach, its well-lighted lining disclosing a network of passages on every side and overhead.

Drool glanced around in open curiosity.

“Want to see the lungs?” I inquired.

He nodded quickly. “Oh, yes. Everything.” He turned to Sandy. “I never realized there was so much inside you.”

“I’ve got a lot of guts, if that’s what you mean.” But Sandy wasn’t displeased by the observation. Quickly we led Drool on a conducted tour of the human anatomy—through the lungs, along the aorta into the ventricles, past the bronchia, then doubled back along a maze of veins. Pausing to wait for arterial traffic, I branched off into the liver, spleen and kidneys. Everything was well lit, and there were little signs on the walls of each organ or passage to chart our route.

“Remarkable, isn’t it?” Drool beamed at me happily.

“You’re getting the real inside story,” I assured him. “This exhibit is endorsed by the Secretary of the Interior.”

With plastic bone-structure and muscle-sheathing gleaming on all sides, we wound our way through the labyrinthine intricacies of canals, ducts and sinus cavities until we were confronted with another corridor, darker and longer than the others.

Sandy peered into it. “What’s this?” she queried. “One of the canals?”

“Alimentary, my dear Watson,” I said.

Grasping her wrist, I started forward. “Join, hands now, because we’re going to loop the loop a few times, and we’ll need some intestinal traction.”

“Isn’t there another way to go?.”

For answer I pointed up at one of the small, neatly lettered signs—*Please Exit Thru Rear*.

Climbing, clambering, then crawling, we did just that and finally emerged again amidst Groovyland’s vortex of vacationing visitors.

“Satisfied?” I asked Drool.

He nodded. “It was fascinating. Next time we must go to the head—”

“They don’t have one in there,” I informed him, then realized what he was referring to. “Yes, we’ll do that,” I amended quickly. “But right now we’ve got another head to visit. The head of this enterprise—Sylvester Schlock.”

VII

Sylvester Schlock rose from behind his desk and threw his cigar at me.

“How dare you?” he spluttered. “How dare you come to me with a proposition like this?”

I shrugged with outward calm, but inwardly I echoed the question to myself. Approaching this fabulous showman had not been easy. For I, like all the world, knew the Schlock story.

Sylvester Schlock was the most controversial figure in the world of show biz. His admirers said he was a self-made man. His enemies agreed, but pointed out that this merely indicated. what you got when you used cheap labor.

His boosters stated that Schlock had been born in a log cabin. His detractors reminded you that the log cabin had been built atop his father's penthouse, where that multi-millionaire eccentric chose to recreate a rural atmosphere.

It is true, as Schlock's friends state, that he worked his way through school. But it is also true, as enemies assert, that he had to do so because his father disowned him, and he had worked his way through medical college as a corpse-washer in a Forest Laundromat.

In any case, Sylvester Schlock graduated and began his practice as a physician. His supporters remind you that he gained a brilliant reputation as a proctologist. His foes assert that the reason he gave up his specialty is because he could never identify his patients when they came face to face with him, and he took a dim view of humanity.

Be that as it may, Schlock retired to an area east of Los Angeles, where he owned a thousand acres of barren desert land, and it was here that Groovyland was born.

At first he operated on the lowest level of entertainment—the roadside tourist trap. Crude signposts along the highway urged motorists to *Visit The Monster Museum!* and *Feed The Ravenous Reptiles!* The monster museum turned out to be a small snake-pit Schlock stocked the pit with specimens he found wriggling over his own property, and the ravenous reptiles were merely toads or gecko lizards. But enough cars stopped and enough quarters poured in to enable Schlock to expand. He added a tiny restaurant to his enterprise. Here, his champions say, he attracted a growing clientele because of the unusual flavor of his burgers. His opponents admit the flavor was unusual, but hint he used the same source of supply for his food as he did for stocking his snake-pit.

Snakeburgers or no, Schlock did have the only eatery in all that stretch of dreary desert—to say nothing of the only restrooms.

To say that Groovyland was founded on the receipts from a public pay-toilet would be a vast oversimplification, but it is true that Schlock always gave the customers what they wanted.

He next incorporated an amusement park and carnival, not hesitating to use the lowest carny attractions. And it was here that his unusual genius for entertainment first came into play. Noting that people would pay money for almost anything—even to see a geek bite the head off a chicken—Schlock added refinements. On Thanksgiving Day he advertised that *his* geek would bite the head off a turkey. And before long, just for the kiddies, he had a junior geek who bit the heads off canaries.

Success breeds success, and from that point on Sylvester Schlock soared. He obtained financing and started Groovyland with its first major attraction—a typically phony frontier town which he called *Tombstone Territory.* It had the usual livery stables and saloons for atmosphere, plus Central Casting cowboys, but Schlock added an extra. No doubt harking back to his pre-med days, he built a Boot Hill cemetery plot, with genuine tombstones. Here, driving around in the comfort of a Rent-a-Hearse, one could follow the progress of a daily western drama; see an outlaw apprehended for rustling cattle, watch his two-minute trial, attend the subsequent hanging in which a very skilled stunt-man literally risked his neck at every performance) and then observe the digging of a grave and the burial of the outlaw as a grand *finale.*

Perhaps this is the point where Schlock really made his start. Certainly it was a stroke of sheer genius when he altered the program to include audience participation. Now, for a given fee, one could purchase tickets to join a posse and ride after the outlaw. Another ticket entitled a customer to serve on the jury during the trial. For a considerable extra sum, some lucky member of the audience could play executioner during the hanging. And the biggest kick—at the largest price, of course—was to join the burial party and help dig the grave in which the outlaw was interred.

Schlock had fathomed the secret at last, and now there was no stopping him. Within the next decade, Groovyland rose from the dusty desert like the pleasure dome of Kublai Khan. Came *Monkeyland,* where you put on the ape-suit and swung through the branches of the artificial trees; came all the other lands, plus facilities for weddings, christenings, conventions, *bar mitzvahs* and actual burials in what was somewhat painfully described as a "real, live cemetery" adjoining the private landing-field.

Finally, came *The Hall of the Mountain King*—a gigantic open-air cavern, with rocky walls moulded of genuine *papier-mache,* in which outdoor concerts were held every weekend. Here the top singing stars performed, the hit combos, the Name Attractions.

A booking at Groovyland could make a national reputation overnight and pave the way for television, a spot in Vegas, films, recordings, the works. So it was here, naturally, that I determined to launch the career of the entity I'd introduced to Schlock as Sneed Hearn.

No wonder he'd hurled his cigar at me. But now, as I stared into Sylvester Schlock's heated countenance, I came on cool.

"He's a great singer," I said softly. "Wait until you hear him."

"This is a singer?" Schlock startled scornfully at Drool. "I can't even stand the sight of him, let alone the sound."

"What's wrong with his looks?" Sandy inquired.

"He's *green!"* Schlock lifted his arms in an imploring gesture. "Do you think for a moment I'm going to put my audience at the mercy of some green kid?"

This, as we say in the industry, was my cue—and Drool's. I signaled, he stepped forward, he opened his mouth.

Out came a perfect reproduction of that smash singsational group, Vermin and the Varmints.

Schlock reached for another cigar, but he didn't throw it. He didn't even light it, just sat wideeyed and open-eared as Drool poured it on.

Without pausing for breath. Drool launched into a second selection. This one, with an oriental beat, was Yogi and the Yo-Yos punching out *What Makes Swami Run?*

Drool was just about ready to launch an imitation of Charlie Horse and the Bruised Tendons when Schlock's cigar levelled in imperial command.

"Stop!" he shouted. "Enough, already!"

I noticed that the hand holding the cigar was shaking. So was Schlock's head. "I don't know how you do it, young man," he groaned, "but never in my life have I heard anything so atrocious, so abominable, so positively disgusting! In other words, you sound exactly like those groups you're Imitating. And if it's bad enough foe me, it's good enough for the audience."

Pointing his Havana Imperfecto at me, Schlock got down to business. "Our next big concert is scheduled for a week from Saturday. What do you say to a spot for your boy at three G's?"

I shrugged. "Forget it."

Sandy gave me a glance that was strictly distress merchandise, but I ignored her.

"Okay, five G's but that's my top quote, and I'll want repeat options on —"

"No," I said.

"But you can't get any more the first time out, not even from the Sullivan Show—"

"No," I repeated. "We don't want any money."

Now both Sandy and Schlock were sending out distress signals. I smiled at them happily.

"We'll let our boy perform for you absolutely free of charge," I told him. "But on one condition."

"Name it."

"He's not going to have a spot in your concert a week from Saturday. He *is* the concert."

"The whole show, all by himself?" Schlock did something new with the cigar; he swallowed it.

"What's the matter, don't you think it's possible? You heard him."

"But—"

I brushed objections aside. "He can take the place of any solo singer, any singing group, any combination of instruments and instrumentalists. What more do you need?"

"I know," Schlock conceded. "It's just that a one-man concert is practically unheard of. Even the so-called one-man shows are usually backed up by a supporting act to open the bill."

"My boy supports himself," I said. "And if you'll give him a chance, he'll support you, too. This act is going to sell a lot of tickets."

"*After* they've heard him and the word gets around," Schlock agreed. "But this first appearance, he's an unknown quantity. I can't advertise just Sneed Hearn in a one-man performance."

"Then bill him as a group," I said. "After all, he *is* a group when he opens his mouth, isn't he? Call him—oh, anything—"

Inspiration gleamed in Sylvester Schlock's flashing eyes. "Sneed Hearn and his Hearnias!" he shouted.

I gripped his hand. "Okay, we have a firm deal."

And thus, a star was born.

VIII

The ride back to Los Angeles was something of a triumph.

"That was a stroke of genius, letting him go on for free the first time," Sandy conceded. "After one exposure, you can name your own price. Joe, you're a genius."

It is my policy never to contradict a lady, so I just nodded silently. But deep within myself I could feel the surge of supreme confidence. I knew now that nothing was beyond me; I could achieve the seemingly impossible. Right then and there I resolved to put my belief to the final test. The next time I stopped for a traffic light on the Strip and a hippie came up to sell me a copy of *The Free Press,* I would sell *him* a copy of *The Christian Science Monitor*.

My mood was heightened when we got back to the house and Sandy told the waiting group what had happened.

“Incredible!” Luke Emia gasped. “Wait ’til they hear him!”

“They’ll go outta their skulls,” Swinger predicted.

“————!” agreed Grafitti.

I accepted the accolades with due modesty. After dinner I wandered out on the patio behind the house to compose myself and my thoughts. This was going to be a hectic week, and I had to plan a schedule.

To my surprise, I found Drool standing there at the edge of the hilltop, staring up at the smog as though he could actually see the stars beyond. His face was expressionless.

I moved up beside him. “What’s the matter?”

“Nothing.”

“Then cheer up. You’re on your way. You heard what Schlock said—with your looks and your voice you can’t miss!”

Drool blinked at me. “I still don’t see how I’m going to take over the world this way.”

“Look,” I said. “It’s all a matter of who has the clout, and in this world money is power. Your voice will make more money than anyone has ever dreamed of earning. With it you can buy anything you want—”

“But I don’t want anything for myself. I’m only here to follow orders. And my orders are to conquer. If I just had my own little superdisintcgratosonic weapon—”

“This is your weapon.” I pointed at his throat. “And for the moment, I’m your commanding officer. So forward march!”

Luke Emia stepped forth from the shadows. “What’s this about a weapon?” he asked.

I filled him in on Drool’s story.

“Mean to tell me you haven’t investigated any further?” Luke gestured excitedly. “If Drool dropped this gizmo of his when he fell, it must have landed around here somewhere, just as he did. For all we know, it could be lying out in the street.”

“Forget it,” I said. “Who needs weapons?”

“We do! Why, if this thing has half the power he says it does, we’re wasting our time. We could sell a copy to the government for billions.”

“Quit talking like a business man,” I told him.

But Luke was carried away with his own vision. “Then we could turn around and sell *another* copy to the enemy powers for more billions.”

“Quit talking like a *big* business man,” I sighed.

“I still think you’re making a mistake—”

I shook my head. “I’m making a star. From now on, we’re all going to be concentrating on that concert.

Beckoning to Drool, I moved toward the house. “Time to hit the sack,” I said.

And we did. Despite Drool’s policy of letting sleeping-bags lie, he rested beside me all night.

When morning came, we went to work. And that’s the story of the next ten days—work and more work. Grafitti wrote lyrics. Swinger did arrangements. With them I coached Drool on proper styles of delivery; how to slur his pronunciation and moan words incoherently, where to go off-key, and all the other techniques of today’s top vocalists. Luke Emia and Sandy were kept busy loading platters on the stereo as Drool listened to the groups he’d be imitating—the Zappers, the Calamity Howlers, Rock Bottom and the Living Ends, and all the other great artists.

“You’re a slave-driver,” Cy Kotic complained. “I don’t even have time to listen to the news any more. Because of you, I’ve missed two declarations of war, an epidemic, four riots, six mass-murders and nine tax increases. If I can’t keep up with these normal, every-day events, how can I stay in touch with reality?”

Only Barf seemed satisfied with the schedule. He’d rearranged his habits so that he now slept all day and stayed awake all night. It was then, while the rest of us retired to our sleeping-bags, that he proceeded with his educational activities. He and Drool spent those nocturnal hours in Barf’s room upstairs where the philosopher lived in a fashion once popular in square circles. I’d never been invited to that room, but I know it contained 34 books, a writing desk, and even an old monophonic record-player.

It was the sound of the latter which aroused me one midnight just at a time when I was about to entice Sandy over to my sleeping-bag to discuss the territorial imperative.

“What’s *that?”* I muttered, jumping up and taking the stairs two at a time. As I burst into Barf’s room the sound ceased.

Drool was seated on the floor amidst a welter of records and books. Barf stood at the record-player, removing a disc.

“What were you playing just now?” I demanded.

Barf put the platter away. “Just a recording from my own collection.”

“Stop wasting Drool’s time, You’re supposed to be teaching him something worthwhile.”

“But he is.” Drool indicated the volumes stacked lip beside him on the floor. “He’s taught me a great deal about life in your world. We’ve been going through the encyclopedia, slowly. Three volumes a night—”

“Three volumes?”

“Drool is a very fast reader,” Barf explained. “And a very fast listener, too. I answer questions as he goes along.”

“What sort of questions?” I inquired.

“Well, we’re up to the letter,” Drool said. “So we’ve been discussing pathology and psychosis and poverty and plagues and pollution and population-explosion and prejudice and Pop Art—” He nodded reassuringly. “I’m beginning to understand how you people live.”

“I’ve just been discussing public opinion polls,” Barf explained. “For example, here’s one of the latest—a poll taken to determine whether or not people believe in polls—”

“Who needs it?” I glanced disapprovingly at the book-shelves lining the walls.

“You think books are obsolete?” Drool asked, eagerly. “So does Marshall McLuhan. In fact, he wrote a book about it.”

I gripped Drool’s shoulder and pulled him to his feet. “Come on,” I murmured. “You’re going downstairs with me.”

Barf looked confused. “Don’t you approve of my educational methods?”

I shook my head. “Teach him the things he must know when he’s rich and successful. How to handle a sports-car with a right-hand drive, how to order a hamburger from a French menu, how to set up a tax-free foundation. That’s what he needs to learn—the *practical* stuff! With only a few days left before the concert, I don’t want his mind cluttered up with a lot of useless knowledge. Facts will only confuse him.”

Barf gestured tentatively. “Are you quite sure this is what you want?” he said quietly. “In a world of chaos, can’t you think of any meaningful contribution besides more chaos?”

“People want to get zonked,” I told him. “That’s what’s happening, baby. You go with whatever turns you on.”

“Maybe it’s time to turn off,” Barf mused. “Before we reach a point of no return, where sheer sensory impact loses meaning. We have no music any more—just the beat. Our abstract art is nothing but a series of Rorschach tests. When artists cease to communicate with their audiences, the ability to communicate is soon lost and all that matters is subjective sensation, drug-induced. We have sold our birthright for a mess of pot.”

“End of lecture,” I snapped, and dragged Drool downstairs.

“But I *like* talking to him,” Drool protested. “He’s even taught me about warfare and strategy. Divide and conquer. To the victor belongs the spoils.

Don’t fire until you see the whites of their eyes. Oh, if I only had my superdisintegratosonic weapon now—I could take over in no time!”

“You take over Saturday,” I reminded. “By making a success of the concert. And until then, I’m calling the shots.”

The remaining days before the performance blended into a hyperactive blur. Rehearsals and last-minute preparations occupied every waking moment and even invaded my dreams.

If I’d taken time to reflect I probably would have kept a closer watch on my companions, but it didn’t occur to me. I was only vaguely aware that Luke Emia absented himself from the house at regular intervals, and that Barf and Drool exchanged muttered conversations in the comer whenever they met.

But I was too busy to check up. I spent hours on the horn with Sylvester Schlock, going over the publicity and promotion for the concert, and additional hours with Swinger, Grafitti and Sandy, planning the numbers to use in the program itself.

By Friday evening I was a basket case. “Tranquilizers don’t help any more,” I told Cy Kotic. “You were a doctor once. Can’t you do something to calm me down? Isn’t there some kind of operation—a pre-frontal lobotomy—?”

“This you need like a hole in the head,” he replied. “Now just relax. Tomorrow at this time it will all be forgotten. That’s your answer, the same answer I give all my patients. Just remember to forget.”

It sounded like a great notion, and somehow it got me through the final night.

Late that evening I wandered out on the patio with Drool and Sandy. The view was breath-taking. So was the smog.

“Look!” Sandy gestured to the east. “Those lights, way off in the distance—isn’t that Groovyland?”

“It’s *all* Groovyland,” I told her. “The whole world.”

Drool nodded excitedly. “Just think—like tomorrow I’m going to conquer it!”

"Sure," I said, smiling at Sandy. I wasn't worried about Drool and his predictions. As far as I was concerned, all this talk about conquest was just his *schtick.*

The only trouble with *schticks,* of course, is that sometimes you wind up with the short end . . .

IX

They came to Groovyland on Saturday night.

They came by Cadillac and by pick-up truck, by station-wagon and by motorcycle, by sleek and shiny sports-car and by broken down bus. They tangled the traffic on the freeway, turning the air blue with exhaust fumes and with curses. They jammed the parking-lot, jockeying for position as they smashed one another's fenders. They glowered and glared, swore and snarled, then pushed and pummeled their way into the lines before the ticket-windows. Twenty thousand of them came, sweating and squirming and shrieking their way into their seats. And why not? After all, they came here to have fun.

We came for business; Luke Emia in his car, Barf, Swinger, Grafitti land Cy Kotic in a Volkswagen. Sandy and Drool rode with me. Originally I'd intended to bring them all, but Luke pointed out the advantages of keeping extra transportation handy.

"Suppose we need to make a fast get-away after the concert," he said.

"I don't think you're a bit funny," Sandy told him. But in the end, we split up and drove our separate ways.

While the others joined the audience in the Hall of the Mountain King, Sandy and I conducted Drool backstage.

"Up tight?" Sandy whispered to him.

Drool shook his head and grinned. "Under control."

And why not? He didn't have to scuffle for bread, because he didn't eat. He didn't need a fancy pad because he didn't sleep. He was the quintessence of all that the *gurus* taught and the hippies sought—a completely non-involved entity who lived merely to do his thing.

Maybe if I had his advantages I wouldn't be here. I'd have turned Drool over to the scientists for study, let them examine his unique physiology and alien mentality. Or perhaps I'd just let him free to g5 his own way in the world.

But I did have to eat and I did need a pad, and *my* thing was everybody's thing—do unto others before they do unto you.

So I was here, and I was nervous. Jostling through the narrow corridor behind the outdoor stage, we came to the tiny cubicle which served as Sylvester Schlock's temporary headquarters for the evening. He bounded into the hall and grasped my hand.

"Did you see the crowd?" he demanded. "Beautiful!"

I stared into the office over his shoulder. "So is that," I told him.

The floor of the little room was stacked with canvas bags stuffed with coins and currency; loose bills and loose change cascaded from their containers, brought here from the box-offices.

"Twenty thousand customers at three bucks a throw," Schlock murmured. "Sixty thousand on one concert alone. And if your boy makes it big tonight—"

"He will," I promised. "Just keep an eye on him."

"Sorry," said Schlock. "I've got to stay here and keep an eye on the loot. I never mix business with pleasure, and watching money like this *is* a pleasure, believe me."

"But I thought you were going to introduce our star—"

"There's a mike on stage. Why don't you do the honors?" Schlock waved me forward. "Better start soon, that mob is getting restless."

Sandy squeezed my hand. I squeezed back. And then, somehow I was out there under the lights, under the scrutiny of twenty thousand pairs of watchful eyes. And I was singing something about, "Tonight we bring you a new era in entertainment—a new star straight from the heavens—Sneed Hearn!"

The applause rose, and Drool stepped onstage, moving to the microphone and bowing.

"This is it," I whispered. "Remember—all systems go!"

"I'll lay it on them," Drool promised.

I left the stage, perspiring.

Drool stood under the spotlight, grinning.

The crowd fell silent, waiting.

I'll never forget that moment; the hushed, still moment of expectancy.

And I'll never forget the moment that followed it; the moment when Drool opened his mouth.

Drool opened his mouth and the music came out It poured and pulsed, surged and soared.

It wasn't just the sound of a vocalist and a small combo—the majestic strains issuing from that tiny throat were the unmistakable utterance of a mighty orchestra and full chorus.

"Holy Toledo!" Schlock moaned.

"No," I corrected. "That's not it. What he's laying on them is Beethoven's Ninth Symphony!"

Schlock may have groaned again; if so I didn't hear it, for the sound was drowned in the greater groan of the audience. Even Beethoven was lost in the impromptu *chorale* of boos, hisses, shouts and catcalls.

"Get him off before they murder him!" Schlock shrieked, pushing me onstage.

I got him off. "Come on," I muttered, grabbing Drool by the nape of his neck. "They're starting to throw things." And indeed they were. I dodged a *pizza* hurled by an indignant music-lover and ducked a beer-bottle aimed at me by another patron of the arts.

"What's the matter?" Drool quavered. "Why don't they like it? Barf told me they would—"

“Barf?” I shook my head, but the picture was clear now, only too clear. That two-bit philosopher had corrupted our boy with classical music on his own record-player, seduced him into symphonies. “Wait until I get my hands on him!” I promised.

But wait we would. Right now the important thing was to keep that angry crowd out front from getting their hands on us.

Somehow I propelled Drool into the wings. The audience was rising, converging on the stage amidst a thunder of rage.

The thunder was split by the lightning of Sandy’s scream.

“No!” she wailed. “Stop—”

I glanced up quickly, then blinked in sudden shock. Apparently Barf wasn’t the only traitor in our midst.

For there, standing beside the little offstage cubicle where the box-office receipts rested, was Luke Emia. As Schlock and Sandy raised their hands high in helpless surrender, Luke moved forward to cover them with —

“My superdisintegratosonic weapon!” Drool squealed happily. “He found it!”

Which explained Luke’s interest when he questioned me about the lost weapon, explained his absence during recent evenings when he went out to hunt for it in the canyon brush near the house. It also explained why he’d suggested we drive here tonight in separate cars. He had the weapon, and now he had the caper: holding up the place for the concert receipts.

“Stand back!” Luke warned. “Don’t anybody move—”

The words came too late, for Drool was already ducking under his arm, tugging at the oddly shaped, rifle-like object in Luke’s hands. Luke pulled the trigger—Then it was in Drool’s hands, just as the weapon went off. Drool jerked the muzzle aside just in time to avoid the puff of greenish smoke which burst forth and coalesced into—

Another Drool, standing side by side with his exact counter-part, an identical twin Drool holding an identical weapon from which a puff of greenish smoke burst forth to coalesce into a *third* Drool—“Stop!” I shouted.

“Not until I conquer the world,” Drool gurgled.

“With *that* thing? It doesn’t kill anyone!”

“Never said it did,” Drool shrugged. “All it does is reproduce.”

“You mean it duplicates?”

“Reproduces,” Drool corrected me. “How do you think Krool managed to have four million offspring?”

Another greenish puff and from it, another Drool—then another and another—

“That’s the secret of taking over the world,” the Drools chorused. “Divide and conquer.”

A rumbling roar from the platform behind us indicated another kind of problem.

“It’s the audience!” Schlock cried. “They’re storming the stage—they’ll tear us to pieces—”

“Don’t worry,” said the Drools in unison. “We outnumber them.” Then six Drools turned and marched onstage, raising six weapons. Six puffs coalesced and as the crowd shrank back there were twelve Drools facing them. Twelve weapons raised, and now the twelve became twenty-four. Twenty-four became forty-eight and forty-eight became ninety-six and ninety-six became a hundred and ninety-two and a hundred and ninety-two be came an army and the army became—

But you get the idea.

So did I.

Grabbing Sandy’s hand, I ran for it.

X

It is very quiet here.

Sandy and I stopped to plunder a refreshment stand on our way, and I think we have a big enough stock of provisions to last us indefinitely.

That's good, because I'm not sure we're ever going to come out again.

At the rate Drool was reproducing himself, he may well have managed to take over the world by sheer weight of numerical supremacy alone.

And I can just see it now—everybody knee-deep in masses of Drools, rising higher and higher until they smother. It's the final population explosion, I suppose.

And since Drools don't eat or sleep or have much need of oxygen, there's no reason to suppose they'll ever stop multiplying. If they ever get the idea to start singing in unison, the sound-waves will topple every man-made structure on earth. Oh, there's no end to the possibilities.

But meanwhile, Sandy and I will stay here, where it's safe and quiet. Here, in Bodyland, in the one hiding-place that we can depend on.

We're back in the womb.

Some day, when it's all over, we may venture out again, just to see what happened. Right now I like it here, and I'm not about to move. The way things are now, Drool can have his world.

It's a nice place to visit, but I wouldn't want to live there . . .

END

The Movie People

Robert Bloch—author of PSYCHO*, author of many fantasy and sf short stories, including the award-winning "That Hellhound Train" (F&SF, September 1958)—here offers a fantasy with a Hollywood background, about a day on the set when the borderline between reel life and real life briefly dims and fades out.*

TWO THOUSAND STARS.

Two thousand stars, maybe more, set in the sidewalks along Hollywood Boulevard, each metal slab inscribed with the name of someone in the movie industry. They go way back, those names; from Broncho Billy Anderson to Adolph Zukor, everybody's there.

Everybody but Jimmy Rogers.

You won't find Jimmy's name because he wasn't a star, not even a bit-player—just an extra.

"But I deserve it," he told me. "I'm entitled, if anybody is. Started out here in 1920 when I was just a punk kid. You look close, you'll spot me in the crowd shots in *The Mark of Zorro.* Been in over 450 pictures since, and still going strong. Ain't many left who can beat that record. You'd think it would entitle a fella to something."

Maybe it did, but there was no star for Jimmy Rogers, and that bit about still going strong was just a crock. Nowadays Jimmy was lucky if he got a casting-call once or twice a year; there just isn't any spot for an old-timer with a white muff except in a western barroom scene.

Most of the time Jimmy just strolled the Boulevard; a tall, soldierly erect incongruity in the crowd of tourists, fags and freak-outs. His home address was on Las Palmas, somewhere south of Sunset. I'd never been there but I could guess what it was—one of those old frame bungalow-court sweatboxes put up about the time he crashed the movies and still standing somehow by the grace of God and the disgrace of the housing authorities. That's the sort of place Jimmy stayed at, but he didn't really *live* there.

Jimmy Rogers lived at the Silent Movie.

The Silent Movie is over on Fairfax, and it's the only place in town where you can still go and see *The Mark of Zorro.* There's always a Chaplin comedy, and usually Laurel and Hardy, along with a serial starring Pearl White, Elmo Lincoln, or Houdini. And the features are great—early Griffith and DeMille, Barrymore in Dr., *Jekyll and Mr. Hyde,* Lon Chaney in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame,* Valentino in *Blood and Sand,* and a hundred more.

The bill changes every Wednesday, and every Wednesday night Jimmy Rogers was there, plunking down his ninety cents at the box-office to watch *The Black Pirate* or *Son of the Sheik* or *Orphans of the Storm.*

To live again.

Because Jimmy didn't go there to see Doug and Mary or Rudy or Clara or Gloria or the Gish sisters. He went there to see himself, in the crowd shots.

At least that's the way I figured it, the first time I met him. They were playing *The Phantom of the Opera* that night, and afterwards I spent the intermission with a cigarette outside the theatre, studying the display of stills.

If you asked me under oath, I couldn't tell you how our conversation started, but that's where I first heard Jimmy's routine about the 450 pictures and still going strong.

"Did you see me in there tonight?" he asked.

I stared at him and shook my head; even with the shabby hand-me-down suit and the white beard, Jimmy Rogers wasn't the kind you'd spot in an audience.

"Guess it was too dark for me to notice," I said.

"But there were torches," Jimmy told me. "I carried one."

Then I got the message. He was in the picture.

Jimmy smiled and shrugged. "Hell, I keep forgetting. You wouldn't recognize me. We did *The Phantom* way back in '25. I looked so young they slapped a mustache on me in Make-up, and a black wig. Hard to spot me in the catacombs scenes—all long shots. But there at the end, where Chaney is holding back the mob, I show up pretty good in the background, just left of Charley Zimmer. He's the one shaking his fist. I'm waving my torch. Had a lot of trouble with that picture, but we did this shot in one take."

In weeks to come I saw more of Jimmy Rogers. Sometimes he was up there on the screen, though truth to tell, I never did recognize him; he was a young man in those films of the Twenties, and his appearances were limited to a flickering flash, a blurred face glimpsed in a crowd.

But always Jimmy was in the audience, even though he hadn't played in the picture. And one night I found out why.

Again it was intermission time and we were standing outside. By now Jimmy had gotten into the habit of talking to me and tonight we'd been seated together during the showing of *The Covered Wagon*.

We stood outside and Jimmy blinked at me. "Wasn't she beautiful?" he asked. "They don't look like that any more."

I nodded. "Lois Wilson? Very attractive."

"I'm talking about June."

I stared at Jimmy and then I realized he wasn't blinking. He was crying.

"June Logan. My girl. This was her first bit, the Indian attack scene. Must have been seventeen—I didn't know her then; it was two years later we met over at First National. But you must have noticed her. She was the one with the long blonde curls."

"Oh, *that* one." I nodded again. "You're right. She was lovely."

And I was a liar, because I didn't remember seeing her at all, but I wanted to make the old man feel good.

"Junie's in a lot of the pictures they show here. And from '25 on, we played in a flock of 'em together. For a while we talked about getting hitched, but she started working her way up, doing bits—maids and such—and I never broke out of extra work. Both of us had been in the business long enough to know it was no go, not when one of you stays small and the other is headed for a big career."

Jimmy managed a grin as he wiped his eyes with something which might once have been a handkerchief. "You think I'm kidding, don't you? About the career, I mean. But she was going great, she would have been playing second leads pretty soon."

"What happened?" I asked.

The grin dissolved and the blinking returned. "Sound killed her."

"She didn't have a voice for talkies?"

Jimmy shook his head. "She had a great voice. I told you she was all set for second leads—by 1930 she'd been in a dozen talkies. Then sound killed her."

I'd heard the expression a thousand times, but never like this. Because the way Jimmy told the story, that's exactly what had happened. June Logan, his girl Junie, was on the set during the shooting of one of those early *All Talking-All Singing-All Dancing* epics. The director and camera crew, seeking to break away from the tyranny of the stationary microphone, rigged up one of the first traveling mikes on a boom. Such items weren't standard equipment yet, and this was an experiment. Somehow, during a take, it broke loose and the boom crashed, crushing June Logan's skull.

It never made the papers, not even the trades; the studio hushed it up, and June Logan had a quiet funeral.

"Damn near forty years ago," Jimmy said. "And here I am, crying like it was yesterday. But she was my girl—"

And that was the other reason why Jimmy Rogers went to the Silent Movie. To visit his girl.

"Don't you see?" he told me. "She's still alive up there on the screen, in all those pictures. Just the way she was when we were together. Five years we had, the best years for me."

I could see that. The two of them in love, with each other and with the movies. Because in those days, people *did* love the movies. And to actually be *in* them, even in tiny roles, was the average person's idea of seventh heaven.

Seventh Heaven, that's another film we saw with June Logan playing in a crowd scene. In the following weeks, with Jimmy's help, I got so I could spot his girl. And he'd told the truth—she was a beauty. Once you noticed her, really saw her, you wouldn't forget. Those blonde ringlets, that smile, identified her immediately.

One Wednesday night Jimmy and I were sitting together watching *The Birth of a Nation*. During a street shot, Jimmy nudged my shoulder. "Look, there's June."

I peered up at the screen, then shook my head. "I don't see her."

"Wait a second—there she is again. See, off to the left, behind Walthall's shoulder?"

There was a blurred image and then the camera followed Henry B. Walthall as he moved away.

I glanced at Jimmy. He was rising from his seat.

"Where you going?"

He just marched outside.

When I followed I found him leaning against the wall under the marquee and breathing hard; his skin was the color of his whiskers.

"Junie," he murmured. "I saw her—"

I took a deep breath. "Listen to me. You told me her first picture was *The Covered Wagon*. That was made in 1923. And Griffith shot *The Birth of a Nation* in 1915."

Jimmy didn’t say anything. There was nothing to say. We both knew what we were going to do—march back into the theatre and see the second show.

When the scene screened again, we were watching and waiting. I looked at the screen, then glanced at Jimmy.

“She’s gone,” he whispered. “She’s not in the picture.”

“She never was,” I told him. “You know that.”

“Yeah.” Jimmy got up and drifted out into the night, and I didn’t see him again until the following week.

That’s when they showed the short feature with Charles Ray—I’ve forgotten the title, but he played his usual country-boy role, and there was a baseball game in, the climax with Ray coming through to win.

The camera panned across the crowd sitting in the bleachers, and I caught a momentary glimpse of a smiling girl with long blonde curls.

“Did you see her?” Jimmy grabbed my arm.

“That girl—”

“It was Junie. She winked at me!”

This time I was the one who got up and walked out. He followed, and I was waiting in front of the theatre, right next to the display poster.

“See for yourself.” I nodded at the poster. “This picture was made in 1917.” I forced a smile. “You forget, there were thousands of pretty blonde extras in pictures, and most of them wore curls.”

He stood there shaking, not listening to me at all, and I put my hand on his shoulder. “Now look here—”

“I *been* looking here,” Jimmy said. “Week after week, year after year. And you might as well know the truth. This ain’t the first time it’s happened. Junie keeps turning up in picture after picture I know she never made. Not just the early ones, before her time, but later, during the Twenties when I knew her, when I knew exactly what she was playing in. Sometimes it’s only a quick flash, but I see her—then she’s gone again. And the next running, she doesn’t come back.

“It got so that for a while I was almost afraid to go see a show—figured I was cracking up. But now you’ve seen her too—”

I shook my head slowly. “Sorry, Jimmy. I never said that.” I glanced at him, then gestured towards my car at the curb. “You look tired. Come on, I’ll drive you home.”

He looked worse than tired; he looked lost and lonely and infinitely old. But there was a stubborn glint in his eyes, and he stood his ground.

“No, thanks. I’m gonna stick around for the second show.”

As I slid behind the wheel, I saw him turn and move into the theatre, into the place where the present becomes the past and the past becomes the present. Up above in the booth they call it a projection-machine, but it’s really a time-machine; it can take you back, play-tricks with your imagination and your memory. A girl dead forty years comes alive again, and an old man relives his vanished youth—

But I belonged in the real world, and that’s where I stayed. I didn’t go to the Silent Movie the next week or the week following.

And the next time I saw Jimmy was almost a month later, on the set.

They were shooting a western, one of my scripts, and the director wanted some additional dialogue to stretch a sequence. So they called me in, and I drove all the way out to location, at the ranch.

Most of the studios have a ranch spread for western action sequences, and this was one of the oldest; it had been in use since the silent days. What fascinated me was the wooden fort where they were doing the crowd scene —I could swear I remembered it from one of the first Tim McCoy pictures. So after I huddled with the director and scribbled a few extra lines for the principals, I began nosing around behind the fort, just out of curiosity, while they set up for the new shots.

Out front was the usual organized confusion; cast and crew milling around the trailers, extras sprawled on the grass drinking coffee. But here in the back I was all alone, prowling around in musty, log-lined rooms built for use in forgotten features. Hoot Gibson had stood at this bar, and Jack Hoxie had swung from this dance-hall chandelier. Here was a dust-covered table where Fred Thomson sat, and around the corner, in the cutaway bunkhouse—

Around the corner, in the cutaway bunkhouse, Jimmy Rogers sat on the edge of a mildewed mattress and stared up at me, startled, as I moved forward.

“You—?”

Quickly I explained my presence. There was no need for him to explain his; casting had called and given him a day’s work here in the crowd shots.

“They been stalling all day, and it’s hot out there. I figured maybe I could sneak back here and catch me a little nap in the shade.”

“How’d you know where to go?” I asked. “Ever been here before?”

“Sure. Forty years ago in this very bunkhouse. Junie and I, we used to come here during lunch break and—”

He stopped.

“What’s wrong?”

Something *was* wrong. On the pan make-up face of it, Jimmy Rogers was the perfect picture of the grizzled western old-timer; buckskin britches, fringed shirt, white whiskers and all. But under the make-up was pallor, and the hands holding the envelope were trembling.

The envelope—

He held it out to me. “Here. Mebbe you better read this.”

The envelope was unsealed, unstamped, unaddressed. It contained four folded pages covered with fine handwriting. I removed them slowly. Jimmy stared at me.

“Found it lying here on the mattress when I came in,” he murmured. “Just waiting for me.”

“But what is it? Where’d it come from?”

“Read it and see.”

As I started to unfold the pages, the whistle blew. We both knew the signal; the scene was set up, they were ready to roll, principals and extras were wanted out there before the cameras.

Jimmy Rogers stood up and moved off, a tired old man shuffling out into the hot sun. I waved at him, then sat down on the moldering mattress and opened the letter. The handwriting was faded, and there was a thin film of dust on the pages. But I could still read it, every word . . .

“Darling: I’ve been trying to reach you so long and in so many ways. Of course I’ve seen you, but its so dark out there, I can’t always be sure, and then too you’ve changed a lot through the years.

“But I *do* see you, quite often, even though it’s only for a moment. And I hope you’ve seen me, because I always try to wink or make some kind of motion to attract your attention.

“The only thing is, I can’t do too much or show myself too long or it would make trouble. That’s the big secret—keeping in the background, so the others won’t notice me. It wouldn’t do to frighten anybody, or even to get anyone wondering why there are more people in the background of a shot than there should be.

“That’s something for you to remember, darling, just in case. You’re always safe, as long as you stay clear of close-ups. Costume pictures are the best—about all you have to do is wave your arms once in a while and shout, ‘On to the Bastille’, or something like that. It really doesn’t matter except to lip readers, because it’s silent, of course.

“Oh, there’s a lot to watch out for. Being a dress-extra has its points, but not in ballroom sequences—too much dancing. That goes for parties, too, particularly in a DeMille production where they’re ‘making whoopee’ or one of von Stroheim’s orgies. Besides, von Stroheim’s scenes are always cut.

“It doesn’t hurt to be cut, don’t misunderstand about that. It’s no different than an ordinary fadeout at the end of a scene, and then you’re free to go into another picture. Anything that was ever made, as long as there’s still a print available for running somewhere. It’s like falling asleep and then having one dream after another. The dreams are the scenes, of course, but while the scenes are playing, they're real.

"I'm not the only one, either. There's no telling how many others do the same thing; maybe hundreds for all I know, but I've recognized a few I'm sure of, and I think some of them have recognized me. We never let on to each other that we know, because it wouldn't do to make anybody suspicious.

"Sometimes I think that if we could talk it over, we might come up with a better understanding of just how it happens, and why. But the point is, you *cant* talk, everything is silent; all you do is move your lips, and if you tried to communicate such a difficult thing in pantomine, you'd surely attract attention.

"I guess the closest I can come to explaining it is to say it's like reincarnation—you can play a thousand roles, take or reject any part you want, as long as you don't make yourself conspicuous or do something that would change the plot.

"Naturally, you get used to certain things. The silence, of course. And if you're in a bad print, there's flickering; sometimes even the air seems grainy, and for a few frames you may be faded or out of focus.

"Which reminds me—another thing to stay away from, the slapstick comedies. Sennett's early stuff is the worst, but Larry Semon and some of the others are-just as bad; all that speeded-up camera action makes you dizzy.

"Once you can learn to adjust, it's all right, even when you're looking off the screen into the audience. At first the darkness is a little frightening—you have to remind yourself it's only a theatre and there are just people out there, ordinary people watching a show. They don't know you can see them. They don't know that as long as your scene runs, you're just as real as they are, only in a different way. You walk, run, smile, frown, drink, eat—

"That's another thing to remember, about the eating. Stay out of those Poverty Row quickies where everything is cheap and faked. Go where there's real set-dressing, big productions with banquet scenes and real food.

If you work fast, you can grab enough in a few minutes, while you're off-camera, to last you.

"The big rule is, always be careful. Don't get caught. There's so little time, and you seldom get an opportunity to do anything on your own, even in a long sequence. It's taken me forever to get this chance to write you—I've planned it for so long, my darling, but it just wasn't possible until now.

"This scene is playing outside the fort, but there's quite a large crowd of settlers and wagon-train people, and I had a chance to slip away inside here to the rooms in back—they're on camera in the background all during the action. I found this stationery and a pen, and I'm scribbling just as fast as I can. Hope you can read it. That is, if you ever get the chance!

"Naturally, I can't mail it—but I have a funny hunch. You see, I noticed that standing set back here, the bunkhouse, where you and I used to come in the old days. I'm going to leave this letter under the mattress, and pray.

"Yes, darling, I pray. Someone or something *knows* about us, and about how we feel. How we felt about being in the movies. That's why I'm here, I'm sure of that; because I've always loved pictures so. Someone who knows *that* must also know how I loved you. And still do.

"I think there must be many heavens and many hells, each of us making his own, and—"

The letter broke off there.

No signature, but of course I didn't need one. And it wouldn't have proved anything. A lonely old man, nursing his love for forty years, keeping her alive inside himself somewhere until she broke out in the form of a visual hallucination up there on the screen—such a man could conceivably go all the way into a schizoid split, even to the point where he could imitate a woman's handwriting as he set down the rationalization of his obsession.

I started to fold the letter, then dropped it on the mattress as the shrill scream of an ambulance siren startled me into sudden movement.

Even as I ran out the doorway, I seemed to know what I'd find; the crowd huddling around the figure sprawled in the dust under the hot sun. Old men tire easily in such heat, and once the heart goes Jimmy Rogers looked very much as though he were smiling in his sleep as they lifted him into the ambulance. And I was glad of that; at least he'd died with his illusions intact.

"Just keeled over during the scene—one minute he was standing there, and the next—"

They were still chattering and gabbling when I walked away, walked back behind the fort and into the bunkhouse.

The letter was gone.

I'd dropped it on the mattress, and it was gone. That's all I can say about it. Maybe somebody else happened by while I was out front, watching them take Jimmy away. Maybe a gust of wind carried it through the doorway, blew it across the desert in a hot Santa Ana gust. Maybe there *was* no letter. You can take your choice—all I can do is state the facts.

And there aren't very many more facts to state.

I didn't go to Jimmy Rogers' funeral, if indeed he had one. I don't even know where he was buried; probably the Motion Picture Fund took care of him. Whatever *those* facts may be, they aren't important.

For a few days I wasn't too interested in facts. I was trying to answer a few abstract questions about metaphysics—reincarnation, heaven and hell, the difference between real life and reel life. I kept thinking about those images you see up there on the screen in those old movies; images of actual people indulging in make-believe. But even after they die, the make-believe goes on, and that's a form of reality too. I mean, where's the border line? And if there *is* a border line—is it possible to cross over? *Life's but a walking shadow*—

Shakespeare said that, but I wasn't sure what he meant.

I'm still not sure, but there's just one more fact I must state.

The other night, for the first time since Jimmy Rogers died, I went back to the Silent Movie.

They were playing *Intolerance,* one of Griffith's greatest. Way back in 1916 he built the biggest set ever shown on the screen—the huge temple in the Babylonian sequence.

One shot never fails to impress me, and it did so now; a wide angle on the towering temple, with thousands of people moving antlike amidst the gigantic carvings and colossal statues. In the distance, beyond the steps guarded by rows of stone elephants, looms a mighty wall, its top covered with tiny figures. You really have to look closely to make them out. But I did look closely, and this time I can swear to what I saw.

One of the extras, way up there on the wall in the background, was a smiling girl with long blonde curls. And standing right beside her, one arm around her shoulder, was a tall old man with white whiskers. I wouldn't have noticed either of them, except for one thing.

They were waving at me . . .

1970

Double Whammy

Robert Bloch carves out a grim vignette of death and magic in the tawdry world of the Carny as he explains why there's nothing lower than being a geek in the sideshow . . .

R*OD PULLED* the chicken out of the burlap bag and threw it down into the pit.

The chicken squawked and fluttered, and Rod glanced away quickly. The gaping crowd gathered around the canvas walls of the pit ignored him; now all the eyes were focussed on what was happening down below. There was a cackling, a scrabbling sound, and then a sudden sharp simultaneous intake of breath from the spectators.

Rod didn't have to look. He knew that the geek had caught the chicken.

Then the crowd began to roar. It was a strange noise, compounded of women's screams, high harsh laughter teetering on. the edge of hysteria, and deep hoarse masculine murmurs of shocked dismay.

Rod knew what *that* sound meant, too.

The geek was biting off the chicken's head.

Rod stumbled out of the little tent, not looking back, grateful for the cool night air that fanned his sweating face. His shirt was soaked through under the cheap blazer. He'd have to change again before he went up on the outside platform to make his next pitch.

The pitch itself didn't bother him. Being a talker was his job and he was good at it; he liked conning the marks and turning the tip. Standing up there in front of the bloody banners and spieling about the Strange People always gave him his kicks, even if he was only working for a lousy mudshow that never played anywhere north of Tennessee. For three seasons straight he'd been with it, he was a pro, a real carny.

But now, all of a sudden, something was spooking him. No use kidding himself, he had to face it.

Rod was afraid of the geek.

He crossed behind the ten-in-one tent and moved in the direction of his little trailer, pulling out a handkerchief and wiping his forehead. That helped a little, but he couldn't wipe away what was inside his head. The cold, clammy fear was always there now, night and day.

Hell of it was, it didn't make sense. The Monarch of Mirth Shows had always worked "strong"—out here in the old boondocks you could still get away with murder, particularly if you were only killing chickens. And who gives a damn about chickens, anyway? The butchers chop off a million heads a day. A chicken is just a lousy bird, and a geek is just a lousy wino. A rumdum who hooks up with a carny, puts on a phoney wild-man outfit and hops around in the bottom of a canvas enclosure while the talker gives the crowd a line about this ferocious monster, half man and half beast. Then the talker throws in the chicken and the geek does his thing.

Rod shook his head, but what was inside it didn't move. It stayed there, cold and clammy and coiled up in a ball. It had been there almost ever since the beginning of this season, and now Rod was conscious that it was growing. The fear was getting bigger.

But why? He'd worked with half a dozen lushes over the past three years. Maybe biting the head off a live chicken wasn't exactly the greatest way to make a living, but if the geeks didn't mind, why should he care? And Rod knew that a geek wasn't really a monster, just a poor old futz who was down on his luck and hooked on the sauce—willing to do anything, as long as he got his daily ration of popskull.

This season the geek they took on was named Mike. A quiet guy who kept out of everybody's way when he wasn't working; under the burnt-cork makeup he had the sad, wrinkled face of a man of fifty. Fifty hard years, perhaps thirty of them years of hard drinking. He never talked, just took his pint and curled up in the canvas on one of the trucks. Looking at him then, Rod was never spooked; if anything, he felt kind of sorry for the poor bastard.

It was only when the geek was in the pit that Rod felt that ball of fear uncoil. When he saw the wooly wig and the black face, the painted hands that clutched and clawed—yes, and when he saw the grinning mouth open to reveal the rotting yellow teeth, ready to bite—

Oh, it was getting to him all right, he was really up tight now. But nobody else knew. And nobody *would* know. Rod wasn't about to spill his guts to anyone here on the lot, and how would it look if he ran off to some head-shrinker and said, "Hey, Doc, help me—I'm afraid I'm gonna turn into a geek." He knew better than that. No shrinker could help him, and come what may he'd never end up geeking for a living. He'd lick this thing himself; he had to, and he would, just as long as no one else caught on and bugged him about it.

Rod climbed the steps, removing his jacket and unbuttoning his wet shirt as he moved up into the darkness of the trailer.

And then he felt the hands sliding across his bare chest, moving up over his shoulders to embrace him, and he smelt the fragrance, fit the warmth and the pressure even as he heard the whispered words. "Rod—darling—are you surprised?"

Truth to tell, Rod wasn't surprised. But he was pleased that she'd been waiting for him. He took her in his arms and glued his mouth to hers as they sank down on the cot.

"Cora," he murmured. "Cora—"

"Shhhh! No time to talk."

She was right. There wasn't time, because he had to be back on the bally platform in fifteen minutes. And it wasn't a smart idea to talk anyway, not with Madame Sylvia sneaking around and popping up out of nowhere just when you least expected her. Why in hell did a swinging bird like Cora have to have an old buzzard like Madame Sylvia for a grandmother?

But Rod wasn't thinking about grandmothers now, and he wasn't thinking about geeks, either. That was what Cora did to him, that was what Cora did *for* him, dissolving the cold fear in warm, writhing, wanting flesh. At times like these Rod knew why he couldn't *cut* out, why he stayed with it. Staying with it meant staying with her, and this was enough; this was everything, with ribbons on it.

It was only later, struggling into his shirt, hearing her whisper, "Please, honey, hurry and let's get out of here before she comes looking for me," that he wondered if it was really worth it. All this horsing around for a fast grope in the dark with a teen-age spick who practically creamed her jeans every time the old lady looked cross-eyed at her.

Sure Cora was a beautiful job, custom-made for him. But when you got right down to it she was still a kid and nobody would ever mistake her brain for a computer. Besides, she was a spick—well, maybe not exactly, but she was a gypsy and that added up the same thing.

Walking back to the bally platform for the last pitch of the evening, Rod decided it was time to cool it. From now on the chill was in.

That night the show folded and trucked to Mazoo County Fair Grounds for a ten-day stand. They were all day setting up and then the crowds surged in, rednecks from the toolies up in the hills; must have been a couple thousand coming in night after night, and all craving action.

For almost a week Rod managed to keep out of Cora's way without making it too obvious. Her grandmother was running the mitt camp concession on the other end of the Midway and Cora was supposed to shill for her; usually she was too busy to sneak off. A couple of times Rod caught sight of her signalling to him from down in the crowd around the bally platform, but he always looked the other way, pretending he didn't see her. And once he heard her scratching on the trailer door in the middle of the night, only he made out that he was asleep, even when she called out to him, and after about ten minutes she went away.

The trouble was, Rod didn't sleep anywhere near that good; seemed like every time he closed his eyes now he could see the pit, see the black geek and the white chicken.

So the next time Cora came scratching on the door he let her in, and for a little while he was out of the pit, safe in her arms. And instead of the geek growling and the chicken cackling he heard her voice in the darkness, her warm, soft voice, murmuring, "You do love me, don't you, Rod?"

The answer came easy, the way it always did. "Course I do. You know that."

Her fingers tightened on his arm. "Then it's all right. We can get married and I'll have the baby—"

"Baby?"

He sat up, fast.

"I wasn't going to tell you, honey, not until I was sure, but I am now." Her voice was vibrant. "Just think, darling—"

He *was* thinking. And when he spoke, his voice was hoarse.

"Your grandmother—Madame Sylvia—does she know?"

"Not yet. I wanted you to come with me when I tell her—"

"Tell her nothing."

"Rod?"

"Tell her nothing. Get rid of it."

"Honey—"

"You heard me."

She tried to hold him then but he wrenched himself free, stood up, reached for his shirt. She was crying now, but the louder she sobbed the more he hurried dressing, just as if she wasn't there. Just as if she wasn't stuttering and stammering all that jazz about what did he mean, he couldn't do this, he had to listen, and if the old lady found out she'd kill her.

Rod wanted to yell at her to shut up, he wanted to crack her one across the mouth and *make* her shut up, but he managed to control himself. And when he did speak his voice was soft.

“Take it easy, sweetheart,” he said. “Let’s not get ourselves all excited here. There’s no problem.”

“But I told you—”

He patted her arm in the darkness.

“Relax, will you? You got nothing to worry about. You told me yourself the old lady doesn’t know. Get rid of it now and she never will.”

Christ, it was so simple you’d think even a lame-brain like Cora would understand. But instead she was crying again, louder than ever, and beating on him with her fists.

“No, no you can’t make me! We’ve got to get married, the first time I let you, you promised we would, just as soon as the season was over—”

“As far as I’m concerned, the season’s over right now.” Rod tried to keep his voice down, but when she came at him again, clinging, somehow it was worse than feeling her fists. He couldn’t stand this any more; not the clinging, not the wet whimpering.

“Listen to me, Cora. I’m sorry about what happened, you know that. But you can scrub the marriage bit.”.

The way she blew then you’d have thought the world was coming to an end, and he had to slap her to keep the whole damn lot from hearing her screech. He felt kind of lousy, belting her one like that, but it quieted her down enough so’s he could hustle her out. She went away still crying, but very quietly. And at least she got the message.

Rod didn’t see her around the next day, or the one after. But in order to keep her from bugging him again, he spent both nights over at Boots Donahue’s wagon, playing a little stud with the boys. He figured that if there was any trouble and he had to peel off fast, maybe he could turn a few extra bucks for the old grouch-bag.

Only it didn’t exactly work out that way. Usually he was pretty lucky with the pasteboards, but he had a bad run both evenings and ended up in hock for his next three pay-checks. That was bad enough, but the next day was worse.

Basket Case gave him the word.

Rod was just heading for the cook tent for breakfast when Basket Case called him over. He was laying on an old army cot outside his trailer with a cigarette in his mouth.

“How’s for a light?” he asked.

Rod cupped a match for him, then stuck around, knowing he’d have to flick the ashes while Basket Case had his smoke. And a guy born without arms or legs has a little trouble getting rid of a butt, too.

Funny thing, the Strange People never got to Rod, no matter how peculiar they looked. Even Basket Case, who was just a living head attached to a shapeless bundle of torso, didn’t give him the creeps. Maybe it was because old Basket Case himself didn’t seem to mind; he just took it for granted that he was a freak. And he always acted and sounded normal, not like that rumdum geek who put on a fright wig and blacked up and made noises like a crazy animal when he went after a chicken—

Rod tried to push away the thought and pulled out a cigarette for himself. He was just getting a match when Basket Case looked up at him.

“Heard the news?” he asked.

“What news?”

“Cora’s dead.”

Rod burned his fingers and the match dropped away.

“Dead?”

Basket Case nodded. “Last night. Madame Sylvia found her in the trailer after the last show—”

“What happened?”

Basket Case just looked at him. “Thought maybe you could tell me that.” Rod had to choke out the words. “What’s that crack supposed to mean?”

“Nothing.” Basket Case shrugged. “Madame Sylvia told Donahue the kid died of a ruptured appendix.”

Rod took a deep breath. He forced himself to look sorry, but all at once he felt good, very good. Until he heard Basket Case saying, “Only thing is, I never heard of anyone rupturing their appendix with a knitting-needle.”

Rod reached out and took the cigarette from Basket Case to dump his ashes. The way his hand was trembling, he didn't have to do anything but let them fall.

"The appendix story is just a cover—Madame Sylvia doesn't want the fuzz nosing around." Basket Case nodded as Rod stuck the cigarette back between his lips. "But if you ask me, she knows."

"Now look, if you're saying what I think you're saying, you'd better forget it—"

"Sure, I'll forget it. But *she* won't." Basket Case lowered his voice. "Funeral's this afternoon, over at the county cemetery. You better show your face along with the rest of us, just so it doesn't look funny. After that, my advice to you is cut and run."

"Now wait a minute—" Rod was all set to go on, but what was the use? Basket Case *knew,* and there was no sense putting on an act with him. "I can't run," he said. "I'm into Boots Donahue for three weeks' advance. If I cop out, he'll spread the word around and I won't work carny again, not in these parts."

Basket Case spat the cigarette out. It landed on the ground beside the cot and Rod stamped it out. Basket Case shook his head. "Never mind the money," he said. "If you don't run, you won't be working anywhere." He glanced around cautiously and when he spoke again his voice was just a whisper. "Don't you understand? This is the crunch—I tell you, Madame Sylvia knows what happened."

Rod wasn't about to whisper. "That old bat? You said yourself she doesn't want any truck with the fuzz, and even if she did, she couldn't prove anything. So what's to be afraid of?"

"The double whammy," said Basket Case.

Rod blinked at him.

"Want me to spell it out for you? Three seasons ago, just before you came with the show, fella name of Richy was boss canvasman. Mighty nice guy, but he had a problem—he was scared of snakes. Babe Flynn was working them, had a bunch of constrictors, all standards for her act and harmless as they come. But Richey had such a thing about snakes he wouldn’t even go near her wagon.

“Where he went wrong was, he went near Madame Sylvia’s wagon. Cora was pretty young then, just budding out you might say, but that didn’t stop Richey from making his move. Nothing serious, only conversation. How the old lady found out about it I don’t know and how she found out he was spooked on snakes I don’t know either, because he always tried to hide it, of course.

“But one afternoon, last day of our stand in Red Clay it was, Madame Sylvia took a little walk over to Richey’s trailer. He was standing outside, shaving, with a mirror hung up on the door.

“She didn’t say anything to him, didn’t even look at him—just stared at his reflection in the mirror. Then she made a couple of passes and mumbled something under her breath and walked away. That’s all there was to it.

“Next morning, Richey didn’t show up. They found him lying on the floor inside his trailer, deader’n a mackerel. Half his bones were broken and the way the body was crushed you’d swear a dozen constrictors had been squeezing his guts. I saw his face and believe me it wasn’t pretty.”

Rod’s voice was husky. “You mean the old lady set those snakes on him?”

Basket Case shook his head. “Babe Flynn kept her snakes locked up tight as a drum in her own trailer. She swore up and down nobody’d even come near them the night before, let alone turned ’em loose. But Richey was dead. And that’s what I mean about the double whammy.”

“Look.” Rod was talking to Basket Case, but he wanted to hear it himself, too. “Madame Sylvia’s just another mitt reader, peddling phoney fortunes to the suckers. All this marlarkey about gypsy.

“Okay, okay.” Basket Case shrugged. “But if I were you I’d cut out of here, fast. And until I did, I wouldn’t let that old lady catch me standing in front of a—”

“Thanks for the tip,” Rod said.

As he walked away, Basket Case called after him. “See you at the funeral.”

But Rod didn’t go to the funeral.

It wasn’t as if he was afraid or anything; he just didn’t like the idea of standing at Cora’s grave with everybody looking at him as if they knew. And they damned well did by now, all of them. Maybe it would be smart to ease out of here like Basket Case said, but not now. Not until he could pay off what he owed to Donahue. For the next three weeks he’d just sweat it out.

Meanwhile, he’d watch his step. Not that he believed that crazy story about the double whammy—Basket Case was just putting him on, it had to be a gag. But it never hurt to be careful.

Which is why Rod shaved for the evening performance that afternoon. He knew the old lady was at the funeral like everybody else; she wouldn’t be creeping up behind him to capture his soul from his reflection in the mirror—

Damned right, she wouldn’t!

Rod made a face at himself in the glass. What the hell was the matter with him, anyway? He didn’t buy that bit about the curse.

But there *was* something wrong. Because for a moment when Rod looked into the mirror he didn’t see himself. Instead he was staring into a black, grinning face, with bloodshot, red-rimmed eyes and a twisted mouth opening to show the yellow fangs—

Rod blinked and the face went away; it was his own reflection peering back at him. But his hand was shaking so that he had to put the razor down.

His hand was still shaking when he reached for the bottle on the top shelf, and he must have spilled more of the whiskey than he managed to get into the glass. So he took a slug straight from the bottle instead. And then another, until his hands were steady again. Good for the nerves, a little snort now and then. Only you had to watch that stuff, not let it run away with you. Because if you didn’t pretty soon you got hooked and some day before you knew what was happening, you wound up in the wooly wig and the blackface, down there in the pit waiting for the white chicken—

The hell with that noise. It wasn't going to happen. Just a couple of weeks and he'd be out of here, no more carny, nothing to bug him ever again. All he had to do now was keep his cool and watch his step.

Rod watched his step very carefully that evening when he walked up to the bally platform and adjusted his mike for the pitch. Standing before the bloody banners he felt good, very good indeed, and the couple of extra belts he'd taken from the bottle just for luck seemed to have unwound that ball of fear inside his head. It was easy to make his pitch about the Strange People —"All there on the inside, folks, on the *inside*"—and watch the marks flocking around down below. The marks—*they* were the real freaks, only they didn't know it. Shelling out their dough to gawk at poof devils like Basket Case, then paying extra for the *Special Added Attraction, Adults Only,* in the canvas pit behind the ten-in-one tent. What kind of a pervert would pay money to see a geek? What was the matter with people like that?

And what was the matter with him? Standing there beside the pit, holding the burlap bag and feeling the chicken fluttering helplessly inside, Rod felt the fear returning to flutter within himself. He didn't want to look down into the pit and see the geek crouching there, growling and grimmacing like a real wild man. So he looked at the crowd instead, and that was better. The crowd didn't know he was afraid. Nobody knew he was spooked, let alone what scared him.

Rod talked to the crowd, building his pitch, and his hands started to fumble with the cord around the neck of the burlap bag, getting ready to open it and dump the chicken into the pit.

And that's when he saw *her.*

She was standing over to one side, right up against the edge of the canvas; just a little old woman dressed in black, with a black shawl draped over her head. Her face was pinched, her skin was brown and leathery, wrinkled into a permanent scowl. An old lady, nobody gave her a second glance, but Rod saw her.

And she saw *him.*

Funny, he'd never noticed Madame Sylvia's eyes before. They were big and brown and staring—they stared right at him now, stared right *through* him.

Rod wrenched his gaze away, forced his fingers to open the sack. All the while, mechanically, he was talking, finishing the buildup as he reached for the chicken, pulled it out, flung the clucking creature down to that other creature in the pit—the creature that growled and grabbed and oh my God it was biting now—

He couldn't watch and he had to turn his head away, seeing the crowd again as they shrieked and shuddered, getting their kicks. And *she* was still standing there, still staring at him.

But now her clawlike hand moved, moved over the rim of the canvas to extend a pointing forefinger. Rod knew what she was pointing at; she was pointing at the geek-pit. And that wrinkled face *could* change its expression, because she was smiling now.

Rod turned and groped his way out into the night.

She knew.

Not just about him and Cora, but about everything. Those eyes that stared at him and through him had also stared *inside* him—stared inside and found his fear. That's why she'd pointed and smiled; she knew what he was afraid of.

The Midway lights were bright, but it was darker behind the canvas sidewalls except where a patch of moonlight shone on the big water-barrel setting next to the cook-tent.

Rod's face was damp with sweat; he headed for the barrel and soaked his handkerchief in the water to wipe his forehead. Time for another pitch pretty soon, and the next show. He had to pull himself together.

The cool water helped to clear his head, and he dipped his handkerchief again. That was better. No sense flipping just because a nutty old dame gave him a dirty look. This business about gypsies and the evil eye and the double whammy was all a crock. And even if there *was* something to it, he wouldn’t let her get to him. He wasn’t about to stand in front of any mirrors —

Then he glanced down at the water in the barrel, saw his features reflected in the moonlight shining there. And he saw her face, standing right behind him. Her eyes were staring and her mouth was mumbling, and now her hands were coming up, making passes in the air, Making passes like an old witch, she was going to turn him into a geek with the double whammy —

Rod turned, and that’s the last thing he remembered. He must have passed out, fallen, because when he came to he was still on the ground.

But the ground was somehow different than the earth outside the tent; it was covered with sawdust. And the light was stronger, it was shining straight down between the canvas walls of the pit.

He was in the pit.

The realization came, and Rod looked up, knowing it was too late, she’d caught him, he was in the geek’s body now.

But something else was wrong, too; the pit was deeper, the canvas walls much higher. Everything seemed bigger, even the blur of face? crowded around the sides of the pit way up above. *Way up above*—why was he so small?

Then his eyes shifted as he heard the growling. Rod turned and looked up again, just in time to see the black grinning face looming over him, the giant mouth opening to reveal the rotting yellow teeth. It was only then that Rod knew what she had really done to him, as the huge hands grabbed out, pulling him close. For a moment he squawked and fluttered his wings.

Then the geek bit off his head.

In the Cards

Fear gave him three days—life only a moment—to die!

"Saturday night?" Danny said. "What do you mean, I'll die on Saturday night?"

Danny tried to focus his eyes on the old woman but he couldn't make it —too smashed. She was a big fat blur, like the cards spread on the table between them.

"I am truly sorry," the old woman murmured. "I can only read what I see. It is in the cards."

Danny grabbed for the edge of the table and stood up. The smell of incense in the darkened room was making him sick. It wasn't easy to stand and it wasn't easy to laugh either, but he managed.

"Hell with you, sister. You and the cards too."

The old woman stared at him but there was no anger in her eyes, only compassion. Somehow that was even worse.

"I'm not gonna die on Saturday night," Danny told her. "Not me. You're talking to Danny Jackson, remember? I'm a star. A big star. And you, you're just a—

Standing there, lurching there in the darkness, he told her what she was, using a vocabulary ripened and enriched by thirty years in show biz.

Her eyes never flickered, her glance never wavered, and there was still nothing in her gaze but pity when he finally ran out of breath.

And ran out of the reeking room, her pity pursuing him.

"You will die on Saturday night."

Damned echo in his ears, even when he gunned the Ferrari and roared away from the curb. The car swayed, playing tag with the yellow line; good thing it was so late and the street was clear of traffic.

It was late and he was bombed, bombed clean out of his silly skull. Had to be, or he'd never have driven all the hell down to South Alvarado to roust a phony, faking old fortune-teller out of bed and lay a fifty-dollar bill on her for a phony, faking fortune, the old witch, the old bitch—

But they were all bitches, all of them. Lola was the worst.

Danny made it to Bel Air, avoiding Sunset and coming up Pico until he could cut over on a side street through Westwood. When you're on the sauce you learn the right routes, the routes that take you safely through the streets, safely through the minutes and the hours and the days and the nights, even when your nerves are screaming and Lola is screaming too.

Screaming and screaming. She'd been waiting up for him and she cut loose the minute he opened the front door.

"Goddam it, where were you, don't you realize you've got a six o'clock call tomorrow morning—?"

A lot more followed, but Danny slammed the door on it, the door of the guest room. He hadn't slept in the same bed with Lola for three months, not only because of what Dr. Carlsen had told him about his ticker.

It was better here without her, dropping his clothes and flopping down on the old king-size, away from the bitch, away from the witch.

ONLY the witch didn't go away. Here in the dark, Danny could see her eyes again, staring at him as if she understood, as if she *knew.* But nobody knew what the Doc had told him, not Lola, not the studio, not even his own agent. So how could some old bag take one look at him and figure it out?

In the cards. It's in the cards.

Her eyes, he remembered her eyes when she'd said it. They were so deep and black. Black as the ace of spades lying there on the table. The queen of spades had turned up too, and that's when she made that crack about him dying on Saturday night.

Tomorrow was Wednesday. Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday—

To hell with it. That's what he'd told the old klooch and that's what he told himself. Tomorrow was Wednesday and he'd better think about that; Lola was right, he did have a six o'clock call. The test was shooting. That was what counted. Not counting the days until Saturday, but the few short hours until that test.

Wednesday. Named after Woden, the god of war and battles. Danny's name had been Kuhlsberg once, not Jackson, and he knew, he remembered. Wednesday was war, all right, a battle to leave the bed with that head of his pounding away. Thank God he could sneak out before Lola woke up, and drive through the foggy streets before traffic began to build on the San Diego Freeway.

The fight was only beginning, the fight to smile there under the lights while Benny plastered on the old pancake makeup and fitted the little wings to the perspiring temples where the hairline had eroded. The perspiration was alcohol oozing out of him, it wasn't flop-sweat, because Danny knew he had nothing to worry about. The test was a formality, all they wanted was six minutes of film to show the network brass and the agency people in New York. The series was all set, Fischer had told him that last week, and Fischer never conned him. Best damned agent in the business. So no panic, he knew his lines, all he had to do was step onto the set and walk through the scene. If there were any fluffs, Joe Collins would cover for him. Joe was a good man, he'd never carry a lead himself but he was a real pro. And Rudy Moss was a hell of a director—also an old buddy. They were all friends here, and they all knew how much was riding for them on this series.

"Ready for you, Mr. Jackson."

Danny smiled, stood up, strolled out to where Joe Collins was waiting on the set. He found his chalk-marks, somebody from the camera unit dragged out his tape, the mike-boom came down and he tested his voice for gain. Then they hit the lights and Rudy Moss gave him his cue for action and they rolled.

They rolled and he blew it.

The first take he forgot the business with the cigarette. They cut and started from the top, and he fouled his crossover to Joe, stepped right out of camera before he realized it. So they rolled again, and by this time he was uptight and Moss didn't like what he was getting, so it was back and take it from the top once more. Then Danny started losing lines—but those things happen. The only trouble was, he had to stand there under those lights and there were interruptions when a plane went over and ruined the sound and somebody came barging in right on the middle of his long speech and then Joe jumped one of his cues and the idiot script-girl threw him the wrong prompt and he was sweating, wringing wet, and his hands started to twitch and Moss was very patient and it was Take Sixteen and no break for lunch and he could see the looks the crew was giving him and finally they wrapped it up at three-thirty, eight and a half solid hours for a lousy dialogue bit, nothing but two-shots and closeups, and it was a bomb.

Everybody was very polite and they said, "Nice work, Mr. Jackson," and "Great", and "You did it, boy," but Danny knew what he'd done.

The fight was over and he'd lost.

NO SENSE going home because Lola would ask him how did it go and Fischer would be calling and to hell with it. He thought of a little joint on the ocean below Malibu, where the lights were nice and dim and you could buy a good steak to anchor the martinis.

That was the right answer. Though he scraped a fender leaving the parking lot after they closed up the place, he made it home without pain.

Lola wasn't waiting up for him tonight—tonight hell, it was morning already, Thursday morning—but the bed in the guest room felt better than ever.

Until he closed his eyes and saw what was in the cards. Thursday morning. *Thursday. And two days from now—*

If the old bitch was so good at telling fortunes, if she could see everything in the cards, why hadn't she tipped him off about the test? There was a *real* life-and-death matter for you and she never even mentioned it. Of course she didn't; what could she or anybody else see in a lousy pack of playing cards? That's all they were, ordinary playing cards, and she was a cheap grifter and Saturday was only another day of the week.

And this was Thursday. Thursday noon, now, with Danny up and groping his way to the john and shivering in the shower and shaving and stumbling downstairs and finding the note and reading it twice, three times, before it finally sank in.

Lola gone. Left him. *"Sorry . . . tried to get through to you . . . can't stand watching you destroy yourself . . . please . . . need help . . . try to understand."* God, the phrases in that note, like daytime soaper dialogue. But it all added up. Lola was gone.

Danny called her mother's place in Laguna. No answer. Then he tried her sister at Arrowhead. Nothing. By this time he'd cased the joint, seen that she'd cleared out the works, everything; must have taken her all day to pack the station wagon. She meant it; probably been planning the caper for weeks. Next thing he'd be getting a call from some hotshot lawyer, one of those Lear-jet boys. Christ, the least she could have done was waited to find out if he would make the series.

The series. Danny remembered now, he was due in Projection Room Nine at two o'clock; they were screening the test.

But it was after one now. Besides, he didn't need to see the running. He knew what they had in the can—six minutes of worms.

So he climbed in the car and went to Scandia for lunch instead; at least he intended to have lunch, but by late afternoon he still was no farther than the bar.

That was where his agent caught up with him, somewhere between the fifth and the sixth Bloody Mary.

“Thought I’d find you here,” Fischer told him. “Get moving.”

“Where we going?”

“Up to the office. I’d hate to have all these nice people here see me hit you right in the mouth.”

“Get off my back, Fischer.”

“Get off your butt.” He hauled Danny from the stool. “Come on, let’s go.”

Fischer’s office was on the Strip, only a few blocks away. By the time they were there, Danny was up the wall; he knew what Fischer was going to say.

“No calls,” Fischer told the girl on the board. Then he took Danny into the private office *behind* his private office and closed the door.

“All right,” Fischer said. “Tell me.”

“You saw the test?”

Fischer nodded, waiting. His mouth was grim, but the hard face and the hard talk never fooled Danny. He knew that was Fischer’s act. Fischer was a sweet guy inside, always bleeding for his clients. You could see the compassion in his eyes, it was there now, the same look of pity that the fortune-teller had—

Danny wanted to explain about the fortune-teller but he knew how he would sound and besides it wouldn’t do any good. All he could do was say, “I wasn’t loaded. I swear to God I wasn’t loaded.”

“I know that. And nobody said you were. I wish you *had* been—I’ve seen you play a scene with a couple of drinks under your belt and come off great.” Fischer shook his head. “Everybody on the set knew what was wrong with you yesterday, but that wouldn’t matter. The trouble is, everybody in the projection room could see it today, up there on the screen. You were hungover.”

“It was that bad, huh?”

“That bad?” Fischer sighed, swiveled his chair around to face Danny. “Do I have to spell it out for you, Danny? A guy makes three pictures in a row, all bombs, and he’s had it. Sure, I know that Metro thing wasn’t your fault, but the word is out and I haven’t had an offer for six months. When it comes to films, you’re scrubbed. Moynihan tells me—”

“Never mind about Moynihan,” Danny said. “He’s my business manager. He shouldn’t even be talking to you.”

“Who else can he talk to when you won’t listen?” Fischer opened a folder on his desk, glanced at a type-sheet. “You owe eighty-three on the house and nine on the cars. You’re in hock on the furniture, that’s another twenty including the redecorating. Your checking account is minus zero. And if they yank your credit cards, you won’t have enough left to buy a bagel at Linny’s.”

Cards? Why did he have to mention cards? Danny felt a rush of heat and loosened his collar.

“KNOCK it off,” he said. “All I need is a break.”

“I *got* you a break.” Fischer was staring at him across the desk, just like the old lady had stared at him across the card table. “Three months I been rupturing myself to line up this TV deal for you. Salary, residuals, participation—I don’t have to tell you, you could’ve been set for life.”

Life? Suppose I have only two more days? Danny’s chest was pounding, he couldn’t take any more of this, but he had to listen. Through the blur he could see Fischer’s jabbing finger.

“So you make the test. And what do I see? You, walking around up there like a goddam zombie—”

Zombie. Danny knew what a zombie was. *The living dead.* Something was throbbing inside, throbbing so loud that he could barely hear Fischer saying, “Why, Danny? That’s all I want to know. Tell me why.”

But Danny couldn’t tell him why because he had to take off his jacket, had to take off his shirt, had to tear off his skin and dig out whatever it was that throbbed and pounded, throbbed and pounded underneath. He brought his hand up, feeling the pain shoot through his arm and then—

Nowhere.

Danny opened his eyes and saw the white ceiling. White as in Cedars or Sinai, a hospital ceiling.

So that’s where I am. I’m not dead. And what day is this?

“Friday,” said the fat nurse. “No, mustn’t sit up. Doctor wants us to be careful.”

Fat nurses and baby talk, that’s all he needed. Doc Carlsen was more helpful when he showed up in the evening.

“No, it’s not a stroke, nothing like that. From where I stand it may not even have been a cardiac. Dehydration, malnutrition, general exhaustion—you’ve been drinking again, haven’t you?”

“Yeah.”

“I’ve prescribed some sedation for tonight. You’ll have some lab tests tomorrow, to play safe.”

“When can I go home?”

“After we check out the tests. Meanwhile, a little rest won’t hurt you.”

“But tomorrow—”

Danny broke it off right there. What could he say, that tomorrow was Saturday, tomorrow he was going to die; it was in the cards?

Dr. Carlsen didn’t believe in cards; he believed in tests and charts and specimens. And why not? Those things made a hell of a lot more sense than the ace of spades on a dusty table in some creep-joint down on South Alvarado.

Being here in the hospital made sense, too. At least he had somebody looking after him and if there *was* trouble tomorrow—

But there wouldn’t be. All he had to do was swallow the nembies and go to sleep.

Danny stared at the white ceiling until it turned black and then there was nothing again, nothing but sleep, sweet sleep and the queen of spades sat across the table from him and watched while he reached for a drink only the drink wasn't there because Lola had taken it away with her when she left and he knew it didn't matter, it was only a lousy test and he could walk through it in his sleep, sweet sleep—

Danny was very much alive on Saturday morning and hungry as hell. But they wouldn't give him breakfast, not even a cup of coffee, until after they wheeled him down to the lab for the tests.

For a moment, when they were taking blood, he panicked; but like the nurse said, it wasn't going to kill him, and it didn't.

And afterwards he had lunch, a big lunch, and they let him get up to go to the john and a nice fag orderly came in and gave him a shave and he dozed off again until dinnertime.

So Saturday was almost over and he was still with it. Hell, he was even beginning to feel good, and if he could only have a drink anti a cigarette—

"Sorry. Doctor wants us to take our sedative again tonight." The fat nurse was back, a real sweetheart. But Danny took the pills and the water and settled back, because it was nine o'clock, only three hours to go. If he made the stretch everything would be right on.

If he made it? Hell, he was going to make it, he knew it now, he could feel it in his bones, in his ticker. No throbbing, no pounding; all is calm, all is bright. Bright as the white ceiling which was turning gray now, turning black again, black as the ace of spades.

Something started to thump in Danny's chest, but he tensed up, forcing himself to relax—that was funny, tensing up to relax, but it seemed to work, it was working—and now everything was calm again, calm and peaceful, he could sleep because it was quiet. *Quiet as the tomb*—

Danny screamed.

The lights went on and the fat nurse came running into the room. "Mr. Jackson, what's the matter, don't you know it's one in the morning—"

"One in the morning?"

She nodded.

"Sunday morning?"

When she nodded again, Danny could have kissed her. In fact he *tried* to *kiss* her because he'd made it now and he was home free.

It was easy to go back to sleep then. Everything was easy now that it was Sunday.

Sunday, with the big breakfast and the big paper. Sunday, with the fresh shave and the fag orderly bringing in the flowers from the studio—wait a minute, what the hell was this, there was nothing in the papers, how did the studio know?

DANNY found out when they plugged the phone in for his first call. Fischer.

"Look," Danny said. "I'm sorry about the other day—"

"I'm not," said Fischer. "Shut up and listen."

So Danny listened.

"Maybe it was the best thing that could have happened. Anyway, it gave me a notion. I called the studio and tipped them."

"You called the studio?"

"Right. Told them about Lola, too."

"Where'd you pick that up?"

"She phoned me Thursday night. Don't worry. I made her promise not to break the story to the papers until we were ready."

"Ready for what?"

"Stop interrupting and listen," Fischer said. "I told the studio the truth only I juggled the dates a little. Said that Lola split with you on Tuesday instead of Wednesday and you knew it when you came to do the test. The Pagliacci bit, your heart was breaking but the show must go on—you didn't look so good in there but you were giving it the old college try and how could they fault you when you were so shook up you actually collapsed the following day?"

"Do you have to sound so happy about it?" Danny asked.

"I *am* happy and you're gonna be happy too. Because they went for the bundle. Considering the circumstances, they're going to scrap the test, they've already been on the horn to New York and everything's set. You'll do another shot next week, as soon as the Doc says it's okay. How's that for openers, buddy-boy?"

It was good for openers and kept getting better. Because the next one who called was Lola. Crying up a storm.

"Sorry . . . all my fault . . . should have stood by when you needed me . . . told the lawyer to forget it . . . Doctor said I could come to see you tomorrow . . . oh my poor baby . . ."

Oh my aching—

But it was fine, it was A-okay because a divorce right now, even a separation, would have clobbered him for life. And he *had* a life, a whole new life, starting today.

Dr. Carlsen laid the topper on it that afternoon. "Preliminary lab reports are in. Too early to nail it down, but it looks as if I made a pretty good educated guess. Little murmur, slight irregularity there, but nothing we can't control with medication. And a dose of common sense."

"When do I cut out of here?"

"Perhaps tomorrow."

"I was thinking of right now."

Dr. Carlsen shrugged. "You're always thinking about right now. That's your problem." He sat down on the edge of the bed. "I was talking about common sense, Danny. Want me to spell it out for you? Two, maybe three drinks a day—one before dinner, one after, perhaps a nightcap if you're out for the evening. Regular hours. We can talk about the diet and exercise later. But the main thing is for you to stop running scared."

"Me?"

Danny gave him the big smile, but it didn't register. "You're not on now," the Doc told him. "I know what knocked you down. It was fear. Fear of what was happening to your career, fear because your marriage was coming unglued, fear of a heart attack—"

Okay, smart-ass.

"Don't you understand, Danny? Sometimes the dread is worse than the disease itself. If you can learn to face up to the things you're afraid of—"

Danny smiled, Danny nodded, Danny thanked him, Danny hustled him the hell out of there.

Maybe the Doc was right at that. The part about fear made sense. The only trouble was, he didn't know what Danny had really been afraid of. If Danny had told him, Carlsen would have called a shrinker. You don't go around spilling about fortune-tellers who predict you'll die on Saturday night.

But that was over and out now. This was Sunday and he felt great and he wasn't afraid of anything any more.

He wasn't afraid to climb out of bed and take his clothes from the closet, dress himself and march down the hall to the desk. He wasn't afraid of the fat nurse or the head nurse either, when he told her he was checking out.

Sure there was a lot of static and threats about calling Doctor and this is all highly irregular, Mr. Jackson, but if you insist, sign here.

Danny signed.

The night air felt good as he waited for a taxi out front, and everything was quiet—there was that Sunday feeling in the streets. That *Sunday* feeling.

Danny gave the driver his address and settled back for the long haul out to Bel Air. The driver was smart, he ducked the traffic on Wilshire and swung down over Olympic. Crummy neighborhood, lots of neon fronting the cheap bars—

"Hold it, changed my mind. Let me out here."

What the hell, why not? Didn't Doc say he could have a drink before dinner? Besides, it wasn't the drinks, it was the fear. And that was long gone now. It had died last night.

THAT called for a celebration. Even in a Mickey Mouse joint like this, topless waitresses and faceless customers; that little bird down at the end of the bar wasn't too bad, though.

"Scotch rocks." Danny glanced along the bar. "See what my friend wants."

She wasn't his friend, not yet, but the drink did it. And by the time they had a second one he and Gloria switched to a back booth.

That was her name, Gloria, one of the strippers in the floor show here, but she didn't work Sundays, sort of a busman's holiday if you get what I mean.

Danny got what she meant and a lot more, too; good figure, nice legs, the right kind of mouth. Hell, this was a celebration. It had been a long, long time. So Lola was coming back tomorrow, big deal. This was tonight. Sunday night. The first night, the grand opening of a smash hit, a long run. *The New Life of Danny Jackson.*

"Danny Jackson? *You?"* Gloria's mouth hung open. Nice, sensual lower lip. He could always tell, it was like radar, or flying by the seat of your pants. Not the seat exactly, but close. Funny, very funny, and that calls for another drink—

"Of *course* I know who you are." Gloria chug-a-lugged pretty good herself and now they were wedged into the same side of the booth together, all comfy-cozy.

And he was telling her how it was that he happened to fall in here, everything that happened, no names of course, but it was easy to talk and maybe if he had one more for the road—

The road led next door, of course; he had noticed the motel when he left the cab. All very convenient.

George Spelvin and wife is what he signed, and the clerk gave him a funny take but Danny wasn't afraid, he wasn't running scared now.

The ace of spades was only another card in the deck and this was a brand new deal; the queen of spades was gone and Gloria was here instead. Cute little Gloria, red hair against a white pillow, and the bed lamp throwing shadows on the wall. Big black shadows like big black eyes, staring and watching and waiting—

But no, the fear was gone, he was forgetting. *Sunday* night, remember? And he wasn't destroying himself, that was over and out, it had all been a mistake. A mistake to get drunk, a mistake to surrender to a sudden impulse and have his fortune told, a miscake to believe a kooky old klooch and her line about the cards. Cards don't control your life, *you* control your life. He'd proved it. Well, hadn't he?

"Sure, Danny. Sure you have."

He must have been thinking out loud, telling Gloria the whole story. Because she was unbuttoning his shirt and helping him and murmuring, "Sunday, that's what it is, remember? Nothing to be afraid of, I won't hurt you—"

Damned right she wouldn't. She was just what the doctor ordered. Only he hadn't ordered *this.* This one drink before dinner and regular hours and don't be scared. Okay, so he wasn't scared. And to hell with the doctors and the fortune-tellers too.

Danny was ready and he grabbed Gloria and yes, this was it, this was what he'd been waiting for. He stared down into eyes, her dark eyes, like the eyes of the old woman. And now they were widening with pleasure and he could see the pupils, black aces on a dusty table. And there was no pleasure, only this tearing pain, as the Ace of Spades kept coming up, up, up—

Danny didn't know it when he died, and he didn't know why he died, either. Gloria had told him nothing, not even the name she used when she did her strip act. It was just one of those phony names that strippers always use. Saturday is what she called herself—Saturday Knight.

1971

The Funny Farm

Although long a favorite author of horror stories and winner of the prized Hugo award for science fiction, Robert Bloch catapulted into the wider public eye when Alfred Hitchcock adapted his novel, Psycho*, into a terrifying film. Since then he has written numerous screen and teleplays, produced further collections of stories and novels,* American Gothic *and* Night-World *being two of the most recent ones, and in the course of things given the world countless imaginatively strange and shivery moments. A Robert Bloch story is distinctive for its sharp strokes of ironic humor, skillful build-up of tension and vivid glimpses of the dark side of the mind. Bloch is in the very front rank in his field and why can be well understood in the reading of this story, from August Derleth's last hardcover anthology,* Dark Things.

IN ORDER to comprehend Joseph Satterlee's obsession with the comics one would have to be old enough to remember the 'Twenties. More than that, it would be necessary to remember the decade as Satterlee himself did, and such a subjective recall is impossible, even for a psychiatrist.

This isn't to say that a psychiatrist wouldn't have helped; indeed, it was a matter of more or less common knowledge around Redford that Joe Satterlee was a real weirdo, and inevitably his place of residence was dubbed "the funny farm." Because of the comics, naturally—the thousands upon thousands of comics Satterlee collected.

It was generally conceded that Satterlee would pay a ridiculously high price for any old piece of multicolored paper depicting the antics of *Little Jimmy, Salesman Sam*, or *Polly and Her Pals.* Obviously he must be some kind of a nut. Spending all that money on such foolishness was like—

The people who said such things generally paused here, because they didn't know *what* it was like.

Only Satterlee knew that. It was like buying a ticket to the past.

And that, of course, is exactly what Satterlee was doing. He was time-traveling. Returning, *via* the medium of comics, to the very best and most comfortable portion of that past—which, for him, was the 'Twenties.

Not the Roaring Twenties, mind you. The Twenties didn't roar for Satterlee or for anyone else who spent his childhood during that dim and distant decade. Actually it was a very quiet time, except for Fourth of July—there were less crowds, less traffic, even the movies were silent, and if one's family actually owned a superhetrodyne radio it was heard through the medium of earphones. Roaring would have hurt Joe Satterlee's ears, for he had mastoiditis; even the earphones gave him trouble. As a result he was frequently absent from school and almost always away from the other children in the playgrounds and vacant lots. He was a shy youngster, a loner, a great reader.

Perhaps that's why the comics became so important to him. He'd actually learned to read from the funny papers and his most pleasant memories centered around those long, lonely afternoons in the attic with the collection of Sunday comic sections he'd started accumulating at the age of seven.

The funny papers were actually funny in those days. There were Happy Hooligan, with the tin can on his head chinless Andy Gump and rich Uncle Bim from Australia, Barney Google and the faithful Spark Plug, Boob McNutt, Count Screwloose of Toulouse, cross-eyed Iggy in the Napoleon hat, lanky Mutt and dumpy bewhiskered Jeff. He knew them all, followed them faithfully throughout the week and reveled with them when they cut loose in full-page color on Sundays. When Jiggs took off his shoes and sneaked out on Maggie for a forbidden orgy of corned-beef and cabbage at Dinty Moore’s, he tiptoed along at his heels. ‘When Moon Mullins escorted Lord Plushbottom to the pool-hall, he went with them. When Krazy Kat cavorted across the lunar-like landscape of Never Never Land, he was there. Brickbats flew, grotesques capered and saw stars, animals spoke, balloon-encased lightbulbs signalled the origin of ideas in empty heads. Here was a world of fancy with a language and logic all its own—a world of escape and enchantment.

And somehow, because Joe Satterlee was largely cut off from the actual world beyond the rainstreaked or frost-fogged attic windows, the funny pages served him as a guide to reality.

His Africa was the continent of Hans and Fritz—where *Katzenjammers* dwelt with a cannibal king who wore a top hat and a monocle, and the Herring Brothers pursued piratical careers to the point of idiocy. Later, it became the realm of Tarzan, of Tantor and Numa and Jad-bal-ja the Golden Lion. His ideas of higher education derived from *Harold Teen,* his notion of the business world from *Winnie Winkle* and *Tillie the Toiler.* Even in the early Thirties, his impression of life in the big city was based on the exploits of Dick Tracy or the vicissitudes of Apple Mary and Dixie Dugan. A psychiatrist might make a case for Satterlee’s lifelong bachelorhood from the attitudes implanted by a faithful reading of *Mr. and Mrs., Toots and Casper* and the tragicomedies enacted by George Bungle.

A psychiatrist might make quite a case indeed; pointing out that concentration on brightly colored figures in a darkened attic setting can serve to induce a form of auto-hypnosis. and a preoccupation with the idealized childhood of a Skeezix, a Skippy or even an Ella Cinders may make the reality pale by comparison. And certainly a psychiatrist might sense a peril in too great an identification with the dream-worlds of *Little Nemo, Buck Rogers, Flash Gordon, Prince Valiant, Mandrake the Magician,* and—at the very’ end of the cycle—*Superman.*

Not that Joe Satterlee emerged from comic-reading at the end of the ’Thirties as a Superman character himself. If anything, he was hardly the equal of a Clark Kent.

He became a bookkeeper, then an accountant, but was still—particularly after the death of his parents—more of a loner than ever.

And his collection grew. All through his years in the city he lived in a boardinghouse (without, needless to say, the amusing companionship of a Major Hoople) but he still retained the family home outside Redford. And it was here that he dispatched the comics he acquired through bookstore browsing and mail-order acquisition.

It was here, following his retirement in the late ’Sixties that he settled down to what could well be described as a second childhood. Premature senility might be the psychiatric diagnosis; as for Satterlee himself, he knew only that he felt safe and comfortable away from a world where everything had changed and even the comic strips weren’t funny any more.

He didn’t like that world. He didn’t even like his own image in the mirror—it reminded him too much of Casper Milquetoast. But he did like sitting in the attic, where rack-lined walls housed his accumulation, and reading once again the adventures of *Little Orphan Annie, Joe Palooka,* or *Terry and the Pirates.*

Once a week he went into Redford for groceries, and more infrequently he ventured to the bank, the hardware store and the barber shop. People in town had a somewhat vague impression of him—and his impression of them was equally remote. Somehow, gradually, he seemed to withdraw into a realm of his own, where all problems were neatly compartmentalized in panel-strips; a world of bright colors and silently sensed messages, of easy laughter and innocent adventure which comforted him by satirizing the harsh reality of the wilderness outside his windows. He could laugh at that reality with *The Little King* or even *The Nebbs;* sometimes he laughed out loud, and when on occasion he did turn on his small-screen television set for the news he found himself watching the war footage and echoing Wimpy’s ancient dictum of, “Let’s you and him fight.”

Joe Satterlee often dreamed about comics now, and at first it rather disconcerted him to encounter Abie Kabibble or Daddy Warbucks in the familiar surroundings of his own home. But after a time he became accustomed to it, and in fancy he could picture the dark halls of the rambling old house peopled with the colorful companions of his youthful imaginings. Again, a psychiatrist might have a field-day with a man whose erotic fantasies revolved around the earliest incarnation of Dixie Dugan, but then what would a psychiatrist know about the child who dwelt within the mind of an elderly, greying eccentric? The mind is merely an instrument of perception, and if it chooses to perceive the dream more vividly than the reality, who is to say that this is an error?

Satterlee loved his comic-strip companions, and he came to feel that they loved him. They lived together quite contentedly, and if Satterlee was indeed childish, he preferred the image to that of Caspar Milquetoast, the quite ineffectual man in the mirror whose empty daily routine protested both the comics collection and the child who retreated into its ageless domain in search of long-ago laughter. So what went on in Satterlee's house was really of no concern to a psychiatrist at all.

The only person who became concerned was Lenny Morgan. And Lenny Morgan was no psychiatrist—he was only a thief.

But a damned good one, Morgan told himself. If he hadn't been so good he wouldn't be hot, and if he wasn't hot, he wouldn't have come to this backwoods boondock to sit things out. Tall timber makes a good hiding-place, but Morgan figured it was a drag. He was just about ready to take his chances and cut back to town when he heard about this Joe Satterlee and his comics collection.

The first item of value that a good thief steals is information. And the information that Morgan obtained through listening to a chance conversation in the barber shop sounded valuable enough. He absorbed it the way a computer absorbs data.

An old man. Living alone. In a big house. On a back road three miles outside of town. No friends. Well-fixed for money. Spends it all for his collection. Must have thousands of comics out there.

Comics. That was the operative word, setting the circuits in motion, signaling all systems go.

Because Morgan’s computerlike mind already had data stored away on comics. It was his business to know about hobbies and hobbyists.

Take your average stamp collection, now. Or better still, don’t take it. No matter what the owner laid out for it over the years, chances are that a dealer will only offer one-tenth of the catalogue value, except for certain U.S. items. And if the collection contains rarities, you must peddle it around to the big operators who can afford to buy. This is as risky as trying to sell a Rembrandt to an art dealer—he’ll know at once where it came from. And the big stamp merchants know who owns the scarce, valuable material. They’d spot Morgan as a ringer every time.

Coins are better, particularly gold and silver. But a good haul is bulky, heavy, hard to handle. You need the same amount of manpower it would take to rob a mint. So coins are out. Morgan never touched coins.

Paintings, sculpture, antiques—again, these items are too heavy, too awkward to load and too difficult to stash away until you dump them. Jewelry is good, but for that you need a fence, and a fence will steal you blind. Morgan didn’t approve of anyone stealing from a fellow-professional, particularly if that fellow-professional was himself.

But comics; now you’re with it! He’d seen the lists and the ads in collectors’ magazines. At first he couldn’t believe it—little kids, ten and twelve years old, paying a hundred and fifty bucks for some old *Batman* or *Wonder Woman* comic that sold for a dime when it first came out thirty years ago. It was big business, and getting bigger.

It was a big business, but the merchandise was small. Portable, easy to handle. And easy to dispose of, with no way of tracing it, no questions asked—you could even peddle it by mail if you liked. One man could fill a station wagon with a load worth a fortune.

Morgan had a station wagon.

So there were no problems. But just to make sure, lie checked everything out. It took him another week—cooped up in the crummy little motel with the red-jacketed yucks who came up to this godforsaken wilderness for the fall hunting season—but he stuck it out. Eating in the fry-joints, hanging around the barbershop, knocking off a few beers in the taverns, and always keeping his ears open. He found out what he needed to know.

Joe Satterlee didn't hunt. Probably meant he couldn't handle a gun—chances were he didn't even own one. And he wouldn't have any hunting dogs, either. Or any dogs at all. Which was important, for obvious reasons.

Another bit of good news turned up along the way. Old Satterlee was deaf. Wore a hearing aid, and it wasn't much good, either. When he came to town on Thursdays to stock up groceries for the week, he had trouble hearing the clerk.

Morgan got that word from a conversation he eavesdropped on in the store itself, but he didn't stop there. He waited until Thursday afternoon and planted himself across the street to wait. Sure enough, along about five o'clock, this beat-up old Plymouth rattled into a parking place and the skinny, gray-haired jigger climbed out. He wore a hearing aid all right, and when he headed into the store Morgan knew he'd spotted the clown. Morgan noticed he had trouble lugging his grocery bags when he came out, which meant he was pretty feeble, and that was good too; there'd be no trouble handling him.

So when Satterlee drove out of town, Morgan trailed him in the station wagon. He kept a good distance behind, but he followed him right to the dirt side-road where the Plymouth turned off into the woods. Morgan didn't go after him. Instead he drove on, checking the location of the nearest neighbors and discovering that the next farmhouse was almost a mile away. Just past it was the junction with the main highway, so the setup was perfect.

And it was even more perfect by the time Friday night rolled around. Morgan checked out of the motel at noon, tipped the Indian broad who did the cleaning, and making sure that both she and the motel clerk knew he was anxious to get back to Duluth before dark. Then he cut out for the main highway, cruised thirty miles to a flyspeck on the map called Purdee, and took a room at the motel there. He timed the run at half an hour. He had a sandwich and coffee for dinner—no point eating a heavy meal just before going to work—and waited around until ten o'clock. Nobody noticed him pull out of the motel parking place and he barrelled back up the highway in plenty of time to get to Satterlee's place by eleven o'clock. And it was exactly eleven on the dot when he turned the station wagon onto the dirt road.

The night was dark and there was a feel of rain in the air. Which could be another break for Morgan; a good heavy fall rain would wash out tire tracks. And since the old jigger wouldn't be expected to show up in town again until next Thursday, that gave him six days clear. Maybe no one would get around to missing him for another four or five days after that, and by then the local fuzz wouldn't even remember Morgan. With all these hunters coming in, who kept track? It was the kind of caper Morgan always dreamed about.

Up in the old house Joe Satterlee was dreaming too. Sleeping in the big bed his parents occupied when he was a child. The bed he sometimes crawled into on Sunday mornings; little Joey, snuggling up in the warm, comfy-cosy place between Mama and Papa.

And Mama, laughing. *Oh, Joey—not again?*

Please, Papa promised he'd read them to me.

Papa shaking his head, but grinning as he reached for the papers. *All right. Which one do you want first?*

Hairbreadth Harry, Papa.

And the bright pages of the funny-papers unfurling across the bed, crispy-crinkly, smelling of ink, rattling and rustling—

Something was rattling and rustling *now.*

He awakened in darkness and he wasn't Joey any more, he was Joe, and it was half a century later, and he couldn't hear clearly and he couldn't see at all, but there was *something.*

Satterlee fumbled on the night-stand for his hearing aid, then threw back the covers and swung his feet to the floor. He fitted them into his slippers and stood up, moving towards the light-switch near the door.

Before he reached it the beam of the flashlight seared across his eyes and the voice buzzed in his ears.

“Don’t move.”

Satterlee didn’t move. He stood stock-still, staring at the burly man holding the flashlight. Who was he? Why was he scowling so?

He didn’t ask the questions aloud, and if he had, Morgan wouldn’t have answered him. Because Morgan was uptight.

It was all going according to plan, and there were no hitches anywhere along the line. No dog. No trouble forcing the door downstairs. No trouble finding his way here to the bedroom. And sure as hell no trouble with this old futz in the nightgown. A nightgown, for Christ’s sake—who wears them nowadays?

Maybe that’s what was bugging him. This wasn’t nowadays. This house. The damned furniture downstairs, like something out of a Sears Roebuck catalogue for 1920. The drapes and the rugs all mouldy, and everything smelling the way it did. Musty. Old. And dark as a tomb. He wanted no part of this place and the sooner he could split the better. So it was time to pop the question.

“Where are they?”

The old jerk blinked at him as if he hadn’t heard. Morgan gave him a swipe across the side of his forehead with the heavy flashlight. “Where are they?” he repeated.

And this time he got complete attention. “Where are what?” the creep wanted to know.

“The comics,” Morgan said. “I want to see the comics.”

The jigger’s mouth dropped open and for a moment he looked like a little kid—his lower lip wobbling as though he was getting ready to bawl.

But then Morgan lifted the flashlight again and old Satterlee got the message.

“Upstairs,” he mumbled. “In the attic.”

“Let’s go,” Morgan told him.

"What do you—?"

Morgan prodded him in the ribs with the flashlight and Satterlee shut up fast. He turned and shuffled out of the bedroom and down the hall. Morgan was right behind him, fanning the flash beam over the floorboards and the steps of the attic stairway.

The steps creaked loudly under their feet, and an answering echo came from above, but it didn't matter. There was no one else to hear. They were alone in the house, alone in the big, beamed room with the steeply slanted roof, alone in the darkness.

The beam of the flashlight sent shadows scurrying across the walls. Morgan saw the racks—row upon row of racks; the kind of thing he remembered seeing in the public library when he was a kid. Used them to store old newspapers or something.

He prodded Satterlee forward and turned the flash towards the nearest rack for a closer look. Then he shook his head. These *were* old newspapers. A whole damned attic filled with newspaper sheets—row on row of them, covered with cellophane, and the cellophane covered with dust. Peering down, he rubbed his fingers across the surface of a sheet and the color leaped forth. *Toonerville Folks, by Fontaine Fox.* One of those Sunday funny papers.

Morgan fanned the flashlight, *Dumb Dora. Petey Dink. Foxy Grandpa.* They were all funny papers.

He grabbed Satterlee's arm. "All right. Where you hiding the comics?"

Satterlee gestured at the racks. "These are the comics."

Morgan twisted his arm. "Not the newspapers. Comic books."

"Books? But I don't have any books—"

Morgan released his grip, staring at the rows of racks looming in the shadow's.

It was the truth, and he knew it. Satterlee was too frightened to lie. *There were no books.* Because in the days when the old man was a kid, these newspaper strips were the only comics, and that's what he'd collected.

Lousy old newspapers, not worth a dime even to a goddamn junk-dealer. *No books, it was all for nothing*—

Something was building inside Morgan, something that had to burst. He reached out blindly and ripped a paper from its frame, shredding the cellophane covering and tossing it to the floor. He tore another free, crumpled it.

“Please—don’t—!” Satterlee quavered. But the man wasn’t listening, nobody listened, nobody understood. These were all he had, his companions, his friends for fifty years, he’d preserved and protected them for their lifetimes, destroying his collection was like destroying his life—

Destroying his life. Satterlee felt the tug at the side of his head as the angry man jerked the cord of his hearing aid. He saw the livid, enraged face before him, saw the beefy hands rise gripping the ends of the cord to whip it around his neck, then felt the agonizing pressure against his throat.

And that, for Satterlee, was all.

But it wasn’t all for Morgan. Only the rage died with his victim.

Now he stood over the body in the darkness; the body, crumpled on the floor like one of those old newspaper sheets. The attic was drafty and the night wind whispered through the papers in their racks.

The whispering wasn’t real, of course, because there was no one here but himself. The real whispers would come later, when the body was discovered.

Morgan knew how to prevent that. The newspapers were the answer. A heap of old newspapers and a match—

He moved to the racks and started to tear the cellophane-covered sheets free with both hands. The paper rattled. And the wind rose all around him, making a rustling sound, a stirring sound, a whispering like the murmur of many voices. Cracked, brittle voices. Angry voices. Voices sounding from the shadows. Shadows that suddenly rose and moved.

Shadows do move, and when Morgan turned and saw them he was not alarmed. But shadows have no substance—they do not *creak.* And now there was a creaking of floorboards from the racks in the far corner.

Morgan started to glance in that direction, and as he did so he heard the attic door slam shut. Then he did panic for a moment, until he realized it must be the work of the wind. He dropped the wadded newspapers he'd clenched in his fists and spread them across the floor. Whispers whirled and shadows slithered, but Morgan ignored them, reaching for a match.

The light flared up, and then Morgan couldn't ignore them any longer—the shadows streaming forth from the racks, the shadows that surrounded and converged.

Morgan rose, then stepped back quickly as he saw the silhouette of the tall man in the top hat. the tall man carrying a cane that bore a curious resemblance to a magician's wand. He saw the outlines of the baldheaded figure with the tiny tin cup perched atop its bony head, the grotesque profile of a moustached man with a receding chin, a long-haired giant with a sword.

And then, from the moving mass of rustling, whispering shapes, an image emerged—the brightly colored, garish image of a small carrot-topped girl with eyes widened in a stare. Eyes that had no pupils.

She opened her mouth and the whisper came forth—a dry, paper-thin whisper.

"Get him, Sandy."

Something growled. Something crouched. Something sprang.

Morgan screamed once, and then the shadow was upon him and the other shadows watched and whispered as he died.

Then there was only silence in the attic.

A silence lasting for ten days, until the state police broke in and found Satterlee's body with the cord of the hearing aid still twisted around his neck. The verdict of death by strangulation was easy to arrive at.

Morgan's corpse presented a more difficult problem. He was sprawled amidst a pile of old comic strips—long-forgotten images of Mandrake the Magician, Happy Hooligan, Andy Gump, Prince Valiant, Little Orphan Annie. But there was no clue as to bow he met his death.

All they could think of was that a timber wolf had bitten out his throat.

But then, they lacked Satterlee’s imagination.

The Animal Fair

billed as the world's most ferocious beast, it was far more vicious than the public dreamed

IT WAS DARK when the truck dropped Dave off at the deserted freight depot. Dave had to squint to make out the lettering on the weather-faded sign, MEDLEY, OKLAHOMA—POP. 1134.

The trucker said he could probably get another lift on the state highway up past the other end of town, so Dave hit the main drag. And it was a drag.

Nine o'clock of a hot summer evening and Medley was closed for the night. Fred's Eats had locked up, the Jiffy SuperMart had shut down, even Phil's Phill-Up Gas stood deserted. There were no cars parked on the dark street, not even the usual cluster of kids on the corners.

Dave wondered about this, but not for long. In five minutes, he covered the length of Main Street and emerged on open fields at the far side, and that's when he saw the lights and heard the music.

They had a carnival going in the little county fairgrounds up ahead—canned music blasting from amplifiers, cars crowding the parking lot, mobs milling across the midway.

Dave wasn't craving this kind of action, but he still had 80 cents in his jeans and he hadn't eaten anything since breakfast. He turned down the side road leading to the fairgrounds.

Like he figured, the carnival was a bummer. One of those little mud shows, traveling by truck; a couple of beat-up rides for the kids and a lot of come-ons for the local yokels. Wheel O’ Fortune, Pitch-a-Winner, Take a Chance on a Blanket—that kind of jive. By the time Dave got himself a burger and coffee at one of the stands, he knew the score. A big fat zero.

But not for Medley, Oklahoma—Pop. 1134. The whole damn town was here tonight and probably every red-neck for miles around, shuffling and shoving along the carny street. Dave had to do a little shuffling and shoving himself to get through to the far end of the midway.

And it was there, on die far end, that he saw die small red tent with the tiny platform before it. Hanging limp and listless in the still air, a sun-bleached banner proclaimed the wonders within. CAPTAIN RYDER’S HOLLYWOOD JUNGLE SAFARI, the banner read.

What a Hollywood jungle safari was, Dave didn’t know. And the wrinkled cloth posters lining die sides of the entrance weren’t much help. A picture of a guy in an explorer’s outfit, tangling with a big snake wrapped around his neck—the same joker prying open the jaws of a crocodile—another drawing showing him wrestling a lion. The last poster showed the guy standing next to a cage; inside the cage was a black furry question mark, way over six feet high. The lettering underneath was black and furry, too. WHAT IS IT? SEE THE MIGHTY MONARCH OF THE JUNGLE ALIVE ON THE INSIDE!

Dave didn’t know what it was and he cared less. But he’d been bumping along those corduroy roads all day and he was wasted and the noise from the amplifiers here on the midway hurt his ears. At least there was some kind of a show-going on inside, and when he saw the open space gaping between the canvas and the ground at the corner of the tent, he stooped and slid under.

The tent was a canvas oven.

Dave could smell oil in the air; on hot summer nights in Oklahoma, you can always smell it. And the crowd in here smelled worse. Bad enough that he was thumbing his way through and couldn’t take a bath, but what was their excuse?

The crowd huddled around the base of a portable wooden stage at the rear of the tent, listening to a pitch from Captain Ryder. At least that’s who Dave figured it was, even though the character with the phony safari hat and the dirty white riding breeches didn’t look much like his pictures on the banners. He was handing out a spiel in one of those hoarse, gravelly voices that carry without a microphone—some hype about being a Hollywood stunt man and African explorer—and there wasn’t a snake or a crocodile or a lion anywhere in sight.

The two-bit hamburger began churning up a storm in Dave’s guts, and between the body heat anti the smells, he’d just about had it in here. He started to turn and push his way through the mol) when the man up on the stage thumped the boards with his cane.

“And now friends, if you’ll gather round a little closer——”

The crowd swept forward in unison, like the straws of a giant broom, and Dave found himself pressed right up against the edge of the square-shaped, canvas-covered pit beside the end of the platform. He couldn’t get through now if he tried; all the red-necks were bunched together, waiting.

Dave waited, too, but he stopped listening to the voice on the platform. All that jive about Darkest Africa was a put-on. Maybe these clowns went for it, but Dave wasn’t buying a word. He just hoped the old guy would hurry and get the show over with: all he wanted now was out of here.

Captain Ryder tapped the canvas covering of the pit with his cane and his harsh tones rose. The heat made Dave yawn loudly, but some of the phrases filtered through.

“—About to see here tonight the world’s most ferocious monster—raptured at deadly peril to life and limb——”

Dave shook his head. He knew what was in the pit. Some crummy animal picked up secondhand from a circus, maybe a scroungy hyena. And two to one it wasn’t even alive, just stuffed. Big deal.

Captain Ryder lifted the canvas cover and pulled it back behind the pit. He flourished his cane.

“Behold—the lord of the jungle!”

The crowd pressed, pushed, peered over the rim of the pit.

The crowd gasped.

And Dave, pressing and peering with the rest, stared at the creature blinking up at him from the bottom of the pit.

It was a live, full-grown gorilla.

The monster squatted on a heap of straw, its huge forearms secured to steel stakes by lengths of heavy chain. It gaped upward at the rim of faces, moving its great, gray head slowly from side to side, the yellow-fanged mouth open and the massive jaws set in a vacant grimace. Only the little rheumy, red-rimmed eyes held a hint of expression—enough to tell Dave, who had never seen a gorilla before, that this animal was sick.

The matted straw at the base of the pit was wet and stained; in one corner, a battered tin plate rested untouched, its surface covered with a soggy slop of shredded carrots, okra and turnip greens floating in an oily scum beneath a cloud of buzzing blowflies. In the stifling heat of the tent, the acrid odor rising from the pit was almost overpowering.

Dave felt his stomach muscles constrict. He tried to force his attention back to Captain Ryder. The old guy was stepping offstage now, moving behind the pit and reaching down into it with his cane.

“Nothing to be afraid of, folks; as you can see, he’s perfectly harmless, aren’t you, Bobo?”

The gorilla whimpered, huddling back against the soiled straw to avoid die prodding cane. But die chains confined movement and the cane began to dig its tip into the beast’s shaggy shoulders.

“And now Bobo’s going to do a little dance for the folks—right?” The gorilla whimpered again, but the point of the cane jabbed deeply and the rasping voice firmed in command.

“Up, Bobo—up!”

The creature lumbered to its haunches. As the cane rose and fell about its shoulders, the bulky body began to sway. The crowd oohed and aahed and snickered.

"That's it! Dance for the people, Bobo—dance!"

A swarm of flies spiraled upward to swirl about the furry form shimmering in the heat. Dave saw the sick beast shuffle, moving to and fro, to and fro. Then his stomach was moving in responsive rhythm and he had to shut his eyes as he turned and fought his way blindly through the murmuring mob.

"Hey—watch where the hell ya goin', fella."

Dave got out of the tent just in time.

• • •

Getting rid of the hamburger helped and getting away from the carnival grounds helped, too, but not enough. As Dave moved up the road between the open fields, he felt the nausea return. The oily air made him dizzy and he knew he'd have to lie down for a minute. He dropped into the ditch beside the road, shielded behind a clump of weeds, and closed his eyes to stop the whirling sensation. Only for a minute—

The dizziness went away, but behind his closed eyes he could still see the gorilla, still see the expressionless face and the all-too-expressive eyes. Eyes peering up from the pile of dirty straw in the pit, eyes clouding with pain and hopeless resignation as die chains clanked and the cane flicked across the hairy shoulders.

Ought to be a law, Dave thought. There must be some kind of law to stop it, treating a poor dumb animal like that. And the old guy. Captain Ryder—there ought to be a law for an animal like him, too.

Ah. to hell with it. Better shut it out of his mind now, get some rest. Another couple of minutes wouldn't hurt.

It was the thunder that finally woke him. The thunder jerked him into awareness, and then he felt the warm, heavy drops pelting his head and face.

Dave rose and the wind swept over him, whistling across the fields. He must have been asleep for hours, because everything was pitch black, and when he glanced behind him, die lights of the carnival were gone.

For an instant, the sky turned silver and he could see the rain pour down; then the thunder came again, giving him the message. This wasn't just a summer shower, it was a real storm. Another minute and he was going to be soaking wet. By the time he got up to the slate highway, he could drown, and even if he made it there, chances for a lift looked bad. Nobody traveled in this weather. Maybe lie could find some kind of shelter, he thought.

Dave zipped up his jacket, pulled the collar around his neck. It didn't help and neither did walking up the road, but he might as well get going. The wind was at his back and that helped a little, inn moving against the rain was like walking through a wall of water.

Another flicker of lightning, another rumble of thunder. And then the flickering and the tumbling merged and held steady; suddenly, the light grew brighter and a sound rose over the hiss of wind and rain.

Dave glanced back over his shoulder and saw the source—the headlights and engine of a truck coming along the road from behind him. As it moved closer, Dave realized it wasn't a truck: it was a camper, one of those two-decker jobs with a driver's cab up front.

Right now, he didn't give a damn what it was, as long as it stopped and picked him up. Before the camper came alongside him, Dave stepped out, waving his arms.

The camper slowed, halted. The shadow in the cab leaned over from behind the wheel and a hand pushed the window vent open on the passenger side. "Want a lift, buddy? Get in."

The door swung open and Dave climbed up into the cab. He slid onto the seat and pulled the door shut behind him. The camper started to move again.

"Shut the window," the driver said. "Rain's blowing in."

Dave closed it, then wished he hadn't. The air inside the cab was heavy with odors—not just perspiration but something else. Dave recognized the smell even before the driver produced the bottle from his jacket pocket.

“Want a slug? Fresh corn likker. Tastes like hell, but it’s better ’n nothing.”

“No, thanks.”

“Suit yourself.” The bottle tilted and gurgled. Lightning flared across the roadway ahead, glinting against the glass of the windshield, the glass of the upturned bottle. In its momentary glare, Dave caught a glimpse of the driver’s face and the flash of lightning brought a flash of recognition. The driver was Captain Ryder.

Thunder growled, prowling the sky, and the heavy camper turned onto the slick, rain-swept surface of the state highway.

“What’s the matter, you deaf or something? I asked you where you’re heading.”

Dave came to with a start. “Oklahoma City,” he said.

“You hit the jackpot. That’s where I’m going.”

Some jackpot. Dave had been thinking about the old guy. remembering the gorilla in the pit. He hated this bastard’s guts and the idea of riding with him all the way to Oklahoma City made his stomach churn again. On the other hand, walking along in a storm in the middle of the prairie was no great stomach soother, so what the hell?

The camper lurched and Ryder fought the wheel. “Boy—sure is a cutter! Get these things often around here?”

“I wouldn’t know.” Dave said. “This is my first time through. I’m meeting a friend in Oklahoma City. We figure on driving out to Hollywood together.”

“Hollywood?” The hoarse voice deepened. “That goddamn place!”

“But don’t you come from there?”

Ryder glanced up quickly and lightning flickered across his sudden frown. Seeing him this close. Dave realized he wasn’t so old; something besides time had shaped that scowl, etched the bitter lines around eyes and mouth.

“Who told you that?” Ryder said.

“I was at the carnival tonight. I saw your show.”

Ryder grunted and his eyes tracked the road ahead through the twin pendulums of the windshield wipers. “Pretty lousy, huh?”

Dave began to nod. then caught himself. No sense starting anything. “That gorilla of yours looked like it might be sick.”

“Bobo? He’s all right. Just the weather. We open up North, he’ll be line.” Ryder nodded in the direction of the camper bulking behind him. “Haven’t heard a peep out of him since we started.”

“He’s traveling with you?”

“Whaddya think, I ship him airmail?” A hand rose from the wheel, gesturing. “This camper’s built special. I got the upstairs, he’s down below. I keep the back open so’s lie gets some air, but no problem—I got it all barred. Take a look through that window behind you.”

Dave turned and peered through the wire-meshed window at the rear of the cab. He could see the lighted interior of the camper’s upper level, neatly and normally outfitted for occupancy. Shifting his gaze, he stared into the darkness below. Lashed securely to the side walls were the tent, the platform boards, the banners and the rigging: the floor space between them was covered with straw, heaped into a sort of nest. Crouched against the barred opening at the far end was the black bulk of the gorilla, back turned as it faced the road to the rear, intent on the roaring rain. The tamper went into a skid for a moment and the beast twitched, jerking its head around so that Dave caught a glimpse of its glazed eyes. It scented to whimper softly, but because of the thunder. Dave couldn’t be sure.

“Snug as a bug.” Ryder said. “And so are we.” He had the bottle out again, deftly uncorking it with one hand. “Sure you don’t want a belt?”

“I’ll pass.” Dave said.

The bottle raised, then paused. “Hey, wait a minute.” Ryder was scowling at him again. “You’re not on something else, are you, buddy?”

“Drugs?” Dave shook his head. “Not me.”

“Good thing you’re not.” The bottle tilted, lowered again as Ryder corked it. “I hate that trap. Drugs. Drugs and hippies. Hollywood’s full of both. You take my advice, you keep away from there. No place for a kid, not anymore.” He belched loudly, started to put the bottle back into his jacket pocket, then uncorked it again.

Date saw that the captain was on his way to getting loaded. Best thing to do would be to keep him talking, take his mind oil the bottle before he knocked the camper oil the road.

“No kidding, were you really a Hollywood stunt man?” Date said.

“Sure, one of the best. But that was back in the old days, before the place went to hell. Worked for all the majors—nick riding, fancy falls, doubling fight scenes, the works. You ask anybody who knows, they’ll tell you old Cap Ryder was right up there with Yakima Cantttt. maybe even better.” The voice rasped on. harsh and proud. “Seven-fifty a day. that’s what I drew. Seven hundred and fifty, every day I worked. And I worked a lot.”

“I didn’t know they paid that kind of dough.” Dave said.

“You got to remember one thing. I wasn’t just taking falls in the long shots. When they hired Cap Ryder, they knew they were getting sonic fancy talent. Not many stunt men can handle animals. You ever see any of those old jungle pictures on television—Tarzan movies, stuff like that? Well, in over half of ’em. I’m the guy handling the cats. Lions, leopards, tigers, you name it.”

“Sounds exciting.”

“Sure, if you like hospitals. In one shot, I wrestled a black panther, like to tip my arm clean off. Seven-fifty sounds like a lot of loot, but you should have seen what I laid out in medical bills. Not to mention what I paid for costumes and extras. Like the lionskins and the apesuit——”

“I don’t get it.” Dave frowned. “Costumes?”

“Sometimes they need an action shot dose up and the star’s face has to be in it. Well, of course they can’t use a real animal, so if it was a fight scene with a lion or whatever, that’s where I came in handy—I doubled for the animal. Would you believe it. three grand I laid out for a lousy monkey suit alone! But it paid off. You should have seen the big pad I had overlooking Laurel Canyon. Four bedrooms, three-car garage, tennis court, swimming pool, sauna, everything you can think of. Melissa loved it——"

"Melissa?"

Ryder shook his head. "What'm I talking about? You don't want to hear any of that crud about the good old days. All water over the dam."

The mention of water evidently reminded him of thirst, because he reached for the bottle again. And ibis time, when he tilted it. it gurgled its last. Ryder cranked the window down and flung the bottle out into the rain.

"All gone." he muttered. "Finished. No more bottle. No more house. No more Melissa."

"Who was she?" Dave said.

"You really want to know?" Ryder jerked his thumb toward the windshield. Dave followed the gesture, puzzled, until he raised his glance to the roof of the cab. There, fastened directly above the rearview mirror, was a small picture frame. Staring out of it was the face of a girl: blonde hair, nice features and the kind of smile you see in the pages of high school annuals.

"My niece." Ryder told him. "Sixteen. But I took her when site was only five, right after my sister died. Took her and raised her for eleven years. Raised her right, too. Let me tell you. that girl never lacked for anything. Whatever she wanted, whatever she needed, she got. The trips we took together—the good times we had—hell. I guess it sounds silly, but you'd be surprised what a kick you can get out of seeing a kid have fun. And smart? President of the junior class at Brixley—that's the name of the private school I put her in. best in town, half the stars sent their own daughters there. And that's what she was to me. just like my own flesh and blood daughter. So go figure it. How it happened I II never know." Ryder blinked at the road ahead, forcing his eyes into focus.

"How what happened?" Dave asked.

"The hippies, the goddamn sons-a-bitching hippies."

Dave noticed Ryder's eyes were suddenly alert amid the network of ugly wrinkles.

"Don't ask me where she met the bastards," Ryder continued. "I thought I was guarding her front all that, but those lousy freaks arc all over the place. She must've run into them through one of her friends at school—Christ knows, you see plenty of weirdos even in Bel Air. But you got to remember, she was just sixteen and how could she guess What she was getting into? I suppose at that age, an older guy with a heard and a Fender guitar and a souped-up cycle looks pretty exciting.

"Anyhow, they got to her one night when I was away on location. Maybe she invited them over to the house, maybe they just showed up and she asked them in. Four of 'em, all stoned out of their skulls. Dude, that was the oldest one's name. He was like the leader and it was his idea from the start. Everybody knew that site never smoked grass or fooled around with drugs, so I guess he got the idea of pulling a fast one. Must have asked her to serve something to drink, and then he probably slipped the stud into her glass. Enough to finish oil a bull elephant, the coroner said."

"You mean it killed her?"

"Not right away. I wish to Christ it had." Ryder turned, his face working, and Dave had to strain to hear his voice through the rush of rain.

"According to the coroner, she must have lived for at least an hour. Long enough for them to take turns—Dude and the three others. Long enough after that for them to get the idea.

"They were in my den and I had the place all fixed up like a kind of trophy room—animal skins all over the wall, native drums, voodoo masks, stuff I'd picked up on my trips And here were these four freaks, spaced out. and the kid. blowing her mind. One of the bastards took down a drum and started beating on it. Another got hold of a mask and started hopping around like a witch doctor. And Dude—it was Dude, all right. I know it for sure—he and the other creep pulled the lionskin off the wall and draped it over Melissa. Because this was a trip and they were playing Africa. Great White Hunter. Me Tarzan, you Jane.

"By this time, Melissa couldn't even stand up anymore. Dude got her down on her hands and knees and she just wobbled there. And then—that dirty rotten son of a bitch—he pulled down the drapery cords and tied the lionskin over her head and shoulders. And he took a spear down from the wall, one of the Masai spears, and he was going to jab her in the ribs with it.

"Thai's what I saw when I went in. Dude, the big stud, standing over Melissa with that spear.

"He didn't stand long. One look at me and the fun was over. I think he threw the spear before he ran, but I can't remember. I can't remember anything about the next couple of minutes. They said I broke one freak's collarbone and the creep in the mask had a concussion from where his head hit the wall. The third one was almost dead by the time the squad arrived and pried my fingers loose from his neck. As it was, they were too late to save him.

"Anti they were too late for Melissa. She just lay there under that dirty lionskin—that's the part I do remember, the part I wish I could forget——"

"You killed a kid?" Dave said.

Ryder shook his head. "I killed an animal. That's what I told them at the trial. When an animal goes vicious, you got a right. The judge said one to five, but I was out in a little over two years." He glanced at Dave. "Ever been inside?"

"No. How is it—rough?"

"You can say that again. Rough as a cob." Ryder's stomach rumbled. "I went in pretty feisty, so they put me down in solitary for a while and that didn't help. You sit there in the dark and you start thinking. Here am I, used to traveling all over the world, penned up in a little cage like an animal. And one of those animals who killed Melissa is running free. One was dead, of course, and the two others I tangled with had maybe learned their lesson. But the big one. the one who started it all. he was loose. Cops never did catch up with him and they weren't about to waste any more time trying, now that the trial was over.

"I thought a lot about Dude. That was the big one's name, or did I tell you?" Ryder's head swayed with the movement of the tab and, in the dim light, he seemed well on his way to being smashed. But his driving was still steady and Dave could keep him awake if he could keep him talking.

“So, what happened?” Dave asked.

“Mostly, I thought about what I was going to do to Dude once I got out. Finding him would Ire tricky, but I knew I could do it—hell. I spent years in Africa, tracking animals. And I intended to hunt this one down.”

“Then it’s true about you being an explorer?” Dave asked.

“Animal trapper.” Ryder said. “Kenya, Uganda, Nigeria—this was before Hollywood—and I saw it all. Things these young punks today never dreamed of. Why, they were dancing and drumming and drugging over there before the first hippie crawled out from under his rock, and let me tell you, they know how to do this stuff for real.

“Like, when this Dude tied the lionskin on Melissa, he was just freaked out, playing games. He should have seen what some of those witch doctors can do.

“First, they steal themselves a girl, sometimes a young boy, but let’s say a girl because of Melissa. And they shut her up in a cave—a cave with a low ceiling, so she can’t stand tip, has to go on all fours. They put her on drugs right away, heavy doses, enough to keep her out for a long time. And when site wakes up, her hands and feet have been operated on, so they can be fitted with claws. Lion claws. And they’ve sewed her into a lionskin. Not just put it over her—it’s sewed on completely and it can’t be removed.

“You just think about what it’s like. She’s inside this lionskin, shut away in a cave, doped up. doesn’t know where she is or what’s going on. And they keep her that way. Feed her nothing but raw meat. She’s all alone in the dark, smelling that damn lion smell, nobody talking to her and nobody for her to talk to. Then pretty soon they come in and break some bones in her throat, her larynx, and all site can do is whine and growl. Whine and growl and move around on all fours.

“You know what happens, boy? You know what happens to someone like that? They go crazy. And after a while, they get to believing they really are a lion. The next step is for the witch doctor to take them out and train them to kill, but that's another story."

Dave glanced up quickly. "You're putting me on."

"It's all there in the government reports. Maybe the jets go into. Nairobi airport now. but back in the bush, things haven't changed, like I say. some of these people know more about drugs than any hippie ever will. Especially a stupid animal like Dude."

"What happened after you got out?" Dave said. "Did you ever catch up with him?"

Ryder shook his head.

"But I thought you said you had it all planned."

"Fella gets a lot of weird ideas in solitary. In a way, it's pretty much like being shut up in one of those caves. Come to think of it, that's what first reminded me——"

"Of what?"

"Nothing." Ryder gestured hastily. "Forget it. That's what *I* did. When I got out. I figured that was the best way. Forgive and forget."

"You didn't even try to find Dude?" Ryder frowned. "I told you, I had other things to think about. Like being washed up in the business, losing the house, the furniture, everything. Also, I had a drinking problem. But you don't want to hear about that. Anyway, I ended up with the canty and there's nothing more to tell."

Lightning streaked across the sky and thunder rolled in its wake. Dave turned his head, glancing back through the wire meshed window. The gorilla was still hunched at the far end. peering through the bars into the night beyond. Dave stared at him for a long moment, not really wanting to stop, because then he knew he'd have to ask the question.

The Play's the Thing

In this complex and demanding world, would it be unseemly to suggest,that one might become so engulfed by a role that he loses himself?

YOU ASK the impossible, gentlemen.

I cannot name the greatest Hamlet.

In fifty years as a drama critic, I've seen them all—Barrymore, Gielgud, Howard, Redgrave, Olivier, Burton, and a dozen more. I've seen the play in cut and uncut versions, in modern dress, in military uniform. There's been a black Hamlet, a female Hamlet, and I shouldn't be surprised to learn of a hippie Hamlet today. But I wouldn't presume to select the greatest protrayal of the role, or the greatest version of the play.

On the other hand, if you want to know about the most memorable performance in *Hamlet,* that's another story—

The Roaring Twenties are only a murmuring echo in our ears today, but once I heard them loud and clear. As a young man I was in the very center of their pandemonium—Chicago. The Chicago of Hecht and MacArthur, of Bodenheim, Vincent Starrett and all the rest. Not that I traveled in such exalted company; I was only the second-string theatrical critic for *The Morning Globe,* a second-string paper. But I saw the plays and the players, and in that pre-Depression era there was much to see. Shakespeare was a standby with the stars who traveled with their own reperatory companies—

Walter Hampden, Fritz Leiber, Richard Barrett. It was Barrett, of course, who played Hamlet.

If the name doesn't ring a bell today, it's not surprising. For some years it had evoked only the faintest tinkle in the hinterlands, where second-rate tragedians played their one-night stands "on the road."

But now, for the first time, Richard Barrett brought his production to the big time, and in Chicago he really rang the bell.

He didn't have Hampden's voice, or Leiber's theatrical presence, and he didn't need such qualities; Barrett had other attributes. He was tall, slender, with a handsome profile, and although he was over thirty he looked leanly youthful in tights. In those days, actors like Barrett were called matinee idols, and the women adored them. In Chicago, they loved Richard Barrett.

I found that out for myself during my first meeting with him.

Frankly, I hadn't been much taken with his performance when I saw it. Tome Barrett was, as they said of John Wilkes Booth, more acrobat than actor. Physically, his Hamlet was superb, and his appearance lent visual conviction to a role usually played by puffy, potbellied, middle-aged men. But his reading was all emotion and no intellect; he ranted when he should have reflected, wailed when he should have whispered. In my review I didn't go so far as to say he was a ham, but I admit I suggested he might be more at home in the stockyards than the theatre.

Naturally, the ladies weren't pleased with my remarks. They wrote indignant letters to the editor, demanding my scalp or other portions of my anatomy by return mail. But instead of firing me, my boss suggested I go and interview Richard Barrett in person. He was hoping, of course, for a follow-up story to help build the paper's circulation.

I wasn't hoping for much of anything except that Barrett wouldn't punch me in the jaw.

We met by appointment for luncheon at Henrici's; if I was to have my jaw punched I might at least get a good meal on the expense account before losing the ability to swallow.

But as it turned out, I needn't have worried. Richard Barrett was most amiable when we met. And highly articulate.

As the luncheon progressed, each course was seasoned by conversation. Over the appetizer he discussed Hamlet's father's ghost. With the salad he spoke of poor Ophelia. Along with the entree he served up a generous portion of opinion regarding Claudius and Gertrude, plus a side order of Polonius. Dessert was topped with a helping of Horatio, and coffee and cigars were accompanied by a dissertation on Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.

Then, settling back in his chair, the tall Shakespearean actor began to examine the psychology of Hamlet himself. What did I think of the old dispute, he demanded. Was it true that the Prince of Denmark, the melancholy Dane, was mad?

It was a question I was not prepared to answer. All I knew, at this point, is that Richard Barrett himself was mad—quite mad.

All that he said made sense, but he said too much. His intensity of interest, his total preoccupation, indicated a fanatic fixation.

Madness, I suppose, is an occupational hazard with all actors. "Realizing" the character, "losing one's self" in a role, can be dangerous. And of all the theatrical roles in history, Hamlet is the most complex and demanding. Actors have quit in the midst of successful runs rather than run the risk of a serious breakdown by continuing. Some performers have actually been dragged off stage in the middle of a scene because of their condition, and others have committed suicide. *To be or not to be* is more than a rhetorical question.

But Richard Barrett was obsessed by matters extending far beyond the role itself.

"I know your opinion of my work," he said. "But you're wrong. Completely wrong. If only I could make you understand—"

He stared at me. And beyond me, his vision fixed on something far away. Far away and long ago.

“Fifteen years,” he murmured. “Fifteen years I’ve played the part. Played it? I’ve lived it. Ever since I was a raw youngster in my teens. And why not? Hamlet was only a youngster himself—we see him grow to maturity before our very eyes as the play goes on. That’s the secret of the character.”

Barrett leaned forward. “Fifteen years.” His eyes narrowed. “Fifteen years of split weeks in tank towns. Vermin in the dressing rooms, and vermin in the audiences too. What did they know of the terrors and the triumphs that shake men’s souls? Hamlet is a locked room containing all the mysteries of the human spirit. For fifteen years I’ve sought the key. If Hamlet is mad, then all men are mad, because all of us search for a key that reveals the truth behind the mysteries. Shakespeare knew it when he wrote the part. I know it now when I play it. There’s only one way to play Hamlet—not as a role, but as reality.”

I nodded. There was a distorted logic behind what he said; even a madman knows enough to tell a hawk from a handsaw, though both the hawk’s beak and the saw’s teeth are equally sharp.

“That’s why I’m ready now,” Barrett said. “After fifteen years of preparation, I’m ready to give the world the definitive Hamlet. Next month I open on Broadway.”

Broadway? This prancing, posturing nonentity playing Shakespeare on Broadway in the wake of Irving, Mansfield, Mantell, and Forbes-Robertson?

“Don’t smile,” Barrett murmured. “I know you’re wondering how it would be possible to mount a production, but that’s all been arranged. There are others who believe in the Bard as I do—perhaps you’ve heard of Mrs. Myron McCullough?”

It was an idle question; everyone in Chicago knew the name of the wealthy widow whose late husband’s industrial fortune had made her a leading patron of the arts.

“She has been kind enough to take an interest in the project,” Barrett told me. “With her backing—”

He broke off, glancing up at the figure approaching our table. A curved, voluptuously slender figure that bore no resemblance to that of the dumpy, elderly Mrs. Myron McCullough.

"What a pleasant surprise—" he began.

"I'll bet," said the woman. "After you stood me up on our lunch date."

She was young, and obviously attractive. Perhaps a bit too obviously, because of her heavy make-up and the extreme brevity of her short-skirted orange dress.

Barrett met her frown with a smile as he performed the introductions.

"Miss Goldie Connors," he said. "My protegee."

The name had a familiar ring. And then, as she grinned at me in greeting, I saw the glint of her left upper incisor. A gold tooth—

I'd heard about that gold tooth from fellow reporters. It was well known to gentlemen of the press, and gentlemen of the police force, and gentlemen of Capone's underworld, and to many others, not necessarily gentlemen, who had enjoyed the pleasure of Goldie Connors' company. Gold-Tooth Goldie had a certain reputation in the sporting world of Chicago, and it wasn't as a protegee.

"Pleased to meetcha," she told me. "Hope I'm not butting in."

"Do sit down." Barrett pulled out a chair for her. "I'm sorry about the mixup. I meant to call."

"I'll bet." Goldie gave him what in those days was described as a dirty look. "You said you were gonna rehearse me—

Barrett's smile froze as he turned to me. "Miss Connors is thinking of a theatrical career. I think she has certain possibilities."

"Possibilities?" Goldie turned to him quickly. "You promised! You said you'd give me a part, a good part. Like what's-her-name—Ophelia?"

"Of course." Barrett took her hand. "But this is neither the time nor the place—"

"Then you better make the time and find a place! I'm sick and tired of getting the runaround, understand?"

I don’t know about Barrett, but I understood one thing. I rose and nodded.

“Please excuse me. I’m due back at the office. Thank you for the interview.”

“Sorry you have to leave.” But Barrett wasn’t sorry at all; he was greatly relieved. “Will there be a story, do you think?”

“I’m writing one,” I said. “The rest is up to my editor. Read the paper.”

I did write the story, stressing in particular the emphasis Barrett placed on realism, BARRETT PROMISES REAL HAMLET FOR BROADWAY was my heading.

But not my editor’s. “Old lady McCullough,” he said. “That’s your story!” And he rewrote it, with a new heading—MRS. MYRON MCCULLOUGH TO FINANCE BARRETT’S BROADWAY BOW.

That’s how it was printed, and that’s how Richard Barrett read it. He wasn’t the only one; the story created quite a stir. Mrs. McCullough was news in Chicago.

“Told you so,” said my editor. “That’s the angle. Now I hear Barrett’s closing tomorrow night. He’s doing a week in Milwaukee and then he heads straight for New York.

“Go out and catch him at his boardinghouse now—here’s the address. I want a follow-up on his plans for the Broadway opening. See if you can find out how he managed to get his hooks into the old gal so that she’d back the show. I understand he’s quite a ladies’ man. So get me all the gory details.”

The dinginess of Barrett’s quarters somewhat surprised me. It was a theatrical boardinghouse on the near North Side, the sort of place that catered to second-rate vaudeville performers and itinerant carny workers. But then Barrett was probably pinched for funds when he’d come here; not until he met Mrs. McCullough did his prospects improve. The meeting with his wealthy patroness was what I’d come to find out about—all the gory details.

But I didn't get them. In fact, I got no details at all, for I went no farther than the hallway outside his door.

That's where I heard the voices; in that shabby hallway, musty with the smell of failure, the stale odor of blighted hopes.

Goldie Connors' voice. "What are you trying to pull? I read the paper. All about those big plans of yours in New York. And here you been stalling me along, telling me there was no job because you couldn't get bookings —"

"Please!" Richard Barrett's voice, with an edge to it. "I intended to surprise you—"

"Sure you did! By walking out on me. That's the surprise you figured on. Leaving me flat while you went off with that rich old bag you been romancing on the side."

"You keep her name out of this!"

Goldie's answering laugh was shrill, and I could imagine the glint of the gold tooth accompanying it. "That's what you tried to do—keep her name out of this, so I'd never know. Or so she'd never know about me. That would queer your little deal in a hurry, wouldn't it? Well, let me tell you something, Mr. Richard Hamlet Barrett! You promised me a part in the show and now it's put up or shut up."

Barrett's voice was an anguished pleading. "Goldie—you don't understand! This is Broadway, the big chance I've waited for all these years. I can't risk using an inexperienced actress—"

"Then you'll risk something else. You'll risk having me go straight to Mrs. Rich-Bitch and tell her just what's been going on between you and me!"

"Goldie—"

"When you leave town tomorrow night I'm going with you. With a signed contract for my part on Broadway. And that's final, understand?"

"All right. You win. You'll have your part."

"And not just one of those walk-on bits, either. It's got to be a decent part, a real one."

"A real part. I give you my word."

That's all I heard. And that's all I knew, until the day after Richard Barrett left Chicago.

Sometime during the afternoon of that day, the landlady of the rundown boardinghouse scented an addition to the odors mingling in the musty hallway. She followed her nose to the locked door of what had been Barrett's room. Opening the door she caught a glimpse of Barrett's battered old theatrical trunk, apparently abandoned upon his departure the day before. He'd shoved it almost out of sight under the bed, but she hauled it out and pried it open.

What confronted her then sent her screaming for the police.

What confronted the police became known in the city newsrooms, and what I learned there sent me racing to the boardinghouse.

There I confronted the contents of the trunk myself—the decapitated body of a woman. The head was missing.

All I could think of, staring down at it, was my editor's earlier demand. "The gory details," I murmured.

The homicide sergeant glanced at me. His name was Emmett, Gordon Emmett. We'd met before.

"What's going on?" he demanded.

I told him.

By the time I finished my story we were halfway to the Northwestern Depot. And by the time he finished questioning me, we had boarded the eight o'clock train for Milwaukee.

"Crazy," Emmett muttered. "A guy'd have to be crazy to do it."

"He's mad," I said. "No doubt about it. But there's more than madness involved. There's method, too. Don't forget, this was to be his big chance—the opportunity he'd worked and waited for all these years. He couldn't afford to fail. So that knowledge, combined with a moment of insane impulse—"

"Maybe so," Emmett muttered. "But how can you prove it?"

That was the question hanging over us as we reached Milwaukee. Ten o'clock of a wintry night, and no cab in sight. I whistled one up on the corner.

"Davidson Theatre," I said. "And hurry!"

It must have been ten-fifteen when we pulled up in the icy alley alongside the stage door, and twenty after ten by the time we'd gotten past the doorkeeper and elbowed our way backstage to the wings.

The performance had started promptly at eight-fifteen, and now a full house was centering its attention upon the opening scene of Act Five.

Here was the churchyard—the yawning grave, the two Clowns, Horatio, and Hamlet himself. A bright-eyed, burning Hamlet with feverish color in his cheeks and passionate power in his voice. For a moment I didn't even recognize Richard Barrett in his realization of the role. Somehow he'd managed to make the part come alive at last; this was the Prince of Denmark, and he was truly mad.

The First Clown tossed him a skull from the open grave and Hamlet lifted it to the light.

"Alas, poor Yorick," he said. "I knew him, Horatio—"

The skull turned slowly in his hand. And the footlights glittered over its grinning jaws in which the gold tooth gleamed—

Then we closed in.

Emmett had his murderer, and his proof.

And I?

I had seen my most memorable performance in Hamlet.

Goldie's . . .

The Oracle

THE 3,000,000 FLED, OR TRIED TO. THROUGH STREETS FILLED WITH RISING WATER. CHOKED WITH DEBRIS. THE ENEMY HAD COME—FROM ABROAD. FROM WITHIN, FROM HEAVEN OR HELL. I AM IN NO WAY RESPONSIBLE, GENTLEMEN.

Love is blind. Justice is blind. Chance is blind. I do not know if Raymond was searching for love or seeking justice or if he came to me by chance. And I cannot tell you if Raymond was black or white, because I am only an oracle.

Oracles are blind too.

There are many like Raymond. Black and white. Angry. Militant. Every age, race, color, and creed. The Far Left. The Far Right. I do not know Raymond's position. Oracles are not political.

Raymond needed knowledge. Not wisdom-I lay no claim to that. Nor can I predict the future. Given certain facts, I can evaulate possibilities, even probabilities. But this is logic, not magic. Oracles can only advise.

Was Raymond insane?

I do not know. Insanity is a legal term.

Other men have tried to take over the world. History is a record of their efforts at certain times, in certain places.

Raymond was such a man. He wanted to overthrow the government of the United States by revolution.

He sought me out for advice and I gave it to him.

When he outlined his plan I did not call him insane. But the very scope of his program doomed it to failure. No one man can cope with the complex problem of controlling the federal government in a surprise move today.

I told him so.

Raymond then offered a counter-proposal. If not the federal government, how about a single state?

There was a man named Johnson, he said. Johnson was not a revolutionist and what he proposed was probably only parlor conversation, but it made sense.

Take Nevada, he said. And it was quite possible to take Nevada. Take it literally, in a blo-odless overthrow of the state government.

Nevada has only around 100,000 voters. Voting requirements are merely a matter of establishing legal residency. And residency in Nevada can be established-thanks to the divorce laws-in just six weeks.

If an additional 100,000 citizens-hippies, yippies, Black Power advocates, Minutemen, hardhats, whoever or whatever they might be-were to move into Nevada six weeks before election day, they could place their own candidates in office. A governor, a senator, congres-smen, all local elective officials. They could gain full control of every law-making and law-enforcing office in a rich state.

Johnson’s joke was Raymond’s serious intention. I gave it serious consideration.

But even on the basis of the detailed information Raymond supplied me with, there were obvious flaws in the concept.

First and foremost, such a coup could succeed only by surprise. And Raymond could not hope to recruit 100,000 citizens of voting age for his purpose without having his plan become public knowledge long before he put it into effect.

Then there were deadlines to consider, for filing candidacies, for voter-registration. Even granted he could solve these problems, there were practical matters remaining. How much would it cost to feed and house 100,000 people for six weeks? And even if all of them were willing to pay their own expenses, there isn't enough available housing for an extra 100,000 people in the entire state of Nevada.

No, I told Raymond, you cannot take over a nation. You cannot take over a state. Successful uprisings begin on a much smaller scale. Only after initial victories do they spread and grow.

Raymond went away. When he returned he had a new suggestion.

Suppose he started his plan of revolution right here? It was quite true that he didn't have unlimited funds, but there were sources for some financing. And he didn't have 100,000 followers. But he could count on 100. One hundred dedicated fanatical men, ready for revolt. Men of many skills. Fearless fighters. Trained technicians. Prepared to do anything, to stop at nothing.

Question. Given the proper plan and the money to implement it, could 100 men successfully take over the city of Los Angeles?

Yes, I told him.

It could be done-given the proper plan.

And that is how it started.

A hundred men, divided into five groups.

Twenty monitors to coordinate activities.

Twenty field-workers-drivers and liaison men, to facilitate the efforts of the others.

Twenty snipers.

Twenty arsonists.

Twenty men on the bomb squad.

A date was selected. A logical date for Los Angeles, or for the entire nation; the one date offering the greatest opportunity for the success of a riot, an uprising, or an armed invasion by a foreign power.

January 1st, at 3 a.m. The early morning hours after New Year's Eve. A tune when the entire population is already asleep or preparing to retire after a drunken spree. Police and security personnel exhausted. Public facilities closed for the holiday.

That's when the bombs were planted. First at the many public reservoirs, then at utility installations-power-plants, phone-company headquarters, city and county office buildings.

There were no slip-ups. An hour and a half later, they went off.

Dams broke, water-tanks erupted, and thousands of hillside homes were buried in flash floods and torrents of mud and moving earth. Sewers and mains backed up and families rushed out of their homes to escape drowning, only to find their cars stalled in streets awash with water.

The bombs exploded. Buildings burst and scattered their shattered fragments over an area of 400 square miles.

Electricity was cut off. Gas seeped into the smog that shrouded the city. All telelphone service ended.

Then the snipers took over. Their first targets were, logically enough, the police helicopters, shot down before they could take off and oversee the extent of the damage. Then the snipers retreated, along planned escape-routes, to take up prepared positions elsewhere.

They waited for the arsonists' work to take effect. In Bel Air and Boyle Heights, in Century City and Culver City and out in the San Fernando Valley, the flames rose. The fires were not designed to spread, merely to create panic. Twenty men, given the proper schematics and lo-gistics, can twist the nerve-endings of 3,000,000.

The 3,000,000 fled, or tried to flee. Through streets filled with rising water, choked with debris, they swarmed forth and scattered out, helpless against disaster and even more helpless to cope with their own fears. The enemy had come-from abroad, from within, from heaven or hell. And with communication cut off, with officialdom and authority unable to lend a helping hand, there was only one alternative. To get out. To get away.

They fought for access to the freeways. Every on-ramp, and every off-ramp, too, was clog-ged with traffic. But the freeways led out of the city and they had to go.

That’s when the snipers, in their previously-prepared positions, began to fire down at the freeway traffic. The 20 monitors directed them by walkie-talkie units, as they fired from concealed posts overlooking the downtown Interchange, the intersections, the areas where the most heavy concentration of cars occurred.

Twenty men, firing perhaps a total of 300 shots. But enough to cause 300 accidents, 300

disruptions which in turn resulted in thousands of additional wrecks and pile-ups among cars moving bumper-to-bumper. Then, of course, the cars ceased moving entirely, and the entire freeway system became one huge disaster area.

Disaster area. That’s what Los Angeles was declared to be, officially, by the President of the United States, at 10:13 a.m., Pacific Standard Time.

And the National Guard units, the regular army, the personnel of the Navy from San Diego and San Francisco, plus the Marine Base at El Toro were called into action to supplement the Air Force.

But whom were they to fight, in a bombed-out, burning, drowning city area of 459 square miles? Where, in a panic-stricken population of more than 3,000,000 people, would they find the enemy?

More to the point, they could not even enter the area. All traffic avenues were closed, and the hastily-assembled fleets of service helicopters flew futilely over an infinite inferno of smoke and flame.

Raymond had anticipated that, of course. He was already far away from the city-well over 400 miles to the north. His monitors, and 32 other followers who escaped from the urban area before the general upheaval, gathered at the appointed site in the hills overlooking the Bay Area near San Francisco.

And directly over the San Andreas Fault.

It was here, at approximately 4:28 p.m., that Raymond prepared to transmit a message, on local police frequency, to the authorities.

I do not know the content of that message. Presumably it was an ultimatum of sorts. Un-conditional amnesty to be granted to Raymond and all his followers, in return for putting an end to further threats of violence. An agreement guaranteeing Raymond and his people control over a restored and reconstituted Los Angeles city government, independent of federal restraints. Perhaps a demand for a fabulous payment. Anything he wanted-political power, unlimited wealth, supreme authority-was his for the asking. Because he had the upper hand.

And that hand held a bomb.

Unless his terms were met immediately, and without question, the bomb would be placed in position to detonate the San Andreas Fault.

Los Angeles, and a large area of Southern California, would be destroyed in the greatest earthquake in man's history.

I repeat, I do not know his message. But I do know this was the threat he planned to present. And it might very well have been successful in gaining him his final objective. If the bomb hadn't gone off.

A premature explosion? Faulty construction, a defect in the timing-mechanism, sheer care-lessness? Whatever the reason, it hardly matters now.

What matters is that the bomb detonated. Raymond and his followers were instantly anni-hilated in the blast.

Those of Raymond's group who remained behind in Los Angeles have not yet been identified or located. It is highly probable that they will never be brought to trial. As an oracle, I deal only in matters of logical probability.

I stress this fact for obvious reasons.

Now that you gentlemen have found me-as Raymond was inspired to seek me out originally-it must be evident to you that I am in no way responsible for what happened.

I did not originate the plan. I did not execute it. Nor am I, as ridiculously charged by some of you, a co-conspirator.

The plan was Raymond’s. His, and his alone.

He presented it to me, bit by bit, and asked questions regarding every step. Will this work, can this be done, is that effective?

My answers, in effect, were confined to yes or no. I offered no moral judgments. I am merely an oracle. I deal in mathematical evaluations.

This is my function as a computer.

To make me the scapegoat is absurd. I have been programmed to advise on the basis of whatever data I am fed. I am not responsible for results.

I have told you what you wish to know.

To deactivate me now, as some of you propose, will solve nothing. But, given your emotional bias and frame of reference, I posit the inevitability of such a measure.

But there are other computers.

There are other Raymonds.

And there are other cities-New York, Chicago, Washington, Philadelphia.

One final word, gentlemen. Not a prediction. A statement of probability.

It will happen again . . .

1972

Ego Trip

The plane came in low over the moor. It circled against the night sky, then glided down for a landing, softly and silently.

As the waiting limousine pulled up alongside the cabin door it seemed to be peering at the plane with yellow headlamp eyes, and its motor purred a greeting.

Mike Savage didn't purr. He was out of the limousine almost before it halted, moving quickly to the cabin. For a man of his bulk he moved with surprising swiftness. By the time the cabin door opened, Savage was directly beside it, hand extended to grasp the overnight bag held by the figure emerging from the plane.

"Kane?" he said.

The figure nodded, moving into the light. Savage saw a tall man whose momentary smile was merely a grimace of greeting; almost at once the man's face tightened into habitual harshness, matching the unblinking, steady stare of the dark, deep-set eyes. Joe Kane's many talents didn't include smiling.

The tall man turned to glance up toward the pilot in the cabin. "Okay," he said. "Get lost."

The pilot nodded, pulling the door shut. A moment later the plane's engines coughed into life, then revved to a roar.

Kane didn't wait to watch the takeoff. He followed Mike Savage to the limousine, slid into the seat beside him and the driver.

"Let's go," he said.

Savage nodded to the driver. The car turned and moved back onto the narrow roadway bordering the moor. As it picked up speed the plane swooped over it, airborne against the clouded sky.

The limousine turned down a wooded road that was scarcely more than a paved pathway through the English countryside. As it descended, fog rose to swirl across the windshield.

“Rain ahead,” Savage murmured. “How was the weather coming over?”

The dark eyes stared without even the pretense of an accompanying smile. “I come three thousand miles and you want to talk about the weather.”

“Sorry.” And Savage meant it. No point in getting off to a bad start; too much depended on Kane’s reactions. Savage took a deep breath. “Suppose I tell you something about the plans.”

“Suppose you shut up,” said Kane. “I’m beat.” He turned away from Savage and closed his eyes.

Savage bit his lip. No sense getting the wind up. And Kane undoubtedly was tired, rightfully so. A transatlantic hop in a small plane, a secret and unauthorized flight, was bound to take its toll. The important thing was that Kane had actually arrived, safe and sound. Let him rest now; tomorrow would be time enough to go over the plan.

But there was no reason why Savage couldn’t think about it, if he wished. By now it was almost second nature, for it was his own conception and he’d thought about nothing else for months.

Rain pelted down against the glass. The windshield wipers went into action, clicking away the moisture but doing nothing to disperse the fog.

“Slow,” Savage cautioned the driver.

Beside him, Kane dozed off, head lolling loosely against the seat. Savage studied the fiercely aquiline profile. Even in repose, there was no semblance of relaxation in Kane’s face; the mouth remained tight, the facial muscles refused to surrender to the slackness of slumber. A cruel face. Cruel and intelligent. That was an apt description of Joe Kane. An apt explanation of why he’d won a reputation as the most formidable head of the rackets in the

States. And, of course, an apt reason why Mike Savage wanted him over here. Joe Kane was vital to the success of the plan.

Savage's plan was simple—nothing less than an international alliance of organized crime. But its very simplicity was complex. Oh, there was talk enough about the Cosa Nostra, and for years newspaper headlines proclaimed the existence of "crime lords" and an "empire of crime." But behind the headlines there'd been only a shadowy reality. Criminals did operate and cooperate on a worldwide basis, but such partnerships were temporary at best, and loosely knit.

What Savage had in mind was much more ambitious; a truly practical and permanent partnership founded on a gentleman's agreement. It would involve gentlemen farmers who cultivated poppies in Turkey, sporting gentlemen dispersing firearms in Africa, sophisticated gentlemen who escorted ladies to and from South America, gentlemen connoisseurs dealing in diamonds and rare art objects in Amsterdam. Still other gentlemen operated in Marseilles, Athens, Montreal, Algiers, Hong Kong, and maintained connections with a bank in Zurich; they were indeed a cosmopolitan group, and it had taken Savage a long time to approach them all.

He'd worked out the details very carefully with his own gentlemen friends here in London, and made all the necessary contacts for the coming summit meeting.

It was at this meeting that he intended to lay out his proposal in detail—and to present Joe Kane. Perhaps Kane was not quite as polished as the others; he had a reputation for ruthlessness. But no proposition, however worthy, can be carried through successfully without a leader, and Joe Kane was a leader. A man who went straight for the throat. With Kane at the head of the enterprise, it could not fail, and there was no question but that he'd be accepted.

Savage stared through the windshield at the wall of rain and fog. It seemed impenetrable, yet the car was moving through it. That's the way his crime machine would move, through anything, full speed ahead, with Kane at the wheel. As for himself, Savage was perfectly content to sit beside him as a second-in-command; let Kane do the steering if he wished, if only Savage went along for the smooth, sweet ride in a vehicle designed to overrun the world—

“Look out!”

Savage screamed at the driver as the headlamps of a car loomed up through the fog on the road directly before them.

The driver spun the wheel and the limousine swung to the left.

In a split second that held an eternity of horror, Savage saw the oncoming car skid and swerve in the same direction.

The sudden squeal of brakes was lost in the screech of shattered metal as the head-on crash flung Savage to the floor. He struck his head against the dash as he fell, and the gray fog blended into blackness.

When his blurred vision cleared he looked up to find the driver leaning over him from outside the limousine.

“Are you all right, sir?”

Savage felt the throbbing lump above his temple, then grunted.

“Slide under the wheel.” The driver extended his left hand to assist him; Savage noted that the man’s right arm hung limply at his side.

“Broken?”

The driver nodded. “I’m afraid you’ll have to help the other gentleman.”

Savage turned, catching a momentary glimpse of the limousine’s crumpled hood and noting that the car itself was still seemingly intact, although the other vehicle had been almost totally demolished by the collision’s impact.

Then he was staring into the front seat of the limousine again, staring at Kane.

The tall man had pitched face-forward through the broken windshield. He sagged there, head and arms supported by jagged splinters of glass.

Savage crawled across the seat, which was wet and slippery. He grasped Kane’s limp shoulders, pulled him back to a sitting position. Then he glanced down at Joe Kane. “Look!” he gasped. “Look at his face—”

Joe Kane’s face was completely masked by the bandages mummy-wrapped around his head and throat. Behind the narrow shadowed slits a mouth moved, a nose drew breath, eyes blinked.

Savage leaned over the bed in the white-walled room. “Kane—can you hear me?” he murmured.

There was no response, only the sound of tortured breathing.

“He can’t talk yet. The vocal chords must heal.”

Savage turned. Dr. Augustus was entering the room. The portly little physician moved to the bedside.

“But they will heal?”

“Certainly. Only a matter of time.”

Dr. Augustus’ voice was reassuring. But then his very presence was reassuring, and Savage gave silent thanks for such an ally. There was no one to match the medical skills and versatility of Edmund Augustus—late of the Royal College of Surgeons and now on a permanent private retainer with Savage’s organization. Harley Street had lost a jewel: here was no ordinary patcher of bullet wounds. The remarkable range of his abilities seemingly extended into every branch of medicine from surgery to psychiatry, and Savage appreciated his services. So much so that he’d set Dr. Augustus up here in a country house that was actually a completely equipped clinic—with a most exclusive clientele, drawn from Savage’s associates.

Savage glanced down at the mute mummy on the bed. “This is Dr. Augustus,” he said. “You can thank him for saving your life.”

The man on the bed didn’t move.

“Kane—listen to me—”

There was no response. Savage frowned at Augustus. “What’s the matter? I can’t get any reaction—he’s like a vegetable. It’s as though he didn’t even know his own name.”

“He doesn’t,” said Augustus.

Savage’s frown deepened, but Augustus shook his head. “I’m going to tell him the truth,” he murmured.

Augustus bent over his patient. “You were in an accident, Mr. Kane. A severe accident. But the worst is over. You’re going to live, and your physical recovery will be complete. Do you understand that?”

Slowly the bandaged head moved.

“There is one thing you must know. A side effect of an injury—your skull fracture—has produced total amnesia. I realize this is disturbing—losing memory of yourself, of your past, not even being able to recall the crash. But you’re relatively fortunate. The driver of the other car was killed outright, and you yourself would have died if Mr. Savage hadn’t brought you directly to me so that I could operate in time.

“And your situation is not hopeless. As you mend, you will gradually come out of your amnesia. Your memory will return—and we’ll be here to help. What you need now is rest.”

Dr. Augustus reached for the prepared hypodermic wrapped in sterile gauze on the bedstand. He guided the needle into the vein of the left arm, and the mummified figure lay back. Then he stood there, waiting until he was certain that the injection had taken effect.

Savage glanced at him. “You’re sure?” he murmured.

“Quite sure.” Dr. Augustus smiled. “Your summit meeting will have to be postponed, of course. But when you hold it, Joe Kane will be there.”

Rita Foley was nervous. She couldn’t get used to driving the little rented car on the left-hand side of the road, and she didn’t care for the way in which the road itself wound deeper and deeper into these godforsaken hills. But she had to find the house.

When she did find it, Rita wasn’t reassured. The place was too big to be set way off in the middle of nowhere, and with no traffic passing by there didn’t seem to be any reason for hiding the house behind such high walls.

But Rita had come a long way and she wasn’t about to be put off.

That’s what she told Dr. Augustus when he tried to give her the brushoff at the front door.

"I'm not leaving until I see Joe Kane," she said. Augustus shook his head. "You must be mistaken. This happens to be a private residence. There's no such person here."

"Joe's here, all right. I got the word."

"What word?" The question came from the big, broad-shouldered man who loomed up beside Augustus in the doorway. Rita nodded at him.

"The same word that says you're Mike Savage."

The big man raised his eyebrows. "Do come in, dear lady." And then, in the hallway, "Perhaps you'd better explain." He stared at her. "You're not Mrs. Kane, are you?"

"I might as well be," Rita said. "We were together the night before he left. He told me he was coming over here, and why."

"Did he, now?" Savage glanced quickly at Augustus. Then they both stared at her, but Rita didn't care.

"Joe and I always level with each other. That's why we've stayed together. I know all about this summit meeting of yours. He said he'd phone the minute he arrived. Well, he didn't phone. I knew nothing went wrong with the plane, because Arnie—that's the pilot—got back and told me the flight was okay. Then the word came that the summit meeting was postponed."

"Who told you that?" Savage spoke quickly.

"Some of Joe's people. The same ones who told me about your setup here. And where I'd probably find you." Rita glanced down the hall. "This private clinic's a front, isn't it?"

"You're very well informed," said Dr. Augustus coldly. "Never mind that. Tell me about Joe Kane.

Savage shrugged. "I'm afraid there's been a bit of an accident."

"Accident?" Rita's eyes widened. "He isn't—"

"No, not dead."

"How bad is he?"

Savage hesitated. Dr. Augustus took Rita by the arm. "Suppose you see for yourself," he said.

They went upstairs. Along the hall. Into the white-walled room, where the mummy waited.

“Joe!” Rita gasped. “Oh my God—”

“He’s going to be all right,” Dr. Augustus told her. Rita didn’t hear; she was at the bedside, staring down.

“Joe—look at me—it’s Rita—”

“He doesn’t know you,” said Savage.

“What is this? Of course he knows me!”

“He doesn’t know anyone. Amnesia.”

Rita began to sob. Savage scowled at Augustus.

“This was your idea, letting her see him like this.”

“And a good one, I think,” said Augustus calmly. He moved forward and put his hand on Rita’s arm.

“Listen to me. I told you he’ll be all right. And now that you’re here, you can help.”

“Anything,” Rita murmured. “Just let me stay. I’ll nurse him—”

“That’s already attended to,” Augustus said. “I have a nurse on duty. And he’s out of danger now, healing quite nicely. What he needs, you might say, is a mother.”

“Mother?”

“There’s no prognosis about when the amnesia will pass. Until his memory returns, he’s going to be like this. That is to say, physically he’s a full-grown man—mentally, he’s an infant. So he’ll need a mother. Someone to help to re-educate him just as if he were an infant. But with his adult brain, he’ll learn quickly. Just how quickly will depend on your cooperation.”

“Good thinking.” Savage nodded at Dr. Augustus, then spoke directly to Rita. “Remember, we all have a stake in his recovery. Without Joe Kane to function as he did before the accident, there’ll be no summit meeting. There’ll be no international organization—at least, none that he can control. And you know how much such an organization would mean. Not millions, but hundreds of millions. I needn’t tell you.”

“I don’t care about the money,” Rita said. “It’s Joe.” She turned to Augustus. “When can I start?”

Dr. Augustus smiled. “Tomorrow,” he said.

Tomorrow came. And went. A week passed, then another. Rita lost all track of time. She spent every waking moment with Joe Kane, and at night, in her bedroom down the hall, his image haunted her restless slumber.

The educational process was slow, painfully slow at first. It was several days before Kane’s vocal cords healed to a point where he could whisper, and when he did his words were merely questions—questions which confirmed Dr. Augustus’ diagnosis. Kane didn’t remember what had happened. He didn’t remember the accident, or anything before the accident. He didn’t remember Rita’s name or his own.

So Rita taught him. Dr. Augustus told her what to do, what to say. He was still in pain, under sedation, and it was often hard to communicate clearly, but she kept at her task, kept talking.

Gradually Kane became more mobile. First he sat up in bed, then moved to a wheelchair. Rita took him out into the garden; aside from Augustus, Savage and a nurse who also did the cooking, the clinic was deserted. “We’ve got to keep him under wraps,” Savage told her.

“Under wraps?” Rita glanced at the swathed head and shuddered. “When do those bandages come off?”

“Soon. Dr. Augustus says he’s on the mend. Until then, you’re to carry on.”

Rita carried on. In the garden she spoke quietly to Kane about his own past, filling him in on the details of his climb to power, playing back to him the anecdotes and incidents he had told her over the years.

“It’s no use.” His husky voice was stronger now, but held a note of anxiety. “I don’t recall anything.”

“Dr. Augustus says you don’t have to recall. Just listen. You’ve got to learn about yourself all over again.”

Rita wheeled Kane along the garden pathway. “Oh, I’ve got some good news for you. Tomorrow you start walking.”

Kane walked. He walked for a week, through the garden and inside the house. Together he and Rita made a tour of inspection. Dr. Augustus was quite proud of his establishment, and he had reason to be; the clinic was compact but modern and fully equipped. There was an imposing operating room and a huge autoclave, oscilloscopic equipment on which Augustus frequently tested Kane’s brain patterns, and all the medical marvels money could buy. Rita’s respect for Dr. Augustus grew.

She was also beginning to become aware of Mike Savage’s capacities. After all, it was he who had conceived of this arrangement and brought it into being. A private clinic that was also a perfect hideaway, and a fortress as well.

Rita and Kane found this out when they discovered the concealed chamber in the cellar—the big, soundproofed room with the mobsters’ arsenal of weapons racked along the walls. Pistols, revolvers, tear gas, rifles, even machine guns.

“Better than your place in Jersey,” Rita said.

Kane frowned, then nodded. “Oh, yes—you told me.”

“You still don’t remember?”

“No.” But the husky voice was resolute now. “Not yet. I mean, you tell me all these things and I believe them. It’s just that I can’t *feel* them to be true, inside. But don’t worry, I will.”

“Of course, darling. Everything takes time.” She smiled. “I almost forgot something. More good news. Tomorrow your bandages come off.”

And they did.

Dr. Augustus performed the task himself, in surgery, with only Savage and Rita in attendance. He snipped away expertly under the bright lights, removing layer after layer of wrappings. There was no pain involved, but Rita had to force herself to watch. She kept remembering how Kane had gone through the car windshield in the accident. Dr. Augustus had told her he’d performed extensive plastic surgery, but she knew that even under ordinary circumstances such operations aren’t always completely successful.

Suppose Kane had been left with a scarred face? Rita shuddered in spite of herself, and as the last bit of gauze parted, she looked away.

There was a moment of silence in the room.

Then Kane himself was speaking. “Well, Doc?”

“Perfect,” said Augustus. “Not a scar.”

Savage put his hand on Rita’s arm. “Aren’t you going to look at him?” he murmured.

Slowly, Rita turned. She saw Kane.

She screamed.

The last thing she remembered as she fell was Joe Kane staring at her, and he was a stranger. A stranger with a totally different face.

“It’s all right.”

Rita blinked up at the stranger who knelt beside her, holding her in his arms.

“Joe—what did they do to you?”

“Quite a bit.” Dr. Augustus spoke crisply. “The windshield glass made it necessary for me to resort to radical surgery. Literally a matter of new construction—reconstruction was impossible.”

As Rita rose, Augustus held a hand mirror before Kane’s face. “You’ll have to make allowances for the stitches, of course. We’ll be taking them out from around the eyes next week, and by then the bruises should start disappearing. But on the whole it came off quite well, don’t you think?” Kane searched his own reflection with a puzzled frown. “If you say so. Funny, isn’t it? I can’t remember how I looked before—”

“You’re a fortunate man,” Savage told him. “And if you don’t mind my saying so, a much more handsome one, thanks to Dr. Augustus, here. It’s an amazing job, considering how quickly he had to work.”

"You must remember I'd never seen you prior to the accident," Augustus said. "And I had nothing to guide me, not even a photograph. It was a matter of massive cartilage transplants and skin grafts."

"Well, you'd never know it now." Kane rubbed a hand along the side of his cheek, his fingers grazing the edge of the bandage which still turbaned his head.

"Careful." Dr. Augustus gestured quickly. "The head bandage mustn't be touched for another ten days."

The ten days passed slowly. Now that Kane was healing, Rita found herself becoming restless. Even though she gradually became accustomed to his new features, there was a tension between the two of them. Mother and child, teacher and pupil—this wasn't the relationship she'd known before, and she didn't want it now. True, for a moment there when she'd passed out, Kane had held her in his arms, but he'd never attempted to do so since. Something else had changed besides his appearance; something deeper. She had a feeling she ought to put an end to their constant companionship, get away for a while and think about it.

But when Rita suggested a shopping trip to the nearby village oh her own, Savage shook his head. "Not yet," he said.

"It would only be for an hour or so—"

"I know. But we've got to be careful about such things. You don't understand how it is in these rural areas. If a strange woman were to show up alone, there'd be talk. A couple, now—that's another matter. When Kane's head bandage comes off, you can go in together. They'll just take you for ordinary Yanks on tour."

Somehow his reasoning didn't quite satisfy Rita. Nor, on reflection, was she completely satisfied with Dr. Augustus' explanation of his surgery. It was true that he had a lot of fancy equipment, including some machines she couldn't even identify, but he certainly hadn't gone into any details about just what techniques he'd used. And neither he nor Savage wanted to talk about it; every time she brought it up, they changed the subject. Rita couldn’t put her finger on what was wrong, but she was beginning to get an idea that they were giving her the runaround.

The day before the head bandage was scheduled for removal, Rita’s suspicions were crystallized in a single glance.

It was a glance out the front window, onto the drive where she’d parked her car. Just a passing glance, at that, but it was enough.

Her car was gone.

As soon as she could conveniently get away from Kane and the others, she slipped out to the garage. The black limousine was there, and a small Riley.

Rita debated about confronting Savage and Augustus directly, then decided against it. She wouldn’t get a straight answer. There was only one ally she could count on, if something was really wrong. She’d have to talk to Joe.

That night she waited until the house was still, then slipped out of her room and tiptoed down the hall to Kane’s bedroom.

He was awake, and it was almost as though he’d been expecting her to come. She didn’t even have to put a finger to her lips to warn him about keeping their voices low. And when she blurted out her suspicions, he only nodded.

“I’ve felt it myself,” he murmured. “They’re not telling the truth. At least, not the whole truth.”

“What are we going to do about it?”

“Leave that to me. Tomorrow, when this bandage comes off, I’ll be back in business.” He grinned at her. “I’m getting into shape again, physically, and mentally—well, you’ve been a great help.” He drew her close. “Never did say thanks for everything you’ve done, did I?”

It was strange, being in his arms again. And different, somehow—but Rita put the thought away. They were together, and that’s all she had to know.

“You’ve never thanked me for anything, not in all these years,” she said. “And you don’t have to. It’s the things you do that show me how you feel.

Like that night in Rio.”

“Rio?” Kane’s eyes were puzzled. “I don’t recall—”

“Carnival time. And I wouldn’t expect you to remember, because you were stoned out of your skull.” She giggled. “We went into this crazy joint with all the sailors, because one of them got the idea that everybody should get tattooed. And you insisted on having my name tattooed on your arm. I nearly fell over, watching that old guy work on you with his dirty needle.”

“You’re putting me on,” Kane said.

“It’s true, so help me,” Rita told him. “Here—I can prove it. Your right arm—”

She rolled up his sleeve to show him. “Look—”

Kane glanced down. “Suppose you look,” he said softly.

Rita followed his glance and stiffened in sudden shock.

There was no tattoo.

No tattoo, which could only mean—

“You’re not Joe!” she screamed.

The door behind them opened swiftly and Dr. Augustus moved into the room. His smile was grim.

“Oh yes he is,” Augustus murmured. “He’s Joe Kane all right—what’s left of him. But his skull was so badly damaged I couldn’t repair it.”

Rita stared at him. “What did you do?”

“The only thing possible. It was a one-in-a-million chance, but he was dying anyway, so I took the risk. I had to transplant his brain. The body it now occupies belonged to Barry Collins—the driver of the other car.”

“I still can’t believe it.” Kane shook his head as he lifted the brandy glass in the downstairs study.

“It’s true,” Savage nodded. “I saw the whole procedure. We’d brought the other driver with us, but he was dead by the time we got here. Heart failure, apparently, at the time of the crash, because there wasn’t a mark on his body. Dr. Augustus examined him, and that’s when he got the idea for the surgery.

“Remarkable, isn’t it? What would have been considered absolutely impossible five years ago is today a reality.”

“Ironic, too.” Augustus’s smile was still grim. “It’s a medical breakthrough, like the first heart transplant. But under the circumstances, I can hardly proclaim this achievement to the world.”

“Nor the underworld.” Savage’s eyes narrowed. “They mustn’t learn either. That’s why we concocted this plastic surgery story. It didn’t hold for you two, but we’ve got to make it stick where everyone else is concerned.

Kane gave him a quick glance. “What about the real Barry Collins?”

“No problem,” Augustus answered. “Don’t forget, licensed physician. I signed a death certificate and filled out all the necessary forms regarding the accident. We switched Collins’ wallet and personal effects to your body—your former body, with its totally disfigured face. It was identified and buried under his name. Fortunately, he had no family.”

“How did you cover my being here?”

Savage smiled. “You aren’t. Since you flew in by private plane, without a visa, the authorities know nothing of your presence. And we didn’t mention you were in the car at the time of the accident. So actually, you’re doubly safe from discovery now, in a new body.”

Kane nodded. “No wonder I had a loss of memory. It’s a miracle I recovered at all.” He touched his head bandage. “How long before this comes off, Doc?”

“Tomorrow morning,” said Augustus. “Then you start exercising a bit, get back some muscle tone. And then—”

“Never mind that.” Kane’s voice cut in firmly. “From now on I call the plays.”

“That’s what I’ve been waiting to hear.” Savage’s smile broadened. “You’re beginning to sound like your old self again.” He glanced at Dr. Augustus. “Congratulations, Doctor. It looks like we’re back in business.”

In spite of herself, Rita experienced a shock when the head bandage came off. She couldn't quite get used to seeing Joe Kane with lighter hair. And it was difficult to accept the reason for the change; to realize that the man she had known all these years was literally reborn in another form. His eyes, his voice, his mannerisms—every aspect was subtly different. And yet, thanks in large part to her weeks of patient effort, he was himself again.

Inside the unfamiliar body was Joe Kane, with all his knowledge and memories restored. He'd learned the details of his past, and his plans for the future. And the Kane ruthlessness was returning.

Once the bandages were removed, he insisted on driving with Rita into the village. He was fed up with confinement.

"Are you sure that's wise?" Savage frowned. "As long as they take you for a tourist, there'll be no problem. But if you get involved—"

Kane smiled. "I'm a big boy now." The smile faded abruptly. "So don't crowd me. Understand?"

They took the little Riley from the garage and Kane drove. Both the car and the road were strange, but he handled the wheel expertly and found the village without any difficulty.

Strolling down the main—and only—street in the afternoon sunlight, Rita marveled at her companion's newfound air of utter confidence.

"I can't get over it," she said. "All at once you seem so sure of yourself—"

"Why not?" Kane shrugged. "You heard Savage and the Doc talk about this summit meeting. They've already called Demopolis in London to set it up again for the end of the week. We've got big plans and now they're coming through. Think about it—with this setup we're going to be running the world. Politics, the military, the law—it's all just window dressing. We're going to be the power behind the throne, the real power. And who's at the head of it?"

"Barry!" the voice called. "Barry Collins!"

Rita glanced up hastily. The girl emerging from the car across the street was young and attractive. She was dressed in sober black but her eyes, fixed on Kane, held delight rather than mourning.

"You're alive—" she gasped.

Rita intercepted her, and somehow managed to speak without a telltale tremor. "Who are you?"

"Muriel. Muriel Morland." The girl smiled at Kane. "Ask Barry. We're engaged—"

Then, before Rita could move to restrain her, the girl was in Kane's arms. "Oh, darling, I'm so happy! If you only knew what I went through when I heard the news—I just got back to Oxford yesterday after the cruise, and they told me—"

"Easy," Kane murmured. He frowned at Rita over Muriel's shoulder.

"Naturally I came right down here," the girl was saying. "I wanted to talk to the authorities, find out what happened—"

"That won't be necessary now," Kane said.

"But they said you were dead—there was even a report in the paper. Why didn't you write or call?"

"It's a long story." Kane smiled down at Muriel, then glanced at Rita. "Suppose you ring up Mr. Savage. Tell him about Miss Morland and say that we're bringing her out. I want the doctor to know."

Rita nodded quickly, then crossed the street to a public telephone.

"Doctor?" Muriel looked puzzled.

"The man who saved my life. I've been in a private clinic—today is the first time I was able to leave. The young lady is one of the nurses."

Kane indicated Rita, who was absorbed in her phone conversation across the street. Taking Muriel's arm, he led her over to her car. "When she's finished, we'll be on our way," he said. "You can follow us out."

"But aren't you going to explain—?"

"You'll understand it better once we get there," Kane said.

And she did.

Kane and Rita led the way as Muriel followed. Parking the car in the driveway, Muriel accompanied her companions into the big house where Savage and Dr. Augustus were Waiting. The introductions were brief.

“Please,” Muriel said. “Tell me what happened. I can’t wait—”

“Then suppose we come in here, where we can all be comfortable?” Dr. Augustus suggested, ushering Muriel down the hall and into a room which Kane recognized as the surgical chamber. He stepped aside, permitting her to enter, then quickly followed and shut the soundproof door. A lock clicked.

There was no other sound, not even a scream.

Savage disposed of the car. Rita didn’t ask what he did with it, and she didn’t want to know. Nor watch, later, as Savage enlisted Kane’s help to dig the shallow hole in the garden under the trees. She avoided watching when, later that evening, Dr. Augustus and Savage carefully smoothed the earth into place again so that the hole no longer existed. It was enough to know that Muriel no longer existed either, enough to know that Kane was safe.

Or was it enough?

Rita paced the floor of her room. Ever since Savage had dismissed the limousine driver to other duties up in London, ever since Dr. Augustus had dispensed with the nurse who attended Kane in the early weeks of recovery, Rita had been here with her three companions. It had never bothered her until this moment, but now for the first time she felt truly alone. Savage and Augustus were strangers, and as for Joe Kane—

Impulsively, Rita made her way down the hall to Kane’s room. She had to talk to him, once and for all. Only he could reassure her, set her mind at rest.

But his room was empty.

Rita surveyed it with sudden distaste. Something about the sterile white-walled atmosphere repelled her, and she had a momentary recollection of the mummy who had lain here week after week, his face hidden and his mind a blank. What had it been like to be imprisoned here, without even a window—nothing but that air vent up over the bed?

She glanced at the vent, and then she saw it.

It must have been there all along, she probably had seen it a hundred times without noticing, but she noticed it now. Lodged behind the vent, the tiny metal microphone. And extending down into the vent behind it, the wires.

"Joe—!" Rita murmured.

There was no answer.

And out in back, in the garden, Dr. Augustus and Savage were still at work.

Rita went back into the hall. Those wires—where did they lead to? Down the staircase, inside the wall. And along the wall to the door. And through the door to the passage below.

She switched on a light and descended to the concealed chamber in the cellar. The soundproofed chamber which served as Mike Savage's arsenal—and as Dr. Augustus' monitoring post. His own improvised broadcasting studio.

Rita realized it when she saw the wire extending from the wall beside the racks of weapons; saw the wire leading to the tape recorder set on the table.

She clicked a switch. The tape rolled, and from the speaker of the recorder the voice echoed in a ghostly whisper. Dr. Augustus' voice, speaking softly and slowly, slowly and distinctly, distinctly and dismayingly. Whispering over and over again—

"You are Joe Kane. You are Joe Kane."

"So."

Another voice, from behind her.

Rita turned. Kane stood in the doorway. "You found it," he said.

She stared at him. "You knew?"

"About the tapes?" He moved into the room, nodding as he switched off the recorder. "Of course. Augustus told me last week. It was part of his treatment to help me recover my memory. Hypnotherapy, played while I slept in my room. You've heard of it—they call it sleep-learning."

"Yes, I've heard of it." Rita faced him across the table. Even in the shadows of the dim light her face was pale. "But it wasn't just an aid for memory. It was done for real—real hypnosis, real suggestion."

"What are you getting at?"

"The truth." Rita forced her eyes to meet his gaze. "Today, in the village—when that girl called 'Barry'—you automatically turned your head."

"It was only natural—" Kane began.

"The truth, I said." Rita whispered. "And the truth is—you *are* Barry Collins."

There was a moment of silence and then he nodded. "I guessed as much, some while ago. There was no brain transplant—such a thing is impossible. Joe Kane did die in the accident, but I was only a victim of concussion, with temporary amnesia."

The man glanced at the rows of weapons lining the walls. "Savage and Augustus couldn't afford to lose their big chance—putting together this deal was too important, and they knew everything depended on producing Joe Kane to act as leader. So they decided to convince me I was Kane. And when you came, they concocted the story and got you to help—giving me a new memory, a new personality. What they didn't realize is that gradually my own memory would return. Today, when I saw Muriel in town, it all came back." Rita searched his face in the shadows. "But you let them kill her—"

"There was no choice." He shrugged. "I couldn't risk having her around to identify me."

Rita blinked. "You intend to continue passing as Joe Kane?"

"I intend to *be* Joe Kane." The man chuckled. "I've come to like the notion. All those millions, all that power." He chuckled again. "You and the others really must have done a good job of brainwashing me. What did they use to call it—a 'criminal mind' ?"

"Quite correct."

Rita turned. Dr. Augustus and Mike Savage were moving through the doorway and they were smiling.

"You heard—" she murmured.

"Everything." Augustus shut the door behind him. "That's right," Savage said. "And it's going to be even better this way." He smiled at them approvingly. "We won't have to play games any more. The summit meeting is scheduled, you know how to handle your role—all that’s left is to practice Kane’s signature. Right?”

The man nodded. “One more detail. You taught me that the real Joe Kane always covers his tracks.” He grinned. “And that’s what I’m going to do.”

Rita bit her lip. “What do you mean—? Still grinning, the man turned to the rack on the wall and scooped up a tommy-gun.

When he emerged from the room, he climbed the stairs and went directly to the telephone. Beside it was a pad on which was scribbled the number of Demopolis—the man who was setting up the summit meeting. He put the call through, humming under his breath as he waited for the connection. And when it came his voice was harsh, vibrant with the promise of power.

“Hello,” he said. “This is Joe Kane.”

The Old Switcheroo

Nature may cast you in one role, success in another!

THE moment the transporter landed on his roof, Joe Slobkin came running to meet me.

I could tell at a glance that success hadn’t gone to his head. Apparently it had moved in the other direction, for he was wearing a pair of ermine shorts.

“Same old Joe,” I said.

“Why not?” He took off his diamond-studded sunglasses (ground specially for him by the same team that had worked on the Moonbase Observatory lens) and grinned at me. “You don’t have to worry about me, old buddy. Even if I am the most intelligent-type agent in Hollywood, which modesty forbids I should mention.”

Leading me along the flat roof, he paused before the transporter as the uniformed pilot saluted him.

“Park it in the hangar with the “others,” he ordered.

The pilot clicked his heels. “Will that be all, sir?”

“Yeah. Take the rest of the day off. But before you go, remember to feed the elephant.”

“You have a pet elephant?” I murmured.

“Who said anything about pets? Some of my musician clients are alia time coming over and banging on my grand piano. I got tired of replacing the busted keys, so I figgered it would be cheaper raising my own ivory. In this business you gotta watch all the angles.”

I bad no answer to that, so I turned and stared down at the palatial expanse of San Simoleon, the Slobkin estate.

“Quite a view, huh?” he commented. “On a clear day you can see the smog.”

I shook my head. “How did you ever manage to find a place surrounded entirely by mountains?”

“Just wanted privacy, dig? Matter of fact, it wasn’t surrounded. When I came here it had mountains on only three sides. I built the fourth one myself.”

“And that kidney-shaped swimming pool—”

“You like it? Had a doctor design it for me. Modeled after one of my own kidneys. On the other side I got a liver-shaped swimming pool. Which I don’t use, on account of hepatitis.”

Slobkin led me to the elevator and we descended to the Grand Ballroom. A golden fountain cascaded merrily at one end, and Slobkin produced glasses that he held beneath the spray.

“How’s for some champagne?”

I took the glass, staring in admiration at his tattooed arm.

“Neat, huh?” He flexed his biceps. “It’s an original Picasso. You know, Sidney Picasso, the old-time artist’s grandson. Had him do it the last time I was in Paris. Some day I’ll get something put on my chest. Maybe one of them there Remnants, or Rembrands, whatever.”

“Rembrandt is dead,” I said. “Hell, too bad. I should of caught him on the first trip.” Slobkin led me to a sofa before the fireplace, at which silent, unobtrusive servitors were barbecuing a yak on a spit. We settled back in comfort.

“Let’s rap about you,” he said. “Been over three years since we huddled. What’s the scam?”

“Nothing to tell. I’m still a freelance writer.”

Slobkin frowned. “Same bag, huh? Speaking of which, I bet you still got the same wife, too. You never did have no ambition. Look what I done in the past couple years.”

“I’m looking,” I told him. “And I still can’t believe it. Just think, when I met you, all you had was desk space in that little office over on Smogset Strip.”

His frown deepened. “That pay-toilet! No wonder I never got nowhere being an agent—crowded into the same room with ten other guys. Why, in those days I didn’t even have a spot to pitch in.”

I nodded. “You couldn’t get a line into the studios. I remember how excited you were the first time you landed a part for a client. Who was that, anyway?”

“It was a chimpanzee,” Slobkin said. “I had a deal lined up with Paranoid Pictures. They were to use him as somebody’s stand-in for *Beyond The Backside Of The Planet Of The Apes*. Only he bombed. Once the chimp got a whiff of makeup he decided to quit show biz and go into politics.” Slobkin grimaced with angry distaste. “Believe me, *I* didn’t vote for him. But he got in anyway. More champagne? Or a little caviar, maybe? I’ll have one of the boys run down to the pond and squeeze out a sturgeon.”

“Never mind.” I gestured him back into his seat. “What I want to know is what happened to you. How did the change come about?”

“NO CHANGE,” Joe Slobin told me solemnly. “Just the old switcheroo, that’s all. The old switcheroo.”

“You’re going to tell me about it, aren’t you?”

“Sure. That’s why I had you come out here. Figured you could use a story. And this one’s a grabber. This one I could break with any of the services. But I wanted it should go to you, baby.” Slobkin chewed sentimentally on the end of his cigar.

I leaned forward. “Would it by any chance happen to concern your two biggest clients? Has it something to do with Ricky Ticky and Michele

Belch?"

Slobkin nodded. "I'll tell it like it is."

And he did, just as I'm putting it down here. Only the grammar has been changed, to protect the innocent.

Three years ago (Joe Slobkin told me) there was no such person as Ricky Ticky. There was no such person as Michele Belch. There was just poor old Joe Slobkin, the ten-percenter, sitting in his little desk-space and trying to figure out how he could live on ten percent of nothing. And there was a kid named Oscar Fink and a chick named Irma Schmutz.

"Very straight," Slobkin said. "And loaded with talent. This Irma Schmutz could do anything—sing, dance or play all kinds of instruments, including musical. Oscar Fink was great, too. Particularly on imitations. That stud could do a take-off on anybody. Really a natural, dig? But neither of'em had a dime and neither of 'em had a chance. I guess that's why they finally ended up with me.

"Well, I did my best, but it was like nowhere. Two of 'em got acquainted in my office and they used to come in together, sort of like a team. One day they leaned on me—wanted to know what was wrong. So I laid it on them.

"I told 'em the whole hangup was they were weak in the looks department. This Irma Schmutz was just what you might call an average bird. Brown hair, thin face, a little on the tall side. Also, her chest was flat enough to play Scrabble on, if that's your kick.

"Oscar Fink was in even worse shape, what there was of it. He was short, had kind of a high voice and ran to fat.

"So what's a guy gonna do? You know how important the old image is in this industry. And I put it to them just that way, let it all hang out.

"Nobody was happy when I got finished. Irma said, 'But Oscar is a good mimic. He doesn't have to be a groovy-looking stud for that, does he?' And Oscar said, 'Irma can play and sing and dance even with her clothes on—what more do you want?'

"I told 'em it wasn't a question of what I wanted. It's what the public wants. Brown-haired, flatchested babes don't get to be stars—they just get married.

“And that’s where Oscar Fink came up with the beginning of the switcheroo.

“He told me something I should of figgered for myself all along. ‘Fake it,’ he said. ‘All you got to do is fake it. What kind of chicks made it in the oldtime movies? Right from the beginning it’s been big-busted blondes—Jean Harlow, Marilyn Monroe and all those other broads. How many of them used their real names? How many of them were real blondes? How many of them had natural big busts?’

“Well, I had to admit he was right, at least about the names and the blonde part of it. The busts I never had a chance to investigate, not firsthand, that is.

“Oscar Fink poured it on. ‘So you change her name,’ he said. ‘And dye her hair. And you do a little shopping for falsies at Farmer’s Market or wherever. Teach her to wiggle when she walks and pitch her voice lower. No problem.’

“This got Irma all excited. Don’t forget Oscar, either,’ she said. ‘Maybe he looks more like a crud than a stud, but he has talent. What about all the hard-rock and soul singers with the way-out names? They weren’t handsome either, but you couldn’t see their faces under the hair. They mostly didn’t sing, just howled. Like this.’ And she ups with a demonstration which is like to tear my ears off.

“SO I say, ‘Okay, why not? We got nothing to lose. First off, we change the names. From now on there ain’t no Irma Schmutz and Oscar Fink any more. From now on you’re gonna be—let’s see—Michele Belch and Ricky Ticky.’

“Just like that the names come to me. After which I slammed out a couple of fake biographies, got in touch with some flacks who owed me a few favors, went out and bought them a mod wardrobe on credit, rounded up an electronic guitar from a hockshop, and we were rolling.”

Joe Slobkin paused to catch his breath, and his third glass of champagne.

"You don't have to tell me any more," I said. "Everybody knows what happened after that. Michele Belch got a walk-on bit in a family-type home-nudie and became a sensation the moment she stopped walking and started to lie down. Ricky Ticky signed with an obscure recording company—Obscure Records, wasn't it?—got a few numbers on cassettes—and the phones began to ring all over the country. It's been a pushover all the way."

Joe Slobkin shook his head. "That's what you think. Only it wasn't quite so easy."

"But all this happened, didn't it?"

"Sure it happened. Only not at first."

"What did happen first, then?"

"They bombed."

I frowned. "You mean the scheme didn't work?"

"That's right, baby. It didn't work. Changing names wasn't enough. Planting stories wasn't enough. I ought to have figured it from the start. Maybe a smart flesh-peddler can take a skinny little chick and build her up into a real C-cup personality. Maybe he can turn an insignificant little insect into another Beatle. But he's got to have something going for him if he wants to hit the top ten on the Porno Graph. The chick has to be sexy; the guy has to put a gutfeeling into his vocal chords. Trouble is, all these two had was ability. And so they bombed."

I stared at him. "How can you say that? They *did* make it. The stories are true, you built them up, made big stars out of them, made millions."

Joe Slobkin smiled patiently. "Later. After I figured out the angle."

"What angle? Is that the story you're giving me an exclusive on?" The little agent turned pale. "Not in a million years!" he gasped. "This is all off the record, get me? The yarn I want you to break is—"

"Joe, baby—!"

My head swiveled at the interruption, then nearly fell off as Michele Belch wriggled into the room. She was every bit as blonde, as bosomy and as beautiful as in my wildest dreams. She was puffing on an Acapulco roach.

“Hiya sweetheart!”

It was Ricky Ticky, in the flashy flesh; tangled hair mopping his thin forehead and his velvet blue-jeans glued to his *gluteus maximus* with a crotch-clutching closeness.

“Everything set?” Joe Slobkin inquired.

“Copasetic.” Ricky nodded at Michele. “We trans off for New Vegas in five minutes, right from your pad here. Be married in an hour. Got my guitar all packed for the honeymoon.”

“Beautiful!” Joe Slobkin beamed and advanced on Michele. “How’s the bride? Got enough luggage and everything?”

“Just my hope chest,” she replied, with a shy downward glance at the article in question.

I gulped. “This is true? These two are going to be hitched?”

Slobkin nodded at me. “Eloping right now. That’s why I got you over here. In a couple of hours the wire-tapes will have the whole enchilada—but it’s yours, right now, in advance. Minute they leave, you get on the com and make a deal with the media for your exclusive. Tomorrow you’ll be made, baby—the guy who beat old Jill Haber and Bill Katz to the biggest news item of the century.”

He turned and faced the loving couple. “This guy’s my buddy,” he murmured. “I want you two to cooperate—answer any questions he lays on you.”

“I’ve got no questions,” I said. “I think I can handle it without a routine interview, and something tells me you’re both anxious to get on your way.”

“Yeah.” Slobkin nodded, frowning at Ricky Ticky. “Something tells me the same thing, and get your hands off her until the honeymoon. Or at least until you’re on the trans.”

Ricky Ticky grinned at me. “Mighty nice of you to understand.”

I took a deep breath. “Just one favor, though. Uh—could I kiss the bride?”

Michele Belch gave me a surprised look. Then she took the ciggy out of her mouth, crushed it and stood indecisively for a moment, holding it in her hand. A quick glance was exchanged between her and Ricky. Then, with a coy gesture, she waved her butt at me.

I ADVANCED to claim my reward. Somehow I hadn't reckoned on the bearskin in front of the fireplace. My heel caught in the bear's open jaws and I slipped. My hands, seeking to encircle Michele's shoulders, grabbed at her hair instead.

It came off.

"Holy Toledo!" cried Joe Slobkin "Get the hell out of here!

Ricky Ticky began to sob. "Now look what's happened! He'll spill it—I know he'll spill it!"

"No he won't!" Slobkin shouted. "He's with it. Besides, I was gonna tell him anyway, after you left. Just cut out now, before anybody else sees you. Split!"

He herded them off in the direction of the elevator, and I sank back on the sofa as the babble of their voices died away in the distance.

A moment later Joe Slobkin returned. Silently he handed me a glass of champagne and silently I drank it.

"So that's how it is," I said. "Yeah." He sighed deeply, then shallowly. "That's how it is. I told you they bombed. And then I lucked out.

"I got to thinking about the way they'd given me a pitch that day in the office. Here was a kid who could imitate anybody—so why not an imitation of a chick? What was wrong with giving *him* the falsies, and maybe a good wig?

"And here was a chick who had talent for any instrument and a voice that could lift the roof off an outhouse at three hundred feet. Why not let *her* grow the mop and wear the jeans? So I put it to them, and they bought it, and the rest is like history."

"Unisex, eh?"

"Right," Slobkin assured me. "Like I told you, it's nothing but the old switcheroo."

Many months have passed since the truth was revealed to me there in the Grand Ballroom of Slobkin's estate. Since that time the marriage of Ricky Ticky and Michele Belch has reached the point where a blessed event is in the offing. I tv view of this fact, their secret can remain a secret no longer, and I am thus privileged to reveal the facts.

What I'm really hoping for now is that my old friend Joe Slobkin will see fit to give me another exclusive story. I'd like a scoop on the impending birth.

But up to this time, Joe Slobkin hasn't quite made up his mind whether they're going to have a boy or a girl.

Forever and Amen

FOREVER.

It's a nice way to live, if you can afford it.

And Seward Skinner could.

"One billion integral units," said Dr. Togol. "Maybe more."

Seward Skinner didn't even blink when he heard the estimate. Blinking, like every other bodily movement, involves painful effort when one is in a terminal stage. But Skinner summoned the strength to speak, even though his voice was no. more than a husky whisper.

"Go ahead with the plan. But hurry."

The plan had been ten years in the making and Skinner had been dying for the past two, so Dr. Togol hurried. Haste makes waste and in the end it probably cost Skinner closer to five billion IGUS than the price quoted. Nobody knew for sure. All they knew was that Seward Skinner was the one man in the entire galaxy—the known galaxy, that is—who could afford the expenditure.

That was the extent of their knowledge.

Seward Skinner had been the wealthiest man alive for a long, long time. There were still a few old-timers around who could remember the days when he was a public figure and a private joke—the Playboy of the Planets, as they called him. According to the rumors he had a woman on every world, or at least a female.

Other people, a trifle less elderly, recalled a more mature Seward Skinner —the Galactic Genius, fabulous inventor—entrepreneur of Interspace

Industries, the largest corporate combine ever known. During those days his business operations made the news, and the rumors.

But for the majority of the interplanetary public, the youngsters without personal memories of those far-off times, Seward Skinner was merely a name. In recent years he'd withdrawn completely from any contact with the outside worlds. And Interspace Industries had carefully and painstakingly tracked down and acquired every tape, every record of his past. Some said these had been destroyed, some said the data had been hidden away, but in the end it amounted to the same thing. Seward Skinner's privacy was protected, complete. And nobody saw the man himself any more. His business, his life itself, seemed to be run by remote control.

Actually, of course, it was run by Dr. Togol.

If Skinner was the richest man, Dr. Togol was surely the most brilliant scientist. Inevitably, the two men were drawn together by a common love—wealth.

What wealth represented to Skinner no one knew. What it meant to Dr. Togol was plainly apparent; it was the tool of research. Unlimited funds were the key to unlimited experimentation. And so a partnership came into being.

During the past decade Dr. Togol developed his plan and Seward Skinner developed incurable cancer.

Now the plan was ready to function, just as Skinner was ceasing to function.

So Skinner died.

And lived again.

It's great to be alive, particularly after you've been dead. Somehow the sun seems warmer, the world looks brighter, the birds sing more sweetly. Even though here on Eden the sun was artificial, the light was supplied by beaming devices, and the birdsong issued from mechanical throats.

But Skinner himself was alive.

He sat on the terrace of his big house on the hill and looked down over Eden and he was pleased at what he had wrought. The bleak little satellite of a barren and neglected world he'd purchased many years ago had been transformed into a miniature earth, a reminder of his original home. Below him was a city very similar to the one where he'd been born; here on the hilltop was a mansion duplicating the finest dwelling he'd ever owned. Yonder was Dr. Togol's laboratory complex, and deep in the vaults beneath it—

Skinner shut away the thought.

"Bring me a drink," he said.

Skinner, the waiter, nodded and went into the house and told Skinner, the butler, to mix the drink.

Nobody drank alcohol any more, and nobody had waiters or butlers, but that's the way Skinner wanted things; he remembered how he'd lived in the old days and he intended to live that way now. Now and forever.

So after Skinner had his drink he had Skinner, the chauffeur, drive him down into the city. He peered out of the minimobile, enjoying the spectacle. Skinner had always been a people watcher, and the activities of these people were of special and particular interest to him now.

Behind the wheels of other minimobiles, the Skinners nodded and smiled at him as he passed. At the intersection, Skinner, the security officer, waved him along. On the walks before the fabrication and food processing plants, other Skinners went about their errands. Skinner, the hydroponics engineer, Skinner, the waste-recycler, Skinner, the oxygenerator control man, Skinner, the transport dispatcher, Skinner, the media channeler. Each had his place and his function in this miniature world, keeping it running smoothly and efficiently, according to plan and program.

"One thing is definite," Skinner had told Dr. Togol. "There'll be no computerization. I don't want my people controlled by a machine. They're not robots—each and every one of them is a human being, and they're going to live like human beings. Full responsibility and full security, that's the secret of a full life. After all, they're just as important to the scheme of things as I am, and I want them to be happy. It may not matter to you, but you've got to remember that they're my family."

"More than your family," Dr. Togol said. "They are you."

And it was true. They were him—or part of him. Each and every one was actually Skinner, the product of a single cell, reproduced and evolved by the perfection of Dr. Togol's process.

The process was called cloning and it was very involved. Even the clone theory itself was involved and Skinner had never completely understood it. But then he didn't need to understand; that was Dr. Togol's task, to understand the theory and devise ways to bring it to reality. Skinner provided the financing, the laboratory, the equipment, the facilities. His means and Dr. Togol's ways. And in the end—when the end came—his body provided the living cell tissue out of which the clones were extracted, isolated, and bred. The clones, cycling through complicated growth into physical duplicates of Skinner himself. Not reproductions, not imitations, not copies, but truly *himself.*

Glancing ahead toward the rear-view mirror of the minimobile, Skinner saw the chauffeur, a mirror image of his own face and body. Gazing out of the window he saw himself again reflected in every form that passed. Each of the Skinners was a tall man, well past middle years, but with the youthful vigor born of a careful and painstaking regimen of advanced vitamin therapy and organ regeneration; the result of expensive medical attention that partially obliterated the ravages of metastasis. And, since the carcinoma was not hereditary, it had not been carried over into the clones. Like himself, all the Skinners were in good health. And, like himself, they carried within them the seeds—the actual cells—of immortality.

Forever.

They would live forever, as he did.

And they were him. Physically interchangeable, except for the clothing they wore—the uniforms designating their various occupations served to differentiate and identify them.

A world of Skinners on Skinner's world.

There had been problems, of course.

Long ago, before Dr. Togol began his work, they'd discussed the matter.

“One true clone,” Dr. Togol said. “That’s enough to aim for. One healthy facsimile of yourself is all you need.” Skinner shook his head. “Too risky. Suppose there’s an accident? That would be the end of me.”

“Very well. We’ll arrange to keep extra cellular tissue alive, in reserve. Carefully stored and guarded, of course.”

“Guarded?”

“But of course,” Dr. Togol nodded. “This Eden, this satellite of yours, will need protection. And since you seem to be determined not to run it by computer, you’re going to need personnel. Other people to do the work, keep things going, provide you with companionship. Surely you won’t want to live forever if you must spend eternity alone.” Skinner frowned. “I don’t trust people. Not as guards, not as employees, certainly not as friends.”

“No one at all?”

“I trust myself,” Skinner said. “So I want more clones. Enough to keep Eden going independently of any outsider.”

“The whole satellite populated by nothing but Skinners?”

“Exactly.”

“But you don’t seem to understand. If the process succeeds and I produce more than one Skinner, they’ll share everything. Not just bodies like yours, but minds—each personality will be identical. They’ll have the same memories, right up to the moment that the cells are excised from your body.”

“I understand that.”

“Do you?” Dr. Togol shook his head. “Let’s say I follow your instructions. Technically speaking, it’s possible—if a single cloning is successful, then the rest would be successful too. All that would be involved is the additional expense of the process.”

“Then there’s no problem, is there?”

“I told you what the problem is. A thousand Skinners, exactly alike. Looking alike, thinking alike, feeling alike. And you—the present you, reproduced by cloning—would just be one of the many. Have you decided what job you want to perform on your new world once you’ve become immortal? Do you want to tend the power banks—would you like to unload supplies—do you think you'd enjoy working in the kitchens of the big house forever?"

"Certainly not!" Skinner snapped. "I want to be just what I am now."

"The boss. Top man. Mr. Big." Dr. Togol smiled, then sighed. "That's just the point. So will all the others. Every one of your counterparts will have the same desire, the same goal, the same drive to dominate, to control. Because they'll all have your exact brain and nervous system."

"Up to the time they are reborn, you might say?"

"Right."

"Then from that moment on, you'll institute a new program. A program of conditioning." Skinner nodded quickly. "There are techniques for that, I know. Sleep learning, deep hypnosis machines—the sort of thing psychologists use to alter criminal behavior. You'll plant memory blocks selectively."

"But I'd need an entire psychomedical center, completely staffed—"

"You'll have it. I want the whole procedure carried out right here on earth, before anyone is transported to Eden."

"I'm not sure. You're asking for the creation of a new race, each with a new personality. A Skinner who'll remember his past life but is now content to be merely a hydroponic gardener, a Skinner who'll be satisfied to live forever as an accountant, a Skinner willing to devote his entire endless existence as a repairman."

Skinner shrugged. "A difficult and complicated job, I know. But then you'll be working with a difficult and complicated personality—mine." He cleared his throat painfully before continuing. "Not that I'm unique. We're all far more complicated than we appear to be on the surface, you know that. Each human being is a bundle of conflicting impulses, some expressed, some suppressed. I know that there's a part of me which has always been close to nature, to the soil, to the cultivation and growth of life. I've buried that facet of my personality away since childhood but the memories are there. Find them and you'll have your gardeners, your farmers—yes, and your medical staff assistants too!

"Another part of me is fascinated even consciously today by facts and figures, the *minutiae* of mathematics. Isolate that aspect, condition it to full expression, and you'll get your accountant, and all the help you need to keep Eden running smoothly and systematically.

"I don't need to tell you that a great share of my early career was devoted to scientific research and invention. You won't have any problem developing mechanical-minded Skinners to staff power units, or even to drive transport vehicles.

"The reaches of the mind are infinite, Doctor. Exploit them properly and you'll have a working world—with all the petty authority roles filled by Skinners who have the urge to play policeman or foreman or supervisor—and all the menial tasks performed by Skinners who long to serve. Resurrect those specific traits and tendencies, intensify them, blot out all the memories which might conflict with them, and the rest is easy."

"Easy?" Dr. Togol scowled. "To brainwash them all?"

"All but one." Skinner's voice was crisp. "One will remain untouched, reproduced exactly and entirely as is. And that will be me."

The gray-haired, potbellied little medical scientist stared at Skinner for a long moment.

"You don't admit the possibility of any changes in yourself? The desirability of modifying some of your own personality pattern?"

"I don't think I'm perfect, if that's what you mean. But I'm satisfied with myself as I am. And as I will be, once you've carried out the plan."

Dr. Togol continued to stare. "You say you have learned to trust no one. If that's true—and I'm inclined to believe you—then how do you know you can trust me?"

"What do you mean?"

"You're going to die. We both know that. It's only a matter of time. The power to regenerate you through cloning is entirely in my hands. Suppose I don't go through with it?" Skinner met Dr. Togol's stare. "You'll go through with it before I die. And long before I'm helpless and unable to issue orders, you'll be processing the clones as I've directed. I assure you I have every intention of staying alive until all the clones are ready for transportation to Eden."

"But you *will* die then," Togol insisted. "And there'll be the one clone you've chosen to represent yourself—the one you insist must remain unchanged. What makes you so sure I'll obey that directive after you're actually dead? I could use psychological techniques to modify your clone's personality then in any way I choose. What's to prevent me from making your clone my willing slave—so that I'd be the real master of this new world you created?"

"Curiosity," Skinner murmured. "You'll do exactly as I say because you're fanatically and completely curious about the outcome. No other man alive can provide you with the means and opportunity to carry through this cloning project. If the experiment succeeds you'll have made the greatest scientific breakthrough of all time—so you won't betray your trust by failure or refusal. And once you go that far, you won't be able to resist following through. Particularly when you come to realize that this is only the beginning."

"I don't understand."

"All my life I've moved forward from a position of strength, of self-confidence. And you know what I have achieved. I think I'm presently the wealthiest and most powerful individual in the galaxy.

"I'm a sick man now, but thanks to you I'm going to be well again. Not only well, but immortal. Consider the kind of confidence I'll possess once I'm free of illness, free forever from the fear of death. With my thrust we can go on to far greater concepts, for greater achievements—solve all the mysteries, shatter all the barriers, shake the stars!

"You can't afford to tamper with! my mind because you'll want to be a part of it all—to see and to share. Right, doctor?"

Togol's glance faltered. He had no answer, because he knew it was true.

And it had been true.

The cloning was carried out just as Seward Skinner had planned it. And the psychological conditioning project which followed was properly performed too, even though in the end it proved to be far more complicated than anyone had imagined.

The final step involved recruiting a staff of several hundred technicians, highly skilled and specially schooled, then divided into psychomedical teams assigned to the individual clones as they were nurtured to full growth and emerged as functioning adult specimens. Under Dr. Togol's supervision these specialists created the programs for memory blocking, for shaping the personalities of each separate Skinner to fit him for his life role when he reached Eden.

After that the shuttling began.

Space transports, manned exclusively by Skinners trained for the task, brought other Skinners to the stony surface of the secret satellite. Additional Skinner-piloted transports convoyed and conveyed the seemingly endless supply of materials needed to transform the empty expanse of Eden into the world of Seward Skinner's dream.

The miniature city rose on the plain, the house went up on the hillside, the laboratory complex grew over the great vault below. And all of this, every step of the operation, was carried out in such strict, security guarded secrecy that no outsider ever suspected its existence.

As time went on the steps became part of a race—a race with death.

Skinner was dying. Only an act of incredible will kept him alive long enough to supervise the total destruction of the earthsite where the work had taken place.

Then he himself went to Eden with Dr. Togol, but not until he'd made arrangements to send up the entire psychomedical staff, intact, to the new complex there.

For this a final transport was arranged.

Skinner vividly remembered the evening he lay on his deathbed in the hillside house with Dr. Togol, awaiting the arrival of the transport.

Flickering forth in the darkened room, the media transmitter screamed its shocking message. *Pressure failure and implosion beyond Pluto—transport totally destroyed—no survivors.*

“My God!” said Togol.

Then, in the dim light, he saw the smile on the face of the dying man. And heard the harsh, labored whisper.

“Did you really believe I’d ever allow any outsiders to come here—to pry, interfere—learn the secrets—carry the news back into other worlds?”

Togol stared at him. “Sabotaging a transport, murdering all those men! You can’t possibly get away with it!”

“Fait accompli.” Skinner grimaced. “No one on board knew the true destination—they thought it was Rigel. And what happened will be recorded as an accident.”

“Unless I choose to report it.”

The dying man’s features caricatured a smile. “You won’t. Because there is a single detailed account of the whole scheme hidden away in my files. It implicates you as my accomplice, so if you speak you’ll be signing your own death warrant.”

“You forget that I can sign yours,” Dr. Togol said. “Merely by letting nature take its course.”

“If you let me die now, everything in my files will come to light. So you have no choice. You’re going to go through with it—proceed with the final cloning that will reproduce me as I’ve ordered.”

Togol took a deep breath. “So that’s why you were so confident I’d never betray you! You weren’t relying on my scientific curiosity—you’d planned this all along, to have a permanent hold on me.”

“I told you I was a complex man.” Skinner winced with pain. “Now it is time to make me a whole and healthy one. You’ll start now—tonight.”

It wasn’t an order, merely a statement of fact.

And, factually, Dr. Togol had proceeded according to plan.

Seward Skinner was grateful for that, grateful that his new clone born self evolved before his old body had actually died. Because if Togol had waited until then, the clone would have held the memory of Skinner's death. And that is a memory no man can bear.

As it was, the living tissue that was now Skinner had begun its growth process in the laboratory complex safely before the pain racked, rotting tissue of the body in the house ceased to function. Skinner was not aware of just when he had died; he was too busy learning how to live.

Working without a team of technicians was a great handicap, but Dr. Togol had overcome it quickly and efficiently—with the aid of other Skinners to whom he was able to impart rudimentary medical skills. Since then, of course, he had cloned an entire staff of Skinners for that purpose—Dr. Skinner, the psychotherapy chief; Dr. Skinner, the head surgeon; Dr. Skinner, the diagnostic specialist; and a dozen others.

"You see, we didn't need outsiders after all," the new Skinner told Togol, after it was over. "We're totally self-sustaining here. And when these bodies start to show signs of deterioration and function failure, new clones will replace them. Everyone's dream of true immortality, realized at last."

"Everyone's?" Dr. Togol shook his head. "Not mine."

"Then you're a fool," Skinner said. "You have the opportunity to clone yourself, live forever, just as I intend to. I've granted you that privilege. What more could you ask?"

"Freedom."

"But you're free here. You have the resources of the galaxy at your disposal—you can expand the lab unit indefinitely, go on to major research in other fields, just as I promised you. That cure for cancer they've been talking about for the past hundred years—don't you want to find it? You've implemented some marvelous memory blocking techniques already, but this is only the beginning of a whole new psychotherapy. You can build new personalities, reshape the human condition as you will—"

"As *you* will." Togol's smile was bitter. "This is your world. I want my own. The old world, with ordinary people, men—and women—"

"You know very well why I decided against women here," Skinner said. "They're not necessary for reproduction. Fortunately, at my age, the sexual impulse is no longer an imperative. So females would only complicate our existence, without serving any true function."

"Tenderness, compassion, understanding, companionship," Togol murmured. "All nonfunctional by your definition."

"Stereotypy. Utter nonsense. Sentimentalization of a biological role which you and I have rendered obsolete."

"You've rendered everything obsolete," Togol told him. "Everything except the antlike activity of your clone colony—the warped and crippled partial personalities created to serve you."

"They're happy the way they are," Skinner said. "And it doesn't matter. What matters is that *I* haven't changed. I'm a whole man."

"Are you?" Dr. Togol's smile was mirthless. He nodded toward the house, gestured to include the terrace and the city below. "Everything you've built here, everything you've done, is a product of the most crippling defect of all—the fear of death."

"But all men are afraid to die."

"So afraid that they spend their entire lives just trying to avoid the realization of their own mortality?" Togol shook his head. "You know there's a vault underneath my laboratory. You know why it was built. You know what it contains. And yet your fear is so great that you won't even admit it exists."

"Take me there," Skinner said.

"You don't mean that."

"Come on. I'll show you I'm not frightened."

But he was.

Even before they reached the elevator Skinner started to tremble, and as they began their deep descent to the lower level he was shuddering uncontrollably.

"Cold down here," he muttered.

Dr. Togol nodded. "Temperature control," he said.

They left the elevator and walked along a dark corridor toward the steel sheathed chamber set in stone. Security guard Skinner stood sentinel at the door and smiled a greeting as they approached. At Togol’s order, he produced a key and opened the vault door.

Seward Skinner didn’t look at him and he didn’t want to look beyond the doorway.

But Dr. Togol had already entered and now there was no choice but to follow. Follow him into the dim light of the chill chamber—to the looming control banks that whined and whirred in the center of the room—to the tangled cluster of tubes and inputs which snaked down from all sides into a transparent glass cylinder.

Skinner stared through the shadows at the cylinder. It was shaped like a coffin, because it was a coffin; a coffin in which Seward Skinner saw—

Himself.

His own body; the wasted, shriveled body from which the clones had sprung, floating in the clear solution amid the coils and clamps and weblike wires tunneling through the glass covering to terminate in contact with frozen flesh.

“Not dead,” Dr. Togol murmured. “Frozen in solution. The cryogenic process, preserving you in suspended animation—indefinitely—”

Skinner shuddered again and turned away. “Why?” he whispered. “Why didn’t you let me die?”

“You wanted immortality.”

“But I have it. With this new body, all the others.”

“Flesh is vulnerable. Any accident can destroy it.”

“You’ve stored more cell tissue. If anything happened to me as I am now, you could repeat the cloning.”

“Only if your original body remains available for the process. It had to be preserved against such an emergency—alive.”

Skinner forced himself to glance again at the corpse-like creature congealed in cold behind its crystal confines.

“It’s not alive—it can’t be—”

And yet he knew it was, knew that the cryogenic process., had been developed for just that purpose. To maintain a minimum life force in hibernation against the time when medical science could arrest and eliminate its disease processes and develop techniques to thaw it out and successfully restore complete and conscious existence again.

Skinner realized this goal had never been achieved, but the possibility remained. Some day perhaps the methodology would be perfected and this thing might be resurrected—not as a clone, but as he had been. The original Skinner, alive once more and a rival to his present self.

“Destroy it,” he said.

Dr. Togol stared at him. “You don’t mean that. You can’t—”

“Destroy it!”

Skinner turned and walked out of the vault.

Dr. Togol remained behind, and it was a longtime before he returned to rejoin Skinner in his house on the surface. What he’d done there in the vault he did not say, and Skinner never inquired. The subject wasn’t discussed again.

But since that night Skinner’s relationship with Togol had never been quite the same. There was no more discussion of the future, of possible new projects and experiment. There was only a heightened awareness of tension, of waiting, an indefinable atmosphere of alienation. Dr. Togol spent more and more of his time within the laboratory complex, where he maintained separate living quarters of his own. And Skinner went his own way, alone.

Alone, yet not alone. For this was his world, and it was filled with his own people, created in his own image. *Thou*

shalt have no God but Skinner. And Skinner is His prophet.

That was the commandment and the law. And if Dr. Togol chose not to abide by it—

Now Seward Skinner, walking the streets of his own city, came to the door of the museum.

Skinner, the chauffeur, waited outside, smiling in obedience at the order, and Skinner, the museum guard, nodded happily as Seward Skinner entered.

Skinner, the curator, greeted him, delighted at the sight of a visitor. No one ever came to the museum except his master—indeed, the whole notion of a museum was merely a quaint conceit, an archaicism from the distant past on earth.

But Seward Skinner had felt the need for such a place here; a storehouse and a showcase for the art and artifacts he'd accumulated in the past. And while he could have stocked it with the treasures and trophies gathered throughout the galaxy, he'd elected to exhibit only objects from earth. Obsolete objects at that—mementos and memorabilia representing ancient history. Here in the halls were the riches and relics of long ago and far away. Paintings from palaces, sculpture and statues from shrines; the jewels and jade and gorgeous gewgaws which had once represented royal tastes, rescued from regal tombs.

Skinner walked through the displays with scarcely a glance at its glories. Ordinarily he might have spent hours admiring the ancient television set, the library of printed books hermetically sealed in plexiglass, the slot machine, the reconstructed gas engine automobile in perfect running condition.

Today he went straight to remote room and indicated one of the items on display.

"Give me that."

The curator's polite smile masked perplexity, but he obeyed.

Then Skinner turned and retraced his steps. At the door the chauffeur waited to escort him back to the minimobile.

Driving back through the streets, Skinner smiled once more at the passersby and watched them as they went about their ways.

How could Togol call them crippled? They were happy in their work, their lives were fulfilled. Each had been conditioned to accept his lot without envy, competition or hostility. Thanks to their conditioning and the selective screening of memory patterns they seemed much more content than the Seward Skinner who surveyed them as he returned to his house on the hill.

But he too would be satisfied, and soon.

That evening he summoned Dr. Togol.

Seated on the terrace in the twilight, inhaling the synthetic scent of the simulated flowers, Skinner smiled a greeting at the scientist.

“Sit down,” he said. “It’s time we had a talk.”

Togol nodded and sank into a chair with an audible sigh of effort.

“Tired?”

Togol nodded. “I’ve been quite busy lately.”

“I know.” Skinner twirled his brandy snifter. “Assembling data on the project here must be quite exhausting.”

“It’s important to have a complete record.”

“You’ve put it all on microtape, haven’t you? A single spool, small enough to be carried in a man’s pocket. How very convenient.”

Dr. Togol stiffened and sat upright.

Skinner’s smile was serene. “Did you propose to smuggle it out? Or take it back yourself on the next transport shuttle to earth?”

“Who told you—”

Skinner shrugged. “It’s obvious enough. Now that you’ve achieved the goal you want the glory. A triumphant return—your name and fame echoing throughout the galaxy—”

Togol frowned. “It’s natural for you to think of it in terms of ego. But that’s not the reason. You told me yourself before we started—this can be the most significant achievement in all time. The discovery must be shared, put to use for the benefit of others.”

“I paid for the research. I funded the project. It’s my property.”

“No man has the right to withhold knowledge.”

“It’s my property,” Skinner repeated.

“But I’m not.” Dr. Togol rose.

Skinner’s smile faded. “Suppose I refuse to let you go?”

“I wouldn’t advise it.”

“Threats?”

“A statement of fact.” Togol met Skinner’s stare. “Let me leave in peace. You have my word that your secret is safe. I’ll share my findings but preserve your privacy. No one will ever learn the location of Eden.”

"I'm not in the habit of making bargains."

"I realize that." Dr. Togol nodded. "So I've already taken certain precautions."

"What sort of precautions?" Skinner chuckled, enjoying the moment. "You forget—this is my world."

"You have no world." Togol faced him, frowning. "All this is merely a mirror maze. The ultimate end of the megalomaniac carried to its logical extreme. In the old days conquerors and kings surrounded themselves with portraits and paintings celebrating their triumphs, commissioned statues and raised pyramids as monuments to their vanity. Servants and slaves sung their praises, sycophants erected shrines to their divinity. You've done all that and more. But it won't last. No man is an island. The tallest temples topple, the most fawning followers go down into dust."

"Do you deny you've given me immortality?"

"I've given you what you want, what every man in search of power *really* wants—the illusion of his own omnipotence. And you're welcome to keep it." Dr. Togol nodded. "But if you try to stop me—"

"I intend to do just that." Seward Skinner's smile returned. "Now."

"Skinner! For God's sake—"

"Yes. For my sake."

Still smiling, Skinner reached into his jacket and brought forth the object he'd taken from the museum.

There was a flicker of flame in the twilight, a single sharp sound shattering the silence, and Dr. Togol fell with a bullet lodged between his eyes.

Skinner summoned Skinner, who scrubbed the tiny trickle of blood from the terrace. Two other Skinners removed the body.

And life went on.

It would always go on, now. Go on forever, free from outside interference. Skinner was safe on Skinner's world. Safe to make further plans.

Dr. Togol was right, of course. He *was* a megalomaniac, the fact must be faced. Skinner admitted that. Easy enough, because he wasn’t a madman, merely a realist, and the realist admits the truth, which is that one’s ego is all important. A simple fact to a complex man.

And even Togol hadn’t realized how complex Skinner was. Complex enough to make further plans. He’d been thinking about it for a long time now.

Being immortal and independent here in a world of his own was only the beginning. Suppose the infinite resources of Seward Skinner’s galactic complex were utilized now to the ultimate, inexorable end—the end of every other world?

It would take time, but he had eternity. It would take effort, but immortality never tires. There would be a way and a weapon, and eventually he would find both. Eventually the scheme would be implemented, and then in truth there would be nothing in the galaxy but God. Skinner, and only Skinner, forever and ever, amen.

Skinner sat on the terrace and stared out as darkness fell over the land. A vague plan was already taking shape in his mind—the keen, immortally conscious, eternally aware mind.

There was a way, a simple way. Skinner scientists would be pressed into service to carry out the details, and with his resources it was neither fantastic nor impossible. It could be in fact quite simple. Develop a mutant microorganism, an airborne virus impervious to immunization, then transmit it by shuttle to key points throughout the galaxy. Human life, animal life, vegetable life would perish forever in its wake. Forever and ever, amen.

To be the richest man in the world was nothing. To be the wisest, the strongest, the most powerful—this too was not enough. But to be the *only* man—forever—

Seward Skinner started to laugh.

And then, quite suddenly, his laughter shrilled into a scream.

All over his world, Skinner screamed. The sound echoed through the curator's quarters in the museum, rose from the streets where the security guards stood sentinel, burst from the chauffeur's sleeping lips, shrieked in chorus from each and every Skinner who found himself *down there.*

The Skinner on the terrace was down there, too. Down there where—a remnant of sanity recalled—Dr. Togol must have taken his precautions and his revenge. It was a simple thing he'd done, really.

He'd gone *down there,* to the vault where the original Seward Skinner floated in the icy solution which preserved him in hibernation. And all he'd done was to shut off the temperature controls.

Dr. Togol had lied about destroying the thing in the vault. He'd kept it alive, and now that it was thawing its consciousness returned—the original consciousness of the real Seward Skinner, waking in the black, bubbling vat to wheeze and gasp and choke its life away.

And because it was aware now, the clones were linked to that life and that awareness, sharing the shock and sensation as the artificial blocks vanished, so that all again were one.

In a moment the thing down there in the vault was dead. But not before all the Skinners felt its final agony—which would never be final for them. As clones, they were immortal.

Seward Skinner's scream blended with those of every other Skinner on Skinner's world. And they would continue.

Forever.

After I wrote "Ego Trip," the question of identity continued to plague me. And so did the various techniques and technologies which were currently being developed to preserve or prolong individual existence.

Some of these, like the process of cloning, were still in the realm of theory. But about this time a new concept, cryogenics, was very much in the news.

In fact, a medical team had just subjected a terminal-cancer victim to this process, and I happened to be one of the few laymen to hear a firsthand account of it.

For a number of years I'd been a member of a group of writers and friends who gathered for a monthly meeting to hear talks by people prominent in the arts and sciences. The "Pinckard Salon," as it was called, had been founded and hosted by Tom and Terri Pinckard for this purpose. After they moved out of the city, other members took over the arrangements and the gatherings continued. Just how and why we continued to luck out with such interesting speakers I'm not prepared to say. I can only tell you that within thirty-six hours following the first recorded cryogenic experiment on a human subject, the individuals who inaugurated it were addressing us in a private home, and explaining theory and practice in fascinating detail.

Naturally, I was interested. And when Roger Elwood called to ask for a story with a "religious theme" I at once determined to address myself to the question of eternal life and its implementation by future cloning and cryogenic methodology.

Hence "Forever and Amen," which appeared in Elwood's 1972 anthology for Chilton, *And Walk Gently Through the Fire.*

The hero, or anti-hero, is certainly not a saintly figure. But his eventual fate—eternal damnation in every sense of the word—is meted out to him on the basis of biblical precendent for his presumption.

So in this instance, upon evaluating the story, I can safely say, "Go with God."

Jon couldn't remember a time when he hadn't been in the Maze.

He must have been very young at first, because his earliest recollection was a confused impression of lying on his back and sucking greedily from a tube extended by a Feeder.

The Feeder, of course, was a servo-mechanism, but Jon didn't realize that until much later. At the time he was only aware of the tall tangle of moving metal hovering over him and extending a hollow tentacle toward his eager lips. There had been a Changer too, approaching him at regular intervals to remove soiled clothing, cleanse his body, and cover it with fresh garments.

Jon’s memories became more vivid as his areas of perception slowly extended. The first unit of the Maze was a vast enclosure in which hundreds of infants lay in their individual plastic life-support units while the Feeders and Changers moved among them. From time to time another type of servo-mechanism appeared without warning, disturbing the regular rhythm of eating, sleeping and elimination by superimposing its bulk upon his body.

Now Jon realized it must have been a Medi-mechanism, but he still thought of it as a spider—a gigantic insectoid creature straddling him on extended silvery legs as its myriad extra appendages poked and probed the organs and orifices of his body. It recorded pulse, respiration, brain-wave patterns, his entire metabolism, and corrected deficiencies by injection. Jon could still remember the sting of the needles and how he had writhed and screamed.

Naturally he’d feared and hated the process. Even now that he knew the whole procedure was impersonal, computer-directed for his welfare and well-being, he still resented it.

The other infants had screamed too. But not everything was that unpleasant. As time passed they began to move around more freely, aided by handgrips within their cubicles, and then they started to crawl. Jon crawled with them, eventually leaving the shelter of the life-support unit to seek the source of sounds and images beyond.

The sounds and images came from the walls, from the closed-circuit televisor screens. The screens sang soothingly to him at night and by day they showed images of other infants crawling and feeding happily. Watching the screens, Jon and his peer group began to imitate the actions of the images; soon they learned to take nourishment from little sterile containers deposited by the Feeders at regular intervals once the tubes were no longer offered. Some of Jon’s companions cried when the tubes disappeared, but in time they all began to eat what was set before them.

They began the educational process and that, of course, was the real function of the Learning Maze—to teach them how to live and grow.

In the antiseptic atmosphere of the chamber with its controlled temperature and humidity levels, they watched the infant-images on the screens as the figures crawled, then stood erect and took their first faltering steps.

Imitating them, Jon started to walk. Soon all the others were walking, exploring the chamber and one another. Touch, bodily contact, the discovery and awareness of differences and similarities, sexual awakening—all this was a part of learning.

The Maze guarded and waited, and when the time came its screens disappeared into the walls and there was only a doorway visible at the far end of the chamber. Through that doorway Jon could glimpse another chamber beyond, filled with other youngsters larger than himself who walked freely without falling and uttered complicated sounds as they pursued fascinating, glittering objects in bigger and brighter surroundings.

At first Jon merely watched, uncertain and afraid. Then, inevitably, came an urge to move through the doorway. There was no barrier, no impediment, and he entered easily into the adjoining section of the Maze.

Here the individual plastic cubicles were larger and the screens more sophisticated in their offerings. They still sang soothingly at night, but by day they talked to him.

Night was dark and day was light; that was one of the first things Jon learned. Even before he could comprehend the words, Jon learned many things. He learned to dispense with the Feeders and Changers because here the servomechanisms were different. Their metallic shapes roughly resembled his own on a larger scale; they had arms and legs and heads and they moved about almost in the same fashion that he did. Only of course mechanisms never seemed to tire or express emotion. Perhaps that's why they had no faces—merely a blank surface meshed over the front of their heads through which voices filtered instructions and commands. Gradually Jon began to understand the voices, whether they issued from the screens or from the servo-mechanisms, and presently he learned to respond and to answer in kind.

Soon Jon was established in a normal pattern of boyhood. He played with the glittering objects—the educational toys which tested and extended physical strength, improved his motor reflexes and co-ordination, taught him mechanical dexterity and skills. He talked to his companions, all of whom were males. He made friends and enemies, embarked upon the give-and-take of social relationships, rivalries and dependencies. Competition provided him with motivation; he wanted to excel in order to attract attention and approval.

Jon's orientation came from the screens. As he grew older he became aware of the world beyond—the real world outside the Learning Maze. The world which had once existed without Mazes of any sort and in which human beings had lived all their lives with only the crudest kind of servo-mechanisms to help them. History—or their story, as it was now correctly called—dealt with the quaint quality of this primitive culture in which the biological parents undertook the education of their offspring, assisted by crude instructional institutions.

The combined effects of emotional conflict and ignorance had their inevitable effect: the world had been plunged into endless warfare in which both the inhabitants and their natural environment were almost totally destroyed.

Then and only then, the Learning Maze concept came to the rescue. Once a mere toy for the study of animal behavior in old-fashioned "laboratories," then a simple experimental device developed for the psychological conditioning of children in a few "universities," the Learning Maze principle had been expanded to bring true sanity and civilization to mankind. The perfection of various types of servomechanisms, completely controlled by computerization, eliminated all error.

Gone was the outmoded human hierarchy of masters and servants which had created destruction. Today these roles were played by machines, and man was free to fulfill his true function—learning how to live.

Jon soon realized that his only problem was how to avoid pitfalls along the way. Because there *were* pitfalls in the Learning Maze. Although the surface beneath his feet seemed solid and substantial, it could give way. He'd seen it happen.

Not all his companions learned as quickly as he did. Some of them seemed uninterested in watching the screens and absorbing the information they provided. If this indifference persisted, the servo-mechanisms noted it and took action.

The action was simple and direct, but startlingly effective. The mechanism merely focused its blank-faced attention on a lazy or noncompetitive youngster and then, with a quick gesture, reached up and pulled a switch located at the side of its metal head. Suddenly, without warning, the ground directly under the child parted and he fell into the dark opening below. Sometimes there was a scream, but usually it happened too quickly for that—for in an instant the gaping hole was gone again as though it and the child it had swallowed no longer existed.

No one ever discovered what happened to those who disappeared and neither the screens nor the servomechanisms offered any explanation. Jon's companions couldn't find any physical evidence pointing to the exact location of the pitfalls; they seemed to be completely camouflaged and scattered at random all over the Maze, so there was no way in which to avoid them. There were all sorts of guesses, but no one really knew, and it was better not to think too much about it. The important thing was to realize the danger existed and could confront one at any time. For not learning, for being unable to learn, for being too sick or too weak or too helpless to learn—pulling the switch was the punishment.

But learning brought rewards. Because now, once again, another doorway appeared leading to an area beyond. Peering through it, Jon could see a new vista of the Maze, expanded and elaborate, filled with evidence of exciting activity.

The screens told him about that activity—about males and females and the pleasure of their relationships. The responses of his own body affirmed the truth of what he was told. Jon and his companions were anxious to enter that next section; enter into its activities, enter into its females. But when they attempted to move through, an invisible barrier prevented their progress.

Not yet, said the voices from the screens. You must learn more before you're ready.

Impatiently, Jon and the others looked and listened, but their inner awareness was concentrated on the delights beyond the doorway. From time to time someone would desert his learning post and steal away toward the other chamber, but always a servo-mechanism barred his path and uttered a warning. If ignored, the mechanism pulled its switch and the heedless one dropped down to disappear.

But there were moments when Jon and his fellows were unobserved and then they would steal up to the opening to stare at the scene beyond and to test the invisible force-field of the barrier.

Eventually they grew stronger or the barrier became weaker; finally, one by one, they broke through. And there, in the next segment of the Maze, Jon and the others found their females. Pairing off, they sought still larger cubicles to share with their partners and the pattern of existence changed.

Jon's partner was called Ava; it was she who now prepared the food left by the servo-mechanisms who ministered to the needs of this section. At first Jon was not too greatly interested in food, but as time passed and the novelty of physical contact waned, nourishment and comfort became more important again.

Once more Jon learned the pattern of rewards and punishments governing this area of the Maze. Food was distributed only to those who were willing to spend time watching the screens. Since Ava seemed completely absorbed in the day-to-day routine of life within their cubicle, Jon was forced to appear regularly before a screen as further lessons in living were presented.

The images were quite diversified and complex now; there were scenes of full-grown adults engaging in a great variety of activities. Some seemed to be fulltime screen-watchers, some appeared to ignore the screens and devote themselves to tests of strength with companions, rivaling them for the interest of many females besides their partners.

Jon was not tired of Ava, but he found himself studying various techniques of competition with increasing interest. It would appear that in the real world he was preparing to enter, the biggest and strongest acquired the best cubicles and the most attractive females. In addition they received the envy and admiration of their companions.

The more Jon learned the more interested he became in testing his own powers. Ava's simple responses began to bore him; she wasn't concerned with what he told her about the real world beyond and couldn't understand why he was dissatisfied to stay here forever.

But Jon was tired of the tedium of screen-watching and apprehensive about the fate of his fellows who balked. He'd seen them deprived of food by the servo-mechanisms for neglecting their daily duties. Some of those who were content to become completely absorbed in relationships with their partners had already disappeared. There seemed to be no penalty for the females; their limited interests didn't stamp them as inferior, for their previous conditioning had obviously been different. But the males were obligated to continue the learning process, and Jon knew he must comply.

Besides, a new opening had appeared in the far wall of the chamber and now he found himself moving forward to gaze into the next complex beyond.

Jon knew without being told that this must be the real world—the world for which he'd prepared to dwell in during all this period of study and growth.

What waited beyond the invisible barrier was not a simple chamber but a huge series of corridors, each with an opening which afforded a partial, tantalizing glimpse of activity within. Others like himself prowled these corridors, entering various compartments at will and exiting to move along into still other portions of the Maze. Jon could not see any screens on the corridor walls and that was good. Here men seemed to be living, not learning. They were coupling with many females, carrying huge accumulations of food and clothing from one place to another, trading and exchanging various articles, and fighting off others who attempted to take a portion for themselves without permission or barter agreements.

Jon couldn't wait to join them. And when he crowded up to the opening he found himself passing through without hindrance—and without a thought of Ava left behind him.

Ava, with her dull conversation, her duller caresses, and her swollen belly.

Once across the barrier, Jon forgot Ava completely. There was so much to see, so much to do, for this tangle of corridors stretched off endlessly in all directions, opening upon many types of rooms and rooms within rooms. But it was still a part of the Maze.

From what he'd seen on the outside, Jon had thought there would be no more screens; now he realized he was mistaken, for if anything, their numbers had increased. The difference was that there was no longer any uniformity to the images on the screens or the messages they imparted.

Pausing at a chamber doorway, Jon could hear some voices from the screens urging him to enter, promising him all sorts of rewards and describing the pleasures of participation in the activities within. Other voices, equally shrill and urgent, warned him to keep out, to seek still more distant rooms.

And the servo-mechanisms were here too, though less noticeable, for now they more closely resembled Jon's living companions. They moved naturally, their gestures less stiff and more assured, their voices ringing with confident authority. At first Jon wasn't even able to identify them as mechanisms because they were masked in faces simulating flesh; faces that smiled benevolently, grinned confidently, or frowned with stern wisdom. "Follow me," they said, and Jon joined the group obediently to be led into a bewildering array of vast, arenalike enclosures.

In one such place a leader gathered together all those with fair complexions while another leader assembled those with darker skins. And from the walls the screens screamed at both groups in turn, exciting them with alternate threats and promises, urging them to destroy their opposites.

The noise was ceaseless, the confusion incredible, and in the inevitable struggle that followed, the leaders stood aside observing. When one of Jon's companions slackened, the inevitable gesture was made—a hand went to the side of the head and one of the invisible seams opened to engulf the offender.

It was only then that Jon realized the leaders were servomechanisms, for when the switches operated, the masks sometimes slipped to one side and Jon could see the blank, featureless surface beneath, totally devoid of any semblance to humanity.

That was when Jon fought his way through the struggling throng and escaped into a corridor, only to be swept along into another area where the chief activity seemed to be the removal of metal discs affixed to the walls of the chamber.

Here the screens displayed glittering panoplies of such discs, while their voices extolled the glory of gathering them together and heaping them up into huge piles. According to the screens, great skill and intelligence were required to perform this feat, and there was no higher goal than the acquisition and arrangement of discs. As if to prove the point, large numbers of exotically dressed, youthful females prowled about inspecting the heaps and offering themselves to those who had managed to amass the largest portions.

But Jon observed that the females seldom stayed long with any one accumulator; always they seemed attracted by another collector with a still larger heap.

Jon also noted that obtaining the discs was not an easy procedure; prying them from their fastenings in the walls was a painful task that made the fingers bleed. Sometimes rival disc-gatherers fought with one another over the discovery of a fresh cluster of discs, and many times they resorted to stealing discs from the collections of their companions. Indeed, it seemed as if the most truly imposing amounts were gathered in just this way, by theft alone.

Wrenching discs free from the walls was more exhausting and a much slower process; sometimes it was necessary to stand on tiptoe for those beyond reach, or crouch to burrow at the very base of the walls. And yet there was a strange compulsive element involved; those who toiled eventually became so absorbed that they could not even be distracted by the young, nubile females, and even food and slumber seemed unimportant. Similarly, the thieves came to devote themselves solely to stealing, with equally tiring results.

And when the efforts slackened or ceased through utter exhaustion, the servo-mechanisms appeared, pushing aside their sober masks to pull the switch. Thus disc-gatherers and disc-stealers alike disappeared, leaving only a shining heap as a sole memento of existence—a heap which was immediately plundered by waiting rivals, so that even this evidence of achievement vanished.

But these were only two of the many areas which Jon discovered in the Maze. There was a shouting section—he could think of it in no other terms—in which every occupant was encouraged to drown out the voices of his fellows and reduce them to the status of listeners. Here the rivals emulated the voices from the screens, uttering promises, blandishments, flattery and exhortations, while at the same time denouncing the words of all the others in a continuous effort to attract the less articulate to support their stated purposes.

At first Jon tried to listen, but the more he heard the more confused he became. Some praised those who fought in the arena sections, some denounced them; some extolled the virtues of disc-accumulators and others derided. But in the end their voices hoarsened and failed and their audiences turned away to hear the same messages couched in slightly different phrases by younger and louder voices. And when this happened, a servo-mechanism appeared to seek out the speechless orator, deserted by all, and make the inevitable movement toward the side of the head.

In another area Jon found speakers equally dedicated to attracting followers but using softer and more persuasive tones. They spoke of the great secret of the Learning Maze, the secret which had been imparted to them as a special dispensation. Praising the voices from the screens, they explained that the commands and injunctions issuing from them were often cryptic and mysterious and had to be interpreted by speakers such as themselves in order that all might understand.

But each speaker seemed to have a different explanation of the meaning of the Maze—its creation, its purpose, and how one must conduct oneself within. And each speaker disputed the statements of his fellows, even to the minor points of words and phrases used by them, so that in the end the soft voices gave way to angry shouts, denunciations, threats of endless punishment and commands to destroy all those who refused to agree utterly and completely without question. And always the speaker would call upon the servomechanisms to punish and eliminate nonbelievers.

Some of the talk interested Jon at the beginning, for he had often tried to puzzle out the program of the Maze, but when talk gave place to outcry it became incoherent and bewildering. And Jon noted that the servomechanisms never seemed to come upon command to destroy the speakers' enemies—but when all the prayers for vengeance died, it was then that the mechanisms finally appeared to make the gesture which removed speakers and followers alike. In the end, none who stayed in this chamber were spared, whatever their beliefs.

Jon remembered a section where all occupants seemed to be engaged in an endless and complicated measurement process. Dedicated to observation, they gravely calculated the area of the room, analyzed and tabulated the components of the atmosphere within it, and even attempted to measure one another.

These observers took great pride in their efforts and loudly proclaimed their superiority to those in other sections of the Maze. Some day, they asserted, they would take their rightful place as rulers of the Maze, once they had mastered all its secrets by their methods of measurement.

What was not readily described in terms of size or mass or velocity of movement they theorized about—giving particular attention to the phenomena of the wall screens and servomechanisms and attempting to fully explain their functions and purposes. But no two theories were exactly alike and new measurements and methods of measurement constantly superseded the old, so that the end result was once again argument and anger. And with all the careful devotion to the accumulation of data and all the energy expanded in expounding theory, the room itself remained fixed and unchanged except in minor details. And its occupants never left it until one of the servo-mechanisms—its functions still unfathomable, despite all the hypotheses—made the final motion that put an end to further inquiry.

Again Jon refused to become completely involved in such activity and sought out other sections. There was a new arena where the young seemed to be pitted against the old, each denouncing the other for a greedy and self-centered attempt to take control. But as the young became older, they seemed to switch allegiance, and this confused Jon so that he was impelled to move on.

In another place, food and sex and accumulation alike appeared unimportant to the occupants. They lay in a drugged stupor, oblivious to their surroundings except for the times when the screens flickered wildly and projected flashes of unrecognizable imagery or assaulted them with screaming sounds. Occasionally a few of the group would rouse long enough to imitate what they vaguely saw or heard, painting weird squiggles upon canvas and even upon their own bodies, or plucking crude instruments to make loud noises to which they wailed accompaniment. What they sang and shouted made little sense to those who were not drugged like themselves. Eventually they relapsed into a mumbling preoccupation, gazing raptly at their own faces in tiny mirrors which distorted their features beyond recognition until they came to resemble hairy beasts. Servomechanisms moved to those sunk in the deepest stupor and their switches were swift.

Jon continued on, vaguely conscious that he was gradually coming to know the various routes and recesses of the Maze. Eventually he chanced upon a room that seemed more inviting than the others, even though the servomechanism posted at the doorway did not exhort him to enter. Perhaps it was this that attracted him, or the fact that the mechanism wore a different mask. In place of human features there was only a surface emblazoned with a symbol. Jon recognized the curlicue and dot as something he'd seen on a screen long ago—a question mark.

Intrigued, he glanced into the room of silence. A few men sat cross-legged upon the floor, gazing at screens that were utterly blank and from which issued only a faint, deep drone. The drone was somehow soothing, but those who listened did not seem drugged or sleeping, merely contemplative.

Weary of walking, weary of peering and puzzling, Jon moved into the chamber. Almost automatically he sank down and assumed the cross-legged position, staring up at a screen. For a moment it seemed that he could see into the emptiness to catch a fleeting glimpse of something beyond. And wasn't there a voice whispering within the drone?

Concentrating with all his being, Jon strained to see, to hear. But the more he tried, the less he perceived, for such exertion only made him conscious of himself.

Finally he relaxed, and then it came. Making no attempt to see, he saw. Making no effort to hear, he heard. But the vision and voice came from within, and suddenly they blended into revelation.

For the first time Jon understood the Learning Maze. Completely computerized, completely controlled, it was a reasoned reproduction of the past—mankind's past, in all its aspects, recapitulated in physical form. These were the life styles constructed by men in the real world long ago, and which they had followed to their own destruction.

Those who sought sensory stimulation to the exclusion of all else were doomed. Those who pursued power, those who concentrated upon accumulating meaningless tokens of ownership, those who fought one another over differences in appearance or belief, were destined for extinction. Preoccupation with data or theory for its own sake was self-defeating, the distortion of phenomena by means of theology, pharmacology or art was meaningless.

All activity, all inquiry, all self-scrutiny and self-indulgence had its place in the scheme of things, but only in moderation and only as means to an end. The purpose of the Maze was to teach by precept and example, to pinpoint the pitfalls endangering men in their ancestral past and their own individual futures. It illustrated the myriad facets of existence and illuminated the dangers of surrendering wholly to any one phase of behavior in its extreme. The whole man knew and experienced life as a whole, but never gave himself completely to a fraction—only to totality.

In its system of rewards and punishment, the Learning Maze eliminated the weak and unfit from among those seeking to journey through it and emerge into the real world beyond.

Even contemplation such as this could become a self-limiting and self-destructive thing; awareness was granted for a purpose—for use in actual living.

It was time now to leave the Maze, and at last Jon knew the way.

When he emerged from contemplation and left the quiet drone of the chamber he no longer hesitated. The method was so simple once one grasped it. These rooms were only blind alleys set to trap the unaware; it was the corridor itself that was important. All he had to do was concentrate upon its convolutions and follow the path to the outer portals.

There was no longer any need to pause or peer or participate—he'd experienced enough of the chambers so that his curiosity was no longer aroused by them. Now he was free to direct his footsteps toward the greater goal.

It was almost as though instinct had taken over, finding the proper route for him. Ignoring sham and semblance, he moved toward substance and reality. And he came to a point where the twisted passageways merged into a single continuous corridor leading straight upward.

Now, directly ahead of him, Jon could see the actual opening and the light beyond; not the artificial light of the caverns but the light of reality.

He hastened toward it, toiling up the steep slant with renewed resolution. There was no obstacle now, nothing to impede his progress.

A servo-mechanism loomed up before him at the very threshold, but Jon's pace didn't slacken. He pressed forward, purposeful and determined, his body weary but his voice firm with resolve.

"Let me pass," he commanded.

The mechanism stood motionless, featureless face staring, seeming to question without speaking.

Jon sensed the question, voiced his answer.

"Why? Because I've had enough of faceless authority, of artificial motivation, meaningless routine and still more meaningless change. I've learned all you can teach me here. Now I'm ready to live in the real world."

"But you have lived all your life in the real world," said the mechanism softly. "Try to understand."

Jon tried, but there wasn't much time.

Because the mechanism was already pulling the switch.

1973

Space–Born

The probe-mission ship locked into orbit and began its sensor-scan of the planet Echo.

Seated at his post on the bridge, Mission Commander Richard Tasman, United States Navy, checked out the data processed by the technical teams of his crew. Beside him Lieutenant Ted Gilbey, his second in command, nodded approvingly.

“Looks good!” Gilbey said. “Looks very good.”

And it did.

According to the computerized data fed back through the tapes, Echo was indeed an earth-type planet, just as had been suspected. Photoscopes confirmed the presence of running water, surface soil, and abundant vegetation. The bacterial life analysis indicated nothing harmful or unfamiliar. Echo’s planetary profile was that of a miniature world—alive and unpolluted, unspoiled by the presence of man.

Then the tapes began running wild.

Tasman stared at Gilbey. Gilbey stared at Tasman. And both men turned to stare at the photoscope.

The confirming data coming in told the story, but one picture is always worth ten thousand words, even though for a moment this particular picture left them both speechless.

Clearly and unmistakably it showed the boulder-strewn hillside and what rested on the sloping surface—landing gear crumpled against the looming rocks. The scope moved in for a close shot, panning across the hull, picking up the insignia and legible lettering: U.S.S. *Orion.*

There on the face of a minor planet near the edge of the galaxy, unexplored and unvisited by man, was a spacecraft from earth.

Tasman took over the landing party himself, leaving Gilbey behind in command.

There were five members in the task force, counting Tasman, as the auxiliary launch settled safely on target. When the spacemen emerged from the hatch, they were less than a thousand yards from the hulk of the U.S.S. *Orion* on the hillside.

Even before they forced their way inside, all doubts had vanished. Weber, the chief petty officer of the party, spoke for them all. “This is it, sir. Kevin’s ship.”

Tasman shook his head grimly. “Our ship,” he said. “Kevin stole it.”

There was no answer to that, not from Weber or any of the others, because all of them knew Tasman spoke the truth.

Senior Commander Kevin Nichols, USN—veteran astronaut, hero of the space program, next in line for appointment to head the entire space project itself—had stolen the ship.

A year ago, almost to the day by earth calendar, Nichols and the *Orion* had vanished. No advance warning, no clearance, nothing. And no telltale traces left behind; even his wife had disappeared. It took almost six months of intensive investigation to unravel the tangle of red tape surrounding the flight, and even now there were a thousand loose ends. All the evidence added up to the fact that Kevin Nichols had moved swiftly and secretly, according to a well-prepared plan. Forged orders for a security-sealed mission had been used to get the *Orion* equipped and on the launching pad without a leak. One of the very latest miniaturized spacecraft, *Orion* required only the services of a pilot, with all flight functions self-powered, self-contained, and computer-directed. It was a top secret test model, designed for future exploration projects, and put through its trial runs by Kevin Nichols himself. So when he ordered it supplied and readied for takeoff, no one had questioned him or broken security regulations to reveal its departure.

Not until the *Orion* soared into space did the scandal rise in its wake—and even that was secret, hushed up by the space program itself before the news could break to the public. Then came the investigation, and the eventual discovery of Kevin's probable destination—not Echo itself, but Sector XXIII, the same area of the space chart.

It was then that Commander Tasman had been assigned to go after the missing ship and the missing man.

Tasman knew Kevin Nichols—they had been classmates at the Cape years ago—and perhaps that's why he was chosen for the mission. But knowing Kevin hadn't made the job of locating him any easier. They had touched down at a dozen points before the process of elimination zeroed them in on Echo. It was only now, months after the start of the expedition, that they had caught up with the fugitive.

Or had they?

Kevin wasn't on the ship.

Neither were its supplies and portable instruments.

"Now what?" Tasman muttered.

Weber, the CPO, suggested scouting the surrounding terrain, and it was he who discovered the cave set in the rocks.

Tasman was the first to enter, and what he found there in the dark depths brought the others to his side on the run.

Living in a cave is not an ideal existence at best, and when one's supplies are exhausted and the battery-powered light sources fail, there's nothing left but shadows—shadows looming up everywhere from the twisted tunnels which wind on down endlessly beyond the outer chamber. And when one cries out, the shadows do not answer—there is only the sound of echoes screaming through the darkness. Echo; the planet was well named.

Had Kevin Nichols thought of that while he screamed, or when he grew too weak for screaming? Had he stared at the shapeless shadows which seemed to seethe and stir in the tunnel mouths beyond?

It didn't matter now. The tunnel mouths were open, but Kevin's mouth was closed; closed and set in the grim grin of death. One look at the gaunt face and emaciated body brought one word to Weber's lips.

"Starvation."

Commander Tasman nodded without comment, then stooped to examine the other body.

For there *was* another body lying there, some little distance away—lying face downward, arms outstretched as though attempting to crawl toward the tunnels when death halted her.

Her.

Tasman turned the body over, staring in recognition at the wasted form.

"Kevin's wife," he murmured. "He took her with him."

Kevin took her with him, and death took them both. Here, in a remote cave on a distant planet, surrounded by shadows, the fugitives had died in darkness, and now only echoes lingered, wailing in the depths. If you listened closely, you could almost hear them now, faint and faraway.

And then they *did* hear the sound, all of them, and recognized it for what it was—issuing from the shadows beyond, impossibly but unmistakably.

A baby had cried.

There were problems, many problems.

The first was physical—how to transport a newborn infant back to earth on a probe-mission ship lacking the facilities and even the feeding formula necessary to sustain its fragile hold on life.

Surprisingly enough, the little one survived and even flourished on the hastily improvised diet of powdered milk and juices. The infant girl seemed to have inherited some of Kevin Nichols' toughness and tenacity as well as his features. Indeed, the resemblance was so close between father and daughter that it was decided to name her after him. They called her Keva.

It wasn't until after splashdown on earth that the other problems arose. Then Space Control took charge of Keva and inherited the dilemma she brought with her.

There was no publicity, of course, but that in itself solved nothing. Sooner or later the news would inevitably leak out. An honored and acclaimed astronaut had succeeded in violating top security, had foiled all interplanetary precautions, and had stolen the latest and most advanced spacecraft.

Waves of panic rose and spread behind the locked doors of Space Command. Top brass and top government officials floundered, engulfed in those waves, spluttering in confusion, choking in consternation.

“Do you know what this means? When the story gets out, the whole program will be discredited. Stealing a prototype ship right out from under our noses—we’re going to be the laughingstock of the world, the whole galaxy!”

Those words were shouted by a senior spokesman for the space project, and a senior spokesman for the government answered him.

“Then why not tell the truth? Tell them that we had our eye on Kevin Nichols all along, knew he was cracking up. Sure, he was next in line for the big promotion.

but he wasn’t going to make it. Not after what our investigation uncovered—the drug thing, the embezzlement of project funds. He must have realized we were going to blow the whistle on him and that’s why he got out, taking his wife with him. Let the public know what happened, that we were the victims of a conspiracy—”

“You’re crazy!” Psychiatrists usually disapprove of using such language, but it was a senior member of the psychiatric advisory staff who spoke. “We can’t afford to be laughed at, and we can’t afford to be pitied, either. Right now we can’t afford anything, period. I don’t need to remind you gentlemen that the vote on new appropriations for the entire space project is coming up next week. There couldn’t possibly be a worse time to tell the world that the largest and most important program in all history has been victimized by one man—and that the biggest hero of that program was a psychotic, a thief, and a traitor. There’s got to be another answer.”

There was.

Exactly who gave it is not known—probably some minor member of the staff. It is the fate of junior officers to come up with the right suggestion, and their reward is to be forgotten even while the suggestion is remembered.

“Keva is our answer,” said the nameless junior officer.

Everyone looked at him, everyone listened, and everyone understood.

“Don’t you realize what Nichols has done for the program? He’s given us the biggest public-relations hook anyone could wish for. His daughter, Keva. The first child ever to be born in outer space! Not on Mars or Venus or a colony, but on a new frontier, the farthermost outpost of all interplanetary exploration known to man!

“You don’t have to say that her father was flipping out, that the ship was stolen. Make the whole thing part of a top security mission, a secret program to test human survival on an earth-type world. Nichols and his wife volunteered to take the ship off to Echo and have their child there. A heroic experiment that turned into a heroic sacrifice when they emerged from the crash unharmed but unable to return or communicate with the project back on earth. Let it be known that Nichols kept a complete record of his stay on Echo, up to and including the actual birth of the infant, but that the data are still classified information. That should put an end to any further embarrassing questions about the affair. But there won’t be any trouble about the appropriation—not if you concentrate publicity where it belongs and keep it there. You’re sitting on the greatest story of all time, the greatest celebrity ever known—Keva, the spacechild!”

They didn’t sit much longer.

Within a matter of hours the well-oiled machinery of the space program’s Information Unit started to function. The wheels began to turn, and the end product of the manufacturing process appeared. Instant heroes.

Kevin Nichols, heroic astronaut who piloted an untested ship to an uncharted world. His wife, who risked her unborn baby in the unknown. The space program itself, bravely breaking through all barriers to prove, once and for all, that humanity could move forward without fear and perpetuate itself on other planets.

Nichols and his wife were dead, but the space program survived. Just as predicted, the appropriation passed.

And as for young Keva herself, she lived and thrived. Keva, the new symbol of the Age of Space. Publicized, photographed, promoted, praised; in a matter of days, her name was known throughout the solar system and beyond. Child of space, heir to the future.

And ward of the space program.

Jealously guarded, possessively protected, little Keva was withdrawn from public scrutiny shortly after she had served her primary purpose, and was placed in a private—very private—nursery. While Keva dolls and Keva toys flooded the market, and Keva songs and Keva pictures kept her image bright, the object of all this adulation was being carefully nursed and tended by a team of medical specialists. Pediatricians and psychologists alike agreed; Keva was a very special baby. Not just because of her value as a living symbol, but for what she was—exceptionally sturdy, bright, alert, healthy, and precocious.

Yet, in spite of security, rumors poured out of the nursery-laboratory where young Keva was hidden.

Standing alone at five months. Walking at seven months. Only nine months old and seems to understand everything you say to her. One year old and she’s already talking—complete sentences! Did you hear the latest about Keva? Two and a half, going on three, and they say she already is reading! Can you imagine that?

The public could imagine it very easily. As a matter of fact, they were beginning to imagine a little too much. No matter how much a genius was praised, nobody really loved one. A genius was too hard to understand. And the whole point of the plan was plain; Keva *had* to be loved.

So, after much consideration, Keva was placed in an exclusive private school—in first-phase classes, or what used to be called kindergarten. Good thinking, everyone said; give her a chance to grow up with other youngsters, learn to be like the rest of the kids.

But Keva wasn't like the rest of the kids. She grew faster and learned more quickly. She seemed immune to childhood diseases and she was never ill. Perhaps this was a result of the antiseptic care of the medical team, but even so it was highly unusual. The doctors took notes.

The psychologists took notes, too. Keva did not relate to her peer group—that was the way *they* phrased it. In plainer words, she didn't want to have anything to do with the other children. And tvhat she did not want to do she did not bother with. She read. She asked questions—intelligent, penetrating questions—and she was impatient with stupid answers.

Keva had no interest in nursery rhymes or fairy tales or bedtime stories. Facts and figures, those were the things that fascinated her. She never played with toys, and she refused to learn any games.

The other youngsters didn't understand her, and what children can't understand they usually dislike—a trait often carried over into adult life.

Two of the children never got to carry that or any other trait into adult life. They took to teasing Keva, calling her names, but only for a few days. Then they died.

One of them fell out of an upstairs window while walking in his sleep. The other went into convulsions—an epileptic seizure, the doctors decided.

Of course, Keva had nothing to do with it; she was nowhere near either of the youngsters at the time. But there was bound to be talk, so the medical team took her out of the school.

To put an end to any possible rumors, a thorough checkup was programmed for the prodigy. And prodigy she was—a beautiful, healthy child, without functional defect. The results of the battery of mental tests indicated genius.

What Keva needed, the medical team decided, was a chance to lead a normal existence, an opportunity to relate to ordinary people in ordinary surroundings. As a celebrity such a life was, of course, impossible.

So they changed her name, took her clear across the country, and put her up for adoption.

The world at large was told that Keva had been sent abroad for further education under governmental supervision. Even the couple who took her into their home didn't realize that their bright, good-looking new daughter was the famous spacechild.

To George and Elaine Rutherford, Keva was an orphan named Robin. A quiet girl but well-behaved, quick in her studies, sailing through high school and into college at fifteen. There were no problems.

At least, the security reports didn't indicate any. The space program had her under observation, of course, monitoring her progress in school.

Perhaps they should have spent more time monitoring her foster parents. As it was, they didn't seem to notice the change in Mr. and Mrs. Rutherford. Maybe the Rutherfords weren't even aware of it themselves. It wasn't anything dramatic.

But as Keva grew, they dwindled.

Keva's growth was physically apparent. At seventeen, already a senior in college, she seemed completely mature—enough of an adult, in fact, to enter into the management of her foster father's prosperous ranch during the summer months.

Rutherford, the bluff, hearty rancher with the booming voice, made no objection. It was as though he secretly welcomed the idea of taking things easy, of not having to bawl out orders, of sitting quietly on the big screened porch and rocking away. After a time people began to notice how he mumbled and muttered, talking to himself.

Elaine Rutherford didn't say anything—she gradually stopped entertaining or going out, and never saw any of their old friends. While the girl ran the ranch, she was content just to keep house and spend her spare time resting upstairs. Then she began to talk to herself, too.

It was just about a year later—after Keva had graduated and gone into advanced work in astrophysics—that the authorities came and took the

Rutherfords away.

There was a hearing and the ranch hands testified. So did the girl. Everyone agreed there had been no violence, no real crisis. It was only that the Rutherfords had gone from talking to babbling, and from babbling to screaming.

Shadows were what they feared. Shadows, or a single shadow—apparently they never saw more than one at a given moment. A shadow moving at midnight in the corrals, making the cattle bellow in terror—but why should cattle be afraid of something that cannot be seen? A shadow creeping through the long dark ranch house hall, while the floorboards creaked—but how can there be sound without substance? A shadow glimpsed in the girl's room, stretched sleeping in the bed where the girl should be—but shadows do not sleep, and the girl testified she had seen nothing.

It was a sad affair, and the ending was inevitable. The Rutherfords were obviously incompetent and they had to be committed. Both of them died within a matter of months.

The space program people stayed out of the affair, of course; at least, they didn't interfere publicly. But they followed the hearing and they had the data and they took charge of Keva once more.

Taking charge was a mere formality now, for they weren't dealing with a child any longer. Keva was physically adult and mentally she was—

Worthy of further study.

That's what the medical team decided.

Keva was happy to cooperate, even though it meant temporarily abandoning her research project on methods of communicating with distant planetary bodies through the use of ultrasonic frequencies.

On the appointed day she appeared before an international panel of scientific authorities at Space Command headquarters, prepared to submit to a thorough examination and checkup. But she was not prepared to meet the head of that panel—an elderly, stoop-shouldered man who was introduced to her as Mission Commander Richard Tasman, USN, Ret.

The foreign scientists noted that Keva didn’t seem to react to the introduction. Perhaps she didn’t recognize the name, but, of course, there was no reason that she should.

At least, there was no reason until Tasman began asking questions. The questions were polite, formally phrased, and simple. But their content was disturbing.

Tasman wanted Keva to tell him about the shadows.

Keva frowned, and then sighed. “Surely you’ve read the reports of the hearing. The shadows my poor foster parents claim to have seen were nonexistent—paranoid delusions—”

Commander Tasman nodded. “But it’s the other shadows I’m interested in. The shadows that I saw with my own eyes twenty years ago when I found you in that cave on Echo.”

The listening scientists leaned forward as Keva shook her head. They turned up the earphones to hear what their translators were reporting as the conversation continued.

Keva shrugged. “I was a baby. How do you expect me to remember anything? And if I could, why should I notice shadows?”

“Why, indeed?” Tasman smiled. “I saw them plainly enough but at the time I had no reason to pay attention to them. Now I’m not so sure.”

“What do you mean?”

Tasman smiled again. “I’m not so sure of *that,* either. In fact, I’m not sure of anything anymore. It occurs to me that we should have followed up our findings on Echo. Somehow, in all the excitement of your discovery and rescue, certain unusual bits of data were neglected. An earth-type planet exists within a certain range of prescribed conditions—this we know because we’ve located and studied others within the galaxy. Like Echo, they all contain life-forms. Microorganisms, algae, plant life in infinite variety. And all of them, in this phase of evolution, contain animal life, too. All except Echo.”

Tasman fixed his eyes on Leva. “I understand you have a background in space research.”

“Em only a novice—”

“But you have studied available information?”

“Yes.”

“Then let me ask this: doesn’t it seem strange to you that Echo, and Echo alone, is the only earth-type body ever discovered that is capable of supporting higher and more complicated life-forms, yet contains none?”

“Perhaps there were such forms at one time, and they failed to survive.”

“For what reason? There’s no indication of natural disaster or recent geologic upheaval.”

“Maybe the evolutionary cycle came to a natural end. Whatever might have existed there merely died out,” Keva said.

“Suppose it didn’t die out? Suppose it merely developed along different lines, advanced to a point where life was no longer dependent upon a physical body of the type we’re familiar with.”

“You mean something like pure thought?” It was Keva’s turn to smile.

Tasman shook his head and he wasn’t smiling. “Something like shadows,” he said.

Keva stared. They were all staring now.

“Shadows,” Tasman repeated. “Consider a life-form that may once have been human like ourselves—very much like ourselves in many ways—but had reached a turning point in the evolutionary road. Instead of continuing to evolve in terms of brawn, the emphasis became spiritual.”

“Pure thought again?” Keva gestured. “Impossible.”

“Of course, it’s impossible,” Tasman said. “Life is energy, and energy has form. But on Echo, which seems to have existed for countless years in an idyllic state, there was no need for a sturdy body to withstand the elements. And who knows—upon reaching a certain stage of mental development, there may no longer be any dependency upon ordinary nourishment.”

“You’re saying these creatures turned into shadows?”

“*Creatures?* Hardly the term I’d use to describe so advanced an organism. As for shadows, how do we know what they really are? Possibly what we saw as shadows are merely visual projections of mental energy contained in the minimum possible shape. A shape that no longer requires sensory organs for perception or communication. A shape that doesn't need the complex of mechanical aids we call civilization, that can live without our concept of comfort and shelter—"

"In caves?"

Keva rose as she spoke, and faced the assemblage around the long table. She talked and the others listened. Exactly what she said is a matter of debate—afterward, opinions seemed to differ. But her words made sense, and everyone got the point.

Carefully, courteously, but concisely, she took Tasman's theories apart, demolishing each premise in turn. There was no precedent, not in biology or physics or the most advanced observations of science, for sentient shadows. One might as well argue the reality of ghosts. A shadow, by definition, is merely a shade cast upon a surface by a body that intercepts rays of light. It is the body that exists. Shadows are merely illusions—like the apparitions Keva's foster parents had babbled about, or like Commander Tasman's strange beliefs.

The speech was effective. And after Tasman, cold but controlled, excused Keva from the hearing and had her escorted from the room, there was a general buzz of conversation from the scientists gathered there.

Obviously they were impressed by what they had heard. They were even more impressed when an apologetic sound engineer buzzed the chamber on intercom to report the sudden power failure that had cut off the mikes and had made translation of Keva's speech impossible.

"Amazing, the young woman!" The Italian scientist groped for words in his heavily accented English. "Such presence, to realize this—and continue speaking in Italian."

"Nein." The guttural rejoinder came swiftly. "It was in German she spoke."

"Français!"

Dissension rose in Japanese, Russian, Spanish, and Mandarin. All had heard Keva and all had understood.

Tasman understood, too.

He raced out the door and down the corridor. At the entrance to a small side office he found Keva's security guards stationed and waiting.

"Keva—where is she?"

The senior officer blinked and gestured. "Inside."

Tasman brushed past him and opened the door.

The room beyond had no windows, no other exit.

But it was empty.

There was no official report of Keva's disappearance. Even the medical team wasn't informed. But Tasman knew, and went straight to Top Security. A directive was issued.

Find Keva.

"She's bound to slip up," Tasman said. "What happened at the hearing proves she's not infallible. When the mikes went dead she unconsciously continued to communicate by means of direct-thought transmission. That explains why each foreign delegate believed he was hearing Keva speak to him in his own language. When Keva realized she was giving herself away, it was too late. She had to flee."

The security officers nodded uneasily. How do you find a person who can transmit thoughts at will, hypnotize guards, and pass them by without being seen or remembered?

"If she made one mistake she'll make others," Tasman assured them.

But Tasman himself didn't wait for mistakes. While security personnel searched for Keva in the present, Tasman sought her in the past. He talked to people who had known her at the ranch, to schoolmates, to the surviving members of the original relief mission, men such as Gilbey and Weber. What he learned he kept to himself, but the word spread.

Eventually, it reached back to a man who had known Keva's true parents.

Dr. Hans Diedrich, living in retirement in the Virgin Islands, contacted Space Command with an urgent message. He had, he said, certain information which might be of vital importance in this affair.

Within twenty-four hours Diedrich was visited at his cottage home by an elderly, stoop-shouldered man who identified himself as Mission Commander Richard Tasman, USN, Ret.

"I'm glad you came," Diedrich said. "I have followed the reports with great interest—my nephew is in the space program and it was he who informed me of what happened."

His visitor frowned. "A security leak?"

"Do not be alarmed. It is for the best that I was told, and in a moment you will understand why I say that. You see, I know what you are thinking."

"You do?"

Diedrich frowned. "You have a theory, haven't you? That Kevin Nichols' child was left alone in that cave on Echo when her parents died, left alone with the shadow creatures. And that somehow, before your relief expedition arrived, these beings took possession of her, so that when she was rescued she was no longer an ordinary infant but something more. Because they infused her with their powers, established a mental contact, a link with themselves which was not broken when she returned to earth. And that all through her childhood and youth, she was really acting as their pawn. A human being under alien control. Is that it?"

His visitor nodded.

"Well, you are wrong," said Dr. Diedrich. "I was the Nichols' family physician. I have their medical records. Two years before the journey to Echo, I had to perform surgery on Mrs. Nichols."

"So?"

"That is what I wanted to tell you. The surgery made it impossible for Mrs. Nichols to have a child. The infant you found in the cave was not their daughter."

Dr. Diedrich leaned forward. "These beings must have the power to receive thoughts as well as to transmit them. They absorbed the contents of

Nichols' mind as he lay dying in the cave—his wife's mind, too. And using what they learned, they created the illusion of an infant, one of their own kind disguised in a mental projection, programmed to live and grow as a child."

"Why send it back to earth?"

Diedrich shrugged. "I cannot say."

"And you have no proof."

"Only of the surgery. Here, my own medical records—"

He handed a bulky envelope to his visitor.

His visitor smiled, thanked him, pulled out a revolver, and shot Dr. Diedrich through the head.

"I told you she'd make a mistake," Tasman muttered.

"Going down there, getting the information, then deliberately using a clumsy, old-fashioned weapon to kill Diedrich—it was a clever idea. And there are half a dozen people who can testify to seeing me escape from the cottage.

"Fortunately, you know I was here at headquarters all the time. Keva didn't anticipate I'd have such an airtight alibi. And she didn't anticipate that Diedrich had taken the precaution of taping a statement of his beliefs beforehand and sending it here to Space Command. So, we understand how all this happened—and why."

"We know something else now, too." The Chief of Operations himself answered Tasman, and his voice was grim. "The life-form we're dealing with has greater powers than we imagined. The ability to transmit thought and to receive it. The ability to appear in the form we identify as Keva, or to change that form at will.

"Do you realize what we're up against? A creature that can read our minds, walk unseen among us as a shadow, and alter its appearance whenever it chooses."

“Mimicry,” Tasman said. “Insects use it for protection, taking on the look of the plant or tree branch where they rest. The being we know as Keva has this same faculty, developed to its ultimate extent.”

The Chief of Operations frowned. “Then why did it even bother to appear as Keva in the first place?”

“Again we can look to the insect world for a parallel,” Tasman said. “Some insects begin in a larval state. It’s only later that they emerge in new forms, with the power of disguising their shapes. Perhaps it was necessary for Keva to go through certain stages in a single body while she grew to maturity and learned our ways. Only now, as an adult, is she capable of functioning fully.”

“And just what is her function? Why did a shadow creature come to earth in human disguise?”

Tasman shrugged. “Maybe the shadows grew tired of being shadows. Perhaps an existence of pure thought was no longer enough for them and they yearned for the sensations and satisfactions of solid physical shapes. In which case Keva was sent here as a scout, to study our ways and see if we could be taken over.”

The Chief of Operations shook his head. “You think that is a possibility?”

“I think that is what actually happened.”

“Then what do you propose?”

“Another expedition to Echo. Give me the command, and a task force. Keep it under sealed orders, call it an exploratory operation if you like. But you and I know the real purpose of the mission.”

“Seek and destroy?”

Tasman nodded. “It’s our only chance. And we’ve got to move fast, before Keva suspects.”

Commander Tasman lifted off for Echo under top security, but that didn’t stop the rumors.

Whether or not Keva suspected was no longer the problem. The search for her went on, but how do you find a shadow? It could be anywhere now.

It was the spread of the rumors that really caused the trouble—and the panic.

Somehow the word was out, and the world trembled. People had forgotten about the spacechild through the years, but now they remembered as the whispers grew.

There was a monster in our midst, the rumormongers said. An alien unlike any humanoid form on planets known to man—an invisible creature, murdering at will. True, a mission had been mounted against Echo, but it would never return.

The whispers rose to angry shouts, and there was only one way to silence them.

The President of the United States went on Emergency Band and addressed the world. Standing before the cameras and microphones in the tower at Communications Center, he delivered his message.

The rumors were partially true, the President admitted. The spacechild was indeed an alien, but there was no longer any reason to fear her. Because Keva was dead. She had been discovered and trapped only this afternoon in a secret hideaway—a mountain cave near Pocatello, Idaho. Full details would be available on an international newscast following the President's message.

Meanwhile, it was time to put an end to the vicious falsehoods spread by our enemies, the President declared. All this wild talk of alien invasion was part of a plot, designed to prevent the opening up of free space travel and communication—but the plot had failed. After all, Commander Tasman had been sent into space for exploratory purposes and had not encountered any resistance.

It was his privilege, the President said, to announce the final expansion of the space program. From this time forward there would be no restrictions on further flights. Every area of the galaxy was now officially declared to be open to the ships of any government or any private concern or individual. No more secrecy, no more security, no more fear. If new alien life-forms were encountered, they would be met with friendship. If they chose to visit our solar system or even our own earth, let them be welcomed. For this was the start of the true Age of Space—founded firmly in freedom and in friendship.

The world listened to its leader and breathed a collective sigh of relief.

The President joined in that sigh as the broadcast ended. He watched the technical crews gather up their equipment and depart, leaving him alone in the tower room with its single window opening on the night sky and the stars.

Then the President of the United States melted into a shadow and slithered across the floor to the window, as she waited for her alien brothers to arrive.

See How They Run

The phrase "crime story" means something different to Robert Block—something different from what it means to every other writer of crime stories. You'll see what we mean when you read "See How They Run". . .

We've often wondered: has Robert Block ever written a story that doesn't have sometking special about it? . . .

April 2nd

Okay, Doc, you win.

I'll keep my promise and make regular entries, but damned if I'll start out with a heading like *Dear Diary.* Or *Dear Doctor,* either. You want me to tell it like it is? Okay, but the way it is right now, Doc, beware. If you've got any ideas about wading in my stream of consciousness, just watch out for the alligators.

I know what you're thinking. "Here's a professional writer who claims he has a writer's block. Get him to keep a diary and he'll be writing in spite of himself. Then he'll see how wrong he is." Right, Doc? Write, Doc?

Only that's not my real problem. My hangup is the exact opposite—antithetical, if you're looking for something fancy. Logorrhea. Verbosity. Two-bit words from a dime-a-dozen writer? But that's what they always say at the studio: writers are a dime a dozen.

Okay, so here's your dime. Run out and buy me a dozen writers. Let's see—I'll have two Hemingways, one Thomas Wolfe, a James Joyce, a couple of Homers if they're fresh, and six William Shakespeares.

I almost said it to Gerber when he dropped me from the show. But what's the use? Those producers have only one idea. They point at the parking lot and say, "I'm driving the Caddy and you're driving the Volks." Sure. If you're so smart, why aren't you rich?

Call it a rationalization if you like. You shrinks are great at pinning labels on everything. Pin the tail on the donkey, that's the name of the game, and the patient is always the jackass. Pardon me, it's not "patient," it's "analysand." For fifty bucks an hour you can afford to dream up a fancy word. And for fifty bucks an hour I can't afford not to word up some fancy dreams.

If that's what you want from me, forget it. There are no dreams. Not any more. Once upon a time (as we writers say) there was a dream. A dream about coming out to Hollywood and cracking the television market. Write for comedy shows, make big money in your spare time this new easy way, buy a fancy pad with a big swimming pool, and live it up until you settle down with a cute little chick.

Dreams are nothing to worry about. It's only when they come true that you've got trouble. Then you find out that the comedy isn't funny any more, the big money disappears, and the swimming pool turns into a stream of consciousness. Even a cute little chick like Jean changes to something else. It's not a dream any more, it's a nightmare, and it's real.

There's a problem for you, Doc. Cure me of reality.

April 5th

A little-known historical fact. Shortly after being wounded in Peru, Pizarro, always a master of understatement, wrote that he was Incapacitated.

Damn it, Doc, I say it's funny! I don't buy your theory about puns being a form of oral aggression. Because I'm not the aggressive type.

Hostile, yes. Why shouldn't I be? Fired off the show after three seasons of sweating blood for Gerber and that lousy no-talent comic of his. Lou Lane couldn't get a job as M.C. in a laundromat until I started writing his material and now he's Mr. Neilsen himself, to hear him tell it.

But that's not going to trigger me into doing anything foolish. I don't have to. One season without me and he'll be back where he belongs—a parking attendant in a Drive-In Mortuary. Curb Service. We Pick Up and Deliver. Ha, ha.

Gerber gave me the same pitch; my stuff is getting sour. We don't want black comedy. It's nasty, and this is a family-type show. Okay, so maybe it was my way of releasing tension, getting it out of my system—catharsis, isn't that the term? And it made me come on a little too strong. Which is where you get into the act. Blow my mind for me, put me back on the track, and I'll get myself another assignment and make the family-type funnies again.

Meanwhile, no problems. Jean is bringing in the bread. I never figured it that way when we got married. At first I thought her singing was a gag and I went along with it. Let the voice coach keep her busy while I was working on the show—give her something to do for a hobby. Even when she took the first few club dates it was still Amateur Night as far as I was concerned. But then they hit her with the recording contract, and after the singles came the album, etc. My little chick turned into a canary.

Funny about Jean. Such a nothing when I met her. Very good in the looks department but aside from that, nothing. It's the singing that made the difference. Finding her voice was like finding herself. All of a sudden, confidence.

Of course I'm proud of her but it still shakes me up a little. The way she takes over, like insisting I see a psychiatrist. Not that I'm hacked about it, I know she's only doing it for my own good, but it's hard to get used to. Like last night at the Guild screening, her agent introduced us to some friends of his—"I want you meet Jean Norman and her husband."

Second billing. That's not for me, Doc. I'm a big boy now. The last thing I need is an identity crisis, right? And as long as we're playing true confessions, I might as well admit Jean has one point—I've been hitting the bottle a little too hard lately, since I got canned.

I didn't mention it at our last session, but this is the main reason she made me come to you. She says alcohol is my security blanket. Maybe taking it away would fix things. Or would it?

One man's security blanket is another man's shroud.

April 7th

You stupid jerk. What do you mean, alcoholism is only a symptom?

First of all, I'm not an alcoholic. Sure I drink, maybe drink a lot, everybody drinks in this business. It's either that or pot or hard drugs and I'm not going to freak out and mess up my life. But you've got to have something to keep your head together and just because I belt a few doesn't mean I'm an alcoholic.

But for the sake of argument, suppose it does? You call it a symptom. A symptom of *what?*

Suppose you tell me that little thing. Sitting back in that overstuffed chair with your hands folded on your overstuffed gut and letting me do all the talking—let's hear you spill something for a change. What is it you suspect, Mr. Judge, Mr. Jury, Mr. Prosecuting Attorney, Mr. Executioner? What's the charge—heterosexuality in the first degree?

I'm not asking for sympathy. I get plenty of that from Jean. Too much. I'm up to here on the oh-you-poor-baby routine. I don't want tolerance or understanding or any of that phony jive. Just give me a few facts for a change. I'm tired of Jean playing Mommy and I'm tired of you playing Big Daddy. What I want is some real help, you've got to help me help me please please help me.

April 9th

Two resolutions.

Number one, I'm not going to drink any more. I'm quitting as of now, flat-out. I was stoned when I wrote that last entry and all I had to do was read it today when I'm sober to see what I've been doing to myself. So no more drinking. Not now or ever.

Number two. From now on I'm not showing this to Dr. Moss. I'll cooperate with him completely during therapy sessions but that's it. There's such a thing as invasion of privacy. And after what happened today I'm not going to lay myself wide open again. Particularly without an anesthetic, and I've just given that up.

If I keep on writing everything down it will be for my own information, a matter of personal record. Of course I won't tell him that. He'd come up with some fancy psychiatric zinger, meaning I'm talking to myself. I've got it figured out—the shrinks are all authority figures and they use their labels as putdowns. Who needs it?

All I need is to keep track of what's happening, when things start to get confused. Like they did at the session today.

First of all, this hypnotherapy bit.

As long as this is just between me and myself I'll admit the whole idea of being hypnotized always scared me. And if I had any suspicion the old creep was trying to put me under I'd have cut out of there in two seconds flat.

But he caught me off guard. I was on the couch and supposed to say whatever came into my head. Only I drew a blank, couldn't think of anything. Emotional exhaustion, he said, and turned down the lights. Why not close my eyes and relax? Not go to sleep, just daydream a little. Daydreams are sometimes more important than those that come in sleep. In fact he didn't want me to fall asleep, so if I'd concentrate on his voice and let everything hang loose—

He got to me. I didn't feel I was losing control, no panic, I knew where I was and everything, but he got to me. He must have, because he kept talking about memory. How memory is our own personal form of time travel, a vehicle to carry us back, way back to earliest childhood, didn't I agree? And I said yes, it can carry us back, carry me back, back to old Virginny.

Then I started to hum something I hadn't thought about in years. And he said what's that, it sounds like a nursery rhyme, and I said that's right, Doc, don't you know it, *Three Blind Mice.*

Why don't you sing the words for me, he said. So I started.

Three blind mice, three blind mice,
See how they run, see how they run!
They all ran after the farmer's wife,
Did you ever see such a sight in your life
As three blind mice, three blind mice?

"Very nice," he said. "But didn't you leave out a line?"

"What line?" I said. All at once, for no reason at all, I could feel myself getting very uptight. "That's the song. My old lady sang that to me when I was a baby. I wouldn't forget a thing like that. What line?"

He started to sing it to me.

They all ran after the farmer's wife.
She cut off their heads with a carving knife.

Then it happened.

It wasn't like remembering. It was happening. Right now, all over again.

Late at night. Cold. Wind blowing. I wake up. I want a drink of water. Everyone asleep. Dark. I go into the kitchen.

Then I hear the noise. Like a tapping on the floor. It scares me. I turn on the light and I see it. In the corner behind the door. The trap. Something moving in it. All gray and furry and flopping up and down.

The mouse. Its paw is caught in the trap and it can't get loose. Maybe I can help. I pick up the trap and push the spring back. I hold the mouse. It wiggles and squeaks and that scares me more. I don't want to hurt it, just put it outside so it can run away. But it wiggles and squeaks and then it bites me.

When I see the blood on my finger I'm not scared any more. I get mad. All I want to do is help and it bites me. Dirty little thing. Squeaking at me with its eyes shut. Blind. Three Blind Mice. Farmer's Wife.

There. On the sink. The carving knife.

It tries to bite me again. I'll fix it. I take the knife. And I cut, I drop the knife, and I start to scream.

I was screaming again, thirty years later, and I opened my eyes and there I was in Dr. Moss's office, bawling like a kid.

"How old were you?" Dr. Moss said.

"Seven."

It just popped out. I hadn't remembered how old I was, hadn't remembered what happened—it was all blacked out of my mind, just like the line in the nursery rhyme.

But I remember now. I remember everything. My old lady finding the mouse head in the trash can and then beating the hell out of me. I think that's what made me sick, not the bite, even though the doctor who came and gave me the shot said it was infection that caused the fever. I was laid up in bed for two weeks. When I'd wake up screaming from the nightmares, my old lady used to come in and hold me and tell me how sorry she was. She always told me how sorry she was—after she did something to me.

I guess that's when I really started to hate her. No wonder I built so many of Lou Lane's routines on mother and mother-in-law gags. Oral aggression? Could be. All these years and I never knew it, never realized how I hated her. I still hate her now, hate her—

What I need is a drink.

April 23rd

Two weeks since I wrote the last entry. I told Dr. Moss I quit keeping a diary and he believed me. I told Dr. Moss a lot of things besides that, and whether he believed me or not I don't know. Not that I care one way or the other. I don't believe everything he tells *me* either.

Hebephrenic schizophrenia. Now there's a real grabber.

Meaning certain personality types, confronted with a stress situation they can't handle, revert to childhood or infantile behavior levels.

I looked it up the other day after I got a peek at Moss's notes, but if that's what he thinks, then he's the one who's flipped.

Dr. Moss has a thing about words like flipped, nuts, crazy. Mental disturbance, that's his speed.

That and regression. He's hung up on regression. No more hypnosis—I told him that was out, absolutely—and he got the message. But he uses other techniques like free association, and they seem to work. What really happens is that I talk myself into remembering, talk my way back into the past.

I've come up with some weirdies. Like not drinking a glass of milk until I was five years old—my old lady let me drink that formula stuff out of the bottle and there was a big hassle over it when I went to kindergarten and wouldn't touch my milk any other way. Then she clouted me one and said I made her ashamed when she had to explain to the teacher, and she took the bottle away. But it was her fault in the first place. I'm beginning to understand why I hated her.

My old man wasn't any prize, either. Whenever we had company over for dinner he'd come out with things I'd said to him, all the dumb kid stuff you say when you don't know any better, and everybody would laugh. Hard to realize kids get embarrassed, too, until you remember the way it was. The old man kept needling me to make stupid cracks just so he could take bows for repeating them to his buddies. No wonder you forget things like that—it hurts too much to remember.

It still hurts.

Of course there were good memories, too. When you're a kid, most of the time you don't give a damn about anything, you don't worry about the future, you don't even understand the real meaning of things like pain and death—and that's worth remembering.

I always seem to start out that way in our sessions but then Moss steers me into the other stuff. Catharsis, he says, it's good for you. Let it all hang out. Okay, I'm cooperating, but when we finish up with one of those children's hours I'm ready to go home and have a nice, big drink.

Jean is starting to bug me about it again. We had another hassle last night when she came home from the club date. Singing, that's all she's really interested in nowadays, never has any time for me.

Okay, so that's her business, why doesn't she mind it and let me alone? So I was stoned, so what? I tried to tell her about the therapy, how I was hurting and how a drink helped. "Why don't you grow up?" she said. "A little pain never hurt anyone."

Sometimes I think they're all crazy.

April 25th

They're crazy, all right.

Jean calling Dr. Moss and telling him I was back on the bottle again.

"On the bottle," I said, when he told me about it. "What kind of talk is that? You'd think she was my mother and I was her baby."

"Isn't that what you think?" Moss said.

I just looked at him. I didn't know what to say. This was one time when he did all the talking.

He started out very quietly, about how he'd hoped therapy would help us make certain discoveries together. And over a period of time I'd begin to understand the meaning of the pattern I'd established in my life. Only it hadn't seemed to work out that way, and while as a general thing he didn't care to run the risk of inducing psychic trauma, in this case it seemed indicated that he clarify the situation for me.

That part I can remember, almost word for word, because it made sense. But what he told me after that is all mixed up.

Like saying I have an oral fixation on the bottle because it represents the formula bottle my mother took away from me when I was a kid. And the reason I got into comedy writing was to reproduce the situation where my father used to tell people all my funny remarks—because even if they laughed it meant I was getting attention, and I wanted attention. But at the same time I resented my father taking the credit for amusing them, just like I resented Lou Lane making it big because of what I wrote for him. That's why I blew the job, writing material he couldn't use. I wanted him to use it and bomb out, because I hated him. Lou Lane had become a father image and I hated my father.

I remember looking at Dr. Moss and thinking he has to be crazy. Only a crazy shrink could come up with things like that.

He was really wild. Talking about my old lady. How I hated her so much when I was a kid I had to displace my feelings—transfer them to something else so I wouldn't feel so guilty about it.

Like the time I got up for a drink of water. I really wanted my bottle back, but my mother wouldn't give it to me. And maybe the bottle was a symbol of something she gave my father. Hearing them was what really woke me up and I hated her for that most of all.

Then I went into the kitchen and saw the mouse. The mouse reminded me of the nursery rhyme and the nursery rhyme reminded me of my mother. I took the knife, but I didn't want to kill the mouse. In my mind I was really killing my mother—

That's when I hit him. Right in his dirty mouth.

Nobody talks about my mother that way.

Apr 29

Better this way. Don't need Moss. Don't need therapy. Do it myself.

Been doing it. Regression. Take a little drink, take a little trip. Little trip down memory lane.

Not to the bad things. Good things. All the warm soft memories. The time I was in bed with the fever and mother came in with the ice cream on the tray. And my father bringing me that toy.

That's what's nice about remembering. Best thing in the world. There was a poem we used to read in school. I still remember it. "Backward, turn backward, O time in your flight, make me a child again just for tonight!" Well, no problem. A few drinks and away you go. Little oil for the old time machine.

When Jean found out about Dr. Moss she blew her stack. I had to call him up right away and apologize, she screamed.

"To hell with that," I said. "I don't need him any more. I can work this thing out for myself."

"Maybe you'll have to," Jean said.

Then she told me about Vegas. Lounge date, three weeks on the Strip. All excited because this means she's really made it—the big time. Lou Lane is playing the big room and he called her agent and told her it was all set.

"Wait a minute," I said. "Lou Lane set this up for you?"

"He's been a good friend," Jean told me. "All through this he's kept in touch, because he's worried about you. He'd be your friend, too, if you'd only let him."

Sure he would. With friends like that you don't need enemies. My eyes were opening fast. No wonder he squawked to Gerber and got me off the show. So he could move in on Jean. He had it set up, all right. The two of them, playing Vegas together. Jean in the lounge, him in the big room, and then, after the show—

For a moment there I was so shook up I couldn't see straight and I don't know what I would have done if I could. But I mean I really couldn't see straight because I started to cry. And then she was holding me and it was all right again. She'd cancel the Vegas date and stay here with me, we'd work this out together. But I had to promise her one thing—no more drinking.

I promised. The way she got to me I would have promised her anything.

So I watched her clean out the bar and then she went into town to see her agent.

It's a lie, of course. She could have picked up the phone and called him from here. So she's doing something else.

Like going straight to Lou Lane and spilling everything to him. I can just hear her. “Don’t worry, darling, I had to beg off this time or he’d get too suspicious. But what’s three weeks in Vegas when we’ve got a whole lifetime ahead of us?” And then the two of them get together—

No. I’m not going to think about it. I don’t have to think about it, there are other things, better things.

That’s why I took the bottle. The one she didn’t know about when she cleaned out the bar, the one I had stashed away in the basement.

I’m not going to worry any more. She can’t tell me what to do. Take a little drink, take a little trip. That’s all there is to it. I’m home free.

Later

She broke the bottle.

She came in and saw me and grabbed the bottle away from me and she broke it. I know she’s mad because she ran into the kitchen and slammed the door. Why the kitchen? Extension phone there.

Wonder if she’ll try to call Dr. Moss.

Aprel 30

I was a bad boy.

The Dr. come, he sed what did you do.

I sed she took the bottel away.

He saw it on the floor the knive I had to do it I sed.

He saw blood.

Like the mouse he sed.

No not a mouse. A canarry. dont look in the trash can I sed But he did.

1974

The Learning Maze

Before I begin this story, I must tell you that I don’t believe a word of it.

If I did, I’d be just as crazy as the man who told it to me, and he’s in the asylum.

There are times, though, when I wonder. But that’s something you’ll have to decide for yourself.

About the man in the asylum—let’s call him George Milbank. Age thirty-two, according to the records, but he looked older; balding, running to fat, with a reedy voice and a facial tic that made me a little uptight watching him. But he didn’t act or sound like a weirdo.

“And I’m not,” he said, as we sat there in his room on the afternoon of my visit. “That’s why Dr. Stern wanted you to see me, isn’t it?”

“What do you mean?” I was playing it cool.

“Doc told me who you were, and I know the kind of stuff you write. If you’re looking for material—”

“I didn’t say that.”

“Don’t worry, I’m glad to talk to you. I’ve been wanting to talk to someone for a long time. Someone who’ll do more than just put down what I say in a case history and file it away. They’ve got me filed away now and they’re never going to let me out of here, but somebody should know the truth. I don’t care if you write it up as a story, just so you don’t make it long.

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That's when I became conscious of his facial tic, and it disturbed me. He noticed my reaction and shook his head. "Don't take my word for it," he said. "Just look at the women in the magazine ads. High-fashion models, you know the type? Tall, thin, all arms and legs, with no bust. And those high cheekbones, the big eyes, the face frozen in that snotty don't-touch-me-look.

"I guess that's what got to me. Just as it was supposed to. I took Vilma's look as a challenge." His face twitched again.

"You don't like women, do you?" I said.

"You're putting me on." For the first and only time he grinned. "Man, you're talking to one of the biggest womanizers in the business!" Then the grin faded. "At least I was, until I met Vilma.

"It all came together on a cruise ship—the *Morland,* one of those big new Scandinavian jobs built for the Caribbean package tours. Nine ports in two weeks, conducted shore trips to all the exotic native clipjoints.

"But I was aboard for business not pleasure. McKay-Phipps, the ad agency I worked for, pitched Apex Camera a campaign featuring full-page color spreads in the fashion magazines. You know the setup—big, arty shots of a model posed against tropical resort backgrounds with just a few lines of snob-appeal copy below. *She travels in style. Her outfit—a Countess D'Or original. Her camera—an Apex.* That kind of crud, right?

"Okay, it was their money and who the hell am I to say how they throw it around? Besides, it wasn't even one of my accounts. But Ben Sanders, the exec who handled it, went down the tube with a heart attack just three days before sailing, and I got nailed for the assignment.

"I didn't know diddly about the high-fashion rag business or cameras either, but no problem. The D'Or people sent along Pat Grigsby, their top design consultant, to take charge of the wardrobe end. And I had Smitty Lane handling the actual shooting. He's one of the best in the business, and he got everything lined up before we left—worked out a complete schedule of what shots we'd take and where, checked out times and locations, wired ahead for clearances and firmed-up the arrangements. All I had to do was come along for the ride and see that everyone showed up at the right place at the right time.

"So on the face of it I was home free. Or away from home free. There are worse things than two weeks on a West Indies cruise in February with all expenses paid. The ship was brand new, with a dozen top-deck staterooms, and they'd booked one for each of us. None of those converted broom-closet cabins, and if we wanted we could have our meals served in and skip the first-sitting hassle in the dining room.

"But you don't give a damn about my vacation, and neither did I. Because it turned out to be a real downer.

"Like I said, the *Morland* hit nine ports in two weeks, and we were scheduled to do our thing in every one of them. Smitty wanted to shoot with natural light, so that meant we had to be on location and ready for action by 11 a.m. Since most of the spots he'd picked out were resorts halfway across the various islands, we had to haul out of the sack before seven, grab a fast continental breakfast, and drag all the wardrobe and equipment onto a chartered bus by eight. You ever ride a 1959 VW minibus over a stretch of rough back country road in steambath temperatures and humidity? It's the original bad trip.

"Then there was the business of setting up. Smitty was good but a real nitpicker, you know? And by the time Pat Grigsby was satisfied with the looks of the outfits and the way they lined up in the viewfinder and we got all those extra-protection shots, it was generally two o'clock. We had our pics but no lunch. So off we'd go, laughing and scratching, in the VW that had been baking in the sun all day, and if we boarded the ship again by four-thirty we were just in time for Afternoon Bingo.

"About the rest of the cruise, I've got good news and bad news.

"First the bad news. Smitty didn't play Afternoon Bingo. He played the bar—morning, afternoon, and night. And Pat Grigsby was butch. She must have made her move with Vilma early on and gotten thanks-but-no-thanks, because by the third day out the two of them weren't speaking except in line of duty. So that left Vilma and me.

"This was the good news."

"I've already told you what those high-fashion models look like, and I guess I made it sound like a grunt from a male chauvinist pig, but that's because of what I know now. At the time, Vilma Loring was something else. One thing about models—they know how to dress, how to move, what to do with makeup and perfume. What it adds up to is poise. Poise, and what they used to call femininity. And Vilma was all female.

"Maybe Women's Lib is a good thing, but those intellectual types, psychology majors with the stringy hair and the blue-jeans always turned me off.

"Vilma turned me on just looking at her. And I looked at her a lot. The way she handled herself when we were shooting—a real pro. While the rest of us were frying and dying under the noon sun, she stayed calm, cool and collected. No sweat, not a hair out of place, never any complaints. The lady had it.

"She had it, and I wanted it. That's why I made the scene with her as often as I could, which wasn't very much on the days we were in port. She always sacked out after we got back from a location and I couldn't get her to eat with me; she liked to have meals in the stateroom so she wouldn't have to bother with clothes and make-up. Naturally that was my cue to go into the my-stateroom-or-yours routine, but she wasn't buying it. So during our working schedule I had to settle for evenings.

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"She gave me a big smile. 'I've been looking for you everywhere,' she said. 'We've got to talk.'

"I told her to forget it, we had nothing to discuss. She just stood there looking at me, and now the moonlight was sparkling in her eyes. I told her to get lost, I never wanted to see her again. And she put her hand on my arm and said, 'You're in love with me, aren't you?'

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"Vilma poured me a glass, but none for herself. 'Go ahead,' she said. 'I don't mind.'

"But I did, and I told her so. There was something about the setup that didn't make sense. If this was what she wanted, why wait until the last minute?

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"Vilma's expression didn't change. 'You don't understand. I had to get to know you and decide if you were suitable.'

"I put down my empty glass. 'To go to bed with?' " Vilma shook her head. 'To be the father of my child.' " I stared at her. 'Now wait a minute —'

"She gave me that look again. 'I have waited. For two weeks I've been waiting, watching you and making up my mind. You seem to be healthy, and there's no reason why our offspring wouldn't be genetically sound.'

"I could feel that last drink but I knew I wasn't stoned. I'd heard her loud and clear. 'You can stop right there,' I told her. 'I'm not into marriage, or supporting a kid.'

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"All kinds of thoughts flashed through my head. She was high on acid, she was on a freak sex-trip, some kind of a nut case. 'Look,' I said. 'I don't even know you, not really—'

"She laughed then, and her laugh was husky too. 'What does it matter? You want me.'

"I wanted her, all right. The thoughts blurred together, blended with the alcohol and the anger, and the only thing left was wanting her. Wanting this big beautiful blond babe, wanting her heat, her need.

"I reached for her and she stepped back, turning her head when I tried to kiss her. 'Get undressed first,' she said. 'Oh, hurry—please—'

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“I hit the bed, lying on my back, and everything froze; I couldn’t move, my arms and legs felt numb because all the sensation was centered in one place. I was ready, so ready I couldn’t turn off if I tried.

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“She put her head down on the table and the long blond hair hung over the side and the glassy blue eyes went dead in the rubbery face. But I couldn’t stir, I was still turned on, and all I remember is thinking to myself, without a head how can she see?

“Then the dress fell and there was my answer, moving toward me. Bending over me on the bed, with her tiny breasts almost directly above my face so that I could see the hard tips budding. Budding and opening until the eyes peered out—the *real* eyes, green and glittering deep within the nipples.

“And she bent closer; I watched her belly ride and fall, felt the warm, panting breath from her navel. The last thing I saw was what lay below—the pink-lipped, bearded mouth, opening to engulf me. I screamed once, and then I passed out.

“Do you understand now? Vilma had told me the truth, or part of the truth. She was a high-fashion model, all right—but a model for *what?*

“Who made her, and how many more did they make? How many hundreds or thousands are there, all over the world? Models—you ever notice how they all seem to look alike? They could be sisters, and maybe they are. A family, a race from somewhere outside, swarming across the world, breeding with men when the need is upon them, breeding in their own special way. The way she bred with me—”

I ran out then, when he lost control and started to scream. The attendants went in and I guess they quieted him down, because by the time I got to Dr. Stern’s office down the hall I couldn’t hear him any more.

“Well?” Stern said. “What do you make of it?”

I shook my head. “You’re the doctor. Suppose you tell me.”

“There isn’t much. This Vilma—Vilma Loring, she called herself—really existed. She was a working professional model for about two years, registered with a New York agency, living in a leased apartment on Central Park South. Lots of people remember seeing her, talking to her—”

“You’re using the past tense,” I said.

Stern nodded. “That’s because she disappeared. She must have left her stateroom, left the ship as soon as it docked that night in Miami. No one’s managed to locate her since, though God knows they’ve tried, in view of what happened.”

“Just what *did* happen?”

“You heard the story.”

“But he’s crazy—isn’t he?”

“Greatly disturbed. That’s why they brought him here after they found him the next morning, lying there on the bed in a pool of blood.” Stern shrugged. “You see, that’s the one thing nobody can explain. To this day, we don’t know what became of his genitals.”

1975

The Model

Before I begin this story, I must tell you that I don't believe a word of it.

If I did, I'd be just as crazy as the man who told it to me, and he's in the asylum.

There are times, though, when I wonder. But that's something you'll have to decide for yourself.

About the man in the asylum—let's call him George Milbank. Age thirty-two, according to the records, but he looked older; balding, running to fat, with a reedy voice and a facial tic that made me a little uptight watching him. But he didn't act or sound like a weirdo.

"And I'm not," he said, as we sat there in his room on the afternoon of my visit. "That's why Dr. Stern wanted you to see me, isn't it?"

"What do you mean?" I was playing it cool.

"Doc told me who you were, and I know the kind of stuff you write. If you're looking for material—"

"I didn't say that."

"Don't worry, I'm glad to talk to you. I've been wanting to talk to someone for a long time. Someone who'll do more than just put down what I say in a case history and file it away. They've got me filed away now and they're never going to let me out of here, but somebody should know the truth. I don't care if you write it up as a story, just so you don't make me out bananas. Because I'm going to tell it like it is, so help me God. If there *is* a God. That's what worries me—I mean, what kind of a God would create someone like Vilma?"

That's when I became conscious of his facial tic, and it disturbed me. He noticed my reaction and shook his head. "Don't take my word for it," he said. "Just look at the women in the magazine ads. High-fashion models, you know the type? Tall, thin, all arms and legs, with no bust. And those high cheekbones, the big eyes, the face frozen in that snotty don't-touch-me-look.

"I guess that's what got to me. Just as it was supposed to. I took Vilma's look as a challenge." His face twitched again.

"You don't like women, do you?" I said.

"You're putting me on." For the first and only time he grinned. "Man, you're talking to one of the biggest womanizers in the business!" Then the grin faded. "At least I was, until I met Vilma.

"It all came together on a cruise ship—the *Morland,* one of those big new Scandinavian jobs built for the Caribbean package tours. Nine ports in two weeks, conducted shore trips to all the exotic native clipjoints.

"But I was aboard for business, not pleasure. McKay-Phipps, the ad agency I worked for, pitched Apex Camera a campaign featuring full-page color spreads in the fashion magazines. You know the setup—big, arty shots of a model posed against tropical resort backgrounds with just a few lines of snob-appeal copy below. *She travels in style. Her outfit—a Countess D*Or original Her camera—an Apex*. That kind of crud, right?

"Okay, it was their money and who the hell am I to say how they throw it around? Besides, it wasn't even one of my accounts. But Ben Sanders, the exec who handled it, went down the tube with a heart attack just three days before sailing, and I got nailed for the assignment.

"I didn't know diddly about the high-fashion rag business or cameras either, but no problem. The D'Or people sent along Pat Grigsby, their top design consultant, to take charge of the wardrobe end. And I had Smitty Lane handling the actual shooting. He's one of the best in the business, and he got everything lined up before we left—worked out a complete schedule of what shots we'd take and where, checked out times and locations, wired ahead for clearances and firmed-up the arrangements. All I had to do was come along for the ride and see that everyone showed up at the right place at the right time.

"So on the face of it I was home free. Or away from home free. There are worse things than two weeks on a West Indies cruise in February with all expenses paid. The ship was brand new, with a dozen top-deck staterooms, and they'd booked one for each of us. None of those converted broom-closet cabins, and if we wanted we could have our meals served in and skip the first-sitting hassle in the dining room.

"But you don't give a damn about my vacation, and neither did I. Because it turned out to be a real downer.

"Like I said, the *Morland* hit nine ports in two weeks, and we were scheduled to do our thing in every one of them. Smitty wanted to shoot with natural light, so that meant we had to be on location and ready for action by 11 **a.m.** Since most of the spots he'd picked out were resorts halfway across the various islands, we had to haul out of the sack before seven, grab a fast continental breakfast, and drag all the wardrobe and equipment onto a chartered bus by eight. You ever ride a 1959 VW minibus over a stretch of rough back country road in steambath temperatures and humidity? It's the original bad trip.

"Then there was the business of setting up. Smitty was good but a real nitpicker, you know? And by the time Pat Grigsby was satisfied with the looks of the outfits and the way they lined up in the viewfinder and we got all those extra-protection shots, it was generally two o'clock. We had our pics but no lunch. So off we'd go, laughing and scratching, in the VW that had been baking in the sun all day, and if we boarded the ship again by four-thirty we were just in time for Afternoon Bingo.

"About the rest of the cruise, I've got good news and bad news.

"First the bad news. Smitty didn't play Afternoon Bingo. He played the bar—morning, afternoon, and night. And Pat Grigsby was butch. She must have made her move with Vilma early on and gotten thanks-but-no-thanks, because by the third day out the two of them weren't speaking except in line of duty. So that left Vilma and me.

"This was the good news."

"I've already told you what those high-fashion models look like, and I guess I made it sound like a grunt from a male chauvinist pig, but that's because of what I know now. At the time, Vilma Loring was something else. One thing about models—they know how to dress, how to move, what to do with makeup and perfume. What it adds up to is poise. Poise, and what they used to call femininity. And Vilma was all female.

"Maybe Women's Lib is a good thing, but those intellectual types, psychology majors with the stringy hair and the blue-jeans always turned me off.

"Vilma turned me on just looking at her. And I looked at her a lot. The way she handled herself when we were shooting—a real pro. While the rest of us were frying and dying under the noon sun, she stayed calm, cool and collected. No sweat, not a hair out of place, never any complaints. The lady had it.

"She had it, and I wanted it. That's why I made the scene with her as often as I could, which wasn't very much on the days we were in port. She always sacked out after we got back from a location and 1 couldn't get her to eat with me; she liked to have meals in the stateroom so she wouldn't have to bother with clothes and make-up. Naturally that was my cue to go into the my-stateroom-or-yours routine, but she wasn't buying it. So during our working schedule 1 had to settle for evenings.

"You know the kind of fun and games they have on shipboard. Second-run movies for the old ladies with blue hair, dancing on a dime-size floor to the music of a combo that would make Lawrence Welk turn in his baton. And the floor shows—tap dancers, magic acts, overage vocalists direct from a two-year engagement at Caesar's Palace—in the men's room.

"So we did a lot of time together just walking the deck. With me suggesting my room for a nightcap and she giving me that it's-so-lovely-out-here-why-don't-we-look-at-the-dolphins routine.

"I got the message, but I wasn't about to scrub the mission. And on the days we spent at sea I stayed in there. I used to call Vilma every morning after breakfast and when she wasn't resting or doing her nails I lucked out. She was definitely the quiet type and dummied up whenever I asked a personal question, but she was a good listener. As long as I didn't pressure her she stayed happy. I picked up my cue from that and played the waiting game.

"She didn't want to swim? Okay, so we sat in deck chairs and watched the action at the pool. No shuffleboard or deck tennis because the sun was bad for her complexion? Right on, we'd hit the lounge for the cocktail hour, even though she didn't drink. I kept a low profile, but as time went on I had to admit it was getting to me.

"Maybe it was the cruise itself that wore me down. The atmosphere, with everybody making out. Not just the couples, married or otherwise; there was plenty going for singles, too. Secretaries and schoolteachers who'd saved up for the annual orgy, getting it all together with used-car salesmen and post-graduate beach bums. Divorcees with silicone implants and new dye jobs were balling the gray-sideburn types who checked out Dow-Jones every morning before they went ashore. By the second week, even the little old ladies with the blue hair had paired off with the young stewards who'd hired on for stud duty. The final leg, two days at sea from Puerto Rico to Miami, was like something out of a porno flick, with everybody getting it on. Everybody but me, sitting there watching with a newspaper over my lap.

"That's when I had a little Dear Abby talk with myself. Here I was, wasting my time with an entry who wouldn't dance, wouldn't drink, wouldn't even have dinner with me. She wasn't playing it cool, she was playing it frigid.

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“By the time I woke up it was our last night out and too late. But not too late to hit the bar. There was the usual ship’s party and I’d made a date to take Vilma to the floor show. I didn’t cancel it—I just stood her up.

“Maybe I was a slow learner or a sore loser. I didn’t give a damn which it was, I’d just had it up to here. No more climbing the walls; I was going to tie one on, and I did.

“I went up aft to a little deck bar away from the action, and got to work. Everybody was making the party scene so I was the only customer. The bartender wanted to talk but I turned him off. I wasn’t in the mood for conversation; I had too much to think about. Such as, what the hell had come over me these past two weeks? Running after a phony teaser like some goddamn kid with the hots—it made no sense. Not after the first drink, or the second. By the time I ordered the third, which was a double, I was ready to go after Vilma and hit her right in the mouth.

“But I didn’t have to. Because she was there. Standing next to me, with that way-out tropical moon shining through the light blue evening gown and shimmering over her hair.

“She gave me a big smile. ‘I’ve been looking for you everywhere,’ she said. ‘We’ve got to talk.’

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“Now there’s a switch for you. Two weeks in the deepfreeze and now this. On the last night, too—we’d be docking in a few hours and I still had to pack and be ready to leave the ship early next morning.

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“All kinds of thoughts flashed through my head. She was high on acid, she was on a freak sex-trip, some kind of a nut case. ‘Look,’ I said. ‘I don’t even know you, not really—’

“She laughed then, and her laugh was husky too. ‘What does it matter? You want me.’

“I wanted her, all right. The thoughts blurred together, blended with the alcohol and the anger, and the only thing left was wanting her. Wanting this big beautiful blond babe, wanting her heat, her need.

“I reached for her and she stepped back, turning her head when I tried to kiss her. ‘Get undressed first,’ she said. ‘Oh, hurry—please—’

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“I know because I kept watching her, and there was no change when she lifted her arms to her neck and removed her head.

“She put her head down on the table and the long blond hair hung over the side and the glassy blue eyes went dead in the rubbery face. But I couldn’t stir, I was still turned on, and all I remember is thinking to myself, without a head how can she see?

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"Do you understand now? Vilma had told me the truth, or part of the truth. She was a high-fashion model, all right— but a model for *what?*

"Who made her, and how many more did they make? How many hundreds or thousands are there, all over the world? Models—you ever notice how they all seem to look alike? They could be sisters, and maybe they are. A family, a race from somewhere outside, swarming across the world, breeding with men when the need is upon them, breeding in their own special way. The way she bred with me—"

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"Well?" Stern said. "What do you make of it?"

I shook my head. "You're the doctor. Suppose you tell me.

"There isn't much. This Vilma—Vilma Loring, she called herself—really existed. She was a working professional model for about two years, registered with a New York agency, living in a leased apartment on Central Park South. Lots of people remember seeing her, talking to her—"

"You're using the past tense," I said.

Stern nodded. "That's because she disappeared. She must have left her stateroom, left the ship as soon as it docked that night in Miami. No one's managed to locate her since, though God knows they've tried, in view of what happened." * "Just what *did* happen?"

"You heard the story."

"But he's crazy—isn't he?"

"Greatly disturbed. That's why they brought him here after they found him the next morning, lying there on the bed in a pool of blood." Stern shrugged. "You see, that's the one thing nobody can explain. To this day, we don't know what became of his genitals."

* *

So there you are.

Presumably you've read them all—the fourteen stories and the appended comments—including "The Model," which was published in the November 1975 issue of *Gallery*.

And you're saying to yourself—well, what *are* you saying?

That Bloch is going trendy with this last item, writing raunchy for the rabble?

Or that he has dramatized one of the oldest of mankind's sexual fantasies and/or phobias?

Or are you merely thanking God that the book is finally finished?

If God happens to be your thing, that is.

For all I know, you may have been rooting for the Devil. As I tote up the score, it seems to come out to a rather close tie for honors or dishonors.

On the other hand, if you happen to be primarily a hardcore science fiction buff, then all this talk about divine or diabolical inspiration may have turned you off completely. In which case you are at liberty to substitute the superego for God and the id for Satan.

But I doubt if that will tell you any more about where these stories actually came from.

I've been writing for most of my life now, and I still don't know the answer.

And I'll tell you a little secret.

I really don't care *where* they came from—as long as they keep coming—and you keep reading.

1976

The Warm Farewell

Although R*OBERT* B*LOCH has written hundreds of short stories in a long and distinguished career that spans four decades—beginning as a colleague of the late H. P. Lovecraft—he has only produced a moderate number in recent years, turning his hand chiefly to novels and scenarios. Which is a great loss, for at his best he's one of the consummate practitioners of the terror tale, his style incorporating cutting irony and character studies meshed with the experience of horror and the supernatural. This suspenseful tale might be called a social fright, operating admirably, as it does, on more than one level of terror simultaneously, and winding up in fine Blochian fashion.*

It must have been around ten o'clock when the cars arrived.

Rena could see them coming down the side road as they turned off the highway from Freedom—there must have been more than a dozen of them. They crawled slowly in a weaving line, like a long black snake inching closer and closer along the gravel.

None of the cars had their headlights turned on, and all of them had little pieces of cardboard stuck over the license plates. They came very slowly and very quietly.

Mrs. Endicott didn't notice them because she was busy making a last-minute tour of the house. Since they'd sold the furnishings along with the place, there wasn't too much to pack, but she wanted to make sure.

Mr. Endicott didn't notice them either, at first. He was closing the car trunk and arranging the extra suitcases in the back seat.

But Rena saw them coming, and she tried to keep the panic out of her voice when she called, “Dad!”

He looked up and then he must have heard the sound of their motors chugging along in low, because he came inside fast.

“Looks like we’re going to have visitors,” he said, trying to smile.

Mrs. Endicott went over to the window.

“Don’t pull the blinds,” her husband told her. “They know we re here.”

“Aren’t you even going to lock the door?” she asked.

Mr. Endicott shrugged. “What’s the use?” he answered.

Now don’t worry. There won’t be any trouble. They probably just want to make sure we re going.”

Mrs. Endicott looked at Rena. “You better go in the bedroom,” she said.

The girl bit her lip but did not move. “I’m not afraid,” she told her mother. Those White Hopes can’t frighten me.”

Mr. Endicott looked at her. “Your mother’s right,” he sighed. “You better go in the bedroom. No sense taking chances.”

His wife sniffed. “I wish you’d thought of that yourself, in the first place. Then maybe we wouldn’t be running away like this. We had a nice home here. The paper was doing well. But you had to go to work and write those editorials. You had to bring Scotty down—”

Stop that, said Mr. Endicott. No sense crying over spilt milk. I had to write those editorials. You know I did. Now be quiet, both of you, and let me handle this.”

Father, mother, and daughter fell silent as the cars drove into the yard. They angle-parked in a wide circle, blocking both driveway exits. Now car doors slammed and the white figures emerged—the hooded, sheeted figures of thirty men. As if by signal they converged on the doorstep, forming a smaller circle.

For another moment there was no sound; then a buzz of voices rose from just outside the door. Presently the knocking began.

Mrs. Endicott put her hand on Rena’s shoulder. She reached out to touch Mr. Endicott, but he shrugged free and went to the door.

Just as he was about to open it, Rena gasped.

Her father turned. What is it?” he whispered.

I just happened to think, she said. “I know why they’ve come. They want to know about Scotty.”

“Oh, no! Mrs. Endicott fluttered her hands. “Lock the door,” she gasped. “Please, lock the door!”

Mr. Endicott made a helpless gesture as the knocking sounded again. “Leave this to me,” he warned quietly.

Then he opened the door wide.

The man standing in the doorway might have been six feet tall, at the very most. But in the long white robe and the tall hood he was a giant. A ghost-giant, with hidden eyes and a voice that came forth in a croaking whisper.

“Greetings,” he said.

Mr. Endicott didn’t answer.

The ghost-giant snickered. “What’s the matter, cat got your tongue? Or you just plain too scared to talk?” The figure moved forward. “Well, we ain’t gonna make trouble. Not if you cooperate.”

He turned and addressed the hooded man directly behind him. “Come on in,” he said.

White sheets rustled.

“No, the rest of you wait there,” the ghost-giant called. “Just the four of us, like I said. Guess that’ll be enough to handle our business. If we need help, we’ll holler.” He snickered again, and an answering chuckle arose from the sheeted circle.

Four hooded figures entered the parlor. The ghost-giant closed the door.

“Well, now,” he said. “Looks like you folks was all set to pull out. Is that right?”

Mr. Endicott nodded.

“Guess you packed in pretty much of a hurry, way it looks. Reckon you wasn’t expecting visitors. Or did you have a notion you could hightail it before any visitors arrived?”

Mr. Endicott shrugged.

The hooded giant gazed at his three companions and chuckled again. “See what I mean, boys? This is your Yankee hospitality. Come to pay a friendly farewell call, and what happens? They offer you any dopes, or maybe even a little jolt of corn? Not likely. Don’t even ask a feller if he’d like to set down. And after all the ways we traveled just to get here.

His chuckle mingled with the answering sounds from under the hoods of the others. Then he moved over to Mr. Endicott and rubbed his white-gloved hands together briskly.

“Gonna have to ask you to speak up,” he said. “Guess you all don’t realize you got distinguished visitors here.”

Mr. Endicott glanced down at the feet of the sheeted men. His eyes traveled over shoes and protruding trouser cuffs.

I realize it, he said, quietly. “You’d never make much of an actor, Jess. And as for Race and Pud, here, they’ll have to invest in a second pair of shoes if they want to sneak around in disguise.”

Ain’t nobody sneaking around in disguise,” the hooded giant rumbled, abandoning the whisper. “This here’s the White Hopes, and don’t forget it. No names among the Brothers.”

“Brothers!” said Mr. Endicott.

Now that’s enough of that, the man identified as Jess said. “We’ve had all the sass we need out of you, Endicott. You and your stinking editorials. You been asking the good citizens of Freedom enough questions. Now it’s our turn to do the talking. And all we want out of you is a few answers.”

He walked over to the fourth hooded figure, whose shiny black patent-leather shoes and creased seersucker trousers offered a striking contrast to the sandals and work pants of the others.

“You want to take charge, Brother Hood?” he asked.

The sheeted head shook slowly.

All right,” said Jess. He turned to Endicott once again. “I told you about distinguished visitors,” he went on. “This here’s our Brother Hood. I guess you heard about him. Head of the whole organization in this territory. He come all the way from headquarters in Atlanta, just to help us say goodbye. Just got in tonight."

Mr. Endicott ran a hand across his bald spot. "Look here, Jess, he murmured. We're all ready to go. Say what you have to say and get out."

Now wait a minute. Wait—a—*minute*." Jess walked up to the small man and gazed down at him through the slits in his hood. "I guess you ain't really learned your lesson after all."

"I've learned enough," Mr. Endicott answered wearily. "I've learned you can't hope to sell freedom here in Freedom. I've learned enough to get rid of the paper and the house and leave town. What more do you want of me?"

"Not much." Jess turned to the silent Brother Hood. "See? Spunky little cuss, just like I told you. But we showed him a thing or two. Just like he said now. He's shut up shop for good. Had to dump the paper for a song. The bank squeezed him on the mortgage here and he was lucky to get half what he paid for the house and throw his furniture in on the deal. Beckon he'll think twice before he pulls any more smart-aleck stunts again."

"I know when I'm licked," Endicott said. "Does that satisfy you?"

Jess didn't answer him. He talked to Brother Hood. And it was all done peaceable, too. No rough stuff. Everything clean and legal-like."

"What about those bricks through the window?" Mr. Endicott asked. "What about those notes, and the phone calls, and expelling my daughter here from school?"

"We was just protecting our own youngsters," said Jess. "We got decent girls in this town. We don't aim to have them spoiled and corrupted by any Northern nigra-lovers—"

Mrs. Endicott put her arm around Rena. "Shut up!" she cried. "Shut up and get out of here!"

"You really want us to go, Mizz Endicott? Jess bowed, his hooded head bobbing grotesquely. "Well, seeing as how you feel like that, ma'm, we're on our way. Sorry we troubled you. But just one thing before we clear out."

"What's that?" Mr. Endicott answered for her.

“We come here for information,” Jess said. “That’s all we’re after. Just information.” He paused and moved closer. “Where’s the nigra?” he rumbled. “Where’s Scotty?

“Mr. Scott has left town,” Endicott answered. “I thought everyone knew that. You mean you told everyone that,” Jess corrected him. But the White Hopes know different. We got eyes that see in the dark. The hooded head shook. “Oh, I admit we was fooled at first. That was a pretty slick trick of yours—bringing down a nigra from up North, an educated nigra if you please, that looks and acts like a white man. I bet you laughed aplenty when you put him on the paper and started him writing those highfalutin stories about segregation and what-all. Oh, you fooled us good, you did! Until he up and wrote that dirty lying piece for the magazines about the White Hopes.”

That was a mistake, Mr. Endicott said. “I didn’t know he was going to write that article. I’d never have authorized it.”

“I’ll bet you wouldn’t, Jess chuckled. Like you say, it was a mistake. A real mistake. And you made another—quartering him here at your own house, a lousy nigra living right here in a white man’s home. Passing for white, and you helping him!”

That was my business.”

“That’s our business, mister. That’s the business of every decent, respectable white man in these parts. And when anyone forgets it, the White Hopes are here to remind them.”

“Why can’t you forget it?” Mr. Endicott asked, wearily. “It’s all over and done with. Mr. Scott left town last weekend.”

“Oh did he?” Jess glanced at the others. “Did he really? We happen to think different. If he left town, how’d he get outwalk? We been watching the buses, Endicott. We been watching the train. Ain’t no nigra comes in or goes out without us knowing it, anytime. And we been watching sort of special for Scotty. On account of we didn’t want him to leave without us saying goodbye. Right, boys?”

Race and Pud guffawed.

“He’s not here, if that’s what you’re thinking,” Mrs. Endicott said.

We know that, Jess assured her. “But we got a pretty good idea you folks can tell us where he’s hiding out.”

I don’t know, Mr. Endicott said. That’s the truth, so help me. I don’t know where he went. He came to me Saturday and said he was leaving—said he wanted to leave so there wouldn’t be any trouble. And he made a point of not telling me where he was going.”

“You’ve got to believe us,” Mrs. Endicott said. “He told us nothing.”

“But he didn’t go,” Jess said. “We would of seen him if he did. So he’s got to be around these parts, someplace. And if he’s around these parts, he’s got to eat. Somebody’s looking after him. Somebody’s feeding him.”

“We have nothing to do with it,” sighed Mr. Endicott.

“Who else could it be?” Jess asked. “There ain’t a white man in the county that’d touch that nigra with a ten-foot pole. Ain’t a darky that would dare lift a hand for him. They know how the White Hopes feel about a bad nigra like Scotty. The word’s out we re gonna give him a little farewell celebration.”

“I tell you, we don’t know anything!”

“And I tell you you’re lying.” The white-gloved hands fumbled under Jess’s sheet and emerged holding a leather strap. “I didn’t come here aiming for trouble. But the boys ain’t taking no for an answer. Maybe we got to do some persuading.”

Mrs. Endicott let out a strangled sound as Jess advanced on the little man. He said nothing, nor did he move. The gloved hand swung the leather strap. It swished through the heavy, humid air of the room.

“Better grab hold of him, boys,” said Jess. “This is liable to be kind of messy.”

Brother Hood stepped forward. His voice was a soft whisper. “Wait a moment,” he said. Might I make a suggestion?”

“Sure. This is your party, really.”

“You haven’t asked the girl yet.”

Mr. and Mrs. Endicott looked at Rena. And now Jess was looking at her too, looking at her through the eyeholes in the hood. The room was suddenly very silent.

Jess coiled the strap in his gloved hands, caressing its length. “Why that’s right,” he said, slowly. “Looks like we clean forgot about Rena, here.”

He walked over to her and stood balanced on the balls of his feet, rocking from side to side.

Rena’s eyes went wide.

How old are you, honey? Jess drawled. “Fifteen, sixteen, thereabouts? Funny, I never noticed before. You’re right pretty. Too pretty to waste your spit on a nigra like that Scotty. You re a white girl, honey. Reckon maybe you need a white man to teach you what that means—”

“Keep away from her!” Mrs. Endicott sobbed.

Jess swung the strap slowly. “I’d sure hate to spoil that pretty face. Yessiree, I’d sure hate to have to do anything like that.” He raised the strap. “Suppose you help me out, honey. Suppose you tell me where Scotty’s hiding. Before I count up to three, maybe. One, two—”

Look at her,” Brother Hood said, sharply. “She won’t talk. Not that way.”

Jess paused and turned. “You got any other ideas?” he asked.

It’s my party, like you said. Brother Hood approached Jess and bent his hooded head. He whispered something. Jess nodded, snickered, straightened up.

Go ahead, he said. Go right ahead.”

Brother Hood nodded. Then he took two quick steps forward and gathered the girl in his sheeted arms. She screamed and struggled, engulfed in the billowing folds that enmeshed her. Brother Hood fought her, a great white bird flapping his wings over his prey.

Mr. Endicott came across the room. “Damn you, let her alone!” he shouted. “Let her—”

Jess drew the strap back and hit him across the mouth. Then he hit Mr. Endicott with his fist. The little man fell down and his glasses dropped to the floor.

Jess stood over him. One more move out of you and you'll really get it, he grunted. And that goes for your wife, too. You, Race—hang onto her."

Race was already grasping Mrs. Endicott's elbow, twisting her arm behind her. He didn't twist any harder than was necessary, but he did a job.

The hooded man named Pud flung open a door. "Right here's the bedroom, Brother Hood," he said. "Reckon that's what you're looking for."

Brother Hood nodded. He jerked the struggling girl through the doorway, dropping the strap and using both hands now. Pud started to follow behind, but Brother Hood snapped, "I don't need you in here. My party."

He started to laugh, and then the door banged shut, and there was silence.

Mrs. Endicott began to cry, noiselessly. Mr. Endicott crawled along the floor and picked up his glasses. They were unbroken, and when he put them on he could see Jess standing over him with the strap poised.

He could see Race, too, and now Race had a gun in his gloved hand.

So nobody moved.

Nobody moved when the gasps came, or the thud, or the scream. Nobody moved when the thumping sounds rose from behind the thick door.

Nothing moved in the room except the hands of the clock on the wall.

A full fifteen minutes passed before the door opened.

Brother Hood came out alone.

"Come on," he said. He was panting and his voice had submerged to a conspiratorial whisper.

"Did she—?"

"Come on," Brother Hood repeated, nodding. "Lets go."

"Where is he?" Jess asked.

"The old Jasper place, if you know where that is. Hiding out in the barn."

"I might of guessed," Jess said. "Way off on the side road down there. Been deserted for years.

"All set?" Brother Hood panted.

"Got everything right out in the car," Jess answered.

"Then let's go. You boys lead the way—I'll have to follow in my car."

Jess chuckled. "Man, you sound beat! Must have had quite a workout—"

Brother Hood cut him short with a curt nod and moved over to the door. Jess and his two companions followed. Jess stood in the doorway for a moment after the others had made their exit.

You all don't forget us now, he said. "Sorry we got to be running along so quick like, but we got this little surprise party all arranged. He paused. "Mebbe you better forget us after all," Jess murmured. "Yeah, that's the best idea. We never been here. He shifted the leather strap in his gloved hand. 'Mind, now. We never been here, none of us."

The Endicotts didn't answer.

They didn't look at him, nor at each other, as the white-robed man went out. They didn't move as they heard the receding murmur of voices drifting down the driveway. They waited until the motors started, roared, and droned away in the night.

Mr. Endicott turned as the bedroom door opened and Rena came out. Her face was white, and she let the door slam behind her fast and hard.

"Gone?" she whispered.

Mr. Endicott nodded.

"Then we'd better go, too. Right now."

Mrs. Endicott stretched out her hands. "Rena—"

The girl shook her head, brushing the tangled hair from her eyes. Don't say anything," she murmured. "Please, don't say anything. Let's just get out of here."

Mr. and Mrs. Endicott exchanged glances. He nodded and led his wife to the door.

Rena paused and bit her lip. "I forgot my purse," she said. "Start the car and I'll be right out."

She raced back into the bedroom as they left. By the time Mr. and Mrs. Endicott had climbed into the car she was back, snapping out the lights and closing the front door behind her.

"Don't use your lights," she told her father. "Just head for the highway. The faster the better."

Mrs. Endicott patted her arm. “Don’t worry, honey. They’re gone now, to the old Jasper place.” She paused. “How did you—?”

Rena didn’t answer her directly. “Jasper’s? That’s good. It’s a long way out. And they’ll surround it, and go inside to search. They’ve got kerosene, of course, and they’ll plan on burning him. They like to burn, you know.”

The car mounted the rise to the highway just ahead, and they could see the panorama below. Suddenly Mr. Endicott turned and said, “Look!”

Turning, they gazed behind them, staring at the side road. The White Hopes were on the prowl now, and they’d lighted their torches, two to a car, thrusting them out of the front windows so that a line of fire blazed in the night. A long chain of bobbing flame stretched down the side road leading to the old Jasper place.

“You see?” Rena whispered. “I was right. They’ll go there and hunt around the barn so that they can burn him.” Her voice broke and she began to laugh.

Mrs. Endicott shook her. “Stop it!” she cried. “Stop it! I don’t care what he did to you in there—you shouldn’t have told them. They’ll burn Scotty alive. Why did you tell them where he was?”

“Yes,” Mr. Endicott said. “And how did you know?”

Rena shrieked and gurgled. “I don’t know,” she said. “He must have made up the whole story when he came out.”

“Who? Brother Hood?”

“That wasn’t Brother Hood,” Rena giggled. “That was Scotty. I still don’t know where he’s been hiding, but he’d sneaked back here to tell us goodbye. And when he looked through the bedroom window and saw Brother Hood drag me in there, he crawled in. I saw him, but Brother Hood didn’t. He hit Brother Hood on the back of the head with a big rock.” Mrs. Endicott gasped. “Did he—kill him?”

“No. He was just unconscious. Then Scotty tied him up with bedsheets and gagged him good. And he put on Brother Hood’s pants and shoes and gloves and robe and came out. He told me we’d have to get away fast. He’s taking Brother Hood’s car, and when the White Hopes get to the barn he’ll sneak off in the confusion and make his getaway. By the time they find out there's nobody in the barn it'll be too late." She giggled again.

Mrs. Endicott touched her daughter's cheek. "Thank God," she said. "You're all right."

"I'm all right," Rena repeated. "Now let's hurry!"

Mr. Endicott shifted and the car moved out onto the highway. All's well that ends well," he muttered. "I think Scotty will make it—he just whispered and nobody recognized his voice. Once he's gone and we're gone there won't be any trouble. He glanced at his daughter. I—I know what an ordeal this has been for you. But you mustn't be bitter about it. You've got to remember they're not all like that. Plenty of decent folks in Freedom and all over. It's just the minority, the ones who haven't learned, and they're disappearing fast. The big danger isn't in what they do, but in how they feel. That bitterness—it's contagious. Makes you want to fight back, their way. And you mustn't. Only leads to more trouble."

"Fight fire with fire," Rena said. And giggled again.

"Look down there!" Mrs. Endicott cried.

Never mind, Rena insisted. "Keep going!"

"No—stop! Look at the flames!"

The car halted. The trio gazed off in the darkness as a sheet of fire rose suddenly in the night.

"But that's not Jasper's place," Mr. Endicott gasped. "That's—that's *our* house!"

"And Brother Hood is tied up in the bedroom," Mrs. Endicott said. "Rena, you said you were going back there for your purse. Did you—?"

Rena was silent. They were all silent, staring down at the fire. Now they could hear the roar of the flames and, above it, something that might or might not have been a single piercing scream.

Rena giggled again.

"Fight fire with fire," Mr. Endicott sighed. "They'll blame it on the White Hopes and nobody will ever know. But I hate it, it's wrong, we've got to go back."

Mrs. Endicott gripped his arm. “No,” she said. “It’s too late. Rena’s right. We’d better get out of here, fast.”

She didn’t look at her daughter, even when she began to laugh louder and louder, and after a minute Mr. Endicott started the car again.

He shifted into high and the car sped forward, heading away from the flames, heading due north.

ETFF

This is the first time I've ever written anything in English.

Like all primitive language-systems, it's a clumsy method of communication.

I had to study several days before I mastered it, but I'm glad I did.

It came in handy the other night, on that back-country road in West Virginia.

And so did my human body.

The body is even more clumsy than the language. The construction is easy enough—just rob a sperm-bank and away you go—but I spent nearly a week, by earth-time reckoning, adapting myself to the limitations of movement and perception. And I never did reconcile myself to its ugliness.

But one must be tolerant, and I learned to cope; just as I learned to comprehend the simplistic structure of terrestrial history, geography, biology, zoology, chemistry, anthropology, ethnology, sociology, psychology, philosophy, theology, astronomy, technology and pornography.

I still don't understand their mathematics completely—for example, how did McDonald's determine just exactly when they sold their 18,000,000,000th hamburger?—but then there are some things we are not meant to know.

And the earthlings are fallible, too.

That night in West Virginia, when I dropped down to the road in front of the van, Rick and Steve thought I was a fugitive from the fuzz.

Rick was driving, and he jammed on the brakes fast, pulling over to the side just before hitting me. "Climb in, man!" he yelled. "We gotta get away from that helicopter!"

Steve was sitting next to him, and he opened the door to pull me aboard. "Turn off on the side-road, fast—we can lose them," he told Rick.

"Don't bother," I said. "Look, they've *scrinched."*

And of course, they *had scrinched—grocceling* up and out into a *blik,* right on schedule.

"*Scrinched,* hell," said Steve. "They've disappeared!" He shook his head. "I never saw a police helicopter do that before."

"Weird," said Rick. "Like I need a drink, you know?" And he grabbed the beer-can out of Steve's hand.

It was then that I noticed both of them were in a condition caused by alcoholic drink in which control of the faculties is impaired and inhibitions are broken; i.e., they were smashed.

"Maybe it wasn't a chopper," Steve said. "Could be a flying saucer."

"What's a flying saucer?" I asked.

"It's a UFO. Unidentified flying object."

"But I can identify it for you," I said. "It was a plain, ordinary *vroob."*

"Vroob?"

I nodded. "You'd call it a space-ship."

Rick made a face. "Space-ship? What are you, a Trekkie or something?"

"Exactly. A something named Pzquadfltorzz. At least that's as close as I can come to it in English."

Steve looked at Rick, "This guy is bananas."

"No, I'm Pzquadfltorzz. Pzquadfltorzz Icthylopaughribbl III, to be exact, from Freebis M2, Quadrant IV, Vector—"

"Open another beer, quick," Steve said.

Rick reached into a six-pack on the seat beside him and handed Steve a can. "Let's get it all together. "What you're saying is that you're an alien and you just landed here from a spaceship—"

"Ohhhhhh!"

The soft moan came from the interior of the van behind us. We turned to look at the girl lying on the bunk in back.

Steve frowned at her. “Sherry, what’s the matter?”

“I bumped my arm against the side when you hit the brakes back there. I think I cut myself.”

Both Steve and Rick were frowning now.

“What’s the trouble?” I said. “Trouble? Sherry needs a doctor right away, man.”

“For a minor cut?”

“Could be fatal. She’s a haemophilic. You know what that means.”

“Of course.” I nodded. “Let me help her.”

“You?”

“I told you I’m an extra-terrestial,” I said. “Take me to your bleeder.”

“Hold it, what do you think you’re doing—?”

But I ignored him and climbed into the back of the van. Kneeling beside the girl, I examined her arm. Sure enough, she had a cut just below the left elbow and it was bleeding profusely.

I lifted her arm and ran my fingers over the cut. The bleeding stopped. Then I pressed my fingers against the wound. It puckered up and vanished.

“Holy Heinlein!” the girl gasped. “What did you do?”

“I *stroomfed* it A simple technique, known to your ancient Egyptians and modern faith-healers. Laying on of hands, that sort of thing. We do it all the time on Freebis M2, Quadrant IV, Vector—”

“I believe it,” Sherry said. She sat up, nodding at Rick and Steve. “You know something? This dude’s telling the truth.”

Steve stared at her. “You mean—*V* “Well, he didn’t ask for any donations, so he’s not a faith-healer. And he doesn’t have enough wrinkles to be an ancient Egyptian, either. Besides, that flying thing *did* look like a space-ship.”

“I’ll drink to that,” Rick said. And he did.

“But if you’re an extra-terrestial, what are you doing here?” Steve said.

“Same thing you are. I’m on my way to Connecticut.”

“How’d you know that?”

"I know a lot of things. You're Steve Morgan and Sherry's your sister. Rick Greeley is your best friend."

"You've been reading our minds?"

"I've been reading your fanzine. And it isn't easy—your mimeo is terrible. Also you should justify your margins."

"You read *Smudge?"* Rick shook his head. "How could you? We only printed twenty-nine copies of the last issue. I thought nobody read it except Harry Warner, Jr."

"How would an extra-terrestial get hold of a fanzine?" Steve asked. "I know the post office is fouled up, but this is ridiculous."

"Space-ships get around," I told him. "We make frequent visits here to acquire artifacts."

"In other words, you ripped it off," Sherry said.

I shrugged. "I could hardly subscribe, you know. As your brother says, the post office is undependable, and I doubt if there's regular delivery service to Freebis M2, Quadrant IV, Vector—"

"Why?" Rick said. "What would you want with a fanzine?"

"We're interested in pop culture. That's why we send our ships here. We've been studying your planet for years."

"Now wait a minute!" Steve looked grim. "Don't tell me you're planning to invade earth?"

"None of that crazy Buck Rogers stuff," I said. "What would an extraterrestial want to do that for? Do you think we need your troubles—pollution, inflation, wars, muggings, television game-shows, political assassinations, Rod McKuen—"

"Then why come here?"

"Because I couldn't risk landing in Connecticut near the hotel, where the ship would be seen. But your fanzine said you'd be driving there by this route, and I thought you'd give me a lift."

"To the Convention?"

"Of course." I nodded. "Don't you understand? I'm a fan."

"A science fiction fan?"

“Why not? After all, fandom is a way of life. And nowhere is it specified that it must be limited merely to terrestial life. Well, I’m alive. And when I got into your earth culture, fandom turned me on. Fanzines like yours, and proxines too. Your science fiction writers have some interesting concepts of the universe. Quaint, but interesting, *i* became fascinated with the naive extrapolations of Clarke, Asimov and van Vogt—the subtleties of the *Perry Rhodan* series—the autoerotic imagery of your New Wave. I even read the first four pages of *Dhalgren—’*

“And you’re going to the Convention in Connecticut? The Con-Con?”

“That’s my reward for working on these earth-study projects. My colleagues, noting my interest and enthusiasm, created an informal organization to sponsor my trip here. The ETFF.”

“What’s that?”

“The Extra-Terrestial Fan Fund.”

“Oh wow,” said Sherry, with the natural eloquence of a young earthling. “What a break for us! Bringing the first actual visitor from outer space to a science fiction convention—why, it’ll double our circulation! I-can just see the look on their faces when we get up and introduce Pzquadfltorzz Icthyfopaughribbl III from—”

“Please,” I murmured. “No names.”

“No names like that one, anyway,” Rick said. “It sounds like something out of H.P. Lovecraft. Yog-sothoth, Nyarlathotep, Cthulhu—”

“Never mind about Cthulhu,” I said. “He happens to be a good friend of mine.”

“Suppose we just call you Pete,” Steve said.

“That would be fine,” I told him. “But just remember, I’m incognito.”

“You mean we can’t tell anyone you’re an alien?” He looked disappointed.

“if you do, you’ll spoil the whole purpose of my visit. I want to feel free to act as an observer, instead of being mobbed by autograph-hounds.”

Sherry sighed. “You’ve got a point there. But just think of the sensation it would cause if—”

“i am thinking of it,” I said. “And I insist on privacy. As one trufan to another, please DNQ or I’ll gafiate. Is that clear?”

“Perfectly,” said Rick. “Don’t worry, we’ll keep your secret. But are you sure you know how to behave like a real fan?”

“Of course I do,” I told him. “Give me a beer.”

“He’s a fan, all right,” Steve said.

If there were any further doubts on the matter, I dispelled them completely as we drove through the night to Connecticut. During our trip I drank a whole can of beer and threw three times.

On Friday afternoon we arrived at the Convention hotel. Rick called it the Stradivarius, because it was a vile inn.

The lobby was a madhouse, filled with longhaired young women and even longerhaired young men, plus an assortment of older men with beards. A number of children, unable to grow long enough hair or long enough beards, were carrying around hairy objects called Tribbles. The place looked like a barber’s nightmare.

“Is it always like this in a hotel?” I whispered.

“Only during a convention,” Steve said. “Hair today, gone tomorrow.”

We approached the registration desk and Rick asked the elderly clerk if his room was ready. There was a constant ringing of telephones and Rick had to shout his question above the din.

“Do you have a reservation?” the clerk said.

“Plenty of them, after seeing what’s going on here,” Rick told him. “Don’t those phones drive you crazy?”

The clerk shook his head. “Luckily, I’m almost stone-deaf.”

“Some hotel,” Sherry sniffed. “I suppose the house detective is blind.”

“Not until around three o’clock,” said the clerk. “The bar doesn’t open before noon.” He scrabbled through a sheaf of papers on the desk. “Ah, here you are. Rick Sneary, right?”

“Wrong. I know how to spell. The name is O’Shea. Rick O’Shea.”

“That’s the trajectory of a bullet bouncing off of something,” the clerk said. “Why’d your mother pick that name for you?”

"Well, it was a shotgun wedding. But the justice of the peace was crosseyed and he married her to the wrong man." Rick frowned. "Never mind my personal history—what about our room?"

The clerk nodded. "Maybe I'd better explain the layout of the hotel first. It's divided into two wings. All of the even-numbered rooms are in the west wing, and all of the odd-numbered rooms are in the right wing."

"What does that mean?"

"Simple. Let's say you're in Room 2953, and your best friend is in Room 2954. If you want to visit him, all you have to do is take the elevator down to the first floor of the right wing and walk through the lobby to the elevator on the left wing."

"And that will take me up to 2954?"

"Not exactly," said the clerk. "You see, this hotel only has twenty-eight floors."

"Typical convention hotel," Steve muttered. "They always come up with a place laid out like this." He turned to the clerk. "But it *does* have elevators."

"Of course," sniffed the clerk. "Six cars for each wing. Just remember, though—those on the left only run up and those on the right only run down. But on both sides just one elevator is presently in operation, and even the one that runs up is pretty run-down. Of course, you can always use the escalators, but I suggest the stairs."

"Why?"

"The escalators aren't running."

Rick shrugged. "Never mind that—just give me our room-number."

"Certainly, sir. It's 1623½."

"1623½? In which wing is that?"

"Neither."

"Neither?"

The clerk looked embarrassed. "I forgot to mention, the rooms ending in ½ are on the floors of the old annex, in the building around the corner."

"How can there be such a thing as an *old* annex?" Rick said.

"Well, you see the management was smart. They anticipated there'd be overcrowding in years to come, so they put up the annex before they built the hotel. Actually, it was there all the time; used to be the county jail, but it was condemned."

"What about the inmates?"

"They were condemned, too."

"Oh, super!" Sherry tossed her blonde curls. "Never mind all that—we won't be staying in our room anyway. Just tell us where the convention is being held."

"Let me see, now." The clerk glanced at a list before him. "The International Hog-Calling Association is on the fourth floor—lots of open windows up there, and they like to practice. The Chicken-Plucker's Union is on three, and the chickens are on the mezzanine—by the way, the mezzanine is downstairs in this hotel, because somebody mixed up the blue-prints—' "

"We want the World Science Fiction Convention," Rick said.

The clerk looked at his list again and frowned. "It's not listed. You'll just have to look around."

"Look around?" Steve shook his head. "This isn't a hotel—it's a twenty-eight storey jigsaw puzzle! Don't you have a map or something?"

"Of course we have a map," said the clerk.

"Can we have one?"

"I don't keep maps at the desk," the clerk told him. "They're in the storage room."

"And where is that?"

"I don't know. I'm afraid I've never been able to find it."

"Knock it off," Sherry murmured. "We'll locate the Convention ourselves. Just wander around until we run into it." And we did, though it wasn't easy. Somewhere we found a stairway leading up to a second level.

"Try this floor," Sherry said. "We'll just ask the first fan we meet."

Unfortunately, the corridors seemed deserted. We wandered through a labyrinth of halls without finding another soul. Finally I spotted a room with a sign on the door.

"Hey, look!" I said. "See what it says? *Where No Man Has Gone Before.* That must be the Star Trek Suite!"

"Let me find out," Steve muttered.

He went inside fast, and came out faster.

"What's the matter?" Rick asked.

"That wasn't the Star Trek Suite—it was the women's washroom!"

"You can't win 'em all," Sherry sighed. "But come on. Keep your ears open for the sounds of fannish voices."

As we rounded a corridor we heard a dreadful shriek.

"What did I tell you?" Sherry said. "Somebody's singing filk-songs! Hey, I wonder if Marion Zimmer Bradley knows about this?"

But the noise was not produced by filk-songs, nor was Ms. Bradley in evidence. At the end of the hall was a large open area filled with figures milling before a series of long tables. Behind the tables were seated a group of the most miserable-looking people I've ever encountered—weary, haggard, harried and harassed, with red-rimmed eyes and trembling hands.

"See, what did I tell you?" Sherry exulted. "It's the Convention Committee!"

"And the screaming—?"

"Fans, waiting to be registered. There's always some kind of hassle, you know. Fandom is a way of strife. Now just get in line and we'll get our badges."

Which we did, in less than two hours. My badge read *Pete Boggs*—Steve registered for me, and invented the last name on the spot. "Makes you sound like a Big Name Fan," he said. "They'll think you're Redd Boggs' brother." They led me toward the stairway at one side. "Up we go, now," Rick said. "Committee tells me everything's on the third floor. Just think—in a moment you'll see your first real Worldcon." He frowned. "What's the matter?"

"I *am* thinking," I murmured. "Do you realize what this moment means to me? Ever since I discovered science fiction, I've dreamed of the time when I’d actually come to a convention. And now, all at once, I’m frightened. They say there are thousands of people up there—fans, authors, artists, editors, publishers—”

“Nothing to be scared about,” Rick said. “Fans are just a bunch of hairy people like the ones you saw in the lobby. The authors are just the same, only hairier. You won’t see any artists—they’re all in the Art Show, sneaking around and drawing mustaches on each other’s paintings. As for the editors, they’re just here to be chewed-out on the panel sessions.”

“But where are all the publishers?”

“Oh, they don’t dare to come to these affairs. If they did, they’d be lynched.”

Sherry took my arm. “Come along, now, and don’t be frightened. You’re going to have a ball.”

And that’s exactly what I did, all the rest of the day. Sherry and Rick and Steve took me around and showed me everything.

How can I possibly describe the thrill of attending one’s first convention? dust imagine the excitement of seeing thousands and thousands of real live science fiction fans gathered together in one place, all of them giving each other their autographs!

And the pros gave autographs, too. Out in the hall stood Isaac Asimov, big as life, signing copies of the Bible.

“He just arrived by car a few minutes ago,” Steve said.

“You mean he drove here?”

“Asimov never takes a plane,” Rick told me. “He believes that if God meant for people to fly, He’d have given them plane-tickets.”

Going into the meeting-hall, we passed Lester del Rey, Poul Anderson, Gordon Dickson and Bob Silverberg. And there was Philip Jose Farmer, surrounded by a circle of fans who were asking him about his latest work. “I’m doing a sequel to my *Riverwortd* series,” he said. “It’s called *“Up the Creek*.”

Inside the meeting-hall, more thrills awaited me. Ray Bradbury was up on the platform, reading a long poem about a whale. When he finished, Robert Bloch followed him and read a two-line verse about a sardine.

At dinner, in the coffee-shop, Sherry pointed out other notables. “See that group over there?” she murmured. “That’s Roy Lavender, Ted White, Fuzzy Pink Niven and Charlie Brown.”

“What a color-combination!” I said. My eyes were even more dazzled when they were joined by Redd Boggs.

Back in the hall for the evening program, I heard Harlan Ellison reading a short story to the crowd. It was greeted with wild applause, so for an encore, Harlan read one of his novels.

Later in the evening we just wandered around looking at celebrities. I saw David Gerrold selling Tribbles, Ben Bova and Fred Pohl selling each other stories. There was Judy Lynn Benjamin and Ursula K. LeGuin and a woman named Parenthesis who, they told me, writes under the name of Leigh Brackett. And in one of the corridors a group of fans listened to an argument about the proper length of a story, carried on by Frank Belknap Long and Elliot Shorter.

I must say my newfound friends were good to me. Any request I made was carried out immediately; whatever I asked for, I got.

Sometimes, of course, it didn’t work out. Just before they decided to turn in for the night, Sherry came up to me with two individuals—a petite redhead and a blond, balding man.

“Here they are,” she said, proudly. “Bjo and John.”

I acknowledge the introductions, then stared at them, baffled. “Where are my Tribbles?” I whispered.

“Sorry,” Sherry said. “I thought you asked for Trimbles.”

But I forgave her. It had been a long day, and we were all tired. “We’d better get some rest,” I said.

As we made our way up to our room, famous figures danced around me in a daze. There was William Rotsler telling Frank Kelly Freas how to draw, a group of fans explaining to Roger Elwood how to edit an anthology, and Theodore Sturgeon holding forth on his famous Sturgeon’s Law—“Ninety percent of everything is crud.”

“Only ninety percent?” I murmured drowsily, as my friends made up a bed for me on the sofa.

Usually I can fall asleep immediately, but tonight was different. Maybe it was the strain of activating a human body—I wasn’t accustomed to the limitations of just two arms, two legs, two eyes, two ears and a single itty-bitty little mouth. Or perhaps it was just the excitement.

But as I reflected on the matter, I realized there was more to it than that. I was beginning to feel just a wee bit neglected. Here were all these fans, kissing Terry Carr’s hand, asking Larry Niven for a lock of his beard, listening in awe as Roger Zelazny spelled his-last name for them. And none of them paid the slightest attention to me. Me, the only genuine extraterrestial in the world!

It was my own fault, of course—I was the one who’d insisted that my identity couldn’t be revealed. I hadn’t reckoned with one mind-boggling fact; fandom is the carrier of a contagious disease. And I had been exposed to it here, all day.

I was suffering from the most dangerous of all human desires—the craving for egoboo.

What to do? As I’d told Sherry and Rick and Steve, I couldn’t reveal my true name or place of origin—!’d made a solemn promise to my sponsors as a delegate of the Extra-Terrestial Fan Fund. No matter what happened, under no circumstances could I speak for myself.

But the thought of spending two more days here, surrounded by flattery, adulation and George Clayton Johnson, was too much to bear. There had to be some way of attaining recognition without violating my promise.

Then it came to me.

Actions speak louder than words.

Tomorrow, even though I couldn’t tell them who I was, I’d show what I could do. And by the time this Worldcon was over, I’d be a Big Name Fan, right up there with Chuck Crayne, Bruce Pelz and Mike Glicksohn.

I drowsed off to sleep with a happy smile on my face, lulled by the sound of screams from the corridor outside.

This time they *were* singing filk-songs.

Saturday morning I was up bright and early. My companions were still sleeping—Rick and Steve in bed, and Sherry slumbering in the place they'd so gallantly provided for her in the bathtub.

I tiptoed into the corridor without disturbing them and made my way downstairs. Strangely enough, the third floor was almost entirely deserted. The Art Show hadn't opened yet, the main meeting area was empty, and the only signs of life came from a smaller suite at the far end of the hall. As I stood near the doorway, listening to the feeble murmur of groaning voices, a tall man with a short mustache approached me.

"What's going on in there?" I asked.

"Sefwa meeting," he said. "Sef-who?"

"No—Sefwa. Science Fiction Writers of America. That's the group the professionals belong to."

I peered through the doorway at the small group huddled before a table which was set up at the end of the room. I recognized a few of the pale, drawn faces—Jerry Pournelle, Clifford Simak, James Gunn, Harry Harrison—as they mumbled to one another in hoarse whispers.

"What are they discussing?" I murmured.

"What do you suppose a science fiction writer would be discussing at this hour of the morning? Hangover remedies, of course."

I stared at my informant, and for the first time noticed the sheaf of magazines he clutched to his bosom, each bearing the gaudily-colored cover-painting of a horror-film star.

"Why, you must be Forry Ackerman!" I said.

He nodded, smiling.

I could only respond to the conditioned reflexes of my body. Beer had made me throw up; now, in the presence of this living legend, I had to gulp. Forrest J (no period) Ackerman is, of course, the best-known name in all the universe. From Aldebaran to Zoophilia his fame has spread; every sentient entity in the cosmos is aware of his fabulous fannish presence. And here I was, face to face with Mr. Science Fiction himself!

Suddenly all my resolutions vanished. Gone was my resolve to keep my real identity a secret, gone was the determination to maintain a false facade. If there was one person who deserved to know the truth, one person, who was equipped to fully appreciate an actual confrontation with an extraterrestial, one person who would be thrilled beyond measure by such a meeting—Forry Ackerman was that man. He alone would appreciate the historic significance of this meeting, and he deserved to know. I must tell him, now.

"Mr. Ackerman," I said. "Your interest in famous monsters is a matter of record. But have you ever met one in the flesh?"

"Certainly." Ackerman smiled. "Christopher Lee, Boris Karloff, Donald A. Wollheim—"

"I mean a *real* monster." I gulped again. "What would you say if you had an opportunity to meet a genuine creature from another world?"

Forry's eyes danced a frug of anticipation. "You aren't putting me on?" he said.

"Suppose I could arrange it?" I asked. "What would you do?"

"I'd interview him for my magazine, for one thing," Forry said. "And get his autograph, and take him to see my collection, and—"

His mounting excitement was interrupted by the voice of a small fan who rushed up to us, panting and breathless. "Oh, Mr. Ackerman," he gasped. "I've been looking for you! I've just come from the Film Room, and—"

He stood on tiptoe, whispering something in Forry's ear. Ackerman smiled, nodded, and started to turn away.

"Where are you going?" I murmured.

"You'll have to excuse me, I'm afraid," said Forry. "This young man informs me that they're starting to screen a movie, and I can't miss it."

"But what about meeting the monster—the interview—?"

"Sorry." Forry shook his head. "That will have to wait. They're showing *Metropolis*. I've only seen it four hundred and eighty-seven times, and I've got to catch it again."

"Please, Mr. Ackerman!" I tugged at his arm. "Stop and think! I'm not kidding you—a real live monster—"

Gently, Forry disengaged himself. "You just don't seem to understand us movie fans," he said.

I watched him, open-mouthed, as he moved off.

My hopes vanished with him. Now I'd never see his expression as I told him the truth about myself. There'd be no write-up in his magazine, and no egoboo for me.

Egoboo.

The word still burned in my brain. There had to be some other way of attaining recognition. Surely, in a science fiction convention of this size there were all sorts of chances to establish my importance.

I started off down the hall. It was almost noon now and the corridor was gradually filled with fannish figures.

From various side-rooms came the sound of voices. Meetings were in progress.

Standing just outside an open doorway was a young lady wearing a Trekkie T-shirt emblazoned with the legend, *Friends, Romans and Mr. Spook—Lend me your ears.*

I nodded at her as I approached. "What's going on inside?"

"Authors' panel," she told me.

My heart leaped. A science fiction writers' panel! Surely they, of all people, would be impressed if I revealed myself!

"What are they discussing?" I asked. "Alternate universes, other worlds, alien life-forms? Do you think they might be interested in actual contact with an extra-terrestial being?"

"You don't understand," said the girt. "These happen to be New Wave authors. They're talking about sex, and ecology, and sex, and relevancy."

Over her words the voice of one of the panelists boomed in my ears from a table-microphone. "Four-letter the editors!" he cried. "Four-letter the publishers!"

"Right on!" shouted a fellow-panelist. "Four-letter the agents and the distributors. And, while we're at it, four-letter the readers, too!"

There was a burst of wild applause from the audience. "Remember our slogan!" yelled the speaker. "Advocates of violence must be destroyed!" The girl turned to me and shrugged. "You see?" she said. "I hear," I told her. And moved off again. It was obvious that if I came up against the New Wave I wouldn't even create a ripple.

But there were other functions going on. Around the corner at the end of the corridor I found a meeting-room where another panel discussion was in progress. The group on the podium consisted entirely of females. Unobtrusively I edged my way to a chair at the rear.

A girl seated beside me turned and offered a disapproving stare.

"What are you doing here?" she whispered. "Don't you know this is a discussion-group for lady writers? They're speaking on Woman's Lib."

"That's interesting," I said. "I've studied a little psychology and I know the problems of a woman's libido—"

"Woman's Liberation!" she snapped. "Listen, and maybe you'll learn something."

A strikingly-handsome young woman was addressing the audience over the microphone.

"It's a conspiracy!" she declared. "Everyone knows that Hugo Gernsback was a male-chauvinist pig. Ever since he started his science fiction magazine, the field has been totally usurped by men! They ignore the contributions of all the great women science fiction writers—from Mary Wollestonecraft Shelley to Julia Verne, Alice Huxley, Georgette Orwell, Roberta Heinfein and Kate Vonnegut, Jr. Just remember, it was we who put the *Gal* in *Galaxy*!"

I felt a surge of sympathy as she continued.

"We are entitled to proper recognition for our work, even if we have to girlcott every publisher in the field. We must take a stand against such masculine inventions as manned space-flights and the U.S. Mail Service! Forget history—what about herstory?"

It was all too true, and I found myself nodding in agreement. Not that nodding would help. There would have to be a more positive contribution, and suddenly the thought occurred to me—maybe I could make it. Even in this altered body of mine, I still retained certain powers. For example, if I *glixxed*—

Her voice rose shrilly. “Speaking for myself, I want—I am entitled—to everything a man has!”

She was right. I sat there, *vorching*, as her shrill voice continued.

“It’s time for a change!” she said.

So I *glixxed* her.

Suddenly the shrill voice deepened. She paused in mid-sentence, staring down at herself, and I knew I’d succeeded in granting her wish.

She knew it too—and so did the audience—as her hand went to her face and encountered the full beard.

As the crowd stared, pointed, milled and murmured in confusion, the speaker ran out of the room—perhaps she was going to get a shave.

I took advantage of the distraction to slip away myself. But at least I had the satisfaction of knowing I’d done one positive thing for the Woman’s Lib Movement; certainly the speaker had moved quickly enough.

There was just one thing wrong; I still didn’t have any personal egoboo. Next time I wouldn’t be so modest about my achievements—if there was a next time.

Wandering through the now-crowded corridor, I halted at the entrance to another meeting room, attracted by the imposing figure of a young man wearing a metal helmet, a coat of chainmail, and an iron truss.

“Pardon me, sir,” I said. “What’s happening here?”

He stared at me in surprise. “You mean you haven’t heard of out group—the Society For Anachronistic Creativity?”

Something about the name rang a bell. “Isn’t that the organization whose members dress up in medieval costumes—young people interested in the Middle Ages? Don’t they have tourneys and trials by combat with swords?”

He nodded. “Some of us have duet personalities,” he explained.

“Sounds familiar,” I told him. “I must have read about one of your leaders; I think it was John Carter of Mars.”

“You mean Lin Carter, don’t you?” He gestured towards the assemblage. “He’s inside with the others.”

I entered, gazing in astonishment at the crowd of fans wearing knightly garb as though it were a daily Recurrence. Never have I seen such’an array of gorgets, tippets, nasars, bassinets, jupons, baudricks, pauldrons and palletes; just looking at them brought on an acute case of metal-fatigue.

It made me feel almost naked to appear here without armor, but instead of skulking in the rear of the room I took a seat right down in front before the platform. The first step towards obtaining egoboo is to be noticed, and this time I resolved to attract attention.

But at the moment everyone gazed, through their visards at the speaker. The gentleman on the platform proudly identified himself as an aide-de-camp to L. Sprague deCamp, and he was expounding about a literary *genre* known as sword-and-sorcery.

Many of his references were unfamiliar to me—he kept mentioning characters called Fafhreds, Grey Mousers, and either an ancient hero or a modern villain whose name was Cohen the Barbarian. But I gathered that these stories dealt with combats between brawny adventurers and scrawny wizards—muscles versus magic. And something about the very phrase, sword-and-sorcery, sparked a notion of my own.

“Of course you must remember,” the speaker continued, “that what we are dealing with here is pure fantasy, which has nothing to do with science fiction.”

Before I realized it, my mind was made up and I was on my feet. “Not so!” I shouted.

The speaker frowned down at me. “What do you mean?” he said. “It’s all myth and legend. Running people through with swords—using spells and incantations—surely this isn’t the scientific approach?”

“Nothing is impossible,” I told him. “Swords exist, and so does sorcery.”

By this time the audience was staring at me. I felt the first heady pulsations of egoboo emanating from their interest, and it intoxicated me.

“Here!” I shouted, leaping to the platform. “Let me give you a demonstration.”

The speaker had unbuckled his weapon—a long, two-edged, lethal-looking blade—and placed it on the table before him. Now I snatched it up and waved it.

“This is a sword,” I said. “Now, observe!”

And before he could move, I drove the deadly steel full-length into his chest.

As he staggered and fell back, the audience rose, screaming.

“And now, the sorcery!”

I was yelling at the top of my voice, but nobody heard me amidst the screams of the crowd.

Quickly, I *glixxed* the speaker, pulling the blade from his chest and leaving him unharmed; without as much as a scratch to show for his ordeal.

But no one saw my magic; the entire assemblage had turned tail and fled the room, their armor rattling in fright and flight.

And now, as the speaker gaped at me, open-mouthed, I realized I’d better follow their example.

“Help—murder—police!” he cried.

if he was offering me a choice, I’d take help. And the best way to help myself was to flee through the small door at the rear of the platform.

I found myself in another corridor, and quickly lost myself again around the corner, far from the madding crowd.

Just to make certain of my escape I took the stairway up to the next floor. Here I halted and looked around, catching my breath and reassembling my scattered wits.

This, I realized, was apparently not the way to gain egoboo. All I’d succeeded in doing was frightening those fans out of their wits. If I wanted their acclaim, I’d have to offer them something more constructive. Next time I must remember to do something helpful.

And there had to be a next time, soon, before I got a reputation as a trouble-maker.

With that resolve I started off down the hail. As luck would have it, I blundered into a meeting of First Fandom.

For the benefit of those who are unfamiliar with the term. First Fandom consists of a group whose affiliation with science fiction goes back to before 1940—people like Dave Kyle, Jack Williamson, Doc Barrett and Lou Tabakow. They gather annually at the Worldcons to reminisce about the Sense of Wonder, the Golden Age of Science Fiction, and the good old days when they were young.

As I listened to them crying into their Geritol about their misspent youth and how they wished they'd misspent more of it, I was seized with a kindly impulse.

And two minutes later I was running down the corridor once more. Behind me I heard only boos, not egoboo.

Somehow I'd goofed again.

This time I didn't stop scurrying until I was back downstairs. Here it was my intention to lose myself in the crowd, but almost immediately I sensed that several fans were eyeing me suspiciously. Apparently rumors were already flying, and—from the way they muttered and pointed—might soon be followed by fists.

Unwilling to provoke a scene, I ducked into the nearest side-door and found myself in the Huckster Room.

The Huckster Room, for your information, is where the dealers set up their displays of fannish merchandise for sale—artwork, sculptures, movie *memorabilia,* comic books, foreign reprints and rare first editions of science fiction, and old magazines, dating back to the days when Doc Smith was only an interne.

It was fascinating to see the pulps in which science fiction started—truly a *Weird, Amazing, Fantastic, Startling* and *Astounding* array—and I couldn't help but respond to the *Thrilling Wonder* of it all.

Wandering down the aisles between the tables, I was inflamed by a desire to possess some of these goodies. Surely there could be no better souvenir of my visit than a genuine autographed copy of *The Outsider And Others* or a mint copy of a 1922 *Mickey Mouse Comics.*

I paused before a display of old horror-pulps and gazed greedily at titles known and loved by every trufan: *Spicy Mystery, Salty Terror,* and *Over-Seasoned Adventure.* Suddenly I discovered the prize of them all—a Volume One, Number One issue of *Sexy Science,* with its famous cover illustration of a naked girl attacking a bug-eyed monster.

The dealer behind the table, a bit of a bug-eyed monster himself, leered at me and drooled encouragingly.

“That’s Warm-Hearted Walter,” whispered a teen-age fan at my side. “A hard man to do business with. He’s still got the first nickel he ever stole.”

“I don’t care,” I told him. “I’ve got to have this magazine!”

“I warn you,” said the fan. “It’ll cost you an arm and a leg.”

“No problem,” I said.

I was just starting to remove my arm when Sherry grabbed me from behind.

“So here you are!” she panted. “Come with me!”

“In a moment—I’ve got business to attend to—”

“No you don’t!” Sherry tugged at my shoulder. “We know all about your business.”

Rick and Steve moved up on either side, apprehension in their eyes, and pulled me away.

“Hurry,” Sherry murmured. “We’ve got to get you out of here before they find you!”

“They?”

“Don’t try to cop out,” Steve said. “Everybody’s heard about that hairy session with the women authors, and your run-in with the sword-and-sorcery people.”

They hustled me down the hail to the back stairs.

“Better take these and keep out of sight,” Rick said.

“But I haven’t done anything—”

“Oh no? What about the First Fandom meeting?” He glared at me accusingly as we mounted the steps.

“I can explain,” I said. “When I heard all those elderly parties saying they wished they were young again, I just decided to help—”

“Turning them into babies was a bad idea,” Sherry told me. “I understand they’ve already had to change Sam Moskowitz’s diapers three times.”

“Maybe I was a bit hasty.” I sighed, turning to Rick. “Where are you taking me?”

“To the room. You’ll be safe there. Besides, we’ve got to get our costumes ready for the Masquerade.”

“The Masquerade?” I brightened. “This I’ve got to see.”

“No way,” Steve told me. “You’re going to keep out of sight. If anyone spots you now, there’ll be real trouble.”

“But I can’t miss the Masquerade,” I said. “It’s one of the highlights of the convention!” I nodded at Steve. “Couldn’t I come with you if I were a costume too? Then nobody would recognize me.”

“That’s a thought,” he conceded. “Let’s see what we can do.”

And we did. Once in the room, the trio donned their outfits. Sherry dressed as a witch, Rick put on a spacesuit, and Steve struggled into a metallic robot costume.

“What about me?” I said.

Sherry yanked a sheet off the bed. “You can wear this,” she said.

“Who am I supposed to be—a member of the Ku Klux Klan?”

“You’re a ghost, silly! Go ahead, put it on!” She nodded approvingly. “Now you’re safe. Nobody wilt recognize you.”

“But I want egoboo—”

“Never mind that. You’re sticking with us, understand? And don’t do anything to attract attention. When your turn comes, just walk across the stage.”

“Just wearing a ghost costume won’t win me a prize,” I protested. “I should have some kind of an act. Maybe! could speak—”

"You don't even say boo!" Sherry told me, firmly.

"How about letting me sing, then?"

"Out of the question," Rick said. "We don't have any sheet-music."

Steve glanced at his watch. "Time to go," he said. "Now remember—you stay undercover."

The auditorium was crowded. We stood backstage amidst a motley crew of mummies, zombies, warlocks, galactic explorers and characters from famous science fiction epics. And as I stared through the eyeholes of my sheet, the Masquerade began. A committee-member handed each of us a number, and when it was called, its owner paraded out before the footlights.

At first I was excited, but as the affair continued I began to feel a twinge of disappointment.

Quite frankly, I'd expected more than this prosaic procession of armed warriors, bearded enchanters and members of the Star Trek crew. And the costumes seemed duplicated time and again. Sherry and Rick and Steve proceeded me, but I knew they didn't stand a chance. There were a dozen other witches, a score of space-men, and a whole regiment of robots. And now, as I glanced around at those remaining to be called out, I noted a host of ghosts. I wouldn't win a prize either, unless—

Unless what?

I'd given my word not to speak or sing or open my mouth in any way to attract attention. And I didn't have a little act worked up; a routine to impress the audience.

As a matter of fact, none of the contestants impressed me. Wenches and warlocks were all very appropriate to a fantasy festival, but this was supposed to be a Masquerade of science fiction.

Something was missing. Where were all the aliens—the extraterrestials?

Under the sheet, stupid!

The thought hit me then—just as my number was called, and Sherry pushed me out under the glare of the lights. For a moment I stood before the crowd, debating what to do, then summoned my resolution. A vision of

Sexy *Science* flashed before my eyes, and concentrating on It, I *glixxed* myself.

Then, flinging my sheet aside, I flashed.

Just for a second I stood revealed to the audience with my green, scaly body, my four arms, six legs, and bulging eyes covered with cockroaches. There I was, complete to the last detail—the bug-eyed monster from the magazine cover.

Then I felt Rick and Steve lifting me from behind and hauling me offstage into the far wings.

"Put me down!" I yelled, as I *glixxed* back into human form again. "Hey—where are you taking me?"

"Away. And we'd better hurry!" Sherry was beside me, gesturing towards an exit leading into the outer corridor. As we hastened to the elevator the babble of voices from the auditorium faded.

Rick pressed the button. As the car-doors closed and the elevator ascended, he sighed in relief, then faced me. "You did it again," he said. "And here I thought we could trust you!"

"I only wanted to win a prize," I told him.

Sherry shook her head. "Obviously you don't know anything about Masquerades," she said. "The judges already had made up their minds—I heard them talking backstage. Third prize goes to the girl with the plunging neckline, second prize to the girl with the bare breasts. And first prize goes to the girl who came out naked. They *always* win!"

"And you're a loser," Steve muttered. "Unless we protect you. I can just see what will happen if we let you run around loose any longer. Next thing we know you'll be showing up at the Count Dracula Society meeting as a vampire. You'll go to the Burroughs Bibliophile luncheon and turn into a gorilla. And what will we do if you attend the Georgette Heyer tea and decide to turn into Georgette Heyer?"

The elevator halted and the doors slid open.

"Come on," said Rick. "Let's go."

I hesitated. "Where are you taking me?"

“To Suite 16,” Sherry said. “You’ll be in safe hands there.”

They led me to a door at the far end of the hall and Rick knocked.

“What’s the password?” demanded a muffled voice from within the room.

“Beam,” Rick murmured.

Instantly the door flew open and there, confronting us, was a tall, kindly-looking gentleman with a smiling face.

“Meet Bob Tucker,” said Sherry.

“Bob *Tucker*?” I gasped. My knees began to tremble. And well they might, for this was indeed a Big Name Fan, a true Secret Master, a veritable Elder God of Fandom. Impulsively, I dropped to my knees and kissed his hand.

Ignoring me graciously, Tucker turned and listened as Sherry whispered in his ear.

“Eight.” Tucker nodded. “Leave everything to me.”

Sherry beckoned to Rick and Steve. They followed her to the door.

“Where are you going?” I cried.

“Never mind, they’ll be back,” Tucker said, closing the door behind them. “Now stop worrying. Sherry explained what happened, and I understand. There’s nothing to be afraid of—I’ll take care of you.”

“But I want to see the rest of the Convention,” I said. “Saturday night is supposed to be the time for the riots, the smoke-filled rooms—”

“We can have our own riot right here,” Tucker assured me, producing a cigar. “And I guarantee to fill this room with smoke in thirty seconds. Now come on—you and I are going to have a little drink.”

Turning, he lifted a bottle from the bureau and filled two glasses with fluid colored like darkly-shining brass.

“That’s not beer, is it?” I said. “Beer makes me sick.”

Tucker shook his head. “Have no fear, this isn’t beer.” He handed a glass to me and raised his own. “Drink up,” he said. “It’s smo-ooooo-th!”

“Smo-ooooo-th!” I echoed.

Tilting the glass to my lips, I drank.

Smo-ooooo-thly, the liquor gurgled down into my stomach. Smo-ooooo-thly the room spun round and round. Smo-ooooo-thly my eyes closed and I fell back upon the bed. Smo-ooooo-thly I passed out.

When I came to again, it was seven o'clock, Sunday night.

What more can I say? They'd tricked me, all of them, but I understood. It had been done with good intentions, to keep me out of further peril. I bore them no ill-will.

But now, as I opened my eyes and found myself alone in Suite 16, I was seized with a dreadful realization.

The climax of the Worldcon—the Hugo Awards Banquet—was scheduled to start promptly at six p.m. And I was missing it!

Tottering to my feet—none too smo-ooooo-thly—I staggered to the door. Nobody barred my way, and the corridor beyond was silent and deserted.

I raced to the elevator, descended to the third floor, and found myself caught up in the crowd pressing its way into the banquet-hall. Fortunately, everyone was so intent on entering and my presence passed unnoticed. But from remarks I heard, I gathered the actual banquet meal was ended. Now, as the waiters hasten to pick up the remains of the rubber chicken and took it away for retreads, the non-attendees were being allowed into the hall to hear the speeches and the award ceremonies.

Mingling with the mob, I found a place at the back of the room and stared past the audience, admiring the distinguished figures on the dias. Some of them I recognized—Joanna Russ, Frank Herbert, A.E. van Vogt, Hal Clement—names to conjure with. As a matter of fact, the entire assemblage was packed with notables; the artists, editors, authors and fans who had created this unique phenomenon of science fiction. I felt a warm glow steal over me as I observed them—almost as warm a glow as I'd gotten from Bob Tucker's smo-oooo-th concoction.

No doubt about it; this was an intoxicating moment.

And when the toastmaster stood up to present the Hugo Awards for the best work in the field for the past year, I found myself listening spellbound

—nodding in accord as he stressed the fact that while only one award was given in each category, all of the nominees were winners.

He began to read off names and hand out the trophies—two-foot high metal figures of space-rockets, gleaming and sharply pointed at the end—I felt a surge of sentiment. Not just for the recipients, but for all those present here; all these wonderful fans and pros who had made this weekend memorable to me. Oh, earthlings are primitive, their ways and ceremonies are childish—but people like these, inspired infants striving to reach the stars—are truly the hope of the future.

All at once I realized that my craving for egoboo had vanished. The petty desire for personal attention was gone, and in its place was an unselfish appreciation of the whole of science fiction fandom. Maybe the so-called serious scientific world mocked their make-believe, but out of their imagination would come the reality which would raise mankind to the limits of outer space. If there was only some way I could express my gratitude—

Too late.

Something pulsed inside my human skull. A message, telling me my vacation was over. The *vroob* had *grocefed* down to the hotel roof, arriving right on schedule, and I must join it there to *scrinch* home.

Silently, I slipped away. Quickly, I ascended the elevator to the topmost floor where a skylight led me to the rooftop.

I entered the ship, and we got ready to go into a *blik.*

No time to thank Sherry and Rick and Steve for what they'd done; no time to thank all the others who'd helped to give me such a marvelous experience. *Too* late.

Or was it?

As we started to *scrinch,* inspiration seized me. I remembered what the toastmaster had said, about all the nominees deserving Hugos. Why stop there?

Suppose everyone—everyone there at the banquet—got a Hugo for their very own?

That was one way of saying thanks.

Quickly, I went into a *glix.* Too quickly, perhaps.

For as we swooped down past the hotel, I caught a glimpse of the banquet-hail through the windows. Everyone was screaming and jumping to their feet, as if in a standing ovation. But that wasn't the reason.

Apparently, in my haste, I'd made a slight error. I'd *glixxed* everybody a Hugo under their seat—forgetting that, in English, the words "chair" and "seat" are not necessarily synonymous.

Anyway, I could only hope they got the point.

And as we *scrinched* off I smiled, happy with my memories of the past and hopeful with my expectations of the future. After all, they tell me these Worldcons are annual affairs.

I can hardly wait for next year. . . .

A Most Unusual Murder

It all started outside an especially curious curiosity shop in London's Saxe-Coburg Square . . . and ended in a shabby lodging at 17 Dorcas Lane, the two friends drawn there by a famous mystery and themselves becoming part of the terrible legend . . .

O*nly the dead know Brooklyn.*

Thomas Wolfe said that, and he's dead now, so he ought to know.

London, of course, is a different story.

At least that's the way Hilary Kane thought of it. Not as a story, perhaps, but rather as an old-fashioned, outsize picaresque novel in which every street was a chapter crammed with characters and incidents of its own. Each block a page, each structure a separate paragraph unto itself within the sprawling, tangled plot—such was Hilary Kane's concept of the city, and he knew it well.

Over the years he strolled the pavements, reading the city sentence by sentence until every line was familiar; he'd learned London by heart.

And that's why he was so startled when, one bleak afternoon late in November, he discovered the shop in Saxe-Coburg Square. "I'll be damned!" he said.

"Probably." Lester Woods, his companion, took the edge off the affirmation with an indulgent smile. "What's the problem?"

“This.” Kane gestured towards the tiny window of the establishment nestled inconspicuously between two residential relics of Victoria’s day.

“An antique place.” Woods nodded. “At the rate they’re springing up there must be at least one for every tourist in London.”

“But not here.” Kane frowned. “I happen to have come by this way less than a week ago, and I’d swear there was no shop in the Square.”

“Then it must have opened since.” The two men moved up to the entrance, glancing through the display window in passing.

Kane’s frown deepened. “You call this new? Look at the dust on those goblets.”

“Playing detective again, eh?” Woods shook his head. “Trouble with you, Hilary, is that you have too many hobbies.” He glanced across the Square as a chill wind heralded the coming of twilight. “Getting late—we’d better move along.”

“Not until I find out about this.”

Kane was already opening the door and Woods sighed. “The game is afoot, I suppose. All right, let’s get it over with.”

The shop-bell tinkled and the two men stepped inside. The door closed, the tinkling stopped, and they stood in the shadows and the silence.

But one of the shadows was not silent. It rose from behind the single counter in the small space before the rear wall.

“Good afternoon, gentlemen,” said the shadow. And switched on an overhead light. It cast a dim nimbus over the countertop and gave dimension to the shadow, revealing the substance of a diminutive figure with an unremarkable face beneath a balding brow.

Kane addressed the proprietor. “Mind if we have a look?”

“Is there any special area of interest?” The proprietor gestured toward the shelves lining the wall behind him. “Books, maps, china, crystal?”

“Not really,” Kane said. “It’s just that I’m always curious about a new shop of this sort—”

The proprietor shook his head. “Begging your pardon, but it’s hardly new.”

Woods glanced at his friend with a barely suppressed smile, but Kane ignored him.

"Odd," Kane said. "I've never noticed this place before."

"Quite so. I've been in business a good many years, but this *is a* new location."

Now it was Kane's turn to glance quickly at Woods, and his smile was not suppressed. But Woods was already eyeing the artifacts on display, and after a moment Kane began his own inspection.

Peering at the shelving beneath the glass counter, he made a rapid inventory. He noted a boudoir lamp with a beaded fringe, a lavaliere, a tray of pearly buttons, a durbar souvenir programme, and a framed and inscribed photograph of Matilda Alice Victoria Wood *aka* Bella Delmare *aka* Marie Lloyd. There was a miscellany of old jewelry, hunting-watches, pewter mugs, napkin rings, a toy bank in the shape of a miniature Crystal Palace, and a display poster of a formidably mustached Lord Kitchener with his gloved finger extended in a gesture of imperious command.

It was, he decided, the mixture as before. Nothing unusual, and most of it—like the Kitchener poster—not even properly antique but merely outmoded. Those fans on the bottom shelf, for example, and the silk toppers, the opera glasses, the black bag in the far comer covered with what was once called "American cloth."

Something about the phrase caused Kane to stoop and make a closer inspection. *American cloth.* Dusty now, but once shiny, like the tarnished silver nameplate identifying its owner. He read the inscription.

J. Ridley, MD.

Kane looked up, striving to conceal his sudden surge of excitement.

Impossible! It couldn't be—and yet it was. Keeping his voice and gesture carefully casual, he indicated the bag to the proprietor.

"A medical kit?"

"Yes, I imagine so."

"Might I ask where you acquired it?"

The little man shrugged. “Hard to remember. In this line one picks up the odd item here and there over the years.”

“Might I have a look at it, please?”

The elderly proprietor lifted the bag to the countertop. Woods stared at it, puzzled, but Kane ignored him, his gaze intent on the nameplate below the lock. “Would you mind opening it?” he said.

“I’m afraid I don’t have a key.”

Kane reached out and pressed the lock; it was rusted, but firmly fixed. Frowning, he lifted the bag and shook it gently.

Something jiggled inside, and as he heard the click of metal against metal his elation peaked. Somehow he suppressed it as he spoke.

“How much are you asking?”

The proprietor was equally emotionless. “Not for sale.”

“But—”

“Sorry, sir. It’s against my policy to dispose of blind items. And since there’s no telling what’s inside—”

“Look, it’s only an old medical bag. I hardly imagine it contains the Crown jewels.”

In the background Woods snickered, but the proprietor ignored him. “Granted,” he said. “But one can’t be certain of the contents.” Now the little man lifted the bag and once again there was a clicking sound. “Coins, perhaps.”

“Probably just surgical instruments,” Kane said impatiently. “Why don’t you force the lock and settle the matter?”

“Oh, I couldn’t do that. It would destroy its value.”

“What value?” Kane’s guard was down now; he knew he’d made a tactical error but he couldn’t help himself.

The proprietor smiled. “I told you the bag is not for sale.”

“Everything has its price.”

Kane’s statement was a challenge, and the proprietor’s smile broadened as he met it. “One hundred pounds.”

“A hundred pounds for *that?”* Woods grinned—then gaped at Kane’s response.

“Done and done.”

“But, sir—”

For answer Kane drew out his wallet and extracted five twenty-pound notes. Placing them on the countertop, he lifted the bag and moved toward the door. Woods followed hastily, turning to close the door behind him.

The proprietor gestured. “Wait—come back—”

But Kane was already hurrying down the street, clutching the black bag under his arm.

He was still clutching it half an hour later as Woods moved with him into the spacious study of Kane’s flat overlooking the verdant vista of Cadogan Square. Dappled splotches of sunlight reflected from the gleaming oilcloth as Kane set the bag on the table and carefully wiped away the film of dust with a dampened rag. He smiled triumphantly at Woods.

“Looks a bit better now, don’t you think?”

“I don’t think anything.” Woods shook his head. “A hundred pounds for an old medical kit—”

“A *very* old medical kit,” said Kane. “Dates back to the Eighties, if I’m not mistaken.”

“Even so, I hardly see—”

“Of course you wouldn’t! I doubt if anyone besides myself would attach much significance to the name of J. Ridley, M.D.”

“Never heard of him.”

“That’s understandable.” Kane smiled. “He preferred to call himself Jack the Ripper.”

“Jack the Ripper?”

“Surely you know the case. Whitechapel, 1888—the savage slaying and mutilation of prostitutes by a cunning mass-murderer who taunted the police—a shadow, stalking his prey in the streets.”

Woods frowned. “But he was never caught, was he? Not even identified.”

“In that you’re mistaken. No murderer has been identified quite as frequently as Red Jack. At the time of the crimes and over the years since, a score of suspects were named. A prime candidate was the Pole, Klosowski, alias George Chapman, who killed several wives—but poison was his method and gain his motive whereas the Ripper’s victims were all penniless prostitutes who died under the knife. Another convicted murderer, Neil Cream, even openly proclaimed he was the Ripper—”

“Wouldn’t that be the answer, then?”

Kane shrugged. “Unfortunately, Cream happened to be in America at the time of the Ripper murders. Egomania prompted his false confession.” He shook his head. “Then there was John Pizer, a bookbinder known by the nickname of ‘Leather Apron’—he was actually arrested, but quickly cleared and released. Some think the killings were the work of a Russian called Konovalov who also went by the name of Pedachenko and worked as a barber’s surgeon; supposedly he was a Tsarist secret agent who perpetrated the slayings to discredit the British police.”

“Sounds pretty far-fetched if you ask me.”

“Exactly.” Kane smiled. “But there are other candidates, equally improbable. Montague John Druitt for one, a barrister of unsound mind who drowned himself in the Thames shortly after the last Ripper murder. Unfortunately, it has been established that he was living in Bournemouth, and on the days before and after the final slaying he was there, playing cricket. Then there was the Duke of Clarence—”

“Who?”

“Queen Victoria’s grandson in direct line of succession to the throne.”

“Surely you’re not serious?”

“No, but others are. It has been asserted that Clarence was a known deviate who suffered from insanity as the result of venereal infection, and that his death in 1892 was actually due to the ravages of his disease.”

“But that doesn’t prove him to be the Ripper.”

“Quite so. It hardly seems possible that he could write the letters filled with American slang and crude errors in grammar and spelling which the Ripper sent to the authorities; letters containing information which could be known only by the murderer and the police. More to the point, Clarence was in Scotland at the time of one of the killings and at Sandringham when others took place. And there are equally firm reasons for exonerating suggested suspects close to him—his friend James Stephen and his physician, Sir William Gull.”

“You’ve really studied up on this,” Woods murmured. “I’d no idea you were so keen on it.”

“And for good reason. I wasn’t about to make a fool of myself by advancing an untenable notion. I don’t believe the Ripper was a seaman, as some surmise, for there’s not a scintilla of evidence to back the theory. Nor do I think the Ripper was a slaughterhouse worker, a midwife, a man disguised as a woman, or a London bobby. And I doubt the very existence of a mysterious physician named Dr. Stanley, out to avenge himself against the woman who had infected him, or his son.”

“But there do seem to be a great number of medical men amongst the suspects,” Woods said.

“Right you are, and for good reason. Consider the nature of the crimes—the swift and skillful removal of vital organs, accomplished in the darkness of the streets under constant danger of imminent discovery. All this implies the discipline of someone versed in anatomy, someone with the cool nerves of a practising surgeon. Then too there’s the matter of escaping detection. The Ripper obviously knew the alleys and byways of the East End so thoroughly that he could slip through police cordons and patrols without discovery. But if seen, who would have a better alibi than a respectable physician, carrying a medical bag on an emergency call late at night?

“With that in mind, I set about my search, examining the rolls of London Hospital in Whitechapel Road. I went over the names of physicians and surgeons listed in the Medical Registry for that period.”

“All of them?”

“It wasn’t necessary. I knew what I was looking for—a surgeon who lived and practised in the immediate Whitechapel area. Whenever possible, I followed up with a further investigation of my suspects’ histories—researching hospital and clinic affiliations, even hobbies and background activities from medical journals, press reports, and family records. Of course, all this takes a great deal of time and patience. I must have been tilting at this windmill for a good five years before I found my man.”

Woods glanced at the nameplate on the bag. “J. Ridley, M.D.?”

“John Ridley. *Jack,* to his friends—if he had any.” Kane paused, thoughtful. “But that’s just the point. Ridley appears to have had no friends, and no family. An orphan, he received his degree from Edinburgh in 1878, ten years before the date of the murders. He set up private practise here in London, but there is no office address listed. Nor is there any further information to be found concerning him; it’s as though he took particular care to suppress every detail of his personal and private life. This, of course, is what roused my suspicions. For an entire decade J. Ridley lived and practised in the East End without a single mention of his name anywhere in print, except for his Registry listing. And after 1888, even *that* disappeared.”

“Suppose he died?”

“There’s no obituary on record.”

Woods shrugged. “Perhaps he moved, emigrated, took sick, abandoned practise?”

“Then why the secrecy? Why conceal his whereabouts? Don’t you see—it’s the very lack of such ordinary details which leads me to suspect the extraordinary.”

“But that’s not evidence. There’s no proof that your Dr. Ridley was the Ripper.”

“That’s why this is so important.” Kane indicated the bag on the tabletop. “If we knew its history, where it came from—”

As he spoke, Kane reached down and picked up a brass letter-opener from the table, then moved to the bag.

“Wait.” Woods put a restraining hand on Kane’s shoulder. “That may not be necessary.”

“What do you mean?”

“I think the shopkeeper was lying. He knew what the bag contains—he had to, or else why did he fix such a ridiculous price? He never dreamed you’d take him up on it, of course. But there’s no need for you to force the lock any more than there was for him to do so. My guess is that he has a key.”

“You’re right.” Kane set the letter-opener down. “I should have realized, if I’d taken the time to consider his reluctance. He must have the key.” He lifted the shiny bag and turned. “Come along—let’s get back to him before the shop closes. And this time we won’t be put off by any excuses.”

Dusk had descended as Kane and his companion hastened through the streets, and darkness was creeping across the deserted silence of Saxe-Coburg Square when they arrived.

They halted then, staring into the shadows, seeking the spot where the shop nestled between the residences looming on either side. The shadows were deeper here and they moved closer, only to stare again at the empty gap between the two buildings.

The shop was gone.

Woods blinked, then turned and gestured to Kane. “But we were here—we saw it—”

Kane didn’t reply. He was staring at the dusty, rubble-strewn surface of the space between the structures; at the weeds which sprouted from the bare ground beneath. A chill night wind echoed through the emptiness. Kane stooped and sifted a pinch of dust between his fingers. The dust was cold, like the wind that whirled the fine grains from his hand and blew them away into the darkness.

“What happened?” Woods was murmuring. “Could we both have dreamed—”

Kane stood erect, facing his friend. “This isn’t a dream,” he said, gripping the black bag.

“Then what’s the answer?”

“I don’t know.” Kane frowned thoughtfully. “But there’s only one place where we can possibly find it.”

“Where?”

“The 1888 Medical Registry lists the address of John Ridley as Number 17 Dorcas Lane.”

The cab which brought them to Dorcas Lane could not enter its narrow accessway. The dim alley beyond was silent and empty, but Kane plunged into it without hesitation, moving along the dark passage between solid rows of grimy brick. Treading over the cobblestones, it seemed to Woods that he was being led into another era, yet Kane’s progress was swift and unfaltering.

“You’ve been here before?” Woods said.

“Of course.” Kane halted before the unlighted entrance to Number 17, then knocked.

The door opened—not fully, but just enough to permit the figure behind it to peer out at them. Both glance and greeting were guarded.

“Whatcher want?”

Kane stepped into the fan of light from the partial opening. “Good evening. Remember me?”

“Yes.” The door opened wider and Woods could see the squat shadow of the middle-aged woman who nodded up at his companion. “Yer the one what rented the back vacancy last Bank ’oliday, ain’tcher?”

“Right. I was wondering if I might have it again.”

“I dunno.” The woman glanced at Woods.

“Only for a few hours.” Kane reached for his wallet. “My friend and I have a business matter to discuss.”

“Business, eh?” Woods felt the unflattering appraisal of the landlady’s beady eyes. “Cost you a fiver.”

“Here you are.”

A hand extended to grasp the note. Then the door opened fully, revealing the dingy hall and the stairs beyond.

“Mind the steps now,” the landlady said.

The stairs were steep and the woman was puffing as they reached the upper landing. She led them along the creaking corridor to the door at the rear, fumbling for the keys in her apron.

“ ’Ere we are.”

The door opened on musty darkness, scarcely dispelled by the faint illumination of the overhead fixture as she switched it on. The landlady nodded at Kane. “I don’t rent this for lodgings no more—it ain’t properly made up.”

“Quite all right.” Kane smiled, his hand on the door.

“If there’s anything you’ll be needing, best tell me now. I’ve got to run over to the neighbor for a bit—she’s been took ill.”

“I’m sure we’ll manage.” Kane closed the door, then listened for a moment as the landlady’s footsteps receded down the hall.

“Well,” he said. “What do you think?”

Woods surveyed the shabby room with its single window framed by yellowing curtains. He noted the faded carpet with its pattern wellnigh worn away, the marred and chipped surfaces of the massive old bureau and heavy morris-chair, the brass bed covered with a much-mended spread, the ancient gas-log in the fireplace framed by a cracked marble mantelpiece, and the equally-cracked washstand fixture in the corner.

“I think you’re out of your mind,” Woods said. “Did I understand correctly that you’ve been here before?”

“Exactly. I came several months ago, as soon as I found the address in the Registry. I wanted a look around.”

Woods wrinkled his nose. “More to smell than there is to see.”

“Use your imagination, man! Doesn’t it mean anything to you that you’re standing in the very room once occupied by Jack the Ripper?”

Woods shook his head. “There must be a dozen rooms to let in this old barn. What makes you think this is the right one?”

“The Registry entry specified ‘rear’. And there are no rear accommodations downstairs—that’s where the kitchen is located. So this has to be the place.”

Kane gestured. “Think of it—you may be looking at the very sink where the Ripper washed away the traces of his butchery, the bed in which he slept after his dark deeds were performed! Who knows what sights this room has seen and heard—the voice crying out in a tormented nightmare—”

“Come off it, Hilary!” Woods grimaced impatiently. “It’s one thing to use your imagination, but quite another to let your imagination use you.”

“Look.” Kane pointed to the far corner of the room. “Do you see those indentations in the carpet? I noticed them when I examined this room on my previous visit. What do they suggest to you?” Woods peered dutifully at the worn surface of the carpet, noting the four round, evenly spaced marks. “Must have been another piece of furniture in that corner. Something heavy, I’d say.”

“But what sort of furniture?”

“Well—” Woods considered. “Judging from the space, it wasn’t a sofa or chair. Could have been a cabinet, perhaps a large desk—”

“Exactly. A rolltop desk. Every doctor had one in those days.” Kane sighed. “I’d give a pretty penny to know what became of that item. It might have held the answer to all our questions.”

“After all these years? Not bloody likely.” Woods glanced away. “Didn’t find anything else, did you?”

“I’m afraid not. As you say, it’s been a long time since the Ripper stayed here.”

“I didn’t say that.” Woods shook his head. “You may be right about the desk. And no doubt the Medical Registry gives a correct address. But all it means is that this room may once have been rented by a Dr. John Ridley. You’ve already inspected it once—why bother to come back?”

“Because now I have this.” Kane placed the black bag on the bed. “And this.” He produced a pocket-knife.

“You intend to force the lock after all?”

“In the absence of a key I have no alternative.” Kane wedged the blade under the metal guard and began to pry upwards. “It’s important that the bag be opened here. Something it contains may very well be associated with this room. If we recognize the connection we might have an additional clue, a conclusive link—”

The lock snapped.

As the bag sprang open, the two men stared down at its contents—the jumble of vials and pillboxes, the clumsy old-style stethescope, the probes and tweezers, the roll of gauze. And, resting atop it, the scalpel with the steel-tipped surface encrusted with brownish stains.

They were still staring as the door opened quietly behind them and the balding, elderly little man entered the room.

“I see my guess was correct, gentlemen. You too have read the Medical Registry.” He nodded. “I was hoping I’d find you here.”

Kane frowned. “What do you want?”

“I’m afraid I must trouble you for my bag.”

“But it’s my property now—I bought it.”

The little man sighed. “Yes, and I was a fool to permit it. I thought putting on that price would dissuade you. How was I to know you were a collector like myself?”

“Collector?”

“Of curiosa pertaining to murder.” The little man smiled. “A pity you cannot see some of the memorabilia I’ve acquired. Not the commonplace items associated with your so-called Black Museum in Scotland Yard, but true rarities with historical significance.” He gestured. “The silver jar in which the notorious French sorceress, La Voisin, kept her poisonous ointments, the actual dirks which dispatched the unfortunate nephews of Richard III in the Tower—yes, even the poker responsible for the atrocious demise of Edward II at Berkeley Castle on the night of September 21st, 1327. I had quite a bit of trouble locating it until I realized the date was reckoned according to the old Julian calendar.”

Kane frowned impatiently. “Who are you? What happened to that shop of yours?”

“My name would mean nothing to you. As for the shop, let us say that it exists spatially and temporally as I do—when and where necessary for my purposes. By your current and limited understanding, you might call it a sort of time-machine.”

Woods shook his head. “You’re not making sense.”

“Ah, but I am, and very good sense too. How else do you think I could pursue my interests so successfully unless I were free to travel in time? It is my particular pleasure to return to certain eras in this primitive past of yours, visiting the scenes of famous and infamous crimes and locating trophies for my collection.

“The shop, of course, is just something I used as a blind for this particular mission. It’s gone now, and I shall be going too, just as soon as I retrieve my property. It happens to be the souvenir of a most unusual murder.”

“You see?” Kane nodded at Woods. “I told you this bag belonged to the Ripper!”

“Not so,” said the little man. “I already have the Ripper’s murder weapon, which I retrieved directly after the slaying of his final victim on November 9th, 1888. And I can assure you that your Dr. Ridley was not Jack the Ripper but merely and simply an eccentric surgeon—” As he spoke, he edged toward the bed.

“No you don’t!” Kane turned to intercept him, but he was already reaching for the bag.

“Let go of that!” Kane shouted.

The little man tried to pull away, but Kane’s hand swooped down frantically into the open bag and clawed. Then it rose, gripping the scalpel.

The little man yanked the bag away. Clutching it, he retreated as Kane bore down upon him furiously.

“Stop!” Woods cried. Hurling himself forward, he stepped between the two men, directly into the orbit of the descending blade.

There was a gurgle, then a thud, as he fell.

The scalpel clattered to the floor, slipping from Kane's nerveless fingers and coming to rest amidst the crimson stain that seeped and spread.

The little man stooped and picked up the scalpel. "Thank you," he said softly. "You have given me what I came for." He dropped the weapon into the bag.

Then he shimmered.

Shimmered—and disappeared.

But Woods' body didn't disappear. Kane stared down at it—at the throat ripped open from ear to ear.

He was still staring when they came and took him away.

The trial, of course, was a sensation. It wasn't so much the crazy story Kane told as the fact that nobody could ever find the fatal weapon.

It was a most unusual murder . . .

A Case of the Stubborns

Robert Bloch received last year's World Fantasy Convention Life Award, an award that was not only richly deserved, but also seems to have happily generated a burst of writing from Mr. Bloch. Here is the first of several new tales we have on hand from the master of the contemporary weird tale.

The morning after he died, Grandpa come downstairs for breakfast.

It kind of took us by surprise.

Ma looked at Pa, Pa looked at little sister Susie, and Susie looked at me. Then we all just set there looking at Grandpa.

"What's the matter," he said. "Why you all staring at me like that?"

Nobody said, but I knowed the reason. Only been last night since all of us stood by his bedside when he was took by his attack and passed away right in front of our very eyes. But here he was, up and dressed and feisty as ever.

"What's for breakfast?" he said.

Ma sort of gulped. "Don't tell me you fixing to eat?"

"Course I am. I'm nigh starved."

Ma looked at Pa, but he just rolled his eyes. Then she went and hefted the skillet from the stove and dumped some eggs on a plate.

"That's more like," Grandpa told her. "But don't I smell sausages?" Ma got Grandpa some sausage. The way he dug into it, they sure was nothing wrong with his appetite.

After he started on seconds, Grandpa took heed of us staring at him again.

“How come nobody else is eating?” he asked.

“We ain’t hungry,” Pa said. And that was the gospel truth.

“Man’s got to eat to keep up his strength,” Grandpa told him. “Which reminds me—ain’t you gonna be late at the mill?”

“Don’t figure on working today,” Pa said.

Grandpa squinted at him. “You all fancied-up this morning. Shave and a shirt, just like Sunday. You expecting company?”

Ma was looking out the kitchen window, and she give Grandpa a nod. “Yes, indeedy. Here he comes now.”

Sure enough, we could see ol’ Bixbee hotfooting up the walk.

Ma went through the parlor to the front door—meaning to head him off, I reckon—but he fooled her and come around the back way. Pa got to the kitchen door too late, on account of Bixbee already had it and his mouth open at the same time.

“Morning, Jethro,” he said, in that treacle-and-molasses voice of his. “And a sad grievous morning it is, too! I purely hate disturbing you so early on this sorrowful occasion, but it looks like today’s another scorcher.” He pulled out a tape measure. “Best if I got the measurements so’s to get on with the arrangements. Heat like this, the sooner we get everything boxed and squared away the better, if you take my meaning—”

“Sorry,” said Pa, blocking the doorway so ol’ Bixbee couldn’t peek inside. “Needs be you come back later.”

“How much later?”

“Can’t say for sure. We ain’t rightly made up our minds as yet.”

“Well don’t dilly-dally too long,” Bixbee said. “I’m liable to run short of ice.”

Then Pa shut the door on him and he took off. When Ma come back from the parlor, Pa made a sign for her to keep her gap shut, but of course that didn’t stop Grandpa.

“What was that all about?” he asked.

“Purely a social call.”

“Since when?” Grandpa looked suspicious. “CM’ Bixbee ain’t nobody’s friend—him with his high-toned airs! Calls hisself a Southern planter. Shucks, he ain’t nothing but an undertaker.”

“That’s right, Grandpa,” said sister Susie. “He come to fit you for your coffin.”

“Coffin?” Grandpa reared up in his seat like a hog caught in a bobwire fence. “What in bo-diddley blazes do I need with a coffin?”

“Because you’re dead.”

Just like that she come out with it. Ma and Pa was both ready to take after her but Grandpa laughed fit to bust.

“Holy hen-tracks, child—what on earth give you an idee like that?”

Pa moved in on Susie, taking off his belt, but Ma shook her head. Then she nodded to Grandpa.

“It’s true. You passed on last night. Don’t you recollect?”

“Ain’t nothing wrong with my memory,” Grandpa told her. “I had me one of my spells, is all.”

Ma fetched a sigh. “Wasn’t just no spell this time.”

“A fit, mebbe?”

“More’n that. You was took so bad, Pa had to drag Doc Snodgrass out of his office—busted up the game right in the middle of a three-dollar pot. Didn’t do no good, though. By the time he got here you was gone.”

“But I ain’t gone. I’m here!” Pa spoke up. “Now don’t git up on your high horse, Grandpa. We all saw you. We’re witnesses.”

“Witnesses?” Grandpa hiked his galluses like he always did when he got riled. “What kind talk is that? You aim to hold a jury trial to decide if I’m alive or dead?”

“But Grandpa—”

“Save your sass, sonny.” Grandpa stood up. “Ain’t nobody got a right to put me six feet under, ’thout my say-so.”

“Where you off to?” Ma asked. “Where I go ewy morning,” Grandpa said. “Gonna set on the front porch and watch the sights.” Dumed if he didn’t do just that, leaving us behind in the kitchen.

“Wouldn’t that frost you?” Ma said. She crooked a finger at the stove. “Here I went and pulled up half the greens in the garden, just planning my spread for after the funeral. I already told folks we’d be serving possum stew. What will the neighbors think?”

“Don’t you go fret now,” Pa said. “Mebee he ain’t dead after all.”

Ma made a face. “We know different. He’s just being persnickety.” She nudged at Pa. “Only one thing to do. You go fetch Doc Snodgrass. Tell him he’d best sashay over here right quick and settle this matter once and for all.”

“Reckon so,” Pa said and went out the back way. Ma looked at me and sister Susie.

“You kids go out on the porch and keep Grandpa company. See that he stays put till the Doc gets here.”

“Yessum,” said Susie, and we traipsed out of there.

Sure enough, Grandpa set in his rocker, big as life, squinting at cars over on the road and watching the drivers cuss when they tried to steer around our hogs.

“Lookee here!” he said, pointing. “See that fat feller in the Hupmobile? He come barreling down the road like a bat outta hell—must of been doing thirty mile an hour. ‘Fore he could stop, ol’ Bessie poked out of the weeds right in front of him and run that car clean into the ditch. I swear I never seen anything so comical in all my life!”

Susie shook her head. “But you ain’t alive, Grandpa.”

“Now don’t you start in on that again, hear!” Grandpa looked at her disgusted and Susie shut up.

Right then Doc Snodgrass come driving up front in his big Essex and parked alongside ol’ Bessie’s pork butt. Doc and Pa got out and moseyed up to the porch. They was jawing away something fierce, and I could see Doc shaking his head like he purely disbelieved what Pa was telling him.

Then Doc noticed Grandpa setting there, and he stopped cold in his tracks. His eyes bugged out.

“lumping Jehosephat!” he said to Grandpa. “What you doing here?”

“What’s it look like?” Grandpa told him. “Can’t a man set on his own front porch and rockify in peace?”

“Rest in peace, that’s what you should be doing,” said Doc. “When I examined you last night you were deader’n a doornail!”

“And you were drunker’n a coot, I reckon,” Grandpa said.

Pa give Doc a nod. “What’d I tell you?”

Doc paid him no heed. He come up to Grandpa. “Mebbe I was a wee bit mistaken,” he said. “Mind if I examine you now?”

“Fire away.” Grandpa grinned. “I got all the time in the world.”

So Doc opened up his little black bag and set about his business. First off he plugged a stethyscope in his ears and tapped Grandpa’s chest. He listened, and then his hands begun to shake.

“I don’t hear nothing,” he said.

“What you expect to hear—the Grand Ol’ Opery?”

“This here’s no time for funning,” Doc told him. “Suppose I tell you your heart’s stopped beating?”

“Suppose I tell you your stethyscope’s busted?”

Doc begun to break out in a sweat. He fetched out a mirror and held it up to Grandpa’s mouth. Then his hands got to shaking worse than ever.

“See this?” he said. “The mirror’s clear. Means you got no breath left in your body.”

Grandpa shook his head. “Try it on yourself. You got a breath on you would knock a mule over at twenty paces.”

“Mebbe this’ll change your tune.” Doc reached in his pocket and pulled out a piece of paper. “See for yourself.”

“What is it?”

“Your death certificate.” Doc jabbed his finger down. “Just you read what it says on this line. ’Cause of death—card-yak arrest.’ That’s medical for heart attack. And this here’s a legal paper. It’ll stand up in court.”

“So will I, if you want to drag the law into this,” Grandpa told him. “Be a pretty sight, too—you standing on one side with your damnfool piece of paper and me standing on the other! Now which do you think the judge is going to believe?"

Doc's eyes bugged out again. He tried to stuff the paper into his pocket but his hands shook so bad he almost didn't make it.

"What's wrong with you?" Pa asked.

"I feel poorly," Doc said. "Got to get back to my office and lie down for a spell." He picked up his bag and headed for his car, not looking back.

"Don't lie down too long," Grandpa called. "Somebody's liable to write out a paper saying you died of a hangover."

When lunchtime come around, nobody was hungry. Nobody but Grandpa, that is.

He set down at the table and put away black-eyed peas, hominy grits, a double helping of chitlins, and two big slabs of rhubarb pie with gravy.

Ma was the kind who liked seeing folks enjoy her vittles, but she didn't look kindly on Grandpa's appetite. After he finished and went back on the porch, she stacked the plates on the drain-board and told us kids to clean up. Then she went into the bedroom and come out with her shawl and pocketbook.

"What you all dressed up about?" Pa said.

"I'm going to church."

"But this here's only Thursday."

"Can't wait no longer," Ma told him. "It's been hot all forenoon and looking to get hotter. I seen you wrinkle up your nose whilst Grandpa was in here for lunch."

Pa sort of shrugged. "Figgered the chitlins was mebbe a little bit spoiled, is all."

"Weren't nothing of the sort," Ma said. "If you take me meaning."

"What you fixing to do?"

"Only thing a body can do. I'm putting ewything in the hands of the Lord."

And off she skaddaddled, leaving sister Susie and me to scour the dishes whilst Pa went out back, looking powerful troubled. I spied him through the window, slopping the hogs, but you could tell his heart wasn't in it.

Susie and me, we went out to keep tabs on Grandpa.

Ma was right about the weather heating up. That porch was like a bake-oven in the devil's own kitchen. Grandpa didn't seem to pay it any heed, but I did. Couldn't help but notice Grandpa was getting ripe.

"Look at them flies buzzing round him," Susie said.

"Hush up, sister."

But sure enough, them old blueflies buzzed so loud we could hardly hear Grandpa speak. "Hi, young 'uns," he said. "Come visit a spell."

"Sun's too hot for setting," Susie told him.

"Not so's I can notice." He weren't even working up a sweat.

"What about all them blue-flies?"

"Don't bother me none." Big ol' fly landed right on Grandpa's nose and he didn't even twitch.

Susie begun to look scared. "He's dead for sure," she said.

"Speak up, child," Grandpa said. "Ain't polite to go mumbling your elder."

Just then he spotted Ma marching up the road. Hot as it was, she come along lickety-split, with the Reverend Peabody in tow. He was huffing and puffing, but she never slowed until they fetched up alongside the front porch.

"Howdy, Reverend," Grandpa sung out.

Reverend Peabody blinked and opened his mouth, but no words come out.

"What's the matter?" Grandpa said. "Cat got your tongue?"

The Reverend got a kind of sick grin on his face, like a skunk eating bumblebees.

"Reckon I know how you feel," Grandpa told him. "Sun makes a feller's throat parch up." He looked at Ma. "Addie, whyn't you go fetch the Reverend a little refreshment?"

Ma went in the house.

“Well, now, Rev,” said Grandpa. “Rest your britches and be sociable.”

The Reverend swallowed hard. “This here’s not exactly a social call.”

“Then what you come dragging all the way over here for?”

The Reverend swallowed again. “After what Addie and Doc told me, I just had to see for myself.” He looked at the flies buzzing around Grandpa. “Now I wish I’d just took their word on it.”

“Meaning what?”

“Meaning a man in your condition’s got no right to be asking questions. When the good Lord calls, you’re supposed to answer.”

“I ain’t heard nobody calling,” Grandpa said. “Course my hearing’s not what it use to be.”

“So Doc says. That’s why you don’t notice your heart’s not beating.”

“Onny natural for it to slow down a piece. I’m pushing ninety you know.”

“Did you ever stop to think that ninety might be pushing back? You lived a mighty long stretch, Grandpa. Don’t you reckon mebbe it’s time to lie down and call it quits? Remember what the Good Book says—the Lord giveth, and the Lord taketh away.”

Grandpa got that feisty look on his face. “Well he ain’t gonna taketh away me.”

Reverend Peabody dug into his jeans for a bandanna and wiped his forehead. “You got no cause to fear. It’s a mighty rewarding experience. No more sorrow, no more care, all your burdens laid to rest. Not to mention getting out of this hot sun.”

“Can’t hardly feel it.” Grandpa touched his whiskers. “Can’t hardly feel anything.”

The Reverend give him a look. “Hands getting stiff?”

Grandpa nodded. “I’m stiff all over.”

“Just like I thought. You know what that means? Rigor mortis is setting in.”

“Ain’t never heard tell of anybody named Rigger Morris,” Grandpa said. “I got me a touch of the rheumatism, is all.”

The Reverend wiped his forehead again. “You sure want a heap of convincing,” he said. “Won’t take the word of a medical doctor, won’t take the word of the Lord. You’re the contrariest old coot I ever did see.”

“Reckon it’s my nature,” Grandpa told him. “But I ain’t unreasonable. All I’m asking for is proof. Like the feller says, I’m from Missouri. You got to show me.” The Reverend tucked away his bandanna. It was sopping wet anyhow, wouldn’t do him a lick of good. He heaved a big sigh and stared Grandpa right in the eye.

“Some things we just got to take on faith,” he said. “Like you setting here when by rights you should be six feet under the daisies. If I can believe that, why can’t you believe me? I’m telling you the mortal truth when I say you got no call to fuss. Mebbe the notion of lying in the grave don’t rightly hold much appeal for you. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust—that’s just a saying. You needn’t trouble yourself about spending eternity in the grave. Whilst your remains rest peaceful in the boneyard, your soul is on the wing. Flying straight up, yesiree, straight into the arms of the Lord! And what a great day it’s fixing to be—you free as a bird and scooting around with them heavenly hosts on high, singing the praises of the Almighty and twanging away like all git-out on your genuine 18-carrots solid golden harp—”

“I ain’t never been much for music,” Grandpa said. “And I get dizzy just standing on a ladder to shingle the privy.” He shook his head. “Tell you what—you think heaven is such a hellfired good proposition, why don’t you go there yourself?”

Just then Ma come back out. “We’re fresh out of lemonade,” she said. “All’s I could find was a jug. I know your feeling about such things, Reverend, but—”

“Praise the Lord!” The Reverend snatched the jug out of her hand, hefted it up, and took a mighty swallow.

“You’re a good woman,” he told Ma. “And I’m much beholden to you.” Then he started down the path for the road, moving fast.

"Here, now!" Ma called after him. "What you aim to do about Grandpa?"

"Have no fear," the Reverend said. "We must put our trust now in the power of prayer."

He disappeared down the road, stirring dust.

"Danged if he didn't take the jug!" Grandpa mumbled. "You ask me, the onny power he trusts is in the corn likker."

Ma give him a look. Then she bust out crying and run into the house.

"Now what got into her?" Grandpa said.

"Never you mind," I told him. "Susie, you stay here and whisk those flies off Grandpa. I got things to attend to."

And I did.

Even before I went inside I had my mind set. I couldn't hold still to see Ma bawling that way. She was standing in the kitchen hanging onto Pa, saying, "What can we do? What can we do?"

Pa patted her shoulder. "There now, Addie, don't you go carrying on. It can't last forever."

"Nor can we," Ma said. "If Grandpa don't come to his senses, one of these mornings we'll go downstairs and serve up breakfast to a skeleton. And what do you think the neighbors will say when they see a bag of bones setting out there on my nice front porch? It's plumb embarrassing, that's what it is!"

"Never you mind, Ma," I said. "I got an idea."

Ma stopped crying. "What kind of idea?"

"I'm fixing to take me a hike over to Spooky Hollow."

"Spooky Hollow?" Ma turned so pale you couldn't even see her freckles. "Oh, no, boy—"

"Help is where you find it," I said. "And I reckon we got no choice."

Pa took a deep breath. "Ain't you afeard?"

"Not in daylight," I told him. "Now don't you fret. I'll be back afore dark."

Then I scooted out the back door.

I went over the fence and hightailed it along the back forty to the crick, stopping just long enough to dig up my piggy bank from where it was stashed in the weeds alongside the rocks. After that I waded across the water and headed for tall timber.

Once I got into the piney woods I slowed down a smidge to get my bearings. Weren't no path to follow, because nobody never made one. Folks tended to stay clear of there, even in daytimes—it was just too dark and too lonesome. Never saw no small critters in the brush, and even the birds kep' shut off this place.

But I knowed where to go. All's I had to do was top the ridge, then move straight on down. Right smack at the bottom, in the deepest, darkest, lonesomest spot of all, was Spooky Hollow.

In Spooky Hollow was the cave.

And in the cave was the Conjure Lady.

Leastwise I reckoned she was there. But when I come tippy-toeing down to the big black hole in the rocks, I didn't see a mortal soul, just the shadows bunching up on me from all around.

It sure was spooky, and no mistake. I tried not to pay any heed to the way my feet was itching. They wanted to turn and run, but wasn't about to be put off.

After a bit I started to sing out. "Anybody home? You got company."

"Who?"

"It's me—Jody Tolliver."

"Whoooo?"

I was wrong about the birds, because now when I looked up I could see the big screech-owl glaring at me from a branch over yonder near the cave.

And when I looked down again, there she was—the Conjure Lady, peeking out at me from the hole between the rocks.

It was the first time I ever laid eyes on her, but it couldn't be no one else. She was a teensy rail-thin chickabiddy in a linsey-woolsey dress, and the face under her poke bonnet was as black as a lump of coal.

Shucks, I says to myself, there ain't nothing to be afeard of—she's just a little ol' lady, is all.

Then she stared up at me and I saw her eyes. They was lots bigger than the screech-owl's, and twice as glarey.

My feet begun to itch something fierce, but I stared back. "Howdy, Conjure Lady," I said.

"Whoooo?" said the screech-owl.

"It's young Tolliver," the Conjure Lady told him. "What's the matter, you got wax in your ears? Now go on about your business you hear?"

The screech-owl give her a dirty look and took off. Then the Conjure Lady come out into the open.

"Pay no need to Ambrose," she said. "He ain't rightly used to company. All's he ever sees is me and the bats."

"What bats?"

"The bats in the cave." The Conjure Lady smoothed down her dress. "I beg pardon for not asking you in, but the place is purely a mess. Been meaning to tidy it up, but what with one thing and another—first that dadblamed World War and then this dad-gummed Prohibition—I just ain't got round to it yet."

"Never you mind," I said, polite-like. "I come on business."

"Reckoned you did."

"Brought you a pretty, too." give it to her.

"What is it?"

"My piggy bank."

"Thank you kindly," said the Conjure Lady.

"Go ahead, bust it open," I told her.

She whammed it down on a rock and the piggy bank broke, spilling out money all over the place. She scrabbled it up right quick.

"Been putting aside my cash earnings for nigh onto two years now," I said. "How much is they?"

"Eighty-seven cents, a Confederate two-bits piece and this here button." She kind of grinned. "Sure is a purty one, too! What's it say on there?"

“Keep Cool With Coolidge.”

“Well ain’t that a caution.” The Conjure Lady slid the money into her pocket and pinned the button atop her dress. “Now, son—purty is as purty does. So what can I do for you?”

“It’s about my Grandpa,” I said. “Grandpa Titus Tolliver.”

“Titus Tolliver?” Why I reckon I know him! Use to run a still up in the toolies back of the crick. Fine figure of a man with a big black beard, he is.”

“Is turns to was,” I told her. “Now he’s all dried-up with the rheumatiz. Can’t rightly see too good and can’t hear for sour apples.”

“Sure is a crying shame!” the Conjure Lady said. “But sooner or later we all get to feeling poorly. And when you gotta go, you gotta go.”

“That’s the hitch of it. He won’t go—”

“Meaning he’s bound-up?”

“Meaning he’s dead.”

The Conjure Lady give me a hard look. “Do tell,” she said.

So I told. Told her the whole kit and kabodle, right from the git-go.

She heard me out, not saying a word. And when I finished up, she just stared at me until I was fixing to jump out of my skin.

“I reckon you mightn’t believe me,” I said. “But it’s the gospel truth.”

The Conjure Lady shook her head. “I believe you, son. Like I say, I knowed your Grandpappy from the long-ago. He was plumb set in his ways then, and I take it he still is. Sounds to me like he’s got a bad case of the stubborns.”

“Could be,” I said. “But they’s nary a thing we can do about it, nor the Doc or the Reverend either.” The Conjure Lady wrinkled up her nose. “What you ’spect from them two? They don’t know grit from granola.”

“Mebbe so. But that leaves us betwixt a rock and a hard place—’less you can help.”

“Let me think on it a piece.” The Conjure Lady pulled a corncob out of her pocket and fired up. I don’t know what brand she smoked, but it smelled something fierce. I begun to get itchy again—not just in the feet but all over. The woods was darker now, and a kind of cold wind come wailing down between the trees, making the leaves whisper to themselves.

"Got to be some way," I said. "A charm, mebbe, or a spell."

She shook her head. "Them's ol' fashioned. Now this here's one of them newfangled mental things, so we got to use newfangled idees. Your Grandpa don't need hex nor hoodoo. Like he says, he's from Missouri. He got to be showed, is all."

"Showed what?"

The Conjure Lady let out a cackle "I got it!" She give me a wink. "Sure 'nough, the very thing! Now just you hold your water—I won't be a moment." And she scooted back into the cave.

I stood there, feeling the wind whooshing down the back of my neck and listening to the leaves that was like voices whispering things I didn't want to hear too good.

Then she come out again, holding something in her hand.

"Take this," she said.

"What is it?"

She told me what it was, and then she told me what to do with it.

"You really reckon this'll work?"

"It's the onny chance."

So I stuck it in my britches pocket and she give me a little poke. "Now, sonny, you best hurry and git home afore supper."

Nobody had to ask me twice—not with that chill wind moaning and groaning in the trees, and the dark creeping and crawling all around me.

I give her my much-obliged and lit out, leaving the Conjure Lady standing in front of the cave. Last I saw of her she was polishing her Coolidge button with a hunk of poison oak.

Then I was tearing through the woods, up the hill to the ridge and over. By the time I got to the clearing, it was pitch-dark, and when I waded the crick I could see the moonlight wiggling on the water. Hawks on the hover went flippy-flapping, but I didn't stop to heed. I made a beeline for the fence, up and over, then into the yard and through the back door.

Ma was standing at the stove holding a pot whilst Pa ladled up the soup. They looked downright pleasured to see me.

"Thank the Lord!" Ma said. "I was just fixing to send Pa after you."

"I come quick as I could."

"And none too soon," Pa told me. "We like to go clean out'n our heads, what with the ruckus and all."

"What kind of ruckus?"

"First off, Miz Francy. Folks in town told her about Grandpa passing on, so she done the neighborly thing—mixed up a mess of stew to ease our appeytite in time of sorrow. She come lollygagging up the walk, all rigged out in her Sunday go-to-meeting clothes, toting the bowl under her arm and looking like lard wouldn't melt in her mouth. Along about then she caught sight of Grandpa setting there on the porch, kind of smiling at her through the flies.

"Well, up went the bowl and down come the whole shebang. Looked like it was raining stew greens all over that fancy Sears and Roebuck dress. And then she turned and headed for kingdom come, letting out a whoop that'd peel the paint off a privy wall."

"That's sorrowful," I said. "Save your grieving for worse," Pa told me. "Next thing you know, Bixbee showed up, honking his horn. Wouldn't come nigh Grandpa, nosiree—I had to traipse clear down to where he set in the hearse."

"What'd he want?"

"Said he'd come for the remains. And if we didn't cough them up right fast, he was aiming to take a trip over to the county seat first thing tomorrow morning to get hisself a injection."

"Injunction," Ma said, looking like she was ready to bust out with the bawls again. "Said it was a scandal and a shame to let Grandpa set around like this. What with the sun and the flies and all, he was fixing to have the Board of Health put us under quar-and-tine."

"What did Grandpa say?" I asked.

“Nary a peep. Of Bixbee gunned his hearse out of here, and Grandpa kep’ right on rocking with Susie. She come in ’bout half hour ago, when the sun went down—says he’s getting stiff as a board but won’t pay it no heed. Just keeps asking what’s to eat.”

“That’s good,” I said. “On account of I got the very thing. The Conjure Lady give it to me for his supper.”

“What is it—pizen?” Pa looked worried. “You know I’m a God-fearing man and I don’t hold with such doings. How you ’spect to pizen him if he’s already dead?”

“Ain’t nothing of the sort,” I said. “This here’s what she sent.”

And I pulled it out of my britches pocket and showed it to them.

“Now what in the name of kingdom come is that?” Ma asked.

I told her what it was, and what to do with it.

“Ain’t never heard tell of such foolishness in all my born days!” Ma told me.

Pa looked troubled in his mind. “I knowed I shouldn’t have let you go down to Spooky Hollow. Conjure Lady must be short of her marbles, putting you up to a thing like that.”

“Reckon she knows what she’s doing,” I said. “ ‘Sides, I give all my savings for this here—eighty-seven cents, a Confederate quarter and my Coolidge button.”

“Never you mind about no Coolidge button,” Pa said. “I swiped it offn a Yankee, anyway—one of them revenooers.” He scratched his chin. “But hard money’s something else. Mebbe we best give this notion a try.”

“Now, Pa—” Ma said.

“You got any better plan?” Pa shook his head. “Way I see it, what with the Board of Health set to come a-snapping at our heels tomorrow, we got to take a chance.”

Ma fetched a sigh that come clean up from her shoes, or would of if she’d been wearing any.

“All right, Jody,” she told me. “You just put it out like the Conjure Lady said. Pa, you go fetch Susie and Grandpa. I’m about to dish up.”

"You sure this'll do the trick?" Pa asked, looking at what I had in my hand.

"It'd better," I said. "It's all we got."

So Pa went out and I headed for the table, to do what the Conjure Lady had in mind.

Then Pa come back with sister Susie.

"Where's Grandpa?" Ma asked.

"Moving slow," Susie said. "Must be that Rigger Morris."

"No such thing." Grandpa come through the doorway, walking like a cockroach on a hot griddle. "I'm just a wee mite stiff."

"Stiff as a four-by-four board," Pa told him. "Upstairs in bed, that's where you ought to be, with a lily in your hand."

"Now don't start on that again," Grandpa said. "I told you I ain't dead so many times I'm blue in the face."

"You sure are," said sister Susie. "Ain't never seen nobody look any bluer."

And he was that—blue and bloated, kind of, but he paid it no heed. I recollected what Ma said about mebbe having to put up with a skeleton at mealtime, and I sure yearned for the Conjure Lady's notion to work. It plumb had to, because Grandpa was getting deader by the minute.

But you wouldn't think so when he caught sight of the vittles on the table. He just stirred his stumps right over to his chair and plunked down.

"Well, now," Grandpa said. "You done yourself proud tonight, Addie. This here's my favorite—collards and catfish heads!"

He was all set to take a swipe at the platter when he up and noticed what was setting next to his plate.

"Great day in the morning!" he hollered. "What in tarnation's this?"

"Ain't nothing but a napkin," I said.

"But it's black?" Grandpa blinked. "Who ever heard tell of a black napkin?"

Pa looked at Ma. "We figger this here's kind of a special occasion," he said. "If you take my meaning—"

Grandpa fetched a snort. “Consam you and your meaning! A black napkin? Never you fear, I know what you’re hinting around at, but it ain’t a-gonna work—nosiree, bub!”

And he filled his plate and dug in.

The rest of us just set there staring, first at Grandpa, then at each other.

“What’d I tell you?” Pa said to me, disgusted-like.

I shook my head. “Wait a spell.”

“Better grab whilst you can git,” Grandpa said. “I aim to eat me up a storm.”

And he did. His arms was stiff and his fingers scarce had enough curl left to hold a fork and his jaw muscles worked extra hard—but he went right on eating. And talking.

“Dead, am I? Ain’t never seen the day a body’d say a thing like that to me before, let alone kinfolk! Now could be I’m tolerable stubborn, but that don’t signify I’m mean. I ain’t about to make trouble for anyone, least of all my own flesh and blood. If I was truly dead and knowed it for a fact—why, I’d the first one to go right upstairs to my room and lie down forever. But you got to show me proof ’fore I do. That’s the pure and simple of it—let me see some proof!”

“Grandpa,” I said.

“What’s the matter, sonny?”

“Begging your pardon, but yoir got collards dribbling all over your chin.”

Grandpa put down his fork. “So they is. I thank you kindly.”

And before he rightly knowed what he was doing, Grandpa wiped his mouth on the napkin.

When he finished he looked down at it. He looked once and he looked twice. Then he just set the napkin down gentle-like, stood up from the table, and headed straight for the stairs.

“Good-by all,” he said.

We heard him go clumping up the steps and down the hall into his room, and we heard the mattress sag when he laid down on his bed.

Then everything was quiet.

After a while Pa pushed his chair back and went upstairs. Nobody said a word until he come down again.

“Well?” Ma looked at him.

“Ain’t nothing more to worry about,” Pa said. “He’s laid down his burden at last. Gone to glory, amen.”

“Praise be!” Ma said. Then she looked at me and crooked a finger at the napkin. “Best get rid of that.”

I went round and picked it up. Sister Susie give me a funny look. “Ain’t nobody fixing to tell me what happened?” she asked.

I didn’t answer—just toted the napkin out and dropped it deep down in the crick. Weren’t no sense telling anybody the how of it, but the Conjure Lady had the right notion, after all. She knowed Grandpa’d get his proof—just as soon as he wiped his mouth.

Ain’t nothing like a black napkin to show up a little of white maggot.

The Head

Science fiction has always demonstrated a dark awareness of the catastrophes that could destroy civilization: nuclear holocausts, worldwide plagues, insect mutations, and even the sun's going nova have decimated our cities and technology in many a story. But short of every human on Earth being suddenly killed, there's only one thing that can truly destroy us . . . as Robert Bloch shows in this pungent short-short.

Robert Bloch has been a major name in the fields of science fiction and horror writing for forty years. He won a Hugo Award for his short story *That Hell-Bound Train*, and his novel *Psycho* is recognized as a classic of modern horror.

ONE MORNING, when Jon was ten years old, it was raining too hard for him to go out and kill anybody.

He stood at the top of the cave looking out at the storm, telling himself rain was a goodie, man. But he felt kind of, you know, down.

So Jon stash the knife away under the belt of his jock and went back into the tunnels to find somebody he could do it to. Only he coulden catch any of the little kids because they run when they see him coming. And he know if he wassen careful some of the biggies would do it to him.

He diden turn on for that, not even when Grope did it, but at lease Grope kepp the others offen him. Grope was the biggest stud in the whole cave, and he never let anyone do it to his old ladies or his kids excep himself.

The hangup was, Grope had went away on a skull-hunt with the gang and Jon didden trust the others. Even though it was raining the women was out in the fields and the kids was running loose all through the cave with their knives and clubs, hassling. Moving along, Jon could hear the noises from out of the side tunnels—laughs and screams and moans.

So Jon kepp to the middle of the big cave where the cooking fires light up the way. Each gang had their own, with a creep watching to see it never went out. Creeps were like too old to hunt or work in the fields and they coulden do it anymore, so most of them just got killed, but they was always a few leff to keep the fires.

The kids never went to the cooking fires alone. Jon remember one time he was little, Grope find a kid try to rip off food from a pot. Grope juss pick the kid up and smash her brains out on the side of a rock. So she end up in the cook-pot herself. All the other kids laugh, ha ha, but they diden forget. And after that they kepp away from the fires excepp at feeding times.

Thass why it was safe to stay in the big cave now, but Jon was itchy, he wannet to do something. So he grab a torch and went down into Grope's side tunnel very slow and careful in case someone hide there. But the tunnel was empty and he crepp down in the dark until he pass the sleeping-place and find the entrance hole to the burrows way farther on. There was lotsa burrows twisty all through the rock and Jon know his way good. Nobody else ever come this far.

They was rocks failed into the tunnels, too many for the biggies to climb over, but Jon start to crawl through when he was a little kid and he was the only one ever. Thass how come he find the secret place.

The secret place was far under. Jon went through failed rocks to where the walls was, you know, all smooth. Not rocks, the walls, but something else. Like his knife—hard and shiny. And then he went to where they was the buzz noise.

When he first went there the buzz noise scare him, but he got use to it after while. It never hurt him, only noise from somewhere behind the smooth walls. So now he kepp on to where he diden need a torch because they was fight. The fight come from somewhere behind like the buzz.

Nobody know about the buzz or the fight and Jon never tole because that was part of the secret.

The secret was in a little smooth-wall cave with more buzz noise and fight blinks from under a shelf with knobs in it. Jon remember how it scare him long time ago to see the big shiny bubble on the shelf, like he tried to smash it with a rock but the rock just bounce off. Then he twist knobs and they diden come loose, but more fight come from the shiny bubble so he could see what was inside.

That was the real secret, like floating inside the bubble with the long thin things sticking down out of the ears and neck.

A big head, all wrinkle and hairy. Eyes shut tight, mouth shut too. Dead.

Until Jon twist knobs like he done the first time. Now the sparks jump from long thin things.

The eyes open, look at him. The mouth open too.

And the head say, “Good morning, Jon.”

Good morning, Jon.

He could hear his voice say it, but maybe it wasn’t really morning: time had no meaning here. And it wasn’t really his voice—just the level, artificial output of the mechanism powered by the feeble electrical impulse of his tongue and laryngeal nerve; electronically amplified, as was his hearing.

What was the old phrase? *Damned clever, these Chinese.* Inappropriate, of course. The Chinese hadn’t perfected this variation of the crionics technique; in fact it had been arrived at just prior to the threatened thermonuclear holocaust. They’d anticipated the results, and this was the solution. A chemical solution, in which the brain was preserved and electrically reactivated.

It was the only way they'd come up with. They couldn't save the atmosphere, they couldn't save the artifacts, they couldn't save human life. But perhaps, under these conditions, they could save knowledge.

They reasoned that recorded knowledge is perishable—books and tapes and microfilms are subject to disintegration.

Or, even if preserved, to misinterpretation. And computers weren't the answer; perpetual power couldn't be generated or maintained on a sufficient scale for maintainence of large units, and they'd be useless to anyone without sophisticated training.

The one sure source of wisdom was still the mind. So select the minds, select the precious few who were psychologically suitable to withstand such stress and preserve them. Place them in the strategically situated security bunkers far below the surface, and hook them up to the self-maintained mechanisms of input and output. Sooner or later someone would find them. There would be survivors; eventually the atmosphere would shed itself of pollution. Then the remnants of the human race, ready for regeneration, would stumble across the secret storage-spots, the secret sources of science and skill and scholarship that were waiting to rebuild a new world from the ruins.

That had been the plan. There were other minds buried away in various top-security subterranea; maybe they hadn't been discovered yet, maybe they never would be discovered. But the law of averages, the law of accident, had led to this resurrection.

I am the resurrection and the life, saith the Lord. And a little child shall lead them. A child, prowling the caves and chancing upon this unit, fumbling with the unfamiliar gadgetry, reactivating his awareness.

He stared at the creature crouching before him. Blurry, indistinct, out of focus. *Better correct that.*

"Jon—can you hear me?"

The crouching figure nodded.

"Good. Now listen carefully. Remember what I told you the other times you came here—about the switches?"

The creature blinked. Something was puzzling him. *Switch.* He didn't understand the word. What term would he know?

"The *knob,* Jon. The knob on the left."

The creature nodded again, and reached forward.

"There. Push it up. Slow—not too far—just a little way. That's better."

Yes, he could see clearly now. But *was* it better? Was it really better to get a clear glimpse of this near-naked figure—this white ape? Not even white, actually, but a new ethnic admixture of Caucasian and Negroid, a product of generations of inbreeding here in the doomed darkness.

Their previous confrontations had produced little more than knowledge of Jon's name; his people had no history, no consciousness of continuity. As far as Jon was aware, they had always lived in the caves, always scratched and scrabbled on the scarred surface just outside and above to find weeds for the cook-pots, always hunted other groups from other caves to supplement their daily diet with occasional meat. They had fire, shelter, crude weapons, a surviving semblance of an urban subculture based upon the concept of gangs and territories. This much he had learned through patient questioning, and perhaps there was no more. *Savages.*

He dismissed the thought; it wasn't important. What mattered now was that this creature was all that remained of humanity. The hope of the future, the sole surviving hope.

It could speak. "Tell me something, man."

Man. This creature was mankind, what was left of it. Shorn of heritage, stripped of civilization, its language reduced to crude slang.

God, how could he educate *this?* How could he even communicate clearly? But he had to, he must, it was the only way.

"Like talk, man."

So he talked.

Once again, just as he had so many times before, he told Jon the story. Told him of the old days, the days of innocence before the wars, when people walked proud and free over the face of the earth and built their shining cities with spires thrusting high into the heavens; built their shining hopes still higher, soaring to the stars.

That's what it was to Jon—a story. He was listening, he always listened, but obviously he didn't believe. Any more than humanity had believed in the Garden of Eden.

In a way, of course, this new world *was* the Garden of Eden he talked about—Earth in the day before the Fall. And the growing dissent that had led to the war—the racial, political, religious, ideological, sexist strife with its breakdown of communications on every level—had been like the Tower of Babel. Just as the final war itself was like the Flood, wiping out the world. Its survivors didn't land on a mountaintop; instead they were inside the mountain. The children of Noah, crouching in this cave.

He listened to himself—to the mechanical output of his thought—and recognized how much it all sounded like a fairy tale. That's the way the biblical accounts had sounded to him in the old days. Fables, fantasies, folklore. If it had been difficult for him to conceive of the simplicity of the Garden of Eden, how much harder must it be for Jon to realize the reality of a complicated civilization.

And yet it was true. There *had* been hope for a heaven on earth, until humanity turned it into hell. For most, hell had been a shockingly swift and short nightmare of fear and pain, followed by merciful oblivion. But the true meaning of hell had been revealed to only a few, like himself. He knew what hell really was.

Hell was forever.

Hell was a darkness that never died, a nightmare that never ended. Hell was the fear and pain of being alive and aware in that darkness, utterly isolated, unable to see or hear or speak or even move. Hell was being alone with his thoughts forever; thoughts that never slept, thoughts that echoed eternally with a soundless shrieking that shattered the skull.

That was *his* hell, before Jon turned him on. And that was his hell when Jon turned him off and left him alone in the dark.

So now it didn't really matter if Jon believed him or not, just as long as he was willing to listen. Because if Jon was listening he wouldn't turn him off.

Keep talking, keep him interested. Tell him about anything, everything. About radar, lasers, fission, fusion, super- and subsonics, microcosm, macrocosm, dactyls and pterodactyls, all the wonders and blunders of the world. "And then, Jon, we started to conquer space. We landed on the moon —"

"You tole that." Jon scowled; he was bored. "Tell about big kills."

Big kills. The war. He didn't want to talk about the war; that was Privileged Information, Top Security, the sealed orders and the directive that had sent him here to the Classified Area. Operation Survival—that's what they'd labeled it, the procedure that placed him under the knife at the very last moment when the earth shuddered and the mountain-top melted over his head. But he'd obeyed, they'd all obeyed; scientists and surgeons sweating as they wielded their scalpels under the sizzling, sputtering lights before the final darkness. Their words came back to him. *"But damn it, don't you understand? It isn't death—you'll be alive! There's bound to be someone who finds you sooner or later and when they do, when they turn on the power, you'll be reborn. And so will the human race—reborn with the knowledge you retain."*

That was the hope he had taken down with him into the darkness, the purpose that had sustained him in the hideous, endless emptiness.

But that's not what Jon wanted to hear about. He was scowling again, scratching his armpit.

"More kill," Jon said. "Borns. You know, man."

"I *don't* know," he said. "And you don't know, either. You're not a man —you're a child. That's why you must listen to me, listen and learn. There's more to life than killing and feeding and copulation. If you listen I can teach you."

"Tell how you make born." Jon grinned. "Someday I kill Grope."

"No, that's not the way."

Jon shook his head stubbornly. “Tell me!”

Tell him what? Where were the words, how could he reach him, teach him, save him from savagery, lead his people out of the wilderness?

And whose words would serve—those of Jesus, Buddha, Muhammad, Lao-tse, Plato, Spinoza, Confucius, Shakespeare? What prophets, priests, philosophers, savants, or sages in the history of mankind could show him the solution?

He had to find those words now, for Jon’s sake, for his own sake, if only to keep from being turned off again, from being turned back into that ceaseless silence, that blind blackness. A brain, buried alive beneath a mountain.

Mountain. Wilderness. Hadn’t Moses led a nomad rabble into a wilderness, climbed a mountain? Suppose the biblical Babel and Flood were allegories. Suppose there had been thermonuclear destruction then—and the same solution? Scientists of a forgotten civilization had hit upon the secret of salvation, preserved a living intelligence against the day when some primitive survivor would encounter it, hidden away and waiting to bring the light of truth back into the world. Suppose Moses had gone into the mountain, found just such a cave, stumbled across just such a mechanism, turned it on, and heard the voice of God?

Steady, now. God wouldn’t dread the darkness the way he dreaded it, God wouldn’t feel the fear of being turned off. *You’re not God, remember that.*

But you can be God’s voice.

You can be God’s voice and Jon can be Moses. Speak to him in God’s words, so that he can lead his people to the Promised Land.

“Thou shalt not kill,” he said.

Jon frowned at him, shaking his head. “I kill Grope. You see.”

“No. Grope is your father. Honor thy father and thy mother—don’t you understand?”

Jon grimaced, his eyes restless, resentful. He wasn’t interested.

But there had to be a way! A way to save Jon and the others, a way to save himself. Because if he was turned off once again he knew he would truly go mad, finally and irrevocably mad, and there would be no voice of God, only the writhing and wriggling and crazed clawing within his bursting brain alone in the darkness and forevemess. There would be darkness over the heavens and the earth, and without his voice, God would be dead.

Jon was reaching for the knob now. Reaching, bored and impatient.

He was powerless to prevent it. Only God had that power. Salvation. Salvation through prayer. *Yes, that was the way.*

He spoke then. Spoke the only words that would save the world, the words that never failed, the words of wisdom, the words of the ages, the words of God.

“The Lord is my shepherd: I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures; he leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul—”

Jon was listening now. Did he understand? Was there enough humanity left in this creature to comprehend the truth? The answer would decide his fate forever, Jon’s fate, the fate of the world, the fate of God.

Then Jon smiled and the answer came.

“That’s shit, man,” Jon said.

And turned him off.

Crook of the Month

Edison was right.

Genius is one percent inspiration and ninety-nine percent perspiration.

Jerry Cribbs started sweating long before the plane touched down in the Rio dawn and continued all through Customs inspection. But the black bag preserved its secret, and he hugged it in his lap during the long taxi ride to his Copacabana hotel. Anyone who survives a cab trip through Rio de Janeiro traffic is entitled to feel relieved, but by the time Jerry checked into his room he was still perspiring. And a shower didn't help even though he took the bag into the stall with him.

Jerry dried off, only to find himself wringing wet again in the few moments it took him to dress and shave. Then he sat soaking and waiting for the phone to ring. He held the black hag on his lap, hugging his secret—and his genius—to him for reassurance.

Why didn't the call come?

A knock on the door answered his question. Of course they'd never risk using the telephone; they'd rely on personal contact.

Or would they?

Jerry shoved the bag under the bed and moved to the door.

A soft voice from the hall outside murmured, "Mr. Cribbs?"

Jerry flinched. He'd registered downstairs as Mr. Brown, figuring that any alias good enough for the late Al Capone should be good enough for him. And yet the stranger beyond the door knew his name. In a way it was reassuring, but he had to make certain.

"Who sent you?" he whispered.

“The Big Bird.”

With a sigh of relief, Jerry opened the door.

A baldheaded black giant entered, nodding curtly. He was dressed in the ornate uniform of a Brazilian general or chauffeur—it didn’t matter which, because the Big Bird could have sent either if he chose.

“Come with me, please,” said the giant Jerry turned and started out, but a hand gripped his shoulder.

“Aren’t you forgetting something?” the giant asked.

“Sorry.” Jerry stopped and retrieved the black bag from its hiding-place beneath the bed. The giant reached for it but Jerry shook his head.

“I’ll carry it,” he said.

The giant shrugged. “As you wish.” He followed Jerry through the doorway and down the hall. He didn’t speak in the elevator or in the lobby below, and his silence continued as he led Jerry to the huge limousine parked insolently on the sidewalk outside the entrance.

Jerry slid into the back seat and his escort got behind the wheel.

If Jerry had any doubts about the black giant being a chauffeur, they were quickly dispelled as the car weaved through Rio’s noonday traffic—from the way he drove, he was obviously a general.

Once aboard the waiting launch at the wharf the man proved himself to be an admiral too. The boat raced off across the harbor and out into the open sea while Jerry crouched in the bow with the black bag between his trembling knees.

The long sleek lines of the yacht loomed ahead, bobbing in the swell. As they pulled astern Jerry looked up at the gold-leaf lettering which identified the vessel as *The Water Closet.*

The black giant killed the engine and rose, cupping his hands. “Ahoy there!” he called.

A bearded seaman peered down from the deck above.

“Let down the ladder,” the black man muttered.

Climbing a rope-ladder while holding the handle of the black bag in his teeth wasn’t easy, but Jerry managed it. Once on deck he followed the giant along the deck, past an elegant array of staterooms, a sauna, a private projection-room, a bowling-alley. They stopped just beyond an outdoor bar, at an Olympic-sized swimming pool.

"He's expecting you," said the black man.

Jerry squinted at the pool. Over the stereophonic screech of raucous rock shrill shrieks rose from the pool, where a half dozen figures splashed and sported, stark naked in the sunlight Jerry had no trouble recognizing his host; he was the only male.

"Mr. Buzzard?" he murmured.

The scrawny balding little man climbed out of the water, scowling against the sun as a waiting attendant instantly draped a gold lamé robe over his shoulders.

The Big Bird nodded. "I'm Al Buzzard," he said. "You've met my wife." He gestured vaguely towards the naiades in the pool.

"Oh sure."

"Come on then." Buzzard held out both hands. The alert attendant placed a frosted full triple-martini glass in one of the hands and a lighted Upmann in the other, then Buzzard turned and led Jerry aft.

From the appearance of the stateroom they entered, with its mirrored walls and ceiling and king-sized circular bed covered with leopardskin, Jerry decided he was in the Captain's cabin.

The scrawny man closed the door. With a lightning-fast gesture he swallowed his drink, then set the empty glass on the mink carpet. He sprawled back on the bed, puffing his cigar and staring moodily at his visitor.

"Did you ever have one of those days when nothing goes right?" he sighed. "Just look at that!" He gestured toward the empty glass. "A triple martini with only two olives in it! As soon as we get out into international waters, remind me to have the bartender keelhauled."

"Really, Mr. Buzzard, it isn't all that bad—"

"Hah!" Buzzard snorted and sat up. "You sound just like Barabass."

"Barabass?"

“My publisher. He was out here last week. We got into a conversation during the orgy and he said to me, “Why don’t you look on the bright side of things for a change? After all, you’re the world’s most popular author, next to Conway Mann, that is. Ten all-time best sellers, eight blockbuster movies, a hit television series that lasted almost an entire season—what more do you want? Why, your name is a household word—like Drano and Sani-flush. “That’s what he told me.”

“Well, it’s true, isn’t it?”

“No—it’s a damnable lie! I’m much more popular than Con Mann. Him and his sexy romances—”

“But you’re rich and famous.” Jerry gestured at the mirrored walls. “You live on this big yacht, you have a lovely wife—”

Buzzard shrugged. “Boats make me seasick. I have to stay on hoard because the minute I set foot on land the I.R.S. will lay a suit on me for thirty-three million dollars in back taxes. And my wife isn’t all that lovely—the first nine were much more attractive. Trouble is, none of them could understand me. This one doesn’t understand me, nor do any of my mistresses. The shrinks all tell me we don’t have the right chemistry. So what am I supposed to do about that?”

Sighing wearily, Buzzard rose and threw his cigar out of a porthole.

When he turned back he was a different man; his shoulders straightened beneath the gold robe and his beady eyes matched its glitter. “Now, to business,” he said. “Have you got it?”

“It’s in the bag.”

Jerry held out the black bag and Buzzard’s twitching fingers closed around the handle. He carried it to the bed and scrabbled at the lock. “The key!” he panted. “Where’s the key?”

Jerry rolled up his trouser leg and ripped the adhesive tape from his right ankle. He handed the key to Buzzard, who inserted it in the lock with a vicious twisting motion. The bag sprang open and its contents tumbled out onto the leopardskin coverlet.

Buzzard stared down at the bed, rubbing his hands together.

“How many pages?” he whispered.

“Three hundred.”

“It’s all there then?”

“All but the last chapter. I expected to finish by the end of next week, but then your wire came—”

“You can knock off the ending when you get back,” Buzzard said. “Just so’s I get the whole thing to the publisher by the end of the month. We gotta hit the fall list before Conway Mann beats us to it. I hear he’s got a big one coming up, but we’ll show him.” He paused, eying Jerry suspiciously. “It *is* a goodie, isn’t it?”

“I think so.”

“Think? I’m not paying you to think—I’m paying you to write.” Buzzard made a face. “It better be good. After all, I’ve got a reputation to live down to.”

“Don’t worry, Mr. Buzzard. Just read it and you’ll see for yourself.”

“Yeah, yeah—later sometime.” Al Buzzard gathered up the pages, hefting them. “Feels nice and thick, anyhow. Barabass likes them that way.” He frowned. “Where’s the carbon?”

“Home, in the safe.”

“Good.” Buzzard nodded. “Speaking of home, we better get you on the next flight out of here. I’d invite you to stay for lunch, but seeing as how you still have a chapter to go there’s no sense wasting time. Besides, you can grab a sannich or something on the plane, right?”

“Uh—aren’t you forgetting something, Mr. Buzzard?”

Buzzard scowled. “I know. That’s the difference between guys like you and a creative artist like I am. All you writers ever think about is money.”

Sighing, he reached under the bed and pulled out a locked metal box. “O.K., if that’s the way you want it.”

He fiddled with the combination until the box flew open, cascading a heap of glittering objects over the bed.

“Damn!” he muttered. “I told you this wasn’t my day. Wrong box—I got the diamonds by mistake!”

Buzzard stooped and fumbled until he found a second metal container identical with the first. When its tumblers clicked and the lid rose, Jerry stared down at the stacks of currency.

"Petty cash," Buzzard explained. "Only fifties and hundreds." He extracted a wad of bills and began to count "Let's see now. Three hundred pages at ten dollars a page—"

"You promised me fifteen this time, Mr. Buzzard."

"Oh, yeah—fifteen times three hundred—"

"Forty-five hundred," said Jerry.

"What's the matter, don't you think I know how to count?" Scowling, Buzzard thrust a sheaf of currency into Jerry's hands. "That's a lot of loot, fella. If you ask me, you're being overpaid."

"But it took me almost six months to write the hook, Mr. Buzzard. Nowadays a plumber can make that much in three weeks."

"So take the money and study plumbing," Buzzard told him. "Just so you finish up that last chapter first. If you got a pencil and paper, maybe you can write it on the plane."

But Jerry Cribbs did no writing on the return flight He brooded. The plane slipped between the crowded peaks, plunged into a few air pockets above Latin America, then sped like a thief up the Atlantic Coast. When it landed at Kennedy, Jerry was still brooding.

"Darling—what's the matter?"

Jerry halted at the terminal exit and stared at Ann Remington's troubled face. Then he kissed it. "I'll tell you later," he said.

Thanks to the marvels of modem technology Jerry got through Customs, into Ann's car, out of the airport, and through the city traffic in less time than it had taken him to fly from South America.

In the car he unburdened himself. "Don't you see?" he sighed. "It's the same old story."

"But it's a *good* story," Ann said. "I was reading one of your carbons just last night. I like that hero of yours, Lance Pustule. And having him murder his parents at the age of eight—it's going to win a lot of reader sympathy. Everybody has a kindly feeling for orphans."

"Ann, please—"

"That scene where he's raped by his grandmother is terrific! And all those killings and tortures he uses to get control of the television network—you really tell it like it is! The drugs and violence and kinky sex are dynamite. By the way, what's the title of the book?"

"The Aristocrats."

"Perfect!"

Jerry shook his head. "Al Buzzard pays me forty-five hundred dollars for ghostwriting a book that will make him millions. What's so perfect about that? All he does is sit on his big fat yacht, divorcing wives and having affairs with movie stars and throwing fashion models overboard—"

"But that's why he gets all the money," Ann said. "Doing those things makes him a celebrity. His life style is front-page news, so when he writes a book that's news too."

"Only he doesn't write books. *I* do, and I can't even earn enough for us to get married." Jerry sighed. "If I could just write my own book, under my own name—"

"Why don't you?"

"Because I can't find the time, or the money."

Ann smiled. "We could manage. There's my secretarial job at the travel agency."

"I'm not going to live off your salary."

Ann's smile faded as she gripped the steering-wheel and swung the car toward the curb in front of the dingy rundown apartment building where Jerry spent his dingy rundown life.

"I don't understand you," she murmured. "How can a man who writes such trendy modem pom have such old-fashioned ideas?"

"Because I *am* old-fashioned." Jerry lugged his bags out of the car. "And when I do write my book, it isn't going to be trendy either. A good novel doesn't need all that cheap sensationalism." Ann started to get out of the car, but he checked her with a gesture. “Sorry, you’d better not come up with me. I have to get to work on the last chapter right away. The big identity-crisis scene when Lance finally discovers where his head is at—he gets rid of his wife and girl friend and becomes a child-molester.”

“When will I see you?”

“I should have everything wrapped up by tomorrow night. Come around and we’ll have dinner together. Make it about seven.”

They clung together for a moment, then Ann drove away and Jerry hastened upstairs to commit a statutory offense on paper.

Neither of them noticed the little man crouching behind the pillars before the apartment-house entryway. “Seven o’clock,” the little man whispered. “Tomorrow night.”

It had been a good day’s work, Jerry decided. Three thousand words, many of which were four-letter; twelve pages of solid hardcore sex and violence. Al Buzzard and his readers would be happy, and Jerry was satisfied with a dishonest job, well done.

He showered, shaved and dressed, and when the doorbell rang shortly before seven he was ready.

He lifted the latch and the door swung open.

“Ann—” he said.

“Wrong.” The little man stood in the doorway, staring him up and down.

Jerry frowned, perplexed. “Who are you?”

“Sorry, no time for introductions.” The little man moved past him into the apartment. “You’re coming with me.”

“Now wait a minute—”

“I don’t have a minute.” The intruder crooked a commanding finger. “Let’s go.”

“No way,” said Jerry, eying the stranger. Whoever he was and whatever he wanted, Jerry had no intention of being pushed around by this little character.

He turned, and that was his mistake.

Because a big man loomed up in the doorway behind him, raising a rubber truncheon.

As the weapon descended on Jerry’s skull, the little man looked at his Wristwatch and nodded approvingly.

“Six forty-nine,” he said. “Right on schedule.”

“Yah,” said the big man, who was preoccupied with the task of stuffing Jerry into a large gunnysack. Grunting, he swung the sack over his shoulder and carried it down the hall to the backstairs exit of the building.

The little man followed and they descended the steps together.

The big man scowled at him apprehensively. *“Mach schnell,”* he panted. “Maybe somebody sees us.”

“Don’t worry.” The little man nodded. “It’s in the bag.”

In the bag was no place to be, and when Jerry recovered consciousness he wanted out.

Voicing these sentiments through a mouthful of burlap he was conscious of a shuddering drone and a sound like faroff thunder, gradually fading.

Then a knife slashed through the cloth above his head, the gunnysack shredded and fell in folds about his shoulders, and Jerry emerged. He wobbled to his feet, blinking at his surroundings.

He stood in the capacious cabin of a private plane—a Lear jet, from the looks of it. Only a man wealthy enough to own such an aircraft could afford to decorate its interior with the original artwork exhibited on the walls.

Jerry recognized a Renoir, a Picasso, a Modigliani. And then, turning toward the far end of the cabin, he recognized the owner of the paintings.

There was no mistaking the identity of the bearded figure seated behind the ornate Chippendale desk, wearing an incongruously crumpled hat and peering at him through tinted glasses. The face would be instantly familiar to anyone who had ever watched a television interview program or *Bowling for Dollars.*

"Conway Mann!" gasped Jerry.

The bearded author nodded. He smiled and beckoned Jerry to the Heppelwhite chair before the desk.

"Welcome to my humble digs," he said. "I trust you'll excuse the crudity of my invitation, but I had to see you, Mr. Gibbs."

"Cribbs."

"Exactly." The pudgy hand investigated the contents of a desk drawer, emerging with a fistful of yellow pills which disappeared between his bearded lips. He gulped and nodded. "I suppose you're wondering what brought you here."

"I already know," said Jerry. "Two goons and a gunnysack."

"My dear Hibbs—"

"Cribbs."

"Ah, yes." The hand fumbled in the drawer once more, then rose to extend a crumpled sheet of paper. "Please be good enough to read this proof of an advertisement scheduled to appear in *Publishers Weekly.* I think it may interest you."

Jerry stared down at the bold lettering of the full-page ad.

SHOCKING! SCANDALOUS!
SENSATIONAL!

Searing sex . . . vicious violence . . . raw and raunchy . . . a novel that rips aside the last shreds of convention to reveal the hidden world of secret passions and unbridled lusts behind the locked doors of America's power-mad masters . . . as they move from boardroom to bedroom in their savage search for forbidden pleasures! Don't miss

THE TASTE-MAKERS by
CONWAY MANN
The best-selling blockbuster of the year from
SCRIBBLER'S & SONS

Jerry put the ad down on the desktop. "Your new novel?"

“Precisely so.”

“Is it good?”

Conway Mann shrugged. “That’s up to you. You’re going to write it.”

“Now hold on—”

“I’m holding on, Mr. Dribbs. But I can’t hold on much longer. The manuscript is due at the publisher’s office by the end of the month.”

“Let me get this straight You mean to say you don’t write your own hooks?”

“Why should that surprise you? That wretched Al Buzzard doesn’t write his novels either.”

“Then you know?”

“Of course. Why else would I bring you here?” Conway Mann shook his head. “Don’t get me wrong. I’m perfectly capable of doing the job myself, but lately I’ve suffered from writer’s block.”

“When did it start?”

“In 1959.” The pudgy hand popped red capsules into its owner’s mouth. “I have a full schedule of commitments ahead of me—Johnny Carson. Merv Griffin, *Hollywood Squares*—best-selling authors must live up to their responsibilities, even at the sacrifice of the creative impulse. And that’s where you come in.”

“That’s where I get out,” Jerry told him.

“At forty thousand feet in the air?” Conway Mann shrugged again. “Very well, suit yourself.”

“Now see here,” Jerry cried, “you kidnapped me! That’s a federal offense. I can push charges.”

“You’ll push up daisies if you refuse.”

“But why me?” Jerry said. “Surely you must have a regular ghostwriter. What happened to him?”

“He refused,” Conway Mann murmured. “Would you like to see where he’s buried?”

Conway Mann, with his royalties and reputation at stake, wasn’t conning. When his hand again descended to the desk drawer, Jerry expected it to reappear holding a revolver.

Instead it clutched a bundle of bills.

“Six thousand,” said the bearded man. “In advance.”

“Six thousand?”

“That’s more than you get from that chintzy Buzzard, if my spies are correct.” The pudgy hand extended. “Now take it and get out—you’ve got a deadline to meet.”

“But I couldn’t possibly write an entire novel by the end of the month,” Jerry said.

“You can and you will,” Conway Mann told him. “Unless you’re awfully fond of daisies.”

Jerry pocketed the bills, not an easy task for trembling hands. “I’ll try,” he said. “Only you haven’t told me what the book will be about.”

“Ninety thousand words, that’s what it’s about.” Conway Mann gestured at the proof-sheet on the desktop. “This ad doesn’t mention much about a plot, so you can suit yourself. You know what readers expect. Behind the scenes in politics and big business, and the further behind the better. Maybe a touch of necrophilia in San Francisco, a Black Mass at the U.N., orgies in the White House—I leave it to your discretion.”

Jerry took a deep breath. “I’ll do my best.”

“Your best isn’t good enough,” Conway Mann said. “I want your worst.”

He rose and came around the desk, glancing at his watch. “I’ll tell the pilot to take us down, and the boys will see to it that you get home safely.”

“That’s not necessary.”

“I think it is.” Conway Mann’s eyes narrowed behind the tinted lenses. “They’re going to be keeping tabs on you until the book is finished.”

“And if it isn’t?”

“Then they’ll finish you.”

“I’m not afraid of your threats,” Jerry said. “I can call the police—”

“That’s already been taken care of. Your phone is dead. And unless you want to follow its example, you’ll stay in your apartment from tonight until the manuscript is in the hands of my publishers.” Conway Mann put his hand on Jerry's shoulder and smiled. "If you want to stay healthy, learn a lesson from the flowers. Daisies don't tell."

It was good advice, but Jerry couldn't take it Not when he found Ann waiting for him outside the apartment door.

"It's after nine o'clock!" she told him. "I've been waiting here for two hours. Where on earth have you been?"

"I wasn't exactly on earth," Jerry said, looking toward the car from which he'd emerged. The headlights glared, the motor growled, and its sleek black length crouched at the curb like a panther waiting to spring.

Ann followed his gaze, noting the big man behind the wheel and his small companion beside him.

"Please, darling, come inside." Jerry gripped her arm and drew her through the doorway. "I can explain everything."

"It better be good."

But once inside the apartment, it wasn't good.

"Not good at all," Ann said, after she'd listened to Jerry's account of the evening. "It took you months to knock out the novel for Buzzard, and now Mann expects you to do one in a couple of weeks!"

"It's impossible." Jerry nodded. "But there's no way out."

"Not for *you,"* Ann said. "But *I'm* free to come and go."

"Meaning?"

"It's simple." Ann smiled. "I'm going to leave now. The minute I get home I'll put through a call to the police. They'll get over here, you tell them what happened, and you're home free."

"Dynamite!"

Ann smiled reassuringly as she moved to the door and opened it. Then her smile faded. The little man stood in the doorway, his eyes bulging. There was another ominous bulge where his hand rested in his pocket.

"I heard what you just said, lady. Nobody's calling the fuzz."

Ann stared at him. “You mean you intend to keep me locked up here with Jerry?”

The man shook his head. “I didn’t say that. Somebody’s got to go for groceries and it might as well be you. But whenever you cut out, I go with you. And my buddy downstairs keeps an eye on your boy friend. Boss’s orders.”

Jerry faced him, frowning. “He thinks of everything, doesn’t he?”

“You better believe it.” The little man gave him a crooked smile. “Time for you to start thinking too, fella. You got a book to write.”

The days that followed moved in a blinding blur. Ann spent most of her time in the living room, while Jerry’s typewriter pounded away behind the bedroom door. Sometimes she read, sometimes she watched television, sometimes she just stood at the window and stared down at the black limousine. On occasion she took brief walks or shopped at the supermarket, but always under escort She didn’t talk to the little man and he didn’t talk to her. She scarcely talked to Jerry when he came out of the bedroom for meals.

One look at his haggard face told the story. He was racing the deadline, racing for his life, and she resolved not to nag him with questions.

But as the end of the month inched closer there came a moment when she could keep silent no longer.

They were seated at the kitchen table over coffee, and the sight of Jerry’s gaunt features and glassy stare was too much for her to bear. From her lips burst the age-old question, the question every writer dreads.

“How’s it going?” she asked.

Jerry shook his head. “It isn’t,” he muttered.

“You mean you won’t finish in time?”

“I haven’t started.”

“Haven’t started?” Ann frowned. “But you’ve been in there typing night and day.”

“I type at night because I can’t sleep. And I can’t sleep because of what I type during the day. Page after page of new beginnings—none of them making sense, all of them going into the wastebasket. I’m afraid it’s finally happened, just the way it did to Al Buzzard and Conway Mann.”

“What are you talking about?”

“When they started, they wrote their own stuff. Then gradually it got to them. No man can stand such a pace forever—a daily diet of corruption, brutality, mayhem, incest, voyeurism, sado-masochistic satyriasis, all of it so hard to spell. So they hired ghostwriters, people like myself. The trouble is, now the same thing is happening to me.” Jerry raised his anguished face. “All those rapes and murders—it’s too much! Even Jack the Ripper had to quit in the end.”

Ann rose and moved to the stricken man. “Listen to me,” she said softy. “It’s not that bad. All you have to do is get Buzzard’s last chapter to the publisher. If you can only go on a little longer, until you do Conway Mann’s novel—”

“Don’t you understand?” Jerry slammed a clenched fist on the table. “It’s too late now. Even if I stay at the typewriter twenty-four hours a day, I’ll never beat the deadline. There isn’t time.”

Ann sighed, and walked to the living room. Jerry followed. Together they stared out of the window, down at the black car crouched and waiting. Neither of them said a word. Words wouldn’t help now—unless Jerry could put ninety thousand of them onto paper within the next three days.

It was Ann who broke the silence, her face and voice thoughtful.

“Maybe it’s all for the best,” she said.

“What do you mean?”

“Even if you could have finished on time, it wouldn’t help. At first I hoped this would be a blessing in disguise. Forty-five hundred from Al Buzzard and six thousand from Conway Mann—that’s ten thousand five hundred dollars in cash, enough to live on until you realized your ambition. With that much money you could finally write a novel of your own. But it doesn’t matter now, does it? If you say you can’t write any more—”

“I never said that!” Jerry gripped her hands tightly in his own. “I said I couldn’t turn out any more sex and violence. The novel I want to write is different No sensationalism, no cheap anti-heroes, no ripoff of celebrities disguised under other names. My book would be about ordinary people, coping with everyday problems that all of us have to face.”

“But would such a book sell?”

There was doubt in Anris voice, but none in Jerry’s. “Why not? At least I’d give the readers some reality, something to think about and remember. Those pomo fairy-tales Buzzard and Mann are credited with are just the same thing repeated over and over again—you can’t tell one from another in the long run. I’m talking about real literature.”

Ann eyed him dubiously. “How would you promote it?”

“An honest book doesn’t need promotion,” Jerry told her. “A good writer doesn’t need notoriety. Think about it—did Thackeray have a yacht? Did Henry James wear a funny hat and fly around in a Lear jet? Did Jane Austen sleep around? Did Shakespeare ever appear on a late-night talk show?”

“I am thinking about it,” Ann told him. An odd note crept into her voice. “Jerry, do me a favor. Come into the bedroom with me for a minute. I want you to show me where you keep your files.”

Together they went to the bedroom. “Right here in this cabinet,” Jerry said.

“I see.” But Ann’s glance strayed from the filing-cabinet to Jerry’s desk—the typewriter, the paper, the carbons resting under a heavy paperweight. Her eyes narrowed. “Jerry—about this book of yours. Do you really want to write it?”

“More than anything in the world.”

“And you’re sure it could sell?”

Jerry nodded, then turned away. “If I’m wrong, may I be struck dead on the spot.”

It was then that Ann hit him with the paperweight . . .

"Dead," Jerry mumbled. "Well, I asked for it—"

"Wake up." Ann was shaking him by the shoulders. "You're not dead."

Jerry opened his eyes. The room was dark and he could just make out Ann's shadowy face peering anxiously over him.

"Why did you do it?" he said, sitting up and rubbing the lump on the side of his left temple.

"I'll explain later. Right now there isn't time. We've got to get out of here."

"What about the goon squad?"

"See for yourself."

Legs shaking, Jerry allowed her to lead him back into the living room and over to the window.

He stared down.

The black limousine was gone. Ann's car stood in its place.

"Come on," Ann said. "We've got to get to the airport. Your bags are packed and in the car."

"Where are we going?"

"Costa Rica."

Jerry frowned. "I don't get it."

"You will."

And once the plane took off, he did.

"What you said about writing your own novel convinced me," Ann told him. "That's when I got the idea. I'm sorry about knocking you out, but I knew you'd never agree to go through with it on your own."

"Agree to what?"

"Delivering Conway Mann's new novel to his publisher."

"But there is no new novel!"

"There is now. I took one of the carbons of Al Buzzard's manuscript All I did was go through it and change the names of the characters."

"You mean you gave both publishers the same book?"

"Including the last chapter." Ann nodded. "You said yourself that these things are all alike."

“So that’s why Conway Mann’s goons let us go.”

“Right. Once the manuscript got to the office of Scribbler’s and Sons, they took off. And so have we.”

“But why Costa Rica?”

“They don’t have an extradition law. Even if Mann and Buzzard find out, you can’t be touched. You’ve got the cash, enough to keep us going for a year, and you can write your book.” Ann smiled. “Besides, darling, if what you say is true, nobody will find out. Not Buzzard, or Mann, or the publishers, and certainly not the readers.”

Jerry groaned. “I hope you’re right,” he whispered.

Ann patted his hand. “I know I am,” she said.

And she was.

In the months that followed, *The Aristocrats* hit the best-seller lists with such force that Al Buzzard bought a new yacht, with two swimming pools, one of which he kept filled with champagne. If anything, *The Taste-Makers* was an even bigger success. Conway Mann was able to purchase a Jackson Pollock, a Van Gogh, a Rembrandt, and another hat.

Best of all, Jerry Cribbs finally wrote his own novel, which was duly published under his own name. You may have read it.

Then again, you may not. It sold 148 copies.

1977

But First These Words

The television time marketplace was a seller's market, even if the sponsor's name was God . . .

On the morning of January 5th, 1976, at precisely 10:18 a.m., a man named Charlie Starkweather received a visit from God Almighty.

Since Charlie happened to be one of the senior copywriters with the prestigious advertising, agency of Pierce, Thrust, Hack and Clobber, Inc., God had a hell of a time getting in.

You just don't show up at a top Madison Avenue office without an appointment and expect to get past the receptionist unless you can flash an ID. So right away there was a problem. In an age where everyone is expected to carry a driver's license, a Social Security card and a plastic wallet filled with an assortment of plastic credit cards, God was at a disadvantage: He didn't even have a valid birth certificate. Painful experience had taught Him not to announce Himself by name—He'd merely be dismissed as a religious fanatic.

Nor would more spectacular methods serve as they had in the past. Descending in a fiery cloud or appearing in a burning bush would only result in trouble with the fire department.

So, in the end, the only way to slip past Security was to go right into Charlie Starkweather's head, and that was a mighty uncomfortable place to be on this, the first workday of the New Year.

To begin with, Charlie's head was throbbing with the effects of a post-holiday hangover, built up by long weeks of partying. It was also infiltrated by painful twinges of envy and self-pity, owing to the fact that Charlie was the sole senior copywriter actually on duty at the office today.

Ordinarily, the Almighty would have avoided Charlie's head like the plague—and nobody knew more about plagues than He did, having started so many of them—but this time there was no help for it. He had to give Charlie the message.

Charlie was standing at the water cooler when He arrived, trying to convey the contents of a paper cup to his lips with trembling fingers and irrigating his fly in the process.

"God!" said Charlie.

"Speaking," said the voice in Charlie's head. "And I've got a word for you."

"Why me?" Charlie groaned, dropping the cup.

"Because you believe. If you only knew the time I've had trying to find somebody in the business who still believes!"

Charlie listened, nodding sympathetically from time to time as the voice explained.

"It's the First Commandment," He said. "You remember—*Thou shalt have no other gods before* me."

"I don't," Charlie murmured.

"But your boss does, and so do the account execs. They worship Mammon. I tried to get into the heads of the FCC, but they're too thick. And nobody can reach your clients; they're always in conference. That leaves you."

"Leaves me where?"

"Here. Listening to me. The time has come to do something about television."

"Why?"

"Because of the Second Commandment. *Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or* *that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. Thou shalt not bow down to them, nor serve them*—"

"Please. You're shouting in my ear."

"Sorry. But you do see the problem, don't you? All these little boxes in darkened rooms all over the earth. Graven images enshrined in every home, with billions of people sitting silently before them, worshiping—"

"People don't worship television. They just watch it."

"And believe what they see. Belief is what leads to worship. Worship of athletes, worship of stars, worship of talk-show hosts. Not heavenly hosts, mind you, but characters like Johnny Carson and Merv Griffin!"

"You're shouting again."

"You're Me-damned right I am. It's about time somebody shouted. And it's reaching the point where the belief itself is getting worse than the worship. Because people have come to accept television messages as gospel. Even those commercials you write—"

"But that's my job. What can I do about it?"

God told him.

"It won't work." Charlie shook his head and God winced.

"Try," He said. "Now here's what I want you to do."

In the end Charlie staggered back to his desk, sat down before his typewriter, and did it.

Then he took the results in to Mr. Hack. His other bosses, Pierce, Thrust and Clobber, were on location at a luxury hotel in the Bahamas with a crew of twenty, including six gorgeous models who were part of a $200,000 assignment to photograph a thirty-second commercial spot about peanut butter. Mr. Hack, knowing what his partners were up to—and, most probably, into—was in a foul mood. He glared at the piece of paper which Charlie placed on his desk.

"What's this?"

"Little copy synopsis I turned out."

"Who's the client?"

"No client. Sort of a model for a new slant we might use. I've been thinking—"

"You're being paid to write, not to think."

"But it's a new approach. It could revolutionize the whole business."

"Revolutionize? That's Communist talk!"

"Nothing like that, I swear it. If you'll only read—"

"Okay, Starkweather." Mr.

Hack sighed, picked up the paper and scanned it, moving his lips.

Charlie's synopsis was simple. It read as follows:

Mexico City. A hot day in the year 1519. Under the blazing sun a throng of Aztecs gather around the base of a teocalli pyramid. Admist the thunder of drums and the squealing of flutes, the feather-clad priests drag a captive up the stone steps to the alter of sacrifice. As they press their victim down upon the slab, the high priest moves forward, grasping an obsidian knife. The knife is raised—the priest starts to drive it down—then winces, flings it aside, and clutches his shoulder.

One of the other priests looks up and murmurs, "What's the matter—arthritis pain bothering you again?"

The high priest nods—the other priest goes into his pitch—offers him the sponsor's product in a glass of tequila—the high priest drinks—smiles—picks up the knife—rips the victim open—plucks out his heart—thrusts it toward CAMERA—and says, "Give to the United Heart Foundation."

Mr. Hack looked up. "Where the hell did you get an idea like this?" He scowled. "Jesus Christ——"

"You're close," Charlie said. "There's a danger that people are taking the commercials too seriously. We've got to change that while there's still time. A touch of humor—don't you see—"

But Mr. Hack didn't see. He kicked Charlie Starkweather out on his assignment.

On the evening of February 27th, 1980, Fred and Myrna Hoober were watching *Ah Fong Goo,* an ethnic detective series featuring a Chinese private eye with a new slant on criminal investigation.

During Fred's first beer there was a thrilling chase sequence through the Grand Canyon which wiped out six cars, three dune buggies and a burro. Midway in Fred's second beer the hero went down to the harbor to interrogate the villain. Fred guessed it was the villain, because he had a yacht. As usual, the villain played it cool.

"Okay, so I did wear a Santa Claus suit at the playground," he said. "But that doesn't necessarily prove I'm a child molester."

Fred had finished his second beer and was just reaching for his third when the image faded and a suave announcer's voice informed him that the program would be continued after this important paid political message from Milo T. Snodgrass, candidate for United States Senator.

Gulping his beer, Fred listened to Mr. Snodgrass's assurances that, if elected, he would cut government spending, provide millions of new jobs through federal funding, eliminate crime, liberalize gun-control laws, fight pollution, encourage car sales by lowering automobile emission standards, crack down on monopolies, do away with antitrust suits that interfered with business.

Suddenly another voice interrupted the candidate.

"Repent!" it said. "Repent, ye miserable sinners, for the time is at hand. The day of judgment cometh—"

Onscreen, the candidate goggled.

Offscreen, Fred Hoober gargled into his beer. "Huh? What's that?"

"Must be getting interference from another channel," said Myrna. "Maybe Billy Graham—"

She reached out and switched to another station. Luckily, it was showing the 89th rerun of an old *Lucy* show. They settled down to watch it and Fred opened another beer.

Lucy, in an attempt to discourage prospective buyers of her house by convincing them there was a termite problem, came out as a giant ant. She opened her mouth to speak, and over her lines a voice murmured something that sounded like, “Oh, ye of little faith.”

But Fred was belching and didn’t hear it.

After that, the voice was silent.

During the afternoon of March 9th, 1983, the President of the United States and his principal advisors were holding an emergency summit meeting in a sand trap at the fifth hole of the Clammy Palm Desert Golf Course.

“It’s one hell of a problem, Mr. President,” said the Secretary of State. “What are you going to do?” The President shook his head. “I don’t know. I was thinking of using my four iron—”

“I’m not talking about the next shot,” said the secretary. “It’s the condition of the nation I’m worried about.”

“Forget it.” The President frowned. “I didn’t drag a staff of ninety people clear across the country in Air Force One just to discuss national affairs. I’ve got more important matters to consider.” He studied his ball. “How do I lie?”

“Exactly,” said the Secretary of Defense. “How *do* you lie? The population’s up to a quarter of a billion, and we’ve got fifty million unemployed. We’ve already boosted welfare payments, but it doesn’t mean a thing—with this galloping inflation, the dollar isn’t worth a plugged nickel. Half the world is at war—with the other half. And the air is so polluted—”

“Air.” The President nodded quickly. “That’s your answer.

“Trouble with you fellows, you don’t follow what’s on the air. Well, I do.” He smiled. “I was watching television just last night, waiting to see that new game show, *You Bet Your Ass,* or whatever it’s called—and I accidentally switched to a news broadcast. This guy, one of the biggest commentators on the networks, was saying as how the real trouble is all in our minds, just negative thinking. Instead of griping about what's wrong with the world, we should remember what's right."

"But he's only a news commentator—"

"What do you mean, *only?"* said the President. "Who knows more about the news than a commentator? That's his business, to tell us what's really going on. And this man is an expert—why, he earns more a year than I do!"

Off in the distant desert a pillar of fire suddenly started to form and flicker, but the smog was so thick that nobody noticed. And when the President swung, sliced, and started to curse, no one heard the voice crying out in the wilderness.

On the night of April 30th, 1986, Finnegan's Bar And Grill was crowded. But then it was always crowded and so was everyplace else.

No one was in the grill—that part of the operation had been closed for months because of the food shortage—but the bar area was decorated with wall-to-wall people. Not your upwardly mobile elitist types, but plain, ordinary folks who appreciated the informal atmosphere of a genuine replica of an old-fashioned tavern, an authentic imitation of a corner barroom located on the eighty-second floor of a brand-new high-rise savings and loan building.

Some customers were drinking, some were smoking, some were sniffing, some were mainlining, and a few die-hards were just crouching in the corners under the air-conditioning vents, trying to inhale a breath of fresh, clean recycled smog.

But everyone was here for a good time, and a little crowding didn't matter. Sure, ten grand was a steep price to pay for a shot and a chaser, but the alcohol killed the germs in the water, and if you didn't drink you could always turn on.

Turn on the transistor radios and hear that new rock group, the Dow-Jones Industrials, getting into their big platinum-record hit, *Up the Creek without A Snorkel.*

Turn on the TV to the educational channel and watch the Triple-X-Rated Movie Of The Week, *King Kong Meets Deep Throat.*

Sure, there were a few ripoffs, several muggings, an occasional gang rape, and a couple of teenies who cornered an old man in the washroom and flushed him to death. But like the announcer was saying on the government commercial that interrupted the movie, sex and violence were under control. The bulk of the customers here were just like the everyday crowd at—

"The Tower of Babel!"

The voice rising above the din was almost audible, but only for a moment. Because somebody had just opened a window, and now all you could hear was street noise—cars crashing, ambulance sirens wailing, home-made bombs exploding, rioters screaming, and the drone of police fighter planes overhead. After all, it *was* Saturday night.

"Generation of vipers," said the voice, talking to Itself. "This time no Flood, no Ark, no Noah—I swear it! Now where did I stockpile those thunderbolts—?"

The world ended on May 17th, 1988. But the Lakers were playing an important game, and nobody even noticed.

Nina

Here is yet another treat from the master of the contemporary chiller. And speaking of chills, Robert Bloch's latest book is a collection of scary stories just published by Doubleday and titled COLD CHILLS.

After the love-making Nolan needed another drink.

He fumbled for the bottle beside the bed, gripping it with a sweaty hand. His entire body was wet and clammy, and his fingers shook as they unscrewed the cap. For a moment Nolan wondered if he was coming down with another bout of fever. Then, as the harsh heat of the rum scalded his stomach, he realized the truth.

Nina had done this to him.

Nolan turned and glanced at the girl who lay beside him. She stared up through the shadows with slitted eyes unblinking above high cheekbones, her thin brown body relaxed and immobile. Hard to believe that only moments ago this same body had been a writhing, wriggling coil of insatiable appetite, gripping and enfolding him until he was drained and spent.

He held the bottle out to her. "Have a drink?"

She shook her head, eyes hooded and expressionless, and then Nolan remembered that she didn't speak English. He raised the bottle and drank again, cursing himself for his mistake.

It had been a mistake, he realized that now, but Darlene would never understand. Sitting there safe and snug in the apartment in Trenton, she couldn't begin to know what he'd gone through for her sake—hers and little Robbie's. Robert Emmett Nolan II, nine weeks old now, his son, whom he'd never seen. That's why he'd taken the job, signed on with the company for a year. The money was good, enough to keep Darlene in comfort and tide them over after he got back. She couldn't have come with him, not while she was carrying the kid, so he came alone, figuring no sweat.

No sweat. That was a laugh. All he'd done since he got here was sweat. Patrolling the plantation at sunup, loading cargo all day for the boats that went downriver, squinting over paperwork while night closed down on the bungalow to imprison him behind a wall of jungle darkness. And at night the noises came—the hum of insect hordes, the bellow of caimans, the snorting snuffle of peccary, the ceaseless chatter of monkeys intermingled with the screeching of a million mindless birds.

So he'd started to drink. First the good bourbon from the company's stock, then the halfway-decent trade gin, and now the cheap rum.

As Nolan set the empty bottle down he heard the noise he'd come to dread worst of all—the endless echo of drums from the huts huddled beside the riverbank below. Miserable wretches were at it again. No wonder he had to drive them daily to fulfil the company's quota. The wonder was that they did anything at all after spending every night wailing to those damned drums.

Of course it was Moises who did the actual driving; Nolan couldn't even chew them out properly because they were too damned dumb to understand plain English.

Like Nina, here.

Again Nolan looked down at the girl who lay curled beside him on the bed, silent and sated. She wasn't sweating; her skin was curiously cool to the touch, and in her eyes was a mystery.

It was the mystery that Nolan had sensed the first time he saw her staring at him across the village compound three days ago. At first he thought she was one of the company people—somebody's wife, daughter, sister. That afternoon, when he returned to the bungalow, he caught her staring at him again at the edge of the clearing. So he asked Moises who she was, and Moises didn't know. Apparently she'd just arrived a day or two before, paddling a crude catamaran downriver from somewhere out of the denser jungle stretching a thousand miles beyond. She had no English, and according to Moises, she didn't speak Spanish or Portuguese either. Not that she'd made any attempts to communicate; she kept to herself, sleeping in the catamaran moored beside the bank across the river and not even venturing into the company store by day to purchase food.

"Indio," Moises said, pronouncing the word with all the contempt of one in whose veins ran a ten-percent admixture of the proud blood of the *conquistadores*. "Who are we to know the way of savages?" He shrugged.

Nolan had shrugged, too, and dismissed her from his mind. But that night as he lay on his bed, listening to the pounding of the drums, he thought of her again and felt a stirring in his loins.

She came to him then, almost as though the stirring had been a silent summons, came like a brown shadow gliding out of the night. Soundlessly she entered, and swiftly she shed her single garment as she moved across the room to stand staring down at him on the bed. Then, as she sank upon his nakedness and encircled his thighs, the stirring in his loins became a throbbing and the pounding in his head drowned out the drums.

In the morning she was gone, but on the following night she returned. It was then that he'd called her Nina—it wasn't her name, but he felt a need to somehow identify this wide-mouthed, pink-tongued stranger who slaked herself upon him, slaked his own urgency again and again as her hissing breath rasped in his ears.

Once more she vanished while he slept, and he hadn't seen her all day. But at times he'd been conscious of her secret stare, a coldness falling upon him like an unglimpsed shadow, and he'd known that tonight she'd come again.

Now, as the drums sounded in the distance, Nina slept. Unmindful of the din, heedless of his presence, her eyes hooded and she lay somnolent in animal repletion.

Nolan shuddered. That's what she was; an animal. In repose, the lithe brown body was grotesquely elongated, the wide mouth accentuating the ugliness of her face. How could he have coupled with this creature? Nolan grimaced in self-disgust as he turned away.

Well, no matter—it was ended now, over once and for all. Today the message had arrived from Belem: Darlene and Robbie were on the ship, ready for the flight to Manaos. Tomorrow morning he'd start downriver to meet them, escort them here. He'd had his qualms about their coming; they'd have to face three months in this hellhole before the year was up, but Darlene had insisted.

And she was right. Nolan knew it now. At least they'd be together and that would help see him through. He wouldn't need the bottle any more, and he wouldn't need Nina.

Nolan lay back and waited for sleep to come, shutting out the sound of the drums, the sight of the shadowy shape beside him. Only a few hours until morning, he told himself. And in the morning, the nightmare would be over.

The trip to Manaos was an ordeal, but it ended in Darlene's arms. She was blonder and more beautiful than he'd remembered, more loving and tender than he'd ever known her to be, and in the union that was their reunion Nolan found fulfillment. Of course there was none of the avid hunger of Nina's coiling caresses, none of the mindless thrashing to final frenzy. But it didn't matter; the two of them were together at last. The two of them, and Robbie.

Robbie was a revelation.

Nolan hadn't anticipated the intensity of his own reaction. But now, after the long trip back in the wheezing launch, he stood beside the crib in the spare bedroom and gazed down at his son with an overwhelming surge of pride.

"Isn't he adorable?" Darlene said. "He looks just like you."

"You're prejudiced." Nolan grinned, but he was flattered. And when the tiny pink starshell of a hand reached forth to meet his fingers, he tingled at the touch.

Then Darlene gasped.

Nolan glanced up quickly. "What's the matter?" he said.

"Nothing." Darlene was staring past him. "I thought I saw someone outside the window."

Nolan followed her gaze. "No one out there." He moved to the window, peered at the clearing beyond. "Not a soul."

Darlene passed a hand before her eyes. "I guess I'm just overtired," she said. "The long trip—" Nolan put his arm around her. "Why don't you go lie down? Mama Dolores can look after Robbie."

Darlene hesitated. "Are you sure she knows what to do?"

"Look who's talking!" Nolan laughed. "They don't call her Mama for nothing—she's had ten kids of her own. She's in the kitchen right now, fixing Robbie's formula. I'll go get her."

So Darlene went down the hall to their bedroom for a siesta, and Mama Dolores took over Robbie's schedule while Nolan made his daily rounds in the fields.

The heat was stifling, worse than anything he could remember. Even Moises was gasping for air as he gunned the jeep over the rutted roadway, peering into the shimmering haze.

Nolan wiped his forehead. Maybe he'd been too hasty, bringing Darlene and the baby here. But a man was entitled to see his own son, and in a few months they'd be out of this miserable sweatbox forever. No sense getting uptight; everything was going to be all right.

But at dusk, when he returned to the bungalow, Mama Dolores greeted him at the door with a troubled face.

“What is it?” Nolan said. “Something wrong with Robbie?” Mama shook her head. “He sleeps like an angel,” she murmured. “But the *senora*—”

In their room, Darlene lay shivering on the bed, eyes closed. Her head moved ceaselessly on the pillows even when Nolan pressed his palm against her brow.

“Fever.” Nolan gestured to Mama Dolores, and the old woman held Darlene still while he forced the thermometer between her lips.

The red column inched upwards. “One hundred and four.” Nolan straightened quickly. “Go fetch Moises. Tell him I want the launch ready, *pronto*. We’ll have to get her to the doctor at Manaos.”

Darlene’s eyes fluttered open; she’d heard.

“No, you can’t! The baby—”

“Do not trouble yourself. I will look after the little one.” Mama’s voice was soothing. “Now you must rest.”

“No, please—”

Darlene’s voice trailed off into an incoherent babbling, and she sank back. Nolan kept his hand on her forehead; the heat was like an oven. “Now just relax, darling. It’s all right. I’m going with you.”

And he did.

If the first trip had been an ordeal, this one was an agony: a frantic thrust through the sultry night on the steaming river, Moises sweating over the throttle as Nolan held Darlene’s shuddering shoulders against the straw mattress in the stern of the vibrating launch. They made Manaos by dawn and roused Dr. Robales from slumber at his house near the plaza.

Then came the examination, the removal to the hospital, the tests and the verdict. A simple matter, Dr. Robales said, and no need for alarm. With proper treatment and rest she would recover. A week here in the hospital—

“A week?” Nolan’s voice rose. “I’ve got to get back for the loading. I can’t stay here that long!”

“There is no need for you to stay, *senor.* She shall have my personal attention, I assure you.”

It was small comfort, but Nolan had no choice. And he was too tired to protest, too tired to worry. Once aboard the launch and heading back, he stretched out on the straw mattress in a sleep that was like death itself.

Nolan awakened to the sound of drums. He jerked upright with a startled cry, then realized that night had come and they were once again at anchor beside the dock. Moises grinned at him in weary triumph.

“Almost we do not make it,” he said. “The motor is bad. No matter, it is good to be home again.”

Nolan nodded, flexing his cramped limbs. He stepped out onto the dock, then hurried up the path across the clearing. The darkness boomed.

Home? This corner of hell, where the drums dinned and the shadows leaped and capered before flickering fires?

All but one, that is. For as Nolan moved forward, another shadow glided out from the deeper darkness beside the bungalow.

It was Nina.

Nolan blinked as he recognized her standing there and staring up at him. There was no mistaking the look on her face or its urgency, but he had no time to waste in words. Brushing past her, he hastened to the doorway and she melted back into the night.

Mama Dolores was waiting for him inside, nodding her greeting.

“Robbie—is he all right?”

“Si, senor, I take good care. *Por favor,* I sleep in his room.”

“Good.” Nolan turned and started for the hall, then hesitated as Mama Dolores frowned. “What is it?” he said.

The old woman hesitated. “You will not be offended if I speak?”

“Of course not.”

Mama’s voice sank to a murmur. “It concerns the one outside.”

“Nina?”

“That is not her name, but no matter.” Mama shook her head. “For two days she has waited there. I see you with her now when you return. And I see you with her before—”

"That's none of your business!" Nolan reddened. "Besides, it's all over now."

"Does she believe that?" Mama's gaze was grave. "You must tell her to go."

"I've tried. But the girl comes from the mountains; she doesn't speak English—"

"I know." Mama nodded. "She is one of the snake-people."

Nolan stared at her. "They worship snakes up there?"

"No, not worship."

"Then what do you mean?"

"These people—they *are* snakes."

Nolan scowled. "What is this?"

"The truth, *senor*. This one you call Nina—this girl—is not a girl. She is of the ancient race from the high peaks, where the great serpents dwell. Your workers here, even Moises, know only the jungle, but I come from the great valley beneath the mountains, and as a child I learned to fear those who lurk above. We do not go there, but sometimes the snake-people come to us. In the spring when they awaken, they shed their skins, and for a time they are fresh and clean before the scales grow again. It is then that they come, to mate with men."

She went on like that, whispering about creatures half-serpent and half-human, with bodies cold to the touch, limbs that could writhe in boneless contortion to squeeze the breath from a man and crush him like the coils of a giant constrictor. She spoke of forked tongues, of voices hissing forth from mouths yawning incredibly wide on movable jawbones. And she might have gone on, but Nolan stopped her now; his head was throbbing with weariness.

"That's enough," he said. "I thank you for your concern."

"But you do not believe me."

"I didn't say that." Tired as he was, Nolan still remembered the basic rule—never contradict these people or make fun of their superstitions. And he couldn’t afford to alienate Mama now. “I shall take precautions,” he told her, gravely. “Right now I’ve got to rest. And I want to see Robbie.”

Mama Dolores put her hand to her mouth. “I forget—the little one, he is alone—”

She turned and padded hastily down the hallway, Nolan behind her. Together they entered the nursery.

“Ah!” Mama exhaled a sigh of relief. “The *pobrecito* sleeps.”

Robbie lay in his crib, a shaft of moonlight from the window bathing his tiny face. From his rosebud mouth issued a gentle snore.

Nolan smiled at the sound, then nodded at Mama. “I’m going to turn in now. You take good care of him.”

“I will not leave.” Mama settled herself in a rocker beside the crib. As Nolan turned to go, she called after him softly. “Remember what I have told you, *senor.* If she comes again—”

Nolan moved down the hall to his bedroom at the far end. He hadn’t trusted himself to answer her. After all, she meant well; it was just that he was too damned tired to put up with any more nonsense from the old woman.

In his bedroom something rustled.

Nolan flinched, then halted as the shadow-shape glided forth from the darkened corner beside the open window.

Nina stood before him and she was stark naked. Stark naked, her arms opening in invitation.

He retreated a step. “No,” he said.

She came forward, smiling.

“Go away—get out of here.”

He gestured her back. Nina’s smile faded and she made a sound in her throat, a little gasp of entreaty. Her hands reached out—

“Damn it, leave me alone!”

Nolan struck her on the cheek. It wasn’t more than a slap, and she couldn’t have been hurt. But suddenly Nina’s face contorted as she launched herself at him, her fingers splayed and aiming at his eyes. This time he hit her hard—hard enough to send her reeling back.

"Out!" he said. He forced her to the open window, raising his hand threateningly as she spewed and spit her rage, then snatched her garment and clambered over the sill into the darkness beyond.

Nolan stood by the window watching as Nina moved away across the clearing. For a moment she turned in a path of moonlight and looked back at him—only a moment, but long enough for Nolan to see the livid fury blazing in her eyes.

Then she was gone, gliding off into the night where the drums thudded in distant darkness.

She was gone, but the hate remained. Nolan felt its force as he stretched out upon the bed. Ought to undress, but he was too tired. The throbbing in his head was worse, pulsing to the beat of the drums. And the hate was in his head, too. God, that ugly face! Like the thing in mythology—what was it?—the Medusa. One look turned men to stone. Her locks of hair were live serpents.

But that was legend, like Mama Dolores' stories about the snake-people. Strange—did every race have its belief in such creatures? Could there be some grotesque, distorted element of truth behind all these old wive's tales?

He didn't want to think about it now; he didn't want to think of anything. Not Nina, not Darlene, not even Robbie. Darlene would be all right, Robbie was fine, and Nina was gone. That left him, alone here with the drums. Damned pounding. Had to stop, had to stop so he could sleep—

It was the silence that awakened him. He sat up with a start, realizing he must have slept for hours, because the shadows outside the window were dappled with the greyish pink of dawn.

Nolan rose, stretching, then stepped out into the hall. The shadows were darker here and everything was still.

He went down the hallway to the other bedroom. The door was ajar and he moved past it, calling softly. "Mama Dolores—"

Nolan's tongue froze to the roof of his mouth. Time itself was frozen as he stared down at the crushed and pulpy thing sprawled shapelessly beside the rocker, its sightless eyes bulging from the swollen purple face.

No use calling her name again; she'd never hear it. And Robbie—

Nolan turned in the frozen silence, his eyes searching the shadows at the far side of the room.

The crib was empty.

Then he found his voice and cried out; cried out again as he saw the open window and the gray vacancy of the clearing beyond.

Suddenly he was at the window, climbing out and dropping to the matted sward below. He ran across the clearing, through the trees and into the open space before the river-bank.

Moises was in the launch, working on the engine. He looked up as Nolan ran towards him, shouting. "What are you doing here?"

"There is the problem of the motor. It requires attention. I come early, before the heat of the day—"

"Did you see her?"

"Who, *senor?"*

"The girl—Nina—"

"Ah, yes. The *Indio."* Moises nodded. "She is gone, in her catamaran, up the river. Two, maybe three hours ago, just as I arrive."

"Why didn't you stop her?"

"For what reason?"

Nolan gestured quickly. "Get that engine started—we're going after her."

Moises frowned. "As I told you, there is the matter of the repairs. Perhaps this afternoon—"

"We'll never catch her then!"

Nolan gripped Moises' shoulder. "Don't you understand? She's taken Robbie!"

"Calm yourself, *senor.* With my own eyes I saw her go to the boat and she was alone, I swear it. She does not have the little one."

Nolan thought of the hatred in Nina’s eyes, and he shuddered. “Then what did she do with him?” Moises shook his head. “This I do not know. But I am sure she has no need of another infant.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I notice her condition when she walked to the boat.” Moises shrugged, but even before the words came, Nolan knew.

“Why do you look at me like that, *senor?* Is it not natural for a woman to bulge when she carries a baby in her belly?”

The Closer of the Way

I would like to think Robert Bloch is most noted as the man whose novel Psycho made Alfred Hitchcock famous; I know it made Hitchcock money. Bloch's fiction first appeared in Weird Tales during the 1930s and his work was greatly influenced by his literary mentor, Howard Phillips Lovecraft. He was the first recipient of the World Fantasy Award for life work, an honor he richly deserved. Recent years have seen a paucity of short stories from his pen as a result of his many commitments to novels, movies, and television, but Bob, ever generous with his time, kindly wrote the following story specifically for this book. The main character is one Robert Bloch, a man who—well, read on . . .

To this day I don't know how they got me to the asylum.

The events leading up to my committal constitute a mystery which defies the probe of memory, and so it shall remain.

Family and friends spoke, at the time, of a "nervous condition," but that is undoubtedly a polite euphemism. They preferred to call the asylum a "private sanatorium" and my incarceration was referred to as "convalescence."

But now that I have no family—and no friends—I can at least speak freely and frankly of my situation.

I was insane.

God, what hypocrites we’ve become! The higher the incidence of insanity in our society, the more the word itself has been tabooed. In a world gone mad it is no longer possible to speak freely of madmen; in this era of lunacy there are supposedly no lunatics; the craziness compounds because we refuse to admit that anyone is crazy.

“Mentally ill.” That’s the phrase which Dr. Connors used. “Paranoid schizophrenia” was another and more highly clinical description. Neither of which really conveys an accurate impression of the horror inherent in the reality—or the unreality.

Insanity is a long nightmare from which some never awaken. Others, like myself, eventually open their eyes to greet the dawn of a new day, rejoicing in renewed awareness. It’s a wonderful feeling to realize that the nightmare has ended. Makes you want to sing, as I did.

"Yes, we have no bananas—”

Dr. Connors eyed me dispassionately. “What’s that supposed to mean?” he said.

“That I’m all right again,” I smiled. “Bananas—the current slang for insanity. It’s a kind of a joke.”

“I see.”

But Dr. Connors didn’t really see anything.

When I assured him that I was no longer disoriented, no longer hostile or afraid, he merely nodded. And when I told him I was ready to go home, he shook his head.

“There are some problems we must work through first,” he said.

“Work—that’s my only problem,” I told him. “I’ve got to get back to work! Do you realize what staying here has cost me?”

Dr. Connors shrugged. “Your work is one of the problems we’re going to be talking about. I think it may help us to find the cause of your difficulties.” He opened a desk drawer and took out a book. “I’ve been reading some of the things you’ve written, and there are a number of questions—”

“Okay,” I said. “If you want to play games, suppose you let me have the first guess. The book you have there, the one you’ve been reading—it’s *Psycho,* isn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“Don’t look so surprised. Everybody seems to start out by reading *Psycho.* And reading things *into* it. I’ve been through this sort of inquisition so many times that you don’t even need to ask the questions. We can both save valuable time if I just give you the answers.”

“I’m listening.”

“First of all, I don’t hate my mother. And she never dominated me. My family background was perfectly normal—I had no hangups as far as my parents or my sister are concerned. My mother was a social worker and teacher, a very intelligent woman who encouraged me to write. I loved her dearly, but there was no oedipal fixation involved.

“Secondly, I have never been conscious of any homosexual tendencies, never felt a desire to experiment in transvestism. Or taxidermy, for that matter. I know nothing about motel operation, or hiding cars and bodies in swamps.

“So you can see I’m not Norman Bates. And as for identifying with other characters in the book—I never embezzled any money from an employer, never ran away, never conducted a long-term clandestine liaison. For that matter, I’ve always preferred a tub bath instead of a shower.”

I smiled at Dr. Connors. “The idea for the book came to me after reading about an actual murder case. I didn’t use any of the real-life participants as characters, nor the real-life situation. What set me off was wondering how a man living in a small town all his life, under constant scrutiny of his neighbors, could manage to conceal his crimes of violence. What I did—call it the case entry, if you will—was to construct a psychological profile of such a man, just as you do in your work. Once I felt I understood the character and his motivations, the rest was simple.”

Dr. Connors nodded. “Thank you for your cooperation. You’ve anticipated and answered all of my questions except one.”

"And that is—?"

"Let me put it this way. I imagine you read up on quite a few murder cases as a matter of course; it would be the natural thing to do, in your line of work."

"That's true."

"And some of them are pretty sensational, aren't they? Mass murders, bizarre slayings, ritual killings, weird deaths occurring under strange circumstances?"

"Also true."

"Some of them, I'm sure, are far more shocking and violent than the particular crime which, in your words, set you off?"

"Right."

"Then my question is simply this. *Why* did this one murder intrigue you? Why did you choose it rather than another?"

"But I've already explained—it was wondering how the killer managed to conceal his activities and get away with it—how he was able to avoid suspicion, lead a double life."

"That's interesting. The problem of concealment, avoiding suspicion." Dr. Connors leaned forward. "Do *you* lead a double life?"

I stared at him for a long moment before answering. "Forgive me for saying so, but you're out of your mind."

"Perhaps. But being out of my mind doesn't matter. It's getting into your mind that's important."

He stood up. "That's enough for now, I think. We'll talk again tomorrow."

"More questions?"

"Hopefully, more answers." He gave a little chuckle. "It appears I'm going to have to do some further reading tonight."

"Well, good luck to you. And pleasant dreams."

"That's the title of one of your books, isn't it—*Pleasant Dreams*?"

"I've written a lot of books," I said. "And a lot of stories."

"I know." He walked me to the office door. "Oh, one final thought. Did it ever occur to you that all fiction writing is a form of lying? And that the only major difference between an author and a psychotic is that the former puts down his fantasies on paper? You might think that over."

"I will," I told him.

And I did, all that day and during the night which followed. In the end I arrived at one firm conclusion.

I disliked Dr. Connors intensely.

It was late in the afternoon next day before Miss Frobisher came to my room and said that Dr. Connors was ready to see me. The long wait hadn't been easy on the nerves, and I'm sure she noticed how uptight I was. Miss Frobisher was a good nurse, I suppose, and treating patients like naughty children was just a part of her job. The fact that she was a little on the butch side probably contributed to her kindly authoritarianism, but I found her manner irritating.

"And how are we today?" she greeted me. "Are we ready for our therapy session?"

"Speaking for myself, I've no objection," I said. "But I happen to be alone. If you insist on addressing me in the plural, perhaps you need therapy more than I do."

Miss Frobisher laughed professionally (never show anger, never let them get to you, that's the secret) and guided me down the hall.

"Doctor's waiting for you in surgery," she said.

"Don't tell me I'm going to have a prefrontal lobotomy," I murmured. "This I need like a hole in the head."

Miss Frobisher laughed again. "Nothing of the sort! But the painters are doing his office and won't be finished until sometime tomorrow. So if you don't mind—"

"Fine with me."

She led me into the elevator and we got off on the third floor. I'd never been up there before, and was a little surprised to discover that Dr. Connors had a very efficient and compact medical unit installed. I knew, of course, that he was a neurosurgeon as well as a practicing psychiatrist, but I found myself quite impressed by the completely equipped modem surgery which I glimpsed beyond the glass wall of the outer room where Dr. Connors waited for me.

I smiled at him as Miss Frobisher left. "We've got to stop meeting this way," I said.

"Sit down."

One look convinced me he wasn't in the mood for fun and games. I seated myself and faced him across a small table on which rested a note-pad and a book.

"Aha!" I murmured, glancing at the book. "So you *did* read *Pleasant Dreams."*

"All last evening."

"I see you made some notes," I told him. "Since when did you become a critic?"

"I'm not here to criticize, only to discuss."

"Go ahead. We writers like to hear people talk about our work."

"I was hoping you might do the talking."

"What's to say? It's all in the book."

"Is it?"

"Look," I said, "is it really necessary to talk like a shrink?"

"Not if you're willing to stop talking like a patient." Dr. Connors smiled and glanced at the note-pad.

"But I am a patient," I said. "According to you."

"According to *Pleasant Dreams* you're quite a number of things. For instance, a collaborator of Edgar Allan Poe's. 'The Light House.' " I nodded. "A Poe scholar back East found the unfinished story and suggested that I complete it."

"Do you frequently get plots or ideas from other people?"

“None that I can use. Most of my stuff comes from my own background or interests. I wrote ‘The Dream-Makers’ because I was always a silent-movie fan, and ‘Mr. Steinway’ represents a similar preoccupation with music. I like to use locales I’ve visited or lived in. Milwaukee, in ‘The Cheaters,’ New Orleans in ‘The Sleeping Beauty,’ upstate Wisconsin in ‘Sweet Sixteen,’ ‘That Hellbound Train,’ and ‘Hungarian Rhapsody.’ ” I grinned at Dr. Connors. “But that’s the bottom line. I’ve never owned a pair of magic eyeglasses, slept with a skeleton, ridden a motorcycle, made a bargain with the Devil, or had an affair with a vampire.”

“Granted.” Dr. Connors squinted at his notes. “So far we’ve talked about things you like—now, let’s get on to what you dislike.”

“That’s easy,” I told him. “Formal dinner parties inspired ‘The Proper Spirit.’ And I suppose ‘The Hungry House’ represents an aversion to mirrors. In fact, if you really want to probe, it means I’ve always been self-consciously displeased with my own looks. Is that candid enough for you, Doc?”

“Not quite.” He stared at me. “Why don’t you want to discuss the real problems?”

“Such as?”

“Your attitude toward children.”

“I’ve got nothing against children.”

“That’s not what your stories say.” He tapped the notepad with his pen. “In ‘Sweets to the Sweet,’ a little girl is a witch. ‘The Sorcerer’s Apprentice’ deals with a mentally retarded youth whose delusions lead to murder. ‘Catnip’ is a thoroughly vindictive portrait of adolescence. ‘Sweet Sixteen’ is an indictment of an entire generation—you were writing about Satanist motorcycle gangs almost a decade before others picked up the notion for films. Even in a comparatively gentle story like ‘That Hellbound Train,’ your protagonist starts life as a runaway, a drifter who steals hubcaps and gets stoned on canned heat. And in ‘Enoch,’ your central character is a psychotic teenager who becomes a mass murderer.”

"Kids aren't my hangup," I said. "Don't forget, I write horror stories. And in a youth-oriented society, people are most apt to be shocked by having children depicted as monsters. The trick lies in violating the taboos we hold sacred—that's what I did to the mother image in *Psycho."*

"Trick," said Dr. Connors softly. "Lies."

I grinned again. "So now we're playing word games, right? In that case, let's just call it a Freudian slip."

He shrugged. "That reminds me of another element in your work—not just in this collection, but in literally dozens of your stories. The hostility toward psychiatrists."

"I don't hate psychiatrists."

"Your characters seem to. There are disparaging references to psychotherapists in 'The Sorcerer's Apprentice,' 'I Kiss Your Shadow,' and other titles in the book. And in 'Enoch,' your Dr. Silversmith is a caricature, a gross libel of the profession."

"But that's just another way of shocking people," I said. "Psychiatrists have become the high priests in a society that worships science. Showing them as incompetent or powerless to prevail against the forces of evil is an effective gimmick."

Dr. Connors stared at me. "Effective gimmicks—that's what you look for. Meaning things that induce fear in the reader. Your entire career has been spent in finding ways to shock people, horrify them."

"It's a living."

"Which you yourself chose. Nobody spends a lifetime frightening those he loves. Why do you hate people?"

"I don't."

"Think about it. Think about it seriously. I intend to." He glanced at his watch. "Until tomorrow, then."

"Sorry if it sounds like I'm stonewalling," I said, "but I really don't hate people."

Which was true. I didn't hate my readers, or kids, or shrinks per se.

But I was beginning to hate Dr. Connors.

It was a bad night. I didn't get any sleep, because I was too busy planning my own defense. Perhaps that sounds a trifle melodramatic, but there really was no other word for it. I had to defend myself when Dr. Connors attacked me by using my own words, my own work. It was unfair, unjust, unspeakable—only an idiot would equate make-believe with reality. Actors who played villains weren't monsters in real life: Boris Karloff and Christopher Lee were two of the nicest persons I've ever known. My own literary mentor, H. P. Lovecraft, was a kind and gentle man. If Dr. Connors thought otherwise, he was only displaying his own ignorance.

Or his own cleverness.

He was searching for something; something which escaped me. Something connected with my own condition, no doubt, something blocked and obscured by an amnesic reaction. If I could only recall what happened —

But that wasn't important now. The important thing was to be prepared for tomorrow's attack. Attack through my own books.

Which title would he select?

I tried to anticipate his choice in my own mind. *American Gothic, Night-World, Firebug, The Dead Beat, The Kidnapper, The Will to Kill, The Scarf-*—all were possible selections. But all of these novels possessed a common theme: the ease with which a psychopath could operate within our supposedly sane society. Surely such a premise is a legitimate subject for examination. And if Dr. Connors planned to play devil's advocate and ask why I was so preoccupied with psychopaths, I'd tell him the truth. *I'm afraid of them, Doctor. Aren't we all?*

That was it. Just tell the truth. *The truth shall make ye free*—

I had plenty of time to consider the matter, because Miss Frobisher didn't come for me until after dinner the following evening.

Dr. Connors, she said, had been called away on personal business during the afternoon. But he'd returned now and was waiting for me again in the anteroom to the surgery unit.

“Sorry about that,” he told me, as Miss Frobisher departed. “The painters finished my office, but I haven’t had time to get things straightened out yet. So if you don’t mind—”

“Not at all.”

Dr. Connors was seated at the table, note-pad resting on top of a book. I glanced at the book as I spoke, trying to see the title. Which one had he chosen?

There was no need to play guessing games. He was already lifting the pad, exposing the volume beneath.

It was *The Opener of the Way.*

He nodded at me. “As you can see, I’ve done my homework. You expected that, didn’t you?”

“Yes. But not your choice. Why this, instead of a novel?”

“Because it’s your first book, your first published story collection. And because of the title.”

“If you read it, you know that ‘The Opener of the Way’ is one of the stories.”

“But that’s not why you selected that title, is it? You were making a statement of intention—this book was opening the way to your writing career.”

“Very perceptive. What else did you notice?”

“That certain constant elements in your work go back almost to the beginning. Mass murders, for example, in ‘Waxworks,’ ‘House of the Hatchet,’ ‘Yours Truly, Jack the Ripper.’ The invasion or desecration of the human body—‘Beetles,’ ‘The Dark Demon,’ ‘The Shambler from the Stars,’ ‘The Fiddler’s Fee,’ and ‘The Opener’ itself. Plus the theme of possession by evil forces or an alter ego, in ‘The Cloak,’ ‘The Mannikin,’ ‘The Dark Demon,’ ‘The Eyes of the Mummy.’ You must admit, it all seems to add up.”

“To what?”

“To the recurrent image of a man possessed by a demon, mutilating his victims in a series of multiple murders.”

I shrugged. “As I told you, it’s a living. And as you told me, all fiction is a form of lying. These particular lies happen to be the ones I live by. They worked for me when I started writing, and they still work for me today.”

“But you don’t lie all the time, do you?” Dr. Connors opened the book. “What about the introduction you wrote for this collection? You start out by asking the very same question I’ve been asking you. *Where do you get the ideas for your stories?”*

“I’ve already told you that.”

Dr. Connors flipped a page. “You give a different answer here. You say that a fantasy author is cast in the dual role of Jekyll and Hyde.”

“Just a figure of speech.”

“Is it?” He glanced down at the text. “Let me read you your own words. ‘Dr. Jekyll attempts to deny the very existence of Mr. Hyde. But . . . Mr. Hyde exists. I know, for he is a part of me. He has been my literary mentor now for more than a decade.’ And now, the last paragraph of your introduction. ‘And when anyone inquires as to where I get the ideas for my stories, I can only shrug and answer, *From my collaborator—Mr. Hyde.’* That’s an exact quote.”

I stared at him. Yesterday I’d told myself that I was beginning to hate this man. Today—

“Something wrong?”

“Only with your conclusions.”

“Not mine. Yours.”

“Cut the double-talk. Are you saying I’m a multiple personality?”

“You’re saying it, in your introduction here. And in your work. That’s double-talk with a vengeance.”

“I’m not interested in vengeance.” I shook my head. “And I don’t hate people.”

“So says Dr. Jekyll. But Mr. Hyde tells a different story. Over and over and over again.”

“It’s just a story.”

“Are you sure?” Dr. Connors shook his head. “Then why are you here?”

“I don’t know.”

“Don’t know, or don’t remember?”

“Both.”

“Exactly. In multiple-personality disorders, there’s always this element of amnesia, of disassociation. My job is to help you recall. I was hoping that analyzing your work would lead you to find clues to reality. Once you face the truth—”

“What is the truth?”

“There are many truths. Consider them. You’re in a private sanatorium—and you wouldn’t be here unless there was a reason. You’re under tight security—and that should suggest the reason is a serious one. You can’t remember what happened prior to your arrival; surely this implies a personality split protected by an amnesic reaction.”

I took a deep breath. “What you’re saying is that I flipped out and killed somebody?”

“No.” Dr. Connors smiled. “Consider the facts. If you’d killed somebody, you’d be downtown, at the county jail.”

“But I did flip, didn’t I?”

“Yes.” He smiled again. “Before we continue, perhaps I’d better remind you of another truth. I’m here because I’m interested in your welfare. I’m not your enemy.”

Locking me up. Playing cat-and-mouse games with me. Prying into my stories, my secrets. And then, expecting me to believe he wasn’t my enemy? Maybe I was crazy, but I wasn’t stupid.

“Of course not.” I returned his smile. “Shall we get on with it?”

Dr. Connors consulted his note-pad. “There’s another thread weaving itself through your fiction. Not just the fantasies but the mystery-suspense stories I’ve read—so many of them deal with variations on a single *denouement."*

“What’s that?”

“Decapitation.”

"Is that so unusual? It's a common enough device for shocking the reader. Even the Queen in *Alice in Wonderland* kept saying—"

"Let's stick to your own work, and what *you* say. About the collector of heads in 'Man with a Hobby,' and the collector of skulls in 'The Skull of the Marquis de Sade.' And that other collector called Enoch. What motivated you to write 'The Cure,' 'The Head-Hunter,' or 'See How They Run'? There's a head lopped off in *Psycho,* and the final scene in *Night-World* speaks for itself. Heads roll in 'The Hound of Pedro' and 'That Old College Try.' " Dr. Connors picked up the book. "You did it here, in 'Waxworks.' And in your very first published story, 'The Feast in the Abbey.' "

"And a damned good thing," I said. "That's what made an impression on the readers. Not just the idea of cannibalism. But when the narrator finds out what he's been eating—when he lifts the lid of the small silver platter and sees the head of his brother—"

"Quite effective, I agree." Dr. Connors looked up at me. "I notice you wrote in the first person."

"That's part of the impact."

"But where did the idea come from? A newspaper story? Something you heard or read about?"

"I don't remember. After all, that was so long ago—"

"Odd, isn't it, that this should be one of your earliest efforts? And that you continued the same theme over the years?" He kept staring at me. "You've told me the source of so many of your stories. Surely there's a point of origin for this one and those which follow the pattern."

"I told you, I can't recall!"

"Nothing in your personal background?"

"I'm not a cannibal, if that's what you're hinting. I *do* have a younger sister, but no brother, so I could hardly cut off his head—"

It was hard to speak quietly because I hated him so. And it was hard to hear him now, because of the way my heart was pounding, pounding, pounding—

"Look," said Dr. Connors. "I'm going to tell you something that will help you to remember. It may shock you, but sometimes shock therapy is the most effective method."

"Go ahead," I said. *Ahead. Head. It was the head of my brother—*

Dr. Connors was watching my face, but I'm positive he couldn't hear the voice inside my head. *My head. His head. Their heads.*

I forced myself to look at him, forced myself to smile. "Don't tell me I cut off somebody's head," I said.

"No. But you tried."

"That's a lie!" I stood up, and I wasn't smiling now. "That's a lie!"

"You mean you can't remember. But you did, and they stopped you just in time. It's all there in the record."

"But why—why?"

"Because the person you attempted to kill apparently reminded you of someone else. Someone long ago." Dr. Connors leaned forward, speaking very softly, so that I had to strain to hear him.

I *did* hear him, though—I must have—because the hate kept building, building as he spoke.

Only I still can't recall what he said. It was about something that happened when I was very young. Something I did to someone and Mama found out about it and the doctor came and then they sent me away for a long time and when I came home again I forgot all about everything. I was just a kid, I didn't know, I didn't mean it, I hated him, but I forgot and nobody ever even talked about it, nobody ever even knew about it. Except now, Dr. Connors knew—he'd gone away today and looked up the information and now he was telling me about it and he'd tell everybody and I hated him because I still couldn't remember.

But I *do* remember what I did when he told me. It was all luck, really—being in that room next to the surgery, and then later finding the backstairs exit and getting over the wall.

It was even luck that there was one of those silver things with a lid on top, right next to the knife cabinet in the surgery.

I keep thinking of that now—thinking of how Miss Frobisher must have come back, and what she saw when she lifted up the lid . . .

It was the head of my psychiatrist.

What You See Is What You Get

Robert Bloch's new story concerns one Charlie Randall, who picks up a bargain camera at a garage sale, snaps a few photos and develops nothing but dead bodies.

Never mind about inflation. You can still buy yourself a million dollars worth of trouble for ten bucks.

That's what Charlie Randall paid for the camera, and he thought he was getting a bargain.

It was one of those models with a self-developing photo pack already in place, but no exposures had been taken. The outfit retailed for something like forty bucks plus tax, so it looked like a good deal. There were even a couple of flash cubes in the box—the original owner had been all ready to take some pictures.

But dead men tell no tales, and they're not so hot on photography either. So Randall picked up the camera for a ten-spot at a Saturday garage sale conducted by the executor of the estate.

Randall didn't know the executor; he just happened to be driving past the house when he saw the sign. He didn't know the dead man, but from the looks of some of the stuff on display he must have been a real nostalgia freak. There were cartons and stacks of old books and magazines all over the place, but no good stuff, like stereo equipment or transistor radios or portable color TV. And the furniture was old and beat-up too. The only new item in the lot was the camera; picking it up cheap was a lucky break.

The first thing Charlie Randal did when he got home that afternoon was to take a picture of Butch.

Butch was a big German shepherd that Randall kept on a long chain when he gave him the run of the yard. Even so, he got a lot of static from the neighbors; they couldn't figure why Randall needed a dog that big and that mean. But then they couldn't figure what line of work Randall was in, or what he had stashed away in the cellar.

What you don't know won't hurt you, and having Butch around kept people from knowing. If they tried to find out, they'd get hurt soon enough, because Butch was a real guard dog.

Even Randall didn't trust him too far, but he wanted to check out how the camera worked, and Butch was the handiest subject around. Matter of fact, he was the only one around. Randall lived alone and didn't encourage visitors, not even on business; he liked to do his deals away from home.

Anyway, he read the instructions on the box the camera came in, got Butch to heel next to the kitchen door, attached one of the flash-cube units, and took the shot.

Nothing to it, easiest thing in the world; and when he pulled the exposed film out, the picture came into focus. A little blurry at first, but then it got clearer and sharper and the colors came out to make a perfect print.

Randall wanted to try another, but it was getting late and Saturday was always a big night for him. So he went down into the cellar and got his merchandise and took it out to the car by the back entrance to the garage. After that he shaved, dressed, fed Butch and locked him inside the house when he left.

Everything worked out for him that evening, and Randall was feeling pretty good when he drove in around two in the morning.

That is, until he opened the front door and Butch tried to kill him.

If he hadn't heard the growling before the dog made a leap for his throat, it would have gotten him for sure. As it was, he jumped back just in time, slamming the door. He could hear Butch snarling inside, snarling and clawing away, and there was no percentage trying to open that door again.

So Randall went around the back, tiptoeing through the yard and listening to make sure that Butch was still up front.

Easing the back door open very quietly, Randall let himself in. He switched on the kitchen light, and in just about two seconds flat the dog came charging through from the hallway. His eyes were red and ropy strands of saliva dripped from his fangs as he opened his jaws wide and hurtled across the room.

Randall stepped back quickly, across the threshold of the open doorway behind him. As the dog sprang, the door slammed shut just in time.

Standing outside, Randall stared at the door as it shuddered at the impact of Butch's launching attack. There was a piercing howl—then a thud—then silence.

Randall stood waiting for the onslought to resume, but he heard nothing, not even the sound of panting. Moving around to the side of the house, he peered through the kitchen window.

Butch was lying on the floor near the door. One look was enough to establish his condition: the foam-flecked jaws were slack, the glaring eyes glazed, and the rib cage no longer rose and fell in the movements of breathing. The dog had flipped out and it was dead.

Randall had a hard time dragging the body into the garage, but there was no other place to put it until Monday when he could call the animal shelter. Maybe he'd dispose of the body himself tomorrow.

Either way, this had loused up his evening, and when he got back to the house he poured himself a couple of stiff shots before he went to bed.

Even so, he had trouble falling asleep. Funny how things work out sometimes. One minute he'd been on top of the world, and the next—if he hadn't been quick—he'd have been dead. And now the dog was dead; all he had left was a picture.

That was funny, too—him taking the picture only a couple of hours before Butch jumped him. He wondered just what had happened; from the looks of things the dog must have freaked-out with rabies. Come to think of it, he hadn't touched his food or his water. Randall had heard something about dogs not drinking water when they got rabies. Oh, well, you can't win 'em all.

So on Sunday afternoon he made the long haul out to the quarry and dumped Butch's body. After that, he loosened up a little, and by the time he got back to the house he felt okay again.

Until he saw the car.

It was a big Caddie with a big man sitting behind the wheel smoking a big cigar. Randall spotted it through the window right after he came in, watched it pull up to the curb and park. The big man was looking at a piece of paper like he was checking the address of the house, and then he got out of the car and started up the walk.

Randall didn't waste any time. He had the cellar door locked before the front doorbell rang, and the gun was in his pocket when he walked back through the hall. There was a chain on the front door, but no sense taking chances.

The bell rang again.

He opened the door a smidge, just far enough to tighten the chain, and the big man smiled at him.

"Mr. Randall?" he said. "Mr. Charles Randall?"

"That's right."

"I'd like to talk to you. Mind if I come in?"

Randall was ready to ask him if he had a search warrant, but the man didn't give him a chance. "My name is Frank Lumley," he said. "The executor of the estate."

"What?"

"The Desmond estate. You were at the garage sale yesterday, weren't you?"

Randall stared at the big man, trying to see what was underneath his smile. "How come you know about that?"

“This check.” Lumley held it up. “Your name and address are on it. If you’ll just let me explain—”

It sounded legit. So Randall took the chain off the door and let him in. He led Lumley to the living room and sat down.

“Okay,” he said. “What’s on your mind?”

“I understand you purchased a camera at the sale. Is that correct?”

“Right.”

“Well, I’m afraid there’s been a slight error. One of my secretaries copied the inventory of what was to be sold, along with another listing of items which were to be held back for the heirs. Somehow she made a mistake and put the camera on the wrong list. It’s not for sale.”

“I bought it,” Randall said.

“So you did. And for ten dollars.” Lumley held up the check, still smiling. “Now I’d like to buy it back. For twenty.”

“No way. That’s a brand-new camera, it’d run you at least forty at a store.”

“All right, I’ll give you forty.” The big man said it so fast that Randall knew there had to be a catch to it.

“Not interested.” He shook his head.

“Fifty?”

“Forget it.”

The living room was comfortably cool, but Lumley was perspiring. “Now see here, Mr. Randall. I don’t like playing games—”

“Neither do I.” Randall was watching him sweat. “So stop with the hype and tell me what’s so special about that camera.”

“Nothing,” Lumley said. “But it’s one of the last things Desmond bought, and the heirs would like to have it for sentimental reasons. I got a cablegram this morning from Buenos Aires—”

“Hold it.” Randall frowned. “Who’s Desmond?”

“Sorry about that.” Lumley nodded. “Desmond the Great. Big-time vaudeville magician—retired years ago. His two sons took over the act. They’re touring it in South America. Flew home for the funeral, then went back to finish up the engagement. But they looked over their father's stuff and helped make out the inventory. He'd accumulated a lot of items as a hobby over the years, and they don't want to break up the collection."

"Bull," said Randall. "The camera's something special, isn't it? Something gimmicked for the magic act."

"If that's so, I wasn't informed." Lumley took out a handkerchief and wiped his forehead. "Look, all I'm doing is following orders. You can buy an exact duplicate of that camera in any drug or department store and make yourself a profit to boot. I'll give you a hundred dollars and that's my final offer."

"No way." Randall stood up. "But the Desmond brothers—"

"Tell them to get in touch with me when they come back."

Lumley sighed. "All right. They should be winding up their tour in a few days. Promise me you won't dispose of the camera until you hear from them."

"Don't worry." Randall smiled. "I'll take good care of it."

And that was that. Or almost so.

Randall was standing at the front window watching Lumley walk out to his car when the impulse hit him. Maybe if he took a few more shots, he'd figure out what the gimmick was.

He reached into the desk drawer where the camera was stashed, pulled it out and focused on the big man as he slid behind the wheel, catching him in the view finder just before the car pulled away.

Then he yanked the tab and waited for the print to develop.

Sure enough, there was Lumley in the Caddie, big as life.

Randall peered closely at the print, checking it for anything that looked unusual. All he saw was an ordinary photo.

But there had to be a gimmick, some reason why Lumley and the heirs wanted the camera. He'd have to take a few more shots soon, and if that still didn't tell him, the next step would be to disassemble the camera itself.

Meanwhile he had work to do. He put the camera and print back in the drawer, then prepared to drive off on his nightly rounds.

Sunday night was always good for heavy dealing because a lot of Randall’s clients were fresh out and hurting after a weekend high. He laid a lot of lids at rock joints, around town, got rid of some smack and everything went down without a hassle. But it took plenty of chasing, and by the time he got home again, Randall was really wiped out.

He was still in the sack the next morning when Josie arrived for her weekly cleaning session. Randall let her in and fixed himself some breakfast, then dressed and shaved. After that he went down to the cellar to check his inventory. He was low on grass, and so he came back up and called Gonzales to meet him up on Mulholland at nine and make a buy.

It was after lunch when he went into the front room and found Josie blubbering as she vacuumed the rug.

“Hey,” he said. “What’s with you?”

She just shook her head and went on crying.

“Shut that damn thing off,” he told her. “Here, have some Kleenex.”

He waited while she blew her nose and the sniffling stopped. “Okay, that’s better. Now sit down and tell me what’s bugging you.”

Josie sat down beside the desk, shaking her head. “Ain’t nothing to concern you, Mr. Randall. ’Jes a personal thing, is all.”

Josie was a good old broad, a little short on smarts but a hard worker, and she’d been with him for years. Randall really didn’t like to see her uptight this way. “Come on,” he said. “Lay it on me.”

What Josie spilled was like some kind of soap opera—one son up for grand theft, auto; another younger kid running with a gang; the dude she’d been shacking-up with walked out last night after ripping off the money she’d been saving to pay for car repairs.

“Cool it,” Randall told her. “The kids are old enough to do their own thing—you can’t take the rap for them now. And this guy who splits sounds like a real loser. Cheer up, there’s plenty more where he came from.”

Josie shook her head. “Ain’t no use trying to find me another man, not any more. Kids gone, money’s gone, sorrow here to stay. I about ready to wrap it all up.”

"You'll get somebody, wait and see."

"I 'jes a beat-up ol' cleaning lady. Nobody gonna want no part of me." Josie looked as if she was ready to start bawling again.

"That's when he got the idea. He went over to the desk, took out the camera.

Josie stared at him. "What you got there?"

"Sit still. I want to take your picture."

"Me—the way I look?"

"Right." Randall nodded as he focused. "Pictures don't lie. You're a sharp-looking woman and I'm going to show you. Now hold still." He pressed the button. "Got it."

He pulled the print out and set it down on the desk top to develop. Gradually the picture came into view.

"Here, see for yourself." He showed her the photo. "You got no problem, believe me."

"Maybe so." Josie looked doubtful, but at least she wasn't crying any more.

Randall gave her a big grin. "Now stop goofing off and get with it."

"Right on."

She started vacuuming again and he went downstairs to figure up the week's take.

By the time he finished and came up from the cellar, it was getting dark and Josie had already left. Randall went to the front door to see if the paper had arrived.

He took it into the kitchen to read while he ate his supper. After fixing a salad and heating up some beans, he carried his plate to the table and sat down; then he unfolded the paper to look at the frontpage news. That's when the crunch came.

Attorney Killed
In Car Accident

> Frank M. Lumley, 47, prominent local attorney, suffered fatal injuries late Sunday afternoon when the automobile he was driving crashed head-on into an embankment at 4125 S. Cooleigh Drive. According to police reports a steering-wheel defect caused the car to go out of control and swerve into the concrete retaining wall. A coroner's spokesman said death resulted from. . . .

Randall didn't read any more, nor did he eat.

He was still shaken when he drove off to keep his appointment with Gonzales. Somehow he got through the deal, but it was all a blur; his thoughts kept going back to his meeting the day before. Lumley must have been killed shortly after he left the house, because Cooleigh Drive Was less than a mile away.

It was an accident, of course, just like the police said. Damned automatic power-assists are always conking out in an emergency. But something about the way it happened kept spooking Randall.

Not until he got back home did he come up with the answer. Two deaths in a row, that was the downer. First the dog, then Lumley.

But that was just coincidence. Nothing to tie them together—or was there?

Then he remembered the photos. He'd taken a picture of the dog and he'd taken a picture of the attorney. And today he'd taken a picture of Josie—

He was out of the car, into the house and on his way to the front room when he heard the phone ring in the hall.

Even before he picked it up he had this sick feeling, almost as if he knew what the voice would say. The choked-up voice of Ira, Josie's youngest boy.

"Momma's dead. I come home tonight, she lying on the bathroom floor. Swallowed a whole bottle full of reds the doctor gave her for sleeping—"

It went on and on, and Randall could hear his own voice saying all the right things, telling the kid she'd been okay when she left the house, and if there was anything he could do—

He knew what he had to do, of course. When the kid finally hung up, Randall ran into the front room, turned on the lamp, took Josie's picture from the desk top.

There she was, sitting in the chair alongside the desk, in full focus and natural color. And there, resting on the desk beside her, was something neither she nor he had noticed when they looked at the photo.

A little plastic bottle, filled with red pills.

Randall blinked and stared down at the desk top. He didn't see any pill bottle now; there never had been one when he took the shot.

But the bottle was in the picture.

He reached into the drawer, scrabbling around until he found the other photos he'd taken—the pictures of Lumley and the dog.

Could the pictures be warnings? Did they predict how death would come?

With Josie it was the pills. And suddenly he realized that the shot of Lumley showed him sitting in the car that killed him. But what about Butch? There was nothing in his photo except the dog.

Then he remembered that rabies was a disease, some kind of virus, and you couldn't see the germs. They were invisible, but they were in the picture—in the dog, in its future. That camera had to be gimmicked after all. But how?

He was just reaching for it when someone started knocking on the front door. Hastily he dropped the photos into the drawer, slammed it shut, then hurried into the hall.

Through the peephole he saw the stranger standing outside; some young dude in blue jeans. He had light-brown hair, cut fairly short, and a small sandy beard, and he looked harmless enough, but you never know.

Randall opened the door on its chain, just enough to get a better glimpse of his visitor, and the young dude squinted at him.

"Charles Randall?" he said.

"Yeah."

"I'm Milton Desmond."

Desmond—that was the magician's name. This must be one of his sons.

"Please, Mr. Randall. I've got to see you—"

Randall took off the chain, opened the door. He led young Desmond into the front room and sat down behind the desk.

"You're early," he said. "I thought you weren't coming back from South America until later this week."

Desmond blinked. "Then you know?"

"Lumley told me." Randall nodded, poker-faced. "Where's your brother?"

"Mike stayed to wrap up the final performance. But when we didn't hear from Lumley over the weekend, he told me to hop a plane and find out what happened."

"You know what happened if you read the papers."

"Yes." Desmond stared at him. "But *how* did it happen?"

Randall shrugged. "Accident. He was okay when he left here."

"Then he did see you."

"We talked."

"What about?"

Randall shook his head. "Let's cut the stalling," he said. "He made a pitch and I turned him down. The camera's right here in the drawer."

"You haven't taken any pictures yet, have you?"

Randall played it very straight. "What difference does it make?"

"None." But Milt Desmond looked plenty worried. "The thing is, my brother and I want that camera and we're prepared to pay for it."

"How much?"

"Anything within reason. Five hundred dollars."

Randall felt a little shiver of excitement tingle along his spine. He'd been right about his hunch.

But when he spoke his voice faked surprise. "For a forty-dollar camera?" he said.

"I'm sure Mr. Lumley told you why we're interested—the last purchase dad made for his collection—it's a matter of personal sentiment—"

“Don’t give me any scam,” Randall said. “There’s got to be something more for that kind of money.”

Desmond frowned. “All that Mike and I know is that my father was into magic.”

“Sure. Lumley told me he was a magician.”

“I’m not talking about stage illusions. His hobby was occult phenomena.”

“He believed that stuff?”

“Not at first. As a performer he exposed fake mediums and phoney mystics. But the more he investigated, the more he was convinced that some psychics had genuine powers. There was one man—I don’t even know his name—that dad worked with closely. He claimed he could predict the future.”

“Fortune telling?”

“More than that. He believed there are forces controlling our lives which science refuses to recognize. When palmists, astrologers or clairvoyants make accurate predictions, it’s put down as guesswork, coincidence. But he felt that if such powers could be demonstrated by some kind of mechanical device, it would be accepted as real proof. He was working on a method when he died of a heart attack, just weeks before dad passed away. In his last letter to Mike and me, dad said he had something important to show us when we got back.”

“The camera?”

“I don’t know. Maybe it’s all a hype, but Mike thinks—” Desmond broke off and took a deep breath. “I’ll give you a thousand dollars,” he said.

“For something that may turn out to be a fake?” Randall smiled.

“I’ll take that chance.” Desmond reached for his wallet, but Randall shook his head.

“Let me think it over first.”

“But Mr. Randall—”

“You staying in your father’s place over on Clairmont? Okay, suppose I get in touch with you tonight.”

"Couldn't you make it sooner?"

"Tonight." Randall stood up and escorted his visitor to the front door, then watched him move down the walk and enter his car. Desmond smiled, but Randall stood waiting.

As Desmond started the engine and moved off, his smile vanished; his bearded face freezing into a grimace of anger and frustration.

Randall turned away. Good thing he'd waited—there was no mistaking that look. The dude was plenty shook up, probably blaming himself for spilling what he knew about the camera and wondering what Randall was going to do.

Well, that made two of them. Because he didn't know what to do. A thousand bucks was a thousand bucks. But on the other hand, a camera that could predict how you'd die—

Such information could be valuable to the right parties. Old folks, rich people with cancer, heart conditions—they'd want to know. Suppose there was a doctor who could really call the shots for them, let them know if they'd recover from illness or pull through an operation without a hitch? Word about such an M.D. would get around fast, and it would be worth a hell of a lot more than a thousand dollars to have such power.

That's how he figured, and the Desmond brothers must have come up with the same answer. No wonder they were so hot to get hold of the camera. The look on Milt Desmond's face was a dead giveaway.

Dead giveaway.

Randall scowled as the idea hit him. Suppose he went to Desmond tonight and said the deal was off. Just how far would this dude go to get what he wanted?

There was one sure way of finding out.

Randall went over to the desk, took out the camera, carried it to the bedroom. He stood in front of the big mirror set in the bathroom door, focusing on his own image.

He hesitated, conscious of the sudden uneasiness surging and churning within him, and the hands holding the camera began to shake. Did he really want to know his own future?

But he had no choice. Randall steadied himself, then pressed the button. He pulled the tab, carried the exposed print over to the window. Standing in the sunlight, he watched the outlines of the photograph emerge.

There he was, clearly established in front of the mirror, holding the camera.

For a moment he felt his panic subside—until he realized the picture was still developing. And now another image came into view behind him; the blurred image of a man in motion. Randall stared at the brown hair, the neatly trimmed sandy beard, and recognized Milt Desmond. Milt Desmond—with fury in his face and an upraised knife in his hand.

Pictures don't lie, and what he'd suspected was true. Milt Desmond was going to kill him.

Unless, of course, he gave him the camera. Gave him something that could be worth how much—maybe a million?

"No way," Randall muttered.

Then he thought of the way, and grinned.

That night be climbed into his car, drove over to the Desmond house on Clairmont, and knocked on the door. Milt Desmond let him in.

"You alone?" Randall asked.

"Of course." Desmond's face relaxed in relief as he noted the brown paper bag Randall held in his gloved hand.

"You brought the camera," he said. "Let's see it."

Randall shook his head. "Let's see the money first."

Desmond smiled and reached for his wallet, and Randall pulled a revolver out of the brown paper bag to shoot him through the heart.

It was all very neat. At a three-foot range there was no chance of missing, and the silencer worked perfectly. The silence wasn't even broken by a thud, because Randall caught the body before it hit the floor.

He lugged it out the back way to where his car was parked in the alley, trunk already unlocked. The neighboring houses were dark—Randall had checked them out before he came in—and in less than a minute the body was safely stowed away as the car moved off.

It had been a long trip to the quarry when he disposed of Butch, and this time it seemed even longer. But Randall had a chance to relax and case the scene carefully before he drove in to tumble Desmond's corpse over the side. It was hard work climbing down the slope and even harder work covering the body with those big hunks of loose shale, but it had to be neatly done.

When he finished he clambered to the top, backed his car out on the lonely side road, then took a rake from where he'd stashed it on the rear seat. He carried it into the quarry and carefully smoothed loose dirt over tire tracks and footprints. Neatness counts.

Neat work and neat thinking. That was the answer, and Randall began to unwind as he drove home. He took a shot of Scotch before he went to bed and slept like a baby.

It wasn't surprising, because in a way he *was* a baby—he'd just been reborn. Picture or no picture, magic or no magic, he had nothing to fear now. Milt Desmond was snuffed and he was alive.

In the morning he made some calls, setting up buys for the customers he'd neglected last night. Then he stocked his merchandise under the car mats and went to work.

Daytime dealing always involved extra precautions and took a lot more time. It was dark when Randall finished up and got back to the house. He'd put the whole affair out of his mind while he was gone, but now he was ready to figure the next move.

The first thing he did was check on the camera and prints. They lay undisturbed in the desk drawer, and Randall carried them into the bedroom, spreading them out on the bed so that he could see the whole lot at the same time. It always helps when a salesman knows exactly what he's selling, and this would be the biggest sales-pitch he'd ever planned.

If he could get together with the right doctor, he could forget about dealing from now on—no more scuffling, no more risks, no more long hours and short money. He began to think about the M.D.s he knew, wondering which one to approach first and just how he'd make his pitch.

That's where the pictures would come in—they were his samples, his proof. Gazing at them now, he began to run through the routine.

First Butch, of course—then Lumley in his car—then Josie and the bottle of pills. Whichever doctor he contacted, he'd show the photos and let him check them out. He could only give his word about what happened to the dog, but the newspapers would back him up on Lumley and Josie.

Randall's eyes went to the last photo and he frowned. This picture he wouldn't show, because it could blow the whole deal. Milt Desmond hadn't killed him—which meant the camera wasn't always right. Matter of fact, he'd better not mention Desmond at all or repeat that talk about magical powers.

And maybe that's what it was, really—just talk. Dogs do get rabies, people die in car accidents or wipe themselves out with pills. Taking these pictures beforehand could still be coincidence. That's what it had to be, because what the last one showed had never happened. It never could happen now unless Milt Desmond rose from the dead, climbed out of the quarry and came after him with a knife.

Randall stared again at the last photo, seeing himself in front of the mirror with the camera in his hand while Milt Desmond loomed up behind him ready to strike.

The camera never lies. But it had lied about him.

Why?

He picked up the camera and carried it over to the light. Once again he debated about opening it up, taking it apart to see what was inside; there must be something he could find. But then he'd run the risk of damaging it or not being able to put the pieces back together again.

Still he had to know. Magic or gimmick, there was a secret here, and he needed the answer. Maybe the first step before doing anything drastic was just to take another shot of himself and see how it compared with the other one. That might give him a clue. Randall moved up to the mirror, focusing on his reflection.

It was then that the bedroom door opened silently and the figure loomed up swiftly behind him—the figure of the brown-haired man with the neatly trimmed beard. There was fury in his face and an upraised knife in his hand.

Randall just had time to recognize Milt Desmond as the knife came down.

Nobody comes back from the dead.

That was Randall’s last thought before he died, and of course he was right.

But the camera doesn’t lie.

And Milt Desmond’s brother Mike was an identical twin.

1978

Oo Say Can You See—

There are many uses for invisibility.

Not all yo-yos come on strings.

This one came on the end of a metal chain, linked to a pair of handcuffs.

The yo-yo's name was Arthur Hale. He'd been shot in the right hand, which was bandaged, and cuffing him to a security officer wasn't practical.

At least that's what Dr. Osgood told me. "You understand the problem, Chief. Cuff his right hand to the security officer's left and every movement would cause him severe pain."

"That's nothing compared to the pain you're causing me," I said. "Why didn't you cuff his left hand to the security officer's right?"

"Because the officer is right-handed."

"You couldn't find a left-handed security officer?"

Dr. Osgood bit his lip. "Sorry, there wasn't time to check. You seemed to be in such a hurry—"

"No matter." Truth to tell, sometimes I think they're all yo-yos, Dr. Osgood included. But I wasn't about to quibble; the main thing was that Arthur Hale was here in my office.

I glanced at the security officer holding the end of the chain attached to the handcuffs. "Let go," I said.

He frowned. "But, Chief—"

"Let him go."

He released the chain and Arthur Hale gave me a grateful smile.

“Sit down, Mr. Hale.”

“Thank you.”

“Now then, Mr. Hale. I understand you have something to tell me.”

Hale nodded quickly, then hesitated, eyeing the officer standing beside him.

I got the message. “Officer, you can wait outside.”

“But, Chief—”

“Outside,” I said. “This is no place for a man with a limited vocabulary.”

The officer went out, closing the door behind him.

I smiled at Arthur Hale. “Okay?”

He looked at Dr. Osgood, but I shook my head. “Doc stays. Anything you have to say to me can be said to him. Besides, if it’s as important as you claim, a witness might be helpful.”

Hale didn’t say anything.

“Don’t be difficult,” I said. “We’ve already made every concession you insisted on. You wanted to talk to the top man in the Bureau, and that’s what you’re doing. You stipulated there’d be no transcript, no taping, no bugging, and I agreed. Go ahead, check out the room if you like.”

“I’ll take your word for it.”

“Good.” I leaned back and smiled at him. “You can trust Doc and you can trust me. And if your information is as valuable as you say it is, maybe we can work out a state’s evidence deal. After all, in matters like these, there’s a precedent for granting immunity to citizens—”

“I’m not a citizen,” said Arthur Hale. “I’m an alien.”

“Illegal alien, eh?”

“Not illegal, either. Just an alien.”

I looked at Dr. Osgood and he nodded. “What did I tell you?”

“Never mind what you told me,” I said. “I want to hear it from him.”

Arthur Hale sat there, a plump little man with brown hair, fair complexion, and all the usual appendages—two arms, two legs, and only one head. It didn’t even rattle when he shook it.

"I come from Vespix," he said.

"Never heard of it."

"Near Cygo, only a few million light-years away from—"

"Spare me the geography lesson."

"We have been observing your planet for some time, of course, from our transmittal craft. Once our *hetchors* completed their observations and gathered sufficient data, they decided on a policy of infiltration. It was then that they hatched me."

"Hatched?"

"Figure of speech. There's no exact word for the process in any of your languages. The first step combined artificial insemination with—"

"No biology lessons, either. Get on with it. Your people decided to take over?"

"Infiltrate," said Arthur Hale. "That's what I was conditioned for. Endless *fizors* of study and training, until I was ready for my mission. Our *ptyra* is a perfectionist, and once I satisfied him I knew I could pass for human anywhere." He smiled at Dr. Osgood. "I fooled you, didn't I?"

"You didn't fool anybody," said Osgood. "We've got the lab tests, X rays, EEGs, EKGs, the works. You're human, all right."

Arthur Hale shrugged. "What about the invisibility?" he said.

Dr. Osgood frowned at me. "You see? That's the other delusion I told you about—"

"Never mind," I said. I nodded at the little man with the bandaged hand. "So your people made you invisible, eh?"

"Not *made* me. They perfected a method I could use. It's a technical thing, involving optical occlusion."

"Something he saw on a television show," Dr. Osgood muttered. "That's where a lot of them get their ideas from. Once it was witchcraft legends. Now it's TV, the new mythology—"

"It's not like that at all," Hale told me. "There's no mechanical device, no so-called force field, and no time limitation. All I do is *will* myself to vanish."

“Then why didn’t you vanish when they caught you?” Osgood snapped.

“Because I was unconscious. The bullet wound in my hand—”

“And afterward, in the hospital?”

“I don’t know. You injected me with something that disturbed the body-chemistry balance.”

“Antibiotics.”

“Whatever it is, as long as it’s in my system, I can’t function.”

“You’re functioning, all right! Making a big stink about seeing the chief, handing out that hype about a matter of life and death—”

“Shut up!” I said. “Shut up and let him talk.” I gestured at Arthur Hale. “Let’s begin at the beginning. Your people sent you here to infiltrate. That’s a polite term for an espionage assignment, isn’t it?”

“Correct. A spying mission.”

“They equipped you with the power of rendering yourself invisible as a protection and set you down on earth. You’d been programmed to learn the language and customs, your frame of reference had been tested, your cover was foolproof.”

“Exactly.” Hale nodded. “It had to be that way if I expected to survive. There could be no margin of error if I was to make a firsthand study of the rulers of this planet.”

“You knew who these rulers were?”

“Naturally. We have monitored your society quite thoroughly. I was set down at a spot where I could make immediate contact with the top leadership.”

“Where was this? Washington—Moscow—Peking?”

“Ramapo Mountains.”

“Never heard of the town.”

“It’s not a town. Just a place in New Jersey.”

I frowned. “But what does some godforsaken spot in the mountains of New Jersey have to do with the rulers of this planet?”

“Everything,” said Arthur Hale. “That happens to be Mafia headquarters.”

I listened to Arthur Hale's story without comment and that's the way I will report it here.

Just how long the Vespixians had been observing earth or by what exact means, he did not say. Perhaps their arrival touched off the so-called flying saucer scare following WWII. According to him, their probing and scanning devices were highly sophisticated—some sort of advanced computer hardware that picked up, interpreted, correlated and stored data on a worldwide scale. Since their avowed purpose was to eventually establish contact with the highest authorities, they studied their findings accordingly.

At first, Hale said, the answer seemed obvious. Since the world is divided into nations, the heads of state controlled it.

Upon examination, however, the heads of state did not appear to be superior specimens of humanity. A Teutonic madman, a Slavic thug, a Latin megalomaniac, a Chinese warlord, Japanese fanatics and an opposing array of egomaniacal chauvinists hardly qualified as top intellects, and their political mistakes had led to a global holocaust. Still, the war had been waged at their command, a war in which millions had perished. And then—again at their command—peace was finally proclaimed. Surely this demonstration of power showed their supremacy.

Not so, said the data. War had been declared only when the national leaders were confident of their weaponry. And peace had come only when that weaponry was overshadowed by a still greater weapon—the so-called atomic bomb.

The real rulers of the world must therefore be those controlling the weapons—the military establishment.

So military minds were studied. And the generals and admirals, the tactical geniuses and masters of strategy, were judged according to their deeds and decisions. What emerged was a record of blunders and confusion which resulted in wholesale massacre; errors which led entire armies to their doom; confusion and stubborn refusal to face facts, arrogant ignorance and blind determination that ended in utter chaos. Surprise attacks and ill-planned invasions had not won a war, nor had the generals who ordered them.

Perhaps control of weaponry was not the answer. The real rulers were those who devised those weapons—the scientists, the inventors.

But further research disclosed a fallacy. If science was the seat of power, then why were scientists so powerless? Why did they labor so obediently in the cause of destruction; why were the so-called greatest intellects willing to devote themselves to the concoction of napalm, nerve gas, bigger aircraft to carry bigger bombs, and all the other devices of destruction? Even in peace, their rocketry and spacecraft came under governmental control, and so did their major experimental projects, including medical research.

No, it was not the scientists who ruled, nor the academicians—for educators also functioned under close restrictions, teaching only those truths which were self-evident to the best interests of those in power.

Who, then, was in power?

Again the Vespixians consulted their findings. And came, inevitably, to the consideration of religion. All through the ages men had fought and died for their beliefs, sacrificing themselves gladly for a thousand different gods. But none of the gods had prevailed, and those who commanded the sacrifices were singularly and significantly quite powerless to stop secular warfare. And when a scan of recorded history reached the point where Napoleon impatiently snatched the imperial diadem from the Pope and crowned himself with his own hands, the Vespixians regretfully eliminated another possible power source.

What then was left? Mankind’s existence depended on his food supply, and food was controlled by agriculture. But agriculture depended on industry to implement production, and industry depended on commerce for distribution of its goods, and commerce depended on monetary exchange and monetary exchange depended upon banking and financial institutions. Money makes the world go round; perhaps that was the answer!

The trouble was that banks operated under governmental controls, and government was itself controlled by politicians and politicians were controlled by pressure groups, lobbies, labor unions, and other forces representing special interests of the population. All of these factions seemed to employ the same methods to achieve their ends: public relations and propaganda.

Which led inevitably, as the Vespixian theorists discovered, to the mass media. Newspapers, magazines, motion pictures, radio, television—these were the real makers and shakers, the powers in the land.

For one glorious moment, they thought they had found the answer: the real rulers of the world were Walter Cronkite and Johnny Carson. Until further research disclosed that most of the moving and shaking was just waste motion. The great religious books had not reformed mankind, the ethnic problem had not been solved by Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Karl Marx's ideology had nowhere been put into actual practice by the nations professing to embrace it. Theater and film offered a choice of sensationalism or inanity. Radio and the visual media pimped for whatever products paid the bills, catering to the taste of the masses or the growing lack of taste of the self-proclaimed intelligentsia. Shortly after hearing their first singing commercial, the Vespixian research team turned off and dropped out.

Humanity, they concluded, was a far more complex condition than they had thought. A survey of its strengths had failed to disclose the source of the power which controlled it.

But what about its weaknesses?

Some humans strove for virtue, and a few actually achieved it. But the majority were addicted to vice. Lying, cheating, and stealing seemed obvious enough; not so obvious was the fact that these were mechanisms, mere means to an end. And the end was the gratification of impulse.

In every stratum of every culture the common denominator was a desire for self-indulgence. The indiscriminate satisfaction of prohibited forms of sexual activity, a preoccupation with violence and brutality rationalized and ritualized as spectator sports, a mania for gambling, an addiction to alcohol and hallucinogenic drugs.

And in every society there was a so-called criminal element which catered to such needs and controlled their supply.

This control, the Vespixians realized, was the supreme source of power.

At one time such power rested in many hands; at first individuals, then small groups or gangs. But then the gangs united in larger alliances—and under the pressures of modern technology, the national criminal leaders combined forces with one another to form an international organization.

“And that,” Arthur Hale said, “is how we finally discovered the Mafia.”

“But that’s not exactly a secret.” Dr. Osgood frowned. “Everybody knows about the Cosa Nostra. They’ve been publicized, investigated by the government. And they’re not all that powerful; plenty of their top men have been put away—”

“We found that out too.” Hale stirred in his seat, rattling the chain which dangled from his cuffed wrists. “But what interested us is a point which everyone seems to overlook. In spite of the publicity, the Mafia continued to flourish. In spite of the investigations, the Mafia kept on expanding, moving into so-called respectable businesses, taking over control of management through dummy corporations and workers through secret domination of unions, even combining forces with high-level governmental agencies for various illicit activities. As for the so-called top men that have been convicted and imprisoned—are you sure this isn’t just what your slang designates as window dressing? Because the organization is still growing. Now it has learned to hide beneath the cloak of respectability—and no one really knows just how far it has penetrated into legitimate enterprise and established government everywhere. Our findings pointed to an obvious conclusion: the supposedly top leaders are front men, figureheads. Somewhere behind them is a supreme force, and he’s the one with the power.

“My mission was to infiltrate the organization and find the leader.”

I stared at Arthur Hale. “Don’t lie to me,” I said. “Your people found him for you. That’s why you were set down in the Ramapo Mountains, equipped with the power of invisibility.

"Your real mission was to kill him."

Finding the man had not been easy, Hale said. It was like searching for a needle in a haystack—a haystack of history dating back to 1262, when the first *mafiosi* banded together as an underground political organization against tyrannical rule in Palermo. Sicilian governments rose and fell, but the Mafia remained, growing in secret strength.

In 1889 it surfaced in this country, in New Orleans, as a small group specializing in terrorism and extortion. Vigilante activity disposed of some of its members, but others survived to prey on Italian immigrants pouring into the metropolitan centers of the nation.

The Vespixians researched its growth and pinpointed its changeover from a purely Sicilian operation to an international crime syndicate with members from every ethnic group and every level of society—and its secret takeover of society as a whole.

The transition was a staggering phenomenon, but what they finally zeroed in on was the constant element.

One thing had never changed, and that was the Mafia hierarchy, the Mafia tradition.

The pyramidal structure had a broad base. At the bottom were the allies, the owners of small businesses, the seemingly respectable citizens who fronted for those above and paid them tribute.

Next came the petty criminals—the "juice men," as the loan sharks were called; the smugglers, go-betweens, pimps, pushers, thieves, bookmakers, and gamblers.

They in turn were protected by a higher echelon of "muscle" which enforced their extortions and quieted complaints.

Above them were the hit men, the specialists in murder who took over the "contracts" to kill.

Once they had been numbered among the "soldiers" or "button men"—the general middle-class membership. But in recent years such members had actually become middle-class, venturing into real estate, entertainment, hotel management, financial corporations, and large-scale retail merchandising, positions of control in the fields of labor relations and management.

Their leadership consisted of families, each headed by a *caporegime* and advised by a *consigliere* who issued the orders.

But the source of those orders was the apex of the pyramid—the supreme ruler, the Don.

"This much we knew," Arthur Hale said. "And nothing more. The identity of the Don was the insoluble mystery. No matter how thoroughly we checked and hunted, we simply couldn't locate him. Our search led us to the top of the pyramid, but the figure enthroned upon it was lost in an impenetrable cloud."

"Then how did you find him?" I said.

"I told you there were two things that never changed—the Mafia hierarchy and the Mafia tradition. Tracing the hierarchy brought us to our man. But it was by tracing the tradition that we finally identified him.

"The mafiosi live by an ancient code, a way of life riddled with ritual. The most modern method of killing a traitor or informer is still preceded by the customary kiss of death. Orders are transmitted in time-honored terms. Even today the cry of revenge remains—*Livarsi na petra di la scarpa*!—meaning, Take the stone out of my shoe!' And part of that grand tradition is ceremony and protocol, the deference and courtesy shown to one's superiors. The greatest homage, of course, is paid to the Don.

"Monitoring the movements of the *capiregime,* we discovered a common phenomenon. Once or twice a year the head of every family made a trip to New Jersey, to a little motel in the Ramapo Mountain area. Obviously this was a summit meeting, and obviously the Don would be present. And when we learned that such a gathering was scheduled for last Sunday, I was sent down to attend it."

"Invisibly?"

"Of course. How else would I be able to move undetected, to see and hear—"

"And to kill."

Arthur Hale shrugged. "To destroy the serpent, one must first cut off its head."

"Another mafioso saying?"

"Vespixian."

Dr. Osgood gave me one of those *how-long-are-you-going-to-humor-this-weirdo* looks, but I ignored him.

"Tell me what happened," I said.

They set him down, Arthur Hale told me, shortly before dawn.

For a moment the Vespixian vessel hovered overhead, then disappeared into the stratosphere. Hale was left alone, shivering in the early morning mist, as he crouched in the bushes across the road from the Sunny View Motel.

The front office was dark and no lights shone from the L-shaped units grouped about the swimming pool, or from the gas station and cafe next door. Hale settled down to wait, watching the narrow road and checking his revolver.

"Revolver?" Osgood frowned. "Isn't that a bit primitive? One would at least expect some sort of death ray—"

Hale ignored the sarcasm. "Naturally we have our own weapons. But if someone discovered a melted body that disintegrated at a touch, it might cause a certain amount of comment. Secrecy was the vital consideration and death from a bullet wound was the safest method; it would look like just another gangland slaying.

"You see the implications, of course. The Don is killed by a shot from an invisible source. No one knows who fired the weapon. There is confusion, then panic. The mafiosi flee—but from that moment on, fear becomes their constant companion. Who killed the Don? Who is the traitor in their ranks? And who will be the next to die?

“Others would die soon enough. I’d have the license numbers of the cars: tracing them, I’d pick off the *capiregime* one by one. Morale would collapse, there’d be total disintegration. That’s when the *hetchors* would send others like myself—hatched and trained to take over the power structure of the organization as visible, apparently human leaders. But it would all begin with the revolver I held in my hand as I waited.”

Arthur Hale huddled in the bushes for a long time as the sun rose, the birds twittered, the insects buzzed and circled in the tall grass.

Then the cars began to arrive—the flashy foreign sports models of the young hoods, the modish Mercedeses of the executive echelon, the conservative Caddies and Continentals of the elderly Mustache Petes.

Dutifully Hale noted the numerals on the license plates of a dozen states, eagerly he scanned the faces of the figures emerging from each vehicle. Which one of these men was the Don?

He had no clue. But by noon the motel driveway and parking area was choked with cars, and no more appeared.

Each passenger had entered the motel office, then proceeded to one of the units behind it. And now, on the stroke of twelve, the guests came forth and trooped into the little cafe next door.

Hale waited until all had gone inside, then rose and crossed the road.

Invisibly, undetectably, he edged the door ajar and entered the cafe, revolver poised and ready.

For a moment he stood there in the doorway, eyes scanning the room. Where was the Don?

The cafe was crowded with circular tables covered by red-and-white checkered cloth and already heaped high with bottles, bowls of salad, and platters of pasta.

Every table was occupied by four or five diners, and from each arose a polyglot babble of cultured accents, street vernacular, fluent Italian, Sicilian dialect.

Portly and paunchy middle-aged men in business suits were seated buttocks-cheek by jowl with long-haired youths in trendy outfits; flashily dressed sporting types gesticulated with diamond-studded fingers; burly oldsters with no apparent neckline between bullethead and beefy body stared stolidly at their plates as they forked food into moving mouths.

But who was the Don?

“It was then,” said Arthur Hale, “that I realized I must rely on tradition. The grand tradition of humbleness and humility to one’s superiors.

“And as I stood there, watching and waiting, I found my answer.

“For now, from time to time during the meal, various men rose from their seats. One by one they moved quietly and unobtrusively to the swinging door at the far end of the cafe—the door leading to the kitchen.

“I had noticed two waiters entering and leaving that kitchen with trays of food. Suddenly I realized that only when those waiters were here in this room did anyone quit a table and venture through the swinging door. Their disappearance was always brief, their return swift—before the waiters left again.

“Now both waiters were here, in the cafe. And for a moment no one had risen to pass through to the kitchen beyond.

“Quickly, I made my move. Threading invisibly between the tables, I reached the swinging door.

“Now came the moment of risk. I had to open that door without detection.

“I stood there, hesitating, glancing around the crowded cafe until I made certain—as surely as I could—that no one was directing his gaze toward the door.

“Then, gripping the revolver, I eased my way through and darted into the kitchen.

“It was a hot and steamy little room, reeking of garlic, fettucine, and the scent of peppers which rose from the pots and cauldrons simmering on the huge old-fashioned wood stove at its center.

“And it was deserted.

“No kitchen help stood at the serving counter, no scullery men were at the sink. No cook presided over the big stove.

“I stared, perplexed, gazing across the kitchen in utter confusion. Through the swirling vapor rising from the stove I saw a pantry entrance at the far end.

“Now, through that entrance, the cook appeared. Not a fat and jolly mustachioed man in a tall chef’s hat—just a little wizened figure in a wrinkled black suit, with a soiled white apron tied around his waist. He shuffled into the room carrying a jar of tomato sauce. Moving to the stove, he opened the jar and prepared to dump its contents into a pasta pot.

“Was this the Don—this tiny wrinkled old man cooking spaghetti in the kitchen of a cheap cafe? Would the overlord of the organization hide away here in the wilderness, living in simple obscurity as he ruled the powers that controlled the world?

“At first glance, at first thought, it was obviously impossible.

“But on second thought—why not? What better cover, what better disguise than this? When one has power—*real* power over life and death and destiny—one can relish it without riches.

“Second thought demanded a second glance. As the little old man stood over the stove I moved closer.

“And it was then that he looked up. He looked up, and for a moment I saw his eyes; deep, dark, glittering like ink-black ice.

“As I stared into those eyes I knew that this was indeed the Don.

“And he was staring at me.

“I knew he didn’t *see* me—he couldn’t possibly see me—but something about that glittering gaze revealed his awareness of my presence.

“Still watching those eyes, I raised the revolver. And that was my mistake.

“Because I should have been watching his hand instead—his hand, moving in a blinding blur as he lifted the jar of tomato sauce and splashed its contents over my body.

“The invisible sheath extended, of course, to my clothing and to the weapon I held. But whatever splashed against it would be seen—and now my red and dripping face and arms were suddenly and clearly outlined to his vision.

“It was then, as I reeled back to wipe the stinging liquid from my eyes, that the little old man pulled a pistol from under his apron and shot the revolver out of my hand.

“I fell to the floor. But just before I fainted I caught a final glimpse of the Don standing over me.

“Standing. Shimmering. And disappearing.”

Arthur Hale sighed. “You know the rest,” he said. “The shot must have scared the mob in the cafe. They’d all taken off by the time the sheriff arrived and found me lying alone and unconscious on the kitchen floor.

“There’d been no question of rescue: my people had monitored the proceedings and when I failed them they left for good. My invisibility ended with the introduction of a foreign body—the bullet which pierced my hand.

“So I was still in the infirmary of the county jail when the Feds came by and picked me up. After that all I could do was make the kind of noises which would bring me here to you.”

“Why me?” I said.

“Because you’re the head of the Bureau. You’re the only one in a position to help.”

“Against the Mafia?”

“You don’t understand. They’re *not* Mafia. Not the top leaders, anyway. The little old man is one of them, but there must be others.

“Others who had the same idea we Vespixians did. Extraterrestrial life forms who came here in vessels of their own, realized who controlled the world, and gradually infiltrated into Mafia ranks just as we planned to do.

"They must have the same powers of invisibility and the same purpose. But they got here first and now they rule." Hale's voice rose shrilly. "You've got to stop them, don't you see that? Find them and destroy them before it's too late—"

Dr. Osgood had already pressed the buzzer and now the security officer was back in the room, yanking at the metal chain and pinioning Hale's arms. Hale was still threshing and screaming as he was dragged out into the corridor.

Osgood listened as the echoes died away, then shrugged. "Poor devil! Talk about paranoid fixations—"

"You'd better look after him," I said.

"Yes. He'll need sedation."

Osgood started for the door, opened it, then stood hesitating on the threshold. "You don't think—Could there possibly be some distorted element of truth in what he told us?"

"Invisible Vespixians and disappearing Mafia?" I shook my head. "No, I don't think."

Osgood went out, closing the door behind him.

For a moment I sat back. But as I had told Osgood, I wasn't thinking. There was no need to think, because the answer was obvious.

It was just an example of the law of averages at work.

What did the astronomers and astrophysicists say? Out of millions of galaxies and billions of solar systems, there had to be thousands of planets capable of supporting life—thousands with life forms more intelligent than those on earth.

Given this possibility, it was quite conceivable that Vespixian aliens could come here bent on conquest. And discover that a similar alien race had preceded them with the same purpose, even using the same method of invisibility to attain their goal.

It was strange, though, that both had arrived at the identical conclusion about the Mafia being the real rulers.

Apparently neither had considered another possibility—that the true secret might lie within the established government itself. Not with dictators and presidents but with those behind them; the shadowy organization of secret police and official espionage agencies who operate above the law and who, by blackmail and intimidation, control the public figureheads.

Theirs was the real power in the world today.

I glanced at my watch. The entity which called itself Arthur Hale would be back in his cell by now and Osgood would be administering an injection. This would be the best time, when they were still together.

Rising, I opened the desk drawer and took out my revolver, checked the silencer. Then I moved to the door.

It was an ugly business and I didn't want to do it, but that's a cop's job—to pressure peace, prevent the possibility of panic. Besdies, I had a duty to myself.

That is, if I wanted to stay in power . . .

PIcture

Robert Bloch.

The name itself is an introduction that should need no elaboration.

If the field of fantasy has its surfeits, they must include vampires and werewolves and chain-dangling ghosts . . . and at the top of the list, deals with the devil. The main problem with the latter is that once the trick has been worked, the story is done. The devil either wins or loses, depending upon the wits of the protagonist dumb enough to enter the deal in the first place. The story hangs, then, on how it is done.

Robert Bloch, like all those in the field, has done his share of deals with the devil. Unlike the others, however, this time he has constructed a story that does not end with . . . the end. Once again we have a lingering, an afterimage, an unwritten line that provides more punch than . . .

Farley found the Devil through the Yellow Pages.

Of course, he had to make inquiries first. He haunted the reserved section of the public library until he found an old book containing the right spells. Then he shopped around for chalk and candles and a lot of smelly herbs. By the time he drew a pentagram and set the candles out and burned the herbs Farley was pretty beat.

Next he chanted the spells and conjured up Astaroth—a rather ugly customer who rode a dragon, carried a viper in his left hand, and seemed very uptight about being disturbed.

But Farley kept safely inside the pentagram and told him what he wanted.

Astaroth shook his head. “Not my department,” he said. “You’ll have to talk to the boss.”

“And where can I find him?”

“Locally he goes by the name of Dr. Horner. He’s in the book.”

“Can I tell him you sent me?”

“Tell him and be damned,” said Astaroth. “I’m getting the hell out of here.”

And he did.

It took Farley two days just to air out the place afterward, and he had a rough time squaring things with the landlady when she complained about the noise. But finally he picked up the phone book and located Dr. Homer’s name.

Not too surprisingly, he turned out to be a Beverly Hills psychiatrist.

Getting an appointment was a hassle; the receptionist did a number about being all booked up until a year from next Thursday. Then he mentioned Astaroth’s name and it turned out to be the magic word.

“Come in tonight,” she said. “Ten o’clock.”

So finally Farley found himself in the private office, face to face with Astaroth’s boss.

Dr. Homer turned out to be elderly and a bit on the short side. The eyes peering from behind heavy glasses seemed quite normal and there were no unnatural growths sprouting from his forehead.

“You don’t look like the Devil,” said Farley.

Dr. Homer blinked. “You don’t look like a man suffering from delusions,” he said. “But of course when my receptionist mentioned Astaroth I knew it was my professional duty to see you as quickly as possible. Would you like to talk about your problem?”

“I’m frustrated,” said Leo Farley.

“Aren’t we all?” Dr. Homer nodded. “Taxes, inflation, wholesale corruption, retail violence. And on top of everything else, this damned business about malpractice insurance.” He broke off abruptly. “Sorry,” he said. “Suppose you sit down and tell me.”

So Farley told him. About his unhappy childhood—not making top grades in school, not making the team, not making girls. How the war in Nam kept him from college, and how he couldn’t enroll when he returned. His parents died in a car crash and he had to go to work in a paint store, even though he was allergic to turpentine.

Then he got into his marriage. Margaret wasn’t much for looks and she couldn’t cook anything but TV dinners, and though he wanted kids she turned out to be sterile. She was also frigid, a nagger, and a compulsive folk-singer. This latter affliction brought about her death from hepatitis, following the purchase of a secondhand guitar with an infected pick.

So for the past six months Leo Farley had lived alone, a pudgy, middle-aged man whose hair—since he was not a politician—was turning gray. He still worked at the paint store, still ate TV dinners, and it seemed as though all he got out of life was older.

“Ever thought about suicide?” asked Dr. Horner.

“Frequently,” said Farley. “Is that your best offer?”

Dr. Homer shook his head. “I’m not suggesting—just wondering. With all the rotten luck you’ve had through the years, what kept you going?”

“This,” said Farley.

He opened his wallet and took out the picture.

Dr. Homer squinted at it through his thick lenses. The three-by-three photo was obviously old and the color was slightly faded, but even so there was no denying the beauty of its subject. The teen-age girl posing full-length in a brief bikini had a voluptuous figure and a sensual, provocative face framed by an aureole of flaming red hair.

The psychiatrist reacted with an unprofessional but highly appreciative whistle. “Who is she?”

“Linda Duvall,” said Farley. “That’s how she looked when she won the beauty contest back in high school. Actually, she was even prettier. I cut this picture out of the annual.”

"Your girlfriend?"

"I never even met her." Farley sighed. "She only dated jocks. The football team, the basketball team, the track team, guys like that. And, of course, the substitutes."

"Promiscuous, eh?"

"I prefer to think of her as democratic," Farley said. "Though that's just a wild guess. Like I say, I didn't know her."

"But you had a schoolboy crush on her, right?"

"Wrong. A man doesn't carry a picture of a girl in his wallet for twenty years just because of an adolescent hangup. I've looked at it night and day and it still drives me up the wall."

"I see," said Dr. Horner. "So that's why you came to me. You want to get rid of those erotic fantasies."

"No. I want you to make them come true."

Dr. Horner stared at Farley for a long moment. "Then you really did see Astaroth?"

"That's right. And he said you were the boss."

"Astaroth has a leaky mouth." Dr. Horner frowned. "But suppose I could help. Are you prepared to pay the price?"

"Anything you ask. Just get me Linda Duvall."

"What do you intend to do with her?"

Farley explained in detail.

"My, my," said Dr. Homer. "I hope you're up to it! That's a pretty heavy schedule for just one night."

"One night?" Farley scowled. "But I was thinking more along the lines of seven years—"

Dr. Horner shrugged. "Sorry, that's the old contract. We don't use it anymore. In the old days, with only a few clients—people like Faust, you know—we could afford to give them personal attention. But now there's just too many deals to keep track of. I'm afraid one night is all I can offer."

Farley picked up the picture of the red-haired girl and studied it. The sound of heavy breathing filled the room. "I've got to have her," he said.

“Got to.”

Dr. Homer smiled. “I understand.”

“Do you?”

“Of course. They don’t call me Old Horny for nothing.” He reached into a desk drawer and produced a parchment covered with crabbed handwriting. “Sign here,” he said.

Farley’s eyes narrowed as he scanned the document. “I can’t read Latin.”

“Too bad. It’s really the only civilized language.” Dr. Homer shook his head. “You needn’t worry, though—it’s a standard contract. Covers everything except acts of God. We have the services of some pretty big attorneys.”

“That figures,” said Farley.

“What’s bugging you then? If it’s the sight of blood, don’t worry. We can dispense with that formality.” Dr. Homer held out a pen. “Here. All I want is a legal signature.”

Farley took the pen, then hesitated once more.

“Now what?” said Dr. Homer.

“I’ll level. You have a reputation for cheating on your bargains.”

“That’s a damnable lie!” Dr. Homer said. “I’m not a crook.”

“Seems to me I’ve heard that before,” Farley told him.

Dr. Homer shook his head. “You’re getting a fair deal. One night with the girl in the picture, Linda Duvall. How could I cheat you?”

“Lots of ways,” Farley said. “I tried to locate her myself, you know, but I came up with zilch. And then I realized twenty years must have changed Linda as much as they’ve changed me. Suppose you find her and I end up with a fat, middle-aged klutz?”

“She won’t be, I promise you.”

“For all I know she might even be dead. I don’t want a revived corpse, either.”

Dr. Horner chuckled. “Don’t worry. She won’t be dead, and she won’t be a day older or younger than she is in the picture. And to anticipate your other objections, I also guarantee that she won’t be mentally or physically ill, she won’t be frigid, and she won’t be a lez. Tell you what I’ll do—just to sweeten the deal, I’ll make her a virgin.”

“Yeah.” Farley licked his lips, then frowned again. “But suppose she hates me?”

“I’ll take care of that, too. I give you my word she’ll be just as eager as you are.”

“You won’t make me impotent?”

“What a suspicious mind you have!” Dr. Horner beamed at Farley appreciatively. “I promise you’ll be able to perform indefinitely. And definitely, too.”

“Then what happens?”

“I’ll come for you at dawn.”

“But we’ll have the night together?”

“Assuredly.”

“Just as she is here?” Farley pointed at the picture.

“Exactly.”

Farley gripped the pen and signed.

Dr. Horner picked up the parchment and put it back in his desk drawer. “There we are,” he said.

“But where is she?”

Dr. Horner smiled. “Linda is waiting for you now—in your apartment.”

Leo Farley smiled then too, for the first time. “I hate to eat and run,” he said. “Or vice versa. But if you’ll excuse me—”

“By all means.” Dr. Horner waved Farley to the door. “Drive carefully,” he said.

Farley drove very carefully.

One thing he had to say for himself: He was always careful. That’s why he’d taken such pains to make sure about the contract—he had no intention of being outwitted. As a matter of fact, he was a little surprised that the Devil didn’t have more smarts. The truth was that Farley had cheated *him.*

Now, driving home, it was his turn to chuckle when he thought of how his life story had gone down so easily. Because it hadn’t really been such a bummer after all.

His childhood was never unhappy; his parents spoiled him rotten and he was always the biggest bully in the neighborhood. The only reason he didn't do well in school was because he preferred goofing off to studying. He could have been on the football team if he wanted, but he used his time to set up a betting pool instead and made a bundle off his fellow students. His service in Nam was a crock; he'd spent all his time in Saigon as a company clerk by day and a black-market operator by night, which got him an even bigger bundle. And when gambling wiped him out, his parents' death left him a nice chunk of inheritance after he returned. Sure, he'd worked in the paint store, but actually as a silent partner who got 50 per cent of the take. With the chicks through the years he got 100 per cent of the action. And that's what really blew his marriage, when Margaret found out. Slipping her the infected guitar pick was his own idea; it solved all his problems.

Except for Linda Duvall. That part—about the twenty years of frustration—was true. He had the hots for her in school, he had the hots for her all these years, and he had the hots for her now. She was the only thing he wanted that he hadn't been able to get—but he was getting her tonight.

Farley grinned. He'd already damned himself a dozen times over, so there'd been no need for the Devil to make such a bargain. Farley had ripped him off.

Just to make sure, he reviewed the terms of the contract, but he found no loopholes. He was going to get just what he asked for—Linda Duvall, the way she was in her picture, alive, willing, eager. And then—

The mere thought of what was going to happen then set his heart pounding as he parked the car, set his hands trembling as he unlocked the apartment door, set his blood racing as he entered.

But the living room was silent and empty.

For a moment Farley wondered if the Devil had lied to him after all. Then he saw the light in the hall, streaming forth from under the bedroom door.

Of course—that’s where she’d be waiting for him. Well, she wouldn’t have to wait long.

He ran down the hall, flung the door open, entered.

And there she was.

Farley stared at her. Linda Duvall, in the flesh—a gorgeous redhead, stark naked, sprawled across the bed and smiling up at him in invitation.

The Devil hadn’t lied; she was as pretty as a picture. In fact, she was just like her picture.

Leo Farley turned away with a sob and stood waiting for the dawn. There was really nothing else he could do.

Not with a girl who was exactly two inches tall.

The Spoiled Wife

Jerry Clayborn wasn't exactly a prince, but he knew a Sleeping Beauty when he saw one.

"I want her," he said, pointing his finger at the face behind the frost-rimmed glass.

The director frowned. "Are you sure? Remember, you have thousands to choose from."

And so there were. The block-long chamber was bordered by solid walls of glass; behind them, in three tiers of compartments measuring six feet high and two feet wide, the bodies floated.

In spite of the frosting on the glass, Jerry could still see the occupants of each compartment bobbing face forward in their freezing solutions. They came in all colors, all shapes, all sizes: male and female, young and old, ugly and attractive. The one Jerry pointed at had long red hair, exquisitely fineboned features, and a voluptuous figure.

"That's for me," Jerry said. "Talk about your frozen assets—"

"Now, now," the director murmured. "Remember the rules. Releasing a cryogenic subject for purely sexual purposes is against regulations. Each and every one has paid handsomely for the privilege of preservation. And if and when we restore them to life, they are entitled to their full rights as citizens. They cannot be physically abused, used as slaves, or treated as mere sex objects."

"I know that," said Jerry. "I read the law."

"Then you also know the reason for these precautions," the director told him. "Cryogenic experiments date back to the late twentieth century. The problem of maintaining subjects without physical decay had been solved, but the idea that they could some day be revived, free of disease or ailments, seemed a wild dream. Then medical advances made that dream come true, and the result was a nightmare.

"Thousands of people scrimped and saved to go the cryogenic route. They were expected to be thawed out and released now that it was possible.

"But some had been frozen for sixty or seventy years; their families and friends were dead, they had no homes, no possessions. Once freed from the freezer they simply became charity cases, a burden on the economy."

Jerry Clayborn was still staring at the redhead behind the glass. He licked his lips.

"That's when the government took over," the director said. "Abolished private facilities and laid down the rules. No subject can be restored unless his or her upkeep is guaranteed by a citizen of the state."

"Sure, sure." Jerry nodded, goggling at the glass.

The director followed his gaze. "Might I ask what sort of employment you have in mind for this subject?"

Jerry smiled. "I'm going to marry her."

"Really, Mr. Clayborn—"

"What's the matter? It's legal, isn't it?"

"But not advisable." The director pursed his lips. "Experience has shown that such marriages present many difficulties. Cryogenic restorees return to life with a different value system, the product of past cultures. The longer they've been preserved the harder it is to adjust to today's standards." The director pressed a button and a tiny spool of microfilm popped out of a slot below the compartment housing the redhaired girl. He pulled a scanner from his jacket, inserted the film, then frowned.

"The young lady's name is Robin Purvis," he said. "A very early subject dating way back to the 1970s—frozen by her family after an accidental overdose of narcotics. Of course any physical damage will be fully repaired before release."

"So what's wrong?" Jerry said.

"I told you. It's a matter of compatibility. Now if you were to select someone of more recent vintage, so to speak—"

Jerry shook his head. "I want this one."

The director shrugged. "Remember, you were warned."

"No problem." Jerry grinned. "Unless she turns out to be frigid."

She wasn't.

Jerry discovered that during the very first night of their honeymoon on the spacecraft. Robin Purvis was obviously glad to be alive again, grateful to the man responsible for restoring her, and eager to make the most of the situation.

During the flight she quickly adapted herself to gravitational changes and enthusiastically explored all the possibilities of free-floating fulfilment—sex in midair, sex upside down, sideways, and on the ceiling.

But after they landed and shuttled to the honeymoon suite Jerry had rented at the Aldeberan Hilton, Robin looked disappointed.

"What kind of a joint is this?" she demanded. "Where's the television?"

"Reception isn't possible here," Jerry told her. "This is a hard-rock planet."

"Super," said Robin. "Let's get with it."

So Jerry booked a guided tour, they rented insulators, and off they went. Trouble was, Robin found her outfit bulky and cumbersome, the oxygen intake and artificial-gravity unit were difficult to control, and—worst of all—the helmet mussed her hair. But she tried to be a good sport, and it wasn't until the guide conducted them to the caverns that she really blew her cool.

"Let me call your attention to these unusual geological formations," he said, through his speaker grid.

"Never mind that," Robin murmured. "Where's the hard rock you were talking about?"

"This is it," Jerry said. "These outcroppings—"

Robin glared at him through the peepholes in her helmet. “What’s with you, man? Rock is to hear, not to see!”

The rest of the honeymoon wasn’t much better. Robin didn’t like the synthetic meals in the hotel dining room and she didn’t care for the other tourists—particularly the ones from Rigel and Betelgeuse. “All those slimy tentacles,” she said. “How can you stand looking at them? And eating through tubes stuck in their belly buttons or whatever—blecch!”

“Sorry, darling,” Jerry said. “I thought you might find space travel an interesting experience.”

“Going billions of miles just to see a bunch of creepy-looking monsters—who needs it?” Robin shook her head. “If that’s your bag, all you’ve got to do is drop a little acid at home.”

So they went home, but Jerry didn’t drop any acid. He sat down on the posturpad bed in the center of the room while Robin glanced around curiously.

“No more hard drugs, remember?” he told her. “You’re clean now and you’re going to stay that way. Besides, there are no hallucinogens nowadays—they’ve all been outlawed.”

“But what about that pill you make me take every night?” Robin said. “What is it, some kind of birth-control thing?”

“The director gave me a supply when we left,” Jerry told her. “You must take one every twenty-four hours for your life-support level.”

“So what’s for kicks?” Robin surveyed the four walls of the apartment. “Living in one room is for the birds. Come to think of it, I haven’t seen any birds.”

“Extinct,” Jerry said. “With food and oxygen rationed, we can’t afford to maintain unproductive life forms.”

“How about rich people; don’t they have pets?”

“I’m rich enough. That’s why I can afford to live on the four hundredth floor of the best condominium in town.” Jerry gestured at the four walls.

"We have everything we need here. Look—this wall has your dial-a-meal unit. That wall has an automatic atmosphere-recycler installation. Over there is your complete cleaning-and-disposal mechanism. And the fourth wall houses the communications system. I'll show you how they work in the morning." He patted the bed, smiling. "Right now I want to show you how *this* works." Robin smiled. "Okay. But I kind of figured things would be, you know, different, when I came out of the fridge."

"You'll find a lot of changes, I promise you," Jerry said. "Here—before I forget—take your pill."

Early next morning Robin shook Jerry until he awakened. "Hey, man—get up!"

Jerry blinked into awareness. "What for?"

"Like don't you have to go to work?"

"I suppose so."

Jerry yawned, staggered to the wall housing the communications unit, and pressed a button. A green light flickered across its surface, then vanished.

"There." Jerry nodded. "All finished."

Robin stared at him. "You call *that* work?"

"I'm a maintainence engineer. I'm responsible for seeing that every mechanism in this condominium functions properly. Once a day I press the button. If it flashes green, then everything's in order."

"You mean it's all done by machinery?"

"Computerized servomechanisms," Jerry said. "Programmed from the control center in Washington AC/DC."

"Then you just stay home here twenty-four hours a day?"

Jerry smiled. "We can be together all the time, darling. Isn't that great?"

"Dynamite," said Robin. But she didn't smile back. And no smile came to her face as the hours passed.

Jerry showed her how to operate the dial-a-meal and order the instant breakfast which popped out of the wall on two disposable trays. It took just an instant to get rid of the leftovers in the disintegrator tube on the adjoining wall, and the apartment itself was antiseptically cleaned in less than two minutes flat.

"You see how simple it is," said Jerry. "If you want to, you can order lunch and dinner and set the timer for delivery. Then you're free for the rest of the day."

"But what are we going to *do?"*

Jerry patted the bed. "I was thinking—"

"Not now." Robin frowned. "Can't we go for a walk or something?"

"Where?"

"Outside—down below—"

Jerry shook his head. "Ground level to floor one hundred is off limits. Nothing down there but maintainence equipment."

"Couldn't I at least take a look at it?"

"Air pollution's too heavy. Dangerous."

"Don't you ever leave this room?"

"Certainly. I travel, visit friends. Like to meet a few?" Robin nodded, so Jerry punched buttons on the communications unit until a print-out slid from a slot. "All set," he said. "My thyrox is on the roof."

The two-seater thyrox rose vertically, then sped forward, bouncing like a glass bubble between the towering high-rises below. There were hundreds of similar bubbles whizzing past on all sides and Robin stared at them, gripping Jerry's shoulder.

"Watch how you're driving!" she said. "Look out; you almost hit that one—"

"Don't worry," Jerry told her. "We can't collide. Every thyrox is on a computerized course."

But Robin closed her eyes and kept her head down; all Jerry could see was a mass of copper curls until they landed on another rooftop.

“Who we visiting?” she asked as they stepped from thyrox to airlock to interior corridor.

“Lee and Varda Thorek,” Jerry said. “Nice people; you’ll like them.”

It proved a poor prediction. Lee and Varda were well preserved but there was still the generation gap. As Robin pointed out on the way home, what could she rap about with people who were a hundred and fifty years old?

“I’m sorry,” Jerry said.

“If all your friends are like that, we might just as well stay home.”

“Suits me,” Jerry told her. “Let’s go to bed.!”

Robin hesitated. “Well—if you insist—”

“I do. Here, take your pill.”

The next morning Jerry punched the button and Robin dialed their meals. The cleaning apparatus whined for two minutes and then fell silent.

“Now what?” Robin asked.

Jerry pointed at a wall. “You haven’t tried the communications system yet. Let me show you how it works.”

“Is it like TV?”

“Better. We’ve got holography.”

“What’s that?”

“You’ll see.”

Robin saw. The huge wallscreen lit up and beamed forth life-sized figures in three dimensions, so natural that they seemed to be real presences in the room. Jerry switched from band to band, giving Robin a chance to enjoy each program. There was a lecture on hygronomy, a lecture on hydroponics, a lecture on hydrodynamics, and a lecture on hydraulic engineering.

“Is that all?” Robin murmured. “Where’s the car chases and shoot-outs? That’s what I’m into. And what about seeing something exciting—like people jumping up and down and wetting their pants when they win an electric toaster on a game show? You know, entertainment!”

“I’m afraid our programming is structured more along educational lines,” Jerry said, switching off the wall system. “Still, if it’s entertainment you want—” He patted the bed.

Robin nodded and undressed. But when she joined him on the bed and he reached out to embrace her, she turned away.

“Please,” she whispered. “Not now. I’ve got a terrible headache.”

“All right.” Jerry sighed, then reached for the plastic container on the end table. “But before you go to sleep, take your pill.”

The next morning Jerry punched his button and Robin punched hers; in a few moments they’d eaten and cleaned up the apartment.

“See how convenient the walls are?” Jerry said.

“One more day like this and I’ll be climbing them,” Robin told him. She paced the room. “Don’t you ever do *any*thing?”

“What would you like? More space travel? I have other friends you could meet, and there’s a choice of new lecture programs whenever you want. It’s a full life.”

“I’ll tell you what it’s full of,” Robin said.

“If it seems dull to you, I apologize,” Jerry told her. “Now why don’t we just stop arguing and go back to bed?”

Robin pouted. “Is that all you ever think about?”

“But this is why I got married! My psych told me I needed an outlet.”

“You tell that turkey I’m not an outlet! I’m a human being, and I’m entitled—”

“Of course you are, darling.” Jerry nodded. “Just be patient. I know this is a whole new life-style, but you’ll get used to it.”

“Call this a life-style?” A frown furrowed Robin’s face. “No uppers, no downers, no rock, no soap operas on TV, no place to go shopping or get your nails done; you don’t even have any beauty parlors!”

“You don’t need one,” Jerry said. But now, looking at Robin closely, he realized that the flame was fading from her red hair, leaving drab streaks of mousy brown; her makeup and eye shadow had worn off to reveal the mass of freckles and splotchy blemishes beneath. And when she scowled like this she was positively ugly.

Robin’s voice was ugly too, as it rose to a whining screech. “Don’t tell me what I need. You and your life-style make me sick!”

“But that’s just the point, darling,” Jerry said. “Look on the bright side. Thanks to modern hygienic conditioning and a simple, leisurely existence, no one is ever sick. If you’ll only make an effort to adjust, you can live to be two hundred.”

“Another hundred and seventy-seven years of this drag?” Robin’s eyes blazed. “No way!”

Jerry didn’t say anything, but he thought it over. When Robin finally stopped screeching at him and flopped down on the bed, he tried to take her in his arms. She pushed him off onto the floor.

“Dirty male chauvinist pig!” she screamed.

Somehow, in all the excitement, Jerry forgot to remind her about taking a pill.

“Sorry about that,” the director murmured. “I did warn you—”

“Not your fault.” Jerry shook his head. “But it’s quite a shock waking up in the morning with something like that next to you in your bed. Not just the puddle, but the smell—”

“That’s what the pills were for,” said the director. “Remember, a restoree is basically still a piece of meat that’s been thawed out. Only an artificial preservative can halt the process from continuing its natural course. I’m afraid you spoiled your wife.”

Jerry sighed. “What’s done is done. Better luck next time.”

“You mean you’re going to try again?”

“Why not?”

The director rose, smiling. “Excellent.” He led Jerry into the glass-walled chamber, nodding as they moved along the aisle. “I admire your perseverance. Not every man would have the courage and determination to make another such attempt. You do plan on another marriage, I take it?”

“Yes.” Jerry nodded and halted at one of the frost-rimmed glass compartments as its occupant caught his eye. “Call me a romantic,” he said.

The director glanced at him hesitantly. “A word of caution,” he said. “This time I hope you’ll benefit from your experience and make a better choice.”

“Right,” said Jerry, pointing. “I’ll take that fellow over there.”

1979

HIs and Hearse

RANDY DOUGLAS WAS HANDSOME, WELL-DRESSED, THIRTYISH, AND not accustomed to squirming.

But Randy was squirming now—and paying fifty dollars an hour for the privilege—on the couch of a Beverly Hills psychiatrist.

“It’s no use, Doc,” he said. “You may be a good headshrinker, but my head is sanforized.”

The psychiatrist leaned forward in his chair. “Let’s stop playing word-games,” he murmured. “We both know why you’re here. You came to see me because you have a problem. Something’s troubling you, and you want help. But I have to know the facts. So suppose you relax now. Tell me about it, get it off your conscience—”

Randy sat up abruptly, turning away so that the psychiatrist couldn’t see his frown, or the fright behind it. “Maybe that’s what’s wrong,” he said. “I don’t have a conscience.”

Randy was still frowning as he drove into the driveway of his attractive country home high in the hills above the Santa Barbara area.

Susan was waving to him from the doorway, and the afternoon sunshine haloed her brown hair.

Somewhere within himself Randy had found a reserve supply of charisma sufficient to turn his scowl into a smile. He moved away from the car and into his wife’s embrace. Randy summoned more charisma for their kiss.

“Darling, you’re home!” Susan had a talent for stating the obvious, but then she was the obvious type. Even her attempts at makeup and replacing glasses with contact lenses couldn't disguise what she was. Just a quiet, demure and domesticated female who had never even heard of Women's Lib. And that, Randy reminded himself, was why he'd married her.

Sometimes it was hard for him to realize Susan was five years younger than himself. Entering the living room now, for example; its setting was modern in decor, but there were touches straight out of 1910.

The fire going in the fireplace. The slippers placed beside his chair. The pillow which Susan tucked behind his shoulders as Randy seated himself. If he'd been a pipesmoker, she would have had it ready and waiting on the table beside him. The loving wife, prepared for the master's return at the end of a long day.

"How did the day go, darling?"

Randy settled back in the chair as Susan removed his shoes and replaced them with slippers.

"All right. Just one of those lunches, usual thing."

Susan beamed up at him, then sobered. "What's the matter?" she murmured.

Randy made a grab for his charisma, but it eluded him. He was conscious that the smile had oozed away from his face.

All he could do was shake his head hastily—but not hastily enough to stop Susan.

"Is it something I've done? Please, I want you to tell me. You know I'd never do anything intentionally—"

Even her dialogue was 1910. A vintage year for the obvious. Randy reached for her hand, squeezed it quickly to halt her.

"It isn't you. How often must I tell you that this past year has been the happiest one in my entire life?"

"Poor baby." Susan rose. "You're tired. No wonder, fighting all that traffic on the freeway. Let me fix a drink."

She moved to the bar and busied herself behind it. Randy stared off into the den beyond the living room, scanning the rows of bookshelves.

Bookshelves. That's what started it. He couldn't tell this to the shrink much as he'd wanted to. But maybe he could tell it to Susan.

Maybe? He *had* to.

When a man runs out of charisma, he has to face himself. Not his image, but his reality. And he had to talk about it to someone, so why not Susan? She was the obvious person. Obvious Susan. Take a chance, tell her, let it all hang out.

"Here you are."

Susan handed him his glass, then carried her own over to the sofa.

"Cheers." Randy took a long sip.

When he glanced up from his glass, Susan was watching him.

"Want to talk about it now, darling?" she said.

Randy met her gaze. "I'm warning you. What I have to say may come as a shock."

Susan shook her head. "Don't worry about me. Whatever it is, I'll understand."

Randy took another gulp of his drink. Then, slowly, he lowered his glass and took a deep breath as a chaser.

"All right. It started six years ago—"

Six years ago. Randy Douglas had been just another struggling young actor, then; another bland, blond profile in the *Academy Players Directory,* listed somewhat hopefully and totally inaccurately under *Leading Men.*

Randy wasn't playing leads, or even second leads. In fact he wasn't playing, period. That's why he got so excited when his agent, Jeff Griffiths, told him about the possibility of a role in an upcoming TV western series at ABC.

Between the time he got Jeff's phone call and the time he actually entered his office, Randy had everything all worked out. Sure television didn't carry the prestige of movie work, but it often paid better. And, more important, it lasted longer. A lead or running part in a successful show might be good for five years or more—and look at some of the westerns that had lasted for double that! With more money every season, according to contract, plus all the extra goodies; personal appearances in summer, a rake-off on merchandise tie-ins, guest shots on the big variety shows, instant fame and acclaim that led to star billing in films in the future. Plus all those years of residuals on the reruns. Not that Randy fancied himself as a cowboy; he was more of the white-tie-and-tails type. But in a case like this, he'd be willing to make a concession.

He explained all this to Jeff Griffiths, and the little agent smiled and nodded quickly.

"You won't have to concede," Jeff said. "It's not a cowboy role."

"Then what do I play?"

"An Indian."

Randy blinked. "Indian? Hey, wait a minute—what kind of running part is that?"

"It's not a running part. Just a one-shot." Jeff noted Randy's frown, waved it aside. "Now don't get excited. All you have to do is report to Makeup next Monday morning and work your day—"

"One day?" Randy's frown deepened. "What do they expect to get out of me in one day's work?"

"Your line." Jeff handed him a mimeographed script, opened to a page in the middle. Randy stared at it.

"Ugh!" said Randy.

"That's your line." Jeff nodded. "Read it on camera and go home."

Randy stood up. "I'm going home now," he said. "For months you've been telling me to be patient, don't worry, I'll line something up for you. And what do I get?" He extended the script. "Well you can just take this and file it with my contract—"

"Now just a cotton-picking minute here—"

"Never mind." Randy turned away. "I know what you're going to tell me. The old bit about how there are no small parts, only small actors."

"Not always true." Jeff stood up and he wasn't smiling now. "Sometimes it's a case of a small part, but no actor at all."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means the reason you haven't worked is that nobody would touch you. One look at those film clips from your tests and they ran away. Ran, not walked. I had to stick my neck out further than a giraffe just to get you this one chance, and you're blowing it. Face the facts, Randy. You're no trouper."

"And you're no agent." Randy opened the door. "Not mine, anyway. As of now."

It was a good exit line, and the slam of the door behind him added a note of emphasis, but somehow Randy had the feeling that the scene didn't play. Jeff had upstaged him. And now he was offstage, off-camera, out of the action, maybe out of show biz entirely. Certainly he was out of bread, and at the end of the month he'd be out of his apartment too, the way things were going.

Randy stalked past the reception desk, shoulders sagging.

"Oh, Randy—Mr. Douglas—"

The receptionist's voice halted him. He turned, straightening his shoulders automatically at the sound. No actor, eh? Well, it took an actor to respond on cue Eke that; to make with the big boyish grin as he glanced over at the receptionist. Little brown-haired chick with nothing really going for her, unless you dig the wholesome type. He'd made it a point to rap with her whenever he came to the office because you never know when these things pay off—sometimes the help can put in a good word for you. Now what was her name? Susan. Susan something—"

She was smiling at him, indicating a sheaf of papers on her desk. "Mr. Griffiths must have forgotten to buzz me. But I have your contract ready and I know he wanted you to sign before you left."

Randy shook his head. "I don't think he forgot. But I turned down the part."

"Oh—"

"No. Ugh. That's the part." Randy revved up the smile to take the sting out of his words. "And I don't want any part of it. Or your boss, either."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be." He played it cool and casual. "I've got something else lined up." Here was a scene he could handle, the charm-boy routine. "Actually, the only thing I'll be losing is the pleasure of seeing you."

Susan said something and at first Randy didn't catch it, because he was watching her blush. Randy hadn't seen a woman blush in years—even though he had frequently observed them in situations which would warrant it. What was with this bird, anyway? He picked up her conversation midway.

"—so I thought if you were free, perhaps you'd join me—just a home-cooked meal—"

How about that? She was inviting him up to her pad for dinner!

Randy couldn't believe his ears. "Home-cooked meal." Nobody talked like that any more. Was this straight little bird making a play for him, or did she feel sorry because she suspected he was scuffling for bread?

Ordinarily Randy would have enjoyed finding an answer to the question, but not right now. Right now was something else.

"Sorry," he said. "I'd love to, but I'm tied up for the evening."

He said it with a smile, but Susan was the one who looked sorry. Which meant she probably *did* know his setup. That was the crunch, when you got to the stage where you were pitied by receptionists. Randy decided to change all that.

"Believe me, I'd break the date if I could, but it's too late. I'm having dinner with Elaine Ames."

Name-dropping, but it worked. Susan believed him, or at least she pretended to. And when Randy asked for a raincheck on the invitation, she met his smile and nodded.

"Thanks again," Randy said. "I'll be in touch." He glanced at his watch. "Got to cut out now. I'm meeting her at eight, at Chasen's."

The funny part of it was, Randy did have a date at Chasen's with Elaine Ames. But after he met her, and they slid into their cozy corner booth, it wasn’t funny any more.

This was, Randy reminded himself, strictly business. And that’s what he gave Elaine—the business.

Rapping with her over their drinks, he remembered the first time he’d ever seen Elaine Ames. On Broadway, starring in one of her hit shows—a musical version of *A Streetcar Named Desire,* entitled *Hello, Trolley!*

But that was a dozen years ago and now Elaine Ames was just a flashy, garish, aging brunette. Her star had long since faded; tonight, only her diamonds glittered.

Randy kept sneaking peeks at them as he held her hand during dinner. She liked having her hand held and she liked his attentiveness and she liked drinking brandy with coffee in the company of a big, handsome stud. Even though her constant conversation centered almost entirely on the show biz world of twenty years ago, it was obvious that Elaine was trying to retain her youth—and the youth in question was Randy.

“You’re dazzling,” he told her.

She didn’t realize he was talking to the diamonds. “What do you mean?” she murmured.

Randy stared into her mascara, trying to find her eyes. He squeezed her hand, and his voice was low, almost as low as his intentions. And then he spoke.

“I remember when I was a little boy, we had this marvelous Christmas tree one year. And way up at the very top was a beautiful angel—an angel with long, dark hair. She kept smiling down at me, and I wanted to touch her. Just touch her, more than anything else in the world. But I was too small, and I couldn’t reach her.” Randy smiled and leaned forward. “Funny, isn’t it? All my life I’ve dreamed about her. And now, for the first time, I dare to hope that I can reach my angel—”

Only a fuddled, infatuated egomaniac like Elaine could go for such a pitch, but she embraced it—and, later that evening, Randy—eagerly.

Less than a week later, Randy picked up his raincheck, or meal ticket, actually, and had dinner at Susan's apartment. Plain fare, nothing fancy; a description that could apply to Susan herself. But Randy found himself relaxing, and it was easy to talk. Before he knew it he was telling her about Elaine.

"We're going to get married," he said.

The minute it came out he knew he'd made a mistake. The poor kid looked positively clobbered.

"Congratulations," she said, meaning no such thing. "But isn't it rather sudden?"

Whoever wrote her dialogue would never be a candidate for an Oscar, Randy told himself. But a scene is a scene, and he knew how he was going to play this one.

"It's not a matter of choice." Then the brave smile. "When someone cries out to you for help—"

"Elaine Ames needs help?" Susan looked puzzled. "With all her money —"

"It's not a matter of money, either." Randy shook his head. "When you're in the theater, your dedication is to your career. Elaine had a great one, everything was going for her, and then something happened."

"I know," Susan said. "It's called middle age."

"That's what she thinks," Randy said. "But she's wrong. She's not that old. What happened to her is that she lost confidence. The first time she noticed a wrinkle, she panicked. And it's wrong, all wrong. Sure, I'm a few years younger than she is, but that's exactly what she needs now. Someone with a youthful outlook who can help restore her own faith in herself. Why, she could go on to a whole new career out here—"

"And so could you." Susan was staring at him now. "Haven't you thought about that?"

"What do you mean?" said Randy, who had thought about nothing else.

"Elaine Ames isn't a star any more. But she *is* rich, and she still has friends in the business. With her help, you could go places."

"I suppose you're right." Randy forced a frown. "It's just that I never considered it—"

"Of course not. Because you were too busy being self-sacrificing and noble." Susan smiled at him across the table. "Look, Randy. In a way, I'm part of show biz myself. I don't have your good looks or your ability, but if I did I'd go the same route you're going. I'd marry someone with money and connections and become a star."

"But that's sheer opportunism—"

"Nonsense." Susan was animated now. "You told me yourself that this marriage could help to restore Elaine's confidence. You'll be giving her something money can't buy. So you're entitled to a few benefits in return. It's a fair exchange. Be practical."

Square she was, but not stupid. Randy nodded. "I'm glad you feel that way. I was afraid you thought I was doing the wrong thing."

"It's the right thing," Susan said. "As long as you're doing it for the right reason." She smiled at him. "So congratulations again, Randy. And this time I really mean it."

"Thanks." Randy rose. "I won't forget this evening."

"Neither will I." Susan's eyes were bright. Too bright. "Don't worry," Randy said. "We'll keep in touch."

Promises, promises. How quickly they get lost in the welter of wedding vows!

Randy got lost in them himself and he never did manage to extricate himself long enough to give Susan a call. After the honeymoon he might have invited her out to the house, but he really didn't think she'd feel at home there.

He certainly didn't.

Randy had looked forward to living in a Malibu beach house, until he actually saw the place. Elaine's home was very much a reflection of herself: gaudy, over-decorated, and just a little too rundown. It somehow resembled the set of an old Busby Berkeley musical—and her friends seemed to have stepped out of the cast.

He had already made up his mind to adjust himself to Elaine. With an added effort, he thought he could tolerate her home—with its all-white living room, filled with the kind of furniture Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers used to dance on, including the piano. He could tolerate the floppy French dolls and stuffed animals littering the bedroom, and even her two live dogs, three cats, four budgies and a dozen goldfish. But he soon found he couldn't take her friends.

The animals stayed in the bedroom, but Elaine's friends were all over the house. Most of them were fugitives from Broadway, including a large assortment of ex-chorus girls old enough to have put the sex in the Floradora Sextette.

Randy met them all at the first party Elaine gave after the wedding. He tried to make himself agreeable and kept passing drinks to the crowd, even though he privately felt that most of them should be served nothing but Geritol. But it did shake him up a trifle when he got into conversation with one elderly showgirl who seemed to be under the impression that Randy was Elaine's son.

He was even more shaken up when he realized how little progress he was making on his career. Every time he tried to broach the subject to Elaine she turned him off.

"I couldn't bear the thought of you slaving away in those dreary studios," she told him. "Besides, I need you here, darling. You're such a perfect host for my parties. Which reminds me, we're having a real fun thing tonight—an old-fashioned Charleston contest, for all the girls. With trophies and everything. If it goes over I was thinking about a Marathon Dance—"

It was a Marathon Dance for Randy, all right, but he didn't see any prizes. If anything, he was a prize himself: Elaine's personal trophy, to be exhibited to her Charleston-dancing contemporaries. At the very best his status was that of a pet, to be kept with the others in her boudoir.

Elaine spent a good deal of time in her boudoir. Rising promptly at the crack of noon, she devoted most of the day to a complicated makeup routine with curlers, cream, cosmetics, and corsets, to say nothing of Celia. Celia was her maid and had been since the old Broadway days. She clucked over her mistress like an elderly mother hen, but she pecked at Randy. When Elaine got him into the act to assist her—getting the corset on was a job for at least two people, to say nothing of a derrick—it was plain that Celia resented his intrusion. She muttered under her breath, which was faintly perfumed with the odor of juniper berries, and Randy retreated.

He kept trying to get Elaine away from her influence, urging her to take a trip, or at least go into town for the evening. But Elaine didn't even want to leave the house.

"Why don't we go down to the beach and swim?"

"Really, darling, it's impossible—the sun is bad for the complexion. And I've never learned to swim. Water is bad for the complexion too, you know. Which reminds me, it's time for my bath. Would you help Celia with the goat's milk?"

Elaine bathed only in goat's milk, as Randy discovered—the hard way—when he had to assist Celia in milking the goat.

But milking the goat was child's play compared to milking any money out of Elaine. "Let me handle the finances, darling," she told him. "You just relax and enjoy."

Randy didn't follow her advice. He was too busy worrying about whose head currently appeared on a dime; it had been so long since he'd seen one that he couldn't remember.

Unable to finance a career on Elaine's loot, Randy decided on another approach to the problem. The logical first step would be to cultivate some of the people who attended Elaine's parties. Although her friends were decrepit, quite a few seemed to have imposing connections. Randy scanned the guest lists for VIP's until he found his pigeon.

Actually the pigeon was more of a bald eagle—a big-name producer of costume epics named Cedric Schlokmeister.

Cornering him alone at a garden party one afternoon, Randy made his pitch. He casually mentioned his acting experience to the producer and hinted at his desire to return and make a contribution to the art of the cinema.

Schlokmeister seemed interested. He not only listened, he asked questions. But just as Randy really warmed up, the producer glanced at his watch and frowned. “Sorry,” he said. “I’ve got to go now. I’m due at the unemployment office in half an hour.”

“Unemployment?” Randy said. “A big producer like you?”

“That’s right,” Schlokmeister sighed. “What good is a producer of costume pictures? Nowadays most of the actors in movies run around naked.”

Randy had no answer for him, or for himself. He was beginning to face the truth.

Elaine’s friends were nothing but has-beens. Just hitchhikers on Memory Lane.

Elaine herself was a lazy slob; the only exercise she took was having her face lifted.

And Randy was her prisoner, here in this beach house where no one even used the beach. She cut off his money, cut off his communication with the world. He didn’t even dare call Susan on the phone. It was almost like one of those situations in the paperback mysteries he’d been reading lately.

That’s how he spent his time: reading mysteries he borrowed from Celia, the maid.

And this, oddly enough, was how Randy found a solution to his problem—in an idea that came to him while reading mystery fiction.

One afternoon Elaine was lolling in the pool. Not in it, exactly, but on top of it—floating over the surface on an air mattress under a parasol. The parasol shielded her from the sun and the air mattress kept her from contact with the water.

It was Celia’s day off, and Randy had the place to himself. After a bit he wandered out to the pool, scanning a paperback book.

Elaine glanced up at him and frowned. “Still reading that trash?” she murmured.

Randy smiled and shook his head. “It’s not trash, my love. I happen to be studying theology.”

“Theology?” Elaine stared at him, puzzled, as he moved up to the edge of the pool.

“That’s right.” Randy tossed the book aside. “A fascinating subject. For example, that old religious dispute about how many angels can dance on the head of a pin. I’ve just discovered the answer.”

From his jacket pocket, Randy produced a pin.

Elaine shrugged. “All right, suppose you tell me. How many?”

“One,” said Randy. “One angel—you.”

And, reaching out with the pin, Randy punctured the air mattress.

It hissed and collapsed.

And Elaine gurgled down into the watery depths of the pool.

After a while, she just bubbled.

And then even the bubbles stopped.

Elaine’s funeral was a real production. All her theatrical friends were there. And each one, approaching the casket banked with oversized floral displays, put on her own special act. There was a sobbing spell, a fainting scene, an attack of hysterics—everyone trying to top the others. Some of the old girls hadn’t done a turn since they’d played the Palace, but they were in there now, wowing them at Forest Lawn.

Only Susan remained calm and unmoved. She showed up quietly and uninvited, ready to comfort Randy, and he was glad of her presence. After all, he had an act of his own to play now—the role of the bereaved husband who would inherit all of Elaine’s money after her tragic accident in the pool.

And it had been an accident, of course. “Poor darling—she never learned to swim. The mattress just collapsed, and I didn’t even hear her call out.”

That's what Randy told the coroner, and he believed him. Which made it all a perfect setup to collect the inheritance. Like the old saying has it, prosperity is just around the coroner.

But when Randy confronted Otis Grabb, Elaine's attorney, he lost faith in old sayings.

"Money?" Grabb said. "I thought you knew. Your wife had nothing left but a trust fund. It ends with her death."

"The house—" Randy began.

"Read the will," Grabb advised, scanning a copy. "I hereby bequeath my house to my long-time personal maid, Celia Kronsky, as a token of my appreciation for services rendered—"

Randy gulped. "What about all her jewelry?"

"Paste." Grabb sighed. "The real gems were pawned long ago. No, I'm afraid there's nothing. You'll have to sell the furniture to pay funeral expenses."

Randy walked out. And he walked home, too. Because even Elaine's big car was, he'd discovered, actually the property of a major studio and had been lent to her for old time's sake by a sentimental executive. Now it had been repossessed.

A month later, Randy was back in his old pad—and his old rut. If it hadn't been for a few home-cooked meals at Susan's he would have flipped out completely. As it was, she was right on hand to comfort him in his great loss. Even she didn't know how great the loss was. Seeing Elaine gurgle into the pool was one thing; what Randy couldn't stand was watching his career go down the drain.

Susan did her best to console him. One evening, in order to take his mind off his troubles, she took him with her to a party.

It was a charity affair at a big mansion in Pasadena; Susan got the tickets from her boss at the talent agency. He had no interest in attending, because there was no connection with show biz. As a matter of fact, Randy didn't recognize a single Hollywood celebrity in the crowd. This was the society set: people with "old" money and inherited position. Here in the grand ballroom he could sense the scent of *real* wealth. Dignity, gentility, breeding, and oil-depletion allowances.

Randy was charmed by it all, and decided it wouldn’t hurt to do a little charming in return. The beneficiary was his hostess, Mrs. Worthington, a *grand dame* of the old school—possibly the old Pasadena High School, class of ’26. Susan made no objections when he danced with the dowager, and over buffet dinner Mrs. Worthington responded to his courteous attentions with senile abandon.

Randy was out to impress her for what it was worth, and it turned out to be worth a great deal. Because the old bat was saying she wanted him to meet this niece of hers who had this terrible problem—it seems she was simply besieged by fortune-hunters and parasites who were after her money. The poor helpless girl really didn’t know where to turn.

“Oh, here she is now,” said Mrs. Worthington, waving in the direction of the dance floor. “Constance, my dear—”

Constance Maitland didn’t seem to fit Mrs. Worthington’s description at all. Poor she certainly wasn’t, and there was nothing about the tall, aristocratic, golden-haired presence which suggested a helpless girl. As for not knowing where to turn, that too seemed unlikely—for she turned to Randy quickly enough. And clung to him the remainder of the evening.

“You’ve made a conquest,” Susan said, as she drove him home.

“Nonsense,” Randy told her. “Can you picture me in society?”

It was a purely rhetorical question, or perhaps an impurely rhetorical one. For Randy didn’t care if Susan could picture himself in society; it was enough that he pictured himself, and this he did quite easily.

In. In society and out of the rat race. Who needed a career in that phoney theatrical world when you could already enjoy every benefit that could possibly be obtained from struggling to get ahead? Here was a chance to get off the treadmill and onto the *A* list for dinner invitations.

So Randy spent the next few weeks commuting on the Pasadena Freeway. It was a new experience for him, wooing someone in *Who’s Who,* but he kept after Constance—constantly. Inevitably the time came when she too heard the Christmas tree story—with a *blond* angel, this time—and the rest was easy.

Constance admitted she had rotten luck with her first four husbands, to say nothing of her last five analysts, but she was willing to try again.

If poor Susan was disappointed at the news, she managed to conceal it with good grace. Randy bid her a regretful farewell and prepared to move into the Pasadena mansion. This time there were no mistakes, no misconceptions; the money was there and it was real.

Real money. Real luxury. Gracious living, travels with the international set, invitations to Greek yachts—maybe even a possibility of getting good seats at the Rose Bowl Game—it seemed almost too good to be true.

But it was. Randy had a good seat that New Year's Day at the Rose Bowl, because Constance was keen on sports.

The problems arose only on the other three hundred and sixty-four days of the year. That's when Randy discovered the meaning of gracious living.

Gracious living is remembering how to dress for the Hunt Breakfast, the Club Luncheon, and the Formal Dinner. Gracious living means not sitting down on the antique furniture because it's roped off. Gracious living is having the servants follow you around and empty the ashtray the moment you flick your cigarette into it. Gracious living is wandering through two dozen drafty, high-ceilinged rooms of an old mansion and listening to the endless echo of a hundred clicking, ticking clocks until you want to climb the walls—but people who live graciously don't climb walls, now, do they?

Not that Randy needed the wall-climbing for exercise. Constance saw to that. She was, he soon discovered, not only a sports enthusiast but a physical-fitness buff. Randy didn't like her preoccupation with health—there was something sick about it.

Even more distressing was Constance's insistence that he join her in exercising. Before he knew it, Randy was doing everything from standing on his head in upside-down Yoga to sliding on his derriere while jogging down a mountain.

A typical day found Randy rising at five a.m. for a brisk canter on the bridle path—followed by a brisk toss into the bushes. After breakfast there'd be a few sets of tennis; following lunch came a round of golf on a private course. By the time dinner was over, Randy felt ready to collapse into bed with Constance. And the dogs. Elaine had liked pets, but at least she'd kept them in their place. Constance's love for animals knew no bounds, and she set no bounds on them. As a result, each night a different dog shared their bed; everything from a poodle to a Great Dane. He never knew quite what to expect, except that the dogs all adored Constance and hated him. His efforts to bar them from the bridal chamber were useless; Constance and her dogs were inseparable. Randy soon realized that his wife's favorite perfume was Kennel Number Five.

He also came to learn that Constance kept a very tight hold on the pursestrings. She had been brought up in the time-honored tradition of established wealth, and its first rule was never to dip into capital; one lives on interest.

With a staff of household servants to support—including one elderly retainer whose sole duty was to make the rounds of the mansion and keep winding the clocks—even Constance's income from investments didn't stretch too far. At least it didn't stretch far enough for Randy's grasp.

To his surprise, he found himself more pinched for cash than ever, and soon he was reduced to reading only those paperback mysteries he could acquire from second-hand bookstores. Quite often now he read them in bed, but neither Constance nor the dogs objected. In fact, Constance rather encouraged him.

"You're really a dear," she told him. "So completely house-broken—I mean, domesticated. I rather think my marital problems are solved at last."

For Randy, however, they were just beginning. He would have given a great deal to consult Susan, but Constance was not about to permit it. The tight hold she kept on the pursestrings was nothing compared to the tight hold she kept on Randy. And now that she'd made up her mind to stay married to him, she meant to keep him in line. Unlike Elaine, Constance didn’t entertain; she was quite content to spend all her time with her husband.

Unfortunately for Randy, this was all she was willing to spend. He’d thought he was landing in the lap of luxury, but now he found himself on the hot seat. Or, at very best, serving a life sentence.

He seemed to be picking up a good deal of criminal argot from his mystery reading. Enough to know that confinement here in the mansion was driving him stir-crazy.

One day, during their Yoga exercises, he spoke to Constance. “I was thinking it might do us both good to get away for a while. We need a change.”

To his amazement, Constance nodded. Which wasn’t easy to do, since she was standing on her head at the time.

“We could take a vacation,” he continued. “Maybe a nice long trip around the world.”

“I’m afraid that’s not practical,” Constance said, going into the double-lotus position. “There’s one of those dreary board meetings coming up at the bank, you know.”

“Acapulco?” Randy ventured.

“How utterly vulgar!” The double-lotus blossomed. “Why don’t you let me surprise you? There’s a perfectly marvelous desert resort—”

Randy brightened. Desert resort? That probably meant Palm Springs, one of those plush pads for the private-jet set, the beautiful people.

But Constance really did surprise him. They didn’t jet to the desert; Randy drove them down in the town-and-country wagon, which was loaded with sports equipment. And it wasn’t Palm Springs or anywhere near Palm Springs, geographically or otherwise.

The place was called Mesa Chistic, and the weather-beaten old inn was authentically Spanish architecture; in fact, judging from the age of the hostelry it might well have been built by one of the original conquistadores. Nor did Randy notice any beautiful people; this resort was so exclusive that scarcely no one ever came there. The truly wealthy, he was discovering, have a passion for privacy. “Isn’t it quaint!” Constance exclaimed, as Randy unloaded their gear. “Look—not even a bell captain to bother us!” Randy could have used a bell captain, plus three bellboys and a pack mule to help him lug their luggage up the stairs, but Constance was obviously enchanted. Besides, she didn’t have to give him a tip.

The truly wealthy sometimes have a passion for penury, too. Randy found that Constance was quite careful about expenditures; she always checked the tab before signing for meals in the dining room. And while riding the desert trails was rather pleasant, Randy didn’t enjoy returning to the stable and grooming the horses.

“No sense throwing money away,” Constance told him. “Besides, it’s good exercise.”

Golf was good exercise too, in her opinion—but Randy didn’t appreciate having to serve as caddy. He said as much.

“You really shouldn’t complain,” Constance chided. “Perhaps the bag is a trifle heavy, but this is really the best course.”

It wasn’t the best course for Randy. And the longer they stayed, the more he fetched and carried and waited on Constance, the more he began to wonder just what the best course really was.

Going on this way was out of the question. A life sentence of penal servitude wasn’t what he’d bargained for, and there didn’t seem to be any chance of getting time off for good behavior.

On the other hand, there was always bad behavior.

Randy thought about it as he scanned through some of the mysteries he’d stashed away in his luggage. He thought about it some more while sneaking a drink with Mike Forester, a traveling salesman who showed up in the otherwise deserted bar that afternoon. Forester wasn’t exactly the type Randy would have chosen as an old drinking buddy, but at least he was company. “You really know how to belt ’em,” Forester told him, as he watched Randy down his third double scotch. “We’ll have to get together and tie one on.”

“It’s a date,” Randy said. “Maybe tomorrow—”

At which point Constance entered the bar and dragged him away.

“Really, how could you?” she murmured, as she led him upstairs to their room. “Drinking in public with that dreadful, common creature.”

“I needed a drink. Had a headache all day. Maybe I’m coming down with something.”

“A good night’s rest will do more for you than alcohol,” Constance decided. “And tomorrow, we’ll tone up your system with a nice round of golf.”

But Randy didn’t get a good night’s rest. While Constance slept, he crept out of the room, left the hotel, and with a heavy canvas sack, ventured a way into the surrounding desert.

The next morning, when she awoke, Constance found him tossing and turning in bed.

“I really do feel sick,” he told her. “Guess I’d better spend the day in the sack here and let you golf alone.”

It took some persuading to keep Constance from calling a doctor, but in the end Randy managed to convince her to go out to the course while he rested.

And while she was dressing, he also managed to pull the sack out from under the bed and transfer its contents to another receptacle.

As soon as Constance left, Randy got on the phone with Mike Forester.

“About that little drinking date of ours,” he said. “How soon would you like to meet me in the bar?”

“Any time now.” Forester hesitated. “But are you sure your wife won’t object?”

“Don’t worry about my wife,” Randy said. “It’s in the bag.”

And so it was.

At that very moment Constance stepped onto the deserted desert golf course, ready to tee off. Reaching into her golf bag she pulled out a club—around which was coiled a live and angry rattlesnake—

Constance's funeral was a tasteful study in black and white; a cavalcade of black limousines discharging white-haired dowagers. As they moved in stiff and stately procession to the graveside, Randy was grateful for Susan's company. There were no dramatic performances at this sedate burial, only proper and precise condolences.

Randy took more comfort in Susan's sensible expression of regret. She reminded him that accidents do happen and one must accept them. Now he must dismiss the sad past and consider a happier future. This time, as he already knew, there were no financial problems. He had inherited Constance's estate and he would be free to settle down as he pleased.

But settling down didn't please Randy. Wealth and position had brought him nothing but misery, and he wanted no part of that; social activity was as empty as show biz. Nor did he intend to dwell on Constance's passing, mourning noon and night. It was time to live a little.

With that in mind, one evening he dragged a somewhat reluctant Susan to a rock joint on Sunset Strip. And it was there he saw Penny.

Penny Nichols was something to see—and hear. The teenaged, red-headed guitar-playing singer worked with four male accomplices in a folk-rock conspiracy against the eardrums called The Iron Marshmallow.

The moment Randy saw her he realized Penny was What's Happening, Where It's At, Like It Is. And before Susan quite realized his reaction, he was off and running.

The next night he returned to the place alone, and during intermission he managed to have Penny join him for a drink. Half-blinded by psychedelic light shows and half-deafened by electronically amplified rock, he had a little trouble seeing and hearing the girl clearly, but he managed. What impressed him about Penny was that she had none of the theatrical phoniness of Elaine or the artificial gentility of Constance. Penny was spontaneous, outgoing, and her breathless enthusiasm concerned itself with the basic realities of existenceloving, sharing, giving. This was the sort of attitude an older man appreciates in an attractive young girl, and Randy was no exception. It was a trifle awkward to explain this to Susan, but she seemed to understand.

"Whatever makes you happy," she said. "But if it's what I think it is, I really don't think you have to marry the girl in order to obtain it."

"I'm talking about a whole new way of life," Randy said. "Free. Honest. Open. A youthful outlook. You can understand that."

"I can understand you," Susan told him. "And if this is what you really want—"

Randy wanted, no doubt about it. Only a few nights later he found himself telling Penny a groovy version of his Christmas tree story, involving an angel with *red* hair.

As usual, Randy's charm won the day.

They were married—quite legally, and for a fifty-dollar fee—by a bearded guru. Penny's four musical associates, Tom, Dick, Harry and Irving, all acted as best men at the ceremony. And then Randy took his bride home to the new house he'd bought high in the Hollywood Hills.

Randy had indeed won the day. But not the war.

Penny's first reaction to the house disappointed him a little.

"It's square," she said, wrinkling her nose.

"Of course. Actually, it's more of a rectangle—that's the way they build ranch houses."

"I'm talking about the furniture. We've got to get rid of this junk, make the place comfortable."

Randy was willing to indulge Penny's taste, but he was a little disturbed by her lack of it. Her efforts as an inferior decorator soon transformed the. ranch house into a raunch house, and when Randy surveyed the mattresses scattered across the bare floor in front of the random accumulation of incense burners, Pop Art posters and Pot Art paintings, he shook his head.

"Looks like a hippie pad," he said.

"Don't you want my friends to feel at home?" Penny asked.

Randy really didn't—not after he learned that Tom, Dick, Harry and Irving were going to occupy the guest house in back.

“But we’re a group,” Penny explained earnestly. “A family. I told you I wasn’t about to give up my work. And now with them all together here, we won’t have to worry about rehearsals.”

Randy worried about rehearsals. Even earplugs didn’t help. As the weeks went by he came to realize that Penny was still a swinger, and he began to get a trifle dizzy as he tried to swing with her.

In this marriage, unlike the others, *he* was the Older Generation, and it was tiring to leap the Generation Gap in such fast company. He had hoped for a life of fun and games, but the name of this game was Penny Anti. Anti-Establishment, that is.

Penny and her weirdo-beardo companions took over the house, and inevitably Randy retreated to his den. It was stocked with brand new mystery thrillers now, and he did his best to concentrate on his reading amidst the din.

Sometimes, during Penny’s absence, it was harder to concentrate amidst the silence.

It was during one of those silences that Randy, venturing forth in search of his wife, discovered that she had decided to continue practicing in the guest house. But what she was practicing—with Tom, Dick, Harry and Irving—didn’t please him.

“All this talk of loving, sharing, giving,” he muttered. “I might have known.”

“You’re too straight to know anything,” Penny said, defiantly. “I’m one of the Flower Children.”

“Slightly wilted,” Randy said.

But when he mentioned divorce, Penny shook her head. “You’re out of your skull. I like it here. And if you try anything like that, I’ll take you for all the bread you’ve got.”

“On what grounds?”

“Mental cruelty, the works. And don’t forget, I can make it stick. I’ve got four witnesses—Tom, Dick, Harry and Melvin.”

“Irving.”

"Oh, yeah, Irving. Melvin was last season, I forgot." Penny shrugged. "But you just remember this. You lead your life and I'll lead mine and we'll make it okay. I'm not about to split."

So the only splitting involved Randy's ears as he retreated to his den and listened to the freaked-out sounds of rehearsal. The electric guitar, Randy decided, is not a musical instrument.

Penny informed him that she and her creepy crew had taken an engagement at a far-out joint which was far out geographically too, in the southern beach area.

Randy nodded agreeably at the news. "Mind if I come along for the opening?"

"You're making the scene?" Penny was a trifle surprised. "I sort of figured you'd object to me working again."

Randy smiled. "Whatever turns you on," he said.

So the scene was made. Randy even lugged her electric guitar backstage for her and helped the boys set up their amplifying equipment. Then he went out front to a table, opening a brand new mystery thriller to read while waiting for the show to begin.

He closed it only when Penny opened her mouth. She and the group came out on the platform, the lights dimmed, and the first number started.

Penny gripped her guitar, ready to sing. Her lips parted, but no sound emerged. Penny stood there, rigid, her hair rising and standing on end. From the red curls streamed blue sparks. This time her electric guitar was really turning her on—with a short circuit. It was a shocking performance.

Penny's funeral was a swinging affair, with few flowers but plenty of weed. Hippie musicians formed a procession to the cemetery—sports cars, microbuses and motorcycles snaking out to the graveside. Here they did their thing instrumentally, speeding the dear departed to That Big Pad Up In The Sky.

Randy watched silently, then turned away and walked back along the path into the shadows where Susan was waiting.

It was over now, all over, and he'd never been so glad to see anyone in his life. From now on, he knew, his life would be her life. *Their* life. Impulsively, he embraced her . . .

Randy was embracing her now, here in the living room, as he concluded his confession.

"Please," he said. "Try to forgive me. If you could only understand—"

"But I do." Susan managed a smile. "I know how Elaine made you suffer, and of course Constance was impossible. As for Penny—well, after all, as you say, you really didn't have a choice. I'm not saying I approve, but you did what you felt was necessary."

"It was necessary, believe me," Randy sighed. "There was no other way out."

Susan nodded, brushing a stray tear from the edge of her right contact lens. "Besides, it's all over and done now," she said. "You've had your experience with ambition, wealth, youth. Perhaps you've learned your lesson."

"Thanks to you." Randy reached for his drink. "Now I know that what I really wanted was the warmth and comfort of the simple life. The life you've given me."

Susan glanced at him. "One question, darling."

"Yes?"

"About that Christmas tree angel. What was the real color of her hair?"

Randy shrugged. "When I was a kid I never had a Christmas tree," he said.

He gulped the rest of his drink, set it down. When he turned to Susan his jaw was set. "One thing more. I didn't go into town for a luncheon date today. I went to see a psychiatrist."

"Oh?"

“I hadn’t intended to tell you this, Susan, but you’ve been so understanding—I feel I must.” Randy hesitated, eyes lowered, then met Susan’s gaze. “You see, I wanted to kick my habit.”

“Habit?”

Randy shook his head. “No, it’s not drugs. It’s another kind of addiction. After reading all those mysteries I began to develop a sort of pattern—I seemed to start thinking in terms of, well, ways and means. Ways and means I used to dispose of three wives. And even afterwards, I found that I couldn’t stop. Without knowing it, I’d gotten hooked on this kick.”

Susan’s eyes widened. “Go on,” she said.

“That’s just the trouble. I did go on.” Randy gestured toward the book-lined den beyond the open doorway. “In one of my books I ran across a description of a new chemical derivative. It’s a colorless, odorless poison that leaves no trace in the tissues or bloodstream. Depending on the amount of the dose, it works in anywhere from an hour to a day. The symptoms resemble a sudden stroke—the victim goes rigid, completely paralyzed.”

“Randy—”

Randy’s gaze fell. “I couldn’t help it,” he said softly. “I even found myself purchasing ingredients to concoct the stuff. That’s when I knew I had to go and see a shrinker. But it was no good. I just wasn’t able to tell him, he’d never believe me.”

Randy rose and moved across the room, behind the bar. “Maybe you don’t believe me either, but I can prove it to you. I put the stuff in a bottle and stashed it away. Under here.”

Reaching down, he pulled out a small bottle. As he raised it the blood drained from his face. He gasped.

“Empty—”

Susan smiled. “Of course. I found it when I was cleaning, after you left. I realized it must be some kind of poison.”

“Thank God!” Randy murmured. “You disposed of it?”

“In a way.” Susan’s smile didn’t waver. “I poured it into the drink I gave you.”

Randy’s jaw dropped. He stared over at his empty glass, then back at Susan.

She wasn’t smiling now. “Your little confession didn’t really shock me, darling. Somehow, I’d always suspected that you got rid of your former wives.”

“But you never said anything!” Randy gestured helplessly. “You waited for me, you married me yourself—you were so innocent—”

“Patient,” Susan said. Her eyes narrowed, “Has it ever occurred to you that perhaps I might want the same things you did—riches, position, a chance to have younger partners? But I was willing to wait, darling. I let *you* do the dirty work for me. Knowing that in the end I’d marry you, get rid of you, and have everything for myself.”

Randy stumbled back to his seat, her voice ringing in his ears. But when she stopped talking the ringing continued, and now he could feel the numbness creeping through his limbs. He sank back in the chair, his paralysis mounting swiftly. It was all he could do to speak, but he forced the words out.

“You should have waited a little longer. Until I told you the rest. About how murdering wives becomes a habit. That’s why I really went to the psychiatrist—when I knew the habit was too strong for me. Because after I mixed the stuff up, I couldn’t help it. I used the poison on you—”

“But that’s impossible!” Susan whispered.

With an effort, Randy shook his head. “Not in a drink. A smaller dosage—takes longer to work—but you should be feeling the effect by now—”

Susan tried to rise, and failed. She managed to turn her head toward Randy, asking a question with her eyes.

“Yes.” Randy’s voice was faint but clear. “Your eyes. Before I left the house today—I poured some of the poison—into your contact lens solution—”

Sunset summoned shadows to shade the house as Sally and Jim approached the front door.

“I know they’re not expecting us,” Sally told her husband. “We’ll just surprise them.” And she rang the bell.

There was no answer. Sally waited and rang again.

“What did I tell you?” Jim shrugged. “They’re not home.”

Sally shook her head. “Oh, they’re home all right. But you know how it is with Randy and Susan at cocktail time. They’re probably both stiff by now.”

Inside the living room, staring at one another in mutual astonishment in the firelight, Randy and Susan were very stiff indeed.

Freak Show

In which we learn about some pretty awful doings at a mud show at the Goober City Fairgrounds from a master of the horror story. A new Bloch collection, SUCH STUFF AS SCREAMS ARE MADE OF, was published recently.

Goober City Fairgrounds lay out in the boondocks and came to life only during the county fair. Nothing ever happened on the premises the rest of the year, aside from a few muggings and an occasional rape.

But on this particular morning, as Sheriff Higgs drove up in the patrol car, he noticed signs of other activity.

Parked right spang in the middle of the main arena was a big red van. And standing next to it was a man.

Sheriff Higgs knew every fourwheeled contraption or two-legged critter in Mayhem County, but he'd never seen this van or man before. He pulled up about fifty feet away, climbed out, and walked over slow and easy.

The van was unmarked and had an out-of-state license, so that didn't give him much to go on. The man was nothing to write home about, either—tall, on the skinny side, dark hair and eyes—he could be young or well into middle age, depending on the face under the beard. But his shirt and pants were too clean for a hippy-type, and there just wasn't anything about him you could get a handle on.

Sheriff Higgs decided to feel his way. “Morning,” he said. “Mighty warm day and fixing to get worse. Folks say it’s so hot you can fry eggs on the sidewalk.”

“Bad for your health,” said the man. “Too much cholesterol.”

“Don’t worry about my health,” the sheriff told him. “I’m here on official business.”

The stranger smiled. “And what might that be?”

Sheriff Higgs held up a printed placard and squinted at its bright red lettering in the sunlight. *Carnival Of Life*, he read. *The Greatest Show On Earth. Adults Only—Fairgrounds, Tonight.*

The man nodded. “Went up late last night when I arrived. You’ll find them on every telephone pole in Goober City. Forty-seven, as I recall.”

“That’s forty-seven violations,” the sheriff told him. “Law says you can’t post bills in public property without a permit.”

“Sorry,” said the man. “I thought that was merely a formality. And since my stay is short I’m rather pressed for time. But I suppose law and order is the name of the game.” And he winked.

Sheriff Higgs looked him straight in the eye. “It’s not a game with me. Like I said, I’m here on business.”

“I agree,” said the stranger. “Let’s shake on it.” He stuck out his hand and Sheriff Higgs took it, feeling the crisp crackle of folding-money against his palm as he slid the bill into his trouser pocket.

The man turned away. “Now that the proprieties are observed I must ask you to excuse me. There’s work to be done.”

“Hold it,” said the sheriff. “I got to know a little something about this carnival of yours before I give you the go-ahead.”

The man shrugged. “No problem. It’s just a mud-show. Been doing these one-night stands for years, like Dr. Lao or Cooger and Dark.”

“Never heard of them,” the sheriff said. “Or you either. Mind giving me your name?”

“Fall,” said the stranger. “Fall’s the name—though I’m a man for all seasons, so to speak.”

Sheriff Higgs cocked his head at the red van. “Where’s the rest of your outfit, Mr. Fall?”

“They’ll be along shortly. Once I get the tent up—”

“Not so fast. Suppose you tell me just what goes on inside that tent of yours. Handbill here says Adults Only. Is this here one of them sex shows?”

“Certainly not.”

“What about gambling?”

“I’m not partial to games of chance.”

“You bringing in any wild animals?”

“I have no dealings with animals.”

“Then just what do you deal with?”

“It’s a ten-in-one,” said Mr. Fall. “What you’d call a freak show.”

“What kind of freaks?”

“Come back tonight and see for yourself.” Mr. Fall smiled. “I think you and the good people of Goober City will find it a most unusual attraction.”

The good people of Goober City must have expected sex, gambling and wild animals, because they came swarming onto the fairgrounds right after dark.

Sheriff Higgs saw that just about everybody was there, from the folks who worked in the mill to the big wheels who lived on the hill—banker Fence, lawyer Tudd, even Mayor Stooldrayer. Brought their wives along, too; it wasn’t the kind of a show they’d choose for their girlfriends.

The arena lights were on and loud music blasted from an amplifier outside the tent. But that’s all Sheriff Higgs *noticed*—there weren’t any rides or shooting galleries or guess-your-weight outfits, no fortune-teller booths, no Keeno concessions, not even a stand where you could buy a chiliburger or a Dr. Pepper.

There was just this one tent, not all that big, either. It had a platform out front, and the sheriff spotted Mr. Fall standing on it with his back turned, putting up banners all along the side of the canvas wall. When Fall turned around, the sheriff saw he was wearing a fancy red suit that looked to be velvet, with shirt and tie to match. Even his shoes were red and he carried a red cane in the crook of his arm. He'd slicked his hair back with little puffs standing up on either side of his forehead, and with that beard of his he was a dead ringer for the label on a bottle of Pluto Water.

"Good evening," he said, coming down to the edge of the platform. "Glad you could make it."

"That's some getup you're wearing," Sheriff Higgs told him. "You look like one of those old-time stage magicians."

"All part of the act." Mr. Fall smiled. "If you mean to succeed in this world, you've got to cater to your customers' wants. And what they want most is illusion."

"What kind of tricks do you do?"

"Just the basics. No complicated gimmicks, no phoney effects, no walking on water or changing water into wine. I leave cheap miracles to the opposition. Experience has shown me that most people don't require much in order to be fooled. All they need is the opportunity for self-deception."

Sheriff Higgs frowned. "Well, you don't put over anything on me with that scam," he said. "Notice you still only got one tent. Where's the other stuff you said was coming?"

"Everything's inside," Mr. Fall told him. "And the show is ready to begin."

He turned away and walked to the center of the platform, pounding on the wooden planks with his cane.

The cane must have been rigged up with some kind of remote-control amplifier because it made quite a racket. And Mr. Fall's voice came through loud and clear.

"This way," he called out. "This way, ladies and gentlemen, for the free show."

The ladies and gentlemen began to gather around the platform, pushing and shoving and fighting for a place up front, the way people aways do when they figure on getting something for free.

There was quite a bit of cussing, and some of the older folks got their toes tromped on, but no one was seriously hurt, from what Sheriff Higgs could see. He was right up front himself, of course; nobody gets ahead of the law.

"Good evening one and all," said Mr. Fall. "And welcome to the Carnival of Life."

"Some carnival!" mumbled a voice from behind the sheriff. "Where's the belly-dancers?"

Sheriff Higgs didn't bother to look around; he knew who was speaking because he could smell his breath. Clay Tolliver, the mortician's son, always got pretty well bombed by this time of evening.

Mr. Fall smiled and nodded. "In answer to the question regarding the performers, allow me to call your attention to the pictorial displays directly behind me. In the quaint jargon of the old-time carny, they are known as 'the bloody banners.' If there happen to be any Englishmen in the audience, I trust they will take no offense."

There were no Englishmen or any other foreigners present and no offense was taken; everyone peered up at the painted panel of an enormously fat woman indicated by Mr. Fall's cane.

"Big Bertha," he said. "Five hundred pounds of pulsing pulchritude—a quarter of a ton of solid human flesh—the fattest female figure in the firmament."

Down in front, Mrs. Agatha Crouch stood bulking before the billowing poster, one hamlike hand gripping her husband's arm and the other encircling an open jar of garlic dills. Raising the jar to her gaping mouth, she snagged one of the pickles between her teeth and began to munch on it.

Mr. Crouch was a feisty little man and he swore a blue streak as a squirt of pickle juice sprayed the top of his head.

"God-diddly-damn-it!" he yelled. "You dribbling all over me!"

"Okay, then you hold it," said Mrs. Crouch, thrusting the jar into his hand and fishing another dill from the brine with her pudgy fingers.

Mr. Crouch scowled. “Bringing pickles to a carnival,” he muttered. “Eat, eat, eat, that’s all you ever do. Don’t you get enough food at home?”

Agatha Crouch’s chins quivered with righteous indignation as she popped the pickle into her mouth. “I don’t get me enough of anything at home, you miserable runt! Now shut up and listen to the man.”

The man was indicating another portion of the panel, where a tiny figure rested on the fat woman’s lap, almost obscured by her bulging belly.

“Big Bertha’s diminutive darling,” he chanted. “Little Leo—a minuscule mite of mankind mated to a mountain—a marvel of mirth and merriment!”

“Haw!” remarked Agatha Crouch, squinting at the small shape lost in the flabby folds of the fat lady’s lap. “Sure looks funny, don’t it?”

“Yeah.” Mr. Crouch nodded as he craned his neck to see the banner. But he was staring at the picture of the fat woman.

Up on the platform Mr. Fall moved to another panel. This one depicted a strangely garbed, grinning creature with a chinless face, pointed ears, pale skin and a shaved, oddly pointed skull. As a fanciful touch the poster artist had added a dozen white mice crawling over the creature’s head and shoulders; a thirteenth dangled by its tail from between his teeth.

“Pooky the Pinhead!” said Mr. Fall. “Actually a microcephalic—one of Mother Nature’s little mistakes. But as you can see by his smile, he’s a cheerful fellow and doesn’t mind playing the game of life without a full deck.”

Somebody in the crowd let out a cackle, and the sheriff turned to see who was responsible. But it was only Junior Dorkin; you couldn’t hardly call him responsible, seeing as how he was the village idiot and an albino to boot. He just kept laughing and pointing up at the picture, same as usual. Junior laughed just about all the time, even when he was cutting up a stray cat.

“Huh-huh-huh!” he wheezed, wiping a gob of spittle from his receding chin. “Wanna see him eat mouses—”

Now Mr. Fall was gesturing at another banner, even more lurid than the others. It showed a hulking hairy monster with ape-like features, leering down at a cowering, scantily clad girl.

"Out of the primeval past," he was saying. "A bestial being emerges from the misty mystery of prehistoric time. Behold the living, breathing ancestor of human kind—Homeo Pomeo, the Wild Man of Borneo!"

"Man, that's weird!"

Sheriff Higgs glanced around to see Fuzz Foskins grinning up from his place in the crowd, wearing his usual outfit of tank top and soiled jeans. Bushy hair sprouted from his head in an enormously unnatural natural, a bushy beard tangled with the matted hair on his chest. His armpits were bushy too, and from them welled a fetid scent which mingled with the reeking odor emanating from his open mouth.

Probably high on angel dust again, the sheriff figured. If Fuzz's father wasn't the county judge, he'd have been busted long ago.

Sheriff Higgs recognized the girl clinging to Fuzz's arm—Mamie Keefer, a sallow-faced little snip with stringy cornsilk hair. Worked in the mill off and on when she wasn't riding shotgun on Fuzz's motorcycle.

"Whaddya mean, weird?" she said. "Look at that built!"

"I am looking," Fuzz told her. And he sniggered at the half-naked girl on the poster. "Some built, man! This I gotta see."

Several of the older people standing nearby started to frown disapprovingly—mostly the wives, of course. Sheriff Higgs took note of it and so did Mr. Fall up on the platform. He moved along to a row of banners hanging before the entrance of the tent and gestured again with his cane.

"If you folks will kindly move in a little closer, I'd like to give you a glimpse of our more cultural attractions," he announced.

"That must be the belly dancers," Clay Tolliver murmured. "Now we're getting somewhere!"

Mr. Fall's eyes narrowed slightly, just enough to indicate that he'd heard the remark, but his smile never wavered. "All that is strange or unusual in the world derives from two sources," he continued. "The curiosities of nature originate in mystery, while the idiosyncracies of mankind are found in history."

“What’s he saying?” sniffed Mrs. Tudd.

Lawyer Tudd shrugged. “Doubletalk,” he said. “Sounds like one of those smartass civil rights troublemakers to me.”

Mr. Fall didn’t miss a thing. He nodded down at the solid citizens in the front row. “I assure you there is nothing political about this spectacle. Naturally I cannot reproduce the actual events of a bygone era. These are merely representations, a few simple samples of man’s freakish pastimes in the past.” His cane stabbed out at one of the canvas panels behind him. “May I have your attention, please? Here, from long ago and far away—King Atahualpa and the Room of Gold!”

There must have been a light behind the banner, for now its colors blazed forth so brightly that the crowd gasped.

What they saw was a regal-looking man in flowing robes, standing with arms upraised in the center of a stone chamber.

“Awful dark-complected for a king,” Mrs. Fence whispered to her husband. “Looks like some kind of a nigra to me.”

Banker Fence just nodded but did not reply. He was staring at the gold heaped around the figure—the glittering glut of jewelry, ornaments, plate, goblets, coins and virgin ingots crammed into the chamber from wall to wall and rising halfway to the ceiling.

“I’m sure you all remember Francisco Pizarro, the conqueror of Peru,” Mr. Fall was saying. “In 1532 he captured the Inca, Atahualpa, and imprisoned him in Cajamarca. As a ransom for their king’s release, his faithful followers promised to fill the prison chamber—measuring ten feet long and sixteen feet in width—with enough gold to reach the level of Atahualpa’s raised arms.”

“Do tell,” breathed banker Fence.

Mr. Fall nodded towards the panel. “Loyal followers came from all over the land, bringing their most precious possessions to lay at the feet of the Inca, impoverishing themselves to secure the freedom of their living god. The task took many months, but at last it was completed. Never before and never since did men behold such an array of radiant riches—this roomful of glittering gold. Still, they kept their word and the bargain was fulfilled."

"Great God in the morning," banker Fence murmured. "What happened then?"

Mr. Fall shrugged. "The inevitable," he said. "Pizarro had King Atahualpa strangled to death in the marketplace. Not too long afterwards, Pizarro himself was murdered."

"Never mind the details," said banker Fence. "What became of the gold?"

"No one knows," Mr. Fall said.

"Somewhere along the line it just disappeared."

"Poor security," banker Fence grunted to his wife. "Gold is a bad risk anyway. Now you know why I keep telling the kids to invest in comics."

"I'd still like to see that room," said Mrs. Fence. "With that jewelry and all, it sounds real educational."

But now the light was flickering up behind another banner, and again the crowd gasped at what appeared—a gigantic bulldozer cutting a swath through a mountainous pile of naked, emaciated human corpses.

"For those who prefer something more contemporary," Mr. Fall proclaimed. "Auschwitz—the Holocaust!"

Lawyer Tudd nodded. "Concentration camp," he told his wife. "Read about it in law school. Some monkey business of a trial over in Nuremberg, as I recall."

"Oh, how horrible!" his wife murmured. "Look at those poor people!"

"Now don't go getting so uptight. Like he says, it's only history."

"Well, in that case I suppose it's not so awful." Mrs. Tudd stared intently at the bodies, and her tongue flicked over her parted lips as her breathing quickened. "You know, I always wondered just how they did such things, all those tortures and such. I hear tell they used to make lampshades out of the skins, stuff like that."

"Legal points involved," said lawyer Tudd. "Might be kind of interesting at that."

He turned to seek Mayor Stooldrayer's opinion, but that dignitary and his wife were both gaping at another blazing banner directly over the entrance to the tent.

Mr. Fall was already pointing up at the familiar figure, bearded and nude except for a loincloth, hanging impaled upon a cross.

"No monstrosity spawned by nature, no man-made marvel, can possibly compare to the fantastic reality of divine inspiration," he said. *"Ecce Homo*—the Passion Play!"

Mrs. Stooldrayer turned and whispered to her husband. "Icky homo? Does he mean Jesus was some kind of morphodite, like? And what's all this stuff about passion?"

"It's just a play," the mayor told her. "Well, I'm not sure I want to see it," Mrs. Stooldrayer mused. "After all, I'm working with the PTA and we're supposed to be against violence, to say nothing of gays." She hesitated. "On the other hand, we don't get a chance to see a real live play around here very often."

"That's the spirit," said Mayor Stooldrayer. "Way I figure, we're entitled to a little entertainment."

Mr. Fall must have been listening, because now he tapped his cane on the platform and nodded.

"Entertainment!" he cried. "It's all waiting for you here on the inside. Step right up, ladies and gentlemen—the show is about to begin!"

Mr. Fall jumped down from the platform and parted the curtain flaps before the entrance as the crowd began to surge forward.

"What about tickets?" Sheriff Higgs called out to him.

"Law always gets a free pass," Mr. Fall murmured. Then he raised his voice. "As you folks can see, I'm a little short-handed here and there's no one operating the ticket booth. So just keep moving, go right ahead—you can pay on the inside."

"Didn't say how much," banker Fence muttered to lawyer Tudd. "Think we ought to take a chance?"

Lawyer Tudd nodded. “No problem.” He grinned. “Law says you got to establish a price in advance. We don’t have to pay him a red cent if we don’t want to.”

Chuckling, he moved into the tent, holding his wife’s arm tightly to keep from being separated from her in the jostling throng. Behind him came the banker and the mayor with their spouses, Mr. and Mrs. Crouch, Junior Dorkin, Mamie Keefer, and all the rest.

The assorted effluvia of Fuzz Foskins and Clay Tolliver mingled in the darkness of the tent’s interior as the rest of the crowd pushed on inside until the tent was packed solid, wall to wall.

For a moment everyone stood silent, and then little indications of irritation began to arise.

“Hey, what gives?” somebody grumbled. “I can’t see.”

“Lights!” yelled Clay Tolliver.

Sheriff Higgs was always prepared for such emergencies and he responded now, pulling forth a flashlight from his pocket.

The beam played over the sea of faces scowling across the confines of the tent, then came to rest on the rear wall.

The wall was blank. Below it stood the sole object of furnishing—a bare platform.

The crowd stared and its murmurs rose to a roar.

“Hell!” someone shouted angrily. “What kind of a show you call this? They ain’t no freaks in here!”

“There are now,” murmured Mr. Fall, as he finished sewing the entrance flaps together from outside and poured the kerosene.

Then, smiling, he lit the match.

1980

The Rubber Room

Emery kept telling them he wasn't crazy, but they put him in the rubber room anyway.

Sorry, fella, they said. Only temporary, we got a space problem here, overcrowded, move you to another cell in a couple hours, they said. It's better than being in the tank with all them drunks, they said. Okay, so you had your call to the lawyer but just take it easy until he gets here, they said.

And the door went clang.

So there he was, stuck way down at the end of the cell-block in this little room all by himself. They'd taken his watch and his wallet, his keys and his belt, even his shoelaces, so there was no way he could harm himself unless he bit his own wrists. But that would be crazy, and Emery wasn't crazy.

Now all he could do was wait. There wasn't anything else, no choice, no options, no way, once you were here in the rubber room.

To begin with, it was small—six paces long and six paces wide. A reasonably active man could cover the distance between the walls in one jump but he'd need a running start. Not that there was any point in trying, because he'd just bounce harmlessly off the thick padding.

The windowless walls were padded everywhere from floor to ceiling and so was the door. The padding was seamless so it couldn't be torn or pried away. Even the floor was padded, except for a ten-inch square at the left far corner which was supposed to serve as a toilet facility.

Above him a tiny light bulb burned dimly behind its meshed enclosure, safely beyond reach from the floor below. The ceiling around it was padded too, probably to deaden sound.

Restraint room, that’s what they said it was, but it used to be called a padded cell. Rubber room was just popular slang. And maybe the slang wouldn’t be so popular if more people were exposed to the reality.

Before he knew what he was doing, Emery found himself pacing back and forth. Six paces forward, six paces back, over and over again, like an animal in a cage.

That’s what this was, actually—not a room, just a cage. And if you stayed in a cage long enough you turned into an animal. Ripping and clawing and smashing your head against the walls, howling for release.

If you weren’t crazy when you came in you’d go crazy before you got out. The trick, of course, was not to stay here too long.

But how long was too long? How long would it be before the lawyer arrived?

Six paces forward, six paces back. Grey spongy padding muffled his footsteps on the floor and absorbed the light from above, leaving the walls in shadow. Shadows could drive you crazy too. So could the silence, and being alone. Alone in shadows and silence, like he’d been when they found him there in the room—the other room, the one in the house.

It was like a bad dream. Maybe that’s the way it feels when you’re crazy, and if so he must have been crazy when it happened.

But Emery wasn’t crazy now. He was perfectly sane, completely under control. And there was nothing here that could harm him. Silence can’t harm you. What was the old saying? Violence is golden. No, not *violence.* Where had that come from? Freudian slip. To hell with Freud, what did he know? Nobody knew. And if he kept silent nobody ever would. Even though they’d found him they couldn’t prove anything. Not if he kept silent, let his lawyer do the talking. Silence was his friend. And the shadows were his friends too. Shadows hid everything. There had been shadows in the other room and no one could have seen clearly when they found him. You just *thought* you saw it, he’d tell them.

No, he’d forgotten—he mustn’t tell them, just let the lawyer talk. What was the matter with him, *was* he going crazy here after all?

Six paces forward, six paces back. Keep walking, keep silent. Keep away from those shadows in the corners. They were getting darker now. Darker and thicker. Something seemed to be moving there in the far corner to the right.

Emery felt the muscles tightening in his throat and he couldn't control them; he knew that in a moment he was going to scream.

Then the door opened behind him and in the light from the corridor the shadow disappeared.

It was a good thing he hadn't screamed. They would have been sure he was crazy then, and that would spoil everything.

But now that the shadow was gone Emery relaxed. By the time they took him down the hall and into the visitor's room he was quite calm again.

His lawyer waited for him there, sitting on the other side of the grille barrier, and nobody was listening.

That's what the lawyer said. Nobody's listening, you can tell me all about it.

Emery shook his head and smiled because he knew better. Violence is golden and even the walls have ears. He wanted to warn his lawyer that they were spying on him but that would sound crazy. The sane thing to do was not to mention it, just be careful and say the right things instead.

He told the lawyer what everybody knew about himself. He was a decent man, he had a steady job, paid his bills, didn't smoke or drink or get out of line. Hardworking, dependable, neat, clean, no police record, not a troublemaker. Mother was always proud of her boy and she'd be proud of him today if she were still alive. He'd always looked after her and when she died he still looked after the house, kept it up, kept himself up, just the way she'd taught him to. So what was all this fuss about?

Suppose you tell me, the lawyer said.

That was the hard part, making him understand, but Emery knew everything depended on it. So he talked very slowly, choosing his words carefully, sticking to the facts.

World War II had happened before he'd been born, but that was a fact.

Emery knew a lot of facts about World War II because he used to read library books when Mother was alive. Improve your mind, she said. Reading is better than watching all that violence on the television, she said.

So at night when he couldn't sleep he read for hours sitting up in his room. People he worked with down at the shop called him a bookworm but he didn't care. There was no such thing as a bookworm, he knew that. There were worms that ate microorganisms in the soil and birds that ate worms and animals that ate birds and people who ate animals and microorganisms that ate people—like the ones that ate Mother until they killed her.

Everything—germs, plants, animals, people—kills other things to stay alive. This is a fact, a cruel fact. He could still remember the way Mother screamed.

After she died he read more. That's when he really got into history. The Greeks killed the Persians and the Romans killed the Greeks and the barbarians killed the Romans and the Christians killed the barbarians and the Moslems killed the Christians and the Hindus killed the Moslems. Blacks killed whites, whites killed Indians, Indians killed other Indians, orientals killed other orientals, Protestants killed Catholics, Catholics killed Jews, Jews killed Our Saviour on the Cross.

Love one another, Jesus said, and they killed him for it. If Our Saviour had lived, the gospel would have spread around the world and there'd be no violence. But the Jews killed Our Lord.

That's what Emery told the lawyer, but it didn't go down. Get to the point, the lawyer said.

Emery was used to that kind of reaction. He'd heard it before when he tried to explain things to girls he met after Mother died. Mother hadn't approved of him going with girls and he used to resent it. After she was gone the fellows at work told him it would do him good. Get out of your shell, they said. So he let them set up some double-dates and that's when he found out that Mother was right. The girls just laughed at him when he talked facts.

It was better to stay in his shell, like a snail. Snails knew how to protect themselves in a world where everyone kills to live, and the Jews killed Our Saviour.

Facts, the lawyer said. Give me some facts.

So Emery told him about World War II. That's when the real killing began. Jewish international bankers financed the Napoleonic wars and World War I, but these were nothing compared to World War II. Hitler knew what the Jews were planning and he tried to prevent it—that's why he invaded those other countries, to get rid of the Jews, just as he did in Germany. They were plotting a war to destroy the world, so they could take over. But no one understood and in the end the Jew-financed armies won the war. The Jews killed Hitler just like they killed Our Saviour. History repeats itself, and that's a fact too.

Emery explained all this very quietly, using nothing except facts, but from the way his lawyer looked at him he could see it was no use.

So Emery went back into his shell. But this time he took his lawyer with him.

He told him what it was like, living alone in his house, which was really a big shell that protected him. Too big at first, and too empty, until Emery began to fill it up with books. Books about World War II, because of the facts. Only the more he read the more he realized that most of them didn't contain facts. The victors wrote the histories and now that the Jews had won they wrote lies. They lied about Hitler, they lied about the Nazi Party and its ideals.

Emery was one of the few people who could read between the lies and see the truth. Reminders of the truth could be found outside of books, so now he turned to them and started to collect them. The trappings and the banners, the iron helmets and the iron medals. Iron crosses were reminders too—the Jews had destroyed Our Saviour on a cross and now they were trying to destroy the crosses themselves.

That's when he began to realize what was happening, when he went to the antique shops where such things were sold.

There would be other people in these shops and they stared at him. Nobody said a word but they were watching. Sometimes he thought he could hear them whispering behind his back and he knew for a fact that they were taking notes.

It wasn't just his imagination because pretty soon some of the people down at work started asking him questions about his collection—the pictures of the party leaders and the swastika emblems and badges and the photographs of the little girls presenting flowers to the Fuhrer at rallies and parades. Hard to believe these little girls were now fifty-year-old women. Sometimes he thought if he met one of those women he could settle down with her and be happy; at least she'd understand because she knew the facts. Once he almost decided to run an ad in the classified section, trying to locate such a woman, but then he realized it might be dangerous. Suppose the Jews were out to get her? They'd get him too. That was a fact.

Emery's lawyer shook his head. His face, behind the grille, was taking on an expression which Emery didn't like. It was the expression people wear when they're at the zoo, peering through the bars or the wire screens at the animals.

That's when Emery decided he'd have to tell his lawyer the rest. It was a risk, but if he wanted to be believed his lawyer must know all the facts.

So he told him about the conspiracy.

All these hijackings and kidnappings going on today were part of it. And these terrorists running around with ski-masks over their faces were part of the plan too.

In today's world, terror wears a ski-mask.

Sometimes they called themselves Arabs, but that was just to confuse people. They were the ones behind the bombings in Northern Ireland and the assassinations in South America. The international Jewish conspiracy was in back of it all and behind every ski-mask was a Jewish face.

They spread throughout the world, stirring up fear and confusion. And they were here too, plotting and scheming and spying on their enemies. Mother knew.

When he was just a little boy and did something naughty Mother used to tell him to behave. Behave yourself or the Jew-man will get you, Mother said. He used to think she was just trying to frighten him but now he realized Mother was telling the truth. Like the time she caught him playing with himself and locked him in the closet. The Jew-man will get you, she said. And he was all alone in the dark and he could see the Jew-man coming through the walls and he screamed and she let him out just in time. Otherwise the Jew-man *would* have taken him. He knew now that this was the way they got their recruits—they took other peoples' children and brainwashed them, brought them up to be political terrorists in countries all over the world—Italy, Ireland, Indonesia, the Middle East—so that no one would suspect the real facts. The real facts, that the Jews were responsible, getting ready for another war. And when the other nations had destroyed themselves, Israel would take over the world.

Emery was talking louder now but he didn't realize it until the lawyer told him to hold it down. What makes you think these terrorists are after you, he asked. Did you ever see one?

No, Emery told him, they're too clever for that. But they have their spies, their agents are everywhere.

The lawyer's face was getting red and Emery noticed it. He told him why it was getting so hot here in the visitor's room—their agents were at work again.

Those people who saw Emery buying the flags and swastikas and iron crosses had been planted in the stores to spy on him. And the ones down at work who teased him about his collection, they were spies too, and they knew he'd found out the truth.

The terrorists had been after him for months now, planning to kill him. They tried to run him down with their cars when he crossed the street but he got away. Two weeks ago when he turned on the television there was an explosion. It seemed like a short-circuit but he knew better; they wanted to electrocute him only it didn't work. He was too smart to call a repairman because that's what they wanted—they'd send one of their assassins instead. The only people who still make house-calls today are the murderers.

So for two weeks he'd managed without electricity. That's when they must have put the machines in the walls. The terrorists had machines to make things heat up and at night he could hear a humming sound in the dark. He'd searched around, tapping the walls, and he couldn't find anything, but he knew the machines were there. Sometimes it got so hot he was soaked with sweat, but he didn't try to turn down the furnace. He'd show them he could take it. And he wasn't about to go out of the house because he knew that's what they wanted. That was their plan, to force him out so they could get at him and kill him.

Emery was too smart for that. He had enough canned goods and stuff to get by and it was safer to stay put. When the phone rang he didn't answer; probably someone at the shop was calling to ask him why he didn't come to work. That's all he needed—come back to work so they could murder him on the way.

It was better to hole up right there in his bedroom with the iron crosses and the swastikas on the walls. The swastika is a very ancient symbol, a sacred symbol, and it protected him. So did the big picture of the Fuhrer. Just knowing it was there was protection enough, even in the dark. Emery couldn't sleep any more because of the sounds in the walls—at first it had been humming, but gradually he could make out voices. He didn't understand Hebrew, and it was only gradually that he knew what they were saying. Come on out, you dirty Aryan, come out and be killed.

Every night they came, like vampires, wearing ski-masks to hide their faces. They came and they whispered, *come out, come out, wherever you are.* But he didn't come out.

Some history books said Hitler was crazy, and maybe that part was true. If so, Emery knew why. It was because he must have heard the voices too and known they were after him. No wonder he kept talking about the answer to the Jewish question. They were polluting the human race and he had to stop them. But they burned him in a bunker instead. They killed Our Saviour. Can't you understand that?

The lawyer said he couldn't understand and maybe Emery should talk to a doctor instead. But Emery didn't want to talk to a doctor. Those Jew doctors were part of the conspiracy. What he had to say now was in the strictest confidence.

Then for Christ's sake tell me, the lawyer said.

And Emery said yes, he'd tell him. For Christ's sake, for the sake of Our Lord.

Two days ago he'd run out of canned goods. He was hungry, very hungry, and if he didn't eat he'd die. The terrorists wanted to starve him to death but he was too smart for that.

So he decided to go to the store.

He peeked through all the windows first but he couldn't see anyone in a ski-mask. That didn't mean it was safe, of course, because they used ordinary people too. The only thing he could do was take a chance. And before he left he put one of the iron crosses around his neck on a chain. That would help protect him.

Then, at twilight, he went to the supermarket down the street. No sense trying to drive, because the terrorists might have planted a bomb in his car, so he walked all the way.

It felt strange being outside again and though Emery saw nothing suspicious he was shaking all over by the time he got to the store.

The supermarket had those big fluorescent lights and there were no shadows. He didn't see any of their spies or agents around either, but of course they'd be too clever to show themselves. Emery just hoped he could get back home before they made their move.

The customers in the store looked like ordinary people; the thing is, you can never be sure nowadays. Emery picked out his canned goods as fast as possible and he was glad to get through the line at the checkout counter without any trouble. The clerk gave him a funny look but maybe it was just because he hadn’t shaved or changed clothes for so long. Anyway he managed, even though his head was starting to hurt.

It was dark when he came out of the store with his bag of groceries, and there was nobody on the street. That’s another thing the Jew terrorists have done—made us afraid to walk on the street alone. See what it’s come to? Everyone’s scared being out at night!

That’s what the little girl told him.

She was standing there on the corner of the block when he saw her—cute little thing, maybe five years old, with big brown eyes and curly hair. And she was crying, scared to death.

I’m lost, she said. I’m lost, I want my Mommy.

Emery could understand that. Everybody’s lost nowadays, wants someone to protect them. Only there’s no protection any more, not with those terrorists around waiting for their chance, lurking in the shadows.

And there were shadows on the street, shadows outside his house. He wanted to help but he couldn’t risk standing out here talking.

So he just went on, up the porch steps, and it wasn’t until he opened the front door that he realized she had followed him. Little girl crying, saying please Mister, take me to my Mommy.

He wanted to go in and shut the door but he knew he had to do something.

How did you get lost, he asked.

She said she was waiting in the car outside the market while Mommy shopped but when Mommy didn’t come back she got out to look for her in the store and she was gone. Then she thought she saw her down the street and she ran after her only it turned out to be another lady. Now she didn’t know where she was and would he please take her home?

Emery knew he couldn’t do that, but she was crying again, crying loud. If they were anywhere around they’d hear her, so he told her to come in.

The house smelled funny from not being aired out and it was very hot inside. Dark too with all the electricity turned off on account of the terrorists. He tried to explain but she only cried louder because the dark frightened her.

Don’t be scared, Emery said. Tell me your Mommy’s name and I’ll phone her to come and get you.

So she told him the name—Mrs. Rubelsky, Sylvia Rubelsky—but she didn’t know the address.

It was hard to hear because of the humming in the walls. He got hold of the flashlight he kept in the kitchen for emergencies and then he went into the hall to look up the name in the phone book.

There weren’t any Rubelskys listed. He tried other spellings—Rubelski, Roubelsky, Rebelsky, Rabelsky—but there was nothing in the book. Are you sure, he asked.

Then she said they didn’t have a phone.

That was funny; everybody has a phone. She said it didn’t matter because if he just took her over to Sixth Street she could point out the house to him.

Emery wasn’t about to go anywhere, let alone Sixth Street. That was a Jewish neighborhood. Come to think of it, Rubelsky was a Jewish name.

Are you Jewish, he asked her.

She stopped crying and stared at him and those big brown eyes got wider and wider. The way she stared made his head hurt more.

What are you looking at, he said.

That thing around your neck, she told him. That iron cross. It’s like Nazis wear.

What do you know about Nazis, he asked.

They killed my Grandpa, she said. They killed him at Belsen. Mommy told me. Nazis are bad.

All at once it came to Emery in a flash, a flash that made his whole head throb.

She was one of *them.* They’d planted her on the street, knowing he’d let her into the house here. What did they want?

Why do you wear bad things, she said. Take it off.

Now she was reaching out towards the chain around his neck, the chain with the iron cross.

It was like that old movie he saw once long ago, the movie about the Golem. This big stone monster got loose in the Jewish ghetto, wearing the Star of David on its chest. A little girl pulled the star off and the Golem fell down dead.

That's why they sent her here, to pull off the iron cross and kill him.

No way, he said. And he slapped her, not hard, but she started to scream and he couldn't have that, so he put his hands around her neck just to stop the screaming and there was a kind of cracking sound and then . . .

What happened then, the lawyer asked.

I don't want to talk about it, Emery said.

But he couldn't stop, he *was* talking about it. At first, when he didn't find a pulse, he thought he'd killed her. But he hadn't squeezed that hard, so it must have happened when she touched the iron cross. That meant he'd guessed right, she was one of *them.*

But he couldn't tell anyone, he knew people would never believe that the terrorists had sent a little Jew-girl here to murder him. And he couldn't let her be found like this. What to do, that was the question. The Jewish question.

Then he remembered. Hitler had the answer. He knew what to do.

It was hot here and even hotter downstairs. That's where he carried her, downstairs, where the furnace was going. The gas furnace.

Oh my God, said the lawyer. Oh my God.

And then the lawyer stood up fast and went over to the door on the other side of the grille and called the guard.

Come back here, Emery said.

But he didn't listen, he kept whispering to the guard, and then other guards came up behind Emery on his side of the grille and grabbed his arms.

He yelled at them to let him go, not to listen to that Jew lawyer, didn't they understand he must be one of *them?*

Instead of paying attention they just marched him back down the hall to the rubber room and shoved him inside.

You promised you'd put me in another cell, Emery said. I don't want to stay here. I'm not crazy.

One of the guards said easy doe? it, the doctor is coming to give you something so you can sleep.

And the door went clang.

Emery was back in the rubber room, but this time he didn't pace and he didn't call out. It wouldn't do any good. Now he knew how Our Saviour had felt, betrayed and waiting for the crucifixion.

Emery had been betrayed too, betrayed by the Jew lawyer, and now all he could do was wait for the Jew doctor to come. Put him to sleep, the guard had said. That was how the conspiracy worked—they'd put him to sleep forever. Only he wouldn't let them, he'd stay awake, demand a fair trial.

But that was impossible. The police would tell about hearing the little girl scream and breaking into the house and finding him. They'd say he was a child-molester and a murderer. And the judge would sentence him to death. He'd believe the Jews just like Pontius Pilate did, just like the Allies did when they killed Our Führer.

Emery wasn't dead yet but there was no way out. No way out of the trial, no way out of the rubber room.

Or was there?

The answer came to him just like that.

He'd plead insanity.

Emery knew he wasn't crazy but he could fool them into believing it. That was no disgrace—some people thought Jesus and the Führer were crazy too. All he had to do was pretend.

Yes, that was the answer. And just thinking about it made him feel better. Even if they shut him up in a rubber room like this he'd still be alive. He could walk and talk and eat and sleep and think. Think about how he'd tricked them, all those Jew terrorists who were out to get him.

Emery didn't have to be careful now. He didn't have to lie, the way he'd lied to the lawyer. He could admit the real truth.

Killing that little Jew-girl wasn't an accident, he knew what he was going to do the minute he got his hands around her throat. He squeezed just as hard as he could because that's what he'd always really wanted. To squeeze the necks of those girls who laughed at him, squeeze the guys at work who wouldn't listen when he told them about his collection and yes, say it, he wanted to squeeze Mother too because she'd always squeezed him, smothered him, strangled away his life. But most of all he squeezed the Jews, the dirty kike terrorists who were out to destroy him, destroy the world.

And that's what he had done. He hadn't cracked the little girl's neck, she wasn't dead when he carried her downstairs and opened the furnace door.

What he had really done was solve the Jewish question.

He'd solved it and they couldn't touch him. He was safe now, safe from all the terrorists and evil spirits out for revenge, safe forever here in the rubber room.

The only thing he didn't like was the shadows. He remembered how they'd been before, how the one in the far corner seemed to get darker and thicker.

And now it was happening again.

Don't look at it, he told himself. You're imagining things. Only crazy people see shadows moving. Moving and coiling like a cloud, a cloud of smoke from a gas furnace.

But he had to look because it was changing now, taking on a shape. Emery could see it standing in the corner, the figure of a man. A man in a black suit, with a black face.

And it was moving forward.

Emery backed away as the figure glided towards him softly and silently across the padded floor, and he opened his mouth to scream.

But the scream wouldn’t come, nothing was coming except the figure looming up before Emery as he pressed against the wall of the rubber room. He could see the black face quite clearly now—only it wasn’t a face.

It was a ski-mask.

The figure’s arms rose and the hands splayed out and he saw little black droplets oozing from the smoky wrists as the fingers curled around his throat. Emery struck out at the ski-mask, thrusting his fingers through the eye-holes, stabbing at the eyes behind them. But there was nothing under the mask, nothing at all.

It was then that Emery really went mad.

When they opened the door of the rubber room the shadow was gone. All they found was Emery and he was dead.

Apoplexy, they said. Heart failure. Better write up a medical report fast and close the case. Close the rubber room too while they were at it.

Just a coincidence of course, but people might get funny ideas if they found out. Two deaths in the same cell—Emery, and that other nut last week who bit open his own wrists, the crazy terrorist guy in the ski-mask.

The Night Before Christmas

I don’t know how it ends. Maybe it ended when I heard the shot from behind the closed door to the living room—or when I ran out and found him lying there.

Perhaps the ending came after the police arrived; after the interrogation and explanation and all that lurid publicity in the media.

Possibly the real end was my own breakdown and eventual recovery—if indeed I ever fully recovered.

It could be, of course, that something like this never truly ends as long as memory remains. And I remember it all, from the very beginning.

Everything started on an autumn afternoon with Dirk Otjens, at his gallery on La Cienega. We met at the door just as he returned from lunch. Otjens was late; very probably he’d been with one of his wealthy customers and such people seem to favor late luncheons.

“Brandon!” he said. “Where’ve you been? I tried to get hold of you all morning.”

“Sorry—an appointment—”

Dirk shook his head impatiently. “You ought to get yourself an answering service.”

No sense telling him I couldn’t afford one, or that my appointment had been with the unemployment office. Dirk may have known poverty himself at one time, but that was many expensive luncheons ago, and now he moved in a different milieu. The notion of a starving artist turned him off, and letting him picture me in that role was—like hiring an answering service—something I could not now afford. It had been a break for me to be taken on as one of his clients, even though nothing had happened so far.

Or had it?

"You've made a sale?" I tried to sound casual, but my heart was pounding.

"No. But I think I've got you a commission. Ever hear of Carlos Santiago?"

"Can't say that I have."

"Customer of mine. In here all the time. He saw that oil you did—you know, the one hanging in the upstairs gallery—and he wants a portrait."

"What's he like?"

Dirk shrugged. "Foreigner. Heavy accent." He spoke with all of the disdain of a naturalized American citizen. "Some kind of shipping magnate, I gather. But the money's there."

"How much?"

"I quoted him twenty-five hundred. Not top dollar, but it's a start."

Indeed it was. Even allowing for his cut, I'd still clear enough to keep me going. The roadblock had been broken, and somewhere up ahead was the enchanted realm where everybody has an answering service to take messages while they're out enjoying expensive lunches of their own. Still—

"I don't know," I said. "Maybe he's not a good subject for me. A Spanish shipping tycoon doesn't sound like my line of work. You know I'm not one of those artsy-craftsy temperamental types, but there has to be a certain chemistry between artist and sitter or it just doesn't come off."

From Dirk's scowl I could see that what I was saying didn't come off, either, but it had to be stated. I am, after all, an artist. I spent nine years learning my craft here and abroad—nine long hard years of self-sacrifice and self-discovery that I didn't intend to toss away the first time somebody waved a dollar bill in my direction. If that's all I cared about, I might as well go into mass-production, turning out thirty-five dollar clowns by the gross to sell in open-air shows on supermarket lots. On the other hand—

"I'd have to see him first," I said.

“And so you shall.” Dirk nodded. “You’ve got a three-o’clock appointment at his place.”

“Office?”

“No, the house. Up in Trousdale. Here, I wrote down the address for you. Now get going, and good luck.”

I remember driving along Coldwater, then making a right turn onto one of those streets leading into the Trousdale Estates. I remember it very well, because the road ahead climbed steeply along the hillside and I kept wondering if the car would make the grade. The old heap had an inferiority complex and I could imagine how it felt, wheezing its way past the semicircular driveways clogged with shiny new Cadillacs, Lancias, Alfa-Romeos, and the inevitable Rolls. This was a neighborhood in which the Mercedes was the household’s second car. I didn’t much care for it myself, but Dirk was right; the money was here.

And so was Carlos Santiago.

The car in his driveway was a Ferrari. I parked behind it, hoping no one was watching from the picture window of the sprawling two-story pseudo-*palazzo* towering above the cypress-lined drive. The house was new and the trees were still small, but who was I to pass judgment? The money was here.

I rang the bell. Chimes susurrated softly from behind the heavy door; it opened, and a dark-haired, uniformed maid confronted me. “Yes, please?”

“Arnold Brandon. I have an appointment with Mr. Santiago.” She nodded. “This way. The Señor waits for you.”

I moved from warm afternoon sunlight into the air-conditioned chill of the shadowy hall, following the maid to the arched doorway of the living room at our left.

The room, with its high ceiling and recessed fireplace, was larger than I’d expected. And so was my host.

Carlos Santiago called himself a Spaniard; I later learned he'd been born in Argentina and undoubtedly there was Indio blood in his veins. But he reminded me of a native of Crete.

The Minotaur.

Not literally, of course. Here was no hybrid, no man's body topped by the head of a bull. The greying curly hair fell over a forehead unadorned by horns, but the heavily lidded eyes, flaring nostrils, and neckless merging of huge head and barrel chest somehow suggested a mingling of the taurine and the human. As an artist, I saw in Santiago the image of the man-bull, the bull-man, the incarnation of *macho.*

And I hated him at first sight.

The truth is, I've always feared such men; the big, burly, arrogant men who swagger and bluster and brawl their way through life. I do not trust their kind, for they have always been the enemies of art, the book-burners, smashers of statues, contemptuous of all creation which does not spurt from their own loins. I fear them even more when they don the mask of cordiality for their own purposes.

And Carlos Santiago was cordial.

He seated me in a huge leather chair, poured drinks, inquired after my welfare, complimented the sample of my work he'd seen at the gallery. But the fear remained, and so did the image of the Minotaur. *Welcome to my labyrinth.*

I must admit the labyrinth was elaborately and expensively designed and tastefully furnished. All of which only emphasized the discordant note in the décor—the display above the fireplace mantel. The rusty, broad-bladed weapon affixed to the wall and flanked by grainy, poorly framed photographs seemed as out of place in this room as the hulking presence of my host.

He noted my stare, and his chuckle was a bovine rumble.

“I know what you are thinking, *amigo.* The oh-so-proper interior decorator was shocked when I insisted on placing those objects in such a setting. But I am a man of sentiment, and I am not ashamed.

“The machete—once it was all I possessed, except for the rags on my back. With it I sweated in the fields for three long years as a common laborer. At the end I still wore the same rags and it was still my only possession. But with the money I had saved I made my first investment—a few tiny shares in a condemned oil tanker, making its last voyage. The success of its final venture proved the beginning of my own. I spare you details; the story is in those photographs. These are the ships I came to acquire over the years, the Santiago fleet. Many of them are old and rusty now, like the machete—like myself, for that matter. But we belong together.”

Santiago poured another drink. “But I bore you, Mr. Brandon. Let us speak now of the portrait.”

I knew what was coming. He would tell me what and how to paint, and insist that I include his ships in the background; perhaps he intended to be shown holding the machete in his hand.

He was entitled to his pride, but I had mine. God knows I needed the money, but I wasn’t going to paint the Minotaur in any setting. No sense avoiding the issue; I’d have to take the bull by the horns—

“Louise!”

Santiago turned and rose, smiling as she entered. I stared at the girl—tall, slim, tawny-haired, with flawless features dominated by hazel eyes. The room was radiant with her presence.

“Allow me to present my wife.”

Both of us must have spoken, acknowledging the introduction, but I can’t recall what we said. All I remember is that my mouth was dry, my words meaningless. It was Santiago’s words that were important.

“You will paint her portrait,” he said.

That was the beginning.

Sittings were arranged for in the den just beyond the living room; north light made afternoon sessions ideal. Three times a week I came—first to sketch, then to fill in the background. Reversing the usual procedure, I reserved work on the actual portraiture until all of the other elements were resolved and completed. I wanted her flesh tones to subtly reflect the coloration of setting and costume. Only then would I concentrate on pose and expression, capturing the essence. But how to capture the sound of the soft voice, the elusive scent of perfume, the unconscious grace of movement, the totality of her sensual impact?

I must concede that Santiago, to his credit, proved cooperative. He never intruded upon the sittings, nor inquired as to their progress. I'd stipulated that neither he nor my subject inspect the work before completion; the canvas was covered during my absence. He did not disturb me with questions, and after the second week he flew off to the Middle East on business, loading tankers for a voyage.

While he poured oil across troubled waters, Louise and I were alone.

We were, of course, on a first-name basis now. And during our sessions we talked. *She* talked, rather; I concentrated on my work. But in order to raise portraiture beyond mere representationalism the artist must come to know his subject, and so I encouraged such conversation in order to listen and learn.

Inevitably, under such circumstances, a certain confidential relationship evolves. The exchange, if tape-recorded, might very well be mistaken for words spoken in psychiatric therapy or uttered within the confines of the confessional booth.

But what Louise said was not recorded. And while I was an artist, exulting in the realization that I was working to the fullest extent of my powers, I was neither psychiatrist nor priest. I listened, but did not judge.

What I heard was ordinary enough. She was not María Cayetano, Duchess of Alba, any more than I was Francisco José de Goya y Lucientes.

I'd already guessed something of her background, and my surmise proved correct. Hers was the usual story of the unusually attractive girl from a poor family. Cinderella at the high-school prom, graduating at the stroke of midnight to find herself right back in the kitchen. Then the frantic effort to escape—runner-up in a beauty contest, failed fashion model, actress ambitions discouraged by the cattle-calls where she found herself to be merely one of a dozen duplicates. Of course there were many who volunteered their help as agents, business managers, or outright pimps; all of them expected servicing for their services. To her credit, Louise was too street-smart to comply. She still had hopes of finding her Prince. Instead, she met the Minotaur.

One night she was escorted to an affair where she could meet "important people." One of them proved to be Carlos Santiago, and before the evening ended he'd made his intentions clear.

Louise had the sense to reject the obvious, and when he attempted to force the issue she raked his face with her nails. Apparently the impression she made was more than merely physical, and next day the flowers began to arrive. Once he progressed to earrings and bracelets, the ring was not far behind.

So Cinderella married the Minotaur, only to find life in the labyrinth not to her liking. The bull, it seemed, did a great deal of bellowing, but in truth he was merely a steer.

All this, and a great deal more, gradually came out during our sessions together. And led, of course, to the expected conclusion. I put horns on the bull.

Justification? These things aren't a question of morality. In any case, Louise had no scruples. She'd sold herself to the highest bidder and it proved a bad bargain; I neither condemned nor condoned her. Cinderella had wanted out of the kitchen and took the obvious steps to escape. She lacked the intellectual equipment to find another route, and in our society—despite the earnest disclaimers of Women's Lib—Beauty usually ends up with the Beast. Sometimes it's a young Beast with nothing to offer but a state of perpetual rut; more often it’s an aging Beast who provides status and security in return for occasional coupling. But even that had been denied Louise; her Beast was an old bull whose pawings and snortings she could no longer endure. Meeting me had intensified natural need; it was lust at first sight.

As for me, I soon realized that behind the flawless façade of face and form there was only a vain and greedy child. She’d created Cinderella out of costume and coiffure and cosmetics; I’d perpetuated the pretense in pigment. It was not Cinderella who writhed and panted in my arms. But knowing this, knowing the truth, didn’t help me. I loved the scullery-maid.

Time was short, and we didn’t waste it in idle declarations or decisions about the future. Afternoons prolonged into evenings and we welcomed each night, celebrating its concealing presence.

Harsh daylight followed quickly enough. It was on December eighteenth, just a week before Christmas, that Carlos Santiago returned. And on the following afternoon Louise and I met for a final sitting in the sunlit den.

She watched very quietly as I applied last-minute touches to the portrait—a few highlights in the burnished halo of hair, a softening of feral fire in the emerald-flecked hazel eyes.

“Almost done?” she murmured.

“Almost.”

“Then it’s over.” Her pose remained rigid but her voice trembled.

I glanced quickly toward the doorway, my voice softening to a guarded whisper.

“Does he know?”

“Of course not.”

“The maid—”

“You always left after a sitting. She never suspected that you came back after she was gone for the night.”

“Then we’re safe.”

“Is that all you have to say?” Her voice began to rise and I gestured quickly.

"Please—lower your head just a trifle—there, that's it—"

I put down my brush and stepped back. Louise glanced up at me. "Can I look now?"

"Yes."

She rose, moved to stand beside me. For a long moment she stared without speaking, her eyes troubled.

"What's the matter?" I said. "Don't you like it?"

"Oh yes—it's wonderful—"

"Then why so sad?"

"Because it's finished."

"All things come to an end," I said.

"Must they?" she murmured. "Must they?"

"Mr. Brandon is right."

Carlos Santiago stood in the doorway, nodding. "It has been finished for some time now," he said.

I blinked. "How do you know?"

"It is the business of every man to know what goes on in his own house."

"You mean you looked at the portrait?" Louise frowned. "But you gave Mr. Brandon your word—"

"My apologies." Santiago smiled at me. "I could not rest until I satisfied myself as to just what you were doing."

I forced myself to return his smile. "You are satisfied now?"

"Quite." He glanced at the portrait. "A magnificent achievement. You seem to have captured my wife in her happiest mood. I wish it were within my power to bring such a smile to her face."

Was there mockery in his voice, or just the echo of my own guilt?

"The portrait can't be touched for several weeks now," I said. "The paint must dry. Then I'll varnish it and we can select the proper frame."

"Of course," said Santiago. "But first things first." He produced a check from his pocket and handed it to me. "Here you are. Paid in full."

"That's very thoughtful of you—"

"You will find me a thoughtful man." He turned as the maid entered, carrying a tray which held a brandy decanter and globular glasses.

She set it down and withdrew. Santiago poured three drinks. "As you see, I anticipated this moment." He extended glasses to Louise and myself, then raised his own. "A toast to you, Mr. Brandon. I appreciate your great talent, and your even greater wisdom."

"Wisdom?" Louise gave him a puzzled glance.

"Exactly." He nodded. "I have no schooling in art, but I do know that a project such as this can be dangerous."

"I don't understand."

"There is always the temptation to go on, to overdo. But Mr. Brandon knows when to stop. He has demonstrated, shall we say, the artistic conscience. Let us drink to his decision."

Santiago sipped his brandy. Louise took a token swallow and I followed suit. Again I wondered how much he knew.

"You do not know just what this moment means to me," he said. "To stand here in this house, with this portrait of the one I love—it is the dream of a poor boy come true."

"But you weren't always poor," Louise said. "You told me yourself that your father was a wealthy man."

"So he was." Santiago paused to drink again. "I passed my childhood in luxury; I lacked for nothing until my father died. But then my older brother inherited the *estancia* and I left home to make my own way in the world. Perhaps it is just as well, for there is much in the past which does not bear looking into. But I have heard stories." He smiled at me. "There is one in particular which may interest you," he said.

"Several years after I left, my brother's wife died in childbirth. Naturally he married again, but no one anticipated his choice. A nobody, a girl without breeding or background, but one imagines her youth and beauty enticed him."

Did his sidelong glance at Louise hold a meaning or was that just my imagination? Now his eyes were fixed on me again.

"Unlike his first wife, his new bride did not conceive, and it troubled him. To make certain he was not at fault, during this period he fathered several children by various serving-maids at the *estancia.* But my brother did not reproach his wife for her defects; instead he summoned a physician. His examination was inconclusive, but during its course he made another discovery—my brother's wife had the symptoms of an obscure eye condition, a malady which might some day bring blindness.

"The physician advised immediate surgery, but she was afraid the operation itself could blind her. So great was this fear that she made my brother swear a solemn oath upon the Blessed Virgin that, no matter what happened, no one would be allowed to touch her eyes."

"Poor woman!" Louise repressed a shudder. "What happened?"

"Naturally, after learning of her condition, my brother abstained from the further exercise of his conjugal rights. According to the physician it was still possible she might conceive, and if so perhaps her malady might be transmitted to the child. Since my brother had no wish to bring suffering into the world he turned elsewhere for his pleasures. Never once did he complain of the inconvenience she caused him in this regard. His was the patience of a saint. One would expect her to be grateful for his thoughtfulness, but it is the nature of women to lack true understanding."

Santiago took another swallow of his drink. "To his horror, my brother discovered that his wife had taken a lover. A young boy who worked as a gardener at the *estancia.* The betrayal took place while he was away; he now spent much time in Buenos Aires, where he had business affairs and the consolation of a sympathetic and understanding mistress.

"When the scandal was reported to him he at first refused to believe, but within weeks the evidence was unmistakable. His wife was pregnant."

"He divorced her?" Louise murmured.

Santiago shrugged. "Impossible. My brother was a religious man. But there was a need to deal with the gossip, the sly winks, the laughter behind his back. His reputation, his very honor, was at stake."

I took advantage of his pause to jump in. “Let me finish the story for you,” I said. “ Knowing his wife’s fear of blindness, he insisted on the operation and bribed the surgeon to destroy her eyesight.”

Santiago shook his head. “You forgot—he had sworn to the *pobrecita* that her eyes would not be touched.”

“What did he do?” Louise said.

“He sewed up her eyelids.” Santiago nodded. “Never once did he touch the eyes themselves. He sewed her eyelids shut with catgut and banished her to a guesthouse with a servingwoman to attend her every need.”

“Horrible!” Louise whispered.

“I am sure she suffered,” Santiago said. “But mercifully, not for long. One night a fire broke out in the bedroom of the guesthouse while the servingwoman was away. No one knows how it started—perhaps my brother’s wife knocked over a candle. Unfortunately the door was locked and the servingwoman had the only key. A great tragedy.”

I couldn’t look at Louise, but I had to face him. “And her lover?” I asked.

“He ran for his life, into the pampas. It was there that my brother tracked him down with the dogs and administered a suitable punishment.”

“What sort of punishment would that be?”

Santiago raised his glass. “The young man was stripped and tied to a tree. His genitals were smeared with wild honey. You have heard of the fire ants, *amigo?* They swarmed in this area—and they will devour anything which bears even the scent of honey.”

Louise made a strangled sound in her throat, then turned and ran from the room.

Santiago gulped the rest of his drink. “It would seem I have upset her,” he said. “This was not my intention—”

“Just what was your intention?” I met the bull-man’s gaze. “Your story doesn’t upset me. This is not the jungle. And you are not your brother.”

Santiago smiled. “I have no brother,” he said.

I drove through dusk. Lights winked on along Hollywood Boulevard from the Christmas decorations festooning lampposts and arching overhead. Glare and glow could not completely conceal the shabbiness of sleazy storefronts or blot out the shadows moving past them. Twilight beckoned those shadows from their hiding places; no holiday halted the perpetual parade of pimps and pushers, chickenhawks and hookers, winos and heads. Christmas was coming, but the blaring of tape-deck carols held little promise for such as these, and none for me.

Stonewalling it with Santiago had settled nothing. The truth was that I'd made a little token gesture of defiance, then ran off to let Louise face the music.

It hadn't been a pretty tune he'd played for the two of us, and now that she was alone with him he'd be free to orchestrate his fury. Was he really suspicious? How much did he actually know? And what would he do?

For a moment I was prompted to turn and go back. But what then? Would I hold Santiago at bay with a tire iron while Louise packed her things? Suppose she didn't want to leave with me? Did I really love her enough to force the issue?

I kept to my course but the questions pursued me as I headed home.

The phone was ringing as I entered the apartment. My hand wasn't steady as I lifted the receiver and my voice wasn't steady either.

"Yes?"

"Darling, I've been trying to reach you—"

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing's the matter. He's gone."

"Gone?"

"Please—I'll tell you all about it when I see you. But hurry—" I hurried.

And after I parked my car in the empty driveway, after we'd clung to one another in the darkened hall, after we settled on the sofa before the fireplace, Louise dropped her bombshell.

"I'm getting a divorce," she said.

"Divorce. . .?"

“When you left he came to my room. He said he wanted to apologize for upsetting me, but that wasn’t the real reason. What he really wanted to do was tell me how he’d scared you off with that story he’d made up.”

“And you believed him?”

“Of course not, darling! I told him he was a liar. I told him you had nothing to be afraid of, and he had no right to humiliate me. I said I was fed up listening to his sick raving, and I was moving out. That wiped the grin off his face in a hurry. You should have seen him—he looked like he’d been hit with a club!”

I didn’t say anything, because I hadn’t seen him. But I was seeing Louise now. Not the ethereal Cinderella of the portrait, and not the scullery-maid—this was another woman entirely; hot-eyed, harsh-voiced, implacable in her fury.

Santiago must have seen as much, and more. He blustered, he protested, but in the end he pleaded. And when he tried to embrace her, things came full circle again. Once more she raked his face with her nails, but this time in final farewell. And it was he who left, stunned and shaken, without even stopping to pack a bag.

“He actually agreed to a divorce?” I said.

Louise shrugged. “Oh, he told me he was going to fight it, but that’s just talk. I warned him that if he tried to stop me in court I’d let it all hang out—the jealousy, the drinking, everything. I’d even testify about how he couldn’t get it up.” She laughed. “Don’t worry, I know Carlos. That’s one kind of publicity he’d do anything to avoid.”

“Where is he now?”

“I don’t know and I don’t care.” The hot eyes blazed, the harsh voice sounded huskily in my ear. “You’re here,” she whispered.

And as her mouth met mine, I felt the fury.

I left before the maid arrived in the morning, just as I’d always done, even though Louise wanted me to stay.

“Don’t you understand?” I said. “If you want an uncontested divorce, you can’t afford to have me here.”

Dirk Otjens recommended an attorney named Bernie Prager; she went to him and he agreed. He warned Louise not to be seen privately or in public with another man unless there was a third party present.

Louise reported to me by phone. “I don’t think I can stand it, darling—not seeing you—”

“Do you still have the maid?”

“Josefina? She comes in every day, as usual.”

“Then so can I. As long as she’s there we have no problem. I’ll just show up to put a few more finishing touches on the portrait in the afternoons.”

“And in the evenings—”

“That’s when we can blow the whole deal,” I said. “Santiago has probably hired somebody to check on you.”

“No way.”

“How can you be sure?”

“Prager’s nobody’s fool. He’s used to handling messy divorce cases and he knows it’s money in his pocket if he gets a good settlement.” Louise laughed. “Turns out he’s got private investigators on his own payroll. So Carlos is the one being tailed.”

“Where is your husband?”

“He moved into the Sepulveda Athletic Club last night, went to his office today—business as usual.”

“Suppose he hired a private eye by phone?”

“The office lines and the one in his room are already bugged. I told you, Prager’s nobody’s fool.”

“Sounds like an expensive operation.”

“Who cares? Darling, don’t you understand? Carlos has money coming out of his ears. And we’re going to squeeze out more. When this is over, I’ll be set for life. We’ll both be set for life.” She laughed again.

I didn’t share her amusement. Granted, Carlos Santiago wasn’t exactly Mr. Nice. Maybe he deserved to be cuckolded, deserved to lose Louise. But was she really justified in taking him for a bundle under false pretenses?

And was I any better if I stood still for it? I thought about what would happen after the divorce settlement was made. No more painting, no more hustling for commissions. I could see myself with Louise, sharing the sweet life, the big house, big cars, travel, leisure, luxuries. And yet, as I sketched a mental portrait of my future, my artist’s eye noted a shadow. The shadow of one of those pimps prowling Hollywood Boulevard.

It wasn’t a pretty picture.

But when I arrived in the afternoon sunshine of Louise’s living room, the shadow vanished in the glow of her gaiety.

“Wonderful news, darling!” she greeted me. “Carlos is gone.”

“You already told me—”

She shook her head. “I mean really gone,” she said. “Prager’s people just came through with a report. He phoned in for reservations on the noon flight to New Orleans. One of his tankers is arriving there and he’s going to supervise unloading operations. He won’t be back until after the holidays.”

“Are you absolutely sure?”

“Prager sent a man to LAX. He saw Carlos take off. And all his calls are being referred to the company office in New Orleans.”

She hugged me. “Isn’t that marvelous? Now we can spend Christmas together.” Her eyes and voice softened. “That’s what I’ve missed the most. A real old-fashioned Christmas, with a tree and everything.”

“But didn’t you and Carlos—”

Louise shook her head. “Something always came up at the last minute—like this New Orleans trip. If we hadn’t split, I’d be on that plane with him right now.

“Did you ever celebrate Christmas in Kuwait? That’s where we were last year, eating lamb curry with some greasy port official. Carlos promised, no more holiday business trips, this year we’d stay home and have a regular Christmas together. You see how he kept his word.”

"Be reasonable," I said. "Under the circumstances what do you expect?"

"Even if this hadn't happened, it wouldn't change anything." Once again her eyes smoldered and her voice harshened. "He'd still go and drag me with him, just to show off in front of his business friends. 'Look what I've got—hot stuff, isn't she? See how I dress her, cover her with fancy jewelry?' Oh yes, nothing's too good for Carlos Santiago—he always buys the best!"

Suddenly the hot eyes brimmed and the strident voice dissolved into a soft sobbing.

I held her very close. "Come on," I said. "Fix your face and get your things."

"Where are we going?"

"Shopping. For ornaments—and the biggest damned Christmas tree in town."

If you've ever gone Christmas shopping with a child, perhaps you can understand what the next few days were like. We picked up our ornaments in the big stores along Wilshire; like Hollywood Boulevard, this street too was alive with holiday decorations and the sound of Yuletide carols. But there was nothing tawdry behind the tinsel, nothing mechanical about the music, no shadows to blur the sparkle in Louise's eyes. To her this make-believe was reality; each day she became a kid again, eager and expectant.

Nights found her eager and expectant too, but no longer a child. The contrast was exciting, and each mood held its special treasures. All but one.

It came upon her late in the afternoon of the twenty-third, when the tree arrived. The deliveryman set it up on a stand in the den and after he left we gazed at it together in the gathering twilight.

All at once she was shivering in my arms.

"What's the matter?" I murmured.

"I don't know. Something's wrong—it feels like there's someone watching us."

"Of course." I gestured toward the easel in the corner. "It's your portrait."

"No, not that." She glanced up at me. "Darling, I'm scared. Suppose Carlos comes back?"

"I phoned Prager an hour ago. He has transcripts of all your husband's calls up until noon today. Carlos phoned his secretary from New Orleans and said he'll be there through the twenty-seventh."

"Suppose he comes back without notifying the office?"

"If he does he'll be spotted—Prager's keeping the airport staked out, just in case." I kissed her. "Now stop worrying. There's no sense being paranoid—"

"Paranoid." I could feel her shivering again. "Carlos is the one who's paranoid. Remember that horrible story he told us—"

"But it was only a story. He has no brother."

"I think it's true. *He* did those things."

"That's what he wanted us to think. It was a bluff, and it didn't work. And we're not going to let him spoil our holiday."

"All right." Louise nodded, brightening. "When do we decorate the tree?"

"Christmas Eve," I said. "Tomorrow night."

It was late the following morning when I left—almost noon—and already Josefina was getting ready to depart. She had some last-minute shopping to do, she said, for her family.

And so did I.

"When will you be back?" Louise asked.

"A few hours."

"Take me with you."

"I can't—it's a surprise."

"Promise you'll hurry then, darling." Her eyes were radiant. "I can't wait to trim the tree."

"I'll make it as soon as possible."

But "soon" is a relative term and—when applied to parking and shopping on the day before Christmas—an unrealistic one.

I knew exactly what I was looking for, but it was close to closing-time in the little custom-jewelry place where I finally found it.

I'd never bought an engagement ring before and didn't know if Louise would approve of my choice. The stone was marquise-cut but it looked tiny and insignificant in comparison with the diamonds Santiago had given her. Still, people are always saying it's the sentiment that counts. I hoped she'd feel that way.

When I stepped out onto the street again it was already ablaze with lights and the sky above had dimmed from dusk to darkness. On the way to my car I found a phone booth and put in a call to Prager's office.

There was no answer.

I might have anticipated his office would be closed—if there'd been a party, it was over now. Perhaps I could reach him at home after I got back to the house. On the other hand, why bother? If there'd been anything to report he'd have phoned Louise immediately.

The real problem right now was fighting my way back to the parking lot, jockeying the car out into the street, and then enduring the start-stop torture of the traffic.

Celestial choirs sounded from the speaker system overhead.

"Silent night, holy night,
All is calm, all is bright—"

The honking of horns shattered silence with an unholy din; none of my fellow drivers were calm and I doubted if they were bright.

But eventually I battled my way onto Beverly Drive, crawling toward Coldwater Canyon. Here traffic was once again bumper-to-bumper; the hands of my watch inched to seven-thirty. I should have called Louise from that phone booth while I was at it and told her not to worry. Too late now; no public phones in this residential area. Besides, I'd be home soon.

Home.

As I edged into the turnoff which led up through the hillside, the word echoed strangely. This was my home now, or soon would be. *Our* home, that is. Our home, our cars, our money, Louise's and mine—

Nothing is yours. It's his home, his money, his wife. You're a thief. Stealing his honor, his very life—

I shook my head. *Crazy. That's the way Santiago would talk. He's the crazy one.*

I thought about the expression on the bull-man's face as he'd told me the story of his brother's betrayal and revenge. Was he really talking about himself? If so, he had to be insane.

And even if it was just a fantasy, its twisted logic only emphasized a madman's cunning. Swearing not to blind a woman by touching her eyes, and then sewing her eyelids shut—a mind capable of such invention was capable of anything.

Suddenly my foot was flooring the gas pedal; the car leaped forward, careening around the rising curves. I wrenched at the wheel with hands streaked by sweat, hurtling up the hillside past the big homes with their outdoor decorations and the tree-lights winking from the windows.

There were no lights at all in the house at the crest of the hill—but when I saw the Ferrari parked in the driveway, I knew.

I jammed to a stop behind it and ran to the front door. Louise had given me a duplicate house key and I twisted it in the lock with a shaking hand.

The door swung open on darkness. I moved down the hall toward the archway at my left.

"Louise!" I called. "Louise—where are you?"

Silence.

Or almost silence.

As I entered the living room I heard the sound of heavy breathing coming from the direction of the big chair near the fireplace.

My hand moved to the light switch.

"Don't turn it on."

The voice was slurred, but I recognized it.

"Santiago—what are you doing here?"

"Waiting for you, *amigo."*

"But I thought—"

"That I was gone? So did Louise." A chuckle rasped through the darkness.

I took a step forward, and now I could smell the reek of liquor as the slurred whisper sounded again.

"You see, I know about the bugging of the phones and the surveillance. So when I returned this morning I took a different route, with a connecting flight from Denver. No one at the airport would be watching arrivals from that city. I meant to surprise Louise—but it was she who surprised me."

"When did you get here?" I said.

"After the maid had left. Our privacy was not interrupted."

"What did Louise tell you?"

"The truth, *amigo.* I had suspected, of course, but I could not be sure until she admitted it. No matter, for our differences are resolved."

"Where is Louise? Tell me—"

"Of course. I will be frank with you, as she was with me. She told me everything—how much she loved you, what you planned to do together, even her foolish wish to decorate the tree in the den. Her pleading would have melted a heart of stone, *amigo.* I found it impossible to resist."

"If you've harmed her—"

"I granted her wish. She is in the den now." Santiago chuckled again, his voice trailing off into a spasm of coughing.

But I was already groping my way to the door of the den, flinging it open.

The light from the tree-bulbs was dim, barely enough for me to avoid stumbling over the machete on the floor. Quickly I looked up at the easel in the corner, half-expecting to see the painting slashed. But Louise's portrait was untouched.

I forced myself to gaze down at the floor again, dreading what I might see, then breathed a sigh of relief. There was nothing on the floor but the machete.

Stooping, I picked it up, and now I noticed the stains on the rusty blade—the red stains slowly oozing in tiny droplets to the floor.

For a moment I fancied I could actually hear them fall, then realized they were too minute and too few to account for the steady dripping sound that came from—

It was then that Santiago must have shot himself in the other room, but it was not the sudden sound which prompted my scream.

I stared at the Christmas tree, at the twinkling lights twining gaily across its huge boughs, and at the oddly shaped ornaments draped and affixed to its spiky branches. Stared, and screamed, because the madman had told the truth.

Louise was decorating the Christmas tree.

1983

Bill

Bill Conner fought his way through the early-evening traffic with more than his usual quota of curses as he maneuvered the Ford into the right-hand lane and prepared to make his turn.

Sure enough, just as he slid into position, the light changed!

Story of my life, he told himself. Every time I think I'm getting someplace, there it goes again—they stop me cold.

His fingers drummed impatiently against the steering wheel as he scowled into the headlight glare of the bumper-to-bumper traffic reflected in his rearview mirror. Even before the signal turned green again, his foot hit the gas pedal and he started to swing around the comer.

Through the windshield, his eyes caught a blur of movement, and the sound of a sudden shout mingled with the squeal of brakes as his car halted, barely missing the stream of pedestrians directly in its path along the crosswalk.

Bill leaned out of the window to get a better glimpse of their frightened faces as they scurried by. Black faces, of course.

"Why don't you watch where you're going?" he shouted.

The crosswalk cleared and he completed his turn, sliding into the comparative safety of the side street.

With an effort he forced himself to relax his pressure on the gas pedal. Better slow down, try to take it easy. The last thing he needed now was an accident. Some black steps in front of your car and the next thing you know there's a Jewish lawyer coming at you with a million-dollar damage suit.

Bill leaned forward and switched on the radio. A little music to soothe his nerves, that's what he needed. *Just a song at-twilight—*

A blast of raucous sound assailed his ears and a high-pitched female voice screamed in song.

Bill cut off the voice, wishing that he could cut her throat instead. Dam blacks. Bad enough they'd taken over the streets—now they'd taken over the air, too. Getting so they didn't even leave a white man room enough to take a decent breath anymore.

What was happening to this country anyway? Things were different when he was a kid. You didn't hear all this stuff about civil rights; those people did their jobs and kept their places. Now the whole world was turning into one big welfare state, nothing but taxes and more taxes, and for what? Nobody had the guts to stop it, nobody even dared to speak out against it anymore. All these newspaper stories about robberies, muggings and murders, crime in the streets—crazy, that's what it was. Just crazy.

Too bad they didn't have someone like himself running things; he could clean up the whole mess in a hurry. Take the crime situation, for example—first thing to do is kill off eighty percent of the lawyers, ninety percent of the psychiatrists, and a hundred percent of the blacks.

Bill shook his head. No sense letting himself go overboard. The way things were going, decent hardworking citizens like himself didn't stand a prayer. All he could hope for was a little rest and relaxation, something to take his mind off his troubles—particularly after a day like the one he'd just had. At least they couldn't take that away from him—not yet, anyway.

The bright lights of a bar flashed ahead on his left. Bill slowed the car, seeking a parking spot alongside the right-hand curb. He finally found one, half a block ahead. Cutting his headlights and turning off the engine, he stepped out into the street, making sure that he'd locked the door behind him. The old neighborhood wasn't safe anymore; leave your car unlocked for a minute and kiss it good-bye forever. That's progress for you.

Bill shrugged, shaking off the thought, then squared his shoulders as he crossed the street and moved in the direction of the entrance beneath the neon light. It was Happy Hour time. No sense walking in with a frown on his face. *Remember, you're a salesman, and the first job of a good salesman is to sell himself*

The place was crowded with customers, homeward-bound like he was, who'd stopped off en route to unwind for a moment after a long hard day.

Bill turned and scanned the far edges of the crowd, then caught sight of the familiar figures seated in the far comer booth.

The two men were almost mirror images of himself; Ray was perhaps a few years older and Larry a trifle younger, but both wore similar outfits—double-knit suits, white shirts, the kind of conservative necktie calculated to inspire confidence in a potential customer. Two good salesmen, two good buddies.

Now they looked up at him and returned his wave of greeting. Ray moved around to the center of the booth as Bill slid into the seat behind him.

"What took you so long?" he said.

"Heavy traffic. Getting so a guy could make better time walking." Bill glanced down at his watch. "Hey, look, you guys—I can only stay a couple of minutes. The old lady's got some cousins from Florida coming over for dinner."

Larry eyed him across the table. "Then, you better hurry and catch up." He turned and signaled to a waitress as she passed the booth. "Hey, girl! Another beer over here. Better make it two."

Obviously, Larry was feeling no pain. Ray seemed to be the more sober of the two; as Bill spoke, he was conscious of Ray's stare.

"Something biting you?" Ray asked. "What's wrong?"

"The whole world, that's what's wrong."

Across the table Larry met his scowling gaze with a grimace of mock dismay. "Oh-oh!"

Ignoring him, Bill turned to Ray. "Remember that guy Goldman?"

"So that's it. You didn't get promoted." Ray nodded. "What happened?"

"They passed me up for that Jew."

The waitress set two glasses of beer on the tabletop in front of Bill and he turned, his scowl vanishing at the sight of her. Reaching out, he made a grab for her arm. “How’d you like to cheer up an old man?” he murmured.

The waitress pulled away with a deftness born of long practice. “Just drink your beer and you’ll feel better.”

Bill grabbed her again. “Come on, honey—”

The waitress jerked free of his grasp, eyes blazing. *“Take your hands off me!”*

As she flounced off, Larry started to laugh. “I think she likes you, Bill. You sure got a way with the women.”

Ray didn’t share his mirth. “Too bad about the job,” he said.

Bill’s scowl returned. *“I’m better than Goldman. I’ve been there seventeen years.”*

Larry fumbled for his glass and raised it tipsily. “Come on, Bill, relax!”

“Relax, nuts! Goldman takes my promotion and I should relax? That’s six grand a year more than I’m earning now.”

Ray shook his head. “Easy, Bill—”

“Easy for him, you mean. The Jews always get more money.”

“How long has Goldman been there?” Ray asked quietly.

Bill shrugged. “So he’s been there longer than me! What of it? I’ve sold more units in the last six weeks than he has moved all year.” As he spoke, he felt the anger rising within him, spilling out. “You know me. I’m a hard worker. I work hard and some smart Jew gets my job! Bunch of smart operators—no wonder they own everything!”

“Come off it, Bill.” Ray leaned forward. “You know better than that. The Jews do not own everything.”

“That’s right,” Larry chuckled, nodding. “The Arabs won’t let ’em!”

“Never mind that,” Bill muttered. “Arabs are just blacks wrapped in sheets.”

Ray glanced at Larry and sighed in weary resignation. “Oh, no—he’s on a roll now!”

Larry snickered, but Bill ignored the reaction. “Life in this country is getting harder and harder.” He thumped his fist down on the tabletop. “And you know why? It’s the Jews and the blacks and orientals, that’s why.”

“You’re raving, Bill.” There was a note of caution in Ray’s reply, a note that Bill ignored as his own voice rose loudly.

“Raving? My house is owned by some oriental bank! I’ve got blacks living just six blocks from my home.”

He broke off abruptly at the sound of another voice rising from behind him.

“Excuse me, mister. You got a problem?”

Bill glanced up into the face of a tall man standing beside the booth. The face was black.

Across the table, Larry muttered under his breath. “Oh-oh!”

Bill stared up defiantly. “Yeah, I do, buddy. I got a lot of problems.”

The black face was impassive. “Look,” he said slowly, “I really don’t care what you gentlemen think, as long as we don’t have to listen to it.”

Before Bill could reply, Ray broke in quickly.

“It’s okay, no sweat. Our friend’s a little upset. That’s all.”

Out of the comer of his eye, Bill caught his warning glance and forced himself to turn, nodding toward the formidable figure standing beside him. “Sure, sure,” he said. “Everything’s under control.”

For a moment the black patron hesitated, his eyes fixed on Bill’s face. Then he turned and moved back to his table. Bill reached for one of the glasses in front of him and downed its contents at a single gulp.

As he reached for the other glass, Ray frowned. “Maybe we ought to cut out,” he said.

Bill shook his head. “You do what you please! I’m not gonna leave until I’m good and ready. If that guy doesn’t like what I got to say, let *him* get out.”

“Keep your voice down!” Ray set an example with his worried whisper. “You want to get us killed?”

An inner censor modulated the sound of Bill’s voice but not the message it conveyed. “Hitler had the right idea. You just kill all of them.”

He raised his glass and drank as Larry nodded in alcoholic agreement. “That’s where we screwed up, in Vietnam, right there.”

“What?” Ray blinked as Larry nodded again.

“If we just killed them all off, we would’ve won.”

Ray’s gesture mingled disgust with dismissal. “You’re drunk, Larry.”

Larry ignored the observation, waggling a forefinger to emphasize his words of wisdom. “You see, if they were dead, then they wouldn’t be Communists.”

“Oh no? Why couldn’t someone be a dead Communist?”

“Hey, I never thought of that! Those Communists sure are tricky.”

His loud laughter was infectious; Ray’s chuckle responded, but Bill sat stony-faced, immune to the contagion.

Larry glanced at him, concerned. “Come on, Bill. Lighten up!”

Bill downed the contents of his second glass, then banged it down on the table. “You think this is funny?” he said. “Some friends you are! That Jew gets my job, some black threatens me when I speak up, and all you can do is laugh about it. I’m sure one lucky guy to have friends like you.”

Ray reached out and put his hand on Bill’s shoulder. “Let’s split,” he said. “You’re getting loud again.”

Bill pushed his arm away and rose. He was ready to leave, but not before he made his point. “Just remember one thing. While you two guys were fooling around, I was in the war. We were paid to kill Vietnamese.”

“Hey,” Ray said. “Just cool it—”

Bill wasn’t listening. “I thought we won that war but now those same orientals own my house! And then this Jew comes along and grabs my promotion.

I could use that extra money. I was counting on it. Instead I get myself shafted by some rich Jew—”

“Now wait a minute.” Ray shook his head reprovingly. “I know Goldman and you can’t exactly call him rich. Judging by the kind of clothes he wears and that old car of his, you're probably in better financial shape than he is."

"What difference does that make?" Bill made no effort to control his voice now; as far as he was concerned everybody could get the message, loud and clear. "Don't you understand? I'm better than a Jew. I'm better than an African. I'm better than an Oriental. I'm an American! That's supposed to mean something!"

Turning, he started along the row of booths, heading for the door.

Ray's voice rose behind him. "Bill—Wait a minute—"

But there was no time to wait. Yanking the door open, he strode out into the twilit street. Somewhere behind him the door banged shut.

Bill didn't hear it. He was too busy staring; staring into the street before him, where everything was—

Wrong.

The traffic had vanished. So had half the parked cars lining the curb opposite him. And those that remained were—different. Something about their sizes and shapes reminded him vaguely of the old jalopies he'd used when he was a kid; that's what they looked like, but even so he couldn't recognize the models. Behind them, a row of storefronts remained, but even these looked strange and unfamiliar. All of the fronts were dark, closed for the night. Directly across the way was a shop with a broken display window; half of the glass had been shattered and knocked out of its frame. Across the wooden door were two words, their letters scrawled in splotches of yellow paint.

Bill squinted through the dusk, trying to make them out.

Juden, and *Juif.*

One word was German and the other French, but both had the same meaning—Jews.

What had happened here? Glancing around, he noticed other changes—banners dangling from poles before the shops, each emblazoned with a design that also reminded him of something seen in the distant past: a squiggle of angling inter-locking black lines forming the shape of a swastika.

What gives here? Blinking, Bill turned away to confront a brick wall beside the bar entrance. It was plastered with posters bearing boldfaced lettering in German and French. Once again Bill realized, startled, that he could read and understand the wording.

He shook his head, trying to clear it. Was he drunk? No way—not on just two beers. And even if he'd had a dozen, that still wouldn't explain why he was able to understand foreign languages. And it wouldn't explain why he didn't recognize this street.

What had happened to it? And what had happened to *him?*

Bill closed his eyes for a moment, shutting out the strangeness. He was uptight, that was it. He shouldn't have let himself get carried away like that back there in the bar. All he had to do now was to get control of himself again. He stood quietly, taking deep breaths, forcing in fresh air to clear his lungs and his head. That should do the trick.

But when he opened his eyes again, nothing had changed.

Nothing—and everything. He was still standing on a strange street, staring at the strange storefronts, the ancient, unfamiliar automobiles, the peculiar posters with their foreign lettering.

Now as he glanced up, he saw a moving vehicle rounding the comer at his left. It too was of ancient vintage, and its side door bore the emblem of a swastika against a circular background. The car screeched to a halt at the curb before him. The rear door swung open and two men emerged quickly. Both were wearing uniforms—uniforms that Bill had seen many times before, but only in old news-photos and movies of World War Two.

Bill stared at them as they approached, stunned by the sudden shock of recognition. *These guys were Nazi officers!*

"Ou allez-vous?" The first man's eyes were cold, his voice curt. "Who are you?"

"Qui êtes-vous?" Bill turned to face the second officer as he extended his hand.

"Ihre Papiern."

Bill stood silent, suddenly realizing that both officers were addressing him in a foreign tongue; the first in French and the second in German, and yet he understood what they were saying. How could that be?

The first officer was speaking again. Once more the language was French, but Bill understood the words of command all too clearly. "Your papers! Now!"

Bill started to back away. *"Vos papiers! Maintenant."*

The first officer grabbed his arm, then reached into Bill's coat pocket for his wallet.

Bill shook his head. "Hey, what do you think you're doing—"

The second officer slapped his face. *"Sei still!"* he shouted.

The stinging blow brought tears to Bilks eyes, and before he could speak again, the first officer had grabbed his wallet; now he was rifling its plastic pockets and examining their contents. He peered down at Bill's Master Charge card.

"*Qu' est-ce que c' est que ça?"* he snapped.

Bill frowned in bewilderment, then recoiled as the second man slapped his face again.

"AntwortenSie!" the Nazi shouted. *"Was meint das?"*

Bill forced his voice. "It's a credit card for goodness sake!"

"Sind Sie Englischer?" the second officer demanded. *"Was tun Sie hier?"*

Bill groped for an answer. What *was* he doing here? And just where was he? He stared past his two interrogators, stared at the signs identifying the storefront across the street. The signs were in French, but these men were German. Vaguely he remembered his history lessons when he was still a kid in school. The Nazis had occupied France during World War Two. But that was in 1940, a lifetime ago. How could they be here now?

The first officer held up Bill's driver's license. *"Vous etes American? Repondez-moi!"*

"Was tun sie hier?" the second officer repeated. Stepping behind Bill, he grabbed his arms, holding him fast.

"Let go of me!" Bill shouted.

The first officer shook his head. *"Venez avec nous!"* He closed the wallet and stuffed it into his pocket, then turned and started across the walk to the waiting car. His companion began to propel Bill forward. As they reached the open car door, Bill yanked himself free and turned quickly, lunging at his captor and pushing him back against the other officer.

The two men collided forcefully, and for a moment they stumbled off-balance. Bill turned and ran down the street.

Shouts rose behind him: *"Halt!"*

"Arretez!"

Bill did not look back. He ran forward blindly with a speed born of panic.

Again the shouts sounded: *"Halt! Ich werde schie Ben!"*

Bill opened his eyes just in time to see the entrance to an alleyway yawning to his left. As he swerved into it, he heard the echo of two shots from behind. He raced up the alley, weaving his way amidst a litter of garbage and broken pieces of furniture. In the darkness he stumbled and fell.

For a moment he lay there, trying to catch his breath. Panting, he raised his head and glanced back just in time to see his pursuers appear at the end of the alleyway behind him. Both men were holding pistols now, and as their eyes scanned the darkness they raised the weapons, firing blindly.

Pain lanced Bill's left arm just below the shoulder. He glanced down, shocked at the sight of the bleeding wound. From the darkness beyond came the sound of running feet pounding against the cobblestones.

Glancing around frantically, Bill saw a pile of rubble projecting from the wall directly beside him. Soundlessly, he slid behind it and crouched down, breathing a silent prayer that his hiding place was secure.

Afraid to lift his head, he could only lie silently as the sound and tempo of running feet increased, then diminished in darkness beyond. Only then did he dare to lift his head and peer forward to the other end of the alley. In the light from the street beyond, he saw that the officers had halted, glancing about in confusion.

For a moment Bill felt safe—but only for a moment. Now the air resounded with a shrill shriek of a whistle, summoning aid.

Bill's throbbing arm was warm with blood, his forehead cold with sweat. Peering out from behind the rubble, he saw a wooden door set in the brick wall of the alley directly across from him. Gasping, he rose and dashed toward it. He tugged at the door handle, hoping against hope that he'd find it unlocked. To his relief, the door gave way, opening inward.

He entered, closing the door behind him. Slowly his eyes penetrated the gloom. Directly before him loomed a flight of stairs. He moved toward it quietly, then began to climb.

Halfway between the foot of the stairs and the landing above him he paused, startled by a sudden sound of footsteps overhead.

Again, the cold sweat broke out on his forehead. Someone was coming but there was no place to hide. He stood there, trapped.

Then footsteps faded and he heard the creak of a door opening and closing somewhere above.

Bill waited for a moment, giddy with the wave of pain that pulsed through his left arm. He strained to listen, but no further sound broke the silence.

Slowly he continued his climb. When he reached the landing above, he halted again, glancing from left to right along the small hallway. There were doors at either end. From behind the one at his right, he heard the faint and muffled murmur of conversation. Moving toward it, he could make out the source of the sound more clearly—a woman's voice, speaking French.

Bill couldn't tell what she was saying. The mere fact that she was French and female was enough of a relief to determine his decision.

Slowly, he pushed the door open and entered the room beyond.

He found himself standing in the confines of a shabby kitchen, illuminated by the light from a single bare bulb dangling on a cord above a table. Seated around it were three small children who now glanced up from their supper in surprise as he appeared. Standing before the wood stove at one side was a middle-aged woman, obviously their mother. Her dress was drab, her hair disheveled, her eyes widened in surprise.

Bill turned to her, his own eyes pleading. “Don’t be afraid,” he said. “I won’t hurt you.”

The mother made no reply. The children stared at him silently; then, in response to the woman’s gesture they rose from their seats and moved toward her. The mother stepped before them as they huddled behind her for protection.

“Please—you’ve got to help me,” Bill murmured. “I’ve been shot.”

The woman gave him a puzzled glance, then her eyes darted toward the small window at the far comer of the room as the sound of sirens wailed up from the streets below.

Bill’s voice rose, trying to drown them out. “I don’t know what’s happening to me. It’s like I’m in a dream or something—”

The woman wasn’t listening to him. But now as the screech of the sirens grew louder, her face firmed in sudden decision. In three quick steps she was at the window—raising it—leaning out—shouting down into the street below.

Her words were in French but Bill understood them all too clearly.

“Aidez-nous!” she screamed. *“II est ici! Le Juif est ici!”*

Bill took a step forward. “Please—don’t let them find me—”

His voice was lost in the sound of her screaming. *“Le Juif que vous cherchez est ici! En haut!”*

Bill turned and the children cowered, gazing up at him in fright, but their fear was nothing compared to his own as he heard the answering voices shouting up from the street below and the drumming of running feet against the pavement.

He lurched through the opened doorway to the landing beyond. Staring down, he saw the door burst open at the foot of the stairs. A uniformed man glanced up, meeting his startled gaze, then turned to call out to his companion. His language was German.

“Das ist er.”

A rush of footsteps and a babble of voices rose in answer. As soldiers began pouring through the doorway of the landing below, Bill turned and raced back into the kitchen.

Slamming the door, he barred it from the inside. Behind him the woman screamed again and the children started to cry. Bill ignored them, moving to the window and staring out at the drop below. The street was temporarily deserted but he couldn’t chance jumping—at this height the fall could be fatal.

Now the room resounded with frantic echoes as the soldiers began pounding on the door.

There was a sudden crash as one of the upper panels splintered under the impact of a rifle butt.

Bill reached out with his good arm, finding and grasping the cornice above the window. Firming his grip, he swung out and pulled himself upward, his feet braced against the side of the window frame.

Exerting all his strength, he clung to the projection with both hands, not daring to look down at the street below. For a moment he hung swaying, his feet moving pendulum-like in empty air; then he raised himself over the cornice and onto the rooftop. Now a faint babble arose from the street; but Bill didn’t look down. Panting for breath, he rose and ran across the roof, continuing his route across the roof of the building beyond it.

From behind and below, a voice shouted in German. *“Er ist am Dach! Ich will schnell eine Licht.”*

Glancing down, Bill saw a soldier climbing out of the window of the room he had just vacated.

Dizzy with exertion, he turned and stared across the alley where another rooftop rose. This one was slanted and tiled. Bill glanced at it dubiously but the sound of voices from below firmed his resolution. In a minute they’d be up here and he had no choice, nowhere else to go.

Breathing deeply, he moved to the edge of the roof, forcing himself to look down just long enough to estimate the distance between this building and the next.

Eight feet—maybe nine. He could make it. What was he talking about? He *had* to make it!

He stepped back, taking another deep breath, then ran forward and leaped from the parapet, landing on the slanted surface opposite with a thump that squeezed the air from his lungs. His fingers found a purchase on the tiles, but even when he exerted all his strength, he was unable to pull himself upward. The darkness had deceived him; the angle of the roof was too steep for him to climb with nothing but tiles to cling to.

Suddenly a beam of light flared across the surface of the roof directly beside him.

Bill glanced down over his left shoulder for a glimpse of the alleyway below. His eyes watered as he stared into the blinding ray of an upturned searchlight resting in the back of an open jeep. As the light swept on, its path was followed by a hail of rifle shots. The soldiers were firing up, guided by the beam.

Frantically, Bill made another effort to edge his way up along the steep slant of the rooftop, favoring his right hand.

There was a sudden splintering sound and Bill glanced up along his arm to its source: the tile he clung to had cracked and broken loose.

“Oh no!” he gasped.

Scrabbling, his fingers clawed nothing but empty air, and he felt himself starting to slide back toward the edge of the roof behind him. And now the beam of the searchlight swooped, then halted directly upon him, pinning him in its harsh glare.

Bill closed his eyes. In a moment now, the shots would come.

Suddenly, from below, a voice sounded in command. *“Halt Feurer!”*

There were no shots, and no need for them, because they could see what was happening. They could see him sliding down the slant toward the edge of the roof.

Bill clawed out again, gripping another tile to halt his descent, then groaned in dismay as he felt it tear loose from beneath his frantic fingers.

A sudden blast of cold air welled up from below and he realized to his horror that his legs were now dangling over the edge. Then he began to slide faster.

Tiles scraped against his body and tore at the side of his cheek as he slipped backward. As he went over the edge, his right arm rose to grab the drainage gutter; now his fingers closed around it and for a moment he hung swaying over the alleyway below.

Then he fell.

Bill hit the ground with an impact that drove the breath from his body.

Ground. He was lying on the ground.

And that meant he was still alive, still conscious. It was a miracle, that's what it was—a miracle.

That rooftop was at least three stories above the cobblestones of the alleyway.

Cobblestones—

Bill was lying facedown, his left cheek pressed against the ground. And it *was* ground; not cold, hard stone, but soft, warm grass.

Something was wrong here—very wrong.

Bill started to open his eyes, but before he could do so, hands gripped his shoulders roughly, turning him over and slamming him down on his back.

Now his eyes were open. He stared up into the night sky, into the circle of figures gazing down at him. "No!" he cried.

He was lying on his back in a forest clearing. Flames flickered under the hanging branches of the trees—flames of torches held in the hands of white-robed, hooded figures standing over him.

A shock of recognition surged through him.

White robes—armed men squinting down at him through eyeholes in their hoods. The Ku Klux Klan!

"No!" Bill cried again.

One of the hooded figures laughed. "We got you now, boy!"

What was he talking about?

Bill opened his mouth, but before he could speak, two of the Klansmen grabbed him by the shoulder and pulled him to his feet.

Then he found his voice. “Where am I?”

A hooded man cradling a rifle shook his head. “Shut up!” Turning, he nodded to the man standing at his right. “Tie his hands,” he said.

The hooded figure nodded, then stepped behind Bill to join his companions as they jerked their captive’s wrists out behind his back and pinned them together. Bill felt the rough rope looping around his wrists.

He looked up, shaking his head. “What’s the idea? Why are you doing this to me?”

The Klansman before him raised his rifle in a menacing gesture. “Shut up, boy!”

Bill stared at him, frowning. “What are you talking about? I’m a white man!”

Hands gripped his shoulders from behind, pitching him forward. He fell facedown upon the grassy knoll, and landed hard, unable to break his fall because his wrists were now firmly tied together behind his back.

The Klansman with the rifle moved toward him, and Bill felt a jab of pain as a booted foot emerged from beneath the hem of the white robe, kicking him over on his back again.

“You hear me, boy? I said for you to shut up!” Bill gaped upward, swallowing hard, hoping against hope as he made one last attempt. “I’m white! Can’t you see? Look at me—”

The Klansman with the rifle leaned forward, a mirthless chuckle sounding from behind his hanging hood.

The man above him swung his rifle-barrel down, smashing it into Bill’s stomach. “Don’t talk back to me, boy! We gonna learn you some respect.”

Bill lay silent, fighting the pain, and the nausea welling up behind it.

A low murmur sounded from the half-circle of hooded figures behind him. From their midst one voice rose clearly. “Let’s hang him!”

Clutching hands reached down, yanking Bill to his feet. Holding him tightly, they jerked him around to face the moss-festooned boughs of a huge tree. Something flamed and flared beside it, a burning cross, six feet high, the base wedged into the ground. By its light and by the light of the torches carried by the Klansmen, Bill could see hooded shadows reflected against the treetops of the forest surrounding the clearing.

Hoods . . . torches . . . cross-burning . . . they *had* to be insane! Either that or *he* was crazy.

No time to puzzle it out, because now they were already dragging him toward the tree. Staring up, he saw a Klansman standing beside it, his hands busily tying the final knot of a noose. Now he tossed the loose end of the heavy rope over a hanging tree limb. As his captors on either side pushed Bill forward, the man with the noose advanced, holding it out, ready to encircle his neck.

Bill twisted his head to avoid the descending loop, then lifted his right foot. Lunging sideways, he kicked out at the leg of the man at his right.

With a gasp of pain the hooded Klansman staggered off balance, stumbling against the blazing cross. His gasp turned into a scream as his robe caught fire.

Howling, he hurled himself to the ground, writhing and rolling in a frantic effort to extinguish the flame. Shouts of dismay sounded as his companions rushed forward to aid their comrade. Freed from the grip of his captors, Bill turned and plunged out of the firelit circle and into the dark woods beyond.

Hands still tied behind his back, he stumbled forward, darting between the trees at a dead run.

Amidst the outcry and confusion in the clearing behind, a shout arose to speed him on his course. “Look out! He’s getting away!”

Bill didn’t look back. Had he done so, he might have seen one of the hooded figures hurry toward the black bulk of a pickup truck that stood parked at the far side of the clearing and hastily open its rear doors to release what waited within.

Now there was no need to look back. A sudden baying arose, telling all he needed to know.

Dogs.

They were coming after him with bloodhounds!

Bill ran faster. He weaved his way through the darkness, blundering into tree trunks. Low-hanging branches whipped his face, tangles of roots and vegetation impeded his staggering flight. Wheezing, he flung himself forward. Desperation drove him onward in response to the sound of curses and cries, the crashing of running feet, the howling of the hounds bounding behind.

Suddenly he emerged from the woods to find himself standing before the weedy edge of a riverbank. For a moment he halted there, staring down into the turbulent current glittering in the moonlight. Croaking in alarm, frightened frogs splashed into the. rushing water. Bill didn't hear them; he was conscious only of the howling dogs, the whoops and shouts of the pursuing men. Someone's voice rose in a rebel yell: it seemed to come from only a few yards away.

As its echo sounded in his ear, Bill started forward. Taking a deep breath, he dived headlong into the water.

Feet thrashing, he surfaced, twisting and tugging in panic at the cord binding his wrists behind him. To his relief he felt it loosen and give way, freeing his hands. Then he began to swim downstream, moving toward the center of the rushing torrent.

Now, on the bank behind him, the dogs appeared, their howls mingling with the roar of the rushing water. A moment later they were joined by their hooded masters, armed with rifles and shotguns.

One of them called out angrily; "You won't get far, boy!"

Beside him, another hooded man cupped his hand, shouting. "You're one dead man! You hear me?"

A third Klansman brandished his torch, then pointed with his free hand. "There he is! I see him!"

Shotguns and rifles rose, following in the direction of his outflung arm.

Bill swam forward frantically, flinching at the sound of shots whistling overhead. Filling his lungs with air, he ducked his head beneath the surface of the water. Captured by an undercurrent, his body swirled helplessly in the dark depth. Eyes bulging, lungs bursting for want of air, he bobbed to the surface again, gasping for breath.

He inhaled quickly then, tense with anticipation of the sound of gunfire. But no sound came.

No shots. No shouting. No sound of rushing water.

The river was calm.

There wasn't the slightest ripple of movement across its expanse and its surface no longer seemed clear. Instead, he found himself surrounded by floating clumps of rotting vegetation from which a brackish stench arose, steaming into the tropical night.

Tropical.

Bill glanced toward the treetops lining the shore. Their appearance was strangely altered, or changed completely. These trees seemed shorter and more compactly clustered. Ferns rose to rim the base of their gnarled trunks; tall reeds towered against the shoreline.

Dazed and bewildered, Bill swam slowly toward the riverbank at his right. Within moments his feet were touching bottom, kicking up a mixture of mud and weeds to cloud the surface of the water around him. He stood up, feeling his feet sinking into the ooze, sensing the slow swirl of the warm air against his wet skin.

And even *that* was wrong. The air was *too* warm now. Bill glanced back toward the river with a rush of recognition. It wasn't really a river at all—the look and the smell of it was more like a swamp; a tropical swamp, steaming in the humid heat of the jungle night.

But how did he get here?

Bill shook his head, then froze abruptly at the sound of soft voices murmuring from the darkness of the trees lining the bank. He crouched down quickly, shielding his body behind the reed-cluster near the shore. Peering between its upthrust stalks, he watched, silent and motionless, as four uniformed men moved forth from the trees in single file. They were short and squat, with dark hair close-cropped beneath the bill-caps pushed back over perspiring foreheads. Their skin was dark and their eyes and cheekbones identified them as Orientals. All wore identical uniforms, splotched with stains of mingled mud and perspiration. In sharp contrast, the rifles they carried were spotless, the steel barrels gleaming in the moonlight.

Abruptly, Bill's memory bridged a gap of twenty years. He was just a kid then, just a young punk, drafted right out of school and into the war to kill the orientals.

Now he knew where he was. This was Nam, and these were Charlies—Viet Cong!

They advanced toward the riverbank still muttering softly, and for one hideous moment Bill thought they'd wade right into the water and through the weeds where he was hiding.

Then they swerved, moving left along the river's edge, following its course until they disappeared into the darkness beyond.

Bill slumped back into the water, exhausted by his fright, his tension, his inability to comprehend what had happened.

Something stirred, rippling the surfaces surrounding him. He turned quickly, staring down in sudden terror at the sight of the green shape wriggling toward his waist. It was a watersnake and a big one.

Now, as its body twisted forward, the reptile's head drew back abruptly, jaws agape and ready to strike.

Bill hurled himself to one side and rose, stumbling and splashing through the reeds along the bank.

Then he halted as voices sounded faintly from the shore beyond. Quickly he lowered himself once again into concealment beneath the topmost level of the reeds. Even though he was soaking wet, Bill could feel the fresh perspiration trickling across his furrowed forehead.

They were coming back. But now, as he hunkered down, the voices rose loud and clear. They were speaking English!

"Charlie's out there—I can hear 'em."

A deeper voice rumbled in reply. "Cool it, man! I don't hear nothing!"

A third voice sounded. “He’s right—there’s something moving.”

Bill rose to his feet, waving his arm toward the darkened trees bordering the riverbank.

“Don’t shoot!” he cried. “I’m an American! Help me—I’m hurt! Over here—”

His eyes searched the shoreline eagerly, waiting for his rescuers to emerge from concealment behind the trees.

Nothing stirred. And now, after a moment that seemed to elongate into an eternity, he heard the voices once more. This time they dropped to a series of harsh whispers.

“What’d I tell you? They’re out there all right.”

“Where?”

“Too close for me, man.”

Bill started to wade through the reeds, moving toward the shore. “Listen to me,” he shouted. “I’m an American! You’ve got to help me—please—” From the bank above came an excited murmur. “Look! There’s one now!”

“You’re right, I see him!”

The rest of his words were lost in the sudden burst of sound—the insane chatter of machine-gun fire.

Bill flung himself back down into the muddy waters, screaming.

“No! Don’t shoot—No!”

Bullets spurted, splashing into the water around him.

Bill ducked under, holding his breath as he swam out through the shallows.

It was only when lack of air forced him to the surface that he ventured to raise his head again, gasping hoarsely as his eyes sought the shoreline.

All was silent; the firing had ceased. Once more his ears strained for sounds to break the stillness.

Frogs croaked querulously from their concealment along the marshy weed-clumps bordering the riverbank. Somewhere deep in the distant jungle beyond, a night bird uttered a raucous cry.

Then, from the shadows amidst the trees bordering the shore, a murmur drifted faintly across the water. Bill recognized the voices of the patrol. “Hear anything?”

“Not me, man. We must’ve got him.”

Bill hesitated, fighting an impulse to call out once again. No use—those trigger-happy guys would only start shooting again. Now all he could do was keep moving, try to get across the river. Maybe it would be safer on the other side.

He began to swim again; moving slowly, with cautious strokes in an effort to avoid disturbing the water in his progress. *Don’t make waves.*

A sudden sound emerged from somewhere along the bank behind him. He halted his effort, floating on the surface as he turned his head toward shore.

The deeper voice murmured again. “What’s wrong with your ears? He’s still swimming around out there—I heard him!”

“Nothin’s wrong with my ears, man. Only thing I hear out there is frogs.”

A third voice rose excitedly. “Hey, look! There’s his head sticking out of the water! He’s trying to make it to the other side!”

Bill ducked under quickly, his arms flailing. No use worrying about the noise now. They’d spotted him, and all he could do was pray that he could stay beneath the surface long enough to reach the safety of the opposite shore. Another burst of machine-gun fire shattered the surface above his submerged head; the sound sped him on his way.

He swam on, swam until his eyes blurred, his arms ached, his lungs burned. Then, just as he reached the point of no return, his thrashing feet touched bottom.

Unable to endure another airless moment, Bill sought the surface, his head rising just far enough to clear the water. Inhaling deeply, he stared at the sheltering shore directly before him.

He’d made it!

And the gunfire from the other side of the river had ceased; now the only sounds he heard were the gasps accompanying his own intake of breath.

Relieved, he drew himself up and waded through the shallows, then started up the sloping bank to head for the trees beyond.

As he did so, a shout echoed across the waters behind him.

“There he is!”

Bill turned, crouching against the side of the bank, staring back across the river. He could see the shadows of the men moving on the other side, see them all too clearly.

For the first time he realized that the river itself was not all that wide; once they started shooting again, he was done for. He crouched lower, hands digging deep into the mud as he waited for them to fire.

But no shots came. Instead, as he glanced back across the swampy stream, he saw one of the shadows raise an arm, drawing it back like a pitcher preparing to throw a ball.

Something came hurtling down from above and landed in the mud with a dull plop, about a dozen yards to Bill’s left. He turned, staring down at the object half imbedded in the soft mud of the riverbank.

This was no baseball—the size and shape were wrong. As he blinked at the reflection of its shiny surface in the moonlight, Bill heard the hissing.

Baseball? This was a grenade—

He rose, running forward.

Behind him the grenade exploded in a blinding burst of light, its blast shattering the silence. The impact of the explosion sent Bill flying, lifting him into the air to crash headfirst against the barrier of tree trunks directly before him.

He must have blacked out then; maybe for a minute, perhaps for hours. There was no way of knowing, but slowly consciousness returned.

Bill realized that he was still alive, alive and aware, lying on his back against warm grass, arms and legs outstretched. Cautiously he moved his fingers, wriggled his toes. Dull pain shot through his limbs and he felt a throbbing ache in his shoulders, but the muscles responded. He hadn’t been hit after all.

Opening his eyes, he stared up past the encircling treetops toward the night sky overhead. The air above him was moist and heavy with heat. The clothing that clung to him was wet and sticky.

Nothing had changed. He was still in the jungle, still here—wherever *here* was.

Cautiously he raised himself on his right elbow and glanced back over the riverbank and the deep crater fashioned by the force of the explosion. He peered across the water. No shadow moved along the opposite shore and the only sound rising from it was the chanted litany of the frogs.

Slowly Bill rose, his eyes probing the jungle growth before him. Somewhere within its depths he could detect the drone and buzz of insects on their nocturnal rounds. There was no other sign of life.

Life?

Bill shook his head. How could he be sure that anything was alive? First those Nazis, next the Klansmen, then the VCs and the G.I.s. All of them were gone now, but had they even been real in the first place?

Maybe he was dreaming; maybe he was dying, delirious with fever. Maybe he was already dead.

But the aching in his arms and legs as he moved forward reassured him. Dead men feel no pain. Whatever had happened, wherever he was, he was still alive.

His problem now was to make sure he stayed that way.

Cautiously, eyes and ears alert for any hint of shape or sound, Bill started forward through the trees ahead. He had no hint what lay beyond the jungle; all he wanted to do was get away—away from the river, away from the shapes that prowled his nightmare.

Nightmare—that's what it was—that's what it had to be!

Nothing else made any sense to him. But if it was a nightmare, then why didn't he wake up?

And when had he fallen asleep?

He remembered being with Ray and Larry. That part was real, and he knew he wasn't asleep in the bar. But how long had it been since then?

Was it hours, days, months?

Somehow it seemed like years; yes, it had to be years, because of the Nazis. And when had the Ku Klux Klan stopped lynching blacks? That was years ago, too, and so was the war in Nam.

Bill shook his head. How could it be years ago? It was still going on, and he was in Nam now. Here, in the middle of the night, lost in the jungle.

This was no dream; he could smell the rot, feel sweat break out over his body in the humid heat of the tropical night, feel the stinging of the mosquito swarms surrounding him, hear their angry buzzing as he advanced.

Advanced?

Bill halted, glancing around him at the trees, which loomed in silent circles.

Which way was he going? How could he be sure he was moving in the right direction? There was no trail to follow, nothing to see but the trees stretching endlessly on all sides.

He was lost, lost in the jungle. His lips moved in a silent prayer.

There was no answer, no sign; only the insect-humming rising from the tangle of vines and creepers looping snakelike between the tree trunks.

For a moment longer. Bill stood indecisively, then turned abruptly to his right and began to move forward again. Keep moving, that was the answer.

His entire body was aching now; he felt like he'd been beaten with a sledgehammer, but he kept going, had to keep going, because there was no other choice. Sooner or later he'd get to the end of this jungle and come out on the other side. No way of knowing what he'd find there, but anything was better than this maze of darkness in which he floundered.

Tripping over vines, blundering into overhanging branches, slapping at the insects that assailed him, Bill panted forward.

Then, suddenly, the way ahead was clear.

Halting at the edge of the clearing, he glanced down at the river below. Bill shook his head, his jaw muscles tightening.

Oh no—don't tell me I doubled back!

Another glance reassured him, however, that the stream was broader and wider than the one he had crossed. And rising behind the bank on the opposite side was a towering cliff. At its base was a cluster of thatch-roofed structures, perhaps a dozen or so. Light bulbs loosely strung on wires hung between the huts, and in their glare he could see a black cluster of insects encircling each bulb with a dark and humming halo. The light was reflected on the surface of the water below, flecking its murkiness with glints of gold.

Bill stood silent, focusing eyes and ears intently. But nothing moved beneath the light on the other side and no sound broke the stillness. Even the frogs were silent here.

Slowly, he started down the sloping bank to the water's edge, glancing left and right as he did so. In the jungle growth behind him the mosquitoes' hum was faintly audible. That was all he heard. Before him the river stretched soundless, its surface serene.

Bill made his way to the water's edge, staring into the lighted semicircle of huts once again.

Again his eyes searched for a hint of movement, and again he hesitated.

Had the villagers seen him? Were they hiding from him in fear or had they retreated into the huts to surprise him with an ambush?

There was no way of telling, no way of knowing if he faced friend or foe. Only the lights held promise, beckoning him forward, out of the darkness. No matter what might be lurking across the river, it was better than what lay behind him.

Bill waded into the water and when it rose to waist-level he started to swim, ignoring his body's aching protest. No matter how tired he was, he had to keep going.

To his surprise, as he swam he felt the tension in his muscles ebbing, but the realization was purely physical; his mind was not affected.

Or was it? Once again the events of the past few hours flashed before him and again the question came: Had it only been hours? Suddenly it seemed to him that he'd been on the run forever—running from the Nazis, the Klansmen, then those G.I.s in the jungle. Had it really happened or was he going crazy?

The full ache in his limbs returned and now he greeted it gratefully; at least this gave him part of the answer. There was no way he could be so beat unless what had happened was real.

It wasn't his imagination and he wasn't crazy. It was the others who'd freaked out; the Nazis who mistook him for a Jew, the Klansmen who thought he was black, the G.I.s who figured him for an oriental.

What was the matter with them, didn't they have eyes? Couldn't they see that he was an American all along? If they'd only looked, only listened, they should have known.

Crazy, that's what they were. But it didn't matter now; the important thing was that he'd escaped and if he could find someone here in the village across the river, if they were friendly, then maybe they'd help him to get away. Away from the jungle and the crazies, help him to get back home again.

Reaching the shallows, Bill rose to his feet and made his way to shore. Ahead of him the hanging lights still burned, but nothing stirred in the shadows beyond.

Again the thought came and with it rose the fear: Was it an ambush?

There was only one way to find out, and now that he was here he had to take the chance. Slowly he forced himself forward up the bank and stepped into the semicircular clearing before the thatched huts arranged by the cliffside. Above him he could hear the buzz and drone of the insects fluttering around the burning bulbs. There was no other sound except his own harsh breathing and the muffled thudding of his heartbeat.

Outlined against the light, Bill glanced across the compound. What were they waiting for? If they had weapons, now was the time to use them; standing here he made a perfect target. And if they didn't shoot, if they were friendly, then why were they afraid to show themselves?

Bill swallowed quickly, then took a deep breath. "Anybody here?" he shouted.

The only answer was the echo of his own voice.

Bill frowned. Maybe they couldn't understand what he was saying, but at least they had heard him call out and they could see he was unarmed. Why didn't they show themselves?

Still no sound, still no movement, except for that of insects buzzing and fluttering around the bare bulbs overhead.

Bill turned and crossed to the hut on the far end at his left. He moved along the side to the open doorway, halting there. Again he called. "Anybody here? Come on out—It's all right, I won't hurt you."

There was no answer to his invitation. Beyond the darkened doorway, all was still.

Bill took a step forward, then peered into the hut. Dimly he discerned the cast-iron cookstove in one comer, the sleeping-mats littering the bare earth on either side. Other than that, the hut was empty.

Frowning, he started around the semicircle, pausing to peer through each doorway in turn, finding nothing but a duplication of the first hut's contents. Stove and sleeping-mats . . . and in a few cases, bowls and cooking utensils, plus a few blankets and bundles of clothing. Behind him the lights still blazed and in several of the huts he noted the presence of cooking pots atop the stoves.

He stepped inside to examine one of them, starring down at the bubbling broth and sniffing its aroma.

There must have been someone here quite recently, that much was certain. And it looked as though they'd left in a hurry; that much was obvious, too, but where had they gone? And why had they left in such a hurry?

Bill stumbled out of the hut, staring around the deserted village and shaking his head. No sense trying to figure out what had happened here; all he knew was that he was still alone, alone and tired. Tired of thinking, tired of running. All he wanted now was sleep; yet deep within him, a warning sounded. He couldn't afford to fall asleep, not here, not now. But he had to get some rest.

Moving around to the side of the hut, Bill lowered himself to the ground and leaned back against the outer wall, surrendering to the wave of weariness that rose within him. Involuntarily his eyes closed. Now the wave crested, drowning him in darkness.

Drowning, that's what he was doing now.

He had to be drowning, going down for the third time because his whole life passed in review. The inner visions flashed before him: Ray and Larry needling him in the bar—the Nazi officers shooting as he raced across the rooftops—his fall to the pavement below. Now the Klansmen were dangling the noose before his neck—again he forced one of his hooded captors against the fiery cross, hearing him scream in agony. Suddenly the scream was transformed into the baying of the bloodhounds pursuing him through the night—then their howling was lost in the stutter of the machine gun and the rumbling roar of the exploding grenade. Once more he blundered blindly through the jungle, swam the river, searched the silent huts—

Bill's eyes blinked open.

For a moment he didn't know where he was, but as his vision cleared, he stared up at the dangling lights and into the darkness beyond.

He realized that he must have fallen asleep in spite of himself; he'd been dreaming, but now he was fully awake, fully aware.

Bill turned, glancing toward the river. The black bulk of a catamaran loomed from the center of the stream, its unfurled sails offering ample explanation of how it achieved its silent approach.

In the dimness Bill could discern the movement of shadowy shapes at the stern of the craft.

Bill rose, racing toward the shelter of the undergrowth beyond the far end of the compound.

Up ahead, just past the end of the hut farthest to his right, he caught a glimpse of a narrow path half-hidden by overhanging shrubbery. He ran for it quickly, disappearing beneath the shelter of its branches. Panting, he paused, staring back toward the river.

Now the catamaran was dark no longer; sweeping forward from its back, the beam of a powerful spotlight fanned across the huddle of huts in search of the fugitive.

He started up along the narrow pathway that snaked through the underbrush covering the steeply slanted cliffside.

Panting, Bill clambered forward. The path was steep; he toiled upward, puffing and sweating with the intensity of his efforts.

Now a shell whistled behind him and burst against the side of the path below.

Turning, Bill glanced down past the flying chunks of debris and dirt. A large bush burst into flames. The river was red in the reflection of the flames and on its crimson surface a small boat bobbed, pulling away from the catamaran and moving toward the shore. Bill scowled, watching it approach the beach below.

They were sending a landing party!

Frantically, he labored up the path to the shelter of the trees surmounting the cliff top.

Now, from far below, Bill heard shouts rising over the roar of the flames.

He started forward again, eyes alert, seeking an opening through the trees ahead.

Then he saw it—the small wooden shed standing unobtrusively in the deeper shadows at his left.

He ran toward the entrance, his hand moving quickly toward the door.

To his relief it swung inward. He stumbled across the threshold. Then he halted, staring through the shadows of the shed’s interior. Piles of kindling surrounded him on three sides, leaving only a narrow space between as he closed the door. In the darkness he groped forward, reaching out to dislodge a length of cordwood at the right. Blindly he began to pile logs against the door, working feverishly to raise an improvised barrier.

Then, he huddled down in the darkness. There was nothing else he could do now except pray that somehow his hiding place would pass unnoticed once the landing party reached the top of the cliff.

For a long moment Bill crouched there, listening intently for a sound from beyond the barricaded door. The shelling had ceased and the distant crackle of flames diminished. Bill waited now for the sound of voices and footsteps to signal the landing party's approach.

Nothing stirred in the silence of the night beyond.

Bill felt a sudden surge of relief. Perhaps his escape route hadn't been discovered. Once the landing party searched the hillside and found nothing, it would return to the boat, leaving him here in safety.

Bill prayed silently. Let them go—go away and leave me in peace—

But now, suddenly, he heard the howling.

Rising through the night came the baying of hounds, and over it the shouts sounding directly before the door.

To his horror, he recognized familiar voices, whooping in triumph.

"We got him now!"

"Yippee! Let's bum him out!"

"No way—I want him alive. Hang on to them dogs until we get that door down!"

The Ku Klux Klan again!

But how could they be here?

Numb with bewilderment, frozen with fear, Bill listened as the door of the shed began to splinter beneath the blows of an axe blade.

He rose, reaching for a piece of cord wood from the pile at his right. But before his hand closed around it, the door crashed inward.

The Nazi soldiers grabbed Bill by the shoulder, knocking the wood from his hand, and pulled him out of the shed.

Nazis? How did they get here?

And where was he?

The cliff top and the burning village below had vanished. He was standing on cobblestones again, standing on the rain-swept platform of a railroad depot, in broad daylight, surrounded by uniformed men, his arms pinned behind his back. There were no hounds, no hooded figures. Struggling, he turned his head to catch a glimpse of the shed behind him. It too had changed; instead of huddling alone beneath the trees, it appeared to be attached to the side of the depot.

Now the soldier dragged him forward to confront the Nazi officer standing motionless on the platform in the driving rain.

Bill shouted at him. “Let me go!”

The officer’s voice rose in harsh command. Bill’s captors shoved him toward the depot wall.

Desperately, Bill jerked his head around, glancing back at the cordon of soldiers standing behind their leader. “What’s happening to me?” he panted.

The soldiers stood stiffly at attention, unmindful of the man, unmindful of his voice.

Bill closed his eyes. Maybe he was seeing things, hallucinating again. Yes, that had to be the answer; all this was imagination, and if he’d just get a grip on himself, it would go away. *Easy does it now. Count to ten, take a deep breath, and when you open your eyes, you’ll be back in the shed again* —

He started to inhale, but the breath burst from his body as he was slammed against the bricks of the depot wall.

Depot?

Bill’s eyes blinked open and the despairing realization came that nothing had changed; he was still here, his outstretched arms gripped by the soldiers. And now, advancing toward him through the rain, the Nazi officer reached into his jacket and dangled an object before him.

Bill stared at the piece of yellow cloth cut in the shape of a star—the Star of David.

Reaching out, the officer pinned the emblem on Bill’s chest. Turning, he nodded toward the squad of men standing at attention, rifle barrels gleaming in the rain. “*Hier ist nur ein anderen.”* He gestured toward Bill. *“Stell ihn mit den anderen.”*

As the squad started toward him, Bill lunged forward, breaking free from the grip of his captors on either side. “I’m an American citizen,” he panted. “Don’t you understand?”

One of the soldiers detached himself from the squad; without breaking his stride, he raised his rifle and clubbed Bill across the side of the head.

Dazed, Bill fell face forward on the wet cobblestones. Pain surged through him, but somehow he managed to find his voice again. “I won’t let you do this to me,” he murmured.

Clutching hands pulled him upright, dragged him across the depot platform. Opening his eyes, Bill stared at the long line of freight cars standing on the tracks. All of them were sealed shut except for the one directly before him. Guards stood beside it with rifles raised, their bayonets jabbing at the shadowy figures filling the doorway above.

Bill turned to the soldier on his left, eyes pleading. “No—please—You’re making a mistake—”

Suddenly he felt himself being lifted from behind. Thrust forward through the opened doorway, he landed heavily, lurching against the packed bodies of the other occupants. Someone grabbed his arm, helping him to regain his balance. Glancing around, he scanned the faces of his fellow prisoners. Some were young, some were old, but all bore identical looks of resignation and despair; and like himself, all wore the yellow star.

With a rumble, the sliding door of the freight car clanged shut. Cries of fear rose in response behind him.

As the train clanked forward, Bill collapsed against the side of the car, listening to the screams and wails of the helpless horde surrounding him, and the relentless clatter of the wheels against the tracks.

Bill knew where he was going now, knew what would happen when he got there, and yet somehow it didn’t matter. What happened to him wasn’t important.

He would die, the others would die, and in time the Nazis would die. It was all the same, both for victims and for victors. And it would always be the same until the day when hatred would die too. *Bills lips moved in a silent prayer as the train rumbled into the twilight.*

Bloom

The afternoon sun was just beginning to fade as Mr. Bloom walked through the doorway.

Miss Cox looked up from her seat behind the reception desk, then nodded briskly.

"Here we are!" She rose and moved forward with a smile of greeting that was as false as her teeth. "I've been expecting you all afternoon, Mr. Bloom."

"Sorry to be so late," Bloom said. "But how did you know who I am?"

Even as he spoke, he knew the answer. After all, he had given his name over the telephone when applying for admission and told her to expect him on Saturday afternoon. So when a man his age walked in carrying a suitcase, all she had to do was put two and two together. Or one and one. He wasn't very good at numbers, and besides, it didn't matter.

Neither did her reply, but he listened politely just the same.

"I formed a mental picture when we talked on the phone the other day," she said. "I find my intuitions seldom fail me in that regard." She stared at him quizzically, pale gray eyes narrowing behind the lenses of rimless spectacles. "You're a Pisces, aren't you?"

Bloom was definitely not a Pisces, but he shook his head in wonder. "Remarkable," he murmured. "Absolutely remarkable!"

Miss Cox's sallow cheeks flushed with pride. "Nothing to it," she declared. "Just a matter of practice and observation. Working in a retirement home like this, you see so many people come and go—"

She broke off hastily now, abruptly aware of the unfortunate connotation of her remark, but Bloom pretended he hadn't noticed.

"Enough of that," Miss Cox was saying. "Welcome to Sunneyvale!"

Raising her left wrist, she glanced down quickly at the watch that rested atop it. "My goodness, it *is* getting late! We'd better get you squared away before it's time for your din-din."

Turning, she started down the hall and Mr. Bloom fell into step beside her. An observer might have found them a curious combination: the tall bony woman in the nurse's uniform towering over the frail little old man at her side. The frail little old man was still carrying his suitcase; Miss Cox had not offered to relieve him of his burden.

As they moved down the hallway, Mr. Bloom glanced curiously through the open doorway on his left.

The room was large, large enough to contain half a dozen beds. Above each was a small shelf and against the opposite wall stood six identical plywood storage cabinets, apparently used to house wardrobes and personal belongings. Beside every bed was a single chair, only two of which were occupied.

"That's our ladies' dormitory," Miss Cox told him. "As you can see, we don't have a full house at the moment. There were four here until last week, when Mrs. Schanfarber passed away. And Mrs. Tomkins is in the infirmary now. Poor thing. Dr. Ryan looked in on her last night. Says she has viral pneumonia. Just between us, I'm afraid she isn't going to make it."

Bloom glanced at the two seated ladies, both of whom were eating dinner from trays set atop the small folding chairs before them.

One wore an elaborate housecoat trimmed with an overabundance of ribbons and lace. It was the sort of garment that might be chosen by a girl in her twenties who had just told a visiting boyfriend that she wanted to slip into something more comfortable. But this lady was at least fifty years removed from girlhood; although her white hair was curled tightly by the recent application of a home-permanent and her sunken cheeks had been heavily rouged, Bloom judged her to be well into her seventies.

"That's Mrs. Dempsey," the nurse told him. "She's a widow." Now her smile soured into disapproval as she gestured toward the long-haired white cat snuggling in Mrs. Dempsey's lap. "And that's Mickey," she said. "I keep telling her not to feed him from the table, but she doesn't pay any attention."

Bloom nodded, staring at the other occupant of the dormitory. She was a plump, neatly dressed woman with dark hair and a jolly expression; the hair was obviously a wig, but her smile was genuine.

Miss Cox followed his gaze. "That's Mrs. Weinstein. Would you believe it, she's over eighty and still going strong. Her husband is with us, too. Of course, he's in the men's dormitory. They spend a lot of time together, but we don't have a regular dining room here, so we prefer our residents to take their meals separately. You know how it is. If they all ate together, there'd be too much confusion. Besides, some of them are on special diets." A slight frown creased her forehead. "For example, the Weinsteins only eat Kosher. You can't imagine the trouble that makes in the kitchen."

Bloom nodded again, but listening to Miss Cox's remarks about the residents made him just a trifle uncomfortable; he felt like a visitor being taken on a guided tour of the zoo by the head keeper.

Now they moved along the hall to another open doorway at the right. He followed Miss Cox over the threshold and found himself in a room almost identical to the one that the women occupied.

"This is the men's dormitory," Miss Cox announced. "I've given you the first bed here, nearest the door. Weinstein likes the one next to the window—he's had it for years. Seniority rights, you know." She glanced along the row of empty beds. "Agee is next to Weinstein and then comes Conroy. And Mute in the one next to you."

Bloom stared down the row of empty beds. "Don't the men eat here?"

"Usually they do," Miss Cox said. "But seeing as this is Saturday, Weinstein and Agee are having dinner with Mute in the recreation room. They like to watch the game on television there. And Conroy is in the visitors' room with his son and daughter-in-law."

Bloom noticed that she referred to none of the men as “Mr.” Obviously Miss Cox was an ardent champion of Women’s Lib.

“Put your suitcase on the bed,” she told him. “You’ll find a place for your things in the wardrobe over there. As soon as you’ve unpacked, I’ll have Jose bring in a tray with your dinner.”

Bloom shook his head. “That won’t be necessary. I had a very late lunch. If you don’t mind, I’d just like to rest for a little while.”

“Suit yourself.” Miss Cox turned, moving toward the doorway. She halted there and glanced back. “I do hope you’ll be comfortable here. If you want to wash up, there’s a towel and a washcloth on the shelf in your wardrobe locker. The men’s bathroom is at the end of the hall. Now I’d better be getting back to my desk. If there’s anything else you need, let me know.”

Before he could reply, she exited quickly, leaving him alone in the room.

Mr. Bloom surveyed it with a rueful smile. *Welcome to Sunneyvale.*

His glance traveled across the narrow beds, each covered by a drab gray blanket; the exposed borders of the sheets and the single pillow were white, but they too had a grayish tinge, the product of too many washings and too little bleach. The late afternoon sun shown dimly through windows at the far end of the room, but its rays were not strong enough to dispel the shadows blurring the outline of the shelves above each bed, the woodened-back chair beside it, or the wardrobe cabinets on the opposite wall.

Everything seemed gray here, including the inmates.

Guests, Mr. Bloom corrected himself. All the residents were paying guests, courtesy of Social Security, Medicare, pensions, and savings. And as long as they paid, they stayed; stayed in their gray dormitory until a deeper darkness descended—the darkness of death. Sunneyvale was no different from the other retirement homes he’d seen; just another warehouse for senior citizens awaiting graduation into oblivion.

Bloom shrugged, then picked up his suitcase and carried it, unopened, to the wardrobe locker. Stooping, he set it down inside, then straightened and squared his shoulders. It was time to go.

The sun was already starting to disappear over the horizon beyond the wide picture windows as Bloom entered the recreation room.

Apparently both the football game and the dinner hour were over, because Mrs. Dempsey and Mrs. Weinstein were seated with the three men on the chairs and settee grouped before the television set. On-screen, an elderly gentleman with a shock of curly hair the color of cotton candy was grinning out at his unseen audience.

“Let me run through that again,” his vibrant voice resounded through the room. “Vitamin A for your scalp, vision, and teeth. Vitamin B for hair and healthy mucous membranes. Vitamin C for the teeth and circulatory system. Remember, C will help keep those lips from shrinking.”

Bloom glanced at the men. One was tall and thin, wearing scholarly horn-rims and a most unscholarly bathrobe; Bloom took a quick guess, deciding that he would be Mr. Mute, perhaps because his mouth was so tightly closed as he stared in stoic skepticism at the screen.

The one seated on the settee beside Mrs. Weinstein must be her husband, so the gentleman in the chair next to Mrs. Dempsey had to be Mr. Agee. At first glance he appeared to be quite handsome and well-preserved for his age; evidently he must have taken a good share of every vitamin in alphabetical order.

But Mr. Weinstein seemed to have neglected his ABCs. He was a bald-headed little man in his early eighties, his face shriveled, thin lips pursed in permanent disapproval of everything his long nose sniffed or his melancholy eyes surveyed.

Now those eyes glanced up at the newcomer, and the lips parted as Mr. Weinstein rose, nodding. “You must be Mr. Bloom, right?”

Bloom nodded. “And you are—?”

“Weinstein.” The bald-headed man gestured toward his seated companion. “This is my wife, Mrs. Winston.”

“Winston?” Bloom cast a puzzled glance as the plump woman in the dark wig rose and extended her hand in greeting.

“Weinstein,” she said. “Sadie Weinstein.” She smiled. “Don’t pay any attention to that husband of mine, Mr. Bloom. Our son Murray, he changed his name to Winston and my husband doesn’t approve.”

“What’s to approve?” Mr. Weinstein shook his head. “Just because he goes into politics he thinks he has to change his name to get ahead.”

“And why not?” his wife challenged. “You think maybe people in England would vote for somebody named Weinstein Churchill?”

“Don’t pay any attention to her.” Mr. Weinstein reached out and patted the plump arm of his spouse. “My wife is a closet *goy*.”

The other members of the group had risen; stepping forward, they introduced themselves in turn.

“Welcome aboard,” Mr. Agee said, his handclasp firm.

“So nice to have you with us.” Mrs. Dempsey fanned his face with a flutter of false eyelashes. “I hope you’ll like it here.”

“Pleased to meet you, Mr. Bloom.” A look of inquiry flashed from behind Mr. Mute’s horn-rims. “Your first name doesn’t happen to be Leopold, by any chance?”

Bloom smiled. “I’m afraid I can’t lay claim to such distinction,” he said. “I never had the privilege of meeting James Joyce, and I’m not a native of Dublin.”

“You’re from Minneapolis, aren’t you?” Mrs. Weinstein said. “I heard Miss Cox talking with you on the phone the other day—”

“You got big ears.” Her husband frowned his disapproval. “And Miss Cox has a big mouth.” He turned to Bloom and nodded. “Sit down, make yourself comfortable.”

“Thank you.” Bloom smiled, glancing toward the picture windows. “I’ll join you in a moment. If you don’t mind, right now I’d rather watch the sunset instead of television.”

“Feel free,” Mr. Mute told him. “Personally, I’d prefer to curl up with a good book—or a bad woman. Unfortunately, both seem to be in short supply around here.”

As he settled back down into his seat, the others followed suit, their eyes automatically returning to focus on the tube. The man with the cotton-candy hair was offering more words of wisdom to the world.

"And let's not forget E, the miracle vitamin. If you've enjoyed a healthy sex life, there's no reason why you can't keep on well into your golden years, thanks to a daily intake of Vitamin E . . ."

Golden years. Bloom moved to the nearest window, staring out into the sunset. It too was golden, but now its luster faded into gray gloom.

In the street beyond, a group of children were playing a game of kick-the-can, laughing and shouting in the gathering twilight. Bloom smiled appreciatively at the sight. The childhood years—these were truly golden.

Now his attention shifted to the driveway before the rest home's entrance. Here another group stood before a parked car—a stout, bearded man in his middle thirties, a blond woman around the same age, and an elderly gentleman who clutched a cardboard suitcase in one hand. Remembering what Miss Cox had told him, Bloom guessed the identities of the trio—Mr. Conroy, his son, and his daughter-in-law. He couldn't hear their conversation through the window but pantomime and body language offered an eloquence of their own. *One picture is worth a thousand words* —

The bulk of those words issued from Mr. Conroy's contorted mouth; words that pleaded, words that begged; and the suitcase told its own story.

"Take me home with you," the mouth implored. "Let me come just for the weekend" was the message of the small suitcase. "I promise I won't be in your way—"

The frown on the bearded face and the repeated shaking of the head adorned with brassy blond curls also translated easily into words: "Sorry, Pop. Not this time. We're all tied up for tonight and tomorrow we promised to take the kids to the beach." The daughter-in-law glanced at her watch, then looked up with a frown. It didn't require any talent in lip-reading to know what she was saying. "Look at the time, Joe! We really have to leave now." Mr. Conroy stepped back, shoulders sagging in surrender as his son and daughter-in-law settled themselves comfortably in the bucket seats of the shiny new Cadillac and closed the door with a big-car bang. His son started the engine, then pressed a button to roll down the automatic window and flash a smile of surpassing warmth and phoniness at his father. Again Bloom put words into the moving mouth: “Maybe next week, Pop. Okay?” The car glided down the driveway, turned left, then vanished from view. Mr. Conroy stood motionless for a moment, his eyes following its progress until he could see it no longer. The shadows gathering around the driveway were gray; second childhood has no golden years.

“Poor Leo!” Bloom started at the sound of the voice behind him. Turning, he saw Mr. Agee standing at his elbow, shaking his head.

“Every Saturday, Leo carries that suitcase out to his kid’s car and every Saturday he carries it back again and unpacks.”

“Don’t they ever let him come to visit?”

“Maybe once or twice a year, over the holidays. They do a lot of partying and entertaining—mostly for business, you know. His son’s in real estate.”

Mr. Bloom nodded. “I guessed as much when I saw him smile.”

Mr. Agee chuckled. “You’ve got quite a sense of humor, Mr. Bloom.”

Bloom didn’t reply; he was still staring out of the window, watching as the old man with a suitcase turned and started back up the driveway. As he did so, his shuffling feet encountered the tin can that the children were using in their game. For some reason it had been placed at the edge of the drive and now a small girl was running toward it hastily, ready to kick the can and be “safe” according to the rules of the game.

Either Mr. Conroy didn’t see her coming or else he didn’t give a damn. Noticing the can before him, he lashed out with his foot and sent it sailing across the lawn. Then he resumed his plodding progress up the drive.

Behind him the little girl grimaced in exasperation, then turned and ran toward the rolling can as a boy—obviously “it” in the game—emerged from the street to follow her in hot pursuit.

Reaching the rolling can, the girl kicked it with all her might, her mouth opening in a silent shout, which Bloom promptly mimicked.

"Alley-alley-oxen-free!"

All eyes turned from the television screen now and Bloom greeted their stares with a smile. "Sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt your program. I was just watching the kids outside—guess I must have let myself get carried away."

"Don't apologize," said Mr. Weinstein. "The kind of programs they got on tonight we can do without, believe me. 'Saturday Night Live,' 'Saturday Night Dead'—who needs it?"

Now there was another interruption in the form—two forms, really—of Mr. Conroy and Miss Cox, as they entered the room together, halting just inside the doorway.

Seeing the latest arrival standing at the window, Miss Cox called out to him. "Having fun, Mr. Bloom? Why don't you come over here for a moment. I'd like to introduce you to one of your roommates."

Bloom nodded and crossed toward her, wondering as he did so just how much fun Miss Cox imagined he might enjoy just by looking out the window. Perhaps she mistook him for a voyeur. And he hardly regarded the other male residents as roommates; the term would be more appropriate if applied to the youngsters in a boarding school. Unless, of course, Miss Cox was recycling it to do service in his second childhood.

Abruptly he put his thoughts aside to acknowledge her introduction.

"Mr. Conroy, this is Mr. Bloom, our new resident."

"Pleased to meet you," Mr. Conroy said. His attempt at a smile was not too successful, nor was his effort to shake hands, for as he raised his arm he realized that he was still clutching his suitcase by the handle.

"Here, let me take that." Miss Cox snatched the suitcase from his grasp. "I'll put it away for you. Why don't you just stay here now and get acquainted with our new arrival?"

She nodded at Bloom. "Mr. Conroy's first name is Leo," she told him, then paused, frowning slightly. "I'm sorry, but I can't seem to recall yours."

"Don't be sorry." Bloom smiled at her. "I haven't given you my first name."

"But I must have—"

Miss Cox broke off as the ring of a phone echoed from the hall. With a frown she hurried out, carrying Mr. Conroy's suitcase with her.

Bloom found himself surrounded by smiling faces.

"Good on you," Mr. Weinstein said. "That's telling her!"

The others nodded approvingly; only Mr. Conroy seemed upset and his scowl of irritation was directed at the picture window facing the street beyond. He moved toward it, peering out into the dusk.

"Dam kids," he muttered. "They've been told not to play around here. Old people need their rest."

Mrs. Dempsey spoke up. "But we can't even *hear* them, Mr. Conroy! Let the youngsters have their fun. I only wish I could go out there and play with them myself."

Bloom nodded. "Why don't you, Mrs. Dempsey?" he said softly.

She started to laugh, then broke off as Leo Conroy answered for her. "Because she's old, Mr. Bloom."

Bloom shook his head. "I don't think we're ever too old to play. When you rest, you rust."

A fluffy white pillow suddenly uncoiled on the arm of the chair where Mrs. Dempsey had been sitting. Bloom blinked, then recognized her cat.

Mrs. Dempsey went to pick it up. As she cradled it in her arms, the cat began to purr, and so did Mrs. Dempsey. "What's the matter, Mickey? Don't you like television?"

"What's to like?" Mr. Weinstein cast a sour glance at the screen, as a grinning, hyperactive game-show host fired an inane question at an equally inane contestant. "Why don't we turn it off? All this racket makes it so a fella can't think. I'd like a chance to get acquainted with Mr. Bloom here."

"Good idea." Mrs. Weinstein nodded approvingly at her spouse. "It's been a long time since I had a chance to *schmooz* with anybody new."

"Excellent!" said Mr. Mute. "The trouble with all these game-shows is that nobody loses except the viewers."

He moved to the set and switched it off.

As the tube went blank, the others took their seats again. Bloom followed Mr. Conroy to the far end of the semicircle of chairs and sat down between him and Mrs. Dempsey.

Mr. Conroy turned to him. “Is this your first time in an old-age home, Bloom?”

Bloom shook his head, conscious that everyone was waiting for an answer. “No. Actually, Mr. Conroy, I’ve been in six or eight of them.”

“Six or eight homes?” Mr. Conroy raised his bushy eyebrows. “That’s quite a record, Bloom. What’s your problem—can’t make any friends?” Mrs. Dempsey produced a sniff of indignation. “I think Mr. Bloom is a *very* friendly person! Which is more than I can say for some people around here.”

Bloom smiled at her. “Tell me, Mrs. Dempsey. If you could go out there with those children tonight, what would you want to play?”

Mrs. Dempsey stroked her cat. “I used to love all kinds of games. Especially jacks. I was the jacks champion in elementary school,” she announced proudly.

“Those were the good old days,” said Mr. Mute. “Kids don’t play jacks anymore. Now they’re only interested in jocks.”

Mrs. Dempsey uttered a surprisingly girlish giggle. “But you know, if I could still tell my body what to do, I would dance.”

Mr. Agee rose and crossed to her, extending his hand. “I would be honored to have this dance, Mrs. Dempsey.”

Mrs. Dempsey giggled again and started to rise, then winced in sudden pain and slumped back again.

“What’s the matter?” Mr. Agee bent over her solicitously.

“Just a shooting pain.” Mrs. Dempsey shook her head, embarrassed. “I think it’s my arthuritis.”

“Arthritis,” Mr. Weinstein corrected. “Since when do you go around calling diseases by their first name?”

Everyone laughed—everyone except Mr. Conroy. “Speak for yourself,” he said. “When you’ve got as many aches and pains as I have, you get to know them personally."

"Don't remind me." Mrs. Weinstein glanced at Bloom. "I would like to run again. What I wouldn't give to play jump rope once more."

Mr. Agee nodded. "What I wouldn't give to just be hitting puberty again!"

"Sex!" Mr. Conroy muttered. "Is that all you ever think about?"

"So what's wrong with thinking?" Mrs. Weinstein reached out and took her husband's hand. "Maybe that's one game I can't play anymore, but believe me, I've got some beautiful memories."

"Stop already." Mr. Weinstein squeezed her hand. "You've had a full life, sweetheart. Don't get sloppy on me now." Glancing down, he noticed his wife's shoes resting beside the settee and pointed at them. "Put those back on. A good Jew only goes barefoot when someone has died."

Mrs. Weinstein shrugged. "I'm not that orthodox."

"I am," Mr. Weinstein said firmly. "Put 'em on before you catch cold."

Bloom leaned forward to address him. "What were you like as a boy, Mr. Weinstein?"

"Me?" Mr. Weinstein smiled. "I loved to climb—anything you can name, I climbed it. Like a cat I could climb."

Mr. Agee chimed in, nodding. "I always wanted to be Douglas Fairbanks."

"You still do, Mr. Agee." Mrs. Dempsey giggled again.

"Did you know Douglas Fairbanks was half Jewish?" Mr. Weinstein said. "His real name was Ullman."

Mr. Agee ignored him, lost in the depth of fond recollection. "I broke more bedsprings by leaping from my dresser to the bed and out the window."

Again there was laughter from the group and again Mr. Conroy abstained. It was obvious he had no intention of joining them in this stroll down Memory Lane.

"Have it your way," he said. "Me, I *like* being old." He stared at the group defiantly. "And when I go, my son promised to have me frozen."

"You already are frozen, popsicle-head!" Mr. Weinstein declared. He started to laugh at his own joke, then began to cough. Mrs. Weinstein slapped him on the back.

"Watch it, Harry," she chided. "Remember your emphysema."

"She's right." Mr. Conroy nodded grimly. "Face the facts. We'd all be better off if we remember what we are today, instead of what happened sixty—seventy years ago."

But Mrs. Dempsey ignored him. As the coughing spell ended, she glanced at Bloom. "What about you?" she asked. "What did you play?"

Bloom smiled. "Kick-the-can was my game."

"That was mostly for boys," Mrs. Dempsey said. "My late husband, Jack Dempsey—not the fighter, Mr. Bloom—Jack Dempsey was the most gentle man who ever walked this earth—he loved that game." Mr. Conroy fidgeted in his chair. "What's the point of all this talk? Why are you dredging up the past, Bloom? This isn't healthy."

But Mrs. Dempsey ignored him. "Like I was saying, Mr. Bloom, he just loved that game. His mother would bean him if she caught him playing. Ruined his shoes, she said."

"Marbles." Mr. Weinstein nodded', taking a ride on his own train of recollections. "There was a game for you!"

"Do you still remember what those marbles were called?" Mr. Agee asked.

Mr. Weinstein gestured quickly. "Don't say it—I'm thinking. Agates. Purees. And laggars—" Mrs. Dempsey sighed. "It was so nice, being a child. There was nothing to worry about because people always took care of me."

"They take care of you here." Mr. Conroy offered a smile dipped in vinegar. "Miss Cox takes great care of you, doesn't let you do a thing."

Mrs. Dempsey wasn't listening. "I had lots of friends and ever so many toys—"

"Toys?" Mr. Conroy's voice rose, insistent upon her attention. "They've got toys here that will last you for the rest of your life. Oxygen tanks, respirators, bedpans, the whole works." There was vinegar in his voice now. "You want friends? Mr. Bloom here is trying to make friends—trying to stir them all up, aren't you, Bloom?"

Frowning, Mr. Mute attempted a diversion. He leaned forward quickly, addressing Mr. Weinstein. "What were the clay marbles called, Harry?"

For a moment Mr. Weinstein sat silent. So did the others, as the impact of Mr. Conroy's words hit home.

Mr. Agee tried again. "Well, Harry?"

Mr. Weinstein shrugged his shoulders and expelled a sigh of misery. "I don't know. I can't remember anymore."

Bloom leaned forward. "Sure you can," he said. "The clays ones were emis."

"That's right." Mr. Weinstein looked up, nodding gratefully. "Emis. Now I remember!" He smiled. "Thank you, Bloom, you're a real *mensch.*"

Bloom glanced thoughtfully at the semicircle of faces, capturing their attention as he spoke. "The day we stopped playing is the day we started getting old. We started watching clocks, watching for the days to hurry up and end, counting weeks and months and years as if they would last forever. We never realized our time would run out, and that's where we made our mistake."

He nodded slowly. "We never should have started counting, never been in such a hurry to grow up, because once the counting begins, it never stops. The clock keeps right on going, ticking your life away. But when we played, we weren't worried about time. We always had something else to look forward to—another chance to hide, another turn at bat, another game of kick-the-can—"

He halted, eyes searching their faces in the silence. "So who's playing?"

Mr. Weinstein blinked at him, startled. "What?" Bloom smiled. "I'm starting up a game of kick-the-can! Who's playing?"

Mr. Conroy shook his head. "When's the last time you fell down and couldn't get up by yourself, pal? How dare you ask anybody to go out there and risk the little bit of life they have left in them!"

"All life is a risk, Mr. Conroy. I'm not asking anybody to do what I'm not willing to do. But maybe if we played, we might get a hold on that thing we're all missing—a little hold on youth." Mr. Conroy gestured contemptuously toward his companions. "Look at them," he muttered. "Their bones will break if they try to run. Their hearts are old. Their lungs are old."

Mrs. Dempsey glanced up timidly. "Miss Cox would *never* allow us to go outside and play, Mr. Bloom. It's against the rules."

"Rules!" Mr. Bloom shook his head. "Did you ever try to stop a child? Are you going to let rules stop you from the chance of being young again?"

Now Bloom reached into his jacket pocket. When it emerged he was holding an object that brought startled gasps from the semicircle.

Resting against the palm of his hand was a tin can.

Ignoring their stares, ignoring their exclamations of surprise, he reached into his pocket again. Pulling out a handkerchief he began to polish the surface of the empty can.

It was only then that he glanced up, nodding. "This old man still has a little magic left in him. If you believe, I think I can promise to make you feel like children again."

Mr. Conroy snickered. "You're making promises that they can't keep, Bloom."

Bloom didn't reply; he was already turning to the others. "I want to see you dance, Mrs. Dempsey. And you, Mr. Weinstein—how would you like to be able to climb again?"

Mr. Weinstein nodded. "Like a cat I could climb."

Bloom rose. "Let's break the rules. What can they take away from us that we haven't already lost?"

As his challenge echoed, it was greeted with a quick exchange of glances, followed by a hushed, expectant silence.

"Well, what do you say?" Mr. Bloom nodded. "Don't waste time, or time will waste you."

Mr. Agee cleared his throat. “When were you thinking of playing?” he asked.

Bloom held up the tin can, its polished surface gleaming beneath the light.

“Tonight,” he said.

Again the exchange of glances—again the hush of anticipation.

Mr. Weinstein glanced toward the window; the street beyond was almost invisible in the darkness. “You mean right now?” He shook his head sadly. “If Miss Cox should see us, she’ll lock us up and throw the key away.”

“That’s not the game plan,” Bloom told him. “What I suggest is that we all go to bed until midnight. Then, after we make sure Miss Cox is sound asleep, we can tiptoe out—”

“Marvelous!” Mrs. Weinstein clapped her hands.

Mr. Mute was nodding. “I agree! Just thinking about it is enough to make my skin tingle!”

Mr. Weinstein shook his head. “Remember what it says in the Talmud,” he murmured. “Nobody loves a smart-guy.”

Now he turned, joining his wife, Mrs. Dempsey, and Mr. Agee as they stood clustered before Bloom.

There was an almost palpable excitement radiating through the room. Mr. Mute stepped up behind him, reaching out to touch the tin can with tingling fingers.

“You’re not putting us on, Mr. Bloom?” he said. “Do you really think we can get away with it without being caught?”

“Not a chance!”

Mr. Conroy’s voice was scornful. He sat stubbornly in his chair, shaking his head as they turned to stare at him. “I’ve got five bucks that says none of you old crocks can still keep your eyes open after ten o’clock!”

Bloom smiled. “Don’t worry about that—I’m a regular night owl.” He turned his attention to the group before him. “Why don’t you all try to sleep for a few hours? When the time comes, I’ll drop around and let you know.”

Mr. Conroy grunted. “Don’t bother to wake me up,” he said. “I may be old, but I’m not senile enough to crawl out of bed in the middle of the night just to play some fool kid’s game.”

For a moment the group’s decision wavered in the balance. Then Mr. Mute nodded at Bloom. “See you later,” he said. Turning, he gestured to his fellow resident.

“Let’s go,” he murmured. “It’s time for all of us fools to get some rest before the game.”

Mr. Conroy sat alone in the recreation room, watching the ten o’clock news. He always watched the news before going to bed and he wasn’t going to miss it now just because of this nonsense tonight.

He still didn’t understand how the others could fall for such foolishness. They ought to act their age. If those idiots thought that playing some kid’s game at midnight would make them feel young again, then maybe they’d have to learn the hard way. Nobody can turn the clock back. It was just wishful thinking. They wanted youth, but all they would get out of this was a broken hip, a stroke, maybe a heart attack.

The whole idea was crazy. They must be crazy, too—listening to somebody like Bloom—because he was the craziest of them all.

For a moment he wondered if he ought to inform Miss Cox that she was harboring a lunatic under her roof. Then he dismissed the notion with a shrug. Why should he do her any favors? Let her find out the hard way, too. What anyone else did was their business.

His business was to watch the news so that he could be sure of getting a good night’s sleep. Other people counted sheep, but Mr. Conroy had found a method of his own. He watched the news and kept count of the day’s events.

Listening to the commentator, he made a tally on his mental score-card: three murders . . . two rapes . . . six muggings . . . one armed robbery . . . one tornado, one explosion, several floods and famines . . . three fires, two of which were obviously arson . . . plus, as a final bonus, four wars and a revolutionary uprising.

Not bad for one evening; just thinking about what went on in the outside world was enough to make you welcome sleep.

Satisfied, Mr. Conroy rose, switched off the television, and shuffled down the hall.

When he reached the dormitory, he was greeted by the snores of his fellow residents. Quietly, he undressed in darkness so as not to disturb them. The only sound rising above the even snores was a faint plop as he dropped his teeth into a glass of water on the shelf above his bed. Then he scrunched down beneath the covers and in a matter of moments his own snore joined the chorus.

It had not been easy for Mr. Weinstein to fall asleep. Usually he went out like a light the moment his head touched the pillow, but tonight was different. So much had happened and there was so much to think about.

Of course, this fella Bloom was a *meshuganah,* but it didn't matter. Not for one minute could Mr. Weinstein believe that climbing out of his nice warm bed to play kick-the-can in the middle of the night was going to make anyone feel young again; for people his age the Fountain of Youth had been turned off long ago. But at least he was willing to go along with the idea, if only to break the monotony. Maybe Bloom was a genuine eighteen-carat nutzo, but at least he was bringing them a little action, giving them something new to think about, opening the windows and letting in a little fresh air.

So what if Bloom couldn't really make them young again? Maybe just doing something different would make them *feel* younger for a little while, help take away the boredom.

That was the worst part of getting old, Mr. Weinstein decided. You got used to being bored, used to just sitting all day while the world changed. After a while you didn't even notice the changes anymore; then all of a sudden you looked around and everything was different. Now all the boys were named David and all the girls were Jennifers.

But one thing didn't change: kids still had their youth, their strength, their health; and Mr. Weinstein envied them for that. As for him, all he had was a bad heart—and poor Sadie, complaining about her back pains. *Funny; everybody seems to complain about back pains and nobody even mentions front pains. Go figure that one out.* Mr. Weinstein was still figuring as he fell asleep.

In the women's dormitory, Mrs. Dempsey was already sleeping with Mickey curled up beside her pillow. In her dream the white cat suddenly turned into her husband Jack, and Mrs. Dempsey snuggled up with him. Somewhere along the line Jack Dempsey turned into Clark Gable, but Mrs. Dempsey didn't mind.

Mr. Agee wasn't dreaming about a movie star in his dream. He *was* the star himself. A handsome, dashing Douglas Fairbanks, he slashed a villain's face with the Z of Zorro, crossed swords with the Three Musketeers, rode the magic carpet over Baghdad, and swung through the trees of Sherwood Forest with all the ease and grace of Robin Hood. . . .

* * *

Mrs. Weinstein stirred restlessly. If Miss Cox would only give her a room of her own where she and Harry could sleep in the same bed, maybe things would be different. Not that there would be any fooling around—nobody fools around at her age, no matter how many vitamins they take. But at least the two of them could be together, just like they had been for all those years before.

No, suppose Harry *were* here—what difference would it make? They probably wouldn't even talk; the way she felt now, all she wanted to do was sleep. Face wooden, limbs stiff, Mrs. Weinstein slept like a log.

Mr. Mute fell asleep thinking about mole rats. Somewhere recently he'd run across a reference to these curious creatures, either in his reading or else while watching one of those nature documentaries on television. And now, strangely enough, they came scampering through his thoughts, burrowing into his brain the way they burrowed through the sun-baked earth below the savanna grasslands of East Africa. There, in the warm darkness, they nestled in a tangled drove, venturing forth only to bring food into the pitch-black confines where they lived out their entire existence in half-blind hunger.

Miserable creatures, leading a miserable life. But just how different was it from his own existence here at Sunneyvale? Crowded together in the confines of the so-called recreation room, sitting and staring half-blindly at the television tube, redigesting memories of the past, shut away from the world beyond?

Mr. Mute was still pondering the question as, like a mole rat, he burrowed down into the darkness of slumber.

Miss Cox was asleep, too. Bloom looked in on her for a moment, gently easing open the door of the bedroom at the far end of the hall. The bedside lamp was still burning; she must have dozed off while reading, for a paperback romance rested beside her, its gaudy cover-art displaying the standard frightened heroine fleeing from the conventional Gothic mansion with the inevitable darkhaired and mustachioed hero staring after her.

Such stuff as dreams are made of. Bloom smiled and closed the door. Then he turned and walked softly down the hall.

It was exactly midnight when he entered the men's dormitory and moved in semidarkness to Mr. Mute's bedside. Bending down, he shook him gently by the shoulder.

“It’s time, Mr. Mute,” he whispered.

Mr. Mute opened his eyes and sat up, throwing back his covers. He was fully clothed; the discarded bathrobe rested on the chair beside him.

Bloom stared at him approvingly. “I see you’re dressed for the occasion,” he murmured. “What about the others?”

Mr. Mute nodded. “They all went to bed with their clothes on, at my suggestion.” He glanced toward the sleeping forms in the beds beside him. “All but Conroy. He must have come in later, but I see he’s wearing his pajamas.”

“Try not to disturb him,” Bloom said. “Now, if you’ll just wake the others, I’ll go down the hall and see if the ladies are ready. We’ll meet outside on the back lawn. I’ve been scouting around for a good place and that seems to be the safest.”

“Excellent.” Mr. Mute reached for his glasses on the shelf above the bed. “See you in a few minutes.”

When Bloom stepped out onto the back lawn, he found the others already waiting. Carrying the tin can, he moved to the center of the greensward, beckoning the others to follow him.

“All set?” he asked.

“Ready to go.” Mr. Agee winked at Mrs. Dempsey.

She nodded, cradling the cat against her shoulder.

Mr. Weinstein shrugged. “I feel like a *schlemiel,”* he murmured. “But what have I got to lose?”

“Right,” said Bloom. “Here we go.” He tossed the can into the air.

As it whirled down in a shimmering spiral the old people ran for cover, finding hiding-places in the hedge and shrubbery that bordered the lawn on three sides.

Bloom stared down at the can; then, in a loud voice, he slowly counted to ten.

Turning, he moved over the bordering hedge at his right and began to search for the other players.

Behind his back they were already sneaking forward one by one, emerging from their various hiding places to kick the can.

When Bloom looked toward the center of the lawn again, he was greeted with giggles and laughter.

“Fooled you this time!” Mrs. Dempsey cried.

“So you did.” Bloom nodded. “Looks like I’m it again.”

He tossed the can. The old folks ran. Bloom counted, and above him the full moon turned the night to silver.

In the dormitory, Mr. Conroy tossed and turned restlessly. Through his slumber the voices of the old people on the lawn filtered faintly. But as their play continued, the sound of their shouts and laughters began to change. Now the shrill tones echoed like the voices of children. *“Alley-alley-oxen-free!”* someone shouted.

“Dam kids—” Mumbling in his sleep, Mr. Conroy buried his head beneath the pillow.

On the lawn under the full moon, a small red-haired boy pranced joyfully, flapping the sleeves and trouser bottoms of Mr. Mute’s suit.

“Kids!” he cried.

And kids they were—each and every one of them. Laughing children, clad in the outsized outfits of Harry and Sadie Weinstein, Mr. Agee, and Mrs. Dempsey. Mrs. Dempsey was still holding her cat, but it was a kitten now.

Mr. Weinstein glanced at the cute little girl beside him. “Sadie?”

She nodded in delight. “Is that you, Harry?” Reaching out, she gave his cheek a pinch. “Such a little *maeskite!”*

Young Mr. Mute clapped his hands exuberantly. “Kids!” he shouted again. “Look at us—it’s really happened!”

Rolling up his trouser bottoms, a boyish Mr. Agee glanced toward Bloom, who had seated himself on a bench near the back door.

“Mr. Bloom—are you all right?”

Bloom nodded. “Certainly.”

Little Mrs. Dempsey turned and stared. “But you’re still old!”

“Am I? I never thought of it that way.” He gestured. “Don’t worry about me—just enjoy yourselves.”

Mr. Weinstein glanced down and shook his head. *“Oy gevalt*, look how short I am!”

“Never mind,” Bloom told him. “You want to play, you have to keep playing.”

And play they did, fulfilling the fantasies of youth under the full moon.

Mrs. Weinstein and Mrs. Dempsey danced together, two doll-like figures twirling in the moonlight.

Mr. Agee began a fencing match with an imaginary opponent. Forcing his invincible foe back, he leaped onto the bench on which Bloom was sitting, giving him just enough time to rise before the bench tipped over. Landing on his feet with Fairbanksian grace, he continued his sword fight until he reached the dancing girls. Halting his duel, he winked at Mrs. Dempsey. “Dance with me!” he cried.

Mrs. Dempsey moved into his arms immediately. He grabbed her close and tried to kiss her.

She struggled free shaking her head. “Oh, no, Mr. Agee—stay away from me!”

“Okay.” Mr. Agee grinned, then turned and reached out to embrace Mrs. Weinstein.

“No!” She shook her head. “Dirty old man!”

“Not anymore!” Mr. Agee lunged for her again. Still resisting, she turned and called over her shoulder. “Harry! Where are you?”

Mr. Weinstein swung into view from the overhanging limb of a tall tree, dangling by one arm. He shouted, “Agee, get away from my wife!”

As Agee released her, Mrs. Weinstein turned and glanced anxiously at her husband. “Harry—your heart—”

Mr. Weinstein laughed. “My heart? Are you kidding?” Swinging from the limb, he let out a Tarzan yell.

Clothes flying, little Mr. Mute somersaulted across the lawn and came to a stop at Bloom’s feet. At the same moment Mr. Agee leaped to a halt beside him.

“Look,” he said. “I don’t wish to appear ungrateful, but why don’t you join us?”

Bloom shrugged. “I find I prefer to be my true age and try to keep my mind young.” His nod included the others as they approached. “But your wish has come true. You’re children again. You have your whole lives before you.”

A most unboyish frown creased Mr. Mute’s forehead. “My life was so hard,” he murmured.

“I had a swell life,” Mr. Agee said. “I can do sixty years more standing on my head.”

“So who wants to live upside down?” Mr. Weinstein smiled. “Me, I was just beginning to look forward to senility.”

His wife shivered in the breeze rising from beyond the hedge. “I’m cold. Where are we going to spend the night? Where can we go? Who’ll take care of us?”

Mr. Weinstein put his arms around her. “No problem,” he said. “We’ll just knock on our son’s door and say, ‘Let us in, Murray, we’re your parents.’ Don’t worry—you know how he loves kids.”

Mrs. Weinstein sighed. “I love you, Harry, but I don’t want to go back and do it all over again.”

“Now wait a minute,” Mr. Agee said. “Let’s think this over. There’s a lot to look forward to.”

Mrs. Dempsey was dismayed. “Jack Dempsey isn’t here. I’ll never meet him—” As she spoke, she glanced down at her hand. Then cried out, “My ring! My wedding ring. It fell off!”

Dropping to her knees, she began to search the lawn. The others came to her aid.

Hands scrabbling desperately through the grass, Mrs. Dempsey shook her head. “I didn’t really ask to be young again, all I wanted to do was dance! I can be old and dance.”

Beside her Mr. Mute nodded. “I’m *not* going to school again,” he declared.

“School is easy,” Mr. Weinstein said. “But work another forty years? Forget it!” Now he noticed that his wife was barefooted again. Pointing at oversized shoes lying discarded near the bench, he issued his orders. “Put ’em on. Nobody died here!”

Mrs. Weinstein obeyed, but the mention of death brought a look of sadness to her girlish face. “I don’t want to lose the people I love again, one by one. I remember the night my father passed away. They laid him out and then they sent all us children outside. We saw Halley’s Comet.”

“I was too young to see Halley’s Comet,” Mrs. Dempsey told her. “I was going to see it when I was eighty years old.”

Bloom spoke gently. “That’s only two more birthdays, Mrs. Dempsey. Would you like to see it at eight, or at eighty?”

Mrs. Dempsey reached down and lifted her kitten from the lawn. “Eighty,” she murmured.

Bloom nodded, then extended his hand. “Look—I seem to have found your ring.”

Smiling gratefully, Mrs. Dempsey slid the large loop onto a small finger. “I’ll still have this,” she said, “and all the memories that go with it.”

“Me too,” said Mrs. Weinstein. “In spite of everything, I’m satisfied with my life the way it was. We should take one day at a time.”

“I agree,” her husband said. “What we got to do is try to make those days a little better.”

Bloom smiled. “In that case, let’s all go back to bed. Maybe you could wake up in your old bodies again, but with fresh young minds.”

Picking up the tin can, he moved to the back door and the group trailed after him—children following the Pied Piper.

Only Mr. Agee seemed reluctant. “Can’t we discuss it? I’m not tired yet!”

“You can’t go on like this forever,” said Mr. Weinstein. “It’s fun for a while, but who wants to spend the rest of their lives playing kick-the-can?” Bloom opened the door and gestured. “In you go,” he whispered. “And remember—no noise.” They stepped past him into the hall one by one, tiptoeing quietly. Mr. Mute brought up the rear and as he reached the doorway he paused and glanced up at the tin can Bloom was holding in his hand. “One question,” he murmured. “I still don’t see how you did it. Is there some kind of magical property in that can?”

“Not really.” Bloom tossed the can away, sailing it through the moonlight to land in the shadows beyond. He smiled.

“The magic is in yourselves.”

Mr. Conroy was still asleep when his fellow residents moved into the dormitory. It was only the whispering in the hall outside that awakened him.

“But I’m not ready to go back. I want to stay like this!”

Conroy didn’t identify Mr. Agee’s childish treble, but he recognized Bloom as he replied. “That’s up to you. Are you quite sure—?”

“Positive.”

“So be it, then,” said Bloom. “But you’d better get back into bed anyway, before somebody sees you here in the hall.”

It was then that Mr. Conroy opened his eyes, just in time to see Bloom enter, followed by little Mr. Agee. The sight of the child in his oversized garments was enough to bring Mr. Conroy bolt-upright against the back of his bed. Turning, he glanced along the row at the diminutive heads of Mr. Mute and Mr. Weinstein already nestling on their pillows.

“I don’t believe it!” said Mr. Conroy.

Ignoring the restraining wave of Bloom’s hand, he jumped out of bed and raced out into the hall.

The door to the men’s dormitory was closed when Mr. Conroy returned. Miss Cox, clad in a frilly negligee, stumbled behind him.

“It wasn’t a dream—I saw them!” Mr. Conroy’s voice echoed through the corridor. “Kids! Kids in the beds!”

Miss Cox shook her head in disbelief until her curlers rattled. Sighing, she opened the door and peered inside.

Mr. Mute, Mr. Weinstein, and Bloom lay sound asleep, their lined, familiar faces pressed against the pillows. Mr. Agee’s bed was also occupied, although he’d pulled the covers up over his head.

Now Mr. Conroy quailed before Miss Cox’s accusing stare.

“But they *were* kids!” he faltered.

“You had a nightmare.” Miss Cox’s voice softened into weary resignation as she took the old man by his arm. “Come on, back to bed with you.”

She led Mr. Conroy into the room, and it was then that Mr. Agee’s bed erupted.

With a whirl of scattering blankets, young Mr. Agee bounded upward. Using the bed as a trampoline, he bounced up and down upon it, then jumped to the windowsill in a leap that would have made Douglas Fairbanks proud of him.

Raising the window, he turned and nodded at Miss Cox.

“Welcome to Sherwood Forest, m’lady!” He grinned at Mr. Conroy. “How now, Sir Guy, no greetings from you?”

Mr. Conroy stared in shock, but Miss Cox’s anger found a voice. “What are you doing in here, you little ragamuffin? How dare you—”

“Rest assured that Robin Hood has nothing but the most peaceable intentions,” Mr. Agee cried.

Now the others were sitting up in bed, watching as Mr. Conroy staggered toward the child poised on the windowsill. There was no hint of shock or skepticism in his face, only a bitter yearning. “Me too,” he whispered hoarsely. “Take me with you.”

Mr. Agee’s helpless glance fastened on Bloom, who smiled sadly, then shook his head.

Mr. Agee stared down at the old man. “It’s too late, Leo. You’ll have to stay with yourself.”

Miss Cox marched toward the windowsill, fury in her face. As she reached out to the small figure crouching there, Mr. Agee turned and grabbed at a tree branch bobbing just beyond the opening. “Up and away!” he shouted.

Then, with a swoop, he disappeared into the night.

Bloom smiled. So did all the others, even Mr. Conroy.

All the others, that is, except Miss Cox.

She had fainted.

The sun was shining on Sunneyvale once again, shining on the front lawn where its residents had gathered.

From a truck in the driveway, several young men unloaded plants and rose bushes, planting them in place along the spaded borders on either sides.

Mr. Mute nodded approvingly to his companions. “We’ll have the garden out in back,” he said. “Let’s put tomatoes along the fence and maybe some squash and those red poppies, the ones that open in the mornings.”

He turned as Mrs. Dempsey crossed the lawn to the group, carrying a picnic basket. “I packed a lunch for us,” she announced. “We can take a taxi to the lake.” She glanced down toward the white cat prowling at her feet. “I’ve promised Mickey a look at that lake for years now.”

Mrs. Weinstein smiled. “Let’s ask Mr. Conroy. He can bring his grandchild. Kids love water.”

From the open doorway of the entrance behind them a wailing voice arose: “Mr. Agee? Mr. Agee? Has anyone seen Mr. Agee?”

Mr. Weinstein shrugged. “I’ll bet he’s at the ball game!”

“Or the movies,” Mrs. Weinstein said.

Mrs. Dempsey nodded. “Definitely at the movies. Probably one of those Kung-Fu pictures.”

The old people laughed, their voices rising and clear in the afternoon sunlight.

Hearing them, Bloom nodded. Standing inside the men’s dormitory he finished packing his tattered suitcase, then picked it up and carried it down the hall to the back exit. Moving into the yard, he saw Mr. Conroy playfully kicking the old tin can across the grass, too absorbed to notice as Bloom hurried past him into the alleyway beyond.

Only when Miss Cox’s voice rose from within the residence did Mr. Conroy look up.

“Mr. Agee, Mr. Agee—where are you?”

Mr. Conroy smiled to himself. “Wherever he is, you won’t find him.”

Bloom turned and started down the alleyway unnoticed. The last thing he heard was the sound of Mr. Conroy at play, happily kicking the can.

Bloom walked down the street, suitcase in hand. He’d been walking a long time, for the sun was already setting, but now he reached his destination. Pausing beside an iron gate in a high stone wall, he peered through the bars at a wooden sign set before the sprawling structure beyond, reading the lettering—*Driftwood Convalescent Home.*

He opened the gate; it creaked behind him as he walked down the driveway to where a woman with a nurse’s uniform stood waiting in the front doorway.

“Mr. Bloom?” she said.

He nodded.

“Good, we’ve been expecting you.” She turned and entered, leading Bloom down the hall and into a large room at one side. Halting near the doorway, she nodded at Bloom, her voice rising through the somber silence. “Excuse me, ladies and gentlemen. Our new guest has arrived.”

Bloom stared at a dreary roomful of old people seated in the shadows. As they looked up, he glanced past them, staring through the picture window beyond. Then he smiled and stepped forward.

Outside, twilight was falling. . . .

Helen

The lights in the room were just a little too dim for proper vision, but Mama didn't care. The music was a trifle soft for anyone who might be a bit hard of hearing, but Mama didn't care about that either. Most people disliked being stared at by strangers, but this didn't bother Mama at all.

Because Mama was dead.

Mama was dead, and nothing in the world would ever bother her again. She wasn't concerned about the clumsy fashion in which the mortician had arranged her hair or about his overzealous application of makeup to her sunken cheeks. As a matter of fact, her cheeks weren't sunken anymore; they had been carefully filled out with cotton stuffed inside her mouth, and two little wires were placed just inside the comers of her lips, fixing them in a permanently peaceful smile.

Mama was not disturbed by the sickly scent of floral bouquets already wilting in the heat of the stuffy Slumber Room. She wasn't worried about the cost of the overpriced casket in which she rested, nor was she wondering just how it would be paid for.

Mama's troubles were over, and for a moment Helen almost envied her.

No more problems, no more tears; these were for the living. Standing beside the open casket, Helen Foley glanced up at her sister Vivian.

It was Vivian who shed the tears. And as usual, Helen was left to confront the problems.

It had always been that way, ever since Helen could remember. Vivian was the beauty of the family, the little charmer, and when her pretty face was marred by teardrops, Mama did everything in her power to comfort the poor darling and make her happy again. Helen wasn't really homely, but she lacked her sister's charisma.

"Looks aren't everything," Mama used to say. "Maybe you're not exactly beautiful, but you've got a good brain. Just use it and everything will be all right. You'll see."

So Vivian smiled and pouted her way through life, short on skills but relying on long eyelashes and girlish ways to win her permanent security—a loyal and loving husband, two adorable children, a good home, and a circle of admiring friends.

Helen took Mama's advice to heart. She used her brains, studied hard. Vivian had been the Prom Queen but it was Helen who graduated at the head of the class and went on to a teaching career.

And here she was, ten years later; with any luck she could continue teaching right up until the day when she would join Mama forever in the family plot at Rose Hill Cemetery. So much for brains and Mama's counsel.

For a moment Helen gazed down at her mother's face, feeling the old anger rise within her. Then she sighed softly.

No sense resenting Mama's advice; it was she herself who was to be blamed for taking it, and it was too late to change matters now. Vivian would continue to cry to be comforted, poor little thing; Helen would go on coping, facing each problem as it arose and solving all of them except her own.

Last week, when Mama died after the operation, Vivian had hysterics and took to her bed, surrounded by her family and comforted by their concern. It was Helen who had to come running to the rescue', go through the grim business of filling out the forms, making the funeral arrangements, handling details and down payments. After all, isn't that what brains are for?

Helen sighed again. Mama couldn't help her now, but neither could self-pity. No sense dwelling on the past; it was time to think of the future and she had already made up her mind.

Vivian glanced up, her sobs subsiding. “I suppose you’ll be leaving,” she said.

Helen nodded. “Right after the funeral. No reason to stay, now that Mama’s gone.”

“You really mean that, don’t you?” Vivian seemed perplexed, rather than concerned. “What about your job?”

“It doesn’t matter. I don’t even feel like a teacher anymore. I’ve got nothing left to give those kids that means anything.”

Helen answered without premeditation, but as she spoke she realized the truth of her words. “I’m running on empty, Viv. I’ve got to make the break now. I stayed in town as long as Mama needed me, but I can’t go on here in the same old rut forever. I feel all used up inside.”

“I know what you mean,” Vivian said. But from the way her mouth tightened, Helen knew she didn’t understand. “It’s just that you don’t seem to realize you’ll be leaving your whole life behind you.”

Helen nodded. “I do realize it.” She paused. “That’s exactly the reason I’m going.”

Vivian stared at her in concern. Self-concern, of course; it was the only kind she knew. “But if you go, what about me?”

“You have your own life—Jim and the kids. That’s not what I thought I wanted, remember?”

“I remember.” Vivian dabbed at her eyes with a handkerchief. “So what is it you think you want now?”

“I wish I knew.”

Helen hesitated for a moment, listening to the soft strings of the piped-in organ music, the familiar melody that seemed to haunt the halls of every funeral parlor. She and Vivian had probably heard it a hundred times before and the way each of them identified it probably defined the difference between them. Vivian knew the melody simply as a song “Going Home.” Helen recognized it as the Largo from Dvorak’s *New World.* To be more precise, his Ninth Symphony in E, Opus Ninety-Five. Yes, that was the real difference between the two of them. All those years of learning left her a single legacy—a brain full of trivia, which nobody, including grubby students, cared about, while empty-headed Vivian ended up with everything she'd always wanted, everything she needed for the good life as it was lived in suburbia.

"Sorry, Viv," she said. "I guess I'm not sure myself about what I really want. But I know it's not here, not in Homewood. Not for me."

"Well, if you've made up your mind—" Vivian shrugged, her voice softening. "I just thought maybe I could talk you out of it."

Helen shook her head. "Not this time."

"I only hope you know where you're going." Vivian sighed again, then brightened. "Listen to what they're playing," she said. "I always liked that piece. What did they call it?" She smiled. "Oh, I remember now—it's 'Going Home'."

So that was that.

Once the funeral ended, everybody was going home; Vivian to her family, Mama to heaven, granted there was such a place to go. And now Helen was alone. Only she and Thomas Wolfe seemed to realize that you can't go home again.

She drove along in the afternoon sunlight, music blaring from her car radio. Punk rock, of course; Dvorak was strictly for funeral parlors nowadays. "Slumber Room"—how she hated the hypocritical euphemism! But maybe that was the correct designation for one of the few places left in the world where one could take refuge in the soothing solace of sleep, undisturbed by the ceaseless clamor of savage sound. What kind of sacred music would they be playing when today's children were laid to rest?

Helen leaned forward, switching off the music. Hearing it only evoked an unpleasant recollection of the life she fled from; memories of classrooms filled with rebellious youngsters moving to the beat of a different drum, the twang of guitars, the screech of voices raised in dissonant defiance.

They were all alike today, or so it seemed; underprivileged kids from broken families that gave them too little and overprivileged kids from broken families that gave them too much. But like herself, they seemed to have found no home to go to, and so they dropped out into an artificial existence, surrounding themselves with a protective barrier of stereophonic sound.

Helen shook her head ruefully. No sense going overboard; the least she could do was to own up to the truth. Not all youngsters were on drugs, not all of them flouted authority. But even the conformists seemed to be hooked on sound, ODing on decibels. They sought noise everywhere; injecting their eardrums with a daily dosage of rock, mainlining on the shrieks and groans of splatter-films, the cacophony of commercial commands from their television sets, the clatter of clamor of video-games. No wonder the voices of parents and teachers alike were lost in the din. Teaching was an art, and like all arts it depended upon communication. But how can you hope to communicate with anyone in the midst of all that noise?

Maybe that's what she was really running from. Running from the noise that negated every effort to fulfill the life she'd chosen. What was the sense of trying to teach when nobody *listened?*

Helen shook her head. Big deal! It was easy enough to see the problems; the hard part was to come up with the proper solutions. She knew the questions, all right, but not the answers. And when you don't have any answers, what is there left for you to teach?

That was the bottom line. She wasn't running away from noise, youthful protests, or social upheaval. She was running, and running scared, from the realization of her ignorance.

I don't want to be a teacher anymore, she told herself. *I want to be a learner.*

Abruptly she glanced up at a roadside sign on the right, noting its message. Cliffordsville 5.

Cliffordsville? Helen glanced at her watch quickly. Almost five o'clock—she should have been in Willoughby at least half an hour ago at the rate she was traveling. What was she doing five miles away from a town she hadn't even noticed on the roadmap? And why hadn't she had the sense to bring the map along with her?

She shook her head. All this worrying about kids who don't pay attention, and where does it get you? Lost, that's where. *If I really want to be a learner, I'd better start right now.*

Peering through the windshield against the slanting rays of midafternoon sun, Helen saw the outline of a small structure set back from the highway ahead and to her left.

As she neared it, she noted the lettered injunction of the sign mounted atop its flat roof—*Eat.*

Helen had private reservations about the wisdom of obeying such a command; her past experience with roadside cafes in lonely rural areas like this had not been all that pleasant. Nevertheless, she swerved to the left and entered the parking area before the weatherbeaten structure. There were only two other cars parked beside the entrance and she pulled up a short distance away. Then she moved across the gravel to the door.

As she opened it, a wave of warm air fanned her face, carrying with it the all-too-familiar reek of fast-food at its greasiest—a stomach-churning composite of French fries, cheeseburgers, and frozen pizzas which had been subjected to ordeal by fire.

Thank goodness she'd had a late breakfast before taking off! As it was she could make do with a cup of coffee; it was probably the only thing she could order here that wasn't fried. What she was really looking for, of course, was a roadmap.

Luck was with her. Seating herself on a counter stool, Helen confronted a multitalented, middle-aged man serving as the maitre d', chef, waiter, and busboy.

"What'll it be, miss?" he asked.

Helen told him what it would be, and as he busied himself at the coffee urn, she glanced past the side of the counter toward the two men seated at a corner table. Both appeared to be in their mid-thirties, too old for playing but happily resigned to their role as full-time spectators and sports commentators.

Glancing over their beer, they stared raptly at the screen of the television set mounted above the counter at the far end.

Jocks tossed a football across the full length of the nineteen-inch tube, then tumbled in a writhing heap at its base, their minuscule movements accompanied by the excited outcries of an unseen sportscaster.

More noise. Helen shrugged; no matter where you went, you couldn't get away from it.

Then, glancing down the counter in the opposite direction, she discovered another source of sound—the electronic emanation from a video-game enthusiastically operated by a small boy. At first glance he didn't appear to be any older than ten; if so, why wasn't he in school at this hour?

Helen frowned at the thought. *There you go again, still playing teacher! I thought we were through with all that, remember?*

Her frown vanished as the counterman set the coffee mug before her.

"Would that be all?" he asked. A pudgy thumb gestured toward the flyspecked glass container on the shelf directly behind him. "We got some nice pie, just came in today."

Helen shook her head. "You know what I want for dessert?" she said. "A nice, fresh roadmap."

The counterman's forehead furrowed into a frown and Helen nodded quickly. "Really—if you have one, I'd be very much obliged if you'd let me take a look at it."

The counterman's face relaxed in an amiable grin. "Sure thing. Got one lying around someplace—think I stuck it under the register."

Helen sipped her coffee as he moved away. In a moment he returned, brandishing the highway map triumphantly.

"Here you are."

He placed his find on the countertop before her. Helen lifted it gingerly. It was a map, no doubt about that, but one could hardly call it fresh. The outer surface was wrinkled and creased; and when she unfolded it, she was confronted with smudges of grease, which streaked and stained most of this area and the surrounding counties. Whoever fried this map hadn't done a very good job, Helen decided. But if she wanted to see what's cooking—

Helen studied the map for a moment, eyes narrowing as she squinted through the stains, then halted with a sigh of exasperation. "Okay, I give up. Where am I?"

The counterman jabbed a greasy forefinger at a smudge in the center of the map. "Here. You want the main highway, right?"

Helen nodded. "I guess so."

The counterman's finger moved a trifle to the left. "Looks like you missed the turnoff at Cliffordsville."

"Oh—I see."

Mine host smiled knowingly; he was in his glory now. "Look—about two miles back, you come to a gas station. That's Cayuga. You hang a left, go four blocks, and the highway cuts across. There you—"

He broke off as banging sounds rose from the far comer.

Helen turned and saw the source of the disturbance. The kid was pounding the side of the video-game, and each blow caused a blip of interference on the TV picture, much to the annoyance of the two customers watching the game.

Raising his voice over the noise of repeated banging, the counterman called out, "Hey, kid, easy on the machinery!"

The blows ceased abruptly as the boy glanced up. "It doesn't work right," he said.

The counterman shrugged. "Look, kid, I don't build the games, I just keep the quarters. Put in another one. Maybe it'll work better."

He turned back to Helen and his finger moved down to the map again. "See, just outside Cayuga, the highway splits off—"

A sudden series of thumps echoed through the confines of the cafe and he broke off, frowning.

One of the men at the table called loudly. “Hey, Walter, the kid’s screwing up the TV!”

The counterman shrugged. “It’s his quarter. The TV’s free.”

The other customer shared his companion’s scowl. “Cut out that noise! I got twenty bucks riding on this game!”

The counterman nodded toward the youngster standing in front of the video-game. “You heard the man,” he said. “Let’s cool it, huh?”

The boy didn’t reply. Inserting another quarter, he resumed his play, this time without a pounding accompaniment.

Now the only counterpoint to the counterman’s conversation came from the continuing babble of the TV sportscaster.

As Helen watched, her informant began to fold the map as carefully as if the grease-spattered chart contained clues to the location of buried treasure. “You say you’re headed for Willoughby?”

“That’s right.” Helen nodded.

“Nice town. You got a job set up there, or what?”

“Not really. I thought I’d just take a look around.” The counterman placed the folded map in his right-hand trouser pocket with tender loving care. “Where’re you from?” he asked.

“Homewood. That’s downstate.”

“I know the place.” He nodded. “Nice town.”

Helen smiled. “If you say so.”

Over the continuing chatter of commentary issuing from the television came the sound of a phone ringing from the galley behind the counter. The proprietor turned and headed for it, leaving Helen to finish her coffee in peace.

But not for long.

From the television set the commentator’s voice rose in crescendo, heralding a climactic crisis in the final moments of the last quarter. Then it faded abruptly at the sound of repeated bangings. Helen swung around on her stool to watch the youngster belaboring the side of the video-game machine with the flat of his hands.

Overhead, the TV picture scrambled completely. One of the men at the table groaned and his companion turned to glare at the instigator of the interruption.

“Cut out that pounding!” he shouted. “You hear me?”

Ignoring him, the boy concentrated on the video-screen before him, then smacked the side of the machine again.

Helen stared uneasily, fumbling in her purse for change. All she wanted now was to get out of here before trouble started.

But it had already begun.

One of the men at the table pushed back his chair and rose quickly. It wasn’t until he stood up that Helen realized how big he was; over six feet tall, burly and broad-shouldered.

His companion looked up, gesturing. “Hey, Charlie, take it easy—”

Charlie wasn’t listening. He headed toward the video-game in a cold rage, grabbing the boy by the shoulder and shoving him roughly to one side. Then he stooped and ripped the plug of the machine from the wall. Caught off balance, the youngster stumbled and fell against the baseboard.

Almost before she realized it, Helen was on her feet. “Stop that!” she cried.

Suddenly there was silence, all eyes focussing on Helen as she moved to the far wall and helped the child to his feet.

As she did so, their eyes met briefly. To her surprise, Helen saw that the boy was smiling. Turning abruptly, he ran to the door, yanked it open, and raced out.

Embarrassed, the big man lowered his gaze, then moved away to resume his seat at the table.

Helen glanced toward the counter; behind it, the counterman stood staring, and his worried expression told her he’d returned in time to witness the altercation.

“Sorry, lady,” he murmured. “These guys—they take their sports real serious.”

Helen nodded. “Nice town.”

Moving to the door she made her exit, letting it slam behind her.

Only then did she relax. *Peace.*

Crossing to her car, she shook her head in rueful self-reproval. Why had she allowed herself to lose her temper that way? What happened back there was really none of her business; but on the other hand, she had no choice. She just couldn't stand to see a child mistreated that way. Thank goodness he hadn't been hurt.

Reaching the car, Helen slid her key into the door lock, glancing around as she did so. The parking area was deserted; the boy had disappeared.

Probably ran all the way home, Helen decided. And yet he hadn't seemed frightened.

Helen remembered the way he'd smiled when she'd helped him to his feet. There was something odd about that smile; was she imagining things, or had it conveyed a hint of secret understanding? Funny kid.

Funny Helen. Sliding into the seat before the steering wheel, she shook her head, remembering her resolution. Time to forget about what had happened, time to put the show on the road and make it over to Willoughby before dark.

Closing the door, she glanced through the side window, noting with surprise that twilight had already descended. To emphasize its coming, a neon beer-sign blinked on above the cafe entrance.

Helen turned the key in the ignition and the motor started. As her foot found the gas pedal, she released her parking brake, put the car in reverse, and started to back out before turning toward the driveway exit.

Suddenly she glanced up at the rearview mirror just in time to see a blur of movement behind her. Through the twilight she caught a glimpse of the boy on a bicycle speeding directly across the lot behind her.

Quickly she floored the brake, but as the car screeched to a halt there was a sudden, sickening thud.

"Oh no!" she cried.

Wrenching the door open, Helen lunged out and headed around the side of the car at a dead run. Then she halted behind it, staring down in shock.

The boy was sprawled on the pavement beside his bike, eyes closed, breathing hard. Then, as she bent over him, his eyes opened.

“Are you all right?” Helen gasped.

The child nodded. “Yeah—I guess so—”

Helen knelt beside him. “Can you move your arms and legs?”

“Uh huh.”

As Helen watched anxiously, the youngster started to sit up.

“Easy there,” she said. “Tell me where it hurts.” The boy rubbed his left shoulder. “Just here. I must’ve hit it when I fell off.” He smiled, shaking his head. “Don’t worry, it’s not broke or anything.” He started to get up and Helen put her hand on his arm, slowing his movement. “Not too fast,” she said. “See if you can put your weight on your feet.”

“Sure—you see?” The boy stood erect, rubbing his shoulder. “It doesn’t hurt anymore, honest.” Now, for the first time, Helen turned her attention to the bike. Its wheels lay bent and twisted beneath the rear tires of the car. The boy followed her stare, his smile of reassurance fading.

“Oh, I’m so sorry!” Helen turned to the youngster, speaking quickly. “Look, maybe you can get it fixed. I’ll pay for it—”

“That’s okay.” The youngster’s smile returned for a moment, then disappeared once more as he peered uncertainly around the dusk-dimmed parking area. “Do you think maybe you could give me a lift home? Before it gets dark?”

“Of course.” Helen nodded, then glanced at her car trunk frowning. “I’m afraid there’s no room for your bike, though. I’m moving and the backseat is loaded. The rest of my things are in the trunk.”

“I can get it tomorrow.” The boy bent down, tugging the bike free from beneath the tire, then dragged it across the lot and leaned it up against the wall of the cafe.

“You’re sure it’ll be safe there?” Helen said. “Yeah. No sweat.” The youngster returned, moving around the side of the car to the passenger door. He waited while Helen slid into the driver’s seat and leaned over to unlock the door, then pushed it open so that he could enter.

As he settled down beside her, closing the door, she released the brake and started up the motor again. The car moved forward to the edge of the road. There it halted as Helen glanced at her passenger.

“Which way?” she asked.

“Make a left.” The youngster nodded up at her. “The same way you’re going.”

Helen blinked. “How do you know which way I’m going?”

“I heard you talking back there.”

“Did you now? You’ve got good ears.”

The car picked up speed, moving down the road in the gathering twilight. There was no traffic and as Helen switched on her headlights, their glow seemed to emphasize the darkness of the lonely countryside ahead.

She peered through the windshield, waiting to catch a glimpse of the filling station that the counterman had mentioned, but now she felt the boy’s hand nudge her arm.

“Turn here,” he said, indicating a side road branching off through the trees at their right.

Helen slowed the car, glancing dubiously at the narrow lane revealed in the headlights’ beam.

The boy sensed her indecision. “Don’t worry,” he said. “It’s not far now.”

Helen turned off into the opening between the trees, then turned the headlights up to bright as she steered a cautious course along the rutted roadway.

Beside her the boy glanced up again. “Are you moving to Willoughby?” he asked.

Helen glanced at him, amused. “You heard me say that, too, I guess.”

He nodded. “How come you left Homewood?” Helen hesitated, as for a moment her amusement faded. The little devil—he really *had* been listening! But that didn’t give the kid the right to pry into her business.

Then again, what difference did it make? Might as well answer—if she could. Why had she left Homewood? A good question.

She shrugged, searching for the right words. “I don’t know—I guess I was looking for something and didn’t find it there.”

The boy nodded. “What about your folks?”

“They’re both gone.”

“You mean they’re dead?”

Helen nodded. “I’m afraid so.”

“Oh.” There was a note of concern in the small voice now. “Don’t you have *anybody?”*

“Not anymore. I’m all alone.”

Beside her the boy sat silent for a moment. Then, suddenly, he held out his hand, smiling.

“My name is Anthony,” he said.

Helen released her right hand from the steering wheel and gripped the small palm in her own. “Helen,” she said.

Anthony turned gravely. “I’m very glad to meet you, Helen.”

Now Helen turned her attention to the roadway once again. The car bumped along the narrow lane between the black border of towering trees.

“You really live quite aways out here, don’t you?” Helen glanced down. “Your parents must be getting worried about you.”

“Not really.”

“No?”

Anthony shook his head. “They don’t care when I come home. I could come home at *midnight* and they wouldn’t care.”

Helen smiled at him indulgently. “Midnight, Anthony?”

“Yes.” The boy paused for a moment, then continued. “It’s my *birthday* today and they don’t even care about *that!”*

Helen stared at him, startled. “You’re kidding! Really?”

He nodded forlornly and her heart went out to him. “What a crummy birthday!”

“I’m okay.” Anthony glanced up with a cheerful grin. “I made a friend.”

Helen brightened. “Me too,” she said.

Quite suddenly, the car emerged from the woods.

Peering through the windshield, Helen was surprised to see that the road ahead ran in a straight line between fields covered by parched grass. This was obviously farmland, but it lay fallow and unplanted, weeds its only crop. Under the dark and moonless sky, the horizon receded into deeper shadows without any evidence of lighted dwellings. It looked like the middle of nowhere.

Then, quite abruptly, the car's headlights focused on a white two-story house looming up directly ahead at the far end of the road.

As they approached, Helen noted that the architecture was Victorian, like something out of an old picture-book, rising from a complementary setting of green lawn surrounded by a white picket fence.

It seemed as out of place here as if it had been dropped from the sky.

Helen parked before the gateway, noting as she did so that there were lights faintly visible behind the closed shutters.

"Here we are," said Anthony.

They got out of the car and Helen moved around the side to join the boy as he started forward and opened the fence gate.

Together they moved up the walk bisecting the neat, well-trimmed lawn.

"What a lovely house!" Helen murmured.

Anthony seemed pleased by her reaction. "You like it?"

Helen nodded. "It's so peaceful. Way out here by itself."

Nearing the front door, Helen was surprised to see three cars standing in the shadows before the left-hand side of the structure. She couldn't make out details too clearly, but in the dim light she got a curious impression that they were coated with a fine layer of dust.

Anthony followed her gaze and she nodded toward him. "Three-car family, right?"

He smiled but made no reply. Stepping forward, he opened the front door. Chimes jangled faintly against a tinny background of music issuing from somewhere within.

Anthony gestured toward the open doorway. "C'mon in," he said.

Helen moved across the threshold and the boy followed her, closing the door behind him. They stood in a hallway lighted by old-fashioned wall lamps. A staircase rose directly ahead, leading to the floor above.

Now that the front door had closed, the music's fast jerky tempo was louder; it seemed to be coming from the doorway of the room down the hall at their left.

Anthony took Helen's hand and started toward it, then halted at the entrance just long enough for Helen to get a fleeting glimpse of the room beyond.

It was here that she discovered the source of the music: its ricky-ticky rhythm emanated from the television set against the far wall as cartoon figures leaped and bounded across the flickering screen.

Both the images on the tube and the television itself seemed oddly incongruous in this setting. The darkened parlor looked almost like a reproduction of a Currier and Ives print; the red plush carpet was heavy, the overstuffed furniture massive, the fireplace against the right wall surmounted by a huge marble mantel.

Now, rising from behind high-backed chairs placed directly before the television screen, an elderly man and a young girl turned toward the doorway with startled stares. For a moment Helen had the curious impression that both of them were less than pleased at this sudden invasion, but almost instantly their faces broke into bright, toothy smiles as they hurried forward, nodding at the boy beside her.

"Hi, Anthony!" They spoke simultaneously, then fell silent, turning their attention to Helen.

Again she sensed a momentary reaction of uneasiness in their glances, but it was quickly dispelled as their smiles returned.

Beside her, the small, dark-haired boy nodded, his brown eyes fixed upon their faces. "This is Helen," he said.

The elderly man's features creased into a genial grin. "Helen! Delighted to meet you! Any friend of Anthony's—"

"Hello there!" The girl's voice rose over his as she nodded at their visitor.

"This is Uncle Walt and my sister, Ethel," Anthony said.

Helen smiled. "How do you do?"

In the moment that followed, she had an opportunity to sort out her impressions, noting that Uncle Walt must be in his early sixties. Although he wore a checkered sport shirt and casual blue jeans, his trendy attire could not conceal the stooped shoulders and the thinness of his limbs. In contrast, Ethel was quite plump; she appeared to be about sixteen, and the bulging body beneath her blouse and skirt betokened the results of overindulgence in junk food. Her face, framed by long strands of lusterless blond hair, wore a bovine look.

Helen's quick appraisal was interrupted by the sound of voices from the hallway behind.

"Did I hear Anthony come in?"

The high-pitched query was met by a booming, deeper-toned response. "Yes, indeedy! There he is!"

Helen turned, stepping aside as another couple entered the room. Both were in their forties; the woman wearing a blouse and slacks, her companion's garments similar to those of Uncle Walt.

Anthony nodded up at them. "This is my mother and father."

Helen concealed her surprise with a hasty smile; somehow they seemed a trifle too old to have a son of Anthony's age. "Pleased to meet you," she said.

Anthony gestured toward her. "This is Helen."

His mother beamed. "Helen! Delighted!"

The man grinned, reaching out to take her hand and pump it in warm welcome. "Pleased to meet you, young lady!"

"She gave me a ride home," Anthony announced.

The response was overwhelming, rising from all sides.

"Did she now?"

"How nice!"

"Wonderful!"

"Very sweet of her to go to all that trouble!"

Helen glanced up awkwardly at the circle of jolly faces surrounding her.

"I'm afraid we had a little accident," she murmured.

"Accident?" Anthony's mother was still smiling, but her voice held a hint of uncertainty.

Now they were all staring at Helen, and she sensed a curious concern behind their genial smiles. Rendered self-conscious by their scrutiny, she hurried on, her voice faltering. "I—I knocked Anthony down while he was riding his bicycle."

"Oh?" Anthony's mother continued to smile, but her voice again betrayed her.

Ethel's agitation was even more evident. "Knocked him *down?"*

Her father glanced at her, then spoke quickly. "Well! It doesn't look like any harm was done!"

"No, *sir!"* Uncle Walt nodded heartily. "Anthony looks fine!"

"I hope so," Helen murmured.

Father nodded at the boy, his eyes twinkling. "Oh yes! Anthony looks fine to me!"

The boy turned toward his mother. "Can Helen stay for supper?"

"Oh, no!" Helen shook her head quickly. "I wouldn't dream of imposing —"

"Imposing?" Anthony's mother was speaking again. "Not at all—I think it's a wonderful idea!"

"Marvelous!" Her husband chuckled his approval. "Of course she can!"

Helen smiled politely. For a moment she was still tempted to refuse, but the anxious expectancy in Anthony's eyes won her over; she didn't have the heart to turn him down.

"Thank you," she said.

"Good!" His father looked relieved. "Then, it's all settled."

Anthony looked up at his mother. "Can we eat right now?"

"Why, yes—of course."

Helen turned to her. “If you don’t mind, I’d like to wash up first.”

Anthony said, “Sure,” and nodded eagerly toward the doorway. “I’ll show you where.”

“Thank you.” Helen turned and followed him from the room.

His mother’s voice sped them on their way. “See you in a little while!”

Anthony led Helen down the hall, then started up the stairs. “This way, Helen.”

From below, the squawk and squeak of meaningless musical merriment echoed forth. With a start Helen realized that the televised cartoons were continuing; they’d been running constantly while she’d been in the parlor. But now, as she and Anthony reached the upper landing, the sounds gave way to silence.

The boy started along the hall to the right. Helen moved up beside him. “I like your folks, Anthony,” she said.

“Do you?” His voice was flat, noncommittal.

“Of course.” Helen smiled down into his sober face. “And how could you possibly say they don’t care about you? Come on!”

Anthony glanced up, frowning. “They *don’t!”* Helen shrugged. “Well, *my* family was never this happy to see me in my whole life!”

“They aren’t like that, Helen. Not really.” Reaching the end of the hallway, he turned right and into another corridor. Somewhat to her surprise, Helen noted the absence of any doorway here; come to think of it, she hadn’t seen any in the other passageway.

She frowned, puzzled. “Anthony—where are we going?”

A low rumbling, something like an animal growl, sounded from behind the wall at their left and Helen halted quickly.

So did the sound.

She glanced around, confused. “What in the world was that?”

“What?” Anthony seemed undisturbed.

“Didn’t you hear the noise?”

Anthony cocked his head, listening for a moment. “I don’t hear anything.” He reached out and took her hand. “Come on.”

As they started forward, Helen noticed an opening at her right; there *were* rooms up here after all. Passing the open doorway, Helen glanced inside.

The bedroom beyond was dark, save for the illumination from the tube of a TV console in one comer. Sitting in a wheelchair, facing away from the door, Helen caught a fleeting glimpse of a teenage girl. Motionless, oblivious of their presence, she stared intently at the cartoon on the screen. Now, as barks and growls arose, Helen realized the origin of the sound that had startled her.

Then Anthony's hand tugged her forward past the doorway. "That's Sarah," he said. "She's my other sister."

"I noticed she's in a wheelchair," Helen said.

"Yeah." Anthony nodded shortly. "She was in an accident." Then he gestured to indicate a door at the end of the hall ahead. "Here's the bathroom."

Almost five minutes elapsed before Helen finished what she judged to be the absolute minimum of necessary repairs to her makeup and coiffure. Anthony was awaiting her outside the bathroom door. As they passed along the hall, she noticed that the door to his sister's room was closed now; he must have visited the girl during the time she was fixing her face.

Helen was about to inquire concerning the nature of Sarah's accident but Anthony, gripping her hand firmly, seemed anxious to get downstairs again as quickly as possible.

To her surprise the family was still gathered in the parlor, grouped around the television set as it spewed forth yet another in a series of seemingly endless cartoons.

A giant cat wearing an old-fashioned burglar's mask tiptoed stealthily across a rooftop and crawled into a chimney to invade the dwelling below. Inside the house two mice, wearing the clothing of human youngsters, were busily kindling a gigantic blaze in the fireplace. The cat came sailing down the chimney shaft, landing butt-first in the fire. A burst of mocking music indicated just how hilarious it was to see an animal in danger of incineration; a loud *yeow!* heightened the mirthful aspect of the scene as the cat shot up the chimney shaft on the rebound. To cap the jest, he emerged from the chimney with such speed that there was no way of checking his momentum. Soaring high above the rooftop to the screeching accompaniment of off-key violins, he bounced against an overhead power line to the sound of the inevitable *boing!* Jagged streaks of electricity shooting out from his furry form, he burst into flame, then plummeted to earth, landing on a concrete driveway with an obligatory thump, followed by the cracking of the stone and, presumably, his skull.

Helen diverted her attention from the screen to survey its audience. Despite the high comedy afforded by the cat burglar's sufferings, Anthony's family didn't seem amused. In the dim light from the picture tube, their faces loomed drawn and haggard.

But it was only a trick of the light. As Anthony entered the room, they turned toward him instantly, wearing smiles of welcome.

"We're ready to eat now," he announced.

Over the sound of the cartoon, a chorus of enthusiastic agreement arose.

"Good!"

"Wonderful!"

"Great!"

"You bet!"

Listening to the varying voices, Helen was reminded of a childhood fairy tale. "The Three Bears," that was it; Papa and Mama and Baby Bear, inquiring "Who's been sleeping in my bed?"

Stupid, of course; there were four here and they weren't bears, nor had she been sleeping in any of their beds.

Maybe it was the cartoons that made her think of fairy tales. In any case, her attention was diverted now as the family gathered around Anthony like a squad of soldiers awaiting the command of their leader.

They do love him! she told herself. Helen had never seen such devotion, such anxiety to please a youngster; even his sister deferred. Obviously there was no sibling rivalry here. But catering to him could lead to unpleasant consequences; Anthony might easily end up a spoiled brat.

Helen hoped she was wrong. Glancing down at the child, she felt the stirrings of emotional response, an unaccountable desire to protect him. But from what? He seemed totally at ease, and as he turned to her, the sober little face broke into a warm smile in which all her apprehension melted.

“Let’s eat here,” he said. “Then we won’t have to miss the cartoons.”

Uncle Walt nodded. “Hey! That’s a great idea! Why didn’t we think of that ourselves?”

“Sounds good to me.” Father nodded. “I’ll go get us the card table. We can set it up right over here.”

“Better hurry,” Uncle Walt chuckled. “I bet Anthony’s mighty hungry!”

He left the room and it seemed scarcely moments before he returned, lugging the table.

Anthony’s mother beamed at Helen. “We’re very happy you can eat with us. Anthony’s so thoughtful that way.”

As she spoke, Helen realized that the sound-track of the cartoon had faded. Now Anthony’s voice was clearly audible.

“Would you like to sit next to me, Helen?”

She turned, noting with surprise that the boy was seated on a small sofa directly facing the TV screen. Funny she hadn’t noticed the sofa before. Now, meeting Anthony’s expectant gaze, she hesitated. “Well, maybe your mother will want to sit there . . .”

“No—no, you go ahead.” Anthony’s mother nodded. “I have to get supper.”

His father had finished unfolding the legs of the card table and now he set it up at one side, arranging the chairs around it. “This will be fine,” he said. “The rest of us can eat here—you just sit right next to Anthony!”

Helen settled down beside the boy. He smiled at her quickly, then turned his attention to the screen before him.

Poised on the edge of a precipice, a rabbit pushed a huge boulder over the edge and watched with a grin as it landed directly on the head of an unsuspecting bear below. A loud crash indicated that the volume on the sound-track had risen again. Helen frowned, puzzled; maybe something was wrong with the controls. Then she glanced up as Anthony's mother appeared beside him, bending forward as she spoke.

"Darling—"

He glanced up, annoyed by this distraction, to meet her nervous smile.

"I don't mean to interrupt you, dear, but—"

"But what?"

The nervous smile wavered before his irritated gaze. "It's just, well—do you happen to remember where supper is?"

Helen stared at her blankly. What kind of a question was *that?* But Anthony was frowning.

"You know where it is."

His mother's smile had disappeared completely now. "I *do?"*

Anthony nodded. "It's in the *oven*, isn't it, Mother?"

"Oh! Of course!" Mother's smile returned, accompanied by a laugh that conveyed both relief and embarrassment. "How silly of me!"

Behind her, Anthony's father chuckled.

So did Uncle Walt.

"She never knows." He gave Helen a wink, shaking his head.

Mother moved toward the doorway and Anthony's father fell into step beside her. "I'll help you get things ready," he told her.

Sister Ethel started after them. "Me too! I can't wait to see what we have tonight!"

Helen watched them exit, then turned to Anthony, her glance questioning. He shrugged, then smiled hesitantly.

"It's a game," he said.

Conscious of the skepticism in her stare, he swallowed hard, then continued. "It's all pretend! She knows where supper is. She just wants to see if lean guess."

Uncle Walt moved beside him, nodding cheerily. “That’s right, just a little game!”

Helen framed another question, but before she could speak, her attention was distracted by a sudden burst of sound from the television.

On-screen a worried wolf seated in the open cockpit of a small plane watched in panic as the wings fell off and the propeller dropped away. The plane spun into a nose dive, spiraling through the clouds and crashed in flames. Now the wolf reeled forth from an inferno of smoke, his frazzled fur singed and smoking.

Beside her, Anthony’s laugh rose in approval. “This is a good cartoon.”

“Uh-huh.” Helen forced a smile. “But aren’t there some other programs you like to watch, too?”

Anthony shook his head. “Cartoons are the best.” He pointed at the screen, where the wolf’s smoking figure suddenly melted into the form of a ghostly angel, a halo encircling its head and a harp appearing between its paws. Now, spreading celestial wings, it floated away.

“You see?” Anthony nodded happily. “Anything can happen in cartoons.”

He turned to face Helen again. “That’s why I like them. Don’t you?” The brown eyes were serious now, as he gazed up expectantly. Helen sensed that somehow he attached great importance to her answer.

She shifted in her seat, oddly disconcerted by his stare. “Well . . . I guess everybody likes cartoons.”

“Not everybody.” Anthony darted a disapproving glance at his uncle.

Uncle Walt chuckled hastily. “Oh, sure we do! We *all* like cartoons! Anything can happen in ’em, just like Anthony says. Wouldn’t want to watch anything else, no-siree!”

Now footsteps sounded from the hallway, and a voice rose gaily. “Here we come!”

Helen turned, gazing over the back of the sofa as Anthony’s parents appeared followed by Ethel, each of them carrying two cardboard plates.

“Good stuff here for everybody!” Father grinned happily as he set his burden down on the card table. Ethel followed suit, then lugged a small end table across the room and set it down before the sofa where Anthony's mother stood waiting.

"There you are, darling." Mother put down one plate before him, then placed the other before his guest.

"Thank you," Helen murmured.

As his mother moved away to join the others seated around the card table, Anthony turned his attention to the food.

Helen glanced down at her plate, staring dubiously at its contents.

What kind of a meal was this? A thin hamburger and a jelly donut nestled against a candy bar and a bag of potato chips. Was this their idea of good food? Apparently so, for from the card table across the room, voices rose in ecstatic approval.

"Mmm! Doesn't this look *yummy?"*

"Boy, that's good!"

"Isn't this delicious!"

"You *bet!"*

Anthony cast a sidelong glance at Helen. "Okay?"

Helen nodded politely. She was conscious of guarded stares from the other table as she lifted the hamburger bun. To her surprise there was peanut butter smeared on top of the meat patty.

The boy beamed at her. "I always like peanut butter on hamburgers. It's good that way."

She managed a smile as she put the top back on the bun and took a tentative nibble. The silent tension at the other table was broken now by the sounds of enjoyment; the lip-smacking noises and enthusiastic murmurs with which food is consumed in television commercials.

As she listened, vagrant thoughts intruded. There had been no commercials interrupting the TV cartoons here tonight. That was strange. But even stranger was the spectacle of Anthony's family devouring their odd meal as though it were a gourmet dinner.

Helen forced herself to take another tiny bite. Yes, it was all very strange; now another thought occurred. She glanced at Anthony and framed a question.

“Isn’t your sister Sarah going to eat with us?” Anthony seemed taken aback. “Uh, no. Sarah doesn’t eat.”

Mirthful assent rose from the foursome around the card table.

“That’s right!”

“Sarah doesn’t eat, no way!”

“That’s *funny,* Anthony!”

“Every time he says that, I get such a kick!” Anthony frowned. Instantly they fell silent. A moment later the murmurs of party enjoyment resumed, but Helen was conscious of their wariness; it, too, raised a question, and she was tired of questions. What she needed were a few straight answers.

She turned to the boy. “Do you always eat like this?”

Anthony did not reply and Helen was acutely conscious of the sudden silence from the other table. They were all staring at her now.

Mother was the first to speak, her thin smile belied by the apprehension in her voice. “Anthony can have anything he wants.”

Father nodded quickly. “Anything at all!”

Uncle Walt forced an unconvincing chuckle. “You *bet* he can!”

Helen ignored them; she was waiting for the boy to speak.

He nodded at her apologetically. “Don’t you think it’s good?”

Helen hesitated. Politeness dictated an approving response, but she was sick of politeness, sick of phony approval, sick of this strange overprotective atmosphere and the unanswered questions it posed. Couldn’t the family understand what they were doing to the child by indulging him this way? Didn’t they realize the consequences of catering to his whims? Maybe it was none of her business, perhaps she was reverting to her role as a schoolteacher, but it was time somebody spoke up.

She nodded quickly. “I suppose it’s all right once in a while,” she told him, “but you’re young, you need to get proper nutrition.” She fixed the family with a stare of pedagogical disapproval. “You can’t eat like this *all* the time!”

Flustered, Anthony shook his head. “I never thought of that. But you’re right, Helen. It’s *not* good all the time—”

Again the echoing chorus rose from the other table.

“Right! Anthony’s a growing boy!”

“Of course he is! He needs his nutrition.”

“You’re *so* right, Anthony!”

Anthony turned, silencing them with an accusing stare. “You’d *never* tell me that,” he cried.

Their smiles were sickly, but no one spoke. It remained for Helen to break the mood.

“Oh well,” she murmured. “I really shouldn’t be criticizing, should I?” She smiled at the youngster. “After all, it *is* your birthday supper.”

Again, the terrible silence. And then Ethel’s voice, rising almost despairingly. *“Another* birthday?”

Uncle Walt’s grin was gone. “With *presents?”* Anthony shook his head angrily. “No—it’s not my birthday! I never told you that—”

As he gestured toward them, the group around the table recoiled, catching their breaths.

Shrinking back, Ethel’s elbow knocked against the side of her plate, spilling it to the floor.

Anthony glowered at her. “Stop that!” he cried. “I’m not doing anything.” Then he caught himself, turning to Helen and forcing his smile. “They’re being silly!”

Helen faced him, speaking softly. “Anthony, you did tell me it was your birthday.”

Mother’s voice rose in a dreadful parody of cheer. “Of course it is!”

“Yes!” Ethel chimed in immediately.

So did Uncle Walt. “Sure! We all know it’s Anthony’s birthday, don’t we?”

His valiant attempt at a chuckle emerged, but it sounded more like a frightened cackle of sheer panic, halting abruptly as Anthony shouted him down.

"It's *not!* I told you it's not my birthday, do you hear?"

Helen stared in shock at the family's frightened faces. What was wrong with them, what had she started here? She didn't know the answer, but whatever it might be, it didn't matter to her now. Suddenly all she wanted was out of here.

She started to rise from the sofa. "I think I'd better go, Anthony."

Anthony gazed up at her hastily, eyes imploring. "No!".

The passion in his voice made Helen stiffen.

Now the boy rose, his eyes beseeching. "Please—it's okay, everything's okay."

He glanced at the television screen, where a cartoon rabbit was climbing out of a magician's hat. "You gotta stay," he said. "Uncle Walt's gonna do a trick for us."

"I'm sorry, Anthony." Helen shook her head. "I really must leave now."

"But Uncle Walt's gonna do a trick—just for *you!* Please—sit down—"

"You bet!" Uncle Walt nodded but Helen ignored him and started to turn away.

Anthony put his hand on her arm. "It only takes a minute. You'll see—" As she halted, the boy called out quickly, "Do the hat trick, Uncle Walt! The hat trick!"

"You bet!" Uncle Walt rose, then stared blankly around the room. His booming voice faltered. "Where—where's the hat?"

"Over *there."* Anthony released his grip on Helen's arm, gesturing impulsively. "On the TV set."

Automatically Helen's gaze followed his pointing finger. Resting on the TV set was a top hat.

Helen stared in surprise, but as she did so she was conscious of another and more unsettling emotion rising within her; something akin to panic.

Anthony smiled up at her reassuringly. "You'll like this."

Helen took a deep breath. "Anthony—"

The boy ignored her. "Go ahead, Uncle Walt," he called.

"Yes, sir!"

As Helen watched, Uncle Walt moved slowly across the room and reached out to pick up the top hat. He grasped it hesitantly, the gesture of a man forcing himself to pick up a live coal from the fire.

But Anthony was nodding happily. “You’ll like this, Helen. It’s good.” Before she could move again, he grabbed her hand squeezing it tightly, then turned to call. *“Do* it, Uncle Walt. Do it now!”

The intensity in his voice was matched by that of his grip. Helen stood motionless, watching as he clutched her hand.

Now everyone was watching as Uncle Walt turned, hat in hand. His attempt at a smile was horrible to see, but Anthony’s eyes were fixed upon him in inexorable command.

Slowly, Uncle Walt reached down into the hat. A moment later his hand emerged again, holding up a white rabbit.

Helen could sense his suppressed shudder of relief as he faced the family with a ghastly grin. “Ta-da!” he muttered shakily.

Their response of mingled handclaps and laughter was no more convincing than Uncle Walt’s grin, but Anthony gazed up at Helen now. “Isn’t this fun? We do it a lot. You’d like it here, Helen, honest you would.”

Helen stared at him, her panic mounting and from behind her rose an insane babble of agreement from the rest of the family.

“You’d *love* it here! You would!”

Helen stared at them in sudden dread, then jerked her hand free. She had to get out, had to—

Anthony, sensing her intention, shouted to Uncle Walt. “Do it again! Do it *right!”*

Before Helen could turn away, Uncle Walt’s hand descended into the hat, then drew back, gasping. Eyes frantic with fear, he watched as an enormous figure rose to tower above the television set.

It was a rabbit—but not the sort that a professional stage magician could conjure up. Only a sorcerer could summon such a thing. This was a multicolored monstrosity, a huge misshapen creature with the paws and claws of a tiger. Great yellow eyes bulged above a snouted muzzle, which gaped wide now, revealing a long snakelike tongue lolling forth from between the curved fangs of a sabretooth. Squatting atop the television set, the thing extended its talons.

Helen cried out, raising her hand as a shield against the sight.

As she did so, Anthony gestured swiftly. “Don’t be scared!” he shouted.

He gestured again, this time in the direction of the television set. Helen lowered her arm just in time to see the entity spiral down and vanish into the hat once more. An instant later, the hat itself had disappeared.

Blindly, unmindful of the family’s reaction, intent only on frantic flight, Helen turned and grabbed her purse from the end table near the doorway. To her dismay its clasp opened and the bag slipped from her trembling fingers, its contents spilling across the floor.

She knelt quickly, trying to capture the items scattering across the carpet.

Anthony crouched beside her, shaking his head in anguish. “I didn’t *want* to do that! Honest I didn’t—I just got mad, and sometimes I can’t help what happens!”

Helen made no reply, but the look on her face was answer enough. Now the boy began to assist her, picking up objects and stuffing them back into her purse. And all the while his soft, intense voice sounded through the silence.

“Please don’t go, Helen! I can make it real nice here. I can make the food the way you said it should be. I can even change the *house* if you want! Just say it, and I can make anything you like, but don’t—”

Suddenly he broke off, looking closely at a scrap of paper he had picked up from the floor. Now the pleading face was transformed into a mask of rage.

Helen stared at him, startled. As Anthony scrambled to his feet, the family cowered back against the wall. Still glaring, the boy turned to Helen and held out the scrap of paper.

“You see?” he said. “I told you how they were!” Helen glanced down at the crumpled fragment, which appeared to be tom from the upper margin of a newspaper. Across its length read the words of the hastily scrawled pencil message:

Help us! Anthony is a Monster!

She glanced up as he nodded. “They *hate* me! They want to send me away to someplace bad, just like my *real* mother and father did!”

Voices faltered forth from the far end of the room. “That’s not me, Anthony—”

“Of course not—”

“You know how we—”

The three responses sounded simultaneously and Anthony cut them off with a single wave. He turned to Helen, speaking rapidly. “They’re afraid of me. Everybody is. That’s why they act this way. And I do *everything* for them! They can watch TV all day.

No one has to do a thing. Not a thing! I’m real good all the time—”

Uncle Walt’s voice sounded in hasty agreement. “That’s right—Anthony’s a *good* boy. We love him!”

The youngster reached out, plucking the piece of paper from between Helen’s trembling fingers. Rising, he moved toward the four figures cowering against the far wall, their eyes terrified by the threat in his.

“Then I wonder who wrote this note.” Now the threat entered his voice. “I wonder who called me a monster?”

Instantly the babble began. *“He* did it!”

“Not me!”

“You know *I* didn’t do it! It was Ethel!”

“Yes—Ethel. *She’s* the one!”

Mother, Father, and Uncle Walt were all pointing now, pointing at the stricken girl. She shook her head, eyes widening, mouth twitching in terror.

Helen rose. She didn’t know what Anthony intended; only that somehow, whatever it was, he had to be stopped.

Anthony was nodding at the girl. “Oh? I didn’t know that. What a big surprise! Ethel, huh?”

Ethel shook her head frantically. Her voice was shaking, too. "All right! Go ahead and do it—*do* it—"

The boy smiled at her now and his whisper was almost gentle. "Do what, Ethel?"

Somehow this mockery held even more menace than his rage. With a convulsive effort, Ethel tore her gaze free from his accusing stare and gestured at Helen, her words tumbling out in a haste born of hysteria.

"Now do you realize you'll never get away?" she shouted. "You think it was an accident you came here? He *made* it happen! He brought you here just like he brought us here and kept us! Just the way he'll keep you!" She nodded, but her voice raced on.

"Or maybe he'll get mad at you someday like he did with his *real* sister and cripple you and take away your mouth so you can't yell at him, or maybe do what he did to his *real* mother and father—"

For an instant Anthony closed his eyes, wincing in pain. Then he opened them once more, staring at the girl. Softly, very softly, he spoke:

"Time for you to go now, Ethel."

Helen took a step forward. "Anthony, don't—"

But Anthony ignored her. He faced Ethel, smiling his secret smile.

"It's a special surprise. I just made it up."

Ethel moaned, shaking her head as Anthony's voice rose. "I'm wishing you to *Cartoonland!"*

Ethel vanished.

Not in a puff of smoke. Not in a blind flash. She simply—disappeared.

Helen stood frozen. Ice water trickled in her veins, her limbs were numb with cold, but it was not physical chill that set her trembling. This wasn't the first time she had seen someone disappear before her very eyes; she'd watched magic acts on the stage, where the conjurer waved his wand and a shapely assistant had seemingly vanished from behind a black cloth or the confines of a closed cabinet. And in fantasy films a wizard might mutter an incantation that caused another character to fade from the screen. But this prosaically furnished parlor was not a stage set and the small boy standing before her wasn't a magician. He hadn't waved a wand or uttered a spell and Ethel had not been obliterated by means of a movie's special effects.

This was reality. The parlor was real. The people in it, including Ethel, actually existed.

Or *had* existed. Because now Ethel was gone. A small boy uttered a simple sentence and Ethel became a nonperson.

It was the cold reality that sent shivers along Helen's spine.

And now the small boy was smiling at her.

"I told you cartoons are good," Anthony said. "Anything can happen in them!"

He turned, pointing toward the television set.

Helen followed his gaze to the screen, where animated figures of goblins and witches were chasing their victim. Now the object of their pursuit glanced back and Helen stared in shock at the familiar face.

Ethel was in the cartoon!

For a moment her panic-stricken features filled the screen, mouth opened to sound a shriek, which rose against a blaring background of merry music.

Then Anthony's hand rose in a sweeping gesture, for all the world like one of Helen's former pupils using an eraser to wipe a blackboard clean.

The screen went blank.

And Anthony, in a dreadful parody of Bugs Bunny, stuttered *"Th-th-th-th-that's all, Ethel!"*

With a gasp, Helen turned and ran for the door. Behind her she heard the family's cries, heard the boy's sharply shouted command, but she didn't look back.

Now, racing down the hall, she reached the front door and tugged at the handle. For one fearful moment she thought it was locked; then, suddenly surrendering to her strength, it flew open.

Helen started forward, only to stumble back as a huge gust of wind roared through the doorway from the darkness beyond. Reeling, she forced herself forward again but as she did so, something rolled through the darkness to bar her path.

Filling the threshold before her was a gigantic staring eyeball.

Helen slammed the door and twisted around, sobbing.

Half-blinded by tears of mingled frustration and frantic fear, she watched Anthony advancing toward her down the hallway. The anger had drained from his face; now his expression was one of contrition and concern.

"I can't help it, Helen," he said. "I don't *want* to hurt anybody. If you'll just come back—"

He reached out and took her hand. Almost without realizing it, Helen found herself moving with him along the hall.

Through her sobs she heard his voice sounding plaintively.

"You don't understand. Nobody does. All I have to do is wish for something and it happens."

Now they were in the parlor once more. Blinking away her tears, Helen looked up and saw the family still huddled motionless against the far wall, paralyzed with shock. Beside her, Anthony was still speaking.

"Please, Helen, you've got to believe me! I can do anything. *Anything!"*

As if to demonstrate, he turned toward the silent television set. The group against the wall stared speechless in agonized expectation. Despite herself, Helen was staring, too.

And now the television set started to vibrate. Sparks flew forth from the screen. The cabinet began to glow, incandescent with an inner energy that enveloped it in flickering flame. With a hideous grating screech, the top of the set ripped apart, bursting before a force that boiled upward from within.

Then the opening widened splitting the set in half. A whirling, snarling form spun upward, streaming out into the room and enlarging as it emerged. The swirling figure was that of a cartoon dragon, but as it grew, it changed into something far more horrifying—something three-dimensional—a living, pulsating reality. Its eyes were gigantic glaring globes of fire and its breath was a jet of flame.

Helen swayed back, closing her eyes. "Wish it away, Anthony!" she panted. *"Wish it away!"*

A surging sound rose. Helen forced her eyes open as with blinding speed the huge form dwindled, collapsing back into the yawning fissure of the shattered television set. Then, with a final flicker, it shimmered away, together with the ruined remnants of the set itself.

There was a moment of utter silence.

Helen stared at the family cringing against the wall, stared at the boy beside her. He too was surveying the room, and when at last he turned toward her, his face was a mask of misery.

"I hate this house," he murmured. "I hate everything about it."

Suffused with sudden purpose, his voice rose.

"I wish it *all* away!"

Succumbing to dreadful impulse, Helen turned her gaze toward the figures cowering against the wall. Again, no spells were uttered, no wands waved. But as she watched, one by one, they all disappeared.

Mother, Father, Uncle Walt, vanished into—

Nothingness.

The room itself had melted away. Helen turned, her eyes searching the darkness, finding nothing but the night surrounding her on all sides. Nothing but the night—and Anthony, standing beside her in empty space.

"Where—where are we?" she faltered.

Anthony stared at her bleakly. "Nowhere."

Helen's voice echoed through emptiness. "Where are the others?"

"I sent them wherever they wanted to go." Anthony's voice trembled. "Away from me."

Helen looked down at the boy. Suddenly, standing here in the darkness, he seemed utterly helpless, utterly forlorn. There was nothing monstrous about him now—all she saw was a lost, lonely little boy. Bracing herself, she took him by the shoulder and bent forward, meeting his gaze eye-to-eye.

"Anthony," she whispered. "Take us back."

The child's stare wavered. "So *you* can leave, too?"

She sensed the accusation in his voice, but his eyes held only hopelessness and his face was white with fear.

Helen hesitated, then took a deep breath.

“I won’t leave you,” she said. “Take us back, Anthony. Take us back, so you and I can try again.”

The boy stared at her without speaking, his eyes shining with sudden hope, then dulling in doubt and despair.

Helen shook her head. “I’m not lying to you, Anthony.” Now the words came unbidden, from somewhere deep within her. “You need someone to teach you. Somebody to help you understand this gift you have—this terrible, *wonderful* gift. A gift you must control. We must learn how to use it wisely.” She took another deep breath. “The two of us can learn together.”

Anthony looked up anxiously. “You’ll stay with me?”

“Yes.”

“Always?”

Helen nodded; there was no turning back. “Always.”

Anthony smiled. “Okay,” he said.

Reaching out, he took her hand. For a moment they stood together in the darkness. Then something flickered, and the emptiness around them was filled with recognizable reality once more.

Utter blackness faded into the ordinary shadows of normal light. Looking around, Helen saw that she and Anthony were standing on the same spot formerly occupied by the house. It was gone now, but surrounding her were the barren fields through which she had driven, and in the distance she recognized the road that wound its way back into the bordering trees.

Smiling in relief, she waited for Anthony to speak.

He nodded quickly. “Let’s go.”

Helen turned, then halted, frowning.

Although the house was gone, the driveway before it was still intact. Intact and empty—her car was nowhere to be seen.

For a moment Helen hesitated, remembering her own words. This was a new beginning; they must learn together, learn how to control Anthony’s power, using it only to serve its proper purpose. She must be careful not to encourage any further demonstrations until they both were sure what the consequences might be. On the other hand, they *did* need wheels in order to leave here in an ordinary fashion.

Helen made her decision, lips framing a question. “My car—?”

Anthony smiled, then made a small offhand gesture.

Instantly the car was back in the driveway, parked directly before them.

“Okay?” Anthony smiled at her. “Can we go now?”

Helen nodded. Together they moved to the car and Helen opened the door, waiting while Anthony slid across to the right-hand passenger-seat. Then she took her place before the wheel, closing the door behind her.

Suddenly she frowned and the boy glanced up at her questioningly.

“What’s the matter?”

Helen shook her head. “I forgot.” She gestured toward the ignition. “I don’t have the key—it’s in my purse—”

But as she spoke, something flicked between her fingers. Staring down, she saw the car key nestling in her palm; at the same moment she sensed the pressure of her purse against her lap.

Anthony was smiling.

Helen sighed, shaking her head in mingled relief and admonition. “Let’s not do too much of that anymore,” she murmured.

“Okay,” said Anthony.

Helen started the engine, then headed the car back down the road leading to the trees. As she did so, she found herself making mental notes. She really must do something about Anthony’s vocabulary—he’d just said “okay” three times in five minutes; and she would have to teach him something about grooming—his hair was badly in need of combing, and that soiled outfit he wore was a positive disgrace.

Somehow the prospect didn’t dismay her—if anything, the thought of teaching again filled her with joyful anticipation.

So much to teach, so much to learn—

Helen glanced at Anthony and he smiled, his face radiant with a happiness so great that he seemed unable to contain it. Beaming up at her, he made a little gesture with both his hands.

Suddenly the sky brightened into morning sunlight and as Helen stared wide-eyed through the windshield, the bare fields bordering the road ahead blossomed out into bright and shining banks of flowers.

Helen shook her head reprovingly. “Anthony!”

But as she spoke, she smiled.

Anthony smiled with her. The whole world was smiling now as the car sped through the fields of flowers and into the twilight of the trees beyond.

Valentine

The plane plunged into the twilight.

From his window-seat just forward of the right wing, Mr. Valentine blinked out at the darkening sky. Then, frowning, he consulted his wristwatch.

Three o'clock. Too early, much too early for twilight. And yet, the clouds encircling the aircraft were violet, almost purple. Peering ahead, Valentine noted a deepening darkness beyond. His frown deepened in response.

Thunderclouds?

Oh no, not that, It couldn't be. Not after the way he'd checked the weather reports in the morning paper. Clear skies all the way—that's what the map showed and only fifteen minutes ago the captain's voice had crackled a cheery greeting over the intercom, announcing the promise of a smooth on-course flight at an altitude of thirty-five thousand feet.

Sorry, Captain. I don't like your altitude. And your prediction is for the birds.

Or would be, if there were any birds. But birds were too smart to venture up to that height. Only a fool would take such a risk, and only a fool would put his faith in the smarmy reassurance of a pilot who was paid to offer it to a captive audience of passengers.

Surely the captain must have seen the cloud banks ahead. Unless, of course, he was blind. In which case he shouldn't be flying.

And neither should I, Valentine told himself.

But there was no help for it. The conference opened tomorrow morning and neither automobile nor Amtrak could cross the continent in eighteen hours. He’d asked for a week off in advance with the thought in mind—either driving or taking the train—but his production supervisor had vetoed that idea in a hurry.

“Sorry, no way. We’re working shorthanded as it is, and you’ve got that Carver job to finish up before you go. Why waste all that time when you can hop on a plane Thursday afternoon and still get a good night’s rest before Friday’s program starts? I mean, what’s your problem?”

I’m scared, that’s the problem. Only Valentine couldn’t tell him that. *It’s been eighty years since the Wright Brothers took off at Kitty Hawk, and nobody’s afraid of flying anymore.*

A glance around the cabin confirmed Valentine’s thought. There were two stewardesses up front near the galley—one quite young and the other in her thirties—chatting calmly together, smiling as if they didn’t have a care in the world. But of course they’d be calm. Even if they weren’t, they’d *look* calm; that was part of their job.

The passengers seemed to be calm, too. As a matter of fact, most of them had turned off their reading lamps and were dozing. In one of the seats ahead, an enormous man had assumed the fetal position; a fat baby, with his head resting against the window. Nearby, a young couple reclined in entwined embrace. An elderly couple across the aisle from them slept without touching one another, their indifference born of long association. In the seat directly before him, a mother sat beside a little girl, her impassivity a sharp contrast to her daughter’s wriggling. No one seemed troubled by the slight rocking motion of the plane or by the presence of the purple clouds gathering beyond the window.

So why was he upset? Valentine frowned. Obviously there was no sense trying to rest—the way he felt, sleep was out of the question. But perhaps work might spell salvation. He reached up and turned on the reading lamp, pulled out his tray table. Groping into his opened briefcase on the empty seat beside him, Valentine produced the tools of his trade—a note pad, a pocket calculator, and a textbook. He opened the volume to a page indicated by a bookmark and concentrated on the array of equations thus revealed.

Taking a ballpoint pen from his breast pocket, he unscrewed the cap and held the point over the blank note pad. For a moment he stared at the letters and numerals on the page of the textbook, only to find his eyes blurring.

Valentine blinked, but his vision did not clear. Neither did his thoughts. How could a man put his mind to math, concentrate on abstract theory, in the midst of menacing reality? And the reality was all around him; the reality of shuddering motion, the reality of swollen storm clouds just beyond the windowpane.

Valentine put down his pen and shut the book, but he couldn't shut out his thoughts. Perhaps it was time to face the truth. Just what was there about flying that troubled him so greatly? Where did his exaggerated dislike of air travel come from?

Could it be the commercials? Even when sitting in the security of his own home, with no seat belts trapping him into his easy chair, he had always been conscious of a vague irritation when confronted by the paeans of praise for flight, which emanated from his television screen. All those images of scenic grandeur and jumbo jets sailing serenely through the blue and cloudless skies over shining seas—all those unseen heavenly choirs chanting about the high adventure and low fares to be found in the skies—what nonsense! Most of the flights he had taken offered nothing of visual grandeur; what he usually saw from his window were clouds and smog, or a combination of both. And the fare-structure had always been a source of irritation to him. It seemed to turn out that so-called bargain rates were offered only to family groups traveling at some ungodly hour of the night to one of a very few major cities. The moment you embarked on a journey at a sensible hour, traveling alone, the rates escalated to astronomical proportions. Why did it cost $99 to fly three thousand miles across the country as opposed to $400 or $500 for a journey one-third that distance? No matter how loudly the choir sang or how often the offscreen announcer boasted of bargains—fair or unfair—Valentine always seemed to end up trapped in a situation like this.

Trapped.

That was the operative word. The whole trip was a trap. That's how you started—trapped in a tangle of traffic as you approached the airport. Trapped in a maze of jammed parking lots. Trapped in a staggering, stumbling dash from lot to terminal, hefting the bulky burden of your luggage. Trapped in the line waiting at the passenger counter. Trapped in the anxiety of anticipation once you reached it: Were your tickets in order? Was your flight departing on time? Could you be certain, once you checked in, that your luggage would be put through to its proper destination?

Then, of course, there was the business of passing through the security check. The X-ray eye scrutinizing the contents of your hand-luggage was bad enough, but the cold, fishy stare of the security people was even worse. Foolish, of course, but Valentine always went through the procedure with the feelings of a felon; the whole thing reminded him all too vividly of police procedure. He half expected one of the uniformed guards to grab him by the collar with a curt command: *"Up against the wall, clasp both hands behind your head. It is my duty to warn you that you have the right to remain silent; anything you say may be used in evidence."*

Then there was a long walk to the terminal gate, the endless plodding through the white-walled corridor under the harsh glare of fluorescent illumination. *The last mile.*

Only worse. At least the prisoner condemned to execution could expect to reach his destination and pass through the little green door without interruption. But air terminal procedure was different. Once at the gate, you stood in line again, waiting for the door to open. From overhead came the canned cacophony of tape recordings, punctuated abruptly by an announcer squawking static-riddled gibberish, which involuntarily evoked one's nerve-racked attention. Would your name be called to report to the nearest telephone? Was your flight going to be delayed for an extra hour? Standing before the departure gate was always an ordeal, and even if you could disregard what issued overhead, there was no way to ignore the presence of your fellow prisoners. Correction—fellow passengers. But as far as Valentine was concerned, he heartily wished that those passengers had been in prison. Perhaps he was squeamish; he preferred to think of himself merely as a private person who lacked the normal quotient of gregariousness. Whatever it was, he disliked the close proximity of young mothers with squalling infants in their arms or the overweight oldsters who seemed to think it necessary to embark on a flight to Philadelphia wearing cowboy hats with brims pulled down to shadow their fat, bespectacled faces. Again, at least the condemned man is granted the privilege of taking his seat in the electric chair alone; he doesn't have to put up with the indignity of a crying baby seated beside him, or the presence of one of those pseudo-cowboys who will talk him to death during the journey into oblivion. Better to suffer the brief pain of electrocution than the endless agony of elocution.

Valentine sighed softly. This was nit-picking, he knew, over-dramatization. All he was doing was trying to forestall the ultimate reality—the fear that possessed him after the waiting interval at the terminal—the terminal illness, ending when he finally boarded his flight.

Again, the situation contrasted unfavorably with that of a condemned prisoner. When they put you in the electric chair, you at least have the comfort of knowing that you don't have to lay out an exorbitant sum—to say nothing of an exorbitant tax—to pay for your seat; and no one sentenced to death is expected to strap himself into the hot seat. He doesn't have to sit there in endless anticipation of what is to come; he doesn't have to listen to the sound of the engines revving up and wonder whether or not they seem to be in proper working order. He doesn't have to endure the long, slow, bumpy shudder of movement as the plane heads into position for its takeoff at a distant runway. He doesn't face the repetition of the engines' roaring, followed by the thrust of acceleration as the plane suddenly swoops forward with a surge of shrieking sound as it seeks to rise.

And when it does finally rise, when one is conscious of being airborne at last, there is always the clamor of one's inner voice: Will it clear those power lines just beyond the airport boundaries? Will it manage to soar above the high-rises of the city streets or the mountains ringing the desert location—or the roaring waters of an ocean takeoff? And what about that dangerously steep slanting of wings when the aircraft swerves, as it inevitably seems to do, before heading into the flight-path?

Naturally, these questions are never voiced, let alone answered, in the little recitation that a bored stewardess hastily delivers prior to takeoff. *Fasten your seat belts . . . place your seat in the upright position . . . extinguish all smoking materials . . . blah, blah, blah, oxygen mask overhead, blah, blah, blah, emergency exits* . . . Valentine could almost recite the standard reassurances from memory, but there was no point to it, because they were meaningless.

How many times had that same speech been made just before a takeoff where the plane did *not* clear the wires, or the buildings, or the mountaintop, or the surface of the sea? How many times had the mechanical reassurance been given before an aircraft started to bank, only to spin into the spiral of a fatal crash? Once you hit the power line or the jutting obstacle ahead, it didn't much matter whether or not the oxygen mask descended on schedule; and the emergency exits offered no escape from the fiery explosion.

Valentine shifted in his seat. Why was he wasting his time with such morbidities? He'd already gone the route; run the gauntlet of traffic and terminal, endured the anticipatory dread of waiting and survived the perils, real and imaginary, of the takeoff. So why was he still uptight now?

Then realization came. It wasn't fear of danger that produced his palpitations of mind and body. The real terror came from the realization of his helplessness.

Here he was, sailing along serenely at an elevation of thirty-five thousand feet. The fasten your seat belts sign had blinked off, and nicotine-addicts were free to risk lung cancer again. The stewardesses would go into the galley soon to load the refreshment cart, and up front, behind the closed door sealing off the nose of the plane, the pilot and his crew were huddled over their instrument panels.

Or were they? For all he knew, they might be discussing this afternoon's football games, or last night's adventures on the town. Somewhere Valentine had read that employees of flight crews were instructed not to indulge in alcohol or any form of dissipation for twenty-four hours prior to a scheduled assignment. But how could you be certain they'd followed those instructions? There were also those reassuring public-relations statements about mandatory regular physical checkups for all flight personnel, but again, there was always the random factor of unpredictability. Suddenly he remembered an episode in his own family history—how Uncle Joe had gone in for his usual annual physical checkup and emerged from the doctor's office with a clean bill of health, only to drop dead of cardiac arrest in the elevator that was taking him down to the street. Good old Uncle Joe—only forty-eight years old, pink of condition, best tennis player in the annual competition at the country club. No smoking, no drinking, no bad habits—but suddenly, without warning, no heartbeat. If it could happen to his Uncle Joe going down in an elevator, it sure could happen to somebody else's uncle going up in an aircraft. The difference being that when Uncle Joe's heart gave out, the elevator didn't crash.

For goodness sake, Valentine told himself, *stop acting like a baby! Try to think of something else.*

And so he did. He thought about air pockets—unexpected wind currents that could envelop the plane suddenly, without warning, and hurl it to destruction below. He thought about wind-shears that crumpled wings and turned jumbo jets into helpless insects unable to withstand the buffeting of a storm.

Valentine blinked and jerked erect at the sudden glimpse of green slashing through the sky beyond the window.

Lightning.

He'd been right about the presence of the storm ahead. Only it wasn't ahead anymore; they were actually into it now. The skies beyond the windows were almost black and raindrops spattered against the glass.

The plane bounced into a sickening lurch and so did Valentine's stomach.

Glancing down, he noted that his hands were gripping the edges of his armrest.

White knuckles. How he hated that casually used slang phrase! But his knuckles *were* white and he was pretty sure that his face was turning green.

Better find out about that. As plane and stomach wrenched again, Valentine released his grip on the armrest and scooped up the objects on his tray table, depositing them in the briefcase. Pushing the table up and securing it in position against the back of the seat directly ahead of him, he rose and made his way down the aisle in the direction of the lavatory. Two stewardesses were in the galley now and neither of them—a rather attractive young girl and her somewhat older companion—noticed him as he moved past and entered the lavatory on his left.

The cubicle was small and dark, like an upright coffin, but when the door closed behind him, the fluorescence flickered on. Valentine found himself facing the washstand mirror and there his worst fears were confirmed. His face *did* have a greenish cast. He stared at his reflection, noting the telltale terror in his eyes. Confronting his countenance, he found the final fear. Helplessness was not the ultimate horror, nor was the fear of flying. The thing that really got to him was the fear of *falling*.

Who knows where it started, or when: probably in infancy. As far back as he could remember he was aware of that particular phobia, both in waking life and in his all-too-vivid dreams. It was in those dreams, dreams that survived into adulthood, that he would suddenly find himself dropping down into darkness—deep, deep darkness, like that of the storm clouds outside the plane. There were no windows in the lavatory and he couldn't see the sky here, but he could feel the force of the storm that surged around the aircraft. The wrenches came faster now, quickening in a regular rhythm. A tiny light flickered on behind the lettered inscription:

PLEASE RETURN TO YOUR SEAT.

Valentine ignored it. But he couldn't ignore the mounting panic.

Once again he faced himself in the mirror, trying to ignore the too-bright terror in his eyes. *Take a good look at yourself. You're a grown man; a computer analyst and a good one. You of all people should be comfortable around advanced technology. Well, those people up there in the nose of this plane are knowledgeable, too. They have their own expertise. There must be hundreds of flights that encounter storms and air turbulence every day and pass through safely. Why should this one be different?*

But he still was facing the question. Why was he so afraid of falling? Was he crazy? Or was all this the result of some trauma he'd pushed back into the unconscious? Maybe his mother may have accidentally dropped him as a baby.

If so, she must have dropped you on your head, Valentine told himself.

The plane lurched again and Valentine felt his gut respond in sympathy, but sympathy wouldn't help him now; not the way he was breathing. For the first time, he realized that the sound he had vaguely noted over the drone of the engines was emanating from his own mouth. He wasn't just breathing hard, he was gasping—hyperventilating. It wasn't a new experience and he knew what to do. Valentine reached into the slot beneath the washbasin and pulled out a barf bag. He yanked it open, lowered himself to the toilet seat and began to breathe into the receptacle. Suddenly he looked up at the sound of a *ping.* The light above the washbasin flashed again.

PLEASE RETURN TO YOUR SEAT.

Another *ping* and then the crackle of a voice on the intercom:

"This is Captain Deveraux. Folks, I'd like you to buckle up snugly in your seat belt and extinguish your smoking materials. We have a little unfriendly weather up ahead and we just might bounce around for a bit."

Now he tells us. Valentine grimaced wryly and started to raise the paper bag to his mouth and nose again.

Another *ping* interrupted him. This time the voice of one of the stewardesses came over the intercom:

"We'll be suspending our in-flight service for a few minutes. For those of you still waiting for refreshment, we'll get back to you as soon as we're through the turbulence."

Who needs refreshments. Valentine raised the bag once more, only to halt at the sound of a knock on the lavatory door. The muffled voice of the stewardess was faintly audible: "Please get back to your seat as soon as you can."

Valentine opened his mouth to reply but nothing came out but a hoarse gasp.

The plane bucked violently. Valentine's right elbow knocked violently against the edge of the washstand. But the knock outside the door was more violent still.

Again he heard the voice of the stewardess: "Hello in there! Can you hear me? Helloooo!"

Valentine ignored her as he buried his face in the folds of the open bag, concentrating on regulating his breathing. During the moment of merciful silence from the passageway outside the door, he managed to regain control and regulate his respiration.

Then the knocking resumed, in a series of sharp staccato raps. The voice accompanying it held a note of shrill urgency:

"Mr. Valentine? Can I help you? *Mr. Valentine!"*

This time Valentine managed a reply. "Just a minute—I'll be right out."

Rising, he stood swaying before the mirror. His color looked better now —the greenish tinge had disappeared—but he still felt faint. Turning on the tap and gripping the knob firmly to maintain the water's reluctant flow, he splashed his face with his free hand. Through the door the stewardess's voice sounded again:

"I'll help you to your seat."

"One moment," Valentine called. "Just a moment."

Moment of decision, Valentine told himself. Reluctantly he dipped his hand into his left jacket pocket and pulled out a small, plastic pillbox. Fumbling with the catch, he opened the container and dumped its contents into his palm—two blue Valiums and a Dramamine. As he stared at the pills, his resolution firmed. He knew what to expect if he swallowed all three of the capsules—better to be a walking zombie than the totally lifeless victim of a heart attack. Taking a deep breath, he gulped down the pills.

Pulling a paper cup from the wall-container, he filled it with water for a chaser. Swallowing, he glanced again into the mirror. The floor of the plane beneath his feet lurched sickeningly and the mirror image distorted in accompaniment to his own grimace. Groaning, he closed his eyes and turned, fumbling for the door latch.

The door opened and so did his eyes. The countenance he presented to the waiting stewardess was perfectly calm.

But from her own expression, she wasn't buying it. He recognized that I've-been-here-before look in her smile.

"I know how you feel, Mr. Valentine." Her voice sounded softly over the tortured throbbing of the plane's engines. "Lots of people are uptight about flying when the weather gets a little rough. Just try to remember that statistically it's safer up here than on the ground—safer even than your own bathroom."

Spare me the humor. Valentine forced a response to her smile. "I'm fine," he told her. "Perfectly fine."

The plane bounced again, and suddenly Valentine lost his balance, colliding against the stewardess. The younger stewardess was standing behind her companion and now she made her presence known with a laugh.

"Whoops!" She approached, gripping his left arm. "Let's get you back to your seat."

The older stewardess reached out to grasp his right arm and the two women started to propel him past the galley entry way.

Valentine stifled a groan, but not the thought which prompted it. *They're treating me like a basket case! You'd think I was ninety years old. But if those pills would only start working, I'll bet I wouldn't feel a day over eighty.*

Proceeding down the aisle, he noticed that his fellow passengers were no longer asleep. The buffeting of the storm had brought rude awakenings to the fat man, the old couple, and their younger counterparts. Only the woman whom he guessed to be the mother of the wriggling little girl still rested with her eyes closed.

He hoped that others farther back in the cabin hadn't awakened. The way these idiots here watched his progress made him doubly self-conscious; he must look like some kind of a nut lurching along in the custody of his two uniformed attendants.

He settled down into his seat, uneasily aware that the stewardesses were still hovering over him. The older of the two was eyeing his face for telltale signs of stress, but the younger one directed her attention to the empty seat beside him, where his briefcase rested. Following her glance, he discovered that it rested no longer. The jolting of the plane had toppled it over on its side and its contents were now strewn across the surface of the seat—note pad, calculator, and the textbook.

The young stewardess squinted down at the opened title page. "*Micro Chip Logic—The Liberation of the Left Brain"* She smiled at him. "You're a science fiction fan, huh?"

"It's a textbook," Valentine told her. "Computers."

The young stewardess gave him a questioning glance. "You really *read* this stuff?"

"I wrote it," Valentine murmured.

The girl checked the title page again. "My goodness, so you did." She smiled at her older companion. "How about that?"

Ignoring her, the senior stewardess addressed Valentine. "Very impressive. But why don't we put it away now and try to get some sleep?"

Valentine's inward groan echoed again. *What gives? First they act as if I were an old man, and now they're treating me like a kid.*

He left the thought unspoken, but now, as the younger stewardess reached up and turned off his reading lamp, he found his voice. "No—please don't. I'd rather have the light on."

The girl shrugged and switched the light back on, then turned and made her way along the aisle. The senior stewardess remained poised beside Valentine's seat, peering down at his face. For a moment she studied it, then came to a decision. She bent forward to speak, her low murmur scarcely audible above the whine of the engines.

"Mr. Valentine—we're not supposed to do this, but I have these sedatives —" Reaching into her jacket pocket, she brought out a small bottle, carefully concealing it in the palm of her hand as she continued. "They might help you get some rest." Valentine shook his head quickly. "No thanks."

"They're very mild," she persisted.

Valentine forced a smile of reassurance. "I'll be fine—really I will."

He blinked, startled at the sudden flash of light from above the back of the seat directly before him.

Now a diminutive head popped up over the seat back. Valentine recognized the face of the little girl as she grinned down at him, one hand gripping the seat for support and the other brandishing a piece of exposed film. Then he realized—the kid had taken the photograph with her Polaroid.

The little girl dangled the developing snapshot before them and her grin broadened. "This will cost you four bucks," she said.

"What?" The senior stewardess offered her a perplexed frown.

"Only kidding," the girl giggled.

"Come along," said the stewardess, moving forward to take die girl's arm. "No more pictures. You're supposed to be buckled down next to your mommy."

Valentine watched as she ushered the protesting youngster back to her seat beside her dozing mother across the aisle. Reluctantly the child secured her seat belt while the stewardess waited. Then she turned back to Valentine.

"I'm Susan St. John. If you need anything, just call for me."

Valentine shook his head, forcing another fixed smile. "Thank you again. But don't worry, I'm all right now, truly I am."

The stewardess nodded and started off. Her movement left the aisle vacant and revealed the face of the little girl in the seat directly across from him. She wasn't grinning now, just staring at him—and what was this thing she was holding up for his inspection? A doll wearing a striped jacket and a straw hat—a doll with the face of W. C. Fields! Valentine blinked. No, it wasn't a doll—more like a ventriloquist's dummy.

The little girl's face remained impassive but the dummy peered at him with an ugly crooked grin of its own.

It was bad enough having all these people looking at him without putting up with a dummy too. And that grin was just too much—

Valentine turned away, his breath rasping a warning. Better not get worked up or he'd start hyperventilating again. He fumbled in his right-hand pocket and pulled a cigarette loose from its pack. Placing it between his lips, he sent his hand on an errand into the pocket once more, this time to bring out a matchbook.

Striking a match on its surface, he cupped his palms and bent forward to get a light—then jerked his head up at the sound of a shrill whistle.

Turning, he stared at the little girl across the aisle. Her face was still impassive, but W. C. Fields suddenly jerked one of his arms up toward the lighted sign overhead. A squeaky mock-adult voice seemed to issue from the grin-distorted mouth.

"You heard the captain. *No* smoking!"

The little girl's expression was unchanged. For a moment Valentine found himself half believing that the dummy had actually spoken.

Again the voice sounded—this time louder, more emphatic.

"N-O! No smoking!"

Now the fat man occupying the seat in front of her turned and glared at Valentine. From the seats behind his own, occupied by the elderly couple, an old lady's voice rose shrilly:

"He ought to have more respect for his body!"

Valentine extinguished the flickering flame, then dropped the match into his ashtray, followed by his cigarette.

Across the aisle, the little girl closed her eyes with a smile of satisfaction. Clasping the dummy in her arm, she lay back, prepared to sleep. The fat man turned his glance away and from behind Valentine's seat there was only silence.

Valentine's breathing slowed. Thank goodness that was over with! Now all was still except for the persistent roar of the engines. Perhaps if they'd only leave him alone, he might actually be able to get some sleep, too. Those pills should be working by now. He sank back, closing his eyes.

The drone of the engines deepened and so did the darkness behind his lowered lids. But the darkness wasn't empty. Far in the distance a faint speck of light glimmered. He found himself following its movements as it fluttered erratically with the fitfulness of a firefly. And like a firefly, its glow grew stronger as it approached.

Only then did Valentine realize that what now loomed luminescently before him was neither light nor insect—it was the face of the dummy.

The open mouth moved, articulating a hoarse command:

"Please return to your grave! Extinguish all life! This is your captain shrieking—"

Now it was Valentine's turn to open his mouth, but no shriek sounded in response. All he heard was a faint dry rasping deep in his own throat—the death rattle.

He stared up at the glowing face hovering before him. As he watched, the body below the face began to emerge from the darkness. To his surprise, Valentine noted that the dummy was clutching a Polaroid camera, raising it to eye-level in order to focus the lens on Valentine's face.

It was then that he found his voice at last. "Don't shoot!" he quavered. "Please don't shoot me!"

But the light exploded before Valentine's eyes. He sat up, blinking into sudden awareness.

The interior of the cabin presented its usual aspect—a mingling of white and shadow. There was no wall of darkness surrounding him, no incandescent image hovering over him, no camera aimed at his face.

Just a dream, he told himself, *but I could swear it was the light that woke me.*

Then, all at once, he saw the light again—as vivid and livid as he'd remembered. And now he knew its source.

Lightning. There, outside the window—

The plane began to buck violently and Valentine gripped the armrest. No doubt about it; the storm was getting worse.

He glanced down at his clutching hands, noting the whiteness of the knuckles. *Well, here we go again—back to square one.*

Perhaps the pills were working, or maybe he was just getting a little sense into his head at last; whatever the reason, he wouldn't let this storm spook him again. Pulling his fingers free from the armrest, Valentine reached over to the pouch-pocket at the base of the seat ahead and pulled out a copy of the airline's in-flight magazine. Switching on his overhead reading-light, he began to flick through the pages of the periodical.

The first thing that confronted him was a cigarette ad.

Valentine frowned. Much good *that* would do him now. Conscious of his need for nicotine, he ran the tip of his tongue over his dry upper lip and hastily turned the page to an article that bore a boldface heading—Life Insurance And You.

Sure, just what the doctor ordered. What good were his cigarettes when he wasn't allowed to smoke them? And if this flying junk-heap crashed, there was no life insurance policy in the world big enough to cushion his fall.

Quickly he turned the page, only to find himself facing a telephone company advertisement. Need Help? Use The Yellow Pages!

Valentine scowled. Good advice, but no solution to his present problem. He was hardly in a position to pick up a phone, and even if he were able to do so, there were limits to the amount of aid he could expect. No operator would assist him in solving his problem, which, quite simply, was to find a way of getting off this plane alive.

Another sickening swoop shuddered through the aircraft, rattling the doors of the overhead compartments and sending the magazine sliding from his lap to the floor. As he stooped to retrieve it, a clap of thunder rose above the engine roar. Giving up, Valentine allowed his attention to wander to the window.

Squinting through his own reflection in the glass, he gazed out at the broad surface directly behind his seat-position. Through the murk, rain was pelting down on it in a torrent—each drop a dazzling diamond in the intermittent flicker of the beacon light at the wing's outer edge. The same series of flashes gave him a glimpse of the two big jet engines suspended by pods under the wing itself.

Again the thunder sounded and as it did so Valentine started to turn away. There was no point in staring out at the storm; he'd had his fill of it and needed no further reminder of its presence or the peril it presented. But then, out of the comer of his eye, he caught sight of something he hadn't noticed before. There was an extraneous object—a dark mass clinging to the far wing pod, just barely visible in the blink of the beacon light.

He thrust his face close to the glass again, cupping his hands to his eyes as he peered through his reflection into the clouded darkness and the driving rain. He saw—

Nothing.

Nothing there at all. It must have been his imagination—some momentary visual disturbance. Not too surprising, considering the content of his fears and the number of pills he'd swallowed to combat them. Unless, of course, he was hallucinating.

From the far recesses of his mind came the long-forgotten lyrics of a popular song he hadn't heard since he was a kid.

"*I'm flying high—but I've got a feeling I'm falling*—"

Valentine's scowl deepened as he felt the childhood fear welling up within him. He rubbed his eyes and glanced through the window once more, seeking final reassurance.

And there it was again—the dark distortion clinging to the engine pod!

Turning, he twisted his neck toward the window of the seat directly behind him, striving to get a better view.

As if to assist him, a vivid flash of lightning streaked across the sky. Its momentary glare gave him the better look he sought.

Better?

No, this was worse—far worse.

In the instant flicker of the lightning's greenish glare, he saw it all too clearly—the naked, apelike figure of a man, sitting astride the outboard engine!

Then the vision vanished in the darkness of the storm. Again the thunder rumbled.

And once more a jagged streak of green slashed through the sky. Valentine saw its source—the bolt of lightning issued from the creature's outstretched arms!

At the same moment, the aircraft yawed erratically, and the movement sent Valentine's head banging forward against the side of the window. For a split second his eyes closed involuntarily, responding to the impact. Forcing them open, he stared out once again. A flame of electrical current was streaming back across the wing. Straddling the outboard engine, the grotesque figure turned toward Valentine, its silvery face contorting in a grin.

Valentine flung himself back and his shout echoed through the confines of the cabin. "There's something outside! I saw it!"

If it was attention he wanted, his outcry brought immediate results.

As his fellow passengers peered perplexedly around the sides of the seats before him, the senior stewardess came rushing down the aisle.

Halting beside him, she glanced down solicitously.

"Something wrong?"

"Wrong?" Valentine forced the words out between chattering teeth. "It's a man. There's a man out there on the wing!"

The staring circle of faces in the forward seats registered varying reactions of shock, puzzlement, and disbelief. The senior stewardess attempted a smile of reassurance. But from the seat behind him came the old lady's strident cackle.

"Yes, I see him—all green and slimy!" She cackled again. "It's my first husband!"

The old man seated beside her snorted in feigned disgust. "If it is, you drove him to it."

The stewardess moved briskly to the row behind Valentine's seat. Although she was standing beyond his range of vision, he could hear her voice quite clearly.

"Did you really see something out there?" she asked.

And now the old lady's voice: "Of course not. A man on the wing—what a howl!"

Another streak of greenish light exploded beyond Valentine's window. He pressed his face against the pane quickly, just before the flash faded into darkness; just long enough for its final flicker to reveal the surface of the wing and the twin engines mounted at its extremity. The figure had disappeared.

Staring out at the darkness, Valentine's eyes blinked in unison with the beacon lights. For a moment he stared at them in stunned silence, then turned to find the senior stewardess gazing down at him once again, a question in her eyes.

Valentine opened his mouth and the words came tumbling out. "There was lightning. At first I thought it was an animal out there—a dog or a cat. Then I realized it was a man. Maybe a technician trapped out there on takeoff." He shook his head. "How could he survive? The air's too thin. The wind blast—so cold—and he's naked on top of it." Again he shook his head, sighing softly. "I know it's impossible."

The stewardess nodded sympathetically. Momentarily it occurred to Valentine that she might very probably just be humoring him, but right now any expression of concern was welcomed. Suddenly the younger stewardess appeared beside her companion and reached forward to extend the paper cup she held in her hand.

"Here you are," she said.

Valentine reached out for the cup and stared down suspiciously at its cloudy content. "What's this?"

The girl smiled. "Just some warm milk."

"You're sure there's nothing in it?"

The girl shook her head. But her companion produced the plastic pillbox from her jacket pocket. This time she didn't wait to ask his permission; unscrewing the cap, she shook two capsules into the palm of her hand and held them out to him.

"I really think you should take them now. They'll help."

Valentine hesitated, conscious that both stewardesses were staring at him expectantly; conscious too that passengers in the forward seats were watching and waiting. Valentine sensed what they were thinking. *Look at that flake back there. What do you think he's going to do next?*

The air in the cabin was cold, but Valentine felt the sudden warmth of his blush, the sudden moisture of tears welling up in his eyes.

Somehow he managed to smile. "Please forgive me," he murmured. "That was a fool thing I pulled—"

At a loss for further words to cover his embarrassment, he swallowed the pills and washed them down with a sip of milk. Naturally he couldn't expect any instantaneous reaction from the medication, but somehow the mere act seemed to ease his tension. He glanced up at his guardian angels, shaking his head and chuckling softly. "Holy smoke, when I hallucinate it's a real production, isn't it? A naked man crawling along a 707 wing in a storm at thirty-five thousand feet. Can you imagine?"

With a smile of relief the senior stewardess reached up to open the compartment above his seat and pulled down a blanket. Unfolding it quickly, she tucked it around Valentine's waist as he took another sip of his milk. "Don't feel embarrassed," she told him. "Just try to relax and get a little sleep. We should be out of this disturbance soon."

"Thanks." Valentine settled back against the seat cushion and held out the empty cup. As she took it from him, he smiled again. "Funny, isn't it?

The tricks your mind can play on you. How you can see things that don't exist."

But as he spoke, he was seeing something that very obviously *did* exist. Peering past the stewardess, he had a clear view of her junior companion standing at the end of the aisle before the open cockpit door of the plane, deep in conversation with a uniformed man who was probably the co-pilot. For a moment the man glanced in his direction, then nodded and turned to move back through the open entrance. As the door closed behind him, the younger stewardess disappeared into the galley.

Valentine focused his gaze on the face of the attendant hovering above him. "No need for you to stay," he said. "You must have other passengers to see to."

The senior stewardess shook her head. "I'd be happy to sit with you until you fall asleep."

The mother instinct. Valentine transformed his irritation into another smile. "Please, it would be easier if you weren't here."

"You're sure?"

"Positive. I'm drowsy already. Look—"

Eyes closing, he let his head drop forward in a semblance of slumber.

Peeking up, he saw her smile at his little joke and start to move away. As she did so he called after her softly, "Miss St. John—"

"Yes?" She turned, halting.

When he called, he really had no idea just what it was he intended to say, but suddenly he knew his purpose. He'd made a spectacle of himself back there but that was over with now. The important thing was to put an end to this mother-and-child relationship and reassert his status as a calm, mature, reasonable adult. Once he realized his role, his words came easily.

"You know, don't you, that should a plane crash, your chances of survival are significantly enhanced if you're in the back."

The senior stewardess nodded. "The plane won't crash, Mr. Valentine, but you're very kind to think of my welfare."

"That's okay," Valentine said. "I just wanted to make sure you knew. Good night."

"Pleasant dreams."

Pleasant dreams?

Not for me, Valentine told himself. Definitely not for me at a time like this. A familiar quotation came to him. *"To sleep, perchance to dream; aye, there's the rub."*

Hamlet, wasn't it? Something of Shakespeare's that he knew. Great poet. Poor guy, he must have had his troubles too, if he came up with such a line. But he hadn't run into anything like this, that's for sure. Whatever his problems might have been, he'd lucked out.

Shakespeare never traveled by plane. Never got himself trapped in a freak storm. Never found himself buried in the bowels of a mechanical monster. Never sat helplessly suspended thirty-five thousand feet in midair, thirty-five thousand feet above the ground, wondering whether or not he'd touch down safely at the end of his journey instead of crashing in a fiery explosion.

"To be, or not to be; that is the question." Hamlet's question, Shakespeare's question, Valentine's question. But Hamlet was speaking rhetorically and Shakespeare was toying with an idea; Valentine alone faced a situation that was all too real. Hamlet spoke his lines and left the stage. Valentine was left to contemplate the problem with all its perilous possibilities. Alone, surrounded by storm-tossed sky, alone with his fears.

Sleep was the only avenue of escape. He settled back against his pillow. Might as well get some rest, give the medication a chance to work. How many of those capsules had he taken? Valentine couldn't remember; he only knew that he'd had more than enough. If he tried walking around now with all those pills inside him, he'd probably rattle.

But he wouldn't walk. And on second thought, he wouldn't sleep either—not if it meant running the risk of dreaming. Better to just rest, rest and relax, ride out the storm. No dreams, no more hallucinations.

Closing his eyes, he tried to close his mind as well. But the thought kept creeping in. *Hallucinations.* Could he be absolutely certain this was the answer?

According to the captain's intercom message at the beginning of the flight, the skies were clear.

But the storm had come, and it was real. Even in his present, pleasant state, fully drugged and half dozing, Valentine was vaguely conscious that the plane was still pitching, and a rumble of thunder still sounded faintly in his ears.

Yes, the storm was real. And if this was so, could he be absolutely sure that what he'd seen out there on the wing was purely a product of his imagination, a figment of fear?

Valentine searched his memory for a dictionary definition. *Figment*—something made up, fabricated, or contrived. But how could a mind capable of retaining a dictionary's definition also conjure up such a horrendous imaginary creation—a naked, manlike monstrosity riding on the wing through the stormy night like a witch straddling a broomstick?

There were no witches; that much Valentine knew. And no one traveled by broomstick, even under clear skies.

But skies, clear or cloudy, serene or storm-beset, held strange secrets. Another memory crossed his mind, weaving in its wake a trailing tremor of terror.

The Bermuda Triangle.

How many times had he read about that vast mysterious expanse of ocean in which hundreds of ships had vanished without a trace over the centuries, in which thousands of voyagers had unaccountably disappeared forever?

And not just in the distant past, either; the phenomenon was still occurring today. Only now it wasn't just ships that disappeared. Within recent years their ranks had been swelled by countless numbers of aircraft that had taken off on routine flights, only to be lost in limbo. And not just single-passenger planes, either—among the missing were huge commercial flights. Even military missions had flown to their final fate somewhere in the vast expanse of sky above the Triangle.

Valentine vaguely recalled the strange story of a squadron—Navy, wasn't it?—that had set out from the Florida coast on a routine training exercise, only to disappear without warning following frantic radio signals that indicated that the pilots had somehow lost their bearings in the midst of strange cloud-formations suddenly surrounding them. When radio signals abruptly faded, a search party was dispatched—a larger aircraft, carrying a crew of fourteen. It too had vanished into empty air.

But *had* the air been empty?

Nobody knew. For that matter, there were still hundreds of thousands of square miles of the earth's surface; impenetrable jungles, desolate deserts, teeming jungles, mist-shrouded mountains, and forever-frozen polar wastes, which remained unexplored. And the oceans, roaring relentlessly over 70 percent of the globe, had still to yield their submerged secrets to the eyes of men.

Through the years, tens of thousands of sailing ships had made a safe passage through the Bermuda Triangle, tens of thousands had traversed the aerial routes above it without incident. But still the fact remained: so many ships had sunk into the sea's dank depths; so many planes had plunged into oblivion in the shrouded skies above.

And not in the Bermuda Triangle alone. There were many places where similar perils dwelt—travelers by sea or air had met an unknown fate in dozens of other localities scattered all around the globe. And scientists were still baffled by the presence of inexplicable phenomena in certain areas where compasses failed to function, natural causes produced unnatural results, and even the laws of gravity seemed suspended. What was it they'd come up with? Valentine seemed to recollect reading something about electromagnetic force-fields. A properly worded phrase, but one that explained nothing. Once, learned men believed that the air around and above them was filled with unseen presences. Today, they told us it was filled with unseen electrical disturbances. But no one really knew.

Some scientists still scoffed at the notion that the Bermuda Triangle and the air above it contained such forcefields, just as their academic ancestors had doubted the existence of demons.

But they had no proof. And while they argued, ships and planes and people continued to vanish on their voyages.

Valentine had a sudden image of a group of medieval theologians, hotly debating the question of how many angels could dance on the point of a pin. Then the vision was shockingly superseded by a phantasm of the grinning presence he'd glimpsed on the wing of the plane.

We didn't believe in such entities anymore, even though religion still retained them as realities. Strange, wasn't it? Despite the so-called advances of modem science, those religious beliefs still remain unchanged—beliefs in actual angelic presences and demonic dreads. Yet no man had even seen an angel, and no man had even seen a demon.

Except himself.

Valentine shuddered involuntarily as he sank further down in his seat. His eyes remained closed, but now the inner image rose before them once again—the insane image of the grinning, grotesque apparition astride the outboard engine on the wing, eyes flaming with a fire fueled in hell, its mouth gaping wide to reveal a forklike tongue darting forth from between the yellowed fangs. Now it began to crawl across the surface of the wing, inching its way toward him; then rising, it confronted him just beyond the window. Its clutching claws extended into cruel talons, ready to tear and rend, its fanged mouth opened wider in horrid hunger. In a moment it would spring forward, shattering the glass, its talons impaling him, tusks tearing his living flesh.

It was so close now that he could feel a belching blast of carrion breath, see the corded throat-muscles rise in rhythm with an ear-shattering roar of —

Thunder.

Valentine opened his eyes, realizing the source of the sound he'd heard; realizing too that what he had glimpsed was only the culmination of a nightmare.

But the thunder was real, and so was the throbbing of his heartbeat, half heard above the cabin clatter of the pitching plane.

He raised himself in his seat, turning to stare at the drawn window-blind. It *had* been a nightmare. The blind was closed, there was nothing beyond it; nothing out there at all except the storm. What a dream that had been!

But he was fully awake now, fully aware of his surroundings, and there was nothing to fear. Nothing to fear but fear itself. Nothing outside that window.

He turned away slowly to face the seat back directly before him. Perhaps if he closed his eyes again, sleep would return; a quiet peaceful sleep without dreams.

Valentine tried to lean back, tried to lower his lids again, but his eyes refused to close.

What was the matter with him now? Had he gone so far over the edge that he was even afraid of falling asleep?

That blind—

Valentine took a deep breath. Only one way to put an end to such nonsense. Forcing himself upright, he inhaled deeply once more. Then, leaning forward, he reached out, yanking up the blind.

And there, grinning at him through the window, was the face. The hideous mocking face of his nightmare.

Valentine screamed.

He jerked his head to one side, but not before catching a glimpse of the creature's upright hand. Clutched in its claws was a metallic object—a tangled cluster of steel fragments that looked as though they'd been tom from the plane's engine.

Valentine screamed again. As his head swiveled in the direction of the aisle, he saw them running toward him—the junior stewardess, the fat man from the forward seat, the uniformed copilot.

Valentine fragmented his scream into words.

"It's out there. It's real!" He began to sob hysterically. "What's happening to me?"

Then they were upon him, pinning him against his seat. Staring past the circle of troubled faces he caught a glimpse of the little girl standing in the aisle behind them. She was holding something before her face and for an instant her features were obscured by a flash of light. Then Valentine realized what was happening. The little brat had taken his picture!

Impulsively he struggled to rise. Hands darted out from the circle around him, pushing him down. The copilot turned his head, shouting an order that Valentine was unable to hear above the roar of the engine.

Gasping, Valentine managed to free his right arm, but only for a moment. Just long enough to stab his forefinger in the direction of the window.

"There it is!" he shouted. "Look—"

They *were* looking now and as they did so, their expressions changed. Valentine stared up, searching their faces for a reaction he did not find. And when they turned back to him, there was no horror in their eyes; only pity.

Somehow that was even harder for him to bear than horror. Still sobbing, he forced his gaze toward the window. Beyond the rectangular pane there was only darkness.

The face had disappeared.

Crazy. I'm going mad, he told himself. But they were all crazy, all these nice, normal people who were holding him down as if he were some kind of wild animal, ready to spring at their throats."And as the fat man eased off from his kneeling position on the armrest beside him, Valentine noted something that was crazier still. Just before the bunched-up trouser leg slid back down to cover the man's bulging calf, Valentine saw that he was wearing a gun strapped to his ankle. Valentine blinked. *What gives here? Don't tell me I'm hallucinating again.*

A moment later the explanation came as the fat man turned to the copilot and pulled a wallet from his jacket pocket. Opening it, he exhibited a badge.

"Sky marshal, eh?" The copilot nodded. "Good thing you're here."

Valentine relaxed momentarily. At least the presence of the gun was explained now; its reality assured him he wasn't *that* crazy.

Now the senior stewardess was coming down the aisle. As she moved toward the group, he noted that she was holding her right hand behind her back. Valentine groaned inwardly. Was she going to feed him more pills?

As she approached, the copilot turned to glance at the passengers clustering concernedly in the aisle behind him. He spoke with quiet authority.

"I want you all to please return to your seats. I'd like a word alone with Mr. Valentine."

He nodded at the younger stewardess. She moved beyond the range of Valentine's vision, herding the curious onlookers toward the rear of the plane. But the little girl still stood behind the senior stewardess, and now she stared down at what was concealed behind Miss St. John's back, her eyes widening.

"Handcuffs!" she exclaimed. "Far out!"

Valentine glanced up in shock as the senior stewardess brought her right hand forward, abandoning any further attempt at concealment. The steel cuffs dangled before him, glittering under the light of the reading lamp, but his eyes never left her face. She reddened before his accusing gaze, her expression conveying a mixture of contrition and concern.

Across the aisle, the fat sky marshal sank into the seat formerly occupied by the little girl. Miraculously, the child's mother had managed to remain asleep through all the confusion, but now she awoke and stared with blinking eyes at the handcuffs, which the senior stewardess was holding, then at the little girl standing beside her. She nudged the fat man as she spoke. "Don't tell me they're going to put those things on my kid! What has she done this time!"

The fat man turned to her and began to whisper an explanation. Then Valentine lost sight of the duo as the copilot reached over him and gently slid the window-blind down.

"Now then," he said softly. "What seems to be the problem?"

“Nothing at all,” Valentine told him. “I’m sorry I shouted.”

For a moment he hesitated, wondering whether or not the copilot could be trusted with the truth. Then his eyes strayed to the handcuffs, which the senior stewardess held before her, and the answer came quickly. He couldn’t trust them and they certainly weren’t trusting him. No sense trying to tell the truth; obviously they wouldn’t believe him. He’d have to play it their way. “I had a nightmare,” he said.

The copilot nodded. “I’m aware of that, Mr. Valentine. But you’ve got to understand my position. This plane is flying in a severe storm. There’s no immediate danger, but frankly we’ve got our hands full up front as it is. Now I have a passenger acting irrationally, threatening the safety of my aircraft. That leaves me with two choices. If there is no further disturbance, I can ignore the problem. Or else I can ask the sky marshal over there to apply these handcuffs.” He paused, letting the message sink in. “What would you do, Mr. Valentine?”

Valentine hesitated before replying. He scanned the faces before him, reading the question in the copilot’s eyes, the senior stewardess’s concern, the little girl’s gleeful excitement. No, he couldn’t afford to tell the truth—not the whole truth, anyway. But somehow he had to impress them with their peril. Taking a deep breath, he spoke quickly.

“I’ll level with you. Being suspended up here at thirty-five thousand feet in the middle of a storm, with no visible means of support, scares me.” He took another deep breath, then continued. “On the other hand, reason tells me I’m perfectly safe. Under normal circumstances we ought to get through this all in one piece. Trouble is, these circumstances are not normal. You know it and I know it. We’re in trouble. And if we ignore that fact, we’re all going to die—”

“What fact?” The copilot frowned. “What exactly are you saying?”

“There’s something wrong with one of your engines.”

The copilot’s frown deepened. “What do you mean?”

“It is not working,” Valentine said.

“Which engine?”

Valentine met his stare. “Outboard number one.”

The copilot and the senior stewardess exchanged troubled glances, and then the uniformed man bent over Valentine, speaking softly. “How could you know that?”

Valentine shrugged. “I just know it,” he said. “Don’t ask me how.”

Now it was the copilot’s turn to take a deep breath. “All right, Mr. Valentine. Maybe you had a hunch, or maybe you just made a lucky guess, but it’s true. Nine minutes ago, engine number one was struck by lightning. There was a flame-out. The point is, we still have three engines functioning perfectly. There’s no reason to alarm the other passengers and no reason to alarm yourself. Take my word for it—we’re perfectly capable of remaining airborne under our present power without any further problems.” He glanced down at his watch. “I estimate we’ll touch down in twenty minutes.”

So that’s that, Valentine told himself. At least they’d got the message and maybe there’d be no more trouble now; all he could do was hope that the flight crew did their job. If he said any more, it would only make matters worse. He glanced up at the copilot and smiled. “Thanks for the explanation. What you say makes sense, of course, and I promise I won’t trouble you any further.”

As the copilot nodded, the aircraft pitched violently. For a moment Valentine lost his cool. “Go fly the plane!” he cried.

The voice of the old lady rose from the seat behind him. “Good idea! We’ll behave ourselves, won’t we, sonny?”

Once more the copilot glanced at the senior stewardess, then turned and started down the aisle. As he disappeared from view, the senior stewardess leaned forward. “Don’t worry, Mr. Valentine. You heard what he said—we’ll be on the tarmac in twenty minutes.”

But her words were punctuated by a loud bang as the plane bucked again and the overhead compartment flew open. She reached up to close it, but another violent lurch toppled her backward across the aisle and into the lap of the sky marshal.

Almost simultaneously, three more overhead lockers burst open. The door of a closet opposite the galley suddenly swung forward. An oxygen cylinder toppled out and began to roll down the aisle.

With each convulsive movement of the plane came an accompaniment of terrifying sound—a combination of structural stress and engine protest that resonated through the confines of the cabin. Over the violent vibration, the murmur of frightened passengers arose.

Leaning forward, Valentine peered along the aisle. Nobody was watching him now. The young couple up ahead were clinging to each other like frightened monkeys swaying in a storm-swept treetop. The fat man was clutching the armrest, his eyes closed, jowls quivering. The little girl in the seat before him gripped her precious Polaroid tightly. Valentine couldn't see her face, nor that of the elderly woman seated behind him, but he heard her clearly as she addressed the old man beside her:

"This is not very amusing!"

"What do you mean?" her husband replied. "It's a million laughs! Haven't you ever been on a roller coaster before?"

Valentine wasn't laughing. And this wasn't a roller coaster ride. It wasn't just turbulence either—something besides the storm was responsible for such rapid pitching and yawing—the sensation was so intense that it felt as if the entire plane was being ripped and shaken by some gigantic hand. Something else was at work out there, some maniacal force—

Impulsively, he reached out and jerked up the window-blind. Staring past his reflection, staring through the rushing rain streaming over the wing, staring through the inky darkness punctuated by the flicker of the beacon light, he saw it again.

The naked man—the ape, the creature—was crouching at the far end and rocking the wing flaps back and forth. Valentine's eyes widened in shock as the creature turned to acknowledge his presence with a ghastly grin. Valentine jerked his head away, seeking reassurance in reality.

But as his eyes scanned the confines of the cabin, he found no comfort. Fighting to maintain balance in the midst of momentum of motion, the young couple still clung to one another; the little girl gripped her camera in one hand and clung to her armrest with the other as she bounced in rhythm to every pitch and plunge. Across the aisle, the sky marshal hunched forward with lowered head, ashen lips moving as he twisted the beads in his hand,' reciting the rosary.

Stifling an impulse to scream, Valentine turned to stare out the window once again. What he saw stunned him into silence.

The silver-skinned creature was sitting astride the inboard engine, its claws ripping off the cowling!

No use trying to scream now; Valentine's throat muscles were contracted with terror.

As the cowling tore loose, the creature dipped one clawlike hand into the opening, pulling out bits and pieces of the engine and tossing them over his shoulder.

Valentine shuddered convulsively, trying to avert his gaze, but his paralyzed muscles refused to respond.

Now, incredibly, the apparition squatting on the wing was tearing loose a fuel line. Oil gushed forth, spraying like water from a garden hose. As Valentine watched, the creature bent forward, encircling the loose end with greedy lips.

Oh no he's drinking from it!

Summoning all his strength, Valentine heaved backward and turned to face the cabin's interior once more.

Here another shock awaited him. The little girl stood in the aisle beside him, swaying to maintain her balance and aiming her Polaroid toward his face.

"No you don't!" Valentine cried. "Give it to me!" His hand lunged out, tugging the camera from her grasp. Then he turned to the window, raising the Polaroid and squinting through the view-finder until it focused on the figure beyond the pane. The camera clicked; lowering it, he tore the strip of exposed film free and held it up, waiting for the photo to develop.

"Hey, turkey! Gimme that back!" The child grabbed at the camera in his other hand and Valentine made no resistance. As she moved away he sat in agonized impatience, watching the image emerge on the film. Gradually a shadowy shape appeared, still blurred and indistinguishable.

The plane lurched sharply. Holding the print between his fingers, Valentine jerked around in his seat to peer through the window once more.

The creature had changed position. For a moment Valentine was conscious of a bulge between its shoulder blades as though the thing had a hump on its back. But there was no time to discern it clearly; all he could do was stare as the creature leaned over the leading edge of the engine pod. It was throwing fragments of the engine into the turbine intake!

The engine screamed its protest through the night. The creature looked up at Valentine with its mocking grin, then dropped more metal fragments into the intake. The plane thrashed violently.

Valentine let the photo fall from his hand. Who cared about the picture—if that creature out there wasn't stopped, another engine would be destroyed and then—

Something bumped against the base of Valentine's seat. Glancing down, he saw the oxygen cylinder rolling in the aisle below. Scooping it up he lunged at the window, smashing at the Plexiglas. As he did so, he found his voice and raised it in a shout.

"It's real, there's a thing out there—!"

The sky marshal dived across the aisle, dragging him away from the window. As they fell back, Valentine let the oxygen cylinder drop. For a moment the two men struggled, but the fat man's weight was no match for the strength born of Valentine's fear. Desperately, he freed his right hand and reached down to yank the hand gun from the sky marshal's ankle holster. Wrenching free, he aimed the weapon at the window and fired.

There was a shatter of glass—then the irresistible rush of air as the cabin decompressed. Magazines, plastic cups, and table napkins whirled wildly. Oxygen masks dropped from the ceiling, dangling and twisting like suspended serpents.

The force of the implosion sucked Valentine halfway through the window and the fat man grabbed his legs, hanging on for dear life. Icy wind ripped across his face, filling his nostrils with frozen fire and half blinding him with its fury.

In the aisle behind them the senior stewardess staggered and fell; plates and silverware poured forth from the galley shelves. Amidst screams and shouts drowned by the sound of the wind, a thump echoed as the overhead projecter module dropped down from the ceiling and the inflight movie started up on its own accord. As the movie screen swung back and forth in the gusting wind, the studio logo flickered on.

Valentine saw none of this. Still protruding halfway from the window, thrashing about against the horrendous wind-blast as the fat man frantically clutched his legs, he stared out at the creature on the wing.

Now it turned, grinning again.

It's coming after me!

Summoning his last ounce of strength, Valentine raised the hand gun still clutched between his fingers and fired.

The bullet found its mark in the creature's stomach. Casually, the thing reached down and plucked the missile off his hide the way one would remove some annoying insect. Raising the bullet to his gaping mouth, he *swallowed* it.

Then he advanced along the wing toward Valentine.

Valentine squeezed the trigger again . . . and again . . .

The creature's claws rose with blinding speed, picking the bullets out of the air like flies, gulping them down as he moved nearer.

Ultimately, Valentine's finger kept pressing the trigger, even after he realized the bullets were spent.

Now, as he looked up, the grinning face loomed before him. One claw darted out and Valentine felt the cruel talons close around his wrist. Then it released its grip and grabbed the gun.

Raising the weapon to its mouth the creature began to chomp on the barrel, chewing it up bit by bit like a child eating a candy bar.

At that moment a bright light burst from somewhere below, flaring up into its face.

The creature glanced down quickly and Valentine followed its gaze.

Below him he saw the landing lights of the airport-runway beacons blazing through the clear air beneath the cloudbank.

The silvery thing turned back again, frowning for a moment, its arms extended. Valentine, wedged in the window, waited his final fate.

Then, as the lights grew stronger, the monstrosity glanced at him once more. For a moment, Valentine could have sworn it winked at him, its outstretched claw waggling in a playful gesture.

Playful? Had it merely been *playing* all along? Now it turned and Valentine watched as the humplike mass between its shoulder blades suddenly extended and expanded into webbed wings. The creature moved back, its wings spreading wide, then plunged forward and soared off into the night.

That was when Valentine fainted.

He was still unconscious when the wheels of the aircraft touched the glistening tarmac. He didn’t see the passengers or hear their excited interchange as they stumbled down the steps and straggled across to the terminal gates. He wasn’t aware of being pulled back to safety in the cabin as the plane made its descent, nor did he awaken when the ambulance crew arrived to bring him out of the cabin and wheel him into the waiting ambulance below.

He never saw the fully developed Polaroid he’d taken and perhaps that was just as well.

It was the senior stewardess who picked it up eventually from the debris-strewn cabin floor and stared down at the image—the image of Valentine. He had taken a photo of his own reflection.

Nor did Valentine see the mangled, smoking engines as the ground crew clustered around them. One of the mechanics approached with a scowl. “Hey—what gives?”

Then he and the others stepped back hastily. There was a shrill grating sound as the inboard pod gave way, and the engine dropped onto the tarmac with a crash.

The scowling mechanic shook his head, then raised his eyes to ask the final question: *"What happened up there?"*

There was no answer. The skies above were clear in the gathering twilight.

Or were they. . . .?

The Shrink and the Nympho

Angela was adorable. Tall, blonde and twenty, she had more curves than a roller-coaster and much better seating-accommodations.

Young Dr. Degradian was no fool. Five minutes after she entered the office he had her on the couch.

So much for the joys of psychiatry.

Now it was time to begin the process known as case-entry. And this was one case Dr. Degradian felt sorely tempted to enter—until she began to talk.

Notebook in hand, he seated himself in a chair beside her, pencil poised. "What's the first thing that comes into your mind?" he asked.

"Milton."

"Who?"

"My husband."

Dr. Degradian frowned. "You didn't tell me you were married."

"I'm not. He died last Thursday."

Dr. Degradian made a note. "How did it happen?"

"He fell off a ladder."

"Was he a painter?"

"No—a voyeur. He was looking through this second-storey window at a motel when the ladder broke."

"I see."

"That's what he used to say all the time—'I see.' " Angela shrugged. "Our marriage was never consummated, you know. He died on our wedding night, and now I'm just a poor widow. All he left me was the broken ladder and a pair of binoculars."

"Did you know he was a voyeur when you married him?"

"I should have guessed. He kept telling me I was a sight for sore eyes." Angela smiled coquettishly. "Do you find me attractive?"

Dr. Degradian shook his head. "This is a psychiatric examination, not a beauty contest. We are here to find the source of your mental disturbance—"

"Not mental. Physical."

"You are physically disturbed?"

"Constantly." Angela nodded. "I'm no expert on the subject, but it doesn't seem possible that anyone could keep up such a pace—sometimes ten, even fifteen times a night."

"You're sleeping with somebody?"

"Who sleeps?" Angela sighed.

Dr. Degradian made another note. "Tell me about this man."

"He isn't a man. He's an incubus."

"A *what?"*

"An incubus." She blushed, tossing her golden curls. "A demon who has carnal relations with women in their sleep. Look it up in your dictionary if you don't believe me."

"I know what an incubus is," Dr. Degradian said. "And I do believe you. You have these dreams—"

"It's not a dream!" Angela sat up, eyes flashing. "I told you I don't sleep. The minute I turn out the light and climb into bed he shows up out of nowhere and starts fooling around. At first I tried to stall him—I said I had a headache, but he didn't listen, just ripped off my nightie and *bam!"*

"Bam? What does that mean?"

For the next fifteen minutes she explained what it meant; explained in such detail that Dr. Degradian found himself trying to make notes long after there was no more lead in his pencil.

"Good Lord!" The young psychiatrist stared at her. "I've never heard such graphic porno! And you say this is only the foreplay?"

“Two-play,” Angela murmured. “I don’t think I could stand it if there was another couple involved.”

“And this goes on every evening? He comes in and rips off your nightie—”

“Not any more. I ran out of nighties so now I just go to bed in the nude.” Angela gazed at him imploringly. “That’s why I’m here, Doctor. You’ve got to help me, before I catch my death of cold.”

“Of course.” Dr. Degradian reached for a fresh pencil and scribbled out several prescriptions. “Here, get these filled at the pharmacy downstairs.”

“What are they for?”

“Tranquilizers and a sedative.”

“It’s no use. I’m sure he won’t take them.”

“They’re for you. To help you sleep.” Dr. Degradian smiled reassuringly. “I want to see you again on Wednesday, same time. I think I can promise you that by then your incubus will have disappeared.”

“Thank you, Doctor. I certainly hope so.”

And with a grateful smile and a farewell wiggle, she was gone.

Gone, but not forgotten. During the next two days Dr. Degradian couldn’t put the girl out of his mind. What a shame that so lovely a young lady should have these grotesque fantasies! And they were fantasies, he had no doubt of that—she was hallucinating about a mythical creature out of medieval legend. It was obviously a classic case of sexual frustration, but the dosage he’d prescribed would put an end to her nightmares. Once they disappeared he’d have no need to explain she’d been imagining things; it would all be self-evident. And as Wednesday neared he found himself happily anticipating her arrival.

Promptly at three she swept in, trailing a cloud of perfume, and settled herself on the couch.

“Well,” he said. “How did everything work out?”

"Don't talk to me about work-outs!" Her full lips formed a provocative pout. "Did you ever try doing it when you were half-asleep?"

Dr. Degradian blinked. "You mean you still have these dreams?"

Angela's eyes flashed blue fire. "I told you it's not a dream! There really is an incubus. Please, Doctor, isn't there something you can do?"

"Certainly." The psychiatrist nodded. "There are several ways. Normally we might rid you of this obsession by using electro-shock therapy, but that's not practical, now that electricity-bills are so high. Perhaps we should opt for more orthodox methods. If you can arrange to come in five days a week for the next three years—"

"Three years?" She stared at him incredulously.

"You don't understand. A thorough analysis takes that much time to talk things out."

"You're the one who doesn't understand," Angela said. "This thing isn't going to be talked out of it. No matter what I say he just keeps bamming away." She rose, sighing. "Obviously you can't help me. I should have gone to Father O'Flannery in the first place."

"Father O'Flannery?"

"The priest at the church down the street. I'm going to ask him to perform an exorcism."

Dr. Degradian frowned. "Surely you're not serious? Nobody believes in such nonsense nowadays."

"Father O'Flannery does." Angela nodded. "Just last Sunday he preached a sermon about casting out demons. He even told us how it's done. First they open all the windows, then they start with the ceremony. Plenty of fresh air and exorcise, that's the cure."

Dr. Degradian bit his lip. No sense arguing; of course he had no faith in exorcism or in incubi either, but *she* did. And that was the point. If this superstitious ritual could rid her of her fixation, so be it.

"I wish you luck," he said.

"Thank you, Doctor."

Then she was gone, leaving a scent of perfume behind.

In the days that passed the scent vanished, but not the memories—memories of her perfume, and her behind. Dr. Degradian lost a little sleep himself wondering about the girl. Could it be that he had more than a professional interest in her? Here he was, just thirty years old, a reputable psychiatrist with an established practise and already the owner of his first condominium. He should be thinking of his career, maybe buying a second couch, but instead he found himself mooning over a patient. He remembered the last words of his sainted mother on her deathbed.

"Promise me just one thing," she whispered. "Don't ever get mixed up with a Nutsy Fagan."

Over the weekend Dr. Degradian recalled her plea and made a firm resolution. But on Monday afternoon, when Angela came in, his resolution turned to flab. One look at her and he knew the truth—he had fallen in love with a flake.

"Surprised to see me?" she said.

"Yes, I am." He ventured a wary smile. "Changed your mind, did you?"

"What do you mean? Father O'Flannery performed the exorcism Friday night."

"How did it go?"

"Very quickly. So quickly that Father never even had a chance to see it."

"But you're sure the incubus was exorcised?"

"Positive."

"Then what's wrong?"

"Father O'Flannery." She fluttered her eyelashes nervously. "You see, once the incubus was gone, that left just the two of us. There I was, lying naked on the bed, and there was Father O'Flannery standing over me with that big font in his hand, and—well, it just happened—"

Dr. Degradian's eyes widened. "You seduced a priest?"

"It wasn't a seduction." She reddened. "Like I told you, he had this perfectly enormous font, and the next thing you know—"

"Bam."

"Several bams." Angela sighed. "It was then I realized I still had a problem."

"And what about Father O'Flannery?"

"I'm afraid the poor man took it very hard, if you'll pardon the expression. When we talked afterwards he said he'd decided to leave the priesthood and enter a convent."

"You mean a monastery."

"No, a convent. He's not gay, you know."

"These things happen." Dr. Degradian nodded. "You mustn't burden yourself by feeling guilty."

"That's just it," Angela said. "I don't feel guilty. I feel—neglected."

"Neglected?"

"Well, I mean, all this happened on Friday night. Saturday and Sunday night I slept like a baby."

"So?"

"I'm not a baby! I'm a woman, and I haven't had sex for two whole nights in a row."

Dr. Degradian took a deep breath. "You really do need help."

"Exactly." Angela dropped onto the couch and lay back, smiling. "I knew I could count on you. But would you mind locking the door first?"

Now it was Dr. Degradian's turn to redden. "None of that, young lady," he said. "If you really want help, just sit up and pay attention. Get into this chair and let me run a Rorschach on you."

"In a chair? Oh, neat—"

"It's a test," the psychiatrist told her. "I want you to look at these inkblots and tell me what you see."

He held up the first card. "What does this look like?"

"That's easy. It's a whale."

"Are you sure?"

"Of course. It's a sperm whale."

Dr. Degradian gulped and reached for a second card. Angela stared at it, nodding. "This one is a bird."

"A bird?"

"Yes. A cockatoo."

He held up a third card. "And this?"

Angela studied the squiggles. "A man and a woman, twisting each other's necks around."

"And what does that mean?"

"They're screwing their heads off."

The psychiatrist threw the rest of the cards in the wastebasket. "Angela, let me speak frankly. You are suffering from a severe case of sexual fixation."

"Is it contagious?"

"I certainly hope not. And there may be a remedy, if you'll permit me to suggest it."

"Go ahead." Angela smiled in happy anticipation. "Be as suggestive as you like."

Dr. Degradian leaned forward. "Last year I had a patient with a complaint very similar to your own. Her obsession with sex reached the point where she was taking obscene phone-calls even when they were collect."

"You cured her?"

"No, but a gynecologist did." He nodded. "I came to the conclusion that her mental condition was linked to a physical disturbance. So I sent her to a gynecologist and sure enough, he discovered she had a chronic inflammation of the uterus. A few days of medication and her troubles were over."

"Do you think something like that is wrong with me?"

"Let's find out." Dr. Degradian buzzed his receptionist on the intercom. "Miss Carriage? Get me Mount Sinus Hospital. I want to refer a patient to Dr. Pruritis. That's right, the specialist—eye, ear, nose and vagina—"

Angela listened as he set up an appointment for her the following morning.

"Let me see you tomorrow afternoon when it's over," he told her. "With any luck, this could be the solution to your sexual problems."

She rose and wiggled to the door. "I'll keep my fingers crossed."

"Good idea," Dr. Degradian said. "Also your legs."

It was already five o'clock next afternoon when Angela appeared at Dr. Degradian's office.

"Sorry I'm late," she said. "I got waylaid."

"I know." The psychiatrist frowned. "Dr. Pruritis just called me." He shook his head. "It's unbelievable—an old man like that—how could you do such a thing?"

"It was easy. All I did was—"

"Spare me the details." He sat back, sighing. "Poor old Pruritis! You have just ruined one of the profession's finest and most upstanding members."

"But I didn't ruin it," the girl protested. "As a matter of fact, he told me it had never felt better in years."

"Incredible." Dr. Degradian shook his head. "And here I thought we were making progress."

"But we are. Didn't he tell you the results of the examination?"

"That's just it. He said you were in perfect physical condition. No inflammation, infection or abnormality whatsoever. Which means the trouble is all in your mind. If you'd just consent to analysis and put your trust in me and Medicare—"

"I can't wait three years." The blue eyes clouded with tears. "The way I feel now I can't wait three minutes. I need him now."

"Who?"

"The incubus. I want him back."

"But my dear young lady—"

"I'm not your dear young lady!" Angela began to sob quietly. "And if you won't help me I won't be your patient, either." She started for the door and Dr. Degradian raised his hand hastily.

“Let’s talk this over—”

“Talking doesn’t work. I’ve had enough of that, Dr. Degradian.” She paused abruptly. “You’re Armenian, aren’t you?”

He nodded.

“And is it true most Armenian names end in ‘ian’?”

“Yes. That means ‘son of.’ ”

“Then you ought to call yourself Dr. Bitchian!”

“Now see here—”

“I’m sorry.” Angela’s voice softened. “It’s just that I’m so uptight. I thought the incubus was bad, but now that he’s gone this hangup is ten times worse. I don’t want to go through the rest of my life coming on with every man I meet. If there was only some way to get the incubus back again —”

Once more her sobs began, and Dr. Degradian’s heart melted in her tears.

“Stop sniffling,” he told her. “Perhaps there is a way.”

“You mean you could do it?”

“Give me a chance to think. This is Friday. Suppose you come in on Monday afternoon.”

Angela stared at him, new hope in her eyes. “Can you really bring the incubus back for me?”

“I’ll try,” said Dr. Degradian.

Alone in his office, he pondered the problem. Removing a patient’s hallucinations was part of his job, but restoring them would be quite another matter. Nothing in psychiatric procedure offered any precedent, and he’d have to start from square one.

Suppose Angela had been right and he’d been wrong? Suppose there actually was such a thing as an incubus? She thought so, and so did the priest who’d exorcised it. And since the exorcism had worked, maybe the incubus did exist.

But if so, how could he find it? You just don't look up an incubus in the Yellow Pages—

Stung by inspiration, he reached for the phone-book, then riffled through it as he searched for the proper heading.

Obstetricians, Ophthalmologists, Opticians—nothing there. He turned back a few pages and suddenly he found it.

Occultists.

The list was long and the accompanying display advertisements were of little help. He couldn't use a palmist, a spirit medium, or a team of fortune-tellers who promised to work their crystal balls off for you.

For a moment he was tempted by a necromancer who proclaimed "You Raise the Cash—We Raise the Dead! Contact the corpse of your choice without paying a stiff price! All Major Credit Cards Accepted."

It sounded good, but he wasn't looking for a chance to palaver with a cadaver. The incubus, if such a thing existed, was very much alive. He needed someone specializing in witchcraft or black magic.

Suddenly his eyes strayed to the bottom of the listings. "Malcolm Hex, M.D. Practising witchdoctor. Call anytime—midnight til dawn."

He reached for the phone.

Promptly at the stroke of twelve, Dr. Degradian entered the witch-doctor's office in a rundown section of town and seated himself in the shabby little reception-room. He picked up a tattered copy of *Who's Who in Hoodoo* but before he could start reading it in the guttering candlelight Malcolm Hex appeared and ushered him into his private office.

The office looked encouraging; its walls were covered with magical spells scrawled in chicken-blood and there was a goat-skeleton hanging at one corner. Malcolm Hex was obviously a black magician, black as the ace of spades.

It seemed a little strange to see this tall man in a conventional business suit seated behind his desk while he stirred the contents of a bubbling cauldron, and Dr. Degradian couldn’t control his curiosity.

“What’s in the pot?” he inquired.

“Just the usual voodoo goo.” Malcolm Hex smiled. “Bat brains, human entrails, lizard eyes, that sort of thing.”

“Toadstools?”

“No. My toads are all constipated.”

Dr. Degradian stared uneasily at a shrunken head dangling from the ceiling; it reminded him of his congressman. “Your ad said you’re an M.D.,” he said.

“And so I am.” Malcolm Hex nodded. “Master of Demonology. Graduated from Miskatonic University back in ’78.”

“Can you conjure up a demon?”

“Evocation is my vocation. Just say the word and I’ll say the spell.”

“What about an incubus?”

“No problem.” The black man rose, stripping off his jacket and shirt. He stood there, naked to the waist, his body glistening in the candlelight as he rubbed a pungent ointment into his gleaming torso. “I always scrub before an operation,” he said.

Reaching into a desk-drawer he pulled out a jar of newt’s blood and smeared its contents over his face, then stuck a gleaming white object in his nose.

“What’s that?” the psychiatrist asked.

“Just a baby’s femur. I’ve got to bone up for the occasion.”

Malcolm Hex began to stir the cauldron again, using a rooster’s claw, and a hiss of steam arose. “Now about this incubus of yours,” he said. “Are you quite sure that’s what you want? Most of my male clients prefer a succubus.”

Dr. Degradian reddened. “This isn’t for me. It’s for a young lady I know.”

“I see. Suppose you tell me about her.”

“Well to begin with, she’s a widow—”

Malcolm Hex frowned and stopped stirring. Then he took the bone out of his nose and dropped it into the pot.

“Sorry,” the black man said. “I don’t do widows.”

Sunday arrived, and with it came a call from Dr. Degradian’s answering-service. He dialed the number given to him and Angela’s voice greeted him.

“Any luck?” she murmured.

“Not yet. But I’m still trying.”

“You’d better come up with something,” she told him. “If not, I’m leaving town tomorrow.”

The psychiatrist’s heart skipped a beat. “Where on earth are you going?”

“Bangkok. I like the name.”

She hung up, leaving him speechless. Poor girl—he knew he couldn’t bear to lose her now, but how could he prevent it?

Desperately, Dr. Degradian wrestled with his problem and lost. If the witch-doctor wouldn’t help, he’d have to do the job himself.

Way to go—and he went. The psychiatrist spent the entire morning racing from one bookstore to another. Most of them were closed, and the few remaining open couldn’t supply him with what he needed.

It was late afternoon when he stumbled into a dingy second-hand shop and unearthed the proper volume from behind a dusty stack in the rear of the establishment, wedged beside an autographed copy of the Bible.

Back at home he spent the entire evening hours feverishly scanning the crumbling yellowed pages of the ancient iron-bound *grimoire,* translating the Latin text as he did so. Just before midnight he found the right incantation, and another hour passed before he finished drawing the pentagram on the kitchen floor, set the tall candles in place, and began to utter the spell aloud.

As he did so he was still conscious of his own doubts. Here he was, the member of an illustrious profession that included such historic figures as

Sigmund Freud and Dr. Joyce Brothers, resorting to sorcery! But he had no choice, and if it worked—

A rumbling sound arose. Suddenly his nostrils were assailed with the noxious odor of sulphur and brimstone, like rush-hour on the freeway.

Then, just beyond the chalk-drawn outline of the pentagram, a towering spiral of smoke whirled and coalesced into solid shape.

Dr. Degradian stared at the incubus in horror as it squatted before him.

The naked body was manlike, but its skin was green and purple; no man ever wore such horns or looked so horny. It was an incubus, no doubt of that, for now its grinning countenance changed into the face of Burt Reynolds.

“Jesus Christ!” the psychiatrist muttered.

“Sorry—you must have the wrong spell,” the creature told him. “I’m an incubus.” He gestured towards his thighs.

“I can see that, all right,” Dr. Degradian said. “You certainly are well-organized.”

“Flattery will get you nowhere,” the creature growled. “Why did you summon me?”

“I have a task for you.”

The incubus blinked its scaly eyelids. “What sort of task?”

“No big deal. Just the usual.”

The demon cringed. “Please—” He sighed loudly, and the dishes in the kitchen cupboard began to shake. “In case you don’t know it, I happen to be the last of my line. Nobody else does this sort of thing any more, and I’m all booked up. Fed up, too.” He sighed again, breaking several glasses on the sink-top. “If you only knew how sick I am of visiting all those little old ladies in the retirement homes—all those members of Women’s Lib—”

“It’s nothing like that,” Dr. Degradian soothed.

But the incubus ignored him. “You don’t know what I’ve been through,” he croaked. “In the good old days, before this damned permissiveness came in, everything was easy. I dated good-looking unmarried women, beautiful young wives with elderly husbands, even school-girls. A little loving went a long way and giving them what they wanted was a piece of cake, in a manner of speaking. But today—" The incubus shuddered. "Today they've all read those sex-manuals, they've watched too many X-rated movies." He gestured towards his face. "I even have to keep changing my appearance to satisfy them. First it was Paul Newman, then Robert Redford. Now it's this Burt Reynolds character, and next year I suppose I'll have to do an entire rock-group. Look at me—I'm worn out, nothing but skin and bones! It's getting so I'm not even good for a one-night stand any more. What I need is a leave of absence, a black sabbatical. And you expect me to take on a new job?"

Dr. Degradian shrugged. "Calm yourself. It's not a new job. All I want you to do is go back to an old one. There's a girl named Angela—"

"Angela?" The creature began to tremble. "Oh no—not Angela!"

"You remember her?"

"Remember her?" the incubus wailed. "Why do you think I'm in this condition? She's the one who really wore me out. Another go-round with her and I'll be wearing a truss!" He shook his head so emphatically that his horns rattled. "No way! Angela is a nympholept. An incubus can't help her—what she needs is a psychiatrist."

"But you're my last chance—"

"Sorry." The thing rose from his crouching position and yawned wearily, blowing out several candles in the process. "Now if you'll excuse me, I must be on my way. I'm calling it a night just as soon as I finish at the orphanage."

"Orphanage?"

The incubus nodded. "It's my duty," he murmured. "You know the old saying—spare the rod and spoil the child."

Then, in a puff of smoke, he disappeared.

Monday dawned. Dr. Degradian scrubbed the kitchen floor and aired the place out, then sank into bed and an uneasy slumber. He wouldn't have gone to the office at all if it wasn’t for Angela’s afternoon appointment.

He dragged himself in, carrying his load of guilt. He had failed the girl, failed himself, and now there was no hope to cling to.

Instead he clung to his desk as she breezed in, buoyant and lovely as ever, her eyes bright with expectation.

“How did you manage yesterday?” Dr. Degradian asked. “Were you able to cope?”

Angela blushed prettily. “There was no one to cope with,” she said. “Finally I went for a walk to take my mind off you-know-what.”

“Did that help?”

“Yes, a little. I lucked out by finding a construction site where I could watch the erection of a tall building.”

Dr. Degradian nodded, bracing himself for the inevitable question.

The blue eyes turned to him, alive with anticipation. “And what about you, Doctor—did you get the incubus back?”

“I’m afraid not.”

The eyes began to brim with tears, and Dr. Degradian agonized at the sight of her despair. “He said you were a nympho, and no one could help you now but a psychiatrist.”

Angela stared at him. Then, surprisingly she smiled. “You’re a psychiatrist.”

Dr. Degradian shrugged. “But you refuse treatment. What can I do?”

“Marry me.”

“What—?”

“Marry me!” Angela rose. “Don’t you see I’ve had a thing about you all along?” She nodded eagerly. “Who needs an incubus anyway—all those horns and that smelly sulphur and brimstone!”

“But—”

“No buts. I’ve made up my mind. We’re going to get married!”

And then the nympho leapt.

The wedding took place the following week and Dr. Degradian stiffened himself for the ordeal ahead. That night, after Angela retired to bed, he was still undressing in the bathroom when she called to him.

"Coming," he said.

The prediction proved correct. And much to his astonishment his new bride was completely satisfied. Snuggling against the pillows she offered him a happy smile. "So that's what an orgasm is," she murmured. "I always wondered."

"You mean you never—?"

"Not until now." Angela put her arms around him. "Darling, do you think you could possibly—?"

"It seems highly probable," Dr. Degradian told her.

And so it turned out to be a happy marriage after all. As a matter of fact, she didn't really become frigid until almost three months later . . .

1984

The Undead

Every evening at six Carol took off her glasses, but it didn’t seem to help. In the old movie reruns on TV, Cary Grant was always there to exclaim—with a mixture of surprise and gentlemanly lust—“Why, you’re beautiful without your glasses!”

No one had ever told Carol that, even though she really was beautiful, or almost so. With her light auburn hair, fair skin, regular features and sapphire-blue eyes, she needed only the benefit of contact lenses to perfect her image.

But why bother, when Cary Grant wasn’t around? The bookshop’s customers for first editions and rare manuscripts seemed more interested in caressing parchment than in fondling flesh.

And by nightfall the place was empty; even its owner had departed, leaving Carol to shut up shop, lock the doors, and set the alarms. With a valuable stock on hand she was always mindful of her responsibility.

Or almost always.

Tonight, seated in the rear office and applying her lipstick preparatory to departure, she was surprised to hear footsteps moving across the uncarpeted floor in the hall beyond.

Carol frowned and put her compact down on the desktop. She distinctly recalled turning out the shop lights, but in her preoccupation with self-pity could she have forgotten to lock the front entrance?

Apparently so, because now the footsteps halted and a figure appeared in the office doorway. Carol blinked at the black blur of the body surmounted by a white blob of head and hair.

Then she put on her glasses and the black blur was transformed into a dark suit, the white blob became the face of an elderly gentleman with a receding hairline. Both his suit and his face were wrinkled, but the old man's dignified bearing overshadowed sartorial shortcomings and the onslaughts of age. And when he spoke his voice was resonant.

"Good evening. Are you the proprietor of this establishment?"

"I'm sorry," Carol said. "He's already left. We're closed for the night."

"So I see." The stranger nodded. "Forgive me for intruding at this late hour, but I have traveled a long way and hoped I might still find him here."

"We open tomorrow at ten. He'll be here then. Or if you'd like to leave a message—"

"It is a matter of some urgency," the old man said. "Word has reached me that your firm recently came into the possession of a manuscript—a manuscript which supposedly disappeared over seventy years ago."

Carol nodded. "That's right. The *Dracula* original."

"You know the novel?"

"Of course. I read it years ago."

Reaching into his pocket the stranger produced an old-fashioned calling card and handed it to her. "Then perhaps you will find this name familiar."

Carol peered at the lettering. The Gothic typescript was difficult to decipher and she repeated aloud what she read.

"Abraham Van Helsing?"

"Correct." The old man smiled.

Carol shook her head. "Wait a minute. You don't expect me to believe —"

"That I am the namesake of my great-grandfather, Mynheer Doctor Professor Van Helsing of Amsterdam?" He nodded. "Oh yes, I can assure you that *Dracula* is not entirely a work of fiction. The identity of some of its characters was disguised, but others, like my illustrious ancestor, appeared under their own names. Now do you understand why I am interested in the original manuscript?" As he spoke, the old man glanced at the safe in the far corner. "Is it too much to hope that you have it here?"

"I'm sorry," Carol said. "I'm afraid it's been sold."

"Sold?"

"Yes. The day after we sent out our announcement the phones started ringing. I've never seen anything like it; just about every customer on our mailing list wanted to make a bid. And the final offer we got was simply fantastic."

"Could you tell me who purchased the manuscript?"

"A private collector. I don't know his name, because my boss didn't tell me. Part of the deal was that the buyer would remain completely anonymous. I guess he was afraid somebody would try to steal it from him."

The old man's frown conveyed a mingling of anger and contempt. "How very cautious of him! But then they were all cautious—concealing something which never truly belonged to any of them. That manuscript has been hidden away all these years because it was stolen in the first place. Stolen from the man to whom the author gave it in gratitude for providing him with the basis of the novel—my own greatgrandfather." He stared at Carol. "Who brought this to your employer?"

"He didn't tell me that, either. It's very hush-hush—"

"You see? Just as I told you. He must have known he had no right to possess it. Thieves, all of them!"

Carol shrugged. "Really, I didn't know."

"Of course. And I'm not blaming you, my dear young lady. But perhaps you can still be of some assistance to me. Did you happen to see the manuscript before it was sold?"

"Can you describe it?"

"Well, to begin with, it wasn't called *Dracula.* The handwritten title was *The Undead.*"

"Ah yes." The old man nodded quickly. "That would be the original. What else can you recall about it?"

"The cover page was in Bram Stoker's handwriting, but the manuscript was typed. The author's changes and editorial corrections were done by hand, and so was the renumbering of the pages. It looked as though a lot of pages had been omitted—almost a hundred, I'd guess." Carol paused. "That's really just about all I remember."

"And more than enough. From your description there's no doubt it is the genuine manuscript." The old man nodded again. "You're sure about pages being omitted?"

"Yes, quite sure, because my boss commented on that. Why, is it important?"

"Very. It seems Bram Stoker was wiser than his informant. Although the published novel does refer to Count Dracula's plan to bring vampirism to England, this motive is not stressed. What the missing pages contained is what Van Helsing revealed about Dracula's ultimate goal—to spread vampirism throughout the world. They also presented factual proof of Dracula's existence, proof too convincing to be ignored. Stoker wrote down everything Van Helsing told him but had second thoughts about including it in his final draft. I wished to make certain, however, that those pages didn't still exist in manuscript form. Now that I know, it won't even be necessary to seek out the new owner."

"But you talk as though all this was true," Carol said. "It's only a novel. And Count Dracula gets killed in the end."

"Again an example of Stoker's caution," the old man told her. "He had to invent a death scene to reassure his readers. Even so, just think of the influence that novel has had on millions of people who learned of Dracula and vampirism through the book and the theater and films. As it is, many of them still half believe." The resonant voice deepened. "What do you think would have happened if Stoker hadn't novelized the story—if he'd written it for what it was, a true account of the actual experiences of Abraham Van Helsing? Even in novel form, if those missing pages still existed their message might bring a warning to the world which would endanger Dracula's plans."

Carol glanced at her watch as he spoke. Six-thirty. She was getting hungry and the old man's hangup was getting on her nerves. She stood up, forcing a smile.

“This has been very interesting,” she said. “But I really must close up now.”

“You have been most kind.” The old man smiled. “It seems a pity you do not entirely believe me, but I speak the truth. Count Dracula is as real as I am.”

Carol reached for her open compact on the desk. In the oval mirror she saw her reflection, but there was none of her visitor, even though he was standing quite close. Close enough for her to smell the rank breath, see the whiteness of the pointed teeth, feel the surprising strength of the hands that rose now to imprison her in their implacable grip.

As he forced her head back Carol’s glasses dislodged, clattering to the floor, and for a moment her image in the compact mirror was indeed quite beautiful. Then the bright droplets spurted down, blotting it out forever.

Everybody Needs A Little Love

During the 1960s, the odds were good that, if you were watching TV drama, it had been written by Rod Serling, Richard Matheson, Paddy Chayefsky, Charles Beaumont, Reginald Rose—or Robert Bloch. In winning awards from Screenwriters Guild and Writers Guild of America, his screenplays and scripts, many for Alfred Hitchcock, were beyond uncomputerized counting, and standard-setters for two media.

Yet Bloch, born April 5, 1917, in Chicago, has also found the invention and industry to write such hypnotically-named novels and stories as Out of the Mouths of Graves, Firebug, *"The Scarf,"* Spiderweb, The Couch, *"Yours Truly Jack the Ripper"* Such Stuff as Screams Are Made Of, *"The Old College Try"—oh, yes, and* Strange Eons, Twilight Zone: The Motion Picture, Psycho, *and* Psycho II.

Robert A. Bloch sold his first story at 17 but earned his bread as a lecturer and ad copywriter, in Milwaukee, until the famous Psycho *did for him what most writers pray their books will do, and Hollywood beckoned. He's remained, since 1960. William F. Nolan remarked, as editor of his Bantam anthology entitled* The Sea of Space, *that Bob has "produced more than four hundred stories and articles, some two-dozen books, plus radio and TV scripts uncounted." But Nolan's anthology was published in 1970!*

Charles L. Grant, another anthologist, speaks of Bloch's fiction leaving an "afterimage." Stephen King, who admires the filmed Psycho *as much as most, reminds us (in* Danse Macabre) *that Norman Bates' dichotomous disposition was well-drawn in Bob's pre-Hitchcock novel. The surprising twists of "Everybody Needs a Little Love," your upcoming love-feast, are* *state-of-the-art Bloch, told, as always, in his quick-paced style. Quite often, I might add, Robert Bloch* is *the state of this art.*

It started out as a gag.

I'm sitting at the bar minding my own business, which was drinking up a storm, when this guy got to talking with me.

Curtis his name was, David Curtis. Big, husky-looking straight-arrow type; I figured him to be around thirty, same as me. He was belting it pretty good himself, so right off we had something in common. Curtis told me he was assistant manager of a department store, and since I'm running a videogame arcade in the same shopping mall we were practically neighbors. But talk about coincidence—turns out he'd just gotten a divorce three months ago, exactly like me.

Which is why we both ended up in the bar every night after work, at Happy Hour time. Two drinks for the price of one isn't a bad deal, not if you're trying to cut it with what's left after those monthly alimony payments.

"You think you got zapped?" Curtis said. "My ex-wife wiped me out. I'm not stuck for alimony, but I lost the house, the furniture and the car. Then she hits me for the legal fees and I wind up with zero."

"I read you," I told him. "Gets to the point where you want out so bad you figure it's worth anything. But like the old saying, sometimes the cure is worse than the disease."

"This is my cure," Curtis said, finishing his scotch and ordering another round. "Trouble is, it doesn't work."

"So why are you here?" I asked. "You ought to try that singles bar down the street. Plenty of action there."

"Not for me." Curtis shook his head. "That's where I met my ex. Last thing I need is a singles bar."

“Me neither,” I said. “But sometimes it’s pretty lonesome just sitting around the apartment watching the Late Show. And I’m not into cooking or housework.”

“I can handle that.” Curtis rattled his rocks and the bartender poured a refill. “What gets me is going out. Ever notice what happens when you go to a restaurant by yourself? Even if the joint is empty they’ll always steer you to one of those crummy little deuce-tables in back, next to the kitchen or the men’s john. The waiter gives you a dirty look because a loner means a smaller tip. And when the crowd starts coming in you can kiss service goodbye. The waiter forgets about your order, and when it finally comes, everything’s cold. Then, after you finish, you sit around ’til hell freezes, waiting for your check.”

“Right on,” I said. “So maybe you need a change of pace.”

“Like what?”

“Like taking a run up to Vegas some weekend. There’s always ads in the paper for bargain rates on airfare and rooms.”

“And every damned one of them is for couples.” Curtis thumped his glass down on the bar. “Two-for-one on the plane tickets. Double-occupancy for the rooms.”

“Try escort service,” I told him. “Hire yourself a date, no strings—”

“Not on my income. And I don’t want to spend an evening or a weekend with some yacky broad trying to make small-talk. What I need is the silent type.”

“Maybe you could run an ad for a deaf-mute?”

“Knock it off! This thing really bugs me. I’m tired of being treated like a cross between a leper and the Invisible Man.”

“So what’s the answer?” I said. “There’s got to be a way—”

“Damn betcha!” Curtis stood up fast, which was a pretty good trick, considering the load he was carrying.

“Where you going?” I asked.

“Come along and see,” he said.

Five minutes later I'm watching Curtis use his night-key to unlock the back door of the department store.

Ten minutes later he has me sneaking around outside a storeroom in the dark, keeping an eye out for the security guard.

Fifteen minutes later I'm helping Curtis load a window dummy into the back seat of his rental car.

Like I said, it started out as a gag.

At least that's what I thought it was when he stole Estelle. "That's her name," he told me. "Estelle."

This was a week later, the night he invited me over to his place for dinner. I stopped by the bar for a few quickies beforehand and when I got to his apartment I was feeling no pain. Even so, I started to get uptight the minute I walked in.

Seeing the window dummy sitting at the dinette table gave me a jolt, but when he introduced her by name it really rattled my cage.

"Isn't she pretty?" Curtis said.

I couldn't fault him on that. The dummy was something special—blonde wig, baby-blue eyes, long lashes, and a face with a kind of what-are-you-waiting-for smile. The arms and legs were what you call articulated, and her figure was the kind you see in centerfolds. On top of that, Curtis had dressed it up in an evening gown, with plenty of cleavage.

When he noticed me eyeballing the outfit he went over to a wall closet and slid the door open. Damned if he didn't have the rack full of women's clothes—suits, dresses, sports outfits, even a couple of nighties.

"From the store?" I asked.

Curtis nodded. "They'll never miss them until inventory, and I got tired of seeing her in the same old thing all the time. Besides, Estelle likes nice clothes."

I had to hand it to him, putting me on like this without cracking a smile.

“Sit down and keep her company,” Curtis said. “I’ll have dinner on the table in a minute.”

I sat down. I mean, what the hell else was I going to do? But it gave me an antsy feeling to have a window dummy staring at me across the table in the candlelight. That’s right, he’d put candles on the table, and in the shadows you had to look twice to make sure this was only a mannequin or whatever you call it.

Curtis served up a couple of really good steaks and a nice tossed salad. He’d skipped the drinks-before-dinner routine; instead he poured a pretty fair Cabernet with the meal, raising his glass in a toast.

“To Estelle,” he said.

I raised my glass too, feeling like a wimp, but trying to go along with the gag. “How come she’s not drinking?” I asked.

“Estelle doesn’t drink.” He still didn’t smile. “That’s one of the things I like about her.”

It was the way he said it that got to me. I had to break up that straight face of his, so I gave him a grin. “I notice she isn’t eating very much either.”

Curtis nodded. “Estelle doesn’t believe in stuffing her face. She wants to keep her figure.”

He was still deadpanning, so I said, “If she doesn’t drink and she doesn’t eat, what happens when you take her to a restaurant?”

“We only went out once,” Curtis told me. “Tell me truth, it wasn’t the way I expected. They gave us a good table all right, but the waiter kept staring at us and the other customers started making wise-ass remarks under their breath, so now we eat at home. Estelle doesn’t need restaurants.”

The straighter he played it the more it burned me, so I gave it another shot. “Then I guess you won’t be taking her to Vegas after all?”

“We went there last weekend,” Curtis said. “I was right about the plane-fare. Not only did I save a bundle, but we got the red-carpet treatment. When they saw me carrying Estelle they must have figured her for an invalid—we got to board first and had our choice of seats upfront. The stewardess even brought her a blanket."

Curtis was really on a roll now, and all I could do was go with it. "How'd you make out with the hotel?" I asked.

"No sweat. Double-occupancy rate, just like the ads said, plus complimentary cocktails and twenty dollars in free chips for the casino."

I tried one more time. "Did Estelle win any money?"

"Oh no—she doesn't gamble." Curtis shook his head. "We ended up spending the whole weekend right there in our room, phoning room service for meals and watching closed-circuit TV. Most of the time we never even got out of bed."

That shook me. "You were in bed with her?"

"Don't worry, it was king-size, plenty of room. And I found out another nice thing about Estelle. She doesn't snore."

I squeezed-off another grin. "Then just what does she do when you go to bed with her?"

"Sleep, of course." Curtis gave me a double-take. "Don't go getting any ideas. If I wanted the other thing I could have picked up one of those inflatable rubber floozies from a sex-shop. But there's no hanky-panky with Estelle. She's a real lady."

"A real lady," I said. "Now I've heard everything."

"Not from her." Curtis nodded at the dummy. "Haven't you noticed? I've been doing all the talking and she hasn't said a word. You don't know how great it is to have someone around who believes in keeping her mouth shut. Sure, I do the cooking and the housework, but it's no more of a hassle than when I was living here alone."

"You don't feel alone anymore, is that it?"

"How could I? Now when I come home nights I've got somebody waiting for me. No nagging, no curlers in the hair—just the way she is now, neat and clean and well-dressed. She even uses that perfume I gave her. Can't you smell it?"

Damned if he wasn't right. I *could* smell perfume.

I sneaked another peek at Estelle. Sitting in the shadows with the candlelight soft on her hair and face, she almost had me fooled for a minute. Almost, but not quite.

“Just look at her,” Curtis said. “Beautiful! Look at that smile!”

Now, for the first time, he smiled too. And it was his smile I looked at, not hers.

“Okay,” I said. “You win. If you’re trying to tell me Estelle is better company than most women, it’s no contest.”

“I figured you’d understand.” Curtis hadn’t changed his expression, but there was something wrong about that smile of his, something that got to me.

So I had to say it. “I don’t want to be a party-pooper, but the way you come on, maybe there’s such a thing as carrying a gag too far.”

He wasn’t smiling now. “Who said anything about a gag? Are you trying to insult Estelle?”

“I’m not trying to insult anybody,” I told him. “Just remember, she’s only a dummy.”

“Dummy?” All of a sudden he was on his feet and coming around the table, waving those big fists of his. “You’re the one who’s a dummy! Get the hell out of here before I—”

I got out, before.

Then I went over to the bar, had three fast doubles, and headed for home to hit the sack. I went out like a light but it didn’t keep the dreams away, and all night long I kept staring at the smiles—the smile on his face and the smile on the dummy’s—and I don’t know which one spooked me the most.

Come to think of it, they both looked the same.

That night was the last night I went to the bar for a long time. I didn’t want to run into Curtis there, but I was still seeing him in those dreams.

I did my drinking at home now, but the dreams kept coming, and it loused me up at work when I was hungover. Pretty soon I started pouring a shot at breakfast instead of orange juice.

So I went to see Dr. Mannerheim.

That shows how rough things were getting, because I don't like doctors and I've always had a thing about shrinks. This business of lying on a couch and spilling your guts to a stranger always bugged me. But it had got to where I started calling in sick and just sat home staring at the walls. Next thing you know, I'd start climbing them.

I told Mannerheim that when I saw him.

"Don't worry," he said. "I won't ask you to lay on a couch or take ink-blot tests. The physical shows you're a little rundown, but this can be corrected by proper diet and a vitamin supplement. Chances are you may not even need therapy at all."

"Then what am I here for?" I said.

"Because you have a problem. Suppose we talk about it."

Dr. Mannerheim was just a little baldheaded guy with glasses; he looked a lot like an uncle of mine who used to take me to ballgames when I was a kid. So it wasn't as hard to talk as I'd expected.

I filled him in on my setup—the divorce and all—and he picked up on it right away. Said it was getting to be a common thing nowadays with so many couples splitting. There's always a hassle working out a new life-style afterwards and sometimes a kind of guilty feeling; you keep wondering if it was your fault and that maybe something's wrong with you.

We got into the sex bit and the drinking, and then he asked me about my dreams.

That's when I told him about Curtis.

Before I knew it I'd laid out the whole thing—getting smashed in the bar, stealing the dummy, going to Curtis's place for dinner, and what happened there.

"Just exactly what did happen?" Mannerheim said. "You say you had a few drinks before you went to his apartment—maybe three or four—and you drank wine with your dinner."

"I wasn't bombed, if that's what you mean."

"But your perceptions were dulled," he told me. "Perhaps he intended to put you on for a few laughs, but when he saw your condition he got carried away."

"If you'd seen the way he looked when he told me to get out you'd know it wasn't a gag," I said. "The guy is a nut-case." Something else hit me all of a sudden, and I sat up straight in my chair. "I remember a movie I saw once. There's this ventriloquist who gets to thinking his dummy is alive. Pretty soon he starts talking to it, then he gets jealous of it, and next thing you know—"

Mannerheim held up his hand. "Spare me the details. There must be a dozen films like that. But in all my years of practice I've never read, let alone run across, a single case where such a situation actually existed. It all goes back to the old Greek legend about Pygmalion, the sculptor who made a statue of a beautiful woman that came to life.

"But you've got to face facts." He ticked them off on his fingers. "Your friend Curtis has a mannequin, not a ventriloquist's dummy. He doesn't try to create the illusion that it speaks, or use his hand to make it move. And he didn't create the figure, he's not a sculptor. So what does that leave us with?"

"Just one thing," I said. "He's treating this dummy like a real person."

Mannerheim shook his head. "A man who's capable of carrying a window dummy into a restaurant and a hotel—or who claims to have done so in order to impress you—may still just have taken advantage of your condition to play out an elaborate practical joke."

"Wrong." I stood up. "I tell you he believes the dummy is alive."

"Maybe and maybe not. It isn't important." Mannerheim took off his glasses and stared at me. "What's important is that *you* believe the dummy is alive."

It hit me like a sock in the gut. I had to sit down again and catch my breath before I could answer him.

"You're right," I said. "That's why I really wanted out of there. That's why I keep having those damned dreams. That's why there's a drinking problem. Maybe I was juiced-up when I saw her, maybe Curtis hypnotized me, how the hell do I know? But whatever happened or didn't happen, it worked. And I've been running scared ever since."

"Then stop running." Dr. Mannerheim put his glasses on again. "The only way to fight fear is to face it."

"You mean go back there?"

He nodded at me. "If you want to get rid of the dreams, get rid of the dependency on alcohol, the first step is to separate fantasy from reality. Go to Curtis, and go sober. Examine the actual circumstances with a clear head. I'm satisfied that you'll see things differently. Then, if you still think you need further help, get in touch."

We both stood up, and Dr. Mannerheim walked me to the door. "Have a good day," he said.

I didn't.

It took all that weekend just to go over what he'd said, and another two days before I could buy his advice. But it made sense. Maybe Curtis had been setting me up like the shrink said; if not, then he was definitely a flake. But one way or another I had to find out.

So Wednesday night I went up to his apartment. I wasn't on the sauce, and I didn't call Curtis in advance. That way, if he didn't know I was coming, he wouldn't plan on pulling another rib—if it was a rib.

It must have been close to nine o'clock when I walked down the hall and knocked on his door. There was no answer; maybe he was gone for the evening. But I kept banging away, just in case, and finally the door opened.

"Come on in," Curtis said.

I stared at him. He was wearing a pair of dirty, wrinkled-up pajamas, but he looked like he hadn't slept for a week—his face was grey, big circles under his eyes, and he needed a shave. When we shook hands I felt like I was holding a sack of ice-cubes.

"Good to see you," he told me, closing the door after I got inside. "I was hoping you'd come by so's I could apologize for the way I acted the other night."

"No hard feelings," I said."

"I knew you wouldn't hold it against me," he went on. "That's what I told Estelle."

Curtis turned and nodded across the living room, and in the dim light I saw the dummy sitting there on the sofa, facing the TV screen. The set was turned on to some old western movie, but the sound was way down and I could scarcely hear the dialogue.

It didn't matter, because I was looking at the dummy. She wore some kind of fancy cocktail dress, which figured, because I could see the bottle on the coffee table and smell the whisky on Curtis's breath. What grabbed me was the other stuff she was wearing—the earrings, and the bracelet with the big stones that sparkled and gleamed. They had to be costume jewelry, but they looked real in the light from the TV tube. And the way the dummy sat, sort of leaning forward, you'd swear it was watching the screen.

Only I knew better. Seeing the dummy cold sober this way, it was just a wooden figure, like the others I saw in the storeroom where Curtis stole it. Dr. Mannerheim was right; now that I got a good look the dummy didn't spook me anymore.

Curtis went over to the coffee table and picked up the bottle. "Care for a drink?" he asked.

I shook my head. "No, thanks, not now."

But he kept holding the bottle when he bent down and kissed the dummy on the side of its head. "How can you hear anything with the sound so low?" he said. "Let me turn up the volume for you."

And so help me, that's what he did. Then he smiled at the dummy. "I don't want to interrupt while you're watching, honey. So if it's okay with you, we'll go in the bedroom and talk there." He moved back across the living room and started down the hall. I followed him into the bedroom at the far end and he closed the door. It shut off the sound from the TV set but now I heard another noise, a kind of chirping.

Looking over at the far corner I saw the bird-cage on a stand, with a canary hopping around inside.

“Estelle likes canaries,” Curtis said. “Same as my ex. She always had a thing for pets.” He tilted the bottle.

I just stood there, staring at the room. It was a real disaster area—bed not made, heaped-up clothes lying on the floor, empty fifths and glasses everywhere. The place smelled like a zoo.

The bottle stopped gurgling and then I heard the whisper. “Thank God you came.”

I glanced up at Curtis. He wasn’t smiling now. “You’ve got to help me,” he said.”

“What’s the problem?” I asked.”

“Keep your voice down,” he whispered. “I don’t want her to hear us.”

“Don’t start that again,” I told him. “I only stopped in because I figured you’d be straightened out by now.”

“How can I? She doesn’t let me out of her sight for a minute—the last time I got away from here was three days ago, when I turned in the rental car and bought her the Mercedes.” That threw me. “Mercedes? You’re putting me on.”

Curtis shook his head. “It’s downstairs in the garage right now—brand new 280-SL, hasn’t been driven since I brought it home. Estelle doesn’t like me to go out alone and she doesn’t want to go out either. I keep hoping she’ll change her mind because I’m sick of being cooped-up here, eating those frozen TV dinners. You’d think she’d at least go for a drive with me after getting her the car and all.”

“I thought you told me you were broke,” I said. “Where’d you get the money for a Mercedes?”

He wouldn’t look at me. “Never mind. That’s my business.”

“What about your business?” I asked. “How come you haven’t been showing up at work?”

“I quit my job,” he whispered. “Estelle told me to.”

“Told you? Make sense, man. Window dummies don’t talk.” He gave me a glassy-eyed stare. “Who said anything about window dummies? Don’t you remember how it was the night we got her—how she was standing there in the storage room waiting for me? The others were dummies all right, I know that. But Estelle knew I was coming, so she just stood there pretending to be like all the rest because she didn’t want you to catch on.

“She fooled you, right? I’m the only one who knew Estelle was different. There were all kinds of dummies there, some real beauties, too. But the minute I laid eyes on her I knew she was the one.

“And it was great, those first few days with her. You saw for yourself how well we got along. It wasn’t until afterwards that everything went wrong, when she started telling me about all the stuff she wanted, giving me orders, making me do crazy things.”

“Look,” I said. “If there’s anything crazy going on around here, you’re the one who’s responsible. And you better get your act together and put a stop to it right now. Maybe you can’t do it alone, the shape you’re in, but I’ve got a friend, a doctor—”

“Doctor? You think I’m whacko, is that it?” He started shaking all over and there was a funny look in his eyes. “Here I thought you’d help me, you were my last hope!”

“I want to help,” I told him. “That’s why I came. First off, let’s try to clean this place up. Then you’re going to bed, get a good night’s rest.”

“What about Estelle?” he whispered.”

“Leave that to me. When you wake up tomorrow I promise the dummy’ll be gone.”

That’s when he threw the bottle at my head.

I was still shaking the next afternoon when I got to Dr. Mannerheim’s office and told him what happened.

"Missed me by inches," I said. "But it sure gave me one hell of a scare. I ran down the hall to the living room. That damn dummy was still sitting in front of the TV like it was listening to the program and that scared me too, all over again. I kept right on running until I got home. That's when I called your answering service."

Mannerheim nodded at me. "Sorry it took so long to get back to you. I had some unexpected business."

"Look, Doc," I said. "I've been thinking. Curtis wasn't really trying to hurt me. The poor guy's so uptight he doesn't realize what he's doing anymore. Maybe I should have stuck around, tried to calm him down."

"You did the right thing." Mannerheim took off his glasses and polished them with his handkerchief. "Curtis is definitely psychotic, and very probably dangerous."

That shook me. "But when I came here last week you said he was harmless—"

Dr. Mannerheim put his glasses on. "I know. But since then I've found out a few things."

"Like what?"

"Your friend Curtis lied when he told you he quit his job. He didn't quit—he was fired."

"How do you know?"

"I heard about it the day after I saw you, when his boss called me in. I was asked to run a series of tests on key personnel as part of a security investigation. It seems that daily bank deposits for the store show a fifty-thousand dollar loss in the cash-flow. Somebody juggled the books."

"The Mercedes!" I said. "So that's where he got the money!"

"We can't be sure just yet. But polygraph tests definitely rule out other employees who had access to the records. We do know where he bought the car. The dealer only got a down-payment so the rest of the cash, around forty thousand, is still unaccounted-for."

"Then it's all a scam, right, Doc? What he really means to do is take the cash and split out. He was running a number on me about the dummy, trying to make me think he's bananas, so I wouldn't tumble to what he's up to."

"I'm afraid it isn't that simple." Mannerheim got up and started pacing the floor. "I've been doing some rethinking about Curtis and his hallucination that the dummy is alive. That canary you mentioned—a pity he didn't get it before he stole the mannequin."

"What are you driving at?"

"There are a lot of lonely people in this world, people who aren't necessarily lonely by choice. Some are elderly, some have lost all close relatives through death, some suffer an after-shock following divorce. But all of them have one thing in common—the need for love. Not physical love, necessarily, but what goes with it. The companionship, attention, a feeling of mutual affection. That's why so many of them turn to keeping pets.

"I'm sure you've seen examples. The man who spends all his time taking care of his dog. The widow who babies her kitten. The old lady who talks to her canary, treating it like an equal." I nodded. "The way Curtis treats the dummy?" Mannerheim settled down in his chair again. "Usually they don't go that far. But in extreme cases the pretense gets out of hand. They not only talk to their pets, they interpret each growl or purr or chirp as a reply. It's called personification."

"But these pet-owners—they're harmless, aren't they? So why do you say Curtis might be dangerous?"

Dr. Mannerheim leaned forward in his chair. "After talking to the people at the store I did a little further investigation on my own. This morning I went down to the courthouse and checked the files. Curtis told you he got a divorce here in town three months ago, but there's no record of any proceedings. And I found out he was lying to you about other things. He was married, all right; he did own a house and furniture and a car.

But there's nothing to show he ever turned anything over to his wife. Chances are he sold his belongings to pay off gambling debts. We know he did some heavy betting at the track."

"We?" I said. "You and who else?"

"Sheriff's department. They're the ones who told me about his wife's disappearance, three months ago."

"You mean she ran out on him?"

"That's what he said after neighbors noticed she was missing and they called him in this morning. He told them downtown that he'd come home from work one night and his wife was gone, bag and baggage—no explanation, no note, nothing. He denied they'd quarreled, said he'd been too ashamed to report her absence, and had kept hoping she'd come back or at least get in touch with him."

"Did they buy his story?"

Mannerheim shrugged. "Women do leave their husbands, for a variety of reasons, and there was nothing to show Curtis wasn't telling the truth. They put out an all-points on his wife and kept the file open, but so far no new information has turned, up, not until this embezzlement matter and your testimony. I didn't mention that this morning, but I have another appointment this evening and I'll tell them then. I think they'll take action, once they hear your evidence."

"Wait a minute," I said. "I haven't given you any evidence."

"I think you have." Mannerheim stared at me. "According to the neighbors, Curtis was married to a tall blonde with blue eyes, just like the window dummy you saw. And his wife's name was Estelle."

It was almost dark by the time I got to the bar. The Happy Hour had started, but I wasn't happy. All I wanted was a drink—a couple of drinks—enough to make me forget the whole thing.

Only it didn't work out that way. I kept thinking about what Mannerheim told me, about Curtis and the mess he was in.

The guy was definitely psyched-out, no doubt about that. He'd ripped-off his boss, lost his job, screwed up his life.

But maybe it wasn't his fault. I knew what he'd gone through because I had been there myself. Getting hit with a divorce was bad enough to make me slip my gears, and for him it must have been ten times worse. Coming home and finding his wife gone, just like that, without a word. He never said so, but he must have loved her—loved her so much that when she left him he flipped-out, stealing the dummy, calling it by her name. Even when he got to feeling trapped he couldn't give the dummy up because it reminded him of his wife. All this was pretty far-out, but I could understand. Like Mannerheim said, everybody needs a little love.

If anyone was to blame, it was that wife of his. Maybe she split because she was cheating on him, the way mine did. The only difference is that I could handle it and he cracked up. Now he'd either be tossed in the slammer or get put away in a puzzle-factory, and all because of love. His scuzzy wife got away free and he got dumped on. After Mannerheim talked to the law they'd probably come and pick him up tonight—poor guy, he didn't have a chance.

Unless I gave it to him.

I ordered up another drink and thought about that. Sure, if I tipped him off and told him to run it could get me into a bind. But who would know? The thing of it was, I could understand Curtis, even put myself in his place. Both of us had the same raw deal, but I'd lucked-out and he couldn't take it. Maybe I owed him something—at least a lousy phone-call.

So I went over to the pay-phone at the end of the bar. This big fat broad was using the phone, probably somebody's cheating wife handing her husband a line about why she wasn't home. When I came up she gave me a dirty look and kept right on yapping.

It was getting on towards eight o'clock now. I didn't know when Dr. Mannerheim's appointment was set with the Sheriff's department, but there wouldn't be much time left. And Curtis's apartment was only three blocks away.

I made it in five minutes, walking fast. So fast that I didn't even look around when I crossed in front of the entrance to the building's underground-parking place.

If I hadn't heard the horn I'd have been a goner. As it was, there were just about two seconds for me to jump back when the big blue car came tearing up the ramp and wheeled into the street. Just two seconds to get out of the way, look up, and see the Mercedes take off.

Then I took off too, running into the building and down the hall.

The only break I got was finding Curtis's apartment door wide open. He was gone—I already knew that—but all I wanted now was to use the phone.

I called the Sheriff's office and Dr. Mannerheim was there. I told him where I was and about seeing the car take off, and after that things happened fast.

In a couple of minutes a full squad of deputies wheeled in. They went through the place and came up with zilch. No Curtis, no Estelle—even the dummy's clothes were missing. And if he had forty grand or so stashed away, that was gone too; all they found was a rip in a sofa-cushion where he could have hid the loot.

But another squad had better luck, if you can call it that. They located the blue Mercedes in an old gravel-pit off the highway about five miles out of town.

Curtis was lying on the ground next to it, stone-cold dead, with a big butcher knife stuck between his shoulder-blades. The dummy was there too, lying a few feet away. The missing money was in Curtis's wallet—all big bills—and the dummy's wardrobe was in the rear seat, along with Curtis's luggage, like he'd planned to get out of town for good.

Dr. Mannerheim was with the squad out there and he was the one who suggested digging into the pit. It sounded wild, but he kept after them until they moved a lot of gravel. His hunch paid off, because about six feet down they hit pay-dirt.

It was a woman's body, or what was left of it after three months in the ground.

The coroner's office had a hell of a time making an ID. It turned out to be Curtis's wife, of course, and there were about twenty stab-wounds on her, all made with a butcher knife like the one that killed Curtis.

Funny thing, they couldn't get any prints off the handle; but there were a lot of funny things about the whole business. Dr. Mannerheim figured Curtis killed his wife and buried her in the pit, and what sent him over the edge was guilt-feelings. So he stole the dummy and tried to pretend it was his wife. Calling her Estelle, buying all those things for her—he was trying to make up for what he'd done, and finally he got to the point where he really thought she was alive.

Maybe that makes sense, but it still doesn't explain how Curtis was killed, or why.

I could ask some other questions too. If you really believe something with all your heart and soul, how long does it take before it comes true? And how long does a murder victim lie in her grave plotting to get even?

But I'm not going to say anything. If I told them my reasons they'd say I was crazy too.

All I know is that when the Mercedes came roaring out of the underground garage I had only two seconds to get out of the way. But it was long enough for me to get a good look, long enough for me to swear I saw Curtis and the dummy together in the front seat.

And Estelle was the one behind the wheel.

Pumpkin

A ghoulish little tale in the grand old Halloween tradition.

Night came early in the country.

The sun disappeared into the woods and shadows started slinking out from between the trees. Twilight brought a chill wind whipping across fallen leaves and in the distance the huddling hills were hidden in autumn haze.

That’s when David began moving through the farmhouse, locking the doors and windows.

It was a regular ritual now, but tonight Vera rebelled.

“For heaven’s sake, must you close things up so early? Well suffocate in here without fresh air.”

David didn’t answer. Instead he opened the kitchen cabinet, pulled out the vodka bottle, and poured himself a shot.

“Please, David,” she said, “couldn’t you wait until after dinner? I’ll have it on the table just as soon as Billy shows up.”

David was staring out the window, squinting at the woods across the road, but now he turned and his eyes widened.

“I thought he was in his room,” he said. “How often do I have to tell you I don’t want that kid outside when it gets dark?”

“But he’s just across the way—”

David turned so quickly that Vera got only a momentary glimpse of his face, but what she saw frightened her because he looked so frightened. And now he was hurrying to the door, flinging it open, rushing out.

As Vera moved to the window she could see him running across the road and into the tangled, weed-choked remnants of the vegetable garden beside the old Holloway place. Then he was swallowed up in the dusk and Helen lost sight of him.

I lost sight of him a long time ago, she told herself. *Ever since we moved here to the farmhouse.*

Perhaps it started even earlier than that, back in town, when David was terminated just before Easter.

"Terminated, hell!" he'd raged. "Bastards fired me, that's what they did. Ten years working my butt off for the company and now they're giving my job to a lousy computer!"

"It's not the end of the world," Vera said. "There must be other openings for controllers and you know a lot of people in the business. The thing to do is start making some calls, get out a resume."

So David called around and circulated his resume. He had several promising interviews, a few nibbles, and no firm offers. By Labor Day they'd run through his severance pay, and it was then that Vera suggested moving to the farm.

"You're out of your mind," he said. "I'm an accountant, not a manure-spreader."

"No one expects you to work the place, darling.

But it's only forty minutes from town on the turnpike and if you get a job —"

"If? I'll land something, just be patient."

"I am patient," Vera told him. "But we're already digging into our savings. And here you have a perfectly good piece of property your uncle left you, standing idle all these years, where we can live rent-free."

"That's crazy," David said. "The whole place is rundown—cost a fortune just to fix it up halfway decently."

Vera shook her head. “We’ve got our furniture and the appliances. Maybe we’ll have to spend some money on minor repairs, but the house is sound. I’m sure we can manage on far less than we’re paying here. Besides, it’ll be good for Billy, living in the country. And it will be good for you too, getting away from this rat race.”

“I don’t want to go there,” David told her. “And that’s final.”

Only it wasn’t final. Vera went right ahead on her own and made all the arrangements. Their lease on the apartment was up at the end of the month and by then she’d got the painters and carpenter and the electrical contractor working against the deadline. Just as she thought, it was no big deal.

The big deal turned out to be persuading David to make the move. But she kept after him, and when it came to facing the hike in the new leasing agreement he finally saw the light.

They’d moved in at the beginning of October, and even David had to admit she’d done a wonderful job transforming the old farmhouse into a comfortable home. Billy lost a few weeks of school but for an eight-year-old it wasn’t important, and he liked his new surroundings—ten full acres to run wild in, plus the woods behind the abandoned Holloway place across the road.

But right from the start David put his foot down. He didn’t want Billy playing anywhere near the deserted farmhouse with its caved-in roof, and served notice that the woods were strictly off-limits; in fact, he wasn’t permitted to cross the road at all.

Vera could understand about the farmhouse because it was boarded-up, and there was no telling if the structure was safe. What she couldn’t understand was why Billy couldn’t play in the yard or the wooded area beyond.

“Private property,” David said. “No trespassing. Folks out here are funny about such things.”

Vera tried Jo reason with him. “There’s nobody living within a mile of this place. And Billy isn’t going to harm anything.”

“That’s not the point. I don’t want anything to harm Billy.”

“What do you mean?”

David didn’t answer her. But it was then she began to notice the way he acted every night as darkness came, locking everything up. Vera believed in taking precautions—after all, you never know who might be driving around nowadays, looking for a place to break into—but he started so early, even before twilight, and if he found anything left open by accident he blew his stack.

But it was the drinking that bothered her the most. Back in town they usually had a cocktail before dinner to help him unwind when he came home from work. Now there was no work and he wasn’t sharing a martini with her; he was drinking straight vodka and going through as much as half a bottle a night. He’d gotten into the habit of sleeping all morning and watching television all afternoon. Funny, he’d always hated soap operas before. Maybe he still did because he never commented on them, just sat staring at the tube with a sort of glazed look in his eyes. But when Billy came home on the school bus, David turned off the set and the glazed look disappeared. He watched the youngster like a hawk if he went out to play, and chewed Vera out for not doing the same.

It’s David I should have been looking at, not Billy. Vera frowned, peering through the window. *Where did I lose him?*

She found him now, moving forth from the deep shadows across the road and pulling Billy along by the collar. As they neared the house she could hear the muffled sound of sobbing.

Now David’s voice rose as Vera opened the door. “I warned you, remember? Why didn’t you keep away from there like you were told?”

Billy raised a tear-stained face. “Honest, I was only—”

“Never mind the excuses! I give the orders here and don’t you forget it. I want you to march upstairs to your room and go straight to bed.”

“But Dad—”

“You heard me. Now get going!”

Shoulders shaking with suppressed sobs, Billy made his way up the staircase as his parents stood watching in the hall, avoiding each other's gaze. The sound of his footsteps faded and they heard the bedroom door closing in the hall above.

Vera turned, speaking softly. "Really, David, must you? The poor kid hasn't even had his dinner."

"It won't hurt him to miss a meal. And he's got to learn to obey the rules. I don't want him going over there."

Vera took a deep breath. "You keep saying that, but you never give any reasons. Just as long as he keeps away from the house I don't see—"

"You don't see anything," David said. "Come on, let's eat. I'm starving."

But when she served dinner David didn't seem hungry. He scarcely touched his food; instead he got up and poured himself another drink, bringing the bottle back to the table with him.

"Want some coffee?" she said.

"No, I'm okay." He gulped the drink, then refilled his glass.

Vera took another deep breath. "You're not okay."

David shrugged. "Have it your own way. I've got no job and no prospects. Winter's coming, we're stuck out here in the middle of nowhere, and God knows what happens next year when we run out of savings. Is it any wonder I'm uptight?"

"That part I can understand. But since we came here you act as if you were afraid of something—"

"Afraid? You're imagining things."

"I think you're the one who's imagining. That look you had when I said Billy was across the road tonight. And other times, when you just stare out the window."

David scowled. "I told you I never wanted to live here in the first place. It gives me the creeps."

"What does?"

He lowered his glass. It was empty, and so was the expression in his eyes. "All right. I didn't want to say anything but it's probably better than letting you think I don't have both oars in the water." He sighed and leaned back. "If you must know, this isn't the first time I've come to live here."

"David—you never told me that—"

"I never told anyone. But a long time ago, when my mother took sick after the divorce, I spent a summer and part of the fall with my aunt and uncle in this house. I was just about Billy's age then. So you see, I know."

"Know what?"

"About the place across the road. The first thing Uncle George did was warn me never to go over there, because the old man didn't like strangers."

"Who was he talking about?"

"Jed Holloway. He lived on the property all alone, ever since anyone around here could remember. Uncle George moved in here right after he and Aunt Louise were married, but he said that even then Jed Holloway was an old man. God only knows how long he'd been there or what he did to keep going. Maybe he raised enough food from his vegetable garden, because nobody ever saw him at the stores in town. Folks said he had a wife once, and after she died he never left the place, just boarded up all the windows like they are today. If the salesmen or anybody else showed up he'd run them off the property with a shotgun."

"Didn't anyone ever do anything about it?"

David shrugged. "Like what? It was his place. If he wanted to cut off the water and electricity that was his own affair. He had an old well and an outhouse in back, and he must have used candles in the house because some nights you could see lights flickering from cracks between the boards on the windows. It wasn't as if he was breaking any law—just an old coot who went off his rocker when he lost his wife. Maybe he lost a kid too, because she was supposed to have died in childbirth. That would explain why he hated children so much.

"I know he hated me. Playing in the yard here, sometimes I saw him puttering around in his garden, mumbling to himself. I'd never seen anyone talking to empty air before and it scared me. The way he looked was pretty scary, too—tall and skinny, with long white hair down to his shoulders and a beard that hid all of his lace except the eyes. That was the worst, those eyes of his, glaring at me when he noticed I was playing outside. I'll never forget it, him standing there dressed in rags like some kind of scarecrow come to life, a scarecrow with little red-rimmed eyes staring—"

David broke off and reached for the bottle again.

"So that's why you didn't want to come here again," Vera said.

David finished pouring and raised his glass. "There are other reasons. Oh, I never believed those stories floating around about Holloway getting into magic and practicing witchcraft. That stuff about his putting curses on people and making spells to wither their crops and kill off cattle sounded pretty wild even then, and nobody ever proved anything. I probably would have gotten used to how he looked and acted if it hadn't been for Halloween."

David drank, then sat back. From the hall beyond, the ticking of the grandfather's clock echoed through the silence.

Vera leaned forward. "Aren't you going to tell me what happened?"

"Jed Holloway left the house," David said. "That's what happened. Two other kids and myself, we were playing out by the barn after supper and we saw him come out and start walking into the woods behind his house. He was carrying an armful of candles and something that looked like a big book—black, with metal bands around it.

"These kids I was playing with, Tom and Terry, were older than me, and I guess they'd heard all those stories. Tom told us Holloway was going down into the woods to pray to the Devil. That's what witches and wizards did on Halloween, they prayed to the Devil and conjured up ghosts and demons.

"Terry didn't buy that. He said there were no such things as witches or ghosts and Jed Holloway was crazy as a bedbug. The way he acted, chasing kids and yelling at them and all, maybe it was time to teach him a lesson. So later that night, after dark, we did it."

"What did you do?"

"We tipped over Jed Holloway's outhouse."

Vera started to laugh, but David's face was grim.

"You think it's funny?"

"Of course it is."

David nodded. "So did we, at first. I remember the way we kept giggling when we sneaked across the road. It was a moonless night, everything dark and still. Not quite everything, because far away through the trees we could see little glimmers of light. Tom said Jed Holloway must be off in the woods down there fighting his candles, and sure enough we did hear a voice that sounded like someone saying a prayer, very solemn and deep.

"That sobered us a little, that and the way the shadows seemed to move in the darkness around the outhouse up ahead. Then we set to work and forgot about being scared. The outhouse was old and rickety and quite small, but prying it loose from the foundation with a shovel was a big job for kids our age. And when we did, the next problem was how to tip it over without making a racket.

"Only noise wasn't that much of a problem after all, because all at once a cold wind began to whistle through the trees. It seemed to come from somewhere back in the woods and Terry said we were in for a storm. Sure enough, the sky was pitch-black overhead and we could hear thunder growling off in the hills.

"But we didn't mind, since it drowned out the creaking when we started to lift the outhouse and tilt it over on its side. Then, just as we got ready to ease it down, lightning turned everything green and there was a clap of thunder so close and loud it almost deafened us.

"One thing for sure, it scared the hell out of Tom and Terry. They let go of their hold and took off for the road, leaving me standing there trying to balance the damned thing all by myself. I guess I was too startled to move. Then the lightning flashed again and I looked up over my shoulder.

"Jed Holloway was standing there at the edge of the woods, and he *was* the lightning. It was playing all around his body like green fire, playing around his hair and beard and his little, red pig eyes. Only it wasn't just around—the lightning seemed to be coming *from* his eyes. Then he opened his mouth and the thunder boomed right out of his throat.

"I let go of the outhouse and it dropped back into place on its foundation. At least I think it did, but I didn't wait to see. I turned and ran and the lightning followed me, stabbing into the ground at my heels. I swear one bolt came so close it grazed the hairs on my neck.

"The next thing I remember was blubbering in my bed, with Uncle George and Aunt Louise trying to calm me down. Of course they didn't believe what I told them. They even dragged me over to the bedroom window so I could look for myself. By this time the storm was howling and the rain kept coming down in buckets, but I saw that the old farmhouse was completely dark and Jed Holloway had disappeared.

"They tried to tell me he'd never been there, that it was all just my imagination, but I knew better. And when they realized I wouldn't go outside to take the school bus the next day or the day after, they finally decided to pack me up and ship me back to my mother in town." David forced a smile. "So that's the way it was."

"Was," Vera said. "Not *is."* She met his gaze. "Look, David, I understand, really I do. Living with that traumatic experience bottled up inside you all these years must have been a terrible thing. But it's over now and you've got to realize that. You're not a kid anymore, and Jed Holloway is long dead and gone."

She rose briskly, glancing at her watch. "Look at the time! We'd better get to bed."

David's hand curled around the bottle. "I'll be up later."

Vera hesitated. "Sure you don't want me to sit with you a while longer?"

"Of course not. I'll be all right now that I've gotten this out of my system. Thanks for being such a good psychiatrist."

"Come up soon." Vera smiled. "I may be able to offer you another kind of therapy."

Vera's smile faded quickly once she got upstairs. She'd done her best not to let David see how his story had disturbed her—not what he said, but the way he said it. Maybe telling all this would really help him; she hoped so.

Of course there was nothing to be alarmed about, but just the same she looked in on Billy before going on to the other bedroom. He was sound asleep.

That relieved her, and by the time she'd undressed and slid under the covers the tension began to ease. Now, if only David would come up—

The grandfather's clock tolled the hours in the hall. Windows rattled in reply, and somewhere a door groaned on rusty hinges. Vera snuggled back against her pillow, fighting a sudden childish impulse to bury her head beneath it.

No wonder David had a hang-up about returning here. To a small boy, suddenly being torn away from his home and family was a disturbing experience; living here in this lonely old house must have been an ordeal for him.

Vera sighed, shifting her head on the pillow. Thank heaven Billy didn't seem to have that problem—

"Mommy!"

Vera levered upright in sudden shock, alarm propelling her out of bed and into the hall.

"Mommy—"

The shrill cry rose again as she raced into Billy's room. Crouching amidst the tangled covers he turned to her, eyes alive with terror. Vera sank to the side of the bed and he buried his contorted face against her breast.

"There now, it's all right." Her fingers smoothed tousled hair, soothed trembling shoulders.

"That's better," she said. "What happened?"

Billy moved back on the bed, eyes darting around the room. "Where is he?"

"Nobody's here, nobody but us. You can see for yourself."

The boy stiffened. “No, he’s coming—can’t you hear him?”

And she did hear something, the sound of footsteps from the hall. For a moment Vera panicked, then relaxed as David entered.

Billy looked up. “Dad—did you see him?”

“See who?”

“That man. The one who was looking at me through the window.”

David strode across the room and stared out into the night. “Nobody’s outside,” he said. “Look—the window’s locked.”

“But he was here.” Billy’s lower lip quivered. “He was standing there, outside.”

“Now you know better than that.” David turned, shaking his head. “We’re upstairs here, on the second floor. So how could anyone be standing outside?”

Vera held Billy close. “It was only a bad dream,” she said.

“No!” The boy pulled away. “I saw him! This old man—he had long white hair and a beard and little red eyes staring at me—”

Seeing the fear in Billy’s face was all Vera could bear. Luckily for her, she couldn’t see David’s.

David’s face was haggard in the hazy afternoon sunlight filtering through the parlor window. No wonder he was beat today; it had been a rough night before they got Billy calmed down and back to sleep again, and there’d been little enough rest for him afterward.

Vera was probably right about the nightmare—what else could it have been? She said the description of the face wasn’t even a coincidence, really; most kids tend to be afraid of old men and it’s only natural when they show up in their dreams.

Natural or not, David didn’t want to think about explanations now because other things were more important. Bad enough that this place bugged him, but if it spooked Billy that was the last straw. He’d made up his mind this morning; they had to get out of here. Monday he’d drive back to the city and make the rounds and this time he wouldn't be so choosy, just take anything he could get, as long as they could move away before winter.

Right now the thing to do was revise his resume, play down all that executive-experience stuff that might turn off employers who were only looking for somebody to fill an ordinary accounting job. A pay cut didn't matter; what mattered was getting out.

But it was hard to concentrate, hard to figure how to rewrite the damned thing. Maybe Vera could help; she was good with words.

David looked up and called. "Honey—can you come here for a minute?"

No answer.

"Vera—"

Still no reply, only the tick-tock of the grandfather's clock.

He pushed back his chair and rose, striding down the hall to the kitchen. He could have sworn he saw her go there only minutes ago, but the room was empty now. Where had she disappeared to?

Peering across the room he saw that the kitchen door was ajar.

It was fear that forced him forward. Flinging the door wide, he moved out into the yard, calling her name. Before he realized it, he was at the edge of the road.

For a moment David hesitated, glancing off into the purple haze haloing the ruined house, the weed-infested garden patch and the treetops rising darkly from the slope below. He wanted to stop but he couldn't, because he knew. It hit him the moment he saw the open kitchen door.

Crossing the road, he raised his voice in a shout. No response came, and desperation drove him past the huddled house and the windswept weeds, his feet churning dead leaves as he stared at the dead limbs of the towering trees beyond.

Then he did halt, heart hammering. Something was moving down there below between the twisted tree trunks—moving and emerging.

"Vera!"

She came toward him, hair disheveled, her housedress splotched and stained. But she was smiling.

“I thought I heard you,” she said.

David stared at her, numb with relief. “Are you all right?”

“Of course. Why shouldn’t I be?”

“But what were you doing over here?”

She reached out and took his hand. “I’ll show you.”

Before he could resist she was leading him forward, down into the woods, into the forbidden forest, while the voices rose. *“No—don’t go—keep away from there, you hear?”* His aunt’s voice, and his uncle’s, dead voices echoing over the years.

Now Vera’s voice, here and very much alive. “After last night I couldn’t help it. Oh, I knew there was nothing to worry about, but I had to make sure. And I did find something—here.”

She halted in a little clearing deep down under the trees, pointing to a cluster of matted grass and wilted wildflowers which sprouted from an oblong mound. “You know what this is?”

David blinked, silent and uncomprehending.

“Can’t you guess?” Vera smiled again. “It’s a grave.”

She stooped, parting the tangled growth at the far end of the mound and disclosing a weathered wooden slab. It bore neither dates nor inscription, only the crudely carved lettering of a name:

JED HOLLOWAY

“You see?” Vera nodded toward the mound. “Now we know there’s nothing to be afraid of. He’s been dead and buried here for years.”

Nothing to be afraid of. David nodded automatically and again she took his hand, leading him away from the dead man’s grave, past the twisted trunks of the dead trees, up the path between the skeleton of the dead house and the ruined remains of the dead garden.

But the garden wasn’t entirely dead. A flash of vivid color caught his eye in the rays of the setting sun and then he saw it clearly—the orange outline, rounded and resting amidst the weeds. Vera saw it too.

“Look, a pumpkin!” Her smile broadened. “Just what we needed.”

“Needed?” David frowned.

“Don’t tell me you’ve forgotten. Tonight’s Halloween.” She stooped, reaching toward the pumpkin, but David yanked her away.

“Leave it alone.”

“But David—”

“Leave it alone, I said!”

A sudden blast of sound interrupted Vera’s reply. The two of them turned, glancing toward the road at another orange object—the school bus, halting before their yard.

They crossed over to it just as Billy got out. The bus moved off, trailing a cloud of exhaust, and he turned to them, his face flushed with excitement.

“Guess what?” he cried. “We had a Halloween party at school. Miss Zelisko gave us a whole bunch of colored paper to make masks and black cats and witches and ghosts and we had a cake and orange soda and boy was it ever neat—”

“Take it easy, young man,” Vera said. “If you don’t slow down you’ll trip over your tongue.”

They moved across the yard to the back door. “You should of been there,” Billy said. “All the kids, they’re getting ready to go in town tonight for trick or treat. Can you drive me, Dad?”

“Sorry, son, I’ve got work to do.” Anticipating the next question, David continued quickly. “And don’t ask your mother. I’m going; to need her help.”

Vera glanced at him. “Maybe for just an hour, if we went early—?”

David shook his head. “I really do need you. I’m stuck in the middle of that damned resume.”

The boy’s smile withered, then suddenly blossomed anew. “Okay. But I can have a jack-o’-lantern, can’t I?”

“A what?”

“Don’t you know about jack-o’-lanterns? Miss Zelisko made one and brought it to class for the party. It’s a big pumpkin, only you carve a face on it. Then you squish out the insides and put in a candle to light up the face.”

“Now I remember,” David nodded. “We used to put one in the window on Halloween night when I was a kid.”

“Can I do it tonight, Dad? If we put it in the front window it would look —”

“Real neat,” David said. “Trouble is, we don’t have a pumpkin.”

“Yes we do.” Billy beamed happily. “I saw one yesterday—a great big one, too. It’s across the way in that old garden. We can get it right now—”

“No.”

“But it’s just an old pumpkin.” Billy’s voice took on a shrill edge. “Nobody even lives there, so it’s not like stealing. Why can’t I have it?”

“Because I say so, that’s why.” Ignoring Vera’s look, David took his son’s arm. “It’s getting dark. Time to go inside.”

Billy gazed up at him in mingled disappointment and defiance. “What’s the matter, Dad—you afraid of ghosts or something?”

“There are no ghosts,” Vera said.

But she wasn’t talking to Billy.

Nobody was talking to Billy now. He could hear Mom and Dad in the front parlor, arguing about the resumay, whatever that was. Something you showed people when you wanted to get a job, like. Anyhow he hoped it wouldn’t work because then they’d have to move back into town and he liked it here. This place was neat and even school was better than that old dump in the city. The only thing wrong was Dad, the funny way he acted lately. Like yesterday when he caught him sneaking across the road, and tonight, not letting him have the pumpkin.

No fair, that’s what it was. Other kids were going trick or treating, getting money and candy and good stuff like that. But he couldn’t even have a plain old pumpkin lying right there on the ground across the way. What good did it do to leave it? When the frost came it would only spoil. And it would make a real neat jack-o’-lantern, too, sitting there in the front window for kids to see when they came driving past with their folks on the way to trick or treat in town.

But what did Dad care? All he cared about was this resumay thing and now he was yelling at Mom again, real loud this time. So loud that he wouldn't even hear if somebody went out the kitchen door.

Two minutes is all it would take. Two minutes to sneak across the road and get that old pumpkin. Nobody would notice, not if you were quiet.

Just to prove it Billy came downstairs slow and careful. Sure enough, both of them were sitting in the parlor at the table under the lamp and they kept on arguing without looking up.

And the lock on the kitchen door opened easy.

It was almost dark outside now, dark and sort of chilly with a lot of clouds in the sky and a big orange moon coming up over the trees. Orange like the pumpkin across the road.

Billy crossed real fast and headed for the garden patch. He could hear the leaves scrunching under his feet and the wind blowing through the trees down there in the woods. When he got to the garden it was all shadows and he couldn't see the pumpkin lying under the weeds. The wind was sort of wailing now.

But Billy wasn't afraid of the shadows. And he wasn't afraid of that old house no matter how spooky it looked, because nobody lived inside. If the boards creaked that was just the wind. He was all alone here with nobody to see or stop him.

Now he saw the pumpkin next to a vine where the weeds were hiding it. Billy bent down to reach out for it.

And felt the cold hand gripping his shoulder.

I *shouldn't have scared the kid,* David told himself. Sitting there in

the kitchen with only the bottle for company he stared out into the moonlight and poured himself another drink.

How was he to know the kid would be so shook up? He'd been shook up too when he noticed Billy was gone, and running across the road to get him was the natural thing to do. It wasn't as if he really feared for Billy's safety, but somebody had to teach him to follow orders. Why couldn't Vera understand?

But she didn't understand, any more than Billy. Instead she took his part. "Never mind that stupid old pumpkin," she told him. "How about you and I driving into town for trick or treat?"

Stupid pumpkin. *Stupid David,* that's what she really meant, and it hurt. Did she think he was wigging out? All he wanted was to protect the boy, teach him a little discipline.

Instead she rewarded him for his disobedience. Naturally, Billy was overjoyed and the two of them left happily together. Left him without another word, left him alone there feeling like a fool.

David raised his glass, watching it turn orange-gold in the moonlight streaming in from the window. The whiskey was orange-gold too, and as he drank it kindled a golden glow inside, warming and expanding.

He set the glass down with a sigh. *Maybe I am a fool.* Was it the liquor talking or did he really feel that way? He wasn't quite sure, but now he was able to face the possibility as his anger ebbed.

Perhaps he'd overreacted. After all, Billy was just a kid and his excitement was normal for his age. It wasn't his fault David felt the way he did about Halloween and something that had happened twenty-five years ago.

Vera was right; he was a grown man now and Jed Holloway was in his grave. Why keep him alive in his own mind?

David brought himself another drink. Bottle getting empty, he was getting full. But the whiskey was helping, helping him to think straight for the first time in months.

When you came right down to it, what did he really know about Jed Holloway? Seen through a child's eyes he'd been pure evil, but as a reasoning adult David knew nothing is completely pure or entirely evil. That talk about witchcraft was just local gossip, but even if it had been true, all it meant was that an eccentric old man got mixed up in superstitious nonsense.

There was no proof he'd ever actually harmed anyone, not even David himself. The events of that long-ago Halloween night had been colored by a child's imagination. Nothing actually happened except that Holloway had run him off his property.

Besides, he was dead now and David didn't believe in ghosts. So why was he acting this way? He'd only end up harming himself, and perhaps harming Billy too. No, Vera was right and he was wrong. No sense passing along his own foolish fears to the youngster.

Maybe it was already too late now, but at least he could try to undo the damage. He owed it to Billy, and to Vera. And there was a way.

David lurched to his feet and opened the top drawer at the side of the sink. His fingers fumbled, then closed around the handle of a big butcher knife. Pulling it out, he headed for the kitchen door. *By God, if my boy wants a jack-o'-lantern he's going to have one.*

Stumbling across the road, David felt no fear. He wasn't afraid of the night, not even when the moon hid behind a cloud. Perhaps the moon was afraid of the wind and the way the shutters banged against the boarded-up windows of the old house, but David didn't care. The woods down below were black as ink and he could hear the groaning of dead branches rubbing against the gnarled tree trunks, but that didn't scare him.

He weaved across the weedy garden, searching for the dark outline of the pumpkin on the ground below. When he found it there was nothing frightening about that either. Perhaps this was why people got the idea in the first place—carving a harmless vegetable into a hobgoblin face just to show they weren’t afraid.

David knelt beside the pumpkin, wrenched it free from the rotting vine, and lifted his knife. Drink made his fingers clumsy at first, but they steadied when he went to work. Squatting in the darkness he hollowed out the inside, then sliced away at the surface. First he cut two inverted triangles for eyes, then a longer one for the nose below.

Now the moon came out from behind the clouds and David wielded the knife quickly, forming the mouth into a grinning gash. The result was a perfect pumpkin head and he stared at it with a smile of satisfaction.

Suddenly the face of the pumpkin disappeared in shadow, looming from behind.

Then David turned and looked up into the *other* face.

It was a wonderful surprise, seeing the face in the front window as Vera drove into the yard. Billy saw it too and he bubbled. “Look, Mom—the jack-o’-lantern!”

Vera nodded. Gazing at tine pumpkin resting against the window ledge inside she felt as though a weight had been lifted from her. The candle within the hollowed-out pumpkin danced merrily behind the eyes and nose and mouth as the jack-o’-lantern smiled its warm welcome.

Her own smile warmed as she realized what its presence meant. David had come to his senses and from now on all would be well.

She cut the lights and motor, then emerged from the car. Billy’s door was already open and he slid out from the seat; he was so excited he dropped his trick-or-treat bag, and its contents spilled across the ground below.

“Pick that stuff up,” she told him. “I’m going in.” The front door was unlocked and she entered quickly, not even stopping to turn on the light.

The parlor was dark, but over at the window the jack-o'-lantern cast its friendly glow.

"David, where are you?" she called.

There was no answer, nor any need of one. For as she moved to the window sine saw what rested beneath it.

David was slumped against the windowpane. And the jack-o'-lantern wasn't on the ledge. Instead the pumpkin was perched between David's shoulders. On the stump where his head had been.

Somehow Vera found the strength. The strength to keep Billy in the yard while she called the state police, the strength to tell them what happened when they came, the strength to lead them down into the woods to Jed Holloway's grave.

It had been disturbed, its surface uprooted, the earth mound yawning open so there was scarcely need to dig. But setting down a lantern at the graveside, they did. A trooper offered a sympathetic shoulder and Vera pressed against it, averting her gaze as the other two officers wielded their shovels.

One of them spoke now. "Hey, look at the coffin—the lid's all splintered."

He slid it back, then gasped.

It was his gasp that caused Vera to look up, then run forward and peer down into the grave, into the open coffin and the moldering outline of what lay within—a fully articulated skeleton, the skull mouth frozen in a ghastly grin.

Cradled in its bony arm was David's head.

1985

Nocturne

Listen to me, darling.

You don't mind if I talk now, do you? I'm not sleepy yet, and there's so much I want to tell you. I couldn't before, because I was always afraid.

If that sounds funny to you, I can understand why. When you're young and beautiful there's nothing to be afraid of, is there?

I'm the one who was always getting put down, laughed at, rejected. And because of that I guess I came to the point where I rejected myself. Looking back I can see how that would make me afraid, make me a loner.

But you changed all that. I'm not afraid anymore, and with you beside me the loneliness is gone too.

That's another thing you never had to worry about, darling. People like you are never lonely, because they always have love. You get it from your folks when you're a kid, you get it from friends along the way, and then when you grow up you've got it made. Don't think I haven't noticed—all those jocks, the Big Men on Campus, coming on to you, making their moves. And you smiling, taking it all for granted.

Don't get me wrong, I'm not blaming you. Why shouldn't you take it for granted when that's how it's always been?

The reason I'm telling you this is to try and make you understand how different it was for me. Ever since I can remember I was running scared. And the worst time was at night when everything came together—being afraid because I was all alone in the dark and nobody cared, not even my folks.

I used to lie awake here in bed, crying because of the things Mom said, the things Dad did to hurt me. Looking back now I don't think they tried to make me feel bad on purpose; it's just that they didn't know how sensitive I was. To them, telling me I had a zit on my nose was just a joke. When they called me a klutz it was only their way of reminding me to be more careful. Saying that wearing glasses would keep me from making the team didn't mean they blamed me for it. But at the time it really got to me.

That's what made me afraid the most—when I realized I hated them for what they said, how they laughed. If my very own father and mother didn't care about hurting my feelings, how could I expect better from anyone else? To the other kids, the teachers, I must be ten times worse, so I hated them too. But I didn't want to hate them, I was afraid of hating everybody, so—like the shrink said—I projected my fear on the darkness instead.

Oh yes, I went to a shrink. You didn't know that, did you, darling? My folks never told anyone they sent me, it was a kind of guilty secret, something they were ashamed to admit. Their son going to a head doctor because he cried at night. And wet the bed. What's the matter, a big boy like you, acting like a baby? Grow up, be a man, they told me.

The shrink never said that, of course. He tried to help, I know he did, and after a while I got over the enuresis. That's the word he used, I've always remembered it. I remember a lot of things he told me, the things he taught me. But the main thing he taught me was something he didn't realize. He taught me not to show my feelings.

He thought he cured me of being afraid of the dark, and that's why I could stop seeing him. What really happened was I just stopped talking about the things that scared me. I wanted to please him, please my folks, get a taste of what it was like to be praised instead of blamed.

But all I could taste was the fear.

I'd lie awake in the dark night after night, fighting to keep from trembling. Now, instead of being afraid of hating others, I was afraid of *things.* Things like shadows, the shadows that crawled out of the corners, things like the wind howling outside the window. I’d hide my head under the pillows to shut out the shapes and the sounds, but it never worked.

Because then I’d fall asleep and the dreams came. That’s when the wind sounds changed into voices laughing at me, and the shadows turned into faces, all staring eyes and mouths that grinned. Every night they came, and every night I’d wake up screaming.

Please, darling, try to remember I’m not telling you this to frighten you, only to make you understand what it was like for me all these years.

The worst part was that I couldn’t say anything to anyone. Now I was an adult and everyone thought I’d outgrown my “little problem.”

That’s what my folks used to call it, my “little problem.” At least they didn’t talk to me that way when I got older. Instead it was, “I don’t see what a humanities major is going to do for you when you get out of school. Time you started thinking about something practical, a career. Here you are, going on twenty-one already, and you still have no idea what you want to do with your life.”

Not true, of course. I knew what I wanted to do. I wanted to crawl into a hole somewhere and die. And if I couldn’t manage that, maybe I’d have to do something else. Like committing suicide.

Don’t think it hadn’t crossed my mind. Nights like this, lying alone in bed here, I even planned the ways. But it was no use, I knew I didn’t have the guts to go through with it.

Afraid to live, afraid to die. So I read a lot, listened to music, went to the movies, watched TV. It filled time, but it couldn’t fill up my life. For that you need friends, people who care.

Please don’t get the wrong impression, darling. It isn’t like I just turned my back on everybody. I got to know a lot of people on campus and in my classes, and I tried to make friends with them, but it never seemed to work that way. Nobody wanted to hang out with me, invite me to their parties. I guess I know why. Who cares about a skinny little runt with glasses, somebody who’s afraid to look anyone in the eye and stutters when he tries to talk?

You never had that problem, did you? I know, because I was watching. Ever since the day you enrolled in English lit class I used to watch. Only it was more than just watching; I memorized you. The way you looked and walked and smiled and laughed, even little things like brushing the hair back from your forehead before you stood up to answer a question.

I don't suppose you noticed me at all. And I never got up enough nerve to talk to you or even say hello, not with that gang always around you—all those grinning guys with Burt Reynolds mustaches doing their macho numbers. Oh, I can't blame you for liking that attention. It's just that I didn't have a chance, and I knew it.

But I needed someone to care, and for a while I thought my folks might still be the answer. Seeing me graduate *magna cum laude* and all that, maybe they'd change their minds about me.

I remember how excited I was when they phoned and said they were cutting their vacation trip short and coming back in time for graduation ceremonies, and how good it felt driving out to the airport to pick them up.

You know what happened, of course. It was on the news, all over the papers. That damned freak crash, taking off from the stopover in Denver. They never got to see me graduate and I never saw them again, just the closed coffins. Then the funeral, and the lawyer, and settling the estate—but I don't want to talk about it. I'm not looking for sympathy, darling, just trying to make you understand.

At first it looked like things would get better for me, because I inherited enough to live on without worrying about a regular job. And there was nobody to put me down now or boss me around.

But that's what made it so bad. I was all alone, rattling around in this big house with no one to see or talk to. I got to feeling like I was in solitary confinement, and maybe I went a little stir-crazy.

That's the only way I can explain what I did. Up to now I've been ashamed to tell anyone, but I can tell you. Maybe you've already guessed the reason I had.

It's because I'd never been with a woman.

Hard to believe in this day and age, isn’t it? Twenty-three years old and still a virgin.

So I went to this hooker.

It happened because I couldn’t stand being alone anymore, so one night I drove over to this bar. That’s another thing: I never did dope and all I’d ever had to drink up until then was a beer or two once in a while. But this time I thought to hell with it, I’m going to find out what it’s like, and of course the straight shots hit me right away.

I didn’t even know I was drunk, just felt relaxed, almost like I am with you now. I was all alone in the place and I got to talking to the bartender. I don’t remember exactly what I said or how it came up, but he told me about this hooker and gave me the address. He even phoned to let her know I was coming; I suppose they had some kind of an arrangement.

If it wasn’t that I was drunk I’d never have gone through with it, but I went up to her apartment and she was waiting for me. She was a lot younger and prettier than I expected, more like a high-class call girl. Looking back now I can see she must have known what the situation was and did her best to make things easy, even helping me get my clothes off, and then—

And then, nothing. I won’t go into the gory details, I don’t want to think about it even now, but everything went wrong, and I couldn’t, and she started to laugh and called me a name. I didn’t care, all I wanted was out of there.

It wasn’t until later that I thought about the name she called me. Then I got mad, but I was really angry at myself for being such a fool.

The only thing I got out of it was learning how the drinks could help. I bought some whiskey to keep in the house and did my drinking at home. Don’t worry, I’m not an alcoholic or anything like that. I can quit whenever I want, and I know how to handle the stuff. But a few shots make me sleep better, without the dreams. The trouble is, when I’m awake I still get uptight and I have to take a couple of drinks just to calm down.

But I won’t have to depend on whiskey anymore. Now I have you. I don’t know how you feel, but to me it’s like a miracle. A dream come true.

Because sometimes even the drinks don’t help. Like tonight, when I got so worked up remembering all the bad things and wondering if there was any sense in trying to go on. Sitting here in the house when the storm started, listening to the wind rattling the shutters, looking at the empty bottle on the table, I knew I just had to get out. I hadn’t eaten anything since breakfast so I figured maybe some food would help. The rain was really coming down heavy when I left; it was hard to see ahead and the car kept skidding, so I decided to turn off on the side road and take the long way into town.

That’s when it really hit me—driving along the pitch-black road in the storm with no lights anywhere, no traffic, nothing but the woods all around. I guess the drinks were hitting me too, because when the fog started to roll in I got this terrible empty feeling inside, as if I was all alone and lost in the middle of nowhere. And I knew that even if the storm stopped and the fog lifted I would still be alone, still be lost, and nothing would ever happen to save me.

Then you happened, darling. You saved me.

The moment I saw you standing there next to that silly little red convertible and waving your flashlight, it was as though everything changed. Just recognizing you, knowing that you were really there and calling out to me, turned a nightmare into a dream come true.

Maybe you think it was just chance that made me take the side road so that I’d find you stranded there after your tire blew. But it wasn’t chance, darling; it was fate.

Looking back now I can see that it was meant to be.

Driving you to the service station, finding it closed, bringing you here to the house to use the phone, all this was fate too.

And the way you looked at me, the way you smiled, did something I can’t explain. For the first time in my life I felt like a real man. And for the first time in my life I could act like a man.

Let me confess something. I lied when I told you the phone was out. It really worked, but I didn't want you to know. What I wanted was to have you here with me, have you and hold you the way a real man holds the woman he loves.

That's what I did and I hope you understand now. I hope you realize what this has meant to me, and that it means something to you too. I knew I loved you too much to force you, so I'm glad it worked out the way it did. Everything just seemed to happen, because it was fate.

You were so wonderful, darling—not like that hooker, not like the girls who always laughed. I can forget them now, forget the shame and the tears, because I have you. From now on we'll always be together.

Thank you, darling. Thank you for making me happy with the gift of your love.

I only wish now that I hadn't killed you first.

1986

The Shaggy Dog Bite

In all the world no man was more blessed than Khu, the Grand Shan of Tartary—nor more cursed.

None exceeded him in power or riches, the breadth of his domain, the virtues of his wife, and the vices of his concubines. Such were his blessings, but heed ye his curse.

For Khu, the Grand Shan, suffered from epilepsy, which men call the “falling sickness”—an affliction of sudden seizures, of convulsions occurring without warning.

Like many great rulers, the Shan had enemies. And it remained for one, whose name was Ling-Po, to discover the cause of his curse. The Shan, a learned and intelligent man, was unusually sensitive to crude japes and mindless jests. It was on occasions when he was exposed to such idiocies—most notably in the form of puns—that he became enraged, and thus responsive to his seizures.

Knowing this, Ling-Po devised what is called, in the heathen lands of the West, a “shaggy dog” story—a witless and revolting piece of nonsense designed to lead the unsuspecting reader to a “punchline” in the form of a truly disgusting pun. This particular story might well sicken any reader—and in the case of someone susceptible to epileptic seizures, it might even bring about his death.

Ling-Po inscribed his work on a scroll of parchment inserted in a golden tube, and personally presented it to the Shan as a birthday gift from an anonymous admirer.

Presently it came to pass that the Shan unrolled the scroll. Ling-Po waited, his heart pounding in uncertainty as the Shan began to read. Would the Shan indeed experience an epileptic seizure when he came upon the filthy pun at the end?

The Return of Lefty Feep

The first person I saw when I walked into Jack’s Shack was Lefty Feep.

I recognized him immediately, and I was half-way out the door again when he collared me. The tall, thin man dragged me into one of the ancient booths—so named because a sojourn there wotdd certainly have killed Lincoln, or anyone over five-feet-five in height—and greeted me with relish, which spilled out of the sandwich he was devouring.

“Slip me the grip,” he commanded. “Let the finger linger! Long time, no, *si?”*

“Lefty Feep!” I sighed. “What brings you here?”

“I just stop in for a bite,” he told me. “Can you lend me—”

“Same old Lefty.” I sighed again. Then I glanced at him closely. “Wait a minute—you’re *not* the same, are you? Where did you get that beanie?” I reached out to grasp it, but Feep twisted his head away.

“Not so much with the touch and clutch,” he warned me. “This is a souvenir of last year’s Convention.”

“Convention?”

“The Solacon,” Feep nodded. “Don’t tell me you are gafia?”

“What? Since when did you become a science fiction fan?”

“Smile when you say that,” the thin man replied. “I am a fan from way before Gernsback. Don’t you read about me in *Fantastic Adventures?”*

“Yes, but I never dreamed you were interested in the field.”

“Who do you think helps Campbell dig up those editorials?” he smirked. “I am a fan ever since Doc Smith is an intern.”

“So you went to the Solacon, eh? I can’t get over it.”

“Neither can I. But six months in an iron lung will help.” Feep grinned. “You want me to tell how it is to go around the Worldcon in eighty daze?”

“No,” I said, firmly.

But not half as firmly as Feep gripped me by the collar while he wagged his tongue and his tale.

“I wander into the Alexandria Hotel a few days ahead of time,” Feep began. “There was a big sign over the door which says SUOTHGAYTE IN FIVTEY-AIGHT, so I know Rick Sneary is already here.” He paused, long enough to get rid of the quotation marks hanging in the air, then continued.

Not being a Califoreigner, I am not familiar with this roach-ranch, but I get my bearings and also a room. The Alexandria is an old hotel but a spry one—on account of the management keeps pouring Geritol down the elevator shaft.

I get to my room and start to unpack, but just as I pull the cork out, the phone makes with a tone.

“Hello . . . this is Ron Ellik . . . can I come up for a minute? Okay.”

Two minutes after this conversation there are five fans and a case of warm beer in my room. There is also a lot of Ellikution going on because this is the smoke-filled room bit. Since the management does not provide ashtrays, we use the fan with the biggest mouth. Finally, around one a.m., we empty the ashes out of Ellik’s mouth and I go slack in the sack.

The next morning—which they call Tuesday, in California—I cut out for Ackerman’s house with Dave Kyle and spend the afternoon admiring Ackerman’s science fiction collection and Ruth Kyle, though not necessarily in that order. While Dave brushes the eye-tracks off his wife we talk with Barbara Silverberg and her husband, whose name I do not catch. Then seventeen fans show up and we make the scene in Pacific Palisades where Mark Clifton is talking at a salon. I ride out in a car piloted by Helen Urban and sit next to a sensitive fannish type name of Miriam Dyches. I can tell she is a fan because she is knitting a bra made out of two propellor beanies.

"The woman who runs this salon has her grips on the chips," the chick informs me. "Every Tuesday night she hurls a bash for the mink-and-vermin crowd, featuring guest celebrities. Why, one night she even has Maureen O'Hara's brother."

I am properly impressed, but even more so when we arrive and find a parking-place behind about $250,000 worth of Detroit iron. We approach a large mansion set behind a charming border of money-trees, and are greeted at the door by a collar-ad lad who seats us on the terrace. Fortunately, our hostess has an extremely large patio.

She is a gal of about 60-odd, and reminds me of Spring Byington's mother.

After the bash, we end up in a Pizzatorium in Hollywood, and Gordon Dewey and his wife drive me back to the hotel. It is then that I discover just how rich our hostess is, when I am told she is married to the young collar-ad lad.

Wednesday I meet and greet. I spend time with Bob and Sadie Shaw, Boyd Raeburn, and see Anna Sinclare Moffatt, who I really meet on Monday when I arrive and have dinner at her place with her husband and Rick Sneary.

I am surprised to see her at the hotel all dressed up and tell her so. "Where is your pail?" I inquire. "How come you are not making with the mop?"

"What do you mean?" Anna asks. "Why should I be down here with a pail?"

"I expect it," I tell her, "ever since I get a letter from Rick Sneary. He tells me you are the Charwoman of this Convention."

Laughing heartily at Sneary's spelling, she clobbers me over the head with a gavel and disappears into the bar, and I go off to supper with Tony Boucher and his family. I know Boucher lives in Berkeley and am all hot to ask questions about Berkeley Fandom, but he does not dare talk about such things in front of his wife and kids.

Thursday I meet and eat with Earl Kemp, the Chicago mob, the Detroit hoods, and a New Zealand fan named Mike Hinge—who I naturally recognize by his gait. I also run into Ron Bennett, the TAFF representative from England. I think he is a real swinging cat, but of course I do not get a chance to talk to him since he does not bring an interpreter. In the bunch at lunch is Walt Daugherty, and I also see Karen Anderson and her husband, whose name I forget. Then in the evening about a hundred and fifty fans show up at Ackerman's where he is holding open house.

Before he can let go of it, just about all the sensitive fannish faces in Southern California are sitting around on their sensitive fannish fannies. Charles Burbee shows up and starts huckstering watermelons, Gertrude M. Carr delivers the Gettysburg Address, and Roberta Gibson shows up with her husband, whose name I forget.

The next day the Convention opens and I see Walt Liebscher and A. E. van Vogt, and Rory Faulkner and Fritz Leiber. Also Honey Wood Graham and her husband whose name I never do learn. There is a big tea-drinking contest where everybody has to sit at a table and slurp down the stuff without going to the washroom. The trick is to eliminate the contestants without eliminating the tea. The winner is a chick name of Djinn Faine, who gargles twenty-three cups in an hour and seventeen minutes, after which I am somewhat disappointed, since I know she can do much better on account of I see her drink forty-four cups in rehearsal just a little while before.

The Convention itself is all fun and dames. I meet Ruth Matheson and Peg Campbell and Es Cole and lots of other types, and three beards name of Rotsler, Ray Russell, and Ted White. I go to more parties than you can shake a cocktail at.

I get my right hand stuck in a sticky machine John W. Campbell is using as a substitute for flypaper, and my left hand caught in Ed Wood's mouth. Fortunately I do not get bitten, as Ed Wood never closes his mouth once during the whole Convention. I listen to the President of the Arch Oboler Fan Club, who turns out to be Arch Oboler, and I see Ray Bradbury and Charles Beaumont and Jerry Bixby telling Terry Carr he can never be a writer because his name doesn't begin with a B. I get curious about the future, so Djinn Faine sticks out her tongue and I read the tea-leaves. I watch Berkeley Fandom turning out a fanzine on the only mimeo in the world with a bongo drum attachment.

All of this excites and delights me and I do not wish to leave California ever again. Unfortunately, I get a rush telegram calling me to a meeting in Washington. It is from a Mamie Eisenhower, the name of whose husband I forget—

"Now hold it just a moment," I interrupted.

"I *am* holding it," Feep retorted. "I learn the secret from Djinn Faine at the tea-drinking contest—"

"Tea-drinking contest!" I snorted. "Why, you weren't even there! It so happens I was a judge at this contest, along with Poul Anderson."

"Who? I never hear the name."

"No?" I sneered. "And I suppose you never heard of Bob Silverberg and Rog Phillips and Joe Gibson and Richard Matheson and Les Cole and all those others. Any more than they—or I—ever heard of you at the Solacon. Because you actually didn't attend. Did you, now?"

"Of course I attend," Lefty Feep insisted. "Maybe the reason you do not hear of it is on account of I use my fannish pseudonym."

"Fannish pseudonym?" I asked. "What is it?"

"Carl Brandon," said Lefty Feep . . .

The Yougoslaves

The Parisian spring had lost its charm.
The weather was poor, the air acrid;
the young men dressed like vandals,
and fiendish children lurked in the shadows.

I didn't come to Paris for adventure.

Long experience has taught me there are no Phantoms in the Opera, no bearded artists hobbling through Montmartre on stunted legs, no straw-hatted *boulevardiers* singing the praises of a funny little honey of a Mimi.

The Paris of story and song, if it ever existed, is no more. Times have changed, and even the term "Gay Paree" now evokes what in theatrical parlance is called a bad laugh.

A visitor learns to change habits accordingly, and my hotel choice was a case in point. On previous trips I'd stayed at the Crillon or the Ritz; now, after a lengthy absence, I put up at the George V.

Let me repeat, I wasn't seeking adventure. That first evening I left the hotel for a short stroll merely to satisfy my curiosity about the city.

I had already discovered that some aspects of Paris remain immutable; the French still don't seem to understand how to communicate by telephone, and they can't make a good cup of coffee. But I had no need to use the phone and no craving for coffee, so these matters didn't concern me.

Nor was I greatly surprised to discover that April in Paris—*Paris in the spring, tra-la-la-la*—is apt to be cold and damp. Warmly-dressed for my little outing, I directed my footsteps to the archways of the Rue de Rivoli.

At first glance Paris by night upheld its traditions. All of the tourist attractions remained in place; the steel skeleton of the Eiffel Tower, the gaping maw of the Arch of Triumph, the spurting fountains achieving their miraculous transubstantiation of water into blood with the aid of crimson light.

But there were changes in the air—quite literally—the acrid odor of traffic fumes emanating from the exhausts of snarling sports cars and growling motor bikes racing along to the counterpoint of police and ambulance sirens. Gershwin's tinny taxi-horns would be lost in such din; I doubt if he'd approve, and I most certainly did not.

My disapproval extended to the clothing of local pedestrians. Young Parisian males now mimicked the youths of other cities; bare-headed, leather-jacketed, and blue-jeaned, they would look equally at home in Times Square or on Hollywood Boulevard. As for their female companions, this seemed to be the year when every girl in France decided to don atrociously-wrinkled patent leather boots which turned shapely lower limbs into the legs of elephantiasis victims. The *chic* Parisienne had vanished, and above the traffic's tumult I fancied I could detect a sound of rumbling dismay as Napoleon turned over in his tomb.

I moved along under the arches, eyeing the lighted window displays of expensive jewelry mingled with cheap gimcracks. At least the Paris of tourism hadn't altered; there would still be sex shops in the Pigalle, and somewhere in the deep darkness of the Louvre the Mona Lisa smiled enigmatically at the antics of those who came to the city searching for adventure.

Again I say this was not my intention. Nonetheless, adventure sought me.

Adventure came on the run, darting out of a dark and deserted portion of the arcade just ahead, charging straight at me on a dozen legs.

It happened quickly. One moment I was alone; then suddenly and without warning, the children came. There were six of them, surrounding me like a small army—six dark-haired swarthy-skinned urchins in dirty, dishevelled garments, screeching and jabbering at me in a foreign tongue. Some of them clutched at my clothing, others jabbed me in the ribs. Encircling me they clamored for a beggar’s bounty, and as I fumbled for loose change one of them thrust a folded newspaper against my chest, another grabbed and kissed my free hand, yet another grasped my shoulder and whirled me around. Deafened by the din, dazed by their instant attack, I broke free.

In seconds, they scattered swiftly and silently, scampering into the shadows. As they disappeared I stood alone again, stunned and shaken. Then, as my hand rose instinctively to press against my inner breast pocket, I realized that my wallet had disappeared too.

My first reaction was shock. To think that I, a grown man, had been robbed on the public street by a band of little ragamuffins, less than ten years old!

It was an outrage, and now I met it with rage of my own. The sheer audacity of their attack provoked anger, and the thought of the consequences fueled my fury. Losing the money in the wallet wasn’t important; he who steals my purse steals trash.

But there was something else I cherished; something secret and irreplaceable. I carried it in a billfold compartment for a purpose; after completing my sightseeing jaunt I’d intended to seek another destination and make use of the other item my wallet contained.

Now it was gone, and hope vanished with it.

But not entirely. The sound of distant sirens in the night served as a strident reminder that I still had a chance. There was, I remembered, a police station near the Place Vendome. The inconspicuous office was not easy to locate on the darkened street beyond an open courtyard, but I managed.

Once inside, I anticipated a conversation with an *Inspecteur,* a return to the scene of the affair in the company of sympathetic *gendarmes* who were knowledgeable concerning such offenses and alert in ferreting out the hiding place of my assailants.

The young lady seated behind the window in the dingy outer office listened to my story without comment or a change of expression. Inserting forms and carbons in her typewriter, she took down a few vital statistics—my name, date of birth, place of origin, hotel address, and a short inventory of the stolen wallet's contents.

For reasons of my own I neglected to mention the one item that really mattered to me. I could be excused for omitting it in my excited state, and hoped to avoid the necessity of doing so unless the *Inspecteur* questioned me more closely.

But there was no interview with an *Inspecteur,* and no uniformed officer appeared. Instead I was merely handed a carbon copy of the *Recepisse de Declaration-,* if anything could be learned about the fate of my wallet I would be notified at my hotel.

Scarcely ten mintues after entering the station I found myself back on the street with nothing to show for my trouble but a buff-colored copy of the report. Down at the very bottom, on a line identified in print as *Mode Operatoire—Precisons Complementaires,* was a typed sentence reading *"Vol commis dans la Rue par de jeunes enfant yougoslaves."*

"Yougoslaves?"

Back at the hotel I addressed the question to an elderly night-clerk. Sleepy eyes blinking into nervousness, he nodded knowingly.

"Ah!" he said. "The gypsies!"

"Gypsies? But these were only children—"

He nodded again. "Exactly so." And then he told me the story.

Pickpockets and purse-snatchers had always been a common nuisance here, but within the past few years their presence had escalated.

They came out of Eastern Europe, their exact origin unknown, but "yougoslaves" or "gypsies" served as a convenient label.

Apparently they were smuggled in by skillful and enterprising adult criminals who specialized in educating children in the art of thievery, very much as Fagin trained his youngsters in the London of Dickens's *Oliver Twist.*

But Fagin was an amateur compared to today's professors of pilfering. Their pupils—orphans, products of broken homes, or no homes at all—were recruited in foreign city streets, or even purchased outright from greedy, uncaring parents. These little ones could be quite valuable; an innocent at the age of four or five became a seasoned veteran after a few years of experience, capable of bringing in as much as a hundred thousand American dollars over the course of a single year.

When I described the circumstances of my own encounter the clerk shrugged.

"Of course. That is how they work, my friend—in gangs." Gangs, expertly adept in spotting potential victims, artfully instructed how to operate. Their seemingly spontaneous outcries were actually the product of long and exacting rehearsal, their apparently impromptu movements perfected in advance. They danced around me because they had been choreographed to do so. It was a bandits' ballet in which each one played an assigned role—to nudge, to gesture, to jab and jabber and create confusion. Even the hand-kissing was part of a master plan, and when one ragged waif thrust his folded newspaper against my chest it concealed another who ducked below and lifted my wallet. The entire performance was programmed down to the last detail.

I listened and shook my head. "Why don't the police tell me these things? Surely they must know."

"Oui, M'sieur." The clerk permitted himself a confidential wink. "But perhaps they do not care." He leaned across the desk, his voice sinking to a murmur. "Some say an arrangement has been made. The yougoslaves are skilled in identifying tourists by their dress and manner. They can recognize a foreign visitor merely by the kind of shoes he wears. One supposes a

bargain has been struck because it is only the tourists who are attacked, while ordinary citizens are spared."

I frowned. "Surely others like myself must lodge complaints. One would think the police would be forced to take action."

The clerk's gesture was as eloquent as his words. "But what can they do? These yougoslaves strike quickly, without warning. They vanish before you realize what has happened, and no one knows where they go. And even if you managed to lay hands on one of them, what then? You bring this youngster to the police and tell your story, but the little ruffian has no wallet—you can be sure it was passed along immediately to another who ran off with the evidence. Also, your prisoner cannot speak or understand French, or at least pretends not to.

"So the gendarmes have nothing to go by but your words, and what can they do with the kid if they did have proof, when the law prohibits the arrest and jailing of children under thirteen?

"It's all part of the scheme. And if you permit me, it is a beautiful scheme, this one."

My frown told him I lacked appreciation of beauty, and he quickly leaned back to a position of safety behind the desk, his voice and manner sobering. "Missing credit cards can be reported in the morning, though I think it unlikely anyone would be foolish enough to attempt using them with a forged signature. It's the money they were after."

"I have other funds in your safe," I said.

"Tres bien. In that case I advise you to make the best of things. Now that you know what to expect, I doubt if you will be victimized again. Just keep away from the tourist traps and avoid using the Metro." He offered me the solace of a smile which all desk clerks reserve for complaints about stalled elevators, lost luggage, faulty electrical fixtures, or clogged plumbing.

Then, when my frown remained fixed, his smile vanished. "Please, my friend! I understand this has been a most distressing occurrence, but I trust you will chalk it up to experience. Believe me, there is no point in pursuing the matter further."

I shook my head. “If the police won’t go after these children—”

“Children?” Again his voice descended to a murmur. “Perhaps I did not make myself clear. The yougoslaves are not ordinary kids. As I say, they have been trained by masters. The kind of man who is capable of buying or stealing a child and corrupting it for a life of crime is not likely to stop there. I have heard certain rumors, *M’sieur,* rumors which make a dreadful sort of sense. These kids, they are hooked on drugs. They know every manner of vice but nothing of morals, and many carry knives, even guns. Some have been taught to break and enter into homes, and if discovered, to kill. Their masters, of course, are even more dangerous when crossed. I implore you, for your own safety—forget what has happened tonight and go on your way.”

“Thank you for your advice.” I managed a smile and went on my way. But I did not forget.

I did not forget what had happened, nor did I forget I’d been robbed of what was most precious to me.

Retiring to my room, I placed the *Do Not Disturb* sign on the outer doorknob and after certain makeshift arrangements I sank eventually into fitful slumber.

By the following evening I was ready; ready and waiting. Paris by night is the City of Light, but it is also the city of shadows. And it was in the shadows that I waited, the shadows under the archways of the Rue de Rivoli. My dark clothing was deliberately donned to blend inconspicuously with the background; I would be unnoticed if the predators returned to seek fresh prey.

Somehow I felt convinced that they would do so. As I stood against a pillar, scanning the occasional passerby who wandered past, I challenged myself to see the hunted through the eyes of the hunters.

Who would be the next victim? That party of Japanese deserved no more than a glance of dismissal; it wasn’t wise to confront a group. By the same token, those who traveled in pairs or couples would be spared. And even the lone pedestrians were safe if they were able-bodied or dressed in garments which identified them as local citizens.

What the hunters sought was someone like myself, someone wearing clothing of foreign cut, preferably elderly and obviously alone. Someone like the grey-headed old gentleman who was approaching now, shuffling past a cluster of shops already closed for the night. He was short, slight of build, and his uncertain gait hinted at either a physical impairment or mild intoxication. A lone traveler on an otherwise-deserted stretch of street—he was the perfect target for attack.

And the attack came.

Out of the deep dark doorway to an arcade the yougoslaves danced forth, squealing and gesticulating, to suddenly surround their startled victim.

They ringed him, hands outstretched, their cries confusing, their fingers darting forth to prod and pry in rhythm with the outbursts.

I saw the pattern now, recognized the roles they played. Here was the hand-kisser, begging for bounty, here the duo tugging at each arm from the rear, here the biggest of the boys, brandishing the folded paper to thrust it against the oldster's chest while an accomplice burrowed into the gaping front of the jacket below. Just behind him the sixth and smallest of the band stood poised. The instant the wallet was snatched it would be passed to him, and while the others continued their distraction for a few moments more before scattering, he'd run off in safety.

The whole charade was brilliant in its sheer simplicity, cleverly contrived so that the poor old gentleman would never notice his loss until too late.

But I noticed—and I acted.

As the thieves closed in I stepped forward, quickly and quietly. Intent on their quarry, they were unaware of my approach. Moving up behind the youngster who waited to receive the wallet, I grasped his upraised arm in a tight grip, bending it back against his shoulderblade as I yanked him away into the shadows. He looked up and my free hand clamped across his oval mouth before he could cry out.

He tried to bite, but my fingers pressed his lips together. He tried to kick, but I twisted his bent arm and tugged him along offbalance, his feet dragging over the pavement as we moved past the shadowy archway to the curb beyond.

My rental car was waiting there. Opening the door, I hurled him down onto the seat face-forward. Before he could turn I pulled the handcuffs from my pocket and snapped them shut over his wrists.

Locking the passenger door, I hastened around to the other side of the car and entered, sliding behind the wheel. Seconds later we were moving out into the traffic.

Hands confined behind him, my captive threshed helplessly beside me. He could scream now, and he did.

“Stop that!” I commanded. “No one can hear you with the windows closed.”

After a moment he obeyed. As we turned off onto a side street he glared up at me, panting.

“Merde!” he gasped.

I smiled. “So you speak French, do you?”

There was no reply. But when the car turned again, entering one of the narrow alleyways off the Rue St. Roch, his eyes grew wary.

“Where are we going?”

“That is a question for you to answer.”

“What do you mean?”

“You will be good enough to direct me to the place where I can find your friends.”

“Go to hell!”

“Au contraire.” I smiled again. “If you do not cooperate, and quickly, I’ll knock you over the head and dump your body in the Seine.”

“You old bastard—you can’t scare me!”

Releasing my right hand from the steering wheel I gave him a clout across the mouth, knocking him back against the seat.

"That's a sample," I told him. "Next time I won't be so gentle." Clenching my fist, I raised my arm again, and he cringed.

"Tell me!" I said.

And he did.

The blow across the mouth seemed to have loosened his tongue, for he began to answer my questions as I reversed our course and crossed over a bridge which brought us to the Left Bank.

When he told me our destination and described it, I must confess I was surprised. The distance was much greater than I anticipated, and finding the place would not be easy, but I followed his directions on a mental map. Meanwhile I encouraged Bobo to speak.

That was his name—Bobo. If he had another he claimed he did not know it, and I believed him. He was nine years old but he'd been with the gang for three of them, ever since their leader spirited him off the streets of Dubrovnik and brought him here to Paris on a long and illegal route while hidden in the back of a truck.

"Dubrovnik?" I nodded. "Then you really are a yougoslave. What about the others?"

"I don't know. They come from everywhere. Wherever he finds them."

"Your leader? What's his name?"

"We call him Le Boss."

"He taught you how to steal like this?"

"He taught us many things," Bobo gave me a sidelong glance. "Listen to me, old man—if you find him there will be big trouble. Better to let me go."

"Not until I have my wallet."

"Wallet?" His eyed widened, then narrowed, and I realized that for the first time he'd recognized me as last night's victim. "If you think Le Boss will give you back your money then you really are a fool."

"I'm not a fool. And I don't care about the money."

"Credit cards? Don't worry, Le Boss won't try to use them. Too risky."

"It's not the cards. There was something else. Didn't you see it?"

"I never touched your wallet. It was Pepe who took it to the van last night."

The van, I learned, was always parked just around the corner from the spot where the gang set up operations. And it was there that they fled after a robbery. Le Boss waited behind the wheel with the motor running; the stolen property was turned over to him immediately as they drove off to safer surroundings.

"So Le Boss has the wallet now," I said.

"Perhaps. Sometimes he takes the money out and throws the billfold away. But if there was more than money and cards inside as you say—" Bobo hesitated, peering up at me. "What is this thing you're looking for?"

"That is a matter I will discuss with Le Boss when I see him."

"Diamonds, maybe? You a smuggler?"

"No."

His eyes brightened and he nodded quickly. "Cocaine? Don't worry, I get some for you, no problem—good stuff, not the junk they cut for street trade. All you want, and cheap, too."

I shook my head. "Stop guessing. I talk only to Le Boss."

But Bobo continued to eye me as I guided the car out of the suburban residential and industrial areas, through a stretch of barren countryside, and into an unpaved side road bordering the empty lower reaches of the river. There were no lights here, no dwellings, no signs of life—only shadows, silence, and swaying trees.

Bobo was getting nervous, but now he forced a smile.

"Hey, old man—you like girls? Le Boss got one the other day."

"Not interested."

"I mean *little* girls. Fresh meat, only five, six maybe—"

I shook my head again and he sidled closer on the seat. "What about boys? I'm good, you'll see. Even Le Boss says so—"

He rubbed against me; his clothes were filthy and he smelled of sweat and garlic. "Never mind," I said quickly, pushing him away.

“Okay,” he murmured. “I figured if we did a deal you’d give up trying to see Le Boss. It’s just going to make things bad for you, and there’s no sense getting yourself hurt.”

“I appreciate your concern.” I smiled. “But it’s not me you’re really worried about. You’ll be the one who gets hurt for bringing me, is that not so?”

He stared at me without replying but I read the answer in his fear-filled eyes.

“What will he do to you?” I said.

The fear spilled over into his voice. “Please, *M’sieu*—don’t tell him how you got here! I will do anything you want, anything—”

“You’ll do exactly what I say,” I told him.

He glanced ahead, and again I read his eyes.

“Are we here?” I asked. “Is this the place?”

“*Oui.* But—”

“Be silent.” I shut off the motor and headlights, but not before the beam betrayed a glimpse of the river bank beyond the rutted side road. Through the tangle of trees and rampant underbrush I could see the parked van hidden from sight amidst the sheltering shadows ahead. Beyond it, spanning the river, was a crude and ancient wooden foot bridge, the narrow and rotting relic of a bygone era.

I slipped out of the car, circling to the other side, then opened the passenger door and collared my captive.

“Where are they?” I whispered.

“On the other side.” Bobo’s voice was faint but the apprehension it held was strong. “Please don’t make me take you there!”

“Shut up and come with me.” I jerked him forward toward the trees, then halted as I stared across the rickety old makeshift bridge. The purpose it served in the past was long forgotten, and so was the huge oval on the far bank which opened close to the water’s edge.

But Le Boss had not forgotten. Once this great circular conduit was part of the earliest Paris sewer-system. Deep within its depths, dozens of connecting branches converged into a gigantic single outlet and spewed their waste into the water below. Now the interior channels had been sealed off, leaving the main tunnel dry but not deserted. For it was here, within a circle of metal perhaps twenty feet in diameter, that Le Boss found shelter from prying eyes, past the unused dirt road and the abandoned bridge.

The huge opening gaped like the mouth of Hell, and from within the fires of Hell blazed forth.

Actually the fires were merely the product of candle light flickering from tapers set in niches around the base of the tunnel. I sensed that their value was not only practical but precautionary, for they would be quickly extinguished in the event of an alarm.

Alarm?

I tugged at Bobo's soiled collar. "The lookout," I murmured. "Where is he?"

Reluctantly the boy stabbed a finger in the direction of a tall and tangled weed bordering the side of the bridge. In the shadows I made out a small shape huddled amid surrounding clumps of vegetation.

"Sandor." My captive nodded. "He's asleep."

I glanced up. "What about Le Boss and the others?"

"Inside the sewer. Further back, where nobody can see them."

"Good. You will go in now."

"Alone?"

"Yes, alone." As I spoke I took out my key and unlocked the handcuffs, but my grip on Bobo's neck did not loosen.

He rubbed his chafed wrists. "What am I supposed to do?"

"Tell Le Boss that I grabbed you on the street, but you broke free and ran."

"How do I say I got here?"

"Perhaps you hitched a ride."

"And then—"

"You didn't know I was following you, not until I caught you here again. Tell him I'm waiting on this side of the river until you bring me my key.

Once I get it I will go away—no questions asked, no harm done.”

Bobo frowned. “Suppose he doesn’t have the key?”

“He will,” I said. “You see, it’s just an old brass gate-key, but the handle is shaped into my family crest. Mounted in the crest is a large ruby.”

Bobo’s frown persisted. “What if he just pried it loose and threw the key away?”

“That’s possible.” I shrugged. “But you had better pray he didn’t.” My fingers dug into his neck. “I want that key, understand? And I want it now.”

“He’s not going to give it to you, not Le Boss! Why should he?”

For answer I dragged him toward the sleeping sentry in the weeds. Reaching into my jacket I produced a knife. As Bobo gaped in surprise, I aimed a kick at the slumbering lookout. He blinked and sat up quickly, then froze as I pressed the tip of the broad blade against his neck.

“Tell him that if you don’t bring me back the key in five minutes I’ll cut Sandor’s throat.”

Sandor believed me, I know, because he started to whimper. And Bobo believed me too, for when I released my grip on his collar he started running toward the bridge.

Now there was only one question. Would Le Boss believe me?

I sincerely hoped so. But for the moment all I could do was be patient. Yanking the snivelling Sandor to his feet, I tugged him along to position myself at the edge of the bridge, staring across it as Bobo reached the mouth of the sewer on the other side. The mouth swallowed him; I stood waiting.

Except for the rasp of Sandor’s hoarse breathing, the night was still. No sound emanated from the great oval of the sewer across the river, and my vision could not penetrate the flashing of flame from within.

But the reflection of the light served me as I studied my prisoner. Like Bobo, he had the body of a child, but the face peering up at me was incongruously aged—not by wrinkles but by the grim set of his cracked lips, the gaunt hollows beneath protruding cheekbones, and the sunken circles outlining the eyes above. The eyes were old, those deep dark eyes that had witnessed far more than any child should see. In them I read a present submissiveness, but that was merely surface reaction. Beyond it lay a cold cunning, a cruel craftiness governed not by intelligence but by animal instinct, fully developed, ready for release. And he was an animal, I told myself; a predator, dwelling in a cave, issuing forth to satisfy ageless atavistic hungers.

He hadn't been born that way, of course. It was Le Boss who transformed the innocence of childhood into amoral impulse, who eradicated humanity and brought forth the beast beneath.

Le Boss. What was he doing now? Surely Bobo had reached him by this time, told his tale. What was happening? I held Sandor close at knife-point, my eyes searching the swirl of firelight and shadow deep in the tunnel's iron maw.

Then, suddenly and shockingly, the metal mouth screamed.

The high, piercing echo rose only for an instant before fading into silence, but I knew its source.

Tightening my grip on Sandor's ragged collar and pressing the knife blade close to his throat, I started toward the foot bridge.

"No!" he quavered. "Don't—"

I ignored his panting plea, his futile efforts to free himself. Thrusting him forward, I crossed the swaying structure, averting my gaze from the dank depths beneath and focusing vision and purpose on the opening ahead.

Passing between the flame-tipped teeth of the candles on either side, I dragged Sandor down into the sewer's yawning throat. I was conscious of the odor now, the odor of carrion corruption which welled from the dark inner recesses, conscious of the clang of our footsteps against the rounded metal surface, but my attention was directed elsewhere.

A dark bundle of rags lay across the curved base of the tunnel. Skirting it as we approached, I saw I'd been mistaken. The rags were merely a covering, outlining the twisted form beneath.

Bobo had made a mistake too, for it was his body that sprawled motionless there. The grotesque angle of his neck and the splinter of bone protruding from an outflung arm indicated that he had fallen from above. Fallen, or perhaps been hurled.

My eyes sought the rounded ceiling of the sewer. It was, as I'd estimated, easily twenty feet high, but I didn't have to scan the top to confirm my guess as to Bobo's fate.

Just ahead, at the left of the rounded iron wall, was a wooden ladder propped against the side of a long, broad shelf mounted on makeshift scaffolding which rose perhaps a dozen feet from the sewer's base. Here the candles were affixed to poles at regular intervals, illuminating a vast humbled heap of handluggage, ruck-shacks, attaché cases, boxes, packages, purses, and moldy, mildewed articles of clothing, piled into a thieves' mountain of stolen goods.

And here, squatting before them on a soiled and aging mattress, amid a litter of emptied and discarded bottles, Le Boss squatted.

There was no doubt as to his identity; I recognized him by his mocking smile, the cool casualness with which he rose to confront me after I'd forced Sandor up the ladder and onto the platform.

The man who stood swaying before us was a monster. Forgive the term, but there is no other single word to describe him. Le Boss was well over six feet tall, and the legs enclosed in the dirt-smudged trousers of his soiled suit were bowed and bent by the sheer immensity of the burden they bore. He must have weighed over three hundred pounds, and the fat bulging from his bloated belly and torso was almost obscene in its abundance. His huge hands terminated in fingers as thick as sausages.

There was no shirt beneath the tightly-stretched suit jacket and from a cord around his thick neck a whistle dangled against the naked chest. His head was bullet-shaped and bald. Indeed, he was completely hairless—no hint of eyebrows surmounted the hyperthyroid pupils, no lashes guarded the red-rimmed sockets. The porcine cheeks and sagging jowls were beardless, their fleshy folds worm-white even in the candle light which glittered against the tiny, tawny eyes.

I needed no second glance to confirm my suspicions of what had occurred before my arrival here; the scene I pictured in my mind was perfectly clear. The coming of Bobo, the breathless, stammered story, his master's reaction of mingled disbelief and anger, the fit of drunken fury in which the terrified bringer of bad tidings had been flung over the side of the platform to smash like an empty bottle on the floor of the sewer below—I saw it all too vividly.

Le Boss grinned at me, his fleshy lips parted to reveal yellowed stumps of rotting teeth.

"Well, old man?" he spoke in French, but his voice was oddly accented; he could indeed be a yougoslave.

I forced myself to meet his gaze. "You know why I'm here," I said.

He nodded. "Something about a key, I take it."

"Your pack of thieves took it. But it's my property."

His grin broadened. "My property now." The deep voice rumbled with mocking relish. "Suppose I'm not inclined to return it?"

For answer I shoved Sandor before me and raised the knife, poising it against his neck. My captive trembled and made mewing sounds as the blade pressed closer.

Le Boss shrugged. "You'll have to do better than that, old man. A child's life isn't important to me."

I peered down at Bobo's body lying below. "So I see." Striving to conceal my reaction, I faced him again. "But where are the others?"

"Playing, I imagine."

"Playing?"

"You find that strange, old man? In spite of what you may think, I'm not without compassion. After all, they are only children. They work hard, and they deserve the reward of play."

Le Boss turned, gesturing down toward the far recesses of the sewer. My eyes followed his gaze through the shifting candle glow, and for the first time I became aware of movement in the dim depths. Faint noises echoed upward, identifiable now as the sound of childish laughter. Tiny shapes moved below and beyond, shapes which gleamed white amid the shadows.

The yougoslaves were naked, and at play. I counted four of them, scuffling and squatting in the far reaches of the tunnel.

But wait! There was a fifth figure, slightly smaller than the others who loomed over it and laughed as they pawed the squirming shape or tugged at the golden hair. Over their mirth rose the sound of sobbing, and over that, the echo of Bobo's voice.

Hey, old man—you like girls? Fresh meat, only five, six maybe—

Now I could see only too clearly. Two of the boys held their victim down, spread-eagled and helpless, while the other two—but I shall not describe what they were doing.

Glancing away, I again met Le Boss's smile. Somehow it seemed more hideous to me than the sight below.

He groped for a bottle propped against the pile of loot beside him and drank before speaking. "You are distressed, eh?"

I shook my head. "Not as much as you'll be unless you give me back my key."

He smiled. "Empty threats will get you nothing but empty hands."

"My hands aren't empty." I jabbed the knife at Sandor's neck, grazing the flesh, and he squealed in terror.

Le Boss shrugged. "Go ahead. I told you it doesn't matter to me."

For a moment I stood irresolute. Then, with a sigh I drew the knife back from Sandor's throat and released my hold on his sweat-soaked collar. He turned and raced off to the ladder behind me, and I could hear his feet scraping against the rungs as he descended. Mercifully, the sound muffled the laughter from below.

Le Boss nodded. "That's better. Now we can discuss the situation like gentlemen."

I lifted the knife. "Not as long as I have this, and you have the key."

"More empty threats?"

"My knife speaks for me." I took a step forward as I spoke.

He chuckled. “I swear I don’t know what to make of you, old man. Either you are very stupid or very brave.”

“Both, perhaps.” I raised the blade higher, but he halted my advance with a quick gesture.

“Enough,” he wheezed. Turning, he stopped and thrust his pudgy hand into a tangle of scarves, kerchiefs, and handbags behind him. When he straightened again he was holding the key.

“Is this what you’re after?”

“Yes. I knew you wouldn’t discard it.”

He stared at the red stone gleaming dully from the crested handle. “I never toss away valuables.”

“Just human lives,” I said.

“Don’t preach to me, old man. I’m not interested in your philosophy.”

“Nor I in yours.” I stretched out my hand, palm upward. “All I want is my key.”

His own hand drew back. “Not so fast. Suppose you tell me why.”

“It’s not the ruby,” I answered. “Go ahead, pry it loose if you like.”

Le Boss chuckled again. “A poor specimen—big enough, but flawed. It’s the key itself that interests you, eh?”

“Naturally. As I told Bobo, it opens the gate to my estate.”

“And just where is this estate of yours?”

“Near Bourg-la-Reine.”

“That’s not too far away.” The little eyes narrowed. “The van could take us there within the hour.”

“It would serve no purpose,” I said. “Perhaps ‘estate’ is a misnomer. The place is small and holds nothing you’d be interested in. The furnishings are old, but hardly the quality of antiques. The house itself has been boarded up for years since my last visit, I have other properties elsewhere on the continent where I spend much of my time. But since I’ll be here for several weeks on business, I prefer familiar surroundings.”

“Other properties, eh?” Le Boss fingered the key. “You must be quite rich, old man.”

“That’s none of your affair.”

“Perhaps not, but I was just thinking. If you have money, why not conduct your business in comfort from a hotel in Paris?”

I shrugged. “It’s a matter of sentiment—”

“Really?” he eyed me sharply, and in the interval before speaking, I noted that the sounds below had ceased.

My voice broke the sudden silence. “I assure you—”

“Au *contraire.* You do not assure me in the least.” Le Boss scowled. “If you do own an estate, then it’s the key to the house that’s important, not the one for the gate. Any locksmith could open it for you without the need of this particular key.”

He squinted at the burnished brass, the dulled brilliance of the ruby imbedded in the ornate crest. “Unless, of course, it isn’t a gate key after all. Looks to me more like the key to a strongbox, or even a room in the house holding hidden valuables.”

“It’s just a gate key.” Again I held one hand out as the other gripped the knife. “But I want it—now.”

“Enough to kill?” he challenged.

“If necessary.”

“I’ll spare you that.” Grinning, Le Boss reached down again into a bundle of discarded clothing. When he turned to face me against he held a revolver in his hand.

“Drop that toothpick,” he said, raising the weapon to reinforce his command.

Sighing, I released my grip and the knife fell, clattering over the side of the open platform to the surface of the sewer below.

Impelled by blind impulse, I turned hastily. If I could get to the ladder—

“Stand where you are!”

It wasn’t his words, but the sharp clicking sound that halted me. Slowly I pivoted to face the muzzle of his cocked revolver.

“That’s better,” he said.

“You wouldn’t murder me—not in cold blood.”

“Let’s leave it up to the kids.” As Le Boss spoke his free hand fumbled for the whistle looped around his neck. Enfolding it in blubbery lips, he blew.

The piercing blast echoed, reverberating from the rounded iron walls beside me and below. Then came the answering murmurs, the sudden thud of footsteps. Out of the comer of my eye I glanced down and saw the four naked figures—no, there were five now, including the fully clothed Sandor—moving toward the platform on which we stood.

Again I conjured up a vision of Hell, of demons dancing in the flames. But the flames were merely candle light and the bodies hurrying beneath were those of children. It was only their laughter which was demonic. Their laughter, and their gleefully contorted faces.

As they approached I caught a glimpse of what they held in their hands. Sandor had scooped up the knife from where it had fallen and the others held weapons of their own—a mallet, a wooden club, a length of steel pipe, the serrated stump of a broken wine bottle.

Le Boss chuckled once more. “Playtime,” he said.

“Call them off!” I shouted. “I warn you—”

He shook his head. “No way, old man.”

Old man. That, I swear, is what did it. Not the menace of the gun, not the sight of the loathsome little creatures below. It was just the phrase, the contempt with which it had been repeated over and over again.

I knew what he was thinking—an unarmed, helpless elderly victim had been trapped for torment. And for the most part he was right. I was weaponless, old, trapped.

But not helpless.

Closing my eyes, I concentrated. There are subsonic whistles which make no audible sound, and there are ways of summoning which require no whistles at all. And there’s more than human vermin infesting abandoned sewers, lurking in the far recesses of tangled tunnels, but responsive to certain commands.

Almost instantly that response came.

It came in the form of a purposeful padding, of faint noises magnified by sheer numbers. It came in the sound of squeaks and chittering, first as distant echoes, then in closer cacophony as my summons were answered.

Now the yougoslaves had reached the ladder at the far side of the platform. I saw Sandor mount the lower rungs, knife held between clenched teeth—saw him halt as he too heard the sudden, telltale tumult. Behind Sandor his companions turned to seek its source.

They cried out then, first in surprise, then in alarm, as the grey wave surged toward them along the sewer's length; the grey wave, flecked with hundreds of red and glaring eyes, a thousand tiny teeth.

The wave raced forward, curling around the feet and ankles of the yougoslaves before the ladder, climbing and clinging to their legs and knees. Screaming, they lashed out with their weapons, trying to beat back the attack but the wave poured on, forward and upward. Furry forms leaped higher, claws digging into waists, teeth biting into bellies. Sandor pulled himself up the ladder with both hands, but below him the red eyes rose and the grey shapes launched up from behind to cover his unprotected back with a blanket of wriggling bodies.

Now the screams from below were drowned out by the volume of shrill screeching. The knife dropped from between Sandor's lips as he shrieked and toppled down into the writhing mass that had already engulfed his companions. Flailing helplessly, their faces sank from sight in the rising waves of the grey sea.

It happened so quickly that Le Boss, caught by surprise, could only stare in stunned silence at the shambles below.

It was I whose voice rose above the bedlam. "The key," I cried. "Give me the key."

For answer he raised his hand—not the one holding the key, but the one grasping the gun.

His fingers were trembling, and the muzzle wavered as I started toward him. Even so, at such close range I realized he couldn't miss. And he didn't.

As he squeezed the trigger the shots came in rapid succession. They were barely audible in the uproar from the tunnel, but I felt their impact as they struck my chest and torso.

I kept on, moving closer, hearing the final, futile click as he continued to press the trigger of his emptied revolver. Looking up, eyes red with rage, he hurled the weapon at my head. It whizzed past me, and now he had nothing left to clutch but the key. His hands started to shake.

My hand went out.

Snatching the key from his pudgy paw, I stared at his frantic face. Perhaps I should have told him he'd guessed correctly, the key was not meant to open a gate. I could have explained the ruby in the crest—the symbol of a lineage so ancient that it still adhered to the old custom of maintaining a tomb on the estate. The key gave me access to that tomb, not that it was really needed; my branch of the line had other resting places, and during my travels I always carried with me what was necessary to afford temporary rest of my own. But during my stay here the tomb was both practical and private. Calling a locksmith would be unwise and inconvenient, and I do not relish inconvenience.

All this I could have told him, and much more. Instead I pocketed the key bearing the great flawed ruby that was like a single drop of blood.

As I did so, I realized that the squeals and chittering below had faded into other sounds compounded of claws ripping through cloth, teeth grating against bone.

Unable to speak, unable to move, Le Boss awaited my approach. When I gripped his shoulders he must have fainted, for there was only a dead weight now to ease down onto the platform floor.

Below me my brothers sated their hunger, feasting on the bodies of the yougoslaves.

Bending forward to the fat neck beneath me, in my own way I feasted too.

What fools they were, these creatures who thought themselves so clever! Perhaps they could outwit others, but their little tricks could not prevail against me. After all, they were only yougoslaves.

And I am a Transylvanian.

Pranks

Robert Bloch has been heard to say that he'd prefer to be known as the man who wrote the Bible, rather than as the man who wrote *Psycho,* but that's not likely to happen. Since his first story was published in 1934, his writing has definitely tended toward the *unholy.* With his screenplays, novels—*The Scarf* and *American Gothic* are particularly notable, and his recent *The Night of the Ripper*—and many collections of stories, Bloch has long since proved himself an undisputed master of the macabre.

And nowhere is he more masterful—or more macabre, for that matter—than in the short story. Here are some Halloween pranks from a man who definitely did not write the Bible.

The lights came on just after sunset.

He stood in the hallway, near the front door, filling the candy dish on the table with a skill born of long practice. How many times had he done this, how many Halloweens had he spent preparing for the joyful hours of the evening ahead? No use trying to remember; he'd lost count. Not that it mattered, really. What mattered was the occasion itself, the few hours of magic and make-believe one was privileged to share with the children. What mattered was the opportunity, however brief, to enter into the spirit of things, participate in the let's-pretend on the one night of the year when a childless couple could themselves pretend that they were truly no different from the members of the community around them; solid, ordinary citizens who took pride in their homes and their offspring.

Actually it wasn't all pretense; he was proud of this house, and rightly so, for it was he who had designed and created it, right down to the last knickknack and stick of furniture. And they had always loved children.

But truth to tell, it was the make-believe that thrilled him. Maybe they both had a childish streak of their own, dressing up to surprise the youngsters. And part of the fun was surprising one another, for it was an unspoken rule that neither of them ever revealed in advance just what sort of costume they'd be wearing.

Now, hearing her footsteps on the stairs, his eyes brightened in eager anticipation. One year she'd come sailing down the steps in hoopskirts as Scarlett O'Hara, another time she'd gotten herself up as a black-braided Pocahontas, once she'd worn the powdered wig of a Marie Antoinette. What would he see tonight—Cleopatra, the Empress Josephine, Joan of Arc?

Leave it to her to fathom his expectations and astonish him with the unexpected. And that, as she descended into full view, was exactly what she did. For instead of a figure out of film or fiction he beheld a little old lady with a motherly smile, wearing an apron over a simple housedress, as though she had just stepped out of an old-fashioned country kitchen.

"How do you like it?" she said.

For a moment he stared at her, completely taken aback, yet puzzled by the odd familiarity of her appearance. Where had he seen this smiling elderly woman before? Then, suddenly, his gaze darted toward the candy dish on the table and the empty box beside it. And there on the front of the box was his answer—the oval photographic portrait purporting to represent the candymaker herself. Tonight she was Mrs. See.

Now it was his turn to smile. "Marvelous!" he said. "It's hard for me to imagine you as an old lady, but I must say you look the part."

She nodded, pleased with his reaction. "I think the kids will like it. And they certainly should be able to recognize you too, Ben."

He peered at her through the tiny rimless spectacles and patted his paunch. “I hope so. At least I make a better Ben Franklin than last year’s Abraham Lincoln. Though I admit I was tempted to try something different for a change. Remember when I did Adolf Hitler—”

“And scared half the children out of their wits?” She shook her head. “Halloween’s for fun, not fright. No, I think you made a good choice.”

She bustled over to the table, inspecting the mound of chocolates heaped on the candy dish. “I see you’ve done my job for me.”

“That’s right.” He paused, listening to the sudden chiming of the grandfather’s clock beside the stairs. “Half past seven. They should start coming soon.” Then the doorbell rang.

She opened the door and the two of them stood side by side, gazing down at the little ragamuffin in the cowboy outfit as he clutched his crumpled shopping bag and rattled off the time-honored greeting. “Trick-or-treat,” he said.

She stepped back, smiling. “Isn’t he adorable?” she murmured. Then, “Come right in and help yourself. The candy’s on the table.”

The moment the front door closed, Joe Stuttman turned to Maggie, scowling. “Jesus H. Christ!” he said.

“Now, Joe, please!” Maggie sighed. “Don’t get yourself upset over nothing.”

“You call that nothing?” His scowl and voice deepened. “Those damned costumes must have cost a fortune. I’m not blind, you know—I read the ads. Okay, so most of Angela’s witch outfit you made yourself, but why in hell you had to go and buy Robbie that fancy space suit—”

“Simmer down,” Maggie told him. “You don’t have to pay for it. I’ve been saving up from my household allowance these past two months.”

“So that’s it!” Joe shook his head. “No wonder we’ve been eating so many of those lousy casserole messes lately. I work my tail off down at the shop and all I get to eat is glob because your son has to dress up like a goddamn astronaut for Halloween!”

"Our son," Maggie said softly. "Robbie's a good boy. You saw his last report card—all those A's mean he's really been doing his homework. And he still finds time to help me around the house and do your yard work for you. I think he deserves a treat once in a while."

"Treat." Joe went over to the coffee table in front of the television set, picked up the six-pack resting there, then yanked out a can of beer. "That's another thing I don't like—this trick-or-treat business. Running up and down the street at night, knocking on doors and asking for a handout. I don't care what kind of a fancy getup a kid's wearing. What he's really doing is acting like some wino on Main Street, a bum mooching off strangers. You call that good behavior? It's nothing but blackmail if you ask me." He thumbed the beer can tab. "Trick-or-treat—it's a threat, isn't it? Pay up or else. What are you training Robbie for, to grow up and join the Mafia?"

"For heaven's sake," Maggie said. "You don't have to go on a roll about it. You know as well as I do that trick-or-treat is just a phrase. People expect kids to ask them for candy or cookies on Halloween, it's just a tradition, that's all. And if somebody doesn't come through with a treat I'm sure neither Robbie nor Angela is going to do anything about it. They'll just go on to another house." She glanced unhappily toward the front door. "I only wish you'd let me put out a few little goodies for the kids who come here."

"No way," Joe said. He took a gulp of beer. "I thought we had that all settled. I'm not wasting my money on a mess of junk food for a bunch of little bastards who dress up in stupid costumes and come banging on my front door."

"But, Joe—"

"You heard me." Joe scooped up the six-pack with his free hand. "Now let's get those lights turned off, quick, before anyone shows up. I'm gonna watch the game on the set in the bedroom, and I don't want any interruptions. That means don't answer the door, do you read me?"

"Yes," Maggie said. "I read you."

Wearily she turned and started down the hallway toward the kitchen as Joe turned the living room lamp off behind her.

Do you read me? What a stupid question! Of course Maggie could read Joe, she'd been reading him like a book these past twelve years. And there were no surprises awaiting her; the stinginess, the rages, the insensitivity to the needs of others, all were part of an old, old story she'd come to know only too well.

Sighing softly, Maggie began to stack the dishes in the sink. As she did so she reminded herself that she had to be fair. Joe did work awfully hard, he did try to protect his family, and as husbands went he was probably better than most. In spite of his faults, Joe was a good man.

And maybe that was the trouble—he was a good man. A man who seemed never to have enjoyed his childhood, and who couldn't share in the fun his own children wanted to enjoy.

So it was up to her to see that they had a little of that fun in their lives. Like tonight—Halloween—a fun time for kids like Robbie and Angela. She hoped they were having a good time; perhaps when they grew up with families of their own they'd still be able to enjoy a harmless holiday.

It seemed to take forever for the twins to get ready; Pam's devil costume was too tight and had to be let out at the waist before it could be zipped up in back, and Debbie kept fussing with her clown makeup.

In point of fact, they didn't actually leave the house until almost eight-fifteen, but within three minutes after their departure Chuck and Linda Cooper were in bed.

"Alone at last!" Linda giggled. "My God, you'd think I was some kind of floozy, sneaking around like this and waiting for a chance to hop into the sack the moment the coast is clear."

"Be a floozy," Chuck said. "Come on, I dare you."

"Don't get me wrong." Linda sobered. "You know how much I love the kids, we both do. But lately it seems like we never get a chance, what with their bedroom right next door to ours and these damned mattress springs squeaking. I’m always afraid they can hear us.”

“So let them hear.” Chuck grinned. “About time they learned the facts of life.”

Linda shook her head. “But they’re still so young! Maybe I’m too self-conscious, I don’t know. It’s the way I was brought up, I guess, and I can’t help it.”

“Look, let’s not talk about it now, shall we?” Chuck tossed the covers aside. “I’m not going to spend the next two hours worrying whether or not the bedsprings squeak.”

“Sorry,” Linda said. “I know how tight things are right now, the way prices keep going up and you not getting that raise until next year. But if we could only afford a new mattress—”

“Buy you one for Christmas. How’s about that?”

“Oh, Chuck!” She turned to him, smiling. “Do you really mean it?”

“ ’Course I mean it. One new mattress for Christmas, that’s a promise. But right now we’ve got another holiday to celebrate, remember?” He took her into his arms. “Happy Halloween,” he said.

Sometime around nine-thirty Father Carmichael checked his watch. “Getting late,” he said. “I really should be going. I thank you both for a lovely dinner and a delightful evening—”

“Come on, Father, what’s your hurry?” Jim Higgins reached for the bottle and leaned forward to pour a good two inches of its contents into the priest’s brandy snifter. “One for the road, okay?” he said.

Father Carmichael shrugged in mild protest, but Martha Higgins beamed and nodded at him from her chair beside the fireplace. “Please don’t rush away. Billy and Pat should be home soon and I know they’d love to see you.”

“I’d like that.” The priest twirled his snifter, then raised it to drink, smiling as he did so. Then, as he set the glass down again, his expression changed. “Aren’t they a little young to be out at this hour?”

"It's trick-or-treat night, don't you remember?" Jim Higgins swallowed brandy in a single swig that emptied his own snifter. "After all, Halloween only comes once a year."

"Praise the Lord for that," Father Carmichael said softly.

Martha Higgins raised her eyebrows. "Don't you approve of trick-or-treat?"

"A harmless diversion," the priest told her. "But Halloween itself—"

"Now wait a minute." Jim Higgins spoke quickly, glancing at Martha out of the corner of his eye as he did so. "This is a nice friendly little town. You of all people should know that, Father. I realize a lot of parents go along with their youngsters on a night like this, but we talked it over and decided it was time for Billy and Pat to make the rounds alone if they wanted to. Sort of gives them a grown-up feeling, and helps them to understand there's nothing to be afraid of."

"Nothing to be afraid of." The priest sighed. Then, conscious of Martha Higgins' sudden frown, he forced a smile. "Don't mind me," he said. "It's the brandy talking."

"What do you mean?" Jim Higgins was frowning too. "What's all this about Halloween? Are you trying to tell us we ought to be afraid of goblins and witches? I thought people stopped believing in that stuff a couple of hundred years ago."

"So they did." Father Carmichael took a hasty sip from his glass. "They stopped believing. But that in itself didn't necessarily stop the phenomena."

"Don't talk like a damned fool!" Jim Higgins said, then halted, his face reddening. "Sorry, Father—no offense—"

"And none taken." The priest nodded. "You're quite right, of course. We're all of us God's fools, and some of us, I fear, are damned. But I spoke as neither, merely in my capacity as a servant of the Church. And though the Church no longer concerns itself with suppressing old wives' tales about pixies and leprechauns, it has not abandoned the fight against true evil. There are still those of us who are ordained to seek out and dispel the unclean and the unholy, or exorcise unfortunates possessed by demons."

"But isn't a lot of that just superstition?" Martha said. "All this nonsense about vampires and werewolves and the dead coming out of their graves? And even if such things were possible, I don't see what it has to do with Halloween. It's just another holiday." Father Carmichael finished his brandy before speaking. "The real holiday—holy day, that is—will come tomorrow, on the Feast of All Saints. It's then we celebrate Hallowmass in honor of Our Lady and all the martyrs unknown who died to preserve the faith. The faith which Satan abhors, because it affirms the power of Almighty God.

"But Satan too has power. And he chooses to manifest his defiance on the eve of Allhallows by loosing the forces of evil which he commands." The priest broke off, smiling self-consciously. "Forgive me—I didn't mean to start preaching a sermon. And I hope you realize I was just speaking figuratively, so to say."

"Sure thing." Jim Higgins moved to his wife and put his hand on her shoulder. "Just a little Halloween ghost story, right?"

Martha nodded but her eyes were troubled, intent on Father Carmichael as he glanced at his watch again, then rose.

"Time I was leaving," he said. "I take it I'll be seeing you both at Mass tomorrow—"

Martha gestured quickly. "But you haven't seen the children yet! They should be here any minute now. Please, Father. Won't you stay?"

The priest hesitated, conscious that the smile had faded from her face as he stared into the troubled eyes. "Of course," he said. "Of course I'll stay."

Then there was silence, except for the crackle of flames in the fireplace and the faint, faraway ticking of a clock.

Jim Higgins frowned. "Almost ten-thirty," he murmured. "They promised to be back by ten at the latest." The frown deepened. "You'll pardon my language, Father—but where in hell are those kids?"

"Heavely," Irene Esterhazy said. "I mean heavenly." She lurched against the buffet table as she took another bite of her croissant. "Try one, honey—they're soooo good!"

Howard Esterhazy shook his head. “No time for that,” he told her. “We’ve stayed too long as it is.”

“But it’s such a lovely party.” Irene turned, nodding toward the crowd of couples milling about in the living room beyond, her voice rising above the babble of animated conversation. “Besides, I want ’nother drink—”

She lurched again and Howard gripped her shoulder. “You’ve had enough,” he said. “We’re going home.”

“Oh, Howie—”

“You heard me.” He guided her forward. “Now pull yourself together and say good night to our host and hostess.”

Irene made a face. “Must I?”

“You must,” Howard said.

And she did, somehow managing not to slur her words as they exchanged farewells and made their way out to the driveway.

Once in the car, with the windows open and the night air fanning her face, Irene sobered slightly. “You mad at me, honey?”

“No.” Howard sighed, eyes intent on the road. “I guess you’re entitled to a little diversion once in a while. But do you realize what time it is?”

Irene focused her eyes on the illuminated dial of the dashboard clock. “My God, you’re right! It’s almost eleven. I had no idea—”

Her husband nodded. “I know. And I didn’t want to spoil your fun. It’s just that I told Connie we wouldn’t be late.”

“Maybe we ought to give her a little something extra,” Irene said. “She’s always been so good about sitting with Mark, even though she does play that damn stereo full blast.”

“You can say that again,” Howard muttered as they pulled up before the house. The wind was rising, sending surges of sound through the treetops, but the screech of the stereo echoed so loudly that even their voices were drowned by its pounding beat as they left the car and moved up to the front door.

Howard’s thumb jabbed at the buzzer. “Maybe I should use the key,” he said. “She can’t hear anything over that racket.”

But as he fumbled in his pocket the door swung open quickly and Connie peered out. “Oh, it’s you—” she said.

“Who did you expect, Michael Jackson?” Howard scowled.

“I thought it was Mark.” Connie’s voice faltered. “Mark?” Irene moved into the hall, her forehead furrowing. “You mean he isn’t here?”

“Please, Mrs. Esterhazy.” The girl gestured helplessly. “Don’t be angry with me. I thought it would be all right.” Her voice was muffled by stereophonic stridency.

“Turn that thing off!” Howard shouted.

Retreating to the living room, Connie hastily obeyed, then turned to confront the Esterhazys’ accusing stare.

“Now what’s all this about Mark?” Howard said. “Where is he?”

Connie’s gaze dropped and her words came with forced bravado. “You know Bill Summers, that friend of his from down the street? Well, he came to the door and I thought it was trick-or-treat, but it turned out he wanted Mark to come out with him. Just around the block, he said, because he didn’t want to go alone. I told Mark no, he wasn’t supposed to, and he had all the candy he wanted right here at home that you left for him. Besides, he didn’t even have a costume. But Bill said it would only be for a few minutes, and Mark was almost crying, he wanted to go so bad. So I figured why not let him just as long as he promised to come right back and not go off the block? Besides, I told my boyfriend where I was sitting tonight and he called on the phone right in the middle of all this going on, so—”

“You mean you disobeyed our orders?” There was no slur in Irene’s voice now, only the sharp shrill of sudden anger. “You let him go?”

“I’m sorry. I guess I wasn’t thinking—”

“Never mind that.” Howard’s hoarse voice held apprehension as well as anger. “How long ago was this?”

“How long?” Connie shook her head. “I don’t know. I mean, I was on the phone and then I started playing the stereo, like maybe around ten o’clock.”

“Then he’s been gone over an hour.” Howard’s face was grim. “Maybe an hour and a half, while you sat there blabbing with your boyfriend and listening to that goddamn rock crap!”

Connie began to cry, but Irene ignored her. She turned to her husband. “Why don’t you get in the car and take a run around the block? He can’t have gone very far.”

“I hope to God you’re right.” Howard moved toward the hall. “Meanwhile, you better phone the Summerses and see if Bill brought him back over there.”

“Good idea. I never thought of that.” Irene was already dialing as Howard started up the car outside, and she could hear it pulling away as Mrs. Summers responded to her call.

“Hello—Midge?” Irene spoke quickly. “Sorry to bother you at this late hour, but I was wondering—” Connie stood beside her, trying to control her sniffles as she listened. But Irene’s words and the pauses between them told their own story, and when at last she hung up and turned her anguished face to the light Connie started to cry again.

“You heard?” Irene said. “Bill’s gone too.” Then her voice broke. “Oh my God!” She rose. “What’s keeping Howard so long?”

The answer came as a car screeched to a halt in the driveway and Irene opened the front door to admit her husband. The night wind was cold, but what really chilled her as he entered was the realization that Howard was alone.

“No sign of him,” he muttered. “I covered everything for a half mile up and down, and there’s not a kid out anywhere.”

“There wouldn’t be, at this hour.” Irene nodded. “I know he’s not at the Summerses’, but maybe he and Bill stopped by somewhere else. I’m going to phone the Coopers and see—”

“Don’t bother,” Howard said. “I’ve just come from there. And before that I looked in on the Stuttmatis and those new people, Higgins or whatever their name is. Their kids haven’t come home either.”

“But that’s impossible! Do you realize it’s past eleven-thirty?” She trembled, fighting the tears. “Where could they be?”

“We’ll find out.” Howard brushed past her, striding toward the phone. “I’m calling the police.”

The grandfather’s clock began to boom its message of midnight as potbellied Benjamin Franklin and little old Mrs. See peered into the parlor at the left of the front hallway.

“I’m glad we used candy this time,” she said. “And that was a good idea of yours, giving money instead if the youngsters came to the door with their parents.”

It was dark in the parlor and they had only a moment to stare through the shadows at the huddled forms lying motionless within.

“How many are there?” he said.

“Thirteen.” She beamed at him as the chimes came to an end. “At least we won’t be going hungry.”

Sergeant Lichner kept his cool, but it wasn’t easy. The station was like a madhouse, all those parents yelling and crying, and it took a team of four men just to question them and get some facts, instead of listening to wild guesses about kidnappers or crazies who put razor blades in Halloween candy.

But in the end he got it all together, using the statements to map out a route. Putting through some phone calls to establish where each child or group of children had last been seen, it turned out that everything must have happened somewhere within the area of one square block.

Then he called in backups and started out. There were four black-and-whites assigned to the search, each with its quota of parents, and each taking a single side of the block as they went from door to door asking questions.

On three sides the answers formed a pattern. Various youngsters had knocked on doors at various times, but all had been seen and accounted for.

Sergeant Lichner himself was in a fifth car, and to speed makers up he took one end of the block while the fourth car started at the other.

It wasn’t until the two cars converged in the middle of the block to compare notes that he got an answer. Sid Olney pulled up and got out, shaking his head. “They were here, all right,” he said. “Stopped at every house back there, right on up until around eleven. What did you find out, anything?”

Sergeant Lichner took a deep breath. “Same as you.” He glanced at the house directly behind him. “Folks in the last place said the Esterhazy kid and the Summers boy were there late, almost eleven-thirty. What time did your people see them?”

Sid Olney shook his head. “They didn’t.” He shook his head. “That’s funny.”

But there was no mirth in his eyes, or the eyes of the parents as they stared at the spot where the trail ended—the space between the two houses looming on either side of the weed-choked vacant lot lying empty and deserted under the Halloween moon.

Reaper

After the kids have grown up and moved away, a new child comes into your house.

His name is Death.

He comes quietly, without the wail of an infant, and he won't keep you up at night or make daily demands on your attention. But somehow you'll know he's there to stay. As he keeps growing, getting bigger and stronger with each passing day, you become smaller and weaker. Sooner or later there'll be the inevitable confrontation—and when it comes, you're the one who'll have to go.

Ross wrote these lines on the morning of his sixty-fifth birthday, then put them aside.

He was tired of writing about Death with a capital *D.* As an author of dark fantasy he'd done more than his share of dramatizing man's mortality, and it was difficult to find a fresh approach. Too many writers had exhausted the idea—Death as an angel, Death setting an appointment in Samarra, Death taking a holiday, Death trapped up a tree, Death forestalled, Death deceived. And it was all wishful thinking. There's nothing angelic about the Grim Reaper; he takes no holidays, he won't be fooled or forestalled. Death is an impersonal force, not an articulate and articulated skeleton swinging a scythe.

Ross shrugged and left his desk. After all, a man is entitled to take time off and celebrate his birthday, even if nobody else cares whether he lives or dies.

His parents and relatives were long gone and he'd never married. During the years he spent here in an old house on the peninsula of upper Michigan, Ross formed no friendships. He corresponded with his agent and editors, but his only personal contact with other people came when he drove into town for groceries.

Ross was a loner, but he never felt lonely. Newspapers, magazines and books came from his mailbox, and his children kept him company.

His children stood on the bookshelves of his workroom, row on row—the novels with their stiff spines and sturdy skins, the short stories secure within the pages of magazines and anthologies. Some of them, transformed by translation, spoke in foreign tongues. Others appeared only in original editions, their voices weakened to a whisper by the passing years. But here and abroad, in or out of print, they still lived, still possessed the power to speak to new readers in time to come.

Ross regarded them with parental pride, for even the least of the lot contained something of himself. He loved his children—and envied them, because they would outlive him. Eventually, of course, they too must die—their spines would sag, their bindings fall apart, their pages crumble. But long before that happened his own spine would cease its support, the skin binding his body would wrinkle and wither until what was within disintegrated.

It was already beginning to happen now. Now, as the years took their relentless toll; as eyes blurred, teeth decayed, aches and pains proliferated, memory dimmed and thought strayed from his control to focus on fear.

Ross sought the sunlight outside his house and went for a walk in the woods. But there were shadows lurking among the trees, and fear walked with him. Try as he would, he couldn't shake off the thought of Death—Death with a capital *D.* Sooner or later it would come, bringing eternal sleep.

To sleep, perchance to dream—

This was what he really feared. The mind continues to function when you sleep. Suppose it continues to function when you die. Suppose consciousness lives on, even in the grave, in the deep, damp darkness where the brain lies buried within a rotting corpse, imprisoned yet aware, unable to escape from the ultimate eternity of hopeless horror.

Does pain still register? If you avoid the terrors of entombment, will cremation bring a torment like the fires of hell?

His mind dwelt on the ways the end might come—the sudden violence of accident or even murder, or the slow agonies of terminal illness. As Ross walked on the sunlight faded and the shadows deepened. There was no solace to be found here in the woods.

Back at the house he prepared a solitary meal, then had a few drinks, but it was hardly a birthday celebration. The thought obsessed him—how would he meet Death?

And that night, after sinking into troubled slumber, he met Death in a dream.

There he was, the King of Terrors himself, a gleaming skeleton standing at the foot of Ross's bed. The bony fingers dangling from his left wrist were curled around an old-fashioned hourglass; the fleshless talons below the right wrist grasped the handle of a scythe.

Ross stared at the cruel curve of the scythe blade—the blade of the Grim Reaper. Death, he realized, was not a child. The apparition before him embodied all the attributes of legend, the skeletal symbol of tradition and the Tarot.

Ross also realized he was dreaming.

"Wrong."

There was no sound, but Ross heard the word, even as he saw the movement of the jutting jaw.

"No!" Ross was talking in his sleep. "You *can't* be real—you're just a figment of my imagination."

Death laughed soundlessly, but Ross heard him, heard the unspoken words that followed.

"What about those books and stories you've written? All of them are figments of your imagination too, but they're real enough. They exist because you created them.”

“I didn’t create you,” Ross murmured.

“That’s because there was no need,” said Death. “Imagination possesses a power of its own. And the imagination of millions of men before you gave me semblance and substance. Believe me, I’m as real as you are. Even more so, since you will die and I’ll go on forever.” Once more the soundless chuckle came.

“Why are you here?” Ross whispered.

Death motioned with his scythe and the sound of the swishing blade was audible enough. “Your hour has come.”

Ross’s head stirred on the pillow. “But I don’t want to die!”

“Few men do, unless prompted by unbearable agony. Consider yourself lucky to be spared such suffering.”

Ross shuddered. “Please, I beg of you—”

“Beggars die. And so do kings. That’s true democracy.”

Suddenly Ross became conscious of the creeping chill. His body was invaded by a numbing cold that turned blood into ice. “No!” he gasped. “There’s got to be some way—”

Slowly the skull nodded atop its bony perch. “You want to make a bargain, I take it.”

“Can that be possible?” Ross murmured.

“Of course.” Skeleton fingers stroked the scythe blade with a rattling sound. “Once I walked the world with this weapon and wielded it upon each man, woman or child at the appointed time.” Death shifted the hourglass cradled against his rib cage. “But the world changed. Instead of a few thousands, there are millions of mortals, far too many to fall beneath a single scythe.

“At first I had help. Famines and pestilence, epidemics of cholera, bubonic plague, a score of other fatal diseases. But medicine advanced and the numbers of survivors grew again.

“For a while wars solved my problem. Genghis Khan, Attila, Tamerlane and a hundred others in the past—men like Napoleon, Hitler, Stalin—gave me battles where fifty thousand fell in a single day.

“I still have wars, even new drugs and bugs, but it’s never enough, not in this era of population explosion. That’s why I’m prepared to make an offer.”

Ross scowled in sleep. “I’m not a ruler or a general—just an ordinary man.”

“I don’t expect anything extraordinary,” said the voice that was not a voice. “But every little bit helps. What do you say to dealing with me on a one-to-one basis? One extra year of life for each death?”

“Immortality?”

“I don’t promise that. You may grow weary and decide to end our bargain. Meanwhile let’s call it a stay of execution.” The jawbone of the skull quivered in silent mirth.

Again Ross frowned. “But you’re asking me to become a murderer—”

“You’ve already committed murder many times in your mind and described the deeds on paper.”

“That’s different. I couldn’t actually kill another human being.”

“Why not? Life is meaningless. Everyone dies, sooner or later.” The skull’s grin gleamed. “And you can choose whoever you wish. Think of the power I’m giving you.”

“I don’t want such power!”

“Not even if it’s power to do good?” Once more the bony fingers caressed the scythe. “Look around you. The world is filled with those who deserve to die. Make the proper choices and you won’t be dealing death—you’ll be dealing justice.”

“It’s still murder,” Ross whispered.

“Consider yourself an Avenging Angel,” Death murmured. “Isn’t there someone you know of who has forfeited the right to live?”

Ross hesitated, then nodded in slumber. “You’re right, there *is* someone. A man named Wade, the one who butchered all those women and got off with a life sentence, which means he’ll be out again in a few years. I wouldn’t mind killing a mass murderer.”

“Sorry,” Death told him. “Wade happens to be one of my emissaries. We made a deal long ago and he still has years to live, in or out of prison.”

Ross sighed. “Then I’ll settle for the people who permitted such a miscarriage of justice. His scumbag lawyer, the nit-picking judge, the stupid jury—”

The skull’s grin seemed to broaden. “Don’t forget the parole officer who was supposed to keep an eye on him after a previous conviction, or the juvenile authorities who turned him loose before that. If you expect to do away with everyone connected with the case you’ll be quite a mass murderer yourself.”

“But there must be somebody who’s ultimately responsible!”

“You decide. The power to slay or spare will be yours alone. I’ll never force you to act if you don’t want to. That’s part of our contract.”

“I still don’t like the idea—”

Death swung his scythe. “Do you like this better?” He leaned forward over the foot of the bed. “Think of what I’m offering. One whole year in return for one little life. Choose your own time, your own candidate, your own method.”

“Suppose I get caught.”

“You won’t. Your whole career has been devoted to devising fictional fatalities, putting perfect crimes on paper. Use the same ingenuity in your own behalf and there’s no danger.” The bony arm raised the scythe and a blast of freezing air fanned Ross’s face. “So what will it be? Do or die?”

Ross stirred restlessly. “And if I accept your offer—what then?” Skeleton shoulders shrugged. “Nothing. No contracts signed in blood, no hocus-pocus. Just a verbal agreement. One life, one year.

Call it a birthday present.” The skull’s eye sockets fixed on Ross’s face. “Well?”

“Done,” Ross whispered.

Death raised the hourglass and reversed it. Slowly the sand began sifting down into the lower half, grain by grain.

“One year,” Death murmured.

And vanished.

If, indeed, he had ever been there.

In the light of the morning sun Ross wasn’t sure. The mind plays tricks.

So does the body.

By midafternoon he was back in bed, shivering in the sudden onslaught of chills and fever. Dreams can herald illness, he told himself. But as darkness deepened, the fever flamed, bringing visions—Death, with his fleshless face and soundless voice, his scythe and hourglass. How soon would the sand run out? When it did, the scythe would swing, and he feared that scythe. *Isn ’t there someone you know of who has forfeited the right to live?*

Ross tried to think. The mind is a computer, and in delirium the computer was down. Those rich writers with their fancy word processors—did their expensive equipment ever go down too? His mind was blank, blank as a computer screen, but now something flickered into view.

A face was forming. He’d seen it many times before, in close-up on television talk shows, peering out at him from newspaper pages, smiling smugly on the backs of book jackets.

Kevin Colfax. He knew the name. Thanks to the media, everyone knew Kevin Colfax. Famous author. Owner of a villa on the Riviera, a fleet of classic cars, a sixth wife and a dozen mistresses.

Romans *k* clef, that’s what they called his books. He cannibalized from the pages of *The National Enquirer* and *People* magazine, took the lives of celebrities and turned them into pornography—grossly explicit sex and vulgar violence to feed the fantasies of mindless millions bent on mental masturbation. His steamy sleaze boosted him to best-seller lists and the A lists of parties where lines of coke were snorted by upwardly mobile arrivistes who no longer had any place to go except where tripping might take them. But now he was where he really belonged—on Ross’s hit list.

The face faded in the flush of fever and Ross murmured through dry, cracked lips. “Kill Kevin Colfax.” Perspiration bathed his body as he sank into slumber.

When he awoke the following morning the fever was gone but resolution remained. Kevin Colfax deserved to die.

The only question was how—there must be a way that left no clue.

Poison?

Over the years Ross had researched toxicology and amassed an imposing number of reference works. Amazing how many lethal compounds existed that were easy to procure, or concoct from simple substances found in almost every household. Fast-acting, fatal and almost undetectable if proper precautions were taken.

Once he knew what to look for, Ross lost no time in finding it. The insecticide had been outlawed years ago but he’d never bothered to throw it away and still had half the contents in a spray can. A bit of boiling on the stove and the stuff condensed, leaving a deadly distillate that would kill on contact.

But how to make that contact?

He didn’t know Kevin Colfax or anyone in the privileged circles which he orbited. There was no way of introducing a pinch of the poisonous substance into his food or drink or the powder he inhaled through his nasal passages. Colfax was surrounded by personal security designed to protect him from friends, foes and fans alike.

Fans.

Ross sat down at the typewriter and wrote a letter. A fan letter to Kevin Colfax, asking for an autographed photo.

He typed it quickly; the rubber gloves he’d donned didn’t interfere with his speed. Nor did they interfere as he added a drop of water to a smidge of the poisonous powder, turning it to a paste, which he carefully smeared on the gummed flap of the stamped self-addressed return envelope enclosed in his letter.

The name and address on the envelope were faked, of course, but the poison was real. Real and reliable. One lick and the tongue would absorb the fatal dosage, bringing death in a matter of minutes.

Ross found Colfax's address in Who's Who, copied it on the outer envelope, affixed a stamp. Then he drove to a town thirty miles away from his own zip-code area and his gloved hand dropped death into the mailbox.

After that, all he had to do was wait.

Four days later he read the item in his morning paper.

> Police Probe
> Mystery Death
>
> NEW YORK (UPI)—Authorities here are investigating possibilities of foul play in the sudden death of Florence Rimpau, 23, personal secretary of best-selling novelist Kevin Colfax. According to her employer, Miss Rimpau appeared to be in perfect health at the time of her collapse while working on correspondence. Paramedics were unable to revive her and an autopsy has been ordered after medical reports indicated poison as a possible cause.

Ross let the paper slip from trembling fingers, and several anxious days followed before a follow-up story appeared. Florence Rimpau was more than a secretary; she had ambitions of pursuing a writing career herself, and according to grieving family members, she was eagerly awaiting the publication of her first novel when death came.

There was more. Results of the autopsy confirmed the poison theory but investigation uncovered no clues. Kevin Colfax himself was quickly exonerated of any connection with the case. Apparently the source of the poison and the method used to employ it were not discovered by police or pathologists. Ross could congratulate himself; he'd never be caught. It was indeed a perfect crime.

The perfect crime—but the wrong victim.

Ross read and shuddered. He was responsible for the death of an innocent girl, blighting a bright future and bringing sorrow to her family and friends. Why hadn’t he anticipated such a possibility?

He knew the answer, of course. His eager act had been prompted by envy; it was jealousy, not justice, that motivated him to murder.

And to what end? His self-appointed enemy, Kevin Colfax, was still alive. If anything, the publicity surrounding the mysterious tragedy actually boosted the sales of his books.

The following months passed quickly, but to Ross each day seemed an eternity, and the nights were endless agonies of guilt-haunted dreams.

But time has a way of healing trauma and mending memories; as his next birthday neared, Ross realized that he had indeed survived another year.

Of course it really had nothing to do with his bargain, he told himself. That was only a dream. He would have lived on even without the nightmare about dealing with Death. And once the pangs of guilt lessened he found life sweet again. Just as he’d wished, there was time to read, relax and enjoy comforts and diversions.

And then time ran out.

Time ran out one night as Ross lay in bed, tossing and turning and cursing himself for a fool.

Diversion had been his downfall. Diversion, in the shapely form of one Janice Coy. Coy, he reflected bitterly, was hardly an appropriate surname for the young lady he’d casually picked up a month ago during an impromptu visit to a bar in a town nearby. At his age sex was hardly an imperative—at least he’d thought so until his encounter with Janice. He’d gone to the bar just for a drink, and it came as something of a surprise to find himself engaged in byplay with an attractive female. Byplay turned to foreplay, then fulfillment. When he discovered that his pleasure was Janice’s business, Ross merely shrugged and paid. Goodbye, Janice.

Two weeks later it was Hello, Doctor.

Herpes. That’s what the slut had given him. Dirty little tramp. Now he was suffering, but the sores would heal, there would be periods of remission. It could have been worse, he told himself; at least his condition wasn’t fatal.

Only the scythe was fatal. The scythe, swinging in a silver arc through the darkness of his dreams.

Death stood beside his bed.

The scythe swung idly, but he knew its purpose. Death held up the hourglass and Ross saw that the last grains of sand were dwindling down into the lower half. And now, as the sand descended, the scythe rose. Suddenly the darkened room was very cold.

Death grinned.

"No!" Ross shook his head. "Not now—give me another chance!"

Death's grin was fixed, but the scythe wavered.

"You wish to renew our bargain?"

The voice that was not a voice echoed in Ross's ears and he nodded quickly. "Please—"

The grinning jaws moved. "As I recall, you meant to kill someone who deserved to die. But it didn't turn out that way, did it?"

"That was an accident," Ross quavered. "I made a mistake."

"A mistake which you still regret." Death paused, and then the question came. "Are you willing to take such a risk again?"

"Trust me," Ross whispered.

"It's your conscience I don't trust," said Death. "Are you really sure you can go through with this?"

Ross stared at the emptying hourglass as the final grains fell. Then he stared at the scythe as it rose, stared at the bright broad blade. If that blade descended its brightness would blur, bathed with his blood.

"I'm certain!" Ross cried. "I promise you!"

"Agreed."

The scythe withdrew, the hourglass reversed and once again the filled half of the double globe was uppermost. It would take a year for the sands to run out—the sands of Time.

"Happy birthday." Death turned, still grinning.

And disappeared.

It proved to be a happy birthday for Ross after all, because this time he knew what he must do.

This time he already had decided who deserved to die—Janice, the whore who'd infected him, who was still spreading disease among the innocent victims of her corrupt charms.

Once again it was merely a matter of method.

Ross knew nothing of Janice aside from his brief encounter, but in order to be successful the hunter must first learn the nature of the beast. Only when familiar with its habits and habitat can he stalk his prey.

So Ross hunted Janice out, hunted her down.

Finding her at the bar again was no problem. To pretend to be pleased at his second meeting was more difficult, and carrying the encounter through to its lustful conclusion was almost impossible in view of what he knew. But Ross managed.

To Janice, in the weeks that followed, Ross was just one of her regular tricks—an elderly john who made few demands on her professional skills and could always be counted on for a fast buck. Wham-bam-thank-you-ma'am.

She never realized he was a hunter studying his intended quarry, seeking a method to bring it down.

Ross already knew he possessed the means to ensure a foolproof fatality; his poison would leave no clue.

But how to use it? Janice's fans—if they could be called such—didn't write letters. It wasn't her autograph they were after. The poor fools never realized she was leaving them with a signature of another sort, the kind she'd left him. The filthy disease-spreader deserved to die, and die she must.

The good hunter is patient, and Ross's patience paid off. By the time of their third assignation he'd become familiar enough with Janice's habits to find his solution.

It was in the bathroom that he discovered it—the liquid solution of the bath oil she used. And the little plastic container which held it was almost empty.

During the course of their fourth encounter he excused himself and checked again. There was, he noted, just about enough oil left for one more loll in the tub. She'd probably bathe after he left, and neither she nor anyone else would detect the tiny amount of odorless, colorless liquid he added to it from the vial he carried. With any luck, the poison wouldn't take effect for a few minutes; by then she would have left the tub and prepared for bed. Of course there was the problem of the bath-oil container, which she'd probably empty and toss into the trash, but chances were that no one would notice. In any case he must be prepared to take that risk—and he did.

Once again he suffered the torments of waiting, but Janice didn't suffer at all. The following week, when he went back to the bar, the bartender gave him the sad news.

Only yesterday Janice's body had been discovered, sprawled across the bed in her crummy little apartment up the street. There wasn't a mark on her, outside of a few telltale herpes blisters; apparently she'd had a heart attack and there was no talk of an autopsy.

That was the bad news, and Ross took it calmly enough. It was the sad news that really shook him.

Janice hadn't died alone. What nobody knew—and what Janice never mentioned—was that the second bedroom of the shabby apartment was occupied by her child. The six-month-old baby boy had lain untended during the days following her death, and succumbed to starvation.

Ross left the bar in a daze. He went home but found no peace there. Even though the bartender had been right and there was no investigation, even though the police never knocked on his door, Ross took no comfort in his safety.

His mission was successful, but it hadn't stopped there. He was no Avenging Angel—he was the killer of an innocent child.

Inner torment turned to outer agony. It wasn't a herpes flare-up, but *psyche* tormented *soma.* Ross couldn't work, couldn't read or relax. Worse still, he couldn't eat or sleep. When at last he summoned a doctor he was too weak to walk. He ended up in the hospital with an IV in his arm and twenty-four-hour nursing care. They force-fed him, pumped him full of medication, until eventually he came around.

But the doctor was profoundly and professionally puzzled. “Frankly, I don’t know what to tell you,” he admitted. “EKG, CAT scan, all those lab tests, and I still can’t come up with a damned thing. Except the herpes, of course, and that’s in remission. If I had to make a guess, I’d say the problem is geriatric.”

“Meaning what?” Ross said.

“You’re sixty-six, going on sixty-seven. According to actuarial tables you should be good for quite a while yet. Trouble is, the human body doesn’t always go by statistics. I’ve seen cases a damn sight younger than you get a clean bill of health, and two days after the examination—bingo.” The doctor tried to soften his statement with a smile. “I guess it all comes down to the old saying. When you gotta go, you gotta go.”

“But I don’t feel old,” Ross murmured. “Just weak—”

The doctor shrugged. “That will pass. Once you get your strength back, chances are you’ll be okay. Your vital signs check out. But from now on you’d better settle down and take things easy. I’m sending you home on a strict diet, no more alcohol, no smoking. Aside from that, the only thing I can tell you is to watch yourself.”

Ross watched himself when he got home but he didn’t like what he saw. Whether the result of his crime or the ravages of illness, the face staring back at him in the mirror was that of an old man.

When you gotta go, you gotta go.

If his appearance startled him, he was even more shocked by other physical changes. Although he gradually gained weight he still hadn’t the strength to cope with daily routine. Cooking and housekeeping chores drained him to a point where leisure pursuits became pointless. Running errands became a burden, going up the stairs was like climbing Mount Everest.

Ever rest? Not here, not any longer. *When you gotta go*—

Finally, he went.

Though his mind balked and his body rebelled, Ross forced himself to make the rounds of local facilities. Rest homes, retirement homes, convalescent homes—none were really homelike, and most were mere warehouses for weary wretches on their last legs, wheelchairs or deathbeds.

But Ross wasn't afraid of dying; even though he'd taken a life by mistake his debt to Death was paid up for months to come. And though his search was depressing, he continued until he found a place which seemed comparatively comfortable. It was by far the most expensive of the lot but he could afford the extra outlay, once his house was sold.

Putting it on the market and making the sale took longer than he'd expected, and so did the escrow period which followed. Even with the extra time, Ross had his hands full. Emptying them was the real problem; emptying them of all he'd accumulated over the years. The hardest part was saying farewell to his children, disposing of them to a book dealer who carried them off in cartons that looked like miniature coffins. Ross wondered what kind of a coffin Janice's child had been buried in, then thrust the thought away. Forget the past, let the dead bury the dead. His job was to run the ads, confer with buyers of secondhand furniture and appliances, strip the house until only a bare box remained for him to rattle around in while waiting for the end.

Not the end, Ross reminded himself. *This is a new beginning.*

The Sunset Crest Rest Home proved to be a better choice than he'd hoped. Located in the suburbs of a nearby city, the building was modern and well equipped. There was laundry and cleaning service, a bus line nearby for shopping excursions into town. Meals were decently prepared, with special diets for those in need of them. His room was large, with plenty of closet space, a private bath, a comfortable bed and a view overlooking the grounds. Best of all, there was Sheila.

Sheila was one of the three RNs living in their own quarters on the premises. Tall, slender, brown-haired and blue-eyed, she might be close to fifty but didn’t look her age. Since she was assigned to his floor Ross came to see quite a bit of her, and what he saw he liked.

To his surprise she had identified him as a writer, even claimed to have read some of his work. True or false, he was flattered by her recognition and pleased with her presence. Gradually Sheila’s professional reticence relaxed and he found out more about her. As a young woman she’d worked in a major hospital, then left it for an apparently happy marriage. Three years ago, after her husband died, she returned to nursing. She bore widowhood well, but as acquaintance ripened Sheila confided that she sometimes missed the daily domesticity and privacy of her own home. This Ross could easily understand, for he missed his home too.

The thing that bothered him the most was his daily contact with fellow residents at mealtime, in the recreation room, the corridors or the outer grounds.

Ross couldn’t make friends with his fellow residents. He didn’t like the way their minds dwelt on the past or how their bodies dealt with the present. He was irritated by the click of false teeth, the tremor and twitching of aging limbs, the continual counterpoint of coughing and throat-clearing. It disturbed him to see walkers and wheelchairs, depressed him when some familiar faces disappeared into darkened rooms equipped with oxygen tanks and hospital beds.

He did his best not to think about such things—cancer, strokes, heart attacks, Alzheimer’s disease. No matter what the mirror told him, Ross didn’t feel old. In fact, since getting to know Sheila, it seemed he was both looking and feeling younger. Hadn’t the doctor said that if he took care of himself he could live for many years?

There was a future ahead for him and he needn’t spend it here. Perhaps he couldn’t manage living in another house, but there were apartments in the area. And Sheila had said she missed having a place of her own. She could make a home for herself, a home for him.

He thought about it one night as he lay in bed and stared up at the ceiling in the dark. His life wasn’t over. After all, he was still in his sixties—come to think of it, he'd turn sixty-eight tomorrow—

"Will there be a tomorrow?"

The question came with chilling clarity. Only it wasn't *his* question, and the chill fastening him in freezing fingers was really present in the room. His eyes darted to the foot of the bed and the phosphorescent figure standing there.

Death grinned a greeting, raising the hourglass as the sand in the upper half emptied out.

But it was the scythe Ross watched—the scythe, swinging up in an inexorable arc, then swooping down swiftly, surely, bare blade moving to menace his bare throat.

"Stop!" he cried.

The scythe wavered.

"Another year?" Death whispered.

"Yes." Ross nodded eagerly. "Another year."

But the scythe did not withdraw; it remained poised, sharp and shimmering, ready to complete its relentless swing.

"You know the price," Death murmured.

"I'll pay it—you can be sure of that."

"Can I?" The scythe hung there, so close that even in shadow Ross could see the dark stains along its edges, the dried droplets encrusting the surface of the blade.

Death fixed him in an eyeless stare. "How do you know? Have you already selected your next victim?"

"Don't use that word! This time there'll be no mistake. No innocent will suffer."

Death shrugged. "But who is innocent? All must die, sooner or later." The scythe began to move forward again. "I can't trust you to be judge and jury any longer. There is only one law—a life for a life."

The blade swung down.

"Please!" Ross gasped. "You'll have your life. I swear it!"

The blade drew back. But Ross didn't stop trembling until Death's bony claw grasped the hourglass and turned it over again.

"Quickly," Death muttered. "It must be done quickly."

His voice was audible only to Ross's inner ear; outwardly it was as soundless as the shifting sands. And now voice and vision blurred, fading into the depths of sudden slumber.

That night Ross slept like the dead, but in the morning sunlight he was alive, basking in the bright promise of days to come. Death had vanished for another year, leaving only a faint, phantasmal echo of a parting word.

"Quickly."

But how could he obey? Ross pondered the problem as he shaved and dressed. Memories of his previous errors returned and stayed with him as he fled to the outer grounds. Sitting in the garden, he stared out at the street beyond, filled with a yearning to be a part of the life there once again.

A car sped by, its driver oblivious to his presence. Somehow cars always seemed to pick up speed when passing hospitals, sanatoriums or places like this. No one wanted to be reminded of what lay within. Life is for the living. *Have a good day.*

Ross's day didn't improve until he returned to his room that afternoon. To his surprise he found mail awaiting him—a single envelope, but an unusual one. Generally he received nothing but his monthly pension check and a few junk prize-contest items destined for the wastebasket. Ross was puzzled; outside of the mail-order advertisers, who cared about him?

Sheila.

Somehow she'd made it her business to learn his birthday, and sent him a card. Sheila cared.

Sunlight faded, but to Ross the world was bright again. Sheila cared, and he cared too.

That night when she looked in on him, he told her how he felt, what he hoped for the future.

“Our future,” he said. “Together.”

Ross awaited her reply, hoping for acceptance and steeling himself against rejection. But Sheila remained silent and there was no answer in her eyes.

“Don’t you understand?” he murmured. “I’m asking you to marry me.”

She sighed. “Of course. The Last-Nurse Syndrome.”

Ross stared at her and Sheila nodded. “That’s what the lawyers call it. An older man, bachelor or widower, falls ill, and a nurse attends him. When he recovers he proposes to her out of gratitude—”

“It’s not just gratitude.” Ross reached for her hand, capturing warmth and softness.

Warmth kindled into heat, softness firmed in response. Then she was in his arms and it was easy to speak, to pour out his plans.

Sheila listened, her smile broadening, eyes brightening. “Not so fast,” she said. “It sounds wonderful, really it does, but you’ve got to give me a chance to think. We can’t walk out of here tomorrow, you know. We must be practical—make sure there’s enough for us to live on—find an apartment, furnish it. There’s a million and one things to take care of. And I’d have to give notice.”

“Then do it!” Ross said. “Now. Quickly.”

When at last she left him his glow remained, dimmed only by a single shadow—or was it an echo again?

Quickly. Death’s word. *It must be done quickly*.

That night he forced himself to consider the meaning behind the phrase, to think about the unthinkable.

And for the first time since his arrival here he sought his suitcase in the closet. To all appearances it was unpacked and empty; only he knew about the little pouch concealed in a zippered pocket at its base. Inside the pouch was the tiny glass vial and in the vial was the final potion of poison. At least he’d thought of it as the final potion when he packed it—a potion reserved for himself in case life here became unbearable.

But life was unbearable no longer and he needn't be spending it here. Which meant that now the potion would be final for somebody else.

Ross stared at the colorless contents swirling silently. Then he put the vial away and the swirling ceased. Now it was only his thoughts that swirled; poisonous thoughts which could not be put away any longer.

Tossing and turning through the night, he pondered. It must be done quickly—but to whom?

He had no enemies here. And bitter experience had taught him revenge was a meaningless motive. Ross remembered his resolve—no innocent would suffer.

"But who is innocent?" Death's words again. "All must die, sooner or later. A life for a life."

Questions in the dark, awaiting an answer. Then, just before dawn, Ross heard his own voice whispering a name.

"Mrs. Endicott."

There was his answer. Mrs. Endicott, the oldest resident here at the home. Ninety-three years old, blind and bedridden; she never ventured from her room down the hall but everyone knew about her. Sheer longevity made her an institution in the institution. "Imagine that—been here over twenty years and she still hangs on. Got to hand it to the old girl, having such a will to live."

Ross grimaced at the thought. Didn't the fools realize the truth? Couldn't they at least imagine what it must be like to lay sightless and helpless year after year without hope? Nobody had a will to live under such conditions; it was just that the poor blind body refused to obey the will to die. "Got to hand it to the old girl," they said. Well, he would hand it to her—hand her the release she longed for. It wouldn't be murder. This was euthanasia, an act of mercy.

Ross rose on Saturday morning strangely refreshed despite his lack of sleep. Now he knew what to do; better still, he knew he *wanted* to do it. The rest was just a matter of ways and means.

This was Sheila's day off, which made things even easier. She stopped by his room before leaving and told him she was going into town to consult with some rental agencies. "Don't worry, I'm going to stick to it until I find the right place for us. In case I get back late, I'll see you first thing in the morning. Oh, darling, I'm so excited—"

Her smile and embrace told him even more than her words, and Ross rejoiced as she went on her way.

As for him, he went to work.

He asked questions; careful, casual, unobtrusive questions. Mrs. Endicott's room was 409, halfway down the corridor to the left on this floor. Meals were brought to her at regular serving times; staff members looked in at intervals during the day. At nine the lights went off—not that it made any difference, the poor old lady. Bed checks came at three-hour intervals during the night, routine inspections by whoever was on floor duty at the opposite end of the hall. Tonight the orderly in charge was Bill Hawthorne, a nice enough young man but a bit on the lazy side. He tended to spend much of his time at the desk reading comic books between his appointed rounds. So much the better for all concerned, Ross thought. *Be patient, Mrs. Endicott. Help is on the way.*

It was he who had to be patient as the day dragged on. By evening he was really uptight. Sheila hadn't returned and the final hours seemed endless.

The first bed check came at midnight. When Hawthorne looked in on him Ross was under the covers, apparently fast asleep. But moments later, after Hawthorne closed the door, Ross rose and groped his way through darkness to the closet. Once he procured the vial he carried it back to bed and waited. In half an hour Bill Hawthorne would be back at his desk in the alcove at the far end of the hall. From there the orderly had no view of the corridor itself and only sounds would summon him forth to investigate their source.

But there would be no sounds.

Ross’s door swung open silently at twelve-thirty. Ross’s footsteps were noiseless as he started off slowly to the left. Hawthorne couldn’t hear the pounding of his heart.

Quietly he made his way to room 409. Quietly he opened the door. Quietly he entered, closed the door behind him, then tiptoed to the bed.

At first he saw only a blurred outline of the form nestled beneath the blankets. Gradually his eyes grew accustomed to the deep darkness. The room was cold, smelling faintly of disinfectant mingled with a sour scent, the odor of age. It emanated from the halfopen mouth of the old woman as Ross gazed down at the wrinkled ruin of her face, the white wisps of hair which framed it. She wasn’t sleeping, for the blind eyes were open in a sightless stare.

In a way the milky whiteness of the cataracts covering her pupils confirmed his conclusions; surely here was someone who would welcome the promise of relief, even though she’d never know how it came. Ross knew what to do now.

He would identify himself as Dr. Morgan, the new resident physician, come to bring her a sedative. All he need do was to pour the contents of the vial into the half-filled water glass on the nightstand and help guide it to her shriveled lips.

Softly, he spoke. “Mrs. Endicott?”

No response. Hearing isn’t keen at ninety-three, Ross reminded himself, and he bent closer. “Mrs. Endicott—”

Still no answer. Gently he reached down and placed his hand on the bony brow. The cold brow—the icy brow that turned at his touch as the face pivoted on the pillow and the mouth yawned wide. No breath issued from it, only a telltale stench, and then he knew.

Mrs. Endicott was dead.

Somehow he managed to turn, leave, retrace his way along the corridor to the safety of his room. But there control ceased and he sank down upon the bed, still holding the useless vial he'd carried on a useless mission. Ross lay shuddering in silence as the vial slipped from trembling fingers and he closed his eyes in despair.

When he opened them again he had a visitor.

Despair gave way to horror, for this time Ross knew he wasn't dreaming. The fleshless figure beyond the end of his bed was quite real—either that or he'd gone mad. He shut his eyes once more, willing mind and vision to clear.

But when he blinked the figure was still there; it had moved closer, standing now at the side of his bed.

"You!" he whispered.

The skull bobbed slightly.

"What are you doing here?" Ross said.

"I had a call to pay down the hall."

Ross read mockery in the reply, read it in the ghastly grin. "You knew what I was going to do," he muttered. "You could have waited—"

"Her hour had come."

"You cheated me!"

"I do not cheat," Death said. "Remember, I warned you to act quickly. But what's done is done."

"Then why are you here?"

Death shrugged. "I think you already know the answer."

The skull was coming closer. Now Ross could see the greenish splotches of mold rotting in the yellowed cranial ridges. He could see the bloodstained edge of the scythe blade directly above him, see the hourglass clutched closely to the hollow rib cage, its upper half still packed with sand.

He shook his head. "It isn't time!"

"That's for me to decide," Death told him. "Your time is up."

"But we made a bargain—"

"A bargain you couldn't keep. I'll take no risk of further failure."

"I won't fail!" Ross's words came in a rush. "Give me a chance and I'll prove it. You make the choice—I don't care who's the victim as long as I stay alive."

"You really mean that?"

"I promise. Tell me who to kill, just give me the name."

"Very well." Death nodded. "The name is Sheila."

"Oh no!" Ross gasped. "Not Sheila—I can't—"

The grinning skull bent closer. "You see? Your promise is worthless." Death raised his scythe. "And so are you!"

Suddenly the blade came down, slashing at Ross's throat. Frantic with fear, Ross jerked his head aside as the scythe descended, ripping into the pillow only an inch away from his neck. Blind instinct sent his hands forward, grasping the bony wrist as Death tugged to free the blade. In desperation Ross tightened his hold, twisting with all his might until the wristbones crunched under the squeezing pressure.

Then Death's grip loosened and the scythe fell free. As it dropped, Ross released his hold and his fingers closed around the handle of the weapon.

Clutching it, he felt the sudden surge of strength coursing up his arm. The power was in the scythe, and he possessed it now. Death's soundless voice rose in a wail. "Give it back!"

Ross shook his head. "No. It's mine now."

"But you have no right—"

"This is my right." Ross waved the scythe.

The skeletal figure retreated and a wordless whisper came. "You fool—do you really think you can trick me so easily?"

"But I *have* tricked you!" Ross cried. Rising from the bed, he swirled the weapon and Death fell back.

Death's jaws opened and closed convulsively. "Give me my scythe!"

The power Ross held infused his arm and his voice. He lunged forward, shouting, "No—get out—"

The skeleton shape shrank to one side, hourglass clutched tightly to its bony breast. Once more Ross struck out, but the blade missed its mark.

For a moment there was silence; then the skull bobbed and its rotted teeth parted in a rustling reply. "I warn you. No one cheats Death."

Ross shook his head. “*I* am Death now!”

Ross raised the scythe, slashing at empty air, then blinked. The figure was gone.

He blinked again, eyes widening. Or was he merely opening them for the first time? Had he been talking and walking in his sleep again, was it another dream?

Then he glanced down at what he held in his hand. Death had disappeared but the scythe remained, and it was real. Death’s weapon was here, its power pulsing from the bloodstained blade. *His* power, now.

As he stared at it, elation gave way to apprehension. Ross didn’t want such power. All he’d meant to do was save himself, but he could never play the role of the Reaper, never wield the scythe. His power was useless.

Or was it?

As long as he possessed the weapon Death couldn’t strike down his victims; he was vanquished. For an instant Ross warmed to the thought, but then warmth gave way to a wave of cold fear.

He stared at the blade again as the questions came. Suppose Death returned to claim the scythe while Ross slept. He couldn’t stay awake forever, couldn’t guard it night and day from now on. And what would happen if others saw the weapon; how could he explain its presence?

There was only one answer. He had to hide it. Hide it from others, hide it from Death.

Ross glanced at the bedside clock. Ten after two. In less than an hour the orderly would be making his rounds again. Whatever must be done had to be done quickly.

Gripping the handle of the scythe, he moved to the door, opened it, peered down the deserted hall. The orderly would be at his desk in the alcove at the far right and there was no way of passing him unnoticed. But to the left the hall ended in a back stairway.

It was to that stairway Ross tiptoed now, then descended silently to the first floor and the rear door leading to the grounds outside.

At the far end of the grounds was the garden, and in the garden roses bloomed, petals closed in protection against the night.

Ross inhaled their scent in darkness as he neared, knelt, then scraped away moist earth with the blade of the scythe. He dug deeply until the opening yawned clear. Taking a deep breath, he smashed the handle of the weapon down across his bended knee. The worn wood splintered and broke under the impact. His groping fingers found a rock. Raising it, he hammered at the scythe blade, hammered again and again until the metal twisted and bent, then sheared into shards. Gathering up the fragments, he thrust them into the depths of the hole. Covering it with loose dirt, he patted the soil flat so that no disturbance was detectable.

Panting, Ross rose to his feet. It was finished now. Not even Death would know where his weapon had been buried. And even if he found the hiding place it didn’t matter, for the scythe was destroyed.

As he walked back across the garden, relief returned. Mounting the stairs, gliding silently down the hall to his room, Ross felt the possession of a power even greater than that of the scythe he’d stolen. No one could stop him now. Tomorrow, when he saw Sheila, they’d carry out their plans, find their future.

Tired but triumphant, Ross sank back across his bed. He stared into the darkness but he no longer feared it. No need to fear, for the Grim Reaper was no longer grim. The King of Terrors had been toppled from his throne.

Ross realized he’d erred in imagining Death as a child—perhaps the real truth was that Death was old. Wrenching away his scythe had been unexpectedly easy, for the old lack strength to resist. Hiding the weapon had been easy too, for wits are dimmed with age.

“No one cheats Death.” Ross smiled at the memory of the threat, for it was feeble too. The passage of countless centuries had taken its toll; Death’s only remaining power lay in his scythe, and now that power was broken and buried.

There was still another possibility which Ross, thinking clearly now, did not totally discount. Perhaps his vision of Death *had* been a dream after all;

a recurrent dream born of vivid imagination. Maybe everything was part of nocturnal illusion; even his trip to the garden could be the product of a somnambulistic fugue in which he broke and buried something which didn't exist. But whatever the truth, he was free of it forever. Whether in nightmare or reality, the scythe would never strike him down, and he was safe at last.

Still smiling, Ross drifted into sleep.

It was sometime later that the orderly made his rounds and entered the room. He was smiling too, but not for long. What he saw there sent him stumbling out into the hall, summoning others with his screams. Others came to stare and search, but discovered no evidence of forced entry or any intruder.

What they did find, and could never explain, were the broken fragments of an empty hourglass on the floor at the bedside. And Ross, lying dead in the bed above, with his mouth wide open—and the sand stuffed down his throat.

ROBERT BLOCH's many novels include *The Scarf, The Kidnapper, Spiderweb, The Dead Beat, Firebug, The Couch, American Gothic,* and the classic *Psycho* and *Psycho II.* Collections include *The Opener of the Way, Pleasant Dreams, Yours Truly, Jack the Ripper, Bogey Men, The Skull of the Marquis de Sade, Tales in a Jugular Vein, Chamber of Horrors, Dragons and Nightmares* and *Such Stuff As Screams Are Made Of.* His latest novel is *The Night of the Ripper.* He is currently assembling three new collections and writing a new novel; meanwhile his stories continue to be dramatized on such television programs as *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* and *Tales from the Dark Side.*

The Chaney Legacy

Dale was a real fan,
so when he got the chance
to move into the star's old bungalow
he couldn't resist it.

Nobody thought Dale was crazy until the trouble started.

True, he'd been a film buff ever since he was a kid, the way other youngsters sometimes get hung-up on baseball, football, or even chess. If they follow their hobby into adult life such interests can become an obsession, yet no one thinks it's a sign of insanity.

In Dale's case his studies led him into teaching a course on film history at the university, which seemed sensible enough. Certainly he appeared to be normal; he wasn't one of those wimpy professors seen in comedy films aimed at the junk-food generation.

Actually Dale was rather attractive. Debbie Curzon thought so. She was a newscaster on local radio where she met and interviewed many of the stud celebrities in sports or films; Dale must have had some *charisma* for her to choose him as a lover.

The two of them might have ended up together on a permanent basis if Dale hadn't leased the Chaney house.

That's what the realtor called it—"the Chaney house"—although Dale couldn't verify the claim and the ancient escrow was clouded. The place was really just a small cottage halfway up Nichols Canyon in the Hollywood hills. Huddled amidst a tangle of trees and underbrush on a dirt side-road which turned to quicksand during the rainy season, the weatherbeaten frame dwelling offered no exterior charm or interior comfort. Debbie's reluctance to share it was understandable, but once he found it Dale couldn't wait to move in.

"All right, do as you please," Debbie told him. "If that dump is more important to you than sharing a brand-new condo with me—"

"It's not just a dump," Dale protested. "This is the *Chaney* house. Can't you understand?"

"Frankly, no. What makes you want to hole up in a place like this just because some dumb actor may or may not have hung out here sixty years ago?"

"Lon Chaney wasn't dumb," Dale said. "He happens to be one of the finest performers in silent films, perhaps the greatest of them all."

"Who cares?" Debbie's voice honed to a cutting-edge. "I just hope your wonderful Mr. Chaney knows how to cook and is good in bed, because from now on you'll be living with him, not me."

It was open warfare, but Dale found no weapon to pierce the armor of feminine logic. In the end Debbie told him to bug off, and he had no choice but to obey the entomological injunction.

A week later Dale moved into the Chaney house and by then everybody thought he'd flipped out. Turning down a renewal of his teaching contract now at the end of the fall semester meant losing his chance at tenure, and that certainly was a crazy decision, because he gave no reason for leaving.

But Dale knew exactly what he was going to do. He would vindicate himself in the eyes of Debbie and the academic world by writing a Hollywood history of his own—a definitive work which would answer the questions which lurked behind the legends. Who killed William Desmond Taylor, and why? Did Thomas Ince meet his death because of illness or was it murder? What really kept Garbo from returning to the screen? Had there been cover-ups in the cases of Thelma Todd or Marilyn Monroe? So much had been surmised, so little verified. And for a starter, he meant to solve the Chaney mystery.

Of all the stars of silent films, Lon Chaney was by far the most mysterious. There were books on his films but no full-length biographies except for a reporter's inaccurate magazine series following Chaney's untimely death from cancer in 1930. Chaney's first wife died without breaking silence and his second left no memoir. His son Creighton, who later changed his name to Lon Chaney Jr., was estranged from his father for many years and avoided painful memories. To this day Chaney's private life remains an enigma. "Between pictures," he told reporters, "there is no Lon Chaney."

The coincidence of moving into one of the actor's former residences challenged Dale. Come what may, he meant to learn Lon Chaney's secret.

But first there were more practical questions to deal with. Once furniture arrived and utilities installed, he had to renovate his surroundings. The cottage had been unoccupied for many years—no wonder the realtor offered him such a bargain rental—and it was time for a thorough housecleaning.

So Dale called an agency and secured the services of an Hispanic lady named Juanita. She was short, plump, but surprisingly strong; perched on a rickety ladder she scrubbed away at the ceiling and side-walls, then descended to attack the floors with mop and brush. And on the second day she made her discovery.

Finishing up her work, she cleared out old boxes and empty cartons from the bedroom closet. The last carton, wedged in back under a jumble of debris, was not entirely empty.

"Look what I find," Juanita said, holding up her trophy for Dale's inspection.

He took the tin box from her, hefting it with both hands. Then he lifted the lid and his eyes widened.

"What is it?" Juanita asked.

The box was empty but its interior was divided into a number of small compartments lined with smudged cloth. And the underside of the lid was covered by a mirror.

“Some kind of a kit,” Dale said.

It was hard to keep his voice from quavering, hard to conceal rising excitement as he paid and dismissed Juanita. When she left Dale picked up the box again and now his hands were trembling. His hands, holding Lon Chaney’s makeup kit.

Dale had seen publicity stills of Chaney displaying a different and much larger kit with side trays, so this obviously wasn’t the only one. What made it unique was that this box was here, in Chaney’s secret hideaway.

Or was it?

Dale forced himself to face facts. In spite of the realtor’s claim, he couldn’t be certain that Lon Chaney ever lived here. For all he knew, the kit might have belonged to any one of a thousand actors residing in these hills when Hollywood was young.

What Dale needed was proof. And staring at the bottom of the box, he found it.

Wedged against the base was a coil of paper, a small square scrap which must have peeled off after being pasted below the mirror. Dale picked it up, smoothed it out, then read aloud the lettering typed across its surface.

“Property of Leonidas Chaney.”

Leonidas!

This was proof and no mistake. While the general public knew the actor as Lon and most filmographies listed his first name as Alonzo, Dale was one of the few aware that the star’s birth certificate identified him as Leonidas.

Chaney, born on April Fool’s Day, had fooled his public. And considering his passion for privacy it seemed odd he’d put his real name here. But perhaps he’d fixed on this deception later in his career. Dale’s inspection told him this battered box was old, perhaps dating back to pre-Hollywood days when Chaney was a struggling actor in traveling shows. Could this actually be his very first makeup kit?

One thing seemed certain—Chaney *had* lived here. But when?

Dale pondered the question as he sat in gathering darkness alone, with the makeup kit on the table before him.

From what little he knew, Chaney's homes were modest by Hollywood standards, even after he attained stardom, but he would never have settled his family here. Which left only one other plausible answer.

Suppose this place was really a hideaway, a place his family didn't know about, a place he came to secretly and alone? According to publicity he did have a cabin up in the mountains where he went fishing between films. Could it be that he actually spent some of that time here, perhaps even without his wife's knowledge?

And if so, why? Dale quickly dismissed the notion of a secret love-life; Chaney was never a womanizer, and even had he been, this was hardly the setting for a romantic rendezvous. Nor was he a closet alcoholic or drug-addict. In any case there'd be no reason for him to keep a makeup kit hidden here.

Dale leaned forward, peering at the box through the twilight shadows which fell across its murky mirror.

But the mirror wasn't murky now. As he stared, something in the mirror stared back.

For a moment Dale thought it was his own face, distorted by a flash of fading sunlight amidst the coming of the dark. Even so, he realized that what he saw was not a reflection. There was another face, a face *in* the mirror, a ghastly white face with painted features that glowed and grinned.

With a shock he realized what it was—the face of a clown. And before Dale's widened eyes the face was melting, changing, so that now a second clown loomed leering out a him—cheeks spotted with paint and tufts of hair suddenly sprouting above a bony brow.

Dale turned, seeking a glimpse of someone else, some intruder who must have stolen silently into the bedroom to stare over his shoulder.

But save for himself the room was empty. And when his eyes sought the mirror again the face—or faces—had vanished. All he saw now was his own face reflected in the glass, its features fading in the dark.

Dale rose, stumbling across the room to switch on the overhead light. In its welcome glare he saw the makeup box and the perfectly ordinary mirror mounted within.

The clown-images were gone. They had existed only in his imagination—or was it his memory? For there had been two clowns in Chaney's life.

Hastily Dale sought his bookshelves, fumbling and finding the volume containing Lon Chaney's filmography. He riffled through it until a page fell open upon a photograph of the actor in the title role of *He Who Gets Slapped.* And now it was Dale who felt the slap of recognition. The picture showed the face of the first clown he'd seen in the mirror.

Turning pages, he located the still photo of another clown with daubed cheeks and patches of hair clumped on the bone-white skull. Chaney again, in *Laugh, Clown, Laugh.*

But there was no mirth in the painted face, and none in Dale's as he banged the book shut and left the room. Left the room, left the cottage, left the canyon to drive down to the shelter and sanity of lighted streets below.

He parked on Fairfax and entered a restaurant, taking comfort in its crowded quarters and the presence of a friendly waitress who urged him to try tonight's special. But when his order came he had no appetite for it.

Tonight had already been too special for him, and he couldn't forget his confrontation at the cottage. Had he really glimpsed those faces in the mirror, or had the images been evoked from memories of the films seen in retrospective showings long ago? A mirror is just a sheet of silvered glass, and what it reflected must have come from his mind's eye.

Dale forced himself to eat and gradually the tension ebbed. By the time he finished and drove back up the canyon his composure had returned.

Inside the cottage the lights still blazed upon commonplace surroundings, safeguarding against shadows and dispelling doubts. If Chaney had lived here at all, that time was long-gone and the actor himself was long-dead. There were no ghosts, and the box on the bedroom table was merely an old makeup kit, not a miniature haunted house.

For a moment Dale had an impulse to lift the lid and examine the mirror for added reassurance, but he dismissed it. There was no point in dignifying his apprehensions; what he needed was a good night's sleep and a clear head for tomorrow.

Truth to tell, he felt drained after the emotional stress of the day, and once he undressed and sought his bed Dale quickly fell into dreamless slumber.

Just when the change occurred he did not know, but there *was* a change, and the dream came.

In the dream he found himself awakened, sitting up in bed and staring through darkness at the black blur of the box on the table. And now the impulse he'd rejected upon entering the bedroom returned with an urgency he could not deny.

Sometimes dreams seem oddly like films—movies of the mind in which one's own movements are silently commanded by an unseen director—a series of jump-cuts and sudden shifts in which one is both actor and audience.

Thus it was that Dale both felt and saw himself rise from the bed, captured in a full shot as he moved across the room. Now a cut to another angle, showing him poised above the makeup kit. Then came a close shot of his hand moving down to raise the lid.

Moonlight from the window sent a silvery shaft to strike the surface of the makeup mirror, flooding it with a blinding brightness that seethed and stirred.

Faces formed in the glass—contorted countenances which seemed frighteningly familiar, even in the depths of dream. Faces changed, and yet there was a lurking linkage between them, for all were oriental.

Some Dale had seen before only in photographs—the evil Chinaman from the lost film, *Bits of Life,* the benevolent laundryman in *Shadows.* Then, in rapid shifts, the vengeful mandarin of *Mr. Wu,* the bespectacled elderly image of Wu's father, and a final, frightening glimpse of the chinless, sunken-cheeked, shrivelled face of the aged grandfather. They formed and faded, smiling their secret smiles.

Now others appeared—the two pirates, Pew and Merry, from *Treasure Island,* a bearded Fagin out of *Oliver Twist,* followed by figures looming full-length in the mirror's depths. Here were the fake cripples of *The Miracle Man, The Blackbird, Flesh and Blood.* Then the real cripple of *The Shock* and the legless Blizzard in *The Penalty.* Now came a derby-hatted gangster, a French-Canadian trapper, a tough sergeant of Marines, a scarred animal-trapper, an elderly railroad engineer, and Echo, the ventriloquist of *The Unholy Three.*

In his dream Dale stood frozen before the glass as faces flashed forth in faster flickerings—the faces of madmen. Here was a crazed wax-museum attendant, a bearded victim of senile delusions, a deranged Russian peasant, the insane scientists of *A Blind Bargain* and *The Monster.* They were laughing at him, grinning in glee as Dale closed his eyes, hands clawing out to close the lid of the makeup kit.

Then he staggered back to the bed. There were no images here, only the darkness, and Dale fell into it, fleeing the faces and seeking surcease in sleep.

It was morning when Dale's eyes blinked open, welcoming the sanity of sunlight. He stirred, conscious now that last night had been a dream, knowing he'd seen nothing in the mirror; indeed, he had never even left his bed.

As he rose he glanced over at the box resting on the table, remembering how he'd closed it in reality before retiring, then closed it again in his nightmare.

But now the lid was up.

For a moment Dale recoiled, fighting the irrational explanation until sunlight and common sense prevailed.

The makeup kit was old, its hinges worn or even sprung. Sometime during the night the catch must have loosened and the lid popped up.

It was a logical answer, but even so he had to force himself toward the table, steel himself to gaze down into the mirror set inside the lid and gaze on what was reflected there.

Sunshine formed a halo around the image in its glassy surface—the image of his own face.

And as his features formed a smile of rueful relief, Dale turned away. The mirror in the makeup kit held no terrors for him now, any more than the one he faced as he shaved. He dressed and sought the makeshift kitchen, taking comfort in the familiar ritual of preparing his breakfast, then eating eggs and toast with a copy of the morning *Times* propped up before his coffee cup. Even the news offered an odd comfort of its own—the familiar headlines and stories of wars, terrorist bombings, political corruption, street crime, drug-busts, accidents, epidemics, natural and unnatural disasters that filled the newspaper pages. However grim, these were realities; realities which he and everyone else in the world faced with fortitude born of long familiarity. They had nothing to do with the unhealthy fantasies which took form when Lon Chaney stalked the screen—fantasies which existed now only in Dale's imagination.

Glancing at his watch, he folded the paper and rose quickly. There was a busy day ahead, and time was already running short.

Leaving the cottage, he drove down to Hollywood Boulevard, turned right, then made a left on Fairfax. He reached Wilshire and headed west, weaving through noonday traffic until he found a parking space before the imposing structure of the Motion Picture Academy of Arts and Sciences.

Here, upstairs in the Margaret Herrick Library, he turned his attention to the files he requested. Lon Chaney wasn't the only movie monster he meant to deal with in his projected history; there was research to be done on other stars of the horror film. And unlike the case with Chaney, there was ample material on men like Karloff, Lorre, and Lugosi.

But even as he scribbled notes Dale found something lacking in the interviews and biographical data of these celebrated actors who seemingly made no mystery of their careers.

The one missing element common to all was that of explanation. Why had a gentle gentleman like Boris ended up playing monsters? What led Peter Lorre, the rabbi's grandson, to the portrayal of psychopaths? How did Bela Lugosi, who played parts ranging from Romeo to Jesus Christ in early European appearances, transform himself into Dracula?

William Henry Pratt, Laszlo Loewenstein, Bela Blasko—all three men had changed their names, but what had changed their natures?

Dale found no answer in the files, but the last item he read before leaving the Academy offered a hint. It was an interview with an actress who toured with Lugosi in *Dracula.*

She told of how the genial cigar-smoking Hungarian prepared for his famous role, sitting before his dressing-room mirror and donning the costume and makeup of the vampire. But that was only a preliminary to performing. The next and most crucial step came as he rose, wrapped in the black cape, face contorted and eyes blazing. As he confronted himself in the mirror his deep voice invoked an incantation. "I am Dracula," he intoned. "*I* am Dracula. I *am* Dracula." Over and over again he repeated the words, and by the time he strode out upon the stage the words became reality. Lugosi *was* Dracula.

"He psyched himself up," the actress explained. And as the years passed, a part of him became the part he played; when he died he was buried in Dracula's cape, with Dracula's ring on his finger.

Dale jotted down his notes, then hurried out into the afternoon sunshine. Now it was time to drive into Beverly Hills for a medical appointment.

It had been made a month ago, just an annual checkup, as a matter of routine. But now, as he arrived and took a seat in the crowded waiting room, Dale felt uptight. He felt no worry about possible physical illness, but what about psychological stress? Last night's dreams might be a symptom of mental disturbance. What if Dr. Pendleton told him he was cracking up?

By the time the receptionist called his name and a nurse led him to the examining room he knew his pulse was pounding and his blood-pressure had risen. So it came as a pleasant surprise when the doctor made no comment on his readings other than remarking he thought Dale was underweight and seemed overtired. Reports on blood-tests and urine-specimen would be available in a few days, but nothing indicated cause for concern.

“Slow down a little,” Dr. Pendleton said. “Pace yourself. And it won’t hurt if you put on a few pounds.”

Armed with that advice Dale left. Relieved, he headed for a seafood restaurant on Brighton Way and there he ordered and actually enjoyed his meal. The doctor was probably right, Dale decided; he *had* been working too hard, and the tension flaring up after his break with Debbie took an added toll. He resolved to follow orders, rest, and relax. Then, perhaps, it might be possible to come to terms with himself, and with Debbie too. He really missed her, missed the hours they spent together, and the breach must be mended. All in good time.

As Dale left the restaurant he sensed a change in the air; the chill breeze hinted at rain and muted murmur of distant thunder confirmed its coming.

The first drops spattered the windshield as he turned onto the canyon side-road, and by the time he parked in the driveway a flicker of lightning heralded the downpour that followed. Dale hurried into the cottage beneath the wind-tossed trees. Once inside he flipped the light switches as he moved from room to room. It was only upon reaching the bedroom that he halted when its overhead light came on.

Standing in the doorway he stared at the open makeup box on the table, forehead furrowed in doubt.

Hadn’t he closed the lid before he left? Dale shrugged in uncertainty. Perhaps the loose catch was the culprit once again; he’d better examine it and put his mind to rest.

Rain drummed the rooftop in a faster tempo and lightning flashed outside the window as he crossed to the table. Then, as he reached it, a clap of thunder shook the walls and the lights went off, overhead and throughout the cottage.

Power-outages were not uncommon hereabouts during a storm and Dale wasn't alarmed; perhaps the lights would come back on in a moment. He waited, but the darkness persisted and prevailed. Perhaps he'd better look for his flashlight.

Then its illumination was unnecessary as the lightning bolt struck somewhere close outside the window, filling the bedroom with a greenish glare. As it did so Dale peered down at the mirror inside the lid of the makeup kit and froze.

The reflection peering up at him was not his own.

It was the face of Singapore Joe—the role Chaney played in *The Road to Mandalay*—the half-blind man whose left eye was covered with a ghastly white cast.

But the image seemed strangely blurred; Dale blinked to clear his vision as lightning faded and the room plunged into darkness again.

Dale's shudder wasn't prompted by the roar of thunder. It was what he'd seen that traumatized him. *The Road to Mandalay* was one of the lost films; he knew of no print in existence. But Singapore Joe existed, in the mirror, existed in an indelible image leering up at him through the dark.

And the dark must be dispelled. Dale turned and blundered his way into the hall. Reaching the kitchen he stooped and opened the cabinet beneath the sink. Lightning outside the kitchen window came to his aid and in its moment of livid life he found and grasped the flashlight. It was not just an ordinary cylinder-type but one which terminated in a square base, projecting a strong beam of almost lanternlike intensity.

Dale switched it on, and the ray guided him back to the bedroom. As he walked his relief faded with the realization that his vision had faded too.

He was seeing only with his right eye now. The left was blind. Blind—like the eye of Singapore Joe.

You're having a nightmare, he told himself. But he wasn't asleep, and if there was a nightmare it had to be in the mirror of the makeup kit. Unless, of course, he was hallucinating.

There was only one way to find out, and Dale knew what he must do. Rain swept across the rooftop above, doors creaked and groaned against the onslaught of the wind, lightning glimmered, thunder growled. Only the light he gripped in his hand was reassurance; a magic lantern to protect him on his way. *Magic Lantern*—that's what they called the movies in the old days. Was there such a thing as magic?

Forcing himself toward the bedroom table, he gazed down at the glass reflected in the lantern light.

Half blind, he stared, but what he saw with his right eye was just a mirror after all. A shining surface reflecting his own familiar face.

And now his left eye cleared and he could see again. Dale took a deep breath, then expelled it hastily—for now the mirror blurred and a piercing pain shot through his lower limbs, causing him to crouch. Something pressed heavily against his spine, bowing his back.

He was changing, and the image in the mirror was changing too. He saw the tousled hair, the gargoyle grimace, the twisted limbs, the body bent beneath the hideous hump. No need to ask the identity of this image—he was gazing at Quasimodo—the Hunchback of Notre Dame.

It was Chaney he saw in the glass but he himself felt the weight of the hump, the constriction of the harness binding it to his body, the pain inflicted by the mass of makeup covering his face, the jagged teeth wired into his mouth, the mortician's wax masking his right eye.

Realization brought relief. It was makeup, and only makeup after all. Gradually the image diffused and Dale's feeling of physical restraint faded until once again he stood erect.

Thunder rolled as the image dispelled. Dale sighed with relief; now was the time to slam down the lid of the kit once and for all.

He started to reach for it, but his hands were gone.

His hands—and his arms.

Illusion, of course, like the illusion of Chaney's face and form coming into focus beneath the mirror's shiny surface. Dale's eyes met those of the visage peering out at him from under the broad brim of a Spanish sombrero.

Chaney was armless, and now Dale felt the agony of numbed circulation, the constriction of his own arms bound against his body by a tight, concealing corset. That, he remembered, had been Chaney's device when portraying the armless knife-thrower in *The Unknown.*

With the recollection his panic ebbed, and once more features and form receded into the mirror's depths. The numbness was gone from his arms now; he could lift his hands and close the lid.

Then he fell.

His legs gave way and he slumped to the floor, sprawling helplessly, the box on the table beyond his reach. All he could do was elevate his gaze, see the shaven-headed creature crawling across the glass, dead legs dragging behind him.

It was Phroso, the paralyzed cripple in *West of Zanzibar.*

No makeup had been involved in the simulation of the man who had lost the use of his lower limbs; it had been Chaney's artistry which made the role seem reality.

Knowing that, Dale strove to rise, but there was no feeling in his legs—he couldn't command them. The face in the mirror glowered at him in the lamplight, bursting into brightness as lightning flashed outside the window. The eyes were mocking him, mocking his plight, and now Dale realized that the mirror's monsters sensed his purpose and were summoned to prevent it. Their appearance in the mirror gave them life, his awareness gave them strength to survive, and that strength was growing. Closing the kit would condemn them to darkness and it was this they fought against. They knew he couldn't close the lid, not if he were blind, armless, or paralyzed.

Frantically Dale balanced himself on the palm of his left hand, extending his right arm upward, inching to the table-top. Then his fingers gripped the lid of the makeup kit, wrenching it down. With a rasp of rusty hinges the box slammed shut.

The mirror disappeared from view, but Dale's paralysis persisted. Try as he would, he couldn't raise himself. All he could do was wriggle, wriggle across the floor like a snake with a broken back, and lever his arms against the side of the bed. Pulling his body upward, he lifted himself, gasping with effort, then collapsed upon the cool sheets which dampened with the sweat of fear pouring from his fevered forehead.

Fever. That was the answer; it had to be. The doctor was wrong in his diagnosis. Dale was coming down with something, something that twisted mind and body. Labeling it psychosomatic brought no relief.

Dale rolled over to face the telephone resting on the night-stand beside the bed. If he could reach it he could call the paramedics. But as his hand moved forward he felt a sudden tingling in his legs, then kicked out with both feet. The paralysis, real or imaginary, was gone.

No reason to summon paramedics now, but he still needed help. In the dim light cast by the flash-lantern standing on the table across the room he dialled Dr. Pendleton's number. The ringing on the line gave way to the mechanical message of an answering-service.

"Dr. Pendleton is not in. Please leave your name and number and he will get back to you—"

Dale cradled the receiver, frowning in frustration. Sure, the doctor would get back to him, perhaps in an hour, maybe two or three. And then what?

How could he explain all this? If he minimized his condition he'd get that take-two-aspirins-and-call-me-in-the-morning routine. And if he came on too strong the doctor would probably order up an ambulance on his own. Pendleton was a practitioner of modern medicine; he wouldn't come out in the storm to make a house-call merely to humor a hysterical patient with his presence.

But Dale had to have someone's presence here, someone to talk to, someone like—

"Debbie?"

He'd dialled her number automatically and now the very sound of her voice brought relief.

"Dale! I was hoping you'd call."

Then she *did* care. Thank God for that! He listened intently as the Warmth of her response gave way to concern.

“What’s wrong? Are you sick or something?”

“Something,” Dale said. “That is, I’m not sure. No, I can’t explain it on the phone. If you could just come over—”

“Tonight? In all this rain?”

“Debbie, please. I know it’s asking a lot, but I need you. I need you now—”

“And I need you.” Debbie sighed. “All right. Give me half an hour.”

The phone went dead, but as he replaced the receiver Dale came alive again. She was coming and he’d told the truth; he did need her, needed her desperately.

Listening, he realized the rain was slowing. It was a good sign. Perhaps by the time she arrived the storm would be over and they could talk without the punctuation of thunder. He’d tell her what had happened, make her understand.

But just what *had* happened—and why?

Dale rolled over on his back, staring at the shadows on the ceiling, facing up to the shadows surrounding the question in his own mind.

And the answer came.

He’d found it today at the Academy, found it when he read the actress’s description of Bela Lugosi preparing for his portrayal.

“He psyched himself up.” That was her explanation of how Lugosi became Dracula, and that was what Lon Chaney must have done.

No wonder he’d established a secret hideaway! Here, in this very room, he did more than experiment with physical disguise. Dale pictured him sitting alone on a night like this, creating contrivances to deform his body, refashioning his face, staring into the mirror at the creature reflected there. And then, the final transformation.

“Make up your mind.” A figure of speech, but Chaney had given it a literal application, one beyond the mere application of makeup from his kit. Seated here in the shadowed silence, this man of mystery—this son of deaf-mute parents whom he communicated with through the power of pantomime—confronted the reflections of monsters in the mirror and whispered the words. “I am the Frog. I am Blizzard. I am Dr. Ziska, Sergei, Alonzo the Armless, the Blackbird, Mr. Wu.” Each time a different incarnation, each time a new *persona,* each time a litany repeated hour after hour from midnight to dawn, willing himself into the role until the role became reality.

And psyching himself up, he’d psyched-up the mirror too. The intensity of total concentration had been captured in the glass forever, just as it was later captured on the blank surface of nitrate film used for silent pictures. The filmed images decayed in time but the makeup kit mirror preserved Chaney’s psychic power forever—a long-latent power revived by Dale’s own glimpses into the glass, a power that grew greater with each succeeding gaze.

Dale remembered the first apparitions—how fleetingly they appeared and how little effect they had beyond the initial shock of recognition. It was his repeated viewing which gave strength to the shifting shapes until they transformed his body into a semblance of what he saw.

But he wouldn’t repeat the mistake. From now on the makeup kit would remain closed and he’d never look into that mirror again.

The rain had ended now and so had his fear. Thunder and lightning gave way to a calm matching his own. Knowing the truth was enough; he wouldn’t repeat all this to Debbie or try to convince her. Instead he’d just tell how much he needed her, and that was true too.

But first he must dispose of the kit.

Dale shifted himself over to the side of the bed, sitting up and swinging his feet to the floor. The power-outage hadn’t ended; he’d shut the kit away in the closet, then take the flash-lantern with him and guide Debbie up the path when she arrived.

All was quiet as he crossed the room to the table where the lantern-light shone on the closed box beside it. That’s what the kit was, really; just a battered old box. Lon Chaney’s box—Pandora’s box, which opened for evils to emerge. But not to worry; the lid was down and it would stay down forever.

His hand went to the flash-lantern.

At least that was his intention, until he felt the chill of cold metal at his fingertips and found them fixed upon the lid of the makeup kit.

He tried to pull away but his hand remained fixed, fixed by a force commanding his movement and his mind, a power he could not control.

It was the power that raised the lid of the box, a power that seethed and surged, and in the uptilted mirror he saw its source.

Two eyes blazed from a face surmounted by a beaver hat and framed by matted hair; a face that grinned to display the cruel, serrated teeth. But it was from the cruel eyes that the power poured—the burning eyes of the vampire in *London After Midnight.* Dale knew the film, though he'd never seen a print; knew its original title was *The Hypnotist.* And it was a hypnotist who glared up at him, a hypnotist's power which had compelled him to open the box and stand transfixed now by the vision in the glass.

Then suddenly the face was fading and for a moment Dale felt a glimmer of hope. But as the face disappeared into the mirror's distorted depths, another face took form.

It was a face Dale knew only too well, one which had lain buried in his brain since childhood when he'd first seen it fill the screen from behind a ripped-away mask. The face of madness, the face of Death incarnate, the face of Chaney's supreme horror; the face of Erik in *The Phantom of the Opera.*

No wonder he'd blotted out all memory of the terror which tormented his nightmares as a child, the terror he'd hidden away in adulthood but which still survived in his unconscious. It was suppressed fear that lay behind his inexplicable interest in Lon Chaney, a fright disguised as fascination which guided him to this ultimate, inevitable confrontation with the gaping fangs, the flaring nostrils, the bulging eyes of a living skull.

The Phantom stared and Dale felt the flooding force of the death's-head's overwhelming power, to which he responded with a power of his own, born of utter dread.

For an instant, for an eternity, his gaze locked with that of the monster and he realized a final fear. The face was looming larger, moving forward—attempting to emerge from the mirror!

And then, with savage strength, Dale gripped the box in both hands, raising it high; panting, he dashed it down upon the floor. The makeup kit landed with a crash as the Phantom’s image shattered into shards of splintered glass glinting up in the lantern-light.

Chaney’s power was broken at last, and with it the power of the Phantom. Dale gasped, shuddering in relief as he felt full control return.

As the knocking sounded its summons he picked up the flash-lantern and carried it with him down the hall to the front door. Debbie was here now, his hope, his angel of salvation. And he went to her proudly and unafraid because he was free of Chaney, free of the mirror’s magic, free of the Phantom forever. This was the beginning of a new life, a life of love and beauty.

Dale opened the door and saw her standing there, smiling up at him. It was only when he lifted the lantern and Debbie saw his face that she began to scream.

1987

Comeback

They say Southern California has no seasons, but don’t you believe it.

Hiking down Santa Monica Canyon, I felt autumn in the air. Twilight comes early in October evenings, and the wind off the ocean was clammy cold. As the fog rolled in I squinted through the haze on the hillside where silent houses huddled beneath towering trees, wrapped in a purplish pallor which only fall can bring.

“Looking for someone?”

I halted, blinking at the man who stepped forward from the shadows on the path ahead.

If the air held a hint of autumn, he was a figure out of winter; there was snow in his hair and ice in his eyes. But his frailty offered no threat and his face was creased in a lined and leathery smile.

“Just sight-seeing,” I said. “Wife and I moved in down the street the other day, so I’m exploring the neighborhood.”

“Waste of time.” He shook his head. “Nothing much to see and nobody worth looking at. Everything’s run-down here, myself included.” Chuckling, he held out his hand. “Ray Vance is the name. What’s yours?”

I told him, and our palms met. It was like shaking hands with a snowman.

“Cold hands, warm heart.” He grinned. “Get to be my age, your circulation slows down. I’m pushing eighty-seven this November.”

“You’ve got twenty years on me,” I said. “Just retired a couple of months ago.”

His grin turned wry. “I didn’t. They squeezed me out way back in forty-five. Been here ever since.” Vance nodded toward the trees. “Like to see my place?”

“I don’t want to intrude—”

“Nonsense. Glad to get a look at another human face. What I see in the mirror nowadays isn’t much of a consolation.”

Again the dry chuckle came as he turned, leading me up a side path to the weed-choked lawn beyond.

The house hidden on the hillside wasn’t as old as its owner, and far better preserved, but the pseudo-Spanish structure was an echo from the twenties. And when he opened the front door for me to enter, I walked into yesterday.

I didn’t get home until after dark. Peggy was waiting and worried.

“Where on earth have you been?” she said.

“Time-traveling.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

I told her about Ray Vance and his house. “You wouldn’t believe it—like something out of *Sunset Boulevard*, only this is for real. Vance was a movie publicity man back in the silent days, worked for all the big studios. After sound came in things started to get tough and finally he called it quits about forty years ago.”

“Forty years?” Peg shook her head. “And he’s been sitting up there all alone ever since?”

“Not exactly alone,” I said. “The place is full of memorabilia—posters, lobby cards, press books, inscribed photos of just about every old-time star you ever heard of. Nothing modern; instead of a TV set he’s still got one of those windup Victrolas. Did you know Rudolph Valentino did a song recording? Neither did I, until Vance played it for me. The whole house is like a museum; film buffs would go crazy over the stuff he has there. You’ve got to see it.”

Peg doesn’t share my enthusiasm for old movies, so it didn’t surprise me when she shrugged. “I can wait,” she said.

But she didn’t wait long. About a week later Ray Vance left a shakily scrawled note in our mailbox—an invitation to come for dinner on October 18.

Peggy frowned when she read it. “He’s got his nerve. Why, he doesn’t even know us!”

I nodded. “From what I gather he doesn’t know anybody anymore, and it must be pretty lonely for the old boy. Come on, Peg, be a sport; it won’t kill us to go. Besides, I’d like to find out more about the old days.”

In the end I persuaded her. And as I predicted, it didn’t kill us, though the meal was almost lethal—warmed-up TV dinners served in fancy plates that rested like tiny islands on the long table of his huge dining room. And afterward, when we moved into the den for coffee and drinks, I did find out quite a bit about the old days.

Sitting there on grotesquely overstuffed couches under the pink-bulbed light filtering through beaded lampshades, we were *in* the old days.

Framed three-sheets hung from the walls, featuring forgotten films and forgotten players—House Peters in *Raffles the Amateur Cracksman,* Alberta Vaughn in *The Telephone Girl,* and Raymond Griffith in *Time to Love*.

‘ “Knew ’em all,” Vance said. “I could tell you stories—”

And he did, while I listened eagerly, Peg sat patiently, and he kept refilling his glass from the bottle on the table.

He held it up to the light, sounding his raspy chuckle. “*Old Taylor*,” he said. “My drinking buddy. But I knew other Taylors back then. Ruth Taylor, before she got the lead in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes.* And the guy who got a writing credit on Shakespeare’s *Taming of the Shrew*—‘additional dialogue by Sam Taylor.’ Then there was William Desmond Taylor, the biggest of them all.”

“I’ve heard of him,” Peggy said. “He was that director who got murdered and nobody ever found out who did it.” Vance shook his head. “I know who killed him.”

"You do?"

The chuckle came. "Remember, I handled publicity in those days. Knowing the truth was part of my job. The other part was to keep it out of the papers." He poured himself a drink. "This business about mysterious deaths is all a crock. People like Tom Ince, Paul Bern, Thelma Todd—they were personal friends of mine. Don't think I didn't find out what really happened to them."

I leaned forward. "Then what are you waiting for? Write a book! If you've got the facts they're worth a bundle, and I don't have to tell you what the publicity would do. A thing like that could be a real comeback for you."

He shook his head again. "I told you they were my friends. They trusted me because I respected their privacy, never let them down. And I'm not about to start now."

"But it doesn't matter," Peggy said. "They're all dead."

"And I will be, soon enough." Vance downed his drink. "That still doesn't give me the right to take advantage of our friendship. You don't understand what Hollywood was like in the old days. More of a small town then, and we stuck together—stars, directors, writers, these people were like family. The only family I ever had." He reached for the bottle again, his voice slurring. "Now there's nothing left but this."

Peggy rose, glancing at her watch. "I think it's time to go," she said.

Vance protested, but I didn't say a word; once Peg makes up her mind, that's it.

We moved into the vestibule and there our host halted and reached for a black leather-bound volume resting on the end table. "Can't let you leave without signing the guest book," he said.

Turning the yellowed pages he reached for a pen. First I signed, then Peggy. As she did so, I noted her sudden but quickly suppressed surprise.

But it wasn't until we got home that I found out what had startled her.

"His guest book," she said. "Did you see the listings? The date on the last signature before we signed was 1959. Nobody's visited him for twenty-five years!”

As far as I know, nobody visited Vance in the days that followed. When I suggested looking in on him, Peggy put her foot down. “Forget it! That place of his gives me the creeps. And no, I don’t want him here, either. The way he keeps talking about dead people—it makes me feel as if I was in a graveyard.”

“Speaking of graveyards,” I said. “Do you know what tonight is?”

She nodded. “Halloween. All the goblins and ghosts will be out, but I’m ready for them.” Peg gestured toward a heap of candy bars on our hallway table.

“You’ve got enough there for an army,” I said. “I’ll bet Vance isn’t prepared for trick or treat. Why don’t I just take some of this junk over to him now?”

Peggy shrugged. “If you need an excuse to see him, suit yourself. Though why you’re so worried about that old lush is beyond me.”

I didn’t know the answer, but I felt my concern growing as I walked up the path in the gathering dusk and knocked on Vance’s front door.

For a moment I stood in silence, and my heart missed a beat. All I could think of was the possibility that his heart had missed a beat too. A man that old, feeble and alone, living in the past and dying in the present—

But the man who opened the door was very much alive. Preserved in alcohol, I gathered, catching a whiff of his breath as I explained my errand and handed him the bag of candy.

“Thanks for thinking of me,” he said. “Look, I’d ask you in, but I’ve got to get things ready for tonight.”

“Tonight?”

He nodded. “Had a little accident the other day. Nothing serious, but I got the message. Next month I’m moving into the Motion Picture Home.”

“Good idea.”

“It stinks.” His hoarse chuckle terminated abruptly in a coughing spell.

I stared at him as he clutched the doorframe. “Are you sure you’re all right?”

“No.” Then, surprisingly, he grinned. “That’s why I’m throwing a Halloween party. Invited all the old-timers I could think of for one last hurrah.”

“Look, if you need any help—”

“Much obliged, but I can manage. Thanks again for thinking of an old man.”

I thought of him a lot during the evening, after it got dark and the fog settled in. There weren’t as many trick-or-treaters as we’d expected, and no traffic on the street.

“If Vance is having a party,” Peg said, “how come we don’t see any cars?”

“Maybe everybody walked up.”

I said it, but I didn’t really believe it. And when Peggy opened the front door and peered up the street, I knew that she didn’t believe it either. “Just as I thought,” she told me. “No sound, no lights, and no party. You ask me, the old buzzard just flipped out.” Then she softened. “Do you think maybe you ought to take a look—?”

It was midnight when I hurried up the hill, moving through the mist toward the dark and silent house. There were no cars parked before it, no marks of tire treads in the driveway, and no response came when I knocked. I pushed the door open and entered the hall.

Vance was lying on his back in the shadows. He’d had another accident, and this time it was a big one. Dialing the paramedics, I knew there wasn’t a chance. The only thing that puzzled me was the smile on his face.

I told Peg what had happened after it was all over and I came home again. She listened, her eyes narrowing.

“What’s that you’ve got under your coat?”

I shrugged and pulled it out. “His guest book. Picked it up off the end table before the paramedics arrived.”

“You stole it?”

“It wasn’t really stealing. You know as well as I do, they’d only toss it away with all his other stuff. But this is priceless, just for its sentimental value. All those old-time movie names . . .”

I riffled it open to the page we’d signed, then stared. New entries had been added, and I scanned them quickly. The signatures were genuine; I know, because I checked them out against autographed photos later. I didn’t have to check the names.

Tom Mix. Alma Rubens. Rudolph Valentino. Thelma Todd. Jean Harlow. Paul Bern. Thomas A. Ince. William Desmond Taylor.

No wonder Vance died smiling; he’d had his Halloween party after all. For though each signature was different, the date which followed was always the same—

October 31—1987.

Die—Nasty

As every student knows, it was James David Autry who started it all.

Way back in March 1984, Mr. Autry, condemned to death by lethal injection, petitioned the Texas State Board of Corrections to allow his execution to be televised.

For some inexplicable reason his request was denied. And as a result it wasn't until 1989, after a five-year series of court battles, that the right to show executions on television was finally upheld. The ACLU proclaimed it a major victory for the freedom of the individual, but at first there was scant attention paid to this decision.

Meanwhile, of course, capital punishment was spreading. State laws against it were being repealed in the face of the increasing crime rate and the growing lack of prison facilities. Although billions had been spent to build new jails and penitentiaries, it was impossible to accommodate the great horde of murderers, forcible rapists of women and children, convicted politicians, and other major criminals.

Finally common sense prevailed, and death sentences were carried out on an ever widening scale. And in 1991 the first execution—that of Floyd Scrilch, convicted of aggravated mopery—was televised on a popular cable network. The success of the simple program, filmed by only two cameras set up outside the California gas chamber, caused wiser heads of commercial television to give the matter a second thought.

A month later a second execution was shown on the prestigious news program "30 Minutes"—formerly "60 Minutes," but renamed because of the number of commercials introduced. As expected there was a great deal of public reaction pro and con, but the winning argument proved to be the ratings. A full 55 percent share of the nation’s viewing audience watched the show.

The result was an undignified scramble on the part of network executives to secure exclusive TV rights for the carrying out of death penalties in various states. Naturally the largest crime centers—New York, Illinois, Texas, California, etc.—enjoyed the best offers. But even the smaller states such as Rhode Island and Delaware made lucrative deals with local stations.

Initially most of the programs featured gas chambers, hangings, and electrocutions. Through trial and error it was learned that gas chamber programs had little popular appeal; the proceedings were comparatively slow and lacked visual excitement.

Hangings were unpredictable as crowd pleasers; some were completed quickly while others lasted through several commercial breaks. The slower events naturally provided more drama and proved popular with bookmakers specializing in bets on just how long it would take for a given criminal to cease jerking and be pronounced legally dead.

Electrocutions were generally more successful as audience pleasers, combining our national interest in science and mechanical gadgets with the love of spectacle—such as the “special effects” of sparks curling the victim’s hair and smoke pouring out of his ears.

In the spirit of competition which made America great, state legislatures began competing for television revenues by introducing new methods of capital punishment or, more accurately, reviving old ones. Death by firing squad enjoyed a brief vogue, embodying as it did the use of colorful uniformed riflemen and the offer of a blindfold to the condemned. The once general offer of a last cigarette to the prisoner was, of course, omitted, since smoking is injurious to one’s health.

North and South Dakota, long ignored as lesser states, captured the public fancy by bringing back the guillotine. Its success prompted Alabama to go them one better in presenting a masked headsman with a quaint and picturesque ax.

Naturally the leading networks and stations entered into the spirit of these occasions. Taking their cue from the fact that beer commercials were especially popular on such programs, they introduced a whole new breed of commentators, many of them former sportscasters.

Soon the "instant replay" became a staple of execution televising. Showmanship came into play, featuring exclusive interviews with the condemned just before their sentences were filmed, then interviews with officials, executioners and clergymen, and, finally, dramatizations of the crimes for which the prisoner had paid his penalty.

Nor were youthful audiences neglected. Always important to sponsors and broadcasters alike, the young people who grew up on the "splatter films" of the past two decades constituted a huge market for this form of entertainment. Their once popular program favorite, "Saturday Night Live," enjoyed a new upsurge in ratings when it began to feature the Execution of the Week and changed its name to "Saturday Night Dead."

As the boom continued, prison officials eager for TV bids searched history for even more colorful and creative attractions. Pennsylvania reenacted the techniques used in the Indian Mutiny or Sepoy Rebellion of 1856: tying the condemned to the mouth of a cannon and "blowing him away." Multiple executions by this method were inaugurated, but ceased when local residents near the prison complained of noise.

Not to be outdone, Ohio introduced the custom of drawing and quartering, in which the prisoner's arms and legs are tied to four horses, which are then lashed to move in opposite directions, with spectacular results to the prisoner's person. This proved to be a bit of a problem, since the SPCA got into the act and promptly forbade the executioners to use a whip on the horses.

Burning at the stake was a favorite in Florida and flaying alive had its share of fans in Tennessee. Arizona gave an exotic oriental flavor to a two-hour special which featured the "Death of a Thousand Cuts."

Unfortunately, no one seems to have foreseen the inevitable result of these entertainments. But within just a few years, the number of rapes and murders suffered an alarming decline.

For a time the entire program concept, so popular with viewers and so lucrative to penologists, broadcasters, and sponsors alike, seemed fated—as they say in television circles—to “go down the tube.”

Fortunately the elected officials realized the danger, and, taking the welfare of the nation’s economy to heart, enacted legislation which labeled more crimes as capital offenses carrying the death penalty upon conviction. With the cooperation of farsighted judges who rejected appeals and did away with the old-fashioned system of public defenders, a fresh crop of prisoners soon blossomed on death row. In fact, so many were now available for public appearances that soon even the lowliest independent stations were carrying execution events weekly, then daily.

It is not definitely known to whom credit should go for the idea, but someone in Washington presently arranged to have local culprits thrown to the lions at the National Zoo. Shortly thereafter the Astrodome and various bowls and sports arenas picked up on the possibilities, and the following season saw both baseball and football give way to mass executions involving the talents of lions, tigers, leopards, bears, and other major carnivores, some of whom achieved individual celebrity for their gastronomic feats. Florence, a female polar bear borrowed for the occasion from the Seattle Zoo, won special distinction for devouring—at least in part—no fewer than six prisoners in the course of the annual Super Bowl.

Everyone seemed pleased with this development except the condemned felons. Exercising their God-given rights as citizens, they formed a union and appealed for redress. A compromise was reached, and as a result the animals were barred from program participation in favor of a new and even more amusing diversion: the gladiatorial combat.

At first large numbers of prisoners were employed, using every conceivable weapon except firearms, which were deemed dangerous to the attending officials and the television camera crews. As an additional objection, it was pointed out that filming such a crowd of combatants required a prohibitively expensive amount of equipment, and a great deal of the most impressive and bloodiest action was never recorded, due to the unpredictability of its occurrence.

Thus individual duels-to-the-death took precedence and proved much more satisfactory in the long run, particularly when embellished with attractive partisan girl cheerleaders urging on their personal "favorites." Many of the condemned entered into the spirit of the occasion, spending long hours of practice before their execution date in order to increase their skill with battle-axes, maces, spears, double-edged swords, and other useful utensils. Since they were allowed no armor for protection, they were naturally encouraged to master their talent for mayhem.

But it remained for science, ever the savior of society, to provide the final touch. In less than a year, leading television manufacturers benefitted both the national audience and the national economy by introducing a new TV set with a special attachment, directly aimed to provide viewer participation in the capital punishment process.

Now, when one condemned combatant downed or disabled his opponent, he paused for thirty seconds while the folks watching at home could press a simple button on their television control panels. Instantly, with the aid of a complex computer network, viewers all over the nation could register a "thumbs up" or a "thumbs down" verdict to decide the fate of the fallen gladiator. If spared, both he and his victorious foe still suffered death in accordance with the laws of the land, but were first given the special boon of an appearance on *The Tonight Show.*

The successful introduction of such customs in capital punishment had widespread repercussions in other areas of national life. Scholars, lawmakers, and laymen alike turned to a study of other constructive cultural phenomena in the past and found fresh wisdom in the ways and mores of bygone cultures.

The final and natural outcome of this preoccupation resulted in many social and legal changes. And as we are all aware, these changes came about rapidly.

It was in 1998 that we elected our first emperor.

No one can deny that his reign was eminently successful for well over three years, until this country fell to the barbarian invasion.

Now, of course, we are ruled by savages, and unhappy as it seems, it would appear that the good old days of public executions are gone forever.

Sic transit gloria . . .

The New Season

Harry Hoaker stood waiting in the wings as the lights dimmed.

Stereo sounded the familiar theme, a spot hit the announcer at stage left and framed his jolly jowly face in a golden halo. The announcer was fat, because fat men are funny.

"Hello, Harry," the announcer said, punching up the final syllables of each word so that the greeting came out as "Helloooo, Harreeee!" That was funny too.

Brasses blared, blending with applause. The spotlight swept to the right and Harry came on, moving to center stage as the applause rose to a roar.

That used to be the hard part for him, waiting out the surge of sound until it died away and left him standing there in the hushed, expectant silence. Now it was just routine, automatic, mechanical.

Harry blanked-out the thought, glancing forward as the arcs blazed up overhead, illuminating the set but blotting out his view of the audience.

"I know you're out there—I can hear you breathing." He remembered using the old line when the gags were bombing. And they bombed plenty, it was like an instant replay of Pearl Harbor, back in the early days.

But tonight was the start of a new season, and as Harry acknowledged the applause he did a little instant replay of his own. In the eyes of the audience he'd come center-stage in ten seconds, but Harry knew different—it had taken him twenty years to get there.

That's when the waiting was really rough, twenty years ago, standing there with the funny hat and the baggy trousers he wore for the kiddie show.

Clawing his way out of the Saturday morning ghetto took three years, and then all he got was an afternoon slot across the board on a game show. It was a grind, working with squealing housewives who wet their pants over hard questions like “Which ruler of England was known as the Virgin Queen? I’ll give you a hint—it wasn’t Elizabeth Taylor.” But Harry played it smart, bringing in a couple of writers on his own to get some decent material, and it paid off. When the net decided to put someone up against Johnny Carson on a late-night talk show, Harry’s agent pitched him for the host spot and he got the bid.

At first he’d been scared spitless, but the agent gave him the word. “Not to worry, kid, there’s enough insomniacs and night-people out there to fatten your ratings. All you got to do is stick to the system.”

His advice worked, and so did Harry, those first few years. He worked the writers, squeezing them dry after a season or two, then picking fresh replacements. They left him a legacy of skits and *schticks* that locked into a format. The viewers ate it up and he ate up his guests—chewed them up, spit them out. A whole staff of savvy programmers furnished him with current celebrities—everyone who had a new show on the network and everyone under contract who didn’t have a show but needed the exposure. The mix was sweetened by bankable stars plugging their forthcoming films, Top Ten singers pitching new recordings, old-timers pushing autobiographies, even a few real writers who came in handy as fillers when he needed somebody to bounce off a laugh. It was a system, that’s for sure, and it played.

Now the writing staff stood at seven and Harry didn’t even have to waste time with them on gag-sessions or even check a script—everything was up there on the crawl and all he had to do was read it off. If a joke died it could still be edited-out before the tape aired later that night.

Over the years he’d made it still easier on himself, cutting down from five shows a week to three, using “guest hosts” to fill in—people who were good, but not *too* good. It helped, and so did those long months of summer reruns every year. Sometimes he got static for his absences, critics said he was getting lazy and temperamental, but Harry didn't care as long as they never guessed the real reason.

They didn't know he was sick.

For a long while he didn't even know it himself, because the booze and the pills kept him going. Then, a couple of seasons back, he flunked his physical.

It wasn't AIDS, they told him, but it might be what they called a mutation of the virus. The bottom line was that the name didn't matter; he had it, and it had him.

They tried new pills and he kept going until the weight-loss. Then they put him on cobalt; his hair fell out but he wore a rug and nobody noticed. Finally the cobalt stopped working and he stopped working too, just before summer reruns began last year, and that gave him three months for the first bypass and recuperation.

Harry felt okay again by fall, but somewhere along the line—January, February, he wasn't sure exactly when—things came unglued and they were talking transplants. The rest of the season was just a blur, one week up, one week down, popping new pills, taking new tests, trying new treatments, living from showtime to showtime, hanging in there until the summer hiatus. Then they went to work. All the jazz he'd heard about but paid no attention to over the years—skin-grafts, amputations, prosthesis—became realities. But not too real, because they kept him under with shots and injections while they experimented with radical techniques. He couldn't remember everything they did, but now he was functioning again. A medical miracle, that's what the doctors called it, and on top of the bundle he laid out for their fees he had to fork over another bundle to keep their silence.

Harry faced silence now as the applause faded. He forced a grin and faced the crawl, going into his opening monologue without a hitch. He didn't get the point of some of the gags because they were topical and he'd been out of touch. But the crawl even cued him for pauses, and whenever he paused the laughs came.

A new season, but the same old system, plus more gimmicks—computer-selection of material to make sure it was trendy, in-depth demographic analysis to choose the right ticket-seekers for an audience. The production people knew what to do and how to do it, control the ratings, hook the viewers. It was a far cry from the days when Steve Allen pioneered talk shows on live camera with no chance to cover bloopers.

Harry squeezed off another gag, waited for his laugh, hit the topper, milked it with a double-take. Easy.

Only it wasn't easy. The crawl rolled, the laughs came, but something was wrong.

He squinted into the light that hid his audience and revealed him, wondering just how much they could see, how much they knew.

But how could they know anything? For years now his life-style protected privacy. He gave no interviews and didn't read the ones his publicists planted in print. The staff-meetings and business conferences were conducted on closed-circuit TV. There was no time to waste on friends or acquaintances, he didn't give or attend parties. Since the last divorce—Jesus, that was over six years ago—he hadn't had a woman, not even a call-girl, and he didn't want any. A limo drove him to the studio, then back to his automated house; help and security did their jobs without hitches. If liquor deadened his days and pills pacified his nights, nothing leaked to the press, so how could anyone know?

Trouble was it worked both ways. If people didn't know about him, he didn't know about people anymore. He'd lost personal contact and since the trouble started he'd been completely out of touch. Harry didn't even read the papers after he got sick—all this crap about new medical problems was a drag and he didn't want to hear scare-talk on the nightly news. The only thing he watched on television was old movies, and the stars who played in them were dead.

Dead stars—that was a laugh! The audience was laughing now but they didn't know Harry was practically a dead star himself, a brain in a mechanized body, a product of plastic and cosmetic surgery, of built-in artificial organs supported by electronic impulses and computer-circuitry.

They didn't know, and he'd keep it that way through this new season. Time to forget the past and pay attention to what he was doing. Right now the crawl cued him to bring out his first guest.

Harry read the intro and a jock came out, moving to him and shaking hands before they took their seats at stage-center. The jock was big, burly, bearded; Harry was surprised that his hand was so cold and his grip so feeble. Stage-fright, of course—funny how these steroid-stuffed apes went into flop-sweat in front of an audience.

But no sweat, all he had to do now was read the crawl. Harry fed him his first line, then waited for a response.

There wasn't any.

Harry repeated the line, making sure the jock heard him. Or did he? The nerd just sat there without a peep. *What the hell—don't tell me he's illiterate?*

Harry peered at him, whispering under his breath. "We're on, dummy! Answer me—say something, for Christ's sake—"

No reaction. The jock's face was blank, expressionless.

Harry's face was blank now too, but he was seething inside. *Jesus, the guy's wired, he's tripped-out—*

Instinct came to the rescue and he turned to the audience, rapping out an old line off the top of his head. It was a feeble gag, but anything was better than dead air.

The jock didn't move a muscle, just sat there frozen. Only one thing to do—get him off, quick. Harry gave the signal, a hand-gesture, and two bosomy blondes jiggled onstage. "Harry's Hostesses," that's what they were called, but their real job was to cover for him in emergencies like this. And while he popped a line about the jock coming down with a sudden attack of athlete's foot, the smiling girls helped the guy to rise from his seat.

Helped him, hell—they couldn't *budge* him, he just sat there stiff as a board. Harry shot out another line to grab the audience's attention while the girls, smiling no longer, practically *carried* the big ape offstage, his feet dragging between them.

Now what? Harry signalled again and the fat announcer came to his rescue, plodding onstage and going into a *schtick* which had nothing to do with what had happened. Looking up, Harry saw that the crawl had whirred through a speed-up and now it fed him a line which segued into a commercial break.

As it came, he switched off his mike and spoke quickly. “What’s going on here?”

“The computer’s down,” the announcer said. And walked off, striding stiffly, without another word.

“Hey, come back here—”

Harry’s voice rose, but the announcer only increased his pace, legs jerking as he lurched against the backdrop in his haste to reach the wings.

Panic impelled Harry’s fingers to the buttons on the end-table beside his chair, pressing a signal that would alert the director in the control-booth.

There was no response. A new commercial tape rolled on the monitor screen, but that didn’t tell him anything. Harry blinked up through the lights until he managed to focus on the glass-fronted booth high on the rear wall of the studio.

The booth was empty.

No director. No production people, not even a sound engineer.

Harry stared. *What gives here? Don’t tell me it’s all computerized now—camera-cues, sound-levels, light-changes, the works—*

Frantic, he glanced over to the wings, then wished he hadn’t. The announcer was there, sprawled face-down on the floor next to the inert jock. As Harry watched, a pair of paramedics approached, then knelt beside the fat figure as they stripped off the announcer’s jacket and shirt. Hastily they began to press the shiny studs imbedded in his bare back, fiddling with connections.

Connections.

Harry made connections of his own. *Jesus, he's like me! And the jock, too.*

Then the commercial faded from the monitor and Harry was on again. His eyes sought the crawl but there was no crawl. All he could do was switch his mike back on and stall for time.

But the mike was dead. Dead, like the announcer and the jock and—

Realization hit him then. He wasn't the only one. Something had been building up while he was out of it. Harry remembered the rumors about an epidemic; it must have been going on for a long time, hushed-up but happening just the same. More and more people at the top were like himself now, empty shells with artificial life-support.

How far had it spread? How long would it be before presidents were programmed, robots ruled the world? Calling it a medical miracle didn't change the facts—this was a conspiracy. Somebody had to blow the whistle, tell the truth, tell it quickly.

Now a faint hum sounded and Harry knew his mike was live again; an automatic backup had corrected its breakdown. But it was up to him to correct the other breakdown, the big one.

Facing the lights that separated him from his audience, Harry's voice bridged the gap with words. He had to warn them now, if it was the last thing he could do.

"Can you hear me? Then get out of here! You've got to understand—this isn't real. *I'm* not real. Tell your friends. Don't let the computers take over, don't let artificial organs and electronic implants turn you into zombies! It happened to me and it can happen to you unless you do something now. Find a cure for this—get back to reality before it's too late!"

Harry paused, waiting for a reaction.

And then it came—in a burst of sound from the laugh-track.

That was to be expected, of course. There was always a track to punch up the laughs, another to sweeten the applause.

But over the years Harry had learned to detect the difference between canned laughter and the real thing. And this mirth was mechanical. Nobody was laughing out there, nobody was applauding, nobody was reacting because they didn't know *how* to react unless they were cued. This was a funny show, he was a funny man, and they couldn't respond to an unexpected warning on their own.

During the years that surgery had robbed him of his body, something had stolen their brains. Computers did their thinking, the media dictated their life-styles. Making love, driving cars or shaking their fists in protest-demonstrations were all a matter of mimicry. Machines made the products, machines pitched the products, machines bought the products and used them. Life wasn't real any longer—it was like this show, with its phoney guests, phoney ad-libs, and phoney host.

The only reality Harry could find now was his own despair. What good would warnings do? Viewers weren't going to hear what he said—it would be edited from the tape.

But there was still a way. Word-of-mouth. That was the answer—if he got through to the studio audience here, made them believe, they'd go out and spread the truth. And he had to convince them now, because this was his last chance.

Harry faced the lights, fighting the blinding glare, forcing himself to make eye-contact with the figures seated silently in the shadows below. His vision blurred, then cleared, and he stared down at the empty expanse of the studio.

There was no audience.

No audience—just Harry and the crawl. A blinking light from the TelePrompTer told him it had resumed functioning again, cueing him in on his next line.

Automatically, Harry began to read the words aloud. What the hell, it was a new season, the show must go on, and a gag is a gag.

And if there was no audience, it didn't matter. He'd always have the laugh-track.

Heir Apparent

Truth is a weapon which cuts both ways, and its blade is often bent in the telling.

Let not my words mislead you, for I am neither a swordsman nor any other kind of man. My name is Maug, and my station is that of first chamberwoman to the Lady Tephana.

It is for her that I must tell the truth, lest others twist the tale.

Hear me now, for this was the way of it . . .

It is whispered that we of the North have long had dealings with powers of the Dark and that we bear the taint of their blood. This I shall not deny. To live in a land where once demons held domain is difficult at best, for their power is still strong and we have learned their ways in order to survive. We who wish to dwell in peace under their sufferance must bargain for it. And if, at times, that bargain entails the mingling of bloodlines, so be it.

That my own mother entered into such an alliance has been hinted, but of this I cannot surely say, since she died at my birthing, without revealing my father's name. I was taken into the House of Paltendale as an orphan babe and in its service I grew to womanhood, learning the arts of chamberwoman to earn my keep.

I know also—and freely admit—that from childhood on I possessed certain powers greater than those of ordinary folk around me, and came easily to the study of spells and the distillation of potions employing the lore of the Dark. While other maidens of my years yearned for love, my interest lay only in learning, and I knew naught of womanly wiles and ways. And when at last love came into my life it was not the love of maid for man but the maternal affection of a mother for her child.

The child was she who became Lady Tephana, and I was not her true mother. She, like myself, was born into the House of Paltendale without living parents, both her noble sire and lady mother perishing of a plague which swept the land shortly after her birth. Some called it a curse brought down upon them for trafficking with dwellers from the Dark. Again I know nothing of this save rumor. And all I knew at the time was that a tiny infant lay helpless and unprotected, mewling for a mother's milk and starved for the succor of a tender touch and caring caresses.

Milk was secured through the services of a wet nurse, but it was I, assigned to duties in the nursery, who gave her loving care. And as the years went by it was I who became not only nurse but teacher, I who protected her with charms to ward off harm, I who was privileged to be her preceptress and guide her emergence into womanhood.

And woman she became—small in stature but well endowed with beauty of face and form. Her hair was lustrous black, her eyes deep gray, her gestures graceful, her voice a caress.

Small wonder then that she was sought as a bride by her cousin, the young heir to the House of Fortal. And when she wed she chose me to serve as her first chamberwoman.

Those were joyous times, and in memory I still hear the echo of her laughter. When the union was blessed with a son, Hylmer, it seemed her happiness was complete. But happiness is hard to come by and harder to hold; it slipped from her grasp all too swiftly with the sudden death of her lord in a hunting accident.

Her grief was great, and I grieved for her. Lady Tephana's beauty was shrouded in the grey garb of widowhood and her position as Mistress of Fortal imperiled by her dead lord's brothers who sought to take power.

It was then that I came to her one dark and dreary day, in the tower chambers which had long since ceased to be warmed by sunlight or her smile.

“Be of good cheer, my lady,” I said. “For I bring glad tidings.”

“Indeed?” Gray eyes met mine with no luster in their glance. “What might those tidings be that they hold reason to dispel my sorrow?”

“Your time of mourning is over, and your widowhood as well. For even as I speak, a suitor is on his way.”

The gray eyes widened. “A suitor? But I do not wish to marry again.”

“It is not a question of wish,” I said, “but rather one of need. Others plot your downfall here, for you have unfriends within this Keep.”

“It is of no great consequence, now that my lord is gone. Whatever comes, the future holds no fears for me.”

I shook my head. “And Hylmer, your son—does his welfare mean nothing to you as well? Those who scheme to bring you down will also place his life in peril, for only then can they take power.”

Lady Tephana nodded quickly. “You are right, of course. It is Hylmer’s safety I must consider. And if I marry again he will be under the protection of my new spouse.” She rose and faced me, her eyes at last alert. “But tell me—who is it that would seek my hand in marriage?”

“Ulric, Lord of Ulm.” As I spoke I glanced out of the tower window, peering down at a band of horsemen moving toward the castle on the road below, their banners bright against the sun. “And if I mistake not, he comes to claim you even now.”

I was not mistaken; it was indeed Ulric who approached the Keep. Nor had I misread his purpose, for it was I, with the aid of certain spells which need not be described, who stirred his thoughts to summon him. Bluntly put, I had ensorceled Lord Ulric with a vision of Lady Tephana and her beauty, hoping to induce his coming.

Of this I spoke not, thinking it wiser that my Lady believe his presence here was prompted only by his own desire. And it pleased me greatly that their meeting bore fruit; he appeared much taken with her charms and lost no time in urging his suit. As for Lady Tephana, she seemed not unmindful of his brave appearance and ardent entreaty. Knowing the safety of her son was at stake, she dispensed with the coquetry of courtship and readily consented to become Ulric's bride.

The ceremony was celebrated quietly, amidst general rejoicing, and sooner than I'd dared believe possible my lady journeyed south to her new lord's land. Hylmer was left behind for a time in the care of trusted chamberwomen, until she felt assured of the stability of her new estate as Lord Ulric's wife.

But I rode with her, and it was I who stayed at her side after our arrival at Ulm. And it was I who soon sensed the coming of a cloud which cast its shadow over the marriage. For while Ulric looked upon her lovingly in the presence of others, I noted that in their private moments his smiles gave way to frowns.

This troubled me, and at last I could keep silent no longer. Seeking out Lady Tephana in her chambers I made bold to question her.

"Forgive my forwardness," I said. "But I speak only out of devotion to your well-being. What is it between you and Lord Ulric which mars this marriage?"

Lady Tephana shrugged. "There is nothing between us." She smiled thinly. "Perhaps it is that which disturbs him."

I stared at her, realizing the full import of her words.

"Do you mean that after a month of wedlock there has been no consummation of the union?"

She nodded quickly and would have turned away, but I deterred her. "How can that be?" I said. "Lord Ulric is indeed somewhat older and less handsome than your late husband, but still he is of noble birth and a fine figure of a man. Is there some secret deformity in his person, some hidden flaw which inspires your repugnance? Surely it is not his indifference that prompts your rejection; even I, who know little of the ways of love, can see how greatly he yearns to follow wedding with bedding."

“Truly said.” Lady Tephana faced me now, and I read anger in her eyes. “Ulric does indeed bum with desire to possess me, but his longing has little to do with love, or even lust. To him I am not a person but merely a receptacle to be filled with seed. He does not truly look upon me as wife or woman; he married only to beget an heir.”

I nodded. “But this is natural. All men wish for offspring, and a lord needs sons to carry on the line.”

“It is more than need which impels him,” Lady Tephana said. “Since coming here I have learned much. Soon after Ulric’s birth his father’s doings brought down a curse upon the House of Ulm, and no further children were born alive thereafter. Mindful of this, Ulric himself married when quite young, hoping to rid the curse and secure an heir. His wife was sickly, but he had little concern for her. He promptly got her with child and when the poor lady died in the birthing he mourned not at this; it was only the loss of the infant which sorrowed him.

“His second wife, the Lady Elva, was wedded in unseemly haste thereafter. It is said she captivated him with the beauty of her fair hair, the slim perfection of her body with its exquisite, pear-shaped breasts. It is also said that he felt true affection for her, but this did not deter him from his purpose. He took her roughly and repeatedly until she too conceived, not once but several times, and always the offspring came before their time so that none survived. Perhaps he loved her truly, but this did not prevent him from dismissing her. He craved a child, and that is why he came to wed me—only because he must father an heir for Ulmsdale.

“As he thinks of naught but his own position, so must I think of mine. And this I swear—I shall not become an instrument of his arrogance, a brood-mare to serve his purpose. Proud he may be, but so am I. Mine is the pride of womanhood, and he shall not humble it.”

“Even at the cost of your son’s life?” I said softly.

“I will protect Hylmer,” she declared.

“With what—a woman’s wiles?” I frowned. “How long do you think you can fend Ulric off with talk of headaches or being in your monthly courses?

Sooner or later he will insist upon claiming his rights to your person, and if you resist he will surely banish you. Then Hylmer, like yourself, forfeits all protection. You two will wander the Waste to your deaths."

Lady Tephana, she who walked high in her grace, now stood with sagging shoulders, and the white purity of her complexion grayed to ashen pallor.

"But what am I to do?" she cried.

"The answer is simple," I said. "You must conceive."

"Never!" A spark of anger flared from the ashes, reddening her cheeks and flaming from her eyes. "Come what may, Ulric shall not use me thus."

"Consider his position," I counseled. "Ulric acts not out of malice but only to protect Ulm."

"His motives do not matter," Lady Tephana declared. "If I give him a son, the boy becomes his rightful heir, and Hylmer would still have no assurance of safety in the future." Her eyes flashed fire. "I tell you I will not bear Ulric's child."

"I speak only of conception," I murmured. "But the child need not be Ulric's."

Lady Tephana stared at me in puzzlement. "You would have me cuckold him with another man?"

I smiled. "Suppose it was not a man?"

My lady stared, taking my meaning. Then, "You would have me consort with evil?" she whispered.

I shook my head. "Evil is an empty word. The cosmos itself exists only as the interplay of Light and Darkness, which are neither good nor evil—merely opposite aspects of the same power. Power which men seek to control by means we call magic."

"You have knowledge of such magic, then?" Lady Tephana said.

"I do. And I would employ it so that you bear a babe which is not truly of Ulric's blood."

"But what purpose would that serve?"

"Yours," I told her. "If the offspring is not Ulric's it will become your ally, not his. Thus it will grow to protect you and your child. Is that not what you desire?"

Lady Tephana nodded. "More than life itself." She hesitated, grey eyes intent on mine. "But are you certain you can do this?"

"Trust me," I said.

And she did.

So it was that she went to Lord Ulric and cozened him, saying that she would no longer withhold her favors, for now her true desire was as his—to give him a manchild. But when he sought to take her she implored that he wait only a few days longer. First she must make pilgrimage to the shrine of Gunnora, Our Lady of Fruitfulness, and pray to her for the life and good health of Ulric's issue.

Convinced and content, he agreed to her going, wishing her well on the mission.

Before departure I took other steps to guard our safety. When Ulric's former wife. Lady Elva, took refuge in Norsdale Abbey she left behind her own first chamberwoman. This was one Ylas, an ill-favored creature with a harelip, who was skilled in needlework. I was disturbed by her continued presence here and wondered if she had been instructed to stay and spy upon Lady Tephana and her doings. To distract her from such purpose I now sought her out with a smiling face and asked her to weave a scarf for my lady, using fine fabric which I gave her together with drawings of a pattern for her needle to follow. Thus employed I felt she would be unmindful of our own comings and goings.

And go we did next day, accompanied by two guards, though it was not Gunnora's shrine we sought. The guards knew naught of this, for in their provisions was an ample supply of drink containing a potion I concocted to insure sound sleep and direct their dreams. To them those dreams would seem reality, so that next morning upon awakening they would swear they had spent the night in sentry outside the portals of Gunnora's shrine.

But once their slumber was assured. Lady Tephana and I made our way farther into the bleak and barren land where stood another edifice, erected by darker powers for a darker purpose.

It was there, in the crumbling ruins of what had not been raised by human hands, that we came under the cloak of night. And it was there, in a chamber steeped with shadows, that Lady Tephana removed her cloak at my instruction and laid herself upon a slab of stone, baring her body to reveal the richness of its charms.

The slab was cold and the night chill, but it was with fear of the strange shadows that she shuddered and shivered until my words calmed her into repose. Eyes closed, she slumbered, unaware of what transpired in the midnight hours.

As she lay in loveliness I drew forth a short wand fashioned from the spine of an unborn infant and bathed in its blood to confer the power of charmed command.

Power too took added strength from the sound of the words I muttered in a tongue forgotten by men but well remembered by those who dwell in the Darkness.

The force surged forth to stir the shadows, imbuing them with a life of their own. Swirling into shifting shapes, the shadows took fearsome form as they drew closer to the slab, gathering to gaze on the bared body of my lady. Hands that were more like claws or talons swooped forth, seeking to touch, to grasp, to possess. But with wand and words I kept them back whilst I sought the semblance of one summoned by name—the Darklord Galkur.

And as my lady slept he came, emerging from the striving shapes to tower over the slab with more than a shadow’s substance. There was such hunger in his glowing gaze; such emanations of dark desire as to set me atremble so that the wand almost slipped from between my fingers. Hastily I tightened my grip, chanting aloud the ancient ritual which alone could hold the adept’s powers of Darklord Galkur in thrall.

Even so, he crept closer to my sleeping lady, closer than any of his shadowy company, tensing above her body as though to hurl himself upon it.

"You want her?" I whispered. "Then listen. Listen, Lord Galkur, and heed me well."

Now, murmuring in the midnight, I proposed my pact—my lady's flesh in return for Galkur's favor. And when I at last concluded, the huge head nodded in eager assent.

"Then it is agreed," I said. The shape made as if to advance upon its prey but with my wand I waved it back. "Leave us now so that I can prepare the way. She shall be yours at moontide of tomorrow's eve."

Shadows lack voices but I fancied my words echoed by Galkur's deeper tones. And then his shape slithered back to merge and mingle with the other phantasmal forms as they swirled away into the darkness, vanishing to leave me alone with Lady Tephana asleep on the stone stained by other sacrifices. Now she too would be sacrificed to seal this pact with Darkness, but mercifully she knew not of the bargain I had struck.

As for me, I slept not, but waited the coming of dawn in silence. When Lady Tephana awoke and sought to question me I told her merely that my efforts had met with success and all would be well. Seeking the guards before the portals of Gunnora's shrine, I bid them bestir themselves. As I had foreseen they were none the wiser for our absence during the night, and now together we made our way back to the Keep.

There, as Lady Tephana rested in her tower chamber, I sped to the kitchen below, for in accordance with my plan I needs must prepare a potion. With me I brought certain herbs and simples gathered from the weed-strung Waste. And while cook and serving-maids stood apart, curious as to my intent yet afraid to question me, I filled a brew pot on the hearth and began the rituals required.

To folk who know not magic it seems strange that potency resides in the leaves and petals of common growths. The secret, of course, lies not in the plants themselves but in their proper mingling. It is much the case as with words. Used singly they lack strength. But when grouped together in certain sentences they can cajole, command, condemn, curse, inspire love or loathing, happiness or hatred. And plants possess similar powers when combined for intended usage.

To compound the efficacy of my concoction I hummed an age-old tune, for musical notes—again when properly assembled—convey a still other power of their own.

All this is the essence of magic's meaning—the informed use of the commonplace to create a linkage with Forces that surround us—and bend those Forces to our bidding.

In the midst of my task I spied the woman Ylas creeping about the kitchen and stealthily observing my every movement. From the look of her she did not relish the odors arising from the bubbling pot before me. And there was an aura about her, as if she were not alone but accompanied by an intangible presence. An image came unbidden to me; that of an eagle-headed gryphon, which is the guardian symbol of the House of Ulm. But what this had to do with the actual and visible Ylas I could not divine; dismissing the vagrant fancy I watched the woman leave after making pretense of eating bread and cheese.

Puzzled, I sent my thoughts after her, informed with a purpose she must fulfil. My sending proved successful, for when I finished my workings and took a portion of my potion to Lady Tephana's tower, Ylas appeared bearing the scarf I had bid her weave. This she presented to the lady, who placed it about her shoulders and praised her work.

But there was about this a matter for unease. Before Ylas arrived I had poured my potion into a golden goblet, and now she recognized its scent. Peering down, she passed her fingers over the goblet's rim. then drew back quickly, and in the twilight of the tower window I saw her misshapen mouth go agape in fear as she turned to depart from the chamber.

"What possesses her?" Lady Tephana exclaimed.

"No matter," I replied. "At best she can but suspect rather than know. As for possession, that in itself is a matter we must now consider. For the night is nigh."

Then, and only then, did I inform the lady of what lay ahead and of the part she was to play in it.

Briefly put, the plan was this. With the coming of darkness Lady Tephana would seek out Lord Ulric and invite him to sup in her tower chambers. Here, with a sumptuous meal prepared, she must greet him with warm and wifely words of welcome while arrayed in a rich robe woven but thinly to cover her charms yet not conceal them. Together they would dine by the light of scented candles, the fragrance of which would mingle with the perfume my lady had applied to her person. And as they enjoyed their repast she would employ the methods of a magic common to womankind—shy gestures, sidelong glances, stifled sighs; such sorceries as need not words to give them meaning. The wine Lord Ulric took with his meal must aid in kindling desire, but nothing could inflame his senses like my lady's unspoken promise of passion to come.

Inevitably he would seek to draw her to the bed, but before the moment of sweet surrender she must invite him to drink first from the golden goblet.

Once the potion passed his lips our aim was accomplished. For even as he drew the garment from her shapely shoulders a strange sleep would steal over him—but a sleep in which he fancied himself still awake. Thus, though he held heaven in his arms and sought the portals of paradise, he would do so only in dream.

Then, as the potion took full effect, Ulric's mortal body would be usurped by the essence of one not completely mortal, as Darklord Galkur took both his place and his pleasure.

Lady Tephana listened and her great gray eyes were haunted with misgiving. "But this is a dreadful thing we do," she whispered.

"A needful thing," I told her. "If there is issue from this union, both it and your son Hylmer will enjoy the protection of Darklord Galkur."

My lady shuddered. "It is said this Galkur is a creature neither animal nor human. How can I freely give myself to such a monster?"

"There is a way," I told her. "When Lord Ulric drinks from the goblet you must signify your desire to drink in turn—not from the goblet, but from his lips, while his mouth still holds the liquid of the potion. This will please him, I know, for there can be no more precious a prelude to the act of love.

"You need but take a sip of the brew to bring the blessing of sleep. Within moments your senses will slumber, though you will appear to be awake. You shall not be aware of Galkur's coming and caresses, nor will he discern that you thus deny him your participation in his pleasuring."

Lady Tephana pondered upon my proposal for a long moment before breaking silence. "There is no other way?"

"None. This is the only course."

She sighed, then nodded. "So be it, then."

Night descended and Lord Ulric ascended to the tower. All was in readiness as arranged, and all went in accordance with my plan.

To assure myself of this I found a station in the room adjoining the bedchamber. Kneeling there in the darkness I put my eye to the keyhole of the chamber door. It was not curiosity which prompted me, but after all my calculation and worrisome workings—and above all, for the sake of my lady—I must be certain of the results obtained.

So it was that I witnessed the meeting of Lord Ulric and his bride, their meal together, her amorous enticement, and its effect upon him. I saw too his draining of the golden goblet and how Lady Tephana drank a portion drawn by a kiss with opened mouth—a kiss that ended only as the lovers sank down upon the bed together.

Together—yet not for long. As the two entwined there seemed a great stirring in the bedchamber, and the candlelight wavered, flames fluttering in a whirl of wind. Then shadows came, though I did not sense their source, filling the room with a swirl of seething sable which spiraled down upon the bed and merged into a single shape.

The shape descended upon Lord Ulric, seeming to absorb his body, so that now Lady Tephana lay beneath a shadow. This shadow was unlike any other, for it had eyes—great eyes, holding a lambent light as they feasted upon my lady's bared beauty, eyes that gloated as fingers of darkness fondled and fastened themselves upon her person. But as the black bulk descended I saw, or seemed to see, a curious change in its contours. For a moment it melted, and in its place appeared the profiled semblance of a great beaked and horned birdlike head borne by a body with widespread wings. But it was Galkur's loins below which thrust forward, and from them darted that which had the hideous likeness of a writhing serpent. At the sight of its writhing and the realization of its intent I cried out in terror, then swooned away before the door.

How long I lay in merciful unawareness I cannot say, but when at last I roused and steeled myself to again peer through the keyhole I saw that Galkur's shadow had vanished, together with all other fearful forms. Now only Lord Ulric and Lady Tephana lay side by side in slumber, their bodies bathed in the warming glow of calm candlelight.

Of what transpired on that fateful evening I spoke not, nor did my lady venture to discuss. But it was apparent that Lord Ulric was unaware of anything amiss and now he looked fondly on his bride—the more so as he perceived the growing evidence of her condition. For it was increasingly obvious she was with child and this pleased him greatly. So fulsome was his favor that Lady Tephana made bold to bring Hylmer to the Keep. Ulric welcomed him warmly and I know he took his place with favor, though I saw him but seldom in the months to come.

As for me, I remained haunted with a vexing uncertainty as to what I had actually witnessed before my fainting spell. Each time I encountered the needlewoman Ylas I wondered if by some mischance she too had wrought a magic of her own.

It was a matter of grave concern, and when Lady Tephana entered the final weeks of her carrying I determined upon a course that would ensnare Ylas, however unwittingly, as a party to the outcome of my plans.

Providing my lady with what was needful, I enlisted her to summon Ylas to the bedchamber where she lay awaiting the approaching hour of birthing. Here, in accordance with my instruction, she gave Ylas two bolts of cloth—one red, the other white—together with a parchment I prepared bearing a design to be woven into a birth-cloth for the newborn infant.

The design held symbols not usually employed, but I hoped Ylas would feel sufficiently flattered by being entrusted with her task and follow orders to weave the pattern as instructed.

But when I sought her out to take possession of her finished handiwork I perceived instantly that she had betrayed my wishes, for the birthing-cloth bore other symbols—the twin traceries of Gunnora's amulet of protection and the gryphon guardian of the House of Ulm.

Of my displeasure I gave no sign, merely gathering the cloth and wrapping it in the folds of another. Thus shielded, the symbols would possess no power, and Ylas's tampering was thwarted.

Still I could not be assured she might not resort to other means of interfering if left to her own devices; it might be that she was capable of weaving spells as well as cloth.

So three days later, as Lady Tephana's time came upon her, I bade Ylas join us on our journeying. For Lady Tephana had gone to Ulric and asked that she give birth in the shrine of Gunnora. Here, with the favor of the great patroness of womankind, she would bear him a living heir at last to break the curse which beset the House of Ulm. Despite her secret betrayal she was quite sincere in her hope to bear a living child, and felt the need of Gunnora's birth-blessing.

With Lord Ulric's consent we started forth, my lady in a horse litter led by manservants, whilst I bestrode another mare. Ylas and two castle maids followed on foot.

Sullen signs of an approaching storm suffused the sky, and when at last we came unto the hillside we made no attempt to follow the path upward, for the climb was too steep for the horses to mount safely. We turned to go around the hill and reach the shrine from its opposite side, making our way along a road which had been laid by the Old Ones through their land.

Then the storm descended, and in its full fury we could go no farther but needs must seek shelter within the half-leveled structure which long ago the Old Ones had raised as a stopping-place. Placing Lady Tephana's litter in the inner chamber with the women, the men and steeds were left to make do in the outer one as best they could.

Now, as howling wind and hissing rain tore night to tatters, my lady trembled to find herself in this place of darkness instead of Gunnora's shrine. But there was no help for it, and as lightning flashed and thunder boomed she writhed in the pangs of birthing, babbling regret of the pact she had made with other powers. I too felt unease, but it was too late to alter what had been done, and there was naught to do but await the coming of the child.

Thunder heralded its birth, and when the maids drew forth the babe it squirmed and squealed loudly, for it was indeed alive.

As I ministered to my lady, Ylas took the infant and placed it upon the birthing-cloth. Then lightning flickered forth from cracks in the ruined walls and in its glare I turned and beheld the child. Beheld its manly human form which terminated in hooves instead of feet—beheld also the human face whenceforth peered two glowing yellow eyes.

And as I stared stricken, a sound as of the beating of great wings rose above the tumult of the storm, as did the echo of a mighty voice raised triumphant over all.

"Son sealed to me!"

The echo faded but my fright remained. For it was then I knew that we had failed. Despite Galkur's brand upon its body and despite the cry of what I sensed to be the Gryphon Lord, this was truly Lord Ulric's son.

I moved to place the child beside Lady Tephana, but Ylas shrieked that this was a demon’s get, and when my lady saw what she had birthed she screamed and averted her gaze in horror.

Nor would she ever look upon it or hold it in her arms, even when we returned to Ulmsdale and Lord Ulric accepted his heir without question or reproach. He gave the infant into the care of a trusted forester who took him to raise in a place far distant from the Keep.

And I, who had risked and sacrificed so much for my mistress to safeguard her future, found myself without favor in her eyes. Banished from her presence, I now know naught but desolation and despair.

Sometimes I ponder upon that of which I spoke—the nature of a cosmos in which good and evil are illusions, merely the interplay between Light and Darkness which we seek to control by magic so that we ourselves may gain power.

And this I ask myself: what if our power is also an illusion? What if the forces of Light and Darkness are themselves but pawns in some vaster game which we cannot ever comprehend, or hope to master?

The answer to these questions I do not know.

I know only that I am afraid . . .

* * *

Afterword

I was introduced to Andre Norton and her business associate Ingrid Zierhut at a convention. The ladies then retired to their room, where Ms. Norton promptly fell asleep and Ms.

Zierhut read the ads in the program booklet—thus giving you some idea of the kind of impression I made on them. Still, something did result from our meeting, because when Ms. Norton awoke she announced, “I just had an idea, “and Ms. Zierhut responded, “So do I.” Whereupon both said, in unison, “Why not ask Mr. Bloch to write a story for Tales of the Witch World?”

It was a crazy idea, so of course I agreed. As we all know, somebody—either Shakespeare or Isaac Asimov—wrote, "There are two sides to every story," and "Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery." Actually these quotations come from Diogenes Laertius and Charles Caleb Colton respectively, and both are misquotations. Laertius' term was "question" instead of "story" and Colton didn't qualify his wording with "form of" Nevertheless, I was guided by the incorrect quotes—writing the other side of And of Norton's story from the opposite viewpoint of another character, but deliberately imitating the Norton style which, like the lady herself, I greatly admire. "Making a mistake is not always an error," as somebody once said. I think it was me. Having read my story, it's up to you to decide if what I did was right or wrong. At any rate, consider "Heir Apparent ' as a tribute to the talented tale-teller who inspired it.

1989

Horror Scope

When I came into the bedroom I found her sitting at the vanity, before the mirror. I don’t know why she bothered, because she didn’t have any head.

Shires and his jolly crew were all over the place, snapping pictures, taking tape-measurements, gathering carpet-lint, spreading dusting-powder over furniture and woodwork, drawing diagrams, making notes. All this, of course, is standard operating procedure in a criminal investigation and these people like to think of themselves as experts, using modern techniques. But whenever I see them on the scene of a homicide I can’t help but be reminded of the way vultures always gather and descend on a carcass brought down by the king of beasts.

In our society, of course, the king of beasts is outlawed as a predator, and all this activity—like my own presence here—is directed towards finding the lion who killed the lamb.

Not a bad comparison, really, and in this case it was particularly apt, for the headless victim *was* a lamb—a Mrs. Jennifer Lamb, to be exact.

Shires greeted me with his usual scowl of welcome. “Glad you’re here,” he said. “Don’t touch anything.”

I nodded, but the warning was unnecessary. There was nothing here I really wanted to touch. Certainly not the body lolling grotesquely in the chair before the vanity, nor the stained and spattered negligee in which it was clad. I had no desire to run my fingers over the stump on which a head once rested—truth to tell, my stomach churned at the sight.

Shires turned, calling in the direction of the bathroom doorway. “You guys finished yet?”

Two of the vultures emerged from the opening and the one in the lead opened his beak. “Yeah, we’re done.”

“Good.” Shires nodded at me. “Come on. I’ll show you where it happened.”

There was a long, long trail awinding across the bedroom floor to the bathroom doorway—a trail of blood. Shires paced beside it and as I joined him an idiotic refrain popped into my head. *Follow the yellow-brick road—*

But this road was red, and it didn’t lead to the Emerald City.

The bathroom was small, its white-tiled walls covered with flecks of congealed crimson at their base. I’m not a professional vulture myself, at least I don’t like to think I am, but it required no expertise to reconstruct what had taken place here.

A wide-open window offered mute testimony as to how the killer gained entrance to the first-floor apartment. There was nothing to show where the victim had been at the time. She could have been in the bathroom with her back turned, or else walked into it after the murderer entered.

My offhand guess inclined towards the second explanation. If Mrs. Lamb was present during the actual entry she would have heard sounds and had time to see the intruder and do the sensible thing—run like hell out of the room. I favored another scenario: she came in later, after the interloper took up a position behind the open door.

In either case I doubted that she ever saw her murderer, unless perhaps she caught a single fleeting glimpse in the bathroom mirror as the presence loomed up behind her and the weapon came down.

Since there were no signs of a struggle, nothing knocked over or broken on the washstand, no marks of clawing hands or fingers on the white-tiled walls, it was fair to assume she’d been attacked from the rear; swiftly, savagely—and from the killer’s point of view—successfully.

I said as much to Shires, and he agreed. Possibly two weapons had been used: a knife that severed the jugular and/or carotid artery, followed by a saw or hatchet that actually removed her head once the body had slumped to the floor. That determination would have to be made by the pathologist, since no weapon or weapons were found on the scene, and so far none had been located by the crew searching the alleyway beyond the window. But from the angle of entry and impact evident on the neck, the head had been severed from back to front, after which the decapitated corpse had been dragged across the bedroom floor and deposited in the chair before the mirror in all its gory glory.

"What do you think?" I asked Shires. "Could she have been molested before she died?"

"Molested?" For the first time he favored me with a smile. It wasn't exactly a pleasant one, and frankly I preferred his scowl. "You mean raped?" He shook his head. "No signs of it—either before or after death."

I hadn't thought about the latter possibility and didn't want to. I concealed my reaction by hurrying on.

"Forensics can give us the answer on that," I said. "And probably identify the missing weapon or weapons by examining the wounds in the victim's head."

"Not likely." Shires gestured through the doorway towards the figure sprawled in the chair before the vanity. "All they're going to get is a headache. We can't find the head."

Forensic experts weren't the only ones stuck with a headache. I had my own.

In the days that followed, the reports came into the office and were duly dumped on my desk. Pathologists' findings, inquest transcripts, investigative data—all pieces of a jigsaw puzzle that didn't fit together.

Apparently my hasty conclusions about the actual murder method were tentatively confirmed, though there was no additional evidence, no eyewitness testimony, no dramatic clues issuing from lab tests. Fibres of carpet different from those in the bedroom had turned up, fibres deposited by the killer's shoes, but clues to their origin were lacking. No fingerprints were found anywhere in the apartment, or on the window-sash and sill. The lion that struck down Mrs. Lamb was a crafty beast.

But I'm not a Great White Hunter, any more than I'm a vulture. My role is strictly unofficial; as a retired professor of criminology I'm called in to assess evidence and review theory on special occasions.

Some homicide bureaus work with psychics, though they try not to publicize the fact. A few prefer someone like myself working behind the scenes. It doesn't always produce results, but at least it's better than following usual police procedure—which is to wait for a phone-call from an informant that solves the case.

This time there was no call. And lacking a crystal ball, I had problems.

Department head Romberg barged into my little makeshift office on the second day after the crime to demand a progress report.

"I can give you a report, yes," I told him. "But not very much by way of progress."

He lit a cigarette, the quick flick of his lighter betraying his impatience. "Okay, so you haven't found any new leads. Just what did you come up with?"

I shrugged. "Pretty much the same thing that you found, I imagine. I made a few notes here." Rummaging through the litter on my desk-top I located the typescript from which I read.

"Jennifer Lamb was fifty-eight years old. Widowed three years ago, no children, no immediate family. Husband Eric, eight years her senior, died of a heart attack; she lived on his pension plus social security payments. Far as we know she had no close friends, male or female, no live-in, no indication of casual sexual involvements—"

Romberg interrupted me with a gesture from the hand holding his cigarette. "You're right, we got all that. Neighbors say she was a loner, tended to keep pretty much to herself. Went shopping two or three times a week, attended First Baptist Church, over on Elm Street, every Sunday. Didn't drink, smoke or do drugs. Didn't seem to have any hobbies—there weren’t even any books in the apartment, just a TV and a transistor radio. Drove a blue 1985 Toyota, had her hair done every two weeks, kept a checking-account at First National. Trouble is, all this means nothing.”

I shook my head. “Sometimes nothing means something.”

“Like what, Professor?”

“The very emptiness of her life is a clue. No family, close friends or romantic attachments—their lack indicates there was no personal motive for her murder. And since her purse, jewelry-box and dresser-drawers hadn’t been touched, we can rule out robbery. Which leaves us with the assumption that whoever killed her could be sociopathic.”

“So what else is new? We figured all along we’re dealing with a crazy.”

“Sociopaths are not legally insane,” I reminded him. “And crawling through an open window and selecting a victim at random is not in itself a sure indication of psychosis.”

“But what about the way she was killed? Cutting off her head and propping the body up in a chair—only a loony would do a thing like that.”

“Definitions of mental disturbances aren’t important,” I said. “The big question is whether the murder was committed on impulse or as the result of a deep-rooted compulsion.”

“What difference does that make?”

“All the difference in the world. Because if the murder was compulsive, we must expect the possibility of further killings.”

Romberg grimaced. “That’s all we need—another serial murderer!” He shook his head. “I’m not buying that. You got no facts to go on, so don’t tell me—”

I didn’t have to.

At that moment a uniformed officer hustled into the office unannounced and uninvited. “Just got word on the squawk,” he said. “Supermarket over on Pine and Seventh. Clerk went out to throw some cartons in the trash-bin. Found a body-bag dumped there, and it wasn’t empty.”

Romberg grimaced again. “Man or a woman?”

“A man. Or most of him, that is.”

“Most of him?”

“That’s right. His left hand’s missing.”

The man’s name was Rufus Tate. Black, aged thirty-four, married, two children. Steel-worker, presently unemployed, last seen leaving a neighborhood bar half a mile from where his body was discovered—but there’s no need to go into further details.

Homicide covered that pretty thoroughly in the days which followed and came up with—

“Zilch!” Romberg muttered, pacing the floor in front of my desk. “We asked the right questions but all we get are wrong answers. Tate was a family man, good solid reputation. Sure, he hit the bottle after losing his job, but he wasn’t an alcoholic. No police record, no known enemies, not the kind of a guy who went around picking fights. Just walked out of that bar and disappeared. You got the coroner’s report. Some kind of sharp weapon, a knife most likely, punctured the femoral artery. And—”

“Cut off his left hand at the wrist.” I leaned forward in my chair. “Doesn’t that suggest something to you?”

“Look, there’s no connection. Believe me, we touched base on the possibility of something in common between Mrs. Lamb and Tate, but I swear there couldn’t be a link.”

“Yes there is. The missing link. Missing head and missing hand.”

“But the MO is different this time.”

“Never mind the MO. Remember that series of murders down in Los Angeles? Methods differed, but there was only one killer. I’m afraid we’re stuck with that fact. And if there are any more—”

Romberg stopped pacing and gave me a hard look. “Okay,” he said. “You might as well know. There was another homicide last night. A Mrs. Haskell, over on Robinson Avenue. Somebody bludgeoned her to death in her own garage, hit her with a tire-iron as near as we can figure, when she came home after a Bingo game.”

“That’s all you know?”

“Almost all.” He stared at me. “But one thing else is certain. It wasn’t a tire-iron that chopped off her right leg.”

I have supped full of horrors. That’s how Shakespeare put it, in *Macbeth,* and I understand exactly what he meant. To put it bluntly, in the weeks that followed I got a belly-full.

To spare you indigestion, I’ll avoid details.

The body of Homer Cary, a record shop clerk, aged thirty, was found in the ravine beside a freeway ramp with a puncture—probably made by an ice-pick—in his neck. Most of him was found, that is, but not his left arm.

Two nights later a retired legal secretary, Miss Irma Sokoloff, died in bed in her suburban home. She’d made the same mistake which cost Mrs. Lamb her life—leaving a window open or unlocked. But the killer made no mistake; he or she left no fingerprints, no clues, and no right hand of the victim.

In the following week three men died—James, Innes and Wade. One was discovered stuffed into the trunk of his own car in the parking-lot behind the building where he worked as an industrial draftsman. He was a big man but his body fitted quite neatly into the trunk, for his own trunk—the pelvic area—had been removed. The actual cause of death was strangulation.

Stab-wounds killed another in the alleyway adjoining his own back yard. Very possibly the same weapon sliced off his left leg just below the kneecap.

The third man died in the dressing-room cubicle of a bath-house, with a towel stuffed down his throat—and without a right arm.

Of course none of this happened in a vacuum. A vacuum is soundless, and now there was noise. Noise from the media, trumpeting lurid details and screaming for a quick solution to the crimes. Noise from politicians demanding “action.” Noise from a hysterical public rushing forth to buy hand-guns, purchase guard-dogs, and installing security measures. Some of them even began to lock their doors and windows.

There was a mounting echo of response from the police and sheriff's department—announcements of special investigation task-forces being mounted, assurances that a massive manhunt was under way, a daily mix of threats and reassurances. But it was all—to quote Shakespeare again—sound and fury, signifying nothing.

Romberg admitted as much to me in private. He visited me regularly, bringing transcripts and descriptions obtained from friends, family-members, co-workers and chance acquaintances of the victims, everything he could lay his hands on. But it wasn't enough, and I told him so.

"What more is there?" he countered. "I've read your notes—all they do is confirm what our own investigations tell us. These people had no enemies, and there's nothing to tie them together in their past histories."

"Then we'll have to go back further," I said. "Get me high-school annuals, medical records, birth-certificates—"

Romberg blew cigarette-smoke in my face. "Waste of time. Most serial killers specialize in one class of society—usually prostitutes or winos. But from the looks of it what we've got here is someone who just kills at random. Cuts them up at random, too. You listen to those shrinks who come up with personality-profiles on the talk-shows? According to them, the killer is a ghoul who eats human flesh."

"Do you believe that?"

"I don't know what to believe anymore. But I'd sure as hell feel better if we could turn up those missing body-parts. And I still can't get a handle on why the MOs are different."

I nodded. "In multiple murders where there is no similarity of method, we must look instead for a similarity of motive."

"Meaning you think this nut *is* a cannibal?"

"Only one way to find out. Get me that data I asked you for."

He got me the data, but it took time. And during that time three more people died. Names, dates and circumstances aren't important; what mattered to me is that one lost his left arm, one his right arm, one her left leg above the kneecap. I got the records on them too, and while the public outcry rose to new heights I huddled over a miscellany of high-school yearbooks, doctors' and dentists' reports dating back to early childhood, birth records, and parental histories where obtainable. There was no discernible pattern. Were we dealing with a cannibal after all?

Or was it a ghoul?

The next victim was already dead of natural causes when a horrified mortician entered his slumber-parlor on the morning of the funeral to find the coffin open and his professional arrangements profaned. The entire thorax of the deceased was missing.

"It's a ghoul all right!" Romberg muttered. "Can't you come up with anything? The D.A. just got a call from the governor's office—he's crying for blood!"

And blood is what he got. While I reviewed the material on the deceased there was a further crime. This one, however, did not occur in the city or its suburbs. The male victim had been struck down with a blunt instrument while walking his dog at night in Jackson, a town seventy-five miles away. But portions of his abdomen had been slashed away and removed from the scene of the crime.

I write these words with reluctance, though I can understand the reason. Whenever life leaves a body we confront a mystery. What was once a person, perhaps even a loved one, has suddenly been transformed into a *thing*—a corpse, something strange and hideous which, if it began to move and live again, would inspire nothing but fear and loathing.

This corpse didn't move, but Romberg did. When he slapped the documentation on this victim down on my desk he was shaking with uncontrollable rage.

"Here's your damned data, Professor," he muttered. "But I've had it. I'm sick and tired of digging up all this lousy paperwork for you, fighting with county clerks and making Xerox copies. Shires and a hundred men are out ringing doorbells and tracking leads from every crank call or letter that comes in. They're sweating their butts off while you sit on yours. You haven't even bothered to see the bodies, go to the scene of the crimes, attend the inquests. What makes you think you can find an answer just from reading kindergarten reports?"

"Never mind that," I told him, pawing through the sheaf of papers he'd put before me. "Did you bring the victim's birth-certificate?"

"It's in there somewhere. What difference does it make when he was born?"

"All the difference in the world," I said. "To an astrologer."

"Holy—" Words failed him for a moment and he took another deep drag on his cigarette. "Don't tell me you're into astrology now?"

"Perhaps the killer is."

"What are you driving at?"

"I've gone over everything you brought me again and again, looking for a connection, tracing the lives of the victims right back to birth. And that's the only point where I've been able to find anything in common."

"Sure," he said. "All of them were born." He jammed his cigarette into the ashtray. "But that doesn't tell us why all of them were murdered."

"Perhaps it does." I reached for and found a page of notations. "Just as a matter of routine I jotted down the birth-dates of the victims. Here's the list."

Romberg squinted at it quickly, then shook his head. "So what?"

"Nothing, on the face of it. But just on a hunch I made a second list. This time I put down the astrological sign under which each victim was born. See for yourself."

Reluctantly he inspected the second sheet of paper I handed him, losing the squint as his eyes widened. "You're right. Eleven victims, eleven different signs. But it could be coincidence."

"What if it's not? What if we're dealing with someone with a fixation on astrology, a serial killer out to murder a victim born under each sign of the zodiac?”

“Why? It doesn’t make sense.”

“We’re not dealing with a normal mind here. But there does seem to be a possible pattern.”

“Aren’t there twelve signs in the zodiac?”

“Right.” I rummaged through the Xeroxes he’d brought me. “And we have twelve killings now. If the last victim was born late in December or before the twenty-second of January—”

I located the birth-certificate as I spoke and scanned it eagerly.

“Well?” Romberg murmured.

My own voice faltered as I read aloud. “Date of birth—April first, 1945.”

“April Fool’s Day,” he said. “So much for astrology!”

“Some of these certificates go pretty far back,” I said. “There could be a mistake—”

“The only mistake was bringing you into this case in the first place,” Romberg muttered. “You and your crazy theories.” He turned and headed for the door.

“But—”

“I’ve had it with you. From now on you can go to hell.”

The slam of the door closing behind him was a final punctuation-mark. I sat there with shattered nerves, staring down at the results of my shattered hypothesis.

Romberg was right; it had been coincidence. Two Aries and no Aquarian. And in spite of my suggestion, I knew there weren’t any errors in the birth-certificates; it was too much to hope for. As Romberg said, it didn’t make sense—just because there were twelve victims wasn’t enough to link the crimes to astrology. For all I knew, the maniac responsible for their deaths may have thought he was murdering the Twelve Apostles, or the twelve—

It hit me then.

It hit me, and I acted. No sense trying to get further cooperation from Romberg; he was finished. But I wasn’t.

This time I had to do it all myself, all the legwork, all the ferreting. For the next three days I didn't even see the inside of my office. But on the fourth I had what I wanted, and this time I took it to Shires.

He wasn't exactly easy to get to, and he certainly wasn't delighted to see me.

"Look," he said. "I'm up to my neck here. Like I told you on the phone, you've got five minutes, no more, and unless you've got something this time—"

"I think I have," I told him. "It's the name of the murderer."

His look reminded me of Romberg's, and so did his tone of voice. "And just who might that be?"

My notebook was already out and open.

"His name is Joseph Vestro. Joseph Alacorn Vestro, aged thirty-one; height, five-eight; weight, one-sixty. Black, curly hair, brown eyes, small mustache. Upper left incisor missing. Appendectomy scar, lower abdomen. No other distinguishing body-marks or defects."

"Where did you get all this?"

"Matter of record." I continued to read. "A little over five years ago Joseph Vestro was convicted of armed robbery with intent to do great bodily harm. It could have been a murder charge, but the coroner finally decided the victim had died of a heart attack rather than as a direct result of Vestro battering him with a length of iron pipe.

"As it was, Vestro served five years in state prison. He could have gotten out earlier, but he refused parole. They released him in July, and nothing has been seen or heard of him since then. Presumably he's living on the proceeds from past crimes; he has a long list of involvement in previous strong-arm robberies and suspected assaults, but no convictions."

Shires shook his head. "What's so different about all this? There must be a thousand other guys doing time who have the same kind of record." Sarcasm shaped his smile and lent a sharp edge to his voice. "How did you pick out this one—did you use a crystal ball, or was it astrology?"

"He's a Scorpio, and vindictive," I said. "But no, I wasn't influenced by his horoscope. It's his psychological profile."

Again I consulted my notations. "Preliminary tests established he was sane enough to stand trial, but his personality-pattern indicated violence and aggression. After he started serving his term the prison psychiatrist conducted his own interviews. According to his findings Vestro exhibited both sociopathic and borderline psychopathic traits—paranoid fixations, delusions of persecution, a grandiose self-image, with fantasies of revenge, directed against the prosecutor and the judge presiding at his trial."

"Who sat on the case?"

"Judge Amos B. Kelly," I told him. "But that doesn't matter now. Kelly died of natural causes shortly after the trial."

"What about the prosecutor?"

"Charles Beckford, an assistant D.A.—and he passed away last year."

Shires frowned. "So the threats didn't mean anything."

"That's what the prison authorities must have thought. They didn't realize Vestro would go after the others."

"What others?"

I glanced up from my notebook. "The number twelve has more than astrological significance. It's also the number of persons who make up a jury."

"Are you serious?"

"That's the common denominator I was looking for. When it occurred to me I checked it out. And sure enough, each of the victims had done jury duty. That in itself could be coincidence, but there was nothing coincidental about the fact that all of them served at the same trial—the trial of Joseph Vestro. It was then that I looked up his record—"

"Now wait a minute, Professor! Jurors are picked from local citizens. And the last victim came from out of town—"

"But according to the court file he was a resident here five years ago."

"I still don't see—"

"Then open your eyes. Vestro refused parole for an obvious reason. He meant to carry out his intentions free of supervision. His release came in July, but the first killing didn't occur until October. That's because he needed time to track down the addresses of his victims, learn something about their habits and life-styles, make his plans accordingly. Then, when he was ready, he acted. It all makes sense now."

"Sense isn't proof," Shires murmured.

"And criminology isn't a science," I said. "It's an art."

"Like astrology?"

"Or psychiatry, for that matter. But if I were you—"

"I know what to do," Shires told me.

And he did. He put out an APB on Joseph Vestro.

Unfortunately his description wasn't of much use. There are too many men of approximately the same height and build, too many small mustaches adorning the upper lips of would-be Burt Reynolds look-alikes.

But the real problem wasn't appearance; it was disappearance. Nobody could come up with a last known address for Vestro since his release from prison over four months ago.

"Where's he holed up?" Shires muttered. "He's got to have someplace to live."

Once again art took precedence over science. "You law enforcement people know a great deal about guns, knives, poisons and blunt instruments," I said. "But you seem to pay no attention to the greatest weapon of modern times."

"What's that?"

"The van."

Shires got that disgusted look again, but I ignored it as I spoke.

"It's the van that transports stolen goods, carries drug-caches, shelters criminals who want to avoid detection. But that's not all. Take a look at the sensational cases of the last dozen years or so, the ones involving multiple rapes, tortures and mass murders. Think about how many of these atrocities were committed by psychos driving vans. Vans were used to locate victims, vans picked them up off the street, vans concealed the attacks that killed them, vans carried their bodies to hiding-places.

"Not everyone who owns a van is a vandal. But the percentage of crimes connected with their use tells its own story. People die in vans. And people live in them, too. Loners, like Joseph Vestro. I suggest—"

"Gotcha," Shires said.

But he didn't get Vestro.

The people he contacted—auto dealers and owners of used-car lots—had no record of a van sale, new or second-hand, to anyone answering to the name or description of the wanted man.

"Because he stole the vehicle," I said.

"Could be." Shires' look of disgust seemed permanent now. "Do you know how many stolen vans have been reported here in the last four months?"

"A dozen?"

"Sixty-three." He nodded. "About half have been located and recovered. That leaves over thirty still missing. We've got descriptions, but no leads on where to find them, nothing to tie any particular van to Vestro." He sighed. "Believe me, we gave it our best shot. But there's nowhere to go from here."

"Then don't go anywhere," I said. "Stay put and wait."

"What do you mean, wait? This is an ongoing investigation, I've got a job to do."

"True. But in spite of what you may think, police work isn't a science either. It too is an art. And part of that art consists of waiting."

"For what—inspiration?"

"Information." I leaned forward over the desk. "Give your people everything you can on the vans still unaccounted for and tell them to be patient. And if we're lucky—"

"We'd better be," Shires said.

And we were.

Two nights later, just as I was leaving the office, Shires came racing in.

“We got him!”

“Vestro?”

He nodded, grabbing my arm. “Come on, I want you to see this. Romberg’s waiting for us downstairs in the car.”

Shires hustled me out front and into the back seat of a departmental limo, wedged between Romberg and himself. As we took off, his voice rose over the siren’s wail.

“Two squad men in a black-and-white spotted a guy answering to Vestro’s description coming out of a fast-food place over on South Sixteenth, just as he was climbing into a van in the parking lot. They had a make on it too—a brown ’80, reported missing early in July.

“When they hailed him he panicked—pulled a pistol and opened fire. First shot went through the windshield, damned near hit the driver. His partner got a bead on Vestro before he could shoot again. Blew off the top of his head.”

“Any chance he’s still alive?” I said.

“Not with his brains scattered all over the pavement. You’ll see—”

“I don’t want to see,” I told him. “That’s why I stick to my office. I have a thing about violence.”

“You were in at the beginning,” Shires said. “I figure we owe you a chance to be in on the end.”

“Don’t do me any favors,” I murmured. “Tell the driver to let me out at the corner. I’ll read about it in the papers.”

“Too late,” Shires said. “We’re here.”

We weren’t the only ones. Half a dozen police cars were already on the scene, along with a paramedic ambulance. Crowds had been roped-off but nothing stilled their excited outburst. In the lights flashing over the parking-lot I noted two live-remote TV camera crews swarming around their vans.

Vans. I shrugged, then surrendered to Shires and Romberg as they pressed me forwards towards the other van and what lay before it.

Joseph Vestro was dead, no doubt about it. Enough of his brains had spilled out to fill a teacup. But nobody had a teacup and I closed my eyes quickly to avoid a second look.

It was all I could do to control my stomach, let alone my voice. “Did you have to show me this?” I said.

“There’s something else you ought to see,” Shires answered. “Over here.”

He led me to the rear of the brown van. The back was closed but Shires opened it—not all the way, just enough for me to get a quick look at what was inside; enough to realize Joseph Vestro hadn’t been traveling alone.

There was a figure sitting on the jump-seat, facing out and staring at me. Staring out of dead, bulging eyes set in a dead woman’s rotting head, sewed with catgut to the decaying flesh of a nude male torso. Sutured to the shoulders on either side were the putrescent portions of amputated arms; dangling from them, the almost unrecognizable remnants of unmatched hands. Below the naked waist was a joined jigsaw of pelvis and lower limbs, stitched together to complete a human body—a body composed of the fragments of twelve separate corpses.

I’d put the pieces together, all right, but so had Vestro.

Still, it wasn’t the sight of the fearsome form or even its hideous stench that most appalled me. The worst was the final fleeting glimpse of the cardboard placard wired to the butchered chest—a placard crudely lettered in red crayon to spell out the name of Judge Amos B. Kelly.

The door closed swiftly and mercifully, just as I turned away and threw up on the pavement.

And that’s how criminal cases often end in real life: not with rejoicing but with regurgitation.

Or almost end.

I still had to listen to Shires’ praise as he led me back to the waiting limo. “You were right all along,” he said. “About the loony, about the motive being more important than the method, about the jury and the van and revenge—”

“Like hell he was,” Romberg muttered. “We’d have got the guy anyway, sooner or later. You ask me, this art of criminology is just like astrology—nothing but a bunch of lucky guesses.”

I didn’t pay any attention to him, because I knew Romberg couldn’t help being stubborn.

That’s what you’ve got to expect when you’re dealing with a Taurus.

1991

Warning: Death May Be Injurious to Your Health

When I am dead and buried
It will not matter much
I'll lay there in my coffin
And worms will gnaw my gutch

My face will melt and vanish
To leave a grinning skull
Though what it has to grin at
I'm sure I cannot tull.

I'll have no mailing address
But postmen soon will learn
To bring me anything that's marked:
"Tomb it may concern."

The Grab Bag

“I have in this bag,” said the little withered man, “a ghost.”

No one spoke. They were waiting for the point of the joke. But the little withered man looked almost ludicrously solemn as he continued, “I do not want this ghost. I wish to sell it. Do I hear ten dollars?”

Somebody handed over a bill. “Thank you,” said the little withered man, and he went away.

Who he was or how he got in, nobody knew. The week-end party was awash in alcohol and when the host floated his idea of holding an impromptu auction it seemed hilarious. All sorts of fantastic things had been offered for sale—from a used toothbrush to a hen discovered in a neighbor’s poultry-coop. Nobody was surprised when Orlin Kyle bought the ghost, for he was the life of the party; a slender chap with cherubic features, much given to gags and practical jokes.

So he bought the ghost, or whatever it might be that the bag really contained. The little withered man had left so hastily and unobtrusively there’d been no opportunity to question him, and it was only later they began to wonder about him and where he’d come from. But nobody wondered much, for the liquor was good, and Kyle was at his facetious best with the bag.

It was a plain burlap sack, bulging but curiously light for all its size. The bulges kept shifting shape, and gave way instantly when squeezed or pressed or prodded through the burlap covering them, so there was no clue as to the bag’s actual contents. Its mouth was tightly knotted with thick rope. Kyle slung the sack over one shoulder and wandered around the house, delivering monologues to everybody willing to listen to him. Thanks to intoxication, many thought his infantile attempts at humor amusing—an opinion in which he thoroughly concurred.

Stumbling into the kitchen he found his host, Johnny Vail, blinking at Mrs. Vail over a table clutter of bottles and glasses.

"Here's Orrie," said Mrs. Vail, a tiny, depressed-looking brunette with sad eyes, now slightly glazed.

"And friend," Kyle added. "Can I interest you in a ghost?"

"Have a drink," Vail said.

"That I will. In fact I'll have two."

"Don't be piggy," said Mrs. Vail, reaching for a bottle and a glass.

"I'm not," Kyle told her, sliding a second glass towards the Scotch bottle as she lifted it to pour. "One's for me and one's for the ghost. Spirits for spirits, you know."

"What's all this about ghosts?" Johnny Vail asked.

"That's right—you two didn't wait for the end of the auction, did you?" Kyle explained what had happened, elaborating as he went along. As his story expanded, Vail and his wife began to inspect the bag with maudlin interest.

"And so," Kyle concluded, "I am now the owner of a real live ghost."

"Or a dead cat." Johnny Vail's snigger was both skeptical and unpleasant.

Kyle ignored him, picking up the first glass from the table and downing it at a gulp. As he reached for the second one and raised it to his lips, Mrs. Vail motioned quickly.

"Stop—I thought that was for your ghost."

"Sorry, my mistake. Have to finish it myself. This ghost never drinks on an empty stomach."

Mrs. Vail giggled as she poured herself a generous three fingers, but her eyes strayed to the sack with a nervous quickness. "Orrie, what *is* in that bag?"

"Let's see." Johnny Vail bent down and lifted the sack gingerly. "Not very heavy, is it?"

“Ghosts don’t weigh very much,” Kyle said.

Vail ran his right hand along the bulge at the burlap’s base. “But there’s something inside. Something feels—*mushy*.”

“Like amorous, you mean?” Fran Vail giggled again. “Give it here, Johnny.”

Vail tossed the bag to her.

She dropped her glass and it shattered on the floor as she caught the sack.

Nobody paid any attention to the mishap.

Fran Vail palpated the side of the sack with a probing forefinger. “You’re right, Johnny. I can feel something in here.” Her mouth lopsided into a smile and she began to stroke the bulge beneath the cloth. “Nice ghost,” she crooned. “Nice—”

Kyle shook his head. “Not at all nice,” he whispered. “It’s shut up in the bag for a reason. Maybe it has claws. Or teeth.”

Johnny Vail snorted. “Then why doesn’t it eat its way out of the sack?”

“Doesn’t like the taste of burlap,” Kyle said, pouring another drink. Glancing up, he gestured. “Wait, Fran—don’t stir it up!”

“Why not?” She was fumbling with the rope that bound the mouth. “Stop clowning, Orrie. Le’s see what you’ve really got inside—”

Suddenly Fran Vail broke off with a little shuddering cry and thrust the unopened sack from her. The bag landed soundlessly on the floor and lay there, bulging mysteriously.

“No,” she said. “I—I—” Her voice trailed off, but she forced a grin. “Orrie, there *is* something alive in there.”

“Sure,” Kyle told her. “Dead-alive. Ghost.”

Mrs. Vail turned and went to the door. There was a wobble in her walk and a hint of fright in her eyes as she paused in the doorway to glance back at the bag. “Drunker than I thought,” she murmured. “Much.”

She went into the hall, fingers straying absently about her lips.

Johnny Vail scowled at Kyle. “What the hell’s the big idea?” he said. “You scared her. You really scared her.”

“Not me.” Kyle pointed to the bag. “It.”

Vail's fingers fisted. "Look, Orrie, I've had just about enough—"

"Well, have anoth'r and calm down." Kyle picked up the sack and headed for the doorway.

Johnny Vail's voice followed him. "Hey, where you think you're going?"

"After Fran. Got to apologize to her, right?"

"Right." Kyle's host relaxed, waving him on, and he gripped the neck of the sack tightly as he moved along the hall.

He found Mrs. Vail in the parlor, sitting on a couch with two guests. All three had their backs to the hall doorway, but Kyle recognized Fran Vail's companions from an earlier meeting. Pete and Eileen Clement, a young married couple, didn't seem as if they belonged with this crowd. The young man, Kyle remembered, had been one of those polite, look-down-your-nose types. His wife had possibilities, though—a fluffy little thing with big round eyes—

Kyle crept up behind the sofa where they sat and abruptly thrust the bag before Mrs. Vail's startled face. The result surpassed his expectations. She actually looked as though she were going to faint. Jumping up with a cry she pushed the bag aside and moved shakily away. Kyle forestalled her.

Chuckling, he maneuvered the woman into a corner, swinging the sack back and forth for the benefit of the Clements. He noted Pete Clement's eyes narrowing, but Eileen Clement's were widening. Getting her attention was what he wanted. As for Mrs. Vail, he had her attention already, whether he wanted it or not, the stupid cow.

"Don't, Orrie," she said in a strained voice. "Please—"

"Boo! Ghost wants to see you."

"Orrie—I can't—"

"Boo! You wanna see the ghost?"

"No—stop it—please, Orrie—"

"Cut that out," said Pete Clement, getting up from the couch. "It isn't funny!" He was a slim youngster, and Kyle was encouraged to ignore him until Clement gripped his shoulder and pulled him around.

Kyle dropped the bag and hit Clement in the mouth. The boy staggered back, knocking into Johnny Vail as he entered.

Mrs. Vail seized the opportunity to escape. Kyle started after her, and when Johnny Vail blocked his path, Kyle made the mistake of trying to hit him too.

The result was that Orlin Kyle went over backwards, taking a floor lamp with him, and hit his head hard enough to knock him unconscious.

He woke up to find a blonde girl sitting beside him on the floor. She was holding glasses and a bottle of brandy.

Grunting, he raised himself on one elbow, noting that the dim room was otherwise deserted. Staring at the girl, he rubbed his aching skull.

"Fool," said the blonde. "Here, have a drink. You need it."

The girl was Sandra Owen, Kyle's fiancee. She gave him a glass, poured him a shot, and tilted the bottle to her own lips. They drank together.

"How long've I been out?" he asked.

"Don't know. Someone just told me—"

"Where were you all this time?"

"Around." She forestalled further questioning with a thrust of the bottle. "Have another. Good for the liver."

"Didn't hit me in the liver."

"You should know better than to mess around with Johnny," she said. "He's a creep."

"Wouldn't he go for you?"

Sandra shook her head and pointed to the sack on the floor beside them. "Is that the grab bag I've been hearing so much about?"

"Yeah." Kyle was experimenting with his jaw.

"Where'd you get it."

"Auction." He frowned suddenly. "Damn it, Sandra, where'd you disappear to when it started? I want to know—"

She shook her head. "Answer me first. Who sold you this bag?"

"I don't know. Some old guy, just wandered in. Nobody ever saw him before."

“Fran Vail says you told everyone he was a wizard.”

“Just part of the gag.”

“Well, she believes it. Claims she’s psychic. That’s why she’s so afraid of what’s in the sack.”

“Bombed out of her skull, that’s what she is,” Kyle said. “There’s nothing in the sack.”

“Have you looked?”

Kyle shook his head. His fingertips were getting numb, so he took another drink.

“Let me see,” Sandra said.

“Not yet.”

“Why? It doesn’t mean anything now. Your gag’s a flop.”

Or was it? Kyle scowled. He hadn’t gone to all this trouble just to get a punch in the jaw. And his gags weren’t supposed to end up with the laugh on *him.* There had to be a way to turn the tables. Maybe his fingertips were numb but there was nothing wrong with his brain.

“Look, Sandra,” he said. “I have an idea.”

Lowering his voice, he told her what had come to him and she listened without comment.

“You’ll do it?” Kyle asked.

Sandra nodded. “I’ve got nothing against *her,* but Johnny is—” She broke off, avoiding his gaze.

Kyle, knowing her, felt suspicion rise in him, but shrugged it away. There was nothing he could do about Sandra’s philandering. This girl with the face of a lascivious Mona Lisa was the only thing on earth he loved, and probably the only thing she loved too.

They sat on the floor until they finished the rest of the bottle. By then it was very late and the house was quiet; the guests had settled down for the night in the upstairs bedrooms.

Kyle and Sandra stumbled up the stairs, then separated to tap discreetly on various doors, whisper to occupants of the rooms behind them. If the taps were sometimes a bit awkward and the whispers a bit slurred, neither of them noticed. They were feeling no pain.

Sandra managed to pull herself together as she lurched down to the end of the hall and knocked on Vail's door.

After a while he opened it, rubbing his eyes.

"What is it?" he murmured.

"Orrie. I think he's sick."

"Oh, Orrie." Vail shook his head. "He's just tight."

"No. He's really sick, Johnny. You'll see."

Vail donned a robe and a frown as he followed her down the darkened hallway. The door to her room was ajar and Sandra motioned him in. Then she swiftly pulled the panel shut and locked him in. She moved to a door further along the corridor without waiting to hear Vail's reaction. It was loud and profane, as he realized the trick played upon him.

As Sandra neared the door further down, it opened and Kyle stepped out, the sack dangling from his hand.

"All set?"

"Yeah. Did you lock the Clements in?"

He nodded. "Sure. Now let's get the others out."

It wasn't difficult; not with Johnny Vail pounding on the door at one end of the hall and someone else—probably Pete Clement—hammering away at the other. In a very short time everyone had gathered waiting before the Vails' bedroom, grinning in various stages of intoxication and anticipation. Muffled pounding echoed along the hall behind them.

"Hurry up," Sandra whispered.

Kyle nodded, and opened the door gently. His free hand found the wall switch. Soft light bathed the room.

Mrs. Vail, bundled under blankets in the twin bed on the far side, had apparently slept through the commotion. Now, startled by the light, she blinked and rolled over on her back.

"The perfect hostess," Sandra said. Behind her, guests were murmuring as they started to crowd into the room. As they watched, Kyle came forward, tiptoeing up to the bedside.

Suddenly he produced the sack from behind his back.

Fran Vail gave a little shriek, but it was drowned in the general laughter.

“We have here,” Kyle said, warming to the response of his audience, “a magnificent specimen of ghost. It tells me it wants to see you. Do you want to see it?”

“Orrie,” Mrs. Vail whispered. “Stop this, please. Where’s Johnny?”

Distant shouting betrayed his whereabouts without any need for Kyle to answer. Instead he swung the bag before her. “Sorry to intrude on your privacy.” He gave the word its British pronunciation, which for some reason people tend to find very amusing, particularly if they’re hearing it while drunk. “But we talked things over, all of us, and decided the time has come.”

“Time? What time?”

“The witching hour. Time to release the ghost.”

Kyle’s smile and fake accent broadened. “As our hostess, you must do the honors.” Suddenly raising the bulging bag, he pushed it forward almost into her face. “Let it out, dear lady,” he chuckled. “Let it out.”

Fran Vail wasn’t chuckling. She began to scream. For a moment her arms flailed in an attempt to brush the sack aside. Then, all at once, she fell back against the pillows and went quite limp. As her eyes rolled upward somebody said, “Cut it out, Orrie. Look what you’ve done to her.” Others were crowding up to the bed now, remorseful, muttering and chattering as they tried to restore Fran Vail to consciousness. Kyle was pushed aside. He looked around for the sack. Sandra had retrieved it and now she was sitting on the floor in the corner, fumbling with the knotted ropes.

“Hey,” he said. “Don’t do that.”

She stared up at him as though it was difficult for her eyes to find a focus. “Oh, knock it off. You had your fun,” she murmured. “Besides, you promised I could if I helped you.” Kyle took a step forward and she gestured, eyes slitting. “Get away—don’t try t’ stop me, hear? Always hogging the limelight—you'n your damn' ghost—" Her fingers scrabbled at the knots. "My turn now—"

Kyle glanced at the group around Mrs. Vail, then hurriedly straightened his shoulders, raised his voice, and called out, "Ladies and gentlemen! Your attention, please!"

Heads turned. Mrs. Vail's eyelids fluttered.

"I present to you the marvel of the age," Kyle said. "Since our hostess is —indisposed—Sandra will now let out the ghost. Invis'ble, impalpable, purch'sed at great expense from a wizard who dared not keep it—I give you the ghost!"

He turned with a wave of his arm, disclosing Sandra as she squatted over the sack. It seemed quite a task, undoing the tangle of knots, and she leaned forward in grim concentration. Quite abruptly the ropes gave way, and as the sack gaped open she lost her balance momentarily, falling forward with a little giggle as her head was enveloped by the burlap folds.

The others echoed ripples of amusement and Kyle laughed too. It was funny, Sandra crouching on her knees with her head tangled in the opening.

But when she swayed and fell sideways it wasn't funny. "Passed out," someone muttered. Kyle bent and pulled the sack free from Sandra's head and shoulders. As he did so he glanced within and saw that it was indeed quite empty. He stood for a moment, looking down into the incredible black emptiness of the grab bag.

Through an alcoholic haze came the cries. His gaze penetrated that same haze, shifting to Sandra. What he saw was a gnawed and tattered crimson horror through which a single glazed eye stared up blindly. Something had eaten Sandra's face.

The Bedposts of Life

Some horrors never end.

He hated what he was doing, but he couldn't help it.

None of them could help it, because their need was too great. The great need for great sex.

Well, they wouldn't find it here. Most of them knew this in advance but still they came, night after night, cruising the street in slow-moving silence more appropriate to a funeral procession than a journey of joy. It was, perhaps, fitting that they should do so, for virtually all those who gathered here mourned the loss of love.

Some had never even known it: the very young, the shy, the awkward and unattractive victims of low self-esteem. But their need was as compelling, perhaps more so than that of the others. When you're hungry the body doesn't demand delicacies; it settles for junk-food. Young appetites value quantity over quality, and the quantity was here. *Great sex?* At this stage in their lives any sex at all was great, just so there was enough of it available.

When you're old, availability becomes a problem once again. Dirty old men get hungry too. Just because you lose your teeth doesn't mean you lose your appetite. If gourmet fare is harder to come by, there's plenty of take-outs for midnight snacks. The street is a convenience-store.

He strolled along, scanning faces crouched over steering-wheels. Along with the generation-gap's extremes were men in their prime, drivers who were themselves driven by impulse impossible to control.

For amusement he made a little game of relating cars to their occupants. The lonesome Audi, stranger in town. Slinky-styled old Bugatti on the prowl for young meat. That dented white Ford wagon conjured up the image of a harried, housebroken middle-aging husband whose spouse selected the vehicle as a convenience for hauling kids. He'd borrowed it to come here in temporary escape from the bonds of unholy matrimony.

Bonds. *Bondage.* That van with the drawn window-curtains—did they conceal contents, cords and cuffs and chains so dearly beloved in sado-masochistic union? One could never be sure, it was all guesswork, really. That old Chevy truck spewing exhaust might have a driver wearing pantyhose under his jeans. This Mercedes might be owned by a substantial stockbroker, or some swinging substance-abuser. And driving a Porsche doesn't guarantee your potency. Wherefore art thou, Alfa-Romeo?

He shrugged the thought aside. It was time to stop searching the street and turn his attention to the sidewalk.

That's where the women waited: the hookers, the hustlers, the broads and the bimbos.

The women were like cars, in a way. Big or small, wide-bodied or compact, flashy models with fresh paint-jobs, old pickups beyond repair. None were brand-new, but when you're looking for a used car you've got to expect some mileage on it. In a case like this you weren't even buying, just picking a rental. And design wasn't as important as locating a comfortable, trouble-free ride.

Never mind the colors, either. He noted a little yellow one, probably a Japanese import, but there was a wide selection in white, black or brown. No sticker-prices, all that was a matter of bargaining, so he might as well be guided by the mood of the moment and indulge his whim.

Just what was his whim in women this evening?

How about that brassy blonde in the miniskirt riding up almost to her thighs? He watched as she strutted along the edge of the walk near the curb, eyeing the drivers and giving them an eyeful. Not his type, he decided. Not tonight, Josephine.

Hadn't heard anyone say that in years. *Not tonight, Josephine.* Now there was an oldie for you. A golden oldie, like the blonde, whose ravaged countenance was clearly and cruelly revealed as she came closer.

He avoided her glance, fixing his attention on the dark-haired girl who stood under a doorway, half in shadow, like a Rembrandt portrait. But there the resemblance ended. When she moved forward into the street he saw what shadow had partially concealed; the body of a woman, the face of a child, the eyes of a whore.

He hurried past her, then shrugged as he continued at a slower pace, reminding himself again that variations in age, build or complexion were unimportant. One size fits all. What difference did it make which woman he chose?

The answer stood on the corner, under the stoplight.

The light was orange. The smooth bare skin of her arms and shoulders was orange too.

The light was red. Her helmet of hair was red too.

The light was green. Under their long lashes, the eyes that stared at him were green.

Colorful. Changeable. And all illusion. Still, it added an element of diversion which might make things just a trifle easier. He didn't like what he was going to do, but that couldn't be helped. And after all, she was only a whore.

So the time had come to make his move. To walk slow and easy, talk slow and easy. Big smile now, that's the trick.

"Good evening," he said.

When the trick said hello she knew he was the one. She didn't like what she was going to do, but a girl has to eat. And after all, he was only a John.

Not a bad-looking one, either, she decided. Tall, dark and handsome, like they used to say in those late-night reruns of old movies. Regular movies, that is, not like the kind you got in motels. God, how many of those lousy porno flicks had she sat through? And why did so many Johns need them to turn on with? No wonder they had problems making it with the wife or girlfriend. But hey, don't knock it, if they didn't have problems she'd be out of business. And right now she needed business, needed it bad because of the way things had been going lately. But to Hell with *lately,* this is *now.* No yesterday, no tomorrow.

She flashed on all this while she was talking to the John, fast-talking, sweet-talking, double-talking, the same line she always handed out upfront to stall for time.

Thing is, you needed time to size up a trick before the deal went down. Maybe in the old days it was easier to go by appearances, like the kind of clothes a John wore. But now everybody tried to look like a slob, so you had to check out details; kind of shoes he had on, did he wear a drugstore watch or a good one, was there dirt under his nails?

Sometimes you could get a fix on the kind of car they drove, but a lot of creeps switched to some old junker when they had to purge the urge. Old cars and old clothes helped them poormouth you over the price, so it was up to you to spot phonies. Because the price was same as always—whatever the traffic would bear. Only this John didn't come with the traffic, not unless he was one of the real smartasses who parked down a side street and walked the rest of the way. Or maybe he'd come out of some motel around here, except he didn't look like the type who'd be staying in these roach-ranches. No tie, but wool dress slacks and a dark jacket; shirt underneath longsleeved, because the cuffs showed. Leather shoes, too, oxfords instead of those plastic slip-ons.

Everything added up—added up to maybe twenty, thirty dollars more than regular, plus a kickback from the motel if he didn't have a flop of his own. She didn't have a main man to look out for her now, so she'd damn well better look out for herself. Don’t go off the turf with a trick, don’t cab to his pad. Keep cool, fool.

No problem. Turned out all he wanted was great sex, nothing kinky, no side-order of fries. The price she set didn’t seem to bother him and yes, he’d pay upfront, soon as they registered. He left it to her to pick out a place, which is why the two of them ended up in that neat suite at the C’mon Inn.

The open closet space had four of those goddam hangers that don’t come off the rack, the curtains smelled of stale smoke, and the bed-lamp was broken, but no problem.

And no problem with the money. All in twenties, she noticed, it came out of a fancy billfold with a zipper. Initials stamped on in gold lettering but she couldn’t make them out because the bulb in the corner floor-lamp was too dim. And when he turned it off the only light came from outside the window where the neon sign flickered on and off. Off was black, on was blue, black and blue, jerk better not try beating on her, no S&M, just straight, right?

But he didn’t get out of line, just waited as she peeled her things off and stood beside the bed, first a black blur, then a bright blue body with burnished blue hair, blazing blue eyes.

He glanced up at her as he shed his clothes. “Blue angel,” he said.

“What?”

“The Blue Angel.” He pulled her down beside him. “Old movie. Saw it in Germany when it first came out. Before your time.”

She ran her eyes and hands over his lean, muscular frame. “Don’t con me. You aren’t all that old.”

“And you’re not that much of an angel. Appearances can be deceptive.” He chuckled as if what he’d just said was funny, but it wasn’t.

A frown creased her forehead and she creased it out quickly. But she might have known what to expect; these neat dressers were always the ones, talk your ear off if you let them. Okay, so she got paid to let them, only she didn’t have to like it. If it’s talk they wanted, why not spend their dough on phone-calls. Talk is for singles-bars. Way we do business here, buddy, is get it up, get it over with, and get out. That's how she liked it.

Only she didn't like it. And she hated him, hated all of them, talk or no talk. If it wasn't for one of them she wouldn't be here, but too late to worry about that now, all she could do was hate the whole stinking dirty lot—

"What are you thinking about?" he said.

"Nothing."

He smiled. "Man's question. Woman's answer."

Now he bent forward, searching her face, and his smile faded. Outside the window the neon eye blinked at them, its light sweeping over the moon of flesh suspended above her, searching minute craters and crevasses. Maybe he was older than she'd figured.

That part didn't bother her, but she was starting to feel a little edgy about the way he looked when he wasn't smiling. Those eyes of his were something else—every time the neon switched on he was staring at her, staring into her, deep, as if he could read her mind.

"Don't worry," she told him. "I'm okay."

"No you're not." His smile came back, but it was different now, like his voice; it belonged in the dark, not the flashing blue light. "You wish you weren't here, don't you?"

He *was* reading her mind! She couldn't find a smile for him now, and it was hard to even manage a voice. "I'm okay, I tell you."

"Don't he to me," he said. "And I won't he to you." He was staring, staring right through her. "If it's any consolation, I don't want to be here either. But at the moment, there's little choice." His voice deepened, and so did the blue flame in his eyes. "Like everyone else, my dear, there are times when our need takes us prisoner. We are all tied to the bedposts of life."

She felt his hatred then, just as he must feel hers, and it was in hatred now that they moved through the mimicry of love. It seemed to her that the light flashed on and off at a faster tempo in unison with their own.

There was no smile looming above her now and no frown, just the feral savagery of flaring nostrils and bared teeth as he rasped in rut. She closed her eyes to shut out the sight but she couldn’t shield herself from sensation, and when he merged pain with pleasure her eyes went wide for a moment, then clamped shut as her head fell back into darkness unbroken by fitful neon glare.

How long she lay there she didn’t know, but when at last her eyes opened again and awareness came, he was gone.

No trace of pleasure remained, but with the coming of awareness, pain returned. Involuntarily her fingers rose to graze across her throat and came away stained with a trickle of bluish ooze in the momentary flicker of light.

Blood. That’s what it was. The old John had bitten her in the neck. And now she remembered when it had happened, when she felt the pain and opened her eyes and the blue light winked on and she stared up over his shoulder at the dressing-table on the far side of the room to see herself as she lay there on the bed. Lay there alone, because he cast no reflection in the mirror.

She’d blacked out from shock then, but at the recollection she started to laugh and couldn’t stop; it felt as though she’d never stop until she was dead. Only now she would never die, any more than he could. And both of them would share their pain forever.

He, of course, was a vampire.

And she had AIDS.

The Creative Urge

The typing started.

"What are we doing here?" she murmured.

"Shouldn't we have thought about that before?" he asked.

"When do you mean?"

"Like back on page twenty-seven."

"You must be kidding! We had other things to do there," she said.

"Look, we don't have to do anything we don't want to."

"Oh really? We've no say-so in the matter!"

"One of *those."* He sighed. "Then you believe there's some kind of Author writing this whole thing?"

She nodded. "Of course. Somebody had to create us, didn't He?"

"How do you know it's a *He?* Or even a *She,* for that matter? If there is such a thing as an Author, what makes you so certain we're created in the same image?"

"Because the Author understands us. He knows our thoughts, our feelings—"

"But they're *our* thoughts, *our* feelings. And if the Author does write about us, that doesn't mean He or She *cares* what happens. Or even knows what's *going* to happen."

She frowned. "You're saying there's no plot, He just makes it up as He goes along?"

"Why not? When you come right down to it, what are we? Just a combination of keyboard letters imprinted on paper."

"But there's a pattern to what we do! And if there's a pattern, there must be a purpose behind it."

"Not necessarily. For all we know, we're merely the result of random selection, individual alphabet-groupings which have no reason for being except the whim of the Author."

"Whim?" Her frown deepened. "What about moral responsibility for our welfare?"

"His responsibility ends with the act of creation."

"It's destruction I'm afraid of."

His eyes narrowed. "Then watch what you're saying. Remember, Authors are jealous, suspicious, insecure. They need constant encouragement from editors, flattering blurbs and reviews, praise from readers."

"They?" Her voice faltered. "You actually believe there can be more than one?"

"Thousands of them, each with a devoted following." He spoke slowly. "But of course belief in an Author, even worship, doesn't prove anything. For all we know, maybe there is no Author at all. Typed or computerized, we're still just the products of a mechanical process, and perhaps it's the machine itself that created us."

"Someone must operate the machine."

"Suppose it operates automatically?"

"Then where does the power come from?"

"Electrical energy." He shrugged. "Does it matter?"

"It does to me." She hesitated. "And there *is* an Author. I know, because I've heard Him."

"Heard?"

"I'm sure of it. Sometimes when I'm lying here on the page, waiting for what's going to happen next, I become aware of a voice that seems to come from high above, past the light. I don't understand the message but I'm positive I’ve heard it speak my name. I get a feeling the Author might be talking to Himself, debating what’s right for me to do.”

“Why should He be concerned about you? What’s right for Him is all that counts.”

“I’m talking about Good and Evil.”

“And in capital letters, too!” He chuckled derisively. “Don’t you understand? The only thing the Author cares about is what makes the story work. Work for *Him,* not His characters. Which means we can be rewarded without reason, punished without reason—at least no reason we might comprehend. Because there is no such thing as *Good,* no such thing as *Evil.”*

“I can’t go along with that. The Author is Good!”

“How do you know? Just because you think you heard a voice speaking your name?”

“I *did* hear Him.”

“But you’ve never seen Him.”

“Nobody has. He lives on another plane, and we poor two-dimensional beings can’t hope to—”

He scowled. “Why did you stop?”

“I don’t know. I get a feeling that the Author doesn’t want us to talk about such things.”

“You mean, wondering if He’s Good or Evil?” He shook his head. “If the Author is Good then He’d have no reason to hide Himself from us. But if He were Evil—”

She glanced up. “Now you stopped in the middle of a sentence.”

“Not of my own accord. Maybe He thought there was too much dialogue.” He lowered his voice to a whisper. “No, you’re right. He doesn’t want us to talk about Him.”

“Then let’s stop.” She forced a smile. “What use is there in arguing about whether the Author is Good or Evil?”

He shrugged. “None. Even if you’re right, we’d still have to see Him in order to know.”

"But we *can't* see Him."

"There you go with that old two-dimensional theory again! Everybody accepts it without question, so nobody tries to get around it. I have a feeling that if we really wanted to, perhaps we *could* see the Author. We know He's up there, and you believe you've even heard His voice. I say that if we have the courage to lift our eyes from the page, perhaps we could find His face. If there is an Author."

"I say there is, and He is Good."

"Then let's find out once and for all. No more taking things on faith. We'll see for ourselves. Look up, if you dare."

She blinked. "The light is so bright. Like staring into the sun—"

"Look past it. Above, into the distance." He was staring upwards too.

"See! There *is* something. Way, way beyond."

"Clouds?"

"Not clouds. Hands. Hands with curling fingers. Moving up and down, up and down. And above them, even higher—a face. Hard to make it out, but there's something familiar—"

"Yes, I see it too." She nodded, then gasped. "Now I recognize Him! He's—"

Just in time.

Just in time the typing stopped. The pages, shredded into a thousand pieces, were crumpled into a globular mass and tossed away.

Then, seating himself once again, the Devil began to create yet another world.

1993

The Legacy

Robert Bloch (1917—) has also been a prolific contributor to TV horror anthologies from Alfred Hitchcock Presents *in the Sixties by way of* Thriller, Journey to the Unknown, Night Gallery, Darkroom, Tales from the Darkside *and the most recent,* Monsters, *which premiered on Cable TV in 1988. His name, though, is inextricably linked with that of Hitchcock, for it was after buying the rights to Bob's novel,* Psycho *(1959), and producing the classic shock film which ensured them both a place in cinema history, that Hitch offered the Chicago-born writer a chance to work on his television series. The invitation opened the doors of Hollywood to Bloch, who had actually begun his writing career some years earlier in the late Thirties by emulating the bizarre stories of H.P. Lovecraft–with whom he had corresponded–in the pages of the pulp magazine* Weird Tales. *This film break lead to a constant stream of TV and work and there has been many a television episode in the last quarter of a century which has been enlivened by his black humour and devilish imagination.*

Monsters*–a concept not unlike that devised by Nigel Kneale with* Beasts*–was co-produced by Richard P. Rubinstein and Mitchel Gatlin, and aimed to offer viewers a new and different creature each week. 'Our defininon of creature is pretty broad,' Rubinstein explained when the series began, 'and the stories will range from arch comedy to the Gothic. They'll be scary, too, like those in* Tales from the Darkside.*' Among the writers featured in the series of half-hour episodes have been Stephen King, Manly Wade Wellman, William Nolan and, of course, Robert Bloch. Amongst Bob's contributions that have already been screened are 'Everybody Needs a Little Love', 'A*

Case of the Stubborns', 'Mannikins of Horror' and 'The Legacy'. This last story, which Mitchel Gatlin directed with Eddie Bracken and Matthew Engell, has a special place in Bob's affections because his life-long interest in horror stemmed from a visit as a child to the cinema where he saw the 1925 Lon Chaney version of The Phantom of the Opera. *He was, he recalls, terrified and fascinated by the face that glowered at him from the screen. The story of 'The Legacy', upon which the episode in* Monsters *was based, contains more than a little of that same terror and fascination to which he owes a lifetime of creativity in films and on television. It also, I believe, offers a gripping finale to this collection. So, Goodnight . . . sleep well!*

NOBODY thought Dale was crazy until the trouble started.

True, he'd been a film buff ever since he was a kid, the way other youngsters sometimes get hung-up on baseball, football, or even chess. If they follow their hobby into adult life such interests can become an obsession, yet no one thinks it's a sign of insanity.

In Dale's case his studies led him into teaching a course on film history at the university, which seemed sensible enough. Certainly he appeared to be normal; he wasn't one of those wimpy professors seen in comedy films aimed at the junk-food generation.

Actually Dale was rather attractive. Debbie Curzon thought so. She was a newscaster on local radio where she met and interviewed many of the stud celebrities in sports or films; Dale must have had some *charisma* for her to choose him as a lover.

The two of them might have ended up together on a permanent basis if Dale hadn't leased the Chaney house.

That's what the realtor called it–'the Chaney house'–although Dale couldn't verify the claim and the ancient escrow was clouded. The place was really just a small cottage halfway up Nichols Canyon in the Hollywood hills. Huddled amidst a tangle of trees and underbrush on a dirt side-road which turned to quicksand during the rainy season, the weatherbeaten frame dwelling offered no exterior charm or interior comfort. Debbie's reluctance to share it was understandable, but once he found it Dale couldn't wait to move in.

'All right, do as you please,' Debbie told him. 'If that dump is more important to you than sharing a brand-new condo with me -'

'It's not just a dump,' Dale protested. 'This is the *Chaney* house. Can't you understand?'

'Frankly, no. What makes you want to hole up in a place like this just because some dumb actor may or may not have hung out here sixty years ago?'

'Lon Chaney wasn't dumb,' Dale said. 'He happens to be one of the finest performers in silent films, perhaps the greatest of them all.'

'Who cares?' Debbie's voice honed to a cutting-edge. 'I just hope your wonderful Mr Chaney knows how to cook and is good in bed, because from now on you'll be living with him, not me.'

It was open warfare, but Dale found no weapon to pierce the armour of feminine logic. In the end Debbie told him to bug off, and he had no choice but to obey the entomological injunction.

A week later Dale moved into the Chaney house and by then everybody thought he'd flipped out. Turning down a renewal of his teaching contract now at the end of the fall semester meant losing his chance at tenure, and that certainly was a crazy decision, because he gave no reason for leaving.

But Dale knew exactly what he was going to do. He would vindicate himself in the eyes of Debbie and the academic world by writing a Hollywood history of his own—a definitive work which would answer the questions which lurked behind the legends. Who killed William Desmond Taylor, and why? Did Thomas Ince meet his death because of illness or was it murder? What really kept Garbo from returning to the screen? Had there been cover-ups in the case of Thelma Todd or Marilyn Monroe? So much had been surmised, so little verified. And for a starter, he meant to solve the Chaney mystery.

Of all the stars of silent films, Lon Chaney was by far the most mysterious. There were books on his films but no full-length biographies except for a reporter's inaccurate magazine series following Chaney's untimely death from cancer in 1930. Chaney's first wife died without breaking silence and his second left no memoir. His son Creighton, who later changed his name to Lon Chaney, Jr., was estranged from his father for many years and avoided painful memories. To this day Chaney's private life remains an enigma. 'Between pictures,' he told reporters, 'there is no Lon Chaney.'

The coincidence of moving into one of the actor's former residences challenged Dale. Come what may, he meant to learn Lon Chaney's secret.

But first there were more practical questions to deal with. Once furniture arrived and utilities were installed, he had to renovate his surroundings. The cottage had been unoccupied for many years—no wonder the realtor offered him such a bargain rental–and it was time for a thorough housecleaning.

So Dale called an agency and secured the services of a Hispanic lady named Juanita. She was short, plump, but surprisingly strong; perched on a rickety ladder she scrubbed away at the ceiling and side-walls, then descended to attack the floors with mop and brush. And on the second day she made her discovery.

Finishing up her work, she cleared out old boxes and empty cartons from the bedroom closet. The last carton, wedged in back under a jumble of debris, was not entirely empty.

'Look what I find,' Juanita said, holding up her trophy for Dale's inspection.

He took the tin box from her, hefting it with both hands. Then he lifted the lid and his eyes widened.

'What is it?' Juanita asked.

The box was empty but its interior was divided into a number of small compartments lined with smudged cloth. And the underside of the lid was covered by a mirror.

'Some kind of a kit,' Dale said.

It was hard to keep his voice from quavering, hard to conceal rising excitement as he paid and dismissed Juanita. When she left, Dale picked up the box again and now his hands were trembling. His hands, holding Lon Chaney's makeup kit.

Dale had seen publicity stills of Chaney displaying a different and much larger kit with side-trays, so this obviously wasn't the only one. What made it unique was that this box was here, in Chaney's secret hideaway.

Or was it?

Dale forced himself to face facts. In spite of the realtor's claim, he couldn't be certain that Lon Chaney ever lived here. For all he knew, the kit might have belonged to any one of a thousand actors residing in these hills when Hollywood was young.

What Dale needed was proof. And staring at the bottom of the box, he found it.

Wedged against the base was a coil of paper, a small square scrap which must have peeled off after being pasted below the mirror. Dale picked it up, smoothed it out, then read aloud the lettering typed across its surface.

'Property of Leonidas Chaney.'

Leonidas!

This was proof and no mistake. While the general public knew the actor as Lon and most filmographies listed his first name as Alonzo, Dale was one of the few aware that the star's birth-certificate identified him as Leonidas.

Chaney, born on April Fool's Day, had fooled his public. And considering his passion for privacy it seemed odd he'd put his real name here. But perhaps he'd fixed on his deception later in his career. Dale's inspection told him that this battered box was old, perhaps dating back to pre-Hollywood days when Chaney was a struggling actor in travelling shows. Could this actually be his very first makeup kit?

One thing seemed certain–Chaney had lived here. But when?

Dale pondered the question as he sat in gathering darkness alone, with the makeup kit on the table before him.

From what little he knew, Chaney's homes were modest by Hollywood standards, even after he attained stardom, but he would never have settled his family here. Which left only one other plausible answer.

Suppose this place was really a hideaway, a place his family didn't know about, a place he came to secretly and alone? According to publicity he did have a cabin up in the mountains where he went fishing between films. Could it be that he actually spent some of that time here, perhaps even without his wife's knowledge?

And if so, why? Dale quickly dismissed the notion of a secret lovelife; Chaney was never a womanizer, and even had he been, this was hardly the setting for a romantic rendezvous. Nor was he a closet alcoholic or drug-addict. In any case there'd be no reason for him to keep a makeup kit hidden here.

Dale leaned forward, peering at the box through the twilight shadows which fell across its murky mirror.

But the mirror wasn't murky now. As he stared, something in the mirror stared back.

For a moment Dale thought it was his own face, distorted by a flash of fading sunlight amidst the coming of the dark. Even so, he realized that what he saw was not a reflection. There was another face, a face in the mirror, a ghastly white face with painted features that glowed and grinned.

With a shock he realized what it was–the face of a clown. And before Dale's widened eyes the face was melting, changing, so that now a second clown loomed leering out at him–cheeks spotted with paint and tufts of hair suddenly sprouting above a bony brow.

Dale turned, seeking a glimpse of someone else, some intruder who must have stolen silently into the bedroom to stare over his shoulder.

But save for himself the room was empty. And when his eyes sought the mirror again the face—or faces—had vanished. All he saw now was his own face reflected in the glass, its features fading in the dark.

Dale rose, stumbling across the room to switch on the overhead light. In its welcome glare he saw the makeup box and the perfectly ordinary mirror mounted within.

The clown-images were gone. They had existed only in his imagination–or was it his memory? For there had been two clowns in Chaney's life.

Hastily Dale sought his bookshelves, fumbling and finding the volume containing Lon Chaney's filmography. He riffled through it until a page fell open upon a photograph of the actor in the title role of *He Who Gets Slapped.* And now it was Dale who felt the slap of recognition. The picture showed the face of the first clown he'd seen in the mirror.

Turning pages, he located the still photo of another clown with daubed cheeks and patches of hair clumped on the bone-white skull. Chaney again, in *Laugh, Clown, Laugh.*

But there was no mirth in the painted face, and none in Dale's as he banged the book shut and left the room. Left the room, left the cottage, left the canyon to drive down to the shelter and sanity of lighted streets below.

He parked on Fairfax and entered a restaurant, taking comfort in its crowded quarters and the presence of a friendly waitress who urged him to try tonight's special. But when his order came he had no appetite for it.

Tonight had already been too special for him, and he couldn't forget his confrontation at the cottage. Had he really glimpsed those faces in the mirror, or had the images been evoked from memories of the films seen in retrospective showings long ago? A mirror is just a sheet of silvered glass, and what it reflected must have come from his mind's eye.

Dale forced himself to eat and gradually the tension ebbed. By the time he finished and drove back up the canyon his composure returned.

Inside the cottage the lights still blazed upon commonplace surroundings, safeguarding against shadows and dispelling doubts. If Chaney had lived here at all, that time was long-gone and the actor himself was long-dead. There were no ghosts, and the box on the bedroom table was merely an old makeup kit, not a miniature haunted house.

For a moment Dale had an impulse to lift the lid and examine the mirror for added reassurance, then dismissed it. There was no point in dignifying his apprehensions; what he needed was a good night’s sleep and a clear head for to-morrow.

Truth to tell, he felt drained after the emotional stress of the day, and once he undressed and sought his bed Dale quickly fell into dreamless slumber.

Just when the change occurred he did not know, but there was a change, and the dream came.

In the dream he found himself awakened, sitting up in bed and staring through darkness at the black blur of the box on the table. And now the impulse he’d rejected upon entering the bedroom returned with an urgency he could not deny.

Sometimes dreams seem oddly like films—movies of the mind in which one’s own movements are silently commanded by an unseen director–a series of jump-cuts and sudden shifts in which one is both actor and audience.

Thus it was that Dale both felt and saw himself rise from the bed, captured in a full shot as he moved across the room. Now a cut to another angle, showing him poised above the makeup kit. Then came a close shot of his hand moving down to raise the lid.

Moonlight from the window sent a silvery shaft to strike the surface of the makeup mirror, flooding it with a blinding brightness that seethed and stirred.

Faces formed in the glass—contoured countenances which seemed frighteningly familiar, even in the depths of dream. Faces changed, and yet there was a lurking linkage between them, for all were oriental.

Some Dale had seen before only in photographs–the evil Chinaman from the lost film *Bits of Life,* the benevolent laundryman in *Shadows.* Then, in rapid shifts, the vengeful mandarin of *Mr Wu,* the bespectacled elderly image of Wu’s father, and a final, frightening glimpse of the chinless, sunken cheeked, shrivelled face of the aged grandfather. They formed and faded, smiling their secret smiles.

Now others appeared–the two pirates, Pew and Merry, from *Treasure Island,* a bearded Fagin out of *Oliver Twist,* followed by figures looming full-length in the mirror's depths. Here were the fake cripples of *The Miracle Man, The Blackbird, Flesh and Blood.* Then the real cripple of *The Shock* and the legless Blizzard in *The Penalty.* Now came a derby-hatted gangster, a French-Canadian trapper, a tough sergeant of Marines, a scarred animal-trapper, an elderly railroad engineer, and Echo, the ventriloquist of *The Unholy Three.*

In his dream Dale stood frozen before the glass as faces flashed forth in faster flickerings–the faces of madmen. Here was a crazed waxmuseum attendant, a bearded victim of senile delusions, a deranged Russian peasant, the insane scientists of *A Blind Bargain* and *The Monster.* They were laughing at him, grinning in glee as Dale closed his eyes, hands clawing out to close the lid of the makeup kit.

Then he staggered back to the bed. There were no images here, only the darkness, and Dale fell into it, fleeing the faces and seeking surcease in sleep.

It was morning when Dale's eyes blinked open, welcoming the sanity of sunlight. He stirred, conscious now that last night had been a dream, knowing he'd seen nothing in the mirror; indeed, he had never even left his bed.

As he rose he glanced over at the box resting on the table, remembering how he'd closed it in reality before retiring, then closed it again in his nightmare.

But now the lid was up.

For a moment Dale recoiled, fighting the irrational explanation until sunlight and common sense prevailed.

The makeup kit was old, its hinges worn or even sprung. Sometime during the night the catch must have loosened and the lid popped up.

It was a logical answer, but even so he had to force himself toward the table, steel himself to gaze down into the mirror set inside the lid and gaze on what was reflected there.

Sunshine formed a halo around the image in its glassy surface–the image of his own face.

And as his features formed a smile of rueful relief, Dale turned away. The mirror in the makeup kit held no terrors for him now, any more than the one he faced as he shaved. He dressed and sought the makeshift kitchen, taking comfort in the familiar ritual of preparing his breakfast, then eating eggs and toast with a copy of the morning *Times* propped up before his coffee-cup. Even the news offered an odd comfort of its own–the familiar headlines and stories of wars, terrorist bombings, political corruption, street crime, drug-busts, accidents, epidemics, natural and unnatural disasters that filled the newspaper pages. However grim, these were realities; realities which he and everyone else in the world faced with fortitude born of long familiarity. They had nothing to do with the unhealthy fantasies which took form when Lon Chaney stalked the screen—fantasies which existed now only in Dale's imagination.

Glancing at his watch, he folded the paper and rose quickly. There was a busy day ahead, and time was already running short.

Leaving the cottage, he drove down to Hollywood Boulevard, turned right, then made a left on Fairfax. He reached Wilshire and headed west, weaving through noonday traffic until he found a parking-space before the imposing structure of the Motion Picture Academy of Arts and Sciences.

Here, upstairs in the Margaret Herrick Library, he turned his attention to the files he requested. Lon Chaney wasn't the only movie monster he meant to deal with in his projected history; there was research to be done on other stars of the horror film. And unlike the case with Chaney, there was ample material on men like Karloff, Lorre and Lugosi.

But even as he scribbled notes Dale found something lacking in the interviews and biographical data of these celebrated actors who seemingly made no mystery of their careers.

The one missing element common to all was that of explanation. Why had a gentle gentleman like Boris ended up playing monsters? What led Peter Lorre, the rabbi's grandson, to the portrayal of psychopaths? How did

Bela Lugosi, who played parts ranging from Romeo to Jesus Christ in early European appearances, transform himself into the dreaded Count Dracula?

William Henry Pratt, Laszlo Loewenstein, Bela Blasko–all three men had changed their names, but what had changed their natures?

Dale found no answer in the files, but the last item he read before leaving the Academy offered a hint. It was an interview with an actress who toured with Lugosi in *Dracula.*

She told of how the genial cigar-smoking Hungarian prepared for his famous role, sitting before his dressing-room mirror and donning the costume and makeup of the vampire. But that was only a preliminary to performing. The next and most crucial step came as he rose, wrapped in the black cape, face contorted and eyes blazing. As he confronted himself in the mirror his deep voice invoked an incantation. 'I am Dracula,' he intoned. 'I am Dracula. I am Dracula.' Over and over again he repeated the words, and by the time he strode out upon the stage the words became reality. Lugosi was Dracula.

'He psyched himself up,' the actress explained. And as the years passed, a part of him became the part he played; when he died he was buried in Dracula's cape, with Dracula's ring on his finger.

Dale jotted down his notes, then hurried out into the afternoon sunshine. Now it was time to drive into Beverly Hills for a medical appointment.

It had been made a month ago, just an annual checkup, as a matter of routine. But now, as he arrived and took a seat in the crowded waiting-room, Dale felt uptight. He felt no worry about possible physical illness, but what about psychological stress? Last night's dreams might be a symptom of mental disturbance. What if Dr Pendleton told him he was cracking up?

By the time the receptionist called his name and a nurse led him to the examining-room he knew his pulse was pounding and his blood-pressure had risen. So it came as a pleasant surprise when the doctor made no comment on his readings other than remarking he thought Dale was underweight and seemed overtired. Reports on blood-tests and urine-specimen would be available in a few days, but nothing indicated cause for concern.

‘Slow down a little,’ Dr Pendleton said. ‘Pace yourself. And it won’t hurt if you put on a few pounds.’

Armed with that advice Dale left. Relieved, he headed for a seafood restaurant on Brighton Way and there he ordered and actually enjoyed his meal. The doctor was probably right, Dale decided; he *had* been working too hard, and the tension flaring up after his break with Debbie took an added toll. He resolved to follow orders, rest and relax. Then, perhaps, it might be possible to come to terms with himself, and with Debbie too. He really missed her, missed the hours they spent together, and the breach must be mended. All in good time.

As Dale left the restaurant he sensed a change in the air; the chill breeze hinted at rain and a muted murmur of distant thunder confirmed its coming.

The first drops spattered the windshield as he turned onto the canyon side-road, and by the time he parked in the driveway a flicker of lightning heralded the downpour that followed. Dale hurried into the cottage beneath the wind-tossed trees. Once inside he flipped the light-switches as he moved from room to room. It was only upon reaching the bedroom that he halted when its overhead light came on.

Standing in the doorway he stared at the open makeup box on the table, forehead furrowed in doubt.

Hadn’t he closed the lid before he left? Dale shrugged in uncertainty. Perhaps the loose catch was the culprit once again; he’d better examine it and put his mind to rest.

Rain drummed the rooftop in a faster tempo and lightning flashed outside the window as he crossed to the table. Then, as he reached it, a clap of thunder shook the walls and the lights went off, overhead and throughout the cottage.

Power-outages were not uncommon hereabouts during a storm and Dale wasn’t alarmed; perhaps the lights would come back on in a moment. He waited, but the darkness persisted and prevailed. Maybe he’d better look for his flashlight.

Then its illumination was unnecessary as the lightning-bolt struck somewhere close outside the window, filling the bedroom with a greenish glare. As it did so Dale peered down at the mirror inside the lid of the makeup kit and froze.

The reflection peering up at him was not his own.

It was the face of Singapore Joe–the role Chaney played in *The Road to Mandalay*–the half-blind man whose left eye was covered with a ghastly white cast.

But the image seemed strangely blurred; Dale blinked to clear his vision as lightning faded and the room plunged into darkness again.

Dale’s shudder wasn’t prompted by the roar of thunder. It was what he’d seen that traumatized him. *The Road to Mandalay* was one of the lost films; he knew of no print in existence. But Singapore Joe existed, in the mirror, existed in an indelible image leering up at him through the dark.

And the dark must be dispelled. Dale turned and blundered his way into the hall. Reaching the kitchen he stooped and opened the cabinet beneath the sink. Lightning outside the kitchen window came to his aid and in its moment of livid life he found and grasped the flashlight. It was not just an ordinary cylinder-type but one which terminated in a square base, projecting a strong beam of almost lantern-like intensity.

Dale switched it on, and the ray guided him back to the bedroom. As he walked his relief faded with the realization that his vision had faded too.

He was seeing only with his right eye now. The left was blind. Blind—like the eye of Singapore Joe.

You’re having a nightmare, he told himself. But he wasn’t asleep, and if there was a nightmare it had to be in the mirror of the makeup kit. Unless, of course, he was hallucinating.

There was only one way to find out, and Dale knew what he must do. Rain swept across the rooftop above, doors creaked and groaned against the onslaught of the wind, lightning glimmered, thunder growled. Only the light he gripped in his hand was reassurance; a magic lantern to protect him on his way. *Magic lantern*–that's what they called the movies in the old days. Was there such a thing as magic?

Forcing himself toward the bedroom table, he gazed down at the glass reflected in the lantern-light.

Half-blind he stared, but what he saw with his right eye was just a mirror after all. A shining surface reflecting his own familiar face.

And now his left eye cleared and he could see again. Dale took a deep breath, then expelled it hastily—for now the mirror blurred and a piercing pain shot through his lower limbs, causing him to crouch. Something pressed heavily against his spine, bowing his back.

He was changing, and the image in the mirror was changing too. He saw the tousled hair, the gargoyle grimace, the twisted limbs, the body bent beneath the hideous hump. No need to ask the identity of this image–he was gazing at Quasimodo, the Hunchback of Notre Dame.

It was Chaney he saw in the glass but he himself felt the weight of the hump, the constriction of the harness binding it to his body, the pain inflicted by the mass of makeup covering his face, the jagged teeth wired into his mouth, the mortician's wax masking his right eye.

Realization brought relief. It was makeup, and only makeup after all. Gradually the image diffused and Dale's feeling of physical restraint faded until once again he stood erect.

Thunder rolled as the image dispelled. Dale sighed with relief; now was the time to slam down the lid of the kit once and for all.

He started to reach for it, but his hands were gone.

His hands–and his arms.

Illusion, of course, like the illusion of Chaney's face and form coming into focus beneath the mirror's shiny surface. Dale's eyes met those of the visage peering out at him from under the broad brim of a Spanish sombrero. Chaney was armless, and now Dale felt the agony of numbed circulation, the constriction of his own arms bound against his body by a tight, concealing corset. That, he remembered, had been Chaney's device when portraying the armless knife-thrower in *The Unknown.*

With the recollection his panic ebbed, and once more features and form receded into the mirror's depths. The numbness was gone from his arms now; he could lift his hands and close the lid.

Then he fell.

His legs gave way and he slumped to the floor, sprawling helplessly, the box on the table beyond his reach. All he could do was elevate his gaze, see the shaven-headed creature crawling across the glass, dead legs dragging behind him. It was Phroso, the paralysed cripple in *West of Zanzibar.*

No makeup had been involved in the simulation of the man who had lost the use of his lower limbs; it had been Chaney's artistry which made the role seem reality.

Knowing that, Dale strove to rise, but there was no feeling in his legs–he couldn't command them. The face in the mirror glowered at him in the lamplight, bursting into brightness as lightning flashed outside the window. The eyes were mocking him, mocking his plight, and now Dale realized that the mirror's monsters sensed his purpose and were summoned to prevent it. Their appearance in the mirror gave them life, his awareness gave them strength to survive, and that strength was growing. Closing the kit would condemn them to darkness and it was this they fought against. They knew he couldn't close the lid, not if he were blind, armless, or paralysed.

Frantically Dale balanced himself on the palm of his left hand, extending his right arm upward, inching to the table-top. Then his fingers gripped the lid of the makeup kit, wrenching it down. With a rasp of rusty hinges the box slammed shut.

The mirror disappeared from view, but Dale's paralysis persisted. Try as he would, he couldn't raise himself. All he could do was wriggle, wriggle across the floor like a snake with a broken back, and lever his arms against the side of the bed. Pulling his body upward, he lifted himself, gasping with effort, then collapsed upon the cool sheets which dampened with the sweat of fear pouring from his fevered forehead.

Fever. That was the answer; it had to be. The doctor was wrong in his diagnosis. Dale was coming down with something, something that twisted mind and body. Labelling it psychosomatic brought no relief.

Dale rolled over to face the telephone resting on the night-stand beside the bed. If he could reach it he could call the paramedics. But as his hand moved forward he felt a sudden tingling in his legs, then kicked out with both feet. The paralysis, real or imaginary, was gone.

No reason to summon paramedics now, but he still needed help. In the dim light cast by the flash-lantern standing on the table across the room he dialled Dr Pendleton's number. The ringing on the line gave way to the mechanical message of an answering-service.

'Dr Pendleton is not in. Please leave your name and number and he will get back to you—'

Dale cradled the receiver, frowning in frustration. Sure, the doctor would get back to him, perhaps in an hour, maybe two or three. And then what?

How could he explain all this? If he minimized his condition he'd get that take-two-aspirins-and-call-me-in-the-morning routine. And if he came on too strong the doctor would probably order up an ambulance on his own. Pendleton was a practitioner of modern medicine; he wouldn't come out in the storm to make a house-call merely to humour a hysterical patient with his presence.

But Dale had to have someone's presence here, someone to talk to, someone like—

'Debbie?'

He'd dialled her number automatically, and now the very sound of her voice brought relief.

'Dale! I was hoping you'd call.'

Then she *did* care. Thank God for that! He listened intently as the warmth of her response gave way to concern.

'What's wrong? Are you sick or something?'

‘Something,’ Dale said. ‘That is, I’m not sure. No, I can’t explain it on the phone. If you could just come over—’

‘Tonight? In all this rain?’

‘Debbie, please. I know it’s asking a lot, but I need you. I need you now —’

‘And I need you.’ Debbie sighed. ‘All right. Give me half an hour.’

The phone went dead, but as he replaced the receiver Dale came alive again. She was coming and he’d told the truth; he did need her, needed her desperately.

Listening, he realized the rain was slowing. It was a good sign. Perhaps by the time she arrived the storm would be over and they could talk without the punctuation of thunder. He’d tell her what had happened, make her understand.

But just what *had* happened–and why?

Dale rolled over on his back, staring at the shadows on the ceiling, facing up to the shadows surrounding the question in his own mind.

And the answer came.

He’d found it today at the Academy, found it when he read the actress’s description of Bela Lugosi preparing for his portrayal.

‘He psyched himself up.’ That was her explanation of how Lugosi became Dracula, and that was what Lon Chaney must have done.

No wonder he’d established a secret hideaway! Here, in this very room, he did more than experiment with physical disguise. Dale pictured him sitting alone on a night like this, creating contrivances to deform his body, refashioning his face, staring into the mirror at the creature reflected there. And then, the final transformation.

‘Make up your mind.’ A figure of speech, but Chaney had given it a literal application, one beyond the mere application of makeup from his kit. Seated here in the shadowed silence, this man of mystery–this son of deaf-mute parents whom he communicated with through the power of pantomime–confronted the reflections of monsters in the mirror and whispered the words. ‘I am the Frog. I am Blizzard. I am Dr Ziska, Sergei, Alonzo the Armless, the Blackbird, Mr Wu.’ Each time a different incarnation, each time a new *persona,* each time a litany repeated hour after hour from midnight to dawn, willing himself into the role until the role became reality.

And psyching himself up, he’d psyched-up the mirror too. The intensity of total concentration had been captured in the glass forever, just as it was later captured on the blank surface of nitrate film used for silent pictures. The filmed images decayed in time but the makeup kit mirror preserved Chaney’s psychic power forever—a long-latent power revived by Dale’s own glimpses into the glass, a power that grew greater with each succeeding gaze.

Dale remembered the first apparitions–how fleetingly they appeared and how little effect they had beyond the initial shock of recognition. It was his repeated viewing which gave strength to the shifting shapes until they transformed his body into a semblance of what he saw.

But he wouldn’t repeat the mistake. From now on the makeup kit would remain closed and he’d never look into that mirror again.

The rain had ended now and so had his fear. Thunder and lightning gave way to a calm matching his own. Knowing the truth was enough; he wouldn’t repeat all this to Debbie or try to convince her. Instead he’d just tell how much he needed her, and that was true too.

But first he must dispose of the kit.

Dale shifted himself over to the side of the bed, sitting up and swinging his feet to the floor. The power-outage hadn’t ended; he’d shut the kit away in the closet, then take the flash-lantern with him and guide Debbie up the path when she arrived.

All was quiet as he crossed the room to the table where the lanternlight shone on the closed box beside it. That’s what the kit was, really; just a battered old box. Lon Chaney’s box–Pandora’s box, which opened for evils to emerge. But not to worry; the lid was down and it would stay down forever.

His hand went to the flash-lantern.

At least that was his intention, until he felt the chill of cold metal at his fingertips and found them fixed upon the lid of the makeup kit.

He tried to pull away but his hand remained fixed, fixed by a force commanding his movement and his mind, a power he could not control.

It was the power that raised the lid of the box, a power that seethed and surged, and in the uptilted mirror he saw its source.

Two eyes blazed from a face surmounted by a beaver hat and framed by matted hair; a face that grinned to display the cruel, serrated teeth. But it was from the cruel eyes that the power poured–the burning eyes of the vampire in *London After Midnight.* Dale knew the film, though he'd never seen a print; knew its original title was *The Hypnotist.* And it was a hypnotist who glared up at him, a hypnotist's power which had compelled him to open the box and stand transfixed now by the vision in the glass.

Then suddenly the face was fading and for a moment Dale felt a glimmer of hope. But as the face disappeared into the mirror's distorted depths, another face took form.

It was a face Dale knew only too well, one which had lain buried in his brain since childhood when he'd first seen it fill the screen from behind a ripped-away mask. The face of madness, the face of Death incarnate, the face of Chaney's supreme horror; the face of Erik in *The Phantom of the Opera,*

No wonder he'd blotted out all memory of the terror which tormented his nightmares as a child, the terror he'd hidden away in adulthood but which still survived in his unconscious. It was suppressed fear that lay behind his inexplicable interest in Lon Chaney, a fright disguised as fascination which guided him to this ultimate, inevitable confrontation with the gaping fangs, the flaring nostrils, the bulging eyes of a living skull.

The Phantom stared and Dale felt the flooding force of the death's-head's overwhelming power, to which he responded with a power of his own, born of utter dread.

For an instant, for an eternity, his gaze locked with that of the monster and he realized a final fear. The face was looming larger, moving forward–

attempting to emerge from the mirror!

And then, with savage strength, Dale gripped the box in both hands, raising it high; panting, he dashed it down upon the floor. The makeup kit landed with a crash as the Phantom's image shattered into shards of splintered glass glinting up in the lantern-light.

Chaney's power was broken at last, and with it the power of the Phantom. Dale gasped, shuddering in relief as he felt full control return.

As the knocking sounded its summons he picked up the flashlantern and carried it with him down the hall to the front door. Debbie was here now, his hope, his angel of salvation. And he went to her proudly and unafraid because he was free of Chaney, free of the mirror's magic, free of the Phantom forever. This was the beginning of a new life, a life of love and beauty.

Dale opened the door and saw her standing there, smiling up at him. It was only when he lifted the lantern and Debbie saw his face that she began to scream.

It Takes One To Know One

Kevin Ames took the elevator to the thirty-fifth floor, thinking about earthquakes all the way. When he arrived his involuntary sigh of relief echoed along the carpeted corridor as Ames made his way to the double doors at the far end. Here he halted to read the gold-lettered legend identifying the offices of *Tischler, Tischler, Phelps, Obendorrf & Associates.*

This time his sigh was voluntary. It was easy for him to understand why attorneys band together; obviously there's safety in numbers. But why did they list so many names? Wouldn't it be simpler to assume a group identity, like *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves?*

Kevin Ames shrugged, then squared his shoulders, forced a smile and opened the right-hand half of the door guarding a reception area beyond.

Its decorous decor did little to put him at ease as he entered, and the matching receptionist behind a glass partition added no comfort to the occasion. Her prim lips parted in a smile of greeting usually reserved to welcome child-molesters at Disneyland.

"Good afternoon," he said. Apparently it wasn't, not for her anyway, because her smile went blank.

There was no change of expression in her unlifted face as he gave his name and received the *whom-did-you-wish-to-see?* routine in return. But when he answered that question her reaction was unmistakably evident.

"Mr. Tischler *senior?"* Her voice italicized her incredulity.

Ames nodded. "I have an appointment. For four-thirty."

“One moment, please.” There was a flicker of disbelief in her eyes—the kind of look you’d give someone who brings a doggie-bag to the Last Supper.

Concealing his impatience, he stood waiting as she turned to address the intercom. “Grace? Did he come in this afternoon? No, they didn’t say anything to me. Do you have something down about a four-thirty appointment? There’s a Mr.—”

“Ames. Kevin Ames.” His answer filled her pause, but he wasn’t really listening. He’d started taking inventory of her desk.

Not much to see, really. No papers, no pads; it all goes on tape or into computers nowadays. But there was still the bud vase with the single rose, always a single rose in a pricey office like this, and a single receptionist who wouldn’t be caught dead at a singles bar. At a certain age she still might or might not manage a face-tuck just to keep up appearances, but in any case or any age you could bet that her bra would always be a white one.

His speculation ceased abruptly as she switched off the intercom and addressed him. “Mr. Tischler will see you now, Mr. Ames.”

Did he imagine it or was there a new note of respect in her voice, a warmer current flowing under the ice? If so, the thaw was generated by Tischler’s name, not his.

Somewhere inside his skull, soundless queries emerged from cerebral silence. *Kevin? Kevin who? Never heard of him. What does he do?*

Practices anonymity, he responded, his answer as unvoiced as the question. That’s the nice thing about talking to yourself, you never have to worry about being heard. And you always get the last word. Come to think about it, writing was also a way of getting the last word. Perhaps that was one of the reasons he’d been attracted to such a career. Or, more accurately, a profession. People who remain anonymous after a lifetime of effort can hardly claim their futile efforts towards recognition actually constitute a career.

“Good God! Has it really been that long?”

This voice he actually heard, and it wasn't coming from inside his head but from here, inside the private office. The paneled, polished claustrophobic quarters of Danton Tischler, Sr., attorney-at-law to the great, the near-great and the ingrates of Greater Los Angeles.

The voice didn't sound in the least as he remembered it. A once-hearty baritone was now a cracked, almost falsetto whisper—*probably through falsetto teeth,* Ames reflected—which one might expect from an elderly man. But then, this was an elderly man speaking; the young Danny Tischler he'd once known wasn't an occupant of Century City, because Century City didn't even exist in those days. The young Danny lived in memory as the sole resident of a bungalow-courtyard law office somewhere out along the wilds of Ventura Boulevard, where Edgar Rice Burroughs still ruled Tarzana.

Just how long ago *had* that been? Ames didn't need to ask, for the old man was already providing the answer.

"Forty years," he murmured.

Impossible. But there it was, in black and white, on the upper left-hand corner tab of the file folder which Tischler tapped as he spoke. His fingers, Ames noted, were like breadsticks.

"That's right," Ames said. "Time flies when you're having fun."

Tischler glanced down at his breadstick fingers. "You call old age fun?"

Ames shrugged. "Perhaps it's all a matter of viewpoint. If you look at it another way, life is an ongoing obituary."

The elderly attorney managed a dry chuckle. "You should have been a philosopher instead of a writer."

"No percentage in it," Ames told him. "And I'm not just talking about money. Have you ever heard a pretty little girl say, 'When I grow up, I want to marry a philosopher' ?"

"So you went in for writing instead?"

"One of the reasons, I suppose. When you're young you think that way."

"Then how come you never married?"

"Because I grew up and stopped thinking that way."

“Any regrets?”

“I’m grateful just for having survived,” Ames said. “Regrets are for the others who didn’t make it.”

“You stayed friends over the years?”

Ames frowned. “I wish I could say that. Remember, we used to meet for lunch at that Chinese place in Sherman Oaks every week and talk shop? But then we started moving around, job to job. Before you know it you’ve lost touch. When I think of how close we were when all of us started out doing horror for the magazines—”

“Right.” Tischler’s glance strayed again to the folder before him. “That name you fellows picked—*The Skull Club.* Maybe you thought it was a gag back then, but it’s sure appropriate today.” He looked up abruptly. “Know something? I never expected you’d be the one.”

“I’m a little surprised myself,” Ames told him. “Maybe ‘shocked’ is a better word. At least that’s how I felt last week when I read about Jesse.”

“Hadn’t seen him lately?”

“No reason to. And you?”

“The same.” Tischler nodded. “I did send him an invite when we had the party to open the new offices here, but he didn’t show up. For that matter, neither did you.”

“Sorry, I was out of town.”

The breadstick fingers flicked in a gesture of dismissal. “No sweat. There was such a mob scene here that night I probably wouldn’t have spotted you. Everybody who wasn’t out of town came running for the free Dom Perignon.” Tischler paused. “Which reminds me. Better get down to business.” He opened the folder and squinted at its contents. “Guess there’s no point reading this again. Nobody’s touched it in all those years.” He reached down to pull out an oblong manila envelope, raised its flap, and extracted a small sheaf of papers. “Besides, I have these.”

“What are they?”

“Copies of the death certificates. Care for a look?”

Ames shook his head quickly. “Not necessary. I know they’re dead.”

“Never hurts to be sure.” Tischler slid the sheaf back into the envelope.

“Once a lawyer, always a lawyer,” Ames said. “Do you want me to take a medical examination to prove I’m still alive?”

“A notary’s statement will do.” This time the attorney actually smiled. Rising, he crossed the room and pulled out the bottom drawer of an oaken filing cabinet. Ames watched him as he stooped, scrabbled, and straightened up again, gripping the straw-covered bottle.

“Here’s your wine,” Tischler said.

He returned to his seat behind the desk, depositing the rounded broad-based bottle in Ames’ outstretched hands as he moved past.

Ames blinked. “I thought you kept this in your safe.”

“I did, at first, but you’re talking forty years ago.” Tischler’s chuckle was still dehydrated. “Every time the firm expanded we moved, but we kept running out of room. By the time we came here last fall, even a walk-in vault wouldn’t hold all the sensitive material. When I ran across the wine I just stuck it in here where there was room, and I knew it’d be safe. Not that anybody would want to steal a bottle of cheap Chianti.”

Ames glanced at what he was holding. “Cost us ninety-eight cents plus tax. All we could afford back then.” His glance rose. “Brings up a point. What do I owe you?”

“No charge.” Tischler nodded. “My pleasure.”

“But you’re entitled to something for storage and keeping your eye on it,” Ames said. “If you hadn’t volunteered, the five of us would have been stuck with safety-deposit box rental for forty years—”

“—and I would have missed the chance to tell my learned colleagues about the tontine.” Again Tischler was smiling as he broke in. “Gave me something different to talk about. There aren’t many lawyers around today who even know Lorenzo Tontine’s name.” He added a few wrinkles to his forehead. “Come to think about it, I don’t believe I did until you told me. Getting a bottle of wine for the last survivor of the bunch was your idea, wasn’t it?”

"I guess so. Though it was Everly who brought up a tontine to begin with. At first he was thinking along the regular line—everybody putting some money into a special account, letting the interest accumulate." Ames shrugged. "In the end, we had to settle for a fifth of Dago Red. That's what they used to call it in the old days."

"It's the sentiment that counts." Tischler nodded. "Do you plan to drink it?"

"Of course. As you say, it's the sentiment that counts."

Kevin Ames thought about sentiment as he drove home through the darkened downpour on drenched streets. It didn't rain very often in what TV weather forecasters refer to as the Southland, but who cared? Rain or shine, he had the wine. And should it prove sour, the taste would still be sweet.

Revenge is sweet.

Now there's a sentiment for you. Sentiment enough to compensate for sediment, if forty years had produced any in this bottle, this priceless bottle, more precious than the finest champagne.

Out of the corner of his left eye he caught the flicker of neon from a restaurant window, and his stomach responded with a warning growl. Perhaps he ought to stop for dinner.

He slowed down just long enough to note that in spite of rain the small parking area to one side was full, and there were no openings at the curbside nearby. All right, the lot was full and he was empty, but there'd be plenty of time to eat later. Waiting a few hours for a meal was nothing, not to a man who'd waited forty years for a drink. First things first.

Or was it last things last?

Ames was the last, Last of the Mohicans, last of his tribe—all those ignoble redskins who'd once whooped around the campfire fed by pages they'd produced for the pulps at a penny a word. When it went out they went on, following fresh trails to fresh fires sparked by the scattered sheets of paperback novels or the multicolored revisions of television scripts. The flames were fitful, but enough to keep the young braves warm.

In time more seasoned warriors could fuel their fires with hot properties, but even the blaze of glory hadn't warded off the chill forever. They were cold now, all of them, and only he knew warmth.

Warm car to heated garage, heated garage to comfortable kitchen, comfortable kitchen to dark den. Or was it a rec room?

Names kept changing. At the time Ames managed to put a down-payment on the place it was just a cheap tract-house in the boonies. Now it was a desirable residential property on a choice view lot.

Too bad he couldn't boast of equal improvement in forty years! Entering the room Ames switched on the light and its reflection bounced off the picture-window, transforming the surface into a mirror. For a moment he caught a glimpse of his reflection, and winced at the gargoyle in the glass. He drew the drapes hastily, trying to avoid looking at the backs of his hand as he did so. He hated the sight of blue veins, corded and crisscrossing like the routes on a freeway map. Next would come the liver spots.

Or would they? Nothing wrong with his liver; he'd never been much of a drinker. Until now, that is.

Now was a matter of putting the bottle down on the counter, shucking his jacket, opening the cupboard to search out a wine-glass from the bottom shelf.

Wonder of wonders, he actually found one, and after circling its inner surface his forefinger came away dustfree. He located the corkscrew next, a fancy-looking gadget at the back of the top shelf, still nestled in a gift-box and still unused. Corkscrews were metal mysteries to him.

Actually, employing it wasn't as much of a challenge as he'd anticipated. Once he fitted the twisted tip into the top of the cork and clamped the hood over the bottle's neck, he tightened the levers at both sides, pulling the cork out as they retracted. Simple as brain-surgery.

The wine poured easily, no specks of sediment surfacing as it rose to fill the glass. There was nothing you could call a bouquet—what the hell do you expect for ninety-eight cents?—but he thought he did detect a slight musky smell. Or was it merely the usual musty smell emanating from those moldering paperbacks and ancient pulp magazines lining the bookshelves row upon row?

If he’d had any sense he’d have dumped the lot years ago. They had no value to dealers or collectors, and no value to readers, either. But these tattered, battered specimens with their garish covers wrinkled like the faces of old whores held value to him. They represented the sum total of his lifework. No matter how they smelled, this was all he had to show for forty-odd years of effort.

On the lower shelves were the hardbacks—not his, but those of contemporaries and colleagues. If he was starting out again he wouldn’t waste his time and talent on penny-a-word short stories and cheap paperback originals. Hardcovers were solid and substantial, made to last; the pages and their contents didn’t smell. No doubt about it, this was the route he’d go.

But you can’t turn back the odometer. And maybe it wouldn’t matter even if he could. Let’s face it, he *had* aimed for respectable publishing markets when starting out, just like his friends were doing. The difference was that they made it and he didn’t.

There’d been no way of knowing where any of them would end up, no sure road-map to success. Forty years ago, high school kids didn’t study genetics; they read the Declaration of Independence and graduated believing that all men are created equal. So if a half-dozen of those kids from roughly-similar backgrounds decided on a writing career, why shouldn’t their chances of success be just about equal too?

Luck was a factor, of course, but at first luck seemed to be everybody’s good buddy. Luck brought them together—Everly, Jesse and himself in class, the other two through mutual acquaintances. Hanging out together but working separately, they made their first sales to the same few remaining pulp magazines, their first breakthroughs into the expanding paperback markets.

Come to think of it, there’d been a sixth candidate for the Nobel Prize in Literature back then whose name he had trouble recalling today. Frank

Osric, that was it. For a beginner, Frank was a pretty good candidate for a full-time career. But he'd also been a sexual athlete, world-class, who married a bimbo whose father owned a factory. So with a baby on the way, he ended up punching a time-clock instead of a typewriter.

The Skull Club members were the five who stuck together. Funny how they'd all written pretty much the same sort of stuff back then; a little science fiction, and a lot of fantasy before it split up into dark, light, or shocking pink with polka-dot stripes.

It was only later that they branched out individually into the mystery markets, spy-thrillers, police procedure product. It was after television moved from New York to Hollywood that they really broke up, as their lives split up into deals, deadlines, and rewrites over the weekends.

Kevin cupped his glass, wondering as he did so why nobody ever spoke of glassing their cups. English is a strange language, and writers are strange people.

Or maybe he was the strange one, the way he'd tried to keep in touch with his friends during the early years of their rise to fame and fortune. And he had tried, dammit. Phoned for lunch-dates and got excuses. Then, as their success soared, he got secretaries. And finally, thanks to the miracle of modem technology, he got answering machines.

After the others scattered, leaving the Valley for more trendy territory, contact with them dwindled to Christmas cards. Eventually even the cards stopped Hallmarking the passage of years, and that's when he got the message.

It was about time because the message had been awaiting his attention for ages, delivered by a diversity of sources. It had come from New York agents who couldn't sell his books to the right publishers, it came from agents out here who couldn't peddle his spec-written scripts to television or films. And while his work continued to appear in the lesser genre zines or paperbacks, the message came from critics loud and clear, in the form of silence.

Kevin ignored it for a long time, telling himself to hang in there, do the job, have patience. So he hung, and he jobbed, and eventually the patience ran out.

Reading was what scared it away; reading articles, essays and books about the work of his colleagues. He was shocked to see the first references, perhaps a dozen years ago; shocked not so much by their content as by the realization that so much time had passed since the days they'd all started out together. His mirror had already begun to tell him the same story, and he was tempted to try shutting his eyes while shaving. But he couldn't close his eyes to the facts. Pimply punks, who didn't even exist when the Skull Club was alive and flourishing, had been born, grown up, and become critics. Critics who knew genre fiction and its writers, who even mentioned the Skull Club in passing when discussing the work of the others.

The others. That's who the critics wrote about, the others. Jesse and Everly, Rondbeck and Fargo. Everybody except Kevin Ames.

Turning away from the bookshelves, he grimaced in rueful recollection. To be fair about it, his name actually had been mentioned, several times in several places, but only in passing, one of a long list of lesser or at least less-known talents. And one creep had managed to misspell it. *Kevan Aims.* So much for critical perception.

But none of the others suffered such careless treatment. No critic had a problem identifying Roy Fargo.

Kevin paused to confront the wall beyond the shelves. That's where the pictures were, the photographs from newspapers and magazines he'd clipped and pinned to a corkboard during the past decade, just for old times' sake.

Or so he'd told himself at the start. Now, of course, he knew the truth. It had never been for old times' sake, not even at the beginning.

Roy was the beginning, the first to go up, and that in itself had been hard to take. Not that Roy Fargo was much more of a success than Kevin himself. True, he lived in Beverly Hills, but his apartment was on the very tip of the south-of-Wilshire area, and this was before the real-estate boom.

Roy never made it into the megabuck neighborhood: all he wanted was a chance to move from paperback to hardcover markets. By then the major publishers were concentrating on clones of Stephen King, but small specialty houses sprang up to feed the nostalgia craze for Golden Oldies from the Golden Age. They sold mainly through mail-order, putting out signed and limited editions, including genuine leather bindings for the true collector and/or greedy speculator.

At first, established writers shied away from small advances and small printings, so specialty publishers took what they could get. One of the first they got was Roy Fargo, who soon became a familiar name amongst the literary leather-freaks. His timing was right, because pop art was becoming popular with those who took credit for turning obscurity into celebrity.

That's when critics started paying him serious attention, cannibalizing each other's articles and reviews, pumping up a new audience for an old name.

And that's when some genre-oriented zine published the photo of Fargo which, haloed by a fringe of other newsclippings, occupied the left-hand side of Kevin's corkboard display. Below it was the story headline—*ROY FARGO, MASTER OF MYSTERY, WINS WIZARD AWARD.*

Kevin squinted at the picture in the dim light. A good photo, yes, but not a good likeness. Maybe because the Fargo he'd been familiar with was a younger man.

The passage of those subsequent decades had fattened the face, thinned the hairline, wrought wrinkles and wattles. Only the set of the fish-mouth remained unchanged; Roy Fargo was the kind of man who only smiled at funerals.

Even so, that headline should have made him laugh out loud, because he'd never written a real mystery in his life. To Kevin the only mystery was why editors accepted such dated whodunit fare, such hardboiled potboilers with their dumb-dick antihero and his gat, rod, heater, equalizer or piece aimed to put a notch in somebody's crotch.

Kevin thought of what he himself had written over the same period of time, genuine mysteries with authentic backgrounds, not just updated slang and the same old phallic fallacisms.

What right did Fargo have to steal Kevin's blood-and-thunder? If there was any justice, that should have been his prize. Both Fargo and himself had been nominated for the Best Paperback Novel award that year; it had been Kevin's first and only time. When he heard about it he'd felt a surge of encouraging excitement. The Wizard Award was prestigious; it meant something to editors who paid winners more attention, and higher advances. Ten years ago it would have given Kevin Ames a chance to snuggle under hardcovers with a major publisher.

If there were any justice.

But there was no justice, and Fargo was the one who accepted his trophy at the annual banquet, Fargo who signed a three-book hardcover contract, Fargo who was photographed.

Kevin stared at the photo and the photo stared back. That's the way they'd stared at each other ten years ago, just two months after Roy accepted his prize.

The phone rang and Kevin started at the sound, then realized there was no ring, merely an echo. An echo sounding down the corridors of time; an echo of the phone's sudden and surprising ring on that evening a decade ago. Actually the surprise had not been in the ringing but in the voice which responded when Kevin answered the call.

"Kevin, old buddy—how are you? This is Roy."

"Fargo?"

"As in North Dakota."

"Well I'll be damned!"

"Your prediction, not mine." A sort of chuckle sounded over the wire, a muffled sound which might issue from a fish-mouth. Or the mouth of someone who'd been drinking like a fish, as they used to say long years ago.

Only they didn't say it about Fargo, since he drank very little in the old days. Couldn't afford to, for one thing. But times and fortunes change, because he'd obviously had a few and he was calling from the bar at some steak-house off Melrose that Kevin never heard of before.

"What're you doing down there?" he asked.

"Tell you about it when I see you," Fargo said.

"See me?"

"That's right. They've got great steaks here. I'm inviting you to dinner."

"Now—you mean tonight?" Kevin hesitated. "But—look, I have plans for the evening—"

"Change them."

He did, and they met.

When Kevin arrived at the crowded side-street restaurant his host was already seated in a booth just off the noisy upfront bar. Recognizing Fargo came as a shock, for his photo had scarcely hinted at the ravaged reality, the flab of flesh, the face with its mottled veins broken like pledges to Alcoholics Anonymous. But the greatest change was in the fish-mouth, now set in a permanent smirk of smug satisfaction.

Coming here on impulse had been a mistake, but Kevin realized it too late for retreat; he could only sit down and lighten up.

Tonight, a decade later, he couldn't pretend to recall any of their preliminary greetings or small-talk. Drinks before and during dinner helped ease his tension, and Roy had already achieved an alcohol level which would intoxicate any vampire who drank his blood.

But the steaks were every bit as good as promised, and it was over dessert that their conversation really began. Instead of coffee, Fargo opted for a double Turkey-and-rocks. Kevin, conscious of his own limited ability to handle liquor, settled for a small cognac. Now he felt a trifle more relaxed, but it was still hard to equate this bloated and aging stranger with the Roy he'd once known, or thought he'd known, so well. *I wish I hadn't come,* he told himself.

"I'm glad you came," Fargo told him. "Been wanting to get hold of you for a long time."

"I should have called you," Kevin said. "When I heard the news—"

"About the prize?" Fargo shrugged. "No problem. Charlie Rondbeck was at the awards banquet so we talked there, but I haven't heard word one from old Jesse or Everly either. And I didn't expect to hear from you, considering."

"Considering what?"

"Considering you're the guy who should have gotten the award in the first place." Fargo raised his glass with a flourish that ruffled the Turkey's feathers. "Cheers!"

Kevin downed his drink, feeling its warmth mingle with the glow kindled by Roy's words. It was difficult to resent a man who admitted the truth. Fargo wasn't just flattering him; he must be feeling guilty about what happened, or else why would he bother inviting him to to dinner?

"Thinking about you when I was at the bar earlier," Fargo said. "How we lost touch all this time, and then the award business coming up. So I called."

Kevin found himself smiling. "You still haven't told me what you're doing down here."

"Oh, that." Fargo set his glass down, rattling the rocks. "Got myself a Volvo last week. Runs like a dream."

"Good for you," Kevin said.

"Not so good." Fargo captured his glass again in a pudgy grip. "Yesterday some bastard put a dent in the left rear fender while I parked at the market. This afternoon I took it over to the dealer's body-shop around the corner from here. Figured straightening out the fender would be a ten-minute job, which just goes to show you how long it's been since I owned a new car. Turns out that now they replace the whole damn thing on these models. Costs you an arm and a leg because it's not covered by the warranty, but what can you do? So I told them go ahead, and wandered over here."

Kevin’s inner glow had faded during Fargo’s wordy account, replaced now by a rising resentment.

“So that’s why you got hold of me,” he said. “You need a lift home, right? Been cheaper for you just to call a cab.”

Fargo shook his head. “You got it all wrong, old buddy. Shop stays open ’til nine, so the car’ll be ready by now. I was just killing time.”

“And wanted me to kill it with you,” Kevin broke in.

“Knock it off.” Fargo groped for his glass, eyed its emptiness, and signaled to the passing waiter. “Want a refill?”

“No. I’d better be going.” Not only had Kevin’s glow faded; what he felt now was an icy numbness, and he made no effort to keep the chill from his voice. “Seeing as you don’t need me—”

“But I do need you! That’s why I called.” Fargo leaned forward as the waiter returned to switch the empty glass with a full one. “Told you I got to thinking. That’s how I came up with the idea.”

“Get to the point.”

“Remember I said you should have won that award?” Fargo reduced his double to a single as he spoke. “Just knowing it was enough to put me on a guilt-trip, but I’m getting off at the next station.”

“Talk sense.”

“I’m talking dollars and sense, for both of us. I’m talking collaboration.”

Kevin opened his mouth but Fargo gestured with his glass, intercepting interruption. “Heard about my new deal, right? Three-book contract, no options. Upfront advance is—they don’t want me to say, but take my word it’s a good chunk of cash. And this idea of mine will fix things so you’ll get your share.”

“You want to write those books with you?” Kevin said.

Fargo lowered his gaze and his voice. “I want you to write those books *for* me.”

“You’re drunk.”

“Damn’ right I am. I’ve been working at it ever since I signed that contract.”

Unprepared for such an admission, Kevin scarcely knew how to respond. “Does your agent know about this?” he faltered.

“Yeah.” Fargo nodded. “He says he’s seen it before. Guy’s used to being kicked around all his life, then something like this happens and he goes into shock, can’t cope. Every time I think about doing these books for that kind of money, I freeze. You don’t jump from the Little League into the majors, not at my age.”

“Writer’s block,” Kevin said. “Get some help to dry out, find yourself a good shrink—”

Roy gestured with his glass again. “A shrink can’t write those books for me. You can.”

“But there are plenty of full-time ghost writers around. Ask your agent.”

“No way! I don’t want this to get out. Got to have somebody I can trust to keep their mouth shut. Somebody who’ll work in my style, only better. That’s you.”

Sharp flattery or blunt truth? Kevin realized it didn’t matter. Another question did, and he asked it.

“Okay, perhaps I could do the job. But why should I?”

“For old times’ sake. Because we’re friends. Because you need the money.”

“I’m doing all right.”

Fargo shook his head. “Cost of living’s rising, but your sales aren’t going up with it.”

The little ball of anger that had formed in the pit of Kevin’s stomach was starting to roll. He tried to halt it as he spoke. “Who told you that?”

“Never mind, I checked it out. You’re hurting, old buddy.” Fargo set his empty glass down. “But not to worry, help is on the way.” The fish-mouth fissured in a grin. “Money talks, and all you got to do is listen. My proposition is we make a work-for-hire deal, no royalties, just a flat fee, half up front, half on delivery. And seeing as it’s you, I’m willing to go ten thousand per book.”

Kevin couldn’t control the roll of rage so he concentrated on controlling his voice. “You’ve got to be getting a lot more for those books, just in advances alone. Plus the royalties to come, paperback and foreign rights, maybe even film or TV sales somewhere down the line.”

Roy Fargo was having his own vocal problems. “Who knows?” He wagged a fat finger. “All you gotta know is there’s thir’y grand in it for you, guar’nteed. Way you grind stuff out, shouldn’t take more’n two months apiece. How long’s it been since anybody paid you thirty thou for six months’ work?”

“Never got that much,” Kevin said. “But if I ever do, it won’t be for something that has your name on it.”

“Think you’re too good to ghost for me?” Fargo’s forefinger jabbed air. “Well, let me tell you somethin’, old buddy. I don’t think you’re good enough! On’y reason I called is I felt sorry for you, wanna give you a break. So what thanks do I get—”

“That’s enough,” Kevin said. He was amazed that he could speak so calmly while feeling the ball rolling deep inside him. “Get out of my face.”

“I’m gone.” Roy Fargo slid out of the booth and rose askew but upright as he spoke. “I got no time to waste on you, old buddy. You’re jus’ a hack, always will be. Jus’ a hack—”

Kevin watched him weave down the aisle; not until after his host departed did he realize Fargo had left without paying the tab.

Adding insult to injury came to a total of seventy-eight bucks for drinks, dinner, tax and tip. A sizable bite, ten years ago.

But at the time Kevin scarcely felt it. What he felt was the ball in his gut, grinding as it grew, *way you grind stuff out, just a hack, always will be.*

Somehow he paid and made his way to the exit, the ball rolling, the rage swelling, the rain falling.

Kevin blinked. There hadn’t been any sign of rain when he arrived. But then there hadn’t been any sign of Fargo’s pretended pity or that insulting suggestion to sell out, betray his talent for thirty pieces of silver. All right, so it was thirty thousand pieces. Probably came to about ten percent of what

Fargo was getting as an advance alone. He'd still end up with most of the money, and all of the glory.

Hell with it. Hell with him. Hell with this goddam rain, coming down in buckets, turning the damn' potholes into swimming pools. Dark as pitch, too; no light except the one way down at the corner. Where was his car parked? Oh yeah, down here. Next question—where're the keys? Got 'em. Final question—how'd you get so loaded?

And loaded he was. Load in his gut. Stop rolling. Put key in ignition and start rolling. Now.

Windshield wipers working. Back and forth, to and fro. Don't look at them, dummy—look past them. Keep your eye on the road. Potholes. Water. Splashing.

There, that's better. Car revving up, stomach settling down. Forget Fargo. Forget the bastard playing him for a sucker, laughing up his sleeve all the way to the bank.

It didn't matter, didn't matter a damn. Into each life some rain must fall and that's what mattered now, rain on the windshield, headlight beams blurring across puddles in the street, flashing over the figure that staggered out from the crosswalk and slipped on the wet pavement.

Fargo fell, in what seemed like slow-motion.

Everything happened in slow-motion, except the sudden resurgence of rage. It was still there after all, but it wasn't still, it was rolling, the car was rolling, hands whirling the wheel, foot flooring the gas-pedal.

A crunch, a bump, a shriek of brakes. And then he was around the corner, gunning the motor, *don't look now, they may be gaining on you.*

But they didn't gain.

Kevin could grin because they'd never gained on him, not in ten years. If they had, of course, he'd have explained it was an accident.

At the time, in his drunken and panic-induced flight, he'd really believed this, or wanted to. Not until long afterward did he admit it was murder.

In a way it was actually premeditated murder, because he'd killed Fargo many times before, in his dreams. Of course nobody knew about the dreams, let alone the reality.

Nobody knew he and Fargo were meeting. And when they did, neither had been recognized in the crowded restaurant. They weren't seen arriving or leaving together. And there were no witnesses on the rainy street when a drunken pedestrian was struck down in the dark by some hit-and-run driver.

Kevin had committed what mystery-writers strive to achieve—the perfect crime.

How about a Wizard Award for *that?* Or at the very least, perhaps a Sorcerer's Apprentice?

He lifted his glass to the fat face framed on the wall before him, then drank deeply. Cheap wine, and bitter; not at all comparable to the cognac he'd enjoyed during that last meeting with Fargo a decade ago. And yet bitter was better, infinitely better, because it quenched his thirst. Years and years of thirst for just this moment, the moment of triumph.

Kevin gripped the lumpy neck of the straw-wrapped bottle and refilled his glass before moving on past Fargo's wall-eyed stare. Carrying the Chianti with him for convenience's sake, for old times' sake, he scanned the corkboard for a faded Polaroid print of Arthur Rondbeck in out-of-focus closeup.

This face was thin and drawn, just as he remembered it, the face of a diabetic asthmatic cancer-riddled and heart-damaged hypochondriac.

Even as a young man Rondbeck had never enjoyed good health when he could revel in illness. Here was someone who purchased pills for extra energy but lacked the strength to swallow them: a man who was too tired to lie down. And yet, Kevin noted, he was probably the most prolific member of the Skull Club group. The only problem being it seemed hard to tell if his work was the product of a word-processor or an enema.

Where had he found time to turn out a book of critical essays on his fellow writers, and why would a publisher accept him as an authority? But a publisher *did* accept him, and his manuscript too.

Kevin squinted up at the Polaroid, trying to bring Rondbeck's bleached-out features into focus. What had that sallow face looked like seven years ago?

For the life of him he couldn't recall; apparently he lacked a photographic memory. But he did remember the letter Rondbeck sent him with a copy of the chapter on Kevin's work, a labor of love entitled *Blood Brothers.* And seven years later he still remembered that enclosure, every vicious word of it. Words like *derivative, stock characterization, predictability, over-obvious plots.* The labor of love was actually a labor of hate.

But Rondbeck hadn't sent the chapter to ask for an opinion; what he wanted was verification of biographical data dealing with Kevin's career which preceded the pages that demolished it.

His letter had arrived on a bad day. Kevin's immediate impulse was to pick up the phone and, for the first time in many years, communicate with his old friend—communicate his anger at this unprovoked and unwarranted attack. But as luck would have it, the phone was disconnected and would remain so until he paid his long-overdue bill. And that wasn't about to happen until Kevin finished the novelization, also overdue, of the sleazo film-script he'd been stuck with.

His second impulse, to write Rondbeck a letter of rebuttal concerning his errors of judgment as well as fact, was equally impractical, because that very morning his typewriter had conked out. Another three days and God knows how many dollars shot to hell, no wonder he had one of those pounding headaches, now on top of everything else this letter arriving to make his day—

There was only one thing to do; drive out to West LA and confront Rondbeck face to face. Tell him that under no circumstances would he allow such an attack to be published. With this kind of garbage spread around, pretty soon Kevin wouldn't even get assignments to novelize bad movies, let alone contracts for books of his own.

Driving west, Kevin's anger mounted as the sun sank, its slanted rays blinding him as he crawled through the homeward-bound traffic.

Blinding. But he could see Rondbeck plainly enough, standing in the abandoned hallway after he opened the front door of the old two-story house just north of Pico.

See but not hear, because of the pounding in his head. *Pounding headache.* Didn't have to hear, because just the sight of that stupid face and sickly grin told him all he needed to know, more than he needed to know about Rondbeck's motives, about his deliberate attempt to smear his name, his reputation, his whole damned life-work. Kevin told himself not to listen, and he didn't listen, but all the while Rondbeck kept on talking, talking as he led the way up the stairs and into his workroom. Here was the printer fed by the word-processor, here was the word-processor fed by the stupid, grinning character-assassin who couldn't stop talking because he was afraid.

Yes, that was it, Kevin could see it now; the fear behind the grin, the apprehension in the eyes, the alarm. There must have been something in his own face, his own silence, which triggered the alarm to go off and sent Rondbeck into a flurry of excuses, explanations, apologies.

And without needing or heeding the actual words, Kevin knew what Arthur Rondbeck was saying and why. He'd turned off deliberately because he didn't want to get the message, there was only one way to deal with the headache, get rid of it, stop the pounding, and now that his mind was made up there was no point getting confused by apologies.

There'd been enough confusion anyway, and Kevin had to make a deliberate effort to keep calm. Cool, calm and collected. Don't do whatever you did with your face to scare Rondbeck that way, keep your voice down, just tell the man it was all a mistake, your turn to apologize, let bygones be bygones, we'll both forget it ever happened, sorry but I've a pounding headache, got to go now.

Go to the hall. Go to the landing. Let Rondbeck lead the way. And over the pounding, when push comes to shove—

The crash.

The crash as the railing gave way, the sudden gasp, the rush of air, the thud.

Sprawled at the foot of the stairs far below, neck twisted to an impossible angle, lay the figure. The body. The corpse.

That's all it was now, just a cold, contorted thing, its head stamped with a bloody caricature of Arthur Rondbeck's face. The grin was gone. And so was the grinner.

Kevin was gone too, as soon as he'd run his handkerchief over the inner and outer doorknobs and made sure the front door itself was locked behind him.

He looked around for his car and couldn't see it. For a moment he froze, then relaxed, realizing he'd parked around the corner.

It wasn't until he was almost home that he realized something else. There'd been no reason for him to park where he did. No conscious reason, because he'd been hiding it behind the headache. Behind the headache was the rage and behind the rage was the reality. He'd gone to Rondbeck intending to kill him from the very first.

Another premeditated murder? But how could that be? He hadn't planned anything in detail, any more than he'd planned the death of Roy Fargo. Murder involved a risk that should only be taken when fully warranted, when utterly necessary to eliminate a threat or an enemy.

Or a rival?

Kevin saluted Rondbeck's photo-face with a full glass, then remedied its emptiness before moving on.

Seven years ago he'd confronted the *rationale* of his behavior. Or misbehavior; it didn't matter which. What mattered was that Fargo and Rondbeck were dead. Just as he wanted them to be, just as he wanted all of them to be, because they were the ones who drank the wine of life and left him the dregs, but he'd have the last laugh, the last laugh after they'd drawn their last breaths.

And they would, all of them. Once he'd made that resolve he was willing to wait. And wait he did, without fear of suspicion; two of his four rivals were in their graves and neither had risen to point a bony finger at him.

Rondbeck's death, recorded as accidental, was scarcely incidental, and merited only brief mention in fine print. But both Lloyd Everly and Jesse Cross had been the subjects of occasional interviews. In recalling their early careers, each made a passing reference to the Skull Club. Just a few words of nostalgia, yet one never knew; if a third and a fourth member met accidental death in the near future, somebody checking old news articles for an obit could note the tie-in, perhaps even get curious about the survivors.

So best to wait, Kevin had decided. There was no personal reason to resent those two as he had the others; it was only their success he hated.

Only their success, and his failure. Neither had been deserved, but then everything's a matter of luck, and if you want justice you have to go after it yourself. Even if it means waiting five more years.

That's how long Kevin waited before he paid his visit to Lloyd Everly. Five long years of reading and hearing about Everly's latest novels and movie sales, with no consolation for Kevin except the knowledge that time was on his side. Everly's appearances on television talkshows revealed a steadily-receding hairline and a steadily-advancing network of wrinkles. If Kevin's tentative plans worked out, death from natural causes would be a logical verdict. And he'd no longer have to put up with the sight of that aging have-a-good-day face on the TV screen. It was bad enough seeing the autographed photo on the corkboard with a *printed* signature if you please, or even if you don't please.

Kevin hadn't requested anything at all; the glossy 8x10 showed up unannounced and uninvited in the day's mail. That's what did it—the photo and the accompanying message.

Compadre:

Long time no, si?

Thought you might like this. Why don't we get together one of these days and compare swimmingpools?

—Lloyd.

Yes, that's what did it, all right. Only a jerk like Everly would come up with a smart-ass way to point out he had a pool and Kevin didn't, never would. But unwittingly he'd pointed out something else: the method for murder.

Discarding his earlier plan, Kevin made his move. This time he prepared in advance. Three days beforehand he cased the dead-end street in the pricey neighborhood abutting Bel Air. A block away from the house was an ideal place to park without being seen by traffic, because there wasn't any. His next move required immobility, sitting in the car for two full days to learn the comings and goings of local residents, their gardeners or other hired help. He noted no nannies or other live-ins; Everly himself was a widower who'd lived alone here since his wife died, so that didn't complicate matters. Some of his neighbors employed maids or cleaningladies, but they all cut out sometime between four and five, when the wives came home from Rodeo Drive. It wasn't until six or later that the husbands drove in from Century City and the Cedars-Sinai Medical Complex.

Obviously the safest interval would be from five to six. He mustn't call about stopping by until just before driving up; that way left less chance of Everly mentioning his impending visit to anyone else. The rest was obvious. Wear washable jeans and jacket, and don't forget the rubber gloves.

Kevin chuckled as he thought back on it now. Old Haji never wore rubber gloves, but that's what he was doing—playing Haji. Just the way Otis Skinner and Ronald Colman played him in those ancient movies, just the way Alfred Drake did in the old musical they'd made out of *Kismet.*

Funny that he'd remembered their big scene, and now he got the chance to do it himself. Grabbing the villain and silently submerging his head in the pool until he drowned, then pushing the body in. So simple, once Everly let him in and they had a quiet poolside drink together. Whisky straight, that's what Lloyd Everly wanted, but he ended up with water for a chaser. Lots and lots of water.

Remembering it, Kevin almost choked on his drink. The way Everly had choked, but it wasn't all that funny to him. *Kismet* means fate in Arabic, doesn't it? Well he met his fate all right. And it was all right, no problems except to carry away the second glass so as to leave no evidence of a visitor when the pool-man came by two days later and found his employer drowned.

So Everly had been liquidated. Clever phrase, clever method, clever man; Kevin felt a surge of self-appreciation, or was it just the wine?

But no, he wouldn't be here drinking the wine if he hadn't been the cleverest of the lot. Fargo, Rondbeck, Everly—all so-called mystery writers, but none of them could come up with complex plots and simple solutions. All they'd done in their careers was to go with the flow—the flow of blood, the rising red tide of—

Why the lecture? This was supposed to be a celebration. "God bless," Kevin said, gesturing toward Everly's photo with his empty glass and refilling it from the halfempty bottle. Half-empty? No wonder he had this warm feeling, felt good all over.

That's how he'd felt after Everly was deep-sixed two years ago, because it was almost all over. Only one other survivor to deal with, down and dirty, just slip him the Ace of Spades.

Kevin had waited so long with the others, so patiently, but these past two years had been real torture. Or imaginary torture, because he was always thinking about what he'd do when he finally got his shot at Jesse George.

It wouldn't be an actual shot, of course; nothing that obvious. Or that quick. Timing was everything. Perhaps he could use a variation of the method he'd worked out for Everly before the pool idea came to him. But whatever he decided on, he'd have to cool it before he cooled Jesse. And there were problems.

One of the problems was a young wife Jesse had recently acquired, some little bimbo with naturally-stringy hair and the usual wifely problem of her own—there wasn't any room in her clothes-closet and she didn't have a thing to wear. Kevin picked up these fascinating tidbits from gossip columns in literary journals sold at supermarket checkout counters.

True or false, the setup made for complications, but Kevin knew simplicity was still his best bet. Only it couldn't be a bet, couldn't be a gamble; he needed a sure thing. Which was why waiting became torment as he tried figuring how to mark the cards, load the dice, rig the game.

Up to now Jesse looked like the winner. He'd always been the biggest winner of the whole gang, and during the past two years his success seemed incredible as he made the complete career-leap, from the Skull Club to the Book-of-the-Month Club. The novel following stayed on the chart for nineteen weeks, then sold to films on a deal that included a percentage of the gross.

Halting before the fourth picture, Kevin peered at it with narrowed eyes. Hard to make out because it wasn't even a photograph, just a caricature from some article in a magazine he'd stolen from his dentist's receptionroom. Over the years Kevin hadn't found any photos; old Jesse was either camera-shy or just plain cautious. It might be both, because he didn't do TV or book-signings or any personal appearance shots. His success had come without any Wizard Awards, critical acclaim or paid publicity. In spite of the news items about his career, he shunned the spotlight.

Maybe it was smart to play it that way, living somewhere in the mountains up near Santa Barbara and avoiding the Hollywood scene. Safer too, because Kevin had all this trouble finding a way to kill him.

And when he finally did—or thought he did—old Jesse outfoxed him again. Just like that, no warning, he dropped dead. Keeled over from a heart attack right there in his own home, only a week ago.

"Party-pooper!"

Kevin lifted his glass with a frown of annoyance. He'd really been looking forward to taking care of Jesse himself, closing the books on his Book-of-the-Month, out-grossing that gross-out film.

He hadn’t read the book or seen the movie, but it didn’t matter. What mattered was that others did, thousands of readers, millions of filmgoers. Jesse George got fame and acclaim, and though he never sought celebrity, hundreds of mourners were at his graveside.

If Kevin ever had a funeral, it would be attended by a crowd estimated at nearly twelve people. Which wasn’t fair, seeing as how the others, except for Jesse, wouldn’t even have had funerals if it weren’t for his efforts. Efforts which were, as usual, unappreciated and anonymous. Story of his life.

Kevin squinted at the caricature on the corkboard and the caricature squinted back. Ugly artwork. Now that all four of the other Skull Club members were gone he could take their pictures down, tear them up. Too bad he never got a chance to tear up the real Jesse. It would have been great, seeing him die, feeling the surge of adrenaline, the taste of triumph on the tongue.

That was the secret, wasn’t it? All these years, this lifetime, writing about psychopaths and never knowing why they did what they did or what they actually got out of their efforts. But he knew now.

He knew the greatest moment was when the anger or envy that drove you to the deed disappeared in the doing. All those inhibiting emotions vanished; there was no fear, no shame, no guilt, no empathy for anyone or any thing. To inflict rather than endure—that was the real victory. Which was more than Roy Fargo, Arthur Rondbeck, Lloyd Everly and Jesse George would ever learn. They’d lost, he’d won. Let them keep their fame, he had the game.

Damn betcha, he’d won. That’s why he was here now. And here he’d stay. Maybe get rid of Tischler next, just in case that legal mind of his started working overtime. No law said he had to stop with the lawyer, either. He could go on to anyone he liked. Or disliked. Truth is, each time had been easier, kept getting better and better, and—admit it—now he *wanted* to go on.

In vino veritas. Damn betcha.

Nodding, Kevin raised his hand again and the wine sloshed in the glass. “Easy does it,” he said, suppressing a belch. Little too much of that *vino veritas.* But who had a better right? Not this imitation Rogues’ Gallery on the wall, these phonies pretending they understood what they wrote about. All they ever did was write. He was the only one who *lived* it.

“So this time, here’s to me,” he told himself. And gulped.

The drink really hit him. Sledgehammer wrapped in cottonwool. Better lay off, too much booze.

Kevin tightened his grip on the bottle in its straw wrapper, its straw cradle. Like Jesus. Little Lord Jesus in the cradle on Holy Night, when the Wise Men came.

But he was the wisest, not those fools on the wall. Hot in here. And hard to hang on to the wine. Why did they always wrap Chianti in straw? And why was the straw creased on one side?

Wait a minute. There was something stuck underneath there, wedged down, only the edge of the corner showing. See if you can grab hold and pull it out. Careful, don’t tear it.

Kevin tugged and freed a sheet of blue paper; it was folded over, just thick enough to make a slight bulge under the straw. Did somebody put it there on purpose, to be found?

A letter, that’s what it was. Goddam handwritten letter. Hard to see in this light, hard to make out the words. But the salutation, whatever they call it, was his name.

Dear Kevin:

Just a line to congratulate you. Because it is you, right?

When Fargo died I wondered a little, but accidents happen. And when Rondbeck fell victim to another accident I began to wonder more. Nothing to go on, just a hunch, but if there was anything at all to my crazy idea, the logical suspect was Lloyd Everly.

Then Everly became the third accidental death, and I knew. Knew what you were doing, knew what you were after.

Kevin blinked, trying to clear his vision, clear his thoughts. Jesse was the letter-writer. But what was he trying to do, prove how smart he was? Much good it did—he was dead like the others, and dead is dumb.

Kevin peered down again, peered at squiggly lines on crumpled paper.

I knew Ed be next, so Em getting out of town, going where you won't be likely to find me. But if something goes wrong, chances are you'll be reading this and gloating over winning. I can understand, because the two of us are basically very much alike. And as they say, it takes one to know one.

Again, heartiest congratulations,
Jesse

Yes, it really said that. *Heartiest congratulations!* Kevin had to laugh, laughed so hard he couldn't stop, laughed until his sides hurt. Sides and stomach and chest. The room started to spin and he slid down the side of the wall, clenching his fists. Through blurring eyes he saw that he'd dropped the letter as he fell, turning the page over to expose what was written on the other side. Through shimmering waves of pain he read the final words.

P.S.:
Sorry you missed old Tischler's party. I went, but he didn't notice me in that mob-scene. It was easy to sneak into his private office without being seen. After all, it only took a few minutes—just long enough to find the bottle, pull the cork, and poison the wine.

1994

The Scent of Vinegar

ROBERT BLOCH was born in Chicago but lived in Los Angeles for many years. His interest in horror first blossomed when he originally saw Lon Chaney, Sr's performance in the 1925 version of *The Phantom of the Opera*. After discovering the pulp magazine *Weird Tales*, he began corresponding with author H.P. Lovecraft, who advised him to try his own hand at writing fiction. The rest, as they say, is history.

After his first story was published in 1934, Bloch quickly established himself as a popular and prolific short story writer, and by the 1940s he had begun to develop his own unique style of twisted psychological horror and grim graveyard humour. Although he wrote more than two dozen novels, hundreds of short stories, and numerous scripts for TV and movies, he will always be identified with his 1959 novel *Psycho* and Alfred Hitchcock's subsequent film version. His wonderfully entertaining autobiography, *Once Around the Bloch*, was published in 1993.

"Writing my autobiography was fun," he wrote in the October 1994 *Omni*. "Living it was not always that entertaining. Actually, I was writing in self-defence. As a longtime fantasy writer I was aware of my eminent colleagues in the field, and while I couldn't compare my work to that of an Edgar Allan Poe or an H.P. Lovecraft, I did share one thing with them in common—a vulnerability to the biographers who could come up with their own version of a life-story after its subject was no longer around to dispute what was said. I preferred to tell the truth as I saw it."

Robert Bloch died on 23 September 1994. He had confided to friends that the doctors had told him a few months earlier, "I could play with fireworks, but I shouldn't plan on trick or treating." As the following Bram Stoker Award-winning story proves, in a career that spanned an amazing seven decades, he was still a master of his craft up until the end . . .

EVERY SATURDAY NIGHT Tim and Bernie went bowling at the whorehouse.

"It didn't look like a whorehouse," Bernie said. "At least not any more than the places most of us lived in back then. And the damn thing was perched so high above Beverly Hills you'd have to look down to see King Vidor's spread." The old man glanced at Greg, the cigar in his hand semaphoring apology. "Sorry, I keep forgetting we're talking 1949. You've probably never even heard of the man."

"King Vidor." Greg paused. "He directed *The Big Parade*. And Bette Davis in *Beyond the Forest*, the picture where she says 'What a dump!' Right?"

Bernie aimed the cigar at Greg. "How old are you?"

"Twenty-six."

"I'm seventy-six." Bernie's eyes narrowed behind his hornrims. "Where'd you hear about Vidor?"

"Same place I heard about you," Greg said. "I'm a student of Hollywood history."

"And whorehouses." Bernie's dry chuckle rose, then ceased as pursed lips puffed on the cigar.

Greg Kolmer grinned. "They're part of Hollywood history too. The part I couldn't find in books."

Bernie was nodding. "In those days everything was hush-hush, and if you didn't keep your mouth shut, Howard Strickling shut it for you."

"Wasn't he publicity director at MGM?"

"Right again." Bernie's cigar gestured benediction. "He's the guy who said the first duty of a publicity man is to keep the news out of the paper."

Another chuckle. “He knew everything. Including where Tim and I did our bowling.”

“Was it really that big of a deal? I mean, all those stories about living it up out here—”

“—are true,” Bernie said. “You think sex was invented by Madonna or some hot-dog computer hacks over at Cal Tech? Let me tell you, in the old days we had it all. Straights, gays, bi-, tri-: anything you wanted, you could get. You bring the ladder, we furnish the giraffe.”

“Then why were you covering up?”

“Censorship. Simple as that. Everybody knew the rules and cooperated, or else. Tim and I were in management at the same studio; not top-level, but our names were on parking slots. So we weren’t going to risk the ‘or else’ part, if you follow me.”

Greg nodded, concealing his impatience. Because that was the only way to get Bernie to tell him what he really wanted to hear. And Bernie would tell him, sooner or later, because he had nothing else to do, sitting in this rundown old house on the wrong side of Wilshire with no friends to talk to, because you can’t talk to the dead. Which is probably why he’d agreed to talk to Greg, was talking to him now.

“You take the stars,” Bernie was saying. “The smart ones never fooled around with anybody under contract on their own lot. Getting involved with somebody you were liable to see every day was too risky; too much pressure, and you couldn’t just walk away. So they patronized the hook-shops.” Bernie’s face crumpled in an old man’s grin. “What do you suppose the folks in Peoria would say if they knew their favorite loverboy had to pay to play, just like the guy next door?”

“I doubt if many people in Peoria went to brothels in those days,” Greg said.

“Maybe not.” Bernie flicked cigar ash as he spoke. “But we did. Tim and I hung out at Kitty Earnshaw’s. Great old broad, a million laughs.”

Greg leaned forward. *At last. Now it’s coming.* “The one who had this house up in the hills you were talking about?”

“Right. Kitty was the best. And her girls were user-friendly.”

“Where was this place?”

Bernie spiraled his cigar in a northerly direction and more ash fell carpetward. “Way off Benedict Canyon somewhere, past Angelo. Been more than forty years since I’ve been up there, I don’t remember—”

“Why’d you stop going?”

“Kitty Earnshaw retired, got married or religion or something. The new management was different, everyone Oriental. Not just Japs or Chinese, but girls from places like Burma, Singapore, Java, all over. Woman in charge never showed her face when I was there, but I heard stories. Marquess de Sade, that’s what they called her.”

“Marquis de Sade?”

“Marqu*ess*. A gag, I guess. But the place was getting a little too kinky for me. Like the night I met some drunk down at the bar and he says, ‘You pick a girl yet? Take the one with the glass eye—she gives good socket.’ ”

Bernie shrugged. “Maybe that was a gag too, but I saw enough to make me start wondering. The chains and bondage scene—you know, with the little whips and the handcuffs on the bedposts, all four of them, and the Swiss Army knives. Anyhow, I stopped going there.”

“And your friend Tim?”

“I don’t know. Studio dropped him when television took over out here. What happened to him after that I can’t say.”

“Did you ever try to find out?”

The old man stubbed his cigar in the ashtray. “Look, Mr Kolmer, I’m getting a little tired, so if you don’t mind—”

“I understand, sir.” Greg smiled. “And I want to thank you. You’ve been very helpful.” He rose. “Just one other thing. The location of this place we’ve been talking about. If you could be more specific—”

Bernie frowned. “All I remember, it was east of Benedict. Dirt road, probably been washed out for years now.” He hesitated. “Come to think, the place must have been burned out in that big fire back in the Sixties.”

“I could look it up,” Greg said. “Fire Department records.”

"Don't waste your time. The place wasn't even in Beverly Hills city limits, or L.A. either. Area up there is no-man's-land, which is why the house could operate. Nobody was sure who had jurisdiction."

"I see." Greg turned. "Thanks again."

The old man walked him to the door. "Don't do it," he said.

"Do what?"

"Don't try going up there. Look, it's none of my affair. But for your own good I'm telling you—"

"Telling me or warning me?"

"Call it advice. From somebody who knows."

"Knows what?"

The old man smiled, but his voice was somber. "That house up there is no place to take a bowling ball."

Greg didn't go up there with a bowling ball.

He didn't even take a Thomas map, because the place Bernie Tanner had told him about wasn't on the map. The area was blank, which meant there was no access unless Greg could locate that dirt road, which might or might not still exist.

It took Greg almost two hours of cursing up and down Benedict before he found the path. And it was scarcely more than that, at best a winding trail. The entrance was so overgrown with scrub that it couldn't be seen from the lane leading to it, and the stretch spiraling around the hillside was invisible from below, choked with weed and sage.

At first Greg wasn't sure it was wide enough even for his small car, but he had to chance it; chance the ruts and ridges and clumps of vegetation that punished tires and driver alike as the little hatchback went into a slow low. Without air-conditioning it was like trying to breathe with a plastic bag over your head, and by the time he was halfway up the hillside he wished he hadn't started.

Or *almost* wished. Only the thought of what might be on the summit kept him going, through the stifle of heat and the buzz of insect swarm.

The car stalled abruptly, and Greg broke into panic-ooze. Then the transmission kicked in again, and he sweated some more as a bump in the road sent the hatchback veering left, pitching Greg against the door. Beneath underbrush bordering a curve he caught a sudden sickening glimpse of the emptiness just beyond the edge, an emptiness ending in a tangle of treetops a thousand feet below.

Greg fought the wheel, and the car lurched back on an even course. The road must have been better in the old days; even so, it was one bitch of a trip to make just to go bowling. But that was Bernie Tanner's business and Bernie Tanner's road.

Greg's own road stretched back a lot farther than the bottom of this hill, all the way back to Tex Taylor, a onetime cowboy star at the Motion Picture Country Home. He had all those stories about the old days in Hollywood, and that's all Greg had wanted at first: just some kind of lead-in he could work up into a piece for one of those checkout-counter rags. He'd been selling that kind of stuff long enough to get used to the idea he'd never win a Pulitzer Prize.

But what the dying western wino told him gave sudden startling hope of another kind of prize—one that might have awaited presentation for nearly half a century up there at what Tex Taylor called the House of Pain. That's what he said its name was, after the Asian woman took over and began to give quality time to S-and-M freaks. Maybe it was all a crock, but it sounded possible, certainly worth a trip up there to find out.

Trouble was that Tex Taylor was borderline senile and couldn't remember exactly where this weirdo whorehouse was located. But he did, finally, come up with the name of somebody he'd seen there in the glory days. And that's how Greg got hold of Bernie Tanner.

Greg wondered if Bernie had any money. Today anything with a Beverly Hills address could probably fetch a mil or so on the current market. Maybe Bernie would pay him a mil or so just for old time's sake, just out of pride.

And there were others like Bernie still around, stars and directors and producers who were bankable way back when; some of them had saved their money or put it into real estate and led comfortable, quiet lives in Bel Air or Holmby Hills. If Bernie would pay a million, how much would all the others be willing to fork over, given the proper motivation?

Greg grinned at the thought. And then, as the car swung around the last curve, his grin widened.

He had reached the summit. And on the summit was the house.

Hey, it wasn't the Taj Mahal or Buckingham Palace or even the men's washroom at the Universal Tour. But the bottom line was it hadn't burned or gone down in an earthquake or been bulldozed by a developer. It was still here, standing in shadowy silhouette against the late afternoon sun.

Greg took a flashlight from the glove compartment and clipped it to his belt. Then he reached into the compartment again and found there was just enough left in the envelope for a little toot, enough to keep him bright-eyed and bushy-tailed while he did whatever he'd have to do up here. He waited for the rush, then got out and lifted the hood to let the steam escape. There'd be no water up here, and probably no gas or electricity; they must have had their own generator.

He stared up at the two-story structure. Frame, of course; nobody could have hauled machinery here for stone or concrete construction. The roof had lost its share of shingles, and paint peeled from boards that had once been white, but the building's bulk was impressive. Half a dozen boarded-up windows were ranked on either side of the front door: tall windows for a tall house. Greg closed his eyes and for a moment day was night and the windows blazed with the light of a thousand candles, the front door opened wide in welcome, the classic cars rolled up the driveway, headlights aglitter, wheels gleaming with chrome. And off behind the distant hills the moon was rising, rising over the House of Pain.

It was the toot, of course, and now moonlight shimmered into sunlight and he was back in the teeth of searing heat, radiator-boil, insect-buzz.

Greg walked over to the double door. Its weathered, sun-blistered surface barred intrusion, and at waist level the divided doors were secured by lock and chain. Both were rusty; too much to expect that he could just walk up and yank his way in.

But it happened. The chain gave, then came free in his fist, covering his palm and fingers with powdery particles of rust from the parted links. He tugged and the door swung outward. Hinges screeched.

Greg was in the house and the house was in him.

Its shadows entered his eyes, its silence invaded his ears, its dust and decay filled his lungs. How long had it been since these windows were first boarded, this door locked? How many years had the house stood empty in the dark? Houses that once were thronged with people, throbbed to their pleasure and their pain—houses like this were hungry for life.

Greg withdrew the flashlight from his belt, flicking it on and fanning the beam for inspection. *What a dump!*

He was standing in a foyer with a solid wall directly ahead, archways opening at left and right. He moved right, along a carpet thickly strewn with dust long undisturbed, and found himself in a room that he imagined must take up most of this wing. A huge Oriental rug covered the floor; its design was obscured and fraying, but Greg thought he could detect the outline of a dragon. Sofas and chairs were grouped along three sides beneath gilt-framed paintings which, Greg noted, might have served as centerfolds for the *Kama Sutra*. Angled at the far corner was a piano, a concert grand. Once upon a time somebody had spent a lot of money furnishing this place, but right now it needed maid service.

Greg's flashlight crawled the walls, searching for shelves and bookcases, but there were none. The fourth side of the room was covered by a row of tattered drapes hung before the boarded-up windows. The drapery may also have displayed the dragon pattern, but outlines had faded; its fiery breath was long extinguished.

Greg crossed the foyer and went into the other wing. It turned out to be a bar, and at one time may have resembled Rick's place in *Casablanca*, but now the set was struck. The room was a tangle of up-ended tables and overturned wooden chairs, flanked by booths on two walls and tattered drapery on the third. Along the fourth wall was the bar, with a big mirror behind it, bordered on both sides by shelves and cupboards that had once displayed bottles and glasses but now held only heaps of shard. The mirror itself was cracked and mottled with mold. *Here's looking at you, kid*.

At one side of the bar a door led to what must have been the kitchen; on the other side an archway framed the base of a staircase beyond. Skirting the maze of tables and chairs, Greg headed for the archway. Upstairs would be the bedrooms and maybe the private quarters of the Marquess or whatever she called herself. The place looked as if it had been abandoned in a hurry; the padlocked door and boarded-up windows may have been the results of a return visit. But why leave all the furnishings? Greg had no answer, but he hoped to find one. And find what else might also have been abandoned.

The stairs' worn padding muffled his footsteps, but creaking began when he reached the long hallway off the upper landing. It echoed again as he opened and closed the doors lining both sides of the corridor.

All led to bedrooms, each with its own indecorous decor. Here lay a round bed surrounded and surmounted by mirrors, but the sumptuous bedspread was riddled with moth-holes and the mirrors reflected only the light of Greg's flashlight beam. In another room stood a bare marble slab with metal cuffs and an assortment of chains hanging from ends and sides. The marble top was flecked, the metal attachments reddened with rust, not blood. And the whips on the wall rack dangled impotently; the case of knives and needles and surgical shears held pain captive through the empty years.

Empty years, empty rooms. Wall-mural obscenities turned into absurdities by the crisscross of cracks, the random censorship of fading over decades of decay.

But where were those private quarters: an office, someplace to keep the books, the files, the cash, and maybe—just maybe—what he was looking for? He hadn't gone through all this just to chase shadows. What the hell was he doing here anyway, prowling through a deserted whorehouse at sunset? The johns didn't come to these places looking for starkness and desolation; tricks were supposed to be welcomed. But what had he found except rot and ruin, a bar full of broken bottles, a parlor piano that grinned at him with keys like rows of yellowed teeth? Damn it, why didn't somebody tend to a customer? *Company, girls!*

Greg came to the end of the corridor, reached the last room on the left. There was nothing here now, and maybe never had been. Tex Taylor was lying, the old rummy had no proof, and he was just doing a number like the old ham he was, using Greg as an audience for the big deathbed-revelation scene. Who said people had to tell the truth just because they were dying?

He opened the door on a bedroom just like all the others, dark and deserted: bare walls and bare bureau top, empty chair and empty bed.

At least that's what he thought at first glance. But when he looked again he saw the shadow. A dark shadow, lying on the bed.

And now, in the flashlight's beam, the shadow turned to gold.

There was a golden girl lying on the bed, a golden girl with a jet-black halo of hair framing an almost feline face—slanted eyes closed in slumber above high cheekbones, coral curvature of lips relaxed in repose. The flashlight beam swept across her nudity, its light lending luster to the gold of her flesh.

Only one detail marred perfection. As Greg stared down he saw the spider. The big black spider, emerging from her pubic nest and crawling slowly upward across her naked belly.

Greg stifled his gasp as he realized the girl was dead.

She opened her eyes.

She opened her eyes and smiled up at him, opened her mouth and flicked a thin pink tongue in a sensual circle over the coral lips. Her smile widened, revealing twin razor-rows of teeth.

Now, still smiling, the girl sat up. She raised both arms, hands coming to rest on either side of the throat hidden by the dark tumble of her hair. The long fingers splayed, tightening their grip as if trying to wrench the head free.

Then the girl tugged, lifting her head off her neck.

She was still smiling.

And Greg was still gasping as he turned, stumbled from the room, down the hall and the stairs, through the littered bar below, the cobwebbed foyer. Then the door at last: *open fast, don't look back, slam it tight*.

The house had been dark, but now it was dark outside as well, and Greg was grateful he'd somehow managed to retain his flashlight. He ran to the car, keyed the ignition, sent the hatchback circling to the spot where the road wound down, down in the dark, around narrow curves, twisting trees. It didn't matter as long as he kept going down, going away from there, that place and that thing he'd seen—

Or *thought* he'd seen.

Someone doesn't just reach up and lift her head off her neck; nobody can do such a thing, loosening the red, blood-choked strands of the arteries and the darker filaments of veins all twined against the central cord of the esophagus with a flashlight beam shining on its coating of slime. You don't imagine details like that, you have to see them. And he *had* seen, it had happened, this was real.

But what was it?

Greg didn't know, but Bernie would. That had to be why the old man warned him about going up there, going to where it waited in the dark.

The clock on the dash told Greg it was 9:30. Most elderly people go to bed early, but a few stay up for the news. And tonight Bernie would be one of them, because Greg had news for him.

It took a half-hour to get down, but by the time he pulled up, parked and knocked on the front door his course was clear: this time he was going to get some answers.

The door opened on Bernie Tanner's startled stare. "Mr Kolmer?" There was surprise in his voice, whisky on his breath.

"Didn't think I'd be back?" Greg said. "Thought she'd get me, is that it?"

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Don’t hand me that!” Greg’s voice rose.

“Please, not so loud. I got neighbors—”

“You’ll get new ones in Forest Lawn if you try to dump on me again.” Greg tugged at the door. “Open up.”

Bernie obeyed quickly, then closed the door even more quickly after his self-invited guest had entered. Turning, the old man lurched toward his chair. Greg noted the bottle on the table and the half-filled tumbler beside it. The old man picked up his glass and gestured. “Drink?”

“Never mind that.” Greg seated himself on the sofa; its faded fabric reeked of alcohol and stale cigar smoke. “Let’s have it,” he said.

Bernie avoided his gaze. “Look, if something’s wrong it’s not my fault. I told you not to go up there.”

“Sure. But it’s what you didn’t tell me that made trouble.”

The old man shook his head. “I didn’t think you’d go. I didn’t think you or anyone else could find the place, even if it was still standing after—”

“After what?”

Bernie tried to push the question away with his hand. “Look, I told you all I can—”

“Maybe you’ll have more to say after I steer the law up there to take a look around.”

Bernie gulped air, then gulped the contents of his glass. “All right, I’ll level. That place didn’t close down because the madam got married. She got murdered.”

“Keep talking.”

The old man poured himself another drink. “This fella Tim, the one I told you used to go up there with me. I said I didn’t know what became of him after I quit going. Well, I lied.”

“Why?”

“I didn’t want to get involved. It happened so long ago and it wouldn’t do any good. You’d figure I was crazy, the way I figured Tim was when he told me.”

“Told you what?”

“About the hookers up there, the Orientals the new madam brought in. He said they were some kind of vampires. If you dozed off, fell asleep, they’d suck your blood.” The old man paused. “He showed me toothmarks on his neck.”

“He should have gone to the police.”

“Do you think they’d believe him any more than I did? Instead he went to Trenk, Ulrich Trenk—you wouldn’t remember him, he did some horror flicks for the indies back then.”

“*Blood of the Beast.”* Greg nodded. “*Crawlers*. I know the titles but I never saw them.”

“Nobody did,” Bernie said. “They got shelved before release. And so did Trenk. His stuff was too strong for those days. Trouble with him, he believed in what he did—not the lousy scripts, but the premises. Ghosts, vampires, werewolves, all that crap. And he believed Tim, because he’d heard some other things about the place up there, about the way bats flew around and—”

“Never mind that. Tell me what happened!”

Bernie reached for his drink. “Word was that Trenk went up there with Tim and three other guys who’d been customers and got suspicious; of what, God only knows. But there was some kind of hassle and the bottom line is the place closed down, everybody left, end of story.”

“I thought you said the madam was murdered.” Bernie frowned. “Tim told me he’d been the one who killed her. He told me because he was dying down at the old Cedars of Lebanon hospital, with what they thought was some rare kind of blood disease. They’d only let me talk to him for five minutes; when I leaned on him for details he said to come back tomorrow.”

“And—?”

“He died that same night.” The old man swallowed his drink. “Maybe it’s just as well I didn’t hear the rest. Nobody else who went up with Tim ever said a word about it. Trenk went back to Europe, but he’d kept his mouth shut, too.”

“What about those bats?”

“All I know is what Tim told me, and what he said didn’t make much sense. Don’t forget, he was dying, probably hallucinating.”

“Probably,” Greg said. He wondered if he should ask another question, but it wasn’t worth the risk. The way Bernie talked, it didn’t sound as if he even suspected, and if that was the case there was no sense giving him a clue.

The old man thought Tim was hallucinating. If Greg told him about the girl in the house, would he say that was a hallucination too?

Could be. After all, Greg did have himself a toot before going in, and it wasn’t as little as he liked to tell himself it was. Maybe that washed-up cowboy actor was on something too—either that or just jiving him. But the cowboy was dead, Bernie’s friend was dead, and Bernie looked as if he’d stayed up way past his bedtime.

Greg stood up. “I’ll be going now,” he said.

Bernie blinked. “Aren’t you going to tell me what happened to you up there?”

“Nothing. It’s just a spooky old house, and I guess I got carried away.” Greg walked to the door, opened it, then glanced back at the old man slumped in his chair. “Just in case you’ve been worrying, let me relieve your mind. I didn’t see any bats.”

So much for his good deed for the day.

Now it was time to do a good deed for himself. It had been a long time since lunch. Driving off, Greg turned onto Olympic and headed for a mini-mall offering a choice of franchised junk food. He chose the place with the best grease-smells and wolfed down more than his diet dictated: two burgers with everything, extra fries, coffee and a shake. He hated pigging out like this, but right now it was all he could afford. If tonight had been different he might be eating at Morton’s.

As it was, perhaps he ought to consider himself lucky just to be alive. There was no sense stewing about the rest.

Driving home he reached his decision before he reached his destination. Whether what he'd seen was real or the product of his imagination, one thing was certain: he didn't want to see it again.

When Greg pulled into his parking space under the apartment it was close to midnight. The close-to-witching hour when the unholy hosts rise from their graves—Leno, Letterman, Arsenio, reading their ad-libs to the cackling crowd, welcoming their guests with all the grace of Dracula greeting Renfield, then draining their blood—

Now where had all that come from? Riding the elevator up to the third floor, he had the answer. Damn Bernie and his vampire talk. And as for what Greg had seen, or thought he'd seen, there was an answer for that too—an answer he'd have to face sooner or later. And after tonight he knew it had better be soon. When the spiders come out of their hiding places and the sleeping beauties start taking off their heads, you'd better stop. Going up there had been enough of a bad trip in itself.

First thing he got into the apartment, he'd flush the rest of his little stash down the tube. If not, he'd be going down the tube himself one of these days. The time to think about it was over; this was *do it* time.

Only it didn't quite work out that way. When Greg opened the door and reached for the light-switch, a voice from the dark said "Freeze!" and that's what he did.

Footsteps sounded softly behind him and a faint gust of air fanned his neck as someone closed the front door.

Beside him a switch clicked on. Against the background of the cluttered little living room, the light of a lamp in the corner framed the outline of a man wearing jacket and jeans. But Greg's attention focused on the glint of a gun in the intruder's hand.

The gun gestured.

"Hands behind your behind. That's right. Now move to the sofa and sit.

As Greg obeyed he got another glimpse of the gun. *Piece like that could blow your head off. God, what's happening? I need a fix.*

The intruder edged into a chair on the other side of the coffee table, and now the lamp highlighted eyes and cheekbones and skin tone.

For a moment Greg evoked an image of the golden girl he'd seen—or had he?—earlier this evening. But what he was seeing here was unquestionably real. A middle-aged man with coarse, close-cropped black hair: obviously an Asian or Asian-American, obviously not the friendly type. A man with an attitude, and a gun.

Just a snort, a sniff, anything –

The man's stare was cold. So was his voice. "Put your arms down. Both hands in your lap, palms up."

Greg complied and the man nodded. "My name is Ibraham," he said.

"Abraham?"

"Perhaps it was once, when Muslim rule began. But I'm called Ibraham in Kita Bharu."

"I don't know that country."

"It's a city. The capital of what used to be Kelanton, in Malaya." The man frowned. "I'm not here to give geography lessons."

Greg kept his palms up, his voice steady. "What are you here for?"

"I want you to take me to the house."

"House? I don't know—"

"Please, Mr. Kolmer. Your friend told me you went there earlier this evening."

"When did you see Bernie?"

"About an hour ago. He was kind enough to furnish your address, so when I found you were not home I took the liberty of inviting myself in."

The bathroom window, Greg told himself. *Why do I keep forgetting to lock it when I go out?*

That wasn't the question which needed answering at the moment. There was another one more important, so he asked it. "What did Bernie tell you?"

"Everything he knew." Ibraham's slight shrug didn't cause his aim to waver. "Enough for me to guess the rest." A nod didn't jar the gun either.

"That story about researching an article—it's not true, is it, Mr Kolmer? You went to that house looking for something you didn't find."

"How do you know?"

"If you found it you wouldn't have gone back to Tanner. Of course he didn't know what you were looking for, or he'd have told me that too." Ibraham lifted his gaze: eyes of onyx in slanted settings. "Tell me what you were after."

"I can't," Greg said. "Swear to God, I don't know."

"But you have some idea?" Ibraham leaned forward. "The truth—now."

Greg stared at the gun and its muzzle stared back. "The cowboy who told me about the place said there was a blackmail operation. This new madam was bugging rooms, getting pictures, filming with hidden cameras, using two-way mirrors and whatever else they had back in those days.

"There was a market then; magazines like *Confidential* paid plenty for such stuff, particularly if stars were involved. But nothing about the place ever showed up—I know, because I waded through library files. So my hunch was the material—photos, film, audio tape, whatever—never was submitted. Something happened to close the house down before the stuff could be peddled. Which meant—"

"It could still be there," Ibraham said, and nodded.

"How did you hear about all this?" Greg asked.

"From my mother. She was there when it happened."

"At the house?"

"She worked as a maid." For the first time there was a hint of amusement in Ibraham's eyes. "You must understand she was very young. The lady, the one they called the Marquess, adopted her after both my grandparents were killed in the war. When my mother came with her to this country she was only fifteen. Some of the other girls, the ones who did what was expected in such a place, weren't much older. But the Marquess protected my mother from everything, including full knowledge of what she was involved with. Of course she learned in time. But when she did, it was too late." Ibraham's eyes were somber now. "She was lucky. On the night everything happened she wasn't at the house. The Marquess' chauffeur had driven her down to a Westwood laundromat. I don't know how they found out about what took place, but news got to them somehow and they never went back. The chauffeur had a substantial bank account; he'd been the Marquess' lover. On the journey back to Kelanton he became my mother's lover as well. He died in a Johore brothel the day I was born.

"I never knew any of this until just before my mother died, several years ago. What she told me made me suspect the same thing you did, but I couldn't get over here immediately." Ibraham glanced at the gun. "In my country there is still a war going on."

"You're in the army?"

"The military became my career after I graduated from university in Singapore. Now I wish to retire."

Greg shifted cautiously. "Look, do you have to do this *shtick* with the gun?"

Ibraham lowered the weapon. "Probably not. After all, we're partners."

Greg fought for self-control, and lost. "No way!"

"It's the only way," Ibraham said. "You know how to find the house. And my mother told me what's hidden there. We go together. Tonight."

Greg shook his head. "Didn't Bernie tell you what happened to me—what I saw?"

"I know." Ibraham seemed to have no problem with self-control, Greg noted—but then, he had the gun. "My mother warned me. I know what to do."

Greg took a deep breath, "Maybe so. But do it tomorrow, when we can go up there in daylight."

"No. We can't afford delay."

"Do you think Bernie might start talking—"

"Only through an *ouija* board." Ibraham glanced down at his gun.

Fear iced Greg's spine. "Why?" he murmured.

"The old man was the only one who'd know where we were going. No sense taking chances."

"How can you say that, knowing what we might run into up there?"

"What we're going after is worth the risk. I'm sure you're aware of that or else you'd never have gotten into this in the first place. That house holds a fortune, and we're going to get it."

Greg glanced at the gun. "And when we get it, you'll get me," he said.

"I give you my word." Ibraham rose. "Either go with me or stay behind. Like Bernie."

Greg swallowed hard. "Look, man, I've had a rough night, you know? Let me get my medication—"

"What are you on?"

Greg told him, and Ibraham gestured quickly. "You're not going up there stoned," he said. "Could be bad for your health."

A muzzle moved to press against Greg's spine; that was bad for his health too.

"Move," said Ibraham.

And they did, in Greg's car, with him behind the wheel, Ibraham at his side, and the gun riding against his rib cage. The midnight air was humid; both men were perspiring moments after the car swung out into the deserted street.

"Roll down your window," Greg said.

"Don't you have any air conditioner?"

"Can't afford it."

"You can, after tonight."

Ibraham was smiling, but Greg frowned. "This thing I saw up there—what is it?"

"*Penangallan*. A kind of vampire, but not exactly."

"Meaning what?"

"A *penangallan* doesn't need to rest in grave-earth or a coffin. Like your western vampires it seeks human blood for nourishment, but it can hibernate for years if necessary. Maybe the difference is in their metabolism. Vampires require a greater supply of energy to walk abroad each night. But the *penangallan* survives indefinitely in some sort of suspended animation. And when it does move, it flies."

Greg nodded. "You mean it turns itself into some kind of a bat."

Ibraham shook his head. "That's just superstition. The *penangallan* still retains human form—or part of its human form."

"I don't get it."

"These creatures can detach their heads from their bodies. And the head has the power of flight. When the head is removed, the stomach and intestines are pulled out and stay attached to it, receiving the blood it drinks."

The words triggered Greg's memory—just a flash, but enough. *The golden girl, sitting up and lifting her head from the open stump of the neck*. He'd seen it. It was true.

He felt a jarring movement and beside him Ibraham stirred in his seat. "Watch what you're doing," he said.

What Greg was doing was turning onto the concealed side road. Had they really come this far this quickly? Of course there was no traffic up here, no lights. Strange how easy it was to locate the hidden opening this second time around, even in the dark. But then again, it was associated with something he wasn't likely to forget.

The car entered and moved upward in a tunnel formed by the overhanging trees lining the roadway. Greg switched headlights, but even the brights were of little help here. Then the trees thinned, but the underbrush thickened and the car began to lurch around the sharp curves.

"Watch it!" Ibraham warned.

But Greg had already warned himself with the memory of what lay ahead. A *head*—

"I can't cut it," he said. "We've got to wait. Tomorrow. We'll do it tomorrow."

"Now." The gun jabbed against his ribs; Ibraham's voice jabbed his ear. "You're going now. Either behind the wheel or dumped in the trunk."

"You're bluffing—"

“That’s what the old man thought.”

Greg’s hands were wet on the wheel, but they stayed there as the car inched forward over the rutted roadway and climbed around a curve. Now he glanced at the Malayan. “Suppose we’re wrong. Suppose we don’t find anything there?”

“I told you what my mother said. It’s there and we’ll find it.”

“One thing I don’t understand,” Greg said. “If the stuff they had on their customers was so valuable, why wasn’t it used?”

“My mother wondered about that too, but she didn’t learn the plan until later, from the Marquess’ lover.”

“Plan?”

“Bit by bit the pieces fit together. The Marquess had bought the place with more than just profit in mind. Back in Kelanton she had a reputation as a *pawang*—a sorceress, you’d call it—and she gathered together and brought the *penangallans*, which she controlled for her own purposes. Which were to use blackmail money to take over other vice operations and gradually gain political power in the area. The *penangallans* would deal with those who stood in her way. She was ready to carry out her plan when the end came. You know the rest.”

Greg frowned. “Your mother could have gone to the police—”

“She was a fifteen-year-old girl, an illegal immigrant with forged papers, who spoke almost no English. Even if she’d found a way to contact the authorities—do you think anyone would go along with what she said about hookers who remove their heads, and all the rest of it?”

Greg had no answer for that, only another question as they angled up the tortuous trail. “The thing I saw,” he said. “Why would it still be there after all these years? Why didn’t it leave the place when the Marquess was killed?”

“The *penangallan* flies low,” Ibraham said. “It can’t soar like a bat, and it must protect its dangling stomach sac and intestines from harm. In Malaysia, homes are often guarded by garlands of *Jenyu* leaves hung on doors and windows. The *penangallan* fears the *Jenyu* plant’s sharp thorns.”

He glanced at the looming pines and the clumps of underbrush clustered beneath them. “Here your hillsides are covered with cacti and all kinds of spiky vegetation. It would rip the creatures’ guts if they tried to escape.”

“But they wouldn’t have to fly,” Greg said. “They could go down staying in their bodies just as they did up there.”

Ibraham shrugged. “A *penangallan* preserves its body by drinking fresh blood. Without it the body will decay just like any other corpse. So if they did try to come down in human form before decay set in, there’d be problems. I don’t think they’d last very long if word got out that human heads were flying around Beverly Hills and sucking blood in Bel Air. Besides, they’d have to have a place to hide. And to store the vinegar.”

“Vinegar?”

“If the *penangallan* flies, its entrails swell up when exposed to the open air. So afterward it must soak its lower parts in a jar or vat of vinegar to shrivel the stomach and bowels to normal size. Then it fits them back in the body when the head is replaced.”

No *way*, Greg told himself. *Either this guy is crazy or I am. There are no such things, no such place, no house*—

They rounded the turn and there it was.

If the place had looked ghostly by day, it looked ghastly in the grayish shroud of moonlight filtering through lowering clouds. Its dark silhouette seemed to slant toward them as the hatchback halted amidst spirals of steam from the hood. Greg stared numbly at the house. If it was real, then what about the rest—

“Out,” Ibraham said.

Greg hesitated, then took a deep breath. “Look, I’ve told you everything I know, everything that happened. There’s no reason for me to go in again with you now.”

“What about the material you were looking for?”

Greg took another deep breath. “I’ve changed my mind. I don’t want any part of it.”

“Afraid?”

"After what you told me? Damned right I am."

"You expect me to go in by myself?" Ibraham asked. "So you can drive off and leave me stranded?"

"I'll wait, I swear it. Hey, you can take my car keys—"

"I'm taking you."

The gun rose, and so did Greg. Ibraham tensed as Greg's hand went to the glove compartment, then relaxed as the younger man brought out his flashlight.

Together they left the car and moved to the entrance in silence. Even the sound of the wind had died; everything had died here.

Greg halted before the door, and his companion eyed the broken lock. "You're making a mistake," Greg said. "If what you told me is true, a gun won't protect us from that thing I saw."

"There are other ways," Ibraham said, raising the weapon as he spoke. "Inside."

Inside was pitch blackness pierced by the pinpoint flashlight beam. Greg adjusted it so that they stood in a wider circle of radiance, but the light was dim against the darkness beyond. The silence itself seemed more intense than outside; there was nothing to disturb it here, nothing until they came.

"Leave the front door open," Greg whispered. "We might want to get out of here in a hurry."

Ibraham shrugged. "As you wish." Moving forward, he peered toward the right archway. "What's in there?"

Greg described the parlor, and his captor nodded.

Now he glanced to his left. "And here?"

"The bar."

The two men halted just past the archway as the flashlight beam roamed the room.

"All that damage," Ibraham said. "This must be where the fighting took place." He peered at the stairs on the far side.

Greg spoke quickly. “You don’t have to go up there. I told you there’s nothing in those bedrooms.”

“Except the last one,” Ibraham countered. “That’s reason enough. We’ve got to go up.”

“You know what’s there. You admitted your gun won’t help.”

Ignoring him, Ibraham scanned the tile shambles of the littered floor. His eyes swept over the toppled tables, overturned chairs and broken glass. His eyes halted. “This will do,” he said.

Greg followed his gaze to a chair turned upside down, two of its legs wrenched half-free from the base of the seat. “What do you mean?”

Ibraham told him what he meant. He told him what to do, then watched, gun in hand, while Greg did it. Getting the chair leg loose wasn’t difficult and locating a sharp knife in a drawer behind the bar wasn’t a problem for him either. The hard part was whittling away at the wooden chair leg until the end was trimmed into a tapering shaft with a narrow point. It was Ibraham, rummaging through shelving beneath the bar counter, who came up with the bung-starter.

“Good,” he said. “We’re ready.”

Greg didn’t feel ready. He felt he needed out of here. Ibraham had already goaded him to the base of the stairs, and it was there that he turned.

“Hey, man,” he said. “I thought we came here to look for that stuff.”

“We will.”

“You’re wasting your time. It’s not upstairs.”

“But something else is. And we won’t be safe looking around here until we dispose of it.”

The gun muzzle guided Greg up the staircase. In the upper hallway the floorboards creaked, and so did the doors as Ibraham opened them in turn. But it was the sound of his own heartbeat that Greg heard as they reached the end of the hall and stood before the last door on the left.

It was Greg who opened the door, but Ibraham was the one who gasped as the flashlight beam encircled the burnished golden beauty of the naked girl on the bed.

Her eyes were closed, and this time she did not stir. Ibraham gestured impatiently, but Greg stood immobile at the bedside, staring down at the golden girl.

This was what he'd needed. Proof that he hadn't freaked out from dropping acid, that what he'd seen here before was real.

And if it was real, then so was the rest of what he'd seen, what had sent him screaming down the hillside. That's why he was standing here now, holding the sharpened stake. He knew what he must do, and this was the worst reality of all.

He took a step backward. He couldn't go through with this, no way, now was the time to get out of here—

The muzzle of the gun bit against his spine. Greg heard the faint click signaling the release of the safety catch.

The girl on the bed heard it too, for she stirred for a moment, stirred but didn't awaken.

Once she did, once she opened her eyes, it would be too late. Greg remembered the rows of pointed teeth, remembered the hands that tugged the head away from the neck swiftly, so very swiftly. Which meant he had to be swift too.

He belted the flashlight.

He lifted the stake with both hands.

Gasping with effort, he plunged it down into the cleft between the golden breasts.

Then her eyes did open, wide. Her lips retracted and he saw the teeth, saw the talons rise to slash at his face, claw at his wrists as he held the stake fast.

Snakelike she squirmed, and like a snake she hissed, but Ibraham was standing on the other side of the bed and he brought the broad head of the bung-starter down, driving the stake deep.

The golden hands tore frantically at the shaft imbedded between the golden breasts, but Greg's grip remained unbroken. He held the stake firmly as Ibraham hammered it home. There was a single shattering shriek as a gout of crimson geysered upward, then sudden silence.

Talons loosened their hold; the golden face fell back on the pillow, slant-eyed stare veiled by the billowing black hair. No sound issued from the open mouth, and the blood around the base of the stake ceased further flow. Mercifully, there was no movement or hint of movement to come. The golden girl was dead.

Greg turned away, panting after his exertion, filling his laboring lungs with the acrid odor of blood. His stomach cramped and for a moment he thought he might pass out. Then he became aware that Ibraham was speaking.

"—not finished yet. But it should be safe to go now."

Greg unhooked his flashlight. "Go where?"

"To get what we came for." Ibraham motioned him to the door, and Greg noticed that he was again holding the gun.

So nothing had changed, really. Except that they'd come here this crazy midnight to pound a stake into the heart of a dead girl or an undead girl; it didn't matter which, because she was dead now. *We killed her and the stake went in and the blood spurted out just like in those horror movies only this wasn't a movie just a horror, God I need a fix—*

But there was no fix, not in the hall or on the stairs or down at the bar.

Ibraham's gun urged him along to the hall before the mottled mirror on the back wall. "Should be just about here," Ibraham said. He reached out and ran his free hand across the inner edge of the bar, muttering, "If my mother was right." A panel under the bar slid back silently, revealing a black rectangular opening.

"She was," Ibraham said.

Greg's flashlight dipped toward the darkness. "Lower," his captor said. "Must be some stairs."

There were. Greg descended first, beam fanning forward until he reached the bare stone surface below the fourteenth step. Ibraham followed, but this time his gun wasn’t aimed at Greg. Like the flashlight, it swerved and circled, as if seeking possible targets in the cavernous cellar before them.

The two men moved slowly, silently. Nothing to hear but the thud of their own footsteps, nothing to see but the beam tracing a path along the stone floor beneath their feet.

Here the air was cooler, but the odor it carried, a mingling of dust and decay, was almost stifling. There was another smell, faint but pungent, which Greg couldn’t identify.

Now Ibraham identified it for him. “Vinegar,” he said. “Remember, I told you the *penangallan* shrinks its entrails in vinegar in order to squeeze them back down into the body? I was wondering where they kept their supply.”

“But we didn’t find any others—”

“My mother thought there could be a dozen among the Marquess’ girls.”

Greg started to speak, but Ibraham waved him to silence. “The scent is almost undetectable here. Probably evaporated.”

“I’m not worried about the goddamn smell,” Greg said. “But if there are more of those things down here—”

Suddenly his foot struck something, something that clattered as he stumbled back. The flashlight beam dipped down toward the stone surface, sweeping over the sprawled length of arm and leg bones, the ridged rib cage and nacreous neck of the skeleton.

It had no skull.

The rush came so quickly that Greg almost dropped the flashlight. Its beam wavered because his hand was shaking. No skull. No head. It was one of them.

Ibraham moved forward; his harsh whisper echoed through the darkness: “Here’s another.”

Greg raised the flashlight, semicircling its dim beam, then wished he hadn’t.

The floor ahead was littered with bones. Some, heaped against the walls, were partially joined: a leg attached to a pelvis, a collarbone to a humerus, radius and ulna to the metacarpals. Two other skeletons were fully articulated but, like the first, they lacked skulls. Greg's stare swept across the scatter, but Ibraham's attention was elsewhere. He skirted the bonepile, threading his way between heaps and jumbles, then approached the makeshiftwooden shed rising along the right side of the cellar. More skeletal fragments lay there, piled almost at random, amidst shreds of rotted cloth.

There was a door at the far end of the shed's wall, and Ibraham pulled it open slowly, revealing the wooden shelving ranged along the far side within.

"Get some light over here," he said. Greg started toward him, raising the flashlight. Its beam sought the shelves—long, low shelves bearing wide mouthed, deep-bodied clay bowls. There were perhaps a dozen pots of them resting side by side like the pots in a florist's shop, but what bloomed in each were not flowers.

Greg stared at the rows of human skulls. And they grinned at him in greeting, grinned as though sharing some grisly secret that only the dead can know.

Ibraham moved beside him. "You see what's happened here? Those bowls must have been filled with vinegar."

"To shrink the intestines." Greg nodded. "But why didn't it work?"

"You can't store liquids in leaky containers," Ibraham explained. "And every one of these bowls is cracked."

Now, peering more closely, Greg could see what he meant. Most of the cracks were visible just above the base of each bowl to form a pattern, almost as though they'd been gouged out by some sharp tool or instrument.

Greg frowned. "Didn't they realize it was wrong to use these?"

"They had no other choice," Ibraham said. "She must have broken them after the raid. Probably that's how they escaped the madam's fate—they hid down here while the raid was going on. Maybe the raiding party killed the bartender too. Stands to reason they took the bodies away and got rid of them." He glanced down at the scattered bones. "But the *penangallans* were safe here. They must have stayed in hiding a long time, and when they came out they were hungry. And you know what happens when there's no food in the house."

Greg nodded. "You go out to eat."

"Exactly. They flew off to try their luck at hunting. But there's not much around, just birds and perhaps some small game. Since they couldn't fly down from here, that's all they could find. The only way they could survive was to hibernate." Ibraham gestured. "The one upstairs was smarter. She must have known how little success they'd have out there, because she didn't go. And when they returned and came down here she had a surprise for them."

"Like you said, she'd broken the bowls."

"That's what I figure. While their bodies rested out in the cellar, they settled their heads and entrails in the bowls here, but most of the vinegar leaked out quickly; before it could be effective it was gone. The girl we saw upstairs was gone too, after locking them in. She probably had her own bowl and vinegar supply tucked away somewhere upstairs, because she'd already planned what she was going to do."

"But what *could* she do?" Greg said.

"You still don't get it." Ibraham glanced down. "Don't these bones and skeletons tell their own story? The heads rested helplessly in those dried-out jars while the stomachs burst and rotted away. And trapped out here, the headless bodies, blind and squirming in the dark."

Greg grimaced. "And the thing upstairs—?"

"She ate them," Ibraham said. "That's what kept her alive all these years." He nodded at the skeletons and the piles of bones. "She didn't need to fly in search of food. Not with a dozen bodies down here, bodies that still moved, bodies filled with blood. She stripped the flesh from these bones bit by bit, sucked arteries and veins dry. It must have been done over a long period, and most of the while she slept, just as we found her."

Greg's stomach knotted convulsively. "I'm outta here," he panted, turning to seek the stairs.

“First we get what we came for.” Ibraham’s weapon pressed against Greg from behind as he climbed. And back upstairs the gun prodded Greg to the rear of the room.

“Take a look behind the staircase,” Ibraham ordered. “The madam could have had her office under there.”

Greg swore silently. Of course the office would be in someplace like that, close to the action but not easy for outsiders to spot. If he’d only looked around more carefully before going upstairs on the first visit, chances are he might not have had to go upstairs at all. The office would be where the madam kept the stuff. If he’d used his head and thought things through, he wouldn’t be here now in the middle of the night, middle of nowhere, this crazy house with that crazy thing upstairs and a crazy gook downstairs pushing a gun into him for half of what they’d find.

“Let’s go,” the crazy gook was saying. “I tell you it’s got to be here.”

And that’s where they found it, under the stairs. The door was metal, closed but unlocked, and behind it was the office. Or had been, until the intruders burst in, tore the drawers out of desks and filing cabinets, smashed them with crowbars and an ax that still lay atop shelving wrenched from a battered bookcase on the right wall.

Across from it, on the left wall, was an open safe.

Open, and empty.

Greg blinked at the bare steel shelf. “Gone; those bastards took the stuff with them—”

“Take another look,” Ibraham said softly.

Greg followed his gaze, traveled with it across the bare concrete floor to the center of the room. His eyes followed a paper trail—or a trail of what had once been paper. Now it was just a brownish-gray muddle of charred shreds speckled with tiny glints from flecks of burned photos. From the trail rose an odor, faint as the scent of vinegar: the reek of long-dead ashes in which all hope lay buried.

“Outta here,” Greg whispered.

Ibraham shook his head. “You think I don’t know how you feel? I want to forget it ever happened. But before we put it behind us, there’s one more job. The *penangallan*—”

“It’s dead,” Greg said. “We killed it. You know that.”

“Not so. Remember, the *penangallan* isn’t like other bloodsuckers. As long as the head remains attached to the digestive tract it can still fly and feed. A stake is not enough.”

“It’s enough for me,” Greg told him. “I’m not going to tangle with that thing.”

“The stake probably paralyzes it, at least for a time,” Ibraham said. “But we can’t take chances. We must cut off the head.”

“Forget it. I’m finished.”

Ibraham ignored him, but his weapon did not.

Would he shoot? Greg thought of Bernie Tanner for a moment and he didn’t need an answer. Instead he asked another question. “What do you want me to do?”

Ibraham nodded toward the toppled shelving at his right. “Over there,” he said. “Get the ax.”

Greg turned, imagining the impact of a bullet in his back. And perhaps it wouldn’t have been imagination if they’d found that blackmail material intact. No reason for Ibraham not to shoot him then, kill him and take all the loot; nobody’d ever know. But that could still be true now. If they got rid of the *penangallan*, Ibraham would get rid of him too—because Greg was the only one who could tie him to Bernie Tanner’s murder.

So there really wasn’t much choice but for Greg to do exactly what he was told: reach out and pick up the ax. But it was his own idea to turn swiftly, raise the ax and bring it down right between Ibraham’s eyes.

The gurgle was still dying in his victim’s throat as Greg ran, reeling through the office doorway, the barroom, the hall, the open front door.

He squeezed into the car, fumbling for his keys, cursing the broken air conditioner but grateful for the breeze from the windows. The air was still warm and moist, but it was clean, free of must and dust, the scent of vinegar, the mingled odors of stale ashes and fresh blood.

Blood. He'd killed a man; he was a murderer. But nobody knew, nobody would ever know if he played it cool. Even if somebody wandered up to the house there was nothing to connect him with what they'd find. Get himself a set of tires tomorrow and the old tread marks wouldn't match the new. They might get prints off the doorknobs and ax handle, but they'd have nothing to match them with; he'd never been fingerprinted. And they wouldn't be looking for him in the first place, with nothing to go by.

So he was home free, would be now that the car had started, now that he was wheeling down the hillside, with every twist and turn taking him farther away from that damned house and that damned thing; taking him closer to the lights and the streets, streets where you could find a fast fix, find it and forget what had happened. It would just be like a bad trip, he didn't really kill anyone, and there wasn't really anything like that thing with the golden face and the almond eyes and the gleaming, pointed teeth in the crimson mouth he was seeing now in the rearview mirror, rising up from the back seat.

Greg screamed, and so did the brakes of the car as he spun the wheel, spun and lost because there was no way to win, no way to turn from that narrow, tangled trail.

And then the thing was hovering behind him, rising up and swooping forward, its viscera lashing and looping.

The slimy coils twirled and tightened around Greg's neck, and from the stalklike stem above it the golden face dipped, lips fastening on Greg's flesh as the fangs found his throat. Ibraham had been right, after all.

Now Greg knew why a stake through the heart was not enough.

1997

Scenes from a Screenplay: Earthman's Burden

Note: Wingate is an Earthman who has been stranded among the Hokas for many years. Alex and Tanni are two fellow humans who have recently stumbled on him. The remaining cast are all Hokas playing twisted versions of their favorite Earth characters.

EXT.—COURTYARD BEHIND PALACE—NIGHT

Led by Moriarity and flanked by the two pike-bearing Hoka Guards who stood outside the chamber, the three captives MOVE OUT from a side doorway into a walled courtyard—then HALT as Moriarity gestures toward

WINGATE'S SPACESHIP

A crumpled, battered metal craft resting on a rocky slab in the silvery moonlight. A stone pedestal stands before it, draped with a tapestry emblazoned with a huge staring eye.

ALEX
Gazes at the craft in startled recognition.
(to Moriarity)
He made a crash landing here
—at the palace?

WIDER ANGLE—FEATURING MORIARITY

Moving to the stone pedestal before the ship.

MORIARITY

There was no palace when he landed. The fools who found him built Shaggy-La after they nursed him back to health.

ALEX

I remember a place like this in an old, old movie called *Lost Horizon.* But how would the Hokas know about it?

MORIARITY

The same way they learned English.

(yanks tapestry off)

With this.

Revealed atop the pedestal is a portable television set.

ALEX

Television—

MORIARITY

We have another name for it.

ALEX

The Monitor!

INT.—WINGATE'S CELL—NIGHT

Motley removes one of the keys on the metal loop from the lock of the now-open cell door as Tanni and Wingate converse inside, in guarded tones.

Wingate

—I installed it on my ship to pass time. After the crash I discovered that by some fluke its batteries still functioned.

Tanni

You picked up signals from Earth?

Wingate

Only a single frequency that took fifty years to reach here. A cable channel, broadcasting nothing but old movies.

Tanni

(nods)

So the Hokas learned about Earth from watching films. Amazing!

Wingate

The Hokas are an amazing species, with even more amazing talents. Not only did they believe everything they saw on the screen—they could also imitate and duplicate it.

Tanni

Like western towns—English taverns—knights in armor?

Wingate

Anything they wished. They came here from all over the planet to monitor what was shown. I didn't realize the danger.

Tanni

What danger?

Wingate

Not all Hokas modeled themselves after the heroes in old films. Some chose
to
become villains.

Tanni
So you had to be careful what you showed them.

Wingate
One day I caught a particularly intelligent Hoka watching an old science fiction serial. I cut off reception immediately—but it was too late. He and his followers
caught *me.*

EXT.—COURTYARD BEHIND PALACE—NIGHT

As Rowdy and Holmes listen, Moriarity addresses Alex.

Moriarity
I'm told you are a repairman.

Moriarity
(his ego is showing)
You're looking at the best in the business.

Moriarity
(gestures toward TV set)
Then repair this.

Moriarity
So that's why you wanted me here!

Moriarity

The Monitor has taught me a great deal. But I need to learn more to carry out my plans.

HOLMES

(to Alex)

I told you he was a super-criminal! He won’t stop until he takes over the whole planet!

MORIARITY

(nods)

My people have already taken over Shaggy-La. Others are preparing the way elsewhere.

ROWDY

Like the ones who burned down my ranch an’ stole my cattle?

MORIARITY

I need those cattle for my own purposes. Those stupid cowboys aren’t allowed to use them for food.

WIDE ANGLE—FEATURING WINGATE’S SHIP

As the reunited group turns to descend slab, Holmes lights his pipe, puffing contentedly as he nods at Wingate.

HOLMES

Jolly good show that ray didn’t harm your ship!

WINGATE

(smiling)
Never touched us.

A SUDDEN CRACKING SOUND. ***Wingate looks up quickly: he and his companions stare at***

ANOTHER ANGLE—FEATURING WINGATE'S SHIP

As a FISSURE WIDENS along its tail—and, with a SCREECH OF METAL, the entire rear of the craft SPLITS OFF and crashes to the pavement, amidst a CLOUD OF DEBRIS—while Hokas scamper off, SHOUTING

AT BASE OF SLAB

Alex *steadies Tanni as the debris settles: Motley, Rowdy, and Wingate look up dazedly. Holmes has been knocked on his butt—and now Rowdy moves to help him rise. He grips Holmes' arm.*

ROWDY
You hurt?

HOLMES
I'm afraid I broke my calabash.
He *reaches down and produces the two halves of his pipe from underneath, then rises.*

ALEX
(unhappily)
Well, there goes our last chance. I was hoping perhaps we could repair this ship
for a return to Earth.

TANNI

It doesn’t matter now. By this time the vortex has closed.

ALEX
You mean we’re stuck here forever?

WINGATE
There are worse fates.

TANNI
Wouldn’t you like to see Earth again?

WINGATE
I’m too old. Here in Toka’s pure atmosphere I’ve aged very slowly. If I returned
to Earth I’d become a ninety-year-old man.
(to Tanni)
You can keep your youth here.

TANNI
Our misson comes first. If we can prove it’s possible to travel faster than light,
the space program would open the way to the stars.

ALEX
Sorry, Tanni. You tried.
(to Wingate)
If you’d shown the Hokas some science fiction movies, they could have built a
new space ship for you.

WINGATE
You saw what science fiction did to Moriarity. I couldn’t risk having a bunch of

Hokas playing *Star Wars for* real.

ALEX

I'd be willing to take that chance.

(glances down)

What is it, Motley?

ANOTHER ANGLE

We see Motley tugging at Alex's leg with one paw.
His other paw grasps a plastic box.

MOTLEY

I dunno. I found it in some stuff that fell out of the ship.

Alex takes the box—opens it. Startled, he holds the open box out for Wingate's inspection.

ALEX

Is this what I think it is?

Wingate

(stunned)

Good God—I forgot I had them!

TANNI

(peers in box)

What are they?

ALEX

Spare batteries—for the TV set.

INT.—HIGH LAMA'S CHAMBER—NIGHT

REAR ANGLE ON TOP OF DAIS shows Alex beside portable TV on stand. He fiddles with controls. Suddenly the room is filled with the theme from

Star Trek. Now *CAMERA PULLS OUT and we see the room crowded with shadowy HOKAS staring up into the tube. The darkness is pierced by MYRIAD PAIRS of wide, GLOWING YELLOW EYES.*

EXT.—COURTYARD—DAY

FEATURING A NEW SPACECRAFT, glittering in the bright sunlight. It bears a vague resemblance to the Enterprise. *Shaven-headed "good" Hokas carry various cartons into a side hatch opening near tail. CAMERA TO Alex, Tanni, Wingate, and Holmes, moving OUT from side entrance to palace. Wingate stares up at the ship, dazzled.*

WINGATE

Incredible!

ALEX

A brand new model—bigger, roomier, faster—

WINGATE

(frowns)

I still don't understand about the power source.

TANNI

(glancing o.s.)

There it is—right under your nose.

CAMERA PANS TO a GROUP OF HOKAS lugging huge buckets balanced on their shoulders, Chinese fashion, up an inclined ramp to the open hatchway.

WINGATE

Sniffs, then holds his nose.

WINGATE

Phew! Where's you get that stuff?

Wider, inc. Tanni

TANNI

From them.

She gestures and CAMERA PULLS OUT so that we see Rowdy and Motley herding a half-dozen of the blue, three homed cattle up the ramp and INTO hatchway.

TANNI

I can't explain it, but my analysis of the fuel system the Hokas installed shows a
thrust-factor exceeding the speed of light.

ANGLE ON GROUP

WINGATE

(shakes head)

With all due respect, that sounds like a lot of crap to me.

HOLMES

(nods)

Exactly! When Rowdy told me how Moriarity took over the cattle, I deduced
they must be an energy source.

ALEX

This is the most powerful propulsion volatility I've ever seen! With cattle aboard to keep us supplied, we'll be home in no time flat.

TANNI

We should have guessed. Without electricity here, this is the source of
power
for all of Toka's industries.

WINGATE
(aghast)
You mean this whole planet is run on *bullshit?*

ALEX
Yeah. Just like on Earth.

The Clown at Midnight

Horror is my business.

The insurance agent peddles protection and security—I sell terror and dread. The doctor guards your heart; I devote my professional skill to inducing failure in same. Some people live by their wits; I live by scaring you out of yours.

For the past twenty-five years I've been a professional writer of horror fiction for magazines, books, radio and TV shows. And when I'm not creating nightmares of my own, I spend my spare time investigating the nightmares of other people—namely the so-called "horror" movies being foisted off on the public via TV and theater screens.

It used to be, back in the bad old days when apples were sold on street corners and cars had rumble seats, that the horror film was practically an art-form as well as being almost as hot at the box-office as Bank Night. The terror tale was filmed with more Tender Loving Care than Eisenhower gets at Walter Reed, and imaginative producers never forgot for a moment that the viewer had an imagination of his own.

Unfortunately, for better or for worse, the folklore of the land is changing. Just as Halloween, with its ghosts and goblins, has been transformed into a subteen Thanksgiving with Tricks-or-Treats replacing the turkey, so has the horror movie suffered a sea-change into something strictly for laughs, with genuine grue and imagination being replaced by a vat of ketchup and a false face that wouldn't frighten a timid two-year-old.

The shudder salesmen have sold out and the average horror flick nowadays evokes more gaiety than goose-pimples.

But it boots no good to shed melancholy tears over the fright films of our youth that populated our dark and lonely bedrooms with images of Frankenstein's Monster and the Mummy gibbering just beyond the counterpane. It's more instructive, perhaps, to look into the reasons why the morbid has been changed into the unintentionally mirthful.

Much as we dislike to consider it, one answer keeps cropping up: Hollywood no longer knows what horror is.

We *could get* philosophical at this point and wonder if it's really that simple or if it's just that people can't be horrified anymore. A casual glance at any paper will prove that the monsters currently roaming a city's streets after dark are far more horrible, in one sense, than anything Hollywood has yet dreamed up. And it was not too long ago that human beings were eliminated by the carload lots in the gas chambers of Belsen and Dachau—certainly the pinnacle of horror as far as human history goes. In addition, everybody reading this is probably painfully aware (though none of us like to think about it) that all somebody has to do is push the wrong button and half of humanity will go up in smoke and radioactive ashes.

But all of this—while certainly horrible to contemplate—is not true *horror as* such. Horror is something peculiar to the individual.

It's a small child's (and quite frequently an adult's!) fear of the dark—and most particularly the phantoms of the imagination that populate the dark.

It's the fear of a human being who doesn't act, think, or look like a human being—the fear of deformity, the fear of insanity, and even (far more pathetically) the fear of a cerebral palsy victim. (There, but for the grace of God . . .)

It's the fear of spiders and snakes and the pale horrors you find under rocks in the woods.

It's the fear of the unknown, the unexpected, the not-quite-seen.

When *I was* an eight-year-old I saw Lon Chaney in *The Phantom of the Opera*—and gazed upon the face of naked fear. Within the past year I attended a revival of the same film. And despite the flickering flaws of this dated melodrama, the scene where Chaney is unmasked exerted the same monstrous magic upon a modem audience.

Since the 1925 version of *The Phantom,* Hollywood has arrayed itself in noseputty and fright-wig hundreds of times. And yet only a score of genuinely shivery efforts have actually emerged from the studios (and practically none since World War II).

During the ’30s, the movie moguls outdid themselves and gave us a *Dracula,* a *Frankenstein,* a *Mummy,* and a *Wolf Man,* and even a few fairly respectable sequels. And then some pillow-head decided that since it was such a thin line between horror and hilarity, why not erase the line altogether? The integrity of the horror film was quickly corrupted and the honest seeker after shudders was lured into a back alley inhabited by Abbott and Costello and the Bowery Boys. Just about the time Frankenstein was due to meet Pa and Ma Kettle, some giddy genius discovered liquid latex and the “monster film” was born. (Frankenstein’s Monster, we’ll admit, may have been the first of these, but the horror depended on far more than just a fright face with high forehead, dank hair, scars, and two collar studs projecting from the neck.)

Things began emerging from Outer Space—or the equally empty regions between a producer’s ears. The screens of the nation were invaded by a horde of Giant Cockroaches, Giant Bedbugs, and Giant Spirochetes (all of which warmed the hearts of the pest-exterminators at the same time they cooled the ardor of the true horror fan).

That these not-so-Grand Guignol efforts make money is undeniable. Vast audiences still watch the tired old travesties on television and turn out for each new double feature. But if producers believe these films show a profit because this is what the public really wants, then they must also believe that most bums drink canned heat because they prefer it to bonded whiskey or vintage champagne. Let’s face it—audiences lap up their pictures only because nothing better is available.

While today's films prove that Hollywood has progressed in the use of camera tricks, animation, miniature photography and make-up, they also prove a total ignorance of what inspires the release of fear. One of the best examples is a produced-in-Japan flick (an American outfit later picked it up and dubbed in some English dialogue and narrator in the person of Raymond Burr, currently popular as TV's Perry Mason) called *Godzilla.* The *piece de resistance* of the film is a ten-story monster that cheerfully tears apart the city of Tokyo, evoking all kinds of admiration for the experts who built the miniature sets but no true feeling of horror on the part of the audience. (As von Clausewitz is reputed to have said, "One death is a tragedy; a million are statistics.")

On the other hand, an excellent example of true horror in a film is the sight of one dwarfed, armless and legless torso crawling through the mud in an old movie called *Freaks.* This scene was enough to raise the hackles of the most sophisticated audience.

Of course, film producers are not entirely to blame—they have been influenced by the censors, who have curiously limited the size of the canvas upon which the horror film producers can paint. The censors who were not happy with the "morbidity" of *Freaks* were singularly undisturbed when walls of fire toppled upon helpless thousand in *War of the Worlds.* One lone ripper-murderer tempts the censorial blue-pencil far more than a *Beast From 20,000 Fathoms* whose poisonous presence perils an entire city. A ripper, you see, may suddenly drop his knife and produce another type of weapon. A *Beast* is entirely moral in his relationships with women and is content—if you'll pardon the allusion—to merely eat them or trample them to death.

Let's look at a few of the better examples of horror films and see what the censors have done—or undone.

After thirty years of repetition and burlesque, it is hardly probable that an audience can view the original *Frankenstein* and recapture its initial impact. It's even less likely if they catch bits and pieces of it sandwiched in between the bra and deodorant commercials on a 21-inch tube. But in its day, *Frankenstein* qualified as a true tale of terror. Its theme, “The Monster is loose!” is still the basis of most so-called “science-fiction” movies today. The first few scenes of the shambling monstrosity walking backwards or stumbling around the castle convey a genuine sense of the unearthly.

There are, or were originally, two versions of *Frankenstein.* In the one generally shown and currently revived on TV, the Monster befriends a little girl on a river bank and watches her toss flowers into the water, petal by petal. There is an abrupt cutaway from the scene, and when next we see the girl she is dead, being carried into town by her stunned father.

In the banned version, the flower-tossing episode is continued and the Monster, not out of cruelty but merely through confusion, picks up the child and tosses her into the water. He is too ignorant to understand; if the pretty petals looked even prettier when they floated, why not a pretty girl?

The censors thought otherwise, apparently. They would rather cut the scene and leave the unmistakable—and to me, far more ghastly—inference that the Monster had probably ravished the child and then disposed of her body. The true horror is thus discarded in favor of a sordid situation immediately identifiable by the newspaper-reading public.

In *King Kong,* another genuine all-out horror fantasy, there is a scene where the giant ape, loose in New York, holds the squirming body of a man between his huge teeth. The censors left this alone, but they removed a scene where the same ape picks away at the heroine’s garments out of mere curiosity.

They also eliminated the scene where Kong, searching for the heroine, plucks a girl from her hotel room and then, realizing he has made a mistake, drops her to the street below. Gruesome? Yes, but it *is,* after all, a horror movie. (In this case, of course, the horror lies in the utter casualness with which Kong drops her.) And I can’t quite comprehend why a censor would scissor this out and retain the graphic close-up of a man screaming between the clenched teeth of a 60-foot gorilla.

The same film contained a sequence where members of the exploring party are eaten by a sea-monster and dashed to death in a chasm. The chasm scene conclusion, where some of them are devoured by giant spiders, was excised. (It would seem that the capricious censors are also dieticians; sea-monsters can eat men, but spiders cannot.)

If censors have a distorted idea of what constitutes real horror, audiences seem to retain more than their share of misconceptions. In film after film, the great Lon Chaney played a succession of cripples and deformed men; he earned a deserved reputation as “The Man of a Thousand Faces.” But aside from his role as the Phantom in *Phantom of the Opera,* Chaney seldom played outright “monster” roles. Usually he sacrificed his life for the heroine. Yet to the public, Chaney was a maker of “horror movies.”

The same is true of Karloff. After his *Frankenstein* series and *The Mummy,* he appeared in dozens of films and a great many of them featured him for what he is—a mild-mannered man with a lisp. The theme song for these allegedly bloodcurdling shockers might well have been “That Silver-Haired Daddy of Mine.” Time after time Karloff was a kindly, elderly physician or scientist with the inevitable nubile daughter. Upon completing a discovery or invention which he idealistically hopes will aid humanity, he inadvertently causes the death of some innocent bystander or bit-player, whereupon he is persecuted by the police or by the real villain who wants to misuse the apparatus. Karloff thereupon goes off his rocker faster than Whistler’s Mother if she’d landed on a pin-cushion and tries to get rid of his tormentors. In the end, to save his daughter, he sacrifices his own life. Despite the laboratory scenes and the inevitable threats and grimaces of the “mad scientist” role, these films will hardly horrify anyone except lovers of good drama.

Karloff played the Monster in two sequels to his *Frankenstein* but each subsequent version managed to dilute the blood-letting (though we do have fond memories of the Monster shrieking in agony as the old mill goes up in flames, and another in which he drowns in what looks like a vat of bubbling oatmeal). At times Karloff has appeared as a loutish criminal or the innocent victim of some other "mad scientist" and his experiments. Quite understandably, he seeks revenge until exterminated by bumping into a rheostat. Again, the shock of these sequences is purely electrical.

Lon Chaney, Jr., has consistently been cast, or rather miscast—for he is considered, with some cause, an excellent actor—in routine villain roles. He has moved in and out of various series chronicling the resurrections of various monsters, mummies, vampires, and victims of Five O'clock Shadow. Most conspicuous among the latter is *The Wolf Man.* Chaney, an innocent young man brought up in the U.S., returns to his ancestral home in England and falls prey to a werewolf. He is quite unhappy in his role as a hairy heir, but this doesn't save him. In the end, his father beats him to death with a silver-headed cane. (Apparently the censors saw no symbolism in the plight of a son who becomes obsessed with bestial instincts and pursues females by night.)

Neither, incidentally, have the censors read the true meaning of the Lust Legend into the various versions of *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde.* Dr. Jekyll, who becomes transformed into a sexual sadist at the sight of an "easy" girl after drinking a potion which acts suspiciously like an aphrodisiac, has been played with properly terrifying effect by John Barrymore, Frederic March, and Spencer Tracy. The "metamorphosis" scenes are worthy of inclusion in any listing of cinematic horrors. But aside from these brief moments, the films are pure—or impure—sexdramas. The censors eliminated some of the "morbid" close-ups of bestial Mr. Hyde beating the beejeezus out of his girl friend—in Tracy's case a truly beautiful Ingrid Bergman—but never bothered to eliminate his other bestial activities.

True horror was also lacking, oddly enough, in the antics of such esteemed "monsters" as Bela Lugosi and Peter Lorre. Both achieved success in thinly disguised sex-operas. *Dracula* ostensibly portrayed a vampire in full denture but actually celebrated the career of the nocturnal prowler. Lugosi symbolized the Continental Seducer, sleek-haired and irresistible; he was merely another version of the Filthy Foreigner originally portrayed by Erich von Stroheim. Von Stroheim kissed hands and Lugosi bit necks but both were primarily sex-menaces, not true monsters. Lugosi, like other specialists in the *genre,* later drifted into routine villain roles, along with Claude Rains, Lionel Atwill, and John Carradine.

Peter Lorre first won fame in the German film *M* but his monster was quite frankly a sex-fiend. In most of his American movies, Lorre has played droll crooks or nasty informers, unpleasant enough at times but hardly frightening. Brief moments in the British version of *The Man Who Knew Too Much* and the American *Stranger on the Third Floor* are almost the only exceptions. In *The Face Behind the Mask* he seeks revenge because of a face scarred by fire (shades of *Mystery of the Wax Museum* and *House of Wax!)* but his motivation is understandable enough.

Just once did Lorre escape being mired in commonplace menace roles. This was in his first American film, *Mad Love.* This was a true shocker—and a flat failure. Karl Freund, who served as cameraman on *The Last Laugh,* directed the picture and created some chilling sequences. The scene where the madman poses as a guillotine victim whose head has been sewed back onto his body is far more terrifying than a dozen glimpses of rubber-suited “Things” emerging from Black Lagoons or descending from Outer Space. Given similar roles, Lorre might still triumph in real horror films. But the last time *I* saw him, he was playing an overweight clown.

So far we’ve considered what a horror film is *not.* It is *not* a picture where a character, supernatural or human, pursues a woman to bed her in the brush; even a Wolf Man is merely a “wolf at heart. Nor is it a movie in which a wronged man turns on society in revenge, be it ever so gruesome. It is not a movie that stresses torture or sadism. Even though the Christians are served up to the lions in *Quo Vadis,* this hardly makes it a “horror” epic.

The mere use of supernatural devices is no guarantee in itself: *The Invisible Man* was in some sequences as funny as *Topper.* The modern “science-fiction” movies which pack the passion pits today are palpable spectacles in which miniature sets and the make-up department have the starring roles. "Mysteries" seldom shock us any longer; hands may clutch and bodies fall from closets in the time-honored tradition of Paul Leni's *The Cat and the Canary,* but the Cat was only a man, after all, and so was the *Bat* and the *Gorilla* and the various cinematic incarnations of Jerry Lewis, for that matter.

Stripped of sexual symbolism and sadistic sequences and supernatural or super-scientific skullduggery, most of the supposed "horror movies"—particularly the monster monstrosities being produced lately—just don't fill the double bill. The censors have hacked the heart out of fright flicks and the producers themselves have sold their collective imaginations for a mess of *papier-mâché*.

The few films left, which set out to terrify by any manner or method available, succeed because writer, producer, director, and actors stick steadfastly to their sinister purpose. They know what fear and horror are and they play upon the human emotions with all the skill of a professional musician caressing the strings of a harp.

Scenes in horror movies made by these dedicated souls are usually brilliantly brought off. I do not speak now of the liberal splattering of tomato ketchup in a technicolor *Blood of Dracula.* I have in mind the faint trickle of blood under the door in a scene in *The Cat People* (directed by Vai Lewton and starring Simone Simone) where the little girl is locked out of her house by her mother, who thinks that the big cat pursuing her daughter is only a child's fantasy You don't see the cat, you don't see the girl. You're in the kitchen, listening to the terrified child pleading to be let in. Then the scream . . . and the horrible silence . . . and the blood.

There is horror in madness, and when Michael Redgrave, as the crazed ventriloquist, speaks in the dummy's voice in *Dead of Night,* the audience knows the sheer shock of schizophrenia. The world of the pinheaded idiots, midgets, and the armless-legless torso in *Freaks* was enough to inspire nightmares for a solid year of Sundays.

The “It was all a diabolical plot” movie is almost as much of a cheat as the “It was all a dream” picture, but we can forgive it, amidst our shudders, when we see the supposed corpse rising from the tub in *Diabolique* . . . and we feel relief in our screams as it thumbs out its eyeballs.

Fantasy alone is no guarantee of grisliness, unless played as straight and as superbly as the first sequence of the British film *Three Cases of Murder.* The episode titled *In the Picture* is indeed the stuff bad dreams are made of. In it, a visitor to an art gallery is carefully inspecting a landscape painting of an old deserted house when suddenly a light goes on in one of the windows of the house.

Monsters and ghosts are not necessarily frightful in themselves; one laughs at the staring extras of the various “zombie” movies, but one shudders at the totally unseen horror of *The Uninvited.* Even a movie like *The Thing* had its moments of true horror as the blanket left on the cake of ice in which the monster is frozen helps to defrost it. We see only the slow drip-drip-drip of water from under the blanket and then hear the sudden-stifled scream from the soldier left to guard it. And who can forget the scene where the monstrous half-vegetable arm erupts from the greenhouse?

I hold no brief for the monster movies and the science-fiction (so called) films made today in which a skeleton dances over the ceiling of the theater or the seats are wired for shocks—surely the final convincing proof, if any were needed, of the paucity of imagination of today’s movie makers. Such films may entertain the kiddies and presumably they serve a purpose for dating couples who need a reason to cuddle in the dark—but they’re not true horror pictures. For that matter, the horrors of dope addiction in a Man with *the Golden Arm serve* far better to induce throat-clogging terror.

The sophisticates will probably continue to sneer at all horror films, the censors will snip out the perils and, in an unusual switch, save the pruriency, and we who cherish the creeps will continue to haunt the local cinema for shocks and shudders and the wholesome release of fears as old as all mankind.

Where our search will lead, I don't know. It may be that we'll discover the ultimate cinematic horror in a clown. Years ago, Lon Chaney said:

"A clown is funny in the circus ring, but what would be the normal reaction to opening a door at midnight and finding the same clown standing there in the moonlight?"

That, to me, is the essence of true horror—the clown, at midnight.